



**THE
NAPPY
COLLECTIVE**

NAPPY STRESS IN AUSTRALIA DURING COVID-19



WHAT IS NAPPY STRESS?

Nappy stress occurs when families do not have the nappies they need to change their children as often as they need to. They are likely to cut back on other essentials, such as food or medicine, to afford enough nappies. They can sometimes be forced to dry out and re-use soiled nappies, or use paper towels or newspaper instead.

Nappy stress can affect families who are living below the poverty line or find themselves in crisis. Nappy stress can have serious negative impacts on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of families and children. It also affects families financially and socially.¹

HOW BIG IS THE ISSUE?

In late 2018, in conjunction with the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services and Social Ventures Australia, The Nappy Collective carried out the first known research study into nappy stress in Australia to better understand the size and impact of the issue.

We found that around 250,000 children in 140,000 families experience nappy stress, requiring around 383 million nappies per year, at a cost of \$122-191 million annually.²

In the case of extreme nappy stress, a single parent under the poverty line would need to spend more than 8% of their disposable income on nappies.³

HAS THIS WORSENERD OVER TIME?

Sadly, it has. Looking at the most recent available data (but pre COVID-19), the child poverty rate had risen from 17.2% to 17.7%.⁴ This is the highest rate in a decade.

Nappy stress has worsened by at least 12%. Around 280,000 children, or almost 1 in 5 children under 5, in more than 150,000 families are experiencing nappy stress.⁵ These families have a total nappy need of more than 430 million nappies, at a cost of approximately \$138-215 million annually.

A sole parent living under the poverty line would now need to spend almost 9% of their disposable income to afford the nappies they need for their children.⁶



¹ Nappy Stress in Victoria (2019, May) The Nappy Collective, Melbourne Australia.
² Nappy Stress in Victoria (2019, May) The Nappy Collective, Melbourne Australia.
³ Assumptions: Families have two children under 4 years old, both in nappies, the total nappy need per family per week is ~60 nappies, this usually costs ~\$30 per week.
⁴ Poverty in Australia 2020 (2020) ACOSS and UNSW Sydney, Sydney Australia.
⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019, 2016 Australian Historical Population Statistics, cat no. 3105.0.45.001, viewed 9/9/2020
⁶ Assumptions: Families have two children under 4 years old, both in nappies, the total nappy need per family per week is ~60 nappies, this usually costs ~\$30 per week.

HOW HAS COVID-19 AFFECTED NAPPY STRESS?

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the main drivers of nappy stress, so a worsening of 12% is almost certainly now an underestimate of the true size of the issue.

Nappy stress is driven by three main factors:

1. Lack of income, or income poverty
2. High cost of living
3. Broader social disadvantage



LACK OF INCOME

Australia is now experiencing a recession, with many businesses shutting down or cutting back on expenses, meaning more people are out of work. The number of people receiving unemployment benefits has more than doubled from December 2019 to July 2020.⁷ Loss of income has hit single mothers hardest, with them experiencing the largest fall in employment from March to June 2020.⁸ Women are generally facing more economic uncertainty, given they are more likely to be in insecure and casual employment compared to men.

“ One family is a single mother to four children of various ages, two of which are school age and she is home schooling due to COVID-19. This mother does not work and does not receive any financial support from the children’s father. It has been difficult for her to purchase nappies whilst attempting to manage the care of all her children. ”

The Nappy Collective community partner

Loss of income is likely to be a long-term issue, with unemployment figures predicted to remain high for the next two years.⁹ In addition, more jobs have been lost where unemployment rates were already highest, meaning the pandemic has worsened regional inequality.¹⁰

As of July 2020, 1.1 million children, or 1 in 5, were in families receiving the \$550 fortnightly Coronavirus Supplement, which was reduced on 25 September 2020 and is to be removed at the end of the year. This figure includes 500,000 children whose parents were receiving the JobSeeker payment. When the supplement is removed, 120,000 children aged newborn to 14 will fall into poverty, according to the Australia Institute.

Asylum seekers, refugees and non-residents are also at-risk groups, because they have not been eligible for any government support during the crisis. Many of our community partners have reported that these are the families who most need immediate support since COVID-19.

“ CARAD supports people seeking asylum in the Perth community. These people are not eligible for any government support (Newstart, JobSeeker, JobKeeper) and have felt the same impacts as the rest of the community of COVID-19 and the restrictions to prevent its spread. They are forced to live in destitution and would not be able to survive without charitable support from their communities and organisations like CARAD. For those with young children, having access to free nappies helps them provide this basic need to their children. ”

CARAD - Centre for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Detainees

[7] Anti Poverty Week [2020] Briefing on Poverty, Unemployment & Covid-19. 26/8/20, viewed 10/09/2020

<https://antipovertyweek.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/26AugAPW-Briefing-Poverty-Unemployment-COVID-19.pdf>

[8] The Australia Institute [2020] Poverty in the age of coronavirus Canberra Australia Viewed 10/09/2020

<https://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P949%20Poverty%20in%20the%20age%20of%20coronavirus%20%5BWEB%5D.pdf>

[9] The Australia Institute [2020] Poverty in the age of coronavirus Canberra Australia Viewed 10/09/2020

<https://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P949%20Poverty%20in%20the%20age%20of%20coronavirus%20%5BWEB%5D.pdf>

[10] Deloitte Access Economics [2020, September] Estimating the economic impacts of lowering current levels of income support payments, Australian Council of Social Service

HIGH COST OF LIVING

Panic buying early in the pandemic led to shelves being stripped of essentials, including nappies, particularly those in bulk packs.¹¹ This would have affected the poorest and may have tipped more families into poverty, because they would have had to buy items in smaller quantities at greater expense and travel further to find them. Nappies on average can cost \$0.50, but this can reduce to \$0.32 when bought in bulk.¹²

The vast majority of those who could move into poverty when the Coronavirus Supplement ends have either rent or mortgage commitments, which will increase financial pressure to meet housing costs, particularly those with families.¹³

A recent study of single mothers receiving the Coronavirus Supplement reported that the majority were spending it on household costs, including bills and groceries.¹⁴

BROADER SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

Family violence

Family violence tends to increase during times of natural disaster. COVID-19 has worsened many factors known to contribute to family violence, including increased financial insecurity, unemployment, housing insecurity and alcohol abuse.

For many, public health measures introduced to reduce the spread of COVID-19 such as social distancing and isolation have increased their risk of family violence.

During the first period of restrictions, frontline domestic workers in Victoria and Queensland reported an increase in frequency and severity of family violence.¹⁵ This included 42% reporting first-time family violence. They reported that men were using COVID-19 to threaten and coerce women, including forcing women to share a house when previously living apart, threatening to infect women with COVID-19 and controlling their children.

Domestic violence services have reported an increase in usage. For example, in South Australia services reported a 66% increase in need for emergency accommodation, and the ACT experienced a 138% increase compared to same time last year.¹⁶



¹¹ <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/health/health-problems/parents-worried-as-baby-items-sold-out-everywhere-in-coronavirus-panic-buy/news-story/0973818fe7a8ebfd295116d2acca41d> Viewed 14/09/2020

¹² Nappy Stress in Victoria (2019, May) The Nappy Collective, Melbourne Australia

¹³ The Australia Institute (2020) Poverty in the age of coronavirus Canberra Australia Viewed 10/09/2020 <https://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P949%20Poverty%20in%20the%20age%20of%20coronavirus%20%5BWEB%5D.pdf>

¹⁴ Impact of the Coronavirus Supplement: results of the National Council for Single Mother & their Child Survey (2020, September) National Council for Single Mothers and their Children Viewed 11/09/2020 <https://antipovertyweek.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/550RTS-Analysis8Sept20.pdf>

¹⁵ Pfitzner N, Fitz-Gibbon K, and True J. (2020) Responding to the 'shadow pandemic': practitioner views on the nature of and responses to violence against women in Victoria, Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions. Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Monash University, Victoria, Australia

¹⁶ Natasha Stott Despoja, National Press Club Address, 19 August 2020

<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/natasha-stott-despoja-chair-of-our-watch-addresses-the-national-press-club-19-august-2020/>

Last viewed 11/09/2020

Mental health problems and social isolation

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women's mental health, with women reporting feeling more loneliness, and symptoms of depression and anxiety compared to men.¹⁷ This is likely because COVID-19 has worsened existing inequalities. Women have reported being three times more likely to be looking after children full-time and providing unpaid care to vulnerable people outside their homes compared to men.¹⁸

Pregnant and new mothers have also reported worsened mental health, with pregnant women reportedly reporting to mental health services with severe anxiety¹⁹ and new mothers experiencing significant isolation due to social distancing measures and restricted access to usual face-to-face supports such as new mothers' groups and maternal and child health services.

“ Every family we support is different, but they share one thing in common: children who urgently need help. The effect of COVID-19 has been enormous and unemployment is now increasing the burden, even more for the already disadvantaged families we are supporting. Nappies are so essential and at the same time a major expense for families struggling to put food on the table and pay the electricity. There are so many times when the simple gift of a pack of nappies can have enormous impact and make a world of difference. And sometimes the gift of nappies can be absolutely critical, meaning the difference between nappies and no nappies before the next pay day. No family should bear this plight. ”

We Care Uniting

17 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4940.0 – Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, August 2020

18 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4940.0 – Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, 12-15 May 2020

19 Corbett G, Milne S, Hehir M, Lindow S, O'Connell M (2020) Health anxiety and behavioural changes of pregnant women during the COVID-19 pandemic, *European Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology and Reproductive Biology*



CONCLUSION

Nappy stress is a major issue faced by parents with young children, and it has worsened by 12%. At the beginning of 2020, it was affecting at least 280,000 or almost 1 in 5 children aged newborn to four years old. The COVID-19 pandemic has since aggravated many factors that contribute to nappy stress, including financial insecurity, unemployment, family violence, social isolation and mental health problems.

The true number of children and families currently affected by nappy stress is likely to be far greater than this estimate and may not be fully understood until the pandemic has passed. The risk to the health and wellbeing of babies, young children and their parents who experience extreme nappy stress cannot be underestimated.



The Nappy Collective is the only Australian organisation dedicated to redistributing nappies to families in crisis through its partnership with more than 300 community organisations. We are committed to reducing the burden of extreme nappy stress experienced by families, particularly during this time of heightened uncertainty and upheaval.

To date, we have distributed more than 3.5 million nappies to families in crisis since 2013. Our partners tell us that when families receive the nappies they need they report children are changed more often and are more settled. Parents report feeling grateful, relieved and calmer having the nappies they need. This in turn allows parents to afford to pay for other essential items, such as food, medicine and bills. Parents also report feeling more emotionally supported, which can help improve overall wellbeing and confidence. We look to the ongoing support of the public, business and government to ensure we can continue to achieve our mission.

“ The nappies provided by The Nappy Collective are going to families who are in desperate need and cannot afford them – families escaping domestic violence who are living in motels and emergency accommodation; families who have lost income and are not eligible for any government assistance; and families who are struggling on low incomes with young children at home and forced to self-isolate due to serious health issues – to name just a few examples. The support provided by The Nappy Collective has been invaluable – we cannot thank you enough! ”

Port Phillip Community Group

