

Long time, no see

The impact of time poverty on Australian workers

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Executive summary

Time, as they say, is money. In fact, one of the most important aspects of our lives—what we do for a living—involves exchanging our time, in the form of labour, for money. Yet, millions of Australians ‘donate’ unpaid overtime to their employers on a regular basis.

Like money, time is vital to personal wellbeing. We need enough time to keep healthy, exercise, relax, sleep, develop and maintain relationships—in other words, to live a balanced life. But there are a range of demands on people’s time that can stop us from getting enough time to do these other things. If the demands on our time are excessive, we can say that someone is suffering from time poverty.

Time poverty refers to not having enough time to do all the things you want or need to do. Not everyone faces the same time commitments or has the same access to free time. Like a shortage of income, lack of free time may be another aspect of disadvantage in societies.

Various factors contribute to time poverty, including the incomes we have and those we aspire to, the places we live and work, the nature of our jobs and our family and social responsibilities. It is linked to longer working hours, a blurring of the boundaries between work and home time, and is compounded in households where both parents must combine working with caring.

The changing nature of the workforce plays a critical role in contributing to time poverty. Where once the traditional family model involved men being breadwinners and women looking after home and children, women now make up nearly half (45 per cent) of the workforce, up from a third (35 per cent) in the late 1970s. This change has largely been driven by the number of mothers entering the workforce.

Time poverty can have a substantial impact on those experiencing it. Long working hours and time pressure have been linked to lifestyle illnesses such as obesity, alcoholism and cardiovascular disease, while anxiety disorders and depression can also be caused by job-related stress. Time poverty can also have other, less tangible effects which undermine individual, social and community wellbeing.

Working hours mismatch

To explore the way work affects other aspects of people’s lives and to gauge the extent of time poverty, The Australia Institute conducted a survey of 1,786 adult Australians in June 2010.

The survey asked people how many hours they worked in the past week, as well as how many hours they would prefer to work *taking into account the effect on their income*. Actual working hours match preferred working hours for just one in five workers (21 per cent). Half of all workers (50 per cent), and 81 per cent of those working more than 40 hours a week, would like to work fewer hours than they worked in the past week. A further 29 per cent of workers would like to work additional hours, including the majority of those working part time (60 per cent).

Across the survey sample, the average mismatch between preferred and actual working hours was -2.5; in other words, respondents expressed a desire to work around two and a half fewer hours on average each week. People working more than 50 hours a week indicated wanting to work almost two standard working days (13.5 hours) fewer a week. Meanwhile, people working under 15 hours a week wanted to work around one extra day (8.7 hours) more on average.

Even taking into account the natural variation in people’s circumstances and preferences, there is a clear mismatch between the hours the labour market makes available (or enforces) and the hours that people want to work, with most of the workforce preferring fewer hours. Our survey

results suggest that an average working week of 30–35 hours would provide a better match between actual and preferred hours.

The survey results suggest that ‘overwork’ accounts for the equivalent of more than 1.9 million jobs while ‘underwork’ is equivalent to around one million jobs. If we use the results of the French ‘experiment’ in capping work hours at 35 hours a week to estimate the number of real jobs that could be generated by reducing the working week by 2.5 hours, we find that an additional 390,000 jobs could be expected economy-wide.

Time pressure

One in two respondents (47 per cent), and 62 per cent of those in paid work, said they always or often felt rushed or pressed for time. Women (51 per cent) reported feeling more time pressure than men (46 per cent); although women work fewer hours in paid work than men, they carry most of the burden of unpaid work like child care and housework. Three in four people working overtime (that is, more than 40 hours a week) said that they always or often felt rushed and pressed for time.

The impact of time poverty

One in two respondents (51 per cent) said that work had prevented them spending time with family and friends in the past week, while 45 per cent said that work had stopped them spending time with friends. Family time was a particular problem for those with children in the household (62 per cent).

Around half of respondents (45 per cent) said that work had prevented them from doing physical exercise in the past week, while a third (36 per cent) said that work had prevented them from eating healthy meals. In other words, time poverty clearly affects many people’s ability to stay healthy.

Carers¹

The survey indicates that one group in particular suffers the effects of time poverty more than most. People caring for a disabled spouse or relative, who are also in paid work, expressed a preference to work six fewer hours a week than they currently do—much more than the average of 2.5 hours. Three in four carers (75 per cent) reported feeling always or often rushed or pressed for time, and most (50 per cent) said that work had prevented them from looking after someone who needed them in the past week.

The survey results suggest that a majority of the population would like to see either a shortening of their standard working week or a substantial reduction in the amount of unpaid overtime they are working, or both. Conversely, the survey also found that a large number of part-time workers² desire additional hours of work. Addressing the problem of overwork while simultaneously maximising opportunities to tackle underemployment will require a wide variety of changes—in the workplace, by individuals, and through policy intervention.

¹ For the purposes of this research, ‘carers’ refers to people who indicated spending time in the past week caring for a disabled spouse or relative. It does not include child care except where children had an ongoing illness or disability.

² Although part-time workers and casual workers are distinct categories with different working conditions, the term ‘part-time’ is used in this paper to indicate the sub-set of people who work fewer hours than a standard full-time worker.

Recommendations

The workplace:

- Provide a clear statement of expected hours of work.
- Clearly communicate existing flexibility arrangements to all staff on a regular basis.
- Provide remuneration alternatives whenever possible.
- Reconfigure staff roles to better balance preferred working hours, skills and productivity.

Individuals:

- Keep track of time.
- Talk to colleagues about work hours.
- Find out more about existing flexibility arrangements.
- Signal to employers/unions the importance of time and genuine flexibility.

Government policies:

- Take an active role in regulating to ensure work-life balance.
- Introduce caps on working hours.
- Adopt a whole-of-government approach to the link between work hours, health and the provision of care.
- Collect and publish better and more frequent data on work-life balance.

Introduction

In his 'Advice to a Young Tradesman', Benjamin Franklin wrote:

Remember that TIME is Money. He that can earn Ten Shillings a Day by his Labour, and goes abroad, or sits idle one half of that Day, tho' he spends but Sixpence during his Diversion or Idleness, ought not to reckon That the only Expencc; he has really spent or rather thrown away Five Shillings besides.³

While little in the modern workplace would resemble that of Franklin's time, his 18th century maxim is just as pertinent today. 'Time is money' captures the pace and ever-increasing drive for profits and efficiency that are the hallmark of today's economy, as well as the 'cost' of using time for other purposes such as leisure. That said, millions of Australians 'donate' unpaid overtime to their employers on a regular basis.

Like money, time is vital to personal wellbeing. We need enough time to keep healthy, exercise, relax, sleep, develop and maintain relationships—in other words, to live a balanced life. But there are a range of demands on people's time that can stop us from getting enough time to do these other things. If the demands on our time are excessive, we can say that someone is suffering from time poverty.

Time poverty refers to not having enough time to do all the things you want or need to do. Not everyone faces the same time commitments or has the same access to free time. Like a shortage of income, lack of free time may be another aspect of disadvantage in societies.

Our economy is based on the exchange of labour: employees sell their labour to employers, who buy it in return for wages. While the characteristics of labour in today's workforce will vary from workplace to workplace and across the professions, the one common trait is the process of turning time into money. In this sense, time can be considered a resource just as much as capital.

Of course, the economic value placed on someone's time can differ greatly and somewhat arbitrarily. It is often argued that those with high 'human capital' (characteristics such as intelligence and education) will tend to be paid more than someone with low human capital, but such explanations often do a poor job of explaining disparities in income.⁴

How individuals value their own time also differs greatly from one person to another. Some would rather be income rich and time poor, while others would prefer the opposite. For some especially unfortunate people, circumstances will cause them to be both income-poor and time-poor.

This paper is concerned with the nature and extent of time pressure, a problem which has been described as a 'modern malaise'. It is linked to longer working hours and fewer boundaries between work and free time, and is compounded in those families where both parents must combine working with caring.⁵

³ B Franklin, 'Advice to a Young Tradesman, Written by an Old One', *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, Philadelphia 1726–1757, The History Carper, 1748.

⁴ T Burchardt, *Time and income poverty*, CASEreport 57, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, 2008.

⁵ L Strazdins and B Loughrey, 'Too busy: why time is a health and environmental problem', *NSW Public Health Bulletin* 18:11–12, 2007, pp. 219–221.

The paper begins with an overview of time as a resource, in particular the notion of ‘time poverty’, and the physical and mental health consequences of time stress. New survey results about working hours, the mismatch between actual and preferred working hours, and the impact this has on wellbeing are then presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of how we might go about alleviating time poverty.

Working hours and other time commitments

Paid work is now a part of life for a majority of Australians; two-thirds of the population aged 15 and over are in or looking for paid work.⁶ Australian employees work the longest hours in the western world; whereas the average for full-time employees in developed countries is 41 hours a week, in Australia it is 44 hours. By comparison, workers in Norway and the Netherlands work 39 hours a week.^{7,8}

In 2009, research by The Australia Institute found that each year Australians work more than two billion hours of unpaid overtime, worth the equivalent of \$72 billion or six per cent of GDP.⁹

As well as working long hours, Australians work more days each year than their counterparts in Europe. Many Australians find it difficult to access the four weeks of annual leave they are entitled to by law.¹⁰ By contrast, German workers are entitled to six weeks paid leave each year, while the average leave entitlement in the UK, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark and Finland is five or more weeks a year.¹¹

In its annual Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI), the Centre for Work + Life reported that in 2009 the majority of Australian employees did not take all their annual leave entitlements.¹² Australia’s inability or reluctance to take annual leave has become so entrenched that Tourism Australia has used it as a marketing opportunity. The ‘No Leave, No Life’ campaign highlights the 123 million days of stockpiled annual leave in Australia and urges Australians to ‘win the work/life battle with an Aussie holiday’.¹³

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) divides the activities on which people spend their time into four main categories or types of time use:

- *Necessary time*—activities which are performed for personal survival, such as sleeping, eating and personal hygiene.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force, Australia, Sep 2010*, Cat no 6202.0, Canberra, 7 October 2010.

⁷ These figures relate to full-time employees but exclude business owners. When business owners are included in the statistics, Australia ranks third in hours worked behind Korea (where people work an astonishing 52 hours a week on average) and Greece (44 hours). See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Economic Policy Reforms: Going for Growth 2008*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2008.

⁸ R Tiffin and R Gittins, *How Australia Compares*, 2nd ed., Melbourne, Cambridge University Press..

⁹ J Fear and R Denniss, *Something for Nothing: Unpaid overtime in Australia*, Policy Brief No. 7, The Australia Institute, 2009.

¹⁰ R Denniss, *Annual leave in Australia; an analysis of entitlements, usage and preferences*, Discussion Paper No. 56, The Australia Institute, Canberra, 2003.

¹¹ Tiffin and Gittens, *How Australia compares*.

¹² B Pocock, N Skinner and N Pisaniello, *How much should we work? Working hours, holidays and working life: the participation challenge*, The Australian Work and Life Index 2010, University of South Australia, 2010.

¹³ Tourism Australia, ‘No Leave, No Life’, 2010.

- *Contracted time*—activities such as paid work and regular education where there are explicit contracts which control the periods of time in which the activities are performed.
- *Committed time*—activities to which a person has committed him/herself because of previous social or community interactions such as establishing a household or volunteering. The consequent housework, other household management activities, child care, shopping or provision of help to others are all examples of committed time activities.
- *Free time*—the amount of time left when the previous three types of time have been taken out of a person's day.¹⁴

In its *How Australians use their time* series, the ABS found that Australians are spending less time playing, sleeping and eating and drinking than 10 years ago. In 2006, we spent an average of 46 per cent on necessary activities, 16 per cent on contracted time activities, 17 per cent on committed time activities and 21 per cent on free time activities. Compared with 1997, there was a slight fall in the time used on necessary activities, which was more than offset by rises in the time spent on both contracted and committed activities, resulting in a slight fall in free time.¹⁵

AWALI data also point to a trend of workers having less free time, with around one-quarter of those surveyed 'often or almost always' feeling that work interferes with their quality of life by reducing their ability to participate in activities outside work and spend time with family and friends.¹⁶

Time as a resource

Because time is a resource, we can adopt the language we use when discussing money to describe our use of time. This notion is already subtly reflected in everyday terms like *wasted time* and *lost time*. But we could also seek to define more precisely a series of terms which refer to time as a resource in order to give ourselves a vocabulary with which to describe the way time is used and experienced.

For example, we could use the term *discretionary time* to refer to those parts of the day in which we are free to do whatever we choose, much like the ABS's notion of *free time*. There are obvious parallels between this intuitive understanding of discretionary time and the idea of discretionary income (the after-tax income that is left over after spending on essentials like food, utilities and housing).

However, there are disagreements about what discretionary time actually means. While accepting that people can suffer from a lack of time, Goodin et al. argue that much of the time pressure that people feel is itself discretionary and of their own making. They disagree with the conventional assumption that 'free time' is the amount of time left to people after deducting the number of hours they spend on life's necessities: 'paid labour, unpaid household labour; and personal care (eating, sleeping, grooming and so on)'.¹⁷ While those activities may be necessary, they argue that people may spend more time on them than is strictly necessary.

¹⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *How Australians use their time, 2006*, Cat. No 4153.0, Canberra, 21 February 2008.

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *How Australians use their time*.

¹⁶ Pocock et al., *How much should we work?* p. 30.

¹⁷ R Goodin, J Rice, M Bittman and P Saunders, 'The time-pressure illusion: Discretionary time vs free time', *Social Indicators Research* 73, 2002, pp. 43–70.

They consider the residual time left over after the unavoidable activities are met to be 'discretionary time'. This led them to conclude that people can suffer from a 'time pressure illusion', defined as 'the difference between how much (or little) actual "free time" someone has and how much "discretionary" time they actually had'.¹⁸ In this way, they emphasise the notion of choice or personal responsibility in determining time pressure rather than social and environmental factors.

Whether this accords with how a majority of Australians feel about time pressure in their life is highly questionable. It is certainly true that decisions about time use are not always strictly 'rational', just as other economic decisions do not exactly match the conventional economic notion of the rational consumer. Nevertheless, lack of free time and the psychological and social consequences resulting from it are very real and have a huge impact on the lived experience of millions of Australians.

Other terms which convey time as a resource are less controversial, and we might therefore use them in discussing how Australians use their time. For example, *borrowed time* could be used to describe the way people go into 'time-debt', for example with an employer (so they can forgo some work time and make up this time later) or with a family member (who might be looking after their children with the expectation that the favour will be returned later). *Time credit* is the inverse of borrowed time, and refers to someone spending more time doing something than they need to now in order to spend less time on it later. Employees who accumulate overtime hours and then take off time in lieu later are essentially engaging in the process of building time credit.

Time poverty

Time poverty is one of the most compelling ways in which we can characterise time as a resource and in so doing gain further insight into how and why people use their time as they do. It raises the issue that not everyone faces the same demands on their time or has the same access to free time. Like lack of income, lack of free time may be another aspect of disadvantage in societies.

Some sources attribute the phrase to the American marketing consultant Bill Geist and date its first use to around 2002.^{19,20} Of course, the concept of 'time pressure' or being 'time poor' is well-documented prior to Geist coining his phrase.²¹

Essentially, time poverty refers to not having enough time to do all the things you want or need to do. Various factors contribute to time poverty, including the incomes we have and those we aspire to, the places we live and work, the nature of our jobs and our family and social responsibilities.²² The growing use of 'remote-working' technology such as email, laptops and smart phones has also meant that the working day is often extended, often to the point where employees find themselves perpetually 'on-call'. Almost half (46 per cent) of all working Australians are spending more time working remotely than five years ago, with one quarter (24 per cent) spending five or more hours a week working outside the workplace. The same study

¹⁸ Goodin et al., 'The time-pressure illusion'.

¹⁹ The Phrase Finder, 'Phrases, sayings and idioms: time poverty', 2010.

²⁰ copperwiki, 'Time poverty', 2010.

²¹ C Vickery, 'The time-poor: a new look at poverty', *Journal of Human Resources* 12, pp 27–48, 1977.

²² L Strazdins, A Griffin, D Broom, C Banwell, R Korda, J Dixon, M Shipley, F Paoloucci, M Esler and L Glover, 'Time scarcity: Another health inequity? Time-Space and Life-Course', *Environment and Planning A*, [in press; accepted 1 July 2010].

indicated that two in three people report that work has caused them to miss out on personal events such as birthdays and family occasions.²³

The changing nature of the workforce probably plays the most substantial role in contributing to time poverty. Where once the traditional family model involved men being breadwinners and women looking after home and children, women now make up nearly half (45 per cent) of the workforce, up from a third (35 per cent) in the late 1970s.²⁴ This change has largely been driven by the number of mothers entering the workforce.²⁵ By 2010, more than half (54 per cent) of all couple families were dual-income.²⁶ For dual-income families with children or other caring responsibilities, time pressure is likely to be felt more acutely, with these essential tasks having to be juggled against work commitments.

The personal cost of time poverty

Time is of course vital to personal wellbeing. People need enough time to keep healthy, exercise, relax, sleep, develop and maintain relationships. If time is viewed as finite, anything that increases the demand on people's time (for example, a long commute) will mean there is less time available for other things that are important to them.²⁷

Across the four years that the AWALI has been published, it has consistently found that daily life is busy for many people and time pressure is very common. This year's survey again found that for the majority of workers, work often adversely affects other aspects of life by creating strain and reducing the time they can spend on themselves, on their families and friends and in their communities.²⁸

AWALI 2010 also found that while the majority of those surveyed were satisfied with their work-life 'balance', those experiencing poor work-life balance tended to be more unhealthy and stressed, use more prescription medications and be less satisfied with their close personal relationships. The authors conclude that 'work-life outcomes are imposing high costs on individuals, families and the broader community'.²⁹

While some studies have disputed the relationship between time poverty and adverse health outcomes, there are also a number of studies that support such a link. A study commissioned by the Queensland Department of Industrial Relations found a connection between longer working hours and lifestyle illnesses such as obesity, alcoholism and cardiovascular disease.³⁰ According to an Australian study of the social trends contributing to obesity, one in five health experts identified 'increasing "busy-ness" and lack of time' as affecting the amount of physical

²³ Telstra, *New research reveals Australians working outside the office is on the rise*, media release, 18 October, 2010.

²⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force, Australia, Sep 2010*, Cat no 6202.0, Canberra, 7 October 2010.

²⁵ Strazdins and Loughrey, 'Too busy'.

²⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force, Australia: Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families, June 2010*, Cat. No 6224.0.55.001, Canberra, 28 October 2010.

²⁷ Strazdins et al., *Time scarcity*.

²⁸ Pocock et al., *How much should we work?*

²⁹ Pocock et al., *How much should we work?*

³⁰ D Dawson, K McCulloch and A Baker, *Extended working hours in Australia: counting the costs*, commissioned by the Queensland Department of Industrial Relations, Adelaide, Centre for Sleep Research, 2001.

activity we do, and that it also influences our eating habits, with less time spent on cooking and greater reliance on take-away and pre-prepared food.³¹

There are also occupational health and safety implications for those working long hours or overtime. A United States study found jobs with overtime were associated with a 61 per cent higher injury hazard rate compared to jobs without overtime.³²

Bent³³ has explored the psychological effects of working overtime, extended hours and shift work, finding links between certain mental disorders and long hours of work. These effects include a greater prevalence of substance abuse, a tendency to anxiety and depression, headaches and sleep disturbances resulting from both long work hours and substance abuse.³⁴ Roxburgh³⁵ also found that there are mental health consequences for both men and women who feel time pressured. An Australian study has linked 'job stress' to an increased risk of mental health problems ranging from increased visits for psychiatric treatment to general mental health and psychological distress, anxiety disorders and depression.³⁶

In a 2010 follow-up report for VicHealth, the authors identified the following stressors as having the strongest evidence linking them to poor mental health: job demands, job control (how much say you have over how to do your work), the combination of high job demands and low job control (defined as 'job strain'), job insecurity, low social support at work and effort-reward imbalance.³⁷ They cited job strain as the cause of depression in 13 per cent of working men and 17 per cent of working women, costing businesses and the wider economy \$730 million annually. Another Australian study calculated that on average, every full-time employee with untreated depression costs an organisation \$9,665 a year.³⁸

In order to address the impact of depression and anxiety in the workplace, beyondblue developed its National Workplace Program in 2004. Because depression can cause absenteeism and reduce productivity, the Program seeks to raise awareness and promote early intervention and prevention in workplaces by increasing the knowledge and skills of staff and managers to address mental health issues. The National Workplace Program has been presented to more than 400 organisations and 40,000 participants in Australia.³⁹

³¹ C Banwell, S Hinde, J Dixon and B Sibthorpe, 'Reflections on expert consensus: a case study of the social trends contributing to obesity', *European Journal of Public Health* 15:6, 2005, pp. 564–568.

³² A Dembe, J Erickson, R Delbos and S Banks, 'The impact of overtime and long work hours on occupational injuries and illnesses: new evidence from the United States', *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 62:9, 2005, pp. 588–597.

³³ S Bent, 'The psychological effects of extended working hours', in: *The Twelve Hour Workday: Emerging Issues*, Kathryn Heiler (ed.), Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training Working Paper No 51, University of Sydney, 1998.

³⁴ Bent, 'The psychological effects of extended working hours', p26

³⁵ S Roxburgh, 'There Just Aren't Enough Hours in the Day: The Mental Health Consequences of Time Pressure', *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 45:2, 2004, pp 115–131.

³⁶ A LaMontagne, A Louie and A Ostrey, 'Job stress & health: A review of the epidemiologic evidence', Chapter 1 of: *Workplace Stress in Victoria: Developing a Systems Approach*, Report to the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, VicHealth, 2006.

³⁷ VicHealth, *Estimating the economic benefits of eliminating job strain as a risk factor for depression*, Summary report by A LaMontagne, K Sanderson and F Cocker, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Carlton, 2010.

³⁸ M Hilton, *Assessing the financial return on investment of good management strategies and the WORC Project*, The University of Queensland, 2004.

³⁹ beyondblue, 'National Workplace Program', 2010.

Survey results

To explore the way work affects other aspects of people's lives and to gauge the extent of time poverty, The Australia Institute conducted an online survey of 1,786 adult Australians in June 2010.⁴⁰ Some 59 per cent of these respondents (n=1,061) were in paid work and were asked a range of questions about their work-life balance.

Working hours

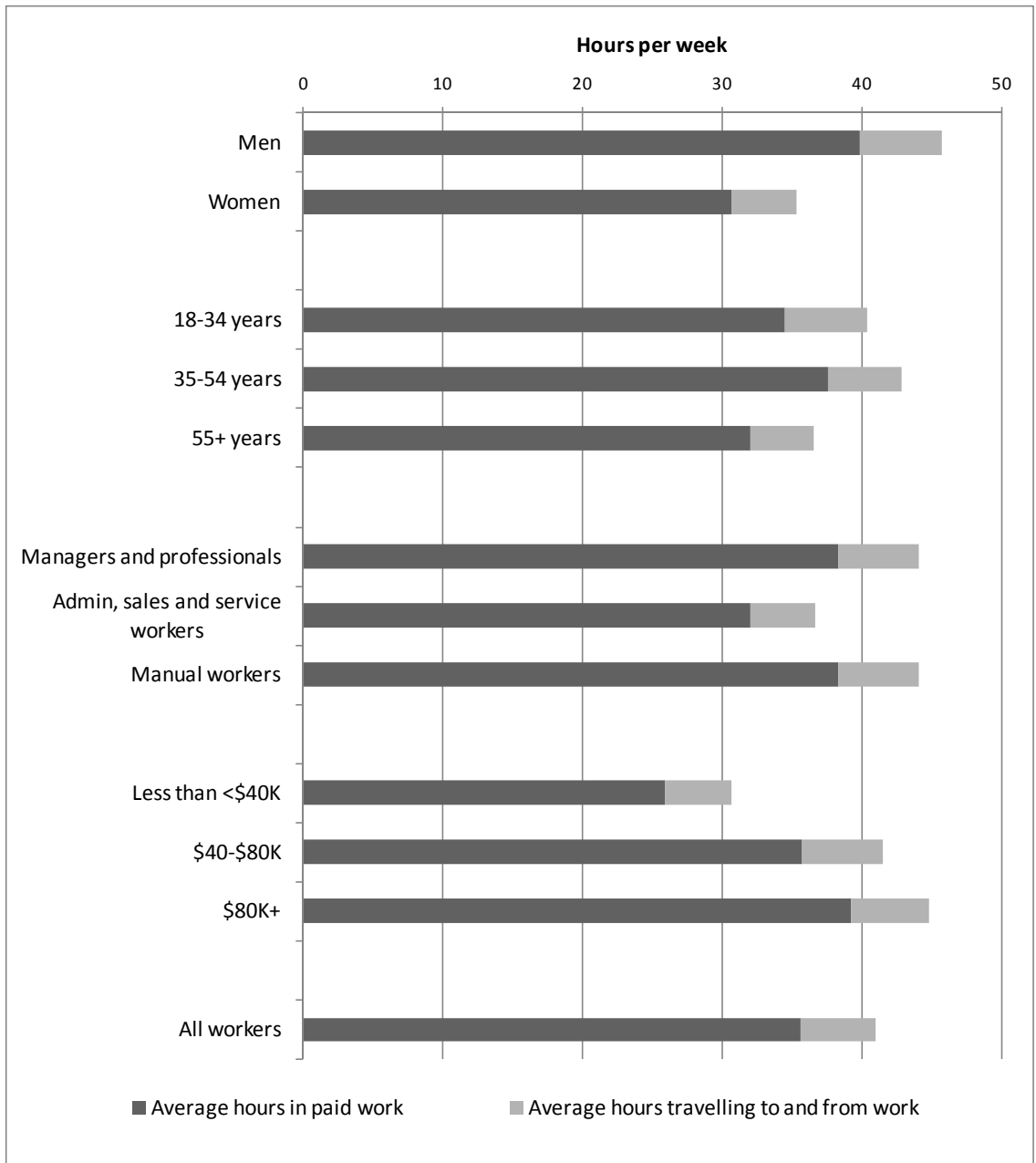
Survey respondents in paid work reported working an average of 35.6 hours in the past week, with a median working week of 40 hours.⁴¹ They also reported spending an average of 5.3 hours travelling to and from work, or a little over an hour a day for a five-day working week. Travelling to work, which is unavoidable for most employees, considerably lengthens the time commitment associated with working—on these figures by some 15 per cent.

Men spend more time than women in paid work, and also more time travelling because they work more days in the week. Working hours are higher in the 'middle' period of a working life (34–54 years) than in the earlier or later years of work. Naturally enough, longer working hours are much more common among people in higher-income households than in lower-income households.

⁴⁰ Survey respondents were sourced through a reputable independent online panel provider. In keeping with standard practice in online market research, respondents were incentivised at a level that encourages participation but does not attract 'professional' respondents; for this survey the incentive was \$1.50 per respondent. To ensure a representative sample of the broader Australian population, interlocking quotas were applied by gender, age and state/territory. The results described in this report are all weighted by gender, age and state/territory.

⁴¹ Recent ABS figures indicate an average working week of 32.4 hours for all workers (full-time and part-time). These figures include workers taking holidays, sick leave and other absences from work, whereas the survey data presented in this report include only those who did some paid work in the past week. See ABS, *Labour Force, Australia, Sep 2010*.

Figure 1: Time spent working and travelling to and from work*



* Base = 987. Includes respondents who reported working in the previous week and indicated how many hours they spent in work and travelling to and from work.

Mismatch between actual and preferred working hours

As well as indicating how many hours they worked in the past week, survey respondents were asked to specify exactly how many hours they would prefer to work each week. Half of all respondents (50 per cent) gave a number that was lower than the number of hours they had worked in the previous week, while 29 per cent gave a number that was higher. Preferred working hours perfectly matched actual working hours for just one in five workers (21 per cent).

A desire to work less was very common among those working overtime; four in five of these (81 per cent) specified a lower number of preferred working hours than they had worked in the previous week. Conversely, 60 per cent of part-time workers wanted to work more hours, while only 19 per cent wanted fewer hours.⁴²

Table 1: Preferred hours by length of working week*

	Part time (fewer than 35 hrs/wk)	Full time with no overtime (35–40 hrs/wk)	Full time with overtime (more than 40 hrs/wk)	All workers
	%	%	%	%
Perfect match between actual and desired hours	21	31	10	21
Preferred hours greater than actual hours	60	17	9	29
Want to work up to 4 hrs/wk more	10	3	2	5
Want to work 4–8 hrs/week more	16	6	4	9
Want to work 8–16 hrs/wk more	22	6	3	11
Want to work 16+ hrs/wk more	12	1	<1	5
Preferred hours fewer than actual hours	19	52	81	50
Want to work up to 4 hrs/week fewer	4	15	4	8
Want to work 4–8 hrs/week fewer	5	9	18	10
Want to works 8–16 hrs/wk fewer	9	22	39	23
Want to work 16+ hrs/wk fewer	1	6	20	9
Total	100	100	100	100

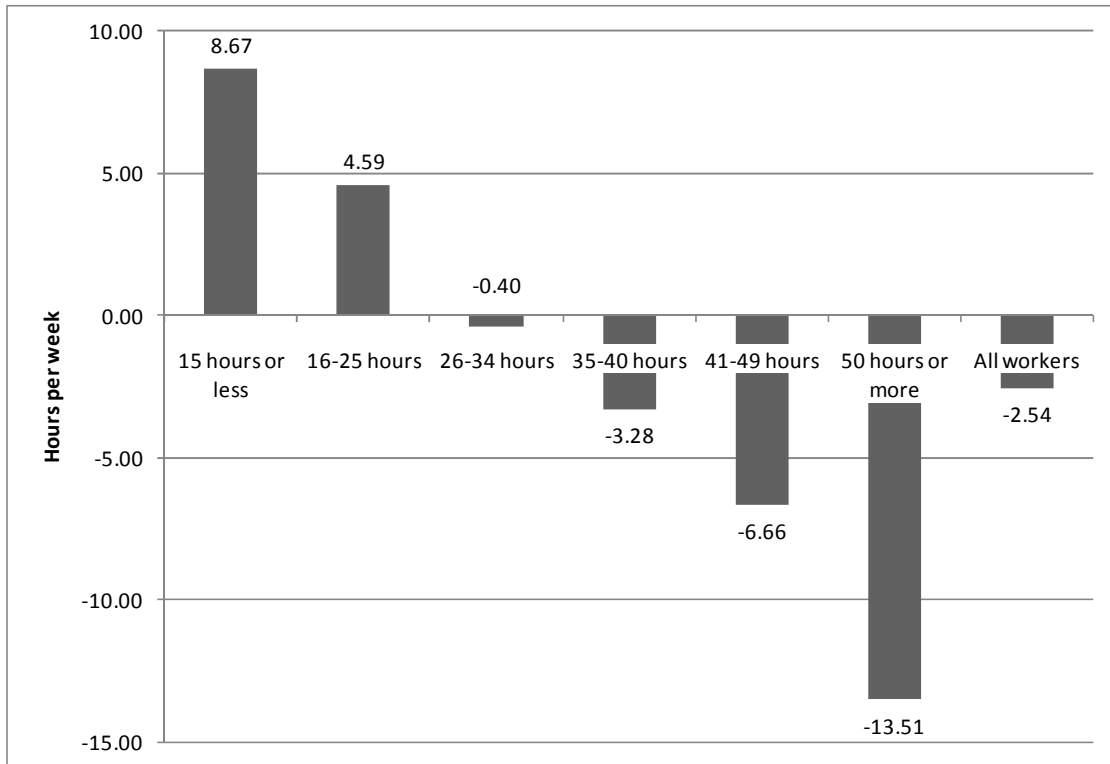
* Base = 892. Includes respondents who reported working in the previous week and indicated how many hours they would prefer to work.

Note: Due to rounding, columns may not necessarily sum as indicated.

⁴² For the purposes of this paper, no distinction has been made between people working on a casual or permanent basis. 'Part-time', 'full-time' and 'overtime' are defined solely according to the number of hours respondents reported working in the past week.

As the results above indicate, the desire to work fewer hours is more common in the workforce than the desire to work more hours, particularly among full-time workers. This pattern becomes more pronounced with longer working hours, as Figure 2 shows. People working 50 or more hours a week indicated wanting to work almost two fewer standard working days (13.51 hours) each week.

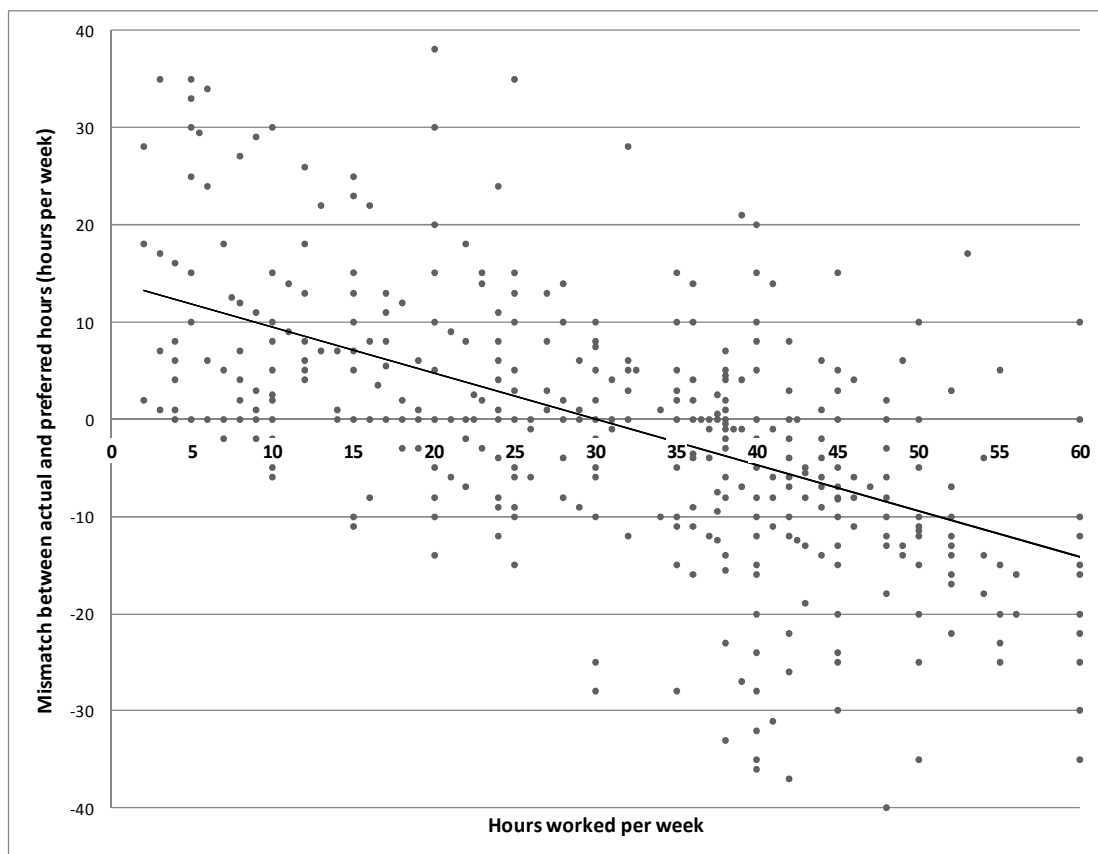
Figure 2: Average mismatch between actual and preferred hours by length of working week*



* Base = 892. Includes respondents who reported working in the previous week and who indicated how many hours they would prefer to work. A positive number indicates a preference for working more hours, while a negative number indicates a preference for working fewer hours.

Even taking into account the natural variation in people's circumstances and preferences, there is a clear mismatch between the hours the labour market makes available (or enforces) and the hours that people want to work, with most of the workforce preferring fewer hours. As Figure 3 suggests, an average working week of 30–35 hours would provide a better match between actual and preferred hours.

Figure 3: Mismatch between actual and preferred working hours by length of working week*



* Base = 892. Includes respondents who reported working in the previous week and who indicated how many hours they would prefer to work. A positive number indicates a preference for working more hours, while a negative number indicates a preference for working fewer hours.

Across the survey sample, the average mismatch between preferred and actual working hours was -2.54; in other words, respondents expressed a desire to work around two and a half fewer hours on average each week. Those who wanted to work more specified an average of 9.85 hours more a week, while those who wanted to work less favoured an average of 10.88 fewer hours a week.

As Table 2 shows, the desire to work fewer working hours was stronger among men than women, and stronger among mid-career workers (35–54 years) than those earlier or later in their working lives. People in low-income households (less than \$40,000) wanted to work an average of 1.23 hours *more* each week, while those in high-income households (more than \$80,000) wanted to work 4.61 hours *fewer* on average. Carers in paid work are particularly overworked; their survey responses indicated a desire to work an average of six fewer hours a week.

Table 2: Average mismatch between actual and preferred working hours each week

	Mismatch (hrs/wk)
Gender	
Males	-3.57
Females	-1.31
Age	
18–34 years	-0.81
35–54 years	-4.00
55+ years	-2.17
Occupation type	
Managers and professionals	-3.97
Admin, sales and service workers	-1.83
Manual workers	-2.16
Household income	
Less than \$40,000	1.23
\$40,000–\$80,000	-1.35
More than \$80,000	-4.61
Caring responsibilities	
Carers	-6.01
Non-carers	-1.81
Working hours preference	
Want to work more	9.85
Want to work less	-10.88
Want to work the same amount	0.00
All workers	-2.54

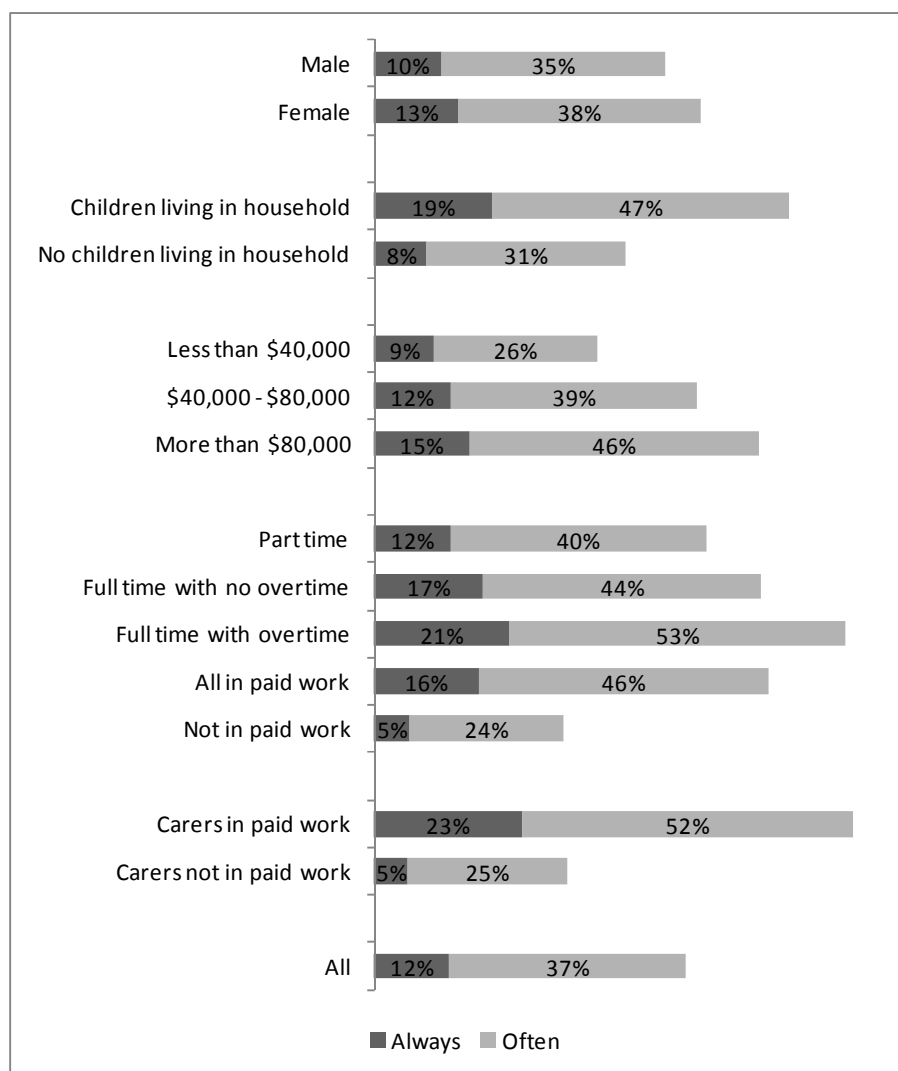
Base = 892. Includes respondents who reported working in the previous week and who indicated how many hours they would prefer to work. A positive number indicates a preference for working more hours, while a negative number indicates a preference for working fewer hours.

Time pressure

Survey respondents were asked how often they feel rushed or pressed for time. One in two (47 per cent), and 62 per cent of those in paid work, said they always or often felt this way. Women (51 per cent) reported feeling more time pressure than men (46 per cent); while women work fewer hours in paid work than men, they carry most of the burden of unpaid work like child care and housework. The group most likely to feel rushed and pressed for time was comprised of carers in paid work (75 per cent).

Time pressure was more common in households with higher incomes and among people working longer hours. Three in four people working overtime (that is, more than 40 hours a week) said that they always or often felt rushed and pressed for time. By contrast, only 30 per cent of people not in paid work felt such time pressure.

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents who always/often feel rushed or pressed for time*

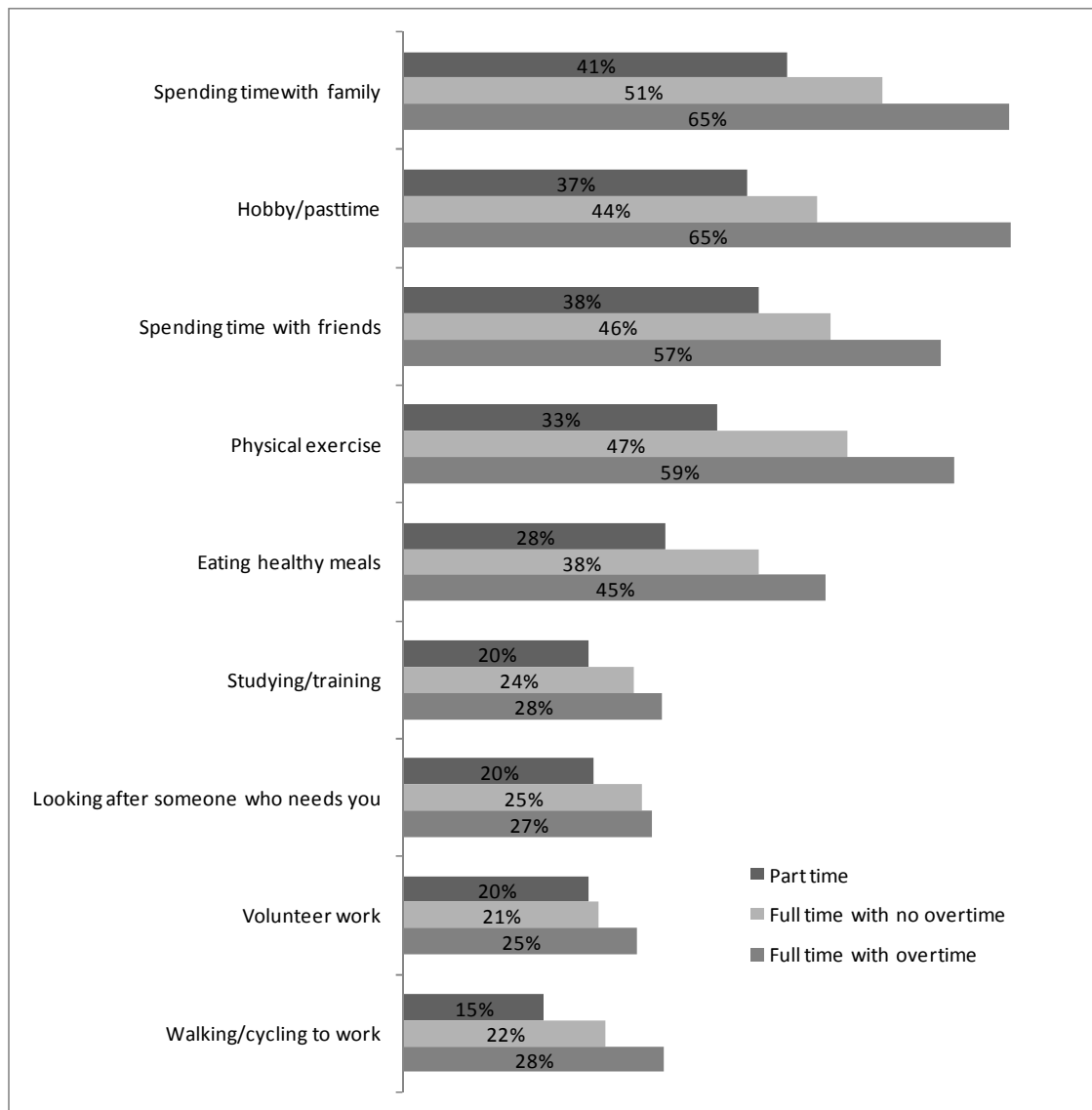


* Base = 1,786

The impact of time poverty

Respondents were asked whether work had prevented them from spending as much time as they would like on a range of positive activities in the past week, including spending time with family and friends and doing things to benefit their health. The results emphasise the extent of time poverty across the workforce. As Figure 5 illustrates, time poverty has a particularly severe impact on people working more than 40 hours a week.

Figure 5: In the past week, has your work prevented you from spending as much time as you would like on the following things?*

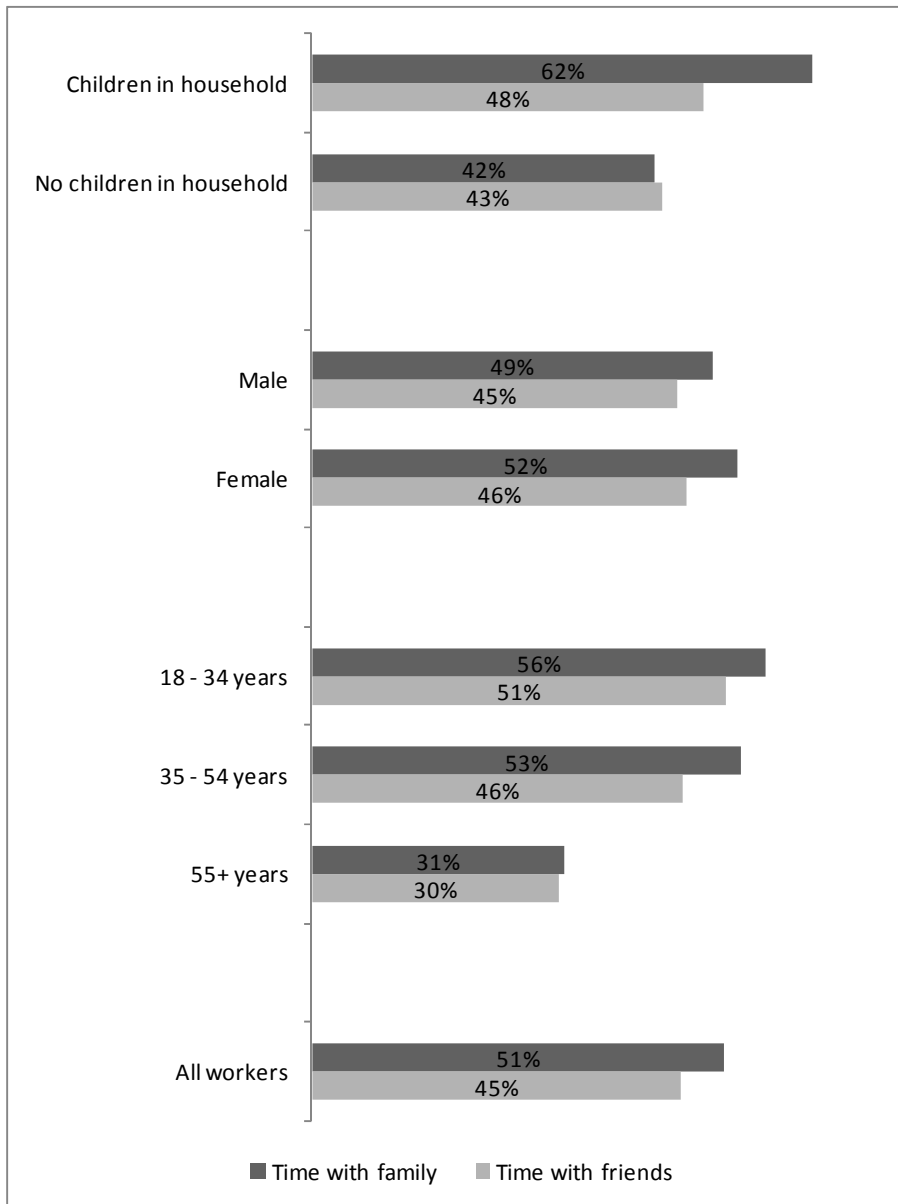


* Base = 1,061. Includes respondents in paid work.

One in two respondents (51 per cent) said that work had prevented them spending time with family and friends in the past week, while 45 per cent said that work had stopped them

spending time with friends. Family time was a particular problem for those with children in the household (62 per cent).

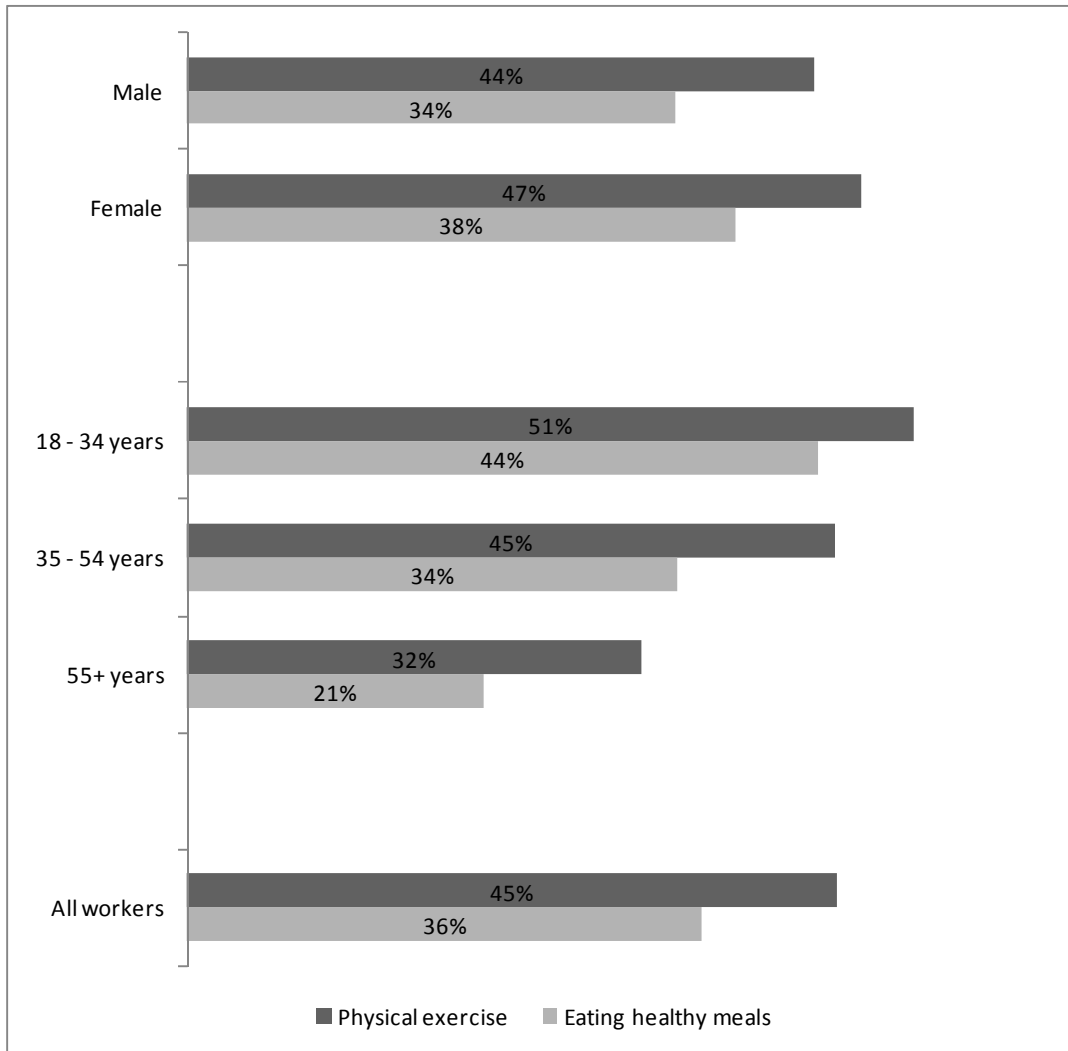
Figure 6: Percentage prevented from spending time with family and friends in the past week because of work*



* Base = 1,061. Includes respondents in paid work.

Survey results also show the extent to which work inhibits people taking action to improve their health. Around half of respondents (45 per cent) said that work had prevented them from doing physical exercise in the past week, while a third (36 per cent) said that work had prevented them from eating healthy meals. Although men tend to work longer hours in paid work, women were more likely to report that work had stopped them doing these things.

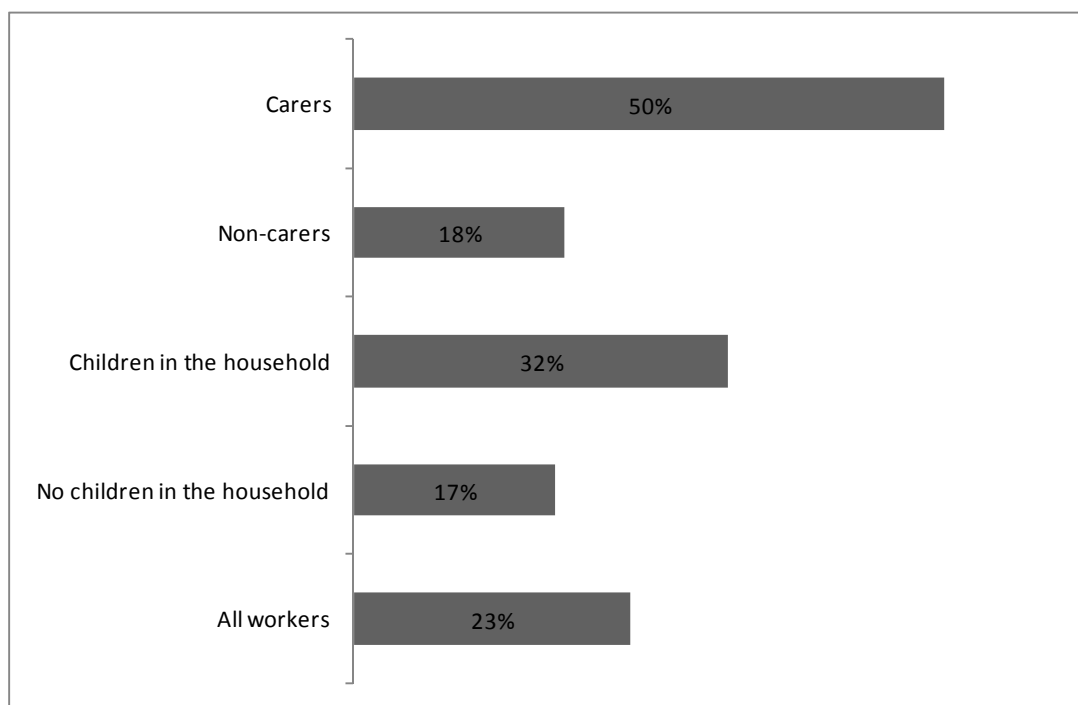
Figure 7: Percentage prevented from doing physical exercise and eating healthy meals in the past week because of work*



* Base = 1,061. Includes respondents in paid work.

Survey results show that time poverty affects both the people who work long hours and the people around them. A quarter of respondents (23 per cent) said that in the past week work had prevented them from looking after someone who needed them. Fully half (50 per cent) of people with responsibility for caring for a disabled spouse or relative said that work had prevented them from looking after someone who needed them, while a third of those with children in the house (32 per cent) said the same.

Figure 8: Percentage prevented from looking after someone who needs them in the past week because of work*



* Base = 1,061. Includes respondents in paid work.

What if there were more time?

Survey respondents were asked what they would spend more time doing if they did not have to work so much and were given the opportunity to answer in any way they chose. Their responses fell into the following broad themes, from most to least common:

- Family
- Relaxation/rest
- Travel
- Housework
- Hobbies
- Exercise
- Socialising
- Studying
- Volunteer work

There were some notable differences between the answers men and women gave about how they would like to spend any extra spare time. Women were far more inclined to want to catch up on housework (including chores and renovations/improvements), while men wanted to spend more time doing exercise or sport, or having general 'downtime'. Taking part in relaxing activities was less of a priority for women, who tended to say they wanted to spend more time socialising and catching up with friends.

Respondents with children living in the house commonly said that they would want to spend any extra time with their immediate family, including spouses and children. Meanwhile, those without children were more likely to say that they would dedicate their time to hobbies or becoming involved in sport or other activities outside the home.

Responses also differed by age. Younger respondents tended to say that they wanted to spend more time with their family, relaxing and doing housework. On the other hand, older respondents wanted to spend time gardening, cooking, doing creative things, travelling and socialising.

Conclusions

Personal Implications

These survey results show how widespread the phenomenon of time poverty is. Our findings indicate that just one in five employees are working the hours that they want to work, and around half would prefer to work fewer hours. On average, respondents said that they would prefer to work around two and a half hours fewer each week. People working very long hours—more than 50 hours a week—want to work almost two fewer standard working days (13.5 hours) a week.

At the other end of the labour market where people are working comparatively few hours, most want to work more hours. For example, people working less than 15 hours a week typically prefer to work an additional standard working day (8.7 hours) each week. Given these patterns—with people working long hours wanting to work less, and those working shorter hours wanting to work more—we can conclude that the labour market is quite ineffective in matching people's preferences with the right hours. This research indicates that an average working week of 30–35 hours would provide a better match between actual and preferred hours by bringing the average mismatch in hours closer to zero.

Survey results also show the impact that overwork, and the time poverty that overwork engenders, has on people's lives. Most workers report that work prevents them from spending enough time with family or friends, which is bound to have a negative effect on their individual and social wellbeing.

In addition, time poverty is affecting people's health. With one in two people prevented by the demands of work from doing physical exercise, and one in three finding it difficult to eat healthy meals, overwork is contributing to the 'lifestyle' diseases that are increasingly afflicting Australians and people across the world. Moreover, an earlier survey by The Australia Institute found that one in four people report being too busy to see a doctor, even though they probably should.⁴³ This means that overwork is inhibiting both the preventative and the therapeutic aspects of healthcare.

⁴³ R Denniss and J Fear, *Measuring What Matters: Do Australians have good access to primary health care?*, Policy Brief No. 13, The Australia Institute, May 2010.

This research shows that one group in particular suffers disproportionately from time poverty—carers. People caring for a disabled spouse or relative are much more likely to want to work fewer hours than other people. In addition, a majority of carers report that work prevents them from spending enough time looking after someone who needs them.

Economic implications

The survey results presented above suggest that a considerable majority of the population would like to see either a shortening of their standard working week or a substantial reduction in the amount of unpaid overtime they are working, or both. As the survey results also indicate that an appreciable number of part-time workers desire many additional hours of work, it seems inevitable that addressing the problem of overwork is likely to create opportunities for tackling underemployment.

The mismatch of hours worked in Australia is a significant economic issue. As described above, 50 per cent of respondents reported that they wanted to work an average of 10.9 *fewer hours* a week while 29 per cent of respondents said that they wanted to work an average of 9.8 *more hours*. If these figures are applied to the Australian labour market as a whole (11.3 million employees),⁴⁴ the implications are stark.

If 50 per cent of workers (5.7 million) are seeking to work 10.9 fewer hours each week, the sum total of 'overwork' is equivalent to 61.6 million hours a week, or 1.9 million jobs.

Similarly, if 29.4 per cent of workers (3.3 million) are seeking an average of 9.8 more hours a week, the amount of underemployment in the economy is equivalent to around one million average jobs.⁴⁵

If those wanting to work more hours could be matched with those who want to work fewer hours, we could shift the equivalent of one million jobs from those who do not want them to those who do.

Put simply, if all 11.3 million employed people were able to work their preferred hours, there would be 28.7 million fewer hours worked each week (using the average reduction of 2.54 hours). If employers sought to employ others to make up those lost hours, they would be looking for 886,000 new workers, given an average working week of 32.4 hours.

Of course, in reality it is not easy to divide the existing jobs of those who are working too many hours among the existing pool of those who would like to work more. However, there was a natural experiment in the reduction of working hours that may indicate the orders of magnitude likely to apply in Australia. In 2000, France reduced its working week from 39 to 35 hours and, as might be expected, unemployment fell and employment increased by 1.07 million in the period from 1999 and 2001.⁴⁶ The proportionate increase in employment was 44 per cent of the reduction in official working hours. If an Australian experience with a voluntary reduction in hours were to produce a similar result, the employment impact would create an additional 390,000 jobs as a result of people working 2.54 hours fewer each week. Interestingly, France experienced an increase in both GDP and GDP per capita in real terms, by 5.9 and 4.5 per cent respectively, after the reduction in hours. Such a result suggests the possibility of a reduction in

⁴⁴ ABS, *Labour Force, Australia, Sep 2010*.

⁴⁵ These jobs are assumed to correspond to the average working week for all workers (full-time and part-time) of 32.4 hours a week.

⁴⁶ International Monetary Fund, 'World Economic and Financial Surveys: World Economic Outlook Database', October 2010 Edition.

hours in Australia leading to an increase in employment without any sacrifice in material living standards.

What can be done about time poverty?

Are people suffering from overwork and time poverty ‘choosing’ to do so? In a certain narrow sense it can of course be argued that they are—every worker has the option of quitting their job and finding another one that better suits their circumstances. But should our society be placing so many people in the kinds of situations where this is the only ‘choice’ available to them? Put another way, after decades of public debate about the importance of labour-market flexibility, can we really describe a labour market as ‘flexible’ when four in every five workers are dissatisfied with their hours of work?

In addition to questioning the sincerity of those who claim to find it difficult to work the hours they say they would prefer, there are a number of steps that can be taken, both individually and collectively, to ensure that people have access to meaningful choices about the hours they work.

Addressing the problem of overwork while simultaneously maximising opportunities to attack underemployment will require a wide variety of changes—in the workplace, by individuals, and through policy intervention.

Recommendations

The workplace

1. Provide a clear statement of expected hours of work

In order to ensure that both potential and current employees of an organisation are aware of its work-hours culture, all firms should be required to provide an explicit statement about the hours of work that are expected, if necessary distinguishing between the expected hours for differing roles. Further, all firms employing more than 100 staff should be required to publish an annual report on employee satisfaction with work hours to facilitate conversations between senior managers and their employees and provide existing and potential employees with a basis to compare actual employment conditions between different workplaces.

2. Clearly communicate existing flexibility arrangements to all staff on a regular basis

Most public-sector workers and many employees of large corporations already have access to a wide range of flexibility mechanisms such as the ability to purchase additional weeks of annual leave, the right to request part-time work and even, in some instances, the ability to work for 80 per cent of pay in exchange for working only four years in every five. In order to encourage greater uptake of such arrangements, employers should regularly remind their employees that such schemes exist.

3. Provide remuneration alternatives whenever possible

Whenever employees’ pay is to increase, for example due to promotion, salary increment or changes to the tax scales, they should be informed of the range of alternatives available. For example, a four-per-cent pay rise is approximately equal to the provision of an additional two weeks of annual leave each year. If employees are to receive such an increase in pay, they should be informed beforehand that if they wish they can reduce the amount they work while maintaining their take home pay rather than, by default, maintaining the amount they work while increasing the amount they earn.

4. Work redesign

In recent decades, new technologies such as word-processing software and mobile phones have largely replaced the need for office-support positions such as typists and receptionists. However, while technological change has made some workplace tasks more productive, it has also resulted in shifting more administrative work from support staff to more highly skilled employees. As the volume of email, phone calls and other communications increases, so too does the difficulty for many workers to complete their tasks 'on time'.

In addition to reducing the administrative burden on skilled workers, the provision of an increased number of administrative support staff within organisations is likely to provide for a more effective distribution of work between those who feel they are working too many hours and those who wish to work more. However, it is often suggested that the redistribution of work from the overworked to the underemployed is made difficult by the mismatch in skills between the two groups. If organisations sought to redefine the responsibilities of employees such that skilled workers were freed from performing time-consuming administrative tasks while new positions were created for less-skilled workers, this mismatch would be of much less concern

Individuals

1. Keep track of time

Employees can help minimise the mismatch between their actual and desired hours of work by paying close attention to the hours they work and recording these hours in a way that facilitates discussion with their employer. Just as individuals who are struggling with their personal finances are encouraged to keep track of all of their spending, so too should individuals who are struggling with their work-life balance closely monitor the time they spend at work.

If, as proposed above, employers were required to make explicit statements to their staff about the organisation's expectations in relation to work hours, the value of keeping such information would be even greater.

2. Talk to colleagues about work hours

Dissatisfaction with work hours, as shown by the results presented above, is widespread in Australian workplaces. While individuals may find it difficult to cope with work-life balance issues in isolation, it is likely that they will find support from their colleagues. Events such as National Go Home On Time Day, for example, provide an impetus for such conversations but, if cultural change is to be achieved, such conversations need to be more frequent than once each year.

3. Find out more about existing flexibility arrangements

Many employees are either unaware of the existence of flexibility arrangements in their workplace or they feel that the pursuit of such arrangements is not well-regarded by their managers. While it is difficult for individuals to address issues of workplace culture, there is little doubt that increased awareness of such facilities is a precondition for increased uptake.

4. Signal to employers/unions the importance of time and genuine flexibility

As discussed above, the notion of workplace 'flexibility' has dominated debates about industrial relations in Australia for more than two decades. However, despite the repeated claims about the increased flexibility of the labour market, around four in five employees are dissatisfied with the number of hours they work.

Employees should, both individually and collectively, signal to their employers and to their unions how important it is to address the mismatch between the desired and actual number of

hours worked. Given that it has taken decades for this problem to arise, it is unlikely that it will be solved after any one conversation. The sooner that organisational restructures and enterprise bargaining agreements prioritise the issue of work-life balance, the sooner improvements can begin to be made.

Policy options

1. Government needs to play an active role

The policy rhetoric in Australia in recent decades has sought to shift responsibility for the determination of work hours from the state on to individual employers and employees but strong legal, economic and social arguments for policy intervention remain.

For more than a century, the struggle for a work day consisting of eight hours of work, eight hours of leisure and eight hours of rest dominated the policy and political landscape. Governments played a central role in creating institutions, generating a workplace culture and passing laws to ensure that such balance was achieved. Significant reforms are unlikely to be achieved without the direct involvement of governments.

2. Introduce restrictions on working hours

Capping working hours is not new to Europe, with France experimenting with a 35-hour week in 2000. The European Working Time Directive is also significant in that it seeks to deal with the issue of long working hours from a health and safety perspective. The Directive seeks to protect workers by limiting the average working week to 48 hours, including overtime, as well as mandating rest breaks and paid annual leave and setting out specific recommendations for industries such as doctors in training and transport sectors.⁴⁷ While the Directive applies to all EU member states, workers in the UK who are 18 and over can choose to opt-out of the 48-hour limit.⁴⁸

3. Improve the integration of the workplace and health portfolios

The Council of Australian Governments' healthy workers initiative,⁴⁹ which promotes physical activity and healthy eating in the workplace to prevent lifestyle-related diseases, has been expanded under the government's Preventative Health Taskforce⁵⁰ to include a range of workplace activities aimed at tackling obesity, smoking and alcohol consumption. The potential for contradiction between an industrial relations policy regime based around individual bargaining and a health focus on preventative medicine needs to be addressed within a whole-of-government framework. Put simply, the 'benefits' of a flexible labour market, in which 50 per cent of the population work longer hours than they would like, need to be considered against the cost of the preventable diseases associated with permitting such 'choices'.

⁴⁷ European Commission, Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 'Working conditions—Working Time Directive [Directive 2003/88/EC]', 2010.

⁴⁸ Directgov, 'Working time limits (the 48-hour week)', 2010.

⁴⁹ Council of Australian Governments, *National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2008.

⁵⁰ Australian Government National Preventative Health Taskforce, *Australia: The healthiest country by 2020—National Preventative Health Strategy—the roadmap for action*, Canberra, 2009.

4. Improve the design of policies to facilitate the provision of personal care

Acknowledging Australia's ageing population and the caring responsibilities of many working Australians, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) recently recommended that leave entitlements similar to those that exist for workers with young families apply to workers who want to spend more time with aged parents. ACTU President Ged Kearney observed that having the right to leave work early or take off blocks of time to care for frail parents 'would not only make life more manageable for millions of workers, it would speak to the sort of society we actually want'.⁵¹

5. Require the collection and publication of better data on work-life balance

It is often said that what gets measured gets managed. The Australian Government has collected a wide range of data on employment and unemployment for many decades. While there have been improvements in recent years, the current patterns of data collection do not match the significance of the problems associated with work-life balance. In particular, the government should fund the collection of regular data on:

- the mismatch between the desired and actual hours worked of all labour-force participants
- the reasons for any mismatch
- the personal implications of any mismatch.

As discussed above, there is also a need for substantial additional information in relation to the performance of specific employers in regard to the promotion of better work-life balance. There is an important role for government to play in ensuring that all large employers collect and publish data in a consistent way, giving existing and potential employees the capacity to make informed decisions about which firms to work for, based on each organisation's ability to provide a workplace environment that is consistent with employee preferences.

A decade after then Prime Minister, John Howard, declared work-life balance to be a 'barbeque-stopper', overwork still presents a massive imposition on the individual and social wellbeing of many Australians. Indeed, the steady creep of work on to weekends is, no doubt, responsible for stopping an increasing number of actual barbeques in addition to the metaphorical barbeque referred to by Mr Howard.

The data presented in this paper show that overwork is widespread, has significant implications for the health of both individuals and relationships and plays an important role in restricting the opportunities for those who desire additional work. While many workers and employees have taken steps to bring about more flexibility and better working arrangements, at an economy-wide level there remains a substantial mismatch between the hours that people want to work and the hours they are working. Unless concerted action is taken by all of those with an interest in this issue—workers, employers and policymakers—the scourge of time poverty is likely to persist.

⁵¹ G Kearney, 'A vision for the Australian union movement', speech to the National Press Club, Canberra, 6 October, 2010.

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