

YOUNG WOMEN DELAYING FAMILIES

In the mid-1980s¹, 46 per cent of all women aged 25–34 years who had the care of dependent children were in the labour force. By the mid-1990s, this had increased to 54 per cent. This is, by now, a well-recognised trend.

What is not so well-recognised, however, is that over that period, of all 25–34 year old women in the labour force, the percentage who had the care of dependent children had dropped in an almost identical way – from 54 per cent in the mid-1980s to 46 per cent in the mid-1990s. How can this be so?

It is because two trends have been working in parallel. The first is the trend for more of those women who have children to stay in, or return to, the workforce after the birth of a child or during the early child-raising years. The second trend has been occurring with somewhat less fanfare, perhaps because it has not attracted the need for specific services. As Table 1 shows, it is a trend towards non-family living among young women, and is driven largely by declines among young women who have the care of dependent children and to a lesser extent by declines among young women living with a partner.

Table 1 shows that at the end of the

Much of the commentary on women and children in the 1980s and 1990s has been about the increasing labour force participation of women with children. A counter trend, as swift and dramatic, has been masked by this focus, but is likely to have some impact upon the environment in which family-friendly workplace policy is framed.

CHRISTINE KILMARTIN
discusses a silent revolution among young women.

ten-year period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, among women aged 25–34 years:

- ten per cent fewer young women had dependent children living with them (down from just under 70 per cent to just over 59 per cent);
- the impact of this general trend on those in the labour force has been that 8 per cent fewer young women in the paid workforce had dependent chil-

dren living with them² (down from 54 per cent to 46 per cent);

- seven per cent fewer young women were living with a partner (down from 76 per cent to 69 per cent);
- five per cent more young women were living in non-family circumstances – that is, they were not living with a partner nor with dependent children (up from 16 per cent to 21 per cent).

These are quite significant changes in the lives of women aged 25–34 within a decade. This age range represents the major childbearing years for women. In the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, more than six in ten of the births that occurred were to women aged 25–34. But between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, the annual birthrate for women aged 25–29 years declined from almost 15 per cent to almost 13 per cent of women giving birth during the year.

During the same period, the birthrates of women aged under 25 have also declined. In 1985, almost 10 per cent of young women aged 20–24 years gave birth during that year. By 1995, the annual figure had declined to 7 per cent. This, too,

has shown up in the family arrangements of young women.

Table 2 shows that at the end of the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, among all young women aged 20–24 years:

- six per cent fewer young women had dependent children living with them (down from 24 per cent to 18 per cent);
- eleven per cent fewer young women were living with a partner (down from 40 per cent to 29 per cent);

- ten per cent more young women were living in circumstances other than with their own formed family (that is, they were not living with a partner nor with dependent children, although an increasing number were living with their own parents).

Although there has been some increase in birthrates over the decade among women in their thirties, that catchup has not been sufficient to make up for the losses at the younger age range. The birthrates for

women aged 30–34 years increased from 9 per cent in 1985 to almost 11 per cent in 1995, and for women aged 35–39 years from just under 3 per cent to just over 4 per cent. The percentage of women aged 35–44 who have the care of dependent children dropped slightly over the decade, from 79 per cent to 76 per cent, and the percentage living with a partner from 82 per cent to 78 per cent.

The intersection of trends has meant that between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, there has been no increase in the percentage of the female workforce with children under the age of ten years (23 per cent at both time periods). In the coming decade, if current trends continue, this percentage is likely to drop as the participation rate of women with children in the workforce stabilises while the participation rate for women without children continues to grow.

This should be reasonably good news for employers who want to offer additional flexibility to parents with young children because it means that costs are not likely to increase significantly. On the other hand, if the voices of parents with young children are dulled by a drop in numbers, it behoves employers to ensure that they continue to focus on the needs of such families, and not let them get buried in the larger section of the workforce who do not have such needs.

The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics child care survey (ABS 1996b) indicates that growth in demand for formal child care has

Table 1 Labour force and family status of females aged 25–34 years, mid-1980s and mid-1990s, Australia

	<i>Females aged 25–34</i>			
	<i>Total: % with dependants</i>	<i>In labour force: % with dependants</i>	<i>Total: % in couples (with/without dependants)</i>	<i>Total: % not in own families#</i>
mid-1980s	70	54	76	16
mid-1990s	59	46	69	21

not living with a partner or with dependent children

Source: ABS (various years), *Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families*. Catalogue No. 6224.0.

Table 2 Labour force and family status of females aged 20–24 years, mid-1980s and mid-1990s, Australia

	<i>Females aged 20–24</i>			
	<i>Total: % with dependants</i>	<i>In labour force: % with dependants</i>	<i>Total: % in couples (with/without dependants)</i>	<i>Total: % not in own families#</i>
mid-1980s	24	9	40	55
mid-1990s	18	8	29	65

not living with a partner or with dependent children

Source: ABS (various years), *Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families*. Catalogue No. 6224.0.

slowed considerably over the years 1993–1996. Most of that slowing has come from increased provision to meet demand, but some of it is coming from a slowdown in growth of overall numbers of children. The combination of this new labour force analysis and the 1996 child care data suggest that the recent assessment of demand made by the Economic Planning Advisory Commission (EPAC 1996) might be an upper range of possible need for child care.

One recent policy for which the effects might be felt upon this age range is the increase in direct costs of education to students, and a prolonged impact on wages during the early years of workforce participation and repayment of those costs. The likely effect will be to push out the ability to enter the house purchase market; and unless more young people decouple home ownership from the start of a family, there will be some flow-on effect to the age of first childbearing, compounding the trends described.

Beyond those policy implications lies the need for further exploration of the meaning of these trends for young women. Are we looking at a generation which has needed to gain a hold in the workforce before they can think about having families? Are we looking at a generation for whom the only age-specific achievements which will not stretch out almost forever are those associated with the biological clock? Young people may have to prolong the age by which they achieve a secure job, secure housing, and secure relationships,

but the one time point which is rather less flexible is the end of the child bearing period for women.

These trends are likely to be reflected in many post-industrialised countries but, set in a total international context, they are well ahead of the declines in birthrates throughout the major populations of the world. They suggest that countries like Australia may be on the edge of a revised form of policy agenda for families, one which recognises that a declining number of people are likely to participate in the raising of families as a direct experience.

How far these trends will go is not clear. Australia's Total Fertility Rate, at 1.824 for 1995, is still considerably higher than the figures for recent years in countries like Hong Kong (1.2), Italy (1.3), and Japan and Greece (each 1.4) (ABS 1996a), although it is falling and is likely to continue to do so into the near future. Canada and the United Kingdom have current Total Fertility Rates similar to those in Australia, while the United States and New Zealand have rates at around replacement level (2.0). Australia is likely to remain closer to these latter groups of countries, with which it shares other similar trends, into the near future.

Nevertheless, the data in this article show that the re-ordering of the lives of young women over the past decade will continue to impact upon the revision of policy and the distribution of paid work. The biggest impact of all, though, may be upon the lives of young people themselves, deciding in an indecisive world

about the value of children. Policy development which allows this decision to be well-balanced, and not driven solely by economic hardships at the beginning of the traditional family life cycle stages, is to be encouraged.

References

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- EPAC (1996), *Future Child Care Provision in Australia: Task Force Final Report*, Economic Planning Advisory Commission, AGPS, Canberra.

Notes

¹ In this article, the term mid-1980s refers to the years 1984–1986, and the term mid-1990s to the average of the years 1994–1996, in order to smooth the variation in annual figures.

² The data are drawn from household labour force surveys. They do not measure the number of births women have had, but rather the composition of the household in which women are living. There may therefore be a small group of women who have had children but are not living with them. There may also be a small group of women who have not had children but are caring for the children of a partner. The data do not allow an analysis of these circumstances, nor of any change in these circumstances in the time period.

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