

# The use of family-friendly work arrangements by lone and couple mothers

Having access to a range of “flexible” work arrangements has been shown to be important in assisting employed mothers to balance their family and work responsibilities. While there has been a substantial amount of research on the use of family-friendly work arrangements by Australian mothers, little is known about the use of these work arrangements by lone mothers and how this differs from that of couple mothers.

JODY HUGHES AND MATTHEW GRAY

**A**ccess to family-friendly work arrangements is important to mothers in negotiating their work and family responsibilities. Although as many as one in five Australian children lives in lone-parent families (usually lone-mother families), little is known about lone mothers’ demand for, and use of, family-friendly work arrangements, and how this compares to that of couple mothers.

Although there are likely to be many similarities in the challenges faced by lone and couple mothers in balancing work and family responsibilities, there are also likely to be differences. This may mean that the patterns of demand for, and use of, family-friendly work arrangements may differ between lone and couple mothers.

One source of difference in the demand for family-friendly work arrangements may arise from changes to the parenting role of fathers following marital separation, particularly in providing physical care. Post-separation, fathers’ involvement will almost certainly change. Around one-quarter of non-resident fathers have little or no face-to-face contact with their children, and around one-third have face-to-face contact with their children each Saturday night or every other weekend (see Smyth elsewhere in this issue). In other cases, fathers may play a greater role in providing physical care post-separation than they did pre-separation. However, on average, it appears that fathers provide less physical care post-separation.

To the extent that non-resident fathers have less involvement than resident fathers in caring for their children, lone mothers will need to provide greater levels of care or make greater use of non-parental

care. This may limit the number of hours and the days or times of day when they can work.

Irrespective of the overall amount of involvement of fathers in caring for their children, the timing and other aspects of their involvement are likely to change following separation, with less day-to-day involvement and less flexibility, making parental care difficult to coordinate. This may mean that lone mothers have a greater need for flexible work hours and leave arrangements to enable them to manage unpredictable events like family illnesses. On the other hand, it is possible that lone mothers may actually receive greater levels of child care support from extended family because their perceived need is greater.

Another factor influencing the need for and use of family-friendly work arrangements is that the types of jobs in which lone mothers are employed differ from those of couple mothers, with lone mothers more likely than couple mothers to be employed on a casual basis. In 2001, 35.1 per cent of employed lone mothers compared with 23.7 per cent of employed couple mothers were casually employed (ABS 2001).<sup>1</sup> By definition, casual employees do not have access to paid leave.

Access to family-friendly work arrangements also differs according to type and level of work. Those with higher levels of education and higher status jobs (such as managers, professionals and advanced clerical and sales workers) have better access than other employees (de Vaus 2004; Gray and Tudball 2002). Lone mothers have lower levels of education than couple mothers and are more likely to be employed as elementary or intermediate clerical and sales workers (unpublished cross-tabulations from 2001 Census).



This article addresses the question of whether lone and couple mothers differ in their use of, and unmet need for, family-friendly work arrangements. These are questions on which there is little published research.

The analysis is based on data from the *Managing Caring Responsibilities and Paid Employment Survey (2000)*, New South Wales, conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2000). This is one of the few Australian surveys that includes information on: the extent to which carers report wanting to make greater use of flexible work arrangements to provide care (unmet need); reasons for any inability to make greater use of the work arrangements; whether mothers have made employment changes in order to better manage their caring responsibilities; and whether there have been job changes they wanted to make but were unable to because of their caring responsibilities.

The family-friendly work arrangements and types of leave examined include: flex time; rostered days off; working from home; time off in lieu; shift work; part-time work; casual work; informal arrangements with employer; paid leave; and unpaid leave.

Although the survey is restricted to New South Wales, there is no particular reason to think that the pattern of results would fundamentally differ in other States or Territories of Australia, but further research would be needed to confirm this.

### **Labour force status of lone and couple mothers**

According to the *Managing Caring Responsibilities and Paid Employment Survey (ABS 2000)*, in New South Wales in 2000, 27.9 per cent of working age

women were couple mothers and 5.3 per cent were lone mothers (mothers being defined as women with children under the age of 15 years).

Table 1 shows the labour force status of lone and couple mothers. Lone mothers were less likely to be in paid employment than couple mothers, but among those who were in paid employment, lone mothers were more likely to be working full-time (50.1 per cent) than couple mothers (41.4 per cent). Although lone mothers were more likely to be not-in-the labour force than couple mothers, lone mothers were about three times as likely as couple mothers to be unemployed. These patterns are broadly similar to the national patterns (de Vaus 2004).

### **Work arrangements used to provide care**

The arrangements used by employed lone and couple mothers to provide care in the six months prior to the survey are shown in Table 2.<sup>2</sup> Nearly two-thirds of lone mothers (63.1 per cent) had made use

**Table 1 Labour force status of lone and couple mothers, NSW 2000**

	Lone mothers %	Couple mothers %
Total employed	47.5	60.8
Part-time employed	23.7	35.5
Full-time employed	23.8	25.2
Total not employed	52.5	39.2
Unemployed	6.8	2.1
Not in the labour force	45.6	37.1
Population total ('000)	105.4	559.4

*Notes:* Table population is mothers 18 to 64 years. Contributing family workers and employees paid in kind are classified as being employed.  
*Source:* ABS (2000).

of family-friendly work arrangements to provide care. This is greater than for couple mothers of whom 54.8 per cent had made use of a family-friendly work arrangement. An important point to be kept in mind when interpreting these figures is that the data only capture whether the work arrangement was used, not the intensity of use, thus there may have been differences between lone and couple mothers in intensity of use.

While the overall patterns of family-friendly work arrangements used by lone and couple mothers are similar, there are some important differences.<sup>3</sup>

One difference is that lone mothers were almost twice as likely as couple mothers to use shift work to manage work and caring responsibilities (10.2 and 5.2 per cent respectively). It is sometimes argued that shift work can be attractive to couple parents because it allows shifts to be coordinated so as to minimise (or eliminate) the need for formal child care (Deutsch 1999). It is therefore perhaps a little surprising that lone mothers were more likely

than couple mothers to use shift work to assist with providing care. A possible explanation is that lone mothers use shift work as a means of assisting with balancing work and family because their children are cared for by the non-resident father, friends or other family members who themselves are working during the standard working hours but are available to care for children at nights or on weekends.

Couple mothers were more likely than lone mothers to use part-time work to assist in providing care (21.0 and 16.5 per cent respectively). The slightly higher rate of use of part-time work by couple mothers is consistent with the results of other research which has shown that lone mothers are more likely than couple mothers to prefer full-time over part-time employment because of the need to earn a sufficient income for their family (Drago, Tseng and Wooden 2004; Glezer and Wolcott 1995).

Lone mothers were more likely to report using paid leave (19 per cent) than couple mothers (15 per cent). The higher rate of use of paid leave by lone mothers is significant because lone mothers are more likely to be casually employed than couple mothers and, by definition, casual employees do not have paid leave. Couple mothers may have less need to make use of entitlements such as paid leave for caring purposes if they have more child care options (including their partner, informal networks, or can afford to pay for formal child care).

Lone mothers are about one-third more likely than couple mothers to use casual employment to manage work and caring responsibilities (12.7 and 8.4 per cent respectively). This finding is interesting because lone mothers are substantially more likely to be casually employed than couple mothers and this therefore suggests that a substantial proportion (perhaps around one-third) use casual employment to assist with providing care.

The extent to which casual employment is sought because it provides flexibility in managing work and family commitments is unclear (Hosking and Western 2005 provide a discussion of this literature). Casual employment can provide flexibility to organise work shifts and schedules around caring needs, including being able to change the number of hours worked from week to week, and the timing/schedule of those hours (which might be helpful for lone parents, for example, if the children spend blocks of time living with their other parent). Wooden and Warren (2004) found that casual employees report high levels of satisfaction with the flexibility that casual employment provides for balancing work and non-work commitments. In other cases, particularly where the employee has little or no control over their work hours and work schedule, casual employment may make it more difficult for mothers to balance their work and family commitments (Pocock 2003).

### Unmet need for family-friendly work arrangements

A limitation of much of the research into the use of family-friendly work arrangements is that little information is available on the extent to which there are employees who would have been better able to balance

**Table 2 Type of work arrangements used to provide care, lone and couple mothers, NSW 2000**

	Lone mothers %	Couple mothers %
Flex-time	5.7	7.4
Rostered day off and time off in lieu	9.5	11.0
Working from home	7.0	5.8
Informal arrangement	10.5	11.0
Shift work	10.2	5.2
Casual work	12.7	8.4
Part-time work	16.5	21.0
Paid leave	19.0	15.0
Unpaid leave	10.5	9.2
Other	0.0	0.8
<b>Total using family-friendly work arrangements</b>	<b>63.1</b>	<b>54.8</b>
Population total ('000)	40.1	260.6
Average number of types used (for those who used any)	1.6	1.7

*Notes:* Table population is employed mothers 18 years plus. Respondents could use more than one type of working arrangement.  
*Source:* ABS (2000).

**Table 3 Unmet need for flexible work arrangements, lone and couple mothers, NSW 2000**

	Lone mothers %	Couple mothers %
Flex-time	9.0	3.6
Rostered day off and time off in lieu	4.7	2.8
Working from home	4.7	3.3
Shift &/or casual work	1.0	0.4
Part-time work	3.0	2.3
Informal arrangement	4.2	2.6
Paid leave	5.0	4.1
Unpaid leave	3.0	1.3
Other	0.0	0.5
<b>Total with unmet need for any type</b>	<b>21.2</b>	<b>14.5</b>
Population total ('000)	40.1	260.6
Average number of types (for those who had any)	1.6	1.4

*Notes:* Table population is employed mothers 18 years plus. Respondents could nominate multiple work arrangements that they would have liked to make greater use of.  
*Source:* ABS (2000).

work and family responsibilities had they been able to make greater use of flexible work arrangements.

An unusual feature of the Managing Caring Responsibilities and Paid Employment Survey (ABS 2000) is that it contains a question on whether those with caring responsibilities would like to have made greater use of particular work arrangements to provide care in the six months prior to the survey. This is a particularly valuable question because, from a policy perspective, it is useful to know the extent to which employees could have benefited from increased access to these work arrangements. This question has been previously used to analyse the unmet need for flexible work arrangements to provide adult care and how this compares to its use by those caring for children (Gray and Hughes 2005).

Overall, among employed mothers, the level of unmet need for flexible work practices to provide care was quite low (Table 3). For couple mothers, 14.5 per cent would like to have been able to make greater use of some kind of family-friendly work arrangement. This is a little lower than lone mothers' level of unmet need for family-friendly arrangements (21.2 per cent). Lone mothers had a higher (often substantially higher) level of unmet need for every type of work arrangement covered in the survey. For example, 9.0 per cent of lone mothers reported an unmet need for flex-time as compared to 3.6 per cent of couple mothers. Lone mothers, on average, also reported wanting to make use of a larger number of work arrangements than couple mothers (1.6 and 1.4 respectively).

The ABS (2000) Survey also asked those with unmet need for family-friendly work practices the reasons why they could not make more use of flexible work arrangements to provide care. The small number of lone mothers who wanted to make greater use of family-friendly work arrangements means that the data could not be released for all reasons for lone mothers. Table 4 shows that for both lone and couple mothers, the most common reason given was not having access to adequate work arrangements (33.3 and 39.8 per cent respectively). The next most common response was work commitments, with 28.6 per cent of lone mothers giving this reason compared with 25.3 per cent of couple mothers.

The major difference between lone and couple mothers is that lone mothers were much more likely than couple mothers to nominate other reasons for their having unmet need. More than twice as many lone mothers as couple mothers said they would not be paid for time off (25.0 and 9.8 per cent respectively). This is likely to reflect the fact that a larger proportion of lone mothers is employed casually.

The other answers provided suggest that the reasons for higher levels of unmet need for family-friendly work arrangements among lone mothers are more complex than merely a lack of provision in the types of occupations and industries in which lone mothers

work. Twice as many lone mothers as couple mothers said they did not make greater use of family-friendly work arrangements because of subtle or other pressure from bosses or other workers (20.2 and 10.3 per cent respectively) and almost twice as many lone mothers as couple mothers said they did not make greater use of family-friendly work arrangements because they thought that, if they applied, their boss would refuse (27.4 and 15.0 per cent respectively).

There are several possible explanations for lone mothers being more likely than couple mothers to say that they did not make greater use of family-friendly work



**Lone mothers, on average, reported wanting to make use of a larger number of work arrangements than couple mothers.**

arrangements because of pressure from others or because they thought that, if they asked, their manager would refuse.

One possible explanation is that lone mothers are employed in jobs or workplaces with less formal provision of family-friendly work arrangements which means that there is more scope for their manager to refuse the request. Second, the culture of the workplaces that lone mothers are working in could be less family-friendly than those of couple mothers. It is also possible lone mothers may be less likely than couple mothers to be granted access to family-friendly work arrangements because they tend to have lower levels of education and are therefore seen as being of less "value" to the employer. Finally, it is possible that since lone mothers already make more use than their colleagues of the family-friendly work arrangements that exist in their workplace, they feel unable to ask for more, despite greater need. Further research is needed to explore these possibilities.

**Employment changes and caring responsibilities**

The extent to which mothers are able to find jobs with the kind of work arrangements that enable them to balance their work and family commitments is likely to influence their ability to maintain

**Table 4 Reasons for unmet need, lone and couple mothers, NSW 2000**

	Lone mothers %	Couple mothers %
Applied or asked but was refused	#	9.0
Do not have adequate working arrangements	33.3	39.8
Didn't apply as thought they would say no anyway	27.4	15.0
Work commitments	28.6	25.3
Not paid for time off	25.0	9.8
Subtle or other pressure from bosses or other workers	20.2	10.3
Anything else	#	13.2
Population total ('000)	8.4	37.9

*Notes:* Table population is employed mothers 18 years plus. Respondents could nominate multiple reasons for not being able to make greater use of the family-friendly work arrangements. # Indicates that the figure was not released by the ABS due to confidentiality concerns. *Source:* ABS (2000).

a job and progress in a career over the longer term. To explore this issue, we examined the kinds of job changes made by employed mothers in the six months prior to the survey to make caring easier, and the kinds of job changes they wanted to make, but were unable to make, because of their caring responsibilities.

The proportion of employed lone mothers who reported making job changes in the six-month period to make caring easier was very similar to that of couple mothers (15.7 and 13.8 per cent respectively). There was also little difference between lone and couple mothers in the types of job changes made. These rates of making job changes would appear to be quite high given the relatively short time period referred to in the questions. Furthermore, the impact of caring responsibilities on mothers' employment decisions might be most evident at particular points in time – say, when they first have children and/or seek to return to paid employment following the birth of children – and is not recorded in a survey at a single point in time (or over a single six-month period).

Table 5 shows that a larger proportion of lone mothers than couple mothers wanted to make some kind of job change but felt unable to because of their caring responsibilities (21.4 and 10.7 per cent respectively). Lone mothers were about twice as likely as couple mothers to have wanted to make each type of work change, and more than six times more likely to have wanted to change jobs (14.7

and 2.3 per cent respectively). It appears that lone mothers are more likely than couple mothers to be unable to make desired job changes because of their caring responsibilities.

The final type of job change considered is the decision to become a contractor or start up a business in order to make caring easier. It is sometimes argued that becoming self-employed may make it easier to combine paid work with caring responsibilities because it means more control over work hours, work loads and work arrangements (Berke 2003; Bell and La Valle 2003). Table 6 shows the proportion of employed mothers who are employees and the proportion who are self-employed or a contractor. It also shows the proportion of self-employed mothers who said that the main reason they became self-employed was to make caring easier.

Employed couple mothers are more likely to be self-employed or a contractor (18.9 per cent) than lone mothers (12.5 per cent). This is consistent with the results of the ABS Forms of Employment Survey (2001) which provides national data on self-employment for lone and couple mothers (ABS 2001). The survey found that 20.2 per cent of employed couple mothers were owner managers of incorporated or unincorporated enterprises, compared with 8.3 per cent of employed lone mothers.

This may reflect the fact that couple mothers are more likely to work in a family business, alongside their partner. However, among those who are self-employed, lone mothers are more likely than couple mothers to say they became self-employed in order to make caring easier. This again suggests that lone mothers' employment decisions are more likely to be affected by their caring responsibilities than are those of couple mothers.

## Conclusion

Having access to a range of "flexible" work arrangements has been shown to be important in assisting employed mothers to balance their family and work responsibilities. While there has been a substantial amount of research on the use of family-friendly work arrangements by Australian mothers, little is known about the use of these work arrangements by lone mothers and how this differs from that of couple mothers. This paper has used survey data collected in New South Wales in 2000 to examine this issue. The paper also provides an analysis of the unmet demand for these work practices amongst employed mothers, something on which there is very little empirical evidence. The limitations of the dataset are that it is restricted to New South Wales, and the sample of lone mothers is relatively small. Thus further research would be valuable to confirm these findings.

A focus on lone mothers is important for several reasons. First, about one in five Australian families with dependent children is a lone-parent family and these are mostly lone-mother families (de Vaus 2004). Second, differences in the amount and nature of the fathers' involvement in providing physical care of their children may mean that the needs of lone and couple mothers differ. Third, lone mothers have a lower employment rate than couple

**Table 5 Job changes wanted to make but could not because of caring responsibilities, lone and couple mothers, NSW 2000**

	Lone mothers %	Couple mothers %
Change jobs	14.7	2.3
Apply for a promotion	5.7	2.5
Change total number of hours worked	13.0	6.2
Change usual start or finish work times	11.7	4.6
None	78.6	89.3
Population total ('000)	40.1	260.6
Average number of job changes wanted (for those who wanted any)	2.1	1.5

*Notes:* Table population is the employed mothers 18 years plus. Respondents could nominate multiple job changes they wanted to make. A small number of lone and couple mothers also mentioned other types of job changes. These are not reported in this table. *Source:* ABS (2000).

**Table 6 Type of employment, lone and couple mothers NSW 2000**

Family type	Type of employment		
	Employee %	Self-employed or contractor contractor %	Became self-employed or to make it easier to provide care %
Lone mothers	87.5	12.5	42.2
Couple mothers	81.1	18.9	35.3
All	82.0	18.0	36.0

*Notes:* Table population is employed mothers 18 years plus. Contributing family workers and employees paid in kind are excluded since it is not possible to determine the nature of the employment relationship. The percentages who became self-employed in order to make caring easier are percentages of self-employed persons only. Respondents who said that they didn't know whether they became self-employed in order to make caring easier are classified as not having become self-employed to make caring easier. *Source:* ABS (2000).

mothers and one potential reason for this is that lone mothers, on average, find it more difficult to balance family and work responsibilities.

More than half of couple mothers and nearly two-thirds of lone mothers had made use of a family-friendly work arrangement to enable them to provide care for their children in the six months prior to the survey. While lone mothers were more likely to have made use of family-friendly work arrangements than couple mothers, their overall patterns of use were similar. This is perhaps not surprising given that the work arrangements that are available will be largely dependent on the workplace and the type of job in which the mother is employed rather than the personal situation of the employee.

However, there were some important differences in the types of work arrangements used by lone and couple mothers. Lone mothers were more likely than couple mothers to use shift and casual work to manage caring responsibilities, while couple mothers were more likely than lone mothers to use part-time work. Lone mothers were also more likely to use paid leave arrangements in order to manage caring responsibilities.

The majority of employed lone and couple mothers reported that, in the six months prior to the survey, there were no work arrangements that they wanted to make more use of to provide care for their children. However, lone mothers did report having a greater level of unmet need (78.8 per cent) than couple mothers (85.5 per cent). Lone mothers were more also likely to say that they were not paid for time off, that they did not apply because of subtle or other pressure from bosses or other workers, and that they did not apply because they thought their boss would refuse their request.

Although the levels of unmet need were relatively low among employees, caring responsibilities were given as a major reason for not seeking employment among mothers not-in-the labour force (Gray and Hughes 2005). It is likely that improved access to family-friendly and flexible work arrangements would result in entry into the labour force by some mothers.

Lone mothers and couple mothers both reported quite high rates of having made job changes in the six months prior to the survey (15.7 and 13.8 per cent respectively). However, lone mothers were much more likely to say that there were job changes they wanted to make but could not because of their caring responsibilities. This suggests that caring responsibilities are having a greater impact on the types of jobs and potentially career advancement of lone mothers than couple mothers. It may also reflect the fact that lone mothers are the single income earner for the family (notwithstanding possible child support payments) and hence are more conscious of obtaining promotions, working longer hours, and getting higher paid jobs.

The data presented in this paper suggest that lone mothers have a greater demand for family-friendly work arrangements than couple mothers, and they

also have a higher level of unmet need. This paper has not provided direct evidence about the reasons for the higher levels of unmet need among lone mothers but the reasons given for the unmet need suggest that it is explained in part by the fact that the types of jobs held by lone mothers differ on average to those held by couple mothers. However, it is also likely that it is explained in part by the different parenting demands that lone and couple mothers face.

### Endnotes

1. An additional 2.7 per cent of employed lone mothers and 2.6 per cent of employed couple mothers were employees without paid leave entitlements but did not classify themselves as being casual.
2. Mothers who are self-employed or contractors were not asked this question.
3. The sample of lone mothers is much smaller than the sample of couple mothers and so for lone mothers some of the estimates have relatively high standard errors and therefore need to be interpreted with caution



**Lone mothers have a greater demand for family-friendly work arrangements than couple mothers, and they also have a higher level of unmet need.**

### References

- ABS (2001), *Forms of Employment Survey (2001)*, Catalogue No. 6359.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- ABS (2000), *Managing Caring Responsibilities and Paid Employment Survey (2000)*, New South Wales, Catalogue No. 4903.1, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Bell, A. & La Valle, I. (2003), *Combining self-employment and family life*, The Policy Press, Bristol.
- Berke, D. (2003), "Coming home again: The challenges and rewards of home-based self-employment", *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 24, May, pp. 513-546.
- Deutsch, F. (1999), *Halving it all: How equally shared parenting works*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- de Vaus, D. (2004), *Diversity and change in Australian families: Statistical profiles*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- Drago, R., Tseng, Y. & Wooden, M. (2004), *Family structure, usual and preferred work hours, and egalitarianism in Australia*, Working Paper No. 1/04, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, Parkville.
- Glezer, H. & Wolcott, I. (1995), *Work and family life: Achieving integration*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- Gray, M. & Hughes, J. (2005), "Caring for children and adults: Differential access to family-friendly work arrangements", *Family Matters* no. 70, pp. 18-25.
- Gray, M. & Tudball, J. (2002), *Family-friendly work practices: Differences within and between workplaces*, Research Report No. 7, Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Hosking, A. & Western, M. (2005), "The effects of non-standard employment on work-family balance", Paper presented to the 9th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Melbourne, 9-11 February.
- Pocock, B. (2003), *The work-life collision: What work is doing to Australians and what to do about it*, Federation Press, Annandale.
- Wooden, M. & Warren, D. (2004), "Non-standard employment and job satisfaction: Evidence from the HILDA survey", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 46, pp. 275-297.

Jody Hughes is a Senior Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Matthew Gray is the Deputy Director, Research, at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.