

# An Unexpected Tragedy

Evidence for the connection between working hours and family breakdown in Australia

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**Executive Summary**

Relationships Forum Australia

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## A Nation Dominated By Work

Thirty years ago, the average Australian worker spent less than forty hours a week at work – the vast majority of this time was in steady employment, working on weekdays between the hours of 8am and 6pm. This pattern of working life was shared across the broad community, providing opportunity for most Australians to enjoy consistent patterns of life *outside* work – to spend time on a predictable basis with family and friends, and in other community-related pursuits.

The past three decades have been a time of unambiguous economic prosperity for our country. But this success has come at a price. Working patterns have altered to such an extent that Australia is now the only high-income country in the world that combines:

- average working hours that are at the top end amongst high-income nations
- a strong tendency for work on weeknights and weekends, and
- a relatively large proportion of the working population employed on a casual basis.

## The Harsh Reality: Relational Breakdown and Dysfunction

A significant body of evidence suggests that those people who work long and unsocial hours spend less quality time with their families and friends and that most Australian families are suffering time pressure resulting from their work.

An emerging body of international research shows that these long and atypical working patterns are associated with dysfunctional family environments, including:

- a) Negative health outcomes for those working these times, particularly if they are parents
- b) Strained family relationships
- c) Parenting marked by anger, inconsistency and ineffectiveness

And, critically, both long/atypical hours and dysfunctional family environments are associated with:

- d) Reduced child wellbeing.

Notably, these associations are evident when either or both parents work atypical schedules, so the timing of fathers' not just mothers' work matters to children. And although low-income members of Australian society are generally more keenly affected by these changes, the impact is shared across all strata in our community.

Unsurprisingly, over the last 30 years in Australia, the decline in family relational health has led to an increased incidence of separation and divorce. And there are now more single parents than ever before. With only a single parent providing care for one or more children, increased time pressure and stress increase the probability of adult ill health, and parenting and child difficulties.

Other trends in the Australian workplace, and society more broadly, exacerbate the relational health problems described here and leave the workforce increasingly vulnerable to an eventual downturn in the economy. These trends include a sustained reduction in job stability, intensification of work responsibilities and increased household debt.

## What Australians Want

In 2006, 77% of surveyed Australians agreed with the statement: “A government’s prime objective should be achieving the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth”. And when asked “What is the most important thing for your happiness?”, almost 60% of surveyed Australians cited partner/spouse and family. A further 8% specified community and friends. It would appear, then, that a large proportion of the Australian population believes that a primary responsibility of government is to support and protect their happiness, founded in relationships with their family, friends and the broader community. At the same time, only one quarter of those surveyed think that life is getting better.

## What Australia Needs

To date, Australian governments have shown little awareness of the general association between working patterns and quality of relationships, particularly those in our immediate families. However, a variety of signals point to growing, broad-based dissatisfaction with the way that working patterns have evolved over the last three decades, particularly as they affect workers’ ability to foster relationships with family and friends. More than two-thirds of Australians believe that too many of us are working long hours. And almost two-thirds of those working long hours consider that their hours of work interfere with their family and personal life.

Sustained discontent with this core aspect of our shared social structure indicates an underlying imbalance of power between employers and employees. Two conditions will be required for policymakers to redress this imbalance:

1. A broadly-held public preference for the government to take action needs to be communicated clearly to those responsible for implementing public policy. The analysis and findings included in this report are intended to provide important grist to public debate. It is the task of politicians, journalists and other leaders within the Australian community to engage personally with this critical issue, encourage broad public discussion, independently gauge public opinion and, ultimately, push for policy reform.
2. Policymakers must have access to tools that will enable them to take appropriate action to support strong relationships in families and in the wider community. Two key tools required by policymakers are an integrated set of performance indicators to understand critical aspects of working patterns and relational outcomes, and practical policy options, so as to be equipped to take appropriate and timely action to foster relational health within households and families, and in the community more broadly.

It is likely that, once implemented, a set of policies that builds a platform for relational wellbeing, while minimising any downside to employers, will have a strong ongoing positive impact on the Australian macroeconomy, as well as greatly improving the lives of all Australians.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates the connection between changing working patterns and a general decline in wellbeing associated with relationships – particularly those in families, but also including friendships and participation in the broader community. The cold statistics hide immense human tragedy.

If the link between working patterns and family disintegration is accepted, it is incumbent on political leaders to take urgent action to address working time issues – so as to avert emerging social and economic repercussions, and to ensure a stable and sustainable society in the future.

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