

## **PARENTS' LONG WORK HOURS AND THE IMPACT ON FAMILY LIFE**

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### **Abstract**

This article reports on findings from a multi-method study on long working hours and their impact on family life. It draws on data from the New Zealand 2006 Census, a review of the literature, and a small qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with 17 families with dependent children in which at least one partner was working long hours. The study found that parents' working hours were driven by the requirements of their jobs, income, and the cultures of their workplaces, as well as the satisfaction work provided. Many parents felt unable to reduce their hours, despite believing that their hours had a variety of negative impacts on family life. A number of factors mediated the impact of long hours of work, including the availability of extended family for childcare and support; having flexible work arrangements and control over hours of work (including both the number of hours and when hours were worked); and how satisfied spouses were with both the number of hours of paid work and the impact of these hours on the availability of the long-hours worker to spend time with children and to do a share of the household chores. The article concludes by noting that long hours are just one factor among many that affect family functioning and wellbeing.

### **INTRODUCTION: WHY ARE WE INTERESTED IN LONG HOURS?**

Long working hours<sup>1</sup> are a significant issue for a number of reasons. It has been known for some time that working hours in New Zealand are among the highest in the world. Messenger (2004) compared the working hours of employees in a variety of countries, and found that only Japan topped New Zealand in the proportion of employees working 50 or more hours per week. Similarly, Callister (2004) found that New Zealand appears at the high end of the spectrum internationally when long weekly hours of work are considered, for both couples and individuals. He found that the proportion of employees working long hours has increased in the past 20 years, while the average hours worked has remained relatively stable, due to an increasing polarisation of working hours.

Long working hours affect a significant number of New Zealand families. In the 2006 Census 415,641 people reported working 50 or more hours each week, representing 23% of the workforce and 29% of full-time workers.<sup>2</sup> Those in agriculture, management and road/rail were the most likely to work long hours, and although workers with high incomes were the most likely to work long hours, the majority of long-hours workers were in lower income brackets (Fursman 2008).

Census data show that the largest group of long-hours workers have no qualifications, and that those who work the longest hours are lower income (Fursman 2008). As such, while there are significant proportions of long-hours workers earning high salaries in management

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as 50 or more hours per week.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics New Zealand defines full-time work as 30 or more hours each week, and it is this figure that is used in this paper for calculations based on all full-time workers.

positions, some of the parents working these hours are those least likely to be able to negotiate working arrangements conducive to family wellbeing.

Among dual-earner couples with dependent children, 29% (or 98,466) worked 80 or more hours between them, while 27,063 (or 8%) worked more than 100 combined hours. Of the couples who worked 100 or more hours between them, there were 12,963 couples with dependent children where both partners worked 50 or more hours each. The literature suggests that long hours of work can have a variety of impacts on family wellbeing, including providing greater income but also negatively affecting time available for family members.

As an advocate for families, the Families Commission was interested in not only which families worked long hours, but also in the impact such hours have on families, particularly those with dependent children. The objectives for this project were to:

- gain an understanding of the impact of long working hours on family life and family wellbeing
- gain an understanding of the factors parents consider when making decisions about working long hours, including the hours worked, who works them, and the role of income(s)
- explore the trade-offs that working long hours involve, for both the family as a whole and the individual(s) working long hours
- explore the reasons family members work long hours
- explore how external factors such as travel time affect the effects of long working hours.

#### A FRAMEWORK FOR EXAMINING LONG HOURS AND THEIR IMPACT ON FAMILIES: CONSIDERING "WELLBEING"

In looking at the issue of long working hours and their effect on family life, it is useful to consider a framework for family wellbeing in order to examine the areas of family life where working hours might have an impact. Wellbeing can be defined as "the quality of life of an individual or other social unit" (Behnke and MacDermid 2004); however, there is no standard definition of wellbeing across disciplines or studies. Across definitions, most descriptions and measurements of wellbeing seem to contain both subjective and objective measures, which commonly include physical, material, social, psychological and health factors.

Defining and measuring family wellbeing is complicated by the fact that there is no commonly agreed definition of individual wellbeing. Weston et al. (2004) note that family wellbeing indicators include:

subjective and objective indicators or gradations. Common indicators of family wellbeing include a family's financial and material circumstances, parental employment, family members' satisfaction with relationships with each other and their reports of behaviour that provide insight into parenting styles and the quality of "family functioning". (p.4)

Most studies of family wellbeing tend to assume that "the wellbeing of families is a function of the wellbeing of each family member. When one family member struggles all others are impacted" (Behnke and MacDermid 2004). As such, the impact of a variable like working hours affects both the individual worker and their family, directly and indirectly. In line with this, the project focused on the views of the long-hours worker regarding the impact of long working hours on their family life, with their partner (in most cases) also participating in the interview. The participation of the partner was important because previous research has

shown that factors such as the satisfaction of the partner with their spouse's working hours mediates the impact of long hours on family life (Weston et al. 2004). Because of ethical and resource implications, data from children in the families were not gathered.

In a report on using census data to construct indicators of family wellbeing in New Zealand, Milligan et al. (2006) adapted Hird's (2003) model of individual wellbeing to provide an analytical structure for examining family wellbeing. In Milligan et al.'s model, the objective and subjective components that contribute to family wellbeing are teased out to include factors such as income, education and health, as well as the quality of relationships and family functioning. The model was used as the basis for the interview schedules for this project, and shaped the analysis of the collected data.

## METHODOLOGY

The project draws on a number of sources in order to obtain a more complete picture of the impact of long working hours on New Zealand families. It began with a literature review, which canvassed recent research on the impact of long working hours on the family. The results of this review are reported throughout this article.

The review highlighted the fact that while there is a reasonable body of literature examining the impact of long working hours on various aspects of family life, the bulk of previous research tended to be large quantitative studies conducted outside New Zealand. The majority of these studies focused on just one aspect of family wellbeing (e.g. on the impact of long working hours on partner relationships), and measured outcomes as discrete variables that were then analysed using a variety of statistical methods.<sup>3</sup> However, few studies provided a more holistic discussion of the range of impacts of long working hours on families, with even fewer including the voices of family members themselves. Other studies have examined the impact of work on family life, but have not focused in detail on long working hours (Ministry of Social Development 2006). For this reason, a mixed-method approach was selected for this project, which included both quantitative data from the most recent New Zealand Census and qualitative data from a small but diverse group of families who had at least one parent working long hours.

While the literature review was being conducted, analysis of the 2006 New Zealand Census was carried out as part of a joint project between the Families Commission and the Department of Labour.<sup>4</sup> This analysis examined the demographic profile of long-hours workers across a range of variables, including gender, ethnicity, education, occupation, industry, income, location and family type. Results for some of these analyses are included throughout this paper.

The results of the Census project were used to set the parameters for the selection of families for inclusion in the qualitative stage of the research. This ensured that the long-hours workers included in the qualitative research were drawn from the groups who are most likely to be working long hours. Families were chosen where a parent worked long hours and was employed in an occupation or industry shown by the Census to involve high proportions and

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Baxter 2007, Alexander and Baxter 2005, Crouter et al. 2006, Crouter et al. 2001, Crouter et al. 1999, Galambos et al. 1995, Strazdins et al. 2004, Weston et al. 2004, Weston et al. 2002.

<sup>4</sup> The full findings from this analysis have been published separately (Fursman 2008).

numbers of long-hours workers. The study targeted families where the parent working long hours was employed in roading, in a management position, in education, as a hospitality or retail manager, or worked in agriculture. In addition, families where the parent working long hours was self-employed or held multiple jobs were targeted.

As the majority of long-hours workers in the Census were male, the parent working long hours was male in 12 of the 17 families selected. Families were also selected to include a range of ethnicities, and a range of number and ages of children; however, because of the small number of families involved, differences in results by gender or ethnicity can not be reported.

Families in both rural and urban regions participated, and across a variety of ages, although the criterion of having dependent children meant there were natural age boundaries around the sample. Analysis of the income of long-hours workers in the Census suggested that both families with a parent who worked long hours and had a relatively high income and families where a parent worked extremely long hours for relatively little compensation should be included, so both these factors were among the criteria for family selection.

The qualitative research was designed to elicit the voices of families across a range of different circumstances, and to illustrate the diversity of experiences families have with long working hours. Because the parents included in this stage of the research fitted a general profile of long-hours workers in New Zealand, their stories can be used to illustrate a range of impacts long work hours may have on family life. However, the sample is small and therefore is not representative of all parents working long hours, or of all families with dependent children who have a parent working long hours. Nor does it claim to be representative of other families who appear to be in similar circumstances. Rather, the qualitative research complements both the Census data and the literature on long-hours workers and their families.

In-depth interviews were conducted with both partners in 15 families with dependent children, and one interview was conducted with one long-hours worker whose partner was unavailable. A further interview was conducted with a divorced father of dependent children.

As noted, the project used Milligan et al.'s (2006) model of wellbeing as a guide to assist in the interviews with the couples. These interviews asked parents about their subjective views on how the long working hours of one partner were affecting their family. Although the areas explored in the interviews were shaped by Milligan et al.'s model, the research did not examine the impact of long working hours on the various aspects of family wellbeing from an objective standpoint. That is, the researchers did not construct objective measures of wellbeing (such as physical and psychological measures), then assess each family against these measures. Rather, the model was used to shape the range of areas on which interviewers focused their questioning.

The data used in the qualitative analysis came from both transcriptions of selected passages of the interviews and from two interviewers' field notes. The transcriptions and notes were read multiple times to identify the emergent themes, with iterative coding done throughout the analysis. To increase reliability, at the completion of the field work the interviewers and note-takers involved in the interviews met and worked through each interview individually, to allow comparison of dominant themes and to compare and resolve any discrepancies in interpretation through discussion.

## REASONS FOR WORKING LONG HOURS

There were four main reasons why parents in the study worked long hours:

- the requirements of the job (including completing the tasks involved, having a high workload, and customer demands)
- the need for a greater income (both maintaining a basic standard of living, and being able to afford “extras”)
- the pressure of workplace and industry culture
- to a lesser extent, to reap the more intangible rewards of work.

However, most of the family members interviewed indicated that there was more than one reason behind the long hours worked. Few workers could therefore be classed as working long hours as result of just one of these drivers, with some families citing all four reasons for their long working hours.

### Requirements of the Job

Of the parents we interviewed, all but two of those working long hours attributed their hours in part to their workload or the requirements of their job. The two who did not cite workload were the two workers interviewed who were holding down more than one job. Similarly, a significant body of research attributes long working hours to work demands (Department of Labour 2006, Relationships Forum 2007, Department of Trade and Industry 2007).

In the group of families we spoke to, the demands of work played out differently in different circumstances, and in different occupations. For some, work hours were dictated by a physical task or set of tasks that could not be left incomplete, or that had to be finished within an available window, which was often limited by weather or season. These included parents working in agricultural occupations, as well as a truck driver who needed dry weather to unload goods, a builder, and a road worker. These long-hours workers considered their hours a standard part of working in their particular occupation.

The qualitative research illustrated the extremity of actual working conditions for these workers, a reality that is somewhat obscured by a percentage total summarising the number of “workers putting in more than 50 hours a week”. In eight of the seventeen families we spoke to, one parent worked more than twice the standard 40-hour week. Ron, a farmer, who also took on contract driving work, worked up to 130 hours a week for the six months between August and January, sometimes missing meals or working right through the night without a break to make the most of dry weather.

Ron: “You just keep the lights on and drive all night ... we just can't leave it until the next day. It doesn't work like that.” (Family 7)

For the other six months of the year Ron worked a 10-hour day.

Analysis of the Census data showed that Ron worked in the occupation with the highest proportion and the second-highest number of long-hours workers. The analysis divided occupations into 43 categories, then ranked each according to the proportions and absolute numbers of workers who reported working long hours. “Farmers and Farm Managers” was the occupation with the highest proportion of long-hours workers (56.7%), and the second-

highest absolute number of long-hours workers (33,474). Farmers were also disproportionately more likely to work long hours, making up 8% of workers putting in long hours but only just over 3% of the total workforce.

Similar to the pressure to complete work during particular weather conditions was the need to stay on the job until a particular task was completed. Doug, married to Abbey and with two young children aged three and six, worked as a supervisor on a road crew laying down bitumen. He normally began work at around 5.30 am and worked a 12-hour shift, six days a week. However, he averaged at least 80 hours of work each week, as it was not uncommon for shifts to start at 5.00 am and not be finished until 10 at night, when the job was complete.

In addition to the fixed demands of the task at hand, and the seasons or weather, a number of workers also spoke about the demands of their customers or clients as directly increasing their working hours, with this having a particular impact for those who were self-employed. Parents with their own businesses who had no staff also found themselves working long hours to deal with the administrative work of running a business.

For others, particularly those in management positions, overall workload drove working hours up by requiring the worker to work beyond "standard" hours simply to keep up with all the necessary tasks. Managers in the study noted that they wouldn't be able to do their jobs in fewer hours, with most working extra hours in the evenings and weekends to ensure they completed all their necessary work.

Work demands that exceed a standard 40-hour week are disproportionately found in highly skilled and highly paid management positions (Maume and Bellas 2001, Callister 2004, Fursman 2008). New Zealand Census data also indicate that managers of various kinds ranked highly in both the proportions and the absolute numbers of long hours, with "Specialist Managers" ranking as the occupational category with the highest number (45,069) of long-hours workers.

### Income

Although income was a driver for most families in the study, there were three distinct groups of parents, delineated by how essential the money earned by working long hours was.

The first group of parents were working long hours simply in order to meet the basic costs of living. Lani, a 34-year-old Pacific Island woman, married with four children, was working an average of 75 hours a week as a caregiver in two different hospitals, while her husband, Tino, worked as a bus driver. Lani's main permanent shift was at night, but most days, after getting her children off to school and catching up on domestic tasks, she would sleep for maybe three or four hours before beginning a second casual afternoon shift. This would finish at 10.30 pm, allowing her to get to her fixed 11 pm shift on time, and resulting in her working back-to-back eight-hour shifts most days.

Lani rarely turned down the extra agency shifts, explaining:

Lani: "It's just the extra money, because our rent is going up, and power bills, telephone, and petrol as well, the children's school things, everything is going up." (Family 15)

Lani's situation illustrates a trend evident in the Census data: those who work the longest hours are often low-income earners. Of all those working 50 or more hours a week, more than half (55%) have incomes below \$50,000. In line with this, because those with incomes under \$30,000 are a significantly larger group than those with incomes over \$100,000, the absolute numbers of long-hours workers with low incomes are much greater than long-hours workers with high incomes. More than 90,000 low-income workers worked 50 or more hours each week, compared with just over 51,000 workers with incomes greater than \$100,000.

A second group of parents in the qualitative research worked long hours in order to maintain the lifestyle or income they felt they needed. This group of parents were working long hours in order to afford "extras." In many cases, these extras were relatively small treats, such as family outings. These families, with the exception of one, were far from wealthy, but at the same time, did not appear to struggle to pay basic living expenses. Rather, they spoke about needing to earn enough money to sustain a particular standard of living.

Sarah, a supermarket manager, noted:

Sarah: "For me it was the money ... and to be able to go ten pin bowling and go to the pictures and do things. And to do that, I did need to go up a few more hours each week. And if you want Sky, and you want to be insured ... if you want all that, I had to work the extra hours really." (Family 11)

The final group of parents did not appear to be working long hours for income-related reasons, and were spread across the income spectrum. Long-hours workers in these families attributed their working hours to other causes, such as workload and the requirements of their jobs as discussed above, and the intrinsic rewards they received from their work.

### Workplace and Industry Culture

A number of workers interviewed cited the culture of their workplace as a key driver affecting their long hours of work. This was particularly the case both for managers working long hours and for workers in particular industries where long hours were the norm, such as hospitality, road/rail and agriculture. These workers expressed strong views that long hours were an integral part of the industry they were in.

Sue: "I have to work those hours to meet the expectations of the people around me." (Family 4)

Interviewer: "What would happen if you asked for shorter hours?"

Reagan: "That would be unreasonable in the job capacity I have that that would ever happen ... That sort of arrangement is completely unrealistic in the industry I'm in." (Family 12)

Hemi: "We've got a couple of young guys start with us who want to get into trucks and that, and they thought it was a job from 8 until 5" [roars with laughter]. (Family 6)

The culture of the workplace was not only a top-down phenomenon, shaped by the attitudes and actions of managers, but was also a product of the attitudes of those at other occupational levels, a finding which was evident in the Department of Labour (2006) work--life balance study, which found that 59% of employees reported that the attitudes of colleagues and workmates made it harder for them to achieve work--life balance.

## IMPACTS OF WORKING LONG HOURS

### Positive Impacts

Parents who worked long hours identified a number of positive impacts when asked about their hours, including being a role model, earning extra income (for those on wages) and building up a business.

Marian: "He's a role model. In order to get anywhere in life, you have to work, and they learn that." (Family 7)

However, some of the positive benefits cited, such as staying off a benefit, were factors that resulted from being in paid work generally rather than from working long hours in particular.

### Negative Impacts

Negative impacts for many long-hours workers included fatigue and sleep deprivation, stress, negative impacts on health and fitness, and having less energy for parenting.

Kate: "[He comes home] tired, grumpy."

Ariki: "When you get tired, you don't want people, kids, bugging you all the time." (Family 9)

Wayne: "[Exercise] is one thing where I do miss out ... but my excuse [is] that I'd just have to make up the time. If I did an hour a day ... it just means that that hour of work has to be picked on Thursday night, or on Saturday night, and I do enough of that anyway." (Family 2)

Ron: "It will be from 5 in the morning until 12 at night, 1 o'clock in the morning."

Interviewer: "So, not much sleep?"

Ron: "No. I had seven hours' sleep in five days there a few months ago, so it's just, yeah ... coffee and V are the two priorities." (Family 7)

A key impact of long-hours work on the family was the reduction in time available to spend with children. Many of the parents interviewed spent very little time with their children, and, in most cases, felt the absence of this time keenly.

Interviewer: "Have your hours had an impact on the family?"

Karen: "Yeah, they have, because I haven't had that amount of time just to chill out with the kids ... just haven't been as available to them, which is really hard, because you don't get the time back." (Family 3)

Polly: "He'd be gone at 6 in the morning, didn't see him until 7 at night. I used to keep the kids up until 7.30 so he could see them for half an hour. Then they were off into bed. That was the norm during the week, gone at 6 and back at 7." (Family 2B)

Barbara: "The kids don't really see him ... During the summer, it's usually, it might go probably four or five days and the kids don't see him at all." (Family 14)

Lani: "The only thing I think about is the time I spend at work affects my family life. Like, spending more time working and not enough time here with family ... I am afraid that I am not going to know my children." (Family 15)



Parents cited examples of their children's negative reactions to insufficient time with parents, but even if they could have afforded it financially, many parents were unable to change the number of hours they worked.

Other impacts for some families included not having family holidays together, children being less able to take part in other activities, an inability to spend special occasions together, a faster pace of life, and much of the family "quality time" being spent in the car.

John: "The kids have got used to having no real holidays ... they realise that their life basically sort of gets manipulated around the business ... They'd all like a holiday, like a camping holiday, so, yeah." (Family 8)

Ariki: "I just want to ... take her to the park, go for walks, to the playground, ducks, because last time, the last time was that I took her out ... I really enjoyed doing that."

Interviewer: "How long ago was that?"

Ariki: "Four or five weeks ago."

Kate: "It comes down to if he works a Saturday."

Ariki: "Because if I'm tired, I can't, you know? But I just want to do it more often. It's the most important thing, spending time with your family." (Family 9)

Karen: "We don't do a hell of a lot as a family ... I haven't had a Christmas with my kids for I don't know how long." (Family 3)

There were significant impacts on the spouse of the long-hours worker, including being overloaded with all of the parenting and domestic duties, often while simultaneously working full-time, while those spouses outside the paid workforce felt unable to take on paid work or training.

Tessa: "It does get annoying at times. It does get annoying, because the burden of everything, I mean, I can squeeze my [work] hours in to a shorter day, but then the burden of everything else is on me, and the sick days and dropping off and picking up from pre-school and going to the doctor's and taking them to swimming on Saturday mornings and doing all the shopping. So Saturdays are just as stressful as a work day really, because it's full on." (Family 6)

Barbara: "Well, I'd like to go, go back in and work part-time or something, but I mean, in order for that to happen too, the hours have to be cut. His hours have to be cut. I mean, I can't go back into work if he's still going to work 12 hour days." (Family 14)

There were significant gender differences in the division of labour in the family, with women most commonly taking on all of the domestic work and childcare, even when they were also working full-time.

Although the literature suggests mixed findings regarding the impact of long hours on couple relationships, there was some evidence that long working hours put some couples under stress.

Barbara: "He'd go out and say I'm just going to work for a couple of hours and I'll be home at lunchtime, and he'd show up at 4 o'clock. So I just don't even ask anymore. I just think, 'Yeah, whatever'. Just move on. Because you're never when you say, ever, ever. So I just kind of go [shrugs] yeah. And then I'll say to him the next week, but you worked all day Saturday."

Craig: "Only half a day."

Barbara: "Yeah, but you finished at 4, Craig. How do you consider that a half a day?"

Craig: "Well, I started at 10."

Barbara: "You know, it's like, uugh, a couple of hours' work turns into 8, you know?" (Family 14)

Overall, it was clear that for a number of parents their long-hours means that work totally dominates their lives.

Abbey: "Doug basically works, eats, sleeps, and that's kind of his life." (Family 13)

Hemi: "Most of the time I'm just like a boarder, aren't I? I come in, have dinner, go to bed, wake up, gone again." (Family 6)

## FACTORS INFLUENCING THE IMPACTS OF PARENTS' LONG HOURS

A number of studies have found that direct relationships between long work hours and impacts on family functioning are negligible (Baxter 2007, Dermott 2006, Bianchi et al. 2006, Crouter et al. 2001). However, many have identified factors that act as mediators between long hours and the family. These include satisfaction with hours worked, spousal perception of hours, role overload, and the nature of the work being performed, both in terms of when it is performed and the quality of the work itself.

Because of the small sample size and the qualitative nature of this project, it was not possible to determine from the interviews a causal link between long hours and family wellbeing, nor to ascertain the relative roles of factors that acted as mediators in the causal chain. However, it was clear that there were a number of factors that reduced the impact that long work hours had on the families in the study. These included:

- having extended family support and assistance with childcare
- having flexible work arrangements and control over hours of work (including both the number of hours and when hours were worked)
- the perception of having sufficient income
- both spouses being satisfied with the number of hours of paid work and the impact of these hours on the availability of the long-hours worker to do unpaid domestic work generally, and spend time with children in particular.

Whether or not the partner of the long-hours worker was also employed, and the number of hours they were employed, also made a difference to the impact of long-hours work on the family.

A number of other factors acted to exacerbate the impact of long work hours, some of which acted as "tipping points" pushing the family into an extremely difficult situation. These included having no control over the hours or timing of work, the frequency and duration of travel, the poor health of family members, and, for those who were self-employed, the health of their business.

For example, Doug and Abbey (Family 13) are an example of the way long hours can combine with other factors to push the family into a fragile state. Doug worked very long hours in an industry with a culture of long hours, and he had no choice about the number or timing of his hours and no flexibility in his working arrangements.

Doug: "Start time is normally pretty standard. It is the finish times that fluctuate."

Abbey: "And what days ... there's no planning family events or anything like that ... it is really tough to plan anything actually. We just have to wait until generally the day before, and yeah, which is a bit hard on the kids. Especially Owen, now he is six, and he wants to do such and such in the weekend, like go to the museum or movies ... and we just can't plan."

Doug: "The biggest problem is, they won't let us know, on a Thursday, what's happening over the weekend. It's always Friday night they'll tell us. As frustrating as it is for her, it's as frustrating for me, because we're in there going, 'What's happening on the weekend?'" (Family 13)

Neither Doug nor Abbey were satisfied with his hours. Doug earned a relatively low salary (below minimum wage if he calculated his earnings per hour), and his lack of qualifications and other experience left him with limited options for changing jobs. He and Abbey had two young children, and because of his long hours Abbey essentially had the sole responsibility for their care. This was a major source of stress for her, and contributed to the stress-related health issues she suffered from. They had little extended family support.

Doug and Abbey's family situation highlights the role of education in providing alternative choices for long-hours workers. Those workers with few or no qualifications - and low-paid work - were trapped, required to continue to work in long-hours jobs because of a need for income and an inability to secure work in a different field. Doug fell squarely into this category. When asked about the reasons for his extremely long hours, he noted that he had few alternatives.

Interviewer: "Why do you work these hours?"

Doug: "Some of it is my schooling. I didn't stay at school very long, so I actually fell into the industry, and it's kind of stuck with me for so long, it's become my trade." (Family 13)

The situation of this family also illustrates that care must be taken not to attribute family stress solely to long working hours. The variety of factors at play in this family highlight that long working hours are just one factor among many that may strengthen or threaten family functioning, and as such, the impact of working hours can not be considered in isolation.

## DECISIONS AND EXPECTATIONS ABOUT WORKING HOURS

One of the goals for this project was to gain an understanding of the factors parents consider when making decisions about working long hours. However, a key finding of this and other recent research by the Families Commission (2008) is that many families don't make conscious decisions about their working arrangements. Instead, arrangements evolve without discussion or active decision-making, with little planning and discussion about working hours.

A number of the workers interviewed expressed the belief that their hours were an unavoidable part of working in their industry, a finding mirroring research on flexible work conducted by the Families Commission (2008). Families with workers who perceived long hours as being an integral part of their work were unlikely to make active decisions about reducing or maintaining working hours. For example, both Craig (a truck driver) and Ron (a farmer) made comments indicating that their expectations about what a normal day involved had shifted significantly away from the eight-hour day and 40-hour week.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the range of impacts parents' long working hours can have on family life. However, it also highlighted the fact that the impact of long working hours on family life is complex, with a number of factors influencing and mediating whether -- and the degree to which -- long hours positively or negatively affect family wellbeing.

Within the families we spoke with, there were some where a variety of factors converged to exacerbate the impact of long working hours, with the result that the families were under significant stress. For example, families who were on a very low income and had little or no flexibility in their working hours, and had few or no educational qualifications with a resulting lack of occupational alternatives, were without apparent choices regarding their working hours. In contrast, even while they felt the negative impacts of long working hours on time together and with children, parents who had choices about their work, and had made a joint decision for one partner to work extended hours in order to fulfil shared goals, appeared to show greater wellbeing than those lacking such agreements.

The situations of the families in this study illustrate that care must be taken not to attribute family stress solely to long working hours. The variety of factors at play within this group of families highlights the fact that long working hours are one factor among many that may strengthen or threaten family functioning, and as such, the impact of working hours can not be considered in isolation.

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