

Changes in paid working hours for couples, 1986 to 2001

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Abstract

In New Zealand, the weekly paid hours worked by individuals have generally not been considered within the context of working hours of other adults who may live in the same household. Using census data between 1986 and 2001, this study focuses on total usual hours of paid work for couples. The research shows that, for individual workers, while average hours of work have not changed much, there has been growth in both short and long weekly hours of paid work. The increase in working hours shows up more strongly in couple data than in individual data. This reflects both an “added worker” effect and changes in hours worked by individuals living in couples. The data also show that individuals and couples who work the longest paid hours tend to have the highest incomes. Finally, international comparative data indicates that New Zealand is amongst a group of countries at the upper end of the spectrum in terms of the proportion of individuals and couples working long hours.

Introduction

The Department of Labour has become increasingly interested in the Future of Work and investigating work-life balance policy options. As part of this interest, Grimmond (2003) explored a number of changes in work hours for individuals over recent decades as part of his scorecard of labour market performance. Using Household Labour Force (HLFS) data, and based on a measure of usual median hours of paid work, he showed that between 1986 and 2001 male hours stayed steady at around 41 per week, while median female hours decreased slightly from 35 to 34. In addition, the HLFS data indicated for women and men a downward trend in the proportion of individuals working under 40 hours per week, and an upward trend in those working more than 40 hours. Grimmond also undertook some preliminary analysis to determine if workers were putting in longer hours to compensate for a lack of increases in wages. He concluded that the increases in hours worked appeared to have been largely voluntary and were not a response to a lack of wage growth.

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Using Grimmond's work as a springboard, this article examines the changes in working hours for both individuals and households and the reasons behind the changes, in order to aid policy development. The main focus in the article is on changes in total paid working hours for couples during the same time period as Grimmond's study – between 1986 and 2001.¹ However, the source of data is the census rather than the HLFS.

Why Couples?

A great deal of useful information can be obtained from analysing the work patterns of individuals. Yet, a significant proportion of adults live with other adults in households, mainly as couples. Research in a number of countries has demonstrated that there has been a growth in both "work-poor" (neither partner has a job) and "work-rich" (both adults have a job) couple households amongst those in prime working ages (OECD, 1998; Gregg & Wadsworth, 2002; Singley & Callister, 2004). This type of measure provides a crude indication that, across society, there has been a concentration of paid employment at the household level. The concentration of paid work in couple households is linked to changes in both men and women's employment patterns, as well as being an outcome of assortative mating that brings people with similar characteristics together. In the US, research has indicated that when couples are the unit of analysis, increases in employment rates by partnered women, (that is, adding an additional worker to the household), have lead to quite dramatic increases in the total working hours of couple families. Yet, hours worked by individuals in the US have not changed that much (Matz & Pitt-Catsoupes, 2003).

Dual-earner couples are the focus of much of the work-life balance research in the U.S. (e.g. Clarkberg & Moen, 2001; Jacobs & Gerson, 2001; Jacobs & Gornick 2001). In dual-earner, childrearing households, long hours of paid work may restrict parental time with their children. For couples without children, long hours can lead to stress and the couple having little shared time together. Yet, some of the international literature suggests that there has also been a polarisation of hours of paid work among couples. While a group of couples are working long hours, others are working relatively short hours.

Finally, understanding total hours of work for couples can be important when considering the possible introduction of regulations to place a "cap" what are deemed to be excessive working hours for individuals. For example, in a couple with children, one partner may work 55 hours a week with their partner at home looking after the children full time. If a cap was placed at 48 hours, as in the UK, then the main earner would have their hours reduced. This may result in this worker spending more time with their children, but is likely to reduce total family income. In contrast, a couple where both partners worked 45 hours would not have their working hours capped, yet potentially would be spending 35

¹ Some of the interactions between paid and unpaid working hours for couples are explored in Callister (2005a &b).

hours more hours per week away from their children. If schemes are to be devised to ensure children have more time with their parents, both individuals' and couples' hours need to be considered.

Previous New Zealand, Australian and US Research

There has been no in-depth research in New Zealand on working hours for couples. However, using census data between 1986 and 1996, an initial exploration of changes in usual working hours among New Zealand couples aged 25-59 (based on the woman's age) indicates some polarisation in hours (Callister, 2000). More detailed research carried out in the US and Australia in recent decades suggests some polarisation of hours for couples (in Australia ABS 2003; Burbidge & Sheehan, 2001; in the US Jacobs & Gerson, 2001). Based on their findings, Jacobs and Gerson (2001) also argue that researchers and policy makers need to focus more *on work patterns* in a family rather than just an individual context.

Australian research between 1986 and 1996 indicates that education and presence of dependent children are important variables when studying the polarisation of work amongst couples. When changes in hours worked for couples with children by qualification of husband were investigated, it was found that some polarisation of work within couples had occurred at all qualification levels (Burbidge & Sheehan, 2001). However, the growth in long hours of combined work was strongest where the husband held a bachelor or postgraduate qualifications. In contrast, the growth in short hours (under 20 hours of joint work) was strongest where parents had no post-school qualifications. The data also showed that long hours of paid work were more common amongst couples without children than amongst those with them.

In summary, the US and Australian research indicates that:

- Average hours of work have not changed much for individuals, but there has been a polarisation of hours with growth in both short hours and long hours of paid work.
- "Overwork" tends to show up more strongly in couple data than in individual data.
- The longer total hours of work in couple households has been primarily due to increases in women's employment rates.
- Qualifications are important in hours of work both at the individual and household level, particularly in terms of short hours of work.
- Age and presence of dependent children are also very important.
- On average, women, both as individuals and when living in couples, tend to work shorter hours than men.
- Women, nevertheless, have been increasing their share of paid working hours in couples.

Data and Methods

As noted, the focus of this article is on changes in working hours for couples between the 1986 and 2001 Censuses of Population and Dwelling. The censuses provide a record of usual weekly hours of paid work, with individual hours recorded. Total work hours in all jobs are used in this research.

Age is an important variable in this research. Dealing with age for individuals is straightforward, but defining couples by age creates some conceptual challenges. In this study, couples are defined by the age of the female partner. In addition, only opposite-sex couples are considered.

Data are presented on averages, as well as long and short hours of paid work. For individuals, average hours could be calculated in two ways 1) average hours for all individuals including those not working 2) average hours only for those in paid work (and only those who recorded actual hours). In this article, the latter measure is used. For calculating average hours of couples, only those couples who were linked into paid work were included (that is, work poor couples were excluded). This means calculation of hours worked for employed couples includes both couples where one partner was not in paid work and those where both partners were working.

There are some different cut-off points used by international researchers in terms of defining short and long hours for individuals. For individuals in Australia, the US and the UK, 48 hours or more per week are usually considered to be long hours. For this research, 50 or more hours per week are used. This was the cut-off point used by the Ministry of Social Development in its 2003 Social Indicators Report. For short hours of work for individuals, a somewhat arbitrary fewer than 20 hours per week of paid work is used. This is ten hours shorter than the official definition of part time work in New Zealand.

Where couples are concerned, there are some variations in the cut-off point used in the international literature. In Australia, Burbidge and Sheehan (2001) used 90 or more hours of combined work as an indicator of long hours, and under 20 hours of joint work as an indicator of short hours. In the US, Jacobs and Gerson (2001) used 100 hours of combined work as an indicator of long hours. In this New Zealand research, under 30 hours of combined work is used as an indicator of short hours. For long hours, 100 or more hours is used.

In this article, there is some exploration of the association between education and incomes and changes in hours worked by couples using a broad 25-59 age group. In terms of income, deciles of yearly income, which includes income from all sources not just the labour market, are used. With regards to education in couples, three groups

are used: both partners have a degree or higher, neither have a qualification, and other combinations of qualifications. Finally, some data are presented on how women's share of total couple working hours has changed between 1986 and 2001. Additional information on the methodology can be found in Callister (2004).

Results

Changes for individuals

To set the couple data in context, this section briefly summarises changes in work for individuals. Overall, across society, average hours of paid work for those employed changed relatively little in the 15 years between 1986 and 2001. The average hours for men declined by just under half an hour, while for women the decline was just under an hour. However, there were some significantly larger declines in average hours worked amongst some age groups, notably those 15-24 and those 85 and older (although this latter group is very small). The strongest increase in average working hours of the employed over this 15-year period was amongst women aged 45-54, with an increase of just over two hours worked per week.

However, averages disguise changes in the distribution of hours of paid work. For men aged 15 and older, in almost all 10-year age groups there was a growth between 1986 and 2001 in the proportion working under 20 hours per week as well as an increase in the proportion working 50 or more hours. For women there was a slightly different pattern of changes between 1986 and 2001. In some age groups (25-34 and 45-54) there was a decline in the proportion working less than 20 hours per week. Like men, in the 15-25 age group there was very strong growth in the proportion of employed women working short hours. In almost all age groups there was an increase in the proportion of women working 50 or more hours per week. Much of this growth in long hours for men and women took place between 1986 and 1996 and, in fact, plateaued or even declined for some groups of men in the subsequent five years. Given that men are over-represented amongst those working long hours, this led to an overall plateauing of the proportion of all workers putting in long hours between 1996 and 2001. However, going against this overall trend, for other groups, notably women aged 25-34, 45-54 and 55-64, growth continued in the proportion working long hours between 1996 and 2001.

International comparative data on long working hours show that New Zealand is at the high end of hours worked amongst industrialised countries. In a comparison of the proportion of employees working 50 or more hours per week in selected OECD countries on, or near, the year 2000, Messenger (2004) found that only Japan topped New Zealand in the long working hours' league. Other comparative research into working hours by Johnston (2005) and Callister (2005a) lend further support to the view that there is a group of New Zealanders, particularly men, who, on average, work long weekly and yearly hours of paid work.

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In New Zealand, when education and hours of work for men aged 25-59 were considered, there was little difference in average hours by level of formal education in both 1986 and 2001. For these men, while there was growth amongst all educational groups in the proportion working under 20 hours per week, in 2001 such work was more common amongst those with no formal qualifications. A stronger pattern in relation to education emerges for prime working-aged women. Well-educated women showed the strongest increase in working hours over the 1986 to 2001 period.

Finally, in line with Grimmond's findings, when personal income was considered the data show that for prime working aged men and women there was a strong relationship between decile of personal yearly income and weekly working hours in both 1986 and 2001. However, this relationship became stronger between 1986 and 2001. In 2001 those individuals working the longest hours generally had the highest income.

Couples

To set the context of changing hours within employed couples, in the age range 15-54 there was a decline between 1986 and 2001 in the proportion of couples where one or both worked (that is, there was an increase in the proportion of work-poor couples). In the same time period, there was an increase in employed couples in the 55-84 age groups (that is, a decline in work-poor couples). The increase in couples where at least one partner was employed was particularly strong in the 55-64 age group.

Changes in average total work hours for couples provide some initial guide to the direction of change. Table 1 shows changes in total average combined hours worked by employed couples in 1986 through to 2001. Included in this particular table are also average hours for the intermediate censuses of 1991 and 1996. These additional data show that, in most age groups, there was not a marked variation from a trend over the whole time period. [This was despite some significant growth in the proportion of work-poor couples from 1986 to 1991 (Singley & Callister, 2004) – reading this makes me think this should be cut – this trend is not part of the data shown in Table 1 but as it stands it kind of implies it is]. In the age groups where the changes in average hours worked for couples were the strongest, the trend was a gradual increase in the total average hours worked between each census. Overall, Table 1 shows that average hours for couples in the broad age group of 25-84 years increased, with the strongest growth in couples where the female partner was aged 25-34, 45-54, or 55-64. While these patterns primarily reflect changes in women's employment rates, they also are influenced by changes in working hours for some individuals.

Table 1: Average combined hours worked per week for employed couples by age of female partner, 1986 to 2001

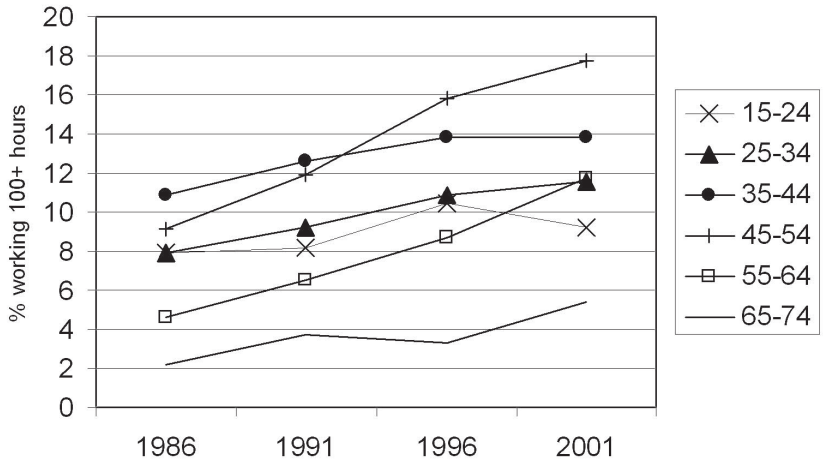
Age of female	1986	1991	1996	2001	Change 86-01
15-24	69.7	69.6	70.8	68.7	-1.0
25-34	64.7	66.1	69.2	70.4	5.7
35-44	70.5	71.4	72.1	72.4	1.9
45-54	67.5	69.3	73.1	76.0	8.6
55-64	52.7	53.0	56.5	62.1	9.4
65-74	37.2	38.1	33.6	38.9	1.8
75-84	33.7	36.2	29.8	34.1	0.4
85 and over	54.8	45.3	32.4	34.5	-20.4
Total	65.8	67.1	69.1	70.4	4.6

When actual combined hours are considered, a number of key trends show up. These include:

- In all age groups there has been a decline in the 40-45 hour peak of combined hours. This primarily reflects the decline in couples where there was just one full-time worker. Where hours for couples increased, this has often been due to an “added worker” effect.
- In the 25-34, and 55-84 age groups there has been an increase in the 80-85 work hour peak. This primarily reflects the increasing numbers of couples in these age groups where both work 40-hour weeks.
- In 2001, in the 10-year groups within the broad 25-54 age span, the 80-85 hours of combined work peak is larger than the 40-45 hour peak.

While many couples work approximately 80 hours of combined work per week, growth has also occurred in longer combined hours. The data in Figure 1 show changes in the proportion of couples working 100 or more hours per week occurred across the four census periods. It indicates that growth in the long end of the working hours’ spectrum for couples took place throughout the whole period for those aged 45-54, 55-64 and, to a lesser degree, 25-34. Again, this primarily reflects changes in women’s rather than men’s patterns of work.

Figure 1: Proportion of employed couples working 100 or more hours of combined work per week in each age group, by age of female partner, 1986 to 2001



Although in each age group, single people and couples without dependent children are more likely to work longer hours than couples with dependent children, in 2001 there was still a significant number of couples with dependent children who worked long hours. In 2001, in the broad 15-54 age group, there were 35,000 couples without children who worked 100 or more hours per week, but 32,000 with children. In the group with children, couples where the youngest child was in their teenage years tended to work the longest combined hours.

There are relatively few couples where the 100 or more hours of combined work come from both partners working 50 or more hours per week. However, in 2001 when women's hours were considered, men were more likely to work long hours if their partner also worked these hours. For example, in the 25-34 age group, in couples where the female partner worked zero hours (i.e. was either unemployed or not in the labour force) 37 percent of the male partners worked 50 or more hours per week. In those couples where the female partner worked 50 or more hours, 59 percent of their male partners did likewise. At the other end of the prime-working-age spectrum – the 55-64 age group – the figures were 26 and 67 percent respectively. This undermines the notion that long hours are generally worked by one partner to compensate for short hours by the other.

Table 2 explores the association of education with changes in working hours among couples aged 25-59. It shows that, in both 1986 and 2001, it was the well-qualified couples that worked the longest average hours. In addition, while there was an increase in average hours worked in all educational combinations, the slowest growth was amongst couples with no formal qualifications. These trends link into occupational data, where it has been found that long hours of work are particularly common in managerial and professional occupations. However, other data show that while well-educated couples

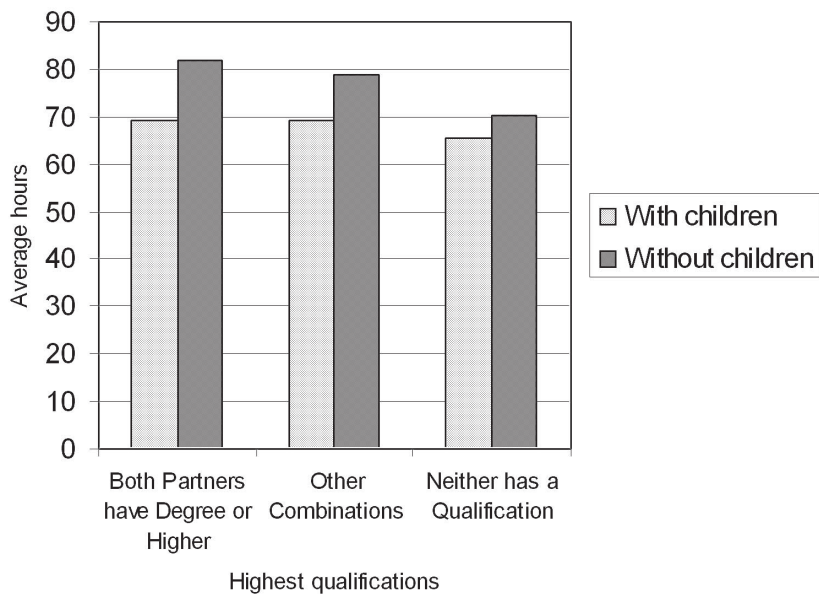
work, on average, longer hours they are only marginally over-represented amongst those working very long hours (Callister, 2004). Again, this may link to occupational patterns, with relatively unqualified groups such as farmers or fishers, working very long hours.

Table 2: Average hours worked per week by employed couples in each highest qualification gained category – Women aged 25-59, 1986 and 2001

Qualifications of Couple	1986	2001	Change 86-01
Both Partners have Degree or Higher	68.9	74.3	5.4
Other Combination of Qualifications	67.0	73.2	6.2
Neither has a Qualification	65.9	68.3	2.4
Total	66.7	72.7	6.0

While having children is associated with a reduction in total hours worked by couples, the reduction is highest amongst those couples with higher qualifications. However, overall, in 2001 well-educated couples with children worked, on average, longer hours than childrearing couples with no formal qualifications, and almost the same average hours as non-childrearing couples with no formal qualifications. These patterns are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Average weekly hours of paid work for employed couples with in each highest education category and presence of dependent children – Women aged 25-59, 2001



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These patterns also show up when a narrower age range for parents is used and only couples with preschool children are considered. For example, between 1986 and 2001 for couples where the female partner was aged 25-34 and where both partners held degrees or higher qualifications, average hours increased from 57 to 61 per week. For couples with no formal qualifications, there was still an increase in working hours, but from 55 to 57 hours per week. In 2001, 23 percent of the well-qualified couples worked 80 or more hours per week, while the figure was slightly lower at 21 percent for poorly qualified child rearing couples.

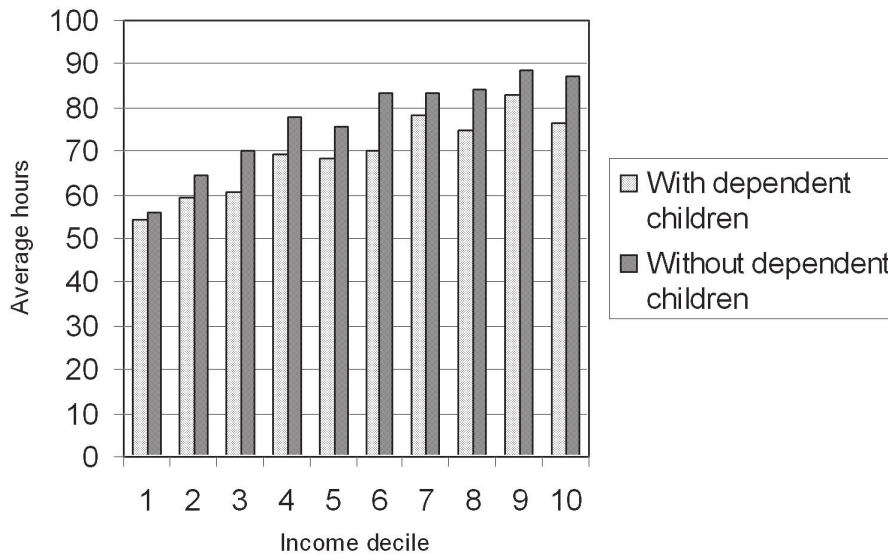
In terms of yearly couple income, in 2001 there was an overall (although uneven) gradient in average total weekly hours worked by couples, with the longest hours tending to be put in by the couples with the highest yearly income (Table 3). This gradient became more pronounced in 2001 than it was in 1986.

Table 3: Average hours worked per week by employed couples in each decile of couple income—Women aged 25-59, 1986 and 2001

Income Decile	1986	2001	Change 86-01
1	61.4	55.2	-6.1
2	55.6	61.0	5.4
3	65.0	67.1	2.1
4	58.2	70.0	11.8
5	65.8	70.7	4.9
6	70.2	78.6	8.4
7	68.2	81.3	13.1
8	75.9	79.2	3.2
9	76.3	85.9	9.6
10	78.5	81.4	2.9
Total	67.5	73.0	5.5

Figure 3 shows only 2001 data and illustrates the association between yearly income and the presence dependent children with the average weekly working hours of couples. In a similar, (and no doubt linked), pattern to that of education, in 2001 the gap between average hours worked by high-income couples (both with and without children) was relatively large compared with those of low-income couples. Having dependent children reduces average hours worked in all deciles, but by the least amount in the bottom decile of income.

Figure 3: Average total hours of employed couples in each decile of income for those with and without children –Women aged 25-59, 2001



While the data do not rule out the notion that a group of poorly educated, low income earning couples may be being forced to work long hours due to economic necessity, the largest increase in average hours worked appears to have come about within the higher educated and, generally, higher income couples.

Women’s hours as a proportion of total working hours for couples were then considered. The increasing employment of partnered women, as well as the higher proportion of women working long hours, was likely to lead to women working a higher proportion of hours within couples. This is confirmed by the data. There was an overall shift in the distribution worked by women relative to men in couples where the female partner was aged 25-59. One measure of this shift is where women work half or more of the hours in the couple. In 1986 just under 20 percent of women in prime working aged couples contributed half or more of the hours work. By 2001 this had risen to 28 percent.

Finally, while international comparisons always need to be treated with some caution due to methodological problems, Table 4 compares average combined hours worked for couples across a number of industrialised countries. The table also compares the number of couples where both partners were employed. Like the international data for individuals, these data suggest New Zealand is at the higher end of the spectrum in terms of hours worked for couples.

Table 4: Joint average hours of paid work for non-agricultural employed married couples aged 25-59, selected industrial nations

Country and year	Average hours worked per week - All couples where one or both partners work	% dual earners	Average hours for dual earners
US (1997)	72	76	81
New Zealand (2001 & 1996)	71 (70)	74 (72)	81 (80)
Finland (1991)	70	81	77
Canada (1994)	65	66	77
Sweden (1995)	64	85	69
Belgium (1996)	64	58	79
France (1994)	62	61	76
Germany (1994)	60	56	75
Italy (1995)	59	46	78
UK (1995)	57	55	74
Netherlands (1994)	52	52	64

Note: The source of all non-New Zealand data is Jacobs and Gornick (2001). There are some differences in how the data were calculated between countries. The main one is that in some countries, including New Zealand, both defacto and married couples are included. In all countries the couples included are those where at least one partner was in paid work. In New Zealand, agricultural workers -ANZSIC Industry - Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing - were removed from the calculation to make the data internationally comparable. In addition, both partners needed to be in the 25-59 age group. Finally, the New Zealand and international data is rounded to the nearest hour or percentage.

Discussion

Not surprisingly, most of the trends in hours of paid work for individuals and couples already found in the UK, the US and Australia can be seen in New Zealand data. However, New Zealand appears to be at the high end of the spectrum internationally when long weekly hours of work are considered for both individuals and couples.

Census data do not give a definitive answer as to whether the increasing hours for some groups of New Zealanders are due to economic necessity rather than choice. However, they do lend support to the preliminary analysis that Grimmond undertook to determine if individual workers were putting in longer hours to compensate for a lack of increases in wages. His conclusion that the increases in hours worked appear to have been largely voluntary and were not a response to a lack of wage growth seems also to be on the whole correct when couples are the unit of analysis. Yet, some of the increasing employment rates and hours put in by women in couples are likely to be linked to poor labour market prospects for a group of low-skill, low-income men, and a subsequent need to raise couple income. It is also possible that some workplaces are creating long working hour "norms", thereby restricting choices even for those individuals with apparently strong labour market negotiating positions. More research is needed in order to understand why a group of New Zealanders are working long hours.

While a more complex, census-based, multivariate analysis of the changes in working hours for couples might provide a greater insight as to why hours have been changing, a better understanding is likely to come from different data sources. Moreover, although there is an expanding international literature on individual preferences of working hours in most countries, including New Zealand, we still do not know what the total combined working hour preferences of couples are.

Time use data could also be used to study the working patterns of couples. For a significant number of couples in the New Zealand time use dataset, information is available on both partners. These couple data have yet to be used by researchers. Issues such as joint patterns of both paid and unpaid work could be explored, as well as the gender division of paid and unpaid work within households. This, in turn, would assist our understanding of inequalities in hours of employment and earnings between women and men.

Researchers also need to better understand how bargaining takes place within couples, for example how joint retirement decisions are made, and what factors influence decisions about working hours among couples with dependent children. This will require new sources of data.

One potential source of new data is a proposed supplement to the Household Labour Force Survey that the Labour Department and Statistics New Zealand have been developing. This may include questions on satisfaction with working arrangements and preferences for working hours. While full data may not be able to be collected for both partners in couples, this proposed supplement may, nevertheless, provide some useful, additional, couple-level data.

Conclusion

Census data from 1986 through to 2001 show that for individual workers, while average hours of work have not changed much, there has been growth in both short and long weekly hours of paid work. However, the increase in working hours shows up more strongly in couple data than in individual data. This reflects both an "added worker" effect and changes in hours worked by individuals living in couples. Given discussions in early 2005 about further lifting participation in the labour market of women aged 25-34, unless men's hours of work reduce, there is the potential for average hours worked by couples to further increase (Callister 2005a).

While, as yet, we do not have strong evidence that a significant number of those individuals and couples working long hours would prefer shorter hours of paid work, there is nevertheless concern in New Zealand about the possible negative effects of 'overwork'. This has prompted the introduction of a private members bill into parliament in mid 2005 that aims to give parents of young children more negotiating power over their hours of work. This proposed legislation is based on legislation introduced in the

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UK in 2002 (Callister 2005b).² As yet, it not clear as to the effects of the UK legislation on either individual or couple hours of paid work. However, even if this bill fails to pass into legislation, it is likely that there will continue to be discussion around the causes and effects of the long working hours of a group of New Zealanders.

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² A useful site for information on British working-hour legislation is: http://www.dti.gov.uk/er/work_time_regs/