

House of Representatives

In Australia, as elsewhere in the world, there have been three great revolutions in labour supply since WWII - the mass entry of married women into the workforce, the drastic shrinkage of the youth labour market and the large scale exit of men over 55 years of age from the labour force. Currently rates of employment for men of this age are less than 60%. The situation of older workers has been the hidden revolution, little discussed and little understood.

In the 1960s it was widely predicted that by the end of the century Australians would be living 'in a society of leisure'. Instead, we have seen rising unemployment and mounting anxiety about overwork. While a large number of people have no hours of work, an even bigger proportion has more hours of work than they want. Many think that significant unemployment and overwork are just two sides of the one condition - insecure employment. And the answer to maldistribution of working hours, is the regulation of working.

We have been using time diary data to study changes in working time over a twenty-three year period in Australia. Diary data is the only source of information that can shed light on a number of key issues - what has happened to the length of the working day; how much work takes place on the different days of the week; and has there been any change in the time of day when paid work takes place.

Our research leads us to believe that there has been a simultaneous growth in unemployment and in long hours of work over the last quarter century. There has been a significant increase in weekend work and work outside of the hours of nine-to-five. These so-called 'unsociable hours' acquired this name because they make participation in family and community life more difficult. There are also more families where both parents devote more time to work and where juggling work and family commitments has become a far more delicate balance to maintain. This has been accompanied by a growing sense among working age Australians that they are 'more rushed and pressed for time'.

How do these changes affect Australian workers over the age of forty-five? Long working hours fuel downsizing and make less work available. The most socially acceptable group for employers to make redundant is older workers. Every one in this age group knows someone of a similar age who has been made redundant or is having difficulty finding new employment. For those in work, long hours increase stress and interfere with good family functioning. This makes 'early retirement' attractive.

Among workers over the age of forty-five there are probably four groups -those in the workforce, those made redundant and looking for work, those who genuinely voluntarily retired at an early age; and those who took retirement as a way of pre-empting redundancy. Now one yet knows the size of this last group and their prospects for a decent life in retirement.