

---

## 7 Factors affecting part time employment of prime age workers

Prime age workers, those aged 25–54 years, formed nearly 80 per cent of the labour force in 2006, with around one quarter of these workers in part time employment. This group also displays the largest differences between the rate of part time employment for men and women. Clearly, understanding their reasons for working part time is important for understanding the level and growth of aggregate part time employment.

This Chapter explores in more detail the reasons why prime age women and men work part time. It also examines how and why the prevalence of part time work has changed over the past three decades for prime age men and women. There is a particular emphasis on the role part time work plays in balancing work and family life.

### 7.1 Women aged 25–54 years

Motherhood and family responsibilities are a major factor influencing the part time employment of prime age women. The nature of family responsibilities changes with the birth of each child and as children age, and as such, women's preferences of work life balance also change. Given these changing preferences, there are several different trends underlying the changes in part time employment within the age groups that comprise prime age women. Accordingly these age groups are considered separately.

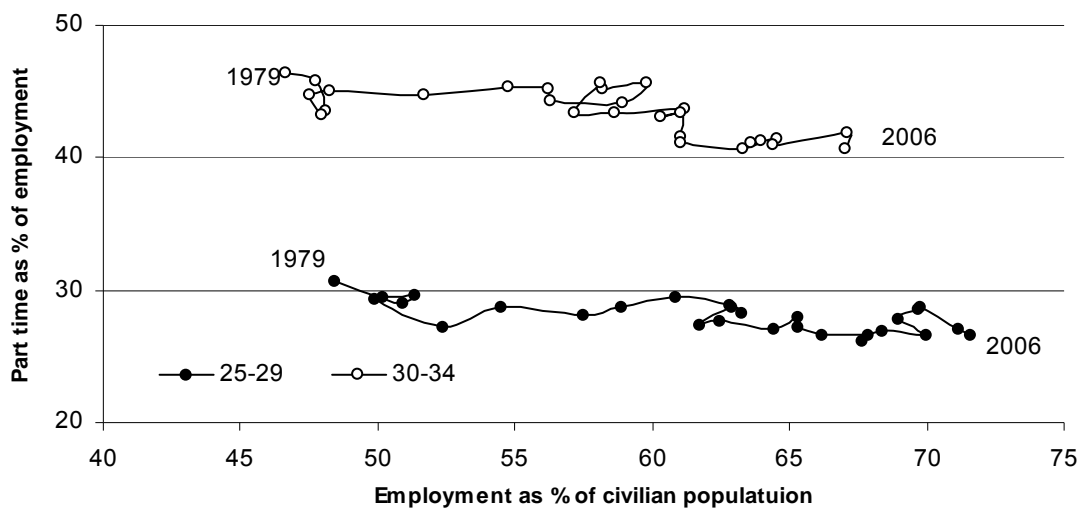
#### Women aged 25–34 years

There has been strong growth in the rate of employment for women in this age group over the period 1979–2006 (figure 7.1). But the proportion of women employed part time among all women in this age group has declined. Indeed, there appears to be a strong shift away from home based activities and into the labour market, as well as a shift to increased hours of work. Both these trends point to a reduction in the marginal utility of home based activities relative to labour income.

Caring for children was identified in Chapter 5 as the most important reason for working part time in this age group. The use of part time work by mothers is often a means of transitioning into and out of the workforce for reasons related to the birth and care of children. In addition, part time work assists mothers to continue their workforce attachment during the early years of their children's lives (Venn and Wakefield 2005). This aspect is looked at in more detail later in this Chapter.

**Figure 7.1 Involvement of women aged 25–29 and 30–34 in employment and part time employment, 1979–2006**

Per cent of persons working and per cent of part time work among workers



Data source: ABS (*Labour Force Australia detailed — electronic delivery*, April 2007, Cat. no. 6291.0.55.001, table LM8.).

### Women aged 35–44 years

There has been a large increase in the proportion of women aged 35–44 years who are working, but a smaller increase in the proportion working part time (figure 7.2). That is, there has been a general shift out of home based activities towards labour market activities but only a relatively small shift in preferences towards part time employment. Moreover, the share of part time employment has tended to increase during periods of subdued labour demand, such as after 1979 and 1990, indicating that demand factors may have a role to play in the increasing share of part time employment for this age group.

Figure 7.2 **Involvement of women aged 35–44 in employment and part time employment, 1979–2006**

Per cent of persons working and per cent of part time work among workers



Data source: ABS (*Labour Force Australia detailed — electronic delivery*, April 2007, Cat. no. 6291.0.55.001, table LM8).

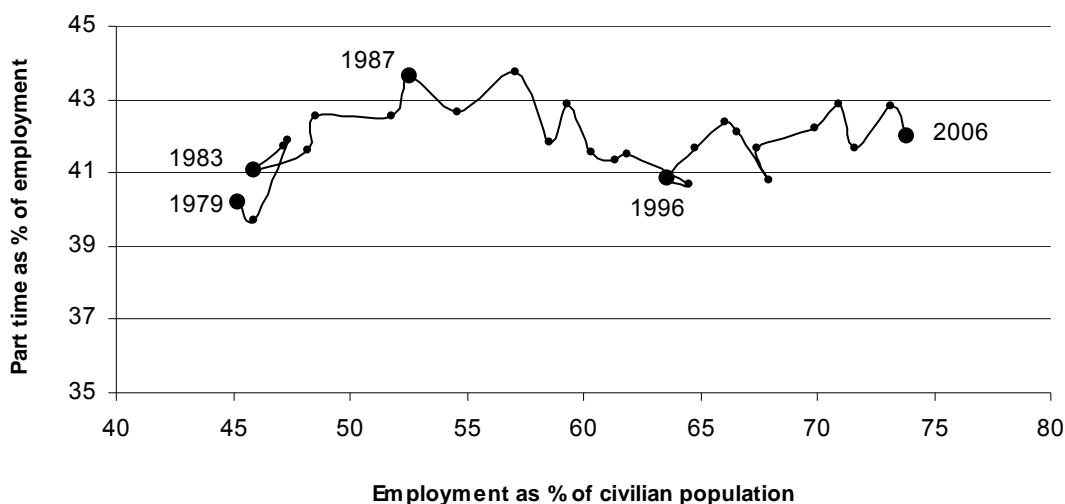
### Women aged 45–54 years

For women aged 45–54 years, it is expected that most of their children would have reached high school age or even completed school. As such, family responsibilities are less likely to influence preferences for hours of work of these women. As outlined in Chapter 5, the main reason women in this age group gave for working part time was that they preferred part time hours, compared to women aged 25–44 years who indicated caring for children as the main reason for working part time. This change in family responsibility is consistent with the higher levels of employment by women aged 45–54 years and their slightly lower rate of part time work compared to 35–44 year old women (figures 7.2 and 7.3).

As for all age groups, the proportion of women working has increased substantially for 45–54 year old women since the early 1980s. This increase has continued during periods of strong economic growth and economic contraction. There has been little change in the share of part time employment, indicating little change in part time work preferences over this period.

**Figure 7.3 Involvement of women aged 45–54 in employment and part time employment, 1979–2006**

Per cent of persons working and per cent of part time work among workers



Data source: ABS (*Labour Force Australia detailed — electronic delivery*, April 2007, Cat. no. 6291.0.55.001, table LM8).

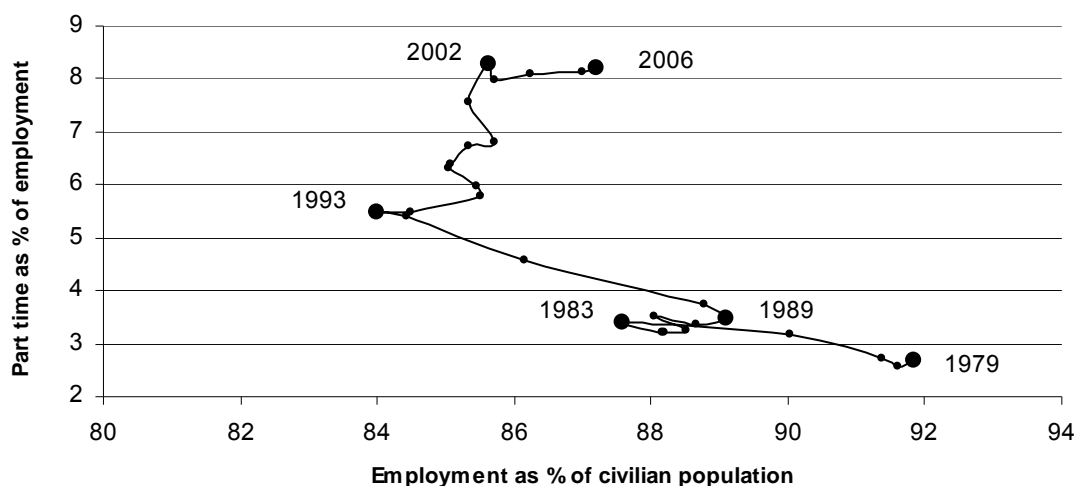
## 7.2 Men aged 25–54 years

Since 1978, the proportion of male workers aged between 25–54 years who are working part time has more than tripled, but from a very low base (figure 7.4). The main employment trend for these prime aged men has been a large decrease in employment rates generally, but particularly for full time employment. Lattimore (2007) found that supply side effects contributed to falling participation by prime aged men including disability, poor health and injury. These are identified in Chapter 5 as important reasons why older men aged 35–54 years are working part time.

However, given the overall fall in employment among prime aged men, a substantial part of the increase in part time work is likely to be driven by demand side factors. Indeed, a large share of men in this age group identified a failure to find full time work as the reason that they worked part time (Chapter 5). The issue of involuntary part time work is discussed more fully in Chapter 10.

**Figure 7.4 Involvement of men aged 25–54 in employment and part time employment, 1979–2006**

Per cent of persons working and per cent of part time work among workers



Data source: ABS (*Labour Force Australia detailed — electronic delivery*, April 2007, Cat. no. 6291.0.55.001, table LM8).

### 7.3 Family formation and part time work

The role of caring for children is a major reason given by prime age women for their preference to work part time. Reduced hours of paid work, through part time employment, is used to balance paid work with family responsibilities (Campbell and Charlesworth 2004; Quality Part-Time Work Project 2005; Weston et al. 2003). In order to consider the question of work–life balance, this section will further examine the impact of parenthood and marital status on the likelihood of working part time and the impact of changes in fertility and availability of child care on part time work.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The following analysis employs the social definition of marital status used in the ABS labour force survey. Using this definition, individuals may be classified as married (registered or de facto) if they usually live with their partner, or not-married if they have no partner or do not usually live with their partner (ABS 2007e). Furthermore, couple families are those in which there are two married persons (and these persons are husband and wife) and a lone parent is the head of a one parent family.

---

## Parenthood and part time work

Workers with children generally have more family responsibilities than those without children. For instance, Craig (2005) noted that ‘depending on the number and age of children, time in unpaid work (housework, shopping, and childcare) can be up to six and a half hours a day higher in families with children than in childless households’ (p. 1).

In order to care for their children, some parents will leave work, while others will choose to work reduced hours. As such, the presence of children is likely to alter the desired hours of work. Indeed, Pocock (2003) argued that part time work is one of the three main ways of combining care and paid work, in addition to intermittent work and extended absence or withdrawal from the labour force.

A larger share of mothers with children under 15 years work part time compared to women with no children. This holds for both coupled (39 per cent) and lone mothers (32 per cent), who had much higher rates of part time work in 2006, than women without children (coupled 20 per cent and lone women 13 per cent) (ABS 2007i).

Between 1994 and 2006, the rate of part time employment grew for all women, but the most dramatic increase was for lone mothers — with growth of nearly 57 per cent (or 65 000) over the period. Despite this, coupled mothers maintained a higher rate of part time work over the period.<sup>2</sup>

Around 16 per cent of lone fathers with children under 15 years worked part time in 2006, possibly reflecting the trade off between hours of work and caring responsibilities. This rate is much higher than for men with no children (4 per cent for lone men and 9 per cent for coupled men). For coupled men, the presence of children under 15 years was associated with an even lower rate of part time work (6 per cent). Craig (2005) argued that this might reflect the usual roles and responsibilities in families where ‘... most households retain a “traditional” approach to childrearing, in which it is mothers who contribute the opportunity cost of forgoing wages in order to spend time with children’ (p. 3).

---

<sup>2</sup> Data from the ABS collection for *Labour Force Australia: Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families* is available from 1994.

---

There was a large increase in the number of men in part time work between 1994 and 2006. Coupled men with no children contributed the most additional part time workers, increasing by 126 000 between 1994–2006. Yet, the largest growth rate was for lone fathers, with the number in part time work growing by around 11 percentage points over the period (compared to less than 4 percentage points for coupled men with no children).

### *Age of youngest child*

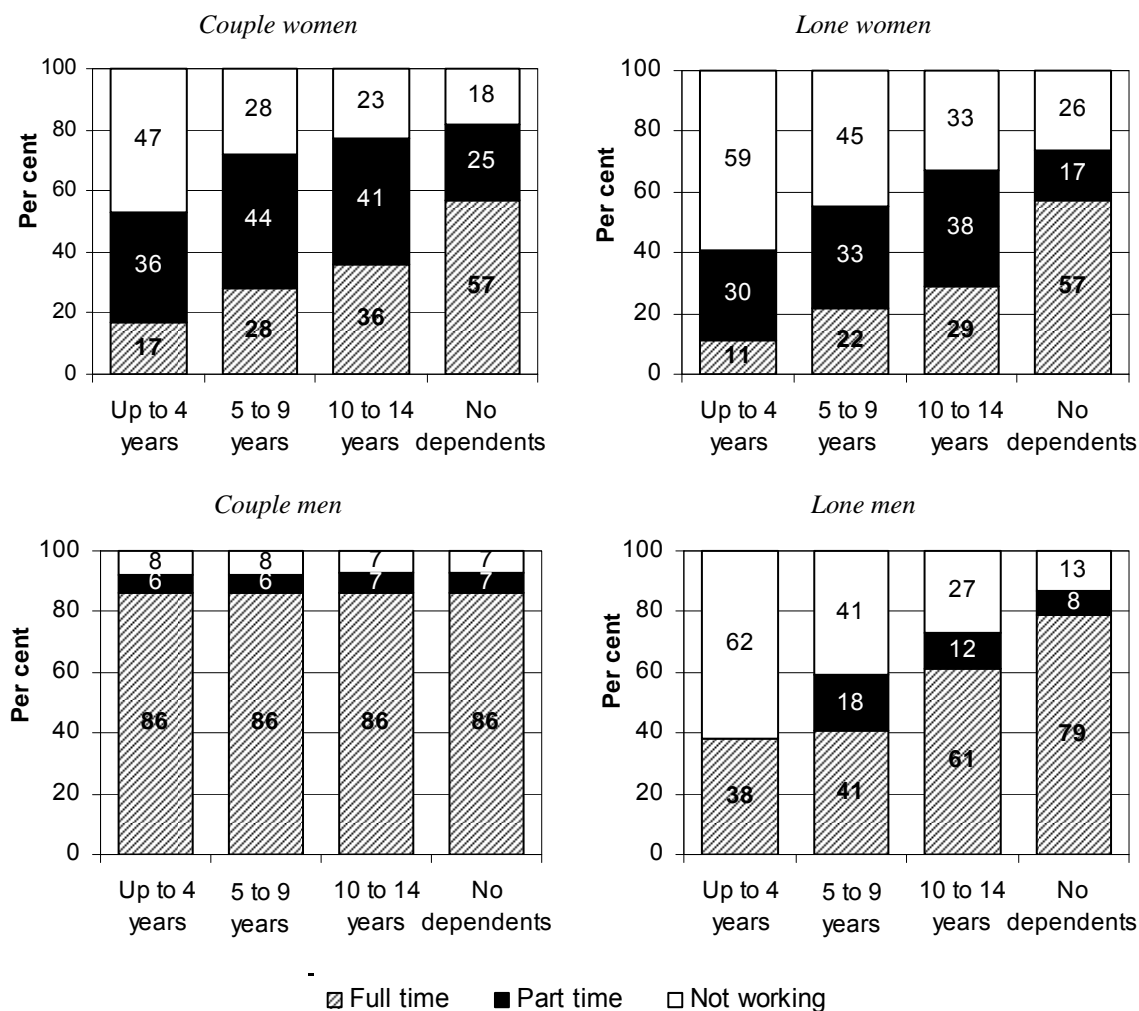
As children mature, parents often increase their labour force activity, reflecting the lower level of required care and supervision (ABS 1999). For prime age coupled and lone mothers, the labour force participation rate and incidence of part time work increases as their youngest child ages (figure 7.5). In 2006, the rate of part time work was around 8 percentage points higher for coupled mothers whose youngest child was aged between five and nine years, compared to coupled mothers whose youngest child was under five years old. Similarly, the rate of part time work was around 7 percentage points higher for lone mothers whose youngest child was aged between five and nine years, compared to lone mothers whose youngest child was under five years old.

This finding is consistent with work by Pocock (2003). Pocock studied 2001 census data on employment rates of lone and coupled mothers where the youngest child was under five years old. She found that the lowest employment rates and the heaviest bias in employment towards very short hours occurs when the child is under one year old. As the youngest child moves beyond the earliest stages of infancy, there is a rapid increase in employment rates and the take-up of longer part time work and even full time work.

The participation rate of prime age lone fathers also increases with the age of their youngest child. In 2006, the incidence of part time work was highest (around 22 per cent) for lone fathers whose youngest child was five to nine years old. The rate of part time work was lower (around 14 per cent) and the rate of full time work higher for lone fathers with their youngest child aged 10–14 years. Unlike mothers and lone fathers, the labour force status of prime age coupled fathers did not change significantly with the age of their youngest child, remaining below 10 per cent — and barely differed from the coupled men without children.

**Figure 7.5 Labour force status of 25–54 year olds by family type and age of youngest child,<sup>a</sup> June 2006**

Persons aged 15 years and over



<sup>a</sup> Children (dependents) include all family members under 15 years of age; family members aged 15-19 attending school and those aged 15-24 attending a tertiary educational institution full time (except those who are married or have children themselves).

Data source: ABS (*Labour Force, Australia: Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families — electronic delivery, 2007, Cat. no. 6224.0.55.001*).

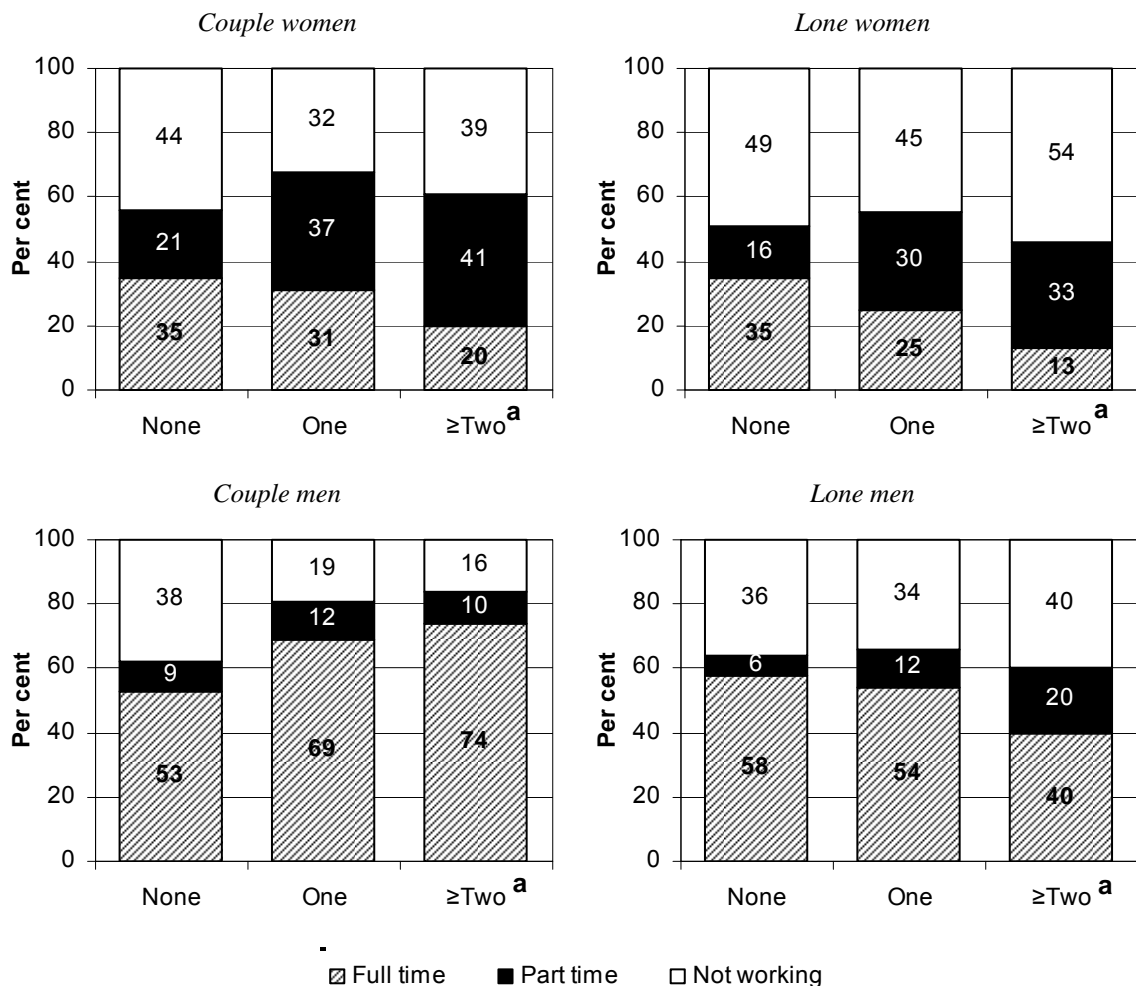
### Number of children

The number of children in a family also alters the likelihood of working part time. The more children there are in a family, the more time parents typically need to devote to care and supervision. Therefore, the cost of substituting the home production of some goods for market income — such as, substituting caring for children at home for formal child care or substituting home cooked meals for pre-prepared meals — will rise. Therefore, parents with several children may be

expected to participate less actively in the labour force compared to parents with fewer children.

In 2006, coupled and lone mothers with two or more children were less likely to work compared to mothers with one child, but if mothers with several children did work they were more likely to work part time (figure 7.6). The difference between the rate of part time work for mothers with two or more children compared to mothers with only one child was 3.5 percentage points for both coupled and lone mothers.

**Figure 7.6 Labour force status by family type and number of children aged under 15 years, June 2006**  
Persons aged 15 years and over



<sup>a</sup> The number of children under 15 years old in each family is only published as none, one or two or more in this data set.

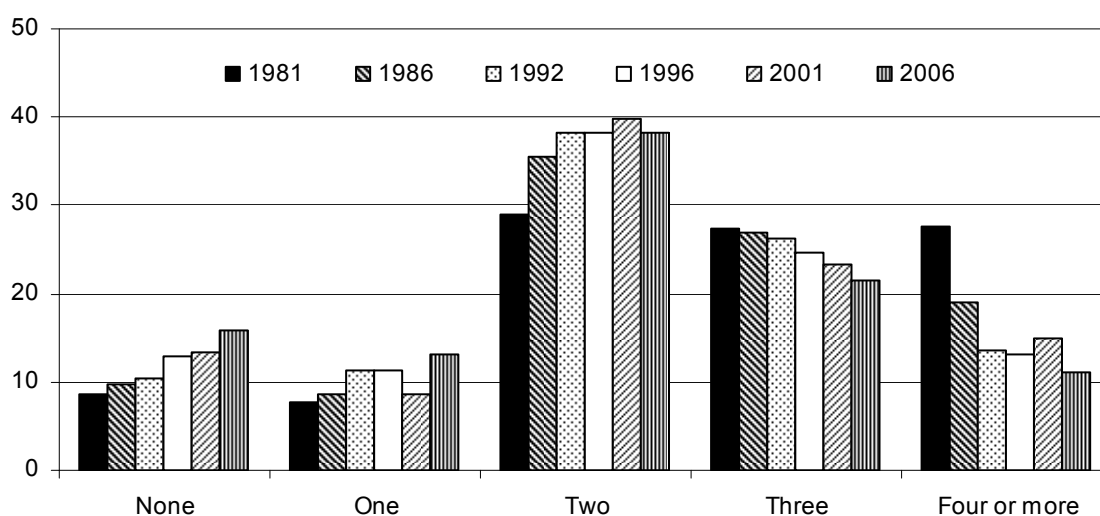
Data source: ABS (*Labour Force, Australia: Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families — electronic delivery*, 2007, Cat. no. 6224.0.55.001).

The labour market activity of lone fathers followed a similar pattern to mothers. Lone fathers were more likely to work part time if they had two or more children — the share of lone fathers with two or more children working part time was around 9 percentage points higher than lone fathers with only one child. Coupled fathers with two or more children, on the other hand, were more likely to participate in the labour force (by around 4 per cent) and work full time (by around 7 per cent) compared to coupled fathers with one child. This possibly reflects the ‘traditional’ approach to childrearing in couple families discussed in Craig (2005).

Over the past few decades, there has been a reduction in the number of Australian families with three or more children (figure 7.7). Since the likelihood of working part time increases with the number of children, the reduction in family size since the early 1980’s will have operated to reduce the number of parents that, otherwise would have been working part time in 2006.

The identified differences in part time work by family status, including the number and age of children, is consistent with the view that mothers and lone fathers use part time work to help balance work and family responsibilities. In the case of coupled men, the additional income requirements associated with the raising of children appears to intensify their labour market activity. In particular, there is a greater division of labour between men and women within the household between home-based and market production as the number of children increases.

**Figure 7.7 Number of children ever had by women, selected years**  
Per cent of 40–44 year old women in selected years by number of children ever born



Data source: ABS (*Australian Births 2006, 2007*, Cat. no. 3301.0).

---

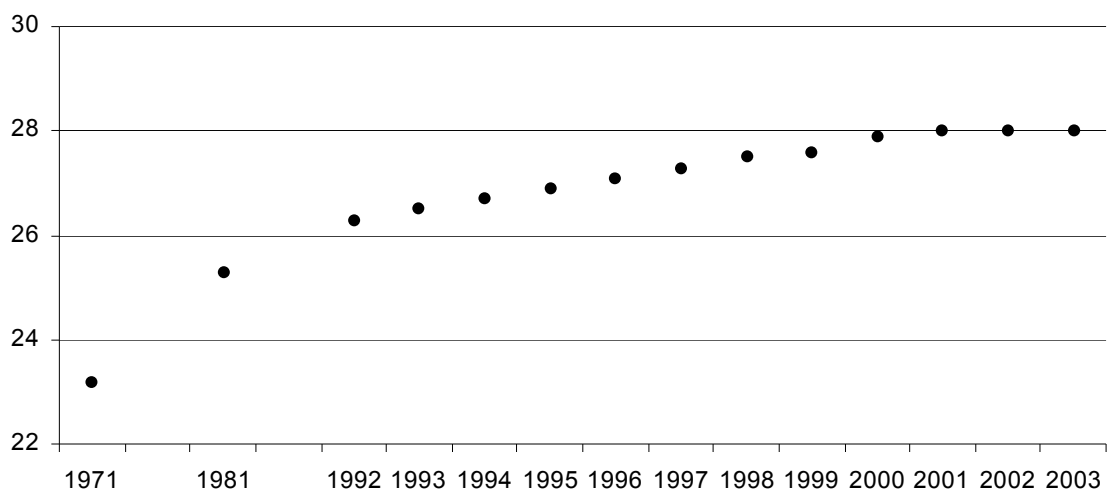
### *Fertility impacts*

Just under 70 per cent of working mothers with children under 5 years worked part time in 2005 (ABS 2007i). Changes to the proportion of women having children, the number of children they have and the age mothers give birth will all affect the preference for part time work by prime age women.

First time mothers in 2003 were more than a year older, on average, than those in 1995 and five years older than the average for 1971 (figure 7.8). In addition, the age specific fertility data (figure 7.9) demonstrates that the number of children born to mothers under 30 years has fallen dramatically since 1971. However, for mothers over 30 years, the rates are higher than in 1971 and are even approaching the levels observed in 1951. Such changes would be expected to lead to reduced rates of part time work by women under 30 years and substantially increased rates of part time work by women over 30 years, assuming no other changes had occurred.

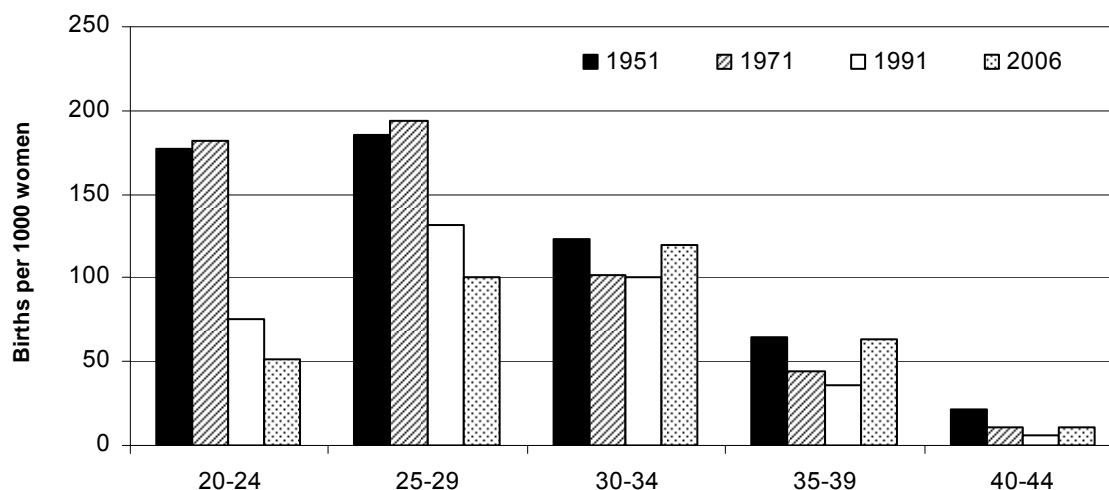
**Figure 7.8 Mothers average age at birth of first child, 1971–2003**

Age in years



Data sources: ABS (*Australian Social Trends*, Cat. no. 4102.0); OECD 2005 (*A caring new world; the new social policy agenda*).

**Figure 7.9 Change in birth rates by age group, selected years**  
Births per 1000 women in each age group



Data sources: ABS (*Australian Historical Population Statistics*, 2007 Cat. no. 3105.0.65.001); ABS (*Australian Births 2006, 2007*, Cat. no. 3301.0).

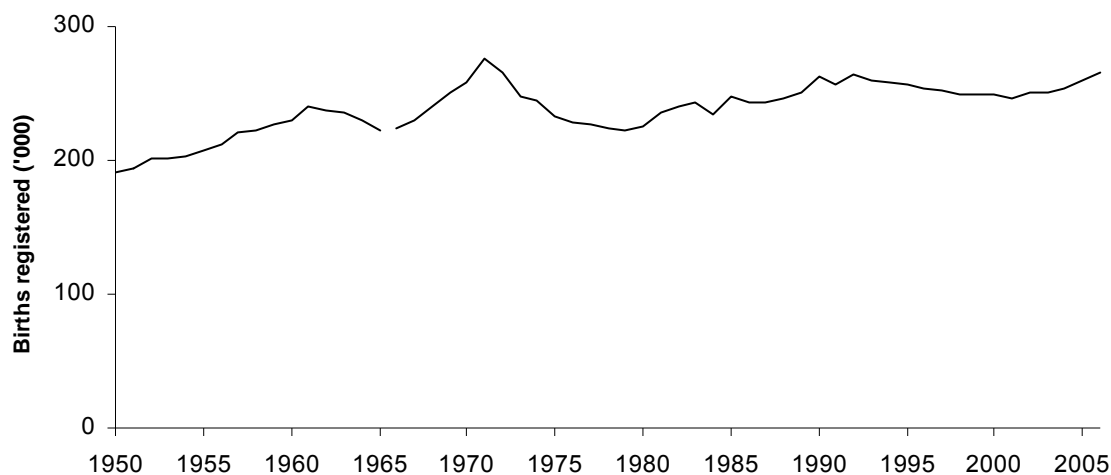
But there has also been a shift in how quickly mothers return to work. The percentage of partnered women whose youngest child is under 3 years old who are in work has increased from 28 per cent in 1981 to 45 per cent in 2001 (Baxter, 2004). More recent data indicate that in 2004 nearly 40 per cent of women with children under the age of 5 years had returned to work before the youngest child's first birthday (Baxter et al. 2007). As just under 70 per cent of working mothers with children under 5 years are working part time, this trend towards an earlier return to work is contributing to an increased pool of workers who want to work part time.

While most measures of fertility are decreasing over the long term, Australia has recently experienced an increase in births, with the second and third highest number of births ever being recorded in 2006 and 2005 respectively (figure 7.10). The highest number of births in Australia occurred in 1971, and is linked to births among women born during the post war baby boom. Given the current surge in births, it is likely that there will be an associated reduction in labour force participation by some of these mothers, and a subsequent increase in part time work when they return to work.

---

Figure 7.10 **Registered births in Australia,<sup>a</sup> 1950–2006**  
Thousands of births registered each year

---



---

<sup>a</sup> The series break in 1966 indicates the first year all indigenous children were included in the births data.

Data sources: ABS (*Australian Historical Population Statistics*, 2007, Cat. no. 3105.0.65.001); ABS (*Australian Births 2006, 2007*, Cat. no. 3301.0).

### Childcare

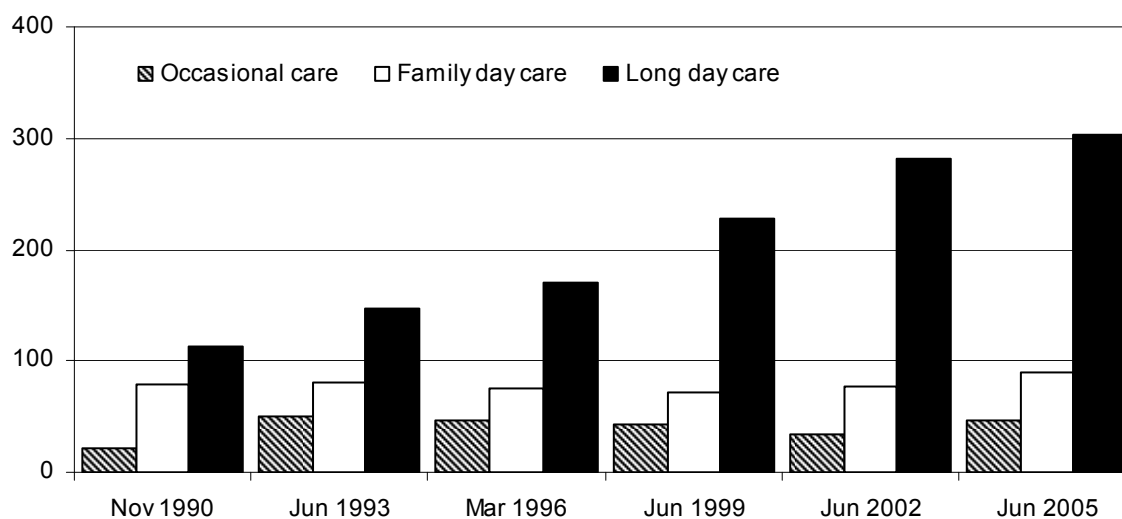
Another change that may have facilitated an earlier return to the workforce among mothers is the increased availability of childcare. As most mothers returning to work do so on a part time basis, changes in childcare availability may also influence the demand for part time work.

While the main factor expected to influence the use of childcare would be cost, parents need to have available childcare services in convenient locations to make that option viable (Kalb 2007). If there was unmet demand for childcare at the going price, then an expansion of childcare places would lead to an expansion of children in care. Australia has experienced a dramatic expansion in the number of childcare centres, of staff working in childcare and of childcare places since 1990 (FACS 1999, 2005).

Between 1990–2005, the number of children under 5 years that attend formal care arrangements increased by 100 per cent, with long day care attendance increasing by more than 160 per cent — nearly an extra 190 000 places (figure 7.11). The proportion of work related care in centres has barely changed over the last 15 years — around 90 per cent (FACS 1999, 2005). This indicates that most of this increase in formal childcare is associated with care provided while a parent is working. As most mothers with pre-school aged children work part time, the labour force expansion is likely to be concentrated among part time workers.

**Figure 7.11 Children under 5 years attending formal child care, selected years**

Thousands of places<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> Children may have attended more than one form of care in each period.

Data source: ABS (*Child Care*, Cat. no. 4402.0).

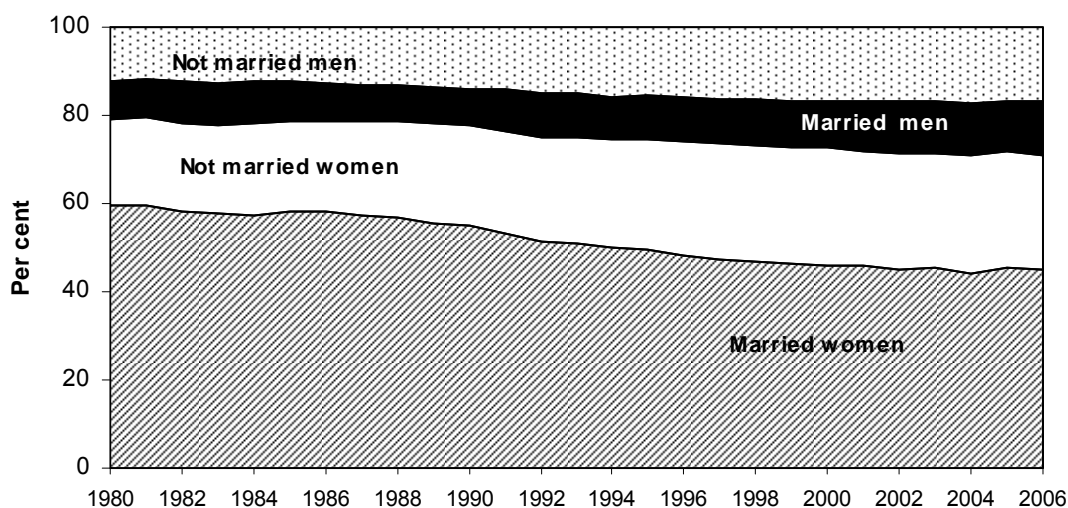
## The changing importance of marital status

Marital status also has an impact on the likelihood of working part time, although the impact differs between men and women. Around 47 per cent of all employed married women worked part time in 2006 compared to 43 per cent for women who were not married (ABS 2007a). Men, on the other hand, were far less likely to work part time, and married men were substantially less likely to work part time (10 per cent) than men who were not married (25 per cent).

The social and institutional changes over the past few decades (including the increase in the availability of childcare) is reflected in the changing composition of part time workers. Since the 1980s, the proportion of part time workers who are married women has declined substantially with a corresponding increase in all other groups, especially not married men and women (figure 7.12).

Comparisons of the levels of part time employment between people who are married and not married are affected by the differing age structures of the two groups. Not surprisingly, the average age of workers who are not married is younger than that for married workers. As explained in previous Chapters, the level of part time employment varies across differing age groups and is higher among younger age groups, particularly for men.

Figure 7.12 **Composition of the part time workforce,<sup>a</sup> 1980–2006**  
Persons aged 15 years and over by marital status and sex.



<sup>a</sup> Based on the social definition of marital status used in the ABS labour force survey. Average for calendar year.

Data source: ABS (*Labour Force, Australia detailed — electronic delivery*, 2007, Cat. no. 6291.0.55.001, table LM1).

The discussion that follows focuses on the age-standardised rate of part time work which adjusts for these different age structures. The age-standardised rate of part time work measures the proportion of part time work that would prevail if workers who are married and those who are not married were to share the same age structure as the population of workers as a whole, but retain their current age-specific rates of part time work.<sup>3</sup>

Using the age-standardised rates, the incidence of part time work among women is highest for married women — around 45 per cent for married women compared to 37 per cent for women who were not married in 2006 (figure 7.13). The prevalence of part time work for married women has grown slowly over the past twenty-five years (increasing by around 5 percentage points between 1980 and 2006). For women who are not married, however, part time work has become increasingly common, increasing by around 17 percentage points between 1980 and 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The age-standardised rate of part time work ( $PTR^S$ ) for married and not-married workers can be calculated as the weighted average of all age groups of workers using the following formula:

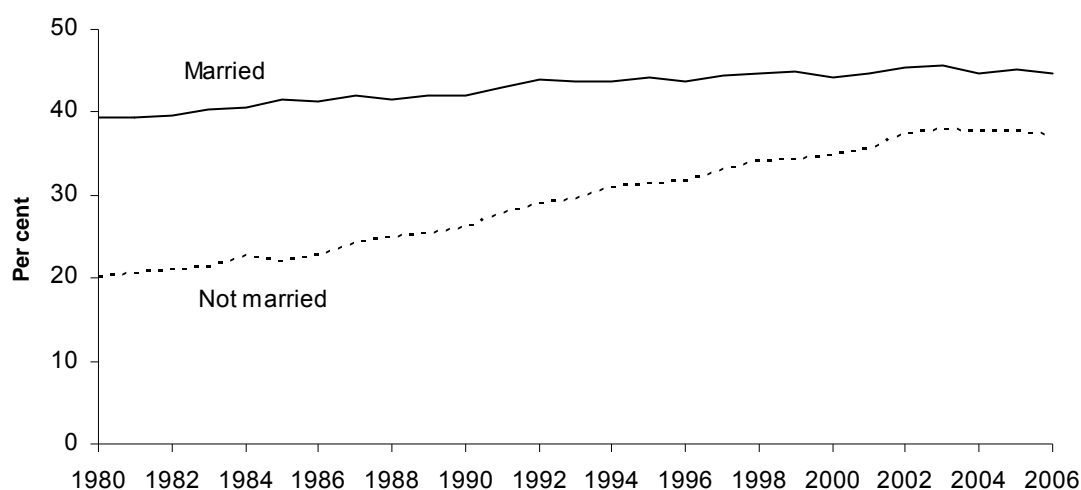
$$PTR_j^S = \sum_{i=1}^n \left( \frac{PT_{ij}}{Emp_{ij}} \times \frac{Emp_i}{Emp} \right) * 100$$

where,  $PT_{ij} / Emp_{ij}$  is the age-specific rate of part time employment for age group  $i$  and marital status  $j$ , and  $Emp_i / Emp$  is the share of age group  $i$  in aggregate employment.

The gap between the rates of part time work for married women and women who are not married has narrowed over this period (from around 19 to 7 percentage points). This is largely due to the increasing rate of part time work among young women who are not married — an increasing number of young, typically single women are studying, and a higher proportion of students are working part time (Chapter 6). Consistent with this explanation, excluding women under 25 years increases the gap between married and not married women to 15 percentage points in 2006.

**Figure 7.13 Age-standardised rate of female part time work by marital status,<sup>a</sup> 1980–2006**

Persons aged 15 years and over.



<sup>a</sup> Based on the social definition of marital status used in the ABS labour force survey. Average for calendar year.

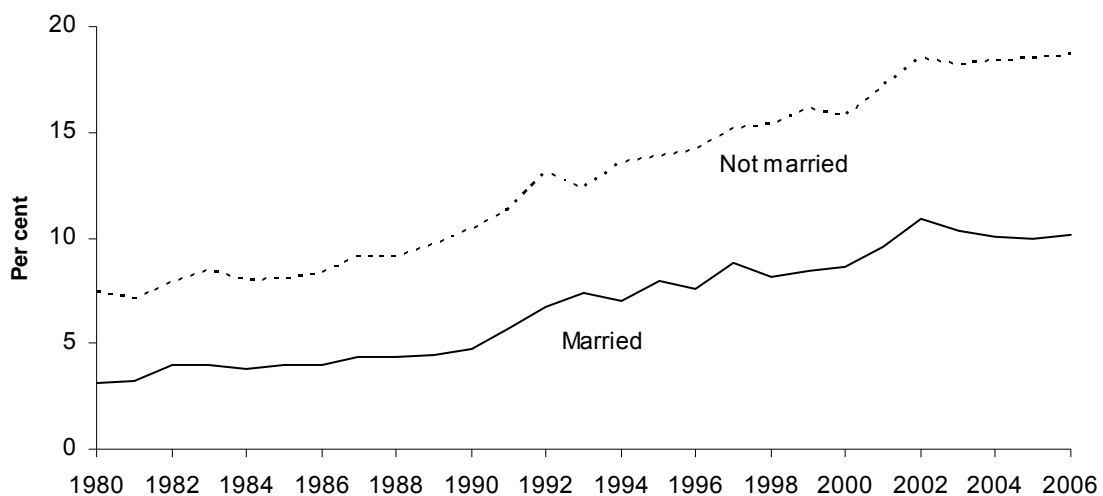
Data source: ABS (*Labour Force, Australia, detailed — electronic delivery*, 2007, Cat. no. 6291.0.55.001, table LM1).

In contrast to women, men who are not married are more likely to work part time (figure 7.14). In 2006, only 10 per cent of employed married men worked part time compared to around 19 per cent of employed men who were not married. From 1980–2006, the share of men working part time grew substantially from a small base, increasing by 7 percentage points for married men and around 11 percentage points for men who were not married. Similar to women, much of the increase in part time work for men may be attributed to increasing rates of part time work by men under 25 years, due to the growing number of not married men combining study with part time work.

Over the past few decades, the rate of part time work for men who are not married increased faster than the rate for married men. As a result, the part time work gap between married men and men who are not married increased from around 4 to 9 percentage points between 1980 and 2006. However, if men under 25 years are excluded, the gap reduces to 5 percentage points in 2006 — the increase in part time work is then similar for both married men and men who are not married.

The relatively high rate of part time employment for men who are not married may also be due to lower labour force attachment of single men. Lattimore (2007) found that for men, marriage is associated with much better labour force prospects (especially for prime aged men), most likely reflecting the underlying characteristics of married men rather than the impact of marriage on participation.

**Figure 7.14 Age-standardised rate of male part time work by marital status,<sup>a</sup> 1980–2006**  
Persons aged 15 years and over.



<sup>a</sup> Based on the social definition of marital status used in the ABS labour force survey (see footnote 1 on page 101). Average for calendar year.

Data source: ABS (*Labour Force, Australia, detailed — electronic delivery*, 2007, Cat. no. 6291.0.55.001, table LM1).

## 7.4 Summary

There are distinctly different trends and reasons for prime age women and men working part time. An important trend for women over the past three decades has been the change in fertility patterns — namely, women are generally having fewer children and having them later in life. Furthermore, some women are re-entering the

---

labour force earlier after having children and are working part time while their children are young. The increased availability of childcare has helped mothers with their return to work.

The past few decades have seen a decline in employment rates for prime age men in addition to a considerable uptake of part time work. Several supply side effects have been linked to the share of prime age men working part time, including the importance of ill health or disability. There has been a fall in overall employment of prime age men, suggesting that demand side effects also play a role in explaining the growth in the share of men working part time. Support for the deficient demand argument is provided by prime age men indicating that the main reason they work part time is because they cannot find full time work.

A key theme emerging from the discussion in this Chapter is the role of part time employment in balancing the responsibilities of work and family life for prime age workers, especially for mothers and lone fathers. There is evidence to suggest that women are more likely to work part time if they are married and/or have children under 5 years old or have several children. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to work part time if they are not married or are a lone parent.