

How working away is changing home

18 August 2020, by David Bissell, Libby Straughan



For many families in Australia, one partner works away from home for days or weeks at a time. Credit: Shutterstock

With many of us cooped up at home with our families over the past few months, waving goodbye to your partner for a fortnight might not seem like a big deal, perhaps for some it might even afford a welcome relief.

But imagine the practical and emotional impacts that this would have on your household if this were to happen on a regular basis.

Suddenly, you're faced with having to balance paid work, domestic labour and possibly childcare on your own, and that's before all the other things that you might have to put on hold until your partner returns.

And yet this is a way of life for many families in Australia in which one partner works away from [home](#) for days or weeks at a time.

While you've been working from home during the pandemic, many families have been living apart. A sizeable mobile workforce has been vital for keeping the wheels of the economy turning during this time.

Truck drivers, mobile health professionals and [agricultural workers](#) are just some of the many people whose work continues to take them away from home for days or weeks on end, servicing communities and ensuring supermarket shelves are full.

Upwards of sixty thousand fly-in fly-out workers have kept the mines in Western Australia operating during the pandemic, credited with helping to keep the economy afloat.

Mobile work has always been a crucial part of the Australian economy.

Between 2006 and 2011, the number of mobile workers in Australia travelling over 100km to work increased by 37 percent to around 213,773 or about 2 percent of the Australian workforce. The most recent census data indicates that this is now around 320,000 workers.

Though commonly associated with the [mining sector](#), around eighty percent of people who travel long distances for work are involved in other sectors, including IT, healthcare and agriculture.

While we have a good idea about the numbers involved, we know much less about the personal impacts that this work is having on mobile workers, their partners and their households.

Over the past four years, our team has conducted in-depth qualitative research to find out about the impacts that working away has on Australian households.

Through surveys, in-depth interviews, photo-diaries and home tours, we are building a detailed picture of how people's lives change in response to mobile work and how it affects people's wellbeing.

The mobile workers and partners in our study come from all across Australia. They work in a range of different employment sectors including mining, health, education and information technology.

While we research both men and women who worked away, this is a highly gendered practice. Of 65 people interviewed, only two participants are male partners of mobile workers.

There are positive dimensions to mobile work, including job satisfaction, the possibility of higher salaries, having extended time at home, and giving partners independence. However, our participants reveal a wide range of challenges.

Our [project report](#) highlights that these are connected to issues around relationships, health, homemaking, parenting and partner employment. Importantly, these challenges can change over time, so mobile work can start out easy and get harder, and vice versa.

Some mobile workers find they are losing touch with home, family and friends. This creates feelings of isolation and loneliness.

A lack of intimacy can also be compounded by difficult conversations that might need to be had, or issues stored up while away that need to be resolved when they return home.

Mobile workers are telling us that they tend to have poorer diets, consume more alcohol and exercise less than they did when working closer to home.

Because they work long hours and travel frequently, they are also telling us that mobile work can be exhausting. The cumulative effects of this means mobile workers can have poor mental and physical health.

Mobile workers travel lightly and efficiently. But this means work accommodations are anonymous spaces.

Meanwhile the absence of mobile workers from home places an uneven burden of household chores and childcare on the shoulder of partners left behind. Because of issues like these, our research is finding that mobile work is changing the home.

The absence of a parent from home can create several challenges for those with children. It can

result in a lack of parenting continuity; children can differently accept authority from their stay-at-home and mobile working parents; and young children can find parental absence distressing.

Our research has shed light on problems associated with mobile work. Indeed, our participants are finding that these challenges can feel privatised, as individual households are left to negotiate these issues.

However, we have identified a range of solutions which we hope will be helpful to current mobile [worker](#) families, or families contemplating mobile work in the future.

Many of these solutions relate to improving communication, enabling mobile workers to keep up to date with everyday life at home, which also gives partners a sense of what it is like to work away.

Communication is also key to negotiating the division of household chores and routine rhythms across a worker's periods of absence and presence.

In the wake of the COVID-19 lockdown we are looking at a time of high unemployment, and this means that there may be an absence of work near home.

Some may find that they need to travel further distances to undertake paid employment and may be contemplating working away.

We hope that our findings will help families navigate their job options in the difficult times ahead.

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