

**Changes in paid work for mid-life
couples between 1981 and 2006:
A research note**

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Changes in paid work for mid-life couples between 1981 and 2006: A research note

Paul Callister, Martin von Randow, David Rea and Gerard Cotterell

Abstract

Major changes in paid work and living arrangements have taken place for mid-life men and women in New Zealand since the early 1980s. When the variables are looked at independently, we find fewer such men and women living as couples, fewer men and more women in paid work, and fewer men and women living with dependent children. When these variables are brought together we see an increasing diversity of living arrangements (including whether a person lives with children) and work arrangements. This includes some growth in the proportion of women and men who are not employed, not partnered, and not living with children.

When only those living in couples are considered we also see an increasing diversity of work arrangements. This diversity has emerged over periods of economic decline and economic growth. However, some of this diversity could also be characterised as polarisation with growth in both work-rich and work-poor couples. Although a strong labour market to 2006 substantially reduced the proportion of work-poor couples, they were not back to the proportions seen in 1981 or 1986. This lends some support to the Gregg and Wadsworth (1994) hypothesis that recessions in recent decades increase the number of work-poor households, but in times of strong economic growth do not reduce the number of work-poor households to the same extent. In addition, within the work-poor couples, a larger proportion has both partners not in the labour force, indicating perhaps a higher level of disconnect from the labour market than seen in the past.

Key words: work rich, work poor, couples

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Introduction

In New Zealand, as in other industrialised countries, there has been much change in the living arrangements of men and women in couple-forming and childrearing age groups (Pool et al. 2007). Since at least the 1970s, the proportion of men and women in their mid working life living as couples has rapidly declined. These changes have been accompanied by the increase in the proportion of, largely female, sole parents and an increase in men living alone.

Despite the rapid decline in the proportion of male–female partnerships, in the 2006 New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings the majority of men and women aged 30–44 were still recorded in official data as living as part of a couple. However, for men and women living as couples, the nature of their living arrangements has changed. The proportion that is legally married (i.e., not in a de facto relationship or civil union) has dramatically decreased. In addition, because of delayed childbearing, as well as an increase in childlessness, a smaller proportion of couples are raising children. Another important change, which is the focus of this paper, is the distribution of paid work within mid-life couples.

The changes described above have occurred, to varying extents, in many countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The international research on these changes highlights diverse concerns. At one end of the employment spectrum, much national and international literature has traced the growth of dual-career, or at least dual-job, couples, over the past few decades in all OECD countries (OECD 2007). These couples are those in which both partners are in paid work while raising young children. This reflects the very strong growth in the employment of women, particularly women with young children. In some of the research literature, these dual-job couples are seen as being ‘work rich’. This has prompted a policy agenda in most countries around increasing the availability of childcare, developing paid parental leave schemes, and introducing flexible work policies. But there has also been much discussion around the sharing of paid and unpaid work within these couples, so information on working hours is important.

Within the work–life literature, distinctions are sometimes made between work-rich couples with different employment arrangements. Key groups that have been identified include those where both members of the couple work full time or both work part time. These couples are sometimes described as ‘egalitarian’ couples in relation to their paid work (Gornick and Meyers 2000, Sullivan 2000). Another couple type identified in the literature is the ‘neo-traditional’ couple (Moen and Yu 2000). Rather than the male partner working full time and their female partner not being in paid work (the ‘traditional’ couples), the female partner works part time in a neo-traditional couple. Although we use the term ‘role reversal’ in this paper, it is not an expression that has found favour in the academic literature. The term, as well as ‘househusband’, is more commonly found in

media articles about couples where the female partner is the primary income earner and the male partner stays at home to look after the children (see Callister 1995).

At the other end of the employment spectrum has been a concern about the growth of 'work-poor' couples. This concern was particularly strong in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand in the 1990s. The OECD (1995) noted that around one-third to one-half of all unemployed across its member countries were living in households where no other person had a job. The OECD demonstrated that the proportion had increased almost universally across OECD countries between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s. Moreover, a substantial and increasing proportion of the unemployed living in these "jobless" households were long-term unemployed, a factor that, the OECD suggests, may have exacerbated their lack of contact with the world of work.

In Britain, both "work-poor" and "work-rich" couples emerged at the same time, giving rise to concerns about the polarisation of paid work within couples (Gregg and Wadsworth 1994). For example, Gregg and Wadsworth (1994) showed that twice as many working-age households had no one in paid work in 1994 than in 1975. In New Zealand, similar patterns emerged between 1986 and 1996 (Callister 1998).

This concern about polarisation receded somewhat with the strong growth in employment in the late 1990s and early 2000s. New Zealand Household Labour Force Survey data from 1986 to 2006 for couples where at least one adult was aged 18–64 indicated strong growth in 'work-rich' couples both with and without children. In addition, overall the level of work-poor households in 2006 had returned to the level seen in 1986. At this broad household level, these data indicate that concerns about possible 'jobless' economic growth were overstated. However, the Household Labour Force Survey is based on a sample, so can indicate only broad trends.

We now turn to the New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings to consider trends in couple employment. All data used in this paper were derived from the five-yearly census conducted from 1981 to 2006 by Statistics New Zealand. An advantage of using census data is that we can start some of the analysis in 1981, before the major economic restructuring of the New Zealand economy. In contrast to earlier work on work-rich and work-poor couples aged 25–54 (Callister 2000), the age group has been narrowed to 30–44 years. In this paper, couples are defined on the basis of the male partner's age, and are heterosexual couples who are legally married or in de facto relationships (including heterosexual civil unions) and living in the same household.

The paper begins by setting the scene around work and family change for men and women aged 30–44. This initial analysis draws on a census data set that begins in 1986. The remainder of the paper draws on data sets for each census from 1981 to 2006. These latter data were prepared for a project the COMPASS Research Centre at The University of Auckland undertook on the well-being of family and whānau (COMPASS 2002). The data sets contain useful information on family type, including the dependency status of children in families, and access to these data was permitted for the current work. Data were accessed and analysed under the conditions described in the Appendix to this paper. The paper also draws on some Household Labour Force Survey couple-level employment data from 1986 to 2009 to indicate broad trends since 2006.

Sometimes people filling out the census forms do not complete particular questions. Our data include only those couples where both partners identified whether they were employed and whether they were employed part time or full time. In addition, only those couples where it was possible to identify whether they had children are included in this analysis. A couple might have dependent or independent children living with them or they might have both dependent and independent children living with them. A third group of couples has no children. The 'no children' couples may not have borne children or may have children living away from them (e.g. as a result of separation, being at boarding school, or having left home).

This research follows an earlier census-based investigation into transitions for young people (Rea and Callister 2009). The transitions research showed the cohorts that seemed to have had the most favourable transitions were the cohorts born in the late 1950s and the early 1980s. The cohorts born between 1967–1971 and 1972–1976 seem to have had the least favourable transitions. This research also showed that for young women, the most recent cohorts have had the best outcomes: a finding that accords with the notion that young women now have more opportunities and choices than older women had at the same age. The most recent cohort of young men also fared relatively well, although not as well as the cohorts that were born in the 1950s. Of note is that the cohorts born in the 1967–1971 and 1972–1976 periods who entered the labour market in the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s are those who have reached mid life in 2006 and are part of our 2006 data.

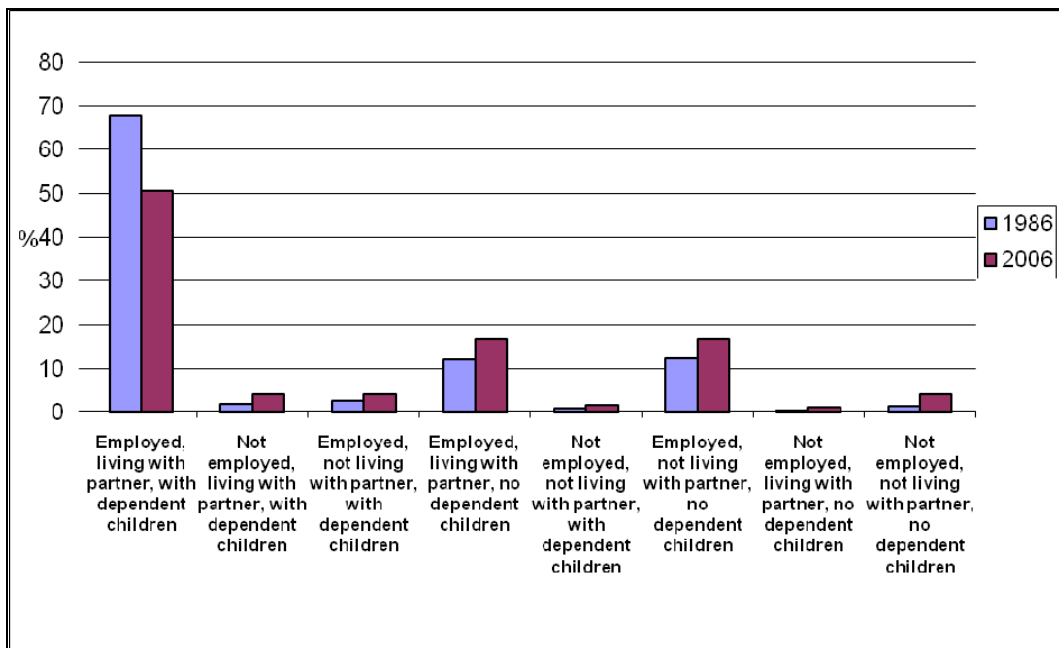
Changes in work and family for women and men from 1986 to 2006

Figures 1 and 2 show changes for males aged 30–44 in three variables: whether they were partnered, were employed, and had dependent children in 1986 and 2006.

Figure 1 reveals that over two decades, the extent to which men in mid life are 'employed, partnered, and living with children' has declined dramatically. In 1986, almost 68% of men were living in this 'traditional' work and family arrangement, but by 2006 this had fallen to just on half.

Figure 1 shows there has been growth in all categories aside from the traditional one. This reflects three changes that have occurred individually or together. These changes are a larger proportion of men in 'traditional' couples not being in paid work, a larger proportion not living in a couple, and a larger proportion not living with dependent children in 2006 compared with 1986. In the subsequent analysis, we consider only four of these categories, each where the male is partnered. In doing so, it is worth keeping in mind that there is some evidence that poorly skilled men, especially those not in paid work, are less likely to be in couples than skilled employed men (Callister, 2000). Therefore, the changes in employment of men living in couples described in the following section are only a subset of employment changes for men in this age group.

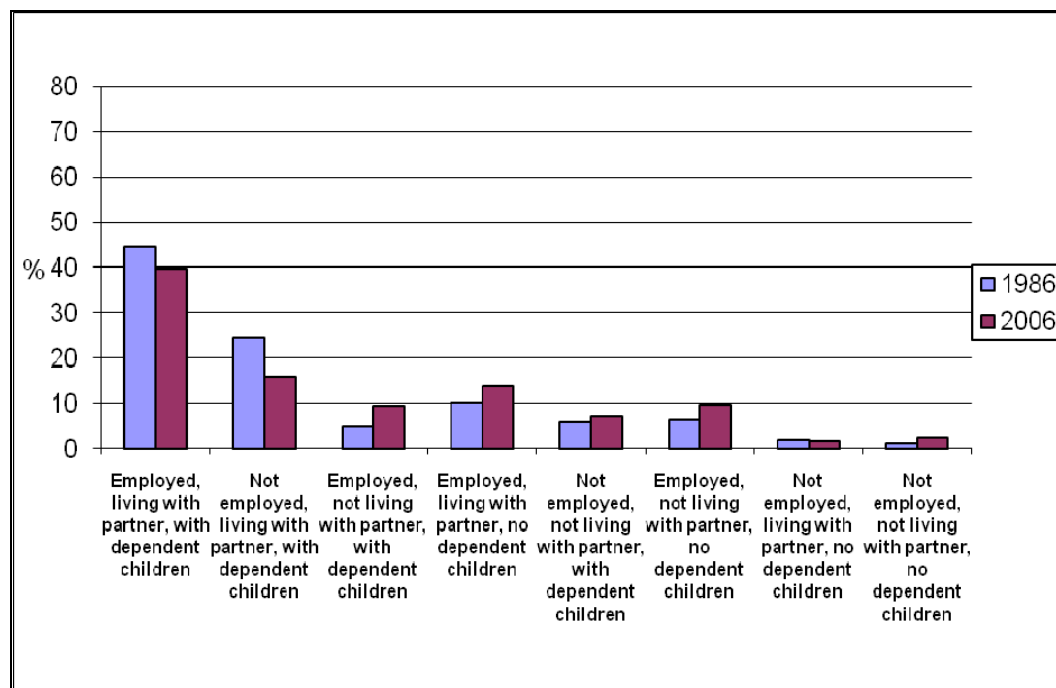
Figure 1 Work and living arrangements of males aged 30–44, 1986 and 2006



Source: New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings.

Figure 2 shows the parallel pattern for women aged 30–44. The patterns for women have both similarities and differences compared with the male patterns. Four key differences are the larger proportion of women than men not employed but partnered and living with dependent children group in 1986 (the mirror image of the male traditional family) – this declines significantly between 1986 and 2006; the larger proportion of both the not employed and the employed sole parent groups, due to more women than men being sole parents; and the smaller group that is outside paid work and family life (but which nevertheless grew from 1986 to 2006). Despite the growth in partnered women with children being in paid work, the category employed, partnered and with dependent children did not grow between 1986 and 2006 primarily due to the growth in sole parenthood and the increase in the number of couples without children.

Figure 2 Work and living arrangements of females aged 30–44, 1986 and 2006



Source: New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings.

Changes in employment within couples

Table 1 further sets the scene by showing changes in the relative size of three types of couples with a male aged 30–44. A feature that stands out is the increasing proportion of couples in this age group with no children. In 1981, there were nine times as many couples with children than without children in this age group, but by 2006 this had fallen to just three times as many. This does not reflect a reduction in fertility over this period, but a nearly five-year increase in the age at which women are having their first child and more children being raised outside of couples.

Table 1 Couples with and without children, male partner aged 30–44, 1981–2006

Year	With dependent children	With only independent children	With no children living with the couple
1981	198,504	3,444	21,924
1986	213,744	6,372	30,696
1991	212,808	6,930	42,354
1996	210,348	5,661	52,935
2001	200,427	3,672	54,846
2006	207,276	3,741	62,595

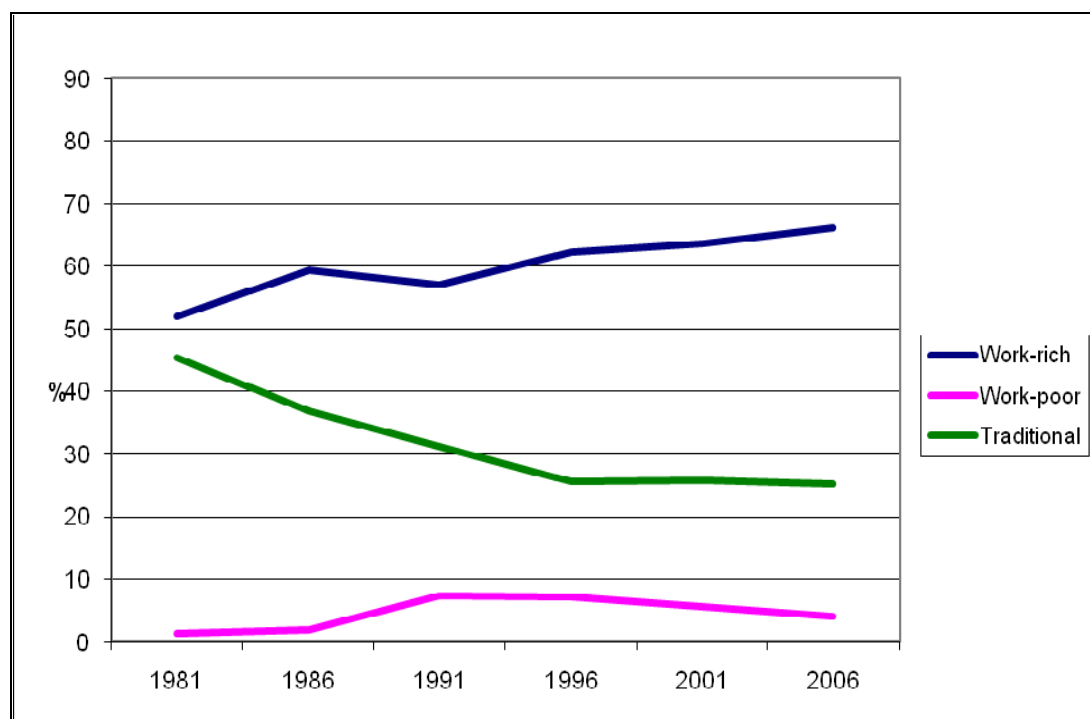
Source: New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings.

Figures 3 and 4 focus on three types of work arrangement within couples: work rich (both partners in paid work for any hours), traditional (male in full-time work and female not in paid work), and work poor (neither partner in paid work, either unemployed or not in the labour force).

Figure 3 shows just those couples with dependent children. Several patterns are important. The first pattern is the big decline in the proportion of traditional couples. This decline took place primarily between 1981 and 1996. Second, while the peak of the recession in 1991 slowed the growth of work-rich couples, overall there has been a steady growth of such couples from 1981 to 2006. In terms of a narrower definition of work rich (i.e. both members of the couple in full-time paid work), there has been a steady increase in this group with dependent children: from 23.9% in 1981, 30.4% in 1986, 31.4% in 1991, 32.1% in 1996, 34.1% in 2001 to 36.4% in 2006.

Just as important has been the growth in work-poor couples. The main growth was between 1986 and 1991, reflecting restructuring that lead to major job loss for males (including mid-life males). The data also show that while the size of this group has decreased since its peak, the relative size of the group (4.1%) was larger in 2006 than in 1981 (1.4%) or 1986 (1.9%). Overall, the data indicate some polarisation of paid work within couples between 1981 and 2006 with the growth of both work-rich and work-poor mid-life couples with dependent children.

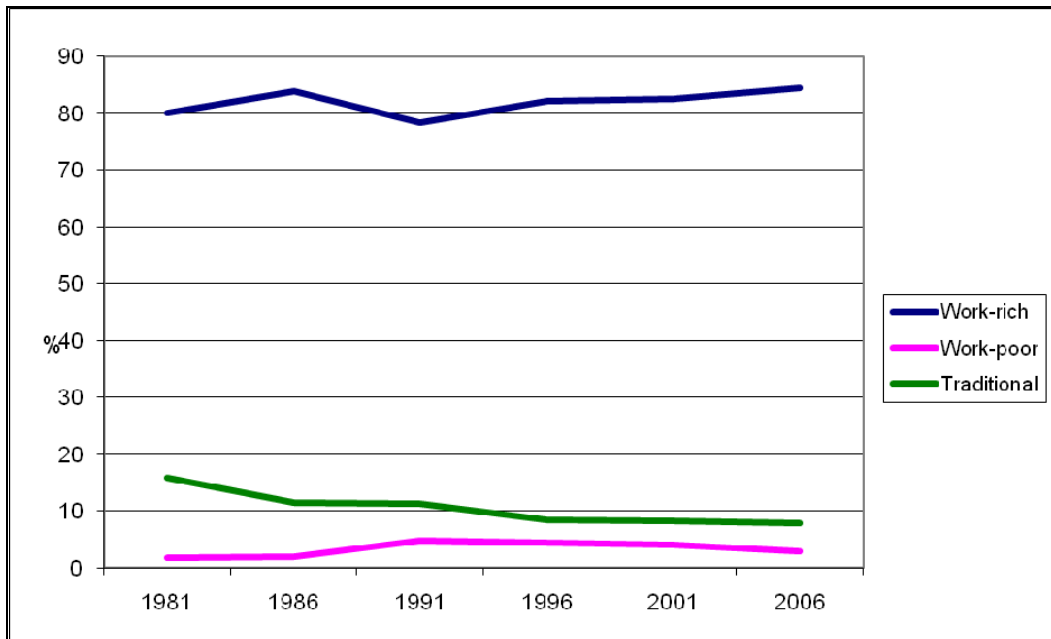
Figure 3 Couples with dependent children, male partner aged 30–44, 1981–2006



Source: New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings.

Figure 4 shows that the changes have been less dramatic for couples without dependent children. There was only a small increase in the proportion of work-rich couples without children from 1981 to 2006. Using the narrower definition of work rich (i.e. both members of the couple working full time), the increase was from 72.7% in 1981 to 77.3% in 2006. Overall, a larger proportion of couples without dependent children were work rich in all census periods, and a larger proportion of work-rich couples had both partners working full time. However, Figure 4 does indicate some minor polarisation between work-rich and work-poor couples.

Figure 4 Couples without dependent children, male partner aged 30–44, 1981–2006



Source: New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings.

Table 2 considers changes in three paid work arrangements within couples. All proportions are calculated as a percentage of total couples rather than of just couples with one or more person in paid work.

Table 2: Proportion of all couples in each work arrangement, male partner aged 30–44, 1981 to 2006

<i>Work arrangement</i>	<i>With dependent children</i>	<i>With no children</i>
<i>Role reversal</i>		
1981	0.4	1.9
1986	0.7	2.0
1991	1.8	4.2
1996	1.9	3.4
2001	2.1	3.6
2006	2.2	3.4
<i>Egalitarian</i>		
	<i>With dependent children</i>	<i>With no children</i>
1981	24	70
1986	30	73
1991	29	68
1996	30	70
2001	32	71
2006	35	73
<i>Neo-traditional</i>		
	<i>With dependent children</i>	<i>With no children</i>
1981	28	9
1986	28	9
1991	27	9
1996	31	10
2001	30	9
2006	29	9

Source: New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings.

Note: The role reversal work arrangement is where the male partner is not in paid work and the female partner is in full-time paid work. The egalitarian work arrangement is where both partners work full time or both work part time. The neo-traditional work arrangement is where the male partner works full time and the female partner works part time.

As women have become better educated and have better opportunities in paid work, there was the possibility that we would have seen a growth in the mirror image to the traditional couple, that is a growth of couples where the female partner works full time and the male partner is not in paid work (i.e. the role reversal work arrangement). Although there has been some small growth in this couple type, even by 2006 they represent a very small minority of childrearing or non-childrearing couples. There are probably a variety of reasons for this. First, the idea of having one parent at home full time, whether it is a mother or father, seems to have become less popular even among those couples who can afford this working arrangement. Secondly, it may simply reflect that most men and women still hold on to a traditional model of who should undertake unpaid work in the home. Thirdly, it may also reflect a greater difficulty for women moving into jobs that pay a wage sufficient to maintain a family (i.e. a “family wage”). This is despite women in this age group on average being better qualified than men.

The data on egalitarian couples suggests that having children is a major barrier to this work arrangement. However, the proportion of egalitarian couples with dependent children has grown.

The neo-traditional couple is not a popular arrangement among couples without children. This couple is relatively common among those with children but it has not been growing.

Tables 3 and 4 show the changing numbers of work-poor couples with dependent children.

Table 3 shows the growth in the number of work-poor couples peaked in 1991 but did not drop back to the absolute numbers seen in 1981.

Table 4 shows a shift within work-poor couples. This has been a move to both partners not being in the labour force. However, the number of couples where both were unemployed is also higher in 2006 than in 1981 (Table 3). The major reduction has been in couples where the male partner was unemployed and the female partner was not in the labour force. These couples are likely to have been 'traditional' couples where the male partner lost his job and was actively seeking work.

Table 3 Work-poor couples by labour market status within couple, male partner aged 30–44, 1981–2006

<i>Year</i>	<i>Male & female unemployed</i>	<i>Male unemployed & female NLF</i>	<i>Female NLF & male unemployed</i>	<i>Male & female NLF</i>	<i>Total</i>
1981	105	1,893	12	807	2,817
1986	453	1,743	171	1,629	3,996
1991	1,857	6,159	654	7,233	15,903
1996	2,067	4,026	885	8,145	15,123
2001	1,476	2,775	735	6,513	11,499
2006	507	1,440	528	6,060	8,535

Source: New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings.

Note: NLF = not in the labour force.

Table 4 Work-poor couples by labour market status within couple, male partner aged 30–44, 1981–2006

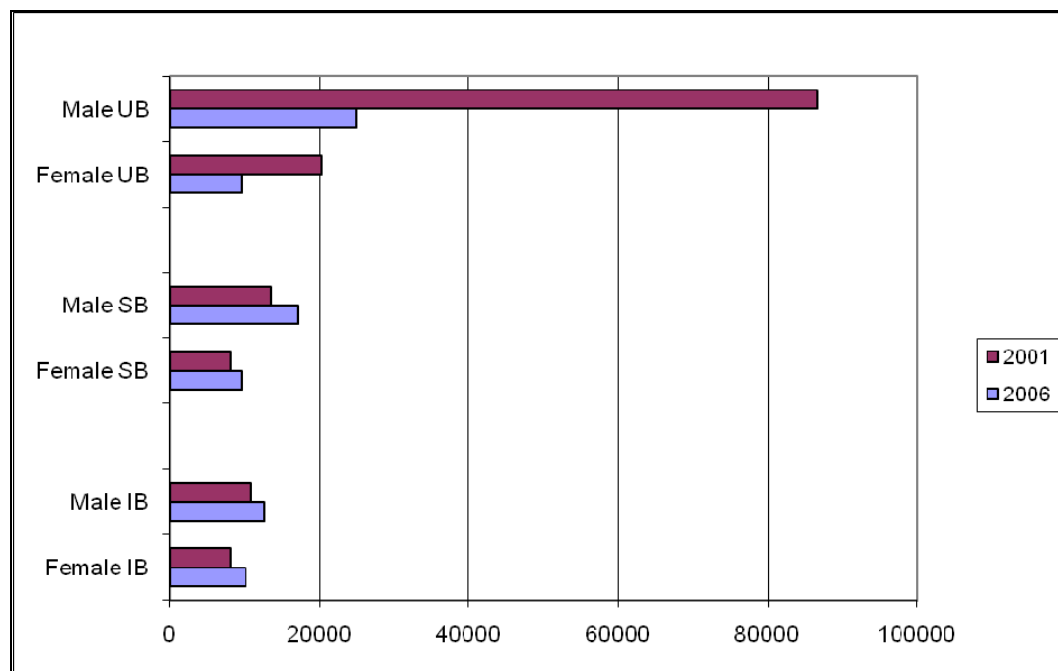
Year	Male & female unemployed (%)	Male unemployed & female NLF (%)	Female NLF & male unemployed (%)	Male & female NLF (%)	Total (%)
1981	4	67	0	29	100
1986	11	44	4	41	100
1991	12	39	4	45	100
1996	14	27	6	54	100
2001	13	24	6	57	100
2006	6	17	6	71	100

Source: New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings.

Note: NLF = not in the labour force.

The shift to both partners in work-poor couples not being in the labour may reflect a growing detachment from the labour market, seen in parallel by declines in those receiving the unemployment benefit and a small growth in those receiving sickness and invalid benefits (Figure 5). The shift comes primarily from a reduction of the proportion of couples where the male was unemployed and the female not in the labour force. These may have been formally traditional couples where the male lost his job.

Figure 5 Receipt of unemployment (UB), sickness (SB), and invalid benefits (IB) by males and females aged 30–44, 2001 and 2006



Source: Administrative data from the Ministry of Social Development, February years.

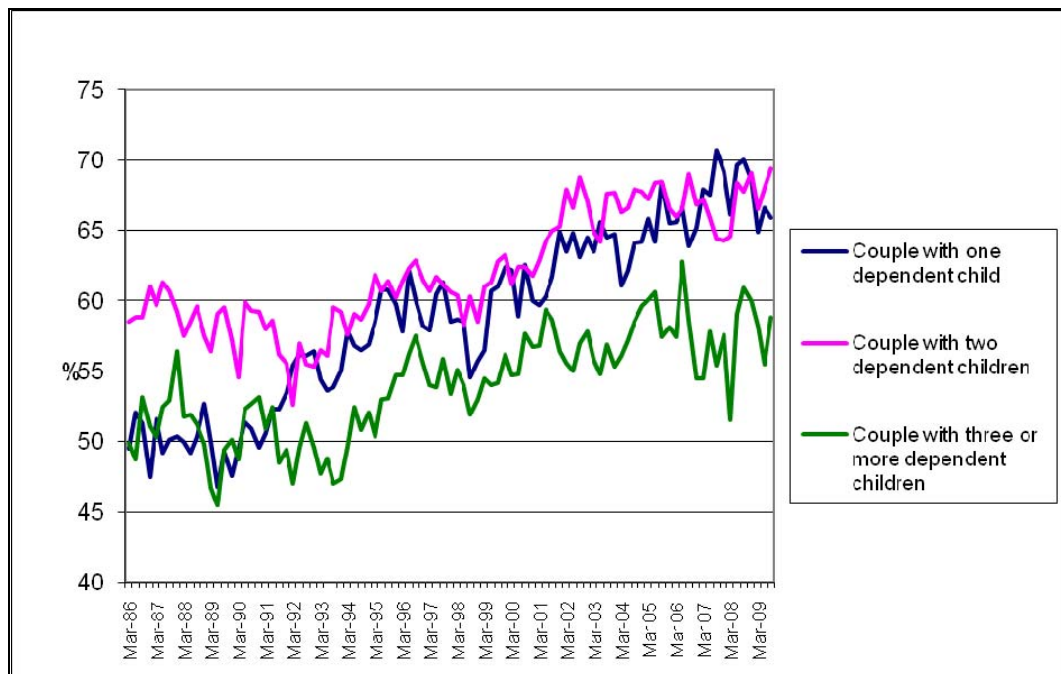
Note: This includes men and women in all living arrangements.

Changes since 2006

Household Labour Force Survey data allow some tracking of employment at a couple level. Due to the survey's sample size, the age restriction cannot be placed on the males, but many of the couples in the sample who have dependent children would be in our target age range. Figure 6 shows the trend for work-rich couples from 1986 to 2009, and Figure 7 shows the trend for work-poor couples over the same period.

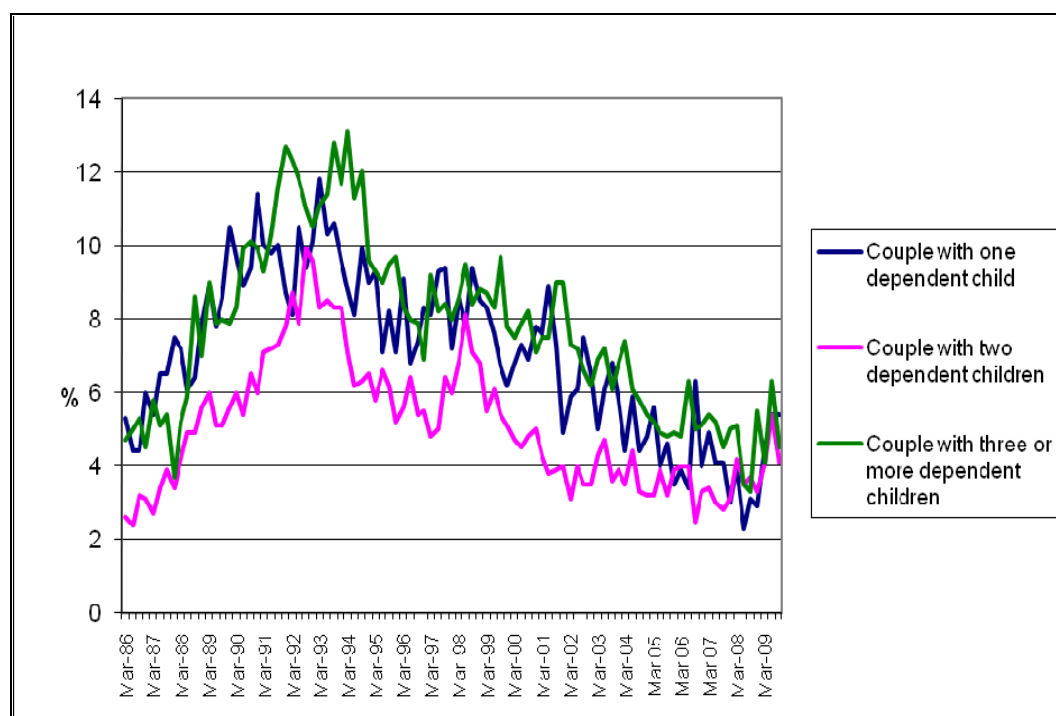
Figure 6 suggests some slowing of the growth of work-rich couples with children since 2006. For work-poor couples, the strong labour market through to the end of 2008 kept the size of this group on a downward trend. But the rise in unemployment in 2009 saw the proportion of work-poor couples growing again. How much this growth will continue will depend substantially on the overall levels of unemployment in New Zealand in 2010 and beyond.

Figure 6 Couples with dependent children where both partners are in paid work and at least one partner is aged 18–64, March 1986 – September 2009



Source: Household Labour Force Survey.

Figure 7 Couples with dependent children where both partners are not in paid work and at least one partner is aged 18–64, March 1986 – September 2009



Source: Household Labour Force Survey.

Conclusion

Major changes in work and living arrangements have taken place for mid-life men and women in New Zealand since the early 1980s. When the variables are looked at independently, we find fewer such men and women living as couples, fewer men and more women in paid work, and fewer men and women living with dependent children. When these variables are brought together we see an increasing diversity of living arrangements (including whether a person lives with children) and work arrangements. This includes some growth in the proportion of women and men who are not employed, not partnered, and not living with children.

When only those living in couples are considered we also see an increasing diversity of work arrangements. This diversity has emerged over periods of economic decline and economic growth. However, some of this diversity could also be characterised as polarisation with growth in both work-rich and work-poor couples. Although a strong labour market to 2006 substantially reduced the proportion of work-poor couples, they were not back to the proportions seen in 1981 or 1986. This lends some support to the Gregg and Wadsworth (1994) hypothesis that recessions in recent decades increase the number of work-poor households, but in times of strong economic growth do not reduce the number of work-poor households to the same extent. In addition, within the work-poor couples, a larger proportion has both partners not in the labour force, indicating perhaps a higher level of disconnect from the labour market than seen in the past.

Finally, this research raises several issues. Being a cross-sectional analysis, there is always the question of how long couples stay in each labour market status. And does the labour market status of partners have an impact on family form? Then there is the

important question of changing patterns of income, including for those who appear to be increasingly dependent on the state. There is also a question about the spatial distribution of couples: are work-rich couples increasingly clustering in neighbourhoods that have good labour market outcomes, and are work-poor couples equally concentrated in neighbourhoods with more disadvantageous outcomes?

Appendix: Working with data from the census

Access to the census data used in this study was provided by Statistics New Zealand in a secure environment, the Data Laboratory. The Data Laboratory was designed to give effect to the confidentiality provisions of the Statistics Act 1975. Personal identification information, such as name and address, supplied on the original census forms is not carried over to the computer records held by Statistics New Zealand, so these details are not available to Data Laboratory users. Further omissions eliminate the linking of individual-level records in the Data Laboratory data sets back to respondents.

In addition, all Data Laboratory output is subject to confidentiality rules set by Statistics New Zealand to further protect respondents' confidentiality. In particular, counts lower than six are set to zero and those of six or above are randomly rounded to one of the nearest multiples of three (so, a count of seven could become six or nine) to further guard confidentiality (Statistics New Zealand 2001). Percentages are then calculated on the basis of rounded counts. Derived statistics such as medians and quantiles are not rounded. Given that the numbers presented are typically very large, rounding is not expected to affect the conclusions drawn.

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