



# Living Apart Together: How Working Away Affects Individuals, Households and Wellbeing

---

## Research Report for Stakeholders

A/Prof David Bissell  
Prof Andrew Gorman-Murray  
Dr Kim McNamara  
Dr Elizabeth Straughan





# Contents

02	Introduction
04	Key Findings
08	Fieldwork
10	01 Relationship challenges
14	02 Health challenges
18	03 Homemaking challenges
22	04 Parenting challenges
26	05 Employment challenges
30	Project publications
32	The Researchers

#### Report authors

David Bissell, Andrew Gorman-Murray, Kim McNamara, Elizabeth Straughan

#### Editorial assistance

Emilie Baganz

#### Research support

This project was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Award (DP160103771). It was facilitated by The University of Melbourne and Western Sydney University



Australian Government  
Australian Research Council

#### Report design

Charcoal Creative

#### Photos credits

istockphoto, Adobe Stock

ISBN: 978-0-9943186-2-6 online resource

ISBN: 978-0-9943186-3-3 paperback

© 2020 Copyright is held by the authors

This work is copyright. *The Copyright Act 1968* permits fair dealing for study, research, news reporting, criticism or review. Selected passages may be reproduced for such purposes provided acknowledgement of the source is included. Major extracts of the entire document may not be reproduced by any process without written permission of the authors.

# Introduction



For a long time, the Australian economy has been reliant on workers who travel long distances to work in, particularly, mining, agriculture and nursing. This century has seen an increase in long-distance travel for service sector work in the business, finance, health and technology sectors, among others. As a measure of social and economic significance, the number of mobile workers in Australia – those who commute more than 100 km – increased by 37% over 2006–2011, from 155,610 to 213,773, comprising 2.1% of the workforce.<sup>1</sup> The 2016 Census revealed this number had increased further, to c. 320,000 workers, with c. 200,000 commuting over 250 km.<sup>2</sup> The number of people impacted by long-distance work arrangements increases when workers' families are included.<sup>3</sup> To date, however, there has been little research that explains the complex social and economic relationships around this working style across different industry sectors.

The practice of working away from home has been given a number of terms, including long-distance commuting and non-resident work. We prefer to use the term 'working away', which entails travel away from the worker's primary residence – or home – for employment purposes, for days or weeks at a time. We use the term 'mobile worker' to refer to individuals who work away. The term 'living apart together' (LAT) is used to refer to the household arrangements of mobile workers' families, where partners (and children) are present. In 'resource regions' such as Australia, working away is often conflated in policy and popular understandings with fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) resource sector workers. However, these workers comprise just 20% of mobile workers in Australia.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, to date the bulk of research on the personal and familial impacts of working away, as well as policy and media attention on these issues, has concentrated on mine workers in the resource sector. Little has been said about mobile workers outside this sector, or about ancillary workers within the resource sector (e.g. construction, catering and health).

1 KPMG. *Analysis of the Changing Resident Demographic Profile of Australia's Mining Communities*, Report for the Minerals Council of Australia (2013).

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Commuting Distance for Australia*, 25 May 2018. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0.55.001~2016~Main%20Features~Commuting%20Distance%20for%20Australia~1> (accessed 10 December 2019).

3 Fiona Haslam McKenzie. 'The socio-economic impacts of long-distance commuting on people and communities' in Haslam McKenzie, F. (Ed.). *Labour Force Mobility in the Australian Resource Industry: Socio-Economic and Regional Impacts*. Springer, Singapore (2016) 11–28.



The aim of the report is to provide helpful information for those involved in industries in which working away is integral. The content is derived from a project that explores the experiences and complexities of working away on both mobile workers and, where relevant, their partners and families, with particular attention to wellbeing. Wellbeing refers to an often subjective measure of life satisfaction, rather than an objective measure of health (the presence or absence of specific diseases) or economic (employment, income) indicators.<sup>5</sup> In a geographical framework, wellbeing is integrally related to personal connections to place, which can be disrupted in the context of working away.<sup>6</sup> The project was thus designed to develop deeper understanding of the positive and negative impacts of working away on individuals and households, as well as how individuals and households manage these impacts. Specific concerns included effects on long-term decision-

making, financial choices, household practices and personal and familial wellbeing.

Research was conducted with mobile workers and mobile workers' partners based across Australia, including those whose primary residence is located in a major capital city and those whose primary residence is located in a remote or regional town. The research team also interviewed stakeholders in key mobile-worker sectors, such as peak industry body representatives and human resource representatives.

4 KPMG (2013) 20.

5 Andrew Gorman-Murray and David Bissell. 'Mobile work, multilocal dwelling and spaces of wellbeing.' *Health and Place* (2018) 51, 232–238.

6 Sebastien Fleuret and Sarah Atkinson. 'Wellbeing, health and geography: a critical review and research agenda.' *New Zealand Geographer* (2007) 63, 2, 106–118.

# Key Findings

## 01 Relationship challenges

Working away can put significant emotional and social pressure on mobile workers' relationships with family and friends. The main challenges include the lack and disruption of routines as well as establishing regular and intimate or personal communication with family members and friends.

## 02 Health challenges

Common health challenges of mobile workers relate to unhealthy eating habits, lack of maintaining fitness, alcohol consumption and work- or travel-related fatigue, all of which can negatively impact on physical and mental health. These challenges are fostered by the work environment (e.g. lack of access to fresh food or cooking facilities), working culture (e.g. after-work drinks) or work-time pressures (e.g. lack of time for leisure or exercise).

## 03 Homemaking challenges

For mobile workers, creating liveable, personal spaces while working away can be a challenge. Partners of mobile workers can experience a heightened burden of domestic unpaid work responsibilities when they are home alone.

## 04 Parenting challenges

Children can suffer from the regular separation from one parent, especially when they are younger. Periods away also challenge the parental authority of the mobile worker and place uneven parenting burdens on the parent who stays home.

## 05 Employment challenges

Employment challenges for mobile workers include insecurity in economic crisis and unpredictability of future employment. Furthermore, the nature of periodic working and shifting rosters make it difficult to establish personal relationships and support networks at work, and can hinder career progression. In addition, employment opportunities of partners of mobile workers are also compromised by the periodic work of the mobile worker.

# Fieldwork

Research on working away in Australia is often quantitative and provides useful insights into the significant number of people who are involved in mobile work, as well as the socio-economic drivers and impacts that are associated with them. However, much less is known about how different sorts of mobile work are changing the very nature of the households involved. Qualitative methods used to gather information in this project have generated rich data, enabling an understanding of how working away is transforming some Australian homes.

Fieldwork was carried out using a five-stage approach:

## 01 Stakeholder interviews

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 10 organisations involved in employing, recruiting or supporting mobile workers. These included organisations that employ significant numbers of mobile workers, as well as career-support organisations. The aim of these interviews was to highlight problems the organisations had identified about working away.

## 02 Data capture survey

A short web-based, nationwide-screening survey of mobile-worker households attracted 192 respondents. It was implemented to capture quantitative data relating to seven themes: 1) occupation; 2) industry of employment; 3) work and home locations; 4) duration of work rosters (work involving frequent single overnight stays; work involving staying away for a number of days each week; work involving stays longer than a week; and work involving seasonal stays); 5) household composition; 6) length of time engaged in this employment pattern (a mixture of people who have recently started long-distance commuting and those whose routines might be more established); 7) socio-economic and socio-cultural identifiers.

## 03 Mobile worker & partner interviews

Semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were undertaken, with 60 mobile workers or partners drawn from the screening survey. The sample was nationwide and was intended to maximise the diversity of experiences. Interviews were conducted virtually using Skype or FaceTime to increase rapport. Where this was not possible, phone interviews were conducted.

Interviews were undertaken with 42 mobile workers and 18 'left-behind' partners. With the 42 mobile workers, discussion focused on four interrelated elements: 1) everyday routines and rituals of home environments; 2) practical aspects of the journeys involved in the work cycle; 3) everyday working and living practices away from home; and 4) practices involved in maintaining contact with family and friends while away from home. With the 18 'left-behind' partners, discussion focused on three interrelated elements: 1) everyday routines during their partner's work absence; 2) everyday routines when their partner is at home; and 3) practices involved in maintaining contact with the mobile-working partner while they are away.



## 04

## Mobile methods

A sample of 10 mobile workers or partners was invited to participate in 'mobile methods' to gain a more detailed understanding of LAT. This involved: a) a photo diary of an 'on-the-road' period for mobile workers and 'left-behind' partners; and b) a home tour and an interview at the primary place of residence. This involved seven mobile workers, and three 'left-behind' partners.

4a) Photo diaries were used to capture some of the most significant experiences during one 'on-the-road' cycle for mobile workers and 'left-behind' partners. Photo diaries were chosen because they have been shown to be effective at 'probing' experiences that would be impractical to observe directly, owing to financial and time constraints. Participants were invited to photograph their most uplifting and depleting moments, and encouraged to annotate the photographs with their feelings at the time, either by using an app on their phone (e.g. Snapchat) or a separate 'photo log'. This contributed important data on the meaning of the places, people, or objects captured. Participants took as many or as few photos as they wished, although a rough guide of around 20 images was suggested. They were invited to send their images to the project team prior to the final part of the fieldwork.

4b) Home tours were undertaken at the primary residence of these 10 mobile workers or partners. The participant was invited to take the researcher on a guided tour of their home. The rationale was that specific objects or spaces in the home prompted heightened reflection on LAT that might not come to the fore in interviews. Afterwards, interviews of around 45–60 minutes were undertaken and involved two key components: 1) reflections on the experience of undertaking the photo diary and how this practice heightened particular aspects of the experience; and 2) a discussion of each photograph in turn, focusing on selection and subject matter, allowing the participant to draw out the significances of each.

## 05

## Fieldwork on relationships

This final part of the project was carried out in response to interviews where mobile workers and partners highlighted the tensions that mobile-working practices placed on their relationships. We felt these tensions required greater consideration. The fieldwork involved a) data capture survey, and b) semi-structured interviews.

5a) A final screening survey of mobile workers and partners was initiated by asking participants to consider the following: 'Has working away from home pushed your relationship to the limit?' The survey attracted 51 responses.

5b) Five respondents were drawn from this second screening survey to take part in a 45-minute semi-structured interview. Three interviews were undertaken with mobile workers and two with 'left-behind' partners. Interviews were conducted virtually using Skype or FaceTime to increase rapport. Where this was not possible, phone interviews were conducted. Discussion focused on four interrelated themes: 1) which relationships were significant to the interviewee; 2) how these significant relationships had changed during a worker's mobile career; 3) practices and technologies involved in communication; 4) relationship tipping points. No restrictions were placed on our participants' interpretations of 'relationship'.

# 01

## Relationship challenges

### Working away can put significant pressure on relationships

'So the distance – it creates a distance, metaphorically and literally. We weren't having shared experiences. So, everything became about the practicality of – what I call the polite conversation: "How was your day?" "Oh, okay, good." It becomes a much more function-based relationship.' Philip, teacher and mobile worker.

- Periods of absence between the mobile worker and 'left-behind' partner can induce significant relationship challenges. These challenges include feelings of loneliness and isolation, and a lack of intimacy.
- Routine absence from the home can lead mobile workers to feel disconnected from family.
- Relationships can be strained by missing significant events.
- Relationships can be particularly strained by rosters that require workers to be away more than they are home.
- However, for some, regular time apart can have a positive impact on relationships. The partner at home can enjoy independence, and the time when living together can be felt as more rewarding.
- Working away can also put pressure on other significant relationships, such as friendships, owing to inflexible working schedules, which are compounded by family commitments making mobile workers time poor.
- Mobile-worker households find there can be a lack of understanding from friends about work commitments that make them time poor.
- Social media is important to mobile workers for tackling loneliness by maintaining friendships while working away. However, this can cause tension in the home if mobile workers continue online friendship maintenance in the presence of their families.

## Switching between routines can put strain on relationships

'When he comes home that first morning and we're all together in the house, the four of us, it is hell. Honestly it is door slamming, screaming, yelling. It's horrendous. I just always wait for that day to be over because it, the four of us back in the house together – you know, we do things one way, then he's home and he expects things to be done differently. It's exhausting because you just say things you shouldn't say. You know, we're happy to have him home but then it just always implodes. Always. Without fail.' *Mary, bank manager-turned-mature student, partner to a machinery operator and mobile worker.*

- As mobile workers move between work and home environments, they also move between different daily routines.
- Once disturbed, it can take time for everyday routines to settle. For mobile-working households, switches to daily routines when the mobile worker leaves and returns home can be a source of tension as it can take effort to settle back into a routine.
- For mobile workers, it can take time to process things that have been going on at work. Transition time is often needed by mobile workers to 'decompress' when they return home.
- In homes where there are no children, partners of mobile workers can find they need to be flexible and develop two different routines: one for when the worker is home, and one for when the worker is away.
- Changing routines in response to the presence of a mobile worker can lead partners to experience a sense of life being 'on hold' when the mobile worker returns home or conversely, when they are away.
- Mobile workers develop efficient travel routines; this can cause tension when they travel with their families on holiday.

## Communication between family members can be challenging

'Communication – with someone on a submarine – is incredibly limiting. So you can't really even have a conversation about "I've been thinking about this thing; what should we do?" That thought passes for weeks before you can actually talk to them.' *Sally, business owner, partner to a submariner and mobile worker.*

- In the absence of daily in-person contact, mobile-worker relationships have to develop communication routines, which involve frequent voice and messaging contact. This is important for maintaining trust. It can help partners feel closer if they share mundane aspects of their daily routines with each other.
- Other forms of connected presence such as watching the same TV show or playing a video game at a distance can create a sense of proximity.
- However, some mobile work roles prevent use of mobile phones, while other mobile work sites may not have sufficient phone reception or bandwidth. This can compound feelings of isolation for workers and partners.
- Time-zone differences and the clashing of work routines between mobile workers and their partners can exacerbate feelings of isolation and disconnection for some mobile workers and partners.
- Misunderstandings can arise, which can affect relationships. In some industries, partners can imagine that mobile working is more glamorous than it actually is. It can sometimes help if workers share their routine with their partners, either in person or through images, to encourage empathy.
- Some couples respond to the demands of mobile work by putting off challenging or difficult conversations, which can create emotional distance between mobile workers and partners.



## Recommendations

### Mobile workers

- Families should be encouraged to develop regular communication habits, which include sharing mundane details of daily life that can create a sense of intimacy. While voice calls are important, families should consider the wider range of ways of keeping in touch, such as sharing images while on the road.
- Families should be encouraged to establish and discuss their home routines together so that a) it is easier for mobile workers to slot back in, and b) children experience a consistent home life.
- Mobile-working households should develop and facilitate a transition or 'decompression' period as part of the mobile worker's homecoming routine.
- Mobile workers and their partners should be encouraged to talk about their relationship with each other as the job proceeds, so that problems can be identified as they emerge and can thus be rectified.
- A way of enhancing empathy between couples is for mobile workers to 'walk through' their routine either in person, or virtually through images, which can give a more vivid sense of their 'on-the-road' reality.
- Having a partner or other family member collect the mobile worker from the airport can help reduce feelings of disconnection.
- Holding a regular group gathering for friends to drop in (for example, first Sunday of the month) can enable time-poor mobile workers to maintain friendships and social networks.



## Employers of mobile workers

- Employers should allow sufficient opportunities for employees to keep in touch with others while working away. This includes internet connectivity at remote sites, as well as sufficient opportunities to use internet-connected devices throughout the day.
- Employers should run assistance programs to disseminate information and provide toolkits to assist workers and their partners build resilience into relationships.
- Work rosters should not require workers to be away from home for longer periods than they are at home.

# 02

## Health challenges

### Healthy eating can be compromised

'The food quality is very poor, and people are just sick of it. There's quite a few people that bring up their own food. I work with a guy who's started bringing his own water.' Gavin, mine surveyor and mobile worker.

- Eating healthy food can be difficult for workers in mobile workplaces, especially for those in workplaces where there is little control over meal choices.
- For others, eating alone can decrease the incentive to cook healthy meals. This can be compounded by substandard cooking facilities and a lack of easy access to fresh food, especially in remote locations, or the relative ease of being able to order takeaway food in more urban locations.

### It can be difficult to maintain fitness when working away

'In the early days of travelling, my wife saw my travelling life as, well, you're staying in the Hilton, you're staying in the Sheraton, you know ... She'd say, "What's the gym like?"; it's, like, I don't know, I haven't even seen the gym. Well, you know, "is the pool warm?" I don't even know what floor the pool's on.' Simon, IT consultant and mobile worker.

- Mobile workers often lack access to leisure and exercise facilities, which over time has a detrimental impact on their physical and mental health.
- Even when such facilities are present, job-related time pressures can restrict the opportunities for leisure and exercise.
- Unfamiliar environments can raise concerns for safety, especially for female mobile workers, and limit possibilities for physical activity.
- Some mobile workers find there is a trade-off between communicating with family in the evening and going to the gym.

## Alcohol challenges

'I'll have a drink on the plane; if I'm going on a long-haul flight, I love a whisky on a plane, a couple of whiskies.' [Simon, IT consultant and mobile worker.](#)

- For mobile workers in corporate roles, expectations around dining with clients can create problems relating to excessive consumption of food and alcohol.
- For mobile workers who work at remote sites with many other mobile workers, there is often an 'after-work' drinking culture, which can negatively impact bodily and mental health, as well as affect personal relationships.
- This drinking culture can spill beyond work sites and affect drinking habits in home communities.
- Loneliness, isolation and relationship pressures can exacerbate the pressure to drink alcohol.

## Illness

'I've never been as sick as I've been in the 18 months that I was doing the 10-and-4 roster – and that's not an exaggeration. I think I was properly sick about four times over the space of 18 months with really bad flu-like symptoms, respiratory infections, skin infections.' [Rob, health, safety and environment manager and mobile worker.](#)

- As mobile workers are often required to travel through transport hubs such as airports, they may be at greater risk of contracting viruses and infections.
- The cumulative effects of poor diet, lack of exercise and exhaustion can result in a higher propensity for mobile workers to get sick.
- Mobile workers find frequent air travel can affect the health of their sinuses and eustachian tubes, which can negatively affect their hearing.

## Life on the road can be exhausting

'If you finish [your roster] on the Thursday night or Friday morning, your Friday and Saturday you're pretty tired. Because you've been working 12, 13-hour days. You've been living in a camp. So yeah, you get home and you know it's the weekend and normal people that live in Perth they want to do stuff on the weekend, but sometimes it can be a bit of a struggle just because you're worn out, you're tired.' [Rob, health, safety and environment manager and mobile worker.](#)

- Some mobile workers experience significant fatigue because of working away.
- Frequent travel itself can be physically tiring, especially for mobile workers who undertake significant periods of driving.
- Noisy accommodation can negatively affect the quality of sleep for mobile workers.
- It can take mobile workers time to adjust to their new sleeping environment.
- Mobile workers find nightshift rosters particularly exhausting.
- Fatigue is exacerbated when jet lag is involved.
- For some workers, periods of living alone 'on the road' can lead to overwork and burnout, as work-life boundaries can become blurred.
- Some mobile-working roles can be emotionally as well as physically draining.
- Travel fatigue can reduce a mobile worker's desire to travel for their holiday. This can be at odds with the desires of their family.



## Recommendations

### Mobile workers

- Mobile workers should ensure that they have sufficient 'downtime' away from their work activities.
- Workers should be encouraged to use their 'down time' in ways that will facilitate their wellbeing.





## Employers of mobile workers

- Employers should facilitate access to healthy, fresh food for mobile workers.
- For non-site mobile workers, temporary accommodation should have adequate meal preparation facilities.
- Employers could consider subscribing to recipe and meal-kit delivery services, where available, for mobile workers who travel to other urban centres.
- Employers should facilitate access to fitness spaces and equipment.
- For site-based work, employers should consider increasing non-drinking-oriented leisure spaces, such as cinemas.
- Employers should ensure accommodations are sufficiently quiet to facilitate quality sleep for mobile workers.

# 03

## Homemaking challenges

### It can be difficult to feel at home 'on the road'

'I suppose "home" is basically wherever I dump my bag, like, I've got most things in my carry-on.' Ari, mine surveyor and mobile worker.

- For mobile workers, creating liveable spaces while working away can be a challenge. This is especially the case for workers who have to share accommodation, have little personal space, or who have to move frequently between different locations.
- Many mobile workers travel light and so living spaces can feel anonymous without opportunities for personalisation.
- Given the significance of travel time, mobile workers who fly appreciate access to airline lounges. These can also be important spaces for networking.
- For workers returning to the same mobile work location, being able to leave clothes and belongings at their work location can be beneficial.
- Workers whose jobs require frequent movement between different locations can experience heightened feelings of dislocation and estrangement.
- Some mobile workers find it useful to take a few significant objects that connect them to other significant people and places while they are away.
- Taking objects such as music players or even musical instruments can help to create liveable spaces while on the move.
- Remote locations with few colleagues, which is common in some industries, can raise concerns for personal safety and security.
- For some mobile workers, digital devices and virtual spaces become synonymous with familiarity and a sense of home.

## Managing a home alone can be challenging

'When Jason is away—I mean it's just a crazy juggle. I just do all the shopping, all the cooking, all the food prep and all the picking up and dropping off the kids – and they do a bunch of extracurricular activities. School finishes at two in this region. So you have this whole afternoon with kids, to do something with them ... So I just run around like a crazy person when Jason is not here. I think my mental health definitely will go down when he's not here. I find it unpleasant. I find it hard work. Just living on coffee, like I've got a coffee drip in my arm. I really don't find it fun.' *Bea, part-time freelance journalist, partner of a mobile worker in land management.*



- Partners of mobile workers can experience a heightened burden of domestic unpaid work responsibilities when they are home alone. This hardship can be exacerbated for those who also undertake paid employment.
- Since mobile work is highly gendered, it is therefore female partners who shoulder a greater burden of domestic work.
- In some cases, female mobile workers undertake extra domestic work before travel, and maintain parenting and household management roles while working away.
- Online support forums for partners can be beneficial. However, for some, they can intensify resentment and frustration, therefore this can be bad for mental health.
- Certain home-management tasks that require the expertise or input of the mobile worker can be deferred until they return home, which can add additional feelings of pressure for the mobile worker and their partner during this period.
- For households living in remote areas, partners can find mobile-worker absence particularly challenging.

## 'I suppose "home" is basically wherever I dump my bag'

### Mobile work creates opportunities to be footloose

'I don't have any base in Australia. I'm flying from work to Perth, I walk from the airport to domestic to get a shuttle to International. And then I get the flight to Bali.' *Ray, mobile worker in mining accommodation and catering.*

- For some mobile workers, especially those without partners, working away can provide opportunities to live more nomadic lifestyles.
- Some younger mobile workers with fixed-work rosters choose to have no fixed home base, instead choosing to travel during their time off work.



## Recommendations

### Mobile workers

- Mobile workers could consider taking a few significant objects that connect them with family and friends on the road.
- Workers should be encouraged to think about taking objects that might enhance their 'down time' and create more liveable spaces.
- Mobile-worker families should be made aware of the online support forums available. However, they should evaluate over time whether being involved in these forums is ultimately enabling or constraining.
- Mobile work families should be encouraged to discuss and regularly review their household's division of labour.



## **Employers of mobile workers**

- Employers must provide comfortable accommodation that can facilitate good-quality rest and relaxation.
- For workers who return to the same site, employers should provide space to leave personal belongings.
- For mobile workers who fly, employers should facilitate access to airline lounges, and, if appropriate, explore possibilities of using regular chauffeured driver services to make the transit experience less anonymous for mobile workers.

# 04

## Parenting challenges

### Children can miss the presence of a parent

'With a toddler, a month is a long time with regards to their emotional development, so the difference between the way she took it last time to the way she's taking it this time is getting bigger and bigger. Sometimes she won't talk to him on the phone because she's mad at him. She's just starting to be able to vocalise her emotions... the last time he was away she's been saying a lot that she's sad, that she misses Daddy.' *Jessica, partner of a production operator and mobile worker.*

- In mobile-worker families, children are separated from one parent for periods of time.
- Difficulties can arise through of a perceived lack of continuity of parenting during times of absence and presence.
- Children can miss the presence of the working-away parent. This challenge can be heightened when that parent misses significant occasions, such as birthdays or other important celebration days or personal achievements.
- While older children can more easily adapt to periods of parental absence, younger children can find this parental absence much more distressing.

## Mobile working creates uneven responsibilities for parenting

**'When he's away the downsides are that there are no breaks; I solo parent, day, night, every minute.'**

Jessica, partner of a production operator and mobile worker.

- There is an uneven parenting burden placed on the parent left at home during times of mobile-worker absence, often operating as a 'single parent' while the mobile partner is working away.
- Given the gendered nature of mobile work, this parenting burden frequently falls to women.
- Furthermore, the mobile worker's partner may feel unable to help in a tangible way while working away and can feel like a disruption or burden when they return home.



## Periodic absence and presence can disrupt parenting

**'Who's the person that disciplines the kids and that sort of stuff? In my mind, it should be me. But in some respects, it's really my wife for two weeks. So, when I'm home, I've got to ride shotgun, rather than be in the driver's seat, I guess.'** Samir, engineer and mobile worker.

- Children may accept authority differently from their stay-at-home parent and their mobile parent, where the child may not accept the latter as co-leader of the family when they return from long stretches of work.
- Some parents are concerned about the potential impacts of having the male role model absent from home.
- In extreme cases, young children may struggle to recognise the mobile worker as their parent.

**'Sometimes she won't talk to him on the phone because she's mad at him'**

# Recommendations

## Mobile workers

- Parents should identify and discuss their respective parenting roles to ensure consistency.
- Mobile workers could elect to undertake specific non-routine tasks to allow them to fulfil parenting ambitions.
- Calendars can enable children to visualise and emotionally prepare for upcoming mobile-worker absence.





## **Employers of mobile workers**

- For mobile workers at a fixed site, employers should consider ways to facilitate family visits to the site, to give children a greater appreciation of where one of their parents works.
- Employers of mobile workers must consider the paternity and maternity needs of mobile worker families. This might also involve reviewing working-away patterns to ensure more frequent non-work periods.

# 05

## Employment challenges

### Economic uncertainty can exacerbate problems

'In 2007 the [price of] nickel crash[ed], and this was our first lesson on watching the environment that you work in, we took a nosedive. To cut a long story short, we had put a lot of money into the house because we were building it for a family, [and Ben thought] we're just going to have to give ourselves a heart attack to hold onto the house because I've put all this money into it. And I was, no, we've got to walk away; like at the end of the day it's a debt.' Rose, partner of a jumbo operator and mobile worker.

- Some mobile-worker roles are highly contingent on periods of economic growth. In times of economic uncertainty, people working in these roles experience greater insecurity.
- The challenges of some mobile-worker jobs are in part compensated by higher remuneration and substantial 'windfall' payments.
- However, this presents challenges in terms of financial management, and can give rise to consumption habits that are unsustainable relative to the unpredictability of ongoing employment.

### Mobile workers can feel excluded

'Often when you arrive [at the office] no one responds to you. You're just another person; you fly-in, fly-out so you're not actually part of that team, so no one says "oh my God it's so good to see you".' Rumina, project manager and mobile worker.

- For mobile workers who have significant peripatetic roles, it can be difficult to establish collegial relationships with others in their organisation.
- A lack of presence for these workers can make them feel excluded from decision-making processes and work-based social networks.

- There is a perception that this can make it more difficult for peripatetic mobile workers to progress their careers within the organisation.
- Peripatetic mobile workers can find themselves negotiating several workplace cultures.
- Some mobile workers harbour a concern that their work is not thoroughly evaluated by office-based colleagues, leading to concerns over work quality.

## Partners face additional challenges

**‘Sometimes [when he is away] I try to juggle if I have freelance commissions due, yet my youngest one is not at kindergarten. So, the other day I was writing something whilst watching her. That is mentally tiring, getting interrupted every 15 minutes when you’re trying to focus. I need that other set of hands.’** *Bea, part-time freelance journalist, partner of a mobile worker in land management.*

- Alternating periods where the mobile worker is at home and then away can create difficulties for their partner’s employment.
- Employment challenges can emerge because partners routinely become the only parent who can care for the couple’s children.
- There may be an expectation by the mobile worker that their partner will be present at home when they are at home.
- Even in the absence of this expectation, alternating periods of absence and presence of the mobile worker can restrict the range of employment opportunities that their partner can take up.

## Work challenges can feel privatised

**‘I’ve got a few friends that are army wives and I know that they do it tough. [But] our husbands [in the resource sector] are away too, but we don’t have the defence family aid, we don’t have any of the support things. Nothing, no one cares. We work for private companies. They get special defence transition aids for their kids in school. They get everything free, they get a lot of stuff provided to them by the defence. We don’t get anything.’** *Mary, bank manager-turned-mature student, partner to a machinery operator and mobile worker.*

- The challenges that mobile workers face can feel ‘privatised’ so that the responsibility of dealing with them falls to the worker and their family, rather than other institutions or organisations that could take some responsibility.
- Mobile workers can find it difficult to discuss problems with their employers, even when employee-assist programs exist, owing to perceived stigma.
- There is a perception among mobile workers that employee-assist programs are more reactive than proactive, and many are reluctant to seek help, especially in male-dominated work environments where help is perceived as a sign of weakness.
- Mobile workers in corporate roles find the time it takes to travel to and from meetings is often not appreciated by clients.
- In male-dominated industries, female mobile workers can feel obligated to ‘do more’ or ‘work harder’ than their male counterparts in order to prove themselves worthy of the job.
- At the same time, mobile work can be particularly rewarding for women, allowing them to define a distinct professional identity away from home, gendered divisions of domestic labour and expectations of motherhood.



## Recommendations

### Mobile workers

- Mobile workers need to be aware of how their working pattern can negatively impact on their partner's employment.



## Employers of mobile workers

- For peripatetic mobile workers, employers should consider more effective ways of integrating mobile workers into work sites.
- Employers should be encouraged to provide financial planning advice for mobile workers.
- Employers should provide access to counselling services that workers feel safe to use without fear of judgement or reprisal. Employers need to find ways of destigmatising talking about mental health.

# Project publications

## The project has resulted in the following academic publications to date:

Bissell, D. (2018) Proximity from a distance: mobility, landscape and the intimacies of life on screen. In Kesselring, S., Jensen, O. and Sheller, M. (eds.) *Mobilities and Complexities*. London: Routledge. 41–47.

Bissell, D. (2020) Mobilities and Place. In Edensor, T., Kalandides, A. and Kothari, U. (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Place*. London: Routledge.

Bissell, D. and Gorman-Murray, A. (2019) Disoriented geographies: undoing relations, encountering limits. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 44(4), 707–720.

Bissell, D., Straughan, E. and Gorman-Murray, A. (2020) Losing touch with people and place: labor mobilities, desensitized bodies, disconnected lives. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, in press.

Bissell, D., Vannini, P. and Jensen, O.B. (2017) Intensities of mobility: kinetic energy, commotion, and qualities of supercommuting. *Mobilities*, 12(6), 795–812.

Gorman-Murray, A. and Bissell, D. (2018) Mobile work, multilocal dwelling and spaces of wellbeing. *Health and Place*, 51, 232–238.

Gorman-Murray, A. and Bissell, D. (2020) Women working away from home in Australia. *Gender and Sexuality at Work Conference Proceedings* (peer reviewed). University of Melbourne, 20 February 2020.

Straughan, E., Bissell, D. and Gorman-Murray, A. (2020) Exhausting rhythms: the intimate geopolitics of resource extraction. *Cultural Geographies*, 27(2), 201–216.

Straughan, E., Bissell, D. and Gorman-Murray, A. (2020) The politics of stuckness: waiting lives in mobile worlds. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 38(4), 636–655.

Further journal articles and book chapters are currently under review or in preparation. These will be listed on the project's website <https://www.workingaway.net> in due course.

## The project's findings have also been used to contribute to media work:

Featured article 'Study shows emotional toll for families of highly mobile workers', *WorkingMums*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.workingmums.co.uk/study-shows-emotional-toll-for-families-of-highly-mobile-workers/>

Featured article 'The impact of mobile work on partners and families in Australia', *Geographical*, 16 April 2019, <https://geographical.co.uk/people/cultures/item/3153-mobile-work-australia>



# The Researchers

## Associate Professor David Bissell

David is Associate Professor in the School of Geography at the University of Melbourne. He combines qualitative research on embodied practices with social theory, to explore the social, political and ethical consequences of mobile lives. His research draws on theories of mobilities and cultural geography, to investigate contemporary social problems involving mobility-labour relationships. He is co-editor of *Stillness in a Mobile World* (2011), and *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (2014). His monograph *Transit Life: How Commuting is Transforming our Cities* was published by MIT Press in 2018.

## Professor Andrew Gorman- Murray

Andrew is Professor of Geography at Western Sydney University. He is a social, cultural and political geographer whose research encompasses urban and regional transformations with respect to social diversity; household dynamics with respect to home/work interchange, mobile work and commuting; inclusive disaster planning and emergency management; and health, wellbeing and place. He is co-editor of *Material Geographies of Household Sustainability* (2011), *Sexuality, Rurality, and Geography* (2013), *Masculinities and Place* (2014), *Queering the Interior* (2018) and *The Geographies of Digital Sexuality* (2019).



## Dr Kim McNamara

Kim is a research officer working on the project. Her book *Paparazzi: Media Practices and Celebrity Culture* was published by Polity in 2015. Through over 30 interviews with key industry players, the book examines the various ways in which the controversial paparazzi industry is structured, including its workforce practices, development of image markets, and how it has been reconfigured during the transition from analogue paper-based photography to digital platforms. Kim was also a co-author of *Key Concepts in Urban Geography* (Sage, 2009), and has published in international journals such as *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and *Social & Cultural Geography*.

## Dr Elizabeth Straughan

Elizabeth is a Research Assistant in the School of Geography at the University of Melbourne. She is a cultural and social geographer interested in the sensory experiences and embodied practices through which humans engage with environments. Attentive to the cultural, social and ethical implications of these engagements, she is particularly interested in their emotional geographies. Elizabeth has published in international journals such as *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *Emotion, Space and Society* and *Cultural Geographies*, and is co-editor of *Geographical Aesthetics: Imagining Space, Staging Encounters* (2015).



## Contact Details

A/Prof David Bissell  
School of Geography  
The University of Melbourne  
Parkville VIC 3010 Australia

E: [david.bissell@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:david.bissell@unimelb.edu.au)  
W: [workingaway.net](http://workingaway.net)  
T: +61 3 834 43889