

Life Patterns Project

Pathways in Adult Life:

*Summary Report on the 2014 Survey
of participants in Cohort 1*

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Photo: Corrine Holllier

INTRODUCTION

We are pleased to provide you with this latest update on the Life Patterns research program in which you are a highly valued participant. This report details the results of the Pathways in Adult Life survey that was completed in 2014, part of the ongoing research project being undertaken by the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. It aims to understand how a generation of Australians born after 1970 – commonly described as Generation X – are faring in various aspects of life over time. The survey asked questions about living arrangements, work and career, personal and social relationships, parental expectations and wellbeing and health. This report provides you with a summary about how your generation is negotiating these different spheres of life.

We hope that you find the report interesting. We greatly appreciate your generosity in continuing to respond with such enthusiasm to our surveys for over two decades. As time goes by, this study has become a unique documentation of the lives of your generation and we thank you for your ongoing support.

SAMPLE, LIVING ARRANGEMENTS & CIVIL STATUS

The 2014 survey was completed by 272 participants. Consistently with previous surveys, more women than men completed the survey (68% and 32% respectively). Despite an initial strong rural and regional out-migration to urban centres to continue with tertiary education and find employment, we currently have a good representation and spread across geographic location with at least 35% of participants living in regional and rural areas.

The goal of owning your own house is now a reality for the majority. In 2014, 69% are paying off a mortgage, compared to 65% five years ago. Some own a house but do not live in it. Overall, 10% are renting, slightly lower than in 2009 (16%). In terms of living arrangements in the last five years we found an increase in those who are living with a partner and children, from 59% in 2009 to 68% in 2014, while approximately two out of ten participants (19%) are not living with a partner or children, a slight decline from 2009 (25%). Table 1 shows some of these patterns over the last few years.

Table 1. Civil status, between 2009-2014, aged 35-40, (%)

	2009	2011	2014
In a relationship (living together)	10.4	10.0	15.9
In a relationship (not living together)	6.3	4.1	5.2
Not in a relationship	18.5	17.4	17.0
Married	62.2	63.0	65.6
Divorced or separated	0.7	1.9	2.6

Table 1 shows that a significant majority of participants are currently in a relationship – either married, de facto or not living together, but a significant minority are not in a relationship. More people are parenting, with 72% having at least one child, compared to 63% five years ago. The majority of participants in a parenting situation have between two and three children (86%). In terms of your children’s education, across the board we noticed that government schools are the preferred option for the majority (approximately 60%). However, for those living in regional towns the preferred sector is catholic schools (approximately 53%) over the other options.

In the last few years we have seen a notable increase in the number of people starting a family. The overwhelming majority of you enjoy the experience of being a parent. However, this hasn’t come without implications for other spheres of your life. That is, different obligations and a sense of greater responsibility has had an impact on your life. However, we noticed, as showed in table 2, that these duties impact somehow differently depending the gender.

Table 2. Opinions about parenting statements, by gender, between 2011-2014, aged 37-40, those responding “strongly agree” & “agree”, (%)

	2011		2014	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
I am able to balance my parental duties and my work/social life	65.1	70.2	58.4	67.7
I often feel tired, worn out, or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children	37.1	68.6	50.8	58.1
I feel trapped by the responsibilities as a parent	11.3	11.4	18.5	16.9
I find that taking care of my child/children is much more work than pleasure	9.7	8.1	9.4	16.1
I feel that I do much more of the share of parenting than my partner	3.2	54.4	3.1	54.9

Table 2 reveals some particular trends. Firstly, women report that they do more parenting than their partner. Secondly, they are more likely than men to report that they feel that parental responsibilities leave them feeling exhausted. Thirdly, the proportion of women who say that taking care of their children is more work than pleasure has doubled since 2011, from 8% to 16%. Fourthly, women in parenting situation also say that they are less satisfied than males with the support of their partner (80% vs. 97%). However, between 2011 and 2014 there has been an increase in the proportion of men who feel ‘trapped’ and ‘tired’ from their parental responsibilities, while women seem to feel less tired or exhausted from this activity than three years ago.

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Over the course of this study family relationships, particularly the material and emotional support that they can provide, have been paramount to most of you. We acknowledge that some of you are not in a parenting situation. To those who are parenting, we posed a series of statements that enabled you to paint a picture of the challenges in the present and those that you see in the future for you and your children. Table 3 describes these statements over the last two surveys.

Table 3. Proportion of participants who indicated a “high” or “very high level” of concern about the following issues in 2011 & 2014, aged 37-40, (%)

	2011	2014	Difference
Availability of quality education	57.4	68.8	+ 11.4
Cost of education	80.1	94.0	+ 13.9
Your child/children’s health issues	48.3	41.3	- 7.0
Your child/children’s mental health issues	40.3	37.8	- 2.5
Health care costs	53.1	61.9	+ 8.8
Physical safety	59.8	62.4	+ 2.9
Environmental issues	56.3	56.1	- 0.2
General cost of living	77.3	78.8	+ 1.5
Political climate	23.9	39.9	+ 16.0
Development of values in life	68.8	63.3	- 5.5
Their ability to develop positive friendships	69.1	59.3	- 9.8

Over the last four years concerns about the development of children’s values and their capacity to develop positive relationships and their health have decreased slightly. However, concerns about education and health costs; the availability of quality education for your children, and the political climate have increased up to 16%.

Nonetheless, beyond these concerns, many of you spoke warmly about being a parent. These participants said:

It’s impossible to really understand the emotional and practical experience of parenthood until it happens. A wonderfully rewarding but demanding role. (Male)

Each day is fascinating. I have grown more after becoming a parent. Being a parent has made me a better wife, daughter, friend and worker. (Female)

Many participants commented on the important role that grandparents offer in raising your children. This has been a constant over the last few surveys. Similarly, participants parenting have showed their frustration with the lack of articulation between your children’s education and your work life. This includes strong concerns about affordability and availability of childcare and workplaces neglecting to the challenges of modern parenthood. The following comments reflect these issues.

Childcare isn’t flexible enough to respond to the casual, contract and varying hours of work. When I didn’t take up childcare when my child was eleven months it took until she was two and a half before I found a place. I’m committed to being more focused on my children than work while my children are under 5 but sometimes as a result I feel isolated and that I lack a public identity. (Female)

The work side of things, as much as corporate Australia thinks they do, is hard to manage because when push comes to shove dads are not treated equally as carers when asking for leave or flexible work arrangements. I felt it first-hand. (Male)

I work full time in health management but my kids suffer as they have to be very independent. It makes it very difficult to keep in control of teenager issues: i.e. bullying, drugs, alcohol, social media. (Female)

The comments above reflect the challenges and the steep road that balancing life is for many participants. At least 41% of the total sample stated that they are not able to spend enough time with their families. Men (48%), those working on a full-time basis (46%) and those living in a rural area (53%) were the social groups less likely to state that they were able to spend as much time as they like with their family (compared to 65% females, 61% urban dwellers and 64% part-time workers saying that they could spend as much time as they like). As one male farmer put it: “Being a self-employed farmer I find it hard to take time off from my work commitments to spend time with my children; I often find myself working 6-7 day weeks.”

For many, family plays a vital role in who you are and what you do for those parenting. But family also plays a critical role for those that are not in a relationship and have no children. Here are a few comments reflecting this:

Family is an important part of my life. I try to have balance in life with work, family and activities I like to do. (Female)

Family has always played a big part of my life. As mentioned my elderly grandmother lives with me and I take care of her as well as working full time. She is no trouble and is a treasure to me, always been close. However my parents are ageing as well and are quite demanding and difficult at times so life is not all rosy. So I don’t have a social life at all which is very hard because I used to have a pretty good one when I was younger. I am buying my home and have enjoyed doing some renovating with my brother but financially it is a struggle. (Female)

This last comment points to a common pattern that has been a constant in the last five years to many participants in the study. As you grow older, you increase your commitments and your caring responsibilities in an intergenerational way. While many of you found this rewarding, it is also a source of constant challenge and commitment, creating changing roles and different responsibilities to juggle.

WORKING LIFE

As showed in previous surveys, one of the continuities for your generation is the gender imbalance in relation to employment. A great part of this gender difference responds to women having to interrupt their careers for maternity reasons, including the challenges of re-entering the full-time labour market after caring for offspring. As Table 4 reveals, the patterns of work vary significantly by gender:

Table 4. Main work situation between 2000 - 2014, by gender, (mark all that apply), (%)

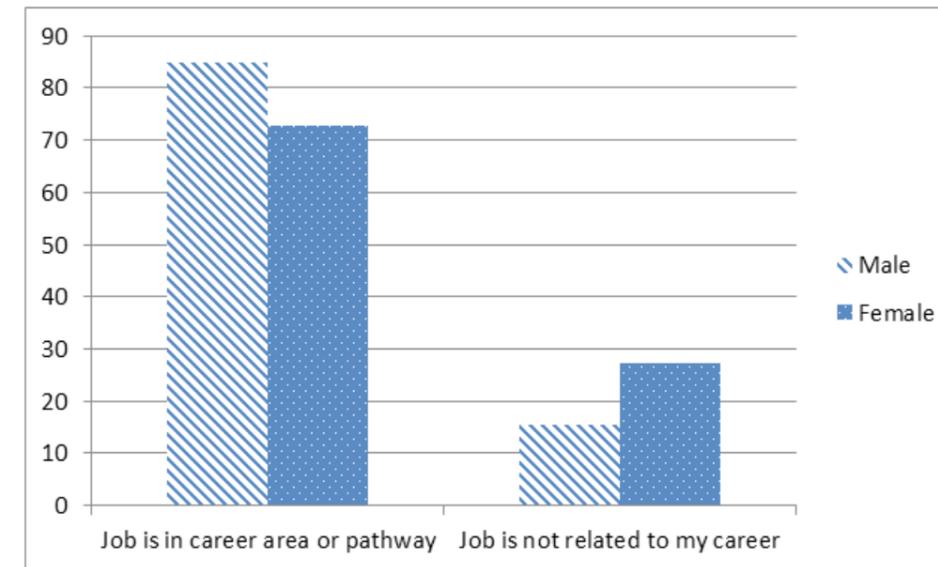
	2000 (age 26)		2006 (age 32)		2009 (age 35)		2011 (age 37)		2014 (age 40)	
	Male	Female								
Full time work	78	69	80	42	92	39	92	33	85	43
Study	7	6	1	2	1	1	7	7	4	7
Home duties	0	6	0	28	0	18	9	43	8	35
Not employed	3	4	0	2	3	6	1	2	4	4
Part time work	5	9	1	17	1	28	5	45	10	44

Table 4 shows some remarkable continuities and changes over the last 15 years. For instance, men continue to be strongly represented in the full-time employment market, albeit with a slight decrease in the last few years due to precarious jobs; while women, despite some gains, continued to be underrepresented due to the impact of parental care responsibilities. The part-time labour market continues to be dominated by women, although men have also increased their share in this space. It is also interesting to note an increase in the proportion of women currently undertaking studies – with the vast majority arguing that the reason is based on improving their access to new employment opportunities. For those that do not currently participate in further studies, family commitments and the cost of the course were the two main reasons for not taking that path. Finally, the share of participants “not employed” has slightly increased in the last three years, reflecting changing priorities in life and/or the complex and competitive labour market of the present.

Gender imbalances can also be found in the conditions of employment. Men (86%) were more likely to be in permanent work positions than women (68%), while the latter are more likely to have contract (16% vs. 6%) and casual positions (11% vs 5%). An important gain for the whole cohort is the increase in participants working in regular shifts (9 to 5) since 2011 (47% in 2014 vs. 41% in 2011) and a decrease in those working non-standard hours (23% in 2014 vs. 30% in 2011). This gain in standardisation at work is a positive trend towards claiming a better work-life balance for many participants.

Over the last two decades, we found that many participants have invested in further and higher education, with at least 85% currently holding a tertiary qualification. More than two decades after your cohort left secondary school we found that the goal of achieving a job in your career area have become a reality for many but still eludes some participants. Figure 1 shows these patterns.

Figure 1. Job relation to work-career expectations, by gender, in 2014, (%)



Another gender imbalance appears in Figure 1. Despite investing as much as men in further and higher education, women lag behind in terms of working in a preferred career area or in a job that is a ‘stepping stone’ towards that career. While many of you are doing well in the job market, a significant proportion still finds that their work position is insecure (26%), they worry about the future of their job (35%), or they find their work physically stressful (56%) or psychologically stressful (57%). And while the numbers presented so far in tables and figure in relation to work offer a stark contrast in the opportunities and barriers for men and women, your comments in the survey add a critical narrative to this story revealing that both gender work hard to navigate the challenges of work and life. The following comments provide a sample of way many participants go through in their daily lives.

WELLBEING

Working in manufacturing has a level of uncertainty which can cause stress/anxiety at times. I have been through two redundancies and several reviews and still working at the same time. Unfortunately it gets to a point where you are just a number and the levels of loyalty of the past are not seen. But if one door closes, I would like to think that another will open. (Male, electrical mechanic)

I work hard living in fear of failure. My farm is a family farm and I think I have a limited time to work as hard as I can. When I get older I hope to be able to slow down. I hope this is not detrimental to my relationship with my children. Being self-employed, if I feel like things are getting too much I can always take time off to recharge, time permitting. (Male, farmer)

Work, while very satisfying, has had recent physical and psychological negative side effects - primarily during the years I was sole income earner. My wife's recent part time employment has allowed me to rebalance my life, giving me more time with our children and less time at work. Mental and Physical health have both improved. (Male, teacher)

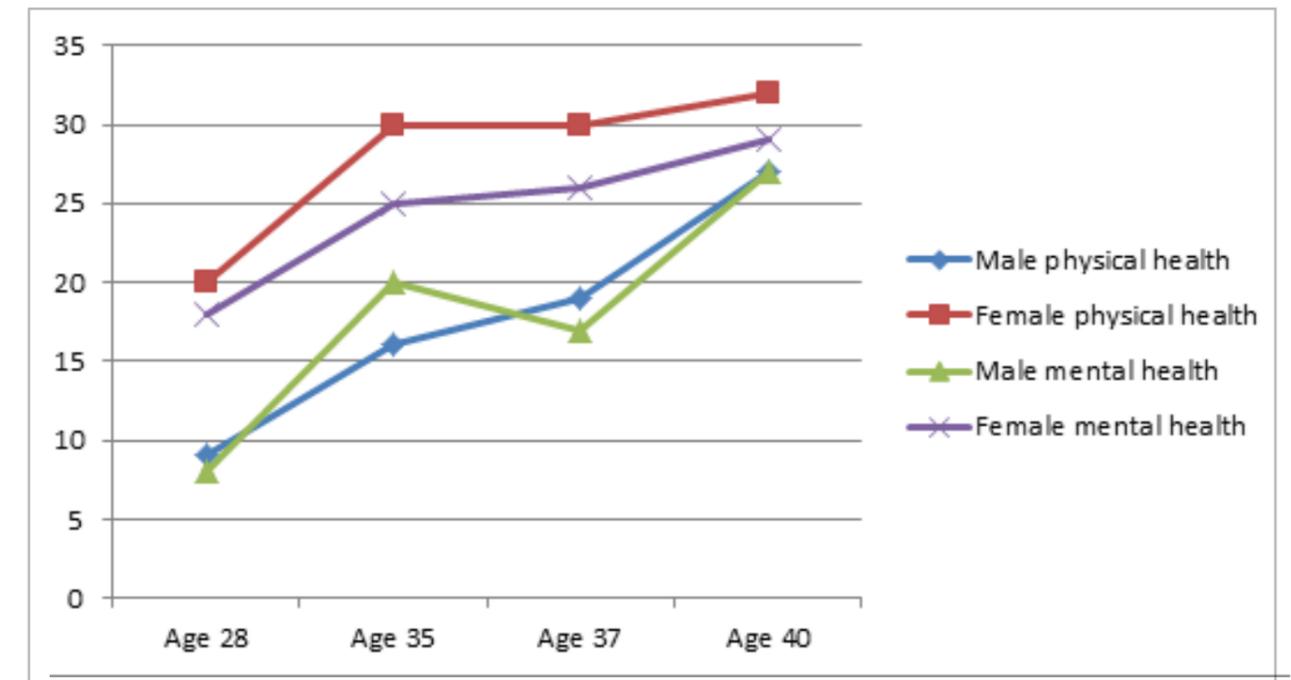
At present my working conditions are not ideal. I have to work in between school and kinder times and sometimes when I can't get work done during the week then I have to do it on weekends. Things that I use to do and enjoy doing like gardening & exercise have gone by the wayside. (Female, administration manager/accountant)

These comments paint a picture of many of the issues that concern your generation and society at-large in the recent past decades and the present. For example, the last comment by the female participant shows that taking care of the functioning of family in many instances rests on women, creating challenges when trying to balance work and personal interests. Nonetheless, male participants also expressed serious concerns about the difficulties of balancing different spheres of life. Over the last 15 years, this has been one of the top three concerns for your cohort. The first comment reflects a significant structural shift in Australian society that impacted your generation: the shift from manufacturing to a service economy with its explicit closing and opening of jobs requiring different skills. As we have stated in many research reports, that you can access from our website, the working conditions that your parents enjoyed (e.g. job for life, smooth transition from school to work) have not been available to your generation – creating different types of anxieties and risks but also enabling individuals to adapt and change to what better suits them.

We asked participants to reflect on the hopes that they had at school and rate their level of satisfaction on certain issues in their lives. Analysing only by the category of “very satisfied”, participants affirmed that their ‘family life’ (40%) and their ‘educational attainments’ (33%) were the most satisfying issues, while their ‘health and fitness’ (14%) and their ‘social life’ (16%) achieved the lowest scores. These responses reaffirm participants’ challenges to balance life and the significance of family in their lives.

Health in particular has been a constant challenge for many participants. The following figure shows a longitudinal view of men and women physical and mental health, looking into those that have answered “very unhealthy” and “unhealthy”.

Figure 2. Physical and mental health, between 2002-2014, by gender, by “very unhealthy” & “unhealthy”, (%)



Overall, figure 2 shows a worrying pattern of an increase in the deterioration of mental and physical health - in particular for women, for whom the responsibility to care for their offspring and/or their parents and grandparents have been a greater concern. Approximately one third of female participants said they felt currently physically (32%) and mentally unhealthy (29%), while 27% of males affirmed feeling equally physically and mentally unhealthy. Of the approximately one third of the sample who said they felt unhealthy, the great majority (82%) stated that as a consequence of their poor health they were accomplishing less than they would like, and 74% stated that poor health was limiting their social activities (like visiting friends or family). The following comments offer a general view of the issues that are pressing for your generation:

Lack of success at work has caused a lot of stress over the future which has clouded up my life. It makes me angry, frustrated, uncertain, paralysed. I often just don't know what to do. Also, I am just getting older, slower and fatter. (Male)

I suffer horrible anxiety making all decision making difficult. Knowing what to do with the rest of my life, how to get back to work and balance the kids & school and lose the security of government income makes me feel sick and unsure of all the priorities, and what level of responsibility will I be able to handle, knowing how much I come home to each day. I've kept the house since becoming single, but also the mortgage. My parents are quite old and retired and go away a lot so there's child care to think of. Just managing study time since I started my course has been really hard which has made me stress more about what it would be like when I'm working and yet I know I'd be more confident and the kids would be so proud to say mum's at work. Then there's still plain old loneliness and I'm very jaded about ever bothering with relationships again. (Female)

Mid-last year my anxiety levels "hit the roof" which impacted on my work, home and social life. It's taken much time and support from my partner, family, colleagues and health professionals and only recently have I been able to get back on track and I am almost well again. Physical exercise has really helped along with other relaxation techniques and counselling. (Female)

Occasionally I feel extremely overwhelmed with the amount of commitments I have taken on and wonder how the hell I can do it all. Physically I am perfectly fine. I have made time to play basketball once a week which I love. I don't have a weight issue and since turning 40 last year, I have suddenly let go of my body issues and changed my mentality regarding my body image. Recently I took part in a photo shoot for a project raising awareness and trying to change women's views about their bodies after having children. 365 women will have their photo taken in their bras and knickers and these photos will be made into a book. It was a very empowering experience. I just need to work on my life balance, get more organised and less manic. (Female)

GENERAL LIFE ISSUES

In the last question of the survey we always asked for your opinions in general life issues. Many of you use the space to expand your comments on issues already presented in this report: concerns with cost of living, difficulties in balancing work and life and making time to have a healthy life, while others took the space to comment on their disappointment on issues related to politics and the environment. These expanded comments help us to make sense of the survey questions.

One participant drew attention to the length of time we have traversed in this study:

I realise that I have now been in this study for more than half my life - and a significant chunk of yours too. What a commendable effort by your research team.

It is us, the Life Patterns team of the past and present, who are thankful to you for your time, efforts and considerations towards keeping this project alive. Thank you.

**We appreciate and thank you for your contribution
and we look forward to seeing how future years
go for you and the group**

**For more information on the Life Patterns Project
visit our website:**

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