

Life Patterns Project

**Pathways in Adult Life:**  
*Summary Report on the 2011 Survey*

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## INTRODUCTION

We are pleased to provide you with this latest update on the Life-Patterns research program in which you are participating. We hope that you find this report interesting. We greatly appreciate your generosity in continuing to respond with such enthusiasm to our surveys. As time goes by, this study has become a unique documentation of the lives of your generation. We thank you for your ongoing support.

This report details the results of the Pathways in Adult Life survey that was completed in 2011, 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.

## SAMPLE

The 2011 survey included two hundred and eighty four participants. Although more females than males completed the survey (65% and 35% respectively), we still have a good representation and spread across geographic location and schooling background. Our research also shows that a substantial proportion of people have been mobile over time. In the early post-school years we found an important rural and regional out-migration to metropolitan areas to do further study and work. Despite many of these migrants staying in urban areas, a good proportion of the sample have returned or relocated in a regional or rural town. Thus, currently 38% of males and 33% of females live in non-metropolitan areas.

## LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND FAMILY SITUATION

The goal of owning your own house is now a reality for the majority. In 2011, 72% were paying off a mortgage, compared to 65% two years ago. Some, however, own a house but do not live in it. Overall, 11% were renting, slightly lower than in 2009 (15%). Approximately two thirds are now living with a partner and children, while a quarter have a living arrangement that does not involve a partner and children. Table 1 shows living arrangements by gender.

**Table 1: Living arrangements, (%)**

	Males	Females
Living with parent/s	6	6
Living in a shared household	2	5
Living on my own	9	14
Living with a partner	14	8
Living with a partner and child(ren)	68	65
Living with child(ren) as a single parent	1	2

This survey shows that in terms of relationships, marriage is the preferred civil status with two thirds committed to it. Interestingly, more men (71%) than women (64%) have chosen this path. A significant proportion of people are currently not in a relationship, with women (21%) twice as likely as men (10%) to remain single. Finally, divorce rates for this cohort remain very low for both genders.

In relation to parenthood, 68% are currently in a parenting role – a slight increase from two years ago (63%). The most common pattern is having two children (40%), followed by three children (14%) and one child (10%). In terms of your children's education, across the board we noticed that government schools are the preferred option (approximately 57%). However, for those living in regional towns the favored sector is catholic schools (approximately 56%) over the other options.

In the last few years we have seen a notable increase in the number of people starting a family and securing their preferred job. The overwhelming majority of you enjoy the experience of being a parent. However, this hasn't come without implications for other sectors of your life. That is, different obligations and a sense of greater responsibility has had an impact on your life. Table 2 reflects your agreement about the following statements about parenthood.

Despite women feeling a greater pressure with family duties, both men and women are satisfied with their partner's support; albeit men (97%) more than women (88%). The major concerns across the board are the availability of parental leave entitlements, of quality/affordable childcare and the quality of education. In addition, the costs of living and education were also important preoccupations for three quarters of parents. These concerns reflect those of the general population across the country; thus signalling that your responses are an accurate representation of wider social patterns. Finally, we found that these worries reflected some spatial differences. For those living in metropolitan and regional areas, cost of living and education was their major concern. Those living in rural settings also expressed a great concern for the costs of education but in addition they stated their worry about the costs of service provision, such as childcare and health and a lower preoccupation for the general cost of living than their urban counterparts.

**Table 2. Opinions about parenting statements, by gender, by strongly agree + agree, %**

	Male	Female
I am able to balance my parental duties and my work/social life	65	70
I often feel tired, worn out, or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children	37	69
I feel trapped by the responsibilities as a parent	11	11
I find that taking care of my child/children is much more work than pleasure	10	8
I feel that I do much more of the share of parenting than my partner	3	54

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FAMILY

Over the course of this study family relationships, and particularly the material and emotional support that they can provide, have been paramount to most of you. We have pointed out people's concern about spending more time with family and friends and less in other everyday activities such as work. This trend is sometimes reflected in the media; particularly for people in your generation who have young families. Less reported in newspapers, radio and other media outlets, is the difficulties and dissatisfaction for men to achieve a balance and spend enough time with their family. In this survey, men overwhelmingly have expressed that they are not able to spend enough time with their family: 60% of them compared to 38% of women.

*"Family is everything, but work commitments limit my ability to spend time with the kids. My wife and I agreed she could quit her job and become a full time parent, but that meant I was the sole income earner which makes it difficult to balance family versus work."*

*(Male, living in a capital city)*

*"As I approach 40, and see parents of friends pass away, I find myself examining the priority we continue to place on work and the extraordinary imbalance this creates in all of my friends life (as well as my own). The emphasis our parents placed on education and excelling academically has ingrained into our professional work lives, where we continue to compete for the high distinction many times with high personal costs that cannot ever be recouped. Sea changing or tree changing does not appeal but a deceleration of sorts, in the work realm would be fantastic."*

*(Male, living in a capital city)*

In the previous survey (2009) many defined family beyond their partner and children to include parents, grandparents, relatives and even friends. For many of those that have remained single, family continues to be a relevant part of their lives. It provides valuable support and guidance.

*"I have no children but have a god daughter and nieces who I adore. They give me the opportunity to play a guidance role in their lives which I take very seriously. Plus they give me lots of joy and laughs. Family is important as it provides the basis of the values and ethics and the standard to which I run my life."*

*(Female, living in a regional city)*

*"My parents are very important. I want to enjoy my adulthood with them while we're all in good health. I value their support and advice. However, I am not close with my siblings."*

*(Female, living in a capital city)*

Interestingly, we have noticed that the intergenerational support is becoming increasingly complex, leading to changing roles and juggling duties. As time passes, some of you are becoming carers of your parents or looking after them; thus involving new and different commitments in your lives.

*"As my elderly mother becomes more frail, I find myself torn between taking care of her, developing my own personal relationship & spending time with my partner. There is a difficulty maintaining all 3 without one suffering in some way or another."*

*(Female, living in a country town)*

*"My family provide my emotional support base, and stable home life. However the roles are changing with my parents ageing and health issues starting to develop."*

*(Female, living in a capital city)*

## EMPLOYMENT AND STUDY

This year's survey continues to show a gender imbalance in relation to employment. A great part of this gender difference responds to women having to interrupt their careers for maternity reasons. The low percentage of women in full-time work is also due to the difficulties of returning to the workforce, signalling the family-unfriendly policies that some workplaces have and the lack of support from the state with the above mentioned welfare entitlements. As Table 3 shows, the patterns of work vary significantly by gender:

**Table 3: Main work situation in 2000, 2006 and 2009, 2011 by gender, (%)**

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

Women are far more likely than men to be employed part time. Over the last decade the number of men employed full time, and in permanent employment, has increased while the number of women employed full time has decreased dramatically, with women taking on more home duties as their primary work role, as well as taking on part time work. Interestingly, this survey shows for the first time almost one in ten men stating that 'home duties' is part of their main work situation. Nonetheless, it is still primarily women who are altering their employment situation in order to take on home duties. Finally, another interesting pattern is the increase in volunteering work by women in the last two years: from 3% to 15%.

We also found gender differences in the conditions of employment. Men (85%) were more likely to be in permanent work positions than women (69%). This is a significant issue, given that “finding a secure job” has been a long-term goal for many people. Furthermore, over the last two years, more people are involved in non-standard work, including weekends - from 15% in 2009 to 29% in 2011. This pattern reflects the continuous casualisation of the labour market. It also implies greater difficulties for those working non-standard hours to balance work with family and personal relationships.

*“We both earn well, but are both on highly uncertain contracts, which is very stressful. I enjoy what I do very much but may not get to keep doing it... Casualisation a contract nature of the workforce makes long term planning (house, family) more difficult. Career uncertainty pushed us to have a family later in life, with associated added complexity. So this workforce change has major life impacts”.*

*(Male, living in a rural area)*

*“We have [made] some key decisions to put family above work - so I’m working 2 jobs that allow the flexibility I need for family needs and have turned down otherwise attractive offers because of their hours.”*

*(Male, living in a country town)*

*“We are one of the lucky ones - currently doing well in our own business, but that comes at a price - stress, uncertainty, finances that go up and down. Cost of living is huge and we don’t yet have education / kids costs to deal with. Planning for the future is a constant conversation.”*

*(Female, living in a capital city)*

Despite the burgeoning literature about the need to be a ‘life-long’ learner, the majority (77%) was currently not engaged in any type of study. This might be explained by the stage of life where you are at: completed some form of formal post-school study and have no time to dedicate to new studies. This picture, however, is partial. Almost a quarter of you are currently involved in some form of learning, particularly work-related/based (16%). Most importantly, at least 60% are considering doing some type of study in the next year (compared to 47% in 2009). The most favoured options are: work-based course, university postgraduate course, and non-credentialed, informal learning. Table 4 shows the main motivations to undertake study.

**Table 4: What is the main motivation for you to undertake study? By gender, %**

	Male	Female
Employment requirement	22	18
Means of getting promoted	7	8
Status	0	2
Improve access to new work options	36	34
For personal interest	26	31

Work continues to be main reason to undertake studies. This is not surprising given that many are concerned with their current financial situation and two thirds believe that their work requires them to constantly be learning new skills. Personal interest, however, is also an important part of your study motivation. This interest has been persistent over the last couple of years. However, it is the motivation to gain access to new employment options and requirements in your job that are driving many to study. Finally, three quarters of you said that your current employment situation provides you with learning opportunities and many have stated that learning takes place in many different contexts of life.

## MANAGING & BALANCING LIFE AND WELLBEING

Throughout the two decades that this project spans, relationships have been the most important thing in life, particularly family ones. However, descriptions of how you manage your time show that other things can often interfere with this priority. In the previous report, we decided to gauge this by looking at how you actually spend your time, and how you would like to spend your time, and then calculate what we have called the “reality gap”. The “reality gap” describes the difference between how you would like to spend your time and how you actually spend your time in reality. Table 5 shows interesting findings from the reality gap:

**Table 5: Comparison of actual time spent with preferred time spent on different activities in 2002, 2009 and 2011, by gender, (%)**

		“Most of the time spent...”								
		Pursuing my work & career			Personal relationships			Family & home life		
		Actual	Want to	“Reality gap”	Actual	Want to	“Reality gap”	Actual	Want to	“Reality gap”
Male	2002	55	41	+14	20	49	-29	30	53	-23
	2009	63	21	+42	8	37	-29	49	70	-21
	2011	61	12	+49	1	19	-18	36	66	-30
Female	2002	50	36	+26	32	56	-24	51	68	-17
	2009	34	10	+24	23	45	-22	72	80	-12
	2011	31	13	+18	9	28	-19	67	75	-8

Recording the situation in 2002, 2009 and 2011 combined with the idea of the reality gap allows us to highlight some important trends. The first is that overall there is a continuous pattern in the last few years where both men and women are spending more time at work than they would like. However, this has worsened for men (42% to 49%) and got better for women (24% to 18%). That is, the amount of time men spend in employment remains almost the same, but they want to spend less time on it than ever.

Table 5 shows the ongoing struggle to maintain a balance between time spent at work and time spent with family and on personal relationships. The data reveals the scarce amount of time many of you are spending developing personal relationships; although approximately 55% of the total sample stated that they are able to spend “some” time, as opposed to 6% saying they could do it “most” of the time. In terms of family life, as we mentioned earlier, men are struggling to allocate enough time, registering a substantial disenchantment with the amount they can spend with their family. On the other hand, women seem to be able to spend more time with their family, although table 5 still shows negative numbers.

The following quotes illustrate some of these issues regarding balancing life, including the stress that arises from it:

*“I love both work and parenting, but there is definitely not enough time in a week to do both of them to the extent and quality that I would like to.”*

*(Female, living in a country town)*

*“I have had to re-adjust (in a major way) my expectations. The image I had of myself, briefcase in one hand and child in another, moving from work to home has been replaced by real image of the fact that everyone wants you and there is not enough time in the day. Work / life balance?? No such thing.”*

*(Female, living in a capital city)*

*“Mortgage and educating children means it is a struggle to move forward financially”*

*(Male, living in a regional city)*

The issue of balance in life has a direct impact on physical and mental health. Table 6 describes your answers to questions about how physically and mentally healthy you felt, comparing your responses in 2002, 2009 and 2011:

**Table 6: Comparison of health status in 2002 and 2009, by gender, (%)**

	Male			Female		
	Physical health			Physical health		
	2002 (aged 28)	2009 (aged 35)	2011 (aged 37)	2002 (aged 28)	2009 (aged 35)	2011 (aged 37)
Very unhealthy or unhealthy	10	20	22	20	31	32
Neutral	30	25	26	27	17	17
Very healthy or healthy	60	55	52	53	52	51
	Mental health			Mental health		
Very unhealthy or unhealthy	10	21	16	18	26	25
Neutral	24	29	25	24	19	21
Very healthy or healthy	66	50	59	58	55	54

This table shows that over time, levels of physical health have decreased significantly for both genders. For instance, one fifth of men and almost a third of women now report feeling physically unhealthy or very unhealthy. In terms of mental health, there has been a slight decrease for men, while for women it remains much the same. Nonetheless, this deterioration in health over time has been attributed to the difficulties of balancing life's responsibilities. The following quotes illustrate it :

*"High levels of stress caused by long hours and heavy workloads have had an extremely negative impact on both my mental & physical health. This has been to the extent that I will be resigning from my current position and taking some time off from work. Unfortunately at the company I am employed at the work/life balance is not very good. In my eyes, health & happiness is far more important than a job. I will pursue a different role after I feel fit and well again."*

*(Female, living in a capital city)*

*"My physical health over the last 10-15 years has been poor - chronic neck & back pain. However, I have been able to manage it (sometimes better than others). However in the last 12-24 months my mental health has severely been impacted on. I feel lonely, isolated, and the burden of everyone's expectations on me as a mother, wife, daughter, worker. This is starting to take it's toll."*

*(Female, living in a country town)*

## CONCLUSION

This report shows that many of you are devoting considerable time and energy to the responsibility and pleasures of family life, and it is these relationships that are the most important sources of happiness and support. Work is also a big part of life and maintaining these different responsibilities is often a challenge. Your mental and physical health and wellbeing continues to be of concern for a significant proportion of participants. It may be that the challenge of managing complex lives and finding the right balance between the different aspects of your lives has an impact on your wellbeing.

We hope that you found this report about you and your generation interesting and informative. We appreciate and thank you for your contribution and we look forward to seeing how the upcoming years go for you and the group.

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

**[www.education.unimelb.edu.au/yrclifepatterns](http://www.education.unimelb.edu.au/yrclifepatterns)**