

Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia

Written submission cover sheet

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Name for identifying submission on website				Dan Woodman	
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CONTACT PERSON					
Organisation name (if relevant) University of Melbourne					
First name		Dan		Surname	
Woodman					
Phone		(03) 8344 9081		Mobile	
0402434167				Email	
Dan.woodman@unimelb.edu.au					
Street address		6/2 Little Wurruk Lane			
Suburb		Preston		State	
VIC				Postcode	
3072					

The Impact of Variable Hours on Young Workers

This submission is a 'lay' summary of the findings of research I have been conducting with young workers. A research article supporting the argument presented here is currently in press in *Sociology*, the journal of the British Sociological Association:

Woodman, D (forthcoming-2012) 'Life out of Synch: How New Patterns of Further Education and the Rise of Precarious Employment Are Reshaping Young People's Relationships', *Sociology*.

The published version will be available in the coming months. If it is of interest, I'm happy to submit the draft paper to the Inquiry if they wish to see it more quickly. Again if it is of interest, I am happy to discuss the paper and the large body of data on young workers that I discuss here with members of the Inquiry.

Since 2005 I have been an investigator on a project that has tracked approximately 1000 young Australians from when they left high school through to their mid-20s. As well as conducting a survey with the participants every year, the project has interviewed 50 participants every second year. This study, called the Life Patterns Project, has explored all aspects of life for young people in today's Australia. My research has focused in particular on the effects of the participants' paid employment on the rest of their lives.

Most work in the retail and hospitality industries, with many of the remainder in other sectors (like security and care work) where insecure work conditions are common. As many of the sectors that employ young people have moved towards 24-7 hours of operation, this has increased the times at which they can potentially be at work. The participants report that it is the variability in hours of work attached to working in these sectors which has the greatest impact on their lives.

Varying hours of work each week has material consequences, making it hard to budget in the short term or plan, or save, for the long term. The greater consequence however, is social. The participants reported finding it challenging to combine their paid employment with maintaining relationships with significant others (friends, partners and family), continually ranking this as one of the greatest challenges they face during the first years of their lives after leaving school.

'Flexibility' can be beneficial to young workers. Helping them coordinate making a living with other aspects of their lives, like higher education. Yet, in our era of apparent workplace 'flexibility', for most participants the power to decide when they work is held by their employers. The primary challenge of insecure work for the young workers in the Life-Patterns study is that for many their work schedules vary, more or less unpredictability, from week to week. As members of their friendship group often have similar variability with little control in their work schedules, there is no longer a standard timetable or rhythm amongst the group members into which to fit. As a result, scheduling regular periods of time with others becomes harder.

Young people with this type of variability in their work week find it very difficult to regularly get together with close friends, or to find the regular periods of time most people need to build new acquaintances into close friends (or, as some complained, intimate relationships). Maintaining these close connections becomes more difficult and requires more coordination.

Variable work schedules can also impact on the time the participants do get to spend with friends or family. Increased variability in people's hours of work also make it hard to establish a 'rhythm' to daily life that fits with these significant others. The interview participants with this type of insecure work talked of being tired, or distracted by the possibility of being called into work, when they wanted to be focused on enjoying the company of others.

Not all of the participants struggled with this consequence of work in sectors like retail and hospitality. Some had a relative control over their work, because of financial support from their family they were undertaking paid work primarily for 'spending money' or work experience. This group were less dependent on their employer and hence felt more power to decline shifts. This group also tended to be working in insecure work while they were studying for a university degree. In many, but not all cases, they are moving into more secure work as they graduate (most of the participants who went into study graduated last year or will do so this year). Others appear to be stuck in insecure work for the foreseeable future.

Kind regards

Dan Woodman (TR Ashworth Lecturer in Sociology, University of Melbourne)