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The Money or the Care: a comparison of couple and sole parent households' time allocation to work and children*

Lyn Craig

Abstract

Households provide their members with both financial support and caring services. In sole parent households, the functions of earning money and caring for children fall to one individual. Current government policy favours work force participation as the solution to the higher poverty rates in lone parent families, but this may have a mirror effect on their ability to provide care. There is a great deal of research into the financial impacts of sole motherhood, but very little into the amount of time that sole parents' devote to care of their children, and what this means for their total (paid and unpaid) work commitments. In this paper I address this research gap. I analyse the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Time Use Survey 1997* (over 4000 randomly selected households), to compare sole and couple parents' overall time commitments to paid and unpaid work and to investigate whether time spent with children in lone parent and couple-headed families differs in type or quantity.

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1. Introduction

Households provide both financial support and caring services to their members. How to balance market work and care is a challenging issue for most contemporary families, but it is particularly difficult for lone mothers (Land and Lewis 1997; McLanahan 2002; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Scott et al. 1999). Compared to two-parent households, lone parents have not only reduced money but also half the adult time resources available. Time poverty is the flip side of sole mothers' employment. If they do paid work, they have less time to devote to household production, including childcare (Douthitt 1992). Put simply, time they spend working for money is time that they cannot be looking after their children. Even more than most parents, they are faced with conflicting pulls upon their time.

This is not an exclusively private difficulty. Because many lone parents have to rely on public assistance for income or services, their options about work and care are directly influenced by state policy (Skevik 2005). Policy responses to sole parenthood differ cross nationally. A sole mother may be primarily expected to engage in market work or to care for her children, or to do both (Duncan and Edwards 1997; Lewis 1999; Lewis 2002). Some countries respond to sole parenthood principally through income support; others prefer sole mothers be economically independent through workforce participation (Scott et al. 1999). Some countries provide subsidized non-parental childcare to facilitate workforce participation; others leave such arrangements to the private market (Cass 1992; O'Connor et al. 1999; Orloff 1996; Sainsbury 1996). Sole mothers' choices and opportunities are shaped by the relative value their governments place on work and care (Skevik 2005).

In Australia, the combination of policy measures has suggested ambivalence about the relative importance of financial independence and care provision (Cass 1994; Gray et al. 2002). There has been long-standing policy acknowledgement that the ability of sole mothers to care for their own children matters. Care giving has historically been a basis upon which to claim income support (Cass 1992). This is the case in few other countries (Sainsbury 1999; Skevik 2005). Further, Australia has provided benefits to lone mothers who care for their own children for longer periods of a child's life than other countries do (Cass 1992). On the other hand, the income support is set at a rate that means that sole mothers who do care for their own children full time are extremely stretched financially (ACOSS 2000; Harding et al. 2001; Healey 2002; Whiteford 2001). Currently, under the same rules as apply to all families, Australian sole parents receive a one-off maternity payment and may be eligible for Family Tax Benefit Part A (FTBA) and Family Tax Benefit Part B (FTBB). FTBA is income tested on joint parental income, and FTBB is income-tested only on the principal carer's income. Sole parents are eligible under the same criteria as other single-earner families, because if they have income they are treated as the sole breadwinner (Brennan and Cass 2005). A means-tested benefit is available both to eligible sole parents (Parenting Payment Single: PPS) and to partners of unemployed income support recipients and low-wage earners (Parenting Payment: PP), with children up to the age of 16. Depending on whether there is income from other sources, recipients may receive concessions on government services, childcare assistance and rent assistance. PPS is currently \$488.90 a fortnight (Centrelink 2005; FaCS 2005). This is close to the Henderson poverty line (ISAESR 2004).

It is widely acknowledged that in Australia sole parents and their children are the family grouping most likely to be living in poverty (ACOSS 2000; Harding et al. 2001; Healey 2002; Whiteford 2001). Many believe the best way to address sole parent poverty is by raising their work force participation rates (Gray et al. 2002; McClure 2000; Skevik 2005), and the preferred Australian answer to the worker/mother issue has steadily moved from supporting sole mothers at home towards encouraging them into paid work (Shaver 1998). This goal has been pursued through increasingly persuasive measures. The Jobs Education and Training (JET) scheme, introduced in 1987, aimed to help sole parents gain skills with which to enter the paid work force, but they were not compelled to take up employment (Brennan and Cass 2005). Measures introduced in 2003 tightened the requirements. Parents on PPS with a youngest child aged between 6 and 12 must attend Centrelink¹ interviews every 12 months to discuss their plans for participation. With a child aged 13 to 16 years, they must work or participate in community activity for 6 hours a week. If they fail to do so, they may be considered in breach of their eligibility for PPS, and subject to financial penalty (Brennan and Cass 2005). There will be further changes from mid-2006, when sole mothers will be required to make themselves available for 15 hours of paid work a week when their youngest child reaches the age of six. They will be moved off PPS and on to the Newstart Allowance for jobseekers. This is set at a lower rate than PPS, and has a less generous earnings disregard and taper rate for part time earnings (Brennan and Cass 2005; Centrelink 2005; Harding et al. 2005).

The changes mean sole mothers who are in breach of these requirements will be subject to penalties similar to those which apply to unemployed people who do not have caring responsibilities (Brennan and Cass 2005). But encouraging sole parents into the labour market by reducing benefits does not solve the work-care dilemma for sole mothers. Rather, it merely sidelines the issue of care (Skevik 2005). This is consistent with an imbalance in research. Despite the importance of both aspects of parental responsibility, we have a welter of evidence on the financial consequences of sole motherhood (ACOSS 2000; Bradbury and Jantti 1999; Harding et al. 2001; Healey 2002), but there has been remarkably little systematic investigation into the extent and nature of sole mothers' caring duties. There is a relative dearth of information about how sole mothers balance work and care in their daily lives.

Sole mothers and time allocation

Time use investigation offers a way of researching this important but obscured aspect of the lives of sole mothers and their children. Surveys of time-use are a relatively recent form of data collection now being regularly conducted in many countries. Time-use data's unique contribution to research is to provide direct information about the private sphere, particularly by quantifying unpaid work, which is largely invisible to usual data collection methods. They provide a valuable adjunct to more established statistical information regarding income, household expenditure, employment patterns, housing and demographics. Time-use studies give "the most accurate current estimates of all unpaid work and family care that takes place in society, and giving an otherwise unavailable glimpse of all the things that people do" (Robinson and Godbey 1997: 288-289).

Welfare is more commonly compared in the metric of money than of time. But time in itself is an important independent measure of welfare, particularly for women, because it is central to issues of family and gender (Gershuny 1999). The problem of balancing work and family is arguably more about time constraints than about the scarcity of money resources. This is particularly true for sole mothers who have no one with whom to share care. Given the dual demands upon them to earn money and to care, sole mothers' time use is an extremely important indicator of their overall welfare. Recognising sole mothers' time constraints should be an indispensable input to policy that impacts upon their lives. At issue are questions as to the amount and nature of parental attention the children of single mothers receive, and how burdened single mothers are by time commitment to work and/or children. Sole mothers are not able to simply devote their time to paid work, and thus increase their earnings, without a corresponding effect on their ability to attend to their children.

Using time use study allows this aspect of sole mothers' responsibilities to be highlighted, but there has been little research to date. Most previous time use study into family care has looked at couple families. An exception is (Sandberg and Hofferth (2001), who found that US sole parents spend less time caring for children than couple parents. This may reflect the more demanding employment participation requirements of sole parents in the US (Scott et al. 1999). (See Brennan and Cass (2005) for a full comparison of welfare to work policies for sole parents in Australia and the USA). Some previous Australian studies into parental time have included sole parents within the analysis (Bittman et al. 2004; de Vaus 2004), but none have compared sole and couple parents' overall work time commitments and relative time in paid and unpaid work, *and* investigated whether time spent with children in lone parent and couple-headed families differs in type as well as quantity. This study will explore these issues in detail, and investigate how, ahead of the 2006 changes to income support policy, Australian sole mothers balance the competing priorities of earning money and providing caring services to their children.

2. Data

The paper uses data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Time Use Survey (TUS) 1997. The survey is the most recent in a regular series of cross-sectional time use surveys conducted by the ABS. The survey uses the time-diary method, which is recognised by international specialists to be the most accurate method of time data collection (Andorka 1987; Juster and Stafford 1991; Robinson and Godbey 1997). The diaries were collected at four different points in time over the year, in order to capture seasonal variation in time allocation. They require each person aged fifteen years or older resident in each sampled household (> 4000) to record all his or her activities over two days. This yielded a sample of 7269 persons.

The TUS divides activities into nine broad categories (personal care, employment-related activities, education activities, domestic activities, childcare activities, purchasing goods and services, voluntary work and care activities, social and community interaction and recreation and leisure). Activities are recorded at 5-minute intervals (ABS, 1998).

Some of the survey's features make it particularly useful for gathering information about caring for children. It collects very detailed information on the extent and composition of childcare activities, allowing investigation into the actual activities that are being done with children (ABS 1998). Parental interaction with children ranges from passive, supervisory care to highly demanding forms of interaction with children. Most studies simply tally childcare in terms of total minutes of parental time. But the TUS activity codes can be used to create a typology of categories ranging from the most to the least intense interactions. Breaking "childcare" down into its component parts can give some indication of the quality and intensity of parent care. In this paper, childcare is grouped into four categories:

1. Interactive child care (ABS activity codes 521 and 531): Face-to-face parent-child interaction in activities teaching, helping children learn, reading, telling stories, playing games, listening to children, talking with and reprimanding children. These activities are critical for the development of children's linguistic, cognitive, and social capacities (Brooks-Gunn et al. 2002).
2. Physical childcare (ABS activity codes 511 and 512): Face-to-face parent-child interaction that revolves around physical care of children. Feeding, bathing, dressing, putting children to sleep, carrying, holding, cuddling, hugging, soothing. This is nurturing care that fosters security and emotional wellbeing in children (Leach et al. 2005).
3. Travel and communication (ABS activity codes 57 and 58): Travel can be associated with transportation to school, visits, sports training, music and ballet lessons, parents and teacher nights. Travel time includes time spent waiting, and meeting trains or buses. Communication (in person, by telephone or written) includes discussions with a spouse, other family members, friends, teachers and child workers when the conversation is about the child.
4. Passive childcare (ABS activity code 54): supervising games and recreational activities such as swimming, being an adult presence for children to turn to, maintaining a safe environment, monitoring children playing outside the home, keeping an eye on sleeping children.

There is a further dimension: secondary activity. The TUS has a column asking "what else were you doing at the same time?" This gives information on simultaneous ("secondary") activities, which is extremely important in understanding the full extent of time devoted to childcare. A lot of childcare consists of supervision but not active involvement or is done at the same time as other activities such as shopping. However, it is rare that the childcare is recorded as the main ("primary") activity in such circumstances. Therefore looking solely at primary activity only leaves a great deal of childcare time unacknowledged. Despite this, with few exceptions, (Craig 2002; Ironmonger 2004; Zick and Bryant 1996) earlier studies have excluded secondary activity from the analysis of time-use in connection with children.

Acknowledging secondary activity is particularly important when considering the constraining effect of children on adult time. The presence of children may sometimes not require activity or direct intervention, but it does prevent the carer from being elsewhere, and allows only certain types of other tasks to be undertaken. Including

secondary activity in estimations of childcare and total work time allows recognition of how being responsible for children acts upon parents as a constraint. This is particularly pertinent to sole mothers who have no one with whom to share the care. This study includes secondary activity in the estimation of childcare to give a fuller count of the amount of time parents commit to children. To avoid double counting, periods during which the same activity was coded as both a primary and a secondary activity were counted once only, and childcare as an activity while the parent was asleep is excluded.

The TUS also asks respondents "who were you with?" during an activity. This means that all time during which the parent was in the company of children, even when not performing childcare as either a primary or a secondary activity, is available for analysis. In this paper, "with whom" information is used to calculate the total time that parents are with their children, and the amount of time they are *alone* with their children. Time during which the parent is asleep is not counted. Time alone with children is another indicator of constraint upon sole parents, because if they are the only adult present, they cannot leave, or their young children would be unsupervised.

This paper also uses information from the "with whom" column to calculate the amount of time parents spend in recreation activities without children present. Adult only recreation time is arguably more pure and leisurely than time in which a parent is at rest, but also accompanied by young children (Mattingly and Bianchi 2003). The paper uses this measure to compare the amount of time sole and couple parents have in childfree recreation.

For this analysis I draw from the TUS two sub-samples. This is because finding a point of comparison for sole parents is not straightforward. It is not obvious whether sole-parent households should be compared to single-person households or to households with two parents. I first create a sub-sample of all respondents aged between 25 and 54 living in couple or single-adult households, whether or not they have children (N=6035). Second, I create a sub-sample of parents aged between 25 and 54 in lone or couple headed households containing at least one child under 12 (N=1708). The age parameters ensure that the sample contains people of prime working age.

Throughout this paper, I use the terms "partnered", "married" or "couple" to denote either defacto or de jure unions in which spouses are living in the same household. The term "partnership" is used interchangeably with "marriage".

3. Method

The method is Ordinary Least Squares regression analysis, which is conducted in two stages using in turn the two samples described above. The full model specifications and variable descriptions are set out in Table A1, Appendix 1.

Model 1 uses the sample of single childless men and women, married mothers and fathers, and sole mothers. The intention is to investigate the effect of both partnership and parenthood on total workload and its composition. The dependent variables are:

- Hours per day spent in total paid and unpaid work, and its subcomponents;
 - Unpaid domestic work including childcare², and
 - Paid employment.

The independent variables of interest are marital (partnership) status, parenthood status, and age of the youngest child. The latter is to see whether the maturity of the children impacts differently on the time requirements of single and partnered parents. The model contains interacted variables for single mothers and for married mothers and married fathers with children under 5 and children aged between 5 and 11.

The second stage of analysis compares time spent by sole mothers and by married parents in all childcare, in each of the various activities that comprise childcare, in all time in the company of children, in time alone with children, and in childfree recreation.

Specifically, the dependent variables are

- Hours per day spent in childcare, both as a primary activity and as either a primary or a secondary activity ³
- Hours per day spent in each of the subcategories of childcare, “interactive care”, “physical care”, “low intensity care” and “travel and communication”⁴
- Hours per day spent in the company of children
- Hours per day spent in the company of children only
- Hours per day spent in childfree recreation

The independent variable of interest in model 2 (mothers only) is family type (partnered vs sole parent). Sole parenthood is entered as a dummy variable (yes=1). Because of the low numbers of custodial sole fathers in the sample (4), this analysis cannot be done for men. However, to provide a point of comparison with women, the regression model is run separately upon married fathers. This model (3) is the same as model 2, except it does not include the dummy variable “sole parenthood” and it contains a set of dummy variables for labour force status. The reference category is “employed full time” as the large majority of fathers (89%) fell into this category. The models control for factors which have been found by previous research to affect time allocation to work and childcare: age, educational qualifications, the use of non-parental childcare, household income, day of the week, and whether there is a disabled person in the household. Labour force status is not controlled in the female model, nor when paid work is part of the dependent variable.

The constant terms in model 1 represent time spent in the dependent variable on a weekday by a *single childless woman* who has no tertiary qualifications, uses no non-parental childcare, is aged 35-44, and has no disabled household member. The constant terms in model 2 represent time spent in the dependent variable on a weekday by a *married mother of one child under 5*, who has no tertiary qualifications, uses no non-parental childcare, is aged 35-44, and has no disabled household member. In model 3 the constant term represents time spent in the dependent variable on a weekday by a *married father of one child under 5*, who has no tertiary qualifications, uses no non-parental childcare, works full time, is aged 35-44, and has no disabled household member.

4. Results

Background analysis: workforce participation

In the sample, being married and being a mother are both associated with a reduction in the time women allocate to the paid work force (see Table 1). Of the two effects, motherhood is the most profound, but the impact differs according to whether or not the mothers are married. Childless single women and childless married women are about equally likely to be out of the work force altogether (24% and 25% of each group, respectively), but single childless women who *are* employed are likely to work longer hours than their married counterparts. There are many more married women than single women working part time, particularly in the 0-20 hour a week bracket, even if there are no children in the household. This indicates that being married is in itself associated with a reduction in the likelihood a woman will work full time hours.

Having children decreases the likelihood that a woman will be part of the paid workforce even more than being married does. For both couple and lone mothers this effect is stronger the younger the child. However, regardless of the age of the youngest child, the association between motherhood and non-participation in employment is more pronounced for sole than for married mothers. With children under 5, 60% of sole mothers do not participate in paid work, compared to 48% of couple mothers of children the same age. Of those with school age children, 48% of sole mothers do no market work, compared to 34% of couple mothers.

Table 1 Percentage (%) of mothers in each category of employment hours by family structure

	No children		Youngest child under 5		Youngest child 5-11	
	Single	Partnered	Lone	Partnered	Lone	Partnered
Usual hours employed						
None	24	25	60	46	48	34
0-20	07	17	21	30	25	30
21-39	29	23	05	12	15	20
40 and over	40	35	14	12	12	16
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: ABS Time Use Survey 1997

In the sample, a similar proportion of sole and married mothers work full time. The major difference in work force participation pattern by family structure is in the proportion of sole and couple mothers who work part time. Particularly when they have a child under 5, married mothers are more likely than sole mothers to work part time.

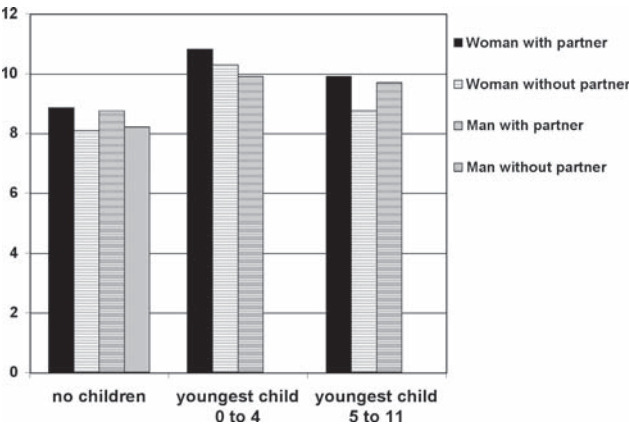
Multivariate analysis

In all the figures below, reference category households with no children are contrasted with reference category households containing two children, because this is the modal category for families with children. In Table 2, the contrast is between parents of one child under 5 years old according to whether they are sole or partnered. The full regression results are available from the author upon request.

Total work (paid and unpaid)

There is a partnership work penalty, in that just being in a couple makes more total work for all (see Figure 1). Being married but childless is associated with a higher workload for both men and women, with the effect slightly more pronounced for women. Regardless of their motherhood status, married women do more total work than single women. It is not sole mothers who have the highest total workloads, but women who combine motherhood with marriage. This is discussed more fully below.

Figure 1 Hours a day spent in total work (paid and unpaid) by family structure and age of youngest child



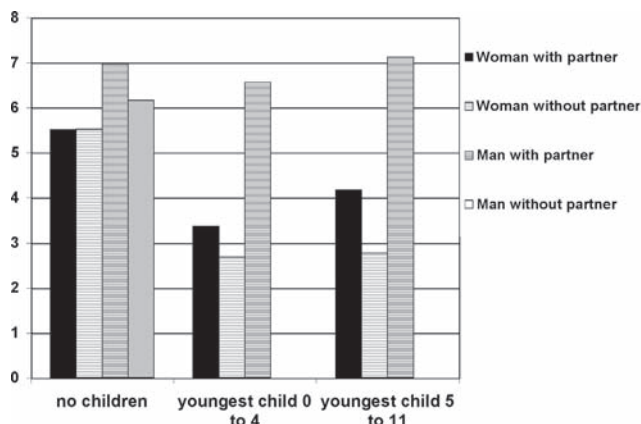
Total work is comprised of employment and unpaid work, with its subcomponents domestic labour (housework and shopping), and childcare. In order to see whether all these types of work increase with parenthood and marriage, I look at each in turn.

Employment

Married men average more time in paid work than single men (see Figure 2). For men, being in a childless couple is associated with nearly 50 minutes more time in paid work than is being single. There is no upward swing in paid work for married women compared with single women.

For women, the effect of partnership on time spent in the paid work force is clearly separable from the effect of motherhood. The presence of children is associated with reduced time in paid employment for all mothers, but the effect is much more pronounced upon sole than upon married mothers. This continues as the children age. For partnered mothers, daily employment hours are much higher for those with a youngest child at school, but this is not the case for sole mothers. This implies that fewer lone mothers are included in the well-recognised phenomenon whereby many mothers reallocate time to paid work upon the graduation of their youngest child from nursery to “big” school. This is perhaps because sole mothers have less flexibility to arrange their schedules around work and family than partnered mothers.

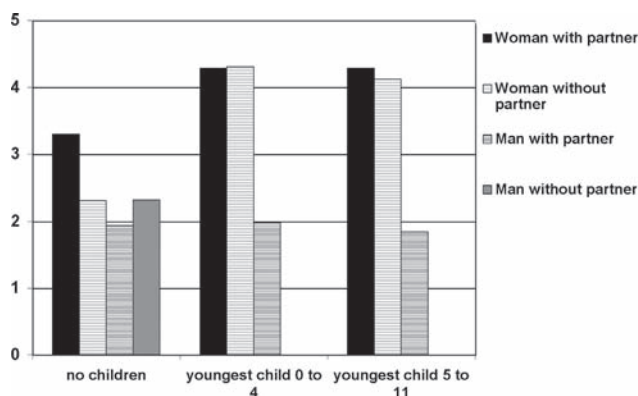
Figure 2: Hours a day spent in paid employment by family structure and age of youngest child



Housework (all domestic tasks except childcare)

The effect of partnership upon the unpaid work time of childless men and of women is diametrically opposite. Women's unpaid work goes up; men's unpaid work goes down (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Hours a day spent in housework by family structure and age of youngest child



This means that the partnership workload penalty is composed differently for each sex (see Figures 2 and 3). For men it is comprised entirely of more paid work, but for women it includes more domestic labour. Nor is there symmetry in the *amount* of extra work that partnership brings for each sex. The net time penalty of partnership is higher for women than for men. This is because childless partnered men do more paid work but less domestic labour. There is no corresponding fall in paid work by partnered childless women. Her housework time goes up, but her paid work time does not go down.

Having children is not associated with more male time doing housework. Married men do not do more housework, shopping and other non-childcare domestic tasks when there are children in the house. Married fathers in families with youngest children under 5 do the same amount of housework as men in childless couples. Married fathers in families with a youngest over 5 years old actually do *less* than men in childless couples.

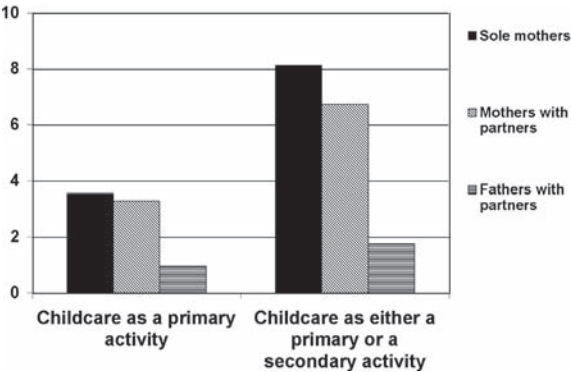
Sole mothers and partnered mothers do the same amount of unpaid domestic work net of childcare. The absence of a male partner does not mean that sole mothers do more domestic work to make up for the lack of male input. Rather, men create more work for women. This is why the total workloads of sole mothers are lower than the total workloads of married mothers. On average, male contribution to household domestic labour is a net deficit.

The other major component of unpaid work is childcare, and it is this aspect of the domestic responsibilities of sole mothers that causes the most social concern. Time spent in parental childcare is the focus of the next part of this analysis, which investigates in close detail how partnered parents and sole mothers allocate time to their children.

Childcare

Sole and married mothers do the same amount of childcare as a main activity. There is no statistical difference in the amount of time mothers in the reference category spend performing childcare when it is counted as a primary activity only, according to whether or not they are married (see Figure 4). Both couple and lone mothers of two children under 5 years old average just less than 3 hours a day in childcare as a main activity. Men in couple families average just over 50 minutes a day in primary childcare. This may mean that children in couple families, having regard to both fathers’ and mothers’ input, receive more care in total than children in sole parent households. However, the picture changes when secondary activity is included in the calculation of childcare time.

Figure 4: Hours a day spent in childcare by family structure



When childcare is calculated with both primary and secondary activity included, there *is* a difference according to mothers’ marital (partnership) status in the time spent caring for their children. When simultaneous activities are acknowledged, sole mothers average 7 hours and 25 minutes a day in childcare, compared to a married mother’s average of

just over 6 hours a day. Fathers in two-parent families spend a total of an hour and 20 minutes in childcare a day when both primary and secondary activity is counted. This is almost exactly equal to the difference between the time sole mothers and partnered mothers spend in primary childcare. This suggests that sole mothers, through increased double activity, compensate in quantitative terms for the absence of a partner.

I now turn to the issue of whether children of sole mothers are receiving qualitatively different parental care than are children in two parent families. I investigate this by looking at the activities that comprise childcare. I have identified those aspects of childcare that are likely to be almost entirely primary only (physical care, travel) almost entirely secondary only (passive care), or a mixture of the two (interactive care). The independent variables presented here are those that are the most representative indicators of time in each of the childcare activities.

Table 2 Hours a day spent in childcare activities, with children, alone with children, and in childfree recreation, by family structure

	Partnered Mother (constant terms)		Lone Mother (predicted values)		Partnered Father (constant terms)	
Childcare subcategories						
Physical care	1.62	***	1.67		0.13	
Travel	0.08		0.31	**	0.03	
Interactive care (primary activity)	0.87	***	0.86		0.41	
Interactive care (primary or secondary activity)	1.39	***	1.72	*	0.58	***
Passive childcare	3.52	***	4.47	*	0.80	**
Company variables						
Hours a day in the company of children	12.10	***	12.98	*	6.65	***
Hours a day alone in the company of children	3.84	***	9.62	***	0.58	***
Child-free recreation	0.13		0.45	***	0.53	***

Source: ABS Time Use Survey 1997 * P-value<.05 ** P-value<.01 ***P-value<.001

Childcare activities

Physical care

Both partnered and sole mothers devote over an hour and a half a day to physical care of their children. Employed fathers in two-parent families also spend time doing physical childcare, which may suggest that children in couple families receive more physical care when the input of both their parents is counted. However, at just under 8 minutes a day, full time employed fathers' average input is much lower than that of either married or sole mothers.

Child-related travel

Partnered mothers of pre-school children average 5 minutes a day in child related travel. Sole mothers spend nearly three times as long in this activity. There are two, non-exclusive, plausible explanations for this difference. Sole mothers rely more heavily on care outside the household to substitute for their own care and they use a more complex mixture of care arrangements of their children than do women in couples (Bittman et al. 2004). Therefore, it seems likely that this higher travel time results from taking the children to and from these multiple arrangements. Also, since sole mothers are on average poorer than partnered mothers, it could be that fewer own their own cars, and rely more heavily on (slower) public transport.

Interactive care

Interactive care includes playing with, talking to, listening to children, reading to children, reprimanding children, supervising homework, and helping children. It has been identified as the type of care most associated with the development of children's linguistic, cognitive, and social capacities (Brooks-Gunn et al. 2002). It is also the type of childcare that is most mixed as to whether it is done as a primary or a secondary activity. There may be a difference in the degree of intensity according to whether the parent is doing these activities at the same time as something else. Having a conversation with a child, or supervising their homework, and doing nothing else at the same time, may give more focused attention to the child (and perhaps be more pleasurable for the parent) than doing the same childcare activity while (for example) preparing dinner. For this reason, I present the results of both interactive care as a primary activity, and as either a primary or secondary activity.

Sole and partnered mothers perform the same amount of interactive care as a main activity: about 55 minutes a day. Fathers in couple families perform just less than 25 minutes a day interactive childcare. So parents in couple families, together, total an average of an hour and 20 minutes a day (just over 25%) more interactive care as a main activity than lone mothers. However, sole mothers appear to use secondary activity to reduce this gap. When interactive care as a secondary activity is counted, married mothers average an hour and 23 minutes a day interactive care. Sole mothers' primary and secondary interactive care time is an hour and three quarters, 22 minutes more than couple mothers'. When both primary and secondary activity is counted, fathers' time in interactive care totals 35 minutes a day. This means that the net loss of interactive parental care time to children without resident fathers is about 13 minutes a day. However, as is discussed more fully below, this father interactive care time would probably be contemporaneous with mother care time.

Passive childcare

Passive childcare is very rarely performed as a main (primary) activity. Supervising children without active involvement is almost always done while engaged in other tasks. Therefore the variable presented in Table 2 includes both primary and secondary activity.

Passive childcare as a secondary activity makes up the bulk of parental childcare time. Partnered mothers average three hours and a half hours a day in passive childcare, and fathers in the reference category average 48 minutes a day. This paternal input is compensated for by sole mothers, who average 57 minutes a day more passive childcare than partnered mothers (see Table 2). So by doing more than one thing at a time to an even greater extent than partnered mothers, sole mothers ensure that their children do not receive lower supervisory time inputs than children in two-parent families.

Passive childcare as secondary activity may not require much extra physical effort. It could even be conducted while the children are asleep. However, it does necessitate the continued presence of a parent. Therefore, these results suggest that the time of a sole mother is more constrained than that of a partnered mother. They imply that in ensuring their children are supervised for the same time as those in couple families, lone mothers have less opportunity than partnered mothers to undertake other activities such as paid work.

Company variables

Time in the company of children⁵

Considering the variable "time spent alone in the company of children" further reveals the extent of constraint upon sole mothers (see Table 2). Partnered mothers average 12 hours, and 6 minutes a day in the company of their children. Sole mothers average an additional 52 minutes a day with their children. There are also big differences in the amount of that time during which they are the only adult present. Partnered mothers average nearly four hours a day alone with children, sole mothers average over 9 hours. So a major consequence of not having a partner is that a sole mother spends very long periods of time alone with her children. This is time that she is constrained from spending elsewhere, because she cannot leave her children alone and unsupervised.

Married mothers are not as deprived of adult company as sole mothers are, but being partnered does not relieve them of much of their childcare duty. This is because when fathers are in their children's company, their spouse is usually present as well. Therefore the ability of sole mothers to match partnered mothers' input to children appears to be mainly because married fathers' and married mothers' childcare time largely overlaps. Partnered fathers in the reference category average about half an hour a day alone with their children.

Childfree recreation

Sole mothers do have more recreation without their children present than do married mothers (see Table 2). This may somewhat mitigate the time constraints upon them, identified above. Partnered mothers average about eight minutes a day in childfree leisure. In contrast, lone mothers average nearly 30 minutes a day in childfree leisure. A possible explanation for this difference is that greater use of non-parental childcare by sole parents (Bittman et al. 2004) affords them the extra leisure. It is also possible that it reflects the input of non-resident fathers. The ABS time diaries are recorded on only two days, and it is therefore a matter of chance whether those days will coincide with paternal access, but in some cases it will. When non-custodial fathers see their children,

it is not usually in the mothers' company. Thus, in those families in which a non-custodial father maintains contact with his children, sole mothers may have more substantial periods of time in which they are completely relieved of direct childcare responsibilities.

Discussion

This study finds that sole mothers' total workloads are much greater than single childless women, but less than those of partnered mothers. They average less time in both domestic labour and in paid work than mothers in couple families do. Single women do less housework than women in couples, and this holds true even when children are present in a household. There are greater domestic labour demands upon married than upon lone mothers. This presumably reflects the caring services married mothers provide to their husbands. Married men do not do more domestic labour, net of childcare, than single men. They create more domestic labour than they contribute. The group of people with the highest total paid and unpaid workload are married mothers.

However, sole mothers spend longer performing childcare than married mothers. This is shown when primary and secondary activity is both counted. Lone mothers do even more supervisory childcare simultaneously with other activities than partnered mothers do. That is, they do more multi-tasking. In doing so, they nearly compensate for the absence of a resident father. Largely because fathers' childcare so often overlaps that of their wives, sole mothers manage to almost match couple families' levels of childcare. The results suggest that children of sole parents do not receive fewer total hours of parental care than children in two parent families. This contrasts with the findings of the US study by Sandberg and Hofferth (2001), which found that US sole mothers did not match the care time of couple families. The difference could arise from the policy differences between the two countries. In the US, there are compulsory workforce participation or employment readiness programs, which vary across states, but which demand greater workforce participation by sole mothers than is currently the case in Australia (Brennan and Cass 2005).

Some differences between Australian couple and sole parents households in childcare input do pertain. Children in couple families have two parents present more often than do the children of single parents. Therefore, though they may not accumulate longer total hours of parental care, they may receive more total parental attention. When the (often simultaneous) input of both parents is counted, children in couple families average 8 minutes a day more physical care, and 13 minutes a day more interactive care. Also, a slightly higher proportion of their interactive time with parents is as a primary activity. So children of sole mothers receive the same amount of care in terms of hours a day, but less than children in couple families if both partnered mothers and fathers' care are counted separately. This may imply that the children in sole parent families are receiving qualitatively different parental care than are children in two parent families. However, the broader point is that sole mothers match the hours of supervision provided by couple families. Unless the simultaneous presence of both parents is seen as a major independent benefit, the results of this analysis should allay fears that the children of sole mothers are inadequately attended to.

Broadening the inquiry from childcare activity to all time spent in the company of children, this research found that sole mothers spend more daily time with their children than couple mothers. What also differed was the amount of time that sole mothers were *alone* with their children. For many more hours a day than partnered mothers, sole mothers are in the company of their children and no other adult. This indicates a very great constraint on their time. The lower total (paid and unpaid) workload identified above may have some advantages for sole mothers, but it is not an unalloyed benefit. Lone mothers may not be working longer hours than mothers in couple families, but they are not able to leave their children alone. This time commitment ensures the children are supervised, but could also contribute to feelings of isolation and stress, and exposes a constraint that provides ample reason for a lower time allocation to paid work.

5. Conclusion

Sole parents are both lone earners and lone carers. Therefore, even more than most parents, they are faced with conflicting pulls upon their time. Most research and policy focus has been on the financial situation of sole mothers, which can sideline recognition of the full extent of their caring responsibilities. This paper addresses a research gap by using the most recent ABS time use survey to investigate the amount of time that Australian sole parents devote to care of their children, and what this means for their total (paid and unpaid) work commitments. It compares how their time commitments differ from those of partnered parents.

The results of this study demonstrate the high value sole parents place on providing care to their children. The findings suggest that under current policy, children of Australian sole mothers do not experience a parental care deficit. Sole mothers provide their children with very similar care to that available to children in couple families. They achieve this by spending more time in double activity, more extended periods alone with their children, and averaging less daily time in both paid work and in housework, than do partnered mothers.

However, these results should be placed in the context of the high rates of poverty in lone parent families. The lack of a care deficit exists simultaneously with the significant money deficit known to pertain in many sole parent families (Harding et al. 2005). This implies that many sole parents prioritise their caring function over their earning function even in the face of economic deprivation. This may be even more difficult in the future. Policy changes to Parenting Payment arrangements are due to be introduced in July 2006. Sole parents with a youngest child over 6 years old will be required to undertake at least 15 hours paid work a week, or to look actively for employment (Brennan and Cass 2005). Given that time they spend looking for work or working for money is time that they cannot be looking after their children, this may mean sole mothers will have reduced ability to avoid a care time deficit. Increased paid work time may reduce the capacity of Australian sole mothers, identified in this study, to substantially match the care of couple parent households. If the preference is for sole mothers to be employed, attention must also be paid to how their children will be cared for.

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Endnotes

¹ The Australian Federal Government agency for income support administration and payment

² Domestic labour includes food and drink preparation and meal clean up; laundry, ironing and clothes care; tidying, dusting, scrubbing and vacuuming; lawn, yard, pool and pet care; home maintenance and car care; shopping for goods and services; and travel associated with these tasks.

³ See explanation of secondary activity in section 2

⁴ See explanation of these activities in section 2

⁵ This variable excludes time when the parent is asleep

Appendix 1

Table A1: Model specification

Independent variables	
Family type	Single woman with no children (omitted category) Single man with no children Mother with youngest child under 5 (yes = 1) Mother with youngest child aged 5 to 11 (yes = 1) Partnered woman with no children (yes = 1) Partnered man with no children (yes = 1) Partnered mother with youngest child under 5 (yes = 1) Partnered father with youngest child under 5 (yes = 1) Partnered mother with youngest child aged 5 to 11 (yes = 1) Partnered father with youngest child aged 5 to 11 (yes = 1) Single mother of dependent children (yes=1)♣
Controls	
Age of youngest child★	0-4 years (omitted category) 5-11 years (yes=1)
Number of children in household	Yields values 1-4+
Hours per week child attends day care	Midpoint of values, yields ranges 0-50
Household income♣	Midpoint of ranges, yields values 0-2,300
Qualifications of parent (s)	No post-school qualifications (omitted category) Basic vocational qualifications (yes = 1) Skilled vocational qualifications (yes = 1) University diploma (yes = 1) Bachelor degree (yes = 1) Postgraduate qualifications (yes = 1)
Labour force status♣	Full time (omitted category) Part time (yes = 1) Not in the labour force (yes = 1)
Age of parent (s)	Aged 35-44 (omitted category) Aged 25-34 (yes=1) Aged 45-54 (yes=1)
Day of the week	Weekday (omitted category) Diary day is Saturday (yes =1) Diary day is Sunday (yes =1)
Disabled person in household	No disabled person in household (omitted category) Disabled person in household (yes=1)
Spouses' hours per week in paid work	Midpoint of ranges, yields values 0 – 50

♣ Only in model 2 comparing sole mothers with partnered mothers

★ Only in model 2 comparing sole mothers with partnered mothers, and in model (3) for fathers only

♣ Excluded from model 2 comparing sole mothers with partnered mothers

♣ Only in male-only model (3), and then only when paid work is not part of the dependent variable