

Fly-in-fly-out workforce practices: The effects of FIFO workforce practices on children and families

Submission to Queensland Parliament

Lucy Ockenden and Elly Robinson¹

Introduction

In February 2014, the Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) information exchange, based at the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), published a literature review on the effects on children and family relationships of having a parent who is engaged in the fly-in, fly-out workforce.

This submission is a summary of the resulting publication *Fly-in fly-out workforce practices in Australia: The effects on children and family relationships*, authored by Veronica Meredith, Penelope Rush and Elly Robinson. The publication can be found at: <https://www3.aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/fly-fly-out-workforce-practices-australia-effects>

This submission specifically focuses on the following issues as outlined in the Terms of Reference for the inquiry into *Fly in, fly out and other long distance commuting work practices in regional Queensland*:

- Health impacts on workers and their families from long-distance commuting, particularly mental health impacts and the provision of health services in mining communities
- Effects on families of rostering practices in mines using FIFO workforces
- Quality of housing provided in accommodation villages for FIFO workforces
- Strategies to optimise the FIFO experience for employees and their families, communities and industry

Methodology

A search of Australian literature published from 1993-2013, conducted by a specialist AIFS librarian, as well as snowballing techniques and discussions with other researchers, produced 60 articles related to FIFO work practices for consideration.

After exclusion criteria were applied, a total of 17 articles were identified as specifically examining, or having results that related to, the effects on children and family relationships of parental FIFO work arrangements in the onshore mining industry in Australia. The literature search found a lack of depth and breadth of peer-reviewed evidence to 2013 in Australia; hence the review also included a number of unpublished works relevant to the topic. The limited

¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne. Contact: Elly Robinson, Manager, CFCA information exchange, elly_robinson@aifs.gov.au. This submission has been approved by AIFS Director, Professor Alan Hayes.

research conducted in this area to 2013 highlighted the need for further research, rather than providing any strong conclusions.

Further information on the methodology can be found at:

<https://www3.aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/fly-fly-out-workforce-practices-australia-effects/effects-having-fifodido-parent>

Findings

Findings from the review fell into five themes relating to the effects on children and families of parental FIFO employment. The themes were:

- family functioning;
- wellbeing, including mental health:
 - FIFO worker; and
 - at-home parent/partner
- couple relationships;
- parenting; and
- the effects on children.

The review also looked at the influence of contextual factors on outcomes. Contextual factors included organisational and individual family factors. Organisational factors take into account work related circumstances, such as workplace policies, workplace culture, recruitment practices and roster cycles. Individual factors provide a contextual understanding of the reasons a family chooses to undertake a FIFO lifestyle, and how individual families can create unique challenges depending on the structure and life stage of each family.

Health impacts on workers and their families from long-distance commuting

A number of the studies reviewed for the paper reported on FIFO families' mental health and wellbeing, with the findings producing mixed results. It is worth noting that a confounding factor not addressed in any study is the degree to which the FIFO worker and/or the family are already under stress or experiencing mental health difficulties *prior to* engaging in FIFO work.

In terms of general family functioning, some findings suggested that FIFO workers and partners experienced relatively healthy levels of family functioning, family communication, and family satisfaction (Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008; Bradbury, 2011; Taylor and Simmonds, 2009; Sibbel, 2010). However, other studies have found that FIFO workers had high levels of psychological distress (Henry, Hamilton, Watson & McDonald, 2013; Voysey, 2012) and a greater likelihood of psychological disorder (Henry et al., 2013).

There are certain periods in the FIFO work cycle that result in higher levels of stress for some families. Return to home and departure points in the FIFO roster, including the days leading up to the departure and days spent adapting to the FIFO worker being home again, were reported in a number of studies as being periods of high stress for families (Fresle, 2010; Gallegos, 2006; Henry et al., 2013). These transition periods can result in an increase in arguments between the FIFO worker and the at-home partner, or periods of depression and anxiety.

Certain workplace factors have also been reported as having more negative impacts on FIFO workers and their families. Some of these factors included:

- highly compressed rosters;
- lack of access to communication and technology, in order to contact home;

- workplace culture – e.g. drinking culture, FIFO worker status (treatment received as contract employees compared to mining operator employees) and attitudes to help-seeking behaviours;
- lack of knowledge of the mining industry’s functions and potential impacts of the FIFO lifestyle; and
- poor accommodation facilities – e.g. excessive noise, poor quality of food, isolating conditions, lack of access to on-site health promoting initiatives and sporting teams, and having to share facilities.

The impact of rostering practices on the FIFO worker and families, and quality of housing and accommodation facilities is discussed in more detail below.

FIFO worker

The vast majority of study participants in the review were male FIFO workers. Some of the common findings relating to the impact of the FIFO lifestyle included:

- stress caused by being away from families and friends, particularly for workers with children;
- the negative impacts of highly compressed rosters; and
- high levels of stress experienced during the return/departure points of the FIFO roster.

Findings related to female FIFO workers were very limited. One small-scale study of female FIFO workers found that FIFO work was isolating and lonely. Participants also reported difficulties with establishing and maintaining friendships (Pirota, 2009).

Working conditions that caused stress for some FIFO workers included:

- accommodation and work conditions that led to feelings of isolation, particularly those accommodation sites subject to onerous rules;
- difficulties associated with seeking psychological support on site;
- being away from family and friends; and
- missing important family events.

Many workers found it difficult to sleep on site, and many used alcohol or illicit drugs to manage stress and disrupted sleep.

Positive outcomes reported by FIFO family members included wellbeing benefits such as career satisfaction and favourable work conditions for their partner, which resulted in positive knock-on effects for family functioning and child-father relationships (Bradbury, 2011). Female FIFO workers reported benefits such as enjoying the adventure, making close friends on site and extended time at home for quality time with friends and family (Pirota, 2009).

At-home partner/parent

Some common findings relating to the impact of the FIFO lifestyle on at-home parents included difficulties with:

- finding employment that was sufficiently flexible to enable care for children (Gallegos, 2006);
- finding regular and affordable child care when the spouse is absent, to enable working a full-time job (Hoath & Haslam McKenzie, 2013); and
- the physical and emotional work of managing children and a household without a partner at home (Gallegos, 2006).

Loneliness and social isolation were reported in a number of studies as being a significant issue for at-home parents.

There were mixed results reported in terms of psychological stress levels found among at-home parents. One study reported that at-home parents experienced higher levels of psychological distress (Sibbel, 2010), while another study found generally low levels of short-term stress, depression and anxiety levels, with only a small proportion finding the working arrangements particularly stressful (Clifford, 2009).

Parenting

The biggest challenge imposed by FIFO work in terms of parenting was the coming and going of the FIFO worker, which created confusion regarding the role of each partner and requiring constant adjustment between co-parenting and sole parenting. One study found that more than 50% of the mothers and fathers reported parenting conflict in the clinical range over child rearing issues (Bradbury, 2011).

At-home parents also found that being predominantly responsible for providing for the physical, emotional and intellectual needs of children was challenging. One study reported significantly higher dysfunction in the areas of communication, affective involvement, and behaviour control for FIFO mothers when compared to a community sample of mothers (Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008). Similarly, FIFO parents reported parenting to be more challenging and less rewarding when compared to other family groups (Henry et al., 2013).

Children

Few studies have looked specifically at the effect of the FIFO lifestyle on children. Furthermore, drawing generalisations from the existing literature is difficult because of the inconsistent findings, varied ages of the children who participated in the studies, and limited sample sizes. However, some of the potential impacts on children of long-distance commuting of the FIFO parent found in the existing literature include:

- negative emotions experienced in the FIFO parent's absence;
- increased level of behaviour problems, particularly among boys, when the parent is away for longer periods;
- increased experiences of bullying at school; and
- increased pressure to succeed academically.

Some children felt that having the FIFO parent home for extended and uninterrupted time was a positive outcome, in comparison to work arrangements experienced by other children's parents.

Health services in mining communities

The review noted that a number of FIFO workers were reluctant to seek psychological support from health services while on site (Henry et al., 2013; Torkington, Larkins & Gupta, 2011). Participants in one study were reported to have demonstrated poor insight into their own levels of stress and a general reluctance to seek support for reasons such as:

- a culture of not discussing problems – i.e. a “tough it out” mentality;
- fear of loss of employment if problems were openly discussed;
- embarrassment;
- mistrust in available supports (Henry et al., 2013).

When workers indicated that they did seek help, they preferred to talk to friends on site, colleagues or family (Henry et al., 2013; Torkington et al., 2011).

Effects on families of rostering practices

There is considerable evidence throughout the literature to indicate that highly compressed rosters have a more negative influence on FIFO workers and their families, compared to less

compressed roster cycles.² Highly compressed rosters have also been linked to lower employee satisfaction (Clifford 2009). FIFO employees who are more satisfied with their roster arrangements are less likely to experience work-family conflict (Henry et al., 2013).

Quality of housing provided in accommodation villages for FIFO workforces

Accommodation standards vary considerably across mining sites in terms of quality of facilities, how the facilities are managed, and the degree to which their design provides the necessary privacy individuals require (Sibbel, 2010).

One survey conducted by the Queensland Resource Council found that 62% of non-resident mining employees rated the quality of their accommodation as good or excellent; however, the remaining 38% rated their accommodation as neutral, poor or very poor (URS Australia, 2012).

Complaints from non-resident employees included:

- inability to sleep because of excessive noise;
- onerous rules and regulations;
- isolating conditions in remote facilities;
- having to share showers and toilets;
- unsuitable conditions for nightshift workers – e.g. using an outdoor toilet in daylight rest hours, further disrupting sleep patterns; and
- quality of food provided (Gallegos, 2006; Henry et al., 2013; Sibbel, 2010; Sibbel, Sibbel & Goh, 2006).

Access to suitable communication facilities varies across mining sites. Some worksites have limited or no mobile phone coverage and/or no Internet access (Henry et al., 2013). Where FIFO workers and their families do have access to communication technology, strategies such as social networking, receiving photos of their children, using real-time video applications and daily phone contact are popular methods used by FIFO workers to stay actively involved with their families (Henry et al., 2013).

Strategies to optimise the FIFO experience for employees and their families, communities and industry

FIFO families

It is important that families who are considering the FIFO lifestyle are offered information that help them to realistically and thoroughly review the benefits and challenges of the lifestyle, and what the impact is likely to be for the family and its individual members. Families would benefit from assistance in developing strategies to minimise disruption to the family and to maximise communication. By anticipating stressful periods, such as the absence of the worker at special occasions and the transition period between work and home, and utilising pre-determined strategies, stress, anxiety and depression may be minimised.

² A compressed roster has been defined as working a shift of 10 hours or more on consecutive days over a period where the work-to-leave ratio is greater than two (Clifford, 2009). For example, staying on site for 28 days followed by 7 days leave at home has a work-to-leave ratio of four and would be considered highly compressed because of the longer time away from home. A less compressed roster might consist of 8 days on consecutive shifts followed by 6 days leave at home (a work to leave ratio of 1.3:1).

Mining organisations

According to the studies included in the review, organisations that facilitate happier FIFO workers and families:

- provide flexibility with rosters;
- offer low work-to-home ratios;
- offer access to timely and private communication options and good reception; and
- offer access to good accommodation and facilities.

The studies in the review also included several specific strategies that organisations with a FIFO workforce could consider, including:

- The development of a parenting resource including communication strategies, how to manage children's behaviour, and how to facilitate positive interactions (Gallegos, 2006, cited in Henry et al., 2013).
- Specific induction training for issues such as transitioning between work and home (Gent, 2004), and pre-employment preparedness and awareness to facilitate informed choice (Hoath & Haslam McKenzie, 2013).
- The New Access and Taking Action to Tackle Suicide resources offered by *beyondblue* should also be considered.

These resources could be provided through pre-employment packs, inductions or industry websites. It was also suggested that a mentoring scheme in which FIFO families assist others with social activities and provide assistance with techniques for stress and fatigue management could greatly benefit FIFO families (Gallegos, 2006).

Research

Significantly more primary research is needed to develop a better understanding of the complexities that determine outcomes for FIFO families. Areas that could be further examined include:

- the impact of different roster cycles;
- the characteristics of families who choose, and adapt successfully or not successfully, to the FIFO lifestyle;
- reasons for entering the FIFO lifestyle and the impact of these on outcomes (e.g., economic reward vs appeal of the lifestyle);
- age of children at entrance to and exit from FIFO lifestyle and effects on outcomes;
- nature or quality of child attachments with absent/present parent;
- partner's expectations of the FIFO lifestyle, and whether these have been met;
- the impact of access to various types of communication, and the frequency of contact;
- how mental health problems may arise, how they may vary over time, and strategies to address reluctance to seek help;
- age and employment lifecycle stage of FIFO worker, and lifecycle stage of the family;
- role of at-home partner in buffering effects of FIFO lifestyle for children;
- mediating effects of any available support services (e.g., Mining Family Matters) and/or help-seeking behaviours; and
- availability of support networks in communities for the at-home partner.

Summary

The unique conditions of FIFO employment can have varying impacts on children and families depending on the conditions of the FIFO workplace and the characteristics of individual families. While it is clear that there is a need for further research to determine direct effects on

families and children, there are areas that have been identified in a number of studies as impacting negatively and placing increased stresses on FIFO workers and families.

However, many studies also found that FIFO employees and partners were generally no more likely to have stress levels, poor relationship quality or poor health behaviours than community samples.

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