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Fifty years of Labour Force:
Now and then

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Information on people's experience in the labour market – about when and whether they work, in what sort of jobs and for how many hours a week – is a window into life in Australia. It highlights changes in both our economy and society and the interactions between them. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) collects this information through its Labour Force Survey (LFS).

The LFS is the Bureau's longest running household survey and has provided the basis on which the ABS has built an extensive program of labour and social surveys of the Australian population. The LFS provides official statistics about the number of employed and unemployed Australians and their working arrangements. Labour statistics are used by government and business analysts, academics, employee and employer organisations, and the community, and they help in the development, monitoring and evaluation of policy.

November 2011 marked the 50th anniversary of the ABS Labour Force and Supplementary Survey Program. A lot has changed since its humble beginnings when the LFS first started, not only in the way the data are collected and disseminated, but – more importantly – in the numbers themselves. Australia in 2011 is a very different place to the Australia of 1961. This article compares then and now and pays particular attention to a number of important trends over the past half century: the increase of women working, the rise of part-time employment, and changes within industry and occupation.

Data source and definitions

This article is based on an article that was first published in *Australian Labour Market Statistics, Oct 2011* (cat. no. 6105.0). The data presented in this article are sourced from *Labour Force Historical Timeseries, Australia* (cat. no. 6204.0.55.001) and *Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Quarterly* (cat. no. 6291.0.55.003).

The *labour force* consists of people who are employed or unemployed.

The *participation rate* is the number of people in the labour force, expressed as a percentage of the civilian population aged 15 years and over.

The *unemployment rate* is the number of unemployed people, expressed as a percentage of the labour force.

For technical definitions of *employed* persons and *unemployed* see the Explanatory Notes of *Australian Labour Market Statistics, Oct 2011* (cat. no. 6105.0).

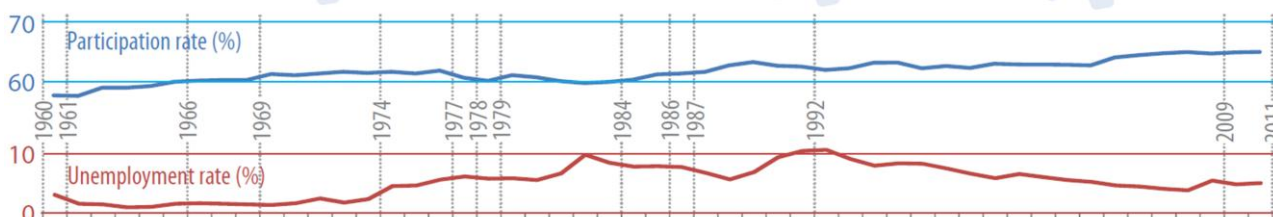
A note on data comparability over time

Although LFS data are available as far back as November 1960, the majority of historical comparisons in the article between now and then are from 1966. This is mainly because prior to 1964 the LFS was run only in six state capital cities. Also, data between 1960 and 1965 are fairly limited; there is no breakdown between full-time or part-time work; the age groupings are very broad; nor are there data available on industry or occupation.

Although there have been some key changes to the LFS, it's important to note that the Labour Force Framework, on which the key concepts in the LFS are based, has conceptually remained the same since it was first developed (though there have been some minor amendments made in accordance with International Labour Organisation guidelines). Any changes made to the LFS since 1966 have had minimal impact to the time series.

Timeline of major events impacting upon Australia's labour force

1960	First Labour Force Survey	1979	12 months maternity leave for women
1961	The Pill - oral contraceptives go on sale	1984	Sex Discrimination Act
1966	Ban on married women in the Public Service lifted	1986	Universal superannuation for Australian workers
1969	ACTU wins Equal Pay Case for women	1987	Female students outnumber male students in university
1974	Four weeks annual leave becomes standard	1992	Unemployment peaks at 10.9%.
1977	First work related child care centre opens since WWII	2009	Fair Work Act
1978	Labour Force Survey goes monthly	2011	National paid parental leave scheme



Source: ABS *Labour Force Historical Timeseries, Australia* (cat. no. 6204.0.55.001), ABS *Labour Force, Australia, Detailed – Electronic Delivery* (cat. no. 6291.0.55.001).

1960s – The tea lady, smoking and the introduction of the Pill

In the 1960s, tea ladies still did the rounds, smoking in the workplace was the norm, and the standard working week was Monday to Friday – nine to five. Three weeks annual leave became the standard across Australia in 1963, and it wasn't until more recent decades that that the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secured personal carer's leave and maternity/paternity/adoption leave for Australian workers.¹

The average Australian workplace was very different 50 years ago.

The labour force was characterised by a marked division of the sexes and their expected roles in society. For men, the traditional role was to be the breadwinner and support a wife and young family. Consequentially, part-time work was uncommon and childcare was rare, leaving women the option of either starting a family, or working full time, but not in the public service – it wasn't until 1966 that married women were allowed to work for the Commonwealth Public Service! In 1961 it was common for women to marry young. The median age for first brides was 21 years,² and it was common for women to have their first baby in their early 20s. The fertility rate was 3.5 babies per woman.³

In the late 1960s, Australian women began to question the restrictive roles society had placed on them. Many women felt there was more to life than raising children and 'keeping house'. Women marched, protested and pressured governments in a bid to gain equal rights in all aspects of life including the workplace, education, politics and sport. The introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1961 granted women greater sexual freedom, and allowed them to control whether and when they had children. The role of women in society began to be challenged and to change.

2011 – Flexible hours, access to family friendly leave and child care

Fast forward to August 2011, and the tea lady has been replaced by handwritten notes at the coffee point warning staff to clean up after themselves, and smoking is no longer permitted in, or outside, many offices. Women are starting a family much later in life, having fewer children (the fertility rate has fallen to 1.8 births per woman) and they are often having children without marrying first. In 2009, 35% of the babies born were to unmarried parents.⁴ The crude marriage rate was 5.5 marriages per 1,000 estimated resident population in 2009,⁵

compared with 9.2 marriages per 1,000 estimated resident population in 1969.³

The nature of the labour force has changed remarkably over the last 50 years. Today, people are working an increasingly diverse range of hours and patterns, often related to their stage of life or family circumstances. Flexible hours of work are important, as are access to family friendly leave provisions and affordable child care. As women's labour force participation has increased, there has been a corresponding increase in the demand for child care places.⁶

Over the last 50 years there has been significant growth in overall employment, and this partly reflects population growth over that time. There has also been increased participation in the labour force, particularly for women.⁶ This is largely due to the increased proportion of women returning to work after having children. There is also considerable diversity in how families participate in the labour force. The traditional male breadwinner arrangements have declined since the 1960s, and now both partners of couple families are likely to be employed (55% in 2011).

People have access to more paid leave entitlements and types of leave than those of 50 years ago; personal carer's leave, and maternity/paternity/adoption leave all form part of the family friendly leave provisions which help parents juggle paid work and family responsibilities, the latest being the national Paid Parental Leave scheme which was introduced in January 2011. Other recent changes include the Fair Work Act, 2009, which effectively gives parents and other people caring for young children the right to make formal requests for flexible work arrangements. Finding ways to balance work and family life is a constant challenge, especially for families with young children. Achieving this balance is important for the wellbeing of parents and their children.⁷

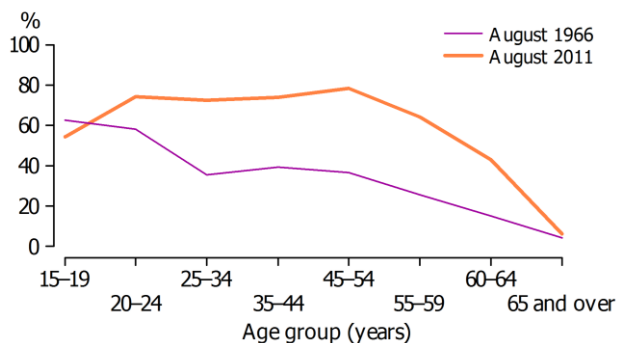
Changing role of women

There has been significant growth in employment, and increased participation in the labour force over the last 50 years, particularly for women. Women's participation in the labour force in August 2011 was 59%, almost double that of August 1961 (34%). Changing social attitudes, the availability of safe contraception and planned parenting, as well as adequate child care facilities have all helped to allow women to continue their careers. The growth in availability of part-time work has helped too.

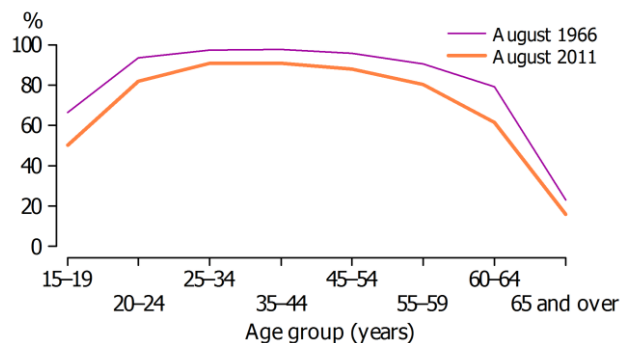
In August 1966, labour force participation for women reduced dramatically during the prime child raising years (20–24 and 25–34 year age groups), with the majority of women never to return to the labour force. In August 2011, the

Age specific labour force participation rates

WOMEN



MEN



Source: ABS [Labour Force Historical Timeseries, Australia](#) (cat. no. 6204.0.55.001), ABS [Labour Force, Australia, Detailed – Electronic Delivery](#) (cat. no. 6291.0.55.001).

‘nappy valley’ was no longer evident and labour force participation was a lot higher for women than it had been in 1966.

At the same time that women’s participation in the labour force has increased, there has been a noticeable decline in the labour force participation of men (82% in August 1961 to 72% in August 2011). This may be due to greater retention in school and further education, as well as earlier retirement.

Although the number of employed only tells part of the story, it’s important to note the proportion of men employed full time declined substantially in recent decades. In August 1966, 80% of men aged 15 years and over were employed full time. By August 2011, this proportion had fallen to 57%. It’s difficult to determine the main factors responsible for the decline. One working paper from the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research suggests the decline in male employment may be attributable to a combination of factors including changes in patterns in partnering and in the educational attainment and employment status of partners.⁸ That said, even though the participation rates for women have experienced large gains over the last 50 years, participation rates for men still remain higher, except in the 15–19 year age group.

Part-time trends

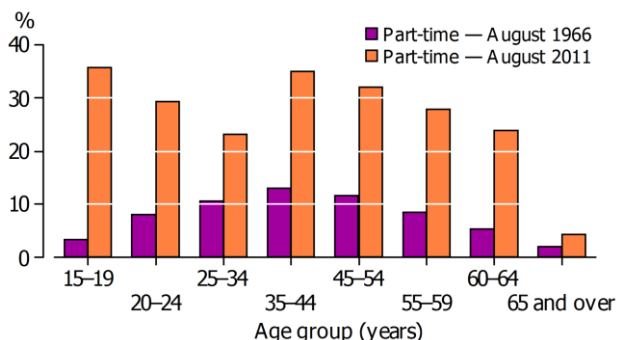
One of the most noticeable developments in the labour market over the past 50 years has been the substantial growth in part-time work. Part-time workers are defined by the ABS as employed people who usually work fewer than 35 hours per week in all jobs (and did so in the survey’s reference week). Part-time work enables people to combine work with other activities and commitments. This is especially important for women with young children and those, primarily young people, who are studying.

Having young children has a large influence on women’s labour force participation. Nowadays many women reduce their working hours while their children are young, rather than leave the labour force altogether as was previously the case. In August 2011, the proportion of women working part time in the 25–34 year age group (24%), although lower than for women in the younger or older age groups, was still twice as high as it was in August 1966 (11%).

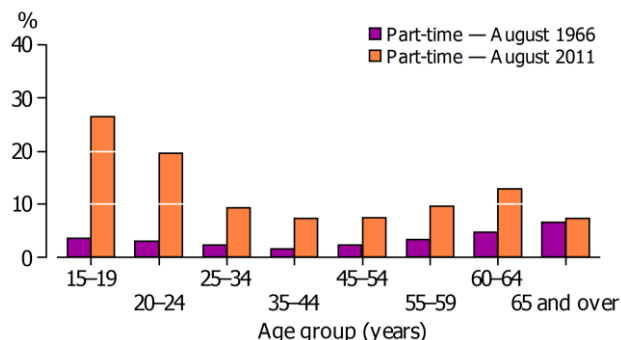
Part-time work has always been dominated by women: close to three-quarters of part-timers were women in August 2011. However, in recent years there has been an increase in the proportion of men working part time. In contrast to the pattern for women, for men

Employed persons as a percentage of the population

WOMEN



MEN



Source: ABS [Labour Force Historical Timeseries, Australia](#) (cat. no. 6204.0.55.001), ABS [Labour Force, Australia, Detailed – Electronic Delivery](#) (cat. no. 6291.0.55.001).

A brief history of the Labour Force Survey 1960-1978

The first Labour Force Survey was run in November 1960, with the first supplementary survey in November 1961. Initially, it was known as the Survey of Employment and Unemployment or the Work Force Survey, and it was the first household survey ever run by the ABS. It was made possible by the integration of the state and federal statistical agencies into a single bureau and major advances in survey methods and technology. It was driven by keen interest from the Commonwealth Treasury for a reliable economic indicator of the health of the labour force. The survey was originally run quarterly. It only covered the six state capital cities, and excluded Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but by 1966 the survey had expanded to include regional and Indigenous Australians.

The original survey form was a card about half the size of an A4 sheet, and contained only 23 questions. It wasn't long before the value of interviewing 38,000 households four times a year captured the imagination and the survey began to expand. Initially the program of household surveys comprised only the LFS, however in November 1961 the first supplementary survey topic 'Internal Migration' was included. By the end of the 1960s, 25 different supplementary surveys had been run, tagged onto the back of the Labour Force Survey form. They covered a broad range of economic and social topics, including education, work experience, travel, chronic illness, superannuation, child care, income and ex-servicemen. One of the most unusual was run on behalf of the Victorian Egg Board on the number of hens kept – and eggs produced – at home. Additional questions were also added to the main Labour Force Survey, including family relationship which led to the first issue of family-based Labour statistics in 1974. As the survey expanded and more data were collected, interviewers in the 1960s and 70s had to cope with more and more questions being squeezed onto the form, so font sizes became increasingly small. By 1978, common-sense prevailed and the size of the form was doubled to A4.

there is a clear U shaped graph: men at the start or end of their working lives are more likely to be part-time than those in the prime working years. Many younger men combine work with study, while those in their late 50s or older may be in a transition to retirement. In 2008–09, a quarter of men in the 55–59 year age bracket intended to retire from working full time and were working part time.⁹

Change in industries

In the 1960s, Australia was evolving from a nation of largely primary industries – of sheep, cattle and wheat – to one of manufacturing. By the late 1960s refrigerators, washing machines, vacuum cleaners and cars had become increasingly available to Australians. This is reflected in the industries which employed most people in August 1966; Manufacturing (26%) and Wholesale and retail trade (21%).

In August 2011, manufacturing was a relatively much smaller component of the economy than it was in the past (accounting for just 8% of

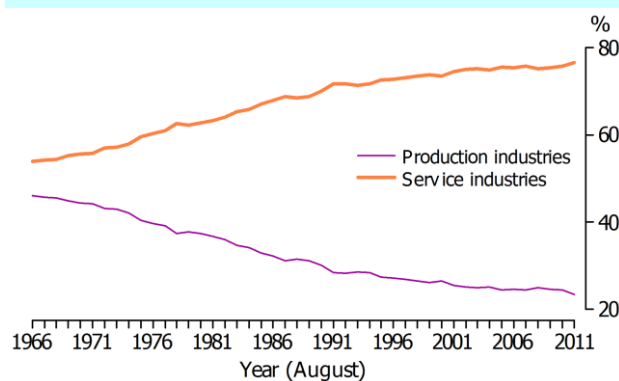
A brief history of the Labour Force Survey 1978-current

In February 1978, the survey frequency changed from quarterly to monthly, and was adopted as the official source of national measures of employment and unemployment. The ABS has carefully maintained the monthly series from this point onwards, managing the introduction of new classifications and survey changes with a minimum of disruption to the consistency of the data. The content has also expanded, including the introduction of regional estimates in October 1982 and annual Indigenous estimates in 1994. In November 1989, the survey form was updated to make use of new optical scanning technology – very much like the current Census form today. Since then the ABS has introduced telephone interviewing (1996) and computer assisted interviewing (2003) which have done away with pen and paper. Data are now input directly into ABS systems. Back in the 1960s, it took about 3 years to publish the first survey results. The time between the last interview of the month and the published results is now less than 3 weeks!

The data are now easier and cheaper to access. The ABS has moved on from providing books retailing from \$30–\$40, to diskettes and CD-roms and teletext and the 0055-dial-a-statistic services (75c per min), to taking advantage of the world wide web to publish free electronic publications, Excel spreadsheets, and SuperTABLE datacubes. Recent developments in technology and data manipulation have allowed the ABS to provide new ways of looking at Labour Force Survey data, such as the Aggregate monthly hours worked series released in 2009.

employed people). The Health care and social assistance industry was the largest industry (employing 12%), followed by Retail trade (11%) and Construction (9%), while Agriculture and Mining only accounted for 3% and 2% respectively of all employed people. The growth in some service industries also reflected a changing Australia; some 77% more people worked in the child care industry compared with just 10 years ago.

Proportion of all employed people in the production and services industries – 1966-2011



Note: Refer to 'Industry and occupation definitions' box for information regarding production and service industries.

Source: ABS [Labour Force Historical Timeseries, Australia](#) (cat. no. 6204.0.55.001), ABS [Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Quarterly](#) (cat. no. 6291.0.55.003).

...production and service industries

In August 1966, nearly half (46%) of all employed people in Australia worked in production industries. Fast forward to 45 years later, and that proportion has halved to 23%.

Industry and occupation definitions

Production industries refer to:

1966 to 1984: Agriculture, forestry and hunting, Mining, Manufacturing, Electricity, gas and water, Construction.

1985 to 1993: Agriculture, forestry and fishing, Mining, Manufacturing, Electricity, gas and water supply, Construction.

1994 to 2011: Agriculture, forestry and fishing, Mining, Manufacturing, Electricity, gas, water and waste services, Construction.

Service industries refer to:

1966 to 1984: Wholesale and retail trade, Transport and storage, Communication, Finance, property and business services, Public administration and defence, Community services, Recreation, personal and other services.

1985 to 1993: Wholesale trade, Retail trade, Accommodation, cafes and restaurants, Transport and storage, Communication services, Finance and insurance, Property and business services, Government administration and defence, Education, Health and community services, Cultural and recreational services, Personal and other services.

1994 to 2011: Wholesale trade, Retail trade, Accommodation and food services, Transport, postal and warehousing, Information media and telecommunications, Financial and insurance services, Rental, hiring and real estate services, Professional, scientific and technical services, Administrative and support services, Public administration and safety, Education and training, Health care and social assistance, Arts and recreation services and Other services.

Blue collar occupations refer to:

1966 to 1985: Farmers, fisherman, timber-getters etc, Miners, quarrymen and related workers, Transport and communication, Tradesmen, production-process workers and labourers, Service, sport and recreation workers.

1986 to 1995: Tradespersons, Plant and machine operators, and drivers, Labourers and related workers.

1996 to 2011: Technicians and trades workers, Machinery operators and drivers, Labourers.

White collar occupations refer to:

1966 to 1985: Professional, technical etc, Administrative, executive and managerial, Clerical, Sales, Service, sport and recreation.

1986 to 1995: Managers and administrators, Professionals, Para-professionals, Clerks, Salespersons and personal service workers.

1996 to 2011: Managers, Professionals, Community and personal service workers, Clerical and administrative workers, Sales workers.

During that 45 year period, almost all employment growth has been in the service sector, the workforce of which has more than tripled from 2.6 million to 8.7 million, a rise from 54% of all employed people in August 1966, to 77% in August 2011. Meanwhile the number of people working in production industries remained steady at between 2.2 and 2.7 million.

Change in jobs

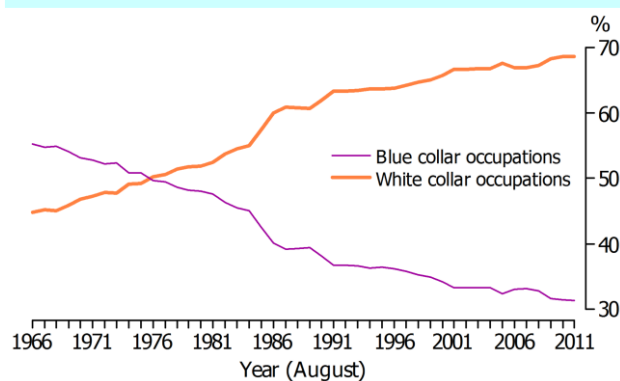
The type of jobs occupied in the 1960s reflected the more hands on and physical work, predominantly associated with trades and lower skilled jobs, often referred to as blue collar work. The most common occupations in August 1966 were Tradesmen, production process workers and labourers (44%); Farmers, fishermen, timber getters (12%); and Clerical (9%).

The broad patterns of industrial change over the last 45 years can be seen in the occupations in which Australians work today. The shift away from production to service industries has reduced the opportunities for blue collar workers, and increased the opportunities for white collar workers.¹⁰ The most common occupations in August 2011 were Professionals (22%); Clerical and administrative workers (15%); and Technicians and trades workers (14%).

Looking ahead

Over the last 50 years, the LFS and Supplementary Survey Program has provided a window into life in Australia in order to help Australians monitor and understand what is happening in the labour market. While the LFS will continue to offer its perspective into Australian life, the future will hold its own challenges.

Proportion of all employed people in the blue and white collar occupations – 1966-2011



Note: Refer to 'Industry and occupation definitions' box for information regarding blue and white collar occupations.

Source: ABS [Labour Force Historical Timeseries, Australia](#) (cat. no. 6204.0.55.001), ABS [Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Quarterly](#) (cat. no. 6291.0.55.003).

As society changes, what we need to know also changes. Future innovations within the LFS such as on-going enhancements to the sample design, a longitudinal Confidentialised Unit Record File (CURF), improvements in the way the ABS disseminates microdata, as well as work to enable respondents to respond via the web, are all well underway. The ABS is also close to finalising a review of the content of the LFS and Supplementary Survey Program, as well as the current LFS product set.

Maintaining a relevant LFS which reflects changes in the Australian labour market is a constant challenge – but it's one the ABS has been meeting for 50 years, and one that we will continue to meet in the future.

Endnotes

- 1 Australian Council of Trade Unions, [About Trade Unions](#), viewed 28 September, 2011, <www.actu.org.au>.
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- 9 Australian Bureau of Statistics, [Retirement and Retirement Intentions, Australia, Jul 2008 to Jun 2009](#), cat. no. 6238.0, ABS, Canberra, <www.abs.gov.au>.
- 10 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997, 'Paid Work: Changing industries, changing jobs', [Australian Social Trends](#), cat. no 4102.0, ABS, Canberra, <www.abs.gov.au>.

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