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Who Cares? Trends in the Division of Care Among Separated Parents

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Research Summary

Why was the research done?

Family structures are shifting in Australia and one in three children do not live in families with a coupled mother and father. There is currently limited research on how separated parents share the care of their children and little is known about how these arrangements vary over time or by the characteristics of the parent. Using 23 waves of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, we track changes in childcare arrangements among families where a child's biological or adoptive parents reside in different households. We pay particular attention to whether the gender division of care has become more equitable and differences by partnership status, income and age of children.

What were the key findings?

Despite evidence of a move toward greater gender equality in care arrangements, progress has been slow and uneven. We find that roughly one in four Australian mothers have a resident child with a father who lives elsewhere, and that half of these women report that their child has no overnight stays with their father. Trends toward gender equality are concentrated amongst high-income groups and the parents of young children. A notable discontinuity in men's reported care between 2008 and 2009 coincides with Child Support Scheme reforms, raising questions about whether observed changes reflect genuine behavioural shifts or financial incentives biasing men's reports of childcare.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

Overall, our findings point to the persistence of deeply gendered caregiving responsibilities after separation, posing challenges for family law and social policy aiming to support children's time with both parents and gender equitable post-separation parenting.

Citation

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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and live across Australia.
We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise their continued connections
to land, sea and community.

Abstract

How has the division of childcare between separated parents changed in Australia over the last two decades, and has it become more gender equitable? Using 23 waves of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey spanning 2001 to 2023, we track changes in childcare arrangements among families where a child's biological or adoptive parents reside in different households. While we do find evidence of a move toward greater gender equality in care arrangements, progress has been slow and uneven. We find that roughly one in four Australian mothers have a resident child with a father who lives elsewhere, and that half of these women report that their child has no overnight stays with their father. Trends toward gender equality are concentrated amongst high-income groups and the parents of young children. A notable discontinuity in men's reported care between 2008 and 2009 coincides with Child Support Scheme reforms, raising questions about whether observed changes reflect genuine behavioural shifts or financial incentives biasing men's reports of childcare. Overall, our findings point to the persistence of deeply gendered caregiving responsibilities after separation posing challenges for family law and social policy aiming to support children's time with both parents and gender equitable post-separation parenting.

Keywords: separated parents, sole parents, division of care, shared care, levels of care, gender.

Introduction

Family structures are shifting in Australia and one in three children do not live in families with a coupled mother and father (Naidoo et al., 2024). Similarly, the number of one-parent families with a dependent child has grown from 16% of all families with dependent children in 1981 to 22% in 2021 (Qu et al., 2024). Although most one-parent families tend to be mothers (Qu et al., 2024), social norms around mothers' and fathers' roles are shifting, making room for a more equal division of care work associated with raising children. This gives rise to a wide range of questions regarding how childcare is shared between mothers and fathers who do not live together, how these divisions of care vary by family type and how they are changing over time.

There is currently a limited amount of research on the division of care of children of parents who do not live together¹ and little is known about how these arrangements vary over time or by the characteristics of the parent. Most research on the division of childcare has focused on partnered couples living together in one household (Baxter, 2024; Baxter et al., 2023; Bianchi et al., 2012; Craig & Mullan, 2011). In this paper, we broaden the focus to understanding gender divisions of childcare across households of separated parents. This is important as standard nuclear family rates decline and living arrangements for children become more diverse. Further, gender divisions of labour are not bounded within couples but transcend relationship and household changes leading to important implications for policies designed to support women's economic independence and children's wellbeing.

We fill this gap in evidence by drawing on data from 23 waves of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey spanning 2001 to 2023, to track changes in childcare arrangements among families where a child's biological or adoptive parents reside in different households. After providing descriptive statistics on the prevalence of raising a child with a parent living elsewhere, we provide information about the number of nights a child spends with a given parent per year. We then delve

¹ A note to terminology: in this paper we examine parents who have a child under 18 and the child's other biological parent lives elsewhere. Some of these parents will never have lived in a marital or defacto relationship and are technically not separated from each other. Despite this, for clarity and ease of writing, we will use the term 'separated parent hereafter'.

more deeply into variations associated with partnership status, income, and age of youngest child.

Background

What is shared care?

There are no internationally accepted guidelines for how to share care of children following separation or when parents have never lived together. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that both parents share responsibility for a child's upbringing but do not prescribe how care should be distributed between parents (UNICEF, 1989). Across Western countries, there is a growing recognition of the importance of father involvement and increased interest in research examining how separated partners are sharing care, driven by shifting gender norms, increasing paternal involvement in care, and the increased prevalence of single-parent households (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Keogh et al., 2018).

The terminology and thresholds for how care is divided between separated parents and what is considered 'shared care' varies widely (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Cancian et al., 2025; Keogh et al., 2018; Smyth, 2017; Zilincikova, 2021). Terms such as *shared care*, *joint physical custody*, *shared residence*, *dual-time residence*, and *alternating residence* are often used interchangeably, with definitions typically ranging from 25–50% of time spent with each parent (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Cancian et al., 2025; Hakovirta et al., 2024; Meyer et al., 2025). In addition, research has measured the distribution of care between separated parents using multiple definitions, including measures of time spent with the child, the allocation of caregiving tasks, and which parent has responsibility for decision-making about the child (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Cashmore et al., 2010; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Smyth, 2017).

We use the term 'division of care' to refer to the proportionate number of overnight stays a child has with each parent per year. We further categorise this measure into five "levels of care" consistent with Services Australia thresholds (Services Australia, 2025).

These categories are used in the administration of child support and family payments, and therefore provide a policy-relevant framework for examining how care is divided between separated parents. While this approach does not capture all dimensions of caregiving, it offers a consistent and nationally recognised basis for tracking changes in parental division of care over time. In this paper we will use the term equal shared care to refer to parents whose youngest child spends 35%-65% of their nights with them and the remaining nights with their other parent.

Policy context

Over the past thirty years, Australian federal policy on shared parenting arrangements has undergone multiple reforms (see Table 1). The 1995 Family Law Reform Act emphasised children maintaining relationships with both parents post-separation, moving away from sole parent custody, a reform that was partly driven by father's rights groups advocating for more paternal involvement (Keogh et al., 2018; Rhoades, 2008). This reform was further supported by the 2006 reform that encouraged courts to consider equal or substantial shared care arrangements and establish Family Relationship Centres for dispute resolution (Cashmore et al., 2010; Kaspiew et al., 2011). Subsequently, the 2008 Child Support reform changed how overnight care time affected payment calculations by lowering the threshold for parents to receive child support exemptions from 30% to 14% of nights (Smyth & Chrisholm, 2025). Parents with children spending 14–34% of nights with them (classified as 'regular care') were recognised as covering 24% of child costs directly, and those with children spending 35–65% of nights with them (classified as 'shared care') were assumed to cover 25% or more of costs, reducing the amount of child support parents owed (Smyth & Chrisholm, 2025). Thus, these Child Support Scheme reforms introduced financial incentives that exempted child support payments when children spent over 35% of nights with a separated parent (Cashmore et al., 2010; Kaspiew et al., 2011; Keogh et al., 2018). Smyth and Chisholm (2025) found that the 2008 reforms nudged child support payers to spend more time with children and reduced their payment obligations.

From 2011 onwards child safety became a more prominent focus in policies surrounding shared care. The 'family violence' amendment of 2011 aimed to safeguard

children from domestic abuse by removing the requirements for children to spend equal or substantial and significant time with each parent (Smyth & Chisholm, 2025). Subsequently, the 2023 Family Law amendment that came into effect on May 6, 2024, reversed many of the amendments of the 1995 and 2006 reforms to make the law clearer and more straightforward and allow parents to concentrate on their child's best interests in each individual case. Thereby, policy reforms in Australia have shifted from encouraging shared care arrangements through the family courts to prioritising the safety of children.

Early research finds the 2006 reforms and 2008 financial incentives may have increased the proportion of parents who report sharing childcare time (Kaspiew, et al., 2011; Smyth, 2017). However, more recent studies suggest uncertainty about the lasting impacts of policies on parents engaging in shared care arrangements (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Smyth & Chisholm, 2025). Smyth and Chisholm (2025) found that changes to family law in the last 20 years may have not had the intended effects on shared care arrangements, rather other factors such as socioeconomic status and access to resources, changing cultural values and norms around parenting, and shocks like the pandemic that enabled more flexible work arrangements have impacted shared care arrangements in multifaceted and nuanced ways. The authors speculate that the observed steady increase in shared care arrangements in Australia may be due to socioeconomic changes rather than legislative changes over the past two decades, yet there is not enough current data to show this with certainty.

Changes in cultural values about parenting and social trends relating to gender equality may explain the growing trend in shared care, including increased participation of married women in the workforce (Wilkins et al., 2020), more recognition of the role of fathers (Baxter & Smart, 2011), and a broader understanding of the best interests of the child that includes the value of spending time with both parents after separation (Rhoades, 2010; Smyth, 2017). In sum, policy in Australia has evolved with shifting social norms around parenting amongst separated families but may not be accounting for the full spectrum of parenting arrangements that are emerging in the population. A more nuanced understanding of how separated parents share care may help design

better policies and systems that enable and support families to engage in childcare arrangements that work best for them and their children.

Table 1. Legislative shifts governing childcare arrangements for separated parents in Australia from 1995-2024.

Year	Policy Change	Details
1995	Family Law Reform Act 1995	Shifted the legal framework away from sole custody toward shared parental responsibility and emphasised children maintaining relationships with both parents. Established the policy foundation for increasing expectations of paternal involvement after separation (Keogh et al., 2018; Rhoades et al., 2000; Smyth & Chisholm, 2025).
2006	Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006	Introduced a presumption of equal shared parental responsibility and required courts to consider equal or substantial time arrangements (at least 30% of nights with each parent) where feasible. Marked a strong institutional push toward shared care, including the establishment of Family Relationship Centres for dispute resolution, and possibly contributed to growth in shared parenting consequently (Cashmore et al., 2010; Smyth & Chisholm, 2025).
2008	Child Support Scheme Reforms	Revised the child support formula to recognise shared care. Introduced 14% care threshold: parents spending $\geq 14\%$ time with children (roughly 1 night per week) received reduced child support obligations. Increased the shared care time threshold to $\geq 35\%$ time with each parent. Created financial incentives that may have influenced father time reporting (Keogh et al., 2018; Smyth & Chisholm, 2025).

2011	Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Act 2011	Expanded the definition of family violence and clarified that child safety takes priority over shared parenting responsibilities in cases where there is a high risk of conflict. Act took effect on June 7, 2012. Signalled a moderation of earlier strong shared-care assumptions (Smyth & Chrisholm, 2025; Fehlberg et al., 2025).
2024	Family Law Amendment Act 2023	Removed provisions encouraging equal or substantial time arrangements and returned decision-making fully to what's in the best interest of the child framework, that had existed pre-2006 reforms. Act took effect on May 6, 2024. Marked the end of the extended policy emphasis on shared parenting (Smyth & Chisholm, 2025).

Previous Literature

Global trends

International evidence indicates that shared care following parental separation has increased over time across several Western countries, although rates vary substantially across countries (Berman & Daneback, 2022; Hakovirta et al., 2024; Meyer et al., 2025; Zilincikova, 2021). For example, rates of equal shared care are comparatively high in countries such as Sweden (around 40%) but remain much lower in others, such as Estonia (around 10%) (Hakovirta et al., 2024). Meyer et al. (2025) suggest countries with higher levels of equal shared care are more common in contexts with longer-standing legislative support for shared parenting, more gender-egalitarian norms, higher educational attainment of parents, and higher rates of parental separation. Although definitions and measurement approaches vary across studies, limiting direct comparison, the overall direction of change suggests a gradual shift toward a higher prevalence of equal shared care between separated parents in many high-income contexts.

Prevalence of shared care in Australia

Australian research also suggests formerly coupled parents may be gradually partaking in more equal shared care arrangements (Cashmore et al., 2010; Kaspiew et al., 2011; Smyth & Chisholm, 2025; Smyth & Chisholm, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2025; Wilkins et al., 2020). A study commissioned by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 2010 that examined a random sample of 10,000 recently separated parents engaged with the family law system, found that most children of separated parents still spent a majority of time with their mothers, with 16% in shared care arrangements (35%-65% time) and 7% in near equal shared care (48%-52%) (Kaspiew et al., 2011). However, families that go through the courts to decide on care arrangements may have a higher level of conflict than those who do not and studies indicate shared care is more prevalent and long-lasting in contexts with more parental cooperation (Cashmore et al., 2010; Keogh et al., 2018; Weston et al., 2011). This signals a need for more evidence that captures population-wide trends over time.

A recent series of studies examined longitudinal data from the Child Support Agency showing fluctuating trends in the progression of shared care (defined as the percentage of children spending more than 30% of nights with each parent)(Smyth & Chisholm, 2025; Smyth & Chisholm, 2017). The study found a gradual rise in shared care rates between 2003 to 2007 from 9% to 16%, before plateauing at around 16% from 2007 to 2014, followed by a steady growth in rates of about 1% year every year from 2014 onwards (Smyth & Chisholm, 2025). While the authors suggest the 2008 child support reforms may have provided financial incentives that nudged shared care rates higher, they also point to other drivers of these trends including income and sociodemographic changes, and the pandemic that offered parents more flexibility in work arrangements that enabled more parenting time (Smyth & Chisholm, 2025). While these findings provide a broad overview of how shared care has changed over time in Australia, Keogh et al. (2018) note that Child Support Agency data only accounts for 85-90% of separated families and does not include parents that do not register with the agency, such as voluntary private arrangements between carers and families with no formal arrangements (Cook et al., 2011; Dixon, 2001; Keogh et al., 2018). Thus, while this

evidence is timely it is incomplete and does not delve into how shared care differs between different segments of the population.

Sociodemographic variability

Research consistently shows that the division of care following parental separation varies across child age (Cashmore et al., 2010; Kaspiw et al., 2011). Shared care arrangements are generally more common among families with primary school-aged children (5-11 years) and less common among families with very young children (0-5 years) or older adolescents (15-17 years) (Kaspiw, et al., 2011; Keogh et al., 2018). These patterns are often attributed to developmental and practical considerations, including higher maternal caregiving in infancy and early childhood and increasing autonomy among older children in determining where they spend their time (Fehlberg et al., 2025; Keogh et al., 2018; Wilkins et al., 2020).

Socioeconomic factors have also been associated with decisions around shared care. Wilkins et al. (2025) found that shared care was more common among parents in higher income quintiles, with 41% participating in shared care compared with 27% among the most disadvantaged families, who were more likely to be female-headed households. Evidence suggests that shared care is significantly increased by parental geographic proximity, higher parental income and education, and flexible working arrangements that enable children to commute to school from two homes with safe and adequate amenities for children to live in (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Cashmore et al., 2010). Thus, the capacity to engage in shared care is unevenly distributed and lower-income mothers are more likely to assume primary caregiving responsibilities following separation.

We build on and add to these previous studies by investigating changes over the past two decades in rates of shared care between separated parents. At the broadest level we are interested in how care of children is divided between parents living in different households. Most research has focused on divisions of care within households, but care increasingly takes place across and beyond a single household. We also examine differences associated with demographic and socioeconomic characteristics to gain insight into how these characteristics structure care arrangements.

Methods

Data

Our study uses data from 23 waves of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, a household panel study conducted annually since 2001 (Summerfield et al., 2023). The HILDA Survey had approximately 13,000 respondents (aged 15 years and over) between 2001 and 2010 and since 2011 has had approximately 17,000 respondents (Summerfield et al., 2023). It collects information on the characteristics and wellbeing of respondents, including a wide range of data on the level of contact that a respondent's youngest child has with their parent living in another household. The HILDA Survey sample has become slightly less representative of the Australian population due to under-representation of new immigrants, notwithstanding a 2011 general sample top-up which addressed the underrepresentation of immigrants arriving between 2001 and 2011 (Summerfield et al., 2023). Despite this, Wilkins et al. (2025) find that HILDA retains a high level of validity for sole parents after 2001. Weights correcting for sampling bias, non-response, and alignment to population benchmarks have been applied throughout our analyses (Summerfield et al., 2024).

Sample

Our analyses are based on two analytical samples. We first examine a sample comprising all parents who have a child under the age of 18 living in their household, regardless of how many nights per year the child is in the household. For our main analyses the sample comprises all individuals who have a biological or adoptive child under 18² where the child's other parent lives elsewhere.

Measures

HILDA collects information on how many nights each week, fortnight or month a respondent's youngest child who has a parent living elsewhere, usually stays overnight with their other parent, including a category for zero overnight stays. This variable is used to construct two key variables to examine levels of shared care. First, *percentage*

² We conducted sensitivity analyses with different cut-offs for the upper age limit of the children, and our results did not vary substantially from what is presented here.

of care measures the percentage of nights that a separated parents' youngest child spends with them per year, regardless of whether the child lives with them or not. This measure ranges from 0% (no nights per year) to 100% (all nights in a year).

The percentage of care variable is then divided into a measure of *levels of care*, based on five "levels of care" consistent with the Services Australia administrative thresholds (Services Australia, 2025)³. Our measure thus reflects the categories used by Australian Government authorities. While the Services Australia measure has 5 categories, we have collapsed these into three, to maximise the number of observations per category: regular care or below (0% - 34% nights), shared care (35% - 64% nights), primary care or more (>65% nights). We use these categories as they reflect an individual's entitlement to a wide range of benefits and payments, including Family Tax Benefits, Child Care Subsidy, Rent Assistance, the Health Care Card and Child Support (Services Australia, 2025). Further, this reflects how care provision is measured by government agencies for the purposes of calculating child support payments.

It is important to note three points; first, the number of nights reported by men and women and the associated categories we apply may not add up to 100%. We are not comparing the two parents of a particular child, but rather are comparing men who report having child with a parent living elsewhere, with women who report the same. Second, while HILDA also collected data on the days with the other parent, we focus on overnight stays to more accurately reflect time, responsibility for care, cost, and logistical demands of caregiving overnight as opposed to care during the day only. Third, HILDA only collects this information on the youngest of a respondent's children with a parent living elsewhere. If care provision for older siblings is shared differently between parents than is the case for the youngest child, this cannot be accounted for in this study. If a parent re-partners and has another child, we are still able to identify the care

³ The original Services Australia (2025) categories comprise: below regular care (0–13% of nights, equivalent to less than 2 nights per fortnight), regular care (14–34%, or to 2–4 nights per fortnight), equal shared care (35–64%, or 5–9 nights per fortnight), primary care (65–85%, or 10–12 nights per fortnight), and more than primary care (more than 85% of the time or 13 or more nights per fortnight) (Services Australia, 2025).

arrangement for the *youngest child with a parent living elsewhere* (but not that child's older siblings).

Our four key predictor measures of interest are *gender* (mothers or fathers), *partnership status* (married/de facto or single), *income group* (in the bottom 40% of the income distribution compared to the top 60%) and the *age of the youngest child* (5 years and under or 6 years and over). We examine partnership status to determine how re-partnering is associated with care arrangements. Note, that for married/de facto respondents, the parent is in a coresidential romantic relationship with someone other than the parent of their youngest child with a parent living elsewhere. The income group threshold was selected to capture a meaningful distinction between those at the lower end of the income distribution and those with comparatively greater economic resources. For the dichotomous category of age of youngest child, before or after school age has been chosen as it reflects a shift on the intensity of care that a child requires and has a substantial impact on a wide range of policy and socio-economic factors. For example, shared care may become more difficult after schooling has started as both parents either need to live near the school or commute.

Analysis

We first show the prevalence of parents raising a child with the other parent living elsewhere. This provides a baseline against which subsequent analyses of care arrangements can be contextualised: for all mothers and fathers with at least one child under the age of 18 living in their household, what proportion has at least one child *with a parent living elsewhere*? We then report trends in levels of shared care within this subgroup of parents. We start by showing the percentage of parents whose child never stays the night with their other parent (for those with a resident child⁴), or parents who never have their child stay overnight (for those with a non-resident child). This shows the extent to which parents are entirely absent from overnight care arrangements, by the residency status of the child. Following this, we present two measures capturing the level of care involvement to assess the depth of caregiving by each parent: the share of

⁴ HILDA defines a resident child as one who sleeps at least 50% of nights with that parent, and a non-resident child as one who sleeps fewer than 50% of nights with that parent.

nights per year that mothers and fathers who live separately spend caring for their youngest child, and the distribution of levels of care provided to the youngest child, each examined by gender. Finally, we assess trends in levels of care over time according to partnership status and income. Tables reporting the percentages and number of observations for each category are available from the lead author on request.

Findings

Having a Child with a Parent Living Elsewhere

Our first analysis shows the proportion of mothers and fathers with at least one child under 18 years of age living in their household, whose other parent lives in a different household between 2001 and 2023. The sample includes all parents who have a child under the age of 18 living in their household, and comprises partnered and re-partnered as well as sole parents.

Figure 1: The proportion of mothers and fathers with a child in the household with a parent living elsewhere, HILDA 2001 - 2023

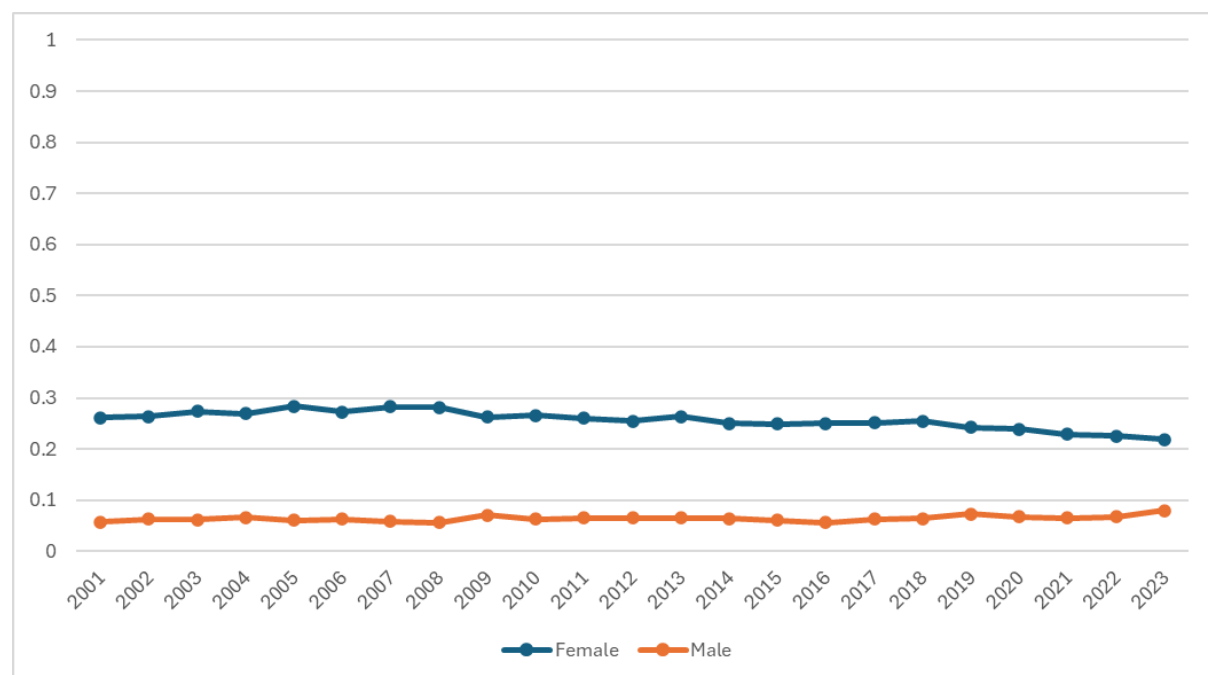


Figure 1 reveals that between 2001 and 2023, roughly 1 in 4 Australian mothers were raising a child in a household without the child's father. Our analysis shows a prominent gender gap, with mothers 20% more likely than fathers in 2001 to be caring for a child

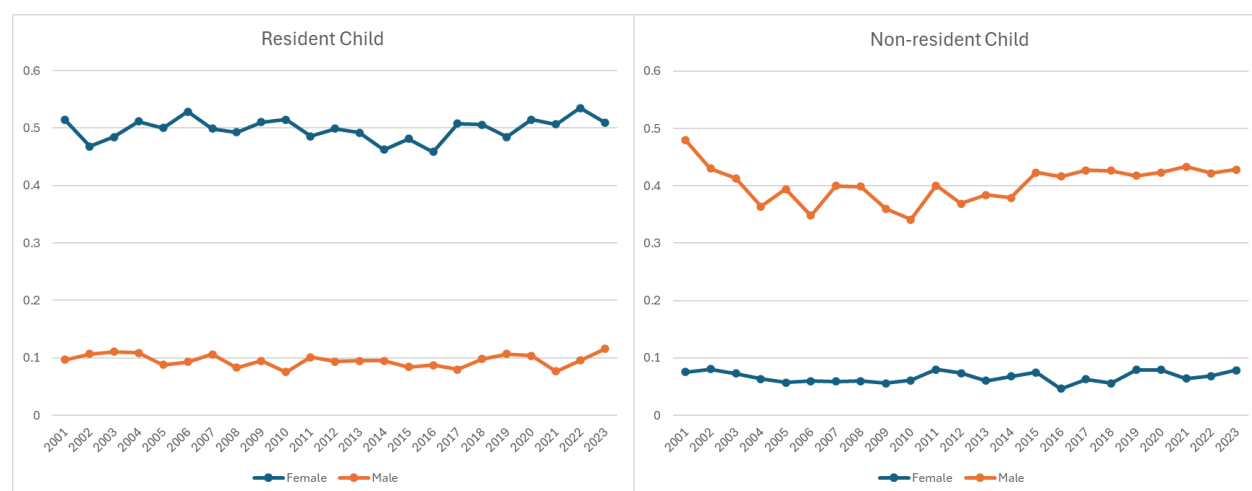
whose other parent lives elsewhere. This reflects well documented patterns in the gender division of care labour in intact couple households (Craig & Mullan, 2011), and shows that an unequal distribution of care work between parents is also present across separated households. By 2023 this gap had narrowed to 14%. In some households, mothers and fathers will have formed new partnerships and may have had additional children. Nevertheless, the results suggest that biological mothers continue to undertake the bulk of childcare for children of separated parents. In what follows, results refer to only those parents who do have at least one child with another parent living in a different household.

Zero Overnight Stays

Employing a sample of all parents who have a resident or non-resident child who has a parent living elsewhere, Figure 2 presents the proportion who report their child has zero overnight stays with the other parent per year between 2001 and 2023. We find that roughly 50% of mothers with a resident child and biological father living elsewhere report zero overnight stays with the non-resident father per year. The comparable figure for fathers who report zero overnights stays with a non-resident mother is approximately 10%. These figures remain very consistent across the 23 year time period.

Conversely, only about 7% of mothers with a child living elsewhere report zero nights per year with their child, with limited change over time. The comparable figure for men was 40% in 2001, 27% in 2010, and 35% in 2023. Note that these are samples of mothers and fathers in HILDA and not parents of the same child. Hence the slight discrepancy with the previous results may reflect real differences in rates of overnight stays across the two samples of mothers and fathers. Furthermore, the estimates are based on samples exceeding 500 observations, suggesting these findings are robust.

Figure 2: Proportion of parents reporting zero overnight stays, by child residency status, HILDA 2001 - 2023



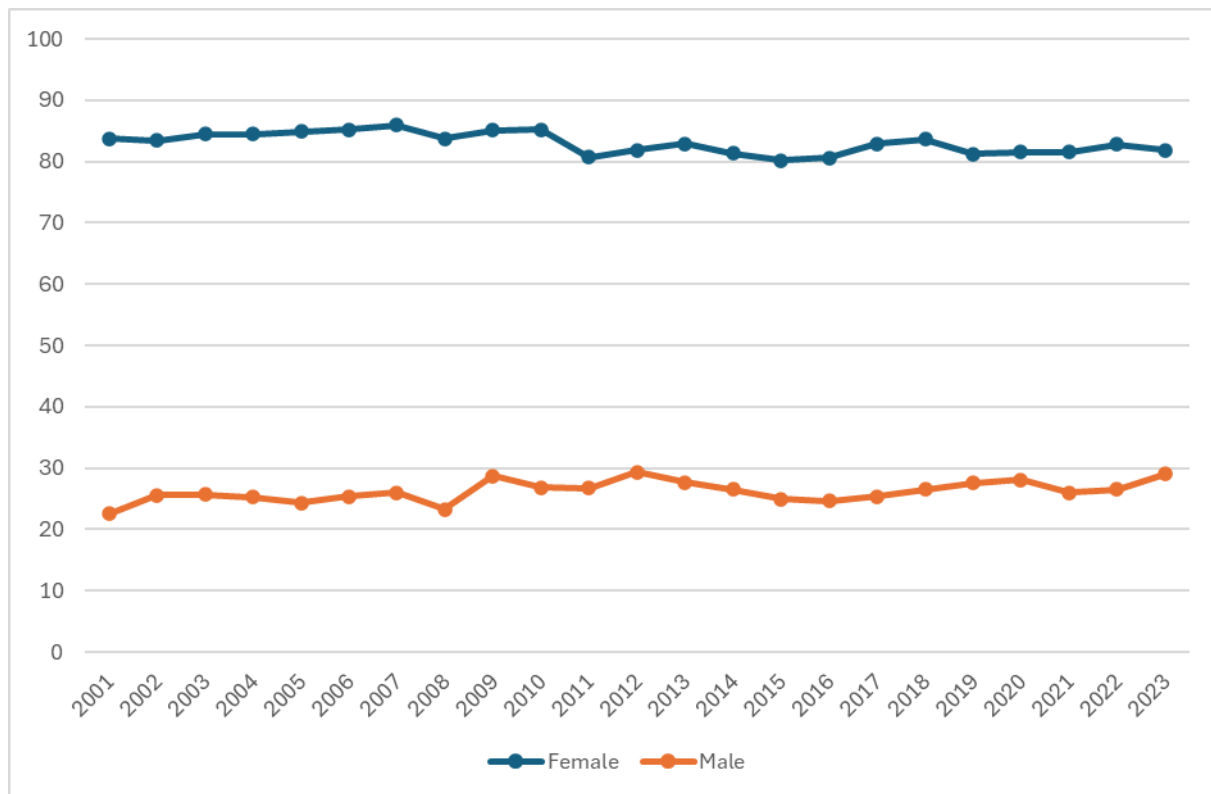
Note: For resident child, the proportion represents the parents who have a resident child who has zero nights per year with the parent who lives elsewhere. For non-resident child, the proportion represents parents who have zero nights per year with their non-resident child.

It is notable that arrangements appeared more gender equitable around 2010, before diverging again in subsequent years. Overall, these findings suggest that roughly half of separated Australian mothers are raising children with essentially no support from the non-resident father and this has not changed greatly over the last two decades.

Percentage of Nights

Figure 3 presents the percentage of nights per year that separated mothers and fathers cared for their youngest child between 2001 and 2023. This measure includes parents of both resident and non-resident children. In 2001, the average number of nights for mothers providing care was 84% and in 2023 it was 82%. For fathers the comparable figures are 23% and 29% respectively.

Figure 3: The percentage of nights per year that separated mothers and fathers care for their youngest child, HILDA 2001 - 2023



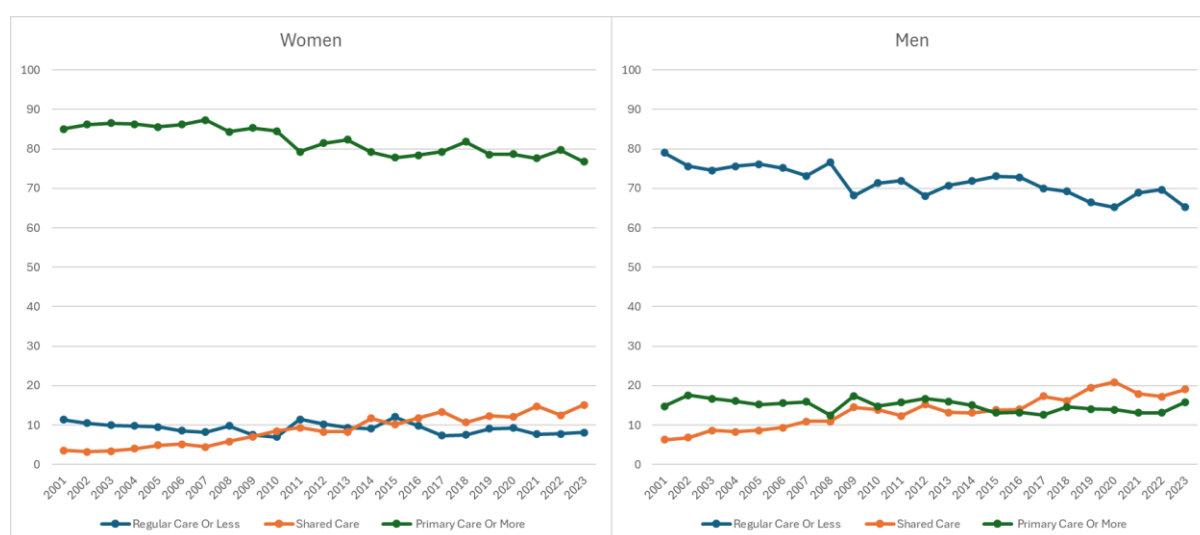
These findings point to a substantial and enduring gender gap in post-separation caregiving, with little meaningful change over the two decades, notwithstanding a modest increase in overnight care provided by fathers. The following analyses examine these gender differences in more detail, by rates of care, partnership status and income level.

Levels of Care

Grouping the data according to the categories used by Services Australia provides further insights into the trends over time. Figure 4 shows the levels of care provided to the youngest child by gender from 2001 to 2023 using a collapsed version of Services Australia categories as explained above. The data show that over time, mothers are consistently, albeit slowly, becoming less likely to report providing primary care or more (from 85% in 2001 to 77% in 2023). Fathers are 14% less likely to report providing regular care or less (from 79% in 2001 to 65% in 2023). There has been a notable increase in reports of shared care for both genders, whereby for mothers it increased from 4% to

15% and for fathers from 6% to 19%. The proportion of men providing primary care or more has remained broadly stable, while the inverse category of women providing regular care or less, has seen a slight decrease from 11% to 8%.

Figure 4: Levels of care of separated mothers and father's youngest child, HILDA 2001 - 2023



These results suggest that the first two decades of the 21st century have seen a redistribution of care with mothers overall doing less care and fathers doing more. Specifically, there are fewer women who provide the vast majority of the care, and fewer men who provide very limited care. There has also been a noticeable shift in the number of parents who report a broadly equitable division of care with their former partner.

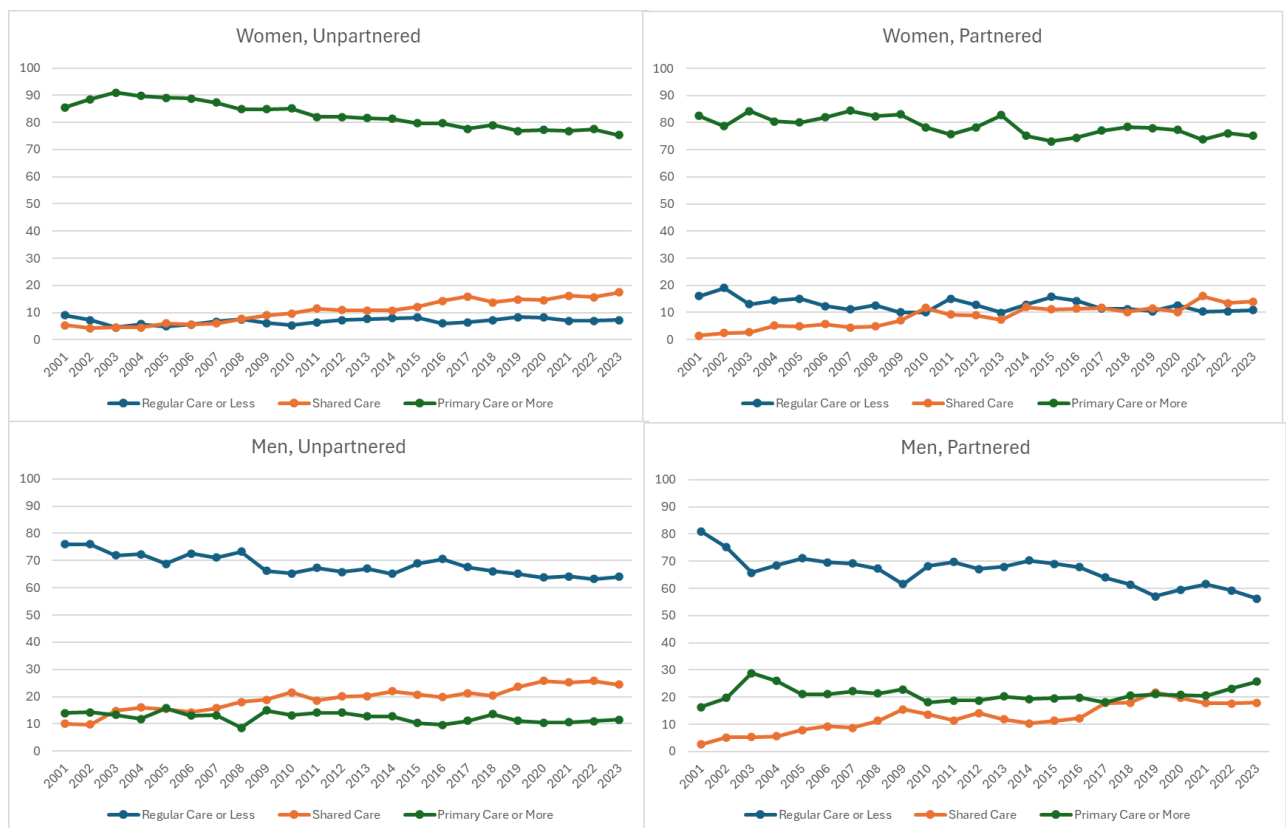
Interestingly our data reveal a substantial drop in the number of fathers who report regular care or less between 2008 and 2009 (a drop of 8% from 77% to 68%). Fathers' reports of shared care increase from 11% to 15%, and primary care from 13% - 17%. Mothers do not report less care during the same period. Indeed, we see an increase of 1% for primary care or more (from 84% to 85%), a decrease of 2% for regular care or less (from 10% to 8%) and only a 1% increase in shared care. Fathers' reports of increased care of 16% over all categories (8% + 4% + 4%) are not matched by an increase in mothers' reports. In 2008 the Child Support Scheme Reforms were revised so that more care resulted in lower child support payments. These findings thus support Keogh et al. (2018) and Smyth and Chisholm (2025) conclusion that these reforms created financial incentives that may have influenced father time reporting.

Alternatively, the presumption of equal shared parental responsibility enshrined in the 2006 Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act, may have shifted social norms and expectations around fatherhood. The desirability for more involved fathering presumed in the reforms may have prompted greater awareness amongst fathers of their caregiving role and how they perceived and reported it. This may have led to fathers undertaking more caregiving. Nonetheless, this does not explain the substantial increase in the specific year that saw a change in how child support is calculated or the lack of symmetry in mothers' reports of fathers' caregiving.

Levels of Care by Partnership Status

We expect that decisions regarding the care of children may be influenced by whether or not a separated parent is re-partnered. Figure 5 shows the division of care for the youngest child with a parent living elsewhere by parent's gender and partnership status.

Figure 5: Separated mothers and father's levels of care for their youngest child with a parent living elsewhere, by partnership status, HILDA 2001 - 2023

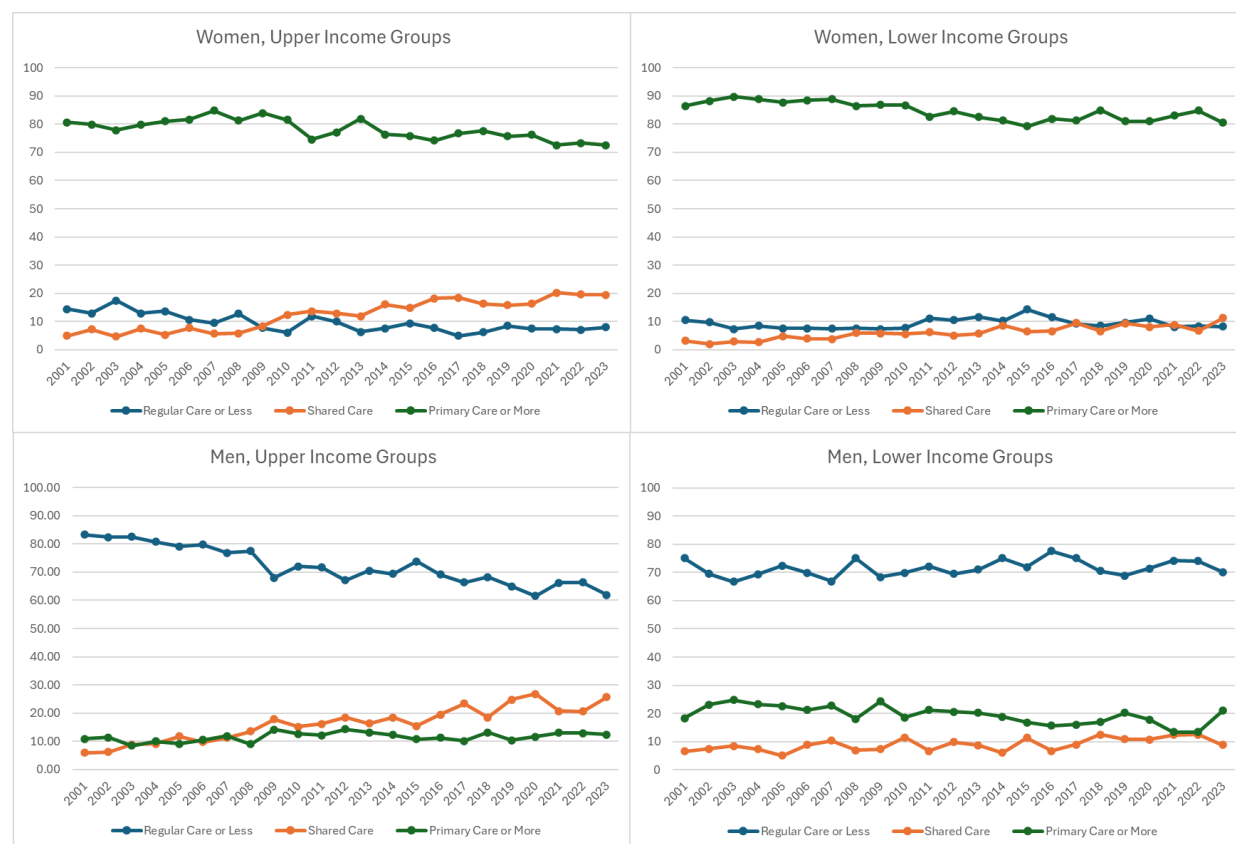


The most common level of care for mothers regardless of partnership status, by a very large margin, is primary care or more. The inverse is true for fathers, with the majority having regular care or less. Differences become apparent when examining the lower half of each graph. The most notable difference is the higher rate of primary care or more amongst partnered fathers compared to unpartnered fathers. Interestingly, shared care appears to be more common amongst unpartnered fathers over time. On the other hand, primary care or more is more prevalent for partnered fathers. This may reflect family dynamics associated with repartnering with children of repartnered fathers more likely to spend time with their new family including potentially further siblings, or that care is provided by the father's new partner rather than the father himself.

Levels of Care by Income Group

To examine if the division of care between mothers and fathers is impacted by socio-economic status, we examine differences between those in the bottom 40% of the income distribution compared to those in the top 60%. Our analyses, presented in Figure 6, reveal a socio-economic gradient in both the gender division of care and rates of change over time. The proportion of mothers in the upper income group who have primary care or more has dropped from 81% to 73%, while the corresponding change for mothers in the lower income group is only about half as large, from 86% to 80%. The change for fathers is more marked, with the percentage of fathers in the upper income group reporting regular care or less declining from 83% in 2001 to 62% (21%) in 2023. Change over time for fathers reporting regular care or less in the lower income group is far smaller, from 75% in 2001 to 70% in 2023. It is becoming increasingly common for men in the upper income group to have their child living with them for at least 35% of the nights in a given year.

Figure 6: Separated mothers and father's levels of care for their youngest child by income group, HILDA 2001 – 2023

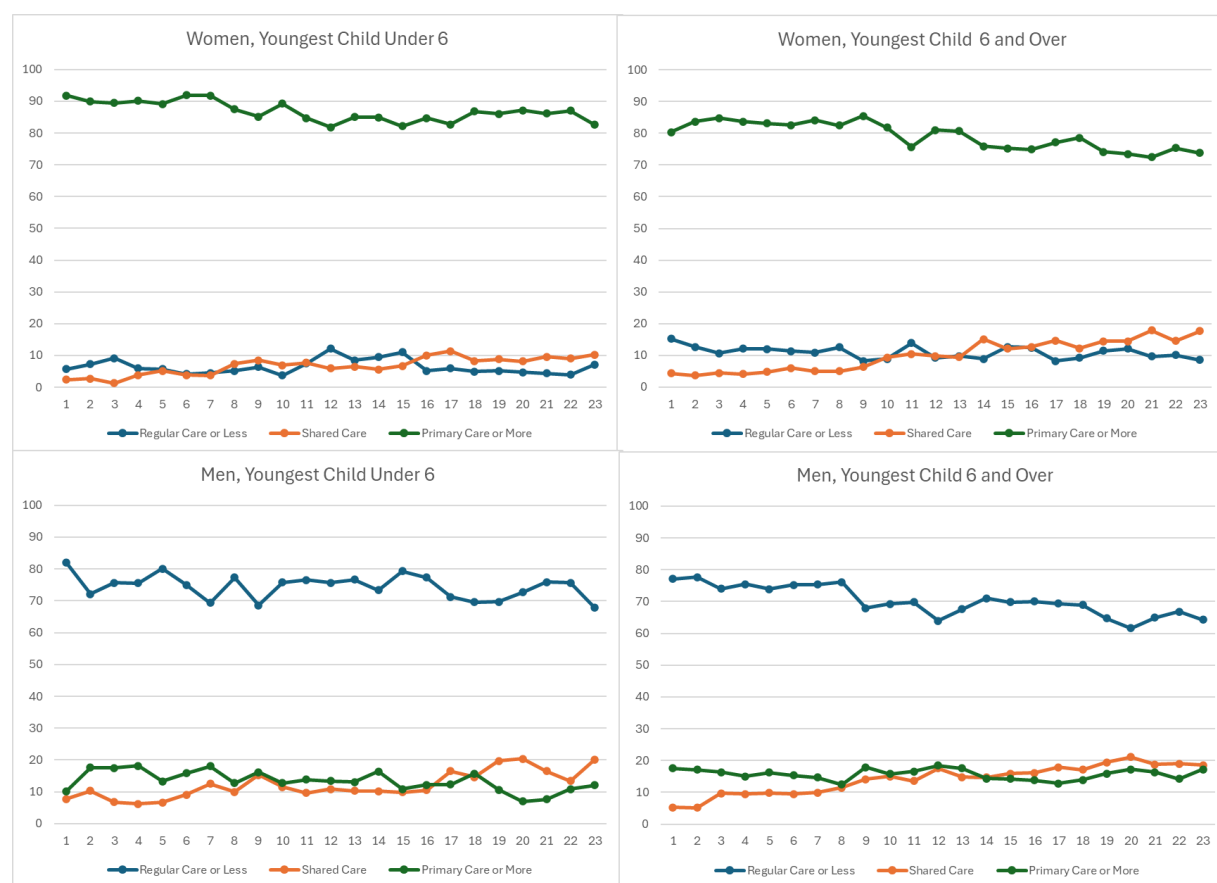


The changes for shared care follow similar trends: very slow changes for the lower income group, and a substantial move toward more gender equality in care arrangements amongst the upper income group. Shared care amongst mothers and fathers in the upper income group has increased from 5% to 20% and 6% to 26%, respectively. The comparative change for the lower income groups is 3% to 11% and 7% to 9%, respectively. Note, this needs to be viewed with some caution, as the number of observations are low for some categories, especially in the earlier years (available on request). It is unclear whether men in higher income groups have different preferences for care provision, more resources to help facilitate care provision (such as better housing and the ability to pay for outside help with cooking or cleaning, leaving available time for care) or are responding to a greater incentive to over-report their care provisions, as the reduction in child support obligations would decrease more strongly with increased care reporting for higher income men.

Levels of Care by Age of Youngest Child

Finally, we consider levels of care by the age of the child. Figure 7 shows that mothers are most likely to have primary care of their child, regardless of the child's age. The time trend shows that primary care by mothers with a youngest child under 6 has decreased from 92% to 83% (9%) and the comparable change for women with their youngest child over 6 is from 80% to 74% (6%). Men with a child under 6 have also seen a substantial drop in their rates of regular care or less, from 82% to 67% (15%), with the comparable figures for men with a youngest child over 6 being 77% to 64% (9%).

Figure 7: Separated men and women's levels of care for their youngest child by age of youngest resident or non-resident child, HILDA 2001 – 2023



Changes in shared care show slightly different trends, with the greatest gains in gender equality being evident for all groups except for women with a youngest child under 6.

Note, these findings need to be considered with some caution as the number of observations become quite low for the shared care category, especially in the earlier years of HILDA.

Discussion

Family structures are evolving from the predominant ‘one home one family’ model towards arrangements where formerly coupled parents, or parents who were never partners to one another, are raising children across households. While policies in Australia have tried to support shared care arrangements, there is insufficient research about the extent of shared care amongst separated families in Australia and how this is changing over time. In this paper, we examine how care is shared between separated parents, how rates of shared care have changed in Australia over the last two decades, and whether it has become more gender equitable. We measure care as the number of nights a child spends with the separated parent. We recognise that this is a limited measure and overlooks care provided during the day that does not involve an overnight stay. Nevertheless, responsibility for childcare is likely to be higher when the child stays overnight compared to daytime visits and is likely a more accurate measure of sole care of children.

Our aim is to provide up-to-date information using large-scale nationally representative data that provides insights for policy makers and researchers interested in shared care. While there is a wealth of research on gender divisions of care within households, less is known about how care of children is organised across households when parents are not living together. Recent Australian studies of shared care have tended to rely on bespoke samples of separated families and few have examined national trends over time (Kaspiew et al., 2011; Smyth & Chisholm, 2025). Our paper aims to address gaps by presenting recent analyses using nationally representative data from 2001 to 2023. We assess levels of shared care for mothers and fathers over time and show how patterns vary in shared care by partnership status, income and age of children.

Our main finding is that mothers continue to be the primary caregivers of children, defined as the child spending greater than 65% of nights with their mother, amongst separated parents. Our analyses show some changes over time with mothers doing less primary care and fathers providing more care, but the gender gaps are still very wide. This points to the persistence of a highly gendered division of care after separation.

At the same time, there has been a marked increase in the extent of equal shared care defined as couples whose youngest child spends between 35-64% of nights with each parent. Fathers report an increase in equal shared care from 6% in 2001 to 19% in 2023 while for mothers the comparable figures are 4% to 15%. This indicates that parents are sharing care of their youngest child more than in the past, but within the bounds of a relatively broad definition of equal shared care.

Patterns change a little when we take partnerships status, income and age of the child into account. Fathers who have repartnered are more likely to report primary care compared to men who are unpartnered, who in turn, are more likely to report equal shared care. And we also see an increase in levels of equal shared care for mothers and fathers in the upper income bracket compared to those in the lower income bracket. It is likely that the opportunity for participating equally in shared care will be higher for those who have more resources as this will likely influence housing availability and ability to have children stay over. Mothers retain most care work when children are young.

Our paper has a number of limitations. First, since the number of nights spent with each parent is only reported for the youngest child with a parent living elsewhere and we cannot examine how care arrangements vary for siblings of different ages. Second, we cannot distinguish between changes in reported time caring for children versus actual time spent caring for children. This also implies that where mothers' and fathers' reports differ, there is no empirical way to verify which report more closely reflects the truth. And third, our cross-sectional analysis reports associations between parent characteristics such as income, partner status and age of child. An opportunity for further research includes longitudinal analyses that follow parents over time to see how shared care changes as the children age, or as the parents form new families, have further children, and experience changes in income. This could help understand whether the variation seen across subgroup reflects pre-existing differences between groups or causal links between caregiving and changes over the life course.

Another avenue for future research is to examine care intensity (for example, hours spent caring for children). Ironically, parental separation may provide increased

opportunities for parents who live in close proximity to more equally share the responsibilities of caring for children than parents in intact households. If one parent is not in the household, by default the other must take full responsibility during the time their child spends with them. Our analysis is restricted to examining the number of nights the youngest child spends with each parent, but broadening the scope to observing care intensity during these times would be an interesting expansion of our results. This could also shed light on the mechanisms that lead to partnered fathers being more likely to provide substantial amounts of care than unpartnered fathers.

Arrangements for primary care will also be influenced by levels of conflict between parents, as well as legal and safety issues. Examining the role of the separation process as well as the relationship between parents with a shared child may shed further light on the mechanisms underlying childcare arrangements for separated parents.

Conclusion

Patterns of shared care of children is both an important policy and research issue. For policy makers understanding how couples arrange care of children across households is important for decisions about child support, understanding the costs of children to families and developing programs to support parents and children to maintain connections when they do not live in the same household. For researchers patterns of shared care enable insight into gender divisions of labour across households, parenting patterns following separation and outcomes and wellbeing of children of separated parents. Our paper provides an overview of trends in shared care for Australian parents living apart and a baseline for future analyses to delve more deeply into determinants of shared care of children amongst separated parents.

Appendix

Detailed tables with percentages and number of observations for each cell available on request. Please contact the lead author.

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