

Kickbacks, drawbacks and complexity: the transport implications of parents working from home

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented changes to how people live and work. One of the most significant and long-lasting changes is the increase in remote working, particularly working from home. Provoked by the need to maintain productivity through periods of government-mandated lock-down, industries that could introduced structures, policies and supports for employees to physically and socially isolate. As the pandemic subsided and economies re-opened, employers have, to varying degrees, continued to support working from home for amenable occupations. Likewise, having had positive experiences, employees have indicated a preference for access to the opportunity.

Predicting the future impact of working from home is complex. Attempts to etch out functional understandings of the practice are thwarted by the sheer diversity of possibilities. Employers regulate varying degrees of independence and flexibility for employees, who interpret the options they have available according to what they need at the time. This complex mess of new work-life geographies will have significant impacts on people's lives and the transport task of cities.

Transport related scholarship on working from home tends to concentrate on either quantifying its potential impact on transport systems (for example, Currie et al., 2021), or seeking to understand who is more likely to assume it as regular practice (for example, Balbontin et al., 2022). The latter is most relevant to this study. In many ways, this prior work conceptualises the worker as an individual, isolated from responsibilities to care, or desires to connect, with others. Yet many people, particularly parents of young children, have commuting schedules that are finely intermeshed with other household members. Although there are some exceptions (Zhang et al., 2020), few studies from the COVID era have sought to consider the implication of life-stage and household structure on the experience of working from home, and thus on the propensity to work from home into the future. To fill this gap, this paper explores parental preferences for working from home, and how this practice might impact the way they travel into the future.

We use in-depth interviews with 30 parents to examine the way the benefits and drawbacks of working from home are filtered through the lens of caring for children. We propose that in the complexity of the parenting task – its unique spatial, temporal and emotional imprints – the benefits of working from home may well offset the drawbacks. This implies that this relatively large and vocal cohort will demand it as an option where possible, adding to the likelihood that working from home as a common practice inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic will remain. We draw several conclusions on how this will impact the transport task of cities.

2. Method

To examine the complex spatial, temporal and practical patterns of parents working from home, a qualitative research project was undertaken in Sydney and Melbourne Australia, between October and December 2021. Both cities at this time had emerged from COVID-related periods of lockdown. Children had returned to school, shops, services and other places of employment had opened up, and life was beginning to resemble a degree of normalcy. Families were finishing up a school year disrupted by periods of home learning and were heading into summer holidays.

The study aimed to explore a speculative proposal - that is, that families experience benefits and drawbacks of working from home in a unique way, and this will impact transport demand. A qualitative approach was therefore deemed appropriate because it does not rely on prior assumptions, leaving the research open to supposition to be confirmed or otherwise by the reality of participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, Creswell, 2007). In other words, they provide an avenue for participants to describe daily life from their own perspective, rather than one imposed upon them by a survey with limited options (Minichiello et al., 2008).

We used a purposive sampling approach to identify participants for in-depth interview. A panel company was used to identify 30 people who were over the age of 18, caring for one or more children aged 0 to 17, and had the option to work from home at least some of the time. Participants were compensated for any expense incurred through their involvement in the interview and the study was approved by the human research ethics committees of both Monash University (ref: 2021-30526) and the University of Sydney (ref: 2021/807).

The semi-structured interview technique was selected to enable the researcher to guide the participant's attention to themes, while providing for the flexibility for both the researcher and the participant to delve deeper into points of interest (Minichiello et al., 2004). Each interview followed an interview guide which listed a series of topics to be covered. These included the respondents' current life situation, their transport practices, their access to different transport options, and their perceived future life and transport situations. Participants were asked to describe household routines in detail, and to reflect on the positive and negative material and emotional impacts of working from home. They were asked about their future intentions to work from home, and describe the rationale behind their stated plan. Interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform at a time nominated by the participant. The audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim by an external transcriptionist, and double-checked for accuracy by reading through each transcript during the coding process.

The interviews were conducted independently by both authors, who met regularly throughout the data collection process to discuss themes, reflect upon and modify the approach, and record emergent findings. Each researcher kept notes over the course of the data collection process, where they identified gaps, recorded decisions, and documented conceptual insights. All participants, and their children, were given pseudonyms. Data was analysed using several layers of topic, thematic and axial coding which was conducted once all interviews were complete. (Saldaña, 2009).

3. Results

The aim of this study is to examine whether the COVID-catalysed uptick in practices of working from home is likely to persist for parents, and how this persistence might unfold and impact the way people travel. We first present a narrative of parents' experiences and

preferences for working from home and conclude with reflections on the impact of these aspects on the transport practices of families.

3.1 Experiences and preferences for working from home

We interviewed 30 parents from both Sydney (14) and Melbourne (16), 16 identifying as female and 14 identifying as male. Most interviewees had two children and all children were aged between 6 and 18. Most lived in heterosexual relationships (26) and four were sole-parents. All but two expressed a desire to continue to work from home into the future, with most preferring a hybrid solution with time split between home and on-site. Participants described an array of different working from home employer policies. Only one participant had an employer who would only allow working from home under very extreme circumstances.

A key insight generated by our interviews is that in families where both parents worked, or families with a sole parent, the scheduling and transport requirements of the modern parenting project were intricate and complex. Participants described juggling multiple commitments across multiple locations and timeframes. Often both parents as well as external caregivers (grandparents, paid carers, after school programs) are needed to manage these schedules. Mother of three, Sandy, describes the usual weekday routines in mornings and afternoons:

“So usually on Monday and Thursday Martin will drop off the kids, I pick up – I look after Michael at home and obviously I will feed him, bathe him and everything but Martin would come back with Felicia after Felicia has finished swimming andMartin will look after Michael, and I pick up Gabriel ... during weekdays it’s just a bit crazy.”
Sandy, Melbourne

When the concept of working from home on some days a week and not on others comes into the mix, this complexity is further augmented. The flexibility to assume a hybrid working week turns what was already a complex routine into something that needs to be reconsidered and rearranged depending on whether parents were at home or on-site. Yet this complexity also provides context to many of the benefits parents associated with working from home. By avoiding on-site attendance, our participants saved time commuting and preparing for on-site work. Table 1 highlights the different morning routines for one family depending on whether or not they’re working from home.

Table 1: Comparison of morning routine working at-home vs on-site (Ester, Sydney)

Morning routine working from home:	Morning routine working on site:
<p>My husband and I will generally get up around six, just get up and have our morning coffee. I’ll start making lunchbox for my son. He’ll generally get up around seven, 7:30am, then start getting him ready for school. So that’s breakfast in the morning, getting him dressed in his school uniform and then by around 8:15, we’re out of the house to drop him off at school, so that would be either driving or walking. We’re relatively close to our school. So then I’ll come back home and I will log in from 9:00am or a little bit earlier, depending on when I get back from school drop off, come back and log straight back on to our work.</p>	<p>Mornings would be a lot more hectic, that’s for sure, so trying to get everyone ready and out of the house by around 7:00am. We’d go drop him off at my mum’s, already dressed for school, so everything had to be done by then, drop him off at my mum’s and then she’d keep him there until she had to do [school] drop-off. We would then – so there’s a bus stop around the corner from my mum’s so we’d wait for the bus. ...Then we’d catch the bus to the train station and then catch the train in. Depending on whether I’ve got a meeting at 8:30 or nine, I’d probably just grab a coffee downstairs and then head up. So that would be our morning routine.</p>

3.2 Benefits and drawbacks of working from home

Most parents expressed that the additional time with their children was one of the great benefits of working from home. Many considered themselves to be better parents as a result, and some noted that their children were happier, particularly when parents were at home in the afternoons instead of arriving home in the evening.

The potential to save time by overlaying work with domesticity and caring was another commonly cited benefit to working from home. More time working from home meant that they could use work-breaks to pace out mundane household tasks (such as laundry, sweeping or washing dishes) through the week instead of relying on more structured blocks of time on weekends. This reduced some of the mental and physical load of administering a family household, especially when it redistributed some of those household tasks onto a spouse who previously did not share these tasks.

However, this flexibility also has drawbacks, including the spatial and temporal blurring of boundaries between work and home. For parents, these blurred boundaries are played out under the constant scrutiny of curious children, adding to the sense of stress it creates:

“If I’m making dinner and whilst something’s cooking, I might quickly jump on for another half an hour and answer a few more emails....I need to stop it, I think it’s impacting me negatively. My son will occasionally say, ‘you’re always working’, particularly if I’m jumping on, on a weekend, I don’t particularly like that.” Ester, Sydney.

Many participants reflected on the pros and cons associated with working from home. Anna, mother of two, described the “double-edged sword” of working from home, longing for the ability to work solely on work, while also appreciating the increase in time to spend with her children:

“I really miss the block concentrated undivided attention to work that I just, I can't get to the kitchen, I can't get to the laundry. I can't get to anywhere else, I just, I got my own office space, I've got my own time. The block time, I really miss that. Yeah, I think flexibility is really a double-edged sword. While it has given me opportunities to cook better, to be with my children more, but the flexibility part has also caused a lot more distractions for me.” Alina, Sydney.

3.3 The temporal lag of transport impacts

Our analysis thus far has concentrated on the negotiations between the benefits and drawbacks for parents working from home as a way to explore whether the practice will remain into the future. We now turn to considerations of how families working from home might shape the day-to-day travel that they do.

The transport implications of working from home extend beyond the removal of the work commute, and this is particularly applicable to parents (Bai et al., 2021). The transport task associated with the journey to work is often conceptualized as between home and the workplace, with the implication being that the transport impacts of working from home are primarily a reduction in journey to work travel (for example, Beno, 2021). This simple work commute, however, is less likely to apply to parents. We found that, for parents, the journey to and from work is often linked to other trips, including school and care drop off and pick up, transferring children to other activities, and carrying out household tasks, such as grocery shopping. While working from home may reduce travel associated with the journey to work,

the destinations previously chained to the journey to work, including the school drop off, usually remain fixed, requiring travel.

Our data also shows that some fixed-site commitments have not yet been adjusted to account for the revised parental travel pattern. One mother, for example, described a 90 minute morning drive to drop her two children to a school which was previously relatively close to her workplace – a process that was repeated in the afternoon. In this sense, working from home has actually *increased* her daily travel. While these anchored trips may be relocated over time, the concept does raise the question of how parents who work in a hybrid manner will structure their commitments – whether around the journey to work, or around working from home. This adds yet another dimension of complexity to daily travel behaviour, rendering standard models based on predictable daily patterns less useful.

Of course, many of the care commitments chained to the journey to work were more local, with children generally attending a local school. For these families, the need to travel is likely to be reduced, perhaps opening up possibility for the embrace of active modes for the journey to school, where a short walk replaces what was the drive chained to the journey to work.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This is one of the first studies to reveal the complex negotiations and decision making that goes on behind the closed doors of families with access to the choice to work from home following the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. We must acknowledge that these findings stem only from interviews with families where at least one parent has some ability to work from home, and so are not relevant to families where both parents must work out of home.

We found parents experience benefits and drawbacks to working from home that are defined by the complexity of the contemporary parenting project. The benefits relate to a temporal gain, which results in increased time together as a family; a flexibility, which calms the familial routine; and a merging of tasks throughout the working day, easing the need to dedicate blocks of weekend and evening time to household administration. The drawbacks for parents relate to the lack of definition between home and work life. For many parents, however, the benefits of working from home exceed the drawbacks. Even though working from home can be a spatial and temporal juggle, the flexibility is a prized outcome.

The most obvious implication of the parental appreciation of working from home identified in this study is that this relatively large and vocal cohort will demand it as an option where possible, adding to the likelihood that working from home will remain as a common practice. Our findings suggest that parents value the opportunity to work from home, and so will prioritise it as an offering, either to safeguard it in existing employment or when looking for a new position.

The transport implications are more subtle but nevertheless important. First, confirming existing understandings of parental travel (Gilbert et al., 2022), we find that parents, rarely experience simple journey to work trips. Instead trips are chained to caring commitments; removal of the journey to work is therefore unlikely to result in a dramatic reduction in parental travel (Hostettler Macias et al., 2022). Instead, it will result in augmented complexity of the travel patterns of parents, from day to day and week to week. Second, we found some indications of latent opportunities for parents with younger children to use active transport modes for the school drop off and pick up. Third, while for some there may be the opportunity

to incorporate the use of more active modes to walk children to local schools and caring facilities, for others, it may mean more reliance on the private car to accommodate the messy geographies a hybrid approach to working can create. In this sense, we predict a temporal lag to the impact of working from home on the transport system, as parents work through existing commitments to caring services and extra-curricular activities located closer to their onsite workplace than their home.

Finally, our findings demonstrate just one more way transport practices are becoming less fixed and more complex. This implies that traditional ways of thinking about transport need to be stretched to accommodate this complexity. COVID-19 has officially heralded the death of using the journey to work as a reliable indicator of the transport task of cities.

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