

# **Labour Market Experiences of Teenage Australian Workers in the 21st Century**

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Using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) this paper compares the labour market faced by today's teenagers with that of the previous generation. The contention of the paper is that the youth labour market has deteriorated over the last three decades and is now much less favourable than that which faced the parents of today's teenagers. Findings revealed that teenagers now face a highly competitive and limited labour market where most jobs are part-time, low paid and casual. Full-time jobs are hard to find, and those who cannot find them compete with school and university students who want part-time work. Moreover, many teenagers are forced to look for several part-time jobs to make ends meet. Competition from married women in some segment intensifies the competition further. Possible explanations for these findings along with implications for youths are explored in the paper.

## **Introduction**

The evolving structure of the Australian labour market has impacted largely on those at each end of the age distribution. Older workers are leaving the labour market at increasingly younger ages (Peetz, 2005), while young workers face a limited demand for their labour, and are forced to either be unemployed or to accept unsatisfactory jobs (Campbell, 2000). These two groups of workers have much in common, particularly since many of the older workers at the end of their career are likely to be the parents of those teenagers struggling to gain a foothold in the labour market. Although the parents of today's teenagers are likely to have left the labour market by the time they are 60, teenagers face considerable difficulties in finding good jobs and therefore there is no sense in which teenagers can inherit the jobs left vacant by their parents' or grandparents' generations.

These young workers, born in the second half of the 1980's, make up the 15-19 year old age bracket. They comprise generation 'Y', the 'echo boomers', 'nexters' and/or 'millennials' (Zemke, Raines and Filipeczak, 2000). 'Nexters' are said to bring a unique set of skills and attitudes to the workforce and they tend to have a different (although not homogenous) experience of work than older workers (Loughlin and Barling, 2001). Many claim that they will also have a profound influence on our future labour force and associated labour institutions.

For example some commentators argue that having seen their parents suffer the dramatic workplace changes of the 90's, the new generation of employees is insisting on better working conditions and safe, high quality work (Zemke et al., 2000). Today's teenagers are also said to be the most well educated generation to enter the workforce and as such they are comfortable with technology and a global, 24-hour society and they embrace diversity in the workplace. Given these arguments it seems reasonable to expect current adolescent workers to have a more positive experience of youth employment than those before them.

This expectation certainly seems to fit with the positive views of parents towards teenage employment. Evidence suggests that parents and teachers are generally in favour of adolescent work as they believe that, among other things, it fosters development of personal and social responsibility and eases the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Cooper and Rothstein, 1995).

These beliefs seem out of step, however, with evidence on the actual experiences of adolescents in the workforce. These workers tend to be located in 'poor quality' service sector employment that is said to be insecure, low paying, mostly part time, largely routine and alienating (Wooden and VanDenHeavel, 1999). Most of the international data also indicates that adolescents face adverse working conditions that involve stress and danger resulting in a higher incidence of injury compared with adults (Salminen, 1996). Indeed young workers are at the highest risk of lost time injuries compared to all other workers (Depre, 2000).

It is difficult to explain the disparity between the positive views of parents and other commentators towards adolescent employment and the realities of today's youth labour market. One plausible explanation is that parents and policy makers are using their own experience of adolescent employment as an anchor to judge the quality and safety of children's employment, as they are unaware of differences between their own work experiences and those of today's teenagers.

Brooks and Davis (1996), who found that parents were unaware of differences in the hazards and risks teenagers are exposed to, provide support for this notion in regards to parents. As for other commentators, several state governments have initiated reviews of child labour (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, 2004; Victorian Government, 2001), which suggests some acknowledgement that the teenage labour market has changed and legislation may not adequately protect these workers. These reviews, however, are hampered by a lack of research and statistics on child and adolescent labour, which make it difficult to gain an accurate picture of their employment (Job Watch, 2002; Mayhew, 2005).

It is for these reasons that we think it is worthwhile to consider in detail the employment situation that today's teenagers are forced to face and to make comparisons between their employment profile and that of the previous generation. The contention of the paper is that the youth labour market has deteriorated over the last three decades and is now much less favourable than that which faced the parents of today's teenagers. We examine this argument using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The next section provides an introduction to the cohort under examination and outline of our approach to the data. Following this direct comparisons are made between the labour market profiles of two age groups along with possible explanations for some of the findings. The final section draws together implications of the findings for today's youth labour market.

### **Sample and Data**

The situation of today's teenagers, and the changes that have been wrought in the labour market, can be seen by comparing the labour market experiences of teenagers with those of their parents' generation. In order to do this it is first necessary to identify a typical cohort of parents. This is not easy because the parents of the cohort, which is aged 15-19 at present, cover a wide range of ages. The mothers of 15 year olds could be as young as 31, at one extreme, while mothers of 19 year olds could be as old as 69, at the other extreme. If we use the mid range of these ages, namely 50, we have women who were born in 1954, and thus aged 15-19 between 1969 and 1973. The data from the 1971 Census are therefore a useful snapshot of these women in the middle of this age group. The fathers may be slightly older in some cases but again the 1971 Census should be a fair representation of them as teenagers too. Most data for 15-19 year olds trend across the census years and the data for 1971 would be a reasonable approximation of the average for most measures. That year coincided with a population census thus we have excellent data for most measures.

In this paper, data for 15-19 year olds from 1971 are compared with the data for the same age group in 2003. Data for 2003 are from the *Labour Force Survey* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003) while data for 1971 are from the five-yearly population census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1972). In some cases where data for 1971 are not available, we have used data from the *Labour Force Survey* (Australian Bureau of Statistics) or other comparable data. Given that we are attempting to characterise a very broad cohort, the use of data from 1961, 1974 and 1976 as well as 1971, does little damage to the overall picture.

### The Changing Teenage Labour Market

Looking at Table 1, the teenagers who were 15-19 years old at the beginning of the Millennium were a smaller proportion of the population compared with their parents. In 1971, 15-19 year olds were 8.6 percent of the total population, but by 2001 they comprised only 7 percent. They were also more likely to be students and less inclined to be married. The proportion of students among 15-19 year olds was approximately 30 to 35 percent in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By 2003 the proportion had doubled to 67 percent. Around the debut of the 1970s, students were more likely to be male whereas now they are more likely to be female.

**Table 1. Labour market experience: persons 15-19: 1971 and 2003 (%)**

	1971			2003		
	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons
Share of population	8.9	8.4	8.6	7.2(a)	6.7(a)	7.0(a)
Share of labour force	8.7	16.7	11.2	7.5	9.3	8.3
Labour force participation rate	55.7	52.1	53.9	60.4	63.2	61.7
Students %	34.2(b)	31.4(b)	32.9(b)	63.6	70.9	67.2
Married	1.4	8.7	5.0	0.1	0.5	0.3

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics: 1971 Census; The Labour Force, February 2003 (6203.0); Marriages and Divorces, November, 2003 (3310.0).

(a) 2001

(b) Average of 1961 and 1976

The increasing proportion of female students is linked to other social changes such as much later ages of marriage and first childbirth. The proportion of 15-19 year olds who were married was 5 percent in 1971 (the rate for females was much higher than for males), but was only 0.3 percent in 2003. The reduced marriage rate for teenagers reflected changed views about marriage, but it also reflected other factors, such as increased housing costs, worsened social security systems, increasing consumption levels and changes in the labour market.

Teenagers have become a smaller proportion of the male labour force, but almost halved their share of the female labour force. The drop in the share of the male labour force – a little over one percentage point – is due to the reduced share of teenagers in the population offset by the increase in teenage male participation rates. The reduced teenage share of the female labour force is due to both these same factors but the largest amount of the drop – more than eight percentage points is due to the increased participation of older women.

In 1971 teenage males were more inclined to be in the labour force than females, but to have a lower rate of unemployment. Much of the difference can be attributed to females being more likely to be married, possibly with a young child. By 2003 the situation had reversed; females had higher participation rates and the lower rate of unemployment. This despite females being more inclined to be students. One major change has been the decline of traditional male jobs in the manufacturing sector and the growth of services sector jobs, which are constructed more often as female jobs. Unfortunately official data do not tell us anything further about these teenagers; perhaps male students were less inclined to be in the labour force or, given the higher male unemployment rates, more inclined to be discouraged workers. A further possibility is that teenage females, who may be employed where pay rates are lower, have to work more to obtain the same basic income.

The period since 1971 has seen a substantial change in the industrial structure. Industries such as manufacturing and agriculture that employed young workers, have declined and this has also affected the demand for education. Jobs in the expanding sectors, such as finance and business services required more schooling. Consequently, boys have stayed at school longer, and school retention rates for girls, which had previously been lower, caught up with and exceeded the boys' rates. The increased output of teenagers with a complete high school education, and a substantially increased output of university graduates, produced a very different labour market for young workers. Jobs that had previously been available to teenagers with perhaps only 10 years of schooling, such as apprenticeships and basic clerical positions, began to be reserved for people with 12 years of schooling or a university degree.

While there is more pressure for teenagers to continue to university, this is a financially less attractive option than it had been in the past. Among their parents who attended university, the younger ones received free tuition (between 1973 and 1989). While the older ones may have had to pay fees, they had a good chance of obtaining a government funded scholarship. Now students face increasing tuition costs, and unless their parents are on very low incomes, are reliant on their parents for financial support until they are 25. Given how difficult it is for all except the wealthiest parents to support their teenage children, especially if they are unable to live at home, students face a substantial financial burden, which can only be borne by working a considerable number of hours a week while they study.

The labour market for teenagers thus comprises four distinct segments: teenagers who want full-time jobs that might be the beginning of their career, tertiary students who want full-time work while they study, school and university students who are seeking part-time work on a full year basis to provide living expenses and pocket money, and other school and university students who want full-time work in the vacation periods.

This is in contrast to their parents' generation that did not normally have part-time work while at school or university but may have worked in full-time jobs, particularly seasonal jobs, in the vacation periods. The parents of teenagers had faced a much more accommodating labour market. The unemployment rate in 1971 was only 1.7 percent whereas the rate today is more than four times as high (Table 1).

A fundamental change to the labour market since the 1960s has been the growth of part-time employment. Data on part-time employment is in Table 2. Part-time employment had always been a possibility, but it developed in the 1960s as a response to labour shortages and the need to conscript women who had child-care responsibilities. It developed particularly in the new service industries where temporal patterns of demand made part-time employment a cost-effective option for employers. This has played a key role in increasing the labour force participation of married women, whose participation rates increased from 33 percent in 1971 to 59 percent in 2003 (Table 3).

**Table 2. Part-time labour market experience: persons 15-19: 1971 (1974) and 2003 (%)**

	1971			2003		
	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons
Full-time participation rate			49.0	26.9	15.4	21.2
Part-time participation rate			5.0	33.5	47.8	40.5
Proportion part-time			9.0	55.4	75.6	65.6
Proportion part-time: all ages			1971 9.6	14.0	45.0	27.8
	1974	1974	1974			
	3.4	22.4	10.8			

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics: 1971 Census; The Labour Force, May 1974 and February 2003 (6203.0); The Labour Force Australia: Historical Survey, 1966 to 1984 (6204.0).

**Table 3. Labour force participation: Females: 1971 and 2003 (%)**

Age	1971		2003	
	Married	All females	Married	All females
45-54	36.1	40.0	74.7	74.3
55-59	23.2	28.3	50.8	51.7
60-64	12.0	16.0	27.9	26.6
65+	3.6	4.2	4.4	3.2
15 and over	32.8	37.1	58.7	56.8

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics: 1971 Census; The Labour Force, February 2003 (6203.0).

The increases in part-time employment are more marked among older married women – those who are likely to be teenagers’ mothers. As Table 3 shows, the participation rates for women aged 45-54 almost doubled over that period; from 40 percent to 74 percent. The majority of married women in that age-group work full-time (57 percent), however, whereas women in the age-groups 35-44 and 55-59 are more inclined to work part-time (53 percent and 55 percent respectively) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). These women compete with teenagers for part-time jobs in many segments of the labour market.

**Table 4. Unemployment 15-19: 1971 (1974) and 2003 (%)**

	1971			2003		
	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons
Unemployment rate	3.8	4.1	3.9	19.0	16.2	17.6
Unemployment rate all ages	1.5	2.1	1.7	6.7	6.7	6.7
Full-time unemployment rate all ages	1974	1974	1974	6.7	6.7	6.7
	2.7	4.9	3.3			
Part-time unemployment rate all ages	1974	1974	1974	8.3	5.2	6.1
	7.7	3.3	4.1			

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics: 1971 Census; The Labour Force, May 1974 and February 2003 (6203.0). The Labour Force Australia: Historical Survey, 1966 to 1984 (6204.0).

Despite the higher proportion of students, labour force participation rates for teenagers are now higher: 61 percent in 2003 compared with 54 percent in 1971, and the rates for males and females have become almost equal. This increase in participation is entirely in the part-time labour force. The participation rate for 15-19 year olds in the part-time labour force has increased from 5 percent to 41 percent, while the full-time participation rate has fallen from 49 percent to 21 percent.

The higher rate of labour force participation by teenagers in a period of higher overall unemployment has meant higher rates of teenage unemployment. In 1971 the unemployment rate for 15-19 year olds was less than 4 percent compared with 17.6 percent in 2003 (Table 4).

When teenagers are employed, they work in a different range of occupations than their parents had. This is due to a number of factors: technical change which has displaced some occupations and created others, jobs that teenagers did being reconstructed as adult jobs, and part-time work being concentrated in certain sectors where the hours match the availability of teenage labour. Some jobs which had employed female teenagers in the 1960s such as telephone operator hardly exist, while new jobs such as call-centre worker tend to be given to older workers. On the other hand, the fast food industry where teenagers provide much of the demand tends to have its peak periods of activity in the hours when teenagers are available for work.

Tables 5 and 6 provide data on employment by industry. The codes used in 1971 and 2003 are different, reflecting the changing structure of industries, however the data can be read to give a comparative picture. In 1971, teenagers employment differed from that of the total labour force but there were no large differences; the greatest being an over representation of teenagers in wholesale and retail trade (which included restaurants), finance and business services and an under representation in agriculture. By 2003, more than half the teenage labour force was employed in retail trade or accommodation, cafes and restaurants, with small numbers in all industries except construction and manufacturing. The difference partly represents the transformation of the teenage labour force itself to a part-time one, but it also reflects a limited range of opportunities in other sectors.

**Table 5. Distribution of labour force by industry: 1971 (%)**

Industry	15-19	All ages
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	4.7	7.4
Mining	0.9	1.5
Manufacturing	20.9	23.2
Electricity, Gas and Water Supply	1.3	1.7
Construction	6.4	7.9
Wholesale and retail Trade	26.2	18.9
Transport and Storage	3.0	5.2
Communication Services	2.4	2.0
Finance, business services etc	11.7	6.9
Government Administration and Defence	5.9	5.4
Community services	7.8	10.8
Entertainment recreation	5.0	5.1
Other and NS	3.8	4.1
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics: 1971 Census.

**Table 6. Distribution of labour force by industry: 2003 (%)**

Industry	15-19	All ages
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	3.2	3.7
Mining	0.2	1.0
Manufacturing	6.5	12.0
Electricity, Gas and Water Supply	0.1	0.8
Construction	6.2	8.1
Wholesale Trade	2.0	4.8
Retail Trade	50.5	15.4
Accommodation, Cafes and Restaurants	10.1	4.8
Transport and Storage	1.5	4.3
Communication Services	0.4	1.9
Finance and Insurance	1.7	3.9
Property and Business Services	4.8	11.3
Government Administration and Defence	1.3	4.7
Education	1.4	6.8
Health and Community Services	3.3	9.8
Cultural and Recreational Services	3.4	2.4
Personal and Other Services	3.5	4.2
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics: The Labour Force, February 2003 (6203.0)

Looking at the occupational data in Tables 7 and 8, it is evident that the occupational distribution has changed along with the changes in industry and changing technologies. Despite different codes being used in 1971 and 2003, it is still clear that in 1971 a third of teenagers were craftsmen, production workers or labourers. By 2003 two out of five were elementary clerical, sales and service workers.

**Table 7. Distribution of labour force by occupation: 1971 (%)**

Occupation	15-19	All ages
Professional/technical	5.7	10.2
Administrative, executive, managerial	0.2	6.7
Clerical	29.1	15.8
Sales	11.9	8.1
Farmers hunters etc	5.0	7.7
Miners	0.3	0.6
Transport and Communications	3.0	5.5
Craftsmen, Production workers and labourers	32.5	32.1
Service, sport and rec	6.1	7.4
Armed forces	1.7	1.2
Inadequately described	4.4	4.6
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics: 1971 Census.

**Table 8. Distribution of labour force by occupation: 2003 (%)**

Occupation	15-19	All ages
Managers and Administrators	0.5	7.0
Professionals	1.8	18.5
Associate Professionals	2.4	12.4
Tradespersons and Related Workers	13.1	12.8
Advanced Clerical and Service Workers	0.6	4.1
Intermediate Clerical, Sales and Service Workers	17.1	17.4
Intermediate Production and Transport Workers	6.8	8.6
Elementary Clerical, Sales and Service Workers	40.5	10.0
Labourers and Related Workers	17.2	9.2
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics: The Labour Force, February 2003 (6203.0).

## Discussion

The examination above highlighted the fundamentally different labour market for teenagers in the current period compared with their parents' time as teenagers. A byproduct of that discussion was to show how the teenage labour market differs from that for older workers: teenagers are mainly students; despite this, they have participation rates that compare with the total of population; teenage females have participation rates that are higher than the rate for all females; the majority of teenage workers are in the part-time labour force; they mainly work in the retail and hospitality sector where they are production, transport, clerical sales or service workers; and they have higher rates of unemployment than other workers.

These four segments of teenage labour face a highly competitive labour market. The examination showed that students tend to be in competition with one another in a narrow range of occupations and industries. They are likely to compete with married women for many of the part-time jobs, and with other teenagers too. Teenagers who leave school before

year 12, or even after year 12 without going on to further study, and likely to fail in their bid to secure full-time work, and thus they will compete with students for part-time positions.

The result of this highly segmented, but competitive teenage labour market is that teenagers are disadvantaged in terms of labour market outcomes in two main ways. First, teenagers who face insecure employment, a high risk of unemployment, and limited access to social security benefits, are a ready source of low paid labour. Second as we have noted, most teenagers work part-time and one of the features of part-time employment in Australia is that it is frequently casual employment. That is to say the worker is employed, more or less with a new contract each day. Furthermore, they have no entitlement to sick leave, bereavement leave, maternity leave or holiday pay. They can be dismissed at will. They do receive a higher rate of award wages to compensate for these things (in the order of 23 percent), but in many of the occupations or industries where teenagers work, virtually all workers are casual and the relevant award wage with casual loading is the going rate and, is generally very low. Furthermore, with the growth of individual enterprise agreements, only a minority of casual employees receive a loading (Burgess and Campbell, 1998: 43). Some jurisdictions in Australia have moved to give some rights to casual employees but these remain unavailable to most teenagers. Should an employer wish to dismiss a teenager, they need not do anything, except stop calling them in for work.

Part time and casual workers are also rarely invited to meetings or provided with training, other than the basics that they need to do their job (Brosnan et al., 1996). As such there is little opportunity for the development of skills that have long term relevance (Spierings, 1998). It is no wonder that researchers consistently conclude that casual workers have more in common with the unemployed than with ongoing workers (Parliamentary Library, 2004). The casual nature of the employment also limits the likelihood that teenagers will be represented by unions or in workplace forums, which is likely to contribute further to the poor working conditions (Watts, 1998).

Thus, it is easy to see how teenage students can become locked in a vicious circle. As long as large numbers of teenagers are unemployed, they remain available for low paid, precarious work. Being low paid, the teenagers have to work longer hours to meet target income needs. These pressures to work interfere with students' studies. This may lead to failure and they remain trapped in the student labour market for longer, adding to the reserve army of students and reducing conditions further by intensifying competition in the part-time labour market.

Such negative labour market outcomes further weaken the position of teenagers as employees should they obtain employment. As such their position in the labour market is less favourable than that experienced by their parents as teenagers and the types of work they perform is less likely to assist them with obtaining a worthwhile, secure, full time position. Furthermore, difficulties in obtaining employment, experience and training are likely to continue to disadvantage teenagers as they enter adulthood. These difficulties may also explain why teenage jobs are consistently characterised as scoring badly on measures of occupational health and safety, and are likely to be the site of harassment or bullying (Mayhew and Quinlan, 2002).

In summary this paper has highlighted the ways in which the labour market has changed over the last decades to the detriment of teenagers. Today's teenagers face a limited and highly competitive labour market where most jobs are part-time, low paid and casual. Full-time jobs are hard to find, and those who cannot find them compete with school and university students who want part-time work. Moreover, many teenagers are forced to look for several part-time jobs to make ends meet. Competition from married women in some segments intensifies the competition further.

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