

BULLETIN

Exploring Long Distance Weekly Commuting

Introduction

The 1980s and 1990s have seen a variety of important changes in the manner in which family and working lives are being co-ordinated in Britain. The dramatic rise in female participation rates, particularly for women employed in the higher professional and managerial categories, has led to a significant increase in the number of dual-career couples who are trying to balance two career paths (Green, 1995)¹.

The process of balancing two careers can be extremely difficult, particularly if one person's chosen occupation tends to be geographically constrained to a particular area. Couples who had been managing careers in the same local area may be forced to reassess their position if one partner is made redundant and cannot find suitable employment close to the family home. Likewise, career advancement may mean changing locations. Both scenarios can lead to one partner becoming a long distance weekly commuter where one person works and lives at some distance from the family home during the week, returning to the family fold at the weekend.

A study undertaken in the late 1980s by Hogarth and Daniel (1988)² highlighted the growth of long distance weekly commuters amongst middle class households in the north-east of England: faced with poor job opportunities in their home region, these individuals took jobs in London and the South East. The depressed nature of the labour and housing markets in the north-east at the time meant that it was not feasible for these people to 'up sticks' and move to London due to house price differentials.

Changes in economic circumstances, the significant narrowing of housing and labour market spatial inequalities, the increase in dual career households and other changes in family and working life suggested it was an appropriate time to undertake new research on long distance weekly commuting in order to determine the extent to which individuals were part of dual location households.

This Bulletin presents the results of research carried out by the Institute for Employment Research into the phenomenon of long distance weekly commuting³. It presents findings from interviews undertaken with the long distance weekly commuters and highlights the reasons why they began this arduous lifestyle and the extent to which they considered it sustainable over the longer term.

The Sample of Long Distance Weekly Commuters

115 long distance weekly commuters were identified during May and June 1997 on trains and coaches leaving London on Friday afternoon/evening and returning early Monday morning. From this sample 25 people were selected for case-study, in-depth interviews. Key characteristics of sample members are:

- The majority of long distance weekly commuters identified were men who were in their mid 40s, married (or living as such), and working in the higher occupational categories with average earnings of £46,000.

- 16 of the partners of the long distance weekly commuters were in employment: 9 worked full-time and 7 part-time. Less than half the commuters surveyed were in dual career households.
- In certain instances the partner of the commuter had altered their working life (i.e. becoming part-time or ceasing to work) in order to cope with the new running needs of the household.

Why become a long distance weekly commuter?

The decision to become a long distance weekly commuter is likely to involve a series of personal, social and financial trade-offs with push and pull factors often working in tandem. The 25 people involved in the case studies were asked to identify why they had become long distance weekly commuters.

- 12 respondents highlighted the prestigious nature of the job offer or the chance for promotion;
- 7 respondents noted that it was the only work available following redundancy;
- 3 respondents had decided to locate their family home in a remote rural area – irrespective of the availability of employment opportunities locally; and
- 3 respondents noted it was because they were on secondment.

The survey revealed that the commuters had in the main started the lifestyle due to ‘pull factors’ associated either with the career advancement proffered by the job or the pull of aesthetic rural areas. ‘Push factors’ were also important too, with 1 in 4 respondents stating that redundancy was the reason they had taken job away from their home area. It was evident that there was a clear distinction between those people who were attracted to the lifestyle and those who considered they had no other option but to work away from home in the week in order to secure employment and maintain the family income.

Flexible working practices⁴

On the whole the respondents enjoyed flexible working arrangements with the majority of people being able to leave early on a Friday and not return to their office until mid morning on Monday. Only 3 respondents reported that they had no flexibility in their working hours as their jobs were very structured (i.e. teaching). The respondents were at relatively senior levels and as such could fix their

own working hours; as employers were generally not concerned what hours they were physically in the office as long as the work was completed. Any ‘shaving off’ of working hours in order to expand the weekend was usually made up for by the long hours that people worked during their working week. In this way, respondents considered that they could maximise the quality of their ‘family-time’ and their ‘working-time’.

A selection of respondents had begun experimenting with flexible working arrangements in order to allow them to spend more time in the family home. These arrangements were largely facilitated by developments in information technology which allow people to be remotely connected to the office and work from home. Other people had arranged their work schedules so that they could return home for an evening during the week.

Where tele-commuting had been tried as an option to reduce the time spent away from the home the consensus was that it was not really a satisfactory answer – except on an occasional or part-time basis – as people felt too detached from work and missed the social aspects of working alongside colleagues.

The research also uncovered a group of people who were ‘partial’ long distance weekly commuters in that they lived away from home during half the week and worked from home during the rest (69 people were identified). This finding reflects the growing complexity of many people’s working lives as they try to balance working and family commitments.

The cost and benefits of living a long distance weekly commuter existence

All the respondents noted that there were both costs and benefits to working away from the family home during the week. The precise nature and strength of these costs and benefits were individually – and household – specific. The case studies revealed that there were those people who actually enjoyed the lifestyle and those who merely endured it. Overall, the main benefits of the lifestyle were related to monetary reward, career development and feelings of self-fulfilment, whilst the main disadvantages were generally perceived to be social and emotional.

The survey sought to try to identify the extent to which the costs and benefits accruing to individuals differed depending on their rationale for becoming commuters. Those respondents who had been attracted to long distance weekly commuting because of the career opportunities it afforded or because they wanted to locate their family home in an aesthetic rural area were most likely to see the benefits of the lifestyle. These benefits

were driven in the main by the attributes of the job. These include:

- the additional financial rewards accrued;
- the prestige attached to the position; and
- the sense of personal fulfilment engendered.

Another commonly cited plus amongst this group was the fact that the lifestyle allowed them to completely immerse themselves in their work during the week without the distractions of family commitments. By concentrating all their energies into work during the week, respondents considered they could wholly concentrate on family activities during the weekend. The compartmentalising of family and work roles was seen as a positive attribute of the long distance weekly commuting lifestyle as respondents commented how work had previously intruded into the weekend, eroding the quality of time the family spent together.

The main costs of the lifestyle for this group of were:

- the lack of intimacy and companionship usually associated with continually cohabiting;
- a diminishing quality of relationship with children;
- loosening of social ties and activities in home area; and
- feeling physically exhausting due to the travelling and the fact that people had to switch modes from being 'selfish dedicated employee' to being a 'selfless family person'.

Overall, however the personal benefits of the lifestyle outweighed the losses and this group of commuters found the lifestyle to be positive. These respondents actively chose the lifestyle and therefore were more accommodating of its disadvantages.

Those respondents who considered that they had no option but to live away from home during the week to secure employment held different views about the pros and cons of the lifestyle. These respondents had been 'pushed' into the lifestyle and were using long distance weekly commuting as a 'stop-gap' in order re-engage themselves with the labour market, or because they were on secondment. These respondents were therefore more likely to hold fatalistic views about long distance weekly commuting as they considered themselves constrained by lack of choice. The main advantages cited by the respondents was that long distance weekly commuting:

- allowed them to have and maintain a good standard of living; and
- those individuals who were long distance weekly commuting due to secondment considered that it was a necessary evil which would facilitate their career development.

The net costs of the lifestyle were clearly more severely felt by this group and it is clear that the general opinion was that the costs outweighed the benefits. This group of commuters were persevering with working away from home until a more suitable opportunity became available nearer to their homes.

The main costs associated with their weekly absences were that they missed their family and the social activities they pursued when living continually at home. These costs appeared more acute when young children were involved and certain respondents said they tried to over-compensate at the weekend for their absences during the week. These respondents also noted the fact that this lifestyle was physically exhausting.

Is long distance weekly commuting sustainable?

Clearly, the rationale 'pushing' or 'pulling' people into the decision to initiate long distance weekly commuting affects the manner in which the commuter approaches and copes with their absences from the family home during the week. Perhaps understandably those long distance weekly commuters who had been to some extent forced into the lifestyle through redundancy were more resentful of the way working life had eaten into their family life. Those respondents who were positive at the onset of their weekly commuting were more accepting of their absences from the family home.

The available evidence suggests that long distance weekly commuting is not purely a temporary phenomenon – a transitional phase after which the family home is relocated nearer to work:

- At the time of the interview, the shortest duration a respondent had been undertaking the lifestyle was 6 months whilst the longest was 12 years;
- 16 out of 25 case study commuters had been pursuing the lifestyle for more than two years; and
- 11 had been living away from home for more than 4 years.

Despite the longevity with which many commuters had been pursuing the lifestyle all the respondents cited at

least some disadvantages of living away from the family home. The next question to consider, therefore, is the extent to which individuals consider the lifestyle sustainable. When respondents were asked whether they envisaged continuing the lifestyle the following answers were provided:

- just under half of the commuters thought that the lifestyle was sustainable over the longer term;
- a quarter of respondents considered it totally unsustainable; and
- the remainder either thought that the lifestyle was suitable for a few years or were in the process of relocating their families nearer their place of work.

Hence, the interviewees in the main believed the lifestyle to be sustainable. They recognised the disadvantages but believed it provided the financial means to fulfil a standard of living not otherwise available. Some commuters had considered relocating their families nearer to their place of work, with one household actually in the process of relocating. It became evident that formidable barriers needed to be overcome before people were willing to relocate. These included the fact that:

- their families disliked London as a place to live;
- they had well established kinship and social networks where they currently lived; and
- they could not afford to buy a comparable place to live in London and the south-east.

Implications

Long distance weekly commuting is a well established way of live for a small, but growing, number of people in the labour force. The lifestyle obviously involves significant trade-offs for all family members who devise various coping strategies to deal with the interruption to 'typical' family life.

In general the interviews with commuters identified the fact that those individuals who actively sought to take a job in London, which separated them from their family during the week, were content to continue in the lifestyle perhaps permanently. Long distance weekly commuting

provided these people with a highly paid job in London which typically gave them a sense of personal satisfaction they were unable to find in positions near to the family home.

Conversely, those individuals forced into the lifestyle in order to re-engage with the labour market were merely coping with the lifestyle until something suitable near to home became available. These people had no intention of moving their families to London or the south-east as they were waiting for an opportunity to take work in the vicinity of their family home.

This Bulletin has concentrated specifically on the views of the commuter. This research into long distance weekly commuting has produced indicative evidence concerning the increasingly complex, diverse manner in which individuals and households combine family and working lives. Interviews were also undertaken with selected commuters' partners to ascertain their views on being 'home alone' during the week. It is sufficient to note here that in many instances the partner considered that they were the person most disadvantaged by the lifestyle. This was particularly the case when young children were involved as partners often felt like lone parents having to deal with the responsibility for the children alone. This was slightly more likely to be the case amongst those families who were left behind by those people who were positively pursuing the lifestyle rather than by those who had been forced into it.

- ¹ Green, A.E. (1995) The geography of dual career households: a research agenda and selected evidence from selected data sources for Britain, *International Journal of Population Geography*, 1, 29-50
- ² Hogarth, T. and Daniel W.W. (1988) Britain's New Industrial Gypsies: Long Distance Weekly Commuters, PSI, London.
- ³ This Bulletin was drafted by Ruth Shackleton at the Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, 01203 522530. It summarises some of the results from a research project undertaken by Anne Green, Terence Hogarth and Ruth Shackleton at IER entitled 'Adapting to Increased Insecurity: The Growth of Dual Location Households', funded through the Leverhulme Trust (reference F/215/AV).
- ⁴ An employer survey investigating the attitudes towards and the incidence of long distance weekly commuting was conducted as part of this research project, the findings of which can be found in the project report titled: 'Dual Location Households: Long Distance Weekly Commuters', details of which are available through IER.