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The damaging effects of part-time work on women's careers: Can they be avoided?

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Many Australian women expect that part-time work will allow them to fulfil their parenting responsibilities while remaining integrated in the paid labour market. Recent research, based on analysis of the Negotiating the Lifecourse Data (NLC data), suggests that part-time work does not allow women to maintain attachment to their careers (Chalmers and Hill, 2008). The analysis found that women who return to full-time hours of work after periods of part-time work tend to earn less than they did before reducing their hours of work. It appears that the scarring effect of short amounts of part-time work disappears with time. Yet, women forego *all* the earnings growth, or career advancement, that they would have achieved had they stayed in full-time work. These findings pose more questions than they answer. What is it about part-time work that inhibits women's careers? To reduce their hours of work do women have to change jobs or even occupations? The research presented here builds on the Chalmers and Hill analysis in two ways. It increases our understanding of the impact on women's future earnings of different patterns of part-time work. Using the work-history information from the NLC data it determines, for example, whether a woman can avoid the scarring effect of part-time work by delaying parenthood until her career is well established. It also explores the question of whether part-time work is more damaging when it is associated with periods of absences from the paid labour market. Then, exploiting the longitudinal nature of the NLC data it delves into why the various patterns might impact differently on future earnings. It shows which patterns are associated with job changes and occupation changes. For example, are extended periods of part-time work more likely to be associated with movements between occupations and/or jobs? Are women in certain occupations more likely to change jobs when they move from full-time to part-time work?