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## Work killing the family, report says

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AUSTRALIA has emerged as one of the most intensely work-focused countries, but it is creating a human tragedy.

Research has found a strong link between long and unpredictable work hours and the breakdown of family and other relationships.

Australia is the only high-income country in the world that combines very long average working hours with a high level of work at unsocial times - during weeknights and weekends - and a significant proportion of casual employment.

These work patterns are making employees unhealthy, putting relationships under extreme stress, creating angry, inconsistent parents, and reducing the well-being of children, says the report by Relationships Forum Australia, titled *An unexpected tragedy*.

"These associations are evident when either or both parents work atypical schedules, so the timing of fathers', not just mothers', work matters to children," it says.

"Although low-income members of Australian society are generally more keenly affected by these changes, the impact is shared across all strata in our community."

More than 20 per cent of employees work 50 hours or more each week, and more than 30 per cent regularly work on weekends. When these measures of long work hours and weekend

work are combined, Australia ranks as the most work-intense high income country. About 2 million people now lose at least six hours of family time to work on Sunday, and those hours are not fully compensated for during the week.

The trends in working patterns suggest worse is to come, says the report, which draws together a large body of Australian and international research on work and family.

"The cold statistics hide immense human tragedy," the report concludes.

The struggle for many families to balance the demands of work and family has emerged as a hot political issue in many marginal seats. A cluster of work-related issues, including the Government's industrial relations changes and the cost and availability of child care, are set to feature in the federal election.

The report's co-author, Paul Shepanski, a former partner of Boston Consulting Group, said the work patterns that were causing widespread damage to relationships and families had emerged slowly over 30 years.

"The past three decades of prosperity experienced by Australia have come at an unexpected price ... especially in families," he said.

The Relationships Forum, chaired by John Collins, a senior partner in the law firm Clayton Utz, seeks to

promote the importance of relationships as a fundamental ingredient of individual and community well-being.

The report had an independent reference panel that included the former deputy prime minister John Anderson, the former NSW premier Bob Carr, the chief National Party whip, Kay Hull, and Labor's finance spokesman, Lindsay Tanner.

Despite public dissatisfaction about more demanding work patterns, governments have shown little awareness of the link between work and the quality of relationships, the report says.

If the link between working patterns and family disintegration was accepted, it says political leaders should take urgent action to deal with working time issues "to ensure a stable and sustainable society".

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