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Who Cares? Trends in the Gender Division of Care Among Separated Parents

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Acknowledgement of Country

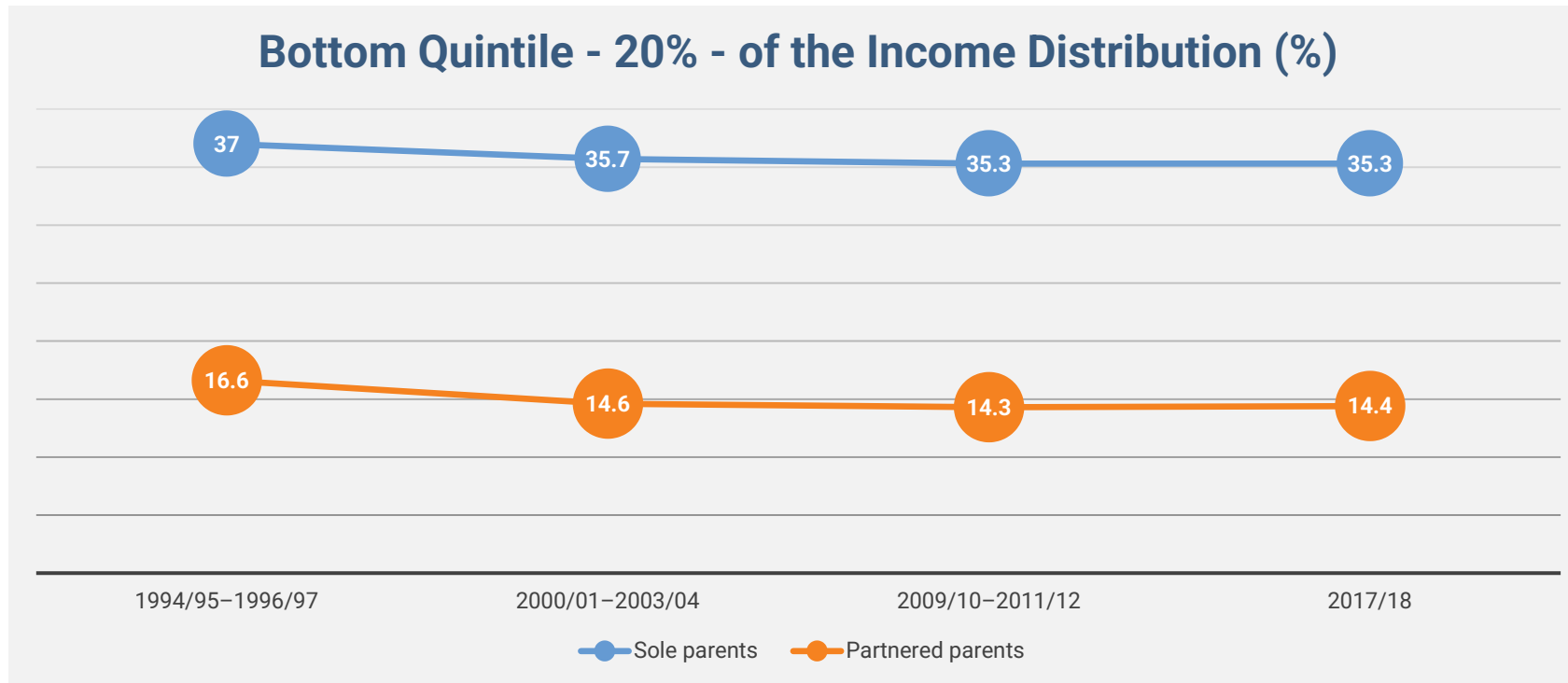
I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which I conducted this research in Meeanjin, and the lands on which we meet today, Narm.

I pay my respect to the both the Yuggera and Turrbul people of Meeanjin and the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples of Narm, and their ancestors and descendants. These lands were never ceded, have long been a place of learning and teaching.

*The Brisbane River
pattern from A
Guidance Through Time
by Casey Coolwell and
Kyra Mancktelow.*



Sole parent families – primarily households headed by women
– are one of Australia's most disadvantaged groups.



Survey of Income and Housing: sole and partnered parents with dependent children aged under 18, 1994/95 to 2017/18

Changing Family Structures in Australia

1 in 3

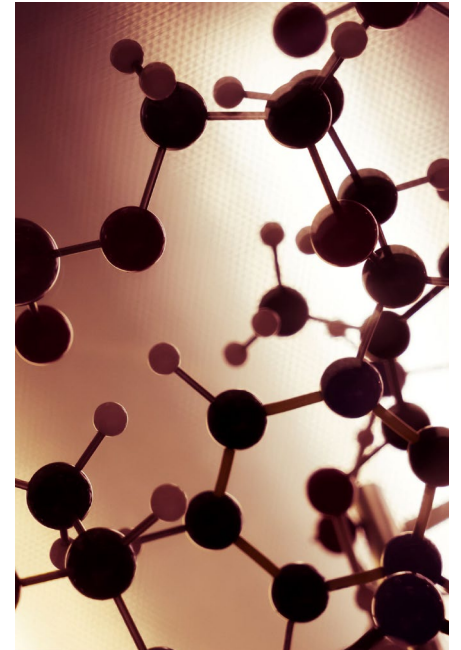
children live outside the traditional coupled mother-father family

22%

of families with dependent children are one-parent families (up from 16% in 1981)

~85%

of one-parent families are headed by mothers



Who Cares?

Social norms around mothers' and fathers' roles are shifting, but how is childcare being shared between parents who no longer live together?



Shared Care - Terminology

Shared care

Joint physical custody

Shared residence

Dual-time residence

Alternating residence

Often used interchangeably

Definitions typically range from 25%–50% of time spent with each parent.

Measures include: overnight stays, task allocation, or decision-making responsibility.

Shared Care in the Literature

Growing international evidence

- Shared care has increased across Western countries, rates vary - from ~40% in Sweden to ~10% in Estonia
- Higher rates linked to legislative support, gender-egalitarian norms and higher parental education

Australian trends

- Gradual rise in shared care from 9% in 2003 to 16% by 2014-15, with steady growth of ~1% per year since (Smyth & Chisholm, 2025)
- More common among high-income parents
- Most children of separated parents still spend the majority of time with their mothers.

Population-level longitudinal evidence on how care arrangements vary over time is limited.

Policy Context: Australian Legislative Reforms 1995–2024

Year	Reform	Key Change
1995	Family Law Reform Act	Shifted from sole custody to shared parental responsibility; emphasised children's relationships with both parents
2006	Shared Parental Responsibility Act	Presumption of equal shared parental responsibility; courts to consider equal/substantial time ($\geq 30\%$ nights); Family Relationship Centres established
2008	Child Support Scheme Reform	$\geq 14\%$ care threshold reduces child support obligations; financial incentives for increased father time reporting
2011	Family Violence Amendment	Child safety takes priority over shared parenting in high-risk cases; moderated earlier strong shared-care assumptions
2024	Family Law Amendment Act 2023	Removed provisions encouraging equal/substantial time; returned to 'best interests of the child' framework (pre-2006 position)

Method: Data and Sample

HILDA Survey, Waves 1-24

Sample A: Prevalence Analysis

- All parents with a resident child under 18 years living at home
- (partnered, re-partnered, and sole parents)

Sample B: Main Analyses

- Biological or adoptive parents with a child under 18 who do not co-reside with the child's other parent
- (partnered, re-partnered, and sole parents)

* HILDA captures data on the youngest child's overnight arrangements only. Sensitivity analyses with varied age cut-offs produced consistent results.

Method: Key Measures

Outcome Variables

% of care - Percentage of nights the youngest child spends with a given separated parent per year (0%–100%)

Levels of Care - Collapsed Services Australia thresholds: Regular care or below (0–34%), Shared care (35–64%), Primary care or more (>65%)

Key Predictor Variables

Gender: mothers / fathers

Partnership status: Married/de facto (with new partner) vs. unpartnered

Income group: Bottom 40% vs. top 60% of income distribution

Age of youngest child: 5 years & under vs. 6 years & over (pre- vs. post-school age)

Method: Analytical Approach

01

Having a Child with a Parent Living Elsewhere

Proportion of all parents with a resident child under 18 whose other parent lives elsewhere, by gender, 2001-2024

02

Zero overnight stays

Proportion of parents (resident and non-resident) reporting zero overnight stays with the other parent: capturing complete absence from overnight care

03

Percentage of nights

Average share of nights per year separated mothers and fathers spend caring for their youngest child

04

Levels of care over time

Distribution of collapsed Services Australia care categories by gender, 2001-2023

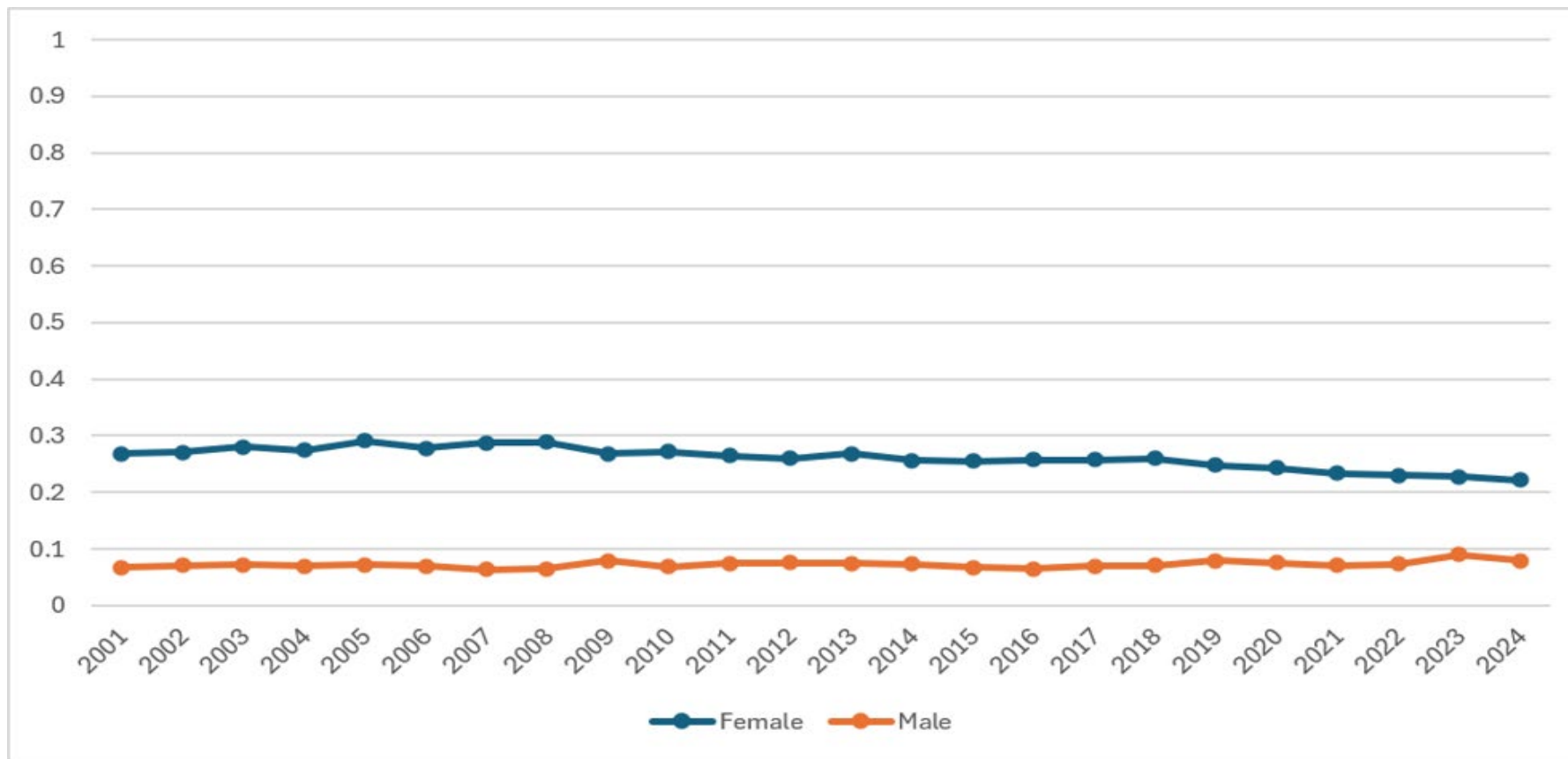
05

Variation by partnership status, income & child age

Stratified analyses by key predictor variables to examine sociodemographic patterns in care arrangements

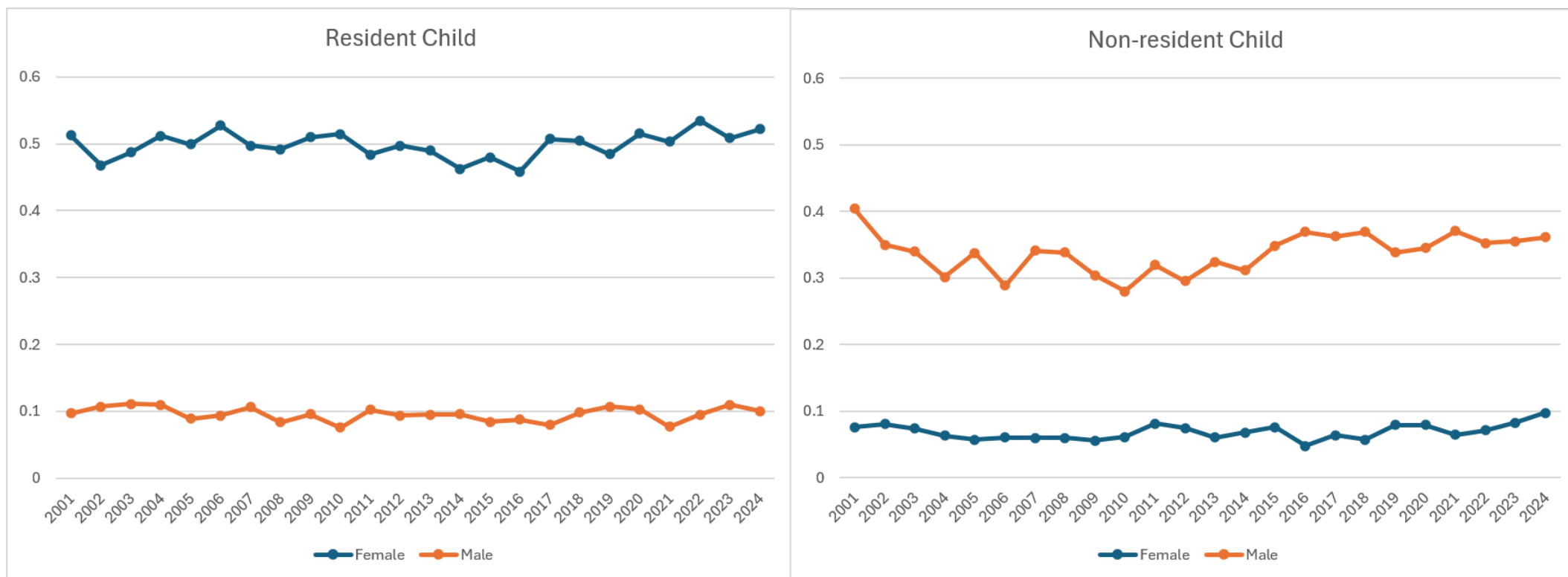
(1) Having a Child with a Parent Living Elsewhere

Figure 1: The proportion of mothers and fathers with a child in the household with a parent living elsewhere, HILDA 2001 – 2024



(2) Zero Overnight Stays

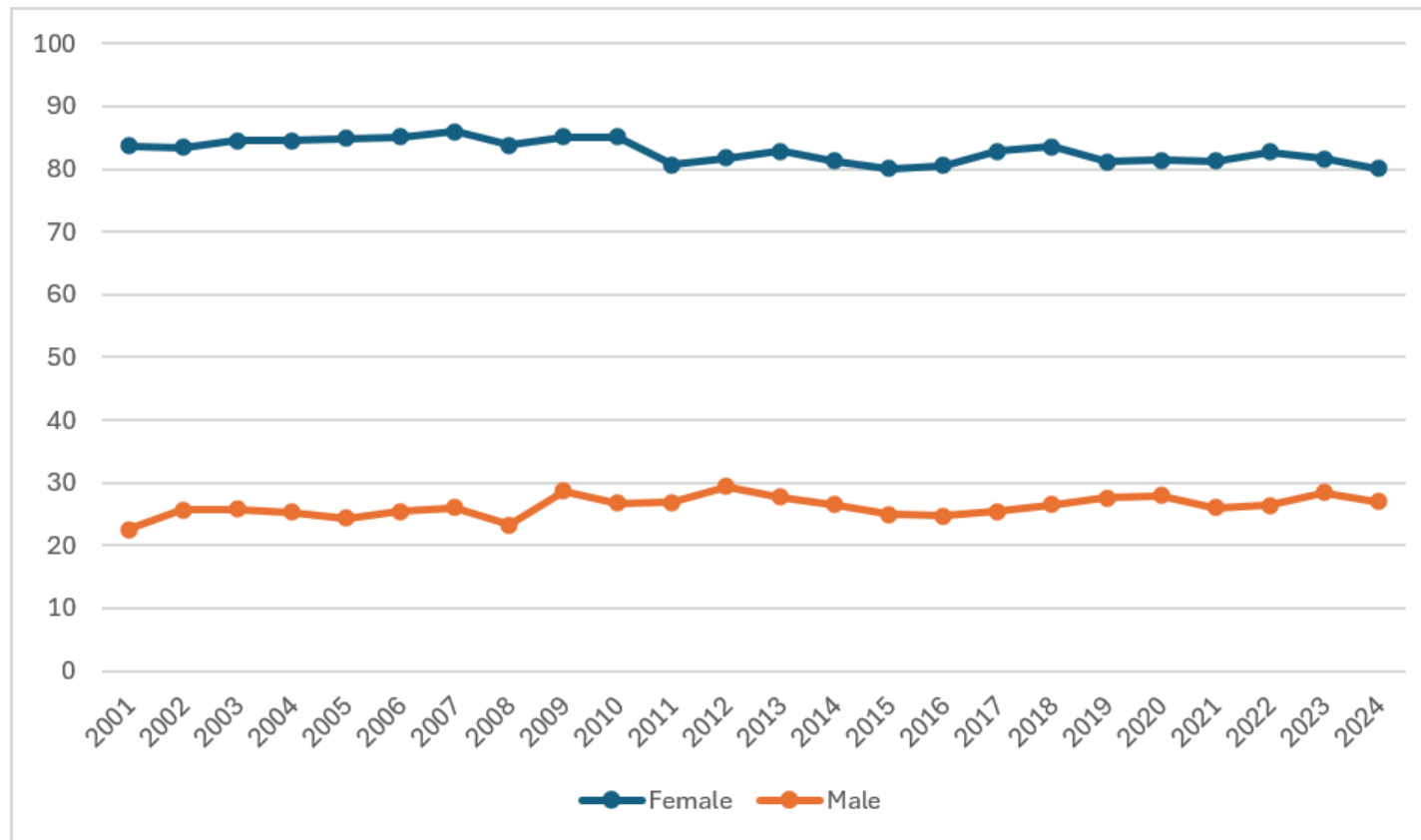
Figure 2: Proportion of parents reporting zero overnight stays, by child residency status, HILDA 2001 - 2024



50% of mothers are effectively raising children with no overnight support from the non-resident father – little change over two decades.

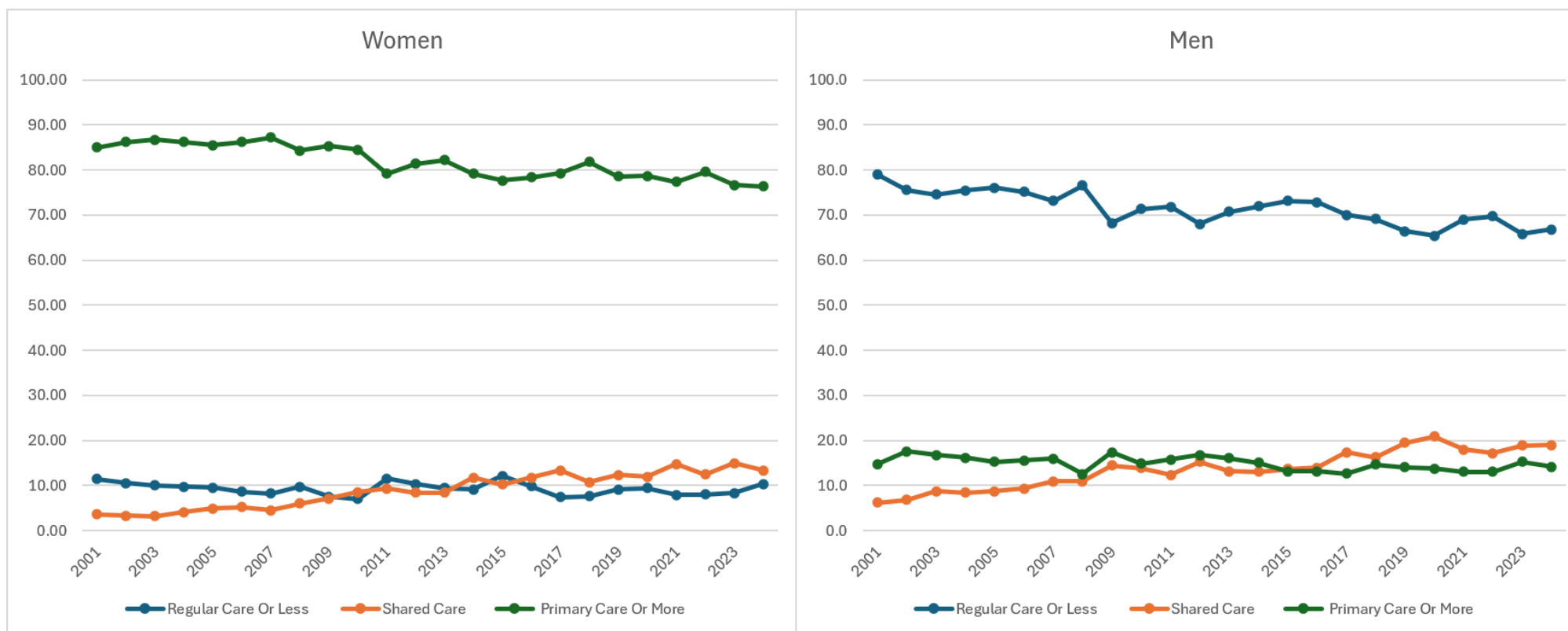
(3) Percentage of Nights per Year

Figure 3: The percentage of nights per year that separated mothers and fathers care for their youngest child, HILDA 2001 - 2024



(4) Levels of Care Over Time

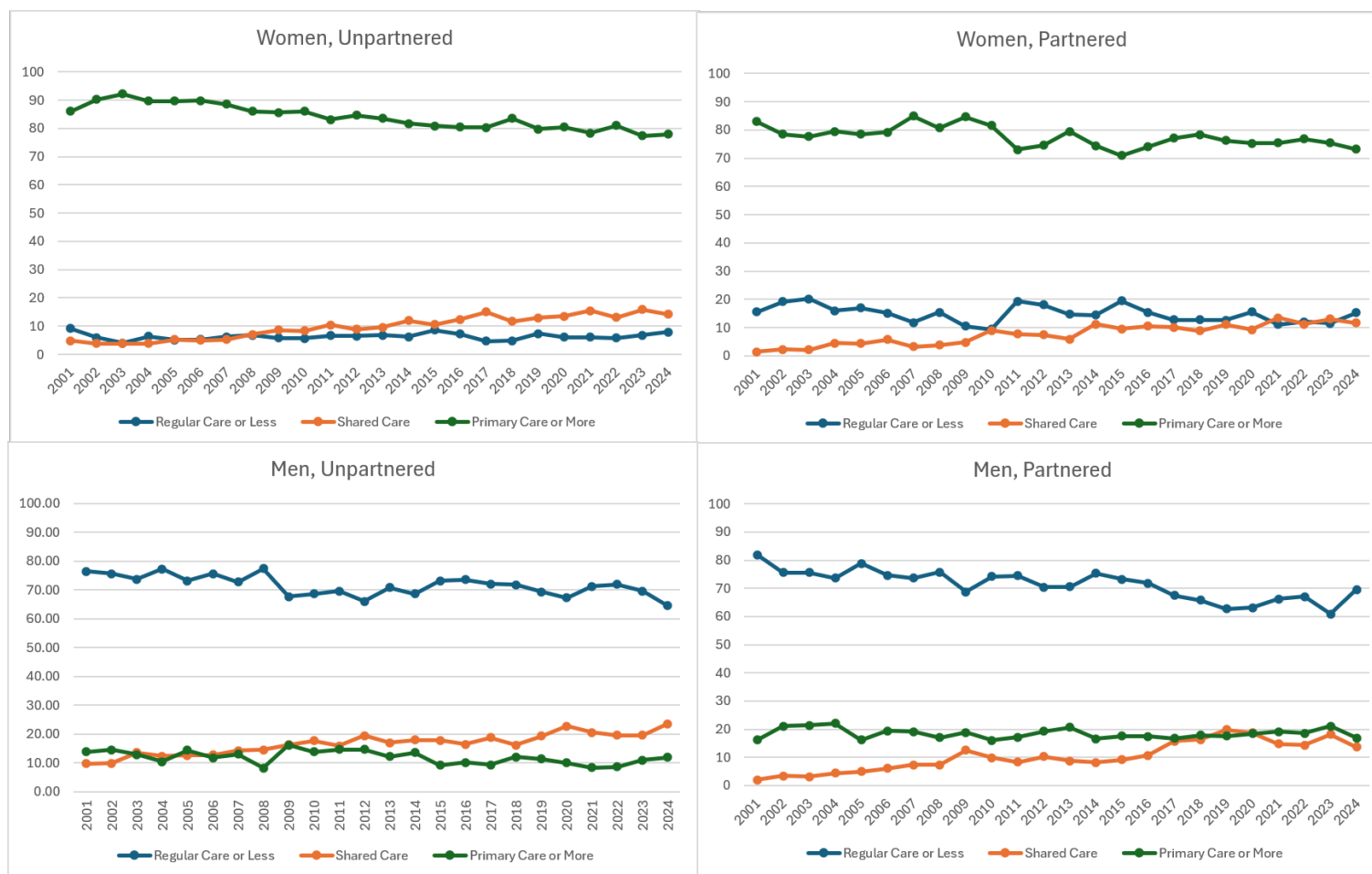
Figure 4: Levels of care of separated mothers' and fathers' youngest child, HILDA 2001 – 2024



⚠ Fathers' reported increases in 2008–09 are not mirrored in mothers' reports – possible financial incentive effect from Child Support Scheme reform.

(5) Levels of Care by Partnership Status

Figure 5: Separated mothers' and fathers' levels of care for their youngest child with a parent living elsewhere, by partnership status, HILDA 2001 - 2024



Mothers: primary care or more is by far the most common, regardless of partnership status

Fathers: majority have regular care or less regardless of status

Partnered fathers more likely to report primary care or more

Unpartnered fathers show higher rates of shared care over time

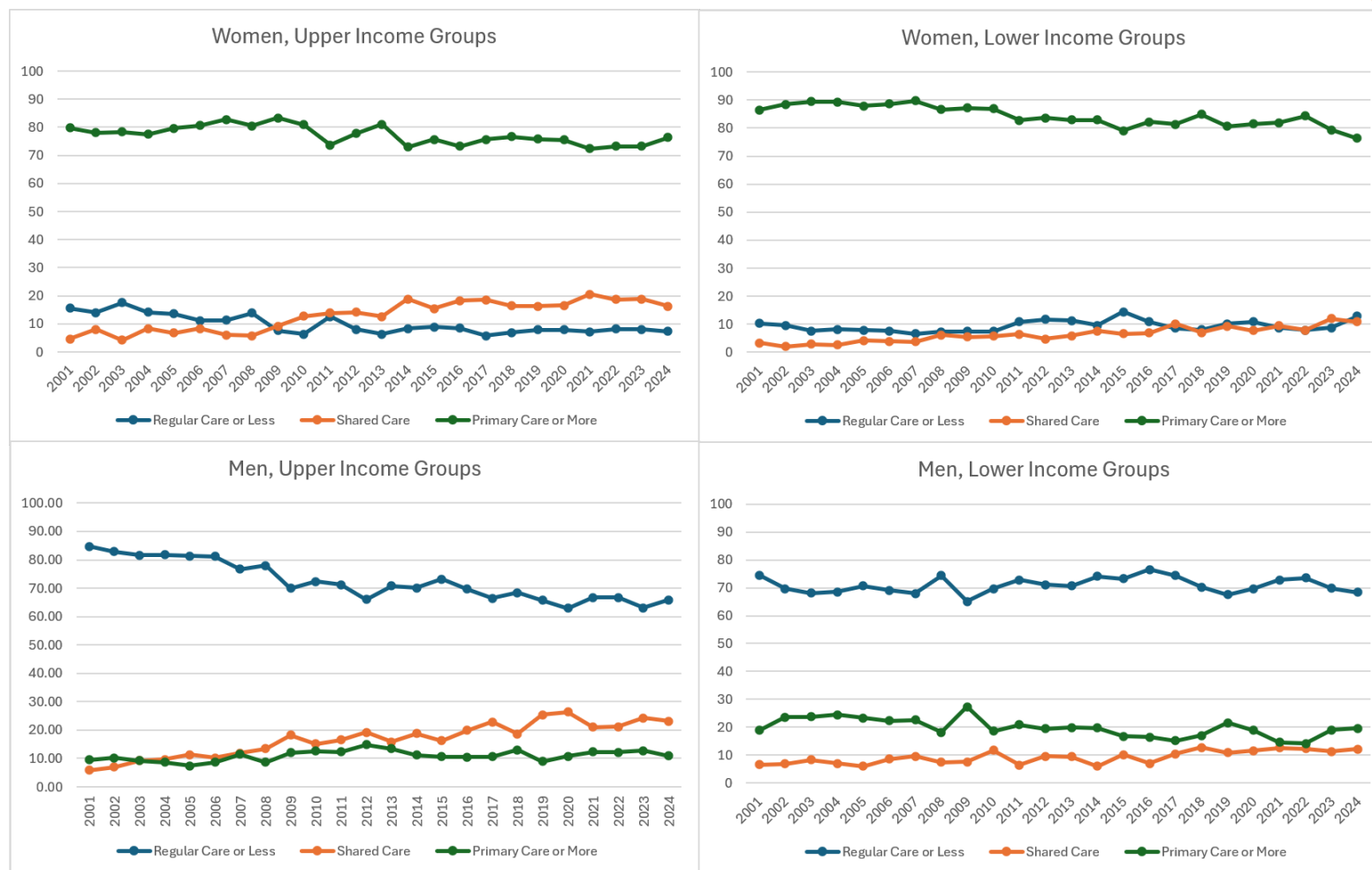
(6) Levels of Care by Income Group

Figure 6: Separated mothers' and fathers' levels of care for their youngest child by income group, HILDA 2001 – 2024

Substantial move toward more gender equality in care arrangements amongst the upper income group

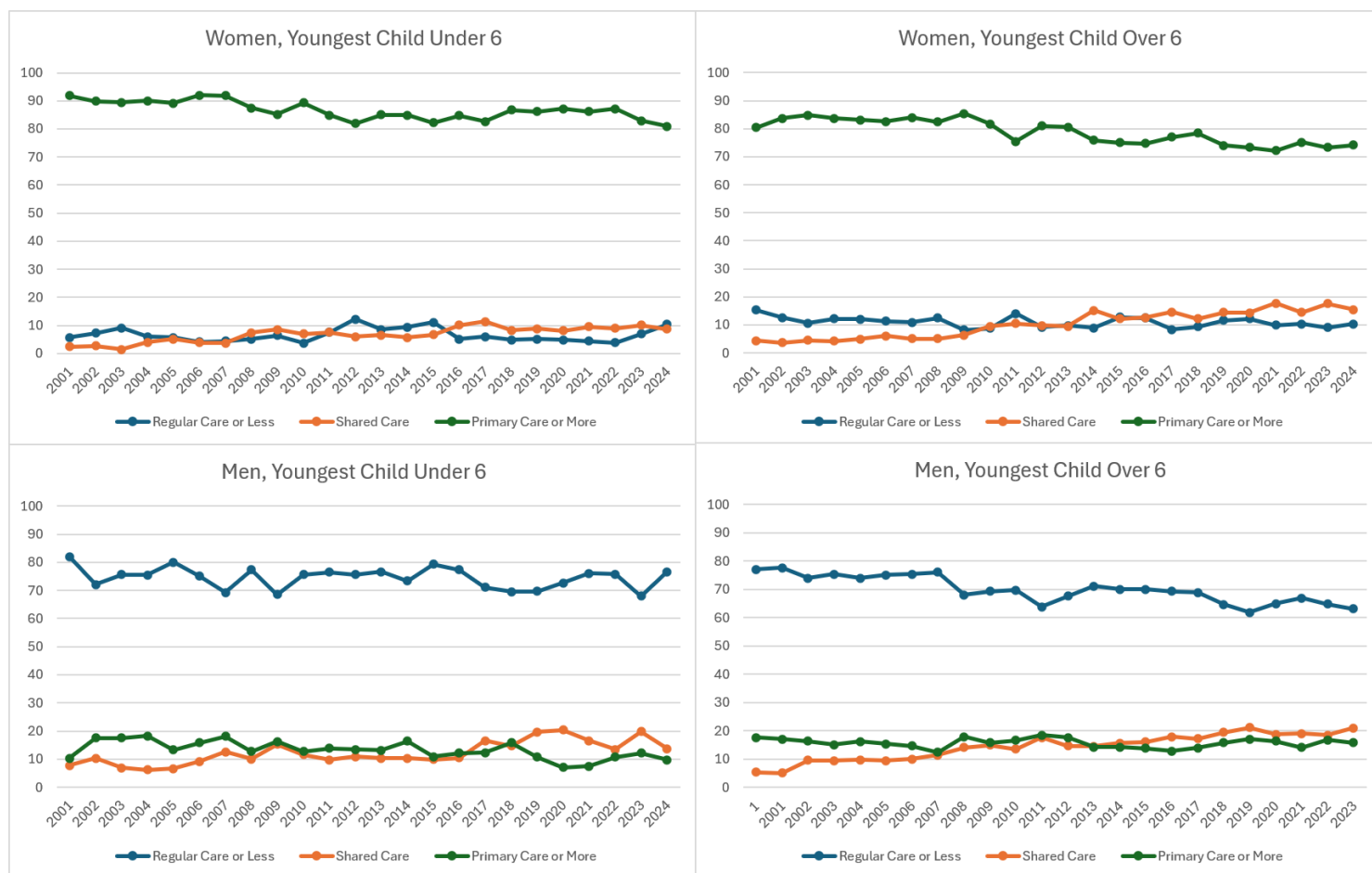
Shared care more prevalent amongst higher income groups, especially upper income group men.

Year of Child Support Scheme Reforms shows change men lower income group men's reports



(7) Levels of Care by Age of Youngest Child

Figure 7: Separated men and women's levels of care for their youngest child by age of youngest resident or non-resident child, HILDA 2001 – 2024



Division of care remains most unequal when children are young

Substantial decline in primary care or more among mothers with a youngest child under 6.

The greatest shift toward equality is evident in shared care, particularly among fathers with a youngest child over 6.

Discussion

Persistence of gendered caregiving

The gender gap in care has narrowed but remains wide

Growth in equal shared care

The increase may reflect changing norms and/or financial incentives

Inequality compounds the gender gap

Progress toward shared care is concentrated in higher-income groups. Low-income separated mothers face a compounded disadvantage: less support & fewer resources.

The 2008 discontinuity: reporting or behaviour?

Marked jump in fathers' reported shared care in 2008–09, not mirrored in mothers' reports. Coincides with Child Support reforms - financial incentives?



Who Cares?

- Mothers do most of the care post-separation: only modest movement toward gender equity
 - Father's reports impacted by Child Support Scheme Reforms
- ➔ Persistence of gendered disadvantage a challenge for family law and social policy.

Thank you!

Please contact me if you have any further questions or comments:

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This research uses unit record data from Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey [HILDA] conducted by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS). The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the author[s] and should not be attributed to the Australian Government, DSS, or any of DSS' contractors or partners. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26193/NBTNMV>.

Policy Changes 1942–2023

Year	Policy Change	Details
1942	Introduction of the Widow Pension	Widows with dependent children.
1968	Introduction of the States Grants (Deserted Wives) Act	Support was extended to single mothers beyond widows.
1973	Supporting Mother's Benefit Introduced	The first income support for single mothers.
1977	Replaced by the Supporting Parent's Benefit	Extended to include sole fathers - renamed the Supporting Parent's Benefit.
2003/ 2006	Welfare to Work Reforms	2003: if child over 12 required to seek employment; 2006: changed to over 8. After this age moved to 'Newstart' payments.
2013	Eligibility Tightened	All Single Parenting Payment recipients were transitioned to Newstart when their youngest child turned 8.
2020	JobSeeker Replaces Newstart	Parenting Payment recipients transferred to JobSeeker.
2023	Eligibility Reforms to the Parenting Payment	Eligibility changed to youngest child aged up to 14.

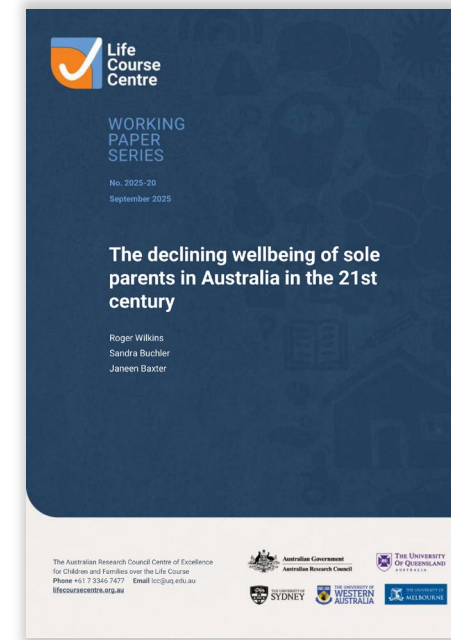
- Welfare systems and policies are crucial.
- Decline in poverty 1982 – 1999, associated with improvements in social security payments.
- Reforms after 2003 entrenched disadvantage



gifts family | Single Mother Families Australia
(<https://smfa.com.au/giftsfamily/>)
<https://smfa.com.au/>

The declining wellbeing of sole parents in Australia in the 21st century

Roger Wilkins, Sandra Buchler & Janeen Baxter



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