

Bulletin

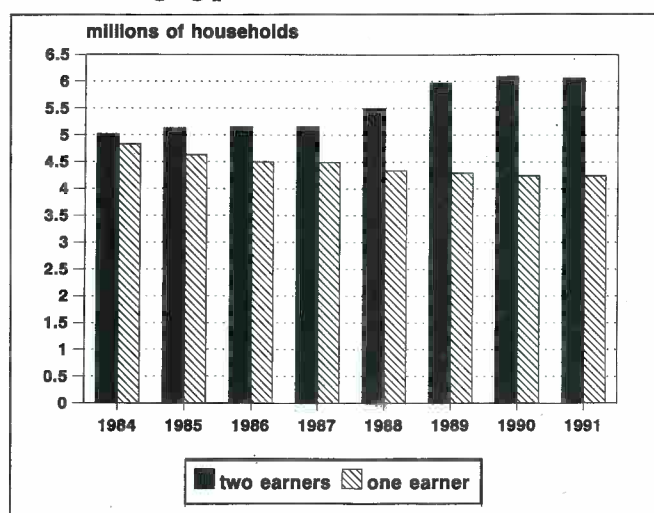
Institute for
Employment
Research

THE RISE OF 'DUAL CAREER' HOUSEHOLDS: THEIR CHARACTERISTICS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Introduction

Recent research has pointed to the simultaneous growth of 'work poor' households (containing no 'earners') and 'work rich' households (with two or more 'earners')¹. Work is becoming concentrated in fewer households: Figure 1 shows that the number of households containing two adults living as a couple in which both partners were working increased from 5 million in 1984 to over 6 million by 1991, while over the same period there was a 600 thousand decline in the number of households containing two adults living as a couple in which only one partner was working.

Figure 1
Changing patterns of work in households



In some local authority districts – notably those located in a broad swathe to the west and north-west of London, well over two out of five households contain two or more earners (see Figure 2). In Wokingham (Berkshire) nearly half of all households were recorded by the 1991 Census of Population as containing two or more earners. This is partly a function of the age structure of the population – with a higher than average proportion of residents of working age, but it is also a reflection of the pattern of available employment opportunities and the cost of living (with higher housing costs and large mortgages in much of the South East).

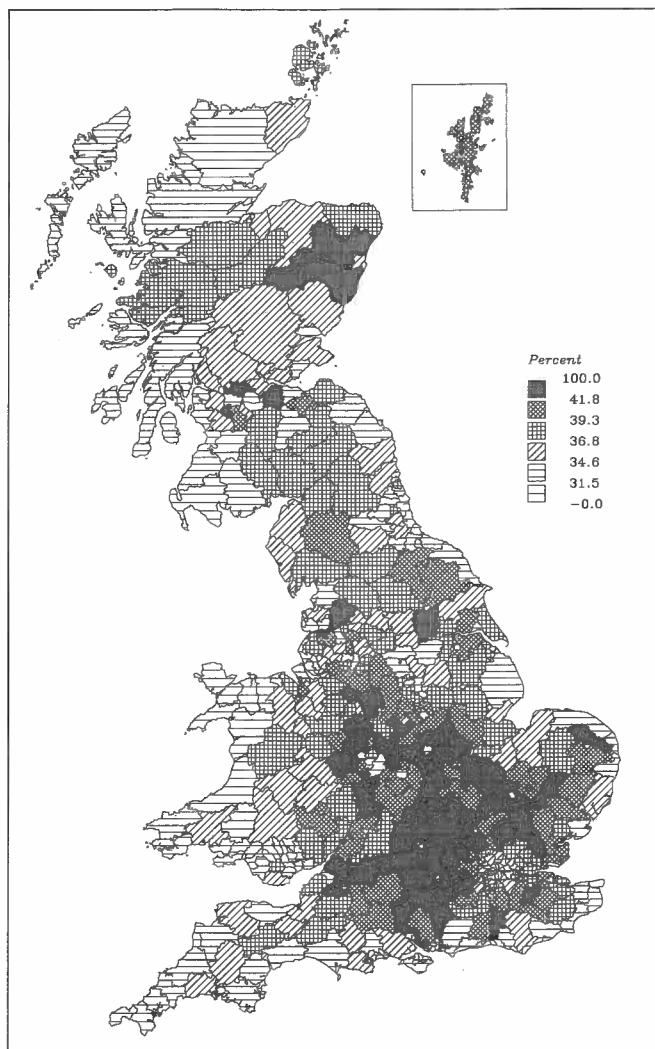
Dual career households

This *Bulletin* outlines some of the results from recent research on a subset of 'work rich' households – *dual career households*.

Dual career households are a subset of all dual earner households. The definition of dual career households used here is outlined in Box 1:



Figure 2
Proportion of households with two or more earners
by local authority district, 1991



Box 1: Types of dual earner household

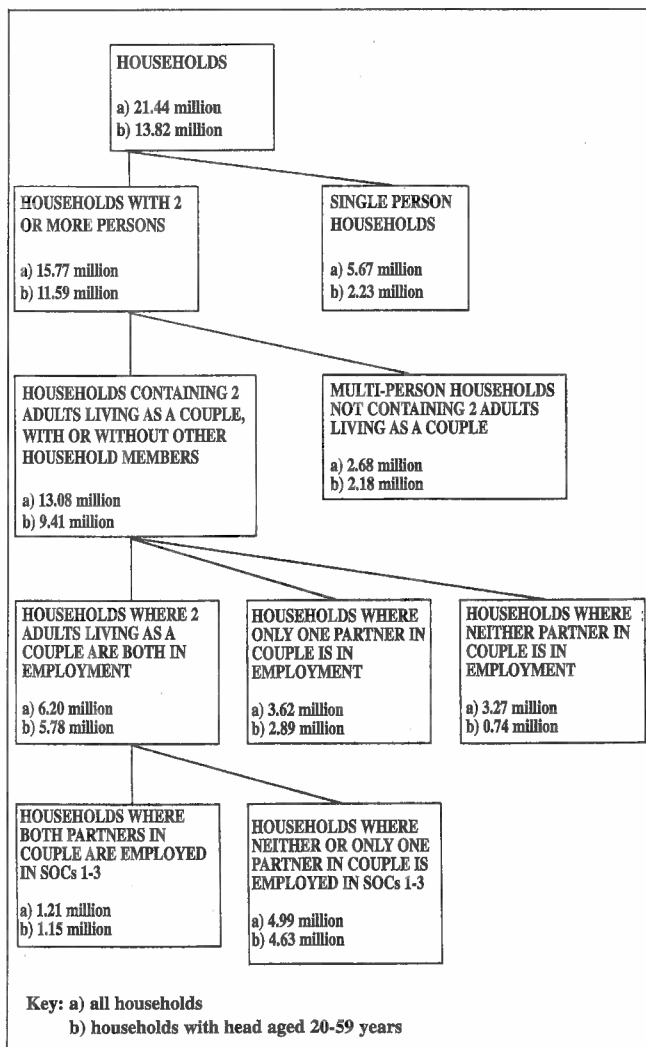
Dual career households are those households containing two or more adults living as a couple, with or without other household members, where both partners are working in managerial, professional or associate professional occupations.

Other dual earner households are those households containing two or more adults living as a couple, with or without other household members, where neither or only one partner in the couple is working in a managerial, professional or associate professional occupation.

How many dual career households are there?

Analyses using data from the Labour Force Survey suggest that the number of dual career households in Great Britain increased by over 300 thousand between 1984 and 1991. Estimates from the Census of Population 1 per cent household Sample of Anonymised Records indicate that there were 1.21 million dual career households in 1991 (see Figure 3 for further details of the process of identifying dual career households and of the numbers of different types of households).

Figure 3
Categorisation of household types



Although accounting for only 6 per cent of all households, and just over 8 per cent of households with a household head aged 20-29 years, in the increasingly competitive environment of a knowledge-based society, the significance of dual career households in economic terms outstrips their importance in numerical terms.

Likely future trends

On the basis of recent and forecast socio-economic and demographic trends it is likely that the increase in dual career households will continue. Some of the factors pointing to a continuing rise in the number of dual career households are outlined in Box 2:

Box 2: Factors suggesting a continuing rise in dual career households

- forecast increase in demand for higher level non-manual occupations;
- continuing rise in female participation rates;
- declining fertility rates;
- increase in women's attachment to labour force;
- recognition of the importance of retaining and using women's human capital;
- changing household structures – more 'egalitarian' household arrangements.

Key characteristics of dual career households

Dual career households are a small, but important, subset of all dual earner households. Relative to other dual earner households (for definition see Box 1), dual career households are more likely to:

- have both partners in full-time employment;
- have one or both partners in self-employment;
- travel over longer distances to work;
- have two or more cars – two in three dual career households have two or more cars, compared with two in five other dual earner households and one in five of all households (see Figure 4);
- be characterised by both partners travelling to work by car;
- live in the owner-occupied sector – over 90 per cent of dual career households own / are buying their own home (see Figure 5).

Figure 4
Number of cars by household category
(households with heads aged 20-59 years)

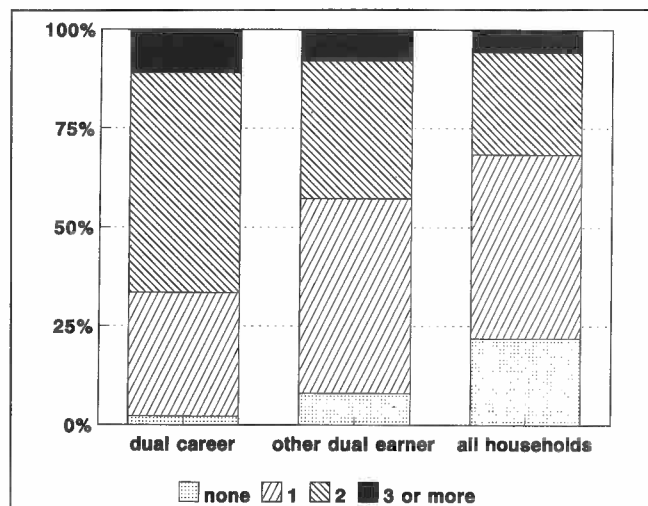
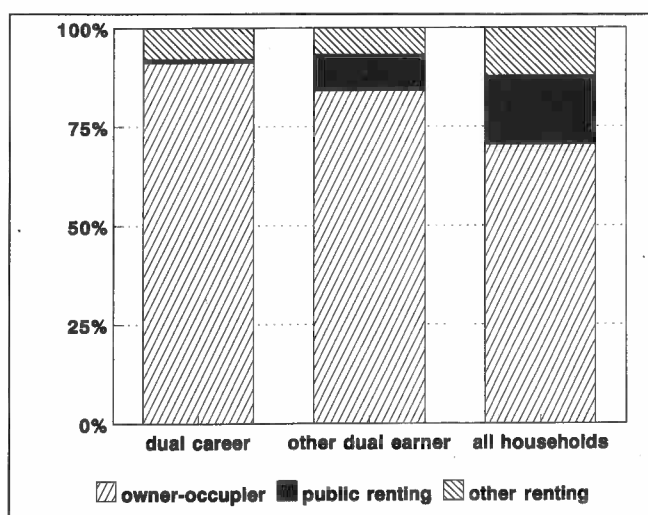


Figure 5
Housing tenure by household category
(households with heads aged 20-59 years)

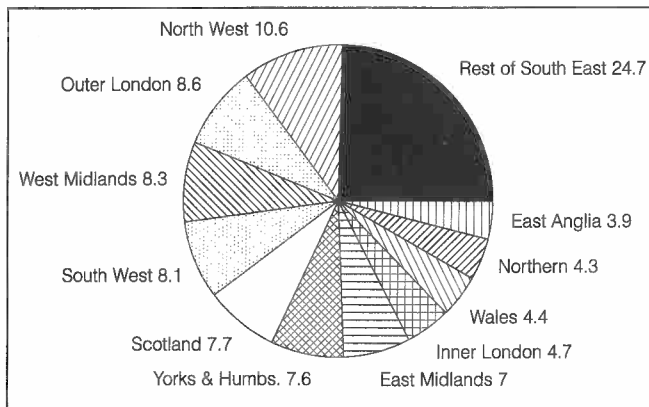


Regional distribution of dual career households

The incidence of dual career households is greatest in the Rest of the South East (ROSE). Nearly 11 per cent of households with a head aged 20-59 years in ROSE are dual career households – compared with just over 8 per cent across the whole of Great Britain. Outer London and East Anglia are the only other regions where the share of dual career households exceeds the national average. The Northern region and Scotland have the lowest proportions of dual career households.

A quarter of all dual career households in Britain live in 'Roseland' (see Figure 6). The North West region accounts for the next largest proportion – nearly 11 per cent.

Figure 6
Regional distribution of dual career households
(% of Great Britain total)



Understanding household behaviour: the case of dual career households

If dual career households are likely to increase in number and significance, it seems appropriate to pay greater attention to understanding their decision-making and socio-economic behaviour. Yet most existing theories are appropriate for 'traditional' single earner households with a male breadwinner and a female homemaker, or for dual earner households with a 'conventional' division of labour (i.e. where the man's career / job would be expected to take precedence over the woman's job). Such theories need to take account of the increase in female labour force participation and penetration into managerial and professional jobs, as well as changes in household arrangements, if they are to be relevant for dual career households.

For dual career households the decision-making process may be particularly complicated. For instance:

- Should / can both careers be pursued to the same extent?
- Whose career should take precedence, and when?
- What 'compromises' are necessary?
- What are the implications of such 'compromises'?

A strategy with a positive outcome for one partner, may have negative consequences for the other and the rest of the household. A decision made in the best interests of the household, may represent a sub-optimal solution in career terms for one or other partner (or both). Clearly, 'compromises' are necessary.

The location and mobility decisions of dual career households

Some of these 'compromises' may be illustrated with respect to one important set of decisions faced by dual career households – those relating to location, migration and commuting ².

Key questions of interest are:

- What are the key factors influencing the location and migration decisions of dual career households?
- How are these different factors 'traded off' one against another?
- Does one partner have to compromise more than the other, and if so, which and why?
- What are the characteristics of locations favoured by dual career households?
- Are locations selected so as to enhance commuting potential and minimise the need for migration?
- How tolerant are individuals in dual career households of long commuting journeys?

For many dual career households 'trading off' various alternatives – for example, deciding:

- whether one partner should pursue a new career opportunity
- where to live
- whether, where and when to move

is analogous to a 'juggling act'.

Since different households have different priorities, and are operating in differing circumstances, it would not be expected that the outcomes of decisions would be the same. However, it is possible to identify some important key factors influencing the location and migration decisions of dual career households. Some of the key factors influencing decisions emerging from case studies of dual career households are listed in Box 3:

Box 3: Key factors influencing decisions

- a more 'locationally-specific' career would tend to take priority;
- a more 'secure' career would tend to take priority;
- a more 'highly paid' partner would tend to take priority;
- accessibility to a range of current and possible future job opportunities is important;
- schools are a significant factor for households with children.

Preferred residential locations

In the British context, London offers the greatest number and range of employment opportunities to dual career households – analyses of the occupational structure of employment by region shows that Greater London and ROSE have a greater share of high level non-manual jobs than the national average. Indeed, the South East has been likened to an “escalator region” – since prospects for career advancement (particularly for women) are particularly pronounced compared with other regions.³ Outside London, it would be expected that metropolitan locations (notably larger regional and sub-regional centres) would be favoured, since accessibility to a reasonably large range of job opportunities is important.

Case study research involving dual career households in which at least one partner worked for an employer based in Nottingham⁴ revealed a clear preference amongst the majority of dual career households for village or semi-rural locations, coupled with good accessibility. Such residential environments were felt by many to offer “the best of both worlds” – where there is “peace, quiet and green”, not too far “away from the action”. In such “villagey” locations old “character properties” held particular appeal for many.

An essential prerequisite for many households living in such locations is that each partner has a car. Without a car, or with only one car per household, many contended that their current dual career lifestyle could not be maintained. Most partners in dual career households are prepared to travel long distances to work – usually by car – in order to live in rural / semi-rural / small town environments. The car offers ‘control’ and ‘flexibility’ to travel to a variety of destinations. Public transport does not provide such flexibility, and in the ‘Greater Nottingham’ study was used for travel-to-work by only a small proportion of the individuals interviewed.

Planning for ‘alternative futures’

A number of trends suggest that working lives are becoming more complex, such that household decisions are becoming increasingly difficult to manage (see Box 4):

Box 4: Factors underlying the increasing complexity of working lives

- traditional organisational career structures (in which social mobility was often linked with spatial mobility between different establishments within a single multi-site organisation) are becoming less prevalent;
- the trend towards ‘portfolio’ careers – with individuals building their own careers, often involving a range of employers / occupations / experience;
- deregularisation of labour markets – with an increase in insecurity and greater emphasis on flexibility;
- seemingly contradictory trends towards individualism’ and ‘partnership’ in working environments;
- uncertainty in the housing market – in the early 1990s more households are experiencing difficulty in selling their houses, and some have problems of negative equity.

In the face of such complexity, ‘adaptability’ and willingness to ‘compromise’ are key attributes. The location and mobility decisions of dual career households provide a good example of such attributes in practice. In making such decisions most dual career households are attempting to ‘maximise their options’ and as far as possible look ahead – ‘planning for alternative futures’.

The seeking of accessible residential locations within easy reach of motorway junctions (and to a lesser extent InterCity stations) represents a rational choice in the face of uncertainty. From such accessible locations individual household members can maximise the range of current, and future, job opportunities available to them. Moreover, from such locations the need for future migration is minimised (so avoiding disruption to children’s schooling and partner’s career) by maximising the potential for (long-distance) commuting. For many, long-distance commuting – usually by car, interspersed with ‘odd days’ working from home, is a practice which can be adapted to, and is a ‘price worth paying’ in order to satisfy other individual and household desires.

Notes

- 1 Gregg, P. and Wadsworth, J. (1994) More work in fewer households, NIESR Discussion Paper 72, NIESR, London.
- 2 The evidence reported here is derived from the findings of a research project on 'The Location and Mobility Decision of Dual Career Households' funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The project was undertaken by Anne Green and David Owen (University of Warwick), with Irene Hardill and Anna Dudleston (Nottingham Trent University). The material presented in this Bulletin draws in particular on two papers:
Green, A. E. (1995) 'The geography of dual career households: a research agenda and selected evidence from secondary data sources for Britain', IER, University of Warwick (mimeo), to be published in the September 1995 issue of *International Journal of Population Geography*.
Green, A. E. (1995) 'A question of compromise?: case study evidence on the location and mobility strategies of dual career households', IER, University of Warwick (mimeo).
- 3 This term was coined by Tony Fielding in studies of migration: see Fielding, A. (1992) Migration and social mobility: South East England as an escalator region, *Regional Studies* 26, 11-25; Fielding, A. and Halford, S. (1993) Geographies of opportunity: a regional analysis of gender-specific social and spatial mobilities in England and Wales 1971-81, *Environment and Planning A* 25, 1421-40.
- 4 See note 2 for further details of the research project which included case studies of dual career households in the 'Greater Nottingham' area.

Acknowledgements

This Bulletin includes data derived from the 1991 Census of Population, which are Crown Copyright. The 1991 Census of Population Local Base Statistics and the 1 per cent household sample of Anonymised Records were made available to the academic community via the Economic and Social Research Council.

IER CONFERENCE PROGRAMME 1995/96

The IER conference programme for 1995/96 will include a conference on The Highly Qualified in the Labour Market. For further details of this and other conferences contact Jane Pitcher (Conference Convener) at the Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, Tel: 01203 523531, or Alison Negus (Conference Secretary) Tel: 01203 524128.

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

Review of the Economy and Employment: Occupational Assessment 1995

Review of the Economy and Employment 1995:

- Occupational Studies*
- Managerial, Professional & Technical Occupations*
- Clerical Workers, Service & Sales Occupations*
- Craft, Operative and Other Manual Occupations*

Labour Market Prospects for the Highly Qualified