

# PROJECT 5

A WEEKEND FOR EVERY WORKER

## Executive Summary

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Prepared by The Australian Human Rights Institute, UNSW Sydney





# Highlights

1

Project 5 examined whether changing construction workers' schedules to include a full weekend would make a positive difference to their wellbeing in a sector characterised by long and unpredictable working hours, which have an impact on physical and mental health.

2

On the construction sites examined, working hours were re-allocated to create a Monday to Friday working week. The sites were closed on weekends, and workers were encouraged not to work elsewhere.

3

Most workers adhered to the five-day working week and preferred it to the usual six-day week. They reported improvements to their wellbeing, and their relationships with colleagues, their partners and their children.

4

The next of kin who were interviewed described the five-day work week as life changing. With their partners more available and active in family life, they felt their own wellbeing had also improved.

5

Among the recommendations of Project 5 is for governments to implement a five-day work week in construction contracts, ensuring that taxpayer-funded projects are delivered by a workforce that's both physically and mentally healthy.



# Introduction

The Australian construction industry is a powerhouse of the nation's economy. With more than 1.15 million workers, it is Australia's third largest employer. However, despite its importance to the economy, construction sector conditions are not kind to workers. Every second day in Australia, a construction worker dies by suicide.<sup>1</sup> A strong body of evidence suggests that working conditions are harmful to the physical and mental health of construction workers. For the long-term sustainability of the industry, and the health and wellbeing of the wider community, it is vital that these conditions are improved. Currently in Australia, it is standard practice for construction

workers to work at least a half-day on Saturdays, meaning they miss out on leisure activities with their family and friends who work in other industries. This study, known as Project 5, examined whether giving a group of construction workers access to the regular weekend of Saturday and Sunday would improve their wellbeing. Project 5 also inquired into the effects of construction sector conditions on the community more broadly, by interviewing the next of kin of construction workers about how working hours and conditions impacted family life. An economic analysis was included to determine the costs or savings of shifting to a five-day work week.

Project 5 is the first study of a five-day working week to examine the effects on workers' next of kin.



# Testing the five-day work week

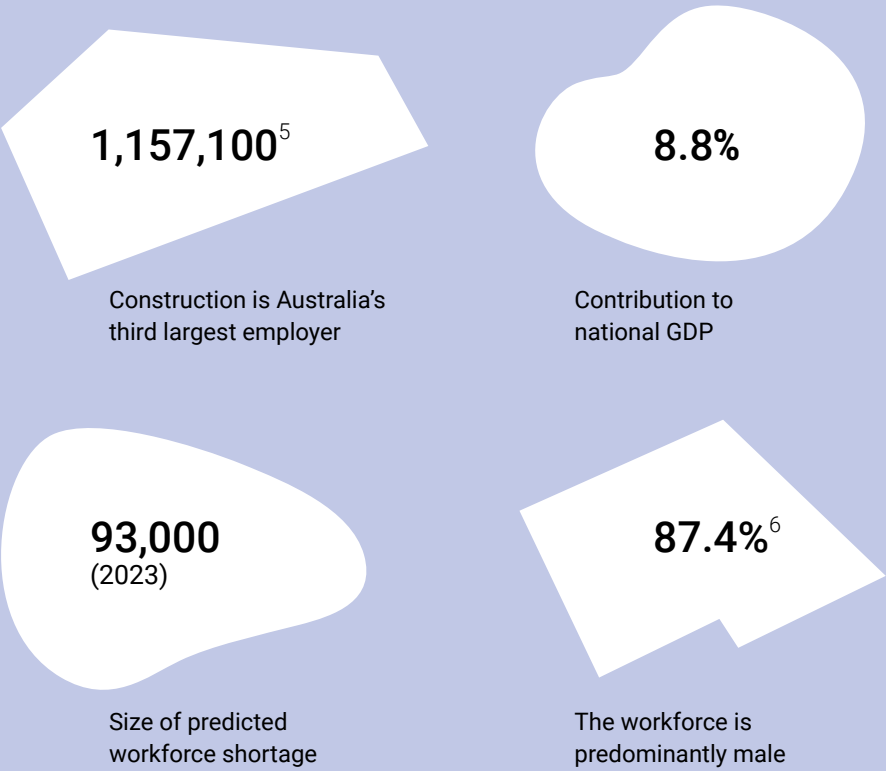
Introducing a weekend, something most workers take for granted, does not sound like a radical intervention. However, in the Australian construction industry, the practice of working on Saturday at higher pay rates, known as overtime, is deeply rooted and remains in place even though workers are now able to earn the same overtime rate after hours Monday to Friday. Increasingly, workers are also asked to work on Sundays, as construction companies set ever more demanding schedules to keep costs down. Construction work is financially rewarding, but there is a cost in wellbeing terms. Research by welfare advocacy group Mates in Construction has found that Australian construction workers are six times more likely to die by suicide

than from an accident at work.<sup>2</sup> Research has established that conditions in the sector are linked to high stress, burnout and poor mental health.<sup>3</sup> These issues can contribute to substance abuse<sup>4</sup> and relationship breakdowns, creating a ripple effect in the community. Construction firms have acknowledged these issues with initiatives that seek to support individuals, such as employee assistance programs, rather than making structural changes. In this sense, Project 5 was indeed ambitious. With the backing of an innovative client (Health Infrastructure NSW) and contractor (Roberts Co.) the study asked workers to look beyond old notions of productivity and adopt new methods of working in order to accommodate the five-day week schedule.

## About this report

Workers were recruited to participate in Project 5 from three Sydney construction sites operated by construction firm Roberts Co. Two of the sites implemented a five-day work week. These were construction sites for hospital redevelopments, where the client was the state government service Health Infrastructure NSW. The third site was a control site where the usual six-day work week operated. This report presents the findings of surveys and interviews with the workers who participated, the next of kin who participated, and construction industry stakeholders who were interviewed for their views on the five-day work week. Project 5 contributes a much-needed contemporary case study of how a work schedule modification can change work-life balance and the flow-on effects to wellbeing, not only for workers but for their partners. The Project 5 study was launched in February 2020, and recruitment was impacted by both the Black Summer bushfire disaster and the global COVID-19 pandemic. In turn, this has impacted on the research team's ability to present a full economic analysis on the cost benefit of the five-day working week examined in this intervention.

### Insights on the Australian construction industry



"When you don't see your kids for a couple of days 'cause they're in bed by the time you get back or they start asking, 'When are you coming home?' I think that's, that's not a work-life balance... I think it's having those Saturdays. You see your kids and your wife on a Saturday, and you can have dinner with your family in the afternoon, I think that's a work-life balance."

Construction worker

# Key findings

There is a positive link between the five-day work week and improvements in workers' wellbeing. However, data collection was hampered by COVID-19 lockdowns in Sydney, meaning it was not possible to perform repeat surveys with the same construction workers. This prevents the Project 5 research team being able to definitively say that a shorter working week resulted in improved mental health outcomes for workers, or that it resulted in an economic advantage. That said, the research did identify trends in the improvement of quality of life and mental health for workers the longer they spent working a five-day week.

## Inquiries into the effects of a five-day working week on construction workers and their families found:

- > Most workers (75.4%) preferred a five-day work week over either a six- or seven-day working week.
- > Workers reported improvement in work-life balance – 50% said they found a great difference to their work-life balance and 28% said they saw some difference to their work-life balance (see Figure 1).
- > Workers reported an increase in all areas of job satisfaction including work hours, pay, job security, family and work relationships during Project 5 compared to their previous job.
- > Next of kin noticed improvements in their partner's mood and wellbeing during Project 5, reporting that they were less fatigued, more relaxed, and more available to enjoy their social and family life.

"I think the five-day week is the biggest thing to come out in our industry in 20 or 30 years."

Construction industry stakeholder

## An economic evaluation of the costs and benefits of a five-day work week on the health of workers found:

- > Weekly analysis suggested an increasing trend in the quality of life among workers on a five-day work week site.
- > K10 scores capturing mental distress reduced from 17.13 to 14.2 over a 20-week period (May 2020 to October 2020), suggesting a trend towards improvements in worker mental health on a five-day work week site.
- > Monthly analysis showed a decreasing trend in injury rates for Project 5 sites.
- > There was no increase in variable costs of delivering the project with a five-day work week. The only difference was in the preliminary costs (for example, site sheds and office hire, utilities, security, scaffolding) because of the longer duration of the project. On Project 5 this totalled \$61/sqm based on the gross floor area of 44,000 sqm.

## Analysis of the challenges and successes of implementing the five-day work week found:

- > Changing project delivery practices, mindsets and behaviours in the construction industry was not easy. A particular obstacle to introducing a five-day week is the view held by many clients that hours spent on site equate to productivity.
- > The project team had to think creatively and plan carefully to re-schedule construction to a five-day working week. They observed greater productivity during Project 5, as workers were motivated to complete work by Friday, and enjoy their two-day weekend.
- > Project 5 has shown what can be achieved when clients play a critical role in sponsoring, testing and evolving project delivery interventions in the construction sector.

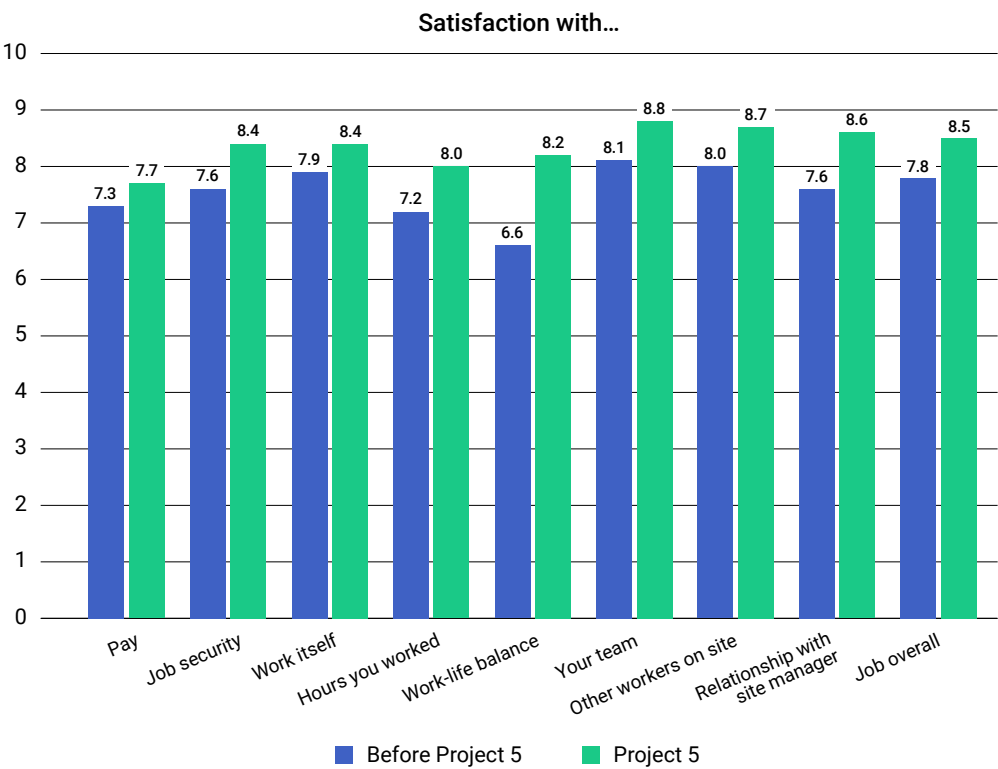


Figure 1. Satisfaction with aspects of work (paired sample t-test, p<.001)

## Time for life outside of work

Delivering regular consistent working hours should be a future area of focus for the construction sector. Only a minority of workers said they regularly

fulfilled their domestic obligations, spent time relaxing, and spent time with their partner, family, and friends (Figure 2).

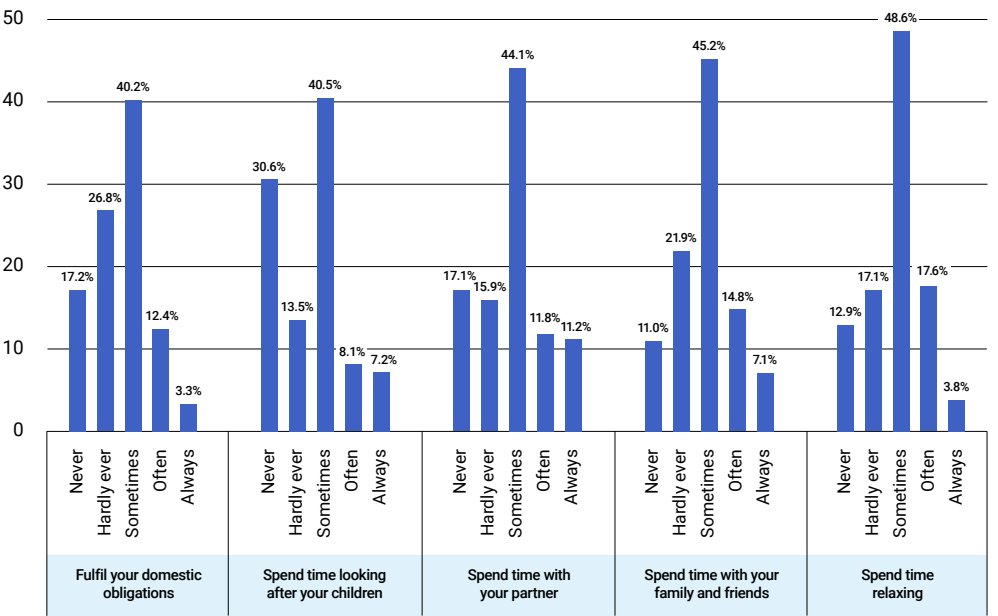


Figure 2. Time spent on activities outside of work



# Recommendations

## For governments:

- > Australian governments, with the scale of construction works they undertake, have both the influence and authority to require a five-day work week on their construction sites and should lead by example in this area.
- > Government procurement processes should include a rigorous assessment of work schedules proposed in tenders, to ensure they can be delivered without adverse impacts on the health and wellbeing of workers.
- > There are currently no statutory limits on working hours in Australia and the federal government should consider whether this needs to be revised in order to ensure the safety and wellbeing of workers in high-risk sectors.

## For all clients including government:

- > Clients should pay for the time it takes to deliver a construction project safely, without harming the wellbeing and health of construction workers and their families.
- > Seek early collaboration with contractors in the tendering process to 'stress test' projects, making sure they can be reasonably delivered within timeframes without adverse impacts on people.
- > If clients cannot consistently apply a five-day work week to all construction projects, they should clearly outline the case for a six-day work week program, and how it will not negatively impact worker health, gender equality and social sustainability.

## For the industry:

- > The industry should prioritise mental health and wellbeing as well as physical health and safety. Initiatives to improve wellbeing on worksites could include fairer and simpler construction contracts with subcontractors, and mental health and wellbeing training.
- > Working hours need to be reduced and regulated to lighten the impact of construction working hours on the wellbeing of workers and their families and to allow workers to plan and share in childcare. Long, irregular hours limit women's participation in construction, particularly in site roles.
- > Project 5 has demonstrated the benefits of investing more time in project planning during the pre-construction and construction phases. It is recommended that industry follow this example as the flow-on effect is a smoother construction phase and less pressure on workers.

## For researchers:

- > More research on interventions to improve wellbeing in this sector is urgently needed. Project 5 has identified a range of avenues for further inquiry, including an economic analysis of the lost employment opportunities for partners of construction workers, who often refuse work or promotions because of their partner's long and irregular working hours.

"Since I've been working five days, I became a different person. I became a better person. More relaxed."

Construction worker

"I'd like to see my son more than I see my site manager... I feel like the five days is perfect for that."

Construction worker



**What Project 5 revealed about gender equality**

Academic research has long detailed the barriers to women's participation in the Australian construction sector. For the first time, Project 5 shone a light on the sector's impact on female partners of construction workers. Notably, it found how the long and irregular hours of construction workers inhibit their female partners from entering paid full-time employment. In the medium term, this can reinforce traditional stereotypes of the male breadwinner and in the long term, may hurt the economic security of women.

As one next of kin articulated, "it's also not that fair on me because I'm the one who's working reduced hours and, if our marriage doesn't make it to the end, then I come out with less super, less income and he's the one who's worked and has got a bigger nest egg. It's the whole gender inequality."

While some accepted their predicament, others were concerned gender stereotypes were being reinforced to their children. As one next of kin explained, "I don't necessarily love my son seeing... me working less than Daddy and he sees me doing more of the household stuff. And that's what he sees but there's no other way around it."

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**Endnotes**

- 1 Mates in Construction. (2020) Why mates exists: The problem. Available at: <https://mates.org.au/the-problem>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Bowen P and Zhang RP (2020) Cross-Boundary Contact, Work-Family Conflict, Antecedents, and Consequences: Testing an Integrated Model for Construction Professionals. *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management* 146(3). American Society of Civil Engineers: 04020005. DOI: 10.1061/(ASCE)CO.1943-7862.0001784. Kotera, Y., Green, P., & Sheffield, D. (2019). "Work-life balance of UK construction workers: Relationship with mental health." *Construction Management and Economics* 38(4). Lingard, H. & Francis, V. (2009). *Managing Work-Life Balance in Construction*. Independence: Routledge, 2009.
- 4 Pidd, K., Duraisingam, V., Roche, A. and Trifonoff, A. (2017), "Young construction workers: substance use, mental health, and workplace psychosocial factors", *Advances in Dual Diagnosis*, Vol. 10 No. 4, pp. 155-168. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ADD-08-2017-0013>
- 5 ABS June 2021 – <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/national-accounts/australian-national-accounts-national-income-expenditure-and-product/latest-release>
- 6 Infrastructure Australia Oct 2021 – [https://www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/Infrastructure%20Market%20Capacity%20Report%20211013\\_0.pdf](https://www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/Infrastructure%20Market%20Capacity%20Report%20211013_0.pdf)

