

# 27 Working far from home separates but also supports many families

Employment-related geographical (or “extended”) mobility has always been a part of the labour market in Canada. Travelling far from home allows many families to find work that is not currently available in or near their communities, or to find higher-paying employment. As a result of extended mobility, however, many of these workers are often separated from their families for varying periods, which can affect their wellbeing, as well as that of their families and home communities.

This working arrangement is sometimes known as “supercommuting.” This has been defined as “short-term labour mobility that allows workers to be transported from areas of high unemployment to employers looking for skilled workers.”<sup>1</sup> These periods can consist of arrangements such as relatively short periods of work (e.g., 14 days on and 14 days off), or longer rotations that can last six weeks, or one week off on a “fly-in, fly-out” (alternatively, “drive-in, drive-out”) arrangement. Or, there might be shorter rotations with just a few days off and long commutes each way. For many jobs, it is an inherent part of the work, e.g., ice road construction, seasonal work in hunting

camps, tree planting, and some tourism employment. Regardless of the specific arrangement or label applied to it, a shared trait is that they often result in workers being separated from their loved ones for prolonged and sometimes uncertain periods.

Changing economic conditions in different regions and jurisdictions may lead employees to work far from home.<sup>2</sup> This can include declining opportunities in the workers’ home region (e.g., the collapse of the cod fisheries in Newfoundland and Labrador in the 1990s, mine or mill closure, or the end of a large industrial construction project), prospects for better paying employment in another province or territory (e.g., the oil sands in Alberta in the early 2000s) sometimes with employer support for travel and accommodations, or some combination that leaves the benefits outweighing the costs for families.

According to recent estimates, 14.2% of the employed labour force in 2021 was engaged in extended or complex work-related mobility.<sup>3,4,5</sup> This included those with long commutes of at least an hour per way (5.4% of the employed labour force<sup>3</sup>),



transportation workers (4.8%<sup>5</sup>), temporary residents with work permits that are part of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program or the International Mobility Program (3.1%<sup>6, 7</sup>), interprovincial commuters (0.6%<sup>8</sup>), and those who worked outside Canada (0.3%<sup>9</sup>).

## Why this matters

Travelling far from home to work has always been part of the Canadian economy. Mobility plays an important role in sustaining economies while helping workers to support their families without themselves having to uproot and move to where work can be found.

Working far from home creates challenges for these employees and their families. For the workers, research has found that mobile and long-distance labour commuting can lead to personal burnout (i.e., physical and mental fatigue and exhaustion).<sup>1</sup> In addition, when one family member starts working far from home, it can limit the employment options of others in the

household by increasing their childcare and other family responsibilities.<sup>10</sup>

Research exploring the impact of long-distance “mobile work” highlights the flexible approaches taken by family and friends to support these workers. “Circuits of care” help workers to manage their family networks, stay in touch, and parent from a distance. Many workers receive support from extended family, friends, neighbours, and other community members.<sup>11</sup>

Interjurisdictional employees tend to rely on their work for most of their income. This leaves their families more vulnerable to fluctuations in interjurisdictional employment opportunities.<sup>2</sup> This was seen in Alberta after oil prices dropped in the mid-2010s, and across the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regions with economies that have become supported by or dependent on labour mobility, such as in Atlantic Canada, can be particularly affected by these shifts.<sup>12</sup>

## Acknowledgement

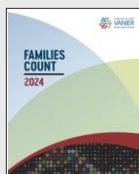
We wish to thank Barbara Neis, John Lewis Paton Distinguished Professor and Honorary Research Professor, Department of Sociology, Memorial University, and On the Move Partnership Project Director, for reviewing this chapter.



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## How to cite this document:

Battams, N. (2024). Working far from home separates but also supports many families. In *Families count 2024*, The Vanier Institute of the Family. <https://vanierinstitute.ca/families-count-2024/working-far-from-home-separates-but-also-supports-many-families>

