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Few carers abandon paid work, says study

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CARING for aged or disabled relatives has less impact on participation in paid work than previously thought, controversial research has found.

The report also debunks the widespread notion that care-giving has a negative effect on people's happiness.

The study, by Andrew Leigh, professor of economics at the Australian National University, found that care-giving has little effect on life satisfaction and only a small negative impact on employment. Other reports have found huge effects.

"People doing the caring load were less likely to have had a job in the first place," Professor Leigh said.

The research followed the same people over seven years to see what happened when they moved in to and out of their care-giving role. Most other research has compared carers with non-carers.

"Most cross-sectional research on carers compares apples with oranges; we're comparing this apple yesterday and today," Professor Leigh said. "We're looking at what happens to a person when she spends say a year caring for her mother and then is no longer caring for her."

Conventional studies show that only 46 per cent of people aged 25 to 54 who give more than 10 hours' care a week have a job, compared with 75 per cent of non-carers. But in following the same people over seven years, Professor Leigh found only 4 per cent dropped out of the labour market when they started their care-giver role, and only 2 per cent of carers who did not have paid work found a job when their care-giving role came to an end.

The paper, *Informal Care and Labor Market Participation*, says the negative impact of care-giving on employment fell from 20-28 per centage points in cross-sectional research to 4-6 percentage points in the longitudinal study.

As well, most studies show that carers cite their care-giving duties as a reason they are not looking for paid work. But of the carers in Professor Leigh's study who gave this reason, four-fifths were neither looking for work nor in work once they had stopped being a care-giver.

"Care-giving is incredibly important and nothing in the paper is an attempt to undermine the social value of carers," Professor Leigh said. "Carers should be rewarded for doing it."

But he was uncomfortable with the argument that carers are paid government benefits because "if they were not caring they would be in the paid workforce".

Research by Matthew Gray, of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, found the hours of caring required, and the extent of outside support, were big determinants of carers' ability to hold a job.

Mary Lou Carter, of the Carers' Alliance, said carers might be able to "tack on" 10 hours a week to paid jobs to look after elderly or sick parents, but severely disabled children "can take up all your adult working life".

The study was drawn from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey, with an original sample of almost 20,000 individuals. The carers in Professor Leigh's study were in two groups of 712 and 440.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/few-carers-abandon-paid-work-says-study-20100112-m4tu.html>