Are Americans working more these days? Are they feeling more pressed for time than ever before? To most observers, the obvious answer to these questions is a resounding “yes.” From sleep-deprived parents to professionals who believe they must put in long hours to succeed at the office, the demands of work seem to be colliding with family responsibilities and placing a tremendous squeeze on many of us.

Yet beyond the apparent growth in the time that so many Americans spend on the job lies a more complex story than we might have imagined. While it is true that some Americans are working more than ever, others are also working less. What’s more, finding a good balance between work and the rest of life seems increasingly elusive to many workers – whether or not they are putting in more time at work than their peers in earlier generations. The growth of harried workers and hurried families is a problem calling out for solutions. Before we can resolve our increasingly intractable time squeezes, however, we must first understand their contours and root causes.
Average Working Time and Beyond

“There aren’t enough hours in the day” is an increasingly resonant refrain. For most observers, including the experts, the main culprit appears to be overwork – our jobs just take too much time away from everything else. Yet the evidence that the average American is spending more time on the job is not so clear. Although it may come as a surprise to those who feel overstressed, the average workweek – that is, work for pay – has hardly changed over the last 30 years. Census bureau interviews show, for example, that the average male worker worked 43.5 hours a week in 1970 and 43.1 hours a week in 2000, while the average woman worker worked 37.1 hours in 1970 and 37.0 hours in 2000. The length of the average workweek has remained remarkably stable for several decades.

Why, then, do more and more Americans feel so pressed for time? Because averages can be misleading. Looking only at the average experience of individual workers misses key parts of the story. From the perspective of individual workers, it turns out that many people are spending more time at work, while others are spending less. Some Americans are working more than ever, while others are finding it harder to get as much work as they need or would like. What’s more, Americans now live in more diverse families than was true when male-breadwinner households predominated in the middle of the 20th century. Many more Americans now live in dual-earner or single-parent families where all the adults work. As these workers juggle the demands job and home, they face time squeezes whether or not they feel overworked on the job.

These two trends – the growing bifurcation of the labor force and the transformation of family life – lie at the heart of the new time dilemmas facing a growing number of Americans. Yet they have not affected all workers and all families in the same way. Instead, they have created
new divisions between those who feel torn between work and the rest of life and those who may have more time away from the job than they need or would like. The growth of time squeezes in America is part of a larger social transformation in the shape of jobs and families. People living in many work and family arrangements feel increasingly time-pressured and overworked, while people living in other arrangements may feel less of a bind or, indeed, wish for more time at work. No one trend fits all groups. Once we pay attention to the increasing diversity of experience, the pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

Who are the time-squeezed and how do they differ from those with fewer time pressures but who also have less work than they may want or need? To answer this question, we need to look at the experiences of both individual workers and whole families. A focus on the individual shows that workers are increasingly divided between those putting in very long workweeks, who are concentrated at the upper levels of our occupational structure, and those putting in comparatively brief workweeks, who are more likely to have fewer educational credentials.

Yet the experiences of individuals cannot tell the whole story. When we shift our focus to whole families, it becomes clear that time-squeezes are linked to the combined working time in households, with dual-earning and single parents facing heightened challenges. Among parents, moreover, women continue to assume the lion’s share of caretaking responsibility and are thus especially likely to be squeezed. The rise of diversity in both working time and family arrangements is thus combining to separate the overworked from the underemployed, dual-earner and single-parent households from other family forms, and parents – and especially mothers – from workers without children at home.
A Growing Divide in Individual Working Time

In 1970, almost half of all employed men and women reported working 40 hours a week. By 2000, however, only two in five worked these “standard” hours. Instead, workers are now far more likely to put in either very long or fairly brief workweeks. The share of working men putting in 50 hours or more rose from 21 percent in 1970 to almost 27 percent in 2000, while the share of working women putting in these long workweeks rose from 5 to 11 percent.

At the other end of the spectrum, more workers are also putting in shorter weeks. In 1970, for example, 4.5 percent of men were employed for thirty hours or less a week, while 8.6 percent worked these shortened weeks in 2000. The share of employed women spending 30 hours or less on the job also climbed from 15.5 percent to 19.6 percent.

These changes in working time, moreover, are not evenly distributed across occupations. Instead, they are strongly related to the kinds of jobs people hold. Managers and professionals, as one might suspect, are prone put in the longest workweeks. More than one in three men in this category now work 50 hours or more per week, compared to only one in five for those in other occupations. For women, one in six professionals and managers work these long weeks, compared to less than one in fourteen for all other occupations. Not surprisingly, since jobs are closely linked to education, the gap in working time between the college-educated and those with fewer educational credentials has also grown since 1970.

[Figure 1 about here.]

Time at work is thus growing for many of those most likely to read articles and buy books about overwork in America. They may not be typical, but they are indeed working more than their peers in an earlier generation. If leisure time once signaled an elite lifestyle, that no longer
appears to be the case. Working relatively few hours is now more likely to be concentrated among those with less education and less elite jobs.

Yet working time does not necessarily reflect worker’s preferences. To the contrary, when workers are asked about their ideal working time, a very different picture emerges. In a 1997 survey conducted by the Families and Work Institute, for example, sixty percent of both men and women workers responded that they would like to work less. At the other end of the working time spectrum, 19 percent of men and women said that they would like to work more. Most workers – among women and men – aspire to work between 30 and 40 hours a week, with men generally expressing a desire to work about 38 hours a week and women about 32 hours. The small difference in the ideal working time of men and women is less significant that shared preferences among them. Whether their jobs require very long or comparatively short workweeks, this shared ideal stands in sharp contrast to their job realities. As some workers are pressured to put in more time at work and others less, finding the right balance between work and the rest of life appears to be increasingly elusive.

Overworked Individuals or Overworked Families?

Alongside the growing bifurcation in working time, equally fundamental shifts have transformed family life. While most analyses of working time focus on individual workers, time squeezes are experienced by families, not isolated individuals. A sixty hour workweek for a father means something different depending on whether the mother stays at home or also works a sixty-hour week. Even a forty hour workweek can seem too long if both members of a married-couple home are juggling job demands with family responsibilities. And when a home depends on a
single parent, the conflicts between home and work can be even greater. Even if the length of the workweek had not changed at all, the rise of families that depend on either two incomes or one parent would suffice to explain why Americans feel time-stressed.

To understand how families experience time squeezes, we need to look at the combined working time of all family members. How, for example, do married couples with two earners compare with those anchored by a sole, typically male, breadwinner? Figure 2 shows that the combined workweek of married couples has indeed increased from about 53 hours in 1970 to 63 hours in 2000. Since the average individual workweek did not change, it may seem strange that the family total grew so significantly. The explanation for this apparent paradox is both straightforward and crucial: Married women are now far more likely to work. In 1970, half of all married-couple families had only male breadwinners. By 2000, this group had shrunk to one quarter, while dual-earner couples took their place. In 1970, only a third of all married-couple families had dual-earners, but three-fifths did in 2000. In fact, dual-earner couples are more common today than were male-breadwinner couples thirty years ago.

Each type of family is also working a little more each week, but this change is relatively modest and certainly not large enough to account for the larger shift in total household working time. Dual-earner families put in close to 82 working hours in 2000 compared with 78 hours in 1970. Male breadwinners worked 44 hours on average in 1970 and 45 hours in 2000. The vast majority of the change in working time over the last thirty years can thus be traced to changes in the kinds of families we live in rather than to changes in how much we work as individuals. Dual-earner couples work about as much today as they did thirty years ago, but there are many more of
them.

Single parents, who are overwhelmingly mothers, are another group who are truly caught in a time squeeze. They need to work as much as possible to support their families, and they are less likely to be able to count on a partner’s help in meeting their children’s daily needs. Although these households are not shown in Figure 2, 2002 Census Bureau figures show that women headed one fifth of all families in 2000, twice their 1970 share. Even though their average workweek remained unchanged at 38.5 hours, the relative paucity of childcare and other supports leaves them facing time squeezes at least as sharp. Although single fathers remain a much smaller group, their ranks have also grown rapidly. Single dads work almost as much as single moms – 37 hours per week in 2000. Even though this represents a drop of two hours since 1970, single fathers face time dilemmas as great as those facing single mothers. Being a single parent has always posed daunting challenges, and now there are more mothers and fathers than ever facing these challenges.

We can thus best understand the work-family time squeeze by seeing it in the context of whole households. Dual-earner couples, who rely on two jobs, and single-parent families, who can’t call on the help of a steady partner, are likely to feel most caught between the demands of work and the needs of domestic life. Two-paycheck and single-parent families may not have the same number of combined working hours, but they face similar binds in juggling jobs and family responsibilities. They have always been stretched thin, but many more Americans live in them today.

At the heart of these shifts are families’ growing reliance on a woman’s earnings – whether or not they depend on a man’s earnings as well. Women’s strengthened commitment to
paid employment has provided more economic resources to families and given couples more options for sharing the tasks of breadwinning and caretaking. Yet this revolution in women’s work has not been complemented by an equal growth in the amount of time men spend away from the job or in the availability of organized childcare supports. This limited change at the workplace and in men’s lives has surely intensified the time squeezes facing women and men alike.

**Dual-Earner Parents and Working Time**

The expansion of working time is especially important for families with children, where work and family demands are most likely to collide. Indeed, there is a persisting concern that in their zeal for paid work, families with two earners are shortchanging their children in time and attention. Yet a closer looks reveals that even though parents face heightened time binds, they cope with these dilemmas by cutting back on their combined working time when they have children at home. Census comparisons show, for example, that dual-income parents worked 3.3 hours less per week than did couples without children in 2000, a slightly greater difference than the 2.6 hours separating them in 1970. Working hours also declined slightly as the number of children increased. Those with one child under 18 averaged 81 hours per week in 2000, while those with three or more children averaged 78 hours. Rather than forsaking their children, employed parents are taking steps as best they can to adjust their work schedules to make more time for the rest of life.

The reduced time among working parents is not gender neutral, however. Indeed, husbands actually work more hours when they have children at home, and their working hours increase along with the number of children. The drop in working time among couples with
children thus reflects less working time among mothers. Figure 3 shows that in 2000, fathers with children at home worked almost 1 hour per week more than did husbands without children, while mothers worked almost 4 fewer hours per week than married women without children. These gaps are not substantially different than in 1970, when fathers worked about an hour and a half more than their childless counterparts, and mothers worked slightly more than four hours less.

Despite the increasing reliance on a mother’s paycheck, having children in the home is still more likely to prompt women to pull back, albeit slightly, from paid work, while prompting fathers to work a bit more. The persistence of this pattern creates a larger gender gap in the levels of work participation among parents compared to childless couples. These differences are nonetheless much smaller than the once predominant pattern in which women withdrew substantially from paid work when children arrived. While the transition to parenthood continues to have different consequences for women and men, the size of this difference is diminishing.

As important, the rise in working time among couples is not concentrated among parents. Even though Americans continue to worry about the consequences for children when both parents go to work, the move toward more work involvement does not reflect neglect on the part of either mothers or fathers. To the contrary, employed mothers continue to spend less time at the workplace than their childless peers while employed fathers today do not spend substantially more time at work than men who are not fathers. Parents may feel harried, but they are doing what they can to attend to their children’s caretaking and financial needs.
Solving the Time Squeeze Puzzle

Even though changes in the average working time of American workers are modest, many American families have good reason to feel overworked and time-squeezed. The last several decades have witnessed the emergence of a group of workers who face very long workweeks and live in families that depend on either two incomes or one parent. And while parents are not putting in more time at work than their childless peers, they shoulder domestic responsibilities that leave them facing clashes between work demands and family needs.

New time dilemmas thus do not stem from steep rises in the time the “average” individual worker spends at a paid job, but instead reflect two major social transformations: the increasing bifurcation of working time between very long and relatively short workweeks and the growth of new family forms that depend on the earnings of women. Women’s increasing commitment to paid work and families’ growing reliance on two incomes do not, however, mean that Americans prefer work over family life. Instead, they suggest that, at the outset of the 21st century, contemporary women and men are seeking a balance between home and work that remains elusive.

The future of family well-being and gender equality will depend on developing policies to help workers resolve the time squeezes created by widespread and deeply anchored social change. Yet developing effective policy responses requires, first, recognizing and accepting social shifts that have sent women into the workplace and left workers wishing for a balance between work and family that is difficult to achieve. Unfortunately, these changes in the lives of women and men continue to evoke ambivalence.
Mothers, for example, continue to face strong pressures to devote intensive time and attention to child rearing despite the rising pressure to hold a paid job as well. And even though most contemporary mothers are counted on to help support their families, we have yet to develop the child care services and flexible jobs that can help workers meet their families’ needs in an era when fewer households can rely on the a full-time, unpaid domestic caretaker. Whether or not mothers work outside the home, they face conflicting expectations that are difficult to meet. These social contradictions take an especially sharp and ironic form in the push to require poor, single mothers to work at a paid job while continuing to castigate middle class mothers for spending too much time in paid employment.

To a lesser but still important degree, fathers also face intensifying cross-pressures. Despite families’ increasing reliance on women’s earnings, men face significant barriers to family involvement. Resistance continues to greet individual fathers who would like to spend less time at work to care for children. For all the concern and attention focused on employed mothers, social policies that would help bring men more fully into the work of parenting get limited notice or support. New time squeezes can thus be better understood by comparing the large changes in women’s lives with the more intransigent situation for men.

Even as family time has become squeezed, workers are also contending with changes in the options and expectations they face at work. Competitive workplaces appear to be creating rising pressures for some workers, and especially professionals and managers, to devote an excessive amount of time to their jobs, while not offering enough work to others. Yet, in contrast to these bifurcating options, American workers increasingly express a shared desire to balance and share the important work of earning a living and caring for a new generation.
Finding solutions to these new time dilemmas will depend on developing large scale policies that recognize and address the new needs of 21st century workers and their families. We suggest in our book, *The Time Divide*, that these policies need to address the basic organization of our work and community institutions, including extending hours regulations and benefit protections to a wider swath of workers, moving toward a shorter work-week norm, creating more family-supportive workplaces that offer both job flexibility and protections for employed parents, and developing a wider array of high quality, affordable childcare options.

Extending protections, such as proportional benefits and overtime pay, to workers in a wider range of jobs and occupations would reduce the built-in incentives to extract as much work as possible from professionals and managers while offering less work to other employees. If professionals and managers were given overtime pay for overtime work, which wage workers are now guaranteed under the Fair Labor Standards Act, the pressures on these employees to put in endless workdays might lessen. Similarly, if part-time workers were offered fringe benefits proportional to the hours they work, there were be fewer reasons for employers to create jobs with workweeks so brief that they do not provide the economic security all families need.

A shorter workweek norm – of, say, thirty-five hours – would also reduce the pressures on workers and help them find a better work-family balance. While this goal may seem utopian, it is important to remember that the forty-hour standard also seemed out of reach before it was adopted in the early 20th century. Other countries, most notably France, have adopted this standard without sacrificing economic well-being. A shorter workweek norm would allow for ample variation in work styles and commitments, but it would also create a new cultural standard that better reflects the needs and aspirations of most contemporary workers. It would also help
single parents meet their dual obligations and allow couples to fashion greater equality in their work and caretaking responsibilities.

Time at work is clearly important, but it is not the whole story. The organization of the workplace and the structure of jobs also matters, especially for those whose jobs and occupations require extended, intensive time at work. Among those putting in very long workweeks, we have found that having job flexibility and autonomy help ease the perceived strains and conflicts. The work environment, especially in the form of support from supervisors and co-workers, also makes a difference. In addition, we found that workers with access to such family-friendly options as flexible work schedules are likely to use them, while workers without such benefits would like to have them.

Yet women and men both express concern that making use of “family-friendly” policies, such as extended parental leaves or nonstandard working hours, may endanger their future work prospects. Social policies thus need to protect the rights of workers to be involved parents without incurring excessive penalties at the workplace. Most Americans spend a portion of their work lives immersed in the work of parenting. Providing greater flexibility at the workplace will help workers develop both short and longer run strategies for integrating work and family life.

Even basic changes in the organization of work, however, cannot suffice to meet the needs of 21st century families. We also need to join the ranks of virtually all other industrialized countries by creating widely available, high quality, and affordable child care. In a world where mothers and fathers are at the workplace to stay, we need an expanded network of supports to care for the next generation of workers.
These changes will not be easy to achieve, but in one form or another, they have been effectively adopted in other societies throughout the modern world. And while no one policy can provide a panacea, taken together, they offer a comprehensive approach for creating genuine resolutions to the time squeezes that confront growing numbers of American workers and their families. Ultimately, these new time dilemmas cannot be resolved by chastising workers (and, more often, mothers) for working too much. Rather, the time has come to create more flexible, family-supportive, and gender-equal workplaces and communities that complement the transformations in work and family life that have already taken place.
Recommended Resources:


Jacobs, Jerry A. and Kathleen Gerson. 2004. *The Time Divide: Work, Family and Gender Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. An overview of trends in working time, showing why and how time pressures have emerged in America over the last three decades, how they are linked to gender inequality and family change, and what we can do to alleviate them.


Figure 1. Trends in Long and Short Workweeks, 1970 and 2000, by Gender, for Non-Farm Wage and Salary Workers

Source: Authors’ estimates based on the March Current Population Survey data.

Figure 2. Couples’ Working Arrangements and Joint Hours of Paid Work, 1970 and 2000, for (Non-Farm) Married Couples Aged 18-64

Figure 3. Joint Hours of Paid Work by Husbands and Wives, 1970 and 2000, by Presence of Children in the Home For (Non-Farm) Married Couples Aged 18-64


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