

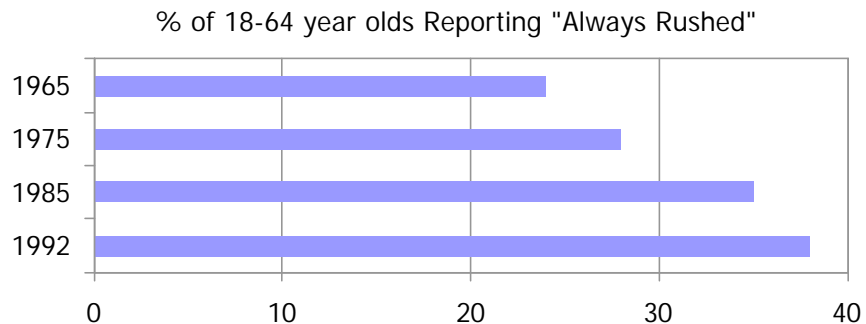
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The Time-Squeeze in American Families: From Causes to Solutions

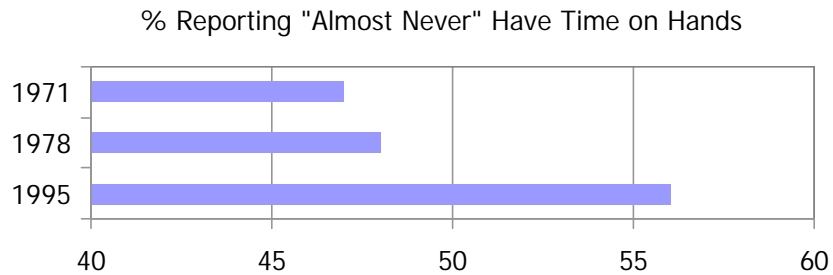
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The Rise of the Time Squeeze in The U.S.

A recurrent theme in any discussion with or about working families is the issue of time, or more accurately, the lack thereof. Data from surveys like the Michigan/Maryland Time Use Surveys document the growing perception of a time famine. Between 1965 and 1992, for example, the percent of respondents saying that they “always feel rushed” increased almost 50%, such that it is now the case that more than 1 in 3 Americans say that they *always* feel rushed.



Similarly, since 1971, the percent saying that they almost never have time on their hands with which they don't know what to do increased more than 10 percentage points, such that more than half of Americans almost never find themselves with time to burn. Again, this trend would not surprise most dual-earner couples, and certainly not those that we've talked to in our interviews at Cornell.



Why Have We Become So Rushed?

What has caused this increased sense of being pressed for time? There are several possible answers to this questions, and I've outlined three answers here. These are not necessarily competing hypotheses, but they clearly highlight different themes or elements of this story, which may or may not be working together.

First, of course, is the contention that we simply work too much—or, more specifically, that work hours have increased over time. This is probably the most familiar account of the time-squeeze, both because of important books such as Hochschild's *The Time Bind* and Schor's *The Overworked American* and because many people in dual-earner couples energetically speak to this theme themselves, as they recount doing a job that entails the responsibilities of two or three employees before restructuring. Still, this story is somewhat controversial, as some scholars fail to find a real increase in the average work week with the best data sets.

The second story highlights the fact that even if hours of work haven't changed, the fact that workers are increasingly married to each other—if married at all—means that relatively few workers can enjoy the services of a full-time, stay-at-home spouse. This is what Kathleen Christenson has called the new mathematics of the family: for dual-earner families with kids it's two parents and *three* jobs, two paid, and one unpaid. Clearly, the lack of the stay-at-home partner may in itself make people increasingly harried, even if they, in fact, work *fewer* hours than their fathers did.

A third and related story has to do less with work hours themselves and more to do with *preferences* for work hours—that is, what people want. The story of preferences is an important one because preferences lie at the center of the whole definition of being time-squeezed: that is, *working more than one would like to work*. Clearly, there are two variables in the equation—actual behavior, on the one hand (which, as I've indicated, has received considerable attention), and, on

the other hand, preferences. It may be the case, for example, that work hours preferences have declined over time, especially given the rise of dual-earner families and the three jobs for two people. Such a decline in work hours preferences could explain the rise in the time-squeeze just as well as a change in actual behavior.

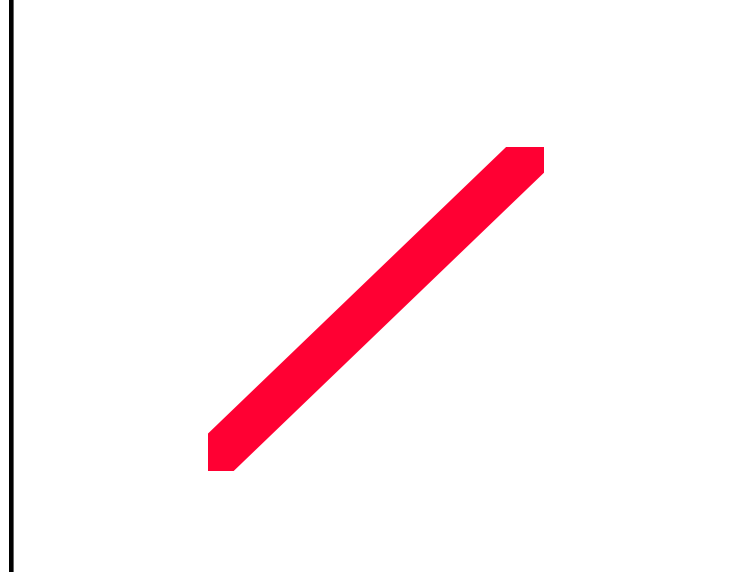
Unfortunately, however, we don't have data on *trends* in work hour preferences. Yet, the question of work hours preferences remains largely unexplored. Much of my own recent research, some of which I'll describe here, has made some preliminary steps into this terrain, documenting, first, what it is that people say that they want and, second, how well their preferences are met. That is, how preferences interact with the institutionalized structures of work and thereby result in certain behavioral outcomes.

More Dual-Earner Couples, Working Harder Than Ever

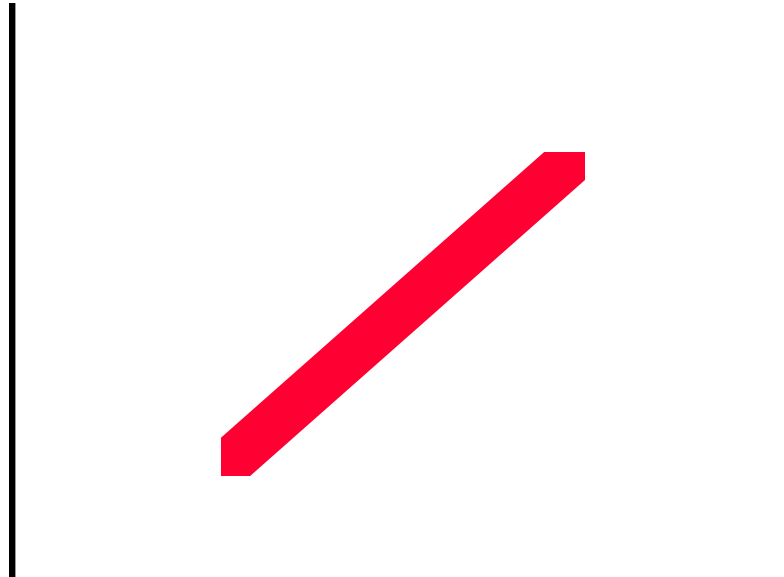
As I mentioned above, the three accounts of the time squeeze above are not necessarily competing stories. All of them may be true. We know unquestionably, for example, that the number of dual-earner couples has increased, and continues to increase, dramatically. In 1998, there were over 30 million dual-earner households, increasing some 20% since 1986 and we are now at the point where dual-earner households outnumber breadwinner-homemaker households nearly 3-to-1. Again, the new mathematics of three jobs but only two people increasingly typifies the American experience.

Data on trends in work hours are a bit more controversial. While some, like Juliet Schor, have found substantial increases in the average work week of the typical workers, others, like John Robinson and Jerry Jacobs conclude that there has been no real increase. But looking at trends as if it is a simple, unified phenomenon may be misleading. As we know, it's possible for averages to stay the same even while the rich get rich and the poor get poorer. And data from the General Social Survey suggest that such has been the case with time.

Data from the GSS show trends not unlike those emphasized or de-emphasized by other scholars. That is, weekly work hours have increased very modestly across all employed husbands, and have shown non-ignorable increases among employed wives.



But these individual patterns can only tell part of the story. Work hours influence entire households, not only individuals. And if you consider work hours at the household level, we see very different patterns.



In particular, there have been quite substantial increases in the work of hours of dual-earner couples. Indeed, the increase in dual-earner's combined hours is greater than the sum of increases among working husbands and working wives. This is the case because those

employed men married in dual-earner households experienced larger increases in work hours than other men. Indeed, husbands married to stay-at-home wives actually experienced a very slight *decline* in their work hours. This suggests that not only are their *more* dual-earner families today, but that these dual-earner families are also working *harder* than ever before. This is a story about increasing *variation* in work hours, which has also been documented by others, including Robert Lerman at the Urban Institute. Those households which *already* worked the most—that is, those with two earners—also experienced the biggest increases in work hours.

The Household Workweek

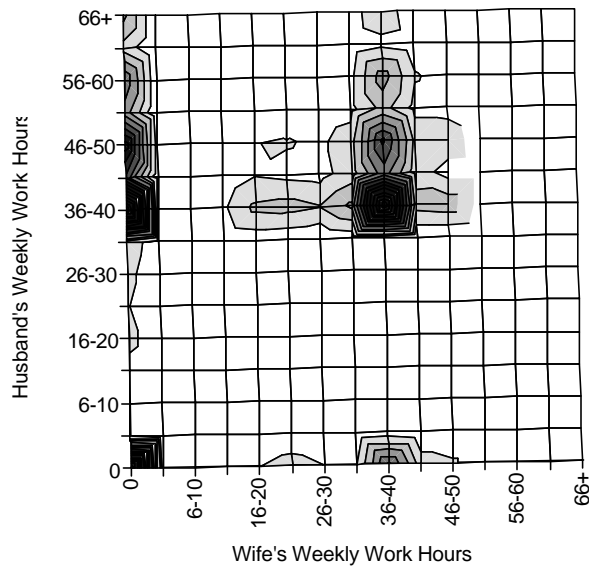
These data demonstrate that considering work hours at the household level yields new insights. This should not be surprising to social scientists, who frequently conceptualize the allocation of time to the labor market as a product of rational household-level calculation. But to what extent do the work hours behaviors we observe, including the trend of increasing hours for dual-earner families, reflect these household level calculations? Or, do actual work hours reflect the institutionalized nature of jobs and the workplace where part-time jobs are rare and under-rewarded? Are employees working long hours out of sense of professionalism, or because they are feel compelled to participate in the “rat race” which dictates that they must demonstrate a willingness to work long hours as a way to show loyalty or commitment to their job or employer?

To explore these issues, Phyllis Moen and I have used the National Survey of Families and Households, which collected data on from both partners in 4,500 married couple households across the nation. The NSFH is a two-wave study, with data collected in 1987-88 and again in 1994-95, which gathered extensive information about both work and family life. What particularly intrigued us about these data is that the NSFH asked both partners in a marriage about the number of hours they worked last week, as well as about their preferences for work hours. In particular, the NSFH asked respondents, “If you could work just the number of hours in paid employment that you would like, how many hours per week would that be?” By examining these responses and the relationship they have with both concurrent behavior as well as behavior *changes* over the two waves of the survey, we can develop a better idea of how and to what extent contemporary work force behavior fits and reflects the goals and desires with contemporary families.

Work Hours Patterns and Preferences in Married Couples

So our first task with these data is descriptive. How much do American families work? As I have indicated above, it's important to look and the work hours of both husbands and wives and how they relate to one another. To the end, we've created a graphic representation of the joint distribution of husbands and wives work hours. This is a sort of topographical map. In this figure, darker shades represent a high frequency of incidence, and white spaces indicate that fewer than one-half of one percent of couples are represented in the cross-tabulation.

Husband's versus Wife's Weekly Work Hours

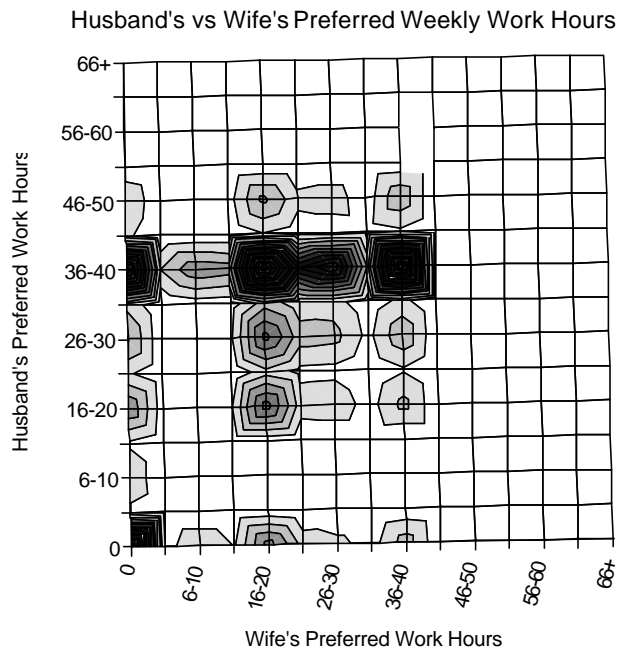


Perhaps the most notable characteristic of this graph is that much of the space is white. In fact, most possible combinations of work hours did not occur with any frequency. Primarily, couples are located at four corners of the space, which primarily represent the various permutations of either not being employed versus or being employed full-time (or more). The mass at the lower left, for example, represents couples in which both partners are not working, and these couples are primarily retired couples. The dark area going up the left side represents the traditional breadwinner-homemaker pattern, where the wife is working zero hours and the husband is working forty or more hours, and the large blob towards the middle represents the increasingly prevalent dual-earner partnership, where both partners are working full-time or more.

The void between these points indicates that the incidence of part-time work is rare in contemporary married couples. While a few wives work part-time while their husbands work full-time, there are extremely few cases of husbands working part-time hours. Indeed, what we find are couples in which both partners are working full-time or more (1 in 4 couples), couples in which the husband is

working full-time or more while the wife is not employed (also 1 in 4 couples), and couples in which both partners are not employed (these 15% of couples are primarily retirees). We also find a handful of couples, primarily in their 20s, in which the wife is working full-time and the husband is not employed, perhaps because he is enrolled in school. Between these four points there is an overwhelming lack of variety in couples' work patterns.

The next figure, illustrating the joint distribution of work hours preferences, reveals a considerably different picture.



Most notably, there is considerably more variation in preferences than in the analogous figure of work hours behavior. Where the first figure emphasize the black and white extremes of working full-time or not at all, this figure is more about shades of gray, in a literal and a figurative sense. For example, in this figure of work hour preferences, fully 1 in 6 couples indicate that they would prefer an arrangement in which *both* partners worked full time—a substantially greater percentage than the 1 in 50 couples who *actually do* work such schedules. The contrast between these figures begins to hint at the strong influence of the structure of jobs and workplaces, exhibiting little ability to actually *meet* workers preferences for work hours and instead constraining work options to institutionalized definitions of a full-time job—an argument I'll deal with in fuller detail in a moment.

From Preferences to Behavior

Looking at the data in this way helps to bring a several questions into focus. Two of those I'll address here. First, who is it that is experiencing the time-squeeze, working substantially longer hours

than they might prefer, working full-time when they prefer a part-time schedule, or working over-time when they'd like to stick with the standard 40 hour work week?

Second, how are preferences translated into behavioral outcomes over time? Are these preferences meaningful indicators, in that they actually predict behavioral changes? When are people able to successfully attain what they want? And, especially, are some preferences actually “easier” to meet than others?

The results of our analyses are available in detail in a Cornell Careers Institute working paper, but I will highlight some of the key findings in brief here.

First, for women, family context matters a lot, which may come as no surprise. Most notably, children, and especially children under the age of five, are associated with feeling overworked. But family matters in more subtle ways, as well. Women who are married to professional husbands or other men who tend to work long hours, for example, are more likely to feel like they need to cut back on their own jobs. This is important given both the professionalization of our occupational structure, and, as I documented above, the increase in work hours among men in dual-earner households. Even if it is husbands who put the long hours into their careers, wives feel the pressure of *his* lack of time for family life, and respond by wanting to cut back themselves. Among husbands, the time-squeeze is a less a result of family context—for example, wives' work doesn't contribute to husbands' feelings of overwork—but largely reflects the reality that they frequently work well over the “standard” 40 hours work week.

Our second analysis—which is more an analysis of process—how do preferences translate into behavior over time highlights the how it is we arrive at a situation in which people are not working what they say they would like to. Recalling the topographical maps above, what process make the images so different? How is it that fewer than 1 in 10 couples prefer the traditional breadwinner-homemaker paradigm, but almost 1 in 4 couples in the sample end up fitting that model? At the other end of the spectrum, how is that only 14% of couples say that they would like to fit the “dual-career” mold (with each working full-time or more), while in fact almost 30% actually do? In essence, we ask: why don't couples work the hours that they prefer?

Importantly, I findings indicate that preferences do matter, in that they do predict behavior. People who say that they want to work more are more likely to increase their work hours and people who say that they want to work less are more likely to decrease their work hours. However, even while that association is strong, it is also clear that some preferences are easier to meet than others. Easiest of all to

attain, with no employer input at all, is simply not working. Compared to those who preferred regular full-time hours, both husbands and wives who wanted to be out of the labor force are far more likely to meet their desired end. Also likely to have few problems meeting their goal are husbands who prefer to work more than the standard 35-45 hour work week. Men who actually seek to work very long hours are apparently easily accommodated by their employers; they are nearly twice as likely to meet their preferences as husbands who wanted to work the standard full-time work week.

But in stark contrast to the happy outcomes, it appears to be next to impossible to meet the preference for any kind of part-time work. Both wives and especially husbands who prefer part-time work are far less likely to actually get part-time work when compared to those who prefer and find full-time work. Herein is the essential contrast between the topographical images above: the many couples who prefer some type of part-time arrangement are frequently faced between a rock and a hard place: 0 versus 40 or more hours of work each week.

In short, there is a widespread preference for part-time work in married couples, but for some reason, these preferences are not being met; the preference for part-time work is not being translated into behavioral outcomes in the long run. Why?

Two models, one from sociology, the other from economics, suggests why employers have failed to accommodate preferences for part-time work.

The Great Structural Lag

First, sociologists like Matilda White Riley have developed the idea of a “structural lag.” She argues that social institutions— as habitualized, sanctioned and legitimized patterns of action—are resistant to change. When demographic, social or economics conditions change rapidly—as we’ve witnessed with the explosive increase in married women’s labor force participation—the relatively entrenched nature of social institutions means that a mismatch develops between existing social structures and desired or socially “optimal” practices.

In the case of paid work, we can point to, for example, how the restructuring of jobs, which occurred in the wake of the Great Depression, continues to shape work today. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 is a case in point. Among other things, the FLSA defined the standard 40-hour work week and mandated special overtime compensation while exempting professional occupations from its purview. The FLSA is perennially touched-up but it’s

character remains fundamentally unchanged over sixty years, despite both a massive shift from breadwinner/homemaker to dual-earner families and, with increasing professionalization, an increasing proportion of the labor force exempted from its protections. As a result of this and other forms of institutional inertia, organizational policies and expectations regarding work hours are predicated on an outdated template where privileged professionals can be assumed to have a wife taking care of home life.

The New “Rat Race”

A second model, from economics, bears an age-old moniker, the “Rat Race” model, but represents a very recent development of economic theory, garnering attention in a recent volume of the *American Economic Review*. In short, this model suggests that employers frequently over-value the tendency to work hours, particularly when objective measures of productivity are hard to come by. In the absence of good measures of output volume or quality, employers look at work hours an indicator of employee “quality.” They in turn reward long hours with pay increases and advancement. This results in a situation where employees—especially those in a career-building life stage who have the possibilities of promotions ahead of them—have a great incentive to work long hours, even if they prefer some reduced hours schedule.

This model suggests that some workers may work longer hours than they would like. But it also suggests a mechanism through which the expectation of long work hours has risen—and, ironically, it’s driven by an *increase* in the population of workers who would prefer *fewer hours*. In short, an increase in the supply of such workers serves to increase the number of workers who are, at least during early career development years, “masquerading” as workers who prefer long hours, in turn “raising the bar” on the acceptable work hours for “quality” employees. Indeed, it may be that the rise of the dual-earner family has brought about just this infusion of workers with reduced hours preferences. As Rebitzer and Taylor write, “Labor markets will not adjust smoothly to the changes brought about by the rise in female labor force participation. In the absence of some intervention in the market, firms will find it difficult to provide the optimum number of short-hour jobs in response to the increasing numbers of female and male workers seeking to balance job and family responsibilities” (1995) In sum, current conditions of employment may reflect more than just an inertial “lag” in responding to changing preferences, but may also constitute a *reaction against* an infusion of workers with preferences to work reduced hours.

Fostering Change

The growing commitment to employment in American families does not simply reflect a growing taste for employment or an underlying desire for long hours on the job. Our analyses suggest there is a widespread preference for part-time work in working families today. Yet that preference for part-time work is rarely met. In new data just collected through the *Cornell Employment and Family Careers Institute*, working professionals—those exempted from the Fair Labor and Standards Act—who told us that they worked too much overwhelmingly pointed the finger at workplace constraints. Over two-thirds of our respondents indicated that the main reason that they work the hours that they do is because their job requires it and that long hours are defined into the kind of work they want to do. For example, one husband working 50 plus hours a week told us, “I won’t be taken seriously in a professional manner if I work less than the hours that I’m working now.” A women in a similar position says, “My boss wants me there at least that much... it wouldn’t go over well with my boss to work less... He would view me as a valued less.” Others face a starker reality, indicating that they work long hours simply “to be able to employed” at all. In contrast to this dominant theme of employer-based constraints, fewer than 1 in 5 of our respondents suggest that they work more than they would like to for financial reasons.

The lack of cultural and legal protections from required overtime for the large and growing pool of professionals results in enormous costs, both at the personal level, in terms of quality of life, and at the societal level, as overworked families struggle to outsource the care of their homes and children to others, sometimes with unsatisfactory results. It may be time to reconsider the goals and effects of the Fair Labor and Standards Act which has exempted many contemporary American families from its protections.