

Issues



in Labor Statistics

U.S. Department of Labor
Bureau of Labor Statistics

How long is the workweek?

Efforts to shorten the work week were top labor issues in the first four decades of this century and resulted in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. In the 1990s, time spent at work is still a key factor in determining the quality of jobs and one's standard of living. At one extreme, those in managerial and professional jobs who have been spared from the impact of corporate restructuring are perceived as having to work longer workweeks to protect their own positions. On the other end of the market, many newly created jobs have been stereotyped as low wage, part-time, poor-quality jobs.

This report examines trends in weekly working hours between 1976 and 1993 using data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), a representative national sample of households.¹ The data suggest that the average length of the workweek has risen only slightly since the mid-1970s; more important has been a change in the distribution of work hours. In this respect, the most noteworthy differences are an increase in the share of persons who are working very long workweeks—49 hours or more—and a decline in the share working 40 hours a week. A companion piece examines annual work hours and will be released at the same time as this report.

Average hours at work increase

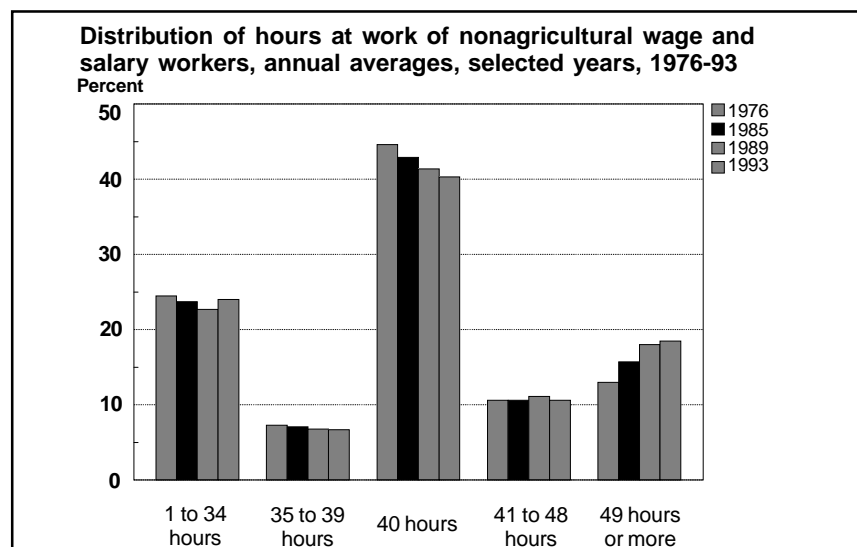
only 1 hour for men and 2 hours for women from 1976 to 1993. Part of these increases can be attributed to a changing age profile of the American workforce (see table). By 1993, baby-boomers—those born between 1946 and 1964—all had moved into the central working ages of 25 to 54. Meanwhile, younger and older workers comprised a declining share of employment. Workweeks typically are longer for workers age 25 to 54, and part-time employment is more common among younger and older workers.

To gauge the effect of the shifting age distribution on the change in workweeks, average hours in 1993 were calculated as if the age distribution of those at work had remained unchanged since 1976. As the tabulation below shows, after removing the effect of age, the

workweek for men was virtually unchanged and women's weekly hours rose by only a single hour.

	Average hours	Age-adjusted hours
Men, 16 years and older	41.0	41.2
Women, 16 years and older	34.0	35.0

The small changes in the length of the workweek, adjusted or unadjusted, reflect offsetting increases and decreases in the hours-at-work distribution. Between 1976 and 1993, the proportion of nonfarm wage and salary workers who reported that they were at work exactly 40 hours per week declined, while the share working 49 hours or more rose. The proportions working



¹ Data from 1994 onward are not strictly comparable to those from prior years because of a redesign of the CPS.

Percent distribution of nonagricultural wage and salary workers at work and their average weekly hours by age and sex, annual averages, 1976 and 1993

Characteristics	Total at work		Average hours	
	1976	1993	1976	1993
Total (thousands)	73,276	102,615	38.1	39.2
16 to 24 years	24.0	16.7	33.6	32.5
25 to 54 years	62.2	72.6	40.1	41.1
55 years and over	13.8	10.7	37.2	36.8
Men (thousands)	42,994	54,573	41.0	42.0
16 to 24 years	21.8	16.2	35.4	34.2
25 to 54 years	64.3	73.1	43.1	44.1
55 years and over	14.0	10.7	39.7	39.6
Women (thousands)	30,282	48,042	34.0	36.0
16 to 24 years	27.1	17.2	31.5	30.7
25 to 54 years	59.2	72.1	35.3	37.7
55 years and over	13.6	10.7	33.4	33.6

fewer than 40 hours and 41-48 hours remained fairly stable. (See chart.)

The growth in the share of workers reporting very long workweeks is not infrequently attributed to a shift in employment towards high-hour occupations such as managers, professionals, and certain sales workers. A detailed analysis of the growth in the number of persons working 49 hours or more from 1985 to 1993 shows that only 8.1 percent

of the increase was produced by changes in the occupational mix. The rest was evenly divided between the impact of overall employment growth during the period and the rise in the share of long workweeks in every major occupational group.

For additional information on hours at work and a technical description of the Current Population Survey, contact Randy E. Ilg or Jennifer M. Gardner, Office of

Employment and Unemployment Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Washington, DC 20212. Tel: (202)-606-6378. Information in this report is available to sensory impaired individuals on request. Voice phone: (202) 606-7828; TDD phone: (202) 606-5897; TDD message referral phone: 1-800-326-2577. This material is in the public domain and, with appropriate credit, may be reproduced without permission.

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