

Burnt Out Britain

How we use and misuse our time,
and why it matters

Jenevieve Treadwell

ONWARD >

About Onward

Onward is a modernising think tank whose mission is to develop bold and practical ideas to boost economic opportunity and strengthen communities in all parts of the United Kingdom.

We are not affiliated to any party but believe in a mainstream conservatism. We recognise the value of markets and support the good that government can do and believe that a strong society is the foundation of both. We want to seize the opportunities of the future while preserving the accumulated knowledge of the past. We believe that most people are hard-working, aspirational and decent, but that many do not have the opportunities to fulfil their potential.

Our goal is to address the needs of the whole country: young as well as old; urban as well as rural; in all parts of the UK – particularly places that feel neglected or ignored in Westminster – by working with ordinary people directly and developing practical policies that work.

Thanks

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Summary of the argument





Our time is precious. With it we build connections, we take on work that can fulfil and sustain us, we care for others and ourselves. But increasingly it can feel as if we don't have enough of it. Our ability to connect with our communities and our sense of well-being have suffered as a result.

People say that they cannot find enough time to spend with their friends, family or local areas. 40% of parents feel that work prevents them from engaging with their community and 45% feel that it stops them from doing hobbies.¹ In focus groups, Onward has found that many consider life not to be plannable with people “too busy” or “too knackered to go to the pub let alone volunteer.”² This is contributing to a weakened national social fabric.

There are three prevailing myths about how we use our time that are used to explain this. First, we are all getting too little sleep. Sleep experts claim that we are in the middle of a sleeplessness epidemic which has left us exhausted.³ 43% of UK adults claim that they are not getting the recommended seven hours of sleep.

Second is the myth that we are all working too much. Increasingly, polling of workers shows that many are experiencing burnout. This is unsurprising, with three in five workers claiming that they work longer hours than they would like and a quarter reporting overworking by 10 hours or more a week.⁴

The final myth is that we are all far too rushed. There is a sense that modernity has brought a faster pace of life.⁵ This busyness is celebrated as a sign of status and wealth. But the more we try to do, the more we feel pressured.

But what is happening to our time is more complex. These myths are neat but too simple. It is not true that we are all sleeping too little, working more, or feeling more rushed. Instead, to work out what is really happening and to whom, we have broken down time into four parts: necessary, contracted, committed and free.

Necessary time is made up of the things we must do, such as sleeping or eating. Contracted time is composed of the things we have agreed to do, like paid work. Committed time is made of the things our circumstances require us to do, like childcare or housework. Free time is composed of the things we want to do like watching a film or visiting friends.

Necessary time: Family life, working hours and technology all eat into the time we spend on ourselves.

- On average, we are sleeping more but spending slightly less time looking after ourselves. But some of us have managed to buck these trends.
- Parents have the lowest increase in time sleeping and take less time for themselves than those without children.
- Those that overwork sleep less and spend less time on themselves than other workers. Overworked women sleep around an hour less than those that work normal shifts and less time on meals than those on shorter shifts.
- Working at night disrupts our body clock, pushing our sleep schedule out of sync with our friends and family. 9-to-5-ers follow a traditional pattern of sleep – 75% are awake by 7:30 am and 78% asleep by midnight. But night workers see their schedule shifted significantly later. 37% are still asleep at 10 am and by midnight 78% are still awake. This makes it harder to connect.
- Using technology before bed is disrupting our sleep. 86% of those that had unbroken sleep did not use their phones before bed. In comparison, 36% of those that woke up 5 times or more a night used their phones before bed.

Contracted time: Those in more vulnerable roles, like those working non-traditional hours or low-income women, are working more and are working in ways that are inhibiting connection.

- On average we are not all working more. In fact full-time men have seen their hours fall. However, changes in the economy have created longer shifts for some vulnerable groups.
- Weekend work used to mean a shorter shift; this is no longer true. Weekend shifts are longer on average but this shift is being driven by “overworkers” who have seen their already long shifts increase by an hour. Vulnerable groups are bearing the brunt of this.
- Part-time shifts are an average of an hour and 30 minutes longer per day than they were in the 1970s. This is being driven by men, whose shifts are lasting 34% longer.
- Women are working more. But wealthier women are able to avoid working on unsociable days. Low-income women work more on weekends.

Committed time: Those working more spend less time on domestic chores and childcare, but wealth gives people more control over their time.

- Overall, we are spending less time on domestic chores and more time with our children than before. But factors like work, wealth, and womanhood exacerbate these changes.
- Work eats into the time we have for tasks like childcare and house care. This is keenly felt by overworkers who spend half the time workers who spend 6 hours or less working on house care a day and 20 minutes less on childcare a day.
- Those that earn more spend less time on domestic care and can find more time for their children. High-income groups spend less time on domestic chores than lower-income groups per day. While work decreases the time people can spend with their children, wealth helps overworkers to pay for childcare support.
- Women spend more time on household chores and childcare than men, regardless of wealth or work. While both mothers and fathers are spending more time on childcare than before, women still do more.

Free time: Our free time is coming under increasing pressure, we are spending less time on leisure activities and the time we have left is more fragmented.

- We spend less than half the time volunteering than we used to. However, rates have remained high, suggesting that people are still keen to volunteer but that they are committing less time to it.
- Technology has changed leisure by introducing new activities and changing how we perform others. We no longer commit to an activity, instead, we can multitask. In 2014, 17% of people used technology while also doing leisure activities up from 1% in 2000.
- Work interferes with leisure time but it is night workers and weekend workers that are struggling the most as their schedules are out of line with society. Parents are also struggling to connect as childcare takes up more time and some activities have become less child friendly.
- Leisure has become more fragmented as it we try to fit in more across our day. On a weekend in 1974, someone could expect to spend just over 5 hours on leisure activities broken up into 4 episodes across a day. Each of these episodes was, on average, over an hour long. But by 2014 the number of episodes of leisure in a day had increased to 7 while time taken has fallen to 4.⁶

Overall, most of us are sleeping more, some of us are working more and parents are spending more time with their children. This displaces time from other areas like self-care and leisure, but it does not stop people from wanting to do these things. Therefore, people are squeezing more and more into their days. This

results in multitasking through fragmentation – breaking up activities to do something else – which creates a stronger sense of time pressure and reduces the quality of activities.

As we chop and change between activities, we break down the distinction between different types of time. This can lead to us feeling burnt out as work is coming home with us, or that childcare never stops. Ultimately, this means that the symptoms – tiredness, feeling overworked and feeling rushed – are real, but our diagnosis is wrong. We aren't all sleeping less, working more or reporting feeling rushed. But our days have become busier and the balance between different activities has been lost.

Addressing this sense of exhaustion, overworking and time pressure requires policies that target those suffering the most. Initiatives like the four-day working week will not achieve this, as they fail to recognise that it goes beyond an issue of volume and is instead about how we work, when we are working and who is working. Repairing our social fabric means confronting Britain's burnout.

Running out of time?

Three common myths



It is said that modern life is manic. The pace is faster, the days busier, and work and family life more demanding. People could not possibly spend more of their time volunteering or engaging with their community - as the quotes above from focus groups illustrate - because there just aren't enough hours in the day.

Or are there? There are three prevailing myths about how our use of time is changing: that overall people sleep less, work more, and are more rushed than ever. But time-use diaries from the last 40 years - which catalogue the activities of the day in sequential, 10-minute intervals - allow us to compare claims with reality. The picture they reveal is far more nuanced.

Sleeping less?

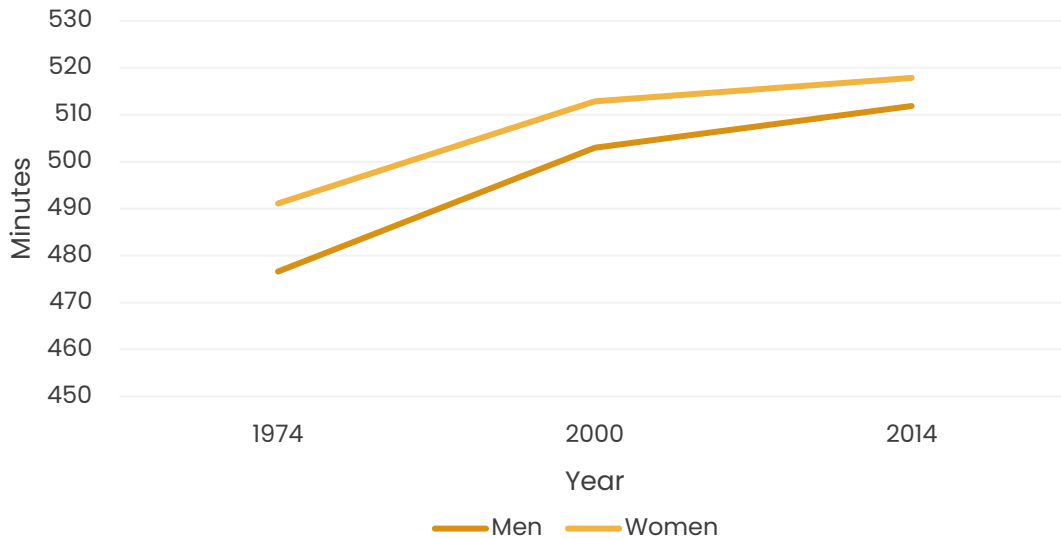
37% of people report they do not get sufficient sleep. Around 2 in 10 feel tired all the time and another 3 in 10 are often tired, with only 1 in 10 reporting that they are not often tired.⁷ That is not surprising: a YouGov sleep tracker found that 43% of adults are sleeping less than 7 hours and 12% of us are sleeping for only 5 hours a night.⁸ Technology, work, and entertainment are all blamed for creating what academics have called a “sleep-deprived society.”⁹ Some experts have even declared a sleeplessness epidemic.¹⁰

Lack of sleep is bad for physical health. Compared to those that sleep 7 hours or more a night, those that sleep for 6 hours or less are 30% more likely to develop dementia¹¹ and 6% more likely to be obese.¹² Poor sleep is carcinogenic, with links to breast and prostate cancer.¹³ And a lack of sleep can be bad for relationships. Those that sleep poorly are more likely to avoid social situations¹⁴ and are more likely to report being lonely.¹⁵ These problems are circular. Lonely people are also more likely to suffer from poor sleep¹⁶ and develop feelings of stress and loneliness as a result.¹⁷

But overall, people are not sleeping less. In fact many are sleeping more. On average, adults have increased their time sleeping by around 30 minutes a day over the last four decades. In 1974, on average men slept for 7 hours and 57 minutes and women slept for 8 hours and 11 minutes. 40 years later, men were sleeping 8 h 32 minutes and women for 8 hours 38 minutes.

Figure 1: Time spent sleeping by gender, 1974 - 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014, 2000 and 1974. Onward Analysis.



Working more?

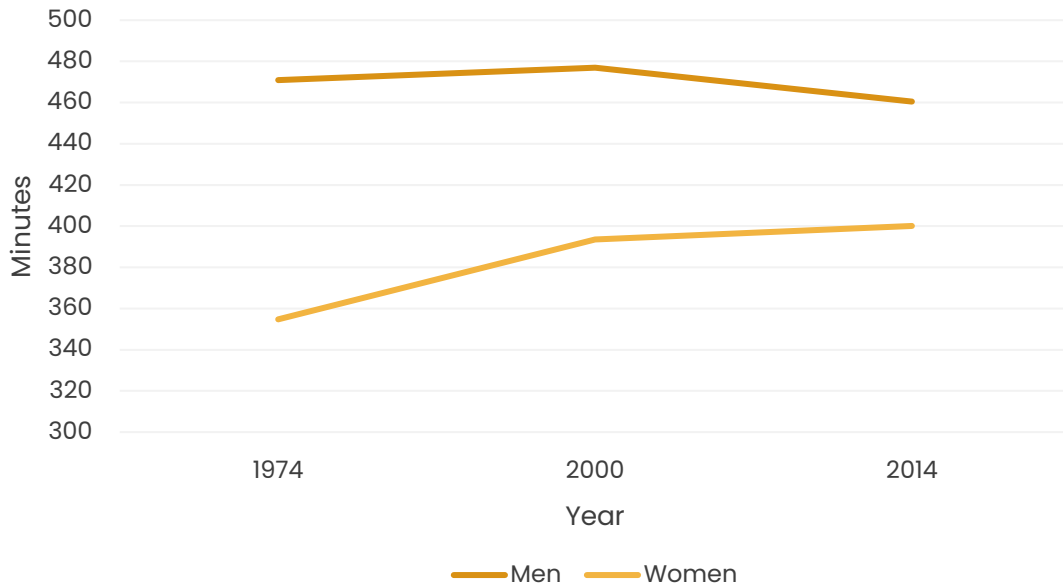
It is often said that people are working far more than they used to.¹⁸ Many blame the 24-hour economy for creating non-traditional, unsociable hours, and Britain's work culture for seeing overworking as a virtue.¹⁹ Three in five workers report working longer hours than they'd like and a quarter report overworking by 10 or more hours a week.²⁰ This takes a toll, with 18% of workers reporting that they always come home from work exhausted and 55% say they feel used up some or all of the time at the end of the day. Workplace stress is currently responsible for 50% of sick days.²¹

Too much time spent working can also lead to disconnection. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Good Work Index found that 26% of workers feel that work is interfering with their personal commitments.²² The Working Families Index found that just under 40% of parents saw work as impinging on their ability to take part in community activities while 45% found that it prevented them from pursuing their hobbies and interests.²³

But overall people are not working significantly longer hours. Despite the claims of large increases in working time, there has been, on average, only a very limited rise in working hours since 1974. And this trend differs markedly by gender. Working time has actually decreased for men by 2%, with only a minor increase for women of 13%.

Figure 2: Minutes spent by adults in paid work by gender, 1974 – 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014, 2000 and 1974. Onward Analysis.



More rushed than ever?

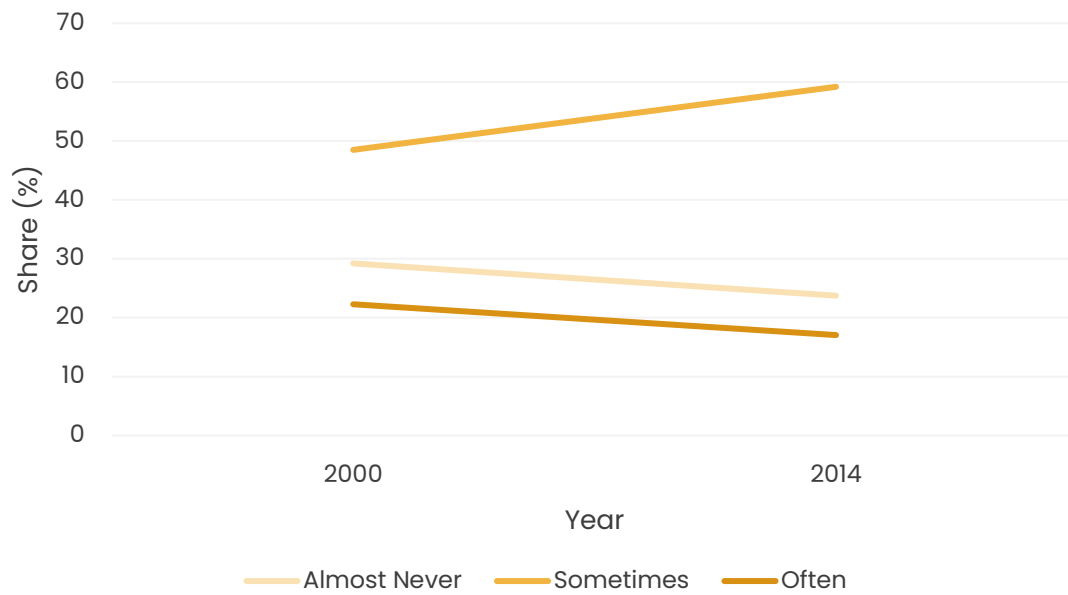
Once, having free time was a sign of wealth and status. Now the opposite is true: busier is better.²⁴ This “speeding up” of the pace of life leads to a greater sense of time pressure.²⁵ This is called the “time squeeze,” the idea that people don’t have enough time to do what they need to do, let alone what they’d like to do.²⁶ For a quarter of American women, the feeling that they were short of time meant they put off going to the doctor even when they needed to.²⁷

The feeling that time is scarce leads people to feel rushed.²⁸ A survey in the UK found that feelings of time poverty push people to eat later, buy takeout rather than cook, and eat on the move.²⁹ And feeling rushed is also directly linked to emotional exhaustion and other chronic conditions, like anxiety and obesity.³⁰

But many people are not feeling more rushed. Compared to the above trends for sleep and work, the true picture of how rushed we feel compared to the myth is more equivocal. In aggregate, the share of people reporting that they are often rushed has fallen in the last two decades from 20% to 17%. But the share of people saying they almost never feel rushed has fallen too. In between these two extremes, there has been a growth in the share of people feeling sometimes rushed, from 49% to 59%.

Figure 3: “How often do you feel rushed?” change, 2000 – 2014


Source: MTUS, UK Time Use Surveys 2014 and 2000. Onward Analysis.



Different times:

A more complicated
picture





There is no “time squeeze” in the literal sense. The day is still made up of the same number of hours, minutes and seconds it has always has been. But how people structure their day and use their time can shift perceptions and impact their health and relationships.

The social researcher Dagfinn Ås’s four types of time help to understand how time use effects perception.³¹

- **Necessary Time** is what we need to fulfil our basic needs. This includes sleep, meals, and personal care like washing and dressing. This time is unavoidable. There is of course variation – for instance, between those that prefer a bath and those that prefer a shower – but overall, this time is relatively stable, even across countries.³²
- **Contracted Time** is what we spend on paid work. This portion of our daily time can generally be planned as it is something people have agreed upon, although the degree of choice is very variable. For those that work, contracted hours take up a substantial amount of the waking day and therefore influence the structure of our time significantly.
- **Committed Time** refers to acts that people do because of choices they have made. Getting a pet, buying a house or even having a child all have consequences for how people spend their days. Committed time looks a lot like work – but unlike contracted time, people can pay others to reduce commitments, through things like childcare, household workers, or a dog walker.
- **Free Time** is what is left when people have done what they need to do (Necessary), what they are paid to do (Contracted), and what they have chosen to do (Committed). This could include socialising with friends, going on a walk or going out for dinner.

These types of time compete with each other. Sleeping more means less time to walk the dog in the morning before starting work, taking on more hours at the office means less time at home with family – there will always be a trade-off.³³ So how are people resolving these trade-offs today? And what does that mean for the structure of their days?

Necessary time

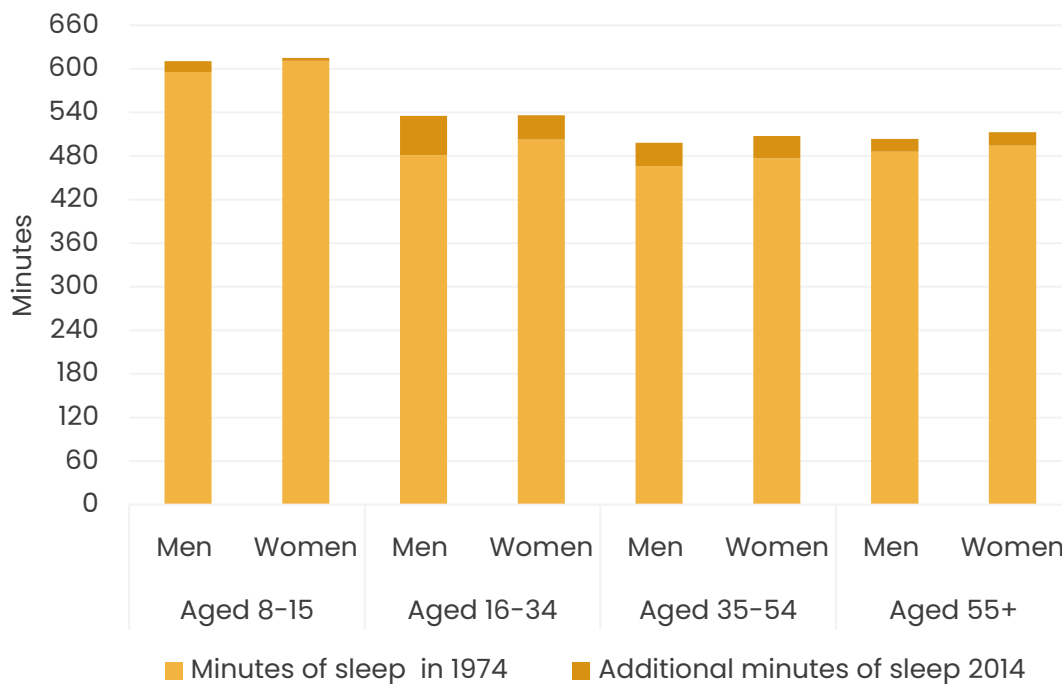
Sleeping and eating are the most basic human needs. They can also be important acts of self-care which serve as a buffer to stress. They keep us functioning, preventing what healthcare experts call “breakdowns or deterioration within systems.”³⁴

Sleep is hard to measure effectively. This is a problem with how data on sleep is collected. The belief that sleep deprivation is a growing problem is largely founded upon polling and survey data. But research has shown that self-reported sleep does not compare accurately with objectively monitored sleep.³⁵ When respondents are asked to estimate how much sleep they get a night in surveys they suffer from a context effect bias: how they feel about sleep impacts how they judge and describe it.³⁶ Time diaries avoid this bias by making participants put activities in the context of their whole day.³⁷

Time diaries show that everyone is sleeping more. Particularly, young adults (16-34 years). This group has seen the largest increase in their time asleep since 1974, with young women gaining an extra 40 minutes of sleep and young men an extra 20.

Figure 4: Time spent asleep by gender and age groups, 1974 and 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014 and 1974. Onward Analysis.



As we've seen, overall people are getting more sleep. But some groups are sleeping less and having their "necessary time" squeezed. The three enemies of necessary time? Children, work, and technology.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, childless people sleep for longer than parents. But this wasn't always the case. In the 1970s parents were getting more sleep than those without children. Over the last 50 years, parents haven't been sleeping less, they just haven't gained any additional sleep whereas childless people have gained 10%.

Parents might not be getting more sleep because they are being kept awake by their kids - who are sleeping less than they were in the 1970s.³⁸ Children need more sleep than adults and they are still getting over 10 hours a night - the most of any age group. However, they have seen the smallest increase in time asleep across the decades. Boys aged 8-15 years old are sleeping 15 minutes more a night but girls of the same age are sleeping only 4 minutes more.

Parenthood impacts self-care for mothers more than fathers. Mothers spend less time looking after themselves than women without children. Mothers spend 9 minutes less a day washing and dressing than childless women do.³⁹ Men, on average, spend less time on things like dressing and washing than women but there is little difference between fathers and childless men.

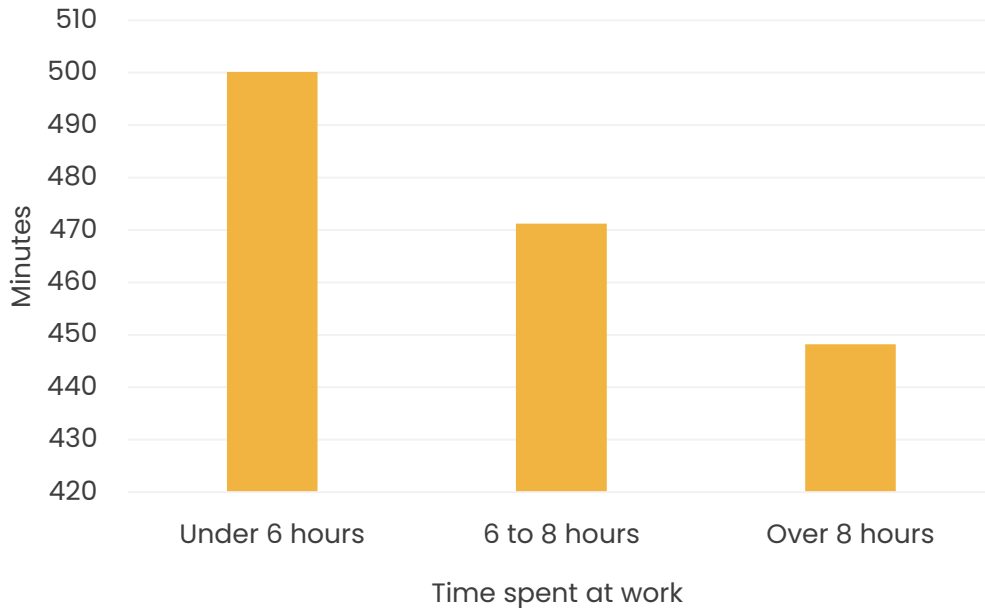
"Overworkers" and night workers have less time to spend on themselves

As working hours increase, time spent on self-care falls. 42% of men and women work between 6 and 8 hours a day, these are the people working the traditional or "normal shifts." But 37% of men and 21% of women work over 8 hours a day - these are Britain's "overworkers."

Overworkers spend the least amount of time on self-care. They spend 54 minutes a day washing and dressing, 8 minutes less than those that work 6 till 8. Overworked men sleep 48 minutes less and overworked women sleep 61 minutes less than men and women working 6 hours or under. Over a five-day workweek, an overworked woman could be sleeping just over 5 hours a week than those working 6 to 8 hour shifts.

Figure 5: Minutes spent asleep by shift length, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. Onward Analysis.



The same pattern remains true for mealtimes. Overworkers spend around 17 minutes less eating compared to those working under 6 hours and 10 minutes less than those working between 6 to 8 hours.

Self-care is not just affected by how much we work but also by *when we work*

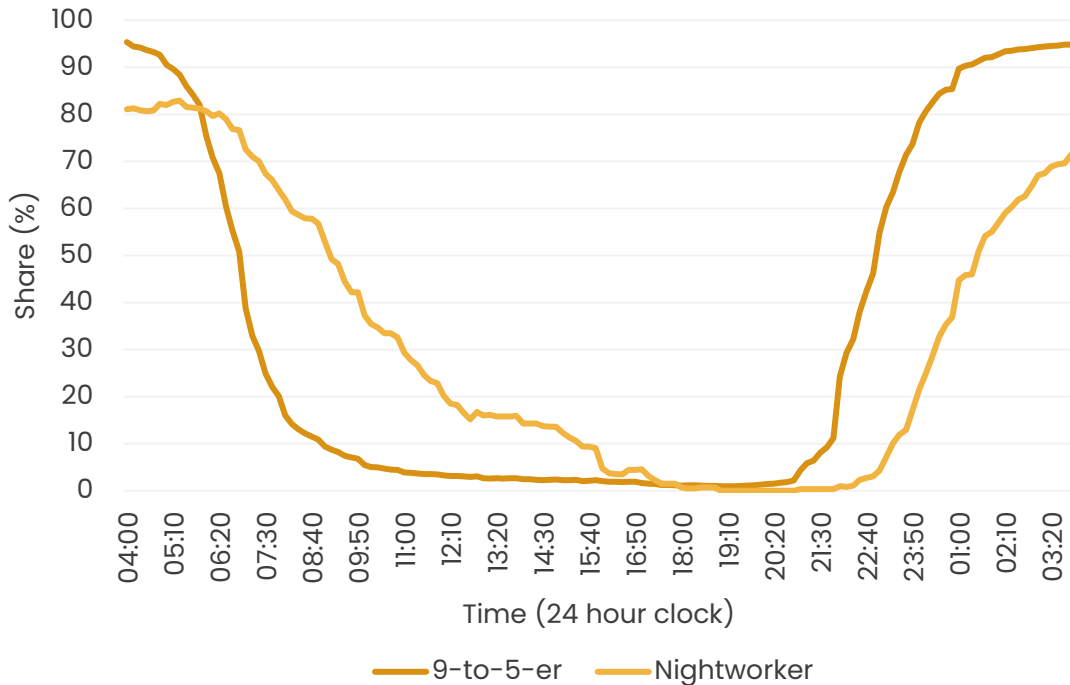
Traditionally, work followed a standard pattern: start work around 9 and finish around 5 or 6. On weekdays, 50% of people work only within social hours. These are the “9-to-5-ers.” This schedule is social because many people work these hours, making it easier to connect.

Unsocial work is work that takes place outside these hours.⁴⁰ Weekends are always unsocial because the majority of people do not work. On weekdays, 33% of people work for at least an hour at an unsocial time.

9-to-5-ers follow a traditional pattern of sleep – 75% are awake by 7:30 am and 78% asleep by midnight. But night workers see their schedule shifted significantly later. 37% are still asleep at 10 am and by midnight 78% are still awake.

Figure 6: Proportion of workers asleep across the day by time of day worked, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. Onward Analysis.



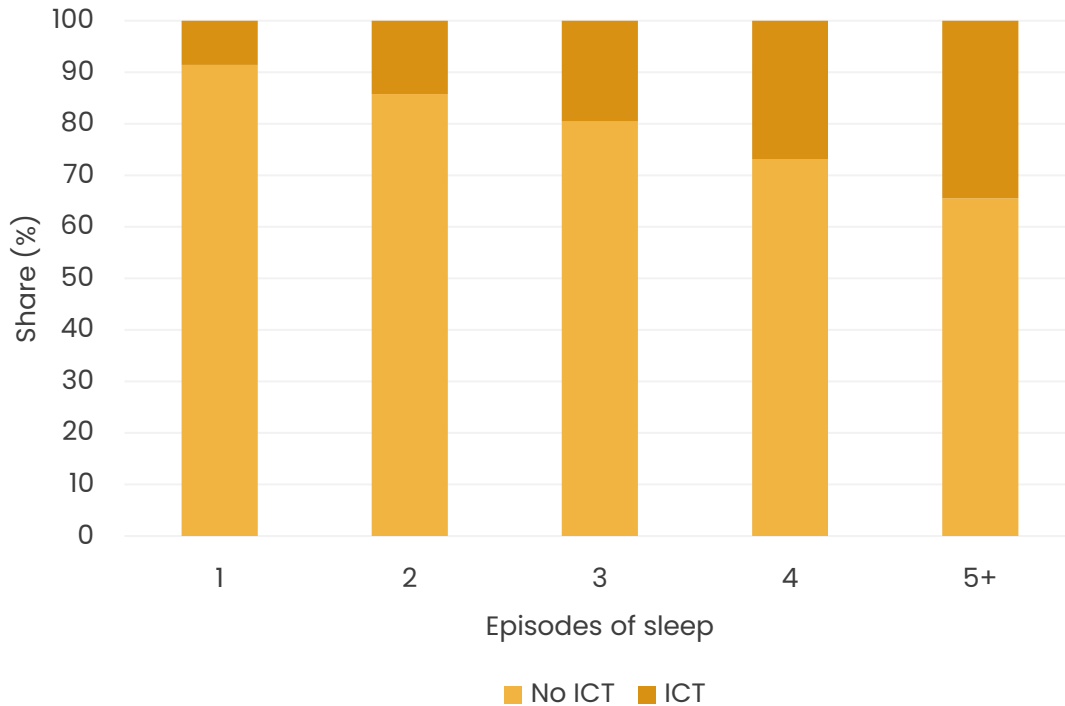
Technology is disrupting our sleep

Technology is also impacting necessary time. Blue light – the light that is emitted by mobile phones, laptops, and TVs – inhibits the production of melatonin, the hormone that regulates sleep. Since the 1970s there has been a proliferation of these devices which has made sleep poorer.⁴¹

Those that use their phone before bed are more likely to have poor-quality sleep than those that do not. Of those that had two unbroken episodes of sleep, 14% used tech before bed. But for those that saw their sleep break five or more times, 34% used before bed.

Figure 7: Sleep episodes by technology use before bed, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. Onward Analysis.



This is consistent with other research that ICT use before bed reduces both the quantity and quality of sleep.⁴² A 2014 study on the effect of night-time technology use on adolescents found that of those that took their phone to bed, 37% were texting late into the night and 1 in 12 was woken up by a text in the middle of the night at least twice a week.⁴³

It is possible that technology is driving a broader decline in the quality of sleep. In 1974, a 39-year-old man could expect to have been asleep twice in the day – taking them from one day to another. That same man in 2014 is likely to break his sleep at twice, creating 4 distinct episodes of sleep. A 30-year-old woman in 2014 could expect 5 distinct episodes of sleep across the day, up from three in 1974. This pattern of inconsistent, broken sleep detracts from the quality and benefits of sleep.⁴⁴

Therefore, the time we need for ourselves is being eaten into by children, work, and technology. Parents are struggling to make time for themselves. They have missed out on the increase in sleep that the rest of the population has felt, even though they recover more sleep as their children age. Overworkers and night workers are struggling too, losing time to spend on themselves and making it harder for them to plan their days to connect with others. And tech use before bed is worsening the quality of our sleep, making even the right amount feel like far too little.

Contracted time

The “typical” worker can be a misleading concept when it comes to our contracted time. Averages hide a polarisation between different types of workers that have seen contrasting trends in how much time they spend working per day.

Like sleep, asking people to estimate their working time leads to inaccurate data. The US Bureau of Labour Statistics found that at all levels, workers overestimate how much they work. And that the more they work the more they overestimate. The Bureau of Labour Statistics found that American workers were overestimating their typical working hours. For those workers that estimated that they worked 75 hours or more a week their time diaries reflected only 50 hours.⁴⁵

Over the last half century, full-time roles have remained the most common type of work and full-time hours have remained broadly constant. But from time diaries, we can see that there have been big changes for three main groups: weekend workers, part-time workers, and women. Some groups are working longer or non-traditional hours and low and high-income women are working more. Much of this can be traced back to the shift to a 24-hour, service-led economy.

The structure of the economy has changed and so has its composition

The time of the day no longer prevents people from doing things. UberEats promises 24-hour food delivery if you get hungry in the small hours. If you are unhappy with a product you can call Amazon’s 24-hour customer service number. Or, if you suddenly remember you have forgotten something at a friend’s house, you can order a Bolt to pick it up.

This is great for consumers. But someone must work these shifts. Their working hours put them at odds with normal workers. Social activities are largely organised according to the rhythms of traditional workers – drinks at 6 pm with colleagues after work, weekend coffee dates with friends or family. Shift, weekend, and night workers are cut out of this as their working schedules are either unplannable or at odds with the traditional rhythm of working life.⁴⁶

People are working longer hours at the weekend

It is estimated that in 2020, around a quarter of employed people did paid work on the weekend. Weekend workers used to have short shifts. In 1974, a weekend worker could expect to work for just over 5 hours a day compared to around 7 hours on a weekday. But in 2014, a weekend worker could expect to work for over 6 hours while weekday working time has remained the same. Both weekend days have seen an increase but Sunday's increase is sharper – rising by an hour 15.

This is primarily a result of the relaxation of Sunday trading laws. Before the reform, 8.5% of the workforce was employed on Sundays, but by 2021 18.7% worked on Sundays.⁴⁷ A Sunday worker once worked 4 and a half hours, but by 2014 they were working for almost 6 hours.

This increase is largely driven by those who overwork. In figure 8 below, we can see that weekend workers in 2014 are more likely to be overworking. In 1974, a weekend worker was much more likely to be working a short shift – 58% worked under 6 hours, 25% worked 6 to 8 hours and only 14% worked over 8 hours. In 2014, 46% worked 6 hours or less, 26% worked 6 to 8 hours and 27% worked over 8 hours.

Figure 8: Proportion of all weekend workers working different shift lengths, 1974 and 2014.

Source: MTUS, UK 2014 and 1974. Onward Analysis.

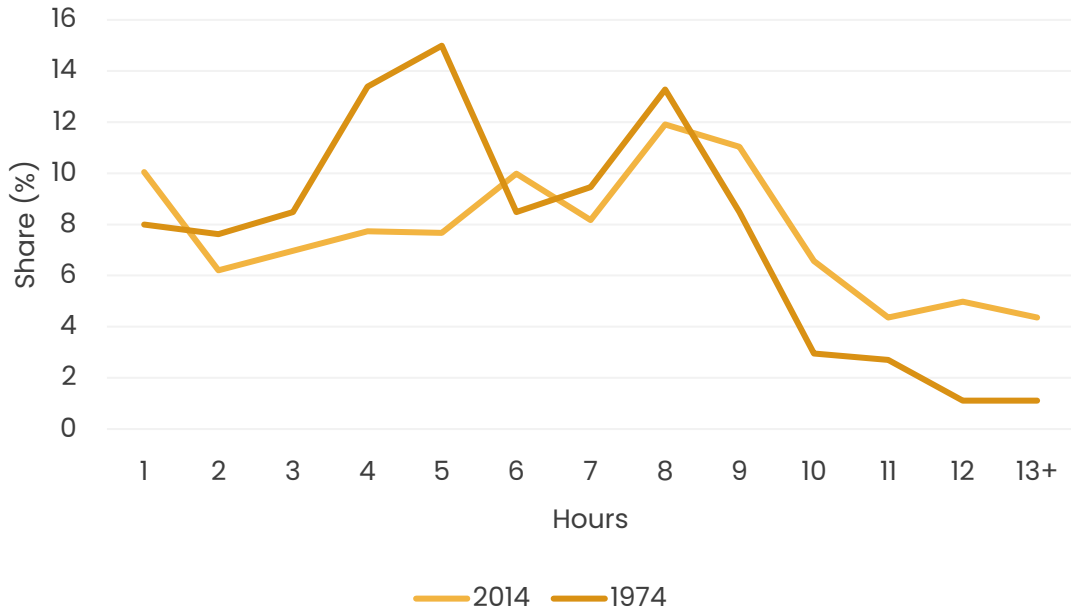
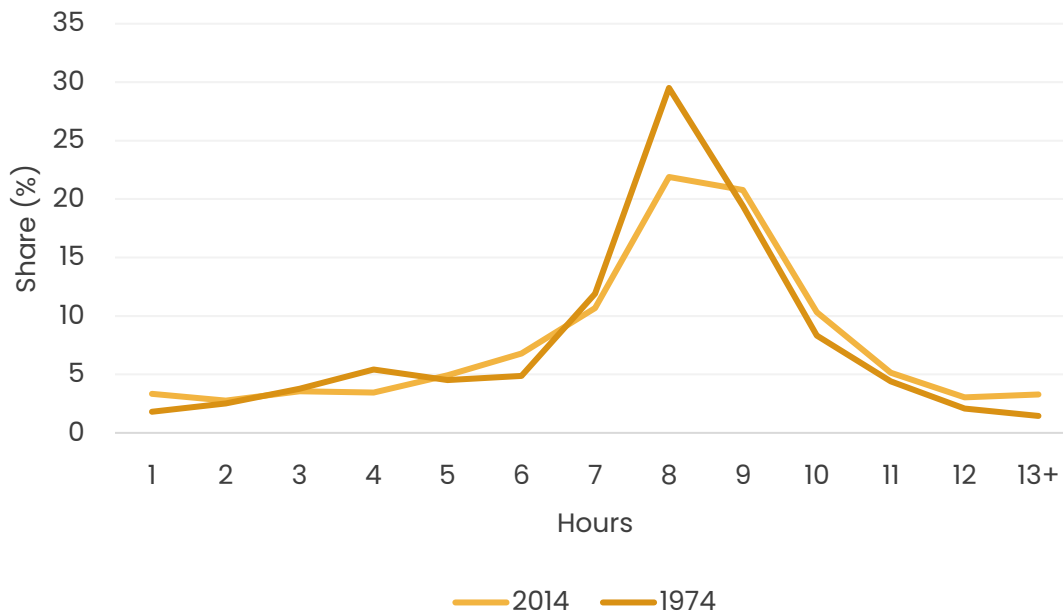


Figure 9: Proportion of all weekday workers working different shift lengths, 1974 and 2014.

Source: MTUS, UK 2014 and 1974. Onward Analysis.



This change is being shouldered by more vulnerable groups. They are more likely to work weekends and work longer hours. In 2014, a fifth of low-income workers work weekends, compared to 12% of high-income workers. On the weekend, low-income full-time women work 8 hours to the 6 hours high-income women work.

This change in contracted time at the weekends can weaken people's relationships. Weekend workers are busy at the same time that most people are resting or socialising. It becomes harder to socialise within the community as community activities happen when most people are free.⁴⁸ In a study of Australian weekend workers that took part in community activities, night shift workers were 42% as likely to engage as those that worked 7am to 4pm.⁴⁹

Part-time work is becoming more common and taking up more of our time

Part-time work became more common in the 1980s and 1990s. Increasing from 9% of workers in 1960 to a quarter in 2022.⁵⁰ On average, part time workers were working 34% more in 2014 than they were in 1974.

Part-time roles have advantages. They provide flexibility for workers who cannot commit to full-time roles due to childcare or other responsibilities. And they benefit businesses, who can contract staff to suit their needs – keeping costs down when demand is low.⁵¹

But in recent years, irregular labour requirements in a growing service-led economy have changed what part-time work looks like. On average, a part-time worker has seen their daily hours increase by an hour and a half on both the weekend and weekdays.

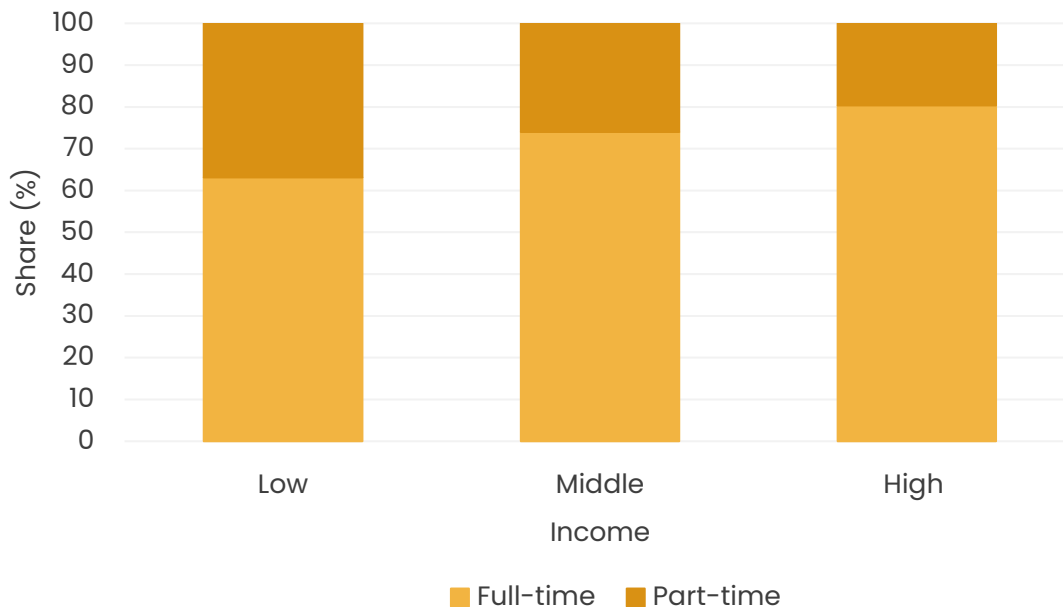
The rise in part-time work has been driven primarily by men. Historically, part-time roles were worked by women who also worked slightly longer shifts. In 1974, 4% of men were in part-time roles compared to 45% of women. Now, the share of men in part-time roles has tripled from 4% to 12%.

Men are not just working more part-time jobs, they are also spending more time in those roles. Shifts last 34% longer than they used to - around an hour and a half more than in 1974. This is in contrast to men in full-time work have seen their hours remain stable. This is partly due to men increasingly working in sales and customer service jobs. The proportion of men working in these jobs has quadrupled, while the proportion of women has tripled.⁵²

Again, these changes are being experienced by the most vulnerable. A third of low-income workers are working part-time compared to a fifth of high-income workers. This is driven by the service sector where jobs are more likely to be part-time and low-paid.⁵³ This explains the larger share of low-income groups in these positions.

Figure 10: The share of workers in part-time and full-time roles by income level, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. *Onward Analysis*.



Part time roles are not always conducive to socialising: parents working shifts rather than traditional roles are less likely to have family meals, a concern considering the important place of family meals on a child's development.⁵⁴

Women are working more

Another symptom of the shift to a service-based economy is the inclusion of women. In 1974, 42% of women were economically inactive. By 2021, this had fallen to a quarter.⁵⁵ Those women that worked in the 1970s were more likely to work part-time, as a result of social norms and family responsibilities.⁵⁶ This has remained the case. In 2021, 77% of women working part-time roles did not want a full-time role and only 8% wanted full-time roles. Double the number of men (16%) said they were working part-time because they could not find full-time roles.⁵⁷ This reflects the greater historical pressure on women to juggle family responsibilities with work.

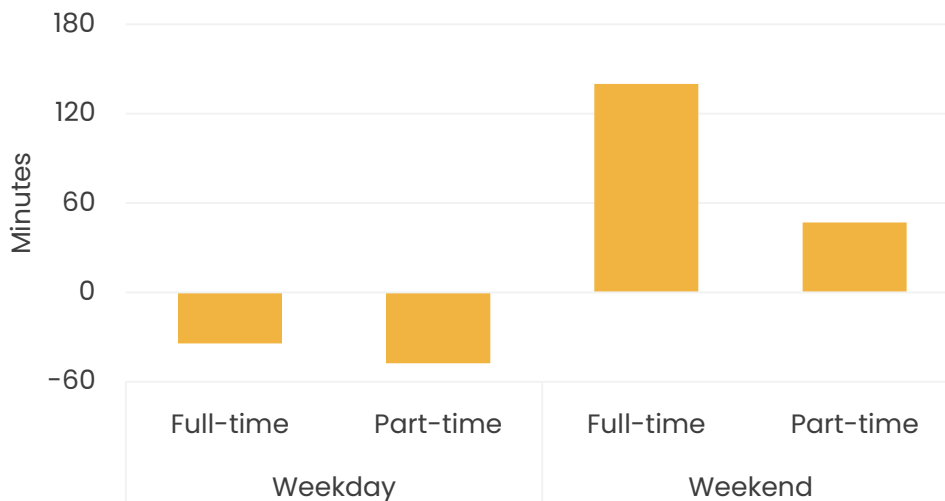
But increasingly women are taking on more full-time roles. In March 1992, of employed women, 56% worked full-time but by June 2022 this had risen to 62%. Men have trended in the opposite direction, with the share of employed men working full-time falling from 93% to 87% over the same period.

Where men in full-time work have seen their hours shrink on weekdays, women have seen theirs increase. In 1974, women worked 7 hours and 20 minutes compared to men’s 8 hours and 20 minutes. Four decades later, men have stayed more or less static but women are working 20 minutes more.

But this overall trend disguises differences in when lower and higher income women work. As figure 11 below shows, low-income women work less than high-income women on weekdays, regardless of being full or part-time. But on weekends, low-income women work more than high-income women.

Figure 11: Difference in working time between low- and high-income women, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. *Onward Analysis*.



Time at work has, therefore, not increased for everyone. But it has for more vulnerable groups: those that overwork on weekends, men that work part-time, and low-income women. Weekend overwork is much more prevalent and much more time-consuming than it was 40 years ago, and it is generally low-income groups that work these shifts. More men are in part-time roles that see them spend an extra 2 to 3 hours working per day than they did 40 years before. Women generally are working more but income determines how unsociable that work will be.

Committed time

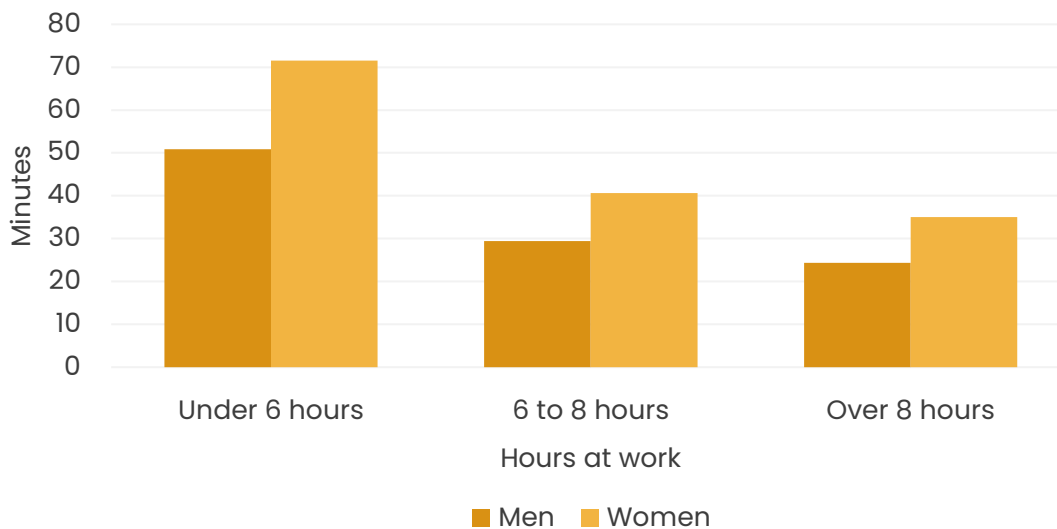
Transferability is a key characteristic of committed time. For people with children, childcare feels like an essential part of the daily routine. But it isn't always. People who have the right resources or support networks can get others to care for their children. But nobody can sleep or eat for you. So committed time is something that the wealthier can often opt out of, either partially or fully.

Those that work more spend less time on their domestic chores and with their children

Overworkers spend less of their time on domestic chores like cleaning, laundry, and other housework than the average worker. Overworked women spend 35 minutes on domestic chores on their working days compared to an hour and 12 minutes for those that work fewer than 6 hours. The same trend is visible for men; however, men spend less time overall on domestic care.

Figure 12: Time spent on housework by time spent working and gender, 2014

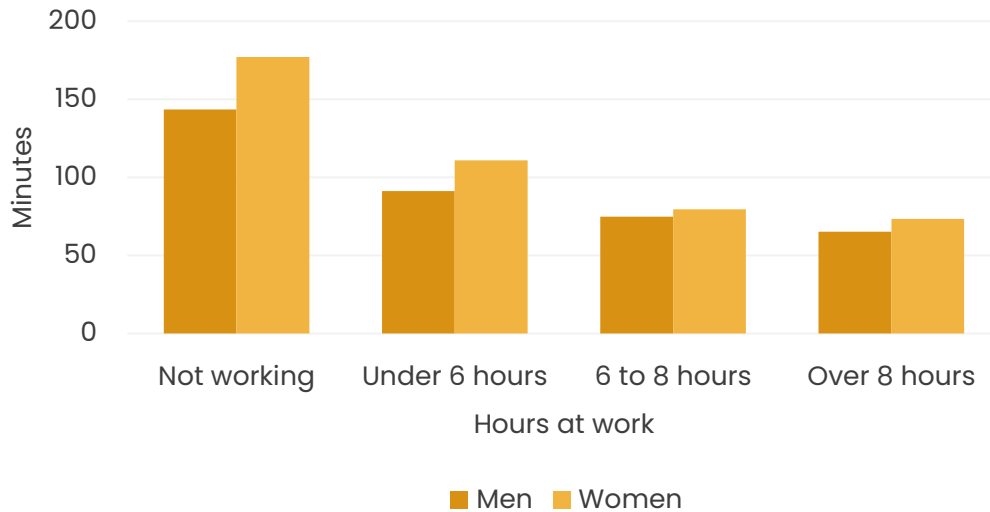
Source: MTUS, UK 2014. *Onward Analysis*.



But work does not only get in the way of tidying the house - it also gets in the way of childcare. For parents that aren't working, there is little difference between men and women - mothers spend 2 hours and 57 minutes on childcare and fathers spend 2 hours and 23 minutes. But for employed parents, work limits the time they spend with their children. Overworking fathers spent an hour and 5 minutes and overworking mothers spend an hour and 13 minutes.

Figure 13: Time spent on childcare by time spent working and gender, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. Onward Analysis.



Surprisingly, a job that demands unsociable hours does not necessarily cost parents time with their children. Parents who work no unsociable hours actually spend less time caring for their children compared to those that spend half or all of their time working unsociably.

Fathers working social hours spend an hour and 13 minutes caring for their children and mothers spend an hour and thirty minutes. Parents for whom half to all of their shift is worked at unsociable hours spend around 30 minutes more. Research suggests that working non-standard hours may give parents more time to care for their children but it is linked to lower levels of quality and poor outcomes for children and parents.⁵⁸

Higher earners spend less time on domestic chores and more time with their children

The transferability of committed time means that wealthier people can contract somebody else's time to perform chores or provide childcare. Hence, higher-income groups spend less time on chores than those with low incomes.

There is a 10 minute difference between employed high-income women and low-income women when it comes to household chores and a 9 minute difference in time spent preparing food. Time spent on laundry is more even, likely due to the evenness of technology.

Figure 14: Time spent per day preparing food by gender and income, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. Onward Analysis.

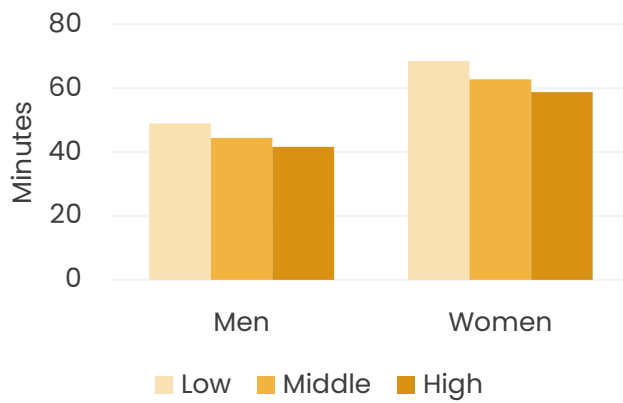


Figure 15: Time spent per day on cleaning by gender and income, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. Onward Analysis.

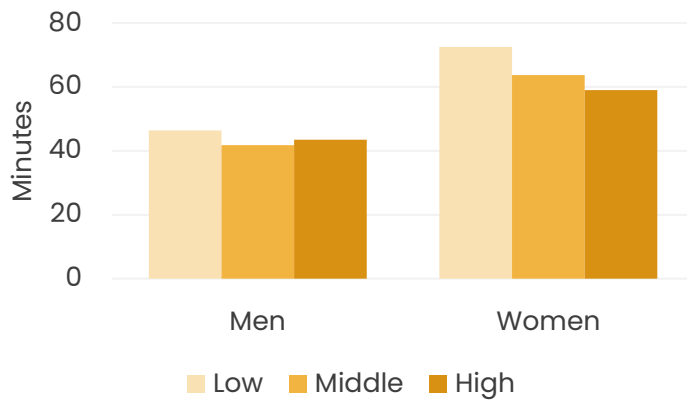
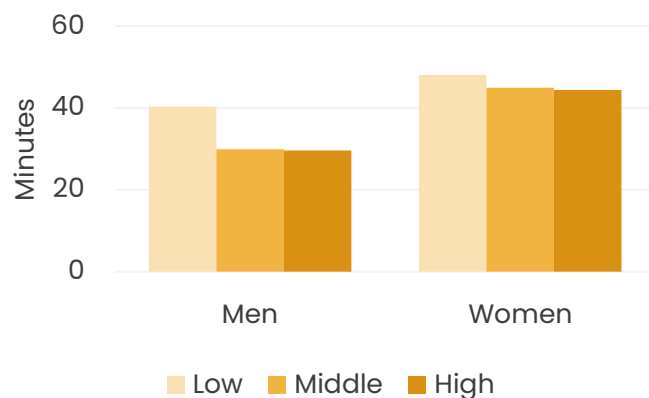


Figure 16: Time spent per day on laundry by gender and income, 2014

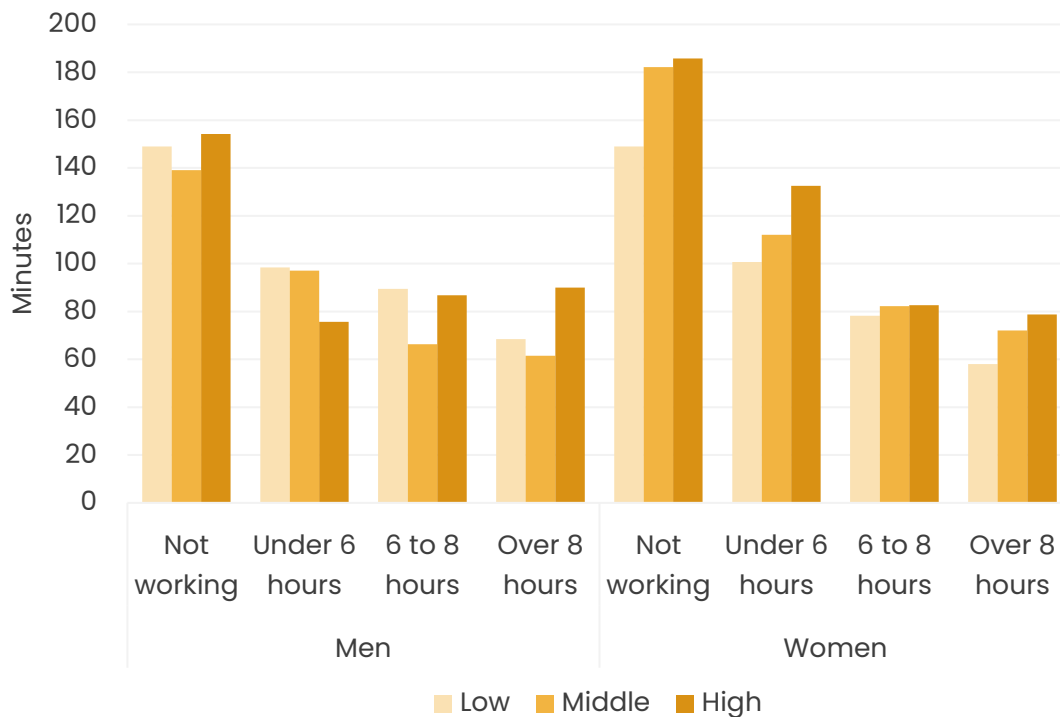
Source: MTUS, UK 2014. Onward Analysis.



Time caring for children predictably differs between genders. The wealthier a man is, the less time he spends with his children. Low-income men spend 2 hours and 16 minutes a day with their children and wealthier men spend just an hour and 53 minutes. This is flipped for women: the wealthier a woman is, the more time she spends with her children.

Figure 17: Time spent by working parents on childcare by shift length, income and gender, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. *Onward Analysis*.



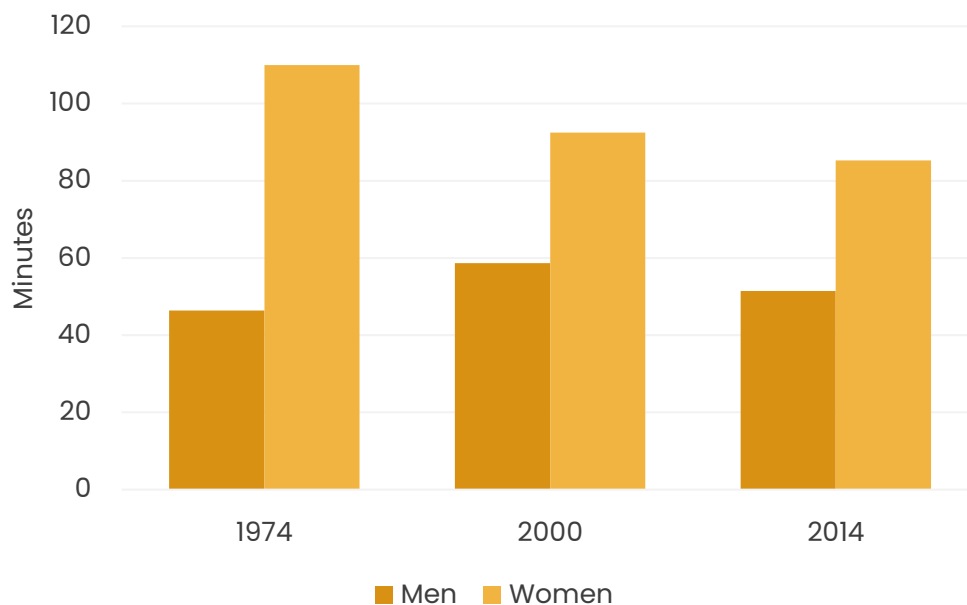
But higher levels of income helps overworkers find time with their children. Overworked, low-income fathers have little time for their children, spending 30 minutes less than those working for 6 hours or less. Overworked, high-income fathers can use their wealth to spend time with their children. Low-income mothers working short shifts have 40 minutes more with their children compared to low-income mothers working 8 hours or more. Overworked mothers on high incomes are able to spend more time with their kids than overworked mothers on low incomes but their time with their kids remains lower than high-income mothers working shorter shifts.

Women are still undertaking a greater portion of housework and childcare

In the 1970s, women did more than twice the amount of housework than men. By 2000, women were doing 18 minutes less and men were doing 13 minutes more – housework seems to be trending to a more equal share. But by 2014, this had stalled. Regardless of working pattern or wealth, women today spend more time on domestic chores and childcare.

Figure 18: Time spent on household chores by gender, 1974 – 2014.

Source: MTUS, UK 2014, 2000 and 1974. *Onward Analysis*.



This trend towards equalisation is likely a result of the proliferation of white goods in the household. Technologies like dishwashers, washing machines and microwaves freed women from some of the more labour-intensive aspects of home care.

For instance, in 1974, a woman could expect to spend almost 2 hours preparing meals or doing the dishes while a man could expect to spend less than an hour. Dishwashers were not yet common and even by 2000, only 5 million households had one. But by 2015 this figure had almost tripled.⁵⁹ This is reflected in women's time spent preparing meals or doing the dishes falling from nearly two hours to an hour 20 in 2014. Across the period men's time undertaking these activities has remained constant.

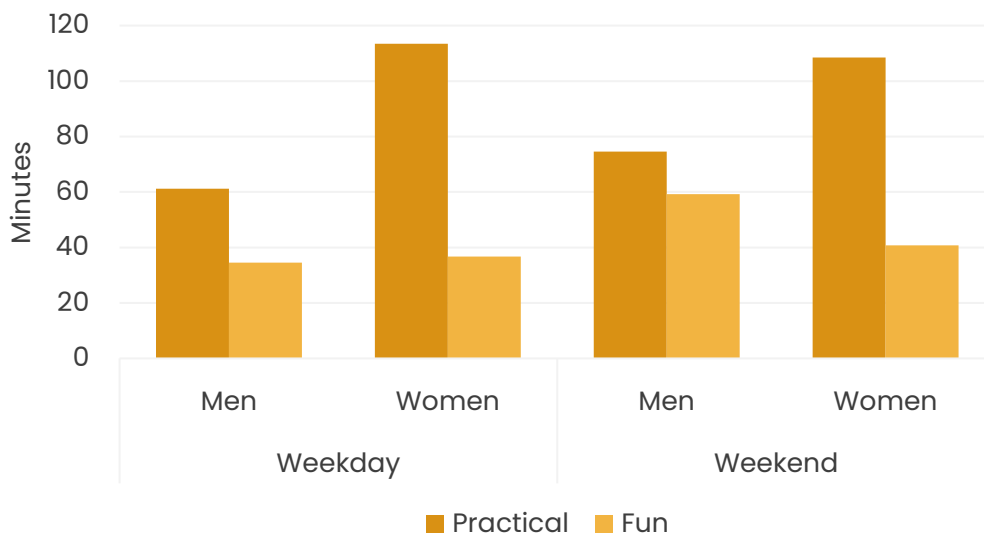
Women also undertake more childcare than men. Overall, fathers spend around an hour 48 on childcare each day and mothers spend 2 hours and a half. Both parents have seen large increases in time spent with children: 85% for fathers and 81% for mothers since 1974. This reflects changing cultural norms in parenting, where parents are now more hands-on and less comfortable letting their children play independently.⁶⁰

Men tend to spend more time with their children on weekends, spending over 2 hours on childcare compared to around 1 hour 35 minutes on a weekday. But for women, there is no difference between weekend and weekday care, with both at 2 hours and a half.

The type of care mothers and fathers provide is also different. Time dairies allow us to break childcare into two types: practical childcare, like feeding or dressing, and fun care, like playing or reading. On average, women are more likely to provide practical care and men are more likely to provide fun care.

Figure 19: Time spent by mothers and fathers on childcare by type of care and day of the week, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. Onward Analysis.



Although women’s time spent on domestic work and childcare is falling, it is still high. The American sociologist Arlie Hochschild refers to this as the “stalled revolution.” More and more women have entered the workforce, yet men have not seen a corresponding increase in domestic and family life.

As a result, women are working a “second shift”. In the 1980s, Hochschild looked at how 50 heterosexual couples with children, both parents working full-time, divided up their time. Mothers, after returning from work, would start another

shift caring for their children and homes. Leading to an extra months' worth of work a year in comparison to their partners.⁶¹

Since Hochschild conducted her research, the “second shift” in the UK has diminished but not gone away. More women are part of the workforce now than in the 1980s but the time they spend on childcare has not seen a corresponding fall. In fact, time spent on childcare has increased, from 56 minutes to an hour and 35 minutes on average across the week.

Free time

Free time is a good thing. Leisure activities are associated with higher wellbeing, helping people to rebalance their lives after the demands of their contracted and committed time.⁶² It can be slipped in across the day: half an hour for a coffee, a couple of hours out at the pub with friends or an evening spent at the cinema. But this flexibility puts it at risk of being displaced.

Today people spend less time seeing their friends, visiting restaurants, going out, volunteering, and exercising than in 1974. The greatest victim of this four-decade decline in socialising is volunteering, which has halved in the last four decades. The figures below show the average time spent on the activity per day for those that performed it.

- Four decades ago, the average person who volunteered spent 2 hours and 26 minutes doing it, whereas in 2014 they spent just over an hour and 10. But this fall doesn't mean we aren't interested in participating. In fact, the rate of volunteering has actually increased from 3% of people in 1974 to 14% in 2014. Instead, it is the time we can dedicate to volunteering that has been squeezed.
- The time we spend hosting or visiting friends has similarly declined, from 2 hours and 26 minutes a day to an hour and 16 minutes a day. Visits to restaurants have similarly become shorter but are now more frequent.
- Time spent on outside leisure activities, like going to cinemas or sporting events, has fallen by 55 minutes over the last 40 years. And we are also spending less time on exercise. On the days people exercise, they now spend on average an hour and 26 minutes down from 2 hours and a half.
- The time we spend relaxing in the home varies by activity. Time spent watching TV has declined from an hour 16 in 1974 to just under an hour in 2014. But time spent reading has remained stable at just over an hour.

- Since 1974 new forms of leisure have emerged. Gaming is the most obvious example. For young men, in particular, gaming has displaced time spent engaging in more traditional forms of leisure. Since 2000, when the activity was first recorded, the time spent on video games has increased by 30 minutes. Across all age groups, men spend more time gaming than women, but this difference is starkest for those aged 16-34 with younger men playing over twice the amount younger women play.

Modern technology has not only created a new, distinct form of leisure, it is now unavoidably interwoven with other leisure activities. For example, in 2000, only 1% of people were using a mobile device or other technology at the same time as watching TV, but 14 years later this had risen to 17%.

This tech-focused multitasking during leisure activities negatively impacts our experience of leisure and its psychological benefits.⁶³ And more of us are doing it. The proportion of people using technology when spending time with friends has risen from 1% to 13% from 2000 to 2014. As the time spent on leisure activities is falling, so too is the quality of those activities.

Work gets in the way of leisure, but this is much more keenly felt by those working non-traditional hours

In the 19th Century, the advent of new technologies led many to believe that we were heading towards a leisure society. Bertrand Russell went so far as to predict only four hours a day of work, with the rest making way for the “enjoyment of art or study.”

That hasn't happened. We may not all be working more but work is still getting in the way. We can see this by looking at time spent volunteering by employed people on days they are not working versus the days they do.

Volunteering remains clearly valued and employed people make space for it across their week. But work cuts the time they can spend on it. On days they are not working, employed people average an hour and 25 minutes volunteering. On working days, this falls to an hour. Overworkers particularly struggle, have even less time to volunteer, managing only 31 minutes.⁶⁴

Those with non-traditional work schedules struggle to match their leisure to those working normal hours. For instance, night workers have an almost opposite schedule of leisure to 9-to-5-ers. The share of 9-to-5-ers participating in leisure peaks at 9:30 pm at 18%, but 0% of night workers are available at this time. The share of night workers enjoying leisure activities peaks at around 11 am at 11%, when only 2% of 9-to-5-ers are free to socialise.

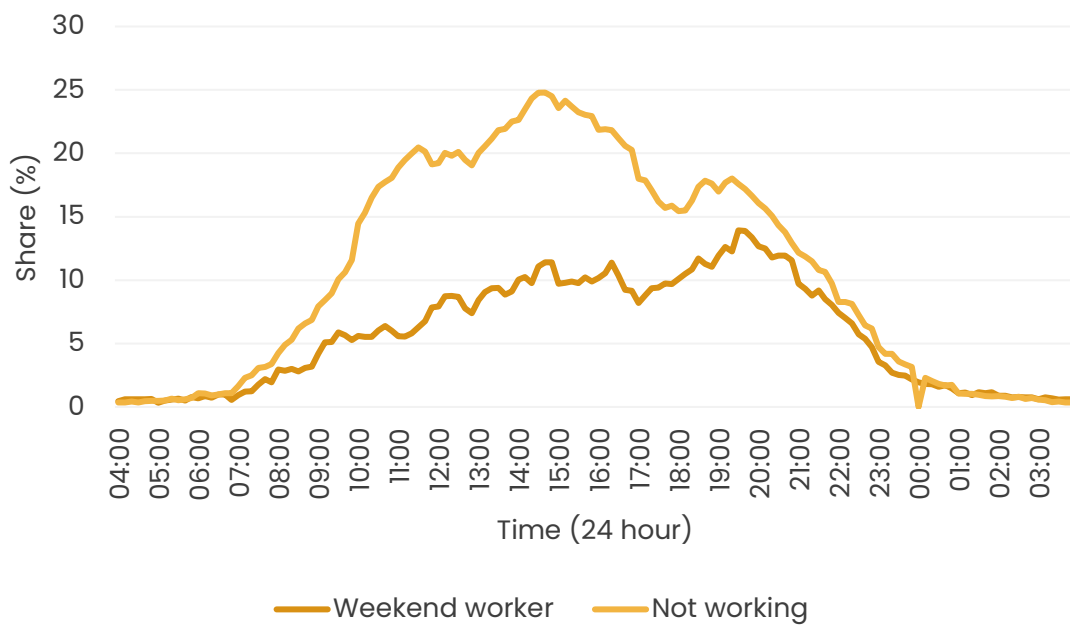
Figure 21: Proportion of night workers and 9-to-5-ers who do leisure, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. Onward Analysis.



Figure 22: Proportion of weekend workers and non-workers who do leisure on the weekend, 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014. Onward Analysis.



Like night workers, free time for weekend workers is out of sync with people in their communities. From 10:30am to nearly 8pm on the weekend, nearly a fifth of those aged over 16 that aren't working are involved in leisure. Weekend workers always trail this. At 10:30 only 6% are involved in leisure and in the evening only 14% are.

Parents are spending less time on leisure than childless people

Parents have less leisure and social time than childless adults. Parents spend about 2 hours and 35 minutes at social events, like parties. Non-parents spend about 4 hours. They also spend less time seeing friends and at pubs (around 25 minutes less). There are two main reasons for this. First, parents are spending more time with their children and second, parents are socialising in different ways.

As discussed above, parents now spend almost double the amount of time caring for their children than they used to. This reflects a societal shift, away from kids playing independently and towards greater parental involvement in both play and care. For most parents though, this is not enough. 71% of parents said that if they had extra time, they would spend it with their families.

Parents are more likely to be dissatisfied with the amount of time they have with friends.⁶⁵ Research has shown that parents' contact with their friends declines after they have children.⁶⁶ This is because parenthood changes how we socialise and makes it harder to connect with those without kids. In a poll of parents, 68% felt "cut off" from their friends and family since having children.

The data from time diaries bears this out. On an average day, parents spend around 20 minutes less time visiting friends than non-parents. And, given that visiting restaurants, cafes or bars is far less child-friendly, fathers spend 40 minutes less and mothers 10 minutes less in these spaces than men and women without children.

Free time has become more fragmented

The time we spend on leisure is reducing overall and being split into smaller periods of time. On a weekend in 1974, someone could expect to spend just over 5 hours on leisure activities broken up into 4 episodes across a day. Each of these episodes was, on average, over an hour long. But by 2014 the number of episodes of leisure in a day had increased to 7 while time taken has fallen to 4. As a result, the average length of a leisure episode has fallen from 1 hour 15 minutes to 25 minutes.

Transitioning between ongoing activities reduces the quality of these activities.⁶⁷ Interruptions may seem small but they add up. This is called time confetti.⁶⁸ You have an hour for exercise but this is broken up by taking a call or letting out the cat. This hour now feels more compressed and leads to people feeling like time is getting away from them.⁶⁹

This is because how we feel about our activities and the time we have changes according to how we organise our days. Researchers found that 'bounded' activities - those that are scheduled around other activities - are perceived differently from activities that are "unbounded." Researchers found that when they gave participants an hour to read, bounded people (those told they had something else to do) estimated that they only had 40 minutes whereas unbounded (free for the rest of the day) estimated that they had 49 minutes.⁷⁰ Time *feels* shorter.

Feeling rushed

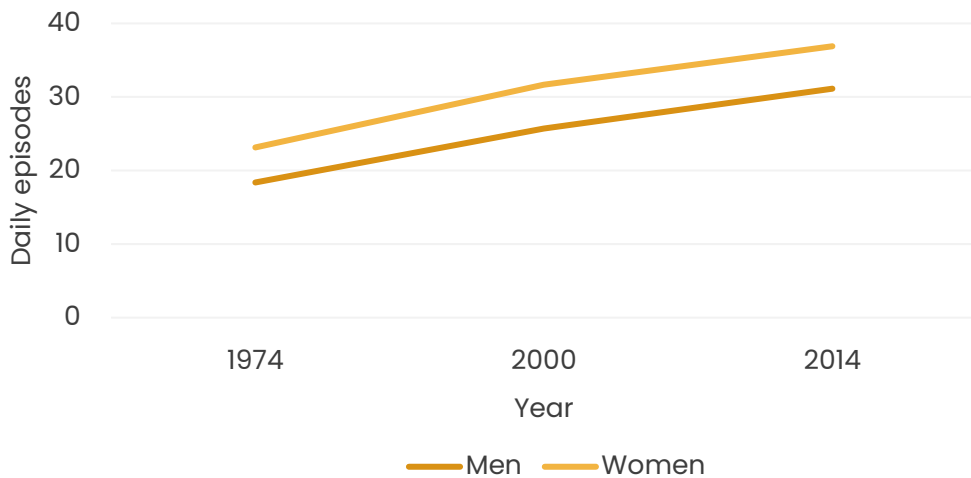


As outlined above, the pressures of parenting, irregular work, and new technologies are changing the structure of our time. This means we have less free time for leisure, and the small amount of time we do have is becoming fragmented.

This fragmentation isn't just limited to free time. People who are facing the greatest time pressures are engaging in more frequent multitasking. Time series data breaks days up into distinct "episodes" like cooking a meal, working a shift, or reading. In 1974, a man could expect his day to be made up of 18 distinct "episodes." The same man in 2014 could expect his day to be much fuller, with 31 distinct episodes. Women have seen an equivalent increase, from 23 to 37 episodes.

Figure 23: Average number of daily episodes by gender, 1974 - 2014

Source: MTUS, UK 2014, 2000 and 1974. Onward Analysis.



This increase in multitasking is a way for people to try and “squeeze more than a day’s worth of activities into any one 24-hour period.”⁷¹ Workers do the same number of activities on working days as people who aren’t working. But work can take up an average of 7 hours 14 minutes – or approximately 30% of the day. Fitting in more means fragmentation, but fragmentation makes us feel more time-pressured and reduces the quality of activities.

Most of us are sleeping more, some of us are working more. This displaces time away from other activities. But we still want to socialise, keep a tidy home and spend time with our children. The push to fit everything in leads us to multitask. But multitasking can make it harder to distinguish between different types of time and reduces the quality of leisure and self-care. This is the key reason we are all feeling so tired, so overworked and so rushed.

The ability to work on our phones while out with friends, to do house chores while also listening to music, has blurred the line between different types of time. The blurring of the work–personal life distinction is the leading cause of burnout. Researchers found that workers that bring work into their personal life are less likely to do activities that help them relax. This contributes to higher levels of exhaustion and a lower sense of wellbeing.⁷² Another study found that a poor work-life balance predicted unhappiness and emotional exhaustion.⁷³ And it is becoming a huge problem. A fifth of workers often or always feel exhausted⁷⁴ and 88% of UK employees complained of burnout between 2020 and 2022.⁷⁵

Other types of time are also becoming less defined. For instance, using our phones before bed is positively correlated with poorer quality of sleep.⁷⁶ A study of Japanese adolescents found that mobile phone usage after lights out was positively associated with short sleep duration, subjective poor sleep quality, excessive daytime sleepiness, and insomnia symptoms.⁷⁷ Self-care and leisure are good for us, but fragmentation reduces their positive effects, leaving people feeling tired, less relaxed and more rushed.

The symptoms of a manic modern world are real, but the diagnosis is wrong. We are not all working more, sleeping less and feeling more rushed. But our push to do it all and reliance on multitasking is creating a higher tempo of life and breaking down the barriers between different areas of time, leaving us feeling burnt out, tired and under pressure.

What could this mean?

The way people structure their time is not an explicit focus of any government. Many of the trends outlined above have their roots in culture, markets, and societal progress. But how people structure their time is already heavily influenced by Government intervention. Through regulations, like the hours children must spend in school or how late people can stay at a bar, and through incentives, like childcare subsidies which free-up parents' time, how people use their time is influenced by policy.


Some believe that additional interventions will relieve the time pressures that people currently feel. Supporters of the four-day working week argue that it will help to tackle overworking. But a four-day week is not the answer for part-time workers, night and weekend workers – or the need for a flexible labour market. Similarly, improving access to childcare may well alleviate time pressures for many. But this must be balanced with parents' clear preference for spending time with their children.

We have identified those groups that are particularly struggling to fit it all in, outlined in the below table. It is these groups that policymakers should focus on as they design interventions.

Type of Time	Impacted Group
Necessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Parents have less time for sleep and self-care. ● Overworkers, weekend workers, and night workers have less time for sleep and self-care. ● Technology is leading to a lower quality of sleep.
Contracted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Weekend workers are overworking. Low-income groups are most likely to work weekends. ● Part-time work has become more common and part-time shifts are getting longer. ● Men are increasingly likely to work part-time. ● Part-time roles are more likely to be worked by low-income groups. ● More women are working and working longer hours. But high-income women are able to avoid more unsociable hours.
Committed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Overworkers spend less time on housework and childcare. ● Low-income, overworked parents have even less time to spend with their children. ● Women still play a disproportionately large part in caring for the home and for children.
Free	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Time spent on free time is decline across a range of activities ● New forms of leisure, like computer gaming, have emerged and are taking up an increasing amount of our time ● Those working non-traditional hours – like night workers or weekend workers – struggle to connect with those on regular schedules. ● Parents spend less time socialising. Their time is increasingly being taken up by childcare time.

Conclusion





Social connection is what makes a strong community. But many of us feel too burnt out, tired and under pressure to participate in civic life. As one of our focus group participants put it, “I’m too knackered to go to the pub let alone volunteer.” The symptoms of a manic modern world are real, but the diagnosis is wrong. We are not all working more, sleeping less and feeling more rushed. Adults are getting around half an hour more shut-eye than they did 40 years ago. And working time hasn’t risen dramatically; women have seen a small increase of 13%, while men’s working hours fell by 2%.

The core problem is our higher tempo of life. In 1974, the average man changed activity 18 times in the day, which almost doubled to 31 times in 2014. Women have seen an equivalent increase, from 23 to 37. Our push to do it all and reliance on multitasking is breaking down the barriers between different parts of our day. Changing activities more frequently makes our days feel busier. This can lead to us feeling burnt out as work is coming home with us, or that childcare never stops - even if the total amount of these is similar.

But some groups are genuinely much more exhausted, overworked and time-pressured. For example, part-time shifts are an average of an hour and 30 minutes longer per day than they were in the 1970s. And parents are doing more parenting. Fathers have seen their childcare time rise by 85% since 1974, and for mothers this has risen by 81%. This necessarily displaces time from other areas, leaving them with less room for the other things they want to do.

We can’t reweave the social fabric without people devoting their time to their communities. Helping people take back control of their time is a necessary first step to revitalising civic life. This can’t happen until we understand what is happening and to whom, so we need have an honest conversation about how we are using and prioritising our time.

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