

# The time of your life

Time use in London and the UK over the past 40 years

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July 2020



## Acknowledgements

The authors thank Torsten Bell, Laura Gardiner and Lindsay Judge at the Resolution Foundation for their editorial and analytical help with this report, to Jonathan Gershuny and colleagues at the UCL Centre for Time Use Research for ideas and advice, and to Bharat Mehta, Manny Hothi and the trustees at Trust for London for their support for the project. Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors alone.

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G Bangham & M Gustafsson, *The time of your life*:

*Time use in London and the UK over the past 40 years*, Resolution Foundation, July 2020

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## Executive summary

Few things in life are equal, but each day every one of us has 24 hours of time to use. How time is best spent has been the subject of an active public debate in recent years, and this question has been thrown still further into the limelight by the disruptions of the coronavirus pandemic. But the current time use debate has been narrow, informed by a view that history has seen reductions in time spent in paid work, and that such reductions lead to increases in leisure time. From this, the argument has then been made that further and faster reductions in paid work are universally desirable.

This report brings new evidence to bear on the important question of how we spend our days. It seeks to broaden the time use debate and ground it in the lived experience and preferences of different groups today. We interrogate time use data from the 1970s and 2010s; analyse new data on attitudes to time use collected through our own survey; and explore public opinions on work-life balance gathered via three focus groups convened in early 2020. We build on our first report on time use (January 2020), which found that an unerring focus on falling average working hours leads to partial (and very male-oriented, since women's hours have increased) conclusions. In this report we take a broader view, looking at how time is allocated to paid and unpaid work as well as leisure, and how this has changed over a 40-year period.

Altogether, this research challenges many of the assumptions underpinning the current debate. Crucially, we find that time

use schedules are highly differentiated, not just by sex, but by income group too. It finds, for example, that for most households paid work has not fallen in aggregate and that leisure time has if anything reduced as people in practice prioritise childcare and sleep. Likewise, it shows that there are many different preferences for change, with the current debate's focus on shorter hours of paid work reflecting the views more of higher-income households than those on lower incomes.

### Paid work occupies a relatively small share of our days, especially for women and those in lower-paid work

We begin by examining how we currently spend the 1,440 minutes in each day. In 2014-15 (the year for which we have the most recent data), paid work accounted for a relatively small part of a working age individual's time: during the working week, only one-quarter (6 hours) of the average working-age man's day was spent in paid work, a figure that falls to one-sixth for the average woman (4 hours). As we have shown previously, both men and women in lower-paid jobs work fewer hours than those in higher-wage roles, and there are regional differences as well. On average, people working in London spend more hours in paid work (including travel) and work longer into the evenings than those in other parts of the country, not least because they spend an extra 25 minutes per day commuting.

But of course, paid work is not the only type of work: in fact, a larger share of society's time is taken up by unpaid work such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children. On average, women spend four hours-plus a day (both weekdays and weekends) performing unpaid work, compared to two or three hours (weekdays and weekends respectively) for men. Childcare is especially time consuming, particularly for parents of children under the age of five. Moreover, at any time of the day or night, parents with young children in high-income households are more likely to be engaged in childcare than those in low-income households.

Interestingly, however, we find that when we add paid and unpaid work time together, women and men perform broadly

similar amounts of work overall. The gender disparity in paid work time – ten hours per week – is matched by a corresponding one in unpaid work time (meaning working-age men and women perform around 50 and 51 hours respectively of total work per week). This confirms the ‘iso-work’ hypothesis, which posits that across whole populations men and women do similar amounts of total work. However, the story does not hold true within all households: while men and women in mixed-sex couple households in the highest income quartile share total work 50:50, in the lowest-income quartile women perform 57 per cent of all work.

Moreover, leisure time is less evenly shared within households. We find that on average, working-age men spend 36 minutes more at leisure each day than women, since the average woman spends more time each day on total work (8 minutes), personal care (16 minutes) and sleep (8 minutes) than the average man. But at the same time, groups with less paid work (those on lower-incomes, for example, or with lower-level qualifications) or fewer family commitments (singles and those without dependent children) unsurprisingly enjoy more leisure time than the average. Those with children or in high-income households have less.

### Over the last 40 years, time schedules have converged for men and women, but diverged for higher- and lower-income households

Our analysis of time use today suggests that the current debate is too narrowly drawn; comparing the most recent data with that from the 1970s leads us to reject the simplistic story that falling average hours in paid work necessarily results in more leisure. To start, we find that on average, women spend more time in paid work than they did in the past (although those from the lowest-income quartile of households spend less). For working-age men, the picture is slightly different: overall, they spend less time in paid work than they did 40 years ago. But this trend is driven largely by men in the lowest-income quartile of households, who in 2014-15 worked 191 minutes less per day than they did in the 1970s. In contrast, the paid work hours of men in the highest-

income quartile of households have barely changed over this period.

These disparities underline why it is important for today's debate on changes to time use to acknowledge the very diverse starting points for people in low- and high-income households. Over the last 40 years, average individual working hours (including travel) have fallen by 2 per cent across the working-age population, while average total working hours in couple households have risen by 15 per cent. In 1974 two adults in a household on a high income jointly spent just short of 40 minutes a day longer in paid work than a couple on a low income; by 2014, this gap had grown to nearly four and a half hours.

Moreover, the evidence suggests that many low-paid workers are not happy with their shorter hours: underemployment is highest among workers in this group, reflecting the impact on overall living standards of short hours and lower hourly pay. And beyond the individual, today's differences in hours worked between higher and lower-income households exert an upward push on income inequality.

Our second key finding is that both the nature and distribution of unpaid work within households has changed considerably over time. Most notably, across the board, time spent on childcare has increased. When we look at parents with children under 5, we note that time spent on childcare has risen by 55 minutes on average for women (a 150 per cent change) and 34 minutes for men (a 400 per cent increase). Overall, men at all income levels perform more unpaid work today compared to 40 years ago (they do more cooking and shopping for example), and women undertake less (although women in higher-income households do significantly less than in the past while lower-income women do only slightly less).

### Despite falling average hours of paid work, most enjoy less leisure time than in the past

Given this, the sum of paid plus unpaid work has changed relatively little over time: at a whole-of-household level, total work has fallen only slightly since the 1970s. It is this that sits



behind our perhaps most surprising finding. Despite the promise of technological progress causing leisure time to rise as average working hours fall, the reality of the past 40 years has been very different. Time spent at leisure has in fact fallen since the 1970s for almost every demographic group. Instead, we have largely assigned more of our time to non-leisure activities. Women are doing more paid work plus more childcare than in the past, for example, having made large reductions in socialising, and smaller reductions in time for eating, hobbies, TV and sport. Likewise, men are using the time freed up by their shorter average hours of paid work to do more unpaid work, more childcare and to spend more time sleeping and volunteering.

Indeed, the only group that has seen falling hours of paid work translate into more leisure time over the last 40 years is men from low-income households. Our analysis suggests that this is not because low-income men have failed to step up when it comes to unpaid work (in fact, in 2014-15, men from households in the lowest income quartile did on average 46 minutes more unpaid work than in the 1970s, compared to 26 minutes more by men from highest income quartile households). Instead, the increase in leisure time for this group is the flipside of the very large falls in paid work time that they have experienced over the period.

### The desire to reduce hours of paid work is not universal, but balance and control are highly prized

Given the divergence in time use schedules in recent decades, it is unsurprising to find that not everyone would like to see their hours of paid work fall in the future. Labour Force Survey analysis shows that in 2019, one-in-seven low-paid workers reported wanting more hours of work (compared to one-in-thirty of the highest paid workers). Posing the question slightly differently, our own survey found that close to one-quarter of working people today did not want to reduce their hours of paid work in order to have more free time. In part, this is to do with money (four-in-ten of those from a lower-income household who report not wanting to cut back on paid work say they cannot afford it, for example, compared to one-quarter of those from a



higher-income household). But, consistent with the well-being literature, we also find that paid work is valued for reasons above and beyond the money it brings in. Four-in-ten say that they would retain their current hours because they enjoy their work, for example, while one-in-five (putting it less positively) say they would lose purpose and be bored with less paid work.

That said, our survey also suggested there is strong support for a better balance between work and free time, with two-thirds of working people saying they would like more free time outside of working hours. Of those, most would like to reduce working hours for positive reasons: 65 per cent want to spend more time with family and friends for example, compared to 20 per cent who wanted to do so because they were working too much. But critically, our focus groups indicated that what many valued above all is control over the timing of their work, far more of a priority than its amount in many cases. Complaints about short-notice changes to shifts, a lack of flexibility from some employers around time off, and around workloads being too great to be finished in the time available were commonplace.

Overall, our survey showed that if large-scale reductions in lifetime working hours took place, most would prefer regular but discrete chunks of free time (one day less a week, for example) rather than changes that are deferred in time (more holidays or earlier retirement) or more marginal (shorter hours each day). But consistent with what the data tells us has happened in the past, we found no reason to expect a clear-cut relationship between future reductions in paid work and more leisure, especially for those with young children: in our focus groups parents made it clear that if they had more free time, they would devote large parts of it to their children.

### Time use policy should be guided by four key principles

Overall, our findings show that a policy debate which centres narrowly on reducing hours of paid work to increase leisure is one that is strongly informed by the experience of higher-income males over the past forty years – a group whose paid work hours have stayed relatively long throughout this period.

While calls for a four-day week may sound attractive, and chime with what many say they would like in an ideal world, they often ignore the reality of those in lower-income households for whom more, not fewer, hours are the top priority. And while more time at leisure may be desirable, the past shows that in couples at least, it is men rather than women who tend to get first dibs on free time.

As a result, our analysis suggests four principles could usefully guide the debate as follows. First (and not to throw the baby out with the bath water), helping those with high hours strike a better work-life balance remains important. But second, this must be complemented by action to ensure that those at the lower end of the income distribution can secure sufficient work to enjoy a decent standard of living and the sense of purpose that work can bring. Third, people should have more control over the amount and timing of paid work, control which can be meaningfully exercised within all jobs rather than just a choice few. And fourth, while the redistribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women over time is to be welcomed, the distance that remains to be travelled on this score must be kept in mind.

These principles have a bearing on a number of key policy areas that include, but go far beyond, the usual focus on reducing paid work. For example:

- They support steps to make real the right to request flexible working to reduce working hours where desired. This could include raising the bar for such a request to be turned down. We might also want to revisit the Working Time Regulations given that 19 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women work more than 48 hours in a typical week.
- While policy has engaged with the wish among largely higher-income workers for more flexibility, less attention has been paid to the desire for more work from those on lower-incomes. In so far as this is driven by lower hourly pay, clearly the ongoing increases to the minimum wage are welcome. But more innovative policy solutions could see part-time workers given the right to request a contract

with longer hours, mirroring the right to request flexible working. In the same way that long-hour cultures dominate in some workplaces and disadvantage those with other responsibilities, short-hour norms reflect an outdated view that some low-paid work is only done by people who are not the main earner in their household.

- These principles should also lead us to prioritise measures to increase the control people have over their working hours. This should include new regulations to give employees the right to a two week minimum notice period for shifts; to contracts that fairly reflect their hours; and to compensation for work cancelled at the last minute.
- The remaining big gaps between time spent in paid and unpaid work between men and women in part reflect ongoing norms about childcare. These in turn are a key driver of the fact that the gender pay gap has now all but been eliminated among workers without children, but remains stubbornly high for those who are parents. The current system of shared parental leave has failed to deliver significant change in this regard, suggesting the time may have come to explore more generous use-it-or-lose-it maternity and paternity leave schemes.

Our four principles and the diversity of experiences and preferences among workers should make us cautious about top-down economy- or firm-wide moves to cut hours to a four-day week. However, taken together, measures such as those outlined above could, over time, allow different groups – men and women, lower and higher income – to share working hours more equally and in the process, normalise working less than five days a week.

### Concerted effort is required to move time use debates forward in a sensible way

In recent months, the coronavirus crisis has turned the time schedules of many upside-down. On the one hand, this can be viewed as an opportunity, creating space for time use debates to move forward and to craft new norms. But on the other, the pandemic poses a serious threat to progress: by choking off

what was already very tepid productivity growth in the UK, coronavirus looks set to have a seriously detrimental effect on this key economic determinant that enables fewer working hours without reductions in household living standards. So how could thinking and policy ideas on time use move forward in this more open, but economically less propitious context?

We have shown throughout this report that the evidence is complex, with time use experience and preferences varying significantly across sex, income groups, place and time. It is concerning that much of the current debate is informed by only part of this complicated (and incomplete) evidence base. Given this, there is a strong case for a Time Use Commission to provide the concerted and high-level engagement with this issue that we believe this report has made the case for. Because for those who believe the questions we have aired in this report are of real importance – for living standards, for well-being and for equity of all types – the time for a properly informed debate has come.

## Section 1

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### Introduction

In mid-2019, with generous support from Trust for London, we launched a new workstream investigating time use in the UK. How time is spent is key to determining our living standards and our well-being. Most obviously, hours in paid work have a direct bearing on the amount of money an individual earns, while hours spent in unpaid work or at leisure do not. But unpaid work within a household still has to be done, imposing constraints on other more lucrative (paid work) or pleasurable (leisure) activities. Moreover, while leisure is important for well-being, too much time spent without purpose (unemployment, for example) is demonstrably bad for mental health.

The first report in this series explored the topic of paid work. It showed that average paid working hours have fallen over time, stopped falling since 2009 and that these trends were the product of a complex set of changes in the working hours of different groups across society. Nowadays, men work shorter paid hours than 40 years ago, while women work longer hours (and are more likely to be in paid work). Critically, we also found that while time schedules of men and women had converged, those of higher- and lower-paid workers diverged with significant consequences for income inequality (low pay plus low hours is a very bad combination).

In this report, we look beyond paid work and consider time use in the round. As real pay grows in the long term, theory suggests people will trade in some of their extra prosperity for more leisure. But has this been the case? And where it has, has it always led to a commensurate improvement in well-being? To answer these and other questions we look not only at what has driven the trade-offs people actually make between leisure and working hours, but also at what they do with the extra time free up when they work less, and whether this is what they actually want or benefit from. By investigating these issues, we seek to bring evidence to bear on the ongoing time use debate.

To this end, this report is structured as follows:

- In Section 2, we begin with an overview of how people spend their time in the UK today;

- Section 3 then analyses how different groups' time use has changed over the past four decades;
- In Section 4, we draw on a new survey of our own as well as the findings from three focus groups to explore public opinions on current time, and where there is appetite for change;
- Section 5 examines the ongoing policy debates on time use and drawing on our evidence base, makes a number of suggestions for how such debates can be advanced;
- Section 6 concludes.

## Section 2

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### Time use today

We begin this report by analysing how people spend their time today. For all the understandable attention economists give to paid work, this activity takes up a relatively small proportion of the average person's day. Dedicated time use surveys provide us with a much more rounded picture of how the 1,440 minutes of every day are allocated. By bringing unpaid work and leisure into plain view, we expose a host of differences between groups (such as men and women, high- and low-income households and Londoners and non-Londoners) when it comes to their current use of time. This suggests that the current public debate about time use is too narrowly drawn, and needs to be much more mindful of the plurality of experiences we document here.

#### Paid work occupies a relatively small share of both men's and women's average days

Household surveys such as the Labour Force Survey and Understanding Society collect data on hours spent in paid (and to a much lesser extent, unpaid) work, but they suffer from both obvious and non-obvious shortcomings for those interested in time use in the round. First, they focus almost exclusively on paid work; second, they ask people to recall their allocation of time over a long period, putting answers at risk of recall bias and inconsistencies of estimation.

In contrast, the UK Time Use Survey (most recently conducted in 2014-15) provides us with a much more comprehensive and contemporaneous record of what household members do throughout their days.<sup>1</sup> Using this dataset, we begin with Figure 1 which shows how the average working-age man or woman allocates their time over an average weekday (Monday to Friday) and weekend day. The first takeaway from this chart is important given the current time use debate: paid work occupies only one-quarter of an average weekday for working-age men (equivalent to 6 hours), and one-sixth for working-

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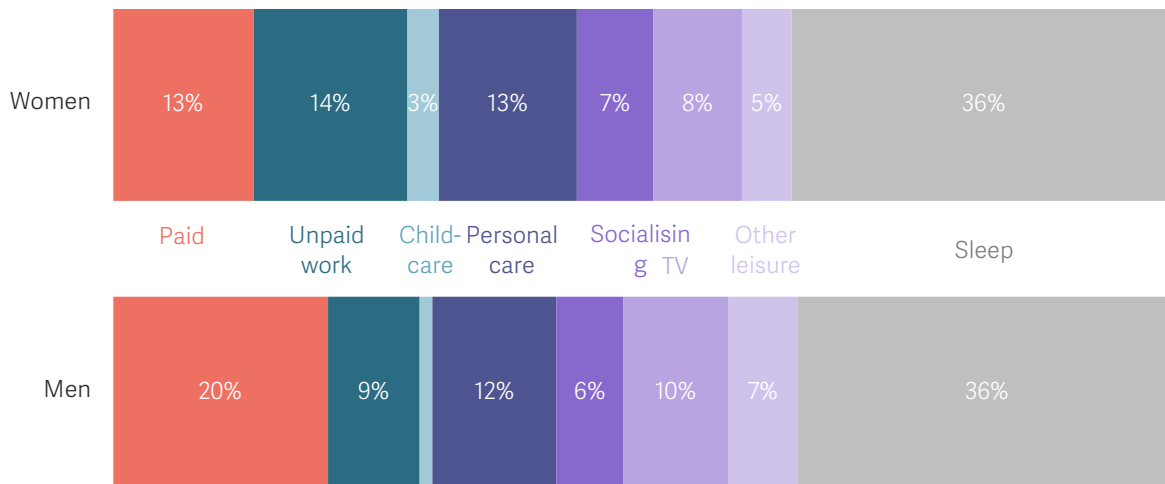
<sup>1</sup> J Gershuny & O Sullivan, [United Kingdom Time Use Survey, 2014-15](#), UK Data Service, 2017. See Annex for further details of how data is collected for this survey via time diaries.



age women (4 hours). On a weekend day, these shares fall to one-twelfth of the day for the average man, and just over one-twentieth for the average woman.

**FIGURE 1: Paid work takes up a small share of both men and women’s average working day**

Proportion of average weekday and weekend day taken up by different activities, men and women aged 18-64: UK, 2014-15



NOTES: Figures exclude missing time (which amounts to around 20 mins per day).  
 SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

A greater proportion of society’s time is in fact taken up by unpaid work, such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children. Just as important and necessary as paid work, unpaid work differs only in that it is not seen as ‘productive’ in the eyes of the marketplace (see Box 1 for more details on time use category definitions). Unpaid work takes up just over three hours per weekday for the average adult: 2 hours 5 minutes for the average man and 4 hours 2 minutes for the average woman. At the weekend it rises, up to 2 hours 51 minutes for an average man and 4 hours 15 minutes for an average woman (though women do slightly less childcare at weekends).

Outside work, sleep time varies little between men and women (though it increases by three-quarters of an hour for both at weekends). More noticeably, men have more leisure time both during the week and at weekends. Men enjoy almost half an hour more leisure than women on weekdays (4 hours 43 minutes versus 4 hours 17 minutes), and a full hour more at weekends (6 hours 58 minutes versus 5 hours 53 minutes). Men watch an extra quarter-hour of TV on a weekday (with the average woman watching 1 hour 50 minutes of it), though it accounts for just over 40 per cent of total leisure time for both men and

women. Despite women having less leisure time overall, they spend slightly more time socialising with others: 86 minutes on a weekday versus 80 minutes for men, and 2 hours 21 minutes versus 2 hours 17 minutes for men at weekends.

### BOX 1: Classifying time use

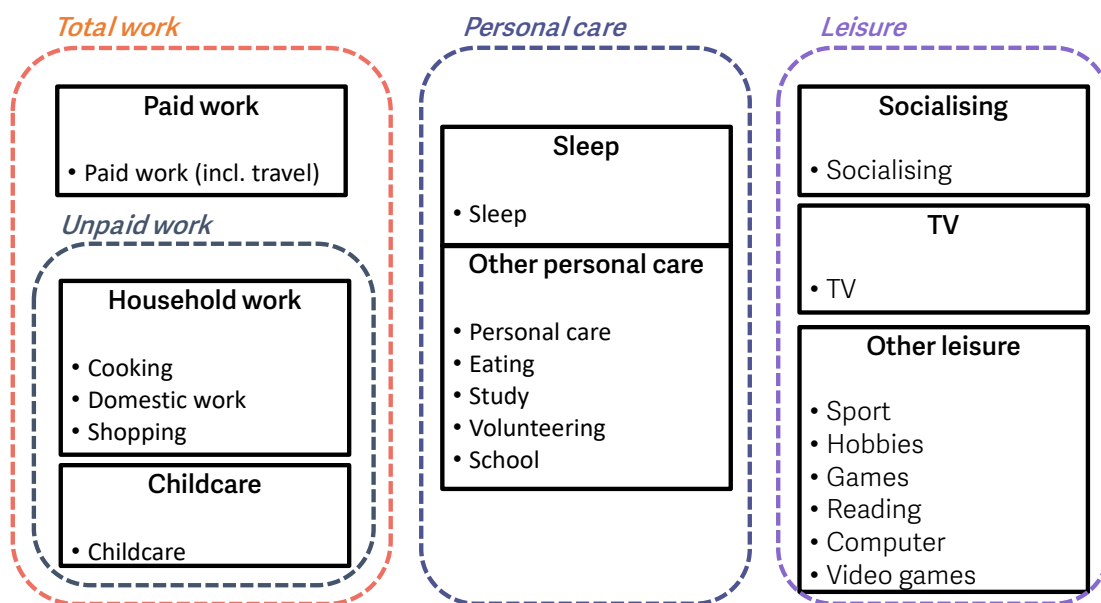
Respondents to the 2014-15 UK Time Use Survey were asked to record their main activity in 10-minute blocks throughout the day, against a list of around 400 activities. For our analysis, we begin by aggregating these 400 activity codes into 20 broader standard categorisations used by the Centre for Time Use Research (see bullets in Figure 2). These 20 activities are then clustered into eight higher-

level categories, namely: paid work, household work, childcare, personal care, socialising, TV time, other leisure, and sleep (solid line boxes). Lastly, these groups can be aggregated still further into top-level categories of unpaid work, total work, personal activities, and leisure (dotted-line boxes).

**FIGURE 2: Time use is broadly categorised into paid work, unpaid work, personal care, and leisure**

Standard classifications of time use

SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.



But what is the rationale for these distinctions? Economists have long classified an activity as ‘work’ – be it paid or unpaid – if it is one that somebody else could perform for the individual if need be (for example, it is possible to pay someone to cook, clean and look after one’s children). Known as the ‘third-person criterion’, this test has a long history.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, personal activities and leisure encompass activities that an individual has to do for his- or herself (think cleaning one’s teeth, or reading a book, for example). The distinction between the two is that personal activities are required (albeit to a greater or lesser extent) but leisure comprises all those activities which are not essential.

Evidently, these distinctions are not always clear-cut: should eating count

as leisure if it happens slowly and in the company of friends? Should we classify drinking beer differently from drinking water, or a long bath differently from a short shower? For the purposes of this report, we have had to take a view on two particularly tricky areas. First, we follow the convention in time use analysis of including travel-to-work time within time spent on paid work – a different approach from that taken by economists studying labour supply and productivity. Second, although childcare might be comprised of parts which could be outsourced (such as providing food for a toddler) and others that cannot (having a conversation with a teenager about their school report, for example), we count all such time as unpaid work.

## Although men perform more paid work than women, the reverse is true for unpaid work

A key finding in the previous report in this series was that paid work hours need to be analysed both at an individual level and across whole households.<sup>3</sup> If we look only at the individual level, we risk missing the important fact that paid work hours have been redistributed within households in recent decades, rather than declining much at the whole-of-household level. Given this, in Figure 3 we turn to the within-household distribution of unpaid work, and then specifically to one component of it: childcare.

And the key message here is that while women perform the majority of unpaid work in all types of cohabiting couple households, the share varies remarkably little between

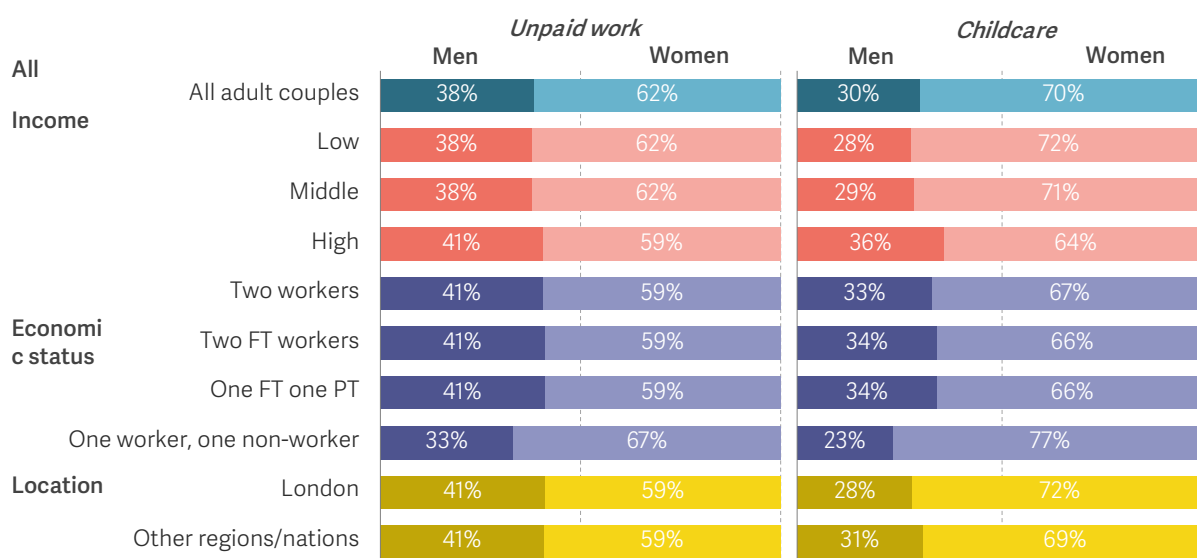
<sup>2</sup> See, for example: M Reid, *The economics of household production*, Wiley 1934 and D Ås, *Studies of time-use: Problems and prospects*, *Acta Sociologica* 21(2), 1978.

<sup>3</sup> G Bangham, *The times they aren’t a-changin’: Why working hours have stopped falling in London and the UK*, Resolution Foundation January 2020.

demographic groups: in most households, women perform around 60 per cent of all unpaid work. The one exception to this rule is in households where one person does not do any paid work: there, women undertake two-thirds of unpaid work, while their male partners pick up the other third.

**FIGURE 3: In cohabiting couples, women do the majority of unpaid work and childcare**

Share of unpaid work and childcare performed by men and women in couple households, aged 18-plus: UK, 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five weekdays and two weekend days. Households grouped by income quartile so that low = lowest-income quartile of households, middle = middle 50 per cent, and high = highest-income quartile.  
SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

The gender split for childcare is more skewed, and varies more between different groups of households. Across all couples, women cover 70 per cent of childcare time, though it is shared slightly more equally among higher-income households, with women in the top quartile of households by income performing 64 per cent of childcare. London also differs slightly from other regions and nations, with women in the capital performing over 72 per cent of childcare compared to 69 per cent in other parts of the country.

### Taking all types of work together, total work is broadly shared within households

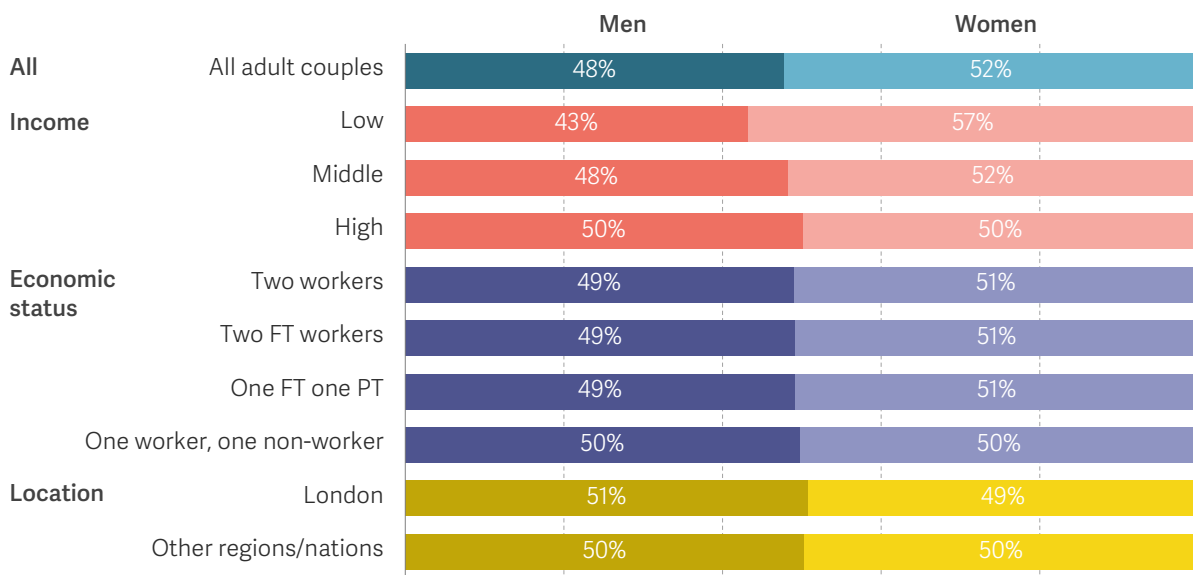
When looking at gender differences in paid and unpaid work time it would be easy to think that either men or women must be performing an unequal share of all work. But when we add together paid and unpaid work time to make total work, the gender

difference is in fact quite slight: individual working-age men and women perform around 50 and 51 hours respectively of total work per week. Turning back to looking at all couple households, women on average perform 52 per cent of all work compared to men’s 48 per cent. The gender split is the same if we include people not in cohabiting or married couples. This broadly confirms what is known as the ‘iso-work’ hypothesis, which suggests that the amount of total work is similar between men and women<sup>4</sup>, a contention that has been found to be true across countries and over time.<sup>5</sup>

A look at the latest detailed time use data in Figure 4 suggests that, although the iso-work hypothesis does not precisely hold for all types of cohabiting couple, it is close to being true for most. Two groups deviate from the norm, though. First, the sharing of work is much less even among lower-income households: here, women perform 57 per cent of all work (a share that would be even larger if single-parent families were included in the average). Second, in London, men work marginally more than women, perhaps because the capital’s longer commute times drive up their hours of paid work.

FIGURE 4: Total work is close to evenly shared by couples in most groups

Share of total work performed by men and women in cohabiting couples, aged 18-plus: UK, 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five weekdays and two weekend days.  
SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: D Hamermesh, *Spending time: The most valuable resource*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

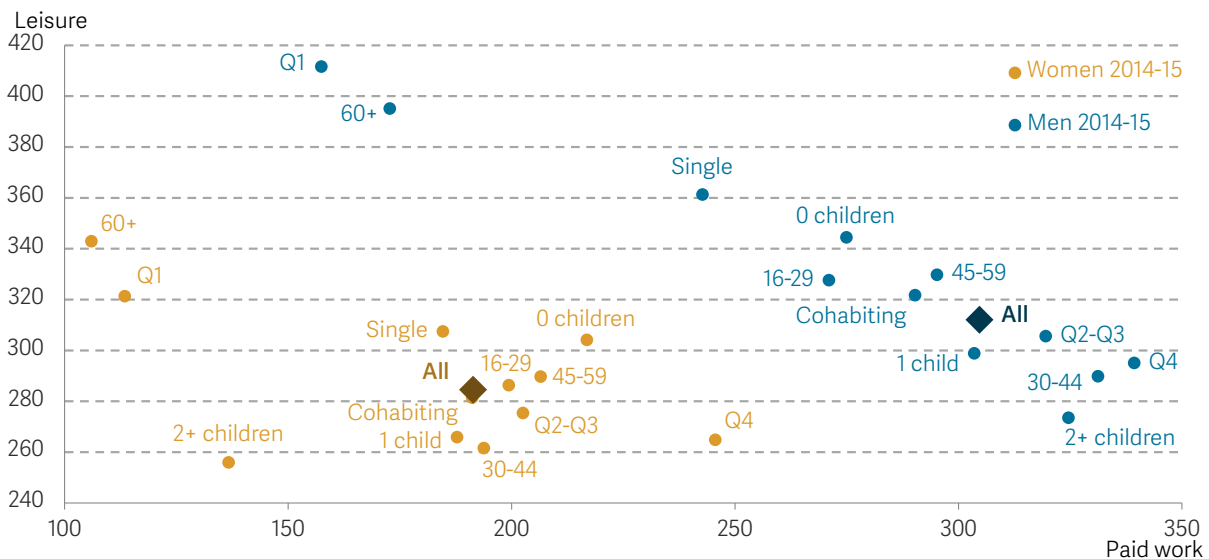
<sup>5</sup> See, for example: M Burda, D Hamermesh & P Weil, *Total work and gender: Facts and possible explanations*, *Journal of Population Economics* 26, January 2013.

## Leisure time is less evenly shared between men and women

If work is more or less equitably distributed between men and women, does the same hold true for other types of time use? The answer to this question is no: as Figure 1 already intimated, leisure is less evenly distributed between the sexes than total work time. Averaging across the week, we can see that working-age women have 4 hours 47 minutes of leisure time per day – including socialising, TV and other activities like reading – while men have more than half an hour (36 minutes) more.

**FIGURE 5: Leisure time is clearly correlated with paid work time for men, but less so for women**

Minutes per day spent in leisure and paid work, by personal characteristics, men and women aged 18-64: UK, 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five weekdays days and two weekend days. Q1 = lowest income quartile, Q2-Q3 = middle income quartiles and Q4 = highest income quartile. SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

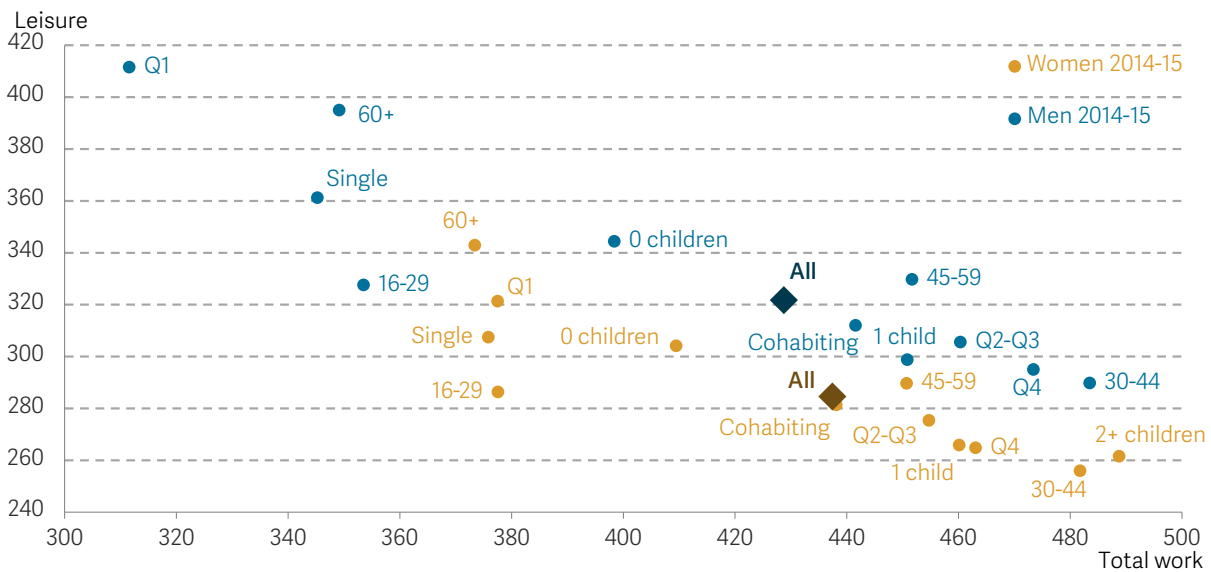
So why might this be the case? The simplest answer is that the average woman spends more time each day on total work (8 minutes), and more time on personal care (16 minutes) and sleep (8 minutes), than the average man. But when (in Figure 5) we explore the relationship between time spent at leisure and in paid work by different sub-groups of men and women, the story is more subtle. This analysis suggests that the trade-offs between work and leisure vary between the sexes. For men, there is a relatively clear (inverse) relationship between paid work time and leisure time: groups like men aged 60-plus and those in low-income households have much more leisure time and much less paid work, for example, and men aged 30-44 and those in the richest households, by contrast, perform around two and a half hours more paid work per day, and receive over

90 minutes less leisure. The relationship between paid work and leisure among women is less clear, with the total time allocated to each activity varying much less between demographic groups. Critically, the average woman has less leisure time than every subgroup of men considered here.

Why is paid work more directly related to leisure time for men than women, as Figure 5 shows? The answer lies in the amount of unpaid work that people also do. Men who spend less time in paid work tend to spend more time on leisure, but women who do less paid work have most of the spare time taken up by extra unpaid work. The more important trade-off is therefore between leisure and total work, not leisure and paid work. Figure 6 repeats the analysis in Figure 5 but with total work on the horizontal axis: it shows that, for both men and women, groups of people who spend more time in total work tend to have correspondingly less time for leisure.<sup>6</sup>

**FIGURE 6: Those who do less total work spend more time at leisure**

Minutes per day spent in leisure and total work (paid plus unpaid), by personal characteristics, men and women aged 18-64: UK, 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five weekdays and two weekend days. Q1=lowest income quartile, Q2-Q3=middle income quartiles and Q4=highest income quartile.

SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

## Work patterns also vary for different groups across the day

Finally, it is interesting to reflect not just on the total amount of time spent doing various activities, but also when these activities are conducted. Studies have shown that well-being is affected by the timing of work as well as its amount, so are there any striking

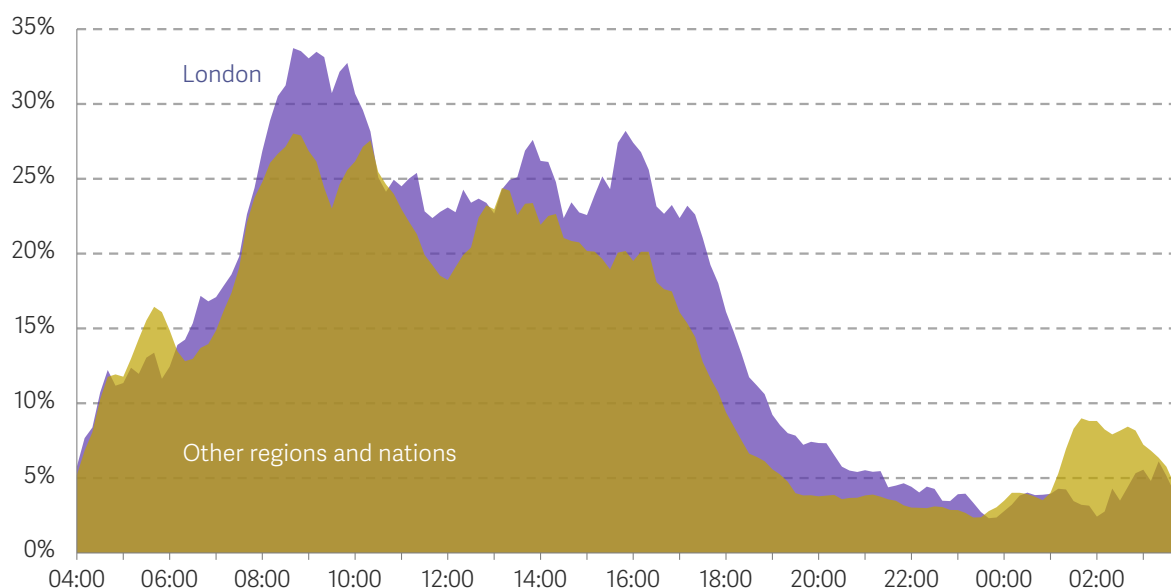
<sup>6</sup> Simple regression analysis of the dependence of leisure time on time in paid work or total work confirms that the correlation with total work is significantly stronger ( $R^2 = 0.48$ ,  $\beta = -0.55$ ) than with paid work ( $R^2 = 0.30$ ,  $\beta = 0.40$ ).



differences between groups?<sup>7</sup> In Figure 7, we investigate patterns of paid work for Londoners and non-Londoners. Despite having lower rates of employment than the rest of the country, people living in the capital spend more hours in paid work, and are more likely to be working longer in the evenings, than those living in other parts of the country. This is partly due to longer commuting times in London – the average worker living in London spends 25 minutes (or 45 per cent) longer each day commuting than the average worker elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, Londoners are less likely than those outside the capital to be doing night shifts or working very early in the morning.

**FIGURE 7: Londoners work later into the evening than those living elsewhere**

Proportion of people undertaking paid work as a primary activity, by time of day and geography, aged 18-64: UK, 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five weekdays and two weekend days.

SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

In general, unpaid work tends to follow a similar daytime pattern to paid work, with its level consistently higher among women than men. Nearly a fifth of women spend their mornings (8am to 11am) doing household work, but the figure is only around half of that for men. Childcare makes up a large portion of unpaid household work, and in Figure 8 we show the proportion of parents of young children engaged in childcare at different points in the day and night. Parents are most likely to be engaged with their children early in the morning and evening, and have down-time between 10 and 11pm. Women with y

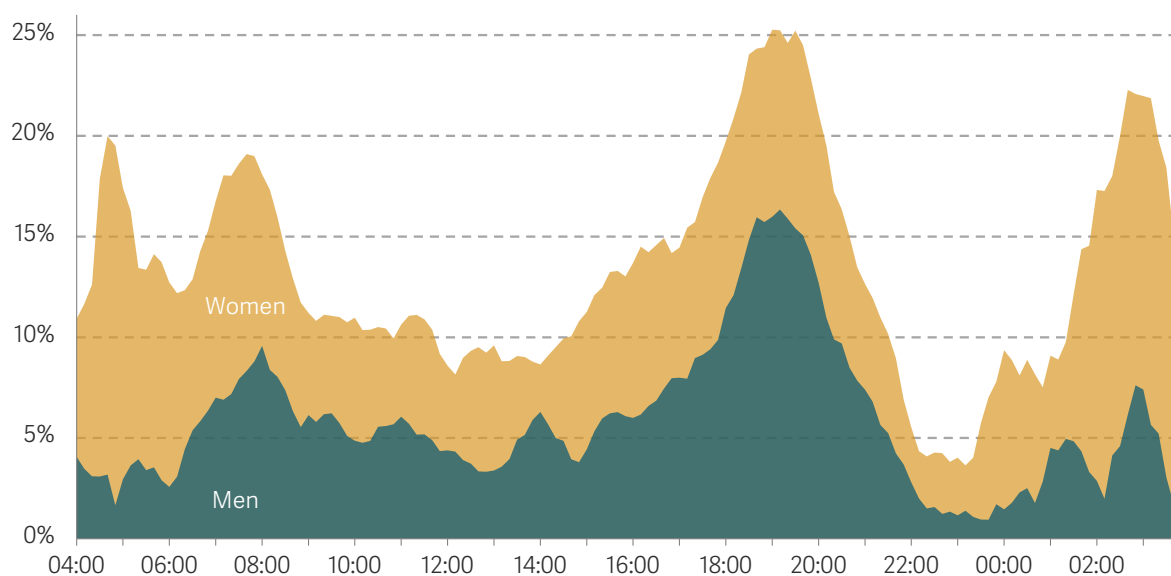
<sup>7</sup> See, for example: J M Harrington, [Health effects of shift work and extended hours of work](#), *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 58, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey. The average Londoner spent 80 minutes per workday commuting in 2019, compared to 55 minutes in the rest of the country.

Young children are always more likely than men to be caring for a child, but the figures are particularly striking throughout the night: over one-fifth of mums with an under-5 are up with their children at 3am, compared to 7 per cent of dads.

### FIGURE 8: In families with young children, women undertake more childcare than men at any point throughout the day

Proportion of people undertaking childcare as primary activity, women and men aged 18-64 with children under 5 in household: UK, 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five weekdays and two weekend days. 50-minute rolling average applied.

SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

All in all, looking at time use in the round shows how complex compromises are being made between paid work, unpaid work and leisure at both an individual and household level, and how the trade-offs shake out differently for various groups in society today. A debate on time use that asserts that reductions in paid work will lead straightforwardly to more leisure looks very narrow (and very male) against the evidence presented thus far. In the next section, we continue our investigation by considering how time use allocation has changed over the past four decades.

## Section 3

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### Changes in time use since the 1970s

In 1974-75, the BBC conducted a time use survey, providing us with invaluable data to compare time use in the UK 40 years ago with that of today. This exercise is revealing in many respects. It tells us a great deal about how gender roles have changed over time, for example, as men's and women's time schedules have broadly converged. It allows us to track how the activities of those from higher- and lower-income households shifted from being broadly the same to now looking quite different. And more broadly, it indicates which activities we as a society dedicate more or less time to today. Critically, a thorough look at change over time shows us that the widely-held assumption that reduced working hours will lead to more leisure does not necessarily hold true.

#### While time spent doing paid work has fallen for men over the last forty years, it has risen for women

We begin by looking at how time devoted to paid work has changed over the last four decades.<sup>9</sup> In Figure 9 we show that on average, women spend considerably longer in paid work today than their counterparts did in the 1970s, while men are doing less. Across the whole working-age population, women are doing 45 minutes per day more paid work, while men are doing 70 minutes less. Put differently, men's and women's schedules have converged to a significant degree, although on average men still spend 100 minutes per day longer in paid work than women.

That said, there are some exceptions to the finding that women have increased hours of paid work since the 1970s. Women under the age of 30, who are single and who live outside of London have seen very marginal reductions in time spent in paid work, for example. But by far the most striking group bucking the trend is women from the lowest-

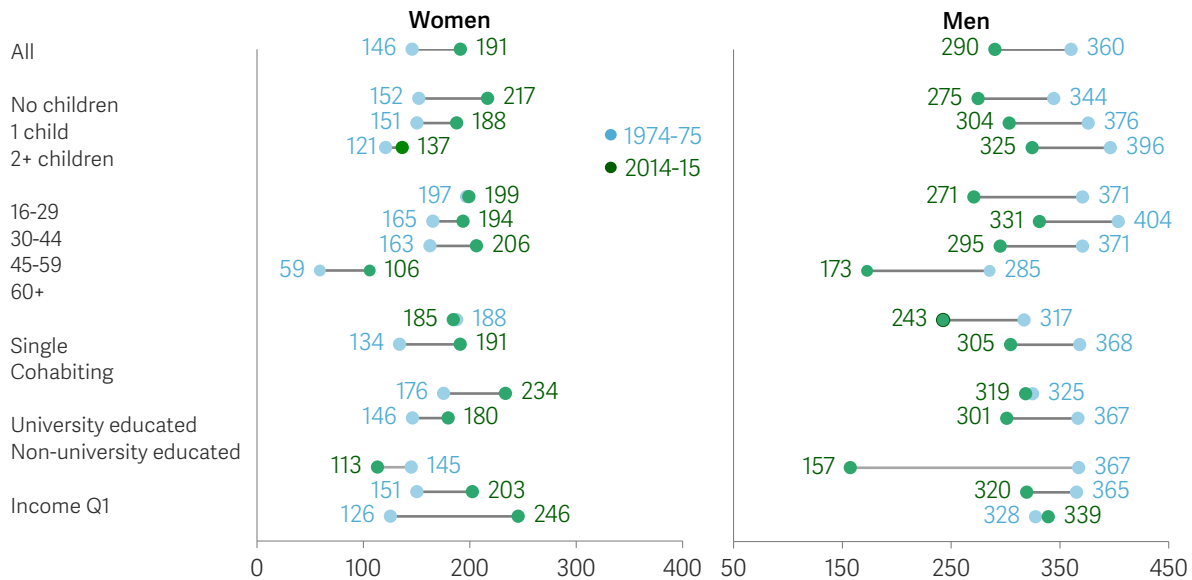
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<sup>9</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of this topic see: G Bangham, [The times they aren't a-changin: why working hours have stopped falling in London and the UK](#), Resolution Foundation January 2020.

income quartile of households.<sup>10</sup> Women in this group worked 32 minutes less a day in 2014-15 compared to 1974-75, while women in the top income quartile now do two hours per day extra of paid work.

**FIGURE 9: Since the 1970s, most men do less paid work and most women do more**

Minutes per day spent in paid work, men and women aged 18-64 by personal characteristics: UK, 1974-75 and 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five working days and two weekend days. Income Q1 = lowest household net income quartile; Q2-3 = middle two household net income quartiles; Q4 = highest household net income quartile.  
SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

In contrast, hours of paid work have reduced for men almost across the board. The solitary exception to this finding is men in the highest household income quartile who still work very similar hours today to their counterparts in the 1970s. At the same time, the overall downward trend in men’s hours of paid work has been driven above all by men in the lowest-income quartile of households, who have seen time in paid work fall by three and a half hours per day. In sum, while hours of paid work did not to vary much between households at different income levels in the 1970s, the story is very different today. By the 2000s large gaps in hours of paid work had opened up between women, but even more strikingly between men.

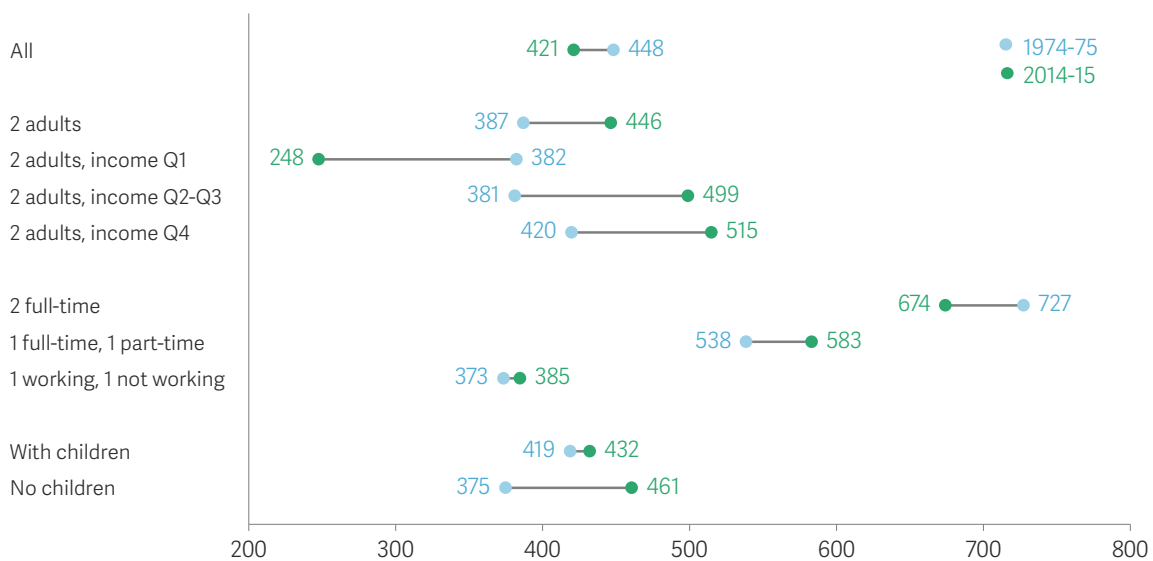
<sup>10</sup> In all analysis by income group in this section, we are constrained by the scarcity of data from the 1970s. The 1974-1975 Time Use Survey only provides data on household income quartiles, hence these are the income categories we must use if we are to make comparisons with over time.

## While the hours of paid work for women and men have converged, they have dramatically diverged between lower- and higher-income households

To properly assess patterns of work between low- and high-income households, we need to look at what has happened to whole households as well as just individuals. Figure 10 shows that the divergence in paid work since the 1970s is not only driven by redistribution of hours within households: the amount of time spent in paid work by whole (couple) households has also diverged. In 1974, two adults in a household on a low income jointly spent just short of 40 minutes a day longer in paid work than a couple on a high income. In 2014, this difference had grown to nearly four and a half hours.

**FIGURE 10: Households with different income levels have diverged in the total amount of work they perform**

Total minutes per day spent in paid work in couple households aged 16-64, by household income: UK, 1974-75 and 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five working days and two weekend days. Income Q1 = lowest household net income quartile; Q2-3 = middle two household net income quartiles; Q4 = highest household net income quartile.

SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

A similar trend holds for households with different qualification levels. In 1974, a household with two adults educated to degree level jointly spent 430 minutes in paid work, whereas two adults with no qualifications spent 367 minutes per day in paid work. Households with compulsory and post-compulsory levels of education spent 433 minutes and 406 minutes in paid work respectively. By 2014 the gap had widened, and

the difference between degree holders and those without qualifications had increased from one hour a day to nearly three hours. Those with compulsory and post-compulsory education were in the middle.

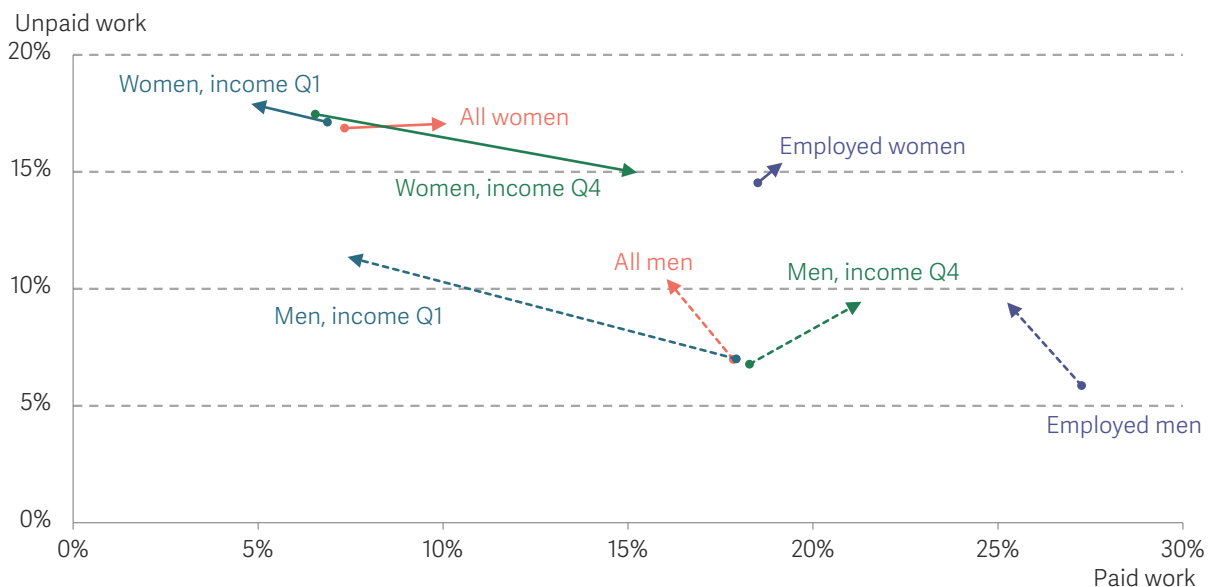
As can be seen in Figure 10, households with two full-time working adults were working fewer hours overall in 2014 than they did in 1974. In households with one person working full-time and one person working part-time, by contrast, total hours went up, likely due to second earners having increased their hours. The total change across all working-age couple households was a 15 per cent rise in weekly paid work hours, as Figure 10 shows, despite average individual hours falling by 2 per cent over the same period.

### Men of all types do more unpaid work today than in the past, but the average woman does much the same

As we saw in Section 2, unpaid work takes up a significant proportion of people’s time and is integral to the link between time use and living standards. Like paid work, the amount of time people spend on unpaid work has evolved in a complex way since the 1970s.

**FIGURE 11: Men do more unpaid work today than they were in the 1970s, while women do much the same**

Proportion of average day spent in paid and unpaid work, men and women aged 18-64, by household income: UK, 1974-75 and 2014-15



NOTES: Base of arrow shows position in 1974-75 and arrowheads show position in 2014-15. Figures show results averaged for five working days and two weekend days. Income Q1 = lowest household net income quartile; Q4 = highest household net income quartile. SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

As Figure 11 makes clear, men collectively do more unpaid work today than in the 1970s, irrespective of their income or employment status: the average man does 49 minutes per day more, and men in low-income households have increased their unpaid work the most (by over an hour per day). But among women the trend is more mixed: while high-income women have reduced their unpaid work by an average 36 minutes per day, women in low-income households have seen their unpaid work time rise slightly (by 11 minutes per day). Netting out across all working-age women, unpaid work time has risen very slightly.

### Parents undertake more childcare today than they did in the past, with both men and women stepping up to a significant degree

The finding that unpaid work has increased overall is surprising, given all the labour-saving devices (such as dishwashers, microwaves and ready-made meals) that we have today compared to the 1970s. Why has this happened? One of the key activities which people have reassigned their time to since the 1970s is looking after children.

**FIGURE 12: Fathers of young children today spend longer doing childcare than mothers 40 years ago**

Minutes per day spent on childcare and paid work, men and women aged 18-64 with children under five in household: UK, 1974-75 and 2014-15



NOTES: Base of arrow shows position in 1974-75 and arrowheads show position in 2014-15. Figures show results averaged for five working days and two weekend days. Income Q1 = lowest household net income quartile; Q2-3 = middle two household net income quartiles; Q4 = highest household net income quartile. SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

As Figure 12 shows, this holds true for both men and women: while fathers have had the largest proportional increase in childcare time (a 400 per cent rise albeit from a very

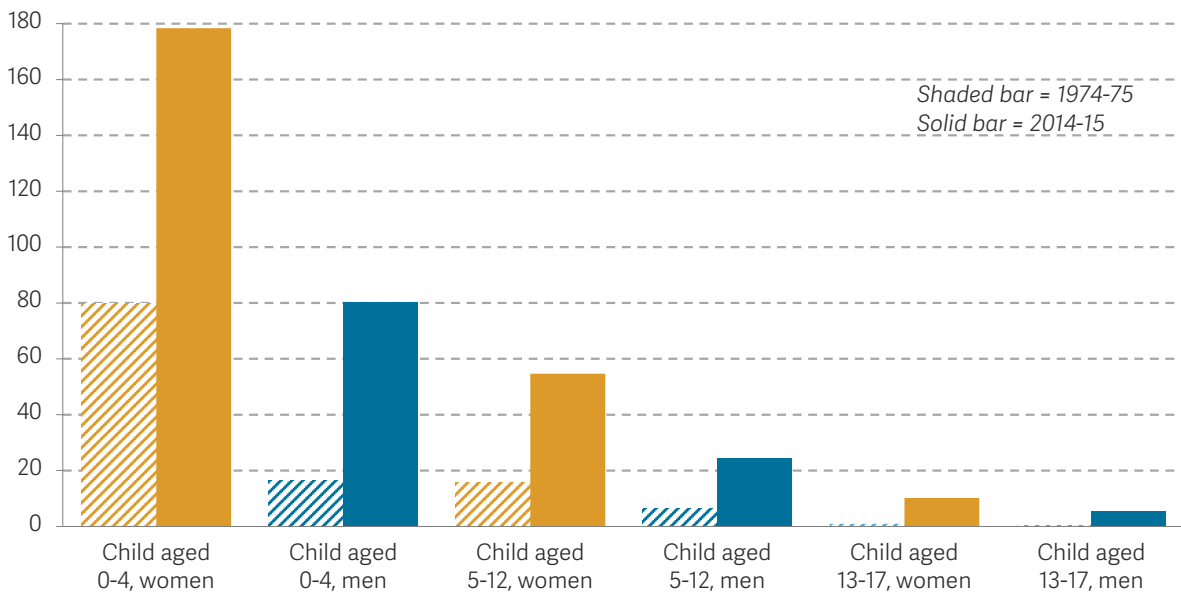


low base, to 42 minutes per day), mothers have had larger absolute increases (from 36 to 92 minutes per day). This is the case even though mothers have also increased their hours of paid work. Parents in the highest income quartile today spend the most time in childcare as a primary activity, while parents in the lowest income group spend the least amount of time. It remains the case that there is more variation in childcare time by income among women than among men.

The amount of time devoted to childcare also depends on the age of people’s children. Figure 13 tells us that time spent on childcare has increased across all ages since the 1970s, but that most of the increase has occurred among parents of children under five. On average, women spend over one and a half hours more looking after pre-schoolers today than they did 40 years ago (99 minutes more), while men spend an extra hour (64 minutes more). Moreover, the amount of time spent actively caring for older children stands at significantly higher levels today compared to the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

**FIGURE 13: Parents dedicate far more time to active childcare than they did 40 years**

Minutes per day spent on childcare as primary activity, men and women aged 18-64 with children: UK, 1974-74 and 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five working days and two weekend days.  
SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

<sup>11</sup> In our focus groups (documented more fully in Section 4) parents frequently spoke about how children today need to be ‘entertained’ more than in the past, which often involves (expensive) technology. As a result, some parents suggested they could only really experience ‘free time’ when their children were asleep; when their children were awake they would always be the first priority.

Since parents across the board are spending longer on childcare today, other activities must have reduced to compensate. This is particularly true for women, who have also increased the time they spend in paid work. For men, some of their extra childcare time may have been freed up by reductions in paid work, although paid work has fallen by more than childcare has risen. For our analysis the key message is this: for fathers, reductions in paid work time since the 1970s have not entirely been absorbed by extra childcare, leaving some time potentially freed up for other activities such as leisure, while mothers have increased their childcare time as well as the time they spend on paid work.

### Time spent at leisure has fallen for men and especially women, bucking the historic trend

More leisure is often held up by advocates of technological progress as the dividend that results from higher productivity. It is also the main objective of many advocates for shorter paid work hours. Given that average time spent in paid work has fallen over the past 40 years, it is reasonable to expect that these promises may have come true, and that people's leisure time might have risen. But the data shows that in fact the historic trend of rising leisure time has stopped.<sup>12</sup>

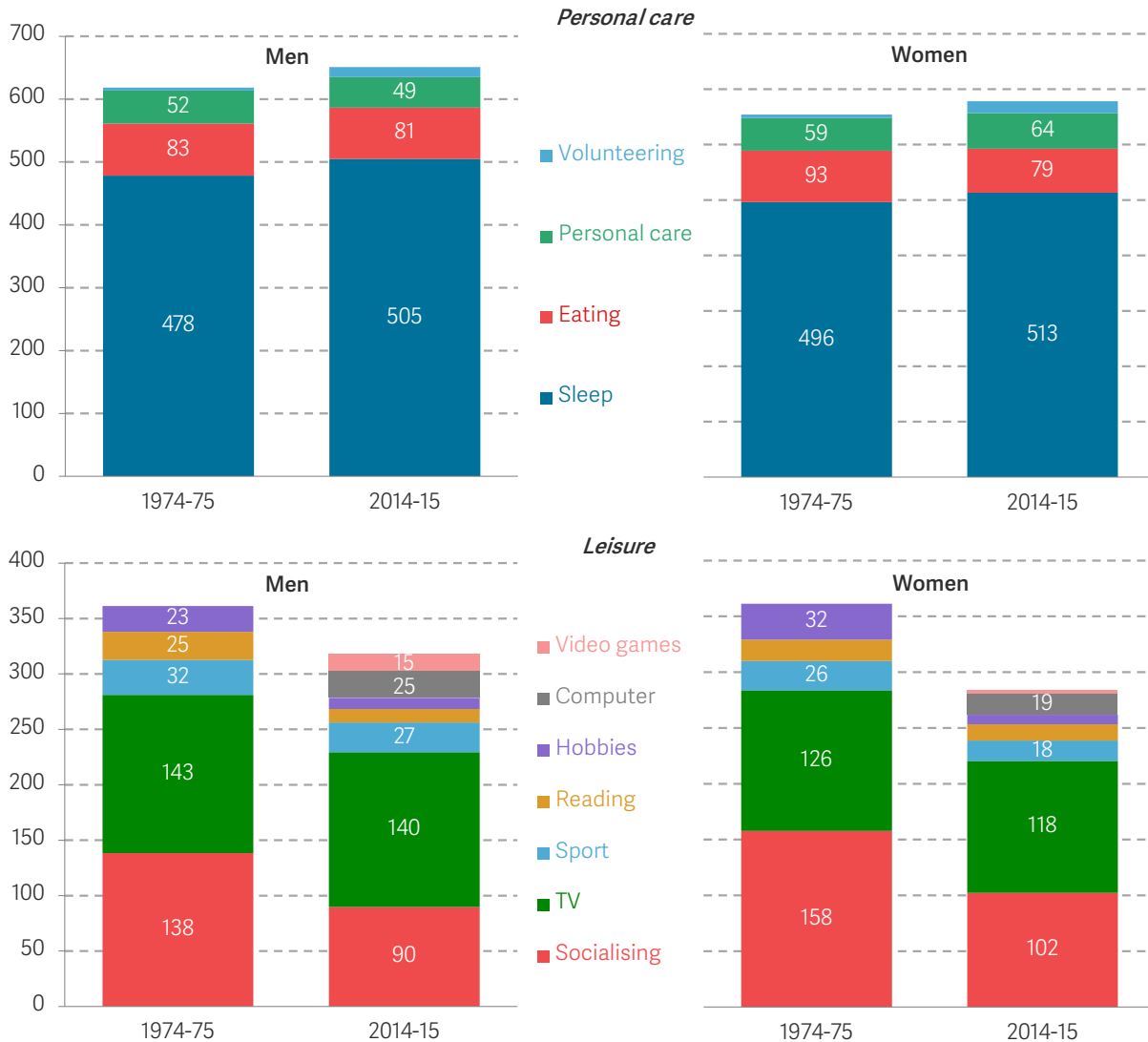
Figure 14 quantifies the fall in leisure time since the 1970s. This shows that working-age men and women enjoyed the same amount of leisure per day in the 1970s (6 hours). Today the figure stands at 5 hours 23 minutes for men while women have seen their leisure time diminish even further, by 75 minutes to 4 hours 47 minutes. A reduction in time spent socialising explains the largest part of these falls: it is down by more than a third, for women and men equally. Time spent playing sport has diminished twice as much for women (30 per cent) than for men (15 per cent), while TV time has only fallen marginally. In contrast to the trend for leisure time, people have a little more time today for personal care, as the lower two panes show. Most of this rise is accounted for by sleep, which takes up more time today among almost all demographic groups.

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<sup>12</sup> J Gershuny, *Time-use surveys and the measurement of national well-being*, Centre for Time Use Research, Oxford, September 2011.

FIGURE 14: Today, we socialise less, but sleep more than we did in the 1970s

Minutes per day spent on different personal and leisure activities, men and women aged 18-64: UK, 1974-75 and 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five working days and two weekend days.  
 SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

## Only low-income men have seen shorter average working hours translate into more leisure time

The trends presented in this section have highlighted a seeming paradox. Why is it that, despite average paid working hours having fallen over time, overall we spend less time at leisure? We identify two main reasons.

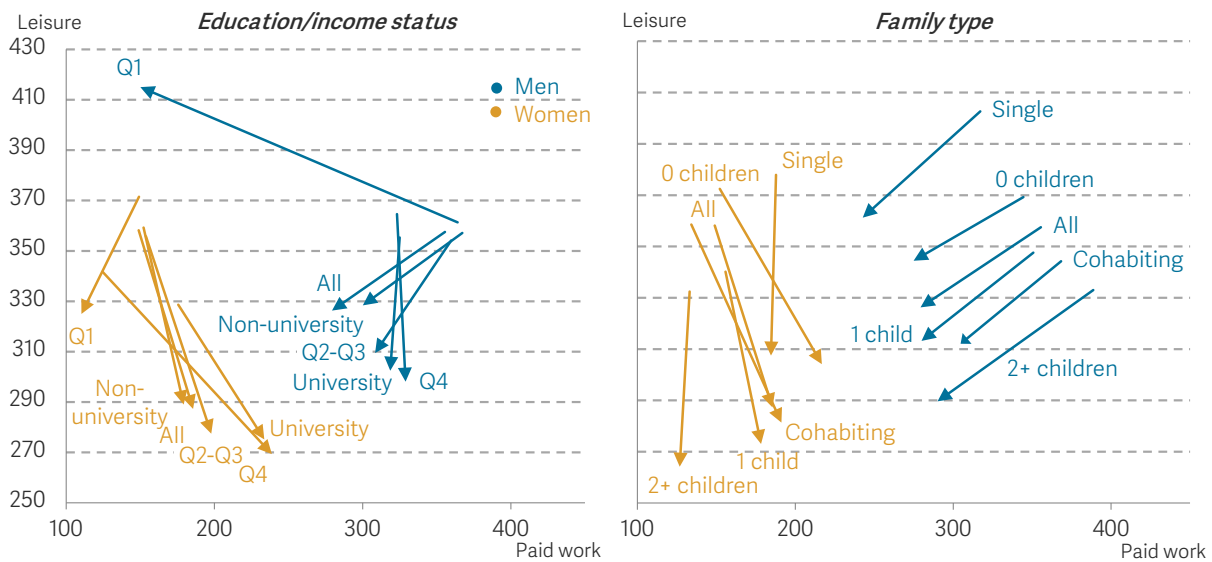
First, while paid work has fallen for the average worker, their total work (paid plus unpaid) has fallen by much less, as people who reduce their paid work tend to take on more

unpaid work (and vice versa). To explain this we must consider once again what has happened at the household level. Paid and unpaid work have been redistributed within households, and so the total change in paid work at the household level has been smaller than the change at level of the individual worker.

Second, any time savings from general reductions in total work have mostly been absorbed by other, non-leisure activities, leaving people with little additional spare time to put towards leisure. Among individuals, the groups that have managed to reduce their paid work hours, mainly lower-income men and single women, have mostly reassigned this time to other non-leisure activities. Men do more unpaid work (cooking and shopping), more childcare, and spend more time sleeping and volunteering. Women are doing more paid work plus more childcare. This time is freed up from a near-halving of cooking time, a slight reduction in domestic work, a large reduction in socialising, and smaller reductions in eating, hobbies, TV and sport.

**FIGURE 15: Leisure has fallen for almost every demographic group, among men and women**

Minutes per day spent on paid work and leisure, men and women aged 18-64 by personal characteristics: UK, 1974-75 and 2014-15



NOTES: Figures show results averaged for five working days and two weekend days. Arrows point in direction of change between 1974-75 and 2014-15. Income Q1 = lowest household net income quartile; Q2-3 = middle two household net income quartiles; Q4 = highest household net income quartile. SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

In fact, as Figure 15 starkly illustrates, the only group that has seen falling hours of paid work translate into more leisure is low-income men. They have sharply reduced the time they spend in paid work, and increased the time they spend in leisure. This increase in leisure is the product mainly of more TV watching (an extra 34 minutes per day compared

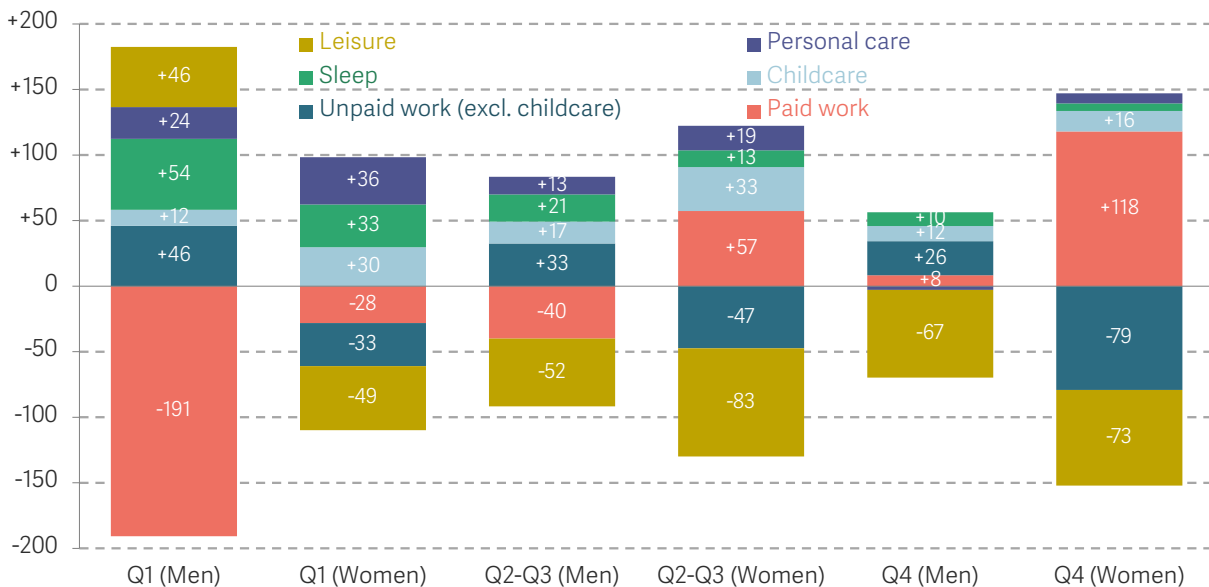
to the 1970s), and the addition of time spent at the computer (34 minutes per day) and on video games (20 minutes per day).

### Over the last 40 years, time use has converged for men and women, but diverged for higher and lower-income households

Time use has changed in many complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory ways over the last 40 years. In Figure 16 we bring together all the pieces for individual men and women split out by their household incomes. As this makes clear, low-income men have seen the biggest change in their time use since the 1970s: they work significantly fewer hours, do more unpaid work and childcare but are also the only group to spend more time at leisure today compared to the past. Low-income women are the only group of women to have seen paid work decline (but by a far smaller degree than men in the bottom income quartile), but have allocated this time to more childcare, sleep and personal care at the expense of leisure.

**FIGURE 16: Different-income households have diverged in their amounts of paid work, unpaid work and leisure**

Change in time use (minutes), men and women aged 18-64, by household income: UK, 1974-75 and 2014-15



Note: Columns do not net to zero due to rounding applied during calculation. Q1 = lowest household net income quartile; Q2-3 = middle two household net income quartiles; Q4 = highest household net income quartile.

SOURCE: RF analysis of Centre for Time Use Research, UK Time Use Survey.

In contrast, high-income men have seen their time schedules change the least over the last 40 years. While time spent in paid work for this group has barely changed, they have taken on more unpaid work and childcare, which combined with more time spent asleep has reduced their average leisure time by more than an hour a day. But women in the top income quartile have seen much more dramatic changes, with significantly more paid work and more childcare absorbing time they previously spent doing unpaid work or at leisure.

To conclude, the results presented in this section show that the usual story about reductions in paid work hours enhancing well-being via more leisure is not entirely accurate. Reductions in average paid work time have not led to increases in leisure time over the past 40 years, for any demographic group save low-income men. But other aspects of the average reduction in paid work time are desirable for other reasons, namely that it results from a partial equalisation in patterns of time use within households.

This section has not, however, given us a fully-rounded guide to the ways future changes in time use might impact people, in terms of raising their well-being or delivering what they want. To answer these questions we need to consider people's views directly. The next section turns to our research in this area, into public opinion around time use.

## Section 4

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### Public attitudes to time use

So far, we have shown that how we spend our time today is less differentiated by sex, but more differentiated by income group, than it was 40 years ago. But are people happy with their current work-life balance? In this section we investigate public attitudes to time use. We explore whether people would like to rebalance their daily lives, how they would like to achieve this if so, and what stops them from doing this at present. We again uncover a complex picture, much of which is at odds with the notion that cutting hours of paid work is a universally-held ambition, or that doing so would result in more time spent at leisure.

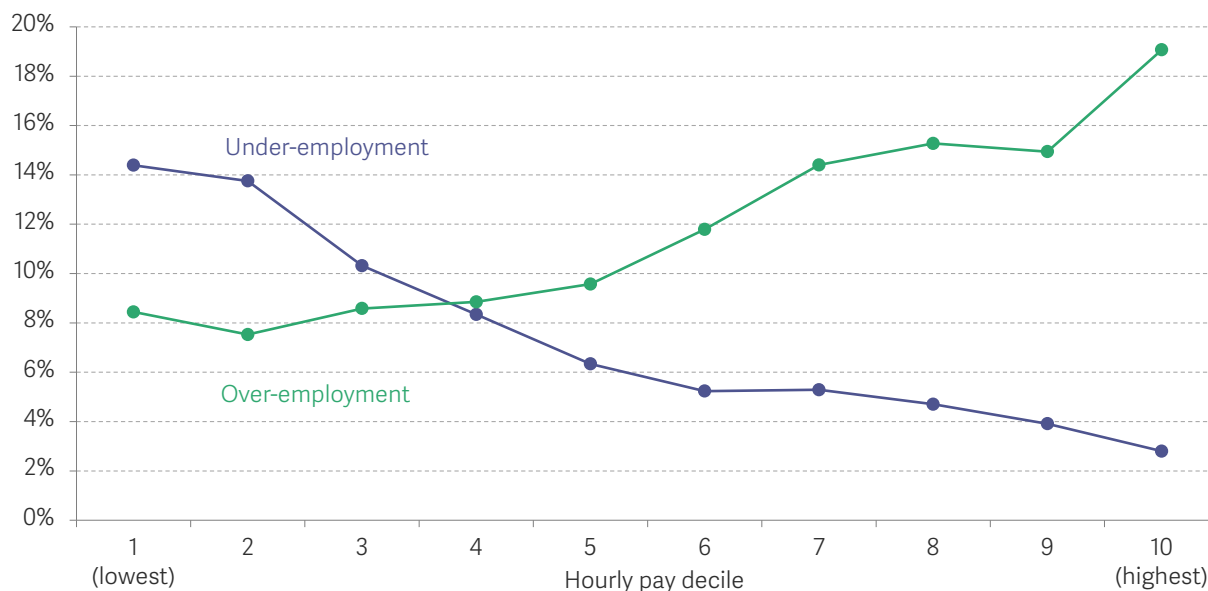
#### One-in-seven low paid workers would like more paid work (while close to one-in-five high paid workers would like less)

We begin by looking at data on attitudes to paid work collected as part of the Labour Force Survey. This suggests that a substantial minority of workers today are either under-employed (i.e. would like more working hours than they currently have) or over-employed (would like fewer hours even if this affected take-home pay).

But as Figure 17 shows, under-employment is three and a half times more prevalent among lower-paid workers than among the highest-paid fifth. Over-employment, on the other hand, is clustered towards the top of the pay distribution, where it is twice as common as at the lower end.

### FIGURE 17: Under-employment is more prevalent among low-paid workers, while over-employment is more commonly observed among the high paid

Proportions of workers who are under-employed and over-employed, aged 18-64 by gross hourly pay decile: UK, 2019



NOTES: Under-employment = wants more hours at the prevailing wage rate, over-employment = wants fewer hours, knowing that pay may go down as a result.

SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey.

Because these statistics capture constrained preferences, they do not allow us to conclude that people reporting neither under- nor over-employment are all happy with their hours. Far from it. In Figure 18 we add in another measure of over-employment – which we call ‘weak’ over-employment. This includes everyone who says they would like shorter working hours, before they are asked to make trade-offs between time and money. Evidently, the proportion of people desiring a change in this scenario is much higher at all income levels. This less-constrained measure suggests that a large proportion of the population would ideally like less paid work, when they are not pushed to think about whether or not they could afford it. But once again, there are striking differences between pay deciles.



**FIGURE 18: Many more workers would reduce their hours if there was no effect on their overall pay**

Proportions of workers who are over-employed, aged 18-64 by gross hourly pay decile: UK, 2019



NOTES: Weak over-employment = all workers who say they would like to work fewer hours; over-employment = wants fewer hours, knowing that pay may go down as a result.  
 SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey.

## However, new survey data suggests there is high demand for balance between paid work and leisure

Paid work is the only aspect of people’s time use on which we have official public attitude data. In order to find out what people think about time use in the round we must look beyond datasets like the Labour Force Survey, and in fact beyond official statistics altogether. To compensate for the scarcity of data on people’s preferred time use beyond paid work we conducted our own representative survey of the working-age population and then took the findings of the survey out to three focus groups to understand the finer nuances (for more details, see Box 2).

## BOX 2: Investigating public attitudes to time use

To find out more about people's views on their time use, we commissioned a survey from Ipsos MORI of a representative sample of the UK adults aged 18 to 75 who are in work. Questions were developed by the report authors, working with polling specialists at Ipsos MORI. Survey fieldwork was carried out between 15 and 22 January 2020, and final sample size was 2,402, stratified to ensure representativeness of the UK by sex, age and region. This sample included a boost of 400 additional respondents in London, to allow analysis at the level of London's population only.

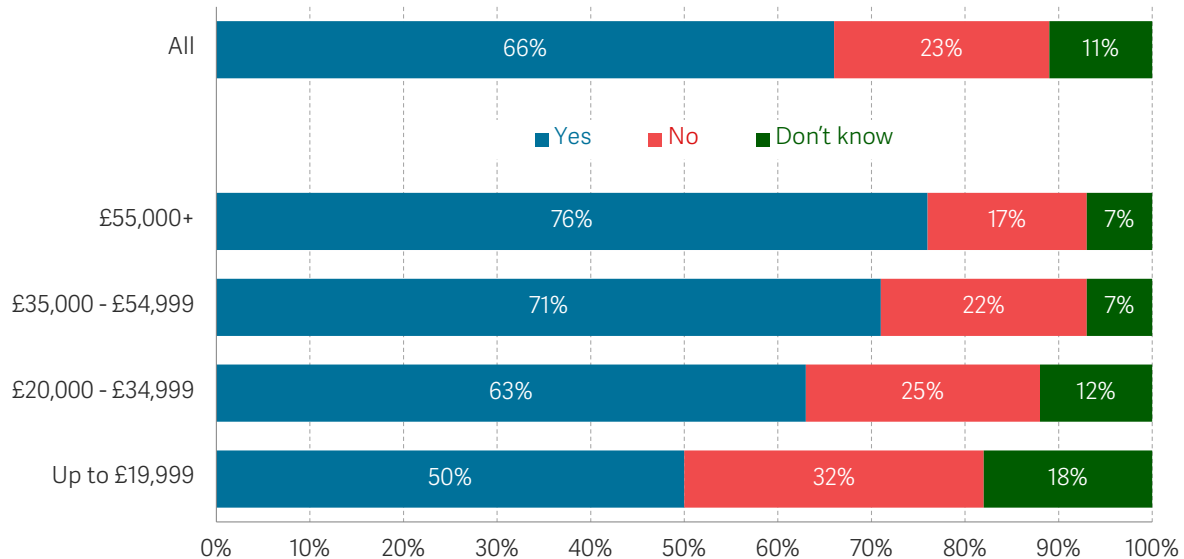
To understand more about how views on time use are formed, we carried out three focus groups between 6 February and 18 February 2020 to delve in more detail into why people hold

the views they do. These were held in three UK cities: Coventry, London and Nottingham. Each had 10 participants, recruited by an agency, with the recruitment criteria that they needed to be of working age and economically active. Participants were also selected to have a diverse demographic profile in terms of age, gender, and employed or self-employed work. All had household gross incomes approximately below the national average for their household type. The London group had no further criteria, whereas the two groups in other cities (locations chosen as being near the national median by hours worked and weekly wages) were further sorted: one group all had children living with them, while in the other group nobody had children in their home.

A key question in our survey was around the balance between work and leisure, and specifically whether people would like more free time outside their work. Across the whole working-age population, two-thirds of people (66 per cent) said they would like more free time outside of work hours, with little difference between women and men. But as Figure 19 shows, people in higher-income households are much more likely to want to increase their amount of free time: three-quarters of those with net household income over £55,000 would like more free time outside of work hours, compared to half of people with income below £20,000.

**FIGURE 19: Those from higher-income households are more likely to want to increase free time compared to lower-income households**

Respondent share to question: On balance, over the next few years, would you like to have more free time outside of work hours?



NOTES: Base = all UK workers or self-employed adults aged 18-75. Fieldwork conducted 15-22 January 2020. SOURCE: Ipsos MORI research for the Resolution Foundation.

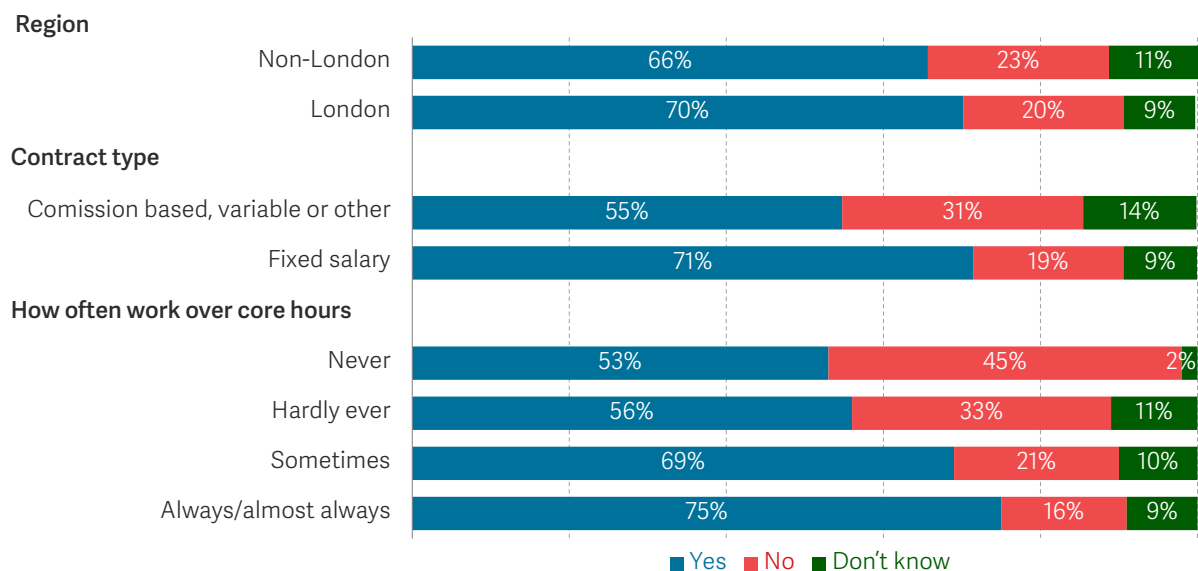
Figure 20 shows that preferences for more free time vary by region, and are higher in Greater London (70 per cent) than the rest of the country. The survey shows that Wales has the lowest share of people who want more free time (57 per cent) while the West Midlands has a particularly high proportion of people who don't want more free time – almost one-third of them (32 per cent). This regional distribution does not correlate with aggregate features of local labour markets like pay or pay levels, but may reflect the composition of the workforce in terms of age, industry sector and skill level.

The type of employment contracts people are on also plays a role. People on a fixed salary, receiving the same amount of money each payday are more likely to want more free time than workers who are on contracts where their pay varies (71 per cent compared to 55 per cent).

The desire for more free time is also linked with workers' frequency of overtime working. Three in four people who say they often have to work more hours than they have agreed to in their contracts wanted to have more free time. Given that our survey found two out of every five workers in the UK state that they always have to work more hours than they are contracted to do, this is an important issue for many people.

## FIGURE 20: Two-thirds of adults would like more free time outside of paid work, yet this varies considerably by personal circumstance

Respondent share to question: On balance, over the next few years, would you like to have more free time outside of work hours?



NOTES: Base = all workers or self-employed UK adults aged 18-75. Fieldwork conducted 15-22 January 2020.  
SOURCE: Ipsos MORI research for the Resolution Foundation.

## Those wanting more free time have largely positive motivations

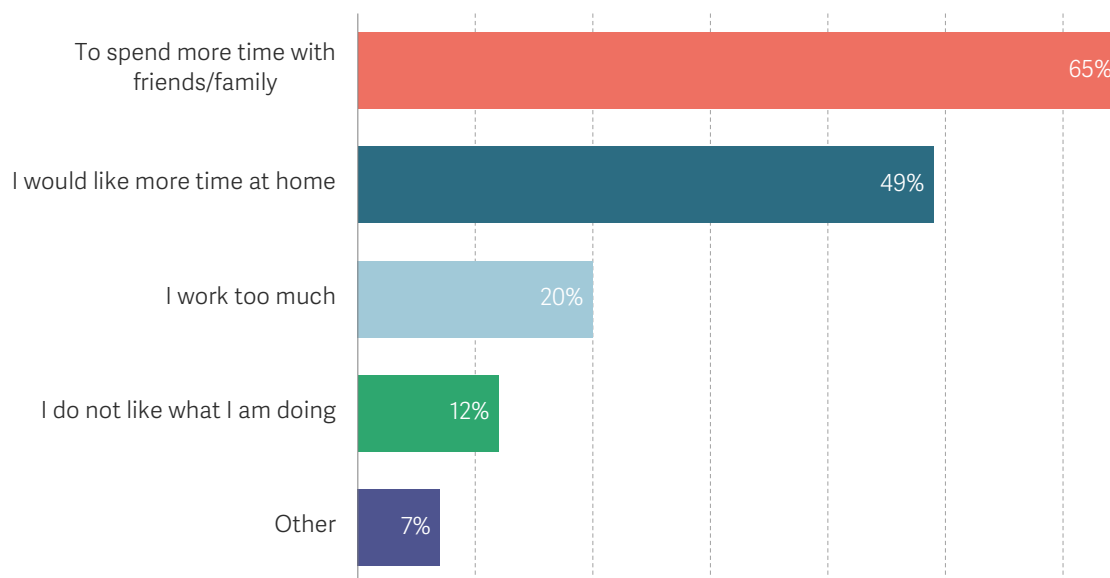
Is people's desire for more free time outside work mainly a negative one, because their work is excessive, or a positive one, because they would prefer to do other activities? Both impulses are important, but the survey findings presented in Figure 21 suggest that positive reasons are uppermost in people's minds. Of the workers who say they would like more free time outside of work hours, two-thirds (65 per cent) say this because they would like to spend more time with friends and family. Almost half would like to spend more time at home. Far fewer (one-fifth) – though still a large number of people – say they work too much, a proportion that varies little across the income distribution.

These findings have two important implications. First, since the most popular reasons for wanting more free time are to spend it with family and friends, any changes to people's time schedules are likely to be better received if people's additional free time coincides with that of other people they spend it with.<sup>13</sup> Second, although work intensification and long hours are a problem for some workers' well-being, these may not be the most compelling reasons why people would like changes to time use in future. People are most likely to desire more free time for the positive reason that they want to spend it with other people.

<sup>13</sup> Previous time use research empirically confirms the intuition that the presence of family and friends plays a key role in how people perceive the value of that time: leisure time spent in the presence of others, such as a spouse, is more enjoyable than that spent alone. See, for example: D Hamermesh, *Timing, togetherness and time windfalls*, *Journal of Population Economics* 15, 2002.

**FIGURE 21: The desire for more free time largely comes from a positive place**

Respondent share to question: For what reasons would you want to have more free time outside of work hours?



NOTES: Base = all UK workers or self-employed adults aged 18-75 who want more free time. Fieldwork conducted 15-22 January 2020. Respondents could select up to three options.  
SOURCE: Ipsos MORI research for the Resolution Foundation.

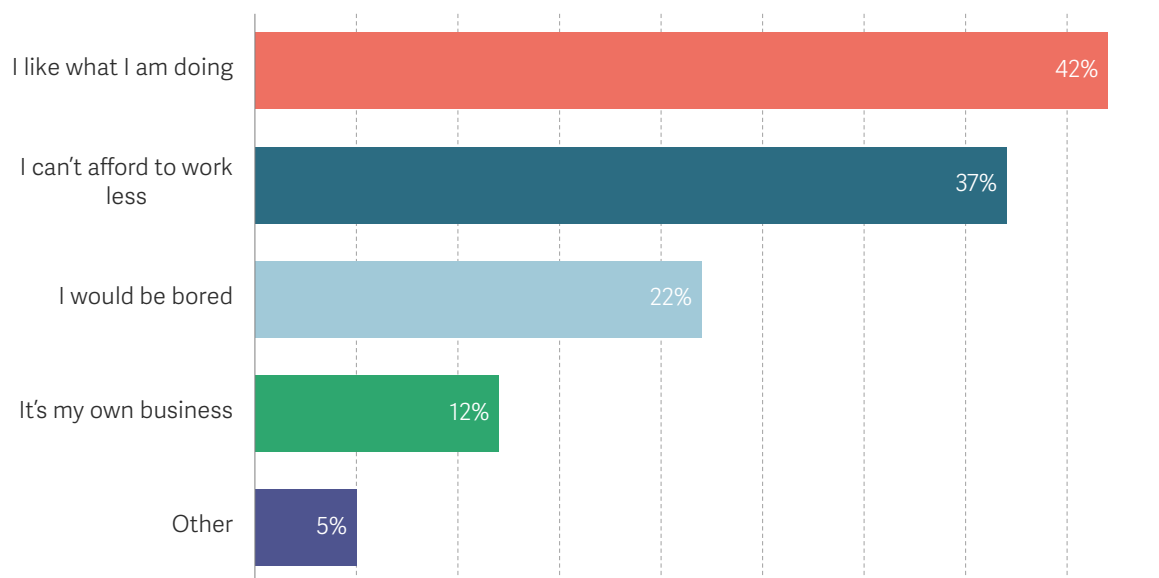
In the debate on working hours reductions these two issues are often reversed in importance, with the focus being on workplace issues like overwork and low productivity, while this evidence shows the importance of broader context: reductions in paid work are worthwhile if they lead to a more balanced time schedule that leaves time for leisure in the presence of others. The most salient reasoning may differ among lower- and higher-income households, too: the desire for more free time in order to spend it with friends and family is strongest among the highest-income households. By contrast, people in lower-income households are more likely than others to say that they dislike what they do.

### People who do not want more free time either like what they are doing, or can't afford to change

Not everybody wants more free time outside work, of course. Figure 22 shows that of the 23 per cent of people who would not like more free time, the most commonly cited reasons are that they like what they do (42 per cent), that they can't afford to work less (37 per cent), and that they would be bored (22 per cent). This further underlines the heterogeneity of people's preferences, and that striking a better balance between different uses of time will entail different changes for different people.

## FIGURE 22: Those who do not want more free time have positive and negative reasons for their preference

Respondent share to question: For what reasons would you not want to have more free time outside of work hours?



NOTES: Base = all UK workers or self-employed adults aged 18-75 who do not want more free time. Fieldwork conducted 15-22 January 2020. Respondents could select up to three options.  
SOURCE: Ipsos MORI research for the Resolution Foundation.

Among lower-income households, the second of these reasons is the most important: four-in-ten of those with household incomes below £20,000 who say they don't want more free time say this because they couldn't afford to work less. They are much less likely than higher-income households to say they like what they are doing or that they would be bored if they had more free time. Workers aged 45 or older are most likely to prioritise liking what they are doing, while those with children are significantly more likely (44 per cent) than those without children (34 per cent) to say that they can't afford to work less. Lastly, among main earners who would not like more free time the most popular reason is that they like what they are doing, whereas second earners are more likely to say that they cannot afford to work less.

## Money and children constrain time use ideals, but so too do employers

Focus group interviews helped us better understand how people think about the top three reasons for not favouring more leisure, given in Figure 22. Participants talked about trade-offs between enjoying paid work, being bored by time off and having enough money to enjoy leisure activities to the full. In making these trade-offs, money plays a central role in deciding how much to work and how much time to take off. Rather than setting out to

work enough to earn a particular target income, participants tended instead to look at the trade-off between paid work and other activities in terms of funding a given lifestyle.

*“You like your lifestyle and you’ve got to fund it, if that means working extra hours then you don’t turn it down.”*

(Female, full time)

*“If you’ve got the leisure time, but you haven’t the money to do leisure in that time, there’s not an awful lot of point in that really.”*

(Male, full time)

The importance of money over lifestyle preferences, in deciding the allocation of time to paid work or leisure, came across most strongly among parents. For parents of young children especially, sufficient paid work is necessary to meet the financial requirements of the family, alongside committing a satisfactory amount of time to childcare. This sentiment cut across people from different occupational backgrounds, ages and family situations. In some cases, people will take a carefully-calculated approach to determining their working hours, calibrating them to account for income net of childcare costs – and responding to incentives introduced by the tax and benefit systems.

*“With the cost of childcare it’s practically impossible – for me at least – to think about dropping hours.”*

(Female, part time)

*“When I dropped to 21 hours I sat down with my partner who works full-time, plus extra work on weekends, so childcare and pickups fall to me... So I sat down and worked out what I’d get paid if I worked 16 hours and actually the reason I came up with 21 is it meant I didn’t hit the tax bracket so I’m getting a similar wage to others in my team.”*

(Female, part time)

However, their constraints were structural as well as personal. Participants did not always feel that they were able to make active labour supply decisions or tailor the household supply according to their families’ needs, and negotiating hours and flexibility is difficult. Changes to labour supply were typically gendered and centred on having children. In these cases, mothers were often able to tailor their supply more freely than men or those who don’t have children.

*“You’d have the conversation, but it’s idealistic to see it like this. There’s what you’d like, but whether you can actually get that to work is about the job opportunities out there, what the employers will allow. Me and my partner have tried to juggle our working hours a bit, and we’ve got nowhere with it really.”*

(Male, full time)

*“You are in a slightly better position to negotiate your hours when you return to work after having a baby.”*

(Female, part time)

## In moderation, work can boost well-being and enhance people’s sense of purpose

For people with fewer constraints on their time imposed by family or money – like those in our focus groups without children – the decision on how to schedule time can give greater weight to what will boost well-being. Most of the people we spoke to accepted work as a necessary way of life, and for many it was a rewarding way to spend their time. When asked whether they would choose to continue working if money was no object, participants did not generally say they would give up work altogether, although this question did prompt a discussion about whether people would be able to reduce the role of paid work in their lives.

Previous research on well-being has repeatedly found that the absence of paid work is detrimental to people’s subjective well-being, though the degree of detriment depends on social norms that prevail in that time and place.<sup>14</sup> Once people are in paid work, its amount seems to matter relatively little to well-being (although extremely long hours are more often detrimental).<sup>15</sup> Work provides value over and above just pay,<sup>16</sup> something our focus groups brought out clearly. Participants’ appetite for changing their time schedules depended on the extent to which they thought their other activities outside paid work were valuable. Those whose leisure time was less likely to be structured and purposeful were less interested in changing their paid work patterns. By contrast, the participants who felt they used their leisure productively – for instance by learning, spending time with friends or tending to their children – tended to value their leisure time

<sup>14</sup> A E Clark and A J Oswald, *Unhappiness and Unemployment*, *Economic Journal* 104(424), 1994; A E Clark, *Unemployment as a social norm: Psychological evidence from panel data*, *Journal of Labor Economics* 21(2), 2003.

<sup>15</sup> D Kamerade, S Wang, B Brendan, U Balderson and A Coutts, *A shorter working week for everyone: How much paid work is needed for mental health and well-being?*, *Social Science & Medicine*, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example: M Jahoda, *Employment and unemployment: A social-psychological analysis*, Cambridge University Press, 1982 which suggests paid work has five ‘latent functions’ beside its chief goal of gaining pay: it provides a structure to people’s time, it brings regular social contact, it gives a sense of collective purpose, it keeps people active, and it confers social status and often a social identity.



more than those who had few commitments outside of work. Although most participants acknowledged that work was boring at times, this was often outweighed by the other benefits it provides to well-being.

*“If I had more [free time] I probably wouldn’t spend it doing anything very productive, most of the time when I’ve got free time I end up just laying around and watching TV and hate myself.”*

(Female, full time)

*“[It provides] a routine, and ... that feeling of providing and earning and making your way. I’m just conditioned to that, it’s very much a miner’s mentality, and of working-class people as well.”*

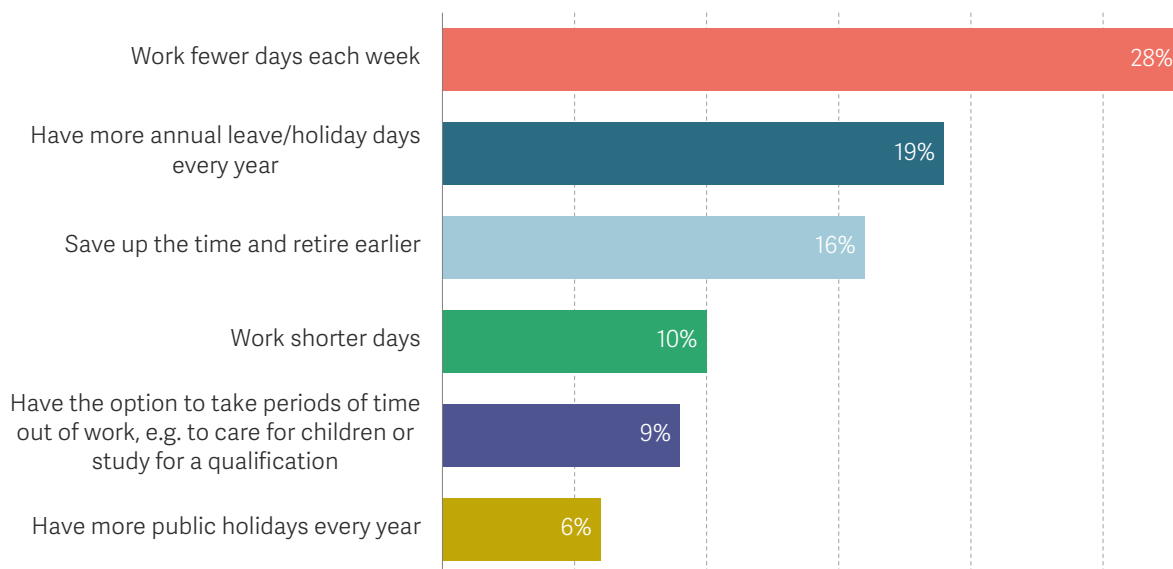
(Male, part time)

## If paid work reductions were on the cards, people would dedicate the time to sports and family

If substantial numbers of workers are open to changes in their paid work schedules, and supposing that changes were on offer, what sorts of new schedule would be most popular? We asked survey respondents their views about a hypothetical law which reduced the number of hours they could spend in paid work over the course of their lifetime, without reducing pay. We then gave them a choice of ways in which to take this additional free time. As Figure 23 shows, the most popular option was to work fewer days each week, which was chosen by 28 per cent of people, followed by more annual leave days per year. Among women, working fewer days each week was even more popular, whereas men were marginally more likely to choose to save up the time and retire earlier. Interestingly, the option of more public holidays per year, as offered by recent Labour party manifestos, was the least popular of the options offered. Looking by income, workers from high-income households were more clustered around a preference for shorter working weeks. Workers with household incomes below £20,000 were less likely to choose any particular option given.

### FIGURE 23: If people had to reduce their working time, shorter working weeks would be more popular than longer holidays

Respondent share to question: Imagine if the Government introduced a law that limited the number of hours people could spend in paid work over the course of their lifetime, what would be your preferred option?



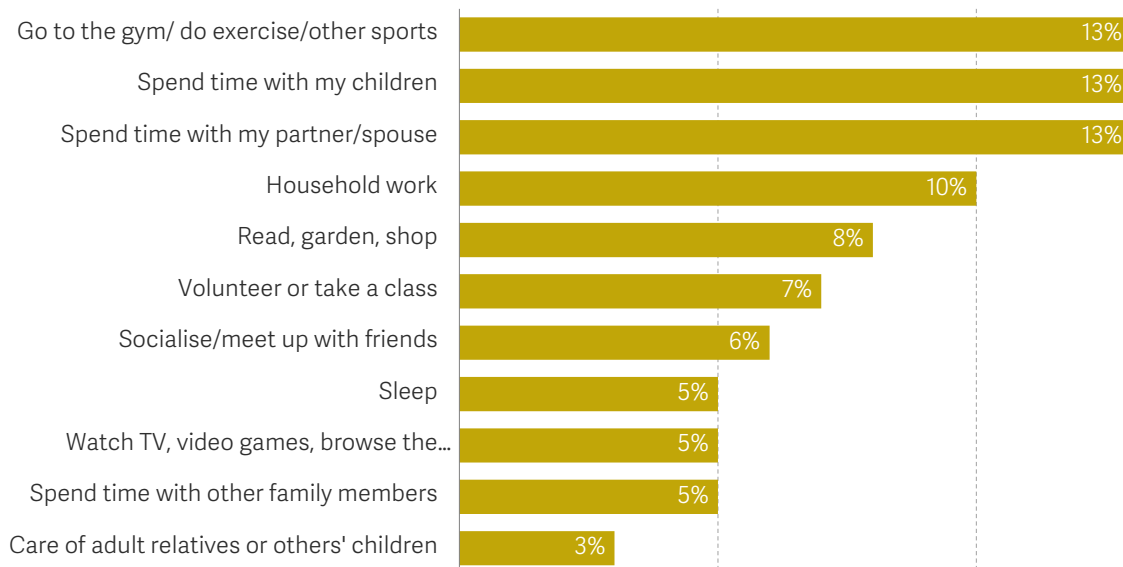
NOTES: Base = all UK workers or self-employed adults aged 18-75. Fieldwork conducted 15-22 January 2020.  
SOURCE: Ipsos MORI research for the Resolution Foundation.

But if people were able to reduce their working hours, what would they do with the time? In Section 3 we examined this question retrospectively, looking at what demographic groups who reduced their paid work hours since the 1970s have replaced that time with. In our survey work we were able to look to the future, and ask people what they thought they might do with the extra time, if their working hours were to be reduced by two per week. The most popular options were more exercise, spending time with children, and spending time with a partner, as Figure 24 shows.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Data currently being collected by the ONS on how furloughed workers have used their time during the coronavirus pandemic will provide alternative evidence for this question, though it is too early yet to be able to conduct such detailed analysis. See Annex 1 for further information.

### FIGURE 24: Most people say they would take care of their health and spend time with loved ones if they had more time

Respondent share to question: If you worked for 2 hours less every week in your main job, with no change to your wages/salary, what would you most like to do with this extra time?



NOTES: Base = all UK workers or self-employed adults aged 18-75. Fieldwork conducted 15-22 January 2020.  
SOURCE: Ipsos MORI research for the Resolution Foundation.

## But people care more about work pressure and control over hours than limiting the amount they work

For all the importance for well-being of the amount of time people spend on paid work or other activities, it is not only the amount that counts. A strong finding from both our survey work and focus groups was that job quality matters as much as, if not more than quantity. In our focus groups in particular, people reported being more satisfied with paid work when they had more control over it. Some of the most-resented aspects of work for certain focus group participants were late notice of and limited control over shift patterns, in sectors like retail and health and social care. Participants told us how disruptive it could be to only receive notice for the following week's shifts on the Sunday evening.

To investigate job quality in our survey work we presented people with a choice of things that they might want to change about their jobs. The most popular categories – shown in Figure 25 – were a more manageable workload (21 per cent), and greater flexibility about where (19 per cent), when in the day (20 per cent) and which days (17 per cent) work is done, as well as flexibility in taking leave (16 per cent). Notably, having the opportunity to work fewer paid hours each week was less popular than all these other options, being selected by only 14 per cent of respondents.

FIGURE 25: Control and balance over hours are just as important as the amount

Respondent share to question: Given the opportunity, what, if anything, would you most like to change in your main job?



NOTES: Base = all UK workers or self-employed adults aged 18-75. Fieldwork conducted 15-22 January 2020. Respondents could choose up to three options.  
 SOURCE: Ipsos MORI research for the Resolution Foundation.

For some workers, control over work patterns will more easily be gained by moving job than it will be by renegotiating terms and hours with an existing employer. Reflecting on why they had chosen their current jobs, some focus group participants volunteered that the job move had given them more control over their work and overtime. They valued the ability to prevent paid work unexpectedly encroaching on free time. Others had moved from employment to self-employment, to win more flexibility in hours and do something they like to do, at a more relaxed pace, for example by becoming contract cleaners or dog walkers.

*“Compared to my previous job in a bank when I was copied in to hundreds of emails, and was salaried and so didn’t get paid when I took work home. In my current role I’m quite happy, because I go in, do my job and then go home, and then I haven’t got to worry about it.”*

(Female, part time)

*“I don’t want to make any change, I’ve made it now. ... I’m not very proud I’m a cleaner, it’s not very glamorous, but it fits my lifestyle. I earn similar money to what I earnt at [previous employer].”*

(Female, part time)

Control over paid work can also mean flexibility over which hours people work in the day and week, and the ability to predict and shape their schedule of work. Focus group participants drew attention to the importance of managers' discretion in determining the control they had over their time in different jobs – with high value being given to the freedom to take time out (at lunchtime for example) for what many called 'life admin', to go to the bank, the dentist or doctor for instance. Especially in London – where commutes are longer than elsewhere – there was a general frustration that banks close early and many other essential services are only accessible during working hours.

*“Because I'd been there a long time, and I had the relationship I did with my manager, and I don't often call in sick ... then she's fine [with any interruptions].”*

(Female, part time)

While most participants had some discretion in how they spent their hours in work, none of the employees we spoke to were able to tailor the hours they worked based on how much they wanted to get paid. Instead, they had to accept the hours that were given to them. In order to achieve flexibility in pay some employees instead supplemented their wages with second jobs. While the situation was slightly different for self-employed participants, their freedom from an employment relationship was generally restricted again by the financial pressure to take on whatever contracts or clients were available.

*“At the moment I'm having to do additional work at the weekends just to try to make ends meet, because they don't offer paid overtime at my work”*

(Male, full time)

To conclude, in this section we have found that workers who want to reduce the hours they spend in paid work want to do so above all for positive reasons, to spend more time with their family and friends. Focus group participants further emphasised that their work time preferences were determined more by positive 'pull factors' than by negative 'push factors'. In moderation, employment can boost people's well-being, although the desirability of marginal hours of work depends on what other activities people think they would use the time for. And the quality of time spent in paid work matters as much as its quantity, in assessing its overall impact on well-being – particularly the degree of control that people are able to exercise over their work conditions. In light of these findings, we move next to considering how public policy could help people achieve their preferences for improved time schedules in the future.

## Section 5

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### Time use and the policy debate

In this final section, we review the policy debates on time use in light of the evidence we have presented so far. We suggest that current discussions are too narrow in two respects. First, they do not consider unpaid work, thereby failing to reflect the full time use experience (especially of women). Second, they do not sufficiently engage with the most striking change in time use over the past four decades, namely the diverging fortunes of lower- and higher-income households when it comes to hours of paid work. In light of this, we end this report with reflections on how policy makers could engage more effectively with the complex question of time use.

#### Time use policy debates should be guided by the evidence

To date, public debate on time use has largely centred on mandating reduced working hours in order to enable people to enjoy more leisure.<sup>18</sup> While a laudable ambition in the abstract, this is one that is largely informed by the male and higher-income experience of the past forty years, and fails to reflect the plurality of experience we encounter when we investigate time use (or indeed the actual use to which people have historically put more free time). As a result, policy makers need a richer way of thinking about change. We suggest four principles should guide deliberations, as follows:

- Work-life balance is a widely-held ambition, albeit tempered by realism for most. Helping those currently working long hours to achieve a better work-life balance is important, while those working part-time – in order, for example, to manage unpaid work – are likely to have different needs;
- The divergence in time use patterns between high-income and low-income households is a matter for considerable concern, particularly to the extent that this drives up earnings inequality. Help for those working long hours must

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example: J McDonnell, [Labour conference speech on shorter working week](#), September 2019; [Green Party Manifesto 2019](#) which pledged “a shorter working week and better work-life balance, freeing up people to spend more time with their loved ones and doing things they love”; and New Economics Foundation, [Workers have seen increases in leisure time stall since the 1980s despite productivity growth](#), September 2019.

be complemented by action to ensure those at the lower end of the income distribution can secure sufficient work to enjoy a decent standard of living and the other benefits from work;

- Our analysis shows people have a strong desire for more control over the amount, nature, place and timing of paid work. As a result, policy makers should take action to enable workers to exercise meaningful control over their time schedules within all jobs rather than just a choice few;
- And finally, the redistribution of paid and unpaid work between male and female household members over time is to be welcomed: it contributes to desirable outcomes such as gender equity and the return to the long-run trend of improvement in the balance between work and leisure. Policy should actively support further progress on this front.

These principles have a bearing on several key policy areas that include, but go far beyond, the usual policy focus on reducing paid work. So how could they be put into practice?

## Limiting long-hours work would especially benefit higher skilled men

At present, working hours in the UK are some of the longest and most lightly-regulated in Europe. The Working Time Regulations 1998 impose a limit of 48 hours per week on the hours people work, averaged over a 17-week period. Workers have a voluntary opt-out from this limit, with a right to 'freedom from detriment' if that right is exercised.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, while certain occupations like airline staff and road transport workers cannot opt out from the regulations, others, including many key workers, are exempt.<sup>20</sup> The UK is the only European country in which most employees' working hours are set by individual negotiation with their employers, giving some freedom to engage with employers on the hours they want, but not allowing much of a collective voice across groups of workers.<sup>21</sup>

Our focus group findings support the notion that this regime works much of the time, but also leads to a certain arbitrariness in the degree of flexibility that workers enjoy: the well-being of those whose managers and colleagues are unwilling to accommodate their needs may suffer. Moreover, the impact of long-hours working extends beyond the workers (and their families): it can exert an upward pull on the hours of all workers in

<sup>19</sup> i.e. freedom from consequences such as disciplinary proceedings or dismissal on the grounds of exercising this right to opt-out.

<sup>20</sup> See for example DVLA, *Guidance on working time rules: lorry, bus and coach drivers and crew*, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> G Bangham, *The times they aren't a-changin': why working hours have stopped falling in London and the UK*, Resolution Foundation, January 2020.

sectors fearful that a failure to work long hours could put them at a disadvantage.<sup>22</sup> In other words, workers who might want to work less can face a collective action problem: no individual wants to make changes to their own schedule, even if many might benefit from changes across the whole workforce.

Would it be a good idea to place stronger legislative limits on working hours in the UK? Other countries have done just this in recent years (see Box 3 for a summary of the experience of France) and trade unions have called for tighter restrictions for many years. A move of this type would affect men far more than women: in 2019, 19 per cent of working men and 7 per cent of working women exceeded the 48-hour threshold in a typical week.<sup>23</sup> Professional occupations would be proportionately most affected by stronger limits on long-hours working, though the largest numbers of affected workers would be among skilled/semi-skilled trades.

Although the Government's review of working hours in 2014 concluded there was little appetite for reduced hours if this also reduced pay, our research tempers this finding somewhat.<sup>24</sup> The first step towards testing this could be to make real the right to request flexible working to reduce working hours where desired. This could include raising the bar for such a request to be turned down. But longer term, it might also be desirable to revisit the current Working Time Regulations, reviewing the current system of exempted occupations and 'opt-outs' by individual workers.

### BOX 3: The French 35-hour week

In 2000, the French Government introduced a new law which established a 35-hour week, or 1,600-hour year (217 days for managers), as the norm for full-time work in the private sector.<sup>25</sup> Firms applying the agreement can receive tax breaks. Overtime hours above the limit generally receive a bonus of 25 per cent of the hourly wage, while subsequent

regulations have capped overtime at 220 hours per year. Managers and other workers in jobs where hours are less easy to track can instead receive additional leave in return for overtime.

The French 35-hour rule may not be suitable for the UK labour market (there have been difficulties with implementation even in the more

<sup>22</sup> See, for example: R M Landers, J B Rebitzer and L J Taylor, *Rat race redux: Adverse selection in the determination of work hours in law firms*, *American Economic Review* 86(3), 1996; S Bowles and Y Park, *Emulation, inequality, and work hours: Was Thorsten Veblen right?*, *Economic Journal* 115(507), 2005.

<sup>23</sup> RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey.

<sup>24</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *The Impact of the Working Time Regulations on the UK labour market: A review of evidence*, BIS Analysis Paper 5, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of the policy and its history see: P Askenazy, *Working time regulation in France from 1996 to 2012*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 37(2), March 2013.



strictly regulated French economy). However, some of its attributes could usefully inform debate in the UK, such as establishing a threshold of weekly hours above which overtime rates

of pay are normal, and the idea of rewarding workers with additional leave so that those working long weeks can keep their annual hours within healthy limits.

## Part-time work should be available in high- as well as low-paid roles, and part-time workers should have easier access to additional hours of work

Juggling paid and unpaid work is a fact of life, and one that previous sections show falls more heavily on women than men. Today, part-time workers have better rights and conditions than they did some decades ago: since 1998 they have had the same employment rights as full-time workers, such as rights to holidays and pension schemes. But they still do not receive equal treatment in the labour market: they are paid less and are less likely to progress. Women in Britain who work part-time are paid around 25 per cent less per hour than those working full-time, while part-time men suffer a similar penalty compared to full-time men.<sup>26</sup> People on low pay, defined as below two-thirds of the hourly median, are less likely to progress out of low pay if they work part-time.<sup>27</sup>

So, what drives the part-time pay gap? Labour Force Survey data suggests it arises mainly because part-time work is clustered in low-paying occupations like retail and hospitality, rather than because part-time workers differ from others in their personal characteristics. People who move from part-time work into full-time work do not subsequently progress more slowly than other full-time workers for example<sup>28</sup>

In so far as the part-time pay gap is driven by lower hourly pay, the ongoing increases in the minimum wage are a welcome development. But a time-use perspective can help policy to go further. In the same way as long-hour cultures dominate in some workplaces to the detriment of workers with other responsibilities, short-hour norms can reflect outdated views that some low-paid work is only done by people who are not the main earner in their household. As a result, policy needs to take a twin-track approach: normalising and improving conditions for part-time workers in sectors where they are numerous, and raising the prevalence and quality of part-time work in sectors where they are comparatively rare.

<sup>26</sup> A Manning and B Petrongolo, *The part-time pay penalty for women in Britain*, Economic Journal 118, February 2008; M Nightingale, *Looking beyond average earnings: Why are male and female part-time employees in the UK more likely to be low paid than their full-time counterparts?*, Work, Employment and Society 33(1), February 2019.

<sup>27</sup> M Nightingale, *Stepping-stone or dead end: To what extent does part-time employment enable progression out of low pay for male and female employees in the UK?*, Journal of Social Policy 49(1), January 2020.

<sup>28</sup> A Manning and B Petrongolo, *The part-time pay penalty for women in Britain*, Economic Journal 118, February 2008.

One way that part-time work could be normalised is to extend the right to request flexible and part-time working. Since 2014, all employees who have worked for their employer for at least 26 weeks have had the right to make a formal request for flexible working arrangements (parents and carers have additional provisions to make requests). The existing regime could be strengthened by giving employees the right to request flexible working from day one in a new job, but also by obliging employers to offer part-time alternatives alongside this.<sup>29</sup>

A more innovative approach could also be to give part-time workers the right to request a contract with longer hours, mirroring the right to request flexible working. This could help encourage employers to focus on progression for part-time workers, to address the continuing problem of under-employment among low-paid workers, and to tackle the perception that it is a type of employment designed for people who are not the main earner in their household.

## Helping workers gain control over their work schedules is just as important as the amount that they work

In Britain in the 2020s, job insecurity is linked partly with low pay and short hours, but also with unpredictable work scheduling and a lack of control on the part of workers. The visibility of zero-hours contracts over the last decade has helped drive broader awareness of the problem of volatile hours: research using the 2017 Skills and Employment survey suggested that 1.7 million workers were anxious that their working hours could change unexpectedly, for example.<sup>30</sup>

In recent years, bodies such as the Living Wage Foundation have drawn attention to the issue of control and predictability with their 'Living Hours' campaign, while similar debates have occurred recently in the USA (see Box 4 for more information). In the UK, three suggestions have been made: a minimum notice period for shifts; guaranteed payment if shifts are cancelled at short notice; and the right to a contract that fairly reflects the hours that people usually work (for example a guaranteed minimum of 16 hours unless the employee opts out).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In an influential article, Claudia Goldin argues that labour market interventions of this type could eliminate the gender pay gap 'if firms did not have an incentive to disproportionately reward individuals who laboured long hours and worked particular hours'. See: C Goldin, A grand gender convergence: Its last chapter, *American Economic Review* 104(4), 2014.

<sup>30</sup> A Felstead, D Gallie, F Green & G Henseke, *Insecurity at work in Britain: First findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2017*, Cardiff University, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Living Wage Foundation, *Living Hours: Providing security of hours alongside a real living wage*, Living Wage Foundation June 2019. See also: T Bell, N Cominetti & H Slaughter, *A new settlement for the low paid: Beyond the minimum wage to dignity and respect*, Resolution Foundation June 2020

## BOX 4: Recent developments in 'fair workweek' laws in the USA

The issue of predictable hours has also received attention recently in the USA, where the state of Oregon and several cities including Seattle and San Francisco have passed 'fair workweek' laws that impose minimum notice periods for shifts, as well as various other protections, mainly for workers in retail and fast food sectors.<sup>32</sup> In New York City for example, employees in fast food establishments have day one rights to a two-week notice period with variable penalties for changes,

alongside other protections against excessive work, while retail employers are banned from scheduling 'on-call' shifts where workers may not be paid and must give workers at least 72 hours' notice of shifts.<sup>33</sup> Other states – Vermont and New Hampshire – have introduced less comprehensive 'right to request' laws, giving moderate protections to a broad swathe of their workforces.

While there has been some progress on this agenda of late, there is still a distance to go. The latter policy was adopted in the Government's December 2018 'Good Work Plan', which indicated legislation would be forthcoming 'to introduce a right for all workers to request a more predictable and stable contract'.<sup>34</sup> Following this, the Government consulted in summer 2019 on further measures to tackle 'one-sided flexibility' in the labour market, including giving workers the right to reasonable notice of hours and compensation in the case of cancelled shifts, with a more moderate option of non-statutory guidance for business on good practice.<sup>35</sup> So far, the former commitment has not been given an implementation date, while Government has not responded to the consultation on rights to reasonable notice of shifts and compensation in case of cancellation.

## Policy should help men and women more equally share unpaid work

The remaining big gaps in the time men and women spend in paid and unpaid work are partly a reflection of ongoing norms around childcare. In recent decades technological advances, changes in norms around gender and (very recent) policies such as 30 hours free childcare may have helped narrow gender differences in hours of paid and unpaid work, yet it remains the case that time use schedules among men and women diverge

<sup>32</sup> J Wolfe, J Jones & D Cooper, 'Fair workweek' laws help more than 1.8 million workers, Economic Policy Institute, July 2018.

<sup>33</sup> NYC Office of the Mayor Fair Workweek and Fast Food Deductions Laws: Frequently Asked Questions, November 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, Good Work Plan, December 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy and Low Pay Commission, Good Work Plan: one-sided flexibility - addressing unfair flexible working practices, July 2019.

considerably when couples have children. This explains why the gender pay gap remains stubbornly high, despite it having been all but eliminated among non-parent workers. Women's paid work hours fall sharply just before they have children, while men's hours and those of women without children remain relatively similar to men's over the life-course.<sup>36</sup> So what more could policy do to advance gender equity when it comes to unpaid work?

One area where progress has been disappointing to date is shared parental leave. Introduced in 2015, the current system gives partners two weeks of leave usually on full pay to be used within the first 8 weeks after childbirth (for which the employer requires 15 weeks' notice) and then 39 weeks, to be shared between partners (and for which employers require 8 weeks' notice). Take-up, however, has been poor: estimates suggest just over 1 per cent of eligible couples use Shared Parental Leave (compared to the original Government impact assessment estimates of between 4 and 8 per cent).<sup>37</sup> In large part this is likely to be because Statutory Shared Parental Pay, at £151.21 per week (in 2020-21) or 90 per cent of pre-tax average weekly earnings (whichever is lower), is for many substantially lower than a partner's earnings, but cultural and practical impediments also abound.<sup>38</sup>

Action to incentivise a more equitable sharing of childcare in the early years is key. One possibility would be to scrap shared parental leave and instead explore longer and more generous use-it-or-lose maternity and paternity leave schemes. For example, both maternity and paternity leave could be offered for a longer period at a higher proportion of average weekly earnings, up to a salary cap, or the Government could extend the period covered by Statutory Shared Parental Pay. And critically, parental leave could usefully be extended to self-employed people, as the Resolution Foundation has previously proposed.<sup>39</sup>

## A dedicated Commission is required to think through policy in the time use sphere

One obvious conclusion from our discussion of the current time use policy debate is that it is one that speaks significantly to the concerns of higher-income groups. This is not to denigrate activism in this field: as we have shown throughout, time use is a complex issue to analyse, with a high level of heterogeneity observed. But if we wish to see a

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<sup>36</sup> More precisely, women's average hours begin to diverge in the two years before first childbirth. See M Costa Dias, R Joyce, & F Parodi, *The gender pay gap in the UK: children and experience in work*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, February 2018.

<sup>37</sup> See G Kaufman, *Barriers to equality: why British fathers do not use parental leave*, *Community, Work & Family* 21, 2018; Annex 3 in Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, *Modern workplaces: shared parental leave and pay administration consultation – impact assessment*, February 2013. Calculations based on Maternity and Paternity Rights Survey of Parents 2005.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example: H Birkett & S Forbes, *Shared Parental Leave: why is take-up so low and what can be done?*, University of Birmingham Business School Policy Brief, September 2018.

<sup>39</sup> See: S Clarke (ed.), *Work in Brexit Britain*, Resolution Foundation, July 2017.

debate that is fully informed by the evidence, and that speaks to the needs of different groups across society, we need to make space for this.

One possibility would be to establish a Time Use Commission to promote and undertake research and unify the policy agenda on working hours and time use writ-large. This body could have a range of powers: like the Low Pay Commission for minimum wages, it could inform policy, collect information on working hours and public opinion, and commission, fund and run research (on issues such as gender hours gap reporting, trialling shorter working weeks, the level of statutory minimum paid leave, and enforcement of overtime pay).<sup>40</sup> Such a body could act as an adviser to and convenor of industrial relations concerning hours, working with trades unions and employer bodies, for example; it could liaise with the Low Pay Commission to collaborate and align policy that involves working hours and pay; and it could help progress the development of a new ONS time use survey, two pilots of which took place in the first half of 2020.<sup>41</sup>

## The coronavirus pandemic gives new impetus to the time use debate, but also means the economic context is far less propitious

This report is published in a period of unusual upheaval around people's time schedules, caused by the coronavirus pandemic. There is evidence that the upheaval has led many people to re-evaluate how they spend their time, creating an opportunity to debate what the 'new normal' for time use might look like. Data on public attitudes collected by the ONS in June, for example, shows that some of the most-welcomed changes to people's lifestyles during the pandemic have been those related to time use, with 56 per cent of adults saying they had enjoyed spending more quality time with others in their household, 50 per cent saying they enjoyed having a slower pace of life, and 47 per cent enjoying spending less time travelling.<sup>42</sup> Large majorities of people also said they wanted to keep these positive aspects of their lives after the pandemic – although all of these opinions were measured before the post-pandemic rise in unemployment, and without obliging respondents to confront the trade-offs between pay and free time.

In the short-term period of crisis and post-crisis recovery there is a case for policy encouraging the sharing of demand-constrained employment among workers, for example as policy in Germany has sought to do.<sup>43</sup> But any short-hours work policies in this domain – such as those floated by the Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon –

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<sup>40</sup> A Commission with a similar remit was proposed in A Stirling, [Time for Demand: Boosting productivity with public investment, minimum wages and paid holiday](#), New Economics Foundation, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> The first publication using data from this survey is C S Payne & G Vassilev, [Coronavirus and how people spent their time under lockdown: 28 March to 26 April 2020](#), ONS, May 2020. See Annex 1 for a discussion of how the ONS survey could usefully evolve.

<sup>42</sup> Data from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey covering the period 18 June to 21 June 2020; see R Davies, [Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 26 June 2020](#), ONS, June 2020.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example: International Monetary Fund, [Kurzarbeit: Germany's short time work benefit](#), IMF June 2020

should not be confused with longer-term policies of working-hours reduction: they serve very different ends.<sup>44</sup>

In the long term, time use policy also needs to confront the issue of productivity growth, since without this, any reductions in paid work time are severely constrained. Productivity rises permit increases in general prosperity which, if they are fairly shared, give society the choice of higher incomes, more free time, or some combination of the two. The Office for Budget Responsibility's central scenario for productivity coming out of the coronavirus crisis is far from positive, and assumes some scarring for some time to come.<sup>45</sup> As a result, while the pandemic may have disrupted received time use norms to a significant degree, we must also recognise that it also created a less propitious economic environment in which to achieve change.

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<sup>44</sup> See the response of the First Minister to a question by Richard Leonard, Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid), The Scottish Parliament May 21 2020

<sup>45</sup> Office for Budget Responsibility, *Fiscal Sustainability Report 2020*, OBR July 2020.

## Section 6

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### Conclusion

Working hours and time use have increasingly become the topics of public debate over the past few years, thanks to campaigns on zero-hours contracts and a four-day week, for example, and policies like the rapid advance of free childcare. The coronavirus pandemic has brought the issue even further into sharp relief, with the 9 million furloughed workers on zero work time, and transforming the way people allocate their time to activities like travel, childcare and socialising. Some of these activities are already beginning to return to normal, but survey evidence shows there is considerable public demand to rethink some aspects of time use: in the post-pandemic recovery, less commuting, spending more time with family and more flexible work schedules could be here to stay. At the same time, for others, particularly lower earners, the impact of the crisis is a deeply unwanted reduction in their working hours.

With time use being debated more widely, it is even more important that the public conversation draws on the best analysis and data available. In this report we have shown that three key assumptions in the time use debate need careful re-examination.

- First, people's preferences and current schedules are more diverse than in the past. Although two-thirds of working people favour more free time and less work, almost a quarter of them do not. The past 40 years have seen the paid work hours of low-income households fall away from the rest, and the evidence suggests that low-paid workers want more hours for the time being – hours over which they have control.
- Second, reductions in paid work time do not automatically lead to greater leisure time: this is in fact the exception not the rule. So while a shorter working week is an effective demand for a campaign, policy makers interested in the issue need also to work out how to deliver alongside it more free time for those who also should the burden of unpaid work.
- Third, the overall objective of public policy should be a balance between free time, paid and unpaid work, since more free time alone is not the optimal way to raise personal well-being.

Looking back at how time use has evolved since the 1970s, this report has shown there are many changes to welcome. Paid and unpaid work have been shared more evenly between women and men, and parents are spending more time with their children. But much remains to be improved. In the coming months and years, policy makers, campaigners, workers and unions all have a role to play to advance the public debate on time use, and advance us towards a more equitable new normal.



## Annex: Measuring time use

### Time use can be measured in a number of ways

Time use is most often measured by economists and social researchers via household surveys. The benchmark Labour Force Survey, for example, asks people about the hours they spend in paid work (both last week and in a usual week) and the hours they spend on overtime. Other surveys, such as Understanding Society, widen the lens a little to ask about the total number of hours people spend doing unpaid household work in the reference week. But for all their merits, household surveys such as these suffer two main drawbacks for those seeking a more rounded understanding of time use. First, they are preoccupied with paid work, which accounts for a small fraction of the average person's week; and second, they ask people to recall their allocation of time over a long period, risking recall bias and inconsistencies of estimation.

Fortunately, dedicated time use surveys have been carried out since the mid-twentieth century on a more or less comparable basis, and painstaking work by the Centre for Time Use Research (CTUR) has harmonised these datasets so that they can be compared over time and between countries. The analysis in this report mainly draws on the CTUR's UK Time Use Survey, which ran in 2000-01 and 2014-15, and it also uses a similarly-designed BBC survey from 1974-75 in order to look at changes in time use over the past few decades.

### Time-diary surveys are the gold standard for accurate measurement of time use

Respondents to the UK Time Use Survey (UKTUS) keep a 'time diary' over the course of a whole week, documenting what they are doing, where they are, who they are with and how much they are enjoying their activity for every 10 minutes of the day.<sup>46</sup> An example page is shown in Figure 26. The 1970s data used in this paper was collected in much the same way, except that people recorded their activities every 30 minutes rather than every 10.

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FIGURE 26: Respondents to the latest time use survey document activities in ten minute blocks

Example time diary page, from UK Time Use Survey 2014-15

Day 1 Time: 7am – 10am Morning		Day 1 Time: 7am – 10am		Were you alone or with somebody you know? Mark all relevant boxes							How much did you enjoy this time? 1 = not at all 7 = very much
Time: 7am-10am Morning (am)	What were you doing? Please write down one main activity.	If you did something else at the same time, what else did you do?	Did you use a smartphone tablet, or computer?	Where were you? Location, or mode of transport	People who live with you						
				Alone	Spouse/partner	Mother	Father	Child aged 0-7	Other person	Others you know	
7am-7.10	Woke up the children		<input type="checkbox"/>	At home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5
7.10-7.20	Had breakfast	checked emails	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	↓	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	6
7.20-7.30	" "	Talked with my family	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5
7.30-7.40	Cleared the table	Listened to the radio	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	4
7.40-7.50	↓	↓	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	↓
7.50-8am	Helped the children dressing	Talked with my children	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8am-8.10	" "	↓	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	↓
8.10-8.20	Went to the day care centre	↓	<input type="checkbox"/>		on foot	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

SOURCE: UKTUS 2014-15 instructions for participants.

The key advantages of dedicated time use surveys such as the UKTUS is that it asks people about the totality of their time use, rather than simply paid (and unpaid) work, and their design forces people to account for all 24 hours in the day. By avoiding giving primacy to any particular activity in the day, they should also reduce context biases that affect more specialised activity surveys. Evidence shows that they are more accurate than the recall questions used in most household surveys, and a validation study comparing time diaries with camera recordings of how people behaved found that the diaries were generally accurate.<sup>47</sup> And critically, unlike many similar surveys in other countries, such as the American Time Use Survey, the UKTUS collects data on each member of sample households, allowing us to analyse how trade-offs are made at a household level.

## Recent developments in time use data collection are encouraging and should be extended

As discussed briefly in Section 5, UK Government statisticians have recently made progress in developing and piloting a new time use survey. Two pilots took place in the first half of 2020, with the first publication drawing on this data appearing in May

<sup>47</sup> J Gershuny, T Harms, A Doherty, E Thomas, K Milton, P Kelly & C Foster, *CAPTURE24: Testing self report time use diaries against objective instruments in real time*. CTUR Working Paper, 2017.

this year.<sup>48</sup> The impetus for this work come from recent reviews of national accounts statistics, which specifically suggested that time use data can be used to measure the size of the non-market economy – and hence make better decisions affecting it.<sup>49</sup> Time use data also has an important role to play in cost-benefit analyses used across public policy, and in other related policy areas where well-being data is used to evaluate different policy options. And it can be used to measure economic progress itself in new ways, since recent time use surveys measure people’s well-being over the course of different activities in their day – an idea which has already been developed by several separate studies that build on the insight that in modern economies the time taken to consume a good or service is to a greater extent than ever an important determinant of the utility it brings to its consumer.<sup>50</sup>

The ONS pilot time use surveys were carried out online by research organisation NatCen, and featured samples of around 5,000 people who filled in time diaries online over two sample days, by selecting their main activity every 10 minutes from a pre-coded list of activities.<sup>51</sup> The data collected will have some of the important unique features offered by time diaries: data on time sequences, data accounting for all 24 hours of the day, data on the timing of activities, and data that is less subject to recall biases than retrospective questions on working hours. Several design features have been chosen for their low cost, however, and so the surveys do not capture the same richness of data as the 2014-15 UK Time Use Survey, for example. They would not allow much of the research in this report to be repeated, for example that looking at co-presence and at the way time use is shared within households. While acknowledging that traditional time use surveys are more expensive to carry out than surveys like the Labour Force Survey, when measured per interview, we believe that the ONS pilot surveys could be improved on when they are repeated in future.<sup>52</sup>

Specifically, it would be desirable for the ONS to adopt a permanent in-house time use survey, building on the advantages of the trials carried out in spring 2020 but adding key features of importance to time use researchers, such as whole-household sampling (rather than individuals) and questions on co-presence. This survey would benefit from being more regular than previous UK Time Use Surveys, and from linking to other ONS household surveys. A good example is the American Time Use Survey, which has been

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<sup>48</sup> CS Payne and G Vassilev, Coronavirus and how people spent their time under lockdown: 28 March to 26 April 2020, ONS, May 2020.

<sup>49</sup> C Bean, [Independent Review of UK Economic Statistics](#), HM Government, March 2016; Office for National Statistics, [Household satellite account, UK: 2015 and 2016](#), October 2018.

<sup>50</sup> D Coyle & L Nakamura, [Towards a framework for time use, welfare and household-centric economic measurement](#), ESCoE Discussion Paper 2019-01, January 2019; J Gershuny, [Time-use surveys and the measurement of national well-being](#), Centre for Time Use Research, Oxford, September 2011; A B Krueger, D Kahneman, D Schkade, N Schwarz, & A A Stone, National time accounting: The currency of life, in A B Krueger (ed.), [Measuring the subjective well-being of nations: National accounts of time use and well-being](#), NBER, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> For a summary of information given to survey participants, see NatCen, [Taking part: ONS Time Use Study](#).

<sup>52</sup> J Gershuny, [Time-use surveys and the measurement of national well-being](#), Centre for Time Use Research, Oxford, September 2011.

carried out annually since 2005 by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics as an extension to its Current Population Survey for households in their final month in the survey.

In future, the Government could consider further extensions to its collection of time use data, such as adding time diary elements to other household surveys, and investing in alternative ways to collect time use data such as cameras and accelerometers as have been experimented with by time use researchers.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See for example J Gershuny, T Harms, A Doherty, E Thomas, K Milton, P Kelly & C Foster, CAPTURE24: Testing self report time use diaries against objective instruments in real time. CTUR Working Paper, 2017.

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