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What are the unexpected consequences of shorter work hours?



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For many, work is increasingly interfering with their home life. Because of this, some countries are proposing shorter work weeks. But does this mean more productivity? Do shorter work weeks result in less work done? *Social Forces* Editor Arne L. Kalleberg caught up with Leah Ruppanner and David J. Maume to examine and discuss current debates arguing for shorter work hours and their latest research.

The findings suggest that directly legislating weekly work hours may have adverse and unexpected consequences. How might governments more effectively regulate hours worked, as we move towards a “24/7 global economy”?

The first question is whether legislating shorter work weeks actually results in a reduction of work. Or, are people feeling more compressed, strained, and vulnerable to work-to-family conflict. Existing research on implementing shorter work weeks (e.g. Sweden's 6 hour day) suggest that employees are happier with their work lives and more productive.

Our study suggests that shorter work weeks may also make employees [more sensitive to work-to-family conflict](http://sf.oxfordjournals.org/content/95/2/693.full) (<http://sf.oxfordjournals.org/content/95/2/693.full>). We argue that this is the legacy of raising public consciousness about work-family issues. This should not dissuade governments from legislating shorter work weeks as other evidence indicates that it is associated with better employee outcomes. But, it does suggest that policy outcomes are complicated.

Are there any alternative legislative policies that appear to alleviate perceived work-family interference better than work hour regulations?

There is growing evidence that policy packages, rather than singular policies, are most effective in promoting a healthy workforce. The goal of governments should be to pair shorter work weeks with other resources. This may include expansive childcare provisions, sick and aged care provisions, and supplementing housework. This is a work-family problem and legislation should address both work and family demands, focusing on this problem holistically rather than focusing on one dimension exclusively.

Your findings present no significant gender differences in the effects of normative and legislated work hours on perceived work-family interference. Could you elaborate on the implications of these findings for countries where women still bear the majority of responsibility for childcare and other family matters?

We argue that this indicates a cultural shift in ideology in our sampled countries. We expected these effects to be highly gendered, with shorter work hours alleviating women's work-to-family strain at higher rates than men's. We would expect this to be especially the case for women in countries with highest domestic burdens. But, this was not what we found.

Rather, we found that all respondents (not just women, or mothers or parents) reported more work-to-family interference in countries with shorter work weeks. This suggests that there was [a real ideological shift in how people viewed work and family](https://theconversation.com/the-more-work-life-balance-we-have-the-more-we-want-global-study-65410) (<https://theconversation.com/the-more-work-life-balance-we-have-the-more-we-want-global-study-65410>) in countries that legislated shorter work weeks. To explain this, we looked at trends from 1989 to 2005 and found that the percentage of respondents reporting preferences for less time at work increased in many countries over this time period. This suggests that a cultural shift for all workers rather than being isolated to one group.

Your findings show that collectivist societies report lower work-family interference despite longer work hours. Do you think this pattern can be explained by stronger multi-generational support systems among families in collectivist societies, or is this a matter of lower cultural awareness of work-time issues?

We cannot speak definitively to this claim as we did not empirically test these relationships. However, it seems reasonable that a combination of these processes is occurring simultaneously. It is also possible that these relationships can be explained by broader patterns of economic inequality, immigration, and domestic work. Specifically, employees in some of the long work hour countries hire in domestic (e.g. live-in) help to perform the domestic work. These processes are likely happening simultaneously and are clearly divided by class. Additional inquiry with appropriate data would test these arguments.

Workers in professional positions have high levels of resources but also highly permeable boundaries between work and family. This stress of higher status means professional workers are never off the clock.

Despite the fact that work hour regulations appear to have no significant effect on perceived work-family interference, does this type of legislation appear to have any other significant benefits for families and workers?

This is beyond the scope of this work. However, we are not arguing that shortening work weeks is negative for workers.

You suggest that changes due to the global financial crisis may have altered some of your present findings. Although the data are not yet available, do you have any intuition as to what sort of changes might be occurring?

We argue (and provide descriptive evidence) that this captures a cultural shift in changing ideologies – preferences for less time at work. However, the global financial crisis may have resulted in workers preferring more time at work because, in many countries, jobs are increasingly scarce.

However, this may not be the case as many citizens (in Europe in particular) challenged their governments' move towards austerity. It is likely that shorter work hours are characteristics of countries with greater welfare provisions. If these provisions raise expectations, then the likelihood that citizens would "go back" seems highly unlikely. But, the GFC may have further polarized views about work by class with those who experience chronic unemployment or precarious work increasing their perceptions of work-centrality post GFC.

Telework and work-at-home are increasing in the United States. What impacts do you think these trends will have on the relationship between work hours and work-family interference?

I think the bigger question is about digital connectedness, because many professionals are expected to be available to work at all times, even those who are not telecommuting. Scott Schieman argues that workers in professional positions have high levels of resources but also highly permeable boundaries between work and family. This stress of higher status means professional workers are never off the clock. Pragmatically, this would increase work-to-family and family-to-work conflict as this is the definition of telework, blurring boundaries between work and family. However, questions about burn-out, stress, depression, and sleep associated with the 24/7 economy are perhaps more pressing, experienced by wider swaths of workers.

One of the surprising findings in your analysis is that there is no difference between families with and without kids in how average work hours in a country relates to work-family interference. Why might this be the case? Wouldn't we expect a greater impact on families with kids?

This is about the direction of conflict. We expect workers with children to have more family-to-work conflict (<https://theconversation.com/having-it-all-in-pursuit-of-gender-equality-and-work-life-balance-19243>) and, Matt Huffman and I confirm this (<http://wox.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/09/26/0730888413500679>). However, for questions of work-to-family conflict it is unclear why

mothers should have more. In fact, we may expect childless men to have the highest tendency to bring work home with them. While some studies combine work-to-family and family-to-work conflict into a single measure of work-family conflict, we argue disaggregating these measures are important as these really are different experiences for men, women, mothers, and fathers.

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Arne L. Kalleberg (<http://arnekalberg.web.unc.edu/>) is the Kenan Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Editor of *Social Forces*. **Leah Ruppanner** (<https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/display/person609199>) joined the University of Melbourne Sociology faculty in July of 2013. Prior to her appointment, she was a Research Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. Dr. Ruppanner researches work and family issues with particular focus on the impact of macro-structural gender equality and public policy. **David J. Maume** (http://www.artsci.uc.edu/faculty-staff/listing/by_dept/sociology.html?eid=maumedj) joined the University of Cincinnati faculty in 1986, where he is now a Professor of Sociology. Prior to joining the University of Cincinnati, he completed a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1983) and held a faculty position at the Illinois Institute of Technology. He has long been interested in racial and gender inequality in the labor market, as well as how work and family responsibilities mutually affect each other. Leah and David are the authors of the article "[Shorter Work Hours and Work-to-Family Interference: Surprising Findings from 32 Countries](http://sf.oxfordjournals.org/content/95/2/693.full)" (<http://sf.oxfordjournals.org/content/95/2/693.full>)."

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