



Popular

Latest

Newsletters

The Atlantic

Saved Stories

My Account

Give a Gift

IDEAS

The 67-Hour Rule



Married couples are working as much as ever.

By Derek Thompson



Illustration by The Atlantic. Sources: Adrian Ace Williams / Hulton Archive / Getty; H. Armstrong Roberts / ClassicStock / Getty; Getty.

APRIL 10, 2024

SHARE & GIFT  SAVE 

Listen to this article



00:00 11:13

Produced by ElevenLabs and News Over Audio (NOA) using AI narration.

This is Work in Progress, a newsletter by about work, technology, and how to solve some of America's biggest problems. [Sign up here.](#)

One of the hard-and-fast laws of economics is that people in rich countries work less than their peers in poorer countries. The rule holds across nations. British and Japanese people work less on average than those in Mexico and India. It's also true across history. Today, the typical American works about 1,200 fewer hours a year than he did in the late 19th century.

But something strange happens when we shift our attention from individual workers to households. In the 1880s, when men worked long days and women were mostly cut off from the workforce, the typical American married couple averaged just over 68 hours of weekly paid labor. In 1965, as men's workdays contracted and women poured into the workforce, the typical American married couple averaged 67 hours of weekly paid labor—just one hour less. In the early 2000s, the typical American married couple averaged,

you guessed it, almost exactly 67 hours of weekly paid labor. In 2020? *Still 67 hours.*

ADVERTISEMENT

These figures come from two papers: “The Great Transition,” which covers labor-market changes since 1880, by the economists Jeremy Greenwood, Ricardo Marto, and Nezih Guner, and “Measuring Trends in Leisure,” which covers labor-market changes from 1965 to 2003, by the economists Mark Aguiar and Erik Hurst. There exists no perfect statistical time series to track work hours for married couples in the U.S. over the past 140 years. Sources do not always agree on precise figures, and over time dual earners may have averaged a little less or a little more than 67 hours *exactly*. And, of course, taking an average across many different industries is an extremely blunt measure. But as I read and reread these statistics, I was struck by the clear implication that married couples are working as much as ever.

That’s astonishing. After all, in the past 140 years, almost everything about the American economy has changed radically. In the 19th century, about half of

the U.S. labor force worked in farming. By the 1940s, agriculture's share of employment fell, and about a third of the country worked in manufacturing. Today, both sectors *combined* barely account for one in 10 American jobs. After all this, the average married couple in America still works about 67 hours a week. It is as if some god with an affinity for double-digit prime numbers descended from heaven and decreed that, no matter what seismic changes upended the world from one generation to the next, the average American family *must* labor for the same number of hours a week, for all of eternity.

So what explains the 67-Hour Rule? Any answer must begin with the fact that paid working hours have increased for women even as they have declined for men, for very different reasons.

In 1900, just 5 percent of married women held down a paid job. Instead, they typically put in a full 60-hour week at home, where basic upkeep was grueling by modern standards. Washing, drying, and ironing one load of laundry took up to seven hours, almost a full day's work. By the mid-20th century, electricity had made possible a set of household technologies—the automatic washer and dryer, the refrigerator, the vacuum, and the dishwasher—that combined to reduce housework by 30 hours a week. Many women took advantage of those efficiencies (and shifting women's-rights norms) to get a

job. From 1880 to 1965, women's labor-participation rate skyrocketed from about 5 to more than 40 percent; by the 1990s, six in 10 women were in the labor force. Meanwhile, housework hours kept falling. From 1965 to 2003, the average married woman reduced her "nonmarket" labor—cleaning, cooking, shopping, running errands—by 13 hours a week and redirected about nine of those hours toward paid work.

ADVERTISEMENT

As married women worked less in the home and more outside of it, married men underwent an opposite shift. In 1880, 98 percent of men participated in the labor force, and the typical worker labored 10 hours a day, six days a week. Gradually, labor-rights protests and union strikes combined to pressure employers to shorten the workweek. In her paper "The Wage and the Length of the Work Day: From the 1890s to 1991," the economist Dora Costa writes that state governments in the late 1800s and early 1900s moved to limit work hours through legislation. During World War I, the War Labor Board established an eight-hour workday for contractors. In 1938, President

Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which created a right to overtime pay for those who worked more than 40 hours a week.

Meanwhile, the widespread adoption of new technologies, including tractors and cars and, later, computers, made workers more productive in their shorter workdays. Men gradually used their extra time to take on more hours of chores, errands, and child care at home.

The 67-Hour Rule is, then, a reflection of increased efficiency. Fantastic news, in other words, especially for women. One study of women in rural areas without electricity in the 1940s found that hand-washing and ironing a 38-pound laundry load required taking about 6,300 steps around the house, the well, the stove, and back to the house. After nine such loads, a woman would have walked the equivalent of a marathon. The electrification of housework reduced the ambulatory burden of that same laundry load by 90 percent.

RECOMMENDED READING



The Con Man Who
Became a True-Crime
Writer



RACHEL MONROE



America's Most Hated
Garment



AMANDA MULL

SPONSOR CONTENT

Meet the Women Building
a More Equitable America
DELOITTE



“It was a tremendous gain for women to be freed from housework and be able to join the labor force in exchange for a wage,” Marto wrote to me by email. “Most people would argue that is a good thing. My wife certainly does!” Household automation, combined with cultural and economic changes, freed women to work as they pleased. At the same time, labor laws shortened the typical workweek and outlawed child labor, while industrial technology increased productivity.

The economist Jeremy Greenwood is emphatic that the most important theme of the past 140 years of work in America has been the rise of leisure time. “Popular books like *The Overworked American* and *More Work for Mother* tell people that we’re doing more work than ever and have less leisure time than ever, but this is clearly false,” he told me. In fact, the decline of men’s paid work and women’s housework has freed up more leisure hours, even after accounting for the increase in child-care time. According to Aguiar and Hurst, leisure time increased in the second half of the 20th century for all groups they studied: men and women, singles and married couples.

But pointing out that men's workweeks declined while women's workweeks increased, and that both men and women have more leisure time, doesn't fully explain why, together, they still labor as long as they used to outside the home more than 100 years ago.

Greenwood told me that, beyond rising efficiency, the 67-Hour Rule may also reflect rising costs and rising expectations. Americans are more productive than ever. But buying homes, raising kids, and caring for older family members are all more expensive than they used to be. (Prices for housing, medical care, and college have been rising faster than inflation for practically this entire century.) The typical home today is also larger than it used to be, and outfitted with a suite of technologies—air-conditioning, flatscreen

televisions, dirt-cheap electric lighting—that would have flabbergasted an 1880s monarch.

Several factors determine why a married couple might work more or less in any given year. Laws shape the normal workweek, employers set schedules, and workers choose jobs based on diverse needs and preferences. Describing the average family is difficult because doing so requires glossing over large differences: Some households with five children get by with one working spouse, while some couples without children work long hours. But overall, millions of families across time have independently concluded that it takes about 67 hours to afford the essential features of a comfortable American life, as they define it. After all, if American families felt that they could be comfortable and happy by working only 15 hours a week, many more of them would do so.

The consistency of the workweek for married couples might also reflect a keeping-up-with-the-Joneses effect. As workers get raises, some of them could choose to work less. But richer economies also create new categories of desire: movies, amusement parks, electronics, travel, summer camps, Stanley water coolers. If people become envious of their peers' rising standard of living, they'll instead choose to continue working at higher wages to buy nicer stuff.

Thus the hedonic treadmill sustains higher working hours and holds the 67-Hour Rule in place.

Why 67 instead of 60 or 70 or some other number? Again, other sources may not replicate that precise figure. More generally, my guess is as good as yours. Here I feel tempted to blame that prime-number god again.

ADVERTISEMENT

At any rate, there is something a little disappointing about the possibility that married couples have the same market workweek that they did in 1880. I'm not the first writer to worry about the tragic ironies of the dual-earner household. In their book, *The Two-Income Trap*, Senator Elizabeth Warren and her daughter Amelia Warren Tyagi observed that the rise in household income

in the late 1990s was driven by the rise in two-income households. Clearly, they acknowledged, this was progress. But when a household adds a second earner, they said, it creates additional expenses, especially for child care, which often consumes much of the additional income. Thus, many working parents with kids feel like they're running in place rather than pooling their income to buy more comfort.

The overwork worrywarts are narrowly wrong: Americans really do have more leisure time than they used to. But they're broadly right: Americans ought to have more leisure time than they have, and it is a little scandalous that they don't.

Derek Thompson is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of the [Work in Progress](#) newsletter.