

The hours people work

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At the turn of the century, workers typically put in 60-hour weeks spread over six days. By 1960, 37 to 40 hours during a five-day week had become the "standard." This standard still prevails. It has been set by custom, or negotiated by collective bargaining, and is reinforced by legislation requiring premium pay for time worked in excess of the standard (see [What is overtime?](#)). The standard week tends to coincide with a notion of adequate employment - adequate to meet both employers' goals of efficient production and employees' physical and financial needs. Nonetheless, the length of the work week varies considerably for individual workers: in 1993, 4 out of 10 usually put in either less than 35 or more than 40 hours a week.

Historically, efforts were concentrated on reducing the length of the work week in the interests of health, safety, and productivity. Today, long hours are still a concern, but the focus is on workers' ability to juggle the demands of employment and family, and the potential for job creation through a redistribution of longer-than-standard hours. At the same time, the recent increase in jobs offering less-than-standard hours (part-time jobs) is also an issue. Not only are such jobs associated with lower earning, opportunities than full-time employment, but they also tend to provide less security and fewer fringe benefits ([Coates, 1988](#)).

Since 1900, hours of work have gone through three phases: reduction, stabilization, and polarization.

The first 60 years ... the standard falls

The longest consistent data series on hours worked pertains to the manufacturing sector and reflects widespread trends in the evolution of the standard work week ([Ostry and Zaidi, 1979](#); [Reid, 1985](#)). Standard weekly hours in manufacturing fell from 59 in 1901 to 40 in 1957. This decline, however, was not steady, as the sharpest drops occurred in the first 20 years of the century and in the postwar years of 1946 to 1957.

Between 1901 and 1921, the standard manufacturing work week fell by 8 hours. This meant that, each

year, the standard work week declined by about half an hour. From 1921 to 1946, the downward trend continued, but at a much slower pace. In fact, over this period, the standard work week fell by only one and a half hours (an average annual decline of about 4 minutes). But the next 11 years saw a dramatic reduction in hours worked. In 1957, the work week was 40 hours, 9 hours less than in 1946 (a drop of more than three-quarters of an hour a year). Most of this decline had occurred by 1949. ([Chart A](#)).



Chart A **Hours of work in manufacturing dropped sharply early in the century and after World War II.**

Source: Reid, F. (see References)

Since 1960 ... stabilization

By the 1960s, almost 7 out of 10 full-time employees worked standard hours. In addition, the declining trend in work hours seemed so well established that some economists considered a 32-hour week inevitable and imminent ([Hameed](#), 1974). However, the length of the standard work week levelled off. For example, between 1964 and 1979, weekly manufacturing hours fell by less than an hour. Standard hours for all industries fell slightly more over this period—from 40.1 to 38.3 ([Reid](#), 1985). Since then, the length of the standard work week has barely changed.

The last 20 years ... polarization

But although the length of the standard work week has stabilized, standard hours have actually become less common, particularly since the 1981-82 recession.

By 1993, only 61% of paid workers put in 35 to 40 hours per week, down from 71% in 1976, with most of the shift going into shorter hours ([Table 1](#)). This overall drop was strongly influenced by a sharp reduction in the hours worked by youths. The proportion of 15 to 24 year-old workers with less-than-standard hours more than doubled, from 24% in 1976 to 51% in 1993. By contrast, for adults, the trend has been to a somewhat more polarized work week.



Table 1 **Distribution of employees by usual weekly hours worked at main job, 1976 to 1993 (selected years)**

Source: Labour Force Survey

Note: Youths: 15-24 years; adult men and women: 25 years and over.

Among adult men, the distribution of hours worked was stable between 1976 and 1981: 77% worked standard hours, 19% longer hours, and only 4% shorter hours. By 1993, however, the incidence of standard hours had declined to 70%, while 22% worked longer hours and 8%, shorter hours.

The distribution of hours worked among adult women followed a different pattern. Weekly hours were more polarized in 1993 than in 1976, but this was the result of shifts to shorter hours before 1981, and to longer hours since then. In 1993, 61% of adult women worked standard hours, down from 66% in 1976. Almost a third (31%) worked less, while 8% worked more in 1993.

Reasons for ...

... the reduction

Growth in productivity and real earnings, rather than changes in legislation, provided the momentum for the sharp decline in work hours over most of the first 60 years of the century ([Tandan](#), 1972). As technology advanced, workers produced the same amount in less time. Both employers and employees enjoyed the benefits of growing productivity through higher profits and rising real wages. This meant that workers could trade some potential wage gains for more leisure and still experience an increase in their standard of living. And as long as productivity grew fast enough to keep reduced hours cost-neutral, it was in the employers' interest to accommodate worker and union demands for more free time.

... the stabilization

After 1960, the length of the standard work week "stabilized" despite strong growth in productivity (until the late 1960s) and continued growth in real wages (until the late 1970s), the very conditions that led to the decline in the first half of the century. Labour market analysts offer a variety of supply- and demand-side explanations for this levelling off.

On the supply side, workers were investing in more years of education. Once employed, pressure to recoup the costs of school and foregone wages as quickly as possible made them less likely to trade wage gains for shorter hours. At the same time, a trend to earlier retirement further shortened the portion of the life-cycle devoted to paid work ([Table 2](#)). This left fewer earning-years during which workers could save for a comfortable retirement.



Table 2 **Life and working-life expectancies for men, at age 16, 1921 to 1986**

Source: *Bélanger, A. and D. Larrivée (see References)*

In addition, workers may have preferred to take their share of increased productivity in non-wage benefits instead of shorter weeks. For example, the average annual vacation in manufacturing rose from 2.7 weeks in 1959 to 3.6 weeks in 1979. Paid holidays also increased over the same period, from 7.8 to 11.1 days per year ([Reid](#), 1985).

Improvements were made in other non-wage benefits as well. Employers' payroll contributions to health and dental care and pension plans, and to mandatory programs such as Unemployment Insurance, the Canada and Quebec Pension Plan, and Workers' Compensation almost doubled from 4.6% of labour income in 1961 to 8.7% in 1979 ([Chart B](#)).



Chart B **Employee benefits have grown more than earnings.**

Source: *Labour Division*

On the demand side, employers had little incentive to reduce the standard work week below 35 to 40 hours, since further reductions were unlikely to yield a proportionate increase in productivity ([Tandan](#), 1972; [Hameed](#), 1974). Shorter hours could even have a negative effect on productivity, as daily "gearing up" and "gearing down" would take a greater proportion of paid work hours.

Many of the factors underlying the stability of standard hours in the 1960s and 1970s persisted into the 1980s and 1990s: benefits have increased to 12% of labour income in 1993, educational attainment has continued to rise, and early retirement has become more common. Most important, virtually no growth has occurred in the real wages of full-time, full-year workers ([Chart C](#)). Thus, workers have had no potential wage gains to exchange for added leisure. Employers were also unlikely to support a reduction in hours without a proportionate reduction in wages, since the growth rate of productivity continued to be slow in the 1980s.



Chart C **Earnings of full-time, full-year workers have changed little since the mid-1970s.**

Source: *Survey of Consumer Finances*

Note: *Data are not available for 1968 and 1970.*

Furthermore, with rapid technological advances, employers have increasingly invested in their long-term, full-time staff through job-specific training ([Crompton](#), 1994). Shorter hours for these workers would mean a smaller return on that investment.

... the polarization

The overall stability of the standard work week masks changes in the distribution of hours, especially since the 1981-82 recession. Several explanations have been proposed for the rising share of workers putting in non-standard hours.

Much of the increase in below-standard hours appears voluntary, and suits the needs of a growing number of women and students ([Logan](#), in this issue). On the other hand, it may also be a business response to rising costs and competition and not to workers' needs ([Noreau](#), in this issue).

The increasing incidence of above-standard work weeks may be part of the same response. While part-timers and casual workers enable an enterprise to meet shifting levels of demand with minimal current and future costs, not all tasks are easily divisible, and not all workers are substitutable. Long work weeks may be required of those with specialized technical skills or management responsibilities, and may be encouraged by pay-for-performance schemes ([Booth](#), 1987).

As yet, explanations for the simultaneous growth in both short and long work weeks are little more than anecdotal. But trends in work hours are sure to receive continued attention, as further polarization will tend to accentuate inequality in employment opportunities and earnings ([Morissette et al](#), 1993).

Summary

Over the first 60 years of the century, standard hours fell sharply, fuelled by growth in productivity and wages. Since 1960, there has been little reduction in the standard work week. However, other work conditions, such as vacations, benefits, and pensions, have improved. And while the majority of workers continue to put in standard hours, the proportion working either shorter or longer weeks is rising.

What is overtime?

Standard hours per se are not defined by law. Nonetheless, legislation does stipulate limits above which scheduled hours are considered overtime and become more costly to employers. Legislation concerning overtime varies by jurisdiction. Overtime pay is applicable for hours worked in excess of 40 per week for workers under the jurisdiction of the federal government and all workers in British Columbia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and the Yukon. The weekly limit is 44 hours for workers in Alberta, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Ontario, Quebec and Northwest Territories, and 48 hours in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island (Labour Canada, 1993).

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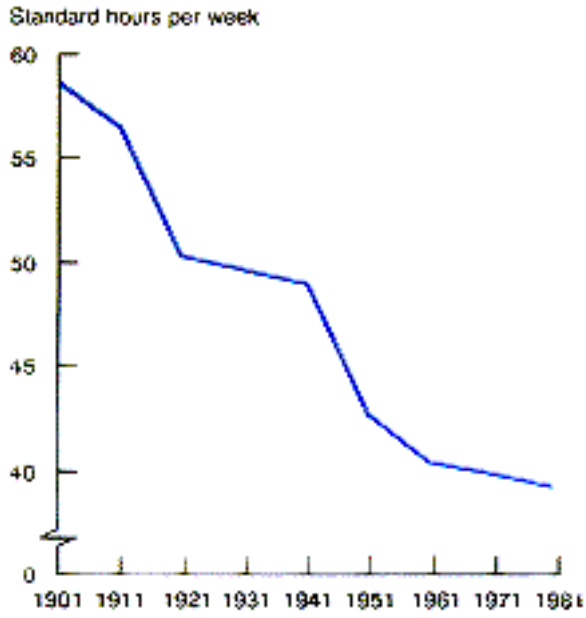
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Perspectives on Labour and Income, Autumn 1994, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E). This is the first of five articles in the issue.



Chart A

Hours of work in manufacturing dropped sharply early in the century and after World War II.



Source: Reid, F. (see References)

Table 1

Distribution of employees by usual weekly hours worked at main job, 1976 to 1993 (selected years)

	Usual weekly hours			Average hours worked
	Jan-34	35-40	41 and over	
	%			
1976	16	71	13	37.6
Youths	24	66	10	34.9
Adult men	4	77	19	41.1
Adult women	28	66	6	34.1
1981	18	69	12	36.9
Youths	28	62	10	34.0
Adult men	4	77	18	40.8
Adult women	30	64	5	33.6
1984	21	67	13	36.5
Youths	35	55	9	32.4
Adult men	5	75	19	40.8
Adult women	30	64	6	33.6
1989	21	65	14	36.6
Youths	40	51	10	31.5
Adult men	5	73	21	41.1
Adult women	29	63	7	34.2
1993	24	61	14	36.0
Youths	51	40	8	28.7
Adult men	8	70	22	40.8
Adult women	31	61	8	34.0

Source: Labour Force Survey

Note: Youths: 15-24 years; adult men and women: 25 years and over

Table 2

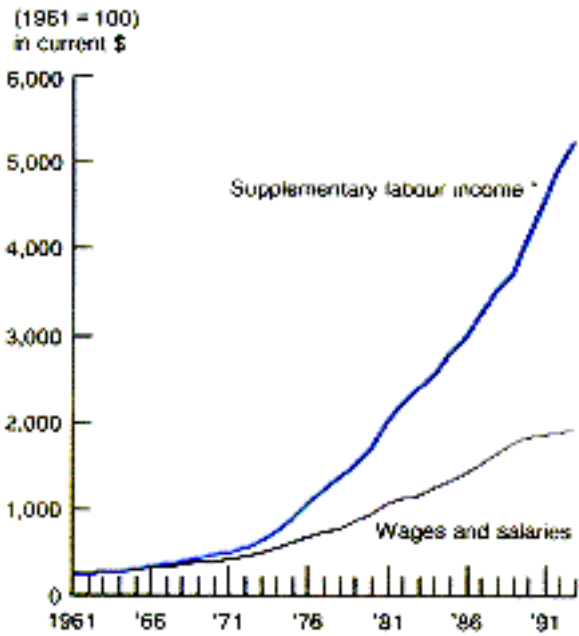
Life and working-life expectancies for men, at age 16, 1921 to 1986

	Life expectancy	Working-life expectancy	Proportion of life expectancy in the labour force
	Years		%
Not accounting for intermittent entries and exits			
1921	51.8	46.8	90.3
1931	52.5	47.1	89.7
1941	53.2	47.2	88.7
1951	54.5	46.9	86.1
1961	55.2	47.0	85.1
1971	55.4	46.4	83.8
1986	57.9	44.6	77.0
Accounting for intermittent entries and exits			
1986	57.9	40.0	69.2

Source: Bélanger, A. and D. Larrivée (see References)

Chart B

Employee benefits have grown more than earnings.



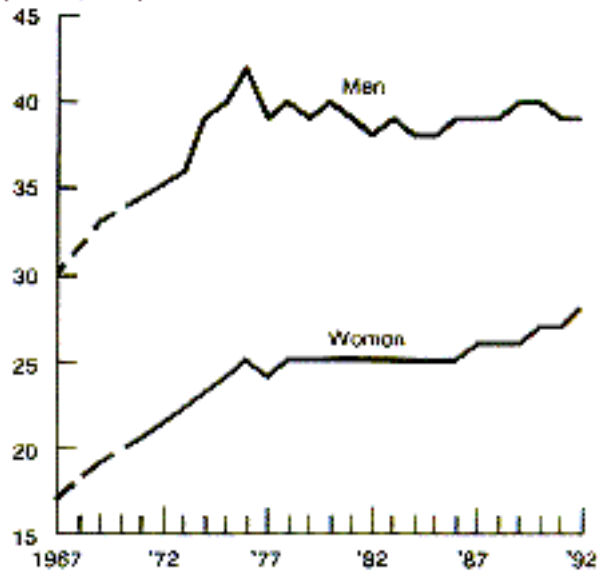
Source: Labour Division

* Includes contributions to health and welfare schemes, pension plans, Workers' Compensation and Unemployment Insurance.

Chart C

Earnings of full-time, full-year workers have changed little since the mid-1970s.

Average annual earnings
(1992 \$, '000)



Source: Survey of Consumer Finances

Note: Data are not available for 1966 and 1970.