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# 2015 American Working Conditions Survey: First Findings

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In this report we present preliminary findings from the 2015 American Working Conditions Survey (AWCS), a new, nationally representative survey of United States workers ages 18-71. The data come from a survey fielded between July 15 and October 15, 2015, to participants in the RAND American Life Panel (ALP). The ALP is a nationally representative (when weighted) sample of individuals residing in the U.S. who have agreed to participate in regular online surveys. Respondents who do not have a computer at home are provided with a computer and Internet access, so that the panel is representative of all individuals in the U.S., not just Internet users. Since its inception in 2006, the ALP has fielded more than 400 surveys on a wide variety of topics including health, employment, and retirement. All surveys are publicly available (after an embargo period) and can be linked to one another. For more details about the RAND ALP, see <https://alpdata.rand.org>.

The AWCS includes several questions harmonized with the concurrently fielded European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), now in its sixth wave of data collection since it began in 1991. (For more about the EWCS, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/european-working-conditions-surveys-ewcs>.) The AWCS collected information on several dimensions of working conditions with a focus on those particularly relevant for understanding work sustainability. We also collected general information about the job/firm (number of workers, tenure), work-life balance, managerial support and detailed health information. Additionally, the AWCS includes information on nonworkers—when they last worked, why they left their last job, current job search activities, perceived barriers to finding work, and preferences over job attributes. However, in this report we focus on workers only.

In this summary, we focus on the 3,075 U.S. workers ages 25-71 who report working for someone else in their main paid job (i.e., excluding self-employed). Table 3 presents the percent of U.S. workers with selected characteristics, overall and by age group. Each measure is oriented so that a higher number corresponds with

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more Americans experiencing what are generally considered “undesirable” working conditions. For example, only 17.9 percent of American workers regularly work very long hours — more than 10 hours per day for more than 10 days per month. While younger workers (those younger than 50) are slightly more likely than older workers (those ages 50 and older) to work long hours (18.8 percent versus 16.4 percent), this difference is statistically insignificant. Note that these simple comparisons of working conditions by age reflect not only actual age differences within a job, but also may reflect selection out of jobs with undesirable working conditions and/or selection out of the labor force over time.

Overall, we find that U.S. workers are flexible in how and when they do their jobs—only 35.7 percent have a work schedule set by their employer with no possibility for changes, and 26.1 percent have no choice of the methods by which they work. That flexibility does not tend to extend to the location of work—more than three-quarters of workers responded “no” when asked, “Can you choose where you work during regular business hours?” Flexibility at work does not vary for older versus younger workers along these dimensions.

At the same time, the prevalence of working at very high speed and experiencing stress at work always or most of the time is very high (68.4 percent and 41.3 percent, respectively, among all workers). However, the prevalence of work-related stress declines with age. While 46.1 percent of younger workers report experiencing stress at work always or most of the time, only 33.5 percent of older workers report persistent stress—a 27.3 percent decrease in the prevalence of work-related stress. Although nearly three-quarters (73.5 percent) of younger workers report working at very high speed most of the time, 60.1 percent of older workers report working at very high speed half the time or more. In addition to mental demands, older workers also tend to have less physical job demands than younger workers. One-third of younger workers report carrying or moving heavy loads half the time or more, compared with 22.3 percent of older workers. Older workers are slightly less likely to receive training from an employer, although fewer than half of both older and younger workers report receiving any training in the past 12 months.

The most striking difference between older and younger workers in Table 3 is the difference in those who report the feeling of making a positive impact on community or society through their work. Younger workers are twice as likely as older workers to report no feeling of positive impact (19.0 percent versus 9.6 percent). However, again, this could reflect some combination of pathways: older workers selecting into jobs they find more meaningful, or those with more meaningful jobs staying in the workforce longer. Identifying which way the relationship runs is critical to understanding the role of working conditions in extending individuals’ working lives. Future work analyzing these data, as well as data collected from six-month and 12-month follow-up surveys, will address these questions.

**TABLE 3. PERCENT OF AMERICAN WORKERS WITH SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS, OVERALL AND BY AGE GROUP**

	All	Age < 50	Age ≥ 50
Work 10+ hours for 10+ days/month	17.9	18.8	16.4
Work schedule set by employer (no possibility for changes)	35.7	35.7	35.6
No option to telecommute	77.2	77.0	77.7
Work at very high speed (1/2 time+)	68.4	73.5	60.1*
No choice of methods of work	26.1	25.9	26.2
Experience stress at work always/most of time	41.3	46.1	33.5*
Carrying or moving heavy loads (1/2 time+)	29.4	33.8	22.3*
No very good friends at work	14.7	15.3	13.7
Did not receive training from employer (past 12 months)	54.2	52.2	57.4*
No feeling of positive impact on community or society	15.3	19.0	9.6*
Not satisfied with working conditions	14.7	15.5	13.4

**Sample:** Ages 25-71, Conditional on working for someone else,  $N=3,075$

Results weighted using raked sample weights.

\* denotes statistically significant ( $p<0.05$ ) from age < 50 group.

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