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Research Brief 362 | December 2016

2015 American Working Conditions Survey: Focus on Older Versus Younger Workers

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As countries around the world grapple with the economic impacts of population aging, one policy recommendation has emerged above the rest: *Encourage older workers to extend their working lives*. Increased employment at older ages would help offset the expected slowdown in economic growth caused by population aging and would also improve the fiscal balance of social security programs. But while the benefit of longer work lives may be clear, it is less clear what types of working conditions make work sustainable over a longer work life and therefore increase the likelihood of working at older ages. In this paper, we highlight key differences in the working conditions of older versus younger workers using data from the 2015 American Working Conditions Survey (AWCS).

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 both 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>.

This summary represents a ‘bird’s eye view’ of our key findings on American working conditions today. Unless otherwise noted, all group differences described in the text are statistically significant at the 5 percent level. For more details on the survey and sample selection criteria, see Section 2 of Maestas et al. (2017); for a description of American working conditions by age, gender, and education more generally, see Section 4 of the main report.

Taxing work environment

A series of questions in the AWCS aim to assess the physical and social work environment. From these questions, we obtain the following findings:

- An overwhelming fraction of Americans report either intense or repetitive physical exertion on the job at least a quarter of the time. This burden is unequally distributed, with noncollege-educated workers having substantially greater physical demands. But perhaps surprisingly, even college-educated, older workers, and women are affected.

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- A disturbingly high fraction of American male and female workers are exposed to a hostile or threatening social environment at work. The incidence of hostile experiences varies in important ways by gender, age, and experience with younger and middle-aged women more likely to have unwanted sexual attention and a large fraction of young men experiencing verbal abuse. But it is telling that a hostile social environment at work is much more evenly distributed by education groups than physical working conditions.

High-pressure work environment

Several questions in the AWCS provide a better understanding of the pace and time demands of the work environment than do measures of hours worked alone. From these questions, we obtain the following findings:

- Most Americans frequently work at high speeds and under tight deadlines, and often perceive they have too little time to do the job. This paints a picture of a work environment that is often stressful and potentially mentally taxing in addition to physically taxing.
- Among all potentially adverse job attributes, this is an area where differences by education are not as clear cut, since noncollege-educated workers more often have to work at high speed, whereas the college educated more frequently face tight deadlines. Similarly, work time variability differs among the high and low educated, with the college educated taking work home, and the less educated facing more variation in start and finishing times.
- Jobs interfere substantially with family and social commitments outside of work.

Autonomy at work

A key aspect of the AWCS is that it allows an in-depth look into how American workers perform their jobs. From these questions, we obtain the following findings:

- U.S. jobs feature a mix of routine tasks and substantial autonomy in problem solving. While a large fraction of Americans hold jobs whose tasks are typically monotonous, an overwhelming majority of American workers view ‘solving unforeseen problems’ and ‘applying own ideas’ as integral parts of their jobs. Similarly, most American workers report their jobs involve complex tasks and learning new things.

Social support and training at work

Several questions in the AWCS speak to social and professional support, including training, at work. From these questions, we obtain the following findings:

- We find that for 50 to 60 percent of workers the workplace is an important source of social support. More than half of American workers report their boss to be supportive, and say that they have very good friends at work.
- Overall, a large fraction of American workers receive some form of training while working, partly by their own initiative and partly paid by employers. However, there are important differences across the population.
- Older workers are substantially less likely to receive on-the-job training than younger workers, but overall an important fraction receives some training.
- Only 35 to 40 percent of workers report their job offers good prospects for advancement. This implies that training does not necessarily correspond to aspirations. Moreover, perceived prospects for advancement vary in complex ways in the population — with young, college-educated men and young, noncollege-educated women being most optimistic.

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Sponsor information: The research reported herein was performed pursuant to grant RRC08098401-08 from the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) through the Michigan Retirement Research Center (MRRC). The findings and conclusions expressed are solely those of the author(s) and do not represent the views of SSA, any agency of the federal government, or the MRRC.

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