



# **2015 American Working Conditions Survey: First Findings**

Nicole Maestas, Kathleen J. Mullen, David Powell,  
Jeffrey Wenger, and Till von Wachter



# **2015 American Working Conditions Survey: First Findings**

**Nicole Maestas**  
Harvard University

**Kathleen J. Mullen**  
RAND

**David Powell**  
RAND

**Jeffrey Wenger**  
RAND

**Till von Wachter**  
University of California, Los Angeles

June 2016

Michigan Retirement Research Center  
University of Michigan  
P.O. Box 1248  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104  
[www.mrrc.isr.umich.edu](http://www.mrrc.isr.umich.edu)  
(734) 615-0422

## **Acknowledgements**

The research reported herein was performed pursuant to a grant from the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) funded as part of the Retirement Research Consortium through the University of Michigan Retirement Research Center (5 RRC08098401-07). The opinions and conclusions expressed are solely those of the author(s) and do not represent the opinions or policy of SSA or any agency of the Federal Government. Neither the United States Government or any agency thereof, or any of their employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of the contents of this report. Reference herein to any specific commercial product, process or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not necessarily constitute or imply endorsement, recommendation or favoring by the United States Government or any agency thereof.

## **Regents of the University of Michigan**

Michael J. Behm, Grand Blanc; Mark J. Bernstein, Ann Arbor; Laurence B. Deitch, Bloomfield Hills; Shauna Ryder Diggs, Grosse Pointe; Denise Ilitch, Bingham Farms; Andrea Fischer Newman, Ann Arbor; Andrew C. Richner, Grosse Pointe Park; Katherine E. White, Ann Arbor; Mark S. Schlissel, *ex officio*

# **2015 American Working Conditions Survey: First Findings**

## **Abstract**

In this report we present preliminary findings from the 2015 American Working Conditions Survey (AWCS), a new nationally representative survey of U.S. workers ages 18-71. We find that older workers (older than 50) are less likely than younger workers to work at very high speeds, experience frequent stress, or carry or move heavy loads. They are also slightly less likely to receive training from an employer. Most strikingly, older workers are much more likely to report having a feeling of making a positive impact on their community or society through their work.

## **Citation**

Maestas, Nicole, Kathleen J. Mullen, David Powell, Jeffrey Wenger, and Till von Wachter. 2016. "2015 American Working Conditions Survey: First Findings." Ann Arbor, MI. University of Michigan Retirement Research Center (MRRC) Working Paper, WP 2016-342. <http://www.mrrc.isr.umich.edu/publications/papers/pdf/wp342.pdf>

## **Authors' acknowledgements**

We thank participants of the 2015 Working Longer conference at Stanford University, the 2015 and 2016 MRRC Researcher Workshops and seminar participants at SSA for helpful comments and suggestions. This research was supported by a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and grant number R-UM15-03 from the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) through the Michigan Retirement Research Consortium (MRRC). The opinions and conclusions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent the opinions or policy of the Sloan Foundation, SSA, or any agency of the federal government.

## **Introduction**

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. These new data will enable researchers to study a number of important research questions for the first time. For example, how do individuals' working conditions, particularly their physical and mental job demands, differ for younger versus older workers? Do older workers prefer different kinds of jobs than younger workers? And to what extent are older workers less able than younger workers to perform certain kinds of jobs? Ultimately, these data will contribute to our understanding of how individuals' working conditions affect the length of their working lives, an important question in light of current policies to extend older workers' participation in the labor force and delay retirement. In this paper, we take the first step in answering these questions by comparing the working conditions of older versus younger workers across several dimensions.

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>.

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 listed in Table 1, which were chosen because they are 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.

### **Employment Statistics and Comparisons with the Current Population Survey**

Table 2 presents a comparison of summary statistics on employment from the AWCS and the 2014 Current Population Survey (CPS). We received 3,878 responses, representing an 87 percent response rate from our sample frame of all ALP respondents ages 18-71 drawn from a probability-based sample.<sup>1</sup> As can be seen from Table 2, the AWCS compares well with the CPS on the proportion of Americans working for pay and (conditional on working for pay), the proportions self-employed and working part-time (defined as fewer than 35 hours per week), and average hours worked per week. In the AWCS, three-quarters of men and just over two-thirds of women ages 18-71 worked for pay in the third quarter of 2015. Of these, 11.6 percent of men and 10.4 percent of women were self-employed. Just under 12 percent of men and 26.9 percent of women worked part time. On average, men worked 44.2 hours per week and women worked 38.9 hours per week.

---

<sup>1</sup> The ALP also includes some respondents drawn from non-probability-based convenience samples (e.g., referrals from current respondents). Before fielding the AWCS to probability-based respondents, we pilot tested the survey on a small (N=50) sample of non-probability-based respondents.

The striking exception to the comparability between the two surveys is the percent of respondents reporting multiple jobs. In the 2014 CPS, 4.2 percent of men and 4.9 percent of women reported that they held more than one job in the prior week. In the AWCS, 12.9 percent of men and 15 percent of women report that they “currently have more than one job, including part-time, evening or weekend work.” Unlike the CPS question on multiple jobholding, the AWCS question did not include a reference period and immediately followed a question about how many weeks *per year* respondents usually work in their main paid job. As a result, respondents may have inferred a reference period of a year (rather than a week), leading to a higher response rate in the AWCS. Additionally, it is worth noting that, given their regular participation in the panel responding to paid surveys, some ALP respondents may consider panel participation itself a second job, and thus, may be more likely to respond that they hold multiple jobs than the average American worker.

### **Working Conditions of Older and Younger Workers**

For the rest of this report, we focus on the 3,075 American 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 American workers with selected characteristics corresponding to the dimensions in Table 1, overall and by age group. Each measure is oriented so that a higher number corresponds with 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 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 American 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.

Figures 1-11 examine differences in working conditions in more detail by separately reporting results for those with and without a college degree, and for men and women, for four age groups: 25-29, 40-49, 50-59, and 60-71. In Figure 1 we examine the proportion of men and women, with and without a college degree who report working 10 or more hours per day for 10 or more days per month. Overall, younger (25-39) and late career (50-59) men without a college degree report the highest proportions of working 10 or more hours for 10 or more days in a month. Men who are near or at retirement age (60-71), are considerably less likely to work in these arrangements. Late-career men and women with a college degree have similar proportions working these longer days many times in a month. It is worth noting that selection effects may play a large part here: men and women with strong tastes for work will likely remain in the labor force and may be more likely to work more hours.

Overall, the figures illustrate that less educated men and women have less desirable working conditions. In particular, work schedule set by employer (Figure 2), no choice of methods of work (Figure 5), and carrying or moving heavy loads (Figure 7) show very steep education gradients with the proportion of college educated with these types of work conditions considerable less frequent than their less-educated counterparts. There are also a number of



working conditions where the age gradient is quite pronounced. In each case the less desirable working condition is less prevalent at older ages (in other words, working conditions are better at older ages). Working at high speed (Figure 4), experiencing stress in your work all/most of time (Figure 6), carrying or moving heavy loads (Figure 7), and no feeling of positive impact on community/society (Figure 10) show strong age gradients.

### **Job Sustainability**

Finally, we examine correlates of job sustainability, where job sustainability is measured by responses to the question, “Do you think you will be physically and mentally able to do the same job or a similar one when you are [age+x] years old, that is [x] years older than now?” The [x] bracket fills for the respondent’s actual age plus x years. For respondents aged 40-59 the question asks about 10 years in the future; for those age 60 or older the question asks about 5 years in the future. Overall, we find that 85 percent of 40-59 year olds report that they can *both* physically and mentally do their same job 10 years from now. This question is only asked of those who are 40 years old or older. Respondents give separate responses for whether they are physically or mentally able to do the same or a similar job. We consider a job “sustainable” if respondents answer yes to both questions. We report results for respondents ages 40-59 only; 85 percent of those ages 40-59 report they can both physically and mentally do their same or similar job 10 years from now.

In Table 4 we cross-tabulate those who can and cannot physically and mentally do their current or similar job (sustainable and unsustainable work) with the job characteristics in discussed in Table 3. Overall, we find that working conditions are *better* in every dimension for workers who report sustainable jobs (with the exception of working long hours, for which the difference is not statistically significant). For example, 59.1 percent of workers who have unsustainable jobs report experiencing stress “always” or “most of the time,” compared to 31.9

percent of workers who report having a sustainable job. Similarly, 50.9 percent of the unsustainable group report carrying or moving heavy loads half of the time or more, whereas only 21.3 percent of the sustainable job group reporting that frequency of heavy load moving. Interestingly, there are a number of work conditions unrelated to the employer that also impact perceptions of work sustainability. For those working in unsustainable jobs, 20.7 percent of them report having no very good friends at work, compared to 14.3 of workers in sustainable jobs. Given that nearly all the specific working conditions in unsustainable jobs are generally worse, it is unsurprising that overall dissatisfaction with working conditions is considerably higher for those in unsustainable jobs. Job dissatisfaction for those in sustainable jobs was nearly three times higher than for those in unsustainable jobs.

**Table 1. Dimensions of Job Characteristics in the AWCS**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Example Question</b>
<b>Hours</b>	How many hours per week do you usually work in your MAIN paid job? By main paid job, we mean the one where you spend the most hours.
<b>Control over hours</b>	How are your working time arrangements set? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They are set by the company/org. with no possibility for changes.</li> <li>2. I can choose between several fixed working schedules determined by my company/organization.</li> <li>3. I can adapt my working hours within certain limits.</li> <li>4. My working hours are entirely determined by me.</li> </ol>
<b>Location</b>	Can you choose where you work during regular business hours?
<b>Paid time off/ benefits</b>	Which of the following benefits are provided by your employer? Paid sick time, paid vacation time, paid holidays, paid leave to care for family members, health insurance, dental insurance, pension/retirement benefits, ...
<b>Pace</b>	Does your job involve...? (all of the time,...,never) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working at very high speed</li> <li>• Working to tight deadlines</li> </ul>
<b>Autonomy</b>	For each of the following statements, please select the response which best describes your work (always, most of the time, sometimes, rarely): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You are consulted before objectives for your work are set</li> <li>• You have a say in your choice of working partners, ...</li> </ul>
<b>Stress</b>	For each of the following statements, please select the response which best describes your work (always, most of the time, sometimes, rarely): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You have enough time to get the job done</li> <li>• You know what is expected of you at work, ...</li> </ul>
<b>Physical demands</b>	Please tell us, using the following scale, does your main paid job involve...? (all of the time,...,never) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tiring or painful positions</li> <li>• Lifting or moving people, ...</li> </ul>
<b>Working with others</b>	Do you work in a group or team that has common tasks and can plan its own work?
<b>Learning on the job</b>	Over the past 12 months, have you undergone any of the following types of training to improve your skills? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training paid for or provided by your employer</li> <li>• Training done on your own initiative outside of your workplace</li> </ul>
<b>Meaningful work</b>	In general how often does your work provide you with the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The feeling of making a positive impact on your community or society,...</li> </ul>
<b>Pay</b>	Thinking about all your income from your MAIN paid job, how much do you earn EACH YEAR before any taxes or deductions?

**Table 2. Employment Rates in AWCS and CPS**

		<b>American Working Conditions Survey (2015)</b>	<b>Current Population Survey (2014)</b>
<b>% Working for Pay</b>	<b>Men</b>	75.2	72.2
	<b>Women</b>	66.8	61.0
<b>Self-Employment*</b>	<b>Men</b>	11.6	11.6
	<b>Women</b>	10.4	7.1
<b>% with Multiple Jobs*</b>	<b>Men</b>	12.9	4.2
	<b>Women</b>	15.0	4.9
<b>% Working PT (&lt;35 hours)*</b>	<b>Men</b>	11.8	12.4
	<b>Women</b>	26.9	26.1
<b>Average Hours per Week (Main Job)*</b>	<b>Men</b>	44.2	41.2
	<b>Women</b>	38.9	36.6

Sample: Ages 18-71, N=3,878

\*Conditional on working for pay

Results weighted using raked sample weights (AWCS) and CPS final weights.

**Table 3. Percent of American Workers with Selected Characteristics, Overall and by Age Group**

	<b>All</b>	<b>Age &lt; 50</b>	<b>Age ≥ 50</b>
<b>Work 10+ hours for 10+ days/month</b>	17.9	18.8	16.4
<b>Work schedule set by employer (no possibility for changes)</b>	35.7	35.7	35.6
<b>No option to telecommute</b>	77.2	77.0	77.7
<b>Work at very high speed (1/2 time+)</b>	68.4	73.5	<b>60.1*</b>
<b>No choice of methods of work</b>	26.1	25.9	26.2
<b>Experience stress at work always/most of time</b>	41.3	46.1	<b>33.5*</b>
<b>Carrying or moving heavy loads (1/2 time+)</b>	29.4	33.8	<b>22.38</b>
<b>No very good friends at work</b>	14.7	15.3	13.7
<b>Did not receive training from employer (past 12 months)</b>	54.2	52.2	<b>57.4*</b>
<b>No feeling of positive impact on community or society</b>	15.3	19.0	<b>9.6*</b>
<b>Not satisfied with working conditions</b>	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.

**Table 4. Percent of American Workers Ages 40-59 with Selected Characteristics, by Self-Reported Sustainable Job Status**

	<b>Non-sustainable</b>	<b>Sustainable</b>
<b>Work 10+ hours for 10+ days/month</b>	16.4	18.1
<b>Work schedule set by employer (no possibility for changes)</b>	44.7	33.7
<b>No option to telecommute</b>	84.3	75.4
<b>Work at very high speed (1/2 time+)</b>	72.7	65.5
<b>No choice of methods of work</b>	35.4	25.0
<b>Experience stress at work always/most of time</b>	59.1	31.9
<b>Carrying or moving heavy loads (1/2 time+)</b>	50.9	21.3
<b>No very good friends at work</b>	20.7	14.3
<b>Did not receive training from employer (past 12 months)</b>	66.7	51.7
<b>No feeling of positive impact on community or society</b>	12.1	11.4
<b>Not satisfied with working conditions</b>	30.3	10.8

Sample: Ages 40-59, Conditional on working for someone else  
 Results weighted using raked sample weights.

Figure 1.

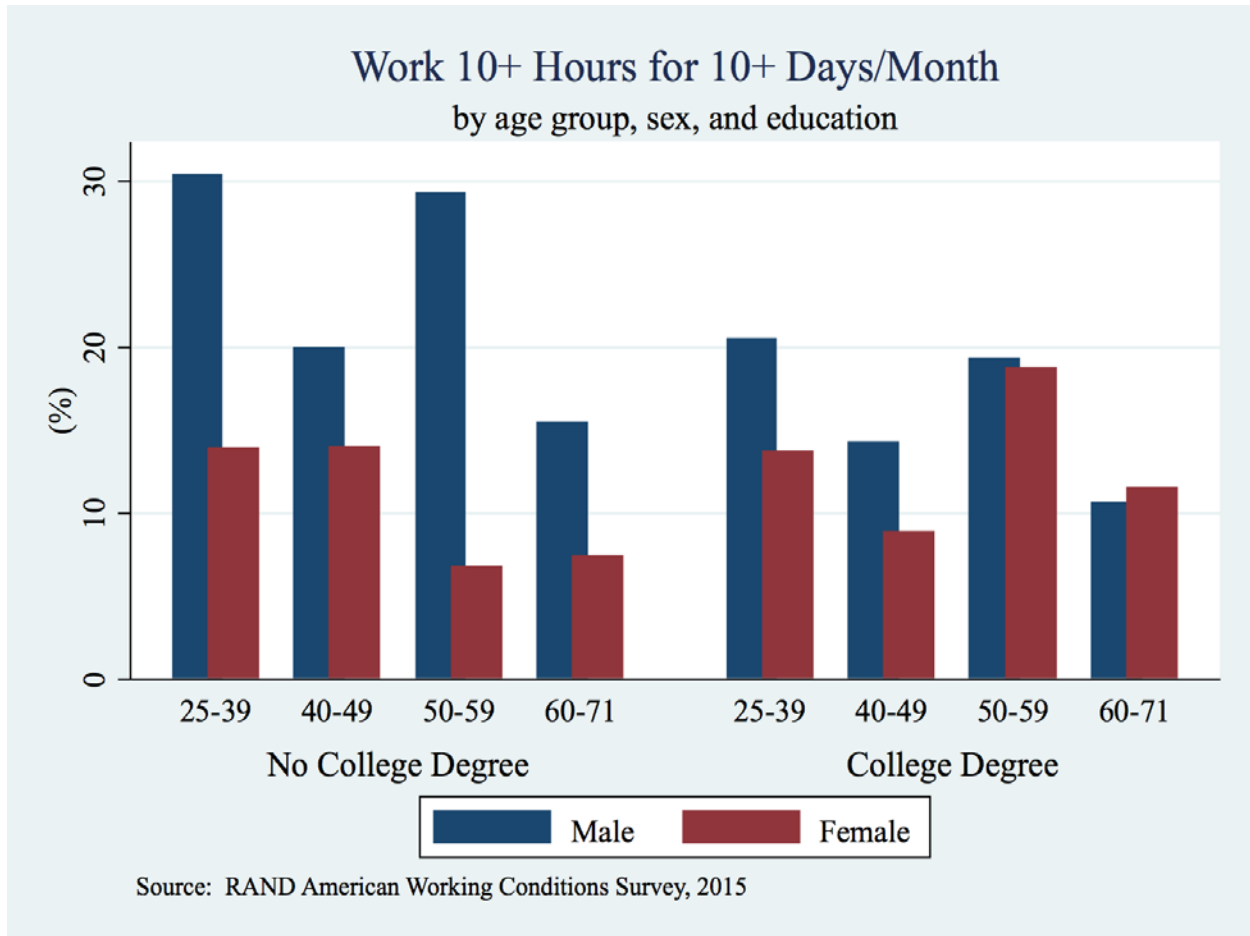


Figure 2.

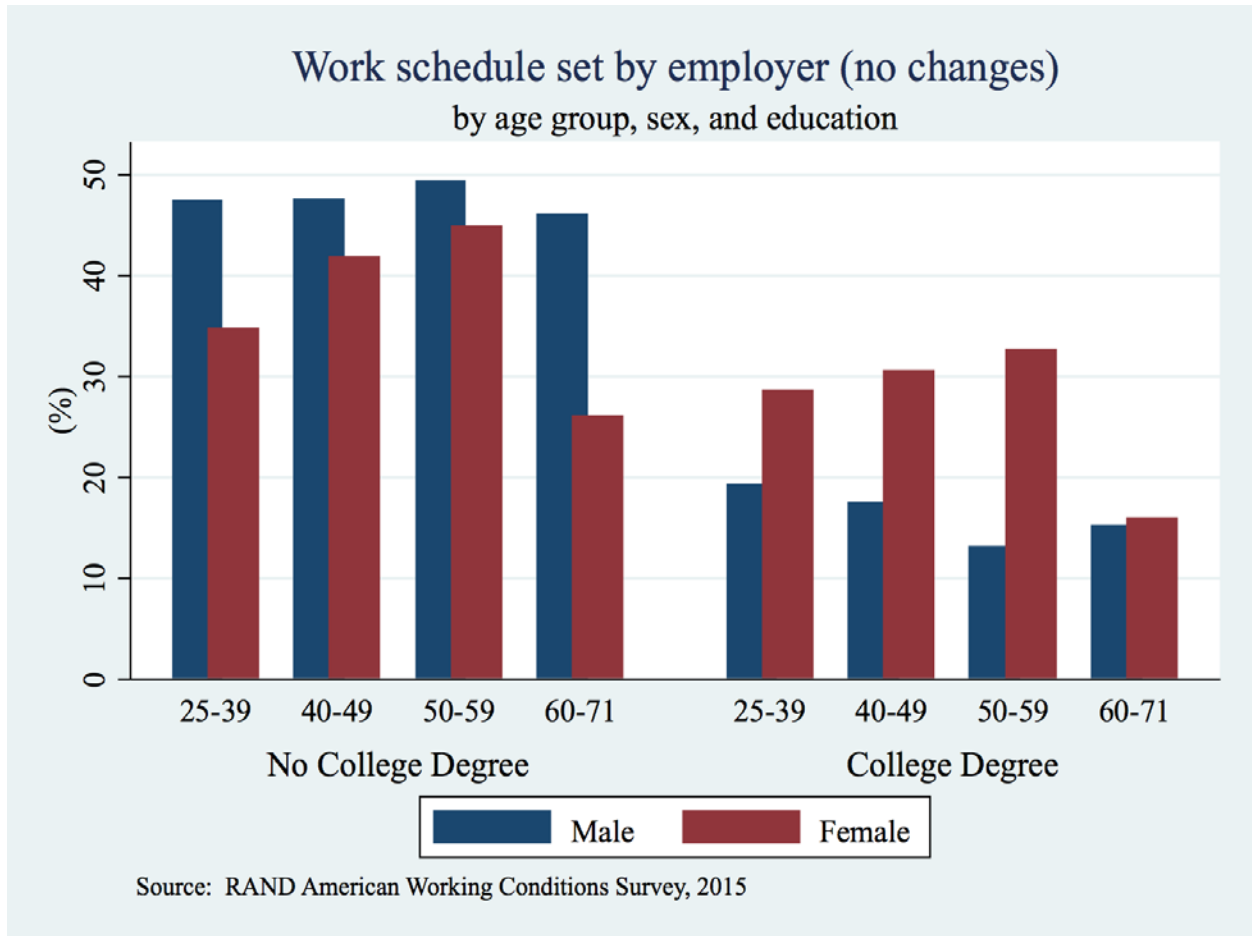




Figure 3.

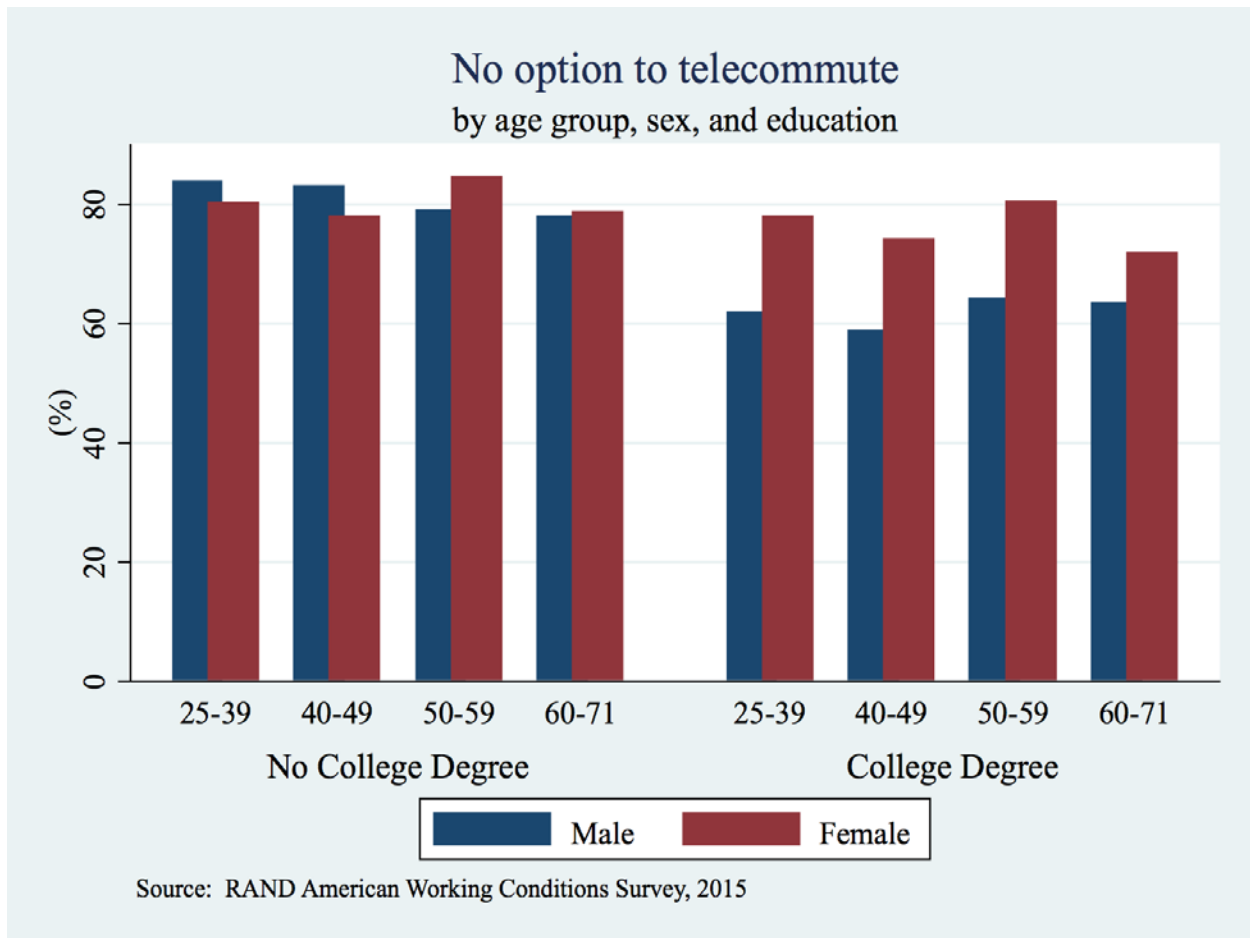


Figure 4

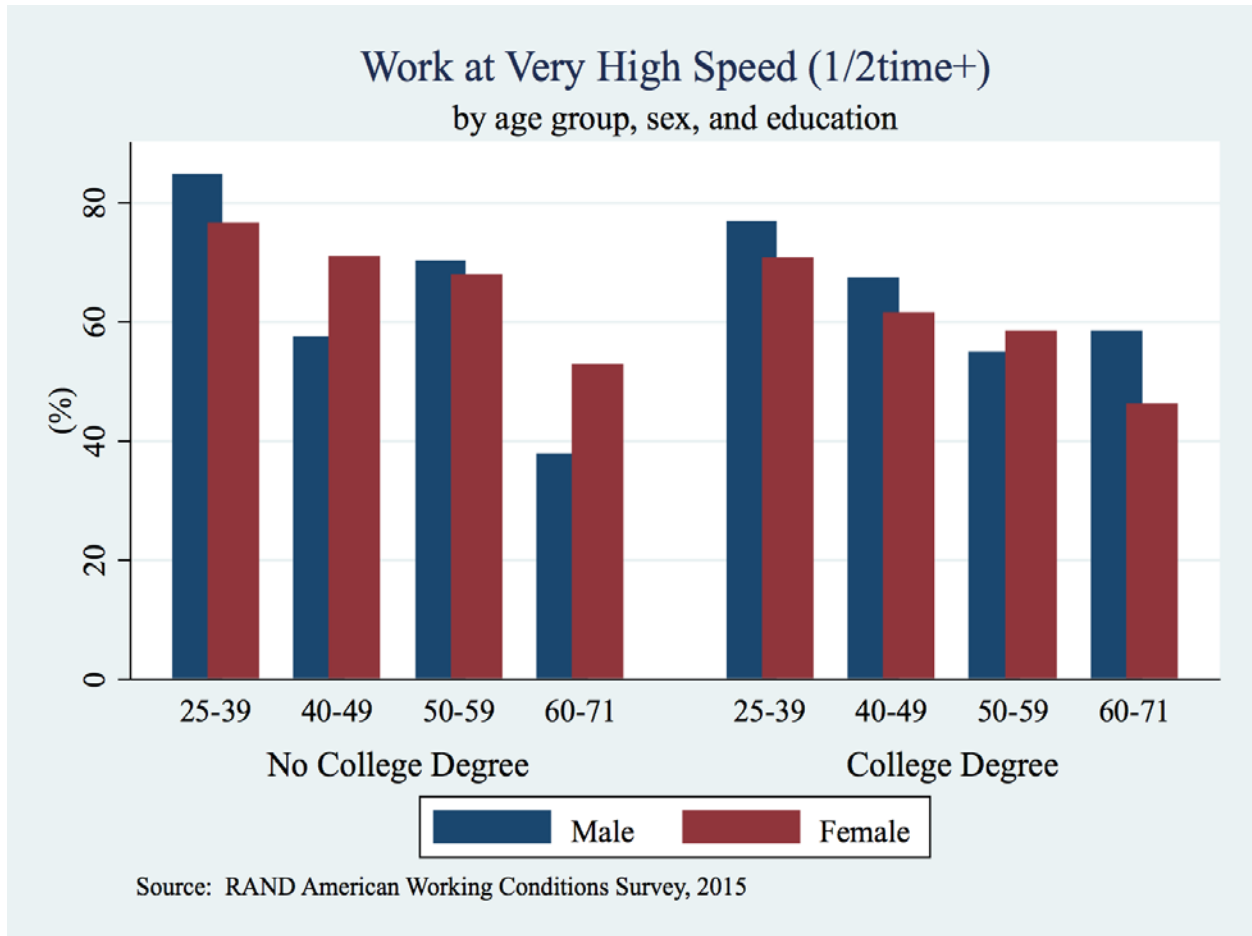


Figure 5.

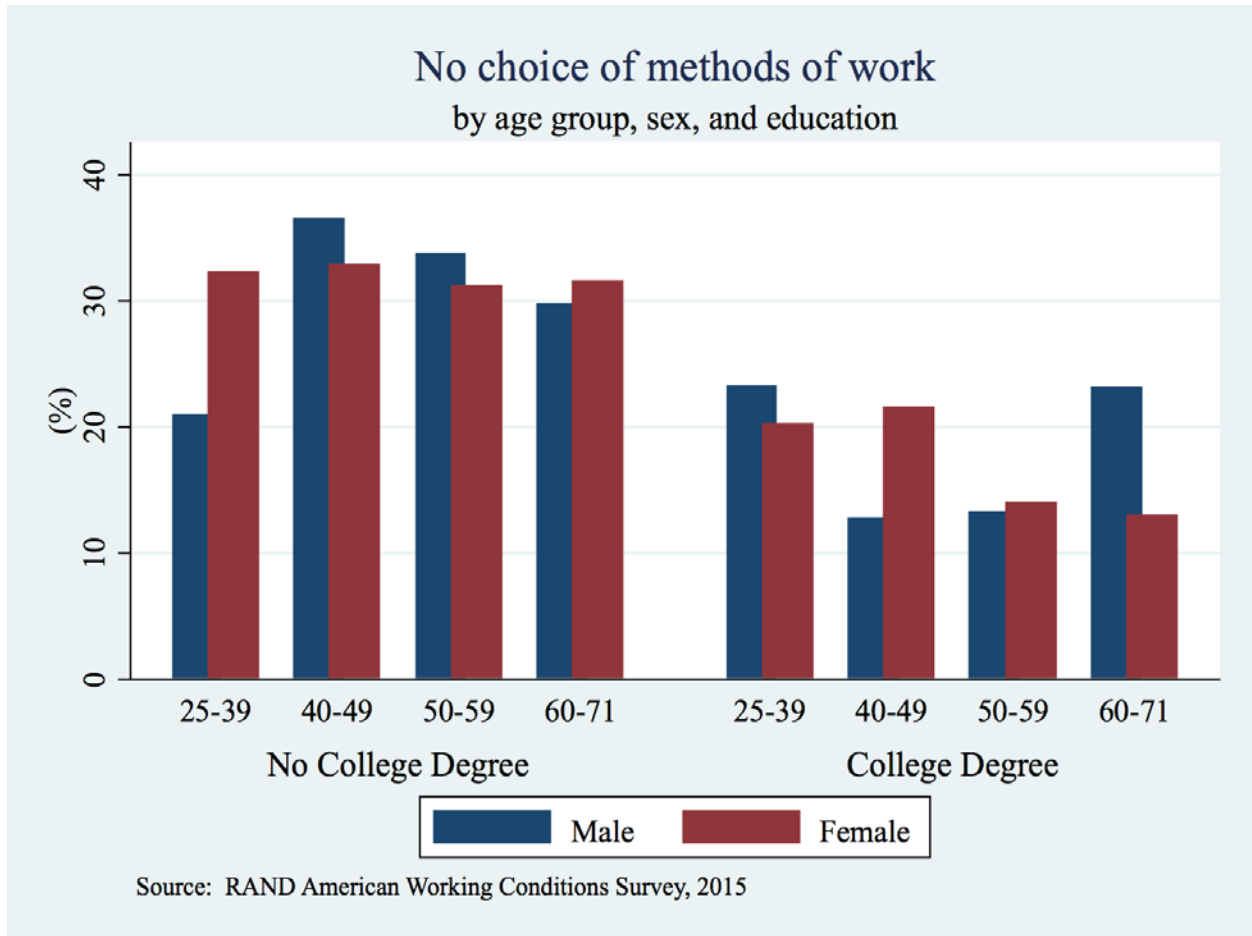


Figure 6.

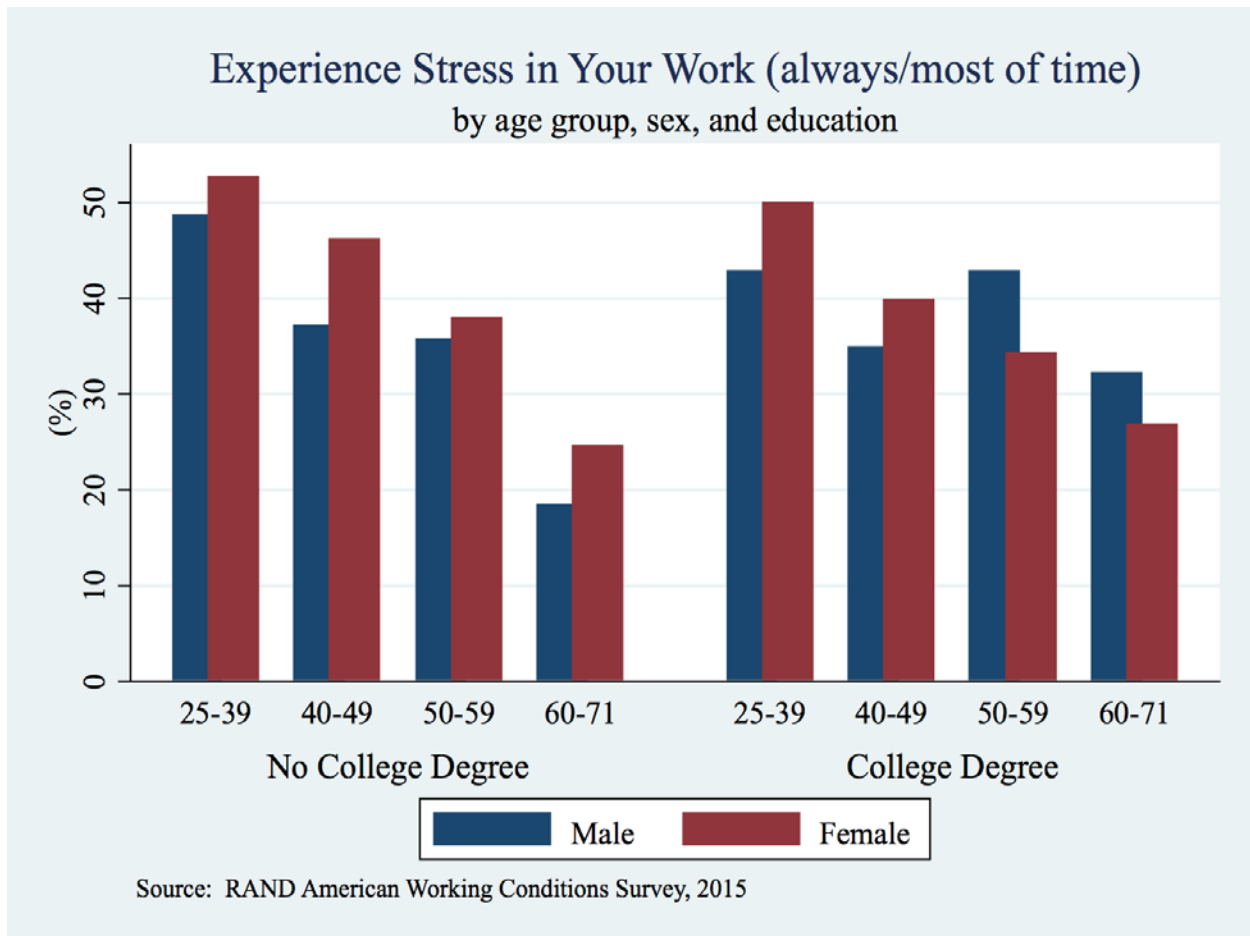


Figure 7.

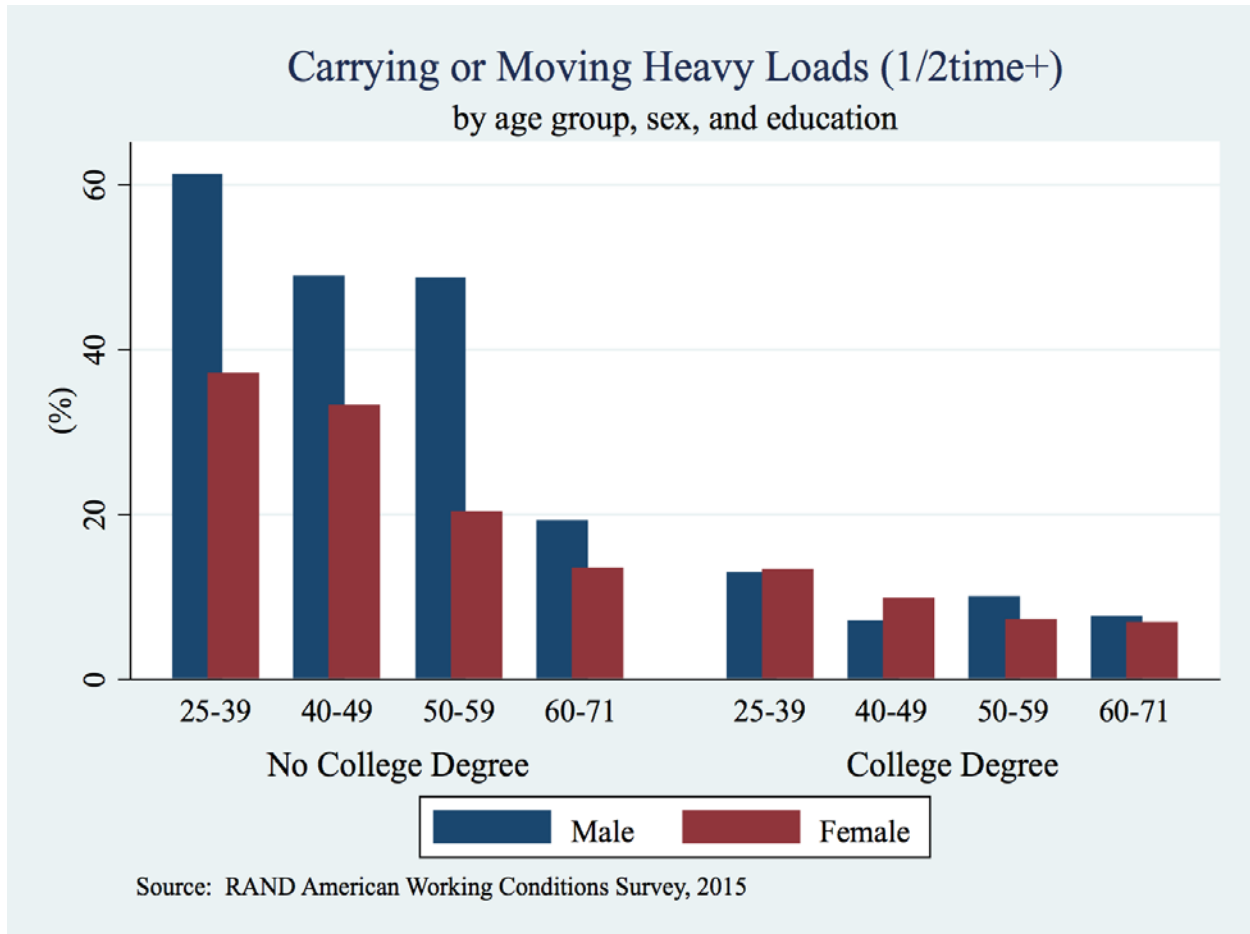


Figure 8

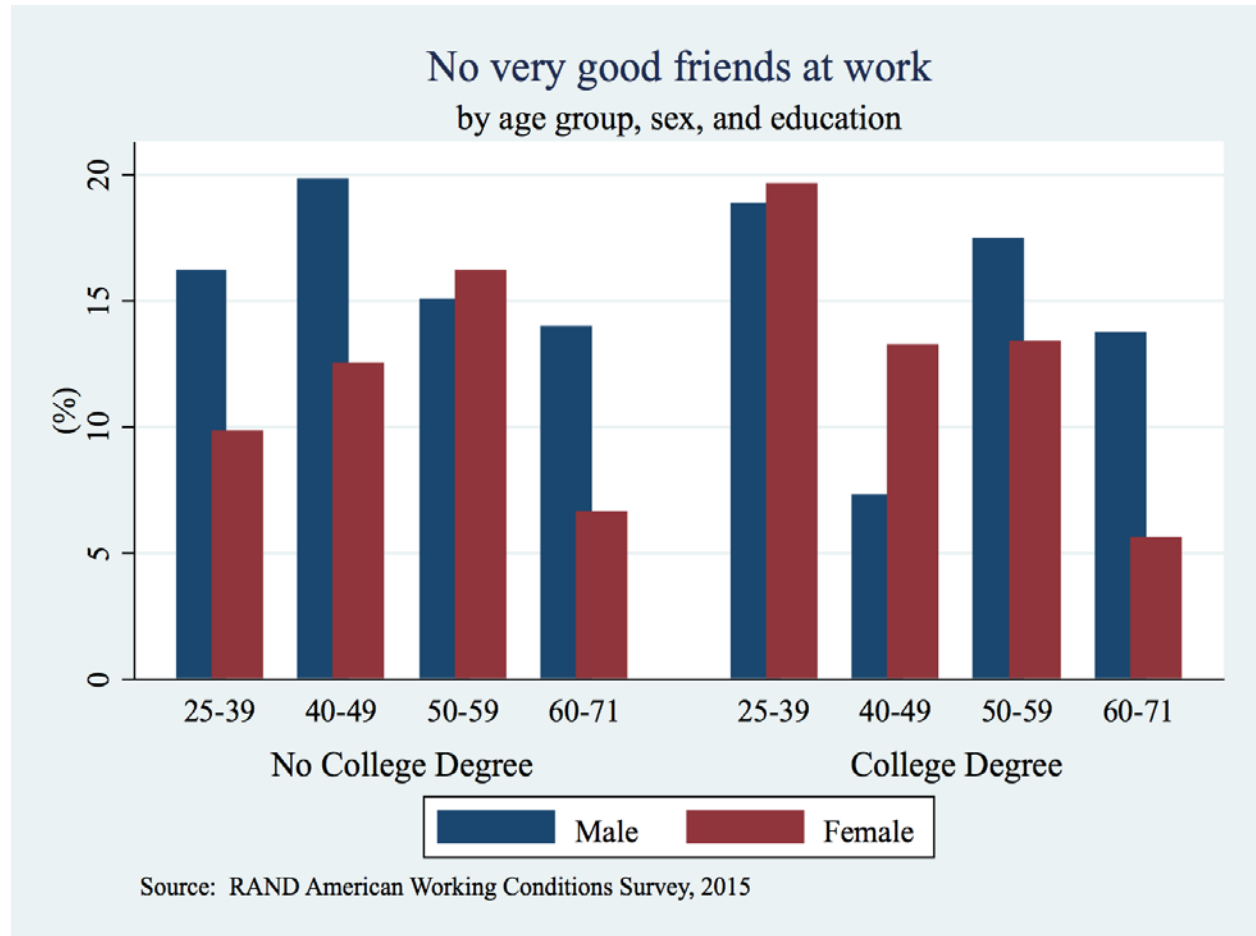


Figure 9

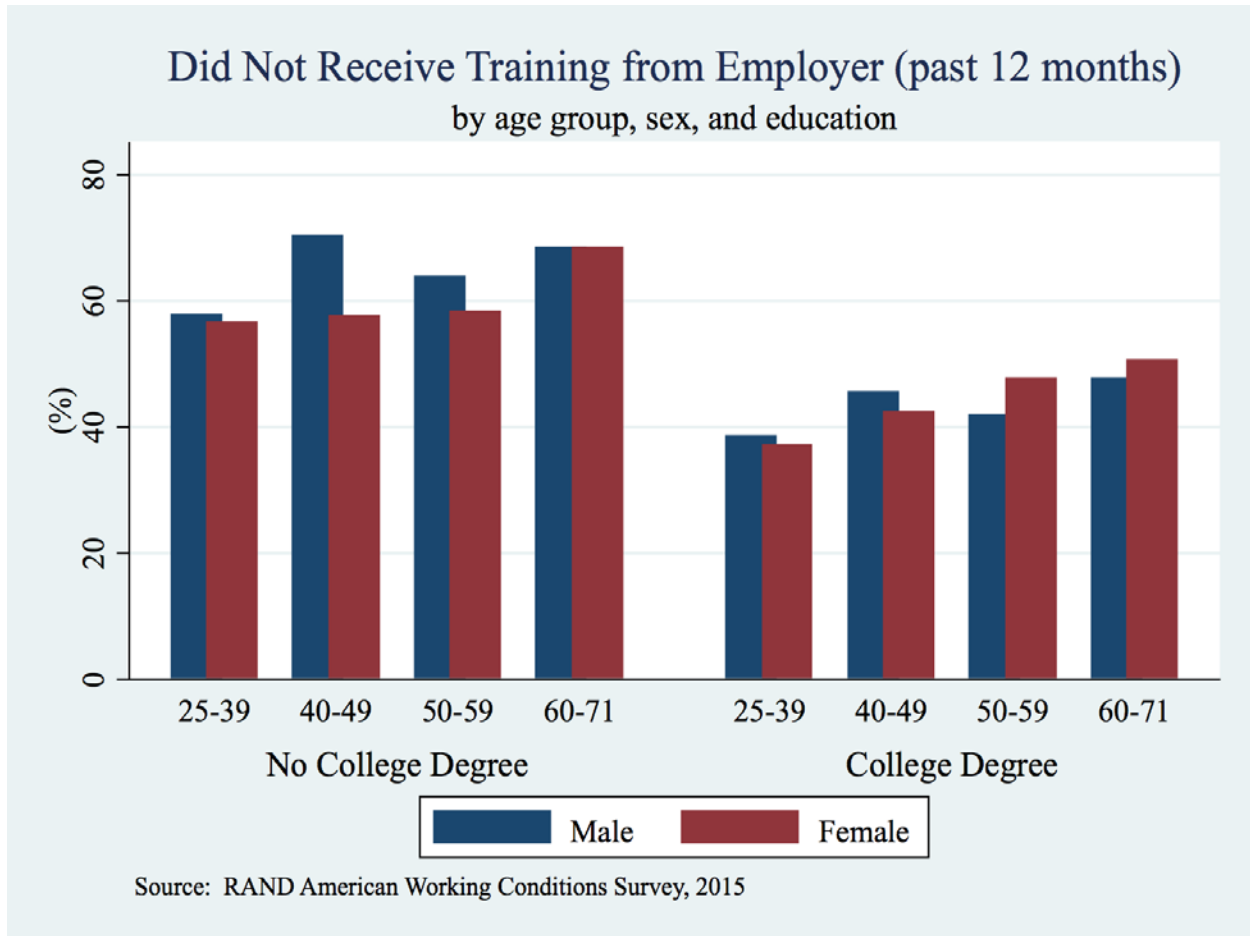


Figure 10.

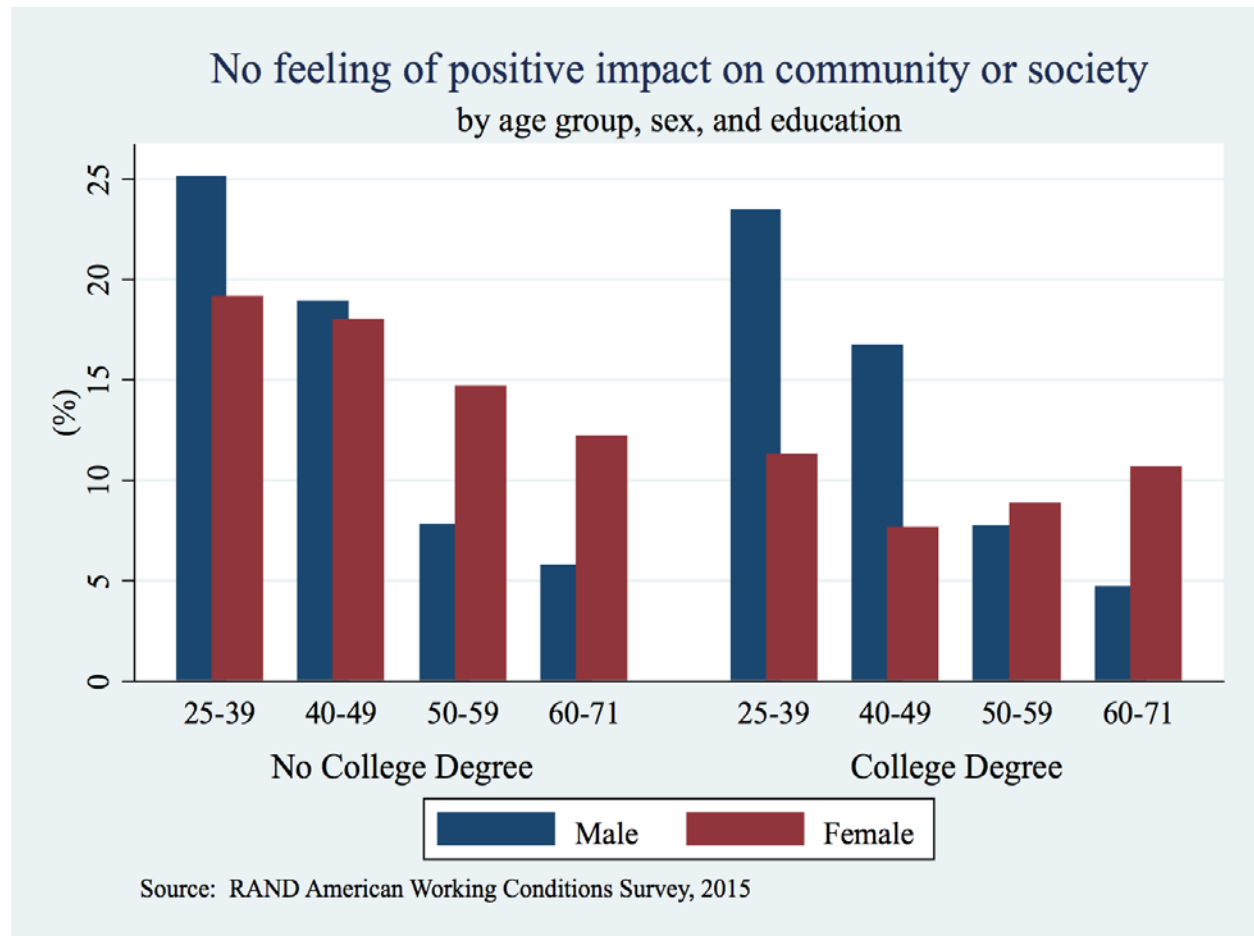




Figure 11.

