

FUTURE
—of the—
MIDDLE CLASS

NO TIME TO SPARE:
EXPLORING THE MIDDLE CLASS
TIME SQUEEZE

February 2021



Tiffany N. Ford | Jennifer M. Silva | Morgan Welch | Isabel V. Sawhill

BROOKINGS

In the last few decades, middle-class wages, especially for men, [have stagnated](#), and the middle class has experienced slower income growth than the bottom and top quintiles. If not for [women's increased economic contributions](#), middle class incomes would not have risen at all. In fall 2019, we conducted focus groups with over [100 middle-class Americans](#) in five locations with the goal of better understanding how they navigate the ["time squeeze"](#) produced by outdated, even family-hostile, workplace policies in the context of rising economic insecurity. The broad argument in this report is simple: the centrality of work shapes how middle-class Americans think about and utilize their time. This top-down shaping of middle-class time has negative impacts on well-being and has direct implications for their health, relationships, and overall sense of autonomy and purpose.

In conducting our analysis for this report, we paid special attention to how race, gender, parenthood, and occupation shaped middle-class Americans' perceptions of time use and related well-being. We found that the strongest and clearest qualitative findings were along the lines of gender and parenthood, thus the evidence that we dig into most thoroughly in this report focuses on middle class parents navigating the balance between work and family life. Despite the fact that family structures and labor force participation have changed drastically over time – including the [rise of dual-earner couples](#) and the [increase in single parent families](#) – policies that would give workers more control over their schedules, and more flexibility to care for children, aging parents, and themselves, have lagged. At its core, the time squeeze for these middle-class Americans is centered on the struggle to fit work into the rest of their lives. In sum, both economic and family policy have failed to adapt to the changing needs of middle-class American families.

In this report, based on our qualitative research, we document the pressure that many parents experience as they try to balance paid work and caring for others. Despite more egalitarian gender discourse in the last few decades, we found that men tended to link their identities as fathers to economic provision, often not questioning the idea that earning money was worth sacrificing time spent with their children. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to believe that being a "good mother" required intensive, constant engagement with their children, yet they also needed or wanted to contribute to the household income and forge independent identities as workers – a theme that persisted across race, parental status, and occupation.

With only twenty-four hours in a day, women frequently reported feelings of failure and lingering guilt.¹ While many participants expressed anger and resentment about their workplaces controlling and demanding more and more of their time, their solutions to the time squeeze they experienced centered on personal strategies such as self-discipline, making endless to-do lists, and emphasizing "time management." Although our participants framed time management as an individual responsibility, they also shared the perception that living their lives at a frantic pace, rigidly scheduled down to the minute, did not allow them to authentically connect with their families, learn and grow as people, fulfill their own physical and emotional needs, or contribute to their communities. These themes suggest that middle-class Americans may be mistakenly blaming themselves for struggles that are pervasive and systematic, and that women tend to bear a disproportionate burden of stress and self-blame when policies are not developed to address the time squeeze. Based on our qualitative findings from this work, coupled with our [previous research](#), we argue for intentional policy efforts to decenter worktime and put more control over time in the hands of workers and their families.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

As discussed more fully in our [methodological appendix](#), we began this project by conducting twelve focus groups from September to December 2019 in collaboration with the research firm, Econometrica, Inc. While our [previous work](#) with this data discusses the experiences of middle-class Americans before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus group

data used in this paper were gathered prior to the pandemic reaching the U.S. As such, discussions of people's experiences with time do not include mention of the COVID-19 pandemic or related impacts. In conducting our focus groups, we took into account the [diversity of the middle class](#). Thus, we stratified our focus groups by race and gender, allowing for a deeper understanding of the variation and complexity of the middle-class experience. We selected [five locations](#) to recruit participants: Las Vegas, Nevada, Wichita, Kansas, Houston, Texas, Central Pennsylvania, and Prince George's County, Maryland. Potential participants were asked to complete an online eligibility screening, resulting in 1,109 responses, of which 419 people qualified to participate. Participants were required to be a working-age adult (24-64 years old); to fit our definition of middle-class (that is, fall into the [middle 60% income range](#) for their specific geographic location); to live in one of the five specific geographic areas; and to meet the race-gender specifications for the focus group in their area. Nearly two-thirds of the 127 middle class participants we spoke with were parents, and roughly a quarter were married. Over half identified as political moderates, with nearly equal proportions of people identifying as liberal (or very liberal) and conservative (or very conservative). Our final group of middle-class Americans represented an income range of \$22,900-\$130,900 and encompassed a wide array of career fields including administrative assistance, health and social services, construction, teaching, service and hospitality, energy, technology, and law. Nearly half of participants reported having attained some college or an associate degree, a little over a quarter held bachelor's degrees, and about 10% held a graduate or professional degree.

In the focus groups, we spent dozens of hours talking to our participants about money, health, respect, relationships, and time. We used a sequential mixed method design to explore the factors shaping time and well-being among middle-class Americans. In short, we analyzed our focus group transcript data using constant comparison and micro-interlocuter analysis in order to better hone in on the time-related themes that arose during the discussions. These nuanced qualitative themes related to time were then triangulated with publicly available nationally representative survey and administrative data, such as the General Social Survey

(GSS), Pew, or the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), which offered another lens through which we could better understand the story of the middle-class time squeeze.

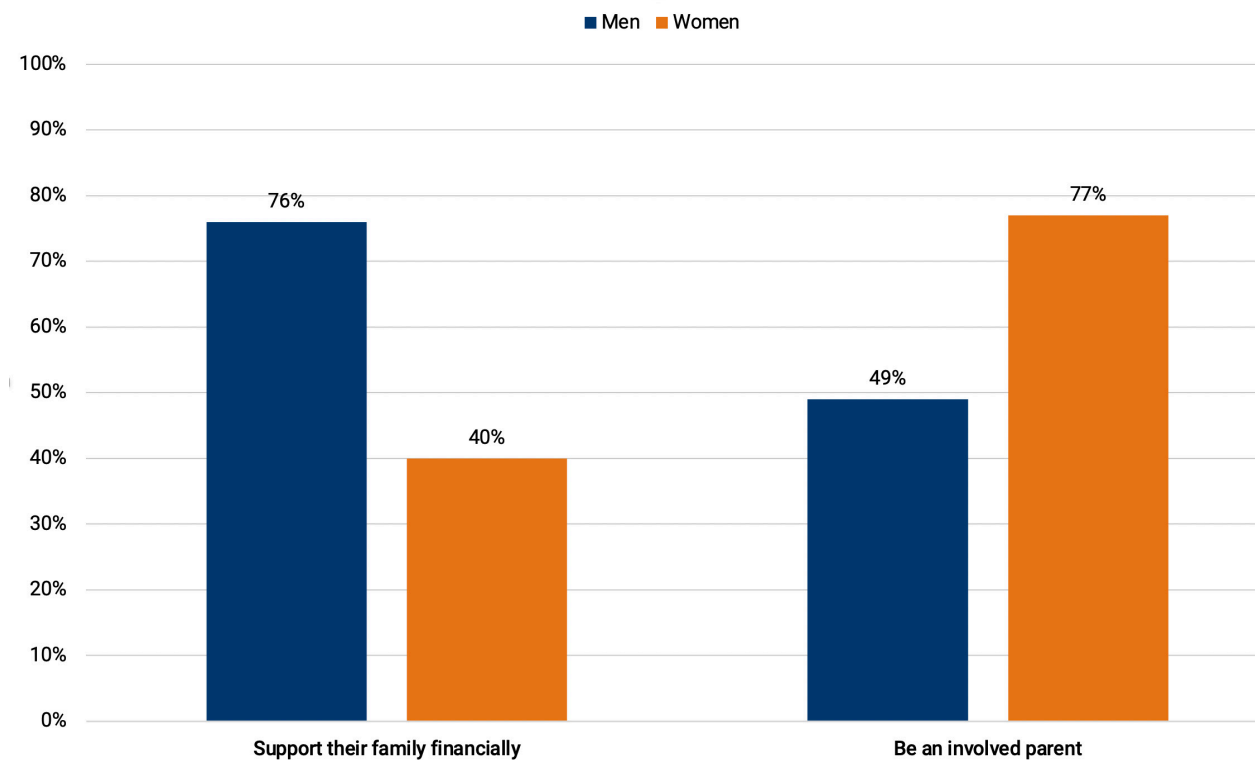
DEFINING A GOOD DAD: "GO OUT AND GET IT"

Americans report that they derive value, purpose, and satisfaction from hard work. The [General Social Survey \(GSS\)](#), a nationally representative survey from the University of Chicago, asks respondents, "if you were to get enough money to live as comfortably as you would like for the rest of your life, would you continue to work or would you stop working?" In response, [seventy percent](#) of Americans said that they would continue to work. While total worktime has [declined](#) over the past century, this decline in the United States has slowed in recent decades and diverged from other high-income countries. As a result, Americans work far more hours than those in other wealthy countries. Our respondents, especially fathers, connected working longer hours with a deep-seated sense of needing to provide for their children and partners. This drive to provide is not merely rational, but is also imbued with emotions, as they hope to give their children a more comfortable life than they themselves experienced, maintain a stable home, and prepare their children for a promising future.

FIGURE 1

Men much more likely to face pressure to support their family financially than to be an involved parent

Percent saying that men/women face a lot of pressure to do each of the following



Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 8–21 and Sept. 14–28 2017, "On Gender Differences, No Consensus on Nature vs Nurture."

This perception of work as the most important means of providing and caring for one's family emerged strongly from our qualitative findings and is perhaps better understood within the context of men's changing roles in work and family life over the last four decades. The [labor force participation rate](#) for men has been steadily declining since the 1960's, which is partially explained by the disappearance of manufacturing jobs due to offshoring and automation. In addition, middle-class men have experienced [slower wage growth](#) than women since the late 70's. Women's wages have risen both because they are working [more steadily](#) than in the past and because they are now [more educated](#) than men. By 2017, about [40%](#) of mothers were the sole or primary breadwinner in their household. Despite these dramatic shifts in men's and women's labor force participation, we've seen [little change](#) in the still-gendered division of tasks within the household (discussed further below). Americans

continue to view fathers primarily as financial providers for their families. In fact, as Figure 1 shows, a majority of Americans (76%) feel that men face a lot of pressure to support their families financially while less than half (49%) say that men face a lot of pressure to be involved parents.

The findings from our focus groups were consistent with this national trend. Kevin, a Hispanic father from Las Vegas, Nevada, explained, "Right now, all my time is on making money, any which way possible." Kevin, who works for his family's small business, worries that they might "close their doors" in the near future, jeopardizing his family's security. Kevin's pursuit of money stems from a longing for his children to experience a carefree, even luxurious childhood - "I pretty much just don't even think about what I want. I try to give the kids stuff. You know, parties, just all the stuff I didn't have."

Jackson, a middle-class Black father in Houston whose job requires frequent travel, describes a tension between providing for his children's material desires and spending time with them. He laments losing time with his children but ultimately decides, "I have to go out and get it for us." But sometimes, he says, work becomes all-consuming. Kyle, a Hispanic man from Las Vegas, is happiest when he is spending time with his "family, grandkids and daughter." However, he admits that "it's kind of hard because I'm always doing something through work for the job that I have now or trying to help with the company and trying to get it to where I want it to be." The men we spoke with connect their sense of purpose and self-worth directly to material provision for their families. They expressed experiencing their lives as "being stuck in the grind" – leaving no time for activities like resting, playing, volunteering, watching television, or exercise. In other words, these middle-class fathers find themselves making necessary sacrifices, rather than being able to choose how they organize their time.

For Trevor, a white middle-class father in Houston who works in pest control, paying off medical debt and saving for retirement felt central to preparing for the future. When Trevor was faced with a choice between going into work over the weekend to "put some money in the bank" or going to the Renaissance festival with his oldest son, he explains, "I told [my son], 'It's just not going to happen, man.' He's like, 'Well, it's the last week.' I'm like, 'Yeah, but I can make \$1,200. I've got to make this money. You don't understand, I can't pass up \$1,200 just to look at some people dressed up like King Arthur. If you can find some friends to take you, I'll give you \$100.'" He was real bummed out about that. My wife was like, "[your son] was upset y'all couldn't go." I was like, "Yeah, but you got to understand." When participants valued their time in monetary terms, they tended to rationalize giving up leisure with thoughts of all the money they could be making instead.ⁱⁱ This scarcity mentality among fathers – an overwhelming prioritization of financial security over other forms of well-being – is not just about getting ahead or about keeping up with the Joneses. For the fathers we spoke with, it seems to be more about staying afloat, being worried about the future, and providing a secure life for their families.

We also talked with men who recognized and expressed the desire to break this cycle – and were hoping to eventually escape the regular 9-to-5 and find alternative ways of making money that freed up their time. Lee, a "first generation American" in Maryland whose parents "came from Third World countries," says he does not want to "work just to work." But he also feels obligated to earn "enough money to pay for my daughter's college education." Lee hoped to solve the time-money tradeoff by "investing in opportunities with business" so he can create "passive income." Shawn, who worked as a freelance artist, found the greatest sense of satisfaction from "being with my family, doing things with my kids." He says, "being involved in the different activities they do makes me happy." He elaborates: "I mean I enjoy my job, but to say that my job brings me happiness? Having work and being able to make money to support my family is a key part to your life. But I don't know that that brings me happiness. I think, the happiness comes from the family part and that you have to do the things we do."

THE PRESSURE COOKER OF MOTHERHOOD

Over the past four decades, the fraction of couples who are dual earners has risen from about fifty percent to [seventy percent](#). The largest increase within this category has been among couples in which both parents work full-time. But the feminist revolution, as [Arlie Hochschild puts it](#), stalled at the front door, which means that women have added paid work to their schedules while also continuing to do the majority of the household work and childcare. Over the same time period, [single parent families](#) have become more common, particularly among women at the lower end of the income ladder and among women of color, intensifying the pressure for these women to do it all. Our focus groups generated a rich trove of data that revealed how women have experienced these shifts, suggesting that these structural changes in the economy leave middle-class mothers feeling that they never have enough time, are unable to catch up, and always have the nagging feeling that their work is incomplete.

Wendy, a married white woman from Wichita, Kansas, is the mother of four children. In addition to homeschooling her children, Wendy picks up “Uber deliveries, Instacart, and all that kind of stuff” on top of running her household. She explains, “I never have enough time. That’s the one thing I always say I’m short on...time. I feel like there needs to be three of me, one here, one there and one somewhere else, all doing some[thing] at the same time because I just don’t have time to do everything.” Wendy chooses to take on additional work in order to improve the richness of her children’s experiences: “I’m doing it for a good reason because I’m trying to get ahead or make money, so I can spend more quality time with them and go more places and do more things.” Wendy’s experiences are supported by a [survey](#) of 2.5 million Americans in which 80% of them said they did not have the time to do everything they needed to do each day.

Female focus group participants’ pride in providing for their children, as well as their sense of fulfillment in their careers, was often tempered by guilt. Mothers felt more compelled than fathers to justify their decision to work for pay – even when the income was necessary for survival. Donna, a white woman from Kansas who lives with her partner and two young children, grew up poor and in foster care and now works at a children’s home. When asked about how she spent her time, she reflects, “I worked at a children’s home and I could not say no. I was working so many hours and anytime they needed me, I could not say no. It’s so hard to say no sometimes.” She adds, “I know my children need me, but the kids at the children’s home needed me too and it’s hard to split yourself like that.” Despite this tradeoff and the guilt that it brings, Donna is “really proud” that she has created a stable life for her family: “I’ve been able to have a house with me and my children and afford for us all to eat, and afford for us all to have clothes, and to have my own car. I’m just really proud that I’m able to do that.”

On the other hand, sacrificing their own professional development and upward mobility to take care of their children leaves many mothers feeling frustrated and somewhat wistful. Patrice is a married Black mother from Las Vegas who works full-time in IT support. Both of her children have type-one diabetes, which requires constant monitoring and vigilance on her part.

Additionally, each child has “seven different teachers” and “a special educational program” that she must keep up with daily to ensure the schools are correctly following the protocol. As she runs through her daily schedule for us, she notes that “I work, and when I get home, I have to support my family and it’s very hard dealing with it.” Caring for her children has forced her to “set her career aside.” She says, “...by the time I’m done with my day, I’m mentally and physically drained, and I pretty much don’t do a lot of stuff because...it’s too much. I just sit back and sleep.”

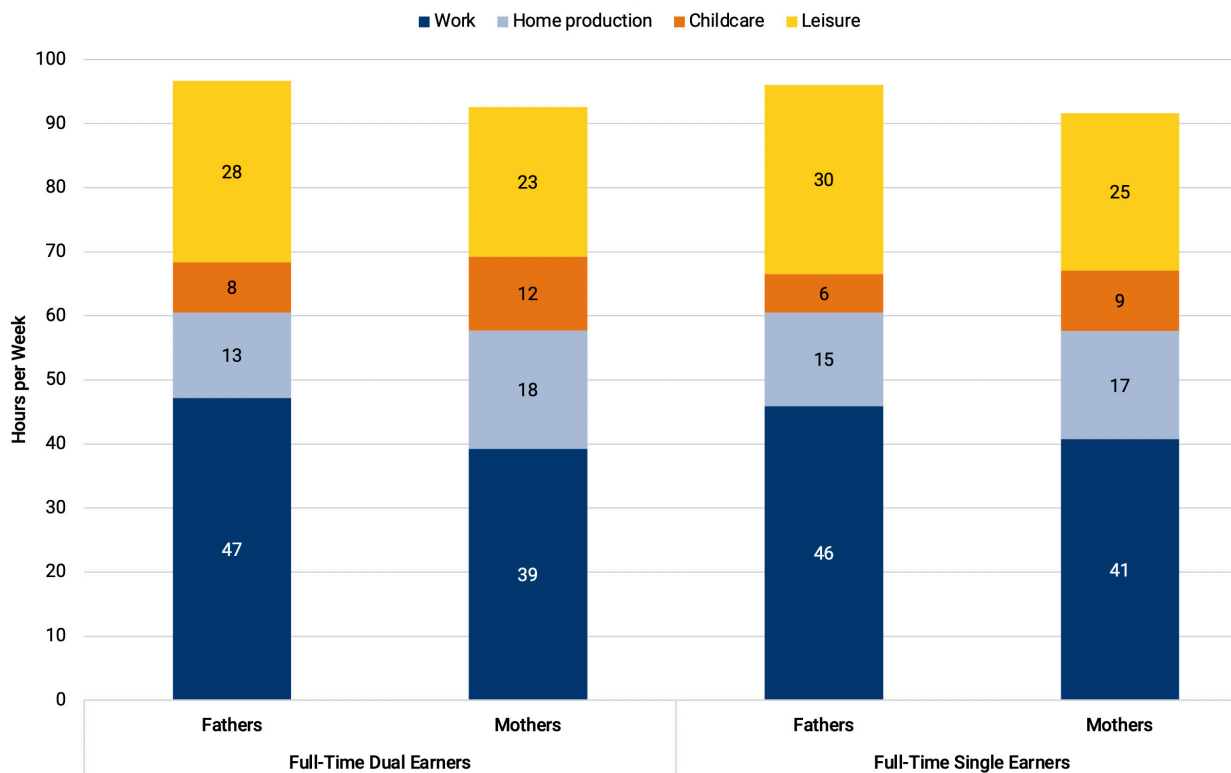
Quantitative data offers broad support for these findings about women’s experiences of gender-based responsibilities where home and work are concerned. Working-age [men have increased their childcare and housework time](#); however, mothers still spend more time on childcare than fathers and take on more of the housework. As shown in Figure 2, even in households consisting of two married dual-earner parents, on average women still perform about 5 more hours of household work a week and spend about 50% more time on primary childcare (while spending less time on leisure). Given these gender differences in how time is spent on childcare and household duties, it is no surprise that 57% of full-time working mothers report that being a working parent makes it harder for them to be a good parent, according to a [2019 Pew Social Trends Survey](#). Additionally, as we heard from Patrice’s story, half of mothers say that being a working parent makes it more difficult for them to advance at work, compared to 39% of fathers.

For single mothers, balancing work, childcare, and household duties falls solely on their shoulders, but their connections with their children were often central to their lives. Deborah, a single mother living in Wichita, Kansas, describes herself as an “entrepreneur with a small business, trying to get extra streams of income going.” She admits she has “student loan debt out the wazoo” and is still not making enough money to enable her to pay for her daughter’s college so that she “doesn’t have to deal” with student loan debt. Nevertheless, Deborah says, “I’m just happy with life” because “my relationship with my daughter is amazing. For her to be a 15-year-old, about to be 16, her attitude, her personality, her work ethic...she loves herself and I love her. She radiates confidence, and I love that.” Like

FIGURE 2

Both married and single mothers spend more time in home production and childcare

Average hours per week in five primary activities among prime-aged parents in the middle class, 2015–2018



Source: Partially recreated from Sawhill and Guyot (2020). Author's calculations using the American Time Use Survey.

many mothers in our focus groups, she grounds her understanding of her well-being in the quality of her relationship with her children more than in her financial security.

Overall, our focus groups suggest that middle-class mothers find themselves in a constant pressure cooker – relying on time spent in paid work to provide material goods for their children while also in most cases being their children's primary caregiver, tending to their education, healthcare, and all other aspects of their child's well-being. Despite this pressure, these mothers reported that they derive a sense of purpose and pride from being able to provide and care for their families. To navigate the time pressures they felt, mothers across racial categories and family statuses in our focus groups tended to take responsibility for their inability to manage their time themselves, expressing a sense of guilt for spending time away from their children, rather than attributing the source of their challenges to their

employers' demands or the inadequacy of public support for families in the form of childcare or other supports.

WORKPLACE POLICY, AUTONOMY, AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE

As we've shown in the previous sections, the balancing of work and family time manifests differently in the lives of middle-class mothers and fathers. Nevertheless, it leads them to make tough sacrifices in how they allocate their time, which has deleterious effects on their well-being. With paid work at the center of how middle-class Americans allocate their time, workplace policies are the [“scaffoldings confining the human experience on and off the job.”](#) Regardless of parental status, these institutional norms surrounding work shape the sacrifices and trade-offs for the middle-class Americans we spoke with. As such, additional duties and responsibilities, such as parenting, resting, engaging in physical activity, sleeping, and even grieving, come to be structured around work time. Many policies and practices surrounding work and family life – such as paid leave, advanced scheduling, and work from home policies – could help to meet the needs of middle-class workers. In this context, we were interested to hear from participants about the policies and practices of their current or previous employers and how these policies either helped or hindered their work-life balance.

Participants pointed to the lack of advanced scheduling as a factor that negatively impacted their work-life balance and ability to be there for their family or plan for their future. According to an [analysis](#) of American Time Use Survey Leave and Job Flexibilities Module data, two in five wage and salary workers over the age of fifteen know their schedules less than one month in advance, and nearly one in five know their schedules less than one week in advance. Less educated workers and Hispanic or Latino workers are [particularly likely](#) to experience short scheduling notice. As Maria, a Hispanic woman from Las Vegas who works in retail shared, when you need to work because you need money and your job calls, “it doesn't matter if that day someone passed away or someone had a birthday” – one must go into work. The inflexibility of these jobs has forced Maria to make choices that undermined her ability to fulfill her obligations to her family – ultimately limiting her autonomy and ability to live consistently

with her values. “I mean last year my grandmother passed away, and I was called into work, and I couldn't go to her funeral because I had bills to pay,” she says wearily. Thinking about how work dominates her time, she worries, “How are you going to have time to devote to your children and teach them the right values if you're working so that they can have a roof over their heads and food to eat? How are you going to put one over the other? I mean you love your child; you want them to do good in life, you want to be there. But you also want to be able to provide for them. So how do you put focus on one?”

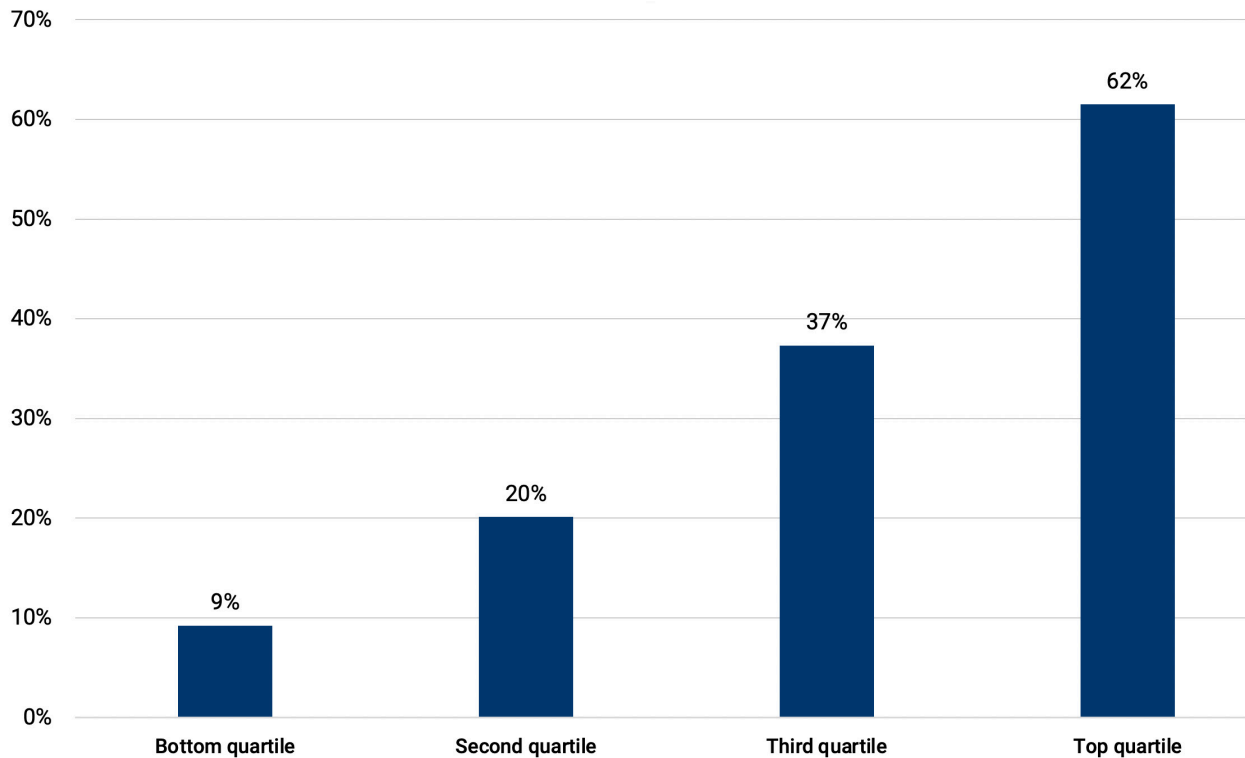
As Thomas, a Hispanic truck driver from Las Vegas explains, “The way I spend my time now is pretty much I got a job that has hours and times switch almost every week so it's kind of hard for me to have that set time.” Thomas shared that he would prefer a different job – one where “it's pretty much weekends off.” Thomas shared how he might structure his future time, if only his work allowed him the opportunity to plan in advance: “I hope to use my time better like as far as work and stuff, be able to be more efficient with my time and going to school for a better job, you know?” Unpredictable schedules and irregular hours have a negative, even dehumanizing, impact on the quality of life of the American middle class – limiting people's ability to attend important events, such as dance recitals or soccer games, social gatherings, or activities that may improve their own chances for upward mobility. In fact, [experimental evidence](#) suggests that most people would prefer to have a set, inflexible schedule over an unpredictable one.

The desire for more work time flexibility and personal control over time was raised across all of our focus groups. Self-employment and the ability to work from home supported better work-life balance and increased worker autonomy and control for those who had access. Stephanie, a Hispanic mother, changed careers in order to have a better balance between work and family life. She says “since I quit corporate America, I do have the opportunity to spend more time with my family because I'm a creator.” Self-employment, which is [highly valued among American workers](#), gave Stephanie more control of her time and also freed up hours previously spent on commuting to and from work. Stephanie feels lucky for this set up and recognizes that her ability to be in

FIGURE 3

Higher earners are able to work from home more

Percent of total workers who could work from home in 2017–18, by earnings quartile



Source: 2017–2018 BLS data

control of her time through self-employment is not open to everyone.

Our focus group members recognized that access to this sort of flexibility – though self-employment or the ability to work from home – depends on what sort of work one does. Survey data demonstrate that the ability to work from home is strongly related to income, with 62% of upper-class Americans (top quartile, Figure 3) reporting being able to work from home compared with 37% of people with earnings in the third quartile and 20% of individuals with earnings in the second, [according to 2017-2018 BLS data](#). Stephanie reflected, “But what about the people who don’t create, who are not into show business, who can’t do YouTube channels?” Yet both Stephanie and Desmond, a middle-class Black man from Prince George’s county, encouraged their fellow focus group participants to consider becoming entrepreneurs. As Desmond put it: “Maybe you’re limiting yourself by just working a job.... why not start

your own business? Why not be an entrepreneur? Why not create jobs for other people?” Others in the focus groups were receptive to this sentiment, “Right,” another Black man in Desmond’s focus group agreed. When discussing entrepreneurship in particular, the focus group participants conveyed a desire to take more control over their time, and saw self-employment as one way to achieve more autonomy. In the next section, we explore this theme of taking responsibility for managing one’s time further.

TIME AS AN INTERNAL, NOT STRUCTURAL, CHALLENGE

When the middle-class participants described how they navigate the time squeeze in their daily lives, we found that many of them framed time management as an individual dilemma, one that could be managed by strategies such as saying no, making lists, and holding themselves accountable. This is consistent

with the individualistic ideologies that are at the root of American culture. That individualism manifests as an obsession with time management and productivity. Participants framed time use and allocation as within their own locus of control – a matter of individual diligence. While many people acknowledged that the norms and practices at their current or previous workplaces may be the problem, they still held themselves responsible for the pursuit of relief from their personal time squeeze.

Iris, a Black woman from Wichita, Kansas, describes herself as someone who likes to help other people. She shared how she has learned to overcome her tendency to be a “yes yes person” and just “say no”: “I’ve learned to not allow people to monopolize my time, because if you allow them, they will. And so, I’m very protective of my time, especially now, because I don’t have a lot of it.” Other participants emphasized list-making and blocking out time to maintain control over the hours in their day. In Nevada, Nadia, a Hispanic woman, shared, “I make a to-do list every night before I go to sleep. And I just try to accomplish it every day as much as I can. But I’m pretty proud of that. That I actually make a list every night.” Her fellow focus group participant, Chloe, added that “being self-disciplined” and “managing your time” are moral choices that reflect personal integrity: “I used to say, “Oh I don’t have enough time for this. I don’t have enough time for that.” But I should be able to make time for that. We all have 24 hours in a day, right?” Chloe goes on to describe time for work, for going to the gym, for meal prep or other activities and concludes with “Managing your time. Time blocking. I mean it’s just “self-disciplining.”

Along these lines, being unable to accomplish everything on their to-do list or even taking some time to rest or do something fun during the day, led to guilt related to their lack of productivity, especially for women. Grace, a single white woman living in Las Vegas, says “I am always striving to use my time better, use it more productively” to be able to accomplish “the things I need to do,” adding that “procrastination sucks.” “There’s time, but you got to just also be smart,” echoed Sam, a middle-class Hispanic man in Las Vegas. Chad, a white man in Texas framed time management as a cognitive skill, explaining how “it’s just the way you schedule your time. It’s all about scheduling and

blocking time.” While framing time use and the time squeeze as problems that can be individually overcome by personal effort, through lists, and by simply saying ‘no,’ it seems as if participants are staving off anxiety and the lack of control over more systemic problems that are at the root of their stress. In 2018, [74%](#) of employed people said it was “not too hard” or “not hard at all” to take time off from work to take care of personal or family matters (GSS). However, these statistics do not show how middle-class people believe it is their own fault if they run out of time – that it is only “hard,” in their words, to balance work and family commitments if they are not smart or organized or disciplined enough.

The focus group data suggested that figuring out how to have a less stressful, more fulfilling future was seen as an individual responsibility, and one that will actually require more work in the present. “I want to know how to figure out ways to be stress free and be able to actually travel....and network and expand financial aspects of life instead of just working nine to five, just to survive,” says Desmond, a construction worker in Prince George’s County. Desmond’s plan to move beyond survival in the future is rooted in his individual actions today. He wants to build a life where he can afford (both financially and timewise) to “have more time to be able to spend with my family and to travel and see the world.” But in the squeezed lives of middle-class Americans, the ability to engage in activities like socializing, working out, church activities, volunteer work, or travel seemed to be more a distant hope than a reality.

MORE TO LIFE THAN JUST SURVIVING

While our participants insisted, sometimes proudly, that they could control their own time through their conscious effort, they were also aware of the heavy emotional – and sometimes physical – costs of this strategy. The participants often used language associated with mental health when describing the effects of time pressures on their lives, admitting that they often lacked enough time to sleep, felt unproductive or had difficulty concentrating, or felt guilt and anxiety associated with being unable to accomplish everything that needed to be done in their day. Eddie, a single man, decided to move from California to Las Vegas to pursue a job at a law firm.

Eddie has been at this new job for about 6 months and has put his entire self into his work. He does, however, worry about “how exhaust[ing] it's going to be” because he works so much, but he does it so he can be in a “better position” than he was before – even if that means, “skipping on hours of sleep” because he works more hours than he really wants to. Eddie adds that he sometimes becomes overwhelmed with so much work and can forget to do something important. He says “... I always feel like I'm missing something. Like I'm forgetting something. Just because I try to get so much done in a day that I just always feel like something slips through the cracks.” Similarly, when asked if he has enough time Joshua, a Black man in Prince George's county shares, “No. I make the time...[but] it weighs on the physical. So, you've got to be conditioned to do it, because certain days you might get three hours of sleep.”

Middle-class participants simultaneously resisted the idea that the most valuable way to spend their time was by earning money. Many participants were adamant that there must be more to life than just surviving – making lists, running errands, commuting, working just to pay the bills. Treating life as blocks of time to be carefully scheduled – making sure “everything is running accordingly” – leaves little time for what some viewed as the most important activities in life, ones that cannot be measured in dollars or minutes. This realization was often sparked by a shock or crisis that forced them to rethink their approach to time. Richard, from Prince George's County, said simply, “I lost my father, he gone. So, I wish I could go back and get that time back, but I can't.” For some, old age, a health scare, or the loss of someone they loved came with the realization that time was passing and couldn't be recovered. Bianca, a middle-aged Hispanic mother with an adult daughter, shared, “at 55 I'm just thankful simply to wake up in the morning. That's what I'm most appreciative [of] now.” She went on, “And as I reached this level in my life, I'm more appreciative of the connections I have with my family and it seems to rise to the surface about how valuable it is to be close to your family.” In a Las Vegas focus group, Black women talked about their shared struggles allotting their time each

day – squeezing in work, taking care of their own health and that of their dependents, commuting, and managing their kids' education. Lauren, a Black mother, responded, “time, whether it is good time, bad time, whatever time, it's precious, because I almost died last year. I had a heart attack... So, time, every breath, every minute is important to me because I could not be here.”

General Social Survey data suggest that 44% of respondents say that their job often or sometimes interferes with their family life. Indeed, in the focus groups, it was only in the absence of paid work that some participants were able to ask themselves “what's important in life?” And “how do I want to be spending my time?” Monica, a single mother to her 11-year-old daughter, recently lost her job and is currently a full-time caregiver. She describes how when she was employed, working and “getting up, picking her [daughter] up from school, taking her to [her] parents' house” it was “hectic” for her. Now, she says, “this is the most relieved I've felt, my blood pressure's down. It's very bizarre. My weight has been the same, I haven't gained any weight or lost any weight, but I felt the most calm just...waking up, taking my daughter to school, spending time with her... that's probably where I find the most solace.” And although she feels guilty for taking this time to focus on her and her daughter, she asks herself “well, should I be contributing more?” and knows soon that she will have to go back to work to give her mother, who has been supporting her, “back her money.” Nevertheless, Monica says that through this experience she has learned that “time is valuable, and I really don't want to waste it working all the time.”

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Through an intentional focus on the lived experience of middle-class parents, our study enabled us to better understand the broader implications of the role of work in people's lives, its implications for gender equality, and personal beliefs surrounding time management, not just collective or systematic conflicts arising from an outdated social contract. In short, the individuals we talked with feel squeezed for time; they feel work is the primary driver of how they structure their days, with fathers especially feeling the need to be good

providers and mothers feeling the greatest pressures associated with balancing work and caregiving. They articulated the ways in which current workplace practices surrounding "just-in-time" scheduling, a lack of paid leave, limited access to remote work, and self-employment affected their lives. But many respond to the time squeeze by blaming themselves for not being better managers of whatever time they have, and looked back over their lives with some regrets about time not spent with family or on personal priorities, such as investing in their educational pursuits.

We continuously heard that workers want greater flexibility in their jobs. They shared stories about resenting the unpredictable scheduling or weekend work to which they are often subjected. Some cited self-employment as one way to achieve a more desirable work-life balance. In [Silva, Sawhill, Ford, and Welch \(2020\)](#), we highlight that for some, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a break from the frantic pace and impossible demands of their normal lives and led, at least temporarily, to more flexible schedules. If remote work does in fact [expand more permanently](#), as a result of COVID-19, that would provide greater flexibility for those who work in jobs where telework is feasible.

Other workers, such as those in leisure and hospitality, construction, and transportation, are much less likely to have that option. These workers are also the most [likely to experience](#) unpredictable work and short notice scheduling. Requiring that such workers be provided their schedules at least two weeks in advance is one solution as proposed in the [Schedules That Work Act](#), first introduced in 2015 by Senator Elizabeth Warren and Representative Rosa DeLauro. Even that kind of regulation, however, may not be sufficient for parents to, for example, have regular childcare needs met adequately or for them to be able to advance educationally while working. There are many other policies that ought to be pursued to ease the time squeeze, including simply [giving workers more control over their hours](#) – a high priority among the middle-class Americans we spoke with.

Another option would be to reduce the [standard work week](#). This could be achieved by implementing stronger overtime protections that would kick in after 35 instead of after 40 hours of work. A new overtime

hours threshold would encourage employers to move toward a 35-hour work week, especially for nonexempt employees at the lower end of the wage scale while simultaneously boosting the wages of these workers if they continued to work more than 35 hours. To be sure, workers often express a preference to work full-time at about 40 hours per week even when they have the option to work less than this. While they appear to have limited interest in sacrificing income in exchange for reduced work time, that may reflect the fact that these preferences are shaped by institutional arrangements and cultural norms around what constitutes "full-time" work. The goal here is a norm shift – to reduce the number of hours worked per week, gradually and in a way that does not affect workers' wages and would allow workers more free time to spend on leisure activities, with their families and loved ones, or to just catch up and rest. Importantly, such a change would kick-start a conversation, with both employers and employees as the main stakeholders.

Just as the 40-hour work week may be an artifact of the past, so too are current school schedules. They are a relic of the days when a large segment of the workforce was employed in agriculture and a majority of women, [primarily white women](#), worked in the home. Currently, the most common work schedule is 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and the most common school day is from 8 a.m to 3 p.m. As a result, working parents are left to navigate schedule misalignment.

For all of these reasons, in [A New Contract with the Middle Class](#), Reeves and Sawhill propose three ways to address the time squeeze. First, they suggest that school schedules be aligned with work schedules. Aligning school days to workdays would obviate the need for afterschool childcare for many parents. Second, they recommend that employers be required to offer at least twenty days per year of paid time off for everyone for any purpose. Third, they propose up to 12 weeks of paid family leave for the birth or adoption of a child, an extended illness, or the need to care for a sick relative. Finally, they favor mid-career sabbaticals – an entirely new social insurance benefit initially proposed by Sawhill in [The Forgotten Americans: An Economic Agenda for A Divided Nation](#). Workers face considerable mid-life time pressure but have greater discretionary time in later life. A social insurance policy

which raised the normal retirement age but allowed for some paid family leave and mid-career sabbaticals would re-distribute working time over the life course, easing the time squeeze in the process.

CONCLUSIONS

Through our exploration of the middle-class experience with time at work and home we found that people discussed work as the main driver of how they spent their time, resulting in a time squeeze that they seemed to take personal responsibility for ameliorating. While the policy recommendations above address a number of pressing issues identified in our research, they only touch on the larger question of "How do we want to use our time, and how can we adjust our institutions, environments, and lifestyles to allow for that?"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Most of our focus group members quite naturally took current institutional arrangements for granted and often blamed themselves for not being able to adequately deal with the resulting time squeeze caused by systematic conflicts arising from policies and practices which have not kept up with changing dynamics in work and family life.

Our findings also beg the question, how do we differentiate between the expectations that society puts on us and the ones we put on ourselves? Despite pointing to unworkable schedules, a peak of duties in middle age, and later regrets about time not spent with family, many of the middle-class Americans we spoke with felt determined to manage their own personal time squeeze as best they could. While this is commendable, we also need to look more critically at societal expectations – around working time, worker autonomy, and dignity – and their intersection with earning enough money to support a family, regardless of occupation or income. We do not want to suggest that policy adjustments, such as a higher minimum wage, greater housing subsidies, or a reallocation of taxes to fall more heavily on the wealthy rather than the middle class, are not needed as well. But policy discussions too often focus on these solutions without considering the day-to-day pressures created not just by the scarcity of money but also by the scarcity of time.

Time is finite. It measures connections and experiences with the people we love, dictates many of the decisions we make, and in the end, frames our life story. At the end of the day, when you've used up all of your hours, did you accomplish everything you wanted or needed to do? Did you run the day or did the day run you? What we know right now is that workplace policies have failed to keep pace with the needs of today's working family. However, at a deeper level, these findings suggest the need to reconsider – and indeed, reimagine – the role of work in the lives of the middle class and whether we should be centering time on our families, health, and emotional well-being, rather than devoting so much of it to work. A country as rich as the U.S. has many options for easing the time squeeze but it may take a collective effort to reimagine the expectations and institutional arrangements that currently produce the time squeeze and take an emotional toll on families in the process.

This research would not have been possible without the collaboration of Econometrica, Inc. researchers and the generosity of the 127 middle class Americans who shared their stories.

ⁱ Hays, Sharron (1996). *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

ⁱⁱ This logic was articulated in Fabian, Mark (2020), "How can the middle class flourish in the 21st century? Insights from the science of well-being." Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-can-the-middle-class-flourish-in-the-21st-century-insights-from-the-science-of-well-being/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Fabian, Mark (2020), "How can the middle class flourish in the 21st century? Insights from the science of well-being." Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-can-the-middle-class-flourish-in-the-21st-century-insights-from-the-science-of-well-being/>