

Surveying the labor force: how simple methodologies lead to great(er) insights

**wFlexibility and work-life interference cause the standard workweek to become less and less 'standard' in contemporary society. Is the traditional Labor Force Survey (LFS) still capable of capturing the deracination of the workweek and the subordination of family life to the scheduling of work?
Only to a certain extent.**

This is evident from the results of the project LFS&TIME. In this research funded by the FPS Science Policy (BELSPO) researchers from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Université Catholique de Louvain combined, analyzed and valorized the data on the LFS, a weekly Work Grid (WG) and a Time Use Survey (TUS) collected from the same participants by the DG Statistics of the FPS Economy.

The researchers demonstrate that even a very simple methodology as the WG already improves the understanding of working times in terms of *estimating working hours, estimating non-standard working times, and understanding the scheduling or work in a great deal. Moreover, the more advanced methodology of the TUS allows for a thorough investigating of the interference of work in family life.*

The Labor Force Survey is the European standard for inquiring work in all its facets of which (the scheduling of) working hours is just one. However, estimating working hours using simple questions becomes more and more difficult given the (presumed) continuing flexibility of work and the interference of work into domains that were previously strictly reserved for family or leisure. In line with the aims of the 'Data Management and Data Collection' area of the Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks (BRAIN) of BELSPO this project evaluated best practices to overcome these challenges.

In 2013 the DG Statistics of the FPS Economy conducted a Time-Use Survey (TUS) and weekly Work Grid (WG) among a subsample of the Labor Force Survey (LFS). In a WG participants keep track of their working times in 15-minute timeslots for 7 consecutive days. In a TUS participants register their daily activities in 10-minute timeslots for one weekday and one weekend day. All data cover the same reference week.

This project rested on three pillars: 1) the construction of the merged database LFS&TIME, 2) the comparison of estimated working hours and scheduling of work in the LFS and the WG, and 3) the valorization of the newly create database.

Ad. 1

Apart from technical, statistical and methodological operations to clean, merge, weight and create the database, a public terminal has been constructed which allows interested parties to construct tables with results from the TUS crossed with socio-demographic characteristics derived from the LFS. The public terminal can be found on <http://www.time-use.be>.

Ad. 2

Three questions concerning (the scheduling of) working times in the LFS have been evaluated against the results based on the work grid.

How many hours have you actually worked?

- On a population average the LFS makes a fairly good estimate of the average working hours per week.
- However, the WG reveals that people working less than 20 hours per week tend to underestimate their working hours in the LFS, whereas people working more than 40 hours per week tend to overestimate their working hours in the LFS.
- Yet even the WG leads to a slight overestimation of working hours, since the comparison with the TUS reveals that frequently lunch breaks and travel from and to work are still included as working hours in the WG.

What is the extent of the part-time job as a percentage of a full-time job?

Whereas the LFS questions into very great detail the main reason for part-time work, it lacks information on the patterning of part-time work. A statistical analysis of the WG shows that a subsample of the LFS that indicated to work around 70% of a fulltime job, can be further subdivided by different patterns of part-time work.

- The pattern of working part-time with Wednesday afternoon off is typically found among women with partner and young children and who are employed as statutory civil servants in the public sector.
- The pattern of working part-time with Friday off is typically motivated by personal reasons and by people age 55 to 64 years.
- The pattern of working part-time with Monday off is typically the result of a job that is only offered part-time and is found among people age 55 to 64 years old working as clerks in the private sector.

How often did you work on non-standard working hours (e.g. evening 7pm till 11pm)?

The LFS questions non-standard working hours in categories with checkboxes ranging from never to always. However, an analysis of the WG reveals that non-standard work much more often happens at the fringes of the workday instead of taking place the whole evening. According to the LFS a certain percentage of the labor force will always work in the evening from 7pm till 11pm, whereas actually, a certain percentage of the labor force will always work in the evening from 7pm till 8pm and spend the rest of the evening in

front of the TV. There is thus an overestimation of working on non-standard hours. In fact:

- Almost 90% of all paid work is performed on weekdays between 6am and 7pm.
- Of the about 11% of all paid work that is performed outside this temporal boundary, 3.3% is performed in the evening, 2.9% during the night, 3.1% during daytime on Saturday, and 1.4% during daytime on Sunday.

Ad. 3

The LFS contains a lot of information on job characteristics, the WG contains a lot of information on (the scheduling of) working hours, and the TUS contains a lot of information on the context and time spent in all other domains of daily life. The combined LFS&TIME dataset thus allows for thoroughly studying matters related to work-life interference. Three cases studies were conducted to valorize this database.

Time pressure

With only 24 hours per day to spend and with work interfering more and more with family life, the experienced time pressure is on the rise. In the TUS an item scale captures this feeling of time pressure and the causes of subjective time pressure are highly gendered:

- Men's time pressure is mainly affected by work and non-work activities. Being self-employed and working in the evening increases the feeling of time pressure and the more time dedicated to leisure reduces the feeling of time pressure.
- Family and individual characteristics mainly affect women's time pressure. All things being equal, being a mother, having a partner, being moderately educated and being 30 to 44 years old increases the feeling of time pressure. These correlations are much higher than the moderate effect of total working time.

Helping with homework

With dual-earner families and single working parent families on the rise, the question arises whether parents adapt their working schedules to help children with their homework. Although the number of cases is too limited for generalizations, it turns out that:

- Women are much more likely to supervise children than men, which in all probability relates to the fact that women are much more likely to work part-time.
- The more children are present, the more likely parents are engaging in homework supervision.

Subordinate flexibility

The information on job characteristics from the LFS and working on non-standard hours from the WG (see above) allows constructing a measure of

subordinate flexibility (i.e. ranging from low flexibility imposed by the employer or by the job itself to high flexibility). Analyzing this scale reveals that:

- Part-time working clerks and clerks employed in the public sector score the lowest on this scale, self-employed leaders or salesmen the highest.
- Young people work the most flexible in all sectors. However, job characteristics are of more significance in explaining subordinate flexibility than are individual characteristics.

The results of this project will be presented at the seminar “work/life and time”.

The full report of the LFS&TIME project will be made available on the website of BELSPO by 3 March 2016.

Contact information (NL/EN)

Theun Pieter van Tienoven – E: t.p.van.tienoven@vub.ac.be, T: +32-2-614-8149

Contact information (FR)

Bernard Fusulier – E: bernard.fusulier@uclouvain.be, T: +32-10-47 42 73