

# All you wanted to know about working hours in South Africa

Have our working hours changed in recent years? Do some sectors of the working population work harder than others? Do we work normal hours? A group of researchers from the University of KwaZulu-Natal answer such questions.

**T**here is considerable cross-country variation in the number of hours individuals usually spend in paid work, but the norm for hours worked is a 40-hour week. In recent years, working hours particularly in developed countries have fallen. This trend is associated with the growth in part-time employment, especially among women, and with a fall in the number of hours worked by full-time employees.

In this article, we investigate hours spent in paid, or income-generating work in South Africa. The data that we use come from nationally representative household surveys conducted by Statistics South Africa - the 1995 October

Household Survey (OHS) and the September 2003 Labour Force Survey. A particular advantage of using these data is that, unlike company survey data, they include information on work in the informal sector of the economy, and in survivalist and subsistence activities.

## SOUTH AFRICANS AND HOURS OF WORK

On average, South Africans worked about 45 hours a week in 2003, including overtime work. This exceeds "the usual weekly hours for most persons in employment" of 40 hours, and would be classified by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as 'excessive'. Average hours worked among those in full-time employment (conventionally specified as 35 hours or more a week) were even higher - almost 49 hours per week.

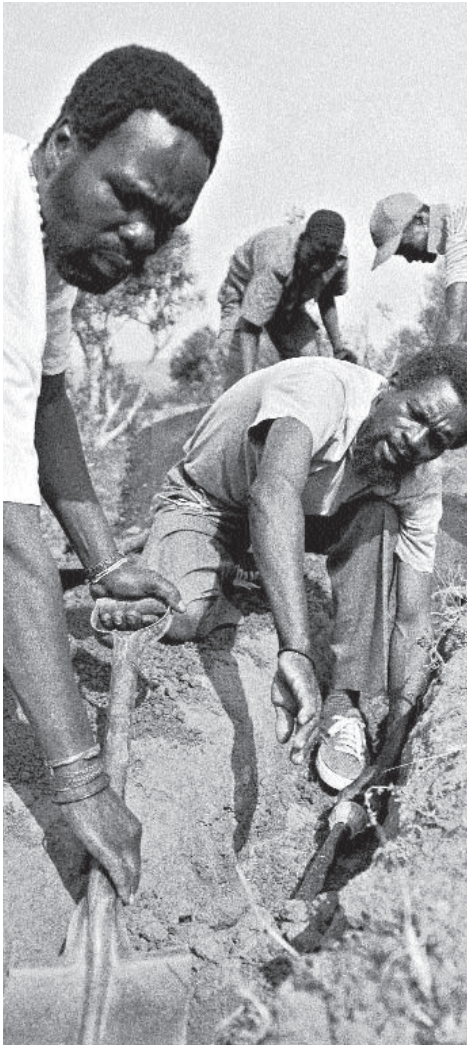
Most employed South Africans (56%) were working at least a 40-hour week. However on average, working hours were significantly higher among men (46.2 hours) than among women (42.1 hours). About 63% of men were working more than 40 hours a week, compared to 46% of women, whereas the percentage of women working 25 hours or less a week (13%) was more than double that for men. The ILO has documented these gender patterns in working hours for many countries around the world.

In 2003, there were small

differences in average hours worked by race. The difference was most pronounced among Africans who worked the highest average working hours (44.9) and Coloureds the lowest (42.9). But averages within groups mask considerable variation. Differences are marked in the tails of the working-hours distribution. For example, relative to other South Africans, significantly larger proportions of Africans worked more than 40 hours a week (57.8%) and 25 hours or less a week (10.8%).

The incidence of 'under' and 'over'-employment is particularly high amongst those in rural areas. About 14% of rural workers were working 25 hours or less; over 60% worked more than 40 hours a week. A key reason for these extended working hours in rural areas is the higher incidence of employment in agriculture. Agriculture shows the highest degree of polarisation across the economic sectors: in 2003, 65% of workers in this sector usually worked more than a 40-hour week, while 18% usually worked 25 hours or less.

The relationship between average hours worked and age in South Africa is characterised by a definite inverted U-shape, a relationship that is commonly identified in international literature. For both the youngest age group of 15 to 19 years and the oldest of 66 years and older, average weekly

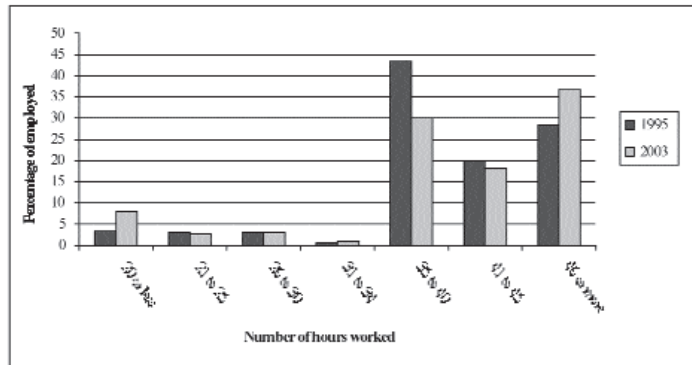


hours worked (33.7 and 37 hours respectively) are significantly lower than for other age groups. This is because, as might be expected, the youngest and oldest labour force participants are both more likely to work part-time, and less likely to work more than 40 hours a week.

**HAVE WORKING HOURS DECREASED?**

Contrary to global trends, the number of hours worked by South Africans has not declined. Rather, the length of the average workweek has remained unchanged between 1995 and 2003. However, the average figures mask some striking distributional changes. In particular, from 1995 to 2003, there has been a growing gap in weekly

**Figure 1. Distribution of hours worked, 1995 and 2003**



Source: OHS 1995 and LFS September 2003.

Notes: Statistics are for actual hours worked by the employed in all jobs.

hours of work and a rightward shift in the workweek.

Figure 1 shows that a considerably smaller proportion worked a full-time week (35 to 45 hours) in 2003 compared to 1995. Rather, a growing number either worked part-time, and particularly 20 hours or less a week, or worked in excess of 45 hours a week. The change at the upper end of the working-hours distribution more than offset the concurrent rise in underemployment, hence a slight increase in the length of the average workweek in South Africa (from 43.81 to 44.08 hours). Furthermore, whereas the largest proportion of the employed had been working a 35 to 40-hour week in 1995, this changed to 46 hours or more in 2003.

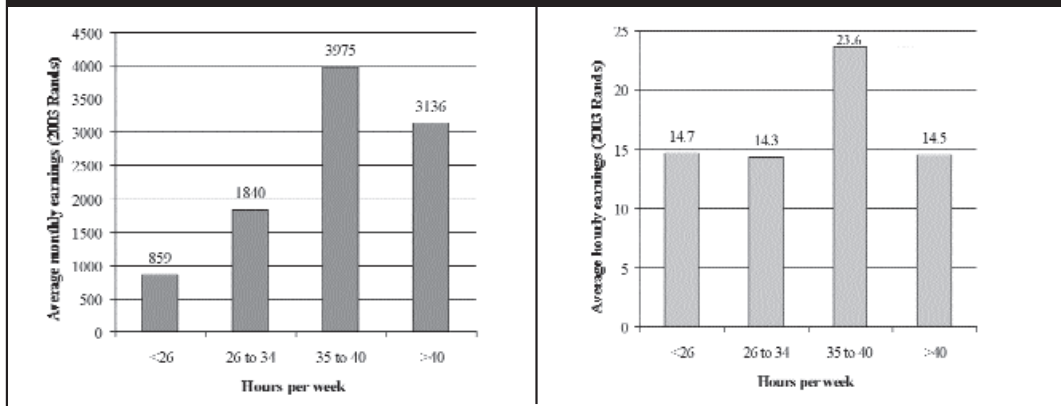
It is possible that at least part of the rise in part-time or underemployment can be explained by changes in survey design since 1995. These changes have increased the likelihood of

capturing work performed irregularly, even if for only a few hours in the week. This would help explain why average hours fell among the self-employed (from 46.1 hours in 1995 to 41.1 hours in 2003), and especially among those classified as working in the informal sector of the economy (where changing definitions of what counts as employment over the period might be expected to have the greatest effect).

However, an increase at the lower end of the working-hours distribution is also likely to reflect real changes in the labour market. From 1995 to 2003, women's employment grew, a change associated with a rise in the proportion of those choosing to work part-time. We would expect the high and rising rates of unemployment also to be associated with a real increase in self-employment, particularly in survivalist work.

The change at the upper end of

Figure 2. Average earnings (monthly and hourly) by hours of work, South Africa 2003



the working-hours distribution derives primarily from the increase in hours worked by wage employees. The average number of hours that employees work per week rose from 43.9 in 1995 to 44.8 in 2003. Although the incidence of part-time employment also increased among employees, this trend was far outweighed by the growing proportion who worked more than a 40-hour week. Working hours of semi-skilled employees in particular increased.

Whereas in 1995 the self-employed were recorded as working two hours more on average than employees, changes in the pattern of hours worked by type of employment by 2003, show that the self-employed were working on average almost four hours less than those in wage employment. In particular, employees in 2003 were significantly more likely to be working in excess of 40 hours a week compared to the self-employed (56% of employees compared to 49% of the self-employed).

**EARNINGS AND HOURS WORKED**

Figure 2 shows the average monthly and hourly earnings for the employed according to the

length of their typical workweek. The data show that the relationship between hours worked and income earned is not simply positive and linear. Monthly earnings of the part-time employed (those who work less than 35 hours per week) on average are very much lower than earnings among the full-time employed. But the employed who work more than 40 hours a week also earn significantly less per month than the full-time employed working 35 to 40 hours a week.

Lower hourly earnings may help explain why the employed want to work longer hours. For example, people working part-time and who wanted to work longer hours (representing about 31% of all part-time workers) on average earned significantly less per hour than individuals who were voluntarily working less than 35 hours a week (R11.10 compared to R16.30). Another characteristic that distinguishes those who are voluntarily and involuntarily underemployed is the presence of another income earner in the household: approximately 56% of voluntarily underemployed were living with at least one other employed household member, compared to 49% of those involuntarily underemployed.

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Nationally representative household survey data show that on average, South Africans work longer than a 40-hour workweek. Africans, males, the employed living in rural areas and those of prime working age are more likely to work longer hours.

There has been little change in the length of the average workweek in South Africa from 1995 to 2003, but this masks a growing gap between working-hours. By 2003 only about 30% worked a 'normal' workweek of 35 to 40 hours. There has been a considerable rise in the numbers working 25 hours or less a week; but there has been an even greater increase in the employed working over a 45-hour week. This latter trend is driven by greater number of hours worked by those in wage employment (semi-skilled employees in particular). Despite the longer workweek, for a growing number of South Africans, many report wanting to work more hours. A key reason for this is that low hourly earnings necessitate more working hours.

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