The Modern Families Index

The Modern Families Index is produced by Bright Horizons in partnership with the charity Working Families. It is a national survey of UK working parents and carers designed to give insight into their challenges and aspirations. It is produced annually using a sample of working parents from across the UK. The 2017 Index was completed in 2016 by 2,750 parents across the UK. Responses were gathered online across 11 regions, with 210 responses from each major UK region.

To take part, respondents needed to be in paid employment (full- or part-time) or self-employed, and to have a dependent child aged 13 or under who lives with them some or all of the time. The 2017 survey had an equal number of respondents by gender. No selection criteria were attached to relationship status, allowing both couples and single-parent households to complete the questionnaires. What problems do you think the survey might be in getting a representative sample of such families?

Extra working hours

As in previous years, the 2017 Index found that many parents put in extra hours of work each week. Some 72% said they do extra hours at home in the evenings or at weekends ‘all the time, often or occasionally’ (Figure 2). Younger employees, 16–35 years (27%), were more likely to do extra hours ‘all the time’ than older ones (19%). Only one in three of parents surveyed said they managed to leave work on time every day. Dealing with a heavy workload is the most common reason parents give for working extra hours, followed by lack of time to get proper planning and thinking done.

Income and gender

Figure 1 shows that the sample was not dominated by particularly high or low reported incomes. Taking £28,200 as the average salary for a full-time UK employee, this cohort seems broadly in line with average UK families in terms of income. Household incomes were higher for couple households, for older households, and for households in London. The lowest household incomes were in Wales. As can be seen in Figure 1, female respondents generally earned less than men, but more women were in part-time work, which might account in part for this pattern.

Patterns for childcare and chores after work

Figure 3 shows that fathers and mothers divide childcare and household chores after work along more traditional lines with mothers clearly doing more in terms of household chores. Fathers are more likely to play with their children (but not do chores), and more are likely to take "me" time. It has been argued that men see playing with their children as more worthwhile because it strengthens the paternal sphere of influence, while indirect childcare tasks, such as sweeping the floor were regarded as tedious and did not augment fathers’ power. Fathers are also more likely to carry out paid work-related tasks at home.

The report shows that more women are in paid employment than before and, at the same time, fathers want to be more involved with their children’s lives. But rather than bringing about a change in working practices, these trends seem to suggest that working fathers face the same issues — of finding time for family and work — that working mothers have faced for many decades.

Source for Figures 1–3: Working Families and Bright Horizons Modern Families Index 2017

John Williams is a managing editor of Sociology Review.