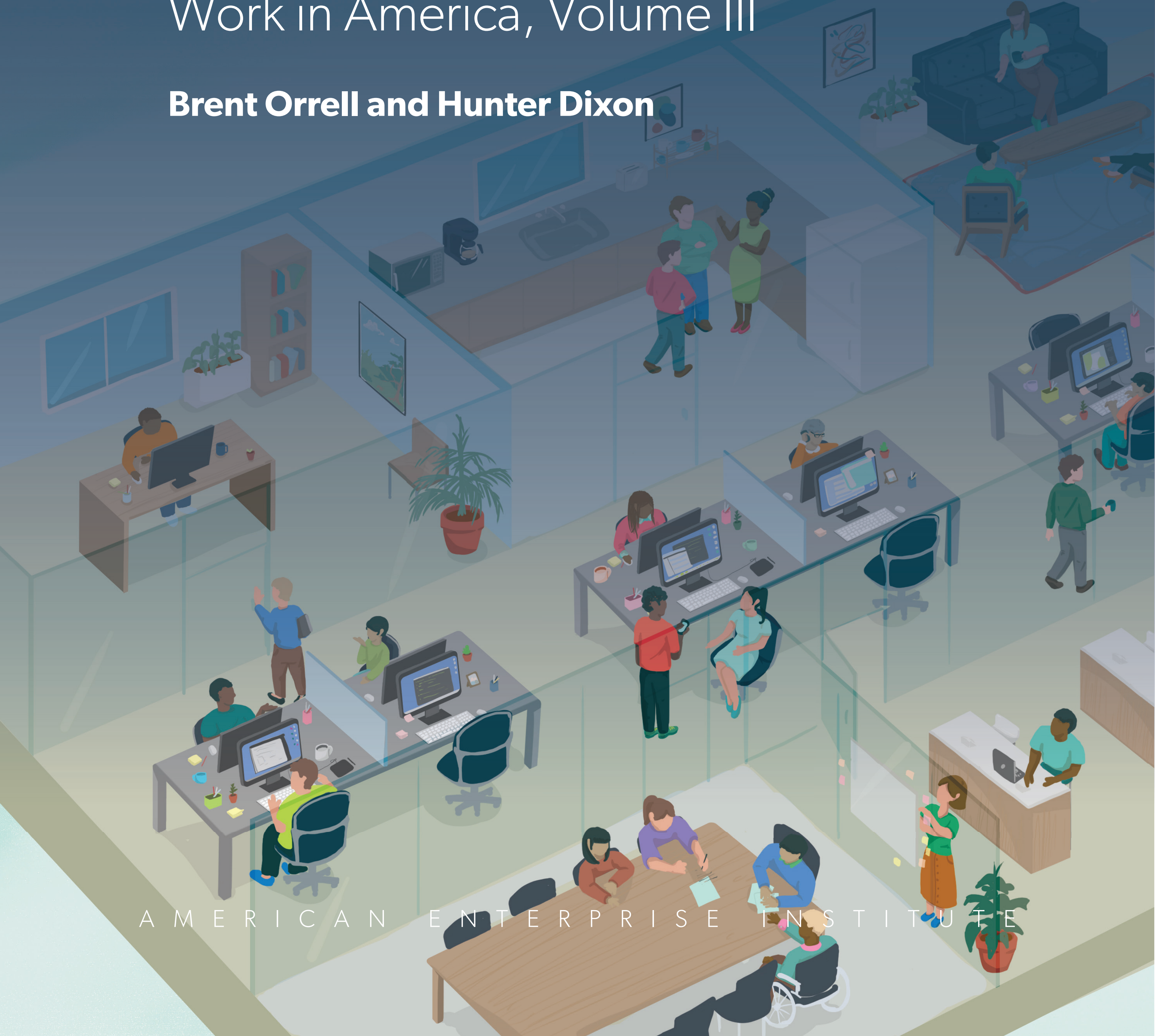
The Social Workplace

Social Capital, Human Dignity, and Work in America, Volume III

Brent Orrell and Hunter Dixon



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Executive Summary

In this report, we analyze 41 interviews of participants in an earlier quantitative survey of worker attitudes. These interviews were targeted to survey participants age 22–29 to better understand the priorities and concerns of younger workers.

Our findings underscore the paramount importance of flexibility and purpose in work. Our analysis suggests the definition of flexibility varies widely among individual participants, but it most consistently means the freedom to balance work with family, education, and other interests. With regard to finding meaning in work, the pursuit of purpose through employment transcends educational boundaries. The report concludes that young workers seek not only economic rewards but also roles that are fulfilling and contribute to their communities, indicating a shift toward valuing both material and social aspects of work.

Economic anxiety also surfaced as a significant issue for younger workers. Such anxiety is more prevalent among those with less education and familial support and less so among those with greater education and familial support, particularly among those who are married or in committed partnerships. Saving and investment for the future, the capacity for which is tied to education levels, wages, and job security, is consistently linked to lower levels of economic anxiety.

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In this third and final installment of our report series on the social dimensions of work, we turn to the workforce's future. Younger workers are fundamental to shaping the economic future, a reality driven by demographics and baby boomers' impending retirement. This transition raises crucial questions about those who will step into workplace leadership roles and how they will adapt to a workplace that is being reshaped continuously by technology and evolving social norms. Addressing these questions is essential for carving out strategies that align with the next generation of workers' aspirations and capabilities.

Our journey through this series drew inspiration from Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.* Smith's insight into the social nature of humans offers a framework for understanding today's workplace dynamics. He proposed that work is not just a necessity for survival but an expression of man's inherently social nature. From a Smithian viewpoint, markets are human sociality at scale. This sociality creates the impetus for exchange and leads to the norms, rules, and laws that govern it. The invisible hand may govern markets, but that hand is a human one, made up of the individual decisions that shape production, prices, and employment. Jobs and workplaces are important parts of this unfathomably complex mechanism. In the end, markets can thrive only to the degree to which the people who create them and work within them thrive.

To better understand how younger workers think about their jobs and workplaces, we commissioned follow-up interviews with a sample of the original survey participants. We discovered that flexibility, while universally valued, fluctuated in terms of its definition. Whether it means balancing work with family life, pursuing educational goals, or dedicating time to other interests, flexibility is a multifaceted concept that varies widely among young workers.

Purpose, too, is a deeply personal pursuit. Consistent with Smith's insights about work and sociality, our survey results show that young workers find meaning in making contributions that positively affect those around them—coworkers, customers, and society more broadly. This search for purpose reflects a related desire to engage in work that is economically rewarding and meaningful.

Another important finding of our research underscores the role of education in mitigating economic anxieties, both in the short and long term. A higher level of educational attainment not only opens more and better career opportunities but also instills a sense of security and confidence in navigating the contemporary labor market.

Investment in long-term economic security also surfaced as a central theme. Our findings suggest that young workers who actively engage in financial planning and investment strategies tend to feel more secure about their future.

Methodology

Our qualitative interview sample included 41 participants age 22–29. These participants were recontacted after participating in our original survey, consisting of 5,037 participants recruited through Ipsos's KnowledgePanel.[1] AEI's vocation, career, and work team reviewed the transcripts and demographic data from the interviews to produce this analysis. Some key analytical themes emerged:

- **Flexibility.** The freedom to harmonize one's job responsibilities with life's competing demands, whether those be family, children, hobbies, exercise, or other priorities outside the workplace.

- **Purpose.** The extent to which one derives existential meaning from work.

- **Economic Anxiety.** Preoccupation with one's current or future economic situation. This can be broken into two subcategories.

    - *Short-Term Economic Anxiety.* Focused on themes such as budgeting and emergency savings.

    - *Long-Term Economic Anxiety.* Focused on themes such as saving and investing for retirement, childcare funds, and broader concerns about politics and the economy.

We rated responses around these themes on Likert scales to measure the strength of responses (see the appendix for details) and then created a codebook to organize our participants according to key demographic markers such as age, educational attainment, and marital status. With this analysis in hand, we identified representative quotes to illustrate the key themes.

Overview

We begin this discussion of our findings with "flexibility," as it was consistently the highest-rated factor for participants looking for work in our initial sample. We detail how education and family ties manifest among participants with flexible employment situations and how low-flexibility participants remain short on time and money.

Next, we turn to "economic anxiety" to discuss how participants navigate long-term financial planning and short-term monetary needs. Once again, those with education and family ties, as well as those with consistent pay or hours, fare well. Higher-anxiety participants expressed less clear or less developed financial goals and more worry about current events, such as high inflation.

Finally, we consider "purpose." The goal of our research was to better understand how the social side of work affects performance and satisfaction. Those with high purpose ratings viewed their work as an identity marker, gave priority to civic engagement through work, and were motivated by provision for families or loved ones. Those with low purpose ratings tended to view work more as a method to pay the bills.

We conclude with the central idea that the social nature of work drives work as an activity and increases employees' and employers' productivity and satisfaction.

Flexibility Is Freedom

Above all other factors, workers in our survey cared most about flexibility. Our initial survey findings showed that 78 percent of participants rated flexibility as one of the most or the most important factor when choosing a job. Of the 18- to 29-year-old group, 82 percent valued flexibility in the same manner.[2] However, while workers value flexibility, our analysis revealed that participants have different definitions of flexibility depending on their employment situation, familial commitments, hobbies, and other activities outside work.

Education and Good Jobs. Our quantitative and qualitative findings suggest higher levels of education increase the likelihood of flexible employment. In our larger quantitative sample, workers with a high school education were more likely than workers with a college education to experience irregular work schedules (47 percent to 34 percent). High school–educated workers are also much less likely to feel free to take care of personal matters during the workday (34 percent to 53 percent).[3]

In our qualitative sample, among 23 participants who had high flexibility in their work, 15 had a bachelor's degree or higher.[4] Our college-educated participants emphasized similar themes, such as consistent work schedules, personal and professional boundaries, and caring for family, more regularly than our noncollege participants. One participant noted:

> COVID has brought this idea that we can be a little more agile and creative in how we address things, understanding that we can't differentiate work and life and that by being able to bring them together better or, just being more adaptable in how we structure what a work day looks like and more tailored to people, I think could be really beneficial and really impactful.[5]

Echoing this theme of adaptability, another participant hoped to "intermix" chores and errands with work, since "running a dishwasher takes two seconds to press a button and I can continue with my work day."[6] For some, like a 29-year-old accountant, flexibility means spending time with family, and others emphasized the importance of time with friends, pets, hobbies, and entertainment.[7] A 27-year-old political consultant uses his remote and seasonal schedule to travel and visit his friends.[8] A 28-year-old statistician at a state labor department told us her 7:30 a.m.–3:30 p.m. schedule enables her to dedicate the rest of her day to parenting.[9]

Most (16 of 23) of the higher-flexibility participants are working 40 hours or less, which affords more time for family, friends, and hobbies. One participant, who is working part-time while a student, said that a part-time schedule allowed for "relationships with friends and family . . . [which] are something I really treasure" in addition to focusing on mental and physical health to "reduce stress levels."[10] Another participant, a part-time fashion model, can manage her chronic medical condition and spend time with family.[11]

While working fewer hours is important for most, some find high levels of flexibility in a packed schedule. One participant works four 10-hour shifts per week in a warehouse while maintaining a side gig as an off-road driving instructor, for a total of 50–55 hours a week. When asked how he balances that with his relationships, he said:

> The extra two hours a day is just a breeze. . . . I walk around and just check out . . . things that keep me awake. . . . I can get on the Internet, do some research about how to repair the fenders and my girlfriend's Jeep, but I'm still getting paid at work, so that's working out.[12]

This participant thus indicates that flexibility is not only about remote work or working fewer hours. Despite working longer hours, he finds ways to balance work with competing life demands, the definition of flexibility. One IT engineer paints the picture of flexibility achieved:

> It's pretty nice with the current company because . . . if we need to stay longer, we do, but for the most part it's you come in whenever and you leave around the same time every day. . . . There's just so much time I have after work that I get all my stuff done. It's really relaxed. . . . I do personal stuff at work all the time or catch up on like paying bills. . . . I get to spend time with my friends and just strictly like, do fun stuff like go in the ocean and I travel . . . four to six times a year.[13]

Other participants build flexibility through tenure in a job, such as a 29-year-old attorney who told us, "The expectation is as long as I get things done, . . . I'm not being micromanaged."[14] Employees in such situations have more flexibility to switch between work and personal tasks (such as everyday chores, cooking, and hobbies) during the standard nine-to-five workday, making it easier to build a balanced life. Such an arrangement is likely more common among salaried work, since clocking in and out is not a concern.

Of the remaining higher-flexibility participants who did not mention completing a college education, one works "10 hours a day" and enjoys watching movies or "dancing and singing and also hanging around with my friends" in the evening. She credits her lack of "children . . . [or] any interpersonal intimate relationships" as the source of her flexibility.[15]

Two participants are working stable jobs in IT support, which provide generous pay with a standard 40-hour week and plenty of time for friends and activities. The last remaining high-flexibility participant is the aforementioned model and is currently in college, with a goal to freelance as a software developer.

Family Flexibility and Income. Some workers enjoy the dual benefits of predictable schedules and the support of a spouse or parent who add to total financial resources, making it easier to navigate conflicting life demands. Our government statistician must maintain her flexible schedule because her husband "definitely has a more stressful job."[16] Similarly, our most educated participant, a 29-year-old PhD engineer, noted that she's compensated well, enjoys her coworkers, and has "a lot of flexibility" in her current job because her husband works full-time and she works part-time.[17] While she would not be able to work part-time and support her kids on her own, sharing income with her husband allows her to work less and still enjoy a high standard of living. Another participant, who works part-time at a community center, credited a stable, affluent family for enabling such a flexible schedule: "I have the ability to work that few hours because I live with my parents right now and my dad has a high paying STEM job. . . . Being from a wealthy family" helps.[18]

However, most of our participants (28 of 41) did not have a spouse or kids. A slightly higher proportion of those with high flexibility scores had no spouse or children (18 of 23). What does flexibility mean for those with fewer family obligations? It mainly comprises entertainment and socializing. The attorney mentioned above, who was engaged at the time of the interview, summed this up succinctly: "Spending time on personal endeavors or with family and friends."[19] Another participant, a college student working part-time at a restaurant, noted that the pandemic taught him the importance of relationships with friends and family, as well as exercise, which he says "really kept me in check."[20] Another participant who is working full-time in marketing noted that time outside work is spent with family, "binge watching series on Netflix or Hulu" or "listening to audiobooks."[21]

Strapped for Time and Cash: Low-Flexibility Workers. Participants we scored as having low flexibility often found their work schedules left little time to pursue activities outside work, including hobbies, travel, and socializing. The lower the flexibility score, the more the participants had to sacrifice spending time with family and friends outside work.

One low-flexibility worker who worked two full-time jobs, including weekends, noted, "Friends are nonexistent. I've had to prioritize the little time that I do have and . . . spend it on family."[22] A college-educated applied behavior analysis therapist split time between school, work, and taking care of her 5-year-old. She noted, "I've reduced my hours at work . . . which was hard for me, but I'm glad I did that. . . . [F]amily comes first."[23]

A librarian who handles programming for children and teens noted that he enjoys playing piano for different churches and organizations and listening to podcasts outside of his work but that, due to his work schedule and commute, he wishes there were "30 hours in a day."[24] One participant, who works at a bottled-water company, when asked how his work and life fit together, said that long hours at his work often kept him from his family and from hobbies like woodworking and video games.[25]

Perhaps the most common frustration with work schedules among low-flexibility workers was the lack of time for family and friends. One participant, who works part-time while pursuing a graduate degree, voiced frustration that her work schedule did not permit her to see her parents and old friends, who live far away.[26] Another part-time deli worker told us, "I really don't get to socialize hardly at all." When we asked him about the time he gets to spend with friends and family, he responded, "What time?"[27]

A nanny found she devotes almost all her limited free time to her kids, leaving little for friends:

> I feel like I have a lot of acquaintances and only two really good friends and one lives . . . over an hour away and the other one works night shifts. So we don't really get to spend a lot of time together. . . . [Our contact is] limited to phone calls and sometimes I have a hard time maintaining friendships or creating new ones because . . . every ounce of my energy is invested in my kids right now.[28]

A manual laborer at a large distribution center said that his life "revolves" around his work. While he enjoys spending time with friends, he finds that his work schedule, which "doesn't . . . line up with the rest of the world," makes it hard to be with others in his free time.[29]

Another common theme among these participants was a general feeling of being overworked. A radiologist found that her job and school were so stressful that she needed to use most of her free time to simply relax.[30] A metal fabricator, for instance, found that working five days a week was exhausting him.[31] And the manual laborer we met above lamented, "I work a lot of hours and then recuperate from that to go work again."[32]

Economic Anxiety

The discussion about the importance of job flexibility needs to be contextualized by other important considerations, chief among them the interaction between work and economics—and especially hopes and fears relating to the economic future. Economic anxiety—based in actual circumstances or unease about the future—strongly affects feelings about work. These challenges appear to have significant influence on the American workforce's psychological well-being. In this section, we delve into how educational attainment, job stability, and political developments influence the American workforce's short-term economic outlook.

Correlates of Low Anxiety. Job insecurity and lower levels of educational attainment are both associated with financial anxiety in the short and long term. Concerns about national economic conditions relating to inflation are a common denominator that at least partially mediate the relationship between job insecurity, education, and short-term anxiety. Over half the interviewees (23) reported both short- and long-term fears, and many (15) reported high levels of anxiety.

Educational Attainment and Feelings of Economic Anxiety. College degrees remain a marker for economic mobility and security. However, our analysis of the sample group shows that a degree alone does not meaningfully decrease short- or long-term anxiety relative to those without college degrees. Respondent narrative responses help explain how college and noncollege workers experience economic anxiety, especially as those concerns relate to the long term.

We often talk about how degrees "signal" competence in the market place. It also seems that having the degree creates an internal "signal" of hope for the future. A 29-year-old near college graduate said,

> I'm going to get the pay that I want once I get that diploma in my hand next Saturday. I'm going to be making more money, and I'm already financially stable. But I'm going to like it when I see something online, not for shopping but for trips, and I'm like "I just want to go there," and just pay it right then and there and go. So that's what I'm looking forward to.[33]

A behavioral therapist similarly looked forward to a secure future: "It's always nicer to have more money, but I feel we're stable. . . . I'm not fearful or concerned about my financial situation. I'm always working to improve it and make more money, but I'm not worried."[34]

By contrast, feelings about the future are more tenuous for those without degrees. Participants who reported the highest levels of anxiety talked about low levels of retirement savings, uncertainty about the job market for people with their skills, and the difficulty of planning for major purchases like a home. One interviewee said, "The biggest ticket on the agenda is saving up for like a down payment or something, but that's been a fleeing dream seeing the political nonsense that's occurring at the moment."[35] Others sense that education is the most important factor in their economic future:

> I definitely don't want to struggle in the future career that I have. That's why school is so important to me. I really want to be able to provide . . . for myself and future kids if I have any.[36]

Spouses, Partners, and Parents Reduce Economic Anxiety. Of the 10 participants who were married, only two showed higher levels of short-term anxiety and only one had higher levels of long-term anxiety. Just as spouses add to life flexibility, sharing the economic load with a spouse significantly decreases financial fears. "If I didn't have a spouse who helped pay bills," one said, "I would be doing terribly, I am very thankful I have a husband whose salary was able to cover me basically . . . slashing my income to one third of what I was making."[37] Likewise, a community nonprofit manager said, "I'm thankful I have a partner that makes definitely double . . . what I currently make. . . . if [I] were solely dependent on myself, I would not be in good standing."[38]

Spouses and partners can also mitigate (or aggravate) financial anxiety. As one respondent put it,

> To be honest, credit and finances always scared me because my parents were horrible with it. They were always in debt growing up. I feel like my partner really helped me with that. He's really good with money, so he's helped me figure out how to budget and save and not live beyond my means.[39]

The opposite can also be true, however. As one interviewee said,

> My partner, who I am hoping to have a future with, has a lot of debt and is not great with money. . . . I didn't grow up in a suburb like he did. And so we're often sort of butting heads a little bit.[40]

Not every participant who shares income shares it with a spouse. Nine of 41 participants received supplemental income from a parent. Unsurprisingly, all but one of the nine were unmarried and childless, with the lone exception being a newlywed graduate student whose parents helped her buy a house.

One of our youngest participants, a 22-year-old who works at a rural, small-town library, quipped,

> I make less money at the library than what I'd make working at the local gas station. . . . I'm living with my parents, which is nice because I'm able to put a lot of that away in savings.

He has plans to use his savings to fulfill his "dream . . . to be able to travel and play piano" around the country.[41] If he wasn't living with his parents, these long-term goals might be out of reach.

Other participants depend on external income for more than investments and savings. One mail clerk noted,

> Financially wise, I feel so-so. The reason I say that is, I live with my parents right now. The reason I do that is because [the price of] everything keeps going up. Everything's super expensive . . . [and] it feels like my salary . . . isn't enough to cover everything. . . . [For] the next few months, I feel like they're my safety net. So as long as I'm with them, I'll be OK. But, let's say, 10 to fifteen years from now, I really don't know.[42]

Consistent Pay and Hours Are Important and Linked to Education, Credentials, and Higher-Paying Jobs. Despite the seeming importance of a college education, we found that some noncollege workers in certain industries, such as real estate and IT, had similar levels of economic security as college-educated workers. Further, when we categorized survey participants by industry and the number of hours they worked, we found that approximately 10 of the 13 who didn't feel anxious about the short-term economic future worked 40 or more hours per week.

Those in our sample who worked multiple part-time jobs responded more like part-time workers than their full-time counterparts. To be clear, working 40 hours does not guarantee the benefits that typically accompany a full-time job. However, full-time jobs are more likely, compared to those characterized as part-time, to have good pay, benefits, and career advancement opportunities.[43]

One interviewee, a real estate broker with some college background but no degree, said,

> I feel pretty confident in my financial situation and my financial future. At the moment, you know, real estate does not really have a retirement plan, so this home is essentially my retirement plan. [It is] actually two homes, so I'm working on fixing up another unit. And eventually, maybe procuring some rental income on that.[44]

She noted that she has been able to save money through her job to prepare for future economic downturns. The other participant, who works in IT, noted that his family is "right on track or ahead of schedule" financially and that he has met with financial planners to create a long-term savings, investment, and emergency fund.[45]

Workers who expressed less anxiety tended to work in commercial firms, knowledge-economy jobs, and other intangible services. These industries typically employ a higher concentration of college graduates or highly credentialed workers and offer higher-than-average earnings. Conversely, those working in the lower-wage sectors expressed far less confidence in their economic circumstances and prospects.

Consider the following comparison between an established clinical researcher and call-center worker (who is also in school part-time). The researcher said,

> Being able to work . . . two jobs that pay well . . . I never really have to worry about where, you know paychecks are coming from, things like that. . . . Career earnings typically go up from where you're starting.[46]

The call-center worker, by contrast, said,

> It's almost scary . . . to see some of the situations that I see firsthand [of people who are on] Medicare and things like that and hearing their stories. . . . I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be that age and have to worry about finances and things and have worked like my whole life and then to just have nothing to show for that.[47]

The first has education and the security of stable, gainful employment, while the second sees the difficult side of living with poverty and the peace that comes with a stable job.

Part-time workers or those who worked on an inconsistent basis were far less likely to feel confident in their security over the next two years. In fact, four of the nine participants who work less than 40 hours reported feeling at least somewhat or very anxious about the short-term future (compared to 10 of 41 of the whole sample). We attribute this to the fact that part-time jobs, such as nannying and social service jobs, typically offer relatively lower wage rates and benefits coverage and, perhaps more importantly, have more inconsistent and unpredictable work schedules. Workers in these positions also regularly hold multiple concurrent lower-wage jobs while struggling to plan for and tackle financial commitments such as rent. As a 27-year-old retail worker commented, "The schedule is never the same week to week, and hours vary depending on business needs."[48]

Financial Planning Lessens Anxiety, but Inflation Worries Persist. Participants who prepared for the future by saving *and* investing tended to have lower anxiety. Most workers we spoke with commented on the rising difficulty of both saving money and affording housing, food, and other essentials. Twenty-eight of 32 interviewees with 40 or more hours of employment per week saved regularly, while just six out of 10 of those reporting high levels of economic anxiety in the short term did the same.

For one 26-year-old soccer instructor, her "just in case" fund serves as the beginning of her life savings:

> I'm paying my bills right now. . . . I would really want to start looking into putting more money into my savings account and having a cushion. . . . That would be one thing that I feel I would want to do or even starting to set aside money for a house, so whenever I am ready, it's there.[49]

After we scored our participants in terms of long- and short-run economic anxiety, we found that investing money was the clearest distinction between those with low and high levels of economic anxiety. No participants who mentioned investments articulated high levels of anxiety about their long-term futures. Only two participants who were investors had high anxiety in the short term. Both of these participants occupy low-wage jobs, one in a grocery store and one as a cashier and stocker.[50]

Of the 14 participants with mixed feelings, those who invested their money had low levels of short-term anxiety. Those who merely saved money but did not invest did not see the same drop in short-term anxiety as those who invested. This suggests that investing in long-term economic security could also decrease stress in the short term for those with mixed feelings about their financials in the long term.

Among these 14 participants with mixed feelings was the aforementioned 28-year-old statistician, who felt that her family's financial goals were feasible, including "higher salaries, . . . promotions,"[51] and the promise of a pension, which keeps her employed with her state government.

One 25-year-old IT engineer, who hopes to manage a "real estate empire" eventually, enjoys the benefits of a car and house that are "paid off" so that remaining money funnels into a budget for travel.[52] The same is true for a government-employed radiologist, whose investments will encourage care for an ill family member and more spontaneous travel. Another participant, who is not college educated, found a well-paying job in a distribution center and is close to paying off his house, which will allow his "substantial stock and investment portfolio" to grow.[53]

Even with the relationship between education and economic anxiety, many of the investors in our sample span the educational spectrum, from those without college degrees to a 25-year-old PhD candidate who has "a couple of investing savings accounts that are very long-term focused."[54]

What Predicts High Economic Anxiety? Those with high economic anxiety parallel those with low flexibility, as time and money are finite resources. High economic anxiety comes down to instability, and our interview responses suggest that for those who can, investment is the surest bet toward securing one's economic future and mitigating anxiety.

Fears of Inflation and Political Instability Chill Investment and Saving. Workers who tend to feel somewhat or very uncertain about the short-term economic future cite significant struggles in balancing living expenses and saving commitments with clear goals. Many who mentioned a desire to own a house in the future had no concrete strategies in place to achieve such financial goals, citing no "plans of . . . being able to get a new apartment anytime soon or purchasing a house or things like that in the near term."[55]

Most workers we spoke with commented on the increasing difficulty of saving while paying for housing and food. Voicing the struggle with long-term savings, a 27-year-old part-time student expressed, "I haven't really had the funds to kind of put anything towards retirement. . . . I just don't have the means to really put anything towards it right now."[56]

Of those who expressed low levels of economic anxiety for the short term, 22 of 23 were actively contributing to savings accounts enabled by strict and healthy spending habits, typically established, and continuously supported by parental figures or partners. By contrast, only six out of 10 of those who indicated feeling very anxious about the short-term economic future did the same.

The choice and ability to save often hinges on or is influenced by external factors, such as inflation and political dynamics. Among those very anxious about the long-term future, four out of eight mentioned politics in a negative light, with none mentioning positive views. One participant who works as a political consultant expressed a lack of preparedness: "Politics can be very fast moving and very sudden. I don't feel yet ready to make a big financial decision such as buying property." An attorney concurred, saying,

> I think the political landscape in this country is always a point of concern. I'm not somebody who's, you know, fretting over politics on a daily basis, but I feel like there's a general looming worry that things could go in some horrible direction [suddenly].[57]

Our call-center worker commented,

> The economy right now is just in such awful shape. I just don't see things really getting any better that quickly, that soon. Like it is really, really hard right now to make ends meet . . . just to live, you know.[58]

Political concerns are also tied into investments and interest rates, according to one participant, a 27-year-old broker:

> I would maybe like to make other investments [in] other cities, but the rates are just far too high to really consider that right now. . . . When I think about my financial future, you know, it's very uncertain because of the nature of my work and the nature of my income is very sporadic and also quite reliant on next year's . . . election year. I have no idea what is gonna happen during an election year.[59]

Another participant, a 25-year-old PhD student, invests "a couple thousand dollars here and there," but expresses the political situation as his main worry:

> I'm really trying my best to not worry about anything. You know, I think if there was something that I had to pinpoint and say, this is something that concerns me, I would say that it's probably between the state of finances in our country and the direction of our country in general, you know there's this real push to dismantle the family. And you know, I feel like that's something that's dangerous for the future of our country.[60]

These quotes illustrate how political uncertainty chills economic confidence and how a more stable society leads to a more prosperous, financially forward-looking populace.

The three participants who took or will take out student loans also focused on the surrounding economic climate. Interestingly, each of these participants expressed a moderate-to-high degree of long-term economic anxiety. Despite reporting above-average flexibility in their present situation, they all expressed feelings of uncertainty and struggle. One said:

> I'm not super confident about getting the tenure track professor job that I know is gonna come with benefits and all those things just because of all these changes in higher ed. So I know that I'll be OK. I just don't know that I'll be OK doing exactly what I want to do. And so I'm sort of, like, torn between pursuing exactly what I want to do to the detriment of my long term finances, and doing what I know I can do to make a solid, decent living.[61]

Another said:

> My financial situation is unique in that obviously I'm making just enough money to cover living expenses. Hence my two jobs. That and to chip away a little bit at my loans. . . . Obviously with inflation there are some uncertainties. So that's why . . . I can't say I feel completely confident. But . . . I can manage. I can modify and tweak certain things. I'm on my routines to minimize expenses, but I'm a little guarded.[62]

And another said:

> About a year ago I started really trying to build up my credit and spend more money essentially to get a higher credit score. So essentially the plan behind that was to get a higher credit score so that I can get a better rate on loans so that I wouldn't have to struggle like way too much and I can get better deals when I go to grad school.[63]

These quotes show the difficult choices faced by young workers who want to gain skills and excel in their careers. Deciding between debt and savings, a house, or an education that may or may not deliver higher incomes in the context of an uncertain political future complicates already difficult decisions.

Purpose or Paycheck?

At the intersection of flexibility and financial confidence is finding the right balance between pay and purposeful work. That balance is subjective; it manifests differently depending on age, career stage, and individual objectives and priorities. However, the subjectivity of purpose does not negate its importance for shaping long-term happiness. For some, finding purpose at work can override core preferences for flexibility and encourage some short- and long-term trade-offs with pay and flexibility. Our analysis of responses to purpose-related questions focused on a few key themes: impact, provision for children and family, and civic responsibility.

Notions of a Purposeful Career Are More Common in Human-Centric Industries. A key metric of purposeful work is a sense of making a difference or leaving a lasting mark. This desire to effect change can be proximate to individual relationships or the functioning of an organization. It can also be wide-ranging (such as the sentiment of "changing the country or world"). Most of the impact-related purpose we noticed in participants involved the people they worked with or around.

Unsurprisingly, strong feelings of impact are common in health care and human-services occupations. One participant, a 29-year-old radiologist for a prominent research hospital, was acutely aware of the impact of her work as the "last resort" for those with illnesses and diseases that are difficult to treat.

Often, purpose operates as an identity statement. A 29-year-old epidemiologist, who also works as a part-time mortician, found multiple ways to have an impact on his community. As a mortician, he provided closure for everyday folks dealing with grief:

> Autopsies are basically . . . assessing people in a state of death, but it's more so to provide answers for people who are still living. You can gain a lot of clarity and understanding from people in death that you don't always discover when they're alive. A lot of people based on our healthcare system here pass away without knowing any kind of genetic or inherited genetic issues that they have that we are able to catch and provide for the other family members as well as giving some sense of closure.[64]

Referring to his day job, he expressed a sense of alignment between his personal gifts, interests, and daily work:

> It's a part of who I am. I'm an academic at heart and so work for me is just a part of my life. It's hard for me to just exist in the environment or, exist in the world and not feel like a portion of that is spent working just because my background as an anatomist . . . and also an epidemiologist. Like, if I see somebody who is eating in a restaurant that I'm at and they have, you know, some kind of like weird walking gait or something. Then, like, I'm looking and I'm just like, OK, they probably have . . . some kind of genetic issue or maybe there's something else going on.[65]

This example goes to show how impactful work can be for an individual and a community when it aligns with identity markers to channel an individual's motivation toward a goal.

Another participant, a 29-year-old who works two part-time jobs as a physical therapy tech and tutor while in school for physical therapy, finds immense purpose in his multiple endeavors:

> I love to see the A-HA moments in the students. . . . It fills my heart up when you know I can hear from somebody who says,"Oh yeah they, I heard they were talking about you [in] this meeting because you know you had helped the student, or . . . this physical therapist can only say good things about you." Because I do take pride in showing up on time, making sure to, you know, play by the rules. Be respectful of everybody.[66]

Identification with one's job doesn't just exist as a privilege for the educated or educators. Take the realization of one participant, who works as a metal fabricator:

> I'm real far leaning away from job being my identity, but I do like some of the skills and everything I've learned and some of the people I've met, so I can't just fully discount it in that way either. . . . I like to think of myself as just my own person. I don't wanna be just something, like, oh he's the painter, or he's . . . that's just what they do, their whole life. . . . But I mean, I do like working with my hands and I like making things, so I guess I'm always a fabricator in some sort of way.[67]

This quote epitomizes the idea that work is an expression of interests and abilities, and it shows how work that uses those gifts well can provide a grounding sense of self and purpose to propel everyday work into excellent work.

College-Educated Workers Rate Purpose in Work More Highly. Many college-educated workers tie their sense of purpose to their field of study or profession. A 24-year-old with an engineering degree noted that while her current job at a community center was more toward "the paycheck side" of the spectrum,

> Overall, I'm pretty far towards the part of my identity thing. . . . In college it was really ingrained in me that you're an engineer. . . . All of these different things we were learning were turned into parts of our identity.

She went on to discuss some of the ways she wanted to "undo values . . . I don't agree with," such as the "idea that you need to be able to function without direction and that's what makes you a good engineer and a valuable employee. . . . I don't need to feel like a failure every time I don't."[68]

Participants did not focus on only personal forms of impact. One previously mentioned participant talked about engaging in important global challenges such as climate change once they received their environmental studies degree.[69] It is important to note that there were few comments relating to abstract matters. Overall, younger workers are preoccupied with the proximate and practical needs of bills, family and friends, and the social connection they feel to their employers and coworkers. As one participant put it, "Yes, things that would keep me working there is that I feel valued. That's the first thing. I feel valued by my management, my, my higher ups. That they invest in me as much as I invest in them."[70]

Purposeful Provision for Family Is Not "Just a Paycheck." Among the 10 participants who were parents, a near-universal theme was their desire to support their children.

While studies have indicated the equivalent economic value of nonworking parents is around $17,000 per year, any person with a loving father, mother, or both knows this is an inadequate measure.[71] Therefore, it's no wonder many of our participants give priority to providing for their children when defining their work's core purpose. Even those who have an otherwise engaging and fulfilling professional life have reprioritized after becoming parents.

This is true across the educational spectrum. A high school–educated mother of three noted that when she isn't managing logistics for two offices, she's spending time with her children and her husband. She noted that she "would love to grow into something that maybe would appreciate my skills more and pay me a lot more."[72] For now, though, her focus is on her children.

Likewise, the 27-year-old PhD researcher noted a swift change in her priorities once she had kids:

> Just because I'm an educated woman doesn't mean that I am obligated to my career, and I think there's often an assumption when I'm around especially other educated women, that I'm going to prioritize my career and that isn't an obvious choice for me. My choice is to prioritize my family and I will. My career will fit around that.[73]

Finally, finding purpose in provision can also give meaning to jobs that function merely as a paycheck. A 29-year-old accountant put it most succinctly: "My wife and my dog. That's what brings meaning to my life. That's why I work; I work so I can spend time with them and provide for them."[74] Additionally, our 25-year-old repairman enjoys his job but notes that it "is just to pay the bills"[75] and take care of his 2-year-old. Fortunately, learning how to repair equipment at work has helped him fix things around the house, allowing him to put more money toward his family.

Civic Responsibility. Similar to those who express purpose through helping others, many can find purpose through a shared civic obligation. Participants broadly defined this concept as a feeling of responsibility to nurture relationships with one's surrounding community. Whether it be routine family gatherings or volunteering, many participants indicated an active civic life or a desire to create one—though priorities like their job or children often intervened.

Additionally, the data suggest that civic engagement significantly enhances a sense of purpose. Active involvement in community services and relationship-building activities provides a sense of belonging and fulfillment. For instance, a 29-year-old male who volunteers in youth programs and derives great purpose from his job explained,

> I am acutely concerned with the community in which I live in, and so meaning for me is just being of service the best way I can to the community. Anytime I feel like I'm engaged with the community in some aspect of work . . . I find meaning in that.[76]

In contrast, a 24-year-old male working at a bottled-water company, who does not find core life purpose in his job, expressed regret about his lack of community engagement: "I have hopes and dreams to be as involved . . . but I have to work myself up to that point of being a true member of the community."[77]

The aforementioned 22-year-old library worker, who is from a rural community, finds a sense of civic engagement in both his job and his outside interests: "I like going around and playing piano, so even that, it's amazing cause it's kind of the same thing as working the library. I'm still providing . . . a service."[78] Being of service is a source of happiness for the participant. He gives more context:

> I grew up visiting [the] library as a kid and then when I was a teen, I started volunteering at the library and it's a really special place. . . . The library is the hub in that community and just about everybody who walks through the door I know. And it was kind of nice because when I started, I really wasn't low man on the totem pole because I knew so many of the people already from, you know, years of coming in over the summers and volunteering.[79]

This sort of active participation in "third places" can provide profound purpose for its members. When we think of trying to increase social connection and capital, it is individual commitments that add up to a stronger, healthier community. When businesses value and promote the flexibility required to sustain these commitments, they, too, are making small, significant contributions to the communities in which they operate.

Mutuality on the Job Builds Commitment. We've reviewed at length those who find their work purposeful, but what of those for whom work truly is just a paycheck? Are they missing key markers of identity? One 24-year-old fellow at a tech startup ranked themselves in the middle of purpose and paycheck and sees a lack of reciprocity from their employer:

> [I] take pride in the work I do . . . but also at the same time especially in today's recent world where everybody's getting laid off, I don't view myself as devoting 100% to a company because they won't devote that to me.[80]

Work as a paycheck can also function as a means to a future goal like education. The 27-year-old worker at a deli mentioned the job was mainly to pay bills while they get their degree.[81] The same goes for a 24-year-old test grader preparing and saving for graduate school: "I would . . . get a lot more sentimental value out of the work I did if I did something I cared about."[82]

Conclusion

Our findings present a complex picture of work and life for young Americans, and they only scratch the surface of each individual's nuanced experiences. The bottom line of this report and the entire series is that work satisfaction is neither fully transactional in economic terms nor only an expression of human sociality.

Businesses and workers that think of jobs as being only a transaction run the risk of tipping over into exploitation as part of a zero-sum game of who can get the most out of the other. Too little attention to transactions undermines business performance. What's needed is a recognition that people are simultaneously self-interested and other-interested.

This is one of the reasons—perhaps the most important reason—that we favor markets over centrally planned economies. Markets are human nature writ large and tend, over time, to promote human happiness and well-being for the greatest number. When all players—businesses and workers—see and recognize the duality of markets, we move closer to outcomes that meet the needs of all.

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Appendix A. Detailed Methodology

For a breakdown of the Likert scales, see Table A1.

Table A1. Key Analytical Themes in Detail

Themes	Likert Scale
Flexibility	1 Low flexibility, unsatisfied with work-life balance 2 Moderately low flexibility, mostly unsatisfied with work-life balance 3 Marginally satisfied with work-life balance, compartmentalized life 4 Moderately high flexibility, moderately satisfied with work-life balance 5 Ideal flexibility, fully satisfied with work-life balance
Purpose	1 Job is a paycheck 2 Job is mostly for pay 3 Job provides a mix of pay and purpose 4 Job provides core life purpose, but pay is still a factor 5 Job provides core life purpose, would enjoy with minimal pay
Short-Run and Long-Run Economic Anxiety	1 Not anxious about the future 2 Somewhat anxious about the future 3 Uncertain or mixed level of anxiety about the future 4 Moderately anxious about the future 5 Very anxious about the future

Source: Authors.

Once we developed scales to analyze our key themes, we organized and segmented relevant quotes from our interview transcripts as a shorthand for the writing process. We then created a codebook to organize our participants according to the following categories:

- Whether they were in school.
- Education level (noncollege and college).
    - Noncollege includes a high school diploma or less.
    - College includes any individual holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Those who were nearing completion of their bachelor's degree were coded as noncollege, but they were folded into a separate category of "in school."
- Industry, using the same categories as our previous reports (resources, commercial sales/tangible services, knowledge economy, intangible services, and government/paragovernment).
- Hours worked (fewer than 40, 40 hours, or more than 40).
    - For part-time workers, we used data in the interview transcripts to determine whether total paid work hours added up to 40. If so, we added them to the 40-hour category.
- Marital status (yes or no).[83]
- Parental status (yes or no).
- Whether they were saving (yes or no).
- Whether they invested in stocks or real estate or had another form of investment.
- Whether they mentioned politics in their responses positively or negatively.
- Whether they received income from an external source (government, spouse, or parent).

We then used these indicators to draw generalizations across participants.

Notes

1. Brent Orrell, Daniel A. Cox, and Jessie Wall, *The Social Workplace: Social Capital, Human Dignity, and Work in America*, American Enterprise Institute, October 25, 2022, https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-social-workplace-social-capital-human-dignity-and-work-in-america.
2. These data are drawn from our original quantitative sample (*n* = 5,037). These specific percentages are drawn from the employed subset's responses (*n* = 2,638) to question 19b.
3. These data are drawn from our original quantitative sample (*n* = 5,037). These specific percentages are drawn from the employed subset's responses (*n* = 2,638) to questions 12c and 13a.
4. These data, along with any further breakdown of our qualitative respondent sample, are based on the authors' calculations. The full spreadsheet and dataset are available on request.
5. Participant #18, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 27, 2023.
6. Participant #18, interview.
7. Participant #36, interview with Johnny Sawyer (Ipsos), May 22, 2023.
8. Participant #33, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 16, 2023.
9. Participant #17, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 26, 2023.
10. Participant #2, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 13, 2023.
11. Participant #3, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 13, 2023.
12. Participant #26, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), May 3, 2023.
13. Participant #24, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 2, 2023.
14. Participant #23, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), May 1, 2023.
15. Participant #29, interview with James Diamond (Ipsos), May 9, 2023.
16. Participant #17, interview.
17. Participant #8, interview with Annaleise Lohr (Ipsos), April 18, 2023.
18. Participant #7, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 18, 2023.
19. Participant #23, interview.
20. Participant #2, interview.
21. Participant #19, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 28, 2023.
22. Participant #30, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 9, 2023.
23. Participant #1, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 13, 2023.
24. Participant #16, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 25, 2023.
25. Participant #41, interview with James Diamond (Ipsos), June 1, 2023.
26. Participant #10, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 19, 2023.
27. Participant #5, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 17, 2023.
28. Participant #9, interview with Annaleise Lohr (Ipsos), April 19, 2023.
29. Participant #27, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 4, 2023.
30. Participant #38, interview with Johnny Sawyer (Ipsos), May 24, 2023.
31. Participant #28, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), May 5, 2023.
32. Participant #27, interview.
33. Participant #38, interview.
34. Participant #1, interview.
35. Participant #30, interview.
36. Participant #3, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 13, 2023.
37. Participant #9, interview.
38. Participant #18, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 27, 2023.
39. Participant #3, interview.
40. Participant #21, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 28, 2023.
41. Participant #16, interview.

42. Participant #35, interview with Johnny Sawyer (Ipsos), May 18, 2023.
43. Janelle Watson, "Full Time vs. Part Time Benefits: What's the Difference and Which Is Better?," Justworks, December 19, 2023, https://www.justworks.com/blog/full-time-vs-part-time-benefits-in-the-us#what-benefits-do-full-time-and-part-time-employees-receive-.
44. Participant #6, interview.
45. Participant #12 (Ipsos), interview with Mallory Newall, April 21, 2023.
46. Participant #31, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 15, 2023.
47. Participant #10, interview.
48. Participant #5 (Ipsos), interview with Mallory Newall, April 17, 2023.
49. Participant #20 (Ipsos), interview with Sarah Feldman, April 28, 2023.
50. Participant #13, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 21, 2023; and Participant #34, interview with Johnny Sawyer (Ipsos), May 17, 2023.
51. Participant #17, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 26, 2023.
52. Participant #24, interview.
53. Participant #27, interview.
54. Participant #11, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 20, 2023.
55. Participant #34, interview with Johnny Sawyer (Ipsos), May 17, 2023.
56. Participant #5, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 17, 2023.
57. Participant #23, interview.
58. Participant #10, interview.
59. Participant #6, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 17, 2023.
60. Participant #11, interview.
61. Participant #21, interview.
62. Participant #4, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), April 14, 2023.
63. Participant #32, interview with Mallory Newall (Ipsos), May 16, 2023.
64. Participant #31, interview.
65. Participant #31, interview.
66. Participant #4, interview.
67. Participant #28, interview.
68. Participant #7, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), April 18, 2023.
69. Participant #15, interview with Annaleise Lohr (Ipsos), April 25, 2023.
70. Participant #4, interview.
71. Cameron Huddleston, "Here's How Much Economists Say Stay-at-Home Moms Should Get Paid," December 1, 2021, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/much-economists-stay-home-moms-010723606.html.
72. Participant #37, interview with James Diamond (Ipsos), May 23, 2023.
73. Participant #8, interview.
74. Participant #36, interview.
75. Participant #26, interview.
76. Participant #31, interview.
77. Participant #41, interview.
78. Participant #16, interview.
79. Participant #16, interview.
80. Participant #25, interview with Sarah Feldman (Ipsos), May 2, 2023.
81. Participant #5, interview.
82. Participant #32, interview.
83. Participant #1 was engaged to be married the weekend after the interview. We marked her as married.