
Agnieszka Piasna
is senior researcher
at the European Trade
Union Institute (ETUI)
in Brussels, Belgium.

Reduced working hours

Impact on workers' health and wellbeing

Agnieszka Piasna

Key points

- Working time is a key element of work organisation, and its length and arrangement have a direct impact on employees' health, wellbeing and, more broadly, quality of life.
- The prevailing standard of a 40-hour, five-day working week is nearly a century old. Designed in a markedly different socioeconomic context, it is closely linked to the male breadwinner model and industrial modes of production. Today's labour markets, in contrast, are characterised by a more diverse workforce, rising income inequality, a predominantly service-based economy and profound changes in how work is organised and performed. These developments have rendered this longstanding working time model increasingly misaligned with contemporary realities.
- Against this background, working time reduction has emerged as a central issue in labour relations and public policy debates. Recent pilots and experiments provide robust empirical evidence of multidimensional benefits, particularly for workers' physical and mental health. These improvements contribute to better work-life balance and are associated with higher levels of wellbeing and job satisfaction. In turn, these individual gains generate broader organisational and societal benefits.

Introduction

In a Eurobarometer survey conducted in June 2023, almost half (46%) of the population of the European Union (EU) reported having mental health problems, including depression and anxiety, in the previous year. The OSH Pulse worker survey conducted in 2022 by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work showed that as much as 27% of employees had experienced stress, anxiety or depression resulting from work, with unusual hours and high work intensity being identified as significant risk factors contributing to these health problems.

Working time is a core component of work organisation. Its duration and scheduling have a direct and measurable impact on workers' physical and mental health, wellbeing and overall quality of life (De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017; Lee et al. 2007). Moreover, together with remuneration, it structures the wage-effort bargain by defining how economic returns are exchanged for labour input. Working time reduction (WTR) is thus an important means, together with wage increases, of redistributing economic productivity gains and, consequently, it is a central issue in labour relations and labour policy (Spencer 2022).

WTR refers to the reduction of statutory, contractual or collectively agreed weekly or annual working time, generally without loss of pay compared to full-time work (De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017). Such a reduction is often calculated on a weekly basis, as in the case of moves to a 4-day working week, but it can also be spread over a month or a year (e.g. in the form of additional leave). In practice, the solutions adopted are more complex and the costs are sometimes shared between employees and employers, e.g. through partial reductions in pay or benefits, the waiver of future pay rises or where part of the costs are covered by the state (De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017; Piasna 2026).

The objective of this Policy Brief is to compile and present a comparative overview of the scattered evidence from various national WTR trials carried out in Europe and beyond in recent years. It aims to demonstrate the impact of WTR on workers' health and wellbeing, as well as on organisational performance. The results of this systematic review of evidence from published reports and journal articles are organised into three thematic areas: (i) the physical and mental health of employees; (ii) work-life balance; and (iii) the broader social and organisational benefits. This analysis of the state of current knowledge about WTR serves to facilitate the formulation of evidence-based proposals for working time policy with a specific view of the potential health and wellbeing effects of reduced hours.

Pilot working time reduction programmes around the world

The last decade has seen increased interest in and the proliferation of pilot programmes of reduced working hours (De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017; Schor et al. 2023), with a substantial part conducted under the auspices of the 4 Day Week Global (4DWG) campaign founded in 2019 and accompanied by extensive media coverage and research. This has stimulated growing interest in this policy,

paving the way for further trials and even legislative proposals, such as that in Spain, where in 2025 the government proposed a reduction in the working week from 40 to 37.5 hours although this did not ultimately gain the approval of parliament.

The pilots selected for this review were largely carried out within 4DWG, which offers some harmonisation of methodology in assessing their effectiveness and impact on employees and organisations (Schor et al. 2023). Their usual duration was six months, with working hours significantly reduced (the goal was a 20% reduction) and pay maintained.

Overall, the results suggest significant benefits in terms of worker wellbeing, job satisfaction and productivity. Nevertheless, more research is still needed, especially on the long-term effects of working reduced hours as well as on its broader and indirect impacts on workers and their surroundings. The overwhelmingly positive results have led to criticism regarding potential reporting bias due to workers' desire to retain this policy. Certain methodological differences also limit the comparability and generalisability of the findings, especially to research carried out outside the 4DWG campaign. Finally, for more robust conclusions, the evaluation of trials based on the voluntary and usually temporary participation of selected companies should be complemented by large-scale programmes of generalised WTR, such as those resulting from legislated or collectively bargained changes to working time.

Physical and mental health of workers

An overall assessment of physical (Table 1) and mental (Table 2) health shows a significant improvement among employees participating in the WTR trials. Regardless of whether the results are measuring the same participants before and after the trial (thus using them as their own controls to assess the impact of changes directly, also called within-individual design) or are based on a comparison with similar workers not taking part in the WTR trial (an external control group), substantial positive effects were observed in all the analysed studies.

Turning first to physical health (Table 1), in Portugal, the percentage of workers rating their physical health as 'very good' or 'excellent' increased from 20% to 27%; in the United Kingdom (UK), 37% reported an improvement in physical health; and in Germany, the physical health and fitness index increased by 9.5%.

This positive impact is evident in several areas including, in particular, in the incidence of insomnia and general sleep problems. A reduction in difficulty falling asleep was reported by 40% of workers in the UK and by 35% in Australia and New Zealand. Workers with reduced working hours also slept longer, by about 38 minutes per week in Germany and by as much as 77 minutes in Portugal. In Brazil, there was a 49.6% decrease in the incidence of insomnia or other sleep problems and an increase in average sleep duration of about 4.5%. In addition, the number of employees who slept more than eight hours a day increased by 42%.

The studies indicate that shorter working hours frequently translate into increased physical activity, a key factor in the prevention of cardiovascular

disease and which also has a positive impact on overall physical condition and on mental health. In surveys, one in three employees reported an increase in the frequency of exercise or an increase in the time spent on it. Accurate measurements of activity using smartwatches in Germany showed that, compared to a control group, participants in the pilot took an average of 1,848 more steps per week and were physically active for 25 minutes longer.

Improved physical health may also manifest itself in reduced feelings of fatigue. In Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, more than a third of employees reported this, while in Brazil work-related frustration decreased by 65.5% and frequent feelings of fatigue by 36.2%.

Table 1 Impact of reduced working hours on workers’ physical health

Health aspects	Impact of reduced working hours	Location and date of study
Overall physical health	Average score for health and physical condition on a scale of 1-5 increased by 0.27 (an improvement of 9.5%)	Germany 2024
	The percentage rating their health and physical condition positively increased by 7 percentage points (pp) (from 20% to 27%), while in the control group it decreased by 3pp	Portugal 2023
	37% felt an improvement in their physical health (18% felt a deterioration)	UK 2022
Sleep quality and duration	35% reported fewer sleep problems	Australia and New Zealand 2022
	The number sleeping more than eight hours/night increased by 42%	Brazil 2024
	49.6% reported a reduction in insomnia	Brazil 2024
	Participants slept 38 minutes longer per week than those in the control group	Germany 2024
	Daily sleep increased from 6 hours 43 minutes to 6 hours 54 minutes, i.e. by 11 minutes per day	Portugal 2023
	The percentage experiencing insomnia or sleep problems fell from 37% to 30%	Portugal 2023
	40% reported a reduction in difficulty falling asleep, while 45% reported no change and 15% reported an increase	UK 2022

Health aspects	Impact of reduced working hours	Location and date of study
Physical activity	36% reported an increase in exercise frequency	Australia and New Zealand 2022
	There was an increase in time spent exercising of an average of 20 minutes per week	Australia and New Zealand 2022
	35% reported an increase in time spent exercising	South Africa 2023
	Compared to the control group, participants took 1,848 more steps per week	Germany 2024
	Compared to the control group, participants were physically active for 25 minutes longer per week	Germany 2024
Fatigue	38% reported a reduction in fatigue	Australia and New Zealand 2022
	36% reported a reduction in fatigue	South Africa 2023
	72.8% reported a reduction in frequent work-related fatigue	Brazil 2024
	There was a decrease in the proportion experiencing work-related fatigue from 64% to 42%, a reduction of 22pp	Portugal 2023
	The average fatigue score fell from 2.56 to 2.12 (a 17% decrease on a scale of 1 to 4), with 46% reporting a reduction in fatigue (14% reported an increase)	UK 2022

Source: own elaboration based on a systematic review of research reports from WTR trials. The reports are available at: <https://4dayweek.com/research>

Improvements in mental health (Table 2) were reported by almost half of the respondents in the UK and by one in three respondents in South Africa. In Portugal, those rating their mental health as ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ doubled from 15% to 31% after six months of working reduced hours.

In assessing mental health, the analyses focused primarily on stress levels, as directly reported by workers on a questionnaire. In the UK, 39% felt less stress (while 48% felt no change in this regard) and the frequency of stress experienced at work decreased by an average of 11%. Furthermore, in Brazil, the perception of work as emotionally exhausting decreased by 49.8%, suggesting a drop in emotional stress.

The results from Germany deserve special attention as the data from questionnaires and interviews were supplemented with objectively measurable physiological parameters that were continuously recorded using smartwatches. These data confirmed the earlier results: participants in the pilot programme experienced 89 minutes less stress per week compared to those in the control group.

From an organisational perspective, it is particularly important how stress levels affect employee functioning and performance. The pilot studies clearly

show that reducing working hours has a positive effect on burnout levels, with a decrease reported by 57% of workers in South Africa, 64% in Australia and New Zealand and as much as 71% in the UK. In addition, as stress levels at work and burnout decrease, job satisfaction increases – for example, 48% of workers were more satisfied in the UK, where the average satisfaction rate increased by 8%. In Portugal, where managers were surveyed, the majority (75%) reported a reduction in stress levels among employees, while almost 60% highlighted an increase in employee engagement and 20% observed a reduction in errors and mistakes.

Results as positive as these are associated with the simultaneous introduction of a number of organisational changes. Where the reverse is true – if the organisation and way of working, as well as the scope and nature of the tasks and responsibilities, remain at the previous level but the time available to perform them is reduced – this results in an increased work pressure and has a negative impact on workers, as shown by a study in New Zealand (Delaney and Casey 2022). The tendency to maintain productivity and output at previous levels, or to compensate for shorter working hours with increased effort, leads to work intensification (Piasna 2024), which is a psychosocial risk factor. There is also a risk of an increase in unpaid overtime if an insufficient reduction in the scope of their duties prompts employees to complete them outside formal working hours.

Table 2 Impact of reduced working hours on workers’ mental health

Health aspects	Impact of reduced working hours	Location and date of study
Overall mental health	Average mental health score on a scale of 1-5 increased by 0.29 (an improvement of 9.5%)	Germany 2024
	The percentage rating their mental health positively increased by 16pp (from 15% to 31%), while in the control group it decreased by 9pp over the same period	Portugal 2023
	35% experienced an improvement in their mental wellbeing	South Africa 2023
	Average mental health score on a scale of 1-5 increased from 2.95 to 3.32 (an improvement of 12.5%)	UK 2022
	43% reported an improvement in their mental health, while 16% reported a deterioration	UK 2022

Health aspects	Impact of reduced working hours	Location and date of study
Stress levels	38% reported a reduction in stress	Australia and New Zealand 2022
	14.5% reported a reduction in work-related stress	Brazil 2024
	There was a reduction in work-related stress of 0.29 on a scale of 1-5 (an improvement of 8.9% from baseline)	Germany 2024
	Participants experienced 89 minutes less stress per week compared to those in the control group	Germany 2024
	39% reported a reduction in stress (48% felt no change). The frequency of reported stress at work fell on average from 3.07 to 2.74 (an 11% decrease)	UK 2022
Burnout	64% reported a reduction in burnout	Australia and New Zealand 2022
	57% reported a reduction in burnout	South Africa 2023
	71% reported a reduction in burnout	UK 2022
	Average burnout levels decreased from 2.8 to 2.34 (a 16% decrease on a scale of 1-5)	UK 2022
	Other symptoms of mental health disorders	The percentage feeling down or depressed decreased from 27% to 16%; while the percentage feeling tense decreased from 39% to 25%

Source: own elaboration based on a systematic review of research reports from WTR trials. The reports are available at: <https://4dayweek.com/research>

Work-life balance

Less time spent at work translates into more time spent with family and in fulfilling caregiving responsibilities. In Germany, 64% of respondents prior to the introduction of reduced working hours expressed a desire to spend more time with their families but the trials satisfied a sizeable part of this, the figure dropping afterwards by 15 points. Combining work and family life has become much easier thanks to the WTR trials, with improvements in this area reported by 44.4% of respondents in Brazil, 47% in South Africa, 49% in Australia and New Zealand and 60% in the UK, where the average rating of the ease of combining paid work with care responsibilities increased by 30%. The percentage of workers who had difficulty achieving work-family balance fell by 29 percentage points in Portugal, while in Belgium, in a study conducted outside the 4DWG campaign, the average rating of conflict between work and private life fell by 23.4% (Mullens and Laurijssen 2024).

Positive results such as these provide strong evidence that reducing working hours by as little as 10-20% could give parents more time to care for their children and make it easier to combine paid work and family life. With the

gender employment gap still wide in the EU, reduced working hours are thus an important element of the policy to increase women's economic activity while they also provide a response to declining birth rates (Lee et al. 2007; Piasna 2026).

Social and organisational benefits

Improvements in workers' physical and mental health have a direct impact on several indicators of their productivity and efficiency.

First and foremost, there is a reduction in absenteeism. With reduced hours of work, the number of sick days or absences for personal reasons decreased by 44.3% in Australia and New Zealand. In the UK, the number of sick days per employee fell from 2.0 to 0.7, a 65% decrease. Due to the high seasonality of sick leave, the comparison in Portugal was based on a control group. The results showed an overall increase in absenteeism, but of five percentage points among workers with reduced working hours compared to eight in the control group. In Germany, on the other hand, more respondents reported no sick days in the previous month (80%) compared to the preceding period (when 69% took no sickness absence), while the group of workers on short (1-2 day) periods of absence halved, from 18% to 9%. At organisational level, a decrease in absenteeism was recorded in approximately 45% of companies in Portugal.

Second, there is an improvement in recruitment and turnover metrics. Recruitment opportunities increased in almost half of companies in Portugal, while staff turnover fell in over 30% (around 5% of companies reported a deterioration in this area and the rest reported no change). In the UK, the number of resignations in participating companies fell by 57% compared to the same period in the previous year, corresponding to a decrease from 2 to 0.8 per 100 employees. In Australia and New Zealand, job resignations fell by an average of 8.6%.

Conclusions

Historically, the working week has evolved alongside social, political, technological and economic developments. The key role was played by trade unions and collective worker struggle, based on a clear demand to reduce excessive working hours (Goerlich and Vis 2024; Piasna et al. 2024; Spencer 2022). These changes have usually culminated in their codification in law. Famously, the eight-hour working day became an international legal standard after it was enshrined in Convention No. 1 of the International Labour Organization in 1919. The current debate on reducing working hours is, in many ways, reminiscent of that which accompanied previous changes, in particular the criticism of its legitimacy and feasibility in organisational and economic terms (Piasna 2026). However, despite the reservations and the contemporary opposition, the 40-hour working week with a two-day weekend has become the norm.

Today, with rapid technological progress and profound changes in the structure of the economy and employment, the need for further changes to the working week has gained new justification (Piasna 2024; Spencer 2022). Interest from employers, workers and trade unions has fuelled numerous initiatives to

test the introduction of reduced working hours in practice, such as the large-scale international pilot of a four-day working week coordinated by 4 Day Week Global. The evaluations accompanying these pilots reviewed in this Policy Brief provide comprehensive scientific data on the impact on workers and the functioning of businesses. They paint a picture of multidimensional benefits to the physical and mental health of individuals which, in turn, results in a better work-life balance, including improved opportunities for all workers to undertake care responsibilities. Furthermore, overall enhancements to wellbeing and job satisfaction are linked to a number of changes that benefit workers, employers and the social security system, including a reduction in sickness absence, increased retention and improved productivity among more rested, motivated, satisfied and healthier workers.

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