

Attitudes of people on a low income: work

by Nancy Kelly and Robert Wishart

This report looks at the wide-ranging impacts that industrial change has had on the lives and livelihoods of people on a low income. It explores what they need from the labour market, and what they expect from employers.

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This report looks at the wide-ranging impacts that economic change has had on the working lives of people on a low income. It finds that they are very positive about work but want more from the labour market: they expect both employers and the Government to step up. Nearly eight out of ten people believe the minimum wage should be increased. Seven in ten support wage top ups for single parents and three fifths support wage top ups for couples with children.

The British people value work and are ambitious to move up in their careers – they see work as good for mental and physical health, allowing them to thrive not just survive. However, the rise of insecure and unpredictable jobs is affecting people on low incomes much more than those who are better off. A fifth (17%) of those in the poorest fifth say they do not know the hours they will be working next month, compared to only one in ten of those in the richest fifth.

Long-term job security is linked to fundamental changes to our society and economy, especially automation. This research shows that most of us know this: three quarters think that robots and computer programmes will take many jobs currently done by humans in 10 years' time. Most of us don't think that this will threaten our own job but fears are greater for those on low incomes. One in six workers in the poorest fifth are worried about losing their job to automation – twice as many as those in the richest fifth.

What you need to know

There are three things that British workers expect employers to deliver:

- Better pay: four-fifths believe that employers should pay a wage that covers the cost of living.
- Training and the chance to move up: three quarters expect employers to provide training to help them progress at work, and three-fifths hope to move up in the next five years.
- Flexibility to balance work and caring: the vast majority believe that employers should always allow part-time or flexible working to enable workers to take care of members of their family.

The Government is expected to make sure that employers pay a decent wage, and to top up the incomes of working families on low incomes.

We can solve UK poverty

JRF is working with governments, businesses, communities, charities and individuals to solve UK poverty. *Attitudes of people on a low income: work* looks at the roles of income and work – these are a key focus of our [strategy to solve UK poverty](#).

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Executive summary

The past 50 years have fundamentally changed the nature of work in the UK, particularly for people on a low income. Manufacturing work has declined and service work has increased, leaving a labour market dominated by low-skill, low-paid jobs, and high-skill, high-paid jobs, with a shrinking proportion of the mid-level roles that in the past offered opportunities for people on a lower income to progress throughout their working lives (Eurofound, 2015). More recently, there has been a rise in non-standard employment, including temporary, part-time or zero-hours contracts, 'gig' work and involuntary self-employment. As these precarious forms of work have become more common, concern has risen about their impact on workers' income and quality of life (Taylor, 2017). How do people feel about this new world of work and what do they want from work? This report investigates, drawing on data from the 35th British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, conducted in 2017. It explores the views of people with differing levels of household income. There are five income groups, each of equal size, with this report focusing particularly on the views of the poorest fifth in society. Their views are often compared with 'all respondents' – all people in the sample, regardless of household income.

A positive outlook

Two-fifths (41%) of people on a low income who responded to the survey believed that work is about more than just money, compared with three-fifths (64%) of those in the highest income group. Four-fifths (83%) of all respondents believed that work is good for physical health, and nine in ten (90%) believed that work is good for mental health. There was no difference in the views of the lowest and highest income groups, despite their very different experiences of the labour market.

People on a low income were confident about their ability to find work similar to their current job and they were also fairly confident about the likely impact of technology and automation on their own jobs. Three-quarters (75%) of all respondents felt that machines and computer programs would take many jobs currently done by humans in 10 years' time, with no difference across income groups. However, the vast majority did not think that this would threaten their own jobs. Twice as many workers in the poorest fifth of the sample were concerned about losing their job to automation as those in the richest fifth (16% and 7% respectively).

What do people on a low income want from work?

Respondents could pick up to three things that they wanted to change about their current job. Regardless of household income, people were most likely to want to be paid more for the work they did. Those in the poorest fifth of the sample were most likely to mention wanting more money (86%), although it was a common desire regardless of household income (71% of the whole sample). Approximately two-fifths (37%) of all respondents wanted their work to be less stressful, the next most common desire after improved pay. There also appeared to be some desire for greater flexibility over working hours, although this was less common among higher earners.

What do people on a low income want from employers?

Pay

Four-fifths (77%) of all respondents believed that employers should pay a wage that covers the basic cost of living. There were no differences in views across the income groups.

Development and progression

The majority of workers in the sample were keen to progress at work. Three-fifths (59%) hoped to progress in the next five years, with the remaining two-fifths (38%) wanting to stay at their current level. Despite small differences, aspiration for promotion did not vary significantly between income groups.

- Two-thirds (67%) of all respondents felt that employers should be responsible for training employees to do their job effectively.
- Three-quarters (73%) expected employers to provide training to allow an employee to take on more responsibilities and progress at work.
- However, people did not expect employers to provide training to help an employee get a job somewhere else, with four-fifths (80%) saying that this was an individual's responsibility.

Flexible working

- Seven in ten (70%) of the poorest fifth of the sample felt that employers should always be expected to allow part-time or flexible working, compared with three-fifths (60%) of the richest fifth.
- Only 21% of the poorest fifth said that flexibility should only be expected where it is convenient for the business, compared with 32% of the richest fifth.

It is striking that despite the sharp decline in 'jobs for life', the rise of job switching and more precarious forms of work, people on a low income had very high expectations of employers, to pay fairly, train and develop employees and support work–life balance.

What do people on a low income want from government?

Pay

- Of respondents on a low income, 79% believed that the minimum wage should be increased, compared with 62% of respondents in the highest income group.
- Of all respondents, seven in ten (70%) supported wage top-ups for single parents and three-fifths (58%) supported top-ups for couples with children, with no differences in views across the income groups.
- Of all respondents, only three in ten (31%) supported the Government topping up wages for couples without children.

Taken as a whole, respondents saw training and development as the responsibility of either employers or employees, with very little appetite for government intervention. This is perhaps surprising, given the increased emphasis on government skills strategies over recent decades, including strategies aimed at reskilling people and adjusting to labour market change.

Conclusion

Despite the wide-ranging impacts that industrial change has had on the lives and livelihoods of people on a low income, their attitudes to work remain positive – work is not only good, but also good for you.

Perhaps most striking is that despite the end of the 'job for life', people on a low income have high expectations of their employers. They believe that employers should pay an adequate wage, provide training for in-work progression and allow flexibility to accommodate working and caring. They want government intervention on pay and wage supplements, but they still see training and development as very much a matter for employers and employees.

As the labour market continues to transform in response to technology and automation, this relationship between employers and employees will be tested yet further. It may be that in a world of work characterised by change and lifelong reskilling, people on a low income will come to desire government intervention in mandating far more than pay.

1 Introduction

The past 50 years have fundamentally changed the nature of work in the UK, particularly for the poorest fifth of society. Manufacturing work has declined and service work has increased, leaving a labour market dominated by low-skill, low-paid jobs and high-skill, high-paid jobs, with a shrinking proportion of the mid-level roles that in the past offered opportunities for people on a lower income to progress throughout their working lives (Eurofound, 2015). More recently there has been a rise in non-standard employment, including temporary, part-time or zero-hours contracts, 'gig' work and involuntary self-employment. As these precarious forms of work have become more common, concern has risen about their impact on workers' income and quality of life (Taylor, 2017).

We also now face the prospect of a 'fourth industrial revolution' driven by technological innovation and automation (Frey and Osborne, 2013). While economists disagree about the number of jobs likely to be affected, there is consensus that lower-skilled jobs are most vulnerable to automation (Frey and Osborne, 2013), and thus lower-income workers are likely to experience significant disruption to their working lives over the coming decades.

All of these changes have had, or will have, a profound impact on the working lives of people on a low income. This report uses data from the 35th British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, carried out in 2017, to explore how people in the poorest fifth of society feel about work and what they want from work.

NatCen's BSA survey has been carried out almost every year since 1983. It is an authoritative source of data on the views of the British public. It uses a random probability sampling methodology to yield a representative sample of adults aged 18+ living in private households in Britain. In 2017 there were four versions of the questionnaire – A, B, C and D – which allowed different subsets of the overall sample to be asked different questions. The detailed income questions that were used to create the five income groups referred to in this report were asked in versions B, C and D. Further information about the methodology for the 2017 survey can be found in Appendix A.

2 Who are the poorest fifth of the population?

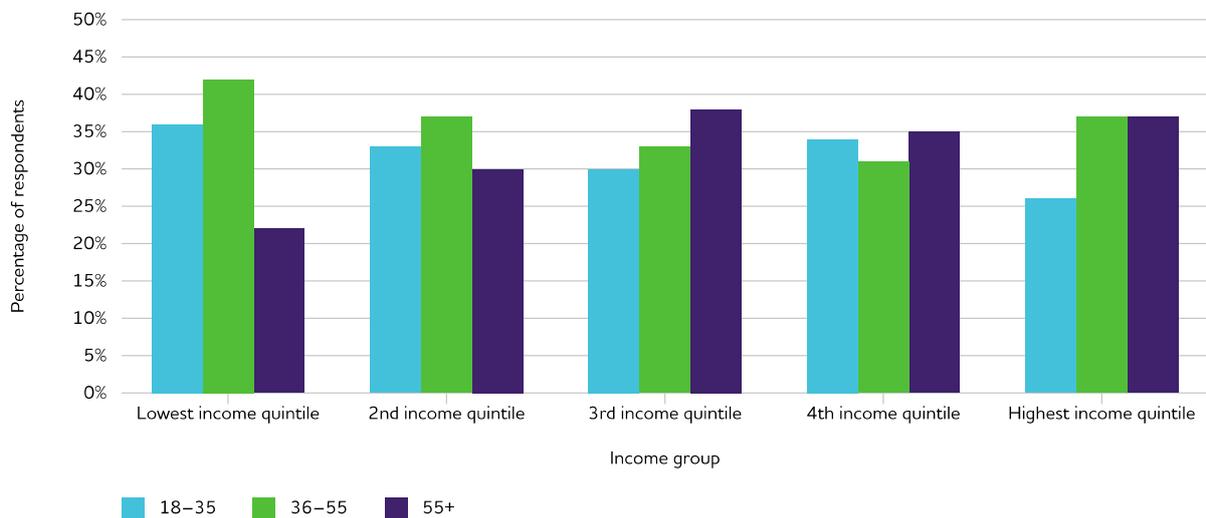
This chapter gives an overview of the characteristics of people in the 2017 BSA survey who were in the lowest income group, relative to the rest of the population sample.

The poorest fifth were more likely to be young and female and had lower educational qualifications relative to the rest of the sample.

Age

Only a fifth (22%) of those in the lowest income quintile were aged 55 or older (see Figure 1). Conversely, younger people (aged 18–35) comprised just a quarter (26%) of those in the highest income quintile, a smaller proportion relative to other age groups.

Figure 1: Age profile of the income groups

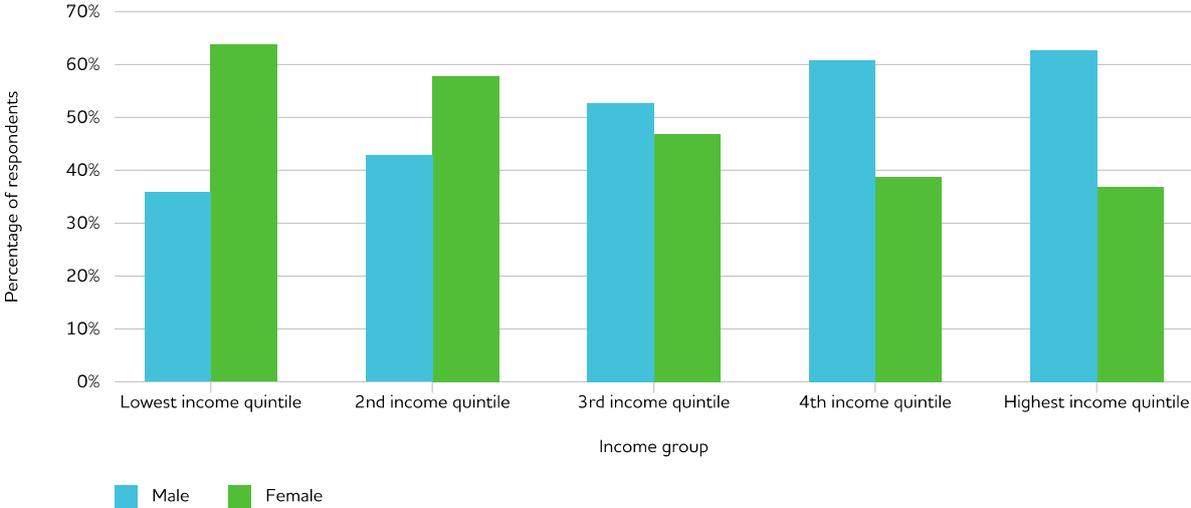


Base: All respondents, versions B, C and D (n = 1,998)

Gender

Those in the lowest income quintile were much more likely to be female than male: two-thirds (64%) were female. Conversely, the majority (63%) of those in the highest income quintile were male (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Gender profile of the income groups

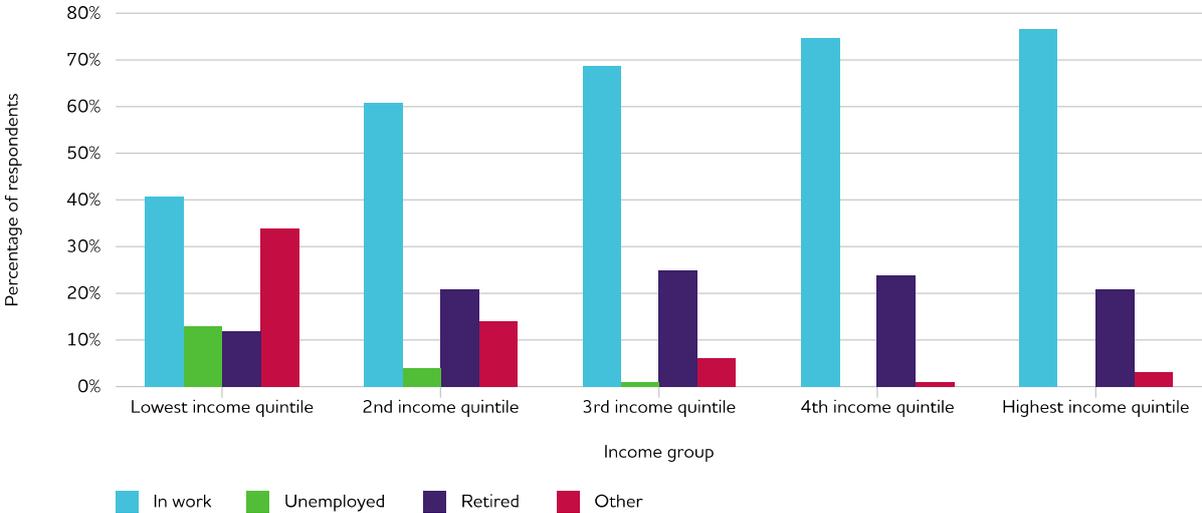


Base: All respondents, versions B, C and D (n = 1,998)

Working status

In line with expectations, the poorest fifth of the sample were much less likely to be in work and more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive compared with those in the other income groups (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Working status profile of the income groups



Base: All respondents, versions B, C and D (n = 1,998)

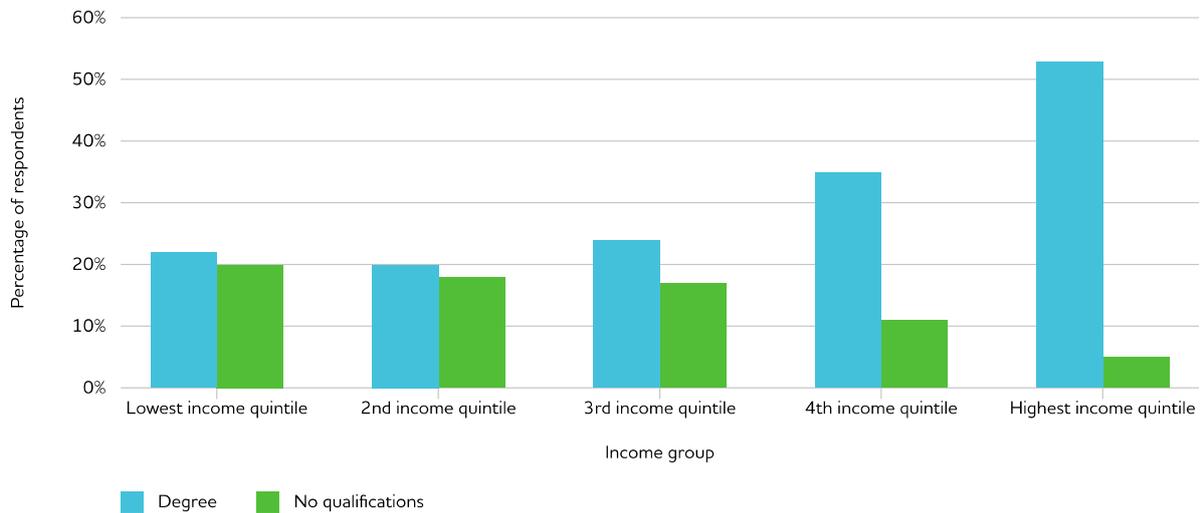
Two-fifths (41%) of those in the lowest income quintile were in work, while 13% were unemployed. A third (34%) of those in the lowest income quintile were in the ‘other’ category, which includes people who were in full-time education and training, people who were looking after the home and people who were unable to work because of disability or long-term health conditions.

In the highest two income quintiles, almost all respondents were either in work or retired. No respondents were unemployed and very few were in the ‘other’ category. Three-quarters of those in the top two income quintiles (75% and 77% respectively) were in work, a higher proportion than that found in the other three income groups.

Educational qualifications

On average, people in the lowest income quintile had lower-level educational qualifications relative to those in the other income groups. A fifth (20%) of people in the lowest income group had no qualifications, a higher proportion than that found in any other group (see Figure 4). A fifth (22%) of people in the lowest income quintile had a degree, less than half the proportion observed in the highest income quintile (53%).

Figure 4: Educational profile of the income groups



Base: All respondents, versions B, C and D (n = 1,998)

Social class

Social class also varied substantially by income group. Two-fifths of those in the lowest two income groups (41% and 39% respectively) were in routine or semi-routine occupations, a much higher proportion than that found in any other group. In contrast, less than one in ten (8%) respondents in the highest income quintile were in routine or semi-routine occupations.

In summary, while people in the lowest income quintile had a diverse set of characteristics, they were more likely to be young and female, with lower levels of educational qualifications, than those in the other income groups. They were also less likely to be in work, and much more likely to be in education or training, to be looking after the home or to have disabilities or long-term health conditions.

3 What do people on a low income think about work?

The idea of work as a social good is embedded in British culture, particularly working-class culture with its emphasis on hard work and self-reliance. Decades of labour market change have had a very significant impact on the working lives of people on a low income, with a steep decline in 'jobs for life' and single-earner families. As work has changed, have the views of people on a low income changed as well? This chapter aims to find out.

Value of work

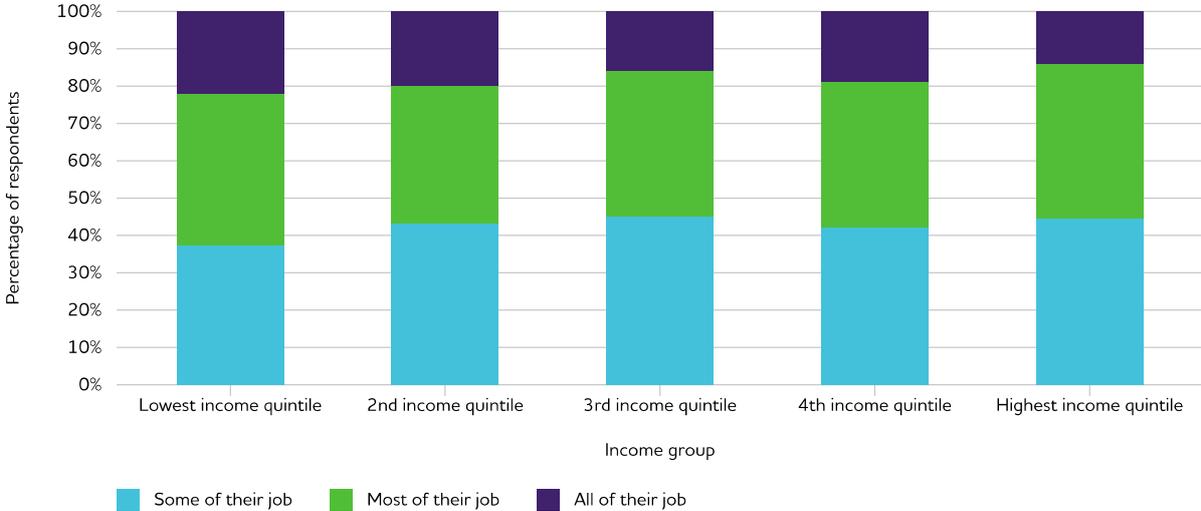
The sample as a whole had positive views about the value of work, with three-fifths (59%) saying they would enjoy having a job even if they did not need the money, and a half (50%) saying that there was more to work than just earning money.¹

However, there was substantial variation between the attitudes of those on a higher income and the attitudes of those on a lower income. Just two-fifths (41%) of people in the lowest income quintile felt that work was about more than just money, compared with three-fifths (64%) of those in the highest income quintile.

There was very strong support, regardless of household income, for the idea that work is good for physical and mental health. Four-fifths (83%) of people in the sample felt that work was good for physical health, and nine in ten (90%) felt that it was good for mental health.²

To gauge how people felt about the interaction between work and health, people were presented with two hypothetical scenarios. In one scenario, an employee had been off work with a back problem, while in the other, the employee had been off work with depression.³ Two-fifths (40%) of all respondents felt that a person with a back problem should return to work as soon as they could do some of their job, with a further two-fifths (40%) saying they should return to work when they could do most of their job. Figure 5 shows the results by income group. Two-fifths (41%) of all respondents also perceived that returning to work more quickly would speed up recovery from a back problem.

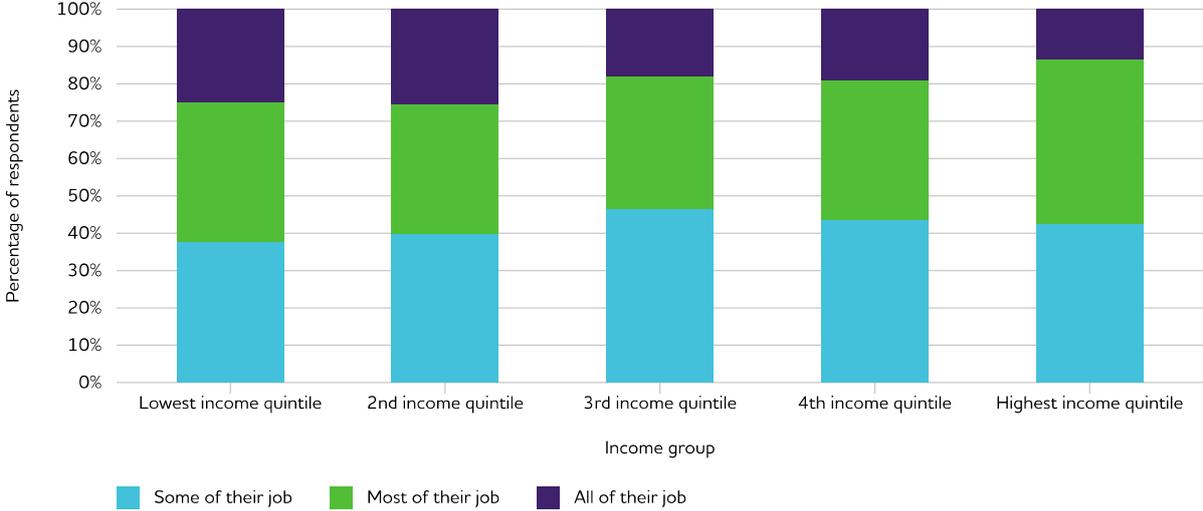
Figure 5: Should an employee return to work after a back problem when they can do some, most or all of their job?



Base: All respondents, versions C and D (n = 1,323)

People thought that work is good for mental health as well as physical health. Two-fifths (39%) of all respondents felt that a person with depression should return to work as soon as they could do some of their job, with another two-fifths (37%) advocating a return to work once they could do most of their job. Figure 6 shows the results by income group. Over half (52%) of people felt that returning to work more quickly would help speed up recovery from depression. Three-fifths (60%) of the most affluent fifth of the population sample felt this way, more than any other income group.

Figure 6: Should an employee return to work after depression when they can do some, most or all of their job?



Base: All respondents, versions C and D (n = 1,323)

People on a lower income are more likely to be in a job that is physical and less likely to be able to control the tasks they do or the times they are required to work. Given this, it is very striking that we saw no difference in the views of lower- and higher-income people when it came to the value of work in promoting physical and mental health.

While people on a low income may be slightly more sceptical of the idea that work is about more than money, it is clear that they believed that work has significant physical and mental health benefits.

Work and gender roles

As part of the wider picture of labour market change, over the past 50 years we have seen a very significant increase in the percentage of women in work: in 1971, 53% of women were in employment, compared with 71% in 2018 (ONS, 2018a). To investigate whether women’s changing place in the labour market has shaped attitudes, we asked a series of questions about women in the workplace.

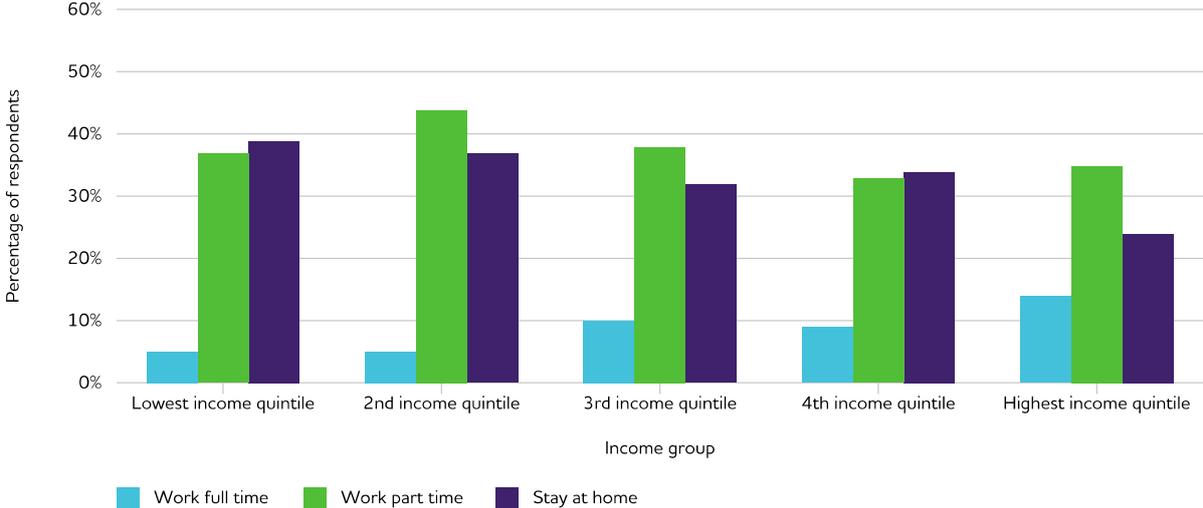
Approximately three-quarters (72%) of people felt that both men and women should contribute to household income⁴ – a significant shift from 1989, when just a half (53%) agreed with this statement. Similarly, attitudes to the statement ‘A man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the home and family’ indicated that Britain is becoming more progressive, with seven in ten (71%) respondents disagreeing, up from two-fifths (42%) in 1984.

However, there were interesting differences between the attitudes of lower- and higher-income respondents when it came to women and work. People on a lower income were more likely to agree that men should earn money while women should look after the home (13% compared with 7% for those in the highest income quintile). Two-thirds (66%) of people in the lowest income quintile disagreed that men should earn money while women should look after the home, compared with four-fifths (77%) of those in the highest income quintile.⁵ Similarly, while approximately half (47%) of people felt that women could do all or almost all the same jobs as men, with a fifth (21%) saying that women could do some or a few jobs that men could do,⁶ there was a small but statistically significant difference between the view of lower- and higher-income people, with those in the lowest income quintile less likely to believe that

women can do the same jobs as men. This suggests that people in the poorest fifth of the sample had slightly more traditional views when it came to women and work.

When asked whether a woman should work when there are children in the household,⁷ lower-income households appeared more likely than higher-income households to hold traditional attitudes. Two-fifths (39%) of people in the lowest income quintile felt that a woman should stay at home while the child is below school age, compared with a quarter (24%) of those in the highest income quintile (see Figure 7).

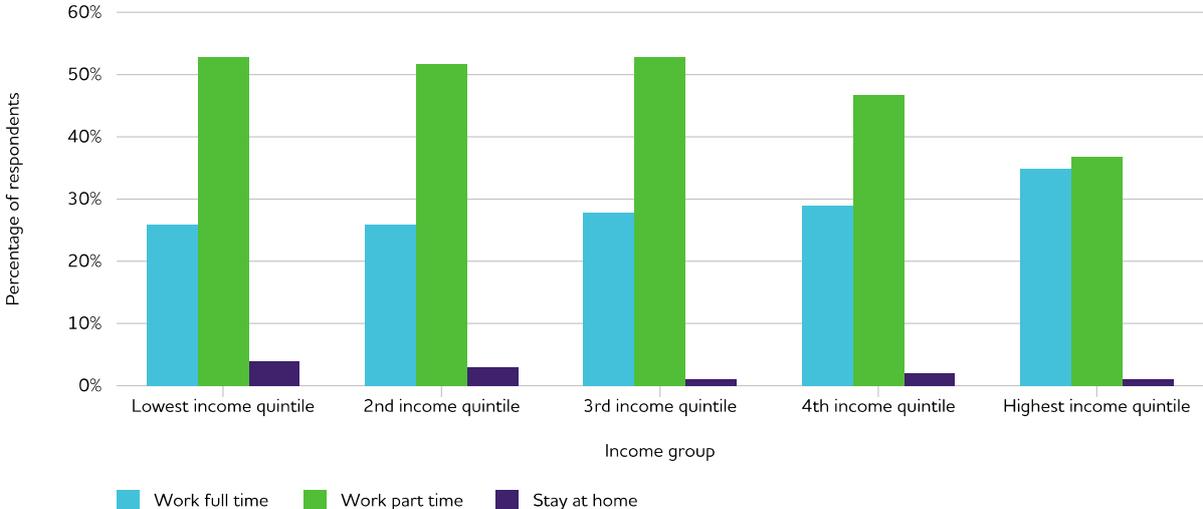
Figure 7: Should a woman work full time, part time or stay at home when there is a child in the household below school age?



Base: All respondents, versions B and D (n = 1,129)

However, attitudes were dependent on the age of the child. Once the child is old enough to go to school, very few people felt that women should stay at home. Half (53%) of those in the lowest income quintile felt that a woman should work part time, with a quarter (26%) saying that they should work full time. People in the highest income quintile were more likely to feel that a woman should work full time (35%), while those in the remaining four quintiles all had broadly similar attitudes (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Should a woman work full time, part time or stay at home when there is a child in the household after the child has started school?



Base: All respondents, versions B and D (n = 1,129)

It seems likely that this difference in the attitudes of people in the lowest and highest income groups is being driven in part by the practical realities of supporting a family while working. Childcare costs are high and currently rising higher than both wages and inflation. For families who can access the government-funded entitlement to 30 hours of free childcare, topping up to the 50 hours needed for a full-time nursery place costs an average of £94 a week (Harding and Cottell, 2018). This is likely to significantly affect the way in which people on a low income think about the trade-off between family life and work, particularly full-time work.

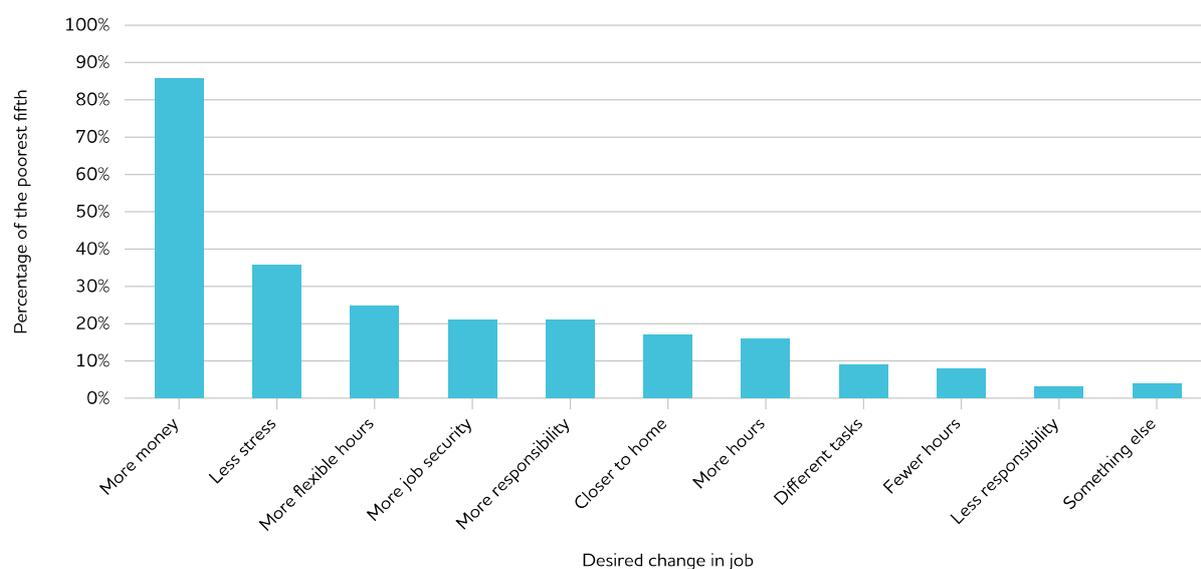
4 What do people on a low income want from work?

People on a low income believe that work has intrinsic value, beyond its monetary benefits. Yet they also have expectations about what constitutes good work. This chapter explores how people on a low income felt about key aspects of job quality, and who they thought was responsible for ensuring that work is good enough.

We asked people to tell us the top three changes they would like to make to their current job.⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, seven in ten (71%) said that they would like more money. In addition to pay, there appeared to be a strong appetite for better work–life balance among workers, with the four next most popular answers all addressing this theme. Four-fifths (37%) wanted their work to be less stressful and a quarter (23%) wanted to work fewer hours. An additional quarter (23%) wanted to work closer to home and a fifth (20%) wanted more flexibility around their working hours.

There were some significant differences across the income groups, with people in the lowest income group more concerned about increasing pay (86%) and about having more flexible hours (25%) (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: What did the poorest fifth of the sample want to change most about their job?



Base: All people in paid employment, versions B, C and D (n = 1,316)

Pay

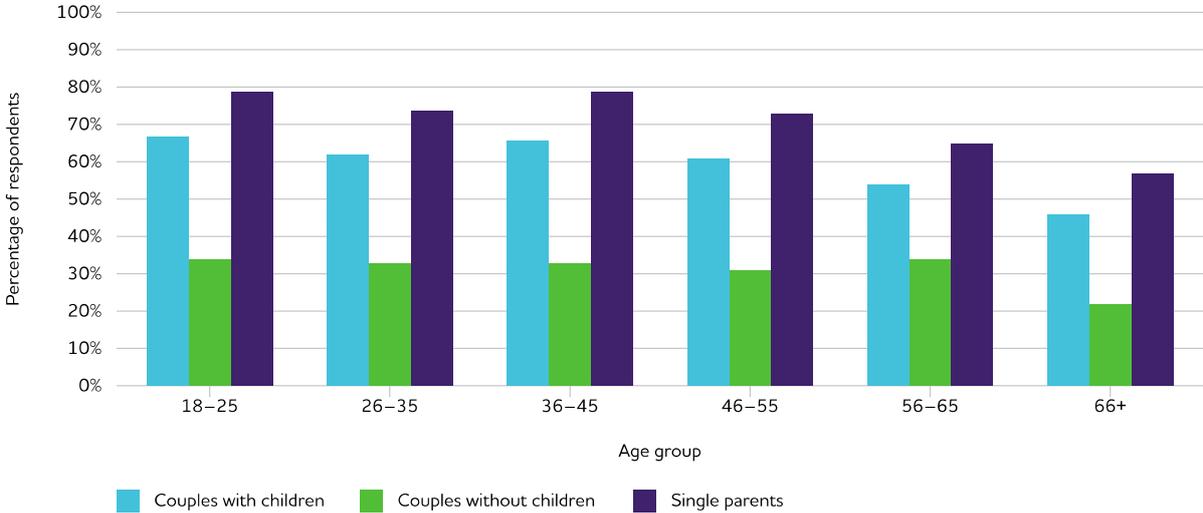
Although recent estimates suggest that pay growth has finally outpaced inflation, average pay is lower now in real terms than it was a decade ago (ONS, 2018b), and estimates from the Resolution Foundation using Office for Budgetary Responsibility projections suggest that pay levels that existed before the financial crisis in 2007 will not be reached until the middle of the next decade (Corlett et al, 2018). To understand whether this prolonged pay squeeze is reflected in public attitudes, we asked a series of questions about pay and income supplements.

First, we asked who should be responsible for making sure that wages cover the basic cost of living.⁹ Four-fifths (77%) of people believed that employers should be responsible, with no differences in attitude across the income groups. A significant majority (71%) believed that the minimum wage should be

increased, and people in the lowest income group were more likely to advocate an increase in the minimum wage than those in the highest income group (79% and 62% respectively).¹⁰ This suggests that the sample as a whole and the poorest fifth in particular were concerned about the adequacy of pay, and believed that the Government should impose a higher statutory wage floor to cover the cost of living.

We also asked a series of questions about whether the Government should top up the wages of different family types.¹¹ Seven in ten (70%) supported wage top-ups for single parents and three-fifths (58%) supported top-ups for couples with children, while only three in ten (31%) felt that the Government should top up wages for couples without children. There were no differences between the views across income groups, but there were very distinct differences in the attitudes of people of different age groups (see Figure 10). Younger people were much more likely to express support for wage top-ups of all kinds than people of retirement age. Seven in ten (67%) 18–25 year olds felt that the Government should top up the wages of couples with children, compared with half (46%) of people of retirement age. Similarly, four-fifths (79%) of 18–25 year olds wanted wage top-ups for single parents, compared with three-fifths (57%) of people of retirement age.

Figure 10: Should the Government top up the low wages of couples with children, couples without children and single parents?



Base: All respondents, versions A, B, C and D (n = 2,259)

People in the lowest income group believed that employers should pay a wage that covers the cost of living, yet their support for government intervention in the form of raising the minimum wage or wage supplements suggests that they did not see employer action as providing the whole answer.

Development and progression

As the labour market has polarised and become more precarious, the idea of a ‘job for life’ has become increasingly anachronistic, with job switching now the norm. We asked a series of questions about development and progression to explore whether the age of the ‘portfolio career’ is reflected in the views about development and progression that the poorest fifth of the sample had.

Respondents believed that employers should play a substantial role in workers’ development and progression, and there was no variation in attitudes across the income groups. Two-thirds (67%) of people felt that employers should be responsible for training and developing employees to do their current job effectively, and three-quarters (73%) expected employers to provide sufficient training to allow an employee to take on more responsibilities and progress at work. However, people did not expect employers to provide training to help an employee get a job somewhere else, with four-fifths (80%) saying that this was an individual’s responsibility.¹² Taken as a whole, training and development were seen as the responsibility of either employers or employees, with very little appetite for government intervention.

The majority of workers in the sample were keen to progress at work. Three-fifths (59%) of workers hoped to move up in the following five years, with the remaining two-fifths (38%) wanting to stay at their current level. Despite small differences (see Appendix B),¹³ aspiration for promotion did not vary significantly between income groups, while other factors did influence aspiration, most notably age and gender. After controlling for income, age and gender, the desire to progress at work was stronger among younger people and men.

In summary, despite very significant changes to the nature of the labour market and individual career trajectories, people on a low income were interested in building careers and had high expectations of employers, believing that they were responsible for investing in training and development, including training to enable employees to progress in work. It is striking that despite decades of government investment in skills strategies with a particular focus on the low-skilled workforce, in the lowest income groups, training and progression were seen as the preserve of the employer–employee relationship, and not as government’s responsibility.

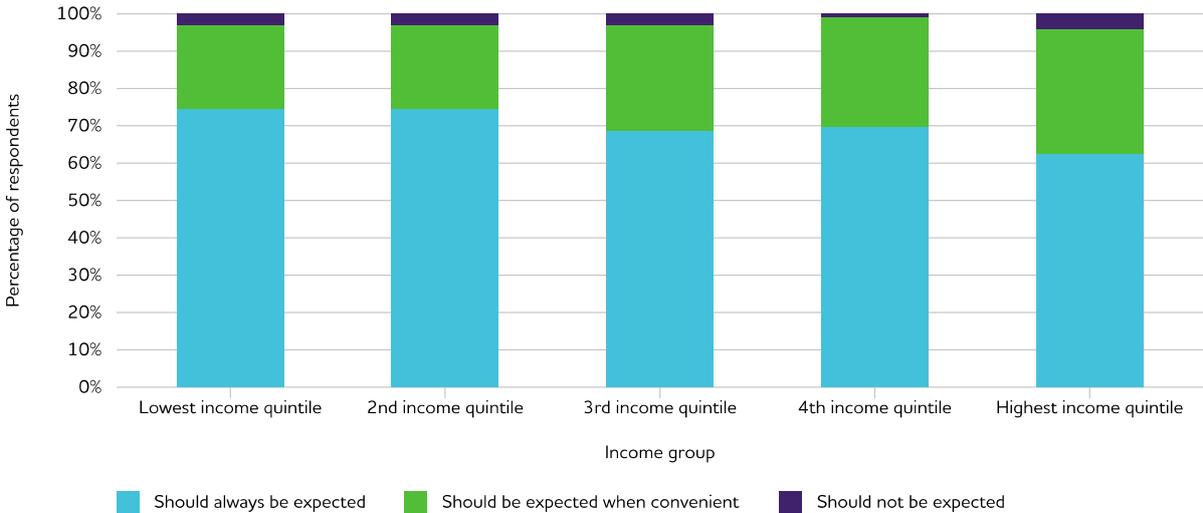
Flexibility

There is a significant body of research on the challenge of maintaining a good work–life balance. Working Families recently conducted a survey of parents and found that just a fifth of working families felt that they had the right balance between work and family (Working Families, 2017) and evidence suggests that negotiating a positive work–life balance can be particularly challenging for lower-income families (Hartley and Couldry, 2006). We asked a series of questions about flexible working and balancing work and care.

In general, people in the sample were very supportive of flexible working. Two-thirds (64%) felt that employers should always be expected to allow part-time or flexible working hours for staff who need it, while just a quarter (26%) said that this could only be expected if it was convenient for the business.¹⁴

People in the lowest income group were more supportive of flexible working than people in the highest income group (see Figure 11): seven in ten (70%) people in the former group felt that flexible working should always be expected, compared with three-fifths (60%) of people in the latter group. People in the lowest income group were also less likely than people in the highest income group to say that flexibility should only be expected where it was convenient for the business (21% and 32% respectively).

Figure 11: Should employers be expected to allow part-time or flexible working for workers who need to take care of members of their family?



Base: All respondents, versions B, C and D (n = 1,998)

This difference in views may be driven by a range of factors. Families on higher incomes are more able to buy in support in the form of carers and cleaners, while families on the lowest incomes often cannot and are therefore at high risk of being both money and time poor (Burchardt, 2008). This may mean that, for

families on the lowest incomes, flexible working is essential to being able to manage working and caring, whereas for higher-income families, flexible working is more of a life choice.

We also asked how easy or difficult it is to balance working and caring in practice. Half (53%) of all respondents felt that it was easy for people at their workplace to manage their workload alongside caring responsibilities, compared with just under three in ten (28%) who felt that it would be difficult. However, a far larger proportion of people felt that it would be difficult if a person at their workplace was promoted to a more senior role¹⁵ (34% felt that it would be easy, compared with 45% who thought that it would be difficult).

Perceptions about managing working and caring in practice did not vary across income groups, but did differ significantly by gender. Perhaps unsurprisingly, women were more likely than men to believe that a person with caring responsibilities would find managing their workload harder if they were promoted. Although parenting norms have changed significantly over recent decades, women still undertake the majority of childcare, and census data indicates that 58% of adult caring is done by women. It is possible that this relative scepticism about balancing caring and a promoted role, and the comparatively lower level of desire for promotion among women, reflect a more accurate understanding of what working and caring entails.

We also asked about shared parental leave, finding no difference in attitudes across income groups.¹⁶ The right to share parental leave was introduced in 2015, but take-up has been low, with some estimates suggesting that just 2% of eligible couples have made use of the policy (BBC, 2018). A small minority (15%) of people felt that the mother should use all of any shared leave, with a further two-fifths (39%) saying that the mother should use most of the leave but the father should use some as well. However, three in ten (30%) respondents felt that parental leave should be split equally between mother and father, suggesting that Britain has an appetite for shared parental leave in principle if not yet in practice. Younger people were significantly more likely to advocate splitting parental leave equally, suggesting that there may be greater sharing of parental leave in the future (see Figure 12). Half (47%) of those aged 18–25 felt that parental leave should be shared equally between the mother and the father, compared with a fifth (21%) of people of retirement age. Meanwhile, just one in twenty (5%) 18–25 year olds felt that the mother should take the entire leave period, compared with over a quarter (28%) of those aged 66 or older.

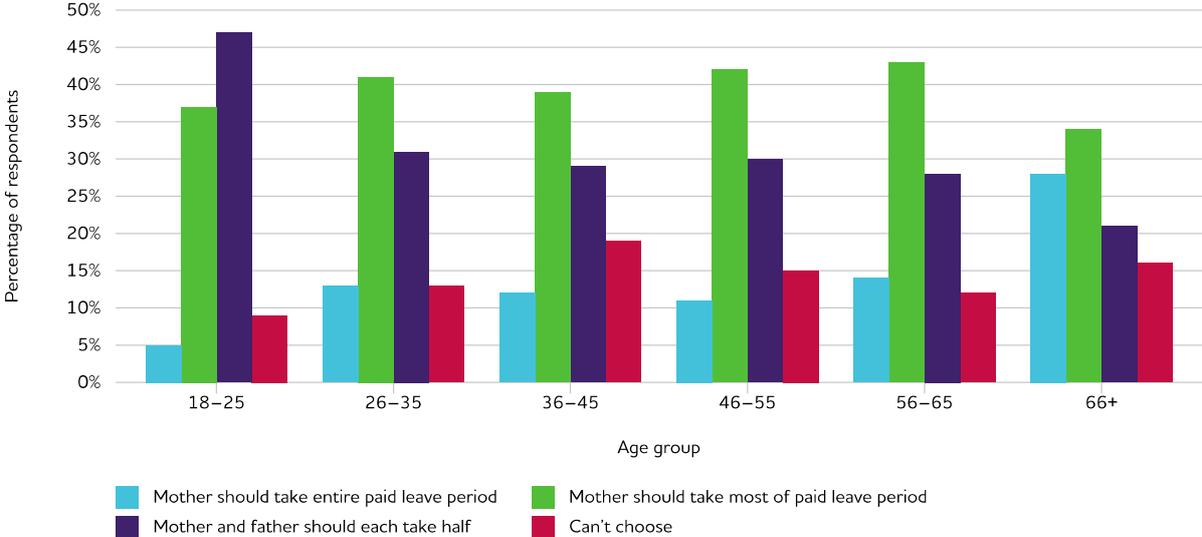
Job security

Overall, people in the sample were fairly optimistic about their job security. Almost all (95%) employees felt confident that they would be working in 12 months' time and only a quarter (26%) were worried about losing their job.¹⁷ Perceptions of job security appeared to be consistent across income groups. However, there was substantial variation between groups with regard to perceptions of their own financial wellbeing. Two-fifths (42%) of respondents who were finding it fairly or very difficult to make ends meet worried about having a job in 12 months' time, compared with a fifth (18%) of those finding it easy or very easy to get by.

When asked how easy it would be to find a job at least as good as their current one,¹⁸ people in the lowest income group were more confident than those on a higher income. Half (48%) of people in the lowest income group felt that it would be easy to find a job at least as good as their current one (see Figure 13), which may be a reflection of the large number of low-pay, low-skill jobs available in the UK labour market. Those in second and third income quintiles were most likely to say that it would be difficult to find a job at least as good as their current one.

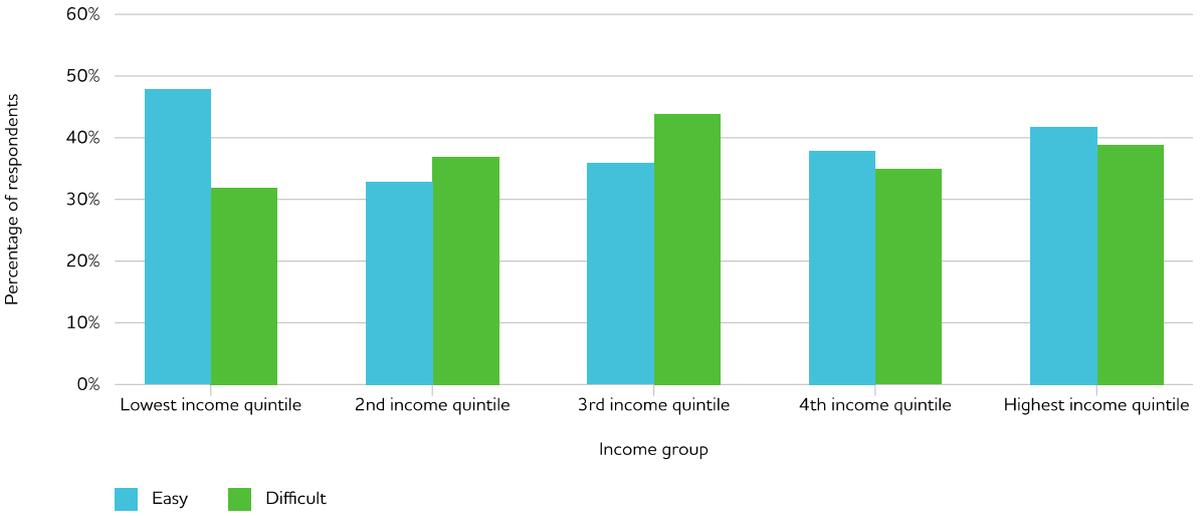
Uncertainty about working hours was also significantly related to income. A fifth (17%) of respondents in the lowest income quintile said that they did not know the hours they would be working the following month, compared with one in ten (9%) of those in the highest income quintile. Similarly, 13% of workers in the lowest income quintile said that they had changing working hours given at short notice, more than twice the proportion of those in the highest income quintile (6%).¹⁹

Figure 12: How should a full-time working couple divide paid leave after their child is born?



Base: All respondents, versions A, B, C and D (n = 2,473)

Figure 13: Will people be able to easily find a job at least as good as their current one?



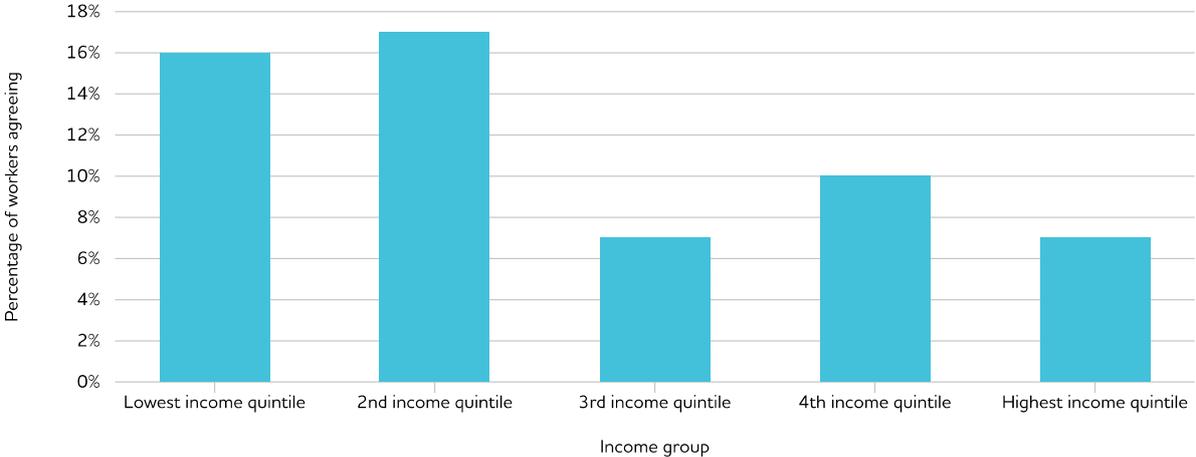
Base: All respondents in paid work, versions B, C and D (n = 971)

The attitudes of the poorest fifth of the sample closely reflect the current state of the labour market. The UK currently has the highest level of employment since records began in 1971 (ONS, 2018c), so a high level of confidence in being able to access low-skill employment is unsurprising. Likewise, the rising prevalence of zero-hours contracts, self-employment and ‘gig’ work is reflected in lower levels of working-hours security and predictably in this group (Taylor, 2017).

Finally, we took a long-term view on job security, asking questions about the impact of technology and automation on the labour market. First, we asked people whether they thought that, in the following 10 years, machines and computer programs were likely to do many of the jobs that humans do. Three-quarters (75%) of the sample felt that this would happen, with no difference across the income groups. We then asked people whether they were concerned that their own job might be at risk. Despite the high level of certainty that automation will do *many* jobs that humans currently do, just one in ten (11%) workers were concerned that their own job might be at risk.²⁰

Low-paid workers, who are perhaps the most at risk (Goos and Manning, 2007; Muñoz de Bustillo, 2016) were more likely than higher-paid workers to perceive automation as a threat to their job in the long term: three in twenty (16%) workers in the lowest income quintile were worried about losing their job to automation, more than twice the proportion of workers in the highest income quintile who were worried about this (7%) (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Will automation take over people’s own jobs? (percentage agreeing)



Base: All people in paid employment, versions B, C and D (n = 1,046)

Although predictions of the impact of automation on the UK labour market vary widely, more conservative models identify 10% of current jobs as being highly vulnerable to automation, and these jobs are concentrated in low-pay and low-skill sectors (Arntz et al, 2016). On this basis, the poorest fifth of the sample were perhaps over-optimistic about the scope of automation’s impact on their own working lives.

5 Conclusions

Despite the wide-ranging impacts that industrial change has had on the lives and livelihoods of people on a low income, this report has shown that their attitudes to work remain positive – work is not only good, it is also good for you. People on a low income are confident in their ability to stay in work over the long term and are keen to progress in their careers.

Perhaps most striking is that, despite the end of the ‘job for life’, people on a low income have high expectations of their employers. They believe that employers should pay an adequate wage, provide training for in-work progression and allow flexibility to accommodate working and caring. They want government intervention on pay and wage supplements, but training and development are still seen very much as a matter for the relationship between employers and employees.

As the labour market continues to transform in response to technology and automation, this relationship between employers and employees will be tested yet further. It may be that in a world of work characterised by change and lifelong reskilling, people on a low income will come to desire government intervention in mandating far more than pay.

Appendix A: Methodology

NatCen's British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has been carried out almost every year since 1983.²¹ It is an authoritative source of data on the views of the British public. It uses a random probability sampling methodology to yield a representative sample of adults aged 18+ living in private households in Britain.²² Respondents answer most of the questions in the survey face to face with an interviewer in a computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI), while they answer a smaller number of questions in a self-completion booklet.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) funded three modules of questions in the 2017 survey:

- The first module was a set of detailed **income** questions. Historically, BSA has asked respondents for their household income using a single banded question, resulting in information that is not very detailed, and is prone to under-reporting. To overcome this, for the 2016 survey NatCen developed detailed income questions that allowed for a more precise categorisation of people by income. We used the same questions and methodology in the 2017 survey.
- The second module was a set of questions about **work**, which covered topics such as career development, job quality and job security, as well as attitudes of the public towards the role of employers and the state in supporting individuals and households. This is the subject of this report.
- The third module was a set of questions about **Brexit**, covering how individuals voted in the 2016 referendum on whether the UK should leave the European Union, as well as public expectations about how migration, economic conditions and social services will be affected as a result of the UK's exit from the European Union. This is the subject of a forthcoming report written by NatCen and published by JRF (Curtice et al, 2018).

We completed most of the fieldwork between July and October 2017, while a very small number of interviews took place in November 2017. We calculated response rates as having a lower limit of 45.4% and an upper limit of 46.1%.²³ The data have been weighted to account for unequal selection probabilities and non-response and calibrated to match the population profile on the basis of age, sex and region. All differences described in this report (between different groups of people) are statistically significant at the 95% level or above, unless otherwise specified.

Income variable

The new income module in BSA 2017 consisted of separate questions asking each respondent for their income and their partner's income from employment, self-employment, pensions, benefits and tax credits, and any other sources of income. We also collected mortgage or rent costs from respondents. From these questions, we derived an income variable, defined as the net total household income from all sources, after housing costs and equivalised to account for household size according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) companion scale, which assigns a weight of 0.58 to the first adult, a weight of 0.42 to all other adults and children aged 14 or over and a weight of 0.2 to all younger children.²⁴ We excluded certain disability benefits from the total income because these relate to specific monetary outgoings that a person will have because of their disability.

We collected data on the income of respondents and their partners but not data on the income of the entire household. This was due to high item non-response for 'other adult' income questions at the questionnaire piloting stage, and the high respondent burden for people in multi-adult households. To correct for this, in the income analysis we did not include respondents who were financially dependent on an adult/s in the household other than their partner.

Appendix B: Non-linear regression analysis

To ascertain the factors associated with different attitudes, we employed a non-linear regression analysis, specifically binary logistic regression (see Table B1).

Table B1: People’s aspiration to move up in their job in the next five years – logistic regression

	Coefficient	Standard error	P-value
Age (continuous)	-0.110	0.009	0.000
Equivalised ‘after housing costs’ income quintiles			
Lowest income quintile (reference group)	–	–	–
Second income quintile	0.172	0.325	0.597
Third income quintile	0.081	0.306	0.790
Fourth income quintile	0.234	0.297	0.432
Highest income quintile	-0.101	0.304	0.739
Gender (female)	-0.429	0.173	0.013
Constant	5.097	0.445	0.000
R squared (adjusted)			0.231
Weighted base			970
Unweighted base			970

Notes

1. Full question wording: 'Please tick one box for each statement below to show how much you agree or disagree with it, thinking of work in general.'
 - A job is just a way of earning money – no more.
 - I would enjoy having a paid job even if I did not need the money.
2. Full question wording: 'Some people think that paid work can be good or bad for a person's physical [mental] health. Taking everything into account, do you think that for most people paid work is generally good for physical [mental] health, or bad for physical [mental] health?'
3. Full question wording: 'I'd like you to think about someone who has been off work from their office job with a back problem [depression]. They have been off for a few weeks but are starting to feel better. Their employer is happy for them to come back to work and has offered to provide support for their return. Using this card, please say when you think this person should be expected to return to work?'
 - As soon as they can do some of their job.
 - As soon as they can do most of their job.
 - Not until they can do all of their job.
4. Full question wording: 'To what extent do you agree or disagree...? Both the man and the woman should contribute to the household income.'
5. Full question wording: 'To what extent do you agree or disagree...? A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family.' This difference decreased, but remained statistically significant, after using logistic regression to control for age and gender.
6. Full question wording: 'Would you say that, in general, men and women are equally suited to doing all jobs: almost all, most, some, a few or are there no jobs to which men and women are equally suited?'
7. Full question wording: 'Do you think that women should work outside the home full time, part time or not at all under the following circumstances?'
 - When there is a child under school age.
 - After the youngest child starts school.
8. Full question wording: 'Many people would like to change certain aspects of their jobs. Looking at this list, which if any, of these would be the first [second, third] thing you would like to change about your job?' Unlike the broader attitudinal questions, only people who were in work at the time of the survey were asked this question.
9. Full question wording: 'Which of these statements comes closer to your view?'
 - Employers should be made to pay a wage that would cover a basic cost of living.
 - People are responsible for finding work that pays enough to cover the cost of their living.
 - (spontaneous) It depends.
10. Full question wording: 'Do you think the minimum wage should be increased, reduced or kept at the same level it is now?'
11. Full question wording: 'Some working couples with children find it hard to make ends meet on low wages. In these circumstances, do you think...'
 - The Government should top up their wages?
 - Or, is it up to the couple to look after themselves and their children as best they can?
 - Can't choose.

'And what about working couples without children? If they find it hard to make ends meet on low wages, do you think...

- The Government should top up their wages?
- Or, is it up to the couple to look after themselves as best they can?
- Can't choose.

'And what about working lone parents? If they find it hard to make ends meet on low wages, do you think...

- The Government should top up their wages?
- Or, is it up to the parents to look after themselves and their children as best they can?
- Can't choose.

12. Full question wording: 'Who do you think should mainly be responsible for making sure a worker has the skills or training they need to do their job effectively [take on more responsibility at their current place of work, get a better job at a different place of work]?'
 - Mainly the person themselves.
 - Mainly their employer.
 - Mainly the Government.
13. Two-fifths (62%) of the poorest fifth of the sample wanted to move up in their job in the next five years, compared with half (52%) of the richest fifth. Meanwhile, a third (35%) of the poorest fifth of the sample wanted to stay at their current level, compared with two-fifths (42%) of the richest fifth. Full question wording: 'Would you like to move up to a job with more responsibility in the next five years, or would you prefer to stay at the level you are at?'
14. Full question wording: 'Do you think that employers should or should not be expected to allow part-time or flexible working for workers who need to take care of members of their family?'
15. Full question wording: 'How easy or difficult is it for an employee at your workplace to manage their workload if they have care responsibilities at home? Now thinking about someone with your job who moved up to a job with more responsibility, how easy or difficult would it be for them to manage their workload and their care responsibilities at home?'
16. Full question wording: 'Consider a couple who both work full time and earn roughly the same amount, and now have a newborn child. Both are eligible for paid leave if they stop working for some time to care for their child. How should the mother and father divide the paid leave period between them?'
17. Full question wording: 'How confident are you that you will be working in 12 months' time? This may be in your current job or in a future job.'
18. Full question wording: 'How difficult or easy do you think it would be for you to find a job at least as good as your current one?'
19. The difference between income quintiles was not statistically significant.
20. Full question wording: 'Overall, how likely do you think it is that in the next 10 years, machines and computer programs will do many of the jobs currently done by humans? Do you think this will definitely happen, probably happen, probably not happen or definitely not happen? And what about your own job? How worried, if it all, are you that in the next 10 years, your job might be done instead by machines or computer programs?'
21. Apart from in 1988 and 1992 when BSA core funding was used to fund the British Election Study series.
22. For more technical details on the survey methodology, see www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/technical-details.aspx

23. The response rate was calculated as a range from a lower limit where all unknown eligibility cases (for example, the address is inaccessible, or it is not known whether the address is a residential one) are assumed to be eligible and therefore included in the unproductive outcomes, to an upper limit where all these cases are assumed to be ineligible and therefore excluded from the response calculation.
24. For more information on standard equivalisation, see DWP (2014).

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