

# Overtime – What Motivates the Sacrifice?

*A qualitative study of overtime workers in South Wales*

## Motivation

Workweeks in the UK are among the longest and least regulated in Europe, exceeding 48 hours for 28% of paid overtime workers in particular (Resolution Foundation, 2017). According to the simplified labour supply model, overtime workers award less value to their leisure time and maximise utility by sacrificing more of it. However, this conceals important trade-offs likely to be involved in their decision, given the proven impact of extended working hours on wellbeing combined with financial constraints on household budgets. Despite affecting a large number of workers, this area is critically under-researched and largely absent from public debate.

Why do people work overtime?

To what extent is the decision to work overtime felt as a choice?

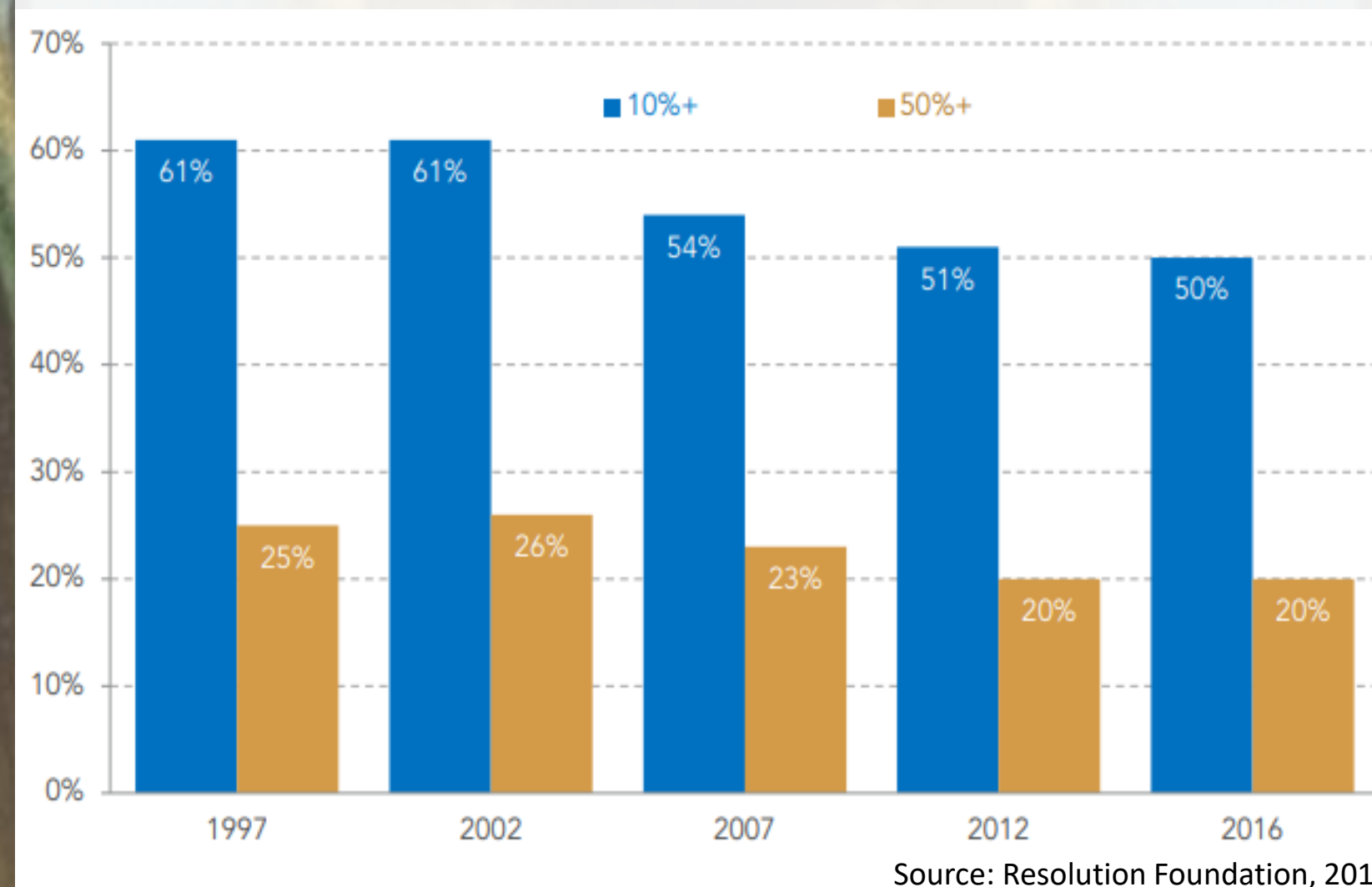
## Setting

- Factory in South Wales
- 1,400+ employees
- High-paid, high value-added work
- Regional economic lifeline, attracts millions in state investment
- Window into contemporary industrial working culture, of which overtime is a key component

## Methods

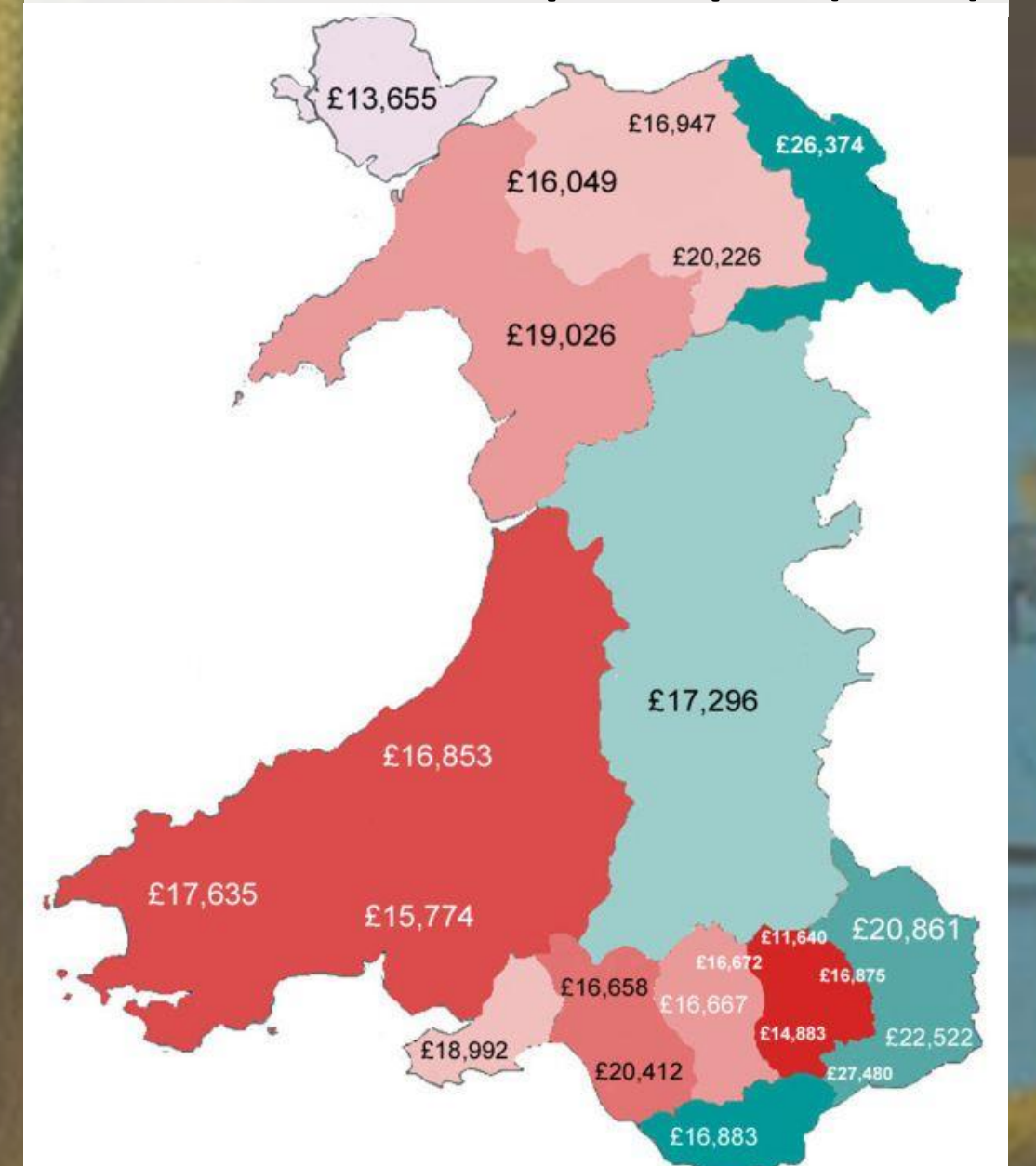
- Semi-structured interviews
- One-on-one and focus groups
- 5 male factory engineers aged 40-70

Proportion of GB employees receiving overtime premia of at least 10% or 50% (1997-2016)



Workers in the sample were paid 1.5 times their base wage for overtime hours. Only 20% of GB employees receive premiums at least as generous as this (Resolution Foundation, 2017).

Gross Value Added per Capita (2016)



Average productivity (GVA/capita) in Wales is lower than in any other region at 73% of the UK figure and 41% of the London figure (ONS, 2017).

## Findings

1. Overtime workers with young families were motivated by the responsibilities of a **breadwinner**, funding mortgages and general expenditure on children. Work schedules were synchronised so as to minimise their impact on family wellbeing.  
*"I spent 17 years working nights, which then gave me more opportunity to be home at the times when my daughter was around when she was small"*
2. As workers' families matured, overtime became a mechanism for **fulfilling lifestyle aspirations**.  
*"[Overtime] was always a choice, because you could always say no. But if you want the nicer things in life, you have to work for it."*
3. Interviewees identified a group of **"grabbers"** motivated by greed.  
*"I think a lot of it is greed. Purely because there's endless amounts of money you can earn."*
4. Workers felt a **professional obligation** to work overtime, reflected in pressure from both management and colleagues.  
*"It's a professional thing, isn't it? We need these engines, we need to put the hours in, so whether or not you need the money, you come in."*
5. Workers were unphased by the potential impact of overtime on their physical health, demonstrating incredible **resilience**.  
*"By working a 70-hour week, that becomes the norm, and you become conditioned to it, and you just carry on."*
6. Workers felt **privileged** on account of their factory's favourable working conditions, frequently comparing them to those in neighbouring factories where overtime was unavailable or used as a lifeline in the face of low base wages.  
*"They kept the basic down, and people with children and mortgages had to work overtime. There was no life balance."*

## Conclusion

Though overtime was technically voluntary for the workers in our sample, closer inspection revealed a number of important restrictions on their labour supply. Even for those who were now free from the financial burdens of a young family, overtime hours were constrained by a dominant workplace overtime culture and to the extent that the living standards they were used to achieve were seen as non-negotiable. Their incredible resilience in the face of important time sacrifices was drawn from their connection to their role within the wider production process and recognition that their working conditions compared favourably to those elsewhere in the region. Thanks to their generous base wages, at no point was overtime a necessity in the name of subsistence. A key area for further research is how workers reconcile competing demands on their time and income where this is not the case.