

Why teachers cannot recall their working hours

Ask a hospital nurse how many hours they worked last week and they can tell you by recalling their shifts, then adjusting for any times they failed to leave on time.

Ask a receptionist how many hours they worked last week and they can tell you their contract hours.

Ask a teacher how many hours they worked last week and you are likely to be waiting a while before they can respond. Why?

Even though everyone agrees that teacher workload is [relatively high in England](#), nobody is really sure how many hours teachers in England are actually working. The highest estimates come from the Department for Education's [Teacher Workload Surveys](#) of 2013 and 2016, where full-time teachers report working an average of 57 hours a week, with school leaders working considerably more.

Other surveys, including Understanding Society and OECD TALIS survey, [report](#) a much lower figure of 50 hours a week during term time. Equally, whilst DfE workload surveys have tended to show working hours increasing in recent years, Understanding Society shows no change in working hours between 2009/10 and 2015/16.

It is hard to know which of these weekly working hours reports is the most trustworthy. Here at Teacher Tapp we think the problem is that recalling weekly working hours isn't easy for a teacher to do. So we wanted to contrast it with an alternative approach of asking working hours every single day.

For seven consecutive days from 20th November to 26th November, inclusive, we asked: How many hours in total did you work yesterday? (Please exclude commuting time and include all teaching, planning, marking and meeting time).

On the 28th November we asked a comparison question: How many hours do you think you worked last week? In total, 854 panellists, who work full-time, answered all the questions. So we took a closer look at their data.

On the daily log, the average hours reported was 53.5 hours.

On the weekly question, the reported hours were higher at an average of 56.1 hours.

The differences in working hours between phases and by teacher sex, age and experience are not particularly significant. However, middle leaders report an average of 3.0 extra hours a

week over and above classroom teachers without significant responsibilities. Furthermore, senior leaders report an average of 6.9 extra hours a week over the same classroom teachers. These differences are consistent with other surveys.

How consistently do teachers recollect their working hours?

Each question asked panellists to report daily or weekly working hours within quite wide bands, so there was a good chance the responses would match. The table below shows the frequency of inconsistency between daily and weekly responses for each weekly response option we gave them.

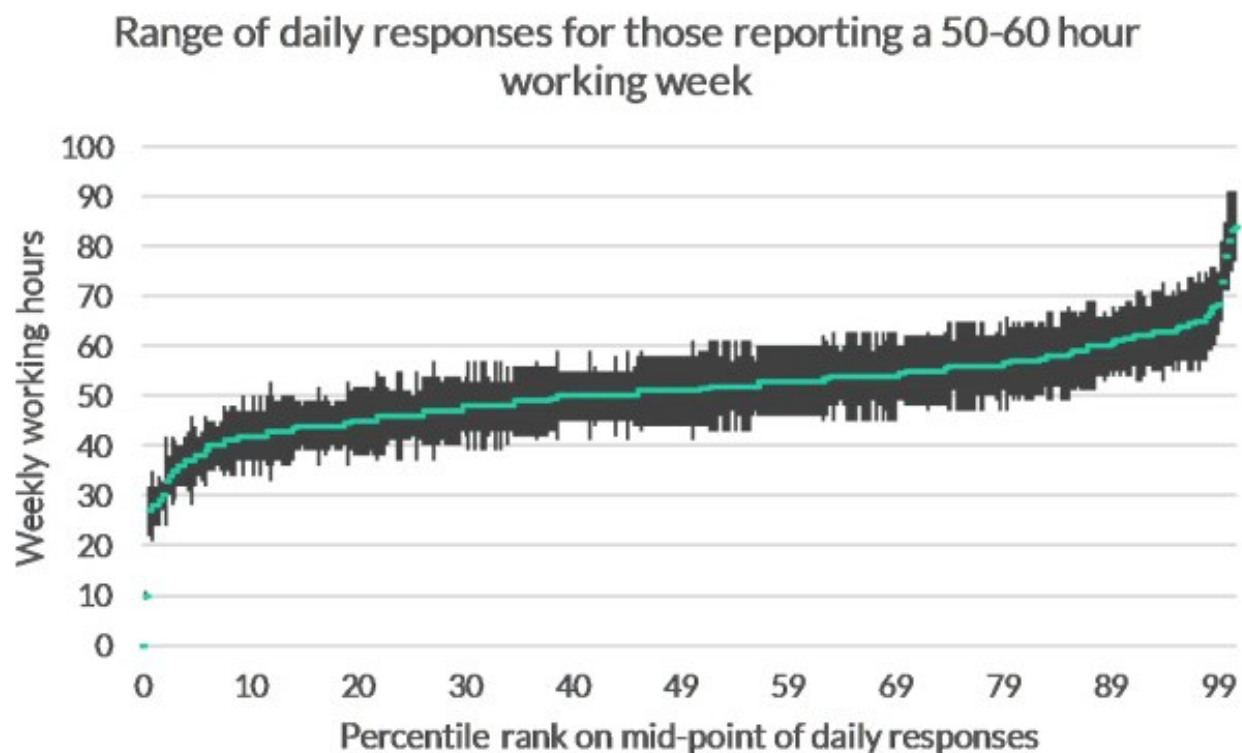
	Week is underestimate	Weekly response is within daily response bands	Week is overestimate
Under 30 hours	1	24	0
Over 30 and under 40 hours	5	35	1
Over 40 and under 50 hours	12	180	16
Over 50 and under 60 hours	6	279	51
Over 60 and under 70 hours	2	129	39
Over 70 and under 80 hours	0	24	23
Over 80 and under 90 hours	2	6	6
Over 90 and under 100 hours	0	1	3
Overall	28 (3%)	678 (80%)	139 (16%)

Frequency of consistencies and inconsistencies between weekly response and daily log

Overall, 4 in 5 teachers calculate their weekly working hours to fall within the same rough range as their daily responses.

However, 1 in 5 do not, and almost all of those over-estimate their weekly working hours, compared to the daily log they provide. There is no individual group of teachers who seem to be more likely to overestimate than others.

The chart below includes everyone who reported a 50–60 hour working week and calculates the minimum and maximum possible values from their daily logs (remember each daily log isn't a precise number of minutes). For this group, the mean average from their daily responses was just within the 50–60 hour band at 51 hours. Moreover, although the range of hours calculated from the daily log crosses the 50–60 hour band over 80% of the time, it is also true that almost 40% have a mid-point of their daily logs that is under 50 hours.



Why are teachers having difficulties in recalling their weekly hours?

Teachers are relatively unusual, compared to other professions, because the hours they must work (i.e. lesson time) amounts to only about half of their total working hours. And unlike other professions, there is no concept of overtime pay and so no need to log working hours.

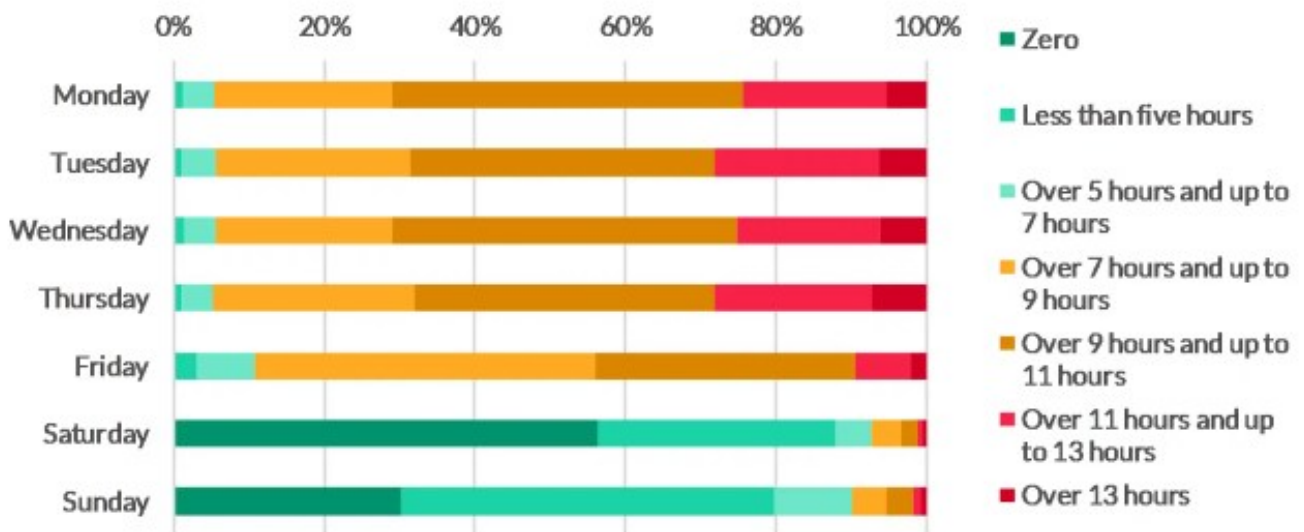
Let's start by thinking about the time at school. Should lunch break be included in working hours? Well, it depends on what you do during that time! Almost a quarter of our teachers are running a lunch-time club for all or part-of the year. When asked, a third say they regularly use their lunch-break to create resources and almost half use it to tidy their classroom.

On any particular day, about half of teachers have at least one 'duty', whether it's overseeing the start of the day, break-time, lunchtime, the home-time or detentions. The day rarely ends when lessons end for teachers. In any particular week, just 6% report they had no after-school meetings or activities. Most teachers have end-of-day commitments at least twice a week.

The majority of teachers find they need to take work home. This isn't surprising – they are either exhausted by 4:30pm or they have caring duties. So, once dinner is over, they return to marking and planning. How productive is this and is it purely work? That's hard to say, but on any given weekday about 4-in-10 teachers tell us they marked in front of the television last night.

At the weekend, the majority of teachers work at some point, particularly on a Sunday in preparation for the week ahead. (See graph below).

Daily working hours over the week



Then we turn to the holidays, which aren't really fully holidays for teachers. Over one Christmas break, only 1-in-5 said they did no work at all and 13% said they did 5 or more days. Over a half-term holiday, over half tell us they planned lessons, one-third marked books or tests, one-in-ten ran a revision session or trip with pupils, and over half spent time reading books or blogs relevant to their teaching.

What 'counts' as work among these activities is different from person-to-person and keeping accurate track of it is almost impossible. It isn't likely that teachers are purposely over-estimating their worktime, but that they've got so much going on, spread across so much of the week, that it feels even more overwhelming in retrospect than when surveyed on a day-to-day basis.

Does this mean that workload surveys aren't to be believed? Definitely not. But it does should we need to be careful to check on the timescales across which they are asked and bear in mind this can affect the estimates.

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[Planning tool from Tom Sherrington \(teacherhead\)](#)

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