The French National Assembly recently reduced the standard workweek from 39 hours to just 35. France followed the Netherlands, which began a program in 1988 to reduce the workweek to a mere 36 hours in certain sectors. In addition, there is proposed legislation to install workweek constraints in the European Economic Community.

In the United States, since passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, the average length of the workweek has not changed drastically. The distribution of workers around the average, however, has changed, quite noticeably in recent years. The number of persons working 49 hours or more has increased, while the number of those working the standard 40 hours a week has declined. In addition, there are large differences in the average workweek across occupations—meaning that any attempts to establish hours constraints in the U.S. would affect occupations and sectors differently.

One factor leading to the increase in hours is the influx of baby boomers into the labor force. This generation has moved into the prime working age range of 25 to 54. Individuals in this age group are more likely to work full time, in contrast to younger and older workers who tend to occupy more part-time positions.