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Everyday administrative burdens and inequality

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Abstract

Administrative burdens create costly experiences for citizens, especially disadvantaged groups. Research to date focuses on how burdens affect outcomes in specific policy contexts, thus little is known about cumulative experiences of burdens in everyday life and their distribution in society. This is the first study to document everyday administrative experiences, accounting for time and well-being costs across 10 domains: tax, retirement, government benefits, bills, goods and services, savings, debt, health, child care, and adult care. Survey results from 2243 UK adults show that administrative tasks are a significant part of everyday life, with time and well-being costs that vary by domain. Benefits-related tasks are particularly costly. There is evidence of distributive effects. Those in poor health and financial insecurity are more likely to engage in salient tasks, such as benefits, but less likely to engage with longer-term tasks including savings and retirement. They experience higher well-being costs, especially during salient tasks.

Evidence for practice

- Citizens experience significant amount of administrative burdens in daily life from a broad range of domains, such as government benefits, bills, and health among others.
- Tasks related to government benefits generate the highest well-being costs of all administrative domains, ahead of debt and tax.
- Disadvantaged citizens experiencing health issues or financial insecurity are more likely to report spending time on tasks related to government benefits, health, and debt, and they face higher well-being costs, especially during tasks relevant to their disadvantage.
- Strategies to tackle administrative burdens should consider citizens' overall administrative workload and should consider focusing administrative assistance on disadvantaged groups.

INTRODUCTION

Administrative tasks are ubiquitous in daily life. They underlie processes from applying for welfare programs to switching insurance providers, returning goods, or claiming tax credits. These processes impose costs on citizens, thereby shaping policy outcomes. These costs are studied as administrative burdens (Herd & Moynihan, 2019) and through the related concept of "sludge," or frictions, in the behavioral public policy literature (Sunstein, 2021). Administrative burdens can significantly impact people's lives, for example by impeding access to education (Dynarski et al., 2021), government benefits (Fox et al., 2023), and healthcare (Fox et al., 2020). Furthermore, they may disproportionately prevent disadvantaged groups, such as older, sicker, or poorer citizens, from accessing key services (Christensen et al., 2020). Hence administrative burdens are a feature of everyday life that may exacerbate inequality.

Current understanding of how people experience administrative burdens is limited as most empirical evidence comes from policy case studies that analyze the

effect of specific burdens on individuals' choices and outcomes (e.g. Fox et al., 2020). This leaves two important evidence gaps. First, it does not allow for observing cumulative burdens in everyday life across a broad range of contexts. Case studies usually focus on policy implementation in specific domains such as health or social policy, while burdens in essential consumer domains such as bills are studied as sludge or transaction costs (Shahab & Lades, 2021). Yet both types of burdens involve costs and have policy implications. As the combined effects of these burdens are rarely studied, information on comparative costs, total administrative workload, and potential trade-offs between tasks is missing. Second, little is known about the experiences of administrative burdens in everyday life, such as how much time people spend on various tasks, and how they feel during these tasks. Yet experiences are crucial to understand the impact of administrative burdens. Burdens are defined as costly experiences of interacting with policies (Moynihan et al., 2015), and involve time and well-being costs (e.g. Hattke et al., 2020; Holt & Vinopal, 2023), yet these costs are rarely accounted for. Experiences can also help identify distributive effects, as theoretical literature suggests that disadvantaged groups may have more time-consuming or emotionally draining experiences during burdensome processes (Christensen et al., 2020).

This study proposes and empirically documents the concept of "everyday administrative burdens." It uses original survey data from 2243 UK adults to measure administrative experiences in daily life, focusing on time and well-being costs across 10 domains: income and tax, retirement, government benefits, bills, goods and services, savings, debt, health, child care, and adult care. The survey is based on "evaluated time-use" survey methods (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006) and asks participants how much time they spent on various tasks in each domain over the past day or month, and how they felt during these tasks.

The results provide new insights into administrative burdens and inequality. Participants report spending approximately between 0.5 and 1.5 h per day (in the prorated "past month" group and the "yesterday" group, respectively) on administrative tasks on average. Tasks relating to bills, goods and services, and savings take up the most time on average. However, there is substantial heterogeneity, with the minority of people who engaged in administrative tasks relating to government benefits and child- or adult care incurring significant time costs. Well-being costs vary significantly depending on the type of task conducted, with the highest costs associated with government benefits, debt, and tax, while the lowest costs (i.e. the highest levels of well-being) are associated with tasks relating to children, goods and services, and savings. The study explores the distribution of everyday burdens in society, focusing on older age, poor health, and financial insecurity. It finds that the experiences of disadvantaged groups differ from those of the rest of the population. They are more likely to engage in tasks particularly salient to them like health, debt, and government benefits, but less likely to engage with savings and, except for older people, retirement. Well-being costs are higher for those with poor health and low financial well-being across all domains, but especially those relevant to their disadvantage, such as benefits.

Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of administrative burdens. It is the first to empirically document administrative experiences in daily life across multiple domains, and it accounts for time and well-being costs, which are central to administrative burden theory yet seldom captured in empirical research. In doing so, the study shows that administrative burdens are a significant, varied part of everyday life, beyond specific case studies or their target populations. The study also shows important distributive effects. Some disadvantaged groups experience higher time and well-being costs, suggesting that everyday administrative burdens are a channel of inequality. The study does not claim causality, but rather it demonstrates that these groups experience systematically higher costs from administrative tasks in their daily life.

The study is structured as follows. First, we propose the concept of everyday administrative burdens and discuss how it can help advance current understanding of administrative burdens. We then summarize the survey methodology and data. Finally, we present our results and discuss their implications and limitations. We conclude with key takeaways for policy.

DEFINING EVERYDAY ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS

Administrative burdens are defined as the costs experienced by citizens when they interact with policy, for example in the context of a means-tested welfare program. Citizens may face learning costs when researching the program and its rules, psychological costs from the stress and stigma created by the application process, and compliance costs from the requirement to provide documentation to prove their eligibility (Herd & Moynihan, 2019). Our study focuses on measuring the presence, impact, and distribution of administrative burdens in daily life. We define "everyday administrative burdens" as costly administrative experiences across domains in everyday life, including domains traditionally studied in the administrative burden literature such as government benefits, but also domains where citizens may indirectly interact with policy as consumers or employees, such as bills and pension. We measure these experiences through time-use and well-being. As a result, everyday burdens provide a simple, quantifiable, comparable measure of citizens' experiences of common administrative processes rooted in existing theoretical frameworks.

Burdens across domains

Everyday administrative burdens result from interactions with policy in a range of domains. The administrative burden literature is arguably fragmented, with different disciplines focusing on different domains (see Madsen et al., 2020). Public administration research focuses on domains related to direct citizen–state interactions, such as government benefits. Behavioral science and economics research on sludge (Sunstein, 2021) and transaction costs (Shahab & Lades, 2021) extends to interactions in consumer domains such as bills, savings, and goods and services. Some recent studies have united these two literatures by highlighting the behavioral factors of administrative burdens (e.g. reviews in Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022; Halling & Bækgaard, 2022; Herd and Moynihan 2022). However, the public administration literature focuses mainly on social and health policy domains (e.g. benefits), and seldom studies domains relating to citizens' lives as consumers (e.g. bills, debt) or employees (e.g. tax, pension), for example. Our study on everyday administrative burdens encompasses all these contexts for four reasons. First, burdens in "consumer" or "employee" domains are often determined by policy and thus need to be included in our study to understand the cumulative impact and distribution of burdens. As argued by Moynihan et al. (2015), 44), "*any context in which the state regulates private behavior or structures how individuals seek public services is a venue to study the burdens imposed in that process*." For example, recent behavioral policies in the UK include an intervention by the energy regulator to automatically switch consumers to better tariffs and thus reduce learning and compliance costs (Ofgem, 2019), and a pensions reform that removed the burden of enrolment from employees (e.g. Arulsamy & Delaney, 2022). Second, burdens across domains often have the same costs, from complex forms to frustrating interactions (e.g. filling out paperwork for an essential service vs. a government benefit). Third, as we measure burdens "in daily life" and thus across many processes for each domain, processes within a domain may be classified as either "consumer" or "social" policy depending on the individual – for example, in the health domain, a UK citizen may interact with the public system or use private insurance. Lastly, accounting for a broad range of domains helps investigate distributive effects at scale, as accumulated burdens may be costlier for disadvantaged groups who are likely to face burdens from many different domains, as argued by de Bruijn (2021, 190).

This study identifies and quantifies everyday burdens in the form of administrative tasks resulting from policies and processes, across 10 domains. For example, registering a child for free school meals is an administrative task, but feeding a child is not. Calling an electricity provider to switch tariffs is an administrative task, but calling a friend to plan a trip is not. In both cases the latter is not an administrative tasks as they do not involve interacting with an institution (such as the government or a service provider) or their policies. More generally, the tasks and domains used in this study (see methodology section for full list) involve common processes identified in the administrative burden and sludge literatures, such as researching options, communicating with organizations, fulfilling paperwork requirements, and managing services, in various contexts.

Time and Well-Being costs

Time and well-being costs are a simple and meaningful measure of burden grounded in theory. Administrative burden theory conceptualizes burdens as a function of learning, psychological, and compliance costs (Moynihan et al., 2015). Learning costs arise from collecting and assessing information, while compliance costs involve following rules and requirements. A key feature of both types of costs is the time spent researching and complying with policies (Moynihan et al., 2015). Hence time costs approximate a significant share of learning and compliance costs. Likewise, well-being costs approximate psychological costs, and the closely related concept of emotional responses (see Carrigan et al., 2020, 47–50). Psychological costs include factors such as stigma, autonomy loss, or stress, while emotional responses may include frustration or confusion. Subjective well-being is based on ratings of various feelings and offers a simple, universal measure of subjective experiences (e.g. OECD, 2013). Concepts such as autonomy loss are more difficult to capture via well-being, though this study includes feeling "competent" as a survey item. However, Döring and Madsen (2022) argue that stress, which is also a survey item, results from autonomy loss. Hence subjective well-being either directly or indirectly accounts for key aspects of psychological costs.

Through accounting for time and well-being costs, the concept of everyday administrative burdens offers a quantifiable and comparable measure of how people experience common administrative processes. While not every burden involves specific costs like complex paperwork or stigma, many burdens can be measured in terms of time-use and well-being. Hence creating a composite measure of burdens that captures these costs by domain helps answer the need for a comparable measure of burdens across domains noted in recent literature (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022; Halling & Bækgaard, 2022) and it allows for a societal-level "sludge audit" assessing the costs created by frictions in basic services (Sunstein, 2020a). However, this approach is restricted to burdens involving time-bounded tasks. It excludes burdens that are not tied to specific tasks, such as ongoing psychological costs from the "ever-present threat" of benefits sanctions for those receiving government benefits in the UK (Dwyer et al., 2020, 318). It also excludes burdens tied to *not* taking action, such as autonomy loss from compliance requirements forbidding asylum seekers

from working (UK Government, 2022) or the time costs of waiting for basic services (Holt & Vinopal, 2023).

Time costs

Administrative burden has been described as a time tax on citizens (Lowrey, 2021). In the US, for example, people spend over 11 billion hours on federal paperwork yearly, most of them on tax and health-related burdens (Sunstein, 2020b, 92–102). Moynihan et al. (2015) note the time-consuming nature of burdens related to welfare programs. Time costs may thus be higher for disadvantaged groups, who often have to navigate a number of complex demands due to their disadvantage (Döring & Madsen, 2022). For example, they may spend more time on administrative domains such as health (if in poor health), retirement (if older), or finances (if financially insecure). Holt and Vinopal (2023) find that those on a low income and Black people spend more time waiting for basic services in domains such as health and goods and services. Qualitative evidence finds that the time needed to access government programs can deter vulnerable groups from applying (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021). Furthermore, these groups may be differentially impacted by seemingly universal burdens. In the UK, following the digitization of the welfare system, those without computers have to spend time accessing public computers to claim benefits (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Finally, disadvantaged groups may have to prioritize between tasks if they face competing demands. Christensen et al. (2020) argue that when people face a scarcity of resources, they may focus their time and energy on urgent administrative tasks, or tasks with immediate benefits, rather than tasks with payoffs further into the future. For example, they may prioritize short-term needs like bills over demanding long-term tasks like a pension.

Well-Being costs

Administrative processes may impact subjective well-being, for example if they are seen as stressful or stigmatizing (Moynihan et al., 2015). A laboratory experiment (Hattke et al., 2020) found that participants facing burdens expressed confusion, frustration, and anger. More generally, household tasks classified as "admin" are often seen as something most people "would be glad to spend less time doing" (Emens, 2015, 1420), and removing administrative demands on citizens accessing government benefits can reduce psychological costs (Baekgaard et al., 2021). Well-being costs may be higher for disadvantaged groups if they spend more time on administrative burdens in total, or more time on tasks that are least pleasant. Moynihan et al. (2015) note that processes typically undertaken by disadvantaged groups, such as applying for public assistance, can involve negative or degrading interactions with officials. In the UK, the automation of the welfare system has led to volatile and unpredictable payments, leading to significant stress and worry for claimants (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Ethnographic research describes the confusing, frustrating, and humiliating process of obtaining identification documents for genderqueer individuals, a marginalized group (Nisar, 2018). Disadvantaged groups also have more to lose if a debt resolution, benefits claim, or bill refund is unsuccessful (Schilbach et al., 2016), which may exacerbate the negative well-being effects of burdens. Finally, those who are older, sicker, or financially insecure may have particularly negative experiences with administrative processes. Christensen et al. (2020) argue that people in these groups are especially averse to tasks seen as dull or time-consuming such as filling out paperwork, less psychologically resilient to stressful or demeaning interactions with service providers, and more likely to experience emotional distress from frustrating experiences like clunky processes. For example, evidence from the US and Denmark finds that people with health problems have significantly more negative experiences with administrative burdens (Bell et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This study uses original survey data. The study was preregistered[1] (https://osf.io/4tq67) and all study materials are available on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/cykja/). Ethical approval was obtained from University College Dublin's human research ethics committee. The questionnaire draws on best practice from the field and methodological literatures, and on the results of two pilot studies. This section summarizes the survey design and describes the data collection and sample.

Survey design

Demographics

The questionnaire asks participants about their age, gender, education, employment status, household income, and household composition. They rate their physical and mental health on 5-point scales ("very bad" to "very good") and their financial well-being using a 5-item subjective questionnaire from the US Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) (2017), in which participants rate the following statements: "because of my money situation, I feel like I will never have the things I want in life"; "I am just getting by financially"; "I am concerned that the money I have or will save won't last"; "I have money left over at the end of the month"; and "my finances control my life". Participants' financial well-being scores are computed on a 0–100 scale based on these items, using CFPB guidelines.[2]

Administrative domains

The survey focuses on 10 administrative domains: income and tax, retirement, government benefits, bills, goods and services, savings and investments, debt, health, child care, and caring for adults, with five common tasks in each domain; this includes an "other administrative tasks" option to account for unlisted relevant tasks. For each domain, we ask participants whether they engaged in any administrative tasks in these domains over either the past day or month – we randomized the unit of response. To help participants, they are shown the list of common tasks (see Table 1). To create this list, we first drafted a list of domains and commonly associated burdens based on the administrative burden and sludge literatures, government lists of policy areas, and literature from other fields, such as law on "admin" (Emens, 2015), and economics on time-use and unpaid work (e.g. Veerle, 2011). We excluded very infrequent burdens such as voting. We ran a first pilot study with 50 participants where we presented each domain with examples of tasks and asked participants to describe recent administrative tasks they had completed in this domain, and to provide feedback on the domains themselves. We then created an updated list based on responses to this pilot and ran a second pilot study with 50 new participants to ensure the tasks were relevant, unambiguous, and that the survey was not excessively long or difficult. Table 1 presents the final list of domains and associated tasks used in the survey.

Time-Use and Well-Being

The measurement of time and well-being costs was an important design choice. Time-use surveys are useful for quantifying unpaid tasks that may otherwise be difficult to observe. The Eurostat Time Survey tracks time-use on household management including paperwork (Eurostat, 2019), while the American Time Use Survey includes social services and financial management (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). However, existing time-use surveys do not provide sufficiently specific or comprehensive measures of administrative time-use, and seldom measure subjective well-being during tasks. Fortunately, "evaluated time-use" methods (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006, 9) such as the day reconstruction method (Kahneman et al., 2004) allow for measuring these experiences. The day reconstruction method collects detailed information about everyday life with a high degree of feasibility. Our study adapts this method to measure the time and well-being costs of administrative tasks. Participants are randomly assigned to questions about either the past day or month, to balance the benefits of short, recent timescales for minimizing recall bias, with those of covering a longer period to capture infrequent tasks. We piloted two further timescales (3 and 6 months), but they did not lead to significantly more reports of tasks than the past month group, hence we did not use them in the final survey.

The questions are simple and task-specific to help minimize bias and avoid irrelevant tasks being reported. We show participants five tasks for each domain they engaged in. For example, tasks in the "bills" domain are managing bills, reviewing or renewing plans, contacting providers, researching deals, and other bills-related administrative tasks. We ask participants how many times they engaged in each task over their randomized period, and how long the task usually took them. Time costs for each domain are calculated by multiplying each instance by length of each task and adding up all five tasks. To measure well-being costs, we ask participants to rate various feelings during tasks for each domain they engaged in, adapting the day reconstruction method's measurement of subjective well-being. We selected six items based on the day reconstruction method and administrative burden literatures: happy / enjoying myself; competent / capable; frustrated / annoyed; bored / impatient for it to end; stressed / under pressure; and worried / anxious, rated on a 0–6 scale from "not at all" to "very much."

Data collection and sample

The survey data were collected online in July 2021, following two pilot studies carried out in May and June. Participants were recruited via Prolific, a survey recruitment platform aimed at academic research. The survey took on average 12 min to complete – this varied based on the timescale group and the number of relevant domains.[3] Participants were compensated via a small monetary reward (£2.50) in line with institutional ethical guidelines.

The sample includes 2243 adult UK residents. A nationally representative sample in terms of age, sex, and ethnicity was first recruited to ensure diversity, totaling 1500 participants. We then collected an additional 743 responses, targeting a mix of older people, people with health issues, and people across the income scale, using Prolific's recruitment filters. One additional participant submitted two responses, which were both dropped due to inconsistency. The study focuses on three facets of disadvantage: older age, poor health, and financial insecurity. Older people are defined as those aged 65 or older and comprise 14 percent of the sample. People with health issues are those who report either their physical or mental health as "bad" or "very bad", and represent 15 percent of the sample. The study uses two indicators of financial insecurity: a yearly household income below £20,000, which accounts for 27 percent of the sample excluding those with undisclosed income, and a financial well-being score in the bottom quintile of the sample, which is 19 percent of the sample by construction.

Table 2 summarizes the sample's demographics. The sample is not fully representative by construction, as 743 responses are from target groups we wished to

TABLE 1 Administrative tasks surveyed for each domain.

Domains	Tasks shown to participants
Income and tax	1. Filing pay slips or managing income paperwork 2. Declaring income and paying taxes 3. Researching or claiming tax credits 4. Managing other tax issues (e.g. checking tax code) 5. Any other administrative tasks (e.g. paperwork, research, communications) on income or tax
Retirement	1. Researching pensions (e.g. age, eligibility, payments) 2. Researching and choosing a pension plan 3. Managing a pension plan (e.g. making payments, checking statements) 4. Contacting the government or a private provider about your pension 5. Any other administrative tasks (…) (as above)
Government benefits	(Participants were shown examples of benefits that may be applicable, e.g. welfare programs relating to income, work, housing, and household bills). 1. Researching benefits 2. Applying for benefits 3. Providing documentation or doing assessments to show eligibility for a benefit 4. Contacting government offices about your benefits 5. Any other administrative tasks (…) (as above)
Bills	(Participants were shown examples of specific bills that may be applicable, relating to household utilities, local services, insurance, telecoms, etc.) 1. Managing bills (e.g. setting up direct debit, checking, paying, and filing bills) 2. Reviewing/renewing plans (e.g. insurance, phone) 3. Contacting providers (e.g. to resolve issues) 4. Researching better deals/providers, switching deals 5. Any other administrative tasks (…) (as above)
Goods and services	(Participants were told to include all goods/services aside from regular bills and were given example tasks such as buying appliances or organizing deliveries.) 1. Researching and comparing deals for a product 2. Contacting a company or customer service 3. Claiming a discount, using a warranty, returning an item, disputing a charge 4. Tracking the delivery of an item 5. Any other administrative tasks (…) (as above)
Savings and investments	1. Reviewing savings and investments (e.g. check accounts, view statements) 2. Researching savings accounts, Individual Savings Accounts, bonds, investments, or other options 3. Opening a new savings or investment account 4. Deciding how much to save and paying into savings or investment accounts 5. Any other administrative tasks (…) (as above)
Debt	(Participants were shown a list of relevant types of personal and household debt, loans, and lines of credit to consider.) 1. Researching/applying for loans/credit (incl. refinancing/switching lenders) 2. Managing loans/credit (e.g. making repayments, checking statements) 3. Communicating with lenders/creditors 4. Researching/applying for government support/financial advice on loans/credit 5. Any other administrative tasks (…) (as above)
Health	(Participants were given examples of benefits that may be applicable, such as the Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payment.) 1. Researching or applying for health-related benefits 2. Finding a doctor or a specialist 3. Scheduling appointments and communicating with health professionals 4. Filling out health paperwork (e.g. health insurance claims, General Practitioner/hospital forms) 5. Any other administrative tasks (…) (as above)
Caring for children	(Participants were given examples of benefits that may be applicable, such as child benefit, parental leave, and free school meals.) 1. Researching or applying for child-related benefits 2. Communicating with a child's school (e.g. letters, calls, texts, emails) 3. Scheduling appointments for a child (e.g. healthcare) 4. Filling out paperwork for a child (e.g. school, healthcare, activities, banking) 5. Any other administrative tasks (…) (as above)
Caring for adults	1. Helping with managing an adult relative or loved one's bills, pension, benefits, or finances 2. Helping with their healthcare or home care paperwork/administration 3. Researching other services or filling out other paperwork for them 4. Applying for assistance (e.g. Carer's Allowance) 5. Any other administrative tasks (…) (as above)

TABLE 2 Sample demographics.

	Mean/%	SD
Age (years)	42.85	16.87
Female (%)	.60	.49
University degree (%)	.51	.50
Full-time job (%)	.39	.49
Household income <£20,000 (%)	.27	.44
Living with children (%)	.30	.46
Living with spouse/partner (%)	.56	.50
Health (from 1 to 5)	3.76	.75
Financial well-being (from 0 to 100)	52.63	12.41
Observations	2243	

Note: Health is the average of physical and mental health, self-reported on 5-points scales ("very bad" to "very good"). Financial well-being scores are based on the US Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's (2017) 5-item questionnaire. 127 participants (6% of the sample) did not disclose their income. 28 participants (1% of the sample) did not disclose their gender or identified outside the gender binary. These participants are excluded from summary statistics on income and gender and from models that use these variables.

TABLE 3 Time costs for each domain.

	Full sample	Engaged participants only	
	Time per day (minutes)	Number of participants	Time per day (minutes)
Income and tax	2.2	483	10.4
Retirement	2.2	364	13.5
Government benefits	2.1	287	16.6
Bills	10.8	1390	17.4
Goods and services	15.9	1661	21.5
Savings and investments	9.3	1257	16.7
Debt	3.8	669	12.9
Health	5.1	958	11.9
Caring for children	3.1	401	17.6
Caring for adults	4.2	298	31.6
Total daily time	58.8		63.1

Note: Time-use is prorated daily for the past month group. Engaged participants in each domain are those who did any administrative tasks in this domain. Total daily time is averaged over the whole sample for "full sample" and over the subsample of those who engaged in at least one task for "engaged participants".

oversample. It skews female and university educated, reflecting the fact that 60 percent of Prolific's UK users are female and 37 percent hold a degree according to Prolific's active users database at the time of the study. However, overall it is a large sample with good socio-economic diversity, allowing for reliable comparisons of different groups. More generally, the recruitment platform used in this study has performed favorably in recent studies in terms of participants' diversity, comprehension, attention, and honesty (Peer et al., 2017, 2021), and provides a high level of transparency between participants and scholars, which is beneficial to data quality (Palan & Schitter, 2018) The potential limitations of this approach are considered in the discussion section.

RESULTS

The results highlight the time and well-being costs of everyday administrative burdens, and the distribution of these burdens across population groups, focusing on older age, poor health, and financial insecurity.

Time costs

Participants report an average total administrative time-use of 1 h per day (see Table 3). This estimate varies between the "yesterday" group, which reports a daily average of 85 min, and the "past month" group, which reports a (pro-rated) daily average of 32 min. This may reflect higher recall bias in the "past month" group. As expected, the past month group engaged in more domains, averaging 4.6 domains compared with 2.6 for the yesterday group. The most reported domains include goods and services, which 75 percent of the sample reported engaging with bills (64 percent of the sample) and savings (57 percent of the sample), followed by health and debt. The least reported domains relate to caring for adults and government benefits, with 14 percent of the sample engaging in each of these domains, followed by slightly higher engagement with retirement, child care, and tax. These patterns hold within both time-scale groups (see Table S1).

Table 3 presents average time costs for each domain. The most frequent domains – goods and services, bills, and savings – also have the highest time costs, between 9 and 16 min a day each. However, when restricted to participants who engaged in each domain, the highest time costs are associated with government benefits and caring for children or adults, alongside the previous three domains. In other words, while few people engage in administrative tasks relating to care work or benefits, those who do incur significant time costs.

Disadvantaged groups' total time costs differ somewhat from the rest of the sample. Older people report spending 21 min less on administrative tasks, and those on low incomes, 7 min less, compared with their non-disadvantaged peers. On the other hand, those with poor health or low financial well-being report spending more time on tasks than the rest of the sample; 9 and 13 min more respectively (see Table S2). However, regression analysis finds that these differences are only significant for older people (see Table S3). These patterns are rarely significant when using alternative specifications, such as a two-part model accounting for null

observations, or a model using the full variation in age, health, and financial indicators rather than binary group variables (see Tables S4 and S5).

Examining time costs by domain highlights how different groups allocate their time. A two-part model first estimates the likelihood of engaging in each domain using logistic regressions, and linear regressions are then used to examine time costs on the sub-samples of those who engaged with each domain. Table 4 presents that each group focuses on the domains most salient to them. Those in poor health, on a low income, or who have low financial well-being are significantly more likely to engage in government benefits-related tasks – by 7, 12, and 11 percentage points respectively. Those in poor health are more likely to engage with health tasks, and those with low financial well-being are more likely to engage with bills and debt. Older people are more likely to engage with bills and retirement. However, people with poor health, low income, or low financial well-being are less likely than others to engage with their savings and pension. Note that disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged groups differ mainly in their probability of engaging in each domain, and less so in the time they report spending on this domain once engaged, as there are few significant results in the second part of the model. However, older people report spending less time on most domains, and those on low incomes report spending 4 min less on savings, and those with poor health, 7 min more on health. Alternative specifications with demographic controls, linear regressions, or using the full variation in age, health, and financial indicators confirm these results, though they often reduce in size or statistical significance (see Tables S6–S8). Most notably, being female and having children living in the household (especially the latter) are both positively and significantly associated with engaging with children-related tasks, and when these variables are included in the analysis, coefficients for the older and poor health groups are no longer significant although still negative (see Table S6); this may be due to these groups being less likely to have children living in the household.

Well-Being costs

Subjective well-being varies significantly depending on the task. Administrative tasks relating to child care, goods and services, and savings are associated with the highest "positive affect" (average of happy/enjoying myself and competent/capable) and the lowest "negative affect"

TABLE 4 Time costs differences between groups, by domain (two-part model).

	Tax	Pension	Benefits	Bills	Goods	Savings	Debt	Health	Children	Adults
Part 1: Logistic regression (probability of engaging in domain, marginal effects)										
Older	−.04	.06**	−.03	.08***†	−.05*	−.00	−.04	−.02	−.17***†	.01
	(.03)	(.03)	(.02)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.02)	(.02)
Bad health	−.04	−.09***†	.07***†	−.02	.00	−.09***†	−.04	.13***†	−.04**	−.02
	(.03)	(.02)	(.02)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.02)	(.02)
Low income	−.05**	−.06***†	.12***†	−.01	−.05**	−.07***†	−.09***†	.01	−.11***†	.01
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
Low fin. WB	.02	−.04*	.11***†	.09***†	−.04	−.10***†	.21***†	.01	.07***†	.01
	(.03)	(.02)	(.02)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.02)	(.02)
Observations	2116	2116	2116	2116	2116	2116	2116	2116	2116	2116
Part 2: Linear regression (time costs in minutes, conditional on non-zero time-use in that domain)										
Older	−6.13***†	−1.45	−2.90	−4.80**	−6.02***†	−5.49***†	−4.80**	−4.18**†	11.27	−2.09
	(1.89)	(3.07)	(6.80)	(2.10)	(1.86)	(1.88)	(2.26)	(1.65)	(11.63)	(7.41)
Bad health	−.56	.71	−1.82	−1.81	.19	1.61	5.12	7.12**†	−7.97*	38.79*
	(2.72)	(6.07)	(4.88)	(2.44)	(2.78)	(2.90)	(4.05)	(2.86)	(4.51)	(21.54)
Low income	.31	.31	5.62	−1.63	−2.46	−3.98**	.34	1.62	−.66	−8.80
	(2.46)	(3.61)	(6.43)	(2.23)	(1.97)	(1.84)	(2.98)	(2.05)	(4.53)	(9.73)
Low fin. WB	−.33	1.46	.11	3.08	2.53	−3.11	4.05	−.31	2.59	9.30
	(2.59)	(4.60)	(6.06)	(2.79)	(3.30)	(2.33)	(3.09)	(2.46)	(6.04)	(13.61)
Constant	10.97***	13.65***	14.73***	18.05***	22.27***	18.63***	11.57***	10.39***	18.13***	26.33***
	(2.02)	(1.92)	(4.02)	(1.33)	(1.13)	(1.25)	(1.31)	(1.43)	(2.35)	(5.82)
Observations	460	354	276	1323	1570	1201	653	907	389	282

Note: The first part of the model shows marginal effects on the likelihood of engaging in each domain. The second part shows time-use coefficients and is conditional on having spent a non-zero amount of time on the domain, as reflected by the number of observations. Participants who did not report their income are excluded. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$, †$p < .05$ after Benjamini–Hochberg correction for multiple hypothesis testing.

(average of frustrated/annoyed, bored/impatient for it to end, stressed/under pressure, and worried/anxious), in other words, they are associated with the highest levels of well-being (see Table S9). On the other hand, tasks related to debt, tax, and most of all government benefits, show the lowest positive affect and the highest negative affect (i.e. the lowest levels of well-being). Health tasks are also associated with high negative affect. To reliably compare well-being costs across domains, we use within-person models. These models remove individual-level effects, thus reducing bias induced by happier people being more (or less) likely to engage in some domains. Figure 1 shows the results of these models (see Table S10 for underlying regressions) and confirms the pattern found in the descriptive statistics: administrative tasks relating to tax, debt, and especially benefits have the highest well-being costs (i.e. the highest negative affect and lowest positive affect), while child care, goods and services, and savings have the lowest well-being costs. Exploratory analysis using the same within-person models but with individual items instead of aggregated positive and negative affect finds that participants are more frustrated and bored during benefits-related tasks compared with other high-costs domains such as tax and debt (see Table S11). They are also more stressed and worried during benefits and debt-related tasks compared with tax tasks, and they feel the least competent during benefits tasks. The high well-being costs of government benefits are noteworthy as these tasks also involve high time costs for those who engage in them. Finally, linear regressions of net (positive minus negative) affect on time-use by domain find that for most domains, spending more time on tasks is associated with a small and often statistically insignificant decrease in well-being (see Table S12). Thus, lengthier tasks are not necessarily associated with poorer well-being.

Disadvantaged groups experience different well-being costs from the rest of the sample. We examine inequalities in well-being using participants' average net affect across all domains, weighting each domain by its relative size in participants' total administrative time-use. Regression analysis shows that those with poor health or low financial well-being have significantly lower levels of well-being, and older people, significantly higher well-being (see Table S13). People on low incomes do not differ from the rest of the sample. Alternative specifications replicate these patterns (see Table S14).

Analyzing well-being costs by domain can identify whether some tasks are especially costly for disadvantaged groups. This is useful because the observed patterns in overall well-being may reflect baseline differences. For example, older people tend to report higher subjective well-being (Steptoe et al., 2015). Table 5 presents the relationship between group membership and well-being (net affect) by domain, using linear regressions. Those with poor health and low financial well-being have lower levels of well-being across all domains. These differences are particularly large in domains most relevant to their disadvantage. For example, those with low financial well-being particularly differ from the rest of the sample when dealing with debt, savings, and benefits, while those with poor health have the lowest relative levels of well-being compared with other groups during tasks relating to health, benefits, and retirement. There is no significant association between low income and well-being during tasks. Being older is associated with higher levels of well-being across almost all domains, but especially so for domains that other groups may find

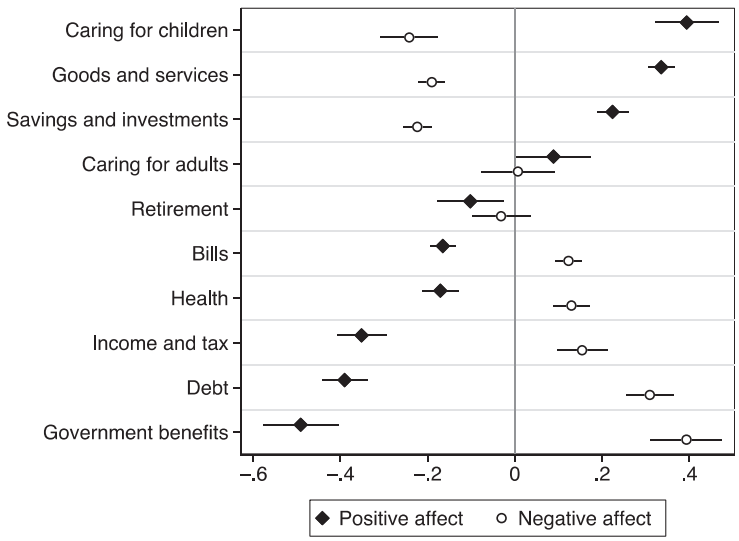

FIGURE 1 Within-person effects of administrative tasks on well-being, by domain. Marginal effects on standardized affect (*z*-scores) with 95% confidence intervals. Positive affect is the average of happy/enjoying myself and competent/capable. Negative affect is the average of frustrated/annoyed, bored/impatient for it to end, stressed/under pressure, and worried/anxious.

TABLE 5 Well-being differences between groups, by domain.

	Well-being (net affect) in each domain									
	Tax	**Pension**	**Benefits**	**Bills**	**Goods**	**Savings**	**Debt**	**Health**	**Children**	**Adults**
Older	1.04**†	.44	.79	1.41***†	.55***†	.99***†	1.43***†	1.15***†	−1.29**	.14
	(.41)	(.34)	(.53)	(.18)	(.17)	(.19)	(.28)	(.21)	(.64)	(.40)
Bad health	−1.05***†	−1.74***†	−1.36***†	−1.25***†	−.74***†	−1.05***†	−1.08***†	−1.22***†	−.50*	−.67*
	(.36)	(.59)	(.32)	(.17)	(.16)	(.22)	(.27)	(.20)	(.30)	(.40)
Low income	−.20	−.18	.09	−.20	.13	−.15	.22	−.06	−.63**	−.45
	(.29)	(.34)	(.28)	(.14)	(.13)	(.16)	(.24)	(.18)	(.31)	(.31)
Low fin. WB	−1.30***†	−.92**	−1.55***†	−1.37***†	−.73***†	−1.76***†	−2.22***†	−.45**	−.57**†	−.41
	(.28)	(.43)	(.31)	(.15)	(.14)	(.20)	(.21)	(.20)	(.24)	(.34)
Constant	.76***	1.70***	.10	1.13***	2.01***	2.30***	.70***	.71***	2.08***	1.31***
	(.16)	(.17)	(.23)	(.09)	(.07)	(.09)	(.13)	(.10)	(.13)	(.18)
Observations	476	356	281	1336	1565	1191	662	923	397	285

Note: Observations vary because only participants who engaged in a particular domain are asked to report well-being for this domain. Participants who did not report their income are excluded. Net affect can range from (−6) to (+6) and is computed by subtracting negative affect (average of frustrated/annoyed, bored/impatient for it to end, stressed/under pressure, and worried/anxious) from positive affect (average of happy/enjoying myself and competent/capable), with each item rated on 0–6 scales. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$, †$p < .05$ after Benjamini-Hochberg correction for multiple hypothesis testing.

particularly taxing, such as debt and health. Alternative specifications using demographic controls and the full variation in age, health, and financial indicators confirm these patterns (see Tables S15 and S16). Notably, after controlling for having children, differences in well-being during child care-related tasks become larger for the low income and low financial well-being groups.

DISCUSSION

This study proposes a framework for studying everyday administrative burdens and empirically demonstrates the role of administrative burdens in everyday life. It is the first study to compare the costs of burdens across different domains. Participant report spending between 32 (past month group) and 85 min (yesterday group) per day on administrative tasks on average. This shows that burdens represent a significant part of daily life, not only for specific target groups or policies, but across a large and diverse sample. Time costs are particularly high for tasks in consumer domains, such as bills or goods and services, however government benefits also impose high time costs on the minority of people who engage with them. This is important as government benefits are associated with the highest well-being costs, alongside debt and tax. Interestingly, tasks such as goods and services or savings have high average time costs but are associated with some of the lowest well-being costs. Likewise, child-related tasks have the lowest well-being costs despite being time consuming for the minority of people who engage in them. These findings suggest that administrative burdens are determined not only by objective measures such as the time spent on a task, but also by individuals' views of the task itself, and these two dimensions may not be related. Indeed, in most domains, there is no relationship between domain time-use and domain well-being. It may be that child-related tasks generate intrinsic satisfaction, while benefits or debt are seen as more adversarial, regardless of the time spent on these tasks. Other important factors may be at play: costly tasks such as benefits, debt, and tax may involve uncertain or negative outcomes and intertemporal trade-offs with payoffs far in the future, while tasks related to children, goods and services, and savings may involve lower stakes, more positive framing, or pay off sooner.

The study explores the distribution of everyday burdens in society. It shows that administrative burdens may exacerbate inequality via higher time and well-being costs for disadvantaged groups, such as those with poor health and low financial well-being. We find that these groups report spending slightly more time on administrative tasks overall. They are more likely to engage in time-consuming tasks such as government benefits (both groups), debt (low financial well-being group), and health (poor health group), which are more salient to them. However, they are also less likely to engage with beneficial longer-term tasks such as savings and retirement. One interpretation is that disadvantaged groups face trade-offs between tasks in line with scarcity theory, which argues that people prioritize salient tasks at the expense of longer-term tasks when resources are scarce (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013; evidence review in de Bruijn & Antonides, 2022). Alternatively, some tasks may simply be less relevant to these groups, though engaging with savings and retirement would still be beneficial to them. The results build on Holt and Vinopal' (2023) finding that disadvantaged groups such as those on a low income and Black people spend more time waiting for basic services overall. Indeed, our study adds to this

evidence base by illustrating the time costs experienced by those with low income but also older people and those with low financial well-being and poor health, across a wide range of non-waiting tasks, as well as comparing the costs of different domains (such as health or benefits). We also find that those with poor health and low financial well-being report systematically lower levels of well-being across all domains. This may reflect baseline group differences, as people who are disabled or have a lower socio-economic status tend to have lower subjective well-being (Mental Health Foundation, 2018; UK Office for National Statistics, 2019). Furthermore, differences are especially large in domains salient to these groups' disadvantage, such as benefits, debt, and health. These tasks are also among those with high overall well-being costs, thereby further exacerbating inequality. Overall, the findings provide empirical evidence to support the arguments that disadvantaged groups face different, often higher administrative demands (Emens, 2015), and significantly worse well-being costs (Christensen et al., 2020).

Important findings on the role of income and age also emerge. Those with low income show the same time-use patterns as the low financial well-being group regarding benefits, retirement, and savings. However, unlike the low financial well-being group, the low income group does not experience higher well-being costs. A potential explanation is that people with low income resemble those with low financial well-being in their objective need to access benefits and reduced scope for savings, which explains their similar time-use patterns. However, those with low income do not necessarily experience higher well-being costs from administrative tasks as well-being costs depend on subjective perceptions of financial insecurity that low-income households do not necessarily have. Recent evidence has found that low subjective income, but not low income itself, leads people to hold more negative opinions about public sector workers, which could help explain why financial well-being, but not income, is associated with higher well-being costs in domains involving interactions with the government (Bertram et al., 2022). Finally, older adults have less costly experiences than others. They report spending less time on administrative tasks overall, but focus this time on tasks salient to them such as bills and retirement. They also report higher levels of well-being than younger groups, consistent with evidence on age and subjective well-being (Steptoe et al., 2015). It may also be that older people who answer online surveys are not the ones experiencing the cognitive decline thought to drive the adverse effects of burdens on older people (e.g. in Christensen et al., 2020).

This study has several limitations. The results may be affected by survey design choices. For example, while the results show that administrative burdens create significant time costs, the study's ability to precisely estimate these costs is limited, as shown by the significant difference between the yesterday and past month groups' reported daily time-use. This is likely due to greater recall bias in the past month group. In addition, although the study uses a large and diverse sample, there are still potential biases from using an online survey, such as a more educated sample, and from collecting data at a particular point in time, such as seasonal effects. The results may also be specific to the UK context, hence not all results may be generalizable to other settings; for example, tax-related time costs are likely to be greater in the US given its different tax administration system which places a larger onus on individuals. Importantly, our study uses observational data, and therefore we do not claim the results as causal. Instead, we illustrate everyday experiences of administrative burdens, and systematic differences between disadvantaged groups and other participants. Finally, our results may under-estimate both the overall and distributive costs of administrative burdens due to sample selection bias. Individuals who chose to take part in the survey are likely to find administrative tasks less costly than the general population, and participants from disadvantaged groups are likely to be less burden-averse than is typical for their group, as the survey itself is an administrative task that they selected into. Furthermore, a recent review of digital exclusion in the UK found that older people, people with health issues impacting device use, and financially vulnerable people are disproportionately digitally excluded (Ofcom, 2022), and thus less likely to participate in an online survey. Hence disadvantaged participants in our survey may not be fully representative of their population groups. Thus, our results may under-estimate distributive effects in the population.

The study suggests several avenues for future research. The first is to replicate the study in different countries to understand the generalizability of the results and how time and well-being costs in various domains and socio-economic groups may vary across countries with different administrative and sector regulation regimes. The second is to test whether the costlier experiences of disadvantaged groups translate into a lower willingness to experience burdens. For example, a survey experiment using high and low-burden scenarios could test whether the distributive effects in this study are under-estimated due to selection bias: if disadvantaged groups are less willing to experience burdens, it may be that they would report even higher costs from unobserved everyday tasks that they chose not to select into. A third avenue of research could combine the methods used in this study with other sources of evidence to estimate time costs with more accuracy, for example by combining evaluated time-use surveys with real-time measurement of tasks. This could involve directly observing participants during a task (building on lab studies such as Hattke et al., 2020) or regularly prompting participants via texts or notifications to report on current or just-finished tasks (adapting the experience sampling method, Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 2014). Finally, this study focused on age, health, and financial inequality, but did not

examined gender inequality within households, which could play an important role as accounting for gender impacted results on children-related tasks. Burdensome tasks may be allocated based on gender norms or intra-household bargaining, following similar patterns to other unpaid work such as house or care work, hence they could be a source of gender inequality within the household.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates administrative burdens in everyday life. It is the first to empirically document everyday administrative experiences across domains, as most evidence focuses on outcomes within specific case studies. As a result, the study accounts for two key dimensions of burdens which are central to theory yet seldom captured in empirical research: time-use and well-being. Through this approach, the study shows that administrative burdens are a significant part of everyday life in society, involving time and well-being costs across a range of domains. The study shows that some disadvantaged groups experience higher burdens, notably those with poor health and low financial well-being. These groups focus on different administrative demands than their non-disadvantaged peers, such as government benefits, and are less likely to engage in longer-term tasks like savings. They experience higher well-being costs than the rest of the sample across all domains and report disproportionately high costs from domains relating to their disadvantage. Hence everyday administrative burdens matter, both as universal experiences and as a channel of inequality.

The results have important policy implications. First, administrative burdens impact time-use and well-being in everyday life, hence public actors should carefully consider whether they will add to this workload when designing new policy processes. Second, consumer domains such as bills or goods and services have high time costs, suggesting that these domains should be considered in administrative burden policy alongside more commonly discussed domains such as government benefits and healthcare. Third, government benefits impose high time costs on those who engage with them and are associated with the highest well-being costs, suggesting a need for reform. Lastly, this study shows that everyday burdens are regressive. Some disadvantaged groups experience higher costs from administrative processes. Practitioners should be aware of the scale and variety of burdens experienced by these groups. These results suggest a way forward for policy: if the same process is costlier for disadvantaged groups, resources such as application assistance or fast-track processes should target these groups.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This article reports the pre-registered analyses on everyday administrative burdens and age, health, and financial inequality. A second article will report the gender-related analyses (in the present study, gender is included as a demographic control in models with controls). A third article will report the survey experiment results.

[2] Financial well-being scores differ from simply summing items as they are adjusted for age patterns and administration mode and translated into a 0–100 score for ease of comprehension. We used the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's dedicated Stata package to compile these scores, as per their technical report (US Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 2017). Our code files are available on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/fecd3/).

[3] The median time spent completing the survey was 10 min. The lowest time was 1.9 min – this participant had no relevant domains. Out of 143 participants with survey times under 5 min, 90% engaged in two or less domains, and 78% were in the yesterday group, where fewer domains are likely relevant (i.e. these participants had to complete fewer survey sections). The highest survey time was 967 min, likely due to a participant pausing the survey. Out of 188 participants with survey times over 20 min, 77% engaged in four or more domains, and 69% were in the past month group, where more domains are likely relevant.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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