

Americans appear to be working less. Numerous economic studies suggest that the number of hours that the average American works in a year has fallen by about 550 hours from 1900 to 2005.¹ The cut in hours worked presumably comes with the benefit of increased time devoted to leisure. Or does it? In two separate studies, economists Mark Aguiar and Erik Hurst and economists Valerie Ramey and Neville Francis found conflicting evidence on the trends in leisure time for Americans. What accounts for these differences? Is it simply alternative definitions of leisure, and, if so, which definition more accurately reflects what Americans view as leisure?

The New Leisure

The presumption that labor and leisure are inversely related is the foundation of many economic models. Time not spent at work must, by definition, be spent on leisure. An innovation of the two studies cited above is that they allow for non-market labor, i.e., hours spent outside the office performing chores not considered leisure. These activities include cleaning, cooking, commuting, etc. Although non-market labor activities might seem straightforward to define, in practice some activities, such as child-rearing, may be difficult to classify.

In their 2006 study, Aguiar and Hurst examined changes in the time allocated to market work, non-market work and leisure from 1965-2003 for working-age adults—those aged 21-65. The accompanying table shows the changes for the whole sample, as well as the changes broken down by gender. According to the authors, total time devoted to the market sector per week (paid hours plus commuting, breaks and meals) declined by 3.2 hours for all workers.² However, the trends for men and women were vastly different; the decline in men's total weekly market work was over three times larger than the increase in women's weekly hours. Similarly, total weekly non-market work (housework plus time spent obtaining goods and services and other home production) fell by 4.6 hours for all workers between 1965 and 2003. In this case, the decline in women's total weekly non-market work was three times larger than the increase in men's weekly hours. Thus, total weekly work (market plus non-market) decreased



Working Hard or Hardly Working?

The Evolution of Leisure in the United States

By Kristie M. Engemann and Michael T. Owyang

by 7.8 hours, with men and women experiencing similar overall declines.

Rather than defining leisure simply as the amount of time not spent on market and non-market work, Aguiar and Hurst defined four alternative measures of leisure. The first accounts for time spent on activities such as socializing, relaxing, active recreation and recreational child care (e.g., playing games with children). Overall, working-age adults spent 5.1 more hours on these activities in 2003 than in 1965 on a weekly basis. The authors' second measure, adding sleeping, eating and personal care to their first measure, increased by 5.6 hours during the sample period. Their third measure, which includes all previous activities plus primary and educational child care, increased by 6.9 hours.

Finally, their last measure of leisure is simply the residual from total work. The authors claimed that adults spent 7.8 more hours a week on leisure in 2003 using this last definition. Based on each of these measures then, adults have more leisure time than they did in 1965.

20th Century Trends in Per Capita Leisure

The 2006 study by Ramey and Francis provides another perspective, yielding seemingly different results. Rather than examining the allocation of time for working-age adults, the authors used the entire population to estimate changes in market work, home production and leisure from 1900-2004. In addition to the three components

used by Aguiar and Hurst, Ramey and Francis estimated the time allocated to school for their sample period.

The authors estimated that the average employed person worked 55 hours per week in 1900 but only 37 hours per week in 2004. Because school and homework are aimed at enhancing the productivity of future market work, Ramey and Francis included time spent on those activities as non-leisure. They found that school hours for those aged 5-22 rose from 330 to nearly 900 hours annually.³ After including commuting, time spent on market work and schooling per year declined by only 40 hours between 1900 and 2004.

For home production, Ramey and Francis included typical housework (meals, cleaning, laundry, etc.) plus basic child care and helping with school work. They found that the typical non-employed woman aged 18-64 spent 56 hours per week on housework in the early 1900s but only 45 hours per week since 1975. For employed women aged 18-64, home production hours remained steady—about 25 hours per week—throughout the entire period. Employed men aged 18-64, on the other hand, saw an increase in housework from 2-3 hours per week in the 1920s to 16 hours per week in 2004. For the entire population, annual hours on home production increased by 67 hours during the sample period.⁴

In their study, Ramey and Francis defined leisure time as time spent on activities that provide direct enjoyment. Hence, leisure is time not spent on market work, school work, commuting or housework. The authors found that the average person spent similar time on leisure in 1900 (6,657 hours) and in 2004 (6,634 hours). These translate into 128 hours and 127.6 hours of leisure per week in 1900 and 2004, respectively. During the same period studied by Aguiar and Hurst, Ramey and Francis' estimate of leisure time actually showed a slight decline in 2003 from the 1965 level.

Discussion

Are Americans enjoying more free time than they used to? Not if you ask them. Social scientists John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey found that in surveys conducted in various years between 1965 and 1995, Americans increasingly felt rushed. In 1965, 24 percent of respondents aged 18-64 "always felt rushed"; this percentage climbed to 38 percent in 1992, but then dropped to 33 percent in 1995. Moreover, the percentage of respondents who "almost never felt rushed" fell from 27 percent to 17 percent between 1971 and 1995.

Economists Daniel Hamermesh and Jungmin Lee offered a different interpretation. The authors studied people's perception of their time stress, finding that people who make more money—but did not work more hours—reported that they felt more stressed for time.⁵ Hence, the authors attributed at least part of the time stress simply to having too much money to spend, given the amount of time left after working.

These conflicting studies leave open this question of whether today's Americans actually have more leisure time than past generations had. The salient difference in these studies' conclusions appears to stem from what one considers leisure and who is being asked. Focusing only on working-age adults, as do Aguiar and Hurst, suggests that Americans enjoy more leisure now than in the mid-1960s. On the other hand, when school and work by children and retirees are included, Americans work about the same amount of time now as they did in both 1900 and 1965. However, no matter which definition of leisure is preferred, the broad conclusion is that Americans' leisure time is, at worst, the same now as it ever was—regardless of perception.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Total hours worked in business divided by the civilian non-institutional population aged 16 and older (Ramey and Francis 2006).
- 2 Aguiar and Hurst's results control for age, education, the day of the week that the survey was taken and family composition.
- 3 The results for school were due to both higher enrollment and more days attended.
- 4 The authors noted that the increase is due to changes in the composition of the population (e.g., retired people now make up a larger percentage).
- 5 Hamermesh and Lee controlled for health and various demographic characteristics (e.g., family composition, age and location).

REFERENCES

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Changes in Weekly Hours (1965-2003)

From study by Mark Aguiar and Erik Hurst

| | All | Men | Women |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Total market work (paid work, commute, breaks, meals) | -3.2 | -11.6 | 3.4 |
| Total non-market work (housework, time obtaining goods and services, other) | -4.6 | 3.7 | -11.1 |
| Total work (total market + total non-market) | -7.8 | -7.9 | -7.7 |
| Leisure 1 (socializing, relaxing, recreation) | 5.1 | 6.3 | 3.8 |
| Leisure 2 (Leisure 1 + sleeping, eating, personal care) | 5.6 | 6.4 | 4.9 |
| Leisure 3 (Leisure 2 + primary and educational child care) | 6.9 | 7.9 | 6.0 |
| Leisure 4 (total hours possible minus total work) | 7.8 | 7.9 | 7.7 |