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Elizabeth Weber Handwerker
Bureau of Labor Statistics

Lowell Mason
Bureau of Labor Statistics

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BLS Spotlight on Statistics: Differences in Parents' Time Use Between the Summer and the School Year

Abstract

Parents can face different constraints on their time during school vacations than during the school year. Although different schools follow different calendars, summer months are frequently a time when children are not in school. Using data from the American Time Use Survey, this Spotlight on Statistics looks at differences in time use between the summer and the school year among parents of school-age children.

Keywords

parents, time use, school calendar

Comments

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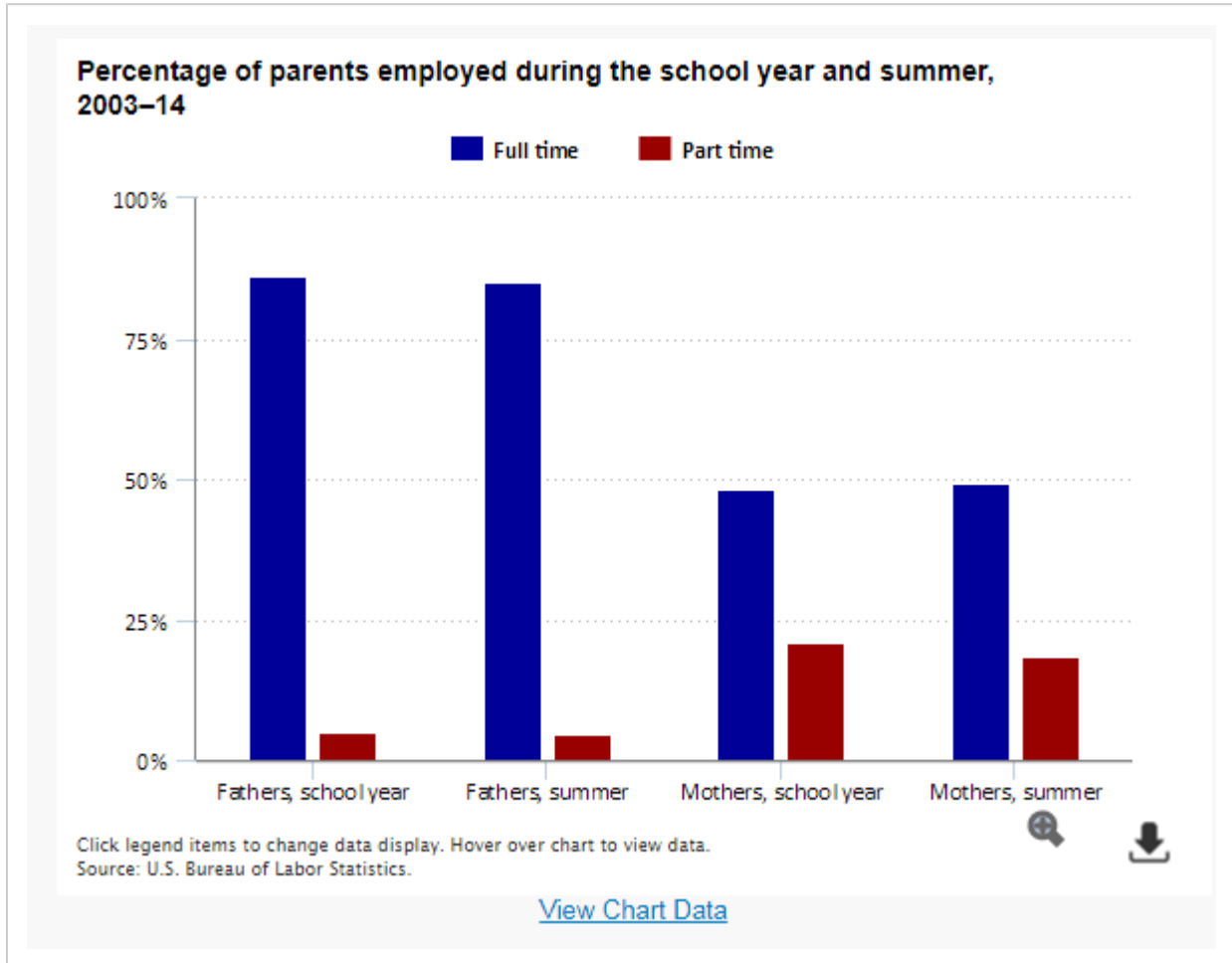
Differences In Parents' Time Use Between The Summer And The School Year

Elizabeth Weber Handwerker and Lowell Mason

Parents can face different constraints on their time during school vacations than during the school year. Although different schools follow different calendars, summer months are frequently a time when children are not in school. Using data from the American Time Use Survey, this Spotlight on Statistics looks at differences in time use between the summer and the school year among parents of school-age children.

Employment patterns of parents vary little between school year and summer

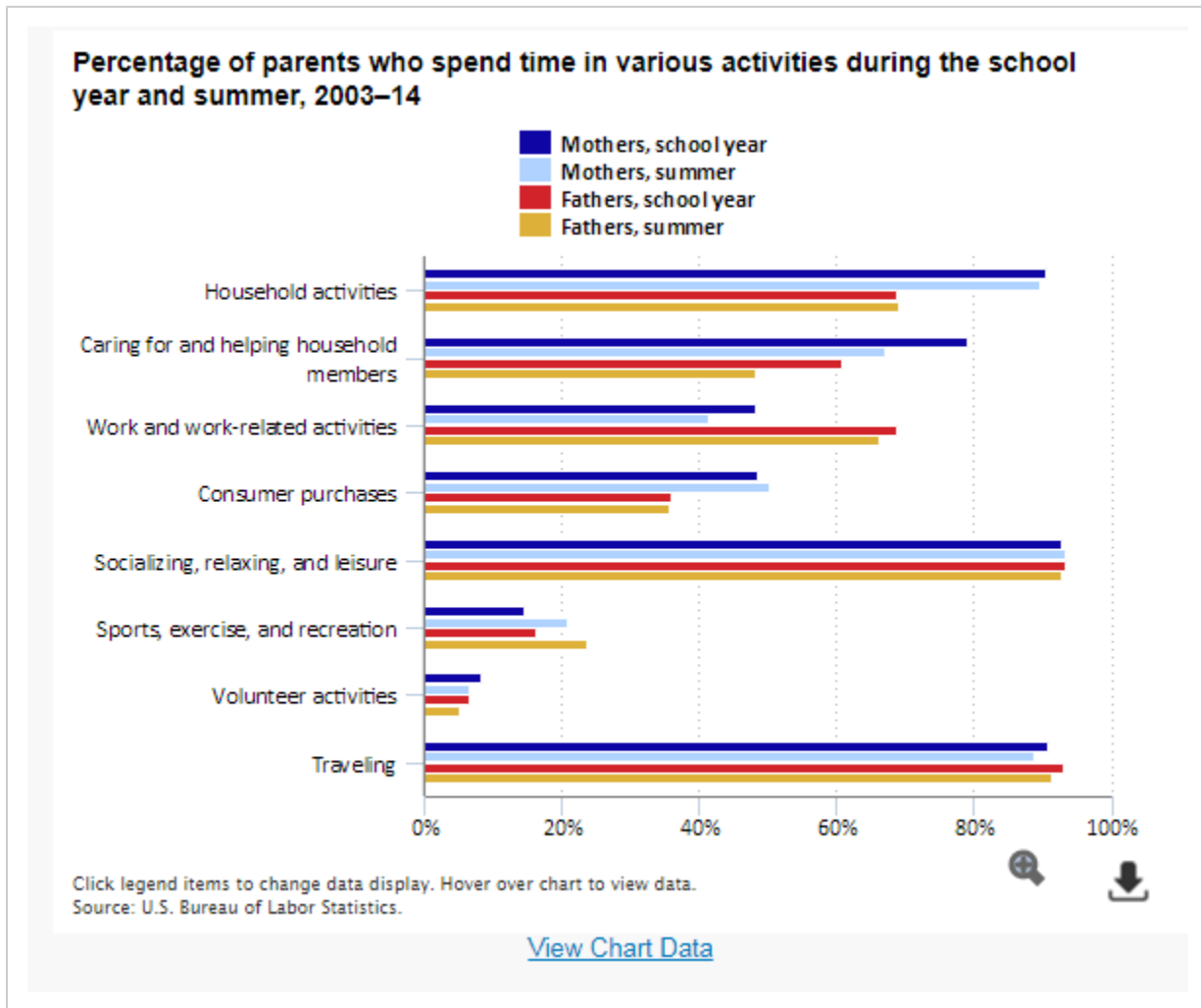
About 86 percent of fathers aged 25 to 54 with biological, step-, or adopted children aged 6 to 17 in the household work full time and 5 percent work part time. These numbers do not vary significantly between summer and the school year. About 48 percent of mothers aged 25 to 54 with biological, step-, or adopted children aged 6 to 17 in the household work full time, during the summer and the school year. Twenty-one percent of these mothers work part time during the school year, and 18 percent work part time during the summer. This difference is statistically significant.



Parents are more likely to spend time caring for household members during the school year

Mothers were more likely than fathers to spend time doing household activities during an average day. The percentage of mothers and fathers doing household activities did not vary significantly between the school year and the summer. Both mothers and fathers were significantly more likely to spend time caring for and helping household members during the school year than during the summer. Mothers were significantly more likely to spend time doing work and work-related activities during the school year than during the summer.

Mothers were also more likely than fathers to spend time on consumer purchases during an average day. The percentage of mothers and fathers spending time shopping did not vary significantly between the school year and the summer. Both mothers and fathers were significantly more likely to spend time doing sports, exercise, and recreation during the summer than during the school year. Both mothers and fathers were significantly more likely to spend time doing volunteer activities during the school year than during the summer. Both mothers and fathers were significantly more likely to spend time traveling (including commuting) during the school year than during the summer.

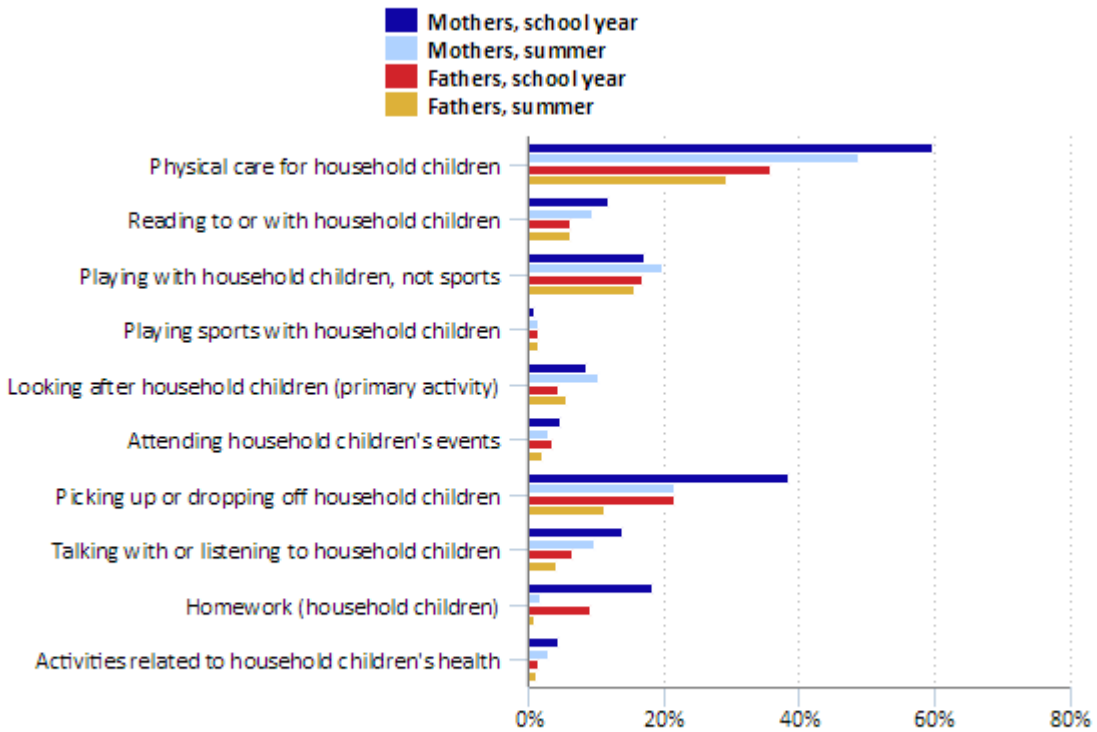


Parents are more likely to spend time caring for children in various ways during the school year

Both mothers and fathers were significantly more likely to spend time caring for and helping children in the household during the school year than during the summer. This kind of help can be broken into many specific tasks, many of which vary between the summer and the school year in the fraction of parents who report spending any time doing these tasks. Both mothers and fathers were significantly more likely to spend some time physically caring for their children during the school year than in the summer. This is time spent laying out clothes for children, waking children, feeding children, bathing children, dressing children, helping children get dressed, getting children ready for school, tucking children in at night, and so forth.

Mothers are significantly more likely to spend time reading to their children during the school year than during the summer. Mothers are more significantly more likely to spend time playing (both sports and engage in play other than sports) with their children during the summer than during the school year. Mothers are significantly more likely to spend time organizing and planning for their children or attending meetings and school conferences on behalf of their children during the school year than during the summer. Mothers are significantly more likely to spend time looking after children (as a primary activity, rather than while doing something else) during the summer than during the school year. Both mothers and fathers are more significantly more likely to spend time helping children with homework, attending children's events, waiting for children, picking up and dropping off children, and talking with children during the school year than during the summer. Mothers are significantly more likely to spend time on activities related to their children's health, such as taking children to medical appointments, during the school year than during the summer.

Percentage of parents who spend time with children in selected activities during the school year and summer, 2003–14



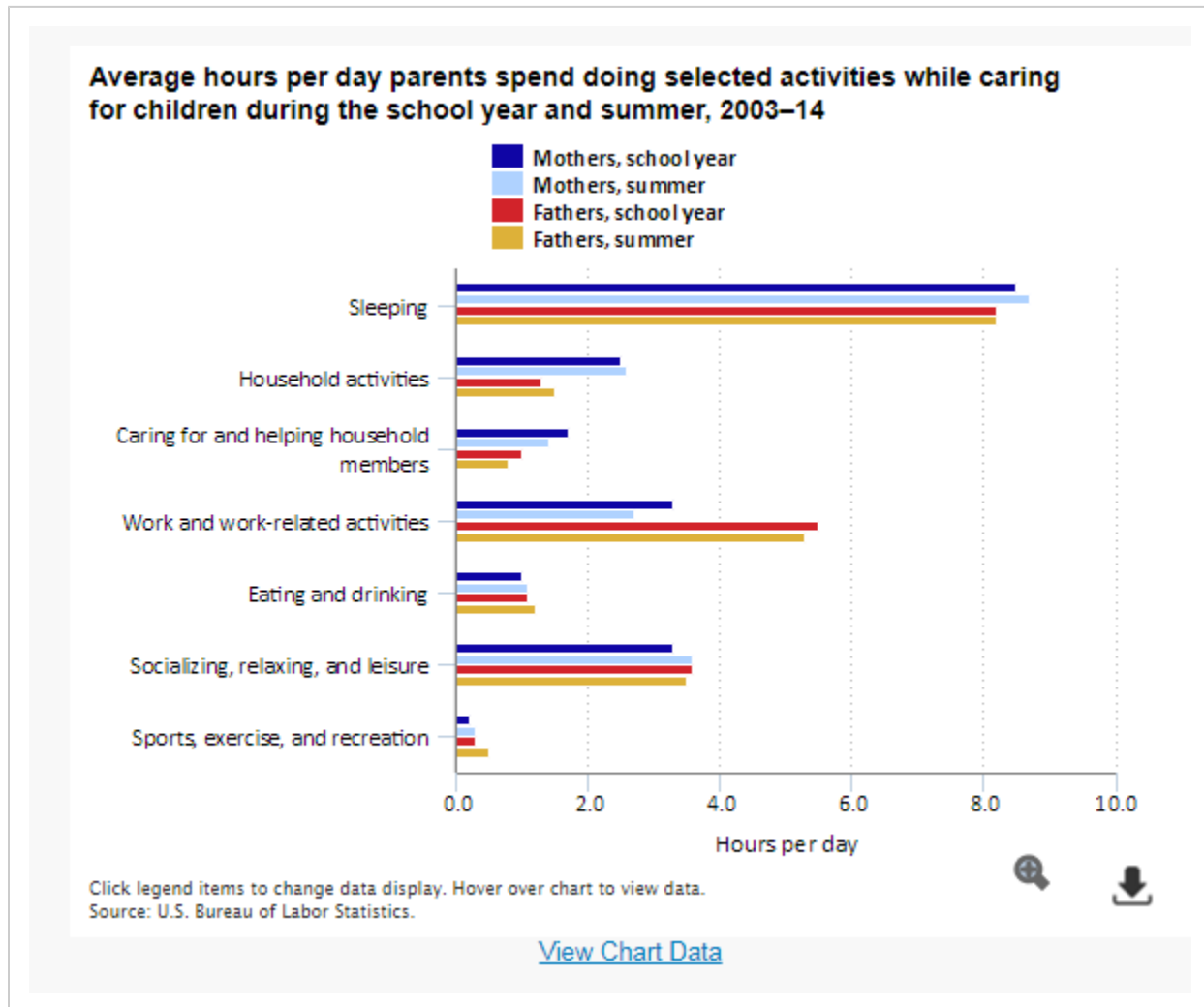
Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

[View Chart Data](#)

The school year is different for parents in how much time they spend doing many kinds of activities

For mothers, there are statistically significant increases in time spent caring for and helping household members (16 more minutes per day), as well as for work and work-related activities (33 more minutes per day), during the school year, compared with during the summer. In addition, mothers have statistically significant decreases in the amount of time they spend sleeping (15 minutes less per day); doing household activities (9 minutes less per day); eating and drinking (3 minutes less per day); socializing, relaxing, and leisure (20 minutes less per day); and doing sports, exercise, and recreation (10 minutes less per day) during the school year versus during the summer.

For fathers, there is a statistically significant increase in the amount of time they spend on caring for and helping household members (15 more minutes per day) during the school year as opposed to during the summer. Fathers also experience statistically significant decreases in the amount of time they spend on household activities (11 minutes less per day); eating and drinking (3 minutes less per day); and sports, exercise, and recreation (9 minutes less per day) during the school year, relative to the summer.



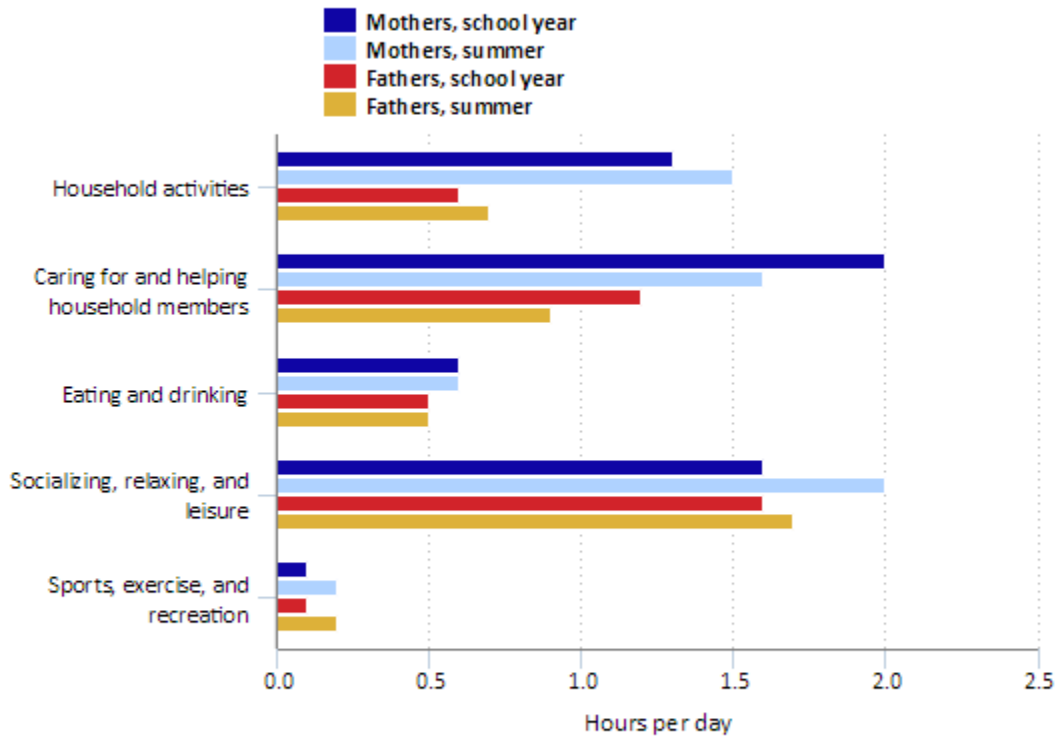
Parents spend more time caring for their children while doing other activities during the summer

Although both mothers and fathers spend more time caring for and helping household members during the school year, relative to the summer, there are other activities that parents spend more time doing while caring for children during the summer than during the school year. For mothers, there are statistically significant increases in the average amount of time spent caring for children aged 12 and younger (“secondary childcare”), while also doing household activities (7 minutes per day); eating and drinking (5 minutes per day); socializing, relaxing, and leisure (21 minutes per day); and sports, exercise, and recreation (8 minutes per day) during the summer, relative to the school year.

For fathers, there also are statistically significant increases in the average amount of time they spend doing secondary childcare while also doing household activities (7 minutes per day); eating and drinking (3 minutes per day); socializing, relaxing, and leisure (9 minutes per day); and sports, exercise, and recreation (9 minutes per day) during the summer, relative to the school year.

Overall, mothers of children aged 6-12 averaged an additional 31 minutes per day caring for their children in the summer than during the school-year, and fathers of children aged 6-12 averaged an additional 18 minutes per day caring for their children in the summer than during the school-year.

Average hours per day parents spend in selected activities with their children under age 12 during school year and summer, 2003–14



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



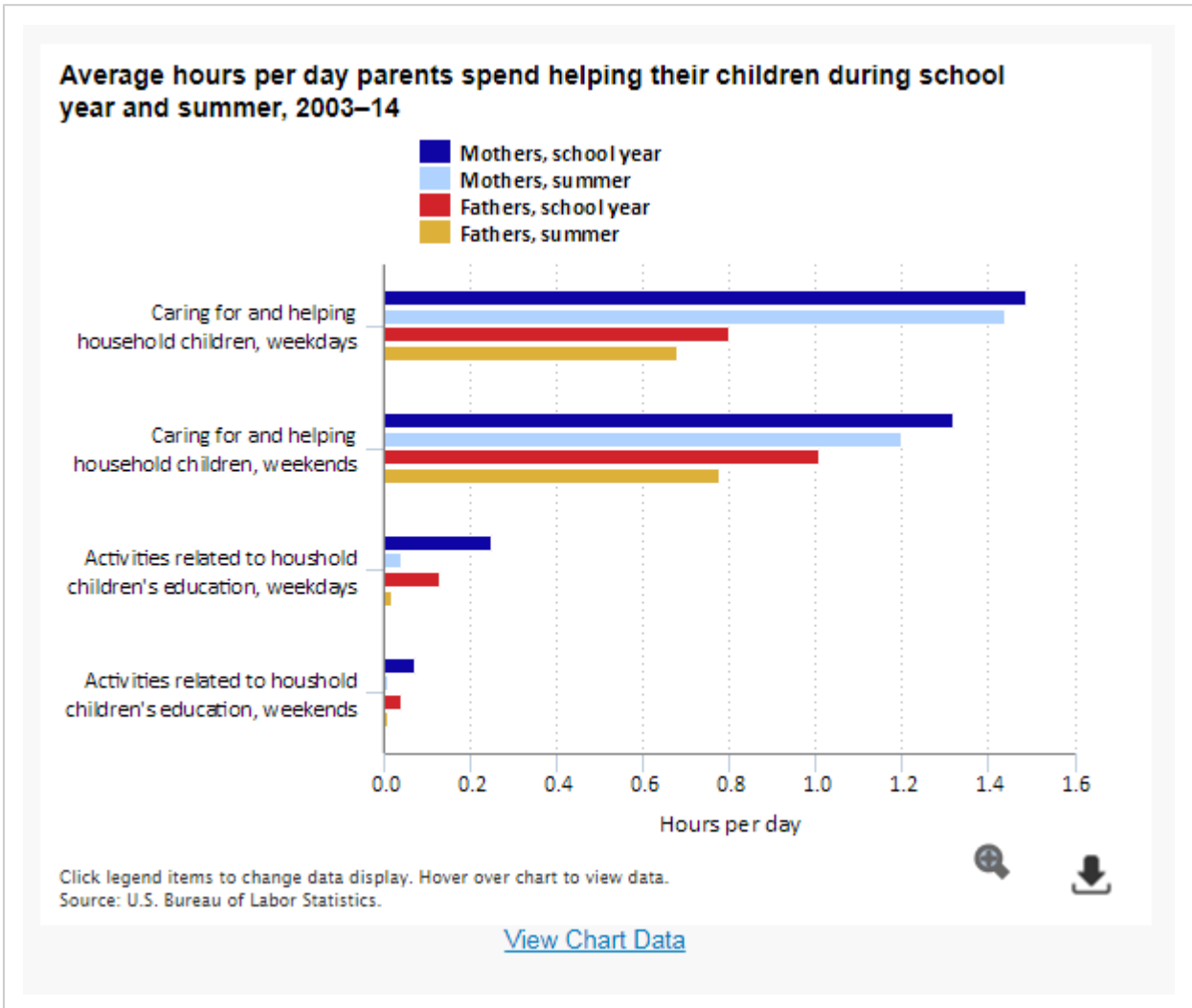
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Parents spend about 14 minutes more per day helping their children during the school year

Caring for and helping household members has three major components that involve children: caring for and helping household children, activities related to household children's education, and activities related to household children's health. The last category is not shown here because the average time use per day in this category is quite small, both during the summer and the school year.

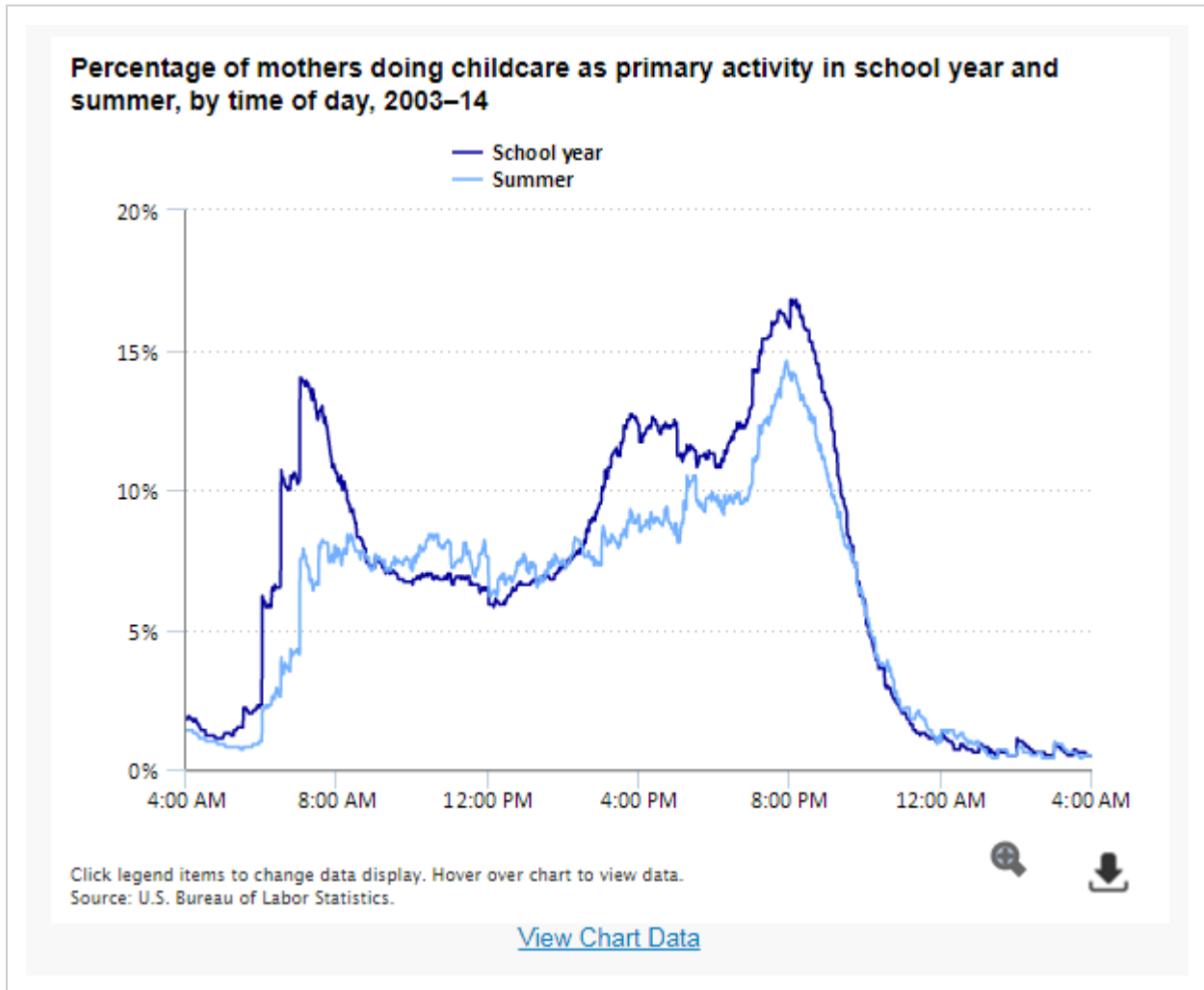
Mothers spend an average additional 13 minutes per day on activities related to their children's education, such as helping children with homework and attending meetings and school conferences on school-year weekdays than on summer weekdays. There is little overall difference in the amount of time mothers spend caring for and helping children in other ways (such as physical care, reading to children, playing with children, and so forth) on weekdays between the school year and the summer.

Fathers spend an average 7 additional minutes per day on caring for and helping children and an additional 7 minutes per day on activities related to their children's education on school year weekdays than on summer weekdays. Mothers spend an average additional 7 minutes per day on caring for and helping children and an additional 4 minutes per day on activities related to their children's education on school year weekends than on summer weekends. Fathers spend an average 14 additional minutes per day on caring for and helping children and an additional 2 minutes per day on activities related to their children's education on school-year weekends than on summer weekends.



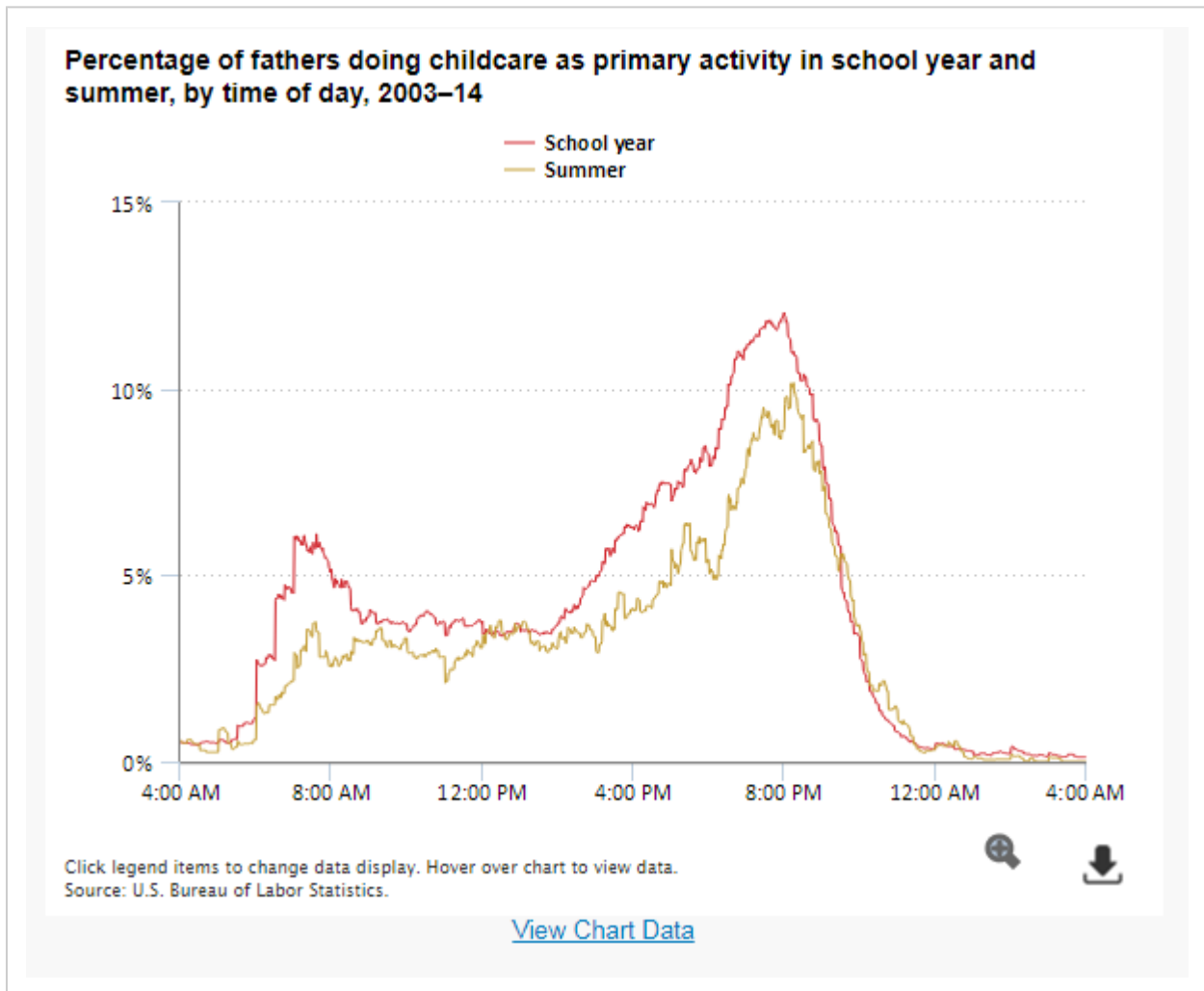
More mothers are helping children at 7am during the school year than in summer

For mothers, the greatest difference between the summer and the school year in the percentage of mothers who are caring for and helping children at any time of day (6 to 7 percent) occurs in the morning, between 6:30 a.m. and 7:30 a.m. The second largest difference (3 to 4 percent) occurs from 3:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and the third largest difference (3 percent) occurs from 7:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. From 8:15 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., from 5:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m., and again after 9:00 p.m., the difference between the summer and the school year in the percentage of mothers caring for or helping their children is not statistically significant.



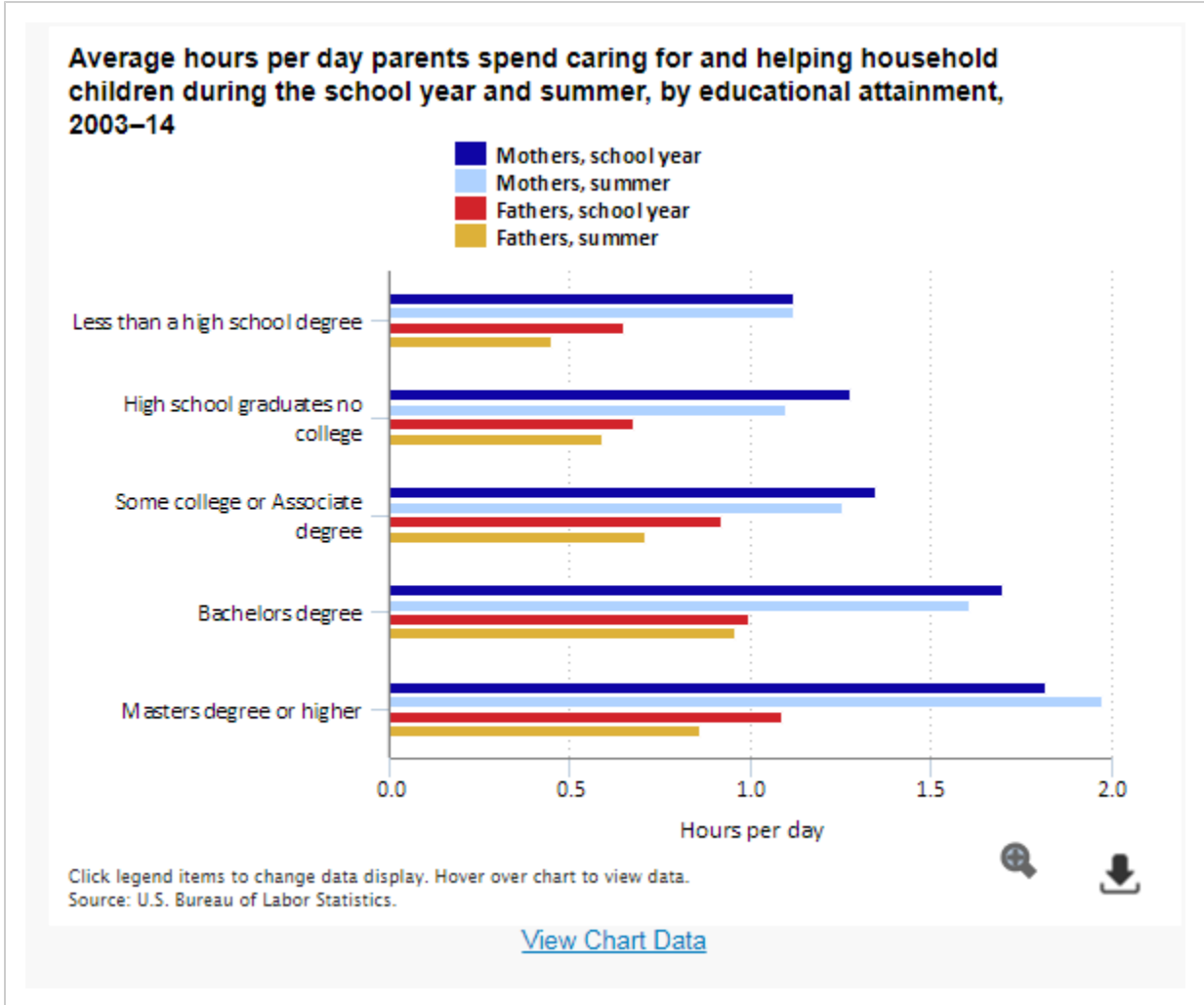
More fathers are helping children at 6:40 p.m. during the school year than in summer

For fathers, the greatest difference between the summer and the school year in the percentage who are caring for and helping children at any time of day (4 percent) occurs in the evening, around 6:40 p.m. Other statistically significant differences between the summer and the school year in the percentage of fathers caring for and helping their children occur between 6:30 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. (about 2.5 percent), between 3:45 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. (about 2.5 percent), and from 5:50 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. (ranging from 2 percent to 4 percent).



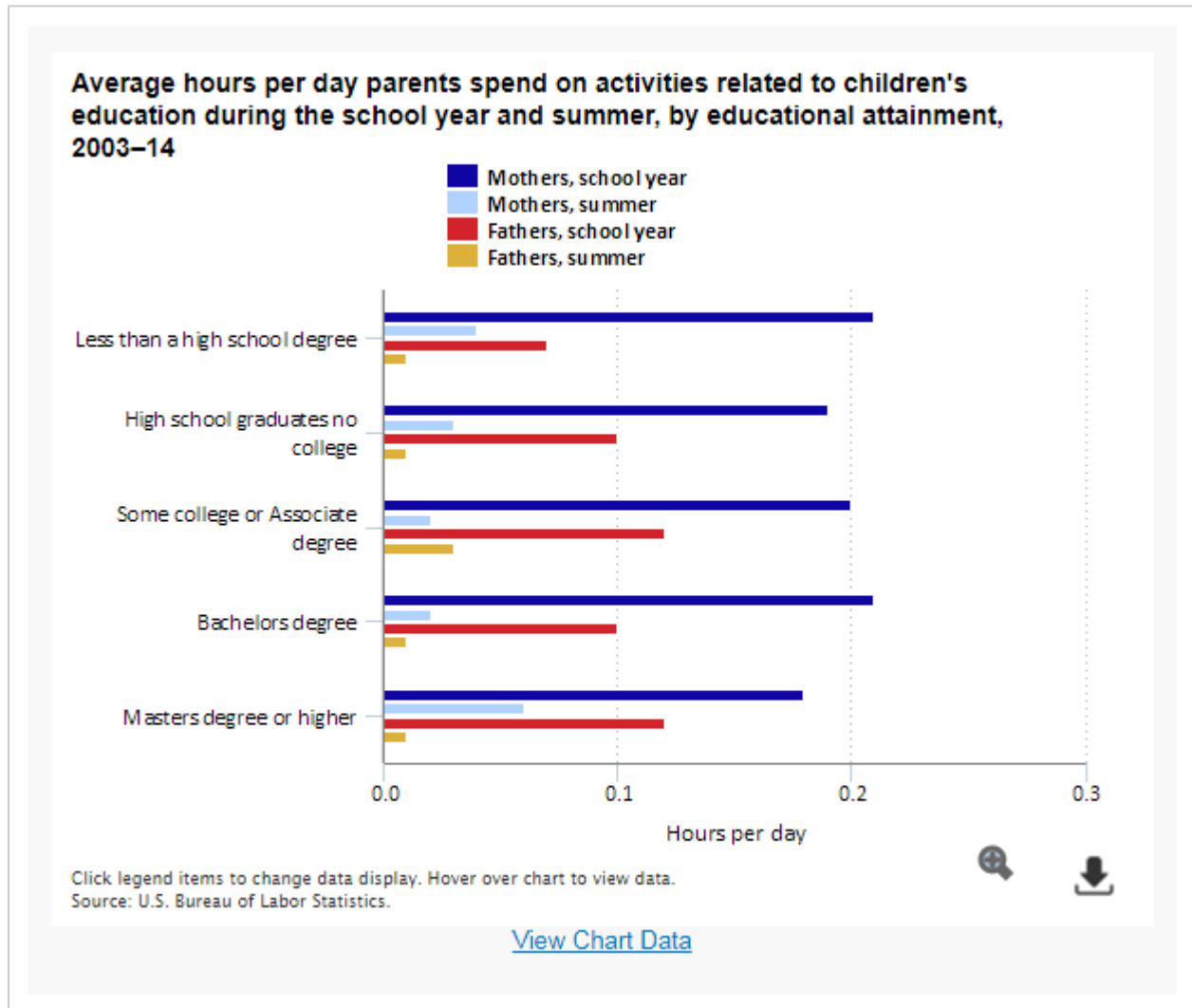
Fathers with more education spend more time helping children during the school year

Previous studies have found increases by parental education level in the amount of time spent caring for and helping children in the household. We see little change in this pattern between the summer and the school year. Among all the educational groups of parents, the only statistically significant increases in time spent caring for and helping children during the school year occur among fathers with some college or an associate degree and among fathers with a master’s degree or a greater amount of education. These groups of fathers spend about 13 more minutes per day caring for and helping children during the school year than they do during the summer.



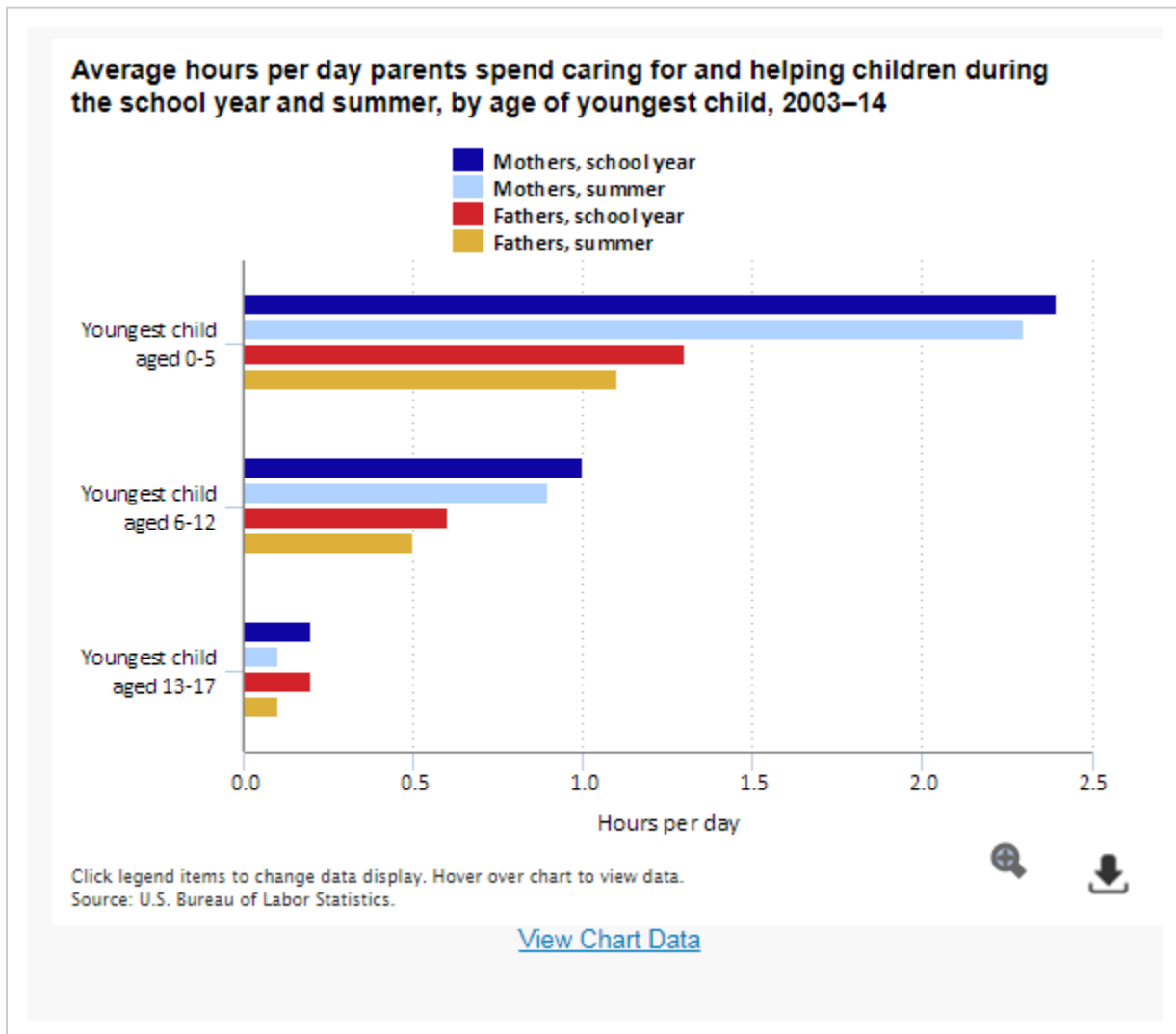
Parents of all education levels spend more time in education-related activities in the school year

Every education group of parents has a statistically significant increase in the amount of time spent on activities related to the education of children in their household between the summer and the school year. The increase in time spent on activities related to children’s education during the school year is greater for mothers than for fathers.



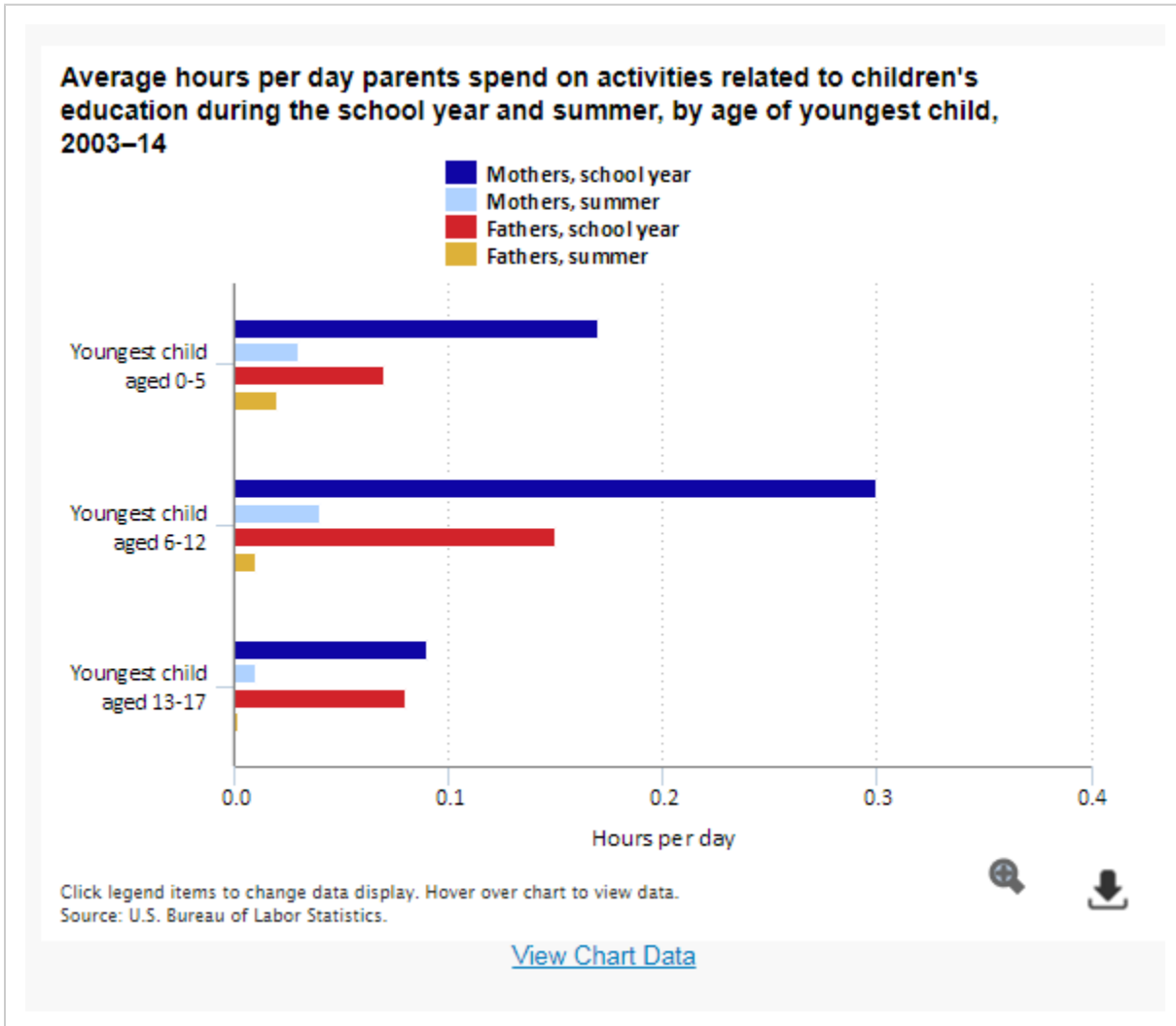
Fathers of younger children have greater increases in time helping children during the school year

For mothers, increases in time spent caring for and helping children during the school year are statistically significant only for mothers whose youngest children are aged 13 to 17. These mothers spent an additional 8 minutes per day, on average, caring for and helping their children during the school year. Mothers of younger children spent much more time caring for and helping children throughout the year, with smaller differences between the summer and the school year. For fathers, increases in time spent caring for and helping children during the school year are statistically significant for fathers whose youngest children are aged 5 and younger (an increase of 12 minutes per day) and fathers whose youngest children are aged 6 to 12 (an increase of 7 minutes per day).



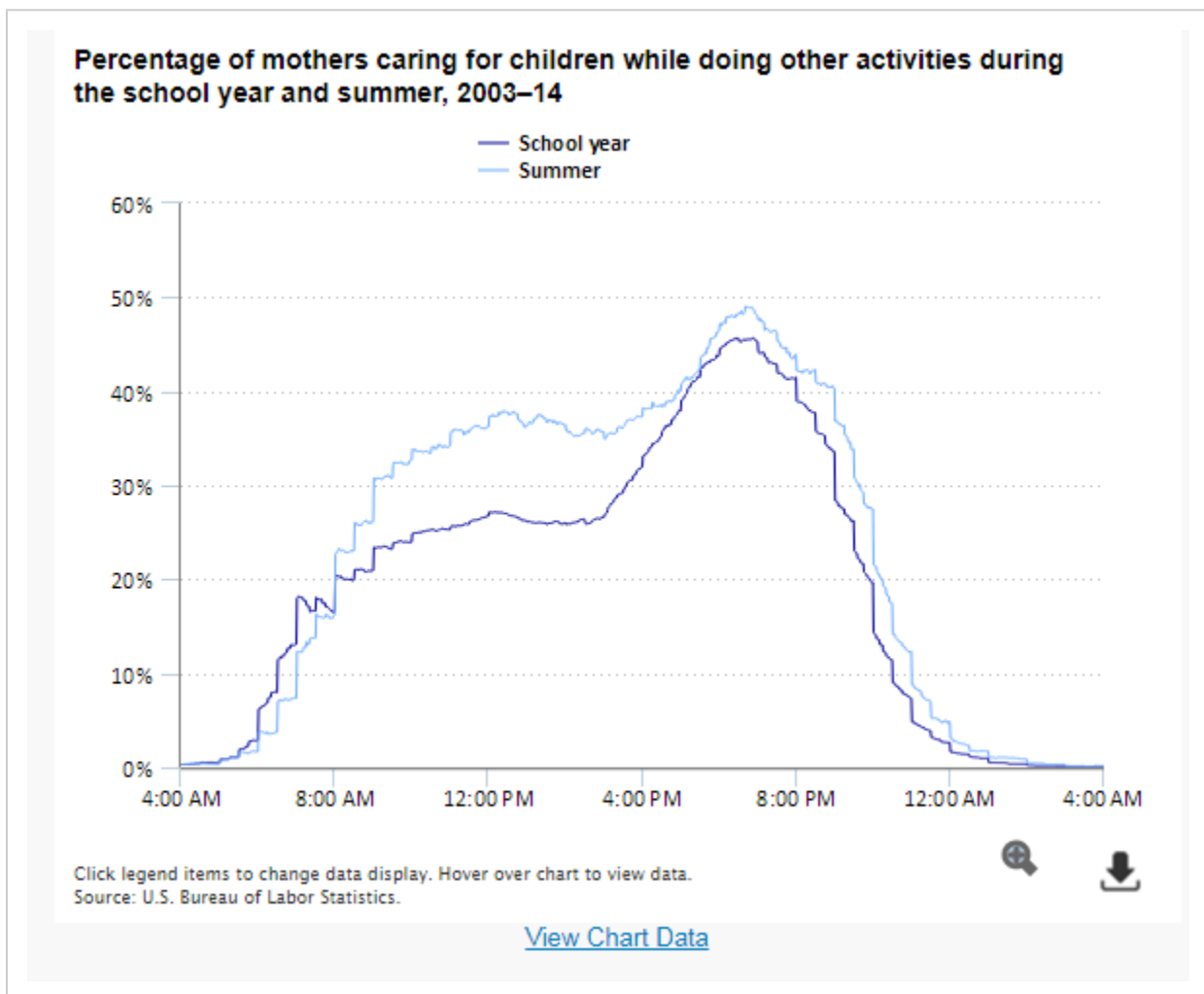
Parents whose youngest child is aged 6 to 12 have greater increases in time on children’s education

Parents with children in every age group spent significantly more time on activities related to their children’s education during the school year than during the summer. The largest increases in time spent on activities related to their children’s education between the school year and the summer were for parents whose youngest child was aged 6 to 12—an increase of 16 minutes per day for mothers and 8 minutes per day for fathers.



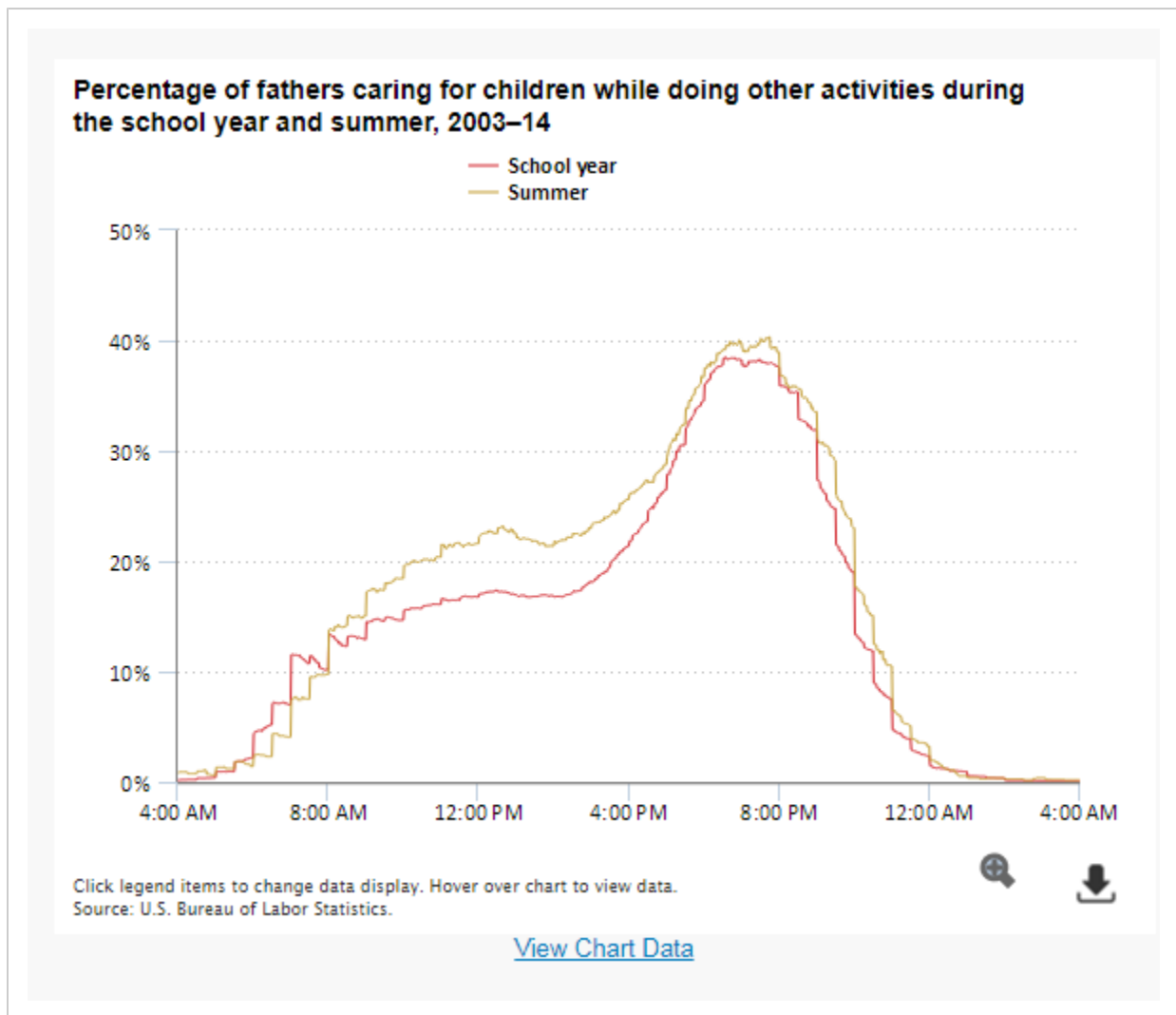
Mothers tend to spend extra time with children during summer months at midday and evenings

For mothers, the greatest difference between the summer and the school year in the percentage of mothers who are caring for children while doing other activities at any time of day (10 to 11 percent) occurs in the middle of the day, between noon and 2:00 p.m. There is a difference of 5 percent or more between the summer and the school year in the percentage of mothers doing secondary childcare from 8:45 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. There is also a difference of 5 percent or more between summer and the school year in the percentage of mothers doing secondary childcare from 8:30 p.m. to 10:50 p.m. From 5:40 a.m. to 7:40 a.m., mothers are less likely to be doing secondary childcare during the summer than during the school year. From 4:45 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., the differences between the summer and the school year in the percentage of mothers doing secondary childcare are not statistically significant.



Fathers tend to spend extra time with their children at midday during the summer

For fathers, the greatest differences between the summer and the school year in the percentage of fathers who have children present while they are doing activities other than childcare at any time of day (4 to 6 percent) occur in the middle of the day, between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., and in the evenings, between 9:00 p.m. and 10:15 p.m. From 6:00 a.m. to 7:30 a.m., fathers are less likely to be doing secondary childcare during the summer than during the school year. From 7:30 a.m. to 8:45 a.m., 4:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., and after 11:15 p.m., the differences between the summer and the school year in the percentage of fathers doing secondary childcare are not statistically significant.



More information

Elizabeth Weber Handwerker is a research economist and Lowell Mason is an economist in the Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Readers can contact them by email at handwerker.elizabeth@bls.gov and mason.lowell@bls.gov.

The [American Time Use Survey](https://www.bls.gov/tus/) (ATUS) measures the amount of time people spend doing various activities, such as paid work, childcare, volunteering, and socializing. The ATUS data show how Americans spend their time in their primary (main) activities as well as how parents allocate their time when they are watching their children while also doing other activities. Childcare is considered to be a parent's primary activity when the main thing that the parent is doing at the time is caring for a child, such as getting a child ready for school; playing, reading, or talking with children; or other childcare activities. Childcare is considered to be a parent's secondary activity when the parent is caring for at least one child aged 12 or younger while doing something else, such as housework, eating, or recreational activities. For more information on activity coding in the ATUS, refer to the Activity Coding Lexicons at <https://www.bls.gov/tus/lexicons.htm>.

Unless otherwise stated, all data in this Spotlight on Statistics refer to single, partnered, and married parents between the ages of 25 and 54, with at least one school-aged child (aged between 6 and 17). Parents are those who live with at least one biological, step-, or adopted child. Because the dates when school begins and ends vary so much from place to place, we drop observations for May, June, August, and September. Thus, "summer" here refers only to July, and the "school year" refers to the months from October through April. All data are taken from the ATUS over the period from 2003 to 2014, with weight adjustments to account for the month restrictions.

For more information on the American Time Use Survey, visit the ATUS page on the BLS website at <https://www.bls.gov/tus/>. The ATUS staff can be reached by telephone at 202-691-6339. They are located in the Postal Square Building, at 2 Massachusetts Avenue NE, Suite 4675, Washington, DC 20212-0001.