

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1596  
August 31, 2007

## Upwards Leisure Mobility: Americans Work Less and Have More Leisure Time than Ever Before

*James Sherk*

Many people believe that Americans are overworked, but new research shows that Americans are spending less time at work and more time at leisure than ever before. That research's key conclusions:

- Since the mid-1960s, the amount of time that the typical American spends working fell by almost eight hours per week, while the time spent on leisure activities rose by just under seven hours per week.
- This additional leisure time is equivalent to an extra seven to nine weeks of vacation per year. Workers' incomes would rise by over \$5,000 per year if they worked these hours instead of enjoying more leisure.
- The amount of money Americans spend on recreation has steadily risen since 1970, and more Americans take part in various recreational activities than a generation ago.
- Americans have enjoyed upwards leisure mobility since the mid-1960s, but leisure has increased unequally. Less educated and lower-income Americans now work less and enjoy more leisure than Americans with higher incomes. This explains part of why they have lower incomes.

The economy has produced large and important gains in the non-material well-being of the American people, but the debate over living standards and inequality has ignored this important fact. Before it embarks on policies to redistribute income to reduce inequality, Congress should recognize that lower-income Americans have disproportionately

benefited from the increase in leisure over the past generation.

**Fewer Hours at Work.** The popular perception is that the average American is overworked and does not have enough time to enjoy life. New research, however, challenges this conventional wisdom.

Economists Mark Aguiar, of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, and Erik Hurst, of the University of Chicago, examined five decades of time diary surveys administered by research universities and the government.<sup>1</sup> Researchers regard time diary surveys as one of the most reliable ways to find out how much time people spend on a given activity.<sup>2</sup> Aguiar and Hurst distinguished between time spent working for wages in the marketplace and time spent working at home doing things such as cleaning or maintenance. They also adjusted their figures to account for outside factors, such as age, marital status, and the presence of children that affect the time spent in work and leisure.<sup>3</sup>

They found that the amount of time Americans spend working has fallen by almost 8 hours per week since 1965. This single figure obscures different trends between the sexes. Men today are working just under 40 hours per week at paid jobs,

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/Labor/wm1596.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Labor/wm1596.cfm)

Produced by the Center for Data Analysis

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Change in Work Hours per Week Since 1965		
	Men	Women
Market Work	-11.6	3.0
Non-Market Work	3.7	-11.1
<b>Total Work</b>	<b>-7.9</b>	<b>-7.7</b>

**Note:** Figures do not sum perfectly because of demographic adjustments.

**Source:** Mark Aguiar and Erik Hurst, "Measuring Trends in Leisure: The Allocation of Time Over Five Decades," NBER Working Paper No. 12082, March 2006, pp. 14-18, at [www.nber.org/papers/W12082](http://www.nber.org/papers/W12082).

which is 11.6 fewer hours than in 1965.<sup>4</sup> This figure includes work-related activities such as commuting to work.<sup>5</sup> That decrease is offset by a 3.7-hour-per-week increase in time spent on household work, such as vacuuming or shopping for groceries.<sup>6</sup> Overall, men work 7.9 fewer hours per week than men a generation ago, leaving today's men with more time to spend with family and friends and pursuing their own interests.

Women also spend less time working today than four decades ago, but for different reasons. Women today spend 11.1 fewer hours per week performing household chores than before. At the same time, more women have entered the workforce, boosting the amount of time the typical woman spends

Increase in Leisure Hours per Week Since 1965	
Men	7.9 hours
Women	6.0 hours
<b>Total</b>	<b>6.9 hours</b>

**Source:** Mark Aguiar and Erik Hurst, "Measuring Trends in Leisure: The Allocation of Time Over Five Decades," NBER Working Paper No. 12082, March 2006, Appendix Table A3, at [www.nber.org/papers/W12082](http://www.nber.org/papers/W12082).

working in the market by 3.0 hours per week.<sup>7</sup> Women today, overall, work approximately 8 fewer hours per week than women in 1965.

Many other researchers have looked at the data and concluded that Americans are working less and enjoying more leisure time.<sup>8</sup> The popular perception of the overworked American is wrong: At home and at work, Americans work less than ever before.

**More Time and Money at Play.** As Americans have had to spend less time working to earn a living, they have had more time to spend doing things they enjoy. Aguiar and Hurst also examined changes in the amount of time Americans spend at leisure. Looking at the amount of time Americans spend on entertainment, social activities, relaxing, napping, eating, and playing with children, Americans enjoy about 7 hours per week more leisure than in 1965.<sup>9</sup>

1. Mark Aguiar and Erik Hurst, "Measuring Trends in Leisure: The Allocation of Time Over Five Decades," NBER Working Paper No. 12082, March 2006, at [www.nber.org/papers/W12082](http://www.nber.org/papers/W12082).
2. Researchers have found that surveys such as the Current Population Survey that ask only about hours of work tend to overstate hours worked. See John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey, *Time for Life*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), and Thomas Juster and Frank Stafford, *Time Goods and Well-Being*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985).
3. Aguiar and Hurst looked only at Americans between the ages of 21 and 65 in order to avoid confusing increased time in school or longer life expectancies with less work.
4. Aguiar and Hurst, pp. 14-16.
5. *Ibid.*, Table 2.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-18.
8. See John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey, and Jeremy Greenwood and Guillaume Vandenbroucke, "Hours Worked: Long-Run Trends," NBER Working Paper No. 11629, 2005.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-26. Leisure here refers to leisure measure 3 in the text.

Table 3 WM 1596

### Percent of Personal Consumption Expenditures Spent on Recreation

2005	8.7%
2000	8.7%
1995	8.5%
1990	7.6%
1984	6.7%
1980	6.4%
1975	6.7%
1970	6.6%

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007, Table 1218, and U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1986, Table 385.

This represents a significant increase in the average American's quality of life. Americans today have significantly more to devote to their own pursuits than did Americans a generation ago.<sup>10</sup>

Other evidence about how Americans spend their time and money confirms that Americans enjoy more leisure than ever before. For example, the amount that Americans spend on recreation has steadily risen over the past generation. (See Tables 3 and 4.) Today, 8.7 percent of personal consumption is spent on recreation, up from 6.6 percent in 1970. In dollar terms, the increase is even more striking. In real terms, Americans today spend \$2,500 per person on recreation each year, about three times the \$850 spent per person in 1970.<sup>11</sup>

Americans today are also participating in more recreational activities than their parents did. Table 5 shows how participation in various pastimes has risen between 1985 and 2004. A significantly larger proportion of Americans participate in golf and tennis than did twenty years ago, and Americans are also seeing more movies in the theaters. (And that does not account for the enormous increase in the quality of home entertainment systems.) Compared to 1970, Americans are spending twice as much per

Table 4 WM 1596

### Inflation-Adjusted Spending on Recreation per Capita

2005	\$2,551
2000	\$2,316
1995	\$1,913
1990	\$1,612
1984	\$1,147
1980	\$1,010
1975	\$945
1970	\$854

**Note:** Adjusted to 2005 dollars using the PCE Deflator.

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007, Table 1218, and U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1986, Table 385. Population data are from U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin."

person each year today on movies and sporting events. (See Table 6.)

Many measures reflect Americans' increased leisure consumption. Attendance at sporting events like Major League Baseball games has skyrocketed. (See Table 7.) Because they have more free time, more Americans can go out to the ballgame with

Table 5 WM 1596

### Selected Recreational Activities

	1985	2004
Adult Golfers per 1,000	46	55
Tennis Players per 1,000	75	104
Average Movies Attended per Year	4.4	5.2

**Note:** Figures represent the number of golf and tennis players per 1,000 residents age 16 years or older and the number of annual movie visits per resident of any age.

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2006, Table 1234. Population data are from U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin."

10. Note that the increase in leisure is less than the decrease in work because some activities, such as visiting the doctor and attending college, are considered neither leisure nor work.

11. Heritage Foundation calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau data.

Table 6 WM 1596

### Inflation-Adjusted Per-Person Spending on Movie, Theater, Opera, and Sporting Event Admissions

2005	\$129
2000	\$120
1995	\$97
1990	\$84
1984	\$66
1980	\$61
1975	\$52
1970	\$66

**Note:** Adjusted to 2005 dollars using the PCE Deflator.  
**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007, Table 1218, and U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1986, Table 385. Population data are from U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin."

their families and friends. And more Americans are going abroad than ever before. The proportion of Americans who travel overseas in a given year has more than tripled since 1970. (See Table 8.)

**Quality of Life.** Seven hours of additional leisure time per week might not seem like a lot, but it represents an 11 to 13 percent decrease since 1965 in the amount of time Americans spend working.<sup>12</sup> If Americans took that leisure time all at once, it would amount to an extra 6.6 to 9 weeks of vacation per year.<sup>13</sup> The average American's annual income would rise by \$5,000 to \$5,500 if he or she chose to work those extra hours rather than spend them at leisure. That would represent a 13 to 14 percent raise.<sup>14</sup>

Some people do make that choice and do work longer hours for higher wages. Most Americans, however, have declined that choice. The prosperity that has given modern Americans more material goods than any society ever also allows Americans to spend more time doing the things they enjoy. Americans today have more time for family, friends, community, hobbies, and pastimes than 40 years ago. Americans' having more time for these pur-

Table 7 WM 1596

### Annual Attendance at Major League Baseball Games

2005	76,285,917
2004	74,822,182
2003	69,501,298
2002	69,427,910
2001	73,881,226
2000	74,339,000
1995	51,288,000
1990	55,512,000
1984	45,262,000
1980	43,746,000
1975	30,373,000
1970	29,191,000

**Note:** Adjusted to 2005 dollars using the PCE Deflator.  
**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007, Table 1218, and U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1986, Table 385. Population data are from U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin."

Table 8 WM 1596

### Overseas Trips per 1,000 Adults

2005	124.4
2000	123.3
1995	93.4
1990	83.2
1985	67.4
1980	47.5
1975	40.5
1970	37.0

**Note:** An "adult" is an individual 16 years of age or older.  
**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2007, Table 1250, and U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1987, Table 390. Population data are from U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin."

12. Aguiar and Hurst, p. 3.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

suits does not show up in economic reports, but it means that Americans today enjoy a significantly higher quality of life than their parents and grandparents did.

**Leisure Inequality.** Largely as a result of the increase in the value of a college education, income inequality has widened over the past generation. What has attracted less attention is the fact that “leisure inequality” has also widened—in the opposite direction. Americans with at least some college education have enjoyed a substantially smaller increase in leisure time than Americans with only a high school diploma or less.

In the 1960s, both highly educated and less educated Americans had approximately the same amount of leisure. Today, highly educated American men enjoy more leisure than such men in the 1960s but 6.8 fewer hours of leisure a week than American men who have not earned more than a high school diploma. Similarly, highly educated American women also have more time off than a generation ago but still 4.4 hours per week less leisure time than their less educated peers.<sup>15</sup> The growing economy has allowed Americans to spend less time at work, and that has particularly benefited Americans with less education.

This trend is also reflected in government poverty data. The fifth of working age Americans with the lowest earnings work half as many hours as those in the top fifth.<sup>16</sup>

Americans with less education and lower incomes may choose to work shorter hours than those with more education due to, in part, performance pay. The increased use of performance pay over the past generation explains a substantial portion of the increase in inequality over that time.<sup>17</sup> Companies pay more productive workers more

when they perform well, and this motivates them to work longer hours. Many Americans with less education could trade off longer hours for higher incomes, but choose not to.

Congress should certainly look to remove barriers that prevent workers from becoming more productive, but the fact that some workers choose to enjoy more leisure and lower incomes does not indicate a problem with “inequality” or call for redistribution of income. A person’s life does not consist of the abundance of his or her possessions, and Congress should not look only at material inequality, while ignoring leisure, before concluding that American society is too unequal.

**Conclusion.** The stereotype of the overworked American is wrong. Americans work fewer hours and enjoy more leisure than ever before. The average American today works 8 hours less per week and enjoys 7 hours more leisure per week than in 1965. Americans today can earn a good living while having time free to focus on their own pursuits. Americans now spend more on recreation, enjoy more pastimes, and travel more than a generation ago. If Americans traded this new leisure time for more time at work, individual incomes would rise by an extra \$5,000 a year, on average.

Americans from all backgrounds enjoy more leisure than a generation ago, but leisure has not increased equally. More highly educated and higher income Americans enjoyed a smaller increase in leisure than Americans with no more than a high school education. Congress should not ignore this rapid upwards leisure mobility, and its distribution among Americans, when it confronts the issue of inequality.

—James Sherk is Bradley Fellow in Labor Policy in the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-29 and Table 6.

16. Robert Rector and Rea S. Hederman, Jr., “Two Americas: One Rich, One Poor? Understanding Income Inequality in the United States,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1791, August 24, 2004, at [www.heritage.org/Research/Taxes/bg1791.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Taxes/bg1791.cfm).

17. Thomas Lemieux, W. Bentley MacLeod, and Daniel Parent, “Performance Pay and Wage Inequality,” NBER Working Paper No. 13128, May 2007, at [www.nber.org/papers/w13128](http://www.nber.org/papers/w13128).