

# Squeezed

## American Inequality and the Shortage of Leisure

Most informed observers recognize that American inequality has worsened over the past generation. The gulf separating high-income families from families in the middle class and on the bottom has widened noticeably, especially since 1979.

Many middle-class Americans also have a nagging sense that they are running harder and faster merely to stay in the same place, that the time it takes to earn a decent living, care for a home, and rear their children has increased, leaving them with less leisure time.

Public polls regularly pick up this perception. In 1973 the median response to a Harris poll question about the time needed to earn a living, attend school, and care for a home and family was 40.6 hours a week. By 1999 the median estimate had jumped to 50.2 hours. Asked how much free time was left each week for relaxation, sports, hobbies, entertainment, and

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# for Time?

## Shortage of Leisure

By Gary Burtless

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socializing, respondents estimated 26.2 hours in 1973, but just 19.8 hours in 1999. And a 1998 Gallup poll found Americans expressing record or near-record satisfaction in most areas of life, with two conspicuous exceptions. Respondents expressed sharply lower satisfaction with their jobs and with the amount of leisure than similar respondents did in the 1960s.

The perception that leisure time is disappearing is reinforced by popular studies, such as Juliet B. Schor's celebrated *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*. Schor's book documents a two-decade surge in work hours, which she reckons added 163 hours a year—almost one month a year in a full-time job—to the paid working time of labor force participants between 1969 and 1987.

Until recently, few scholars have investigated the link between shrinking leisure time and the shifting distribution of incomes. The connection, however, can have important welfare consequences. If people at the bottom of the income distribution have lost out on leisure, the resulting time squeeze compounds their losses from declining hourly pay and scaled-back public assistance. If the affluent have lost more free time, we have a partial explanation for the widening income gap: well-to-do breadwinners have sacrificed free time to boost their spendable incomes.

### More Free Time or Less?

The first question we should ask must be: has leisure time actually declined? Is Americans' perception of a time squeeze based on hard evidence about the trend in hours that people actually work?

Some scholars flatly reject Schor's finding that leisure time has shrunk. Relying on detailed time diaries kept by adult respondents in 1965, 1975, and 1985, sociologist John B. Robinson finds that average free time actually *increased* 4.8 hours a week, or nearly one-seventh, between 1965 and 1985. In his book with co-author Geoffrey Godbey, *Time for Life*, Robinson defines free time as time available after people have completed paid work, family and household chores, and personal care (including sleep). The 1965–85 gain in free time was a result of declines in both paid work hours and time devoted to housework and child care—but in different proportions for men and women. Women devoted more time to paid work, less time to housework and child care; men gave more time to housework, less to paid work. The net gain in free time was similar for the two sexes, though slightly larger for women.

While the time diary findings are intriguing, some are hard to square with other evidence about the hours Americans spend at work. The most comprehensive such survey is the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey, monthly interviews with members of about 50,000 households, used primarily to measure unemployment. For the population and period Robinson examined, the CPS shows small reductions in the weekly work effort of men and women at work in a given week but, thanks to a large jump in the share of women in paid work, a sizable increase in the share of adults

who hold jobs. Thus, average hours at work among 18-64 year-old adults increased significantly.

Robinson's findings can be reconciled with the CPS evidence if time actually spent on the job is reported more accurately in time diaries than in the CPS interviews. Robinson himself suggests that the overstatement of working hours in CPS-type interviews increased more than fivefold from 1965 to 1985, jumping from less than 2 hours a week to more than 8 hours a week among 18–64 year-old workers. This leap in misreporting seems too large to be accepted at face value. At least part of the growing difference between the time diary and CPS hours estimates must be due to flaws in time diary sample or data. Unfortunately, treating Robinson's time diary estimates skeptically leaves us with little hard evidence to gauge the trend in hours devoted to unpaid child care and work around the house. Neither the BLS nor the Census Bureau asks people how much time they devote to activities other than paid work and commuting.

### Trends in Hours Worked

Whatever their defects, the CPS interviews highlight three major changes in work patterns and the use of adults' time over the past generation. Women have joined the paid work force in

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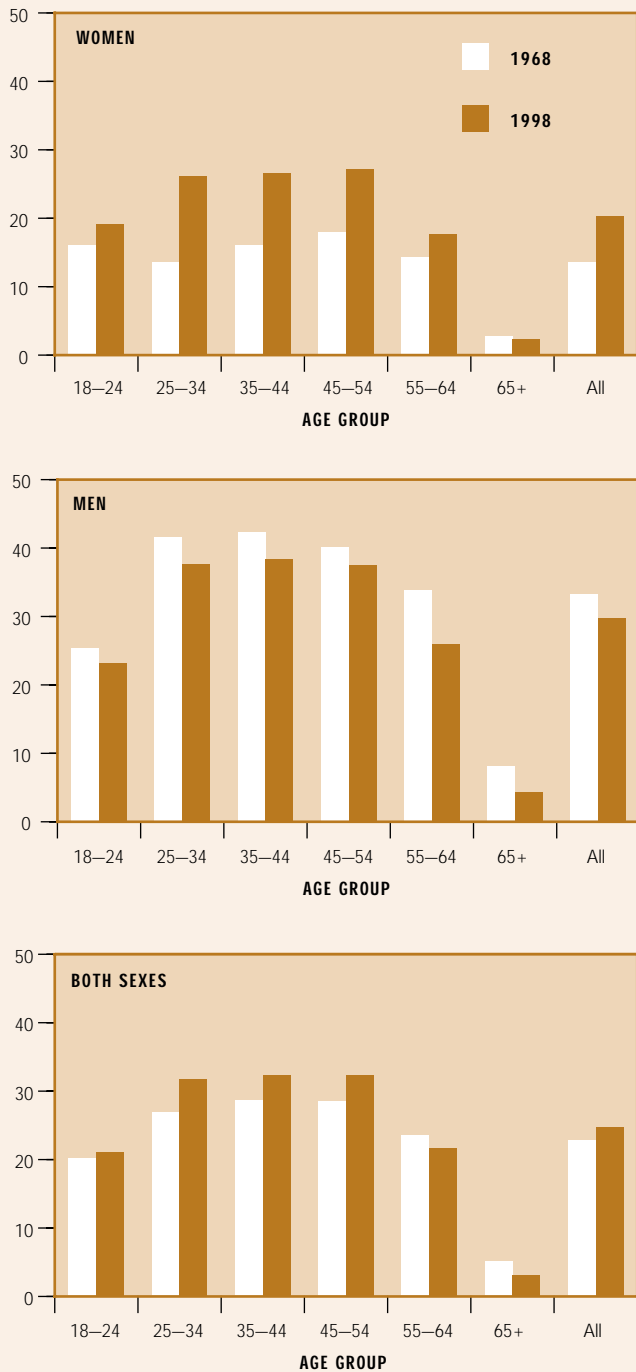
record numbers; men have retired at a younger age; and women have borne fewer children. Figure 1 shows the effects of the first two trends. The lighter bars show average hours Americans spent on the job during the second week of March 1968; the darker bars, average hours exactly 30 years later in March 1998. The weekly average is the total hours of work during the week divided by the number of women or men in the indicated age group, including people who do not work.

As the top panel shows, women worked longer hours in 1998 than they did in 1968 at every age up through 65. Averaging across all ages, women worked half again as many hours in March 1998 as they did in March 1968 (20.3 hours a week, as against 13.6). The rise was due to a 45 percent jump in the fraction of women at work and a 3 percent increase in the average weekly work effort of women holding jobs. The biggest proportional increase in women's employment occurred among the prime-aged groups, those between ages 25 and 54—precisely when women are most likely to be looking after children.

The middle panel of figure 1 shows a dip in men's paid work, mostly as a result of sinking employment, especially among men past age 54. Across all ages the male employment

**FIGURE 1.**  
Average Weekly Hours of Paid Work by Age Group, 1968 and 1998

AVERAGE WEEKLY HOURS AT WORK



Source: Author's tabulations of March 1968 and March 1998 CPS files.  
Note: Weekly hours reflect average reported work hours for the March reference week among all adults in age group, including adults not currently employed.

rate slid 6 percentage points between 1968 and 1998, but it fell 15 percentage points among men between 55 and 64 and 9 points among men past 64. Weekly hours of men with a job

also edged down, but the drop was inconsequential except among men under 25 and older than 64.

When these shifts in male and female work patterns are combined (bottom panel of figure 1), hours spent on the job increased for people aged 18 to 54 and declined for people past age 54. Because people older than 54 are also the least likely to be raising children, it is apparent that older Americans enjoyed much more free time in 1998 than they did in 1968. For prime-aged adults, however, free time may be shrinking. Their employment rate jumped 11 percentage points between 1968 and 1998, boosting the average weekly time spent in jobs from 28 hours to 32 hours—or five extra 40-hour work weeks a year.

### Caring for Children

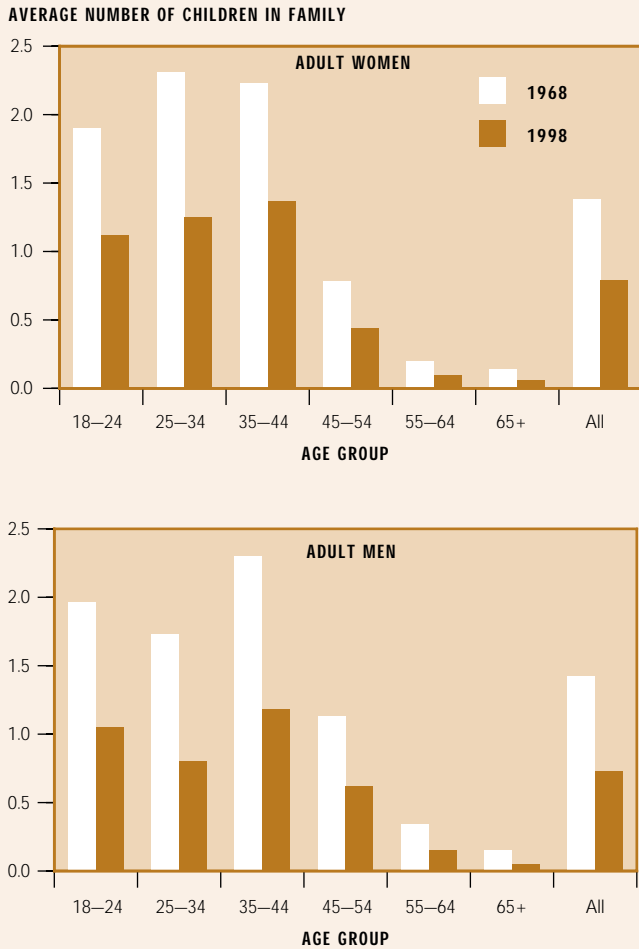
If working-age Americans now spend more time on the job, they spend less time raising children, because there are fewer children to raise. In 1968 there were almost 80 children under 18 for every 100 adults between 18 and 54. By 1998 there were just 50 children for every 100 adults in that age group. Almost 70 percent of women between 25 and 54 lived with dependent children in 1968; only 55 percent did so in 1998.

Figure 2 shows trends in the presence of children in families with adults of different ages. Again, the lighter bars refer to March 1968; the darker bars, to March 1998. The top panel shows the sharp decline of children under 18 in families with women. Families with women between 25 and 34, for example, averaged 2.3 children in 1968, but only 1.2 children in 1998. To be sure, women who have children are nowadays more likely to combine child rearing with employment. Many thus face heavier time demands than did most mothers in their parents' generation. But 37 percent of women between the ages of 25 and 34 live alone or in a family without children today; just 16 percent did so in 1968.

The trend among men is even more striking (lower panel of figure 2). Families with 25-54 year-old men averaged 1.7 children in 1968, but just 0.9 children in 1998. In 1968 the share of those men living alone or in a family without children was one-third; by 1998 it was 53 percent. Even though men today take more responsibility for household chores and child care, fewer men live in households containing children—partly because they have fewer children, partly because children are less likely to be reared in families where both a mother and a father are present. The latter trend obviously increases the time burden on custodial parents, but it eases burdens on parents who do not live with their children.

Much of the concern about a possible time shortage focuses on families with children. In her well-regarded *The Second Shift*, for example, Arlie Hochschild examines how parents reconcile the demands of work and family. Among the couples she interviewed were many who worked in full-time jobs and had children under age 6. But though this pattern is much more common today than it was in the 1960s, it is still far from the norm. Only about a third of married mothers with children under 6 work full-time year-round; about a third do not work at all.

**FIGURE 2.**  
**Number of Related Children under Age 18 in Family, 1968 and 1998**



Source: Author's tabulations of March 1968 and March 1998 CPS files.  
 Note: Families containing adults include unrelated adults. Thus all adults in each age group, including those who do not live in Census-defined families, are included in the tabulations.

The President's Council of Economic Advisors recently issued a report, *Families and the Labor Market, 1969-99*, analyzing trends in income and parental hours of work and the implications of these trends for family well-being. Although its findings suggest that parents in the late 1990s have less free time than they did in the 1960s, the Council's analysis focuses solely on families with children, so it sheds little light on the broader question of whether Americans in general are afflicted by a worsening time shortage.

The Council's (and the public's) concern with the situation of families with children is certainly appropriate. But households *without* children are on the increase. Many Americans refrain from having children to increase time available for paid work and leisure. Some presumably achieve a less hectic life as a result. By focusing on families with children, we can lose sight

of the leisure gains in an important and growing part of the adult population.

**The Time Squeeze Meets the Income Gap**

Trends in free time have not occurred in a vacuum. Women's hourly wages have increased over the past 20 years, and wages of men with little schooling have sunk. Higher divorce rates and postponed marriage have reduced the share of adults who are married at any given time and dramatically increased the share of children reared by a single parent. All these trends helped push income inequality to a postwar high in the 1990s.

Table 1 uses information from the CPS to show the change in work effort between 1968 and 1998 among prime-aged adults, including those who do not work. The adults are ranked by quintile in the income distribution, with income based on the March CPS interviews of 1968 and 1998, adjusted for differences in family size. The top portion of the table shows average weekly hours of work among women. Not surprisingly, the time spent at work increases as we move up the income distribution. Women in the top quintile work about twice as much as women at the bottom. But the 1968-98 *increase* in hours on the job was largest among women in the middle of the distribution. Those in the second and third quintiles worked twice as much in 1998 as their counterparts did in 1968. Women in the bottom quintile had the smallest absolute and proportional gains in hours.

The middle portion of the table shows declining weekly work hours among men. For men in the bottom fifth of the income distribution, hours of work tumbled almost a third. Work effort reductions grow smaller as we move up the income ladder. In fact, men in the top of the distribution worked slightly longer hours in 1998 than high-income men did in 1968. These trends help explain the growing gap in relative incomes. Men at the bottom worked significantly less, cutting their earned incomes; men at the top worked a little more, boosting their incomes. Because men on the bottom suffered losses in hourly wage rates while men at the top

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enjoyed wage gains, the shifts in hours widened an income gap that would have grown even without a change in hours.

The work effort trend for both sexes combined is displayed in the bottom portion of the table. Average hours on the job increased considerably throughout the top four quintiles, but they grew fastest in the middle quintiles. Hours of work fell 9 percent among adults in the bottom quintile. Because adults in the middle and higher quintiles were increasing their work



effort while adults at the bottom worked less, the income gap widened. People on the bottom rungs of the financial ladder suffer a famine of good jobs rather than a time famine. The loss of well-paying jobs is a serious problem for these Americans; the loss of free time is not.

Shifts over time in child care responsibilities are important in interpreting the changes in time spent in a job. Table 2 shows how child care responsibilities are distributed across income groups and how they have declined over the past three decades. In 1968, more than two-thirds of prime-aged adults lived with a related child under 18. By 1998 only about half did so. In both 1968 and 1998, adults with below-average income were more likely than high-income adults to live with related children.

Although child care responsibilities are more common for adults in the lower ranks of the income distribution, such responsibilities have declined much faster at the bottom than at the top of the income distribution. The share of adults living with children dropped 20 to 24 percentage points in the three bottom quintiles but just 4 percentage points among adults in the top. Adults in the bottom fifth thus saw sizable reductions in both the time spent in paid work and the likelihood of living with children. Adults in the middle three quintiles devoted sharply more time to paid employment but were significantly less likely to live with children under age 18. Only in the top fifth of the income distribution were adults working much longer hours while experiencing little reduction in their child care responsibilities. These high-income adults seem more stretched for time than similar adults in the past. On the other hand, their sacrifice of free time has been richly compensated: their incomes have grown about 2½ times faster than those of people in the middle of the income distribution, widening the absolute and relative income differences between high-, middle-, and low-income families.

**Famine and Plenty**

The time famine has not struck indiscriminately. Parents, especially mothers, nowadays have less time left over after paid employment for child care, housework, sleep, and quiet leisure than their parents did in the 1960s. But American seniors as well as younger adults who remain childless

The main victims of the time famine are married couples and single parents who combine full-time jobs with child rearing.

probably enjoy more free time today than people the same age did a generation ago. Nor do adults with low incomes suffer from a shortage of free time. Their situations would improve if they could find well-paying jobs to fill some of the free time they have gained since the 1960s.

**TABLE 1.**  
Change in Work Effort among Prime-aged Adults, by Income Quintile, 1968–98

	AVERAGE HOURS/WEEK BY INCOME QUINTILE				
	BOTTOM	2ND	MIDDLE	4TH	TOP
<b>W O M E N</b>					
March 1968	11.6	12.8	14.5	18.9	22.2
March 1998	16.4	26.3	28.9	30.9	32.4
<b>M E N</b>					
March 1968	36.1	41.4	42.0	42.9	43.6
March 1998	24.6	36.4	39.9	42.0	44.2
<b>BOTH SEXES</b>					
March 1968	21.9	26.6	28.0	30.8	33.0
March 1998	19.9	31.3	34.5	36.6	38.4

Source: Same as figure 1. Prime-aged adults are those between ages 25 and 54. Income is for the previous calendar year. The income of each adult is measured as the ratio of the family’s actual income to the family poverty threshold.

**TABLE 2.**  
Change in Share of Prime-aged Adults Caring for Children, by Income Quintile, 1968–98

	PERCENT BY INCOME QUINTILE				
	BOTTOM	2ND	MIDDLE	4TH	TOP
March 1968	80	83	77	62	40
March 1998	60	59	55	46	36

Source: Same as figure 1. An adult is classified as caring for children if he or she is a member of a nuclear family with at least one related child under 18.

The main victims of the time famine are married couple families and single parents who combine full-time jobs with child rearing. Both kinds of family are more common than they were 30 years ago. Both face difficult choices reconciling lengthy hours of paid work with good care for their children. I suspect both also supply an outsized share of commentators bemoaning the time shortage. Some people

face a time squeeze because a marriage failed (or never took place), forcing the custodial parent to work and care for kids at the same time. Others feel pushed into their predicament because the wage of the male breadwinner has not kept pace with the cost of living. But we should acknowledge that many lucky couples have walked into a time vise with eyes wide open. Enticed into the job

market by improving wages and interesting jobs, mothers in high-income families must squeeze more obligations into a 24-hour day. They may not think they can do it all, but many are confident they can do much more than mothers in their parents’ generation. ■