**The land of leisure: Why Americans have plenty of time to read this**

Feb 2nd 2006 | Chicago | The Economist

AS MOST Americans will tell you if you can stop them long enough to ask, working people in the United States are as busy as ever. Sure, technology and competition are boosting the economy; but nearly everyone thinks they have increased the demands on people at home and in the workplace. But is the overworked American a creature of myth?

A pair of economists have looked closely at how Americans actually spend their time. Mark Aguiar (at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston) and Erik Hurst (at the University of Chicago's Graduate School of Business) constructed four different measures of leisure. The narrowest includes only activities that nearly everyone considers relaxing or fun; the broadest counts anything that is not related to a paying job, housework or errands as “leisure”. No matter how the two economists slice the data, Americans seem to have much more free time than before. Over the past four decades, depending on which of their measures one uses, the amount of time that working-age Americans are devoting to leisure activities has risen by 4-8 hours a week. (For somebody working 40 hours a week, that is equivalent to 5-10 weeks of extra holiday a year.) Nearly every category of American has more spare time: single or married, with or without children, both men and women. The only twist is that less educated (and thus poorer) Americans have done relatively better than more educated ones (see chart). And that is not just because unemployed high-school drop-outs have more free time on their hands. Less educated Americans with jobs—the overstretched middle class of political lore—do very well.

These findings will no doubt be scoffed at by many Americans who are certain that they, and nearly everyone they know, are overworked (and who may find time to write letters to the editor saying so). Indeed, a 1992 book by Juliet Schor, “The Overworked American”, became a best-seller by telling people something that they thought they already knew.

In fact, most of the official numbers have shown that American toil has not changed that much over the past few decades. Americans may put in longer hours at the office than other countries, but that is because average hours in the workplace in other rich countries have dropped sharply. In America, official studies tend to show women working more and men less, but the average working week has been fairly constant. How then have Messrs Aguiar and Hurst uncovered a more relaxed America, where leisure has actually increased? It is partly to do with the definition of work, and partly to do with the data they base their research upon.

Most American labour studies rely on well-known official surveys, such as those collected by the Bureau of Labour Statistics (BLS) and the Census Bureau, that concentrate on paid work. These are good at gleaning trends in factories and offices, but they give only a murky impression of how Americans use the rest of their time.

Messrs Aguiar and Hurst think that the hours spent at your employer's are too narrow a definition of work. Americans also spend lots of time shopping, cooking, running errands and keeping house. These chores are among the main reasons why people say they are so overstretched (especially working women with children).

However, Messrs Aguiar and Hurst show that Americans actually spend much less time doing them than they did 40 years ago. There has been a revolution in the household economy. Appliances, home delivery, the internet, 24-hour shopping, and more varied and affordable domestic services have increased flexibility and freed up people's time.

So women are devoting more hours to paying jobs, but have cut their housework and other burdensome tasks by twice as much. Men have picked up some of the slack at home; but thanks to technology and other advances, there is plenty of free time left over for them as well, since they have yielded some of their paid working hours to women.

The data for Messrs Aguiar and Hurst's study comes from time-use diaries that American social scientists have been collecting methodically, once a decade, since 1965 (the latest one used in their paper was from 2003). These diaries ask people to give detailed information on everything they did the day before, and for how long they did it. The beauty of such surveys, which are also collected in Australia and many European countries, is that they cover the whole day (not just the time at work), and they also have a built-in accuracy check, since they must always add up to 24 hours a day.

Time-use diaries have long been a treasure trove for sociologists. (John Robinson, who helped oversee the diary surveys for years at the University of Maryland, co-wrote a book in 1997, “Time for Life”, that aimed partly to rebut Ms Schor's claims.) But economists in America have only recently begun paying much attention to them. The BLS started using them in 2003.

Do the numbers add up? One thing missing in Messrs Aguiar's and Hurst's work is that they have deliberately ignored the biggest leisure-gainers in the population—the growing number of retired folk. The two economists excluded anyone who has reached 65 years old, as well as anyone under that age who retired early. So America's true leisure boom is even bigger than their estimate.

Another question-mark has to do with child care. When the BLS took over the time-use diaries for the 2003 survey, it changed the measures for what parents do when their kids are around. That cast some doubt on comparisons between the 1993 and 2003 diaries. Against that, the 1965-93 figures are consistent—and over that period, even working women with children enjoyed an increase in leisure time of more than six hours a week.

The biggest theoretical problem with time diaries is “multi-tasking”. Do you measure the time you spend cleaning your house while listening to portable music as “leisure” or “work”? This problem may be exaggerated: usually people seem to combine two work activities (using a laptop computer on a plane), or two leisure ones (watching television and doing something else). The two economists counted many combinations of work and leisure—such as reading a novel while commuting or goofing off on the internet at the office—as time spent working.

Richard Freeman, a labour economist at Harvard, reckons that, despite the inability to measure multi-tasking, the finding of a big increase in leisure is “basically right”. Another well-known work-watcher, Daniel Hamermesh at the University of Texas at Austin, who has worked with various countries' time-use diaries, agrees.

Is all this leisure a good thing? Some part-time workers might well wish they had less leisure and more income. For most Americans, however, the leisure dividend appears to be a bonus. Using average hourly wages after tax, Steven Davis, a colleague of Mr Hurst's, reckons that the national value of five extra hours of leisure per week is $570 billion, or $3,300 per worker, every year.

But why do Americans feel so harried? Weirdly, prosperity may be to blame in two ways. First, thanks to rising real incomes, an American's time is worth more now. A walk in the park is more expensive than it used to be. (When people complain to him about being too busy, Mr Hamermesh tells them that their real problem is too much money.) Second, economic advances allow people to squeeze ever more possible activities, both work and leisure, into a day, which encourages people to try to do too much.

Mr Robinson reckons that people will feel less busy to the extent that they can control their schedule and gain flexibility. It is easy to see why a personal video recorder, which offers near-total mastery of the television, is such a popular device; and why traffic jams and security queues at airports exasperate modern workers. Finally, there is the changing nature of work. Mobile phones and e-mail make people accountable on short notice, and competition may make them less secure in their jobs. So even if they are playing golf or walking in the park, they may feel as if they are working. It is surely nicer to feel overworked in the park than to be overworked at the office, but few Americans seem to look at it that way. Think about that in your spare time.