

# Study: A day in the life: How do older Canadians spend their time?

Released at 8:30 a.m. Eastern time in *The Daily*, Wednesday, March 21, 2018

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In 2015, 91% of senior women and 83% of senior men engaged in unpaid household work in a typical day, which includes meal preparation or indoor and outdoor cleaning. About three-quarters of senior men and women engaged in "active pursuits," such as exercising or socializing, and almost all senior men and women also engaged in passive leisure activities such as watching television.

Senior women and men, however, are not spending the same amount of time in some activities, which suggests that gender differences in the way people spend their time persist, even though seniors have generally transitioned out of employment and parental roles.

These results are included in the new study "[A day in the life: How do older Canadians spend their time?](#)"

Examining how seniors spend their time is important, as they are one of the fastest growing populations in Canada. Moreover, the proportion of the population aged 65 and older is expected to account for almost one-quarter of the overall population by 2031.

An aging population means more Canadians seeking health care and services, while housing and transportation needs are also changing. Understanding the factors associated with how seniors use their time can help service providers develop long-term strategies to meet their needs.

The study describes the participation rates of seniors in selected activities and the average time spent by participants in these activities. The focus is on primary (or main) activities, as reported in 24 hour diaries provided by survey respondents.

## Senior women and men spend time in different ways

In 2015, 91% of senior women engaged in unpaid household work on a typical day, compared with 83% of senior men. Unpaid household work includes activities such as meal preparation, indoor cleaning, and outdoor cleaning or maintenance.

In general, senior women also spent more time than men doing unpaid household work. Specifically, senior women spent an average of 32 more minutes per day than senior men doing unpaid household work.

Senior men and women, however, engaged in different types of unpaid household work. About 76% of senior women engaged in meal preparation, compared with 61% of men. Conversely, about 30% of senior men participated in outdoor cleaning or maintenance activities, compared with 10% of women.

Other types of activities are also important in the lives of seniors. About three-quarters of senior men and women engaged in "active pursuits" in a typical day, which includes activities such as socializing, volunteering, walking, doing sports or cultural activities, and active uses of technology.

Within active pursuits, senior women were less likely to engage in leisure and physical activities, with 39% doing so compared with 44% of senior men. On the other hand, senior women (46%) were more likely to participate in socializing and communicating than senior men (37%).

About 9 in 10 seniors spent time in "passive leisure" activities, such as watching television or reading, including online materials. Senior women (41%) were more likely to read than senior men (35%), while senior men (87%) were more likely to watch television compared with senior women (82%).



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## Older seniors spend more time on passive activities

Other factors such as employment status, health and age can also have a significant impact on the way seniors spend their time.

Seniors who were not employed, as would be expected, spent more time doing household unpaid work and leisure activities than those who were still employed. At the same time, they were as likely as the employed to engage in civic, religious and organizational work (which includes volunteering). In 2015, about 9% of employed and non-employed seniors engaged in such activities.

Health is also an important factor for how seniors spend their time. Aside from some of the more evident impacts good health has on ability to engage in leisure and physical activities, health also plays a role in civic engagement. Among those who reported their health as excellent or very good, 10% participated in civic, religious or organizational activities, compared with 5% among those who were in fair or poor health.

Older seniors spent more time on passive activities (for example, reading and watching television), and also slept more than their younger counterparts. Other activities, such as using technology, were less prevalent among older seniors. Among seniors aged 75 and older, 22% used technology in a single day (general computer use, video games, Internet), compared with 33% among those aged 65 to 74.

## Seniors are now less active than in 1986

Time spent in active pursuits is important for seniors, since these activities can help maintain physical and social capabilities and promote health.

Between 1986 and 2015, fewer senior women reported participating in active pursuits. In 2015, 69% of senior women engaged in active pursuits (excluding active use of technology), down from 77% in 1986. Senior women also reported 40 minutes less time spent in active pursuits in 2016 compared with 1986.

Among senior men, even though the participation rate for active pursuits remained stable (around 70%), the average time spent on such activities decreased by 35 minutes over the period.

In 2015, 87% of seniors engaged in unpaid household work compared with 75% in 1986. The increase was mainly attributable to senior men, who increased their participation rate from 59% in 1986 to 83% in 2015.

### Note to readers

*The results of this study are taken from the General Social Survey (GSS) on Time Use. The GSS is a cross-sectional survey whose target population consists of non-institutionalized persons aged 15 and older living in the provinces. While the GSS is collected every year on different themes, time use is generally measured every five years. This study uses data from Cycle 29 (2015) and uses data from Cycle 2 (1986) for comparisons over time.*

*A 24-hour diary was used to retrospectively collect all the activities a respondent did on a designated day starting at 4:00 a.m. and ending at 4:00 a.m. the next day. All activities lasting at least 10 minutes were recorded. For each activity, additional information was also gathered to provide a better picture of how long the activity lasted, where it happened, and who was present during the activity. For the purposes of this paper, only primary (or main) activities are included in the analyses.*

*The time use of seniors is divided into the following categories of activities: active pursuits (such as socializing and communicating, civic, religious and organizational activities, culture and leisure, and active use of technology); passive leisure (such as watching television, listening to radio or music, and reading online or paper version books, periodicals, newspapers and letters); unpaid household work; paid work; shopping for goods and services; and sleeping. Because no information on technology use was collected in 1986, comparisons between 1986 and 2015 on time spent in active pursuits exclude technology use.*

**Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [4503](#).**

The article "[A day in the life: How do older Canadians spend their time?](#)" is now available in *Insights on Canadian Society* ([75-006-X](#)).

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