

Time or money?

How high and low income Canadians spend their time

by **Cara Williams**

Time — all men neglect it; all regret the loss of it; nothing can be done without it.

— *Voltaire*

Our supply of time is absolute. There are 24 hours in a day — no more, no less. Neither technological advance nor the passage of the centuries has altered this. Yet virtually every one of us has wished for more time to spend with our families, to complete a project at work or school, to enjoy our vacations, or simply to relax. While at the beginning of the 20th century money may have been the scarcest commodity, in the latter half, time has become the scarcest resource.¹ Indeed, by the end of the 1990s, we had a level of prosperity that was unrivaled in history — but this was accompanied by a pace of life that, according to many, was much too hectic.

Just how hectic life gets depends on many factors, one being income. Our incomes affect, among other things, the neighbourhood and housing we

CST What you should know about this study

Data in this article come from the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) on time use. The survey interviewed almost 11,000 Canadians aged 15 and over in the 10 provinces and provided information on how people spent their time during one day. In addition to information about time use, the 1998 GSS also asked general questions about the perception of time.

Individuals included in this article are aged 25 to 54 years, the ones most likely to be in the labour force, to have families and significant demands on their time. For purposes of this study, people were classified as high income if their total household income was equal to or greater than \$80,000 and low income if their total household income was \$30,000 or less. Using these definitions, approximately 2.4 million Canadians live in high income and 1.9 million in low income households. While virtually all working-age adults in high income households are employed (97%), a notably smaller proportion (72%) of those with low incomes work at a job or business.¹

1. Respondents are considered employed if they reported working at a job or business in the last week or during the past 12 months.

live in, the holidays we choose, the activities we engage in and the time we spend on these activities. Our incomes may also be related to the

1. Sharp, C. 1981. *The Economics of Time*. Oxford: Martin Robertson and Company Ltd. p. 18.

number of hours we spend on paid work and household chores, the amount of time we devote to playing with our children, and the time we have left for leisure. Is there any truth to the oft-quoted phrase, “you either have time or money, but not both”? This article uses the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine the activities and time use of Canadians aged 25 to 54 in high and low income households.

High income Canadians spend more time on paid work

According to popular wisdom from the 1950s, “computers and automation were going to create abundant wealth... and... would free us from the drudgery of work.”² Many believed that by the 20th century’s end we would be working a three-day week with plenty of free time to spend at our leisure. By the time the century ended, visions of a three-day work week had vanished. In many Canadian families both parents are now in the work force, resulting in additional stress as they struggle to juggle the often-competing time demands of family, home and work.

Most employed Canadians aged 25 to 54 spend the largest portion of their waking day doing paid work. While this is true for individuals in both high and low income households, those with high income spend an average of 15% more time on their paid job:³ 46 hours compared with 40 hours spent by those with low income.

The majority of employed Canadians in high income households (56%) report being satisfied with the number of hours they work in their current arrangement, while 20% would prefer to work fewer hours for less pay. Only about 8% were willing to work more hours for more pay. Paid employees from low income households felt quite differently. Nearly one-third stated that they would be

CST	High income Canadians are more likely to work longer hours and more weeks	
	Aged 25 to 54	
	High income	Low income
Total (millions)	2.4	1.9
% employed during the last 12 months	97	72
Average number of hours worked in the last week	46	40
Average number of weeks worked in the last year	50	41
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.		

CST	Low income Canadians spend considerably more time on housework	
	Aged 25 to 54	
	High income	Low income
Time spent on...	Average minutes per day	
Housework	30	50
Meal preparation	40	52
Shopping	48	51
Personal care including sleeping (hours)	9.8	10.1
Leisure	277	317
Watching television	82	132
Child care ¹	68	82
Playing with child	17	18
Teaching child	4	9
Reading to or talking with child	4	5
1. Refers only to individuals with children living in the household. Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.		

willing to work more hours for more pay, while only 6% said they wanted to work less time for less pay.

Low income Canadians spend more time on unpaid work

Unpaid work such as housework and home maintenance take up much of the time left after paid work is done. While people from high income households spend more hours on paid work, low income individuals expend considerably more time on unpaid chores. For example, low income Canadians aged 25 to 54 spend

50 minutes a day on housework, while those with high income perform these tasks for just 30 minutes; similarly meal preparation takes up 52 minutes of low income people’s time, but only 40 minutes of a high income individual’s day.⁴

2. O’Hara, B. 1993. *Working Harder isn’t Working*. Vancouver: New Star Books. p. 1.

3. Refers to individuals who were working at a job or business in the past seven days.

4. Daily times for these activities are averaged over seven days.

The 20th century was a period of enormous technological advance. A great number of devices — cars, washing machines, dryers, microwave ovens and computers, to name just a few — were invented during this time specifically to make certain tasks easier and less time consuming. But the extra time these products afford us seems to be offset by the increasing number of activities we do and things we have. For example, in his book, *The Tyranny of Time*, Robert Banks observes that “food preparation and ironing take less time owing to the introduction of pre-prepared foods and non-iron fabrics. But such gains are offset by the fact that, among the middle class particularly, homes and gardens are larger, material possessions requiring maintenance and services are more numerous, and standards of personal and household presentability are higher.”¹

These changes have been likened to an endless spiral. As early as 1970 one social commentator observed that economic growth entails a general increase in the scarcity of time. In addition to growing requirements for the care and maintenance of our ever-increasing consumption goods, “swelling expectations lead to a constant effort to keep up with the latest products.... With so many things to use, and the need to work harder to obtain them, our lives grow more harried and pressured.”²

Indeed, technological advances have allowed us to squeeze more and more activity into our waking hours. Many of us “multi-task” our way through the day. We discuss business over the cell phone as we drive to work, eat “fast food” at our desk in the office, or conduct meetings over lunch. After work we rush home to prepare dinner, attempt to have quality time with our children, drive them to their activities and do the shopping before picking them up again. Back at home we help with homework while doing the wash, then late at night start reviewing the report we brought home from the office. We have little time to relax and often cut down on badly needed sleep to get things done.

1. Banks, R. 1983. *The Tyranny of Time — When 24 Hours Is Not Enough*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press. p. 82-83.
2. De Graffe, J., D. Wann and T.H. Naylor. 2001. *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publisher Inc. p. 44.

Of course, because of their better financial situation, high income Canadians are more likely to purchase cleaning services and eat at restaurants. Indeed, on an average day in 1998, about 25% of high income Canadians ate at least one restaurant

meal compared with about 13% of those from low income households.

Although many people find shopping a chore, most Canadians between 25 and 54 spend a fair amount of time on this activity, regardless of income: low income individuals, an average of

about 51 minutes a day and high income people about 48 minutes a day. Of this time, between 8 and 10 minutes is spent grocery shopping and approximately 12 to 16 minutes on making other everyday purchases such as clothing and gas.⁵

More than 8 in 10 high income Canadians feel rushed

Perhaps as a result of the types of jobs they have, or because they spend a larger part of their day at paid work, Canadians with high incomes are more likely to feel pressed for time than their low income counterparts: 84% feel rushed at least a few times a week, compared with 73% of individuals in low income households. While weekdays tend to be more hectic, for many Canadians, juggling responsibilities is a problem that continues into the weekend. Nearly 60% of high income and about 47% of low income individuals feel rushed every day, including Saturday and Sunday.

Although low income Canadians are less likely to feel pressed for time, a substantial proportion still feel this way, suggesting that the pace of society and its associated stresses affect Canadians from all walks of life. These results contradict theories that suggest low income individuals are not caught up in the time vortex.

If given more time, both high and low income Canadians would spend it on similar types of activities. For example, 36% of Canadians in high income households reported wanting to spend more time with family and friends, while 19% would relax. Among those in low income households, 33% would spend any more time they had on family and friends and 15% on relaxing.

5. The rest of shopping time is spent on the purchase of other goods and services such as car maintenance, finances and personal care services.

Little time left to spend exclusively with children

Families are often the ones most affected by the scarcity of time. Work, family and community responsibilities frequently collide, leaving parents feeling guilty about “getting it all done and remorse that they have not done enough with their children and families.”⁶ Unheard of 30 years ago, many homes today have a special family calendar to schedule work, school and leisure activities.

Overall, low income Canadians aged 25 to 54 spend more time on child care at 82 minutes a day than their high income counterparts, at about 68 minutes a day.⁷ But as all parents can attest, much of child care is done while engaging in other activities such as cleaning, cooking or watching television. Considerably less time is devoted to exclusive interaction with children. In both low and high income households, parents report spending under 5 minutes a day reading or talking with their children and less than 20 minutes a day playing with them. However, low income parents devote more time to teaching or helping their children, at about 9 minutes a day, than do parents with high income who do so for approximately 4 minutes a day.⁸

Less leisure time for high income Canadians

The concept of leisure is difficult to pin down. An activity that for some is leisure (e.g. gardening, baking, building a shed) is, for others, unpaid work. Even sociologists find defining leisure somewhat difficult. Some see it as “a quality of experience” while others regard leisure as a “portion of one’s time.”⁹ While gauging the quality of a person’s time use cannot be done with GSS data, it is possible to examine leisure as a portion of time.

On an average day, 25- to 54-year-old Canadians from high income households spend about 40 minutes less on



High income Canadians are more likely to attend concerts and go to museums

In the last 12 months did you...	Aged 25 to 54	
	High income	Low income
	%	
Read for leisure		
Newspapers	95	84
Magazines	87	67
Books	73	63
Go to conservation or nature parks	66	43
Attend a concert	55	22
Go to a historic site	51	25
Go to a zoo/planetarium	50	33
Engage in a sport	49	24
Improve knowledge through books, TV, computer or talking	48	31
Go to a museum/art gallery	48	25
Attend a cultural/artistic festival	32	21
Go to the library (as leisure)	31	29
Do crafts or woodworking	29	31
Attend other stage performances	24	12
Play a musical instrument	22	15
Attend a cultural/heritage performance	18	12
Do any visual arts	12	12
Take photographs (for art)	10	8
Write prose or poetry (for leisure)	8	12
Sing	8	9
Choreograph or dance	6	4 ¹

1. Subject to high sampling variability.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

6. Daly, K. 2000. *It Keeps Getting Faster: Changing Pattern of Time in Families*. The Vanier Institute of the Family. www.vifamily.ca/cft/daly/dalye.htm. p. 2. (Accessed March 21, 2002.)
7. This is an average and includes time spent with all children up to age 15. Not surprisingly, individuals with small children spend more time on child care. For more information, see C. Silver, Summer 2000. “Being there: The time dual-earner couples spend with their children.” *Canadian Social Trends*.
8. These findings support figures in the United States which show that Americans spend about 6 hours a week shopping and about 40 minutes each week playing with their kids. Taking a weekly average, both high and low income Canadians spend 6 hours shopping but under 2 hours a week playing with their children. De Graffe, J., D. Wann and T.H. Naylor. 2001. *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publisher, Inc.
9. Wilson, J. 1980. “Sociology of leisure.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 6: 21-40.

leisure than their low income counterparts: 4.6 hours versus 5.3 hours.¹⁰ Of this time, sports and hobbies take up about 57 minutes of high income and 49 minutes of low income people's time, while reading books or newspapers constitutes 23 and 18 minutes, respectively. Both groups spend most of their leisure time watching television (high income people 82 and low income people 132 minutes a day). This, despite the fact that in addition to traditional hobbies, the computer and Internet now also compete for scarce leisure minutes.¹¹

Attending events and participating in activities may also be influenced by income. According to the GSS, high income Canadians had been twice as likely as low income individuals to attend a concert or participate regularly in sports in the preceding 12 months. People from high income households are also more likely to attend cultural or artistic festivals, or go to museums or art galleries.¹² The availability of funds, rather than differing interests between the two groups, may be responsible for these disparities.

On the other hand, similarities also exist in how the two groups spend their leisure time. For example, individuals in both high and low income households are equally likely to use the library, do crafts or woodworking, sing or participate in recreational dance.

Summary

Canadians from low and high income households live in a complex, fast-paced world. While high income individuals spend more time on paid work, those with low income devote more time to unpaid work activities. High income adults feel considerably more rushed and have less time for leisure. And whether living in a high or low income household, parents have little time left to spend with their children. This is one reason why adults in both groups report wishing they could spend more time with family and friends.

10. Daily times are averaged over the week and include Saturdays and Sundays.
11. Indeed, more than 30% of Internet users stated that because of being on the Internet they spend less time watching television. Williams, C. Winter 2001. "Connected to the Internet, still connected to life?" *Canadian Social Trends*.
12. Respondents were asked if they had participated in these activities during the past 12 months.



Cara Williams is an analyst with Labour and Household Survey Analysis Division, Statistics Canada.

Do you enjoy reading
Canadian Social Trends?

Do you use our
publication in
your business?

How long have you
been a reader?

Send your comments to:

**Editor-in-Chief,
Canadian Social Trends,
7th floor, Jean Talon Bldg.,
Statistics Canada,
Ottawa, Ontario,
K1A 0T6.**

**Fax number (613) 951-0387.
Internet e-mail: cstsc@statcan.ca.**

WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

Need more information from Statistics Canada?

CALL OUR NATIONAL ENQUIRIES LINE:

1 800 263-1136

To order publications:

NATIONAL ORDER LINE: 1 800 267-6677

INTERNET: order@statcan.ca

National TDD Line: 1 800 363-7629

STATISTICS CANADA HAS 8 REGIONAL REFERENCE CENTRES TO SERVE YOU:

**Newfoundland, Labrador, Nova Scotia,
New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island**

Halifax, Nova Scotia – (902) 426-5331

Fax number (902) 426-9538

Quebec and Territory of Nunavut

Montreal, Quebec – (514) 283-5725

Fax number (514) 283-9350

Ontario

Toronto – (416) 973-6586

Fax number (416) 973-7475

Manitoba

Winnipeg – (204) 983-4020

Fax number (204) 983-7543

Saskatchewan

Regina – (306) 780-5405

Fax number (306) 780-5403

Alberta and Northwest Territories

Edmonton, Alberta – (780) 495-3027

Fax number (780) 495-5318

British Columbia and Yukon

Vancouver, British Columbia – (604) 666-3691

Fax number (604) 666-4863

National Capital Region

(613) 951-8116

Fax number (613) 951-0581

STANDARDS OF SERVICE TO THE PUBLIC

To maintain quality service to the public, Statistics Canada follows established standards covering statistical products and services, delivery of statistical information, cost-recovered services and service to respondents. To obtain a copy of these service standards, please contact your nearest Statistics Canada Regional Reference Centre.

If You're On the Move...

Make sure we know where to find you by forwarding the subscriber's name, old address, new address, telephone number and client reference number to:

**Operations and Integration Division
Circulation Management
Statistics Canada
120 Parkdale Avenue
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0T6**

or by phone at (613) 951-7277 or 1 800 700-1033;
or by fax at (613) 951-1584 or 1 800 889-9734; or
by Internet at order@statcan.ca.

We require six weeks advance notice to ensure uninterrupted delivery, so please keep us informed when you're on the move!