

# Of time and change



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How do we spend our time compared to people 30 or 50 years ago? What impact has this had on our health, wealth and wellbeing? The Centre for Time Use Research has some surprising answers.

Most people have a perception that their lives have changed when compared to those of their parents, but would struggle to pinpoint the exact nature of these changes. What difference has technology made to the way we live our lives? Do we work longer or shorter hours? Are we more or less active? Has the gender gap really changed and, if so, how?

The Centre for Time Use Research seeks answers to such questions through the collection and analysis of an apparently mundane set of resources: hundreds of thousands of diary pages in which people have recorded the minutiae of how they spent their time during days that were, for them, fairly ordinary. The Centre's collection of time-use

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## Useful links:

<https://www.timeuse.org/>

## Funded by:

British Heart Foundation  
US National Institutes of Health

diaries spans the last 55 years and 30 countries. This unique data set illustrates in great detail people's lives at home and at work and reveals the dramatic shifts that have taken place.

Professor Jonathan Gershuny has devised a method of standardising the data from records gathered in many different ways and for varied purposes. This has enabled researchers to make rigorous comparisons between countries and across decades, and come up with conclusive answers to questions about social and economic change. Among the key findings so far are the following:

- Surprisingly, the total number of hours spent on paid and unpaid work has changed very little in thirty years. The perception that people feel 'busier' nowadays is not borne out by the data. Those who report themselves as "always busy" are not, it appears, the busiest group on average.
- In northern Europe, North America and Australia, men and women now spend on average almost exactly the same amount of time in paid and unpaid work combined.
- Across all the countries studied, women now do less unpaid work, and men do more. However, this does not imply gender equality – men still do less unpaid work as a whole.
- Countries which are most friendly to women in the workplace (notably Nordic countries with good state-supported childcare and parental leave entitlements) show the largest shift of unpaid work from women to men. This implies that active interventions are important in public policy for increasing gender equality.

There are endless applications for this data. One example is that researchers are now exploring how the diaries might be used to inform health advice. The diaries reveal a general shift over the decades from active to more sedentary pursuits, reflecting the impact of technology. They also clearly demonstrate that intentional exercise is only a small part of our physical activity. This reduction in activity levels could have major health implications.



Health Gage by Garmin Vivofit CC BY 2.0 via Flickr

External organisations are now taking a keen interest in the Centre's research. The British Heart Foundation is helping to fund an innovative pilot scheme. Self-reporting is notoriously unreliable (people have a tendency to exaggerate the amount of exercise they undertake), so participants wear an electronic activity tracker and a small camera as well as completing a written diary in an bid to find out if electronic recordings adds a new dimension to the diaries. The scheme aims to improve advice on recommended levels of physical activity.

#### Further reading

Sullivan O, and J Gershuny, "Speed-Up Society? Evidence from the UK 2000 and 2015 Time Use Diary Surveys", *Sociology* June 2017. DOI: 10.1177/0038038517712914