

## everyday economics

### The Theory of the Leisure Class

An economic mystery: Why do the poor seem to have more free time than the rich?

By Steven E. Landsburg

Posted Friday, March 9, 2007, at 1:23 PM ET

As you've probably heard, there's been an explosion of inequality in the United States over the past four decades. The gap between high-skilled and low-skilled workers is bigger than ever before, and it continues to grow.

How can we close the gap? Well, I suppose we could round up a bunch of assembly-line workers and force them to mow the lawns of corporate vice presidents. Because the gap I'm talking about is the gap in leisure time, and it's the least educated who are pulling ahead.

In 1965, leisure was pretty much equally distributed across classes. People of the same age, sex, and family size tended to have about the same amount of leisure, regardless of their socioeconomic status. But since then, two things have happened. First, leisure (like income) has increased dramatically across the board. Second, though everyone's a winner, the biggest winners are at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder.

To quantify those changes, you've got to decide exactly what leisure means. You can start by deciding what it's not. Surely working at your desk or on the assembly line is not leisure. Neither is cleaning or ironing. But what about standing around the water cooler, riding the train to work, gardening, pet care, or tinkering with your car? What about playing board games with your children?

Those are judgment calls, but it turns out not to matter very much what calls you make. When professors [Mark Aguiar and Erik Hurst](#) combined the results of several large surveys (including studies where randomly chosen subjects kept detailed time diaries), they found that by *any* definition, the trends are clear.

In 1965, the average man spent 42 hours a week working at the office or the factory; throw in coffee breaks, lunch breaks, and commuting time, and you're up to 51 hours. Today, instead of spending 42 and 51 hours, he spends 36 and 40. What's he doing with all that extra time? He spends a little on shopping, a little on housework, and a lot on watching TV, reading the newspaper, going to parties, relaxing, going to bars, playing golf, surfing the Web, visiting friends, and having sex. Overall, depending on exactly what you count, he's got an extra six to eight hours a week of leisure—call it the equivalent of nine extra weeks of vacation per year.

For women, time spent on the job is up from 17 hours a week to 24. With breaks and commuting thrown in, it's up from 20 hours to 26. But time spent on household chores is down from 35 hours a week to 22, for a net leisure gain of four to six hours. Call it five extra vacation weeks.

A small part of those gains is because of demographic change. The average American is older now and has fewer children, so it's not surprising that he or she works less. But even when you compare modern Americans to their 1965 counterparts—people with the same family size, age, and

education—the gains are still on the order of 4 to 8 hours a week, or something like seven extra weeks of leisure per year.

But not for everyone. About 10 percent of us are stuck in 1965, leisurewise. At the opposite extreme, 10 percent of us have gained a staggering 14 hours a week or more. (Once again, your gains are measured in comparison to a person who, in 1965, had the same characteristics that you have today.) By and large, the biggest leisure gains have gone precisely to those with the most stagnant incomes—that is, the least skilled and the least educated. And conversely, the smallest leisure gains have been concentrated among the most educated, the same group that's had the biggest gains in income.

Aguiar and Hurst can't explain fully that rising inequality, just as nobody can explain fully the rising inequality in income. But there are, I think, two important morals here.

First, man does not live by bread alone. Our happiness depends partly on our incomes, but also on the time we spend with our friends, our hobbies, and our favorite TV shows. So, it's a good exercise in perspective to remember that by and large, the big winners in the income derby have been the small winners in the leisure derby, and vice versa.

Second, a certain class of pundits and politicians are quick to see any increase in income inequality as a problem that needs fixing—usually through some form of redistributive taxation. Applying the same philosophy to leisure, you could conclude that something must be done to reverse the trends of the past 40 years—say, by rounding up all those folks with extra time on their hands and putting them to (unpaid) work in the kitchens of their "less fortunate" neighbors. If you think it's OK to redistribute income but repellent to redistribute leisure, you might want to ask yourself what—if anything—is the fundamental difference.

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Article URL: <http://www.slate.com/id/2161309/>.

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