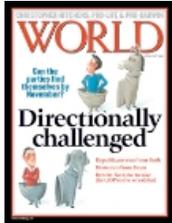




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BUSINESS

Stressful leisure

A Gallup poll last year found that 44 percent of Americans consider themselves to be workaholics | *Timothy Lamer*

It has become axiomatic that the United States is, in the words of CIO magazine, "a nation of stressed-out workaholics." A Gallup poll last year found that 44 percent of Americans consider themselves to be workaholics. Advertisers have cashed in on the idea, with commercials for one theme park featuring fictional undertakers who thank Americans for working themselves into early graves. The concept of the "overworked American" has long been a staple of political and cultural discussion in Western Europe also.

But what if it's not actually true? A study this spring from the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston and the University of Chicago shows that the conventional wisdom about Americans and work is not only wrong, it is spectacularly wrong. Most Americans simply do not work the long, grueling hours attributed to them by popular lore.

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The study, conducted by economists Mark Aguiar and Erik Hurst, found that leisure time increased significantly for both American men and American women between 1965 and 2003. For men, an additional 6-8 hours per week of leisure time was the result of fewer hours spent at work outside the home. For women, greater entry into the workforce was offset by fewer hours worked in the home, yielding 4-8 extra hours of leisure time per week. "This increase in leisure," Messrs. Aguiar and Hurst write, "corresponds to roughly an additional 5 to 10 weeks of vacation per year, assuming a 40 hour work week."

Specifically, the study found that American men spent 114.4 hours per week not working on the job or at home (the authors' broadest measurement of leisure) in 2003, up from 106.8 hours in 1965. American women spent 119.5 hours not working on the job or at home, a number that rose steadily from 113.1 in 1965. (Different definitions of "leisure" produced different results, but in each case leisure increased between 1965 and 2003.)

Go back further than 1965, and the difference in leisure time is even more startling. Researchers Jesse Ausubel and Arnulf Grubler, in a study for Rockefeller University, report that a typical American worker in 1870 spent almost 3,000 hours per year engaged in paid labor. His counterpart in 1987 spent about 1,600 hours per year working for money.

So are Americans, with more free time than ever, simply deluding themselves? Are high stress levels all in our minds? Maybe not. Social commentator Gregg Easterbrook says that many people may feel time-stressed because they heavily schedule their free time with trips and other potentially hectic activities—stressful events that past generations did not emphasize as much.

He also cites studies showing that Americans sleep fewer hours than they did in past generations, with television and the internet keeping people awake longer. Such activities may be entertaining, but they translate into longer days and less of the natural relief from stress that sleep provides. "We're shifting to a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week society, and as a result we're increasingly not sleeping like we used to," Najib T. Ayas of the University of

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The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships

British Columbia told The Washington Post.

So the United States may indeed have a stress problem; for most Americans, though, it's not the result of working too much.

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