

TOO MUCH SPARE TIME?

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While the often–heard complaint about time in contemporary society is that of having too much to do and too little time, there are those who experience the opposite: they experience having too much time and too little to do. Such feelings of having too much “unoccupied free time” may be associated with poorer outcomes if the experience leads to unproductive or even unhealthy pursuits. This paper examines this unoccupied free time, using the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Surveys of 1997 and 2006. The analysis considers whether there has been a decline or an increase in the reporting of having unoccupied free time, the characteristics of men and women that are linked with such experiences, the reasons for experiencing unoccupied free time; and the patterns of time use that are associated with this experience.

TOO MUCH SPARE TIME?

While the often–heard complaint about time today is that of having too much to do and too little time, there are those who experience the opposite: they have too much time and too little to do. Such feelings of having too much “unoccupied free time” (Bloomfield, 2004) may be associated with feelings of dissatisfaction, with frustration and boredom, and may lead to poorer outcomes and to time being spent in unproductive or even unhealthy pursuits (Bloomfield, 2004; Robinson, 1977; Winefield, 1993b).

One particular issue, relevant today with increasing levels of unemployment, is that loss of work, or an inability to find or keep work may leave people with an excess amount of free time that they are unable to productively fill (see, Currell, 2005 for a discussion of this as it applied in the Great Depression). In addition to unemployed people, this may be relevant to retired people, and those with health or disability constraints. Being able to effectively use leisure time is one possible indicator of social inclusion (Bittman, 1999), and this paper therefore contributes to our understanding of social exclusion by developing some ideas of which people cannot effectively use all their spare time to convert that time into “leisure”.

This paper examines unoccupied free time in Australia – identifying whether from 1997 to 2006 there has been a decline or an increase in the reporting of having too much spare time; what characteristics of men and women are linked to a higher likelihood of reporting it; what reasons are given for experiencing it; and how it is linked to different patterns of time use and to different levels of satisfaction with time use. By identifying the groups of people who are most likely to have too much spare time, and what their barriers to better time use are, we can hopefully identify ways this time could be more effectively used. This builds on work of Bloomfield (2004) who analysed this issue using 1997 Australian time use data.

BACKGROUND

People fill their days in many ways – some spending a significant amount of time in paid and unpaid work, balanced with some leisure time and time for personal care activities and sleep. Those with less paid or unpaid work commitments may be able to

allocate more time to leisure time. Generally, the availability of leisure time is linked to positive outcomes (Shaw, 1984), but also, time spent in paid work, can also be fulfilling and lead to enhanced personal wellbeing or life satisfaction (Brereton et al., 2008), although too much time spent in paid work can lead to worse outcomes (Baxter et al., 2007). For most, finding the right balance of work and leisure is perhaps what is important to good outcomes (Pearson, 2007).

Some people are faced with a different challenge: they have so much spare time, because of their lack of paid or unpaid work commitments, that they cannot fill this spare time productively. This is, in particular, a problem for the unemployed, but may also apply to underemployed workers, to those who are yet to join the labour market or have retired, or those who have particular barriers that make it difficult for them to undertake paid or unpaid work. A number of studies have focused on the time use patterns and wellbeing of those groups at greatest risk of having a lot of spare time, such as the unemployed (Feather & Bond, 1983; Fryer & Mckenna, 1987; Jahoda et al., 2002; Waters & Moore, 2002; Winefield, 1993b), the elderly or the retired (Gauthier & Smeeding, 2003; Grossin, 1986), youth or students (Caldwell, 1999; Gordon & Caltabiano, 1996; Møller, 1992; Robertson, 1999; Shaw et al., 1996; Winefield, 1993a), and those with chronic mental or physical health problems (Leufstadius & Eklund, 2008; Pentland & McColl, 1999). A common theme is that being able to spend time productively is important to wellbeing. Others, including those not identified in these groups, may face different obstacles that prohibit their productive use of time, including those caused by lack of access to money or to transport, for example.

Bloomfield (2004) identified that the extent of unoccupied free time was greater for men than women, and for younger rather than older, unmarried rather than married, and not-employed rather than employed people. This paper extends Bloomfield's analyses to incorporate some other socio-demographic characteristics, including disability status, main language spoken at home, hours of paid work, relationship in household and other caring responsibilities. This helps to focus more clearly on who is likely to have difficulties managing an excess of free time.

The fact that spare time becomes hard to fill, and is therefore not filled with enjoyable or "leisurely" activities, suggests that this time is in fact not leisure (Stebbins, 2006).

The time can be characterised by boredom, or having nothing to do – feelings more likely to be associated with lower levels of wellbeing than would be expected if this time were devoted to leisure. The concepts of having too much spare time, or too little to do and being bored are all linked to some extent, and these experiences of time can be associated with poorer overall wellbeing, life satisfaction or self-esteem, and with poorer physical and mental health (Bond & Feather, 1988; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Feather & Bond, 1983; Harris, 2000; Iso-Ahola, 1997; Iso-Ahola & Weissinger, 1987; Shaw et al., 1996). In this paper we are unable to explore relationships between time use and mental health or physical wellbeing, but instead explore how satisfaction with time use varies for those who report different degrees of unoccupied free time.

A further reason for concern about the prevalence of having too much unoccupied free time is that to fill this time, more time may be spent in unhealthy pursuits. At one extreme this may involve higher incidence of deviant behaviours, such as crime, or gambling, or an excess of time spent drinking or smoking. This is the idea that “the devil finds work for idle hands”. Evidence suggests, however, a much more complex relationship between time use and delinquency (Jacob & Lefgren, 2003; Prein & Seus, 2000), although there is perhaps some link between leisure boredom and substance abuse or addictive behaviours (Gordon & Caltabiano, 1996; Iso-Ahola & Crowley, 1991; Iso-Ahola & Weissinger, 1990). The scenario likely to affect more people is that having too much spare time leads to more time being spent in unproductive pursuits, such as watching television, as a means of passing the time of day (Bloomfield, 2004). Others may spend more time on the computer or more time sleeping. Here, we examine selected aspects of time use, to see how time is spent for those with more unoccupied free time.

This paper continues as follows. The next section describes the data and methods used. The results are then organised by first analysing who is more likely to report having unoccupied free time (relating that also to who has more leisure time), then what their reasons are for having this spare time. These data are then related to time use patterns and to time use satisfaction before a discussion and conclusion of the findings.

DATA AND METHODS

These analyses are derived from the 1997 and 2006 Australian Time Use Surveys. These surveys are designed to represent households across Australia, with all persons aged 15 and over from selected households included in the survey. In 2006, the final sample comprised 3,244 males and 3,658 females, and in 1997 the sample comprised 3,476 males and 3,784 females. In these surveys, time use data were collected in diaries, and individuals' and families' characteristics were collected in a personal interview.

Within the diary in both years, a question was asked "How often do you feel that you have spare time that you don't know what to do with?" with response categories of "always", "often", "sometimes", "rarely" and "never". For simplicity, we refer to this information as frequency of unoccupied free time, following Bloomfield (2004) in her analyses of the 1997 data. Those who said they sometimes, often or always experienced unoccupied free time were asked "What are all the reasons you have spare time that you don't know what to do with?" with respondents shown a card listing possible reasons. In 1997 there were six possible reasons, including "other", while two new reasons were added in 2006 (see Table 1).

A question relating to the other end of the time spectrum: "How often do you feel rushed or pressed for time?" with response categories the same as those for the spare time question, is also included in the analyses. Another question used is the measure of time use satisfaction. This question was placed at the end of the diary and actually refers to time use over the days recorded in the diary, rather than more general views: "In general, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way you spent your time over the last two days?" (very satisfied, satisfied, both satisfied and dissatisfied, dissatisfied and very dissatisfied).

Subjective measures such as these are useful, as the actual experience of time is likely to be a key factor in understanding how time use might affect someone's wellbeing. Such perceptions are also likely to be based on real elements of a person's life – whether in terms of caring responsibilities, work responsibilities or other aspects (Garhammer, 1998; Zuzanek, 1998).

The time use data collected in the diaries have also been used to examine exactly how the time use of those with more unoccupied free time varies from those with less or no unoccupied free time. Time use was aggregated based on main activity (using the purpose of activity classification) and averaged for weekdays and weekends.

The 1997 and 2006 surveys are sufficiently similar to make comparisons. Very small changes in scope were managed by applying the same criteria to each survey (the exclusion of visitors in 2006). Person weights were used in the analyses of who experiences unoccupied free time, while day weights were used when relating this to actual patterns of time use.

To analyse who is most likely to have unoccupied free time the relevant item is dichotomised to identify those who often or always have unoccupied free time, rather than reporting less frequent unoccupied free time. Logistic regression was then used to determine which personal or family characteristics explain a greater likelihood of having unoccupied free time.

The characteristics included in this analysis were year of the survey (2006, compared to the reference category of 1996), sex of respondent (males, compared to the reference category of females), age of respondent (in groups, with 35 to 54 the reference group) and relationship in household (family member caring for children – the reference category, family member no children, non-family members living together, lone person). Also for those aged 15 to 24, respondents were grouped into those who were dependent students living at home, others who were living at home but not as students, and other 15 to 24 year olds not living at home. Additional variables were main language spoken at home (not English, compared to English, the reference category), whether has a disability or long-term health condition (yes, versus no, the reference category), usual hours of employment (not employed, less than 35 hours, 35 to 49 hours, 50 hours or more – the reference group) and whether is a carer to someone else (yes, versus no, the reference category).

This estimation was also conducted separately for males and females, to look for how the associations varied within these separate groups.

Similar analyses were undertaken to determine which characteristics explained the reasons for having too much unoccupied free time. These analyses were conducted just for those who at least sometimes had unoccupied free time.

Also, to consider to what extent the analyses of who experiences more unallocated free time is simply measuring who is likely to have an excess of spare time, the time use data, as collected in the diaries, were analysed to derive a measure of total time spent in leisure. This was derived broadly to include recreation, leisure and social activities, where these occurred as main activities. This measure was then analysed using the same variables as used in the analyses of unoccupied free time. An additional indicator of whether the diary related to a weekday or weekend was incorporated. The estimation technique treated the time use data as continuous, with the possibility of repeat observations per person taken into account by adjusting the standard errors.

The remaining analyses (time use satisfaction and patterns of time use) were descriptive only, not based on multivariate analyses.

RESULTS

Males and females experience of unoccupied free time, 1997 and 2006

Figure 1 shows that the majority of males and females, in 1997 and 2006, rarely or never had spare time in which they did not know what to do, or, unoccupied free time. Around one quarter sometimes had unoccupied free time, with fewer than 10 per cent saying they often or always had unoccupied free time. While the proportions are quite small, across the population this amounts to a significant number of people always or often having spare time in which they did not know what to do (estimated at 812,000 people in 1997 and 974,000 in 2006).

Between 1997 and 2006, responses to this question changed little, especially when considering the potentially problematic groups who report often or always having unoccupied free time. There is somewhat less reporting of “never” having unoccupied free time, compensated by more reporting of “sometimes” having unoccupied free time. This is likely to be related to changes at the other end of the spectrum – the

increased tendency for males and females to report being rushed or pressed for time (33% of males and 39% of females were always or often rushed or pressed for time in 1996, compared to 46% and 49% respectively in 2006).

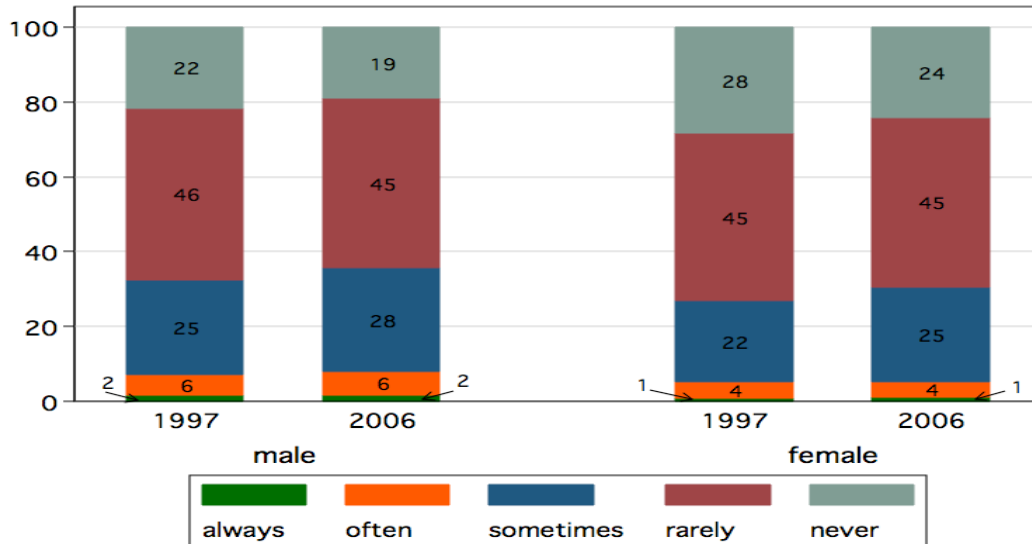


Figure 1 Frequency of unoccupied free time, males and females, 1997 and 2006

Who has more unoccupied free time?

Table 1 shows the results of analysing which males and females are most likely to say that they always or often experience unoccupied free time, using data from 1997 and 2006. Overall, there were no differences between 1997 and 2006. In the first estimation, males and females are combined and a separate variable measures differences between the sexes – this shows that men were more likely to frequently experience unoccupied time than were women, after taking into account the other differences between men’s and women’s characteristics. However, separate models were also estimated for males as females, shown in the next two columns, as various relationships were found to differ for males and females.

In this section, we also refer to Table 2, which shows the relationships for amount of time spent in leisure (leisure, recreation or social activities). In the majority of cases, those variables that predict a higher likelihood of having unoccupied free time also predict a greater amount of leisure time, which is the relationship we would expect, assuming that those with more “spare time” would have more difficulty filling that

time. However, there are one or two relationships that do not follow this expected direction, and where that is the case, these relationships are discussed below.

In analysing the likelihood of having unoccupied free time, strong age differences were apparent; with the youngest men and women the most likely to experience unoccupied free time, especially those who were not students but living with parents. The young male students living at home had no more leisure time than males aged 35 to 54 years (the reference category) however, they were more likely to experience unoccupied free time, indicating that these young men had barriers to their being able to effectively use their time that the older men did not have. Overall, the age differences were greater for women than for men. Also, those aged 55 to 74 were the least likely of all age groups to have unoccupied free time. The women in this age group had significantly more leisure time than the women aged 35 to 54 years, but there was no indication that they had difficulties filling this spare time effectively. This is true also of the older men and women, whose leisure time increased, but did not have a significantly higher likelihood (compared to the 35 to 54 year olds) of experiencing unoccupied free time.

Relationship within the household was important in explaining the likelihood of having unoccupied free time. For both men and women, the reference group is being a family member with no dependent children aged under 15 years living at home. Compared to these family members, those who have dependent children were the least likely to experience unoccupied free time, although this difference was much greater and only significant for women. Men and women living as non-family members (in group households, or living with families other than their own) experience similar rates of unoccupied free time as family members without children. This is true also of women who live alone. For men, those who are living alone are more likely to experience unoccupied free time compared to other men. Interestingly, women living alone had more leisure time than those living in a family with no children, but they were no more likely to experience unoccupied free time, while males living alone did not have a significantly greater amount of leisure time compared to the family members with no children, yet were more likely to experience unoccupied free time. This suggests these men living alone may be faced with barriers to their effective use of time that differ to those of men living in a family.

Other personal characteristics linked to greater incidence of unoccupied free time appear to be related to peoples' ability to participate in society: Those with a long-term health condition or disability were more likely than others to say they always or often have too much spare time. These men and women also had more leisure time than others. Those whose main language spoken is not English were more likely to say they have too much unoccupied free time, compared to those whose main language is English. These males and females actually reported less leisure time than others, again suggesting barriers to their being able to effectively fill the leisure time that they had.

A very clear result was that not-employed men and women were more likely to experience unoccupied free time than others. Differences among those in paid employment also existed, such that those working the longest hours were least likely to experience unoccupied free time. Not surprisingly, these mirror the results for the amount of leisure time reported.

Having other caring responsibilities also somewhat reduced the likelihood of having unoccupied free time, but this is significant only for women. The amount of leisure time was somewhat less for both males and females who provide care to someone.

To summarise these results, those who are most likely to experience unoccupied free time are the youngest men and women, especially those living at home, in addition to men who are living alone, those with limited commitments to paid work or to caring, and those with a potential barrier to social inclusion by way of a health or language barrier. The groups of particular interest are those with a language barrier, who actually experienced less leisure time, and male students living at home as well as males living alone, who did not experience any more leisure time than the reference groups, but experienced more unoccupied free time. We can perhaps also learn from those who experience more leisure time yet do not report more unoccupied free time – these people have the skills, facilities or qualities to be able to effectively use their leisure time. Those that stand out in this regard are older women and women living alone.

Table 1 Likelihood of often or always having unoccupied free time, 1997 and 2006 (odds ratios)

	Persons	Males	Females
Year of survey=2006	1.10	1.11	1.08
Background characteristics			
Male	1.77***		
Age=15-24 at home - dependent student	1.94***	1.71*	2.30***
Age=15-24 at home other	4.34***	3.33***	7.15***
Age=15-24 not at home 25-34	2.29***	1.37	3.69***
35-54 (reference)	1.45**	1.27	1.94**
55-74	0.67***	0.71*	0.62*
75 or older	0.93	1.00	0.92
Family member, no children (reference)			
Family member, with children	0.62***	0.79	0.43***
Non-family member	1.27	1.23	1.36
Lives alone	1.65***	1.98***	1.30
Has a disability or long term health condition	1.84***	1.64***	2.10***
Main language spoken not English	1.74***	1.94***	1.45*
Constraints or commitments			
Is carer to someone	0.65**	0.72	0.59**
Not employed	4.97***	4.86***	5.86***
1 to 34 hours	2.60***	2.83***	2.65*
35 to 50 hours	1.67**	1.98***	1.19
50 hours or more (reference)			
Constant	0.01***	0.02***	0.01***
N	13275	6263	7012
pseudo- r-square	0.09	0.08	0.11

Note: Omitted categories for single dummy variables are not shown.

Table 2 Time spent in recreation, leisure or social activities, 1997 and 2006 (minutes per day)

	Persons	Males	Females
Year of survey=2006	-19.8***	-20.1***	-20.3***
Background characteristics			
Male	54.1***		0
Age=15-24 at home - dependent student	11.5	-9.1	20.4**
Age=15-24 at home other	59.8***	56.2***	61.1***
Age=15-24 not at home	11.5	5.0	17.0*
25-34	-3.5	-0.3	-5.0
35-54 (reference)			
55-74	20.7***	1.7	35.3***
75 or older	45.5***	7.1	71.6***
Family member, no children (reference)			
Family member, with children	-65.3***	-56.8***	-66.6***
Non-family member	5.6	-4.2	12.4
Lives alone	23.4***	11.8	28.4***
Has a disability or long term health condition	16.0***	18.6***	11.4**
Main language spoken not English	-32.0***	-30.2***	-35.5***
Constraints or commitments			
Is carer to someone	-15.8***	-21.4***	-10.6*
Not employed	145.0***	179.0***	109.9***
1 to 34 hours	81.6***	96.3***	59.1***
35 to 50 hours	38.2***	40.5***	23.4***
50 hours or more (reference)			
Weekday	-112.7***	-135.8***	-91.6***
Constant	291.4***	354.9***	298.1***
N	27865	13202	14663

Note: Omitted categories for single dummy variables are not shown.

Reasons for unoccupied free time

Identifying the groups of people who are most likely to have unoccupied free time gives some indication for the possible reasons these people have this experience, however, it is possible to look at this more accurately by examining the reasons people give for having too much spare time. These questions were asked of anyone who said they sometimes, often or always had spare time they did not know what to do with. Respondents could choose more than one reason. As above, we examine both

the 1997 and 2006 data. For 2006, new response categories were added in, as shown in Table 2, which may have resulted in the different distributions across the surveys.

The most often-given reason for having too much spare time was lack of money. Being sick, injured or having a disability, having no family or friends living nearby, having no interests or hobbies and working unpredictable working hours were also contributing factors. The reason, transport difficulties, was more-often cited by females than by males. Smaller proportions reported lack of community facilities or services or other reasons as being contributing reasons for too much spare time.

Table 3 Reasons for having unoccupied free time (%), if at least sometimes has unoccupied free time, 1997 and 2006

	Males		Females	
	1997	2006	1997	2006
Lack of money	53	46	57	49
Being sick/injured/disability	12	16	10	18
No family or friends nearby	10	15	17	21
No interests or hobbies	13	14	12	18
Unpredictable working hours		16		13
Transport difficulties		10		15
Lack of community facilities or services	8	7	7	6
Other reasons	15	5	14	7
Sample size	1,048	1,061	938	1,039

Multivariate analyses were then used to determine whether particular reasons for unoccupied free time were given by different groups of people. The 1997 and 2006 data, and males and females, were combined for each model predicting the likelihood of given a response. (Transport difficulties and unpredictable working hours were also included, just for 2006 data.) The “other reasons” categories have not been included. Some differences by year were apparent, but it is not possible to discern whether this reflects an actual change in the propensity for these factors to affect peoples’ spare time use, or whether it is due to the changes in the response categories.

These analyses show that men and women were equally likely to say they had spare time in which they did not know what to do because of lack of money, being sick, injured or having a disability, having no interests and hobbies, having no community facilities nearby, and working unpredictable hours. However, women were more

likely than men to attribute this to having no family or friends nearby and to transport difficulties.

The oldest people were the least likely to say they had too much spare time because of lack of money and were also somewhat less likely than others to say that lack of community facilities was a problem. The youngest people who are not living with their parents are most likely to report lack of money contributing to their unoccupied free time. For the younger people, transport problems were a contributing factor (both for dependent students and others), and for dependent students, having no community facilities was also a factor. These analyses of reasons for unoccupied free time were also repeated for males and females separately (results not shown), and this showed that it was young male – not female – students who attributed their unoccupied free time to lack of community facilities. The existence of these barriers for young people helps to explain why they might be more likely to experience unoccupied free time, even though they have more leisure time (for students and other young women living at home). The young dependent students were least likely of all ages to report sickness, injury or disability contributed to their unoccupied free time.

Not surprisingly, those with health problems or a disability were much more likely than others to say this is why they had spare time in which they did not know what to do. Those with an illness or disability were less likely than others to say lack of community facilities was a factor but somewhat more likely to say transport difficulties was a factor.

Those whose main language was not English were also somewhat more likely to say their sickness, injury or disability and transport problems contributed to their having too much spare time, but these people were less likely to be affected by financial reasons and by unpredictable working hours.

Based on the relationship in household variable, those most likely to attribute having too much spare time to having no family or friends nearby are those living alone. The previous analyses showed that it was males, not females, living alone who experienced more unoccupied free time, and if these analyses are repeated by sex, it is evident that this finding – that having no family or friends nearby contributes to feelings of unoccupied free time for those living alone – applies only to males living

alone. Those living with non-family members are also more likely to be affected by lack of money than those living with family and no children, which to a lesser extent also applies to those who have children.

Looking at employment status, there is a very strong relationship with the likelihood of lack of money being a reason for having too much spare time – working no hours or fewer hours resulting in a higher likelihood of saying lack of money is a reason. Also, perhaps reflecting reasons for non-employment, those who are not employed are likely to say sickness; ill health or disability is a contributing factor. Surprisingly, unpredictable working hours is most likely to be a reason for having too much spare time for those working the longest hours.

Summarising these results then, while lack of money was the most common reason, and clearly important to those with lower levels of employment participation, there were important differences across groups in the population. Younger people face problems with transport and community facilities, for example, and transport difficulties are also problematic for those from a non-English speaking background or with a disability or health problem. Males who live alone are more likely to attribute their having unoccupied free time to isolation from family and friends.

Table 4 Reasons for having unoccupied free time, 1997 and 2006 (odds ratios)

	Lack of money	Sick, injured, disability	No family or friends nearby	No interests or hobbies	No community facilities	Transport	Unpredictable work hours
Year of survey=2006	0.82**	1.52***	1.57***	1.29**	0.99	n.a.	n.a.
Background characteristics							
Male	0.94	1.11	0.63***	0.83	1.20	0.67**	1.05
Age=15-24 at home - dependent student	0.86	0.28***	0.99	0.89	2.34***	3.07***	0.80
Age=15-24 at home other	1.18	1.28	0.45**	1.21	1.40	2.97***	1.60
Age=15-24 not at home	1.38*	0.49*	1.14	1.09	1.40	2.12**	1.15
25-34	1.05	0.71	1.11	0.87	1.10	1.37	1.17
35-54 (reference)							
55-74	0.66***	0.94	0.74*	0.94	0.59*	0.60*	1.03
75 or older	0.18***	1.04	0.70	1.08	0.33*	0.55	0.53
Family member, no children (reference)							
Family member, with children	1.21*	0.95	0.87	0.93	0.74	0.57*	0.77
Non-family member	1.40*	1.09	1.41	0.86	0.93	1.61	0.99
Lives alone	1.01	0.95	1.72***	0.84	0.81	1.38	0.89
Has a disability or long term health condition	1.09	9.88***	0.93	1.21	0.64**	1.47*	0.90
Main language spoken not English	0.57***	1.47*	1.24	1.23	0.89	2.00***	0.53*
Constraints or commitments							
Is carer to someone	1.04	0.94	0.81	0.95	1.23	0.71	1.13
Not employed	2.27***	5.27***	1.17	0.69*	1.26	2.49*	0.05***
1 to 34 hours	1.80***	2.07*	0.78	0.77	1.16	2.05	0.69
35 to 50 hours	1.73***	1.50	0.83	0.96	1.12	1.18	0.54**
50 hours or more (reference)							
Constant	0.70*	0.01***	0.19***	0.19***	0.07***	0.06***	0.50**
N	4085	4085	4085	4085	4085	2100	2100
Pseudo- r-square	0.04	0.27	0.03	0.01	0.04	0.09	0.16

Note: Omitted categories for single dummy variables are not shown.

Patterns of time use according to unoccupied free time

This section explores how, for males and females, the time use patterns differ according to the experience of having unoccupied time. The main activities undertaken on weekdays and weekends are analysed separately for 2006 only. To illustrate the overall differences, these activities have been grouped into sleep, other personal care (including eating), work or study, other unpaid work (including housework, childcare, other caring or volunteering), then recreation and social activities, with television as a subset of this separately identified. More detailed analyses of some of these main activities are also included.

When compared for those who always or often, sometimes, or rarely or never have spare time in which they do not know what to do, Figure 2 shows that time use patterns do vary. Men with more unoccupied free time sleep for longer (a difference of 56 minutes on weekends and 31 minutes on weekdays between the “always/often” group and the “rarely/never” group) and watch more television (63 minutes difference on weekends and 69 weekends difference on weekdays), and on weekdays spend more time doing other forms of recreation or social activities (69 minutes difference). Differences in personal care activities are also apparent, although not large. Not surprisingly, those with more unoccupied free time spend less time in paid work or study, especially on weekdays. They also spend less time doing unpaid work.

For women the findings are similar, even though the average amounts of time spent on the different activities vary compared to those of men, especially with regard to the amount of time in paid work versus unpaid work.

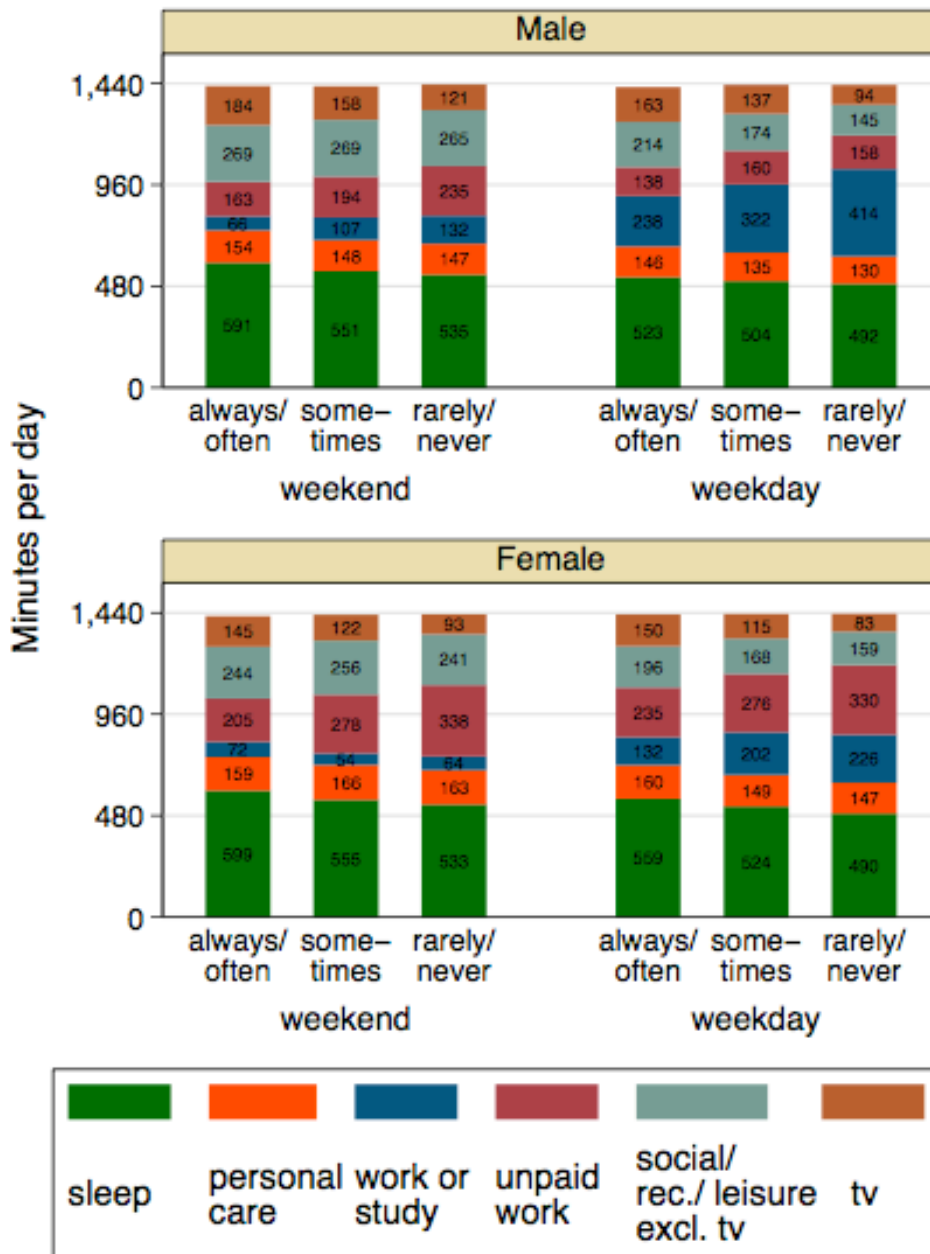


Figure 2 Main activity durations according to extent of unoccupied free time, weekday and sex

To make certain that this aggregation of activities did not conceal differences in some of the activities we might be interested in, Table 5 shows a subset of the recreation and leisure activities – the ones that took up the highest times. Data for males and females, for weekends and weekdays, have been combined. As seen, beyond audio-visual entertainment (particularly television) very small amounts of time are spent in

the separately identified types of recreation or leisure, when averaged over all days and all respondents. Quite small differences are apparent by the frequency of unoccupied time, except in audio-visual entertainment. These data do not, for example, show that those with more unoccupied time spend longer “drinking alcohol/social drinking” as a main activity.

So few people reported main activities of “doing nothing”, smoking, “games of chance/gambling”, or “negative social activities” at any time across the day, that it was not possible to detect differences across the categories of frequency of unoccupied free time.

Table 5 Recreation and leisure activities (main activities) by frequency of unoccupied free time, minutes per day, 2006

	Always /often	Some- times	Rarely/ never	Total
Total recreation and leisure	342	286	231	286
Selected activities				
TV watching/listening	148	127	99	110
Associated communication	18	20	20	20
Audio/visual media not classified	15	16	15	16
Relaxing, resting	16	13	12	13
Associated communication	8	9	9	9
Video/DVD watching	10	10	8	9
Reading not further defined	8	9	9	9
Reading a newspaper	8	9	8	8
Drinking alcohol/social drinking	6	8	7	7
Reading a book	11	7	6	7
Travel associated with recreation and leisure	7	6	6	6
Exercise (excluding walking)	5	4	5	5
Walking (including for exercise)	6	5	4	5
Listening to radio	6	5	4	4
Home computer electronic games/computing as hobby	7	5	3	4

Of course, if we were to look not just at main activities, but at what else people were doing while doing their main activity, other results may be found. This is probably most applicable to smoking, or to “drinking alcohol/social drinking” which are perhaps less likely to be done as main activities. To some extent this is captured in the secondary activities collected in the time use diary. However, an examination of these data finds no relationships between spare time use and these particular secondary

activities. Perhaps the time use survey, in collecting one main activity and one co-occurring activity, does not adequately capture behaviours such as these.

Satisfaction with time use and “too much spare time”

By way of showing that having too much spare time can be considered a problem, these analyses show how dissatisfaction with time use is associated with having a spare time that cannot be filled. This satisfaction question was asked for the first time in 2006, so only those data are used here.

Figure 3 shows that there is a relationship between satisfaction and the frequency of unoccupied free time. Males and females who always or often experience unoccupied free time are most likely to be dissatisfied with their pattern of time use. Note though, that the majority are satisfied, with some very satisfied. Clearly, then, having too much spare time does not result in dissatisfaction in all situations.

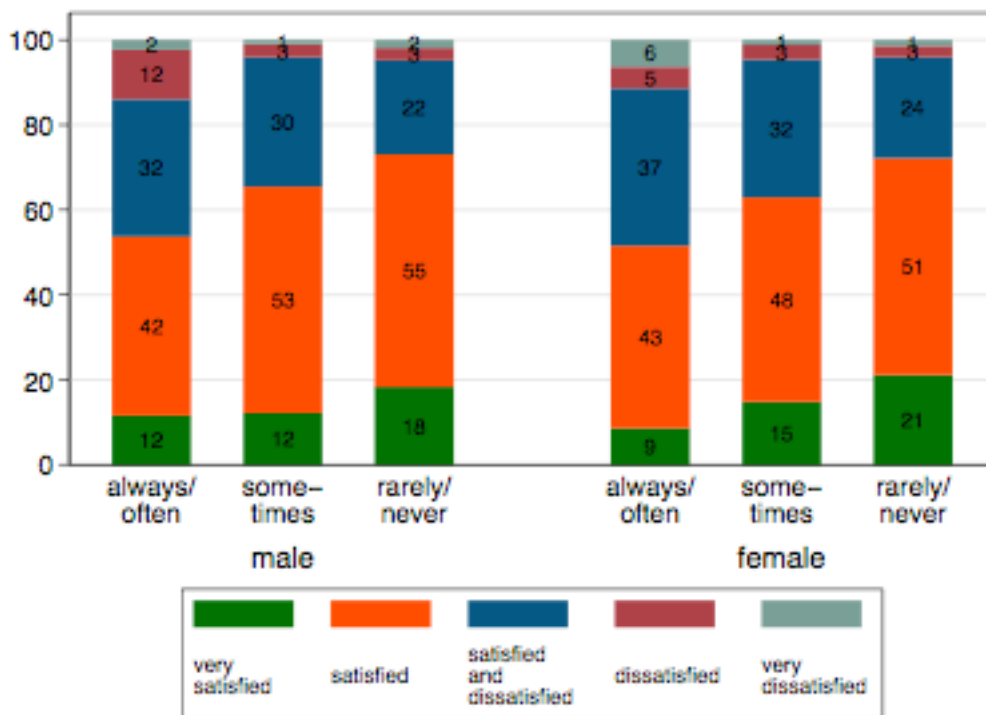


Figure 3 Relationship between time use satisfaction and unoccupied free time, 2006

DISCUSSION

What do these analyses, overall, tell us about the extent to which Australians report having so much spare time that they cannot fill it up productively?

First, it was clear that this is an issue for the minority of people, and further, it is not appear to adversely affect satisfaction with time use for many, and there is no indication that those with more unoccupied spare time tend to spend more time in unhealthy behaviours, except that they watch more television than others. Is it therefore not an issue at all?

Given that for some people, having too much spare time is associated with a greater degree of dissatisfaction with time use, for those people, having an excess of free time is a problem. It is therefore worthwhile asking questions about who might be in this situation, and what their barriers to better use of time might be.

The barriers to being able to fill spare time that were identified here – including lack of money, ill health or disability, and transport – are also commonly associated with social exclusion (Hayes et al., 2008). Indeed, Bittman (1999) discusses social exclusion from leisure activities in terms of having the capacity – in time and in money – to be able to participate in leisure, and notes, consistent with what is found here, that the unemployed may have significant amounts of free time, yet have insufficient money to participate in leisure activities. This paper shows that money is the main reason people give for frequently having spare time in which they do not know what to do, however other reasons also apply, and reasons differ for particular groups of people. Ill health, transport, having no friends or family nearby and lack of community facilities are some of those reasons.

It is possible, also, to argue from both the perspective of the family and of the community, that if some people have unfilled spare time, perhaps ways could be considered for enabling or encouraging them to use this time more effectively to help other family or community members – especially considering that many men and women are often or always rushed or pressed for time.

For example, this analysis showed that young people are the most likely to feel they have too much spare time in which they do not know what to do. This is most

common among those who are living at home with parents. As the ABS Time Use Survey is a household survey, it is also possible to match the records of children to those of their parents. Not surprisingly, if this is done, we find that the mothers very rarely report having spare time in which they do not know what to do, and are much more likely to report being often or always rushed or pressed for time. In 2006, of the 15 to 24 year olds living at home who said they always or often had spare time in which they did not know what to do, 53% of their mothers reported being always or often rushed or pressed for time and 3% reported always or often having spare time in which they did not know what to do. It seems therefore that there may be some potential here for a reallocation of activities within households.

At a community level, this is of interest in respect of volunteering – that an untapped pool of potential volunteers with spare time to fill may exist. Recruitment strategies for volunteering recognise this, and target those thought to have more spare time, like the unemployed and recently retired (Warburton & Crosier, 2001). Research on the reasons for volunteering show that “to fill in spare time” is one reasons given (Clary et al., 1996), but also, time availability is often not the only reason, with various other personal attributes also important in explaining who is likely to volunteer (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991). So, having spare time in itself does not mean someone can or will provide volunteer services. As this paper has shown, barriers such as transport (for young people) and illness or disability (for example, for older people) are likely to apply as barriers to volunteering. It is also worth noting that having more spare time does not always result in more unoccupied spare time, as shown, for example for the 55 to 74 year old women who were the least likely of all ages to report often or always having spare time in which they did not know what to do, yet had more leisure time than the women aged 35 to 54. Many people of this age are likely to fill their time, not only in continuing paid employment, but also in caring responsibilities as well as in leisure.

From a health and wellbeing perspective, of concern are the higher levels of television-watching among those with more spare time (Bloomfield, 2004). It is interesting that there was no evidence that an excess of spare time was associated with particularly negative behaviours or activities, but perhaps the time use diary is not the most appropriate mechanism for collection of data on such behaviours, that may be

too infrequent to detect when selecting just two random days per person on which to base estimates.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided evidence that some men and women are excluded from being able to use their spare time effectively. Those affected include groups commonly explored with regard their spare time use – those not in employment and youth, for example. While having too much unoccupied free time did not appear to be a problem for all – as indicated by their satisfaction with their time use – for others the barriers they face, including money, transport, illness or disability, lack of community facilities or family or friends nearby may be leading not only to their having an excess of unoccupied free time, but also to their dissatisfaction with their use of time. Identifying these limitations, and who is likely to be affected by them, is a first step towards providing ways for these people to be better able to use their free time.

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APPENDIX

Sample distribution

	Males (%)		Females (%)	
	1996	2007	1996	2007
Age=15-24 at home - dependent student	7	7	7	7
Age=15-24 at home other	7	5	4	3
Age=15-24 not at home	5	5	7	6
25-34	20	18	20	17
35-54	37	36	36	36
55-74	20	23	21	23
75 or older	4	6	5	8
Main language spoken not English	8	9	8	9
Has a disability or long term health condition	31	34	27	33
Family member, with children	26	26	30	29
Family member, no children	39	43	41	43
Non-family member	5	4	4	3
Lives alone	11	11	12	13
Is carer to someone	9	13	13	19
Not employed	32	30	49	44
1 to 34 hours	9	12	24	28
35 to 50 hours	36	35	21	21
50 hours or more	23	23	5	6

N