



Retirees are aging well by staying engaged

Making a meaningful difference in the lives of older adults and their families by bridging research, policies and practice

Summary

While engagement in meaningful activities is often assumed to be necessary to age well, we don't know enough about whether older Canadians are adequately engaged in such activities. There is a concern that they are not, especially when not engaged in the labour force. We examined the time allocation patterns of Canadians aged 45 years and older and their engagement in activities claimed to contribute to aging well, with a particular focus on implications of labour force status, using Statistics Canada's 1998 General Social Survey on time use. We found that:

- Most Canadians aged 45+, including those who have recently left the labour force, are reasonably active and engaged.
- Men and women who were no longer employed spent 2 to 3 hours more on leisure, ½ to 1¼ hours more on unpaid work, and an hour more on self-care each day than those still employed.
- Nearly 90% of respondents participated in at least one active (cognitive, social, or physical) leisure pursuit on the survey day, while 84% participated in passive leisure activities.
- Men and women who were no longer employed were more likely to participate in, and spent more total time on, cognitively, socially, and physically active leisure than those who were still employed.
- Even after controlling for age and health status, employment status remains an important predictor of time spent in leisure activities.
- No longer and never employed men each spent over half their waking day on productive and active leisure pursuits, while their female counterparts were so engaged for almost two-thirds of their day.
- Among those who participated in the activity, no longer employed men and women spent 2¾ hours per day cognitively engaged, 2¾ hours per day socially engaged, and over 1½ hours per day physically active, activities that contribute to their well-being, independence, and social support.
- Comparatively more time appears to be reallocated to active than passive leisure on retirement.
- Healthier and better educated men and women spent more time in active leisure. While the time men spent on active leisure increased with age, it declined in later life. Age was not a significant predictor for women.
- Public policies need to recognize the greater personal responsibility that many older Canadians are already taking by engaging in activities known to contribute to aging well.
- Lack of physical, cognitive, and economic resources puts some older Canadians at risk of disengagement and social exclusion. Public programs should focus on helping compensate for the loss of these resources that appear to constrain one's ability to remain engaged.

Concepts of healthy aging, and aging well have become popular with policy makers who are looking for ways of ensuring greater personal responsibility and independence in later life as a way to cope with concerns about population aging. An historical scan of common theories of aging well from the past 50 years¹ shows that engagement in *meaningful* activities is necessary to age well. Meaningful activities that contribute to aging well include productive, physical, social, and cognitive engagement.

We don't know enough about how engaged older Canadians are in 'healthy' activities, but there seems to be great concern that they are not, especially when not involved in paid work. Many people seem to believe that in later life, most leisure time is spent on passive pursuits like watching television. In this study we focus on engagement in active leisure (physical, social and cognitive activities), long recognized by gerontologists as important to the well-being and life satisfaction of older adults.

Research objectives

- To describe the extent to which Canadians aged 45+ are engaged in activities that contribute to aging well;

- To identify factors associated with intensity of engagement, particularly the implications of employment.

Data

We analyzed Statistic Canada's 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) on time use in which single day, 24-hour recall diaries were used to capture the duration of primary activities. The sample was drawn using random digit dialing. Telephone interviews were conducted throughout the year to capture seasonal, weekly, and daily variations in time use. The response rate was 77.6%.

From the total sample of 10,749 respondents aged 15 and older, we drew a sub-sample of 4,245 respondents aged 45 years and older to study the way Canadians use their time in mid- and later-life. Women made up slightly more than half the sample (56%).

Employment and recency of labour force attachment may influence time allocation decisions, so we compared employed, no longer employed, and never employed people. Of the 1,847 male respondents 55% were employed, 41% were no longer employed, and 4% were never employed. Of the 2,398 female respondents 39% were employed, 37% were no longer employed, and 24% were never employed.

Analysis

We used cross-tabular analyses to examine patterns of how people spent their time throughout a 24-hour day across four broad activity categories: paid work, unpaid work, leisure, and self-care.

We used Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analyses to determine the relative importance of labour force status, personal resources, and other factors in respondents' time allocation decisions. Analyses were conducted separately for women and men.

Older adults are engaged

Overall, no longer employed men and women spent more time on self-care, leisure, and unpaid work than those still employed. The time allocation patterns of no longer employed men and women are relatively similar to their never employed counterparts. No longer and never employed men spent at least 3 hours more per day on leisure than employed men; never and no longer employed women spent 2 or 3 hours more per day respectively on leisure than employed women. They also spent at least an hour more per day on self-care and ½ to 1 hour more per day on unpaid work² than those still employed.

¹ Chapman, S.A. (in press). Aging well theorizing: Constructing a narrative. *Canadian Journal on Aging*.

² Unpaid work was the focus of the June 2004 FACT Sheet.

Older adults prefer active to passive leisure

Comparatively more time appears to be re-allocated to active than passive leisure on retirement³. Never employed and no longer employed men spent 4¼ to 4½ hours per day respectively on active leisure compared to nearly 3 hours for employed men. While employed women spent 3 hours per day on active leisure, never employed and no longer employed women spent nearly 4 to 4½ hours per day respectively.

Figure 1 lets us look in more detail at participation in and types of leisure activities in which employed, no longer employed, and never employed men and women engage. Nearly 90% of Canadians aged 45+ participated in at least one active leisure pursuit (cognitive, social, or physical) on the survey day, while 84% participated in passive leisure activities.

We see that individuals allocated their time to different active leisure activities on the survey day. No longer employed men and women were more likely to participate in, and spent more total time on cognitively, socially, and physically active leisure than those still employed.

About 70% of no longer

employed men and women spent 2¾ hours per day on socially active leisure, either in person or on the telephone. Slightly fewer employed men and women were socially engaged, and they spent less time at it (2¼ hours per day).

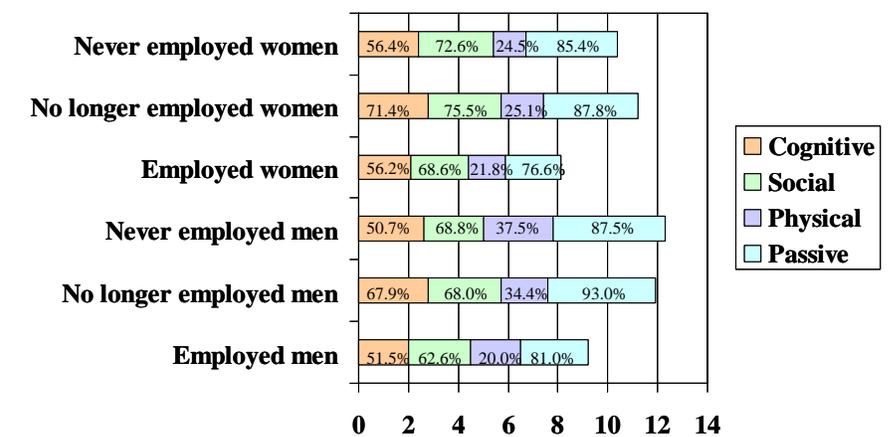
Nearly 70% of no longer employed men and women spent 2¾ hours per day cognitively engaged in activities like reading, writing letters, doing hobbies and games, using a computer, or attending educational programs. In contrast, only 50% of their still employed counterparts were cognitively engaged, spending nearly 2 hours per day doing so.

Over 30% of no longer employed men and 25% of no longer employed women were physically active, spending more than 1½ hours per day on physical activities such as

walking, sports, and exercise. No longer employed men were slightly more physically active than their female counterparts. While those still employed spent a similar amount of time on physical activity as no longer employed men and women, fewer participated (20%).

Nearly 90% of no longer and never employed men and women engaged in passive leisure pursuits, though men spent more time than women on passive leisure activities (4¼ hours v. 3¾ hours per day), like watching television, or listening to the radio or stereo. Over 75% of those still employed participated in passive leisure, spending more than half the time of those who were no longer employed. Again, employed men spent ½ hour more per day than women on passive leisure (2¾ hours v. 2¼ hours per day).

Figure 1. Participation rates and average hours spent on leisure activities by Canadians 45+ on survey day.



³ Caution is required in drawing causal inferences from cross-sectional data. We compared respondents reporting different employment statuses at a point in time.

Factors affecting level of engagement

After controlling for age, health status, marital status, education, housing, household size, and region, employment status remained an important predictor of time spent in leisure activities. In fact, no longer and never employed adults spent significantly more time on leisure activities than their employed counterparts, and time spent on active leisure increased more than passive leisure upon retirement.

Health status, age, and education also impacted levels of engagement in active leisure among older adults. Men and women in better health spent more time on active leisure than those with poorer health. Likewise, better educated men and women spent more time on active leisure. While the time men spent on active leisure increased over time at younger ages and did not begin to decline until later in life, age was not a significant factor for women. As well, the time men spent on active leisure decreased if they were married, lived in an urban area, or were not Canadian born.

Results challenge stereotypes

Evidence emerging from this study suggests that most Canadians, including those who have recently left the labour force, are reasonably active and

engaged. No longer and never employed men each spent well over half their waking day on productive and active leisure pursuits, while their female counterparts were so engaged for almost two-thirds of their day. So if we are to believe the assertion that engagement is “good” and passivity is “bad”, it seems that most older Canadians are on their way to aging well.

When personal resources are controlled for, a substantial amount of time once spent on paid work appears to be reallocated to engagement in unpaid work and physically, socially, and cognitively active leisure on retirement. In fact, respondents who recently left the labour force seem to have re-allocated more of their prior paid work time to each of active leisure and unpaid work than to passive leisure.

Policy Implications

The evidence demonstrates that individuals who are no longer employed remain active and engaged in society, taking part in unpaid work and cognitive, physical, and social leisure activities known to contribute to aging well. Thus we need to look at contributions differently, recognizing not only the unpaid work older adults provide to society, but also their efforts to take care of themselves through active leisure, thereby potentially lessening demands on health

care resources. In short, older Canadians already are taking greater personal responsibility! Perhaps health promotion programs should be developed to give credit to productive and engaged older Canadians.

Lack of physical, cognitive, and economic resources puts some older Canadians at risk of being insufficiently engaged in meaningful activity to maintain optimal well-being and social engagement. Passive, sedentary living seems to be the domain mainly of those with activity limitations, with less education, who do not attend church, and who are apartment dwellers or renters. Therefore, we should focus public programs on compensating for the loss of personal resources that appear to constrain one’s ability to remain engaged. Programs can be developed to target those at-risk of disengagement and social exclusion. For example, physical therapy and adult day programs may be important to the 22% of men and women 45 years and older who reported activity limitations. Similarly, adequacy of income security programs such as the Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement benefits are important to the 8% of older Canadians whose main source of income was these government benefits.

