



Canadian trends in paid and unpaid work across age cohort and time

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

Summary

There seems to be a widespread belief that older adults are not sufficiently engaged in productive activities and are becoming less so. While individuals' stage of life and place in history influence their level of engagement in society, we know little about how older Canadians' time spent in productive activities changes over the years. To challenge ageist beliefs, we examined time spent in paid and unpaid productive activities over the past thirty years. Using harmonized time use data from 1971, 1981, 1992 and 1998 we found that the patterns of time spent on paid and unpaid productive activities varied across the life course and across periods in history, and were different for women and men.

Trends across the life course:

- The patterns in men's paid work time over the life cycle were remarkably consistent across the four survey years: entry into the labour force, career building, and retirement.
- The time women spent on unpaid work increased during life stages typically associated with child rearing and retirement, suggesting that women replaced some of the time previously spent on paid work with unpaid care and domestic work. Likewise, men's unpaid work time peaks at retirement.
- While time spent on unpaid work gradually declined for women and men in their seventies and eighties, they continued to spend an average of 3 hours per day on unpaid work, activities that help them maintain their own independence.

Trends across period in history:

- The time men spent on unpaid work shows a slow, steady increase over the last thirty years, likely reflecting their changing role in child rearing and domestic work. In comparison, the time women spent on unpaid work has decreased over the years, although women continue to spend the same or more time on unpaid work than men.
- The amount of time women spent on paid work has increased over the last 30 years, particularly among 40 year olds. Although women's paid work time typically declined during the life stage associated with child rearing, the decline was less in the 1990s than in the 1970s or 1980s, generally reflecting women's stronger attachment to the labour force.
- While time spent on paid work starts to decline for women and men after age 50, the decline was more rapid in the 1990s than in previous survey years. This may reflect trends toward earlier retirement, the sandwich generation's exit from the labour force to care for elderly parents, and/or the economic downturn of the 1990s in which older workers, particularly older men, were let go as part of employers' "downsizing" and "rightsizing" strategies.
- The substantially greater paid work time among men and women in their sixties in 1971 relative to all of the later survey years likely reflects the fact that they had not had sufficient time to contribute to the Canada Pension Plan to make early retirement affordable.

Widespread belief that older people are not sufficiently engaged, and are becoming less so, have fueled concerns about population aging. Rooted in this belief are outdated assumptions about productive engagement, and the effect of spending more of one's lifespan in retirement. Such ageist attitudes may misrepresent the true contributions of older adults to Canadian society, placing them at risk of social exclusion.

Where individuals are situated in their time of life and what is happening in the world around them influence the way they spend their time. In this study we explore the impact of life stage and period in history on the time Canadians spent in paid and unpaid productive activity over the past thirty years.

Research objectives

- To investigate how people allocate their time to paid and unpaid productive activities across the life course;
- To examine whether patterns of engagement in productive activities for each age cohort vary across time;
- To reflect on connections between time use patterns and the social, political and economic conditions in which they occur.

Data

We used data from four surveys on time use conducted in Canada between 1971 and 1998. The Institute of Public Affairs at Dalhousie University collected the 1971 data. Statistic Canada collected the 1981, 1992, and 1998 data. All four surveys used a 24-hour recall diary method, in which people reported sequentially on the nature and duration of activities in which they had engaged over the previous 24 hours. The sampling procedure used and response rate obtained varied across the surveys¹.

We used harmonized data in which all the activity categories and explanatory variables were made comparable across the four surveys. As a result, the two productive activity categories were broadly defined and there were a limited number of explanatory variables available across all four survey years. *Paid work* includes all time spent at a paid job, including time spent commuting to/from paid work. *Unpaid work* includes meal preparation and clean up, laundry, indoor and outdoor housework, household management, shopping, transportation, child care and care of disabled or ill adults within or outside the household.

¹ For more detail on methods please see the MTUS user guide at <http://iserwww.essex.ac.uk/mtus/world5.5/>

Unpaid work did not include formal volunteer work.

There were 24,087 respondents aged 15 years and older in our sample, comprising 8% from 1971, 10% from 1981, 37% from 1992 and 45% from 1998. Women made up slightly more than half the sample (51%).

Analysis

We used cohort analysis to examine trends across three decades in the time Canadians spent on paid and unpaid work. We used 10-year birth cohorts for our analyses.

We tested for cross-sectional differences in the average time spent on paid and unpaid work:

- across survey years, and
- among age cohorts for each time period.

Data were analyzed separately for women and men, and were weighted to correct for sampling issues.

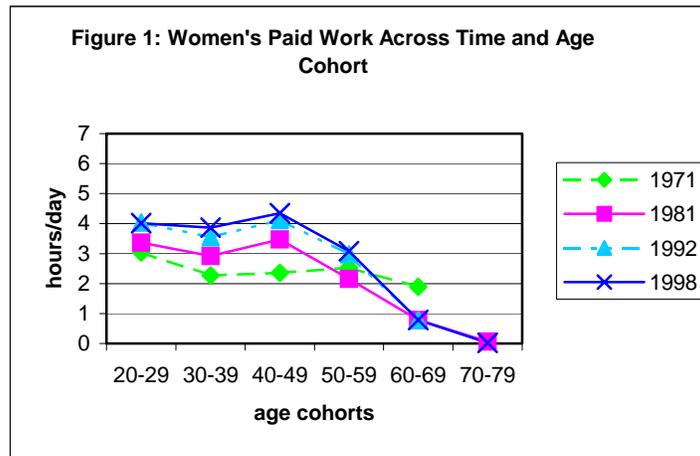
Women's paid work time has increased over time

Figure 1 illustrates the time women spent on paid work by age cohort over the survey years. Looking at the difference between the green line showing time spent in 1971 and the blue lines for 1991 and 1998 we see an overall increase in the amount of time women spent on paid work across successive survey years, particularly among forty year olds. For all birth

cohorts time spent on paid work declined at life stages typically associated with child rearing and retirement. However, women in their 30s spent more time on paid work in the 1990s than in previous periods, reflecting women's stronger attachment to the labour force even while child rearing. The decline in paid work after age 50 was sharper in the 1990s than in previous survey years (1971 and 1981). Perhaps these later cohorts are part of the 'sandwich generation' and leaving the paid work force to care for elderly parents. Women in their sixties did little paid work from 1981 on, likely indicative of greater accessibility to public pensions.

Women's unpaid work time has decreased over time

The time women spent on unpaid work declined over the same period that their paid work time increased, as Figure 2 shows. Looking at the difference between the green line showing time spent in 1971 and the blue

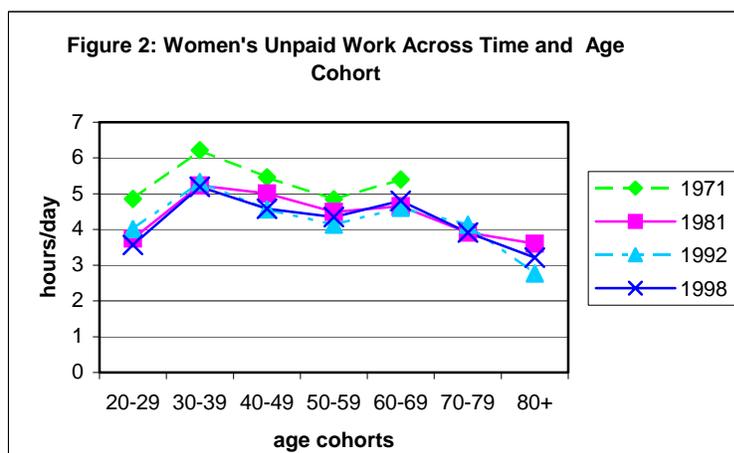


lines for the 1990s, we see that women spent about 1 hour per day more on unpaid work in 1971 than in subsequent survey years. Women were more likely to be full time homemakers in the 1970s than in more recent decades. Generally, time spent on unpaid work increased during life stages typically associated with child rearing and retirement, suggesting a substitution of unpaid care and domestic work for time previously spent on paid work. While the time women spent on unpaid work gradually declined after age 70, older women continued to spend 3 to 4 hours

per day on unpaid work, activities that help maintain their own independence.

Men's paid work time is consistent over time

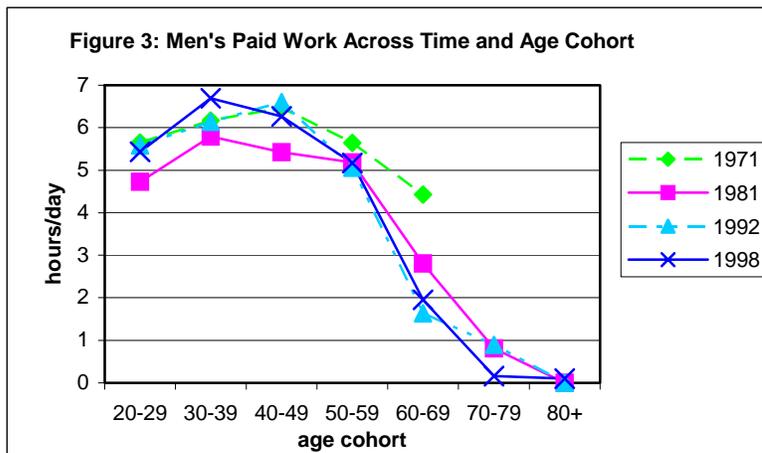
Not surprisingly, the time men spent on paid and unpaid work differed from that of women. As shown in Figure 3, the patterns in men's paid work time over the life cycle are remarkably consistent across the four survey years. Men's paid work time increases in the early adult years as men enter the labour force and build careers, then starts to decline for men in their 50s and drops sharply after age 60, declining more rapidly in successive survey years. In fact, the decline is even sharper for men than for women, perhaps reflecting the economic downturn of the early 1990s in which employers offered generous early retirement incentives as well as other measures to force out older employees as part of their "downsizing" and "rightsizing"



strategies. Men were more often the targets of such strategies than women. Likewise, the relatively fewer hours men spent on paid work in 1981, as shown by the pink line, likely reflects the economic recession of the early 1980s.

Men's unpaid work time has increased steadily

The time men spent on unpaid work shows a slow, steady increase over time, particularly for men in their 30s and 40s, as we see in Figure 4. This likely reflects men's greater involvement in child rearing in the 1990s compared to the early 1970s. In most survey years, the time men spent on unpaid work peaked as their paid work started to decline in later life. In the 1990s, men in their sixties and seventies spent an average of 3 hours per day on unpaid work as did their female cohorts. Time spent on unpaid work began to decline only after age 80, when physical frailties, which may preclude engagement in unpaid work, are more likely.

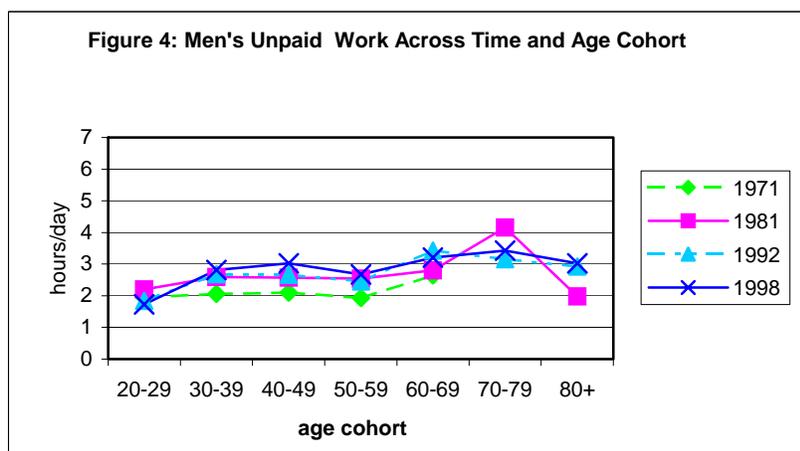


The impact of context on productive work

In looking at the time women and men spent on paid work, we notice substantially greater paid work time among men and women in their sixties in 1971 relative to all other survey years as shown by the green lines in Figures 1 and 3. It's likely that men and women who were in their sixties in 1971 had not paid into the Canada Pension Plan, which was introduced in 1966, long enough to make early retirement affordable. However, in subsequent survey periods, later cohorts had contributed for

15 years or longer. So, greater access to public pension benefits seem to have facilitated earlier retirement since 1971.

As people moved into retirement, time spent on unpaid work increased for both women and men. It's likely that care provided to family and friends accounts for some of this increase, particularly in a current social context in which hospital stays are shorter, community-based services have been reduced, and grandparents are more likely to provide child care for working parents. Over the last six years Canada's federal government has amended its tax code, its employment insurance program, and its labour code in ways that compensate family caregivers for their care work, or for the economic consequences of that work. Perhaps these public policies will have an impact on future time use patterns. Only time will tell!



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