

Time-crunched: Canadians are taking less time for activities that refresh the body and mind... and that is a problem for the whole society

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For most of us today, our main experience of time is largely characterized by a distinct lack of it.

Profound transformational forces are reshaping the way we live, work and play. They're also changing the way we interact -- and the time we have to interact -- with our families, friends, neighbours, work colleagues and communities.

New technologies, despite their convenience, are keeping us tethered to our workplaces 24/7. Our appetite for consumer services is growing, but that means more Canadians must be there to provide them round-the-clock. Urban sprawl may provide more space for families, but also results in long and often frustrating commutes, and

damage to our environment. And, while we're all happy to see Canadians living longer, the greying of our society is creating a greater demand and expectation for unpaid support by family members.

Not surprisingly, more and more Canadians are finding themselves caught in a time crunch. A just-released report by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, "Caught in the Time Crunch: Time Use, Leisure and Culture in Canada," found that the number of Canadians who are experiencing high levels of time crunch has grown in recent years by 20 per cent. Women, especially, are feeling more of the pressure of balancing work with raising children and providing care to seniors.

More of us are working in jobs requiring non-standard hours -- weekends, evenings, nights and rotating shifts. In 1992, 23 per cent of Canadians worked non-standard hours. By 2009 the proportion had jumped to 29 per cent. Research shows that people who work non-standard hours are less healthy, suffer from higher levels of psychological distress, experience greater depressive symptoms, greater relationship conflict and lower life satisfaction. Evening work is particularly bad for the children of evening workers since the lessened contact reduces the parent's ability to support the child's development and secure child care.

We are also putting in more time in unpaid work. The proportion of working-age adults providing care to seniors grew from 17 per cent in 1996 to 20 per cent in 2006. More than one in four employed Canadians has responsibilities for the care of an elderly dependent and one in five has responsibility for both child care and elder care. A significant portion of caregiving to seniors is provided by fellow seniors. Unpaid caregivers are more likely to report poor health, depressive symptoms and high-risk health behaviours. They have less time for leisure activities, report missing more days of work, taking more personal days and retiring earlier to provide care.

Another consequence of the time crunch is that we are missing out on the essential activities needed to refresh body and mind. We are spending less time on social activities (down from 15 per cent to 12 per cent), fewer of us are attending arts performances (down from 15 million to 13 million per year), volunteering for culture and recreation organizations (down from 32 per cent to 22 per cent) or visiting national parks

and historic sites (down from 28 million to 21 million).

That's very unfortunate. Participating in arts, culture or recreation contributes to the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and societies. The myriad of activities and opportunities that we pursue and enjoy all define our lives, our wellbeing. And let's not forget that, when we are rejuvenated by engaging in social and cultural activities, we are healthier and more productive in our work.

The national decline in arts, culture and leisure activity is more than a time-crunch problem. The past several years have seen an ongoing shift away from funding for public agencies and non-profit, voluntary organizations responsible for the provision of arts, culture and leisure programs, services, facilities, and other opportunities. Since 1990, community per capita spending on arts, culture and leisure has failed to keep pace with inflation or population increases.

There is no doubt too many Canadians are leading lives out of balance. We have compounded the problem through our failure to connect the dots to harmful effects on our health and productivity. We also tend to trivialize time crunch by viewing it as a domestic issue -- one that families need to argue out on their own -- rather than as a national social policy issue that can be improved through coherent and imaginative policy initiatives. We can learn a lot in this regard from the Scandinavian countries. It's no coincidence the average Dane has 11 more free hours a week than the average Canadian.

We need to adopt family-friendly policies for all workers and supports for

seniors so that all Canadians can have the time to enjoy activities that enrich their lives and promote good health. Family-friendly work policies such as flex time, job sharing, parental and elder care leave benefits and other employee benefits are good for our health and good for our productivity. With the trend toward non-standard work hours increasing, it's all the more important that our governments upgrade employment standards to ensure workers' health and safety.

We need governments and public policies that support our culture and leisure infrastructure. We must continue to develop meaningful venues and opportunities, mindful that ensuring equity and inclusion are overarching principles in our approach.

We need to encourage barrier-free arts and culture activities by supporting and promoting performing artists, productions, venues and festivals such as Ottawa's Winterlude, where every year more than 650,000 people participate in the capital region's largely free and accessible celebration of winter.

It's time we, as a society, adopt a broader view of our wellbeing and recognize that it depends on much more than our economic productivity. It's time for all of us to enjoy the kind of personal fulfillment and leisure that Canadians once dared to imagine was possible for ourselves and for future generations.

The Hon. Roy J. Romanow is chair of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing Advisory Board, former premier of Saskatchewan and Commissioner on the Future of Health Care in Canada. 'Caught in the Time Crunch: Time Use,

Leisure and Culture in Canada' is available online at www.ciw.ca.

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