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Time Poverty Thresholds in the USA

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Synonyms

Discretionary time indicators; Time poor; Time scarcity; Time stress; Time-adjusted income poverty; Time–pressure illusion

Definition

Time poverty is the concept that individuals do not have enough discretionary time – the time available after engaging in necessary activities like sleep and in the committed activities of paid and unpaid work – to engage in activities that build their social and ► [human capital](#). Time poverty thresholds define a level of discretionary time below which individuals are considered to be “time poor.” Such thresholds are often defined relative to a population distribution although absolute thresholds can be defined based on the minimum amount of time required to perform certain tasks.

Description

Time constraints, like money constraints, affect individuals’ well-being. Everyone has 24 h in a day, but some individuals have more control or flexibility over their time than others.

People who are “time poor” do not have enough discretionary time to engage in activities that improve their social and ► [human capital](#). Yet, the focus of policy discussions is ► [income poverty](#). Indeed, when time poverty was initially suggested as a social problem in the 1970s, Vickery (1977) modified existing income poverty

thresholds to define time-adjusted income poverty thresholds for the United States (US). She based the thresholds on her estimate of the minimum amount of time that would be needed to complete household tasks, based on the average amount of time non-employed homemakers spent on household tasks according to US time budget data and on other assumptions regarding how much time was necessary for certain activities. Vickery calculated different thresholds based on ► [household composition](#) – the number of adults and the number of children in the household – to account for differences in household time resources and needs. Similar time-adjusted income poverty measures were constructed by Douthitt (2000) for the United States using 1985 data and by Harvey and Mukhopadhyay (2007) for Canada using 1998 data. However, it is important to measure time poverty separately from income poverty as the relationship between time poverty and income is not clear a priori.

Rather than use ad hoc assumptions about how much time is needed for various tasks, other researchers have constructed time poverty thresholds as relative measures. These thresholds are defined as some percentage of median discretionary time. Bittman (2002), Bardasi and Wodon (2006), and Burchardt (2008) constructed relative thresholds for Australia, Guinea, and the United Kingdom, respectively.

Because such relative time poverty thresholds were lacking for the United States, Kalenkoski, Hamrick, and Andrews (2011) constructed several sets of thresholds using nationally representative data on individuals’ actual activities from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS). The ATUS is a continuous survey that the US Bureau of Labor Statistics began in 2003 (<http://stats.bls.gov/tus/>). The time-diary component of the ATUS is a 24-h diary such that individuals’ own descriptions of their activities are coded into standardized activities. The questionnaire portion of the ATUS provides information on the respondent’s ► [household composition](#) as well as demographic and labor force participation for the respondent and the respondent’s household members. The time-diary method of collecting information on

Time Poverty Thresholds in the USA, Table 1 Time poverty thresholds for the total population and by household composition, 2003–2006

	Group percent of population	Median discretionary minutes	Median discretionary hours	60 % of median discretionary minutes
Total population	100.0	483	8.1	289.8
<i>One adult, no children</i>	14.4	583	9.7	349.8
<i>One adult, one child</i>	1.5	408	6.8	244.8
<i>One adult, 2 or more children</i>	1.7	390	6.5	234.0
<i>Two adults, no children</i>	32.5	535	8.9	321.0
<i>Two adults, one child</i>	8.8	418	7.0	250.8
<i>Two adults, two or more children</i>	15.9	382	6.4	229.2
<i>Three or more adults, no children</i>	14.1	525	8.8	315.0
<i>Three or more adults, one child</i>	5.9	480	8.0	288.0
<i>Three or more adults, two or more children</i>	5.2	440	7.3	264.0

Source: Kalenkoski et al. (2011)

individuals is considered a neutral method of collecting activity information, less subject to social desirability bias than a questionnaire asking about specific activities (Stinson, 1999). Time-diary data can be used to develop an objective measure of time poverty; a subjective measure would use survey data that asked respondents whether they felt ► [time pressure](#) or time stress.

Kalenkoski et al. (2011) first defined an individual's daily discretionary minutes to be 1,440 min (the total number of minutes in a day) minus minutes spent in *necessary* and *committed* activities. The authors defined necessary activities to be those activities that an individual must perform for himself or herself, such as sleeping and grooming. They defined committed activities as those activities that an individual must perform given prior commitments, such as market work, childcare, and household work:

Necessary activities [ATUS major activity code]:

- Personal care (sleeping and grooming) [01]

Committed activities [ATUS major activity code]:

- *Household activities* [02]
- *Caring for and helping household members* [03]
- *Work and work-related activities* [05]

A person's remaining activities were then defined as discretionary activities, and the total duration of time spent in these activities was defined as discretionary time. What might be referred to as recreational time or free time was included in discretionary time, but activities such as caring for non-household members, education, and civic obligations were also included.

Kalenkoski et al. (2011) defined alternative thresholds at 50 %, 60 %, and 70 % of the population median of this discretionary time. For example, 289.8 min was the threshold calculated at 60 % of the median population discretionary minutes. They then defined similar alternative thresholds based on the median of discretionary time for various subgroups in the population based on household composition and employment status. They adopted 60 % of the median as the time poverty threshold (Table 1).

After defining these thresholds and calculating time poverty rates for various groups in the population, Kalenkoski et al. (2011) performed multivariate regression analysis using the ATUS data to determine the correlates of discretionary time and time poverty. The authors found that, controlling for other factors, an additional household child substantially decreased a person's daily discretionary time and increased the

probability of being time poor. However, an additional household adult did not affect a person's daily discretionary time or his or her probability of being time poor. Being employed for pay, however, was the most significant factor determining a person's daily discretionary time and whether or not the person was time poor. Income was not associated with discretionary time or time poverty, supporting the creation of time poverty measures apart from income poverty measures.

Other Approaches

Goodin, Rice, Parpo, and Eriksson (2008) developed a time–pressure measure defining discretionary time to be the minimum time necessary for paid work, household tasks, and personal care. They defined *time–pressure illusion* as the time difference between the actual time spent on these activities and the minimum amount of time necessary.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) included time-use measures in its Better Life Initiative report on measuring ► [well-being](#) across its member counties (OECD, 2011). However, instead of using time poverty thresholds, the OECD used a group of indicators to assess ► [work-life balance](#). The indicators were working more than 50 h per week, time in leisure and personal care, commuting time, satisfaction with work-life time allocation, and employment rate of mothers with school-age children.

Davis and You (2011) used a cost difference approach to create money-time thresholds for food production, where household production time was valued at a market rate. They found that, for single-headed households, time is more of a constraint than money in reaching the nutritional recommendations of the US Department of Agriculture Thrifty Food Plan.

Discussion

Researchers can apply time poverty thresholds to a variety of questions to see if lack of discretionary time is a determining factor to an observed outcome. For example, time poverty may be a determinant of energy balance behaviors,

that is, physical activity levels and food intake. Traditionally, policymakers have used income poverty measures to identify individuals and households lacking sufficient material resources. However, time is also a scarce resource that affects individuals' well-being. Lack of time to exercise or eat healthily may lead to obesity and its associated health problems. Recognition of the importance of time poverty could further improve analysis and policymaking in a wide variety of public assistance and public welfare contexts.

Cross-References

- [Gender and Poverty](#)
- [Poverty](#)
- [Poverty Lines](#)
- [Poverty Measurement](#)
- [Relative Poverty Rate](#)
- [Social Indicators](#)
- [Time Budget\(s\)](#)
- [Time Trade-Off](#)

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Time Preference

► Inter-temporal Aspect of Well-Being

Time Pressure

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Synonyms

Combination pressure; Scarcity of time; Time competition

Definition

There are only 24 h in a day, which means that, by definition, the time devoted to one activity leaves less time for other activities. The scarcity argument, which is commonly used for real time, can also be applied to time as experienced. If someone puts in more hours at work, he or she will perceive a reduction in the number of hours which are available for family obligations. This can cause someone to feel pressed for time (van der Lippe, Jager, & Kops, 2006).

Description

These days people often feel busy and hurried (Gleick, 1999). For many women and men in

paid employment, balancing work and family obligations has grown into a major problem, which is hard to solve. In families where both spouses are active in the labor market, difficulties may arise as to who should bear the responsibility of domestic and caring duties (van der Lippe, 2007). Running the household does not just mean that competing responsibilities have to be juggled: parenting standards and job expectations have risen as well (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). With respect to the latter, employers seem to demand an ever greater willingness of their employees to be permanently available.

All in all, then, the scarcity of time appears to have grown more urgent in both the family and the workplace, with people frequently feeling torn between the two. As Schor (1992) states, the modern employee faces a serious distortion in the allocation of time between paid work and the private sphere; Hochschild (1997) notes that, in the USA, work has become home, and home has become work. Although Gershuny (2000) argues that, in the past 50 years, the amount of leisure time in Western society has increased, in actual practice, people seem to be running out of time. Employed couples tend to feel they have to make the most of the amount of time there is available and experience ever more and greater pressure. As a consequence, a growing number of people suffer from ► stress due to work-home interference, with fatigue or even serious health problems, such as ► burnout, as a result.

In particular when work cannot be finished at the office and must be completed at home, such problems might arise. The work-family conflict is sometimes thought to have become more similar for men and women. However, it is a well-known fact that the amount of time spent in the labor market varies less for men than women. In addition, more hours of paid employment tends to put greater time pressure on women as compared to men. And not only the actual number of hours spent at the office will be of influence on the time pressure experienced, the amount of overtime is a contributing factor as well. Flexible work schedules, for instance, can pose a serious threat to maintaining stable relations