

Study: Americans working less, playing more

By Neil Shah, Wall Street Journal

With the economy struggling to find its footing, Americans spent less time at work last year and found more time for leisure activities such as watching television, a government survey finds.

The average American aged 15 or older spent three hours, 32 minutes a day doing work-related activities last year, according to the American Time Use Survey released by the Labor Department on Thursday. That is down from 2011, when time spent on work jumped from three hours and 30 minutes to three hours and 34 minutes. While such changes may not seem big, average yearly changes in time spent on different activities tend to be small, and even minor changes are significant.

The survey, which has been conducted annually since 2003 and includes employed and unemployed persons, suggests America's sluggish recovery continues to hamper workers. While the U.S. unemployment rate fell last year from 8.3 percent to 7.8 percent – it is now at 7.6 percent – other trends are likely holding down average hours spent at work. The number of part-time workers was higher in 2012 than the year before, for example.

“The recovery has basically been a recovery for a tiny fraction of the population,” said Geoffrey Godbey, professor emeritus at Pennsylvania State University and co-author of “Time For Life: The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time.” “What you’re seeing is people who might want more work but aren’t getting it,” he said.

Meanwhile, the share of the population working or looking for

a job dropped to 63.6 percent at the end of last year, compared with 64 percent in December 2011. That number, known as the labor force participation rate, has been falling as a result of a combination of discouraged workers dropping out of the workforce and baby boomers retiring.

The aging of America's population means fewer people are working and more retirees are at home watching TV, Godbey said. At the same time, women have become a larger share of America's labor force, but tend to work fewer hours than men do. And there's a growing informal economy, he said, that might not be captured by government surveys.

With less time spent at work, Americans boosted the portion of their day going to leisure and sports activities: Time spent on leisure jumped about nine minutes to five hours and 22 minutes. Americans watched TV for two hours and 50 minutes a day, a second-straight increase from two hours and 44 minutes in 2010. Meanwhile, time spent sleeping edged up to eight hours and 44 minutes, from eight hours and 40 minutes in 2010. Time devoted to volunteering and cooking, meanwhile, fell.

Wendy Wang, a sociologist at the Pew Research Center, said the changing nature of fatherhood is also altering the way Americans use their time. In a March report based partly on the government's survey, she found fathers were logging in fewer hours a week on job-related activities, roughly 37 hours on average in 2011, compared with 42 in 1965. Also, more American fathers are working part-time, and spending more time doing chores and with their kids. "Fathers think they need to go home earlier," she said.

Indeed, the latest government survey shows men spent slightly more time doing housework than in 2011, while the reduction in time spent at work was more pronounced for men than women.