

Homebound: The Long-Term Rise in Time Spent at Home Among U.S. Adults

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Abstract: The changes in daily life induced by the COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed attention to longstanding concerns about social isolation in the United States. Despite the links between the physical setting for individuals' daily lives and their connections with family, friends, and the various institutions of collective life, trends in *where* American adults spend their time have been largely overlooked as researchers have focused on *how* and *with whom* they spend their time. This article analyzes data from the American Time Use Survey over a timeframe spanning nineteen years and argues that the changes in Americans' daily routines induced by the COVID era should be seen as an acceleration of a longer-term trend: the rise of time spent at home. Results show that from 2003 to 2022, average time spent at home among American adults has risen by one hour and 39 minutes in a typical day. Time at home has risen for every subset of the population and for virtually all activities. Preliminary analysis indicates that time at home is associated with lower levels of happiness and less meaning, suggesting the need for enhanced empirical attention to this major shift in the setting of American life.

Keywords: time at home; time use; social isolation

Replication Package: All data files and code for replication are available here: <https://data.verse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/R4P98D>

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
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THE COVID-19 pandemic led to an abrupt set of changes in the patterns of daily life, shutting down public and private institutions and resurfacing longstanding concerns about the consequences of social isolation in the United States (Cutler and Glaeser 2021; Kannan and Veazie 2023; Klinenberg 2024; Lee, Lee and Hartmann 2023; Murthy 2023; Thompson 2024). This article takes a longer view, spanning nineteen years, and argues that several changes in Americans' daily routines associated with the COVID era should be seen as an acceleration of a longer-term trend: the rise of time spent at home. The article is oriented around a trend that has not been documented in prior research, and which marks a profound shift in the setting of Americans' daily lives. Drawing on data from the American Time Use Survey covering 2003 to 2022, I show that the average time spent at home among U.S. adults rose from 2003 to 2022 by one hour and 39 minutes in a typical day.

The analysis examines the implications of this trend for American adults' social networks, family life, religious life, and wellbeing. In describing these connections, I link the article with the long tradition of theory and research in sociology that has centered on the concern that shifting forms of settlement, technologies, and social and economic systems alter the way individuals interact with each other, leading to rising levels of social isolation and weakening engagement with institutions that

bring people together and form the basis for collective life (Fischer 1982; Putnam 2000; Simmel 1950 (1908); Tönnies 2001 (1887); Wilson 1987). In recent years a large, interdisciplinary literature has focused on social connections and social isolation by analyzing trends in indicators like organizational memberships, behaviors such as volunteering and voting, the size of core discussion networks, and time spent alone or with friends (Atalay 2024; Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Kannan & Veazie 2023; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006; Putnam 2000). Despite the links between the setting for individuals' daily lives and their connections with family, friends, and the various institutions of collective life, trends in *where* American adults spend their time have been largely overlooked as researchers have focused on *how* and *with whom* they spend their time.

Results show that these trends are tightly intertwined, and any analysis of changes in the strength of social network or institutional ties must consider the physical settings in which daily life unfolds. Over the past 19 years, the home has become a more common setting for virtually every category of activity, and among each subgroup that I examined. The rise in time at home is associated with less time with friends, for instance, and more time with family. The rise in time at home helps to explain another trend that has received substantial attention: growing time spent alone (Atalay 2024; Kannan & Veazie 2023). After considering changes in time spent at home I find no clear trend in time spent alone, reflecting the broader conclusion that changes in the location of everyday life have had substantial consequences on our social and familial lives. Preliminary evidence suggests that rising time at home has consequences for individual wellbeing and sets the stage for a research agenda focused on the broader implications of rising time at home for engagement in U.S. civic institutions, local and national politics, and Americans' commitment to cities and public spaces (Florida, Rodríguez-Pose, and Storper 2023).

Isolation, Disconnection, and the Setting of Daily Life

In a recent edited volume, McCabe and Rosen (2023, p. 2) renew a call made decades earlier by Louis Wirth (1947) for sociologists to “apply our own theoretical insights and methodological tools to demonstrate how housing shapes everyday lives and structures social relations.” This article responds to this call by bringing attention to a set of basic questions about the home setting: How much of Americans' daily lives are spent at home? How is time spent at home linked with time with friends and family, and time spent alone? To what degree are Americans' interactions with religious and political institutions carried out at home? How have the answers to these questions changed over time?

In responding to these questions, this article builds on and engages with more than a century of research focusing on the ties that connect individuals and institutions in the United States. Much of this tradition of research has been framed around the concept of social isolation, which can be defined as a lack of contact or close connection with other individuals and with institutions of collective life. Although concern over social isolation has been a consistent theme in sociological research, researchers have used a wide variety of measures to conceptualize and operationalize it (Klinenberg 2002; Parigi and Henson 2014). Summarizing this

literature in a comprehensive way is not possible within the scope of this article, but in this section I provide a broad overview of three overlapping approaches to studying social isolation in terms of spatial location, interpersonal ties, and engagement with organizations and institutions, respectively.

Spatial, Social, and Institutional Isolation

The concern over social isolation first emerged during a period of industrialization and a concurrent shift from village life to city life. In an urbanizing world, sociologists sought to understand how communities within the city were separated from each other and how moving through dense urban spaces changes the nature of interpersonal interactions (Fischer 1982; Simmel 1950 (1908); Wirth 1938). Research associated with the Chicago School of urban sociology focused on the spatial segmentation of cities, arguing that city life weakened interpersonal ties and created areas isolated from the larger city (e.g. Park and Burgess 1984 (1925); Wirth 1938). Views varied on the consequences of this form of spatial isolation, however. In his classic book on the Jewish ghetto in Chicago, Wirth (1956 (1928)) argued that spatial separation could serve to strengthen local community ties among common members of a group that is spatially segregated from the rest of the city (see also Gans 1962).

In the latter half of the 20th Century, similar concerns were expressed as poverty became increasingly concentrated in central cities. In an urban landscape stratified by race and class, researchers examined how high-poverty neighborhoods influenced exposure to risk, access to sources of social support, and contact with mainstream institutions (Klinenberg 2003; Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1987; see also Pattillo 1999). Most notably, William Julius Wilson (1987, p. 60) argued that the emergence of areas of concentrated poverty within central cities had led to a “lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society.” According to Wilson’s theory, the combination of the outmigration of the middle-class from disadvantaged central-city neighborhoods, deindustrialization of urban economies, and rising joblessness resulted in a new form of concentrated poverty and shaped patterns of interaction, altered norms of behavior, and structured the life chances of residents of low income, racially segregated neighborhoods in ways that reproduced family-level poverty and reinforced urban inequality.

Although Wilson did not measure contact with middle-class individuals or institutions in his analysis, subsequent research testing his ideas documented that living in a high-poverty neighborhood is associated with fewer network ties to people and institutions outside the neighborhood and fewer ties with college educated or employed individuals (Tigges, Browne, and Green 1998; Rankin and Quane 2000; Small 2004). Wilson’s (1987) spatial conception of isolation within intensely disadvantaged central-city neighborhoods has served as one focal point in the recent literature, but it is part of a broader tradition of research that links together the spatial environments in which people spend their lives and the social connections they make (adams, Faust and Lovasi 2012; Fischer 1982; Small 2009; Small and Adler 2019).

Barry Wellman (1972; 1979; Rainie and Wellman 2012) presented an alternative perspective, arguing that the sociological literature on primary ties was overly focused on residential environments and physical space. Wellman (1979) documented the prevalence and importance of ties that are not limited to local communities. Moving beyond the debates about whether community was “lost” or “saved” in urban environments, Wellman put forth the idea that community was “liberated”—set free from the spatial bounds of the local neighborhood or workplace settings that were the dominant focus of urban sociology. This intervention, in combination with advancements in theory and methods for studying social networks, set the stage for a literature investigating social connections between individuals through the analysis of interpersonal network ties decoupled from the neighborhood or urban setting.

A central question in this literature is whether our social ties are strengthening or weakening as society changes and as new forms of social connection become possible. The analysis of trends in network ties has been the source of major debates in sociology and across psychology and public health. McPherson et al. (2006) analyzed data from the General Social Survey and found that the average number of close confidants per American dropped by around one-third between 1985 and 2004, although the methods and interpretation of findings from the study received extensive criticism and have been the subject of debate (Bearman and Parigi 2004; Fischer 2009; McDonald and Mair 2010; Paik and Sanchagrin 2013). More recently, greater attention has been given to the problem of social isolation, which has garnered concern among researchers in the social sciences, psychology, and public health (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Cacioppo et al. 2015; Umberson and Donnelly 2023). Several longitudinal studies point to rising rates of social isolation, declining time with friends, and growing levels of perceived loneliness since the 1980s (Hawkley and Capitano 2015; Kannan & Veazie 2023). This literature, which is typically carried out at the individual level, focuses primarily on the value of strong interpersonal ties and the consequences of weakening social ties for wellbeing and health.

A third strand of research has focused on what I will refer to as institutional isolation, or the degree of engagement with the organizations and institutions of collective life. Much of the recent focus on engagement with collective institutions can be traced to Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000), which argued that civic engagement and social capital in the United States declined since the 1960s. Putnam presented data showing declines in membership in community organizations, attendance at public meetings, volunteering, informal socializing, and activities like having friends over for dinner (see also Costa and Kahn 2003; McDonald and Mair 2010; Paxton 1999). Putnam called attention to shifts in private and public life, demographic and economic changes in explaining these trends, including rises in television viewing, suburbanization and urban sprawl, and the movement of women into the workforce. Other prominent research in political science points to the replacement of mass-membership civic associations by professionally managed advocacy groups and nonprofits as a core explanation for the decline in civic participation and organizational membership among U.S. adults (Skocpol 2013). This strand of research argues that the decline of active participation in communal

organizations has weakened the state of American democracy as well as the social fabric of society, with far-reaching negative implications for individual and collective outcomes.

In attempting to condense and review this expansive literature, I have suggested that a large body of research can be classified in overlapping categories focusing on spatial isolation, social isolation, and institutional isolation. A crude summary of each category follows. First, spatial isolation is most commonly measured with indicators for racial or economic segregation, and the literature is primarily concerned with the degree to which groups of Americans are isolated from mainstream institutions such as the labor market (e.g., Wilson 1987). Second, social isolation is typically captured with measures of friendship or core discussion ties, and the central concern expressed in this strand of research is whether our connections to close friends, confidants, or sources of support have declined or weakened over time (e.g. McPherson et al. 2006). Third, organizational or institutional isolation is typically measured with indicators of memberships/affiliations, time spent in civic activities, or behaviors that connect individuals with the institutions of collective life (e.g., voting, attending church), and the central concern in this tradition is whether the institutional fabric that connects a society together has weakened (e.g. Putnam 2000).

In this article, I am not arguing that the trend in time spent at home is more important than other related trends in American life, nor am I arguing that time spent at home should replace other measures of social isolation that have been analyzed in the literature. Instead, the article begins with the observation that our social and familial ties, our daily activities, and our engagement with institutions are situated within public and private settings offering different amenities, resources, and risks that facilitate or weaken connections between individuals and institutions (Small and Adler 2019). The effect of the neighborhood environment is likely to differ, for instance, depending on whether the individual spends her time out in the community or inside at home (Furstenberg et al. 2000). The nature and consequences of engagement with civic institutions are likely to differ depending on whether the individual comes together with others in a shared setting, or instead writes a check to support an organization from home (e.g. Skocpol 2013). The closeness of a friendship tie is likely to differ depending on whether the two individuals take part in activities together or communicate while both are at home (e.g., boyd 2014). The implication is that perspectives focusing on how and with whom individuals spend their time must be integrated with a perspective that considers where individuals spend their time. This article thus aligns with prior research demonstrating how the physical setting for our daily lives is tightly intertwined with our network and institutional ties (Fischer 1982; Klinenberg 2003; Klinenberg 2012; Small 2009; Small and Adler 2019).

To measure where individuals spend their time, a number of recent studies have taken advantage of data from mobile phones or other sources of data and analyzed movement across the neighborhoods of a city or metropolitan area (Browning et al. 2021; Logan 2012; Sampson and Levy 2020; Wang et al. 2018). This article provides an entirely different perspective, shifting the focus to consider the degree to which American adults spend their time at home. The article can be seen as a part of

an expanding literature that recognizes the importance of the home to Americans' political, economic, and social lives (Dwyer 2007; Fischel 2002; Kuhn et al. 2017; McCabe 2016; McCabe and Rosen 2023). The focus on the home has particular salience in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a sudden change in which a wide range of daily activities, from work to school to leisure, were shifted to the home. Social scientists are only beginning to generate evidence on the immediate and long-term consequences of this shift for the labor market, the education system, the future of cities, and for Americans' social ties and wellbeing (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis 2023; Cutler and Glaeser 2021; Klinenberg 2024).

The analysis includes the COVID years but takes a longer view, spanning from almost two decades prior to the pandemic through 2022, when most of the restrictions of the pandemic had ended. After documenting the trend in time spent at home, the analysis proceeds by linking together the spatial and social context of daily life, examining the relationship between time spent at home and time spent alone, with friends, and with family; and examining the relationship between time spent at home and engagement with social and religious institutions.

Data and Methods

Data are from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), a sample representative of all non-institutionalized adults age 15 and older in the United States drawn from the outgoing rotation of the Current Population Survey (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023). Data used in the analysis are based on a time diary that asks about all activities over a 24 hour period beginning at 4 am in the day prior to the survey and ending at 4 am on the morning of the survey. Survey respondents are asked about all activities over the course of this period, including details about who they were with and where they were. The analysis uses sampling weights provided by the ATUS, which are necessary to address sampling, response rates, and the timing of interviews across days of the week. Weights are important because of extensive nonresponse in the ATUS (Abraham, Maitland, and Bianchi 2006). Response rates have been below 60 percent throughout the course of the survey, and have fallen below 50 percent in more recent years. I discuss attempts to uncover bias arising from nonresponse later in the article. In 2020, the ATUS was suspended for a period spanning from March to May, and then continued data collection in the remainder of the year. I use the special sampling weights for 2020 accordingly. Results are not sensitive to dropping observations from 2020 or removing weights.

Measures

Time at home. Time at home is based on questions asking where the respondent was when taking part in each specified activity. The activity is coded as taking place at home if it took place in the "respondent's home or yard." To protect private or confidential information, information on where the activity took place is not collected for sleeping hours or for a small number of sensitive personal activities. Main analyses estimating the total number of hours in which the respondent is at

home make the assumption that the respondent slept at home. Results are not at all sensitive to this assumption. Figure S1 in the Online Supplement shows the trend in percentage of time spent at home while including and excluding sleeping hours. The rise in percentage of time spent at home is larger when excluding sleeping hours, as shown in the graph. Percentage of time spent at home rose by seven percentage points when including sleeping hours, and by 10 percentage points when excluding sleeping hours.

Activity types. The ATUS uses an activity classification scheme to code all activities using broad categories and more detailed activities within those categories. The analysis uses broad categories to measure work and work-related activities, education and education-related activities, eating and drinking, socializing, relaxing, and leisure activities, and religious and spiritual activities. I expand on this classification scheme for some categories in order to provide more granular analysis of particular types of activities. For instance, instead of analyzing all activity related to sports and exercise collectively, I break down this category into a measure of whether the individual was attending a sports event and another indicating whether the individual was involved in sports or exercise. Similarly, I divide the category of leisure, socializing, and relaxing into separate measures that capture socializing, leisure spent on the computer, and leisure not spent on the computer.

Time spent alone and with friends/family. Measures of overall time spent alone, time spent with friends, and time spent with family are based on questions asking respondents whom they were with when carrying out an activity. Respondents are counted as alone if there is no one else in the room or location where the activity took place; emailing or phoning a friend would therefore be coded as “alone” if the friend was not physically present.

Emotions and meaning. Measures of whether the respondent felt happy, sad, stress, and perceived the activity to be meaningful, respectively, are based on a Well-Being (WB) Module added to the ATUS survey in 2010, 2012, and 2013. For the measures of happy, sad, and stress, respondents were asked: “From 0 to 6, where a 0 means you were not happy at all and a 6 means you were very happy, how happy did you feel during this time?” For the measure of meaning, respondents were asked: “From 0 to 6, how meaningful did you consider what you were doing? 0 means it was not meaningful at all to you and a 6 means it was very meaningful to you.” All analyses of emotions and meaning use the wellbeing module pooled activity weights.

Individual/family characteristics. Models include control variables capturing the following: age (categories for 15-24 years, 25-34 years, 35-44 years, 45-54 years, 55-64 years, 65+); race and ethnicity (non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Asian, Hispanic/Latino, all other groups); high income (\$75,000 or more in household income) and low income (less than \$20,000 in household income) relative to households in other income categories; employment status (not employed compared to those actively employed); educational attainment (less than high school diploma, completed high school including some college, college graduate or more); marital status (married with spouse present vs not married/other marital status); presence of own child under 18 in the household; individual gender; and home ownership.

Analytic Methods

The outcome for the main analysis is time spent at home on a typical day, measured in minutes. Time spent at home is regressed on the full set of controls plus indicators for day of week, month of year, and calendar year, as in Equation 1.

$$TimeAtHome_i = \beta_0 + X_i'\beta + Year_t + \theta_d + e_i \quad (1)$$

Here, $TimeAtHome_i$ is the outcome measure for individual i , $X_i'\beta$ is a vector of socio-demographic characteristics of the respondent and family, $Year_t$ is the set of indicators for each calendar year, θ_d denotes the fixed effects for day of the week and month of the year, and e_i is the error term. The coefficients for each calendar year indicator capture changes in average time spent at home after taking into account changes in the characteristics of individuals that may affect their activities (such as employment) and their individual circumstances (such as income or family structure). Analyses are weighted using ATUS weights and standard errors are adjusted for heteroskedasticity.

Models are then stratified by a set of subgroups in the sample to assess heterogeneity in the trend across different segments of the population. The same models are used to assess the relationship between time spent at home and the percentage of time in several specific types of activities that is spent at home, as displayed in Figure 2. In models predicting time spent alone, time with friends, and time with family, respectively, the measure of time spent at home is a predictor variable and the coefficient for time spent at home is reported in Figure 3.

Results predicting emotions and meaning utilize a slightly different set of specifications. The first is an individual fixed effects specification in which the measures of emotions and meaning are regressed on an indicator for whether the activity took place at home, plus indicators for the category of activity, as shown in Equation 2 using the example of the measure of happiness as the dependent variable.

$$Happy_{ai} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Home_{ai} + \sigma_a + \zeta_i + e_{ai} \quad (2)$$

The dependent variable is self-reported happiness when carrying out the given activity a for individual i , and the model includes fixed effects for each activity type σ_a as well as fixed effects for each individual ζ_i . The coefficient of interest, β_1 captures the effect of taking part in an activity at home versus not at home for the same individuals.

The central limitation of this model is that the “effect” of carrying out an activity at home may be driven by the type of activities more likely to take place at home, rather than the location. To address this issue I use an activity fixed effects specification, as in Equation 3.

$$Happy_{ai} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Home_{ai} + X_i'\beta + \sigma_a + e_{ai} \quad (3)$$

In this model comparisons are made across different individuals taking part in the same activity, some at home and some not at home. The model includes fixed effects for each activity type, σ_a , and a full set of controls for all individual characteristics,

$X_i'\beta$ plus a measure of overall time spent at home across all activities to capture the individual's overall tendency to be at home. The coefficient of interest β_1 now represents the effect of the activity being conducted at home versus not at home but considering the same activities among different individuals. Each approach has a different interpretation and assumptions, and the results are compared to assess whether findings are similar across specifications.

Results

Figure 1 displays the long-term trend in time spent at home on a typical day in the United States relative to the baseline in 2003. The graph shows a trend of rising time spent at home from 2003 to 2019, a sharp increase in 2020, and a slight decline in 2021 and 2022. Over the full period from 2003 to 2022, average time spent at home increased by 99 minutes, roughly 10 percent of the average daily time spent at home in the baseline year of 2003.¹ Note that this estimate is from a model that controls for changing economic and demographic characteristics of the sample over the full period. If I instead estimate the weighted mean of time spent at home in 2003 and 2022, the difference in time spent at home is identical to the full model results, indicating that the trend is unaffected by changes in the characteristics of the adult population over time.

A central concern to address is the question of whether the trend showing rising time at home may be an artifact of changes in the administration of the survey or changes in the types of people who respond to the survey over time (Abraham, Maitland, and Bianchi 2006; Abraham, Helms, and Presser 2009; Phipps and Vernon 2009; Schnabel, Bock and Hout 2024). Although it is not possible to identify this type of potential bias definitively, additional analysis was conducted to assess whether adjustments for survey nonresponse or the mode of the original interview for the Current Population Survey may influence the trend. I first estimated the model with and without survey weights that adjust for sampling and nonresponse in the ATUS. Results were extremely similar—time spent at home rose from 2003 to 2022 by 99 minutes in the weighted analysis, and by 92 minutes in the unweighted analysis. I next stratified the sample based on the interview mode for the Current Population Survey (CPS), from which the ATUS sample was drawn.² The rise in time spent at home from 2003 to 2022 for sample members who were interviewed by phone for the CPS was 96 minutes; the rise for sample members interviewed in person for the CPS was 98 minutes; and the rise for sample members whose interview mode was labeled as “Blank” in the CPS was 111 minutes—although it should be noted that this latter group is small and the confidence interval for the estimate is wide.

This set of results does not provide definitive evidence one way or another of whether there is bias in the estimate of the overall increase in time spent at home from 2003 to 2022. However, the results do suggest that any bias from survey methods or changes in U.S. adults' willingness to respond to the survey may influence the magnitude of the estimated change in time spent at home, but is unlikely to be the core explanation for the large increase in time spent at home.

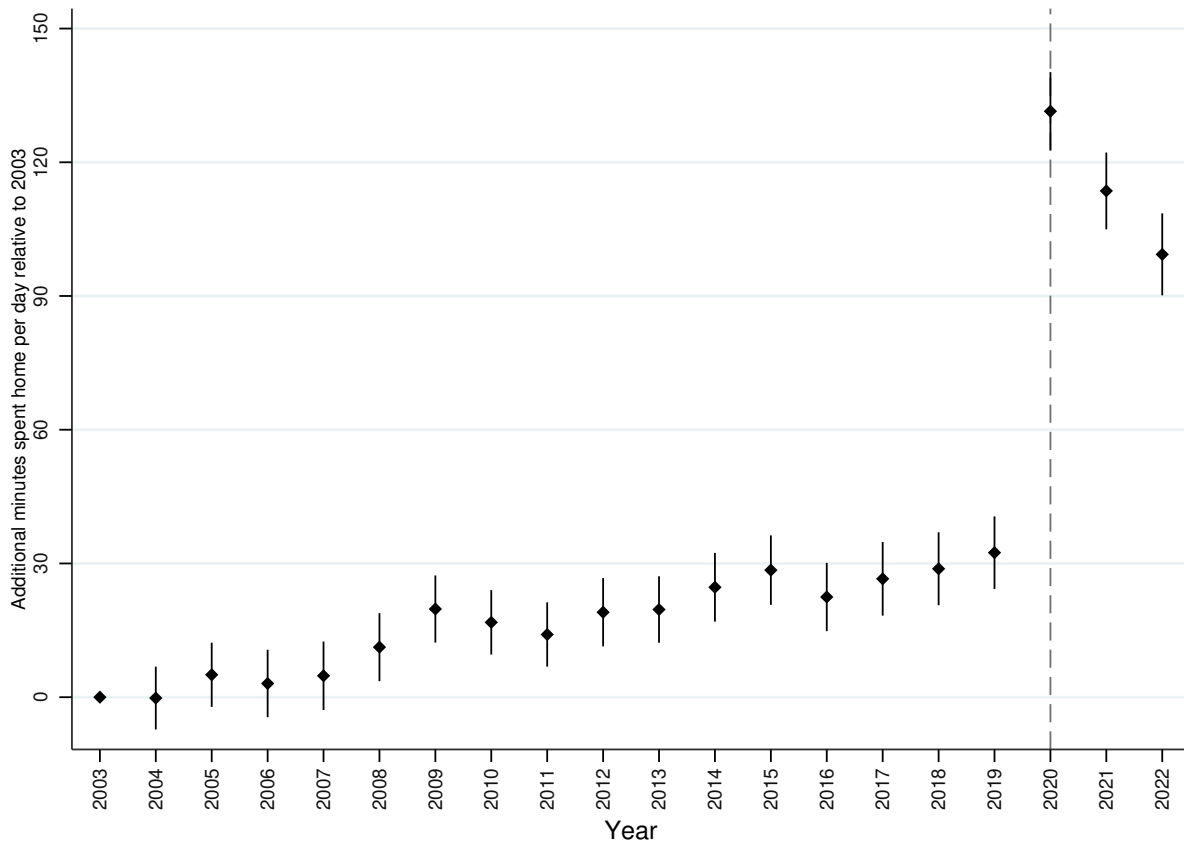


Figure 1: Additional minutes spent at home per day relative to 2003. *Notes:* Y axis = Coefficient on year indicators from linear regression including controls for gender, race and ethnicity, employment status, marital status, educational attainment, the presence of own child in household, age, home ownership, household income, month of year, and day of week fixed effects. Models are weighted with ATUS weights. Standard errors are adjusted for heteroskedasticity. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Heterogeneity in Rising Time Spent at Home

Time spent at home has increased for each subgroup of respondents I analyzed, but the trend is more pronounced for some groups. Figures displayed in the Online Supplement show that the largest changes in time spent at home are found among younger people. Young adults age 15-24 spent 57 minutes more time at home per day in 2019 as compared with 2003, and by 2022 this group spent 124 more minutes at home relative to 2003. The change from 2003 to 2022 was similar for 25-34 year-olds, and was smaller for older adults and smaller still for adults over the age of 55. All age groups, however, spent more than an hour longer at home in 2022 than in 2003.

Additional results presented in the Online Supplement show that the trend was more pronounced among men than women, among employed individuals relative to unemployed individuals and those out of the labor force, among high income

individuals relative to low income individuals, and among those with more years of schooling relative to those without a college degree. The trend in rising time at home is clearly not concentrated among more disadvantaged segments of the population and appears to be associated with economic and educational advantage. I find minimal differences in the rise of time spent at home across racial and ethnic groups, with the exception of Asian Americans. Asian Americans experienced a much sharper rise in time spent at home since the pandemic than other groups. This finding should be interpreted with caution, however, as the sample of Asian Americans in the ATUS is small and the confidence interval around the estimate for this group is wide.

Rising Time Spent at Home by Activity Type

The rise in time spent at home could be driven by changes in the types of activities that compose the average adult's day, or by a shift in the location of activities that compose the average adult's day. To distinguish between these explanations, Figure 2 displays the results from a decomposition of the average difference in total time spent in each of several common activities between 2003 and 2022, the average difference in total time spent at home, and the average difference in total time spent away from home.

I find that the overall rise in time spent at home is due to a combination of a shift in activities and a shift in the setting for activities. Activities that show a large change in either time spent at home or away from home, but not both, reflect a change in the types of activities in which U.S. adults took part. The figure shows that U.S. adults spent less time shopping for consumer items, socializing, volunteering, and traveling (including commuting and all transportation) in 2022 when compared with 2003. All of these activities are more likely to take part outside the home, and thus the decline in time spent in each activity results in an overall drop in time spent outside the home. Alternatively, U.S. adults spent more time sleeping and using the computer for leisure in 2022 when compared with 2003 (Basner and Dinges 2018). Both of these activities were more common at home, resulting in an increase in time spent at home.

Although changes in the types of activities in which U.S. adults took part accounts for a share of the overall rise in time spent at home, the more pronounced changes from 2003 to 2022 occurred in the location of various activities. Over this period, U.S. adults spent less time away from home, and more time at home, engaged in all of the following activities: working, taking part in education-related activities, eating and drinking, taking part in leisure without a computer, taking part in sports or exercise, and engaging in religious or spiritual activities. Based on this decomposition, about 71 percent of the increase in time spent at home is explained by a shift in the location of just six different types of activities: work, school, eating/drinking, leisure without a computer, sports/exercise, and religious/spiritual activities.

Figure 3 provides an alternative way to see the changes that have taken place over time by displaying the increase from 2003 to 2022 in the average percentage of time in each activity that is spent at home relative to outside of the home. I focus my interpretation first on the change from 2003 to 2019, as represented in the

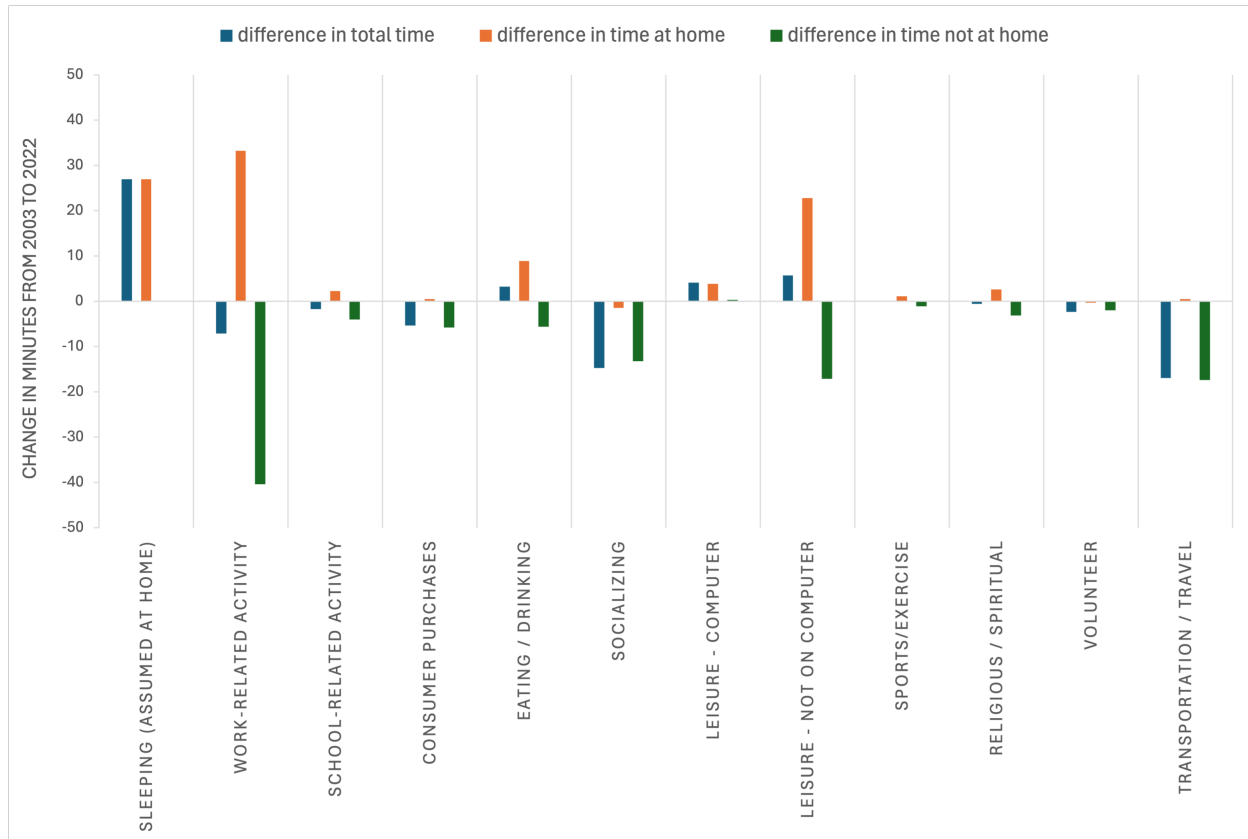


Figure 2: Decomposition of change in time spent at home in each of several common activities. *Notes:* Y axis represents the change from 2003 to 2022 in total minutes, total minutes at home, and total minutes not at home in each activity. The measures of time sleeping do not include the location of the activity, and the analysis makes the assumption that sleeping takes place at home. For this reason it is not possible to calculate change in the number of minutes sleeping away from home.

coefficients above the label for 2019 in the graph, to represent the change prior to the pandemic; and I focus on the coefficients for 2022 to represent the full change from 2003 to 2022, after many of the shifts in behavior induced by the pandemic have subsided.

The average percentage of time in work-related activities spent at home increased by two percentage points from 2003 to 2019, rose sharply during the pandemic, and remained 14 percentage points higher in 2022.³ To put this figure in context, consider that just 13 percent of the average American adult's work-related activity was conducted at home in the baseline year of 2003. By 2022, the percentage of work-related activity carried out at home had more than doubled.

The average percentage of time in education-related activity spent at home rose by 12 percentage points from 2003 to 2019, before the pandemic, and remained 12 percentage points higher in 2022. This result means that the trend of rising education-related activity carried out at home was present before the pandemic,

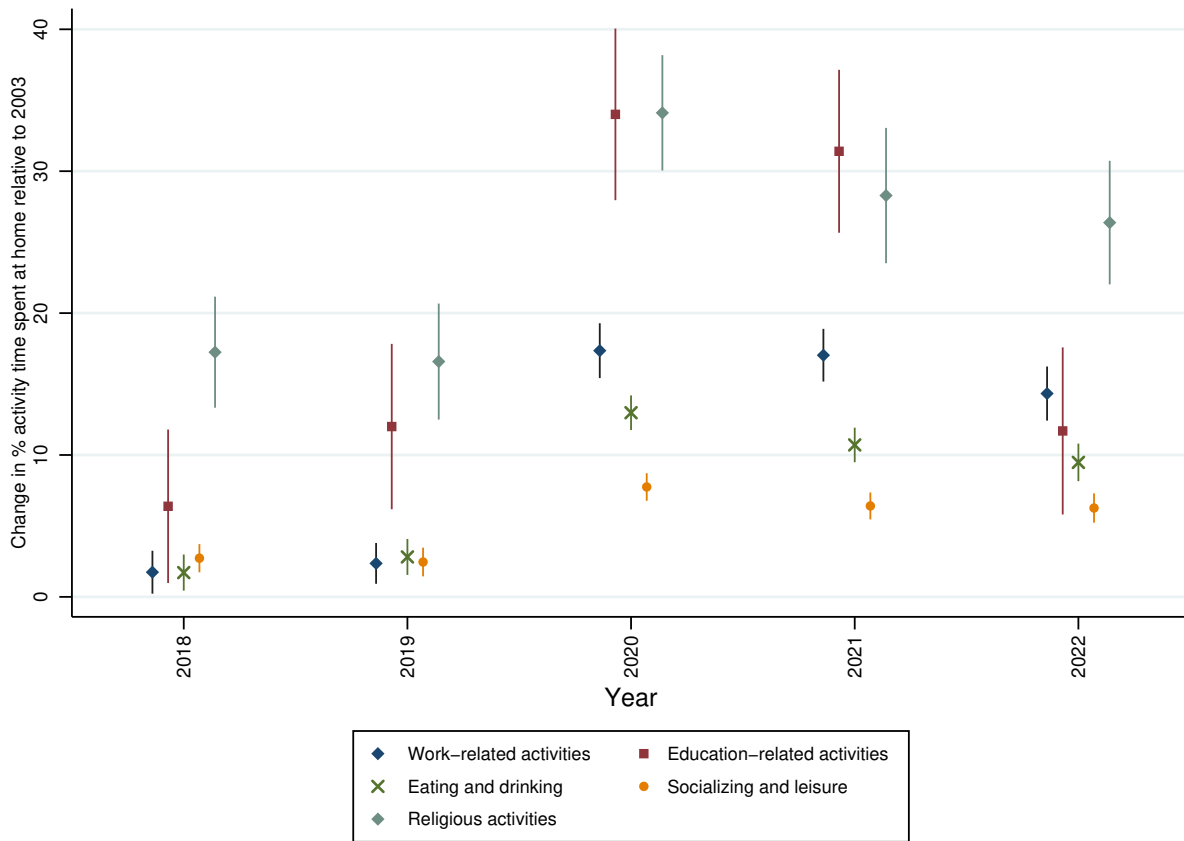


Figure 3: Change in average percentage of time in each activity spent at home, relative to 2003. *Notes:* Y axis = Coefficient on year indicators from linear regression including controls for gender, race and ethnicity, employment status, marital status, educational attainment, the presence of own child in household, age, home ownership, household income, month of year, and day of week fixed effects. Models are weighted with ATUS weights. Standard errors are adjusted for heteroskedasticity. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

and the sharp increase in schooling at home during 2020 and 2021 has leveled off and returned to pre-pandemic levels.

By contrast, the rise in the percentage of time at home while eating and drinking, socializing and taking part in leisure activity, and in religious activity changed substantially during the pandemic and has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. The percentage of time eating and drinking spent at home rose by three percentage points from 2003 to 2019, and by nine percentage points in 2022; the percentage of time socializing and taking part in leisure activity at home rose by two percentage points from 2003 to 2019, and by six percentage points in 2022; and the percentage of time in religious activities spent at home rose by 17 percentage points from 2003 to 2019, and by 26 percentage points in 2022.

These trends reinforce the point that a major shift has taken place in the location of many different domains of everyday life over the past two decades, ranging

from work to religion. The only exceptions to this trend, not shown in the graph, are time talking on the telephone and time spent on the computer for leisure. The percentage of time talking on the phone spent at home and the percentage of time on the computer for leisure spent at home declined by 6 and 4 percentage points, respectively, from 2003 to 2022, reflecting the long-term growth in the use of mobile phones and laptop computers and the more frequent use of both technologies outside the home.

Association Between Time Spent at Home and Time with Friends, Time with Family, and Time Alone

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to identify the causal effect of the rise in time spent at home on outcomes related to social, economic, familial, religious and political life or overall wellbeing. However, the remaining analysis provides descriptive evidence on potential consequences of rising time spent at home that is designed to provide motivation for additional research.

Results displayed in Figure 4 estimate the relationship between time spent at home and time spent with family, with friends, and time spent alone in the full sample.⁴ The graph shows that more time spent at home is associated with more time spent with family, less time spent with friends, and more time spent alone. For ease of interpretation, I transform the coefficients to represent the association between each additional hour spent at home and each outcome. The findings indicate that each additional hour spent at home is associated with an increase of 7.4 minutes in time spent with family, a decline of 5.0 minutes spent with friends, and an increase of 21.0 minutes spent alone. These findings are averaged over the full population, and clearly vary depending on individual characteristics and family structure.

The findings on the relationship between time spent at home and time spent alone are not surprising and reflect the well-documented trend of rising rates of living alone and rising rates of time spent alone (Atalay 2024; Klinenberg 2012). However, the results do suggest that the rise in time at home does not simply translate into a loss of all interpersonal contact, but rather represents a shift away from time spent with friends and toward time spent with family. In an additional analysis in the Online Supplement, I estimate the trend in the percentage of waking time spent alone over the full period from 2003 to 2022 with and without adjusting for time spent at home. I find a sharp increase in the percentage of time spent alone since the pandemic, as previously documented (Atalay 2024). However, this trend is fully explained by including the measure of time spent at home. After adjusting for time spent at home, there is no longer any clear trend showing rising time alone among American adults.

Time Spent at Home and Individual Emotions and Meaning

In a final set of analyses, results of which are shown in Figure 5, I estimate the association between time spent at home in different activities and self-reported happiness, sadness, and stress, as well as self-reported feelings about whether the activity is meaningful. Measures of self-reported emotions and meaning are on

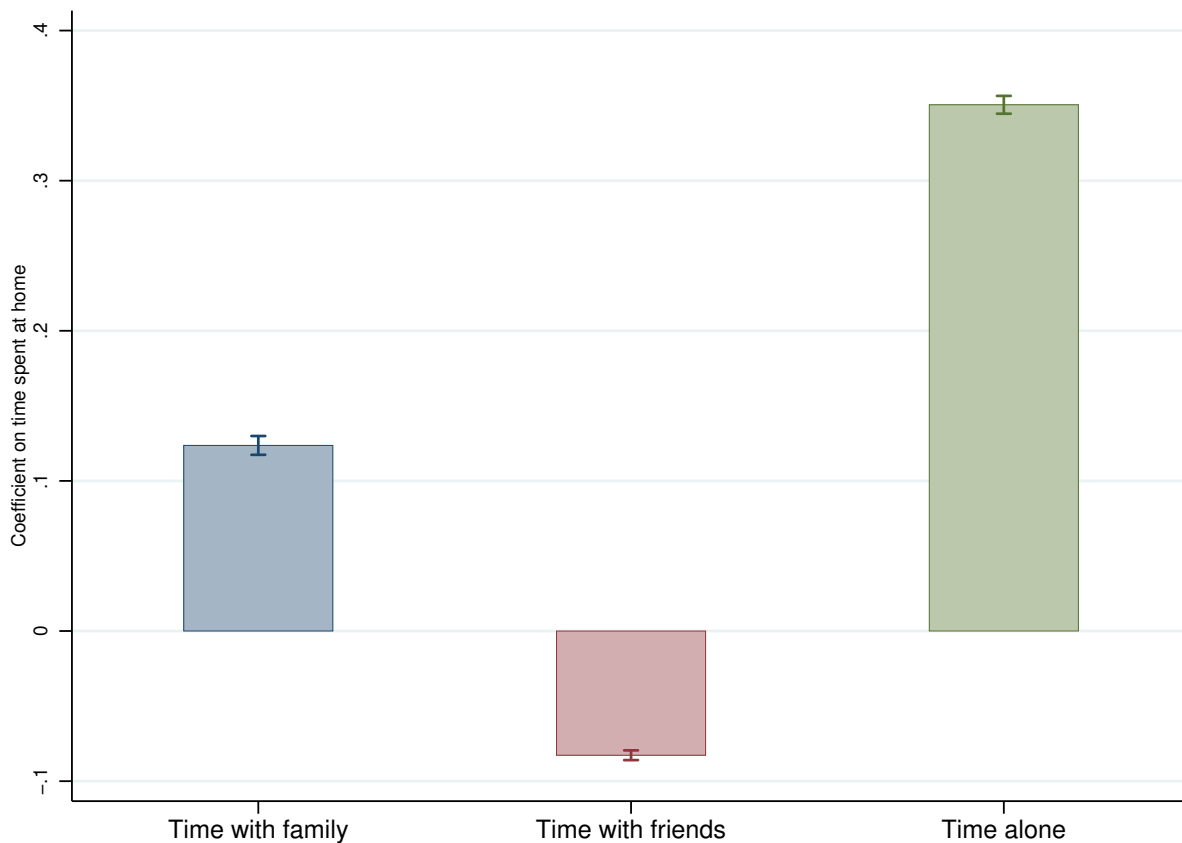


Figure 4: Association between time spent at home and time spent with friends, family, and alone. *Notes:* Y axis = Association between time spent at home and each outcome, conditional controls for gender, race and ethnicity, employment status, marital status, educational attainment, the presence of own child in household, home ownership, household income, calendar year, month of year, and day of week fixed effects. Models are weighted with ATUS weights. Standard errors are adjusted for heteroskedasticity. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

a six-point scale ranging from 0 to 6, representing how strongly the respondent felt each emotion while taking part in each activity. For each outcome, the first model specification examines different activities carried out by the same individual and assesses whether activities at home are associated with different emotions and meaning than activities outside the home.⁵ A second model specification generates the same estimate drawing on variation across individuals taking part in the same activity, and examines whether individuals who take part in the activity at home express different self-reported emotions and meaning than others who take part in the same activity outside the home. The models for the second specification control for all observed characteristics of individuals, as well as a measure of the overall time spent at home.

The first point estimates in Figure 5 show that activities at home are associated with a strong reduction in self-reported happiness. This point estimate is extremely

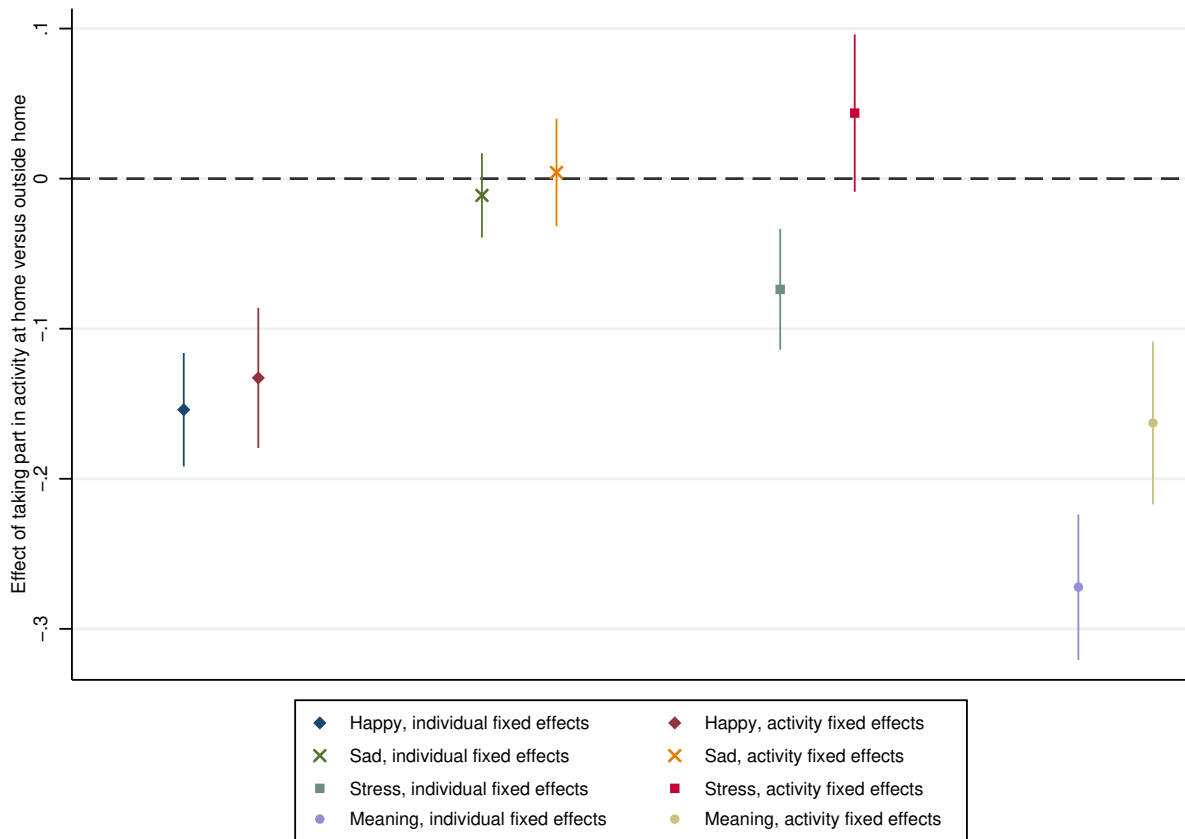


Figure 5: Association between activities at home and self-reported emotions and meaning. *Notes:* Y axis = Coefficients are the estimated effect of taking part in the activity at home versus outside the home. The first model specification is from an individual fixed effects model which draws on variation in the location of different activities among the same respondent. Models are weighted using ATUS weights and include indicators for the type of activity. The second specification is an activity fixed effects model, which draws on among the same activity types across respondents. Activity fixed effects models are weighted using ATUS well-being module weights and include controls for gender, race and ethnicity, employment status, marital status, educational attainment, the presence of own child in household, home ownership, household income, month of year, and day of week fixed effects along with a measure of overall time spent at home. Standard errors are adjusted for heteroskedasticity and clustering at the individual level. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

similar in the model drawing on variation in the location of different activities within the same respondents, and the model drawing on variation in the location of the same activities among different respondents. The second set of point estimates show that activities at home have no relationship to self-reported sadness. The third set of point estimates show that activities at home are associated with lower levels of stress in the first model specification, which draws on variation within the same respondents. However, the second specification shows a non-significant, positive relationship between activities at home and stress when drawing on variation across

individuals taking part in the same activity. The fourth set of point estimates shows that respondents perceive activities to be less meaningful when carried out at home, and the estimates are negative and statistically significant in both specifications.

Overall, the findings in Figure 5 provide strong preliminary evidence that activities at home are associated with lower happiness and less meaning, activities at home show no relationship with sadness, and the association between activities at home and stress differs depending on the specification. A supplemental set of analyses not shown in the table indicate that the findings are only partially explained by who the individual interacts with while at home or not at home. After controlling for a measure of whether the respondent was interacting with someone while taking part in the activity, activities at home are still strongly associated with lower levels of happiness and perceptions of whether the activity was meaningful. Being at home thus appears to have an independent association with happiness and meaning that is only partially mediated by whether the individual was interacting with someone while taking part in the activity.

Discussion

A profound change in American life has taken place in the past two decades: American adults now spend substantially more time at home. The trend in rising time spent at home was present well before the COVID-19 pandemic but accelerated sharply during the pandemic and has subsided only slightly in 2021 and 2022. On an average day in 2022, U.S. adults spent one hour and 39 minutes more time at home than they did in 2003. This translates to roughly 10 percent more time spent at home on a daily basis.

Before discussing the implications of this trend for different dimensions of American life, I first consider a range of possible explanations for the trend. To be clear, the data available do not allow for a simple or complete explanation for the growth in time at home, an area ripe for future research. However, a series of analyses provide preliminary evidence to help adjudicate among several different explanations for the trend.

A first possibility is that the rise in time spent at home is an artifact of survey methods, survey administration, or changes in the characteristics of adults who respond or do not respond to social surveys. Although the relatively low response rates of the ATUS are a concern for any research using this source of data, I find no evidence to indicate systematic bias arising from adjustments for nonresponse or by the interview mode for the CPS, from which the ATUS sample was drawn. Still, it is possible that these sources of bias may affect results for specific types of activities (e.g. Schnabel, Bell and Hout 2024), and additional research should be carried out with different sources of data to provide points of comparison with the results presented in this article.

A second possible explanation is that the rise in time spent at home is driven by demographic or economic changes in the composition of the U.S. adult population, such as growth in the population above the age of 65, changes in marital status or the prevalence of living alone, or changes in employment rates. The evidence available does not support this explanation. The trend in time spent at home is not

affected by adjusting for shifting characteristics of the sample, including age, marital status and family structure, employment, income, education, home ownership, race and ethnicity, and gender. Further, every subset of American adults I examined spent at least an hour more time at home in 2022 than in 2003, indicating that the trend is not driven by a specific segment of the population.

There is, however, heterogeneity in the increase in time spent at home across subsets of the population. I find that the rise in time spent at home is largest among adults under the age of 35 and smallest among adults age 55 and older. The age gradient in the trend runs in the opposite direction of the age gradient in level of time spent at home—younger adults spend less time at home on average than older adults, but the amount of time younger adults spend at home has risen the sharpest since 2003. The rise in time spent at home is most pronounced for more advantaged segments of the population, especially those with high levels of educational attainment. This is particularly true in the years after the pandemic, suggesting that the finding is driven at least in part by the rise in work from home among more educated members of the labor force. Lastly, I find minimal differences in the rise of time spent at home across racial and ethnic groups, with the exception of Asian Americans (see also Casselman and Koeze 2021). The small sample of Asian Americans in the ATUS suggests that this finding should be interpreted with caution. However, considering the increase in hate crimes and discrimination directed toward Asian Americans since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, this finding merits additional attention using other data sources (Pew Research Center 2023).

A third possible explanation is that U.S. adults have changed the types of activities on which they spend their time. For example, one might imagine that a large-scale decline in labor force participation or international travel might help explain the rise in time spent at home. I find some evidence that provides partial support for an explanation that focuses on long-term changes in types of activities. From 2003 to 2022, U.S. adults spent more time sleeping and using the computer for leisure, and less time shopping, socializing, volunteering, and traveling. The decline of activities that tend to occur outside the home and the growth in time spent sleeping, which has been documented in prior research based on the ATUS (Basner and Dinges 2018), both contribute to the overall rise in time spent at home. However, these shifts in activities account for only a small fraction of the overall trend in rising time spent at home.

A much larger share of rising time spent at home is driven by a fourth explanation: a shift in the location of activities. Over the period spanning from 2003 to 2022, there was minimal change in the overall time U.S. adults spent engaged in work, school, eating/drinking, leisure without a computer, sports/exercise, and religious/spiritual activities. However, the amount of time in each activity spent away from home declined and the amount of time in each activity spent at home increased. The shift in the location of these six categories of activities accounts for more than 70 percent of the overall rise in time spent at home. The movement of various activities to the home also makes clear that this trend is not explained by any single change in society, such as the rise in work from home since the pandemic. Both employed and unemployed adults now spend substantially more time at

home than the equivalent groups did in 2003. American adults are not only more likely to work from home, they are also more likely to take part in education-related activities at home, to eat and drink at home, and to take part in religious activities at home. The percentage of time spent at home has risen for most types of activities, with few exceptions.

A fifth, related explanation is that the arrival of COVID-19 is the dominant change that led to the most pronounced shifts in the setting for daily life. This explanation has some evidence to support it and some to temper that support. The evidence against the pandemic explanation begins with the observation that the trend in rising time spent at home was clearly present well before the emergence of COVID-19. Time spent at home was rising in a roughly linear way from the mid-2000s all the way through 2019. By 2019, U.S. adults spent more than a half hour longer at home than they did in 2003. Although the trend in rising time at home was present before COVID-19 began to spread, the beginning of the pandemic led to a dramatic, abrupt increase in time spent at home that was a clear shift from the prior trend. After spending months largely confined to their homes, it is possible that Americans became used to spending more time at home and more reluctant to venture out into public space, and that these changes in daily life during the early months of the pandemic will fade only partially and gradually (Barrero, Bloom and Davis 2021; Kannan & Veazie 2023; Klinenberg 2024).

The expanded use of technologies like the Internet and the rise of mobile phones and social media represents a sixth potential explanation for rising time at home (Turkle 2011). The findings showing that many different types of activity are more likely to take place at home, including activities that seemingly have little to do with new technology, complicate any simple explanations focusing on the Internet or social media. Mobile phones and laptops have made it easier to use the Internet and social media outside the home, for instance, and it is not inherently the case that these technologies would mechanically lead to more time spent at home (Hampton et al. 2011). One major limitation of the ATUS is that the survey does not have precise questions that track the amount of time on smartphones or social media. It is plausible that the rise of time spent on social media plays an important role in explaining the rise in time spent at home as well as the shift in the location of different activities, such as socializing (Twenge, Spitzberg and Campbell 2019). More research using alternative data sources is needed to assess the relationship between smartphone use, social media use, and time spent at home.

Beyond these possible explanations, other changes in social life and other social forces that are not possible to capture in the ATUS may well help to explain the trend showing rising time at home. One plausible factor may be fear or discomfort associated with public spaces. Even though the national rate of violence remains well below the rate in the early 1990s, the rise of gun violence since the beginning of the pandemic and the long-term rise of mass shootings, along with other high-profile acts of terrorism, are plausible explanations for a retreat from public spaces (Sharkey 2018). An alternative hypothesis is that increases in the size of homes in many parts of the United States may help explain why Americans are more comfortable spending time at home (Dwyer 2007). Evidence on the role of broader

social forces and changes in American life that are not captured in the ATUS data should be a central priority for future research.

Similarly, additional evidence will be necessary to fully understand the consequences of this trend for social, political, and economic life. Data from the ATUS allow for only suggestive evidence on the possible consequences of this shift in the location of Americans' daily lives for relationships and emotional wellbeing. Results show, first, that the rise in time at home should change how social scientists think about a related trend that has garnered substantial attention: the rise of time spent alone (Atalay 2023; 2024). I find that after controlling for time spent at home, there is no longer a clear trend in average time spent alone. In other words, the finding showing growing time spent alone during and after the pandemic is entirely explained by the shift toward life spent at home. Moreover, the rise in time at home should not be interpreted to mean that Americans are simply retreating to their homes on their own, isolated from others. Spending more time at home is, in fact, associated with spending less time with friends, but it is also associated with spending more time with family. This set of findings makes clear that the trend in rising time at home is distinct, with different consequences, than the related trend of rising time spent alone. The implications for family structure, family life, and the social lives of U.S. adults are important topics for additional research (Dunatchik et al. 2021).

Second, activities conducted at home are associated with lower levels of happiness and are viewed as less meaningful. Although additional evidence is needed to assess whether being at home has a causal effect on emotional wellbeing, the strongly consistent findings using two very different analytic approaches provide more confidence in the relationship between the setting for activities and individual emotions. On the other hand, results from additional models show a much weaker, inconsistent relationship between time spent at home and sadness and stress, respectively, suggesting that the shift toward rising time at home is not uniformly associated with negative emotional wellbeing.

These analyses are only an initial, descriptive attempt to understand the consequences of rising time at home for individuals. Although much of the research in this area has focused on the economic implications of the large growth in working from home, the implications for different domains of public life are potentially substantial. To provide two examples, consider religious life and the future of cities and communal spaces in the U.S.

Coming together as a congregation is a central feature of most religious traditions, and yet a growing portion of religious activity is taking place at home, either online, on TV, or alone (Pew Research Center 2024). If the shift toward greater religious activity at home grows, it is likely to have important implications for the experience of religious rituals, for the organization of religious institutions, and for the dissemination of religious ideas and practices (Durkheim (1912) 1964; McClure 2017; Wuthnow 2010).

Next consider the fortunes of cities and communal public spaces in the United States. When the pandemic first emerged in U.S. cities and much of the professional workforce shifted to remote work, urban scholars began to analyze and speculate about how cities might change as the workforce and residential population shifted,

because many cities experienced widespread vacancy in downtown business districts, and city governments faced declining revenue and growing challenges like rising violence (Cutler and Glaeser 2021; Florida, Rodríguez-Pose and Storper 2023; Glaeser 2022). Years later, these questions have not been resolved. The growth in work from home has receded only gradually, a partial reconfiguration of the landscape of business and residential districts within some central cities has begun to take shape, and federal funding to support local governments continues to flow. If the long-term rise in time spent at home continues, the trend is likely to have important implications for the population's and policymakers' commitment to public spaces, to supporting city governments, and to investing in local social infrastructure like libraries, parks, and playgrounds (Klinenberg 2018).

This article is not designed to answer these questions. Rather, the article's primary contribution is to identify the long-term trend of rising time at home, present preliminary evidence to help explain it, and to assess potential consequences. Causal evidence on the explanations and consequences of rising time at home, along with qualitative evidence designed to understand how time at home is experienced by different segments of the population, will be necessary to understand how the trend is related to other changes and social forces and how it has affected various domains of social, political, and economic life in the United States.

Notes

- 1 The mean time spent at home in 2003 was 992 minutes.
- 2 Note that all interviews for the ATUS were done by computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI). However, the Current Population Survey uses a combination of in-person and phone interviews.
- 3 Atalay (2023) finds a slightly larger increase in work from home from 2003 to 2019, before the pandemic. There are a few subtle differences that explain the discrepancy. First, Atalay measures the percentage of work from home as the aggregated total number of hours worked at home in the population divided by the total # of working hours in the population—that is, the percentage of all working hours in the adult population that took place at home. My analysis calculates the percentage of hours worked from home for each individual and then takes the average over the sample (including adults who are not working). This means Atalay's figures are more heavily weighted by individuals in the sample who work more hours. Second, Atalay calculates work time including only time actually conducting work at a primary job. I include all "work-related activities," such as income generating hobbies or real estate management. Third, my analysis reports trends after adjusting for changes in demographic and economic characteristics of the sample. When I examined raw trends in work from home without including other controls in the model I estimate that the percentage of work time taking place at home rose by 4.2 percentage points in 2019 relative to 2003, which is very similar to the same comparison in Atalay (2023).
- 4 In this analysis the measure of time spent at home excludes time spent sleeping. This is done to avoid making assumptions about whether the individual was alone while sleeping.
- 5 Analyses of emotions and meaning are similar in structure to the approach used in Atalay (2024).

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