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Mind the gap: gender differences in time use narrowing, but slowly

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The Australian Bureau of Statistics has released its first time-use survey in 15 years. The last time it collected such data, in 2006, Apple was yet to release the iPhone and Facebook was a start-up.

So much has changed, though the differences in time use between men and women have not changed as much as many might like.

The new survey suggests we're spending an average of 4 hours 23 minutes a day watching video, listening to audio or some other activity involving a computer or handheld device.

The average full-time worker spent 8 hours 44 minutes a day on employment-related activities. But we're getting pretty much the same amount of sleep – about 8½ hours on average for both men and women.

The survey suggests a slight narrowing in gender differences – but with domestic and caring responsibilities still principally undertaken by women.

Caution, however, is needed in interpreting these new results. The data was collected from 2,000 households between November 2020 and July 2021. So the times reported reflect the COVID-19 pandemic, with closed borders, restrictions and lockdowns. These were not ‘normal’ times.

Comparisons with the past data (from 2006, 1997, 1992 and the 1987 pilot study) are further complicated by the bureau warning the new figures “are not fully comparable with previous collections due to changes in methodology”.

With this in mind, let’s take a look.

How we use our time

Our first graph shows how men and women, on average, spend their days.

Necessary activities are things like sleeping, eating and personal care. Contracted activities are things such as paid work and education. Committed activities cover unpaid domestic chores, child care, adult care and voluntary work. Free time means exactly that.

How Australians divide their day

Average allocation of time by four types of time use, 2020-21.

Necessary Contracted Committed Free


Females



Males



Source: abs.gov.au

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These times add up to over 24 hours. This is because many people spend part of their day doing two things at once. For example, while at work or driving or having breakfast (what the bureau terms a “primary” activity), they may be listening to the radio (a “secondary” activity).

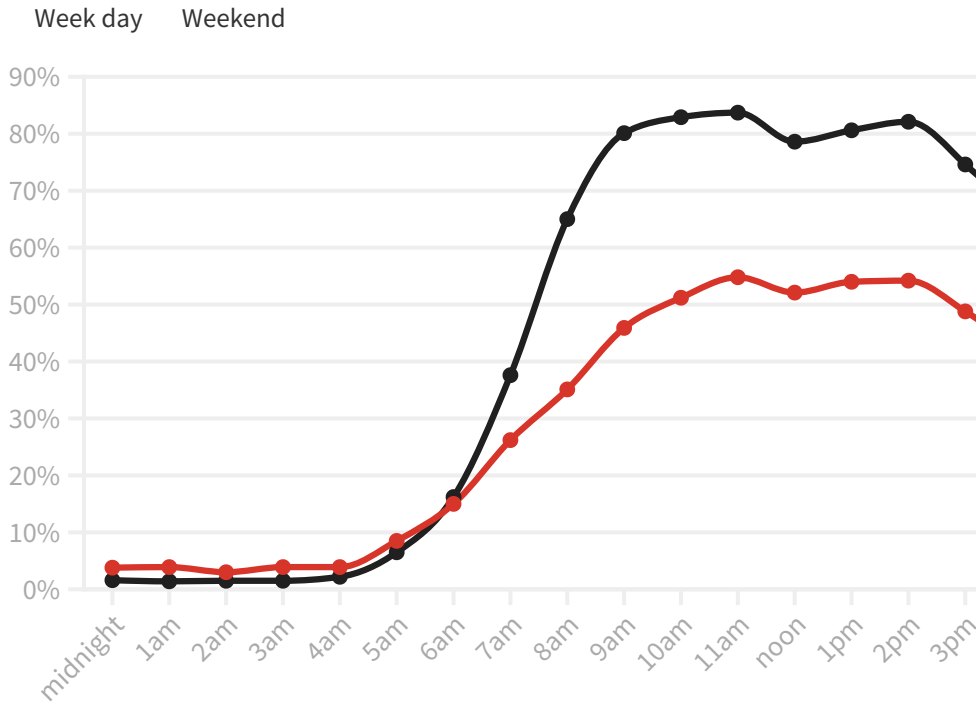
Nonetheless they provide a useful snapshot – with men spending more time on paid work, and women more time on unpaid work.

When we’re working

Most of us who work do so during standard office or trading hours. But about a tenth of all workers were working between 8 pm and 10 pm at the time of the survey – either because they were shift workers or due to (paid or unpaid) overtime.

When Australians are working

Percentage of respondents working at each hour of the day.



Source: abs.gov.au

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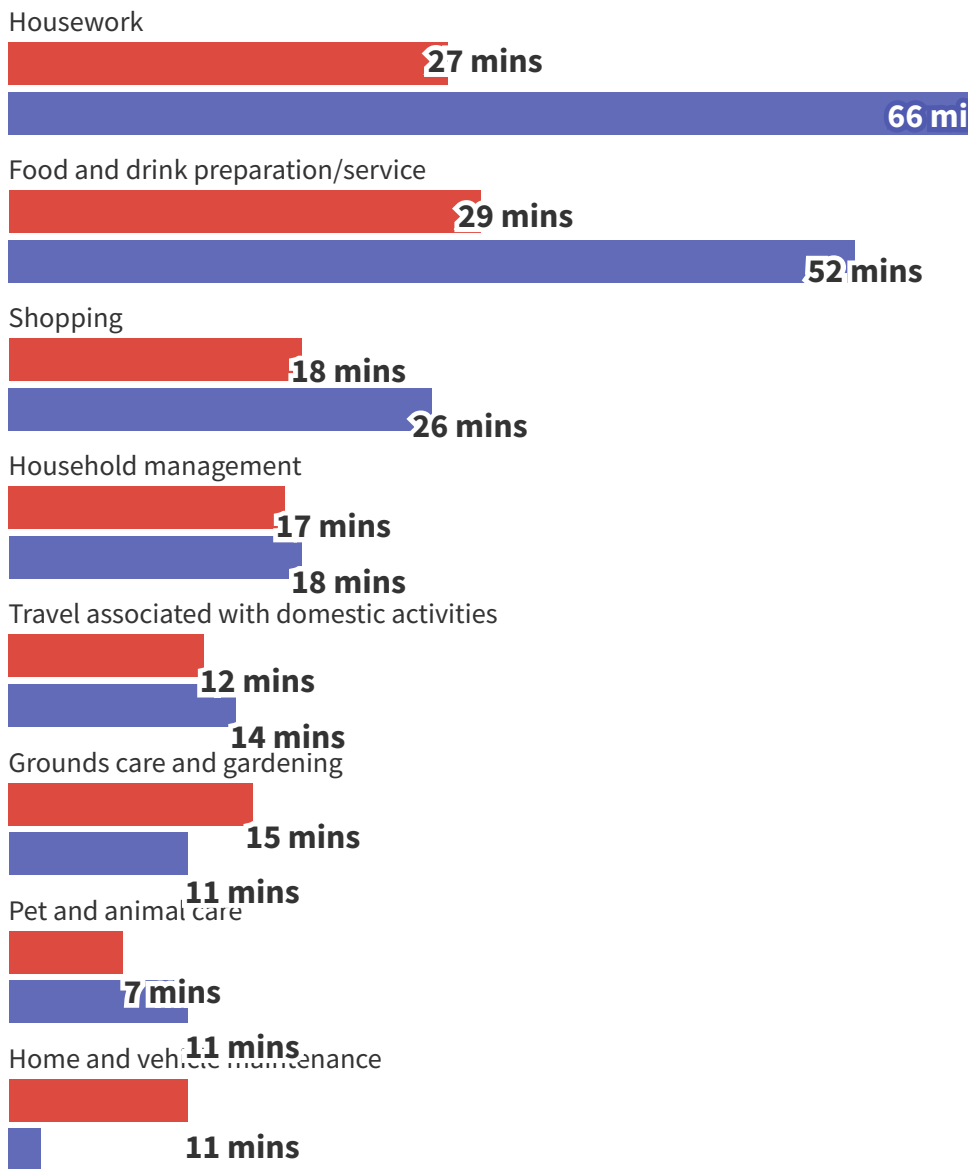
Time on domestic chores

On average women spent 3 hours 22 minutes a day on domestic responsibilities, compared with 2 hours 19 minutes for men. (Child-care responsibilities were on top of this – an average of 1 hour 26 minutes for women, 40 minutes for men.)

Time spent on domestic chores

Average minutes per day for Australians aged 15 years and over, 2020-21.

Male Female



Source: abs.gov.au

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The time-use survey also reports these activities by participation rate and by average time spent by those who undertake such activities.

The percentage of men reporting doing any domestic activities was 84%, compared with 94% of women. Participation differences were particularly pronounced in housework (72% of women compared with 44% of men) and cooking (77% of women compared with 56% of men).

Among those who reported doing these activities, women spent an average 3 hours 36 minutes compared with an average 2 hours 46 minutes for men.

How we use our leisure time

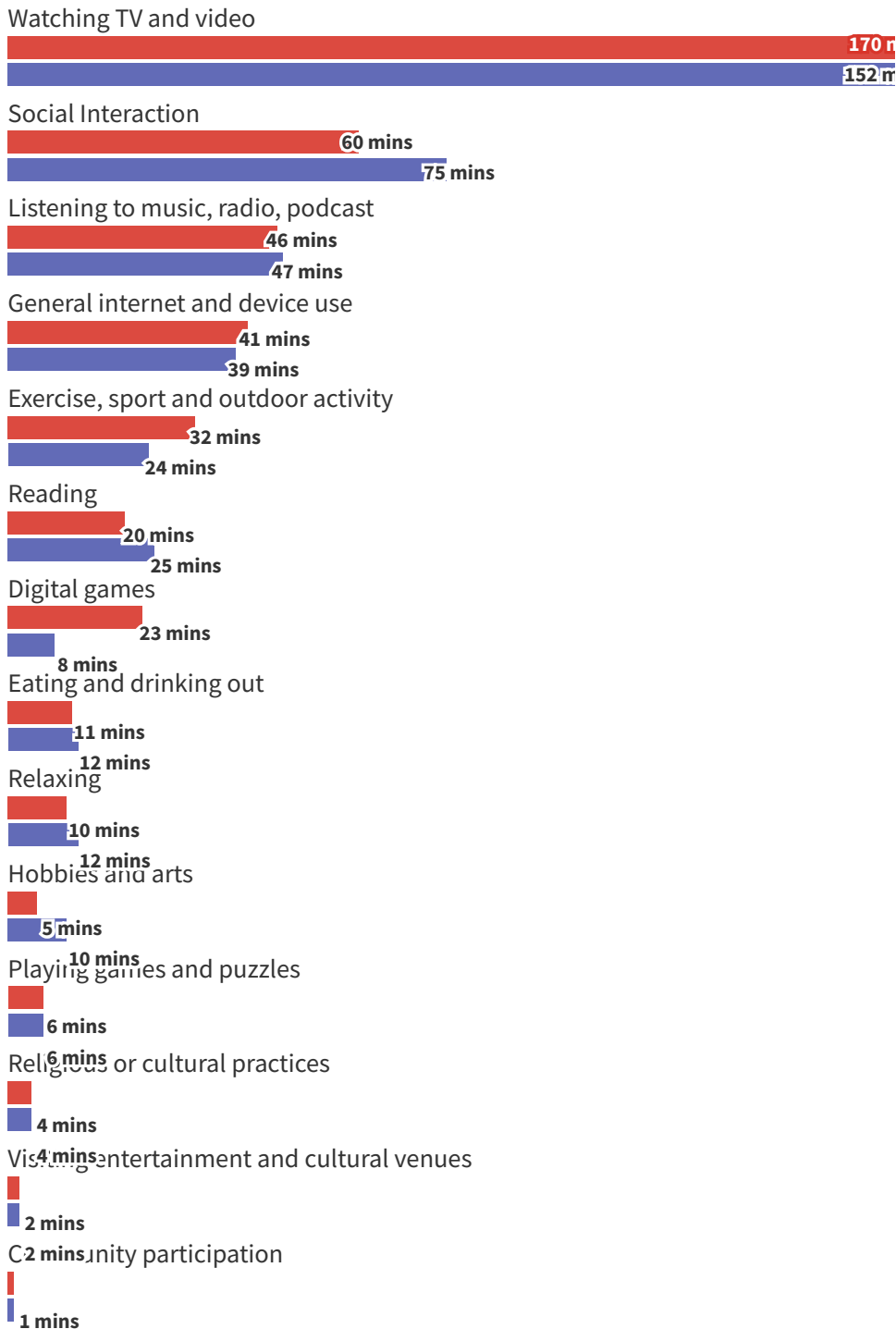
In its 2006 survey the ABS reported five main categories for how people spent their leisure time: sport and other outdoor activities; games, hobbies, arts and crafts; talking, writing or reading correspondence; using audiovisual media; and “other” activities.

This survey has updated procedures to ensure greater clarity around our burgeoning consumption of various types of media – recording times for listening to music and podcasts; games and puzzles; video games; and general internet and device use.

How Australians spend their free time

Average time per day for those aged 15 years and over, 2020-21

Male Female



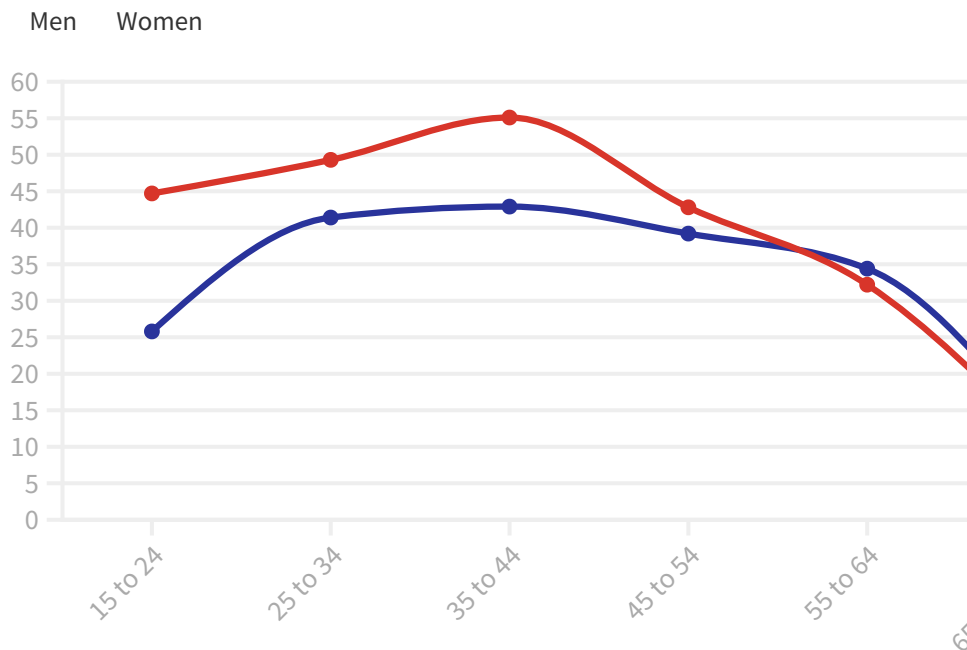
Source: abs.gov.au

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Perhaps not surprisingly, more women than men reported feeling “rushed or pressed for time”. These stresses were particularly prevalent among parents with children at home.

Who's feeling time stressed

Percentage of Austalians who 'always' or 'often' felt rushed or pressed for time, 2020-21.



Source: abs.gov.au

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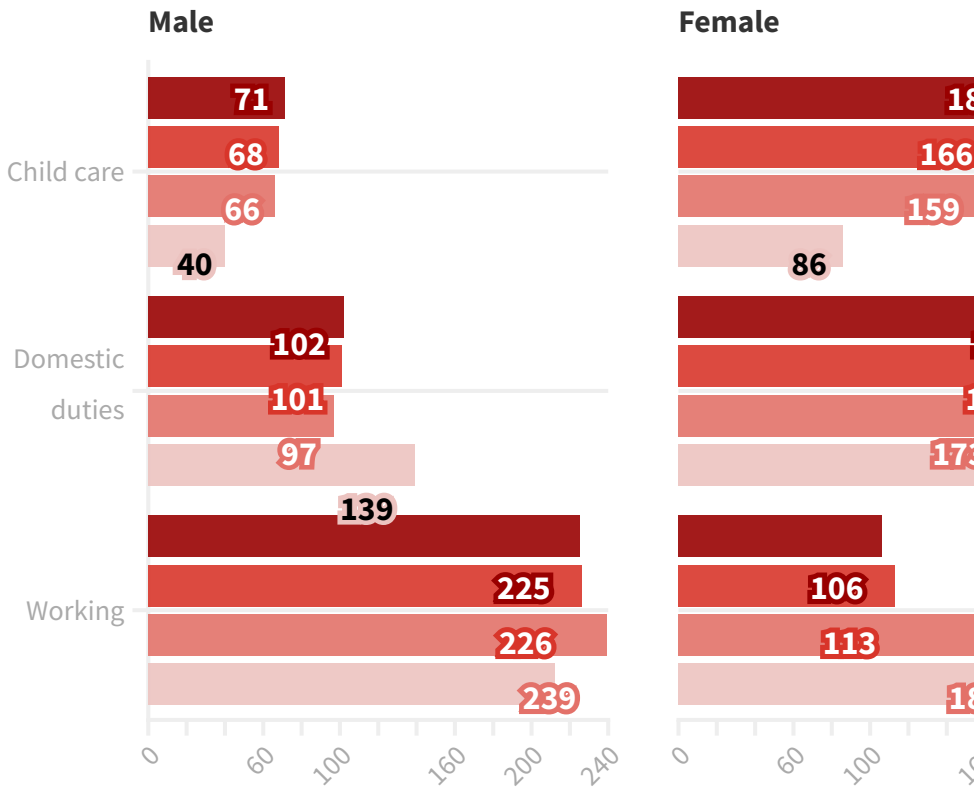
Are gender differences narrowing?

While comparison with past surveys is complicated for the reasons mentioned, gender differences do appear to have narrowed, with men doing a little more housework.

Narrowing the gender gap

Changes in time spent (minutes per day) on child care, domestic duties and paid work.

1992 1997 2006 2020/21



Source: abs.gov.au

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This is consistent with international studies suggesting “some signs of gender convergence, with a widespread decrease in women’s housework ... and increases in men’s housework and childcare”.

However, with comparisons with earlier years being muddled by the pandemic and changes to coding procedures, we will have to wait for the next time-use survey for a clearer picture.

Hopefully it won’t be 15 years.