

Sex Differences in Time Spent on Household Activities and Care of Children Among US Physicians, 2003-2016

Dan P. Ly, MD, MPP, and Anupam B. Jena, MD, PhD

Abstract

Limited data exist on differences in time spent on household activities and child care between male and female physicians, which may influence sex differences in hours worked professionally. We studied sex differences among married physicians in time spent on household activities (eg, cleaning and cooking) and child care (eg, bathing and homework) from 2003 through 2016 using the American Time Use Survey, a detailed time use survey administered by the US Census. Overall, we found that female physicians with children spent 100.2 minutes (95% CI, 67.0-133.3 minutes) more per day on household activities and child care than did male physicians, a finding that was qualitatively similar after adjustment for work hours outside the home of both spouses. These patterns may reflect societal norms that ultimately influence physician sex differences in hours worked professionally.

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Limited data exist on differences in household effort between male and female physicians, which may influence sex differences in hours worked professionally. A previous study of physician-researchers found that women spent more time on domestic activities than did men,¹ but this study used self-reported survey data regarding a “typical” day rather than detailed time use survey data, which may be less susceptible to sex bias in recall. In addition, no evidence exists on sex differences in household effort among physicians overall and how these differences compare with other peer professions.

METHODS

We performed analyses using the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) from January 1, 2003, through December 31, 2016.² The ATUS is a nationally representative, US Census-administered survey of approximately 26,000 households annually. Response rates range from 46.8% to 57.8% by year.³ The Harvard institutional review board waived study review.

The ATUS interview is conducted by telephone and includes a time use diary, during which the interviewer obtains a detailed minute-by-minute account of the respondent's

previous day. The interviewer uses conversational interviewing to allow the respondent to report what he or she did accurately, asking questions such as “Yesterday at 4 am, what were you doing?” “How long did you spend?” and “What did you do next?” The interview is later coded into activities, and 2 different coders code each interview for quality assurance. The ATUS has been used to estimate total time costs of outpatient visits and informal elder care.^{4,5}

We examined sex differences in household activities (eg, cleaning and cooking) and child care (eg, bathing and homework) among married physicians and lawyers with and without household children. We examined whether sex differences in domestic work differed between physicians and lawyers. Differences in means were assessed using *t* tests. In a sensitivity analysis of married physicians with children, we estimated a multivariable linear regression of time spent on household activities and child care as a function of sex, age, race/ethnicity, number of household children, weekend vs weekday, own weekly hours worked outside the home, and spouse's weekly hours worked outside the home. Specialty was unavailable. We used ATUS-provided weights to make

From the Department of Health Care Policy, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Married Physicians and Lawyers in the American Time Use Survey, 2003-2016^{a,b,c}

Characteristic	Married physicians		Married lawyers	
	Men (n=380)	Women (n=185)	Men (n=493)	Women (n=196)
Age (y)	47.9 (46.3-49.5)	43.2 (41.1-45.2)	50.3 (48.8-51.7)	42.6 (40.7-44.5)
Child <18 y present in household (%)	62.2 (54.5-69.8)	73.1 (63.6-82.6)	51.3 (45.4-57.2)	63.2 (54.8-71.6)
Hours worked per week outside the home	54.9 (52.6-57.2)	43.1 (39.7-46.5)	49.0 (47.5-50.4)	43.5 (41.5-45.6)
Spouse's hours worked per week outside the home	19.7 (16.6-22.8)	40.4 (37.0-43.8)	21.6 (19.0-24.2)	41.5 (38.6-44.4)

^aATUS = American Time Use Survey.

^bData are given as mean (95% CI).

^cAuthors' calculation using data from the ATUS from 2003 to 2016. Estimates use ATUS-provided weights to account for the complex sample design and are nationally representative.

estimates nationally representative, and we used complex survey modules in Stata software version 15.0 (StataCorp LLC) to account for the survey's complex sample design.

RESULTS

The sample included 380 male physicians, 185 female physicians, 493 male lawyers, and 196 female lawyers who were married (Table 1). The percentage of individuals with household children ranged from 51% to 73%.

Overall, female physicians with children spent 100.2 minutes (95% CI, 67.0-133.3 minutes) more per day doing household activities and child care than did male physicians, and female lawyers with children spent 115.9 minutes (95% CI, 78.9-152.9 minutes) more per day on these activities than did male lawyers ($P=.53$ for the sex difference between physicians and lawyers) (Table 2).

Among married physicians with children, married physicians without children, and married lawyers with children, women spent considerably more time overall on household activities than did men (eg, 103.2 vs 55.8 minutes per day for female vs male physicians with children). Women in these 3 groups spent more time cleaning, doing laundry, and cooking; men on average spent more time on maintenance and repair activities. Sex differences in overall time spent on household activities were not observed among married lawyers without children. Female physicians and lawyers spent significantly more time on child care than did their male counterparts (52.8 minutes more per day for

female physicians, 61.6 minutes more per day for female lawyers).

Results were qualitatively similar after adjustment for respondent and spouse hours worked outside the home (eg, among physicians with children, female physicians spent 77.6 minutes [95% CI, 36.8-118.3 minutes] more per day on household activities and child care than did male physicians).

DISCUSSION

In a nationally representative survey of detailed time use patterns, female physicians spent more time on household activities and child care than did male physicians, even after adjustment for professional hours worked. Similar sex differences were observed among lawyers. These patterns may reflect societal norms that ultimately influence sex differences in hours worked professionally. These patterns may also help explain why professional hours worked by female physicians are lower for those with children than without.⁶ Study limitations include insufficient data to analyze trends over time and by physician specialty.

CONCLUSION

Female physicians spend more time on household activities and child care than do male physicians. These results, which may reflect societal norms, may influence sex differences in professional hours worked.

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