



Television, capturing America's attention at prime time and beyond

By Rachel Krantz-Kent

Watching TV is America's favorite pastime, according to data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS). With nearly 80 percent of the population watching TV on a given day, and accounting for more than half of all the time Americans spend in leisure and sports, watching TV is the choice leisure activity for many Americans.

The ATUS is a Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) survey that collects information about how people spend their time, along with individual and household characteristics useful in understanding how people use their time.¹ In the core part of the survey, participants retrospectively report the activities they did on the previous day, when and for how long they did them, where they were, and who else was in the room with them or accompanied them during

the activities. Using this information, BLS produces estimates of average time use for the civilian noninstitutional population ages 15 and older and various subpopulations.

This **Beyond the Numbers** article presents American Time Use Survey data about who watches TV and for how long they watch. It explores the richness of the data set by presenting statistics on when, where, and with whom Americans watch TV. One result has been clear since the survey began back in 2003: television dominates the time Americans spend in leisure and sports.²

How much time do people spend watching TV?

In the 2013–17 period, the U.S. civilian noninstitutional population ages 15 and older spent an average of 2 hours 46 minutes per day watching TV. This amounted to more than half (55.2 percent) of the total time per day they spent in leisure and sports activities. As defined in the ATUS, “watching TV” refers to any time people said their main activity involved watching TV, videos, or movies. This includes the time they spent watching live programming, viewing DVDs, and streaming shows on their TV sets, computers, and portable devices. It does not include time spent viewing movies at a theater.

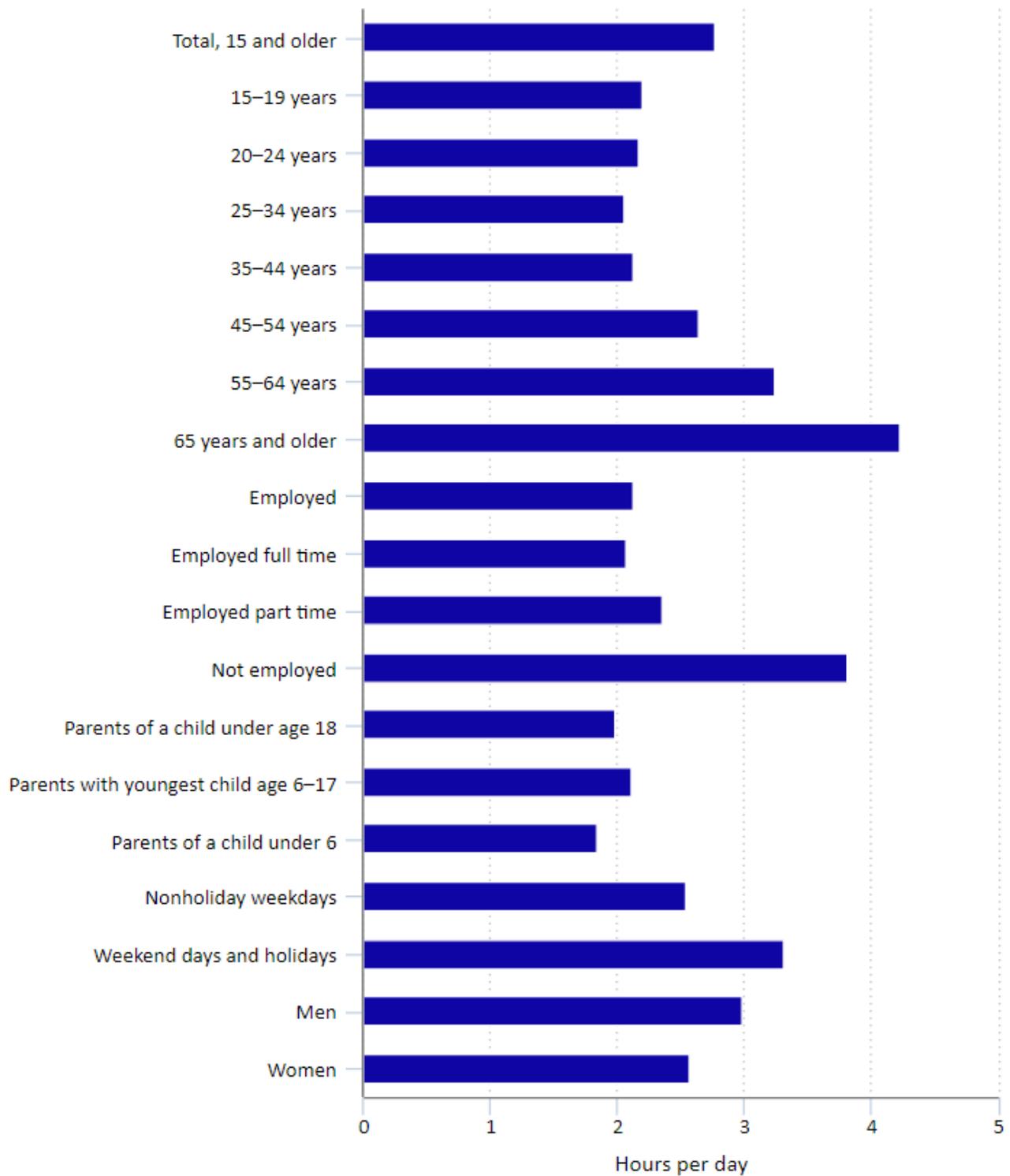
There was some variation within the population in the time people watched TV, as shown in chart 1. Older people and people who were not employed spent the most time watching TV. Those ages 55 to 64 averaged 3 hours 14 minutes of TV time per day, and those ages 65 and older averaged an hour more (4 hours 14 minutes) per day. People who were not employed, which includes people of all ages who did not work for pay, watched TV for an average of 3 hours 49 minutes per day. The majority (80.2 percent) of people ages 65 and older were not employed; this group watched TV for an average of 4 and a half hours per day.

Parents of young children clocked the least TV time per day. With 73.0 percent of parents of young children employed, little time was left for leisure after providing care for their children and working for pay. Parents with a child under age 6 averaged 1 hour 50 minutes per day of TV time. Those whose youngest child was between the ages of 6 and 17 averaged about one-quarter hour more TV time per day (2 hours 7 minutes).

On weekend days, employed people are less likely to work and students are less likely to attend class. This allows people to do other things—like watch TV. People watched TV about 45 minutes more per day on weekends than on weekdays. On average, they watched TV for 3 hours 19 minutes per weekend day and 2 hours 32 minutes per weekday.

Overall, men spent more time watching TV than women did. Men averaged about 3 hours per day watching TV, and women averaged 2 hours 34 minutes per day. This may seem surprising considering that men are more likely than women to be employed, and men represented just 45 percent of the population ages 65 and older. A closer examination of how men and women spent their time over the 2013–17 period shows that men averaged more time per day working for pay than women did, but women averaged more time doing unpaid household work, such as household chores, providing care and help to others, and shopping. On net, the time men and women spent doing these paid and unpaid work activities was about equal.³ While men spent more time in leisure activities, such as watching TV, women spent 28 minutes per day more than men in personal care activities, such as sleeping and grooming.

Chart 1. Hours per day spent watching TV, average for the 2013–17 period



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.

Note: Holidays include New Year's Day, Easter, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day.

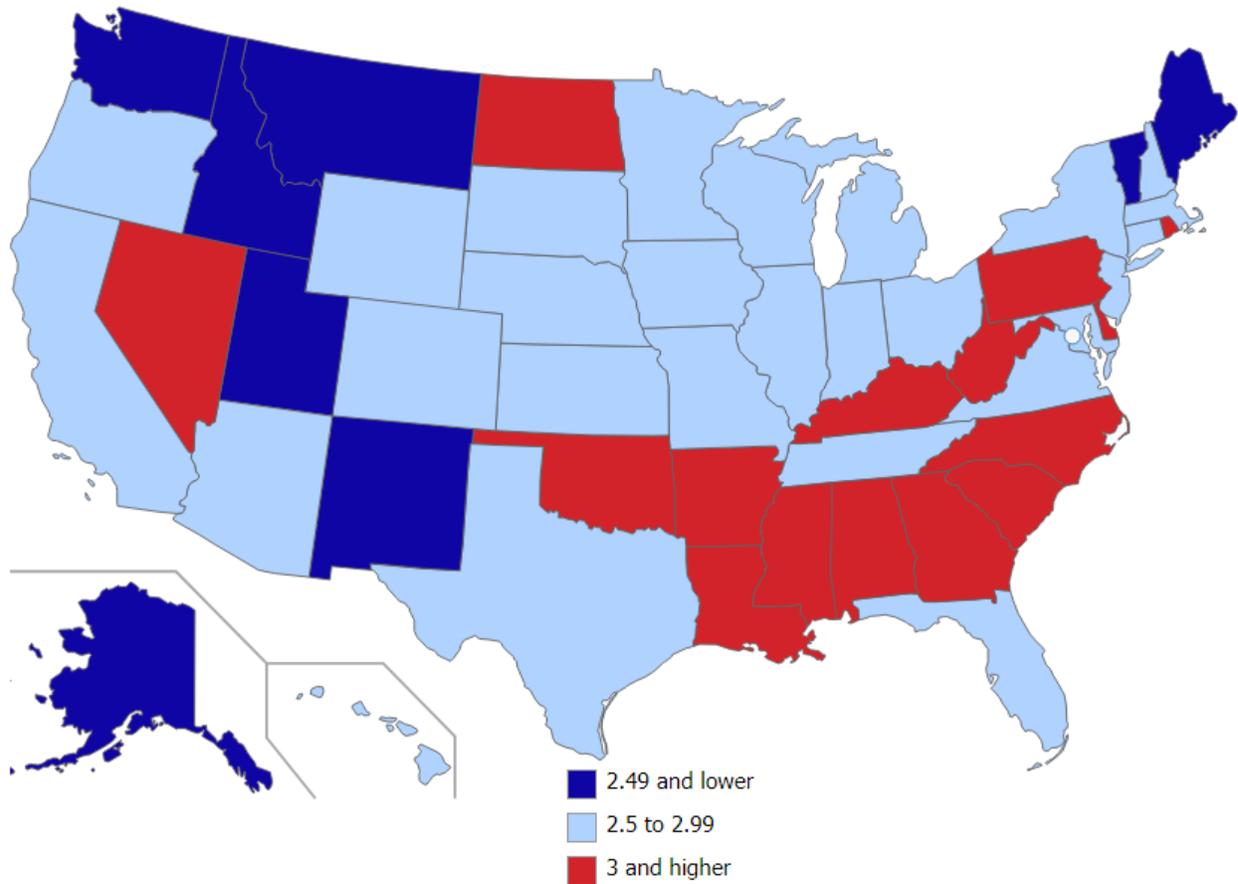
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



How does TV watching vary by geography?

As shown in figure 1, people living in several of the Rocky Mountain States and those in the far northeastern part of the country watched TV less per day than those living in other parts. On average, residents of Alaska, Idaho, Maine, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, Vermont, and Washington watched TV less than 2 hours 30 minutes per day in the 2013–17 period. People living in 27 states, including many of those located in the middle and far western part of the country, spent an average of 2 hours 30 minutes to just under 3 hours per day watching TV. Residents of states mainly in the southeastern part of the United States spent the most time per day watching TV, averaging 3 hours or more. These results may reflect underlying differences between the states in socioeconomic, demographic, and other factors. For example, in 2017, many of the states with the highest average TV times had some of the lowest labor force participation rates in the United States.⁴

Figure 1. Hours per day spent watching TV by state, average for the combined years 2013–17



Hover over a state to see data.
 Hover over legend items to see states in a category.
 Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

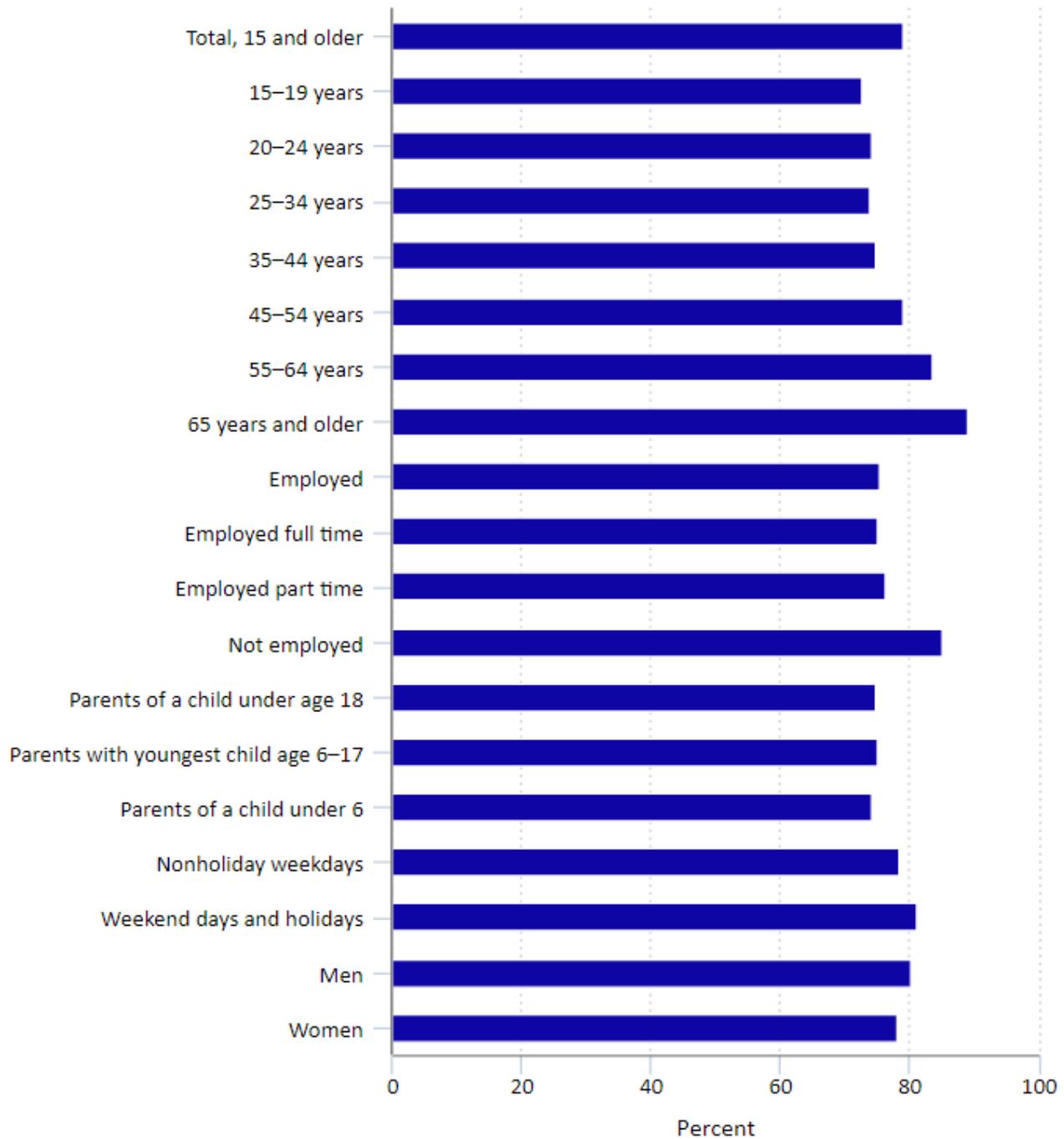
Which subpopulations are most likely to watch TV?

Not everyone watches TV on a given day, but most people do. Of the population ages 15 and older, 79.2 percent spent some time watching TV on a given day in the period from 2013–17. Chart 2 shows some variation among subpopulations in their likelihood of watching TV; however, the high rates across all groups—including age, employment status, parental status, and gender—is particularly notable. The group with the lowest percentage of people watching TV per day is 15 to 19 year olds with 72.6 percent.

The high rates of TV watching are supported by data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration showing that even with the number of televisions in U.S. homes declining, more than 97 percent of households used a TV in 2015, with an average of 2.3 TVs used per household.⁵ With televisions present in nearly all U.S. households, TV watching is a leisure activity that is easily accessible to the vast majority of the population. Also, with TV programs, videos, and movies accessible from such devices as tablets and computers, televisions are no longer needed for people to engage in TV watching as defined by the ATUS.

Those ages 65 and older were the most likely to watch TV—89.2 percent did so on a given day in the 2013–17 period. This group also had more leisure and sports time overall than the other populations shown in chart 2, averaging 7 hours 8 minutes per day. Only about 20 percent of those ages 65 and older were employed, and less than 1 percent of them were parents of children under age 18, so their time was largely free of the demands of work and childcare.

Chart 2. Percentage of people who watched TV on a given day, average for the 2013–17 period

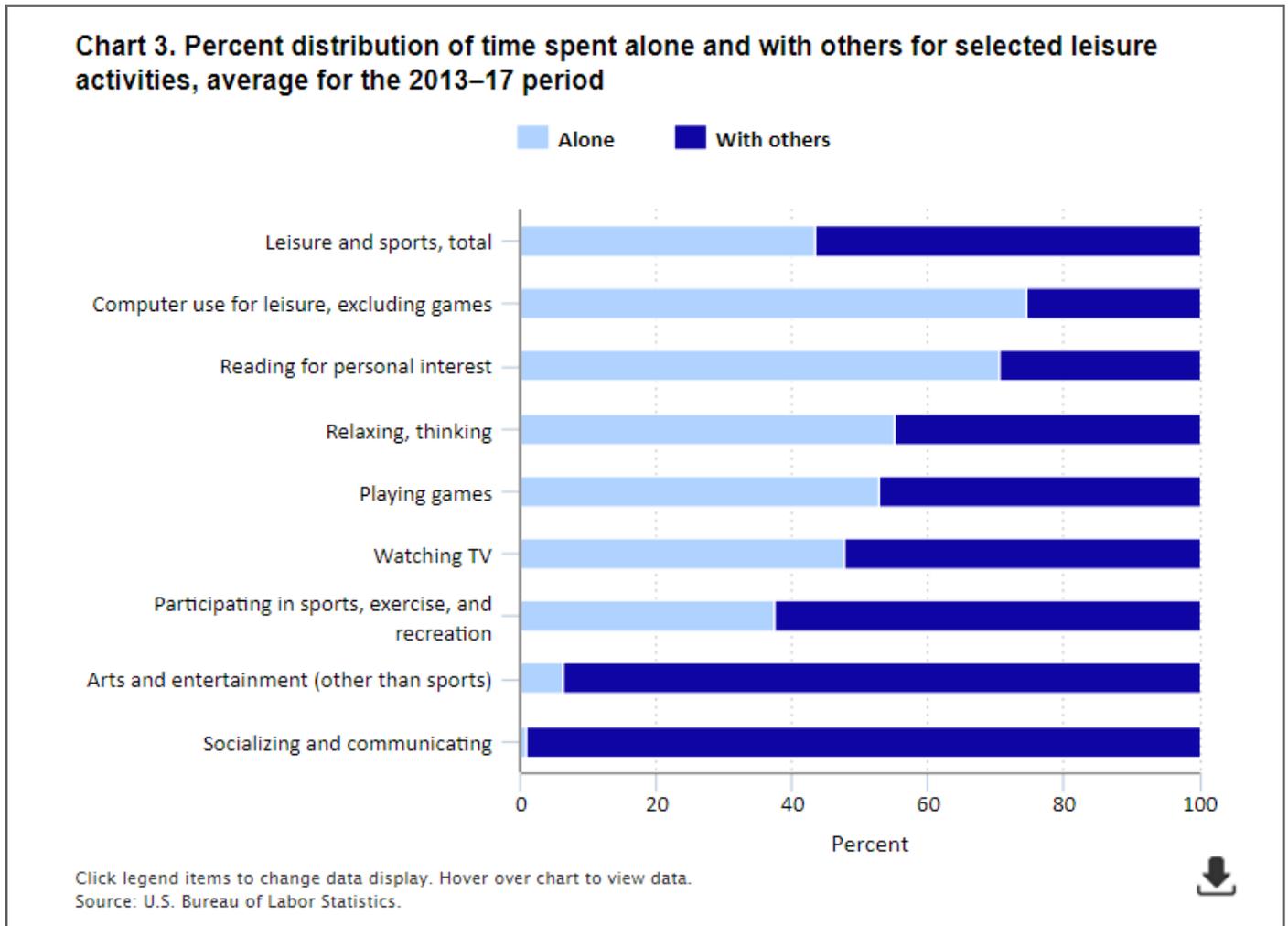


Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
 Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



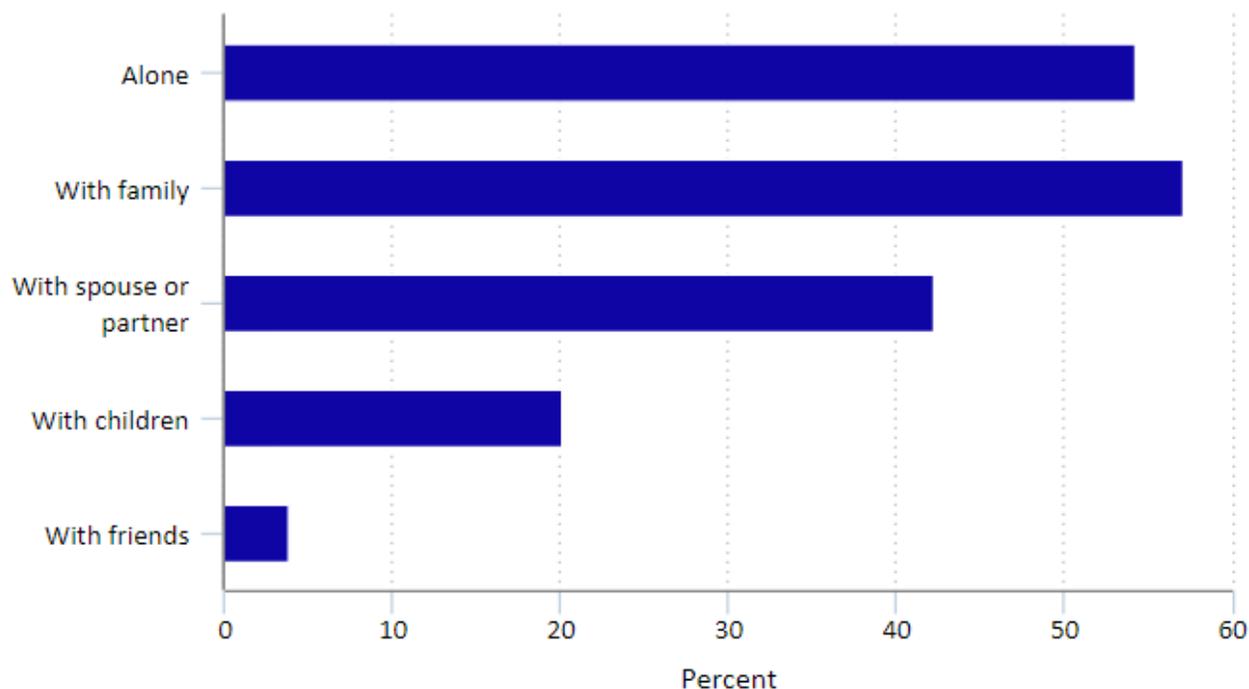
Is TV watching a solo or social activity?

As shown in chart 3, most people watched TV with others. During the 2 hours 46 minutes per day that people ages 15 and older watched TV, others were present 52.4 percent of the time (1 hour 27 minutes per day), and they were alone 47.6 percent of the time (1 hour 19 minutes per day). TV watching was more solitary than some leisure and sports activities and more social than others. Time spent socializing and communicating; participating in arts and entertainment other than sports; and participating in sports, exercise, and recreation was more likely to be spent with others than TV time. Time spent using a computer for leisure or reading for fun was more likely to be spent alone than the time people watched TV. [6](#)



Among those who spent time watching TV on a given day, 57.2 percent watched TV while with family and 54.3 percent watched TV solo. (See chart 4.) These numbers sum to more than 100 percent because some people watched TV both with family and while alone, at different times of the day. About two-fifths of TV viewers spent time with a spouse or unmarried partner while watching TV. Smaller shares of the population watched TV with children under age 18 (20.2 percent) or with friends (3.8 percent) on a given day.

Chart 4. Percentage of people who watched TV on a given day alone or with select companions, average for the 2013–17 period



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.

Note: Estimates sum to more than 100 percent because some people watched TV more than one time per day; sometimes they may have been alone, and other times with family, friends, or others. Additionally, some of the "with whom" categories overlap.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



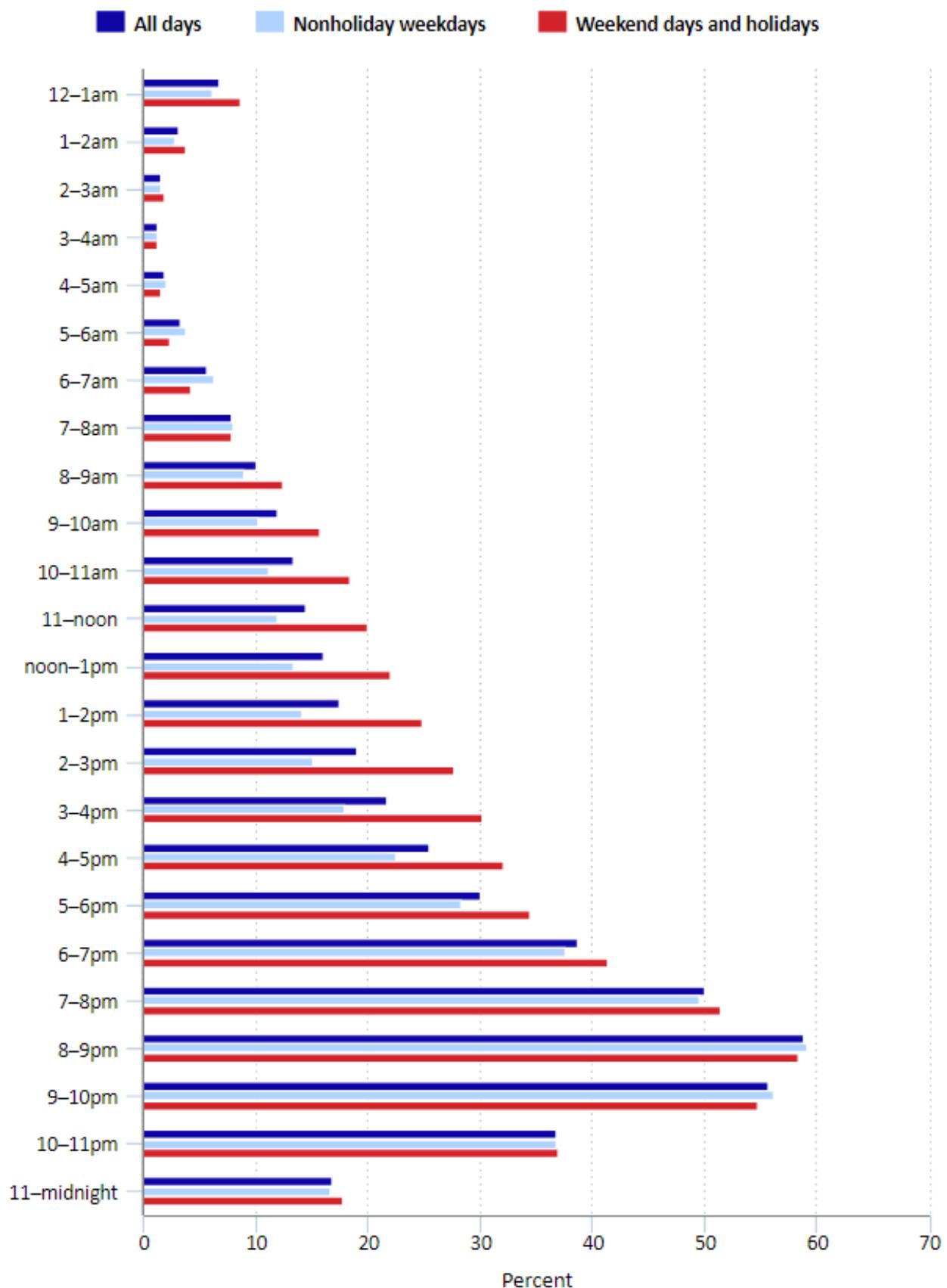
There is little variation in where people watched TV. Nearly all (96.7 percent) of those who watched TV on a given day did so at home. Less than 5 percent spent time watching TV at someone else’s home, and it was rare for people to watch TV as their main activity while at other places.⁷

When do people watch TV?

People spent more time watching TV during the fall and winter months and less during other times of the year. On average, they watched TV just shy of 3 hours per day (2 hours 54 minutes) in October through March of 2013–17, and a quarter of an hour less per day (2 hours 39 minutes) in April through September.

There is a good reason TV shows compete for prime time. Of the nearly 80 percent of the population ages 15 and older who watched TV on a given day, a majority did so each hour between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. (See chart 5.) The highest rate of viewership was reached between 8 p.m. and 9 p.m., when 58.9 percent were tuning in. The timing of TV watching differed somewhat by the day of week. Although evening hours were peak TV viewing times on both weekend days and weekdays, TV viewership was greater on weekend days beginning in the morning during the 8 o’clock hour and continuing until the evening 8 o’clock hour.

Chart 5. Percentage of people who watched TV on a given day, by hour of day on weekdays and weekend days, average for the 2013–17 period



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
 Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



TV and simultaneous activities

This analysis of TV watching focuses on times people watched TV as their main activity, because these are the data available from the ATUS. An activity done simultaneously with one's main activity is referred to as a secondary activity. The ATUS does not collect information about the times people watched TV as a secondary activity. Examples of this include socializing with friends with a game on TV in the background, or getting ready in the morning and watching or listening to one of the networks' morning shows.

ATUS does collect a limited amount of information about secondary activities. The survey regularly collects information about times people were providing secondary childcare—that is, times they had a child under the age of 13 in their care while doing another activity. The data show that, of the people who watched TV on a given day in the 2013–17 period, 16.3 percent of the population, and 56.2 percent of parents of a child under age 18, spent time watching TV while they had a child in their care. This does not necessarily mean parents were watching TV with their child, although in some cases they certainly were. For example, parents may have been caring for a child who was in another room or somewhere else nearby while they were watching TV.

During some years, the survey also provides information about times people were eating as a secondary activity.⁸ The secondary eating data show that 36.8 percent of those who spent time watching TV on a given day in the 2014–16 period spent some time eating while they watched.

Conclusion

The ATUS provides a rich source of information about Americans' TV time, including who, when, where, and how much people watch TV. Watching TV is an activity the majority of people ages 15 and older do each day, and it is the leisure activity they spend the most time doing. Watching TV is an activity people often do at home, with family, and most frequently during evening hours.

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NOTES

¹ For more information about the ATUS, see: <https://www.bls.gov/tus>.

² In the ATUS, leisure and sports refers to social activities, such as communicating with others and attending parties; relaxing; playing games; watching TV; playing or listening to music; reading; writing; and hobbies. The category also includes arts, cultural, and entertainment activities, such as attending events or shows related to nature, the arts, amusement, and performances. Participating in sports, exercise, and recreation, and attending sporting and recreational activities, also are included in leisure and sports.

³ For more information see Rachel Krantz-Kent, “Measuring time spent in unpaid household work: results from the American Time Use Survey,” *Monthly Labor Review*, July 2009, pp. 46-59, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2009/07/art3full.pdf>.

⁴ See Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population, 1976 to 2017 annual averages,” <https://www.bls.gov/lau/staadata.txt>.

⁵ U.S. Energy Information Administration, Residential Energy Consumption Survey; see “Average number of televisions in U.S. homes declining” (U.S. Energy Information Administration, February 28, 2017), <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=30132>.

⁶ The ATUS measures who people were with by asking “Who was in the room with you?” or “Who accompanied you?” A respondent who was alone in one room of a house, and talking to someone in another room, would be recorded in the data as socializing and communicating while alone.

⁷ Similar to the estimates about who people were with while watching TV, estimates about where people watched TV sum to more than 100 percent because some people watched TV at more than one location on the same day.

⁸ Secondary eating data were collected as part of special, USDA-sponsored Eating and Health Module supplements to the ATUS in 2006–08 and 2014–16.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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