

SR Quest

the bimonthly newsletter of Simply Research Services LLC, a research and analytics consulting firm

Breathe!

Unfortunately, income inequality is real. In this issue of SR Quest, we resume our discussion of social mobility that we started in August. It mushroomed from memories of my students' complaints that the topics covered in their non-major courses be relevant to their career aspirations. I have always contended that the topic of social mobility is relevant to every aspect of our lives. And that given this, it and education in general have tremendous value.

*We balance this subject with a discussion of the need to avoid getting bogged down in the things we have to do, like work and school. In *Time to Take a Break*, we address Americans' feelings of vacation deprivation and delve into several explanations for it. We close with several suggestions for alleviating the stresses and strains brought on by not making it a point to get away from it all on occasion – and just breathe.*

Following our own advice, we will be taking a break for the upcoming winter holiday season. Our next issue will be published in early February 2020. Have a safe, joyous and stressless holiday – and we look forward to seeing you next year. Until then – and as always...

Happy reading!

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Principal*

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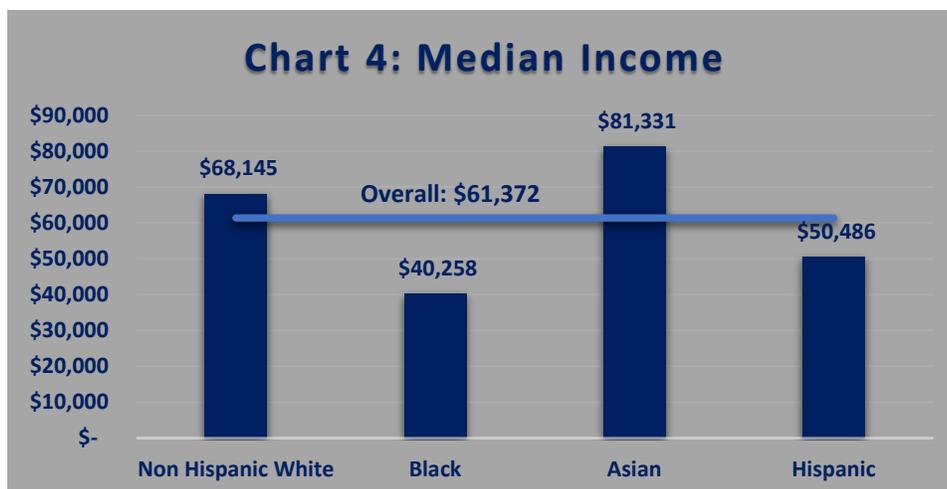
Keeping it Real-levant – Part 2 of 2

Please see part 1 in the August 2019 issue, where we began our discussion on the interconnections of income, education, occupational prestige and the ways they affect social mobility. In the article, we addressed the intersections of education and gender and education and race. In part 2, we focus on income and occupational prestige.

Income and Race/Ethnicity

Chart 4 depicts [median income by race](#). Median is the point at which the group splits in half. In other words, it is the number in the middle of the top half and bottom half of the data's range. This differs from the mean. Mean represents the average in the data but it is often not used because it is pulled up or down by outliers, which are extremely high or low numbers. Typically, outliers are removed in the data before calculating the mean, though not always. And when presenting the mean, it helps to include the standard deviation to convey how much the data varies from it. Although at times, the mean and median are close, the latter is often preferred over the mean because of its representativeness of the data and its simplicity. Mode is the most frequent occurrence in the data but this is most useful when the data's range and volume of data are small. Neither is applicable to examining social indicators like income and educational attainment for the US. The overall median income is represented by light blue bar.

As the groups with the highest educational attainment, Asian and Non Hispanic Whites earn the highest incomes at \$81,000 and \$68,000, respectively. Although more than one third of Blacks complete an Associate's degree or higher, their income lags about \$10,000 behind Hispanics, whose completion rate is just over a quarter. There are at least two factors that help to explain this, unemployment rate and business ownership.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Income and Poverty in the United States: 2017.

The [unemployment rate](#) for Blacks is the highest among the four groups at 6.1% overall, with Hispanic unemployment at about 3.9. For Asians and Non-Hispanic Whites, the rates are 2.2 and 3.1, respectively. In short, Blacks are the least likely group to be employed. And as with women, they are most likely to be paid substantially less than other groups regardless of their qualifications.

The Census Bureau's [Annual Survey of Entrepreneurs](#) revealed that both Blacks and Latinos also own fewer businesses than Whites and Asians. Also, their businesses tend to be smaller and less profitable. According to a report by the [Aspen Institute](#), "most minority business enterprises [are] service and retail establishments, many serving low-income and minority

Keeping it Real-levant (continued)

communities.” They add, though, that some growth has been occurring in the construction and business service sectors since the 1970s.

In culmination, the data suggests that Blacks and Hispanics struggle to provide for their families relative to Asians and Non Hispanic Whites. This is not to say that all Asian and Non Hispanic White families are doing well financially and do not struggle to stay in school. The data strongly indicates that they are less likely to struggle given their college completion rates and incomes relative to Blacks and Hispanics.

Education and Occupational Prestige

Finally, Chart 5 conveys the kinds of jobs we hold at each level of schooling. The jobs are listed from high to low prestige beginning with Management, business and financial. It is clear that the higher the level of education, the greater the occupational prestige of the work. Most people with Bachelor and advanced degrees are found in Management, business and financial jobs as well as professional occupations like medicine and law. Jobs in Service, Transportation and material moving and Other

(includes construction, leisure/hospitality, mining, utilities, agriculture, and public administration) are largely occupied by individuals without college credentials. So as with income, education is a major determinant in occupational prestige. Now that the students had begun to understand how they were and could be situated more broadly in the larger society, it was time to discuss factors other than education that influence social mobility.

Other Factors

Social mobility can be explained in a myriad of ways. Social networks, for example, exert a substantial influence that can manifest not only in a job, but a good, high paying one with growth opportunities. A [2016 LinkedIn report](#) revealed that the number of jobs obtained through referrals varies by the status of the applicant. The survey of 3,000 LinkedIn members found that nearly half of unemployed persons landed their jobs through networking. For employed, the number was 40 percent for those actively searching. About 60 percent of casual and passive job seekers landed jobs through networking. Social media sites like LinkedIn have

Chart 5: Percentage of graduates in the occupation, 25 years and over, 2018

	Management, business, and financial	Professional and related	Service	Sales and related	Office and administrative	Transportation and material moving	Other
High school graduate	10%	6%	23%	10%	13%	12%	26%
Some college, no degree	15%	14%	18%	11%	18%	7%	16%
Associate's degree	15%	25%	17%	9%	14%	5%	15%
Bachelor's degree	28%	36%	8%	11%	10%	3%	5%
Advanced degrees	25%	62%	3%	4%	3%	1%	2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2018 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. Table 2-01.

Keeping it Real-levant (continued)

facilitated the process of connecting with professionals who might be able to help with everything from mentoring to getting an actual offer letter, sometimes with minimal effort. It can be impactful at every level of education and job status.

The prevalence of this can be attributed in part to company incentives. Today, companies offer bonuses to employees for referring someone for a job opening who eventually gets hired. The premise is if the existing employee is a good fit for the company, then it is likely that members of his or her circle will be too. Sounds like inbreeding! An unintended consequence of this is employees who casually attach referrals to resumes of acquaintances, essentially people they barely know, in hopes of getting that bonus. But who can blame them? At \$2,000 or more a pop, some of the bonuses exceed their annual raises!

But social networks differ from referrals. They are not just people with whom we have a connection on LinkedIn; rather they are people we have known for a while and have had a friend or business relationship with over some period of time. Such relationships can result in something more than just referrals, but recommendations and meaningful conversations with hiring managers. Jobs have even been created in this manner. Although this process differs from referrals, the LinkedIn report collapses the two and suggests that they are the same.

Nonetheless, I begrudge both practices. First, there is something unseemly about snuggling up to people to fulfill an agenda. Second, they deny opportunities to others who might be a perfect fit for the role. Instead these candidates are left to submit their qualifications through company bots, where the chances of their resume being seen by a human being, let alone getting invited in for an interview, are minuscule. But at least with social networks, the submission of a candidate's credentials for a role is based on something substantive and real, unlike casual referrals.

Social networks are akin to the preferential treatment afforded to students in the admissions processes of many colleges and universities, and even some private high schools. Donations from affluent families of current and former students often open doors for children to be admitted to the schools, regardless of their grades, test scores, or any indication that they are able and/or willing to do the work. This is also the case with legacy admissions. By virtue of having a parent or sibling as an alum, students are typically admitted to the schools regardless of their ability or inability to do the work required. As with the job market, these standard practices have historically blocked opportunities for poor and minority students. Affirmative Action existed in large part to help these groups overcome the impediments created by this practice.

Back in the day, people were reluctant to divulge that they landed a job through connections. Doing so exposed the hiring process as impure - not based on merit. Our system of meritocracy insinuates that we earn opportunities and climb the ladder by fairly competing, doing a good job and winning out. Admitting that we got a job through connections vaporizes this notion along with the intrinsic pride that comes with the idea of achievement in a culture that values merit. Wink, wink. So, those who benefited said nothing - or at least avoided bragging about it. Times have changed. Today, this practice is the norm.

Conclusion

By the end of the course, my students appreciated and some even articulated that their perspective had been broadened by the material. They felt more informed about gender, race, income, and educational inequalities and how these affected their life chances. It gave them something to think about as they moved forward in their lives. Glee!!! This introspection is what all educators endeavor to stir in their students.

Keeping it Real-levant (continued)

As for social mobility, Nirvana is having a little bit of luck sprinkled in with a college degree and connections to a strong social network or at least someone who will give you a referral. But the link between education and social mobility has proven reliable and compelling. Education is our best shot at experiencing social mobility. Toward this end, the questions become:

What can be done to promote education as the best option for improving lives?

What can be done to provide affordable, high quality educational opportunities to people who aspire to take this path?

What can be done to support families financially and provide resources for language assimilation to increase a student's chances of success?

Education sets us up to realize our aspirations. Let's explore these questions with the goal of devising policies that address the crux of the problems – unequal access to educational and job opportunities. Let's keep it real!



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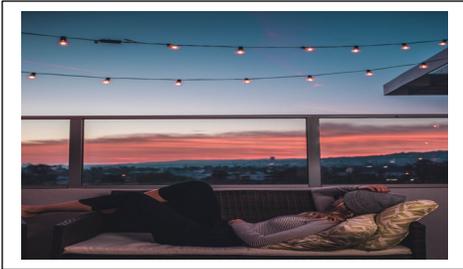


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Most Europeans receive at least 30 vacation days per year ([Expedia 2016 vacation study](#)).

to Take a Break

Winter is upon us, but it doesn't mean we do not have happy times ahead. Yes, for many of us, the cold season means trading our sunny skies for overcast ones for a few months. And shedding our sandals and slippers for real shoes. And our shorts and sun dresses for pants and long sleeves. And our windbreakers for heavy coats and sweaters. And baseball caps for knits ones. And...yeah – I guess winter *can* be a drag. We do have options though. Vacationing is not only for the warm weather months. And according to much of the research, we need to vacation because we are stressed due to the many demands for our time and attention.

A [1997 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(BLS\) report](#) showed the average hours worked per week for non-agricultural wage and salary workers at 39.2 hours in 1995. In its 2018 [American Time Use Survey \(ATUS\)](#), the BLS found that employed persons now work 45 and a half hours per week on average. Ironically, technology seems to have contributed to longer rather than shorter work hours since the advent of microcomputing in the 1990s. Today, many white-collar workers have laptops that allow them to sign onto their virtual private networks to do work or hop onto a WebEx when they are not physically at the office. They can check email on their cellphones and easily dial into conference calls while on the commuter train, at the airport, in the coffee shop, during work-outs at the gym, and even at the kids' baseball games. A [Pew Research Center](#) survey found that "35 percent of employed online adults say the internet, email and cell phones have increased the amount of time they spend working." When unpaid labor is considered, our time and attention is demanded even more so as the responsibilities of household and family begin tugging at our shirt-tails.

Psychologists and laypersons alike agree that leisure, or the occasional escape from the everyday stresses of work and home, is needed to maintain physical and psychological health. To explore the link between leisure time and happiness, [Nawijn and his colleagues](#) conducted a study of 1,532 vacationers. They found that the vacationers were happiest when they were planning their getaway and when they reported experiencing a "high level of relaxation." The latter occurred during their travel and while at their travel destination. This suggests that not only is the vacation itself a way to de-stress, but the act of just planning the vacation creates a level of anticipation that in and of itself is relaxing and de-stressing.

Many companies make efforts to emphasize work-life balance in their benefits portfolios. But recent studies show that Americans seem to dismiss the benefits of vacation as evidenced by the fact that they do not take much time off from work. In their 2016 Harvard Business Review (HBR) [article on declining vacation](#), Achor and Gielan found that Americans took 20.3 days of vacation in 2000 but only 16.2 days in 2015. "[So over a 15 year period], Americans lost nearly a week of vacation," they wrote.

Fortunately, things have improved slightly since then. The [2018 US Travel Association's study](#) found that Americans use an average of 17.4 vacation days and that this has been an upward trend since the low point in 2015. Still, that same study found that Americans left 768 million vacation days on the table in 2018 – up 9 percent from the previous year.

Time to Take a Break (continued)

Given that Americans do not exhaust their annual vacation allotments, it is not surprising that [Expedia's 2018 Vacation Deprivation Study](#) found that 59% of Americans reported feeling "somewhat vacation-deprived." This is up from 53% in 2015. Some of the factors that might help explain Americans' vacation deprivation are: the number of paid time off days granted by their jobs, the cost of vacation travel, and self-imposed constraints.

Paid Time Off (PTO)

The [BLS](#) reports that about 75 percent of civilian and private sector employees have access to PTO, benefits which typically increase as tenure milestones are reached on the job. According to the report, US employees are granted 10 to 15 vacation days per year on average. But when illness hits or family commitments such as parent-teacher conferences, doctor's appointments, and children's extracurricular activities, etcetera occur, men and especially women are forced to use their PTO sporadically. This makes it difficult for parents to save their PTO for an extended vacation.

In response to this, some employers have recently instituted unlimited PTO, which in theory should make taking extended excursions a possibility for employees. Thus far, the research has found no substantial change in the rate at which Americans use their PTO but more time is likely needed for this new policy to manifest in the data and the policy perhaps needs to become more widespread.

For now, many parents with small children are forced to preserve their PTO days for emergencies and children's activities. This combined with the cost of vacations make it difficult for parents to plan their PTO in ways that will result in a truly relaxing time away from the office.

The Cost of a Break

Another explanation for vacation deprivation is affordable travel for families. While there are a lot of variables, [Money We Have estimates](#) the cost of a vacation to Disneyworld for a family of four at just over \$5,700. Ouch!

The age range of today's Generation Xers is about 39 to 54 and [Pew Research](#) estimates their median household income at \$85,800. These demographics suggests that while they are fairly well settled into their jobs, most Generation Xers have families and are in the midst of raising children and/or saving for their college education. Even when driving instead of flying for vacation, these families are faced with the costs of hotel, car rental, and admission to venues for each family member. So, with children to support and the challenges to save, Generation Xers are faced with significant financial pressures in this pivotal stage of their lives, making vacation travel a rare indulgence.

Ranging from age 23 to 38, Millennials are in the nascent to mid stages of their careers. According to [Pew Research](#), about 17 million Millennial women are moms out of an estimated total of 183 million Millennials. Extrapolating to include dads, we can estimate that about 40 percent of Millennials are parents. The [median household income](#) for this group is estimated at just over \$69,000. Millennial parents are fewer in number and make less than Generation Xers given their present life and career stages. But both groups are faced with the same dilemma – the affordability of vacation travel for their families.

Time to Take a Break (continued)

Travel is not the only means of escape though. Just an extended break from work filled with relaxing and enjoyable activities alone or with family and significant others could suffice for alleviating the stresses of work. The time can be filled with a concert or a play followed by a quiet dinner, a sporting event, or indulgence in a favorite pastime or hobby such as skiing, volleyball, yoga, or fixing up a vintage car. Each of these can cost much less than travel for a vacation. Not all are cheap though.

Statista found that the average cost of a [concert ticket in 2018 was \\$94.31](#), a 20 percent increase from seven years prior. In their 2017 telephone research of 1,003 adults, [creditcards.com](#) found that the cost of taking a family of four to a NFL game was just over \$502, a 232 percent increase over 1991. A NBA game: \$339.02, a 139 percent increase over 1991. And a MLB game \$219.53, a 176 percent increase over 1991. All are a lot cheaper than travel, but still – ouch! Also concerning here is that the costs are continually rising, increasing the strain on the pocketbook and making it difficult still for families to even enjoy the simple indulgences close to home.

Self-Imposed Constraint

The decision to take a vacation is also an individual one. To what degree does a worker choose not to take his or her vacation? In other words, to what degree is vacation deprivation self-imposed? It might help to consider the norms of other cultures as a way of appreciating the peculiarities of our own in this regard.

[Expedia's 2013 vacation deprivation study](#) noted that "French adults vacation three times as much as Americans," taking all 30 vacation days available to them. Yet, 90% of French adults indicated they still feel vacation deprived. The sentiments of the French, [which represent those of many Europeans including Germans, Spaniards, Fins, and Italians](#), underscore the distinct cultural differences between Americans and many Europeans in how vacation is viewed as a right versus a privilege. The same can be said for Brazilians and Emaratis, [according to the 2016 study](#). They too take their full complement of 30 vacation days. In stark contrast though, Americans worked rather than vacationed.

The [US Travel Association's study](#) of 5,600 individuals revealed that American workers do not exhaust their PTO each year. The main explanations workers gave for this were: fear that work would accumulate while they were away and that no one else could assume their responsibilities in their absence. These explanations along with the finding that Europeans, Brazilians and Emaratis exhaust their vacation allotment each year while Americans do not, suggests in part that many people of other cultures feel much more secure in their jobs than do Americans.

American workers' belief that their jobs cannot do without them for a couple of weeks is reflective of cultural norms. These norms reward individual accomplishments and encourage self-reliance over sharing and teamwork. It is no wonder then that we resist sharing our work and do not trust coworkers to perform certain tasks in our absence. We compete with them for individual accolades in the form of raises, promotions, prestigious projects, our own office, and yes, even to rub elbows with the brass at lunch.

Here is the quandary though - competition is good. It motivates us to be better at what we do. It spurs innovation, provides us with quality choices in the market, and creates opportunities and the potential for great rewards. On the other hand, we do, at times, gain these rewards to our detriment and to the detriment of our colleagues. Depriving ourselves of vacation time is only one example of this. Refusing to share information with coworkers is yet another. The consequences of these, though, are stress and its ill effects.

Time to Take a Break (continued)

The Dangers of Stress

The [National Institutes of Health \(NIH\)](#) writes extensively about stress and its acute and chronic effects. They first point out that not all stress is bad. The stress that occurs during work-outs or that accompanies events like weddings, births and buying a new home – are euphoric, motivating and short-lived. When these types of stresses pass, the body typically returns to its normal functioning. Chronic stress, according to the NIH, wears down the body and causes our immune, digestive, and reproductive systems to stop functioning normally. Some people even experience high rates of sleeplessness and headaches and become susceptible to frequent viral infections. The NIH report adds that routine stress, such as that stemming from the everyday pressures and strains of work, is the most dangerous because it is “constant” and “the body gets no clear signal to return to normal functioning.” Over time, this can lead to “serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other illnesses, as well as mental disorders like depression or anxiety.”

Conclusion

Given the dangers of stress, how can Americans be encouraged to take extended breaks from work each year? Since they report feeling vacation-deprived, they are apparently experiencing some level of stress. While recent research shows that Americans do not vacation because they would rather work, the culmination of the findings above highlight this as a constrained choice – limited PTO, family obligations, tight budgets, and culture. Understanding this though does not extinguish the reality that stress wears on physical and psychological health and that an outlet is needed to alleviate it. So, below we present several ideas for companies to encourage their employees to take extended time away from the office:

1. Openly and explicitly encourage PTO breaks in group and one-on-one meetings. This way each employee comes to appreciate that taking extended PTO days is fully supported and sanctioned by management and that it is embedded in the culture of the company. Further, management can reinforce this message by taking time off themselves.
2. In addition to raises and cash bonuses, the company can award vouchers to employees for substantial discounts to events and venues, and/or vouchers for deep travel discounts.
3. When an employee’s work hours have accumulated to some high point over a set period, the company can require the employee to take PTO as a way to prevent over-stress.
4. The company can require employees to take a short PTO every 3 months and a long one every six months to prevent over-stress.

Not all companies can afford to take these measures but all can use them as a starting point to think about how to encourage their employees to prioritize their health over work.

One final thought on self-imposed constraints. While our reasons for not taking time off work might be legitimate at times, deep down, we like being thought of as the go-to person and irreplaceable. Truthfully, the office will do fine without us for a week or two if we briefed our coworkers and prepared sufficiently detailed notes before our departure. We have a choice. We just choose to work – and we often stay tethered to work even when we take that time off. Given its potentially detrimental effects on our physical and psychological health, we should probably ponder the wisdom of foregoing that extended time off.

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