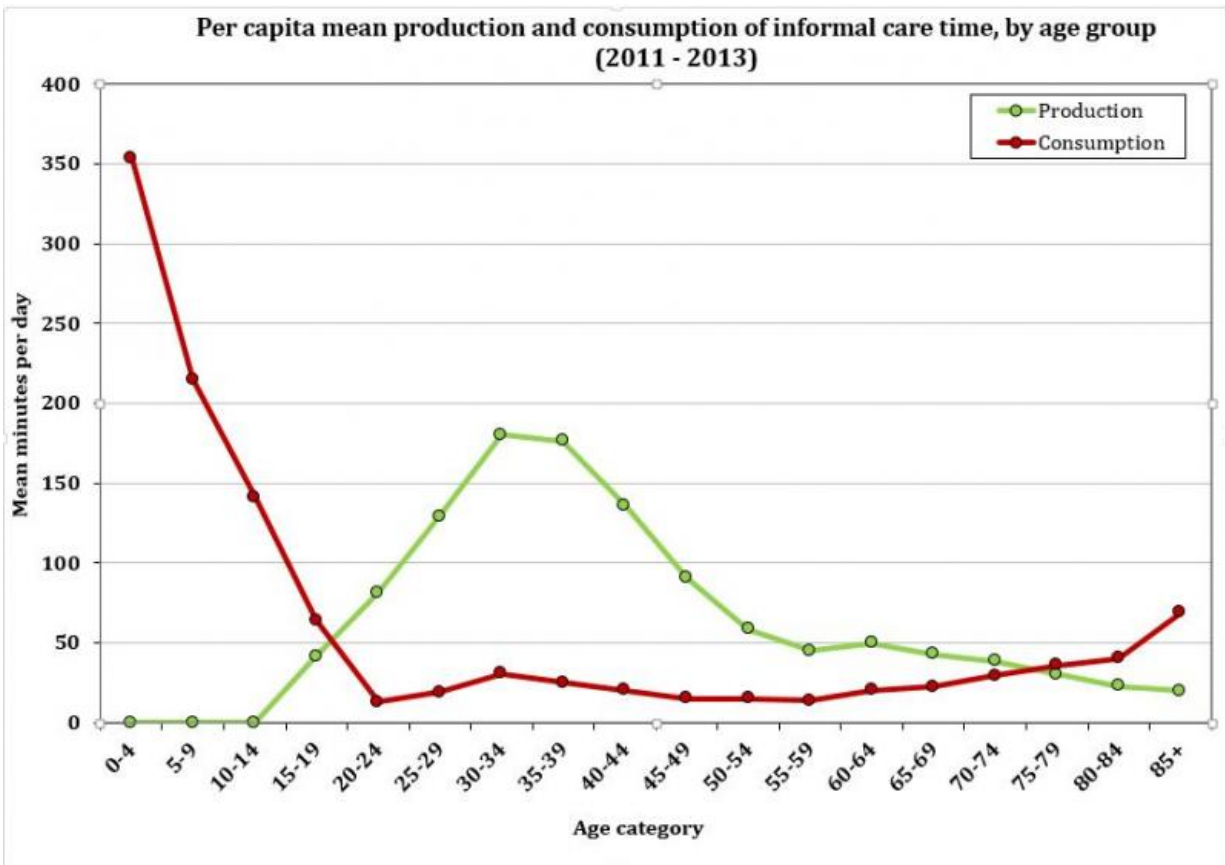


# Study reveals surprising truths about caregivers

June 17 2015, by Deborah Bach



Mean per capita production and consumption of unpaid care time in hours per day. Credit: Emilio Zagheni

Caregiving is a part of daily life for millions of Americans, particularly

the so-called sandwich generation balancing the needs of aging parents with looking after their own children.

A new study looks at just who is doing that caregiving, and who they're caring for—and some of the findings are surprising.

Published online in *Population and Development Review* on June 16, the research is believed to be the first to break down unpaid caregiving in the United States by age and gender of caregivers and those they care for, in their own homes or elsewhere.

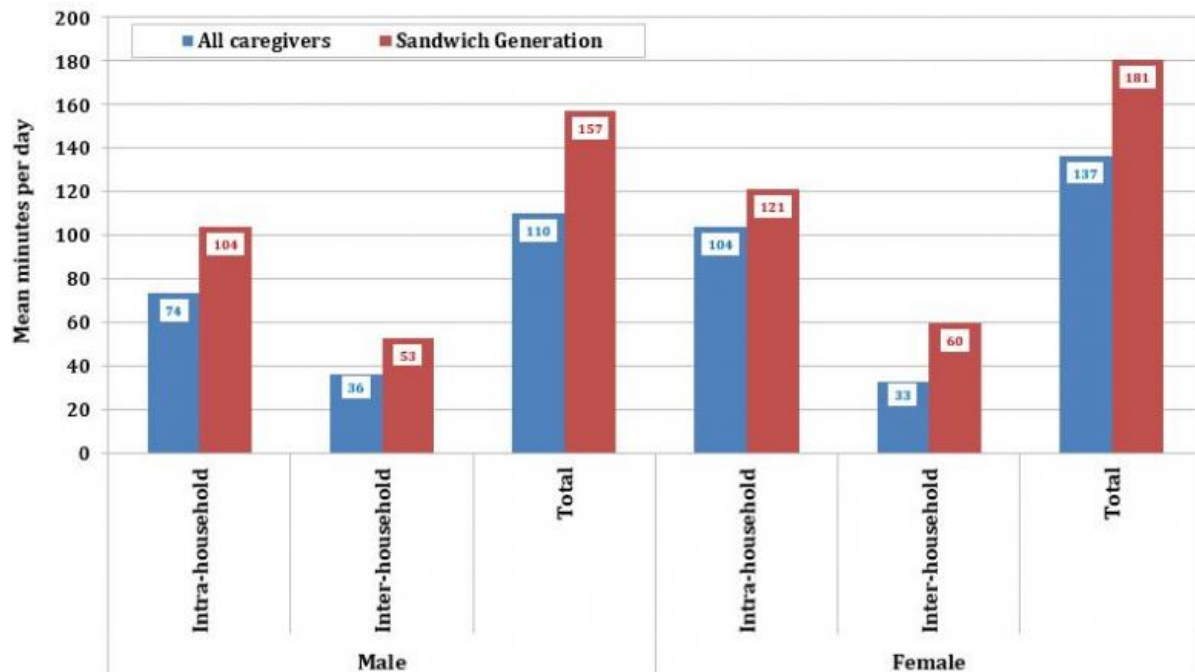
The study found that almost one-third of the U.S. population are informal caregivers and collectively provide about 1.2 billion hours of unpaid work weekly, the equivalent of about 30.5 million full-time care aides. But the sandwich generation comprises just 3 percent of the population, much less than researchers anticipated.

The researchers were also surprised to find that [elderly people](#) were frequently being cared for by spouses, not their adult [children](#). About 20 percent of caregiving time spent on people 80 years or older comes from people of the same age, they found.

"The extent to which spousal care is prevalent at old ages, 70 and 80 years old, was surprising to us," said lead author Emilio Zagheni, a UW assistant professor of sociology.

"We expected to see more caregiving by [adult children](#) of their parents."

Older men provided slightly more spousal care than women, Zagheni said, which might be explained by men dying earlier, possibly before they need much care, and women living longer but being in poor health at older ages.



Mean time commitment in minutes per day of caregivers and sandwich generation caregivers. Credit: Emilio Zagheni

And much less caregiving time was spent on elderly people compared with [young children](#). Across the various age groups, elderly people received caregiving typically no more than 1.5 hours daily, on average, compared with six hours for young children.

The unexpectedly small number of sandwich generation caregivers, Zagheni said, could reflect the fact that while Americans are living longer, people are also having children later, so the two trends might counterbalance each other.

"That could be one reason," he said. "Or it could be that health overall is

improving, so people at older ages don't need as much help."

Overall, women continue to shoulder the bulk of the caregiving burden in most situations. They provide 137 minutes of unpaid caregiving a day on average, compared with men's 110 minutes. Among the sandwich generation, the numbers increase to 181 and 157, respectively.

To develop their analyses, Zagheni and co-author Denys Dukhovnov, a research associate at CUNY Institute for Demographic Research in New York, looked at three years of data from the American Time Use Survey, which asks respondents how much time they spent the previous day on various activities.

Collected in 2011 through 2013, the data reflects responses from around 36,000 Americans. Zagheni and Dukhovnov broke down responses into five-year age groups for caregivers and recipients, then developed matrices showing who gave and received care in specific age ranges.

While other studies have focused on caregiving within the home or between specific groups, such as middle-aged parents and young children, most have not looked at caregiving by subgroups of people, or a range of caregiving scenarios both inside and outside the home—for example, babysitting a friend's children or taking a niece or nephew out on weekends.

The study revealed some notable patterns. Childcare occupies a sizable chunk of time for caregivers of various ages, but particularly women in their 30s, and to a lesser degree, in their late 50s and older, underscoring the importance of parenting and grandparenting. And while grandmothers spend considerable time with grandchildren from birth to age 4, grandfathers tend to steer clear of newborns and spend time with grandchildren aged 5 to 14.

Men aged 60 to 79 spend less than one-third of the time caring for children from birth to age 4 than women in the same age group do, but spend slightly more time with children age 5 to 14. While women spend only slightly more time with girls than boys, men spend three times the amount of time with boys as with girls.

The study estimates the value of unpaid care nationwide at \$691 billion in 2012, roughly 4.3 percent of the country's GDP. That figure could rise to \$838.8 billion by 2050, the researchers predict, but if caregiving continues at current levels, another 1.3 million more care workers could be needed.

That increased demand, Dukhovnov said, could be partially addressed through more flexible workplace policies and tax breaks or other incentives that would better allow people to provide informal caregiving and continue working.

"Right now, many people must make a choice between staying home to look after parents or children or working," he said. "If people can work more, that means they're contributing to the overall economy, and helping to pay for social supports and other care services."

The U.S., Zagheni said, is currently in a "golden [age](#)" of caregiving. Gaps between those who need care and those who are available to provide it are smaller than in the 1950s and '60s, when high birth rates put a squeeze on caregiver availability, and what we will see in coming years, when the numbers of elderly Americans are expected to increase dramatically.

"At least from a demographic perspective, there are enough people in the productive [age groups](#) to distribute the work to take care of those who need it, either children or the elderly," he said. "That's not going to last."

**More information:** *Population and Development Review*,  
[onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... 57.2015.00044.x/epdf](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1522-0591.12157)

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