

# Student Reports of Time Spent on Homework: Results from 20 Years Of National Samples

By Peter Freedman-Doan and Margaret Libsch

**As part of the Monitoring the Future annual survey, researchers from the University of Michigan have been asking representative national samples of high school seniors about the number of hours they spend on homework each week. Here are the results for the past 20 years, from 1976 to 1995.**

**T**he Monitoring the Future research team found that high school seniors in the class of 1995 spent about the same amount of time doing homework as seniors in the class of 1976. This picture of stability might come as welcome news, but further analysis indicates the similarity found among the entire sample from year to year obscures declines in the amount of time spent on homework among two significant subgroups: college bound and non-college bound seniors.

Each year seniors from approximately 150 randomly sampled public and private high schools were asked to report the number of hours they spent doing homework each week, both in school and out of school.<sup>1</sup> The research team found a remarkable degree of continuity over the course of those years.

As Figure 1 shows, roughly two-thirds of seniors reported they spent 1-9 hours per week on homework. In 1976, 67 percent of the seniors

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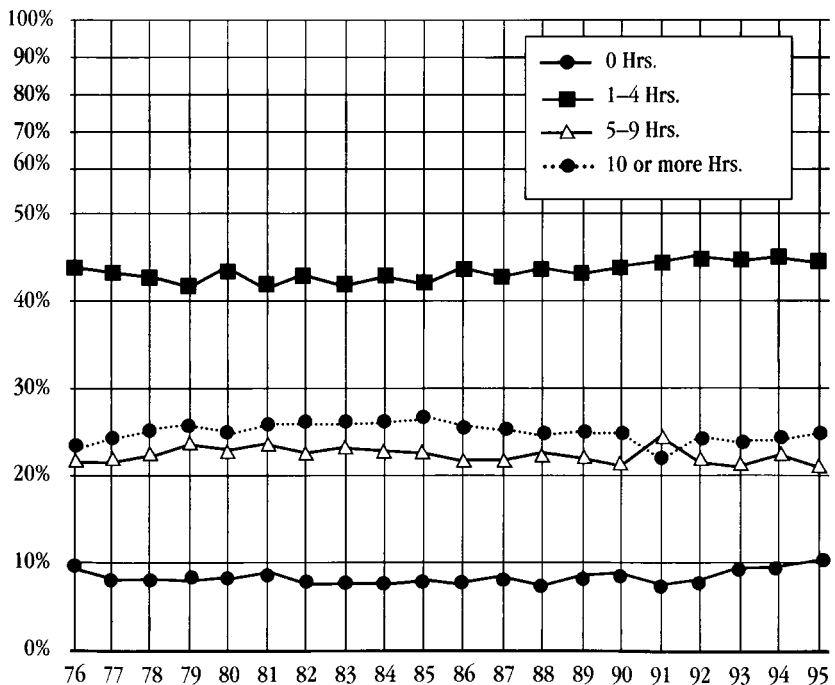
1. About 16,000 seniors participate in the survey each year. The Monitoring the Future survey has six forms. The item about homework appears on one form. Thus, each year, a nationally representative sample of approximately 2,000 seniors are asked: About how many hours do you spend in an average week on all your homework including both in school and out of school? Seniors are asked to respond using the following scale: 0 hours, 1-4 hours, 5-9 hours, 10-14 hours, 15-19 hours, 20-24 hours, and more than 25 hours. We collapsed the scale in Figure 1 for ease of presentation. We calculated mean hours by using the center point for each interval on the scale and by using 27 hours as the center point for the last interval of the scale.

reported spending 1–9 hours per week, while in 1995, 66 percent of the seniors spent that amount of time doing homework. The proportion of seniors who reported spending 10 or more hours per week on homework was 23 percent in 1976 and 24 percent in 1995. In 1976, 10 percent of the seniors reported they spent no time doing homework and in 1995 that figure remained at 10 percent.

Expressed as a measurement of central tendency, the mean number of hours per week that seniors in 1976 spent on homework was 6.5, or slightly more than one hour and 15 minutes per school day. By 1995, the mean had risen to 6.8 hours, or about an hour and 20 minutes per school day. Expressed in either fashion, the aggregate picture that emerges from the 20 years of data collection is one of seniors spending roughly the same amounts of time with their homework year after year.

The picture of stability in the amount of time that seniors report they spent on homework during the last 20 years takes on a slightly different slant, however, when the seniors' responses are examined by whether or not they plan to attend college.

**Figure 1**  
**Trends in Seniors' Reports of Hours per Week Spent on Homework, Either in School or At Home**



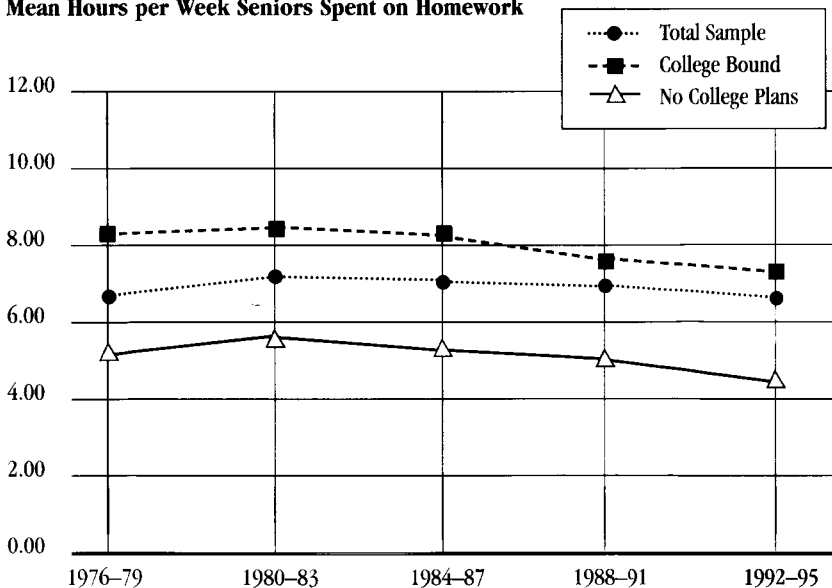
Changes in U.S. society and our economy during the last 30 years or so have changed the status of the high school diploma. A high school diploma once sufficed to prepare a student for upward mobility; today the high school diploma is more like an intermediate step than an endpoint in the educational journey. A college degree has replaced the high school diploma as the ticket to success in our society and economy. High school students have internalized those realities. In 1976, 50 percent of seniors reported they planned to graduate from a four-year college. By 1995, that proportion had risen steadily to 76 percent.

As one might expect, seniors with plans to graduate from a four-year college reported they spent more time doing homework than seniors who did not have such plans. As Figure 2 shows, the mean number of hours per week spent on homework during the years 1976–79 was 8.1 for the college bound and 5.3 for the non-college bound, a difference of 2.8 hours per week.<sup>2</sup> The difference in mean hours per week spent on homework between the college bound and the non-college bound remained steady over the years under review.

Given the combination of the difference in homework behavior between the college bound and the non-college bound and the increase in

**FIGURE 2**

**Mean Hours per Week Seniors Spent on Homework**



2. In Figure 2 we present the data grouped by three-year averages, except for the last time period where we group four years together. There are differences from year to year, but those differences are small enough that grouping them does not distort the trends.

the proportion of college-bound seniors, we might have expected a rather healthy increase in the overall mean hours per week devoted to homework. Note, however, that college-bound seniors in 1991–95 spent an average of 7.5 hours per week on homework while their counterparts in 1976–78 spent an average of 8.1 hours per week on homework, a decline of more than one-half hour per week. Thus, the decline in mean hours spent on homework among the college bound offset the increase in the proportion of college-bound seniors. These two trends combine to yield stability in the overall picture of hours per week spent on homework.

At a time when declines in many aspects of the educational system regularly make news, finding 20 years of stability in time spent on homework among seniors is a bit of good news. Even the declines in time spent on homework that we did discover were modest, about one-half hour per week for both the college bound and the non-college bound. Nevertheless, among the college bound even modest declines are troubling. College preparation would seem to imply a need for the consistent discipline of homework. A decline in that discipline, even a modest one, is worthy of attention. ~B

### Service Learning Statistics

- In the 1994-95 school year, almost 630,000 students participated in service learning.
- Among the states with the most active service learning programs, California, Maryland, Iowa, and Oklahoma have the largest. Each of these states counted more than 50,000 students involved in school-based service programs last year.
- According to UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute survey of 3,400 college students at 41 Learn and Serve locations, students who participated exhibited higher levels of civic responsibility, leadership abilities, self-confidence, and academic achievement.
- The following districts already have mandatory service requirements:  
Bethlehem, Pa.; Atlanta, Chatham County, and Canaw County, Ga.; Mason County, West Va.; Chapel Hill-Carrboro and Raleigh, N. Car.; Bloomfield Hills, Mich.; Rye High School and Westchester County, N.Y.; Detroit (Mich.) Public Schools; the District of Columbia; Dade County, Fla.; San Antonio and Corpus Christi, Tex.; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Jefferson Parish, La.

*(Statistics from Learn and Serve America)*