



# CultureWork

A Periodic Broadside \*  
—  
for Arts and Culture Workers

July, 1999. Vol. 3, No. 3.

Institute for Community Arts Studies  
Arts & Administration Program, University of Oregon

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**Economic and Leisure Factors Impacting  
Participation  
in the Arts by Middle Aged Adults**

Gaylene Carpenter, Ed.D.

## Introduction

It is widely accepted that participation in the arts is a popular leisure pursuit for adults. Hundreds of thousands of adults annually attend a variety of performance arts presentations, visit museums and galleries, and spend time at arts fairs and festivals. Their participation is partly motivated by their available discretionary time, existing art opportunities, and the personal and social benefits they know they will receive through experiencing the arts. Such behavioral patterns not only have significant economic impact to arts organizations, but to the community in general. The purpose of this paper is to explore economic issues seen as having relevance in the leisure choices made by adults during their middle years. Knowing how leisure is viewed or experienced is useful information for arts managers engaged in identifying potential market segments of the adult population. Of particular interest in this paper is how leisure is experienced within the context of economic factors associated with middle aged individuals, as well as how those individuals might influence economic change in America.

In examining economic and leisure factors influencing arts participation for this population, it is important to mention that it is done within a socio-historical perspective. For the purposes of this paper, that socio-historical perspective includes adults who make up the large post World War II era in America. Historians and developmental psychologists have produced volumes of information on this socio-historical group and will no doubt continue their interest in them. This paper will limit itself to considering ways these middle aged adults potentially impact American economics given this population's demographic trends, their availability of discretionary money, and their patterns associated with adult work. This discussion will be followed by findings related to leisure and economic implications as evidenced in the lives of middle aged adults.

## Demographic Trends

The middle age population in America represents a vast number of persons between the ages 30 to 60. They make up some 38% of the total population according to USA census information. Their numbers are 95,196,632 of the total US population of 248,709,873. Within in this group are those middle aged adults called "baby boomers," the largest segment of the adult population in America. Approximately 84 million, born between 1946 and 1964, make this the biggest population bulge to date in American society.

True to the previous impacts that this segment of the population has exerted, moving through middle age to older adulthood will likely carry with it the same level



Clown, parade, Kentville, Nova Scotia, May 1994.

of attention that these post war "babies" have had since birth. We can expect that their influence will continue to be noticeable in most aspects of American life, including upon its economic climate. In fact, those in the "baby boomer" generation are expected to live longer, be better educated, be healthier, better off financially, get more dollars from their parents, own more stocks and bonds, and not be a burden on the economy (Business Week, 1994) than previous generations. As such, they remain an important factor contributing to the economic well-being of society.

Some see "doomsday scenarios" which portend a rapidly escalating economic burden on members of the labor force brought on by aging societies struggling to meet the income-maintenance and health-care needs (Schulz, Borowski, & Crown, 1990). The concern centers around the economic impact that will result as this huge number of individuals grow older and need more services.

However, this concern is of less importance at the turn of the new Millennium because the vast numbers of middle aged adults who are contributing to the economic stability of the country are relatively free from illnesses or physical impairments which often inflict persons who are older. But because their numbers alone make them the most economically powerful generation affecting every industry (Yesawich, Pepperdine, & Brown/Yankelovich Partners, 1998), their income and health issues could be factors in the future.

## Discretionary Money

As a subset of the larger American adult population, those in middle age are better off financially than were their parents. Figures show that their real median household income and wealth is higher than their parents' at comparable ages (Business Week, 1994). They are more likely than their parents to have employer-based pensions (Lewis, 1994), especially those in the age range of 45 to 60 (Stepanek, 1994). Many are dual income families with 25% earning more than \$75,000 per year (Yesawich, Pepperdine, & Brown/Yankelovich Partners, 1998).

Their sheer numbers and the corresponding discretionary money have American retailers marketing to this segment of the population more vigorously than ever before. Often, product designs are altered to more appropriately meet the needs of diminishing eyesight, taste, hearing, and dexterity (Young, 1994). Merchandisers are mass-marketing everything from clothing and parking accommodations, to hair coloring and vacation homes based upon knowledge gained in surveys undertaken to identify the purchasing interests of this segment of the American population.

Americans spend billions of dollars each year on non-discretionary purchases such as food, housing, and other essential products and services. Discretionary spending has also been in the billions of dollars annually for years. This trend is reflected in leisure product expenditures, in purchasing of public and private or commercial leisure experiences, and in travel to destination points of interest. And the trend is expected to continue.

## Patterns of Work

Though the American economy has been expanding and unemployment has been going down, not all adults have the full time work that they desire. This has been partly initiated by employers and partly by those in the work force. Organizational restructuring has eliminated thousands of full time positions, and among the hardest hit for job losses as been persons in middle age. Often, the newer jobs that are taken tend to offer lower wages, benefits, and security (Lawrence, 1994).

There are also more instances of adults retiring earlier than previous generations. Many retire in their 50's rather than 60's. Positive or negative reactions to employment changes at mid-life will vary by whether the change was self-initiated or employer-initiated. Securing seasonal or part time employment opportunities has been of more interest to those middle aged adults who purposefully decided to downsize their lifestyles and belongings. When traditional work patterns change in these ways, leisure choices are impacted.

Quantitative measures such as the large number of middle aged adults, leisure spending in the billions of dollars, and non-traditional work patterns, contribute to a better understanding mid-life. However, besides looking at these trends, what about individual life stories? If we examine leisure within the context of a person's life, rather than in comparison to quantifiable factors, what patterns might be identified? The next portion of this paper will take a closer look at associations linking economics with leisure values and behaviors of middle aged adults.

## A Study of Leisure During Adulthood

For several years, researchers at the University of Oregon have been investigating change and continuity with respect to leisure across the life span with particular interest during middle age (Carpenter, 1997; Carpenter, 1994; Carpenter 1992). Beginning in 1987, 84 middle aged adults agreed to participate in longitudinal study (*A Study of Leisure During Adulthood*). The primary approach for data collection was in the form of a yearly self-report questionnaire completed by the same study participants each year for ten years. Variables associated with participants' leisure (e.g.s leisure attitudes, leisure values, perceived freedom in leisure) and life perceptions (e.g.s. life structure, life events, wants out of life) were tracked over time.

Beginning in 1994, extensive interviews were conducted. The findings from 34 study participants were reviewed for this paper. Adding this qualitative component to the database, enabled researchers to examine a person's life in more depth. While the intent of this study was not specifically centered on economics and leisure, there are some interesting findings that have economic implications. Using interview data as the basis of information, a number of things can be mentioned. For the purposes of discussion, emergent themes suggesting economically based leisure contexts will be identified.

## Leisure and Economics Implications During Middle Age

As a group, study participants earned middle to upper range incomes and therefore, are not representative of the American population for all persons in middle age when all income levels are considered. In addition, study participants were largely of European descent and thus, did not represent the multi-cultural pattern of American society. However, study participants did represent a segment of the middle age population that is likely to have an effect on leisure economics and change. Themes which were identified from the interviews are presented as contexts for understanding leisure and economics during middle adulthood.

**Leisure Astuteness.** When the data were examined case by case, it became noticeable that individuals tended to be somewhat astute regarding the role of leisure in their lives. Middle aged individuals in America had the good fortune to grow up in a country whose organized park and recreation system was evolving and growing with great strides during their childhood and youth. In addition, the public schools offered a number and variety of classes specifically related to arts education and development. As adults, those in middle adulthood continue to have choices from amongst many, many public institutions and private and commercial enterprises. They may well be the most well educated yet in terms of recreation, arts, and leisure options when compared any other socio-historic age group before

them. We can expect that they use this knowledge and propensity for leisure when making choices about everything from how to spend their time, to how to spend their money.

**Self-Determination in Leisure.** The data also suggested that individuals in the study group were

particularly adept at directing their lives during times of recreation and leisure. The self-directedness of adults, a tendency which has been long noted by adult developmental theorists as an adult characteristic (Knox, 1977), might partly explain this factor, as might their leisure astuteness. This tendency would suggest that choices made for spending leisure time or money would be done so thoughtfully and in a discriminating fashion by an adult experienced in making such life decisions. The middle aged adults in the study did not report boredom or frustration with their leisure during the interviews. Rather, they seemed to know what they wanted do for leisure, in doing so, reinforced the choice and freedom inherent in the leisure experience (Iso-Ahola, 1980, Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). They were, however, frustrated with the lack of time they had available for pursuing leisure. Most all longed for more free time for leisure than they presently had; usually from one-third to one-half more time per week for leisure. In their leisure, individuals reported it provided them an opportunity for gaining control over their lives, and suggested that kind of control was often missing in other aspects of their lives (i.e. work, relationships).

**Leisure As Spirituality.** There appeared to be a subtle trend amongst women in particular, to seek relevant spiritual or religious connections through leisure. One's mid-life leisure was often viewed as somewhat of a leisure-quest, of sorts, which provided enormous portions of freedom. Leisure was described as a conduit for experiencing a sense of meaning in one's life in relationship to a 'higher order'. There was some indication that exploring Eastern religions and Native American beliefs were leisure pursuits in which middle aged adults found great meaning and solace. It, more than exercise and fitness activities, was viewed as a source of well-being. In addition, when this notion of leisure-quest was combined with other pre-selected portions of an individual's life which were less free, it provided a kind of emotional satisfaction which complimented other mid-life roles.

**Defining Leisure.** Verbal descriptors of leisure did not always include leisure in relationship to activity or work. Typically, the indication was that leisure was more apt to be viewed in the context of time (free to and free from) and once in that context, leisure was experience. Activity was not a particularly relevant descriptor. Leisure tended to represent control to a person in middle age; or an opportunity in which to gain control over one's life. For individuals living non-traditional life patterns, the line between what they viewed as work and leisure was blurred or

non-existent.

## Conclusions

The emergence of these contexts for understanding leisure during mid-life offer insight into choices the middle aged adults in this study made during their discretionary time. If leisure astuteness, self-determination in leisure, spirituality in leisure, and leisure viewed as both time and experience are characteristic of the broader population of mid-life adults, then the ways these adults spend their money to express their leisure choices will likely fall within those contexts. Patterns of leisure spending in arts participation by middle aged adults is relatively unexplored. And yet, it is in the best interest of arts organizations to be well positioned to serve those in middle age because their numbers are many and finances are sound. Their leisure purchases and spending patterns can make a positive impact to arts organizations along with the general economic impact associated with leisure spending in general. By combining this information with all that we know about this generation, arts administrators can make the programming and marketing decisions necessary to serve this population. Offering art experiences that take advantage of their leisure astuteness and their tendency toward self-determination to make meaningful leisure choices about how they spend their time and their money, will likely yield economic benefits to those arts organizations that provide programs and services designed for this age group.

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NOTE: Portions of this paper were originally presented at the World Leisure and Recreation Association's Research Commission Workshop on Economic Change: The Leisure Implications.

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## **WESTAF Launches [www.artjob.org](http://www.artjob.org), Searchable Arts Employment and Opportunities Web Site**

Finding a good job in the arts online will now be a reality for many job seekers with today's introduction of ArtJob Online. Launched by WESTAF, the Western States Arts Federation, ArtJob Online is the first employment Web site dedicated to connecting individuals to jobs and opportunities in the arts. The Web site is located on the Internet at [www.artjob.org](http://www.artjob.org). "Prior to the launch of ArtJob online, people using the Internet to search for jobs in the arts would typically find themselves sifting through massive job Web sites that are not specific to the arts and are generally lacking in arts content. WESTAF is thrilled to meet the need in the arts field for a comprehensive, highly-functional, arts employment Web site," said Anthony Radich, Executive Director for WESTAF. ArtJob Online features a national database of job listings in all arts disciplines in the nonprofit, commercial, academic, and public sectors. The Web site also features information about fellowships, grants, residencies, and other artist and art-related opportunities.

Job seekers using ArtJob Online can search the job listings database by several criteria, including discipline, type of organization, type of employment (such as full-time, part-time, or consulting), geographic region or state, and salary range. Job seekers also have access to an employer database that includes background and contact information about employers in the arts.

The ArtJob Web site allows job seekers to market themselves online by posting their resume, which is accessible to organizations and companies that are registered users of the Web site. Access to timely information is the most critical factor in any job search and is a key feature of the ArtJob Web site. The site is constantly updated with real-time job postings, and makes information about opportunities available as soon as they are announced. The ArtJob Web site is the online extension of WESTAF's print publication, ArtJob, which has been the arts employment publication of record in the arts for over twenty years. WESTAF continues to publish the print edition of ArtJob. WESTAF is dedicated to the creative advancement and preservation of the arts. The organization is currently programmatically engaged in the areas of visual arts, presenting, literature, Native American arts, and folk arts. In addition, WESTAF is involved in a variety of research and technology-development projects, including studies on the economic impact of the arts. You may visit the WESTAF Web site at [www.westaf.org](http://www.westaf.org).

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