

Are Americans overworked and overwhelmed?

The Frantic Society



by JEFF DAVIDSON

MUCH HAS BEEN written lately about the typical American worker, describing him, variously, as overworked, underworked, energetic, or lazy. But the answer, of course, cannot be summed up in a single adjective. Powerful social forces have the potential to turn each of us into human whirlwinds charging about in fast forward.

Jeff Davidson is a speaker and author of eighteen books, most recently *Breathing Space: Living & Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society* (MasterMedia, New York, \$10.95). He may be reached at (919) 932-1996. © 1992 Jeff Davidson.

Work, time away from home, and everything in between appear as if they all belong on a never-ending, ever-lengthening list of things to do.

To say that Americans work too many hours — and that too much work is at the root of the time pressure we feel and the leisure we lack — is to miss the convergence of larger, more fundamental issues. We could handle the longer hours (actually seventy-nine minutes daily) that we work compared to Europeans. It's everything else competing for our attention that leaves us feeling overwhelmed. Once

overwhelmed, the feeling of being overworked quickly follows.

Nearly every aspect of American society has become more complex, even since the mid-1980s. Traveling is becoming more cumbersome. Learning new ways of managing and new ways to increase productivity takes its toll. Merely living in America today and participating as a functioning member of society guarantees that your physical, emotional, and spiritual energy will easily be depleted without the proper vantage point from which to approach each day and to conduct your life.

DOSE OF MEGAREALITY

Five factors — call them megarealities — are simultaneously contributing to the perceptual and actual erosion of leisure time among Americans: population growth, an expanding volume of knowledge, the growth of the mass media, the paper trail culture, and an overabundance of choices.

- *Population.* From the beginning of creation to 1850 A.D., world population grew to 1 billion. It grew to 2 billion by 1930, 3 billion by 1960, 4 billion by 1979, and 5 billion by 1987. Every thirty-three months, the current population of America, 257 million people, is added to the planet.

The world of your childhood is gone forever. The present is crowded and becoming more so. Each day, world population (births minus deaths) increases by more than 260,000 people. Regardless of your political, religious, or economic views, the fact remains that geometric growth in human population permeates and dominates every aspect of the planet and its resources.

When John F. Kennedy was elected President in 1960, domestic population was 180 million. It grew by 70 million in one generation. Our growing population has not dispersed over the nation's 5.4 million square miles. Rather, about 97 percent of all

“We are saddled with 30-page laws when two pages would do.”

Americans reside on 3 percent of the land mass; one-half of the population live within fifty miles of the Atlantic or Pacific oceans. Some 75 percent of Americans live in metropolitan areas. By the end of the decade, that figure could reach 80 percent.

More densely packed urban areas have resulted, predictably, in gridlocked roads. It *is* taking you longer merely to drive a few blocks; it's not your

Rampant Commercialism

Commercialism is wrecking America. Our cultural resources are dwindling. The very idea of *citizen* has become synonymous with *consumer*.

The omnipresent signs of commercialism's stamp are so numerous that we are in danger of becoming oblivious to the obvious. Ads are tucked in books, displayed on giant screens at sports events, projected from subway monitors, pumped into doctors' reception rooms, posted in public restrooms, inscribed on clothes, embedded in arcade games, zapped through fax machines, and emblazoned (thanks to food dyes) on hot dogs.

Some \$130 billion is dumped annually into advertising. That's more than the gross national product of oil-rich Saudi Arabia.

— *The Utne Reader*
January/February 1992

imagination, it's not the day of the week or the season, and it's not going to subside soon. Our population and road use grow faster than our ability to repair and build highways, bridges, and arteries. In fact, vehicles are multiplying twice as fast as people. Today, there are nearly 400,000,000 vehicles, compared to 165,000,000 registered motorists.

Some 86 percent of American commuters get to work by automobile and 84 percent of inner-city travel is by car. The average American now commutes 157,600 miles to work during his working life, equal to six times around the earth. Commuting snarls are increasing.

City planners report that there will be no clear solution to gridlock for decades. And studies show that our nation's metropolitan areas will become home to an even greater share of the population. Even less populated urban areas will face unending traffic tie-ups. If only the gridlock were confined to commuter arteries. But everyone in motion — shoppers, air travelers, vacationers, even campers — feels the effects, or will soon.

- *Knowledge.* Everyone in America fears that he is underinformed. This moment, you and everyone you know are being bombarded on all sides. Too much information wreaks havoc on the receptive capacities of the unwary. The volume of new knowledge published and broadcast in every field is enormous. It exceeds our ability to keep pace. Taken together, more works are published or broadcast in a single day than you could hope to comfortably in-