

Involuntary part-time work: new information from the CPS

Persons who work part time involuntarily have lower median family incomes and a higher incidence of poverty than do other part-time workers

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Persons who work less than 35 hours per week but would prefer to work full time—frequently referred to as the partially unemployed—receive less attention than other unemployed workers, low wage workers, and those discouraged over job prospects. Nevertheless, the problem of involuntary part-time employment affects millions when the economy is performing well and grows considerably during recessionary periods.

Detailed information about part-time workers¹—their numbers, characteristics, and reasons for working part time—has long been obtained monthly through the Current Population Survey (CPS).² These data, when converted into annual statistics, record the *average number* of persons working part time during a year. However, because part-time jobs are often brief, generating a high employee turnover, one could not, until recently, determine the *total number* of persons who work part time during a given year. Additional information which explores this dimension of part-time work is now obtained annually through the March work experience and income supplement to the CPS.

The March supplement contains a series of retrospective questions about employment, unemployment, and income received during the previous year. New questions were introduced to this supplement in 1975 to determine whether respondents, including those who usually work full time, had worked part time during the

year and their reasons for doing so.³ Thus, it is now possible to determine not only the total number of persons engaging, both voluntarily and involuntarily, in part-time work during the year, but also to examine the relationship between the incidence and type of part-time work and the level of family income.⁴

Differences between the two measurements

As derived from the monthly household survey, the *average number* of persons with part-time work during 1978 was 21.4 million. On the other hand, data from the March 1979 supplement show that the total number of different individuals who worked part time during at least part of 1978 was nearly double that, 40.7 million. (See table 1.)

The two sources of data show even more striking differences in the numbers of persons working part time involuntarily. The average of the monthly data collected during 1978 indicated that 3.4 million persons worked part time involuntarily. The work experience survey conducted the following March counted three times as many workers—10.1 million—with some involuntary part-time work during the year. As noted above, the reason for this wide gap between the two sets of numbers is high turnover in the part-time labor market. Many part-time jobs are of very short duration and many others are likely to be filled by different individuals during the year.

In addition, the ratio of the work experience numbers to the CPS monthly averages (column 3 of table 1) shows that flexibility and turnover vary markedly ac-

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ording to the specific reason for working part time. For example, the work experience data show that there were four times as many individuals who had to work part time for a week or more because of "slack work or material shortages" during the course of 1978 than does the average of the monthly data for the same year. These are workers who expect to return to full-time schedules as soon as business conditions improve. Therefore, under a generally favorable economic climate, like that of 1978, their part-time work experience is likely to be brief.⁵ In contrast, there were only twice as many individuals who worked part time voluntarily at some time during 1978 than indicated by the annual average of the monthly data. Voluntary part-timers generally find themselves in a work situation which accommodates their needs; therefore, they tend to exhibit less turnover and stay on such schedules longer than other part-time workers.

There are, of course, several basic differences between the way in which part-time work is measured in the work experience supplement and the way it is measured in the monthly CPS. The main difference concerns the so-called "reference period." The work experience survey records, retrospectively, the total number of different individuals who engaged in part-time work for 1 week or more at any time during the year. However, the basic CPS data provide a purely cross-sectional look of the work force and record only those engaged in part-time work during 1 week of each month (the week which includes the 12th).

In order to identify part-timers who would prefer to work full time, the responses obtained in the work experience survey are classified into four categories:

1. Wanted or could only work part time
2. Could only find part-time job
3. Slack work or material shortages
4. Other

The first category refers to part-time work of a predominantly "voluntary" nature. The second and third categories relate to that which is incurred because of job market conditions or other job-related developments and is thus of an "involuntary nature." The fourth category covers a mixture of reasons for part-time employment which cannot be easily labeled as either voluntary or involuntary.⁶ The monthly questionnaire includes additional categories of involuntary part-time work: "beginning or ending a job in the survey week" and "repairs to plant and equipment." Thus, the definition of involuntary part-time employment used in the monthly questionnaire is slightly more comprehensive than that used in the annual work experience supplement. Nevertheless, the aim of both is to identify those workers who are employed less than 35 hours a week but would prefer to work more.⁷

Table 1. Comparison of CPS annual average and work experience part-time data,¹ 1978

[Number of workers in thousands]

Reason for working part time	Number of workers (in thousand)		Ratio of work experience to CPS annual average
	Annual average of monthly CPS data	Annual work experience supplement	
Total	21,441	40,685	1.9
Involuntary reasons	3,428	10,118	3.0
Slack work	1,499		
Material shortages or repairs to plant and equipment	85	6,430	4.1
New job started during week ²	238	(²)	(²)
Job terminated during week ²	100	(²)	(²)
Could only find part-time work	1,506	3,688	2.4
Voluntary reasons			
Does not want, or unavailable for, full-time work	10,430	19,405	1.9
Other reasons	7,583	11,161	1.5
Vacation ²	884	(²)	(²)
Illness ²	1,881	(²)	(²)
Bad weather ²	902	(²)	(²)
Industrial dispute ²	27	(²)	(²)
Legal or religious holiday ²	559	(²)	(²)
Full time for this job ²	1,311	(²)	(²)
All other reasons ²	2,019	(²)	(²)

¹ The monthly CPS annual average and the work experience data are not strictly comparable because of cross-over in some classifications of part-time workers. Specifically, the category "repairs to plant and equipment" is included with "material shortages" in the monthly CPS, while in the work experience supplement "plant repairs" is part of "other reasons." However, this difference does not significantly affect the totals.

² Applies only to monthly CPS data.

Who are these workers?

The work experience supplement shows that about 10 million persons worked part-time involuntarily at some time during 1978—one fourth of all part-time workers during the year. Voluntary part-timers made up close to half of all persons with part-time work during the year and the remaining quarter consisted of those who gave other reasons.

As shown in table 2, the most important reason for working part-time involuntarily is slack work or material shortages. Slack work is any suspension of full-time pay status because of lack of orders, model changeovers, taking inventory, plant breakdowns, shortages of materials, and seasonal or temporary slowdowns, and is often associated with economic downturns.⁸ In 1978, 6.4 million persons or 64 percent of those who worked part-time involuntarily named this as their reason for doing so. Workers in this category were usually employed at full-time jobs during the balance of the year (83 percent). The majority were men (61 percent), were primarily between the ages of 25 and 54 (59 percent), and were blue-collar workers (59 percent). The remaining 3.7 million worked part-time involuntarily because that is all they could find. They were most likely to be usually employed at part-time jobs (72 percent); women (62 percent); 16 to 24 years old (53 percent); and white-collar and service workers (70 percent).

Table 2. Main reason for working part time, by age, sex, and occupation, 1978

[Numbers in thousands]

Characteristic	Persons with part-time work experience						Persons with involuntary part-time work experience	
	Total	Involuntary			Voluntary	Other	Usually full time	Usually part time
		Total	Slack work	Could only find	Wanted to work			
All persons	40,685	10,118	6,430	3,688	19,405	11,161	6,395	3,723
16 to 19 years	8,210	1,639	563	1,076	5,166	1,405	602	1,037
20 to 24 years	7,304	2,103	1,233	870	3,038	2,163	1,424	679
25 to 54 years	19,056	5,268	3,825	1,443	7,621	6,169	3,709	1,559
55 years and over	6,115	1,110	810	300	3,581	1,425	660	450
Men	17,871	5,306	3,891	1,415	6,174	6,392	3,858	1,448
16 to 19 years	4,195	937	384	553	2,458	800	385	552
20 to 24 years	3,586	1,084	762	322	1,279	1,224	847	237
25 to 54 years	7,160	2,690	2,275	415	989	3,483	2,218	472
55 years and over	2,929	596	472	124	1,448	885	407	189
Women	22,815	4,813	2,539	2,274	13,231	4,770	2,537	2,276
16 to 19 years	4,015	702	179	523	2,709	604	217	485
20 to 24 years	3,718	1,018	470	548	1,759	941	576	442
25 to 54 years	11,896	2,577	1,550	1,027	6,632	2,685	1,490	1,087
55 years and over	3,185	515	339	176	2,132	540	252	263
Occupation:								
White collar	17,009	2,833	1,384	1,449	9,922	4,254	1,558	1,275
Blue collar	12,895	4,791	3,785	1,006	3,348	4,757	3,647	1,144
Service	9,181	1,978	843	1,135	5,606	1,596	814	1,164
Farm	1,601	517	418	99	529	554	377	140

Family status. Seven of ten persons with some involuntary part-time work during 1978 belonged to a husband-wife family. (See table 3.) However, reasons for working part-time involuntarily differ markedly among family members. Nine of ten of the husbands who worked part-time involuntarily did so because of slack work or material shortages. Wives with some involuntary part-time work were more evenly divided between "slack work" (60 percent) and "could only find part-time work" (40 percent). Other related family members—many of whom are youths—were more likely to work part-time involuntarily because they could only find part-time employment.

Members of families maintained by women made up the second largest group of involuntary part-time work-

ers—about 1.4 million of the 10.1 million total. These persons were just as likely to have worked part-time involuntarily because of slack work as because of their inability to find full-time work.

Part-year employment. Table 4 shows that persons with part-time work experience were employed for fewer weeks during the year than were all workers. While 3 in 5 persons who worked during 1978 were employed year-round (50 to 52 weeks), only 2 in 5 with part-time work experience worked all year at either a part-time or full-time job. Nearly one-third of those employed part-time at some time during 1978 worked less than half of the year.

For the 19 million who held part-time jobs voluntarily, working fewer weeks during the year probably indicates a rational choice between leisure, personal responsibilities, and employment. The labor market should and does provide opportunities for marginally attached workers—mothers, students, and retirees—to supplement their incomes and enrich their working lives through part-time jobs. However, for the 10 million persons with involuntary part-time work who already face the labor market problem of reduced work hours, being employed only part of the year probably compounds the personal difficulties already encountered. Those working reduced schedules because of slack work may face temporary lay-offs, unemployment, and eventually drop out of the labor force if business conditions fail to improve. Only 45 percent of these workers were employed the whole year. In addition, more than half of the 3.7 million who could only find part-time jobs worked less than half the year. Not coincidentally,

Table 3. Main reason for working part-time, by family status, 1978

[Numbers in thousands]

Family status	Total	Involuntary			Voluntary	Other
		Total	Slack work	Could only find	Wanted to work	
All persons	40,685	10,118	6,430	3,688	19,405	11,162
Husband-wife families	29,992	6,882	4,482	2,400	15,068	8,037
Husbands	8,081	2,583	2,271	312	1,818	3,680
Wives	12,769	2,367	1,421	946	7,783	2,618
Other family members	9,142	1,932	790	1,142	5,467	1,739
Families maintained by women	4,247	1,376	688	688	1,821	1,049
Householder	1,940	651	365	286	749	540
Other family members	2,307	725	323	402	1,072	509
Families maintained by men	869	277	186	91	284	308
Householder	313	88	(¹)	(¹)	(¹)	(¹)
Other family members	556	189	(¹)	(¹)	(¹)	(¹)
Unrelated men	2,808	871	653	218	910	1,026
Unrelated women	2,770	709	421	288	1,321	740

¹ Not separately available but included in higher level total.

Table 4. Percent distribution of workers by weeks worked and main reason for working part time, 1978

Reason for working part time	Total (in thousands)	Percent distribution number of weeks worked		
		50 to 52 weeks	27 to 49 weeks	1 to 26 weeks
All workers	110,290	63.4	17.9	18.7
All persons with part-time work experience	40,685	40.3	28.3	31.4
Involuntary reasons:				
Slack work or material shortage	10,118	36.0	32.0	32.0
Could only find part-time work	6,430	44.9	34.5	20.7
Voluntary reasons:				
Wanted to or could only work part time	3,688	20.8	27.6	51.5
Other	19,405	35.8	27.5	36.8
	11,162	52.0	26.4	21.6

women, blacks, and youths, are overrepresented among persons who could only find part-time work. These demographic groups, as entrants into the assimilation process of the labor market, are also most susceptible to unemployment and low earnings.

Poverty is more prevalent

What makes persons with involuntary part-time work of particular interest is their lower median family income and higher incidence of poverty⁹ relative to other groups of employees. In 1978, 1.4 million or 13.5 percent of all persons who worked part-time involuntarily lived in families with income below the Federal Government's poverty lines, while this was the case for only 7.7 percent of those who did so voluntarily. The median family income of involuntary part-time workers was only three-fourths that of voluntary part-timers. Those who took involuntary part-time jobs because it was all they could find had a lower median family income (\$14,454) and higher incidence of poverty (16.5 percent) than any other group of persons with part-time employment. (See table 5.) Families of persons who worked part time involuntarily because of slack business conditions were slightly better off economically than families of those who could only find part-time work.

Husband-wife families had the highest median income and lowest incidence of poverty among families with a member who experienced involuntary part-time work during the year. On the other hand, women who maintained families and unrelated women were the two groups at the bottom of the income scale. Two of five women who maintained families and 3 of 10 female unrelated individuals who worked part time involuntari-

Table 5. Main reason for working part-time by median family income, incidence of poverty, and family status, 1978

Family status	Total	Involuntary		Voluntary	Other
		Slack work	Could only find	Wanted to work	
MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME					
All persons	\$17,501	\$14,875	\$14,454	\$19,673	\$16,952
Husbands	15,995	15,685	10,182	14,237	17,746
Wives	19,940	17,706	15,852	20,816	20,210
Others in husband-wife families	28,009	26,757	24,641	29,032	27,011
Women who maintain families	7,627	7,181	6,097	8,067	8,358
Others in such families	13,293	14,415	12,151	13,513	13,067
Men who maintain families	13,213	(¹)	(¹)	(¹)	13,727
Others in such families	19,283	18,664	16,676	20,115	20,831
Unrelated men	6,663	7,808	4,493	5,465	8,185
Unrelated women	5,309	5,860	4,071	4,956	6,344
PERCENTAGE BELOW POVERTY					
All persons	9.4	11.8	16.5	7.7	8.7
Husbands	7.5	10.1	20.4	5.8	5.7
Wives	3.9	5.0	6.2	3.3	4.4
Others in husband-wife families	3.1	4.5	5.0	2.4	3.3
Women who maintain families	33.2	36.0	42.8	30.8	29.7
Others in such families	15.5	12.1	26.3	13.2	14.2
Men who maintain families	12.4	(¹)	(¹)	(¹)	9.7
Others in such families	5.6	7.1	7.5	4.2	5.5
Unrelated men	22.3	20.0	33.9	27.9	16.4
Unrelated women	26.5	23.7	41.1	26.7	22.0

¹ Data not shown where base is less than 75,000.

ly during the year lived in families with incomes below the poverty level.

Unfortunately, workers most likely to have primary economic responsibility for their families—husbands, women who maintain families, and unrelated individuals—are most adversely affected by involuntary part-time employment. The families of these workers made up more than 70 percent of those with incomes below poverty.

IMPORTANT SIMILARITIES and differences exist between workers whose part-time employment stems from cut-backs in hours and those who take part-time jobs simply because that is all they could find. Persons involuntarily in part-time status differ by sex, age, occupation, family status, and work experience. But these workers share two important characteristics: their median family incomes are lower and their incidence of poverty is greater than any other group of part-time workers. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Part-time workers are those who work less than a 35 hour week. For a discussion of the delineation of 35 hours as being part time, see Janice N. Hedges and Stephen J. Gallogly, "Full and part time: a review of definitions," *Monthly Labor Review*, March 1977, pp. 21-28.

² The Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes monthly data on invol-

untary part-time workers in *Employment and Earnings*, tables A-27 through A-30. Numerous studies have examined voluntary part-time workers using monthly cps data. See for example, William V. Deutermann, Jr., and Scott Campbell Brown, "Voluntary part-time workers: a growing part of the labor force," *Monthly Labor Review*,

June 1978, pp. 3-10; John D. Owen, "An Empirical Analysis of the Voluntary Part-time Labor Market," Report to the Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor under Grant No. 21-26-76-13-1; and Carol Leon and Robert W. Bednarzik, "A profile of women on part-time schedules," *Monthly Labor Review*, October 1978, pp. 3-12. Studies which have concentrated on worksharers (persons who work part time involuntarily because of slack work) include Robert W. Bednarzik, "Worksharing in the U.S.: its prevalence and duration," *Monthly Labor Review*, July 1980, pp. 3-12; and Sar A. Levitan and Richard S. Belous, *Shorter Hours, Shorter Weeks: Spreading the Work to Reduce Unemployment* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

³The March work experience supplement obtains information for the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years of age and older. The data presented in this summary have been extracted from the following four questions in the CPS questionnaire:

- a. In the weeks that . . . worked, how many hours did . . . usually work per week?
(If more than 35 hours Question b. is asked, if less than 35 hours Question c. is asked.)
- b. Did . . . work less than 35 hours for at least one week in 1978? Exclude time off with pay because of holidays, vacations, days off, or sickness.
- c. How many weeks did . . . work less than 35 hours in 1978?
- d. What was the main reason . . . worked less than 35 hours per week?

⁴For more complete information regarding the data available on a person's employment experience during the year, see "Work Experience of the Population in 1978," Special Labor Force Report 236, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

⁵In "Worksharing in the U.S.," Robert Bednarzik estimates that the average duration of involuntary part-time employment because of slack work is approximately 6 weeks.

⁶Persons who cited "other" as their main reason for working less

than 35 hours were on reduced schedules because of labor disputes, bad weather, illness, plant retooling, holidays, or because their regular full-time workweeks were less than 35 hours. In 1978, 11.2 million or 27 percent of all part-time workers named "other" as their reason for their short workweeks. Workers in this category are apt to be men (57 percent), 25 to 54 years old (55 percent), and usually employed at full-time jobs (73 percent).

⁷Another methodological difference lies in the identification of part-time workers as usually employed at full-time jobs or usually employed at part-time jobs. Because questions in the monthly CPS refer to a part-time worker's current job, certain reasons for working part-time—wanted to work part-time, could only find part-time work, and full-time workweek is less than 35 hours—are always classified as usually part-time. Other reasons—vacations, bad weather, labor disputes, holidays, and job terminated or begun during survey week—are always classified as usually full time. Questions in the work experience supplement refer to a person's past year's employment experience, thus, no restrictions are placed on the classification of a worker as either usually full time or usually part time. For example, a mother who voluntarily works part time during the summer but returns to a full-time schedule when her children are back in school would be classified during the summer by the monthly CPS as a voluntary part-timer usually employed at a part-time job, while the work experience supplement would count her as a voluntary part-timer who usually works full time.

⁸For detailed information on the cyclical movements of persons involuntarily employed part time, see Robert W. Bednarzik, "Involuntary part-time work: a cyclical analysis," *Monthly Labor Review*, September 1975, pp. 12-18.

⁹For a discussion of the concept of poverty, see *The Measure of Poverty* (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1976); and *Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level: 1978*, Current Population Reports, Series p. 60, No. 124 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).