

# Missed work and lost hours, May 1985

*Absences were lower in 1985 than at any time since 1973; for the first time, absence rates in the goods-producing industries were lower than the rates in the service-producing industries*

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On any given day, some people do not show up at work for one reason or another. These unscheduled absences can disrupt the work flow and raise costs such as sick pay and the hiring of temporary help. Absences may also result in a reduction in product quality and low morale among the workers who get additional duties passed onto them.

According to data collected in May 1985 from the Current Population Survey (CPS), about 4.7 percent of the full-time nonfarm workers had an absence in a typical week caused by illness, injury, civic duties, or personal reasons. The proportion of hours lost was 2.6 percent of the potential that would have been worked during the survey's reference week. These absence figures were substantially lower than those last obtained in a 1980 survey. In fact, they showed the first decline since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began estimating absences in 1973.

The proportion of full-time wage and salary workers who had an absence which kept them from working at least 35 hours per week declined by more than 20 percent between May 1980 and May 1985. An absence measure computed by the Bureau of National Affairs from entirely different data has also shown a similar decline over the same period.<sup>1</sup> In addition to a decline in the percent of workers absent from

work, the CPS shows that the percent of total worktime lost because of absences also declined by more than 20 percent during the period mentioned.<sup>2</sup> (See table 1.)

The drop in absences during this 5-year period may have stemmed from the aftereffects of the 1981-82 recession. There appear to be two primary reasons for a drop in absences: (1) workers laid off during the recession are likely to have included many of the frequent absentees, and (2) remaining workers were less likely to be absent from their jobs in the aftermath of a recession or during a period of business uncertainty for fear of job loss.<sup>3</sup> In addition, absence rates may have remained low during the economic recovery because of explicit personnel policies on absences. In some cases, various penalties and incentives were put into place to keep them down.<sup>4</sup>

Although there has been a substantial reduction in the frequency of absences and in the proportion of time lost, the number of hours lost per individual worker with an absence increased slightly between 1980 and 1985. Reasons other than illness or injury were responsible for most of the increase.

## **Absence concepts**

The term "absences," as used here, relates to generally unscheduled periods of leave from work. Reasons for absences include illnesses, injuries, personal and civic commitments, and mishaps. For example, car failure is some-

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times an excuse for an absence. The data presented here relate only to full-time wage and salary workers, those who usually work more than 35 hours per week and who hold only one job. They are deemed to have been absent by reporting that they worked less than 35 hours per week because of illness, injury, or other reasons.

Absences are measured by rates which identify (1) the proportion of workers with an absence; (2) the proportion of hours lost relative to all scheduled hours; or (3) relative to the hours usually worked by those with an absence. Specifically, the incidence rate is the number of workers absent divided by the total employed times 100 or,

$$\frac{\text{Number of workers absent}}{\text{Total employed}} \times 100 .$$

The inactivity rate is the number of hours absent divided by the total number of hours usually worked times 100 or,

$$\frac{\text{Numbers of hours absent}}{\text{Number of hours usually worked}} \times 100 .$$

A third measure, the severity rate, indicates the proportion of hours lost by workers with an absence relative to the hours they usually work, also expressed in percentage terms, or

$$\frac{\text{Number of hours lost by absent workers}}{\text{Number of hours usually worked by absent workers}} \times 100 .$$

### Annual rates and comparisons

Extrapolating from the data gathered for May, it is estimated that because of absences, an average worker lost 7.2 days in 1985, compared with an estimate of 9.7 days in 1980. It is estimated that a typical worker had absences in 3 of 52 weeks during 1985, down from 4 of 52 weeks in 1980.

The absence rate for the United States—4.7 percent—compares favorably with recent percentage rates of the following countries: England (11.8), Canada (11.6), Denmark (7.7), France (5.9), the Netherlands (5.4), Belgium (3.8), Greece (3.1), Germany (3.0), Sweden (3.0), Italy (2.9), and Japan (2.5). The rates for Australia and Ireland are similar to the U.S. rate—4.3 and 5.2, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

### Variation by industry and occupation

Differences in absence rates between the various industries and occupations were also significant, as were their trends. In May 1985, for the first time, the absence rates in goods-producing industries were lower than those in service-producing industries. This was true both for the incidence of absences and the measurement of hours lost because of absences. This reversal could reflect a new attitude in goods-producing industries regarding the costs associated with unscheduled work absences. Many companies have instituted various policies to reduce absences, using

both “the carrot and the stick.” In some instances, they have introduced the practice of giving bonuses to workers with high attendance. They have also counseled workers who are frequently absent before taking more serious steps against them. In part because of these new policies and the other factors cited above, the durable goods industry has achieved especially low absence rates. (See table 2.)

Public administrations have the highest percentage of workers with absences, which may be the result of liberal leave policies towards Federal, State, and local government employees. Businesses which supply professional services also have relatively high rates of absences, both in terms of incidence and inactivity. Within the professional services sector, educational and medical service providers have the highest absence rates. This may reflect the fact that teachers, who make up a large component of this group, usually have an allotment of personal days off which are filled by substitute teachers. Absences are not easily explained for employees of hospitals and other health service providers.

In terms of occupation, the absence rate reported by persons in executive and administrative positions, and those in management-related occupations was relatively low—3.2 percent. This contrasts sharply with the higher incidence of absences for professional specialists, 5.2 percent. These differences, which are also reflected in the proportion of time lost, could be caused by the high degree of competition and visibility among executives and also the fact that some of the professionals, such as teachers, have contracts which allow for a certain number of absences during the year. (See table 3.)

The precision production, craft, and repair occupations

**Table 1. Absence rates for full-time nonagricultural wage and salary workers, by reason, May 1980 and May 1985**

[Numbers in thousands]

Measure	1980	1985	• 1980-85 change	
			Number	Percent
<b>Absent workers</b>				
Total number of workers <sup>1</sup> . . . . .	64,043	77,698	13,655	21.3
Total absent . . . . .	3,926	3,683	-243	-6.2
Total incidence rate <sup>2</sup> . . . . .	6.1	4.7	-1.4	-23.0
Illnesses and injuries . . . . .	3.6	2.6	-1.4	-27.8
Miscellaneous reasons . . . . .	2.6	2.1	-.5	-19.2
<b>Hours lost</b>				
Weekly hours usually worked . . . . .	2,693,930	3,276,410	582,480	21.6
Weekly hours lost . . . . .	89,823	86,279	-3,544	-3.9
Total inactivity rate <sup>3</sup> . . . . .	3.3	2.6	-.7	-21.2
Illnesses and injuries . . . . .	2.1	1.6	-.5	-23.8
Miscellaneous reasons . . . . .	1.2	1.1	-.1	8.3
<b>Hours lost per absent worker</b>				
Usual weekly hours per worker . . . . .	42.1	42.2	.1	.2
Total severity rate <sup>4</sup> . . . . .	56.1	57.2	1.1	2.0
Illnesses and injuries . . . . .	61.4	61.9	.5	.8
Miscellaneous reasons . . . . .	48.9	51.6	2.7	5.5

<sup>1</sup> Includes incorporated self-employed workers.

<sup>2</sup> Number of workers absent as a percent of the total working.

<sup>3</sup> Number of hours absent as a percent of the total number of hours usually worked.

<sup>4</sup> Number of hours absent as a percent of the number of hours usually worked by absent workers.

**Table 2. Absence rates for full-time wage and salary workers, by industry, May 1985**  
 [Numbers in thousands]

Industry	Total number of workers <sup>1</sup>	Incidence rate (Percent of workers absent)			Inactivity rate (Percent of time lost)		
		Total	Illnesses and injuries	Miscellaneous reasons	Total	Illnesses and injuries	Miscellaneous reasons
Total, 16 years and over .....	76,093	4.8	2.6	2.2	2.7	1.6	1.1
Total nonagricultural wage and salary workers .....	74,908	4.8	2.6	2.2	2.7	1.6	1.1
Goods-producing industries .....	24,854	4.4	2.7	1.6	2.5	1.7	.8
Mining .....	929	4.0	2.8	1.2	3.6	2.4	1.1
Construction .....	4,817	4.3	2.4	1.9	2.5	1.5	.9
Manufacturing .....	19,108	4.4	2.8	1.6	2.4	1.7	.8
Durable goods .....	11,778	4.0	2.6	1.4	2.2	1.5	.8
Nondurable goods .....	7,330	5.1	3.2	2.0	2.9	1.9	1.0
Service-producing industries .....	50,054	5.1	2.6	2.4	2.8	1.5	1.3
Transportation and public utilities .....	6,477	4.8	2.6	2.2	3.2	1.8	1.4
Wholesale and retail trade .....	12,835	4.7	2.8	1.9	2.7	1.8	.9
Wholesale trade .....	3,322	3.8	2.2	1.6	2.4	1.6	.8
Retail trade .....	9,513	5.0	3.0	2.0	2.8	1.9	.9
Finance, insurance, and real estate .....	5,326	4.1	2.1	2.0	2.0	1.0	1.0
Services <sup>2</sup> .....	20,757	5.4	2.5	2.9	2.9	1.4	1.4
Professional services .....	14,858	5.8	2.7	3.1	3.1	1.5	1.6
Educational services .....	6,283	6.2	2.5	3.7	3.3	1.5	1.8
Health services, including hospitals .....	5,373	5.9	3.2	2.7	4.2	1.7	2.5
Other professional services .....	2,682	4.6	2.4	2.2	2.7	1.3	1.5
All other services .....	5,899	4.5	2.1	2.5	2.3	1.2	1.1
Public administration .....	4,659	5.9	3.1	2.8	3.0	1.6	1.3

<sup>1</sup> Excludes incorporated self-employed workers.  
<sup>2</sup> Includes industries, not shown separately.

NOTE: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

have a relatively low incidence rate (4.3 percent). The less skilled group of operators, fabricators, and laborers have a higher incidence rate (5.5 percent). Among the lower skilled workers, handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers have the highest absence rate (6.7 percent). These lowest skilled, low-paying jobs are often hazardous and have unpleasant working conditions, for example, fumes, noise, dirt, and heat. Given the gradual shift in technology, a substitution of high skilled manual workers for low skilled may have contributed to the reduction in absence rates.

### Variation by personal characteristics

Teenagers have the highest absence rate of any age group, as shown below in the incidence rates for men and women in various age groups:

	<i>Percent of workers with an absence in the reference week, May 1985</i>		
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
All ages .....	4.8	3.7	6.3
16-19 years .....	7.0	6.7	7.4
20-24 years .....	4.8	3.9	5.9
25-54 years .....	4.6	3.4	6.3
55 years and over .....	5.7	5.0	6.8

Teenagers may have a higher absence rate because they attach more importance to nonwork activities than do older workers. As workers get into their early twenties, their

absence rates decline and approach that of workers age 25 to 54. Past age 55, the absence rate rises again for both men and women. Health problems and health maintenance needs may affect this increase.

For women, the absence rate increases in their prime years, while for men, the rate falls. Understandably, women have a higher incidence of absences during their childbearing years, especially women with children under age 6. However, men with children have a relatively low absence rate. (See table 4.) Marital responsibilities seem to induce men toward a firmer commitment to their jobs, so that they spend less time away from work. For most women, the proportion of time lost increased with the presence of children, especially young ones. Women maintaining families alone who have three children or more have the highest absence rate. This may be because these women have no one to fall back on when their children need care during their working hours. Other family-related responsibilities, such as care of other family members, may be another factor in their relatively high absence rates.

ABSENCE RATES DROPPED considerably between 1980 and 1985. This is probably caused by the fallout from the recession of 1981-82 when workers with attendance problems may have been dismissed in greater numbers. This, in turn, may have induced fear of job dismissal in other workers who kept their absences low. Cost-cutting measures have also

**Table 3. Absence rates for full-time wage and salary workers, by occupation, May 1985**

[Numbers in thousands]

Occupation	Total number of workers <sup>1</sup>	Incidence rate (Percent of workers absent)			Inactivity rate (Percent of time lost)		
		Total	Illnesses and injuries	Miscellaneous reasons	Total	Illnesses and injuries	Miscellaneous reasons
Total, 16 years and over .....	76,093	4.8	2.6	2.2	2.7	1.6	1.1
Managerial and professional specialty .....	19,598	4.2	1.9	2.3	2.3	1.0	1.2
Executive, administrative, and managerial .....	9,381	3.2	1.6	1.6	1.7	.9	.8
Professional specialty .....	10,217	5.2	2.2	3.0	2.8	1.1	1.6
Technical, sales, and administrative support .....	22,745	4.9	2.7	2.2	2.5	1.5	1.1
Technicians and related support .....	2,624	3.0	2.1	1.7	1.8	1.0	.8
Sales occupations .....	6,934	3.9	2.3	1.6	2.2	1.4	.7
Administrative support, including clerical .....	6,477	4.8	2.6	2.2	3.2	1.8	1.4
.....	13,186	5.6	3.0	2.6	2.9	1.6	1.3
Service occupations .....	7,554	5.7	3.0	2.7	3.1	1.8	1.4
Private household .....	279	3.6	1.1	2.5	2.2	.2	1.9
Protective service .....	1,345	4.7	1.8	2.9	2.5	1.2	1.2
Service, except private household and protective .....	5,930	6.0	3.3	2.7	3.4	2.0	1.4
Precision production, craft, and repair .....	10,855	4.3	2.8	1.6	2.6	1.8	.8
Operators, fabricators, and laborers .....	13,897	5.5	3.4	2.1	3.4	2.3	1.1
Machine operators, assemblers, and inspectors .....	7,006	5.3	3.3	2.0	3.0	2.2	.8
Transportation and material moving occupations .....	3,619	4.8	3.0	1.8	3.4	2.3	1.3
Handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers .....	3,272	6.7	4.1	2.6	4.1	2.8	1.3
Farming, forestry, and fisheries .....	1,444	3.1	1.3	1.8	1.6	.7	.9

<sup>1</sup> Excludes incorporated self-employed workers.

NOTE: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

**Table 4. Absence rates for full-time wage and salary workers, by marital status, sex, presence and age of children, May 1985**

[Numbers in thousands]

Marital status and sex	Total number of workers <sup>1</sup>	Incidence rate (Percent of workers absent)			Inactivity rate (Percent of time lost)		
		Total	Illnesses and injuries	Miscellaneous reasons	Total	Illnesses and injuries	Miscellaneous reasons
<b>Women who maintain families</b>							
With no children under 18 years old .....	1,475	5.4	3.8	1.6	3.3	2.7	0.6
With one child under 18 years old:							
Youngest child 6 to 17 .....	1,386	5.6	3.2	2.4	2.8	1.9	.9
Youngest child under 6 .....	360	8.4	4.9	3.5	3.8	2.1	1.7
With two children under 18 years old:							
Youngest child 6 to 17 .....	622	5.9	2.9	3.0	3.1	1.6	1.5
Youngest child under 6 .....	311	11.0	5.4	5.7	5.8	2.3	3.5
With three children or more under 18 years old:							
Youngest child 6 to 17 .....	208	9.8	6.2	3.5	4.5	3.7	.8
Youngest child under 6 .....	120	17.7	5.2	12.5	6.2	2.7	3.5
<b>Married women, spouse present</b>							
With no children under 18 years old .....	7,971	5.8	3.2	2.7	3.1	1.9	1.2
With one child under 18 years old:							
Youngest child 6 to 17 .....	2,350	6.7	3.7	3.0	3.8	2.4	1.4
Youngest child under 6 .....	1,506	12.8	3.6	9.2	9.3	2.1	7.3
With two children under 18 years old:							
Youngest child 6 to 17 .....	1,833	6.4	2.8	3.6	3.0	1.5	1.5
Youngest child under 6 .....	1,251	10.9	3.5	7.4	7.0	2.0	5.0
With three children or more under 18 years old:							
Youngest child 6 to 17 .....	612	2.6	1.4	1.2	.8	.6	.2
Youngest child under 6 .....	635	9.2	3.7	5.5	4.0	1.5	2.5
<b>Married men, spouse present</b>							
With no children under 18 years old .....	11,669	4.0	2.6	1.4	2.5	1.7	.8
With one child under 18 years old:							
Youngest child 6 to 17 .....	4,204	4.0	2.4	1.6	2.5	1.6	.9
Youngest child under 6 .....	3,188	3.5	1.8	1.8	1.9	1.0	1.0
With two children under 18 years old:							
Youngest child 6 to 17 .....	3,711	2.3	1.5	.7	1.4	.9	.4
Youngest child under 6 .....	3,601	3.4	1.9	1.5	1.7	1.0	.7
With three children or more under 18 years old:							
Youngest child 6 to 17 .....	1,507	3.1	1.7	1.4	2.0	1.3	.7
Youngest child under 6 .....	2,383	3.5	2.3	1.2	1.9	1.4	.5

<sup>1</sup> Excludes incorporated self-employed workers.

NOTE: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

caused employers, particularly in manufacturing, to institute various means to hold absences down, both through incentives and disciplinary action. Reflecting these trends, the absence rates in the goods-producing sector were lower in 1985 than those in the service-producing sector, a situation that has not been observed before, at least not since 1973. □

—FOOTNOTES—

<sup>1</sup> *Quarterly Report on Job Absence and Turnover, 2d Quarter 1985* (Washington, The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc., Sept. 5, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> The situation in these 2 particular months (May 1980 and May 1985) may not be totally representative of the trend in absences over this 5-year

period. However, separate estimates of absences based on CPS data for the 12 months of 1980 and 1985, showed declines well in excess of 10 percent.

<sup>3</sup> J. Paul Leigh, "The Effects of Unemployment and the Business Cycle on Absenteeism," *Journal of Economics and Business*, May 1985, pp. 159-70.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Perl, "Work Place Conflicts Arise Over Rules on Absenteeism," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 1986, p. A1.

<sup>5</sup> *Labour Force Sample Survey, 1983* (Luxembourg City, Luxembourg, Statistical Office of the European Communities, 1985), p. 114; *Report on the Special Survey of the Labour Force Survey, February 1984* (Tokyo, Japan, Statistics Bureau, Management and Coordination Agency, 1984), pp. 58-59; *The Labour Force Australia, February 1986* (Canberra, Australian Bureau of Statistics, April 1986), p. 21; *The Labor Force, December 1985* (Ottawa, Statistics Canada, January 1986), p. 118; *Arbetskraftundersökningar, Arsmädel 1985* (Stockholm, Sweden, Statistiska Centralbyran, 1985), p. 121.

### Measures to increase incomes

The vital role of women in agriculture in many parts of the developing world means that they should be assisted in rural development programs, for example, by the introduction of appropriate technology and simple farm tools to reduce the burden of their work on the land and in the home. Technological innovation and appropriate training aimed at peasant and small-holder farmers should be organized as part of extension services which are easily accessible to even the poorer segments of the rural population. The adoption of appropriate technologies will be crucial to the attainment of food self-sufficiency in the coming decade, and here again is a field in which the ILO has an important role to play in the coming years, building on experience gained so far. Other policy measures to increase agricultural production deserving of consideration include the provision of infrastructural facilities and essential public services (for example, roads, irrigation, health centers, schools); improved access to credit; and pricing and marketing policies appropriate to the maximization of the growth of output and employment in rural areas.

—*The Changing World of Work: Major Issues Ahead*  
*(Report of the Director-General (Part I),*  
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 1986), p. 18.