

Work schedules of Americans: an overview of new findings

A group of eight articles examines data from a special 1985 household survey covering topics such as the number of workers who moonlight, who work at home, who have flexible hours, or who would prefer to work more or fewer hours per week

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In recent years, we have become familiar with such “mega-trends” in the labor force as the rapidly increasing participation of women, the tendency toward earlier retirement among men, the maturing of the baby-boom cohorts, and the shift of workers out of the stagnant goods-producing sector of the economy and into the expanding services sector. Yet, we still have little data about the day-to-day and week-to-week working lives of American men and women. Among the most conspicuous gaps in our knowledge have been such unanswered (or only occasionally answered) questions as: How many Americans work at two jobs? How many work at night, or schedules other than the stereotypical daylight shifts? How many Americans work on weekends? How many have jobs entailing home-based work? And what proportions—if offered such a choice—would prefer to work either more or fewer hours per week at their current rates of pay?

Until recently, there was either no information at all concerning these questions or, at best, information which had been collected sporadically and which had become rather dated. Now, thanks to a special survey conducted in 1985, we have both up-to-date information with which to address some of the traditional questions on work schedules, as well

as entirely new information on work-schedule topics that had not previously been studied at the national level. The new information was collected in May 1985 through a special supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS), the monthly survey which provides the basic measurements of the labor force and unemployment for the Nation. The new findings are discussed in detail, on a topic-by-topic basis, in the eight articles which follow. Here are some selected highlights.

- Multiple jobholders—persons working at more than one job—numbered about 5.7 million in May 1985. They accounted for 5.4 percent of all employed persons, up from 4.9 percent in 1980.
- Saturday work was the usual routine for one-fourth of all workers, while 1 in 8 reported they usually worked on Sunday.
- Work outside the typical daylight hours—usually in the evening—was the usual routine for about one-sixth of the full-time workers and one-half of the part-time workers.
- Home-based work of at least 8 hours a week was reported by over 8 million workers. However, most were full-time employees who did only a small part of their work at home.
- Flexitime or other schedules enabling workers to vary the start and end of their workday was available to about 12 percent of the wage and salary workers with full-time jobs.

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- A preference for a longer workweek (and thus “more money”) was expressed by about one-fourth of the workers. In contrast, fewer than 1 in 10 said they would opt for a cut in hours accompanied by a reduction in earnings.

These and other findings from the May 1985 survey—analyzed in great detail in the articles which follow—add considerably to our knowledge of the work routines and preferences of American workers. But before we focus our attention on these detailed findings, it may be worthwhile to briefly review those historical trends in the labor force which provide a useful background and help to set the stage for the study of these topics.

Background data

While addressing few of the specific questions highlighted above, the data regularly available from the CPS already tell us a lot about the basic trends in the labor force behavior and work patterns of Americans. Through these data, we can, for example, track the historical changes in the rate of labor force participation and in the length of the workweek for the principal population groups. We also have been able to estimate—at least in a rough way—how many persons flow into and out of the labor force over a given period and thus get a notion of the dynamics of the labor force. And when we add to the regularly available data those which have been obtained from time to time through special supplements to the CPS, we can gain yet further insights into the basic labor force behavior of Americans and their work/leisure choices. Let us look briefly at some of these background data.

The expanding labor market role of American women—which can actually be tracked on a month-by-month or year-by-year basis with the data from the CPS—can be illustrated here with some key numbers for 1965 and 1985. Over this 20-year period, the labor force participation rate for women (the proportion 16 years and over who are in the labor force) climbed from 39 to 55 percent. Over the same two decades, the comparable rate for men edged down gradually from 81 to 76 percent, reflecting primarily a tendency among them to retire at an earlier age.

It is also important to note that women did not achieve their spectacular increases in labor market penetration over this 20-year period by taking mostly part-time jobs. To the contrary, the proportion of women working full-time held fairly steady—at nearly 75 percent—during this entire period.

A different perspective on the divergent trends in the work patterns of American men and women comes to us from the “work experience” data collected each March. These data show what proportion of men and women did at least some work during the previous year and, among those with some employment, what proportion managed to work the entire year on a full-time basis.¹

Focusing again on the changes between 1965 and 1985,

we find that the proportion of women with at least some employment in these 2 years was respectively, 49 and 59 percent. And among the increasing number of women with some employment, the proportion actually working year round on a full-time basis posted an equally robust increase. It expanded from 39 percent in 1965 to 48 percent in 1985. This means that practically half of the women with any labor market involvement are now working full time over the entire year.

Further knowledge of the basic work patterns of Americans, particularly with regard to the dynamics of their labor force behavior, can be gained through the data obtained regularly from those not in the labor force. Because these data tell us how many of these persons left their jobs during the previous 12 months, they can be used to determine, by inference, how many entered the job market over the same period. In this regard, the data collected during 1985 show that, on average, 9.1 million of the persons outside the labor force had left the employment ranks over the previous 12 months.² Because there had been a net employment increase of 2.1 million, we can estimate that at least 11 million persons had to enter the job market over this period to replace the outgoing workers and to account for the additional growth.

The monthly data on “gross flows,” although subject to considerable bias and seldom used, point to even larger movements into and out of the labor force. They suggest, in fact, that several million persons may enter and leave the labor force each month.³

While this may leave us with the impression that labor mobility is widespread in the United States, that is not necessarily the case. In fact, there is evidence that the American labor force has a large core of workers who remain in their jobs, with most of the mobility occurring among other workers, especially youths. For example, the most recent CPS data on job tenure, collected in January 1983, show that among workers 25 and older (men and women combined), 1 in 3 had been with the same employer for 10 years or more and 1 in 8 had been with the same employer for 20 years or more.⁴ Here is the percent distribution of these workers by years of continuous employment with current employer:

	Total	1 year or less	2 to 9 years	10 to 19 years	20 years or more
Total	100.00	20.3	45.9	21.4	12.3
Men	100.00	18.0	42.2	23.2	16.7
Women	100.00	23.4	50.8	19.1	6.7

While the above data show women to be somewhat more concentrated in the lower tenure categories than are men, they also show that, even among women, more than one-fourth had been working continuously for the same employer for 10 years or more. It was from an analysis of these tenure data that some have concluded that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, lifetime jobs are not that uncommon for American workers.⁵

And how many years, altogether, can American workers expect to spend in the labor force over their lifetime? The answers to this question come to us in the form of "worklife" estimates, currently based on the observed labor force behavior over the course of a year of men and women at all specific ages. It has been estimated from these observations (also derived from the CPS) that a man age 25 may expect to work an additional 34 years, and that a working woman of the same age may expect to be in the labor force an additional 25 years.⁶

After this brief review of the basic patterns in the working life of Americans, as reflected in various series of data from the CPS, let us now turn back to the various analyses of the May 1985 data on the day-to-day and week-to-week routines of these workers.

Analyzing the May 1985 data

The broad picture which emerges from the various analyses of the May 1985 data is of workers with a generally strong attachment to their jobs. The great majority worked 40 hours a week, but many said they regularly worked well over that standard. As already noted, nearly 6 million held two jobs, an even larger number said they usually did some work at home, and weekend work, particularly on Saturday, was a fairly common occurrence. While most workers seemed satisfied with the length of their workweeks, the vast majority of those who would have opted for a change said that they would have preferred a longer workweek so they could earn more money. As a further indication of the relatively strong attachment to their jobs, fewer than 5 percent of the full-time workers reported an absence from work in the week preceding this special survey.

Of the articles that follow, Shirley J. Smith highlights the predominance of the 5-day 40-hour workweek. Although finding little change in recent years in the proportion of workers on 40-hour schedules, Smith notes that there have been some changes in work patterns, with a still small but growing group of workers on "compressed" full-time weeks of less than 5 days. Surprisingly, she also finds some growth in the proportion of workers on part-time schedules who seem to "stretch" their work out over 6 or 7 days.

Susan Shank examines the data on workweek preferences and finds only moderate support for the hypothesis underlying the "backward bending labor supply curve," according to which an increase in rates of pay past a certain point induces workers to reduce their hours of work. Although the proportion of workers choosing fewer hours of work does grow as earnings rise, the category remains very small. Even among workers earning \$750 or more per week, only about 10 percent of the men and 20 percent of the women were willing to trade hours of work—and the income linked to them—for additional leisure.

Earl Mellor focuses on the workday and finds that about 1 of 8 full-time workers were on flexitime or other schedules that allowed them to vary the start and end of their

What if you are your own employer?

In analyzing the May 1985 data on work schedules and related topics, we decided to make a small departure from the typology generally used in the display and analysis of data from the Current Population Survey. Specifically, we decided to focus mainly on wage and salary workers and, in doing so, to exclude from this universe those who are the nominal employees of corporations which they own. While "wage and salary workers" in a technical sense—and treated as such in the usual display of employment data from the CPS—these persons (numbering 2.8 million in May 1985) exhibit many of the traits and work patterns of the typical self-employed workers. For this reason, in most of the analyses which follow, these "incorporated self employed" are broken out of the total wage and salary universe and either shown separately or merged with the other self-employed. The smaller group of "unpaid family workers" (those 500,000 who, although unpaid, worked at least 15 hours a week in a family owned enterprise) are also either shown separately or merged with the self-employed workers (those not incorporated), with the combined group, totaling 9.8 million, generally shown as "all other workers." This allows the analyst to focus more clearly on the wage and salary workers who are truly working for someone else.

daily work. The great majority were on typical daylight schedules, with about one-fifth reporting 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. as their schedules. About 6 percent worked predominantly in the evening, 3 percent on the "night shift," and 4 percent on rotating shifts.

The data on multiple jobholders are examined by John Stinson. He finds a particularly sharp increase in the number of women with two jobs, which is another sign of the growing strength of their ties to the job market. Nearly 5 percent of working women are now multiple jobholders.

The new data on home-based work are analyzed by Francis Horvath, who observes that most of the persons reporting such work are full-time workers who, apparently, do only a small part of their work at home. Only one-tenth of these workers were engaged in manufacturing activities, an area of traditional concern in the field of labor legislation. Most prevalent were those employed in offices, sales, and miscellaneous services.

Bruce Klein uses the May 1985 data to construct measures of absences. He finds that the proportion of workers with an absence in the reference week for the survey was only 4.7 percent, a rate considerably lower than rates which had been computed for several years until 1980. He hypothesizes that this decline in absences, confirmed by other data, may reflect several factors such as: the job reduction in some industries, which is likely to have fallen most heavily on workers with high rates of absenteeism; the likely impact of such cuts on other workers, who might have reduced their rates of absenteeism so as not to jeopardize their jobs; and the positive measures adopted by some employers to reward the workers with few absences.

Wayne Howe examines the data on the characteristics of the workers employed by temporary help agencies. This has been a rapidly growing sector of employment in recent years. Howe finds that, relative to other workers, those who are employed by temporary help agencies are more likely to be younger and to work part time. Their group contains relatively large proportions of women and blacks, who are heavily concentrated in clerical work and in what might be called "industrial help" occupations.

Darrell Carr looks at the new data on workers receiving overtime pay. These cover not only the persons working more than 40 hours a week; they extend also to those receiving overtime premiums for some hours, even though the weekly total does not exceed 40. He notes that out of 10.5 million workers with some overtime pay for work performed during the reference week for the May 1985 survey, about 1.6 million had actually worked 40 hours or less.

Taken together, these articles improve our understanding of the work practices of American men and women. Of course, further analysis of the data on which the findings are based is still possible. Moreover, other issues could be addressed using these data. For example, where there are multiple workers in a family one might want to determine how the schedules of one member correspond to those of other members. The effect of the presence of children on the work schedules and workweek preferences of the parents might also be explored further. And a construction of a

bridge between the data on work schedules and preferences of workers and those on family income might also be undertaken. These are complex and time-consuming undertakings, but with potentially large payoffs in the form of further insights into the day-to-day work lives of American men and women. □

—FOOTNOTES—

¹ The work experience data are published annually. For the most recent data, see Shirley J. Smith, "Work experience profile, 1984: the effects of recovery continue," *Monthly Labor Review*, February 1986, pp. 37-42.

² The data on when the persons outside the labor force have last worked are not currently published and may be subject to significant bias, particularly because of a phenomenon known as "telescoping." This relates to a possible tendency among survey respondents to report certain events as having occurred in the recent past, when, in fact, they had occurred earlier. To the extent that some of the persons who have been outside the labor force more than 1 year report that they left their last job in the most recent year, there would be an overestimation of the number exiting the labor force and, by inference, of those entering it over the year in question.

³ While very revealing, the gross flow data are subject to serious statistical problems and may also overestimate the flows into and out of the labor force. See Paul O. Flaim and Carma R. Hogue, "Measuring labor force flows: a special conference examines the problems," *Monthly Labor Review*, July 1985, pp. 7-17.

⁴ See Ellen Sehgal, "Occupational mobility and job tenure in 1983," *Monthly Labor Review*, October 1984, pp. 18-24.

⁵ Robert E. Hall, "The Importance of Life Jobs in the U.S. Economy," *American Economic Review*, September 1982.

⁶ Shirley J. Smith, "Revised worklife tables reflect 1979-80 experience," *Monthly Labor Review*, August 1985, pp. 23-30.