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Labour Statistics at a Glance

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Who works part time and why?

by **Martha Patterson**

Some people choose to work part time by personal preference, or to accommodate other priorities such as caring for children and attending school. Others work part time because full time work is not available, often due to economic conditions. This article examines which groups of workers are more likely to be working part time, and the reasons they give for doing so.

Part-time work varies by age and sex

In 2017, nearly one in five employed Canadians, or 3.5 million people, were working part time (less than 30 hours per week) in their main or only job. As shown in Table 1, youth aged 15 to 24 were the most likely to work part time (49% of employed youth), followed by workers aged 55 and older (23%). People in the core working ages of 25 to 54 were the least likely to be part time (12%). Women were twice as likely as men to work part time (26% vs. 13%). These part-time rates have been relatively stable over the last 20 years.

Table 1
Part-time rate, and primary reason for part-time work, by age group, 2017

	15 years and older	15 to 24 years	25 to 54 years	55 years and older
	percent			
Share of workers working part time	19	49	12	23
Age distribution of part-time workers	100	34	41	25
Primary reason for working part time				
All reasons	100	100	100	100
Economic reasons	24	18	34	17
Caring for own children	9	0	21	1
Going to school	29	73	10	0
Personal preference	28	6	21	70
Other ¹	10	3	14	13

1. The "Other" category includes own illness or disability, caring for elderly parents, and other personal or family responsibilities.

Source: Labour Force Survey, custom tabulations.

The most common reasons given for part-time work were "going to school", cited by 29% of part-timers in 2017, and "personal preference" (28%). The prevalence of going to school as a reason for part-time work reflects the relatively large share of youth aged 15 to 24 among the part-time workforce (34%). Nearly three quarters (73%) of youth working part time were doing so because of schooling.

On the other hand, "personal preference" as a top reason can be more attributed to the choices of workers aged 55 and older. In keeping with the aging of the population, the share of older workers among the part-time workforce roughly doubled from 1997 (12%) to 2017 (25%). More than two thirds (70%) of older part-timers in 2017 cited personal preference as the main reason for their schedule.

Although they were the least likely to work part time, people in the core working ages of 25 to 54 comprised the largest share of the part-time workforce (41%). They worked part time for more diverse reasons than their younger and older counterparts, and are the focus of the remainder of this article.

Economic reasons top the list for one third of core-aged part-timers

Economic reasons were cited by 34% of core-aged part-time workers in 2017. The share was higher among core-aged men (45%) than women (30%). "Economic reasons" means that the worker could not find, or believed they would not be able to find, suitable full time work due to economic conditions.

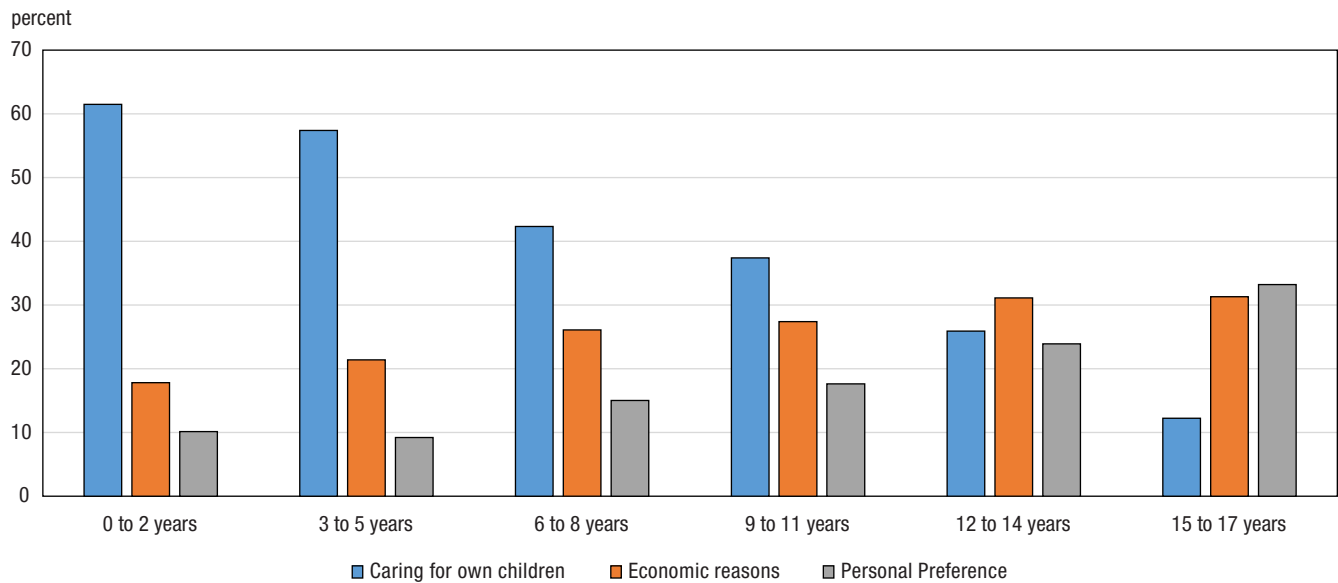
Caring for children is a driver for many core-aged women

Although economic conditions was the top reason cited by core-aged women, this was followed closely by childcare (27%) and personal preference (22%). Looking at smaller age groups, childcare was the most common reason for female part-timers aged 30 to 39. This peaked between ages 35 and 39, when nearly half (45%) of women working part time cited childcare as the main reason. Childcare was also the primary reason for part-time work for nearly 1 in 10 male part-timers in the same age group.

Not all female part-timers with young children in the home indicated that childcare was the main reason for their work schedule. For example, nearly two-thirds (62%) of core-aged women working part time whose youngest child was aged two or younger cited childcare as the primary reason, while 18% cited economic reasons, and 10% chose personal preference (Chart 1). The share giving childcare as the main reason declined as the age of the youngest child increased. For women whose youngest child was in the teen years, economic reasons and/or personal preference were more common drivers of part-time work.

The likelihood of working part time was slightly higher among women whose youngest child was under age 6 (23%) compared with those whose youngest child was aged 6 to 17 (21%).

Chart 1
Primary reason for working part time, women aged 25 to 54 working part time with at least one child in the home, by age of youngest child, 2017



Note: Response categories do not sum to 100% as the “Going to school” and “Other” categories have been omitted.
Source: Labour Force Survey, custom tabulations.

Caring for children more common for those with higher-earning spouse

Choosing to have one spouse working part time to help care for children may be easier for families with greater economic resources. Among core-aged part-timers with an employed spouse and at least one child under the age of six, caring for children was the most common reason for their part-time work, regardless of the income level of their spouse. However, the share citing this reason ranged from 44% for those whose spouse’s weekly wages were in the bottom 20% (first quintile) of all earners, to 70% among those whose spouse earned in the top 20%.

Core-aged part-timers cite different drivers across the country

As shown in Table 2, core-aged workers in British Columbia were the most likely to have a part-time schedule (14%), while New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador had the lowest part-time rate (8%). Provincial variation in part-time rates may be due to differences in the distribution of industries, demographics, or other factors.

The reasons for part-time work also vary across provinces. Although they are among the least likely to work part time, more than half (55%) of core-aged part-time workers in Newfoundland and Labrador cited economic reasons as the primary driver for their work schedule, compared to the national average of 34%. Part-timers in the province were less likely to cite caring for children and personal preference.

Core-aged part-timers in Quebec were about half as likely as the national average to cite childcare as the primary reason for working part time (11% vs. 21%). This may be partly related to differences in the cost of childcare between Quebec and the rest of Canada.¹ On the other hand, part-timers in Quebec were more likely to be driven by personal preference (26% vs. 21%), or attending school (14% vs. 10%).

In Manitoba and British Columbia, core-aged part-time workers were less likely than the national average to cite economic reasons and more likely to cite childcare. Childcare was also a more likely reason in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Table 2
Part-time rate and reason for working part time, workers aged 25 to 54, by province, 2017

	Newfoundland and Labrador	Prince Edward Island	Nova Scotia	New Brunswick	Quebec	Ontario	Manitoba	Saskatchewan	Alberta	British Columbia
	percent									
Share of workers working part time	8	9	11	8	11	12	12	11	13	14
Primary reason for working part time										
All reasons	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Economic reasons	55	40	36	37	33	38	30	32	32	27
Caring for own children	12	20	17	19	11	21	26	27	30	29
Going to school	9	6	10	6	14	9	9	8	8	7
Personal preference	14	21	20	23	26	19	22	21	18	22
Other ¹	10	13	16	15	16	13	13	12	12	16

1. The "Other" category includes own illness or disability, caring for elderly parents, and other personal or family responsibilities.

Source: Labour Force Survey, custom tabulations.

Self-employed and temporary employees more likely to work part time

Among core-aged workers, the self-employed were more likely to work part time than employees (19% vs. 11%). Among employees, those in temporary work (which includes seasonal, contract, casual, and other forms of non-permanent employment) were more likely than those in permanent employment to have a part-time schedule (26% vs 9%).

Core-aged part-timers who were self-employed were more likely to be working part time by personal preference (28%) than their employee counterparts (19%). The share citing caring for children was also higher among the self-employed (25%) than employees (20%). In contrast, the self-employed were less likely than employees to cite going to school as their primary reason (3% vs. 12%).

Among core-aged employees, temporary workers were more likely than permanent employees to be working part time for economic reasons (42% vs. 33%), or due to schooling (19% vs. 9%).

1. For more information on this topic, see the article entitled "[Fertility rates and labour force participation among women in Quebec and Ontario.](#)" *Insights on Canadian Society* (75-006-X).

Multiple job holders driven by both necessity and choice

More than 1 in 10 core-aged part-timers (14%) held more than one job in 2017, compared with 5% of those working full time. Economic reasons were the primary driver for working part time in their main job for 38% of core-aged part-timers with multiple jobs, suggesting that these workers have more than one job in order to earn more income than their main job can provide.

However, 32% were working part time in their main job by personal preference, compared with 20% of single-job part-timers. This difference was particularly pronounced among men, where multiple-job holders were more than twice as likely to be working part time in their main job by personal preference (39% vs. 16%). Core-aged women with multiple jobs working part time in their main job were half as likely as their single-job counterparts to cite childcare as the primary driver (15% vs. 29%).

Conclusion

This article has shown some of the diversity in reasons for part-time work in 2017, particularly among core-aged workers. The majority of young part-timers were in school, while the majority of older part-timers indicated that their work schedule was by personal preference. For core-aged workers, particularly men, economic reasons were a driving force for part-time work. Childcare was the dominant reason for many, but not all, female part-timers with young children, and more so for part-timers with a higher-earning spouse.

Across the country, Newfoundland and Labrador had the highest share of core-aged part-timers citing economic reasons, while childcare was a more common reason in the Western provinces. In terms of work arrangements, the self-employed and temporary employees were more likely to work part-time than permanent employees, but for different reasons. For the self-employed, part-time work was more likely to be by personal preference or to accommodate childcare, while workers in temporary employment were more likely to be part time for economic reasons or to accommodate their studies. Multiple job holders had diverse reasons for working part time in their main job.