

# Voluntary part-time workers

*Ron Logan*

---

**G**rowth in the number of part-time workers has been a characteristic of the Canadian labour market for the last two decades. This growth has concerned some labour market analysts, who contend that part-time jobs are inferior to full-time jobs, providing lower earnings, substandard fringe benefits, and diminished job security. [\(1\)](#) Such concern has been heightened by the increasing number of people who work part time because they cannot find full-time jobs ([Noreau](#), in this issue). However, according to the Labour Force Survey, most part-timers are **not** interested in full-time employment.

Part-time workers, that is, people who usually work less than 30 hours a week at all jobs, are customarily divided into two groups: "involuntary" and "voluntary". Those who work part time because they cannot find full-time employment are "involuntary" part-time workers. The rest, who have various motivations for their part-time schedules, are "voluntary" part-timers.

But like many labels, "voluntary part-time worker" does not convey a complete or necessarily accurate picture. It includes not only workers who do not **want** a full-time job, but also persons whose circumstances (illness and disability, or responsibilities such as the care of children or the elderly) **prevent** them from working full time. For some of these people, the term "voluntary" is a misnomer.

## Trends in part-time employment

The Labour Force Survey (see [Data source](#)) shows that since 1975, there has been a 57% increase in the number of voluntary part-time workers, compared with a 33% increase in total employment. By 1993, voluntary part-timers numbered almost 1.4 million and represented 11.2% of all employment versus 9.5% in 1975 ([Chart A](#)).



## Chart A Economic conditions affect the relative shares of voluntary and involuntary part-time workers.

Source: *Labour Force Survey*

---

However, the 1993 figure was down from the all-time high of 1.5 million in 1990. This is because the number of voluntary part-time workers is sensitive to business cycles. Like the full-time workforce, their ranks tend to increase in periods of economic expansion and decline in recessions.

While voluntary part-timers still account for the majority of part-time workers, their share has fallen relative to involuntary part-timers. In 1993, they made up 65% of all part-time workers, a considerable drop from 89% in 1975. This was not a steady decline, as again, there was a cyclical effect. The proportion dipped to 71% in the mid-1980s and then rose to 78% by the end of the decade.

## Characteristics of voluntary part-time workers

The characteristics of voluntary part-timers distinguish them from the overall workforce ([Table 1](#)). Women are far more likely than men to be voluntary part-time workers. In 1993, 17% of employed women were voluntary part-timers, almost three times the rate of employed men (6%). Nonetheless, the voluntary part-time component of the male workforce has risen from 4.5% in 1975, compared with a slight decline among female workers (from 18%).



## Table 1 Total employment and voluntary part-time workers, selected characteristics, 1993

Source: *Labour Force Survey*

---

Not only do women have a higher rate of voluntary part-time work, but they also represent the majority of voluntary part-timers. Although women made up 45% of the total workforce in 1993, they constituted 71% of voluntary part-time workers. [\(2\)](#)

Voluntary part-timers are also relatively young. In 1993, 15 to 24 year-olds made up 44% of all voluntary part-timers, but just 16% of all workers. Three occupational groups - service, clerical, and sales - accounted for almost two-thirds of voluntary part-timers, but less than half of all workers.

The characteristics of voluntary part-timers differ, however, depending on their motivation for adopting

this work arrangement.

## Reasons for voluntary part-time work

The Labour Force Survey identifies four reasons for voluntarily working part time: school attendance, not wanting full-time work, personal or family responsibilities, and illness or disability. In 1993, 43% of voluntary part-timers were attending school, and an almost equal number (42%) said they did not want a full-time job. Another 13% cited personal or family responsibilities, while 2% were constrained by illness or disability.

The ranking of these motivations has changed recently. From 1975 to 1991, not wanting a full-time job was the leading reason for voluntary part-time work, and school attendance stood second ([Chart B](#)).



### **Chart B In 1992, school attendance became the leading reason for voluntary part-time work.**

*Source: Labour Force Survey*

Reasons for voluntarily working part time vary with age. Young part-timers are likely to be students. At older ages, illness and disability, and not wanting a full-time job figure more prominently as reasons for working part time. Family or personal responsibilities tend to be cited by women in their prime child-bearing years. Consequently, the four groups of voluntary part-timers, classified according to their reason for working part time, comprise people with very different characteristics.

## Learning and earning

Students are the fastest growing group of voluntary part-timers. By 1993, they numbered 593,000, up 73% from 1975. This reflects both rising school enrolment and the increasing tendency for students to work ([Sunter](#), 1992). Nonetheless, the 1993 total was down from the 1990 peak of 612,000 ([Sunter](#), 1994).

Women employed part time because of school attendance (52%) slightly outnumbered men in 1993. However, this female majority is a relatively recent development: from 1975 to the early 1980s, more male than female part-timers were attending school.

As might be expected, voluntary part-time workers who are students tend to be young. In 1993, 91% of both men and women in this situation were 15 to 24 year-olds ([Table 2](#)).



## Table 2 **Voluntary part-time workers by reason for part-time work, selected characteristics, 1993**

Source: *Labour Force Survey*

Students voluntarily working part time cluster in service and sales occupations. In 1993, 34% were in service occupations, and of those, over half worked in food, beverage and related services; [\(3\)](#) sales positions accounted for another 21%.

Of all voluntary part-timers, students had the lowest percentage of managerial or professional jobs (13%). This is not surprising, since most students are still in the process of acquiring the credentials usually mandatory for such positions.

The demands of attending school are evident in the lowest average usual hours of work of all voluntary part-timers: 13 hours a week for men and 12 for women.

### **Family ties**

Personal or family responsibilities prompted a total of 175,000 people to work part time in 1993. This figure was a 45% increase over 1975, but a decline from the 1990 high of 205,000.

Virtually all (96%) these part-timers were women, and they were concentrated in the prime child-bearing and -rearing years. In 1993, 55% of these women had at least one child under age 6 at home, and another 28% had a child aged 6 to 15.

Of all female part-timers, women citing personal or family responsibilities have the highest representation in managerial or professional occupations. In 1993, 35% of them held such positions, many of which were in nursing or teaching. As well, 20% of women working part time because of personal or family responsibilities were self-employed, double the proportion for female workers in general. And despite their other commitments, women who worked part time for these reasons put in relatively long hours: an average of 16 a week.

### **Illness and disability**

Few people work part time because of illness or disability: just 29,000 in 1993. In fact, since 1975, the total exceeded 30,000 only once (1989).

In 1993, the majority of workers employed part time because of illness or disability were women. However, their predominance was not overwhelming (54%), and they have not always been the majority. Age was also a factor for this group, 26% of whom were 55 or older in 1993.

The most common occupations of both men and women working part time because of illness or disability were in service occupations, followed by managerial or professional positions. As well, the rate of self-employment was high: 32%.

People working part time because of illness or disability averaged 15 hours a week on the job.

## **Part time by choice**

Many part-time workers report that they are simply not interested in full-time employment. In 1993, 576,000 people worked part time because they did not want a full-time job. This was a 58% increase over 1975, but a considerable drop from the 1988 high of 647,000.

While most (83%) workers who did not want a full-time job were women, the proportion of men in this category has risen from 14% to 17% since 1975.

To some extent, not wanting full-time employment is a catch-all category. Reasons for working part time depend on individual perceptions and are not mutually exclusive. Thus, this group includes some individuals who could have given another reason for working part time.

For example, in 1993, close to half (46%) of female part-timers who said they did not want a full-time job had at least one child under 16 at home. Totalling 221,000, they outnumbered women working part time because of personal or family responsibilities. Presumably, some of these women could also have stated "personal or family responsibilities" as their reason for working part time.

As well, about 6,500 people who said they did not want full-time employment were full-time students. Potentially, they might also have given school attendance as their reason for working part time.

On the other hand, there is probably less uncertainty about the motivations of older men who state that they do not want a full-time job. In 1993, over half of them were 55 or over, an age when a part-time job may be an alternative or a prelude to full retirement.

The age distributions of men and women working part time because they do not want full-time work diverge dramatically. Men tend to be either near the end of their working years or just entering the workforce, whereas the distribution of women is much more even. A substantial share of people working part time by choice are in occupations that may enable them to exercise some autonomy. The largest occupational group for men was managerial or professional (29%). Another 19% were in service occupations and 17% were in sales. Among women, the leading occupational group was also managerial

or professional (30%). Almost as many (29%), however, were in clerical jobs, while 21% worked in service occupations.

High self-employment rates among men (38%) and women (17%) choosing part-time over full-time work also indicate that they may have some freedom in arranging their schedules.

People who work part time by choice put in relatively long hours. In 1993, women in this situation averaged 17 hours a week, while the average for men was 16 hours.

## Conclusion

For a large group of workers, part-time work is the option that best fits their responsibilities and lifestyle. A part-time job enables students to go to school, earn money, and gain work experience. Women in their child-bearing years are able to combine employment and child-rearing, and thereby maintain their place in the workforce. Similarly, part-time employment permits some people who are ill or disabled to continue working. For men aged 55 and over, working part time may ease the transition to retirement.

---

## Provincial differences

The prevalence of voluntary part-time work varies across the country (Chart). In 1993, the highest rate of voluntary part-time work was 12.7% in Manitoba. Rates were also above the national average of 11.2% in Ontario, the Prairie provinces, and British Columbia. Newfoundland had an exceptionally low rate of just 5.1%, while rates in Quebec and the Maritimes were in the 8% to 10% range. (The Labour Force Survey does not cover persons living in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories.)

The relative importance of different reasons for part-time work also varies by province. In 1993, school attendance was the leading reason east of Ontario, while not wanting a full-time job was reported as the main motivation in the Prairie provinces and British Columbia.



### Chart **Voluntary part-time work by province, 1993**

*Source: Labour Force Survey*

# Data source

The data in this article are annual averages from Statistics Canada's monthly Labour Force Survey. The time series starts in 1975, the earliest year for which consistent data are available.

Full- and part-time employment are determined on the basis of the total number of hours usually worked each week at all jobs. A person employed in the reference week and who usually works less than 30 hours a week is a part-time worker. Respondents are asked why they usually work less than 30 hours a week. Answers to this question are used to identify the various groups of voluntary part-time workers.

Occupation and class of worker data refer to the respondent's main job, whereas average usual weekly hours are calculated on the basis of all jobs held. However, in 1993, less than 5% of voluntary part-time workers had more than one job, so the effect of this discrepancy is negligible.

---

## Notes

### *Note 1*

For an explanation of the difference between full- and part-time jobs, as opposed to full- and part-time workers or employment, see [H. Pold](#) in this issue.

### *Note 2*

Women also constitute the majority (67%) of "involuntary" part-time workers (see [N. Noreau](#) in this issue).

### *Note 3*

In 1993, students voluntarily working part time made up just 5% of the total workforce, but 12% of all persons in service occupations.

---

## References

- Noreau, N. ["Involuntary part-timers."](#) *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada,

Catalogue 75-001E) 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 25-30.

- Pold, H. "[Jobs! Jobs! Jobs!](#)" *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E) 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 14-17.
- Sunter, D. "[Juggling school and work.](#)" *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E) 4, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 15-21.
- ---. "[Youths - waiting it out.](#)" *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E) 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 31-36.

---

## Author

Ron Logan is with the Labour and Household Surveys Analysis Division of Statistics Canada.

## Source

*Perspectives on Labour and Income*, Autumn 1994, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E). This is the third of five articles in the issue.

---

[HIGHLIGHTS](#) [TABLE OF CONTENTS](#) [SUBJECT INDEX](#) [AUTHOR INDEX](#) [FRANÇAIS](#)

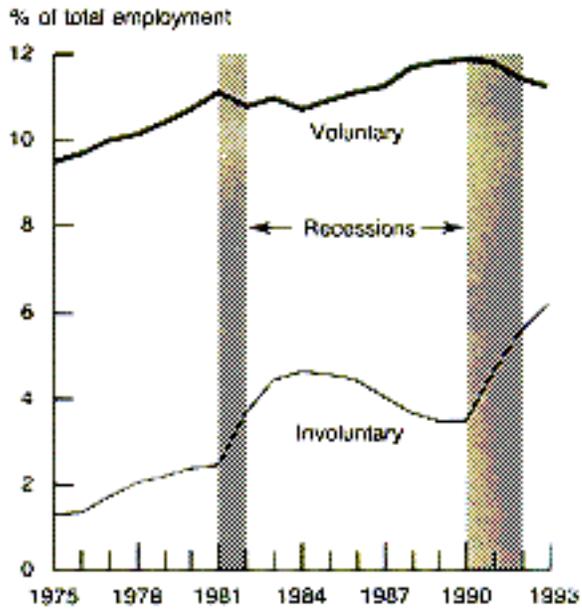
[HELP](#)

[HOME](#)



Chart A

**Economic conditions affect the relative shares of voluntary and involuntary part-time workers.**



Source: Labour Force Survey

Table 1

**Total employment and voluntary part-time workers, selected characteristics, 1993**

	Total employment	Voluntary part-time workers
<b>Number ('000)</b>	<b>12,383</b>	<b>1,383</b>
Average usual weekly hours	38	15
	%	
Increase (1975-93)	33	57
Both sexes	100	100
Men	55	29
Women	45	71
All ages	100	100
15-24 years	16	44
25-34 years	27	15
35-44 years	28	16
45-54 years	19	11
55 years and over	10	13
All occupations	100	100
Managerial and professional	32	23
Clerical	16	22
Sales	10	16
Service	14	26
Primary	5	5
Processing, machining and fabricating	11	2
Construction	5	1
Transportation	4	1
Material handling	3	3
Self-employment rate*	15	16

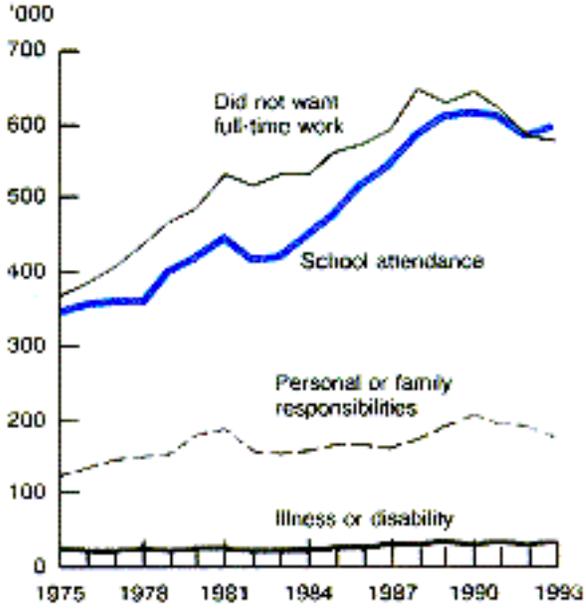
*Source: Labour Force Survey*

*\* Includes self-employed workers in incorporated and unincorporated businesses, with or without paid help.*

*Note: Estimates may not add to totals due to rounding.*

Chart B

**In 1992, school attendance became the leading reason for voluntary part-time work.**



Source: Labour Force Survey

Table 2

**Voluntary part-time workers by reason for part-time work, selected characteristics, 1993**

	School attendance		Did not want full-time work		Personal or family responsibilities	Illness or disability
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Both*	Both**
<b>Number ('000)</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>477</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>29</b>
Average usual						
weekly hours	13	12	16	17	16	15
	%					
All ages	100	100	100	100	100	100
15-24 years	91	91	25	8	6	--
25-34 years	8	7	6	18	41	16
35-44 years	--	2	6	29	36	26
45-54 years	--	--	8	24	11	26
55 years and over	--	--	55	21	7	26
All occupations	100	100	100	100	100	100
Managerial and professional	12	14	29	30	35	19
Clerical	10	27	6	29	27	14
Sales	21	20	17	13	11	13
Service	33	36	19	21	17	28
Primary	7	2	8	4	7	--
Processing, machining and fabricating	4	1	5	1	--	--
Construction	2	--	4	--	--	--
Transportation	2	--	5	1	--	--
Material handling	10	1	5	--	--	--
Self-employment rate†	7	10	38	17	21	32

Source: Labour Force Survey

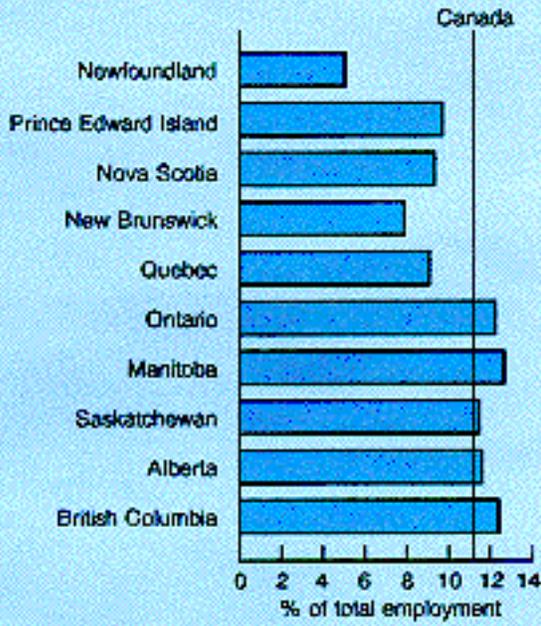
\* The number of men working part time because of personal or family responsibilities (6,500) is too small to allow meaningful cross-tabulations.

*\*\* The number of people working part time because of illness or disability is too small to allow meaningful cross-tabulations by sex.*

*† Includes self-employed workers in incorporated and unincorporated businesses, with or without paid help.*

*Note: Estimates may not add to totals due to rounding.*

### Voluntary part-time work by province, 1993



Source: Labour Force Survey