

# Missing work

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The proportion of full-time employees absent from work for personal reasons (namely, “illness or disability” and “personal or family responsibilities”) at some time during each week has changed little over the past decade. Nevertheless, total time lost has increased.

In 1993, an estimated 5.9% of all full-time employees were absent from work for all or part of any given week for personal reasons, virtually the same rate as in 1983 (6.0%). However, the proportion of time missed from the usual weekly work hours (inactivity rate) had risen from 3.4% to 3.7% per full-time worker. This translates into an increase from 8.6 days in 1983 to 9.3 days in 1993 (see *Data source, definitions and measurements*). While the change for each worker may appear small, the increase in work time missed by all 8.2 million employees was a significant 5.7 million days in 1993.

Throughout the decade, workers lost more time because of illness or disability than they did to attend to personal or family responsibilities. However, during this period, time lost because of illness or disability declined (from 6.7 to 6.1 days per full-time worker), while it increased for personal or family responsibilities (from 1.9 to 3.3 days). This article examines the underlying factors and the resulting impact on absence rates in different industries.

## Illness down, family responsibility up

A number of factors have contributed to the decline in absences

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## Data source, definitions and measurements

The data in this article are annual averages from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The data refer to full-time paid workers holding only one job. Part-time paid workers, the self-employed and unpaid family workers are excluded, because they generally have more opportunity to arrange their work schedules around personal or family responsibilities. Multiple jobholders are excluded because it is not possible, using LFS data, to allocate time lost, or the reason for it, to specific jobs.

**Personal reasons** for absence are split into two categories: “own illness or disability,” and “personal or family responsibilities.” Absences for these two reasons represented about 32% of all time lost by full-time paid workers every week in 1993. Vacations, which accounted for about 45% of total work time lost, are not counted in this study, nor are statutory holidays, which represented 17%.

Absences related to pregnancy or maternity (certainly not considered an absenteeism factor) are in-

cluded in the personal or family responsibilities code in the LFS.<sup>1</sup> While this tends to exaggerate absence levels among some groups of women, the effect on the rate for women overall is probably small. Paternity leave is also included in the personal or family responsibility code, but since the availability and use of this type of leave are believed to be low, the effect on men’s absence rates is likely negligible.

The **incidence** of absence is the percentage of full-time paid workers reporting some absence in the reference week. In calculating incidence, the length of work absence – whether an hour, a day, or a full week – is irrelevant.

The **inactivity rate** shows hours lost as a proportion of the usual weekly hours of all full-time paid workers. It takes into account both the frequency and length of absence.

**Days lost per worker** are calculated by multiplying the inactivity rate by the estimated number of working days in the year (250).

because of illness or disability: the shift of employment from the more hazardous goods-producing industries to the less physically demanding service industries; improved safety measures and awareness programs; healthier working conditions (for example, non-smoking and/or designated smoking areas); and wellness and fitness programs. The decline was greater among male workers – from 6.5 days in 1983 to 5.7 days in 1993 – than among female workers – from 7.0 days to 6.7 days (Table). This reflects, at least in part, men’s concentration in the goods-producing industries,

where the largest reductions have occurred.

The increase in time lost for personal or family responsibilities is largely attributable to the growing participation of women (many of whom have small children) in paid employment. Working women continue to have more responsibility than men for family chores, such as caring for sick children or older family members (Marshall, 1993 and 1994). Because of the unequal sharing of such duties, women’s absence rate is much higher than men’s.<sup>2</sup> In 1983, full-time female employees

Table  
Absences for personal reasons, full-time paid workers, 1993

	Incidence*			Inactivity rate**			Annual days lost per worker †		
	Total	Illness or disability	Personal or family responsibilities	Total	Illness or disability	Personal or family responsibilities	Total	Illness or disability	Personal or family responsibilities
	%						days		
<b>Both sexes</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>3.3</b>
Men	4.5	3.4	1.1	2.6	2.3	0.3	6.5	5.7	0.9
Women	7.8	4.3	3.6	5.3	2.7	2.7	13.4	6.7	6.7
<b>All industries</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>3.3</b>
Goods sector	5.6	3.9	1.7	3.5	2.7	0.8	8.7	6.7	2.0
Agriculture	4.2	--	--	2.1	--	--	5.2	--	--
Other primary	4.7	3.5	--	3.0	2.5	--	7.5	6.4	--
Manufacturing	6.0	4.2	1.8	3.8	2.9	0.9	9.6	7.3	2.3
Construction	4.3	3.0	1.3	2.6	2.2	0.4	6.6	5.4	1.1
Service sector	6.0	3.7	2.3	3.8	2.3	1.5	9.6	5.8	3.8
Transportation, communication and other utilities	5.9	4.1	1.8	4.0	2.9	1.1	9.9	7.3	2.6
Trade	5.0	3.1	1.9	2.9	1.9	1.1	7.4	4.7	2.7
Finance, insurance and real estate	5.6	2.9	2.7	3.6	1.7	1.9	8.9	4.1	4.8
Services	6.4	3.8	2.6	4.2	2.4	1.8	10.5	5.9	4.6
Public administration	6.9	4.7	2.3	4.1	2.8	1.3	10.3	7.1	3.3

Source: Labour Force Survey

\* Absent workers divided by total employed

\*\* Hours absent divided by hours usually worked

† Inactivity rate multiplied by working days in year (250)

lost an average of 3.8 days to attend to personal or family responsibilities; by 1993, the figure had risen to 6.7 days (matching the time they lost because of illness or disability). Among men, however, work time lost on account of personal or family responsibilities remained virtually unchanged, at just under one day.

### Impact on industry rates

The average full-time worker lost 9.3 days for both personal reasons combined in 1993. However, the increase from the 1983 figure (8.6 days) was not universal. In fact, time lost declined in most goods-producing industries, but rose in each of the major service-producing industries. As a result, the ranking of the major industries, in terms of time lost, changed. In

1983, manufacturing workers missed the most time, but by 1993, services, public administration, and transportation, communication and other utilities had pushed manufacturing into fourth place. Agriculture maintained the best record over the period.

### Illness or disability absences

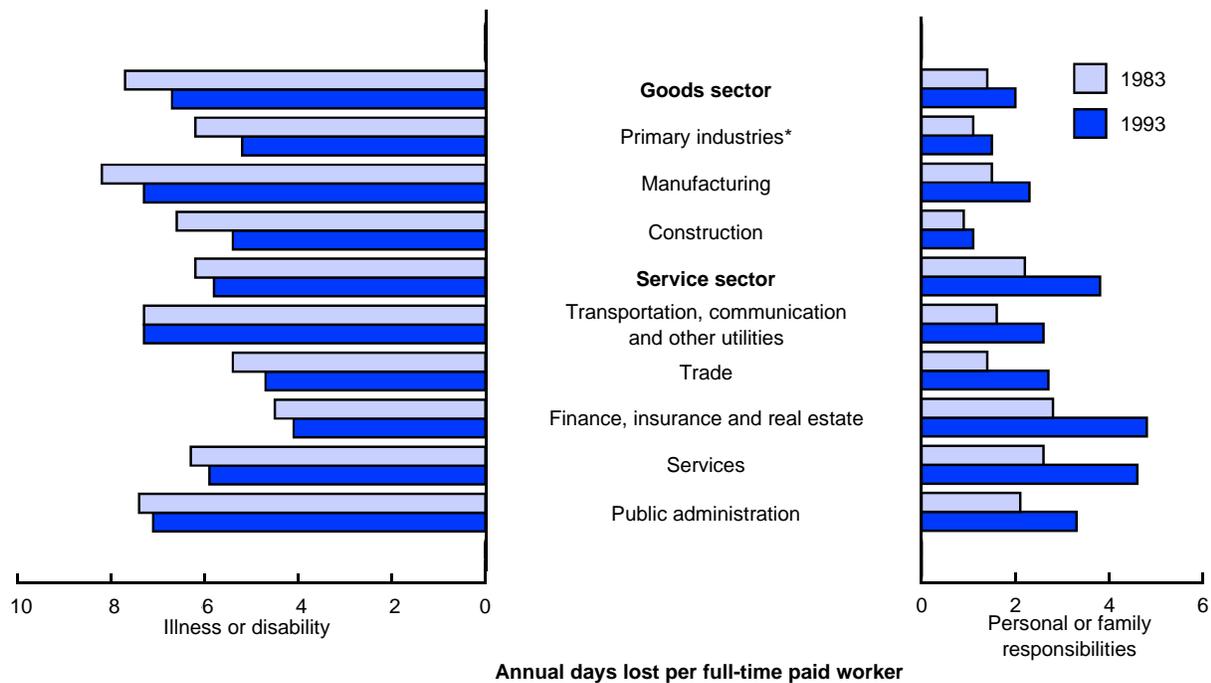
Over the decade, days lost because of illness or disability declined in all the major industries (except transportation, communication and other utilities, where time lost remained stable) (Chart). The largest decrease was in the major goods-producing industries. Time lost per full-time worker fell by almost a full day in manufacturing, and by more than a day in other primary industries (-1.3 days) and in construction

(-1.2 days). The reduction in time lost for this reason was generally less than half a day in most of the service-producing industries.

### Personal or family responsibility absences

Absences because of personal or family responsibilities, on the other hand, have increased since 1983 in all the major industries. The largest increases occurred in the generally female-dominated service-producing industries. Average annual days missed by full-time workers jumped by two days in finance, insurance and real estate and in services. Trade, public administration, and transportation, communication and other utilities also experienced increases of a day or more. In the goods-producing industries, very

Chart  
**Time lost because of personal or family responsibilities has increased.**



Source: Labour Force Survey

\* Agriculture, fishing and trapping, logging and forestry, and mining

little change occurred in construction or other primary industries between 1983 and 1993, but manufacturing workers lost almost a full day more because of personal or family responsibilities.

### Industry absence rate variations persist

The major industries still differ not only in the proportion of workers who report a personal absence during a typical week, but also in the reasons for these absences. The two most important factors in these industry differences are the physical demands of the job and the sex composition of the workforce (Akyeampong, 1988 and 1992).<sup>3</sup> Generally, the more physically demanding and/or hazardous the job, the higher

the illness or disability absence rate (Haggard-Guénette, 1988 and 1992). As well, the higher the proportion of women in an industry, the higher the absence rate because of personal or family responsibilities.

In 1993, higher-than-average (over 4%) illness or disability incidences were reported each week in manufacturing, in transportation, communication and other utilities, and in public administration. Employees in finance, insurance and real estate recorded the lowest incidence (2.9%). Translated into total days missed, workers in the more hazardous manufacturing and transportation, communication and other utilities industries lost the most time (7.3 days), followed by those in the highly unionized pub-

lic administration (7.1 days). Employees in finance, insurance and real estate missed the fewest days (4.1).

Personal or family responsibilities accounted for higher-than-average absence rates (between 2% and 3%) among workers in several industries with relatively high concentrations of women: finance, insurance and real estate; services; and public administration. By contrast, rates were lower than average (below 2%) in the male-dominated goods-producing industries. Again, these differences were mirrored in days lost per worker. In 1993, close to five days were lost by full-time workers in finance, insurance and real estate, and by those in services, compared with only one day in construction.

The weekly absence rate for both personal reasons combined ranged from around 4% in agriculture and construction to over 6% in services and in public administration. The estimated time lost during the year was 5.2 days in agriculture, 6.6 days in construction, 10.5 days in services, and 10.3 days in public administration.

### Larger variations at the detailed industry level

At a more detailed industry level, differences in absence rates were often more striking. For example, in 1993 days lost for illness or disability in durable manufacturing industries averaged 7.8, a full day more than in non-durable manufacturing. On the other hand, employees in durable manufacturing lost less time for personal or family responsibilities than did their counterparts in non-durable manufacturing: 1.8 days versus 2.7 days. Average days missed because of illness or disability in both wholesale and retail trade were similar, at around 4.7 days, yet time lost for personal or family responsibilities in the slightly female-dominated retail trade exceeded that in wholesale trade: 3.1 days versus 1.9 days.

Workers in health and social services lost almost twice as much time as their counterparts in education, whether for illness or disability (9.4 days versus 5.5 days) or for personal or family responsibilities (6.6 days versus 3.8 days). Their time loss for illness or disability can perhaps be attributed to the peculiarities of their work arrangements (such as extended hours and shift work) and to their greater exposure to disease. Their high absence rate for personal or family responsibilities reflects the predominance of women in those industries. Workers in banks and other financial institutions (also heavily female-dominated) had the second high-

est absence rate for personal or family demands: 6.1 days in 1993.

In public administration overall, time lost because of illness or disability was roughly 7 days per full-time worker in 1993. Federal workers lost more time for personal or family responsibilities (4.5 days) than did their counterparts in provincial (3.0) and local (2.1) governments.

A statistical publication entitled *Work absence rates*, containing rates by (detailed) industry, occupation, sex, age and province from 1977 to 1994, will be on sale soon. See *What's new?* for more details.

### Discussion

Absences from work remain a challenge for Canadian employers. While the reductions in absences because of illness or disability are encouraging, further research using sophisticated methods might establish how much of this has resulted from shifts in the proportions of workers employed in specific industries and how much is related to other factors, such as improved safety and health measures and programs. For example, workers in non-durable manufacturing industries had lower absence rates than those in durable manufacturing firms, so a shift from durable to non-durable manufacturing employment would result in lower absence rates for manufacturing as a whole even if the rates in specific industries did not change. However, almost all major and specific industries have recorded a decline in illness or disability absence rates, suggesting that both employment shifts and other factors have contributed to the overall decline.

For absences due to personal or family responsibilities, a clearer interpretation of the trends de-

pends on being able to break that broad category into finer components such as maternity and paternity leave, child and elder care, and other personal or family obligations (unpaid household work, for example). Since the LFS currently does not make these distinctions, one has to turn to the limited data from other sources.

An initial examination of some of these sources<sup>4</sup> suggests that the removal of maternity leave from the personal or family responsibility category would reduce but not completely eliminate the male-female absence rate differentials. Also, the availability and use of paternity leave are not widespread, and hence omitting it would hardly change the overall rate for men. General Social Survey data clearly demonstrate that mothers continue to be burdened with most of unpaid domestic work even when both parents are employed full-time, implying that women face greater challenges in balancing work and family than do men. Not surprisingly, women tend to lose more time from work than men because of personal or family responsibilities. Consequently, absence rates for this reason tend to be higher in industries with higher proportions of female employees. □

### Notes

1 The redesigned LFS questionnaire, scheduled for implementation in 1997, will break personal or family responsibilities into sub-categories (for example, care of own children, care of elderly family members, maternity leave). The new categories will greatly enhance the analytical usefulness of the LFS data for estimating absence rates.

2 In addition to the uneven distribution of family chores among men and women, the inclusion of maternity leave in the personal or family responsibilities category further raises women's absence rates. Removal of maternity leave would reduce the male-female absence rate differentials. According to the Absence from

Work Survey (AWS), a supplement to the February LFS, an average of approximately 210,000 female workers took maternity leave lasting two consecutive weeks or more each year from 1983 to 1992. Thus, the proportion of women using this leave was not overwhelming (4%), and some of them may have left their jobs altogether. Furthermore, the AWS shows a maternity leave growth rate much smaller than the increase in time lost by women for personal or family responsibilities. Even in an analysis limited to short-term (part-week) absences – theoretically eliminating most, if not all, maternity leave – women still lost about twice as much time as men for personal or family responsibilities.

3 Other factors contributing to industry absence rates are the extent of unionization and the age composition of the workforce. Generally, the higher the proportion of union members, the higher the sick, personal or family-related leave entitlements and, possibly, use. Similarly,

the older the workforce, the higher the illness or disability absence rates. Worker boredom (with repetitive work, for example), job stress and employer-employee relations may be additional factors in work absences. Indeed, some respondents may give illness, disability, personal or family responsibility as the reason for absence, when the real cause may be boredom or job stress.

4 For example, data from the AWS (note 2), as well as administrative data from the Unemployment Insurance program itself.

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