

KILM 5. Part-time workers

Introduction

The indicator on part-time workers focuses on individuals whose working hours total less than “full time”, as a proportion of total employment. Because there is no agreed international definition as to the minimum number of hours in a week that constitute full-time work, the dividing line is determined either on an economy-by-economy basis or through the use of special estimations. Two measures are calculated for this indicator: total part-time employment as a proportion of total employment, sometimes referred to as the “part-time employment rate”; and the percentage of the part-time workforce comprised of women. The first of these measures is available for both men and women. Table 5 contains information for 51 economies.

Use of the indicator

There has been rapid growth in part-time work in the past few decades in the developed economies. This trend is related to the increase in the number of women in the labour force, but also to attempts to introduce labour market flexibility in reaction to changing work organization within industry and to the growth of the services sector. Of concern to policy-makers in the apparent move towards more flexible working arrangements is the implicit assumption that such working arrangements are less economically secure and less stable than full-time employment. Recent research seems to disprove the assumption; however, the final results are not yet available.¹

In itself, the concept of part-time work should not be considered as negative. Part-time work may offer the chance of a better balance between working life and family responsibilities, and suits workers who prefer shorter working hours and more time for their private life. Policy-makers may promote part-time work as a means to redistribute working time in countries of high unemployment, thus lowering politically sensitive unemployment rates without requiring an increase in the total number of hours worked.²

Part-time employment, however, is not always a choice. A review of KILM 12, time-related underemployment, confirms that a substantial number of part-timers would prefer to be working full time. While flexibility may be one advantage of part-time work, disadvantages may exist in comparison with colleagues who work full time. For example, part-time workers may face lower hourly wages,³ ineligibility for certain social benefits and more restricted career prospects. Some governments have introduced measures to encourage part-time employment by offering firms financial and tax incentives meant to offset costs associated with bringing entitlements to social benefits for part-time workers in line with those of full-time workers.

Looking at part-time employment by sex is useful to see the extent to which the female labour force is more likely than the male to work part time. Part-time work is often a

¹ For a review of the debate, see P. Bollé: “Part-time work: Solution or trap?”, in *International Labour Review* (Geneva, ILO), 1997/4; website: <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/support/publ/revue/index.htm>.

² Ibid.

³ Wage differentials are likely to show high variation across occupations and skill levels. See J. King: “Part-time workers’ earnings: Some comparison”, in *Compensation and Working Conditions* (Washington, DC, Bureau of Labor Statistics), Summer 2000.

characteristic of women's employment. Although not included as part of this indicator's coverage, age breakdowns are also significant and would probably demonstrate that young workers (aged 15 to 24 years) – especially those enrolled in school – and older workers (55 years and over) are more likely than those in the prime age group (25 to 54 years) to work part time. A suggested virtue of part-time work is that it facilitates the gradual entry of young people into the labour force and the exit of older workers from the labour market.⁴

Definitions and sources

There is no official ILO definition of full-time work, largely because it varies from economy to economy. At the 81st Session of the International Labour Conference in 1994, the ILO defined “part-time worker” as “an employed person whose normal hours of work are less than those of comparable full-time workers”.⁵ Thus, the demarcation point between full and part time is left to the individual economies to define. Some economies use worker interpretation of their own employment situation for distinguishing full-time versus part-time work; that is, survey respondents are classified according to how they *perceive* their work contribution. Other economies use a cut-off point based on weekly hours usually or actually worked. Dividing lines are typically somewhere between 30 and 40 hours a week. Thus, people who work, say, 35 hours or more per week may be considered “full-time workers”, and those working less than 35 hours “part-time workers”.

The definition of a standard work-week can, and often does, provide a legal or cultural basis for the establishment of starting-points for requirements of employee benefits, such as health care, and overtime premiums for hours worked in excess of the standard week. It should be recognized that what might be thought of as the “standard” work-week for an economy could be higher than the official demarcation point for full-time work in a statistical sense. In other words, while a 35- to 40-hour work-week is the probable cut-off standard for full-time work for many industries and workplaces throughout much of the world, national statistical definitions for full-time work are often somewhere between 30 and 37 hours.

In 1997, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) initiated an analysis of part-time work definitions and concluded that a definition of part-time work based on a threshold of 30 hours would better suit the purposes of international comparisons.⁶ Since then, the OECD has carried out work to harmonize data for its member countries, using a 30-hour cut-off, except for Japan for which the 35-hour cut-off is maintained. The OECD harmonized data set makes up the majority of table 5. This should not be interpreted as a decision by the ILO to favour the 30-hour definition, but rather as an attempt to present a consistent set of information for as many economies as possible. For economies in Latin America and the Caribbean, the indicator was assembled by the ILO Caribbean Multidisciplinary Advisory Team (CAMAT).

Of the 51 economies with information on part-time work included in table 5, all but two derive their information from labour force surveys; the remaining two obtain their information from population censuses (British Virgin Islands, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines). Establishment-based surveys, in which information on employees comes

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The 81st Session adopted the Part-Time Work Convention (No. 175) and Recommendation (No. 182).

⁶ OECD: “The definition of part-time work for the purpose of international comparisons”, in *Labour market and social policy*, Occasional Paper No. 22 (Paris, 1997); website: [http://www.oilis.oecd.org/OLIS/1997DOC.NSF/LINKTO/OCDE-GD\(97\)121](http://www.oilis.oecd.org/OLIS/1997DOC.NSF/LINKTO/OCDE-GD(97)121).

directly from payroll records of establishments, are most unlikely to provide information on the number of hours that individuals work and thus cannot be used as a reliable source for this indicator.⁷

One reason that labour force surveys are the preferred source of information for distinguishing between full- and part-time work is that a certain, varying proportion of workers in all economies possess more than one job. In such cases, accounting for the primary jobs of survey respondents may result in their classification as part-time workers, but adding information on the second (and possibly third) jobs may boost their hours over the full-time mark. In other words, it is the total number of hours that an individual normally works in a week that determines full- or part-time status, not that person's job *per se*, especially if only the "main" job is the object of concern. Only labour force surveys (and population censuses with fairly extensive questions) can provide information on the total number of hours that individuals work.

The table notes include the distinction between "usual" and "actual" hours worked. "Usual hours" indicates that it is the number of hours that people *typically* work in a survey week that determines their full- or part-time status, rather than the number of hours that they *actually* work. Usual hours comprise normal working hours as well as overtime or extra time usually worked, whether paid or not. Usual hours do not take into consideration unplanned leave. As an example, a person who usually works 40 hours a week, but who was sick for one day (eight hours) in the survey period, will nevertheless be classified as a full-time worker (for an economy with a 35-hour break point for full-time work).

Limitations to comparability

Information on part-time work can be expected to differ markedly across economies, principally because economies use different definitions of full-time work and also because they may have different cultural or workplace norms. The age inclusions for labour force eligibility can also be an important source of variation. Entry ages vary across economies, as do upper age limits. If one economy counts everyone over the age of 10 in the survey, while another starts at age 16, the two economies can be expected to have differences in part-time employment rates for this reason alone. Similarly, some economies have no upper age bounds for coverage eligibility, while others draw the line at some point, such as 65 years. Any cut-off linked to age will result in some people being missed among the "employed" counts, with the greater likelihood of those missed being part-time workers. Yet another basis for variation stems from the definitions used for "unpaid family workers". Economies that have no hourly bound for inclusion (one hour or more) or a relatively low bound – for instance, 10 hours per week – can be expected to have more part-time workers than those with higher bounds such as 15 hours.

Use of the OECD data set, discussed in the previous section, while largely of benefit to cross-economy comparisons, can also have some negative effects. These will depend on the individual situation for each economy included in the set, as economies vary in terms of each of the following: the range of full-time/part-time hour cut-offs; standard work-weeks in general or in particular industries or occupations; individual conceptual frameworks for full-

⁷ Additional documentation regarding national practices in the collection of statistics is provided in ILO: *Sources and Methods: Labour Statistics, Vol. 3: Economically active population, employment, unemployment and hours of work (household surveys)* (Geneva, 2003); and *Vol. 5: Total and economically active population, employment and unemployment (population censuses)* (Geneva, 2003).

and part-time measurement; and the extent of information available to the OECD for the estimation and adjustment process.⁸

Although harmonized to the greatest extent possible, part-time measurement still varies according to the usual or actual hours criterion. A criterion based on actual hours will generally yield a part-time rate higher than one based on usual hours, particularly if there are temporary reductions in working time as a result of holiday, illness, etc. Therefore, seasonal effects will play an important role in fluctuations in actual hours worked. In addition, the main job or all jobs specification may be important. In some economies, the time cut-off is based on hours spent on the main job, and in others on total hours spent on all jobs. Measures may therefore reflect usual or actual hours worked on the main job or usual or actual hours worked on all jobs.

Because of these differences, as well as others that may be specific to a particular economy, cross-economy comparisons must be made with great care. These caveats notwithstanding, measures of part-time employment can be quite useful for understanding labour market behaviour, more particularly for individual economies but also across economies.

⁸ Users with a keen interest in these comparisons should examine OECD: “The definition of part-time work...”, *op. cit.*

Trends

Figure 5a. Part-time employment rates, selected economies (actual hours, all jobs covered), 1990-2001

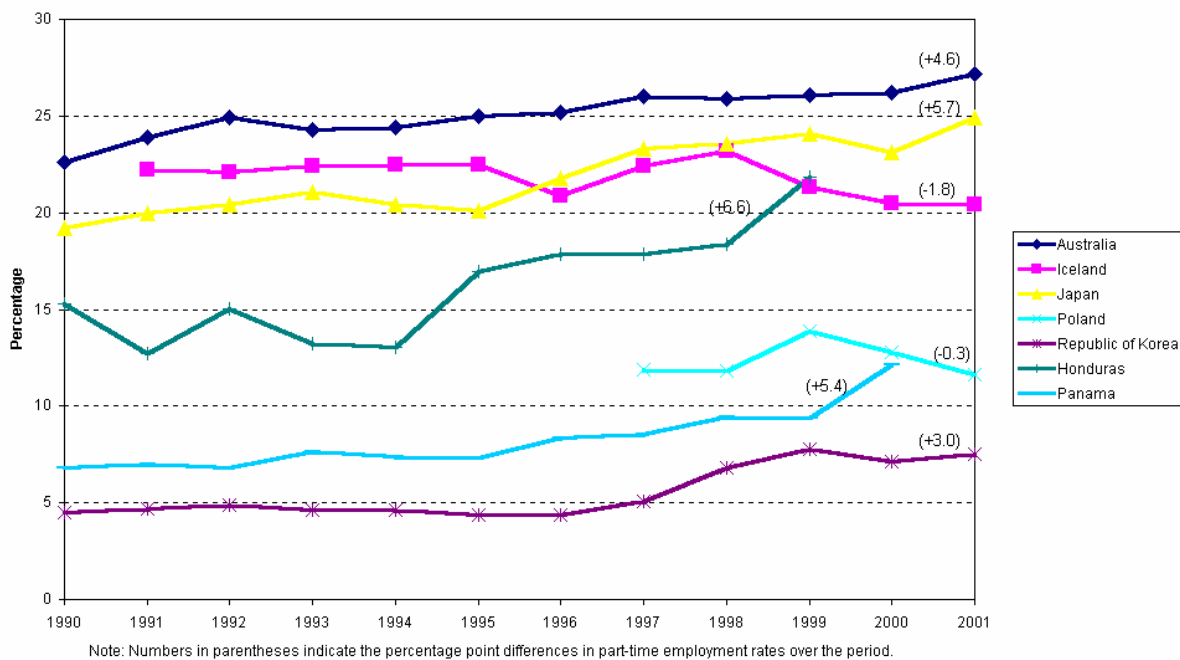
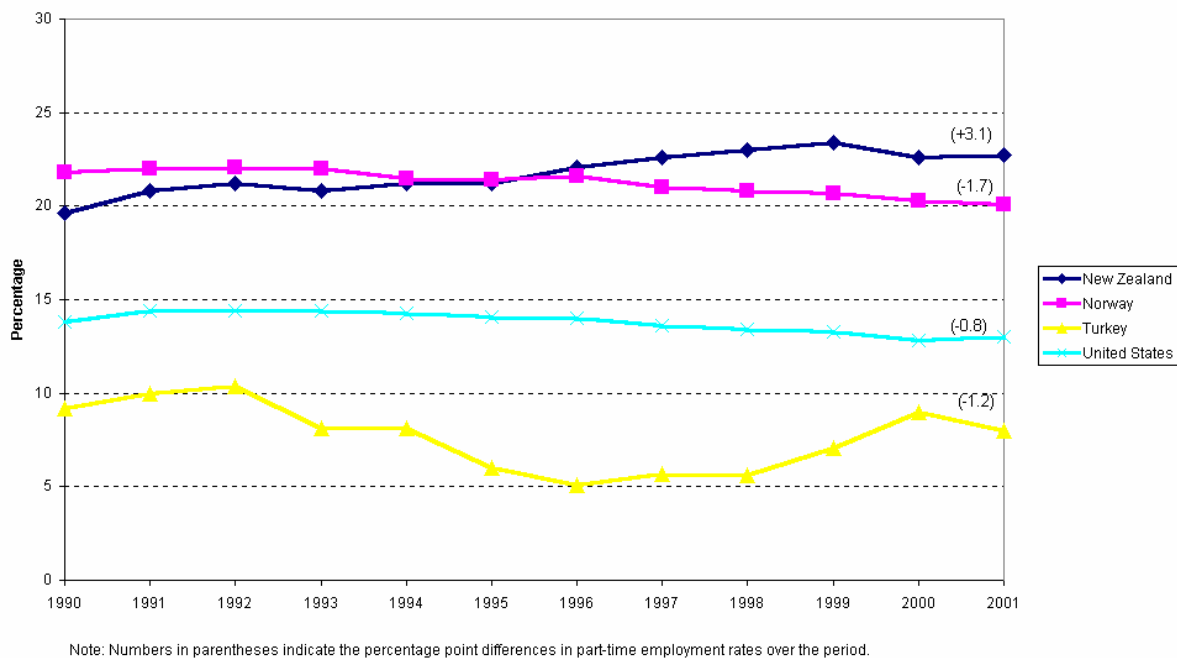


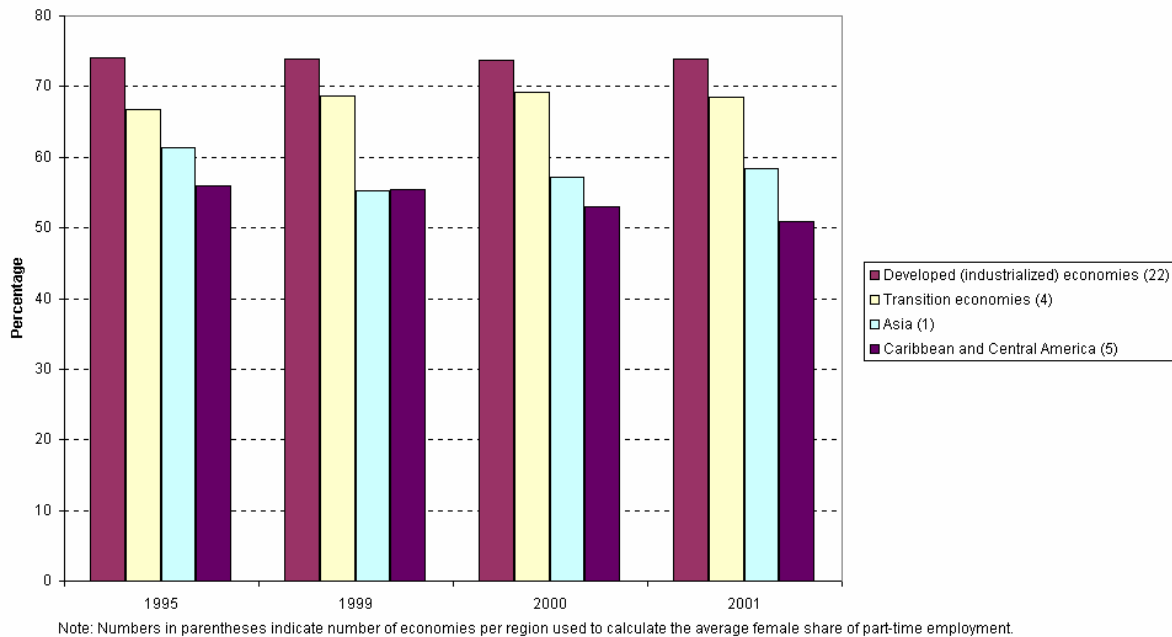
Figure 5b. Part-time employment rates, selected economies (usual hours, all jobs covered), 1990-2001



Time trends of part-time employment rates show little change per country since 1990, either in terms of actual hours (figure 5a) or usual hours (figure 5b). The most dramatic upswings in part-time employment are seen in the Central American countries of Honduras and Panama (6.6 and 5.4 percentage points, respectively). Japan reports an increase of 5.7 percentage points between 1990 and 2001, and the Oceania countries of Australia and New Zealand

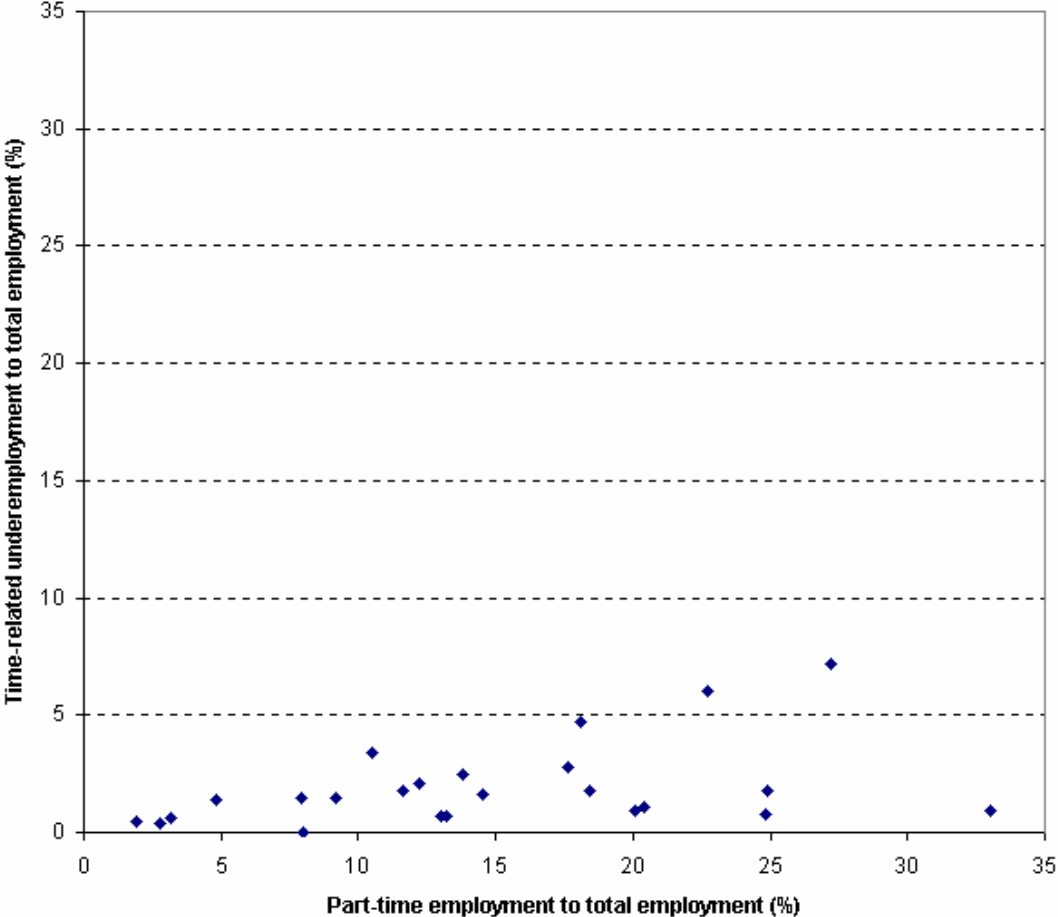
show an increasing trend as well (4.6 and 3.1 points). The European countries of Iceland and Norway show slightly declining rates of part-time employment over the time period, as do Turkey and the United States.

Figure 5c. Female share of part-time employment, regional averages, 1995 and 1999-2001



In almost all economies, a larger proportion of women than men work part time, and women thus account for well over half of all part-time workers in the majority of economies for which data are available. There are, however, regional variations. The difference between female and male shares of part-time work continues to be highest in the developed (industrialized) economies and lowest in the Caribbean and Central American regions. The female share of part-time employment hovers around 50 per cent in the Caribbean and Central American economies, while women in the developed economies make up three-quarters of the total of persons working part time.

Figure 5d. Part-time employment and time-related underemployment as proportions of total employment, developed (industrialized) economies, 2000



The positive relationship shown in figure 5d between part-time employment and time-related underemployment (the latter taken from table 12), both expressed as proportions of total employment, confirms that part-time employment is not always a choice and that a substantial number of part-time workers would prefer to be working full time.