

KILM 6. 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 internationally accepted definition as to the minimum number of hours in a week that constitute full-time work, the dividing line is determined either on a country-by-country 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. Table 6 contains information for 104 economies.

Use of the indicator

There has been rapid growth in part-time work in the past few decades in developed economies. This trend is related to the increase in female labour force participation, but also results from policies attempting to raise labour market flexibility in reaction to changing work organization within industries and to the growth of the services sector. Of concern to policy-makers in the apparent move towards more flexible working arrangements is the risk that such working arrangements may be less economically secure and less stable than full-time employment.¹

Part-time employment has been seen as an instrument to increase labour supply.

¹ For a review of recent trends in working-time arrangements, see Boulin, J.-Y. et al. (eds.): *Decent working time: New trends, new issues* (Geneva, ILO, 2006) and Messenger, J.C. (ed.): *Working time and workers' preferences in industrialized countries: Finding the balance* (Routledge, 2004).

Indeed, as 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, it may allow more working-age persons to actually join the labour force. Also, policy-makers have promoted part-time work in an attempt 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.

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, ineligibility for certain social benefits and more restricted career and training prospects.² Since the early 1990s, most OECD countries have introduced measures to improve the quality of part-time work, for example with respect to social benefits for part-time workers in line with those of full-time workers. Nevertheless, occupational segregation between part-time and full-time work remains an issue in most countries as it limits occupational choices of part-time workers.³

Looking at part-time employment by sex is useful to see the extent to which the female labour force is more likely to work part time than the male labour force.⁴ Age breakdowns

² “How good is part-time work?”, OECD Position paper, July 2010; <http://www.oecd.org/employment/emp/48806797.pdf>.

³ See Sparreboom, T.: “Gender equality, part-time work and segregation”, paper presented at the 73rd Decent Work Forum, February 2013, ILO, Geneva.

⁴ See ILO: *Key Indicators of the Labour Market, Seventh Edition* (Geneva, 2011), Chapter 1, section B,

are also significant and often demonstrate that young workers (aged 15 to 24 years) are more likely than adults (25 years and over) to work part time.⁵ A suggested virtue of part-time work is that it facilitates the gradual entry of young persons into the labour force and the exit of older workers from the labour market.

Definitions and sources

There is no official ILO definition of full-time work, largely because it is difficult to arrive at an internationally agreed demarcation point between full-time and part-time given the national variations of what these terms mean. 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”.⁶ Thus, the demarcation point is left to the individual countries to define. Some countries 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. (See, for example, results in table 6 based on the European Labour Force Survey with Eurostat as the source.) Other countries 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 one country, 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.⁷ Since then, the OECD has carried out work to harmonize data for its member countries, using a threshold of 30 usual hours of work in the main job, which is displayed in the data for table 6 for countries with OECD as repository.

Labour force surveys serve as the source of information on part-time work for nearly all countries included in table 6. Establishment-based surveys, in which information on employees comes directly from payroll records of establishments, are unlikely to provide information on the number of hours that individuals work and thus cannot be used as a reliable source for this indicator.

Another 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 countries possesses 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

“Gender equality, employment and part-time work in developed economies”.

⁵ See ILO: *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2013: A generation at risk* (Geneva, 2013); <http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-employment-trends/youth/2013/lang--en/index.htm>.

⁶ The 81st Session of the International Labour Conference adopted the Part-Time Work Convention (No. 175) and Recommendation (No. 182); texts available at <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/convdisp1.htm>.

⁷ 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).

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*. Only labour force surveys (and population censuses with fairly extensive questionnaires) can provide information on the total number of hours that individuals work. Nonetheless, many of the countries with information based on labour force surveys still report the number of hours worked on the main job only, thus disregarding the fact that a person may work the equivalent of full-time hours in multiple jobs.⁸

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 short reference period such as one week, over a long observation period of a month, quarter, season or year that comprises the short reference measurement period used.⁹ 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 a country 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 countries, principally because countries use different definitions of full-time work and also because

⁸ Users will find information on jobs covered – all jobs, main job only, etc. – in the "job coverage" field of the data table.

⁹ Resolution concerning the measurement of working time, adopted by the 18th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, Geneva, 2008; http://www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/standards-and-guidelines/resolutions-adopted-by-international-conferences-of-labour-statisticians/WCMS_112455/lang--en/index.htm.

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 countries, as do upper age limits. If one country counts everyone over the age of 10 in the survey, while another starts at age 16, the two countries can be expected to have differences in part-time employment rates for this reason alone. Similarly, some countries 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; as part-time work is particularly prevalent among the older and younger cohorts, this will lower the measured incidence of part-time employment. Yet another basis for variation stems from the definitions used for "contributing family workers". Countries that have no hourly bound for inclusion (one hour or more) 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-country comparisons, can also have some negative effects. These will depend on the individual situation for each country included in the set, as countries 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- and part-time measurement; and the extent of information available to the OECD for the estimation and adjustment process.¹⁰

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.

¹⁰ Users with a keen interest in these comparisons should examine OECD: "The definition of part-time work for the purpose of international comparisons", op. cit.

Therefore, seasonal effects will play an important role in fluctuations in actual hours worked. In addition, the specification of main job or all jobs may be important. In some countries, the time cut-off is based on hours spent on the main job; 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 country, cross-country 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 for individual countries but also across countries.