How good is part-time work?

Who works part-time in OECD countries?

How good are part-time jobs for workers?

How useful are part-time jobs for societies?

What can governments do to make the most of part-time work?

Further information

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On average, one in four women and one in ten men working in OECD countries work part-time. The incidence of part-time work is highest in the Netherlands, where over 35% of workers are part-timers. The incidence is also relatively high in Switzerland, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany and New Zealand, where more than 20% of workers are part-timers (Figure 1). Many of the countries that experienced strong growth in the share of part-time employment during the 1980s and early 1990s saw further increases, or at least a stabilisation, over the past decade.

Part-time work has traditionally been dominated by women, who still make up more than 70% of part-time workers today. Most prime-aged women who work part-time do so to balance their work with their caring responsibilities. However, the past decade has seen an increase in the importance of part-time work among other demographic groups who also want to combine work with non-work activities, such as students, workers with health problems and older workers involved in a gradual transition to retirement.
The vast majority of part-time workers do not want to work full-time. Even in countries with the most so-called “involuntary” part-time workers – Australia, Japan, Italy, Germany, Canada, Spain and New Zealand – at most one third of part-time workers would prefer a full-time job. However, there are clear differences between demographic groups. Men working part-time are, on average, about 30% more likely to be involuntary than women, whereas older workers are less than half as likely as others to be working part-time involuntarily. While part-time work appears to be predominantly a voluntary choice, this choice often reflects external constraints, such as limited time to devote to work due to caring or study responsibilities or an inability to work longer hours due to illness or disability. For example, in countries with relatively costly child care, working women are more likely to work part-time than in countries where child care is less expensive.

New OECD research shows that part-timers are penalised vis-à-vis full-timers with respect to earnings potential and job security, but typically have more family-friendly working-time arrangements.

Part-timers tend to earn less per hour than full-timers, once differences in the individual and job characteristics of part-time and full-time workers have been taken into account (Figure 2). They are also less likely to participate in training and are less optimistic about their prospects for future career advancement. It is likely that, over time, these effects reinforce each other. There is also a strong correlation between part-time work and job insecurity. Part-timers are less likely to have a permanent contract than full-timers. For women in part-time jobs, it is the temporary nature of many part-time jobs, rather than part-time work itself, that leaves them feeling less secure about their jobs. In contrast, men in part-time jobs feel less secure than men in full-time jobs on average, even if they have a permanent contract.
Part-time workers are less likely to be union members than full-time workers. Historically, trade unions have been reluctant to push for better working conditions for part-time workers and have in some cases actively campaigned against the spread of part-time work. However, the gap in union membership between full-time and part-time workers has declined over the past two decades as unions reassessed their approach and became more successful in recruiting part-time workers as members.

Some aspects of job quality are better for part-time workers (Figure 2). Part-timers tend to have more control over their working time than full-time workers, despite having characteristics – low-skilled occupations, temporary contracts and concentration in small firms – that tend to be associated with less control over working time. They are also less likely to work on Sundays or at night than full-timers, even though part-timers typically work in industries and occupations with high rates of non-standard working hours. Shorter working hours mean part-timers are less likely to work more than 10 hours per day than full-timers and are less stressed. Part-time workers also face less work-related health and safety risk.

The growth of part-time work does not seem to have reduced its quality. In fact, while benefits and penalties associated with part-time work can be found across almost all OECD countries, the penalty on earnings potential and job security tends to be smaller in countries where part-time work is most widespread, whereas the premium in work-life balance is just as big.

For some part-time workers, the benefits of more flexible working time appear to be outweighed by the costs of lost earning potential and job insecurity. Men in part-time jobs and women who work part-time involuntarily have lower job satisfaction than equivalent full-timers. However, women who work part-time voluntarily – these form the vast majority of part-timers – appear to be relatively happy with the trade-
off they make when accepting a part-time job: lower earnings potential and job security are the price to pay for more family-friendly working arrangements.

This does not mean that policy makers should not be concerned about the quality of part-time jobs for these women. Many workers take up a part-time job in response to temporary constraints on their time due to caring responsibilities, study or illness. While they may be content to trade-off some current earnings for a short-term gain in work-life balance, it is important that their long-run career prospects not be compromised. The danger is that long spells in part-time work can accumulate and magnify the effects of lower wages and fewer hours, with resulting adverse effects on longer-term earnings potential and, ultimately, retirement income.

Part-time work is often viewed as a way of attracting more people into employment, notably among groups with traditionally high inactivity rates, such as mothers of young children, youth, older workers and people with health problems. Whether an expansion of part-time work is desirable for society as a whole depends, in large part, on its impact on labour utilisation, that is, the total number of hours worked in the economy.

Past increases in part-time work have been associated with greater labour market participation of women and higher overall employment rates. More generally, the main reasons for inactivity and part-time work are closely aligned: study for youth, caring responsibilities for prime-age women and sickness or early retirement for older workers. By allowing workers who are currently unable – or unwilling – to work full-time to maintain their labour market connections and skills, facilitating access to part-time work can foster workforce participation. The data bear this out: the employment rate is more than 10 percentage points lower in the 10 OECD countries with the lowest part-time shares (around 60% on average) than in other OECD countries (Figure 3).

Despite this, there is a risk that too large of an expansion of part-time work could have a perverse effect on the total number of hours worked in the economy. The international comparisons in Figure 3 suggest that, beyond a certain level, part-time work may develop at the expense of full-time employment. In the 10 OECD countries where part-time work is most widespread, on average 17% of people of working-age hold a part-time job, against 12% on average across countries with intermediate part-time shares. Similar overall employment rates in the two groups of countries mean that fewer people are working full-time in countries with a high part-time share.

This pattern is particularly striking among prime-aged women (Figure 3). In countries with a low share of part-time employment, less than 10% of these women, on average, work part-time but more than 60% hold a full-time job. On the contrary, almost 30% of women aged 25-54 work part-time on average in the top 10 countries, with only 45% in full-time employment. As a result, the overall employment rates of prime-aged women are very close in both cases and the total number of hours worked by prime-aged women is clearly lower in countries where female part-time employment is most widespread. In these countries, beyond the fact that more women take up part-time work for caring responsibilities, the part-time share is also very high because part-time spells are much longer.
Figure 3: Full-time work, part-time work and inactivity: two possible trade-offs

Notes: PT share: Part-time share, defined as the percentage of part-timers in the working-age population (resp. female population aged 25-54).

a) Countries with low PT share: Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Korea, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Spain, Turkey; Countries with medium PT share: Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Sweden, United States; Countries with high PT share: Australia, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

b) Countries with low PT share: Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Korea, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Sweden, United States; Countries with medium PT share: Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Japan, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain, Turkey; Countries with high PT share: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, United Kingdom.


These simple international comparisons do not provide definitive conclusions concerning the advantages and drawbacks of part-time work for promoting higher labour utilisation, since they do not account for other important factors that affect participation and hours of work choices. But they do suggest that encouraging the spread of part-time work will not necessarily be enough to bring under-represented groups into employment and tap more labour supply. Meeting this goal also requires that taking up or returning to full-time employment is both attractive and possible for part-timers.
What can governments do to make the most of part-time work?

Since the early 1990s, most OECD countries have enacted important legislation intended to raise the quality of part-time work while also facilitating mobility between part- and full-time employment. Virtually all OECD countries have introduced regulations requiring that part-time workers receive comparable hourly wages and working conditions to full-time workers. Many countries have also entitled full-time workers to request reduced working hours in certain circumstances. In most cases, statutory rights to request a part-time schedule were granted to parents of young children, the workforce group that is most at risk of withdrawing from the labour market if part-time work opportunities are not available. These rights apply for a limited period of time, usually until children reach school age. In a number of countries, employers must give their existing part-time employees preferential treatment when hiring for full-time positions.

These various provisions can be assembled into a coherent package that promotes access to high-quality part-time employment while avoiding overly long part-time spells. However, not all countries have implemented the whole package and, even in some countries where regulatory reforms were most comprehensive, implementation may be unsatisfactory. In practice, legal provisions are not self-enforcing: workers must make a complaint to a court or tribunal if they feel they are not being treated equally or if their request for part-time work is not granted. Moreover, these provisions impose additional obligations on employers that may unintentionally obstruct the hiring of some workforce groups, such as women of child-bearing age. It is important that these reforms be better evaluated in order to understand what works, what does not, and why, as there is little evidence on their effectiveness.

It is important to note that regulations alone cannot address every issue connected to part-time work. Very few part-timers take up or return to full-time employment each year – less than 15% on average in European countries for which data are available. The vast majority of them continue to work part-time by choice. Strikingly, the chance of getting a full-time job is even more limited for part-time workers facing severe economic hardship, who instead move out of employment more frequently than other part-timers. There should not be barriers or penalties to part-time work for individuals who strongly value shorter working hours for their work-life balance, but it is also crucial to remove barriers to move from part-time to full-time employment.

A first priority is to ensure that full-time work remains economically attractive as compared to part-time work. In this respect, it is worrisome that tax and benefit systems make taking up a full-time job less attractive financially, sometimes considerably. Social transfer payments decrease and taxes increase as earnings rise, and the corresponding lost income may offset a large proportion of the wage gain associated with the increase in working hours. For every additional dollar earned, 60% is lost in net social transfers on average across OECD countries for a lone parent with two children moving from half-time to full-time in a low paid job. As this amount does not account for possible additional childcare costs, the residual income gain may be even lower. Evidence suggests that these financial disincentives reduce the probability of returning to full-time employment and increase the probability of leaving work altogether, as compared with remaining in part-time work.

A second priority is to assure that the most disadvantaged part-timers receive adequate support from employment services in their search for full-time jobs. For part-timers with low educational attainment and precarious employment status, the main concern is that holding a job, albeit a bad one, prevents them from fully benefiting from training and employment programmes in place for jobseekers who are not working.
Indeed, part-timers who are actively looking for a full-time job – the so-called involuntary part-timers – often receive less assistance than the fully-unemployed. For instance, participation in subsidised jobs, particularly in the public sector, is often not open to involuntary part-time workers. Moreover, a number of other measures, such as training programmes, require full-time participation or may not have sufficiently flexible hours schedule to allow part-timers to participate. For part-timers facing severe hardship, these are lost opportunities that policy makers must address.

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