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COVID-19 tagging Who chooses part-time work and why?

Often, discussions about part-time work focus on people who want to work full time. This article, however, examines the people who want to work part time among different demographic groups and their reasons for working part time.

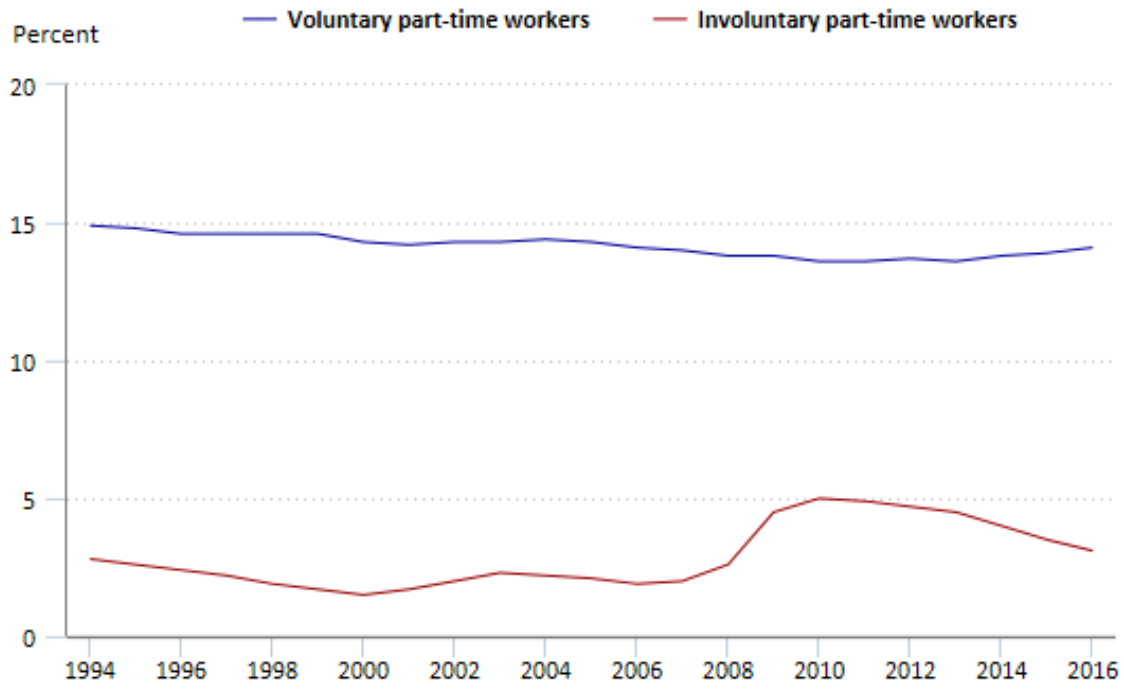
Megan Dunn
dunn.megan@bls.gov

Megan Dunn is an economist in the Division of Labor Force Statistics, Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In 2016, 27.7 million people usually worked part time (that is, they usually worked less than 35 hours a week).[1] Part-time workers are categorized by the reason they work part time—economic or noneconomic.[2] Most analysis of part-time work concentrates on people working part time for economic reasons—often called "involuntary part-time workers"—because of the cyclical nature of this type of part-time work and the associated policy implications. Involuntary part-time workers want full-time work but work part time because of slack business conditions or because they only found part-time jobs.[3] Less than one-fifth of part-time workers (4.7 million) belonged in this category of part-time employment in 2016, or about 3.1 percent of all workers.

In contrast, slightly more than three-quarters of part-time workers (21.4 million) worked part time for noneconomic reasons in 2016, accounting for about 14.1 percent of total employment. These workers are often called "voluntary" part-time workers because they either do not want to work 35 or more hours a week or are not available to do so. In the last 20 years, the share of employed people who worked part time voluntarily held fairly steady, trending down only gradually. Despite this overall stability, noteworthy differences can be observed below the surface in the likelihood of voluntary part-time work among different groups and in the specific reasons people work part time. This article will focus on voluntary part-time workers. (See figure 1.)

Figure 1. Voluntary and involuntary part-time workers as a percentage of total employment, 1994–2016 annual averages



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Note: Excludes a small number of part-time workers who did not work at all during the reference week.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Data and concepts

The following analysis is based on data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly sample survey of approximately 60,000 households nationwide. The CPS defines "part-time workers" as those who *usually* work 0 to 34 hours a week.[4] The CPS interviewer asks a series of questions to determine people's work hours. If people report that they *usually* work less than 35 hours, the interviewer asks their reasons for working part time. The survey interviewer also asks about people's actual hours during the survey reference week, which can differ from their usual hours because they worked more or fewer hours than usual during that specific week.[5] (See appendix.)

The responses to these questions are used to classify part-time workers as either part time for economic reasons (involuntary) or part time for noneconomic reasons (voluntary). The distinguishing factor is that people who work part time for noneconomic reasons either do not want or are not available to work 35 or more hours a week. People work part time for a variety of noneconomic reasons, including childcare problems, health problems, or a full-time workweek that is less than 35 hours. (See table 1 for a full list of noneconomic reasons for part-time work.)

Table 1. Noneconomic (voluntary) reasons for working part time

Noneconomic reason	Description
Childcare problems	Work less than 35 hours for reasons related specifically to affordable, available, or adequate childcare

See footnotes at end of table.

Table 1. Noneconomic (voluntary) reasons for working part time

Noneconomic reason	Description
Other family and/or personal obligations	All other family or home-related reasons, which may include staying home with a sick child, doing housework, or chaperoning a school field trip
Health and/or medical limitations	Person's own illness, injury, or disability prevents him or her from working more than 35 hours
School and/or training	Work less than 35 hours to attend any type of school or training program
Retired and/or Social Security earnings limit	Work less than 35 hours because they are retired or because they cannot work more hours without losing Social Security benefits
Full-time workweek less than 35 hours (short workweek)	When less than 35 hours are considered to be a full-time workweek
Gave economic reason, but is not available for full-time work	Reported that they want to work at least 35 hours a week but that they are unavailable to work 35 or more hours a week
Other reasons	Any other reason reported

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Note that workers' noneconomic reasons for part-time work may not be entirely "voluntary." For voluntary part-time workers who have short full-time workweeks, federal regulations may limit the number of hours for people in certain professions. In addition, the hours for some of these workers may be governed by union contracts that define full time as less than 35 hours and require overtime pay for hours above this threshold. Furthermore, although some people may indeed *want* to work part time, some might argue that "choosing" to work part time when confronted with other time constraints, such as elder- or childcare responsibilities, may not be quite what some people think of as voluntarily working part time.

The following box defines the part-time concepts used in this article.

Part-time concepts*

Part time for noneconomic reasons—

- Works 1 to 34 hours a week
- Does not want to work 35 or more hours a week OR is not available to do so
- Is often called a voluntary part-time worker

Part time for economic reasons—

- Works 1 to 34 hours a week
- Wants to work 35 or more hours a week
- Is available to work 35 or more hours a week
- Is called an involuntary part-time worker

*In this article, these part-time concepts refer specifically to a person's usual work hours, but they are more often presented on the basis of the number of hours a person actually worked during the survey reference week regardless of his or her usual full- or part-time status.

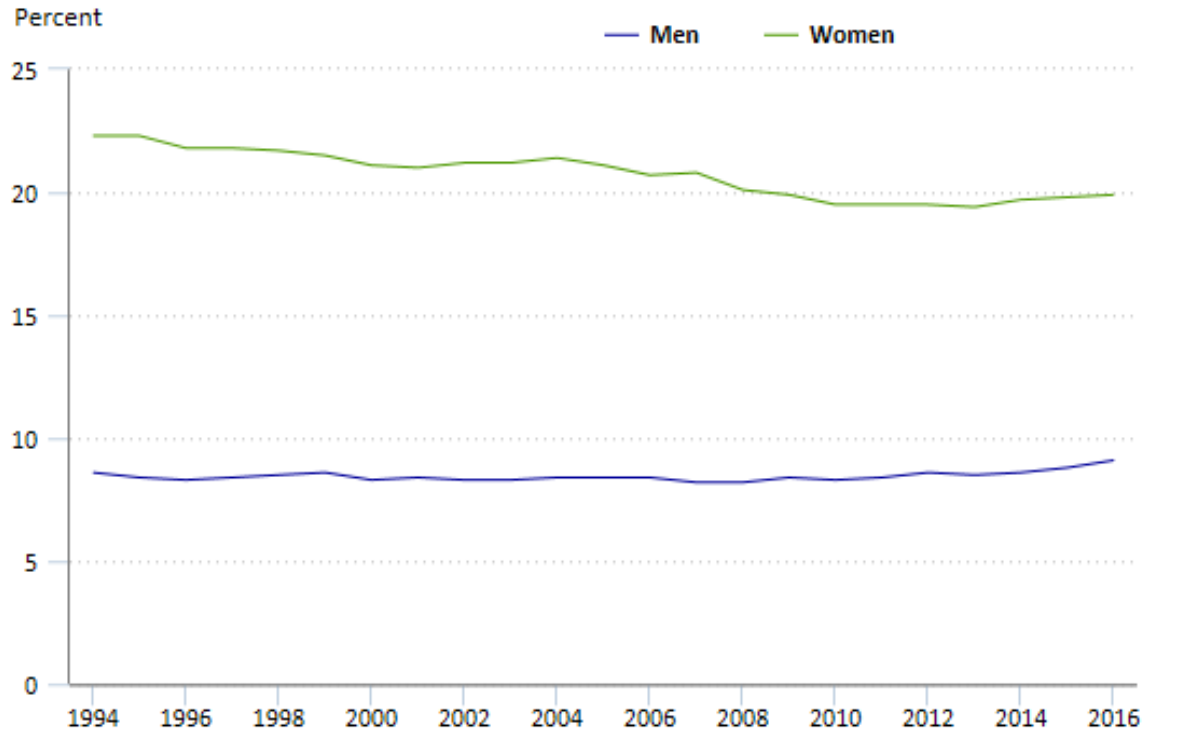
A key metric used for comparisons in this article is the voluntary part-time rate, or the percentage of all employed people who work part time voluntarily. In this analysis, the term "part time" includes workers who usually work part-time hours, regardless of whether their actual hours at work during the reference week were full or part time. However, part-time workers who did not work during the reference week are not included in this rate because they are not asked about the reason they work part time and therefore cannot be classified as either voluntary or involuntary.

Who works part time voluntarily?

Women, teenagers, and older workers

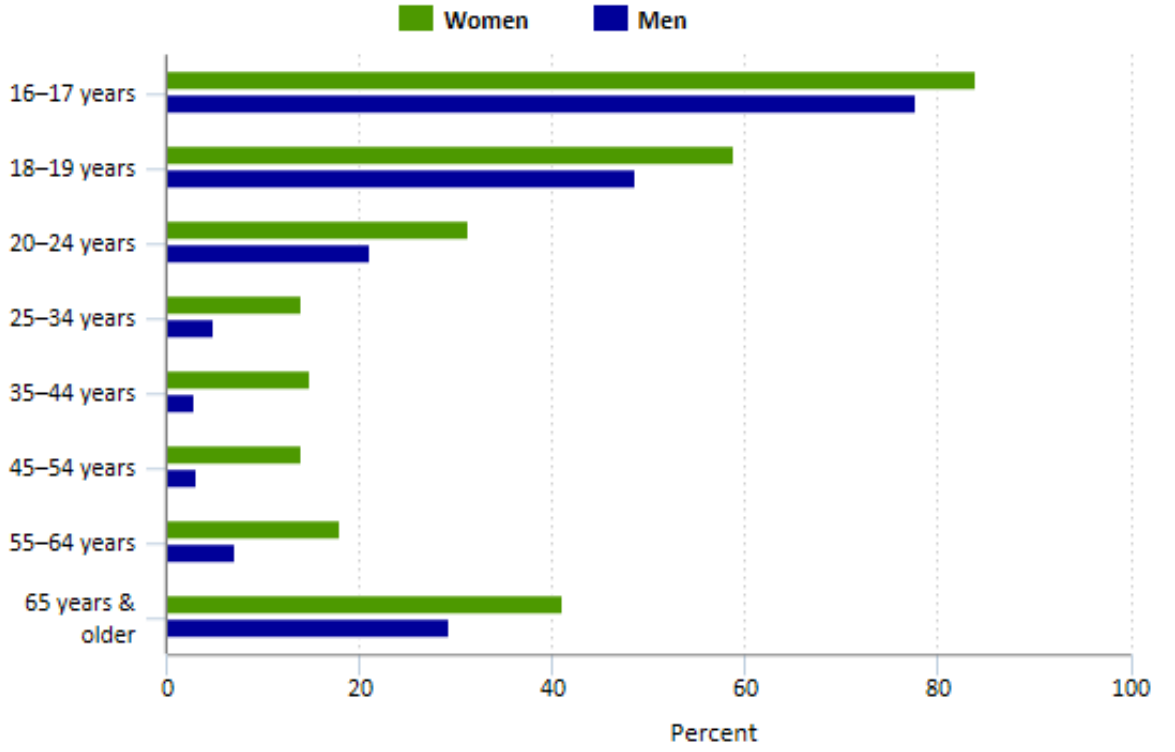
Historically, women have been more likely than men to work part time voluntarily. However, the voluntary part-time rate for women trended down modestly from 1994 through 2013, driving the trend in the overall voluntary part-time rate. In 2016, about 1 in 5 working women worked part time for noneconomic reasons. The proportion of employed men voluntarily working part time varied little over much of the last two decades. However, their voluntary part-time rate has trended upward slightly in recent years, reaching nearly 1 in 10 in 2016. Voluntary part-time rates for women were higher than those for men regardless of age, race, or ethnicity. (See table 2 and figures 2–4.)

Figure 2. Voluntary part-time rate by gender, 1994–2016 annual averages



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Figure 3. Voluntary part-time rate by gender and age, 2016 annual averages



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

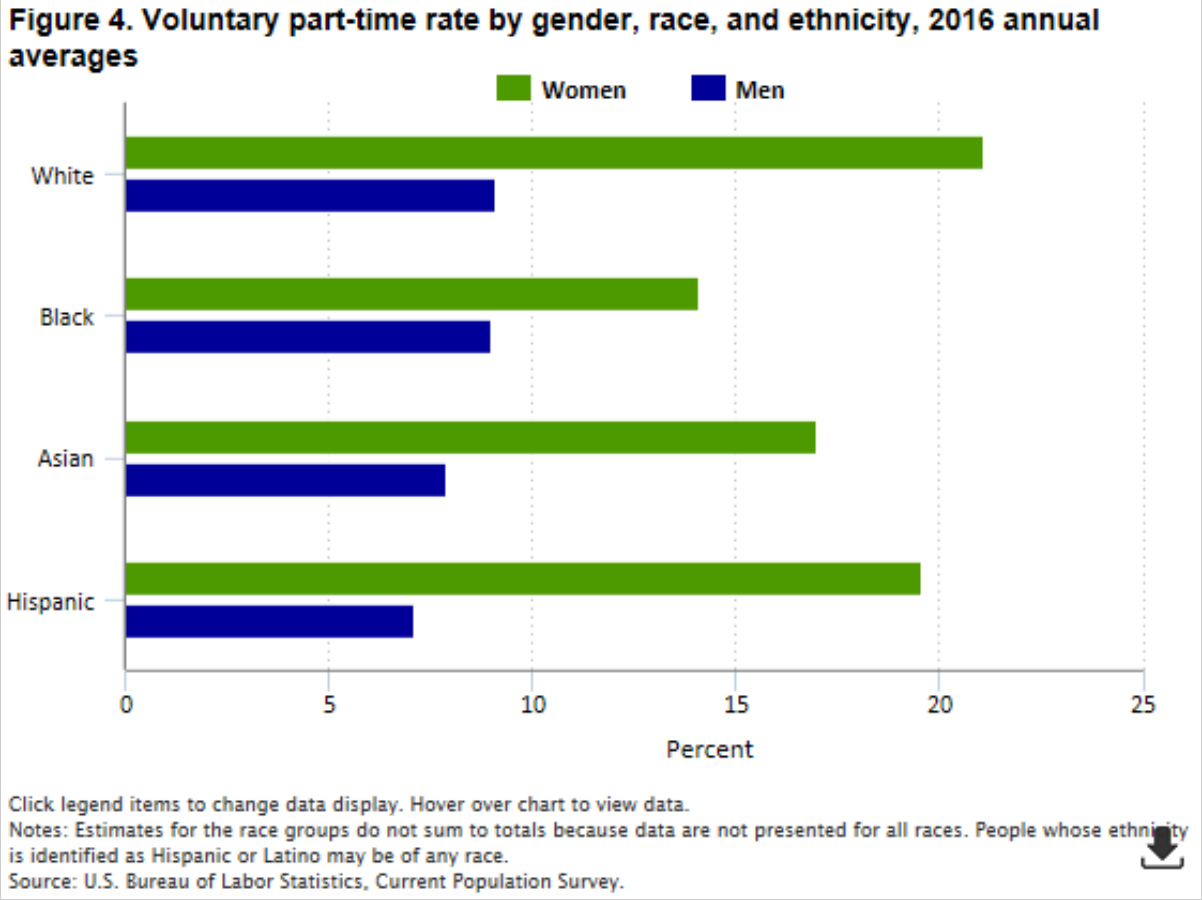


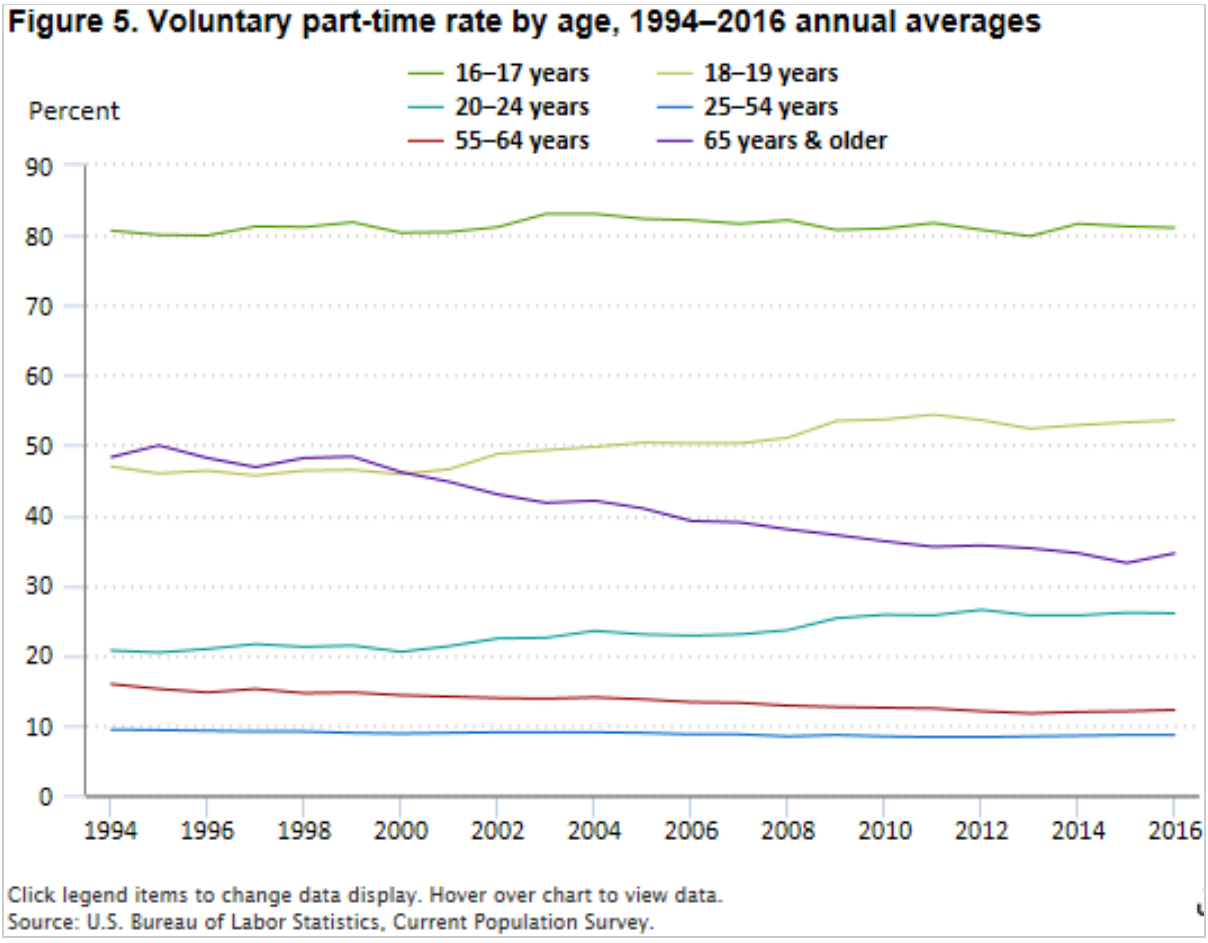
Table 2. Voluntary part-time workers by age and gender, 2016 annual averages (levels in thousands)

Age	Total	Men	Women
Total, 16 years and older	21,421	7,305	14,115
16 to 19 years	3,142	1,448	1,693
20 to 24 years	3,654	1,521	2,133
25 to 34 years	3,067	885	2,181
35 to 44 years	2,681	510	2,171
45 to 54 years	2,679	536	2,143
55 to 64 years	3,113	948	2,165
65 years and older	3,086	1,457	1,629

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

By age, teenagers and older workers are more likely to choose part-time work than people of prime working age (25 to 54 years old). Employed teenagers have the highest voluntary part-time rates of any age group. Given school schedules, some states' restrictions on hours for those younger than age 18, and shifting labor−leisure preferences of young people,[6] it is no surprise many employed 16- to 17-year-olds work part time. For instance, in 2016, about 4 out of 5 employed 16- to 17-year-olds worked part time voluntarily. Older teenagers, ages 18 and 19, also were inclined to work part time—slightly more than half of those employed worked part time voluntarily in 2016, a modest increase from the rate in 1994. Although teenagers and young adults (20 to 24 years old) have

become less likely to work since 2000—as evidenced by downward trending employment-population ratios—older teens and young adults who worked became increasingly likely to work part time for noneconomic reasons over the timeframe studied and were the only age groups to do so. (See figure 5.)



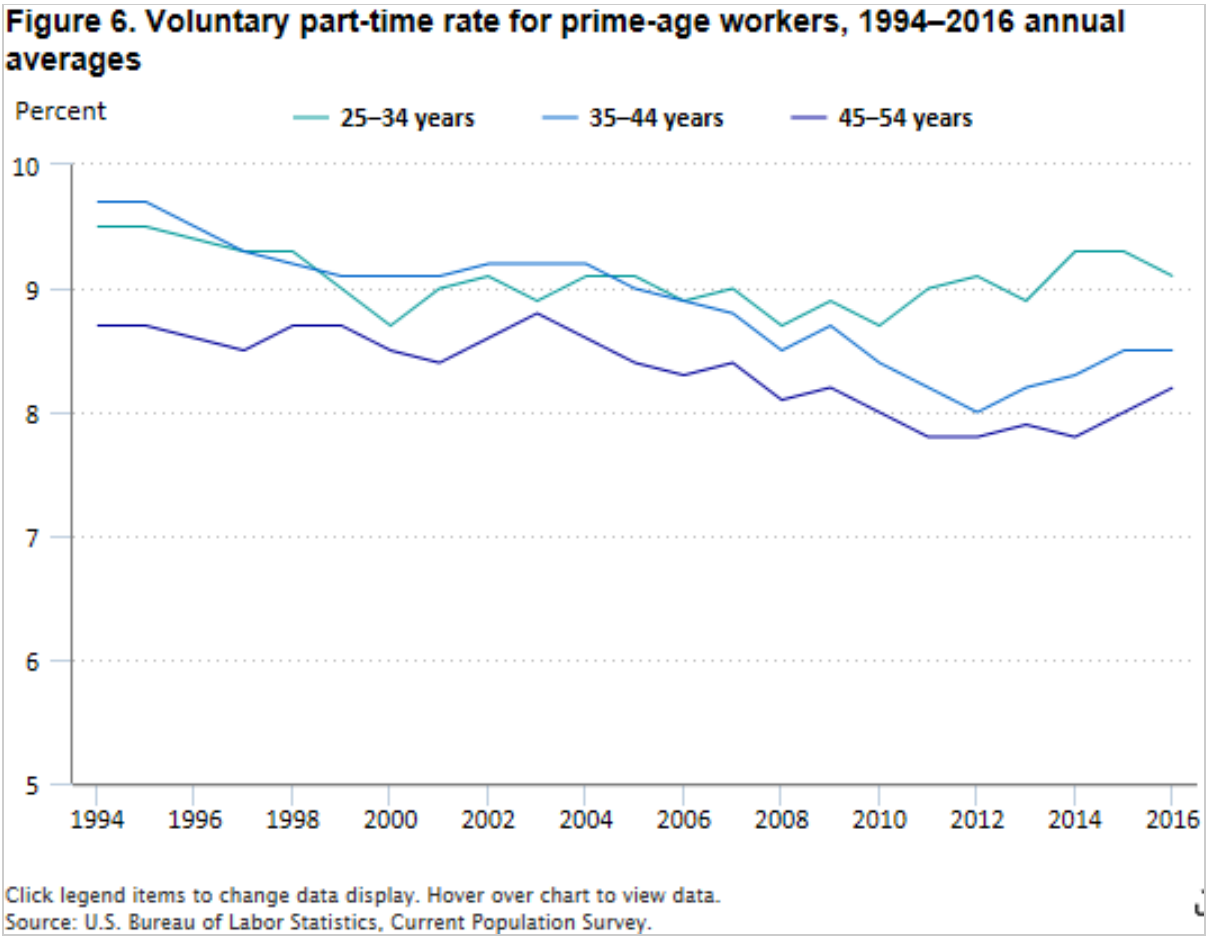
Older workers (those 65 years and older) also have an above-average tendency to work part time. However, this tendency toward voluntary part-time work, unlike that of younger workers, subsided over the period studied. (See figure 5.) The high voluntary part-time rate of older workers, at 34.6 percent in 2016, may reflect provisions in the social safety net that become available to Americans in their mid-60s. Namely, Medicare could affect labor−leisure preferences of older workers by divorcing the provision of health insurance from full-time employment, and Social Security could affect the preferred length of workweeks by reducing the earnings recipients need to maintain their living standards.[7]

Before the Social Security earnings test was eliminated, it restricted the amount of money a beneficiary could earn without penalties. This test could have affected older workers' preferred work hours by limiting the amount they could earn, which effectively restricted the number of hours they could work. The earnings test was eliminated for beneficiaries of full retirement age in 2000. In fact, the voluntary part-time rate of older workers began to fall in 2000, perhaps partially reflecting the elimination of this test.[8] In 1994, nearly half of older workers chose to work part time, a proportion that remained fairly stable through 1999. This rate began a steady decline in 2000, and by 2016, only about one-third of older workers were working part time voluntarily.

Shifting preferences toward full-time employment among older workers could reflect other social or economic phenomena as well. Improvements in healthcare over the past two decades have contributed to better health among older Americans, possibly enabling older workers to work longer hours than previous generations.[9] In addition, over this period, older workers (like all workers) became more heavily concentrated in less physically arduous occupations, such as management, professional, and technical occupations, and less concentrated in more physically demanding occupations, such as natural resource, construction, and maintenance occupations. This occupational shift could have contributed to a change in the number of hours older workers are willing or able to work. Older workers could also prefer more hours today than in the past in pursuit of retirement security. Today's older workers may have inadequate savings to support a nearly 20-year retirement, possibly because of lingering effects of the Great Recession, lower overall savings, or a structural shift in employee retirement benefits from defined benefit plans to defined contribution plans.[10]

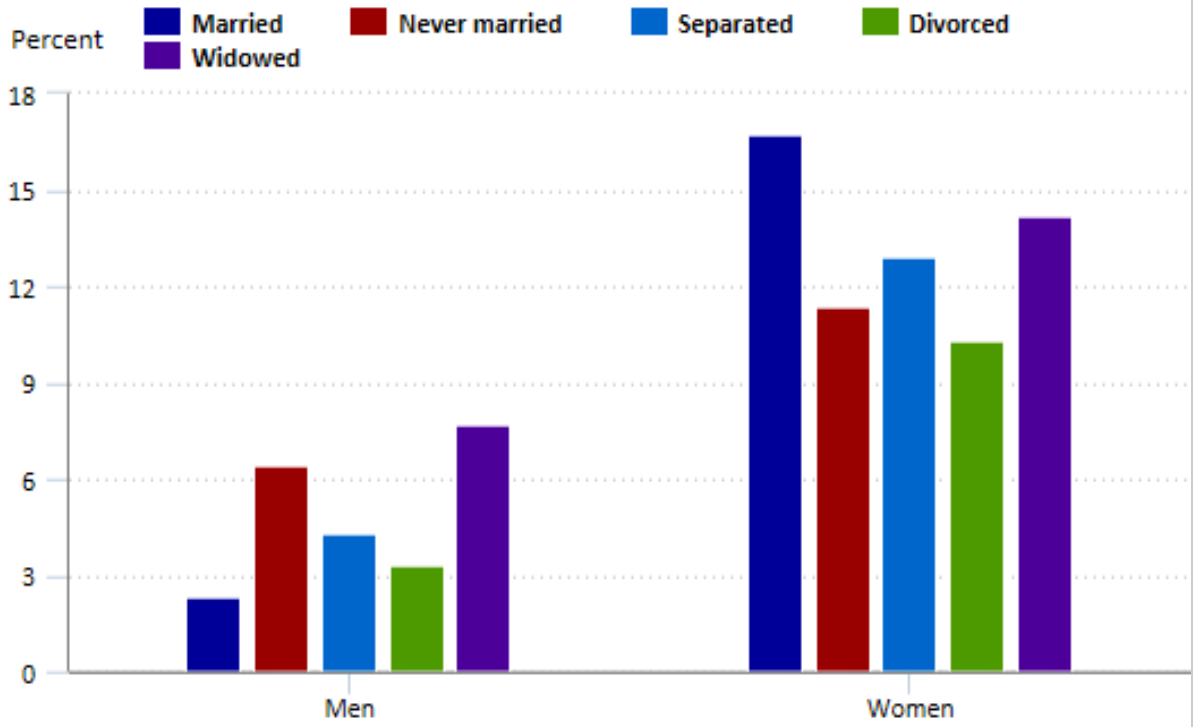
Prime-age workers

The share of prime-age workers, those ages 25 to 54, who worked part time for noneconomic reasons differed little across the component age groups of 25−34 years, 35−44 years, and 45−54 years and had changed little from 1994 to 2016. Nearly 1 in 10 workers between the ages of 25 and 54 worked part time voluntarily. Prime-age workers are less likely to be voluntary part-time workers than teenagers, young adults, and older workers. These rates, however, differ markedly by gender: women in prime working-age groups had rates 3−5 times higher than those of similarly aged men in 2016. As high as voluntary part-time rates of prime working-age women were relative to those of prime working-age men, they were still substantially lower than the rates experienced by teenagers, young adults, and older workers. (See figures 3 and 6.)



Among prime-age workers, married women were the most likely to work part time for noneconomic reasons, and married men were the least likely to do so (16.7 percent versus 2.3 percent). Among women, those who were divorced had the lowest voluntary part-time rate (10.3 percent). Among men, the highest rate (widowed men, at 7.7 percent) was still lower than the lowest rate for women. (See figure 7.)

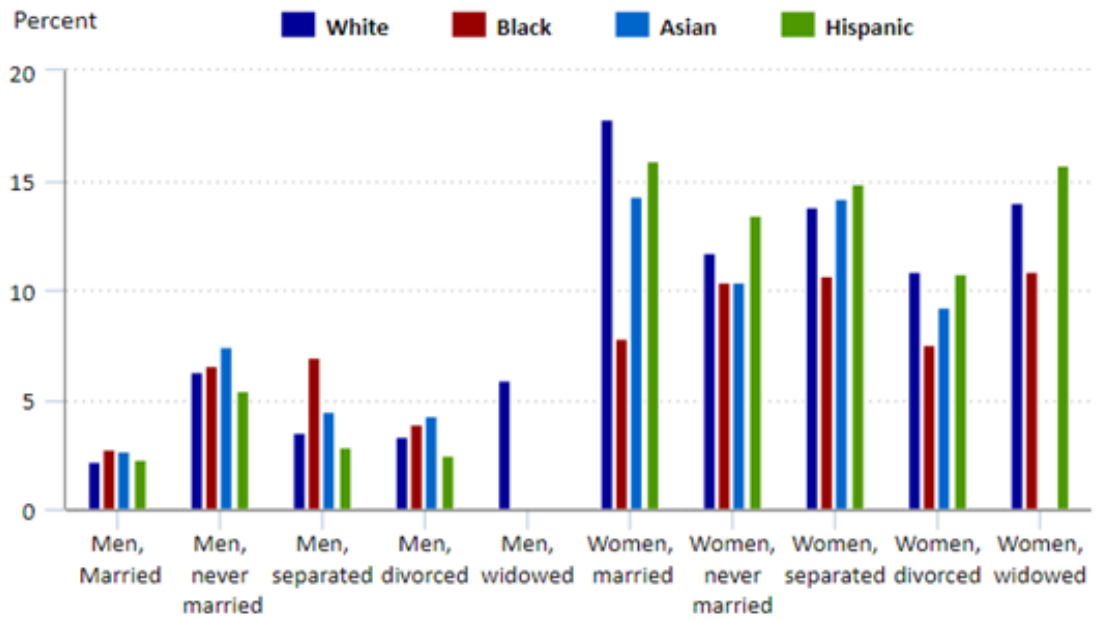
Figure 7. Voluntary part-time rate of prime-age workers by gender and marital status, 2016 annual averages



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Note: Prime-age workers comprise the following age groups: 25-34 years, 35-44 years, and 45-54 years.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Among women, married White women were the most likely to choose part-time work in 2016, at 17.8 percent.[11] In fact, married women had the highest rates within each race or ethnicity group except for among Black women. Voluntary part-time rates for married Black women were considerably lower than rates for married women in all other groups. Voluntary part-time rates for men differed little by race and ethnicity across most marital statuses. (See figure 8.)

Figure 8. Voluntary part-time rate of prime-age workers by gender, marital status, race, and Hispanic ethnicity, 2016 annual averages



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Notes: Estimates for the race groups do not sum to totals because data are not presented for all races. Estimates not shown where base is less than 50,000. People whose ethnicity is identified as Hispanic or Latino may be of any race. Prime-age workers comprise the following age groups: 25-34 years, 35-44 years, and 45-54 years.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Workers by educational attainment

In 2016, voluntary part-time rates for workers ages 25 and older differed little by educational attainment, ranging from 10.0 percent for college graduates to 12.3 percent for workers with some college or an associate's degree. Although voluntary part-time rates showed little difference across educational attainment categories for all workers, differences persisted between men and women. Rates for men ranged from 5.4 percent for workers with a bachelor's degree to 8.0 percent for those with a professional degree. Rates for women ranged from 12.8 percent for those with a professional degree to 21.0 percent for those with less than a high school diploma. In general, voluntary part-time rates were highest among women with less education—those who did not have a high school diploma. This pattern of higher rates among women with less education held across race and ethnicity groups. Among men, however, rates were higher for White male college graduates with advanced degrees than their counterparts with less education; Black and Asian men with advanced degrees, on the other hand, had lower rates than Black and Asian men who had less than a high school diploma. (See table 3.)

Table 3. Voluntary part-time rates by gender, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, and educational attainment, 2016 annual averages (levels in thousands)

Gender, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity	Total	Less than a high school diploma	High school graduates, no college	Some college or associate's degree			College graduates				
				Total	Some college, no degree	Associate's degree	Total	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	Professional degree	Doctoral degree
Total, 25 years and older	11.0	11.3	11.2	12.3	12.3	12.3	10.0	10.0	10.1	10.0	10.0
Men, 25 years and older	6.1	6.0	5.9	6.7	7.2	5.9	5.9	5.4	6.3	8.0	7.5
White	6.2	5.6	5.8	6.7	7.3	5.9	6.2	5.5	7.0	8.8	8.3
Black or African American	6.1	9.8	5.8	6.4	6.8	5.6	5.0	4.8	5.7	2.6	6.5
Asian	5.1	6.5	6.5	7.7	7.6	7.9	4.0	4.6	3.2	4.7	2.7
Hispanic	3.9	3.3	3.4	5.1	5.5	4.5	4.2	4.0	4.0	2.9	7.6
Women, 25 years and older	16.7	21.0	18.6	17.9	17.9	17.9	14.3	14.8	13.4	12.8	13.5
White	18.0	21.8	20.0	19.3	19.4	19.2	15.6	16.2	14.6	14.5	14.6
Black or African American	10.9	18.3	12.7	11.7	12.5	10.3	7.0	7.4	5.9	7.3	10.3
Asian	14.0	19.6	15.9	17.6	17.2	18.1	11.9	11.9	13.0	8.3	10.0
Hispanic	15.3	19.2	15.9	15.6	16.2	14.8	11.0	12.0	7.6	16.5	13.2

Note: People identified as Hispanic or Latino may be of any race.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Workers by race and ethnicity

In 2016, a larger share of White workers ages 16 and older worked part time for noneconomic reasons (14.6 percent) than did Black workers (11.7 percent), Asian workers (12.1 percent), and Hispanic workers (12.4 percent). This difference in overall voluntary part-time rates by race and ethnicity was driven by differences between women in each group—men had similar rates regardless of race or ethnicity (ranging from 7.1 percent for Hispanic men to 9.1 percent for White men). Rates for women, however, had a spread of 7 percentage points, with the largest disparity between White and Black women (21.1 percent versus 14.1 percent, respectively). (See figure 4.)

Why do people work part time voluntarily?

The reasons people voluntarily work less than 35 hours a week vary.[12] School attendance is the primary reason that people choose part-time hours, which correlates with the large number of youth working part time voluntarily. In 2016, 6.0 million people, or 29 percent of all voluntary part-time workers, worked part time to attend school, reflecting that nearly one-third of voluntary part-time workers were between the ages of 16 and 24. (See table 2.) The second most common reason people choose part-time work is family or personal obligations (other than

childcare problems). (See table 4 and figure 9.) In 2016, family or personal obligations were the reason that 4.3 million people, or 21 percent of all voluntary part-time workers, worked part time, and women accounted for an overwhelming majority of them. This finding is supported by American Time Use Survey data, which show that women are more likely to both engage in eldercare than men (18 percent compared with 15 percent) and spend more time caring for children than men (2.1 hours a day compared with 1.6 hours a day).[13]

Table 4. Voluntary part-time workers at work 1–34 hours during the reference week by reason and selected demographics, 1994 and 2016 annual averages

Gender, age, and reason	Numbers (in thousands)			Percent distribution		
	1994	2016	Change, 1994–2016	1994	2016	Change, 1994–2016
Total	17,638	20,680	3,042	100	100	0
Childcare problems	751	956	205	4	5	1
Other family and/or personal obligations	4,810	4,250	−560	27	21	−6
Health and/or medical limitations	673	1,023	350	4	5	1
School and/or training	5,947	6,007	60	34	29	−5
Retired and/or Social Security limit on earnings	1,822	2,633	811	10	13	3
Full-time workweek less than 35 hours	1,859	3,815	1,956	11	18	7
Other reasons	1,776	1,995	219	10	10	0
Men	5,468	7,034	1,566	100	100	0
Childcare problems	15	61	46	0	1	1
Other family and/or personal obligations	206	467	261	4	7	3
Health and/or medical limitations	259	430	171	5	6	1
School and/or training	2,760	2,636	−124	50	37	−13
Retired and/or Social Security limit on earnings	1,055	1,310	255	19	19	0
Full-time workweek less than 35 hours	618	1,376	758	11	20	9
Other reasons	554	755	201	10	11	1
Women	12,171	13,646	1,475	100	100	0
Childcare problems	736	895	159	6	7	1
Other family and/or personal obligations	4,604	3,783	−821	38	28	−10
Health and/or medical limitations	414	593	179	3	4	1
School and/or training	3,188	3,371	183	26	25	−1
Retired and/or Social Security limit on earnings	766	1,323	557	6	10	4
Full-time workweek less than 35 hours	1,241	2,440	1,199	10	18	8
Other reasons	1,221	1,241	20	10	9	−1
16 to 24 years	6,212	6,636	424	100	100	0
Childcare problems	97	105	8	2	2	0
Other family and/or personal obligations	307	323	16	5	5	0
Health and/or medical limitations	59	78	19	1	1	0
School and/or training	5,128	5,064	−64	83	76	−7
Retired and/or Social Security limit on earnings	0	4	4	0	0	0
Full-time workweek less than 35 hours	263	673	410	4	10	6
Other reasons	358	388	30	6	6	0
25 to 54 years	7,978	8,065	87	100	100	0
Childcare problems	651	813	162	8	10	2

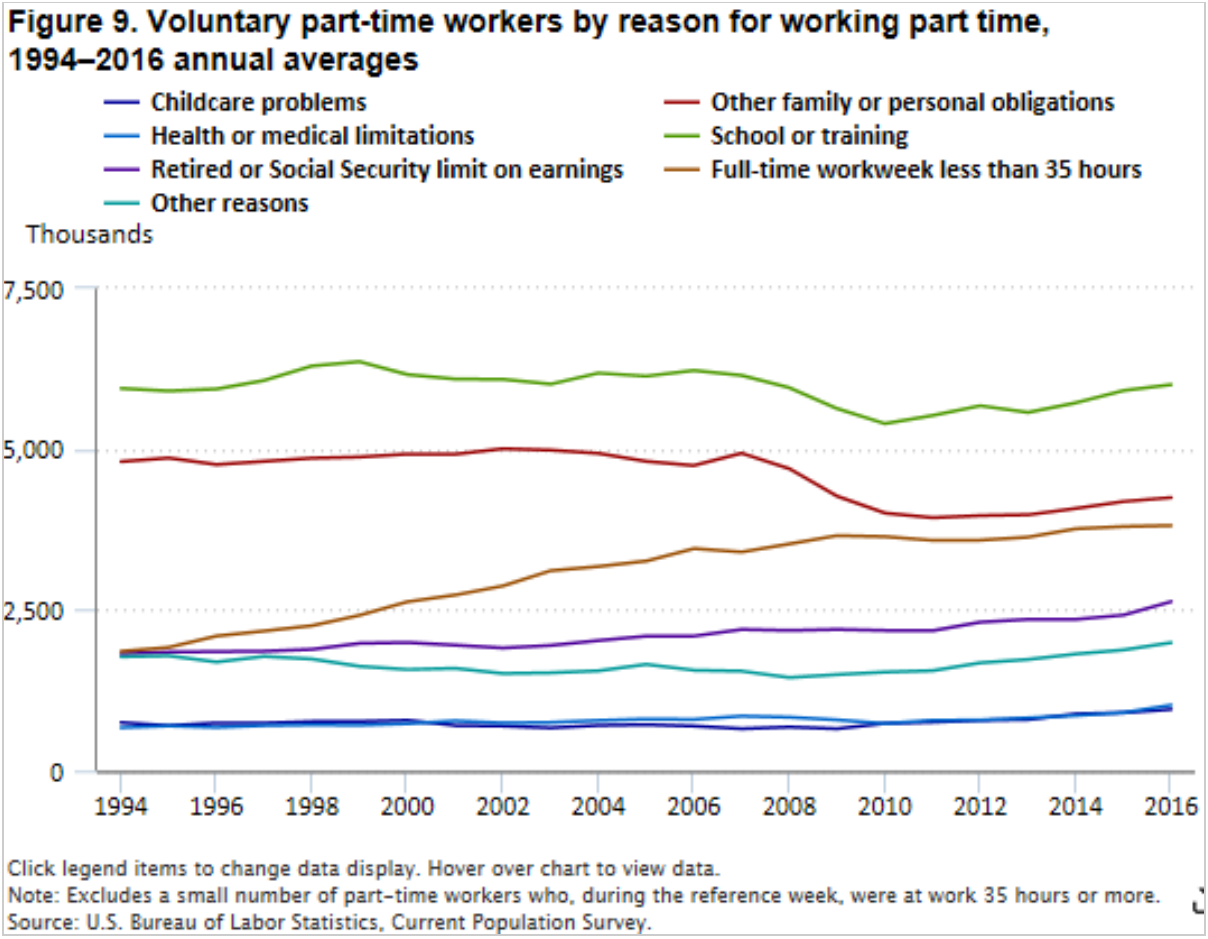
See footnotes at end of table.

Table 4. Voluntary part-time workers at work 1–34 hours during the reference week by reason and selected demographics, 1994 and 2016 annual averages

Gender, age, and reason	Numbers (in thousands)			Percent distribution		
	1994	2016	Change, 1994–2016	1994	2016	Change, 1994–2016
Other family and/or personal obligations	3,887	2,929	−958	49	36	−13
Health and/or medical limitations	363	480	117	5	6	1
School and/or training	806	905	99	10	11	1
Retired and/or Social Security limit on earnings	70	102	32	1	1	0
Full-time workweek less than 35 hours	1,234	1,961	727	15	24	9
Other reasons	968	874	−94	12	11	−1
55 to 64 years	1,712	2,998	1,286	100	100	0
Childcare problems	2	29	27	0	1	1
Other family and/or personal obligations	475	746	271	28	25	−3
Health and/or medical limitations	134	314	180	8	10	2
School and/or training	7	29	22	0	1	1
Retired and/or Social Security limit on earnings	539	694	155	31	23	−8
Full-time workweek less than 35 hours	256	755	499	15	25	10
Other reasons	298	431	133	17	14	−3
65 years and older	1,735	2,982	1,247	100	100	0
Childcare problems	1	8	7	0	0	0
Other family and/or personal obligations	142	253	111	8	8	0
Health and/or medical limitations	118	151	33	7	5	−2
School and/or training	6	10	4	0	0	0
Retired and/or Social Security limit on earnings	1,211	1,832	621	70	61	−9
Full-time workweek less than 35 hours	106	425	319	6	14	8
Other reasons	148	301	153	9	10	1

Note: Excludes a small number of part-time workers who, during the reference week, were at work 35 hours or more.

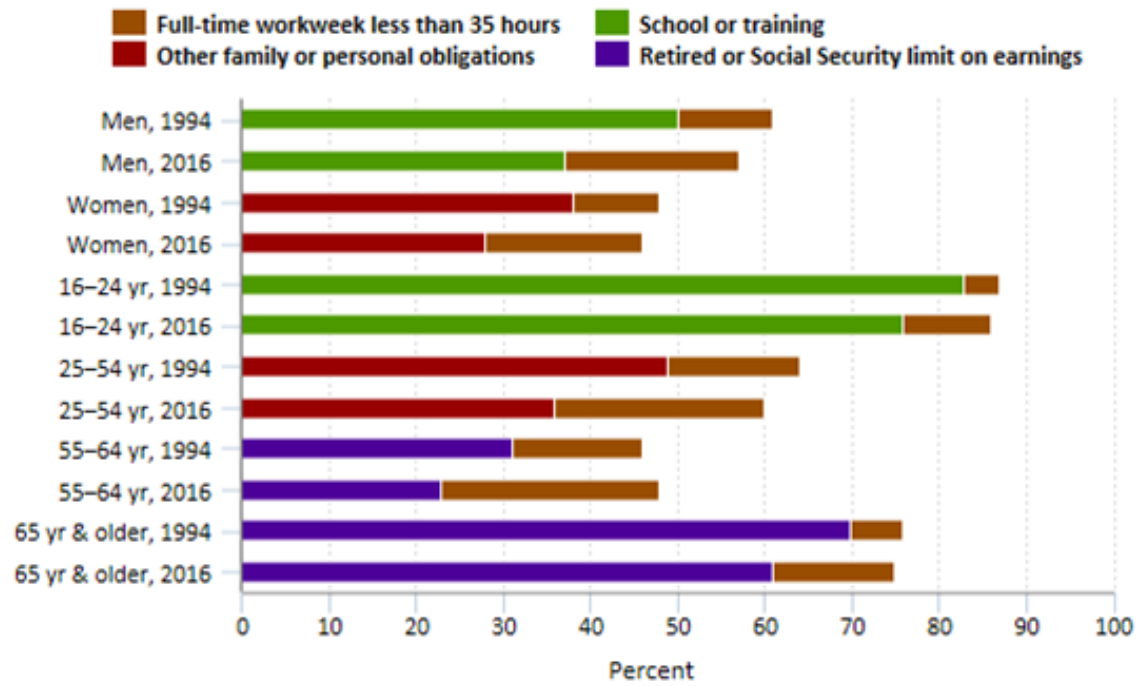
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.



A full-time workweek of less than 35 hours, which has become more common over time, is the third most common reason for voluntary part-time work.[14] The number of voluntary part-time workers who maintained that their hours were full time more than doubled since 1994, reaching 3.8 million in 2016. These workers accounted for about 18 percent of all voluntary part-time workers in 2016, up from 11 percent in 1994.

The growth in the number and share of overall voluntary part-time workers who work short full-time workweeks was evident across all age groups and both genders. Furthermore, this growth was at the expense of the most common reason for each group. Since 1994, school attendance has been the most common reason men had for voluntary part-time work. However, the share of men who worked part time for this reason shrank from about one-half in 1994 to just over one-third in 2016, and the share of men working short full-time workweeks nearly doubled to 20 percent in 2016. Similarly, family or personal obligations have been the most common reason women worked part-time hours since 1994. However, the share of women choosing part-time hours for this reason shrank by 10 percentage points to 28 percent in 2016, while the share working short full-time weeks grew by 8 percentage points, to 18 percent. Likewise, in 2016, smaller shares of teenagers and young adults worked part time to attend school than those who did so in 1994, a smaller share of prime-age workers worked part time because of family obligations, and smaller shares of workers ages 55 and older worked part time because they were retired. Meanwhile, the share of each of these groups that had short full-time workweeks grew—either because fewer workers were reporting the most common reason for their group or because the growth in the number reporting short full-time workweeks was larger than overall growth, or both. (See figure 10 and table 4.)

Figure 10. Share of voluntary part-time workers, by gender and age group, 1994 and 2016 annual averages



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Note: : Excludes a small number of part-time workers who, during the reference week, were at work 35 hours or more.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

This phenomenon has several plausible explanations. The rise of the short full-time workweek could be a byproduct of the decades-long shift away from industries that have a traditional 40-hour workweek toward those with shorter average weeks, such as retail or leisure and hospitality. It could also possibly reflect employers offering work schedules that more closely match their workers' preferences for shorter work hours, productivity gains reducing the number of labor hours that employers need, or even a shift in workers' perceptions of a full-time schedule. The dynamics behind these reported short "full-time" workweeks are not readily evident because of limitations in the data.[15] Presumably, different situations could lead people to describe their work hours as full time, even though they do not meet the 35-hour threshold that has been used for statistical purposes since the 1940s. All that these data can reveal is that a growing number of people consider their hours to be full time even though they meet the statistical definition of a part-time worker.

The remaining reasons people voluntarily work part time combined—childcare problems, health or medical limitations, and other reasons—apply to about 20 percent of all voluntary part-time workers. Notably, among all voluntary part-time workers, only about 5 percent worked part time because they could not find adequate or affordable childcare in 2016, relatively unchanged since 1994. As expected, women were more likely to work part time for this reason than were men (7 percent versus 1 percent in 2016). Nevertheless, relative to other reason categories, few women chose their work hours for this reason.

Where do voluntary part-time workers work?

The majority of voluntary part-time workers, much like most workers in the United States, are wage and salary workers—that is, they are not self-employed but are employees of others. However, wage and salary workers are less likely to work part time voluntarily than the self-employed (13.6 percent versus 19.2 percent in 2016). Among wage and salary workers, nearly half of those who chose part-time work were employed in just three industries in 2016: retail trade (18 percent), food services and drinking places (15 percent), and private educational services (12 percent). However, these industries accounted for about one-fourth of all wage and salary workers. These industries employ disproportionately large shares of youth and women, groups that have high voluntary part-time rates.[16]

Among the self-employed, voluntary part-time rates were higher for those whose businesses were unincorporated than for those with incorporated businesses in 2016 (the majority of the self-employed have unincorporated businesses).[17] Voluntary part-time rates of the incorporated and unincorporated self-employed could differ because there are differences in the nature of their work. The incorporated self-employed are more likely to own firms providing creative, business, or analytical services, as opposed to the unincorporated, whose firms are more likely to provide physical services such as cleaning or landscaping.[18] (See table 5.)

Table 5. Voluntary part-time rate by class of worker and gender, 2016 annual averages

Class of worker	Total	Men	Women
Total	14.1	9.1	19.9
Wage and salary workers	13.6	8.6	18.9
Self-employed, total	19.2	12.5	31.7
Incorporated self-employed	13.1	8.4	24.2
Unincorporated self-employed	22.7	15.2	35.2

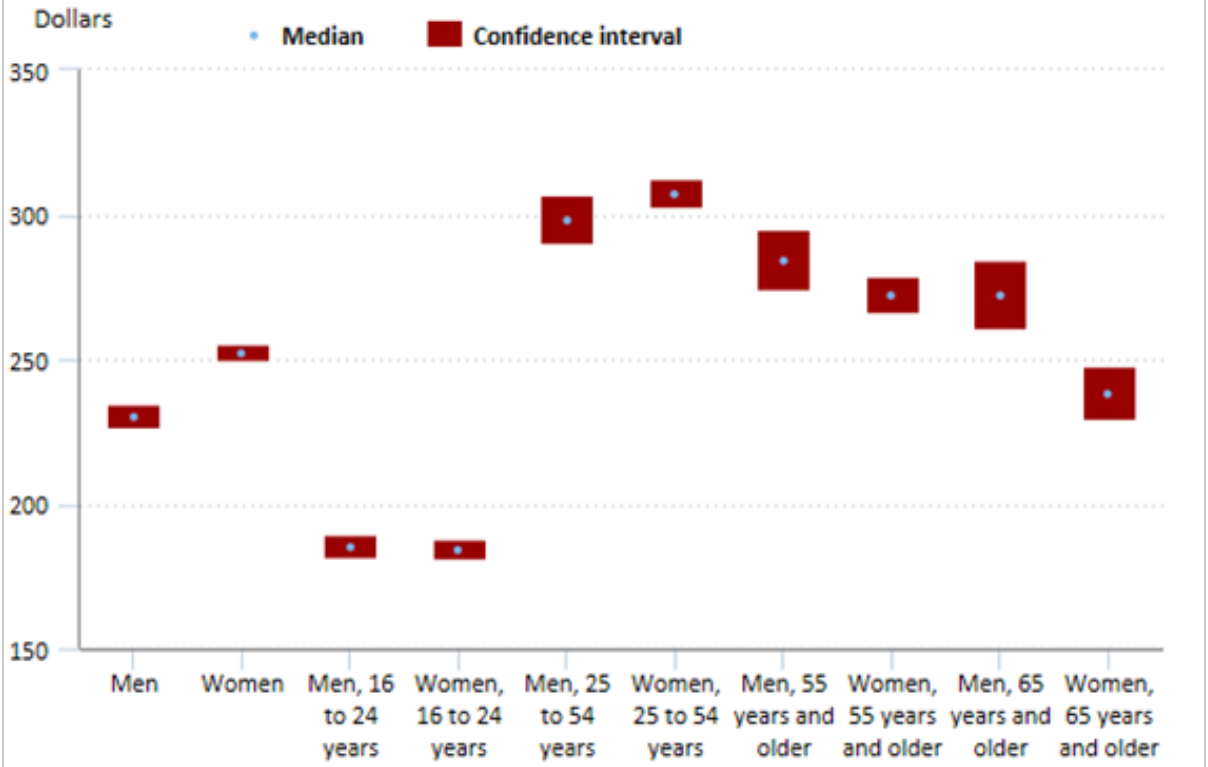
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Self-employed women were particularly likely to work part time voluntarily in 2016. The voluntary part-time rate for self-employed women was high even when compared with that of self-employed men or that of women who worked as employees. In 2016, 31.7 percent of self-employed women worked part time voluntarily, compared with 12.5 percent of self-employed men and 18.9 percent of women who were wage and salary workers.

How much do voluntary part-time workers earn?

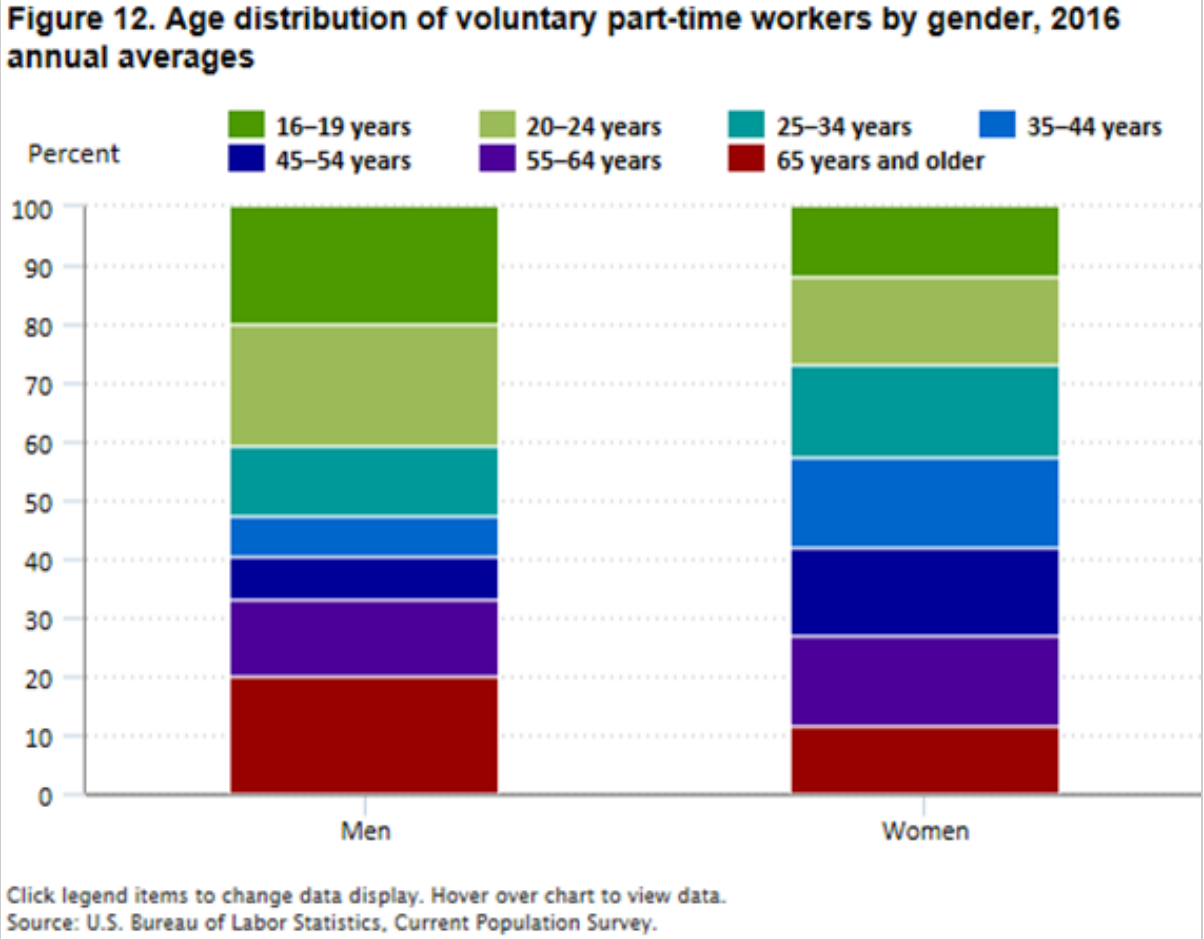
In 2016, median weekly earnings of all voluntary part-time workers were $245.[19] Notably, women working part time for noneconomic reasons earned about 10 percent more than their male counterparts ($252 compared with $230). (See figure 11.) This overall earnings advantage for women does not hold however when comparing earnings of women and men in the same age groups. The earnings difference between male and female voluntary part-time workers is opposite that of full-time workers, which is more widely reported—female full-time workers had weekly earnings about 18 percent less than their male counterparts in 2016.

Figure 11. Median weekly earnings of voluntary part-time workers, 2016 annual averages



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Note: Excludes the self-employed, whether incorporated or unincorporated.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Although the median for all women working part time voluntarily is higher than the median for all men, this earnings discrepancy is largely due to their different age profiles. In other words, women who voluntarily work part time are disproportionately of prime working age (25 to 54 years) compared with men. Among voluntary part-time workers, nearly half of all women were of prime working age in 2016, compared with about one-fourth of all men. For both men and women, earnings of prime-age voluntary part-time workers are higher than earnings of both youth and older workers. Median weekly earnings of female and male voluntary part-time workers in the same age group were not statistically different, with one exception: older workers. For voluntary part-time workers ages 65 and older, men outearned women ($272 versus $238). (See figure 12.)



Summary

In 2016, 14.1 percent of all workers worked less than 35 hours a week either because they did not want to work more or because they were not available to do so. Three demographic groups are highly likely to work part time for noneconomic reasons: women, teenagers, and older workers (ages 65 and older). Regardless of age, race, or ethnicity, women have higher voluntary part-time rates than men. Further, White women had a particularly high voluntary part-time rate, at 21.1 percent in 2016.

In 2016, the voluntary part-time rate of teenagers was more than 4 times the average for all workers, and the rate of older workers was more than twice the average. Almost two-thirds of working teenagers worked part time voluntarily, and about one-third of older workers did so. In contrast, less than 1 in 10 prime-age workers chose to work part time. Older teens and young adults who worked became increasingly likely to work part time for noneconomic reasons over the period studied—1994 to 2016—and were the only workers to do so.

The reasons reported for voluntarily working part time have shifted over the last 20 years. The most profound change regarding voluntary part-time work has been the growing share of these workers who consider their hours to be full time even though they work less than 35 hours a week, up by 7 percentage points to 18 percent. This growth was accompanied by shrinking shares of those who worked part time for either family or personal obligations or to attend school, down to 21 percent and 29 percent, respectively. Although a short full-time

workweek is still the third most common reason for voluntary part-time work—and school attendance and family or personal obligations are still the first two reasons—the gap has narrowed considerably. Short full-time workweeks became more common for both men and women and among all age groups. The reasons for this shift, however, were not explored in this article.

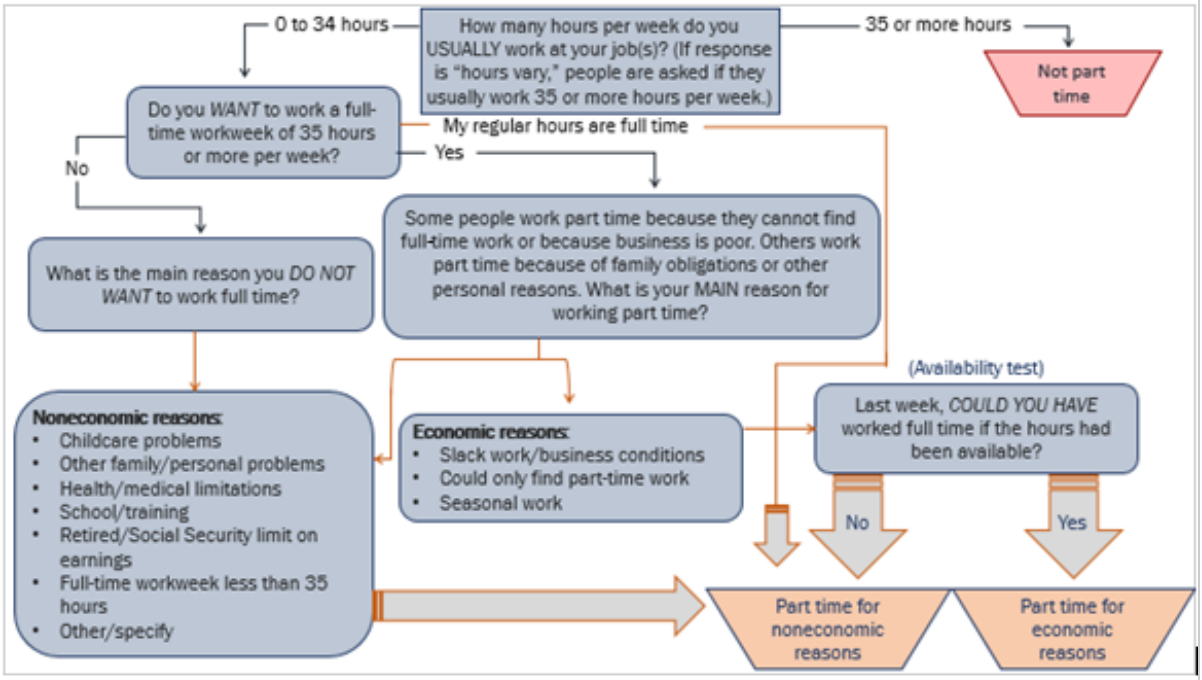
Self-employed workers are more likely to work part time voluntarily than workers who are employed by others (19.2 percent versus 13.6 percent). Among those who work for others, voluntary part-time workers are heavily concentrated in the three industries mentioned earlier: retail trade, food services and drinking places (which both employ disproportionate shares of youth), and private educational services (which employs a disproportionate share of women).

Finally, earnings of voluntary part-time workers differ little between men and women of similar ages; comparatively, male full-time wage and salary workers earned more than their female counterparts in each age group. Overall, female voluntary part-time workers have slightly higher earnings, but this result is because a larger proportion of female voluntary part-time workers are of prime working age and earnings are higher for those of prime working age than for youth or older workers.

Appendix: Technical information about measures of part-time work for economic and noneconomic reasons in the Current Population Survey

To determine if a person is a full- or part-time worker, the Current Population Survey (CPS) interviewer asks the number of hours a person usually works at all jobs. For people who usually work less than 35 hours a week, the interviewer asks questions that are more detailed about whether they want to work 35 or more hours a week and the reason they work less than 35 hours a week. Examples of these questions are shown in appendix figure 1.

Appendix figure 1. Interview questions regarding number of hours a person works full time or part time and why



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Distinguishing part-time workers' usual hours from hours worked during the reference week

In addition to asking about respondents' usual work hours, the CPS interviewer also asks employed people who were not absent from work for the whole reference week about the *actual* number of hours they worked. A person could usually work 40 hours, but take 8 hours off because of a holiday and report working 32 hours during that week. Similarly, a person who usually works 20 hours a week and works 16 additional hours to cover for a coworker who needs time off would report *actually* working 36 hours that week.

Because questions are asked about the reason people usually work part time and the reason people actually worked part-time hours in the reference week, data on part-time work by reason can be presented in two ways: (1) as a count of usual part-time workers by reason for usually working part time, as is done in this article, and (2) as a count of all workers, both full time and part time, who actually worked 1–34 hours in the reference week by the reason they worked less than 35 hours, as is done in table A-8 of the employment situation. (See Bureau of Labor Statistics New Release at https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t08.htm.) In 2016, 741,000 voluntary part-time workers *actually* worked 35 or more hours in the reference week, or 3.5 percent of voluntary part-time workers; these workers are included in the voluntary part-time rate calculated in this article but are excluded from the discussion of reasons for part-time work.

In addition, a number of people usually work full time but were at work part time for noneconomic reasons during the reference period. These people who worked part time temporarily, perhaps because of a holiday or vacation,

are not included in this analysis because working part time periodically is inherently different than belonging to the part-time workforce. In 2016, 8.0 million full-time workers worked less than 35 hours for noneconomic reasons.

The availability test for classifying part-time workers by reason

To be classified as part time for economic reasons, a part-time worker must both want and be available to work full time. Part-time workers who respond that they want to work full time are asked the main reason that they work part time. Those who report an economic reason are then asked if they could have worked full time if the hours had been available. If they respond “no” to this last question, they are classified instead as working part time for noneconomic reasons.

In 2016, 196,000 part-time workers were included in the noneconomic category even though they had an economic reason for working 1 to 34 hours during the reference week because they were not available to work full time; they accounted for less than 1 percent of voluntary part-time workers.

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NOTES

1 In this article, the term “part time” refers to people who *usually* work less than 35 hours a week at all jobs combined even if they worked full time during the survey reference week, which is generally the week of the 12th. This analysis begins with 1994 data because a redesigned CPS was introduced that year, limiting comparability with prior data.

2 A small number of people who usually work part time, 1.6 million in 2016, were not classified according to the reason they work part time because they did not work at all during the survey reference week. They are not included among the reason categories because they were not asked why they usually work part time. They were instead asked about the reason they were absent from work.

3 A small number of people who want full-time work but worked part time because of seasonal work are also classified as involuntary part-time workers.

4 A person who worked during the reference week may not usually work, and therefore, his or her usual hours could be zero. For example, a retired person who does not regularly work could work 20 hours in a friend’s business during the reference week. In this case, this person’s usual hours would be zero, but their actual hours would be 20, and they would be counted as a usual part-time worker because they were employed in the reference week.

5 The CPS interviewer asks people who have a job about their hours of work. People who usually work 0 to 34 hours (and were not temporarily absent from their jobs) are asked why they usually work these hours. From their responses to this question, part-time workers are classified as working part time for either economic or noneconomic reasons. See appendix in this article for additional information.

6 See Teresa L. Morisi, “Teen labor force participation before and after the Great Recession and beyond,” *Monthly Labor Review*, February 2017, https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2017/article/teen-labor-force- participation-before-and-after-the-great-recession.htm.

7 People are eligible to receive full or unreduced Social Security retirement benefits beginning in their mid-60s, with the specific age determined by their birth year. See https://www.ssa.gov/planners/re tire/agereduction.html for more information. People are eligible for Medicare upon turning age 65. See https://www.hhs.gov/answers/medicare-and-medicaid/who-is-elibible-for- medicare/index.html for more information.

8 Before the retirement earnings test was eliminated in 2000, earnings up to $15,500 were exempt from penalties. The earnings test was eliminated only for beneficiaries of full-retirement age; beneficiaries collecting early retirement benefits, which are available beginning at age 62, are still subject to an earnings test. See Michael V. Leonesio, Benjamin Bridges, Robert Gesumaria, and Linda Del Bene, "The increasing labor force participation of older workers and its effect on the income of the aged," *Social Security Bulletin*, vol. 72, No. 1, 2012, https://www.ssa.gov/policy/do cs/ssb/v72n1/v72n1p59.html). In this article, the Social Security Administration analyzed CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement data and found changes in the economic circumstances of older workers in recent decades created incentives for increased work and increased earnings for older workers.

9 See tables on health status at https://agingstats.g ov/docs/LatestReport/Excel/healthstatus.xlsx. These tables include indicators of well-being for older Americans. From 1994 to 2014, life expectancy at age 65 has increased by nearly 2 years (table 15a), and death rates for people age 65 and older have declined for several leading causes of death (table 16a). The incidence of chronic health conditions among those ages 65 and older have remained stable or trended upward (table 17b). The share of Medicare beneficiaries age 65 and older who have limitations in instrumental activities of daily living and the share who reside in long-term care facilities have trended down while the share with limitations in one or two activities of daily living has trended up (table 22d). For original source of tables, see *Older Americans 2016: key indicators of well-being,* Federal Interagency, Forum on Aging-Related Statistics (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 2016), https://agingstats.gov/docs/LatestReport/Older-Americans-2016-Key- Indicators-of-WellBeing.pdf.

10 Leonesio et al. "The increasing labor force participation of older workers," https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v72n1/v72n1p59.html; and "Retirement security: most households approaching retirement have low savings," report no. GAO-15-419 (U.S. Government Accountability Office, May 2015), https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/670153.pdf. Report GAO-15-419 is an analysis of 2013 Survey of Consumer Finances data. The analysis found that 29 percent of households ages 55 and older had no defined benefit plan or retirement savings. For those with some retirement savings, the median amount of savings was equivalent to inflation-protected annuities of $310 a month for households 55 to 64 years old and $649 a month for those ages 65 to 74.

11 Race and ethnicity are not mutually exclusive in this analysis. People whose race is identified as White, Black, or Asian may or may not be of Hispanic ethnicity; people whose ethnicity is identified as Hispanic may be of any race.

12 This section is restricted to voluntary part-time workers who actually worked 1 to 34 hours in the reference week; the 3.5 percent of voluntary part-time workers who worked 35 or more hours during the reference week are excluded.

13 See charts on eldercare, "American Time Use Survey" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), for 2014–15 annual averages at https://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/eldercare.htm and "American Time Use Survey Summary," Economic News Release, (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), for 2016 results at https://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm.

14 The 35-hour cutoff was established in the 1940s—it was intended to set a standard both lower than the prevalent 40-hour week and above what most people consider part-time hours. In 1979, the National Commission on Employment and Unemployment Statistics reviewed this 35-hour threshold. The Commission found that the 40-hour workweek still prevailed, and as such, the 35-hour cutoff was still an adequate dividing line between full- and part-time work. For more information, see "Labor force definition and measurement," Bulletin 56 (Social Science Research Council, 1947), p. 48; and National Commission on Employment and Unemployment, "Counting the Labor Force" (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), pp. 54–55.

15 The CPS does not ask people who say their workweek of less than 35 hours is full time why they consider these hours full time.

16 Teenagers and young adults account for a much larger-than-average proportion of employment in retail trade—nearly one-fourth—and in food services and drinking places—2 out of 5. Similarly, women account for a much larger-than-average proportion of employment in private educational services (two-thirds).

17 In other analyses of the self-employed, the incorporated self-employed are often counted among wage and salary workers because they are employees of their own firms, from a legal perspective. The corporate structure of incorporated businesses offers several benefits to the self-employed, including the legal protection of limited liability, tax advantages, and the ability to sell stocks and

bonds to raise capital. See Steven F. Hipple and Laurel A. Hammond, "Self-employment in the United States," *Spotlight on Statistics,* March 2016, https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2016/self-employment-in-the-united- states/home.htm.

18 See Ross Levine and Yona Rubinstein, "Smart and illicit: who becomes an entrepreneur and do they earn more" (University of California, Berkeley, September 2015), http://funginstitute.berkeley.edu/w p-content/uploads/2015/09/ smart_and_illicit_13sep2015.pdf. A more recent version was published in in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics,* vol. 132, no. 2, 1 May 2017, pp. 963–1,018.

19 Earnings data from the CPS are available as usual weekly earnings of wage and salary workers; all self-employed people are excluded, regardless of whether or not their businesses are incorporated. The data represent earnings before taxes and other deductions and can include overtime pay, commissions, or tips usually received. Data on usual weekly earnings are collected from one-fourth of survey households. Respondents are asked, among other things, how much each worker usually earns.

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