

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.

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...

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