

The 15-hour workweek: Canada's part-time problem^[1]

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EXCERPTS

For years, Eileen Hasselhoff enjoyed her steady job as a cashier at a Toronto fast-food restaurant. She didn't earn a lot, typically minimum wage, but at least she had regular hours that let her plan her life and save a little for retirement.

That all changed a few years ago. Suddenly her hours were cut, her schedule thrown into turmoil and her income slashed. Now sometimes, she gets 15 hours a week. Other times, 12. Often she'll get a last-minute call from her manager asking her to come in earlier, or stay later. She has no guaranteed minimum hours, her savings have evaporated and she's lucky if she can pay her bills.

"I know I should be happy I have a job. But I've done a lot of inner thinking, and I keep asking myself why?" she says.

Ms. Hasselhoff is one of nearly a million Canadians who work part-time when they'd prefer full-time hours. Many have seen opportunities for traditional, full-time jobs with benefits fade, to be replaced by part-time or temp positions without health benefits or pension plans.

This type of unsteady or precarious work is a quieter or less visible trend in Canada's labour market, where muted job creation tends to grab most of the attention. But the growing number of reduced-hours and part-time positions, defined as less than 30 hours a week, as well as contract jobs, have widespread effects, not just for personal finances but for consumer demand and economic growth as a whole.

For employers, more flexible staffing allows them to keep a lid on labour costs, improving their margins at a time of heightened competition and changing business models. It lets them be nimble in an era of fluctuating demand.

But for workers, the shift to a just-in-time labour market creates a host of difficulties for long-term planning, eligibility for jobless benefits, and often results in a diminished ability to save. Erratic hours create challenges in pursuing an education, arranging child care and qualifying for a mortgage.

Part-time work accounted for 80 per cent of net job creation in the past year and the share of people in part-time positions stands at 19.3 per cent, a percentage point higher than pre-recession levels. Back in 1976, that figure stood at 12.5 per cent.

Plenty of part-time positions are great, regular jobs. And many people, especially older Canadians, choose part-time work by choice, not necessity.

But not all. The share of involuntary part-timers rose in the recession and remains elevated.

Read online at the *Globe and Mail* ^[2]

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