Trends and seasonality in absenteeism

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Employee absences from work because of an illness or disability are of constant interest. These absences can be for either part or all of a week (see *Data sources and definitions*).[1] Past studies have examined in detail trends and differences among various work groups with respect to overall illness-related work absences—full- and part-week combined. (Akyeampong 1988, 1992, 1995, 1999).[2] Until now, no work has been done on the two separately, even though part-week absences are more likely to be unannounced and so may be relatively more disruptive to managers for planning and production purposes, and to co-workers. This note examines not only separate trends for the two types of absences, but also their seasonality over the decade 1997 to 2006—namely, since the latest Labour Force Survey redesign.

Rising trend in part-week absences during past decade

The weekly number of employees failing to report for work because of an illness or disability has increased steadily over the past 10 years—from 431,000 in 1997 to 758,000 in 2006. Controlling for employment growth does not change the picture (Table and Chart A); the incidence rose consistently, climbing from 3.8% in 1997 to 5.4% in 2006. Contributing factors include the aging of the workforce and improvements in sick-leave entitlements.[3]

The trend for each type of illness-related absence has been generally upward, but much more pronounced for part-week absences. For example, while the number of employees reporting a full-week absence rose by almost one-third (from 199,000 in 1997 to 262,000 in 2006), part-week absences more than doubled (from 232,000 to 496,000). Similarly, the incidence

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Data source and definitions

The **Labour Force Survey** collects information each month on labour market activity during the survey reference week from the civilian, non-institutionalized population 15 years of age and over. The territories are excluded from the national total, as are persons living on Indian reserves. The survey samples approximately 53,000 households, with each remaining in the sample for six consecutive months.

Among other things, the Labour Force Survey asks respondents if they were absent from work during the reference week, and if so the reason for the absence. If they reported an absence because of their own illness or disability, they are further asked the hours they missed as a result. The full-week and part-week absence designations are assigned by comparing usual weekly hours with hours lost as a result of the illness or disability.

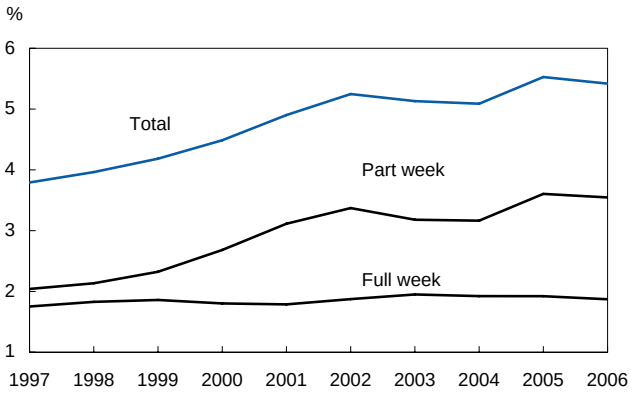
To simplify the analysis, seasonality in this note is based on the four seasons, rather than each month—Winter (December to February), Spring (March to May), Summer (June to August), and Fall (September to November). The seasonal index was constructed with the annual average data being 1.00.

Table Employees absent from work each week due to own illness or disability

	Total		Full week		Part week	
	'000	%	'000	%	'000	%
1997	430.7	3.8	199.0	1.8	231.8	2.0
1998	461.4	4.0	212.9	1.8	248.5	2.1
1999	501.0	4.2	222.7	1.9	278.3	2.3
2000	555.9	4.5	223.5	1.8	332.4	2.7
2001	620.9	4.9	226.4	1.8	394.5	3.1
2002	681.9	5.2	243.6	1.9	438.3	3.4
2003	680.9	5.1	258.9	2.0	422.1	3.2
2004	686.5	5.1	259.5	1.9	427.0	3.2
2005	754.8	5.5	262.5	1.9	492.3	3.6
2006	757.9	5.4	261.8	1.9	496.1	3.5

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey

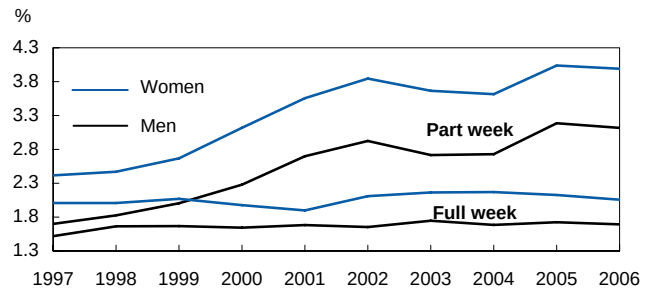
Chart A Part-week absences increased by about half; full-week, virtually flat



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey

of full-week absences rose marginally from 1.8% to 1.9% between 1997 and 2006, while that of part-week absences jumped from 2.0% to 3.5%. Simply stated, part-week absences have been the major driving force for the increase in overall work absences due to illness or disability during the past decade. Throughout the period, women showed a higher incidence of both full- and part-week illness-related absences than men (Chart B). For both women and men, though, the incidence of full-week absences remained little changed over the period, while that of part-week absences rose rapidly.

Chart B Whether full or part week, women's absence rates are higher



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey

Seasonality a factor in part-week absences

Perhaps not unexpectedly, illness-related absences are highly seasonal, reaching a peak during the winter months (December to February) and a trough during the summer (June to August) (Chart C). The high incidence in winter is likely related to the prevalence of communicable diseases at that time, especially colds and influenza. The low incidence during the summer may be partly because many employees take their vacation during these months. Because of survey design, those who fall ill during vacation will likely report 'vacation' rather than 'sickness or disability' as the main reason for being away from work.

Compared with the annual average, part-week absences are roughly 30% more prevalent in the winter months and almost 20% less so during the summer months. Seasonality is much less evident in full-week absences.

Hours lost per absence remains steady

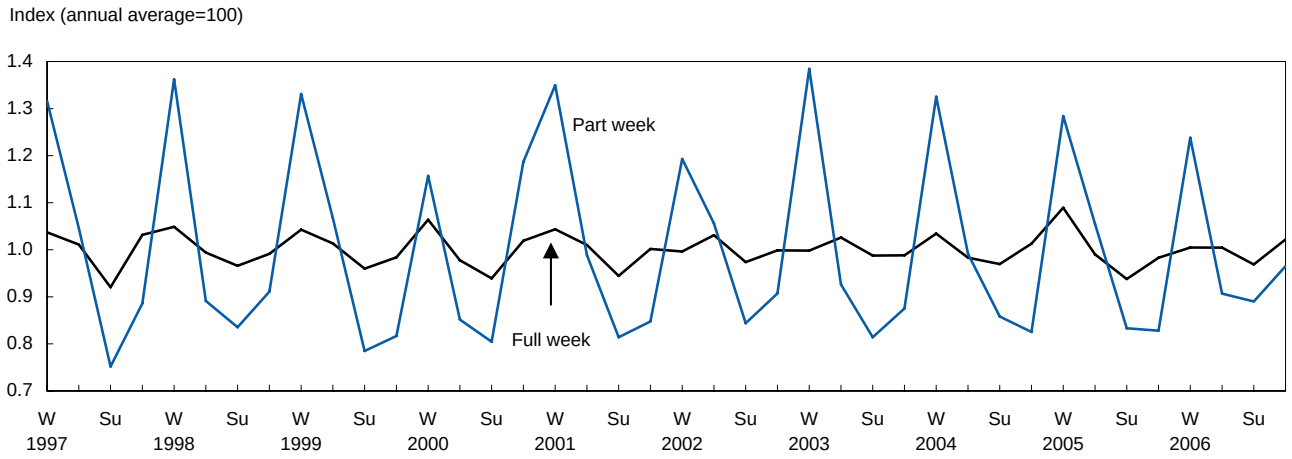
Hours lost for full-week illness absences by definition reflect average usual hours worked—about 37 between 1997 and 2006. Similarly, time lost for part-week absences has been concentrated around 11 hours (roughly a day and a half).

Summary

The number and proportion of employees absent from work for all or part of a week due to own illness or disability have risen over the past 10 years. The growth has been much greater for part-week absences. The number of employees absent for a full week rose from 199,000 in 1997 to 262,000 in 2006, and the incidence grew slightly from 1.8% to 1.9%. The corresponding increases for part-week absences were from 232,000 to 496,000, and from 2.0% to 3.5%.

Both men and women shared in the rising incidence, with rates for both full-week and part-week absences being higher for women. Reasons for the growing trends in both number and incidence include the aging of the workforce and improvements in sick-leave entitlements for employees. While full-week absences have shown minimal seasonal patterns, the same cannot be said for part-week absences. Compared with the annual average, part-week illness absences are roughly 30% more common in the winter months and 20% less so in the summer months.

Chart C Illness-related absences tend to be at their peak during winter (W) months and at their trough in summer (Su) months



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey

Notes

1 Whether an illness-related absence is designated as full- or part-week is dictated by the Labour Force Survey design. The survey results are based on labour market activity during a reference week, usually the week containing the 15th day of the month. As well, absences are snapshots within the reference week and do not necessarily mean completed spells of absence. Such information can only be obtained from a longitudinal survey such as the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics.

2 In these previous studies, the focus of interest was absenteeism, and hence, in accordance with international practices, part-time employees, who normally have low absence rates, were excluded from the analyses. In this note however, the universe includes both full-time and part-time workers.

3 Studies have found that illness-related work absences increase with age (Statistics Canada 2007).

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