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Part-Time Workers Are Facing Heightened Uncertainty During COVID—and Most Are Women

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Over 32.1 million working people in the United States—more than one in five—worked part-time in 2021.¹ Part-time workers were hit hard in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic; there has been a net loss of over 1 million part-time jobs between 2019 and 2021, with women accounting for 100% of the jobs lost.² Yet between February and April 2020, the number of people working part time for “economic reasons” (i.e., involuntarily) more than doubled.³ Although this number has since declined to below pre-pandemic levels, new variants of the coronavirus and ongoing economic uncertainty continue to create instability for the part-time workforce.

Part-time workers—most of whom are women—are far more likely than full-time workers to hold jobs that require them to show up in person, notwithstanding the ongoing risks of COVID-19 infection.⁴ Some people work part time to support their families while caring for loved ones, going to school, or attending to other obligations—but find themselves penalized for working part-time work in terms of pay, benefits, stability, and opportunities to advance on the job. And still others work part time because their employers, particularly in low-paying service industries, rarely offer full-time positions, and some employees—especially women—find that caregiving or other responsibilities preclude full-time work.

Who are part-time workers?

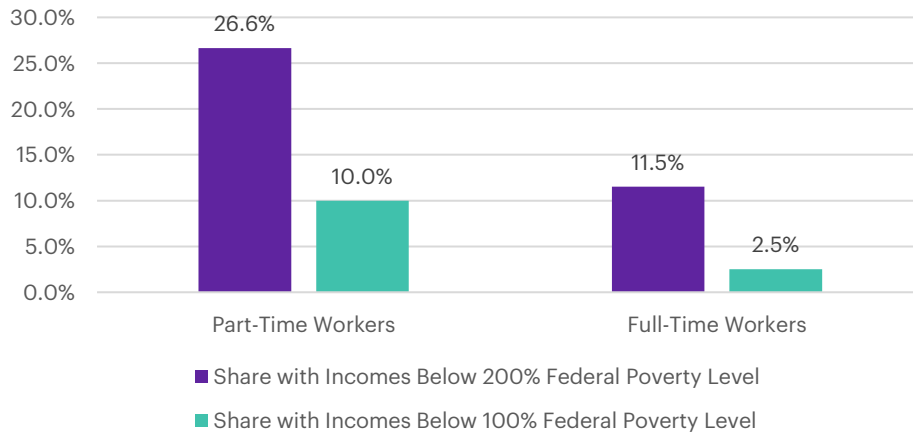
MOST PART-TIME WORKERS ARE WOMEN.

- Over 32.1 million people work part time—approximately 22.2% of workers.⁵
- Nearly six in ten part-time workers (59.1%) are women. There were more than 1 million fewer women working part time in 2021 than in 2019, before the pandemic began.⁶
- Women are about 1.6 times more likely to work part time than men: 27.9% of all working women work part time, compared to 17.2% of all working men.⁷

PART-TIME WORKERS ARE ESPECIALLY LIKELY TO WORK IN LOW-PAID JOBS AND STRUGGLE TO MAKE ENDS MEET.

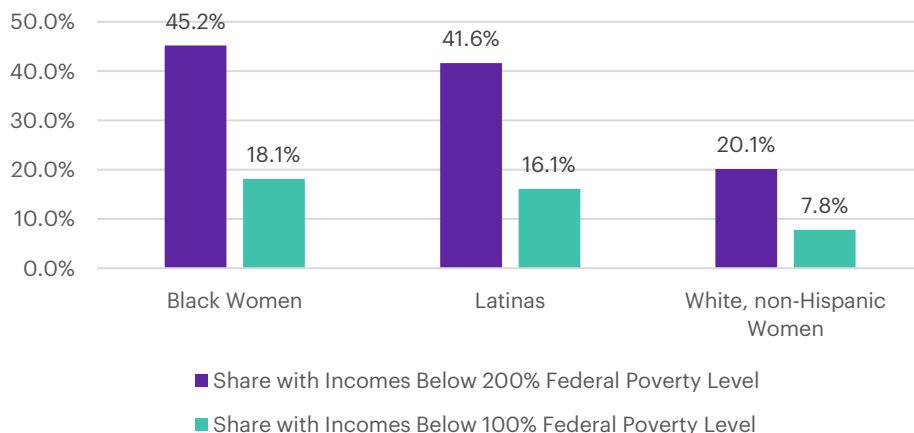
- Part-time workers (32.3%) are about three times more likely than full-time workers (10.5%) to hold low-paid jobs (defined as the 40 lowest-paying occupations in the U.S.). More than two in three part-time workers in low-paid jobs (67.7%) are women.⁸
- One in ten part-time workers (10.0%) lives in poverty—four times the rate of poverty experienced by full-time workers (2.5%).⁹ And the federal poverty line—which is just \$21,831 for a parent with two children—barely begins to capture what families need to make ends meet.¹⁰
- More than one in four part-time workers (26.6%) live near poverty, with household incomes below 200% of the poverty line, compared to 11.5% of full-time workers.¹¹ Similarly, among women working part time, 26.8% have household incomes below 200% of the poverty line, including 10.3% who live in poverty.¹²
- Black women and Latinas working in part-time jobs are especially likely to live paycheck to paycheck. Over two in five Black women (45.2%) and Latinas (41.6%) working part time have incomes below 200% of the poverty line. More than one in six Black women (18.1%) and nearly one in six Latinas (16.1%) working part time are living in poverty.¹³

Poverty and Near-Poverty Rates Among Full- and Part-Time Workers



Source: NWLC calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 Current Population Survey. Figures are for 2020.

Poverty and Near-Poverty Rates Among Women Working Part Time, by Race/Ethnicity



Source: NWLC calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 Current Population Survey. Breakdowns for Native American women and AAPI women are not included due to sample size. Figures are for 2020.

MOST PART-TIME WORKERS ARE AGE 25 AND OLDER.

- Three in four part-time workers (75.1%) are age 25 and older; only 11.0% are teens age 16 to 19.¹⁴
- Nearly half of part-time workers (48.6%) are age 25 to 54—that is, prime working age. More than six in ten prime-age part-time workers (61.8%) are women.¹⁵
- More than one in four part-time workers (26.4%) are age 55 and older. Nearly six in ten older part-time workers (57.5%) are women.¹⁶

MANY PART-TIME WORKERS ARE SUPPORTING FAMILIES.

- Close to one in four part-time workers (23.9%) have children under 18. The vast majority (80.4%) of these parents working part time are women.¹⁷
- Three in ten mothers working part time (30.5%) are supporting children on their own.¹⁸

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ARE MORE LIKELY TO WORK PART TIME THAN PEOPLE WITHOUT DISABILITIES.

- More than one in four workers with a disability (26.6%) work part time, compared to 15.8% of workers without a disability.¹⁹
- More than one in three working women with a disability (31.8%) work part time, compared to 21.3% of working women without a disability.²⁰

Why Do People Work Part Time?

MILLIONS OF PART-TIME EMPLOYEES WORK PART TIME BECAUSE FULL-TIME WORK IS NOT AVAILABLE.

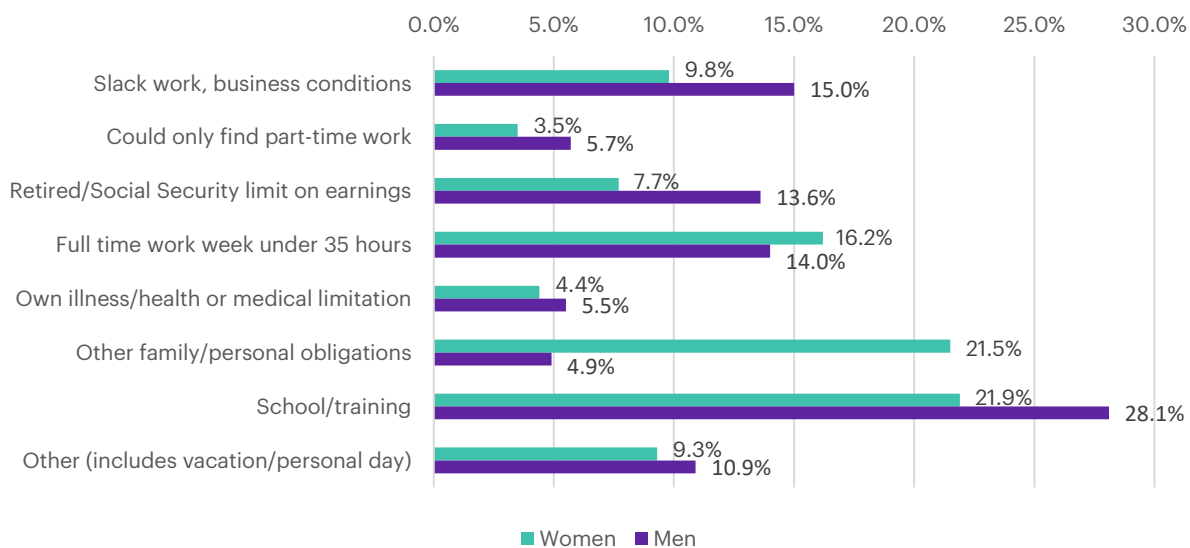
- More than one in seven part-time workers—4.9 million people—work part time “involuntarily” as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which considers part-time work to be involuntary when it is for “economic reasons,” including because of slack work, unfavorable business conditions, the inability to find full-time work, or seasonal declines in demand. Nearly half of employees who work part time involuntarily (48.2%) are women.²¹
- Between February and April 2020, the number of part-time workers citing economic reasons more than doubled, from nearly 4.4 million to nearly 10.9 million. During 2021, this number declined to roughly pre-pandemic levels.²²
- These estimates of the prevalence of involuntary part-time work do not include people who want to work part time but receive fewer hours than they are seeking from their employer—a scenario that is common in many low-paid service sector jobs.²³ Research from the Center for Law and Social Policy shows that up to 40% of all people working part time would prefer more hours, including half of people working part time in service occupations.²⁴

EIGHT IN TEN WORKERS WHO WORK PART TIME DO SO FOR OTHER REASONS, INCLUDING SCHOOL OR FAMILY OBLIGATIONS.

- More than eight in ten people who work part time (85.0%) do so for reasons other than the unavailability of full-time work—reasons that the Bureau of Labor Statistics terms “noneconomic reasons.” Women are six in ten of these workers (60.7%).²⁵

- People who work part time for noneconomic reasons may not seek full-time work for a variety of reasons—many of which are not truly “voluntary,” including caregiving responsibilities that likely have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with ongoing school and child care closures and quarantines.
- Between February and April 2020, the economy lost over 22 million jobs.²⁶ These losses mean that 42.8% fewer women were working part time for noneconomic reasons like child care problems, family or personal obligations, and health or medical limitations between February and April 2020.²⁷ It’s unlikely this number dropped because women found full-time work: during the same time period, women lost over 12.2 million jobs overall.²⁸ As of December 2021, both the number of women working part time for noneconomic reasons and the number of women working full time were still lower than before the pandemic,²⁹ as women’s labor force participation remained at its lowest level since 1991.³⁰
- Nearly 5.3 million workers who are part time for noneconomic reasons (19.4%) report working part time because of child care problems or other family or personal obligations.³¹ Women are over four times more likely than men to cite “other family/personal obligations” as reasons for working part time during a given week.³² While some of these workers prefer to work part time, for others the “choice” of part-time work may be forced by, for example, high child care costs, child care closures, or inflexible and unpredictable work schedules, especially during the pandemic.
- Just over 5.5 million workers who are part time for noneconomic reasons (20.2%) report working part time because they are in school or training.³³
- Over 2.3 million workers who are part time for noneconomic reasons (8.5%) report working part time because they are retired or are subject to Social Security income limits and would lose benefits if they worked more.³⁴
- More than 900,000 workers who are part time for noneconomic reasons (3.3%) report working part time due to health or medical limitations.³⁵
- Over 360,000 workers who are part time for noneconomic reasons (1.3%) report working part time due to weather-related curtailment—a number likely to grow with increasing weather disruptions from climate change.³⁶

Women's and Men's Reasons for Working Part Time Last Week (Economic and Non-Economic)



Source: NWLC calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 Community Population Survey.³⁷ Breakdowns for those who cited child care, seasonal work, weather affected job, job started/ended during the week, and holiday are not included due to insufficient sample size. Figures are for 2020.

What Are Key Concerns for Part-Time Workers?

PAY AND ACCESS TO BENEFITS ARE MAJOR CONCERNS FOR THOSE WHO WORK PART TIME.

- **Part-time workers are paid less than full-time workers in the same industry and occupation.** For example, part-time retail salespersons make more than six dollars less per hour, on average, than their full-time counterparts (\$12.26 per hour for part-time workers, compared to \$18.61 per hour for full-time workers). Similarly, part-time office and administrative support workers make more than \$5.50 less per hour than their full-time counterparts (\$14.08 per hour for part-time workers, compared to \$19.77 per hour for full-time workers).³⁸ Overall, the Economic Policy Institute estimates part-time workers are paid nearly 20% less per hour than their full-time counterparts in the same industry and occupation, and this part-time wage penalty is greatest (at 29%) for workers who work part time because they cannot secure the full-time work they are seeking.³⁹
- **Part-time workers often are not eligible for employer-provided benefits.** Employers provide just 23% of part-time workers with access to medical insurance benefits, compared to 88% of full-time workers.⁴⁰ Full-time workers are nearly twice as likely to have access to retirement benefits as part-time workers (81% of full-time workers, compared to 42% of part-time workers).⁴¹ Full-time workers are also nearly twice as likely to have access to paid sick days as part-time workers (89% of full-time workers compared to 48% of part-time workers).⁴² And while most workers lack paid family leave, full-time workers are about 2.5 times more likely to have this benefit than part-time workers: 27% of full-time workers can access paid family leave, compared to just 11% of part-time workers.⁴³ The disparity also applies to paid medical leave: 89% of full-time workers have paid medical leave for their own health needs compared with 48% of part-time workers.⁴⁴ Part-time workers are often ineligible even for unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act due to their varying schedules and hours.⁴⁵
- **Women who work full time are more likely than those who work part time to be promoted.** A 2014 study found women working full time are more likely to be promoted than part-time workers, though the trend does not hold for men.⁴⁶ And in a 2018 analysis, the Federal Reserve found that more than half (56%) of full-time workers had received a raise in the prior year, while only 29% of part-time workers who cited economic reasons and 37% of part-time workers who cited other reasons could say the same.⁴⁷
- **Part-time workers face varying schedules and hours.** The Federal Reserve's analysis also found only 12% of full-time workers faced varying schedules based on their employer's needs, compared to 36% of part-time workers who cite economic reasons and 26% of part-time workers who cite other reasons for working part time.⁴⁸ And 2017-2018 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that half of part-time workers receive no more than two weeks' notice of their work schedules, while less than one-third of full-time workers receive so little notice.⁴⁹ This kind of precarious scheduling is associated with material hardship, including difficulties securing adequate food and housing, and makes it even more challenging for working parents to arrange child care.⁵⁰
- **Part-time workers are ineligible for unemployment insurance in many states.** Part-time workers who lose their jobs may be unable to access unemployment insurance (UI) due to state policies that, for example, require workers to earn a certain level of wages over a short period or to seek full-time employment to qualify for UI benefits.⁵¹ While coronavirus relief legislation created Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) that broadly expanded eligibility to part-time workers, this program expired on September 6, 2021.⁵²

- 1 NWLC calculations using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), “Persons at work in nonagricultural industries by age, sex, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, marital status, and usual full- or part-time status,” Annual Averages, Table 22 in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey* (Washington, DC: Jan. 20, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat22.htm>. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) defines part-time work as less than 35 hours per week. See BLS, Handbook of Methods: Current Population Survey, at 4-5, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/hom/cps/pdf/cps.pdf>. Figures from this table are for workers 16 and older unless otherwise specified.
- 2 *Id.* 2019 data available at <https://www.bls.gov/cps/aa2019/cpsaat22.htm>. Between 2019 and 2021, there were 977,000 fewer part-time workers, including 1,018,000 less women part-time workers and 42,000 additional men part-time workers.
- 3 NWLC calculations using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), “Employment Level – Part-Time for Economic Reasons, All Industries,” Data Viewer in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey* (Washington, DC: January 7, 2022), <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNS12032194>.
- 4 See, e.g., Elise Gould and Jori Kandra, “Only One in Five Workers Are Working from Home Due to COVID” (Economic Policy Institute, June 2021), <https://www.epi.org/blog/only-one-in-five-workers-are-working-from-home-due-to-covid-black-and-hispanic-workers-are-less-likely-to-be-able-to-telework/> (estimating 26.6% of full-time workers teleworked from May 2020-April 2021, approximately 1.4 times more than the 18.8% of part-time workers who did so).
- 5 NWLC calculations using BLS, Annual Averages, Table 22 in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. Figures are for 2021 and for workers in nonagricultural industries who are 16 and older.
- 6 *Id.* 2019 figures can be found at <https://www.bls.gov/cps/aa2019/cpsaat22.htm>.
- 7 *Id.*
- 8 NWLC calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS), accessed through Sarah Flood, Miriam King, Renae Rodgers, Steven Ruggles, J. Robert Warren and Michael Westberry, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series Current Population Survey* (IPUMS CPS): Version 9.0 (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 2021), <http://doi.org/10.18128/DO30.V9.0>. Figures are for 2020.
- 9 *Id.*
- 10 See U.S. Census Bureau, Poverty Thresholds for 2020, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html> (last accessed January 16, 2022).
- 11 NWLC calculations using 2021 CPS, accessed through Flood et al., *IPUMS CPS*. Figures are for 2020.
- 12 *Id.*
- 13 *Id.* Respondents self-identified their race in the 2021 CPS. “Black women” includes women who self-identified their race in the CPS as Black or African American; “Latinas” includes women of any race who self-identified as Hispanic, Spanish, or Latino.
- 14 NWLC calculations using BLS, Annual Averages, Table 22 in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. Figures are for 2021 and include only those in nonagricultural industries.
- 15 *Id.*
- 16 *Id.*
- 17 NWLC calculations using 2021 CPS, accessed through Flood et al., *IPUMS CPS*. Figures are for 2020. Parents have at least one related child under 18 in the home.
- 18 *Id.* “Women supporting children on their own” are those who have at least one related child under 18 in the home and whose marital status is married, spouse absent; separated; divorced; widowed; or never married/single.
- 19 *Id.* This figure includes CPS respondents who self-identified as having any physical or cognitive difficulty including hearing difficulty, vision difficulty, difficulty remembering, physical difficulty, a disability limiting mobility, or a personal care limitation.
- 20 *Id.*
- 21 NWLC calculations using BLS, “Persons at work by occupation, sex, and usual full- or part-time status,” Annual Averages, Table 23 in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey* (Washington, DC: Jan. 22, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat23.htm>. Per BLS Handbook of Methods, involuntary part-time work includes part-time work due to slack work or business conditions; could only find part-time work; seasonal work; and jobs started or ended during the week. Figures are for 2021, include those in agricultural and nonagricultural industries, and are for workers ages 16 and older unless otherwise specified.
- 22 NWLC calculations using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), “(SEAS) Employment Level – Part-Time for Economic Reasons, All Industries,” Data Viewer in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey* <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNS12032194>.
- 23 See, e.g., Elaine Zundl, Daniel Schneider, Kristen Harknett, and Evelyn Bellow, “Still Unstable: The Persistence of Schedule Uncertainty During the Pandemic” (Shift Project, January 2022), https://shift.hks.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/COVIDUpdate_Brief_Final.pdf; Susan J. Lambert, Anna Haley-Lock, and Julia R. Henly, “Schedule Flexibility in Hourly Jobs: Unanticipated Consequences and Promising Directions,” *Community, Work & Family* 15, no. 3 (Aug. 2012): 293, 301, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2012.662803> (in study examining scheduling practices at a national women’s apparel retailer, 46% of white, 57% of Black and 71% of Hispanic part-time sales associates—all of whom were women—wanted more hours).
- 24 Lonnie Golden and Jaeseung Kim, “The Involuntary Part-Time Work and Underemployment Problem in the U.S.” (Center for Law and Social Policy, August 2020), https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2020/08/GWC2029_Center%20For%20Law.pdf.
- 25 NWLC calculations using BLS, Annual Averages, Table 23 in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. Per BLS Handbook of methods, voluntary part-time work includes child care problems, other family or personal obligations, health or medical limitations, in school or training, retired or Social Security limit on earnings, vacation or personal day, holiday, legal or religious, weather-related curtailment and all other noneconomic reasons. Figures are for 2021, include workers who usually work full- and part-time, are for workers 16 and older unless otherwise specified, and are for workers in agricultural and nonagricultural industries.
- 26 National Women’s Law Center (NWLC) calculations using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), “Employees on Nonfarm Payrolls by Industry Sector and Selected Industry Detail,” Table B-1 in *December 2021 Employment Situation Summary* (Washington, DC: January 7, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t17.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtat1.htm>. Figures are seasonally adjusted.
- 27 NWLC calculations using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), “(Unadj) Number At Work 1-34 Hours, Usually Work Part Time Noneconomic Reasons Women” in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey* (Washington, DC: October 21, 2021), <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNU02006041>.
- 28 NWLC calculations using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), “Employment of Women on Nonfarm Payrolls by Industry Sector, Seasonally Adjusted,” Table B-5 in *January 2022 Employment Situation Summary* (Washington, DC: January 7, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t21.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtat5.htm>.
- 29 NWLC calculations using BLS, “(unadj) Number at Work 1-34, Hours, Usually Work Part Time Noneconomic Reasons Women,” in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. There were nearly 14.8 million women usually working part time for noneconomic reasons in February 2020, compared to 13.4 million in December 2021. The number of employed women who usually work full time dropped from more than 57.2 million in February 2020 to just under 56.9 million in December 2021 (see <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNS12500002>).
- 30 Jasmine Tucker, “Uptick in Women’s Labor Force Participation Still Leaves Rate at Level Last Seen in 1991” (National Women’s Law Center, January 2022), <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/December-Jobs-Day.pdf>.
- 31 NWLC calculations using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), “Persons at work 1 to 34 hours in all and in nonagricultural industries by reason for working less than 35 hours and usual full- or part-time status,” Annual Averages, Table 20 in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat20.htm>. Figures are for 2021 and workers in nonagricultural industries.

- 32 NWLC calculations using CPS 2021 accessed through Flood, et al. Figures are for 2020. Calculations are based on the week prior to the survey, not the whole year. Those deemed “not in universe,” who are likely those who did not work part-time during the reference week, were excluded from calculations.
- 33 NWLC calculations using BLS, Annual Averages 20 in *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. Figures are for 2021 and for those in nonagricultural industries.
- 34 *Id.*
- 35 *Id.*
- 36 *Id.*
- 37 NWLC calculations using CPS 2021 accessed through Flood, et al., IPUMS CPS. Figures are for 2020. Calculations are based on the week prior to the survey, not the whole year. Those deemed “not in universe,” who are likely those who did not work part-time during the reference week, were excluded from calculations.
- 38 NWLC calculations based on BLS Modeled Wage Estimates, 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/mwe/#data> (last accessed November 30, 2021). Figures are for 2020.
- 39 Lonnie Golden, “Part-Time Workers Pay a Big-Time Penalty: Hourly Pay-and-Benefits Penalties for Part-Time Work Are Largest for Those Seeking Full-Time Jobs and for Men, but Affect More Women” (Economic Policy Institute, February 2020), <https://www.epi.org/publication/part-time-pay-penalty/>.
- 40 Bureau of Labor Statistics, “National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2021,” (U.S. Department of Labor, September 2021), 31, <https://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/benefits/2021/employee-benefits-in-the-united-states-march-2021.pdf> (Table 10). Figures are for civilian workers.
- 41 *Id.* at 3 (Table 2). Figures are for civilian workers.
- 42 *Id.* at 127 (Table 33). Figures are for civilian workers.
- 43 *Id.*
- 44 *Id.*
- 45 The Family and Medical Leave Act requires an individual to work at least 1,250 hours for an employer during a 12-month period, preventing many part-time workers from accessing unpaid leave.
- 46 John T. Addison, Orgul Demet Ozturk, and Si Wang, “Job Promotion in Midcareer: Gender, Recession, and ‘Crowding,’” *BLS Monthly Labor Review* (January 2014), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2014/article/job-promotion-in-midcareer.htm> (Table 3).
- 47 “Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2017” (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, May 2018), <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2017-report-economic-well-being-us-households-201805.pdf>.
- 48 *Id.*
- 49 Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Job Flexibilities and Work Schedules—2017-2018 Data from the American Time Use Survey” (U.S. Department of Labor, September 2019), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/flex2.pdf> (Table 5).
- 50 See generally, e.g., “Collateral Damage: Scheduling Challenges for Workers in Low-Paid Jobs and Their Consequences” (National Women’s Law Center, December 2020), <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Collateral-Damage-2020-12.18.20.pdf>.
- 51 See, e.g., “Reforming Unemployment Insurance: Stabilizing a System in Crisis and Laying the Foundation for Equity” (Econ. Policy Inst. et al., July 2021), 22, <https://files.epi.org/uploads/Reforming-Unemployment-Insurance.pdf>. See also “Comparison of State Unemployment Insurance Laws” (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020), 5-28, <https://oui.doleta.gov/unemploy/pdf/uilawcompar/2020/complete.pdf>.
- 52 See Amy Traub, “7 Things We Learned About Unemployment Insurance During the Pandemic” (NELP, November 2021), 3-4, <https://s27147.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Seven-Things-We-Learned-from-Pandemic-UI.pdf>.