Trends in Work Schedules among Key Worker Sub-groups in Canada

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Summary

Well over a decade ago, Betcherman and Lowe (1997) noted that working conditions within the Canadian labour market had become increasingly polarized, and predicted they would become even more so in the future. A key assumption was that fewer and fewer people would have the 'standard' work schedule of the past. Recent literature (e.g. Usalcas, 2008; Zeytinoglu et al., 2009) confirm that this prediction has come true. Betcherman and Lowe also predicted that, in addition to the overall changes, a fortunate subset of skilled workers in Canada would have high quality jobs while others would be likely to be in jobs with relatively poor working conditions. This has also been confirmed by empirical studies (e.g. Saunders 2003; Vallée 2005). The authors of those studies also discuss how important work schedules can be in the lives of individuals. Like the others, we believe that among the most important variables in determining job quality in the labour market is attained education. At the risk of over-generalizing, we sorted workers using hourly wage levels as a rough proxy for higher or lower quality jobs. We also sorted workers according to gender since previous studies (e.g. Cooke et al., 2009a; Cranford et al., 2003) indicate that females have a higher prevalence of non-standard work schedules, especially of the less desirable variety.

The purpose of this study is to look at trends among various work schedule 'components' among four sub-groups of interest: lower-waged lower-educated females then comparable males, and higher-waged higher-educated females then comparable males. The work schedule components are: workweek length (separated into 'short' & 'long' part-time, and 'short' & 'long' full-time), weekend hours, unsocial hours, late schedule notice, and/or flextime. While it is difficult to categorize work schedules lengths as being inherently high or low quality for all, it is fair to presume that late schedule notice, weekend or unsocial hours are generally negative to workers or 'employee-unfriendly', while access to flextime is generally positive to workers, thus being 'employee-friendly'.

For this study, we utilize Statistics Canada's Workplace and Employee Survey (WES) datasets for 1999 to 2005, as well as the 1991 and 1995 versions of the WES predecessor, the Survey of Work Arrangements (SWA). As expected, we found that while approximately three-quarters of workers have a full-time workweek of between 30 and 45 hours, one in four still has either a part-time or long full-time workweek length. We also found that weekend and/or unsocial hours are prevalent (at upwards of 30%) among a significant minority of workers in Canada. Flextime is also prevalent among Canadian workers, but is lower than one would expect, given the public perception that many workers have that scheduling component. The results also indicated that the employee-friendly variety of work schedule components (i.e. flextime) was more prevalent among higher-waged higher-educated workers, while the three employee-unfriendly varieties were more prevalent among lower-waged lower-educated workers. Although the gaps appear to be closing, the three employer-friendly schedule components are still at least as prevalent among females relative to comparable males.

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Introduction

Well over a decade ago, Betcherman and Lowe (1997) noted that working conditions within the Canadian labour market had become increasingly polarized. At the same time, they also outlined three scenarios for the future for Canadian workers. Although the scenarios ranged from optimistic to pessimistic, one of the elements common to all three was that fewer and fewer people would have the 'standard' work schedule of the past.

The empirical literature confirms that this prediction has come true. (For earlier studies, see Armstong-Stassen, 1998; Hall, 1999; Marshall, 2001; Statistics Canada, 1998. For a recent look at full-time versus part-time hours, see Usalcas, 2008.) For example, Cooke (2005) found that in 1999, 42% of Canadian workers had a flexible work arrangement when considering only short or long work weeks, non-permanent employment, and/or home-based work. Focusing on single types of flexible work schedules, Comfort et al. (2003) found that 40% of Canadian workers use flex-time, and Sousa-Poza and Henneberger (2000) showed that a sizable proportion of Canadians work long hours. Cooke et al. (2009a) found that in 2003, 27% of Canadian workers usually worked on weekends with 6.5% in weekend-based short workweeks. Their recent study documenting the prevalence of scheduling variations showed that in 2003 only two in five Canadians had a standard work schedule with more than half of the workers having at least one of these flexible work schedules: flextime (36%), variable workweek length (13%), variable workweek schedule (16%), compressed workweek (7%), and long workweek (5%) (Zeytinoglu et al., 2009).

This paper complements these cross-sectional studies by looking at changes in work schedules over time. The purpose of this longitudinal study is to assess trends regarding the prevalence of various scheduling aspects in Canada over the past two decades. We use work

scheduling components[1] terminology for these work schedules. In particular, we examine the prevalence of workweek length, weekend hours, unsocial hours, late schedule notice, and flextime (See Data Source and Definitions section for definitions).

Data Source and Definitions

For this study, we primarily utilize Statistics Canada's Workplace and Employee Survey (WES) data from 1999 to 2005. The WES surveys all business locations operating in Canada except: i) employers in Yukon, Nunavut and Northwest Territories, and ii) employers operating in crop production, animal production, fishing, hunting and trapping, private households, religious organizations and public administration. Thus, the WES captures the vast majority of the Canadian labour market. For example, on a weighted basis, the 2005 WES represents 12.2 million respondents. The unit of analysis in this paper is the individual worker. The data, which contain linked responses from employers and their employees, are well suited for this study due to the large number of work, personal, human capital, and workplace variables. For more information on the WES dataset, see Statistics Canada, 2008. In addition to the WES, we also utilize its predecessor, Statistics Canada's Survey of Work Arrangements (SWA) for the two available years, 1991 and 1995. Although the data does not match exactly (since the underlying surveys contained similar but different questions in many instances), it is close enough to provide a longer horizon to detect trends. In places where the SWA variable definitions do not allow a meaningful comparison to the WES results, we emphasize the latter. For an in-depth examination of the results from the SWA 1991 and 1995, see Statistics Canada, 1998.

[1] Terminology for these arrangements varies in existing literature. Often, labels like 'non-standard work arrangements' or 'flexible work schedules' are used. However, since these are now common enough that the former label doesn't fit,

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The first key variable is workweek length, with four possible options. A short part-time workweek is under 20 hours, while a long part-time workweek is at least 20 hours but less than 30. A short full-time workweek is at least 30 hours but less than 45, while a long full-time workweek is at least 45 hours. Workweek length is important because there is substantial discussion, in academic literature, regarding the pros and cons of part-time vs. full-time work schedules, and the types of workers and quality of jobs associated with different workweek lengths. Although a part-time schedule is not inherently inferior to a full-time schedule, the former is associated with a host of negative characteristics such as poorer wages, benefits, advancement opportunities (e.g. Zeytinoglu and Cooke, 2005; 2009). That said, a long workweek, however defined, has potentially negative implications for workers as well (see Shields (2000) for a study using a threshold of 41+ hours per week).

In addition to workweek length, we also consider three so-called employee-unfriendly work schedule components: unsocial hours, weekend hours, and late notice of work schedule, as well as one employee-friendly work schedule component: availability of flextime. Weekend hours identifies those whose usual workweek regularly or sometimes includes Saturday or Sunday. Unsocial hours identifies those who do NOT usually work between the hours of 6 am and 6 pm. Late notice refers to those who know their weekly hours of work at most one week in advance among those without regular hours and days. Flextime identifies those who are allowed by their employer to vary their starting and stopping work times as long as they work the equivalent of a full work week.

To create the four worker sub-samples, we use education, hourly wage, and gender. Workers are categorized as having lower education if having at most high school education, while

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and since these components are not necessarily designed to provide flexibility to affected workers, then the latter can be

those with higher education are those with at least some post-secondary education. In terms of wage level, there isn't a commonly accepted threshold identifying those who are low paid. Moreover, even if there was a common threshold dollar value, it would change over time. Thus, we have chosen to use the annual median hourly wage earnings, an arbitrary but nonetheless logical and well-known cut-point. Workers with hourly earnings below the median are categorized as being lower-waged, while the other half (at the median and above) is higher-waged. The median ranges from $12.90 to $18.50, from 1991 to 2005, respectively. Finally, gender is a simple a dichotomous variable (with 1=female and 0=male). For more methodological details, such as definitions we used to create our work scheduling components within the SWA dataset, please contact the first author via gcooke@mun.ca. Moreover, we were unable to find suitable SWA definitions for weekend or unsocial hours, so the presented charts omitted values for 1991 and 1995 for those variables.

For this exploratory analysis of trends, we rely on simple descriptive statistics. All of the WES results have been generated using weighted microdata accessed at Statistics Canada's Research Data Centre (RDC) at McMaster University. While the SWA results have been similarly weighted, SWA analyses do not require RDC access.

Work Schedules within Changing Labour Markets

From a theoretical perspective, flexible work schedules can be discussed within the framework of industrial relations systems theory (Dunlop, 1958; Meltz, 1993), which proposed that employees and especially employers can strategically react to a changing business environment and labour market (Kochan et al., 1986; Cappelli et al., 1997). Of course, that implies that employers can

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argued to be inappropriate as well.

make human resource decisions (such as the design and implementation of work schedules) aimed at achieving operational (i.e. employer) or worker objectives. Not surprisingly then, there are two diametrically opposite sets of literature exploring the changes occurring to work schedules (Lewis et al., 2007). One sees changes to work schedules as primarily employer-driven--an attempt by employers to better match/support the business requirements of the firm. That is, implementing new forms of work, including various types of work schedules, can be used by employers to gain operational flexibility and cost effectiveness (Housemann, 2001). Our study builds on this flexibility concept and extends it by focusing on the scheduling aspect of flexibility.

The other stream of literature discusses work schedules as a tool to attract and retain valued workers. According to this literature, work schedules are primarily employee-driven as individuals are seeking, and gaining, more control over their schedules in a way that helps achieve work-life balance, or at least individual choice. That said, most of the literature considers the possibility of simultaneous employer- and employee-driven work schedule changes (e.g. Zeytinoglu, 1999). The literature also uses employee-friendly and employer-friendly terms for categorizing work schedules (Cooke, 2005; Fleetwood, 2007; Iverson and Zatzick, 2007). The former is designed to address workers' wants or needs, and the latter to address employers' operational needs (Cooke et al., 2008). While it is difficult to categorize work schedules lengths as being inherently high or low quality, it is fair to presume that late schedule notice, weekend hours or unsocial hours are generally negative to workers and thus, are categorized as being 'employee-unfriendly'[2]. Access to flextime programs is generally positive to workers and thus is categorized as 'employee-friendly'. As an aside, it has long been known that, in general, there is a positive association between individuals having desirable work schedules and a number of other favourable worker outcomes (e.g. Kropf,

1999; Lee and McCann, 2006; Presser, 2003) and often organizational outcomes as well (Baltes et al., 1999).

Betcherman and Lowe (1997) also predicted that, in addition to the overall changes, relatively powerful workers in Canada will have higher quality jobs while less powerful workers are likely to have jobs with relatively poor working conditions (see also Zeytinoglu, 1999). This has also been confirmed by empirical studies of the Canadian labour market and elsewhere (Comfort et al., 2003; Cooke et al., 2009b; Golden, 2005; McCrate, 2005; Zeytinoglu et al., 2009).

Among the most important factors in determining the type of work schedule a worker will have is the human capital variable of attained education (OECD, 2005 and 2006). Research shows that education affects work schedules and those with post-secondary education tend to have more standard work schedules (Cooke, 2007; Usalcas, 2008). Along with education, wage level is an indicator of an employee's work schedule (Chaykowski, 2005; Saunders, 2003; Vallée, 2005). Workers with a higher hourly wage are more likely to have flextime (Zeytinoglu et al. 2009), suggesting that they have more ability to negotiate and acquire work schedules fitting their personal wants and needs (Kossek et al., 2005). That said, female workers are inevitably linked to the flexible work schedules debate. There is also a plethora of research on work pressures and interest in flexible work schedules for work-family balance for female workers (e.g. Duxbury and Higgins, 2001; Presser, 2003). Nonetheless, previous studies (e.g. Cooke et al., 2009a; Cranford et al., 2003; Vallée 2005) indicate that females have a higher prevalence of some work schedules, especially of the less desirable variety, and tend to have less flexible schedules than men (Comfort et al., 2003; Golden, 2005; McCrate, 2005; Zeytinoglu et al. 2009). Although the gap is shrinking, females also tend to work shorter workweeks than males as well (Usalcas, 2008).

[2] In this study in which the notion of work schedule quality is from a worker perspective, we have opted to use the term

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In this study, we look at trends among work schedule components among four groups of workers: lower-waged lower-educated females, lower-waged lower-educated males, higher-waged higher-educated females, and higher-waged higher-educated males. The work schedule components are: workweek length (separated into 'short' & 'long' part-time, and 'short' & 'long' full-time), weekend hours, unsocial hours, late schedule notice, and/or flextime. Since our interest is on the possible substantiveness of differences in the prevalence of work scheduling variations rather than statistical significance per se, we make two predictions rather than formal hypotheses. They are: i) work scheduling components are increasing in prevalence, and ii) employee-friendly work schedule components will be more prevalent among higher-waged higher-educated workers, while employee-unfriendly work schedule components will be more prevalent among lower-waged lower-educated workers.

Results

Results are presented below for each of the four sub-groups of workers that we studied. For convenience, we refer to full-time and part-time using the abbreviations FT and PT, respectively.

Work scheduling components among lower-waged lower-educated females

As shown in Figure 1, only about two-thirds of these workers have a conventional 'short FT' workweek length of between 30 and 45 hours. Of those with a different workweek length, the overwhelming majority of them work part-time hours (and 2/3s of those have the long PT variety), with the proportion working a long FT workweek being very low and declining. Almost 40% of these individuals work weekend hours and that amount has been increasing, and a substantial

'employee-unfriendly' rather than 'employer-friendly'.

proportion, of about 1 in 3, have unsocial work hours (outside of 6am to 6pm), although the proportion varies tangibly from year to year among those studied. Another 20% or so have late notice of their work schedule. Finally, only about one-third has flextime, and this proportion has been relatively stable between 1999 and 2005.

< Insert Figure 1 about here>

Work scheduling components among lower-waged lower-educated males

Like females, about two-thirds of lower-waged low-educated males have a short FT workweek length, see Figure 2. However, unlike comparable females, the bulk of the remaining ones have a long full-time workweek of at least 45 hours, and that proportion is growing, while few have a part-time schedule, and that proportion is decreasing. A substantial proportion of these males (at about one third) have weekend hours, and almost as many have unsocial hours. Meanwhile, one in five has late notice of their work schedules. Although the differences are rather small, for all three employee-unfriendly work schedule components, the proportion of males having any given one is lower (i.e. 'better') than among comparable lower-waged lower-educated females. Conversely, the proportion of males with flextime is trending upward and approaching 40%, which is marginally higher than among comparable females.

< Insert Figure 2 about here>

Work scheduling components among higher-waged higher-educated females

In terms of the proportions of these work schedule components, conditions for these workers appear to be much more favourable than among the lower-waged lower-educated workers--most have a conventional workweek length and the proportion having an employee-unfriendly component is noticeable lower, see Figure 3. First, about 80% of these females have a short full-time workweek length and the trend is upward, with the remainder fairly evenly divided among the other three categories. In addition, fewer than 20% work weekend hours, fewer than 15% work unsocial hours, and fewer than 5% have late notice of their work schedule. Moreover, the trend is stable or downward for all three of these employee-unfriendly components, between 1999 and 2005. On the other hand, the proportion of females with flextime has remained stable at about one in three over the 1999 to 2005 period.

< Insert Figure 3 about here>

Work scheduling components among higher-waged higher-educated males

While roughly 80% of higher-waged and higher-educated males have a short full-time workweek length, almost all of the remainder have a long full-time workweek--with the proportion having part-time hours being very small, see Figure 4. Turning to the other variables, about 15% work weekend hours, the same proportion has unsocial work hours, and about 5% have late notice of their work schedule. For these work schedules, unlike the comparable group of females (i.e. higher-waged and higher-educated), these proportions for males have remained fairly stable between 1999 and 2005. Thus, while the proportion of male workers having any of these employee-unfriendly work schedule components is lower or equal to the proportion among comparable females, the gaps

that had existed between males and females in 1999 appear to have narrowed. Finally, the proportion of these males having flextime is approximately 40%.

< Insert Figure 4 about here>

Conclusions and discussion

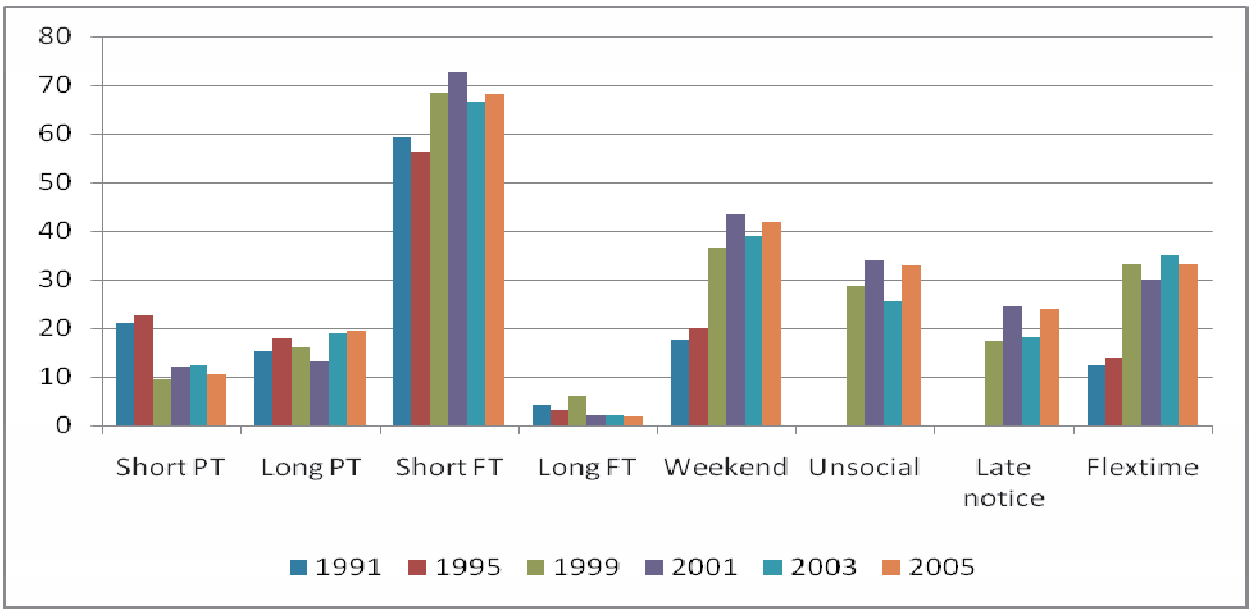
The results, which are generally in line with expectations, reveal the existence of some worrisome realities of work schedules in Canada. First, while a large majority of Canadian workers have a workweek length between 30 and 45 hours (defined in the current study as "short fulltime"), upwards of 30% or more of lower-waged lower-educated workers have a different workweek length, as do about 20% of higher-waged higher-educated workers. Moreover, a distinct difference among the genders consistently appeared among the trends. Both sets of females were much more likely than comparable males to have a part-time workweek, and less likely to have a long workweek length.

Turning to the other results, a sizable proportion of lower-waged lower-educated workers, male or female, have at least one of the so-called three employee-unfriendly work scheduling components of 1) weekend or 2) unsocial hours or 3) late schedule notice. Albeit to a lesser extent, even a tangible proportion of higher-waged higher-educated males and females also have a work schedule featuring weekend or unsocial hours. The results also suggest that higher-waged higher-educated females had been more likely to have one or more of the employee-unfriendly components than comparable males, but it appears that the gap is closing. However, the lower-waged lower-educated females and males continue to be more likely to have one or more of these employee-unfriendly components relative to their higher-waged higher-educated counterparts.

This seems to be consistent with the reviewed literature, in the sense that those in positions of autonomy and control, presumably due to their higher education levels, have the power to negotiate flexible work schedules that fit their needs (e.g. Betcherman and Lowe, 1997; Kossek et al., 2005). That said, only a minority of workers within each of the four categories have a schedule featuring flextime, the employee-friendly component in this study. In fact, the proportion only slightly exceeds 40% among higher-waged higher-educated males (in 2005), and is lower among other workers. Overall, and notwithstanding that our results are exploratory and based on descriptive statistics, the multiple years of data illustrate some distinct patterns regarding the existence of several work scheduling components among Canadian workers, and the continuing differences that exist in the prevalence of those components when sorting workers on the basis of gender, wage level, and education.

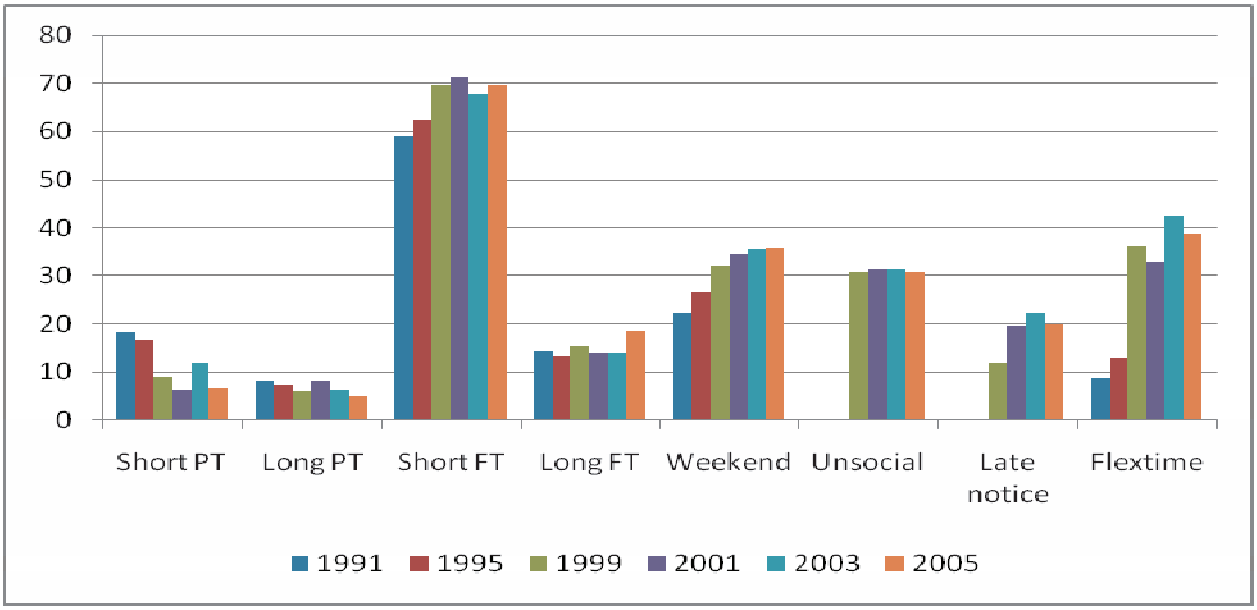
Figures

Figure 1: Proportions of Work Schedule Components among Lower-waged Lower-educated Females



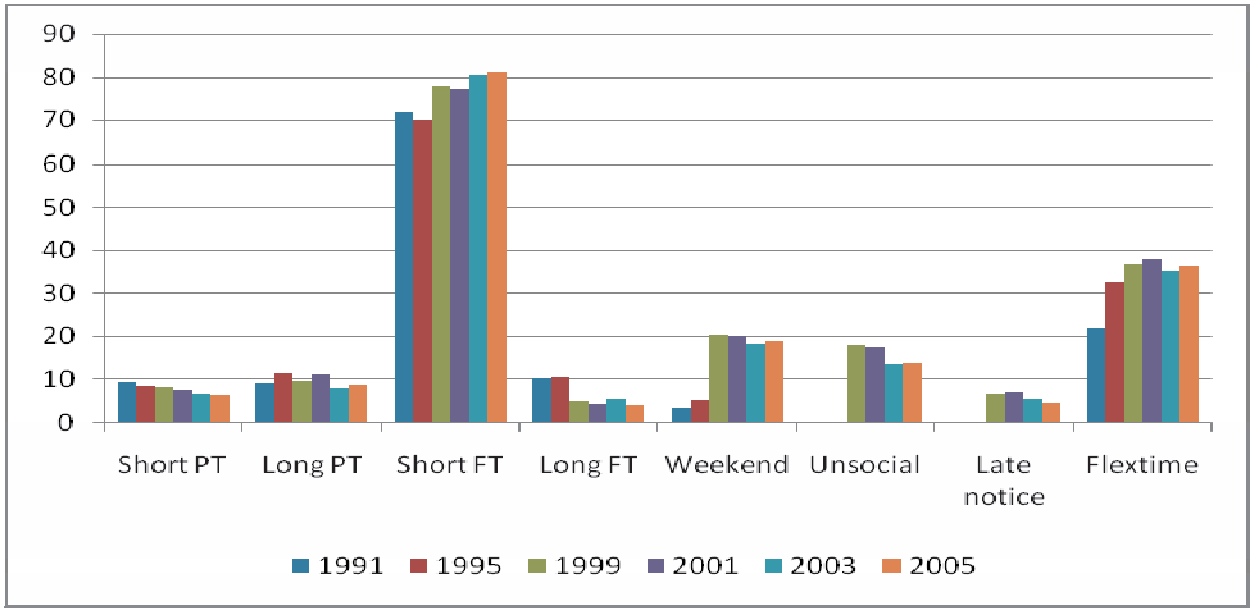
Note: 1991 and 1995 results were derived from the Survey of Work Arrangements (SWA), while the 1999, 2001, 2003, and 2005 results were derived from the Work and Employee Survey (WES). Weekend and unsocial hours for 1991 and 1995 are unavailable. See Data Source and Definitions for more details.

Figure 2: Proportions of Work Schedule Components among Lower-waged Lower-educated Males



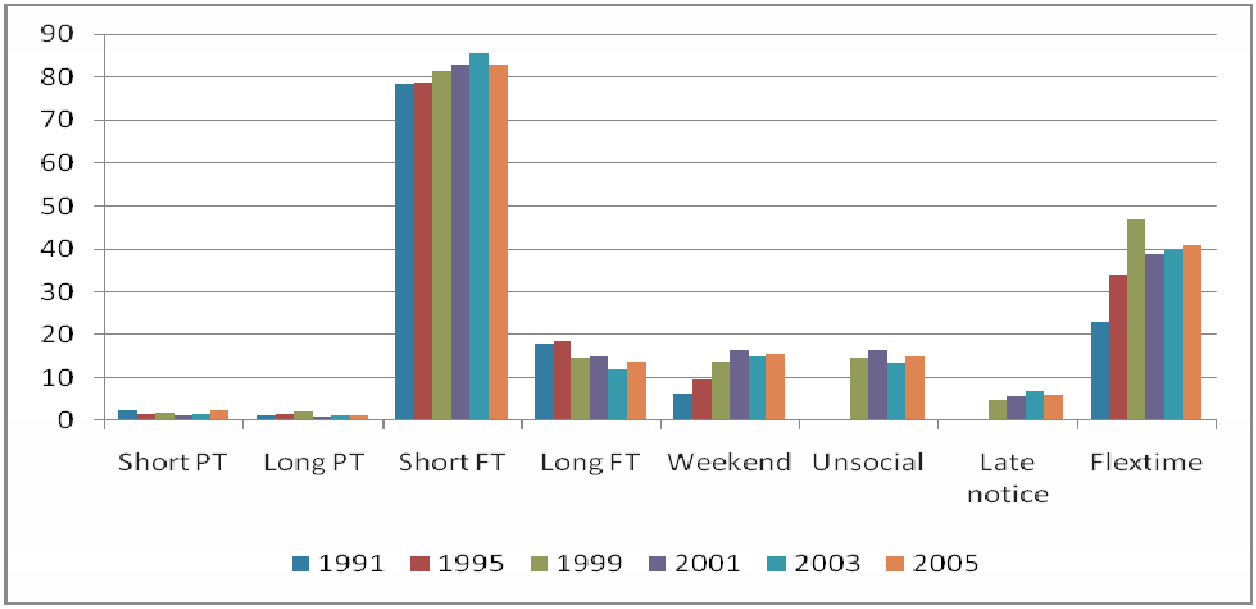
Note: 1991 and 1995 results were derived from the Survey of Work Arrangements (SWA), while the 1999, 2001, 2003, and 2005 results were derived from the Work and Employee Survey (WES). Weekend and unsocial hours for 1991 and 1995 are unavailable. See Data Source and Definitions for more details.

Figure 3: Proportions of Work Schedule Components among Higher-waged Higher-educated Females



Note: 1991 and 1995 results were derived from the Survey of Work Arrangements (SWA), while the 1999, 2001, 2003, and 2005 results were derived from the Work and Employee Survey (WES). Weekend and unsocial hours for 1991 and 1995 are unavailable. See Data Source and Definitions for more details.

Figure 4: Proportions of Work Schedule Components among Higher-waged Higher-educated Males



Note: 1991 and 1995 results were derived from the Survey of Work Arrangements (SWA), while the 1999, 2001, 2003, and 2005 results were derived from the Work and Employee Survey (WES). Weekend and unsocial hours for 1991 and 1995 are unavailable. See Data Source and Definitions for more details.

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