Research summaries

Employee absences in 1989: a new look at data from the CPS

Joseph R. Meisenheimer II

Nearly everyone who has a job is absent from work occasionally. Reasons for absences include illnesses and injuries, transportation problems, family responsibilities such as caring for a sick child, or any number of personal reasons. While missed worktime is often unavoidable, minimizing it is desirable because of the potential costs to employers and to society in general.[1] Some examples of these costs are employers' expenditures for paid leave and workers' compensation benefits, expenses for replacement workers, lower morale among workers burdened with larger workloads, reduced output capacity, diminished product quality, and higher prices for goods and services. In order to minimize absences and their related costs, it is helpful to have information on the number of workers absent, their characteristics, the reasons they are absent, and the amount of worktime they miss.

Previous BLS reports on absences from work were based on Current Population Survey (CPS) data for a single month—May. In the years these data were analyzed, information on absences was derived by asking all workers in the May CPS sample the actual number of hours they worked during the survey reference week, as well as the number of hours they usually worked per week.[2] Analysis of data for the entire year of 1989, however, indicates that fewer absences occur in May than in an average month. This report, then, examines the data on actual and usual hours on an annual average basis in order to obtain a more accurate indication of absence behavior throughout the year.[3] Because it is also useful to know how the absence behavior of workers varies at different times of the year, quarter-by-quarter changes are examined as well.

CPS data only allow for the analysis of absences for workers who usually work full time (defined as 35 or more hours per week). Also, the focus of this report (as in the past) will be limited to the absences of wage and salary workers. Such workers are counted as having had an absence if they worked fewer than than 35 hours in a week due to illnesses or other personal reasons. Employees who worked fewer than 35 hours because of vacations, holidays, labor-management disputes, or bad weather resulting in an employer temporarily curtailing business activity are not counted as having had an absence.

Two measures of employee absences are used in this report: the "absence rate" and the "lost worktime rate." The absence rate is the proportion of full-time wage and salary workers who have an absence (according to the above criteria) in a given week. The lost worktime rate is the total number of hours missed by absent workers in a given week taken as a percentage of the total number of hours usually worked by all workers. The lost worktime rate, then, reflects both the proportion of workers with an absence and the amount of worktime these workers missed.[4]

During an average week in 1989, 4.3 million full-time wage and salary workers had at least one absence from their jobs which reduced their work hours to fewer than 35. This represents an absence rate of 5.1 percent, which, of course, varied during the year. These seasonal variations are largely health related. Workers are less likely to have an illness-related absence in the spring and summer than in the fall and winter, when colds and the flu are more common. There is little seasonal variation in absences from other causes. The following tabulation shows the percent of full-time wage and salary workers with an absence from work because of illness or other reasons, by season:

	Total	*Illness*	*Other reasons*
Annual average	5.1	2.9	2.2
Winter:			
January–March	5.7	3.5	2.3
Spring:			
April–June	5.0	2.7	2.3
May only[5]	4.4	2.5	2.0
Summer:			
July–September	4.6	2.4	2.3
Autumn:			
October–December	5.1	3.0	2.1

Total lost worktime due to absences amounted to 106.1 million hours per week in 1989, 3.0 percent of the hours usually worked. Like the absence rate, the lost worktime rate varies from season to season, primarily due to illnesses.

Sex and age. The proportion of women with an absence during an average week in 1989 was 6.6 percent. This compares with an absence rate of 4.0 percent for men. Women had higher absence rates than men in each age group, and women's lost worktime rates were also higher than men's in age groups younger than 55. Men age 55 and over had higher lost worktime rates than their female counterparts, indicating that older men had longer absences. (Table 1 shows absence data for full-time wage and salary workers by sex and age.)

Among both women and men, teenagers and workers age 65 and older had the highest absence rates, but these two age groups had very different reasons for their high rates. Older workers were the most likely of any age group to miss

Joseph R. Meisenheimer II is an economist in the Division of Labor Force Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Table 1. **Absence from work for employed wage and salary workers who usually work full time, by age, sex, and reason for absence, 1989 annual averages**

[Numbers in thousands]

Age and sex	Total employed	Number absent			Absence rate[1] (in percent)			Lost worktime rate[2] (in percent)		
		Total	Illness	Other reasons	Total	Illness	Other reasons	Total	Illness	Other reasons
Total, 16 years and over	84,553	4,324	2,434	1,890	5.1	2.9	2.2	3.0	1.8	1.2
16 to 19 years	2,303	149	54	94	6.5	2.4	4.1	3.3	1.2	2.1
20 years and over	82,250	4,175	2,379	1,796	5.1	2.9	2.2	2.9	1.8	1.2
20 to 24 years	9,585	505	235	271	5.3	2.4	2.8	2.8	1.3	1.5
25 to 34 years	27,420	1,435	771	664	5.2	2.8	2.4	3.0	1.6	1.4
35 to 44 years	22,277	1,045	613	432	4.7	2.8	1.9	2.7	1.7	1.0
45 to 54 years	14,345	694	428	266	4.8	3.0	1.9	2.9	1.9	1.0
55 to 64 years	7,630	422	293	129	5.5	3.8	1.7	3.6	2.7	.8
65 years and over	984	74	40	34	7.5	4.1	3.4	4.4	2.7	1.8
Men, 16 years and over	48,949	1,965	1,160	805	4.0	2.4	1.6	2.4	1.5	.9
16 to 19 years	1,359	76	23	53	5.6	1.7	3.9	3.0	.9	2.1
20 years and over	47,589	1,889	1,137	752	4.0	2.4	1.6	2.4	1.5	.9
20 to 24 years	5,306	236	105	131	4.4	2.0	2.5	2.3	1.1	1.2
25 to 34 years	16,163	605	361	244	3.7	2.2	1.5	2.1	1.3	.8
35 to 44 years	12,786	455	276	178	3.6	2.2	1.4	2.1	1.3	.8
45 to 54 years	8,237	317	199	119	3.9	2.4	1.4	2.5	1.7	.9
55 to 64 years	4,536	236	175	61	5.2	3.9	1.3	3.7	3.0	.7
65 years and over	562	40	22	18	7.1	3.9	3.3	4.6	2.7	1.9
Women, 16 years and over	35,605	2,359	1,274	1,085	6.6	3.6	3.0	3.8	2.1	1.7
16 to 19 years	944	72	31	41	7.7	3.3	4.4	3.9	1.8	2.0
20 years and over	34,661	2,286	1,242	1,044	6.6	3.6	3.0	3.8	2.1	1.7
20 to 24 years	4,279	269	130	139	6.3	3.0	3.3	3.4	1.6	1.8
25 to 34 years	11,258	830	411	420	7.4	3.6	3.7	4.3	2.0	2.3
35 to 44 years	9,491	590	337	254	6.2	3.5	2.7	3.4	2.1	1.3
45 to 54 years	6,117	377	229	148	6.2	3.7	2.4	3.5	2.4	1.2
55 to 64 years	3,093	186	118	68	6.0	3.8	2.2	3.4	2.3	1.1
65 years and over	422	34	18	15	8.0	4.3	3.7	4.2	2.6	1.6

[1] Absent workers as a percent of total employed.

[2] Hours absent as a percent of total hours usually worked.

work due to illnesses, while teenagers were the most likely to miss work for various personal reasons.

Workers in the central working ages of 25 to 54 generally had low absence rates when compared with other age groups. The exception was women ages 25 to 34, whose rate (7.4 percent) was the third highest among women and was only slightly lower than the rate for teenagers. In fact, the absence rate for 25- to 34-year-old women was more than a percentage point higher than the rates for women ages 35 to 44 and 45 to 54. The high rate among 25- to 34-year-old women reflects the fact that they are much more likely than older women to have young children, and they must occasionally miss work to care for those children.

Marital status and presence and age of children. Mothers of young children, indeed, have a very high absence rate. Among married mothers, 11.5 percent of those whose youngest child was preschool age (under age 6) were absent from work during an average week in 1989. By comparison, the absence rates were 6.0 percent for married mothers whose youngest child was school age (6 to 17) and 5.8 percent for married women with no children. This pattern of absences also occurs among unmarried women.[6] (Table 2 shows absence data for women and men in families by their marital status, the presence and number of children, and the age of their youngest child.)

Although mothers of preschool-age children were about twice as likely as other women to have an absence, most of that difference was due to reasons other than their own illnesses. The CPS questionnaire provides only two possible responses on the reason for an absence: "own illness" and "other." The "other" response includes a broad variety of reasons, so, although specific causes can be inferred from the circumstances, precise reasons are not available. It seems logical that family responsibilities are a major cause of absences among mothers of preschoolers. These mothers are most likely to encounter scheduling problems with child-care arrangements, whereas mothers of older children have more reliable child care—schools. Also, older children are more likely to be able to care for themselves when sick, whereas preschoolers cannot.

Married fathers, in contrast to married mothers, had very low absence rates—3.8 percent for those with preschoolers, and 3.7 percent for those whose youngest child was school age. For both groups of married fathers, three-fifths of those with an absence cited their own illness as the reason for missing work. This seems to indicate that, despite the changing gender roles in society, working mothers, even those employed full time, still bear the primary responsibility for the care of children when work/family conflicts arise. Not only are married fathers much less likely than married mothers to have an

absence, their absence rates are also slightly lower than that for married men with no children (4.1 percent).[7]

Absences due to illnesses show a rather consistent seasonal pattern among all worker groups. Generally, those rates are highest in the winter (January to March) and lowest in the summer (July to September). (Table 3 shows absence

Table 2. **Absence from work for wage and salary workers in primary families[1] who usually work full time, by sex, marital status, and presence and age of children, 1989 annual averages**

[In percent]

Characteristic	Total employed (thousands)	Absence rate[2]			Lost worktime rate[3]		
		Total	Illness	Other reasons	Total	Illness	Other reasons
Married women, spouse present							
With no children under 18 years old	9,465	5.8	3.3	2.4	3.2	1.9	1.3
With one or more children under 18 years old	9,708	8.3	3.7	4.6	5.2	2.3	2.9
Youngest child 6 to 17	5,698	6.0	3.4	2.6	3.3	2.1	1.2
Youngest child under 6	4,010	11.5	4.0	7.5	7.9	2.5	5.3
With one child under 18 years old	4,525	8.7	3.8	5.0	5.7	2.3	3.3
Youngest child 6 to 17	2,826	5.7	3.4	2.3	3.3	2.2	1.1
Youngest child under 6	1,699	13.7	4.3	9.4	9.7	2.6	7.0
With two children under 18 years old	3,699	7.9	3.5	4.4	4.8	2.1	2.8
Youngest child 6 to 17	2,148	6.1	3.2	2.9	3.1	1.7	1.5
Youngest child under 6	1,551	10.4	3.8	6.5	7.2	2.6	4.6
With three or more children under 18 years old	1,484	7.8	3.9	3.9	4.4	2.5	2.0
Youngest child 6 to 17	724	6.6	4.0	2.6	3.6	2.8	.8
Youngest child under 6	760	8.9	3.9	5.1	5.2	2.1	3.1
Unmarried woman							
With no children under 18 years old	13,160	5.7	3.5	2.2	3.0	2.0	1.0
With one or more children under 18 years old	3,149	8.1	4.5	3.6	4.4	2.7	1.7
Youngest child 6 to 17	2,193	6.8	4.3	2.5	3.7	2.6	1.0
Youngest child under 6	956	11.0	5.0	6.0	6.1	2.7	3.3
With one child under 18 years old	1,817	8.0	4.4	3.6	4.5	2.8	1.8
Youngest child 6 to 17	1,364	6.5	4.2	2.3	3.7	2.7	1.0
Youngest child under 6	453	12.4	4.9	7.6	7.0	2.9	4.2
With two children under 18 years old	960	8.7	5.2	3.5	4.2	2.6	1.6
Youngest child 6 to 17	631	7.8	4.6	3.2	3.8	2.4	1.3
Youngest child under 6	330	10.5	6.4	4.1	5.1	3.1	2.1
With three or more children under 18 years old	372	6.9	3.4	3.5	4.0	2.2	1.8
Youngest child 6 to 17	199	5.8	4.0	1.8	2.9	2.5	.4
Youngest child under 6	173	8.1	2.7	5.4	5.3	1.9	3.4
Married men, spouse present							
With no children under 18 years old	12,839	4.1	2.7	1.5	2.6	1.9	.8
With one or more children under 18 years old	19,064	3.8	2.3	1.5	2.3	1.4	.8
Youngest child 6 to 17	9,429	3.7	2.2	1.5	2.3	1.5	.9
Youngest child under 6	9,636	3.8	2.3	1.5	2.2	1.4	.8
With one child under 18 years old	7,491	3.9	2.3	1.6	2.4	1.5	.9
Youngest child 6 to 17	4,192	3.7	2.1	1.6	2.4	1.4	.9
Youngest child under 6	3,298	4.1	2.5	1.6	2.5	1.6	.9
With two children under 18 years old	7,690	3.5	2.1	1.4	2.1	1.3	.8
Youngest child 6 to 17	3,808	3.5	2.2	1.3	2.2	1.4	.8
Youngest child under 6	3,882	3.5	2.0	1.4	2.0	1.2	.8
With three or more children under 18 years old	3,883	4.0	2.5	1.5	2.4	1.6	.8
Youngest child 6 to 17	1,428	4.1	2.5	1.6	2.5	1.6	.9
Youngest child under 6	2,455	4.0	2.5	1.5	2.3	1.5	.8
Unmarried men							
With no children under 18 years old	15,990	4.3	2.3	2.0	2.4	1.4	1.1
With one or more children under 18 years old	778	3.7	2.1	1.6	2.0	1.4	.6
Youngest child 6 to 17	471	4.2	2.6	1.6	2.4	1.8	.6
Youngest child under 6	307	2.9	1.4	1.5	1.4	.8	.6

[1] A family is a group of two or more persons residing together who are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. The data here refer to primary families—the householder and all other persons related to and residing with the householder. Not included are unrelated subfamilies.

[2] Absent workers as a percent of total employed.

[3] Hours absent as a percent of total hours usually worked.

Table 3. **Absence rates for full-time wage and salary workers in primary families,[1] by sex, marital status, and presence and age of youngest child, quarterly averages, 1989**

[In percent]

Characteristic	Total				Illness				Other reasons			
	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	IIII	IV
Married women, spouse present												
No children under 18	6.9	6.0	4.7	5.5	4.6	3.7	2.3	2.8	2.4	2.3	2.4	2.7
At least one child under 18	8.8	8.3	8.2	7.9	4.5	3.3	3.5	3.5	4.3	5.0	4.7	4.4
Youngest child age 6 to 17	6.3	5.7	6.2	5.7	4.1	3.2	3.2	3.1	2.2	2.5	3.0	2.6
Youngest child under age 6	12.4	12.0	10.8	10.9	5.0	3.4	3.8	4.0	7.4	8.6	7.1	6.9
Unmarried women												
No children under 18	6.0	5.3	5.5	6.0	4.4	3.0	2.7	4.0	1.6	2.4	2.8	2.0
At least one child under 18	10.1	7.8	6.5	7.8	5.8	4.6	3.1	4.6	4.3	3.3	3.5	3.2
Youngest child age 6 to 17	8.7	6.8	4.8	6.9	5.7	4.7	2.5	4.3	3.0	2.1	2.3	2.6
Youngest child under age 6	13.2	10.3	10.4	9.9	6.0	4.2	4.4	5.3	7.2	6.1	6.0	4.6
Married men, spouse present												
No children under 18	4.6	4.1	3.4	4.4	2.8	2.6	2.3	3.0	1.9	1.5	1.1	1.4
At least one child under 18	4.1	3.8	3.5	3.6	2.6	2.2	2.0	2.3	1.5	1.6	1.5	1.4
Youngest child age 6 to 17	3.7	4.0	3.3	3.8	2.2	2.2	1.8	2.6	1.5	1.8	1.5	1.2
Youngest child under age 6	4.5	3.6	3.7	3.5	3.0	2.2	2.1	2.0	1.5	1.4	1.6	1.5
Unmarried men												
No children under 18	4.9	4.0	3.9	4.3	2.6	2.1	2.0	2.6	2.3	1.9	1.9	1.8
At least one child under 18	7.0	1.3	2.4	4.5	3.7	.8	1.6	2.7	3.4	.4	.8	1.9
Youngest child age 6 to 17	8.8	1.7	2.7	4.0	4.8	1.0	2.0	2.9	4.0	.7	.8	1.1
Youngest child under age 6	4.0	.6	1.8	5.3	1.7	.6	.9	2.4	2.3	([2])	.9	2.9

[1] A family is a group of two or more persons residing together who are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. The data here refer to primary families—the householder and all other persons related to and residing with the householder. Not included are unrelated subfamilies.

[2] Less than 0.05 percent.

rates on a quarterly basis for workers in families by sex, marital status, and presence and age of their youngest child.)

The seasonal pattern of absences due to other causes, unlike that for illnesses, is not uniform across all groups of workers in families. Among workers without children and married men with children, the incidence of absences that are not illness related fluctuates very little during the year. Absence rates among married mothers and unmarried mothers and fathers vary substantially from quarter to quarter, but these fluctuations seem almost random. This lack of a clear seasonal pattern probably stems from the fact that, throughout the year, a variety of events could cause working parents to have an absence.

Occupation and industry. Differences between occupations or industries in the incidence of absences may reflect differences in the age or gender makeup of each occupation or industry, as well as characteristics unique to a particular occupation or industry. For example, workers in administrative support (including clerical) jobs had one of the highest absence rates (5.9 percent) among the major occupations, but this partly reflects the fact that about four-fifths of those employed in this occupation are women, many of whom have children. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that absence data for occupations and industries reflect not only the nature of the jobs but also the demographic characteristics of workers in those jobs.

Among both women and men, workers in managerial and professional specialty occupations had the lowest incidence of absences. Executive, administrative, and managerial workers, in particular, had a very low absence rate (3.7 percent) and lost the smallest proportion of worktime (2.0 percent). One reason for these low rates may be that the leadership role of managers provides a strong incentive to avoid missing work. (See table 4 for absence data by occupation.[8])

Salesworkers also had a low absence rate (4.2 percent), with men in sales occupations having a much lower rate than women. This difference may partially stem from the fact that men, in general, are less likely than women to miss work, although differences in the types of sales occupations men and women hold may also play a role. Men are more likely to be supervisors or work in jobs that typically pay on a commission basis (finance, business services, and commodities sales). In contrast, a large proportion of women work in retail sales jobs, where commissions are somewhat less prevalent. Being paid on a commission basis may lower the propensity to miss work because frequent absences could result in greatly reduced earnings.

Workers in service occupations had the highest absence rate (6.3 percent) and lost the most worktime (3.9 percent). Operators, fabricators, and laborers also had a high incidence of absences (5.7 percent). The high rates for these workers may reflect their generally low pay and often unpleasant working conditions.

Among industries, the goods- and service-producing sectors of the economy had about the same absence and

Table 4. **Absence from work for employed wage and salary workers who usually work full time, by occupation, 1989 annual averages**

[In percent]

Occupation	Total employed (thousands)	Absence rate[1]			Lost worktime rate[2]		
		Total	Illness	Other reasons	Total	Illness	Other reasons
Total[3]	84,553	5.1	2.9	2.2	3.0	1.8	1.2
Managerial and professional specialty	22,645	4.1	2.1	2.0	2.2	1.1	1.1
Executive, administrative, and managerial	11,335	3.7	2.0	1.7	2.0	1.1	.9
Professional specialty	11,310	4.6	2.2	2.3	2.5	1.2	1.3
Technical, sales, and administrative support	25,195	5.3	3.0	2.3	2.8	1.7	1.1
Technicians and related support	3,042	5.7	3.4	2.3	3.1	1.8	1.3
Sales	7,982	4.2	2.3	1.9	2.2	1.4	.9
Administrative support, including clerical	14,171	5.9	3.3	2.5	3.1	1.9	1.3
Service occupations	8,838	6.3	3.3	3.0	3.9	2.2	1.6
Precision production, craft, and repair	11,326	5.0	3.1	1.9	3.1	2.0	1.0
Operators, fabricators, and laborers	15,166	5.7	3.4	2.2	3.7	2.4	1.3

[1] Absent workers as a percent of total employed.

[2] Hours absent as a percent of total hours usually worked.

[3] Includes farming, forestry, and fishing occupations, not shown separately.

lost worktime rates. During an average week in 1989, 5.0 percent of workers in goods-producing industries and 5.2 percent of workers in service-producing industries had an absence from their jobs. Missed worktime amounted to 3.0 percent of the usual hours in the goods sector and 2.9 percent in the service sector. Among the goods-producing industries, workers in manufacturing both had the lowest absence rate (4.9 percent) and missed the smallest proportion of worktime (2.9 percent). Absence rates for workers in mining (5.3 percent) and construction (5.4 percent) were very similar, although mining had the highest lost worktime rate (4.4 percent) of any industry in either sector of the economy.[9] (See table 5 for absence data by industry.)

Among service-producing industries, workers in communication and other public utilities had the lowest absence rate (3.9 percent), while workers in wholesale trade had the lowest lost worktime rate (2.3 percent). Workers in public administration had the highest rates (6.2-percent absence rate and 3.5-percent lost worktime rate). The absence rate for finance, insurance, and real estate (4.7 percent) was substantially lower than that for services (5.5 percent), despite the fact that women comprised three-fifths of the workers in both of these industries.

IN RECENT YEARS, both employers and employees have shown increasing interest in such issues as workers' physical and mental health, child care and elder care, and flexible work schedules. How these issues are addressed may affect the absence behavior of workers, and data on absence patterns throughout the year may add focus to the dialogue. □

Table 5. **Absence from work for employed nonagricultural wage and salary workers who usually work full time, by industry, 1989 annual averages**

[In percent]

Industry	Total employed (thousands)	Absence rate[1]			Lost worktime rate[2]		
		Total	Illness	Other reasons	Total	Illness	Other reasons
Total	83,344	5.1	2.9	2.2	3.0	1.8	1.2
Goods-producing industries	25,883	5.0	3.2	1.8	3.0	2.0	1.0
Mining	647	5.3	2.4	2.9	4.4	2.0	2.4
Construction	5,324	5.4	3.0	2.5	3.3	2.0	1.3
Manufacturing	19,912	4.9	3.3	1.6	2.9	2.0	.8
Durable goods	11,948	5.0	3.4	1.6	2.9	2.1	.8
Nondurable goods	7,965	4.7	3.0	1.7	2.8	1.9	.9
Service-producing industries	57,461	5.2	2.8	2.4	2.9	1.6	1.3
Transportation and public utilities	6,997	4.6	2.7	2.0	3.2	1.9	1.2
Transportation	4,079	5.2	2.8	2.3	3.5	2.1	1.4
Communication and other public utilities	2,919	3.9	2.5	1.4	2.6	1.7	.9
Wholesale and retail trade	14,385	4.6	2.4	2.2	2.5	1.5	1.0
Wholesale trade	3,612	4.0	2.3	1.7	2.3	1.4	.9
Retail trade	10,773	4.8	2.5	2.3	2.6	1.5	1.1
Finance, insurance, and real estate	6,212	4.7	2.7	2.0	2.6	1.5	1.1
Services	24,544	5.5	2.8	2.8	3.1	1.6	1.5
Public administration	5,229	6.2	3.8	2.4	3.5	2.1	1.4

[1] Absent workers as a percent of total employed.

[2] Hours absent as a percent of total hours usually worked.