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Issues in Labor Statistics

U.S. Department of Labor U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Illness-related work absences during flu season

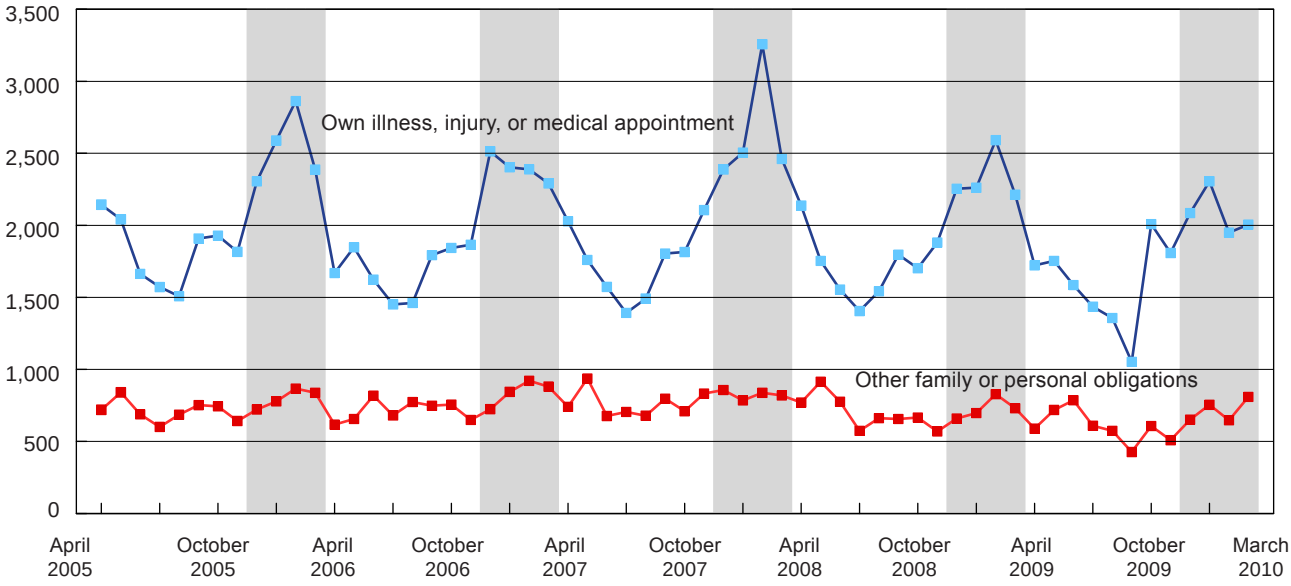
In addition to the many physical difficulties associated with a bout of sickness, workers who come down with the flu or have a sick family member often must deal with interruptions in their regular work schedules. While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regularly tracks the number of flu cases and the severity of flu seasons in the United States each year, data about work absences due to seasonal illness are less commonly discussed.

The Current Population Survey (CPS)—the monthly household survey that is best known for providing the Nation's unemployment rate—contains questions about the reason for a work absence.[1] There are two reason categories listed as responses that are related to illnesses affecting either the workers themselves or the workers' family members: "own illness, injury, or medical appointment" and "other family or personal obligations."[2] Not everyone who worked a reduced schedule for one of these reasons was absent from work because of a seasonal illness or sick family member. For example, those who reported that their absence resulted from other family or personal obligations could have missed work to do chores around the house or to go with a child on a school field trip. Nevertheless, observing changes in these measures over time may shed light on the effect of seasonal illnesses on the labor market.[3]

Chart 1 presents data for workers who normally work full

Chart 1. Persons who usually work full time, but worked less than 35 hours during the survey reference week, by reason for absence, April 2005–March 2010

Numbers in thousands



NOTE: Peak flu season—the months from December through March—are shaded for clarity.

SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

time (35 or more hours per week) but worked less than 35 hours during the week preceding the survey because of the illness-related response categories mentioned previously. These data are not seasonally adjusted, so recurring seasonal patterns are quite evident. The number of workers with an absence due to their own illness, injury, or medical appointment shows a regular spike during the months of December through March. Although not all absent workers who supplied this reason were sick with a cold or the flu, it is likely that the increase in absences during the winter months is related to the seasonal illnesses that are typical during this time of year.[4]

Although absences due to workers' own illnesses, injuries, or medical appointments regularly increase during the winter months, it is not as clear from chart 1 if that is also true of those with absences due to other family or personal obligations. Table 1 compares the average number of absences in April through November with the average number in the subsequent period from December through March. As with chart 1, the table shows that the average level of absence due to a worker's own illness, injury, or medical appointment is consistently higher in the winter months than the average level during the previous 8 months. The average level of absence due to other family or personal obligations is also higher during the winter months.[5] In contrast, absences as a result of other noneconomic reasons—such as vacations or holidays—are somewhat lower during the winter months.

Chart 2 shows the *percentage* of full-time workers with an absence due to illness-related reasons, including both absences due to a worker's own illness, injury, or medical

Table 1. Usual full-time workers who worked 1–34 hours by reason, monthly averages, 2005–10

(Numbers in thousands)

Reason for absence	April–November[1]	December–March (peak flu season)[1]	Percent change during flu season
Total noneconomic reasons			
2005–06	8,595	8,270	-3.8
2006–07	9,017	8,605	-4.6
2007–08	8,095	7,796	-3.7
2008–09	8,383	7,210	-14.0
2009–10[2]	11,336	8,358	-26.3
Own illness, injury, or medical appointment			
2005–06	1,823	2,536	39.1
2006–07	1,695	2,399	41.5
2007–08	1,747	2,653	51.9
2008–09	1,722	2,330	35.3
2009–10	1,591	2,087	31.2
Other family or personal obligations			
2005–06	710	802	13.0
2006–07	713	843	18.2
2007–08	760	825	8.6
2008–09	699	729	4.3
2009–10	603	716	18.7
Other noneconomic reasons			
2005–06	6,062	4,932	-18.6
2006–07	6,610	5,362	-18.9
2007–08	5,588	4,318	-22.7
2008–09	5,962	4,151	-30.4
2009–10[2]	9,142	5,554	-39.2

[1] Averages for each period are calculated by dividing the sum of absences reported by the number of months. For example, the average monthly absences in 2005–06 due to other family or personal obligations April–November was calculated by summing the levels of other family or personal obligations-related absences for April 2005 through November 2005, then dividing by eight.

[2] There were two unusual events that affected the data during the 2009–10 period. The first occurred in September 2009, when the Labor Day holiday fell within the reference week. Reflecting this rare occurence, those reporting an absence due to holiday (legal or religious) was 21.7 million, compared to an average level of 327,000 over the prior 4 years. Additionally, in February 2010 there were record breaking snowstorms along the eastern seaboard that greatly affected businesses. Although large numbers of weather-related absences are not uncommon in the month of February, this exceptionally severe weather caused an unusually large spike in absences.

NOTE: Data are not seasonally adjusted.

appointment and other family or personal obligations. During the winter, this portion of employed persons regularly rises to a high that is close to double the low point from earlier that year. These data display the seasonal effect on full-time employment that is attributable, at least partially, to health-related reasons.

The level of absence due to a worker's own illness, injury, or medical appointment was higher in the winter of 2007–08 than at any other period covered in this analysis, reaching a high of 3.3 million in February 2008. CDC data also show that the weekly percentage of patients with influenza-like illnesses peaked in mid-February during the 2007–08 season. Additionally, CDC data show that, according to several measures of influenza activity, the 2007–08 season was more severe than the previous three seasons.[6]

While it is difficult to quantify all of the different ways that health issues affect the labor market,[7] the CPS absence data can provide some measure of the effect that flu season has on workers. Further, an examination of changes in these data during flu season may be useful in evaluating the impact of a widespread illness on the Nation's labor force.

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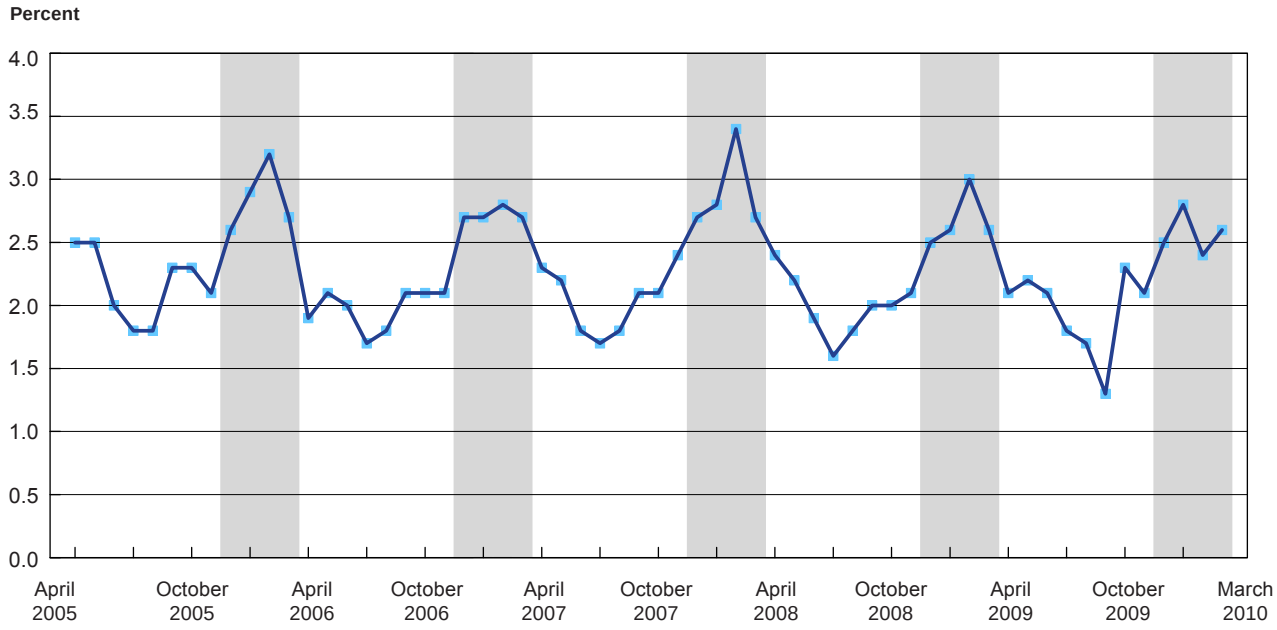
Chart 2. Percent of usual full-time workers who worked 1–34 hours due to illness-related reasons, April 2005–March 2010



NOTE: Peak flu season—the months from December through March—are shaded for clarity. Illness-related reasons include own illness, injury, or medical appointment and other family or personal obligations.

SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Notes

[1] Absences are defined as instances when wage and salary workers who usually work 35 or more hours a week at their main job (usually full time) worked 1–34 hours during the reference week.

[2] Other noneconomic reasons for an absence include child care problems, school or training, vacation, holiday (legal or religious), bad weather, and other reasons. Note that the child care problems response category includes persons who specifically mention child care arrangements as a reason for taking time off from work. For example, "I had to take time off from work because I could not find someone to watch my children on Friday." Those who stay home to care for a sick child should be included in the "other family or personal obligations" category.

[3] Workers who usually work part time or who were not at work for the entire reference week are not included in this analysis. For multiple jobholders, absence data refer only to work missed at their main jobs. All self-employed persons are excluded, regardless of whether their businesses are incorporated.

[4] The CDC report "The Flu Season" shows that peak influenza months are most often December through March. On the Internet at **http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/season/flu-season.htm?wwparam=1263565030** (viewed January 15, 2010).

[5] It is possible that the level of absence due to "child care problems" is also influenced by illnesses during the winter months. However, due to the small size of the sample and associated high levels of sampling variability, it is less clear whether such a conclusion could be supported with the available data.

[6] See "Influenza Activity—United States and Worldwide, 2007–08 Season," MMWR Weekly June 27, 2008 / 57(25); 692–97, on the Internet at **http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5725a5.htm** (viewed May 3, 2010).

[7] For example, because the CPS questions refer to 1 week out of each month, work absences during the other weeks of the month are not measured.