

The July Review

Judging by rush-hour traffic in most cities and metropolitan areas in the United States, one would be safe in assuming that the typical “9 to 5” work schedule is standard among American workers. Although this fact may generally be true at any given point in time for workers as a whole, it of course does not necessarily apply to every person. In this month’s lead article, Harriet B. Presser and Brian W. Ward, both of the University of Maryland, present a first look at Americans’ experiences with nonstandard work schedules. The authors use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (specifically, NLSY79) to examine work-schedule status among those employed at each age from 18 to 39 years. Perhaps surprisingly, the authors find that almost 90 percent of those ages 14 to 18 in 1979 had at least one experience working a nonstandard schedule—that is, worked mostly in the evening, at night, or on a rotating shift—by age 39. The authors also present results by age of those who had ever worked a nonstandard schedule and find complex differences by gender, race or ethnicity, and education. Women were somewhat more likely than men both to never work nonstandard hours and to always work nonstandard hours. Blacks were significantly more likely than other groups to have worked a nonstandard schedule (after adjustments for differences in the number of employment episodes), while Hispanics were considerably less likely than other groups to have worked a

nonstandard schedule. The results presented by educational level are mixed: those with a college degree were less likely to have experienced nonstandard work than those with less education, whereas those with some college were significantly more likely to have worked a nonstandard schedule than those in other educational categories. The article also includes results from an analysis using alternative models, such as one that does not control for the number of employment episodes.

The Bureau, through the National Compensation Survey (NCS), has produced a regular series of statistics on employee benefits since 1979. During those 32 years, however, many things in the world of employee benefits have changed. For example, there are now many more types of health insurance plans, as well as more types of retirement benefit plans. In this month’s second and third articles, Keenan Dworak-Fisher and William J. Wiatrowski—economists in the NCS program—present an overview of the NCS program, including what employee benefits NCS collects, and they also suggest what the NCS program might do to continue to evolve with the ever-changing employee benefits world. One recommendation the authors present is that the NCS reconsider the definitional requirement that a plan involve an employer cost. Various plans have evolved that do not involve a direct cost to the employer but are still an important part of employees’ compensation packages, such as 401(k) plans that rely exclusively on contributions from employees. The authors recommend that

the NCS program address the situation in which plans are frozen and treat pretax savings plans with no employer contribution and employer-managed IRA accounts the same as defined contribution plans.

Employee benefits

The average cost for health benefits was \$2.12 per hour worked in private industry (7.5 percent of total compensation) in March 2011. Among occupational groups, employer costs for health benefits ranged from 91 cents per hour worked and 6.5 percent of total compensation for service occupations, to \$3.17 and 6.3 percent of total compensation for management, professional, and related occupations.

Among other occupational categories, employer costs for health benefits averaged \$1.90 (8.6 percent) for sales and office occupations, about \$2.47 (8.0 percent) for natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations, and \$2.39 (10.1 percent) for production, transportation, and material moving occupations. The news release regarding these data is available at http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/ecec_06082011.htm. Additional information is available at <http://www.bls.gov/ect/>.

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