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More People Pushed Into Part-Time Work Force

By KRIS MAHER

As the softening economy begins to push more people into part-time jobs in place of full-time work, the part-time world is getting tougher.

Take Linda Barry of Pittsburgh, a 57-year-old gas-station cashier who typically works 40 hours a week. Her employer classifies her as part-time and gives her no health benefits because she won't work night shifts; she uses that time for a second job cleaning offices five hours a night. "I have part-time status with full-time hours," she says.

Part-Time Help

Listen to Pat Costa talk to reporter Kris Maher about job availability in her area, trying to pay bills and manage time and her support system.

For many, the nature of part-time work is changing. More and more people are working part-time jobs for economic reasons, rather than by choice. That figure rose by 100,000 in February for the second month in a row, the Labor Department reported yesterday, bringing it to 4.79 million -- compared to 4.13 million a year ago, and the highest since 1993.

More people also are holding multiple part-time jobs out of economic need. In 2007, an average of 1.8 million people held two jobs for that reason, the highest since the government began regularly tracking the statistic in 1994. The growth was largely fueled by women, who overtook men to make up the majority of the multiple-job market for the first time, according to a labor bureau study.

A big factor is the fast-growing retail sector, which has felt more pressure to use part-timers since many supermarket and big-box chains started staying open for extended hours in the 1980s and 1990s. The stores' most recent wrinkle is the adoption of computerized scheduling systems, which try to boost service and trim costs by matching staff size to customer traffic, hour by hour. Growth of part-time staff in the sector has been slightly outpacing that of full-time staff since 2000, according to Labor Department figures.

The average supermarket worker has lost three hours of employment a week since 2003, from 32.3 hours to 29.5 last year, reversing a previous upward trend. Retail workers overall have lost 0.7 hour a week over the same period.

Many retailers say they're not increasingly weighting their staff toward part-timers, while others declined to say. But the retailers' biggest trade group, the National Retail Federation, says use of part-timers by its members has been growing for two decades. "Most of the industry has been on that track already," says Daniel Butler, vice president of retail operations, adding that some "are still getting on the bandwagon." A shift by more customers to night and weekend shopping is the main cause, he said.

A spokesman for the No. 1 U.S. retailer, Wal-Mart Stores Inc., said about a third of its employees are part-time, and there is no effort to increase that. Last month, an analyst with Banc of America Securities LLC warned investors in a note that a "switch to more part-time labor" by Wal-Mart could pose a risk to customer satisfaction, but a spokesman declined to make the analyst available or provide the basis for his comments.

The makers of the new scheduling systems -- as well as retail analysts and unions -- say the systems make it easier for chains to manage a big roster of part-timers working short, flexible shifts. Previously, that was too difficult to be worthwhile for many companies. As use of the systems spreads, the makers are growing fast: Their combined revenue rose 8% last year to \$814 million and could reach \$1 billion in the next few years, according to AMR Research.

Overall, the part-time share of the job market has been fairly constant for decades, accounting for about 17% of jobs. Overwhelmingly, people in part-time jobs continue to take them by choice for the shorter hours and greater flexibility, and both that group and the overall part-time workforce dipped slightly last month. But economists expect the share of those in economic need to keep rising as full-time employment falls. "You're going to see a lot of part-time workers who wish that they were working full time," says John Silvia, chief economist at Wachovia Bank.

Part-time jobs typically pay 10% to 20% less per hour than comparable full-time work. Often they offer no health or retirement benefits and little job security, though some "part-timers" work 60 hours a week, or more. Those working two part-time jobs are taxed twice for unemployment insurance.

Ms. Barry, the part-time cashier and office cleaner, altogether works as many as 65 hours a week, finishing work each weeknight at 11 p.m. The nighttime cleaning job pays \$8.50 an hour, about a dollar more than her daytime job at the Get Go gas station, owned by privately held supermarket chain Giant Eagle Inc. The night job is more consistent, too, because her shifts as a cashier change each week. "Sometimes I have Tuesday and Wednesday off and sometimes Tuesday and Thursday off. Sometimes I only have one day off a week," she says. "It varies."

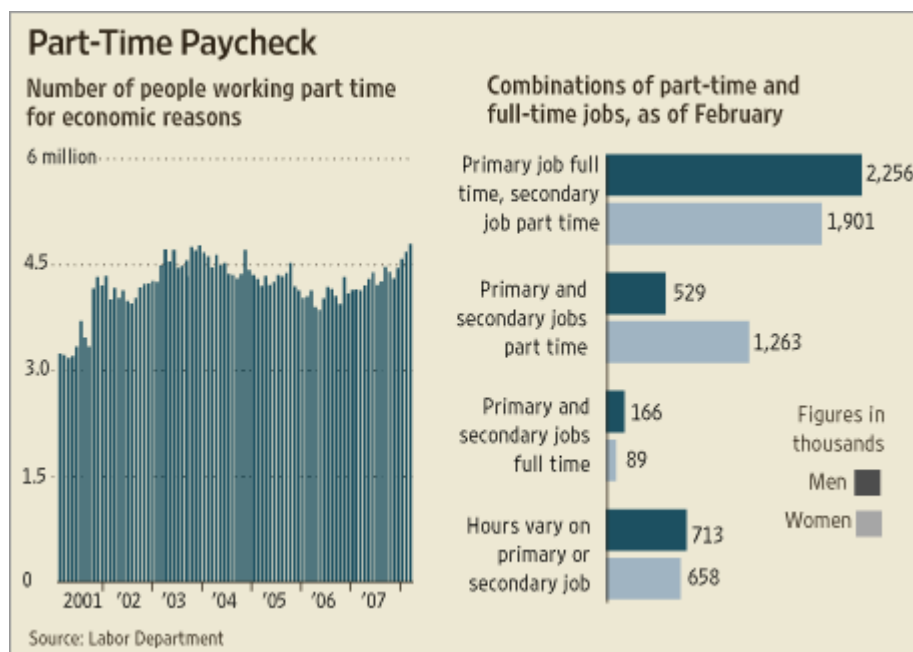
There's no guarantee that if she quit her night job she would earn full-time status in her day job and gain benefits, she believes. Even then, she'd lose more than a third of her current weekly income. A Giant Eagle spokesman, Daniel Donovan, declined to comment on Ms. Barry's situation, but says an employee's availability is part of the mix in determining full-time status. Federal law requires employers to pay overtime to employees who work more than 40 hours a week, but it doesn't require that they be considered full-time or earn benefits.

Giant Eagle says that many employees, especially senior citizens and students, like the flexible scheduling offered by part-time positions. Employers say the systems improve service because they are far better at forecasting labor demand than a store manager relying on last year's sales figures. The systems can factor the effects of store promotions, sporting events, graduations and even the weather to determine the right staffing for different hours and days.

Mr. Butler of the retail federation says retailers aren't using scheduling systems to keep workers' hours down, and are trying to improve benefits for part-timers. "Because they need more part-timers, they're saying, 'How can we make the part-time benefits more competitive?'" he says.

At supermarket chain Kroger Co., the scheduling system helps the company keep lines moving faster at the bakery, deli, pharmacy and checkout lines, says Meghan Glynn, a Kroger spokeswoman. She says the system meets union work rules.

But Kroger and others have been negotiating with their unions to increase the hours to be filled by part-timers, says Marc Levinson, an economist at J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. who follows the grocery industry. He cited a 2004 contract between Kroger and the United Food and Commercial Workers that lowered the maximum percentage of hours staffed by full-time workers in covered Cincinnati stores to half, down from 55%.



Union and company officials said it was done so the company could pay benefits to fewer people. Ms. Glynn said the company agreed to "a very high quality" health-care plan for full-time workers and needed to use more part-time workers to staff its busiest hours.

Susan Lambert, a professor of social service administration at the University of Chicago, collected data on 88 low-skilled jobs at 22 major corporations in Chicago, including retailers, from 1998 to 2004. She found most companies having more workers cover the

same number of overall hours, posing problems for the workers. "If you don't get enough hours, you don't get enough income," she says.

Delora Lewis, an assistant customer-service manager at Wal-Mart until 2003, was in charge of scheduling workers at the chain's Ponca City, Okla., store. She used to put schedules out three weeks in advance. "There were daytime girls and evening or night-time girls," says Ms. Lewis. When the chain adopted a new computerized system in 2006, replacing an older version, hours weren't necessarily lost but stability was.

"Now you might work 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. and the next day, it might be 9 to 5," says Ms. Lewis, now a cashier. Wal-Mart spokesman John Simley says the system has meant more consistent employee schedules overall because employees can indicate their preferences. But he added, "if everyone prefers the same hours, you can't accommodate everyone."

Kroger deli-counter worker Pat Costa of Mount Vernon, Ohio, until recently worked a part-time schedule that was up in the air from week to week. Each Thursday, the 50-year-old mother of four would sit down to review it with her 76-year-old mother and her oldest daughter, Erica, who is 17. They would then figure out how to transport, feed and care for the younger kids and get household errands done.

On a recent morning, she reported at 8 a.m. to her first job, where she earned \$8 an hour supervising people with mental and physical disabilities as they put metal clamps on rubber hoses for use by a nearby Honda auto plant. She moved around a large gymnasium-like room making sure they had enough parts, helped those in wheelchairs use the restroom, helped serve lunch, and cut strips of colored construction paper for a man who was making a long paper chain for a holiday decoration.

At 3:30 p.m., Ms. Costa drove home to change into a black vest for her \$7-an-hour job at Kroger. Her oldest two children were studying and helping the younger ones with homework while her mother left to pick up pizza. She arrived home from Kroger around 10:30 p.m. to say goodnight to the children and eat a dinner of warmed-over pizza, pretzels and a bottle of Coke. She was scheduled to be back at Kroger at 9 a.m. the next day. "There's always such a small window to get dinner in," says Erica.

In January, Ms. Costa was hired full-time at an agency for the disabled. "I got an office," she said, before correcting herself: "I got a cubicle. It's four walls, and it's a step up. I've got my own extension." But she'll remain a part-timer as well, continuing to work whatever evening and Sunday shifts Kroger will give her. "I don't think there's any way I can afford not to," she says.

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