

Youth face snakes and ladders on the path to full-time employment

February 25 2013, by Lucas Walsh



For many young Australians, getting a full-time job — or even sufficient part-time hours — is a significant challenge. Credit: AAP

Getting a job is a major concern for young Australians. Last year's [National Survey of Young Australians](#) showed a large rise in the proportion of young people valuing getting a job, from 16% in 2010 to 22.7% in 2011. The recently launched [2012 Youth Survey](#), which focused on young people aged 15 to 19, suggests that some need to find work to help pay for household bills, school books and other necessities.

For many [young people](#), getting a full-time job or even enough part-time [work](#) is a challenge.

Youth underemployment is in part linked to long-term changes to the labour force, as well as more recent instability in the wake of the GFC.

For growing numbers of young people, the transition from school to work will involve one or more part-time jobs. The 2012 edition of [How Young People Are Faring](#), published by the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), indicates that the number of teenagers in part-time work and who were not in education increased from 8.7% in 1986 to 30% in 2012. The proportion has more than doubled for 20 to 24 year-olds from 8.3% to just over 19% during the same period. This reflects a long-term pattern of replacement of full-time employment with more part-time jobs within the teen and young adult labour markets.

ABS data indicates that in 2011, a third of the 814,700 part-time workers who would prefer to work more hours was aged 15 to 24 years. While just under half of those aged 15-19 years preferred to work less than 30 hours per week, around 28% of underemployed part-time workers in this age group had insufficient work for a year or more.

Beyond the GFC

Teenagers face particular challenges. As the FYA report suggests, more than one in five teenagers not engaged in education indicated they were trying to find full-time work. But the number of teenagers in full-time employment has declined from almost 550,000 in 1981 to almost 200,000 in 2012. A large proportion of this drop can be accounted for by the growth in the numbers staying in school. However, this decline in full-time work has implications for those teenagers not in study or training. Combined with higher unemployment rates than other age groups, these labour force trends signal a labour market in which youth unemployment

and involuntary part-time work continues to be significant.

The concentration of young people in part-time work in Australia includes a significant proportion in involuntary part-time work. The OECD defines involuntary part-time work as comprising: those who usually work full-time but who are working part-time because of economic slack (i.e. unused proportion of economic capacity); those working part-time but have fewer hours in their jobs because of economic slack; and those working part-time because full-time work can't be found.

According to this data, the share of involuntary part-timers aged 15-24 in the labour force was just over 13% in 2011. The percentage of involuntary part-time workers has at times been higher in Australia during the last decade compared to some other OECD countries for which comparable data are available. The share of involuntary part-timers aged 15-24 as a percentage of part-time employment was just under 35% in 2011, compared to 4.8% in Norway.

While these figures serve as a starting point for understanding the challenges of youth underemployment, they are by no means perfect indicators. (The measure of "involuntary part-time work" is itself contested.) They do not necessarily capture the acute challenges facing certain young people in the Australian [labour force](#) – in particular, teenagers who have left school and young women in general. School leavers who want full-time work, but have to take part-time jobs instead, can remain vulnerable to marginalisation from secure work for years.

Some research suggests that amongst those in part-time work, many women in their late teens would prefer to work more hours but do not have opportunities to do so.

Snakes and ladders

While part-time work is important to the personal development of young people in that it gives them key life-experience and material gains, it may not be a stepping stone to full-time work. The evidence suggests that teenagers in part-time jobs are only slightly more likely to move into full-time employment than those who are unemployed. A major concern is for those who are discouraged by the inability to get sufficient work and give up looking. Combine this with significant levels of long-term youth unemployment (notably that between 2008 and 2011 the percentage of young Australians without a job for a year or more nearly doubled) and this concern is intensified considerably.

The proportion of part-time workers who are underemployed generally decreases as they get older, but the experience of insecurity or dissatisfaction with working life during these formative years is not without negative consequences. I have written elsewhere in *The Conversation* about some of the impact of the fluidity of working life on young people. With part-time work comes instability and difficulty in planning ahead socially, financially or to start a family because of the fluidity of contemporary working life. Young people, like most, seek security, connection and a sense of where they are going in life.

Compelling young people to stay in school or post school study and training—though beneficial for most—isn't enough. Particular challenges confront those living in regional and remote areas and those experiencing disadvantage, in which the risk of marginalisation is often concentrated.

It has been suggested, rather too casually I think, that young people should migrate to where the work is. This strikes at real and complex tensions, between addressing the challenges of marginalisation by those who never move beyond their suburb and the socioeconomic disadvantage associated with their marginalisation, and the idea that we reduce success in life to being economically "fit for purpose".

The evidence indicates that young people see more to life than fulfilling economic need or the product of "slack". (Data from the [World Values Survey](#), for example, indicated that three quarters of young adults prioritised the need to protect the environment over economic growth. Although, concern amongst teenagers appears to have fallen significantly since 2011 according to the 2012 Youth Survey, which found a substantial number nominating 'the economy and financial matters' over the environment as a major issue of national importance.) I think that many of us abhor the idea that mobility is dictated exclusively by labour market need and relentless economic growth. The challenges of underemployment must therefore be located in a richer world of values, contexts, expectations and possibilities for young people to participate in the economy and society of the 21st century. Connection and belonging are foundational to individual and social well-being.

More than their marks

There is another possible dimension to [underemployment](#) that provides food for thought. During the last few years, national school retention levels reached the highest levels ever recorded. Participation in study by degrees continues to rise, as many other forms of education and training fall. But an interesting trend identified by the COAG Reform Council is that since 2008 the proportion of people with higher-level qualifications has increased significantly across the working age population except 20 to 24-year-olds.

The data behind this are difficult to interpret because many are still studying or taking a gap year (amongst other reasons), but as a [recent article](#) by Lenore Taylor in *The Age* suggests, the current policy focus on getting more young people into earning or learning is not hitting all of its marks. And in an economy that is placing a higher premium on certain knowledge and skills, what will become of those for whom higher education is not the preferred pathway and for whom full-time work

remains elusive?

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