

# Are Japan's Part-Time Employees Working Themselves to Death?

The country's labor policies, and a tight job market, have some people cobbling together 70-hour work weeks out of multiple jobs.

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On a sunny morning in June, a middle-aged lawyer named Yoshimasa Obayashi heard his telephone ring once, and nearly ring again, before he rushed to snatch the phone's receiver from its cradle. It was an unexpected

call, from an unknown caller, who confessed that he feared he was working himself to death. In Japan, this sentiment can be expressed using a single word: *Karōshi*, or “death from overwork,” refers to fatalities from heart attacks, suicides, and other health issues resulting from the stress and fatigue of long hours spent on the job.

In 1988, at the height of Japan’s economic “[bubble years](#),” a group of doctors and labor lawyers launched Japan’s first telephone hotlines dedicated to curbing *karōshi*. They published their office telephone numbers in pamphlets, and later online, as a means of offering free consultations to at-risk workers, who typically called the volunteer doctors, and bereaved family members, who usually reached out to lawyers like Obayashi for help with compensation claims.

During the summer of 2000, corporate bankruptcies drove hundreds of run-down salarymen to call the hotline each day. By that time, Japan’s government acknowledged [just 100 to 200 \*karōshi\* cases each year](#), though Hiroshi Kawahito, a lawyer at the National Defense Counsel for Victims of *Karōshi*, told me he doesn’t believe that number. He says that given the level of secrecy on the part of employers and what he considers to have been an overly narrow government definition of *karōshi* at the time—which, for example, didn’t count someone as having worked to death unless they logged more than 100 hours of overtime in the month before dying—the actual number of victims might have been as high as 10,000 cases annually. (The government now uses a lower threshold of hours.)

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Press reports about the *karōshi* epidemic helped push millions of young workers—many of them college graduates who had been offered jobs with major companies—to opt out of Japan’s deadly corporate culture, instead choosing freelance or part-time careers that allowed for a more relaxed lifestyle. It seemed like a prophylactic, of sorts, against *karōshi*, and indeed, until around 2008, Japan’s *karōshi* hotlines were used almost exclusively by full-time, salaried workers. (It was considered a shocking outlier, for example, when a young restaurant worker killed herself that year after working more than 140 hours of overtime in a single month.)

These days, though, Obayashi feels that part-time workers are increasingly at risk of *karōshi*. In recent years, firms have been eschewing full-time workers in favor of more flexible arrangements with recruits who work for lower wages, with less job security, which leaves them vulnerable to abuses like unpaid overtime and has forced many to take extra jobs. Since 2015, Japan’s number of workers with two or more jobs has grown by roughly 30 percent. “Today’s generation of part-time workers can’t afford to be so carefree,” Obayashi told me.

The Japanese government, which now considers people to be at risk of

*karōshi* if they regularly work 60 hours a week or more, does not publish statistics on the working hours of part-timers with multiple jobs. In July, hoping for a clearer picture, I visited Asami Ito, a community manager at Lancers, which builds software platforms that match freelance workers with companies. According to Lancers research, some 4.5 million full-time workers in Japan have second jobs, where they work, on average, between six and 14 additional hours each week, on top of any overtime hours they clock at their primary job; a small number of them work up to 30 or 40 hours per week at their second jobs. “We’re recruiting many more ‘parallel workers,’” Ito told me, using a Lancers nickname for people with side jobs on top of full-time jobs. Ito said Lancers’s research suggests most of Japan’s workforce will be freelancers by 2027.

The fact that people are working multiple part-time jobs just to earn a living wage is surprising, given that Japan’s low birth rates have left the labor market as tight as it has been in forty years, with almost 1.6 jobs for every applicant. In the food-service industry, workers are in such short supply that McDonald’s recently resorted to an expensive advertising campaign aimed at recruiting housewives and retirees to help out with its busiest shifts. Convenience-store chains have hired more foreign workers, while small and mid-sized manufacturing companies have increasingly turned to automation. But the one recruitment strategy that hasn’t really taken hold is increasing wages.

An explanation lies partly in Prime Minister Shinzō Abe’s signature fiscal policy, known as “Abenomics,” which relies in part on using monetary policies to weaken the yen so as to make exports cheaper for foreigners—which has increased profits for Japan’s manufacturers. In theory, higher corporate profits should have led to higher wages and an increase in consumer spending. Instead, Japan’s corporations have chosen to sit on the piles of cash they’ve earned from Abe’s fiscal policy. Each spring, over the past six years of Abenomics, the leaders of Japan’s major industries have ceded remarkably little ground to unions during the annual wage

negotiations known as *shuntō*. Workers have responded by saving what little cash they have, rather than spending it. And while a weaker yen has helped corporations increase exports, it has also made importing products and materials more expensive, which contributes to weakened buying power for Japan's increasingly cash-strapped households. Overall, workers are spending an average of 11 percent more time to earn the same salary they were bringing home about 20 years ago, and some are working unpaid overtime on top of that. Even the most promising gains leave room for pessimism: In June, government data showed that inflation-adjusted wages rose at a pace not seen since 1997, but that was mostly due to large one-off summer bonuses.

In recent years, there have been several high-profile cases of *karōshi*. In 2013, a 31-year-old journalist working for Japan's national broadcaster died of heart failure after working 159 overtime hours in a single month, prompting lawmakers to pass legislation aimed at creating greater awareness of the dangers of *karōshi*. In 2015, a 24-year-old rookie employee at Japan's largest advertising firm, Dentsu, took her own life under similar circumstances.

The fact that *karōshi* risk has spread outside Japan's "lifetime employment" system appears to be related, in part, to a series of legislative changes. A *karōshi*-prevention measure set to go into effect next year will restrict overtime to 45 hours during normal months, though it allows for up to 100 overtime hours during busier months. Many workers who have come to rely on overtime wages have simply responded by taking on second jobs, according to Lancers data. That development has been helped by a separate recent decision, meant to improve labor mobility, in which Japan's Ministry of Labor canceled a law that had prevented workers from taking a second job without the approval of their primary employer.

Jun Kobayashi, who has three service-industry jobs that keep him on his feet for as many as 70 hours most weeks, is a reluctant sort of pioneer in

the new class of Japanese workers. When I met him on a damp, humid afternoon near the end of June, he barely had time for the subway ride between the job he'd worked that morning and the one he'd work that night. As we hurtled through the spiderweb of tunnels that sprawl out beneath central Tokyo, I asked Kobayashi whether his bosses forced him to work as many hours as he did. "It's true that they really rely on me," he said. "But if I didn't work so many hours I wouldn't be able to get by."

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