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# The Work and Lives of Japanese Non-Regular Workers in the “Mid-Prime-Age” Bracket (Age 35–44)

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Policies and research on labor in Japan have long recognized the issues concerning disparities between regular and non-regular employment. At the same time, in addition to the conventionally-recognized categories of workers in non-regular employment—that is, married female non-regular workers, known as “housewife part-timers,” and non-regular workers aged 34 and under (excluding married women), known as “freeters”—in recent years there have been a growing number of non-regular workers who belong in a different category, namely, non-regular workers in the 35–44 age bracket (excluding married women), described in this paper as “mid-prime-age non-regular workers.” The objective of this paper is to outline what kinds of labor policy measures should be adopted in response to the increasing numbers of mid-prime-age non-regular workers, while taking into consideration the differences between such workers and freeters. The results of analysis of a questionnaire survey and an interview survey reveal the following points: (i) Many mid-prime-age non-regular workers are in non-regular employment involuntarily, and many are living in a state of poverty; (ii) Many mid-prime-age non-regular workers have experience of regular employment, and a significant number of such workers left their regular employment because they came up against long-working hours and illegal personnel management practices; (iii) Obtaining professional qualifications and making the transition to employment with an indefinite term may help mid-prime-age non-regular workers to enhance their careers and ensure stability in their daily lives.

## I. Introduction

### 1. Issues concerning the Disparities between Regular and Non-Regular Employment in Japan

Since the 1990s, namely, following the collapse of Japan’s bubble economy, Japan has seen a rising number of workers in non-regular employment, and improving the employment situations of such workers has become a key issue in the development of labor policy.

Workers in non-regular employment—or “non-regular workers”—refers to workers employed by a company or organization under different terms to those of so-called “regular employees” (*seishain*), who typically enjoy the benefits of lifetime employment contracts and seniority-oriented pay systems. The results of the “Labour Force Survey” conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications show that while in 1990 non-regular workers accounted for 20.2% of the total number of employed workers, this percentage rose to 26.0% in 2000, 33.7% in 2010, and 37.4% in 2014.

Non-regular workers face significant disparities between their working conditions and

those of regular employees. Firstly, many non-regular workers feel that their jobs are not secure. In the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's "General Survey on Diversified Types of Employment" (2010), the percentage of non-regular workers who responded that they were "satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with the "security of their employment," was 39.8%, in comparison with 58.1% of regular employees.

Secondly, there is a significant disparity in wages. The results of the "Basic Survey on Wage Structure" (2014) by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare reveal that while the average hourly wage of full-time regular employees who work for companies with ten employees or more is 1937.2 yen, the hourly wage for the non-regular workers of such companies is only 1228.8 yen.<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, there is also a disparity in the opportunities for skills development. In the "Comprehensive Survey on the Employment Conditions of Japanese People FY 2009" conducted by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT), while 54.9% of regular employees responded that their current company or organization of employment offered "many opportunities to expand the scope of [their] work and knowledge/experience," only 40.5% of non-regular workers gave the same response. Similarly, in the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's "Basic Survey of Human Resources Development" (FY 2013), 44.9% of the regular employees who responded to the survey had "attended off the job training (Off-JT)," while the percentage of non-regular workers who had attended Off-JT was low, at only 18.9%.

## 2. The Conventional Categories of Non-Regular Workers

It is important to note that, in terms of labor policy, non-regular workers are considered to include two main categories.

The first of these categories is married women in non-regular employment.<sup>2</sup> The increase in the numbers of married women in non-regular employment dates back several decades to the 1970s. In the context of industrial restructuring in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis, Japanese companies began to employ housewives in part-time roles as a source of cheap labor (Osawa 1993). There are currently as many as eight million of such women in part-time work, and even today they make up the largest group of non-regular workers (Honda 2010). These women are generally referred to in Japan as "housewife part-timers" (*shufu pato*).

Many housewife part-timers do not wish to become regular employees because they have responsibilities such as housework and raising children. Instead, the major issue that housewife part-timers face is the disparity between their wages and those of regular employees. This is particularly the case in retail businesses, where although many housewife

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<sup>1</sup> Both the regular employees and the non-regular workers compared here work on a full-time basis. The hourly wages given here are calculated by dividing the amount of salary paid for prescribed working hours by the prescribed number of actual working hours.

<sup>2</sup> Here "married women" refers to women who currently have a spouse.

part-timers are being utilized as part of the core labor force of retail stores, their wage level is extremely low (Honda 2010). At the same time, there is also the issue of the so-called “M-shaped curve” in female labor force participation in Japan, namely, the fact that many women leave employment when they marry or have children. This continues to be a strong trend in Japan, and is a significant factor behind the large numbers of women becoming housewife part-timers (JILPT 2011). In response to these issues, policies are developed such that emphasis is placed on establishing equal and balanced treatment between part-time workers and regular employees, as well as encouraging women to remain in employment after marriage and childbirth and while raising children (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2013).

The second major category of workers in non-regular employment is that of the non-regular workers in the “young to early-prime-age” bracket (age 34 and under). These workers are referred to in Japan as “freeters” (*furita*). The existence of freeters was first recognized at the peak of the bubble economy in the late 1980s, at which time it was not seen as a social problem. However, in the aftermath of the collapse of the bubble economy, and the subsequent long period in which companies decreased their intake of new graduate recruits—a period known in Japan as “the employment ice age”—the number of young graduates who began their professional careers as non-regular workers or as unemployed people increased rapidly, turning the trend into a social issue (The Japan Institute of Labour 2000; Kosugi 2003). There are various arguments regarding how freeters should be defined for the purpose of statistics, but the definition which is generally-adopted is that provided in the Japanese Cabinet Office’s “White Paper on the National Lifestyle 2003” (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan 2003): “Young people aged 15–34 (excluding students and housewives) who are in part-time work or side-jobs (including temporary agency workers, etc.), or who are not in work but wish to find work.”

One of the greatest issues faced by freeters is that the opportunities available for them to develop their abilities are relatively scarce in comparison with regular employees, and they are therefore unable to build up sufficient vocational abilities (Sano 2007). It has also been noted that people who are subject to disadvantageous conditions when they leave education, such as limited academic abilities or parents with a low income, are more likely to become freeters (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan 2012). Unlike housewife part-timers, who have other responsibilities such as housework and raising children, many freeters wish to become regular employees. For this reason, policies are developed with a focus on improving the support provided in schools to assist students in finding employment, as well as incorporating development schemes aimed at equipping young non-regular workers with the abilities they need to make the transition to regular employment, such as vocational and lifestyle training which helps participants to develop relevant personal skills (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2012).

Table 1. Trends in the Numbers (in 10,000s of People) and Proportions (%) of Non-Regular Workers

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2012	2013	2014
Males and females age 25–34												
(A) People in work	1434	1430	1429	1414	1397	1352	1313	1267	1235	1186	1168	1152
(B) Employed workers	1314	1311	1323	1307	1305	1258	1223	1180	1154	1122	1102	1086
(C) Non-regular workers	269	281	308	318	328	324	313	302	298	297	301	303
(C)/(A)×100	18.8	19.7	21.6	22.5	23.5	24.0	23.8	23.8	24.1	25.0	25.8	26.3
(C)/(B)×100	20.5	21.4	23.3	24.3	25.1	25.8	25.6	25.6	25.8	26.5	27.3	27.9
Males and females age 35–44												
(A) People in work	1251	1276	1294	1323	1360	1399	1427	1436	1451	1509	1516	1514
(B) Employed workers	1052	1082	1102	1128	1167	1214	1238	1254	1272	1337	1344	1341
(C) Non-regular workers	259	274	289	301	318	329	344	338	348	370	389	397
(C)/(A)×100	20.7	21.5	22.3	22.8	23.4	23.5	24.1	23.5	24.0	24.5	25.7	26.2
(C)/(B)×100	24.6	25.3	26.2	26.7	27.2	27.1	27.8	27.0	27.4	27.7	28.9	29.6

Source: *Labour Force Survey* (Detailed Tabulation) conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

Note: “People in work” includes employed workers, and people who are self-employed or work for a business run by their family. “Employed workers” refers to people employed by a company or organization, etc.

### 3. Non-Regular Workers in the “Mid-Prime-Age” Bracket (Age 35–44)

The issues concerning freeters have already been the subject of attention for a significant period of time. At the same time, in recent years there has been a noted increase in the number of non-regular workers in an age bracket which is above the typical age range of freeters (age 34 and under). For example, by comparing the results of the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications’ “Employment Status Survey” from 2002 and 2007, Osawa and Kim (2010, 110) observe that the increase in non-regular workers in the labor force—described in Japan as the “non-regularization” (*hiseikika*) of the labor force—has “somewhat eased” its effects on the younger population, while at the same time demonstrating “increasing” effects on the 35–44 age bracket.

Here it is helpful to establish the trends in the numbers and percentages of non-regular workers in the 25–34 and the 35–44 age brackets. Firstly, the upper half of Table 1 shows that in the 25–34 age bracket the percentage of non-regular workers among the total number of employed workers has risen from 20.5% in 2002, to 27.9% in 2014. This confirms that the percentage of non-regular workers in the 25–34 age bracket has continued to increase in the 2000s.

At the same time, the lower half of Table 1 shows that in the 35–44 age bracket the percentage of non-regular workers among the total employed workers has risen from 24.6% to 29.6% in the same period. In terms of the actual numbers of workers, this equates to a rise from 2.59 million to 3.97 million—a 53.2% increase. This is higher than the 12.6%

Table 2. Trends in the Numbers (in 10,000s of People) and Proportions (%) of Mid-Prime-Age (35–44) Non-Regular Workers (Excluding Married Women)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2012	2013	2014
Males age 35–44												
(A) People in work	744	757	767	778	797	816	834	835	843	870	862	856
(B) Employed workers	624	638	650	656	675	699	713	718	728	753	747	740
(C) Non-regular workers	35	35	43	45	49	53	58	53	57	61	68	71
(C)/(A)×100	4.7	4.6	5.6	5.8	6.1	6.5	7.0	6.3	6.8	7.0	7.9	8.3
(C)/(B)×100	5.6	5.5	6.6	6.9	7.3	7.6	8.1	7.4	7.8	8.1	9.1	9.6
Unmarried females age 35–44*												
(A) People in work	71	78	82	93	97	112	112	121	123	134	203	194
(B) Employed workers	66	72	75	86	91	105	105	113	116	127	191	182
(C) Non-regular workers	16	20	24	24	28	34	34	37	38	43	77	78
(C)/(A)×100	22.5	25.6	29.3	25.8	28.9	30.4	30.4	30.6	30.9	32.1	37.9	40.2
(C)/(B)×100	24.2	27.8	32.0	27.9	30.8	32.4	32.4	32.7	32.8	33.9	40.3	42.9

Source: Special Tabulation of the *Labour Force Survey* (Detailed Tabulation) conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications

Note: People in education at the time of the survey were not included in the figures.

\*Figures for 2013 onward include divorced and widowed women.

increase in the number of non-regular workers in the 25–34 age bracket.

It is also important to note the fact that, as mentioned above, housewife part-timers have conventionally accounted for a significant majority of the total non-regular workers in the 35–44 age bracket. However, Table 2 shows that there have been definite increases in the numbers and percentages of not only married women, but also men, single women, and divorced or widowed women in non-regular employment.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, as shown in the upper half of Table 2, the percentage of non-regular workers among male employed workers in the 35–44 age bracket rose from 5.6% in 2002 to 8.1% in 2012. The percentage of non-regular workers among single women in the 35–44 age bracket has also increased, from 24.2% to 33.9% in the same ten-year period, as shown in the lower half of Table 2. The actual number of men and single women in non-regular employment in the 35–44 age bracket has doubled over the last ten years, from 510,000 to 1.04 million people.

The percentage of male non-regular workers in the 35–44 age bracket also continued to rise in 2013 and after, reaching 9.6% in 2014. Figures regarding female workers demonstrate similar trends, with the figures for 2013 and after, which combine single women and divorced and widowed women as “spouseless women,” showing an increase from 40.3% in 2013 to 42.9% in 2014.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, “single women” refers to women who have never been married. Single women and divorced or widowed women are referred to here collectively as “spouseless women.”

Mid-prime-age (age 35-44)	Mid-prime-age non-regular workers	Married female non-regular workers (“housewife part-timers”)
Young to early-prime-age (age 34 and under)*	Young to early-prime-age non-regular workers (“freters”)	
Males	Spouseless (never married, divorced, or widowed)	Married
	Females	

Source: Created by the author.

Note: These terms are adopted for the purpose of this paper, and are not necessarily the same as the terms used in labor administration and other labor research.

\*Young people (age 24 or under) are not included in the questionnaire survey respondents.

Figure 1. Definitions of Terms

In any event, by definition these male and spouseless female non-regular workers in the 35–44 age bracket do not fit in the categories of “housewife part-timers”—married female non-regular workers—and “freters”—non-regular workers in the young to early-prime-age bracket, age 34 or under (excluding married women). The workers in this new category will be referred to in this paper as “mid-prime-age non-regular workers.” Figure 1 summarizes the terms adopted in this paper. In light of the increasing numbers of mid-prime-age non-regular workers, the JILPT has been conducting “Research on Working Styles and Work Consciousness of Prime-Age Workers in Non-Regular Employment” with a view to outlining what kinds of labor policy measures should be adopted in response, while taking into consideration the differences between mid-prime-age non-regular workers and freters. More specifically, this research sheds light on the current work and lifestyle situations of mid-prime-age non-regular workers and the reasons why such workers find themselves in non-regular employment in the “mid-prime-age” period (age 35–44), and investigates the possibilities for career enhancement for such workers and the conditions required for them to do so. This paper is a summary of the latest findings of the research project.

Section II of this paper explains the methods of this research project and the data used in this paper. Section III then goes on to analyze the current work and lifestyle situations of mid-prime-age non-regular workers. In Section IV, the analysis is focused on the employment backgrounds of mid-prime-age non-regular workers. Section V then investigates the potential for mid-prime-age non-regular workers to enhance their careers and the conditions required for them to do so. Building on the results of this analysis, Section VI outlines the issues which need to be addressed in labor policy in the future.

## II. Methods and Data

A questionnaire survey and an interview survey were conducted by the JILPT in pursuit of the objectives described above.

The questionnaire survey was implemented in 2013, under the title “Questionnaire Survey on Vocational Careers and Working Styles.” The 10,000 subjects of the survey consisted of 3,000 men and women from across Japan in the 25–34 age bracket, which is referred to here as the “early-prime-age” bracket, and 7,000 men and women from across Japan in the 35–44 age bracket, which is referred to here as the “mid-prime-age” bracket. The Basic Resident Registers managed by municipal governments were used for sampling. The sampling was made by dividing the country into 65 region- and city-sized groups, assigning the number of survey locations for each group according to the size of the population, and adopting a systematic sampling method to sample in principle 6 people from the early-prime-age bracket and 14 people from the mid-prime-age bracket for each survey location.

The questionnaire survey was conducted through a combination of interviewing survey subjects using life history calendars and providing them with questionnaires to complete. More specifically, the survey was carried out by staff from a research company who visited the homes of the survey subjects and interviewed them on their vocational careers, filling in a life history calendar with details of the subject’s education and work history. The staff conducting the survey then requested the subjects to fill in their own responses to the standard questions on the survey forms and collected the responses at a later date. The data filled in on the life history calendars and the responses on the standard question sheets were codified to allow them to be treated as statistics.

4,970 valid responses were received (a valid response rate of 49.7%). The respondents who provided valid responses consisted of 662 early-prime-age males, 782 early-prime-age females, 1,521 mid-prime-age males, and 2,005 mid-prime-age females.<sup>4</sup>

The interview survey was conducted in 2012, prior to the questionnaire survey, with the aim of developing an in-depth understanding of the lives and vocational careers of mid-prime-age non-regular workers. The subjects of the survey consisted of: (A) 15 non-regular workers from the mid-prime-age (age 35–44) bracket who had experienced non-regular employment for a total of approximately 10 years or more, and (B) 10 regular employees in the mid-prime-age bracket who had made the transition to regular employment at the age of 35 or older after experiencing non-regular employment for a total of approximately 10 years or more. The (A) subjects are mid-prime-age non-regular workers at the time of the survey, and the (B) subjects are former mid-prime-age non-regular workers in regular employment at the time of the survey, who shall also be referred to as “workers

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed overview of how the survey was conducted, see JILPT (2014, 2015).

who transitioned to regular employment during mid-prime-age.”<sup>5</sup>

The sample for the interview survey was created by conducting a survey to screen the registered panelists of an online survey company, and selecting those people who fulfilled certain conditions and were able to cooperate with the interview survey. As it is not a random sampling, and also a relatively small sample, there may be a limit to how representative the sample is of such workers as a whole. However, as one of the conditions adopted when selecting the sample was that subjects should have experienced non-regular employment for approximately 10 years or more, it is thought that (A) and (B) can provide meaningful insights as typical examples of mid-prime-age non-regular workers and workers who transitioned to regular employment during mid-prime-age respectively.

An individual interview record has been created by the JILPT (2013) for 23 of the total 25 subjects of the interview survey (the 15 [A] subjects and the 10 [B] subjects combined). This paper analyses 22 of those records: the records of 12 mid-prime-age non-regular workers and 10 workers who transitioned to regular employment during mid-prime-age (the other interview record was not included in this analysis as the subject was a married female and therefore outside of the scope of this analysis). In the pseudonyms given to the subjects, pseudonyms beginning with “X” indicate mid-prime-age non-regular workers and pseudonyms beginning with “Y” indicate workers who transitioned to regular employment during prime-age.

### III. Current Working and Living Circumstances

This section uses the results of the questionnaire survey to demonstrate the current working and living circumstances of “mid-prime-age” (age 35–44) non-regular workers in comparison with “early-prime-age” (age 25–34) non-regular workers (not including married women in non-regular employment, who are excluded from this analysis). The survey sample analyzed consists of: 85 male early-prime-age non-regular workers, 123 spouseless female early-prime-age non-regular workers, 103 male mid-prime-age non-regular workers, and 153 spouseless female mid-prime-age workers.

Firstly, the questionnaire survey results show that the academic background of mid-prime-age non-regular workers is lower than that of early-prime-age non-regular workers. In Table 3, the percentages of survey respondents for whom the highest level of education completed is “university” or “graduate school” are 41.2% for early-prime age males and 21.4% for mid-prime age males, and 26.0% for early-prime-age spouseless females, and 9.8% for mid-prime-age spouseless females. While it is conceivable that these figures are affected by the fact that the proportion of people who go on to higher education varies on the whole according to generation, it is still possible to suggest that mid-prime-age

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<sup>5</sup> Married women were included as survey subjects at the time the survey was implemented, but as described below, they are not included in the analysis described in this paper.



Table 3. Highest Level of Education and Occupation Types of Non-Regular Workers (%)

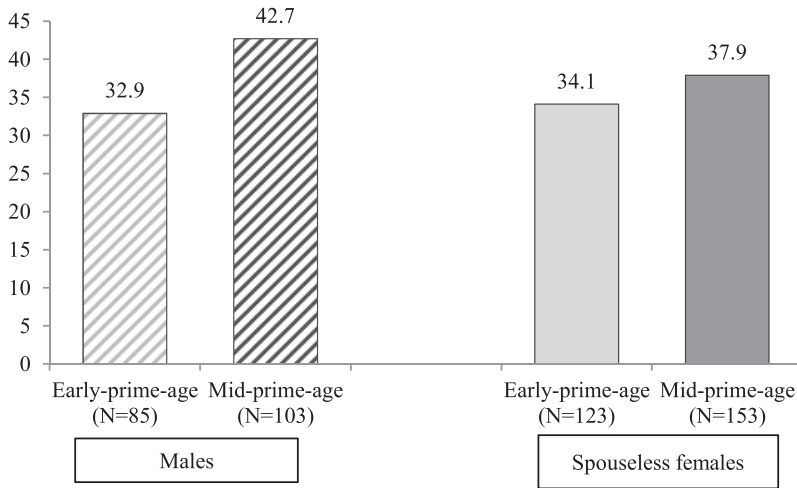
	Males		Spouseless females	
	Early- prime- age	Mid- prime- age	Early- prime- age	Mid- prime- age
Lower Secondary School	3.5	4.9	1.6	3.9
Upper Secondary School	23.5	56.3	30.1	52.9
Specialized training college or school in the “miscellaneous” category*	21.2	10.7	26.0	14.4
Junior college or college of technology	8.2	5.8	16.3	19.0
University	38.8	20.4	24.4	9.8
Graduate school	2.4	1.0	1.6	0.0
Other	2.4	1.0	0.0	0.0
Specialist/technical occupations	23.5	26.2	15.4	11.1
Managerial occupations	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.7
Administrative occupations	4.7	0.0	21.1	30.1
Sales and marketing occupations	3.5	2.9	1.6	1.3
Sales (in-store sales) occupations	15.3	5.8	15.4	9.2
Transport/communications occupations	3.5	14.6	1.6	2.0
Security-related occupations	1.2	1.0	0.0	0.0
Skilled labor/manufacturing process-related occupations	18.8	19.4	11.4	13.1
Agriculture, forestry, and fishery-related occupation	1.2	1.9	0.0	0.7
Service occupations (qualifications required)	2.4	5.8	2.4	5.9
Service occupations (qualifications not required)	20.0	11.7	27.6	18.3
Other occupations	2.4	8.7	3.3	7.8
No response	3.5	1.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	85	103	123	153

Source: *Questionnaire Survey on Vocational Careers and Working Styles* conducted by the JILPT.

\*Schools providing vocational and practical training.

non-regular workers have a lower final academic background than that of early-prime-age non-regular workers.

Secondly, the survey results also demonstrate that mid-prime-age non-regular workers are engaging in different types of occupations to early-prime-age non-regular workers. Table 3 shows that in the case of males, particularly common occupations for early-prime-age non-regular workers are: occupations requiring advanced specialist knowledge or expertise, such as medical or legal professions (referred to here as “specialist/technical occupations,”) which account for 23.5%; roles in the service industry which do not require qualifications (“service occupations [no qualifications required]”), which account for 20.0%; and occupations involving practical operations such as skilled physical labor—including carpentry,



Source: *Questionnaire Survey on Vocational Careers and Working Styles* conducted by the JILPT.

Note: This figure shows the ratio of non-regular workers who selected the response “There was no company where I could work as a regular employee” as the reason why they chose their current working style.

Figure 2. Proportions (%) of “Involuntary Non-Regular Workers”

mechanics, etc.—or work in manufacturing processes (“skilled labor / manufacturing process-related occupations”), which account for 18.8%, while particularly common occupations for male mid-prime-age non-regular workers are: “specialist/technical occupations,” which account for 26.2%; “skilled labor / manufacturing process-related occupations,” which account for 19.4%, and occupations in transport and communications industries (“transport/communications occupations”) which account for 14.6%. At the same time, in the case of spouseless females, particularly common occupations for early-prime-age non-regular workers are “service occupations (no qualifications required),” which account for 27.6%, and office work and other such administrative roles (“administrative occupations”), which account for 21.1%, while particularly common occupations for spouseless female mid-prime-age non-regular workers are “administrative occupations” which account for 30.1%, and “service occupations (no qualifications required)” which account for 18.3%. Namely, among male mid-prime-age non-regular workers “skilled labor / manufacturing process-related occupations” have a relatively high ranking and percentage in comparison with the figures for male early-prime-age non-regular workers, and among spouseless female mid-prime-age non-regular workers “administrative occupations” have a relatively high ranking and percentage in comparison with the figures for spouseless female early-prime-age non-regular workers.

Thirdly, many mid-prime-age non-regular workers are in non-regular employment involuntarily. Figure 2 shows the percentages of early-prime-age non-regular workers and

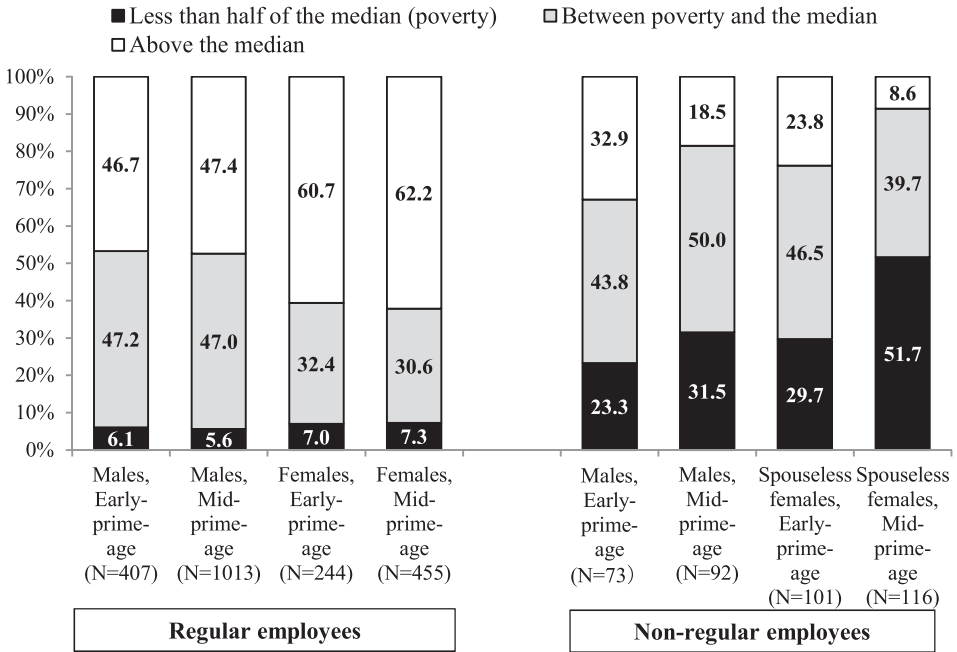


Source: *Questionnaire Survey on Vocational Careers and Working Styles* conducted by the JILPT.

Figure 3. The Average Wages of Regular Employees and Non-Regular Workers

mid-prime-age non-regular workers who became non-regular workers involuntarily, with percentages given separately for each sex. This shows that in the case of males, 42.7% of mid-prime-age non-regular workers became non-regular workers involuntarily, in comparison with 32.9% of early-prime-age non-regular workers, and in the case of spouseless females, 37.9% of mid-prime-age non-regular workers became non-regular workers involuntarily, in comparison with 34.1% of early-prime-age non-regular workers. This demonstrates that for both males and females, the percentage of mid-prime-age non-regular workers who are in non-regular employment involuntarily, that is, who are so-called “involuntary non-regular workers,” is higher than that of early-prime-age non-regular workers.

Fourthly, the wages of mid-prime-age non-regular workers are certainly not high. Figure 3 shows the average wages of early-prime-age non-regular workers and mid-prime-age non-regular workers, with figures given separately for each sex. The average wages of regular employees are given on the left-hand side as a reference. Firstly, it can be seen that the average wages of regular employees increase significantly between the early-prime-age and the mid-prime-age brackets, for both males and females. On the other hand, in the case of non-regular workers, the hourly wages of male non-regular workers increase only slightly between the early-prime-age and the mid-prime-age brackets, from 900 yen to 1000 yen, while the hourly wages of spouseless female non-regular workers decrease slightly from 880 yen to 850 yen between the early-prime-age and the mid-prime-age brackets. This shows that, in contrast with regular employees, the wages of non-regular



Source: Questionnaire Survey on Vocational Careers and Working Styles conducted by the JILPT.

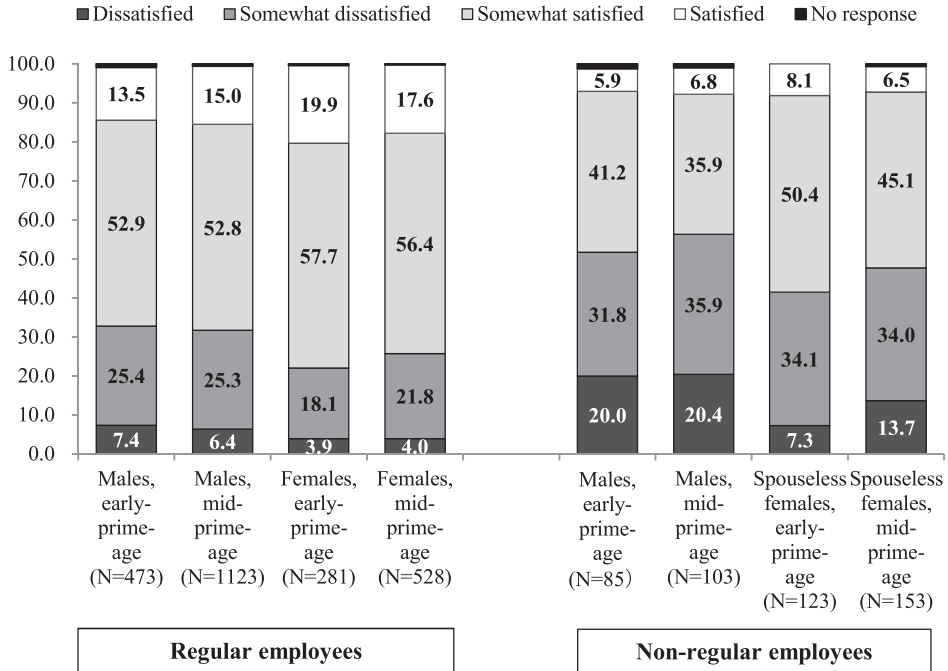
Note: The median of the equivalent household income of employed workers (regular employees and non-regular workers) was calculated, and workers with less than half of the median were defined as being in a state of “poverty.”

Figure 4. Probability (%) of Regular Employees and Non-Regular Workers Falling into Poverty

workers do not increase with age.

Mid-prime-age non-regular workers also face tight household finances. Figure 4 compares the probability of early-prime-age non-regular workers and mid-prime-age non-regular workers falling into poverty (“poverty” is defined here as less than half the median of the equivalent household income of employed workers).<sup>6</sup> The probability of regular employees falling into poverty is given on the left-hand side for reference. Firstly, this data shows that for regular employees, the probability of falling into poverty is less than 10%. On the other hand, for non-regular workers the probability of falling into poverty is high, at between around 20% and 50%. It is also important to note that for both males and spouseless females, non-regular workers in the mid-prime-age bracket are more likely to fall into poverty than those in the early-prime-age bracket. The specific figures are 31.5% of male mid-prime-age non-regular workers in comparison with 23.3% of male early-prime-age

<sup>6</sup> Equivalent household income was calculated by dividing the yearly income of a household by the square root of the number of members of the household.



Source: Questionnaire Survey on Vocational Careers and Working Styles conducted by the JILPT.

Note: This figure shows responses to the question “Are you satisfied with your current life-style?”

Figure 5. Level of Lifestyle Satisfaction (%) of Regular Employees and Non-Regular Workers

non-regular workers, and 51.7% of spouseless female mid-prime-age non-regular workers in comparison with 29.7% of spouseless female early-prime-age non-regular workers.

Mid-prime-age non-regular workers are strongly dissatisfied with their lifestyles. Figure 5 shows the levels of lifestyle satisfaction for early-prime-age non-regular workers and mid-prime-age non-regular workers, with figures given separately for each sex. The lifestyle satisfaction levels of regular employees are given on the left-hand side for reference. Firstly, in a comparison between regular employees and non-regular workers, the overall figures for non-regular workers show a higher total percentage of people who responded that they are “dissatisfied” or “somewhat dissatisfied” with their lifestyles. Among non-regular workers, a higher percentage of mid-prime-age non-regular workers in comparison with early-prime-age non-regular workers responded that they are “dissatisfied” or “somewhat dissatisfied,” in the case of both males and spouseless females. More specifically, the percentage of respondents who responded “dissatisfied” or “somewhat dissatisfied” was, for males, 51.8% of early-prime-age non-regular workers and 56.3% of mid-prime-age

non-regular workers and, for spouseless females, 41.4% of early-prime-age non-regular workers and 47.7% of mid-prime-age non-regular workers.

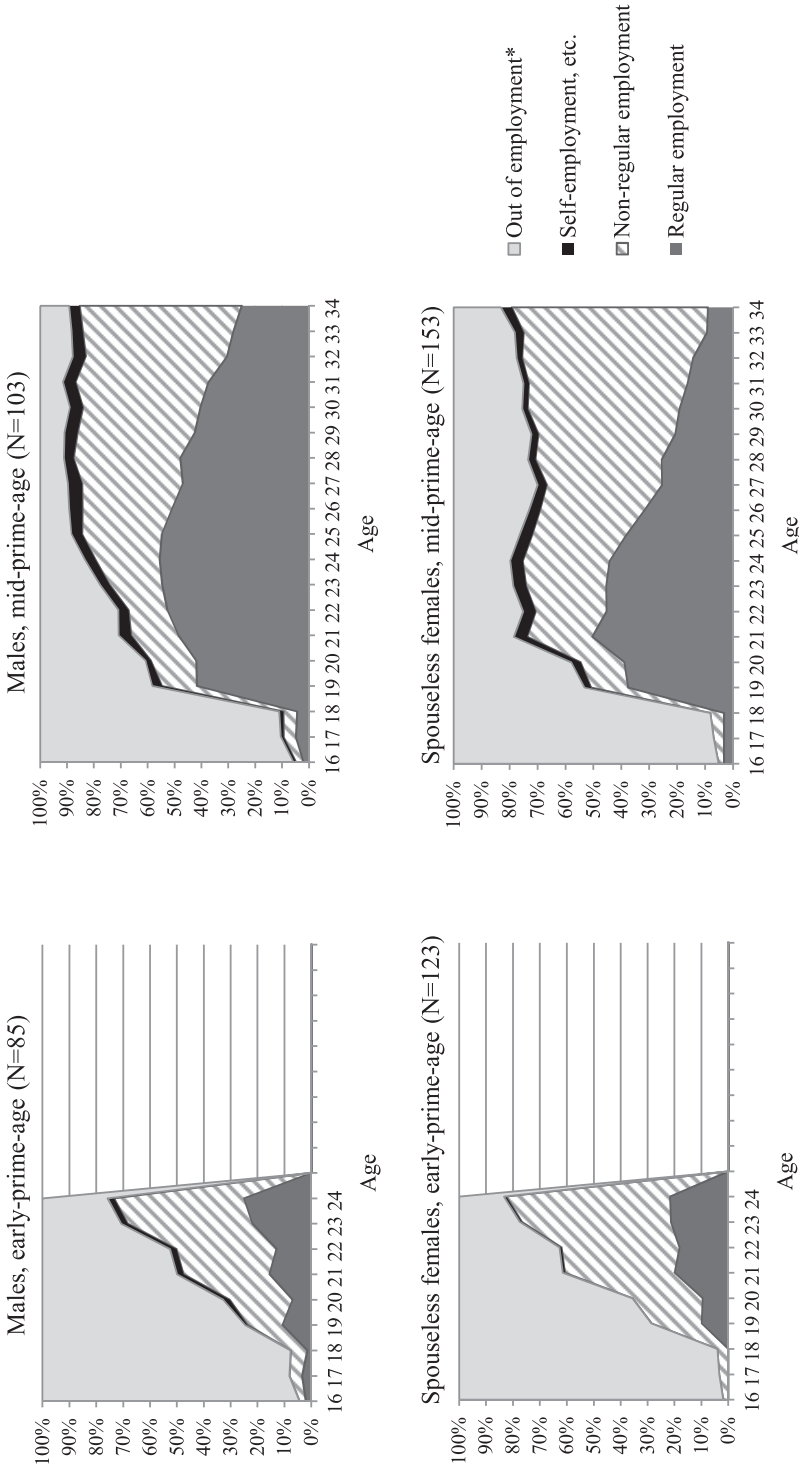
The above analysis can be summarized as follows. Firstly, mid-prime-age non-regular workers have a lower academic background than early-prime-age non-regular workers. Mid-prime-age non-regular workers also engage in different types of occupations to those of early-prime-age non-regular workers, with male mid-prime-age non-regular workers generally engaging in on-site operations work, and female mid-prime-age non-regular workers generally engaging in administrative work. Namely, mid-prime-age non-regular workers are working in a different labor market to that of early-prime-age non-regular workers. Secondly, there is a stronger tendency among mid-prime-age non-regular workers than among early-prime-age non-regular workers to be engaged in non-regular employment involuntarily. Thirdly, as the wages of non-regular workers do not increase with age, the household finances of mid-prime-age non-regular workers are tighter than those of early-prime-age non-regular workers. Fourthly, this results in mid-prime-age non-regular workers having stronger feelings of dissatisfaction regarding their lifestyles than early-prime-age non-regular workers.

#### **IV. Factors Causing People to Become Non-Regular Workers in Mid-Prime-Age (Age 35–44)**

This section draws on the results of both the questionnaire survey and the interview survey to investigate why mid-prime-age non-regular workers find themselves in non-regular employment in the mid-prime-age (age 35–44) bracket.

##### Considerable Numbers of Non-Regular Workers Have Experience of Regular Employment

Firstly, the survey results showed that the proportion of mid-prime-age non-regular workers who have consistently been in non-regular employment since a young age is not necessarily high. Figure 6 shows the record of the types of employment status—out of employment, in self-employment, etc., in non-regular employment, or in regular employment—held by early-prime-age non-regular workers and mid-prime-age non-regular workers, with separate figures given for males and spouseless females, based on the findings of the questionnaire survey. This allows us to say that while around half of the early-prime-age non-regular workers were non-regular workers in their early twenties, in the case of mid-prime-age non-regular workers, nearly half were working as regular employees in their early- and mid-twenties. In other words, a significant number of mid-prime-age non-regular workers have experience of regular employment.



Source: *Questionnaire Survey on Vocational Careers and Working Styles* conducted by the JILPT.

Note: Part-time work during time as a student is not regarded as employment in principle.

\*“Out of employment” includes housewives, students, and other such people not engaged in work, and people who have lost their employment and/or who wish to work but are unable to find employment.

Figure 6. The Employment Background of Non-Regular Workers

### Regular Employees Leave Employment Due to Long Working Hours and Illegal Personnel Management

When looking at the grounds upon which mid-prime-age non-regular workers resigned from positions they formerly held as regular employees, it is interesting to note that there are cases in which workers leave regular employment due to being made to work long hours or under illegal personnel management practices. From the 22 individual interview records made on the basis of the interview survey, I selected 18 records and analyzed the grounds on which the respondents left their jobs as regular employees. The 18 records analyzed included the records of 13 respondents who started their vocational careers as regular employees, and five of the nine respondents who began their vocational careers with non-regular employment. The latter five respondents all made the transition from working as non-regular workers to becoming regular employees, before later returning to non-regular employment. This analysis revealed that five of the respondents (Mr. XD, Mr. YK, Mr. XR, Ms. XT, and Mr. YV) left their employment due to long working hours and illegal personnel management practices. The specific details of each case are described below.<sup>7</sup>

Mr. XD (male, 38 years old) began work as a regular employee of a factory after graduating lower secondary school. However, he was constantly made to work late-night overtime, until as late as 11 or 12 p.m. Although his net wages were considerably high, Mr. XD left his employment with the factory after about two years of working there, due to the fact that the work was too strenuous and the issue of late-night overtime was not resolved. He then started work as a regular employee of a store selling general merchandise, but became unemployed around one year later when the store went out of business. All of the jobs that he has held since then have been non-regular employment.

Mr. YK (male, 40 years old) entered regular employment with a call center company directly after leaving university, having been recommended for the job by the careers services department at his university. However, in addition to long working hours which often began at 8:30 a.m. and finished at 11 p.m., he frequently had to work on days off, and was also unable to take substitute days off to make up for the extra time worked. His dissatisfaction with the long-working hours was one of the factors which resulted in Mr. YK leaving his employment with the call center company after four and a half years, following which he remained in non-regular employment for a long period of time.

Mr. XR (male, 42 years old) worked as a non-regular employee until around the age of 30, after which he was hired by a renovation company as a regular employee in an administrative position. However, his working hours were as long as 13 hours per day and close to 80 hours per week. As he had been in non-regular employment for a number of years prior to being hired by the renovation company, Mr. XR initially took an earnest approach to his work, keen to “catch-up” on the career he had missed up until that point. However, after about three years in the job, he resigned due to the increasingly greater strain

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<sup>7</sup> The summaries given here are as described in Takahashi (2014).



of the long working hours. Since then, he has been working at another company, where he initially engaged in outsourced work under contract, and was later hired as a temporary worker.

Ms. XT (female, 36 years old) was hired by a restaurant as a regular employee. However, consistent long hours, from 10 a.m. to just before the time of the last train of the day, caused her to develop “depression” and leave her employment. After recovering she started working at a different restaurant as a regular employee, but as it was necessary for her to work 11-hour night-shifts six days a week, she felt that it was “just the same as [her] previous job,” and switched to employment as a part-time worker. Since then, she has continued to support herself by working on a part-time basis.

Mr. YV (male, 38 years old) worked part-time until his late twenties, after which he was employed by a musical instrument store as a regular employee. However, there were substantial problems with the personnel management of the company, such as employees not being paid for overtime work, and not being able to use their paid leave. Dissatisfied with the conditions, Mr. YV left his job with the musical instrument store and was then in non-regular employment for the following five years.

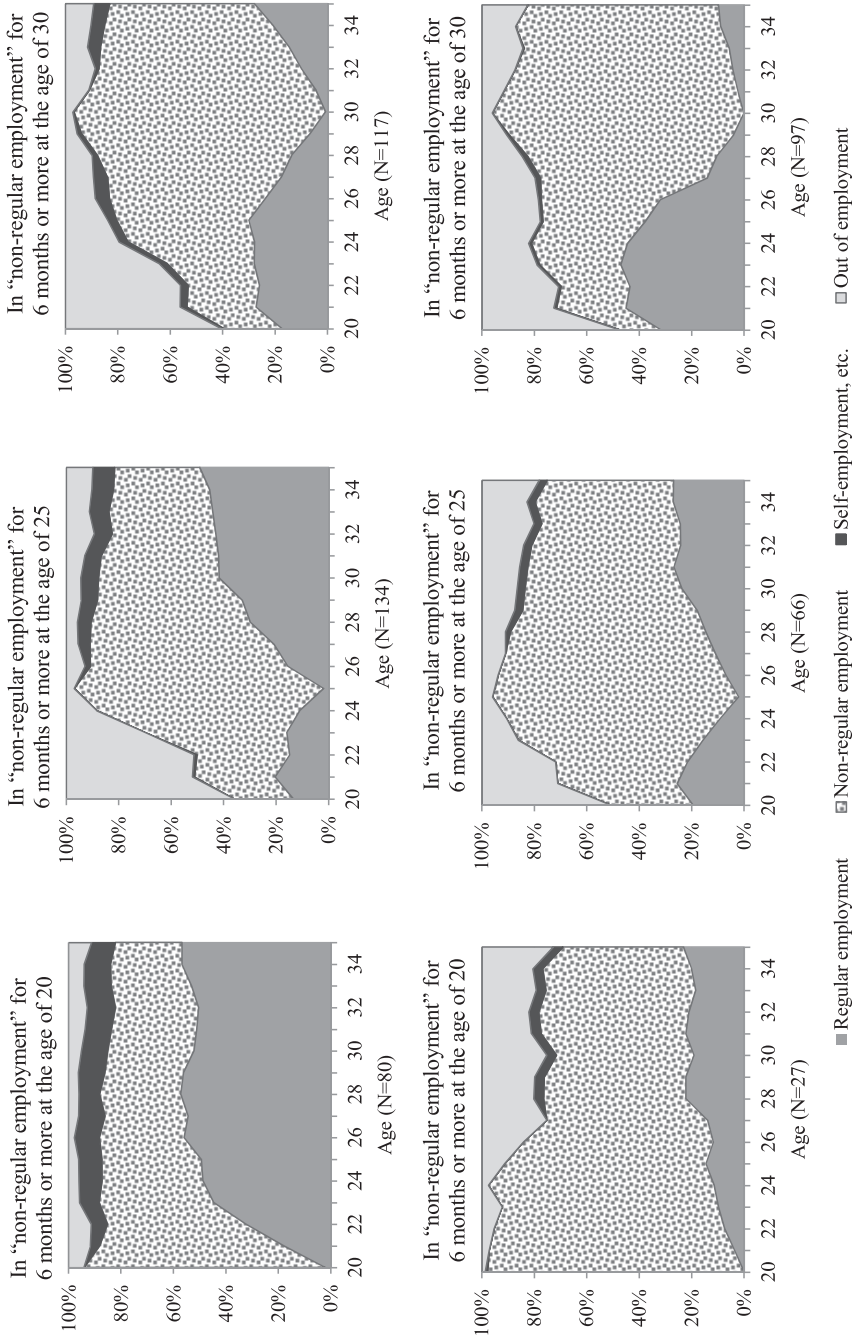
As demonstrated above, a significant number of non-regular workers have experience of regular employment. The above analysis also indicates that one of the causes for such people becoming non-regular workers during the mid-prime-age (age 35–44) period was that they were made to work long-hours or under illegal personal management practices during their time in regular employment. In any event, prior research suggests that the likelihood of young people becoming non-regular workers is influenced by conditions they face *before* entering employment, such as the income of their parents or their own academic abilities. In contrast to this, it can be suggested that in the case of mid-prime-age non-regular workers, it is the circumstances which arise *after* entering employment which lead to them becoming non-regular workers.

## **V. The Potential and Requisites for Career Enhancement**

This section also draws on the findings of the questionnaire survey and interview survey as in the previous section, this time to set out the potential for mid-prime-age non-regular workers to enhance their careers and the conditions required for them to do so.

### **The Low Probability of Making the Transition to Regular Employment**

The harsh reality is that the older a non-regular worker is, the lower the probability that they will be able to make the transition to regular employment in the future. Figure 7 shows people who were non-regular workers for six months or more of the year when they were aged 20, 25, or 30, and the employment types they then entered following non-regular employment. This shows that in the case of males, approximately 50% of those who were non-regular workers at the age of 20 made the transition to regular employment within the



Source: *Questionnaire Survey on Vocational Careers and Working Styles* conducted by the JILPT.

Note: Part-time work during time as a student is not regarded as employment in principle.

Figure 7. Careers after Non-Regular Employment (Upper Row: Males, Lower Row: Females)

following five years. In comparison, the percentage of those who were non-regular workers at the age of 25 who made the transition to regular employment within the following five years was approximately 40%. This figure for those who were non-regular workers at the age of 30 was approximately 30%. While the data for single women is slightly distorted, it has the distinctive feature that the percentage of women who were non-regular workers at the age of 30 and then made the transition to regular employment within the following five years is remarkably low, at around just 10%. On the basis of this data, it can be suggested that there is a lower probability for mid-prime-age non-regular workers to make the transition to regular employment than for early-prime-age non-regular workers.<sup>8</sup>

### Making the Transition to Regular Employment by Utilizing Professional Qualifications

At the same time, there are non-regular workers who wish to make the transition to regular employment during the mid-prime-age (age 35–44) period, and are able to actually do so. Analysis of the case records from the interview surveys of ten non-regular workers who made the transition to regular employment in the mid-prime-age period shows that in fact five people (Mr. YO, Ms. YP, Mr. YV, Ms. YX, and Ms. YY) made use of professional qualifications to make the transition to regular employment. The specific details of their cases are described below.<sup>9</sup>

Mr. YO (male, 43 years old) accumulated experience through training at various architecture-related companies after graduating upper secondary school. He then helped at an architecture-related store owned by his father, during which time he acquired a qualification as a registered *kenchikushi* (architect and building engineer) with a license known as “second-class *kenchikushi*.” When the store went bankrupt shortly after, he was unemployed for about six months, after which he began work as a regular employee for a housing renovation company. His qualification as a second-class *kenchikushi* was apparently recognized as a valuable asset when he was being considered for the position.

Ms. YP (female, 44 years old) had no experience working as a regular employee from the age of 20 onward. She attended a professional training college for two years on a program through which she received benefits to cover living expenses under a system to support single mothers to acquire qualifications, and received a qualification as a certified care worker. With this qualification, she was able to find work as a regular employee at a private residential nursing home for the elderly.

After quitting his job as a regular employee at a musical instrument store, Mr. YV

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<sup>8</sup> Here it is interesting to note that the percentage of mid-prime-age non-regular workers who wish to make the transition to regular employment is by no means low. The results of the questionnaire survey show that the percentages of non-regular workers who responded “yes” to the question “Do you currently feel that you would like to become a regular employee (not necessarily at your current place of employment)?” were 64.7% for early-prime-age males, 68.9% for mid-prime-age males, 54.5% for early-prime-age spouseless females, and 52.9% for mid-prime-age spouseless females.

<sup>9</sup> The summaries given here are as described in Takahashi (2014).

(male, 38 years old) obtained a qualification recognized in the IT industry (not national certification) by attending a vocational training school, while receiving a 120,000-130,000 yen monthly benefit to cover living expenses. Although understandably he was not able to find work as a regular employee immediately after receiving his qualification, after he acquired practical experience in the field by working as a temporary agency worker, he was hired as a regular employee at a software maintenance and support services company.

Ms. YX (female, 43 years old) has a qualification as a childcare worker. When she first began looking for a new job, she was applying for jobs which were not related to her qualification, such as reception work at a hotel, work in a long-established confectionary shop, and work as a caddy at a golf course. However, she persevered in looking for a suitable position, and came across a job vacancy for regular employment as an assistant nurse at a hospital. She immediately applied and was called to an interview, and her qualification as a childcare worker apparently helped her to get the job.

Ms. YY (female, 44 years old) held various jobs between graduating upper secondary school and her mid-thirties, all of which were forms of non-regular employment. In her mid-thirties she took a distance learning course using a system to support single-mothers, through which she completed training as a certified home caregiver, receiving the qualification “second-class home helper.” After acquiring her qualification she worked part-time at a home nursing care provider and a home for the elderly, following which she began work as a regular employee of a different home for the elderly.

### Mitigating Dissatisfaction through Indefinite Employment

As just mentioned, many mid-prime-age non-regular workers are dissatisfied with their lifestyles. However, there are means of decreasing this dissatisfaction. Analysis conducted by Yasutaka Fukui, a member of the JILPT research group, on the results of the questionnaire survey demonstrates that being in indefinite employment—that is, employment that is not limited to a specific period of time—can help to decrease the dissatisfaction that a mid-prime-age non-regular worker feels regarding their lifestyle.

Table 4 shows the results of ordered logistic regression analysis with males and spouseless female non-regular workers as the analysis subjects and the level of dissatisfaction respondents felt toward their lifestyles as the explained variable.<sup>10</sup> The results demonstrate that while being “mid-prime-age” sees an increase in dissatisfaction, the interaction terms “mid-prime-age” and “indefinite employment” decrease dissatisfaction. Even if mid-prime-age non-regular workers do not convert to regular employment, it is possible that by being in indefinite employment their dissatisfaction with their lifestyle may decrease.

As this section has shown, the probability of making the transition to regular employment is lower for mid-prime-age non-regular workers than it is for early-prime-age

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<sup>10</sup> The explained variable was a four-stage scale, in which 4 represents “dissatisfied,” 3 represents “somewhat dissatisfied,” 2 represents “somewhat satisfied,” and 1 represents “satisfied.”

Table 4. Factors Contributing to Lifestyle Dissatisfaction

	Coef	SE
(Unmarried male)		
Married male	-0.147	0.342
Unmarried female	-0.538	0.228 *
(Lower/upper secondary school, specialized training college, junior college, or college of technology graduate)		
University or graduate school graduate	0.216	0.252
Equivalent household income	-0.002	0.001 **
(Early-prime-age: age 25–34)		
Mid-prime-age: age 35–44	0.460	0.269 †
(Fixed-term employment)		
Indefinite employment	0.282	0.311
Mid-prime-age × Indefinite employment	-0.830	0.419 *
$\tau=1$	-3.177	0.400
$\tau=2$	-0.662	0.346
$\tau=3$	1.164	0.352
N		349
McFadden’s R <sup>2</sup>		0.022
AIC		852.002

Source: Fukui (2014, 170).

Note: Brackets are the reference groups.

† $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

non-regular workers. However, there are examples of non-regular workers who made the transition to regular employment during the mid-prime-age (age 35–44) period, and it is possible that the vocational qualifications of these workers help them in securing such regular employment. It is also possible that making the transition to employment with an unlimited term may help decrease the dissatisfaction mid-prime-age non-regular workers feel regarding their lifestyles.

## VI. Conclusion

The focus of this paper was to address the increase in the number of “mid-prime-age non-regular workers” (non-regular workers age 35–44, excluding married women). It set out to outline measures that should be adopted as labor policy, while taking into consideration the differences between mid-prime-age non-regular workers and “freeters” (non-regular workers in the young to early-prime-age bracket [age 34 or under], excluding married women). In the context of these objectives, the analysis in this paper has produced the following conclusions.

In comparison with freeters, mid-prime-age non-regular workers face significant difficulties, particularly in their lifestyles. For example, mid-prime-age non-regular workers

have a greater tendency to find themselves in a state of poverty, and they feel strong dissatisfaction with their lifestyles. The reason for this is that in spite of the fact that as they grow older they are more likely to become responsible for the household finances,<sup>11</sup> unlike the wages of regular employees, their wages do not increase with age. Many mid-prime-age non-regular workers are also in non-regular employment involuntarily. While mid-prime-age non-regular workers are fewer in number than freeters, in light of the level of difficulty they face, and the fact that this is created by the disparities between regular and non-regular employment in the labor market, it is necessary for mid-prime-age non-regular workers to be given consideration in the development of labor policies in the same way as consideration is given to the issues concerning freeters.

The personnel management practices applied to regular workers are thought to be a significant factor behind why people become mid-prime-age non-regular workers. The analysis in this paper has demonstrated that there are a significant number of cases in which people who face long working hours and illegal personnel management practices leave their jobs as regular employees and find themselves in non-regular employment in the mid-prime-age (age 35–44) period. While it is necessary to further develop this analysis to produce quantitative verification regarding the precise causal relationship between such factors and workers leaving their employment, it is possible that it will be important to ensure that personnel management of regular employees is conducted appropriately in order to prevent increases in the number of mid-prime-age non-regular workers.

An effective means of supporting mid-prime-age non-regular workers who wish to become regular employees may be to assist them in obtaining vocational qualifications. Of the ten mid-prime-age regular employees who participated in the interview survey, five were able to successfully make the transition to regular employment by utilizing their vocational qualifications. While it is of course necessary to also support this with quantitative verification, it is possible that, in contrast with the policies for freeters—who require training to develop personal skills—support to allow mid-prime-age non-regular workers to enhance their careers will need to be focused on developing concrete vocational skills and abilities that allow them to be immediately effective in a professional role.

At the same time, even if mid-prime-age non-regular workers do not make the transition to regular employment, if they are able to make the transition to employment with an unlimited term it is possible that their lifestyle may become more stable, and their dissatisfaction with their lifestyle may decrease. Under the amendments made to the Labor Contract Act in 2012, when a worker's fixed-term labor contract has been renewed for more than five years, it is possible for their employment type to be changed to indefinite employment at their request. Ensuring that the aims of this amendment are properly and fully adopted by businesses is another important task that needs to be addressed by labor admin-

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<sup>11</sup> The results of the questionnaire survey show that 27.4% of early-prime-age non-regular workers (males: 32.9%; females: 23.6%) and 58.2% of mid-prime-age non-regular workers (males: 58.3%; females: 58.2%) are personally responsible for their household finances.

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