

Schedule Instability and Unpredictability and Worker and Family Health and Wellbeing

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Background

Between 1950 and 1980, the expanding American economy delivered substantial and sustained gains in income to families across the income distribution. A rising tide lifted “all boats.” But, since 1979, only the most affluent families have seen their incomes and wages rise. For the past thirty years, the bottom fifty percent of families by income have seen their incomes remain stagnant. This is the story of rising income inequality.

The American labor market is also increasingly unequal, characterized by extraordinary returns to work at the top of the market but rising precarity and instability at the bottom of the market. This precarity is multi-dimensional, characterized by low-wages, few benefits, short tenure, contingent employment, and non-standard schedules.

While the consequences of these dimensions of precarity have been studied, scholars, policy makers, workers, and advocates have documented a new set of precarious employment practices related to work scheduling that may have serious negative effects on workers and their families.

Many service-sector employers now use a combination of human resource management strategies to closely align staffing with demand. Under this system, workers receive their weekly work schedules as little as a few days in advance, their scheduled work hours and work days may change substantially week-to-week, and workers may have their shifts changed, cancelled, or added at the last minute (Golden, 2001; Appelbaum et al., 2003; Clawson and Gerstel, 2015). Recent estimates suggest that nearly 90% of hourly retail workers experience such instability (Lambert et al., 2014).

Schedule unpredictability and instability are intimately tied to work hour insufficiency. Workers are often scheduled for a small number of hours that are insufficient for an economic living. Employers then offer workers additional shifts, but at the last minute. The only way for workers to get

sufficient hours is then to accept these last minute shifts or requests to stay late. Insufficient hours go hand in hand with unstable and unpredictable schedules.

Limits of Existing Data and Evidence

Our conversations with men and women employed in the retail and food service sectors, press accounts, and the testimony of workers make a compelling case that these scheduling practices have negative effects on workers. But, to date, we have lacked the large scale survey data to further examine these effects.

Methods

To fill this gap, we use an innovative survey method to collect data from 6,476 hourly non-managerial retail workers in the United States. Our study, the Retail Work and Family Life Study (RWAFLS), is unique in collecting detailed measures on schedule instability and unpredictability as well as measures of worker and family health, social wellbeing, and household financial security for a national sample of retail workers. To date, we have collected detailed surveys from hourly non-managerial workers at eight large employers (6 of which have establishments in the District).

We report on the prevalence of unstable and unpredictable scheduling practices in our sample, respondent's preferences for more hours and more regular hours, and then detail the relationships between unstable and unpredictable scheduling practices and outcomes in three key areas: (1) household economic security, (2) worker health and wellbeing, and (3) parenting.

Descriptive Results

Schedule variability and short-notice are common. The plurality of workers, 45%, report having variable schedules with another 15% reporting a rotating shift. A smaller share, 21% has a regular day-time schedule, while another 8% has a regular evening schedule and 9% has a regular night shift. Over all then, less than a quarter work a regular standard time shift, another 15% work a regular non-standard shift, and almost 60% work some kind of variable schedule.

Workers also receive little advance notice of their weekly schedules. 19% receive less than one week of notice and 42% receive 1-2 weeks. A third receive their schedules between 2 and 3 weeks out and a small minority, 7%, have at least three weeks notice. Together, 60% of workers have less than two weeks of advance notice.

The average worker in our study experienced substantial variation in their weekly work hours: on average there is a 33% variation between the week they worked the most and the week they worked the least in the past month. This means that a worker who averages 25 hours per week would have some weeks with 20 hours and others with 30 hours, with the accompanying fluctuations in income, and, for working parents, in their need for child care coverage.

It is important to distinguish flexibility from instability. Many white collar and professional workers are able to obtain a desirable “flexibility” in their schedules in which they themselves have some control over when and how much they work. Schedule instability is just the opposite. Workers have very little control over their hours and the variability they experience is not their preference, but rather the result of unilateral employer choices.

We see this in our data most simply when we tabulate worker reports of their preferences. Overall, 70% of workers report wanting more hours. Among those with part-time schedules, 74% want more hours.

Most workers are not satisfied with the status quo. Most workers want more hours.

Schedule Instability and Unpredictability and Worker and Family Outcomes

These scheduling practices matter. Schedules are an important determinant of economic security, health, and parenting outcomes.

We estimate a set of multiple regression models to examine how three key measures of unstable and unpredictable scheduling practices are related to our key outcomes. We test the relationship between (1) schedule type, (2) weeks of advance notice, and (3) working clopenings on household economic security, worker health and wellbeing, and parenting. Our models adjust for a broad set of worker characteristics including tenure, wages, income, education, age, and race/ethnicity. We also weight our estimates to the nationally representative American Community Survey.

Advance Notice

Proposed scheduling legislation requires two weeks advance notice of work schedules. We show that having this notice has real benefits for workers.

There are strong links between having at least two weeks of advanced notice and worker wellbeing. Compared to having less than one week of advance notice, having at least 2 weeks of advanced notice significantly reduces the likelihood of experiencing income volatility. Having more advance notice of one's work schedule may make it easier for workers to maintain a second job, which could help with income smoothing and reduce volatility.

Workers with less than 2 weeks' notice of work schedules were substantially more distressed, unhappy, and sleep-deprived. Lacking advance notice of work schedules increased these negative outcomes by as much as 25% compared with workers who knew their schedules 2 weeks in advance. This is the dimension of schedule unpredictability most directly regulated in recent municipal ordinance and our work suggests that increase notice to at least two weeks would make a tangible difference to workers lives.

Cloping

We also find that workers who report staffing "clopenings," that is working a closing shift followed by an opening shift and so who have little rest in between, are also negatively affected. These workers report worse sleep quality, are less happy, and experience more psychological distress.

Schedule Variability

Having a variable schedule significantly increases the risk of experiencing household income volatility, having difficulty paying bills and covering expenses, and increases the number of household economic hardships. We find consistent negative links between working a variable schedule and self-rated health, happiness, sleep quality, and psychological distress.

For working parents, the negative effects of unstable schedules spill over onto their children. Working parents who have variable schedules report spending less time with their children in developmental activities and report higher levels of parenting stress. For example, almost half of working parents with regular day time schedules had a meal with their child every day, but only 1/4 of working parents with variable schedules did. We also saw large effects on helping kids with homework.

Having a predictable and stable schedule means that parents can be there for their children.

In related research, we have interviewed 25 working parents in retail and food services. Those with stable schedules were able to maintain stable routines and care arrangements for their children. Those with unstable schedules were sometimes lucky enough to be able to buffer their children from instability, but only if they had a grandparent or other friend or family member who could be available on call to provide child care. In those cases, the burden of schedule instability was passed on to the grandparent rather than to the child.

But, for many working parents with unstable schedules, their children experienced a great deal of instability. Laura [pseudonym], a mother of four, who worked at a large grocery store chain, had to go through a long list of potential caregivers whenever she got her schedule, could one of her older children pick up her 5-year old? An Aunt? An Uncle? Some of her potential caregivers lived 30 minutes away. She had to scramble. For parents like Laura, kids' routines changed day to day and week to week, mirroring the instability of their parent's work schedule.

Policy Implications

These findings from our research show that the vast majority of retail workers would prefer more hours and more stable work schedules. Our results also show that unstable and unpredictable work schedules are associated with worse outcomes for workers and their families.

Placing these findings in the context of proposed work scheduling legislation, our research supports the claims that requiring employers to provide workers with at least two weeks of advanced notice of their schedules would benefit workers. Advanced notice of at least two weeks seems likely to improve workers' ability to plan their child care, to combine work with schooling or a second job, and in turn may reduce stress and improve mental health. In fact, we find that having at least two weeks of advance notice is associated with workers' happiness, mental health, and economic security.

Proposed "access to hours" legislation would combat involuntary part-time employment by requiring employers to offer existing employees access to full-time schedules before hiring additional part-time workers. Our study finds that the vast majority of workers stated a desire for more work hours, an aspiration that would be advanced by the current access-to-hours proposals.