

Overwork Impacts on Low-Wage Workers: Insights from the Food Manufacturing Sector in Oregon and Washington

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Introduction


“Each week is different. Sometimes they [the employer] ask me to stay one hour after my shift, sometimes two, sometimes more. It really depends on what they need, but they never consider the worker and what we might need. If they need to finish a job, they don’t even ask... ‘Is it okay with you to stay longer? Are you able to stay longer?’ They just say you have to do it. And the problem is that our shifts are usually already long, because 10 hours is a long time to be standing on the line, but it never is just 10 hours. You end up working 12 or 13 hours, and your feet hurt, your back hurts, and you don’t have a choice...You come back home, and you are so exhausted you can barely take care of your family.”

This is the answer Claribel, a migrant worker who has been employed in the fruit packing industry for over 20 years, gave when asked about her work hours. Her response illustrates some key dimensions of overwork—an underexamined component of unstable scheduling practices that significantly impacts low-wage workers and can affect both short-term and longer-term labor force participation across a range of industries and occupations.

Unstable scheduling refers to such employer practices as last-minute schedule changes, lack of advance notice, requiring employees to be on-call, split shifts, “clopening,”¹ and variable hours and shift times. Evidence has shown that such practices can lead to underwork, or involuntary part-time hours, particularly for service-sector workers.² But another, less-explored dimension of unstable scheduling practices—and the focus of this analysis—is overwork. Overwork stems from practices that can limit the ability of workers to get adequate rest and can heighten the bodily and emotional hazards that workers experience. We identify the following forms of unstable scheduling practices that constitute overwork:

¹“Clopening” refers to the practice of scheduling workers to work closing hours, followed by opening hours, or the late shift, followed by an early morning shift, often with insufficient rest time in between.

² Stepick, Lina. 2022. “[Shifting Hours: Unstable Work Scheduling Practices](#).” Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Community Development Research Brief-07. doi: 10.24148/cdrb2022-07.

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- Long work days of over eight hours/day
 - Long work weeks of over 40 hours/week and/or over five days/week
 - Long stretches of over seven days without days off
 - Lack of sufficient breaks during shifts


These multiple dimensions of unstable scheduling are sometimes layered together. For instance, workers can experience both optional and mandatory overtime, which can extend both their work day and/or their work week. When workers are assigned mandatory overtime, they face risk of penalty if they refuse to work these extended hours, including potential loss of employment. In addition, workers may experience combinations of overwork, underwork, or other unstable scheduling practices within one job, or as they move between multiple jobs to cobble together full-time, year-round employment, especially if working in an industry with high turnover and widespread seasonality. These combinations compound the strain that workers experience.³

Unstable scheduling practices—including the implications of overwork for worker health and safety—are associated with considerable costs to employers in lost productivity and increased turnover. For employees, working long hours is associated with adverse health impacts and increased work-family conflict, particularly when long working hours are combined with additional employer practices of unstable scheduling, such as a lack of advance notice and limited or no worker input on scheduling.⁴ Working more than eight hours a day or 40 hours a week is associated with a greater risk of mortality and the development of a wide range of chronic illnesses and maladaptive coping mechanisms.⁵ Mandatory overtime is associated

³ It should also be noted that in this brief we focus on temporal forms of overwork, but workers may also experience increased intensity of workloads, such as through speeding up manufacturing lines, increasing caseloads, or requiring workers to take on additional tasks and responsibilities without sufficient training or support. Increasing the intensity of workloads is often compounded by the rise in understaffing as an employment practice and by high turnover rates, which reinforce one another in a vicious cycle. For more, see: Loustaunau, Lola, et al. 2021. "[No Choice but to Be Essential: Expanding Dimensions of Precarity During COVID-19](#)." *Sociological Perspectives* 64(5): 857–75.

⁴ Golden, Lonnie, and Jaesung Kim. 2017. "[Irregular Work Shifts, Work Schedule Flexibility, and Associations with Work-Family Conflict and Work Stress in the U.S.](#)" In De Groof, Sarah, Frank Hendrickx, and Roger Blanpain, eds. *Work-Life Balance in the Modern Workplace: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Work-Family Research, Law, and Policy*. Kluwer Law International.

⁵ Bannai, Akira, and Akiko Tamakoshi. 2014. "[The Association Between Long Working Hours and Health: A Systematic Review of Epidemiological Evidence](#)." *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health* 40(1): 5–18.



with increased stress, fatigue, depression, anxiety, chronic illness and injury, burnout, and turnover.⁶ The lack of advance notice for mandatory overtime work is an additional layer of unstable scheduling that can compound the hazards of working long hours.⁷ Because the hazards of overwork contribute to worker burnout, injury, premature disability, and turnover, examining overwork is crucial to understanding how unstable scheduling can impact labor force participation and full employment.

This brief examines these different forms of overwork, focusing on the impacts of overwork on low-wage workers. After a brief overview of methods, we draw on a quantitative analysis of publicly available data to provide historical context for overwork in the United States and discuss its prevalence across industries and occupations. We then spotlight the food manufacturing industry, which has particularly high rates of overwork, as well as one of the highest rates of workplace injuries of any manufacturing subsector.⁸ We focus on the industry and workforce in Oregon and Washington—using a robust, original, qualitative dataset that draws on interviews with 75 workers, managers, and other stakeholders—to elucidate the different forms of overwork and the impacts of these employer practices on low-wage workers. Finally, we discuss considerations for policy and practice efforts aimed at addressing the negative impacts of overwork across industries and occupations and their implications for full employment.

⁶ Yu, Jiaoyang, and Stavroula Leka. 2022. “[The Effect of Worktime Control on Overtime Employees’ Mental Health and Work-Family Conflict: The Mediating Role of Voluntary Overtime.](#)” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19(7): 3767–83; Beckers, Debby G. J., et al. 2008. “[Voluntary or Involuntary? Control Over Overtime and Rewards for Overtime in Relation to Fatigue and Work Satisfaction.](#)” *Work & Stress* 22(1): 33–50; Brockwood, Krista, et al. 2021. “[Mandated, but Not Compensated: Exploring the Multifaceted Impacts of Overtime on Farm Workers’ Health, Safety, and Well-Being.](#)” Oregon Health Sciences University and Pineros Y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste White Paper.

⁷ Although several jurisdictions have passed or considered predictive scheduling ordinances, some states have specifically addressed lack of advance notice for mandatory overtime. For example, a 2022 Oregon law requires that employers give five days’ notice for mandatory overtime and that they not penalize workers for refusing last-minute overtime hours.

⁸ Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2020. “[Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities.](#)” Employer-Reported Workplace Illnesses and Injuries.



A Note on Methods

For context on the food manufacturing industry nationally and in Oregon and Washington, this brief includes an analysis of publicly available data, including General Social Survey (2018), U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates (2019), Long-Term Occupational Projections (2020–2030), Quarterly Census on Employment and Wages (2021), and employer-reported Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

This brief also draws upon interviews with 60 migrant and second-generation workers employed in 20 food processing companies in Oregon and Washington and 15 managers, labor and community organizers, and other stakeholders. All interviews were conducted between January 2020 and February 2022. Participants were recruited by sharing flyers at public events and through snowball sampling. Most of the interviews were conducted over the phone, lasted between 75 and 180 minutes, and were conducted in Spanish, English, and Karen (spoken in Myanmar and Thailand). Participants were compensated for their time. In the findings, pseudonyms have replaced participant names to preserve confidentiality.

Among respondents, 70 percent were women, 85 percent were Latinx, and 15 percent were Asian.⁹ Seventy-five percent of interviewees were migrant workers with various immigration statuses, including DACA recipients, T visa holders, asylum seekers, and refugees. Respondents were employed in industry subsectors, such as fruit packing, vegetable processing, meatpacking, seafood processing, industrial bakeries, and juice production and held various occupations, including line worker, stacker, machine operator, quality control, forklift operator, sanitation, etc. The median job tenure was three years.

⁹ We elect to use these terms, but we would like to acknowledge the evolving and complex nature of terminology to describe race/ethnicity and that many people may prefer alternate terminology to identify themselves.



Background: Context and Prevalence of Overwork in the United States

A central aspect of overwork in the United States is the fact that there are no limits on how many hours workers can be asked or mandated to work, with the exception of some specific industries or workers who are employed under a collective bargaining agreement that explicitly states maximum work hours. In contrast, for example, the European Union (EU) Working Time Directive (2003/88/EC) limits weekly working hours in EU Member States to 48 hours, including overtime.¹⁰

Although it does not include explicit limitations on working hours for most workers, a primary goal of the Fair Labor Standards Act when it was passed in 1938 was to address widespread practices of overwork through the introduction of overtime pay.¹¹ However, the law excluded several groups of workers who were disproportionately Black workforces at the time, notably farmworkers, domestic workers, and tipped wage workers.¹² Subsequent amendments, executive actions, and state protections still leave many groups of workers without full access to these basic labor protections.¹³ For example, agricultural workers are one of the occupations most likely to work mandatory overtime, which means employers require workers to frequently work 14–16 hours per day or 52–60 hours per week.¹⁴ Meanwhile, employers in most states¹⁵ are not legally required to pay agricultural workers any additional overtime

¹⁰ European Commission. 2022. "[Working Conditions: Working Time Directive](#)." Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion, European Union.


¹¹ Alexander, Charlotte, and Anna Haley-Lock. 2015. "[Underwork, Work-Hour Insecurity, and a New Approach to Wage and Hour Regulation](#)." *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society* 54(4): 695–716.

¹² A body of scholarship examines the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers as described by law scholar Juan Perea "as a race-neutral proxy for excluding blacks from statutory benefits and protections made available to most whites." See for example: Linder, Marc. 1986. "Farm Workers and the Fair Labor Standards Act: Racial Discrimination in the New Deal." *Texas Law Review* 65 (7): 1335–93 and Mutari, Ellen, Marilyn Power, and Deborah M. Figart. 2002. "Neither Mothers Nor Breadwinners: African-American Women's Exclusion From US Minimum Wage Policies, 1912-1938." *Feminist Economics* 8 (2): 37–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545700210160988>.

¹³ OSHA Education Center. 2022. "[Employee Overtime: Hours, Pay, and Who Is Covered](#)." American Safety Council, Inc.

¹⁴ Brockwood et al., "[Mandated, but Not Compensated](#)."

¹⁵ California, Maryland, and Maine require employers to pay agricultural workers for overtime. [Washington](#) and [Oregon](#) recently passed legislation requiring employers to pay agricultural workers for overtime; however, it will be gradually phased in, with the hour threshold for overtime pay starting at 50 hours per week and reaching the threshold of 40 hours per week in 2024 for Washington and 2027 for Oregon.



compensation.¹⁶ Live-in domestic workers are similarly excluded from basic federal labor law protections, including minimum wage and overtime compensation.¹⁷

Given the uneven coverage and incomplete protections of these policies, overwork in the United States is common. Across industries and occupations, at least 41 percent¹⁸ and as many as 52 percent¹⁹ of all workers report working more than 40 hours per week. Examining mandatory overtime specifically reveals a similar pattern. Twenty-seven percent of all workers are subject to mandatory overtime.²⁰ Of those workers, 28 percent were mandated to work longer than their scheduled shift times at least 10 days each month.

The top five industries where workers were mandated to work overtime hours are agriculture, forestry, and fishing; transportation and logistics; manufacturing; construction; and mining.²¹ With the exception of transportation and logistics, these industries are also the top industries impacted by seasonal variation²² and changing environmental conditions, further destabilizing work hours, productivity, employment, and wages.²³ However, it should also be noted that the employer practice of unstable scheduling through assigning mandatory overtime is still prevalent in subsectors of these industries that are more insulated from seasonal and climate variation, such as factory bakeries.²⁴ This indicates it is an employer practice endemic to the industry and not necessarily driven by seasonality.

¹⁶ Brockwood et al., "[Mandated, but Not Compensated.](#)"

¹⁷ Nadasen, Premilla. 2012. "[Citizenship Rights, Domestic Work, and the Fair Labor Standards Act.](#)" *Journal of Policy History* 21(1): 74–94; Perea, Juan F. 2011. "[The Echoes of Slavery: Recognizing the Racist Origins of the Agricultural and Domestic Worker Exclusion from the National Labor Relations Act.](#)" *Ohio State Law Journal* 72: 95–138.

¹⁸ Authors' calculation of General Social Survey (GSS) 2018 data, [GSS NORC at the University of Chicago](#).

¹⁹ Brenan, Megan. 2019. "[Women, Hourly Workers Less Satisfied with Some Job Aspects.](#)" *Gallup*, October 4, 2019.

²⁰ Authors' calculation of GSS 2018 data.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Geremew, Menelik, and François Gourio. 2018. "[Seasonal and Business Cycles of U.S. Employment.](#)" *Economic Perspectives* 42(3): Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.

²³ Davis, Jane Emily, et al. 2014. "[The Community-Economic Impacts of Large Wildfires: A Case Study from Trinity County, California.](#)" *Society and Natural Resources* 27(9): 983–93; Chan, H. Ron, Martino Pelli, and Veronica Vienne Arancibia. 2022. "[Wildfires, Smoky Days, and Labor Supply.](#)" IZA Institute of Labor Economics.

²⁴ Loustaunau, Lola. 2022. "The Hands That Feed Us: Endemic Precarity and Pandemic Resistance Among Migrant Food Processing Workers in the Pacific Northwest." University of Oregon, Department of Sociology.



Findings: Understanding Overwork in the Food Manufacturing Industry in the Pacific Northwest

Employer practices of overwork are especially prevalent in the food manufacturing industry, which also has particularly high rates of workplace injury.²⁵ For instance, analysis by detailed industry codes reveals that food manufacturing has the highest rate of mandatory overtime, with 64 percent of workers reporting that they are mandated to work overtime, compared with 41 percent of workers in all other manufacturing subsectors and 27 percent of workers in all other industries.²⁶ Food manufacturing also has a recorded workplace injury rate that is 1.65 times the total rate for all of manufacturing and 1.76 times the overall rate for workers in the United States. At least some of this can be attributed to degraded/precarious working conditions, as well as the impacts of employer practices that result in different forms of overwork.²⁷

Food manufacturing is also a large and steadily growing essential industry—both nationally and notably so in Oregon and Washington. Nationally, there are about 1.7 million food manufacturing workers,²⁸ and this figure is projected to grow by 4 percent over the next 10 years.²⁹ In Oregon and Washington, there are about 66,812 food manufacturing workers³⁰ and 1,988 food manufacturing establishments, with a total

²⁵ In this report, we use food manufacturing and food processing interchangeably, as the food manufacturing industry includes several occupations defined as food processing. Food Manufacturing is a subsector of the Manufacturing industry and includes Animal Food Manufacturing; Grain and Oilseed Milling; Sugar and Confectionery Product Manufacturing; Fruit and Vegetable Preserving and Specialty Food Manufacturing; Dairy Product Manufacturing; Animal Slaughtering and Processing; Seafood Product Preparation and Packaging; Bakeries and Tortilla Manufacturing; and Other Food Manufacturing. See: [Industries at a Glance: Food Manufacturing: NAICS 31: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(bls.gov\)](#). In our analysis of American Community Survey data, we include industry codes for food manufacturing industries (1070–1290) and for agricultural support activities (290), combined with occupation codes for graders and sorters, agricultural products (6040), bakers (7800), butchers and other meat, poultry, and fish processing workers (7810), food and tobacco roasting, baking, and drying machine operators and tenders (7830), food batchmakers (7840), food cooking machine operators and tenders (7850), food processing workers, all other (7855), inspectors, testers, sorters, samplers, and weighers (8740), packaging and filling machine operators and tenders (8800), other production equipment operators and tenders (8865), other production workers (8990), and packers and packagers, hand (9640).

²⁶ Authors' calculation of mandatory overtime for frontline food manufacturing workers in General Social Survey (GSS) 2018 data, [GSS NORC at the University of Chicago](#).

²⁷ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "[Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities](#)."

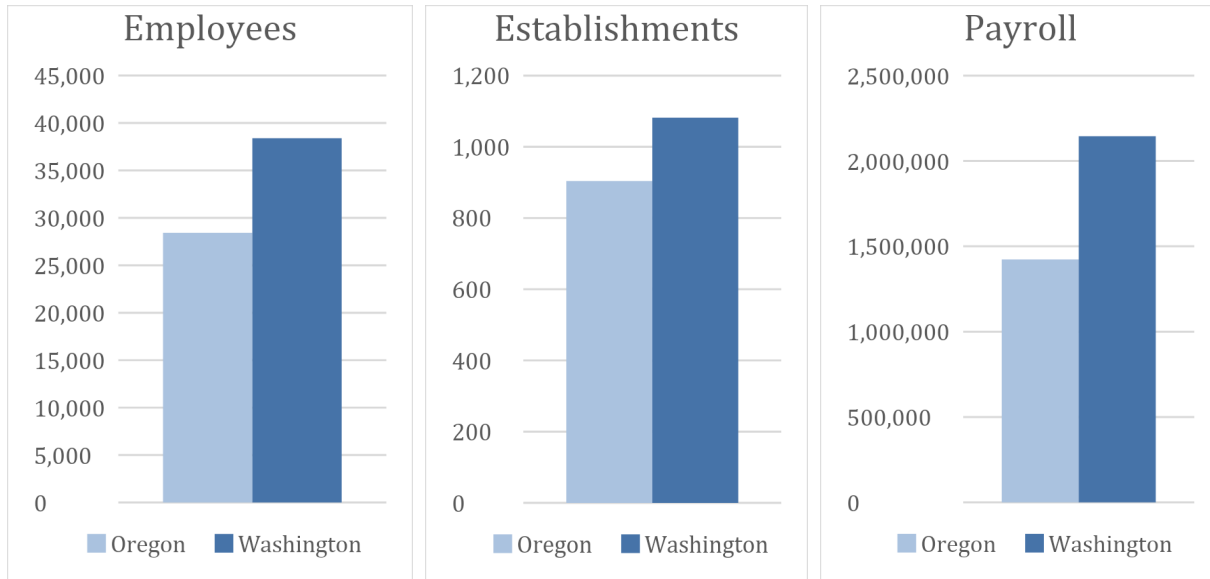
²⁸ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2022. "[Current Employment Statistics](#)."

²⁹ Authors' calculation of occupational projections data, U.S. Department of Labor Projections Central, "[Long-Term Occupational Projections \(2020–2030\)](#)."

³⁰ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2021. "[Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages 2021 Annual Averages by Industry and State](#)."

annual payroll of \$3.6 billion (Figure 1).³¹ Moreover, the industry is projected to add an additional 10,800 jobs in Oregon and Washington over the next decade.³²

Figure 1. Number of (a) Employees, (b) Establishments, and (c) Size of Annual Payroll in the Food Manufacturing Industry in Oregon and Washington, 2021



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages.


Note: Payroll amounts shown in thousands.

Although this sector is expected to grow, it is also expected to continue experiencing high turnover rates—particularly for frontline workers. The job openings for frontline workers in food manufacturing in these two states are projected to be about 4,850 per year over the next decade.³³ That is roughly five times the projected pace of annual job growth in the sector, as workers depart the industry and must be replaced at high rates. High turnover rates reflect a self-perpetuating cycle with regard to overwork practices for both employers and employees. When interviewed, managers and

³¹ Ibid.

³² Authors’ calculation of long-term employment projections, 2020–2030 data, [State of Oregon Department of Employment](#) and [Washington State Employment Security Department](#).

³³ Authors’ calculation of occupational projections data, U.S. Department of Labor Projections Central, “[Long-Term Occupational Projections \(2020–2030\)](#).”




human resources personnel in Oregon and Washington shared struggles with having the needed staff to achieve production goals, and thus overly relying on such practices as mandatory overtime to meet production quotas. For example, a human resources manager at a vegetable processing plant shared that during the past two years, the plant has seen a decrease in the number of job applicants and has had to meet production needs with only two-thirds of the necessary staff, thus becoming dependent on fewer workers doing significantly more than 40 hours a week. Yet resorting to overwork to offset staffing shortages directly impacts employers' ability to recruit and retain workers who face strenuous and sometimes hazardous working conditions.

The frontline workers employed in this industry—and navigating these practices and working conditions—are disproportionately migrant workers and workers of color. For instance, nationally, 31 percent of nonsupervisory food manufacturing workers are Latinx, 17 percent are Black, 6 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander, 1 percent are Native American, and 46 percent are white. The proportion of workers of color is higher among frontline food manufacturing workers in Oregon and Washington compared to national numbers, with 46 percent of workers being Latinx, 13 percent Black, 8 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, less than 1 percent Native American, and 34 percent white. Further, 31 percent of nonsupervisory food manufacturing workers nationally and 44 percent in Oregon and Washington are foreign-born.³⁴

Occupational segregation exists within the industry, with migrant workers and workers of color concentrated in manual labor-intensive occupations on the line and thus more likely to be exposed to the impacts of overwork and hazardous working conditions.³⁵

³⁴ Authors' calculation of U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey: 2015–2019 (Five-Year Estimate). IPUMS Microdata. Ruggles, Steven, et al. IPUMS USA: Version 12.0 ACS Five-Year Estimate 2015–2019. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2022.

³⁵ For example, for the industry overall, 41 percent of nonsupervisory workers are women. Women made up 70 percent of graders and sorters (6,040), 57 percent of hand packers (9,640), and 61 percent of food batchmakers (7,840), but only 24 percent of butchers (7,810) and other meat, poultry, and fish processing workers. These national figures are similar for migrant workers and nearly identical for Oregon and Washington food processing workers in these occupations. Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey: 2015–2019 (Five-Year Estimate). IPUMS Microdata. Ruggles, Steven, et al. IPUMS USA: Version 12.0 ACS Five-Year Estimate 2015–2019. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2022.




This industry, therefore, provides a useful lens to examine different forms of overwork and their impacts, with implications for worker recruitment and retention and labor force participation trends, particularly for lower-wage workers and workers of color. Below we consider each dimension of overwork in turn, informed by the experiences of our sample of food manufacturing workers in Oregon and Washington.

Long Days: Working More Than Eight Hours/Day

The first form of overwork that emerges from our data is working more than eight hours a day. Participants in our study shared that working longer hours consecutively in one shift directly impacted their physical well-being, as well as their personal and family lives. For example, workers in food manufacturing often work in a physically uncomfortable position, making repetitive motions at high speeds. In interviews, workers highlighted that under these conditions, the difference between working eight hours straight versus 10 or 12 hours can be very significant. Angie, a fruit packing worker, shared that when she first started working, her shifts were nine hours long, but they were quickly changed to 11 hours: “Those two hours extra make a huge difference. I feel it in my body, my legs, my hands. It makes it really hard for me to cope with my shift. By the end, I am so tired I can barely walk.”

In addition to the physical exhaustion from working long days, workers who do longer shifts without any advance notice reported struggling to balance their work and family lives. Workers shared that having to work with no set end time is particularly hard, not only on their bodies but also on their lives outside work. Violeta, a vegetable processing worker who is a single mom of a nine-year-old child, explained, “In repack,³⁶ you have a starting time but no end time. I took the job because it had an 11:30 a.m. starting time, and I thought, ‘That’s perfect. I can take her to school, prepare her food, and then go to work.’ But that is not how it works. Yes, I could take her to school and prepare her food, but then I wouldn’t be back home until 1 or 2 a.m., feeling exhausted, and basically could never spend any time with her. It was really heavy on her and me.”

³⁶ Repack is the name usually given to the department in a food manufacturing company that deals with returns; it is tasked with repacking the returned product for new orders/clients.




Rosa, another food processing worker, shared a similar situation and stressed the coercive dimension of mandatory overtime. Unlike Violeta, who accepted a job with no end time, Rosa has a standard schedule but is regularly asked to stay longer. She explained that she would prefer not to do so much overtime but that she does not have a choice: “One time I told them I didn’t want to stay because I have a life, I have things I need to do. And they said, ‘No, this is mandatory. You have to stay.’ And I really wanted to go home to my family because overtime does not leave you any time to be with your family, and I have a small child and wish I had a little bit more time with her. I feel like I am only there to put her to bed and don’t get to spend as much time as I want to. And then you feel it’s not even worth the money...but what can you do?” Rosa’s experience illustrates a theme we heard from many workers, that overtime pay does not necessarily compensate for the impacts that long work days have on workers’ family lives.

Long Weeks: Working More Than 40 Hours/Week and/or More Than Five Days/Week

A second form of overwork is long work weeks without sufficient days off for rest and other obligations. Although the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) defines a standard work week as five working days, many workers interviewed in our sample regularly worked six or seven days per week. Longer work weeks mean fewer days off to recuperate from the physical strain of work and less time and energy to fulfill other obligations. Similar to what Rosa and other workers shared, Michael, a meatpacking worker, explained that without any notice, his schedule had been changed from five days a week to six. This significantly reduced his time to rest, spend time with his three young children, and do things in his home: “I don’t want to work Saturdays because that leaves me with almost no time off. I am so tired by the end of the week that I can barely do anything on Sundays.”

Although employers sometimes make working a longer week optional, refusing to work an extra day might mean facing retaliation or losing benefits, such as presentism bonuses, thus impacting workers’ financial well-being. José, another meatpacking worker, explained: “You used to get a bonus if you came in five days a week. But now it’s six, which makes it harder for you to get the bonus and expensive to refuse to come in because you are not just losing the overtime pay but the bonus as well.” This tension




that José highlights reveals one of the mechanisms underlying overwork and how financial constraints may shape the voluntary nature of such worker choices. Presentism bonuses can function as extra pressure to accept overtime hours even when they are not strictly mandatory. Workers reported that this increased the strain they experienced on their physical, emotional, and family well-being.

Long Stretches: Working More Than Seven Days Without a Day Off

A third form of overwork is consecutive work days that extend beyond a full week without a day off. This form of overwork can be regular, meaning that employers regularly schedule workers for longer stretches of time without days off, with multiple days off together scheduled afterward. (This is also common practice in other industries, such as health care and transportation.) Or this practice can be exceptional, meaning that workers are asked to work without breaks for a specific period of time, after which they work a more standard number of days per week. Workers shared that in some companies, the “regular” work week is eight or nine days long. This means that they need to adapt to working continuously without a proper break for longer than what is considered the standard week outside of these industries; in addition, their days off change constantly. In other cases, particularly in food manufacturing subsectors that have “seasonal” work, such as fruit and vegetable processing, workers might be expected to work without breaks for over 30 days.

Workers shared that the physical toll of working for so many days without any days off was very intense. Armida, a fruit packing worker, said: “By the end of the season, we were all crying on the lines of how much pain we were in.” Beyond the physical pain, working without days off also impacted workers’ overall well-being. Matilde, another fruit packing worker, explained: “During the cherry season, I would come in at 5 a.m. until we were done, every day for almost 40 days. You have no Sundays, no nothing. You lose track of time, you don’t know what day it is, you feel disoriented; it is just a lot.” Matilde points to a usually overlooked dimension of overwork—its impact on workers’ overall mental health. Throughout the interviews, workers explicitly connected overwork to feelings of anxiety and stress due to the increased difficulty of balancing work and personal lives. They also expressed feelings of depression and




sadness that they associated with exhausting work days and little access to time off for rest, time with family, leisure, or other obligations.

Lack of Sufficient Breaks: Limited Breaks During Shifts and/or Insufficient Breaks Between Scheduled Shifts

In addition to working long days and long weeks, workers shared that they regularly had limited access to proper breaks both during their work shifts and between them. Limited breaks during work shifts mean workers are on the lines for long periods without being able to give their bodies a proper respite from the effort of production, including standing for long periods and performing repetitive tasks. A lack of access to breaks during work shifts can happen in different ways. Workers shared that employers often organize production in ways that create longer periods without a break than what is legally required. Ana, a meatpacking worker, said: “We would go on our break, and six minutes after, the supervisors would start clapping and saying, ‘Break is over.’ And we had to return to the line even though our break was supposed to be 10 minutes long.”

Since many food manufacturing plants’ production lines do not stop, staffing levels directly impact workers’ ability to take breaks on time. Octavio, who works at a vegetable processing plant, explained: “Many times we cannot get our breaks because we are running the lines, and we need to wait until someone covers for us to get a break. We can’t stop the line or leave the machines alone, and we have to wait and wait. And it will be very late, and there is only one person to cover for everyone. And they can’t cover everyone, so we don’t get to have our break.” In other cases, production demands limit workers’ break time; for example, workers are usually asked to stay on the line until a particular shipment is ready. Manuela, a bakery worker, explained that it is not uncommon for her supervisor to ask that everyone stays on the line until a particular batch of dough is finished processing, regardless of when workers’ legally mandated break should take place: “We might be half an hour away from a break and they start a new batch, even if it will take us over an hour to finish it.”

The worksite infrastructure and the gear workers are required to use was also reported to reduce their break time. Reyna, who works in a meatpacking plant, shared: “We use special equipment that is 15 pounds heavy to protect us from the knives, and we have these gloves and helmet and boots. It usually takes me the whole




break just to take the gear off.” Similarly, María, a vegetable processing worker, explained: “The break room in our plant is really far from the lines. It takes more than five minutes to get there, and I need five minutes to take the gear off and then another five to put it back on and sanitize properly. Because you need to be on the line and ready by the time the break is over, you basically only have 10 minutes to eat lunch as fast as you can to make sure you are back on time, and if you do not, you get disciplinary points.” Blanca, a fruit packing worker, described the overall irregularities and unpredictability that workers experience regarding proper breaks: “It’s just full of irregularities. They never respect our breaks. They never let us take our lunch break on time. The only time they respect is the starting time. Beyond that, the breaks happen whenever they want. Maybe you are supposed to get a break at 1:30 but don’t get it until 2:30. It all depends on what is most convenient for them. They never respect the law.”

The systematic denial of bathroom breaks appears in both the workers’ interviews and in a large part of the research on the sector.³⁷ Denial of bathroom breaks—a practice emblematic of overwork—has severe immediate and long-term impacts on workers’ health. “I have seen several of my coworkers pee themselves on the line because they were not allowed to leave,” explained Vicky, who is 36 years old and has worked in both fruit packing and meatpacking.

Participants reported another facet of insufficient breaks: the practice of not allowing adequate breaks between shifts. This practice has been analyzed in the service sector for workers who are assigned “clopening” shifts (i.e., sequential shifts that include closing and opening hours, which do not allow time for sufficient sleep).³⁸ In other industries, including manufacturing, insufficient rest between shifts often means working the late shift, potentially without set ending times, and then the middle shift the following day. This leads to insufficient rest time and can be compounded by unpredictable or changing shifts and overall long and nonstandard hours. These forms

³⁷ See, for example: Berkowitz, Debbie, Celeste Monforton, and Jaclyn Sokol. 2016. “No Relief. Denial of Bathroom Breaks in Poultry Industry”; Oxfam America and Linder, Marc. 2003. “Void Where Prohibited Revisited: The Trickle-Down Effect of OSHA’s At-Will Bathroom-Break Regulation.” SSRN Scholarly Paper. ID 2217649. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.

³⁸ Petrucci, Larissa, et al. 2022. “[Persistent Unpredictability: Analyzing Experiences with the First Statewide Scheduling Legislation in Oregon](#).” *ILR Review* 75(5): 1133–58; Harknett, Kristen, Daniel Schneider, and Véronique Irwin. 2021. “[Seattle’s Secure Scheduling Ordinance: Year 2 Worker Impact Report](#).” The Shift Project.



of overwork and unstable scheduling severely impact workers' sleep and increase the chance of accidents both within and outside the workplace.³⁹ For example, Mariela shared that when she was driving back to her home to take care of her kids after a 12-hour night shift, she fell asleep at the wheel and lost control of her car.


Compounding Challenges: When Multiple Forms of Overwork and Unstable Scheduling Practices Are Present

It is not uncommon for workers to experience multiple forms of overwork at once. Having long days and long weeks creates particularly difficult situations for workers, yet legally employers are only required to pay any hours worked in excess of 40 per week, without regard to how those hours might be distributed in additional forms of overwork. A further complication endemic to industries with high seasonality, such as fruit and vegetable processing, is that high seasons can follow one after another such that workers go even longer without a break. Because many processing facilities work with different products with different “peak” moments, some workers may end the asparagus season only to start working the corn one or finish the cherry season only to start working the apple one. Violeta explains: “Last summer in the cherry season, I was a line lead, which meant I had to come in one hour before and leave one hour later. And the regular shifts were already 12 hours long, so I worked 14 hours every day. By the end, I felt like I was tired and could never work again. But the following Monday, I was there at the apple line.”

Alternatively, workers may experience lulls between seasons and therefore fluctuations between overwork and underwork. As a high season winds down, workers reported that employers often reduced workers' hours dramatically, pushing many to leave employment without severance or access to unemployment compensation.⁴⁰ Employers can dictate fluctuations between underwork and overwork, leaving workers unable to choose to leave or change employment freely.

³⁹ See, for example: Brossoit, Rebecca M., et al. 2019. “[The Effects of Sleep on Workplace Cognitive Failure and Safety.](#)” *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 24(4): 411–22.

⁴⁰ Loustaunau, “The Hands That Feed Us.”



This is partly because many employers in the food manufacturing industry⁴¹ enforce practices that bar workers from returning to work for a company if they leave employment. This severely constrains workers’ mobility, particularly in rural areas with limited job options and even more so for workers facing additional barriers to employment. If workers find their hours are cut, or if they find a line speedup or mandatory overtime too hazardous or too onerous and need a break, they not only cannot refuse mandatory overtime without the threat of dismissal but they also may be barred from returning to work for a primary employer in the region at a later date. Moreover, workers lose seniority and benefits every time they leave the packing house.


Considerations for Policy and Practice

The experiences of the food manufacturing workers documented here illuminate the range of impacts the many—and often overlapping—forms of overwork can have on workers’ physical and mental health and both their short-term and longer-term ability to participate in the labor force. Yet these impacts are not unique to the food manufacturing sector. As underscored in the Background section, the challenges that stem from overwork affect workers—and especially workers in lower-wage jobs—across a range of industries and occupations.

Most workers in the United States do not currently have any protections in place regulating maximum hours per day or week or maximum days worked consecutively.⁴² Similarly, few regulations exist against mandatory overtime. As described in the Background section, some protections exist at specific workplaces, including language ensuring that workers have a right to refuse additional hours. However, this right to refuse additional hours generally applies only for last-minute changes to

⁴¹ Freshour, Carrie. 2019. “Cheap Meat and Cheap Work in the U.S. Poultry Industry: Race, Gender, and Immigration in Corporate Strategies to Shape Labor.” In Winders, Bill, and Elizabeth Ransom, eds. *Global Meat: Social and Environmental Consequences of the Expanding Meat Industry*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; Stuesse, Angela. 2016. *Scratching Out a Living: Latinos, Race, and Work in the Deep South*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

⁴² See, for example: OSHA Education Center. 2022. “[Employee Overtime: Hours, Pay, and Who Is Covered](#).” American Safety Council, Inc..



workers' schedules that mandate additional hours. Thus, workers are still mandated to work long hours if given adequate notice.⁴³ Notably, food manufacturing workers in this study reported that although unpredictability is especially stressful, after a certain point, the additional overtime pay ends up not being worth the strain of overwork.

The limited existing regulations primarily focus on overtime pay, and not workers' ability to determine their working hours nor the potential health and safety consequences of extended work hours. Overtime pay regulations encompass various sectors, including food processing workers. However, there are still groups of workers not covered—or only partially covered—by existing regulations, such as agricultural workers, who often have weaker overtime protections with higher thresholds for hours (if any coverage exists), domestic workers providing companionship care, low-wage workers classified as independent contractors, and other industries. These industries often consist predominantly of workers of color and migrant workers, contributing to disparities in labor market outcomes.⁴⁴ Additionally, many worker organizations have argued that the salary threshold above which workers are owed overtime pay has not been adjusted appropriately over time. For example, if the salary threshold had been adjusted to account for inflation from 1975 levels, it would be \$20,000 higher than it currently is.⁴⁵ In 1975, the overtime salary threshold covered 63 percent of full-time salaried workers, but four decades later, only 7 percent of full-time salaried workers were covered.⁴⁶ Scholars estimate that if the threshold were adjusted, it would result in around 3.1 million additional workers who could be covered by overtime pay.⁴⁷


⁴³ See, for example: Goldberg, Jaimie. 2022. "[Oregon Senate Votes to Curb Mandatory Overtime for Bakery Workers.](#)" *The Oregonian*, February 15, 2022.

⁴⁴ Where protections have been extended—such as expanded overtime protections and pay for farmworkers in California—evidence suggests that the industry has not experienced a decline in average hours worked or in the number of farms operating, although this is an area that would benefit from further research given the recency of some of these expanded protections. See, e.g., Dyssegaard Kallick, David, and Daniel Costa. 2022. "[Overtime Pay Will Help, Not Hurt, New York's Farms.](#)" Economic Policy Institute, September 26, 2022.

⁴⁵ Shierholz, Heidi, and John Schmitt. 2022. "[The Court Decision Invalidating the 2016 Overtime Rule Was Based on Fundamentally Flawed Economic Logic.](#)" Economic Policy Institute, April 22, 2022.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.



Understanding how employer practices of unstable scheduling can include multiple forms and combinations of overwork is important when considering solutions. For instance, workers have argued that protections should consider both long days and long weeks. Lessons from efforts that address “clopening” from the retail and service sector could be applied to consider the need for adequate rest between shifts in manufacturing and other industries. This could also include the need for adequate rest and breaks during shifts in ways that take into consideration the different layouts and gear involved in different types of workplaces, such that workers are given adequate time to actually rest on their breaks.

In addition, addressing minimum staffing could help ensure that workers do not feel explicit or implicit pressure to work through necessary breaks and could prevent workload intensification. Pairing these interventions with paid leave could also recognize the hazards of overwork and their implications for labor force participation.⁴⁸ Workers reported that they were sometimes relieved to fall ill because it meant they could finally take needed rest, but they also noted a lack of sufficient paid leave to adequately recuperate. The rapid spread of COVID-19 in food manufacturing factories⁴⁹ illustrated the dangers of overworking this essential workforce and not providing sufficient paid leave.⁵⁰ Workers in this study reported that during the pandemic, they experienced an increase in mandatory overtime, incentives for presenteeism (and penalties for absences), and a lack of paid leave.⁵¹

Research has also shown that collective representation enhances worker voice on the job, amplifying workers’ efforts to implement and enforce scheduling policies.⁵² This means workers have greater support in changing scheduling policies, as well as in


⁴⁸ Loustaunau, Lola and Lina Stepick. 2022. “How Worker Health & Safety Matter for Full Employment: Q&A with Visiting Scholar Dr. Lola Loustaunau.” Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Community Development Blog: <https://www.frbsf.org/community-development/blog/worker-health-and-safety-matter-for-full-employment/>.

⁴⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention et al. 2021. “Coronavirus Disease Among Workers in Food Processing, Food Manufacturing, and Agricultural Workplaces.” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 27(1): 243–49.

⁵⁰ Raifman, Julia R., et al. 2021. “[Paid Leave Policies Can Help Keep Businesses Open and Food on Workers’ Tables](#).” Health Affairs Blog, October 25, 2021.

⁵¹ While there is no publicly available data on mandatory overtime during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings of this study are similar to those of other studies in different industries such as retail, see Loustaunau, Lola, et al. 2021. “No Choice but to Be Essential: Expanding Dimensions of Precarity During COVID-19.” *Sociological Perspectives* 64(5): 857–75.

⁵² Loustaunau, Lola, et al. 2020. “[Persistent Unpredictability: Assessing the Impacts of Oregon’s Employee Work Schedules Act](#).” University of Oregon Labor Center Research Brief.



enforcing them and pursuing recourse if such policies are unfairly implemented. For example, union workers are more likely than nonunion workers to have input in their work hours and to have more advance notice of their schedules.⁵³ In our analysis, insights into the multiple mechanisms underlying the different forms of overwork—for example, how the specific layout and gear necessary in different workplaces affects workers’ ability to access and benefit from breaks—reveal how crucial worker voice is to fully understanding and implementing practices that could prevent and mitigate overwork. At the same time, the ability of workers to make voluntary decisions about working longer hours also—which is shaped not only by employer practices but also by workers’ economic constraints and whether they have access to collective representation—impacts their exposure to overwork.⁵⁴ The negative outcomes associated with overwork can be somewhat mitigated if workers are granted autonomy and flexibility in making decisions over their own work schedule.⁵⁵ Studies show that when workers have a say in whether to voluntarily accept overtime hours, they may avoid some of the negative outcomes associated with working long hours.⁵⁶ Overall, worker voice in scheduling decisions has widespread benefits for worker health and well-being, job satisfaction, and retention.⁵⁷

Finally, part of the mandate of the National Labor Relations Board and of state labor agencies is to play a role in implementing and enforcing labor regulations and collective representation, including in preventing and mitigating the negative impacts of overwork. Funding and staffing levels at state labor and industry agencies have been declining.⁵⁸ This is particularly relevant to overwork, as such agencies are

⁵³ [“Unions Help Reduce Disparities and Strengthen Our Democracy.”](#) 2021. Economic Policy Institute Fact Sheet, April 23, 2021.


⁵⁴ Loustaunau, Lola. 2022. “The Hands that Feed Us: Endemic Precarity and Pandemic Resistance Among Migrant Food Processing Workers.” University of Oregon Sociology: <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/27784>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Lambert, Susan J., and Julia R. Henly. 2012. [“Frontline Managers Matter: Labour Flexibility Practices and Sustained Employment in Hourly Retail Jobs in the U.S.”](#) In Warhurst, Chris, et al., eds. *Are Bad Jobs Inevitable? Trends, Determinants and Responses to Job Quality in the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 143–59. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵⁸ Petrucci, Larissa, et al. 2022. [“Persistent Unpredictability: Analyzing Experiences with the First Statewide Scheduling Legislation in Oregon.”](#) *ILR Review* 75(5): 1133–58.



responsible for enforcing overtime regulations and penalizing employers who, for example, misclassify workers and fail to pay required overtime rates.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The findings of this analysis shed light on an under-explored facet of unstable scheduling practices by detailing the multiple dimensions of overwork. The experiences of food manufacturing workers captured here are emblematic of the challenges related to overwork, yet these challenges are not unique to the food manufacturing sector. Workers across a range of occupations and industries—including retail, food service, hospitality, construction, and manufacturing—often experience one of the (or multiple) forms of overwork analyzed in this brief, which include long work days, long work weeks, extended periods of over seven days without days off, and insufficient breaks during and between shifts. The mechanisms for these different forms of overwork include mandatory overtime, lack of set end times, unpredictable and variable hours, financial incentives (such as presentism bonuses), and other financial pressures that shape workers’ voluntary decisions to work longer hours or additional days. The impacts of overwork include cumulative physical strain and potential injury from extended hours and lack of rest, mental and emotional strain (including anxiety, stress, and depression from unpredictability, instability, disorienting hours, lack of time with family and for other obligations), and workers’ lack of voice in setting their hours. Unstable scheduling practices, including overwork and lack of worker input in scheduling practices, can also have deleterious effects on workers’ economic mobility and labor force participation, and can contribute to increased costs for employers in the form of increased turnover and reduced productivity. Efforts to mitigate the negative impacts related to overwork could yield improved economic outcomes for both workers and employers.

⁵⁹ See, for example: U.S. Department of Labor. 2022. [“Department of Labor Initiative Finds Violations in 80% of Care Industry Investigations; Recovers \\$28.6M for Nearly 25K Workers, Mostly Women.”](#) U.S. Department of Labor News Release, November 16, 2022.



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