

Shifting Hours

Unstable Work Scheduling Practices

Lina Stepick

Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco

November 2022





About the Author

Lina Stepick is a senior researcher in the Community Development department at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. They are a mixed-methods sociologist, whose research focuses on thriving labor force issues, low-wage work, unstable scheduling, care work, and racial equity. They hold a PhD in Sociology from UCLA.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Reyna Orellana, Elizabeth Kneebone, Crystal Theresa Ejanda, and Kelly Kramer for editorial guidance.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco or the Federal Reserve System.

Suggested Citation

Stepick, Lina. 2022. "Shifting Hours: Unstable Work Scheduling Practices." Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Community Development Research Brief 2022-07. doi: 10.24148/cdrb2022-07.



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Introduction

Stable work schedules are a key component of job quality and of supporting a thriving labor force. Stable scheduling practices are associated with improved job attachment, lower turnover, and higher revenues.¹ On the other hand, employer-initiated unstable scheduling practices have been shown to destabilize workers' finances, sleep, caregiving, education, other employment, and community and leisure activities, and are associated with negative health outcomes, reduced worker satisfaction, and increased turnover.² Though unstable scheduling practices are widespread, with about 41% of all workers experiencing such practices, hourly and part-time workers and workers in low-wage occupations are especially affected. Further, due to occupational segregation,³ workers of color are disproportionately impacted by unstable scheduling and its negative outcomes. These inequities in scheduling instability were only compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ As jobs have been added back into low-wage industries hit hard by the pandemic, workers' hours in many of those jobs have remained low and unstable.⁵


¹ 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.

² Schneider, Daniel. 2021. "[Unstable, Unpredictable, and Insufficient: Work Scheduling in the Service Sector in New England.](#)" Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Community Development Issue Brief 21-4; Choper, Joshua, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett. 2022. "[Uncertain Time: Precarious Schedules and Job Turnover in the US Service Sector.](#)" *ILR Review* 75(5): 1099–132; Loustaunau, Lola, et al. 2021. "[No Choice but to Be Essential: Expanding Dimensions of Precarity During COVID-19.](#)" *Sociological Perspectives* 64(5): 857–75; Schneider, Daniel, and Kristen Harknett. 2019. "[Consequences of Routine Work-Schedule Instability for Worker Health and Well-Being.](#)" *American Sociological Review* 84(1): 82–114; Dugan, Alicia G., et al. 2022. "[Precarious Work Schedules and Sleep: A Study of Unionized Full-Time Workers.](#)" *Occupational Health Science* 6(2): 247–77.

³ Here, occupational segregation refers to the uneven distribution of racialized or otherwise marginalized workers in specific, often low-wage, occupations.

⁴ Gould, Elise, and Melat Kassa. 2021. "[Low-Wage, Low-Hours Workers Were Hit Hardest in the COVID-19 Recession.](#)" Economic Policy Institute; Loustaunau et al., "[No Choice but to Be Essential.](#)"

⁵ Zundl, Elaine, et al. 2021. "[Still Unstable: The Persistence of Schedule Uncertainty During the Pandemic.](#)" The Shift Project, Harvard Kennedy School; Herrera, Lucero, et al. 2021. "[Reopening During COVID-19: The Experience of Nail Salon Workers and Owners in California.](#)" UCLA Labor Center.



Unstable scheduling practices exacerbate the increasingly steep tradeoffs that low-income households face in navigating the costs of low-wage work, including the costs of transportation, housing within a reasonable distance of work, and caregiving. This instability in work hours and income makes it particularly difficult to qualify for employer and state benefits, access reliable care, pursue education or training, and consistently cover rising basic costs of living. As these factors play a role in household employment decisions, understanding unstable scheduling is an important consideration for the Federal Reserve’s dual mandate.

This brief outlines the employer practices that comprise unstable scheduling, how underwork and overwork—and fluctuations between the two—can be understood as intertwined with unstable scheduling, and how we can measure the prevalence of unstable scheduling practices across industries. What follows is a discussion of the inequitable distribution and impacts of unstable scheduling, the negative effects of unstable scheduling practices for all workers, and the benefits of stable scheduling for both workers and employers. The final section discusses how potential solutions could address both quality and quantity of work hours, as well as the related challenges of accessing benefits and affordable care.



What Is Unstable Scheduling?

Unstable scheduling is an umbrella term that describes a wide array of employer practices of scheduling irregular and unpredictable work hours.⁶ Some examples of these employer-initiated practices can include:

- *Lack of advance notice:* Assigning or changing workers' shifts with little or no notice, requiring workers to be on-call or to call in to see if they will be working that day or the next day
- *Last-minute changes during a shift:* Sending workers home early or requiring or pressuring them to stay after scheduled shifts
- *Work hours variability:* Varying the days, times, and number of work hours assigned from week to week
- *Shifts that prevent adequate rest:* Assigning workers to split shifts or "clopening" shifts, both of which prevent adequate rest periods between closing and opening shifts
- *Open availability:* Requiring workers to maintain open availability so that they can be scheduled to work any day or time
- *Lack of worker input in scheduling:* Giving workers little or no input in setting their work hours

⁶ Note also that while there is significant overlap between unstable scheduling practices and irregular scheduling, unstable scheduling practices encompass a wider range of practices. Similarly, there is overlap between the challenges workers experience with unstable scheduling and with nontraditional hours, which is more reliably measured in some standard datasets, but these do not necessarily refer to the same practices. For example, workers may have consistent, predictable work schedules at nontraditional times, which makes it challenging to find consistent, reliable care and may disrupt their sleep and cause stress. Still, these outcomes overlap with unstable scheduling, and when workers are unpredictably or variably assigned to work shifts at nontraditional hours, the overlap is especially clear. See, for example: Li, Jianghong, et al. 2014. "[Parents' Nonstandard Work Schedules and Child Well-Being: A Critical Review of the Literature.](#)" *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 35(1): 53–73; Shriane, Alexandra E., et al. 2020. "[Sleep Hygiene in Shift Workers: A Systematic Literature Review.](#)" *Sleep Medicine Reviews* 53.



Unstable Scheduling Practices Are Employer-Initiated

The lack of worker input in scheduling highlights a key component of unstable scheduling—namely, that it is a set of employer-initiated practices. Analyses of unstable scheduling practices focus on employer-initiated scheduling instability, as distinct from employee-initiated flextime. The latter is more commonly experienced by higher-wage professional workers whose hours may fluctuate but who report more control over setting their own work schedules. In contrast, employer-initiated unstable scheduling practices are more commonly experienced by workers in low-wage, hourly occupations whose hours fluctuate and who are more likely to lack control over setting their work schedules. In contrast with employee-initiated flextime, which can have numerous positive outcomes for workers,⁷ unstable scheduling is understood as employer-initiated practices that maximize employer flexibility in an effort to reduce labor costs, with numerous negative outcomes for workers and costs for employers.⁸

In response to persistent pressures to cut labor costs, the increasing demand for around-the-clock services, and increases in “just-in-time” manufacturing and shipping, employers in many industries have implemented “just-in-time” work scheduling practices for hourly workers.⁹ This has resulted in employers cutting costs through understaffing¹⁰ and expanding the numbers of involuntary part-time workers who would like to work full-time hours but are kept below that threshold and are therefore less likely to qualify for employer-provided benefits.¹¹ At the same time, employers increasingly require hourly workers to maintain open availability so that


⁷ Okulicz-Kozaryn, Adam, and Lonnie Golden. 2018. [“Happiness Is Flextime.”](#) *Applied Research in Quality of Life* 13(2): 355–69; Golden, Lonnie, Julia Henly, and Susan Lambert. 2013. [“Work Schedule Flexibility: A Contributor to Employee Happiness?”](#) *Journal of Social Research and Policy* 4(2): 107–35.

⁸ See, for example: Choper, Schneider, and Harknett, [“Uncertain Time”](#); Schneider and Harknett, [“Consequences of Routine Work-Schedule Instability.”](#)

⁹ Golden, Lonnie. 2015. [“Irregular Work Scheduling and Its Consequences.”](#) Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper Number 394.

¹⁰ Lambert, Susan J. 2008. [“Passing the Buck: Labor Flexibility Practices That Transfer Risk onto Hourly Workers.”](#) *Human Relations* 61(9): 1203–27.

¹¹ Golden, Lonnie. 2020. [“Part-Time Workers Pay a Big-Time Penalty.”](#) Economic Policy Institute.



managers can fill schedule holes.¹² These employer practices cause workers to experience “routine unpredictability” in their work schedules.¹³

Underwork and Overwork Are Key Components of Unstable Scheduling

Work hours variability and involuntary part-time work have been increasing over time, and both are intertwined with unstable scheduling.¹⁴ Indeed, a primary worker complaint regarding unstable scheduling is being scheduled for inadequate hours.¹⁵ This form of underwork through involuntary part-time work disproportionately affects service-sector workers, workers of color, and, specifically, women of color.¹⁶

Involuntary part-time work can be understood as an employer practice that makes workers particularly vulnerable to unstable scheduling and can also result from unstable scheduling practices. First, part-time workers who want to be scheduled more hours and who are required to have open availability have more variation week to week in the number of hours and shifts they are assigned, compared with full-time workers. Part-time workers are also likely to feel financial pressure to accept additional hours to make ends meet—though many workers are not given a choice whether to accept such changes in hours.¹⁷ Second, unstable scheduling practices can

¹² Kossek, Ellen Ernst, et al. 2016. [“Filling the Holes: Work Schedulers as Job Crafters of Employment Practice in Long-Term Health Care.”](#) *ILR Review* 69(4): 961–90.

¹³ Clawson, Dan, and Naomi Gerstel. 2015. [《Unequal Time: Gender, Class, and Family in Employment Schedules》](#). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.


¹⁴ Finnigan, Ryan. 2018. [“Varying Weekly Work Hours and Earnings Instability in the Great Recession.”](#) *Social Science Research* 74: 96–107;

Valletta, Robert G., Leila Bengali, and Catherine van der List. 2018. [“Cyclical and Market Determinants of Involuntary Part-Time Employment.”](#) Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Working Paper 2015-19.

¹⁵ Shadduck-Hernández, Janna, et al. 2018. [“Hour Crisis: Unstable Schedules in the Los Angeles Retail Sector.”](#) UCLA Labor Center.

¹⁶ Golden, Lonnie. 2016. [“Still Falling Short on Hours and Pay: Part-Time Work Becoming New Normal.”](#) Social Science Research Network; Valletta, Bengali, and van der List, [“Cyclical and Market Determinants.”](#)

¹⁷ Petrucci, Larissa, et al. 2022. [“Persistent Unpredictability: Analyzing Experiences with the First Statewide Scheduling Legislation in Oregon.”](#) *ILR Review* 75(5): 1133–58; Sharma, Preeti, et al. 2021. [“Time Theft in the Los Angeles Retail Sector: The Need for New Labor Standards and a Fair Workweek.”](#) *Labor Studies Journal* 47(1): 28–55;



lead to involuntary part-time work if employers unpredictably or variably change workers' schedules and reduce the hours they had formerly assigned. Many work agreements do not specify or guarantee the minimum number of hours workers will be assigned. Local predictive scheduling laws may disincentivize employers from last-minute scheduling changes, but these disincentives generally apply only to advance notice of changes in work hours and do not necessarily guarantee minimum weekly work hours in the long term.¹⁸

Unstable scheduling and hours variation can include overwork as well as underwork—and fluctuations between the two. Workers in low-wage occupations may be subjected not only to long hours and optional overtime, but also to mandatory overtime.¹⁹ In the latter case, workers cannot refuse to work extended hours, which may be mandated with little or no notice, without the risk of facing a penalty—including the possibility of losing their job.

Loustaunau et al., [“No Choice but to Be Essential”](#); Alvarez, Camila H., et al. 2019. [“Impossible Choices: How Workers Manage Unpredictable Scheduling Practices.”](#) *Labor Studies Journal* 45(2): 186–213.

Scholars have noted that managers may still retaliate against workers who decline hours by differentially allocating future hours and schedules as a tool of worker discipline. See, for example: Wood, Alex J. 2018. [“Powerful Times: Flexible Discipline and Schedule Gifts at Work.”](#) *Work, Employment and Society* 32: 1061–77.

¹⁸ Many such ordinances currently require that employers offer a “good-faith estimate” of hours upon hiring. However, they do not offer recourse to workers if their hours are subsequently reduced, such that they become involuntary part-time workers even if they were hired with the expectation of working full-time hours. See, for example: Petrucci et al., [“Persistent Unpredictability.”](#)

¹⁹ Another form of overwork occurs when employers increase the intensity of workloads through line speed-ups, mandated increases in caseloads, or requiring workers to take on additional tasks and responsibilities without adequate training or support—often as part of an employer strategy to increase flexibility so that workers can fill multiple positions if needed. This is 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 et al., [“No Choice but to Be Essential.”](#) Please note that although understaffing and intensified workload is orthogonally related to unstable scheduling, this section focuses on mandatory overtime.



Measuring Unstable Scheduling Practices Across Industries

Commonly used workforce data have been shown to vastly underestimate the prevalence of unstable scheduling practices.²⁰ Lack of consistent, nationally representative data with large sample sizes on unstable scheduling practices across industries and occupations makes estimating prevalence and trends in these practices challenging. Much of the research on unstable scheduling practices and their effects has focused on service-sector workers, who are disproportionately exposed to unstable scheduling practices and with whom scholars have conducted robust novel data collection and analysis.²¹ Additionally, some nationally representative surveys have included more detailed questions about hours and scheduling in recent years. These sources allow scholars to make some estimates about the prevalence of unstable scheduling practices overall, though limitations in analyzing unstable scheduling practices comprehensively and their prevalence across industries persist.²² Even with these limitations, the data and research we do have offer important insights into the prevalence and impacts of unstable scheduling practices across industries and occupations.

²⁰ For example, the Current Population Survey (CPS) asks about usual hours in such a way that leads to a significant underestimate of variable work hours. See: Lambert, Susan, Peter Fugiel, and Julia Henly. 2014. [“Precarious Work Schedules Among Early-Career Employees in the US: A National Snapshot.”](#) University of Chicago Research Brief.

²¹ See, for example: [The Shift Project](#), Harvard Kennedy School and University of California, San Francisco; Shaddock-Hernández et al., [“Hour Crisis”](#); Petrucci et al., [“Persistent Unpredictability”](#); Henly, Julia R., and Susan J. Lambert. 2014. [“Unpredictable Work Timing in Retail Jobs: Implications for Employee Work-Life Conflict.”](#) *ILR Review* 67(3): 986–1016; Williams, Joan C., et al. 2018. [“Stable Scheduling Increases Productivity and Sales: The Stable Scheduling Study.”](#) University of California Hastings College of the Law, University of Chicago, and University of North Carolina Kenan-Flagler Business School.

²² Note: Despite these being nationally representative samples, challenges in analyzing trends over time and in disaggregating by geography, demographics, or specific occupations remain, due to limited years that include work scheduling questions (including more recent years that no longer ask about work schedules) and limited sample sizes of different subpopulations. Additionally, surveys may include questions about specific unstable scheduling practices but may not comprehensively include all practices, making overall estimates of unstable scheduling prevalence across industries challenging. For example, according to analysis of General Social Survey (GSS) data from 2017, about 17% of workers’ industries and occupations have irregular work schedules. However, this measure does not include lack of advance notice of one’s work schedule, which is a key component of unstable scheduling practices and is included in other datasets. For more on irregular scheduling, see, for example: Golden, [“Irregular Work Scheduling.”](#)



Understanding the Prevalence of Unstable Scheduling Practices

Analysis of American Time Use Survey (ATUS) data from 2018 reveals that 41% of workers across industries and occupations, including 46% of hourly workers and 58% of part-time workers, reported some form of unstable scheduling practices.²³ The survey included questions about unstable scheduling practices, such as receiving fewer than two weeks' advance notice of their work schedules, being scheduled for rotating, irregular, or split shifts, and receiving variable hours. A study of these practices among early career workers (aged 26–32) surveyed in 2012 for another nationally representative survey, the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY), found similarly high rates of many unstable scheduling practices. Thirty-eight percent of all workers surveyed in the NLSY reported that they received less than one week's notice of their work schedule, including 41% of hourly workers and 48% of part-time workers.²⁴

Work hour fluctuations from week to week—another component of unstable scheduling—are even more common. Analysis of General Social Survey (GSS) 2018 data reveals that 74% of hourly workers reported fluctuations in the number of hours they were scheduled to work from week to week, with variations in hours averaging 50% from their usual hours.²⁵ Fluctuations in hours were particularly common for part-time workers, with 83% reporting that their hours varied from week to week. The wide ranges in hours can result from workers generally being scheduled as part-time but then sometimes being scheduled to work overtime. In 2018, 27% of all part-time workers reported that they were sometimes scheduled for overtime, including 13% who reported that they were required to work mandatory overtime.²⁶ Twenty-seven percent of all workers across industries and occupations were subject to mandatory overtime,²⁷ 28% of whom were mandated to do so at least 10 days each month.


²³ Analysis of American Time Use Survey (ATUS) 2018 data: Flood, Sarah M., Liana C. Sayer, and Daniel Backman. ATUS Data Extract Builder: Version 3.1 [American Time Use Survey 2018](#). College Park, MD: University of Maryland and Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2022.

²⁴ Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly, "[Precarious Work Schedules Among Early-Career Employees in the US.](#)"

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Analysis of General Social Survey (GSS) 2018 data, [GSS NORC at the University of Chicago](#).

²⁷ Ibid.



These work hour fluctuations lead to highly variable and unpredictable wages and incomes. Additionally, workers often experience multiple unstable scheduling practices. Workers who experience large fluctuations in work hours are also twice as likely as workers with stable schedules to lack advance notice of their work schedules.²⁸

Lack of worker input in setting schedules compounds unstable scheduling challenges and inequities. Hourly workers, workers of color, and workers in certain occupations are particularly likely to have little or no input in setting their work schedules. Fifty percent of hourly workers have no input in their work schedules, compared with 39% of non-hourly workers. Fifty-five percent of Black workers and 58% of Hispanic workers have no input in their work schedules, compared with 47% of white workers. Among low-wage occupations, 65% of production workers and 44% of service-sector workers have no input in their work schedules.²⁹

Understanding the Disparate Impacts of Unstable Scheduling


Contemporary inequities in unstable scheduling practices can be understood in the context of historical exclusions of racialized and gendered occupations from labor law protections and an incomplete patchwork of federal and local reforms to address these exclusions. Persistent occupational segregation and worksite discrimination also compound inequitable experiences of unstable scheduling practices, and these dynamics were only heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Historical Context Helps Explain How Unstable Scheduling Is a Racial and Gender Equity Issue

Due, in large part, to occupational segregation and limited regulatory protections in industries that disproportionately employ women and workers of color, the negative outcomes of unstable scheduling practices are inequitably distributed. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938 established the federal minimum-wage, overtime-pay,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.



and maximum-hours protections. This helped address overwork, which was prevalent in many hourly occupations at the time. However, FLSA’s overtime-pay and minimum-wage protections excluded several occupations that were composed of predominantly Black workers at the time, notably farmworkers, domestic workers, tipped-wage workers, and incarcerated workers.³⁰


Subsequent FLSA reform efforts increased some labor protections, including expanding federal minimum wage to cover most farmworkers through a 1966 amendment to the Act. However, this amendment did not extend maximum-hours and overtime-pay protections to farmworkers, and farmworkers currently are subject to wide variations in overtime-pay regulations by state.³¹ Black domestic workers organized and advocated for the passage of a 1974 amendment, which extended some FLSA protections to some domestic workers, but the victory was again incomplete. Live-in domestic workers, “casual” care workers providing babysitting services, and those providing “companionship services”—including many professional home-care workers supporting elderly and disabled clients—remain excluded from some basic federal labor law protections, leaving them subject to a patchwork of state- and local-level labor regulations.³²

This historical context and contemporary occupational segregation and worksite discrimination help explain how current employer practices of unstable scheduling are inequitably distributed. First, due to occupational segregation, women and workers of color are overrepresented in occupations that remain incompletely covered by labor

³⁰ Dixon, Rebecca. 2021. [“From Excluded to Essential: Tracing the Racist Exclusion of Farmworkers, Domestic Workers, and Tipped Workers from the Fair Labor Standards Act.”](#) National Employment Law Project. Testimony delivered May 3, 2021, at the hearing for the U.S. House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee, Workforce Protections Subcommittee. See also: 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.

³¹ Rodman, Sarah O., et al. 2016. [“Agricultural Exceptionalism at the State Level: Characterization of Wage and Hour Laws for U.S. Farmworkers.”](#) *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 6(2): 89–110.

³² Dixon, [“From Excluded to Essential.”](#) See also: Nadasen, [“Citizenship Rights”](#); Perea, [“The Echoes of Slavery.”](#) Note that the Department of Labor narrowed the companionship exemption through regulations that took effect in 2015, and some states have passed further legislation to address this gap. However, some home-care workers remain excluded from minimum-wage and overtime protections due to the federal companionship exemption.



protections and where involuntary part-time work and unstable scheduling practices are particularly prevalent. This is clear, for example, in analyses of the service sector, where unstable scheduling practices are well documented and widespread.³³

Second, within an industry or even a single worksite, unstable scheduling practices can be implemented inequitably. Scholars have demonstrated how scheduling “gifts” can be inequitably distributed and used as rewards or penalties.³⁴ For example, within the service sector, workers of color are disproportionately exposed to unstable scheduling practices in their workplaces, compared with their white coworkers.³⁵ Racial inequities in exposure to unstable scheduling persist when controlling for other worker characteristics, such as educational attainment, and when looking within the same firm.³⁶ Specifically, compared with white workers, Black and Hispanic hourly workers receive their schedules with less advance notice on average and have less control over setting or influencing their work schedules.³⁷ A study of matched service-sector employer-employee data also found that workers of color were disadvantaged in terms of unstable scheduling practices due to racial discordance between workers and managers and firm-level segregation.³⁸

COVID-19 Has Compounded the Scheduling Challenges and Inequities That Workers Face

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequitable workplace dynamics, as essential workers in low-wage occupations have experienced shifting safety protocols and work-schedule demands throughout the pandemic. In early 2020, many workers in

³³ See, for example: [The Shift Project](#), Harvard Kennedy School and University of California, San Francisco.


³⁴ Wood, “[Powerful Times](#)”; Scott, Ellen K., Mary C. King, and Raahi Reddy. 2017. “[The Impact on Oregonians of the Rise of Irregular Scheduling](#).” University of Oregon Labor Education and Research Center; Ben-Ishai, Liz, Emilytricia Marchena Lopez, and Zoe Z. Michel. 2017. “[Scheduling on the Cutting Edge: Implementation of San Francisco’s First-in-the-Nation Fair Scheduling Law](#).” Center for Law and Social Policy.

³⁵ Storer, Adam, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett. 2019. “[What Explains Race/Ethnic Inequality in Job Quality in the Service Sector?](#)” Washington Center for Equitable Growth.

³⁶ Ibid. See also: Schneider, Daniel, and Kristen Harknett. 2019. “[It’s About Time: How Work Schedule Instability Matters for Workers, Families, and Racial Inequality](#).” The Shift Project, Harvard Kennedy School.

³⁷ Henly and Lambert, “[Unpredictable Work Timing in Retail Jobs](#).”

³⁸ Storer, Adam, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett. 2020. “[What Explains Racial/Ethnic Inequality in Job Quality in the Service Sector?](#)” *American Sociological Review* 85(4): 537–72.



low-wage occupations were told that they had been temporarily furloughed, with no guarantee of when or if they would return to work, while others were told they were now deemed essential workers.³⁹ However, these essential workers did not necessarily have stable and predictable hours through the course of the pandemic.

Many workers, such as those employed in essential industries in the food-supply chain—grocery retail or food processing and manufacturing—were scheduled for additional hours for unpredictable periods of time and were required to perform new tasks under heightened physical and emotional workplace hazards.⁴⁰ Then, as additional workers were hired, workers saw their hours cut and their schedules become highly variable once again.⁴¹ This has meant that the hours of many workers in these industries fluctuated unpredictably between underwork, or involuntary part-time work, and overwork, where they were required to work overtime. In addition, many localities that had in place predictive scheduling ordinances, which incentivize stable scheduling practices, suspended these regulations, citing pandemic-induced customer demand.⁴²

The pandemic also compounded racial and gender inequities in unstable scheduling practices.⁴³ Across industries, pandemic-related job losses and reduced hours were inequitably distributed. Low-wage, frontline workers, who were disproportionately women of color, faced more reductions in hours than managers and professional workers in the same industries, who were more likely to be white.⁴⁴ In industries hit hardest by job losses, such as leisure and hospitality, workers in low-wage occupations—who are also disproportionately women of color—already had insufficient and unpredictable work hours, and they experienced the largest numbers of early pandemic job losses and reduced hours.⁴⁵ Even as jobs were added back into

³⁹ Loustaunau et al., [“No Choice but to Be Essential.”](#)

⁴⁰ Loustaunau, Lola. 2021. [“Essential Work, Disposable Workers: Experiences of Immigrant and Refugee Food Processing Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Rural Washington.”](#) University of Oregon Labor Education and Research Center; Loustaunau et al., [“No Choice but to Be Essential.”](#)


⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Loustaunau et al., [“No Choice but to Be Essential.”](#)

⁴³ Storer, Schneider, and Harknett, [“What Explains Race/Ethnic Inequality?”](#)

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Gould and Kassa, [“Low-Wage, Low-Hours Workers.”](#)



these industries in 2021, the proportion of involuntary part-time workers increased,⁴⁶ making workers particularly susceptible to unstable scheduling practices.⁴⁷

Unstable Scheduling Negatively Impacts Workers' Financial Security, Access to Benefits, Health, Ability to Find and Provide Care, and Pursuit of Other Educational and Employment Opportunities

Unstable Scheduling Incurs Significant Financial Costs for Workers and Employers

Unstable scheduling has been shown to disrupt workers' lives both on and off the clock,⁴⁸ including a wide range of material impacts. A national study of 37,263 hourly retail and food-service workers found that those with unstable work schedules were more likely to experience food and housing insecurity, fluctuating finances, and medical and utility hardships than workers in those industries with stable work hours.⁴⁹ The underlying mechanisms linking unstable scheduling and these material hardships include volatility in income and benefits, disrupted household dynamics and informal networks, and an inability to plan ahead.

Lack of advance notice of work schedules and last-minute changes after schedules are posted have significant impacts on financial security. Fifty-nine percent of workers in extremely low-income households and 35% of all workers who report receiving less than a week's notice of their work schedules also report fluctuating weekly earnings.⁵⁰ A national study of retail workers found that unstable scheduling could result in


⁴⁶ Tucker, Jasmine, and Julie Vogtman. 2021. "[Women in Leisure and Hospitality Need Good Jobs to Return To.](#)" National Women's Law Center.

⁴⁷ Dickson, Alison Q., Lonnie Golden, and Robert Bruno. 2018. "[Scheduling Stability: The Landscape of Work Schedules and Potential Gains from Fairer Workweeks in Illinois and Chicago.](#)" *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

⁴⁸ Sharma et al., "[Time Theft in the Los Angeles Retail Sector.](#)"

⁴⁹ Schneider, Daniel, and Kristen Harknett. 2021. "[Hard Times: Routine Schedule Unpredictability and Material Hardship Among Service-Sector Workers.](#)" *Social Forces* 99(4): 1682–709.

⁵⁰ Analysis of Survey of Household and Economics and Decisionmaking 2019 data, [Federal Reserve Board of Governors SHED](#).



workers' weekly earnings being halved from one week to the next.⁵¹ Such income instability and unpredictability has significant implications for low-income households, which are less likely to have a financial cushion.

Fluctuating earnings from unstable scheduling may force workers to seek additional employment to make ends meet. However, unstable scheduling makes it particularly difficult to hold down multiple jobs. The expectation that workers maintain open availability so that employers can schedule them for varying numbers of hours at any given time or day of the week makes it especially challenging to navigate multiple work schedules—particularly if each job has unstable scheduling practices and gives workers little or no input in setting their hours.

Employer practices of unstable scheduling are also significantly associated with increased turnover, which incurs high costs to both workers and employers. Turnover contributes to lower earnings, downward mobility, and cumulative disadvantage for workers. It also incurs high costs for employers and managers, who must hire and train new employees and find ways to fill gaps in the meantime.⁵²

Unstable Scheduling Interferes with Access to Benefits


Unstable scheduling can be a barrier to accessing employer and state benefits, such as health insurance, paid leave, and child care subsidies. Most employers require workers to maintain a minimum number of hours per week for a specific number of weeks to qualify for health insurance benefits. When workers have little or no input in their schedules, and their hours fluctuate from week to week, they may not be eligible for employer benefits, even if they work full-time hours for several weeks.⁵³

This compounds scheduling-related disadvantages that part-time workers experience, as they are less likely than full-time workers to receive employer-provided

⁵¹ Corser, Maggie. 2017. "[Job Quality and Economic Opportunity in Retail: Key Findings from a National Survey of the Retail Workforce.](#)" Center for Popular Democracy.

⁵² Choper, Joshua, Daniel Schneider, and Kristen Harknett. 2019. "[Uncertain Time: Precarious Schedules and Job Turnover in the U.S. Service Sector.](#)" Washington Center for Equitable Growth.

⁵³ Shaddock-Hernández et al., "[Hour Crisis](#)"; Golden, "[Irregular Work Scheduling.](#)"



benefits.⁵⁴ There is evidence that employer practices of scheduling workers as involuntary part-time pushes many workers to supplement their fluctuating and insufficient wages with gig work,⁵⁵ though many are left with no or insufficient benefits even if their total work hours across jobs meets or exceeds full-time hours. Fluctuating hours and incomes make it particularly challenging to qualify for employer or state benefits, due to requirements to provide consistent proof of income and to benefits cliffs, as workers' cumulative incomes may exceed eligibility thresholds.⁵⁶ This can lead to under-enrollment in public safety-net programs.⁵⁷ For example, mothers with unstable work schedules are about 1.5 times less likely than those with stable work schedules to receive child care vouchers, even though their incomes are low enough to be eligible for the subsidy.⁵⁸

Paid leave is another benefit that workers with unstable schedules are less likely to be able to access, and the pandemic exacerbated preexisting inequities in workers' access to paid leave.⁵⁹ Women and workers of color were more likely to be employed by companies that did not expand paid leave during the pandemic.⁶⁰ Overall, workers in low-wage occupations remain far less likely to have access to paid leave, with only two-thirds of workers in low-wage occupations and only one-third of the lowest-paid workers able to access paid sick leave, compared with 95% of the highest-paid workers in the private sector.⁶¹ Workers who did not have access to paid leave—or those who had used up paid and unpaid leave early in the pandemic—felt pressured to return to hazardous working conditions, often in spite of heightened risks and

⁵⁴ Golden, "[Part-Time Workers Pay a Big-Time Penalty.](#)"

⁵⁵ Valletta, Bengali, and van der List, "[Cyclical and Market Determinants.](#)"

⁵⁶ Abelda, Randy, and Michael Carr. 2017. "[Combining Earnings with Public Supports: Cliff Effects in Massachusetts.](#)" Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Communities and Banking Series: Winter 2017.


⁵⁷ Rachidi, Angela, Russell Sykes, and Kerry Dsardjins. 2019. *[The New Economy and Child Care: Nonstandard-Hour Work, Child Care, and Child Health and Well-Being.](#)* Princeton, NJ: Mathematica.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Schneider, Daniel, and Kristen Harknett. 2022. "[Good If You Can Get It: Benefits and Inequalities in the Expansion of Paid Sick Leave During COVID-19.](#)" Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Issue Brief 22-1.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Gould, Elise. 2021. "[Two-Thirds of Low-Wage Workers Still Lack Access to Paid Sick Days During an Ongoing Pandemic.](#)" Economic Policy Institute.



vulnerabilities they or family members experienced in the ongoing pandemic.⁶² Unpredictable school and child care closures during the pandemic, combined with lack of sufficient paid leave and unstable scheduling, meant that when many workplaces reopened in summer 2021, parents of school-aged children had to navigate challenging tradeoffs.⁶³

Unstable Scheduling Harms Workers' Health

Employer practices of unstable scheduling negatively affect workers' health and well-being, as these practices are associated with psychological distress, poor sleep quality, unhappiness, and depressive symptoms.⁶⁴ The connection between these health impacts and low wages is already well established and is even stronger for workers in low-wage occupations who also experience unstable scheduling practices.⁶⁵ Unstable scheduling practices have a particularly strong effect on sleep quality, which, in turn, can lead to numerous negative health outcomes.⁶⁶ Indeed, unstable scheduling is a stronger predictor of poor sleep quality than working a night shift or parenting a young child.⁶⁷

When unstable scheduling includes overwork, workers can experience multiple health impacts. Working long hours is associated with negative health impacts and increased work-family conflict, particularly when long working hours are combined with employer practices of unstable scheduling and limited or no worker input in scheduling.⁶⁸ Working more than eight hours in a day or 40 hours in a week is

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Loustaunau et al., [“No Choice but to Be Essential.”](#)


⁶⁴ Schneider and Harknett, [“Consequences of Routine Work-Schedule Instability”](#); Dugan et al., [“Precarious Work Schedules and Sleep.”](#)

⁶⁵ Schneider and Harknett, [“Consequences of Routine Work-Schedule Instability.”](#)

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Harknett, Kristen, Daniel Schneider, and Rebecca Wolfe. 2020. [“Losing Sleep Over Work Scheduling? The Relationship Between Work Schedules and Sleep Quality for Service-Sector Workers.”](#) *SSM Population Health* 12: 1–12.

⁶⁸ 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.



significantly associated with a greater risk of mortality and the development of a wide range of chronic illnesses and maladaptive coping mechanisms.⁶⁹ The extreme case of mandatory overtime reveals a similar pattern. Mandatory overtime is associated with increased stress, fatigue, depression, anxiety, chronic illness and injury, burnout, and turnover.⁷⁰ The lack of advance notice for mandatory overtime work adds an additional layer of unstable scheduling that compounds the hazards of working long hours.⁷¹ In contrast, these negative outcomes can be somewhat mitigated if workers are granted autonomy and flexibility in making decisions about their work schedules.⁷²

Unstable Scheduling Disrupts Caregiving

The negative outcomes of unstable scheduling practices are particularly salient for families with caregiving responsibilities because unstable scheduling is entangled with the stability of care for children, elderly, or disabled loved ones. On one hand, lack of access to reliable and affordable care can disrupt labor force participation, particularly for women.⁷³ On the other hand, unstable work schedules, in turn, can undermine workers' attempts to provide and arrange for stable caregiving. Demand for affordable and reliable care exceeds the current supply,⁷⁴ and unstable work

⁶⁹ 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.


⁷⁰ 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.

⁷¹ 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 factory bakery employers give five days' notice for mandatory overtime and that they not penalize workers for refusing last-minute overtime hours.

⁷² Lambert and Henly, "[Frontline Managers Matter.](#)"

⁷³ Shrimali, Bina Patel. 2020. "[Child Care, COVID-19, and Our Economic Future.](#)" Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Community Development Research Brief 2020-5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; Stepick, Lina. 2022. "[The Rapidly Growing Home Care Sector and Labor Force Participation.](#)" Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Community Development Research Brief 2022-2.



schedules make it even more challenging to find care that can accommodate unstable and unpredictable work hours.

Because most child care providers receive payment based on attendance, working parents' unstable work schedules also lead to instability for child care providers. Thus, many providers decide against serving families with unstable schedules,⁷⁵ and, as discussed above, working mothers in low-wage occupations with unstable work schedules are also less likely to receive child care vouchers than comparable working mothers with stable work schedules.⁷⁶ This leads many workers with unstable schedules to rely more frequently on informal care networks, as their options for formal care are limited.⁷⁷ A study of 3,653 retail and food-service workers who were parents of young children (aged 0–9) found that workers with unstable schedules were more likely to need to spend time setting up multiple contingency child care arrangements and were ultimately more likely to rely on informal networks to fill child care gaps.⁷⁸

The pressures that working parents with unstable schedules face in navigating work schedule demands and caregiving responsibilities can diminish parental and child well-being. Across industries and occupations, workers with unstable schedules are more likely to report work-family conflict.⁷⁹ Unpredictable scheduling practices are particularly disruptive and stressful for women workers in low-wage service-sector occupations who have caregiving responsibilities, though these stressors are lessened somewhat when workers have input in their work schedules.⁸⁰ A study of 4,275 parents working in the service sector found that unpredictable schedules are associated with negative emotional well-being and negative behavior expressions in their children, echoing similar findings of the negative impacts of nontraditional hours on children's

⁷⁵ Lieberman, Abbie, Aaron Loewenberg, and Cara Sklar. 2021. [“Make Child Care More Stable: Pay by Enrollment.”](#) New America Brief.


⁷⁶ Rachidi, Sykes, and Dsardjins, *The New Economy and Child Care*.

⁷⁷ Carrillo, Dani, et al. 2017. [“Instability of Work and Care: How Work Schedules Shape Child-Care Arrangements for Parents Working in the Service Sector.”](#) *Social Service Review* 91(3): 422–55.

⁷⁸ Harknett, Kristen, Daniel Schneider, and Sigrid Luhr. 2019. [“Who Cares If Parents Have Unpredictable Work Schedules? Just-in-Time Work Schedules and Child Care Arrangements.”](#) *Social Problems* (69)1: 164–83.

⁷⁹ Golden, [“Irregular Work Scheduling.”](#)

⁸⁰ Henly and Lambert, [“Unpredictable Work Timing in Retail Jobs.”](#)



well-being.⁸¹ The negative childhood outcomes associated with unstable scheduling result from increased parental stress, strain, depression, and financial insecurity, as well as parents' reduced time with their children.⁸² The authors note that these findings hold implications for intergenerational cumulative disadvantage due to unstable work schedules.⁸³

These challenges around navigating caregiving and unstable work schedules are not limited to child care. Most families do not qualify for sufficient hours of Medicaid-subsidized elder home care and disability support services and cannot afford to pay directly for enough additional hours. This leads unpaid family caregivers to take on more caregiving responsibilities, often reducing work hours or leaving the labor force.⁸⁴ However, insufficient paid caregiving support means that when unpaid family caregivers' work schedules are unstable and unpredictable, it can be particularly challenging to fill caregiving holes. Scholars have noted that the destabilizing effects of unpredictable schedules cascade throughout a person's network and the effects are unequally distributed, disproportionately affecting women at home and workers of color in low-wage jobs.⁸⁵

Unstable Work Schedules Undermine Educational Pursuits

Unstable scheduling can also be a barrier to upward mobility by interfering with the pursuit of education and training. Workers without control over their schedules are regularly forced to choose between school and work attendance. In a survey of retail workers in Los Angeles, 43% of those who were also students reported missing at least one class due to a work scheduling conflict.⁸⁶ In another survey of young workers (aged 18–29) employed in retail and food services in Los Angeles, respondents noted that unpredictable work schedules interfered with classes, as they felt pressure to

⁸¹ Li et al., "[Parents' Nonstandard Work Schedules.](#)"


⁸² Schneider, Daniel, and Kristen Harknett. 2019. "[Parental Exposure to Routine Work Schedule Uncertainty and Child Behavior.](#)" Washington Center for Equitable Growth.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Stepick, "[The Rapidly Growing Home Care Sector.](#)"

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Shadduck-Hernández et al., "[Hour Crisis.](#)"



take the work hours they could get. Only 9% reported that they had a set schedule, and 82% reported that the number of hours they were scheduled to work varied from week to week.⁸⁷ The challenges of navigating persistent work–school conflicts can accumulate, disrupting educational progress or pushing students to drop out altogether. A third study that analyzed 839 surveys and 75 in–depth interviews with student workers at public colleges and universities in Los Angeles found that 40% of working students considered withdrawing temporarily or permanently from school, with the majority citing competing demands from work schedules as their primary reason.⁸⁸

Considerations for Policy and Practice

Stable scheduling practices can benefit both workers and employers. Employer practices that grant workers autonomy over their work hours mitigate many of the negative health impacts that workers with unstable schedules experience.⁸⁹ This leads to higher rates of worker well-being and job satisfaction, reduced absenteeism, and lower rates of turnover.⁹⁰ For example, studies of a large retail firm revealed that stores where managers routinely consulted their workers about their schedules had lower turnover rates, and workers reported less work–life conflict; stable and predictable scheduling practices also led to increased productivity and higher profits.⁹¹

Local scheduling ordinances have been a first step in policies addressing unstable scheduling, providing instructive lessons from recent efforts as jurisdictions consider


⁸⁷ Ben-Ishai, Liz, et al. 2016. [“Juggling Time: Young Workers and Scheduling Practices in the Los Angeles County Service Sector.”](#) UCLA Labor Center Research Brief.

⁸⁸ Angeles, Sophia, et al. 2020. [“Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County.”](#) UCLA Labor Center Research Report.

⁸⁹ Lambert and Henly, [“Frontline Managers Matter.”](#)

⁹⁰ Okulicz-Kozaryn and Golden, [“Happiness Is Flexitime.”](#); Shifrin, Nicole V., and Jesse S. Michel. 2022. [“Flexible Work Arrangements and Employee Health: A Meta-Analytic Review.”](#) *Work & Stress* (36)1: 60–85; Kotey, Bernice, and Bishnu Sharma. 2019. [“Pathways from Flexible Work Arrangements to Financial Performance.”](#) *Personnel Review* 48(2): 1–26; Golden and Kim, [“Irregular Work Shifts.”](#)

⁹¹ Lambert and Henly, [“Frontline Managers Matter.”](#)



strengthening, expanding, and scaling up existing regulations. However, current predictive scheduling policies vary in the provisions included and the scope of industries and employers covered. This variation means that many lack funding for implementation and enforcement, and many workers are unprotected if they are not employed by covered employers.⁹²

Further, most scheduling policies do not address both the quantity and quality of hours.⁹³ Scheduling policies that include good-faith estimates of hours upon hiring have been shown to be insufficient to guarantee minimum hours, and collective bargaining agreements that include minimum-hours clauses often lack stable and predictable scheduling language.⁹⁴ Solutions could include language guaranteeing minimum hours, adequate funding for implementing and enforcing stable and predictable scheduling practices, including worker input in setting hours, and protections for workers who refuse mandatory overtime. Strengthening and expanding stable scheduling policies and practices to protect workers from unpredictable overwork, underwork, and fluctuations between the two would also help address how unstable scheduling can be a barrier to accessing employer and state benefits.


Expanded Support for Care Access Facilitates Labor Force Participation for Workers with Unstable Schedules

Unstable work schedules and care access are entangled. On the one hand, stabilizing work schedules can help workers access reliable care; on the other, expanding access to affordable, quality care available at nontraditional and variable hours can support labor force participation. Home-based child care providers may be able to accommodate nontraditional work hours that fall outside of traditional center-based care hours. Also, pay differentials that provide additional compensation for providers who offer such flexible hours could incentivize more providers to accommodate

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Petrucci et al., "[Persistent Unpredictability.](#)"

⁹⁴ Ibid.



nontraditional and unstable hours.⁹⁵ This is relevant to parental—and, particularly, working mothers’—labor force participation across a range of large and growing industries, such as construction, health care, and the service sector.

Further, child care funding mechanisms that rely on enrollment, rather than attendance, can accommodate variable and unstable schedules while supporting child care providers in maintaining the stability of their small businesses.⁹⁶ For example, pandemic experiments that shifted child care funding from attendance-based to enrollment-based were shown to support providers through fluctuating attendance due to COVID-related uncertainties by helping to stabilize operations for child care providers while also accommodating family members’ unpredictable schedules and illnesses.⁹⁷ Contracts and grants for family child care networks and Head Start similarly allow providers to receive funding that is not directly tied to children’s attendance, which may vary due to unstable work schedules or illnesses.

Worker Voice Mitigates the Effects of Unstable Scheduling and Supports Implementation of Stable Scheduling Policies and Practices

When workers have a say in whether to voluntarily accept overtime hours, they can avoid many of the negative outcomes associated with working long hours.⁹⁸ Indeed, worker voice in scheduling decisions has widespread benefits for worker health and well-being, job satisfaction, and retention.⁹⁹ Collective representation enhances worker voice on the job, amplifying workers’ efforts to implement and enforce scheduling policies. This means workers have greater support in changing scheduling policies, as well as in enforcing them and pursuing recourse if they experience unfair implementation of scheduling policies. Indeed, union workers are more likely to have


⁹⁵ Petrucci, Larissa, et al. 2022. [“A Labor Crisis Within the Child Care Crisis: Growing Need for ‘Non-Traditional’ Hours Met by Underpaid In-Home Providers.”](#) University of Oregon Labor Education and Research Center; Stepick, Lina, and Rob Grunewald. 2022. [“Introducing a Federal Reserve System Series on Early Care and Education: Cost, Affordability, and Racial Equity.”](#) Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Community Development Blog.

⁹⁶ Lieberman, Loewenberg, and Sklar, [“Make Child Care More Stable.”](#)

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Lambert and Henly, [“Frontline Managers Matter.”](#)

⁹⁹ Ibid.



input in their work hours and to have more advance notice of their schedules, compared with workers in non-union workplaces.¹⁰⁰

Worker voice and input in scheduling practices underscores a crucial element of potential solutions to unstable scheduling that can improve worker recruitment and retention. Though “just-in-time” work scheduling is an employer practice intended to cut labor costs and give employers flexibility, it has been shown to undermine the employment relationship and is associated with higher turnover rates and employer costs. As scheduling practices are entangled with financial stability, access to benefits, equity, worker health and well-being, turnover, occupational mobility, and caregiving, ensuring that workers have a voice in setting schedules holds promise for labor force participation and equitable economic growth.

¹⁰⁰ [“Unions Help Reduce Disparities and Strengthen Our Democracy.”](#) 2021. Economic Policy Institute Fact Sheet.



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