



Good Jobs for All

March 31, 2016

Racial Inequities in Job Quality

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People of color, particularly Blacks and Latinos, are too often stuck in jobs that make caring for one's family, going to school, advancing one's career, or paying the bills extremely difficult. Not only do these jobs often pay low wages; they're often *low quality*, as well. These jobs can be lost if one simply takes one day to recover from illness or take a child to the pediatrician. Further, their erratic schedules make planning and budgeting a nightmare, and they offer little opportunity for advancement. Within a broader context of systemic racism and discrimination, job quality—a category that includes elements beyond just wages—is a significant area of racial disparity. Without addressing these gaps, we cannot achieve racial justice economically, culturally, or socially.¹

Black and Latino workers' disproportionate experience of unemployment is linked to (but does not fully explain) the low quality of their jobs. In January 2016, the unemployment rate among White workers was 4.3 percent; yet Black and Latino workers were out of work at significantly higher rates (8.8 percent and 5.9 percent, respectively).² There is an even greater gap in underemployment, which counts those who are out of work as well as those who are working part time involuntarily or are marginally attached to the labor force.³ A 2015 analysis found that 23 percent of young Black college graduates and 22 percent of young Latino college graduates are underemployed, compared to 13 percent of their White counterparts. Among high school graduates ages 17 to 20, more than *half* of Black workers or those seeking work are underemployed, compared with 36 percent of Latinos and 34 percent of Whites.⁴ According to one study, a Black male with some college credit has a similar probability of employment as a White male who has not completed high school.⁵ A variety of factors contribute to underemployment disparities, but not least among them is discrimination.⁶

When job opportunities are limited—and in the absence of national job quality standards—unemployed workers have little choice but to accept low-quality jobs, reducing pressure on employers to improve the quality of the jobs they are offering. Given high rates of unemployment in communities of color, people of color are also overrepresented in industries with low wages and in part-time jobs.⁷ Latinos, in particular, are disproportionately likely to have jobs that offer neither scheduling flexibility nor paid leave.⁸ Black and Latino workers are less likely than Whites to work for employers who offer retirement plans; partly due to high costs, they are also less likely to participate in the plans that are offered.⁹ Even within low-job-quality industries, people of color seldom have the chance to advance into higher-quality positions. For example, within the retail industry, people of color make up 40 percent of cashiers but just 25 percent of general managers.¹⁰

In this brief, we summarize available data that demonstrate racial inequities in access to quality jobs, which are characterized by decent wages, paid sick time, paid family and medical leave, and fair schedules. We focus primarily on Black and Latino workers' job quality experiences, relative to those of White workers. Other groups are also overrepresented in low-quality jobs, but data limitations prevent a thorough examination of their circumstances. For example, in many data sources, Asian workers are counted as one group, masking highly differentiated experiences among the many sub-groups in this broad category.¹¹ This piece shows why policymakers, advocates, and researchers committed to racial justice should pursue public policy solutions that

improve access to fair, decent jobs for all workers, including and especially people of color. To that end, we also summarize key legislative proposals that could address the inequities described in this brief.

Wages

Around the country, “Fight for 15” activists are standing with Black Lives Matter and immigrants’ rights activists, organizing both to increase wages around the country and achieve justice for people of color. These acts of solidarity are driven by the reality on the ground: in our current economy, people of color are earning significantly less than Whites.

- **Workers of color earn lower average wages than White workers.** In 2013, about half of full-time workers of color—and nearly 60 percent of Latino workers—were earning less than \$15 an hour,¹² compared with 39 percent of full-time workers overall.¹³ Raising the minimum wage to \$15 per hour would increase the wages of 54 percent of Black workers, 60 percent of Latino workers, and 36 percent of White workers nationwide.¹⁴
- **Women of color’s earnings trail furthest behind White men’s wages.** In 2014, White women’s median income was only 83 percent of White men’s median income. However, White men outearned women and men of color by far more. Black women’s median income was 68 percent of White men’s; Black men’s, Latina women’s, and Latino men’s were 76 percent, 61 percent, and 69 percent, respectively.¹⁵
- **Within low-wage industries, there is a concentration of workers of color, who are frequently treated inequitably.** Nearly half of women who work in industries with a median wage of less than \$10.50 per hour, such as the retail and restaurant industries, are women of color.¹⁶ In retail, Black and Latino full-time workers were paid 25 percent less than White full-time workers.¹⁷ Among restaurant workers, workers of color are almost twice as likely as their White co-workers to live in poverty.¹⁸
- **Sub-minimum wages for tipped workers disproportionately affect people of color.** As of 2013, 40 percent of tipped workers (compared to 32 percent of the general workforce) were people of color.¹⁹ In 18 states, the minimum wage for tipped workers is just \$2.13 per hour, and only 8 states have a tipped minimum wage equal to the regular minimum wage.²⁰ Even with tips, 23 percent of Black and 20 percent of Latino tipped workers are living in poverty, compared with 14 percent of White tipped workers.²¹
- **Inequitable earnings keep working families in poverty.** In part because of low wages, half of Latino and 42 percent of Black working parents live below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), which is about \$40,000 for a family of four. In contrast, just 18 percent of White working parents live below 200 percent of FPL.²²

Family and Medical Leave

Without access to family and medical leave, even a significant increase in the minimum wage may not be enough for low-income workers; at some point in our lives, all of us need time to recover from a serious

medical condition, to bond with a new child, or to care for an ailing family member. Disproportionately, it is workers of color who must risk both jobs and wages to take this time.

- **Many workers lack access to unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).** FMLA is a federal law that guarantees some workers access to job-protected, *unpaid* leave. Many are not even eligible for this unpaid leave. According to diversitydatakids.org, about 45 percent of White, 41 percent of Latino, and 51 percent of Black workers meet the criteria for eligibility.²³ In some states, there is a pronounced racial gap in access. For example, in Alabama, 47 percent of White workers but just 32 percent of Latinos are eligible. Maine has the lowest rate of FMLA eligibility for Black workers at just 27 percent (compared to 38 percent for Whites).²⁴
- **Latino workers are less likely than others to be able to afford to take unpaid FMLA leave.** While 40 percent of White workers and 38 percent of Black workers both are eligible for FMLA and can afford to take unpaid leave, only 28 percent of Latino workers are eligible for and able to afford taking FMLA leave.²⁵ The racial gaps vary by state. Notably, in Tennessee, 39 percent of White workers but only 18 percent of Latinos are eligible for and able to afford FMLA leave. And In Iowa, just 20 percent of Black workers, compared to 41 percent of Whites, are able to access and afford taking FMLA leave.
- **Few low-wage workers have access to paid family leave.** Just 5 percent of workers in the lowest 25 percent of wage earners have access to paid family leave, which is used to care for seriously ill family members or new children. Workers of color disproportionately earn such low wages.²⁶
- **Blacks and Latinos lag behind Whites in access to paid parental leave.** In 2012, 50 percent of White workers reported access to at least partially paid parental leave, compared with 43 percent of Black workers and just 25 percent of Latino workers.²⁷ To take paid parental leave, which is used to care for new children, workers often cobble together various types of paid leave, such as sick days and vacation.
- **Women of color take very short maternity leaves.** Nationwide, over 40 percent of Latina mothers reported taking no maternity leave at all for their last pregnancy; about 27 percent of White mothers and 31 percent of Black mothers said the same.²⁸ Shorter maternity leaves can have negative health consequences for mothers and children. For example, mothers who return to work less than six weeks after delivery are much less likely to breastfeed for three months than those who return later.²⁹
- **Job loss after giving birth is more common among women of color.** Among those who worked while pregnant with their first children, 26 percent of Black women and 24 percent of Latina women reported quitting their jobs after delivery in order to have some “leave.” This is compared to 21 percent of White women.³⁰ Among the same group, 6.4 percent of Black women and 8.1 percent of Latina women said they were *let go* from their jobs after giving birth, compared with 4.1 percent of White women.³¹
- **Paid family leave can ameliorate racial disparities in leave taking.** Before California’s paid family leave (PFL) program, new Black mothers in the state averaged just one week of leave, compared to four weeks for White mothers.³² After PFL was implemented, Black mothers’ average length of leave increased by about six weeks, nearly eliminating the disparity in length of leave between Black and White mothers. The differences in likelihood of California’s White mothers and Black and Latina mothers taking *any* leave also decreased.³³

- **Paid leave has positive effects on workforce participation and wages.** Access to paid leave reduces maternal non-employment nine months after delivery by five to six percentage points³⁴ and increases normal weekly work hours of mothers of one- to three-year-olds by 10 to 17 percent, according to studies of California’s paid family leave program.³⁵ A national study found that women who take at least 30 days of paid maternity leave are 54 percent more likely than women who take no leave to receive a raise in the year after their child was born.³⁶

Paid Sick Days

According to a recent study, one in seven low-wage workers—and one in five low-wage working mothers—reports losing a job in the past four years because he or she was sick or needed to care for a family member.³⁷ With workers of color disproportionately earning low wages, too many also experience lost wages or the threat of job loss when they need to take a day to recover from the flu or take a child to the doctor.

- **Latino workers are least likely to have access to paid sick days.** In 2014, fewer than half of Latino workers had paid sick days at their jobs, compared with 64 percent of Whites and 62 percent of Black workers.³⁹
- **Working parents of color are especially affected by lack of sick days.** Parents are more likely to need paid sick time because they must care not only for themselves, but also their children. For the 40 percent of Latino retail workers who have children at home, compared to 33 percent of White retail workers with children, the need for sick days is particularly pressing.⁴⁰
- **Workers of color are often employed in fields that lack sick days.** Workers in certain occupations, such as farming, fishing, and forestry; food preparation and service; and personal care and service, are far less likely to have access to paid sick days. Workers of color are disproportionately represented in these occupational categories.⁴¹

Labor and Community Groups Partner to Promote Racial, Gender and Economic Justice in Oregon³⁸

In Oregon, the Fair Shot for All coalition has taken an approach grounded in racial and gender justice to achieve significant economic gains for workers. In 2015, the state legislature passed four laws promoted by the coalition; these laws guarantee workers paid sick days and retirement benefits and ban police profiling and employment discrimination against formerly incarcerated people (“ban the box”). In 2016, the coalition helped pass the highest statewide minimum wage in the nation.

Because the coalition was committed to moving all four proposals, the anti-discrimination legislation gained considerably more traction than in previous years. Moreover, the coalition’s shared commitment to racial justice ensured that, despite strong pressure, advocates resisted an attempt to exclude agricultural workers (who are largely Latino) from the paid sick days bill. Ramón Ramirez, president of PCUN (the farmworkers’ union) recounts that he told the coalition, “[W]e can’t say we claim to be progressive and then allow farmworkers to get excluded.” Ramirez was pleased that every organization agreed.

Organizing for Good Jobs and Racial Justice in Minneapolis⁴⁴

For Twin-Cities community organizing group Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC), job quality is a racial justice issue. Ron Harris, an organizer at NOC, explains: “If you think about the folks who are the most likely to have an unfair schedule and the least likely to be able do something about it, at that intersection it tends to be people of color, particularly women of color.” NOC plays a key role in the ongoing campaign to pass paid sick days and fair scheduling legislation in Minneapolis. NOC members, who are primarily Black low-wage workers, helped drive ideas for the campaign and the policy solutions it advanced.

Representing NOC’s members, Harris served on the city’s Workplace Partnership Group, which was tasked with developing recommendations for a paid sick days ordinance. In a city with vast economic disparities along racial lines, NOC and its coalition partners called for action from city leaders, a majority of whom were elected on platforms emphasizing their commitment to address these disparities. According to Harris, “The intersection of race and the economy has been really strong here. It’s a compounding effect where if you pay attention to the folks who are getting brutalized by the police, these aren’t middle class and rich folks. These are low-income Black people [...] The people getting shot by police are low-wage folks; they are over-policed and under-resourced.”

- **Unequal access to paid sick days can lead to unequal medical care.** In 2014, Latinos were less likely than Whites or Blacks to have visited a medical provider in the last 12 months; 30 percent of Latinos said they had not made even one visit to a medical provider, compared to 16 percent of Whites and 19 percent of Blacks.⁴² These differences may be due, in part, to the disparities in access to paid sick days. For example, in a 2013 study, one quarter of women reported that lack of time (including lack of time off of work) was a barrier to accessing health care.⁴³ Decreasing racial disparities in access to paid sick days may also decrease disparities in health outcomes.

Unstable Job Schedules and Precarious Work

In 2015, one news headline declared: “The next labor fight is over when you work, not how much you make.”⁴⁵ This refers to the growing call for an end to job scheduling practices that wreak havoc on workers’ lives, including lack of advance notice of schedules; last-minute changes to shifts; insufficient hours of work; workers being sent home from work early, causing them to lose pay; rigid schedules that don’t accommodate workers’ other obligations, such as families and education; and more. In addition to scheduling challenges, today’s low-wage workers increasingly struggle with other aspects of “precarious work,” such as temporary or contract work. (This includes employment in the so-called “gig economy.”) As with other job quality measures, the challenges of precarious employment disproportionately affect workers of color.

- **Involuntary part-time work is more common among people of color than among White workers.** More than one in four Black and Latino part-time workers are involuntarily part time (meaning they would prefer full-time work), compared to about one in six White part-time workers.⁴⁶
- **Early-career workers of color are more likely to face certain unfair scheduling practices.** Among adults ages 26 to 32, roughly 45 percent of workers of color receive their work schedule less than one week in advance, compared to 35 percent of their White peers.⁴⁷ Similarly, among salaried early-

career workers whose hours vary from week to week, Black and Latino workers face *greater* fluctuation in their hours than White workers.⁴⁸ Last-minute notice of shifts and unpredictable work hours make it hard for working families to arrange child care, attend classes, or budget for basic living expenses.

- **Unstable schedules may cause Latino workers more child care challenges.** A greater percentage of Latino than White retail workers have children at home; as a result, they are more likely to face child care problems when dealing with unpredictable or unstable job schedules.⁴⁹
- **Longer commute times exacerbate scheduling challenges for workers of color.** Black workers have longer average work commutes than Whites.⁵⁰ Consequently, being sent home from work early can be more costly in terms of time, fuel, or transit expenses. For example, a worker sent home one hour into an eight-hour shift loses seven hours of pay *and* the time and money required for a round-trip commute.
- **Latinos are often employed as contingent workers.** In a recent study, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that while Latino workers make up 13 percent of standard full-time workers, they are nearly 30 percent of contingent workers.⁵¹ The GAO defines “core contingent workers” as agency temps, direct-hire temps, contract company workers, on-call workers, and day laborers—all precarious jobs that produce lower incomes, have less security and stability, and are typically accepted due to necessity.

Legislative Solutions

Racial inequities in job quality are part of a larger context of systemic discrimination and exclusion within our economy and society. Overcoming this will require activity on numerous levels, including grassroots organizing, cultural change, research, and government action.

Passing legislation to create minimum standards is important. Job quality legislation creates standards for *all* workers but disproportionately benefits workers of color; many will become newly eligible for critical protections that ensure higher-quality employment.

There is already considerable momentum on job quality issues at the state and local levels; this is driven, in part, by organizing led by or including communities of color. As a result of worker and community organizing, 18 states, cities, and counties have passed higher minimum wage laws in the past three years that put their workers on a path to \$15 per hour.⁵² Nearly 30 states and cities have passed paid sick days laws,⁵³ making more than 10 million workers newly eligible⁵⁴ to take the time they and their families need to recover from illness. Three states have implemented paid family leave insurance laws, giving workers time to bond with new babies and care for seriously ill family members. And San Francisco recently became the first city to pass a fair scheduling law. Dozens of other jurisdictions are also considering raising their wages, enacting paid sick time and family and medical leave insurance laws, and establishing fair scheduling standards.⁵⁵ In all of the jurisdictions that have passed job quality legislation, the new laws should benefit people of color. The *extent* to which these laws truly improve racial equity depends in part on the specific provisions within the laws. For example, a growing number of paid family leave campaigns are now advancing legislation that includes a sliding scale of wage replacement, providing lower-income workers with a higher percentage of their salary while they are on leave.⁵⁶ This approach makes it more likely that lower-income workers, who are

disproportionately people of color, will benefit from the laws. (Effective implementation, another critical factor, is addressed below.)

Job quality laws have passed, and legislation is moving around the country, because of the hard work of advocates on the ground. Campaigns have earned broad public support. In one recent national poll, nearly two-thirds of respondents favored a \$15 minimum wage.⁵⁷ A 2010 survey found that 90 percent of Blacks, 77 percent of Whites, and 75 percent of Latinos favor legislation guaranteeing all workers the right to earn paid sick days.⁵⁸ New 2016 data shows that overwhelming majorities (90 percent of Black voters, 86 percent of Latinos, and 71 percent of White voters) favor a law that would create a national paid family and medical leave fund.⁵⁹ And a 2015 poll found that 72 percent of Americans support requiring chain stores and fast-food outlets to give workers at least two weeks' notice of any changes in their work schedules or provide them with extra pay for last minute changes.⁶⁰

As more and more jurisdictions pass job quality laws, federal standards become increasingly likely, bringing us closer to a country where all workers, regardless of where they live, are able to work in jobs that provide fair wages, promote productivity, and allow them to care for their families. There are many legislative proposals in Congress that could help move the needle on job quality. While not exhaustive, the following list includes several key pieces of federal legislation in the job quality arena:

- **The Pay Workers a Living Wage Act (S. 832/H.R. 3164).** The Pay Workers a Living Wage Act would increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour over a period of four years, with subsequent increases indexed to median wages. It would also eliminate the tipped minimum wage. *This bill would have a particularly important effect on the disproportionate number of workers of color earning less than \$15 per hour.*
- **The Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act (S. 786/H.R. 1439).** The FAMILY Act would enable all workers to take up to 12 weeks of paid leave per year to recover from a serious illness, care for a seriously ill family member, or bond with a new child.⁶¹ *This bill would assist a significant proportion of the workers of color who cannot afford to take unpaid leave under FMLA and whose employers do not currently provide paid family and medical leave to take the leaves they need.*
- **The Healthy Families Act (HFA) (S. 497/ H.R. 932).** HFA would enable all workers at firms with at least 15 employees to earn 1 hour of paid sick time for every 30 hours worked, up to a cap of 56 hours at one time. Employees of smaller firms could earn unpaid but job-protected sick time.⁶² *HFA would help alleviate racial disparities in access to paid and job-protected sick days.*
- **The Schedules that Work Act (SWA) (S. 1772/ H.R. 3071).** SWA would enable all workers to request scheduling changes without fear of retaliation and require employers to accommodate requests made by certain categories of workers. For workers in the building, cleaning, retail, and restaurant industries, it would require employers to provide at least two weeks' advance notice of work schedules and compensate workers for last-minute changes, split shifts, and shifts that end ahead of schedule.⁶³ *Black and Latino workers are concentrated in the least stable positions within the retail sector.⁶⁴ While Latino workers make up 11 percent of the workforce, they represent 25 percent of the restaurant work force.⁶⁵ These demographics suggest that, if passed, SWA could significantly promote racial equity.*

Implementation of Job Quality Laws

When job quality legislation passes, effective implementation and enforcement are essential to ensure all workers benefit from newly established protections or programs. The case of California's Paid Family Leave (PFL) program is instructive. The program has had significant effects—including increasing leave taking, parents' ability to care for their children, and breastfeeding duration⁶⁶—but there is also evidence that awareness of the program is low. Though the program has been in existence for more than a decade, a 2014 Field Poll found that only 36 percent of voters in California were aware of PFL, a 7 percent decline since 2011.⁶⁷ The poll found that awareness and take up of the program is lowest among low-income, Latino, new immigrant, and young workers, as well as workers in Los Angeles County. Relatively little data is available with regard to awareness of sick days laws, but anecdotal information from organizers and community groups suggests that, in many cases, the groups of workers most in need of sick time laws are least aware.⁶⁸

To ensure the workers most in need are reaping the benefits of hard-fought job quality wins, advocates and government agencies are employing a variety of outreach and enforcement strategies to maximize awareness and take up. Implementation practices that are most likely to reach workers of color include⁶⁹

- **Funding.** While not always politically feasible, including designated funding for implementation in job quality legislation can ensure resources are available to support an effective process. However, even with relatively limited resources, some jurisdictions have been effective.
- **Multilingual outreach.** Ensure that linguistically appropriate materials, websites, and staff are available to a diverse population, including both employees and employers whose primary language is not English.
- **Outreach through health clinics.** In Los Angeles, the California Work & Family Coalition is piloting a project to raise awareness of PFL and paid sick days by using *promotoras*—community health workers who educate clinic patients and other community members about the available programs.⁷⁰
- **Outreach and enforcement through community groups.** Labor standards enforcement agencies in Seattle and San Francisco contract with community groups to reach out to their constituencies and to help workers file complaints. For example, Seattle's Office of Labor Standards has contracted with the South Park Neighborhood Center, while San Francisco's Office of Labor Standards Enforcement has contracted with the Chinese Progressive Association.⁷¹
- **Strong anti-retaliation protections.** Lower-wage workers often (rightly) fear retaliation for filing complaints about employers who fail to comply with the law. Workers are more likely to come forward if laws have strong anti-retaliation provisions that are operationalized quickly when a worker experiences retaliation.

Racial justice and economic justice are inextricably intertwined. Systemic racism perpetuates economic inequality by driving people of color disproportionately to low-quality jobs. As the data in this brief suggest, Latinos and Blacks are more likely to hold low-wage jobs that do not provide paid sick days, paid family leave, or predictable work schedules. These and other racial inequities must be addressed on numerous fronts. Passing legislation to improve job quality for all, followed by proper outreach and enforcement, is one crucial path

promoting racial equity. Already, there is considerable momentum on job quality legislation; further victories at the local, state, and federal levels will bring the nation closer to the goal of ensuring justice for all.

Endnotes:

¹ For valuable feedback and assistance with this brief, we are grateful to Kisha Bird, Helly Lee, Jodie Levin-Epstein, Clarence Okoh, Anusha Ravi, and Nia West-Bey.

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