



Why Workers and Their Families Need Predictable Scheduling

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Policy solutions that work for low-income people

One in six workers report that their schedules vary based on the needs of their employer—and workers in low-wage jobs are disproportionately represented among those with unpredictable schedules.¹ Erratic schedules are more than an inconvenience. They have serious effects on the wellbeing of individuals and families, are linked to adverse business consequences, and result in broad economic costs.² This brief provides an overview of unpredictable scheduling, breaks down its impact across different demographics, and offers an overview of solutions for ensuring fair scheduling practices and protecting workers.

Unpredictable scheduling explained

Unpredictable scheduling is largely a product of “just-in-time” management practices.³ Just-in-time is often used in restaurant, retail, and hospitality sectors because employers believe it is a useful tactic for keeping costs low while also matching staff supply with operational needs and the demand for services. Technology and scheduling software have increased the use of this practice.⁴ For workers, just-in-time translates to unpredictable schedules that wreak havoc on their work and personal lives.

Unpredictable scheduling is widespread

One in six workers have schedules that change based on the needs of their employer.⁵ *Of those with volatile schedules, over 50 percent report getting their hours three days or less in advance.*

Unpredictable scheduling also impacts the approximately 4.6 million people working part-time involuntarily, who would prefer full-time over part-time hours.⁶ Eighty-three percent of hourly part-time workers have volatile schedules.⁷

How unpredictable and unstable scheduling harms workers

Unpredictable schedules cause undue harm to the wellbeing and economic stability of employees. Following are five major repercussions.

Navigating income volatility. One in three workers experience variations in income from month to month⁸—as many as 40 percent of whom blame irregular work schedules.⁹ As hours fluctuate, so does take-home income. For many families, income volatility makes it difficult to manage expenses, pay bills, and budget. This can have devastating consequences such as missing a housing payment, getting evicted, foregoing medical care, or withdrawing money from long-term saving.¹⁰

Risk of losing benefit eligibility. Some programs that support basic needs—the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—require people to document working a certain number of hours per month. When hours decrease, workers are at risk of losing critical supports that help them make ends meet.¹¹ Over half of workers participating in programs that support basic needs have little to no input into when their workdays begin and end or on the total numbers of hours worked each week.¹²

Inability to secure additional employment. Many workers in low-wage jobs take on multiple positions to support themselves and their families. Yet, unstable and unpredictable scheduling in one job is a barrier to finding additional employment.¹³ When you don't know if or when you will be working during a given week, it becomes impossible to secure shifts elsewhere.

Increased stress and decreased health outcome. Unpredictable work schedules put a huge strain on workers and their families. One survey found this unpredictability led to higher stress for parents, in addition to their missing important events or appointments and spending less time with children.¹⁴ ¹⁵ Studies show that long-term impacts on children are significant—the behavioral and cognitive development of children suffers when parents are stressed.¹⁶ For workers, unpredictable scheduling can also interfere with sleep and lead to physical symptoms often associated with stress, e.g., stomach aches and headaches.^{17, 18}

Costly commute. The take-home incomes of workers in low-wage jobs are disproportionately reduced by the costs of commuting. This is particularly true if a shift is cut short or cancelled at the last minute. Commutes cost workers both time and money, and essentially become sunk costs if a day's wages do not cover the cost of commuting. For many low-income households, these expenses are further complicated by low credit scores or a lack of a credit history, which can result in high car insurance rates and/or car payments.¹⁹ Studies also show that residents of high-poverty and majority-minority neighborhoods are living increasingly farther away from their jobs.²⁰

The impact of unstable schedules

Volatile scheduling harms some groups of people more than others. This is particularly true for the following populations.

Working parents and their children face a unique problem: unstable work schedules that make it extremely difficult to find and afford stable child care—particularly licensed care. Child care providers are typically unable to accommodate scheduling changes or variable hours in care, forcing parents with unpredictable hours to piece together a patchwork of child care arrangements.²¹ A last-minute change in scheduling may force parents to rely on family for help, incur fines from child care providers for late pick up, or even miss their shift if they can't make alternative care arrangements.²² The earnings volatility that often accompanies unpredictable schedules also makes it difficult to plan for and cover child care expenses, which comprise a significant share of families' budgets and must often be paid in full at the beginning of every month.

Women, who make up over 60 percent of workers in low-wage and part-time jobs, are more likely to work in positions that often have unpredictable schedules.^{23, 24, 25} Furthermore, a growing number of women are the sole breadwinners of their family, including almost 30 percent of mothers working part-time who are single, and face many, if not more, of the challenges of accessing child care.²⁶

Workers of color are overrepresented in low-wage and part-time work and are therefore more susceptible to the effects of unpredictable scheduling. For instance: Latinx workers make up 22 percent of those working in contingent jobs that aren't expected to last long-term.²⁷ Black and Latinx workers represent 41 percent of all workers classified as working part time involuntarily.²⁸

Immigrants who are significantly more likely to live in poverty²⁹ and work in industries—like retail stores³⁰ and restaurants (the second largest employer of immigrants)—with problematic scheduling practices.³¹

Workers without advanced degrees who are twice as likely to have irregular work schedules than workers with a bachelor's degree or more (approximately 1 in 5 workers vs. 1 in 10).³² And, workers without advanced degrees are more likely to receive little notice of work schedules—61 percent receive their schedule only 3 days in advance or less.³³ For workers interested in pursuing higher education or additional training, volatile schedules make it difficult to do so, as explained below.³⁴

Students and young adults who are hit hard by unstable scheduling. Eighty-seven percent of early-career adults (age 26-32) in retail report fluctuations in hours from week to week.³⁵ This volatility can be particularly troublesome for young adults who are also in school.³⁶ Approximately 40 percent of undergraduate and 76 percent of graduate students work full time while in school.³⁷ More than 60 percent of independent postsecondary students (previously referred to as non-traditional students) work while in school.³⁸ Predictable schedules are critical to helping students balance work and school.³⁹

Why we need solutions

Unstable and unpredictable scheduling is an unnecessary and avoidable practice with short- and long-term consequences for workers and the businesses that employ them. Ensuring that all workers get advance notice of their schedules would have immediate benefits for millions of individuals and families across the United States. Employers would see returns as well.

Why fair scheduling is good for employees

Giving workers advance notice of work schedules would address many of the problems detailed above. Workers would be able to anticipate bill payments and child care needs. They would also be able to secure additional employment if necessary. In short, they would have stability, which helps planning across the many financial and social activities that are inevitable in life—and would reduce their stress.

Why fair scheduling is good for employers

Predictable scheduling is good for the bottom line. When workers have advance notice of their schedules, employers benefit from decreases in turnover, absenteeism, and operation costs, along with increases in worker productivity.⁴⁰ Additionally, one study found that retail stores giving employees a two-week advance notice of their schedules saw a significant increase in sales.⁴¹ This boost in sales far outweighed the costs of introducing the new scheduling process and system.

What we've learned

Across the country, 10 states, 6 cities, and the District of Columbia have passed scheduling-related laws, and many other states and cities are committed to drafting similar legislation.⁴² Recognizing the various challenges workers are facing, these laws reflect the urgent need workers have for scheduling predictability and are an impressive step in combatting the effects of unpredictable scheduling. The following table highlights key features and considerations of recent legislation.

Promising legislative provisions	
Access to hours	Laws that encourage employers to offer hours to part-time employees before hiring new staff, which allows current employees to reach full-time status and its accompanying benefits. ⁴³
Advance notice of work schedules	An essential protection that ensures workers are given notice of when they will be working. Current and proposed laws require employers to provide 7, 14, or 21 days of advance notice. ⁴⁴
Reporting pay laws	A law that requires employers to pay for the entirety of the time employees were asked to show up for a shift, even if they are sent home early. These provisions protect workers from an unexpected loss of hours and wages, as well as lost time and money from commuting. ⁴⁵
Right to rest	A newer provision being considered in more recent legislation, “right to rest” allows employees to decline a shift that begins soon after the shift they just finished. If an employee doesn’t agree but is expected to work, employers are required to pay the worker time and a half. ⁴⁶
Right to request	A straightforward statute that gives workers the right to request scheduling accommodations without fear of retaliation, whether it’s a request to work remotely, to work part time, or for predictable schedules. ⁴⁷

What’s next?

Efforts at the city and state level have already helped improve the lives of nearly a million workers in those jurisdictions and are gaining momentum.⁴⁸ However, a federal public policy solution would further expand fair scheduling practices to workers throughout the country.⁴⁹

ENDNOTES

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