



How Unpredictable Work Scheduling Hurts Retail Workers – And What Might Change

Daniel Schneider, Harvard University

Kristen Harknett, University of California-San Francisco

Tonya, a mother of three who works at a big box store, is never sure how much she is going to work from one week to the next. Although she is paid a fixed hourly wage, the number of hours she is called to work in any given week is unpredictable and outside of her control. As Tonya explains, *"I get \$10 per hour, you know, my hours vary. Sometimes I work 8 hours, sometimes I work part-time hours...next week I'm only working two days...but then the week right after that I'm working Monday through Friday, you know, [the hours] go up and down and so does the amount."*

Tonya is not alone. Like her, many American workers have little advance notice of their weekly work schedules; their work hours vary from week to week, with times of day and days of the week frequently changed. This happens because many employers in the service sector try to fine tune and shift schedules to closely align staffing with customer demand. Under this system, workers receive their ever-shifting weekly work schedules as little as a few days in advance – and employees may find their shifts changed, cancelled, or expanded at the last minute.

Although these scheduling practices give employers ways to flexibly align staffing with customer demand, low-wage hourly workers experience undesirable instability. These practices are likely to reduce household economic security, disrupt family routines, and harm the health and well-being of workers. Workers who are scheduled for different numbers of hours each week are likely to see their incomes fluctuate; and parents whose work hours vary are likely to have difficulty arranging for quality and stable child care. These disruptions are exactly what we have found in our research.

The Harmful Effects of Unstable Scheduling for Workers

We have conducted in-depth interviews with parents working in retail in the California Bay Area and have also collected thousands of surveys of retail workers across the country as part of the Shift Project. Overall, we find that unpredictable schedules are the norm. Three-quarters of employees at large retail service firms get less than two-weeks' notice of assigned hours that vary daily and weekly. In turn, such schedule instability:

- **Undermines household economic security.** Workers with variable and unpredictable schedules are more likely to have difficulty paying their bills and more likely to experience material hardships like not having enough to eat. Unpredictable and unstable scheduling also contributes to income volatility. Among workers with the most schedule instability, two thirds have incomes that vary from week to week. In contrast, among workers with the most stable schedules, just one third report week-to-week variation in household income.

- **Harms worker health and wellbeing.** We find consistent negative links between variable work schedules and important aspects of worker wellbeing such as sleep quality and feelings of distress or happiness. Working “on-call,” can be hard on employees who have to contend with limited advance notice and deal with cancelled shifts at the last minute. Workers with more stable and predictable schedules are happier, better rested, and less distressed.
- **Leads to unstable care arrangement for children.** For working parents, unstable and unpredictable hours lead to unstable care arrangements for their children. Constantly making new arrangements is logistically and emotionally taxing and harms children. The connection between work schedules and stability of child-care arrangements is significant. Stability of child care contributes to healthy child development – and, in contrast, unstable parental work schedules and constant shifts in child care arrangements hurt the next generation.

Are More Stable Schedules Possible?

Press attention, worker outcry, and organizing efforts have generated momentum to reform scheduling practices. Early efforts are under way through both legislation and company-led reforms.

Some cities are now regulating retail work-scheduling practices. In 2015, San Francisco’s “Retail Workers Bill of Rights” required large retailers and chain restaurants to provide their workers with at least two weeks of advanced notice of work schedules. Other cities including Seattle, New York, and Emeryville, California, have also passed similar ordinances. But legislated reforms remain mostly restricted to big cities, and some states are ruling them out. For the foreseeable future, millions of retail workers are likely to remain without these protections, including those working for nationwide retail chains.

Walmart, the nation’s largest private sector employer, pledged to give its 1.4 million employees the option of working the same hours and same days each week, starting in February 2016.

But has Walmart actually followed through with a step that could, potentially, set a new nationwide standard for the U.S. retail sector? Because internal data are not available, we surveyed 2,000 hourly, non-managerial Walmart workers – and found that there has been no change at all in Walmart workers’ schedules. In January 2016, just before the new practices were supposed to go into effect, 39% reported varying schedules, and so did the same 39% in March 2017. There were only minor changes in hours fluctuation (ranging from 23% to 26%).

We set out to collect this data in the hope of studying how more stable work schedules might improve the health and wellbeing of Walmart workers and their families. But the promised changes have not materialized. Our work points to the importance of independent research to monitoring company compliance – not just with labor regulations but also with companies’ own promises. Improvements for retail workers and their families require more than broken pledges.

Read more about the Shift Project in Dani Carillo, Kristen Harknett, Allison Logan, Sigrid Luhr, and Daniel Schneider, “Instability of Work and Care: How Work Schedules Shape Child-Care Arrangements for Parents Working in the Service Sector,” Social Service Review (2017), and Daniel Schneider and

Kristen Harknett, "Income Volatility in the Service Sector: Contours, Causes, and Consequences," Aspen Institute Financial Security Program (2017), and Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett, "How Work Schedules Affect Health and Well-being: The Mediating Roles of Economic Insecurity and Work-Life Conflict," Paper Presented at 2017 Meetings of the Population Association of America.