

Scheduling Away Our Health: How Unpredictable Work Hours Affect Health and Well-being

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Executive Summary

For many low-wage workers, every week looks different from the next. Receiving a work schedule with little advance notice, fluctuating shift times and working an inconsistent number of hours from week-to-week is the rule rather than the exception. These precarious work hours lead to income instability and make it difficult or impossible to arrange childcare, schooling, or a second job, or for a worker to manage his or her own serious medical condition.

In Seattle, policymakers are working to address widespread scheduling volatility among Seattle's hourly workforce. A recent survey found that half of the Seattle workers interviewed receive schedules one week or less in advance, a finding consistent with national representative data. And among part-time workers, 75% of respondents had weekly schedules that varied by eight hours or more. A focus group of Seattle workers conducted by Human Impact Partners echoed these findings. One retail worker, Holly, said, "There are days I can work a long day and they'll only schedule me 4 hours as opposed to 8 hours. And so that's getting kind of scary when it gets down to the wire, when I really don't have any money and I don't know if you're going to schedule me for 15 hours this week or 4 hours. It's just really hard to deal with." Another former barista, Tyler, said, "My main problems were my shifts being cut. Sometimes I would be scheduled for 8 hours and it would end up being more like 4, or maybe less than 4 with the lunch break... Altogether there was no consistency in the schedule really at all."

In this report, ***Scheduling Away Our Health: How Unpredictable Work Hours Affect Health and Well-being***, we build on a body of evidence analyzing these scheduling practices, and pay special attention to the physical and mental health consequences for workers and their families. As momentum builds for fair workweek policies, the human costs are important to understand as policymakers weigh solutions. Through literature review, original data analysis, and focus groups, we find that the health and well-being of workers is undoubtedly compromised by unpredictable work schedules.

Specifically, we find that unpredictable work hours:

Have Direct and Negative Effects on Worker Health and Well-being

- Widespread research shows that higher levels of stress and poor mental health outcomes are associated with unstable schedules that have little advanced notice and fluctuating weekly hours.
- In our analysis of General Social Survey data, hourly workers who received one week or less notice of their schedules are more likely to report their health as poor or fair (rather than good or excellent) than workers with more advance notice. About 20% of those receiving one week or less of schedule notice reported poor or fair health, compared to about 12%-13% for workers with more notice.
- Workers who say they have the necessary flexibility to meet work, family, and personal responsibilities exercise more frequently and are more likely to self-identify their lifestyles as healthy.
- Many hourly workers face fatigue from overwork and inadequate rest. Workers experiencing sleep deprivation and fatigue have been shown to have decreased reaction time, psychomotor coordination, memory, and decision making skills.

Contribute to Low and Unstable Incomes Which Harm Health and Well-being

- Precarious work hours exacerbate economic instability. People who involuntarily work part-time are far more likely to be in poverty than those who work full-time. Nationwide people with incomes above the federal poverty line typically live more than five years longer than those below.
- Unpredictable schedules mean unpredictable incomes. Less income means less access to healthy housing, food, education, and healthcare. Focus group participants, whose hours varied widely from week to week, reported anxiety about whether their incomes would meet their needs, noting that wage increases would do little to help if their work hours were limited. Increasing incomes contributes to decreasing rates of chronic diseases like high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart failure.
- Erratic work hours can lead to unemployment: variable hours, limited advance notice of schedules and a lack of input into job schedules have all been associated with early job loss. Laid-off workers are more likely to have fair or poor health and more likely to develop a stress-related condition, such as stroke, heart attack, or heart disease.

Inhibit the Ability of Workers to Access Educational Opportunities

- Young people cite conflicts between work and school as the number one reason for leaving college before obtaining a degree. Students who drop out of school say that the challenge of balancing work and school is a greater barrier than the cost of tuition, while working students report that their jobs limit the number of classes they take, their access to campus facilities, and the courses they choose.

- People with more education generally have longer lifespans and lower rates of chronic disease than people with less—a person with a college degree is likely to live about five years longer than someone who has not graduated from high school. For each four additional years of educational attainment, a person can expect a lower rate of diabetes and heart disease, and a lower likelihood of negative health behaviors like smoking.

Contribute to Work-Family Conflict and Childcare Issues, Which Negatively Affect Parent and Child Well-being

- A study of retail workers found that short advance notice of schedules interfered with their personal needs and family responsibilities, both cutting into their time for other activities and straining their families. When workers have greater input in their schedules, these conflicts can be mediated.
- Unpredictable schedules can cause significant challenges for parents, forcing them into less-than-ideal childcare options. One study of mothers with retail jobs who had limited advance notice of their schedules and frequent schedule changes at their job had difficulty planning for childcare and finding time for other family activities, such as meals and volunteering at their children's schools.
- Parents who work erratic hours and/or had no input into their work schedules are more likely to exit childcare subsidy programs after being enrolled, and variable and unpredictable work schedules are reported as a substantial barrier to finding childcare and meeting subsidy requirements.
- Gaps in childcare subsidies are associated with more frequent switching of childcare providers. Childcare instability in turn affects children's well-being, cognitive and behavioral outcomes and language development, especially for children in low-income families.

Recommendations

Our findings indicate that unpredictable work schedules directly and indirectly contribute to a host of health and well-being impacts. Research cited throughout this report indicates that unpredictable schedules are associated with stress, depression, anxiety, disrupted sleep, food insecurity, and numerous physical health problems, including high blood pressure.

Policy changes that deliver more stability and predictability for workers would go a long way towards addressing these myriad impacts. In light of our report findings that unpredictable work schedules directly and indirectly contribute to a host of health and well-being impacts, we recommend Seattle policymakers and employers take immediate steps to ensure a fair workweek. Specifically, Seattle's hourly employees should be given:

- Predictable schedules, stable hours, and reliable paychecks that enable them to plan ahead to meet responsibilities on and off the job.
- Two to three-weeks' advance notice of schedules and the choice to decline any unscheduled hours that conflict with other obligations.

- The ability to set reasonable limitations on their schedules, including the right to request scheduling accommodations and mutual consent to changes in the schedule.
- Predictability pay for changes to schedules and reporting pay for shortened and on-call shifts.
- The right to rest for at least 11 hours between shifts (in practice, this would do away with “clopings” which require employees to close late at night and open early the next morning).
- Family-sustaining wages and hours, including pay parity between part-time and full-time employees, access to additional hours, and the opportunity to become full-time if they choose.

For More Information

Human Impact Partners and The Center for Popular Democracy collaborated on this research project to understand how unpredictable and unstable work schedules affect health and well-being of working people. To access the full report and citations, visit www.humanimpact.org and www.populardemocracy.org.

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