



The Realities of Unpredictable Work Schedules for America's Hourly Employees

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Unpredictable work schedules are a growing problem for many Americans – but what are the issues and how many people are affected? To find answers, we analyzed answers to new questions added to an established survey conducted periodically by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Our findings provide a snapshot of problematic scheduling practices experienced by adults aged 26 to 32 who are starting their careers in today's labor market. All sorts of young workers – but especially workers of color and those paid by the hour or employed part time – cope with fluctuating work hours and last-minute notice.

Fluctuating and Unpredictable Work Time

Here are some of the striking patterns we found:

- **Short notice.** Fully 41% of young adult workers in hourly jobs – and 47% of those who work part-time – report that they find out when they must work less one week or less in advance. Almost half of non-Hispanic blacks working in hourly jobs report such short notice. This situation is especially challenging for workers when their total hours also fluctuate from week to week – and we found that the more workers' hours fluctuated, the less likely they were to have schedules set at least a week in advance.
- **Not much control over timing.** Large proportions of young workers in hourly jobs (and more than half of men and workers of color) report that their employer decides the timing of work hours, although a third report some say in the decisions. Only about one in five hourly workers gets to set hours at will or within limits set by employers.
- **Fluctuating paid hours.** Workers are asked about typical numbers of weekly work hours, and new survey questions ask them to report the greatest and fewest number of weekly hours over the past month. Fully 74% of young adults in hourly jobs report at least some weekly fluctuations – and the average range between greatest and fewest hours was 10.2 hours, which is more than a full conventional eight-hour day of work and pay.

A Closer Look at Fluctuating Hours

The extent to which work hour fluctuations matter to workers themselves is likely to depend on the amount of time workers usually spend at their job. For example, if a worker's weekly hours vary by 4 hours across the month, that difference will feel like a lot more fluctuation for someone who usually works 12 hours per week

than it would for someone who usually works 40 hours. To assess this more nuanced understanding of hour fluctuations, we calculate an “instability ratio,” which identifies how much workers’ hours fluctuate relative to the amount they typically work. When these kinds of calculations are completed for the 74% of all hourly workers who report at least some fluctuation in weekly hours, the instability ratio comes out at .49. In other words, these workers’ actual hours of work in the past month went up or down by almost half of what they think of as their usual hours of work. That is a lot of instability.

Fluctuations in work hours are especially high for part-timers. Fully 83% of hourly part-time workers report at least some fluctuation in weekly work hours during the prior month – and the average instability ratio is a dauntingly high 87%. Already working only part-time, these employees also experience huge swings. Additional analyses reveal that some part-timers experienced sharp increases in work hours during the month – adding to their earnings – while others got fewer hours and pay than usual.

A lot of part-time workers face a triple whammy of challenges: relatively low paid work hours, combined with wide fluctuations in actual weekly assigned work hours, plus limited advance notice. Nearly half of them (47%) learn about their fluctuating schedules one week or less in advance. Such workers obviously find it hard to anticipate how much they will work and earn, week to week and month to month.

Which Occupations are Affected?

Workers in occupations across the labor market may have to deal with unpredictable, fluctuating hours over which they have little control, but workers in some occupations are at particularly high risk. For example, nine out of every ten food service workers report that their hours fluctuated in the last month, averaging two-thirds of their usual hours. Half of retail workers report that they learn their work schedules one week or less in advance; and half of janitors and housekeepers report that their employer completely controls the timing of their work.

But fluctuating and variable work schedules are not restricted to relatively low-paid jobs. Approximately a third of elite professionals, business staffers, and technicians say that their employer decides the timing of their work. In these occupations, more than a quarter of workers say that they learn a week or less in advance exactly when they will need to be on the job. And remarkably, more than three-quarters of early-career workers in such occupations report fluctuations of at least 30% during the previous month. These young workers regularly experience surges of hours that can amount to over-work.

Work Schedules as a Significant Source of Inequality

Most people think of inequality in terms of income, wealth, or race, but work schedules are another source of inequality that matters. Schedule control, predictability, and hour fluctuations can divide full-time from part-time workers, salaried and hourly workers, and workers at the top of the job market from the rest. And they can also divide workers even within the same classification. For example, although 41% of hourly workers have to cope with a week or less schedule notice, another 39% know their schedules four weeks or more in advance. This predictability matters a lot to employees and their families, regardless of hourly wage. We should pay close attention to how America’s workplaces allocate hours in ways that undermine or bolster the control, stability, and predictability of workers’ earnings and lives.

Read more in Susan J. Lambert, Peter J. Fugiel, and Julia R. Henly, "**Precarious Work Schedules among Early-Career Employees in the U.S.: A National Snapshot**," Employment Instability, Family Well-being, and Social Policy Network at the University of Chicago, August 2014.