

Labor Day Wish: Workers Want More Control of Schedules

University of Chicago

Newswise — One wish many workers may have this Labor Day is for more control and predictability of their work schedules. A new report finds that unpredictability is widespread in many workers' schedules—one reason why organized labor groups and policymakers are now focusing on work schedule reform.

When work schedules are unpredictable, so are family and school schedules, as employees must re-shuffle family meals, homework and bedtimes around variable work hours. Almost half of young workers are given their work schedule with one week's notice or less, according to the new national study by researchers from the University of Chicago.

The research brief was released online by the UChicago School of Social Service Administration's Employment Instability, Family Well-being, and Social Policy Network. SSA Associate Professors Susan J. Lambert and Julia R. Henly co-authored the report with UChicago sociology doctoral candidate Peter Fugiel.

"These are the first national data on volatile scheduling practices, and the prevalence of schedule instability is very dramatic," Lambert said. "With these new data, we find that schedule unpredictability and fluctuating hours are not conditions of work relegated solely to the bottom of the labor market. While low-level workers are at greatest risk, these practices are widespread."

The research brief analyzes national data released in 2013 on 3,739 workers, ages 26 to 32, employed in the wage and salaried civilian U.S. workforce. The data come from a nationally representative survey of people born between 1980 and 1984, who are regularly interviewed as part of the National Longitudinal Surveys. The NORC at the University of Chicago conducts the study under the direction of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This was the first time the survey included questions about fluctuating and unpredictable work schedules.

The findings suggest that in addition to receiving little advance notice of their work hours, many workers contend with fluctuations in their work hours and have little or no input into the timing of work. The pattern was found for early-career workers across the labor market, but especially among workers of color and those who work part-time or are paid by the hour. Scheduling fluctuations are particularly common in low-wage occupations where the variability makes it difficult to predict earnings week-to-week, according to the study. For example, the brief reports that food service workers almost universally experience wide work-hour fluctuations over the course of a sample month, fluctuating on average by what amounts to 68 percent of usual work hours. Half of retail workers learn about their work schedule with one week's notice or less, and half of janitors and housekeepers report that their

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employer completely controls the timing of their work.

“Many of these workers are raising children,” noted Henly. The report finds that two-fifths of people in the sample have a child under age 12. Large majorities of working parents reported fluctuations in the prior month of 40 percent when compared to their usual hours. “Parents are also at increased risk of the other forms of instability we studied, including limited advance notice and minimal input into when they work. As a result, work schedules are likely to challenge the ability of even the most motivated parents to fulfill responsibilities at work and at home,” Henly added.

Perhaps most surprising is how widespread these precarious scheduling practices are, affecting workers in higher status jobs as well as those at the bottom of the labor market. “Even at the upper end of the labor market, about a third of elite professionals, business staff and technicians say their employer decides the timing of their work without their input,” said Fugiel. The survey found that more than 25 percent of these workers receive their work schedules with one week’s notice or less, and more than 75 percent of early-career workers in these upper tier occupations reported work-hour fluctuations of at least 30 percent during the month.

Lambert recently presented some of these data at a Congressional briefing in Washington, D.C., and she has consulted several state and local governments that are developing and implementing new standards on employer scheduling practices. “It is exciting that policymakers are finding our analyses useful,” said Lambert.

“The UChicago School of Social Service Administration has a long history of providing data on which to make good policy decisions,” she added. “We don’t want our research to sit on a shelf. We want our research to provide the rigorous empirical foundation needed to develop new approaches to reducing inequality and strengthening the well-being and economic security of today’s families.”

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