

Schedule Unpredictability among Early Career Workers in the US Labor Market: A National Snapshot¹

Susan J. Lambert, Peter J. Fugiel, and Julia R. Henly
University of Chicago

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unpredictable, precarious work schedules are transforming the nature of employment across the economy. Drawing on data from a well-regarded national survey, we provide the first-ever estimates of problematic scheduling practices among a representative sample of early-career adults (26 to 32 years old) in the US labor market.² This is the first time a measure of advance schedule notice has been included in a national survey in the US. This is also the first opportunity to gauge the prevalence and magnitude of weekly work hour fluctuations. In addition, modifications to response categories on an existing survey question make it possible to differentiate those workers whose schedules are set by their employer without their input from those workers who have at least some input into the timing of their work. The findings suggest that early career workers across the labor market, but especially workers paid by the hour, of color, and in part-time jobs, are at high risk of all three of these dimensions of precarious work schedules: short advance notice, large fluctuations in work hours, and little or no input into the timing of work.

The highlights below focus primarily on workers paid by the hour, who are the majority of workers in the US wage and salaried workforce (56 percent of men and 62 percent of women) and whose earnings depend directly on the number of hours worked.

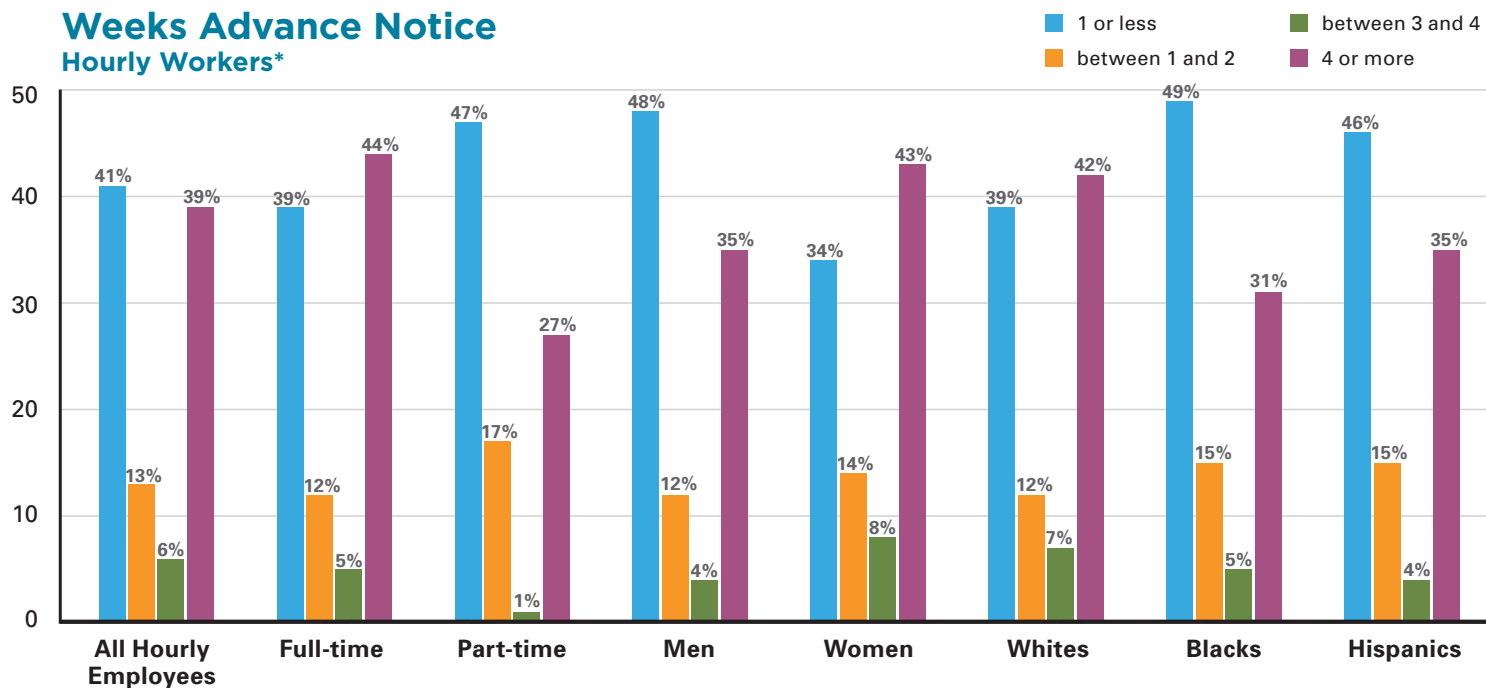
Short notice (one week or less in advance of the workweek) is widespread. Fully 41 percent of early career workers in hourly jobs—47 percent who work part-time—report that they know “when they will need to work” one week or less in advance of the upcoming workweek. Almost half (49 percent) of Black non-Hispanic workers in hourly jobs report a week or less of advance notice. Short notice is likely to be especially problematic when work hours fluctuate from week to week, and the findings suggest that the more workers’ weekly hours fluctuate, the more likely they are to report that they only know their work schedule a week or less in advance.

¹ Research brief issued by EINet (Employment Instability, Family Well-being, and Social Policy Network) at the University of Chicago: <http://ssascholars.uchicago.edu/einet>. The authors of this research brief are solely responsible for its content. We would like to thank the Center for Popular Democracy for helping prepare the executive summary and research brief for distribution.

² The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97) is a nationally representative survey of people born between 1980 and 1984 who were living in the US in 1997. The National Opinion Research Center conducts the survey on an annual basis under the direction of the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Respondents were 26 to 32 years old in round 15 (2011-12), the first round to ask questions about advance schedule notice and fluctuating work hours. For the analyses presented in this research brief, the sample has been narrowed to current civilian employees in the wage and salaried workforce (N=3,739). We focus on respondents’ main job, which the NLSY defined for these questions as the job of the longest duration.

Weeks Advance Notice

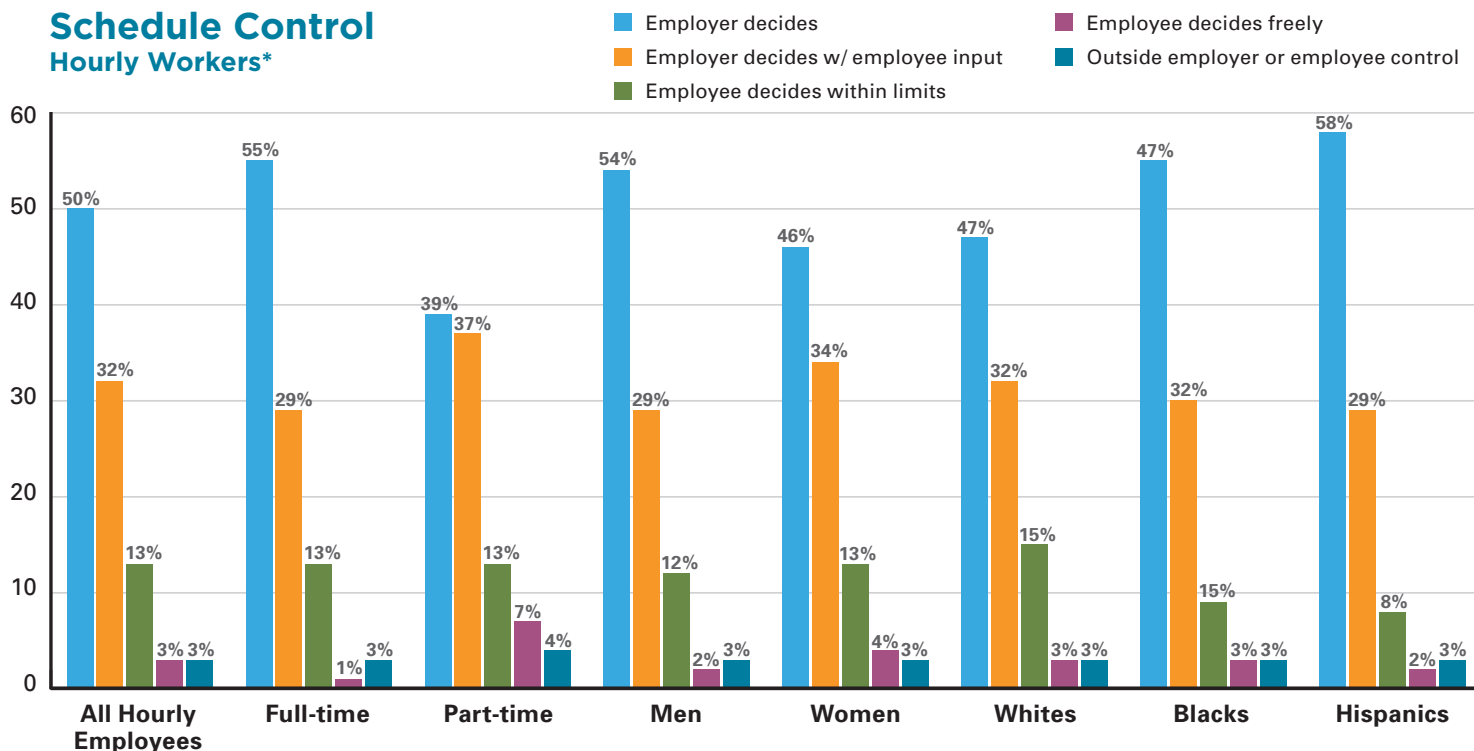
Hourly Workers*



- Control over the timing of work hours is uncommon.** Half of early career workers in hourly jobs say that their employer decides the timing of their work hours. About a third say that their employer allows them at least some input into their work schedule, but only a fraction (at most 1 in 5) report that they decide the timing of their hours either freely or within limits set by their employer. Large proportions of both full-time workers (55 percent) and part-time workers (39 percent), and men (54 percent) as well as women (46 percent), say that their employer determines their work schedule without their input.

Schedule Control

Hourly Workers*



*Source: NLSY97, round 15. Working adults aged 26-32.

- **Fluctuations in work hours are common.** Three-fourths of early-career adults in hourly jobs report at least some fluctuations in the number of hours they worked in the prior month and on average, hours fluctuate by more than a full, conventional 8-hour day of work and pay.³
- **Fluctuations in work hours are substantial, especially among part-time workers.** The magnitude of fluctuations in work hours is estimated by calculating an instability ratio [(greatest hours—fewest hours) ÷ usual hours] that places the range of monthly variation in work hours in the context of usual work hours. For example, a 4-hour range may not be particularly meaningful for a worker who usually works 40 hours a week, but for a worker who usually works 12 hours a week, a 4-hour range may be quite significant. The instability ratio among hourly workers overall is .37 indicating that in the course of a single month, workers' hours varied on average by 37 percent in comparison to what they considered their usual hours. Among the 74 percent of hourly workers who report at least some fluctuation in weekly work hours, the instability ratio is .49, suggesting that their weekly work hours varied from their usual hours by, on average, almost 50 percent during the course of the prior month. Fully 83 percent of hourly part-time workers report fluctuations in weekly work hours during the prior month, with the magnitude of fluctuations averaging a daunting 87 percent.⁴ Analyses indicate that some part-time workers experience up-swings in work hours during the month, adding to their earnings, whereas hours for others fluctuate downward toward under-employment.
- **Workers in occupations across the labor market are at high risk of unpredictable, fluctuating work hours over which they may have little control.** At the lower-end of the labor market, for example, 90 percent of food service workers report that their hours fluctuated in the last month by, on average, 68 percent (when compared to their usual hours). Half of retail workers report that they know their work schedule one week or less in advance, and half of janitors and housekeepers report that their employer completely controls the timing of their work. But problematic scheduling practices are not relegated to the lower levels of the labor market. At the upper end of the labor market, approximately a third of elite professionals, business staff, and technicians⁵ say that their employer solely decides the timing of their work, and over 25 percent of workers in these occupations say that they know their work schedule one week or less in advance. Most notably, over 75 percent of early-career workers in these upper-tier occupations report work-hour fluctuations of at least 30 percent during the month, primarily reflecting surges in work hours that place these workers at risk of over-work.
- **Working mothers and fathers are at high risk of precarious work schedules.** Among respondents with a child 12 or younger (44 percent of the sample; 34 percent have a child 6 or younger), 69 percent of mothers and fully 80 percent of fathers report that their hours fluctuated in the prior month by an average of approximately 40 percent when compared to their usual hours. For many, fluctuations in work hours are driven by the

³ Workers are asked to report the greatest and fewest number of hours they worked a week during the past month. The mean hour range between the greatest and fewest hours workers report is 10.2 hours.

⁴ Although the average absolute variation in weekly work hours during the month among part-time hourly workers (11.1 hours) is only slightly more than among full-time hourly workers (9.9 hours), this variation constitutes larger relative swings in hours when viewed as a proportion of usual work hours.

⁵ Non-hourly workers included.

requirements of their employer rather than personal preferences: half of fathers and 45 percent of mothers report that their employer decides their schedule without their input. Add to this the finding that 46 percent of fathers and 32 percent of mothers say they know their work schedule at most one week in advance, and it is clear that work schedules are likely to challenge the ability of even the most motivated early career worker to fulfill responsibilities at work and at home.

- **The first national snapshot of problematic scheduling practices provides a troubling picture.** Regardless of race, gender, and occupation, large proportions of early career workers face unpredictable, fluctuating work hours as they strive to forge careers in today's labor market. Not knowing your work schedule in advance or working fluctuating hours may not be particularly problematic if you largely decide when you will work, but most early career workers report having little if any input into the timing of their work. Part-time workers are at particular risk of unpredictable and unstable work schedules. Low usual hours combined with wide fluctuations week to week and limited advance notice—47 percent know their schedule one week or less in advance—highlight the challenges many part-time workers face in predicting how much they will work and earn.
- **Legislation that establishes a broad set of standards on scheduling practices is needed to ensure the well-being of all workers and families and a level playing field for employers.** A comprehensive set of standards on work hours is needed to reduce the problematic scheduling practices experienced by workers in different types of jobs and at different levels of the labor market. Both the public sector and the private sector have roles to play in ensuring that America's future includes an economy that strengthens the foundation needed for continued and long-term prosperity of firms and families.