Collateral Damage:  
Scheduling Challenges for Workers in Low-Wage Jobs and Their Consequences

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There are nearly 20 million workers in low-wage jobs (typically paying $10.10 per hour or less), and 76 percent of workers in the ten largest low-wage jobs are women. Low wages can make it hard for workers to support themselves and their families, but wages are not the only problem. Low-wage jobs that are primarily held by women, such as cashiers, maids and housekeepers, and restaurant servers, are marked by work scheduling policies and practices that pose particular challenges for workers with significant responsibilities outside of their job, including caregiving, pursuing education and workforce training, or holding down a second job. The work schedules in these jobs are often unpredictable, unstable and inflexible. Some require working nights, weekends or even overnight, and many offer only part-time work, despite many workers’ need for full-time hours.

Women are disproportionately affected by this problem because women hold the majority of low-wage jobs and still shoulder the majority of caregiving responsibilities. And nearly one in five families with children was headed by a single working mother in 2012, a group for whom scheduling challenges pose particularly acute problems. Many of these families struggle financially as well: single mothers make up nearly two-thirds of breadwinning moms today, but this group has a median family income of only $23,000.

Challenging work schedules also cause problems for men working in low-wage jobs who are increasingly assuming a greater role in caring for their families. Between 1977 and 2008, the average workday time fathers spent with their children increased from 2 to 3.1 hours per day. Among both men and women, 75 percent of low-wage workers reported having insufficient time for their children and 61 percent reported having insufficient time to spend on themselves.

This fact sheet outlines five of the most common scheduling challenges faced by workers in low-wage jobs and explains their prevalence and detrimental impact on workers and their families. Understanding the work schedule challenges facing workers in low-wage jobs is an essential first step toward developing solutions to this problem that work for workers, their families, and their employers.
Common Scheduling Challenges

Lack of Control over Work Schedules

Many workers in low-wage jobs have few opportunities for meaningful input into the timing of the hours that they work, and are unable to make even minor adjustments to their work schedules without suffering a penalty. This is true for low-wage workers on both set and variable schedules.

• About half of low-wage workers report having limited control over the timing of their work hours.

• Between two-thirds and three-quarters of full-time low-wage workers report that they are unable to alter the start and end times of their work days.

• Between 40 and 50 percent of low-wage workers have no control over when they take breaks.

Unpredictable Work Schedules

Some employers adopt “just-in-time scheduling” in an effort to minimize labor costs. Just-in-time scheduling bases workers’ schedules on perceived consumer demand and often results in workers being given very little advance notice of their work schedules. Scheduling software is frequently used to schedule workers at the last minute, matching the number of workers as closely as possible to retail traffic or other indicators of consumer demand.

• Posting schedules just one week before a worker is expected to work is quite common. In a study of low-skilled, non-production jobs in the hospitality, retail, transportation and financial services industries, only 3 of 17 corporations studied assigned schedules more than a week in advance (one retailer, one hotel, and one bank).

• According to a survey of workers in the retail industry by the Retail Action Project, about a fifth of workers receive their schedules only three days beforehand.

• In another survey of 6,085 workers employed by a major retailer in 388 stores across the country (referred to as “the CitSales Study”), workers receive notice of their work schedules only seven days in advance, on average.

• Between 19 and 31 percent of low-wage workers are often asked to work extra hours with little or no notice. Roughly 40 to 60 percent of full-time, low-wage workers who are asked to work extra hours with little or no notice say they comply with the request to avoid negative consequences.

• Some retail workers report that they are routinely required to work call-in shifts, which means they must call their employer to find out whether they will be scheduled to work that day, and if they are told to report to work, they often must do so within two hours. In a study of retail workers in New York City, 20 percent of workers surveyed reported that they always or often must be available for call-in shifts.

Unstable Work Schedules

Many workers in low-wage jobs experience unstable schedules with hours that vary from week to week or month to month, or periodic reductions in work hours when work is slow.

• According to the Retail Action Project survey of workers in the retail industry, only 17 percent of all workers surveyed and 10 percent of part-time workers had a set schedule.

• According to the CitSales Study, for 59 percent of retail employees employed by one major retailer, either the shifts or the days they worked change each week.

• Between 20 and 30 percent of low-wage workers reported a reduction in hours or a layoff when work was slow.

Involuntary Part-Time Work

Workers who want full-time work but are only offered part-time hours—often described as the “underemployed”—struggle to support their families with fewer hours and less pay. The number of workers working part-time involuntarily more than doubled during the recession, growing from 4.4 million prior to the recession 2007 to 8.9 million in 2009, and remains substantially higher than pre-recession levels at 7.9 million workers in 2013.

• In 2013 nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of part-time workers worked part-time involuntarily, including for reasons of slack work or business conditions and because they were unable to find full-time work.

• Low-wage workers are far more likely to work part-time involuntarily than other workers. In 2012, the
rate of involuntary part-time work for employees in low-wage occupations (14 percent) was more than double the rate of involuntary part-time work among employees overall (6 percent).32

• Workers in low-wage occupations made up one-third (33 percent) of all involuntary part-time workers in 2012, despite these low-wage workers only making up 14 percent of all workers.33

Nonstandard Work Schedules

Workers on nonstandard schedules face unique challenges. “Nonstandard” schedules refers to working evenings, nights, weekends, or working on rotating shifts, irregular schedules, or on call.34 Nonstandard work is also called “unsocial work” because nonstandard schedules often conflict with family time and make it difficult to maintain other social ties.35 While the majority of workers on nonstandard schedules do not have these schedules by choice, some workers do choose nonstandard schedules in order to help juggle competing obligations.36

• In one study, roughly half of low-wage hourly workers reported working nonstandard schedules.37 In comparison, an analysis of the American Time Use Survey by the Urban Institute found that 28 percent of workers with very low wages work nonstandard hours, compared to 20 percent of all workers.38 (The difference in these findings may be accounted for by variations in the way the survey question was asked, as well as differences in the definition of low-wage work.)

• Workers have nonstandard schedules for a variety of reasons. According to the 2004 Current Population Survey Supplement, 55 percent work nonstandard schedules involuntarily because they could not find another job or “it is the nature of the job;” 23 percent work nonstandard schedules for reasons related to family or childcare arrangements or school; 10 percent of nonstandard workers prefer the schedule; and 5 percent gave the reason of better pay.39

The Fallout from Challenging Work Schedules

Impact on caregiving responsibilities. Workers in low-wage jobs often face extreme demands at home and work. These workers are more likely to be single parents,40 more likely to have children with special needs,41 and more likely to care for elderly or sick relatives.42 They also have higher rates of illness themselves.43 At the same time, they have fewer resources to pay for child and elder care than other workers, and they are far less likely to have paid sick and vacation days, or job-protected leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act.44 For some workers in low-wage jobs who have little to no control over their work schedules, being able to plan for or respond to the exigencies of daily life — for example, ending a shift on time to pick up a child from school or scheduling an afternoon off to take an elderly parent to a doctor’s appointment — is simply not an option.

Impact on child care. Low-wage workers’ ability to access quality, affordable, and stable child care is often compromised by challenging work schedules.45 With work schedules and incomes that fluctuate from week to week, many workers have no choice but to cobble together child care at the last minute.46 Because many centers require caregivers to pay a weekly or monthly fee, regardless of how often the child attends, holding a spot in a child care center is often infeasible for workers who do not know when, or even if, they will work that week. Further, workers with unstable schedules may not qualify for child care subsidies due to fluctuations in income and work hours.47 Relying on family, friends, and neighbors to provide child care — as most workers in low-wage jobs must do — is complicated by the fact that their child care providers may also be balancing an unpredictable part-time work schedule at their own jobs with providing child care. When workers are unable to find child care or child care falls through, sometimes workers must miss work and lose pay. In one study, 40 to 60 percent of workers who reported missing work due to child care problems also reported losing pay or benefits, or being penalized in some way.48

Impact on marriage. Working nonstandard hours has been shown to have negative outcomes for marriages and for children.49 Research has linked nonstandard hours to higher levels of divorce, less time together as a couple, and lower relationship satisfaction.50 Although some two-parent families in low-wage jobs cope with the child care problems outlined above by “tag teaming”—working on opposite schedules so that one parent is available to provide child care — this results in even less time together as a couple.51
**Impact on children.** Workers on nonstandard schedules spend less time with their children, and their children tend to score lower on cognitive tests, have more behavioral problems and poorer mental health. Less parental involvement in children’s education has consequences for children from low-income families who are three times more likely to drop out of school than children from middle class families.

**Impact on education and workforce training.** Challenging work schedules can make it nearly impossible to pursue further education or training while holding down a job. One of the most commonly cited challenges to completing a college degree is the inability to balance work and school. Both male and female low-wage workers report a lack of opportunities to pursue additional education and training. In a set of focus groups of students enrolled in community colleges, students identified employers’ lack of flexibility with work schedules as a major barrier to pursuing their education.

**Impact on transportation.** Just-in-time scheduling often complicates transportation for low-wage workers, who may be relying on friends or family to provide a ride to and from work, or public transportation that may run infrequently or erratically. Workers may spend hours and precious resources commuting to and from work, to work a shift lasting only a few hours, or to be sent home unexpectedly when work is slow.

**Impact on family economic security.** Challenging work schedules make it more difficult to pay the bills. An unexpected reduction in hours means a loss of pay, and it can mean the loss of employer or government benefits that are tied to work hours, including paid and unpaid time off, health insurance, unemployment insurance, public assistance, and work supports. Women working part-time involuntarily are more likely to live in poverty (more than 25 percent) than their counterparts who worked part-time voluntarily (12 percent) or worked full-time (5 percent). Involuntary part-time workers are more likely to have been unemployed for a substantial portion of the previous year (more than 13 weeks) and are less likely to have health care or pension coverage, and part-time positions typically offer less pay pro rata and less job security than full-time positions. Workers report that scheduling and family conflicts are a major reason why they intend to leave their jobs. And spells of unemployment can have disastrous financial consequences for low-income families. In fact, low-wage workers are 2.5 times more likely to be out of work than other workers, but only half as likely to receive unemployment insurance. Workers’ inability to pursue or complete education and workforce training programs as a result of work schedule conflict also makes it much more difficult for workers to move up into higher-paying jobs.

**Conclusion**

The fallout from low-wage jobs characterized by unpredictability, instability, little worker-driven flexibility, nonstandard schedules, and involuntary part-time work is considerable. These challenging work schedules have a cascade of negative consequences for both workers in low-wage jobs and their children.

In contrast, fairer work schedules benefit employees and employers alike. Low-wage workers report that more job autonomy and involvement in management decision-making led to less negative spillover from work to their non-work life. Employees with flexible workplaces are less stressed and have better physical and mental well-being. Less negative spillover from work also leads to greater productivity and job retention: low-wage workers with flexibility are 30 percent less likely than other workers to intend to leave their positions within two years.

Future briefs from NWLC will discuss fair work scheduling policy and practice solutions that are crucial to ensuring that workers can succeed at work and in the rest of their lives.


8 NWLC, supra note 2.

9 Id.

10 See generally NWLC, Minimum Wage Fact Sheet: Jobs with Largest Project Growth 2012-2011: Almost Half are Low-Wage, Nearly Two-Thirds are Female-Dominated, available at http://www.nwlc.org/resource/jobs-largest-projected-growth-2012-2022-almost-half-are-low-wage-nearly-two-thirds-are-fema. Of the 30 occupations that projected to add the largest number of jobs between 2012 and 2022, nearly two-thirds (18) are female-dominated with workforces that are 60 percent or more female, and almost half (15) are low-wage, with a median hourly wage less than $13.83 per hour.

11 MATOS & GALINSKY, supra note 5 at 1.

12 Id. at 13.

13 LIZ WATSON & JENNIFER E. SWANBERG, FLEXIBLE WORKPLACE SOLUTIONS FOR LOW-WAGE HOURLY WORKERS: A FRAMEWORK FOR A NATIONAL CONVERSATION 6 (Workplace Flexibility 2010, May 2011).

14 In this section, "low-wage workers" are defined as those working an hourly job that pays less than two-thirds the median wage for men, unless stated otherwise. This definition of "low-wage" is based WATSON & SWANBERG. Using 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce data, the sample included workers paid $15.41 or less per hour.

15 WATSON & SWANBERG, supra note 13, at 19-20.

16 Id.

17 Id.


19 WATSON & SWANBERG, supra note 13, at 13.


22 Jennifer Swanberg et al., Introduction to the CitiSales Study 4 (2009), available at http://www.uky.edu/Centers/iwin/citisales_pdfs/I1-HourlyWorkers.pdf. See also Lambert, supra note 20, at 1217.

23 WATSON & SWANBERG, supra note 13, at 21.

24 Id.

25 LUCE & FUJITA, supra note 21, at 13.

26 Id.

27 Id. at 8, 12.

28 Swanberg et al., supra note 22, at 4 ("However, only 41% of employees indicate that they have schedule consistency, i.e., working the same days and the same shift each week.").

29 WATSON & SWANBERG, supra note 13, at 22. With the exception of full-time low-wage workers with standard hours, for whom less than 20 percent reported this problem.

30 NWLC calculations based on Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Current Population Survey (CPS) Annual Table 20. Persons at work 1 to 34 hours in all and in nonagricultural industries by reason for working less than 35 hours and usual full- or part-time status, 2007 through 2013, available at http://www.bls.gov/cps/tables.htm#annual. Figures are annual averages for those working part-time for economic reasons (also known as involuntarily part-time workers) across all industries.

31 Id. Other reasons for working part-time involuntarily include seasonal work (3 percent of all involuntarily part-time workers) and job started or ended during the week (1 percent of all involuntarily part-time workers).

32 NWLC calculations based on King, supra note 1. Data are from the Current Population Survey, ASEC 2013, which refers to the reason for working part-time during the week prior to the reference week of the survey. Median hourly wages are from Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Occupational Employment Statistics (OES), May 2013 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates (Low-wage occupations are defined here as those typically paying $10.10 per hour or less, available at http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm).

33 Id.


37 WATSON & SWANBERG, supra note 13, at 5.

38 Enchautegui, supra note 34, at 7 ("Very low wages" are defined in the analysis as weekly earnings lower than those of 75 percent of the population who work full time.).

39 NWLC calculations based on McMenamin, supra note 36.

40 WILLIAMS & BOUSHEY, supra note 35, at 12.


42 ANNA DANZIGER & SHELLEY WATERS BOOTS, LOWER-WAGE WORKERS AND FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS, Workplace Flexibility 2010 on behalf of the Urban Institute 3 (Georgetown Univ. July 10, 2008).

43 Ellen Galinsky, James T. Bond & Eve TalmiGnolco, What if Employers Put Women at the Center of Their Workplace Policies? When Businesses Design Workplaces that Support their Employees, Both the Businesses and the Employees Benefit, in THE SHRIVER REPORT: A WOMAN’S NATION PUSHES BACK FROM THE BRINK (Shriver Center 2014).

44 See NATIONAL P’SHP FOR WOMEN & FAMILIES, EVERYONE GETS SICK. NOT EVERYONE HAS TIME TO GET BETTER 4 (JULY 2011); FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE IN 2012, available at http://www.nationalpartnership.org/site/DocServer/PSD_Briefing_Book.pdf; ABT ASSOCIATES, FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE IN 2012: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (pre-
pared for the U.S. Dept of Labor (Updated Sept. 2013).


46 Id. at 4.


48 WATSON & SWANBERG, supra note 13, at 8.

49 See Enchautegui, supra note 35, at 3-4.


53 Jane Waldfogel and Sara McLanahan, Work and Family, FUTURE OF CHILDREN 21 NO. 2 (Fall 2011).

54 Lisa Dodson, et al, How Work are Put at Risk by Parents’ Low-Wage Jobs BOSTON COLLEGE CTR, FOR SOC. POLICY (Fall 2012).


56 OXFM, supra note 5, at 4.


58 JOAN C. WILLIAMS & PENELlope HUANG, IMPROVING WORK-LIFE FIT IN HOURLY JOBS: AN UNDERUTILIZED COST-CUTTING STRATEGY IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD 13, 15, 57, (Cfr. for Work Life Law 2011); Caithen, supra note 14, at 7.

59 Caithen, supra note 18, at 1. 7.


Id. at 3.


63 Rebecca Glauber, supra note 61, at 5.


67 See generally Dodson, supra note 65 (describing in detail the ways having parents in low-wage jobs negatively impacts youth.).

68 James T. Bond and Ellen Galinsky, How Can Employers Increase the Productivity and Retention of Entry-Level, Hourly Employees?, Families and Work Institute 12 (Nov. 2006), available at http://www.familiesandwork.org/how-can-employers-increase-the-productivity-and-retention-of-entry-level-hourly-employees-brief-2/; see also Galinsky, Bond & Tahmimocglu, supra note 43 (“Overall, 55 percent of low-income mothers surveyed said it would be ‘extremely important’ to ‘have the flexibility I need to manage my work and personal or family life…No one surveyed said it was ‘not important.’”)

69 Sloan Center on Aging and Work at Boston College, Why Employees Need Workplace Flexibility (citing sources), available at http://workplaceflexibility.bc.edu/need/need_employees