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Wrong on Schedule: How Unstable Scheduling Hurts Massachusetts Workers and their Families

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This report is being released along with a companion piece, [Shifting the Balance: How a Massachusetts “Fair Workweek” Law Can Protect Workers and their Families from Unstable Schedules](#). For an Executive Summary of both this and “[Shifting the Balance](#),” [click here](#).

Introduction

Over the next several years, Massachusetts will see more job openings in hourly retail and food service positions than in almost any other occupation. These include salespersons, cashiers, fast food workers, and wait staff.¹ What kind of jobs will these be?

In 2018, Massachusetts passed a law raising the state minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2023. This is a significant gain for low-wage hourly workers. But higher wages alone aren't enough. For workers paid by the hour, time literally is money.

The same goes for employers, who can boost profits by, among other things, reducing hourly labor costs. Particularly in low-wage service industries like food service and retail, supervisors often change or cancel hourly workers' shifts at the last minute, and these schedules can fluctuate wildly from one period to another.² Many employers force their staff to work consecutive shifts with little time for rest in between, including so-called “clopening” shifts — in which someone closes a store or restaurant at night and has to open it the next morning.³ And most workers have no

Snapshot: Unstable Scheduling

Many hourly retail and food service workers in Massachusetts—and their families—face unstable scheduling practices like:

- **Last-minute shift changes or cancelations.**
- **“Clopening” shifts**—closing a shop at night and opening it the next morning.
- Demand that workers be **“on call”**—that is, wait by the phone to learn if they will be asked to come in to work, often without compensation for this waiting time.
- **Little to no say in their schedules.**

These practices hurt workers and their families in several ways, including:

- **Financial insecurity:** difficulty paying bills and overreliance on predatory payday lenders.
- **Hunger and homelessness.**
- **Poor health:** psychological distress, poor sleep, and unhappiness.
- **Harms to child well-being:** difficulty arranging stable, safe child care; inability to be home to help children with homework; greater likelihood of child behavior problems.

Workers of color—overrepresented in hourly occupations—are especially likely to face unstable scheduling, and many of its harmful effects:

- Workers of color are **far more likely than their white coworkers to have managers of a different race or ethnicity** than their own.
- Having a boss of a different race **increases the chance that workers of color experience unstable schedules.**

say in their schedules.⁴ All of this leads to significant income volatility, and can have harmful effects on household finances, health, and family and child well-being.

Workers of color are much more likely than other workers to face unstable scheduling, and many of its harmful effects. This disparity is not merely the result of the fact that workers of color are overrepresented in hourly food service and retail jobs in the first place. Workers of color are also far more likely than their white coworkers to have a manager of a different race, and this difference makes it significantly more likely that workers of color would experience unstable scheduling practices—even at the same workplace.

In response to this scheduling crisis, a number of states and cities in recent years have enacted so-called “**fair workweek**” laws, covering nearly two million workers.⁵ Fair workweek laws seek to prevent employers from imposing unstable schedules on their workers. There are two fair workweek proposals now before the Massachusetts Legislature.⁶ They differ in important ways, as discussed in a companion report, *[Shifting the Balance: How a Massachusetts “Fair Workweek” Law Can Protect Workers and their Families from Unstable Schedules.](#)*

For the lowest-wage workers, scheduling volatility increased sharply during the Great Recession and remains above pre-Recession levels.⁷ Part of the reason for this increase is the more widespread use of workforce management (WFM) software, which many employers use to set their hourly employees’ schedules. WFM software runs algorithms that consider weather, holidays, sales promotions, and other factors that affect customer traffic and thus staffing needs. If the software recommends a last-minute scheduling change, first-line supervisors put these into place. The idea is to exploit “big data” to manage workers on a “just-in-time” basis.⁸

But workers are not data points. They are people, who need money to put food on the table, time to sleep, and the energy and bandwidth to care for children. Fair workweek laws make it easier for workers to have all of these things.

Unstable scheduling: multi-faceted and widespread

Unstable scheduling takes many forms. Much of what we know about the breadth and impact of the problem comes from the SHIFT project, run by Daniel Schneider of the University of California at Berkeley and Kristen Harknett of the University of California at San Francisco. The SHIFT project has surveyed tens of thousands of service sector workers across the country in recent years. A series of October 2019 reports on retail and fast-food workers found the following:



Little advance notice of shifts



Last minutes changes and cancelations



On-call shifts



Income volatility

One-third of workers receive **less than one week's notice of their shifts**. Just 35 percent of workers receive more than two weeks' notice.⁹

Over 70 percent of workers have had their schedules **changed at the last minute**, and 15 percent have had a shift **canceled entirely**.¹⁰

One out of four workers worked an **"on-call" shift**—that is, they were expected to be available to come in to work without knowing if they would actually be called in.¹¹

One-third of workers experience more than **60 percent variation in weekly hours** over the course of a month. The average worker experiences a swing of 33 percent.¹²

Many employees are not compensated for being on-call even though they are required to set aside the time at their employer's request.

The impacts of unstable scheduling

While employers derive flexibility and profit from these practices, workers experience instability. Workers are also more likely to experience financial hardship, hunger, homelessness, poor health, and child behavior problems.

Financial hardship

As noted above, low-wage hourly workers in retail and food service experience significant volatility in hours worked from week to week. Because they're paid by the hour, this means volatility in income and financial hardship. A 2017 SHIFT study had found that:

- Nearly four out of 10 households with income volatility reported having trouble paying bills.¹³
- About one-quarter had to use a payday lender or pawn shop.¹⁴
- And more than six out of 10 lacked confidence in their ability to come up with \$400 in case of an emergency.¹⁵

Hunger and homelessness

The October 2019 SHIFT study found that:

- Each unstable scheduling practice—short notice of shifts; last-minute shift changes and cancelations; on-call duty; and varying hours—leads to higher levels of what the authors call "hunger hardship" and "housing hardship."¹⁶
- The more unstable scheduling practices workers have to deal with in combination, the more likely they are to suffer these hardships.¹⁷

Unstable schedules may even keep workers from benefiting from the very welfare programs designed to mitigate hunger. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as 'food stamps, keep millions out of poverty each year.¹⁸ But some food stamp beneficiaries have to work an average of at least 20 hours per week in order to receive more than three months of benefits.¹⁹ If their employers cut their hours suddenly, workers risk losing this crucial support.

Health and family well-being

Unstable schedules can also lead to poorer health. A February 2019 paper, also by Schneider and Harknett, found that workers whose bosses imposed unstable schedules – including workers who lack input into their schedules – were more likely to report experiencing higher levels of psychological distress, poor sleep, and unhappiness. Again, workers who experience more unstable scheduling practices *in combination* suffer worse health outcomes.²⁰

Schneider and Harknett also found that, all else being equal, stable scheduling practices have a more positive effect than higher wages when it comes to reducing psychological distress, poor sleep, and unhappiness²¹ By 2023, Massachusetts will have increased its minimum wage to \$15, from \$8 in 2014. If one of the goals of minimum wage increases is to improve the health and well-being of Massachusetts workers, then this finding points policymakers to fair workweeks as another, potentially even more effective path toward this goal.

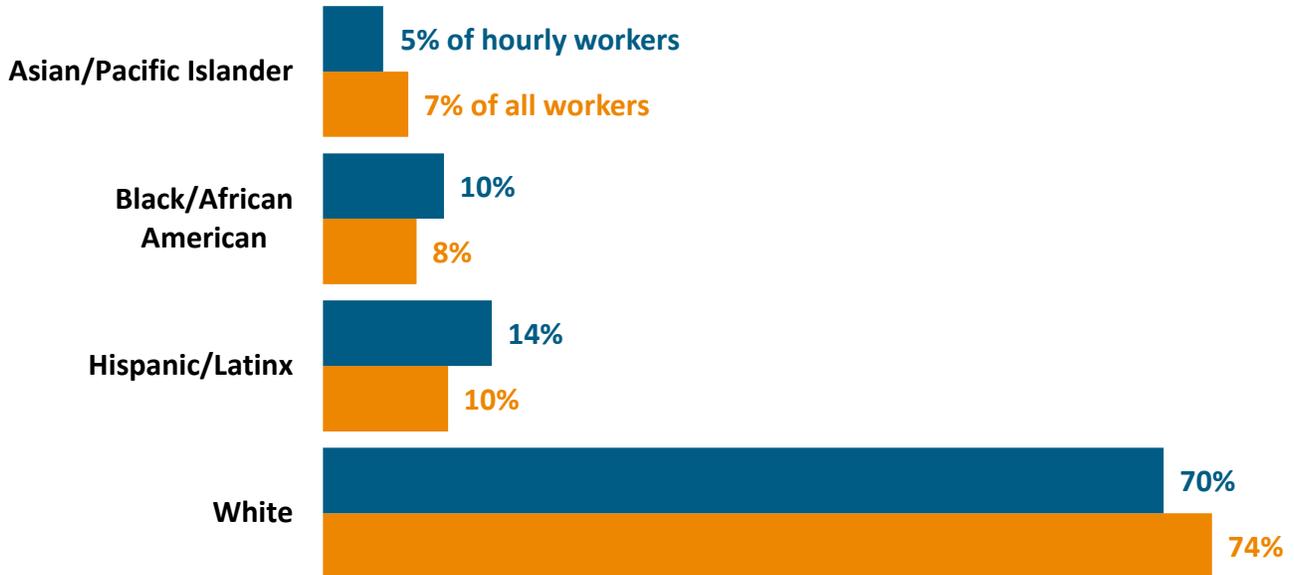
Finally, unstable schedules can hurt family and child well-being, as they make it challenging for working parents to arrange child care, and to monitor homework and participate in bedtime routines – all of which are important for healthy child development.²² The October 2019 SHIFT study found that “each dimension of precarious scheduling significantly increases” the likelihood that a parent reports their child as feeling worthless or inferior; being too fearful or anxious; feeling too guilty; being self-conscious or easily embarrassed; being unhappy, sad, or depressed; or worrying.²³

Racism and unstable schedules

In Massachusetts, Black/African-American and Hispanic/Latinx workers are slightly overrepresented among those paid hourly – and thus more at risk for unstable schedules and their harmful effects. White and Asian/Pacific Islander workers are slightly underrepresented among hourly workers.²⁴ Unfortunately, given the data source, we are unable to disaggregate further.

In Massachusetts, Black/African-American and Hispanic/Latinx workers are more likely to be paid hourly than other workers

Percentage of Massachusetts workers, by race/ethnicity, who report being paid hourly



Source: MassBudget analysis of pooled 2016-2018 Current Population Survey data. Hispanic/Latinx may be of any race. Asian/Pacific Islander, Black/African American, and White are not Hispanic/Latinx.

The October 2019 SHIFT study found that Black/ African-American, Hispanic/ Latinx, and “other” workers “experience significantly more precarious scheduling conditions” than White workers.²⁵ Women of color face the highest degree of unstable scheduling among all race-gender groups.²⁶

The authors found that while factors like age, marital status, education, and job experience explain some of the gaps between White workers and workers of color, there were other dynamics at play. First, they found that workers of color were more likely to be hired by firms with worse scheduling practices company-wide. This led to more shift cancelations, on-call duty, and “clopening” shifts for workers of color overall compared with White workers.

They also found that workers of color were “over three times more likely than their white coworkers to have managers of a different race or ethnicity than their own.”²⁷ Having a boss of a different race, they found, made it significantly more likely that workers of color would experience shift cancelations and “clopening” shifts.²⁸ This discrimination in treatment on the job only compounds the harms of discrimination in screening and hiring based on biases about people of color, and especially women of color.²⁹ Such discrimination has been found to play a significant role in wage and wealth gaps by race and gender.³⁰

These racist employment practices don’t exist in a vacuum. Rather, they mix with other systems to amplify the injustices faced by workers of color and their families. Consider two examples:

Unstable schedules, child behavior, and school discipline. It is easy to see how discriminatory scheduling practices can contribute to especially harmful long-term consequences for the children of

workers of color. As noted above, unstable scheduling can have harmful effects on children’s behavior. This alone would be cause for concern: no child should have to struggle just because employers seek greater flexibility and profit off the backs of their parents. But when children go on to exhibit challenging behavior at school, it can lead to discipline, including removal from class. [Previous MassBudget research](#) has shown that school discipline is already marked by high levels of racial bias. This discipline plays a key role in feeding youth of color into the school-to-prison pipeline.³¹

Unstable schedules and inadequate public transportation. The disproportionate burden of unstable scheduling borne by people of color intersects with another longstanding problem in Massachusetts: unreliable and inadequately funded public transportation. Workers of color in Massachusetts are more likely than White workers to rely on public transportation to get to work. Frontline food service and retail workers are more likely than workers in other occupations to commute by public transportation. And these findings hold even in cities far from Greater Boston’s bus and rapid transit network – like Fall River, Lowell, Springfield, and Worcester.³² Unstable scheduling practices that force workers to change plans at the last minute are even harsher on workers who have to use public transportation to do so.

These findings make clear the role fair workweek policies can play in creating more just workplaces. Fair workweek policies themselves cannot address discrimination in hiring, nor change the individual bias of a boss, and they certainly cannot tear up the deep historical roots of racism in this country. What fair workweek policies can do is force employers to treat their workers fairly *despite* the structural racism and individual biases that workers of color are up against.

For a look at the fair workweek bills being considered by the Massachusetts Legislature, please see the companion report, [Shifting the Balance: How a Massachusetts “Fair Workweek” Law Can Protect Workers and their Families from Unstable Schedules](#).

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