

Parenting Without Predictability: Precarious Schedules, Parental Strain, and Work-Life Conflict



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Against the backdrop of dramatic changes in work and family life, this article draws on survey data from 2,971 mothers working in the service sector to examine how unpredictable schedules are associated with three dimensions of parenting: difficulty arranging childcare, work-life conflict, and parenting stress. Results demonstrate that on-call shifts, shift timing changes, work hour volatility, and short advance notice of work schedules are positively associated with difficulty arranging childcare and work-life conflict. Mothers working these schedules are more likely to miss work. We consider how family structure and race moderate the relationship between schedule instability and these dimensions of parenting. Unstable work schedules, we argue, have important consequences for mothers working in the service industry.

Keywords: childcare, low-wage work, parenting stress, work schedules, work-family conflict

The COVID-19 pandemic drew new attention to the challenges working parents face. Although many workers lost jobs (Parker, Minkin, and Bennett 2020), others were forced to swiftly transition their work online (Miller 2020). Others—including those working in grocery stores and pharmacies—suddenly became essential workers (Robertson and Gebeloff 2020). As schools and daycare centers closed, parents scrambled to arrange childcare for their chil-

dren (Karpman, Gonzalez, and Kenney 2020) and many women took on added responsibilities at home (Collins et al. 2020). Yet even before the pandemic began, parents in the low-wage service industry were struggling to meet the competing demands of work and family life.

Work has grown more precarious over the past several decades, particularly for low-wage workers, who have seen stagnant wages, re-

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trenchment in fringe benefits, and a rise in nonstandard contractual arrangements (Kalleberg 2011; Fligstein and Shin 2004). This transformation has coincided with parallel changes in the American family, including later and less marriage, rising nonmarital fertility, and a higher incidence of single-parent and complex families (McLanahan 2004; Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2019). The confluence of these two currents in American life may create particularly turbulent conditions for young children. The home is a key context for child development that lays a foundation for later life achievement and attainment (Heckman 2006). Yet parental working conditions, especially when precarious and unpredictable, may impede mothers' and fathers' abilities to parent. These challenges may be exacerbated for single parents, who lack the ability to pool resources and coordinate work and care that partnered parents enjoy (Presser 1999). Because of the pronounced class stratification in both the rising precarity of work and instability of family life, this situation may entrench disadvantage across generations.

Alongside low wages and few fringe benefits, precarious work is characterized by a temporal dimension of job quality. Many employers use just-in-time scheduling practices where the number of hours that workers are given and the times those hours are scheduled vary a great deal, often with little notice and limited worker control (Lambert 2008; Schneider and Harknett 2019). Such practices may reduce labor costs for the employer but transfer that payroll risk to workers and households (Hacker 2006). These practices are particularly pronounced in the retail and food service sectors, which account for 17 percent of the American workforce and in which one in ten children have a parent employed (author's calculations from CPS and ACS). Many of these jobs are held by women, who make up 70 percent of waiters and waitresses and 73 percent of cashiers (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017a). Relative to White women (20 percent), Black (29 percent) and Hispanic (32 percent) women are overrepresented in low-wage service occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017a).

Researchers have begun to unpack the consequences of unpredictable scheduling prac-

tices for various dimensions of family life. Recent research describes the associations between exposure to precarious scheduling practices and worker health and well-being (Schneider and Harknett 2019). Other research suggests that parental exposure to schedule instability is associated with complex and informal childcare arrangements (Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022). However, less research has examined how parental exposure to such scheduling is associated with other aspects of parenting, such as parenting stress, work-family conflict, and difficulty arranging care.

In this article, we examine how maternal exposure to a set of precarious scheduling practices—including on-call shifts, last-minute shift cancellation, short notice of schedules, and hours volatility—are associated with various aspects of parenting. We then examine whether any such associations are moderated by family structure or race. To do this, we draw on large-scale survey data collected between 2016 and 2019 from workers in the retail and food service sectors through the Shift Project. These data sample hourly workers employed at 129 of the largest retail and food service firms in the United States. The Shift Project data uniquely contain detailed measures of precarious scheduling alongside reports on parenting behaviors. We focus on the 2,971 mothers with children under the age of fifteen who are captured in the data. We take mothers as our focus because in most families women continue to do the majority of caretaking (Bianchi et al. 2012; Perry-Jenkins and Gerstel 2020).

We find that unpredictable schedules are associated with increases in the share of mothers reporting difficulty arranging childcare, work-life conflict, and missing work. Schedule unpredictability was not associated with levels of parenting stress. Further, we find that marital status affects some of these associations but not others. We find no evidence that marital status moderates the relationship between schedule instability and the difficulty arranging care or missing work, but that it does affect the relationships with work-life conflict and parenting stress. We also find that Black mothers are particularly affected by schedule instability when it comes to parenting stress.

UNPREDICTABLE AND PRECARIOUS WORK

Work has become more precarious and unpredictable in recent years, especially for workers in the low-wage service industry (Kalleberg 2009). The rise of the 24/7 economy means that more workers are working night, evening, and weekend shifts (Presser 2005). At the same time, the growth of on-call and just-in-time work schedules mean that daytime workers increasingly experience uncertainty about when they are expected to work. To drive down costs, employers now use a variety of human resource strategies to match staffing to demand (Lambert 2008). These practices are especially common in the retail and food service industries (Henly and Lambert 2014; Lambert 2008). Although these arrangements allow for flexibility from the employer's perspective (Milkman 2009), they leave workers with little to no control over their work hours. Instead, workers often have shifts canceled, added, or changed at the last minute (Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003). As a result, few workers in the service industry work a predictable nine-to-five Monday-to-Friday schedule (Gerstel and Clawson 2018).

These scheduling practices and the unpredictability they produce can make it difficult for workers to manage their time and plan for other aspects of their lives (Clawson and Gerstel 2014), particularly when it comes to parenting and childcare (Carrillo et al. 2017; Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022). Unpredictability in one person's schedule can spread out to affect others—including caregivers, spouses, relatives, and children—in what Dan Clawson and Naomi Gerstel (2014) call the “web of time.” Yet the consequences of unpredictable schedules on both workers and their families are still not well understood. Gerstel and Clawson call for more research to “document, specify, and explain further both the spillover of unpredictability between work and family and the compounding effects created by the webs connecting them” (2018, 86). In this article, we examine how schedule instability affects three aspects of family life: difficulty arranging care, work-life conflict, and parenting stress.

DIFFICULTY ARRANGING CARE

Although many working parents struggle to find adequate childcare for their children, the conditions of the low-wage service industry pose added challenges. Parents in this sector of the economy rarely have support outside of their friends and families to aid in childcare (Carrillo et al. 2017), and often lack resources at work that can mitigate work-family conflict (Henly and Lambert 2005). These challenges are compounded for women (Luhr 2020), who not only do the majority of childrearing (Blair-Loy 2009; Ishizuka 2018) but are often responsible for arranging childcare in their families (Doucet 2001). Recent evidence suggests that women continued to shoulder the bulk of childrearing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Collins et al. 2020).

Some forms of nonstandard work (such as night, evening, and weekend shifts) could make it easier to arrange childcare, if parents can find informal caregivers who are not working these hours (Han 2004). Other research, however, has linked nonstandard work to difficulty arranging care (Barnett, Gareis, and Brennan 2008). Much of this research points out that nonstandard work schedules conflict with childcare centers' hours of operation (Henly and Lambert 2005; Rachidi 2016), constraining parents' formal childcare options. How disruptive nonstandard schedules are might therefore depend on the form of childcare parents choose (Presser 2005). Yet this research often focuses on nonstandard schedules in the form of night, evening, and weekend shifts, rather than on schedules characterized by routine unpredictability.

A small body of research finds that schedule instability affects the specific forms of childcare that parents use, increasing the use of informal care, sibling care, multiple childcare arrangements, and children caring for themselves (Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2022). This may be because unstable schedules make certain forms of childcare more difficult to access. In a study of retail workers, Julia Henly and Susan Lambert (2005) find that mothers who experienced last-minute schedule changes were more likely to face difficulties arranging childcare. Other researchers similarly determine that

varying shifts heightened the likelihood of mothers' experiencing childcare disruptions by 12 percent, and that working evenings decreased the likelihood by 9 percent (Usdansky and Wolf 2008). Childcare disruptions are particularly detrimental to family well-being when they are unplanned (Pilarz, Sandstrom, and Henly 2022, this issue), as they likely are when driven by unpredictable schedules.

Difficulty arranging care is important to consider not only because it can disrupt family life but also because it might lead parents to miss work (Gordon, Kaestner, and Korenman 2008). Margaret Usdansky and Douglas Wolf (2008) find that nearly half of mothers who reported a disruption in childcare missed work as a result. This missed work can pose problems to both employers and employees. Missed work may lead to losses in income, force mothers to use their vacation and personal days, and potentially jeopardize their jobs (Gordon, Kaestner, and Korenman 2008; Usdansky and Wolf 2008).

WORK-LIFE CONFLICT

Schedule instability may also affect parents by increasing work-life conflict (Ben-Ishai 2015; Haley-Lock 2011). Research suggests that about half of workers report that work "sometimes" or "frequently" interferes with their family life (Schieman, Glavin, and Milkie 2009). Mothers may experience greater levels of work-family conflict, given gender differences in expectations for parents and time spent in caregiving (Bianchi et al. 2012). It is less clear how work-life conflict might vary by race. Some studies suggest that White mothers experience greater work-life conflict than Black mothers (Dilworth 2004), possibly because Black fathers are more likely to help with childrearing (Kane 2000). Other research finds that Hispanic respondents tend to express more traditional gender attitudes, and that Hispanic women report high levels of work-family spillover (Roehling, Jarvis, and Swope 2005).

Various aspects of work are known to affect levels of work-life conflict. Work hours are associated with greater work-family conflict (Hill et al. 2010). Schedule flexibility (Golden 2008) and control (Kelly, Moen, and Tranby 2011) are

associated with lower levels of work-family conflict. Much of this research focuses on professional jobs, where schedule control and employee-driven flexibility are more common (Golden 2008; Kelly, Moen, and Tranby 2011). Yet schedule flexibility is relatively rare; only about a third of workers report that they work their current schedule because it suited their caregiving or personal needs (Boushey 2005).

The service industry, in particular, is often characterized by a worker's lack of control over their work schedules. Schedule instability, including on-call schedules, limited advance notice, and last-minute schedule changes, may increase work-life conflict. European data shows that although 14 percent of workers reported issues with work-life balance when their schedules stayed the same, 35 percent of those with last-minute schedule changes did (Eurofound 2012). In another study of women working at a national retail firm, Henly and Lambert (2014) find that unpredictability of work schedules—measured as limited notice of schedules, last-minute schedule changes, and variation in days worked—was associated with greater work-life conflict. Unlike our study, Henly and Lambert did not restrict their sample to working parents. They did find, however, that respondents who did not live with a partner but had caregiving responsibilities reported less work-life conflict. They suggest that this may be because women who face greater challenges with childcare might be pushed out of the industry. In this article, we add to this research by using a national sample of working mothers and drawing comparisons by family structure and race.

PARENTING STRESS

The responsibilities associated with parenting often lead to parenting stress, specifically, the "feeling experienced when a parent perceives that the demands associated with parenting exceed the personal and social resources available to meet those demands" (Cooper et al. 2009, 559). Parenting stress can have long-term consequences for both parents and their children. It is associated with higher levels of psychological distress and depression among parents (Puff and Renk 2014), poorer develop-

mental and behavioral outcomes in children (Joshi and Bogen 2007), and less effective parenting (Deater-Deckard 2004).

The experience of parenting stress may differ by race, shaping “what events are perceived as stressful, what coping strategies are acceptable, and what support systems mothers may turn to for assistance” (Cardoso, Padilla, and Sampson 2010, 430). Some research indicates that Black mothers, along with foreign-born Hispanic and Asian mothers, experience greater parenting stress than White mothers, because of structural disadvantages (Nomaguchi and House 2013). Jodi Cardoso and colleagues (2010) also find elevated levels of parenting stress among Black mothers relative to both White and Mexican American mothers.

Research on the effect of nonstandard work on parenting stress is somewhat mixed. In one study, Pamela Joshi and Karen Bogen (2007) find that nonstandard work schedules (including night, weekend, rotating, and split shifts) significantly increased parenting stress. Unfortunately, they do not distinguish between these schedule types, making it difficult to determine whether all forms of nonstandard schedules result in similar levels of parenting stress. Other researchers find that nonstandard work schedules may not increase parenting stress (Nomaguchi and Johnson 2016; Lozano, Hamplová, and Le Bourdais 2016). In a study of working-class parents, Kei Nomaguchi and Wendi Johnson find that nonstandard work hours—including evenings, nights, rotating shifts, or weekends—were not related to higher levels of parenting stress for either mothers or fathers. They conclude that “It may be that working-class fathers and mothers work long hours, have multiple jobs, or take informal jobs in order to earn enough to support the family or to avoid being fired, and thus they tend to feel that they are doing what they are supposed to do for their children” (2016, 1552). It is also possible that schedule predictability is important when it comes to parenting stress. Mariona Lozano and her colleagues (2016) find that Canadian workers with nonstandard but predictable schedules experience less stress than those with unpredictable schedules. They argue that parents may use nonstandard schedules “as a means to achieve better life-work balance” (Lo-

zano, Hamplová, and Le Bourdais 2016, 278). Some nonstandard work schedules—like night and weekend shifts—may allow parents to better split their childcare responsibilities with their partners (Carrillo et al. 2017; Lozano, Hamplová, and Le Bourdais 2016), which could reduce parenting stress.

Less research, however, has examined how other forms of schedule instability—such as on-call shifts, last-minute shift cancellation, short advance notice of schedules, and hours volatility—affect parenting stress. Research finds that parental stress generally increases during times of change (Cooper et al. 2009; Halpern-Meekin and Turney 2016) and during workplace transitions (Craig and Churchill 2019). It stands to reason that the types of schedule instability common in the retail and food service industries might increase parenting stress as well. A small but growing literature links schedule instability to poorer health and well-being, including greater psychological distress and poorer sleep quality (Schneider and Harknett 2019). Instability in work schedules can also affect parents financially (Ben-Ishai 2015; Haley-Lock 2011), which can in turn exacerbate parenting stress (Puff and Renk 2014). To our knowledge, however, no studies directly examine how precarious scheduling practices—including on-call shifts, last-minute shift cancellation, short advance notice of schedules, and hours volatility—affect parenting stress.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND RACE/ETHNICITY

Americans are marrying later and less than they were fifty years ago, resulting in a higher number of single-parent and complex families (Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2019). This is particularly true among those with lower levels of education (Wang and Parker 2014) and more precarious jobs (Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2019). Declines in marriage have been particularly steep among Black families (Raley 1996). It is therefore important to consider how family structure and race might moderate the effect of schedule instability on parenting stress, work-family conflict, and difficulty arranging care.

Parents who are married or cohabiting with

a partner may have more resources to buffer against the negative effects of schedule instability, compared to single mothers. Previous research suggests that parenting stress is particularly common among single mothers (Cooper et al. 2009). Having a partner might also reduce work-family conflict and make it easier to arrange childcare. In one study, Hui Liu and colleagues (2011) find that married parents experience some positive associations between nonstandard work schedules—including evening, weekend, and rotating shifts—and parental well-being. This may be because partnered parents are able to “tag team” (Carrillo et al. 2017) childcare with their partner, even when they experience schedule instability. Partners may be able to provide a ready source of backup childcare when work schedules change (Carrillo et al. 2017) or childcare arrangements fall through (Usdansky and Wolf 2008). Single mothers might therefore have a more difficult time arranging childcare for their children (Joshi and Bogen 2007) and experience more work-life conflict and parenting stress.

Yet these same benefits may not extend to cohabiting partners. Although married parents experience higher levels of well-being when working nonstandard work schedules, cohabiting parents working the same schedules experience lower levels of well-being and higher levels of work-family conflict (Liu et al. 2011). Cohabiting mothers working nonstandard schedules also report worse health than married mothers (Shen 2018). This may be because cohabiting parents are less likely to care for their partners’ children, receive childcare help from family members, and have fewer economic resources at their disposal (Abroms and Goldscheider 2002; Liu et al. 2011). These differences are important, considering that the numbers of cohabiting parents are growing (Lichter 2012) and that cohabiting mothers are more likely to work nonstandard hours (Presser 2005).

It is also possible that relationship status will not be strongly related to these outcomes. Researchers have found that marital status and children’s contact with fathers does not necessarily mean that both parents are sharing in childcare responsibilities (Usdansky and Wolf 2008). As Usdansky and Wolf reason, “sharing

a household or having a child in common may not mean sharing responsibility when childcare problems arise, whether because men use their greater economic resources to opt out of childcare duties, face greater time constraints, or subscribe to traditional gender ideologies” (2008, 1206). Precarious work schedules may therefore be particularly disruptive for mothers, who shoulder the bulk of childcare responsibilities (Blair-Loy 2009; Ishizuka 2018), regardless of their relationship status.

The precarious conditions in the service sector may also contribute to racial-ethnic inequality in well-being and to intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Black and Hispanic women are overrepresented in the low-wage service industry (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017a) and therefore disproportionately affected by the challenges of precarious schedules in this sector. Further, research suggests that Black and Hispanic mothers may be more vulnerable to parenting stress and work-life conflict. Some studies have found that Black mothers experience greater levels of parenting stress than their counterparts in other racial-ethnic groups (Nomaguchi and House 2013; Cardoso, Padilla, and Sampson 2010). Other research has shown that Hispanic women report relatively high levels of work-family conflict (Roehling, Jarvis, and Swope 2005). For these reasons, we expect that race-ethnicity may moderate the effects between precarious work and various aspects of parenting.

METHODS

To examine how precarious work schedules shape work-life conflict, difficulty arranging care, missed work, and parenting stress, we draw on survey data collected from the Shift Project. The Shift Project was designed to understand how unpredictable schedules shape the lives and well-being of service sector workers and their families. Between 2016 and 2019, the Shift Project collected completed surveys from approximately forty thousand workers employed in the retail and food-service sectors across the United States. Respondents in the sample are workers age eighteen or older, paid by the hour, and employed at 129 of the largest retail or food service employers in the United States. This paper restricts the Shift sample to

2,971 working mothers who were surveyed between 2017 and 2019. Because this article examines aspects of parenting, we select respondents with dependent children under the age of fifteen. Working mothers of young children represent about 7.5 percent of the Shift Project survey sample. The remainder of the Shift Project sample includes fathers, parents with children age fifteen or older, and nonparents.

We recruited respondents to the Shift Project using Facebook advertisements, targeted by employer name. Advertisements included a photograph of a worker in a setting designed to resemble their workplace, along with text reading, “Working at {*employer name*}? Take a Short Survey and Tell us About Your Job!” and “Chance to win an iPad!” Respondents who clicked on the Facebook advertisement were taken to an online Qualtrics survey, which took about twenty minutes to complete. Although nearly 80 percent of Americans aged eighteen to fifty are active on Facebook (Greenwood, Perin, and Duggan 2016), some people may be more likely to take surveys of this kind than others. We poststratify the data by race-ethnicity, age, and gender and weight the data to the characteristics of parents working in the same sectors surveyed by the American Community Survey. We further adjust the sample to correct for any over- or underrepresentation of respondents by employers by weighting the data to capture the relative employment sizes of each employer according to benchmarks we calculate from the Reference USA data.

We describe the data collection procedures for the Shift Project survey in detail elsewhere (Schneider and Harknett 2022) and these data have been used in a series of recent articles (Harknett et al. 2022; Harknett, Schneider, and Wolfe 2020; Schneider and Harknett 2019; Schneider 2020; and Storer, Schneider, and Harknett 2020).

Measures

We examine four dependent variables to capture different aspects of parenting. First, we measure parents’ reported difficulty arranging for childcare with the items: *How difficult to arrange childcare during work hours* (very, somewhat, a little bit, not at all); *Ever miss work because needed care for children and could not*

arrange (yes or no). Second, we measure work-life conflict through a scale variable (alpha = 0.83) constructed from four items: *It is easy to get time off when I need it; My shift and work schedule cause extra stress for me and my family; It is difficult to deal with family or personal matters during working hours; In my work schedule, I have enough flexibility to handle family needs*. Third, in line with previous research (see Cardoso, Padilla, and Sampson 2010; Cooper et al. 2009), we measure parenting stress using the Aggravation in Parenting Scale adapted from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey. We construct a scale variable (alpha = 0.78) of parenting stress: *Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be; Feel trapped by responsibilities as parent; Taking care of children much more work than pleasure; Often feel tired, worn-out, or exhausted from raising a family*.

We measure in our independent variables a detailed set of parental exposures to precarious scheduling practices. We first gauge schedule type, contrasting those who report that their schedule is variable (defined as “changes from day to day or week to week”) against those with regular day schedules, evening, night, or rotating schedule. We also gauge the amount of advance notice of work schedules, contrasting no to two days, three to six days, one to two weeks, and two or more weeks’ notice. We construct two dichotomous measures of schedule instability—whether the respondent worked at least one on-call shift in the prior month and whether the respondent experienced at least one timing change to schedule in the prior month. Unfortunately, we can only capture this “extensive margin” of on-call shifts and timing changes, not the “intensive margin” of the number of such shifts or changes. Finally, we measure work-hour volatility as the percentage difference in hours between the week in the prior month when the respondent worked the most hours compared to the week when they worked the fewest.

For our moderating variables, we compare parental respondents who report being married with those who report cohabiting and those who report no coresidential partner. We additionally examine moderation by respondents’ race-ethnicity, comparing the association between work schedule instability and our

outcomes for respondents who identify as non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, and as being of another race-ethnicity.

With our control variables, we adjust for a large set of potentially confounding demographic characteristics (age, race-ethnicity, speaking a language other than English at home, educational attainment, school enrollment, marital status, children age zero to four, children age five to nine, children age ten to fourteen, number of children), economic conditions (hourly wage, household income), and job characteristics (schedule control, nonstandard shifts, number of usual hours, occupation, job tenure) in addition to year and month fixed effects.

We present sample demographics in table 1. The mothers in the Shift Project sample, with a median age of thirty-three, are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Fewer than 10 percent holds a bachelor's degree and 10 percent have an associate's. Sixty-one percent of mothers live in households with less than \$35,000 in annual income, and mothers report earning a median wage of just \$11.65 an hour, with little schedule control, frequent night and evening shifts, and near-universal weekend work.

Analysis

We first estimate a series of OLS regression models that describe the association between these scheduling exposures and our outcome measures of difficulty arranging childcare, missed work, work-life conflict, and parental stress. We estimate separate models for each of our five measures of schedule instability and for each of our four dependent variables, for a total of twenty models. We then focus on our scale measure of schedule instability, showing the main effects on our four dependent variables. Finally, we test if these associations are moderated by family structure or race-ethnicity. We limit the analysis sample to respondents who completed the survey and met our inclusion criteria. We then perform multiple imputation to address item non-response.

RESULTS

We first present descriptive statistics from mothers in our sample, before turning to how schedule instability affects work-life conflict,

difficulty arranging childcare, and parenting stress.

Descriptive Statistics

Mothers in our data face significant challenges to arranging childcare. As shown in table 2, nearly half reported that arranging childcare was “very difficult” and another quarter reported that it was “somewhat difficult.” The result was often irreconcilable conflicts between work and care, with a third of parents reporting that they had to miss work in the last month because they needed to care for their child or children and could not arrange care. Parents in the sample also reported significant work-life conflict overall, with a mean score of 2.27. More readily interpretable are the distributions of response from the constituent items in the scale. For example, 30 percent of mothers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that “it is easy to get time off from [Employer] when I need it” and 38 percent said it was always or often true that it was “difficult to deal with family or personal matters during working hours.” Mothers also reported high levels of parenting stress, with a mean score of 2.44 of 4.

Mothers in our sample were exposed to a significant degree of schedule instability. Thirty-one percent reported a “variable schedule” that changed from day to day; another 17 percent reported a “rotating schedule.” Thirty-one percent reported a regular day shift. Mothers also received little notice of their work schedules, 17 percent receiving less than seventy-two hours and another 12 percent three to six days, for a total of nearly a third receiving less than one week and another 30 percent receiving one to two weeks. One in four mothers reported working on-call. Mothers reported that their schedules often changed at the last minute, 66 percent reporting changes like a later starting time or an earlier ending time to their shift in the last month. This schedule fluctuation added up to significant work-hour volatility, mothers reporting mean variation between the week in the last month with the greatest work hours and the week with the fewest of 31 percent. In the second column of table 2, we also compare the schedule instability of mothers with children under the age of fifteen (our analytic sample) with all other women in

Table 1. Demographic, Economic, and Work Covariates

	Weighted to ACS		Weighted to ACS
Demographics		Economic Conditions (cont.)	
Age		Hourly wage	
Mean	33	Mean	\$12.28
Median	33	Median	\$11.65
Race-ethnicity (%)		Job characteristics	
White, non-Hispanic	59	Schedule control (%)	
Black, non-Hispanic	12	Employer decides	56
Hispanic	22	Employer decides, some worker input	26
Other race-ethnicity, non-Hispanic	7	Worker decides with some limits	10
Language other than English at home (%)		Worker decides	2
Yes	17	Non-day shifts (%)	
Educational attainment (%)		Often	10
No degree or diploma	6	Sometimes	16
High school diploma or GED	38	Never	75
Some college	37	Weekend shifts (%)	
Associate's degree	10	Often or sometimes	94
Bachelor's degree	8	Weekly hours (%)	
School enrollment (%)		Mean	33
Enrolled in school	9	Median	36
Partnership Status (%)		Occupation (%)	
Married, living with spouse	45	Manager	31
Living with a partner	27	Cashier or clerk	22
Not living with a spouse or partner	28	Salesperson	16
Children age (%)		Customer service	4
Children 0–4	62	Waiter, waitress, server	5
Children 5–9	45	Cook	2
Children 10–14	38	Baker	2
Number of children (%)		Butcher, meat cutter	1
One child	31	Sandwich artist, food preparation	11
Two children	28	Delivery person	1
Three children	21	Other	5
Four children	11	Job tenure (%)	
Five or more children	10	Less than 1 year	18
Economic conditions		1 year	13
Household income (%)		2 years	13
Less than \$15,000 per year	17	3 years	10
At least \$15,000 but less than \$25,000	23	4 years	8
At least \$25,000 but less than \$35,000	21	5 years	5
At least \$35,000 but less than \$50,000	18	6 or more years	34
At least \$50,000 but less than \$75,000	12	Covered by, member of union (%)	
At least \$75,000 but less than \$100,000	8	Union	7
N	2,971	N	2,971

Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

Table 2. Parenting Outcomes and Measures of Schedule Instability

	Weighted to ACS Demographics	
	Women With Children < 15	Women Without Children < 15
Difficulty arranging childcare (%)		
Very difficult	47	—
Somewhat difficult	22	—
A little bit difficult	18	—
Not at all difficult	13	—
Miss work for child care (%)		
Yes	33	—
Work-life conflict scale		
Mean	2.27	—
Median	2.25	—
Parenting stress scale		
Mean	2.44	—
Median	2.50	—
		35
Schedule type (%)		
Variable schedule	31	35
Regular daytime schedule	31	27
Regular evening schedule	6	8
Regular night schedule	10	8
Rotating schedule	17	19
Other	4	4
Schedule change advance notice (%)		
0–2 days	17	14
3–6 days	12	15
1–2 weeks	30	28
2 or more weeks	40	44
On-call work in last month (%)		
Yes	25	20
Schedule timing change in last month (%)		
Yes	66	64
Work-hour volatility		
Mean	0.31	0.33
Median	0.27	0.28
N	2,971	22,409

Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

the sample. We see that mothers of younger children are somewhat less likely to have variable schedules and somewhat more likely to have regular day shifts and somewhat lower work-hour volatility, though these differences are not large. In contrast, mothers of young children are less likely to get two weeks' notice (40 percent versus 44 percent), more likely to work on-call shifts, and slightly more likely to have last-minute timing changes.

HOW SCHEDULE INSTABILITY AFFECTS PARENTS

We find consistent positive associations between each indicator of schedule unpredictability and difficulty arranging childcare. As shown in table 3, mothers who have variable (or rotating) shifts are significantly more likely to report trouble arranging childcare than those who have regular day shifts. We also find that relative to mothers with at least two weeks' notice of their schedules, those with less than seventy-two hours' have more difficulty arranging care.

Last-minute scheduling practices such as on-call shifts and changes to shift timing also significantly increase the difficulty of arranging care. Finally, work-hour volatility is also significantly associated with difficulty arranging childcare.

By and large, mothers who are exposed to unstable and unpredictable work scheduling practices are also more likely to report having had to miss work at least once in the last month because they needed childcare but could not arrange for it. We see positive associations between short notice, on-call shifts, timing changes to shifts, and work-hour volatility and this outcome. Mothers with more unpredictable work schedules also report significantly higher levels of work-life conflict, with consistent associations between working a variable (or rotating) shift relative to a day shift and work-life conflict as well as with having less than 1 week's notice of work schedules, working on-call, last-minute timing changes, and work-hour volatility. However, quite notably, we

Table 3. Work Scheduling Practices and Parenting Outcomes

	Hard to Arrange Care	Miss Work to Care	Work-Life Conflict	Parenting Stress
Work schedule type				
Regular day shift	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Variable schedule	0.195*	-0.017	0.277***	0.042
Evening shift	-0.164	-0.083	-0.019	-0.067
Night shift	0.080	-0.019	0.073	0.055
Rotating shift	0.251*	-0.055	0.355***	0.046
Other	0.235	-0.045	0.103	0.055
Amount of notice				
2+ weeks	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
1-2 weeks	0.046	0.034	0.095	0.071
3-6 days	0.124	0.072	0.229***	0.025
0-2 days	0.408***	0.171***	0.409***	-0.044
On-call shift				
No	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Yes	0.197*	0.101**	0.262***	0.013
Shift timing change				
No	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Yes	0.253***	0.081*	0.373***	0.074
Work-hour volatility	0.458**	0.243***	0.455***	-0.023
N	2,971	2,971	2,971	2,971

Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

do not find evidence of significant associations between schedule unpredictability and parenting stress across any of our five indicators.

INSTABILITY SCALE AND PARENTING CHALLENGES

In table 4, we assess the association between a scale measure of schedule instability and each of our four outcomes. We first test a categorical measure for the scale variable, which allows us to detect a nonlinear relationship. We see that difficulty arranging care increases with the number of exposures to different types of schedule instability, but that exposure to all five sources particularly raises the risk of difficulty arranging care. We similarly see a strongly positive relationship between schedule instability exposures and difficulty arranging childcare.

Turning to the outcome of missing work because of a lack of childcare, we do not find a significant relationship between one, two, three, or four exposures and missing work due to challenges finding childcare; however, those with five such exposures are significantly more likely to miss work because of childcare. When we constrain the estimated relationship to be linear, we see that missing work for care increases as the schedule instability scale exposures increase.

Work-life conflict is strongly patterned by the number of exposures to schedule instability, rising substantially and significantly in the categorical specification as well as in the linear specification. However, as we saw for each of

the indicators of schedule instability, there is no relationship between the instability scale and parenting stress.

MODERATION OF SCHEDULE INSTABILITY AND PARENTING CHALLENGES

In table 5, we present results from models that test whether marital status moderates the associations between schedule instability and parenting challenges. We do so by interacting the linear term for exposures to work schedule instability with a three-category measure of marital status—married, cohabiting, and single. We find no evidence that marital status moderates the association between schedule instability and difficulty arranging childcare or missing work because of not being able to arrange childcare.

However, we find that the association between schedule instability and work-life conflict is strongest for single mothers. In figure 1, we plot this association based on predicted values from the regression model in table 5. Although work-life conflict rises with schedule instability for all mothers, the slope is steepest for those who are not living with a spouse or partner.

Despite not finding evidence of main effects of schedule instability on parenting stress, we do find that cohabiting mothers appear to be negatively affected by schedule instability. For cohabiters, but not for single or married mothers, parenting stress rises with work schedule instability, as depicted in figure 2.

Table 4. Work Schedule Instability Scale and Parenting Outcomes

	Hard to Arrange Care	Miss Work to Care	Work-Life Conflict	Parenting Stress
Schedule instability scale				
0	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
1	0.079	0.006	0.161	-0.004
2	0.249	0.014	0.324**	0.073
3	0.369**	0.029	0.500***	0.107
4	0.348*	0.120	0.591***	0.058
5	0.794***	0.198*	1.045***	0.084
Schedule instability scale	0.123***	.040**	0.176***	0.018
N	2,971	2,971	2,971	2,971

Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

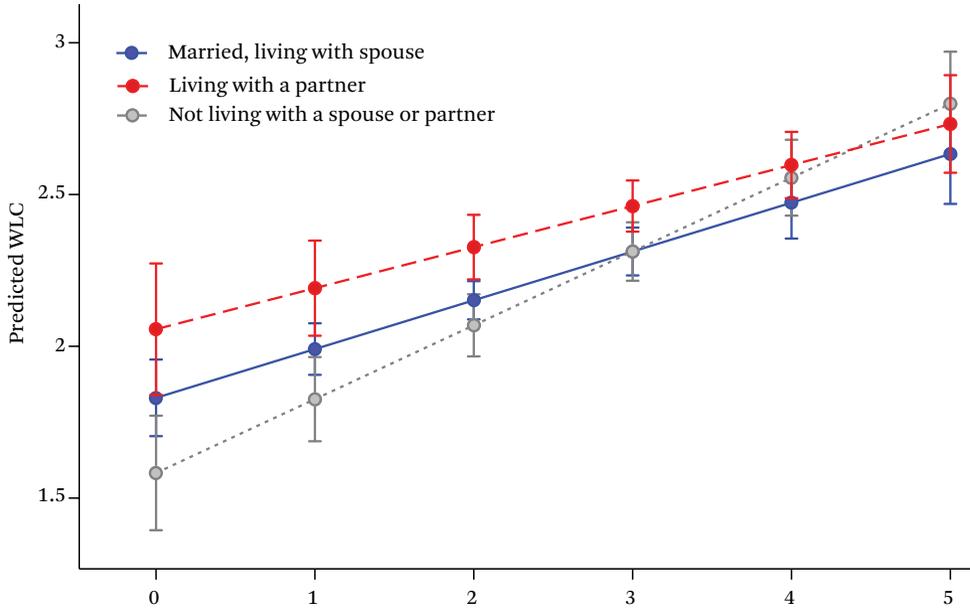
Table 5. Schedule Instability and Parenting Outcomes, Moderation by Family Structure and Race/Ethnicity

	Hard to Arrange Care	Miss Work to Care	Work-Life Conflict	Parenting Stress
Schedule instability scale	0.099*	0.046*	0.161***	-0.016
Marital status				
Married	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Cohabiting	0.030	0.140	0.223	-0.242*
Single	-0.102	0.018	-0.248*	-0.119
Race-ethnicity				
White, non-Hispanic	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Black, non-Hispanic	-0.371	0.150	-0.154	-0.442
Hispanic	-0.105	-0.127+	.269*	-0.146
Other race-ethnicity, non-Hispanic	0.173	-0.069	-0.055	0.043
Instability*marital				
Married*instability	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Cohabiting*instability	0.022	-0.035	-0.025	0.096**
Single*instability	0.069	0.010	0.082*	0.039
Instability*race-ethnicity				
White, non-Hispanic*instability	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Black, non-Hispanic*instability	-0.109	-0.018	0.046	.138**
Hispanic*instability	-0.084	0.041	.088*	0.046
Other race-ethnicity, non-Hispanic*instability	-0.007	0.048	0.052	-0.022
N	2,971	2,971	2,971	2,971

Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

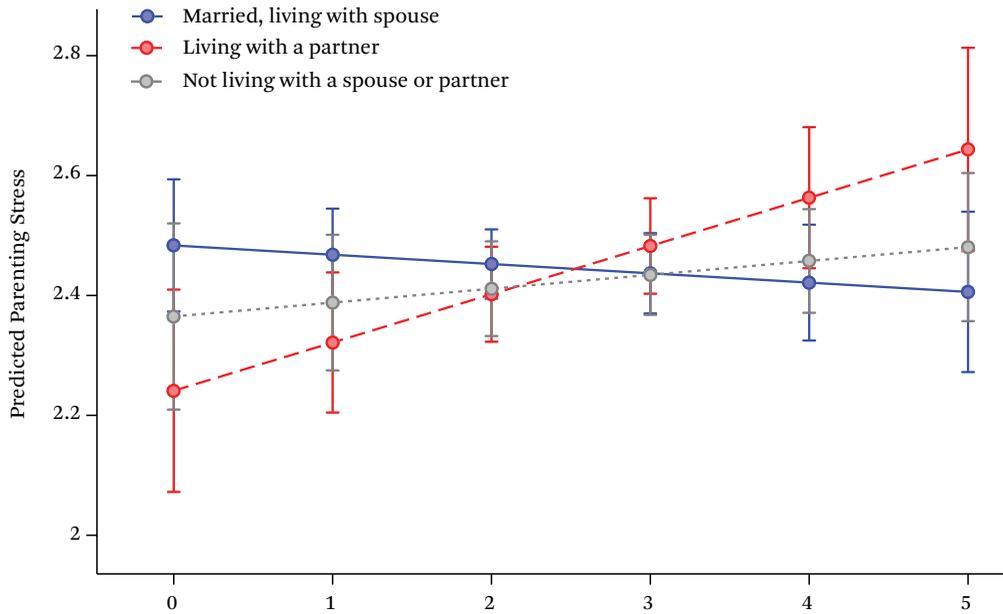
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Figure 1: Work Life Conflict by Schedule Instability and Marital Status



Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

Figure 2: Parenting Stress by Schedule Instability and Marital Status



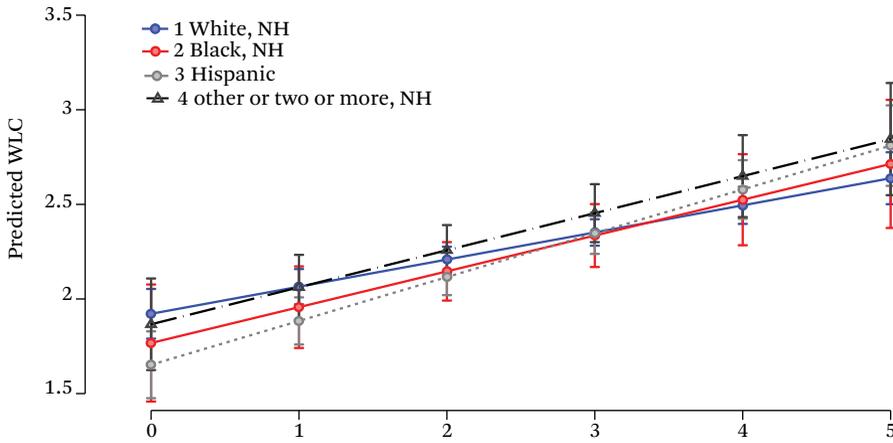
Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

We also examine whether the associations between work schedule instability and outcomes are moderated by race-ethnicity. As we saw for marital status, we see little evidence of significant moderation of the relationship between schedule instability and difficulty arranging care or having to miss work for care by race-ethnicity. Mothers feel these challenges regardless of marital status or race-ethnicity. However, we do find that schedule instability has significantly more pernicious consequences for work-life conflict for Hispanic mothers than for non-Hispanic White moth-

ers. We plot the gradient of work-life conflict by schedule instability by race-ethnicity in figure 3. Although the interaction coefficient is positive, the predicted values plot shows that the substantive differences in the strength of the association are not particularly large between Hispanic mothers and non-Hispanic mothers.

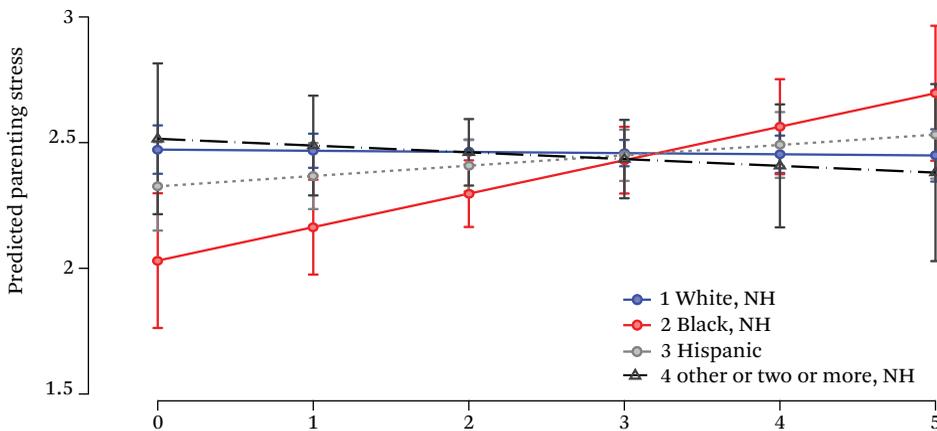
In contrast, when it comes to parenting stress, we find significant moderation by race-ethnicity for non-Hispanic Black mothers, who are more strongly affected than their non-Hispanic White counterparts. Figure 4 plots

Figure 3. Work-Life Conflict by Schedule Instability and Race/Ethnicity



Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

Figure 4. Parenting Stress by Schedule Instability and Race/Ethnicity



Source: Authors' calculations from Shift Project data.

predicted values of parenting stress by schedule instability and by maternal race-ethnicity.

Despite an essentially null relationship for non-Hispanic White mothers, Hispanic mothers, and mothers of other race-ethnicities, the gradient is clear and positive for non-Hispanic Black mothers, for whom greater schedule instability is associated with increased parenting stress. We find no such interaction for our other three outcomes, however.

CONCLUSION

Over the last several decades, shifts in both the nature of work and family life have been profound. The share of women working in the paid labor market has increased dramatically in sixty years (Cohany and Sok 2007). Between 1975 and 2017, the proportion of mothers with children under eighteen in the labor force increased from 47 to 71 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017b). Yet many of the jobs available today, especially to workers of color and those with lower levels of education, have grown increasingly precarious (Kalleberg 2009). This is particularly true in the service sector, where workers often confront unstable and unpredictable work schedules in addition to low wages. At the same time, we have also seen marked changes in the composition of families. These include delays in marriage, along with a rise of cohabiting and single-parent households (Cherlin 2005). As the sociologist Arne Kalleberg writes, “The growth of dual-earner families made it more important for workers to have control over their work schedules and the flexibility to attend to non-work, familial activities” (2011, 14). For many service-sector workers, however, this schedule control does not exist (Gerstel and Clawson 2018; Lambert 2008; Schneider and Harknett 2019).

Against the backdrop of rising precarity in the labor market and changes within families, this article examines how unpredictable work schedules affect three important dimensions of parenting: difficulty arranging care, work-family conflict, and parenting stress. It shows that, for a national sample of low-wage mothers working in the service sector and raising children under the age of fifteen, unpredictable work schedules—including on-call shifts, shift timing changes, work-hour volatility, and little

notice of work schedules—are associated with increased work-family conflict, difficulty arranging childcare, and missed work. We do not find evidence of main effects of schedule instability on parenting stress. Because parenting stress specifically refers to the feeling that the demands of parenting exceed the resources available to meet those demands (Cooper et al. 2009), mothers might see their work—however unpredictable—as a way of meeting their parenting demands (Nomaguchi and Johnson 2016).

We also find that marital status moderates the associations between schedule instability and both work-life conflict and parenting stress. The association between schedule instability and work-life conflict is particularly pronounced for single mothers. This linkage is concerning considering that work-life conflict is associated with worse health and well-being overall (Kelly and Moen 2007). We also find that parenting stress rises with work schedule instability for cohabiting mothers, but not for single or married mothers. We initially predicted that single mothers would be the most affected by schedule instability, as they lack partners to “tag team” childcare (Carrillo et al. 2017). It is possible, however, that cohabiting partners are less likely to care for each other’s children or have family members who are willing to step in to help with childcare (Abroms and Goldscheider 2002), thereby increasing parenting stress. Single mothers might have more resources at their disposal than their marital status indicates—including relatives or nonresident partners who are able to help with childcare. We do not find that marital status moderates the association between schedule instability and difficulty arranging childcare or missing work because of not being able to arrange childcare. It is possible that this is in part because, regardless of their marital status, women are expected to be the primary caretakers in their families (Blair-Loy 2009; Ishizuka 2018).

We also find that Black mothers experience the negative effects of schedule instability more strongly than White mothers when it comes to parenting stress. Research finds that Black mothers may experience greater levels of parenting stress more broadly (Nomaguchi and

House 2013; Cardoso, Padilla, and Sampson 2010). Our research suggests that unpredictable work schedules could exacerbate these trends, heightening inequality across racial groups. This finding is especially concerning given that Black women are already overrepresented in the low-wage service industry (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017a) where schedule instability is common (Schneider and Harknett 2019).

Some limitations apply in interpreting these results. Although our data do not constitute a probability sample, they have been validated and benchmarked to probability samples (Schneider and Harknett 2022). Still, if mothers who are the most stressed and time-strained are the least likely to respond to our survey, we might underestimate the association between work schedules and parenting outcomes. Our analysis also relies on cross-sectional data. It is therefore possible that some workers might choose some of the schedule types we observe. For example, some researchers argue that workers might choose nonstandard schedules as a way of attaining better work-life balance (Lozano, Hamplová, and Le Bourdais 2016). Although workers might strategically ask for night or weekend shifts, however, we doubt that many workers would request schedules with little notice or that are otherwise unpredictable. Further, workers in the low-wage service industry typically have very little control over their work schedules, making it less likely that they choose them (Lambert 2008). Our work is also subject to other threats to causality, including the possibility that workers are negatively selected into unpredictable schedules on unobservable characteristics that also heighten work-life conflict and difficulty arranging childcare. It is possible that some mothers who face extreme schedule instability may drop out of the workforce altogether and are therefore not captured in our sample. Finally, future work might further examine whether and how location shapes these patterns.

Although these data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, we expect that the lives of low-wage mothers working in the service industry became more challenging during the pandemic. Many of the workers in the sample—particularly those employed by grocery

stores and pharmacies—were essential workers who did not have the luxury to work from home. They likely also faced new challenges when it came to arranging childcare, as schools and daycare centers closed. Initial research suggests that Hispanic parents faced particular difficulties in arranging childcare for their children (Karpman, Gonzalez, and Kenney 2020). It is possible that some workers—particularly mothers—may have been forced to reduce work hours or leave the labor force during this period if unable to reconcile the competing demands of work and family (Collins et al. 2020). Future work should further examine the experiences of service-sector workers during the COVID-19 crisis and how they navigated these challenges.

To some extent, the growth in precarious work and job insecurity since the 1970s has affected workers across the socioeconomic spectrum (Hacker 2006; Kalleberg 2011). Research shows that higher-income workers are not immune from the changing demands of work and family life (Kelly and Moen 2020). Yet some workers are more vulnerable to these changes than others. Our research centers work-life conflict among low-wage service workers. Low-wage workers often lack workplace protections and other resources that could help workers in “good jobs” (Kalleberg 2011) mitigate this conflict. We therefore argue that parents working in the service industry are a particularly relevant group to consider for research and policy purposes. Our research shows that, even before the pandemic, mothers working in the low-wage service sector faced heightened work-life conflict and difficulty arranging care when working unpredictable schedules. They were also more likely to miss work. The results of this study add to a small but growing body of evidence that scheduling practices have a meaningful effect on family life. Although evidence on the effects of unpredictable schedules on worker and family well-being is limited, several cities and states have already advanced innovative legislation to regulate these practices. Laws passed in San Francisco, Seattle, New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Oregon seek to regulate or restrict the use of on-call shifts and last-minute shift changes. Those working at large

firms in Seattle, for instance, are now entitled to two weeks' notice of work schedules and unpredictability pay when that requirement is not met (Seattle City Council 2021). Similar legislation has been proposed at the national level.¹ Early evaluations of these policies provide evidence that they have positive effects on worker's lives. A recent examination of the effects of the Fair Workweek Ordinance in Emeryville, California, for instance, suggests that the ordinance decreased schedule unpredictability among parents while improving well-being (Ananat, Gassman-Pines, and Fitz-Henley II 2022, this issue). The ordinance specifically reduced the forms of scheduling unpredictability that we find are especially damaging to mothers, including last-minute shift changes. We see changes in scheduling practices as central to improving the lives of low-wage service workers.

Policies that provide greater access to high-quality, affordable childcare could additionally make it easier for low-wage parents to arrange childcare for their children. Yet childcare providers would need to offer options to accommodate the unpredictable schedules of many service-sector workers to effectively support this group. National Paid Family leave would similarly benefit low-wage service workers, who often do not have access to paid sick leave through their employers (Schneider and Harknett 2020). Our hope is that these future policy changes will make the lives of low-wage workers and their families easier.

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