

CALL FOR ARTICLES

RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences

Issue on:

**New Developments in American Job Quality:
Understanding the Recent Rise of Low-Wage Jobs and
Nonstandard Work Arrangements**

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The question of job quality has emerged as a key challenge for researchers and policy-makers in the 21st century. The growing realization that the quality, not just the quantity, of jobs is central to addressing a myriad of social and economic problems—such as economic development, family formation and social integration, poverty and inequality, and individual well-being—has put this age-old topic on the front burner for social scientists.

This issue of *RSF* will focus on two important dimensions of the quality of jobs created in the past three decades in the United States. First, there has been an expansion of low-wage jobs, a phenomenon that has been documented by numerous studies, many of which have been sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation. This proliferation of low-wage work, especially among younger workers, has contributed to the weakening of the middle class, reversing the dramatic improvements experienced by the middle of the income distribution in the three decades following World War II (Sullivan, Warren and Westbrook 2001; Appelbaum, Bernhardt and Murnane 2006).

Second, there has been a dramatic increase in nonstandard jobs such as temporary help agency workers, on-call workers, contract workers, and independent contractors or freelancers. Many of these jobs are *uncertain, unstable and insecure*, in which *employees bear most of the risks* of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and *receive limited social benefits and statutory protections* (e.g., Kalleberg 2011). Recent studies document an increased incidence of alternative work arrangements, especially among workers hired through contract firms (Weil 2014; Katz and Krueger 2016). While some nonstandard jobs may be good ones—such as well-paid consultants who have high control over the terms and conditions of work—most such jobs are characterized by low pay, low security, and poor working conditions.

Low-wage and nonstandard jobs are interconnected. In both types, workers typically receive few employment-related benefits. They also often lack statutory protections in the form of labor laws and benefits such as health insurance and pension contributions that some employers provide. Moreover, workers in low-wage and nonstandard jobs

often tend to be the most vulnerable members of the labor force such as racial and ethnic minorities, women, immigrants and undocumented workers. While nonstandard jobs often pay low wages, low-wage jobs are also increasingly found in “standard” employment relations. The shifting of risks from employers to workers has reduced protections for standard workers too, leading to declines in their quality.

This journal issue aims to bring together papers that examine three main topics related to job quality in the United States: the *causes* of the increase in low-wage and nonstandard jobs; their *impacts on workers and their families*; and *policies* that are needed to enhance the quality of low-wage and nonstandard jobs. We discuss each topic area in turn, and illustrate the kinds of papers that we encourage for this issue (though we also welcome topics other than those listed below).

Causes

First, we seek papers that assess what we have learned about the causes of the collapse of decent jobs since the publication of the summary volume of the RSF low-wage project. A central conclusion of that research was that “the most important influence on the observed differences in low-wage work is the ‘inclusiveness’ of a country’s labor market institutions” (Gautié and Schmitt 2010, p. 7). But leading explanations, especially by economists, continue to emphasize demand and supply shifts that are rooted in computer-driven changes in skill requirements. At the same time, other research and influential commentary has stressed the importance of increasing competition with lower labor cost regions, made possible by advances in communications and transportation technologies. These explanations (and others) may not be independent of one another, and this raises possible questions that could be explored in this journal issue. These include:

--How important are changes in the demand for and supply of skills for explaining the wage stagnation and proliferation of low-wage nonstandard jobs?

--How closely linked are changes in supply and demand with advances in production, communication and transportation technologies, and what explains differences in the use of these technologies across firms, occupations, sectors and countries? To what extent does the cross-country evidence support the view that skill-biased demand shifts are the source of the rising incidence of low pay and nonstandard work practices, and that these are caused by advances in production technologies and/or by the competitive pressures globalization (which has, in turn, been promoted by advances in communications and transportation technologies)?

--How important are shifts in the demand for skills for explaining reductions in job quality in the firms in which workplace computerization is occurring, and to what extent has declining employment in these firms increased the supply of workers—and lowered job quality—in other firms and sectors? Are there good case studies of these dynamics? Is there compelling evidence of the extent to which the supply of worker skills can account for declines in job quality in firms that are undergoing rapid skill upgrading?

--Is the mix of labor market institutions a central part of the explanation for trends in low pay and nonstandard jobs, and if so, to what extent is there an interaction between institutions and workers' bargaining power on the one hand, and technology-driven shifts in skill requirements on the other, and for which firms, occupations, sectors and countries?

--What do we know about the separate effects of fissuring, de-unionization, minimum wage, and trade and offshoring, for the proliferation of low paid and nonstandard jobs in particular jobs, occupations, or industries? To what extent can these effects be distinguished from changes in the skill requirements of production technologies?

--For specific occupations and sectors that account for a large portion of the growth of low wage and non-standard jobs (e.g., cashiers or fast food counter clerks), what does the case study evidence suggest about: 1) the effects of technological change on skill requirements; 2) the correspondence between changes in skills and changes in wages; and 3) the role played by the increasing supply of low-skilled workers on wages and the proliferation of nonstandard jobs?

-- How have shifts in the composition of the labor force—in terms of gender, education, race and ethnicity, age, immigration status—affected the growth of low wage jobs and nonstandard work arrangements?

--Have changes in the social wage in recent decades—cash transfers, child-care support, housing and health subsidies, etc. that are independent of employment status—affected the “reservation wage” of workers and thereby their bargaining power and the proliferation of low wage and/or “bad” nonstandard jobs?

Consequences

The growth of low-wage jobs and nonstandard work arrangements has affected different groups within the population in different ways. Here we seek papers that address the impacts of these developments on workers and their families. Examples of topics include:

--What accounts for demographic differences (among groups defined by gender, race and ethnicity, age, immigration status, education, region) in low-wage and/or nonstandard work?

--How and why have job stability and the duration of jobs changed, and in which occupations and industries? Do these changes closely track technological changes in the workplace and employment/wage polarization? What are the implications for income security and the psychological wellbeing of American families?

--How are opportunities for promotion and career advancement changing? How do changes in opportunities differ across occupations and industries? How closely do these changes track technological changes in the workplace and employment/wage polarization? What are the implications for income security and the psychological wellbeing of American families?

--What are the effects of low-wage and nonstandard work on physical and mental health, family dynamics and other non-economic characteristics? How do these impacts differ among demographic groups?

--To what extent are low-wage jobs found in “standard” employment relations and what are the implications for working families?

--What are the geographic and political impacts of the expansion of low-wage nonstandard jobs?

Policies

The rise of low-wage jobs and nonstandard work arrangements has been linked to a large number of social and economic problems—such as family fragmentation, poverty and inequality, and poor individual well-being—which have led to calls for policies designed to tackle these concerns. Examples of topics that might be addressed include:

--What kinds of changes to labor and employment laws might be effecting in reducing the incidence of low pay and nonstandard work arrangements? What are the implications of alternative policies for the gendered nature of low wage and nonstandard jobs?

--How much of the rising incidence of low wage and nonstandard jobs is due to the lack of enforcement of regulations already on the books? How prevalent is wage theft and what can be done about it?

--Beyond labor market regulations, how might the social safety net be expanded to support workers in low-wage jobs and nonstandard work arrangements, especially for female workers?

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to two pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than 5 PM EST on **December 20, 2017** to:

<https://rsfjournal.onlineapplicationportal.com/>

All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to <https://rsfjournal.onlineapplicationportal.com/> will be

considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org and not to the email addresses of the editors of the issue.

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on **June 8, 2018** with a group dinner taking place on the night of the 7th. The selected contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present draft papers (due in a month prior to the conference) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their final drafts on or before August 1, 2018. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers before January 10, 2019. The full and final issue will be published in September 2019. Papers will be published open access on the *RSF* website as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse.

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