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Exposing the Precarious Nature of Service Sector Work

Shift Project Survey of 7,850 Retail, Grocery, Food Service Workers in California Shows Widespread Impact of Low Wages, Lack of Sick Leave, and Unpredictable Scheduling

SAN FRANCISCO, CA – Even in a good economy, California’s retail, grocery, and food service workers reported a precarious existence, due to low wages, meager benefits and unpredictable scheduling, according to a new report released today by The Shift Project (<http://shift.berkeley.edu>), entitled “Essential Changes Needed for Essential Workers: Job Quality for California’s Service Sector.”

Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic magnifying the precarity of shift workers, the researchers behind the new report say policy makers and employers must take steps to improve conditions.

Daniel Schneider, co-director of The Shift Project and Professor of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School, said key areas for improvement include increasing wages and ensuring access to health insurance and paid sick leave. “But one of the biggest steps we can take is fixing uncertain work schedules,” he said. “Our data shows that most of California’s retail and food service workers face instability in scheduling.”

Service sector employees have vexing schedules that vary from week-to-week and day-to-day, often with little advance notice and even less employee control, said Kristen Harknett, co-director of The Shift Project and Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, San Francisco. Additionally, many must work “clopening” shifts—working a closing shift and then returning in a few hours to work an opening shift. She said such schedules lead to unhealthy sleeping and eating patterns and less time with family.

Researchers from The Shift Project surveyed 7,850 California service sector employees over four years, revealing a bevy of challenges these workers face on the job, including low wages, minimal benefits and unpredictable scheduling. Among their key findings:

- Unstable and unpredictable schedules are common, with 28% of workers reporting on-call shifts in the last month and 68% reporting last minute changes to their schedules
- This unpredictability goes hand-in-hand with insufficient hours. 35% of these workers are involuntarily part time.
- Women and workers of color experience the most schedule unpredictability and instability and the most involuntary part-time work.
- Women, and particularly Latina and Black women, are more likely than white men to report being involuntarily part time.
- Unpredictable schedules negatively affect these workers’ health, sleep, and family life
- The minimum wage has risen, but half of these workers still earn less than \$15 per hour, far below a living wage.

- The legally required amount of paid sick leave – just three days – leaves these workers economically pressured to work when sick.

Even before the pandemic, service sector workers had little margin for coping with economic shocks from reduced work, furloughs, layoffs or missed work from illness, Harknett said.

“Our data provides a stark look at the risk and uncertainty that these workers faced on a good day,” Harknett said. “Now we must examine what role policymakers and employers play in improving conditions amid an ongoing public health crisis.”

The researchers say legislation could effectively move the needle on work schedule instability, unpredictability, and insufficiency. They cite Seattle’s Secure Scheduling Ordinance, in effect since 2017, which mandated that service sector workers receive at least two weeks’ notice of their schedules.

“This could be replicated in California and nationwide,” Schneider added.

“Employers can also take the high road here,” Harknett said. “Some employers are making the choice to offer workers more notice and more stability.”

Companies such as Costco, Trader Joe’s, and Home Depot provide most of their employees at least two weeks of notice. These same companies also have fewer employees who report being involuntarily part-time, according to The Shift Project’s data.

“As we continue to rely on our essential service sector workforce, improved wages and paid sick leave are critical to ensuring our supply chain stays strong and our basic needs are met,” Schneider said. “But removing the unpredictability of retail, grocery and food service work is important, too. By improving scheduling and allowing these workers some modicum of predictability, we can give our essential workers the dignity and job stability they deserve.”

For The Shift Project’s newest brief entitled, “Essential Changes Needed for Essential Workers: Job Quality for California’s Service Sector,” visit: <https://shift.berkeley.edu/files/2020/06/Essential-Changes-Needed-for-Essential-Workers.pdf>.

For more from The Shift Project about improving scheduling for service sector workers, visit: <https://shift.berkeley.edu/publications/>.

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A joint project of Harvard Kennedy School and UC San Francisco, The Shift Project studies workers and workplace practices at the nation’s largest retail and food service firms. Shift researchers assess the consequences of precarious employment for worker and family health and wellbeing. The James Irvine Foundation provided funding for the research and brief.