



Unpredictable and Unstable: Fast Food Jobs in Los Angeles

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In April of 2023, the city of Los Angeles enacted a [Retail Fair Workweek Ordinance \(FWWO\)](#) for large retailers. With the goal of improving the predictability and stability of workers' schedules, this ordinance requires that retail companies with 300+ employees offer their workers at least 14 days' advance notice of their work schedule, provide good-faith estimates of hours and the right to request schedule changes, and disburse "predictability pay" for last-minute changes or insufficient rest between shifts. In July of 2025, these protections were expanded to retail workers throughout the rest of the county. Los Angeles has joined a growing list of states and localities that have implemented Fair Workweek regulations—but many workers remain uncovered.

This research brief focuses on the working conditions of fast food workers in Los Angeles County, who are not covered by the FWWO. Fast food firms are defined as order-at-counter restaurants where food is served in carry-out packaging: places like McDonald's, Taco Bell, Chick-fil-A, and Domino's Pizza. Nearly 200,000 people

in the Los Angeles metropolitan area are employed in the fast food industry ([California EDD 2025](#)). We draw on recent survey data from fast food workers in the Los Angeles County service sector, collected by the Shift Project between spring 2021 and fall 2025, to better understand how these workers are faring. We also utilize data from retail workers in the county and throughout the state of California as a point of comparison, as well as to estimate how the FWWO in the city of Los Angeles has served to improve the quality of covered workers' schedules.

Service sector jobs in the United States are often characterized by low pay, few fringe benefits, and limited employee control over scheduled work days and times ([Lambert 2008](#)). Many service sector employers across the country rely on just-in-time and on-call scheduling practices designed to minimize labor costs by closely aligning staffing with consumer demand ([Appelbaum et al. 2003](#); [Golden 2015](#); [Clawson & Gerstel 2015](#)). These practices can introduce significant instability into the lives of workers and their families ([Lambert et al. 2014](#); [Schneider & Harknett 2019](#)).

This research brief is part of a series intended to advance our understanding of working conditions in the service sector—in particular, workers' exposure to schedule instability and unpredictability—in cities and states across the country. Since 2016, The Shift Project has collected survey data from workers employed by large service sector companies, reaching workers in the grocery, big box, pharmacy, retail apparel, hardware, fast food, casual dining, logistics, and hospitality sectors. We ask respondents about their work schedules, household economic security, and health and well-being, sampling employees of the firms that are the focus of recent state and local labor regulation efforts. Our data permit an unprecedented view of labor conditions in the service sector and provide unparalleled insight into the work and family lives of low-wage workers.

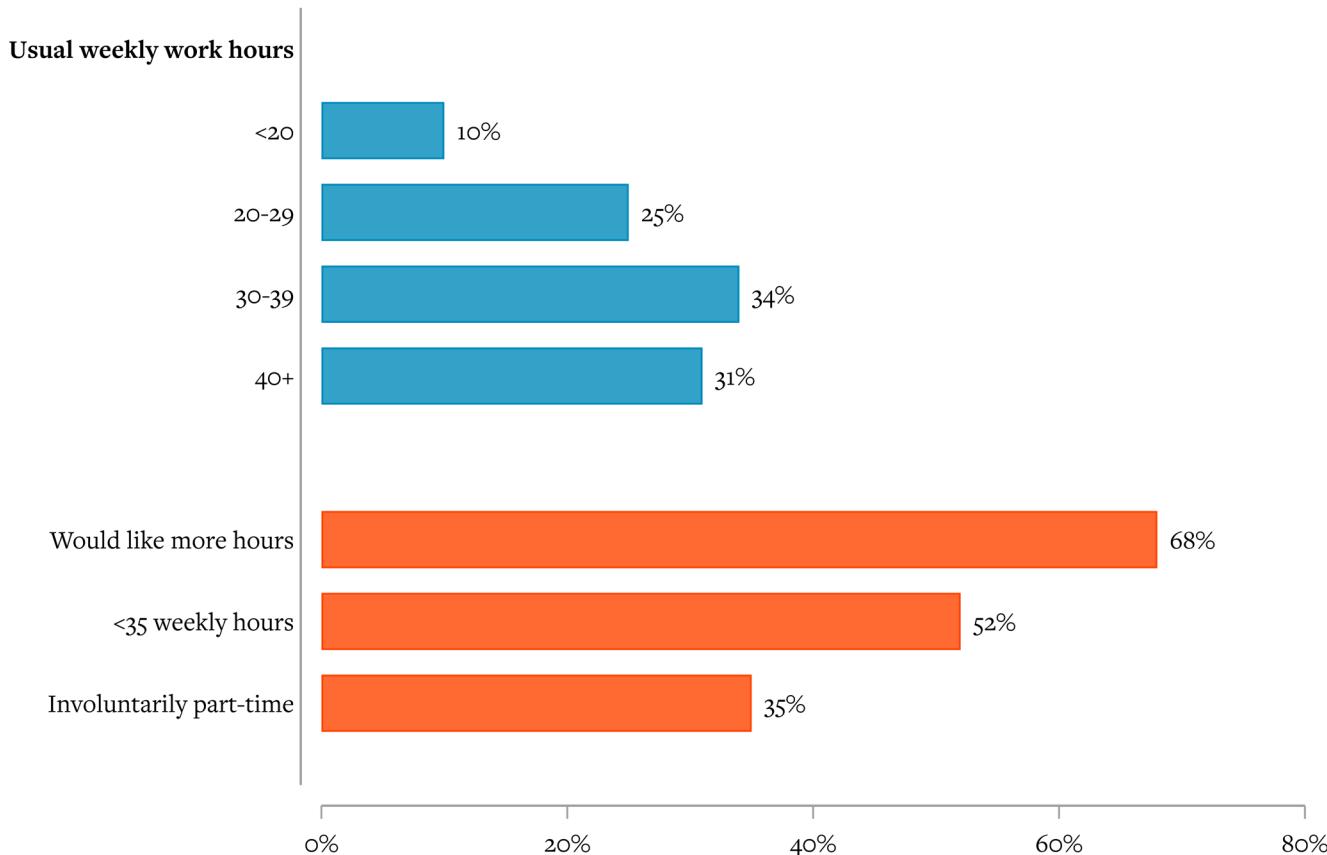
Insufficient Wages and Work Hours

The [minimum wage](#) for hourly workers in California has surpassed both the national minimum wage and the minimum wage standards of many other states.

While the federal minimum wage has remained stagnant at \$7.25 since 2009, the minimum wage for hourly workers in California has steadily risen. Over the period described in our data (March 2021 to November 2025), the minimum wage in California increased from \$14.00 per hour in 2021 (for employers with over 25 employees) to \$16.50 per hour in 2025 for all employers. Since 2024, fast food restaurant employers with at least 60 locations nationwide have an even higher minimum wage of \$20.00/hour. This significant increase in wages is a clear example of how state-level policy can support workers in the fast food industry.

Yet, wages are only part of the earnings equation. To make a livable income, workers need not only a living wage, but also sufficient work hours; a living wage assumes 40 hours of work per week and 52 weeks of work per year ([MIT Living Wage Calculator](#)). However, less than one third (31%) of Los Angeles fast food workers report usually working 40 or more hours per week (Figure 1). A larger share (35%) of workers report working fewer than 30 hours per week, and 10% report working fewer than 20 hours per week.

Figure 1. Work Hours for Fast Food Workers in Los Angeles County



While some fast food workers in Los Angeles are voluntarily employed on a part-time basis, many workers are involuntarily part-time. Most workers we surveyed (68%) reported a desire to work more hours than they typically receive. More than one third of workers (35%) can be characterized as “involuntary part-time” in that they work fewer than 35 hours per week at their main fast food job but reported wanting more hours at that job.

Unstable and Unpredictable Work Schedules

In addition to low wages and insufficient work hours, Los Angeles fast food workers also often face unstable and unpredictable work schedules (Figure 2).

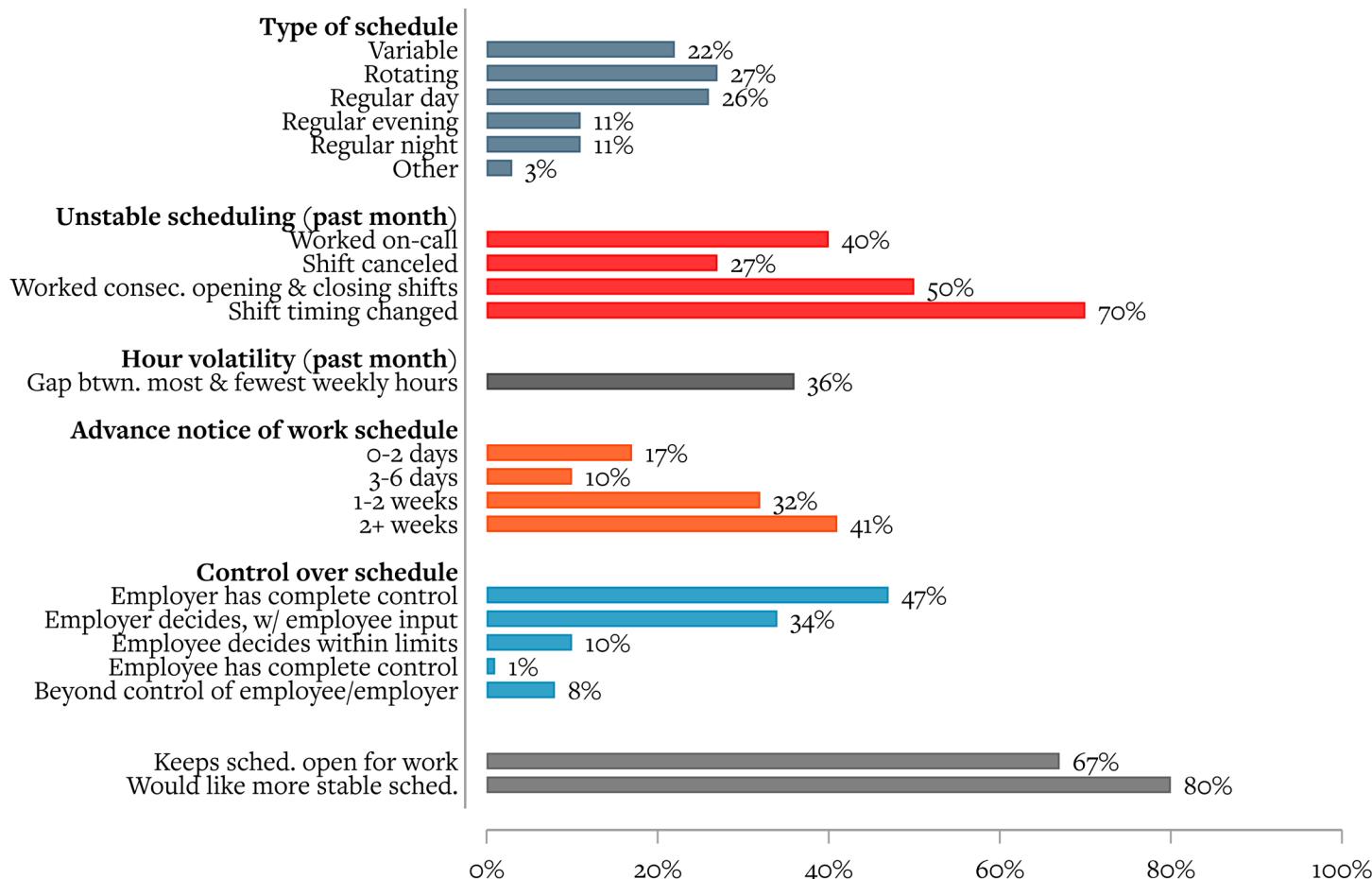
Almost half of workers report irregular schedules: 22% report variable schedules that change day-to-day, and 27% report rotating schedules. Another 22% report regularly working a night or evening shift, while only 26% of workers report a regular daytime

work schedule. In addition to the high prevalence of irregular shifts and shifts at non-standard times, 50% reported working consecutive closing then opening shifts in the prior month, referred to as “clopening.”

These schedules are often announced with very little advance notice. Fewer than half (41%) of workers receive at least 2 weeks’ advance notice of their work schedules. Thirty-two percent receive between 1 and 2 weeks’ notice. The remaining 27% receive less than 1 week’s advance notice, and of these workers, almost two thirds receive no more than two days’ notice. Further, 40% of workers reported working at least one “on-call” work shift in the prior month, meaning that they kept their schedule open and available for work but may or may not have actually been called in to work the shift.

Even once published, Los Angeles County fast food workers’ schedules are subject to change by management. Twenty-seven percent of workers

Figure 2. Work Scheduling Characteristics for Fast Food Workers in Los Angeles County



reported having at least one shift cancelled in the past month. The majority of workers also experienced last-minute changes to the timing of their work schedules. In fact, more than two thirds of workers (70%) reported that they experienced at least one last-minute change in the timing or length of a scheduled shift in the prior month: for example, being asked to come in early or late, or to leave early or stay later than the hours they were originally scheduled.

These unstable and unpredictable scheduling practices, in concert with a generally low base of work hours, conspire to produce a significant amount of variation in the total number of hours worked each week among Los Angeles County fast food workers. When asked about their work schedule over the past month, the average worker reported a difference of 13 hours between the week they worked the most hours and the week they worked the fewest hours, equivalent to 36% of the average worker's maximum number of hours.

In addition to the common experience of schedule instability and short notice, almost half of Los Angeles County fast food workers have no input when it comes to setting their work schedules. Thirty-four percent have some input, and only 11% of workers have a large degree of control over their scheduled work days and times. Compounding all these dimensions of scheduling instability, two thirds (67%) of workers reported that even in their personal time, they feel as though they have to keep their schedule open and available for work. This has implications for their ability to balance work and family responsibilities, to combine work with schooling or other pursuits, and overall to achieve a healthy and sustainable work-life balance. One clear indication that workers lack adequate scheduling flexibility, and instead grapple with substantial instability and unpredictability, is that eight in ten workers reported that they would like a more stable and predictable work schedule.

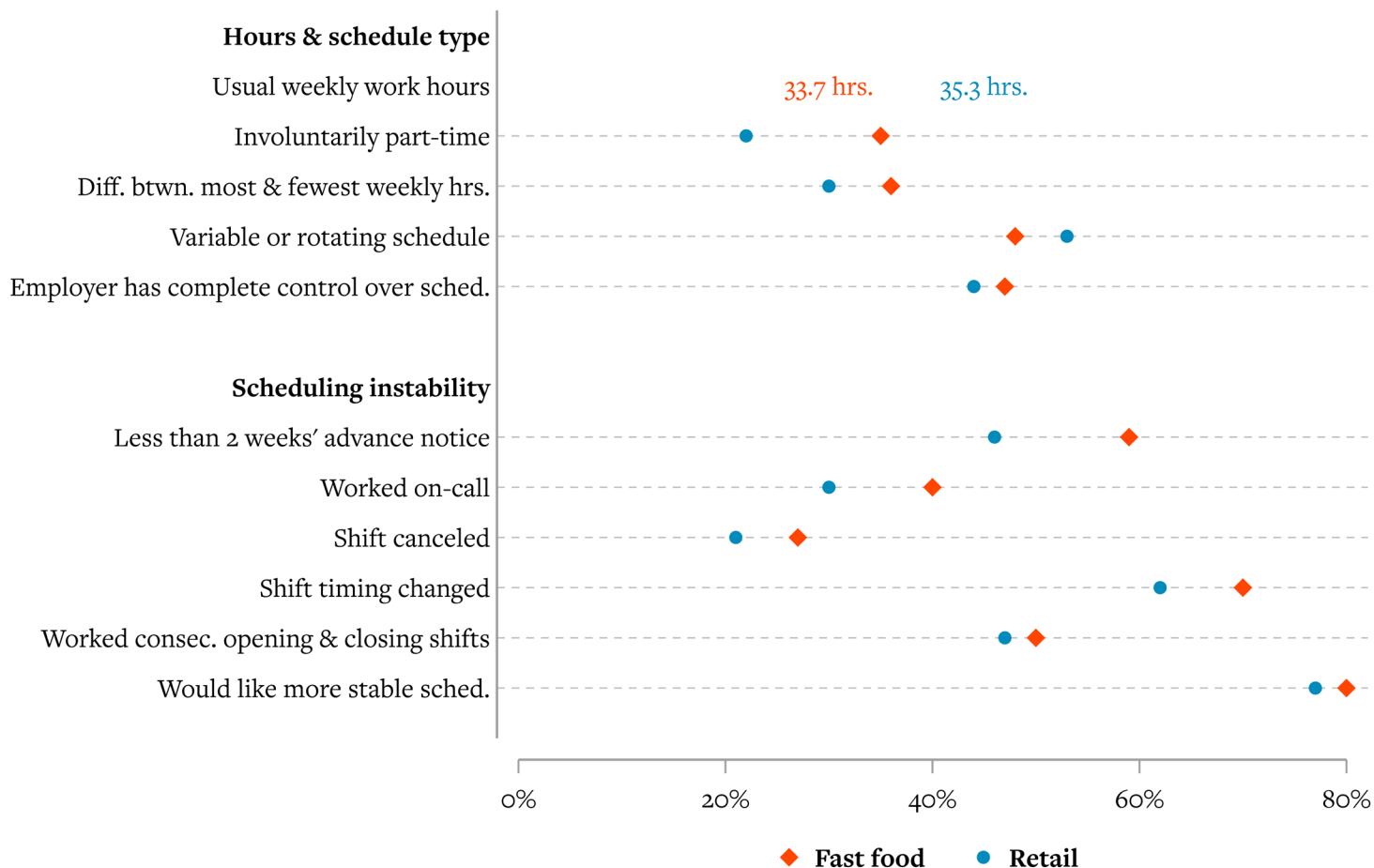
How Do Fast Food and Retail Compare?

In comparison to retail workers in Los Angeles, who are protected by the Retail Fair Workweek Ordinance (FWWO), fast food workers experience greater insecurity and unpredictability across multiple dimensions of work scheduling (Figure 3). They average 33.7 hours per week, slightly fewer than the 35.3 hours worked by retail employees. More than one third (35%) of fast food workers are involuntarily part-time, compared to just 22% of retail workers. They also experience a larger gap between their busiest and slowest weeks—about 13 hours on average (36% of maximum weekly hours), versus 11 hours (30%) for retail workers. While retail workers are slightly more likely to report having a variable or rotating schedule (53% vs. 48%), workers in both sectors report having minimal control over their schedules, with nearly half of each group indicating that their employer has complete control over when they work.

Fifty-nine percent of fast food workers receive less than two weeks' advance notice of their schedules, compared with 46% of retail workers. On top of receiving short notice, 40% of fast food workers report working at least one on-call shift in the prior month, versus 30% of retail workers. Similarly, 27% of fast food workers report having at least one shift canceled in the past month, compared with 21% of retail workers. More than two thirds of fast food workers (70%) experience a last-minute change in the timing or duration of a shift, compared with 62% of retail workers.

“Clopening” shifts and the desire for more stable schedules are highly prevalent in both subsectors. Fifty percent of fast food workers and 47% of retail workers in Los Angeles report working at least one consecutive opening-and-closing (“clopening”) shift in the past month, and roughly eight in ten workers in both industries say they would like more stable schedules.

Figure 3. Work Schedule Characteristics for Fast Food vs. Retail Workers in Los Angeles County



These data indicate that, in Los Angeles County, fast food workers grapple with more severe underscheduling and schedule instability than their retail counterparts. Note that because our 2021-2025 data include some survey responses collected before the FWW policies in the city of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County were implemented (April 2023 and July 2025, respectively), the disparities in scheduling outcomes between fast food workers and FWWO-covered retail workers are likely even larger today.

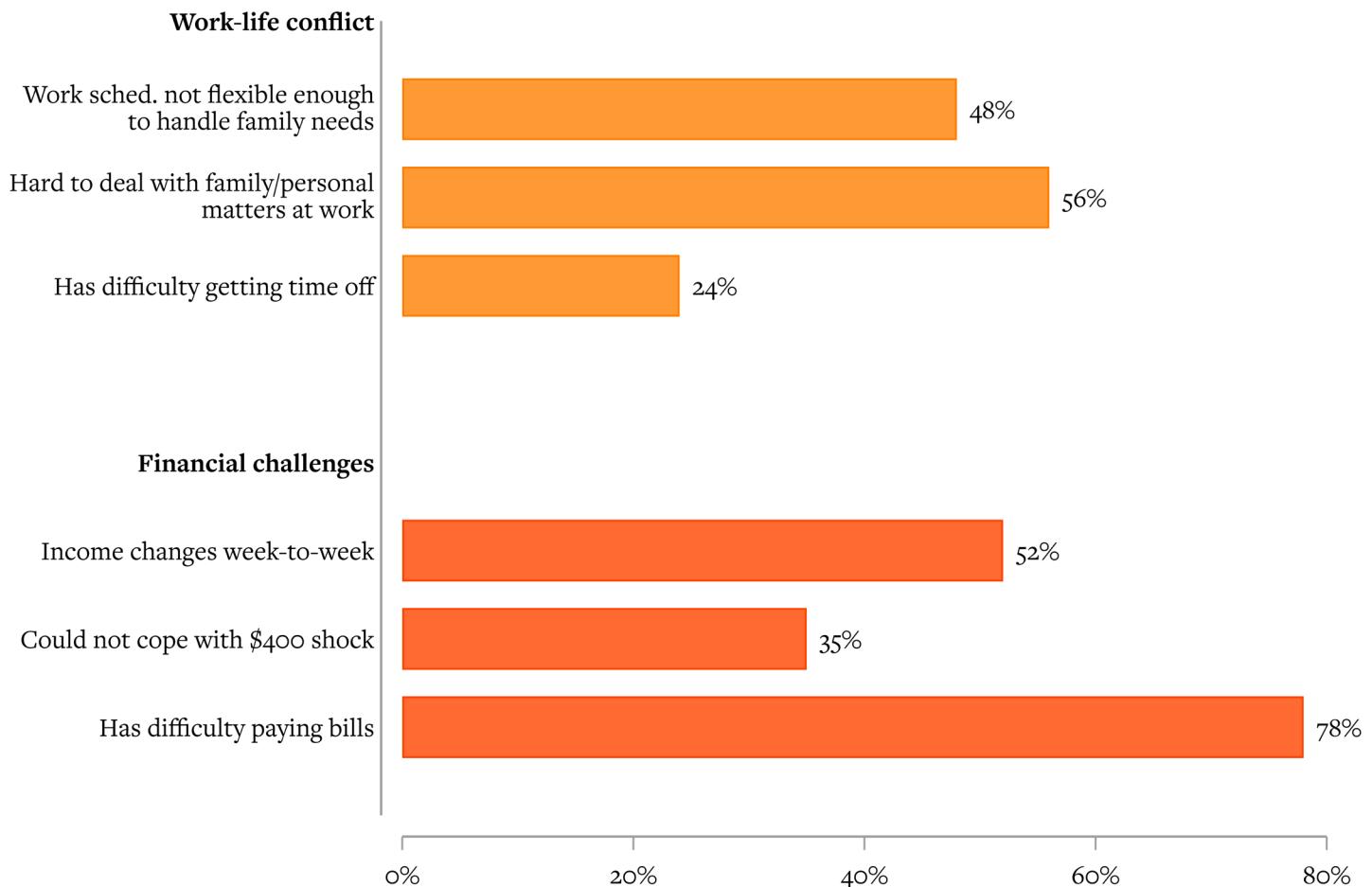
and caregiving responsibilities (Figure 4). Nearly half of workers tell us that their work schedule often does not provide enough flexibility to handle family needs, and 56% find it challenging to address family matters during work. Twenty-four percent of workers also report having difficulty getting time off when needed.

The variation in hours coupled with low wages, and, for many workers, insufficient hours, leads to income volatility and financial insecurity. In our sample, more than half of workers (52%) report that their income changes noticeably week-to-week, and nearly eight in ten workers reported that, in a typical month, they find it very difficult or somewhat difficult to cover their expenses and pay all their bills. When we asked workers whether they could come up with \$400 if an unexpected need arose within the next month, approximately one-third doubted that they could come up with the money.

Challenges Reported by Fast Food Workers in Los Angeles County

Given the constellation of unstable and unpredictable scheduling practices experienced by Los Angeles County fast food workers in our sample, it is not surprising that many of these workers report that their work schedule interferes with their family needs

Figure 4. Challenges Reported by Fast Food Workers in Los Angeles County



Work Schedule Quality & Worker Well-Being

While low wages and limited access to employer-sponsored benefits like health insurance are often highlighted as threats to the health and well-being of service sector workers, the unpredictability of these workers' schedules is another important factor. By disrupting household routines and producing large fluctuations in income, the uncertainties of schedule precarity can be a major source of stress and hardship for workers and their families.

Broadly, work schedule unpredictability is linked with more severe perceived work-life conflict, especially for those workers who have limited control over setting their work hours ([Henly & Lambert 2014](#)). Workers' sleep quality, for example, has been shown to be negatively impacted by exposure to "just-in-time"

scheduling practices; in fact, [Harknett et al. \(2020\)](#) find that work schedule precarity is more strongly associated with poor sleep than having a young child or working night shifts. Schedule unpredictability is also strongly correlated with greater psychological distress and reduced happiness among workers, even more so than low wages ([Schneider & Harknett 2019](#)).

The negative impacts of unstable schedules on health and well-being do not stop with the directly affected workers themselves. For the 31% of our sample of Los Angeles County fast food workers who have children, prior research suggests that their schedule precarity may take a toll on their children's well-being, too. Parents who receive short notice of when they might need to work have more difficulty arranging care for their children ([Carrillo et al. 2017](#)). This can force parents to resort to informal childcare options, like leaving young children alone or under the supervision

of siblings (Harknett et al. 2023), which are associated with worse outcomes as compared to formal, center-based care options (e.g., Vandell et al. 2016). Combining this with the reduced economic resources and reduced parental well-being associated with unstable schedules, prior Shift Project research shows that children whose mothers are subject to precarious scheduling practices are more likely to exhibit negative internalizing (“sad”) and externalizing (“mad”) behaviors (Schneider & Harknett 2021).

In sum, workers’ schedule quality has profound implications for not only their own mental and physical health, but also that of their children. Given that more than 90% of fast food workers in our Los Angeles County sample are subject to at least one just-in-time scheduling practice, unstable schedules are a near-universal challenge for these workers, and interventions to make their schedules more stable could lead to significant improvements in their well-being—as has been shown by studies of such interventions in other jurisdictions (Harknett et al. 2021).

The Impacts of LA’s Retail Fair Workweek Law

Fair Workweek ordinances seek to improve work schedule stability and predictability by mandating greater advance notice of work schedules and requiring “predictability pay” when schedules are changed at the last minute. Could such a policy effectively improve work scheduling for fast food workers in Los Angeles? To answer this question, we use the Shift Project data to estimate the effects of the Fair Workweek Ordinance (FWWO) implemented in the city of Los Angeles on April 1st, 2023, which covered those employed at large retailers.

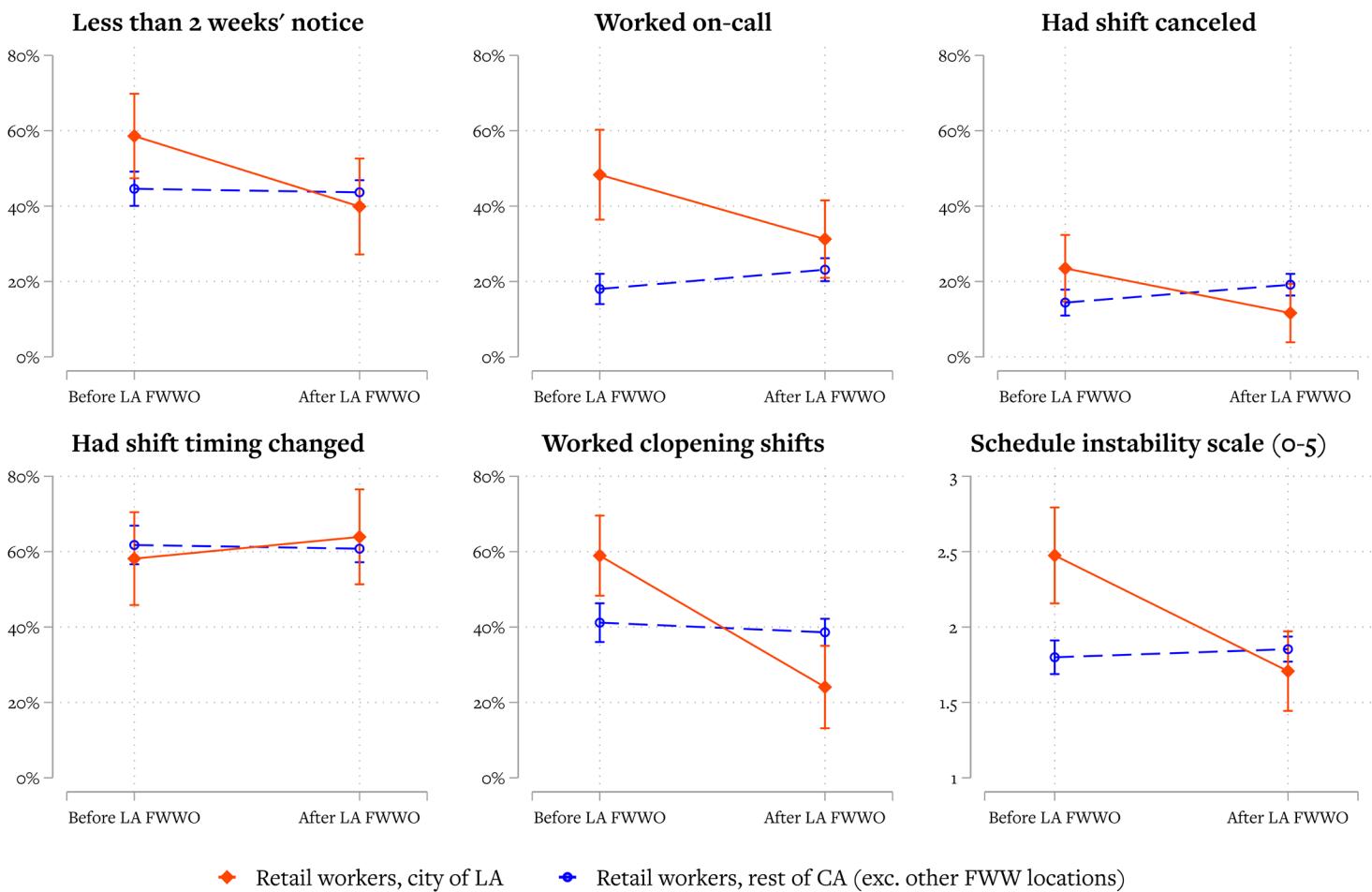
Specifically, we estimate difference-in-differences models that compare scheduling outcomes between retail workers in the city of Los Angeles versus the rest of the state (excluding Alameda, San Francisco, and Santa Clara Counties, which also have major cities that have enacted FWW policies, as well as the remainder of Los Angeles County), before and after this policy went into effect. Difference-in-differences models are a method for isolating the true effect that the FWWO had by taking into account and differencing out changes that would have happened in the absence of

the law. These models identify the effect of the FWWO by comparing changes in outcomes among a treated group (i.e., covered by the FWWO) to changes among a control group (i.e., not covered by the FWWO). This effectively controls for any other time trends that might be affecting workers across the board; if the difference in outcomes between these groups changes after a new policy is enacted, we can credit the FWWO for this change.

In orange, the six panels of Figure 5 show the shares of retail workers in Los Angeles subject to each of five just-in-time scheduling practices in the survey waves before implementation of the city’s FWWO (spring 2021 to fall 2022) versus in survey waves after (spring 2023 to fall 2025). To capture workers’ overall experience of schedule precarity, we also sum these five outcomes to create a 0-5 index of schedule instability. Estimates of exposure to these precarious scheduling practices among our comparison group of California retail workers are illustrated in blue.

We find that Los Angeles’ FWWO led to significant improvements in the work schedule stability of retail workers in the city, consistent with prior research demonstrating that Fair Workweek policies can yield significant improvements in the predictability of covered workers’ schedules (Ananat et al. 2022; Harknett et al. 2021; Kwon & Raman forthcoming). Before the FWWO went into effect, it appears that retail workers in Los Angeles had more unpredictable schedules on average than those in the rest of the state. However, we observe that the FWWO produced large reductions in the shares of retail workers in Los Angeles who report having less than two weeks’ advance notice of their schedule (18 percentage points); having worked on-call in the past month (22 percentage points); having a shift canceled (17 percentage points); and having worked clopening shifts in the past month (32 percentage points). We do not see a change in workers’ reports of having a shift’s timing changed. Overall, Los Angeles’ FWWO reduced covered retail workers’ average score on the 0-5 schedule instability scale by 0.8. Meanwhile, the rates of these unstable scheduling outcomes are stagnant among our comparison group of California retail workers, suggesting that the improvement in schedule stability among retail workers in Los Angeles was not merely the result of a statewide or nationwide trend.

Figure 5. Exposure to Unstable Scheduling Practices Before & After Los Angeles' Retail Fair Workweek Law: Los Angeles Retail Workers vs. Rest of California Retail Workers



Discussion

The Shift Project's surveys of service-sector workers provide a window into the experiences of workers employed at large retail and food establishments across the nation. This brief describes the experiences of fast food workers in Los Angeles County, with specific attention to unstable and unpredictable work schedules, insufficient hours, and the attendant consequences for workers' economic security and well-being.

This portrait of Los Angeles fast food workers reveals that unstable and unpredictable schedules are commonplace. As we have seen nationally, fast food jobs in LA are often characterized by insufficient work hours and a lack of control over work schedules.

Workers contend with variable and rotating schedules, clopening shifts, limited advance of notice of work hours, and shifts that are often canceled or changed at the last minute. We also document that workers experience large swings in hours from week to week, leading to volatile earnings. Hearing directly from workers, we learn not only about their experiences, but also about their preferences: most want more hours and much more predictability in their work schedules.

These challenges persist even in a context where minimum wages have increased and fast food employers are reporting difficulty hiring and retaining staff. Despite rising wage floors and a tight labor market, fast food work schedules in Los Angeles County remain highly unstable, and many workers struggle to cover basic expenses or handle modest financial emergencies.

Around the country, however, work-scheduling practices are beginning to change as a result of new labor laws that regulate schedules. Many jurisdictions—including New York City, Seattle, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and the state of Oregon—have enacted Fair Workweek policies that require advance notice of work schedules, typically two weeks, and require employers to compensate workers when shifts are added, canceled, or changed on short notice. Many of these laws also include “access to hours” provisions, obligating employers to offer additional hours to current part-time workers before hiring new staff.

Secure scheduling laws like these are making a difference in workers’ lives. Prior Shift Project evaluations of Seattle’s secure scheduling ordinance, for example, show that the law led to greater schedule predictability and stability, fewer on-call shifts, and improvements in workers’ happiness, sleep, and material well-being ([Harknett et al. 2021](#)). In the city of Los Angeles itself, our new analysis of the city’s Fair Workweek Ordinance (FWWO), enacted in 2023, shows that it substantially improved schedule predictability and stability for covered retail workers.

Were the City of Los Angeles to extend Fair Workweek protections to fast food workers, our data suggest that it could yield significant benefits for workers and their families. Fast food workers in Los Angeles face some of the most severe underscheduling and schedule instability in the service sector, and they express a strong desire for more predictable schedules. The evidence from other jurisdictions, and from retail workers within Los Angeles, indicates that regulating work schedules can enhance stability, reduce income volatility, and improve worker well-being.

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Methodological Appendix

Data

Between 2016 and 2025, The Shift Project has collected repeated cross-sectional data from over 300,000 service sector workers across 18 biannual survey waves. Survey respondents are recruited using online Facebook and Instagram advertisements that are specifically targeted to users who report being employed at large retail and food service employers. Firms featured in the Shift Project data include nearly every firm in the top 50 of the National Retail Federation’s list of top 100 employers and in the top 50 of Restaurant Business’ list of top 100 restaurant chains, plus 135 other firms that mostly either fall within the 50-100 rank range of these lists or are in other subsectors of the service industry, namely logistics and hospitality. Those who respond to the Shift survey invitation are automatically routed to a survey landing page where they are asked to consent to participate in the study, then begin the online self-administered survey using the Qualtrics platform. The survey, which takes 20-30 minutes to complete, collects comprehensive information about respondents’ working conditions, family life, and demographic characteristics. As an incentive, those who completed the survey and provided contact information are entered into a lottery for a \$500 gift card. For a more detailed discussion of The Shift Project’s data collection and validation methods, see [Schneider & Harknett \(2022\)](#).

In this brief, we only leverage survey responses from workers who participated in the Shift survey between 2021 and 2025, including those who participated in an oversample of California workers that was conducted in early 2024. For our descriptive analyses, we draw on a subsample of 356 fast food workers in Los Angeles County and a comparison subsample of 732 retail workers in Los Angeles County, although certain survey items have reduced sample sizes due to item nonresponse. In our causal analysis of impacts of the Fair Workweek (FWW) policy implemented in the city of Los Angeles for retail workers, we turn to data collected from 188 retail workers in the city of Los Angeles and 1,290 retail workers in the rest of California, excluding those in counties with other cities that have enacted similar FWW laws: Alameda County (Berkeley & Emeryville), San Francisco County, and Santa Clara County (San Jose). Our analysis solely focuses on the effects of the city of Los Angeles’ FWWO (implemented in April of 2023), rather than Los Angeles County’s newer FWW policy (implemented in July of 2025). To avoid contamination of our control group, workers outside of the city of Los Angeles but within Los Angeles County are excluded from our difference-in-differences models, as Los Angeles County’s FWW policy went into effect prior to our most recent wave of data collection.

Measures

The Shift Project data offer uniquely detailed insights into service sector workers’ work schedules. In addition to asking respondents to report their hourly wage and the number of hours they usually work per week, the survey also asks them to classify their schedule as a “variable schedule (one that changes from day to day)”; “regular daytime schedule”; “regular evening shift”; “regular night shift”; “rotating shift (one that changes regularly from days to evenings or nights)”; “split shift (one consisting of two distinct periods each day)”; or “other.” Respondents further report whether their work hours are “decided by [their] employer and [they] cannot change them on [their] own”; “decided by [their] employer but with [their] input”; self-determined “within certain limits”; self-determined with no limits; or set by “things outside of [their] control and outside of [their] employer’s control.”

To gauge respondents' experience of work schedule instability, the Shift survey asks how far in advance they "usually know what days and hours [they] will need to work," with options ranging from "less than 1 day" to "4 weeks or more." From this, we construct a binary measure of having less than two weeks' advance notice. Respondents are also asked to report if, in the past month, they have been asked to be on-call; worked a closing shift and then the very next opening shift, known as "clopening"; had the timing or length of a scheduled shift changed; and/or had a scheduled shift canceled. We consider these five binary outcomes individually, in addition to constructing an additive 0-5 scale that captures overall schedule precarity. Respondents also share their agreement with the statements "I would like to have a more stable and predictable schedule" and "I would like to work more hours." We classify respondents as being "involuntarily part-time" if they report both having fewer than 35 usual weekly hours and wanting to work more hours.

The Shift survey includes several additional measures intended to specifically identify how workers' schedules may give rise to work-life conflict and financial hardship. Respondents are asked if they "feel they have to keep their schedule open to be available for their job"; if they "have enough [work schedule] flexibility to handle family needs" ("always true" or "often true" versus "sometimes true" or "never true"); if "it is difficult to deal with family or personal matters during working hours"; and if "it is easy to get time off" when needed. Respondents also report if their income is "basically the same" or "goes up and down" week-to-week; if they "certain[ly]" or "probably" could come up with \$400 to meet an "unexpected need"; and if it is "very difficult" or "somewhat difficult," as opposed to "not at all difficult," to cover their expenses and bills.

Methods

Throughout all analyses, we implement weights that adjust our sample to reflect the population of service sector workers in California. Specifically, we construct weights for our survey data based on the demographic characteristics (age, gender, and race) of California service sector workers in the American Community Survey (ACS), 2014-2023. We align the ACS sample with the Shift sample by specifically selecting industries and occupations shared with Shift survey respondents.

To estimate the impacts of the retail FWWO in the city of Los Angeles, we employ a difference-in-differences approach that compares the prevalence of unstable schedule practices among retail workers in Los Angeles versus retail workers in the rest of the state (excluding workers in other counties with FWW policies), before and after this law went into effect. We derive the presented predicted values from linear probability models that control for workers' demographic characteristics (age, gender, race, educational attainment, school enrollment, cohabitation status, & primarily speaking a language other than English at home) and work characteristics (job tenure & manager status), and additionally include employer fixed effects.