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Schedule flexibility in hourly jobs: unanticipated consequences and promising directions

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Schedule flexibility in hourly jobs: unanticipated consequences and promising directions

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This article considers the challenge of extending conventional models of flexibility to hourly jobs that are often structured quite differently than the salaried, professional positions for which flexibility options were originally designed. We argue that the assumptions of job rigidity and overwork motivating existing flexibility options may not be broadly applicable across jobs in the US labor market. We focus specifically on two types of flexibility: (1) working reduced hours and (2) varying work timing. We first review central aspects of the US business and policy contexts that inspire our concerns, and then draw on original analyses from US census data and several examples from our comparative case-study research to explain how conventional flexibility options do not always map well onto hourly jobs, and in certain instances may disadvantage workers by undermining their ability to earn an adequate living. We conclude with a discussion of alternative approaches to implementing flexibility in hourly jobs when hours are scarce and fluctuating rather than long and rigid.

Keywords: workplace flexibility; unpredictability; hourly jobs; work schedules; work and family; nonstandard employment

Este artículo analiza el reto de extender los modelos convencionales de flexibilidad a trabajos por hora que a veces son estructurados de manera muy diferente de los empleos asalariados y profesionales para los que las opciones de flexibilidad fueron diseñadas originalmente. Argumentamos que los supuestos de la rigidez laboral y el exceso de trabajo que motivan las opciones de flexibilidad que existen no podrían aplicarse de manera general en el mercado laboral de los EE.UU. Nos centramos específicamente en dos tipos de flexibilidad: (1) la reducción de horas de trabajo y (2) la modificación del tiempo de trabajo. Primero, estudiamos los aspectos centrales del sector empresarial estadounidense y los contextos políticos que causan nuestras preocupaciones, y posteriormente, nos basamos en los análisis originales de los datos del censo estadounidense y varios ejemplos de nuestras investigaciones comparativas de estudios-de-casos para explicar cómo las opciones de flexibilidad convencionales no siempre se adaptan bien a los trabajos por hora, y en algunos casos, pueden perjudicar a los trabajadores al disminuir su capacidad para ganarse la vida adecuadamente. Para conducir, una discusión de enfoques alternativos para implementar la flexibilidad en los trabajos por hora cuando las horas son escasas y fluctuantes en lugar de ser largas y rígidas.

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Introduction
Efforts to promote workplace flexibility include fundamental changes to the organization of work that are intended to increase workers’ influence over ‘when, where, and for how long [they] engage in work-related tasks’ (Hill et al., 2008, p. 152). Research suggests there is good reason to reorganize work in these ways. Job flexibility has been shown to enhance the health and well-being of workers and to benefit employers through reduced turnover and improved employee performance (Fenwick & Tausig, 2005; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2005; Pabayo, Critchley, & Bambra, 2010).

In the US, most attention has been paid to flexibility options for professional and salaried workers, despite the fact that the majority of both men (55.9%) and women (60.7%) in the wage and salary workforce are paid by the hour (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011a). Made available at the discretion of employers or in conjunction with collective bargaining agreements rather than by requirement of law, work-life benefits in the US are distributed unevenly, with low-level workers having less access to flexibility options than their professional and managerial counterparts (Golden, 2005; McCrate, 2002; Swanberg, Catsoupes, & Drescher-Burke, 2005). Recently, policy-makers, advocacy groups, and researchers have become increasingly interested in developing and promoting flexibility options for US workers more broadly, including those in low-level hourly jobs (see Boushey, Moughari, Sattelmeyer & Waller, 2008; Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2009; Council of Economic Advisors, 2010; Families & Work Institute, 2010; Levin-Epstein, 2006; Williams, 2011; Workplace Flexibility, 2010, 2009). As these initiatives proceed, it is important that they reflect the range of work conditions found in hourly jobs, including low-wage jobs in service industries.

The purpose of this article is to consider the implications of extending existing flexibility options to a broader range of hourly workers in the US workforce and to explore some alternative options for workers at the lower-end of the labor market. In particular, we argue that the assumptions of job rigidity and overwork that motivate conventional flexibility options may not be broadly applicable across jobs in the US labor market. We focus specifically on two types of flexibility options that in some form or another are included in most every recommended list of flexibility practices: (1) working reduced hours and (2) varying the timing of work.

We begin by reviewing critical aspects of the US business and policy contexts that lead us to question the premise that workers in hourly jobs would welcome or benefit from policies that reduce their work hours or provide less rigid starting and ending times. Based on original analyses from US census data and several examples from our comparative case-study research across a wide range of hourly jobs in non-production industries, we then explain how conventional flexibility options do not always map well onto hourly jobs and in certain instances may disadvantage workers by undermining their ability to earn an adequate living. In particular, we provide evidence that work hours are both scarce and variable for many low-level hourly workers. By elaborating these characteristics of low-level jobs, our goal is to make a case for why it is necessary to broaden the range of flexibility options beyond those based on assumptions of long and rigid work hours.
Background: the context of low-level hourly jobs in the US

Over time, notions of workplace flexibility have expanded from a narrow focus on flex-time options defined in formal firm policy to a wide menu of both formal policies and informal practices that are intended to give workers more voice in when, where, and how much they work (Bianchi, Casper, & King, 2005; Kossek et al., 2005). The anticipated benefits of workplace flexibility have expanded as well. First seen as a support for professional women seeking to combine work with caregiving, workplace flexibility is now framed as a strategic business initiative that can help bring outdated workplaces into the twenty-first century, a time when both men and women are more likely to be a member of a dual-earner couple or to head a household on their own than to be the sole breadwinner in a dual-parent family (Bianchi et al., 2005; McClanahan, 2004; Society for Human Resource Management, 2008).

Most flexibility options currently included in public discourse are designed to loosen up rigid job structures. For example, the policy brief prepared by the Council of Economic Advisors (2010) for the ‘Flexibility Summits’ held by the Obama administration advocates that employers implement policies allowing workers to reduce the number of hours they work, to vary their start and end times, and to work at home. The goal of reducing rigidity reflects the origins of worker-centered flexibility as a means to ‘level the playing field’ for women in male-dominated managerial and professional jobs characterized by long and rigid hours of work. When hourly jobs share these qualities, flexibility options targeted at reducing job rigidity make sense, and research indicates that they are welcomed by workers (Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2009). As elaborated later, however, broad segments of today’s low-level hourly jobs are already loose, with fluctuating rather than rigid work hours, too few rather than too many hours, and place-bound job duties (e.g., cooking, serving, cleaning) that necessitate workers’ presence at the worksite (Appelbaum, Bernhardt, & Murnane, 2003; Appelbaum & Schmitt, 2009; Haley-Lock, 2011; Lambert, 2012; Williams, 2006).

The business context: business practices in low-level hourly jobs in the US

The literature is replete with evidence that broad changes in the economy over the last three decades (the shift from manufacturing to services, for example), declines in unionization, the spread of business strategies emphasizing cost containment, and loosening of government labor standards are contributing to a growing precariousness in employment, both in the US and globally (Hacker, 2006; Kalleberg, 2009). Although workers across the spectrum have been affected, these economic and policy changes have especially disadvantaged workers in low-level jobs by reducing job security (Bernhardt, Boushey, Dresser, & Tilly, 2008; Kalleberg, 2009) and as we argue later, by reshaping scheduling practices in ways that limit the applicability and relevance of conventional flexibility options.

As part of the transformation of the economy, US firms have been increasingly adopting business models that give priority to cost containment over quality of goods or services as a route to profitability (Kalleberg, 2009; Lambert, 2008). According to such strategies, payment for labor that exceeds narrow definitions of demand is viewed as an unnecessary expense. Across industries, a tight link is kept
between variations in customer demand and outlays for wages, resulting in scheduling practices that increase volatility and unpredictability in workers’ hours and schedules. In retail firms, for example, managers are given a total number of hours to divide among staff based on projected sales (or traffic) derived from recent retail trends and last year’s sales numbers (Lambert, 2008). In food services for airlines, shifts are booked depending on the mix of domestic and international flights, which vary by day of week and can change when flights are delayed or cancelled (Lambert & Waxman, 2005). Similarly, hotel housekeeping staff are scheduled based on projected room census, while workers in lock-box jobs in banks are scheduled according to projections of payments to process (Lambert, 2008). In restaurants, managers monitor food sales and flow of customers (Haley-Lock & Ewert, 2011).

Whether in small, independent establishments or large, national firms, pressures to ‘stay within hours’ result in managers feeling constrained in the total number of hours they distribute among their staff and, in turn, in their ability to respond to workers’ hour and schedule preferences. The goal of minimizing outlays for labor by holding managers accountable for making sure labor allocations do not exceed ongoing business demand – by week, day, and for some firms, hour – creates a situation ripe for workers experiencing too few rather than too many hours and fluctuating work times rather than rigid ones.

The policy context: policies shaping practices in low-level hourly jobs in the US

In jobs paid by the hour, regulations specified in law or in legally-binding collective bargaining agreements can temper employers’ ability to minimize labor costs by either increasing the fixed costs of labor, defined in this article as costs per employee, such as requiring employers to contribute financially toward employee health insurance premiums, or increasing variable costs, defined here as costs per unit of employee time or output, through for example mandating employers to pay a minimum hourly or daily wage. If US workers came with high fixed costs, employers would have an incentive to concentrate hours on individual employees and to keep staffing levels low. Such a policy environment would likely foster business practices that encouraged long hours and schedule rigidity, precisely the job conditions that current flexibility initiatives attempt to address.

The US policy context, however, is one in which employers incur fixed costs for hourly workers at their own discretion or as a result of collective bargaining rather than as a product of legislation. Given that only 8% of private industry workers (13.1% overall) were covered by collective bargaining agreements in 2010, employers are mostly on their own to decide which jobs will come with fixed costs (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011b). To use the example of health insurance as a key fixed cost, the historic lack of a legislative mandate that employers provide insurance has meant that firms have had the freedom to decide which segments of their workforce they would cover, resulting in large segments of hourly workers, especially part-time employees, without employer-sponsored coverage. The convention in the US of making eligibility for employer-sponsored health insurance, when offered, contingent on full-time job status further creates an incentive for American firms to keep work hours for individual employees below the number needed for workers to claim eligibility for benefits (Houseman, 2001). As of 2006, only 52% of
full-time workers and 16.4% of part-time workers in the retail sector had employer-sponsored health insurance. Across industries, only 15% of part-time workers were insured through their employer in 2010 (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Thus, in an environment in which employers can avoid fixed costs by limiting employees’ work hours, it is reasonable to expect that many hourly workers will face the challenge of being scheduled for too few rather than too many hours.

With fixed costs readily avoidable for many establishments that rely heavily on hourly workers, the lion’s share of labor costs in hourly jobs are variable, incurred per hour of actual work. We elaborate next the regulatory provisions that set a floor on hourly wages and work hours, as these are the key mechanisms employers use day-to-day to control labor costs in hourly jobs.

US minimum wage legislation, defined in both federal and state laws, is intended to provide a floor on hourly wages. Federal minimum wage increases are not automatically linked to changes in the cost of living; 2008 saw the first federally-mandated increase in a decade. The last of three scheduled incremental hikes was implemented in 2009, increasing the minimum to its current level of $7.25, still 17% lower than the real value of the minimum wage in 1968 (Filion, 2009). Seventeen states and the District of Columbia provide a more generous floor, ranging from $7.35 in Arizona and Montana to $8.67 in Washington State, and even though not required by federal law, nine states automatically adjust the minimum wage annually to reflect changes in cost of living (US Department of Labor, 2011a).

It is questionable how much minimum wage legislation drives employers’ wage decisions given that only 6.5% of US workers in hourly jobs overall were paid the minimum wage in 2010 (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011a). Minimum wage jobs are over-represented in some of the fastest growing industries in the US, however, including leisure and hospitality (23% of workers) and retail trade (7.3% of workers; United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011a). Moreover, many workers are paid close to the minimum; a significantly higher proportion of adults in the US earn low wages as compared to their counterparts in Western industrialized nations (Mason & Salverda, 2009). Even the modest floor provided by minimum wage laws is not without holes. Minimum wage legislation in 43 states have ‘tip credit’ provisions that establish a sub-minimum wage for workers who regularly receive some amount of customer gratuities (at least $30 per month according to the federal law) (US Department of Labor, 2011b). These alternative pay rates, ranging from $2.13 in multiple states to $7.00 in Hawaii, allow employers an ‘exit strategy’ from minimum wage laws (Haley-Lock, 2011; Haley-Lock & Ewert, 2011).

Unlike minimum wage legislation, US federal law does not require employers to guarantee a minimum number of hours to workers. Any guarantees of minimum work hours are specified in state law, collective bargaining agreements, or at the discretion of the employer. Although a few employers and some union contracts provide minimum weekly hour guarantees that function to establish quasi-fixed costs per employee, most minimum hour or minimum daily pay provisions impose only variable costs, incurred only on days when employees work.

Seven states as well as a range of collective bargaining agreements incorporate ‘reporting pay’ or ‘minimum daily pay’ provisions. These provisions require employers to pay workers who report to a shift for a minimum number of hours.
For example, in some union hotels in Chicago, housekeeping staff must be paid for a full eight hours any day they work. States with reporting pay or minimum daily pay provisions vary widely in the minimum number of hours for which employees must be paid and in terms of which industries are subject to the regulations. For example, California, Connecticut and New York cover only non-exempt employees in select industries, Massachusetts and New Hampshire exclude non-exempt workers in public or charitable organizations, and New Jersey and Rhode Island cover all non-exempt workers. A recent study of low-wage jobs in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles revealed wide-spread violations of even basic wage and hour laws, suggesting that enforcement of state reporting hour laws is likely to be uneven at best (Bernhardt et al., 2009).

In sum, employers who pursue cost containment strategies that keep labor costs tied tightly to demand are facilitated by a policy environment that seldom requires employers to pay employees for a minimum number of hours and maintains relatively meager minimum wage rates. Together, the US business and policy contexts render suspect the basic assumptions behind conventional flexibility options – that workers would prefer fewer work hours and less rigid schedules. When labor costs are mostly variable and employers can incur additional costs when employees work more but not fewer hours, logic dictates that work hours will be scarce rather than overly abundant and schedules erratic rather than fixed.

Sources of data and examples

We briefly describe the Census data and the three studies we use to illustrate the prevalence and ramifications of scarce and fluctuating hours in low-level hourly jobs. Our approach is to present original analyses of national US Census data and select findings from comparative case studies of workplaces that we have previously conducted in order to illustrate (1) the problem of scarce and fluctuating hours for low-level hourly workers across a range of industrial sectors and (2) how providing greater control over the timing of work can result in unintended consequences for workers in jobs marked by these qualities.

Current Population Survey

The Current Population Survey (CPS) is the US government’s official source of statistics on employment and unemployment. Each month, the US Bureau of Census surveys between 50,000–60,000 households, selected to be representative of the nation as a whole. Each selected household is interviewed once a month for four consecutive months, and again for the corresponding time period a year later. Questions on basic working conditions are included in surveys at months 4 and 8. Although detailed questions on work schedules are not included in the regular CPS, the May 2001 rotation incorporated an addendum (The Work Schedules and Work at Home Supplement) of items on work hours and work-hour preferences. Many of the findings reported in this article combine regular CPS data with responses to this 2001 supplement, although more recent CPS data are presented whenever relevant items are available.
Comparative case studies

Our examples of scheduling practices come from three comparative case studies of low-level hourly jobs in a range of non-production industries. The Study of Organizational Stratification (SOS), conducted between 1999 and 2004, examined working conditions in 88 low-level jobs lodged in 22 Chicago-area workplaces, all major firms, in four industries: hospitality (hotels and catering, seven sites), transportation (airlines and package delivery services, three sites), retail (stores and distribution centers, ten sites), and financial services (banks, two sites) (see Lambert, 2008; Lambert & Waxman, 2005). Conducted in 2007 and 2008, the Study of Restaurant Employment (SRE) compared the job of waiter across a sample of 36 full-service restaurants at the low end of the market, including 24 affiliated with one of two US-based chains and 12 independently-owned (see Haley-Lock, 2011, in press). Finally, the Work Scheduling Study (WSS) examined managers’ \( n = 139 \) staffing and scheduling practices and employees’ \( n = 241 \) actual work hours in a national women’s apparel retail firm comprised of small stores (average staff size of 10 employees) located mostly in suburban strip malls. A multi-year study, the examples from WSS included here come from 2007 and 2008 data (see Lambert, 2009; Lambert & Henly, 2012). Each project combines multiple sources of data (interviews, observations, organizational documentation and in the case of the WSS, payroll data and employee surveys) to produce insights into on-the-ground employer practices that shape the quality of low-level hourly jobs, including work schedules. In addition, each study examines jobs in which the fixed costs for labor are negligible and the incentives for concentrating work hours on individuals are weak. For example, in all three comparative case studies health insurance coverage was not offered to most employees in hourly jobs and when it was, high proportions of part-time staff were ineligible.

In addition to serving as a good source of examples of the kinds of low-cost jobs that may place workers at risk of scarce hours, each of the studies makes unique contributions to our understanding of the merits of and limits to schedule flexibility in low-level hourly jobs. The Study of Restaurant Employees provides insight into how the public policy context matters for scheduling practices by offering comparisons of employer practices in the same restaurant chains across states (Washington and Illinois) and nations (US and Canada). By combining information from store managers and store employees, the WSS contributes multiple vantage-points on store managers’ staffing and scheduling practices. And by comparing jobs within and across workplaces in different industries, the SOS is helpful for identifying commonalities in employer practices and job conditions that can provide a foundation for considering new approaches to delivering meaningful flexibility to workers in jobs in which hours are neither long nor rigid.

Drawing from our comparative case studies, together with analyses of CPS data, in the following two sections we (1) demonstrate how low-level hourly jobs are often characterized by scarce and fluctuating hours and thus are a poor fit with assumptions undergirding conventional options for flexibility; and then (2) illustrate how efforts to provide hourly workers greater input into the timing of their work sometimes results in unintended negative consequences for workers and their co-workers.
The misfit between flexibility assumptions and job conditions

Scarcity rather than long hours

As we have suggested, much of the current discourse around flexibility focuses on expanding opportunities to work reduced hours. Although America’s workers average the highest number of hours per week when compared to its wealthy European cousins (Mason & Salverda, 2009), averages can mask considerable variability. As discussed next, our analyses of CPS data demonstrate that rates of involuntary part-time employment are high and a substantial proportion of workers in the US, especially workers of color in hourly jobs, would prefer to work more rather than fewer hours per week.

The current recession is contributing to underemployment, as evidenced by the proportion of American workers classified as involuntary part-time, defined by the Census Bureau as working < 35 hours a week for economic reasons (i.e., could not find a full-time job or work hours reduced due to slack demand) rather than by choice. In September 2010, 9.5 million workers fell into that category, the highest level in recorded history (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011c). CPS trend data show, however, that involuntary part-time employment did not originate with the current economic downturn. The US labor market added 1.5 million involuntary part-time workers between 1981 and 1982 (for a total of 6.8 million workers), surging up again to add 2.3 million between 1992 and 1993 (for a total of 6.7 million workers). The lowest level of involuntary part-time employment in the past 30 years was in 2000–2001 and even then, 3.1 million Americans reported that they were working part-time hours involuntarily (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011c).

Rates of involuntary employment may underestimate work-hour shortages. Table 1 summarizes responses to the 2001 CPS item, ‘If you had a choice at your main job would you prefer to work fewer hours but earn less money, work more hours and earn more money, or work the same number of hours and earn the same money?’ As shown, more than one-fourth (27.4%) of women in hourly jobs reported preferring to work more hours to earn more, whereas only 7.3% reported that they would prefer to work less if it meant earning less. Among women paid by a salary, 16.9% reported that they would prefer to work more hours while 11.6% would like to

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work less even if it meant lower earnings. Thus, too few rather than too many hours would seem to be the bigger challenge among female workers, especially when they are paid by the hour.

This preference for additional hours holds across racial and ethnic groups, but is greatest among women of color, who were even more likely than white women to hold an hourly job (60.6% of white women, 69.2% of African-American women, and 72.2% of Hispanic women who were members of the wage and salaried workforce were paid by the hour in 2001). Notably, as shown in Table 1, more than one-third of African-American and Hispanic women in hourly jobs reported that they would prefer additional hours of work, whereas only a small proportion (about 4%) said they would like to work reduced hours. White women in hourly jobs were almost three times more likely to report a preference for additional hours (23.9%) than reduced hours (8.3%).

The same pattern of results is evidenced among men. Like women, the majority of men, especially men of color, work in hourly jobs: 54% of white men, 70.1% of African-American men, and 74.7% of Hispanic men were paid by the hour in 2001. And as was found for women, the preference for additional work hours is particularly pronounced among men in hourly jobs, especially men of color (see Table 1). Notably, 42.8% of African-American men and almost half (49.4%) of Hispanic men working in hourly jobs reported that they would prefer to work more hours for more pay; 31.5% of white men in hourly jobs also reported a preference for additional hours. Only a small proportion of men of any race indicated a preference for reduced hours.

The desire for additional hours of work likely reflects a preference for additional earnings. Thus, low wage rates may help account for the greater overall percentage of men and women of color preferring additional hours of work. In 2001, the average wage of African-American ($12.50) and Hispanic ($11.76) men was significantly ($p < 0.01$) lower than white men paid by the hour ($14.45$). Similarly African-American ($11.04$) and Hispanic ($10.21$) women’s hourly wages were significantly ($p < 0.01$) lower than white women’s average hourly wages ($11.99$). Still, even a substantial proportion of men earning $20 or more per hour reported that they would prefer additional hours of work: 20% of whites, 27% of African-Americans, and 32% of Hispanics.

A similar relationship between wages and a preference for additional hours is found among women, although not as stark. The lower the hourly wage, the higher the proportion of women who preferred additional hours of work. Only when wage rates were $20 or more does the proportion of women preferring fewer hours of work (12.6% of white women; 18.5% of Hispanic women) equal or exceed the proportion preferring additional hours of work (13.8% of white women; 14.3% of Hispanic women). Even at $20 or more per hour, a greater proportion of African-American women reported a preference for additional (26.4%) rather than fewer (4.7%) hours.

The preference for additional hours of work is mirrored in the experiences of part-time sales associates in the WSS, who were asked the same question about work-hour preferences as included in the CPS supplement. Among part-time sales associates (all women), 45.8% of whites, 57.1% of African-Americans, and 71.4% of Hispanics reported that they would prefer to work additional hours at the company studied. When asked the reasons why they did not work additional hours, 84.8% of employees reported that it was because the store manager did not have
additional hours to assign them. This contrasts with 24% who reported that the available shifts did not fit with their personal responsibilities (the sum exceeds 100% because multiple reasons were allowed).

Managers substantiated this claim. When asked how often requirements established by the firm to staff within the hour limits interfere with key business objectives, store managers reported that hour limits regularly (27% weekly; 22.6% a few times a month) make it hard for them to provide sales associates with enough hours. Managers rated the goal of ‘staying within hours’ as even more challenging than meeting their sales quotas. WSS managers’ responses further suggest that they give priority to company-imposed hour limits over employee preferences for hours when scheduling their stores. Specifically, 83% of the store managers surveyed reported that staying within the hour limits set by the corporation was ‘very important’ in scheduling their store, whereas only 32% said that employees’ preferences for work hours and days were ‘very important’ and 60% said that having the right mix of skills was ‘very important’ in scheduling their store.

In setting priorities, managers were aware that not providing associates with ‘enough’ hours of work could affect store turnover. Almost one-half (48.9%) reported that providing associates with hours was ‘very important’ to retention and the majority reported that at least one sales associate had left in the last year because the associate did not get enough hours (51.1% of managers said this had occurred) or because she had secured a full-time position elsewhere (63.3% of managers said this had occurred). Thus, managers were aware of the potential negative consequences of not giving workers sufficient hours and yet they felt compelled to meet accountability requirements that restricted the hours they assigned their staff.

**Fluctuating rather than rigid work schedules**

The current flexibility discourse also gives substantial attention to providing workers with the opportunity to vary the timing of their work schedules, for example by adjusting the times they begin and end work on different days. National data reveal that over one-fourth of salaried workers and two-fifths of hourly workers report that they are ‘never’ allowed to change their starting and quitting times (Golden, Wiens-Tuers, Lambert, & Henly, 2011; see also McCrate, 2005). Yet a lack of input into start and end times, as captured in current survey-item wording, should not be interpreted to mean that hourly workers’ schedules are stable. Workers who do not control their starting and ending times may still experience fluctuations in the timing of their work, but at the discretion of their employer.

Unfortunately, due to ambiguity in survey-item wording it is difficult to get an accurate read from national data on how much workers’ hours vary, either in terms of number of hours worked per week or the timing of hours. In particular, the items included in many national surveys of individuals were developed in an earlier period characterized by widespread standard employment (full-time jobs with stable schedules), and were designed intentionally to smooth hour variations to capture the ‘average’. In the CPS data analyzed here, for example, an item asks employees to report their ‘usual’ hours of work, including usual start and end times, and the usual hours they worked ‘last week’. ‘Hours vary’ is a default category that is only offered to respondents who volunteer that their hours vary too much for them to report usual work hours. Pooling CPS data from 2000 through 2002 (N = 41,947), 6.4% of
workers were coded as ‘hours vary’. This measurement approach very likely underestimates fluctuating hours, since respondents whose hours vary may make an effort to report usual work hours, recognizing the intent of the question is to provide an average or ‘smoothed’ response.

Evidence that survey respondents do in fact smooth hours in response to the CPS item comes from the WSS. According to the payroll data on the actual hours worked by WSS store employees, most everyone’s work schedules were characterized by regular fluctuations in the number and timing of work hours. For example, the standard deviation in weekly work hours paid (including any holiday or sick time for full-time workers) over a 37-week period in 2008 was 7 hours for both full-time and part-time employees. This means that weekly paid hours varied on average by 21% among full-time employees (mean = 33.4; median = 35.3 hours) and 55% among part-time employees (mean = 12.7; median = 11 hours). Even so, when asked on the employee survey about typical work hours, only five out of 136 survey respondents volunteered that their ‘hours vary too much’ to report usual hours or days; the rest provided a numeric response.

Ours and others’ studies of jobs in non-production industries (cf., Bernhardt et al., 2008; Carré, Tilly, van Kalveren, & Voss-Dahm, 2009; Swanberg, James, Mamta, Werner, & McKechnie, 2008; Williams, 2006) provide reason to believe that fluctuating work hours are widespread in hourly jobs. In the retail stores studied as part of the SOS, for example, sales associates and cashiers were required to work a mix of daytime and weekend/evening shifts, especially those in full-time positions (see Henly, Shaefcr, & Waxman, 2006; Lambert, 2008). In other settings such as banks and hotels, workers were scheduled for a set number of days each week, but the specific days worked would change from week to week (e.g., Monday, Tuesday, and Saturday one week; Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday the next week). This means that although an employee may hold a three-, four-, or five-days-a-week job, variations over time in the particular days of week worked provide little stability around which to structure nonwork activities.

Given that employers adjust hours to fluctuating business demand, the number of hours allocated to jobs can vary season-to-season, week-to-week, and even day-to-day, as highlighted by the following examples from the SOS. Housekeepers in one Chicago hotel were expected to work six days a week in the summer and then were given few if any hours for several weeks during the winter. In the airline catering business, workers were expected to work overtime during busy weeks and routinely sent home early during slow periods. In other jobs, the length of time worked on any given day varied even when weekly schedules were relatively fixed. For example, in one bank, workers processing checks for commercial customers were required to stay until all daily transactions had been completed; a shift could be six to ten hours depending on the quantity of mail received that day. In other jobs, employees worked a fixed shift without a variable start time, as in the cases of overnight workers at one retail store who always started at 11 pm and airlines and catering firms adopting standard starting times for three different shifts. But workers in these fixed-time shift jobs were regularly at risk of being moved involuntarily from one shift to another depending on seniority, job vacancies, or work demands (Lambert & Waxman, 2005).

Low-level hourly employees face further instability as a result of employers’ practices of adjusting work schedules after they have been posted and sending workers home (or telling them not to come in) when business is slow. For example, in
the SRE, the owner of an independently-owned restaurant in rural Washington State described a detailed approach to tracking the ratio of labor costs to sales: if the proportion exceeded 29% by 3 pm, or appeared unlikely to drop to the owner’s preferred target of 21% by the end of the business day, he and his managers began sending waitstaff home (Haley-Lock, in press). Numerous other managers and owners in both independent and chain restaurants and suburban and urban Washington settings – as well as suburban Chicago – more or less replicated this practice, often noting that waiters were selected to be sent home based on seniority or performance (i.e., the newest and weakest were sent home first). Just a few restaurant sites had waitstaff work on other tasks during ‘down times’ – for example, food prep and cleaning – while a few others asked for volunteers rather than selecting waiters to send home (Haley-Lock & Ewert, 2011). These practices are similar to those found in the study of Chicago firms (SOS) in which frontline hourly workers across industries were regularly sent home, and sometimes called in or asked to stay late, depending on whether demand disappointed or exceeded projections (Lambert, 2008).

The practice of asking or requiring employees to stay longer than a shift’s scheduled ending poses particular challenges for working parents, who often want more hours but find that unplanned shift extensions complicate family schedules and sometimes put children’s well-being at risk. For example, in a companion study to the SOS focused on working parents employed in the sampled retail establishments, parents reported a variety of complications due to staying late at work or getting called into work unexpectedly, including being late to pick up children from a childcare provider, experiencing strained relationships with overextended caregivers, missing dinnertime or children’s bedtime routines, and in some cases leaving children unattended when last-minute childcare coverage was unavailable (Henly & Lambert, 2005; Henly et al., 2006).

In sum, the practices that frontline managers use to keep tight control over labor allocation result in work schedules for low-level hourly jobs that are likely to be highly variable rather than rigid. The times at which individual workers begin and end work are likely to vary not only week to week but also day to day. When last minute adjustments to work schedules are commonplace, employees’ work hours – and also earnings – are unpredictable. Empirical evidence thus suggests a troubling lack of fit between the assumptions undergirding conventional flexibility options and the realities of scheduling practices in low-level hourly jobs. This mismatch may not only limit workers’ access to flexibility but, as further explained later, may result in unintended consequences when conventional forms of flexibility are extended to workers in these jobs.

Unanticipated consequences of input into work timing

When hours are scarce and fluctuating rather than long and rigid, conventional flexibility options that grant workers input into their work timing can disadvantage workers by restricting opportunities for sustained employment and earnings. Further, the zero-sum game created among workers when employers apply strict limits to total labor hours means that control granted to one employee tends to lessen control enjoyed by coworkers. Both of these unanticipated consequences of allowing employees to have input into schedules are illustrated in our comparative case studies, as discussed next.
Restricting availability restricts earnings

Some employers grant workers the option to ‘claim availability’, that is, to specify the days and times they are available and unavailable for work. On its face, claiming availability should provide workers some control over their starting and ending times, in turn enabling employees to manage their work and nonwork responsibilities and activities more effectively. Our research suggests that although claiming availability can enable workers to influence when they will not be scheduled to work, it does not ensure that they will be scheduled to work when they are available. In effect, claiming availability increases control over nonwork time but fails to provide workers with the same degree of control over their work time (Henly & Lambert, 2005).

Importantly, not all employees are granted the option of claiming availability or even suggesting their schedule preferences (Henly, et al, 2006; Lambert, 2008). Rather, some jobs require hourly workers to have ‘open availability’ – declaring a readiness to work any day or time – as a condition of employment or to qualify for full-time positions. National data do not exist on the prevalence of requirements for open availability, nor are there reliable estimates of the proportion of employees who are able to indicate their preferences for particular days or shifts. Whether or not employees have the ability to control their work timing in some way, there is evidence from our case study research that managers have strong preferences for hiring workers whose availability is open rather than constrained. Fully 94% of the retail store managers surveyed in the WSS agreed that ‘they try to hire workers with maximum availability’ and importantly, 79% agreed that ‘they give more hours to sales associates with greater availability’. These findings suggest that workers who place constraints on their availability may not be hired, and if hired they may receive fewer hours and subsequently lower earnings than coworkers with greater availability.

Preliminary analyses of the relationship between WSS employees’ self-reported schedule preferences (from employee survey data) and actual hours worked (from payroll records) support this contention. Part-time employees who reported that they had asked their manager not to schedule them for certain days or shifts worked fewer hours on average (mean = 13.4 hours) over a 37-week period than coworkers who did not report that they had restricted their availability (mean = 18.9 hours; \( p < 0.01 \)) (Lambert, Henly, & Hedberg, 2011). Consistent with these findings, retail employees interviewed as part of the previously mentioned companion study to SOS also reported facing repercussions in the form of reduced hours or being assigned undesirable shifts when they took advantage of policies allowing them to request scheduling preferences (Henly, et al, 2006). Thus without minimum hour guarantees or normative pressures to provide them, workers may in effect pay for the opportunity to control their nonwork schedule.

Similarly, when hours are scarce and there are no minimum hour guarantees, workers who attempt to change their availability after the schedule has been posted are also at risk of lost earnings. Employees who want more hours are more willing to cover a coworker’s shift than to trade shifts. ‘Flexibility’ for the worker needing coverage may then wind up being a lost shift, and lost income – with a coworker volunteering to take rather than exchange work hours.
Not all hours are equal

In many service jobs, hours also vary in their income-generating prospects. When workers restrict their availability during peak times of demand they are placed at a disadvantage for garnering hours of work because there are fewer hours available during nonpeak times. In the WSS, for example, sales associates who restricted their availability during weekends and evenings were scheduled for fewer hours than their more available colleagues, regardless of their work hour preferences (Lambert et al., 2011). In addition, the practice of sending workers home when the pace of sales lags means that some hours – for example, certain restaurant shifts that precede or follow meal times – are more likely to be cancelled due to ‘slow traffic’. Employees scheduled during these times thus face the risk of not being able to work all or some of those hours, as reflected by the rural Washington restaurant manager in the SRE study who began sending waiters home on slow afternoons.

Slow shifts have an additional effect on employee income for jobs that include customer gratuities, such as those in the restaurant industry. Busy shifts in a restaurant mean more food and drink sales and consequently higher waiter tips, given the percentage basis on which tips are customarily calculated in the US. When a waiter cannot work one or more high-traffic shifts, her prospects for earning an adequate wage are reduced. Exacerbating this, if that same waiter winds up being unable to work one of her shifts, she may have an especially hard time negotiating a trade with coworkers who get more lucrative shifts assigned to them; she may thus lose the shift and the income (Haley-Lock & Ewert, 2011).

Worker flexibility, workforce instability

Whether a worker makes a request to management to change hours or to a coworker to swap shifts, achieving control over the timing of work often means imposing greater instability on someone else. Hourly employees may even be required to directly seek ‘flexibility’ from their coworkers. In the WSS, for example, 86% of store managers reported that sales associates are required to find a coworker to cover their shift before they change their hours on a posted schedule; almost two-thirds (65%) of managers reported that sales associates are required to find someone to cover their shift when calling off work that same day.

Although the trend of underemployment in lower-level hourly jobs likely creates a set of colleagues eager to add hours, last-minute adjustments may still unsettle careful balancing acts between work and home obligations, putting workers’ relationships with coworkers at risk. The toll on personal relationships of relying on coworkers for flexibility is of course not unique to hourly workers. Studies of professionals reveal how flexibility options benefiting certain groups (e.g., parents) may create a backlash in the workplace as others (e.g., young, childless workers) are pressed to complete additional job tasks (Ryan & Kossek, 2008).

Conventional flexibility options are based on the assumption that employees benefit when they have control over their hours of work. Our analysis is not intended to denigrate current efforts to increase employee control in hourly jobs but rather to highlight some unintended consequences that may result from such efforts. Under circumstances in which minimum hours are not guaranteed, costs are mostly variable, and frontline managers are held accountable for ‘staying within hours’, the
possibilities for meaningful employee control must be pursued carefully so as not to inadvertently reduce employees' hours or undermine relationships among coworkers.

**Increasing flexibility in jobs with scarce and fluctuating hours**

Initiatives to increase flexibility in the workplace are intended to improve workers' ability to meet both work and nonwork responsibilities and ultimately, enhance economic security. The two flexibility options considered in this article are based on the assumption that it is long and rigid work schedules that impede workers' ability to effectively meet both work and family responsibilities. However, the evidence presented here calls into question the accuracy of these assumptions when considering hourly jobs at the lower end of the labor market. In these jobs, hours are in short supply and may vary week to week and even day to day. Although hourly workers would undoubtedly welcome greater input into their work schedules, our research suggests that some efforts to increase schedule control in hourly jobs can place workers' employment and earnings at risk and can fuel instability in the lives of their coworkers.

Extending findings from our research, we offer recommendations for incorporating flexibility into hourly jobs when work hours are scarce and variable rather than long and rigid. By recognizing the US business context that tightly couples outlays for labor to variations in demand and the US policy context that does not guarantee a minimum number of work hours, our goal is to identify new directions for incorporating flexibility into hourly jobs in ways that do not inadvertently undermine the economic security of workers and their families.

**Scarce work hours: strategies for increasing individuals' work hours**

In the context of business strategies that seek to contain labor costs by coupling labor levels to ongoing variations in business demand, managers have little incentive to concentrate work hours on individual employees. Instead, managers are propelled to maintain a pool of workers who can be drawn on as needed to work short shifts during times of peak demand, thus contributing to workers' hunger for hours. Several strategies could be used to refashion the incentive structure so that it is in the best interest of employers to provide individual workers with additional hours of work.

**Increasing fixed labor costs**

As we have discussed, employers often minimize fixed labor costs associated with hourly jobs. Public policy regulations that raise fixed costs across all workers could serve to shift employers' focus toward concentrating hours on existing employees. For example, imposing minimum hours of pay per shift or week would transform a variable cost for firms, that of wages, into one that is at least partially fixed. There is some evidence that doing so can compel employers to manage labor costs differently. For example, in the Study of Restaurant Employees, Haley-Lock (2011) found that American managers often sent scheduled waiters home or called them to tell them not to come in when business was unexpectedly slow. None of the managers in the Canadian sites of the same chains reported this practice. Haley-Lock attributed this
finding to the presence of a British Columbia ‘minimum daily wage’ law. There, employers are legally required to pay employees for at least two hours when scheduled for up to four, and four hours when scheduled for eight or more hours (British Columbia Ministry of Labour, Citizens’ Services and Open Government, 2011). Carré, Tilly, and Holgate (2008, p. 15) also observed that a minimum daily pay law in Mexico made part-time jobs ‘rare in retail…since retailers would have to pay a full day’s wage in any case’.

Requiring employers to contribute toward employee health insurance is another option for raising the fixed cost of labor. As noted, in the research sites that we studied hourly and particularly part-time workers were rarely covered by employer-sponsored health insurance, and some employers actively kept workers’ hours below a level that would make them eligible for benefits. The ongoing effort to reform health insurance in the US holds implications for employers’ practices around controlling fixed labor costs through health insurance benefits. Health reforms have been propelled in part by American business concerns that the burden of employer-based health insurance is having crippling competitive effects in an increasingly global marketplace, within which firms from most other countries enjoy governmental coverage of these expenses (Carey, 2007; Johnson, 2010). Ironically, the health care reform bill signed into law in March 2010 (the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act) continues an employer-based approach. By 2014, employers with a workforce that equals or exceeds the equivalent of 50 full-time employees will be required either to provide ‘affordable’ health insurance to employees or else pay a ‘shared responsibility fee’ (United States White House, 2010).

If the administrative rules were to constrain employers from conditioning eligibility for insurance coverage on employee job status and hours worked, the law would increase the fixed costs of labor in low-level hourly jobs in firms that meet the size criterion, providing an incentive to those employers who currently maintain a large pool of workers with low hours to concentrate hours on a relatively smaller staff. It appears, however, that the incentive structure will stay the same. The administrative rules currently under consideration continue the practice of conditioning benefit eligibility on hours worked (US Internal Revenue Service, 2011). Specifically, employers would not be required to provide insurance coverage or pay a shared responsibility fee for individual employees who average fewer than 30 hours per week, and employers would have ample discretion in choosing which months of the year on which to base eligibility. If these administrative rules are implemented, the Affordable Care Act is likely to not only leave low-level hourly workers on their own to purchase health insurance coverage but also at continued, and perhaps increased, risk of low hours and thus low earnings.

Employee cross-training

Another strategy to address hour scarcity is cross-training. As noted earlier, Haley-Lock & Ewert (2011) found that in lieu of sending staff home during slow shifts, some managers cross-trained waiters so that they could be reassigned to other tasks such as food prep and stocking and cleaning when tables were unfilled. As a result, employees were more likely to work all or most of their scheduled hours even when business was slow.
Firms that are willing to cross-train frontline hourly employees thus create an additional route to working more hours (also see Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2009, for a discussion of this point). Moreover, cross-training provides a strategy for ensuring the productivity of employees during times of low demand. Of course, the advantages to workers of cross-training will be reaped only if employers refrain from using it as a tool to intensify work, that is, to force employees to ‘work faster and harder’ for the same compensation (Burchell, 2002, p. 61). Ultimately, the advantages to employers of cross-training will depend on the ratio of the cost of training and wages paid during periods of low demand in proportion to possible cost-savings such as from reduced turnover.

To the extent minimum hour guarantees, mandated employer-sponsored health benefits, or cross-training result in employers concentrating work hours on a smaller number of employees, these practices may also result in fewer workers being hired by individual firms. These avenues for reducing the scarcity of work hours thus pose at least the theoretical risk of increasing unemployment. Whether disemployment effects occur will depend in part on the magnitude of the economic stimulus that occurs as a result of improving the quality of workers’ jobs, particularly increased and stable earnings. Comparative research across European nations demonstrates that levels of unemployment do not neatly mirror fixed labor costs (Mason & Salverda, 2009). Countries can have relatively high employment rates and high job quality, challenging the inevitability of disemployment effects resulting from increasing the fixed costs of labor.

**Fluctuating work hours: strategies for smoothing work hours**

As we have shown, workers in low-level hourly jobs may inadvertently put their earnings at risk when they place restrictions on their availability for work. Therefore, curtailing the challenges created by an erratic work schedule likely requires strategies that go beyond promising workers greater control over the timing of their work hours. We propose targeting additional dimensions of work schedules, notably predictability and stability.

Work schedules in hourly jobs are often posted with limited advance notice, often just a few days before the upcoming workweek; and as noted earlier, changes are often made once schedules are posted as well. In jobs with fluctuating work hours, this means that work schedules are both unstable and unpredictable. The lack of schedule predictability has been shown to interfere with the ability of workers to remain employed, secure childcare and transportation, and plan nonwork activities, such as scheduling doctor’s appointments, planning meals, and participating in children’s school activities (Henly, et al., 2006; Henly & Lambert, 2010). Thus, one possibility for improving scheduling practices in low-level hourly jobs is to post schedules further in advance and to limit changes thereafter. Although posting schedules in advance does not address the problem of hour scarcity, it should reduce last-minute hour fluctuations and thereby assist workers with managing their employment responsibilities with outside activities and demands.

Another possibility is to directly reduce hour fluctuations by adopting scheduling practices that allow employers to transfer the stability in demand for labor that does exist directly to workers. Such an approach acknowledges business pressures to tightly link labor levels to customer demand while also recognizing that the demand
for labor is not entirely variable. That is, some percentage of labor hours are constant 
over time due to minimum staffing requirements dictated by corporate policy, or 
reliably predicted based on past business cycles. For example, businesses may require 
managers to schedule a certain number of workers to open and close the store, to 
provide sufficient coverage to reduce the risk of theft and ensure worker safety, and 
for the provision of high quality customer service. In addition, through review of 
previous months’ labor hours, employers may be able to estimate quite reliably the 
minimum number of labor hours they are likely to have for future months. By 
capitalizing on these forms of ‘hidden stability’, managers could provide workers 
with some degree of stability in their weekly schedules while still keeping flexible the 
remaining hours to respond to unanticipated variation in demand.

In order to consider the feasibility of such an approach, we examined fluctuations 
in staffing hours across sites of the WSS firm. As part of the manager survey, store 
managers were asked the minimum and maximum number of staffing hours their 
store had been assigned over the preceding year (2006–2007). Their responses 
indicate that the average difference between the highest and lowest number of staffing 
hours assigned the stores was only 19%. Some stores experienced greater reductions 
than this (12% of the stores had over 30% hour reductions), and 20% experienced far 
smaller drops (10% or less). Overall, 80% of staffing hours remained stable 
throughout the course of the year for the majority of stores (Lambert & Henly, 
2010). Store managers in this firm thus had a large base of stable hours throughout 
the year, opening up the possibility of creating fairly stable schedules for sales 
associates and providing workers with advance notice of at least a portion of their 
work hours and times.

Conclusion
Efforts to include hourly workers in the public discourse on workplace flexibility are 
needed and laudable. Our research raises concerns, however, about the extent to 
which conventional flexibility options serve their intended purpose when applied to 
jobs in which schedules already vary and workers are more concerned about getting 
enough hours rather than too many. The Families & Work Institute (2010) makes the 
important point that flexibility has to ‘work’ for both the employer and the employee 
in order for it to be deemed an effective workplace strategy. In the context of highly 
constrained choices on the part of frontline managers and few workplace protections 
on the part of frontline workers, flexibility that works for both employers and 
employees seems a tall order. Even if workers are grateful for the opportunity to 
restrict their work hours, they may not be fully aware that they risk an earnings 
penalty when they restrict their availability for work, and if they are aware, their 
family responsibilities may limit their ability to choose otherwise.

Advocates for increased workplace flexibility have begun to incorporate these 
caveats as they advance new directions for both policy and employer practice. For 
example, several public policy organizations including The Center for Law and Social 
Policy (CLASP), Center for Work-Life Law, DEMOS, Workplace Flexibility 2010, 
and Women Employed have recently made schedule predictability a core element of 
their policy recommendations (see Cauthen, 2011; Levin-Epstein, 2006; Williams, 
This attention to an expanded menu of scheduling options is timely. The industries in which jobs with fluctuating hours are concentrated—retail and hospitality (both accommodation and food services)—are among the fastest growing in the US (US Department of Labor, 2011c). Labor market trends also suggest that fluctuating work hours may be expanding beyond these industries. For example, recent analyses of national data suggest that within-job fluctuations in earnings have grown across several industrial sectors (Gottschalk & Moffitt, 2009). Scarce-hour jobs are also on the rise, not only in the US but in European nations as well. For example, in 2010, 7.3 million Germans held what are termed ‘mini jobs’, up 27% since 2003 (Breitenbach & Schneibel, 2011). As reduced-hour jobs have expanded in Germany, Denmark, and France, so have these countries’ rates of involuntary part-time employment (Mason & Salverda, 2009). In 2009, 10.9% (4.2 million) of Germany’s workforce reported that they would like to work more hours for more pay (Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland, 2010). As in the US, the upsurge in scarce-hour jobs began prior to the recent economic downturn. In France, for example, rates of involuntary part-time employment increased 33% between 1990 and 1997 (Galtier, 1999). Ignoring these labor market trends is likely to result in hourly workers being either excluded from flexibility initiatives or at increased risk of low hours and in turn, low earnings.

Even under a best-case scenario, however, improved work schedule flexibility in hourly jobs will not be enough to ensure that workers have the resources needed to support themselves and their families. Adjustments to scheduling practices, fixed costs, and employee training made at the discretion of employers or by public mandate do not replace the need for a comprehensive safety net of supports for all people (Meyers & Gornick, 2009). For working-poor families, the personal and community resources upon which many individuals draw to accommodate demands at work, even when flexible, are often severely limited. Thus, in tandem with changes to private employer practices, public safety net policies and programs continue to have an important role to play in delivering economic security to those laboring at the frontlines of firms.

Notes
1. Source: H.L. Shaefer unpublished analysis of 2006 CPS data. Part-time workers are defined as those who report working less than 35 hours per week at all jobs. Annual averages used.
2. Labor costs for hourly workers include wages paid by the hour, as well as a percentage of wages paid that constitute the employer share of Old Age, Survivors, Disability, and Health Insurance (commonly called Social Security and Medicare) to the federal government and Unemployment Insurance (wage subsidy of limited duration), and Workers Compensation (insurance providing wage replacement and often medical benefits for work injuries) to the state government. In the longer term, employers may also reduce labor costs by advocating for restrictions to these social insurances.
3. Source: Provided by Attorney Ellen Neely working in conjunction with Women Employed, Chicago, IL.

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