

# Hourly workforce carries burden during recession

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The United States workforce, battered by an economic slowdown, now includes a record number of workers who are involuntarily working part-time due to reduced hours or the inability to find a full-time job.

Hourly [workers](#) — the majority of the wage and salary workforce — are especially susceptible to reduced, irregular and fluctuating hours, and the myriad of challenges associated with them, according to researchers at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago.

Although much has been made of the hardships facing the nearly 10 percent of Americans out of work in the current recession, many workers approach this Labor Day having held onto their jobs while being disadvantaged. So claim Susan Lambert and Julia Henly, associate professors at SSA who are experts on the hourly workforce and workplace flexibility for low-level workers.

Hourly and especially part-time workers receive limited formal employee benefits from their employers, and in many cases, are not eligible for public benefits such as [unemployment insurance](#), cash assistance, or family and medical leave. In addition, their [work schedules](#) are typically set with limited advance notice and subject to last-minute changes, resulting in unpredictable schedules.

Changes in public policy as well as company practices could help these workers, the researchers contend.

"Certainly the current recession is contributing to underemployment, as evidenced by the proportion of American workers classified as 'involuntary part-time,'" said Lambert.

The Census Bureau uses the term for those who work less than 35 hours a week because they could not find a full-time job or those who work reduced hours due to "slack demand." In November 2009, 9.2 million workers fell in this category, the highest level in recorded history.

Other recessions also have seen an increase in involuntary part-time workers, she said. For example, the 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.

"I think it is important to underscore that employment has become increasingly precarious over the past 30 years, not just during recessionary periods, due to structural changes in the economy, reductions in labor protections and evolving employer practices that pass risk from the market onto workers," Lambert said. "The current recession highlights these insecurities, bringing much-needed attention to the plight of disadvantaged workers who are struggling to keep their jobs as well as maintain sufficient hours to make ends meet.

The problems faced by hourly, low-level workers are unlikely to go away when the economy fully recovers."

In good times and bad, employers frequently use "just-in-time" scheduling practices — setting hourly workers' schedules with limited advance notice to accommodate fluctuating demand — as a means of maintaining a tight link between labor costs and demand.

Unpredictable schedules not only make it harder for workers to

determine their incomes, they also make it hard to plan for childcare and family life, Henly said.

"Unpredictable work schedules can translate into instability in family routines and practices, placing additional burdens on already strapped and busy families, their caregivers and extended family members," she said.

"We find that hourly retail employees with more predictable work schedules report lower levels of stress, less work-to-family conflict and fewer work interferences with non-work activities such as scheduling doctor's appointments, socializing with friends and eating meals together as a family."

Lambert and Henly are investigating the management and employee sides of scheduling practices in their "Work Scheduling Study," which tracked a national retail apparel firm. Several key findings are detailed in their recent report, "Managers' Strategies for Balancing Business Requirements with Employees' Needs."

Among the study's findings:

- Hours vary substantially for both part-time and full-time hourly workers in this firm, with full-time employees working more hours but also experiencing the greatest fluctuations in hours from week to week.
- The more hours employees work and the less their hours fluctuate, the longer they remain employed at the firm, even after taking into account factors such as age, race and job status.
- Job turnover is high, particularly for part-time sales associates,

younger workers, African Americans and recently hired workers.

- Management practices contribute to job turnover above and beyond individual worker characteristics. Stores in which managers pursue a strategy of keeping their staff size small with the goal of providing each sales associate with sufficient hours have lower turnover and higher retention rates than stores in which managers keep their staff size large.

Workplace flexibility has become an important topic in public policy debates as more parents seek ways to reconcile demands of their jobs with family life. Flexibility options that are frequently touted include allowing workers to work reduced hours, work at home, or vary the start and end times of the workday.

According to Lambert and Henly, options that reduce job rigidity make sense for managerial and professional jobs characterized by long and rigid hours. But they caution that conventional flexibility options do not map well onto the jobs of many low-level hourly workers, who face fluctuating hours, too few rather than too many hours and place-bound job duties that preclude bringing their work home.

"Fortunately, policymakers, advocacy groups and researchers are becoming increasingly interested in developing and promoting flexibility options for U.S. workers in hourly jobs. As these initiatives proceed, it will be important that they reflect the range of work conditions found in hourly jobs, including low-wage jobs in service industries," Lambert and Henly write in their forthcoming paper, "Work Schedule Flexibility in Hourly Jobs: Unanticipated Consequences and Promising Directions. "

Joining Lambert and Henly on this paper is Anna Haley-Lock, a 2003 Ph.D. graduate of SSA and now an assistant professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Creating flexibility options for low-level hourly workers will be one topic addressed in a series of four regional conferences organized by the White House in the coming year. The first of the forums will be held Oct. 7 in Dallas on the issue of flexibility in small businesses. Forums in both Los Angeles and Chicago are tentatively scheduled for early 2011 and will focus on flexibility in low-wage jobs and in the manufacturing sector, respectively.

Henly and Lambert expect that the need of low-level hourly workers for stable and adequate hours and for benefits defined in both public and employer policy will be discussed.

Provided by University of Chicago

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