

Low-wage workers are often trapped, unable to advance

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Low-wage workers know they have to enhance their skills to escape low-wage jobs, but long hours and multiple jobs make skill-building and education nearly impossible, according to a new policy brief released by the Center for Poverty Research at the University of California, Davis.

"The very conditions of low-wage work necessitate that [workers](#) hold multiple [jobs](#), and that they have to put in long hours if they can," said Victoria Smith, a UC Davis professor of sociology and a faculty affiliate for the Center for Poverty Research. "People find themselves very caught up, just treading water. The fact that they often are supporting other people heightens their need to take extra hours when they can get them."

In this ongoing study, Smith and co-author Brian Halpin, a graduate student in sociology at UC Davis, conducted in-depth interviews with 25 low-wage workers in the Napa/Sonoma area in fall 2012. Smith and Halpin asked workers about their current job situations as well as their plans for the future.

All of the interviewees are first-generation immigrants who either grew up in the United States or their home countries. They work in several sectors, including food service, landscaping, domestic work, office cleaning and construction. Notably, some interviewees work in multiple sectors.

The study has found that low-wage work limits opportunities to learn

new skills needed for better jobs. To sustain their livelihoods, these workers keep the jobs they have while searching for additional opportunities through relatives, friends and work networks. They patch together multiple full- and part-time jobs to maximize their paid hours.

"In the interviews, workers said they needed the hours, wherever they could get them," said Smith. "They could come from jobs they have on a regular basis, or it could come from being asked to do one-time jobs working for a friend, like helping with a landscaping job, or helping clean a house. They constantly keep their eyes open for these one-off jobs so they can get their hours."

Typically, low-wage jobs are part-time with no guaranteed hours, making it difficult for individuals to manage their work and nonwork time effectively. Many employers expect workers to be on-call and available—even for overtime—without advance notice. This makes it extremely difficult to take advantage of educational and training opportunities, which require scheduled attendance.

Smith and Halpin argue that introducing living wages and other worker protections could create more possibilities for workers to support themselves and their families while potentially freeing up time to develop their human capital. They say this could also increase efficiency and productivity for the economy as a whole.

"The American dream is about reaching the middle class and having a reasonable standard of living to support our families," said Smith. "If people are cut out from being able to participate in that middle-class dream, it threatens the social fabric of society."

More information: The policy brief, titled, "Low-wage Work Uncertainty often Traps Low-wage Workers," is available online: poverty.ucdavis.edu/policy-brief-aps-low-wage-workers

Provided by UC Davis

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