

# Stable, predictable work schedules elusive for many Illinois workers, paper says

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An unpredictable work schedule with irregular shifts has become “a broader, more normative trend across all occupations in Illinois,” says new research co-written by Robert Bruno, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois. Bruno’s co-author is Alison Dickson, an instructor in the Labor Education Program at Illinois. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

More than 40 percent of hourly workers and 30 percent of salaried workers in Illinois have variable or unpredictable work schedules, resulting in underemployment and work-life conflicts with child care, parenting and other family obligations, says new research conducted by a pair of University of Illinois experts who study labor issues affecting the working class.

Robert Bruno, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois and director of the Labor Education Program, and Alison Dickson, an instructor in the Labor Education Program, found that the lack of stable, predictable work schedules is widespread for workers in Illinois.

"It's not something that's only relegated to low-wage, hourly employees, and it's not merely an isolated problem in certain sectors of the economy, like the fast-food industry or health care," Bruno said. "It's become a broader, more normative trend across all occupations in Illinois."

"What we discovered is that these workers are incredibly vulnerable, and they don't really get an opportunity to influence their [schedule](#)," Dickson said. "They have no voice in the process and are at the mercy of their employers."

The researchers surveyed more than 1,700 workers throughout the state of Illinois between October 2017 and March 2018. All respondents had an annual household income of less than \$150,000; more than 60 percent of surveyed workers were parents; and slightly fewer than one-third of respondents were financially responsible for other dependents.

The survey included full-time, part-time and temporary workers plus a smattering of independent contractors. Almost 80 percent were paid by the hour, and the rest were salaried. Surveyed workers were clustered in 21 industries ranging from the retail trade, educational services, manufacturing, [health care](#) services and food services to professional and

technical services sectors.

"We didn't just focus on the restaurant industry, where there are large numbers of low-wage workers who work irregular schedules, nor did we just look at folks who could only secure part-time work," Dickson said.

"We also looked at full-time workers, part-time workers, salaried employees and hourly employees, and we found that scheduling instability is quite extensive among all of those groups."

According to the paper, the average fluctuation in working hours per week was plus or minus 14 hours.

"Whether you're working 14 more hours or 14 fewer hours per week, that's significant, and it's difficult to stabilize your home life – whether it's [child care](#) or your finances – when there's that amount of flux," Bruno said. "That kind of instability has all sorts of downstream impact on the [worker](#) and their family."

"Many workers in this sample are underemployed and would love to work more hours," Dickson said. "They just end up with inadequate resources to take care of themselves and their family, and they have very little leverage to change their employment situation. There's really not a mechanism for them to change their schedules or have more say in when they work and for how long."

If there is a need for workers to change their schedule, there's not a way for them to do it without feeling like they're putting their livelihoods at risk, Dickson said.

"When schedules are changed on them at the last minute, they have little recourse to complain," she said. "The worker isn't really given an option. It's 'Be here or else.' There's no penalty to the employer for upending someone's schedule – and there's also no reciprocity when the employee

has to change their schedule due to illness or some other unforeseen circumstance."

And when those schedule changes occur with less than 24 hours' notice, that can throw a wrench into a child care or elder care situation. Then it becomes "a choice of being able to pay the rent or caring for a loved one," Bruno said.

"When that happens, workers really find themselves scrambling to find alternate child or family care," he said. "So whenever a worker's hours are changed, that has a ripple effect in their lives. It affects their family situation. It affects their ability to pay their bills."

The only recourse workers have is finding another job – a task that is time-consuming and difficult in its own right.

"Twenty-three percent of the sample had to look for another job because they couldn't cobble together enough hours to make ends meet," Bruno said. "Making workers contingent or giving them inadequate hours is compelling them to always be looking around the corner for something better, which can't be good for the employer, either."

The paper was co-written by Lonnie Golden of Penn State University and is part of the Project for Middle Class Renewal, a research-based initiative tasked with investigating the labor market institutions and policies in today's economy while elevating public discourse on issues affecting workers.

**More information:** "Scheduling stability: The landscape of work schedules and potential gains from fairer workweeks in Illinois and Chicago" [ler.illinois.edu/wp-content/up...al-embedded-text.pdf](http://ler.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ler-embedded-text.pdf)

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