

Parents' non-standard work schedules make adequate childrearing difficult ^[1]

Reforming labor market practices can improve children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes

Author: Morsy, Leslie & Rothstein, Richard

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AVAILABILITY

Full brief PDF ^[2]

Introduction and key findings

Recent developments in employment practices have increased the prevalence of non-standard work schedules—non-daytime shifts in which most hours do not fall between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., when shifts rotate, or when schedules vary weekly or otherwise. For example, computer software now enables retail, restaurant, service, and other firms to predict hourly customer demand and delivery schedules with precision, encouraging employers to create “just-in-time” schedules in which workers are called in or sent home on short notice.¹ By preventing many parents from adequately caring for their children, such practices adversely affect child and adolescent development.

This issue brief examines evidence on the prevalence of unpredictable and non-standard work schedules, and on how such schedules impair children's development. It concludes by proposing policy solutions.

Key findings include:

- Non-standard schedules are more common among black workers and less-educated workers, and also among mothers who are low-income, younger, and have spent more years as single parents.
- Young children and adolescents of parents working unpredictable schedules or outside standard daytime working hours are more likely to have inferior cognitive and behavioral outcomes.
 - Toddlers whose mothers work non-standard hours demonstrate worse sensory perception, memory, learning, problem solving, verbal communication, and expressive language.
 - Preschoolers whose mothers work non-standard hours exhibit more negative behavior (depression, anxiety, withdrawal, aggression).
 - Parents' variable schedules require irregular family mealtimes and child bedtimes that interfere with children's healthy development. For young children, mothers with non-standard schedules must make inconsistent and poorer quality child care arrangements.
 - Parents with non-standard schedules can engage in fewer pre-academic activities with children, such as reading books, telling stories, and practicing reading, writing, or math skills.
 - Parents with non-standard hours are more tired, anxious, irritable, and stressed, making children's delinquency, aggression, and other negative behaviors more likely.
- Policy changes should create disincentives to schedule work in ways that impede employees' ability to care for their children.
 - For instance, legislation should require premiums for work performed beyond eight hours after the first working hour of the day or outside typical daytime hours, and provide predictable scheduling and pay, adequate rest between shifts, and access to adequate hours.

Related link: Life as a parent with an unstable work schedule ^[3]

Region: United States ^[4]

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Links

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