

Why Job Quality is Family Policy: Predictable Hours

Unifying Family Policy series

By Elise Anderson

Where should family policy in the United States head over the next five to 15 years?

The *Unifying Family Policy* series reimagines key areas of family policy as interconnected threads in a shared tapestry. The series challenges underlying assumptions and invites fresh thinking in light of the deep societal transformations underway and those still to come. Each brief explores how a specific policy area intersects with others, and how, woven together, they can build a coherent, stable foundation for families in a rapidly changing world.

The current patchwork of family policies—paid leave, child care, tax credits, health coverage, etc.—is fragmented, reactive, and out of step with the realities families face. Over the next decade, we must recast family policy as an integrated, future-oriented system—one that recognizes caregiving as vital infrastructure, addresses the real costs of raising children, and gives families true agency to make choices that align with their values, cultures, and needs.

This brief focuses on why job quality, including predictable hours, must be recognized as a core pillar of family policy. Without stable work schedules, caregivers may struggle to maintain consistent routines, arrange child care, manage health needs, or be as fully present and involved in their children's lives as they would like to be. Therefore, states and the federal government should pass well-designed predictive scheduling laws that give families the stability and predictability essential to a healthy home life.

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Current Context and Future Trends

Imagine not knowing your work schedule days or even hours before your shift. Would you arrange and pay for child care, only to risk not being called in? Or would you wait and try to cobble together care at the last minute? How would you—or your child—feel if you missed the play or game you had promised to attend? Would you settle for less-than-ideal child care to keep your job?

Even picturing this scenario is stressful. Yet it is the reality for the [one in four](#) Americans with unpredictable schedules, and an even higher percentage of those without college degrees. Over the past few decades, more employers (especially in the retail and service industries) have embraced “just in time” scheduling practices in which managers schedule shifts with little advance notice. Algorithms decide work assignments by the hour based on customer demand, the time of the day, and even the weather. This system allows businesses to schedule exactly the number of employees they decide they need per shift and reduce expenses caused by overstaffing. But it forces workers (especially low-wage workers) to contend with [unpredictable and unstable work schedules](#) that can change dramatically from week to week, day to day, or even hour to hour.

The traditional 9-to-5 job, once defined by fixed hours, stable wages, and clear benefits, is steadily eroding. The [rise of the gig](#) economy, the growing share of shift-based and on-demand roles, and the looming displacement of middle-class jobs by AI will likely push even more people into this kind of unpredictable work.

At the same time, other trends will make the need for predictable hours even more critical. As we approach the 2030s, families are navigating a convergence of forces reshaping both work and care: [changing demographics](#) and a rapidly aging population, the rise of AI and automation, and the erosion of job predictability across large swaths of the economy. In short, we are entering [an age of greater precarity](#).

Unpredictable schedules—combined with the volatility that often also accompanies low-wage, shift-based jobs—act like a threat multiplier, making so many aspects of life difficult: managing a household, retaining other employment, pursuing education, and more. Being on call for shifts that never materialize can also result in never being assigned enough hours to be considered full-time, which limits financial security and stability. Workers of color are often disproportionately impacted by these practices and report [higher rates of volatile schedules](#).

Unpredictable scheduling, including on-call shifts, clopenings (an employee works a closing shift followed by an opening shift the next day, often with limited time for rest or personal activities in between), and last-minute changes create enormous barriers for parents. Planning for child care becomes a high-stakes game of Tetris. Variable hours and last-minute changes block access to most high-quality, licensed child care centers, as they [rarely accommodate](#)

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night, early morning, or weekend shifts. Similarly, relatively few offer regular part-time slots. As a result, employees must scramble to arrange child care for every shift, often relying on family, friends, and neighbors (even if that's not what they prefer).

These parents are in an impossible situation. If they fail to arrange trusted child care (or it falls through for reasons outside of their control, like a grandparent falling ill), they must either miss their shift or place their child in less-than-ideal, or even unsafe, arrangements. This uncertainty and instability contribute to increased work-family conflict, higher rates of missed work, and strained relationships, along with [increased negative moods and poor sleep quality](#).

Children arguably bear the brunt of these scheduling practices. Unpredictable schedules cause parents to miss family meals, school events, homework time, bedtime, and many other activities, along with important milestones. When parents are absent—or when they're present but stressed—they are less emotionally responsive. They are less able to create the stable, nurturing environment that fosters secure attachment, promotes cognitive and behavioral development, and contributes to strong mental health in their children. When parents have unpredictable schedules, their children are more likely to experience [sleep](#) and [behavior problems](#).

Every American should have the freedom to plan ahead, dedicate time to loved ones, and lead fulfilling lives. That starts with a unified policy agenda that champions better labor policies and respects the responsibilities employees have outside of work, including caregiving.

Predictive scheduling—which requires advance notice of work schedules and protects against last-minute changes—offers a promising avenue. Yet recognizing that unpredictable hours are a problem or that predictive scheduling laws are a potential solution rarely shows up as a priority on the policy or advocacy agendas of child-serving organizations. Predictive scheduling is a family policy blind spot.

When parents cannot plan, coordinate care, and meet family responsibilities, other policy gains unravel. If we are serious about building an agenda that supports families in this new era, we need to address job quality. Predictive scheduling is one of the clearest and most urgent entry points.

The Opportunity

Predictive scheduling laws, more commonly known as fair workweek laws (FWLs), have emerged as a promising solution: they aim to reduce volatile schedules, ease child care challenges, and improve family well-being. These laws provide workers with greater predictability and control over their schedules, which are key conditions for maintaining stable employment and arranging reliable care.

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In 2017, [Oregon became the first state to pass a statewide FWL](#). Cities and localities across the country have adopted similar ordinances, reflecting growing recognition of the need for more equitable and predictable workplace practices that support caregivers.

Only Oregon has adopted statewide FWL legislation, but a handful of cities have enacted their own versions, including:

- Berkeley, CA
- Chicago, IL
- Emeryville, CA
- Evanston, IL
- Los Angeles, CA
- New York, NY
- Philadelphia, PA
- San Francisco, CA
- Seattle, WA

FWLs vary widely in both scope and coverage. In some places, protections are established through a single ordinance. In other cases, provisions are spread across multiple laws. All existing ordinances cover retail workers, with some extending to fast food workers (Emeryville and New York City), the broader food industry (Seattle), and hospitality workers (Philadelphia and Oregon). Chicago has one of the most expansive laws, covering health care, hospitality, manufacturing, restaurant, retail, and warehouse workers.

Provisions (not present in all states and localities) included in FWLs:

- **Right to Request:** Grants employees the express right to request changes to their schedules or flexible work arrangements without fear of retaliation by their employer.
- **Right to Rest:** Mandates a minimum rest period between shifts, and employees who voluntarily waive this rest period must be compensated at a higher rate.
- **Advance Notice:** Requires employers to provide advance notice to employees. In most provisions, new employees receive a good-faith estimate of their typical schedule before beginning employment.
- **Access to Hours:** Requires employers to offer available shifts to existing qualified part-time employees before hiring new staff to fill those hours.
- **Predictability Pay:** Requires employers to compensate employees with additional pay when last-minute changes are made to their scheduled shifts, including additions, reductions, or cancellations of regular or on-call shifts.
- **Reporting Pay:** Ensures that employees are paid for a portion of their originally scheduled shift if they report to work but are then told their shifts

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have been canceled or reduced. These regulations often predate predictability pay provisions and are more limited in scope.

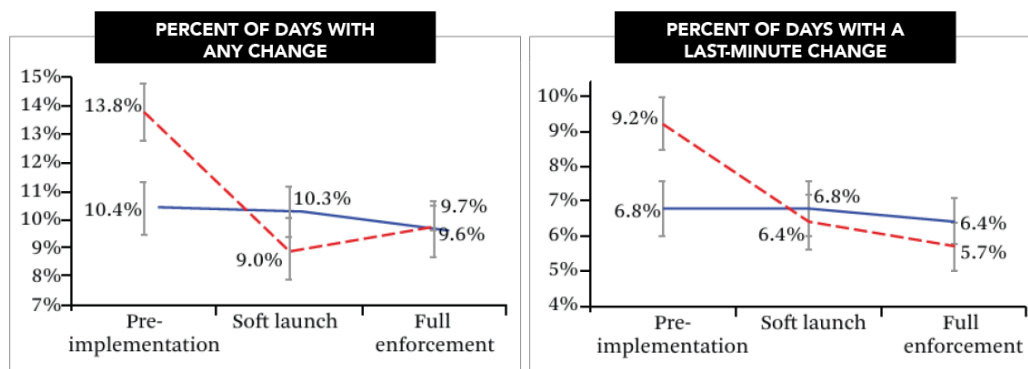
- Split-Shift Pay: Requires additional compensation when employees are scheduled for shifts that include gaps between scheduled hours in the same workday.
- Part-Time Parity (San Francisco only): Requires employers to treat part-time employees equitably compared to full-time staff in terms of benefits accrual of benefits, and access to raises and promotions.

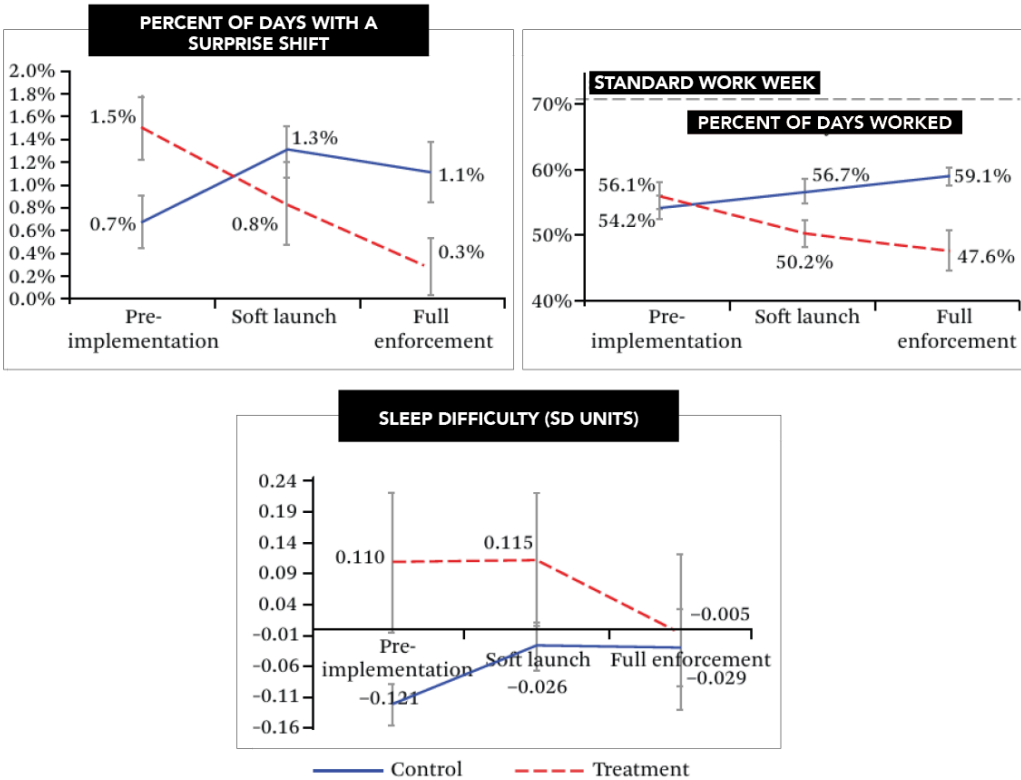
FWLs help make it easier for employees to balance their time both in and out of the workplace, care for their family, and navigate their finances. They show particularly promising results for parents of young children.

Researchers published a [study in 2022 on the impact of the fair workweek law](#) in Emeryville, a small city in the East San Francisco Bay Area, focusing on parents with children under 7. Emeryville’s ordinance grants employees advance notice of their schedules, the right to decline previously unscheduled hours without retaliation if not given advance notice, compensation for last-minute schedule changes, stability pay when a shift is canceled, and the right to decline hours or receive compensation if their scheduled shifts do not include proper rest periods.

Nearly 100 retail and food workers shared their work and family experiences both before and after the enactment of the fair workweek ordinance. The results showed that the ordinance has had a positive impact. Workers covered by the FWL reported a 35% reduction in schedule instability, such as canceled or changed hours. Parents reported improvements in overall happiness, sleep quality, and stress levels—all of which can [significantly impact their children’s development](#) and help create the nurturing and stable home environments they need to thrive.

FIGURE 1. Effects of the Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance on Work and Sleep Outcomes





Source: Ananat et al. The Effects of the Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance on the Daily Lives of Low-Wage Workers and Their Families, The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences.

What To Do

To build the future of family life, we need to build the future of work. Predictive scheduling is a critical starting point, but it must be part of a broader effort to modernize labor policy to reflect the realities of caregiving.

Policymakers, think tanks, advocates, philanthropies, and researchers should explore the following recommendations to advance fair workweek laws:

Build the case: Philanthropies should invest in research that further examines how FWLs affect family well-being, especially among families with young children. A stronger evidence base can drive buy-in from lawmakers and equip advocates with credible tools.

Study what works: Philanthropies should also support a more detailed study to identify which provisions of FWLs are the most effective, particularly in improving outcomes for working parents, to enable smarter policy design and implementation.

Engage the business community: Advocates should respond to common business concerns about FWLs by, for example, highlighting research

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showing how they can improve employee retention, job satisfaction, and efficiency.

Cultivate relationships with labor groups: Child and family advocates should deepen relationships with labor organizations, so that labor policies are developed with their involvement and insight.

Champion FWLs publicly: Child care advocates and other child- and family-serving organizations should take a clear public stance in support of FWLs, incorporating them into policy platforms and testifying in favor of proposed legislation.

The Tough Questions

Oregon is a valuable early case study on the implementation of FWLs. In 2019, researchers conducted a [study](#) that involved in-depth interviews with workers in the state to assess the impact of its FWL. They discovered that while workers were experiencing some improvements in scheduling, persistent challenges continued to create scheduling unpredictability. Those challenges included political resistance, a lack of education and information about the law, and provisions that undermined key objectives of the law.

Oregon's example can help us ask sharper questions and design stronger, more equitable laws. It raises issues that advocates must consider before pursuing FWLs.

How can we advance meaningful change while navigating concerns from the business community? Members of the business community have not been shy in objecting to FWLs. Powerful business groups, including the [Michigan Chamber of Commerce](#), the [Association of Washington Businesses \(AWB\)](#), and the [Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce](#), have documented their opposition to predictive scheduling legislation, arguing that it is unrealistic, hurts small businesses, and forces understaffing.

Oregon's FWL grants workers key protections, but business groups secured concessions that ultimately excluded large groups of workers based on employer size and industry. They also secured exemptions to predictability pay (the requirement to compensate employees for last-minute changes to scheduled shifts).

The voluntary standby list is an FWL provision unique to Oregon. It allows employers to ask workers to "voluntarily" sign a list indicating their willingness to work additional hours without advance notice or additional compensation—which undermines predictability pay altogether. This leads to a question: Will employees who do not sign be penalized or given fewer scheduled hours, potentially harming parents?

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Any future FWL legislation should not include standby lists or other steps that put distance between the intent of the legislation and its execution. Further, child care advocates should advocate for measures that do not penalize employees who fail to subject themselves to unpredictable scheduling.

Oregon is a cautionary tale about the need to bring the business community into the fold early in the process and help encourage support. Otherwise, states and localities risk opposition to FWL policies or concessions that undermine the efficacy of these proposals.

What does effective enforcement look like? Oregon's FWL does not dictate how employers inform employees about the law and their rights, which has contributed to wide variation in education and training. Of the workers included in a recent study, [few knew that predictability pay was available](#) in their workplace. In addition, the law specifies that employers are not obligated to grant employee requests for changes in availability or scheduling, effectively undermining that provision.

The law's right-to-rest provision of the state's FWL has delivered benefits. But overall, as a result of these concessions, many workers in Oregon continue to experience unpredictable scheduling without meaningful compensation. To maximize the efficacy of FWLs, they should include clear language on enforcement and on informing employees of their rights.

Recommended Reading

For more reading on the research base and different perspectives on this topic, we recommend these additional resources.

[The Shift Project](#) at Harvard University is a research initiative that examines how working conditions (scheduling practices, paid leave, minimum wage, etc.) affect hourly workers. Below is a selection of key publications and findings.

Effectiveness of fair workweek laws:

- [Seattle's Secure Scheduling Ordinance Year Two Impact Report](#)

Schedule instability and its impact on parents and children:

- Impact on child care arrangements [here](#) and [here](#).
- [Impact on mothers \(work-family conflict, missed work, difficulty arranging child care\)](#)
- [Impact on children's sleep patterns](#)
- [Impact on children's behavior](#)

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Studies on the efficacy of fair workweek policies:

- [Effects of Emeryville fair workweek ordinance on workers and families](#)
- [Persistent unpredictability in Oregon](#)
- [Effects of fair workweek laws on work schedules in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia](#)

Additional resources:

- [A Better Balance Fact Sheet](#)
 - [Unequal Time: Gender, Class, and Family in Employment Schedules](#)
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Connections

Predictive scheduling is not just a labor policy, it is a foundational element for family stability. Without reliable, stable work hours, all other family supports can break down in practice. Job quality is a thread that helps hold the rest together, and predictability is an inextricable element of job quality.

- Predictive scheduling can help parents take full advantage of PAID PARENTAL LEAVE by having greater confidence in their income when they return and maximizing the earnings bank used to calculate their paid leave payout.

See: capita.org/unifying-family-policy-series/paid-leave

- Predictive scheduling can help reduce stress in households, which is often linked to [relational challenges](#) and can influence decisions on parenting and FAMILY FORMATION.

See: capita.org/a-new-lens-on-the-birth-rate-conversation

- Predictive scheduling can improve earnings histories, which in turn increases the value of any SOCIAL SECURITY CAREGIVER CREDITS for parents who choose to take time out of the paid labor force to care for dependents.

See: capita.org/unifying-family-policy-series/caregiver-credits