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**On-call job, on-call family: The necessity of family support  
among retail workers with unstable work schedules**

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On-Call Job, On-Call Family: The Necessity of Family Support among Retail Workers with Unstable Work Schedules

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**Abstract**

Drawing on 25 in-depth interviews with parents employed in the service sector in the San Francisco Bay area, we describe an array of challenges: insufficient work hours, volatile incomes, unpredictable schedules, and the lack of flexibility for time off. Meeting the demands of work and parenting almost invariably involved reliance on informal child care support. Working parents with *stable* schedules were often able to manage parenting responsibilities using a “tag-team” parenting approach. Those with *unstable* schedules often engaged in a “child-care scramble” in which the care arrangements were pieced together on an ad hoc basis. Some parents with unstable work schedules were able to avoid this instability by relying heavily on one “family anchor,” usually a grandparent, who could consistently provide child care. In sum, on-call family support is required to meet the demands of unstable work schedules, and instability in work schedules often reproduces a similar instability at home.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 50 years, the nature of low-wage work has changed dramatically. As manufacturing jobs have declined, jobs in the service sector have grown and an increasing share of families are relying on income from jobs in retail and food services (Acs, 1999; Hecker, 2005). These jobs are characterized by low wages and a lack of benefits, which make it hard for working parents to make ends meet. Further, the rise of the 24/7 economy has led to work schedules that often do not coincide with children's school days, creating serious challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities (Presser, 2003). Compounding these challenges, in an effort to keep labor costs to a minimum, employers frequently schedule workers on a part-time basis and then use "on-call scheduling" to closely align staffing with demand. The consequence is that many hourly retail workers do not work as many hours as they would like and experience a great deal of volatility in their hourly schedules and total hours worked from day-to-day and week-to-week (Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly, 2014).

Over the same period, dramatic changes have transformed the American family. In the 1950s era when male breadwinner families were the norm, jobs were predicated on the model of the "ideal worker," unfettered by family responsibilities. Over the ensuing decades, this family form has grown increasingly uncommon, while the prevalence of single-parent families and dual-earner families has grown dramatically (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004; Waite and Nielsen, 2001; Pew, 2010; Jacobs and Gerson, 2001). Therefore, families have become less equipped to deal with unpredictable and unstable schedules at the very same time that these schedules have become more common.

In fact, recent research and press accounts portray the difficulty that men and women working these jobs face in arranging child care, establishing stable schedules for their children,

and engaging in quality parenting (Kantor, 2014; Williams and Boushey, 2010). These issues have been gaining attention in the media with many journalistic accounts of the hardships imposed by unpredictable schedules (Singal, 2015; White, 2015; Kantor, 2014; Strauss, 2015). Yet, our understanding of how parents manage their work and family responsibilities under these conditions is limited. Previous research has focused on work family balance among white collar workers contending with limited flexibility, but not with instability (Blair-Loy, 2003; Slaughter, 2015; Stone, 2008), on the challenges that low-income families face in affording and accessing childcare (Chaudry 2004; Henly 1999), and on the challenges posed by non-standard work hours (Morsy and Rothstein 2015; Presser 2013; Henly and Lambert 2005). The literature on work and family conflict has only more recently begun to focus on the challenges of schedule instability and unpredictability for working parents, as distinct from economic deprivation (Henly and Lambert 2014).

In this paper, we draw on in-depth interviews with 25 working parents who are employed at retail or food service jobs and paid on an hourly basis to demonstrate how working parents cope with unstable and unpredictable work schedules. Nearly everyone in our sample could be classified as a member of the “working poor.” However, even within this homogenous population of working parents, some of our respondents were able to carve out fairly predictable work schedules within these jobs while others encountered a steady instability in work times and total hours. We use this comparison to examine how working parents in the service sector meet the dual demands of unstable work schedules and providing care for their dependent children and contrast their strategies with those of their counterparts with stable schedules. For both groups of workers, grandparents and other kin provide a crucial source of child care support. However, the specific constellation of kin support varied depending on the degree of instability in workers’ schedules.

In this paper we describe three different patterns of child care support that low-wage working parents rely upon to balance work and family: the parent tag-team in which co-parents with predictable work schedules can collectively cover work and family demands, the “family anchor” in which working parents are heavily dependent on child care support from a grandparent or another kin member, and “the scramble” in which working parents must piece together child care arrangements on an ad hoc basis to deal with unstable and unpredictable work schedules, and consequently reproduce instability in the lives of their children.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Unpredictable and Precarious Employment**

Dramatic changes in the American economy over the past several decades have fundamentally reorganized the structure of low-skill work. Workers of modest education and training are increasingly employed in precarious and insecure jobs – positions in which wages are low, few benefits are provided, and tenure is short (Fligstein and Shin, 2004). Many workers are only able to secure part-time positions even if they desire full time work (Jacobs and Gerson, 2001) and the structure of shift work has increasingly moved from a 9-5 weekday model to embrace the 24/7 service economy, with many workers employed for non-standard night, evening, early morning, or weekend shifts (Presser, 2003).

A growing body of research has also found that many workers must contend with unstable schedules in which the hours and days they work are constantly in flux (Golden, 2001; Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane, 2003; Clawson and Gerstel, 2015; Enchautegui, Johnson, and Gellatt, 2015). Workers subject to these scheduling practices encounter frequent changes in the timing and number of shift hours, often with very little advance notice and at times with the requirement to be “on-call” for possible work (Golden, 2001; Lambert, Haley-Lock, and Henly, 2012).

While many data sources make it difficult to specifically examine schedule unpredictability and fluctuation, recent estimates from the NLSY-97 show that 87% of early career workers employed in the retail industry reported instability in their work hours from week-to-week over the past month. Of those retail workers who reported unstable work hours, the fluctuations were substantial, averaging almost 50% of their usual weekly hours (Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly, 2014). Research from the Retail Work and Family Life Survey finds that 60% of hourly non-managerial retail workers at eight large companies receive less than two weeks of advance notice of their schedules and 60% work either a variable schedule or have a rotating schedule (Schneider and Harknett, 2016). Smaller targeted studies have also shown substantial variability in the days and time of day on which these hours are scheduled (Henly, Shaefer, and Waxman, 2006; Lambert, Haley-Lock, and Henly, 2012).

Occupational case studies have documented unstable work schedules across a variety of occupational categories including in hospitality (Bernhardt, Dresser, and Hatton, 2003), restaurants (Haley-Lock, 2011), for Certified Nursing Assistants in health care (Clawson and Gerstel, 2015), and in retail sales (Henly Shaefer, and Waxman, 2006). The retail sector has been a particular focus of recent research on unstable and unpredictable scheduling.

The retail sales industry is large and growing, composing 10% of the workforce as of 2015 (BLS, 2015). While retail and minimum wage workers are often portrayed as overwhelmingly young and childless, 3/4 of retail workers are 25 years or older, and almost 1/3 are parents living with children under the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> Further, retail workers stand out as having particularly low median wages with cashiers reporting median hourly wages of just \$9.29 and retail sales persons

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<sup>1</sup> The proportion of retail workers 25 years and old and the proportion with children come from the authors' weighted tabulations of data from the 2014 American Community Survey 5-year sample. Retail workers are defined by the "retail trade" industry code (codes 580 through 691).

of just \$10.47 compared with the across occupation median of \$17.40 (BLS, 2016). These factors may combine to create particular economic vulnerabilities in the retail work force where parents must cope with low wages and economic precarity more broadly.

One of the defining features of jobs with these unstable work schedules is that workers have little or no input into the amount of timing of their work hours, and that these schedules are not preferred or chosen by workers. Henly, Shaefer, and Waxman (2006) use in-depth interviews with workers and managers in retail in the Chicago area to document the extent to which employers exercise substantial control over worker schedules, imposing instability on workers and the limited role for any worker autonomy or input in determining the scheduling of work shifts. Their study also proposes that these work schedules may strain the relationships between working parents and their family members who provide on-call child care. More recent research on retail workers at 21 stores of a single firm in the mid-west shows that retail workers who experienced greater schedule instability and unpredictability and had less control over their schedules reported higher levels of work-family conflict (Henly and Lambert, 2014).

### **Childcare in the Context of Scheduling Instability**

With parents comprising one-third of the retail workforce, the rise of unpredictable and unstable schedules has created a serious challenge for parents in simultaneously meeting the needs of children and employers. Over the past several decades, the social welfare system in the U.S. has decreased cash assistance to poor families and has increasingly aimed to encourage labor force participation (Danziger, 2010). Although this emphasis has meant that some supports for work have expanded, they are still far from comprehensive in their coverage. For example, although public funding for childcare doubled from 3.7 to 9 billion between 1997 and 2006, the

Congressional Research Service estimated that 80% of families eligible for this subsidy did not receive it in 2005 (U.S. House 2008, pp. 9-5, cited in Danzinger, 2010).

Past research has also outlined the difficulty parents with non-standard schedules have in securing center-based care (Ben-Ishai, Matthews, and Levin-Epstein, 2014; Enchautegui, Johnson, and Gelatt, 2015; Morsy and Rothstein, 2015). Eligibility for state subsidized childcare often hinges on having predictable work schedules (Ben-Ishai, Matthews, and Levin-Epstein, 2014). Evening and/or weekend shifts do not fit the standard nine to five childcare center hours, and the prohibitive, fixed monthly cost of child-care centers do not take parents' volatile schedules and unpredictable income into account (Enchautegui, Johnson, and Gelatt, 2015; Morsy and Rothstein, 2015).

The limits on public sources of childcare support and in access to and the affordability of center-based childcare, alongside the rise of unstable and unpredictable work schedules, mean that working parents often face a wide chasm between the child care they need to fulfill their work obligations and the child care available from public or center-based sources. As a consequence, working parents typically rely heavily on kin to provide childcare for free or at low cost (Heymann, 2000; Boushey and Williams, 2010).

### **The Role of Kin in Coping with Schedule Instability**

The classic and contemporary literature on kin support focuses on how parents living in poverty cope with economic deprivation. This literature does recognize the importance of kin for coping with "expense shocks" - the recurrent but unpredictable emergencies of everyday life that arise when someone gets sick or a car breaks down. However, this literature does not focus on how the working poor cope with economic instability on the income-side of the ledger, how now common scheduling practices create regularly unstable and unpredictable work schedules and



volatile incomes. Some scholars of low-wage work have drawn attention to how work workplace practices create intensive and routine dependence on support from kin and other social ties (Chaudry, 2004; Henly and Lyons, 2000; Henly, 1999; Heymann, 2000). We contribute to this emerging literature, and home in on service sector jobs, an important sector of the labor market in which scheduling practices often create instability and unpredictability. We use the comparison between low-wage retail workers with steady schedules and those otherwise similar workers with unstable schedules to show how this form of instability shapes kin support.

These two elements – child care arrangements and unstable work schedules – are nicely summarized by Williams and Boushey (2010), who synthesize existing work across topic areas to suggest that unstable schedules and insufficient hours in the service sector shape the child care arrangements used by working parents. As Boushey (2016) then notes, the challenges of unstable schedules are likely to collide with the reality of changes to family demographics, heightening the need for single-parent and dual-earner households to find some form of flexible and affordable childcare – often kin. This synthesis certainly suggests that work scheduling practices and family structure are likely to shape the particular structures of kin support. However, to make that connection, we need to delve into the lives of workers in such jobs and families.

The recent work that comes closest to doing so examines work-family conflict in four health care occupations, contrasting doctors, nurses, CNAs, and EMTs (Clawson and Gerstel, 2015). Drawing on interviews, observations, and work schedules, Clawson and Gerstel (2015) show how “routine disruptions” to work schedules, which are almost certain to occur from time to time can wreak havoc on workers’ family and personal lives and how workers, particularly lower-class female CNAs, drew on kin to provide needed care. However, Clawson and Gerstel’s (2015) setting is quite distinct from the retail setting in that much of the schedule unpredictability and

instability that they document arises not from employer scheduling practices, but rather from employer's inflexibility in changing schedules set far in advance (up to a year) in response to family demands, need for time off, and other disruptions. In retail, these sorts of disruptions come in the context of tremendous instability and unpredictability on the employer side, leading to an even more complex set of arrangements.

While scholars have long described the crucial support of kin in providing cash, in-kind assistance, and support for childcare (Stack, 1974), kin support has its own costs and limits. The literature has highlighted norms of reciprocity around assistance, whereby "free" childcare or other forms of support are expected to be "paid back" in other ways, such as childcare in return, rides to places, food, or other swaps (Edin and Lein, 1997; Nelson, 2000). Similarly, kin support can be highly contingent on whether one resides near or far from kin, which can influence the quality and quantity of support one can receive (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010). Heymann (2000) critiques the myth of the "fairy tale" grandmother who is available 24/7 to provide child care for her grandchildren, pointing out that grandparents often have competing demands or other barriers to providing care. McDonald and Armstrong (2001) similarly "de-romanticize" the notion of the ideal and always-available grandparent, finding that mothers were "weary" in midlife, reluctant to engage in "othermothering," and protective of their own time and resources. Other research has highlighted the role of weaker, or "disposable," ties in providing crucial resources like food, shelter, or childcare during times of crises but, as their moniker implies, these are often fleeting (Desmond, 2015). Kin and social network support, while indispensable for low-income families, ultimately is an exhaustible resource that must be carefully and strategically employed (Dominguez and Watkins, 2003).

## **DATA AND METHODS**

Our analysis draws on 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with parents residing in the San Francisco Bay Area in the summer of 2015. We recruited parents who were currently employed and paid on an hourly basis and worked in the retail or fast-food industries. In this qualitative work, we are less interested in assembling a representative sample of parents employed in precarious jobs than in ensuring that there is sufficient variation in experiences to gain insight into respondents' understandings of their employment arrangements and the relationship between their economic and family lives.

### **Study Setting**

All of the interviews were conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area between June and August of 2015. The Bay Area, including in our sample the cities of San Francisco, Oakland, Emeryville, Berkeley, Richmond, and San Leandro, is a valuable site to investigate the dynamics of precarious employment in the contemporary United States.

On the one hand, the San Francisco Bay Area is characterized by extremely high housing costs and conspicuous economic inequality. Hourly retail and food service workers face considerable economic challenges. On the other hand, the Bay Area, and the city of San Francisco in particular, has led the way in passing some of the most progressive labor policy in the Country in recent years. In San Francisco, workers are covered by a paid sick leave ordinance and the Health Care Security Ordinance, which mandates employer expenditures towards employee health costs. Workers in both San Francisco and Oakland are also covered by ordinances that set minimum wages at \$12.25 rather than the State minimum of \$9.00 or the Federal minimum of \$7.25. Finally, San Francisco's "Retail Workers Bill of Rights" mandates that large chain store employers provide workers with at least two weeks advance notice of their weekly schedules, pay

excess wages for deviation from those posted schedules, and offer part-time workers newly available shifts before hiring new additional part-time workers. This ordinance, the most progressive in the Nation at the time of enactment, passed in December of 2014 and had an effective date of July, 2015. Enforcement, however, was delayed into the fall of 2015 to allow employers time to bring practices into compliance.

Our interviews in the summer of 2015 follow the passage of paid sick leave and health spending laws in San Francisco and of the minimum wage increases in San Francisco and Oakland, but precede enforcement of the recently enacted “Retail Workers Bill of Rights.” As such, we examine workers experiences of employment practices at a crucial moment, when wages and benefits have improved, but unstable and precarious scheduling practices have not been altered.

### **Data Collection**

The interviews were oriented around six key areas. First, we collected information on family background, current living situation, household composition, and economic resources from each interviewee. Second, we collected information on workers’ current employment situation including experience with scheduling instability and part-time work. Third, we asked about respondents’ abilities to adapt their work schedules to cope with family demands, including rules about missed shifts, lateness, and schedule swaps with co-workers. Fourth, we talked with respondents about their families’ daily schedule, child-care arrangements, and parenting ideology. Fifth we asked respondents about their general wellbeing, as well as more specifically about feelings of stress, time for one-self, and expectations about the future. Finally, we asked respondents about their knowledge and opinions of local workplace ordinances. While the interviewers organized the interaction with each respondent around these key areas, interviewers

were also able to exercise discretion in how they shaped the conversation, allowing the interaction to unfold naturally and for probing for additional information as warranted.

We recruited respondents primarily through advertising on the website Craigslist.com in the “volunteer” and “gigs” categories. We then offered each respondent with whom we completed an interview the opportunity to refer up to three other study-eligible individuals. Respondents received a \$40 pre-paid debit card for completing the interview and an additional \$10 for each person whom they referred and who successfully completed an interview. Using these methods, we conducted 14 interviews with individuals who responded to the Craigslist advertisement and then 11 interviews based on referrals.

The interviews were conducted by three of the authors between June and August of 2015. All three interviewers were female with one identifying as white, the second as Latina, and the third as a mixed race Latina. Interviews were conducted at locations convenient for the respondent, often a coffee shop or public park. All respondents provided their informed consent to participate in the research and to have their interview recorded and transcribed. Interviews lasted from one to two hours with transcribed interviews averaging 27 pages.

### **Sample Characteristics**

Our sample is almost evenly split between male and female respondents. While all were parents with some degree of involvement in their children’s lives, many of the male respondents were non-custodial parents while all of the female respondents had custody of their children. Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 55 with a mean age of 36. The sample was racially and ethnically diverse with approximately a third Black, a fifth White, a fifth Asian, and smaller shares mixed race or Hispanic. Approximately 40% of the sample was married at the time of interview.

All respondents were employed on an hourly basis at retail or fast food establishments. Approximately a third of respondents were employed at grocery stores, with most at a single large national chain grocer. Another third was employed at large chain retail establishments, though two of these establishments also included a grocery section. The final third worked in fast food or “casual dining” establishments.

## **Analysis**

We assigned each author a group of transcripts to read closely with the assignments overlapping such that each transcript was read twice in its entirety. We then drafted a set of short biographical descriptions of each subject, outlining their broad life history and current work and family situation.

The team then identified a set of analytic themes that captured the underlying norms, understandings, tensions, and confusions expressed in the interviews. We identified the general topical areas of childcare arrangements, desirable versus undesirable flexibility, scheduling practices, and parenting ideals, as well as the cross-cutting themes of coping strategies used to deal with instability and discordance between reports and actions.

Finally, we drafted a set of topically oriented memos that drew out and integrated the relevant analytic and interpretive questions. These memos also assembled the related supporting evidence (quotations) from subjects’ interviews. From the previous rounds of analysis and coding, we found that scheduling instability was experienced in multiple ways. Respondents could 1) experience instability in their shifts (e.g. working morning shifts one week, and afternoon or evening shifts the next); 2) experience instability in the hours that they worked (e.g. working 20 hours one week, and working 30 the next); 3) experience instability in the form of on-call work; or 4) experience instability in several or all of the ways described above. Thus, if any kind of

instability was experienced, it was coded as unstable work. On the other hand, if respondents did not have volatile shifts, hours, or on-call hour, we coded them as stable schedules. This entails having consistent shifts and hours, with rare last-minute shifts.

With regards to coding kin support, we found that most respondents employed one of three types of arrangement for childcare. In one childcare arrangement, respondents switched childcare responsibilities with a current or former partner as both partners worked. This required a careful calibration of work shifts – often with one parent working a day shift while another worked an evening or night shift – that we labeled “parental clockwork.” In another arrangement, respondents relied on a partner for childcare but had another figure (usually a grandparent) step-in if needed. Because the grandparent, or in some cases sibling or friend, was a dependable, reliable source of care, we labeled them “family anchors.” In the last arrangement, respondents relied on a more complex form of support that was often arranged on a weekly basis. The respondents expended lots of effort in making these arrangements work, thus we labeled the last arrangement, “the scramble.” We found that particular work schedules lent themselves to different kin arrangements, which form the basis of our findings below.

## **RESULTS**

We begin by drawing on the detailed data from our in-depth interviews to describe the precarious employment conditions faced by working parents in our study. We detail the mismatch between parents’ desired work schedules and the reality of unpredictable shifts, involuntary part time work, and limited flexibility that they encounter. We then show how parents rely heavily on support from families to sustain employment when work schedules are unstable and unpredictable. We draw out the notable contrast between respondents who faced predictable as opposed to

unpredictable work schedules and then between the forms of kin support that each group of workers assembled and relied upon.

## **Work Schedules**

All of the working parents in our sample contended with low-wage jobs in the retail sector. However, there was a significant amount of variation in their experiences of work schedule instability and unpredictability.

### *Stable Schedules – Conventional or Consistent*

Among the 25 workers in our study, we categorized 9 as having “stable” work schedules. These 9 workers either had what can be thought of as “conventional” schedules – regular day shifts hewing fairly closely to a Monday-Friday 9-5 job - or had “consistent” schedules that were non-standard, but did not change substantially week-to-week. None of our respondents worked a truly conventional schedule, though a few came close. For instance, Pete, a father of two living with his fiancé, works at a San Francisco restaurant from 7:30-3:30 Monday through Friday. Most other respondents who worked something comparable to a conventional schedule were sometimes asked to work weekends or stay late. Mike, a father of one working at a large grocery chain, works fairly conventional morning shifts for most of the week, but is asked to work at least one night or weekend shift a week.

The majority of respondents who fell into our stable schedules category worked consistent but non-standard hours (either taking on night shifts or regularly working on the weekends). For example, Jeff, a father of one who works at a large electronics store, is regularly expected to work weekends, which he described as the biggest sales days. Other respondents voluntarily chose to work the night shift. Darryll, another father of one who shares childcare responsibilities with his



ex-spouse, currently works night shifts at a large grocery chain. Again, while none of these workers worked a truly conventional schedule, their shifts were much more regular and predictable than the respondents with unstable schedules characterized below.

### *Unstable Schedules*

While some parents in our sample were able to work a fairly stable schedule, the majority – 16 out of 25 in our sample – struggled with unstable and unpredictable work schedules. This instability and unpredictability took form in fluctuating shifts in which respondents had different work shifts each week, fluctuating hours in which the total number of hours varied each week, and in exposure to just-in-time or on-call work in which people received their schedules at the last minute or were often asked to come early, stay late, or pick-up or drop work shifts.

This instability and unpredictability was brought about through a set of linked employment and scheduling practices. Specifically, parents struggled both with involuntary part-time work in which they were scheduled for far fewer hours each week than they would have liked and with the expectation from employers was that they would be available around the clock and on short notice for additional work shifts. These part-time work and scheduling challenges went hand in hand: working parents struggling to get by on fewer than 30 hours per week were eager to pick up shifts, even on short notice or at inconvenient times, because of the pressing need for extra money.

### *Involuntary Part-Time Work: The Reserve Army of the Underemployed*

Most of the workers in our sample reported working fewer hours than they would have liked, and struggled financially as a result. Full-time schedules were rare. The typical working parent in our sample desired full-time work but worked fewer than 30 hours many weeks. Although involuntary part-time work was a problem that affected both those with stable and with unstable schedules, insufficient hours was an important driver of schedule instability for the unstable

schedule group. Tonya, a married mother with 5 children employed at big box retailer, was a typical example. She described her schedule like this: *“I get \$10 per hour, you know, my hours vary. Sometimes I work 8 hours, sometimes I work part time hours...next week I'm only working two days...but then the week right after that I'm working Monday through Friday, you know, Monday through Thursday...[the hours] go up and down and so does the amount.”* This volatility in income made it difficult for her to make ends meet.

Although part-time workers often clamored for more hours in their assigned schedules, they reported that their requests for more hours were denied and that employers preferred to hire more part-time workers than to offer full-time schedules to existing workers. One single mother describes the volatility in her hours and reports that hours go up when people leave or are fired but then back down when the employer hires more part-timers. She explains, *“They just started giving me more hours because a lot of people had moved to other jobs out of state and some people had got fired so it goes up. Then when they hired new people, it goes back down.”* Laura, a married mother employed by a large grocery store chain reported that the store refused her requests for more hours because her seniority meant that her wage was much higher than that of new employees. She was willing to work in any department and she also made herself available at any time but was unable to get the number of hours she needed. Participants often expressed frustration with this inability to obtain a sufficient number of hours.

Involuntary part-time schedules gave employers a great deal of flexibility in scheduling shifts. Whereas previous labor theory and research has emphasized the bargaining power that employers command over labor when they have a “reserve army of unemployed” (workers hungry for job opportunities) contemporary employers seem to take advantage of a “reserve army of the underemployed” within their own stores. The reserve army of the underemployed and the use of

scheduling software optimized the employers' ability to staff shifts during the busiest peak times and to minimize labor costs by cutting back on staffing during less busy periods. Employers with a reserve army of underemployed workers are able to expand and contract their staffing without having to recruit and hire.

### *Ideal Workers: Open Availability*

These involuntary part-time schedules meant that workers were desperate for more hours and so willing to accept hours that were at inconvenient times or offered on short notice. Workers with part-time schedules reported having to be open to any shift at any time to augment their part-time work schedule. Laura, employed by a large grocery store, was one such worker. A married mother with four children, she was eager for hours and willing to work inconvenient shifts. She received as little as 2 days advance notice of her schedule and was also expected to work some on-call shifts at the last minute. Even with her open availability, she was unable to get the number of hours she wanted. Laura states, *"Hey, I'm willing to work with you to 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning guarantee me my 32 hours. They will not accept it... I'm still willing to work for you on the weekend, I mean, Saturday or Sunday, but I picked Saturday so I can work on Sunday. A lot of people doesn't like to work on Sundays. I'll do it."* Laura also described the erratic nature of her assigned work hours each week, *"It happens a lot of times, especially for me, or they will call me..."I know you work at 10 o'clock in the morning, can you work for me, um, 3 to 10 I really need you?" And sometimes it's been like, yeah it's okay with me, why? Because I needed those hours... My life is being like that all that time...not knowing when I'm going to work, when I'm gonna have my day off, you know, and it's been a hassle."*

Laura was an interesting case because she described former periods of employment when she had control of her work schedule. She described the stark contrast between the relative ease of

this period with the current struggles she was going through because her hours were too few and unpredictable. She saw the move to her current position as a step up because the new position offered a higher hourly wage, but it came with the major downside of ceding control of her hours and her schedule. In applying for her current position, Laura listed “open availability” and in the interview, she explained that her employer treats this availability as absolutely expected and required. Several workers reported that they felt they had to list open availability to have a chance of being hired. James, a father employed by a large grocery store chain said, “*any application I filled out, I put I could work any hours because that looks good.*” Another working parent, Tonya, employed by a big box store also explained that in retail, employees will not get hired or scheduled if they have restrictions. Joanne, a recently divorced single mother with an erratic work schedule feels like she has to make herself available at all times – working both nights and mornings -- even though she would prefer a schedule that lined up with her children’s school schedule.

Although employers use the reserve army of the underemployed to achieve a great deal of flexibility in staffing, most workers in our sample lacked flexibility in their work schedules. This included lacking the flexibility to take a day off when they were sick and when they needed to attend to a child’s health issue. Workers experienced an employer-driven instability at the same time that they had almost no latitude to request any flexibility to meet their own needs.

### **Finding Child Care When Work Is Unpredictable**

Next, we describe how working parents cope with the unpredictable schedules, low wages, and limited hours that characterize many of the retail and food service jobs held by the men and women we interviewed. Heavy reliance on regular child care support from family and partners was prevalent. However, we show how this kin support was structured by the nature of the low-wage retail work – in particular, the stability of work schedules – that our informants encountered.

We describe how those parents with stable schedules were more likely to care for their dependent children through a “tag-team” approach with the child’s other parent. In contrast, working parents with unstable and unpredictable work schedules cannot rely on a standard and fixed childcare arrangement. Parents with unstable schedules often engaged in what we call “the scramble,” where respondents have to piece together help from disparate sources. However, some parents were able to deploy a relative, often a grandparent no longer in the formal labor force, as a “family anchor,” to consistently steady the family against the turbulence of unstable and unpredictable work schedules. Compared to the reliance on family care, the use of formal daycare was far more uncommon. We discuss the exceptional conditions that enabled 3 families to access center-based care. Table 1 displays cell counts of child care arrangements for workers with stable and unstable schedules.

#### *Parental Clockwork: The Stable Parent Tag-Team*

Almost a third of the sample respondents (9 out of 25) had relatively stable schedules; that is, they had predictable, consistent shifts on a weekly basis, even if the shifts didn’t translate into a standard 9 to 5 schedule. For a majority of the people in this subsample (5 out of 9), a parental tag-team ensured that childcare was provided around the clock. In a few of these instances, one parent served as a “breadwinner,” while another assumed the majority of the childcare responsibilities. David, a married father of two, represents the increasingly rare male breadwinner, female homemaker arrangement. David’s wife homeschools both of their children, which “eliminates like a lot of logistical problems” usually involved with getting his children to and from school. David is thus able to act as an “ideal worker,” unconstrained by his family responsibilities because of his ability to rely on his wife for 24/7 care of their children.

In most of these tag-team arrangements, however, two working parents found a way to make their schedules fit together to ensure full childcare coverage. In some of these cases, including the one outlined below, one parent would work days while the other works nights. In other cases, ex-partners split childcare on specific days or specific times of day. The combination of a stable schedule with a reliable parental figure translated into almost guaranteed childcare 24/7 without the need to rely much on kin outside of the nuclear unit. Below, we outline the example of Darryll who fell into this typology and detail his clock-worked schedule.

### *Darryll*

Darryll is a mild-mannered 32-year-old father who grew up in the Bay Area. He currently lives by himself in a Section 8 apartment, but he is heavily involved in the care of his three-year-old son, Jeremy, whom he takes care alongside his son's mother, Janice. When Darryll applied for the position at a large grocery chain, after a year-long bout of unemployment, he was given a choice between working the daytime or night shift. Darryll quickly requested the night shift because he knew this would allow him to spend the most time with this son. In the morning, Janice drops Jeremy off at Darryll's place before she heads to work. Darryll spends time with his son from about 10am to 6pm before Janice picks him up after her work day ends. Darryll then gets a few hours of sleep and heads into work for his midnight shift. Darryll gets home at 7am from work, and "gets a few winks in" before Janice drops Jeremy off again at 10am. Darryll describes how crucial Janice's help is: "*Yeah, it's kinda easier because like we working together it's not like I'm a single parent by myself and she's not either like I'm helping her and she's helping me like for the benefit of our child.*" Because Darryll can count on working the night shift every week when Janice can take care of Jeremy, the childcare arrangement works well.

Not every working parent with a stable work schedule used a parent tag-team for their primary childcare arrangement, but the tag-team approach was predominant among those with stable schedules and far less common among workers with unstable schedules.

### *The Scramble: Unstable Work and Unstable Family Support*

The parental clockwork of tag-team parenting described above works because these informants can count on a regular work schedule. While they still rely on kin beyond their spouses or ex-spouses occasionally for childcare, the stability of their work schedules co-occurs with a relatively stable child-care schedule. In contrast, the majority of respondents in our sample faced unstable and unpredictable work schedules. Many of these respondents struggled to make child care arrangements in the face of this inconsistency at work.

Four respondents in our sample had unstable schedules and engaged in a childcare “scramble.” It is likely though that parents using this constellation of childcare have a harder time getting and keeping jobs with unstable schedules, and are thus selected out of the types of jobs we are studying. For those parents who do obtain jobs with unstable schedules, finding childcare to cover their fluctuating work shifts is an ongoing struggle. In this section, we describe the experiences of Patricia, a participant that must employ the childcare scramble approach to meet her childcare needs.

### *Patricia*

Patricia is a single parent who currently lives with her 8-year old son in a subsidized 2-bedroom apartment. Her mother passed away when she was 12 years old, and she spent some time in foster care and some time with her grandmother while growing up. For the past year, Patricia has worked in the café portion of a large big box store. Although she generally receives her

schedule about two weeks in advance, she explains that, *“there’s no normalcy”* in the hours or days she works. The first 6 months she worked at this store, she worked 30 or more hours a week. In the four weeks before our interview, however, she has worked 20, 12, 12, and 8 hours, respectively. During her interview, she expressed some concern about her next week of work, saying, *“All of a sudden I got one four hour shift for the whole week... And I was like okay so next week I work one day. And it’s on a Saturday when I gotta pay for childcare so is it even worth it then? No, I’m not gonna work that day. I’m not gonna work that day. I’m gonna spend my time with my son and work at this other job, you know?”*

Patricia relies on various programs to help manage her childcare needs, including the Boys and Girls Club, an after-school program that runs until 6pm at her son’s school, and various camps in the summer. Patricia also often relies on a cousin for help with childcare during the summer and on weekends, and pays her what she can. Though she is appreciative of the help she receives from her cousin, there was some indication that her child care needs go beyond what she can get from her kin network alone.

Patricia recently sent her son to a short-term residential care facility that serves young children during times of family crisis. As she explained: *“I was feeling like, I was feeling really overwhelmed and I didn’t wanna, you know, do nothing to my son or, you know. I just didn’t wanna, I needed a break point and period. And they gave me that break.”* Compared to many of our other respondents who can count on a partner for support, Patricia often has to rely on those outside of her immediate network to help care for her son. Doing so requires a great deal of planning and research, and means that securing childcare is a constant worry. This has a meaningful impact on her emotional health, and can lead to crises like the one she describes above. Patricia’s son recently started getting in trouble at his afterschool program, which has caused her



to worry about what she would do if he got kicked out. Thinking back on the situation, Patricia explains how critical that afterschool support is for her ability to work at all. This additional stress is “overwhelming” given the cognitive burden she already experiences with schedule unpredictability and piecemeal childcare arrangements. Patricia demonstrates how any challenges to her fragile constellation of support can have dire consequences on her ability to work in the low-wage service sector, and causes a significant amount of distress in her daily life. This fragility also denies Patricia the ability to work through and negotiate common difficulties that parents experience when raising children: disinterest in school and acting out.

The “scramble” finds working parents reproducing the instability and unpredictability of their work schedules in the care arrangements for their children. While this arrangement “works,” in so far as the children do receive care and workers are able to hold onto their jobs, these arrangements are emotionally taxing and, by definition, unstable for their children. Patricia is an exemplar of this arrangement, describing a variety of health concerns, and the piece-meal or ad-hoc nature of their weekly routines. Respondents like Patricia cannot rely on a single, consistent childcare source, because their needs are constantly changing and span a wide range of days and times. Kin with any other commitments cannot accommodate this broad variability, and so parents necessarily draw on multiple sources of support.

The “scramble” and “parental clock-work” occupy two poles of work-life arrangement: the co-occurrence of instability at work and at home and the co-occurrence of stability at work and at home. Some of our respondents, however, stake out a middle-ground, meeting the challenges of work and family, including of unstable and of stable but low-wage work arrangements, by drawing on a “family anchor” who they could consistently and reliably call on for last-minute childcare.

*Family Anchors: Unstable Work Enabled by Streamlined and Steady Family Support*

For single parents, “family anchors,” such as grandparents, a sibling, or a close friend, that could adapt to shifting schedules were essential to somewhat more smoothly navigating jobs in the low-wage retail sector. These families are different from those engaging in “the scramble,” because the sources of support were often fewer in number and more consistent in nature. Some two-parent families also relied heavily on these “family anchor” figures, essentially using these arrangements as their primary form of childcare. Below, we highlight the work and childcare experiences of Kayla, a married mother of two boys.

### *Kayla*

Kayla grew up in the Bay Area and currently lives with her husband and two sons (ages 6 and 13) in a small studio apartment. The family was previously living with her husband’s mother, but was recently forced to relocate after she passed away. Kayla has been working as a server at a large chain restaurant for about six years, and suggests that this seniority gives her more flexibility than many of her coworkers. While this seniority has not necessarily translated into a set schedule (in fact, it changes every week), it does mean that she has some choice in the matter.

Kayla typically works between 32 and 36 hours a week at her restaurant job, and gets her schedule only days in advance. Kayla’s husband is a forklift operator, and works a fairly regular schedule during the day each week. Though Kayla can rely on her husband to help with childcare on the weekends, she counts on the free childcare that her mother provides during the week. At various points throughout her interview, Kayla mentioned how lucky she is to have this support, making statements such as, *“I’m just lucky that we have help from my mom because if we didn’t then we wouldn’t be able to make it cause its really, really hard”* and *“I’m probably blessed to have the family help I didn’t have to pay like a babysitter or something.”*

Kayla's youngest son often goes to her mother's house after kindergarten. As Kayla describes, *"He's going to the same school and it's like one block from my mom's house so my mom picks him up for me every day. Every day... I can just pick him up at whatever time she loves having them and he loves being there cause he's like super spoiled. So I don't have a problem with taking my kids to school and picking them up at all."* The support Kayla receives from her mother is quite extensive. Although she lives in an adjacent city, she has enrolled her kids in the school system in her mother's city because they are "better," and it allows her childcare arrangement to be more efficient. Kayla picks her children and husband up on her afternoon break, when her husband gets out of work. Kayla explains that she can drop her children off to her mother any other times they need childcare.

Because she can rely on her mother and husband to consistently and reliably help with childcare, Kayla is able to make her erratic schedule work with her family life. She also doesn't talk about stress and being overwhelmed by her erratic schedule as much as those engaging in "the scramble" to make their jobs work. The support Kayla received from her mother and husband also means that she can occasionally pick up extra shifts at the restaurant during times when money is especially short.

Families relying heavily on a "family anchor" did not always describe the experience as positive from all perspectives. Louis, a 30-year old married father of a 3-year-old, describes how his parents are older and watching his daughter is very tiring for them. They provide childcare at least 4 days a week, for at least 8 hours per day. He explains that they want time off, and each suffer from various health issues, but they are really the only option that Louis and his wife have if they are to each work full time and afford the home they live in. On their days off, Louis and his

wife hope that their daughter can start going to a preschool next year to ease the childcare burden on his parents.

Whereas “parental clockwork” was essentially unique to parents with stable schedules and “the scramble” to those coping with unstable and unpredictable schedules, the “family anchor” is found both among workers with stable and unstable schedules. This arrangement becomes an escape hatch from the reproduction of instability across work and family for those with unstable and unpredictable schedules. It is also way for working parents either with a working spouse or without a spouse to arrange care in the context of stable schedules. In some ways, the “anchor” takes on the role of the stay-at-home parent of a prior generation. Yet here, it is often a grandparent or other relative no longer in the formal labor force who takes on this role.

### *Formal Child Care*

The reliance on formal childcare was rare among the working parents in our sample, likely because of the expense and the mismatch between their work hours and the usual hours that day care centers operate. For many respondents, formal daycare was also simply out of their price range, and therefore not an option.

Those who did rely primarily on formal care, three from our entire sample, had extenuating circumstances. One father was able to use day care because his work shifts are short (averaging around five hours) and coincided with regular day care hours of operation. Additionally, his Native American ancestry entitled him to a generous child care subsidy that made this high quality care affordable. Melody, a mother of two who works at a big box store in San Francisco, was able to secure daycare for her oldest son through a program she was involved with while temporarily homeless, though she is currently struggling to get her youngest son into the same daycare. Our third respondent, Dan, has a six-year-old daughter that attends daycare

each day from 7 or 8am to 5pm. He recently split from his ex-girlfriend, who has primary care taking responsibilities, but they each pay half of this childcare each week, which costs \$175. This setup only works because his ex-partner works a conventional daytime job, and because Dan works an extraordinary amount of hours a week to pay this cost — 40 hours at his overnight shift at a warehouse, and 21 or more at a chain restaurant. Overall, the use of formal childcare as a primary (or even supplementary) form of childcare was rare in our sample. Parent working more than part time explained they did not qualify for subsidies, and oftentimes work schedules did not coincide with the hours daycares are open.

## **Discussion**

The modern service sector is organized to protect margins by minimizing labor costs, keeping staffing very thin and carefully matching staffing levels to customer demand. But, this optimization is done with little regard for workers' family responsibilities and personal lives as these systems result in a set of unstable and unpredictable work schedules for hourly employees.

Other recent research has shown that in an effort to keep labor costs down, large chain employers effectively transfer the economic burden from the payroll to the welfare state, even encouraging low-wage workers to apply for public benefits such as food stamps (Jacobs, Perry, and MacGilvary, 2015). Public officials have also suggested that this kind of lean staffing effectively transfers responsibility for public order within stores onto local police (Pettypiece and Voreacos, 2016). We document another, often invisible, subsidy to large-scale service sector employees – parents working hourly jobs simply cannot hold positions with unstable and unpredictable schedules without the aid of informal support from kin. These scheduling practices effectively transfer cost to a shadow and informal support system – that of grandparents, aunts and uncles, and neighbors.

The nature of unstable and unpredictable work schedules in the retail sector means that even if working parents in retail were able to afford formal center-based or home-based childcare, it would be very difficult for them to make use of such care given frequently shifting work hours. Indeed, the use of formal care was very rare in our sample and basically confined to workers who had stable daytime schedules and either had use of a subsidy or assembled a large number of work hours each week from multiple jobs. While it is certainly important to improve the process for daycare subsidy qualification to recognize the instability of household incomes (Henly et al, 2015), the instability of work hours also makes such care difficult to utilize.

The rich sociological literature on kin support has often focused on the poorest of the poor, those who rely on kin (Stack, 1974; Edin and Lein, 1997) or perhaps on weaker and more fragile ties (Desmond, 2012) to get by from day-to-day. We show the importance of kin ties in a group of parents who are not in deep poverty, but must contend with jobs that make going-it-alone all but impossible. However, we find that the particular constellations of kin support that working parents use very much depends on the nature of the low wage jobs that they hold.

While all of the respondents in our sample contended with low wages and few benefits, some managed to arrange for stable schedules – even though these were often non-standard hours. Many though contended with unstable and unpredictable schedules. Almost without exception, all of our respondents made use of kin support for childcare. However, this contrast between those with relatively stable and those with unstable schedules allows us to describe the particular forms of kin support that are predominant for workers with stable versus unstable work schedules.

The respondents with the most stable schedules in our data – even though these schedules were often non-standard – were often able to reproduce that stability at home through a parental clockwork of carefully arranged but generally effective tag-team parenting between mothers and

fathers. In fact, in many cases this clock-work relied on one parent having a stable, but non-standard night shift.

Scholars of the American family have noted the evolution of marriage from an institutional to companionate to individualized and symbolic arrangement (Cherlin, 2004). While our respondents may enjoy the symbolic benefits of marriage, they also clearly utilize the institution for its practical purposes. Two-parent families with stable schedules were able to use a parental clockwork of childcare, providing desirable stability in their care arrangements. However, this also meant that from a couple perspective, these parents saw relatively little of each other, a repercussion previously explored by Presser (1999; 2003). Instead, the couple relationship was oriented around meeting economic obligations and caring for a child. Notably, in these tag-team relationships, we see men, even some non-co-resident fathers, doing a fair amount of childcare.

In contrast to respondents with fairly stable schedules who ran a parental clock-work of childcare, many of our respondents with unstable and unpredictable work schedules engaged in what we call the scramble – piecing together care on an ad hoc basis from family, neighbors, and programs. For these respondents, instability and unpredictability at work was reproduced in their childcare arrangements at home. This scramble led to inconsistency in children’s care and also imposed a heavy psychological burden on parents as they reconciled the difficulty of finding care for their children with the imperative to keep an open availability for work and catch the shifts that became available to them.

A third arrangement – the family anchor – was used by working parents with stable and with unstable schedules. These families relied heavily on someone – a grandparent, a sibling, even a friend - to do substantial childcare work. Often this person had exited the formal labor force, but

we see that she was often still very much a worker – providing the shadow labor required by the low-wage retail jobs of our respondents.

These care providers really did anchor the family, providing cheap, malleable, on-call support. For single parents working unstable jobs, the family anchor was an appealing alternative to the scramble and for dual-parent couples with stable jobs, the anchor helped to fill in predictable gaps as well as deal with the regular instability of family life (Clawson and Gerstel, 2015; Heymann, 2000). But, such anchors also had limits. Reliance on these individuals meant that parents and their children were not geographically mobile and were instead tied to particular place-based networks. Further, when this support failed, when the anchor gave way, the results could be catastrophic. For example, Melody, a mother of two young children, recounted a time in which her fiancé’s mother kicked the family out of the house and her family was forced to stay in a shelter for a few months. She recalled cried every day while living in the shelter.

There is also a potential downside from the caregiver’s perspective. An effective anchor is as much on-call as the respondent worker. They too are asked to give up their time and their flexibility in the service of a service job. In our interviews, we saw how these frictions wore on relations – such as grandparents – who played the role of anchor and we saw how respondents tried to carefully balance their need for this kind support with the recognition that the relationship might give way.

Our focus has been on how working parents arrange for the care of their children and we find that parents heavily relied on kin, almost without exception. However, this is not to suggest that our respondents did not rely on kin for other sorts of support. Facing the high costs of housing in the Bay Area, many relied on kin, particularly older parents, for housing support in the form of doubling-up. Others noted borrowing money from family in times of financial crisis. Many of



respondents also made use of public safety nets, particularly food stamps and health benefits through Medi-Cal.

We show that jobs with on-call schedules are nearly impossible without on-call child care, which usually comes from a spouse/partner or a grandparent. In the absence of this comprehensive, on-call spousal or kin support, jobs with on-call schedules are untenable. The implication is that those in most dire need of employment because they lack familial support are de facto excluded from a sizeable sector of the labor market. Although not advertised as such, having no children or on-call child care – typically only available from a spouse or proximate kin member with “open availability” – is an unwritten job requirement. Therefore, reforms to labor law or company practice that increase the predictability and stability of work schedules have the potential to open up opportunities and improve livelihoods among some of the most economically vulnerable American families – namely, those without comprehensive, on-call kin support.

### *Limitations*

We provide richly textured reports from a sample of 25 parents working low-wage jobs in the retail sector in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2015. Our sample, recruited through craigslist advertisements and respondent referrals, may not be representative of the broader population of parents working at such jobs. However, our study complements the findings of earlier work on the production of unstable and unpredictable schedules in retail – work done more than a decade earlier and in a different geographic setting (Henly et al., 2006), suggesting that there is some uniformity to these practices at an organizational level.

Additionally, we do not have the reports of spouses, family anchors, or the network of providers that our respondents report relying on for childcare. While our respondents provide some indirect information on the experience of these individuals, future work would benefit by

including in the research design not only working parents, but also others who provide them with informal support. Their reports would help us to understand the burdens that the reliance on informal support places on kin.

### *Policy Implications*

Our results do, however, inform policy. While all workers in our sample relied on kin for childcare, there was a clear difference between the stability provided by the parental clockwork of tag team parenting (a stability that was only possible because these parents had stable schedules), and the instability of the scramble – an instability rooted in schedule unpredictability and inconsistency.

Based on our data, it seems clear that the working parents we interviewed who contended with unstable and unpredictable schedules would benefit from more predictable and more stable work schedules. While it may be difficult to directly mandate the employers provide workers with stable schedules, local governments have begun to regulate two of the key employment practices that produce unstable and unpredictable schedules for workers.

First, these regulations include so called “access to hours” provisions that require large-chain store employers to offer new shifts to existing part time workers before hiring additional new part-time workers to do substantially the same job. We document the important role of the “reserve army of the underemployed” in permitting employer-imposed schedule instability. This provision seeks to increase the base hours that workers have, rendering them less vulnerable to the mandate to add additional shifts at odd times on short notice.

Second, these regulations require large chain-store employers to provide workers with at least two weeks of advance notice of work schedules and then impose “predictability pay” in

instances where employers fail to provide adequate notice or change work schedules closer to the time of the originally scheduled shift.

Together, these provisions should increase the predictability of work and the variability of hours and work shift timing. The City of San Francisco passed an ordinance with these provisions in 2015 and several other large cities are slated to follow suit with similar laws in 2016 and 2017.

### *Conclusion*

Previous research has documented how unstable and unpredictable schedules are generated and experienced by workers (Henly et al, 2006) and more recent work has described the prevalence of such practices (Lambert et al, 2014), and begun to estimate the impacts using quantitative data (Lambert and Henly, 2014; Schneider and Harknett, 2016). In this work, we examine how working parents manage schedule instability and unpredictability in the important domain of childcare, showing the crucial role of informal kin support and showing how the experience of instability and unpredictability, over and above economic deprivation, structures the nature of that support, often leading to a reproduction of instability at work at home.

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**Table 1. Typology of Familial Child Care Support by Schedule Type**

	<b>Parent Tag-Team</b>	<b>Family Anchor</b>	<b>The Scramble</b>	<b>Formal Daycare</b>
Stable work schedule (n=9)	5	2	1	1
Unstable work schedule (n=16)	1	9	4	2