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ESSAY: INEQUALITY & MOBILITY

America's job-quality crisis and how to revive workers' pay, dignity, job advancement, and economic well-being

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Overview

The poor quality of jobs in the United States is a slow-burning crisis that has been underway for many decades and has eroded many workers' quality of life. Too many U.S. workers—especially but not exclusively workers without college degrees—are working in jobs with lower pay, lack of opportunities, and challenging work conditions, such as unstable schedules, all of which are detrimental to these workers' well-being.

In contrast, a good job can bring not only a paycheck but also meaning and social standing because it allows us to care for ourselves, our families, and contribute to something larger in our communities and our nation. Beyond earnings, the conditions of our work can affirm our dignity and our sense that our worth is recognized.[1]

As other essays in this project explain, the crisis of poor job quality has encouraged right-wing populist leaders to pitch divisive rhetoric to struggling workers and their families, even if their proposed policies do little to resolve the underlying crisis. This essay focuses on the drivers of poor job quality and concrete policy responses to address those drivers.

The slow-burning job-quality crisis and its consequences, explained

Poor-quality jobs are by no means a new phenomenon in U.S. history, but the modern variant reached different industries and populations at different times starting in the 1970s and 1980s. The steady loss of manufacturing jobs and a decline in union power eroded job quality for many workers.[2] Globalization and increased automation then hit, with some workers facing acute declines in their economic situations, as well as threats to their social standing.[3]

Pressure from financial markets on employers to cut labor costs grew, too, and managers changed practices to reduce costs.[4] The rapid growth of the low-paid service sector as manufacturing jobs declined added new twists to poor jobs—unstable schedules and limited opportunities for advancement.[5]

Some groups, including White men working in manufacturing, have experienced real declines in job quality and economic security over their lives. Others have faced limited opportunities throughout their working lives, including Black workers, who still face hiring biases in many firms and industries.[6] Those who experienced a slide and those who have long felt stuck may feel similarly frustrated, but they often are not united in pushing for change and may not see plausible strategies for collective action.

In recent years, unusually tight labor markets have provided some relief, pushing up wages for those at the bottom and creating some short-term leverage for better working conditions.[7] Still, the broad trends in wages, benefits, and many other dimensions of work experience, unfolding over decades, have left many people with a sense that their lot at work is unfair and also out of their control.

Poor job quality and a sense of limited opportunities prompts anger, fear, and sadness about being disrespected and discarded at work, which plausibly leads to a sense of being disrespected and discarded in society more broadly. And that

can push many workers and their loved ones to respond eagerly to politicians who articulate emotions of anger and fear and promise change.[8] This assessment builds on a very strong research base linking job quality to mental health,[9] as well as compelling qualitative studies making the connections to right-wing populism.[10]

We need to develop—and communicate—a more holistic understanding of job quality and its impact on workers, considering psychological and social, as well as economic, implications. The economic and psychological impacts of losing one's job are well-known, but, additionally and critically, the remaining jobs are often of poor quality, and many feel their future options for good work will be limited.

What policymakers need to understand to address the job-quality crisis

To develop a positive, holistic vision for improving job quality, policymakers need to be aware of the specific ways in which many Americans' quality of work has declined in the past several decades. Specifically, these job-quality issues fall into at least seven areas:[11]

- Diminished purchasing power for low-wage workers
- Unstable work schedules
- Lack of paid leave
- Limited advancement opportunities for low-wage workers
- Lack of job security
- Work design and autonomy
- Gaps in worker voice

Diminished purchasing power for low-wage workers

Many federal laws regarding work and supporting workers have not been updated to reflect new economic realities. One obvious example is the U.S. federal minimum wage of $7.25 an hour, which has not increased since 2009 and has fallen, in real terms, by about 30 percent since then.[12] The failure to update federal wage floors reinforces the sense that, while elite employees can negotiate what they need, large numbers of ordinary workers are stuck on the wrong side of growing income inequality.

In some areas, state and local ordinances have surpassed the federal minimum wage—often creating better conditions in progressive states and on the coasts.[13] Currently, 22 states have a minimum wage at or above $12 an hour, including California, Oregon, Washington state, Colorado, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and

Massachusetts. But state minimum-wage laws seldom reach workers in regions that already feel "left behind." The effective minimum wage is still $7.25 in 20 states, including Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Texas, and more.

Unstable work schedules

Earnings obviously depend on both wage rates and work schedules. Overall, workers value stable schedules and the flexibility to adjust hours as needed for personal reasons.[14] Yet there has been a clear trend toward more "just-in-time" or unstable scheduling practices, driven by employers.

Scheduling software helps tightly link schedules to variations in demand, based on sales by the day or even by the hour, leading to cancelled or shortened shifts, last-minute shift extensions, little advance notice of schedules, volatility in the number of hours worked across weeks, and limited say in schedules.[15] These scheduling practices have negative consequences for economic security, including income volatility and difficulties holding a second job.[16]

Workers with unstable schedules are more likely to face economic hardships, including hunger, housing insecurity, and difficulty paying bills.[17] Unstable schedules increase the odds of workers' quitting their jobs, prompting lost earnings for these workers in the short run.[18]

Unstable schedules convey that employees are expected to be at the beck and call of employers. This workplace practice harms employees' mental health and family life, as indicated by work-family conflicts, complex and more varied child care arrangements, and worse mental health among children whose parents or single parent have unpredictable schedules.[19]

Salaried employees also may experience frustrations about their earnings in relation to their work hours. Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, salaried workers making more than $35,568 a year are not paid for overtime hours, which means some supervisors and lower-level managers work long hours without additional pay. In my own research, salaried IT professionals earning much more than that put in very long hours and responded to emails, text, and chat any time of day or night because they frantically hoped to hold on to their IT jobs threatened by offshoring and emerging technologies.[20]

Even with relatively high earnings and good benefits, then, some workers still felt "owned," disrespected, and stressed. This adds further fuel to the poor-jobs crisis.

Lack of paid leave

The United States is the only rich, industrialized country with no paid leave policy for new parents, and we are among just a few countries without paid sick leave laws.[21] A lack of leave can feel like a lack of respect, and workers resent feeling forced to choose between their job and taking care of their health and their families.

Federal policies have not kept up with increases in mothers' labor force participation, men's caregiving, and an aging population. The Family and Medical Leave Act, passed back in 1993, guarantees the job of a leave-taker but does not provide income replacement. Moreover, due to size, tenure, and hours requirements, only 56 percent of employees are covered by FMLA-guaranteed unpaid leave, and only 49 percent of workers with just a high school education are covered.[22] The inequality is obvious, with higher-income workers much more likely to have access to job-protected or paid leaves.[23]

Paid leave laws have been adopted by 13 states and Washington, DC. Again, most of the middle of the country has no guarantee of paid family leave, with the exceptions of Colorado and soon Minnesota.[24]

Limited advancement opportunities for low-wage workers

The possibility for advancement is a critical part of a quality job. Workplaces that provide training are valuable for moving up and building transferable skills that can lead to a good job elsewhere. About 59 percent of U.S. employed adults received some formal employer-provided skills training in the past year, and about 50 percent had gained skills via informal training from other employees.[25] These opportunities, however, are not evenly available; training is less common for workers without a college degree, Hispanic workers, Black workers, contracted employees, and freelancers.[26]

Moreover, there has been a trend toward flattened firms, reductions in management positions, and outsourcing of some work roles, leaving many front-line workers without a clear career ladder for them to move up.[27] While internal promotion systems have not disappeared, workers starting in low-paying occupations are more likely to move into higher-paying ones by switching employers than by staying with the same employers.[28]

Lack of job security

Job quality involves both adequate earnings and confidence that you can keep the job or find a similar one if needed. While the archetypal story in the news may be manufacturing workers who lost jobs to China, people in many white-collar occupations have faced job loss tied to offshoring, automation, and related pressures from financial markets to cut costs.

Job loss is often felt acutely as disrespect and triggers shame, even if workers are caught up in much broader trends.[29] About half of Americans do not experience continuous employment through their 50s, and those unemployment spells reduce the odds of working into your 60s and beyond.[30]

Job insecurity also impacts those who manage to keep their jobs, negatively affecting health and pressuring those who "survive" a downsizing to do more and more with minimal complaint.[31] Algorithmic management can prompt terminations, and often, front-line workers in warehouses, fast-food restaurants, and retail feel these decisions are out of their control.[32] Insecurity is normalized, with persistent anxiety even among those who are currently employed.[33]

Of course, job security is completely absent from nonstandard work, such as contracting, temp, and gig work. This built-in insecurity is not uniformly negative, however, as the appeal of this work is often the ability to set one's own schedule. But this purported flexibility also creates pressure to always hustle, putting in long hours and lining up new options to weather possible decreased demand, increased competition, or changes in algorithms for those doing platform-based work.[34]

Work design and autonomy

The way that work is designed—the organization of tasks into jobs—matters to workers. To take one element of work design: Workers with more autonomy (discretion over how they do their work) and more variety in the tasks entailed in their work have better mental and physical health.[35] The same job can be designed either to allow for autonomy or to narrowly specify every action, communicating to workers that they are interchangeable and not seen as capable of self-direction and judgment.

Some experimental studies find that changing work practices and policies to increase autonomy and variety can reduce psychological distress, perhaps because such changes signal respect.[36] Yet in many workplace settings, new technologies

have further reduced autonomy and opportunities to learn. Technological surveillance of individual productivity in production, logistics, and retail settings creates even greater pressure to speed through narrowly specified tasks.[37]

Gaps in worker voice

Voice at work—having a say and potentially influencing what happens in your organization—affirms workers' dignity and worth, and can be conceptualized as a dimension of job quality.[38] A workplace that welcomes and incorporates worker voice conveys that employees are valued for their ideas, not just the specific tasks they complete.

Yet today there is a sizable voice gap, captured by the difference workers report in the say or influence they believe they ought to have and the say they currently have. The largest gaps are on topics such as compensation, benefits, job security, and changes in technology.[39]

Working in an environment where you feel you can use your voice with confidence is associated with better well-being, higher job satisfaction, and less interest in quitting.[40] What's more, a field experiment in warehouses by me and my colleagues finds that a new voice channel—specifically, a committee of front-line workers and a few managers, who hear and respond to employees' concerns and ideas—significantly reduces turnover and also improves mental health in the short term.[41]

Unions are a critical and classic channel for worker voice, providing a structured and collective process for elevating workers' concerns and bargaining with management. General approval of unions has grown to 70 percent in 2024, a level not seen since the late 1970s, and younger workers are more supportive of unions than other workers.[42]

Nonetheless, the percentage of U.S. workers who are members of a labor union has dropped from 20.1 percent in 1983 to 9.9 percent in 2024.[43] This decline has implications not only for worker voice, but also for the financial and physical well-being of these workers and their families over the long term. Recent studies estimate that being a union member throughout one's career results in an average of $1.3 million in additional lifetime earnings[44] and also supports physical health.[45] Additionally, the racial wealth gap is narrower among union members.[46]

As noted by other authors in this series, unions improve job quality and also connect workers in a "collective social fabric" that helps "increase workers' social status and guard against the social divisiveness that is at the heart of right-wing populism."[47]

Directions for policy and practice to improve job quality

Policymakers need to pursue both familiar and new approaches for addressing the job-quality crisis and its implications for U.S. democracy. The focus is not on a novel approach but a coordinated vision for a fair future of work that takes into account the numerous ways in which job quality has declined. Specifically, policymakers need to take action to:

- Improve economic security
- Address the economic and care needs of working families
- Facilitate opportunities for job advancement and autonomy
- Support worker power and union organizing

Let's delve into each in turn.

Improve economic security

While the federal minimum wage only applies to a small proportion of the workforce, updating it and ideally indexing it to inflation would improve job quality for a critical segment of low-wage workers and symbolize a renewed commitment to those earners across the entire nation. Many progressive states and cities have done more to set the minimum wage above the federal floor, but some movement also is evident in more conservative political contexts, with ballot measures passed in 2024 in Missouri and Alaska.[48] More states need to take this step in lieu of changes at the federal level.

Importantly, the evidence is clear that increasing the minimum wage does not reduce jobs. A recent review concludes that "minimum wage policies have had limited direct employment effects while significantly increasing the earnings of low-wage workers."[49] Some research suggests, however, that injuries may rise in the wake of minimum-wage increases, perhaps because employers push workers harder to increase productivity.[50]

Wage theft—including minimum-wage violations, failure to pay for all hours worked, and violations of overtime pay requirements—occurs routinely and is patently unfair.[51] The misclassification of workers as independent contractors when they should be counted as employees also robs them of minimum-wage protections and overtime pay, as well as Unemployment Insurance and coverage by other labor laws.[52] Enforcement could certainly be increased, and the financial penalties for violations also should be adjusted to motivate compliance and level the playing field for firms that follow the law.[53]

Currently, most employers who are identified as violating the minimum-wage law only pay back wages; civil monetary penalties are assessed in less than half of cases, even for repeat and/or willful violators.[54] Specifically, the Wages and Hours Division at the U.S. Department of Labor could levy back-pay damages and pursue civil monetary damages more aggressively. Additionally, some states have required violating employers to pay triple or quadruple back pay and have pursued criminal penalties for repeat offenders.[55]

Address the economic and care needs of working families

Earnings are critical to workers, but jobs also must work with employees' personal and family responsibilities. Scheduling reforms and paid leave help people stay in decent or good jobs when they have them.

Scheduling laws, often referred to as fair workweek, fair scheduling, or predictive scheduling laws, aim to shift employers' scheduling practices by requiring more stable schedules, advance notice of schedules, or commitments to minimum hours. These regulations are standard in many countries and could be expanded in the United States.

An evaluation of Seattle's Secure Scheduling Ordinance, for example, finds that "eliminating schedule unpredictability would reduce the share of workers experiencing at least one material hardship by 45 percentage points (from 64% to 19%)."[56] Additionally, that policy evaluation and a study of a stable-scheduling initiative at GAP Inc. stores find workers' well-being and sleep improved with more schedule stability.[57] The GAP study also demonstrates benefits to the firm via reduced turnover among experienced employees and increased productivity.[58]

Passing paid leave laws also is an important priority for improving job quality for working families. Laws enacted in 13 states and Washington, DC demonstrate feasibility.[59] Paid leave recognizes workers' legitimate needs and signals respect for workers and their families. Paid leave also supports economic security by keeping people employed and providing income replacement at a critical time.

California's leave law, for example, nearly doubled access to pay during leaves, increasing benefits especially for low-income and less-educated workers and for men.[60] New paid leave laws at the federal level would address these variations across states and help meet the needs of lower-income workers who are not as well-served by the federal unpaid family leave law and employer-provided benefits.

Facilitate opportunities for advancement and autonomy

Public policy can help expand collaborative training initiatives that engage multiple employers within a given industry. Such sectoral programs typically provide training for jobs in specific industries, such as health care, life sciences, and technology, that have both good starting wages and promotion opportunities.[61]

Rigorously evaluated programs, such as Project Quest and Year Up United, combine the training for these fields with soft-skills training, job-placement support, and a variety of services, including transportation support and child care. Successful sectoral programs increase employment in high-wage jobs, but public investments and long-term commitments are needed to scale these programs.[62] For instance, the Economic Development Administration within the U.S. Department of Commerce recently supported new communities of practice focused on specific industries' or regions' workforce development initiatives.

Other strategies include encouraging employers to remove educational credentials from job listings when alternative training could prepare people for those jobs.[63] Yet research is needed on the impact of those changes. A recent audit study finds employers are less likely to hire applicants with alternative training and related work experience than degree holders; this is still true for employers who have removed educational credentials from their job postings.[64]

Policymakers also can also champion and incentivize employers who design work with autonomy and learning in mind. A long tradition of "high-performance work systems" research finds that the combination of certain practices, such as

building autonomy, cross-training and other skills development, and performance-based pay, can improve productivity, raise pay in some settings, and also support workers' well-being.[65]

Public procurement policies that incorporate job-quality data could encourage employers to design work in these ways.[66] Additionally, local policymakers and community leaders can establish community benefit agreements with developers and new employers, encouraging job-quality standards, the hiring of local workers, and more.[67]

Support worker power and union organizing

Worker power, including collective bargaining by unions, can advance all the elements of job quality discussed here. To protect workers' rights to organize and pursue their own job-quality priorities, we need to strengthen the enforcement of existing laws and ideally update federal labor law as well.[68]

Given how few U.S. workers are currently represented by unions and the limitations of current federal law, though, it is also important to pursue organizing innovations and state and local changes.[69] One such innovation is the industry standard board, also known as a workforce standard board or sectoral co-regulation. These boards involve employers, state officials, and worker representatives in certain industries. They give workers a formalized role in setting wage rates and benefits, often improving pay for those already above the minimum wage. Additionally, these boards can support the effective enforcement of labor laws, acting as partners to educate workers, employers, and the broader community.[70]

"Bargaining for the common good" is another strategic innovation in which unions and other local organizations develop integrated campaigns focused on community concerns, such as housing, climate, racial justice, schools, and also decent jobs.[71] This approach may foster solidarity across people with different employment statuses, work experiences, and backgrounds and provide a path toward feeling respected and recognized both at work and in the larger community.

Conclusion

This may seem like a daunting set of policy challenges, but the time to begin articulating a better vision of work is now. Rebuilding a fair economy over the next decade is particularly critical because of expected disruptions in the U.S. labor market tied to AI technologies and transitions in energy production. As jobs are altered and many jobs are lost while others emerge, there is a clear risk of greater alienation and despair unless another model of quality work is on the horizon.

About the author

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