sociological science

The Double Bind of Precarious Work: Creating Need and Undermining Support

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Abstract: For most adults in the United States, participation in the labor force is a normative expectation and a pre-requisite for social acceptance and inclusion. Yet, the conditions of low-wage work can breed social isolation by interfering with supportive social ties at and outside of work. Drawing on survey data from The Shift Project, we examine the complex interplay between precarious working conditions and supportive social ties and illuminate a vicious cycle faced by low-wage workers. Precarious work schedule conditions are associated with reduced perceptions of support from social ties and act as a mechanism through which precarious working conditions take a toll on worker well-being. Further, those with precarious work schedules are less likely to benefit from the buffering effect of social support that attenuates the negative consequences of unstable and unpredictable schedules on well-being. Our findings demonstrate negative externalities of precarious working conditions for social support and reveal the double bind of precarious work: schedule instability undermines workers' social support while simultaneously heightening the need for it.

Keywords: social support; precarious work; work schedules; worker well-being; low-wage work; schedule instability

Reproducibility Package: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/OEGXOW

Citation: Woods, Tyler, Kristen Harknett, and Daniel Schneider. 2026. "The Double Bind of Precarious Work: Creating Need and Undermining Support" Sociological Science 13: 772-801.

Received: Jan 5, 2026

Accepted: April 28, 2026

Published: July 2, 2026

Editor(s): Stephen Vaisey, Michael Rosenfeld

DOI: 10.15195/v13.a30

HISTORICALLY, workplaces have been an important site for forming supportive social relationships (Fine 1986; Fischer 1982; Estlund 2003; Reddy 2026), and employment has facilitated the formation and maintenance of intimate relationships (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012; Sweeney 2002). Classic and recent works such as Hochschild's *The Time Bind* (2001) and Clawson and Gerstel's *Unequal Time* (2014) each highlight how workplace relationships can serve as a support and refuge. Yet, workplace conditions have evolved in ways that may undermine the ability of paid employment to help cultivate supportive social ties. The rise of remote work (Hipp and Krzywdzinski 2023), the growing contingent workforce (Kalleberg 2011), and the splintering of work into on-demand micro tasks (Burrell and Fourcade 2021) have each militated against work as an avenue for generating social capital and social ties. Against this backdrop, our article illuminates how working conditions shape social support and how these supports explain some of the harmful effects of precarious work and protect against these harms.

Our strategic site is the contemporary U.S. service sector, which is uniquely characterized by in-person and interactive work, providing an opportunity for forging connections. However, many of these workplaces are also characterized by routine instability, which could interfere with the formation and maintenance

of supportive relationships at or outside of work. Work in the United States has become increasingly precarious over the last half-century and the service sector contains a preponderance of the quintessential "bad jobs" in the U.S. economy (Kalleberg 2009:2). Although much of the extant literature has focused on low wages as a key element of precarious work (Kalleberg 2011; Osterman and Shulman 2011), a growing body of research highlights the temporal dimension of precarious employment (e.g., Lambert 2008; Schneider and Harknett 2019), evident in the unpredictability and instability of workers' schedules. Firms often employ "just-in-time" scheduling practices such as on-call shifts or last-minute timing changes to pass on the market risks associated with fluctuating customer demand to workers (Hacker 2019). The resulting schedule instability has well-documented negative consequences for workers' health, well-being, and economic security (Lambert, Henly, and Kim 2019; Schneider and Harknett 2019, 2021). Such precarious work schedules are also quite likely to have consequences for workers' social networks and sources of social support. Yet, prior research has not explored the ways that precarious working conditions may undermine support at the same time as these conditions create the need for support, a "double bind" that we center in our article.

Alongside scholarship on precarious work, recent research and commentary have highlighted a growing loneliness epidemic and a rise in social isolation (Parigi and Henson 2014). The former U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, made social connection a centerpiece of his work, highlighting declines in human connectedness beginning in the late twentieth century (Murthy 2017, 2020). Pugh (2024) unites this concern with social disconnectedness with pervasive changes in the nature of work such as reliance on technology and an emphasis on performance metrics, which serve to undermine and displace human connections. Building on this work, we consider how work shapes and is shaped by human relationships. We draw on prior research to theorize that precarious schedules may deplete social support; that, in turn, frayed networks may partially explain why precarious schedules are harmful for worker health and well-being; and finally, that reserves of social support may also buffer workers against the negative effects of precarious scheduling on health and well-being.

Our article extends prior research in several ways. First, although scholars have established that schedule instability is bad for workers' health (Schneider and Harknett 2019) and that social support is good for workers' health (Allan, Autin, and Wilkins-Yel 2021; Siedlecki et al. 2014; Taylor 2012), little research has systematically investigated whether schedule instability undermines social support and, second, whether social support mediates the relationship between schedule instability and well-being. Third, although sociological literature identifies the negative consequences of precarious work on well-being and recognizes the importance of social networks for coping with poverty, little research has investigated whether the stressors associated with the increasingly precarious nature of work are buffered by social support. More specifically, little work studies whether social support can moderate the negative effects of schedule instability, a chronic job stressor, on worker well-being. Finally, the extant literature in sociology points to the importance of a broad set of network ties, from friends to family to casual acquaintances (Desmond 2012; Edin and Lein 1997; Lubbers, Small, and García 2020a; Stack 2003),

but existing research on the buffering effect of social support at work tends to focus primarily on sources of social support *at work*, such as coworkers and supervisors, without capturing workers' social support from their ties outside of work.

Drawing on novel individual-level survey data from The Shift Project that include repeated cross-sectional surveys from a sample of 37,615 hourly workers and panel data collected from 1,861 workers with 5,798 person-wave observations, we investigate the relationship between schedule instability and workers' perceptions of the availability of social support; whether perceived social support mediates the relationship between schedule instability and well-being; and whether perceived social support moderates the relationship between schedule instability and well-being. We incorporate and compare support from coworkers and broader networks and instrumental and emotional support.

We find that greater exposure to schedule instability is associated with reduced perceptions of the availability of social support, offering evidence that highly unstable schedules have negative ramifications for workers' ability to cultivate and maintain social support. We then show that social support mediates a significant percentage of the relationship between schedule instability and worker well-being. Finally, we present evidence that social support buffers the negative consequences of unstable schedules on well-being. As workers are exposed to increasingly unstable schedules, social support has a larger protective effect on their well-being.

Our article advances understanding of how working conditions can contribute to a weakening of supportive social ties and draws a connection between precarious work, social support, and the pervasive experiences of social isolation in the contemporary United States. We also highlight the "double bind" of precarious work for worker well-being: schedule instability undermines workers' social support while simultaneously heightening the need for such support. This vicious cycle is likely to act as a poverty trap that impedes day-to-day coping as well as upward mobility for millions of low-wage workers and has immediate and longer-term repercussions for worker well-being.

Background

Schedule Instability and Its Consequences

Work has become significantly more precarious since the mid-1970s (Kalleberg 2009, 2011). An increasingly important element of this rising precarity is workers' control over their work time (Gerstel and Clawson 2018). As part of a broader shifting of risk from institutions to individuals (Hacker 2019), employers adopted "just-in-time" scheduling practices to pass on market risks to their employees, attempting to more precisely match employee staffing to customer demand through labor flexibility practices (Lambert 2008). These include making last-minute changes to workers' shifts, having workers be "on-call" for a shift with no guarantee that they will actually work, canceling shifts altogether, and offering little advanced notice on the days and hours for which workers are scheduled (Lambert 2008; Schneider and Harknett 2019).

The consequences of exposure to unpredictable and unstable schedules permeate workers' lives outside of work, including their physical, emotional, and economic well-being. Indeed, precarious employment is an important social determinant of health (Benach et al. 2014). For example, drawing on data from The Shift Project, Schneider and Harknett (2019) show that exposure to schedule instability is associated with increased psychological distress, reduced happiness, and poorer sleep quality, whereas Ananat and Gassman-Pines (2021) find that work schedule unpredictability has negative effects on working parents' mood and sleep quality. Again using The Shift Project data, Harknett, Schneider, and Wolfe (2020) find that schedule instability is particularly challenging for workers' sleep quality, with a stronger association than two established predictors of poor sleep: having a preschool-aged child and working a regular night shift. More broadly, the extant literature makes clear that schedule instability is a chronic stressor in workers' lives and posits that its notable effects on well-being operate through economic insecurity and work–family conflict (Schneider and Harknett 2019). However, little work has explored diminished social support as a consequence of schedule instability or as a pathway through which unstable schedules affect well-being outcomes.

Schedule Instability and Access to Social Support

The concept of social support encompasses both instrumental and emotional support from social network ties (House, Umberson, and Landis, 1988). The robust relationship between social support and better health outcomes has been studied for decades (Holt-Lunstad 2022; Turner and Brown 2010; Uchino 2006), and attention has escalated in recent years, as the pandemic led to increased social isolation (Hwang et al. 2020). One manifestation of this social isolation is individuals' lack of supportive relationships (Cornwell and Waite 2009). Although prior work has not directly considered how the conditions of work may shape or impede supportive social ties, there is strong reason to suspect that schedule instability may have negative effects on workers' social support, operating through at least three mechanisms.

First, schedule instability may deplete workers' social support networks and render them unavailable for future use. Because of the increasingly inaccessible and insufficient nature of the U.S. public safety net (Tach and Edin 2017), low-income individuals must rely on their social networks for support, or what Harknett (2006) calls "private" safety nets. When low-income individuals frequently mobilize their social support networks, such as asking for loans to manage cash flow issues following a shock or chronic variability in work hours (Seefeldt and Sandstrom 2015), it can strain these relationships (Biosca et al. 2020; Lubbers et al. 2020b). In particular, because of economic homophily within social networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), low-income individuals' support networks tend to also be resource-poor, so prolonged mobilization can eventually damage these ties (Biosca et al. 2020; Lubbers et al. 2020b). This is especially relevant in the context of schedule instability, which is not a one-time shock but rather a chronic stressor that prompts workers' need for social support, given the extent to which it can lead to economic insecurity and work–life conflict (Luhr, Schneider, and Harknett 2022; Schneider and Harknett 2021). When workers frequently call upon their supportive

social ties to, for example, assist with childcare or provide small loans to manage the income volatility that arises from unforeseen variation in weekly hours, their networks may be over-taxed and eventually stop offering support.

Second, schedule instability may affect workers' ability to cultivate and maintain supportive network ties outside of work. Scholarship has established that the conditions associated with low-wage work affect the formation and maintenance of supportive social networks (Harknett and Hartnett 2011). In the context of hourly service sector work, unstable schedules may make it difficult for workers to socialize and to develop the sort of meaningful relationships that ultimately offer social support. If, for example, workers experience last-minute changes to their shift timing, they may have to cancel plans with friends or family, whereas those who work clopening shifts may simply struggle to find time and energy to form those connections in the first place. Additionally, reciprocity (i.e., the ability to provide support after receiving support) is key to high-functioning social support networks (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Nelson 2000), but precarious working conditions like schedule instability may also pose challenges for workers' ability to offer reciprocal support. For instance, if someone in a worker's social network requires support but the worker is an unreliable provider because of their highly unpredictable schedules, this would violate norms of reciprocity and endanger the availability of future social support for the worker.

Third, schedule instability and unpredictability may interfere with the formation of supportive social ties with coworkers. Although organizations like workplaces typically create opportunities for the formation of social ties (Small and Gose 2020; Reddy 2026), it is unclear whether precarious working conditions facilitate this in the same way, as extreme levels of schedule instability may reduce opportunities for coworkers to interact, bond, and form long-lasting supportive relationships. Companies that seek to minimize labor costs through just-in-time work schedule practices typically also engage in lean staffing. This conjunction of inconsistent schedules and understaffing may obstruct the formation of supportive relationships among coworkers, both because of limited time to interact and little consistency in which workers share the same shifts. Shepherd (2024) finds that organizational practices in the service sector undermine the formation of workplace relationships through two distinct pathways: reducing *opportunities* for contact (e.g., through schedule unpredictability and irregularity) and affecting the *conditions* of contact among workers (e.g., through workload, managerial treatment). Both pathways are associated with reduced ties among coworkers.

Social Support and Health and Well-Being

When individuals lack social support, it has negative consequences for their health and well-being. Indeed, a large literature has established that social support has a direct effect on well-being (Lakey and Orehek 2011), including physical and mental health (Berkman et al. 2000; Stafford et al. 2017; Thoits 1995; Turner and Brown 2010; Uchino 2006; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, and Fisher 1999; Holt-Lunstad 2022). Specifically, greater social support is associated with lower rates of mortality and morbidity (Berkman and Syme 1979; Uchino 2006), better sleep quality (Grey et al. 2020; Stafford et al. 2017; Yun and Beehr 2024), greater happiness (Lakey 2013),

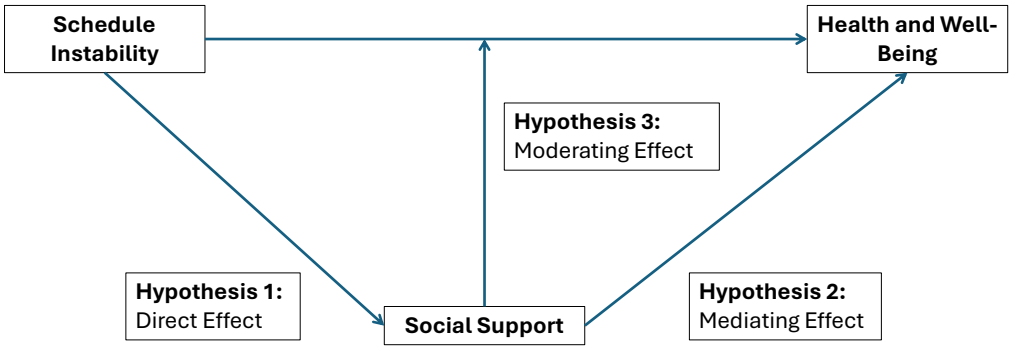


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the relationship between schedule instability, social support, and well-being.

and reduced psychological distress (Beehr et al. 2000; Harknett 2006; Lakey and Cronin 2008; Meadows 2009; Turner and Brown 2010). Although the specific mechanisms linking social support and health and well-being outcomes are outside of the scope of this review, the extant literature points to behavioral, physiological, and psychological pathways (Lakey and Orehek 2011; Uchino et al. 2012).

If, as theorized earlier, precarious schedules reduce workers' access to social support, then diminished social support may play a role in mediating the relationship between precarious scheduling and health and well-being. This theorized pathway is described in our conceptual framework for the relationship between schedule instability, social support, and well-being (Fig. 1). However, despite the potential for schedule instability to undermine social support and the well-documented relationship between social support and well-being, to our knowledge, no research to date directly tests whether social support mediates the effect of schedule instability on worker well-being.

The Buffering Effect of Social Support

In contrast to the dearth of research that examines the potential mediating role of social support, a large body of work has posited that social support is a potential moderator of the relationship between stressors and well-being (Thoits 1995, 2010), including between job conditions and well-being (Allan et al. 2021; Cohen and McKay 1984; Jolly, Kong, and Kim 2021; Lovejoy et al. 2021; Viswesvaran et al. 1999).

Sociological research highlights how supportive network ties can offer social support that helps low-wage workers mitigate the deleterious effects of poverty and economic insecurity (Desmond 2012; Edin and Lein 1997; Henly, Danziger, and Offer 2005; Newman 2020; Stack 2003), such as when low-income individuals double-up with other households to manage housing insecurity (Seefeldt and Sandstrom 2015) or take informal loans from their social networks to deal with short-term cash flow issues (Biosca et al. 2020; Stack 2003). Scholars have also theorized social support as a potential "buffer" that can attenuate the negative effects of job stressors on well-being (Cohen and McKay 1984; House, Umberson, and Landis 1988; Thoits 2010; Viswesvaran et al. 1999), although the empirical evidence on the buffering

effect of social support is mixed (Jolly et al. 2021). Although studies have found that social support can buffer the negative effects of job stressors on well-being (Frese 1999; Park et al. 2020; Viswesvaran et al. 1999), others have found that social support does not moderate this relationship (Beehr et al. 2000).

Jolly et al. (2021:237) argue that the mixed results may stem from "a lack of agreement in theory, definition, and operationalization" of social support. For example, existing research varies in how it measures the *form* of social support (i.e., perceived vs. actual support), the *source* of social support (e.g., friends, family, coworkers), and the *type* of social support (i.e., instrumental and emotional support) (Jolly et al. 2021). Regarding form, we opt to use perceived rather than actual support to avoid conflating the availability of support with the need for this support (Harknett 2006; Harknett and Hartnett 2011). We choose not to focus on the receipt of support because receipt is an amalgam of needing support (for instance, having recently had an expense shock or an eviction) and having that support available. Rather, we intentionally focus on the private safety nets that workers fall back on if needed. In terms of the source of social support, many studies of the buffering effect of social support on work stressors focus specifically on sources of social support *at work* (e.g., coworkers and supervisors) (Jolly et al. 2021), to the exclusion of supportive network ties like friends and family members that may likewise moderate the negative effects of job stressors on well-being. Meanwhile, a rich literature in sociology points to the importance of a broad range of network ties for coping with poverty, including friends, family, coworkers, and casual acquaintances (Desmond 2012; Edin and Lein 1997; Lubbers et al. 2020a; Newman 2020; Small 2009; Stack 2003). We know little, however, about the differential effects of these sources of support in moderating the relationship between precarious work and well-being.

Additionally, correctly specifying the type of social support is important to ensure an appropriate match between the type of support received and the stressor at hand (i.e., the "matching hypothesis") (Viswesvaran et al. 1999). The mismatch between support and stressor may also explain the mixed findings on the buffering effect of social support (Jolly et al. 2021). Importantly, the matching hypothesis also applies to the alignment between the type of support received and the outcome of interest. For example, we might expect that a form of emotional support would be most beneficial for workers' mental health, whereas a form of instrumental support would be more helpful for workers' economic security.

However, little extant work has conceptualized precarious working conditions generally, and routine schedule instability specifically, as a chronic job stressor that may be buffered by workers' perceptions of social support. We depict this theorized moderating effect in Figure 1. We hypothesize that social support will act as a buffer and attenuate the harmful effects of precarious scheduling conditions. To the extent that the portion of the negative relationship between schedule instability and mental well-being that is not directly mediated by social support is driven by economic insecurity (e.g., income volatility), then instrumental support may help workers cope and attenuate this relationship. If, instead, the remaining negative association between schedule instability and well-being is primarily driven by emotional stress (e.g., managing work–life conflict), then emotional support from friends and family, or having supportive coworkers, may act as an important buffer.

Data and Methods

The Shift Project Data

In this article, we leverage both cross-sectional and longitudinal data from The Shift Project. We draw on cross-sectional data from Fall 2019 (Wave 7 of The Shift Project survey) and from Spring 2021 (Wave 10) to Spring 2024 (Wave 16). In each of these waves, the survey included a module on respondents' perceptions of social support. This gives us an analytic sample of 37,615 respondents. Respondents who completed the baseline surveys were empaneled, and The Shift Project attempted to re-contact them for follow-up surveys. We use all available follow-up surveys for the respondents in these baseline waves with at least two follow-ups, for a total panel sample of 5,798 person-wave observations for 1,861 respondents. Of these respondents, 1,646 have 3 observations (i.e., baseline and two follow-ups) and 215 have 4 observations (i.e., baseline and three follow-ups).

These data are drawn from the overarching data collection conducted by The Shift Project. Since 2017, The Shift Project has collected data on nearly 200,000 workers at over 200 large firms in the U.S. service sector, including retail, grocery, food service, and hospitality. The project uses targeted advertisements on Facebook and Instagram to reach adult workers at large service sector employers in the United States, using the employment information in Facebook users' profiles to target and recruit workers from specific firms to complete a web-based survey. Advertisements appear in users' feeds and offer a lottery incentive to complete a short (20-min) survey. Upon clicking this advertisement, potential respondents are directed to the Qualtrics platform, where they complete a consent form and answer questions on their demographic characteristics, employment conditions, benefits receipt, and well-being, among other topics.

To date, the project has conducted 16 semi-annual rounds of cross-sectional data collection, as well as 6 rounds of longitudinal data collection (Fig. S1 in the online supplement). Specifically, The Shift Project empanels respondents to the repeated cross-sectional surveys by conducting up to three follow-up surveys in the 24 months after baseline. Respondents who completed cross-sectional surveys were asked to provide contact information (email address and phone number) and to consent to being recontacted. Shift then uses email and text messages to recontact respondents, offering escalating incentives for completing a follow-up survey that asks a set of questions on current employment status, job quality attributes, and health and well-being.

Addressing Concerns of Non-Coverage and Selection Bias

The Shift Project uses a non-probability approach to survey recruitment, so there may be some concerns with non-coverage and selection bias. However, most adults (70 percent) are active on Facebook or Instagram (Auxier and Anderson 2021), suggesting that the potential for non-coverage is low. Selection into the sample based on observables and unobservables is possible, but we take several approaches to assuage these concerns. Prior work has also shown that non-probability samples can produce similar estimates as probability-based samples using statistical adjustments

(Gelman et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2020). Specifically, to account for potential biases based on observed characteristics, we include weights that align our sample to the demographic characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity) of respondents to the American Community Survey (ACS). In supplemental analyses, we compare results for our model that regresses social support on schedule instability with a variety of alternative weighting schemes and with unweighted estimates, and our results are robust to these alternate specifications (Fig. S2 in the online supplement).

Weighting does not address selection into the sample based on unobserved characteristics. However, Schneider and Harknett (2022) conduct several tests to address concerns around potential bias in The Shift Project data based on unobservables. First, the authors use variation in "social sharing" (i.e., the extent to which respondents enter the sample from clicking on an advertisement that targeted them directly vs. one that was shared by another user and appeared in their newsfeed) to show that there is little evidence that unobserved characteristics introduce bias. Second, leveraging the Facebook advertising platform, The Shift Project recruited respondents into the sample using pairs of opposed advertising messages that were designed to elicit hypothesized unobservable characteristics that might affect survey response and bias results (e.g., insufficient work hours vs. overwork). There is similarly little evidence that differential recruitment into these samples biased the relationship between schedule instability and worker well-being. Furthermore, as described later, we conduct several robustness checks using longitudinal data to address potential concerns around selection based on unobservable characteristics.

Finally, prior work highlights the close match between The Shift Project sample and the target population. Schneider and Harknett (2022) conduct extensive data validity checks for The Shift Project data, benchmarking the survey data against gold-standard probability samples (e.g., CPS) and assessing potential sources of bias. They show that The Shift Project data are aligned with these samples on both univariate and bivariate distributions. More broadly, few data sources contain detailed measures of job conditions (e.g., schedule instability), social support, and health and well-being outcomes, making The Shift Project data uniquely well-suited to studying the mediating and moderating role of social support.

Measures

Perceived social support. We use three measures of perceived social support, informed by the literature on the different types of social support (Cohen and McKay 1984; House et al. 1988; Jolly et al. 2021) and the potential mechanisms through which schedule instability may undermine social support (i.e., depleting networks through repeated mobilization, affecting the cultivation of supportive network ties, and affecting coworker relationships) (Harknett and Hartnett 2011; Lubbers et al. 2020b; Shepherd 2024). First, we construct a measure of perceived instrumental support that is based on two questions in The Shift Project survey, which have been employed previously in research using the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing study (Harknett and Hartnett 2011). First, we ask respondents, "Is there someone you could count on if you needed a $200 loan?," with response options that include "Definitely Yes," "Probably Yes," "Maybe Yes," "Probably Not,"

and "Definitely Not." We then ask respondents, "Is there someone you could count on if you needed a place to live?," with the same options. We dichotomize each of these variables ("Definitely" vs. other options), then create a binary measure of instrumental support, contrasting respondents with no instrumental support (0) and either loan or housing support (1). In supplementary analyses, we test an alternate coding of this measure that compares respondents who "Definitely" or "Probably" have instrumental support to those who do not, as well as an index (0–8) that sums the continuous measures of housing and loan support, and results are robust to these specifications.

Second, we measure perceived emotional support using a question that asks respondents, "About how many friends or relatives do you have whom you could call on for advice or help if you needed?" This is a continuous variable, which we top-code at 10 people (94th percentile). This question has been used in prior research (e.g., Umberson et al. 1996) and closely aligns with a measure of perceived emotional support from the Future of Families study that was asked as a binary question (Harknett and Hartnett 2011). We also test several versions of a categorical measure that contrasts those with low and high levels of perceived emotional support, varying the cutoff points for each category, and our results are robust to this specification.

Third, to contrast sources of support, we use a measure of perceived coworker support that builds on prior studies (Beehr et al. 2000; Patterer, Kühnel, and Korunka 2024) and asks respondents to rate their agreement with this statement: "At my [EMPLOYER NAME] workplace, I feel supported by my coworkers." The options included "Very true," "Somewhat true," and "Not at all true." We dichotomize this to compare "Very true" with "Somewhat" and "Not at all true." Additionally, we test a continuous version of this measure (0 to 3) and obtain similar results.

Schedule instability. Next, we employ a set of measures that capture firms' use of just-in-time scheduling practices. Specifically, we ask respondents whether they have experienced the following unstable scheduling practices in the past month: a canceled shift, a change in shift timing, an on-call shift, and a clopening shift (working a closing shift 1 day followed by the opening shift the next day). These four measures are dichotomous (yes/no) measures. We also ask respondents how far in advance they usually know what days and hours they are working, then create a binary measure comparing workers who receive at least 2 weeks of advance notice to those who receive less than 2 weeks of advance notice. Finally, we use these five measures to construct a schedule instability scale that captures the number of unstable and unpredictable scheduling practices respondents experience, ranging from 0 to 5.

Well-being. We draw on three measures of respondents' well-being. First, we draw on the Kessler-6 index to capture psychological distress. The Kessler-6 index asks respondents to rate the frequency with which they experienced certain symptoms over the previous month, including feeling so sad nothing could cheer them up, feeling nervous, feeling restless, feeling hopeless, feeling worthless, and feeling like everything was an effort. The response options range from "None of the time" (0)

to "All of the time" (4). These six measures are compiled into an index ranging from 0 to 24. We dichotomize the index to high psychological distress (12 or above) or low psychological distress, in line with prior work (Prochaska et al. 2012).

We also use a measure of sleep quality, which asks respondents, "During the past month, how would you rate your sleep quality overall?" Response options included "Very good," "Good," "Fair," and "Poor." We dichotomize this measure to good sleep quality (very good/good sleep) and poor sleep quality (fair/poor sleep).

Finally, we use a measure of happiness that asks respondents, "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say you are. . . ," with options that included "Very happy," "Pretty happy," and "Not too happy." We create a binary variable contrasting respondents who are happy (very/pretty happy) and not happy (not too happy).

Controls. We include a set of controls for sociodemographic and work characteristics that could confound the relationship between schedule instability, social support, and well-being. Specifically, we control for gender, race/ethnicity, age, education, school enrollment, marital status, parental status, English as a second language, job tenure, managerial status, hourly wage, and usual hours worked. We also include year-by-month fixed effects to account for potential temporal variation (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic).

Analytical Approach

Our analytical approach can be summarized by our conceptual framework for the relationship between schedule instability, perceived social support, and worker well-being (Fig. 1).

First, we investigate the direct effect of schedule instability on workers' perceived social support (path A). We use OLS regression models for our cross-sectional data, regressing each social support variable (Y) on each of our five scheduling practices and the schedule instability scale (Eq. [1]), where (S) is a vector of just-in-time scheduling practices, (D) is a vector of demographic controls, (W) is a vector of work controls, and (γ_{ym}) is a year-by-month fixed effect. This analysis includes 18 total models (3 social support outcomes $\times$ 6 schedule instability variables):

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta_s S_i} + \boldsymbol{\beta_d D_i} + \boldsymbol{\beta_w W_i} + \gamma_{ym} + \varepsilon_i. \quad (1)$$

To test the robustness of these results, we also draw on The Shift Project panel data. Here, and in all following panel models, we cluster standard errors at the respondent level, as respondents can appear more than once in the sample (i.e., each follow-up survey is included, with reference to the prior wave). We first estimate these same 18 models on the panel data to establish a baseline for the estimates in this new sample. We then run within-subject (i.e., individual fixed effect) models to address potential unobserved time-constant heterogeneity (Eq. [2]), where (δ_i) is an individual fixed effect:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta_s S_{it}} + \boldsymbol{\beta_d D_{it}} + \boldsymbol{\beta_w W_{it}} + \gamma_{ym} + \delta_i + \varepsilon_{it}. \quad (2)$$

Next, we investigate the extent to which perceived social support mediates the relationship between schedule instability and well-being (path B in our conceptual framework). In supplemental analyses (Table S1 in the online supplement), we first confirm findings from prior work regarding the direct effect of perceived social support on well-being, regressing our three well-being outcomes (psychological distress, happiness, and sleep quality) on each of our measures of social support. Next, using The Shift Project cross-sectional data, we run a series of OLS models predicting these well-being outcomes (Y) as a function of the schedule instability scale (S) (Eq. [3]), then systematically add each of the perceived social support measures (P) (Eq. [4]). We examine the extent to which the coefficients for the schedule instability scale are attenuated by the addition of the perceived social support variables:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta_s S_i} + \boldsymbol{\beta_d D_i} + \boldsymbol{\beta_w W_i} + \gamma_{ym} + \varepsilon_i, \tag{3}$$

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta_s S_i} + \boldsymbol{\beta_p P_i} + \boldsymbol{\beta_d D_i} + \beta_w W_i + \gamma_{ym} + \varepsilon_i. \tag{4}$$

Next, we test this mediation formally using structural equation modeling, which allows us to parse the direct and indirect effects of schedule instability on well-being, as well as the percent of the association that is mediated by perceived social support (Kline 2010). In supplemental analyses (Table S2 in the online supplement), we also test the mediating effect of social support in conjunction with other known mediators, including economic insecurity and work–life conflict.

Finally, we examine whether social support moderates (or buffers) the relationship between schedule instability and well-being. In Table 4, we first show the direct effect of schedule instability on worker well-being. Then, using The Shift Project cross-sectional data, we estimate a series of OLS regression models, regressing each well-being measure (Y) on the schedule instability scale (S) and perceived social support (P), as well as an interaction effect between schedule instability and perceived social support:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta_s S_i} + \boldsymbol{\beta_p P_i} + \boldsymbol{\beta_{sp}} (\boldsymbol{S_i * P_i}) + \boldsymbol{\beta_d D_i} + \boldsymbol{\beta_w W_i} + \gamma_{ym} + \varepsilon_i. \tag{5}$$

A replication package with data and code is available at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OEGXOW.

Results

Schedule Instability and Perceived Social Support

We begin by examining how schedule instability is associated with workers' perceived social support (path A in Fig. 1). In Table 1, we present estimates from cross-sectional models predicting respondents' instrumental (M1), emotional (M2), and on-the-job coworker support (M3) as a function of their exposure to schedule instability, including both individual just-in-time scheduling practices and a schedule instability index. We include the scheduling measures in separate models, such that the estimate in each cell is derived from a separate model.

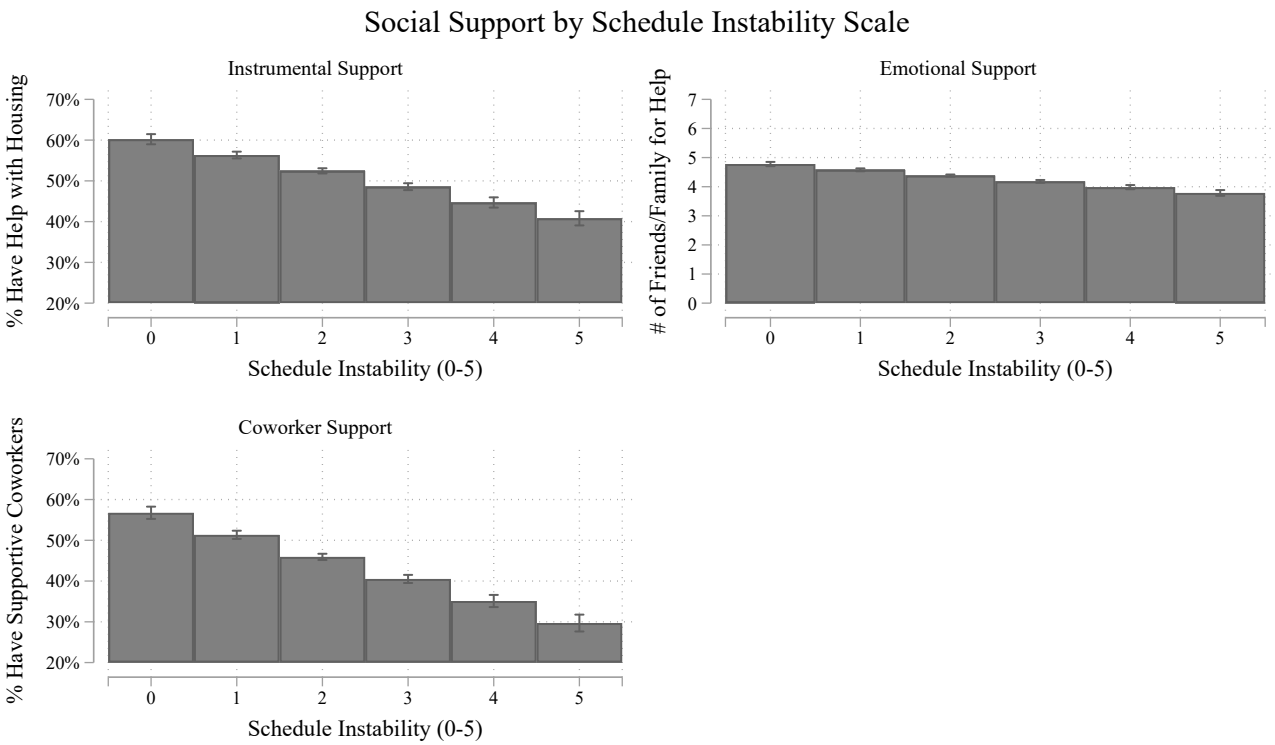
Table 1: Social support regressed on schedule instability measures.

	Instrumental Support (1)	Emotional Support (2)	Coworker Support (3)
Canceled Shift	-0.097^{**}	-0.438^{**}	-0.115^{**}
	(0.010)	(0.055)	(0.012)
Changed Timing	-0.048^{**}	-0.216^{**}	-0.109^{**}
	(0.007)	(0.041)	(0.008)
Clopening Shift	-0.045^{**}	-0.304^{**}	-0.081^{**}
	(0.007)	(0.042)	(0.009)
On-Call Shift	-0.079^{**}	-0.366^{**}	-0.046^{**}
	(0.008)	(0.046)	(0.010)
Less Than Two Weeks' Notice	-0.050^{**}	-0.276^{**}	-0.073^{**}
	(0.007)	(0.041)	(0.008)
Instability Scale	-0.039^{**}	-0.198^{**}	-0.054^{**}
	(0.003)	(0.016)	(0.003)
N	37615	37615	26564

All models include controls for race-ethnicity, age, gender, marital status, parenthood status, enrollment in school, educational attainment, English as a second language, hourly wage, job tenure, usual hours worked, and whether the worker is a manager, as well as year-by-month fixed effects. All models are weighted by race, age, and gender per the American Community Survey. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$.

Across all 18 models (3 outcomes $\times$ 6 predictors), we consistently find a significant negative association between workers' exposure to schedule instability and their social support. For example, workers who experienced canceled shifts in the past month experience less instrumental support ($b = -0.097$, $p < 0.001$), emotional support ($b = -0.438$, $p < 0.001$), and coworker support ($b = -0.115$, $p < 0.001$). Taking predicted probabilities, we see that workers who experienced a canceled shift were less likely to report perceived instrumental support (44 percent) compared with those who did not experience a canceled shift (54 percent) and those who experienced a canceled shift reported fewer friends and family members they could rely on for advice (4.0) compared with those who did not (4.4).

So far, we have treated each scheduling exposure in isolation. In the last row of Table 1, we estimate the association between an additive scale measure of exposure to unstable and unpredictable scheduling and workers' perceptions of social support. We find that the schedule instability scale is significantly and negatively associated with perceived instrumental support ($b = -0.039$, $p < 0.001$), emotional support ($b = -0.198$, $p < 0.001$), and coworker support ($b = -0.054$, $p < 0.001$). Examining the marginal effects, for example, we find that workers with no exposure to schedule instability (i.e., a "0" on the schedule instability scale) perceive much higher levels of instrumental support (60 percent) than those with the greatest exposure to all five forms of instability (41 percent). Similarly, 57 percent of respondents with no exposure to schedule instability report high levels of coworker support, compared to only 30 percent of respondents with the most exposure. These models are consistent with the idea that highly unstable and unpredictable schedules undermine workers' social support of all types. We plot the predicted probabilities



Predicted values are derived from linear probability models that regress support on the continuous 0-5 schedule instability scale. All models include controls for race-ethnicity, age, gender, marital status, parenthood status, enrollment in school, educational attainment, English as a second language, hourly wage, job tenure, usual hours worked, and whether the worker is a manager, as well as year-by-month fixed effects. All models are weighted by race, age, and gender per the American Community Survey.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of social support by schedule instability.

for the relationship between the schedule instability scale and social support in Figure 2.

However, it is possible that unobserved, time-constant heterogeneity among workers drives the association between schedule instability and perceived support. For instance, workers with strong interpersonal skills may be more successful in accessing more stable schedules and in maintaining supportive social connections. To assess this possibility, we turn to our panel data, where we leverage respondents' multiple observations to run individual fixed-effect models. Specifically, we compare (1) how schedule instability predicts support in our cross-sectional data; (2) how schedule instability predicts support cross-sectionally in our pooled panel data (to establish a baseline estimate on a new sample); and (3) how schedule instability predicts support in pooled panel data with individual fixed effects.

We plot the coefficients from each of these models in Figure S3 in the online supplement. Our results are similar for the cross-sectional analysis of the full sample compared with the smaller panel sample, although the estimates are less precise for the smaller panel sample. When we control for unobserved time-invariant heterogeneity by adding individual fixed effects, we continue to see a negative association between schedule instability and both emotional and coworker support, though the magnitude of the associations is somewhat attenuated. For instrumental

support, the association is greatly attenuated in the presence of the individual fixed effects, suggesting either that the association between schedule instability and perceived instrumental support is driven by unobserved heterogeneity or that the processes by which schedule instability shapes instrumental support play out over a longer time horizon.

The Mediating Role of Perceived Social Support in the Relationship between Schedule Instability and Well-Being

Next, we investigate whether this depletion of social support is one reason why schedules are detrimental for workers' health, testing the extent to which social support mediates the well-documented relationship between schedule instability and well-being (Schneider and Harknett 2019). This corresponds to path B in our conceptual framework (Fig. 1), specifically the pathway between schedule instability and well-being that operates through social support.

We run a series of nested regression models (Table 2), beginning with base models that regress each well-being measure on the schedule instability scale (M1, M5, and M9), then add each social support variable individually to these models. Although we report results for all three types of perceived support, it is important to keep in mind that the instrumental support results may be driven by unobserved heterogeneity.

We first see that each social support measure is itself strongly associated with our well-being outcomes, offering further evidence of the direct effect of social support on well-being that has been established in prior work. We also produce estimates of the direct effect of social support on our well-being outcomes without the schedule instability scale in Table S1 in the online supplement. For example, coworker support is associated with an 11 percentage point decrease in psychological distress ($p < 0.001$), a 13 percentage point increase in higher levels of happiness ($p < 0.001$), and a 14 percentage point increase in good sleep quality ($p < 0.001$). We find a similar pattern of results for both instrumental and emotional support.

We also note that the coefficients for the instability scale are reduced following the addition of each of these social support variables. This suggests that perceived support attenuates the relationship between schedule instability and well-being, specifically psychological distress, happiness, and sleep quality. For example, the coefficient for the effect of the schedule instability scale on happiness is -0.033 ($p < 0.001$) in the base model, but reduces to -0.028 ($p < 0.001$) when instrumental support is added, -0.027 ($p < 0.001$) when emotional support is added, and -0.025 ($p < 0.001$) when coworker support is added. This pattern extends to the remaining social support and well-being variables. This attenuation offers evidence of how social support mediates the relationship between schedule instability and well-being.

We next draw on structural equation modeling to decompose the direct and indirect effects to more formally test the hypothesis that social support mediates the relationship between schedule instability and well-being. We find strong evidence of mediation (Table 3). Specifically, the three forms of social support together mediate 24 percent of the relationship between schedule instability and psychological

Table 2: Well-being regressed on the schedule instability scale and social support.

	Psychological Distress				Happiness				Sleep Quality			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Instability Scale	0.051**	0.046**	0.045**	0.043**	−0.033**	−0.028**	−0.027**	−0.025**	−0.030**	−0.025**	−0.026**	−0.024**
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Instrumental Support		−0.130**				0.152**				0.136**		
		(0.006)				(0.006)				(0.006)		
Emotional Support			−0.029**				0.030**				0.022**	
			(0.001)				(0.001)				(0.001)	
Coworker Support				−0.097**				0.126**				0.135**
				(0.008)				(0.007)				(0.008)
N	37615	37615	37615	26564	37615	37615	37615	26564	37615	37615	37615	26564

All models include controls for race-ethnicity, age, gender, marital status, parenthood status, enrollment in school, educational attainment, English as a second language, hourly wage, job tenure, usual hours worked, and whether the worker is a manager, as well as year-by-month fixed effects. All models are weighted by race, age, and gender per the American Community Survey. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$.

Table 3: Social support mediation of the association between schedule instability and well-being.

	Psychological Distress	Happiness	Sleep Quality
Total Association	0.049^{**}	-0.032^{**}	-0.031^{**}
Direct Association	0.037^{**}	-0.019^{**}	-0.019^{**}
Indirect Association	0.011^{**}	-0.013^{**}	-0.012^{**}
Total Mediated	24%	41%	39%
Instrumental Support	6%	10%	10%
Emotional Support	11%	15%	9%
Coworker Support	7%	16%	19%

Associations derived from structural equation modeling (SEM). All models include controls for race-ethnicity, age, gender, marital status, parenthood status, enrollment in school, educational attainment, English as a second language, hourly wage, job tenure, usual hours worked, and whether the worker is a manager, as well as year-by-month fixed effects. All models are weighted by race, age, and gender per the American Community Survey. $N = 26,564$. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$.

distress, 41 percent of the relationship between schedule instability and happiness, and 39 percent of the relationship between schedule instability and sleep quality.

We further decompose this percentage into the component contributions of each type of social support and find that each type of support plays a mediating role. For example, instrumental support mediates 6 percent of the relationship between schedule instability and psychological distress, compared to the 11 percent mediated by emotional support and 7 percent mediated by coworker support. Of the 41 percent of the instability-happiness relationship mediated by social support, 10 percent is mediated by instrumental support, 15 percent is mediated by emotional support, and 16 percent is mediated by coworker support. Finally, of the 39 percent of the instability-sleep relationship mediated by social support, 10 percent is mediated by instrumental support, 9 percent is mediated by emotional support, and 19 percent is mediated by coworker support. In sum, these results suggest that emotional support is the most important mediator for psychological distress and sleep quality, and emotional and coworker support are both important mediators when it comes to workers' happiness. We put more stock in the results for emotional and coworker support, given evidence that instrumental support may be subject to bias from unobserved heterogeneity (Fig. S3 in the online supplement).

In Table S2 in the online supplement, we compare these results to other mediators established by Schneider and Harknett (2019), namely household economic insecurity and work–family conflict. We show that together these three constructs mediate 69 percent of the relationship between schedule instability and psychological distress, 97 percent of the relationship between schedule instability and happiness, and 93 percent of the relationship between schedule instability and sleep quality. Similar to what Schneider and Harknett (2019) report, work–family conflict is the largest mediator, but social support mediates 7 percent of the relationship with psychological distress, 18 percent of the relationship with happiness, and 18 percent of the relationship with sleep quality.

The Moderating Role of Perceived Social Support in the Relationship between Schedule Instability and Well-Being

Our analyses to this point offer evidence that unstable and unpredictable schedules deplete workers' social support (path A), which partly explains the negative relationship between schedule instability and well-being (path B). Next, we consider whether support acts as a buffer (i.e., a moderator) against the negative effects of unstable and unpredictable schedules on well-being (path C in Fig. 1).

To test this, we first reproduce prior findings that highlight how schedule instability is significantly negatively associated with well-being (Table S3 in the online supplement). We then run a series of regression models predicting our three well-being outcomes (psychological distress, happiness, and sleep quality) that include an interaction effect between the schedule instability scale and each social support variable (Table 4). In total, we estimate 9 models (3 outcomes $\times$ 3 types of social support).

In the cross-sectional analysis, we find evidence that social support does buffer the negative well-being effects of unstable schedules, but only for certain combinations of support and outcome variables, in line with the matching hypothesis (Jolly et al. 2021; Viswesvaran et al. 1999). Given that our outcomes are most closely tied with respondents' emotional well-being, it is perhaps unsurprising that we find significant moderating effects of emotional support on both psychological distress ($b = -0.004$, $p < 0.001$) and happiness ($b = 0.003$, $p < 0.001$). For example, the interaction effect between schedule instability and emotional support in the psychological distress model is -0.004 ($p < 0.001$), meaning that for each additional unstable scheduling practice that respondents experience, additional emotional support reduces respondents' psychological distress further.

Figure 3 displays these relationships graphically. As expected, given a large literature on the benefits of social support, these figures show that, at all levels of schedule instability, each type of support is associated with better outcomes (e.g., lower distress, more happiness). These figures also show the expected relationship between schedule instability and worse outcomes. Most notably, these figures provide evidence consistent with social support buffering against the harmful effects of precarious work in that the relationship between schedule instability and worse outcomes is muted in the presence of greater amounts of social support.

For example, Figure 3 shows that the elevated distress associated with increasing schedule instability is most pronounced for those lacking in emotional support and is much more muted in the presence of emotional support, consistent with the buffering hypothesis. In particular, going from the most to the least stable schedules is associated with a 30 percentage point increase in distress in the absence of emotional support and just a 12 percentage point increase for those with the most robust emotional support from their social ties. This same pattern appears for emotional support buffering against declines in happiness as schedules become more unstable; declines in happiness are most dramatic for those without any emotional support (declining by 21 percentage points) and are far more muted for those with the most robust emotional support (declining by just 4 percentage points).

Table 4: Well-being regressed on schedule instability by social support.

	Psychological Distress			Happiness			Sleep Quality		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Instability Scale	0.045**	0.060**	0.045**	−0.031**	−0.042**	−0.031**	−0.019**	−0.022**	−0.027**
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Instrumental Support	−0.134**			0.138**			0.159**		
	(0.011)			(0.011)			(0.011)		
Instrumental ×	0.002			0.007			−0.012*		
Instability	(0.005)			(0.005)			(0.005)		
Emotional Support		−0.022**			0.024**			0.023**	
		(0.002)			(0.002)			(0.002)	
Emotional × Instability		−0.004**			0.003**			−0.001	
		(0.001)			(0.001)			(0.001)	
Coworker Support			−0.088**			0.102**			0.121**
			(0.013)			(0.012)			(0.014)
Coworker Support ×			−0.005			0.012*			0.007
Instability			(0.006)			(0.005)			(0.006)
N	37615	37615	26564	37615	37615	26564	37615	37615	26564

All models include controls for race-ethnicity, age, gender, marital status, parenthood status, enrollment in school, educational attainment, English as a second language, hourly wage, job tenure, usual hours worked, and whether the worker is a manager, as well as year-by-month fixed effects. All models are weighted by race, age, and gender per the American Community Survey. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$.

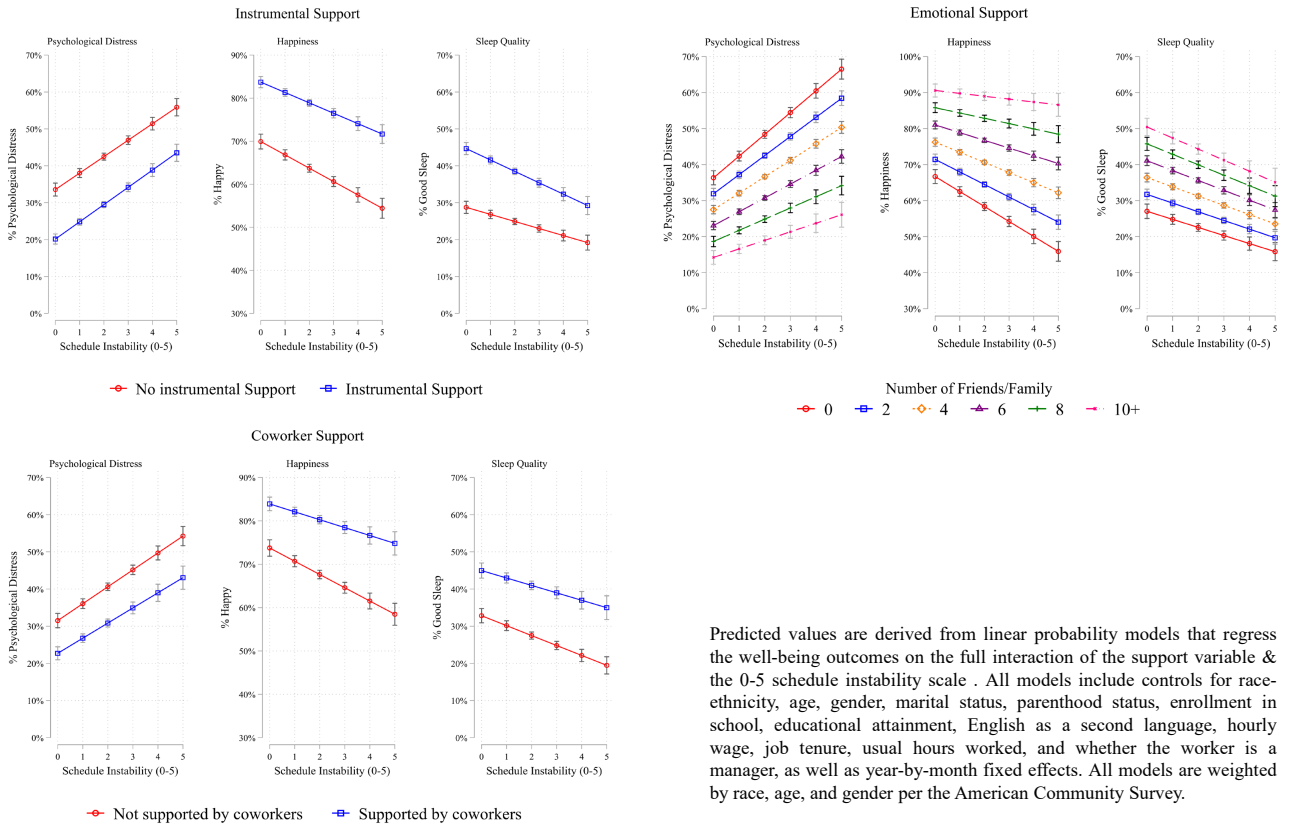


Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of well-being by schedule instability and social support.

Similarly, additional coworker support is associated with improved well-being at higher levels of schedule instability, particularly for happiness ($b = 0.012$, $p < 0.05$). For example, looking at marginal effects (Fig. 3, bottom), among those who lack coworker support, we see a steeper decline in happiness as schedule instability increases, evidence that coworker support buffers against the toll of schedule instability. This suggests that on-the-job social support is an important buffer for the negative effects of schedule instability on well-being.

Instrumental support appears to have little buffering effect compared with emotional or coworker support. The stronger protective effects of emotional and coworker support compared to instrumental support are also in line with the matching hypothesis, specifically that the portion of the relationship between schedule instability and well-being not mediated by social support is driven more by work–life conflict than economic insecurity, as Schneider and Harknett (2019) show in their work. In addition, as shown earlier, the association between schedule instability and instrumental support may be driven by unobserved heterogeneity.

Notably, the buffering pattern reverses for our measure of sleep quality, in that the gap between those with and without social support actually narrows at higher levels of schedule instability, specifically for instrumental support ($b = -0.012$, $p < 0.05$). These findings suggest that schedules are uniquely bad for

sleep, and even high levels of social support are unable to mitigate these negative effects. Furthermore, it is also possible that higher social connectedness (vis-à-vis social support) may create additional time commitments that compete with sleep, particularly if the social support is reciprocal and involves the respondent giving their own time back to their network. In contrast, being socially isolated may mean that, without friends and family to spend time with or take care of, there is more time available to sleep.

Discussion

Over the last half-century, work in the United States has become increasingly precarious as employers shift market risks to their employees, leading to significant declines in job quality, particularly for workers without a college degree (Hacker 2019; Kalleberg 2009). This includes the use of "just-in-time" scheduling practices, which have far-reaching implications for workers' well-being and economic security (Lambert et al. 2019; Schneider and Harknett 2019, 2021). More recently, scholarship has also examined a growing trend of social isolation and disconnectedness and how it affects workers' physical and mental health (Murthy 2017, 2020; Pugh 2024). This research notes that individuals who are more socially isolated and disconnected are likely to have fewer supportive relationships (Cornwell and Waite 2009), but rarely draws a connection to the changing nature of work. Against the backdrop of this rise in precarious working conditions and social disconnectedness, we consider how work both shapes and is shaped by human relationships, specifically workers' supportive ties to friends, family, and coworkers.

Drawing on novel cross-sectional (N = 37,615) and longitudinal (N = 5,798 person-wave observations) data from The Shift Project, we show that precarious work creates a "double bind" for workers: exposure to highly unstable and unpredictable schedules creates a need for support to buffer against the negative effects of schedule instability on worker well-being, whereas at the same time it undermines workers' perceptions of the social support available to them. As a result, precarious work creates compounding disadvantages: workers who lack social support because of their work schedules are also less able to cope with the negative consequences of those work schedules for their well-being.

Our article finds that the conditions of precarious work–particularly unstable and unpredictable work schedules–have negative repercussions for supportive social ties. Empirically, we find that service sector workers who are exposed to schedule instability have reduced perceptions of social support, establishing a direct effect of precarious working conditions on workers' perceptions of social support that was previously unexplored in the extant literature. Strikingly, the consequences of precarious work schedules are not confined to work relationships or particular types of support but are pervasive: having an ever-changing and unpredictable work schedule appears to undermine relationships both at work and outside of work. Although prior research has found that schedule instability is negatively associated with well-being (Schneider and Harknett 2019) and social support is positively associated with well-being (Turner and Brown 2010), to our knowledge, ours is the first study to examine the effect of schedule instability on social support.

The negative effect of precarious work schedules on social support has downstream consequences for worker well-being. We show that diminished social support is one of the pathways connecting precarious work and worker well-being, including workers' psychological distress, happiness, and sleep quality. In doing so, we establish social support as a mediator in the relationship between schedule instability and well-being. Previous research had focused on household economic security and work–life conflict as pathways (Schneider and Harknett 2019) and had not accounted for the role that diminished support plays in explaining the relationship between schedules and well-being.

The availability of support acts as a buffer against the negative effects of precarious scheduling on health and well-being, but alignment between the support and the well-being outcome matters. Social support, particularly emotional and coworker support, helps to buffer against the negative effects of schedule instability on workers' psychological distress and happiness. These findings extend a robust literature on the buffering effects of social support that has been focused more broadly and rarely considers precarious working conditions like schedule instability as a job stressor (Lovejoy et al. 2021). Although scholars have previously positioned social support as a buffer against the effects of job stressors on well-being (Cohen and McKay 1984; Jolly et al. 2021; Thoits 1995), no work has specifically considered social support as a potential protective buffer that could mitigate the instability-well-being relationship. We fill this gap by presenting evidence that emotional and coworker support indeed act as buffers against the harmful effects of precarious work schedules on workers' mental health outcomes, but not against diminished sleep quality. We do not find evidence that instrumental support acts as a buffer. This nuanced pattern of findings is in line with the matching hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of matching job stressor, type of support, and outcome (Cohen and McKay 1984; Jolly et al. 2021; Viswesvaran et al. 1999). Specifically, the stronger buffering effect of workers' perceived emotional and coworker support (relative to instrumental support) may reflect the match between these types of support and mental health outcomes.

Weaving together these findings, we parse the complex and recursive relationship between schedule instability, perceptions of social support, and worker well-being. We argue that social support is both a mediator and a moderator of the relationship between unstable and unpredictable schedules and well-being. As our results highlight, the same precarious working conditions that undermine workers' perceptions of social support also create a greater need for that support. Indeed, we find evidence that precarious work generally, and schedule instability specifically, reduces workers' assessments of the social support available to them, including different forms (i.e., emotional vs. instrumental) and different sources (e.g., friends, family, coworkers). This lack of social support helps explain the negative effects of schedule instability on worker well-being. However, at the same time, workers exposed to high levels of schedule instability are those most in need of this social support and potentially stand to gain the most from its buffering effect. In this way, these service sector workers are "doubly disadvantaged" (Jack 2019).

In interpreting our findings, there are some limitations that should be kept in mind. Although we highlight how schedule instability is strongly associated with reduced perceptions of social support, we are unable to determine the specific

mechanism governing this relationship, although we point to several potential mechanisms based on prior literature (e.g., disrupting the formation and maintenance of network ties, draining networks through mobilization). Future work, particularly qualitative work, would do well to unpack these mechanisms. Given the focus of The Shift Project, our sample and the conclusions of this article are necessarily limited to service sector workers in the United States, but although schedule instability is rampant in the service sector, many other workers across different industries grapple with schedule instability, such as healthcare workers (Clawson and Gerstel 2014), software engineers (O'Carroll 2015), and truck drivers (Snyder 2016). Lastly, as noted, The Shift Project data is a non-probability sample, which introduces potential concerns around selection bias based on observed and unobserved characteristics. However, we have conducted several tests to assuage these concerns using the Facebook recruitment platform and The Shift Project panel data, such as using sample weights and individual fixed effects.

Our work has direct implications for policymaking at the local, state, and federal levels. Sociologists have long written about how private safety nets are critical for individuals and families to cope with the deleterious effects of poverty, particularly in light of the retrenchment of the U.S. public safety net (Edin and Lein 1997, 1998; Edin and Shaefer 2015; Nelson 2000; Stack 2003). However, our work reveals an inherent limitation of a reliance on private safety nets. The "double bind" we describe in this article means that workers' private safety nets are unable to effectively buffer against the consequences of precarious work, as those same conditions that produce need also reduce the support workers have available to them to cope with that need.

Next, although some firms voluntarily opt to provide more stable and predictable schedules in an approach that is often described as taking the "high road" (Osterman 2018), some states, counties, and cities have instead opted to "raise the floor" by passing legislation that mandates some minimum level of schedule predictability and advanced notice (Wolfe, Jones, and Cooper 2018). Although these secure scheduling laws have demonstrable effects both on workers' schedule stability and their well-being, our findings suggest that these laws may also have broader implications for workers' access to social support, which may partly explain the positive effects of this legislation on worker well-being. Finally, both social scientists (Parigi and Henson 2014; Pugh 2024) and public health leaders (Murthy 2017, 2020) have called attention to the rise in social isolation and disconnectedness that has left many individuals without supportive relationships upon which they can rely in times of need. Our research suggests that precarious work may be one contributing factor to this disconnectedness, potentially by reducing opportunities to cultivate and maintain ties at and outside of work or by creating conditions that necessitate the repeated mobilization of these supportive ties, such as through heightened experiences of material hardship (Schneider and Harknett 2021). Public and private initiatives that foster connection and promote meaningful relationships, then, may help to mitigate the consequences of precarious working conditions on individuals' social support networks and, in turn, on workers' well-being.

This article also has important takeaways for a broader sociological audience. We emphasize the need to take seriously the ways that work shapes and is shaped

by human relationships, both at work and in workers' personal lives. Too often, scholarship focuses primarily on one of these domains, as research on low-wage work tends to focus on the conditions of and relationships at work, whereas the research on coping mechanisms of individuals and families in poverty tends to consider work only insofar as it produces the conditions of poverty. We argue that scholars must broaden their lens and consider the multi-faceted and interdependent nature of individuals' work and personal lives. Furthermore, the social world is complex and constructs like social support rarely operate in a single or uniform fashion, but empirical research tends to examine social support either as a moderator or a mediator. In contrast, we demonstrate that social support plays multiple roles in the relationship between schedule instability and well-being, highlighting the importance of more nuanced and comprehensive conceptualizations of empirical relationships. Finally, there is a long-standing tradition in sociology of analyzing how changing working conditions affect workers, from the focus of early social theorists like Marx and Durkheim on rising industrialization to contemporary scholarship on precarious work. In documenting the relationship between schedule instability, social support, and well-being, we offer further evidence of the insidious and far-reaching effects of poor job quality for workers.

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Acknowledgments: We gratefully acknowledge support from the National Institute on Aging (Grant Nos. R01AG066898 and R56AG081273), the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (Grant No. U19OH012293), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Grant Nos. INV-002665 and INV-016942), the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (Award No. 74528), and the W.T. Grant Foundation (Grant No. 188043). The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of these foundations. The authors received excellent research support from Kevin Bruey, Connor Williams, and Alessandra Soto.

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