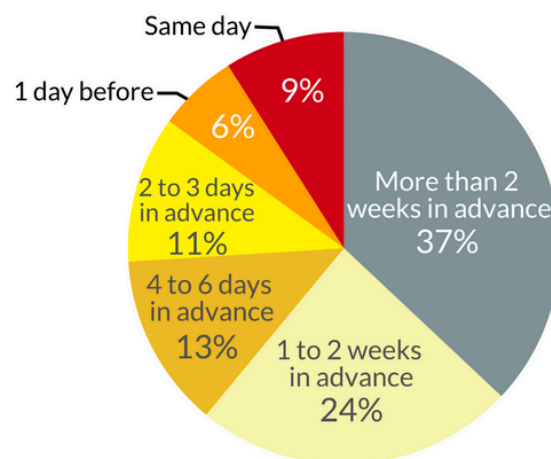


Unstable Hours, Unstable Lives: The Scheduling Crisis Facing Young Workers in Santa Cruz County

Veronica Terriquez, Veronica Hamilton, and Steve McKay

Stable work schedules are a key indicator of job quality, as they make lives and incomes more predictable, particularly for workers juggling multiple responsibilities. However, young workers are disproportionately employed in service industries like fast food and retail, where employers often use “flexible” or “just-in-time” scheduling to shift the burden of business fluctuations onto employees. As a result, irregular and last-minute scheduling makes it difficult for young workers to plan their lives, pursue their education, or fulfill caregiving duties. This instability can lead to heightened stress, adverse health outcomes, missed educational opportunities, and income insecurity.¹

Figure 1. How far in advance do young workers receive their schedules?



Source: Santa Cruz Thriving Youth Study, 2024 (n=1,457)

This brief draws on original data from the Thriving Youth Study, which surveyed workers aged 18 to 34 in Santa Cruz County.² The findings reveal the extent to which local youth experience scheduling instability. Only 37% of respondents reported receiving their schedules more than 2 weeks in advance. Meanwhile, 24% received their schedules 1 to 2 weeks in advance, 13% with 4 to 6 days' notice, and another 11% only 2 to 3 days' before their shift. Even more concerning, 6% of young workers were given their schedules just 1 day in advance, and 9% were informed the day of their shift. These conditions make it nearly impossible for workers to arrange childcare, attend classes, or budget for basic living expenses.

These challenges may be particularly severe for the 13% of young workers who are parents and the 46% enrolled in school. For these individuals, unpredictable work hours can derail educational progress, increase family stress, and jeopardize long-term career goals. In this context, having advance notice of work schedules is not merely a convenience—it is a foundation for economic and domestic stability as well as upward mobility.

Unions play a vital role in efforts to regularize working hours, and these findings can inform organizing efforts to unionize young workers in Santa Cruz County. According to our January 2025 Union Curious report, many young workers in Santa Cruz express interest in joining a union, and organizing campaigns should appeal to them by prioritizing predictable scheduling.³ Unions have already begun to do so. At the time of this writing, Santa Cruz County has five unionized Starbucks stores, and one of their primary bargaining demands addresses understaffing and unpredictable scheduling. Similarly, the REI Union, represented by UFCW 5 in Santa Cruz, is demanding minimum hours and a predictable work week for its members. Workers deserve to be able to plan their time in advance, and an organized workforce is well positioned to make that happen.

A Fair Work Week Ordinance can also help address this crisis. Local legislation requiring employers to provide schedules at least two weeks in advance and compensate workers for last-minute changes would significantly improve job quality for young and other low-wage workers. Municipalities across California—including San Jose, Emeryville, San Francisco, and Berkeley—have already adopted similar ordinances, providing policy models and local precedents.⁴ Enacting a Fair Work Week Ordinance in Santa Cruz County would not only reduce income volatility and scheduling-related stress but also support greater worker retention and stability. More broadly, a Fair Work Week represents a meaningful investment in the well-being of Santa Cruz residents, offering them increased predictability, greater control over their time, and ultimately more opportunities to thrive.



Veronica Terriquez is a Professor of urban planning and Chicana/o and Central American studies, and Director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA.

Steve McKay is a Professor of sociology and Director of the Center for Labor and Community at UC Santa Cruz.

Veronica Hamilton is a Ph.D. candidate in social psychology and a graduate student researcher at the Center for Labor and Community at UC Santa Cruz.

¹ Sharma, Preeti, Lina Stepick, Janna Shadduck-Hernández, and Saba Waheed. 2022. "Time theft in the Los Angeles retail sector: The need for new labor standards and a fair workweek." *Labor Studies Journal* 47(1): 28–55.

² In spring 2024, UC Santa Cruz and Cabrillo students collected surveys from Santa Cruz County workers, students, and residents. The survey sample is weighted to reflect the school enrollment rates, age, race, and gender of young adult residents across Santa Cruz County. The survey sample included a total of 1,466 young adult workers aged 18–34. Three respondents who did not answer the question were excluded from the analysis.

³ Hamilton, Veronica, Steve McKay, Miriam Greenberg, Veronica Terriquez, and Steven Carmona Mora. 2025. *Union Curious Young Workers in Santa Cruz County*. Santa Cruz and Los Angeles. UCSC Center for Labor and Community, and UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

⁴ National Women's Law Center. 2023. *State and Local Laws Advancing Fair Work Schedules*. Washington, DC: National Women's Law Center. <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Fair-Work-Schedules-Factsheet-9.14.23v1.pdf>