

Work and Family: The Impact of Mobility, Scheduling and Precariousness

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There is an immense shift underway in the workforce across Canada that is clear to many people who are working and to those who are looking for work. In recent years, there has been a rise in unstable and precarious employment, as well as a growing number of jobs with long commuting times and those involving long travel times during work. Furthermore, the use of shift-scheduling technology – which automates labour distribution in a workplace – is increasing across a variety of sectors. These evolving contexts can have a significant impact on workers and their families.

A recent study conducted as part of the *On the Move Partnership*¹ surveyed and interviewed union representatives and union members in Canada to explore how they manage unpaid family care responsibilities along with their often erratic work schedules and long or arduous commutes. The goal was to explore *how* these workers reconcile the rhythms of work and life in increasingly mobile and precarious sectors, and what unions are doing to foster harmony for these workers and their families.



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The use of shift-scheduling technology – which automates labour distribution in a workplace – is increasing across a variety of sectors.

Research from *On the Move* has shown that a large but difficult-to-document number of Canadians work in municipalities, provinces and even countries far from their homes and families, and their employment-related mobility often follows complex and nuanced patterns.² These workers often invest considerable time and other resources managing and negotiating the impacts of this mobility.

This study focused on two particular types of mobility:

1. **Lengthy and/or complex commuting**, such as jobs that involve travelling an hour or more each way per day to the place of work (including the time it takes to drop off or pick up children, spouses, parents, etc.).
2. **Mobility during/for work**, such as jobs in which workers move around from worksite to worksite *throughout the day*, as with personal support workers or homecare nurses.

These categories aren't exclusive; for some workers, these two categories – long commutes and mobility throughout the day – overlap. Study participants were all in the Greater Toronto Area, and they either worked *in* or represented employees *within* in the home health care sector, the airport and airline sector, or the higher education sector. While these workplaces differ greatly in the wages, skill sets and demographics of the workers, their diversity serves to highlight how the issues presented here can appear in different settings with different employee characteristics.

Unpaid idle time can represent “time taken from family”

One of the impacts of modern shift-scheduling practices and mobility is a greater amount of *unpaid idle time* for these diverse types of workers: time when they are not at home but *not* officially on the clock. Many of them referred to this as *time taken from family*, and it can have an impact on family finances.

For example, if an employee was paying for child care but stuck with unpaid idle time, it could actually result in *negative earnings*. One airport worker, for example, recalled being scheduled for a shift that began at 2:30 a.m., but the last bus to leave from his neighbourhood to work left at midnight. Therefore, he regularly arrived at work an hour or more *before* his start time to ensure he was on time, and would then sleep or wait around at the airport – unpaid – until his shift began.

Home health care workers with long waits between clients also experience unpaid idle time, as reported by Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Barbara Neis.³ The workers in their study were paid only for *direct* care time and the travel time between clients, regardless of how long they had to wait between scheduled visits. For example, one personal support worker said:

I start at 9:30 in the morning, work with a client for two hours, and then wait until 1:30 to see another client. When it's not cold outside I sometimes sit on a park bench, but most of the time I find a Tim's or a mall to sit in. I don't have money to buy coffee at Tim Hortons every day while I wait for another shift to begin, but I am too far from home to go back there.

Her mobility between clients pulled her far from her home in her unpaid time, and for workers like her with children in daycare or with babysitters, that two hours of unpaid time between patients represented even greater negative earnings.

Aside from lost or negative earnings, idle time also represents unpaid time away from family. Some workers reported trying to resolve this lost family time by multi-tasking – for example, some parents of older children often “parent by phone” during long commutes, in idle time between clients or as they moved between worksites. One union representative in the home health care sector spoke of a member who texted constantly with her daughter throughout



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the workday. Another spoke of workers talking to their children about general life issues through meal preparation, homework and while commuting. During long commutes or drives between clients, the phone becomes a lifeline to more engaged parenting for many, helping to alleviate some of the stress of “leaving your children alone when you would not otherwise,” as one worker put it.

University workers in the study reported that long commutes to rigidly scheduled classes can serve as time to catch up on sleep or to engage in preparatory work, reading or marking student papers. One university worker with a very young child, whose commute often stretched to more than 3.5 hours, said that the travel time by train was often the only time he could find to catch up on uninterrupted sleep. That said, he and other university workers also found that the long commutes and rigid schedules were the cause of significant mental health issues and troubled familial and social relationships.

Mobility and scheduling can affect employee and family well-being

The mental health ramifications of precarious work, as well as work with extended commuting and demands of child care, are well documented.⁴ The convergence of scheduling and mobility, paired with the responsibilities of family, had a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of interviewed university workers (e.g. stress, fatigue, anxiety). One said that his mental health was severely impacted by the pressures of the commute and the schedule, causing things at home to become “bad.” He noted, “I was feeling so very desperate earlier in the fall, even just seeking therapy became difficult.” The convergence of scheduling, onerous mobility and family care responsibilities made finding the time and energy needed to manage his mental health was an insurmountable task. The schedule and commute mitigated the rejuvenating aspects of his work, and he said exhaustion was very common by the

end of the term. As well, maintaining his social circle outside of his immediate family was almost impossible and, he noted, “It [took] intense planning to even schedule a haircut.”

Another university and union worker noted that the time spent on transit exacerbated exhaustion and made the transition for children from daycare or school to home that much more fraught. “You are tired and cranky, and so is your child,” she said, and “you are never really able to honour the schedule of your child or yourself, which leads to you feeling guilty and just bad.” The need to always be up early and rushing to a long and onerous commute also caused her to have residual anxiety issues – issues she says stayed with her long after she left that particular job. “I always feel like everything is being done at the last minute and I’m constantly anxious about that,” she explained. The anxiety that she felt had an effect on her children, she believed, giving them their own sense of urgency or anxiety, and the feeling that the adults around them – those that are caring for them – are constantly in a state of heightened stress. This mirrors what Stephanie Premji found in her research on precarious immigrant workers in Toronto – the worry about work-related economic insecurity caused the children of these precarious workers to become depressed and it contributed to familial stress.⁵



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Accessing child care – quality, affordable child care that works for non-traditional schedules – is a major issue for mobile workers.

Other union representatives and workers I spoke to also noted that family responsibilities and mobility paired with schedules that are out of one’s control increased their unpaid caring labour in the home, which in turn contributed to social isolation and the loss of support networks. They also spoke of their frustration in being unable to address or alter the situation they felt trapped in – they could not move closer to their workplace because it may often change, for example, or because they could not afford to live in areas with better employment opportunities. Other On the Move researchers have found that many aren’t able to overcome these barriers and improve their labour market experiences (and hence mental health) over time.

Non-standard work hours often don’t align with child care availability

All of the worksites in this study operate on non-traditional, often 24-hour schedules. *Non-standard work hours* include a variety of now-common schedule possibilities and working patterns – from slightly extended hours (beginning from 6 a.m. and ending around 7:30 or 8 p.m.) to later shifts (e.g. those that last until 11 p.m. or later) as well as full overnights and weekends.⁶

Non-standard hours of work have been steadily increasing in Canada, and Statistics Canada reports that the period from 2005 to 2015 saw a growing shift from traditional to more flexible, non-standard work schedules.⁷ Yet both transit systems and child care centres have been set up to meet the needs of a standard 9-to-5 work schedule, and have done little to change over this same time period. Many of the interviewed workers and union representatives said that the standard hours of transit and child care conflicted with the rhythms of their workplaces, meaning that daycare centres – formal, regulated and licensed to ensure quality and safety – were not an option for them.

Accessing child care – quality, affordable child care that works for non-traditional schedules – is a major issue for mobile workers. For many low-income, precarious workers on non-standard schedules, informal child care providers are the only accessible option. Such providers may be available by negotiation at a moment’s notice and during non-traditional hours, leading to situations of “trickle-down precarity.” These workers may also supplement child care providers with occasional help from family, friends and neighbours, or rely entirely on them – one union representative and worker at Toronto Pearson International Airport noted that his wife’s parents moved into their home for five years to care for their young children while he and his wife worked non-standard schedules for an airline.



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For many immigrant workers, the social support systems they may have had in their home countries are absent, and thus accessing child care becomes a significant source of anxiety.

daycare in Etobicoke, Ontario instituted fines as high as \$300 per hour, as well as a possible call to Children's Aid Society if no parents or emergency contacts could be reached.⁹

One worker noted that punitive measures such as these are an enormous source of stress for her as she commutes between worksites on the subway, because while underground she has no cellphone access. She continually fears a subway delay or breakdown, since she would not be able to call and alert the daycare if she was going to be late. For her, this is a source of anxiety and stress that does not end when her commute does, but that carries with her into her interactions with her children and at home. Thus, to add to the sense of shame, anxiety and stress associated with mobility, family and non-standard schedules, the possibility of losing access to one's children entirely is introduced, as well as the potential complication to immigration applications if Children's Aid Society is ever involved.

Non-standard work scheduling can be complex and time-consuming

The challenges of non-standard work schedules, mobility and limited incomes, and the friction between schedules and child care, means that workers often spend unpaid time outside of work *scheduling and coordinating* work and family responsibilities, which further encroaches upon family time. In her research on call centre workers in Quebec, Karen Messing found that parents made use of eight different babysitting resources to fill caregiving needs over a two-week period, and spent considerable unpaid leisure time trying to switch shifts with co-workers to make up for the rest.¹⁰

When some workers cannot harmonize their schedules, commutes and family responsibilities, the only option may be to take fewer shifts or remain in casual positions – even if they are entitled to a full-time or permanent job.

positions, because family life simply cannot be coordinated around work life. But as one mentioned, "It's a tricky thing to say when it's a choice and when it's an obligation." Another union representative said, "I've seen people quit entirely over this," and reiterated that if not quitting, remaining casual was often a way that workers sought to assert more control over their work schedule and life.

However, this reliance on family is not an option for everyone. For many immigrant workers, the social support systems they may have had in their home countries are absent, and thus accessing child care becomes a significant source of anxiety, especially as mobility and scheduling disrupt the rhythms of necessary care work in their home.⁸ Even with formal child care, long commutes and worker mobility paired with unpredictable or non-standard schedules can have emotional and mental health impacts on workers who engage in unpaid caring labour at home. One worker noted that her schedule and commute paired with traffic meant she was often arriving very close to the daycare's closing time and, she noted, "There is the horrible shame of being the last person to pick your kids up."

This was especially acute for women workers, who felt that their tardiness to collect children from care was a reflection of their quality as a parent. This shame and even fear is not entirely unwarranted: while most daycares have fines for picking children up after closing time – often in the range of \$1 per minute – in 2016, a

daycare in Etobicoke, Ontario instituted fines as high as \$300 per hour, as well as a possible call to Children's Aid Society if no parents or emergency contacts could be reached.⁹

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When some workers cannot harmonize their schedules, commutes and family responsibilities, the only option may be to take fewer shifts or remain in casual positions – even if they are entitled to a full-time or permanent job. Some union representatives said their members in the home health care sector, for example, "choose" to remain in more precarious

positions, because family life simply cannot be coordinated around work life. But as one mentioned, "It's a tricky thing to say when it's a choice and when it's an obligation." Another union representative said, "I've seen people quit entirely over this," and reiterated that if not quitting, remaining casual was often a way that workers sought to assert more control over their work schedule and life.

Questions remain on mobility and the “duty to accommodate”

One avenue to support those balancing work and family responsibilities has been the human rights codes. In the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and in all provincial acts aside from New Brunswick (where reviews to add the ground are ongoing), “family status” is considered a prohibited ground for discrimination.¹¹ This means that employers have a “duty to accommodate,” which means that employers “have an obligation to adjust rules, policies, or practices to enable you to participate fully.”¹² But “family status” and “duty to accommodate” are ill-defined across the human rights acts and codes in Canada, and accommodation does not guarantee a new or similar position with similar wages for a worker, or reassignment to a job with similar duties and a more amenable schedule. As well, accommodation requests can be rejected due to “undue hardship” on the part of the employer, the definition of which is equally vague.

Awareness of the duty to accommodate as an avenue for mitigating the impacts of scheduling on work and family was low among workers and union representatives, and few had tried to use the legislation. Among those who had attempted to make use of family status accommodations, some representatives for home health care workers, for example, said that the legislation had not been particularly useful to them, suggesting that its relative lack of usefulness “speaks to certain biases within the document around what people’s relationships to the employer are.”

One union representative in the study explained that a member of their union had been moved from her position due to layoffs in the organization. The new position the member was bumped into required hours and commuting times that would not allow her to be home for her child either before or after school. As a single parent, newly immigrated and without extended family in the country, she had no one to share caregiving responsibilities with, and so her union made an accommodation request on her behalf. The employer made an undue hardship claim, and then offered the member a different position with significantly reduced hours. Weighing her hourly wage against the cost of child care before and after school meant that the original job with more hours wasn’t going to be financially worth it, so in the end, the member simply “didn’t have a choice,” according to the union representative. As a result, the member “had to take the reduced hours and now struggles financially.” Another union representative with a similar case said that this is “an example of how the system means well but operates on the basis of older forms of employment relationships.”

Further, it remains unclear how mobility specifically converges with human rights code recommendations around the duty to accommodate. Can a homecare worker or any other worker request a schedule that takes commute time and work time in relation to family status into account? Can a worker cite rush-hour traffic or winter travel or transit delays and overcrowding as part of a duty to accommodate application? Can poor transit options converging with inconvenient schedules be grounds for a request for accommodation? Can workers cite the likelihood of commuting times from certain work schedules causing increased child care late-pickup fees? These are questions that have no clear answer in the current human rights legislation but are serious concerns for workers today.



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Unions adapting to evolving work and family contexts

What emerges from this research is that workers in jobs across multiple sectors have complex lives and multiple, evolving demands on their time. The voices of union representatives and workers presented here highlight the need for labour representatives to begin to consider mobility and care work as an aspect of their negotiations, especially as it converges with increasingly erratic, unpredictable and around-the-clock work schedules.



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Several union representatives who were involved in collective bargaining said that they often felt at an impasse, unsure of how to deal with the impacts of work on their members' after-work lives. Because there seemed little in the way of other options, most union representatives put the focus on increasing wages for workers, so as to alleviate some of the stressors of mobility and unpaid care work. But a focus on wages *to the exclusion of other options* may allow untenable situations for some workers to persist.

There are some interesting examples of possible models for unions to consider. One worker who was active in his union said that all gains cannot be won at the bargaining table, and that workers and unions need to build relationships with non-unionized workers,

their neighbours and community members, and community-based organizations to help build *holistic solutions* to the problems mobile workers on erratic schedules with caregiving responsibilities face. He cited the example of the Toronto Airport Workers Assembly (TAWC), which is made up of unionized and non-unionized airport workers, and partnered with community environmental and transit groups to ultimately win a reduced rate on the UP Express train line to the airport. Originally priced at \$27.50 per ride, the efforts of the TAWC in alliance with community partners contributed to the decision to lower the price to \$3.50 for airport workers and \$12 for regular riders.

What emerges from this research is that workers in jobs across multiple sectors have complex lives and multiple, evolving demands on their time.

As well, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* recommends considering inclusive design in workplaces.¹³ Usually understood as "Universal Design," inclusive design asks employers to consider the ways that workplaces can become more family-friendly. How are schedules, workloads and descriptions of work designed, and how

can the beneficial elements of mobile work on flexible schedules be emphasized while the negative impacts are mitigated? How might inclusive design be implemented within collective agreements is a question union leaders could begin to consider as the landscape of work continues to shift and change.

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² Learn more on the On the Move Partnership website. [Link: https://bit.ly/2l0nijg](https://bit.ly/2l0nijg).

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