

# [Precarious work in the united kingdom](https://assignbuster.com/precarious-work-in-the-united-kingdom/)

Contemporary Issues in Work andEmployment

## Summary

This report will focus upon the issue of precarious employment in the United Kingdom. Insecure precarious employment may only represent a small proportion of overall employment now but in the future, it has a high chance of growing and the UK may run the risk of having an economy that is characterised by high levels ofinsecure precarious work. Kalleberg (2009) has argued for over a decade that we are seeing a rise in labour market inequality.

In recent years, there has been an increase in precarious work and non-standard jobs includingpart time work and employees carrying out ‘ double shifts’ and there has been anincrease in temporary work in the labour market (Presser, 2003; Vosko, 2006).

There is nouniversally accepted definition of precarious work, it is an umbrella term fortypes employment including temporary contracts or zero-hour work for example. Precariouswork is nonstandard employment that is insecure, unprotected, poorly paid andin many circumstances, cannot support a household (Rosemary, 2006). In this report, I aim to demonstrate how precarious work has a negative effect on health andwellbeing on the employee. Jobs that are precarious offer low wages, fewbenefits and low security and cause health problems for workers (Kim et al., 2008).

## Introduction

Many peoplein the UK still cannot afford to live even though the employment rate is strongand up to 74 per cent (ONS, 2016). This could be because this figure includesprecarious employment, people who work zero hour contracts, part time and thosewho get paid for how much they deliver e. g. Hermes curriers.

The groupmost at risk of being in precarious work are young workers, this could bebecause as a generation they have internalised flexibility (Bradley and Davadason, 2007). The GLOBALIFE project also state that young people are the loses andhave faced uncertainty, precarious and atypical forms of employment (Bucholz etal, 2009). There are areas of Britain where the young working class havestruggled to retain a connection with the employed workforce (MacDonald andMarsh, 2005). Additionally, working classes may be more vulnerable toprecarious work because during the last third of the twentieth century theylost the protection of trade unions and they have no one to defend them (Conley, 2002).

Additionally, women are over represented when looking at precarious work (Cranford et al., 2003). In the US 33 per cent of women compared to 12 per cent of men (US Bureauof Labour statistics, 2009) are in precarious employment. These statisticssupport the gender wage gap, despite men and women having similar job titlesand roles women still get paid less than men (Blau & Kahn, 2000). Additionally, Cranford et al. (2003) states women in these roles are lesslikely to be hired permanently and they also work less hours. Likewise, research has shown that women have less union support (Kalleburg et al., 2000). A combination of these factors show that women suffer from a greater risk ofprecarious work. An explanation, of why women may be more involved inprecarious work is family detriments. Women’s jobs can be directly affected byfamily and her investment in the family, such as childcare (England, 1992). Dueto traditional gender roles of a woman’s place being in the home, employers mayinternalise this and hire based on these stereotypes (Kaufman, 2002).

## Findings

One in five UK workers, which is over 7 million people, are in precarious employment. This includes self-employment, temporary work and zero-hours contracts. The total number has increased by nearly 2 million, rising from 18. 1 per cent of the workforce to 22. 2 per cent.

Companies such as Argos and Tesco use thousands of temporary workers, the taxi company Uberand currier firms such as Yodel and Hermes rely on 4. 7 million self-employed workers. Additionally, a record number of UK workers are now on zero hour contracts with 910, 000 people not guaranteed a minimum number of work hours a week but must make themselves available (ONS Labour Force Survey, 2016). Big companies such as McDonalds and Sports Direct offer these kinds of contracts.

Beck’s (1992) de-standardisation oflabour thesis suggests that the old divisions between blue and white collarworkers are being replaced with a new division between full time secureemployment and flexible precarious arrangements.

The deskilling of workers (Braverman, 1974), demonstrates how companies such as Ford made the worker ‘ cogs in amachine’ and took the skill away from the employee and by doing this made thetypical worker replaceable, thus creating precarious employment, this alsolinks to Riter’s discussion of ‘ Mcjobs’ (1998).

## Argument

The mainargument here is that precarious work if harmful to the worker, focusing onboth physical and mental health. There is strong evidence that employees whosee their current employment as precarious are more likely to experiencephysical health problems and psychological distress (Burgard, Brand, and House, 2009). A survey asked by Canadian OH&S News surveyed 4, 771 Ontario workersfrom July to October about their experiences with precarious employment, nearlyone-third of respondents claimed that precarious work had caused some form ofmental or physical health issues.

As peoplespend most of the hours in the day and the majority of their lives at work itis important to look at how work effects health. Working conditions contributesocial inequalities. Employment may also make people feel better aboutthemselves as it is a clear link between education level and income for mostadults (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003), so this benefits mental health. Not onlythat but the more money an individual earns means they can buy goods to improvehealth. Furthermore, employment can be linked to insurance and pensions, thatcover people when they are sick or when they reach a certain age and they donot want to work anymore, this not only helps physical health but mental healthas well because people will not have to worry about their future. While inemployment classed as precarious employment they usually do not have access tothese benefits.

There isresearch linking precarious employment to poor mental health, the insecuritythe workers face makes them vulnerable to bullying and harassment, includingsexual harassment. An Australian study found that temporary and part time workersand those on fixed term contracts were at a greater risk of being subjected tounwanted sexual advances (Tusuno et al, 2015). Cooper (2003) found thatprecarious workers are twice as likely as those in fixed employment to besexually harassed in the workplace. Being a victim of sexual harassment canhave harmful effects on the individual’s mental health, victims of sexual harassmentcan experience long-termdepression, according to Blackstone. In a recent study of 1, 000 youths, Blackstone found that people sexually harassed in their teens and early 20s canexperience depressive symptoms into their 30s, and sine those at the highestrisk of precarious employment are young women this is an issue for them.

A study tosupport the claim that precarious work has a negative effect on worker’s mentalhealth is a 2014 longitudinal study on Italian workers (Salvini & Pirani, 2014). Show that precarious working conditions have a negative influence on mentalhealth. The report showed that precarious employees had a low level of mentalhealth meaning that having a precarious contract is associated to about 40 percent higher risk of poor mental health in the following year.

Furthermore, precarious employment can be liked to several different types of healthproblems such as; distress and fatigue (Benach et al, 2000). This could bebecause people in precarious employment do not know what they are going to workweek to week so take as much work on as they can so they have enough moneyevery payday, this then can lead to them being overworked and tired. Linked tothis precarious employment can be assoiciated with an increase of alcohol andsmoking related deaths, precariousworkers are more likely to be smokers and heavy smokers than standard workers, insecure employment is an even more consistent determinant of current smokingbehaviour than unemployment (Jung et al 2013).

Similarly, Gash et al. (2007) focused on Spanish and German data from their nationalHousehold and Socioeconomic Panel surveys, and they found that when people whowere unemployed find a job they report better health when the contract is apermanent one instead of fixed term. This then supports the fact precariouswork can contribute to poor health of an individual.

Additionally, with more people being in work and working more than just seven days a week, the workplace is a big part of a person’s life. So, with this it can shapeimportant decisions such as where to live, childcare, and other choices thatcould impact their life. For example, compared to those in precariousemployment are three times as likely to delay having children because of theiremployment insecurity and half of those precariously employed said that anxietyabout their employment interfered with personal life compared to those in fulltime work (Lewchuk and Lafleche, 2014). This can affect people because they mayfeel they have no agency over their life, and could lead to people feelingdepressed. Furthermore, D’Souza et al. (2003) have shown that there is a linkbetween job insecurity and low self-rated health such as anxiety anddepression. Quesnel-Vallee et al. (2010), found a significant effect oftemporary work on depressive symptoms for those who had been exposed totemporary work.

Precariouswork can not only be linked to mental illness such as anxiety and depressionbut also stress. Job strain theory developed by Karasek (1979) shows the demand– control model, and looks at how job strain occurs in jobs where workers areexposed to high demands but have a low level of control in their work. Studieshave found that ‘ job strain’ leads to stress and stress related illnesses, including heart disease (Karasek and Theorell, 1990). Another study by Laflammeet al. (1998) found that long term exposure to ‘ job strain’ leads to increasesin blood pressure which is linked to high stress levels. Additionally, jobstress can lead to risk taking behaviour such as smoking or high alcoholintake. Stress and alcohol intake and smoking feed each other, people will feelmore relieved and calm when participating in these activities for a shortamount of time, and they need to feel this relief all the time. However, alcohol and cigarettes are expensive habits to participate in, so people arethen stressed because of the job strain but then also stressed because they maynot be able to afford the things that seemingly relieve their stress. Not onlythat but smoking and drinking increase heart related disease and increase bloodpressure. This added to the existing stress of the individual creates a poorlifestyle.

However, thedemand – control model is mainly based on permanent jobs (Cooper, 2002) so it’scapability of explaining precarious work is limited.

Additionally, the Vitamin Model developed by Warr (1987), attempts to explain employeewellbeing; the factors that are involved in this model are job demands, jobautonomy, and workplace social support. All these factors impact a worker’smental health. The consequences of this could be anxiety, lack of stability, lack of friendships and job dissatisfaction, Benach et al. (2002) found theseto be strongly associated with precarious work. Not only that but precariousemployment is important because workers who believe that they may lose theirjob in the near future have been shown to have worse mental and physical health(Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002).

Additionally, precarious employment contracts may lead to employees having feelings of stress, Marmot (2004) argues that lower status workers compare themselves to people inhigher status positions, generating stress. Not only that but precarious jobpositions are usually repetitive tasks such as cleaning tables, with littleroom for creativity. People who have access to creative work are generally moreeducated and in higher status work and those conditions have been linked to abetter standard of health (Mirowsky & Ross, 2007). Creative self –expression at work could improve psychological well-being and cognitivefunction and could reduce stress in the brain (Mirowsky & Ross, 2007). Allof these positive benefits could also improve chances for a positive careermove if they enhance work performance, creating a positive work loop.

Furthermore, employees in precarious contracts may not feel part of the company, and becauseof this may suffer more physical injuries, in France and Spain show high levelsof occupational accidents for temporary workers than permanent employees(Benach et al., 2002). This is because they not be properly trained on companypolicies on health and safety, and if they don’t feel part of the organisationthey may not report injuries.

There arewider social implications to the rise of precarious work, for example access totraining. Research carried out by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills(UKCES), those on temporary or zero hour contracts are less likely to havecareer development opportunities than those on permanent contracts. Only 58 percent of those on temporary contracts received training paid for by the employercompared to 74 per cent of permanent workers. UKCES also found that people ontemporary contracts often had to train themselves, and 17 per cent of workerson zero hour contracts paying for their own training. If temporary workersreceive less training this is harmful to the employer as their workforce is notas prepared as they should be and the employees will find it harder to progressin their careers.

Precariouswork does on the other hand have some benefits, not only for the company whocan save on money when business is slow and they cannot afford to pay everyone. Additionally, precarious work benefits the governments in charge at the timebecause people in precarious work do not add to the unemployment rate. Precariouswork may also benefit some individuals, such as students who need to fit workaround studying, single parents who need to fit work around childcare and zero-hourcontract and shift work may allow this. McDonald et al. (2010), looks at fulltime secondary school students with part time jobs, having a part time jobduring the weekends and school holidays while in full-time study and apart-time job is a common for Australian secondary school students. In June2015, 30% of secondary students aged 15–19 were counted as employed (AustralianBureau of Statistics, 2015).

## Conclusion

Bravermansdeskilling theory does show how manual work has been replaced by technology, however what if the skill and creativity from human workers moved to differentsectors, for instance science and engineering are constantly growing and newideas are being tested and formed every day. Additionally, Bravermans theory isreductive and sees the worker with no agency or control over their lives. Notonly that but the deskilling theory is gender blind, and does not look at howthe patriarchy contaminates the definition of skill, that it is only a skill ifyou are building cars for example or making something with your own hands,‘ manly’ occupations.

Sociologistshave made predictions for the future of precarious work, while technology may getrid of routine manual jobs it is also possible that it will create jobs whichrequire skills and qualifications (Reich, 1991) creating an educated workforce. However, this will exclude many unskilled unqualified workers mainly those fromworking class areas who are already struggling, this then may put a strain onwelfare systems, especially if you have a large population not paying into thesystem through taxes etc. Not only that but it will exaggerate the poverty gapbetween classes.

Somesociologists have suggested a jobless future, where we separate income and workand pay everyone a citizen’s wage and valuing all work (Gorz, 1999). With thisthe suggestion although everyone is getting some sort of income the standard ofliving may fall as you are splitting an already small amount of money over alarger population, and this is harmful for economic growth as people will nothave a large amount of disposable income to spend and put back into theeconomy.

Additionally, there is a suggestion of an increased precarious future, globalisation andtechnology have not destroyed jobs but have just harmed employment security, and have intensified the competition for jobs (Beck 2000). This is an issuebecause you have a large population all fighting for the few jobs available, and because there are so many people qualified for the same position an elementof job insecurity is there as the worker always knows they are replaceable. Thisis not only an issue for the employment sector but also higher educationinstitutions, if you need a certain educational attainment to get the mostbasic job and there is high competition for it more people will want to have adegree so spaces to get into universities will start to become a battle, andthis may exclude people from low socio economic backgrounds that may not beable to afford university, social class remains the most stubborn andpersistent factor affecting educational attainment in (Andres and Krahn, 1999). Additionally, if there is a battle for jobs and employers have to choose who tohire this may cause a gender divide as they may not want to hire a female ifthey choose to believe the stereotype that women will go and have children andthe working world comes second.

Furthermore, there has been a suggestion that there could be a divided future, where changeis creating ‘ desirable jobs’ where people get to travel and ‘ lousy jobs’, andthis widens the divide between the elites and working/ underclass (Bauman1998). All of the potential futures of work only benefit big companies who havea large qualified skilled workforce to choose from, and because there’s so muchcompetition they will be able to pay less as everyone will be fighting forpositions.

Finally, itis important to look at the issue of precarious work, not only because iteffects the employees mental and physical health but because if precarious workcontinues to be used by employers it has the potential to cause a bigger dividebetween classes and genders.

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