

# Precarious work in the united kingdom



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## Contemporary Issues in Work and Employment

### **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 of insecure 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 including part time work and employees carrying out ‘double shifts’ and there has been an increase in temporary work in the labour market (Presser, 2003; Vosko, 2006).

There is no universally accepted definition of precarious work, it is an umbrella term for types of employment including temporary contracts or zero-hour work for example. Precarious work is nonstandard employment that is insecure, unprotected, poorly paid and in many circumstances, cannot support a household (Rosemary, 2006). In this report, I aim to demonstrate how precarious work has a negative effect on health and wellbeing on the employee. Jobs that are precarious offer low wages, few benefits and low security and cause health problems for workers (Kim et al., 2008).

### **Introduction**

Many people in the UK still cannot afford to live even though the employment rate is strong and up to 74 per cent (ONS, 2016). This could be because this

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figure includes precarious employment, people who work zero hour contracts, part time and those who get paid for how much they deliver e. g. Hermes curriers.

The group most at risk of being in precarious work are young workers, this could be because as a generation they have internalised flexibility (Bradley and Davadason, 2007). The GLOBALIFE project also state that young people are the loses and have faced uncertainty, precarious and atypical forms of employment (Bucholz et al, 2009). There are areas of Britain where the young working class have struggled to retain a connection with the employed workforce (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Additionally, working classes may be more vulnerable to precarious work because during the last third of the twentieth century they lost 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 Bureau of Labour statistics, 2009) are in precarious employment. These statistics support the gender wage gap, despite men and women having similar job titles and roles women still get paid less than men (Blau & Kahn, 2000). Additionally, Cranford et al. (2003) states women in these roles are less likely 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 of precarious work. An explanation, of why women may be more involved in precarious work is family detriments. Women's jobs can be directly affected by family and her investment in the family, such as <https://assignbuster.com/precarious-work-in-the-united-kingdom/>

childcare (England, 1992). Due to traditional gender roles of a woman's place being in the home, employers may internalise 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 Uber and courier 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 of labour thesis suggests that the old divisions between blue and white collar workers are being replaced with a new division between full time secure employment and flexible precarious arrangements.

The deskilling of workers (Braverman, 1974), demonstrates how companies such as Ford made the worker 'cogs in a machine' and took the skill away from the employee and by doing this made the typical worker replaceable, thus creating precarious employment, this also links to Ritzer's discussion of 'Mcjobs' (1998).

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## Argument

The main argument here is that precarious work is harmful to the worker, focusing on both physical and mental health. There is strong evidence that employees whose current employment is precarious are more likely to experience physical health problems and psychological distress (Burgard, Brand, and House, 2009). A survey asked by Canadian OH&S News surveyed 4,771 Ontario workers from July to October about their experiences with precarious employment, nearly one-third of respondents claimed that precarious work had caused some form of mental or physical health issues.

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

There is research linking precarious employment to poor mental health, the insecurity the workers face makes them vulnerable to bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment. An Australian study found that temporary and part-time workers and those on fixed-term contracts were at a

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greater risk of being subjected to unwanted sexual advances (Tusuno et al, 2015). Cooper (2003) found that precarious workers are twice as likely as those in fixed employment to be sexually harassed in the workplace. Being a victim of sexual harassment can have harmful effects on the individual's mental health, victims of sexual harassment can experience long-term depression, according to Blackstone. In a recent study of 1,000 youths, Blackstone found that people sexually harassed in their teens and early 20s can experience depressive symptoms into their 30s, and since those at the highest risk of precarious employment are young women this is an issue for them.

A study to support the claim that precarious work has a negative effect on worker's mental health is a 2014 longitudinal study on Italian workers (Salvini & Pirani, 2014). Show that precarious working conditions have a negative influence on mental health. The report showed that precarious employees had a low level of mental health 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 linked to several different types of health problems such as; distress and fatigue (Benach et al, 2000). This could be because people in precarious employment do not know what they are going to work week to week so take as much work on as they can so they have enough money every payday, this then can lead to them being overworked and tired. Linked to this precarious employment can be associated with an increase of alcohol and smoking related deaths, precarious workers are more likely to be smokers and heavy smokers than

standard workers, insecure employment is an even more consistent determinant of current smoking behaviour than unemployment (Jung et al 2013).

Similarly, Gash et al. (2007) focused on Spanish and German data from their national Household and Socioeconomic Panel surveys, and they found that when people who were unemployed find a job they report better health when the contract is a permanent one instead of fixed term. This then supports the fact precarious work 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 shape important decisions such as where to live, childcare, and other choices that could impact their life. For example, compared to those in precarious employment are three times as likely to delay having children because of their employment insecurity and half of those precariously employed said that anxiety about their employment interfered with personal life compared to those in fulltime work (Lewchuk and Lafleche, 2014). This can affect people because they may feel they have no agency over their life, and could lead to people feeling depressed. Furthermore, D'Souza et al. (2003) have shown that there is a link between job insecurity and low self-rated health such as anxiety and depression. Quesnel-Vallee et al. (2010), found a significant effect of temporary work on depressive symptoms for those who had been exposed to temporary work.

Precarious work can not only be linked to mental illness such as anxiety and depression but 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 are exposed to high demands but have a low level of control in their work. Studies have found that 'job strain' leads to stress and stress related illnesses, including heart disease (Karasek and Theorell, 1990).

Another study by Laflamme et al. (1998) found that long term exposure to 'job strain' leads to increases in blood pressure which is linked to high stress levels. Additionally, job stress can lead to risk taking behaviour such as smoking or high alcohol intake. Stress and alcohol intake and smoking feed each other, people will feel more relieved and calm when participating in these activities for a short amount of time, and they need to feel this relief all the time. However, alcohol and cigarettes are expensive habits to participate in, so people are then stressed because of the job strain but then also stressed because they may not be able to afford the things that seemingly relieve their stress. Not only that but smoking and drinking increase heart related disease and increase blood pressure. This added to the existing stress of the individual creates a poor lifestyle.

However, the demand - control model is mainly based on permanent jobs (Cooper, 2002) so its capability of explaining precarious work is limited.

Additionally, the Vitamin Model developed by Warr (1987), attempts to explain employee wellbeing; the factors that are involved in this model are job demands, job autonomy, and workplace social support. All these factors impact a worker's mental health. The consequences of this could be anxiety, lack of stability, lack of friendships and job dissatisfaction, Benach et al.

(2002) found these to be strongly associated with precarious work. Not only that but precarious employment is important because workers who believe



that they may lose their job 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 in higher status positions, generating stress. Not only that but precarious job positions are usually repetitive tasks such as cleaning tables, with little room for creativity. People who have access to creative work are generally more educated and in higher status work and those conditions have been linked to a better standard of health (Mirowsky & Ross, 2007). Creative self-expression at work could improve psychological well-being and cognitive function and could reduce stress in the brain (Mirowsky & Ross, 2007). All of these positive benefits could also improve chances for a positive career move if they enhance work performance, creating a positive work loop.

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

There are wider social implications to the rise of precarious work, for example access to training. Research carried out by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), those on temporary or zero hour contracts are less likely to have career development opportunities than those on

permanent contracts. Only 58 percent of those on temporary contracts received training paid for by the employer compared to 74 per cent of permanent workers. UKCES also found that people on temporary contracts often had to train themselves, and 17 per cent of workers on zero hour contracts paying for their own training. If temporary workers receive less training this is harmful to the employer as their workforce is not as prepared as they should be and the employees will find it harder to progress in their careers.

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

## **Conclusion**

Braverman's deskilling theory does show how manual work has been replaced by technology, however what if the skill and creativity from human workers moved to different sectors, for instance science and engineering are

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constantly growing and new ideas are being tested and formed every day. Additionally, Braverman's theory is reductive and sees the worker with no agency or control over their lives. Not only that but the deskilling theory is gender blind, and does not look at how the patriarchy contaminates the definition of skill, that it is only a skill if you are building cars for example or making something with your own hands, 'manly' occupations.

Sociologists have made predictions for the future of precarious work, while technology may get rid of routine manual jobs it is also possible that it will create jobs which require skills and qualifications (Reich, 1991) creating an educated workforce. However, this will exclude many unskilled unqualified workers mainly those from working class areas who are already struggling, this then may put a strain on welfare systems, especially if you have a large population not paying into the system through taxes etc. Not only that but it will exaggerate the poverty gap between classes.

Some sociologists have suggested a jobless future, where we separate income and work and pay everyone a citizen's wage and valuing all work (Gorz, 1999). With this the suggestion although everyone is getting some sort of income the standard of living may fall as you are splitting an already small amount of money over a larger population, and this is harmful for economic growth as people will not have a large amount of disposable income to spend and put back into the economy.

Additionally, there is a suggestion of an increased precarious future, globalisation and technology have not destroyed jobs but have just harmed employment security, and have intensified the competition for jobs (Beck

2000). This is an issue because 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 element of job insecurity is there as the worker always knows they are replaceable. This is not only an issue for the employment sector but also higher education institutions, if you need a certain educational attainment to get the most basic job and there is high competition for it more people will want to have a degree so spaces to get into universities will start to become a battle, and this may exclude people from low socio economic backgrounds that may not be able to afford university, social class remains the most stubborn and persistent factor affecting educational attainment in (Andres and Krahn, 1999). Additionally, if there is a battle for jobs and employers have to choose who to hire this may cause a gender divide as they may not want to hire a female if they choose to believe the stereotype that women will go and have children and the working world comes second.

Furthermore, there has been a suggestion that there could be a divided future, where change is creating 'desirable jobs' where people get to travel and 'lousy jobs', and this widens the divide between the elites and working/underclass (Bauman 1998). All of the potential futures of work only benefit big companies who have a large qualified skilled workforce to choose from, and because there's so much competition they will be able to pay less as everyone will be fighting for positions.

Finally, it is important to look at the issue of precarious work, not only because it affects the employees mental and physical health but because if precarious work continues to be used by employers it has the potential to cause a bigger divide between classes and genders.

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