# Precarious Employment and Vulnerable Workers Fact Sheet

## WHY LOOK AT PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT AND VULNERABLE WORKERS?

The world of work is constantly evolving. Employers are adapting their businesses and services to compete in a global economy and workers similarly adapt to meet these needs. In recent years, workers experiencing a traditional standard employment relationship are becoming an exception, and there are a rapidly increasing proportion of vulnerable workers (see below for definitions).

Standard employment is defined as a situation where a worker is employed by one employer on a full-time, permanent basis, receiving decent wages and benefits, and has access to and effective protection from regulatory agencies. [From: Vosko, L. (2006) Precarious Employment.]

Precarious work (also referred to as non-standard employment) is described as any deviation from standard employment and is characterized as being temporary or casual in nature, lacking benefits, lacking in certain legal protections, and usually associated with low income.

Throughout Canada, some workers experience negative consequences as the result of legislative gaps and policy loopholes. Because of the terms of their employment, they do not have access to employment protections like occupational health and safety, employment standards, and employment insurance benefits.

As such, precarious work and issues facing vulnerable workers have been the subject of high-level review and recommendations. For example, research in Ontario by the Law Commission of Ontario has shown precarious employment has far reaching consequences, beyond just the vulnerable worker such that we are now experiencing precarious households and precarious communities.

### What does the term vulnerable worker mean?

There are many interpretations of worker vulnerability. Generally, when used in the health and safety context, a vulnerable worker refers to those workers at greater risk of injury.

An Institute for Work and Health (IWH) study identified four vulnerability dimensions that lead to increased risk of injury:

- Hazards the workers face.
- Workplace or organizational-level protection they are offered in the form of policies and practices.

- Awareness of occupational health and safety rights and responsibilities.
- Extent to which they are empowered to take part in work-related injury prevention and refuse unsafe work.

As a result of their studies, IWH has developed a measure of vulnerability tool to assess a worker's vulnerability to workplace injury or illness. Their research shows that vulnerability is associated with elevated rates of self-reported workplace injury and illness.

This approach promotes an understanding that vulnerability can be changed through prevention, rather than identifying vulnerability based on aspects that cannot change (i.e., new immigrants, young workers, etc.). IWH promotes looking at how a worker is vulnerable, not simply who a vulnerable worker is.

Other interpretations of the concept of a vulnerable worker are broader and include having a circular relationship to precarious employment, meaning that a vulnerable worker is someone engaged in precarious employment.

**What is meant by precarious employment?**

There are several terms used to describe the more common forms and arrangements of precarious work employment experienced by workers. Terms range from flexibilization, atypical, alternative, to non-standard work. Definitions of precarious employment also vary, and each definition has slightly different features. Precarious employment describes work experiences that are associated with instability, lack of protection, and social-economic vulnerability. The common feature in most definitions of precarious employment is low-income level.

Canadian expert Leah Vosko's book titled Precarious Employment uses the following definition: Precarious employment is shaped by employment status, form of employment, and dimensions such as income level and control over the labour process, as well as by social context and social location.

**Who is affected by precarious employment?**

Precarious employment affects many people, but certain groups of workers are cited as disproportionately affected, directly and negatively. The Law Commission of Ontario notes that women, racialized persons, immigrants, aboriginal persons, persons with disabilities, older adults, and youth are disproportionately represented in the category of vulnerable workers.

In Alberta, for example, specific categories of workers such as those working in agriculture are explicitly excluded from labour legislation. This exclusion means that agricultural workers are not protected from reprisal if they refuse to perform dangerous work, or file a complaint about unsafe conditions.

In other situations, legal interpretation may allow for employment practices to avoid requirements in a standard employment relationship.

**What are the consequences of precarious employment?**

Studies have shown that there are many negative consequences attributable to precarious employment and specifically temporary work. Regulators report notes that precarious employment affects community participation, creates social isolation, and often leads to less involvement in democratic processes such as voting.

It is also noted through the literature that workers experiencing precarious employment:

- are more often exposed to hazardous work environments, stressful psychosocial working conditions, increased workload, including unpaid overtime,
- suffer a higher rate of occupational safety and health injuries,

- experience ill health effects,
- experience increased work-life conflict,
- are less likely to receive adequate training for the tasks they are required to perform,
- are less likely to be members of trade unions, and
- have less protection due to limitations, loopholes and exclusive interpretations of legislation.

Note that research has tended to look at one aspect of precarious work, usually job insecurity perceptions, to assess health effects. Studies are expanding their research areas as our understanding of the impacts of precarious work and vulnerable workers grows, including how these experiences affect individuals and communities.

**Where can I find more information about precarious employment and vulnerable workers?**

- Other resources include:
- From Precarious Work to Decent Work, International Labour Organization
- Quick Facts About Vulnerable Workers and Precarious Work, Law Commission of Ontario
- Canadian Mental Health Association

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