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Working Conditions, Worker Rights, and Managerial Domination During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Assessing Their Toll on Precariously Employed Workers and Family Well-Being

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Abstract

Precarious Employment (PE) is characterized by job, income, and benefit insecurities. Studies surrounding PE and well-being have been predominantly quantitative, leaving a gap in rich descriptions of employment experiences. We recruited a sample of 40 adults aged 25-55 who were involved in PE during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic or lost employment due to the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were administered. Employment and income insecurities were common and had negative impacts on the well-being of participants and their families. Uncertainty about future employment prospects and job and income loss resulted in chronic distress. Other insecurities—access to benefits, violation of worker rights, worker safety—was also reported as impacting well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened insecurities, hardships, and distress among workers with PE conditions. Given the myriad insecurities experienced by those engaged in PE, the focus of precarious work research should also include working conditions, violation of worker rights, and managerial domination.

Keywords

non-standard work arrangements, precarious employment conditions, stress, well-being, family impacts, employment conditions, working conditions, insecurities, social justice, employer-employee relations

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic induced economic recession and triggered rapid and catastrophic impacts on the labor force worldwide.[1] In Canada, more than 5.5 million individuals lost jobs or worked fewer hours, a larger decline than in any recession since 1980.[2] Of those earning less than CAN$15 per hour, a category in which those with precarious employment conditions are overrepresented, 52 percent lost their jobs compared to 1 percent of those earning greater than CAN$48 per hour 3. This demonstrates COVID-19's potential contribution to widening inequities.[3] The province of Ontario, a major contributor to the nation's overall economic prosperity, witnessed a sharp decline in real gross domestic product by 5.6 percent from 2020 to 2021.[4]

We take up precarious employment (PE), a concept that emerged in the 2000s, which identifies three fundamental dimensions of employment of relevance to health and

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well-being: employment insecurity (due to the instability of labor contracts); job insecurity (due to the discrepancy between one's preferred and experiential job security); and income and benefit insecurity (due to unpredictability regarding the amount of income and benefits workers receive) (eg, Benach and Muntaner[5]). PE fits with the trend over the past five decades or more, where employment conditions (job insecurity, income insecurity, and employment benefits) were studied separately from working conditions (safety, worker rights and protections) and by separate subfields.[6,7] Thus, it is likely that those with PE conditions routinely experience harmful working conditions, the latter of which is often neglected in studies of PE, with a few exceptions.[8]

Research has emerged focusing specifically on the multidimensional negative impacts that COVID-19 had on those engaged in PE.[9–11] The pandemic has created unique contexts for those who are engaged in PE, which have the potential to further employment-related inequities. Matilla-Santander and colleagues predicted not only increases in PE rates due to the pandemic but also several negative outcomes for those engaged in PE, including: (*a*) worsening precarity, (*b*) high rates of unofficial unemployment, (*c*) increased stress and subsequent health disparities, and (*d*) increased risk of acquiring COVID-19.[12] Given the growth of PE over recent decades, and the overreliance of quantitative surveys in PE research, qualitative insights into the impacts of COVID-19[13] and the range of insecurities experienced by those engaged in PE.[14,15] Such evidence will shed light on the limitations of the current focus on employment versus working conditions for those engaged in PE and reveal the myriad impacts on worker well-being.

Canada was the wealthy country outside the European Union and Australia with a high proportion of those engaged in PE (13.4%), showing a steady increase in the last decades (from 7% in 1997[16]). In Canada, the proportion of precarious and temporary employment varies by industry, with educational services at 26 percent and health care and social assistance at 13 percent. Health care and social assistance have the highest percentage of women among their PE workforce (82%), followed by educational services (68%). Moreover, federal labor standards generally apply to workers in traditional employment relationships. Workers are engaged in nonstandard employment and PE usually do not have access to these protections, and they tend to have working conditions with little worker control and few protections provided by law or collective agreements.[16] This is the context for the current study, which seeks to explore how employment insecurities and working conditions of those in PE impact well-being in Ontario, Canada.

Methods

Precarious Work Research (PWR) is a six-country (Sweden, Belgium, Spain, Chile, the United States, and Canada) research program on nonstandard and precarious employment that includes a mixed methods study aimed at increasing understanding how employment and social safety policies could be better aligned to support workers and their families.[10,11] PWR is informed by theoretical frameworks developed to explain multilevel social, economic and political determinants of precarious work, including how welfare state generosity and power of unions determine both precarious work experiences and supports available to mitigate the negative impacts of precarious work on economic well-being and health.[17–20] Thus, the levels of welfare state generosity varied across the six countries involved, with Canada representing a liberal welfare state.[21] With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic social impacts shortly after the initiation of PWR, this research program pivoted to include an examination of the pandemic's impact on employment conditions. The current analysis is of a single site: Ontario, Canada.

Our interview sample was drawn from 415 respondents of a rapid survey conducted between October 2020 to June 2021 on the topic of COVID-19, non-standard work, and PE.[10] Respondents were aged 25 to 55 who, at the time of the survey or within the three months preceding it, were involved in nonstandard employment, lost their job either permanently or temporarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and were not full-time students. Our sample included individuals who were: (*a*) employed by a temp or gig agency, (*b*) working part-time, (*c*) had a fixed duration contract, or (*d*) were informally employed (defined as not paying taxes or not making pension contributions). Our age limits minimized the representation of students and those in or near retirement as students are often part time workers and those in or near retirement have access to retirement benefits. As such, neither group share all of the same characteristics as precarious workers. Ethics approval was obtained from the St. Michael's Research Ethics Board. As part of the rapid survey, we administered the modified Employment Precariousness Index (EPI;[22]) that included a few additional questions from the Employment Precariousness Scale.[18] We used scores on this index to identify those who had high (>17.5) or low (<12.5) EPI scores, as well as gender (woman, man, gender diverse, or nonconforming) and age (25-39 years and 40-55 years) groups to select 40 individuals for a one-hour semi-structured interview.

An interview guide was created that focused on the topics of the PWR study: experiences of insecurities due to precarious work, health and social impacts of precarious work arrangements, impacts on family and household members, and experiences of precarious work during the COVID-19 pandemic. These interview questions and associated probes were informed by the theoretical frameworks used to guide the overall study.[17–20] The qualitative interviews were conducted by four experienced and trained interviewers (PO, VG, ER, and PB) via Zoom Healthcare video or audio conferencing. Interviews were conducted virtually to ensure

COVID-19 safety and privacy as the healthcare accounts have additional security protections. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed using the Otter AI software (otter.ai). After automated transcription, eight coders (PO, VG, PB, ER, MP, MA, SS, SZ) read each interview transcript and as needed and listened to the audio recording to verify and correct the transcriptions.

Data Analysis

Drawing from theories of precarious employment, welfare state and the social determinants of health[17–20] the multisite team created a cross-site coding framework to guide each of the site-specific analyses to harmonize them across the six countries and to guide thematic analyses. Minor modifications were made to the coding framework during the coding process to capture issues specific to the Ontario context. Coding was performed with NVIVO software (version 12) by the same team involved in verifying the interview transcriptions (PO, VG, PB, ER, MA, MP, SS, and SZ). Several steps were taken to ensure consistency in coding across coders. While we allowed for new themes to emerge, themes largely aligned with our coding framework. All themes were compared to the theoretical frameworks that informed the study. A smaller subset of coders (PO, CM, MP, and VG) worked on summarizing the findings; however, given their familiarity with the data, the full team met weekly to review high-level themes and confirm findings. The final summaries of interview themes along with representative quotations were generated in the form of answers to core research questions.

Results

Workers in our sample reported broad impacts of PE and working conditions on personal well-being with few differences being noted for those with high versus low levels of precarity. These impacts affected the whole productive process from the labor market/employment conditions (the high effort devoted to job hunting, the insecurity in contract duration, schedules, benefits, and income, wage theft/exploitation) to the working conditions (workplace discrimination by gender, race, and migration status; managerial domination as in higher demands, role ambiguity, and closer supervision). We focus here on the specific types of insecurities reported by our sample—employment, income, benefits, and rights insecurities—and their consequences for well-being (stress, distress, chronic worry, and quality of life). Participants did not share new insecurities which occurred because of the pandemic, but on occasion they mentioned that PE-related insecurities were worsened during the pandemic due to factors such as ensuing lockdowns, closing of businesses, and accelerated massive job loss.

Employment insecurity, experienced by almost all our participants, was described in varying ways. Uncertainty around job end dates, length of contracts, and unrewarded expectations around converting into a permanent position often caused distress about employment and financial stability, along with concerns of being unemployed. Worry about whether and when employment contracts would end created chronic stress, with participants being unable to fully relax or take a mental break from thinking about and searching for job opportunities. Another way of describing employment insecurity was as an ongoing cycle of moving back and forth between overlapping sequential short-term contracts. Participants also noted the ways in which unpredictable working hours and wages contributed to poor well-being and exacerbated other types of insecurity such as income insecurity. Often, workers engaged in PE experienced a general lack of support or guidance from employers regarding jobs tasks or workplace procedures. This employment role ambiguity, often due to incomplete or nonexistent onboarding, contributed to feelings of not fully fitting in, being treated differently from other employees, and overall instability of employment. For instance, one recent graduate was attempting to launch an academic career and, instead, had a series of short-term, low-paying contracts that were obtained through hostile negotiation tactics and stalled career development, which created hopelessness and resentment. COVID-19 has exacerbated the highs and lows of employment security for this participant. COVID-19 reduced opportunities in the academic settings where this person was applying, constraining the possibility of landing stable employment.

> I turned down [a nine month] contract when I got a three-month contract that would not require me to move. And so my employment situation in some ways, it's worse. The three-month contract might turn into something permanent. The nine-month contract could have turned into something up to five years. But it's all uncertain. … I resent when I have to take jobs that underpay me because I need the money, taking jobs that pay little. I'm better at negotiating now. I resent it when people, including people who I've known for 10-15 years, adopt a hostile negotiating strategy of insulting me as a negotiating tactic. And insulting my work as a negotiating tactic to try and keep the rates down. Because I do good work. And they're in a position of having full-time jobs with research grants, and I think it's unfair for them to make it personal like that. … Another related thing is I feel that my career development has stalled. I spend a lot of time doing fairly basic work that I've done before instead of getting more experience in new types of work with greater responsibilities that would allow me to progress in my career.
>
> (Male, low precarity)

For another participant, also seeking to launch their career, COVID-19 introduced uncertainty into his plans

and disrupted his workplace, thus impacting his ability to receive necessary direction and role clarity from supervisors:

> For this job that I landed, I was supposed to start in March or April, and then the pandemic hit … and delayed the contract. … I didn't know what I would be doing there, what they had in mind. They kept delaying what they would have me do, based on their being able to reopen their business. … I was brought in to do a certain kind of work [but] I wasn't a fit for that. I was switched over to other work and I really thrived. But that was still disappointing, because I wasn't informed of the switch and the person who was supposed to be my supervisor was really not present. It wasn't the easiest thing in terms of the relationships and conflict there. … The pandemic affected when the contract started, and then if the pandemic was not on, then that organization would have had their own client come back in. And then there would have been more work for me at that time.
>
> (Male, low precarity)

Employment insecurity was also described to preclude long-term planning. Even for those residing in households with another adult with permanent employment who served as a built-in buffer, employment insecurity was not fully eliminated. Many participants described detrimental impacts of insecurity such as added stress, depression, isolation, housing insecurity, and overall negative well-being. These impacts can be all-consuming and managing them becomes the focus for the day, week, or weeks, leaving little opportunity to reflect on the upsides of their work or career path. One older woman, musing on her future plans to stay in her current position, reflected that she could not continue to do the work she loved because of the lack of permanence:

> I love the job. Will I stay in it very long term? I don't know, because of that lack of security. It's difficult to be, you know, a middle-aged woman, who is alone without a partner, constantly living like I would have in my 20s. You know, so I don't really know. I would like to because I enjoy the teaching so much. But is it the secure place to be? No.
>
> (Woman, high precarity)

Another participant describes how being employed and ideologies surrounding work identity safeguard against employment insecurity at the expense of other employment-related goals such as social belonging and community:

> It's become so [that] precarious employment and your identity as an academic is completely tied in with having a job at a university and being paid by a university. And we've forgotten that academia was always more than just the employment or the university. You know, you're welcomed into the Collegium. It's that idea. They can't take that away from you [just] because you can't get tenure.
>
> (Male, high precarity)

With employment insecurity, there is little to no buffer. One household had multiple adults with PE along with a family member living with serious chronic medical conditions requiring long hospital stays. They resided outside of a large city where the hospital was located and had to temporarily leave their employment to relocate and negotiate temporary housing to be closer to the hospital. Because of income insecurity resulting from employment insecurity, there were insufficient funds for housing and other costs (eg, school tuition, transportation, food) for the family during the period of the medical crisis. The impact on mental health was severe:

> And so I think just the cost of school, the cost of housing, the cost of all the, like, stuff that happens with emergencies, like, you know, the gas, the car payments, the like, the groceries for my family, like it was just like, so hard. … I lost a lot of weight because I wasn't eating. But I ended up, you know, just kind of like running out of money … and that's–that's how I became homeless periodically. … I was still working, it just wasn't enough to cover everything. So I remember becoming very suicidal at that point. … you can be working, you can be going to school, you can do everything right by your family, and things can still not work out.
>
> (Woman, low precarity)

Another participant's life situation illustrates how employment and income security are closely intertwined. Income insecurity, experienced by most of our sample, manifests in the form of insufficient income, unpredictable income, unstable income, increased debt, and challenges in meeting basic needs and accumulating savings. Income insecurity in our sample caused both acute and chronic stress as well as having to make tough decisions about finances. Some had to find supplementary income to survive, which could cause further distress. The impacts of income insecurity linked to employment insecurity on mental health are widespread:

> Although I would have liked to work in that field. It's just it's not realistic given the pay ratio. I'm not able to make … I'm not making money, you know. The only way I was making money is through government subsidies. That was what was paying more than 50 percent of my expenses.
>
> (Male, high precarity)

Insufficient income results from expenses outweighing financial resources. Individuals with insufficient income have insecurity in meeting essential needs (eg, food, housing, education, and clothing) and still experience financial dependency (eg, on family members, friends, and government support). Workers across all levels of precarity reported impacts of insufficient income on their or their family's physical, emotional, and mental well-being. For example, an older woman participant with high employment precarity explained how periodic but recurring insufficient income resulted in financial dependency on her mother and affected how she viewed her relationships with herself, her mother, as well as her own daughter, for whom she was a provider:

> There's so much uncertainty, can I pay my rent this month? Do I have to make that dreaded phone call to my mom? You know, she's in her mid 70s and it's a horrible feeling to have to rely on your parents at this time in my life to make up the shortfall. Meanwhile, I have a daughter of my own who's in school. And it's also very emotional for me as well dealing with her because you feel like a failure when you can't do what they need, you know?
>
> (Woman, high precarity*)*

Financial uncertainty, another aspect of unstable income, entails fear of job loss and uncertainty about one's next source of income. This places workers in a situation of high stress, which is commonly shared in the family. Moreover, many PE workers do not qualify for employment insurance to replace some income if they do lose their jobs, and those who have access lack assurance as to the extent of insurance coverage. This participant shared how her employment and income insecurity created stress for her partner:

> Yeah, my husband is stressed when I'm about to be laid off, because we don't know if, like, it's quite a pay cut when I go on unemployment insurance, and I'm not always guaranteed to get that either. So his income alone wouldn't really cover everything that we're used to.
>
> (Woman, low precarity)

Insufficient and unstable income create challenges for budget planning and accumulation of sufficient savings. Consequently, paying off debts becomes difficult. This participant mentioned feelings of stress and burnout that negatively impacted their mental health because of managing their budget and loans with the uncertainty of contract work:

> It was still lots of stress about kind of the precariousness of the contracts, if they'll end in a few months or so on. I had fairly big mental health effects, I would say. I didn't get a full diagnosis, but in the past, I've had depression. And I did begin to feel it again, actually, shortly after starting my job. And October, maybe November, so on, when I began getting worried about work again, I felt that by being so unstable, I was thinking about it so much, I was trying to budget, I was paying student loans and so on, that it was actually taking quite a toll on me, and I was already kind of burned out.
>
> (Male, low precarity)

Income insecurity due to job and income losses concerning participants or their family members was heightened during the pandemic. During this time, respondents reported experiencing high pressure and strain in meeting their needs, as they were confronted by cuts in pay while costs of living remained high. As a result of this financial stress, participants and their family members reported suffering mental and emotional stress. For example, one participant expressed the difficulties in making ends meet when income sources were reduced. Although income insecurity was prominent for this participant across their experiences of PE, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the burden they felt to make ends meet:

> You know, I mean, it's getting harder getting work. And, you know, I mean, the rent stays the same, the bills stay the same, the cost of food stays the same, right? But the hours are cut, you know, and the jobs are lost. At some point you have to step up, and, and maybe do some things that you may have never really thought of doing before, to make ends meet, you know what I mean? They don't delay now, cutting hours or lowering wages. But when you go to the grocery store, the prices are still the same. The government chipped in a little bit here and there on benefits here and there. But then it's like, see you later, you know, wealth building on your own. I need your rent. I do feel it is really unfair, balancing my need, and it's putting a lot of pressure because not everybody's rich. Not everybody has an executive job. With COVID, less hours coming in. It's even a bigger strain. And you have to be creative. And you have to be open to new ideas to find ways to help support your family and put food on the table and stuff like that. So it's a lot of pressure.
>
> (Male, high precarity)

Another type of insecurity is the violation of worker rights, which is disturbingly common among those with PE. Our sample from Ontario exhibited five categories of rights violations related to discrimination, managerial domination, wage or economic theft by employers, workplace safety, and failures of unions to provide protections. In Ontario, laws protect all workers from discrimination.[23,24] Yet, discrimination of many types ranging from age,

ability, gender, and race were reported by our study participants. For example, in one organization focused on education, employees' roles were gendered in that women were expected to pick up more slack or "step up in different types of caring roles" (Woman, low precarity) compared to their male counterparts in that workplace. A young, racialized woman, drawing from her collective work experiences, and pointing to systemic discrimination, reported experiencing multiple types of discrimination based on her gender, race, and, likely, age:

> I would say probably the systematic racism because like with every employer, like if they hire a girl like me, there's always this systematic racism problem because in the beginning, they'll be happy for me to be at their places, it's diversity, it's great, it's wonderful. It's like a cool honeymoon stage, which only lasts for like a couple weeks and then after that is like, "We don't understand why you're here, why you say no to a lot of the stuff' and everything else, and then me bringing up any issue to them it's just like kind of a nonchalant situation, or they're like, okay, we'll take it under consideration, and then nothing happens with it. But if I don't do things the way they want me to, or the way they think I should do it, then it's just like, "Oh, you know, you're being difficult." Though it does fall into a normal stereotypes of a girl like me saying that I'm difficult, I have an attitude problem, I'm just lazy, I don't really want to do anything. … In the past, I work harder than normal and then I still got taken advantage of, so I work smarter and be less like "Don't expect me to do a whole bunch of other stuff that's way above my paygrade. Because to you guys my value is for $14.40 an hour." … . And also, the last one is just like, if I work with other girls from other backgrounds, if I work with white girls, or whatever, they will make more than I do doing the exact same job. I think they're more affected by like the whole race thing because when I work in a place where it's like predominantly, predominantly white, or predominantly Indian, or predominantly another race or dominant whatever, it's just like, I stick out like a sore thumb.
>
> (Woman, high precarity)

Workers in Ontario are also protected from ableism by law and employers are required to provide appropriate accommodations for employees who come forward indicating such need.[23] Moreover, information requested by employers "must be the least intrusive of the person's privacy"[24] and workers should experience no harassment due to disability. Despite this law, the workplace of this older woman did not abide by these laws and left this woman unprotected:

> At the end of the year doing that program and working, my body shut down, and I couldn't function for a while. When I was at work, there were comments made about my performance not being what it used to be, etc., etc. And I would have to say, like, look, you know, there is an underlying medical cause. And it was a constant fight. And it was their personal opinion that I left without cause. I had three years of medical documentation, and I shared everything with them, they got my doctor reports, they, you know, they knew all the appointments and everything else. I appealed it because I had all this medical information. But they decided that I, you know, I didn't need the insurance, I wasn't entitled in their mind. I was 48 years old, and the first time in my life that I've needed the EI. And somebody else decided that, you know, I didn't deserve it.
>
> (Woman, high precarity)

Managerial hierarchies confer power, resources, and rewards to those at the top to facilitate achieving the organizational vision and goals. When taken to extremes, however, managers can possess corrupting power that leads them to treat employees in aggressive and hostile ways, leading to managerial domination. Employees in PE are subjected to more damaging and toxic working conditions and fewer rights and protections than permanent employees and are particularly vulnerable to the abuses of managers' abusive power. Such power abuses were reported for many aspects of the employment relationship such as creating rigid and authoritarian workplaces or abuse and misrepresentation of the employment and working conditions during the hiring process. Abusive behaviors toward employees and colleagues created distress and fear about one's own employment situation. This employee was scared when she witnessed colleagues being fired and, subsequently, was vigilant about going above and beyond to demonstrate her value:

> Yeah, um, when I, when I am at work, I'm very … I'm constantly monitoring everything that I'm doing, double checking what I'm doing. And then also constantly looking for work to do all the time, just because I've seen her. You know, before she fired the people that she did fire, and I could kind of overhear it in the room beside me. She would tell them they were useless. And yeah, and I, it doesn't sit well with me that someone's being called useless, like another person. So I wanted to make sure that like everything that I'm doing is being done correctly. That I'm constantly just doing work. So I've done I would say quite a bit of extra work to like, I've washed the walls of the whole entire clinic and done things that usually people wouldn't really do. Sure. So everything's very, very clean there. And, yeah, just constantly setting things up for other people, too. So that way, I'm perceived as really useful and helpful. But yeah, I think being able to hear another person get fired, a couple of people, definitely puts you on your toes.
>
> (Woman, low precarity)

Employees with PE conditions experienced various types of economic exploitation, ranging from being asked to work more hours than they were paid for, being paid less than what they were promised, or having to share the full value of the wage with temp agencies. One participant observed how remote working made it easier for employers to expect longer work shifts or more unreimbursed hours from their employees. He notes "you're, never checking out really" (Male, high precarity). These situations were heightened during the pandemic and can occur despite being part of a union. A young participant in a low PE condition gives an account of unpaid overtime:

> We have a bunch of interesting things in our contracts and such, so as you know, limits to how long we can work. But they're largely unenforced, and especially with the switch to digital. This is actually a problem because we're only supposed to be working something like 10 h a week is actually the limit set that's not enforced. Nobody I know who's done a position is actually doing 10 h a week, it's generally actually much more close to a full time job. And it's also very, like, fast turnaround times, the workloads increased with virtual and there's not as many, there's not enough workers, so the workloads increase. Everyone ends up working overtime.
>
> (Woman, low precarity)

For another employee, the hourly rate was provided verbally during the hiring process but not stated in the written contract. The hourly rate provided in the hiring interview misrepresented the actual pay and the difference turned out to be $7.44 an hour:

> They will not tell you how much they're gonna pay you in the contract papers. They will tell you then, on phone, they will tell you oh, okay, like in my case, they said, oh we're gonna pay you $28 in a COVID outbreak center. They're going to pay you $28 per hour, right. And when they paid, they short paid me. You know, instead of paying a $28 per hour, they paid me $21.56, per hour. Yeah. And I asked them, but why are you guys doing this? That is not right. Or they said, No, that's what you're gonna be paid, you know, we'll look into it. You know, just like that. It was really traumatizing.
>
> (Male, high precarity)

Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act guarantees all workers a safe workplace.[23,24] Yet, stories of unsafe work situations were repeated by the people we interviewed. Some participants shared that attempts to raise attention regarding safety issues or propose solutions fell on deaf ears. Women have more safety concerns than men, yet they also have fewer protections, keeping them at high risk for experiencing safety violations. In this instance, a high level of abusive and dangerous gender-based violence by a coworker was tolerated by employees because of concerns regarding renewing contracts:

> Well, I'll tell you this, I was in a department where there [were allegations of serious crimes and misconduct against colleagues and students] and a lot of people are afraid to talk out about that type of thing, because they're afraid of the effects that will have on their employment. A number of us did make a fuss about this problem. Um, it was said that we'd all give up our careers to get this guy disciplined by other people. Um, and so I think one of the things I see in my situation is that people tolerate abusive behavior by their co-workers, because they are afraid that they won't get their contracts renewed. As it happens, I had a contract. And before I participated in a formal University process to discipline this guy, I had a contract to teach. And then my contract to teach was rescinded, was removed. And so I think I can't make cause and effect or draw a line of cause and effect. But I can say a lot of people are reluctant to speak up about abusive conditions because of whether it's them being paid to meddle, whether it's them being worked too much, whether it's been them having their rights as workers or the rights to their human rights violated on the grounds of sex, and gender. People are reluctant to do anything about it because they are afraid of what the consequences will be. And they see the consequences that it has hurt upon other people.
>
> (Male, low precarity)

A frequent complaint among those with precarious work conditions is that unions do not address their major needs (eg, job security) or are absent from their workplaces. Accordingly, an older worker in a low PE arrangement revealed that workers feel comfortable to express their concerns to their union, but that the union does not provide support in terms of job stability:

> So we're governed by a union. So that's not too bad. So anything personal or anything that bothers me, I don't know, in an emotional way, they do cover me for, but it doesn't cover my stability of my job. Do you know what I mean? That's a given. It's like, you get what you get. And that's kind of the attitude.
>
> (Woman, low precarity)

The last type of insecurity described by those in our sample relates to lack of employer-based benefits such as pension plans, health benefits including paid sick days, paid vacation, paid prescription plans, and union membership. Even if workers were eligible for benefits, because they require employee contributions, they might not consider

them as affordable or advantageous given low pay. For example, one worker did not appreciate the offered benefit plan as she perceived the monthly costs to be unreasonable and the out-of-pocket expenses too high:

> When I was on part-time, I could have chosen to go for benefits, that was actually something that just came out like about two years ago or part-time people connected to get benefits. And I actually looked into it, and the deductible that I would have to pay to get those benefits wouldn't even … make it worth it. Because the deductible would almost be the cost of whatever service I need to get done. Like I, it wouldn't be worth the money because that's coming out of your paycheck every month plus the deductible that you have to pay it and like it's not even worth it.
>
> (Woman, low precarity)

Lack of access to affordable health benefits created substantial financial barriers to receiving medical care and, consequently, resulted in poorer health conditions for the workers in precarious situations. For example, one older worker explained how not having access to benefits forced him to continue without essential healthcare he should have received, which negatively impacted the ability to maintain his health:

> Four years ago, when my dad was dying, that led to a bout of depression. This time around, I was not formally diagnosed with a bout of depression, but I was depressed. And part of the reason why I didn't even go and get diagnosed is that I mean, I didn't have a benefits package to pay for anything if I had been formally diagnosed. … It's not, it's not great. Um, so it, I would say in terms of how it affected me, your question, it affected me very negatively. Anxiety and depression over the uncertainty? And that's my personal answer.
>
> (Male, high precarity)

The same participant commented on the level of coverage available with his current vision care plan that was not helpful with updating his prescription eyeglasses:

> And it doesn't have benefits too. They, I think they pay you four percent on top of that, in lieu of benefits. And these glasses that I'm wearing. They still work, they're still functional, but I got them, it's going to be three years next month. And when I lost my full-time permanent job last year, if it had happened a few weeks later, I would have had a new pair of glasses. So because the … in the benefits package in my old position was phenomenal. … Now it does have a modest benefit package, it's going to offset the cost of glasses, but it's not going to fully pay for them. But I'm definitely, the first thing I do when those benefits kick in in three months is get a new pair of glasses, and also go to the dentist. Like, my teeth are okay. But they haven't been cleaned in well over a year. So not having benefits matters to workers and matters a great deal.
>
> (Male, high precarity)

Few workers in PE situations had access to paid sick leave. One exception was those few precarious workers who were unionized. However, the majority of our sample were not part of unions, and several participants had none or very poor access to paid sick days. Not having access to job-protected leave or paid time off compromised workers' ability to cope with unanticipated events and illnesses. Without paid sick leave workers, felt forced to select between working while sick and staying home without pay. Often, needed health care was delayed or totally forgone. One young man detailed his exclusion of the right to take time away from work to deal with unexpected illnesses or life situations and have income support during the time off from work:

> No paid sick leave, definitely, no paid sick leave, I have no paid anything except for hours I work and I work really hard during those hours with no paid breaks. It's just I work … I take time off to take my break and that's the deal … there's no set programs of any sort to say, you know, what, you need a day off, here's some paid break, you know, or oh, you can't work because you're grieving; okay, here's some paid break. Nothing like that, or like, anything, nothing at all. So, it's just, I'm making it as best I can, with hours being paid for at $15 an hour. And that's the end of the story.
>
> (Male, high precarity)

Another worker narrated her coworker's experience with a job-related injury and how the precarious worker was unable to obtain timely and needed medical care due to lack of paid leave benefits:

> Yeah, so I think that when I think of gig work, I think of, I think of precarious pretty much, like, immediately, because there really is no, there really is no control. And I think that that's just I'm hoping that that's something that will change. Because there's a lot of especially millennials that are involved in the gig, the gig economy that I feel like there needs to be some sort of standard for, for what our workers' rights are. Because I don't feel like, there's been people who have been like, majorly injured on the jobs, and they have no right to, like, anything—they barely, like, I think they got paid for like, a week or five days of employment, and they had to get like major surgery. And then they were just like back on the job. Because they couldn't afford not to be….
>
> (Woman, low precarity)

This lack of paid sick or other leave for PE workers was a prominent theme in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Leave was more frequent during the pandemic due to illness or quarantine from COVID-19 exposures or caregiving responsibilities such as when schools were closed as a government response to the pandemic. The precarious workers were not entitled to get paid the same amount they would have earned had they not taken the leave, even when isolation was required by the COVID-19 safety guidelines. Thus navigating the pandemic while maintaining a stable income was an additional challenge. One participant recounted the time when she was placed on mandatory quarantine/isolation due to close contact with a positive COVID-19 case at work; however, she was barely compensated for this compulsory time off:

> He called me on my cell phone when I was working, saying that I got tested positive for COVID-19. And I'm told to contact everyone that I had close contact with. Um, so I told my manager that I had to leave my shift immediately. So the rest of the shifts that I had scheduled for that week were paid to me. But that's it. Beyond that, like the rest of my quarantine, there wasn't pay.… No, any little leave of absence is not paid.
>
> (Woman, low precarity)

The data from this sample made it clear that poor well-being and mental distress in particular were due to the impact of these myriad insecurities experienced by workers with PE—employment, income, safety, rights, and benefits. Yet, there was another layer to precarious working conditions embedded in these descriptions—that of the injustice of living with the cumulative indignities endured while in PE. While at times explicit, it more often came through in the tone of the participants' voices reflecting the injustice, resentment, and, at times, hostility as they described the discrepancies in pay or stability—whether income, hours, or duration of contracts—between them and those who are permanently employed, and the impacts on themselves and their families of having little to no recourse to ameliorate these insecurities or employer domination.

Discussion

Through the descriptions provided by workers engaged in PE before and during the early waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, our findings provide complementary qualitative evidence that confirms the contractual and compensation insecurities that comprise PE[5] and reveals additional insecurities and existence of exploitative working conditions that are central to worker experiences.[25] These exploitative working conditions stemming in part from managerial domination are too often left out of research on PE.[19] Moreover, insecurities arising from working conditions are rooted in mechanisms of managerial domination. We document the relationship between PE and poor well-being which, to date, with some exceptions,[11,22,26,27] has primarily been examined through quantitative surveys.[8,9,13,15,17,28] This study enabled us to describe how various insecurities experienced by those engaged in PE impact well-being and create distress,[13] and the ways in which insecurities and impacts for workers with PE conditions have been magnified by the economic crisis and instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.[9]

Over the past two decades in Canada, the number of those with PE has grown at a faster rate than the number of permanent employees.[29] This growth was mainly driven by an increase in short-term or contract jobs. Our study sample demonstrated that employment and income insecurities were universally experienced and created chronic distress for both workers and their families about short- and long-term financial instability and uncertainty. For many, it was difficult to make ends meet regarding basic needs such as housing, food, and medications. In addition to financial deprivation, the continuous cycle of searching for jobs to ensure minimum financial stability required disproportionate time and attention, magnifying existing distress as these employment opportunities were both economically unrewarding and unfulfilling. The additional insecurities regarding safety, violation of rights such as discrimination, lack of paid sick leave and other employer-based benefits, and employer domination, exacerbated a preexisting poor quality of life and created resentment and feelings of injustice. Thus, PE workers reported stress-inducing social mechanisms at work, such as those identified in previous research, including managerial domination[30,31] expressed as higher job demands,[17] role ambiguity,[32] closer supervision,[33–35] and gender[36,37] and racial discrimination.[38,39] These mechanisms incorporate threats and, therefore, generate stress responses,[40] which can lead to psychiatric disorders and poor mental health.[41,42] These uncertainties can also generate various forms of anxiety, or conditioned fear and anxiety disorders.[43,44]

When asked, some of our sample reported how the COVID-19 pandemic furthered negative conditions relating to PE, including loss of or threats of losing jobs, more wage theft, increased managerial domination, and concerns over safety in the workplace.[12,13] Perhaps because Ontario was one of the more conservative jurisdictions enacting COVID-19 restrictions, unlike prior research,[13] work-related infections were not a strong theme in our data. While those able to work remotely did not face safety issues regarding acquiring COVID-19, remote work created additional financial and overwork burdens. Many of these insecurities—compensation levels including equity across permanent and temporary employees, access to paid sick leave, and safety—are under the control of the employers and are modifiable. However, the economic crisis, emerging in the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, tipped the balance of an

already-unequal power relationship between employers and workers in favor of managers and employers, resulting in fewer hours worked and a higher risk of job loss.[12] These risks could partially explain both the ongoing struggles with securing more permanent or higher paying employment reported by those in our sample due to the surplus of available workers in the low-end labor markets, as well as the reports of lack of benefits, wage theft, and employer domination.[45] These trends are not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic. For decades, workers have been losing ground in a changing labor market characterized by fewer permanent jobs due to manufacturing leaving North America, creating a surplus of skilled workers, decreased support for and by labor unions, demands by employers for higher educational credentials, and technology replacing labor.[46,47] This development is responsible for a historically low proportion of low-wage workers in 2021 (ie, 20.1%[48]). A decline in union coverage via collective bargaining agreements from 33.7 percent in 1997 to 30.9 percent in 2021 also suggests a deepening of PE conditions in the Ontarian labor market.[49] The economic crisis of the early phase of COVID-19 merely further eroded the power held by labor.

While worker's accounts of insecurities confirmed the domains of deficiencies in contract duration and work schedules,[17,25] wages that do not guarantee a minimum living standard and benefits, and lack of rights such as sick pay,[17,25] our results support a more comprehensive understanding of PE that extends beyond the current three-domain model.[5,50] Importantly, we found other employment conditions that also appear to cause acute and chronic stress, chronic worry, and poor quality of life. Specifically, workers reported high levels of employment strain[51,52] which is the continuous high effort devoted to job hunting by workers in precarious employment conditions; discrimination based upon gender, race, and ability; wage theft and other forms of employer-employee domination,[31,45] and lack of protections against worker injuries. Consequently, a PE model that only contemplates employment conditions appears limited in its capacity to account for and explain the stressors impacting the health and quality of life of workers.

We should note a few shortcomings of our research. First, we did not design this study to examine COVID-19, rather COVID-19 coincided with the start of our study and we therefore included some questions relating to the pandemic and PE. Had we done so, a distinct set of research questions might have been prioritized. Nevertheless, we were able to identify that exploitation in terms of managerial domination, wage theft, and managerial surveillance intensified during this period as a consequence of the loss of power among workers.[53–55] The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic reported by workers were specific to the period of the first two waves of COVID-19 prior to economic recovery. The impact of COVID-19 might have been described quite differently had we collected data during or after the economic recovery when workers seemed to have gained the upper hand in the hiring market, at least in North America.[56–58] The strengths of this study include a large and diverse sample for a qualitative study. Moreover, our findings unravel a series of mechanisms linked to working conditions that complement the emphasis on employment conditions characteristic of PE research.

The recent approach to defining PE through the identification of the three insecurities of employment, income, and rights[25] may miss important features of this type of work. First, while the research on PE suggests this unique class of workers is characterized by the absence of key employment securities and working conditions possessed by workers with standard arrangements.[25,47,59] An alternative conceptualization is that those with PE share characteristics with all workers but are on the extreme end of the continuum of job security, pay, benefits, and rights. In fact, this level of precarity was described as early as the nineteenth century when Marx and Engels developed the concept of working-class precariousness under their theory of the reserve army of labor;[60,61] individuals with a low degree of attachment to the labor market leading to chronic underemployment, and low levels of worker rights. Thus, those engaged in PE may not be a unique group but rather a subset of workers experiencing extreme forms of exploitation. The second point to mention regarding defining PE by the number and type of insecurities is that all insecurities and poor working conditions experienced by employees are the consequence of the imbalance of power in employer–employee relations. This root cause of insecurities, employer–employee relations, is invisible from much of the literature on PE and currently absent from the definition of PE.[5] Thus, acknowledgement of employer–employee relations as a determinant of power imbalance as well as type and level of insecurities experienced by those engaged in PE should be considered. Employer–employee relations are the determinant of insecurities and protections for all workers. To accept this idea that those engaged in PE have more in common with all workers has implications for whether we continue to isolate those with PE from other workers in both the research and policy arenas. Moreover, we cannot ignore the role that the state plays in regulating prevention of the conditions of PE (eg, enforcing protections against discrimination or wage theft) and the vulnerability of these workers to exploitation by managers, which is often missing from studies.

Yet, the adverse and hazardous employment and working conditions that characterize PE justify a focus on this segment of the working class.[50] In addition, PE is historically specific in wealthy market economies. That is, the precarization of the labor market signaled a degradation of the achievements in terms of compensation and benefits obtained by the working classes in the second half of the twentieth century.[17,25] Whether this segment of the working class, whose material interests are very similar to the whole working class,[62] becomes a distinct political actor (ie, the precariat[25]) remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the construct

of PE could be useful to identify mechanisms of intense domination and exploitation among workers[45] that characterize the neoliberal period (employment and income insecurity, low wages and loss of benefits, wage theft, overwork, forced overtime, racial, gender, ethnic, and migrant discrimination;[63]). These social mechanisms generate stress responses common to many forms of inequalities, which, in turn, have well-known negative effects on the health of workers.[64,65]

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the multidimensional components of employment insecurity during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 magnified the impact of these insecurities, there is little reason to believe that they will abate as the pandemic stabilizes. Although varying forms of insecurities were discussed throughout (eg, employment, income, rights-based, and benefits), overlapping experiences in each of these streams were consistent among our participants. Of particular importance is the far-reaching implications of employment insecurities, deriving from both employment and working conditions, on not only individual levels but also broader social networks (eg, family, friends, community). Our findings provide a contribution to this subject area, given our focus on qualitative data and analysis of insecurities which occurred at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research is needed to understand what mechanisms are best suited to begin to address the complex nature of employment insecurity across Canada, and therefore improve the health and well-being of precarious workers and their families.

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Elham Rasoulain's educational background is in engineering. After moving to Canada in 2019, she joined and now leads the Immigrant Women Integration Program (IWIP) at the Centre of Learning and Development, where she learned about community-based participatory action research (CBPAR). She co-conducted her first CBPAR project, focusing on the affordability and availability of childcare for newcomer families in Toronto. Elham is a research coordinator at the MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions, where she focuses on precarious employment research. Recently, she became a mentor for the UNESCO K4C Toronto Hub.

Maryam Daneshvarfard is an international medical graduate currently serving as a research coordinator at the MAP

Centre for Urban Health Solutions, affiliated with Unity Health Toronto. With a background in medicine and a deep passion for research, she coordinates projects aimed at improving health outcomes. Maryam is committed to making meaningful contributions to the field and is driven by a desire to enhance the well-being of diverse populations and uplift marginalized communities worldwide.

Rachel Ma is a recent MPH graduate from the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto. She completed her BS in food, nutrition and health at the University of British Columbia. She is primarily interested in the social determinants of health, health equity, and healthy public policy, particularly among racialized and immigrant populations. Ma joined the Precarious Work Study at MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions in 2022 as a Research Volunteer, supporting in literature review, thematic analysis, and manuscript development.

Wayne Lewchuk is a professor emeritus in the School of Labour Studies and Department of Economics at McMaster University. He holds an MA in economic history from the University of Toronto and a PhD in economics from the University of Cambridge. He was the codirector of the Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO) project, a joint initiative of the School of Labour Studies and United Way Greater Toronto. PEPSO studied how less secure employment affected individuals, households and communities. In 2020, he coauthored an evaluation of Hamilton, Ontario's basic income pilot which is available online: https://labourstudies.mcmaster.ca/documents/southern-ontarios-basic-income-experience.pdf.

Sherry Baron, MD, MPH is a professor of environmental and occupational health at the Barry Commoner Center for Health and the Environment at Queens College, City University of New York. Previously she was a researcher and coordinator for Occupational Health Equity at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Her research focuses on work-related health problems for precarious, low-wage, and immigrant workers. Her recent research has focused on the employment and working conditions of household cleaners and app-based food delivery workers.

Theo Bodin is an Associate Professor and Resident Physician in Occupational and Environmental Medicine at Karolinska Institutet. He leads the "New World of Work" research group, focusing on the changing dynamics of labor, especially in relation to health impacts from non-standard employment conditions. His work helps the understanding of how precarious employment can affect physical and mental health outcomes. Theo is also the Director of the Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine in the Stockholm Region, integrating clinical expertise with research to improve workplace health standards regionally and globally.

Carles Muntaner, MD, MHS, PhD, is a professor at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on the health effects of capitalism, specifically examining class domination and exploitation. He also investigates other political, cultural, and economic relations mechanisms that contribute to health inequities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and migration. Additionally, he explores the politics and policies aimed at reducing health inequalities.