















COVID-19 and Precarious Employment: Consequences of the Evolving Crisis

International Journal of Health
Services
0(0) 1–3

© The Author(s) 2021

DOI: 10.1177/0020731420986694
journals.sagepub.com/home/joh

Nuria Matilla-Santander¹ , Emily Ahonen² , Maria Albin^{1,3},
Sherry Baron⁴, Mireia Bolibar^{5,6}, Kim Bosmans⁷ ,
Bo Burström⁸ , Isabel Cuervo⁴ , Letitia Davis⁴,
Virginia Gunn⁹ , Carin Håkánsta^{1,10}, Tomas Hemmingsson^{1,11} ,
Christer Hogstedt¹, Johanna Jonsson¹ , Mireia Julià^{5,6},
Katarina Kjellberg^{1,3}, Bertina Kreshpaj¹ , Wayne Lewchuk¹²,
Carles Muntaner⁹ , Patricia O'Campo⁹, Cecilia Orellana¹ ,
Per-Olof Östergren¹³ , Eva Padrosa^{5,6} , Marisol E. Ruiz¹⁴,
Christophe Vanroelen⁷, Emilia Vignola¹⁵, Alejandra Vives¹⁶,
David H. Wegman¹⁷, and Theo Bodin^{1,3} , and
All Members of the PWR Study Consortium

Abstract

The world of work is facing an ongoing pandemic and an economic downturn with severe effects worldwide. Workers trapped in precarious employment (PE), both formal and informal, are among those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Here we call attention to at least 5 critical ways that the consequences of the crisis among workers in PE will be felt globally: (a) PE will increase, (b) workers in PE will become more precarious, (c) workers in PE will face unemployment without being officially laid off, (d) workers in PE will be exposed to serious stressors and dramatic life changes that may lead to a rise in diseases of despair, and (e) PE might be a factor in deterring the control of or in generating new COVID-19 outbreaks. We conclude that what we really need is a new social contract, where the work of all workers is recognized and protected with adequate job contracts, employment security, and social protection in a new economy, both during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords

COVID-19, employment, new economy, pandemic, precarious employment

¹Unit of Occupational Medicine, The Institute of Environmental Medicine, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden

²Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Richard M. Fairbanks School of Public Health, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

³Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Stockholm County Council, Stockholm, Sweden

⁴Barry Commoner Center for Health and the Environment, Queens College, City University of New York, New York City, USA

⁵Health Inequalities Research Group, Employment Conditions Knowledge Network (GREDS-EMCONET), Department of Political and Social Science, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain

⁶Johns Hopkins University – Universitat Pompeu Fabra Public Policy Center, Barcelona, Spain

⁷Interface Demography, Department of Sociology, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium

⁸Equity and Health Policy Research Group, Department of Global Public Health, Karolinska Institutet, Sweden

⁹Lawrence S. Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing and Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

¹⁰Department of Working Life Science, Karlstad University, Sweden

¹¹Department of Public Health Sciences, Stockholm University, Sweden

¹²School of Labour Studies, McMaster University, Hamilton Ontario

¹³Social Medicine and Global Health, Department of Clinical Sciences Malmö, Lund University, Sweden

¹⁴Department of Public Health, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago de Chile

¹⁵Department of Community Health & Social Sciences, CUNY Graduate School of Public Health & Health Policy, New York, USA

¹⁶Department of Public Health, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, CEDEUS, Santiago de Chile

¹⁷University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, USA

Corresponding Author:

Nuria Matilla-Santander, Unit of Occupational Medicine, Karolinska Institute, Solnavägen 4, Stockholm 171 77, Sweden.
Email: nuria.matilla.santander@ki.se

The world of work, barely resuscitated after the 2008 Great Recession, is facing an ongoing pandemic and an economic downturn with severe effects on workers worldwide. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), as of September 2020, 94% of the global workforce was affected by mandatory or recommended workplace closures, and millions of workers faced layoffs and reductions in their working hours.¹ All told, ILO estimates that between 8.8 and 35 million additional people will be in work-poverty worldwide by the end of 2020.² These labor market effects are not distributed equally. The relative decline in employment is greater for women than for men and for lower caste workers in all countries.¹ Another inequality is seen across employment arrangement: Workers trapped in precarious employment (PE), both formal and informal, are among those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Now is the time to address the huge inequalities in our global labor market. As Guy Ryder, ILO director general, said, “The crisis has uncovered the huge decent work deficits that still prevail in 2020 and shown how vulnerable millions of working people are when a crisis hits.”

PE is commonly defined as jobs that accumulate several unfavorable features of employment quality, such as employment insecurity (e.g., contractual temporariness, contractual relation insecurity, underemployment, and multiple job holding), inadequate income, and limited rights and protection (e.g., lack of unionization, social security, regulatory support, and workplace rights).^{4,5}

PE is an important social determinant of health, associated with a multitude of poor health outcomes.^{6,7} PE is more common in already disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, which generates systematic, unfair, and avoidable differences in health.⁶ Workers in PE often find themselves in situations where their governments and employers do not provide access to sufficient social and health protections. Globally, only 45% of the population is covered by at least 1 social protection benefit, which means that 55% is completely unprotected.⁸

Here we call attention to at least 5 critical ways that the consequences of the crisis among workers in PE will be felt globally.

First, PE is likely to increase due to the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic because the rise of unemployment will undoubtedly be followed by an increase in PE (a phenomenon observed in the 2008 financial crisis). As a result of expanded PE, workers are likely to face long-term labor market disadvantages. One example is the group referred to as the “lockdown generation”: Young workers who have suffered disruptions in education and training being pushed into insecure and low-wage jobs with reduced working hours.⁹

Second, workers in employment that was already precarious before the pandemic risk becoming even more

precarious: With limited bargaining power, they will be more vulnerable to unfair treatment, abuse, and exploitation.

Third, workers in PE may face unemployment without being officially laid off—for example, by not having contracts renewed or seeing a reduction in working hours to zero—and thus many will not be eligible for unemployment benefits.

Fourth, workers in PE may experience barriers in accessing health care, because many lack adequate health insurance or access to health insurance,¹⁰ together with difficulties in maintaining adequate housing conditions and accessing adequate amounts of food, given reduced incomes. These stressors and dramatic life changes may lead to a rise in diseases of despair, such as substance use disorders, mental health problems, and suicide attempts.^{11,12} Moreover, workers in PE, who are often unable to work safely from home, will experience poorer work–life balance, be exposed to greater risk of household virus spread, and suffer family conflicts.

Fifth, PE might be a factor in deterring the control of or in generating new COVID-19 outbreaks. Because workers in PE often lack access to paid sick leave, they will be forced to work while sick to avoid losing income or a job, further accelerating the unequal spread of COVID-19.¹³ In addition, many workers in PE have continued to work in environments that lack adequate virus control and safety measures.¹⁴ These factors increase the risk of infection among workers, their families, and the broader public.

Now, possibly more than ever before, there is an urgent need for equitable and inclusive policy responses to guarantee Article 25.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to prioritize decent work in the Sustainable Development Goals agenda. Just as everyone has the same universal rights, having universal social protections would mitigate the impact of this pandemic and prepare us to meet the next one with greater solidarity. What we really need is a new social contract, where the work of all workers is recognized and protected with adequate job contracts, employment security, and social protection in a new economy, both during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge Professor Ann Bergman’s contribution. She sadly passed away during the preparation of this commentary.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Nuria Matilla-Santander  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5249-102X>

Emily Ahonen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0572-5276>


Kim Bosmans  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6326-2417>


Bo Burström  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5770-9422>

Isabel Cuervo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0404-2569>

Virginia Gunn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3104-9539>


Tomas Hemmingsson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6156-3964>

Johanna Jonsson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9132-4734>

Bertina Kreshpaj  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2991-6026>

Carles Muntaner  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3535-467X>

Cecilia Orellana  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5109-4698>

Per-Olof Östergren  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7903-6668>

Eva Padrosa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6367-4860>

Theo Bodin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2074-5857>

References

1. International Labour Organization. *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. 6th ed. Updated Estimates and Analysis*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization; 2020. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_755910.pdf
2. International Labour Organization. *COVID-19 and Labour Statistics*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization; 2020. <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/COVID-19/>
3. International Labour Organization. *The Impact of the COVID-19 on the Informal Economy in Africa and the Related Policy Responses*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization; 2020. https://www.ilo.org/africa/information-resources/publications/WCMS_741864/lang-en/index.htm
4. Kreshpaj B, Orellana C, Burström B, et al. What is precarious employment? A systematic review of definitions and operationalizations from quantitative and qualitative studies. *Scand J Work Environ Health*. 2020;46(3):235–247.
5. Siegmann KA, Schiphorst F. Understanding the globalizing precariat: from informal sector to precarious work. *Prog Dev Stud*. 2016;16(2):1–13.
6. Bodin T, Caglayan C, Garde AH, et al. Precarious employment in occupational health—an OMEGA-NET working group position paper. *Scand J Work Environ Health*. 2019;46(3):1–9.
7. Benach J, Vives A, Amable M, Vanroelen C, Tarafa G, Muntaner C. Precarious employment: understanding an emerging social determinant of health. *Annu Rev Public Health*. 2014;35:229–253.
8. International Labour Organization. *Financing Gaps in Social Protection: Global Estimates and Strategies for Developing Countries in Light of the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization; 2020. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_protect/-soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_740724.pdf
9. International Labor Organization. *Policy Brief: The World of Work and COVID-19*. New York, NY: United Nations; 2020.
10. International Labour Organization. *COVID-19: Social Protection Systems Failing Vulnerable Groups*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization; 2020. Available from: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_739678/lang-en/index.htm
11. Clay JM, Parker MO. Alcohol use and misuse during the COVID-19 pandemic: a potential public health crisis? *Lancet Public Heal*. 2020;5(5):e259.
12. Holmes EA, O'Connor RC, Perry VH, et al. Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science. *Lancet Psychiatry*. 2020; 7(6):547–560
13. Ahmed F, Ahmed N, Pissarides C, Stiglitz J. Why inequality could spread COVID-19. *Lancet Public Heal*. 2020; May;5(5):e240.
14. International Labour Organization. *Beyond contagion or starvation: giving domestic workers another way forward*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization; 2020. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_protect/-protrav/-travail/documents/publication/wcms_743542.pdf

Author Biographies

Precarious Work Research (PWR) is a research program on non-standard and precarious employment. We are an international group of researchers in Sweden (Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm University, Karlstad University, and Lund University), Belgium (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), Spain (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), Chile (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile), United States (University of Massachusetts Lowell, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, and City University of New York), and Canada (University of Toronto and McMaster University). The program is funded by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare Forte. More information can be found at <https://precariousworkresearch.org/>.