

The PERI Conference (Precarious Employment Research Initiative)

Tuesday, November 6, 2018
10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
The Mount Community Centre,
Peterborough, ON

Conference Proceedings



Photo courtesy of Peterborough Public Health

Introduction

- A brief introduction of the topic of precarity was presented; specifically around the importance of having LOCAL data to support anecdotal conversations around employment and precarity in the Peterborough area.
- Relevant data can be shared with local stakeholders to start the conversation around solution development, and to inform program and policy decisions regarding the state of precarity in Peterborough.
- The Peterborough study began in 2016, with a total of 800 respondents completing the survey; the Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO) survey was used.
- Employment Precarity Index (EPI) was presented and explained; individuals can also test their own levels of precarity via the following link: www.pepso.ca/jobprecarityscore.
- To date, five info briefs are completed, with three more to come.

Highlights from the PERI Study

Presentation by: Monique Beneteau, Peterborough Public Health and Dr. Fergal O'Hagan, Trent University

- Peterborough Study shows that 62% of respondents are in either vulnerable or precarious employment situations
- Individuals < 25 and > 55 were more likely to be in vulnerable or precarious employment conditions
- Low incomes (< \$25,000) are more common when employment is precarious
- Data suggests that precarity is not limited to a given work sector (although the sectors themselves are not broken down)
- Unionization is more prevalent in secure and stable employment
- Higher level of educational attainment is associated with more secure employment
- Poor health is more likely reported by individuals in vulnerable or precarious employment
- Financial stress more prevalent in vulnerable and precarious workers
- Precarious workers face greater challenges with childcare
- Full details on PERI, its goal, community partners, and copies of currently available e info briefs can be found at <https://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/peri>



Photo courtesy of Peterborough Public Health

Keynote Address: What is the Cost of Precarity?

Presentation by: Dr. Wayne Lewchuk, McMaster University

- A full list of precarious employment research by Dr. Wayne Lewchuk and partners can be found at <https://pepso.ca/>.
- The main geographies for this work to date is in the greater Toronto and Hamilton area as well as in London and Peterborough. More communities are in the process of looking into administering the survey.
- Historical look at work suggests that precarity is not a new subject; and there have always been jobs that are temporary, short-term casual, or even entrepreneurial in nature, but the prevalence of precarious work is more now than before.
- Precarity is not limited by gender or ethnicity as less than 50% of individuals by gender or ethnicity have secure work.
- Historically, work was secure, but over time there has been a shift to more precarious work.
- Modern work in the so-called, 'gig economy' is characterised by precarious work.



Dr. Wayne Lewchuk

Photo courtesy of Peterborough Public Health

- Since the 1970's, productivity has grown, but wages have not grown at the same rate. Profits are not equally distributed and the balance of power now rests in the hands of employers.
- The cost of precarity for the individual includes increased costs to access healthcare, reduced pensions/ retirement, increased training costs, increased cost associated with mental health, delays in family planning, and increased stress.
- Precarity influences why people volunteer in their communities: i.e. to improve job opportunities versus giving back to the community.
- Productivity has to come from somewhere, and if we continue down the current path of precarity, then we are likely to see changes in productivity.
- The state has a role to play in balancing out the current trajectory of wealth distribution as do employers.

What is the Cost of Precarity? Panel Discussion

Tom Phillips (Trent University), Dr. Rosana Salvaterra (Peterborough Public Health) and Valencia Gaspard (University of Guelph)

Moderator: Mike Gannon, City of Peterborough, Social Services

Guiding Question #1: What are the key ideas that struck you in Dr. Lewchuk's talk?

- [VG] For rural communities, addressing precarity depends on how and to what degree community supports (i.e. human capital) can be leveraged. When these supports are no longer available, then the cost of precarity will be magnified.

- [RS] PERI data provides some numbers behind the anecdotal conversations around precarity in the Peterborough community, specifically that precarity alone is a determinant of health and should therefore be looked at as a discreet factor.
- [TP] Precarity has a long history that goes back over 170 years , but what we are seeing now is less distribution of wealth and unprecedented profit levels. For the employee, the cost of precarity will continue to grow if income is not redistributed.

Guiding Question #2: From your perspective (economic, SDOH, business, rural), what are the costs of precarious employment?

- [TP] Employers expect loyalty in employees, but this will not be the case if no signs of investments (i.e. training, distribution of wealth), are given to employees.
- [RS] Greater disparity means more instability which can have negative impacts on health. There needs to be an opportunity for social inputs for precarious workers.
- [VG] Transportation is a barrier to employment in most rural communities, and even for those who have found precarious work. Access to broadband technology is also a challenge for rural communities as it limits work opportunities.



L to R: Tom Phillips, Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Valencia Gaspard, Mike Gannon
Photo courtesy of Peterborough and District Labour Council

Guiding Question #3: What are one or two local strategies that could be implemented to support workers in precarious employment?

- [VG] Rural communities need to share examples of where successful solutions have been developed to overcome challenges in business development & expansion and employment.
- [RS] Local strategies for Peterborough needs to be explored. For instance, precarity related to childcare access is a local issue, and not one that needs to rely on Federal or Provincial initiatives to address them.

Guiding Question #4: What strategies could our community consider to support business/economic development while not compromising the economic and social well-being of workers?

- [RS] Promoting employers that pay a living wage also supports additional attraction to the area.
- [TP] Community initiatives to pull supports together can be very effective, and there are examples from the employer community (i.e. chambers of commerce member benefits) that can be used as a best-practice for supporting precarious workers and their needs.
- [TP] Change in demand conditions (i.e. employers who now have to pay a higher wage in order to attract employees) will not likely be pervasive, and therefore will not reverse the current trends in profitability and wage stagnation.

Themed Panel Discussions

Three panel discussions followed lunch, each focusing on a different theme based on the PERI Reports: 1) Employment and Working Conditions; 2) Health and Work Stress, and; 3) Children, Families and Communities. Each panel members received the following questions in advance:

1. **With your theme in mind, what are one or two major issues related to employment that we need to address as a community?**
2. **With your theme in mind, what are one or two local strategies related to employment that could be implemented to support these?**

Panel A: Employment and Working Conditions

Marion Burton (Peterborough and District Labour Council), Andrea Vanderherberg (Owner, Silver Bean Café), Andrew Bell (Workforce Development Board)

Moderator: Michael Andrews, Literacy Ontario Central South



L to R: Andrew Bell, Andrea Vanderherberg, Marion Burton, Michael Andrews
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- [MB] As noted in the PERI data, secure workers tend to be in more secure working relationships, but unionization due to precarity is still not the largest contributing factor to unionize.
- [AV] When working for a business that is precarious in nature, it is important that this message is conveyed and understood by employees. Finding employees that can work in a precarious role makes things easier (i.e. hiring students or supporting marginalized workers) as is making the commitment to offer future employment if applicable.
- [AB] The employer who cannot find a worker might not be answering the question of ‘what type of worker am I looking for?’ From the perspective

of the job seeker it might not be that a job cannot be found, rather, that the job is not the one that is wanted.

- [AB] In the upcoming years, more people will be leaving the labour market than entering (not including migration patterns), and the issue of whether or not we have enough people needs to be considered.
- [AB] Employee attraction and retention strategy is an important factor that will have a large impact on precarity, especially if employers have to offer better incentives to attract people.
- [AV] It is important as an employer to see employees as people, and supporting their needs, especially if this cannot be done via an enhanced salary or continuous employment.
- [AV] Goal setting and developing career plans for future employment in secure positions is one way that a precarious employer can give back.
- [MB] Highlighting that this community has living wage employers is important for community attractiveness.

- [MB] State programs such as a guaranteed basic income provide opportunities for creative industries, creative occupations and entrepreneurship to grow.

Panel B: Health and Work Stress

Jack Veitch (Canadian Mental Health Association HKPR), Katherine McInnis (Peterborough Family Health Team), Dr. Fergal O'Hagan (Trent University)

Moderator: Monique Beneteau, Peterborough Public Health

- [FO] Job strain or work stress is sometimes ignored for precarious workers due to the financial implications of not working. As a result, injuries might not be claimed, dental and other health services might not be accessed.
- [FO] Precarious workers tend to be in more physical than psychological/ cognitive roles, so the need to work through injury is even more prevalent.
- [KM] Time off of work due to work stress is challenging for secure workers, and even more so for precarious workers.
- [JV] Precarity has a definite impact on mental health, and there is more that can be done to assist employers and employees to create awareness and understanding.
- [JV] There is still the mindset by employers that they have enough to do already, and addressing mental health is an extra burden. However, work is becoming more cognitive in nature, so how we treat this type of work stress needs to be considered.
- [KM] Not identifying needs of individuals in an organization or a lack of available communication channels for supports can negatively impact work health and work stress. For precarious employment, these lack of supports keeps workers even more isolated.
- [FO] Job design primarily focuses on adapting and improving the physical workspace but rarely does it focus on improving the cognitive workspace. Most employers understand back pain, but not mental health. There is room for improvements in job design related to cognitive needs.
- [KM] There are many agencies at the local level that can provide health services to employees and employers, and a system wide or no-wrong-door approach to accessing them could be useful.
- [JV] When health becomes an issue that affects the bottom line, then there is a likelihood for employers to take notice; the challenge is in looking at mental health supports not as a cost, but as a long term benefit that can improve productivity.
- [FO] Once labour productivity (even one hour) is lost, it cannot be retrieved again.



L to R: Dr. Fergal O'Hagan, Katherine McInnis, Jack Veitch, Monique Beneteau
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Panel C: Children, Families and Community

Jim Russell (United Way of Peterborough and District), Nancy Fischer (City of Peterborough, Social Services), Jack Gillan (New Canadians Centre)

Moderator: Mike Gannon, City of Peterborough, Social Services



L to R: Jack Gillan, Nancy Fischer, Jim Russell
Photo courtesy of Peterborough and District Labour Council

- [JR] Income is a primary need for all individuals and households, and low income or lack of income has adverse affects on children, families and communities. A recent study on homelessness in Peterborough showed that 8% of homeless respondents were families.
- [NF] Precarity should also be looked at in addition to income because the impacts of precarity on stress at home and even standards of living exist even for individuals who have high income levels.
- [JG] For some new Canadians, precarity might not be as bad as the situation to which some immigrants are coming from,

but the goal of earning a wage and providing for families is still difficult when work is precarious, or when individuals are not able to find opportunities due to language or other barriers.

- [NF] Childcare strategy is important as this support is necessary for new parents to access employment opportunities; however, adaptable childcare hours creates more precarious situations for childcare providers. A balance must be considered.



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PERI Resources

For more information about the PERI Project including copies of the slides from this event and published InfoBriefs, visit: www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/PERI.

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Thank you to Jason Dennison for preparing these notes summarizing the events of the day.