



Immigrants and Precarious Employment

Brief One



The Index of Precarious Work (IPW): A Measure to Track Progress Towards Decent Work

Precarious work refers to work that:

- Is unstable and insecure
- Offers limited rights, protections, and benefits to workers
- Allows workers little control over their schedules
- Gives workers little say in decisions on how work will be done.

Precarious work has several dimensions. It gives employers flexibility but takes stable and secure work away from workers. As a result, workers may have to piece together several jobs or short contracts to make ends meet. They may have to work under the table and accept pay in cash. Although many precarious workers pay taxes, they may not qualify for Employment Insurance (EI) and other benefits. In contrast, **decent work** is more secure and stable. It provides a fair income, social and legal protections, and some control over how the work is carried out. 'Good' jobs are regulated and often unionized.

Employer strategies and the lack of government regulations are the two main forces that create precarious work. Faced with global competition, employers break, bend, and evade the laws and standards that help to protect workers. For example, employers can **evade** labour standards by creating a kind of 'legal' distance between themselves and their employees. This can be done through subcontracting or the use of temporary agencies. Subcontracting often

misclassifies workers as self-employed or independent contractors, which makes unclear whom you work for and who is responsible for employment conditions. Employers can also **erode** labour standards by manipulating work hours so that workers do not qualify for benefits. They can lower costs by shifting to a piece-rate pay system, in which workers get paid based on what they produce. They can also hire workers by the day and give them limited-term contracts. Or they can convert full-time positions to less stable part-time jobs. Finally, employers can simply **violate** the law by paying workers in cash, 'off the books.' As such strategies become more and more common, many 'good' (that is, responsible) employers will feel the pressure to adopt them. And weaker regulations and declining unionization will only make matters worse.

The study of precarious work and the push for decent work both present challenges. Both need tools that can clearly explain the complex forces that bring about precarious work – in its different forms, and as it changes over time. After all, it is very hard to study the erosion of good jobs and the creation of precarious ones. First, many of the strategies used by employers to erode the quality of jobs are not really illegal. As a result, regulators do not monitor them. This means that no information exists to document that these strategies are taking place. Second, although many have tried to track the changes in the nature of work, it has been hard to obtain information on the strategies of employers. It has been even harder to get a sense of how these strategies have changed over time. Information on subcontracted jobs and temp agency work is

Dimension	Precarious	Not precarious
Unionization	Non-union	Unionized
Contract type	No contract, verbal contract, short-term contracts	Contract (long-term)
Terms of employment	Day labourer, home-based worker, seasonal work, hired through temp agency, unpaid family worker, part-timer, short-term contract work, self-employed with and without employees.	Full-time employee
Predictability of schedule/control	Never or rarely can plan schedule a week in advance	Can plan schedule a week in advance always, usually or at least half of the time
Basis for pay	Piece-work, for the job or contract	Salary or hourly wage
Benefits	No deductions for benefits	Deductions from pay for benefits
Place of work	Employer's home, own home, multiple sites	Single location; not employer's home or own home
Cash payment	Paid in cash (always or mostly)	Not paid in cash

Figure 1: Indicators of Precarious Work

particularly hard to track, in part because workers themselves are not always clear on how their job has been classified by their employer.

In order to study the many dimensions of precarious work and the way it changes over time, we developed the **Index of Precarious Work (IPW)**. The IPW can be used to show how workers are made vulnerable in the new economy labour market, and as a tool for tracking progress toward decent work.

Measuring Precarious Work: The Index of Precarious Work (IPW)

The Index of Precarious Work captures the complex forces that produce precarious jobs. Figure 1 (above) identifies eight indicators of precarious work, measured in our research and captured by the IPW.

Taken on its own, each indicator of precariousness is not necessarily a problem. It may not even be illegal. But taken together they result in jobs that are dirty, dangerous, and difficult. Our survey gathered information about precarious work at different points in time. The

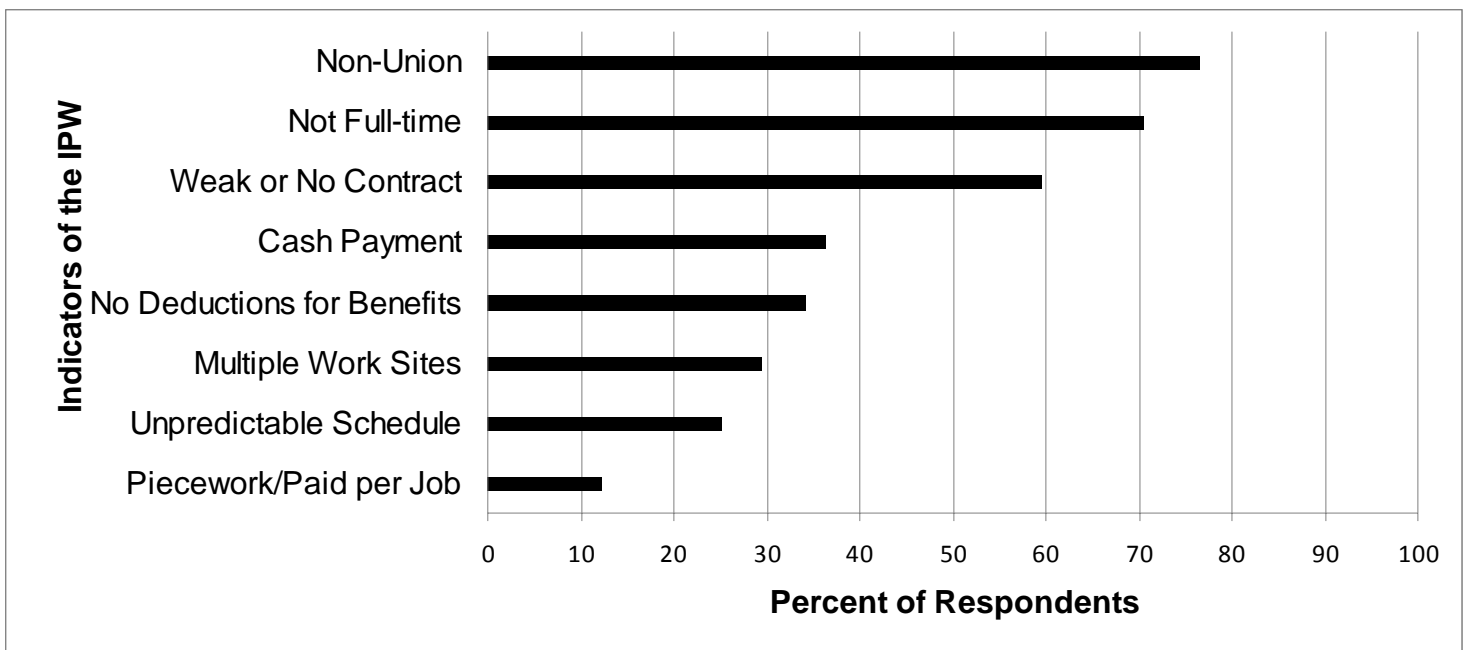


Figure 2: Distribution of IPW Indicators

IPW adds up the indicators that a person has and provides a summary score. This lets us more completely describe the extent to which a person's job is precarious. It also lets us make comparisons between groups, and over time for groups and individuals.

The IPW has been standardized to create a measure that goes from 0 to 1. The number '0' refers to work that is not precarious. The number '1' refers to work that is most precarious. To receive a score of 1, a person's job would have to rank as precarious for each and every one of the indicators that make up the index (see Figure 1). For ease of presentation, we grouped our results into low, medium, and high IPWs.

Immigrants and Precarious Work: Using the IPW

We asked the respondents to our survey to describe their work situations using the indicators outlined above. Figure 2 (above) shows our results for the primary job held by persons at the time of the interview, in 2005.

As shown in Figure 2, more than 75% of the workers surveyed said that their employment was non-unionized. More than 70% did not have full-time jobs. Sixty percent had a weak or vague

contract with their employer – or none at all. More than one-third of workers were paid in cash for their work. One-third had no deductions for benefits taken from their pay.

Changes in precarious work over time

The combination of indicators that make a worker's job precarious may change over time. A person's work may be precarious in different ways at different points in time.

We gathered information for several key points in a person's work history. This allows us to track changes in that history. It also lets us see how a person's past experiences with precarious work affect his or her current experiences. The periods of work we looked at include:

- Pre-migration work: the work held for the 12 months before migration to Canada.
- Early work: the work held for the first year in Canada or the first year in which the respondent entered the labour market.
- Current work: the work held at the time of the interview (2005), which could include up to three jobs.

In this brief we focus on early work and the respondent's primary job at the time of the interview. We compare IPWs over time by

	Early work	Current job
Non-union	90	76
Not full-time	50	71
Cash payment	42	36
Weak or no contract	42	60

Figure 3: Comparing Precarious Work Over Time (%)

looking at overall scores. We also track changes in the composition or importance of the dimensions. For example, Figure 3 (above) looks at the top four indicators of precariousness and compares the proportion of workers that reported having them at two points in time.

This figure tells us that as workers moved from early work experiences to their current primary job, their jobs became less precarious in two ways: they experienced more unionization and

were less likely to be paid in cash or “off the books.” However, over time, workers became *more* likely to have work that was not full-time and to have a weak contract or none at all.

Comparing indicators of precarious work for workers with low, medium, and high IPWs

The IPW also lets us see whether people with low precariousness are hampered by the same

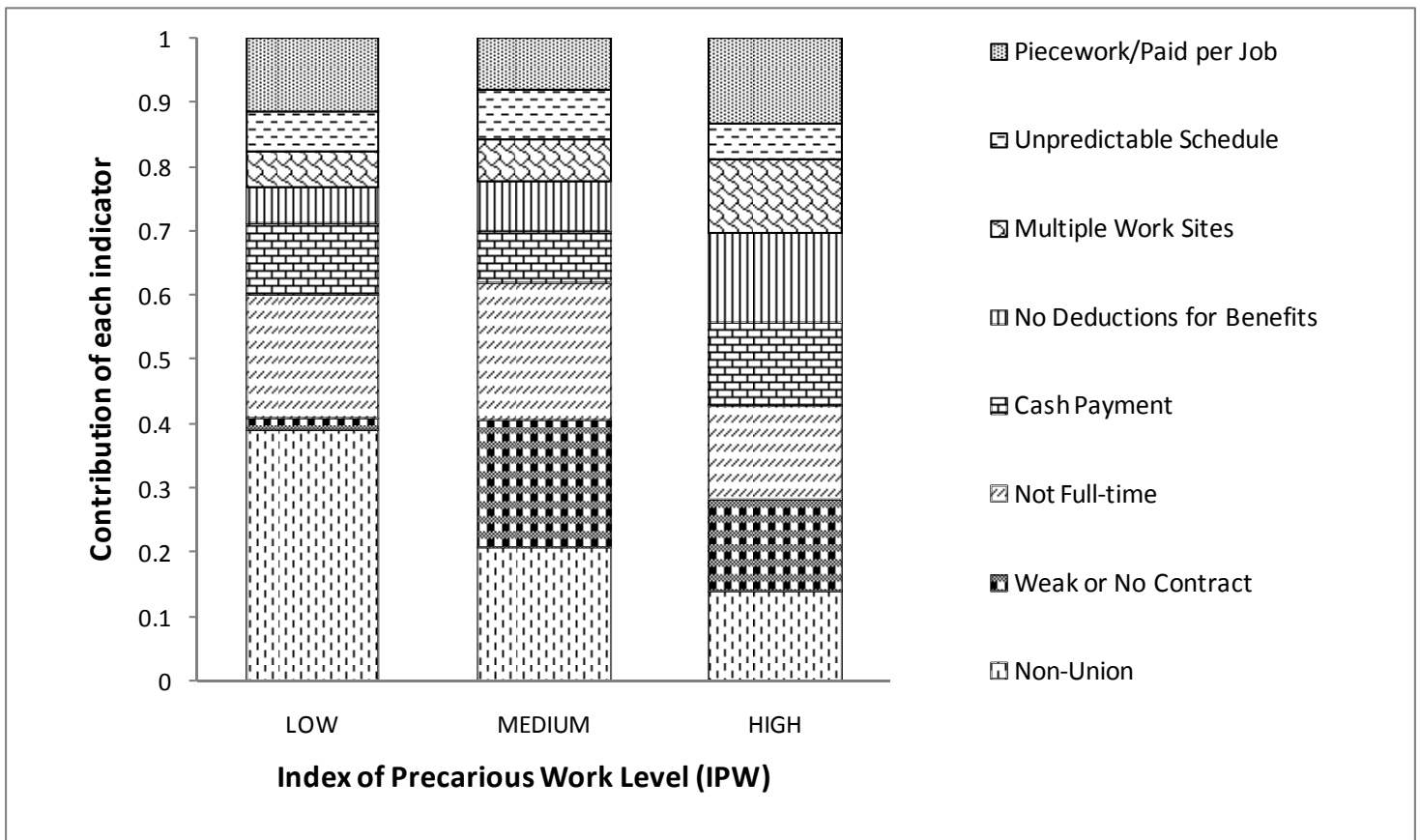


Figure 4: Breakdown of Frequency of Indicators of Precarious Work

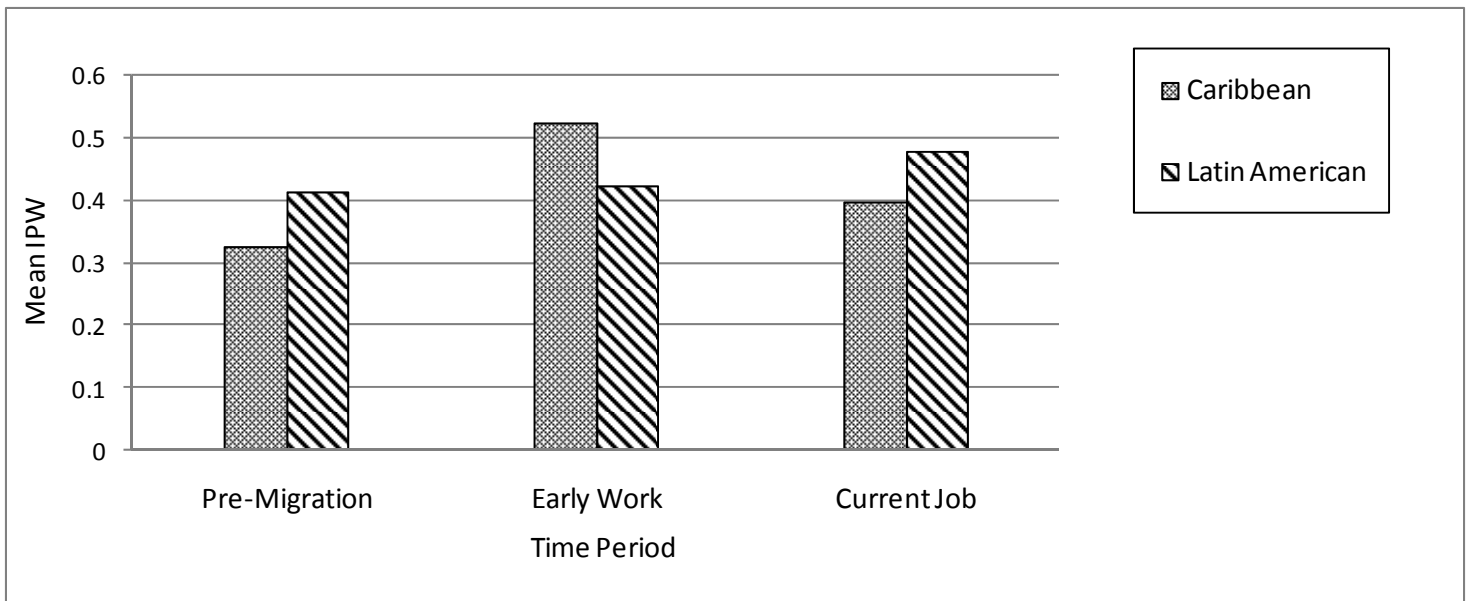


Figure 5: IPW over Time, by Region

factors that affect people with medium or high scores.

As shown in Figure 4 (page 4), workers whose IPW score is low have different distributions of the indicators of precariousness than workers whose IPW score is high. For workers in the “low” category, working in a non-unionized workplace contributes over 2 times more to the overall score of precariousness (IPW) than it does for workers in the “high” category.

The IPW can be used as tool to compare levels of precarious work across categories of social location such as gender, education, and region of origin. As noted earlier, it can also be used to compare different time periods in a person’s work history.

Figure 5 (above) compares the experiences of workers from the two regions covered by our survey. Workers from the Caribbean had the least precarious jobs before they migrated. However, after they arrived in Canada, they tended to wind up in very precarious jobs. Over time, though, their jobs became less precarious, dropping by 10 points. On the other hand, workers from Latin America did not see a big rise in the precariousness of their work after they first arrived in Canada. However, over time, their jobs became more precarious.

Figure 5 shows that workers from different regions and social groups experience different trajectories of precarious work over time. In Brief 2 we analyze the factors that account for different IPW levels. In Brief 3 we examine the factors that explain improvement in IPW levels between early and current work.

Conclusion

The new economy labour market has eroded the quality of jobs. A growing proportion of available jobs is precarious. These jobs are unstable, insecure, and give workers limited rights at work or limited autonomy on the job. Policymakers and advocacy groups recognize this change. However, their ability to implement effective policies to move towards decent work is in part hampered by the kinds of data available on job quality and labour markets. Existing data do not accurately capture the composite, complex vulnerability experienced by workers in the new economy.

Employer strategies of evasion, erosion, and violation of the standard employment contract make precarious work a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Good research tools are needed – tools that can capture the complexity of the problems posed by precarious work. The Index of Precarious Work (IPW) captures this

complexity. The IPW allows us to move beyond a focus on one specific issue, such as unionization, wages, or benefits, toward a broader focus on the various indicators that make a job precarious. The IPW allows comparison across groups, and of changes over time for groups and individuals. The IPW can help to chart the progress of workers as they get more decent jobs. It can also be used to explore how the constellations of indicators of precariousness vary across sectors of the economy. In this way, the IPW can help to build bridges across different sectors of society – immigrant and non-immigrant, men and women, youth and the elderly, and racialized groups – that experience precarious work in different ways.

In general, our research highlights the importance of working on multiple fronts. Improving one indicator alone will not be enough to reduce the overall precariousness of jobs. Employment standards legislation needs to be improved. The terms of employment contracts need to be improved as well. Although some indicators of precarious jobs are illegal (such as paying workers ‘off the books’), others are not. These ‘legal’ indicators include short-term contracts (or the lack of contracts altogether) as well as the reduction of a worker’s hours to deprive him or her of benefits. Unions and advocacy organizations can help to deal with these problems by working to protect workers, enhance their sense of autonomy, and improve their health and safety.

Where can I find out more?

There are a number of online resources about precarious work and decent work, including:

Good Jobs for All Coalition (Toronto)

www.goodjobscoalition.ca

Workers’ Action Centre (Toronto)

www.workersactioncentre.org

Decent Work Decent Life Campaign (European Union) www.decentwork.org

National Employment Law Project (U.S.) <http://www.nelp.org/>

Vosko, L. F., N. Zukewich, and C. Cranford. 2003. *Precarious Jobs: a new typology of employment. Perspectives.* Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Catalogue no. 75-001-XIE

THE IMMIGRANT AND PRECARIOUS WORK POPULAR EDUCATION WORKSHOP MANUAL

The Immigrants and Precarious Employment Workshop Manual uses popular education strategies to generate discussion and action-oriented planning for precarious work and decent work. The manual was designed using concepts, analysis and findings from the Immigrants and Precarious Work research project.

The development of the popular education exercises involved multiple phases of consultation and piloting with frontline workers and community members. Frontline workers also participated in a full-day “train the trainers” session facilitated by The Catalyst Centre.

The Popular Education Manual has five exercises and detailed instructions on how to use the exercises and facilitate group discussions. The five exercises are:

- Two power plays on precarious work. The power plays encourage role playing. Facilitated discussion introduces the different ways in which work can be precarious and the impact of precarious work on well being.
- The precarious work wheel. The exercise asks each workshop participant to identify the indicators that make their job precarious (or not). Discussion encourages participants to compare their jobs and workplaces.
- The Jobology asks people to chart their personal and family work histories. Facilitated discussion encourages analysis of how immigration impacts our experiences of work. Discussion facilitates identification of differences and commonalities of experience among participants.
- What’s Happening Chart: What’s needed to reduce or eliminate precarious work? encourages participants to identify action strategies and advocacy work that is happening in their community.

The “Immigrants and Precarious Employment” Popular Education workshop is a powerful community-building tool. It can be used by community activists, educators, and agency frontline workers to educate, organize and mobilize community members for better jobs for all. A special thanks to community members of the Mennonite New Life Centre – Toronto for translating the materials into Spanish.

The free-access manual is available in English and Spanish and can be downloaded from http://www.arts.yorku.ca/research/ine/public_outreach/materials.html . If you use the manual please let us know by emailing us at: landolt@utsc.utoronto.ca & goldring@yorku.ca.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Policy and plain language consulting by Sarah V. Wayland.

Statistical consulting by Andrew Mitchell, Thinking Cap Consulting and Cecilia Tagliavia.

The Catalyst Centre produced the Popular Education Manual for the project.

The Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University provided editorial support and layout design.

Community Partners

Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services

Center for Spanish Speaking Peoples

Community Social Planning Council of Toronto

Conflict Mediation Services of Downsview

Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre

Doorsteps Neighbourhood Services

FCJ Refugee Centre

Mennonite New Life Centre-Toronto

St. Christopher House

Workers' Action Centre

Policy Partners

Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Ryerson University

Alan Meisner, Social Development and Administration, City of Toronto

Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)

Jeffrey Reitz, University of Toronto

Ted Richmond

Armine Yalnizyan, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

This project was funded by an INE Public Outreach grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Luin Goldring
Associate Professor of Sociology
York University
goldring@yorku.ca

Patricia Landolt
Associate Professor of Sociology
University of Toronto
landolt@utsc.utoronto.ca

This document may be cited as:

Goldring, Luin and Patricia Landolt. 2009. *Immigrants and Precarious Employment in the New Economy*. (Introduction to Research Briefs.) Toronto: Immigrants and Precarious Employment Project. (June). <http://www.yorku.ca/ine/research/publications.html>