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File photo of hundreds lining up for various booths at the The National Job Fair & Training Expo at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, 2012.

For The Globe and Mail

Half of Toronto-area workers have fallen into 'precarious employment': study

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Published Saturday, Feb. 23, 2013 07:56AM EST

Last updated Saturday, Feb. 23, 2013 03:39PM EST

In just a few short decades Canada's labour market has changed dramatically. The widely held belief that employment leads to economic security and social well-being has become out-of-step with an increasing number of people in today's work force.

Research released Saturday by McMaster University and United Way Toronto provides new insights into just how much the labour market in Southern Ontario has changed. Barely half of people working in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton areas have permanent, full-time jobs that provide benefits and stability. Everyone else is working in situations that are part-time, vulnerable or insecure in some way. This includes a growing number of temporary, contract and on-call positions. Jobs without benefits. Jobs with uncertain futures. This significant rise in precarious employment is a serious threat – not only to the collective prosperity of the region, but also to the social fabric of communities.

Beneath this finding is another surprise: precarious employment is hurting everyone. It's found across

all demographic groups, in every sector and across income levels that were previously immune. Having a middle-class income can now come with increased employment insecurity.

It is now common for many workers to piece together year-round, full-time hours by working multiple jobs. In addition, working conditions are more uncertain, as existing labour laws have not kept up with changing realities. Union membership is on the decline. Doors to opportunity are limited as opportunities for job training and development decline.

While we know that being precariously employed is worst when you're living in low income, our research confirms this increasingly is an issue that affects people at every income level. Moreover, uncertainty about work is a major barrier for anyone planning for the future. People find it more difficult to chart a clear and stable path in their careers and are consequently delaying significant life plans, such as whether to start a family, because they feel insecure about their futures. Among parents, making plans, scheduling activities and spending time together as a family becomes much more difficult. The stress and pressure of being precariously employed is also more likely to lead to feelings of self doubt and anxiety.

Just as important, our study also found that job insecurity is about more than just poverty. Its impacts are far-reaching, affecting all parts of our lives, redefining how we contribute to our economy, give back to our community and interact with our families. Precarious work can make it more difficult to make ongoing volunteer commitments and donate to charities. Across all income levels, insecurity makes it less likely that people will have vital social networks, such as friends to talk to.

Trends that have caused nearly half of our work force to engage in insecure employment show no signs of slowing down. Among study respondents, even those who describe their current employment as permanent are aware that change can come suddenly and unexpectedly.

The question now is: How should we respond to this shifting climate? While the global nature of our economy can sometimes make it feel like change is beyond our control, policy paralysis is not an option. We have a variety of tools within our reach to effectively limit the spread of insecure employment and mitigate its negative effects.

The way forward is to confront these trends, assess how current labour market regulations and income security policies are supporting people in precarious employment, and explore options for making them more responsive. It's time for a conversation that brings together the private sector, labour organizations, community groups and all levels of government in a discussion about how together we can mitigate the negative effects of precarious employment.

Raising incomes is an obvious and critical area of focus, but it is not enough. The reality that workers in precarious employment tend to exit and re-enter the labour market much more often than those in permanent employment requires a renewed look at basic employment standards and protections as well as revamped income security programs.

More attention also needs to be given to how we can best support human capital development so that our work force remains innovative and competitive. Training and education models with a life-long learning focus can help workers build the skills to continuously improve their employment prospects.

Family supports, such as early learning and child care, accessible recreation and settlement programs, and affordable housing are also keys to maintaining healthy households and building a stronger sense of community.

What we need today is a renewed public policy framework that will be supportive of those in precarious employment and responsive to the challenges associated with this shifting labour market. Given this reality, it's crucial that we all work together, governments, employers, labour and other stakeholders, to identify common ground and advance a shared agenda for real and sustainable progress.

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