

For millennials, employment is a public health challenge

September 7 2018, by Arif Jetha



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Millennials now make up the [largest share of the Canadian workforce](#) and many are facing precarious working conditions.

As a society, we have previously assumed that if young Canadians invest in formal training and "pay their dues" in poor quality jobs early in their

careers, they will work their way into better quality employment. A [recent report](#) from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) suggests a different reality.

The study, based on a national survey of 1,000 professionals, found that 22 per cent are working in precarious situations, characterized by contract work, part-time hours, unpredictable incomes and a lack of paid sick days.

It reports that working in a professional job no longer provides Canadians with working conditions that are optimal for health, regardless of skills and training. And that Canadians are most susceptible to this job instability at the early stages of their career.

My own research at the [Institute for Work & Health](#) reveals that [many young people with existing health conditions also begin their careers in part-time jobs or gig work](#). These jobs are often an entry point into the [labour market](#), but they offer less access to [workplace health resources](#) like extended benefits, counselling support or paid sick days.

The long-term public health implications of these trends will be significant, and should be addressed at the policy level.

Work stress and heart disease

Research data has consistently shown that work and health are interconnected.

In the late 1960's, [studies of British civil servants](#) uncovered important links between working conditions and mortality. They found that those working in more stressful jobs —characterized by lower pay, unpredictability and less skill —were more likely to experience chronic diseases ranging from [heart disease](#) to depression.

Research among Canadians also shows [employment to be a critical social determinant of health](#). Those who earn higher wages have more access to the safe housing, nutritious foods, social services and medical care that provide pathways to better health.

This income-health relationship is reflected in recent data showing that the highest earning Canadians [live three to eight years longer than the lowest earners](#).



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'Generation screwed'

[In a new study of more than 1,000 Canadian millennials](#), 44 per cent reported job precarity. Close to half of those in precarious jobs also

reported depression or anxiety directly related to their working situation.

Job precarity can add to a number of [social and economic challenges](#) facing millennials including rising personal debts, growing costs of living, shrinking access to pensions and lower retirement savings. It is not surprising that some in the media refer to millennials as, "[generation screwed](#)."

The hurdles faced by millennials inside and outside of the workplace can have a "[scarring effect](#)" and can contribute to adverse work outcomes (such as unemployment, missed work days, loss of confidence) that [extend across adulthood](#).

The scarring effect can be especially deep for segments of the population that already face higher barriers to the labour market: women, people with disabilities, newcomers or racial minorities.

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Prolonged employment in precarious jobs could also have a substantial impact on health. For instance, [studies indicate that millennials are at the highest risk for mental health issues, an outcome that can be exacerbated by those with lower incomes](#).

Policies to ensure pay equity

Traditional public health interventions tend to focus on behavioural or lifestyle changes to improve the health of youth and young adults. The role of employment in health promotion is often overlooked.

Focusing on the working conditions of millennials offers an important opportunity to foster early and sustained mental health and prevent

chronic conditions.

In particular, we need policies to address the changing nature of work for Canadians. In some provinces, recent policy changes have been made to protect workers in precarious jobs by increasing the minimum wage, ensuring pay equity or offering emergency leave.

These changes are an important step forward in improving the working lives of Canadians.

And yet existing policies still fall short of offering tangible pathways for millennials to enhance working conditions and transition to stable employment.

Tackling the specific labour market experiences of millennials represents a critical approach to promoting the [health](#) of young Canadians as they enter the workforce and throughout their working lives.

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