

Zero-hour contracts take huge mental and physical tolls: Poor eating habits, lack of sleep, relationship problems

July 9 2019, by Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi And Janet Barlow



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

The number of workers on zero-hours contracts continues to rise in the UK. The [Office for National Statistics \(ONS\)](#) estimates that between October and December 2018 there were between 777,000 and 911,000 people working on zero-hours contracts. But the impact of such contracts

seems to be underestimated by the government.

An independent government [review of modern working practices](#) states that: "To ban [zero-hours contracts](#) in their totality would negatively impact many more people than it helped." The report mentions that almost a fifth of people on zero-hours contracts are in full-time education and banning zero-hour contracts would make it difficult for them to combine work and studying.

But [research](#) has demonstrated how detrimental zero-hour contracts can be on the psychological and mental well-being of workers. [Anxiety, stress and depression](#) can be common for workers on zero-hours contracts because of the [financial and social insecurity](#).

Workers on zero-hours contracts are not paid [sick leave](#) and tend to [work even when they are ill](#) for fear of losing their jobs. So although [statistics](#) show that a third of all sickness notes signed off by GPs between September 2016 and September 2018 were for [mental health reasons](#), the reality is that the number of people struggling with [mental health problems](#) while in work is likely to be much higher as these statistics do not include workers on zero-hours contracts.

As part of [our research](#), we interviewed 35 zero-hours contract workers and heard how this precarious employment situation was affecting their lives. They told us how a lack of sufficient sleep, poor eating habits and [relationship problems](#) were all contributing to the mental toll of being on a zero-hours contract—as one of our interviewees explained: "I'm just tired and don't have enough sleep ... because when you sometimes finish work maybe [at] 11pm, you get home, all you need to do is eat and go to sleep straight away, so you don't give yourself time for that food to even digest. Everything is mixed up because you are on a zero-hour contract and you don't work specific times, [so your] timing is not stable."



People on zero-hour contracts are more than twice as likely to work night shifts, and are paid a third less an hour than other workers. Credit: Pexels

Zero balance

For many workers on zero-hours contracts, there is a distinct lack of work-life balance. The uncertainty of not knowing when work might be—during the [night](#) or day—and when they should sleep, are issues workers on zero-hours contracts must deal with on daily basis.

Financial insecurity also means that workers are unable to refuse work when it's offered at a time when they should be sleeping. The fear of not getting subsequent job calls means that workers feel they cannot refuse

work even if they're exhausted—which impacts upon their [mood](#) and [productivity](#).

The zero-hours [contract](#) workers we interviewed also spoke about not having enough time to eat or having poor eating habits due to their unstable working hours. Some workers on zero-hour contracts are given shorter breaks than permanent colleagues—forcing them to skip meals or eat fast food more often. One of our interviewees explained the impact this had on their life: "It really affects stuff like eating ... you're kind of holding on to eat until they let you [and] it affects the way you eat, it affects your social life."

Life on hold

The workers we spoke with explained how the precariousness of zero-hours contracts meant they had had to miss or cancel family commitments because work suddenly became available. For them, everything has to stop when a job call comes through. Participants spoke of the stress of being pulled in two directions—needing to earn money to meet household expenses but also wanting to spend time with their family or partner. "Sometimes I run into problems with my wife because I haven't money for the family ... when you've got kids going to school, you've got people who have to eat ... you've got bills ... [and] you've got to buy clothes for them."

The UK is experiencing [record levels of employment](#), with over 32m people in work. But many workers and their families continue to struggle to survive financially. And as our research shows, although more people may be employed than ever before, the jobs they are in are often precarious, unstable and unreliable. There has also been a rise in the number of people who have to work in more than one low paid job to make ends meet.

Zero-hours contracts exploit workers. And despite what the government's report suggests, and the fact that zero-hours contracts tend to work very well for employers, the vast majority of people on zero-hours contracts want out. The only way to tackle this situation is to ban zero-hours contracts altogether. This will enable more people to have access to secure jobs with decent working hours and opportunities for progression.

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