

## **Precarious Workers, Precarious Times**

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Imagine being a restaurant worker in an industry that is struggling to get customers at the best of times... or someone who works in retail. What about the self-employed who are reliant on others for work? How can the shocks of the COVID19 pandemic be weathered by these different workers and their employers? Who really runs the risk of being left behind?

People are more vulnerable because of their socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, disability, and other socially determined circumstance. During a pandemic, the privileged in society can more easily access financial and human resources, as well as mental, physical and social supports for daily living. In contrast, low income people are more likely to live and work in poor conditions, and experience mental and physical health risks. When you layer on other causes of vulnerability such as physical and cognitive disabilities, the situation further complicates itself.

In the context of a health crisis like COVID19, precarious workers are particularly affected in at least three ways: 1) They may feel they have no choice but to work because they are poor; 2) They have a higher chance of getting infected because of persisting health, social and economic inequities; and 3) They are also most negatively affected in the post-pandemic period because they run a greater risk of losing work.

Recent [Statistics Canada](#) estimates suggest that there are just over 19M people working in Canada, of which 2.8M work in the wholesale and retail sector and 1.2M in the accommodation and food services sectors. As of [2017](#), small businesses employed 8.3M people or 69.7% of the Canadian private labour force, compared to medium-sized businesses which employed 2.4M people or 19.9% of this same workforce.

These numbers also do not truly account for the growing number of gig economy workers in Canada who may otherwise remain invisible. A [2019 report from Statistics Canada](#) noted that about 1.7M workers or 8.2% of the workforce in Canada (15 years or older) engaged in some type of gig work in 2016 compared to 1M (or 5.5% of workers) in 2005. [Gig work](#) is usually precarious, meaning it is often low paid and temporary. It doesn't provide health, training, or retirement benefits. Based on the 2019 Statistics Canada report, this work is likely to be performed by poorer workers, women and immigrants.

Second, vulnerable workers have been found to be more susceptible to [complications from pandemics](#) because of poverty. Women, especially single mothers, bear a disproportionate burden of poverty. Many low-income people are unable to meet basic needs for adequate food, water, clothing, shelter.

So many questions remain for our most vulnerable workers and their families during a pandemic and beyond. In response, the government of Canada's 82B economic stimulus package announced March 18/2020 includes expansions on employment insurance, support for Canadians without paid sick leave who are sick, quarantined or forced to stay home to fulfill caregiver duties, and other supports for Canadian workers and businesses. Will it be enough and reach those who really need it the most during post-pandemic? Time will tell.