

# Precarious Employment and Difficult Daily Commutes

## Emploi précaire et déplacements quotidiens difficiles

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Stéphanie Premji

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Article abstract

Precarious employment is on the rise in Canada, increasing by nearly 50% in the last two decades. However, little is known about the mechanisms by which it can impact upon geographical mobility. Employment-related geographical mobility refers to mobility to, from and between workplaces, as well as mobility as part of work. We report on a qualitative study conducted among 27 immigrant men and women in Toronto that investigates the relationship between precarious employment and daily commutes while exploring the ways in which gender, class and migration structure this relationship.

Interview data reveal that participants were largely unable to work where they lived or live where they worked. Their precarious jobs were characterized by conditions that resulted in long, complex, unfamiliar, unsafe and expensive commutes. These commuting difficulties, in turn, resulted in participants having to refuse or quit jobs, including desirable jobs, or being unable to engage in labour market strategies that could improve their employment conditions (e.g. taking courses, volunteering, etc.). Participants' commuting difficulties were amplified by the delays, infrequency, unavailability and high cost of public transportation. These dynamics disproportionately and/or differentially impacted certain groups of workers.

Precarious work has led to workers having to absorb an ever-growing share of the costs associated with their employment, underscored in our study as time, effort and money spent travelling to and from work. We discuss the forces that underlie the spatial patterning of work and workers in Toronto, namely the growing income gap and the increased polarization among neighbourhoods that has resulted in low-income immigrants increasingly moving from the centre to the edges of the city. We propose policy recommendations for public transportation, employment, housing and child care that can help alleviate some of the difficulties described.

# Precarious Employment and Difficult Daily Commutes

Stéphanie Premji

**Drawing on qualitative interviews with immigrant workers, this article examines the relationship between precarious employment and geographical mobility in Toronto. We find that conditions associated with precarious employment can result in long, complex, unfamiliar, unsafe and expensive commutes that can, in turn, contribute to long-term substandard employment trajectories. This relationship is mediated by participants' social location, as some groups of workers are disproportionately and/or differentially affected by the dynamics shown. Our findings provide valuable insights into how precarious work has led to workers having to absorb an ever-growing share of the costs associated with their employment, underscored in our study as time, effort and money spent travelling to and from work. We propose recommendations for transportation, employment, housing and child care policies.**

**KEYWORDS:** precarious work, geographical mobility, commuting, immigrants, gender.

## Introduction

As in the rest of the industrialized world, precarious employment is on the rise in Canada, increasing by nearly 50% in the last two decades (Lewchuk *et al.*, 2013). This type of employment broadly refers to high levels of job insecurity and instability, as well as reduced pay, benefits and protections, such as in jobs that are temporary, on-call, or involuntarily part-time (Fuller and Vosko, 2008; Law Commission of Ontario, 2012). Precarious employment increases employers' competitiveness by maximizing employee flexibility, whilst bringing about adverse material, social and health consequences for workers and their families (Quinlan

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*et al.*, 2001; Vosko, 2006; Premji *et al.*, 2014; Lewchuk, 2016). However, the relationship between precarious employment and geographical mobility is not as well understood. Employment-related geographical mobility (ERGM) refers to mobility to, from and between workplaces, as well as mobility as part of work that can range from local daily commutes to cross-border movements (Roseman *et al.*, 2015). A growing body of research has positioned ERGM as a pervasive aspect of working life, noting that journeys to and from work have become increasingly long and complex (Cresswell, 2006; Newhook *et al.*, 2011; Haan *et al.*, 2014). Shifts in the nature of employment—along with improved transportation and communication infrastructure—are intrinsically linked to the emergence of new mobility patterns. In Canada, these dynamics have largely been examined in the context of temporary migration and/or work in mobile occupations in sectors such as oil and gas, construction, transportation, shipping and agriculture (Ferguson, 2011; Haan *et al.*, 2014).

As MacDonald (2009) has argued, precarious employment has an inherent spatial dimension. This dimension has been highlighted, to a limited extent, in studies conducted among precariously-employed workers, which found that holding multiple jobs or working in split-shifts, at night or in varying locations, increased commuting time and transportation expenses and resulted in unsafe journeys to and from work (Bohle *et al.*, 2004; Zeitinoglu *et al.*, 2004; Fitzpatrick and Neis, 2015; Premji and Shakya, 2016). Dimensions of mobility have also been incorporated in conceptual models of the impacts of precarious employment. Lewchuk and colleagues (2003) proposed that travel time between multiple jobs and sites be included in a model of “employment strain”, which they developed to address the unique complexities of precarious labour and its impact on health. Similarly, Kidder and Raworth (2004) included transit costs in their model of the hidden costs of precarious employment. Research also suggests that commuting difficulties may, in turn, contribute to precarious employment (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto and Family Service Association of Toronto, 2004; Blumenberg, 2008). For example, a study of precariously-employed racialized<sup>1</sup> workers in Toronto found that lack of adequate public transit, length of travel, and cost of fares were barriers to secure, stable employment (Access Alliance Multicultural Health, 2011). Other Ontario studies found that distance and cost of travel limited access to education and employment programs and services, as well as skills and language training for unemployed or underemployed workers (Cummings *et al.*, 2006; Social Development Finance and Administration, 2011; Wilson *et al.*, 2011; Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2012). However, most of the available literature has examined these dynamics only cursorily in the context of studies focused on precarious employment more generally. As a result, the relationship between employment precarity and geographic mobility remains poorly understood.

Understanding the relationship between precarious employment and mobility requires a consideration of individuals' social location, since gender, class and migration structure each of these components. Precarious employment increasingly impacts all sections of the workforce, though studies have found that women, racialized individuals, and recent immigrants have an increased likelihood of being precariously employed (Cranford *et al.*, 2003; Fuller and Vosko, 2008; Lewchuk *et al.*, 2013; Goldring and Joly, 2014). Like employment, mobility is socially produced and underpinned by factors such as class, gender and ethnicity (Adey, 2010). Research has found that women, low-income individuals, and recent immigrants are more likely to use public transit than their counterparts (Heisz and Schellenberg, 2004; Toronto Public Health, 2013). Furthermore, it has found that low-income individuals and recent immigrants tend to have longer commutes than their counterparts (Roberto, 2008; Axisa, 2011), while women tend to have shorter commutes than men (MacDonald, 1999; Crane and Takahashi, 2009). Accordingly, some groups of workers may be disproportionately and/or differentially impacted by the reciprocal dynamics of precarious employment and mobility. The City of Toronto presents an interesting setting for a study on these dynamics, since it is the largest metropolitan centre in Canada and the epicentre of the rapid rise of employment precarity. Moreover, community-led research conducted among racialized immigrant men and women in Toronto has identified mobility as a central determinant and consequence of their precarious employment (Access Alliance Multicultural Health, 2011). There is therefore a need to examine, in this context, the ways by which precarious employment leads to commuting difficulties, and vice-versa, while exploring how gender, class, and migration structure this relationship. This information can help identify strategies that may help relieve the burdens of precarity and mobility for workers in general, as well as for those who may be disproportionately or differentially impacted.

## Methods

This study was part of a large national study on employment-related geographical mobility. It was conducted in partnership with Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, a non-for-profit organization that provides community-governed primary health care services to disadvantaged immigrants in Toronto. Since 2006, Access Alliance has been leading a multi-phase research agenda on the labour market experiences of immigrant and racialized communities. This research brought to light the pervasiveness of precarious employment and its wide-ranging negative impacts for workers, families and communities (Wilson *et al.*, 2011; Access Alliance Multicultural Health, 2012; Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, 2012). The study

we describe builds on results from this body of research that have pointed to the important role of mobility (Access Alliance Multicultural Health, 2011; Premji and Shakya, 2016).

In 2014, using posters, peer researcher networks and partner agencies, we recruited for interviews 27 immigrants who had experienced precarious employment and difficulties travelling to and from work or job interviews since coming to Canada. We did not seek to document the prevalence of commuting difficulties among precariously-employed workers, nor to compare their commuting experiences with those of non-precariously-employed workers. Instead, we sought to describe the mechanisms by which precarious employment can lead to commuting difficulties, and vice versa, among a sample of workers who experience both conditions. Participants lived in the city of Toronto and were currently employed or looking for work. They included recent, medium-term and long-term immigrants who were 18 years or older when they immigrated to Canada. In an effort to include participants with limited English language proficiency, we translated recruitment posters to Bengali, Somali and Spanish. These languages were identified by Access Alliance as the top languages spoken in Access Alliance catchment areas. However, most participants had enough English language fluency to participate in the interview in English, and only one interview was conducted with the help of an interpreter. Researchers screened participants to ensure they met study criteria.

Participants were asked about work and commuting experiences, and about the social, economic and health impacts of work and/or commuting. Participants were also asked about policies, services and supports that could improve their employment or commuting situations. Prior to conducting the interviews, a focus group was held with three female Access Alliance peer outreach workers about their experiences with precarious employment and commuting. The focus group session helped inform the individual interview questions. Individual interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, lasted 1-2 hours and took place at the offices of Access Alliance, which has three locations across Toronto. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVIVO software. We used a mixed coding strategy whereby codes were partly defined a priori—reflecting problematic employment conditions and resulting commuting difficulties (length, cost, safety) previously identified in the literature on precarious employment—and partly defined during analysis using inductive methods. The inductive approach allowed us to identify new problematic employment conditions (e.g. unreasonable requests by employers), aggravating factors (e.g. public transit, weather), as well as strategies used to overcome difficulties. The codes, capturing descriptive and analytic concepts, were grouped into themes from which summaries were produced. Analysis was iterative and done throughout the data collection process

in order to inform it. We used a realist stance which assumes that “the world is the way it is” or, in other words, that workers’ reports of their experiences can be understood as real phenomena. This framework also gives primary importance to causal mechanisms and to the specific context within which mechanisms operate (Maxwell, 2012). Access Alliance peer researchers—who are individuals with lived experience of the issue under study—assisted with recruitment, data collection and analysis. Participants were given a \$45 honorarium and two public transportation tokens, and were offered a child care subsidy. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from McMaster University’s Research Ethics Board.

## Results

### Participants’ characteristics

Table 1 shows the participants’ characteristics. At the time of the interview, most participants (17/27) had been in Canada for more than 5 years. A plurality (8/27) was from Bangladesh, though there were 11 countries of origin in total. Participants were at least 21 years old and 18 out of 27 were between 31 and 50 years of age. Most were married (20/27) and had children (18/27). The large majority of participants (24/27) had a university degree. The majority (18/27) also reported a household income of less than \$25,000/year.

### Participants’ labour market experiences

Despite the fact that most participants were highly educated, had been in Canada for more than 5 years, and spoke enough English to participate in the interview in English, all reported difficulties securing stable, decent employment. About half (12/27) were unemployed<sup>2</sup> at the time of the interview, a minority of whom were on social assistance, employment insurance or disability support. Those who worked did so in jobs that did not match their qualifications:

I also hang clothes in the line and I price the clothes... Sometimes I feel that I am not for this job because I am physiotherapist. I should be with my patients because many people, they deserve my support, but I cannot, so I feel upset. And sometimes when I think that I am surviving and I need a job, then I feel happy that at least I have a job.

*Aasia, 36 years old, from Bangladesh*

The jobs participants held were largely gendered and racialized. For example, men worked as general labourers and gas station attendants while women worked in retail stores and as housekeepers. These jobs were low-paid, low-skill and precarious, namely involuntarily part-time, temporary, casual, seasonal, or on-call. Many reported working multiple jobs and/or according to non-standard and unpredictable schedules, and all but one lacked employment benefits.

**TABLE 1**  
**Demographic Profile of Study Participants**

Variable		n (N=27)
<b>Women</b>		15
<b>Country of origin</b>	Bangladesh	8
	China	7
	Egypt	3
	Mexico	2
	Other	7
<b>Age</b>	21-30	3
	31-40	9
	41-50	9
	51-60	6
<b>Married</b>		20
<b>Have children</b>		18
<b>Length of stay in canada</b>	2 - 5 years	10
	6 - 10 years	12
	11 + years	5
<b>Household income</b>	< \$ 25,000	18
	\$ 26,000 - \$ 50,000	9
<b>Completed education</b>	High School	1
	Undergraduate	14
	Graduate	10
	Professional Training	2

Participants commonly reported relying on temporary employment agencies to find jobs. All participants spoke about the considerable insecurity they experienced as a result:

I have to wait for a call and I have to be very careful about the calls. I call them to say: “Do you have position for today, or something like that?” “No, no, no, at the moment, no. We call you”. But again I call: “OK, what happened today? Do you have a position for today or for tomorrow?”

*Isaac, 54 years old, from Columbia*

Additionally, many participants reported violations of employment standards legislation, such as being asked to work extremely long shifts, not being compensated for overtime, being paid less than minimum wage, and being labelled part-time when working full-time—which can have implications for participation in employer sponsored pension and benefit plans.

Participants noted multiple labour market barriers to decent, stable employment: the non-recognition of foreign credentials, racialized discrimination, communication difficulties, and limited professional networks. Some of these barriers manifested themselves in unique and pronounced ways at the intersection of migration, gender and racialization. For example, Asia (36 years old, from Bangladesh) spoke about how wearing the hijab prevented her from getting a promotion:

Language is one barrier, big barrier. Skin is one barrier. My hijab is another barrier... Like in [the retail store where she works], me and another lady, she is white and she is wearing western clothes, but I am wearing hijab and most of my dresses are full sleeve. So she get promotion, not me. But I'm working harder than her.

Women additionally described social barriers to stable, decent employment that reflected their position as low-income immigrant women. These included high loads of household and caregiving work, social isolation and lack of support networks, lack of access to affordable child care, and limited geographical mobility (e.g. fear of commuting to certain areas or at certain times). Few participants were able to overcome these barriers and improve their labour market experiences over time.

### Where participants live and work

Participants lived across the City of Toronto, although all lived in neighbourhoods with high proportions of low-income immigrants, and most lived in the inner suburbs (suburban communities that are located close to the city centre and that are more densely populated than the more peripheral outer suburbs). Housing location decisions were motivated by affordability, proximity to shops, services, and public transportation, and the desire to be close to one's community. In the majority of cases, participants were unable to work where they lived because their neighbourhoods lacked employment opportunities, even for so-called survival jobs, as work opportunities tended to be found in the outer suburbs of the city. Additionally, most participants were unable to live where they worked as those locations were typically unaffordable, as well as far from their communities. Importantly, participants were reluctant to move to be closer to work because the work was unstable. Maria, a 44-year-old from Mexico, explained the risks involved:

And we moved to be close to [husband's] job and one month after we move from one to the other location, he was laid off. And then, thank God, we found the job in [the new neighbourhood]. It was like in 3 months, we moved three times. Something like that, with two children.

For all participants with children, child care was at home or close to home. Some parents engaged informal child care providers while others rotated staying



home with their children with occasional, supplementary help from friends and neighbours. This type of arrangement was due to the fact that the work location was typically far from home and variable, work schedules were usually non-standard and unpredictable, and formal child care arrangements were unaffordable and inflexible. Most participants lacked the social support systems they had in their countries of origin and those with children struggled with child care arrangements.

### Impact of precarious employment on daily commutes

Participants' employment conditions shaped their journeys to and from work, and this relationship was mediated by their status as low-income immigrant men and women. Since they were largely unable to work where they lived or live where they worked, all had commuted or were commuting long distances. In fact, the majority of participants reported having commuted or currently commuting between 3 to 6 hours a day, with commutes somewhat longer among men. Additionally, jobs were sometimes transient (e.g. house cleaner, door-to-door sales representative), in which case participants described spending large parts of their workday—in addition to their commutes—travelling. At the same time, in order to try to improve their employment conditions, participants engaged in a wide range of strategies that involved additional travel time (e.g. attending resume clinics and workshops, participating in language or skills training, taking courses to upgrade their education, volunteering to gain "Canadian experience" and expand networks). Most relied on public transit because their low and insecure incomes prevented them from owning a car. Thus, commutes were not only long, but also complex, requiring transfers between multiple modes of transportation. All participants spoke of frequent delays for buses, subways and streetcars, which contributed to their long commute times as they had to allocate additional time for travelling. They reported particularly long delays in the wintertime that required them to wait long periods in the cold, almost always without access to bus shelters. They also described how infrequent service in the areas they commuted to and from extended travel times. For example, Ahmed (39 years old, from Egypt) noted the following about his work location: "It's just a gas station...but the buses are slow because everybody in this area have a car. Like you can't live there without a car. But I'm not living, I just working there".

In addition to working far from home, many participants worked multiple jobs that often required them to travel to different locations on the same day. This resulted in extended total commute times and, in light of distances travelled, and delayed or infrequent transit, in difficulties arriving at the second job on time. Importantly, participants frequently worked in new locations, sent by temporary

work agencies with minimal information—often only the address—and without consideration for distances. As a result, participants lacked familiarity with their destination, which increased travel time and complexity:

If I want to go to any job...I go out of my home before 2 hours and a half. Even if the transportation will take 40 minutes...For example, in Kennedy. Where in Kennedy? You are searching here and here and here. It's very, very hard.

*Babu, 40 years old, from Egypt*

The lack of familiarity with the destination location was amplified among new immigrants since they lacked knowledge of the city's geography and transit system. As a result, many participants reported misguidedly travelling very far for jobs in the period following settlement. Eventually, participants adopted strategies such as planning their trips with Google maps or public transit maps, or asking fellow passengers or public transit employees for directions.

Many participants worked according to non-standard schedules, which also complicated their commutes. For example, weekend work resulted in longer journeys as buses, streetcars and subways were less frequent or sometimes unavailable for service. Early morning and night shifts were also problematic. Infrequent service at those times extended journeys to and from work, and in the case of early morning shifts, required participants to wake up in the middle of the night to begin their day. At the same time, unavailable service made it difficult for participants to arrive at work on time:

I have to wake up very, very early and actually I think they lied to me...When they hire me they said it's from 7:00 and then they give me 6:30. I told them I couldn't come here on time. He said you come late 10 minutes, but I don't want to do that. You know?

*Bao Zi, 33 years old, from China*

In response to the infrequency or unavailability of public transit at odd hours, some participants carpooled with colleagues or were given rides by their employer. However, these strategies also had their disadvantages:

Your first day overtime "How am I going to go home?" Plus you're driving with somebody who doesn't want to stay and you wanted to stay...So if you're taking a ride and he leaves, well, you leave too or sometimes he takes a ride or he goes home and you stay then you're thinking "Oh the bus, what's going to happen? I have to walk from here to there to get the bus". It's not rush hour so the bus is kind of slow.

*Abasi, 40 years old, from Kenya*

Night commutes also led to safety concerns, particularly for women, though for some men as well. Winter amplified these concerns as darkness set in earlier in the day. Some female participants noted that, for safety reasons, their husbands walked them home from the bus stop. However, many others mentioned being fearful as they walked home alone:

I would be concerned in winter because...you have to travel say an hour, hour and a half you have to leave home... it's dark. By the time you get home, it's dark. So if you live in a dark street where it's isolated and some of the streets are residential streets. Many people don't walk, they have cars and if you [are] a low paying person [and] you don't have anybody to pick you up at the bus stop...then you have a concern because you have a lot of rapists that are walking on the street.

*Lisa, 57 years old, from Jamaica*

Other schedule issues similarly resulted in commuting difficulties. Starting and ending work at different times on different days required participants to plan their commutes according to different transit schedules, and, as a result, commute times and complexity could vary significantly from day to day. Participants also noted that the combination of long work hours and long commute times was particularly taxing. Short work hours were also problematic as participants spent more time commuting than working. Participants sometimes found it difficult to decide whether the number of hours worked on a particular day would make the commute worthwhile, since work hours were unpredictable. These difficulties were exemplified by the following story from Maria (44 years old, from Mexico):

And he [temporary agency representative] said "I'm telling you to go if you want to get a job just go" and I said OK because I needed a job. Then I went and it takes 1 hour and 45 minutes and there I worked for 2 hours with seniors...After two hours finished and I came back it also take 1 hour and 45 minutes. Then that guy again phoned me "Next Tuesday you have to go" and I say OK, but I don't know how much I will get and he said "For 1 hour you will get \$14". So \$28...To go and come back, I have to spend on the way more than 3 hours and I will work 2 hours. It is almost I will get paid less than ... normal wage.

In addition to the commuting difficulties associated with job location and schedules, participants described how unreasonable requests by employers resulted in unnecessary or difficult commutes. For example, Maria described how the temporary agency representative who sent her to work with seniors initially asked her to travel to a suburb two hours away to first meet with him. Other participants described being sent home immediately after arriving at work or after working a very short amount of time to accommodate production demands. Aasia (36 years old, from Bangladesh), provided another example of this type of unreasonable request:

When there was a black out that time it was really hard for [her husband] ...So that time he don't want to go to his work but his owner say "If you don't come I will not continue you anymore. You have to come." So he had to go by taxi because that time subway was not working. So he had to spend most money to go and come back...But the owner she should be a little bit polite. She should understand the situation, but she didn't.

Participants' income was low and insecure and, as a result, they struggled with the high and rising cost of public transportation. In fact, participants reported spending 10%-20% of their household income on commuting (range for the 27 participants). Costs were especially difficult to manage when travelling to multiple jobs or different regions with different transit systems, or when working short hours or being sent home without having worked, or again when participating in unremunerated strategies to improve labour market conditions:

I did one volunteer [job] that's far from my home like I said, like the secretary, the receptionist [job]...the neighbourhood is far from my home. At that time I am pregnant too. They didn't offer [transportation] to me and they offer nothing so I still go there because I have free time I want to learn.

*Jia, 35 years old, from China*

In response to this financial strain, some participants walked or used a bicycle whenever possible, sometimes for long distances and in bad weather, or carpooled to save money and time.

### Impact of commuting on precarious employment

Participants' commuting difficulties also contributed to their precarious employment or unemployment, and this relationship was mediated to some extent by their status as low-income immigrant men and women. The duration and/or complexity of commutes was a primary consideration in searching for, accepting or maintaining employment, particularly so for women who were unwilling or unable to commute very long distances because of child care considerations and the demands of their husbands' jobs. A number of participants had to refuse work—sometimes desirable work—because the commute was too long or too complex:

In my field, but 1.5 hour and come back 1.5 hour. Three hours...No, no I didn't go. Yes because it's too far. Two fares yes. So it is too much for me...I think it was full-time. I didn't go for the interview. They called me two times...Then I saw it in the like Google. Then I find that no it is too far.

*Arezo, 33 years old, from Bangladesh*

However, two participants, one man and one woman, were prepared to travel any distance for work in their field:

Yes. That I will do because I need to experience in my field. Whenever I write my resume I have experience to do work with children and youth and volunteering with different organizations. I can start my first job in my field, I can commute.

*Nishat, 37 years old, from Bangladesh*

Participants noted that unfamiliar or unsafe commutes (at night and/or to isolated areas) resulted in them declining or quitting jobs. This was particularly,

though not exclusively, the case for women. They also mentioned the infrequency and unavailability of public transportation on certain days and at certain times as barriers to decent, stable employment. In fact, a number of participants reported declining or quitting jobs or refusing overtime as a result:

We were living in [one] area and the work was in [another area]...But this job, it was 7 days and we had to start I think...7:00, but we have to wake up I think 4:00 because it took us like 2 hours to get there. And on some days, because there was no subway, we had to take a taxi...At the end we make our account, our math, we were gaining like \$5 per hour...And wasting like 4 hours, yeah, per day. It was too much. So then we, we quit.

*Maria, 44 years old, from Mexico*

In fact, participants felt that their reliance on public transportation played a central role in limiting their employment opportunities:

I think I need a car now...all your life, you've been working all your life, 15 years in Canada, all you do is working. You, why should you try to save like a car? Because the car would improve your life, offer you more employment, more job.

*Melvin, 58 years old, from the Philippines*

Only two participants reported owning a car. One reported that the car gave him greater flexibility in terms of his work schedule; however, the other explained that the car did not help her find employment:

I bought a car as soon as I came because I'm looking for job, I think I need a car to travel. To find jobs. This is what I thought, but I made a mistake. I could not find, now I have the car and I cannot find jobs.

*Fang, 53 years old, from China*

The cost of public transportation was another major barrier to getting or keeping jobs. Participants described a "catch 22" situation whereby the inability to work led to the inability to pay for public transit, and vice versa. As Camellia (30 years old, from Mexico) stated: "How can you pay the bus if you have no work?". At the same time, the cost of public transportation, combined with the large amount of time and effort spent commuting to and from precarious jobs, limited participants' ability to engage in labour market strategies, and therefore to move out of precarious employment.

## Discussion and recommendations

Our study contributes to the small body of empirical research that has addressed the relationship between precarious employment and geographical mobility (Bohle *et al.*, 2004; Zeitinoglu *et al.*, 2004; MacDonald, 2009; Access Alliance Multicultural Health, 2011; Wilson *et al.*, 2011; Fitzpatrick and Neis, 2015; Premji and Shakya,

2016), and to the growing number of studies that have looked at how changes in the nature of employment is necessitating increased mobility from workers (Newhook *et al.*, 2011; Haan *et al.*, 2014). To our knowledge, ours is one of only two empirical studies that have specifically focused on the multiple and complex ways in which precarious employment impacts daily commutes (Fitzpatrick and Neis, 2015), and the only one to have done so in an urban context. While most Canadian studies on employment-related geographical mobility to date have focused on mobile occupations, ours brings to light the fact that non-transient occupations can have an important mobility component, not only because of where the work is located, but because of how it is organized. Specifically, we found that participants experienced precarious work largely through their experiences with temporary employment agencies and in terms of low income, employment uncertainty, constantly changing jobs and/or multiple jobs, non-standard and unpredictable schedules, and powerlessness. These experiences resulted in long, complex, unfamiliar, unsafe and expensive patterns of mobility that, in turn, contributed to long-term, substandard employment trajectories, highlighting a deeply intertwined relationship between upward mobility and geographical mobility. The challenges associated with work schedules were particularly salient though, interestingly, this dimension is typically absent from discourse and research on precarious work (Fuller and Vosko, 2008; Law Commission of Ontario, 2012). While Lewchuk and colleagues (2003) include scheduling uncertainty in their model of “employment strain”, our results suggest that other scheduling constraints, namely those relating to non-standard and variable work schedules, constitute important elements of the experience of precarious employment. Our results, therefore, point to a need to incorporate the full range of scheduling difficulties in the conceptualization of precarious work.

The new organizational configurations reflected in precarious employment have given rise to an individualization of risks, as workers are required to absorb an ever growing share of the costs and externalities associated with their insecure employment (Mills, 2004; Mythen, 2005), underscored in our study as time, effort and money spent travelling to and from work. This type of increased geographical “flexibility” can contribute to improved employment opportunities and earnings (European Policy Brief, 2008); however, in the case of our participants, the long, complex and otherwise difficult commutes they experienced only allowed them to avoid unemployment. Our study is limited by the fact that it is based on a small sample of individuals who had experienced both precarious employment and difficult daily commutes, and, as such, it does not provide an indication of the prevalence of commuting difficulties among precariously-employed workers, nor does it compare their commuting experiences with those of non-precariously-employed workers who may still experience commuting difficulties, though differently and/or less intensely. However, it does highlight the mechanisms

by which precarious employment can impact daily commutes and indicates a need for further research on an under-studied dimension of employment with potentially far-reaching health, material and social implications.

The dynamics we described can be argued to similarly impact all workers in low-income, precarious employment, as they are largely class-based. However, women and recent immigrants may be disproportionately affected because of their over-representation in precarious employment and increased reliance on public transit (Heisz and Schellenberg, 2004; Fuller and Vosko, 2008; Lewchuk *et al.*, 2013; Toronto Public Health, 2013). Our study indicates that both work organizational factors and public transit reliance may contribute to the longer commutes experienced by recent immigrants in Toronto (Axisa, 2011). At the same time, our results suggest that certain groups of workers may be differentially or more intensely impacted by the dynamics shown. Namely, deskilled immigrants engaged in a wide range of labour market strategies to improve their labour market conditions that other workers may not engage in, and these strategies increased their mobility burden. New immigrants lacked knowledge of the city's geography and transit system, which added to the complexity of their commutes. Women in particular were fearful of travelling at night or to isolated locations and at times refused or quit jobs because of unsafe commutes. Women were also unwilling or unable to commute long distances, and had somewhat shorter commutes than men, in support of results from previous research (MacDonald, 1999; Crane and Takahashi, 2009).

While work organizational factors can lengthen and complicate daily commutes, work locational factors also play an important role as they underlie dynamics of employment-related geographical mobility. Namely, our results indicate a mismatch between labour supply and demand in the neighbourhoods where participants lived, a spatial patterning of work and workers that is strongly influenced by class, migration and racialization. In the United States, proponents of the spatial mismatch hypothesis argued that low-skilled minorities residing in inner cities had poor labour market outcomes because they were disconnected from job opportunities in the suburbs (Gobillon *et al.*, 2007). The mismatch follows a different pattern in the City of Toronto, where the growing gap in income and wealth—which is partly due to the rise in precarious work (Lewchuk *et al.*, 2013)—has resulted in greater polarization among neighbourhoods. As a result, low-income individuals, a large and growing number of whom are new immigrants, have increasingly moved from the centre to the edges of the city, to the inner suburbs (Heisz and Schellenberg, 2004; United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development, 2004; Lo *et al.*, 2011). These neighbourhoods have few employment opportunities because negative stereotypes about violence, crime and drugs have deterred

local economic investments (Keene and Padilla, 2010; Wilson *et al.*, 2011). They have, however, seen a growing number of temporary agencies that have played a central role in pushing residents towards precarious employment (Wilson *et al.*, 2011). The higher unemployment rate among immigrants compared with their Canadian-born counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2016), coupled with a lack of local employment opportunities, has resulted in residents having to travel ever longer distances for work (Axisa, 2011) in Toronto's declining manufacturing and warehousing hubs which, in contrast to the growing white collar sector that is concentrated in the city's core, tend to be located in the outer suburbs near major highway corridors. While workers are unable to work where they live, they are also unwilling or unable to live where they work for reasons that include the instability of the work, as shown in our study. Locational factors further impact experiences with public transit, since residents of the poorest neighbourhoods in Toronto have the worst access to subway stations (Hulchanski *et al.*, 2010) and have to contend with fewer stops and less-frequent service (Lo *et al.*, 2011). These locational dynamics intersect with the deeply rooted structural barriers that racialized immigrant men and women face, highlighting the salient role of neighbourhoods in shaping economic outcomes (Wilson *et al.*, 2011).

The spatial distribution of jobs and workers, and the nature of both work and commutes are shaped by housing, transportation and employment policies that reflect and reinforce dominant structures of power (MacDonald, 2009; Haas and Osland, 2014). Accordingly, our results have a number of policy implications. The first is for public transportation, which has been recognized as a crucial dimension of integration for new immigrants (Lo *et al.*, 2011). Affordability of transit was identified as a major barrier to employment and opportunities for advancement by participants who, like other low-income workers, spent a significant proportion of their incomes on commuting (Government of Ontario, 2008; Roberto, 2008). There is, therefore, a need for strategies to minimize the cost burden of public transit, such as the institution of discount fares and peak and off-peak fares. In addition, there is a need to institute fare integration across the various municipalities in the Greater Toronto Area and to review the transfer system—which currently works on the basis of continuous trips—since a time-based system that allows stopovers and return trips would benefit those who work very short hours or in multiple locations (Toronto Transit Commission, 2014). Furthermore, our results point to the importance of improving availability of transit in low-income areas (Toronto Public Health, 2013), and of putting in place additional bus shelters in those areas. They also point to the need for public transit orientation workshops for new immigrants to be instituted based on the example of those offered by Vancouver's TransLink (Translink, 2016). Participants mentioned the prohibitive costs of owning a car, in particular the higher cost of car insurance for residents of low-income neighbourhoods, highlighting the need for reforms of the auto insurance system.



Furthermore, our findings underscore the need for equity-based policy actions to enable immigrant men and women to achieve decent, stable employment. Irrespective of education level, participants in our study reported getting pushed into racialized and gendered occupations marked by low wages and high levels of precarity, and for which they were over-qualified. In fact, many were involved in a larger process of cross-border employment-related geographical mobility that resulted in their under/unemployment. In most cases, participants were unable to overcome barriers despite years spent in Canada, reflecting research from other studies that have found similar results (De Wolff, 2000; Galabuzi, 2001; Teelucksingh and Galabuzi, 2005; Premji *et al.*, 2014). Potential avenues for action include introducing employment equity policies at the provincial and municipal levels, instituting stronger and more proactive anti-discrimination legislation in the hiring process and in workplace settings, and reforming policy and funding formulae to expand employment/settlement services with proven track records of linking immigrants to well-paying, stable jobs in their professions. The severe economic precarity experienced by participants also points to the need to increase the minimum wage to above the poverty rate and adjusted for inflation (Law Commission of Ontario, 2012), and to address precarious employment more generally by such actions as limiting temporary or agency employment to legitimate needs and below a certain threshold, requiring employers to make temporary workers permanent after 3 months, expanding minimum work hours regulations to all workers, modernizing social benefits to include more workers, and ensuring more effective enforcement of regulations, as well as proactive inspections, particularly in sectors that have high proportions of racialized immigrant men and women.

Housing policies must also be considered, as many Toronto neighbourhoods have or are experiencing gentrification through illegal evictions, unjust rent increases and encroachment of developers, while waitlists for affordable housing are lengthy (Slater, 2004). Improving access to public transit can fuel this process as property values increase, so there is a need for transit-oriented development that includes affordable housing. Lastly, our results point to the need for a national-level universal, affordable and flexible child care program. Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest at the federal and provincial levels for such a program. Proponents have touted the economic and social benefits of this proposal, ranging from reduction of child poverty to more active labour market participation, especially for working women. The first step, however, for tackling these difficult tasks is to engage immigrant men and women in a leadership capacity in research, program planning, policy making, and public education programs to ensure that meaningful and appropriate solutions are developed.

## Notes

- 1 In line with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, we use the term “racialization.” This term recognizes the dynamic and complex process by which racial categories are socially produced by dominant groups in ways that entrench social inequalities (Galabuzi, 2001).
- 2 All participants spoke about their experiences of precarity and mobility. For participants currently unemployed, these included past experiences of employment in precarious jobs as well as experiences of job searching or career building activities.

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## SUMMARY

### Precarious Employment and Difficult Daily Commutes

Precarious employment is on the rise in Canada, increasing by nearly 50% in the last two decades. However, little is known about the mechanisms by which it can impact upon geographical mobility. Employment-related geographical mobility refers to mobility to, from and between workplaces, as well as mobility as part of work. We report on a qualitative study conducted among 27 immigrant men and women in Toronto that investigates the relationship between precarious employment and daily commutes while exploring the ways in which gender, class and migration structure this relationship.

Interview data reveal that participants were largely unable to work where they lived or live where they worked. Their precarious jobs were characterized by conditions that resulted in long, complex, unfamiliar, unsafe and expensive commutes. These commuting difficulties, in turn, resulted in participants having to refuse or quit jobs, including desirable jobs, or being unable to engage in labour market strategies that could improve their employment conditions (e.g. taking courses, volunteering, etc.). Participants' commuting difficulties were amplified by the delays, infrequency, unavailability and high cost of public transportation. These dynamics disproportionately and/or differentially impacted certain groups of workers.

Precarious work has led to workers having to absorb an ever-growing share of the costs associated with their employment, underscored in our study as time, effort and money spent travelling to and from work. We discuss the forces that underlie the spatial patterning of work and workers in Toronto, namely the growing income gap and the increased polarization among neighbourhoods that has resulted in low-income immigrants increasingly moving from the centre to the edges of the city. We propose policy recommendations for public transportation, employment, housing and child care that can help alleviate some of the difficulties described.

KEYWORDS: precarious work, geographical mobility, commuting, immigrants, gender.

## RÉSUMÉ

### Emploi précaire et déplacements quotidiens difficiles

L'emploi précaire poursuit sa croissance au Canada, augmentant de près de 50% au cours des deux dernières décennies. Toutefois, nous connaissons mal les mécanismes par lesquels cette forme d'organisation du travail peut influencer sur la mobilité géographique des travailleurs. La mobilité géographique liée à l'emploi renvoie ici aux divers déplacements que doivent effectuer les travailleurs depuis et entre les lieux de travail, ainsi que les déplacements intrinsèques à l'exercice de l'emploi lui-même. Les résultats qui suivent proviennent d'une étude qualitative effectuée auprès de 27 hommes et femmes immigrants vivant à Toronto, étude qui s'est attardée à la relation entre l'emploi précaire et les déplacements quotidiens qui y sont rattachés, tout en explorant les façons par lesquelles le genre, la classe sociale et la migration structurent cette relation.

Les données en provenance des entrevues indiquent que les participants étaient généralement incapables de travailler près de leur lieu de résidence, ou encore d'habiter près de leur lieu de travail. Leurs emplois précaires se caractérisaient par des conditions qui donnaient lieu à des déplacements quotidiens longs, complexes, peu familiers, dangereux et coûteux. En retour, les difficultés liées aux déplacements quotidiens faisaient en sorte que les participants devaient souvent refuser ou quitter des emplois, parfois intéressants, ou s'avéraient incapables de s'investir dans des stratégies qui auraient pu leur permettre d'améliorer leurs conditions de travail (par exemple, suivre des cours, faire du bénévolat, etc.). De plus, les difficultés vécues par les participants se trouvaient amplifiées par les délais, la rareté, l'indisponibilité et les coûts élevés des transports en commun. Ces dynamiques à l'œuvre affectaient de manières différentes et/ou disproportionnées certains groupes de travailleurs.

L'emploi précaire pousse les travailleurs à absorber une part toujours plus importante des coûts associés à leur emploi. L'étude met clairement en relief ces coûts tels le temps, l'effort et l'argent dépensés à voyager vers et depuis le lieu travail. Nous traitons ensuite des facteurs qui sous-tendent la répartition spatiale des emplois des travailleurs à Toronto, notamment l'écart grandissant des inégalités de revenus et l'accroissement de la polarisation des quartiers, phénomènes qui ont entraîné le déplacement des immigrants à faible revenu du centre vers les limites de la ville. Nous proposons des recommandations concernant le transport en commun, l'emploi, le logement et les services de garde à l'enfance susceptibles de contribuer à atténuer certaines des difficultés décrites.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** emploi précaire, mobilité géographique, déplacements quotidiens, immigrants, genre.

## RESUMEN

### Empleo precario y desplazamientos cotidianos difíciles

El empleo precario está en alza en Canadá, con un crecimiento cercano de 50% en las dos últimas décadas. Sin embargo, se conoce poco acerca de los mecanismos por los cuales éste puede afectar la movilidad geográfica. La movilidad geográfica ligada al empleo refiere aquí a los diversos desplazamientos que deben efectuar los trabajadores desde y entre los lugares de trabajo, así como los desplazamientos intrínsecos al trabajo. Los resultados que siguen provienen de un estudio cualitativo efectuado con 27 hombres y mujeres inmigrantes habitantes de Toronto, con el fin de estudiar la relación entre el empleo precario y los desplazamientos cotidianos vinculados al puesto, explorando así mismo la manera cómo el género, la clase social y las migraciones estructuran dicha relación.

El análisis de las entrevistas revela que los participantes eran mayoritariamente incapaces de trabajar cerca de su lugar de residencia, o de vivir cerca de su lugar de trabajo. Sus empleos precarios se caracterizaban por las condiciones que dan lugar a desplazamientos cotidianos largos, complejos, poco conocidos, peligrosos y costosos. A su turno, las dificultades vinculadas a los desplazamientos cotidianos llevaban a que los participantes rechacen frecuentemente un empleo o que se sientan obligados de abandonar el empleo, incluyendo puestos interesantes, o se sentían incapaces de implicarse en estrategias que les hubieran permitido mejorar sus condiciones de trabajo (por ejemplo, seguir cursos, hacer trabajos benévolos, etc.). Las dificultades vividas por los participantes se veían amplificadas por los retrasos, la rareza, la no disponibilidad y los costos elevados del transporte públicos. Estas dinámicas en acción afectan de maneras diferentes y/o desproporcionadas ciertos grupos de trabajadores.

El empleo precario ha conducido los trabajadores a absorber una parte cada vez más importante de los costos asociados a sus empleos tal como resalta de nuestro estudio, esto es, el tiempo, el esfuerzo y el dinero gastados en viajar hacia o desde el lugar de trabajo. Se trata enseguida los factores subyacentes a la repartición espacial del empleo y de los trabajadores en Toronto, particularmente la las desigualdades cada vez más importantes de los ingresos y el incremento de la polarización entre los barrios, fenómenos que han conducido a que los inmigrantes a bajo ingreso se desplacen del centro hacia los límites de la ciudad. Se proponen recomendaciones respecto al transporte público, el empleo, el alojamiento y los servicios de guardería infantiles susceptibles de contribuir a atenuar algunas de las dificultades descritas.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** empleo precario, movilidad geográfica, desplazamientos cotidianos, inmigrantes, género.