

The precarity trap: Longitudinal associations between precarious youth employment and mental health from the Australian HILDA Survey

Authors:

Guo K¹, Berry H¹, Bower M², Varma S¹, Thomas S¹, Meas D¹

¹ The Youth Employment Wellbeing Taskforce, The Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use, Faculty of Medicine and Health, The University of Sydney

² The Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use, Faculty of Medicine and Health, The University of Sydney

Background:

Young Australians are disproportionately impacted by involuntary unemployment, underemployment, job insecurity, and limited autonomy and labour protections. Global longitudinal evidence indicates adverse effects of precarious employment on mental health, however, there exists minimal literature focusing on young people. Co-designed and co-authored with a lived experience youth advisory group who defined 'precarious employment', identified variables of interest and interpreted study results, this study aimed to identify longitudinal trajectories of precarious employment during emerging adulthood (age 18-24) and investigate associations with mental health during youth (age 25) and adulthood (age 35).

Methods:

This study utilised multiple waves of survey data (2001-2019) from the nationally representative longitudinal Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey. The analytic sample (499, person-year observations=6011) was restricted to participants who were employed for at least two years between ages 18-24 between 2001-2008, with subsequent measures of mental health taken at 25 and 35 years. Group-based trajectory modelling and adjusted linear/multinomial regressions were performed, based on a composite measure of multiple survey items spanning perceived job precarity (exposure), and mental health symptoms using the self-reported Mental Health Inventory derived from the Short Form Health Survey (outcome).

Results:

Two distinct trajectories of precarious employment were identified: persistently high, and low and decreasing precarity. Compared to the low and decreasing reference group, the persistently high group had significantly poorer mental health at age 25 [standardized coefficients (β): -0.349 95% confidence interval: -0.0426, -0.271] and age 35 [β : -0.09, 95% confidence interval -0.14, -0.04].

Conclusion:

Chronically high levels of precarious employment during emerging adulthood are associated with poorer mental health in the short- and long-term. Policymakers and employers can help to safeguard the current and future mental health of Australians by improving young people's job security, stability, autonomy and protections, while expanding access to mental health supports where appropriate.

Presenting author biography:

Sonali is a young person whose lived experience with mental ill-health drives her research, advocacy and volunteering efforts. She recently graduated from the Australian National University and currently works at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the University of Sydney's Matilda Centre.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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