

Improving the economic security of casual workers in B.C.^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

- Full report in pdf^[2]

- Summary in pdf^[3]

Excerpts from an interview with the authors:

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Many experts are puzzling over a paradox in British Columbia's economy -- why have years of solid growth and low unemployment failed to translate into improved earnings for those in lower end jobs?

One piece of the puzzle can be found in the growth in casual work. "Casual" means you have a job but no job security -- working without a contract or with one that lasts a short time (whereas people with permanent jobs expect continuing employment, barring circumstances such as layoffs.)

The likelihood of being in casual employment has increased more in B.C. compared to the rest of Canada -- despite the buoyant economic conditions in the province. In other words, even though a strong economy is increasing the pool of available jobs, the quality of those jobs is deteriorating. Casual (or temporary) employment often gets mixed up in the debate about "flexibility." For some workers, such as professional consultants, the greater flexibility afforded by temporary work can be both desirable and well-paid. But for most people, the flexibility that comes with temporary work is good for the employer and costly for the employee -- costly in terms of personal and family stress and financial hardship.

Casual workers typically have lower-quality jobs and fewer benefits such as holiday pay, extended health coverage or pensions. They usually also have lower pay. Casual jobs are found across both the private and public sectors, particularly in teaching and child care/home support occupations, as well as sales and services, construction trades and occupations in primary industry.

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The overwhelming picture that emerges from our research is of the double bind in which financial and time constraints affect all aspects of casual workers' lives and their ability to balance work and family obligations. There is a constant need for more income, yet this is continually undermined by irregular hours, shift work, short call-ins, minimal notice of work schedules, and low pay.

Comments by respondents in the survey reflect the stresses of being trapped in involuntary casual work:

- "I constantly have to move my kids to different care-givers."...

Recent provincial policy changes have contributed to the growth in casual work.....

It is time the provincial government recognized its responsibility to make sure more British Columbians share in the good times. In addition to reversing the policies listed above, the province should enhance the economic security of workers in the lower end of the labour market by:

- Immediately increasing the minimum wage to \$10 and indexing it to inflation.
- Expanding the Employment Standards Act so that it covers all workers, including independent contract workers and casual workers.
- Establishing reasonable minimum shifts and contract lengths and strengthening rules for termination/dismissal, to ensure work provides people with a basic level of security and predictability.
- Removing barriers to unionization.
- Enhancing child care subsidies and lowering the income threshold at which parents become eligible.

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-reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

Region: British Columbia^[4]

Tags: subsidy^[5]

economics^[6]

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