

PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT AND WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

This summary is based on an analysis of the findings of the Second European Survey on Working Conditions conducted in 1996 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (see page 7).

The sub-population included in the analysis (employees, excluding apprentices) was 12 099.

- Paid employment accounts for 82% of total employment in the European Union. Precarious paid employment (fixed-term contracts and temporary work) accounts for 15% of paid employment in the EU.
- Precarious employment accounts for 49% of paid employment occupied for less than 1 year and is tending to become the only way of gaining a foothold in the labour market. This explains why young people are more affected, especially when they have left school early.
- **International comparisons** are difficult because of the lack of comparable definitions and also because:
 - the proportion of self-employment (which may be perceived as a form of precariousness by some groups of self-employed workers);
 - the proportion of part-time work (which may be a cause of precariousness for employees when it is not chosen).
- The proportions of non-permanent jobs differ within the structure of the European labour market. Precarious employment is **more widespread** in:
 - the least skilled occupational groups (agricultural employees, labourers, etc.);
 - economic sectors in which work is very seasonal (primary sector, hotels and restaurants, etc.); and
 - small enterprises.
- The **working conditions of precarious workers** are **worse** than those of permanent workers:
 - 57% of temporary workers work in painful or tiring positions (in comparison with 42% of permanent workers);
 - 38% are exposed to intense noise (29%);
 - 66% perform repetitive movements (55%);
 - 46% perform short repetitive tasks (36%).
- Levels of **absenteeism** are highest among workers on permanent contracts.
- From the point of view of **work organisation** and the content of tasks, precarious workers:
 - perform work that is more monotonous and repetitive;
 - have less opportunity to acquire new skills from their work and receive less training;
 - although less exposed than permanent workers to high speed work, have much less autonomy over the management of their work and time;
 - are not consulted to the same extent and play less of a part in decision-making.
- The working conditions are reflected by the self reported **health problems**:
 - more musculo-skeletal problems (brought about in particular by repetitive work) and fatigue;
 - in contrast, however, less stress and mental health problems (as a result of lower levels of exposure to work at high speed).
- While poorer working conditions are largely explained by the profile of the jobs concerned, **precarious status undoubtedly worsens the work situation** (in other words, in identical jobs, precarious status entails poorer working conditions for precarious workers than for other workers).



Paid employment under precarious status (fixed-term contracts and temporary work) accounts for 12.5% of total employment in the EU (and for 15% of paid employment). This atypical form of paid employment is closely connected with the economic situation: it accounts for 49% of all paid employment occupied for less than one year in the EU¹ (43% of total employment). (Figures 1 & 2)

Employment under fixed-term or temporary contracts - especially at the time of recruitment - is to be found throughout the EU. Two countries stand out because of particularly high levels of paid employment under

precarious contracts: Spain (40% of paid employees work under precarious contracts) and France (22%). In contrast, Luxembourg and Austria stand out because of very low levels of precarious employment (9%).

When it is not a choice, part-time work may also play a part in making employment precarious. The figures for part-time employees are highest in the United Kingdom, particularly when the employment contract is precarious (fixed-term or temporary).

Cultural, legislative and structural differences between the EU Member States make comparisons by country difficult.

Distribution of employees by contract of employment

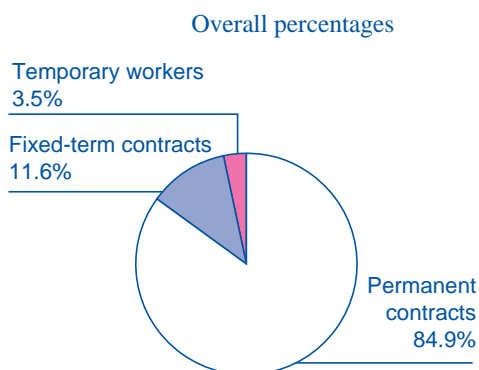


Figure 1

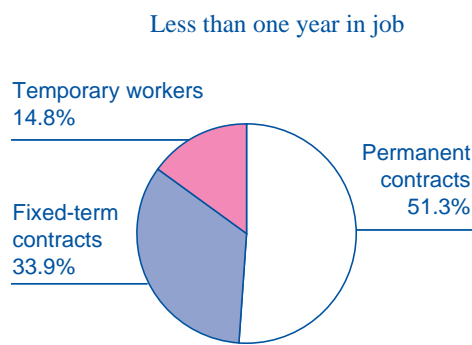


Figure 2

Individual characteristics

* Age

Age goes together with precarious employment in a clear-cut way for the under-25s. This age effect is due to the very strong link between precarious employment and recruitment. At the other extreme, new recruits aged 54 or more (length of service of one year or less) are also affected to a greater extent by precarious forms of employment. Overall, people born during the “baby boom” of the post-war period up to the beginning of the 1960s occupy most of the stable employment in Europe today. (Figure 3)

* Sex

Women account for 44% of the employed population (42% of all workers in the EU). In overall terms,

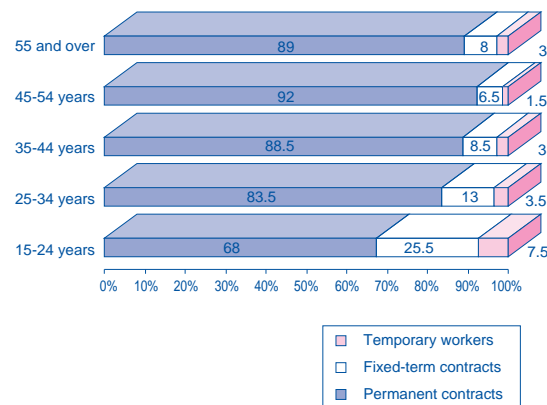


Figure 3

women are more exposed than men to precarious forms of paid employment: they account for 48% of employees employed under fixed-term and temporary contracts.

The main difference, however, in terms of women’s employment status is part-time work. Women account for 74.5% of all employees working less than 36 hours

Employed women, working time and status (%)

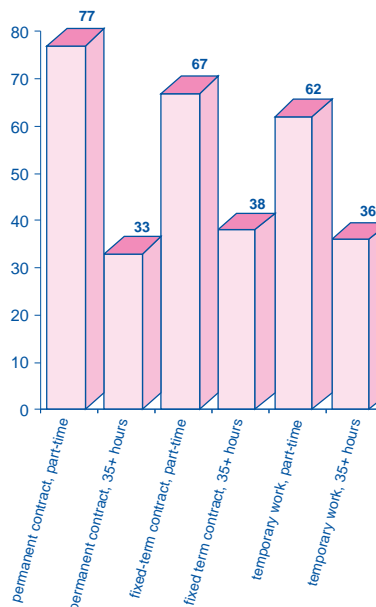


Figure 4

¹ It is assumed that jobs occupied for less than one year on the basis of a precarious contract (fixed-term or temporary) have been occupied on this basis since the date of recruitment.

per week. This over-representation of women is especially strong in stable jobs (i.e. under permanent contracts). (Figure 4)

** Age at the end of education*

Among the group of newly recruited employees, people with low levels of education (leaving school before the

age of 16) are more exposed to forms of precarious employment than people who left school later.

Continuing to attend education for longer periods does not, however, provide protection against precarious employment. On average, 16% of employees who left education after the age of 19 are employed under precarious contracts.

■ Structural distribution

** Occupational group*

The occupational groups most exposed to precarious forms of paid employment have low qualification levels. These are largely agricultural and primary-sector workers and unskilled workers and labourers (35% and 26% respectively of all employees work under precarious contracts). (Figure 5)

** Economic sector*

Non-permanent jobs are concentrated in the primary sector, hotels and restaurants and construction (precarious employment accounting for 35.6%, 26.7% and 16% respectively of all paid employment) - there are high levels of seasonal work in all these sectors.

** Enterprise size*

Small enterprises (from 1 to 9 employees) make greater use of precarious employment contracts than larger

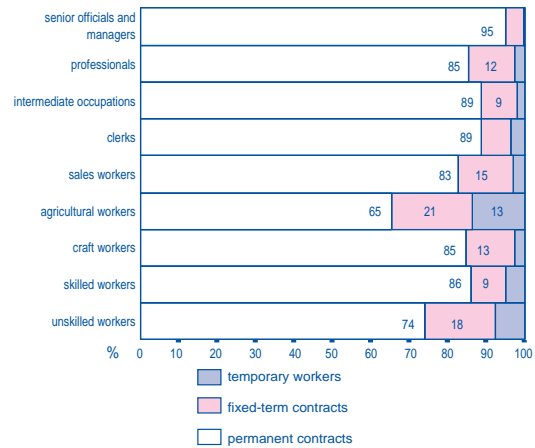


Figure 5

enterprises (21% of non-permanent contracts in comparison with 11% in enterprises with 500 or more employees).

■ Exposure to physical risks

43% of EU employees suffer awkward postures for at least one-quarter of their time and almost 30% of these are exposed, for at least one-quarter of their time, to “noise that is so loud that they have to raise their voices to speak to people”. (Figure 6)

Employees under precarious contracts - and in particular temporary workers - are much more exposed than other workers to these factors of physical discomfort, whether in the performance of their work (awkward postures, handling heavy loads, etc.) or in their working environment (noise, toxic environment, etc.).

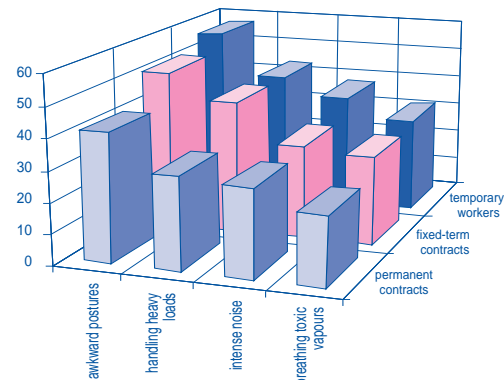


Figure 6

■ Absenteeism

25.5% of EU employees were absent at least once from their workplace for health reasons during the preceding year. Overall, there is a link between absenteeism and work entailing discomfort, absenteeism being more widespread among people whose working conditions are poor than among other workers. This link can be found whatever the type of employment contract. A comparison of the three groups of employees shows, however, that those workers who are absent most often

and for the longest periods are the least exposed to physical risks: employees on permanent contracts. There is therefore an inverse correlation between precarious status and absenteeism, which would tend to show that the link between stable status and absenteeism is stronger than the link between work entailing discomfort and absenteeism: a temporary worker who always has to work in an awkward position is on average less often absent than a worker on a permanent contract who hardly ever has to work in such a position. (Table 1)

Table 1

Average number of days of absence	Permanent contracts	Fixed-term contracts	Temporary workers
permanent exposure to awkward working positions	9	6	2.4
no exposure to awkward working positions	2.7	2	0.7

■ Repetitive work

Repetitive and uncomfortable work is not uncommon in Europe. Over 56% of EU employees therefore have to perform repetitive hand or arm movements for at least one-quarter of their time. Repetitive work is most widespread among employees on precarious contracts. Over 65% of temporary workers and 64% of fixed-term contract workers have to perform “repetitive hand or arm movements” for at least one-quarter of their time in comparison with “only” 55% of permanent employees. (Figure 7)

Interest in the work performed goes together with the level of physical discomfort experienced. The largest numbers of employees who find their work monotonous and not very enriching are temporary workers and, to a smaller extent, fixed-term contract workers.

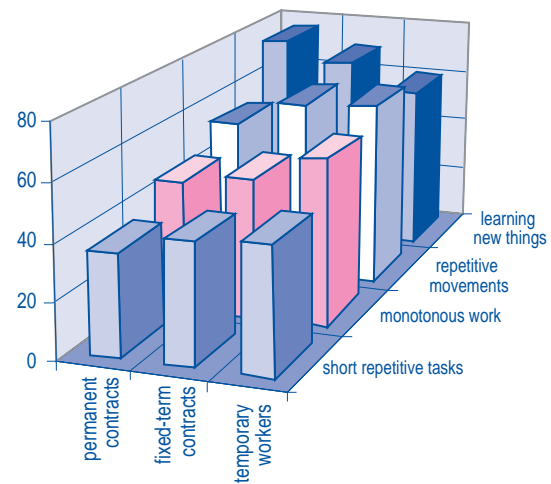


Figure 7

■ Over-qualification / under-qualification

Feeling over-qualified or under-qualified for the content of your job means that you are not satisfied with your job. Temporary workers account for by far the largest numbers for whom there is a mismatch between tasks and qualifications. Almost one out of three temporary workers feel that their work is not in keeping with their abilities. (Figure 8)

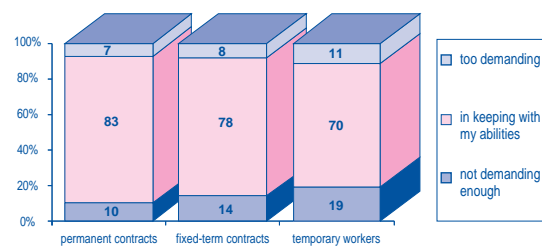


Figure 8

■ Pace and speed of work

Pressures induced by the pace of work are very high: 55% of all EU employees say that they work at “high speed” and 58% have to meet “very tight and very short deadlines” (for at least one-quarter of their time). This feature of work has increased since the First European Survey on Working Conditions (conducted in 1991).

Overall, all employees, whatever the type of employment contract, are exposed to substantial pressures arising from the pace of work. Very tight and short deadlines are, however, more the lot of employees on fixed-term contracts, while working at a fast pace is more the lot of employees on permanent contracts. (Figure 9)

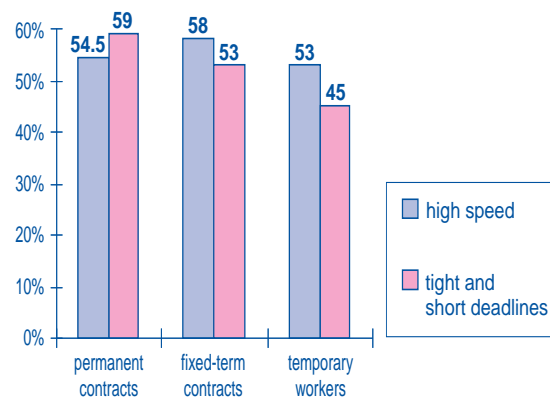


Figure 9

Table 2

<i>Factors determining the pace at which employees work (%)</i>				
	Permanent contracts	Fixed-term contracts	Temporary workers	All employees
Customers, passengers, etc. (for at least 1/4 of time)	67	61	50.5	66
Colleagues	40	43.5	47.5	41
Direct hierarchical supervision	37.5	51.5	55.5	40
Production standards	37	36	38	37
Automatic speed of a machine or movement of a product	22.5	23.5	31.5	23

In proportional terms, permanent employees, followed by fixed-term employees, are more likely to have contacts with people from outside their work environment. Tight deadlines and commercial demand are therefore correlated.

Employees on precarious contracts are more exposed, however, to pressures on the pace of work arising directly from the organisation of the production process. Temporary workers suffer most from these industrial constraints. (Table 2)

■ Autonomy

The level of autonomy of European workers is fairly small in overall terms. Of the population in employment who have been in their jobs for at least one year², 42% cannot take a break when they want, 39% are not free to change the order in which they perform their tasks and almost one-third cannot adapt

their working methods or the speed at which they work. In every case employees on precarious contracts have less personal freedom to change their working speeds, adapt their methods or even change the order in which they perform tasks. There are, however few differences as regards fixed times for starting and finishing work each day. (Table 3)

Table 3

At least 1 year in job (%):	Permanent contracts	Fixed-term contracts	Temporary workers	All employees
Fixed working hours	71.5	73	71	72
Not free to decide when to take leave	46.5	55	57	47.5
Not free to take a break when they want	41.5	46	42	42
Not free to choose or adapt the pace or speed at which they work	30.5	37	41	31.5
Not free to choose or change the order in which they perform their tasks	38	44.5	49	39
Not free to choose or modify their working methods	30.5	41	37.5	31.5

■ Working hours

The average working week for all EU employees is 38 hours. Employees under precarious contracts are more exposed to both longer and shorter working hours. This tendency towards atypical working hours is particularly clear-cut among temporary workers.

The proportion of employees whose status is precarious who work part-time is highest in the United Kingdom (57% working less than 36 hours per week, including 23% working between 20 and 30 hours and 20% less than 20 hours per week). In southern Europe, in contrast, very high percentages of employees on precarious contracts work over 44 hours per week (32% in Italy, 31% in Spain and 27% in Greece and Portugal in comparison with an average of 17%). (Figure 10)

* Full-time / part-time

Proportionally larger numbers of employees on precarious contracts work part-time: 36% of temporary workers and 32% of fixed-term contract workers work less than 36 hours per week in comparison with 22% of permanent employees.

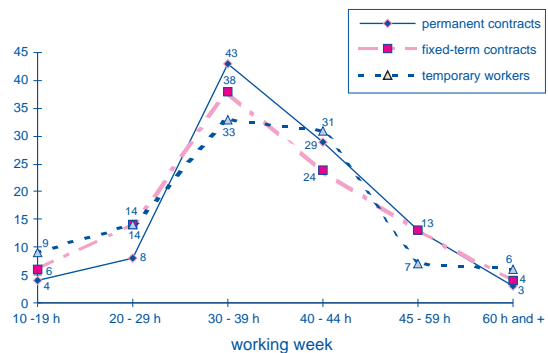


Figure 10

For the same type of employment contract, part-time employees are proportionally less exposed to (or are less consciously aware of) hard working conditions than those working over 35 hours per week. The overall links that have been observed are still to be found, however, as the working conditions of employees combining precarious status with part-time work are always poorer than those of permanent employees (whether they work full-time or part-time).

² This filter was chosen to cancel out the bias caused by periods of induction into new jobs during which there tends to be little individual initiative. For this newly arrived population, the difference in the autonomy of employees on permanent contracts and employees on precarious contracts (in particular temporary workers) is very strongly in favour of the former.

* *Atypical working hours, shift work, etc.*

One out of five employees works at least one night per month, one out of four works at least one Sunday per month and close on one out of two works at least one Saturday per month. Overall, permanent employment status provides no protection against atypical working hours, since the percentage differences are small. There is more of a difference as regards the number of nights, Sundays or Saturdays worked, with permanent employees faring better.

Shift work and irregular hours are particularly the case for temporary workers, over 40% of whom work under these conditions (21% and 20% respectively). Fixed-term contract employees are more likely to work irregular hours than those on permanent contracts, but are not more exposed to shift work than the latter (15%). (Table 4)

Table 4

%	Permanent contracts	Fixed-term contracts	Temporary workers	All employees
night work (at least 1 night per month)	19	21	22	19.5
Sunday work (at least one Sunday per month)	25	26.5	26	25.5
Saturday work (at least one Saturday per month)	48	49.5	50	48.5
Shift work or irregular hours	30	32	41	31

Integration within the workplace

* *In-house training*

Over 32% of EU employees had received in-house training during the year preceding the survey. The in-house training that enterprises organise is chiefly for permanent employees. People whose contractual link with the enterprise in which they work is further removed (temporary workers recruited through a temporary work agency) are proportionally the smallest number to have received training during the preceding twelve months. (Figure 11)

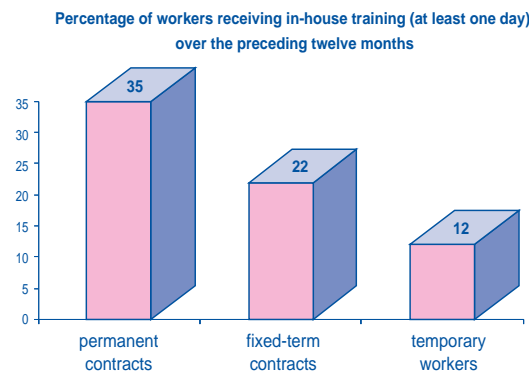


Figure 11

* *Participation*

Employees are most likely to discuss problems relating to their work with colleagues (75%). Two-thirds discuss such problems with their boss and only one-quarter with personnel representatives (this percentage may well be on the low side because not all enterprises have elected personnel representatives).

Employment under precarious status goes together with lower levels of discussion at the workplace, especially in the case of temporary workers. The same link can be found as regards consultation about organisational change within the workplace. (Figure 12)

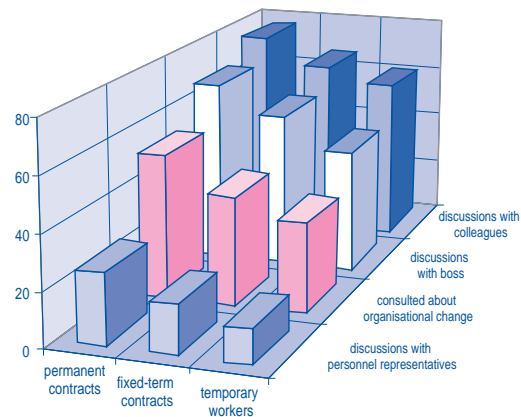


Figure 12

* *Discrimination*

Psychological violence, represented by intimidating behaviour, is the most widespread type of violence in the workplace. Employees who are not as well integrated into the workplace are most exposed to discrimination of all types.

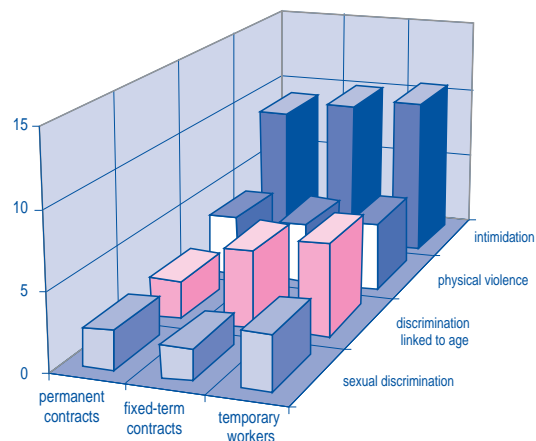
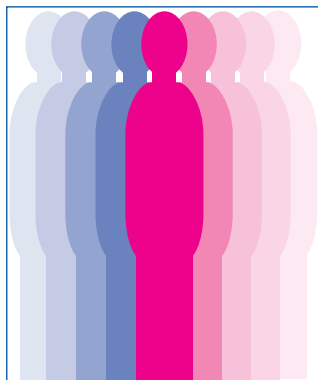


Figure 13



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