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The State of

Precarious Employment for

Medical Laboratory Assistants

in Canada

Results of a National Survey

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Executive Summary

**Background**

The International Labour Organization defines precarious employment as the inadequacy of rights and protection at work. Precarious employment can be associated with temporary contracts, interim work, certain types of self-employment, involuntary part-time work, etc. Frequently, such jobs have less financial security, lower wages, less access to benefits and greater uncertainty about future employment income. The negative impact of such precarity has been well documented. A search within the peer-reviewed and grey literature found a limited number of publications discussing employment conditions for medical laboratory assistants (MLAs) in Canada. This indicated a need for investigation on the topic.

**Purpose**

Using mixed-method design (survey and focus groups), the purpose of this study was to better understand the precarious employment situation of MLAs in Canadian laboratories and determine any psychological or health-related impacts on employee well-being. The results of the survey are presented in this report.

**Survey**

The Employment Precarity Index (EPI) is the primary measure used to characterize employment conditions and was used in the current study. The EPI combines direct and indirect measures of employment insecurity to define precarious employment, such as employment relationship, income uncertainty, scheduling uncertainty and relationship uncertainty. The survey was disseminated to potentially eligible MLAs utilizing the CSMLS membership roster and additional snowball recruitment techniques. The survey was provided online in English and French.

**Results**

A total of 289 MLAs participated in the survey with only three surveys being excluded from the analysis due to incompletion (N = 286). Overall, there is a high level of MLA precarious employment as defined by the EPI.

* Only 35% (100/286) of MLAs have a permanent full-time position with guaranteed hours of more than 30 per week.
* A total of 68% of MLAs were in precarious or vulnerable positions, and less than one-third held secure or stable jobs (31%).

A precarious employment status represents the greatest number of individuals in all age categories except for 34–44, which is represented by vulnerable. No age category is dominated by secure or stable positions. In addition, MLAs lacked consistent access to employee benefits and financial security.

**Conclusion**

The results from the current study suggest that MLAs are experiencing a higher than average level of precarious employment as compared to other health professions in Canada. Their ability to obtain consistent and stable work that provides benefits and financial security is being undermined. Ultimately, the results indicate a need for clinical laboratories across Canada to review their employee hiring practices and support models that decrease precarious employment and increase stable and secure positions, limiting the potential negative impacts precarity can have.

The State of Precarious Employment for Medical Laboratory Assistants in Canada

# Background

Although the Canadian labour market is relatively strong, many workers are employed in non-standard jobs. These individuals may have unpredictable work hours, lack job security, receive insufficient health benefits and/or lack access to some labour standards protections. The Canadian government is “committed to bringing forward legislation to update federal labour standards to reflect the realities of the 21st century workplace and the challenges of precarious work for workers in the federally regulated private sector” (p. 22).[[1]](#footnote-1) In an extensive review and consultation process by Employment and Social Development Canada, it was identified that labour standards for workers in non-standard employment, understanding the worker voice, wages and benefits could merit from further study.[[2]](#footnote-2) Concurrently, there are political urgings for the government to monitor the public sector more heavily due to the similarities of impact by non-standard employment in that realm.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) has identified that the state of non-standard jobs, also called precarious employment, for medical laboratory assistants (MLAs) is not understood well in Canada. Stakeholder and membership conversations, in addition to the minimally published data, elude to high levels of MLA precarious jobs, which can have a negative impact on individuals and the profession. The current study focuses on obtaining baseline data on precarious employment for the Canadian MLA population.

## Precarious Employment Defined

The International Labour Organization defines precarious employment as the inadequacy of rights and protection at work.[[4]](#footnote-4),[[5]](#footnote-5) Precarious employment can be associated with informal jobs (e.g., payment for work that is not captured within the income tax process) or formal jobs, such as temporary contracts, interim work, certain types of self-employment and involuntary part-time work. Frequently, the work is associated with reduced financial security stemming from lower wages, less access to benefits, such as private pension plans and complementary health insurance, and greater uncertainty about future employment income.[[6]](#footnote-6) In order to measure the level of which individuals are in precarious positions, the Employment Precarity Index (EPI) can be considered the primary tool to characterize and monitor employment conditions. The EPI classifies employment on a continuum, as summarized in Table 1.

## ****Table 1: Employment Precarity Index – Employment Continuum Defined****

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Precarious | Vulnerable | Stable | Secure |
| Worker has:  • unstable and insecure employment  • irregular work hours making time management difficult  • unpredictable wages and no other benefits  • less access to job training  Usually characterized as temporary, part-time, limited term, and contract work | Worker has:  • a little more employment security  • unreliable work hours or permanence  • lower earning and likely few, if any, benefits  • less access to training and participation in the workplace | Worker has:  • more predictability • more reliable hours  • more permanence in their position  • more stable wage and maybe access to benefits  • more access to professional development  • more encouragement to voice concerns | Worker has:  • predictable and constant hours  • job security and potential for a career path  • stable wage  • benefits such as medical, paid leaves, and pension  Usually characterized as “standard employment relationship” |

Source: https://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/PERI-Report-Info-Brief-1-May-2.pdf

## Health Care Workers

The Canadian health care system employed over 1.8 million workers in 2016 and was the second largest employer group in the country after retail. The health care workforce is made up largely of females (81%) who are highly educated. However, there are a significant number of part-time workers (23%) compared to other industries,[[7]](#footnote-7) and recent analysis indicates that precarious employment is rising.[[8]](#footnote-8) For example, a study conducted in southern Ontario demonstrated the prevalence of precarious jobs increased by 50% over 20 years.[[9]](#footnote-9) As well, precarious employment is typically thought to be associated with those that are new professionals or those close to retirement; however, national trends show precarious employment is rising in all age categories. For instance, 2017 data identified that half of all workers in temporary jobs were between the ages of 25 and 54.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The negative impact of precarity has been well documented.[[11]](#footnote-11) Research has shown that it contributes to decreased morale, an increase in mental health concerns[[12]](#footnote-12) and increased psychical injuries, stress and sickness.[[13]](#footnote-13) In a study by Stinson et al. (2005), women in precarious work described their working conditions as tense, hectic, exhausting and stressful. Precarious work environments were characterized by strained employee-supervisor relationships and emotional effects were described as distress, depression, anger and frustration.[[14]](#footnote-14) The negative impact of precarious employment goes beyond the individual as well. The Access Alliance suggests that “precarious employment conditions can severely strain and damage family relationships and communication” (p. 10).[[15]](#footnote-15) Such outcomes highlight the need to monitor the level of precarious employment in Canada.

A search within the peer reviewed and grey literature found a limited number of publications discussing employment conditions for MLAs in Canada. In fact, little has been published about the profession’s employment characteristics overall. The Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS) for the National Occupational Code (NOC) 3212, which includes MLAs and pathology assistants, predicts that the ratio of job openings to job seekers is to be consistent in the future (2017-2026) and is well balanced.[[16]](#footnote-16) However, regional and/or provincial variations may exist that cloud underlying issues in specific locations.[[17]](#footnote-17) As an example, data from the COPS showed that the job outlook ratings for MLAs and pathologists' assistants (NOC 3212) in Ontario is “below average” (2017-2021 projections). This is defined as “labour market conditions that result in difficulty to find stable work or employment prospects are not attractive or are deteriorating relative to those in other industries or occupations.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

## Newly Certified MLA Graduates

The CSMLS produces an annual survey which examines the employment rate of medical laboratory professionals one year after successful completion of the CSMLS certification exam.[[19]](#footnote-19) The data provides trending labour market information that can be used to monitor clinical laboratory health human resource needs and set expectations for academic programs and their students entering into the profession.

In the most recent report, MLAs and medical laboratory technologists (MLTs) who passed their CSMLS certification exam in 2017 were asked to complete the survey in 2018. The results showcased the stability of MLT employment, whereas the MLA data showed greater position instability moving into the labour market as has been the trend in recent years. MLAs were significantly more likely to be working in a non-permanent certification level position and in a part-time or casual employment status year over year. Thus, there is a strong trend of employers hiring newly certified MLA graduates in precarious positions. Highlights from the report:

* Ninety-five per cent of MLTs indicated that they were employed at the time of the survey compared to 74% of MLAs one year post certification.
* Of these survey participants, 96% of the employed MLTs stated they were working in a job at their certification level, whereas 88% employed MLAs stated the same.
* Thirty-one per cent of MLAs had two or more jobs one year post certification compared to only 13% of MLTs.
* To the statement, “Considering my experience, education and training, I am satisfied with my job,” only 69% of MLAs positively agreed compared to 91% of MLTs.

Although these results only reflect the experience of young professionals, they are in line with stakeholder conversations CSMLS has had with MLAs at later career stages. The degree to which professionals in later stages of their career are in precarious employment is unknown.

Purpose

Using mixed-method design (survey and focus groups), the purpose of this study was to better understand the precarious employment situation of MLAs in Canadian laboratories and determine any psychological or health-related impacts on employee well-being. The results of the survey will be presented in this report only.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Methodology

This study was conducted by CSMLS in conjunction with an allied health science student as a requirement for her research practicum (Noelle Cater, Ontario Tech University).

## ****Participants****

The following were the eligibility criteria to participate in the study survey:

* Any individual working or seeking work in the MLA profession within the Canadian environment.
* The participant may or may not be a CSMLS member.
* The participant must be 19 years of age or older.

Research Tools

### Employment Precarity Index (EPI)

The Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO) Employment Precarity Index (EPI)[[21]](#footnote-21) was developed and used by the United Way Toronto & York Region – McMaster University SSHRC CURA project. The EPI is the primary measure used to characterize employment conditions and was used in the current study.[[22]](#footnote-22) The Index combines direct and indirect measures of employment insecurity to define precarious employment, such as employment relationship, income uncertainty, scheduling uncertainty and relationship uncertainty. It utilizes the employment continuum as described in Table 1. The average Index score for the general population in the precarious cluster has been reported as 53.3.

The survey was disseminated to potentially eligible MLAs utilizing the CSMLS membership roster and additional snowball recruitment techniques. The survey was provided online in English and French.

Results

## Demographics

A total of 289 MLAs participated in the survey with only three surveys being excluded from the analysis due to incompletion (N = 286). Participants represented a wide age range, with 52% of respondents between 25–44 years old. Those below (14%, 40/286) and those above this age category (24%, 69/286; only 6%, 16/286, were 55 or older) consisted of the remaining categories. The vast majority of participants were CSMLS members (99%, 282/285) and represented all provinces and territories except Nunavut.

## Table 2: Participation by Residence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Residence | Number of Participants | Percentage of Participants |
| Alberta | 52 | 18% |
| British Columbia | 18 | 6% |
| Manitoba | 18 | 6% |
| New Brunswick | 21 | 7% |
| Newfoundland and Labrador | 31 | 11% |
| Northwest Territories | 3 | 1% |
| Nova Scotia | 38 | 13% |
| Ontario | 93 | 33% |
| Prince Edward Island | 5 | 2% |
| Saskatchewan | 5 | 2% |
| Yukon | 1 | 0% |
| Grand Total | **285** | **100%** |

## Job Status

The survey defined an ideal employment situation as an individual who has one employer, who is expecting to work for this employer a year from now, who receives at least 30 hours of work a week and who receives benefits. Only 60% (167/278) of MLA respondents stated that this was an accurate description of their employment relations, indicating that a significant percentage (40%) of MLAs are in non-standard positions. Furthermore, the analysis showed that the MLA employment landscape reflected a high degree of temporary, casual and part-time positions, with only 35% (100/286) having permanent full-time positions with guaranteed hours of more than 30 per week (see Table 3).

## Table 3: Job Descriptions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Which of the following best describes the job/contract that paid you the most in the last three months? | Number of Participants | Percentage of Participants |
| Self-employed, no employees work for me | 5 | 2% |
| Casual | 47 | 16% |
| Temporary/short-term contract (less than a year) | 51 | 18% |
| Fixed-term contract, one year or more | 8 | 3% |
| Permanent part time, less than 30 hours per week | 60 | 21% |
| Permanent full time, hours vary from week to week and could sometimes be less than 30 hours | 15 | 5% |
| Permanent full time, more than 30 hours per week | 100 | 35% |

Overall, there is a high level of MLA precarious employment as defined by the EPI. The average Index score for those in the precarious cluster was 54.6, which is slightly higher than the 53.3 as reported in the literature (see Methodology section). Graph 1 shows that 68% of MLAs who completed the survey were in precarious or vulnerable positions and less than one-third held secure or stable jobs (31%).

## Graph 1: Employment Status of Canadian MLAs

The above results are in line with the 2018 CSMLS Newly Certified Graduate Survey that found 31% of MLAs had two or more jobs one year post certification, indicating a consistently high level of non-standard employment between the two surveys. Although the surveys utilize different classification methods for defining employment status, it is possible to generally compare the results. Table 4 shows the divergence between temporary and part-time positions within the surveys.

## Table 4: EPI and Newly Certified Graduate and Employment Status – Result Comparison

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Job Status** | **EPI Survey** | **Newly Certified Graduate Survey** |
| Self-employed, no employees work for me | 2% | Not recorded |
| Casual | 16% | 10% |
| Temporary (full or part time) | 21% | 47% |
| Permanent part time | 21% | 17% |
| Permanent full time (variable or consistent hours) | 40% | 26% |

The variability between age categories within the EPI was also examined. Table 5 shows the employment status by age category. Comparing the red lines (precarious and vulnerable) to the green lines (stable and secure), the degree to which precarious and vulnerable positions are occurring is highly apparent. A precarious employment status represents the greatest number of individuals in all age categories except 34–44, which is represented by vulnerable. No age category is dominated by secure or stable positions.

## Table 5: Employment Status by Age Category

## Employee Benefits

Other pertinent results relate to the lack of employee benefits, including:

* Sixty-four per cent (174/274) of MLAs said they received employment benefits from their current employer(s), such as a drug plan, vision, dental and life insurance.
* Sixty-nine per cent (189/274) said their employer provided a private retirement income plan, such as a pension plan or a contribution to a registered retirement savings plan (RRSP).
* Forty-eight per cent (131/273) of respondents said they did not “usually” get paid if they miss a day’s work.
* Thirty-eight per cent (101/264) indicated that it was at least “somewhat likely” that their current employment would be negatively affected if they raised a health and safety concern or raised an employment rights concern with their employer(s).

## Financial Stability

In regards to financial stability, variability in income can have a major impact on one’s life. According to the survey results, when considering the previous 12 months, only 15% (37/253) of respondents experienced income stability. Forty-seven per cent experienced “some” or “a lot” of variability in their income, highlighting the fact that the financial stability of MLAs, as a professional group, can be considered consistently compromised due to employment status. In addition, 38% (102/268) of MLAs stated that they were “somewhat likely” to “very likely” to have their total hours of paid income reduced in the next six months (see Graph 2).

## Graph 2: Income Reduction Predictions

Interestingly, although financial instability was high, on-call requests for work were only attributed to 15% (41/267) of the work conducted in the previous three months (half of the time or more). Sixty-one per cent of MLAs (162/267) were never “on call,” while 24% (64/267) said they were on call “some of the time.” This is consistent with 85% (224/263) of MLAs knowing their schedule “most of the time” or “always” at least one week in advance. However, this also means that 15% (39/263) of MLAs know their schedule one week in advance half of the time or less on a regular basis. Four per cent (11/262) of respondents noted that a portion of their income was received in cash over the previous three months.

The survey asked participants the relative number of paid hours that came from temporary employment agencies in the past three months. Eighty-one per cent indicated “none” of their paid hours were from temporary agencies, while 16% said “all.”

# Conclusion

*“Labour standards establish the basic rights of employees regarding hours of work, holidays, leaves, wages and other working conditions. With significant economic and technological changes affecting the world of work in recent years, it has become clear that these basic rights require modernizing. They need to better reflect the realities of the 21st century workplace and the challenges facing workers.”*[[23]](#footnote-23)

~ Employment and Social Development Canada

The results from the current study suggest that MLAs are experiencing a higher than average level of precarious employment as compared to other health professions in Canada. Their ability to obtain consistent and stable work that provides benefits and financial security is being undermined. Ultimately, the results indicate a need for clinical laboratories across Canada to review their employee hiring practices and support models that decrease precarious employment and increase stable and secure positions, limiting the potential negative impacts precarity can have.

1. For current information, follow the progress of Private Members’ Business Motion 194 (e.g., <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/HUMA/Reports/RP10553151/humarp19/humarp19-e.pdf>) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-social-development/campaigns/labour-standards/1548-MLS_WWH-Report_EN.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.criaw-icref.ca/images/userfiles/files/Women%20and%20Public%20Sector%20Precarity%20FINAL(1).pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://hillnotes.ca/2018/11/21/precarious-employment-in-canada-an-overview/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.ilo.org/actrav/events/WCMS_153972/lang--en/index.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://hillnotes.ca/2018/11/21/precarious-employment-in-canada-an-overview/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://occupations.esdc.gc.ca/sppc-cops/l.3bd.2t.1ils@-eng.jsp?lid=85> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://hillnotes.ca/2018/11/21/precarious-employment-in-canada-an-overview/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://pepso.ca/documents/precarity-penalty.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://cupe.ca/myth-buster-precarious-employment> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://pepso.ca/documents/precarity-penalty.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/public-disservice> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241642968_Contracting_Out_Hospital_Support_Jobs_The_Effects_of_Poverty_Wages_Excessive_Workload_and_Job_Insecurity_on_Work_and_Family_Life> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC_Office_Pubs/bc_2005/pains_privatization.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://accessalliance.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Summary_Where-are-the-Good-Jobs-Report-2013.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <http://occupations.esdc.gc.ca/sppc-cops/occupationsummarydetail.jsp?&tid=114> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://hillnotes.ca/2018/11/21/precarious-employment-in-canada-an-overview> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. <https://www.iaccess.gov.on.ca/labourmarket/jobProfile/jobProfileFullView.xhtml?nocCode=3212#projJobOpeningsSection> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. <https://csmls.org/csmls/media/documents/resources/CSMLS-New-Graduate-Employment-Survey-2018-Grads-2017-v1-1.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Results of the qualitative findings were presented in a poster at LABCON 2019, which can be found on the CSMLS website. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [https://pepso.ca/tools](#41mghml) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. [https://pepsouwt.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/its-more-than-poverty-feb-2013.pdf](#32hioqz)

    [https://pepsouwt.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/precarity-penalty-report\_final-hires\_trimmed.pdf](#1hmsyys) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-social-development/campaigns/labour-standards/1548-MLS_WWH-Report_EN.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)