

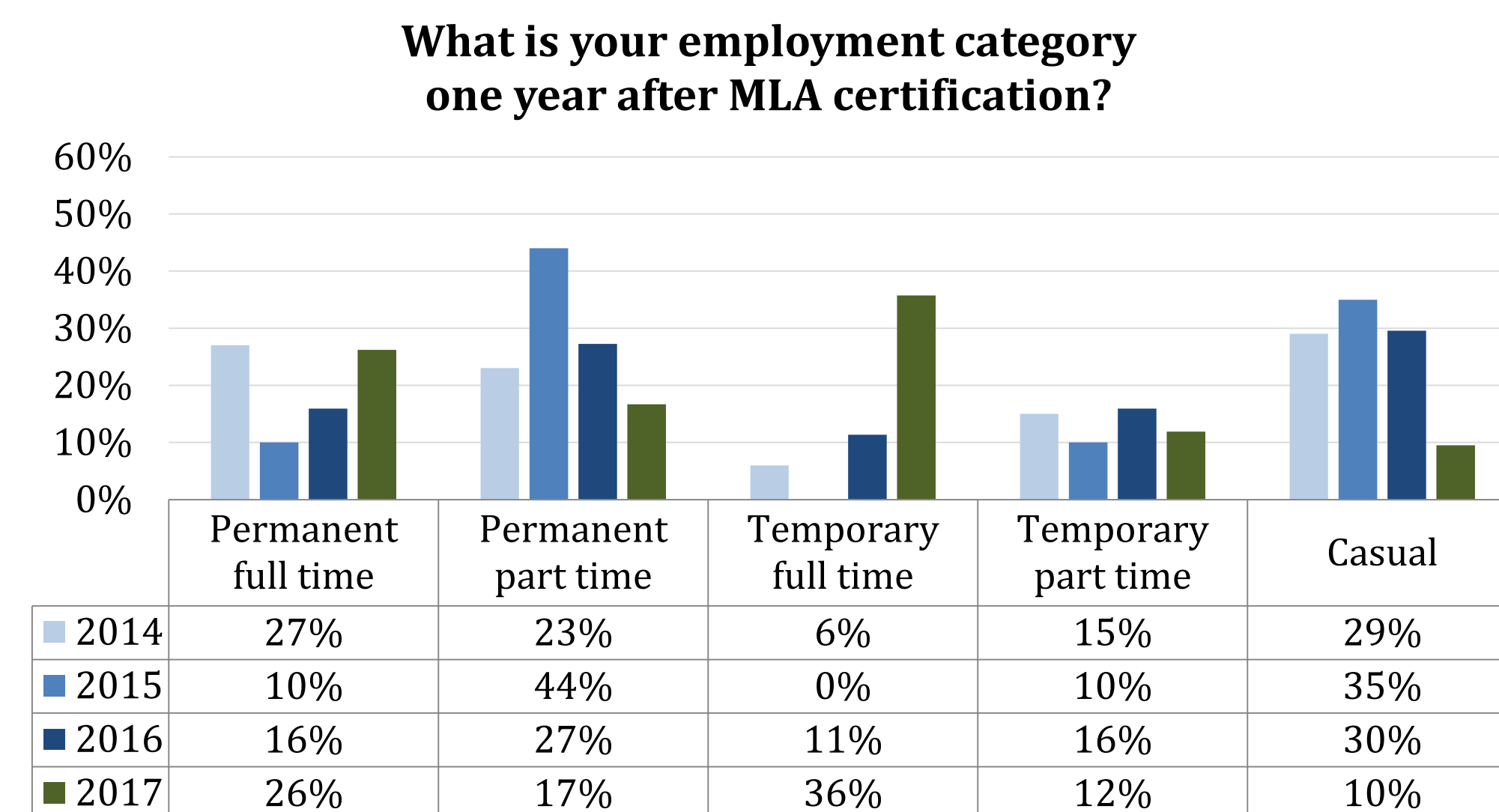
Background

As the Canadian health care system undergoes major transformation across the country due to an aging population, increased treatment complexity and decreasing budgets, the effect of these changes on the career of the medical laboratory assistant (MLA) is largely unknown.

Precarious employment has been increasing in the Canadian health care industry (Fleury, 2018). A Southern Ontario study shows that the general prevalence of precarious jobs have increased by 50% in the last 20 years (Lewchuk et al., 2015). The annual CSMLS Newly Certified Graduate Survey demonstrates that MLAs are experiencing high rates of precarious employment (Figure 1).

Precarious working conditions have been shown to have negative health effects: excessive emotional and mental stress affecting mental health, immunodeficiency syndromes, disruptive influences on family life and the social unit and chronic morbidity rates. It is likely that MLAs are experiencing negative effects of precarity. However, there is a lack of peer reviewed literature to determine this.

Figure 1: MLA Precarious Employment of Newly Certified Graduates
In 2017, only 26% of newly certified MLAs were in a non-precarious position one year after certification.



Purpose

Using a mixed method design, this study was designed to examine the current precarious employment status of MLAs working in Canadian laboratories as well as determine any emotional or health-related impacts this employment status may have on the study population.

Definitions

Worker has:	Precarious →	Vulnerable →	Stable →	Secure →
Job Security	Unstable and insecure employment	A little more employment security	More predictability	Job security and potential for a career path
Work Hour Reliability	Irregular work hours making time management difficult	Unreliable work hours or permanence	More reliable hours and more permanence in their position	Predictable and constant hours
Wage Predictability	Unpredictable wages and no other benefits	Lower earning and likely few, if any, benefits	More stable wage and maybe access to benefits	Stable wage and benefits, such as medical, paid leaves and pension
Training and Professional Development Opportunities	Less access to job training	Less access to training and participation in the workplace	More access to professional development	Access to professional development
Job Characterization	Usually characterized as temporary, part-time, limited-term and contract work			Usually characterized as "standard employment relationship"

Survey

Quantitative Method

Survey: Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO) Employment Precarity Index (EPI) combines 10 direct and indirect measures (12 questions) of employment insecurity to define precarious employment, including employment relationship, income uncertainty, scheduling uncertainty and relationship uncertainty.

The EPI groups employment situations on a continuum with precarious employment at one end of the spectrum and secure employment at the other (shown in the definition table).

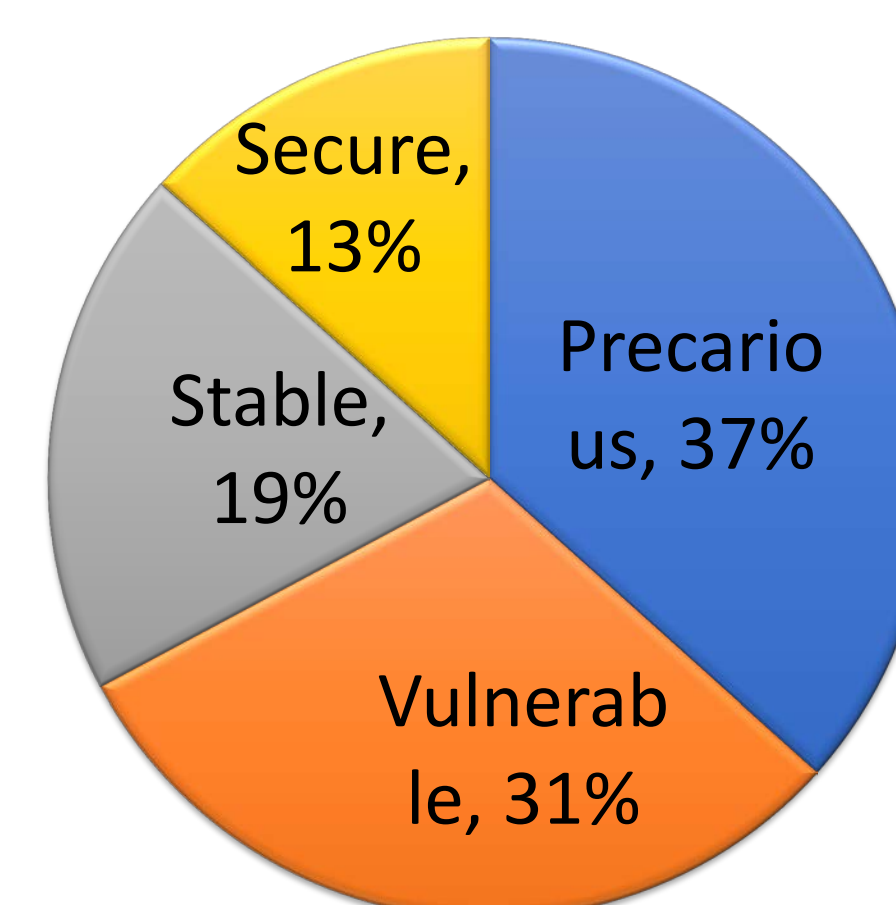
Participants:

- Working or seeking work in the MLA profession within the Canadian environment (excluding students, transition graduates and permanently retired)
- May or may not be a CSMLS member
- Must be 19 years of age or older

Preliminary Results

Respondents: A total of 286 surveys were used in this preliminary analysis. All provinces and territories were represented, except Nunavut. Sixty-two percent of the participants were aged 25 to 44.

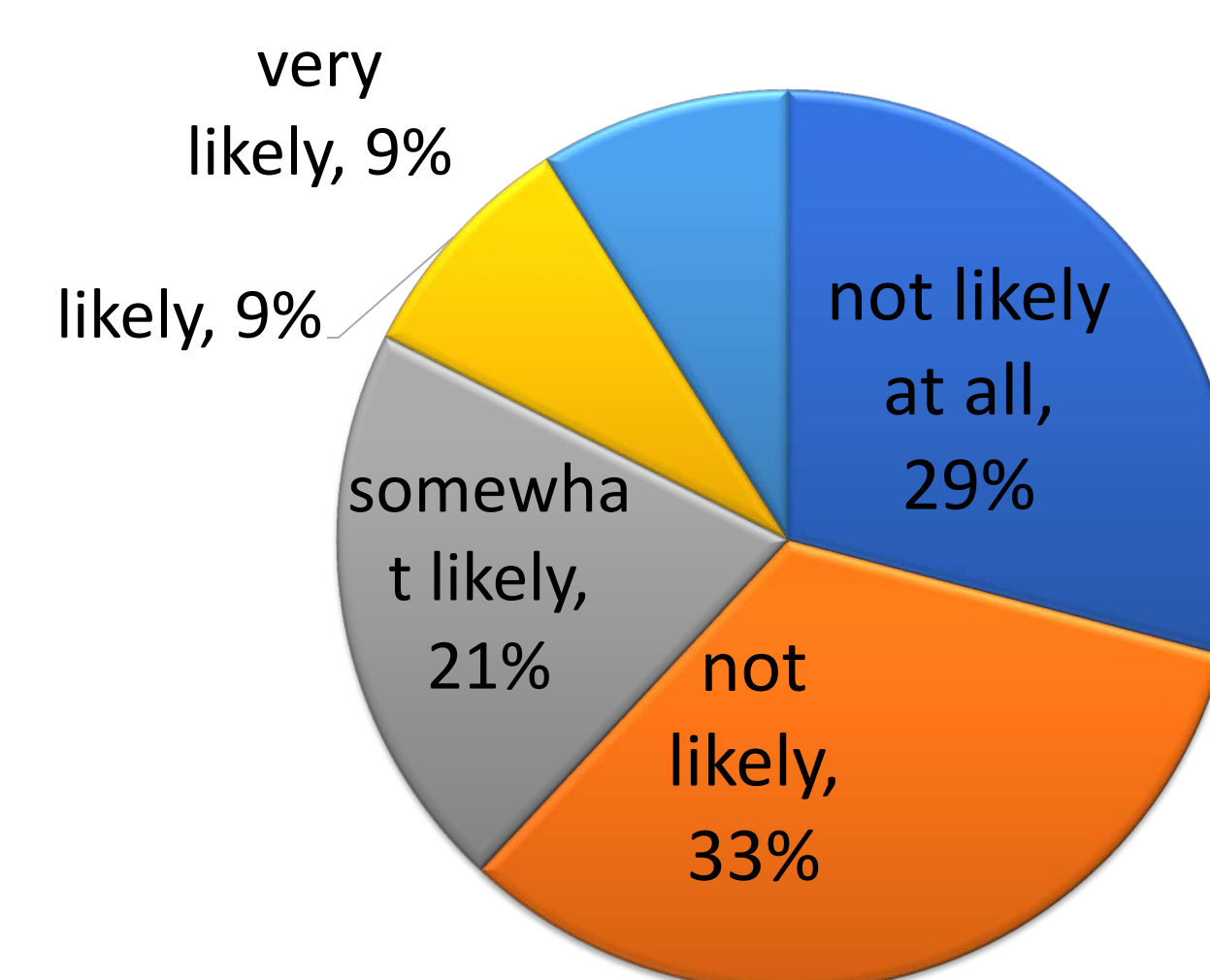
Employment Status of Canadian MLAs



Highlights

- 39% of MLAs believe it was likely their paid employment hours would be reduced in the next six months ("somewhat" to "very likely").
- In the past 12 months, 47% of MLAs had income that varied week to week ("some" or "a lot").
- 48% of MLAs do not usually get paid if they miss a day's work.
- 27% of MLA employers do not provide a private retirement income plan, such as a pension plan or a contribution to an registered retirement savings plan.
- 34% of MLAs do not receive employment benefits, such as a drug plan, vision, dental and life insurance.
- 21% of MLAs felt that their employment would "likely" or "very likely" be negatively affected if they raised a health and safety concern.
- 15% of MLAs work on-call more than half of the time.

How likely will your total hours of paid employment be reduced in the next six months?



*Final study results will be available on the CSMLS website under the Research section.

Focus Groups

Qualitative Method

Focus Groups: Semi-structured focus groups ranging from 1-1.5 hours. Participants were not randomized to a focus group. Each session was recorded and detailed notes were taken by the study investigators. Qualitative data was analyzed using the Framework Method of thematic analysis with individual review, and manual open coding by both investigators for themes and subthemes.

Participants:

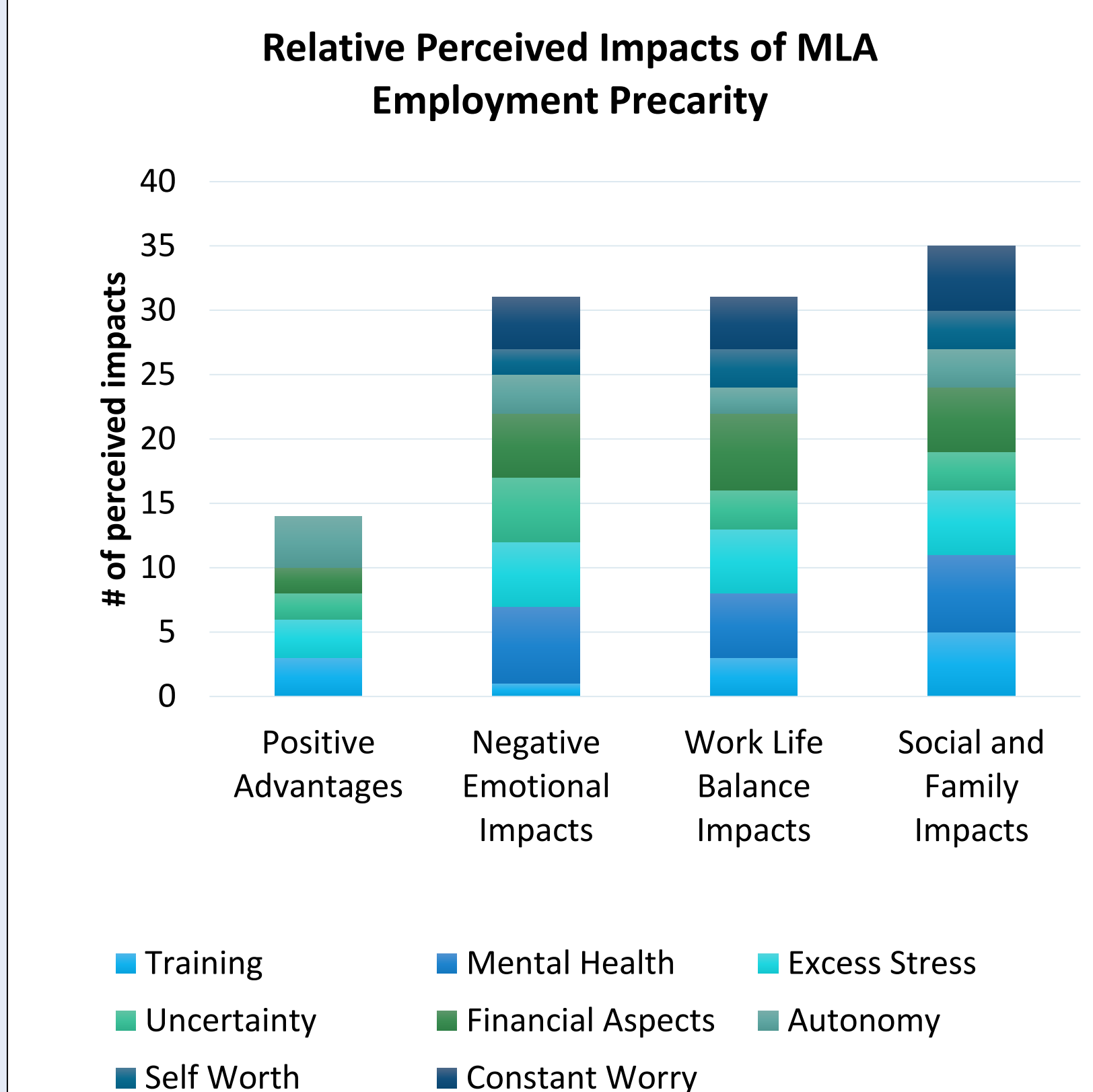
- Active CSMLS MLA members in Canada (excluding students, transition graduates, retired and associate memberships)
- Whether employed or unemployed, the participant must have recent working experience (past 1 year) within a Canadian laboratory, private clinical or clinical setting that pertains to their MLA certification.
- Must be 19 years of age or older

Preliminary Results

Respondents: Five groups were held with 1-2 MLAs participating in each (seven participants in total). Although the study intended to hold focus groups, MLAs were hesitant as represented in the low participation number. This is in high contrast to the number of MLA survey participants (almost triple normal response rate for a survey).

The research team speculates that low participation may be due to the significant number of MLAs in precarious and vulnerable positions. It is unknown whether an inability to attend a focus group and/or the potential fear of speaking out about their employment is the cause.

Figure 2: MLA Precarity Employment Impact



Select Themes:

Emotional Health: There were many negative effects related to mental and emotional health. Examples: constant worrying, fear, self-doubt, anxiety, feeling replaceable, burden of unwanted responsibility, breeding hatred, and unable to move forward or plan one's life. Emotional health was predominately highlighted as compared to physical health.

Work-life Imbalance: A major theme expressed was the negative effects on work-life balance, with specific comments related to family or relationship stability, child care issues, inability to turn off high levels of stress, and inability to plan family events or enjoy life. Specific comments were made about permanent positions greatly alleviating the stress related to job precarity.

Positive Job Attributes: Being in a precarious position highlighted all participants' ability to make choices in their lives, whether it was having made the right career choice, opportunity to try the job out, ability to refuse shifts or take part-time jobs for work-life balance.

Discussion

MLAs are experiencing a significant amount of precarious and vulnerable employment across Canada. As demonstrated, in the preliminary survey findings, the employment trend shows a large percentage of MLAs lacking job security, having irregular and unreliable work hours, lower earnings and unpredictable wages, and little access to or no benefits. Although focus group participation was low, those that came forward predominately described the negative effects of precarious employment. These descriptions focused on the emotional and psychological impacts and less on actual or perceived physical impacts. Overall, an opportunity exists for clinical laboratory employers to examine their workplace employment strategies and the impact this has on the MLA workforce. To achieve this, employers must be sensitive to the profession's precarity situation, recognizing that MLAs require a safe, retribution-free and confidential place to voice their opinions.