THE INSECURE ECONOMY

Measuring and Understanding the Contemporary Labour Market

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Centre for Labour
and Social Studies

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Autonomy

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The Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS) is a leading left think tank working to ensure policy is on the side of everyday people. Originating in the trade union movement, CLASS has an authentic connection to working people and a unique insight into the challenges society faces. We combine grassroots voices with intellectually compelling analysis to show an alternative way forward. CLASS works with a coalition of academics, activists and politicians to inspire the left and cement a broad alliance of social forces to support reform, and equip our supporters with the tools to popularise a new agenda.

FEMINIST FUTURES PROGRAMME

This project is an output of Autonomy's Feminist Futures Programme, a laboratory for feminist theory and policy

CONTENTS

KEY
FINDINGS

- Insecurity is complex, and has many causes. It can take different forms and the driving factors vary for different groups. To offer a quantitative measure of insecurity across the UK economy, we develop an 'Insecurity Index', drawing on new data analysis.

- While simple unemployment has fallen in almost every industry since 2005, our analysis shows that insecurity has consistently increased in almost every industry, region, age group and gender.

- Ethnic minorities have seen a 105% increase in insecurity since 2005 compared to a 32% increase amongst White Britons.

- Elementary occupations are not only the most insecure – their score is over 200% higher than Managers and Senior Officials – they have also seen the biggest increase (93%) since 2005. All 9 major occupational groups, including Management and Senior Officials are less secure than in 2005.

- 18 out 20 industries analysed have seen increased insecurity since 2010.

- The hospitality sector's score is 730% higher than the most secure industries, while workers in Health and social care have seen an above average increase of 51% since 2005.

- Key industries such as Transport, Health and Social Care, and Education are, respectively, 70%, 50% and 40% more insecure than the Finance and

Insurance industry.

- The 'Insecurity Score' for women is 25% higher than for men.

- The average 20-year-old is 4.6 times more insecure than the average 60-year-old, and 20 year olds are twice as insecure as they were in 2005, whereas the average 65 year old is more secure.

- Practices, such as zero-hour contracts and app-work, that have been normalised in the so-called 'gig economy' are spreading to other sectors such as healthcare and education.

- Zero-hours, tiny-hours and temporary contracts; bogus and forced self-employment are all on the rise. These employment models all work in different ways but have common outcomes:

  » They disproportionately impact women and ethnic minorities.

  » They evade the legal protections of employment law that would be expected in most jobs and which most employers abide by.

  » This leaves workers unable to defend themselves against treatment that ranges from undignified to abuse.

  » They, directly and indirectly, create obstacles to unionisation and workplace organising.

• Just as there are many interconnected causes of insecurity, a combination of solutions is also required:

   » *Strategic litigation* - Court cases such as that against Uber are powerful in setting a legal precedent and blocking attempts to act outside of existing laws. However, they require a lot of resources and time, have limited scope and will always be fought against fiercely by multinational corporations with armies of lawyers.

   » *Legislative Change* - Closing loopholes in employment law offers strong protections but is dependent on political support both inside and outside of Parliament. A minority of workers benefit personally from the current laws, and businesses and politicians that also benefit will always amplify these cases.

   » *Organising* - Workers organising to fight for their own protection offers the surest route to security, and a string of recent successes proves the effectiveness of such actions. However, between explicit anti-union activity, employment models that alienate workers, anti-union laws and decades of shrinking trade union power, workers face an uphill battle.
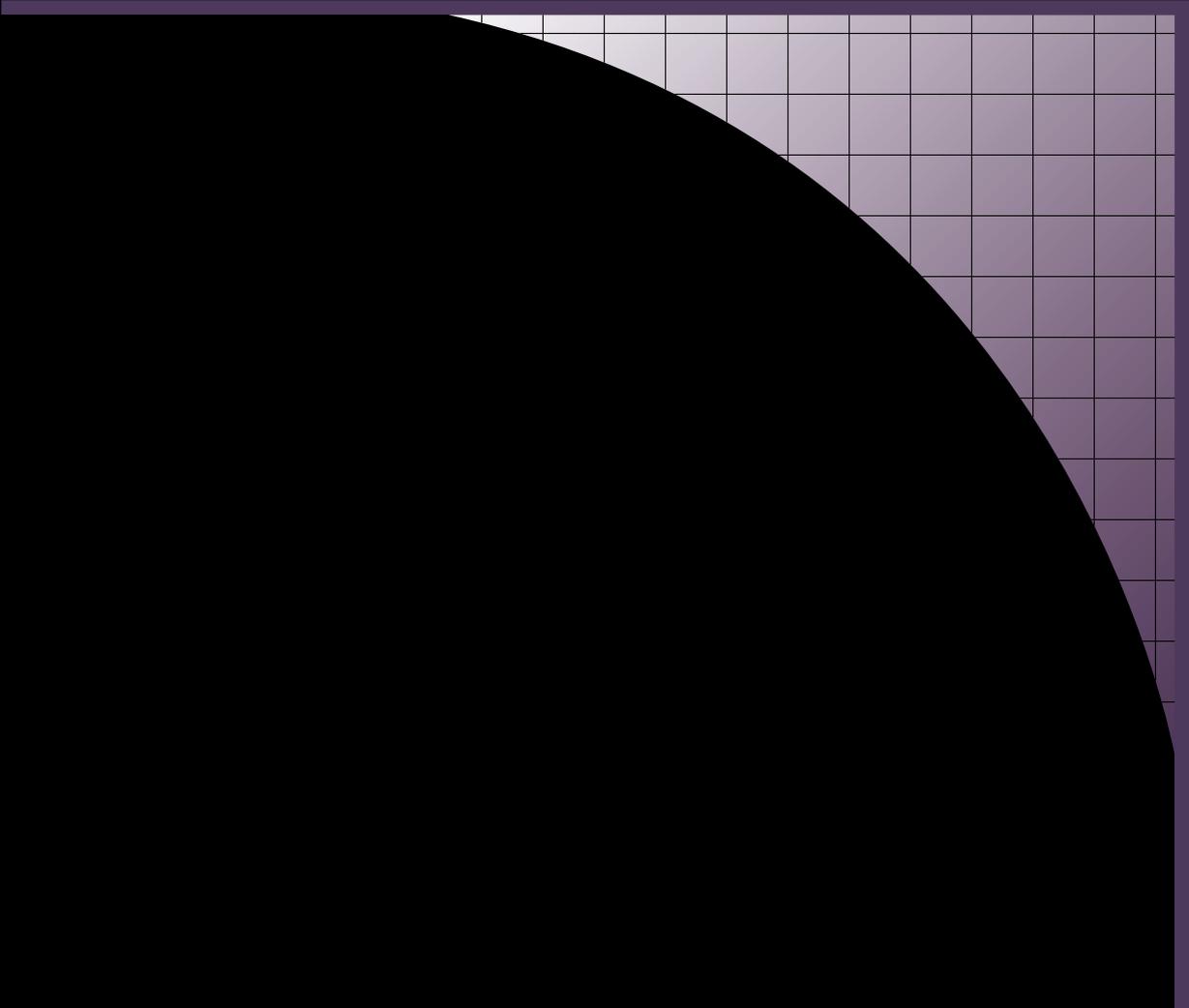
INTRODUCTION

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THE ERA OF INSECURITY

Insecurity is the defining characteristic of our economic era. Insecurity has long been part of the story of the UK's working classes, particularly for the most marginalised workers. The foundation of Britain's trade union movement was, in part, a result of the dockworkers' strike in 1889, where dockworkers demanded more secure working conditions and better pay.

Over the past several decades, we have seen insecurity become an endemic part of British working life; the proportion of the workforce employed precariously has ballooned, and the physical, mental and social impacts on the worker increasingly normalised. Previous eras have seen settlements between businesses and some workers, capital and certain segments of the labour force - largely citizened, white and male. These settlements may not have been universal, fair or equitable, but for those who could access them, they were functioning and sustainable. The era of endemic insecurity is not only unjust and cruel, but also dysfunctional; failing everyone bar a handful of people at the very top of the ladder.

Beginning in the 1920s off the back of growing trade union power, and bolstered in the post-war era by the massive project of building publicly-owned housing and expansion of the welfare state, much of the previous century saw a consistently increasing living standards for the UK population - albeit an unevenly experienced increase. The so-called Fordist settlement accepted as common sense Henry Ford's notion of paying his workers enough that they could afford to buy his cars. For decades, wages grew in real-terms, the labour share of the economy grew and workers expected their children to have a better standard of living than their own. While workers' labour still made a profit for their companies' owners, there was a dominant view that a secure, healthy and happy population made a more productive workforce, and that increased pay led to more disposable income and made workers into consumers too.

This era was replaced by one that relied on individual aspiration and competition to produce the most effective workforce. The post-Fordist settlement came with a sharp reduction in trade union power and the rise of Thatcherism and Reaganomics. As factory work was outsourced to the Global South, much of the UK workforce was freed from the controlling force of the production line, and granted some autonomy over their working day in return for providing their own motivation in the form of personal ambition. In this era, a hierarchy of work was established, and the threat of 'lousy' work - or no work at all - became a powerful force. Competition between workers became the dominant force; in the words of Andre Gorz, "Post-Fordism produces its elite by

producing unemployment. The latter is the pre-condition of the former".[1] Yet from the 1980s up until the 2008 financial crisis, the method of control was predominantly only a threat. A small but significant number of people were left unemployed to motivate everyone else to keep up the work in their full-time, secure jobs.

By the early 2000s the polarisation of jobs into lousy or lovely, or McJobs and MacJobs, was underway and well documented.[2] But the financial crash of 2008 accelerated these trends as the mass unemployment caused by the financial crisis morphed into ongoing underemployment, worsening working conditions and the rise of zero-hours contracts and bogus self-employment. Being plunged into unemployment has become no longer simply an abstract threat - instead, an ever-growing portion of society now permanently treads water in a pool of insecurity. Rather than the warning of job loss hovering in their peripheral vision, keeping their eyes focused on work, workers experience partial joblessness at all times. They are driven to work harder not by the fear of losing a job, but by the ongoing contingency of the job they have. Jobs that only ever have temporary contracts and have to be renewed every three months, jobs in which the number of hours can be changed on a whim, jobs where the last minute offer a shift can never be turned down, because who knows when the next one will be.

This new economic era is in many ways a return to the dockworkers' conditions of the 1800s. It is a concerted effort to evade the employment rights that, over the preceding centuries, have been fought for and won by trade unions, and then enshrined in law. It is a return to the piecework of Victorian Britain, a return to an economy of pure exploitation with no semblance of any settlement between labour and capital. It is a return to a world in which mere survival is the primary objective of most workers.

As this report will show, insecurity is not confined to the so-called 'gig-economy', or limited to newly-emerged jobs like Uber drivers and Deliveroo riders. Working practices established in those jobs have been normalised elsewhere: the 'Uberisation' of childcare, the hospitality sector, cleaning, hair and beauty, and household trades are all well under way. The proliferation of temporary and zero-hours contracts has spread from fast food chains and fulfilment centres to some of the most crucial work in our society - the health and social care sector - and to previously protected middle-class jobs in academia.

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

The ambition of this report is to demonstrate the breadth and depth to which insecurity has permeated our economy and society. We will show how every sector, every occupation and every region of the UK is more insecure than it was 10 years ago. Alongside this, we will

1   Gorz, Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society.
2   Goos and Manning, 'McJobs and MacJobs'.

show how insecurity has seeped into every aspect of life. It is not simply a technical, or economic issue, but one that drastically impacts people's ability to be happy, healthy and even safe. To grasp the true significance of the issue of insecurity it is vital to show - from above - the scale and spread of the problem, but equally to see up close the devastation it is causing to the lives of people in this country. In order to achieve these two perspectives, the research section of the report has two distinct parts.

The first uses national level data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) to create an 'Insecurity Index'. This index is a single number through which we can compare levels of insecurity between industries, occupations, ages and moments in time. The index allows us to discern who is impacted most heavily by the problem of insecurity and see trends over time.

The second strand of the research is qualitative and consists of interviews with workers and trade union representatives. These interviews form three distinct case studies, each selected to expand the public perception of the insecure economy and to, between them, cover its many facets.

The first, Hospitality, is an industry that most people understand to be low-paid and insecure, but is often viewed as transitory work undertaken mostly by young people and students. By focusing on wide-ranging knock-on effects of zero-hours contracts, this case study shows how even the work we know to be insecure has become exploitative and often dangerous far beyond our expectations.

The second, Care, shows how even the most vital and complicated work of caring for one another has been commodified and 'optimised'. Focusing on the use of apps and platforms to manage workers, this case study illustrates an economy in which we allow and ensure that even those we entrust with the care of our children have to do so while struggling to sustain themselves.

The third and final case study, Academia, intends to demonstrate how formally secure, middle-class jobs are no longer protected from the logic of competition and exploitation. With a focus on the unjustified and routine use of temporary contracts, it shows that no worker is safe from the impacts of precarisation.

PROPOSING SOLUTIONS

The final section of the report looks towards solutions. We focus on three distinct areas of struggle: strategic litigation which aims to demonstrate, in court, that companies are treating workers unlawfully; legislative changes that aim to strengthen existing laws to better protect workers; and finally, organising for the power to demand changes directly. In this section we look at the potential and the limitations of each of these strategies as well as recent examples of success.

INSECURITY INDEX

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EXPLANATION OF INSECURITY INDEX

Perhaps one reason the economy has been allowed to function as it does for the last decade - funnelling wealth upwards while generating more and more insecurity for people who work for a living - is the way in which it is measured.

'The economy' is usually discussed in the public sphere as an abstract entity, often likened to a natural force (we are told economic "storm clouds" are brewing, or to expect "choppy waters"). Research by CLASS and others has shown that describing the economy as a separate immutable force makes people less likely to believe in the possibility of progressive change.[3] However, if we situate the economy in terms of people's everyday experiences, emphasising needs like the ability to live in stability, people are more likely to agree with progressive proposals. What's more - when the condition of the 'economy' is framed as the outcome of choices made at the top, the prospect of making different choices feels more possible.

It is no surprise that the public have mentally separated the success of 'the economy' from the ease and reliability with which they are able to pay for the things they need and want in life. For at least a decade, many people have seen that the jobs available to themselves, friends and family, are becoming less and less likely to give them the certainty that they can pay for their rent, bills, food, clothes - let alone luxuries like holidays. But at the same time, the government and media have reported that 'the economy' is strong and doing well. House prices and rent have increased in relation to wages; more people rely on foodbanks, homelessness is increasing, but 'the economy' is strong.

One key aspect of this smoke and mirrors act is the reliance on unemployment as a metric of the economy. Following the 2008 financial crash, unemployment rocketed. Starting at 5.2% in the summer of 2008, it hit 7.9% by spring of 2009 and peaked at 8.5% in the autumn of 2011. From there, the steady decrease to a 45-year low of 3.8% in 2019 has been consistently presented as a signifier of a recovering, then successful, economy: the best way to lift people out of poverty is to get them in work, and more people are in work - or so the mantra goes. But this 'recovery' did not align with most people's experience of that decade, so where is the discrepancy?

In reality, the mass unemployment that followed the 2008 crash didn't simply disappear, instead, it resolved into underemployment, temporary work, zero-hours contracts and bogus self-employment. Or, to frame

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3   NEON, NEF, et al., 'Framing the Economy'.

it through the lens of supply and demand, as the labour market was flooded with labour, workers were forced to accept jobs with worse conditions and stagnating wages. The unemployment rate fell as people returned to work in some form, but the security of a permanent, full-time job that people felt before the crash, did not return.

In this report, we tell individual stories that convey the reality of today's economy, but we will also seek to find a better way to quantify this insecurity, which measures the differences over time, between industries and occupations, and amongst different demographics.

We have created an 'Insecurity Index' that accounts for the range of circumstances that add to people's sense of insecurity. The major challenge is to find data that is more relevant than simple unemployment rates, but that is gathered on a large enough scale that the conclusions can be considered generalisable and that allows more detailed analysis of precisely who is affected by endemic insecurity.

We are using the UK Labour Force Survey (LFS). The LFS is conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and entails a survey of around 33,000 households, conducted on a quarterly basis since 1992. Headline labour market figures published by the ONS on a regular basis are derived from this survey, but the full dataset includes responses to many more survey questions that are not included in ONS publications. Furthermore, the ONS publications are inconsistent in terms of which measures are broken down by which categories – e.g. the ONS publishes regular updates of unemployment broken down by country of birth, and redundancies by size of business, but not redundancies by country of birth. The raw datasets are publicly available, but require a much greater level of analysis to access the combinations of metrics and categorisations that may be desirable. The LFS doesn't contain all the information that might be ideal to measure the issues raised throughout this report. Designed to be consistent with corresponding surveys conducted across Europe, it can be slow to add in new questions that become relevant to a changing labour market. However, it does provide consistent reporting of some of the key aspects of insecurity, and we believe the index generated provides a much greater insight into the state and trends of working life than the figures made widely available by the ONS.

The Insecurity Index used in the rest of this section incorporates the following measures:

- **Unemployment** - Using supplementary questions to exclude those who are not working because they are financially secure enough without an income.

- **Temporary contracts** - Only includes respondents who have stated they would prefer to have a permanent contract.

- **Part-time** - Only includes respondents who have stated they would prefer to have a full-time contract.

- **Underemployment** - Respondents who have said they would accept more hours at the same hourly rate.

- **Variable weekly wage** - Respondents whose income varies significantly week to week.

- **Wage compared to recommended wage** - (sourced from Resolution Foundation's living wage calculations).[4]

- **Zero-hour contracts**

- **Freelance work**

- **Housing tenure** - categorised in 3 descending levels of security: Owned outright, or rented from council or housing association; owned but paying off mortgage; privately rented

For a given respondent, for each of the circumstances above that they are impacted by, their personal insecurity score is increased. Maintaining the weightings assigned to each respondent by the ONS, individual scores are aggregated to provide a figure for particular groups over a particular period of time, say, people working in the hospitality sector in 2015, or black women in 2020.

Full details of how the Insecurity Index is calculated can be found in the methodological appendix.

A NOTE ON HIDDEN DATA

It is important to recognise that the Insecurity Index does not account for many of the signifiers and gauges of insecurity that are discussed in the later sections of this report. Simply, this is because data that represents these features of insecurity is not available on a large enough scale to be generalisable to the population, if available at all.

For example, a key feature of the modes of employment driving insecurity is 'algorithmic management'. This phrase refers to workers' shifts being allocated by a piece of software rather than a human manager, and creates all kinds of issues for workers - not least the potential to be removed from platforms entirely, and having your livelihood taken away, because of technical errors or discriminative coding. Algorithmic management is ubiquitous in minicab and food delivery work, more and more common in the care sector and now

4   Cominetti, 'Calculating the Real Living Wage for London and the Rest of the UK'.

emerging in hospitality. Some but not all agency and 'platform' workers are impacted by it. Critically, this is not a piece of information recorded by the LFS or any other large scale longitudinal study.

Many of these new business models rely on the mass use of digital devices, by both workers and consumers. The business of many of these platforms - when it is stripped down - being nothing more than the collection, analysis and leveraging of data. So, it may seem ironic that there is very little data available to allow analysis of these economic trends. In fact, it is not ironic but illustrative of the way such companies and platforms hoard data and create a 'black box' - where the input and output can be seen, but the interior workings are hidden. What is clear from our research, is that the obfuscation of this data is not merely protecting a company asset which is required for the efficiency gains that make the business competitive; the data black boxes (also called 'information/algorithmic asymmetry') they operate are maintained in order to exploit workers to the maximum. And, in fact, it becomes clear that in most cases, the primary use of technology, platforms and data - and what at least makes them appear to be more profitable than legacy businesses - is to optimise the process of exploiting workers.

As is recognised in, say, two Uber drivers' demand for access to the algorithm,[5] or the work being done in the UK by WorkerInfoExchange around data transparency, the battle over access to data will become more and more important over the coming years. On the one hand we must strive to gain access to data for workers so that they can go to work under conditions that are at least transparent. On the other hand, we also need to make demands to ensure that the data being granted by public organisations, for the sake of social research, is up to date and relevant to today's labour market and economy.

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5   Booth, 'Uber Drivers to Launch Legal Bid to Uncover App's Algorithm'.
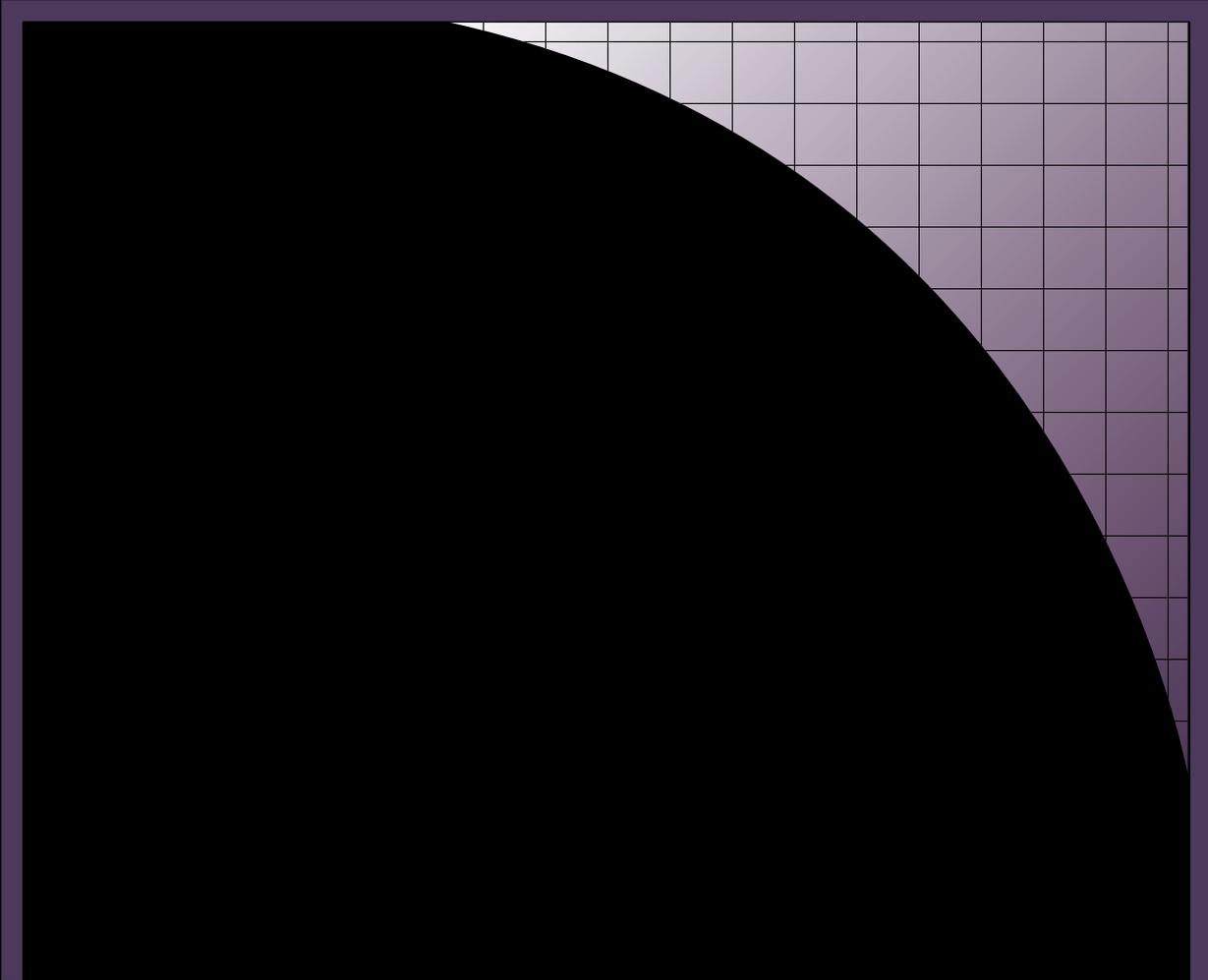
INSECURITY INDEX: FINDINGS

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INTERPRETING THE INSECURITY INDEX

The Insecurity Index developed for this report is only that - an index. It doesn't provide an absolute measure but can be used to compare different groups and to track trends over time. However, it might be useful to pick out a few typical scenarios and look at what scores would be associated with them.

	Employment Status	Contract Type	Guaranteed Hours	Variable Wage	Living Cost Delta	Total
Single, full-time employed, permanent contract, salary of £40k, own their home	0	0	0	0	-0.6	-0.6
Coupled parent of two, zero-hours contract, minimum wage, living in private accomodation	0	1	1	1	0.2	3.2
Single, unemployed, living in social housing	1	0	0	0	5	6

Table 1: Examples of different employment and living circumstances with resultant insecurity index. Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

Trends
Looking only at insecurity across the general population, the first chart shows that overall, insecurity has increased by 50% since 2005. There is a steady increase every year, a trend bucked only by a much larger increase during 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. If we look forward to 2022 by applying forecast inflation, wage increase and universal credit uplifts, we expect this trend to continue.
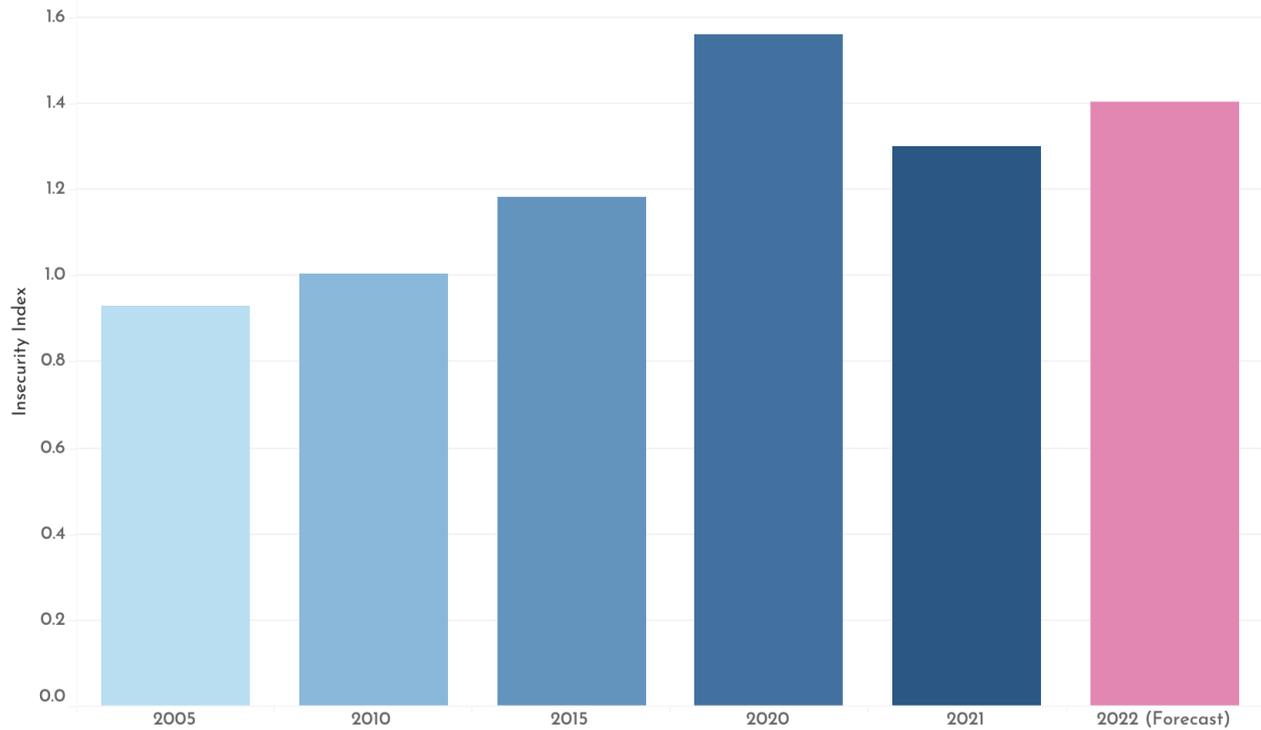
Insecurity Index over Time

Figure 1: Average insecurity index over time. Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

Contributing Factors

For different groups of people suffering the highest levels of insecurity, the main contributing factors will often vary. Insecurity is multifaceted, it is an accumulation of many different problems, and the biggest factor for one person may not be the same as another. In the first example, amongst the general population, we can see that increasing insecurity has been primarily driven by real-terms falling wages and by an increase in insecure housing. However, underemployment, zero-hours contracts and freelance working are all contributing factors.
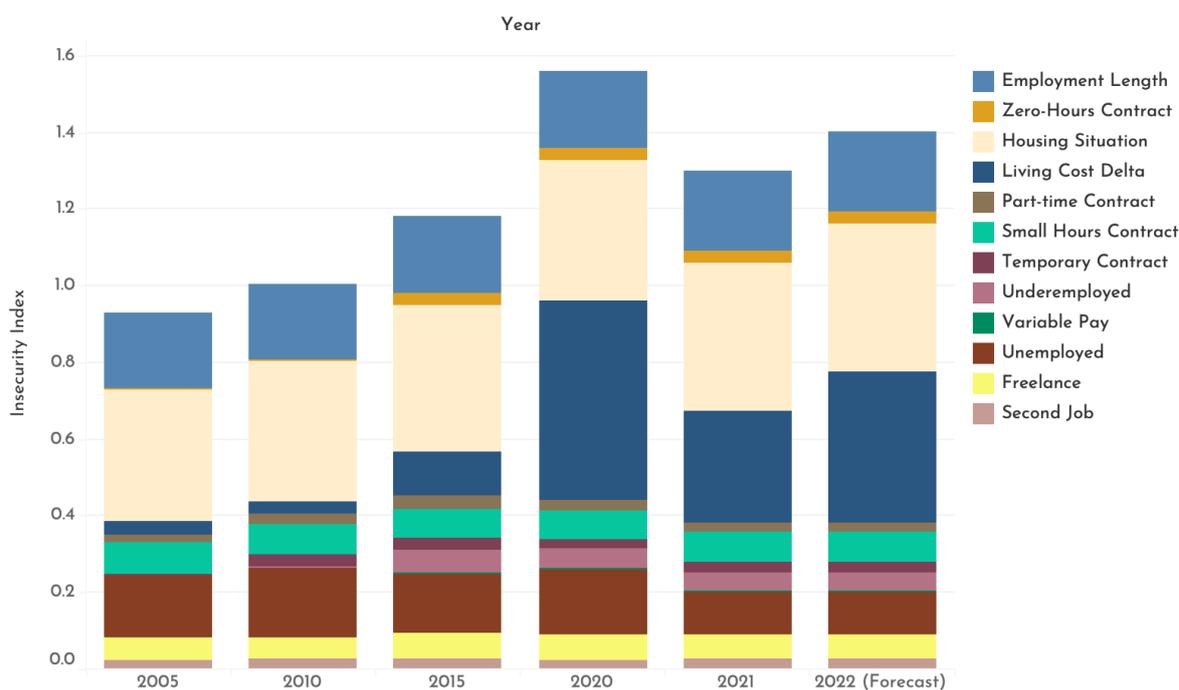
Contributing Factors to Insecurity Index by Year

Figure 2: Contributing factors to average insecurity index over time. Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

INDUSTRY

Insecurity Index by Industry and Year
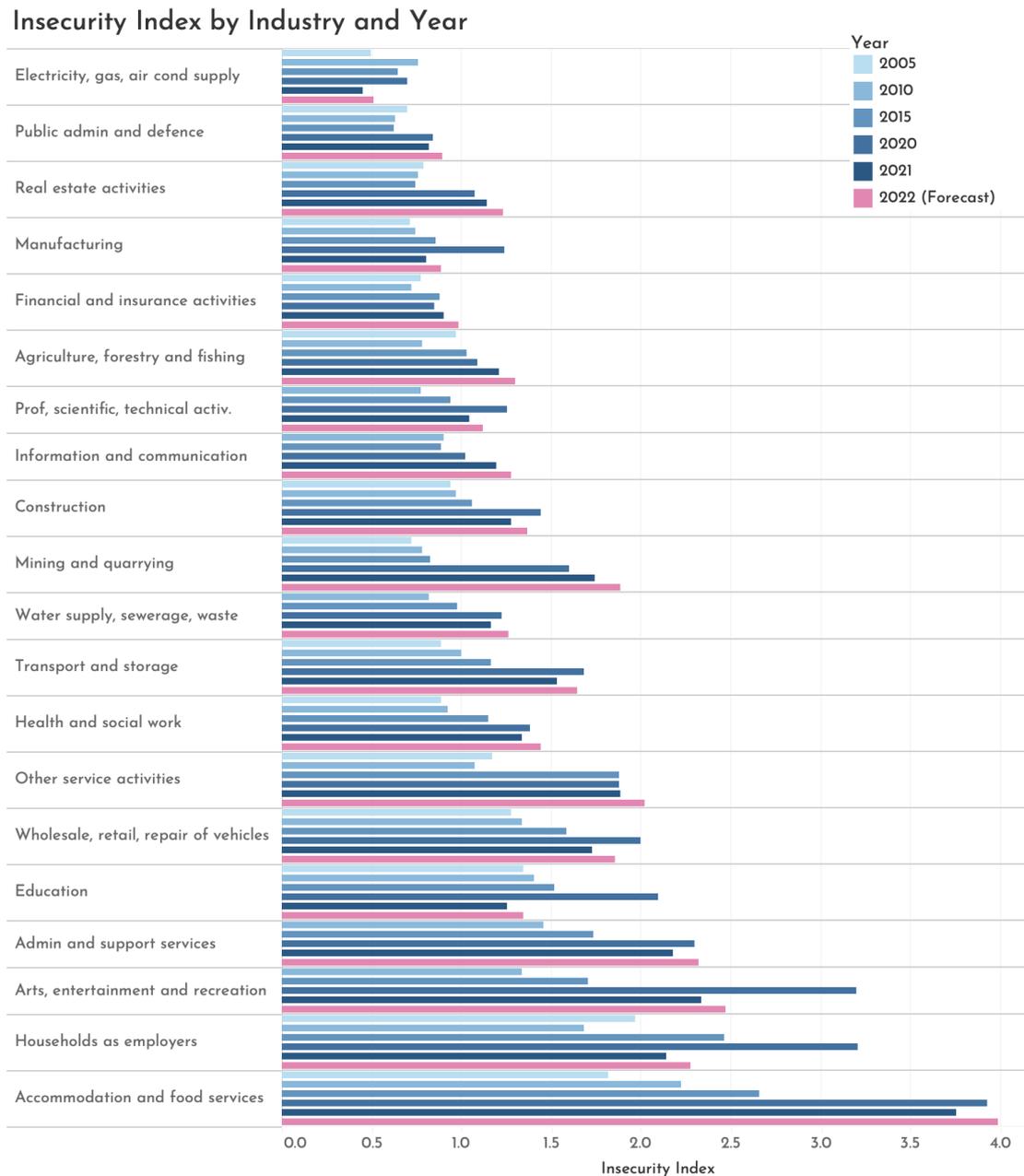
Figure 3: Average insecurity index over time for each industrial sector. Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

If we compare insecurity between different industries, there are a number of insights to discuss.

Firstly, there is a vast inequality between industries. Some industries register an average inequality score of almost 4, while others are comfortably below one. The most insecure industries will come of no

surprise. The hospitality sector suffers the highest levels of insecurity, followed closely by household employees such as nannies and personal cleaners. Both of these will be looked at in more detail in later sections of the report, where we will see precisely how this insecurity impacts peoples lives.

There are two industries that have seen a reduction in insecurity, Electricity and Gas Supply - which happens to have the third highest union density of any private sector industry - and Education - which has the highest union density of any sector. Even so, increased security in Education is driven almost entirely by decreased unemployment in primary and secondary education, with pre-primary, higher and adult education all becoming more insecure. Evidence from staff retention statistics[6] to polling of teachers[7] suggests that even reduced unemployment is largely a result of workers leaving the profession.

While every other industry has seen an increase in insecurity, public administration jobs, manufacturing, and scientific and technical roles have seen relatively smaller increases, as well as financial and insurance jobs.

Even the most fundamental aspects of our economy and society, those that were celebrated as key workers during the pandemic, suffer increasing levels of insecurity. Education, healthcare and transport are all amongst the most insecure, when finance and real estate are amongst the most secure.

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6   'School Workforce in England, Reporting Year 2020'.
7   Weale, 'One in Three Teachers Plan to Quit, Says National Education Union Survey'.

Contributing Factors to Insecurity Index in Hospitality Sector (2021)

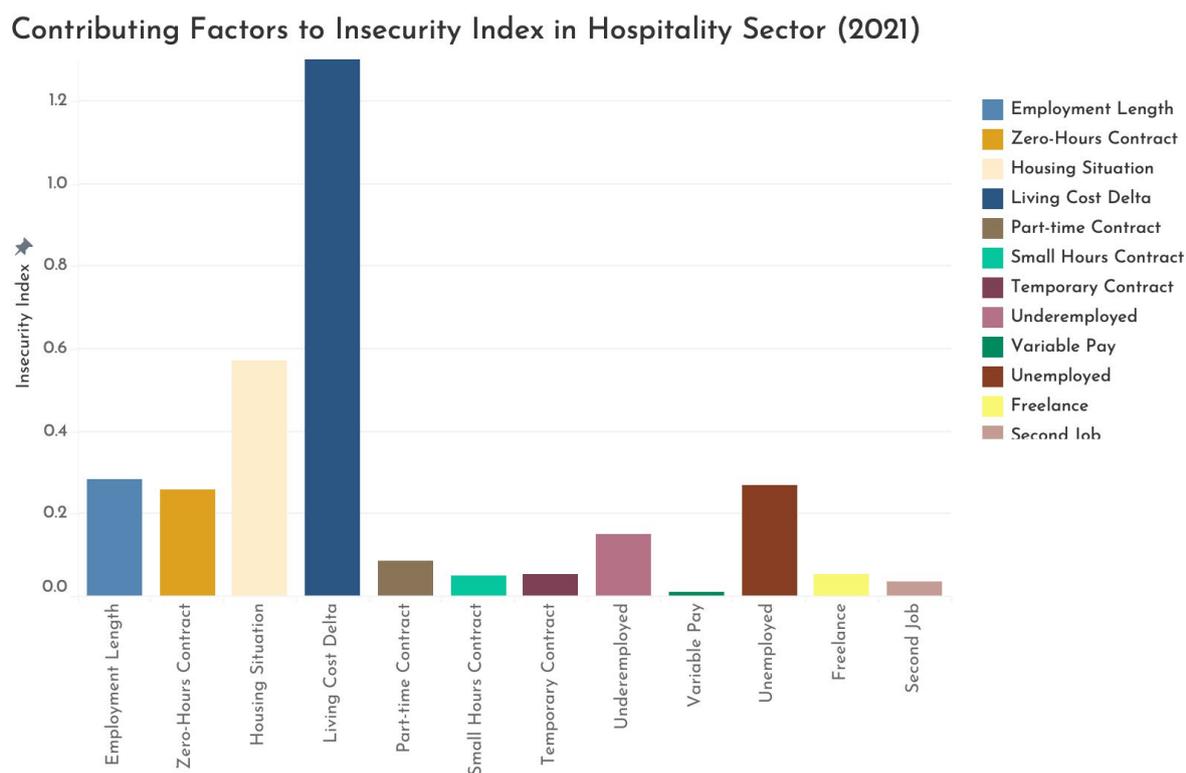*Figure 4: Contributing factors to the insecurity index in accommodation and food services industry, 2021 Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)*

To look in detail at one of the most insecure sectors, hospitality, we can see that housing and unemployment are still big factors, zero-hours contracts are important, but by far the biggest factor is low wages.

If we compare this to household employees, we can see that the impact of wages is lesser but the impact of being freelance workers is much more significant.

Contributing Factors to Insecurity Index for Household Employees (2021)

Figure 5: Contributing factors to insecurity index in the household as employers industry, 2021 Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

At the other end of the spectrum, we see that in the financial and
insurance sectors, high wages actually have the effect of reducing the
industry's average insecurity score.

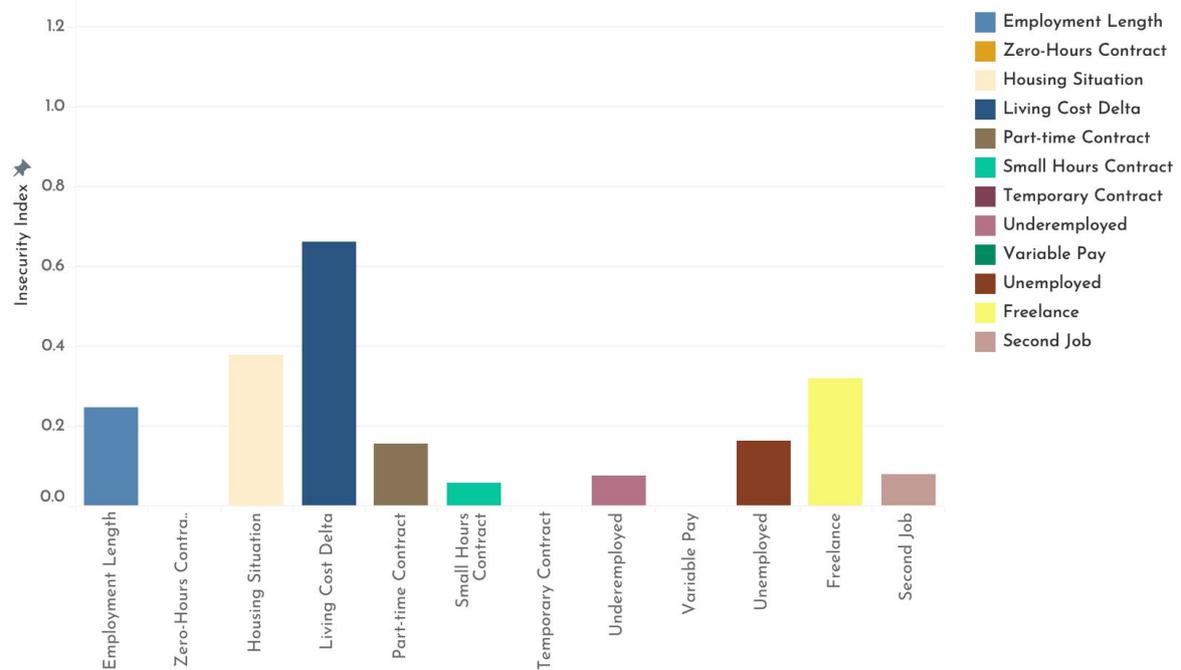**Contributing Factors to Insecurity Index in the Finance and Insurance
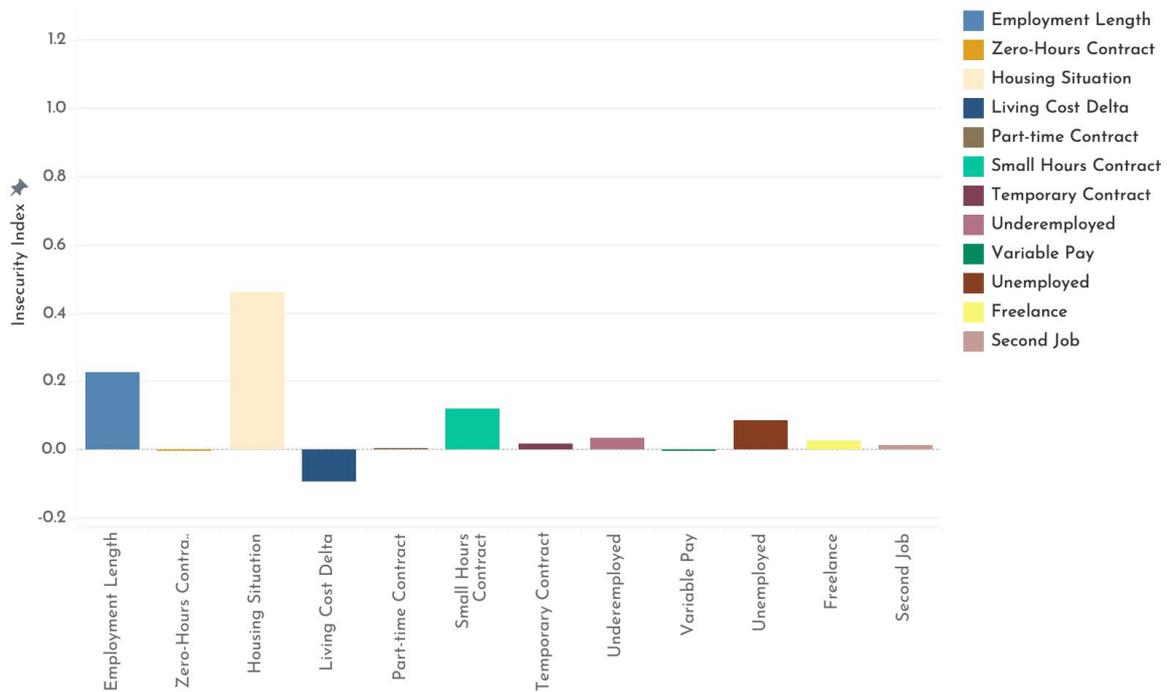Industry (2021)**

*Figure 6: Contributing factors to insecurity index in the finance and
insurance industry, 2021 Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data
(see appendix for full detail)*

OCCUPATION

Insecurity Index by Occupational Group and Year
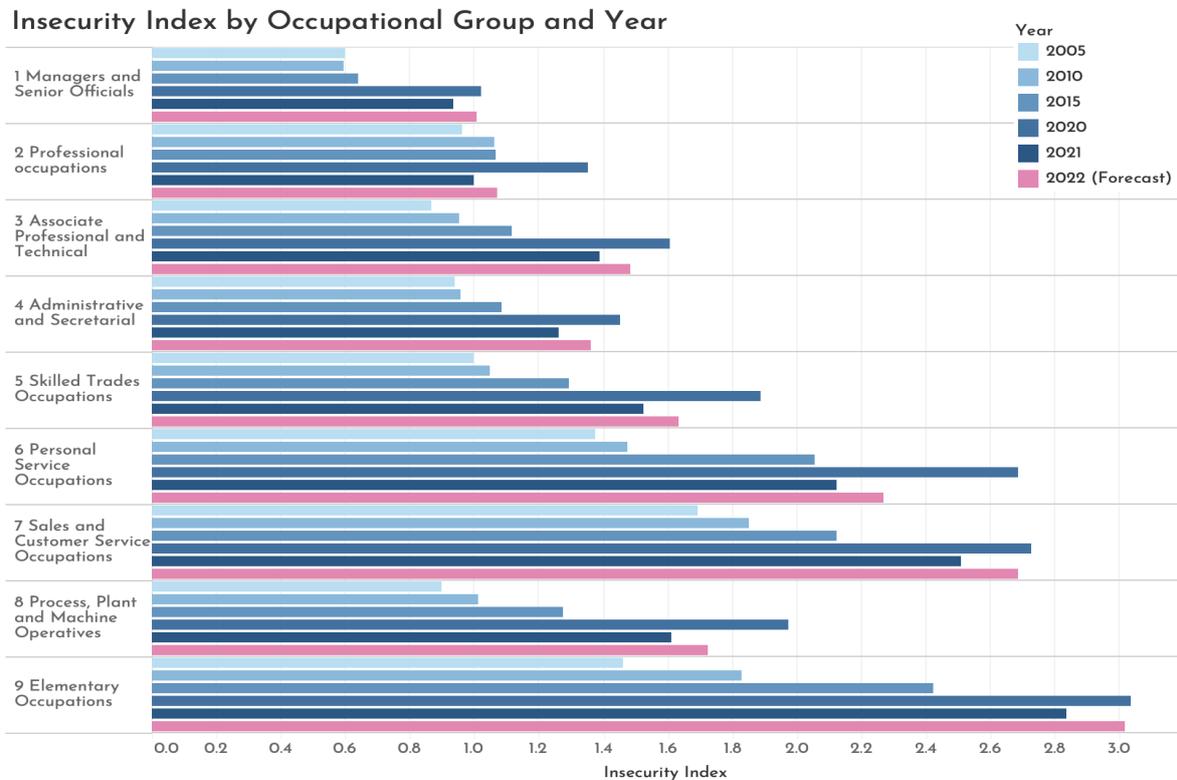
*Figure 7: Average insecurity index over time for each occupational group
Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)*

Within different industries, the type of occupation a worker has also directly dictates their level of security. Elementary occupations are not only the most insecure, but have also seen the biggest increase, of 93% since 2005.

While managers and senior officials are still comfortably the most secure occupations, their score has risen significantly since 2005, increasing by 55%.

This shows us that insecurity is no longer just a condition of low-skilled jobs, or for the working classes. Insecurity has become normalised and is spreading into every corner of the economy, including jobs that have previously been considered middle-class and secure. Later in the report, we will look at Academia as a case study that typifies this particular trend.

Looking at the contributing factors, almost all of them increase as we move from Managers to Elementary Occupations. However, wages are clearly the most significant impact. In fact, until 2015, wages in the top

three occupational groups were high enough to reduce their insecurity score on average. This is no longer the case, but wages have a smaller impact on the score of these occupations, whereas for elementary occupations, low wages account for over half the score. For those working in elementary occupations, it truly is the combination of all factors that results in such insecurity compared to managers. Housing is less secure, more workers suffer zero-hour contracts, more people work part-time, wages are lower and unemployment is higher.

Within the general trends there are some specifics worth noting. Skilled trade occupations are heavily impacted by freelance work. For most people working these occupations, being freelance is not a choice, it is a simple fact of that type of work. Sales and customer services jobs are impacted disproportionately by part-time work and underemployment. Again, it would seem to be an accepted truth that work in this area is by its nature, part-time.

REGION

Regional inequality has been an increasingly public issue over the last few years and the government's rhetoric around 'levelling up' was a cornerstone of their last election campaign. But how does our inequality score match up to this narrative?

In general, it confirms that there is significant economic inequality between different regions of the UK. As we might expect, the south of England is relatively secure in comparison to Scotland, the North and the Midlands.

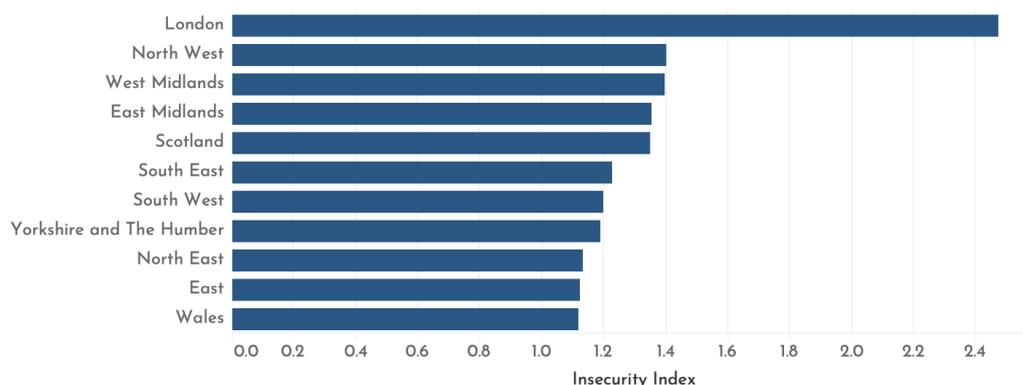**Insecurity Index by Region (2021)**

Figure 8: Average insecurity index for each region of Great Britain, 2021 Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

Where it perhaps diverges from the popular narrative is when separating out metropolitan areas. London in particular is often characterised as wealthy but these figures reveal inner London's population to be the most insecure in the country, followed by outer London, the metropolitan country of West Midlands and Strathclyde which encompasses Glasgow. In each case these areas have higher insecurity scores than their surrounding regions; the South East, West Midlands, North West and Scotland, respectively. This pattern is repeated across the country with Tyne & Wear being more insecure than the North East and Yorkshire more insecure than Humberside. This shows us that while inequality between regions exist - favouring southern regions - metropolitan areas see the greatest inequality and highest levels of insecurity.

Insecurity Index by Region / Metropolitan Area (2021)
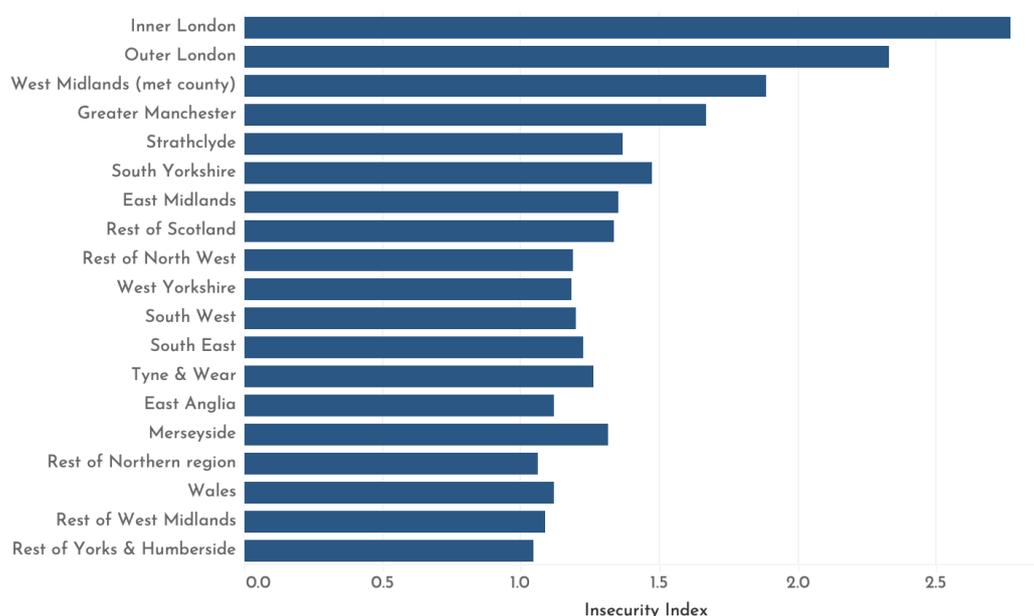
Figure 9: Average insecurity index for each region of Great Britain (including metropolitan areas), 2021 Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

Looking at the contributing factors, a lot of familiar stories can be found. The North of England and the Midlands are disproportionately impacted by low wages compared to the South. The starkest trend is the gap between metropolitan areas and the rest of the country and we can see that this gap is being driven primarily by insecure housing and higher unemployment rates.

GENDER

One of the starkest differences in inequality is between men and women. In every single year we looked at, the average insecurity score amongst women respondents is significantly greater than that of men.

Insecurity has increased more amongst men though. We can see that in 2005, the average man's insecurity score was 0.8. By 2021 this had risen to 1.2 and is set to further increase in 2022.

Insecurity Index by Sex and Year
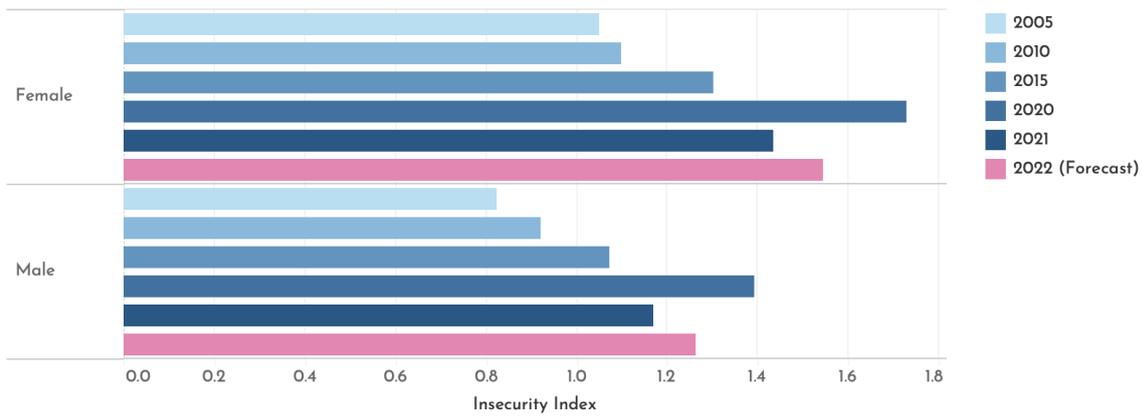
Figure 10: Average insecurity index over time for males and females Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

Contributing Factors to Insecurity Index by Sex (2021)
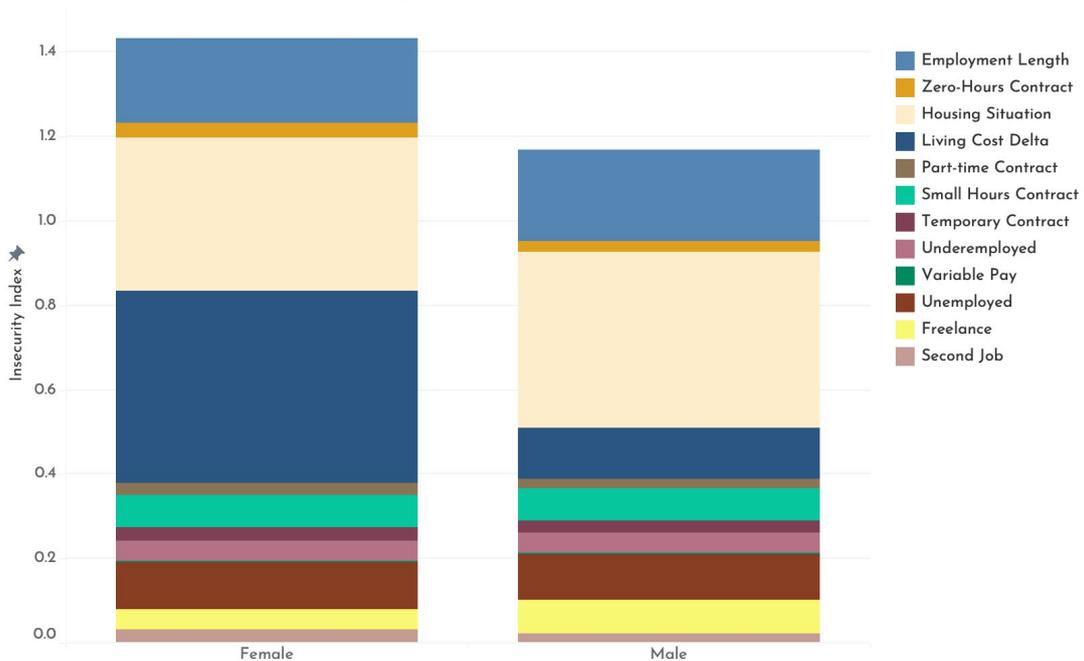
Figure 11: Contributing factors to insecurity index of males and females, 2021 Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

In the general population, for both men and women, unemployment and insecure housing are similarly significant factors. The big difference between men and women is the impact of wages. The gender pay-gap continues to act as a clear and significant barrier between how men and women experience the UK economy.

ETHNICITY

Insecurity Index by Ethnicity and Year
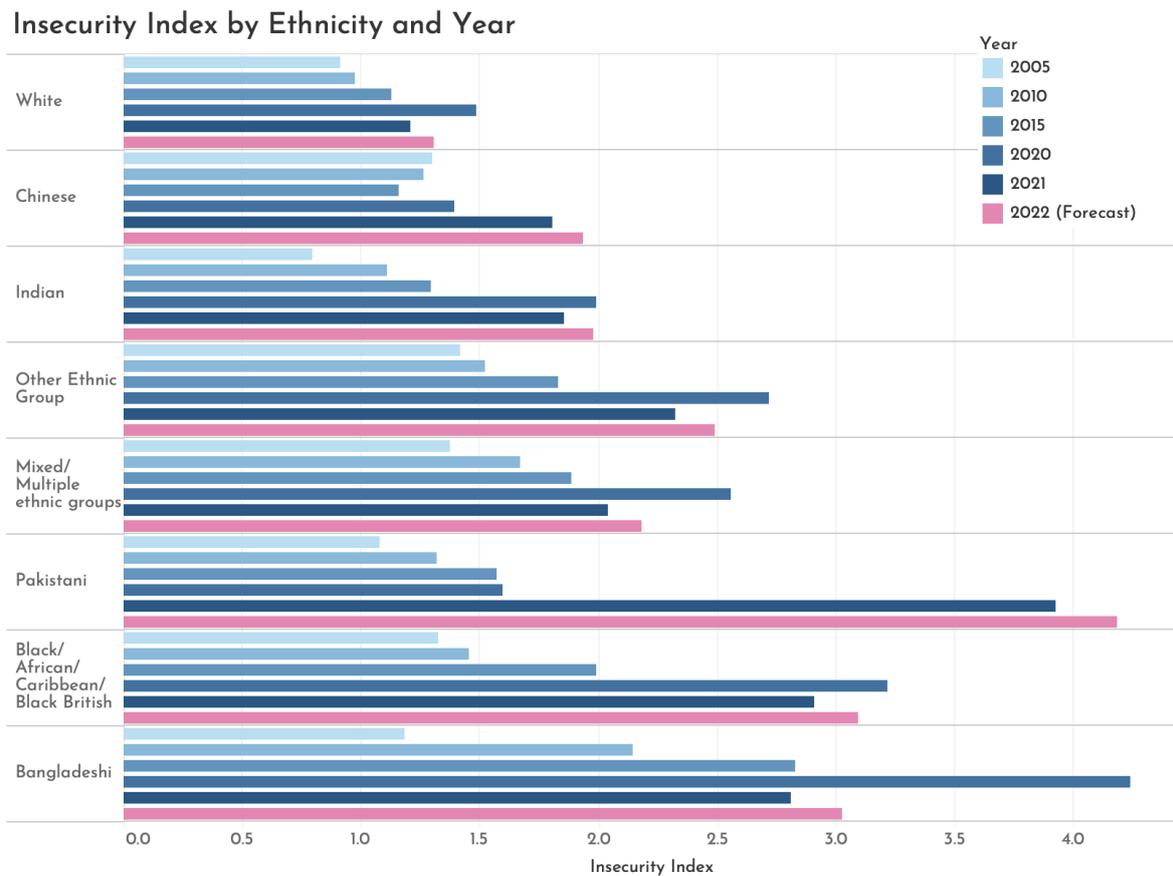
Figure 12: Average insecurity index over time for different ethnicities Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

The factors that impact different ethnic groups are rich and varied, with different communities being most heavily impacted by different factors. For Black and Pakistani Britons, low wages stand out as a contributing factor. Bangladeshi workers are disproportionately impacted by short stints in any one job and by freelance work, which are likely connected. Two factors that are consistently high for many ethnic groups, compared to the white population, are housing and underemployment.

Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities have both the highest levels of insecurity and have seen the biggest increase since 2005, more than doubling in both cases. Considered together, ethnic minorities have seen a 105% increase compared to a 32% increase amongst white britons.

AGE

It will be of no surprise that younger people are more insecure than their parents' generations. However, we can see that the relationship between age and insecurity has increased every year - again, with the exception of an extraordinary jump in 2020 as a result of the pandemic. In 2005, the average 20 year-old was 200% more insecure than the average 60 year-old. In 2021 they were 460% more insecure.

Even more startling is the fact that there is a tipping point - around 60 years old - where people on average are more secure than in 2005. That is to say, while the average 18 year-old's score is 154% higher in 2021 compared to 2005, the average 65 year-old is actually 18% *more secure.*

Insecurity by Age and Year
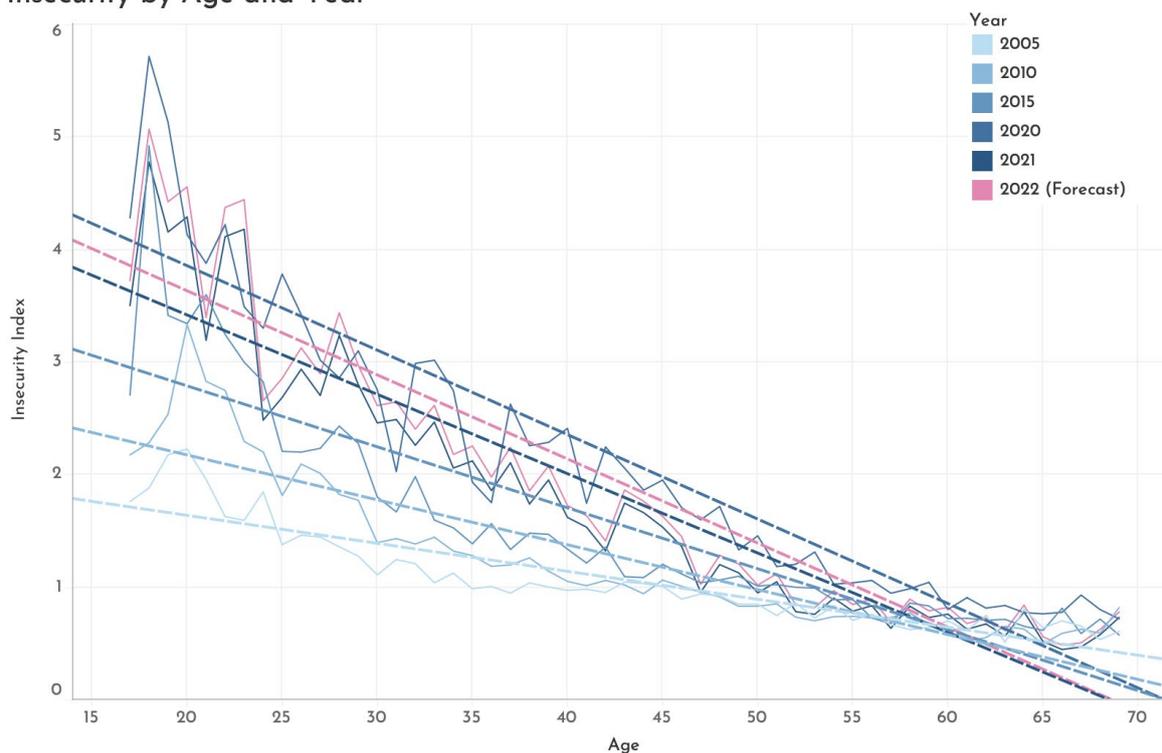
Figure 13: Average insecurity index against age and time Source: CLASS calculations based on ONS data (see appendix for full detail)

INTERSECTIONAL EXTREMES

It is almost certainly the case that the real extremes of insecurity exist at the intersection of these characteristics. Working class occupations in deprived regions, women of colour in precarious industries and young black men all bear the brunt of multiple modes of deprivation. The relationship between insecure work and different axes of societal biases is complex. In the following case studies, we explore why and how the most precarious work is disproportionately carried out by specific groups of people, but also note how it is these very people who are beginning to organise and form a new wave of trade unionism.

CASE
STUDIES

CASE STUDIES

The following cases studies have been selected to, between them, cover a broad range of aspects of insecurity while at the same time expanding the discussion beyond the typical public perception of the gig economy. Each study entails background research that pulls in industry specific statistics. This is supplemented by interviews with trade union representatives who are well placed to provide an overall picture of the issues the sector faces. Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with workers who provided insight into how the issue of insecurity impacts their day-to-day lives.

HOSPITALITY

Work in the hospitality sector, epitomised by bartending, waiting or kitchen staff, has long been normalised as casual, transient labour. The reliance on young people, students and migrants has seemed to excuse the working conditions in the public perception as jobs that provided spending money during transient phases of people's lives, rather than being a long-term career that people rely on for their livelihood.

> *"I think there is a really insidious and deliberate attempt by employers to go out of their way to employ people who are less likely to be in a union. That might sound conspiratorial, but I think it's true. It's not like when an HR manager sits down with workers, and they happen to be black, or they happen to be a woman, or they happen to be 22, they're not thinking 'they won't be in a union', that's down in the list. But they will be thinking, through racial profiling and what they've been taught in Business School, that they will be cheaper." - Bryan Simpson - Unite Hospitality*

Even if this were a justification for exploitative working conditions, pressures in other areas of the economy have meant that more and more people do rely on hospitality to cover their basic needs. Since 2005, the average age of worker in the hospitality sector has increased from 35 to 45, a bigger percentage increase than any other sector. At the same time, the sector has by far the highest, and a steadily increasing portion of workers on zero-hours contracts.

It is our view that the public perception of a bar worker as a student earning some extra money at their local pub while living at home or in university halls, is no longer the norm. Half of all hospitality workers are over the age of 35, three quarters are 23 or older. This dependence on hospitality work, combined with the increased use of zero-hours contracts has led to workers being forced to accept conditions that - if they were widely understood - are almost certainly not acceptable to

most of the public.

> *"There is definitely an aspiration among a lot of bartenders, that it should be a transitional stage. But the reality is, as precarity expands into other sectors, and because a lot of sectors, like academia, journalism and the arts are themselves precarious, and becoming more precarious, the idea that you can rely on hospitality as a transition state is increasingly just not the case. I think there is a stereotype of middle class kids like me, giving it a go to live the lifestyle a little bit. But if you really lay it down functionally, that's not why I'm doing it, it's literally to eat and so I'm not homeless. And that's true for a lot of people."* - Amardeep, 27,

> *"Aside from anything else, the job really eats into your ability to cultivate skills, or to gain the experience or qualifications that you need in order to move on."* - Amardeep, 27

The primary employment model that workers in the hospitality sector have to suffer - from which many other issues flow - is zero-hours contracts (ZHC). Being employed on a ZHC means having an employment contract with no guaranteed hours of work. Equally prominent, but less discussed and not measured at all by the ONS are tiny-hours contracts (THC). These contracts are often as low as 10 or 5 hours per week, a nominal number that no-one could survive off and that neither worker or employee expect to stick. As living off the number of contract hours is an impossibility, they provide very little extra security and so function in a very similar way to ZHCs.

The most direct impact of this model of employment on workers is that it removes any sense of financial security. Workers have no way of guaranteeing what their income will be from one week to the next. For many people this will mean they cannot be sure of their ability to pay their rent and bills each month. For even more, it means that long-term planning such as raising a family, or even going on holiday is all but impossible.

> *"I was there for one summer. The first week, I worked 60 hours. And of course, I didn't sign to opt out of the working time directive, because no one gets you to do that. The last week I worked was six hours. So there was no consistency."* - Amardeep, 27

zero hour contracts

Beyond not having a guaranteed number of hours, ZHCs also mean that workers have no regular schedule. This means that planning child care or any social life becomes extremely difficult. Almost all of our interviewees spoke of the indignity of being sent a text message one evening asking you to come to work the next day.

Proponents of ZHCs - normally business owners - will describe this as flexibility, giving employees the freedom to pick and choose which shifts they want to work. But, in reality, the power dynamic created by these contracts results in one-way flexibility, with most workers unable to turn down shifts that are offered to them.

While, technically, ZHCs offer workers the standard protections of employment law, in practice many of them are meaningless. Primarily the loss of protection relative to a typical employment contract stems from the fact that rather than making an employee redundant, an employer can simply not schedule them for work the next week.

> "It's a really toxic cycle. The nature of precarity means if you do put your head above the parapet, if you do vocalise your situation or join a union or be involved in activity, then you're simply just not going to be on next week's rota, because you're on a zero-hours contract. But then if you're too scared to do that, then continue in that cycle of poverty and insecurity. " - Caitlin, 25

In effect, this means that protections around unfair dismissal become irrelevant because there is no need for an employer to dismiss an employee. The knock-on effects of this circumstance are wide-ranging and in extreme cases lead to workers left with a choice between being the victim of criminal behaviour or being unable to pay their rent.

The act of turning down work, no matter how inconvenient or last minute, risks resulting in being offered less work the following week, or even no future work. This risk creates the power imbalance mentioned above, forcing workers to let their personal life be dictated by the manager of their workplace. But, it also has more severe implications.

Our interviewees consistently raised the fact that clubs, bars and restaurants are very often difficult places to work. Customers of hospitality venues are very likely to be inebriated, whether from alcohol or drugs, and as a result likely to treat staff in ways that would not be expected or accepted in other lines of work. We heard how sexual harassment and racial abuse are commonplace in bars. But, critically to this report, how the fact of ZHCs and the insecurity they breed via the effective removal of protections against unfair dismissal, means that workers do not feel they have a secure footing from which to object to and call out certain behaviours. It might be claimed that abusive behaviour is an industrial hazard of the hospitality sector. However, it is clear that the inability for workers to call out and prevent such behaviours is a structural problem created by zero-hours contracts.

Accepting abusive behaviour can be exacerbated by some of the hospitality sector's reliance on 'regulars'. Pubs, in particular, often draw their customers from a limited local area, so losing a single regular customer can turn into a meaningful financial loss. Paired with the ease with which managers can effectively dismiss bar staff, this can too often lead to managers siding with abusive customers over their own staff. In turn, the knowledge of how a situation is likely to play out often leads

to bar staff not raising the issue of abuse to begin with.

> *"Sexual harassment in the workplace, or by customers, or regulars is something that no one should accept that as part of their job, right? But it's something that does happen in a patriarchal society and environments where there's heavy drinking and drug taking, right? But in terms of what you can then do, knowing whether or not you have the right to kick someone out whether or not if that person submits a complaint against you, knowing that whether or not management is going to have your back, knowing whether or not your job is at risk, because you could immediately be let go; in that context, yeah, the contracts really do matter. Because if you've got a fixed contract, there are at least processes that have to be followed, you're not just going to suddenly get stopped being offered shifts. And that's the case for transphobia and racism and homophobia more broadly as well. Navigating those oppressions and being able to do so from a position of stability is contingent on having job security."* - Amardeep, 27

But the source of abuse is not limited to customers. During our interviews we also heard how sexual harassment from managers is common place and often treated as expected behaviour. In these cases, the ability to give hours to some employees over others without justification clearly creates the necessary conditions for an abusive manager and staff who feel unable to protest against their behaviour.

tips

A second aspect of employment that is specific to the hospitality sector is workers' reliance on tips. As we've already discussed, having a variable income creates insecurity. On top of having a variable number of hours of work each week, many in the hospitality industry rely on tips from customers to top up their minimum wage pay. The reliance on tips results in another layer of uncertainty, but also further indirect problems for workers.

During the pandemic, the reliance on tips caused problems for hospitality workers, beyond those they already suffered. Tips were not included in the calculations for furlough pay, so if a worker would normally expect to get 20% of their wage on top - in the form of tips - rather than receiving 80% of their normal wage as furlough, they were in fact receiving only two thirds.

The reliance on tips also creates a financial incentive, or even necessity, for workers to show deference to customers, to accept abuse or harassment. This imperative to behave in certain ways ranges from forcing workers to be overly friendly on days they are feeling low, to accepting comments or attitudes from customers that they wouldn't outside of work, to feeling the need to act flirtatiously in order to garner more tips. It goes without saying that many of these issues primarily impact women.

It is now commonplace for tips to be collected by management and redistributed amongst staff. This is intended to ensure that back of house staff also benefit from the gratitude of customers, but it provides another mechanism by which employers can control employees. It is only recently that legislation was passed to prevent businesses from taking a share of tips, however, they can still be distributed in ways that top up particular workers' salaries more than others. Often, these tips are seen as a way to increase management's salaries. Seen from the perspective of the employer, this could be viewed as a way to reduce managers' salaries, by taking money from employees. A [recent example from Pizza Express](#)[8] shows how this mechanism can be changed at will to suit the needs of employers. When facing a staff shortage in their kitchens, rather than increase the wages of kitchen staff, Pizza Express diverted more of the tips to them, effectively topping up their wages from the front of house staff's pockets.

anti-union activity

As well as using contrived employment models to evade employment rights originally won by trade unions and later enshrined in law, the modern wave of insecure work thrives off creating obstacles to organising at work in the present. In the case of hospitality, there are 'natural' obstacles, implicit deterrents and in some cases explicit actions that are of questionable legality.

The first such obstacle, that is common to hospitality, courier drivers, nannies, agency care workers and many more, is the lack of a clearly defined workplace. For nannies there are limited places where they can meet and organise. For Deliveroo riders, they may be limited to congregating on organically chosen street corners between rides. For bar workers, their workplace is only the front of house area where they conduct their work and where their customers and managers also reside. Furthermore, the typical rota system of a bar or restaurant means that the entire workforce of a particular bar is rarely all in one place at the same time. This problem is exacerbated even further in a chain of establishments that might see workers moving between different venues for different shifts.

Beyond this obstacle to having the conversations and building the relationships required to organise a collective response from workers to the actions of their employers, ZHCs make it extremely difficult to strike. At the simplest level, how does a worker withdraw their labour when they have no scheduled or guaranteed hours of work?

However, we heard of one even more extreme case of anti-union activity. After a Glasgow hotel chain made the majority of the staff redundant when going into a fresh lockdown in spring 2021, many of the staff elected to bring a trade union representative into their redundancy consultations, as is their legal right. One interviewee told us that, upon the end of lockdown, with the hospitality sector seeing a rapid return of customers, all the staff were emailed with an offer

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8   Butler, 'Pizza Express Waiting Staff Outraged as Share of Tips Is Cut'.

to return to their previous jobs – except those staff that had brought union representatives to their meetings. In one case, an individual used an email forwarded from another colleague to reapply for, and then be rejected from, the very job they held only a month before.

> *"The vocal Unite members didn't receive the email that went out to other people saying they were rehiring. After being forwarded the email, a few actually did then reapply for the job and either got no response or a five minute interview and then were told they were not suitable for the job that they were actually doing six months ago." -* Caitlin, 25

While only anecdotal, this story supports the notion that in hospitality, as in many other sectors, insecurity is not just a byproduct of young people choosing this work as a temporary job. It shows an industry that relies on maintaining an insecure workforce. Its business model depends on maintaining a pool of staff that can be picked up or dropped at will and that have no practical means to defend themselves.

> *"I have on good authority that, at an industry wide level, certainly in Scotland, lobbyists for the industry are having workshops on how to battle Unite Hospitality. So they are doing organised training on how to combat successful organising". - Bryan Simpson - Unite Hospitality*

st:nt

A notable recent event in the hospitality sector is the emergence of platforms such as St:nt, Limber and Indeed Flex. In the simplest terms, these platforms are Uber for the hospitality sector. They allow bars and restaurants to go even further than employing their staff on ZHCs and instead not employ them at all. Companies can request workers for as little as 90 minutes a time and call them in or send them home depending on how busy they are, in real time. The following section will discuss in more detail the myriad implications of app-based work, but it is worth noting here that it is an issue spreading into the hospitality sector which will undoubtedly compound the problems already discussed.

CARE

the care crisis

The austerity-induced crisis of care has been well documented - to the extent that even Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson has made funding care a focus of his public addresses in recent months. Although woefully inadequate in its scale,[9] and unequal in its design, Johnson's announcement of a 'Plan for Health and Social Care' demonstrates the extent to which revamping our care system has become a top voter priority. Indeed, the inability to rely on a consistent, affordable and well-resourced cradle-to-grave care system is one of the most visceral ways in which austerity has been felt in the everyday lives of working-class people.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, much of this focus has been on the breakdown of our social care system, which takes care of people with complex needs - for example, because of old age or particular physical and mental health needs. After nearly 30,000 excess deaths in care homes[10] were recorded following March 2020, media and politicians were finally forced to confront a crisis that care recipients, care workers and their unions had long been ringing the alarm on.[11] The pandemic especially exposed the ongoing crisis of understaffing, which has been several years in the making; just before the pandemic hit, the vacancy rate in adult social care was at 8%,[12] with 1 in 11 care worker roles being unfulfilled. This chronic understaffing has not only left us with a care system unable to weather the storm of a health crisis - but it has created an overworked, underpaid workforce absorbing the mental, physical and emotional costs of a social care system that is not fit for purpose.

In turn, much of our social care infrastructure has been privatised over the past three decades. Even though most social care services are commissioned by local authorities, the vast majority of social care services are delivered by thousands of private companies. The marketisation of what is an essential human need has resulted in lower wages and increased work pressure for staff, and lower quality care provision for service receivers, as companies cut labour and resource costs in order to generate unsustainably high profit margins. According to We Own It, two-thirds of adult social care[13] workers report a decline in the quality of adult care as a result of privatisation since the 1990s. As is often the case with essential yet undervalued work, this has affected a largely migrant workforce - with 20% of residential care workers having been qualified overseas.[14] The deficit in care workers is only intensifying as Brexit begins to unfold; with social care workers

9 Padgham, 'There Is Nothing in Boris Johnson's Social Care Plans to Rescue Providers like Us'.

10 'Deaths Involving COVID-19 in the Care Sector, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics'.

11 GMB, 'Social Care a "Ticking Timebomb"'.

12 Macdonald, 'The Health and Social Care Workforce Gap'.

13 'Privatisation Fails Care Work'.

14 'Health and Social Care - Migrant Workers'.

excluded from Home Secretary Priti Patel's recently announced health and care visa,[15] it is unclear who will fill the widening social care labour gap of an ageing population.

unaffordable and unavailable: the childcare sector

The childcare sector is no different. Despite policies like shared parental leave and extension of free childcare provision being introduced during the Cameron/Osborne years, this has not been enough to shield children from the worst excesses of austerity. The reduction in childcare payments in tax credits from 80% to 70%,[16] has left many families with an annual loss of up to £1560 in childcare benefits. Families with more than two children were hit particularly hard by Osborne's 'two child policy', which saw the third or subsequent child in a family denied tax credits and housing benefit. Changes to the tax and benefit system saw single parent families over £2,300 a year worse off[17] than they would have been under the original proposals for Universal Credit. For many parents - particularly those who work outside school hours - it is simply impossible to provide their children with consistent childcare, especially as the demand and precarity of their own working lives increase.

As social care costs increase, downward pressure is being placed on the ability of families to foot mounting childcare bills - or to take care of their children outside of traditional working hours, leading them to rely more heavily on outsourcing this essential work. When put in the broader context of the UK's care crisis and the impact of budget cuts on social security that families with children rely on, an additional 15 hours of free childcare per week does not meet the urgent challenge created by the austerity.

Much like in the social care system, increased demand for care is not being met with increased resources. Childcare work is the backbone of any modern economy.[18] It is because of childcare workers that parents are able to enter the workforce. Yet, this is not reflected in the wages and conditions of workers in the sector - a largely women workforce is paid on average 40% less than the average woman worker; real term wages have fallen by 5% since 2013.[19]

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15   Ali, Amar, 'Getting Ready for Brexit 2021: Care Home Staff | Reiss Edwards.'

16   Tucker, Josephine, 'The Austerity Generation'.

17   Tucker, Josephine.

18   Kersley, Helen, 'A False Economy'.

19   IER, 'Almost Half of Childcare Workers Forced to Rely on Benefits, Research Shows'.

As is also the case for social care, childcare provision in the UK has been almost entirely outsourced to private company providers.[20] Over the past several decades, the state has shifted from direct childcare provision, to instead offering private finance initiatives that encourage businesses to take over these services. What had once been provided by local authorities, has now become a largely private enterprise, supplemented by funding and regulation by the state. With many corporate childcare companies being owned by offshore companies, this has led to volatility in the childcare sector; as childcare businesses are routinely restructured to maximise profits from afar, the sector has a notoriously low staff retention rate,[21] and is experiencing a high number of nursery and early years service closures. Even before the nursery crisis of the pandemic, 1 in 4 nurseries[22] were at serious risk of permanent closure, creating deep uncertainty for families and childcare workers.

This has understandably led to a staffing crisis in the sector. In 2019, there was a shortage of 11,000 early years practitioners[23] and nursery teachers - a phenomenon that has only intensified in the wake of COVID-19,[24] during which many workers who were furloughed or voluntarily terminated their contracts chose not return to the sector. Workers that are still in the sector are having to take on more responsibilities to compensate for lack of staffing,[25] intensifying what is already a difficult and exhausting job. A 2019 report by the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) made clear the working conditions that have led to this staffing crisis; workers reported burnout, loss of passion, long hours and stagnant wages as major reasons for choosing to leave the profession for jobs in retail and schooling. A similar crisis is being identified in what is known as 'wrap around' care (i.e. childcare provided outside of school hours). Having suffered tremendous losses in working hours and income, over a fifth of childminders told the Childcare During COVID-19[26] project they are not confident they will remain in the profession in six months - and over half of these have been working as a childminder for 10 or more years. This irrecoverable loss of expertise and experience in the sector is a result of squeezed budgets, stagnant funding and lack of investment in skilling up both existing and future workers. A combination of the financial crisis and, later, the COVID-19 crisis has left childcare workers feeling less valued and visible than ever.

At the same time as workers are being pushed out of the sector by stagnant wages, guardians are having to fork out more than ever before for child-care services - with costs rising more than four times faster than wages[27] since 2008, formal childcare has become

20   Penn, 'Gambling on the Market'.

21   Lyons, 'Staff Turnover for Early Years Sector Concerning'.

22   'CORONAVIRUS'.

23   'A Fresh View on Tackling Staff Shortages in the Early Years Sector'.

24   Bonetti and Cottell, 'The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Early Years Workforce'.

25   Whittaker, 'Briefing Paper #2'.

26   Whittaker.

27   TUC, 'Cost of Childcare Has Risen Four Times Faster than Wages since 2008, Says TUC'.

increasingly unaffordable. This affordability crisis impacts those already marginalised in our economy: such as working class families on lower incomes, single parents, parents and children with disabilities and Black families. The UK has the third most expensive child-care system in the world[28] when calculated as a percentage of average wage, and 96% of 20,000 parents recently surveyed[29] blamed the under provision of financial support and childcare availability by the government. Yet, whilst one-third of parents spend more on childcare than on their rent or mortgage, one in 10 childcare workers are living in poverty.[30] It is clear that as childcare costs rocket, this is not being re-invested into the workforce.

plugging the gap

The childcare gap is being plugged in unsustainable ways. Most families are having to rely on a patchwork of different kinds of childcare - from parents (predominantly mothers) leaving their careers or reducing their hours, to reliance on unpaid labour of grandparents[31] and other relatives. A significant part of this patchwork gap-plugging has been done through the rise of the on-demand childcare app - also known as 'childcare platforms'. These platforms have had the most significant impact in the 'at-home childcare sector' - au pairing, nannying, babysitting and childminding.

Au Pairs and babysitters - along with childminders - typically provide care for a few hours a day providing basic childminding. This often includes evening work (when children are usually asleep), or can extend to include school pick up and drop offs, but is typically done on an ad-hoc basis. The primary difference between an au pair and a babysitter, is that an au pair lives in the family home, and is not paid a wage, but rather given weekly 'pocket money'. Au pairing is also typically framed as a 'cultural exchange'[32] where a young person - often a woman - travels to Britain[33] to live with a host family to learn about British culture, whilst also providing cheap domestic labour. Nannies - both live in and live out - provide more holistic, long-term childcare. They often have several years of formal and informal childcare experience, and are considered to be responsible for and have expertise in the learning, development and education of the child on a longer term basis. Many will have specialist experience or qualifications - for example, in taking care of newborn babies, as night/maternity nannies, or in supporting children with special education needs and disabilities.

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28   'Net Childcare Costs for Parents Using Childcare Facilities'.

29   Topping, 'UK Failing on Childcare, Finds Survey of over 20,000 Working Parents'.

30   Topping.

31   '5 Million Grandparents Take on Childcare Responsibilities | Latest News'.

32   'What Is an Au Pair?'

33   'Au Pair Visa UK: Entry Requirements - AuPairWorld'.

what is a digital labour platform?

Digital labour platforms vary according to company and sector - however, the characteristics they typically share include:

The remote management of workers by algorithm - Many platform workers never interact with a human supervisor/manager. Instead, they are assigned work and disciplined by an algorithm. These algorithms rely on constant surveillance and data collection of their workers, influence automated or semi-automated decision-making and use automated 'prompts' to incentivise particular worker behaviours. Sometimes, workers' rates are set by these algorithms.

Taskification - Instead of being paid a wage for an extended period of time, platforms break a job down into smaller, discrete 'tasks' - some of which are compensated, and others are not. For example, instead of paying a courier for the duration of a shift, a platform will pay a courier only for the time they are physically taking an object from one location to another.

Ratings and reviews - Remote algorithmic management relies heavily on the outsourcing of performance review to clients/consumers. This typically takes the form of the worker being rated or reviewed (e.g. by a 'thumbs up' or star rating system) by the customer after each completed task. These ratings often inform the rates set and work delivered by the platform, determine their access to future work and can even be the cause of a worker being automatically suspended from the platform.

Lack of employee status (and therefore traditional worker rights) - Despite having employer-like control on workers, platforms are typically not legally defined as employers, but as technology companies/providers of technology services. This allows them to avoid providing their workers with traditional worker rights such as the right to a fair dismissal process, union recognition, sick pay and holiday pay. In the case of Uber, this was recently contested in the UK Supreme Court, which declared Uber drivers to be workers, rather than self-employed independent contractors.

Information Asymmetry - Platforms rely on a data-driven approach to managing work and workers. As digital infrastructures, platforms are able to collect real time data on workers and the work itself more comprehensively than ever before. Yet, exactly what data they collect, and how this data is used, is concealed from the worker. Workers are therefore not aware of the process and information that is used to manage them. Digital platforms have had an astronomical rise over the past decade. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, they promised two things: the

opportunity for people in the financial crisis to make money in the absence of formal employment and the provision of on-demand services during a period of austerity-induced budget cuts. In reality, the rise of digital platforms has lowered the floor of workers rights, and facilitated the outsourcing of key services to private companies that are unaccountable to those who use the services - either as consumers or workers. The legal and cultural definition of these companies as 'technology companies', rather than employers and service providers allows them to evade relevant regulatory frameworks.

Platforms have created immense amounts of precarity for workers in the sectors they dominate. Whilst they offer an income stream to people excluded from more traditional forms of employment, the consequences have overall been detrimental to labour rights. Platform workers are denied traditional labour rights, such as sick pay, holiday pay, minimum wage and the right to a fair dismissal. It can be hard for workers to predict how much money they will make and how much work will be available on any given day, or how many hours they will have to work in order to make ends meet. Platforms have a tendency to rapidly dominate the sectors they enter, and this typically carries with it lower wages, fewer rights and more insecurity.

The rise of the digital platforms in male-dominant sectors like taxi and courier/delivery work have been well documented. However, their impact in feminised sectors like domestic work, sex work, care and 'personal care' (hairdressing, beauty therapy and wellness) is often overlooked - despite the increasing prominence of platforms in these areas.

platform childcare

In childcare, platforms present parents with a seemingly endless supply of at-home child care workers who can be booked either in advance or on the same day. These platforms generally cover babysitters, nannies and au pairs, although the boundaries between these different kinds of work can be slippery. Workers frequently find themselves being hired through the app technically as a babysitter, yet the hours and type of work they are expected to do are more aligned with nannying.

Before platforms, babysitters and au pairs would be sourced either through word of mouth - with workers often circulating within local communities - or, more recently, through online forums such as Facebook and Gumtree. On the other hand, nannies - technically employees - were typically sourced via agencies (although it is not impossible for a nanny to be also sourced via online forums and word of mouth). The rise of childcare platforms have massively expanded the supply and accessibility of in-home childcare available for parents - they no longer have to rely on being part of the right social networks, and can avoid the often hefty fees associated with hiring a nanny through an agency. As parents' own schedules become increasingly unpredictable, and traditional forms of childcare (such as after school

clubs, nurseries and summer schools) become unaffordable and unavailable, apps provide a convenient - and often cheaper - pool of childcare that can be sourced on-demand and at short notice. In turn, young women in particular, are turning to these apps for work - either to top up insufficient income from existing work (care work or otherwise), as a 'side-hustle' while studying or even as their entire source of income. As with most platforms,[34] a combination of dwindling, publicly-available social infrastructure, and the shrinking availability of well-waged, formal employment has been responsible for the astronomical rise of childcare platforms over the past decade.

Childcare platforms are on the rise globally. They are different from forums such as Facebook, Gumtree and Craigslist, which are also popular in the at-home care sector, but are not specifically designed for childcare, and do not have the described features of a labour platform as outlined above. They are also distinct from websites like sitters.co.uk and rockmybabynannyagency.co.uk, which operate more as online childcare forums/messaging boards; they do not have the 'app' feature, and are much less closely managed than typical labour platforms.

In the UK, three major players in the childcare platform sector are: childcare.co.uk, Bubble, and KoruKids. Childcare.co.uk is the biggest of the three, boasting 2.5 million users across its website and app since it was established in 2009. Bubble and KoruKids were both set up a few years later, in 2016. Whilst it is difficult to get numbers on how many users are on each platform (other than what the company itself divulges), downloads numbers on the Google Play store suggests Bubble to be the second largest out of the three with 50,000+ downloads, compared to KoruKids' 1000+ downloads.

At the macro level, platforms in childcare have had a similar effect to other sectors, in the sense that they have massively expanded the scale and immediacy with which workers can be sourced. These apps carry many of the hallmarks of a classic labour platform. They work on the basis of geolocation, identifying workers within your local area, as well as automating key parts of getting and finding work. Workers are rated and reviewed by clients (often using a star rating system); they are vetted and managed by remote algorithmic processes; their visibility to potential clients on the app is determined by processes they are not privy to; the app algorithmically 'nudges' worker behaviour, for example, to reply to clients within certain time frames, to promote themselves in particular ways and apply for particular jobs. Like platforms across most sectors, the development of these apps were accompanied by significant amounts of media fanfare and venture capital. Bubble was kickstarted by £500,000 of initial seed funding[35] in 2017, boosted in 2020 by £2million of further venture capital funding.[36] In 2019, a fundraising round led by one of Europe's largest venture capital firms Atomico saw KoruKids source £10million in new funding.[37]

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34   Gebrial, 'Dangerous Brown Workers: How Race and Migration Politics Shape the Platform Labour Market'.

35   Perez, 'Babysitting App Bubble Closes £500,000 Seed'.

36   Sunday Times, '£2m Boost for Bubble, "Uber of Babysitting"'.

37   Fisher, 'Startup Profile'.

However, there are many things about childcare platforms that are distinct from platforms in male-dominated sectors we tend to be more familiar with. Due to the nature of care work, the curation of an online personal profile is central to the rate a worker is able to set, and their chances of getting hired for a job. A considerable amount of thought and unpaid time goes into the choice of image, words, and other markers (for example qualifications, childcare philosophies and hobbies/interests that can be shared with children), in order to maximise their chances of getting a job. Unlike Uber and Deliveroo, much more emphasis is placed on how a worker comes across in their profile - how trustworthy and skilled they appear - due to the intimate nature of childcare. These markers of trustworthiness and skill are often intangible - creating differing pressures for different workers, often along lines of nationality, race and class. The particularities of how platforms are shaping work in feminised sectors need to be studied and understood in their own terms, rather than extrapolated from research being undertaken in a limited number of masculinised sectors.[38]

what is bubble

Bubble was founded in 2016 by 'entrepreneur dads'[39] Ari Last and Adrian Murdock. Although forefronting their experience as parents as the main motivator for establishing the app, their professional backgrounds in both finance and tech entrepreneurship are an integral part of Bubble's story. Both held managerial roles in the online sports betting company Betfair and went onto work at retail and financial technology platforms. The establishment of Bubble was, in Ari Last's words, a way to bring parents the "convenience-features we all associate now with on-demand apps"[40] in a childcare context.

The provision of 'on-demand' childcare is what sets Bubble apart from its counterparts KoruKids and childcare.co.uk. Although it has recently launched a permanent nannying agency service, the bread and butter of Bubble's model is shorter term, ad-hoc 'sits'. Parents can book a babysitter with just 30 minutes notice, and around 35% are booked within 48 hours notice. Unlike KoruKids, which is oriented more towards matching nannies with longer-term families, and childcare.co.uk which provides access to emergency babysitters as one of over dozens of services, Bubble is more explicitly designed to be the 'on-demand' option in the childcare sector. Whilst much of the time, these 'sits' are one-off, they often turn into longer term arrangements with the family that take place off-app.

When you log onto Bubble as a parent, you are offered the option to book a single sit, regular help, a permanent nanny, a 'Helpr' (who helps out with other, non-childcare domestic tasks like pet walking, house sitting and cleaning) or a night nanny. Parents are encouraged to post a job, but they can also use the 'sitter lookup' feature, which allows them to 'swipe through' care workers in their local area.

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38   Ticona and Mateescu, 'Trusted Strangers'.

39   Gill, 'Bubble Babysitting App Comes to Manchester'.

40   Basul, 'Meet the CEO'.

the contract

The in-home childcare sector has always operated in a legal grey area. Particular segments of the nannying workforce have worked in more formalised ways - in other words, as an employee of a family, organised via an agency that is responsible for drawing up contracts. However, this arrangement has largely been reserved for White, documented workers, in what is a disproportionately migrant workforce.[41] Au pairs, mostly from abroad, are explicitly not considered workers or employees - instead, their working conditions are governed by an ambiguous set of guidelines.[42] Babysitting on the other hand, is almost exclusively informal and cash-in-hand.

The majority of in-home childcare, whether nannying, babysitting or au pair work, has operated in the informal, insecure sector, without employment rights or union representation. The fact that this work happens in the client's home, and that childcare (particularly childcare that does not take place in a formalised environment like a nursery or school) is often undervalued as a form of work, makes it particularly difficult to monitor and implement contracts. In turn, it makes it difficult for workers to unionise and create a basic standard of labour rights.

Platforms like Bubble formalise some parts of this process. For example, digital payment processors and the automatic provision of third-party public liability insurance for workers. However, much of this formalisation is geared towards the needs of the client, rather than the worker. For example, things like worker identity verification, provision of right to work documentation and the creation of a worker data trail helps to build parent trust, but this does not tend to go the other way.

Bubble does not formalise the employment relationship in ways that make the work more secure. For the app's 'sitter' service, workers do not sign an employment contract - they sign a Terms of Use[43] for the platform. The (mis)classification of a worker as a 'user' of the app, rather than a worker, is a typical way in which platform companies evade responsibility for the working conditions they generate. The Terms of Use makes it clear that Bubble does "not provide employment services" or "seek to find employment for sitters". Unlike traditional nannying agencies, Bubble does not create a contract or act as a mediator between parties. Bubble allows parents to book 'regular help' for up to 12 weeks at a time, after which point the parent can re-book for another 12 weeks. Bubble workers reported this to be a frequent occurrence - with many choosing to go 'off-app' after the initial 12 weeks in order to avoid app fees. In most traditional nannying agencies, a childcare stint that lasts for 12 weeks or less would be classified as a 'temporary nanny placement', and would involve an employment contract. Yet, Bubble's policy and platform design allows a parent to essentially hire a nanny, but at the rate and informality of a babysitter.

> "When you see a job listed as babysitting, but it's an 8 hour full day

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41   Busch, 'The Employment of Migrant Nannies in the UK'.

42   'Can We Host an Au Pair?'

43   'Terms Of Use | Bubble'.

job - that's not babysitting. That's nannying. If I'm with the kid for 8 hours, I'm cooking meals, keeping them entertained, helping them with things. But I can only charge the same as I would for babysitting because that's how they describe it" - Dora, 26

Furthermore, this worker (mis)classification increases the burden of paperwork on the worker. Whilst working with a traditional agency would mean that things like the nanny's taxes and national insurance contributions were paid by the family employer as part of the PAYE system, the Bubble worker is classified as self-employed, and therefore responsible for this cost - bureaucratically and financially.

This is not to romanticise agency employment. Agency contracts are uneven in how fair they are, and how well they are implemented. Working conditions and wages vary dramatically from agency to agency, with these inequalities often [unfold along the lines of race, migration and class.[44]](#) Many smaller agencies [rely on zero-hours contracts, or simply flout the regulations and offer no contract at all.[45]](#) Agency nannies also have not historically had access to union representation, and so struggle to assert the legal rights they do have. For many nannies - particularly those who are undocumented or have irregular migration status - agency work is largely inaccessible, and so a [lack of contract and worker status is nothing new.[46]](#) For many of these workers, 'formalisation' is not necessarily desirable - whilst the ability to work 'underground' comes with significant risks, formalisation could entail loss of work entirely, seen by many to be a worse outcome. However, contrary to expectation, the digitisation of nannying services does not come along with better employment rights - or even any employment rights. Rather, it increases the scale of work that takes place informally and precariously, as nannying itself becomes cheaper and more easily accessible for families.

more work, less pay

As is often the case for platform work, the way the app is designed increases the burdens placed on workers, and places more power in the hands of clients/consumers. Workers report being struck with a sense of disposability each time they open the app, as hundreds of workers compete for a small number of jobs. Under the 'word-of-mouth' system of finding childcare workers, families had a smaller pool to choose from, meaning the loss of one of their local nannies was a greater risk, as they are less easy to swiftly replace. For workers, the acute sense of disposability creates an enhanced sense of precarity, as their sense of power in their workplace is further decreased.

"You can feel insecure....because families can see so many nannies now whenever they want. If they want, it's easy to just exchange you

44   Lalani, 'Ending the Abuse'.
45   Farris, 'The Business of Care'.
46   Redfern, '"I Want to Go Home"'.

for someone else." - Lydia, 22

The sense of childcare workers being endlessly available has pushed nannies on apps to lower their wages while increasing their workload. Whilst workers on Bubble can set their own hourly rate (unlike Uber drivers and app-based couriers), many reported that they could not get any work on the platform when they listed their regular, 'off-app' hourly fee. Once again, the mass availability of workers at the touch of a button creates a downward pressure on wages, as nannies are forced to undercut themselves in order to be considered for a job.

> *"When I started, I put my normal fee, £13 per hour. I got nothing. I had to put it down to £9, £10 an hour just to be considered. I had to do a lot of jobs like that to build up my ratings so I could be considered for more work even though I have experience." - Joy, 28*

Yet, despite having to charge a lower fee, nannies on Bubble report feeling they have to go 'above and beyond' in order to secure a five-star rating. Given the intimacy and stakes of childcare work, many nannies consider anything less than a five-star rating to be a significant blow to their ability to secure future work. Workers communicated that the fear of being poorly rated made it harder to say no to the demands of the parents, and even at times children, they worked with. Some chipped in with non-childcare domestic tasks, such as washing up and cleaning the household, despite not being paid for this work. Whilst families are also rated - and workers report relying on reviews to assess whether or not to apply for a job - the implications of a poor rating is significantly higher for a worker than it is for a family. Whereas most workers would consider applying for a job with a family that had the odd poor rating or review, it was not believed that this would work the other way.

> *"The rating system is everything on Bubble. One bad rating and you're done. You just do what you can really, what you're asked so they don't rate you down." - Lina, 19*

Platforms also 'taskify' the work of childcare. As parents are able to rely on a constantly available pool of childcarers, which they can hire on an hourly basis, workers find themselves having to work between multiple families in order to stitch together a liveable weekly salary. Rather than circulating regularly between a small group of families in a local area, childcare workers find themselves frequently moving between families, with their salaries made up of far more 'one-off sits' than ever before - some interviewees had worked for over one hundred families over a six-month period. Whilst the availability of work is appreciated by childcare workers - particularly after many struggled to work or have access to furlough during pandemic lockdowns - the labour and stress of having to constantly familiarise themselves with the expectations, routines and needs of new families creates an added labour demand that is not reflected in higher wages.

> *"Getting to know families is something I like about the job. But you really don't know what you're walking into with each family. I*

can handle it because I have so much experience, but it must be intimidating for so many." - Joy, 28

The structure of these platforms - the rating system, increased competition, taskification and the blurring of boundaries between different tasks (such as nannying, babysitting and domestic chores) - mean at-home childcare workers are finding themselves doing more work, for less pay. In this way, whilst Bubble expands the access of the nannying sector - both for parents and workers - the overall wages and working conditions in the sector are lowered.

'hands on, hands off'

The impact of platformisation on a workforce that has historically been in the informal sector is often contradictory. On the one hand some parts of the labour process are formalised - such as feedback processes and payment. Yet, much of the process remains informal, abiding by the same intangible, unequal power dynamics that have always governed paid domestic labour. Whilst the presence of Bubble as an intermediary provides a workers that previously would not have access to agency work with a third party, this does not necessarily translate to a sense of protection and security. As has always been the case, workers are left to directly negotiate with their employer. Workers overwhelmingly report that if they found themselves in a problematic, or even risky, situation during a job, they do not feel they could turn to Bubble to help them. Where background checks are not done on clients (but are done on workers), childcarers rely on their own instincts, experience and tools to gauge whether or not they will be safe with the client before accepting a job. This is directly related to Bubble's role as a digital platform; by defining itself as an intermediary platform - not an agent - it is able to evade responsibility for what happens as a result of the connections it fosters. While the platform gives the impression of formalisation, it in fact leaves intact much of the conditions that have always made care work insecure and precarious. In some ways, it enhances this precarity, by increasing the 'replaceability' of individual workers.

> *The App connects Sitters with Parents. When a babysitting appointment is booked, a binding agreement is created between the Sitter and the Parent. Bubble is not a party to that agreement. Bubble does not and cannot control either the Sitter or the Parent, the services provided (or not provided) or the quality or timing of those services and disclaims all liability for such.*
>
> *['Terms of Use', Bubble]*

Yet, apps like Bubble are increasingly becoming a key source of work for people in the at-home childcare sector. As is often the case with platforms, their power is derived from their ability to rapidly dominate certain sectors. For example, it is now extremely challenging to work as a private hire driver in any major UK city without being on a platform such as Uber or Bolt. The jobs simply are not available elsewhere. The

rise of platforms in the childcare sector is slower than say, courier work, given the lingering reluctance of some families to use an app to find childcare and, in their view, "not know who's coming to watch your kids".[47] Yet, the role of digital platforms in at-home childcare is growing significantly - for many looking to start out in this area of work, as either a primary or supplementary source of income, the easiest way to find jobs is to join a childcare platform.

As these platforms become normalised, an increasing proportion of the jobs available - particularly in families that cannot afford high agency fees - are likely to migrate to digital platforms. If other sectors - such as Uber and Deliveroo - can be taken as instructive examples, the meteoric and often unaccountable rise of platforms to dominance creates a force that can be hard to tackle. Even when victories are won in the courts, it can be hard to enforce these rulings on companies that have accrued so much financial and social power. Workers are increasingly forced to comply with whatever terms are outlined by the tiny number of companies that hold the power of the sector - as problematic as these terms may be, being excluded from the platform can mean exclusion from the ability to get work all together. What's more, these platforms often rise to dominance by offering decent terms to workers in the initial phases of deployment. Yet, once saturation of the market is reached, workers experience a steep decline in their working conditions as the platform becomes powerful enough to set the terms of the entire sector. This is why for platforms like Uber, workers are seeing a decline in wages, despite riders experiencing a fare hike.[48]

This 'hook and sink` strategy of digital platforms is already causing much concern amongst undocumented workers in the sector. Whereas Bubble initially did not require proof of Right to Work in order to sign up, it now requires a work visa, a residence permit specifying eligibility to work or proof of settled/pre-settled status for non-UK passport holders. For those who signed up before this became a requirement, the workers have been told that they could be subject to randomised 'spot-checks' of their documents. For a largely migrant workforce - many of whom come from the EU - this is a worrying prospect, particularly post-Brexit. If denied access to the platform, there is deep concern that they will not be able to make up their income from off-app work; what's more, it is unclear how platforms like Bubble will survive without the irregular or undocumented workers the sector has historically relied on. As is often the case, the very workers that facilitate the meteoric rise of digital platforms, are excluded from the decision making processes that govern the platforms on which they now rely.

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47   FOX 6 Now, 'Babysitting App'.

48   Siddiqui, 'You May Be Paying More for Uber, but Drivers Aren't Getting Their Cut of the Fare Hike'.

Yet, platforms workers have famously overcome the deeply skewed conditions in which they work. Despite the seeming impenetrable monopoly held by major platforms, workers have secured significant gains in both the courts and the popular imagination. These wins have been the product of immense struggle; those involved have sacrificed immeasurable amounts of energy and time in order to hold accountable the seemingly unaccountable. By offering solidarity and resources to the often invisibilised struggles of domestic platform workers at this relatively early stage of deployment, we have a unique opportunity to set a basic standard of conditions in this burgeoning space, before platforms like Bubble become overwhelming in their power.

ACADEMIA

Academia is an often overlooked part of the UK's insecure economy. Being an academic has historically been considered a highly professional career - one that promises stability and good pay throughout a person's working life. Even though tenure was removed in the UK in 1988, the job security offered by open-ended contracts has been seen as essential to the autonomy and freedom necessary for academic integrity. Yet, it is clear that academic working life has changed dramatically. Whilst a small few at the top continue to enjoy the conditions many associate with a traditional academic career, a rapidly expanding proportion the labour universities rely upon is being carried out by insecure workers.

a changing landscape

The Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) have been at the forefront of research into how academia is changing. Their recent report, Precarious Work in Higher Education[49] found that one third of all academics are employed on fixed-term contracts, which can be less than one year long. 18 percent of higher education institutions are using zero-hours contracts to employ staff, and 66,115 academic staff are employed on what the UCU call 'atypical' contracts - these include things like zero-hours, variable hours, hourly, fractional and agency contracts. The UCU's University of Cambridge branch reports that university managements employ a variety of "accounting tricks"[50] to keep the amount spent on workers as low as possible. Whilst doing a fixed-term postdoctoral contract has historically been part of an academic's journey, the sheer number of precarious contracts academics are undertaking during their career, and the increasingly exploitative conditions of these contracts, represents a marked shift in the UK higher education landscape.

> "People used to think [precarity] was just something that happened to people at the bottom who were young. But what we've seen is that it's trickled up; with the closing of departments, the downgrading of certain disciplines, the mass redundancies that we've seen and the attacks on the arts and humanities." - Jo Grady - UCU

Many academics are not rewarded with the coveted permanent position, even after years of cutting their teeth on fractional, hourly and fixed-term contracts; in 2019, four in ten academics considered leaving[51] academia as a result of mental and physical health pressures, and 70 per cent of UK PhD holders left the academic sector within 3.5 years of graduating.[52] This is not a system designed to invest in the long-term skills and career development of the next generation of researchers; rather, it is designed to ensure there is a constant pool

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49   UCU, 'Precarious Work in Higher Education'.
50   'Vote for Action on Casualisation – UCU'.
51   Fazackerley, '"It's Cut-Throat"'.
52   Hancock, 'The Employment of PhD Graduates in the UK'.

of workers for universities to draw on on-demand. The considerable emotional, physical and mental disruption incurred by such unpredictable working conditions not only has an immense personal toll on worker wellbeing; it is also not conducive to a healthy, productive research and education environment.

As is to be expected, the distribution of precarity in academia falls along lines of social inequality such as race, gender, class and disability. While 30 percent of white academic staff are on fixed term contracts, this rises to 40 per cent for Black academic staff, and to 43% for Asian academic staff. In every ethnic category,[53] women are more likely to be on a fixed-term or zero hours contract than men are. The series of casual contracts often misrepresented as a 'rite of passage' is in fact a sorting mechanism, wearing out those who do not have the kinds of safety net required to survive years of not having a stable income. Academia has ostensibly become more accessible to marginalised groups; there has been a flurry of diversity initiatives in recent years, and there has even been an increase in the number of ethnic minorities graduating from PhD programmes - rising from 10 per cent in 2000[54] to 19 per cent in 2020.[55] Yet the working conditions of our universities means the sector is far more hostile and, ultimately, unsurvivable for some than it is for others. These lines of exclusion are not as explicit as they have been historically - however, the outcome is that our universities remain profoundly unequal.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified many of the trends that have been unfolding over the past several decades. Workers have been hit by waves of department closures and redundancies, as substantial sources of income[56] - for example, from international student tuition fees, rent from letting student accommodation and conference and catering occupations - declined. Over 3000 employees[57] at UK universities were made redundant during the initial wave of the pandemic - many of whom were on fixed term contracts. Some universities, particularly post-92 institutions, have closed down entire departments[58] - a move that has particularly impacted academics in the arts and humanities. Such moves constitute the latest blow in an ongoing ideological assault against creative disciplines; in the midst of departmental closures, then-education Secretary Gavin Williamson declared a 'crackdown' on 'dead-end courses'[59] in the context of a 50 per cent proposed cut to subsidies given to universities for some arts subjects. Meanwhile, the salaries

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53   UCU, 'Precarious Work in Higher Education'.

54   Vitae, 'Who Does Doctoral Research in the UK?'

55   'Less than One in Five Postgraduate Research Students Are from Ethnic Minorities'.

56   Drayton and Waltmann, 'Will Universities Need a Bailout to Survive the COVID-19 Crisis?'

57   Wootton-Cane, 'Thousands of Staff Made Redundant as UK Universities Struggle to Cope with Pandemic Fallout'.

58   'RHS Statement on the Recent Closure of UK History Departments | RHS'.

59   Hayward, 'Gavin Williamson Under Fire After "Dead-End" Degrees Comment | TOTUM'.

of senior university management have remained high throughout the pandemic - with most taking home well above six figures per year. Rather than being an unavoidable consequence of conditions outside of anyone's control, the abandonment of so many academic workers during the COVID-19 crisis is the result of how UK universities are being funded and managed.

marketisation: a broken model

With income from hiked student fees, expensive summer schools, conferences and accommodation rentals, it may seem that UK universities are making more money than ever before. Yet, how is it that - as universities multiply their streams of income - the working conditions of the academics doing much of the teaching and research activities are in such crisis? Indeed, it is routinely the richest and most elite universities[60] that seem to be relying most heavily on precarious labour.

Since the early 1980s, the UK higher education sector has been gradually marketised. Over time, universities have come to rely less on reliable, stable funding by the state, and more on variable income from a range of sources - such as ever-increasing student fees, rent, selective research funding and private donors - for which universities have to compete against one another.

> *"People often think that tuition fees, and the increasing of them, put an injection of cash into the sector - but it didn't. It just meant that universities have to kind of hunt that money rather than it being delivered to them." - Jo Grady - UCU*

Marketisation has not only transformed how universities are funded; it has shifted the very logic by which universities are governed. In this logic, resources are directed towards investments that promise high, immediate financial returns and attract more student-consumers - things like expanding student halls of residence, flashy new buildings and bloated marketing budgets. The turning of education and research into a commodity leads to an over-reliance on measurable "proxies for quality"[61] like student surveys and narrow definitions of research 'impact', rather than the intangible principles of intellectual development and expansion.

> *"In the last 10 years, the percentage of income that universities have spent on staff has gone down....this isn't cash strapped institutions making ends meet. It is a strategic choice of universities, to make staff the shock absorbers of a business model that chooses the spend less of its income on staff." - Jo Grady - UCU*

60   UCU, 'Precarious Work in Higher Education'.

61   Brown, 'THE MARKETISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION'.

The impact of marketisation on workers' rights in the academy is undeniable. The 'cost-cutting' logic of corporate governance means that if, for example, an undergraduate course can be taught by workers hired last minute and paid by the hour, such a model will be preferred over hiring staff on secure employment contracts - even if this means staff are overstretched, underpaid and unable to spend enough time on their own research and development.

> "Casualisation has increased because it serves universities to increase it. It means they can pick up staff when they think they need them. It means casualised staff won't have their hours pinned down until September, sometimes even October, when they've nailed down their student recruitment numbers." - Jo Grady - UCU

Academic labour is 'taskified' - broken down into discrete tasks, some of which are recognised by the university and therefore compensated, but many others not. Workers find themselves having to spend less time teaching and researching, and more time applying for their next job, or for what feels like increasingly scarce research funding. For migrant academics on Tier 2 or 'skilled worker' visas the ability to remain in the UK is dependent on a holding job that meets certain requirements and pays above a certain amount. As such, the anxiety of precarity is compounded by the fact that if they lose their job or their contract ends, they have just sixty days to find another job that fulfils visa requirements, before having to leave the country. Academics are incentivised to tailor the research and teaching style to hit arbitrary, sector-wide performance metrics, upon which their funding or ability to secure another contract relies. The corporate need to quantify everything in order to ascertain 'value for money' leads to job promotions and funding being linked to notoriously flawed student feedback ratings - which not only can be 'gamed',[62] but tend to compound social inequalities as workers from particular backgrounds[63] are more likely to be scored 'down' by students. These conditions do not provide the kind of time, space and worker wellbeing required for creative, critical and innovative academic work.

the impacts of a precarious life

Being a precarious worker in any sector is known to carry significant health impacts. Being vulnerable to repeated 'shocks' - like having to move house or having a contract end - has been linked[64] to an increased chance of being diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression and leads to burnout, as people push themselves to their physical and emotional limits in order to fulfil their professional duties for

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62   Grove, 'Hold Bad News about Grades until after NSS'.

63   Havergal, 'Growing Evidence of Anti-Female Bias in Student Surveys'.

64   McKee et al., 'Living on the Edge'.

fear of being let go if they are deemed expendable. This is acutely compounded for those without a safety net. This includes those from a working class socio-economic background who cannot withdraw emergency funds from the 'bank of mum and dad'. It also applies to non-citizen workers, whose access to the security of the welfare state is not automatic - for example, those on a tier 2 visa have to be able to afford the immigrant healthcare surcharge for themselves and any accompanying dependants.[65]

More than 50 per cent of higher education employees show signs of depression, and nearly three in ten demonstrate signs of burnout - describing themselves as "emotionally drained from their work everyday".[66] This is related to the intense competition for a small number of permanent posts in academia combined with the prevalence of precarious contracts, which together create the conditions for widespread burnout. Academics on short-term or insecure contracts feel a need to go above and beyond their job description in order to increase the likelihood of contract renewal. Over 62 per cent of academics responding to a survey by Education Support report regularly working over 40 hours a week, and 21 per cent work more than 50 hours a week.

> "There's a lot of this unpaid labour that precarious staff feel they have to do. You can't be bad at your job because you're not getting hired again. That's the thing with precarity….you constantly have to prove yourself. Like, you can't say 'I don't know how to do this thing' or 'I don't do this thing' or 'I can't do this thing', because you're hoping you'll get made permanent." - Nadia

The pressure to do significant amounts of uncompensated work, or work that falls outside of an individual's remit, is systematically created in academic institutions. Academics on precarious contracts feel compelled to agree to a range of non-contracted, uncompensated, yet time-consuming tasks - such as participating in PhD panels, providing teaching cover and undertaking pastoral responsibilities. One interviewee, John, described being pressured by permanent staff members to do teaching work despite being on a research only contract:

> "My funding explicitly says that I'm not to do teaching. I'm supposed to be there to do research only - and the amount of staff that I've had to come to me and say 'right, you need to do some teaching', or 'I want you to do this' or 'cover me to do this'. When I tell them actually, no, I'm not going to do that, some of them get quite aggressive." - John

The combination of precarity and permanent job scarcity creates conditions in which academics on non-permanent contracts feel unable to say no to taking on work that they do not have time for - even

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65   'Immigration Health Surcharge | Complete Guide | IAS'.

66   Wray and Kinman, 'Supporting Staff Wellbeing in Higher Education'.

if this may end up being detrimental to their mental and physical health. People feel pressured to make unsustainable, undignified and sometimes even risky decisions in order to conform to the demands of the academic job market. This includes moving city every few years, commuting for several hours due to being unable to afford to live in the city where they work or being unable to take time off to take care of their mental or physical health:

"There's definitely been times where I've worked even if I should have taken time off for compassionate reasons, because there's no way I could reschedule that teaching and I wouldn't get paid." - Lucy

"During my first postdoc, I tore my ACL [anterior cruciate ligament]. I still haven't had an operation to have it fixed because I was moving around so much. Because I was between two different countries, I wasn't able to get the medical treatment that I needed." - John

"Something that's not really spoken about a lot, but I know is certainly true, is the number of miscarriages female academics have. It's a combination of age, stress and never being able to take it easy…when I was pregnant, I was absolutely terrified of miscarrying, because three of my colleagues had miscarried just in the time I was working there." - Nadia

Academics on precarious contracts describe the impacts of constantly having to uproot their lives with little financial support to follow short-term contracts, and the lengths they have gone to in order to keep up with the demands of an unsustainable system:

"When you're a PhD student, you're poor - you're basically paid minimum wage so you can hardly save. Then you are expected to move with very little financial support. When I moved to [LOCATION REDACTED], they were and still are having a massive housing crisis. So just finding somewhere to live was hard - I ended up sleeping on someone's sofa for three, four months basically because I couldn't find somewhere to live. And you're expected to settle in and start working straight away. Just moving was traumatic… .I ended up sleeping in my freezing car on a motorway in the worst snow storm that the UK had ever had, because I had to get to [LOCATION REDACTED] by a certain date." - John

"You give up socialising - you can't afford to go out a lot of the time. You're constantly working, and I've seen relationships fall apart as a result of that. It's ravaging everyone." - Nadia

What is clear for many insecure academics, is that despite being integral to the teaching and research infrastructure of the university, their struggles and needs are systematically made invisible. The sense is that there is a gulf of understanding and power not just between management and non-permanent staff, but also between permanent and non-permanent staff.

> *"When I'm working at [UNIVERSITY REDACTED] there's nowhere I can sit and prepare for a class. I'll sometimes end up in the photocopier room, eating a packed lunch and preparing....you're just like a kind of ghost in the machine. There's not really anywhere that you fit in - we're working for them but we're not part of the core staff. And that is quite wearing actually, because you don't feel valued. You're sort of an intern effectively, and it's kind of embarrassing." - Lucy*

This imbalance of power leaves precarious academics vulnerable to being bullied. Whether it is in the form of pressure to take on work outside of your remit, or through lack of appropriate and safe outlets of complaint. Dina, who has moved between fixed-term academic contracts for over two decades, describes not having her contract renewed after raising issues about a co-worker's conduct:

> *"[A colleague] had a tendency for bullying, and I reported that... it came back to bite me big time....At the end of that year, once I passed all my probationary review, I got my next contract which I assumed would be permanent, [but] it was another one year, part-time temporary contract." - Dina*

John connected the prevalence of bullying in academia to the proliferation of precarious contracts:

> *"We have a huge problem in academia with bullying....and [precarity] fuels it. If you're a bully, if you have unrealistic expectations, and you expect people to work out of hours or you don't pay people particularly well, you give them short term contracts because if someone says anything, like 'I'm not going to answer my emails on the weekend', you can just get rid of them." - John*

Worker wellbeing and mental health is in a state of crisis in the higher education sector. Whilst provision of support such as mental health services and coaching are an important part of responding to this crisis, the economic drivers, in particular the role of precarity, must not be overlooked. Interviewees explicitly connected their fear of setting boundaries around physical and mental health to the insecurity of their career. This picture is backed up by the data: with almost over 70 per cent[67] of academics agreeing or strongly agreeing that seeking support for their wellbeing would harm their career.

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67   Wray and Kinman.

a vicious,
unequal cycle

The precarity of academia is detrimental to the ability of early-career academics to focus on their own research and publishing, negatively impacting their long-term professional development in some of its most crucial years. It is widely agreed that the number of publications an academic is expected to have to their name in order to be considered for a permanent job is higher than ever - and yet, the demands placed on precarious academics leave little time for such work to take place. Academics find themselves in a vicious cycle, unable to take the steps necessary to emerge from their own precarity.

> *"I was very conscious that….because I was outside of the system, and as a teaching fellow, I never got the opportunity to consolidate [my work] in terms of doing publications or applying for funding…. because we're fractional, there was no time with the amount of work that was given to be able to write properly; to have the emotional, mental headspace to do that." - Dina*

> *"Once I went for a job interview, and they basically told me that the job is very teaching oriented, and my research would suffer, and asked how would I feel about that…When you consider that the job was only for two years, then they would expect you to go off into the world and continue your academic career, what they're saying is: 'we're going to ruin your career. How do you feel about that?" - John*

> *"I can't afford to do research. I can't afford to attend conferences….no one's going to pay for me to go. It's hugely inhibiting terms of what you can do as a researcher….it's almost like exploiting yourself." - Lucy*

This dynamic - where precarious academic workers provide much of the teaching upon which institutions rely, at the expense of their own professional development, both compounds and is compounded by social inequality. Those with a financial safety net are empowered to be able to turn down exploitative contracts that harm their future prospects, or have the time and resources to do their own research outside of working hours. Those without inherited wealth and property, or those who have care responsibilities, are systematically disadvantaged in what is a highly competitive pathway to job security. This is, in turn, compounded by whatever racial, gendered and classed unconscious biases may exist in the hiring process itself. One participant reported knowing of precarious colleagues gambling on the side in order to subsidise lack of stability and liveable earnings in the academy. Others reported being reliant on the income of their partner in order to support them and their family. For Dina, being on a string of short-term contracts meant that when she had to take time out to be a full time carer for her ill parents, she struggled to get back into the sector:

> *"Getting back in is incredibly hard…I had the added story in that I was a carer, and I think there's a lack of understanding of why someone who is an academic would give up their work to become*

a full time carer….they don't understand why you would leave academia to do something as 'menial' as caring. […] Ethnic minority women are also more likely to take on these responsibilities. If they have children, they're less likely to have other family in the country who can help pitch in with childcare." - Dina

As Dina notes, these dynamics implicitly reproduce inequalities based on class, gender, race and disability within the academy. For groups less able to absorb the shocks of precarity or who have care responsibilities or needs, having time to publish enough to secure a permanent job in academia is an almost impossible task.

"I showed [UNIVERSITY REDACTED] what goes into my actual bank account at the end of the month. I said: here's my monthly rent, here's my monthly childcare. This is how much my electricity and bills cost….I've got a PhD. I've got 10 years of postdoctoral experience, and I have a tenner a day to spend." - Nadia

Women academics in particular describe the struggle of balancing the care responsibilities they disproportionately share, with being able to develop their own research agendas alongside precarious contracts. Nadia even described being on a rolling contract for several years at an institution, only to be made redundant when seven months pregnant:

"I felt they were like: 'well, she's pregnant, she's no longer doing the kind of fieldwork that is getting us prestige, she's no longer, therefore, economically viable'. I went to the union and said: look, what are my rights here? And they were like, you're on a six month rolling contract, and there's no obligation [to renew]." - Nadia

For Lucy, the decision to have a child in the first place has been postponed because of the precarious nature of her work

"If I had a secure position, I would have thought about having children sooner. If I do have children now, I won't have maternity leave….I'm getting to an age where I would like to have a child and I'm not sure I could continue as an academic after having a child. It definitely wouldn't work." - Lucy

Together, these conditions create a scenario in which workers stuck in a cycle of precarity subsidise the labour of permanent staff; insecure workers take on the bulk administrative and teaching work, freeing up time for permanent staff to research, attend conferences and publish. Taking into consideration the demographic breakdown of those on permanent contracts versus those on temporary contracts, this constitutes a form of institutional racism, where a disproportionately racialised workforce, that is poorly paid and precariously employed, subsidises the work of a disproportionately white, securely employed workforce.

"Every time I've had a precarious job, it's been a way to relieve

a permanent member of staff of their teaching and pastoral responsibility, so that they can go off and do research that can further their career." - Nadia

For Nadia and Dina, both women of colour, this materialises in watching their white colleagues have an easier, quicker route to permanence than they do. Dina referred to her experience joining a university as part of a cohort of fixed-term workers. By the end of the contract, while Dina and another woman of colour were made redundant at the end of the contract, every white member of the cohort had gained permanent status, either at the same university or elsewhere. Whilst Nadia moved between precarious contracts for a decade before gaining a permanent job, her husband - who is white - secured a permanent contract before completing his PhD.

> *"I'm married to a white man, and when you see him get a permanent job straight away, you're like: what? Not that he's not very good at what he does, but they were like: 'oh well, we can see your potential, so we'll make you permanent then you get to prove yourself', versus me, where they're like 'once you prove yourself, then we will make you permanent." - Nadia*

Yet, academics of colour - particularly those in teaching roles - play an integral, often overlooked role in the pastoral health of the university. For students of colour, their seminar teacher may be the only staff member of colour they encounter. As a result, academics of colour, particularly women, find themselves spending more of their time informally coaching and mentoring students who otherwise may feel alienated at university - particularly universities that are majority white. This labour, although essential, often goes unrecognised, uncompensated and takes time away from professional development. When staff members are also fractional or insecure, this extra time spent doing unrecognised pastoral care is not subsidised by a stable wage.

> *"That caring aspect that comes with a lot of our personal roles, we bring to our professional roles as well. We take on that extra burden of care. As minority women, when we're teaching in a predominantly white environment where there are minority students....they're looking for someone they identify with. Even if they're not assigned to you as a personal tutor or in a pastoral role, very often they will gravitate towards you....when they don't feel that they're [otherwise] being supported in their academic development." - Dina*

The continued reliance on precarious contracts is therefore at odds with the commitments being made by universities to diversify their student body and decolonize their educational environment. The mental, physical and financial shocks of insecurity are not only being unevenly absorbed by ethnic minority workers, but the prevalence of precarious contracts disproportionately stunts the professional development of academics of colour, therefore reproducing social inequality in the academy. In this context, it is unsurprising that only 1 per cent

of professors in the UK are Black;[68] the racial, gendered and class dynamics of precarity create a far more difficult path to permanence for some than for others.

academic freedom

Job security has always been seen as a crucial part of a thriving academic culture. In the United States, tenure (an indefinite academic appointment) is explicitly framed[69] as a way of securing for academics "full freedom in research and in the publication of results", and "freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject." Ensuring the ability of academics to teach, research and publish findings without fear of retribution by an employer is a way of structurally safeguarding the integrity and autonomy required for rigorous, cutting-edge academic work. Famously, Yale University refused to renew the contract[70] of the late David Graeber following his prominence in the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the influence of this in his academic work, which challenged the intellectual and political academic establishment.

Academic freedom has been a fierce topic of public discussion[71] in recent years. Student activists in particular have faced intense media scrutiny over accusations that they are stifling academic debate. Much of this coverage has focused on a small number of high profile resignations taking place following a student campaign. Yet, this is a fairly rare occurrence. Far less attention is given to how the increased reliance of universities and insecure academics on competing for funding, including from private industry, shapes what research is and is not resourced. The assault on arts and humanities funding is an example of how this can unfold on a macro scale. In turn, the lack of security in academia creates a more invisible, yet profoundly pervasive culture of uncertainty that tampers with the ability of academics to invest long term in the kinds of research they feel is important.

> *"I would argue that one of the biggest threats to academic freedom is the marketised system that we have. If you're on casualized contracts, you're probably having to research what's in vogue. If you're doing research....that's not Eurocentric, or it's not going to get you in highly ranked journals, you are going to have to change that if you want to succeed and thrive and get a full time job. Research councils very much set an agenda for what you should be researching." - Jo Grady - UCU*

Lucy described her own experience of what Jo Grady outlines, in particular the pressure to publish what is in vogue, even if this does not align with her own research interests

68   Coughlan, 'Only 1% of UK University Professors Are Black'.
69   '1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure'.
70   Gray, 'How Fear Makes Us Human'.
71   PA and Sandford, 'Universities Could Be Fined for Cancel Culture in New Free Speech Law'.

"My colleagues said to me: to be taken seriously in your applications, you need to do a big book on a single, canonical male author. I'm quite interested in writing about several, slightly non-canonical female writers through time....so not a big single author study. So in some ways, I feel like maybe academia doesn't reward creativity." - Lucy

For Dina, this comes to bear in the fact that certain, undervalued areas of expertise are more likely to be advertised as fixed-term roles

"The positions that are likely to attract minority candidates, for instance, the lectureships on race, ethnicity, culture, identity etc. Those are the areas where you are going to get a large number of candidates from minority backgrounds. Those posts tend to invariably be fixed term." - Dina

In this way, research agendas are being indirectly shaped by the marketisation of higher education. Part of this, is the unspoken pressure felt by precarious academics to shape their research around the status quo of their discipline - whether it is in the hope of gaining a permanent academic job, or when applying for project funding from research councils. Whereas open-ended contracts are more likely to subsidise whatever work academics choose to undertake, precarity creates a de-prioritisation of academic innovation and creativity, in favour of conformity.

THE
OVERALL
STORY

The three case studies presented here look at completely different types of work and highlight seemingly very different issues. But the use of zero-hour contracts, platform or agency work, algorithmic management or perpetually temporary jobs, all set out to and indeed achieve a common goal: to evade the protections afforded to workers by employment law, and make it difficult for workers to organise for their rights.

However, there is another common theme that is the direct result of this removal of economic security. Workers are forced into a logic of survival in which their leisure time, social lives, dignity, career prospects and even personal safety necessarily come second to the need to cling to a job which is continually contingent. The taskification of work, the Uberisation of jobs and the practical removal of all protections has created an economy that is hypercompetitive at the level of the individual worker.. It should be of no surprise that this constant feeling of being on the edge of survival bleeds through from the world of work into people's lives and very characters. And, it should be of no surprise that against this backdrop we have an economy that is far less productive than our peers in the Global North, an endemic mental health crisis and society increasingly defined by political unrest. What is sometimes referred to as the 'hustle economy' leaves us feeling underpaid, undervalued and unwell.

MOVING
FORWARD

MOVING FORWARD

As this report has shown, there is not a singular cause of insecurity, it is the combined effect of many failures and injustices. Because the causes are many, so are the solutions. Just as the causes are intertwined, so are the solutions.

In some cases companies behave outside the law, or at least the intention of the law, and challenges in court can force them to abide by that law. In other cases, the laws themselves are not fit for purpose and need to be challenged and changed. In almost all cases, neither of these things can happen without the political will, without workers organising for power. But in many cases, success can be won by organising alone.

One thing is clear, whichever route brings the most success and spearheads progress towards an economy that provides labour security for its population, trade unions are a necessary driving force.

STRATEGIC LITIGATION

Much of the effort, attention and success around insecure work have been related to strategic litigation. That is, court cases that aim to prove that companies are mis-interpreting or breaking the law in the way that they treat their workers. In some cases, this will set a precedent that will have to be taken up by other companies that treat their companies in similar ways.

uber BV v aslam

The most notable court case in this vein is Uber vs Aslam.[72] In essence, it was argued that although Uber drivers' contracts stated they were self employed, they in fact met the criteria of employees and as such should be entitled to all the benefits and protections of any other employee.

This case was initially brought by Yaseen Aslam, the lead defendant, alongside a number of other Uber drivers and fellow GMB members. Whilst the case was started by GMB, throughout the case and many appeals, defendants who are members of the IWGB and ADCU were

72   Butler, 'Uber Drivers Entitled to Workers' Rights, UK Supreme Court Rules'.

involved and all three unions have committed resources to the case.

Uber's unique selling point, and the reason for their rapid growth to one of the most recognised and used brands in the world, is that it is significantly cheaper and 'on-demand' than traditional taxis and minicabs. For many people, the difference in price is the difference between being affordable or not. It has become extremely common, a part of everyday life, for people to 'get an Uber' when they would never have considered getting a taxi. But as Uber grew, it became clear to many that the reason they are able to provide such a cheap service is not primarily, as Uber claimed, that their technology creates efficiency savings in the driving itself. In fact, the technology behind Uber serves to optimise the exploitation of its drivers.

At its heart, the Uber platform creates a market place in which the price of its service can fluctuate according to supply and demand. However, this is only possible because - unlike most other employers, who abide by employment law - Uber only pays its drivers for the time that they are actually driving, and the price they are paid fluctuates according to an algorithm hidden from the drivers. This means that if there are more customers looking for a taxi than there are drivers available, the price of a journey will increase and drivers' rate of pay will increase to encourage more drivers to log on. However, when demand is low, prices will drop and so will drivers rates.

This model relies on the fact that Uber does not treat its drivers as employees, it tries to claim that each journey is a driver engaging into a new contract with the passenger. The relationship between the driver and Uber is not framed as an employment relationship, but a consumer relationship; drivers are framed as 'consumers' of Uber's technology services, in the same way that passengers are. Because of this, Uber deems that they do not have to pay a minimum wage, sick pay, parental leave, holiday pay or even guaranteed rest breaks. However, it was successfully argued in court that even though Uber says their drivers are self-employed, their work is in fact controlled by Uber.

It has taken four court cases but, after three unsuccessful appeals by Uber, in the end the court based its decision that drivers are workers on five key points:

- Uber sets the fares of a journey and therefore a driver's pay.

- Uber enforces terms and conditions that drivers have no say over.

- Once logged on to the app, a driver's choice of whether or not to carry out work is constrained by the fact that Uber will impose penalties if the driver declines too many journeys.

- The effect of the passenger ratings system is that Uber exerts significant control over the way drivers deliver their service.

- Uber actively limits communication between a driver and passenger, preventing them from building a relationship beyond any one journey.

As a result of this court case, Uber finally agreed to provide holiday pay, to automatically enrol drivers into a pension scheme and guarantee drivers are paid the minimum wage for the period of time that they are driving.

In a clear sign that the practice of bogus self-employment is spreading throughout the economy, a similar court case was won against the taxi group Addison Lee,[73] and it was recently reported that a group of estate agents are planning legal action against Purplebricks for wrongly classifying them as self-employed.[74]

This is by no means the only example of workers winning in the courts. Outsourced cleaners and UVW members at Great Ormond Street Hospital were recently brought in house after the courts upheld the claim that the decision to outsource their cleaners, leaving them on significantly worse conditions of employment, amounted to racial discrimination.[75] Again, since being brought in house, GOSH has been slow to match pay conditions and the workers are returning to court.[76]

In Spain, the "Rider's Law" was passed, explicitly stating that Deliveroo riders and other food couriers should be employed on full-time contracts and granted all the rights and protections that entails. In response to such a clear-cut legal decision, Deliveroo chose to close down their operations in Spain,[77] while competitors Glovo, are reportedly [ignoring the law,](#)[78] and Uber Eats is bypassing the decision by contracting couriers through an intermediary logistics firm.

The Uber case and this small sample of others, are clearly positive results, and will make a meaningful difference to thousands of drivers. However, they are not complete victories and they highlight why strategic litigation has limitations.

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73   Butler, 'Thousands of Addison Lee Drivers Could Receive Payout over Workers' Rights'.

74   Silva, 'Purplebricks Faces Legal Action from Agents over Holiday and Pension Pay'.

75   UVW, 'GREAT ORMOND STREET CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL'.

76   'Cleaners Sue Great Ormond Street Hospital for Racial Discrimination over Pay Inequality'.

77   Jolly, 'Deliveroo Unveils Plans to Pull out of Spain in Wake of "Rider Law"'.

78   Corbishley, 'Deliveroo Prepares to Quit Spain After New Law Gives Delivery Riders Rights'.

limitations

The hope of such litigations is that they set a legal precedent and let Uber and other companies know that, based on this decision, they are open to claims by all of their drivers. The truth is though, that this case was brought against Uber by 25 drivers claiming that they were not paid the legal minimum wage or given paid leave in 2016. As a result, Uber is able to claim that its contracts have changed since 2016 and that the ruling is not entirely applicable. This ruling does not declare that Uber drivers must be classed as workers, just that its 2016 contracts amounted to drivers being workers.

Hope that this ruling will make Uber see the light and implement a swift change of approach is undermined by the fact that this decision was appealed three times, dragging the proceedings out over nearly five years. In the short-term, due the nature of court proceedings, the cost of litigation and the relatively huge resources available to companies like Uber, mean that court cases will be dragged out for as long as possible. This delays the point at which workers get treated fairly and extends the time that companies can further establish themselves and build up their resources. Indeed, it is only due to the resources and finances of a large, national trade union like GMB that a case like this was able to succeed.

In the long-term, these companies have armies of contract lawyers which will do their utmost to find ways to maintain the essence of their employment model - evading the bulk of employment law - while protecting themselves from legal challenges.

LEGISLATIVE CHANGE

The limitations of court cases that intend to stop companies evading the spirit of the law, has led many people to push for changes to the law itself.

"I think the law is always on the side of the employer. They wanted the redundancies to happen in July, and ban union reps from meetings. By organising around it we managed to get people three months more wages. We made them stick to the letter of the law, but the law really let the workers down." - Caitlin, 25

One such proposed legislative change is the Status of Workers Bill, brought to the House of Lords by Lord Hendy QC.

worker
status bill

Lord Hendy identifies six categories of workers in the UK. Three of them he believes to be legitimate and so should be protected, while another three are in effect 'sub-species' of the others and so the bill would aim to eradicate them.

The three legitimate categories are:

Employee - An employee's work is substantially controlled by their employer, they are granted full employment rights. - *Most full-time, salaried jobs.*

Genuinely self-employed - They are in control of their working hours, how they deliver a service and what they charge, and as a result are entirely responsible for ensuring their own working conditions. - *Tradespeople, freelance designers*

Employed through a personal service company (PSC) - They are employed by a company of which they are the owner and sole employee, as a result they are still directly responsible for their own working conditions. - *Consultancy services, chartered professions*

There are three categories that the bill seeks to eradicate. In each case, these workers would be treated exactly as employees are.

Limb (b) Worker - Otherwise known as a dependent contractor, they have a contract, but not a contract of employment. They must deliver the work personally, as opposed to being able to sub-contract to someone else. They enjoy some employment rights (minimum wage, paid leave, rest breaks) but not others (sick pay, parental leave, minimum notice period) - *This is the status that the Uber v Aslam case won for drivers.*

Bogus self-employed - Workers whose contracts state them to be self-employed but in reality their work is substantially controlled by the company they work for. This is rampant in the construction industry but also growing throughout the economy. This arrangement is simply used as a way for employers to avoid the cost associated with guaranteeing workers the rights they are entitled to. - *This is the status that applied to Uber drivers previously and still applies to many app workers.*

Forced into PSC - These workers are, in order to receive work, forced into setting up a PSC, often arranged by the company they work for. While these workers are technically protected by employment rights, they are only protected against their own company. I.e. If they are not paid minimum wage, it is technically their own fault, except, practically, they are unable to

set the rate that they charge and so have no real say over their wage. - *Common in the construction industry, where individual workers are forced to engage via a company in order to provide extra protections for the employer.*

bogus vs forced self-employment

One problem that this legislation would not address is the issue of forced self-employment. In certain industries, for example as a tradesperson or London Cab driver, it is practically difficult to be anything other than self-employed. This is not because of a large multinational company trying to exploit workers, but simply because, historically, the industry has evolved to be based around sole traders rather than bigger companies.

Some workers in these industries would rather have the protections of being an employee, while some will actively desire the conditions of working for themselves, but the fact remains they have little choice over the matter.

Tackling this issue would require much greater economic change, would need to consider ways for the state to provide the things employers normally do; sick pay, holiday pay, guaranteed minimum wage.

protecting limb (b) workers

Another legislative option would be to extend the protections of employees to workers. Some protections such as redundancy pay and a minimum notice period may well be argued as removing flexibility for employers, rendering the worker/employee distinction pointless. However, limb (b) workers are already entitled to paid holiday, so implementing sick pay, parental leave and bereavement leave represent nothing more than a marginal cost increase to employers.

ending zero-hour contracts

Zero-hour, or the equally common tiny-hour contracts are, under the guise of a need for flexibility, simply a way for employers to practically evade the financial costs of providing their staff with the security that modern employment law is intended to bestow.

The case for flexibility is always over-stated. Many employers will claim that their workers appreciate the flexibility, that they enjoy having control over when they do and don't work. In reality, this is rarely the

case. Workers on zero-hour contracts are typically also on low pay and so turning down work is often not a realistic option. In effect, this creates a one way flexibility in which employers are able to dictate exactly how much a little an employee works.

Where workers genuinely do desire flexibility, or where the nature of a job demands it, it is more than possible to build flexibility into employment contracts. The Institute of Employment Rights (IER) has previously proposed one way of building in flexibility while allowing workers to plan their lives around a predictable schedule and income.[79] They recommend legislation that would force employers to provide all employees with a fixed number of contracted hours, with a maximum allowable amount of overtime. Under this scenario, a worker could only work, say, 20% more hours than they were contracted for. This would mean that if an employer had the potential need for 40 hours work a week from one employee, they would have to guarantee them at least 33.3 hours.

Another possibility would be the right for a worker to agree fixed hours after 12 weeks of work, based on the hours they worked in that period.

end 'fire and rehire'

Particularly during the pandemic, the practice of a company firing all staff and rehiring them on worse conditions has become more and more common. While this practice is not an ongoing condition of work and so doesn't directly lead to day-to-day insecurity, it is another way for employers to get around worker protections that have built up over time. In many cases, the new contracts will include worse redundancy policies and even lower pay.

The contractual terms of employment are often the cumulative result of decades of negotiations with workers and trade unions, and the ability of employers to discard them in an instance undermines the role of trade unions that is enshrined in employment law. But, on an even simpler level, workers choose their jobs and plan their lives around the terms of their employment. If an employer is able to rip up that contract whenever they like, especially in the middle of a global health and economic crisis, then that contract is worth nothing to begin with and swathes of employment law are brought into question.

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79   Ewing, 'Zero-Hours Contracts: Some Policy Proposals'.

Proposed legislative changes to prevent the practice of fire and rehire include adding to the definition of an unfair dismissal. In this situation, the rehiring of a staff member on less favourable conditions would retrospectively mean the original dismissal would be deemed unlawful. However despite research showing that over 70% of firms using fire and rehire tactics were profitable,[80] when a bill aimed to prevent the practice was brought to parliament in October 2021, it was soundly defeated.[81]

£15 an hour minimum wage

While for many workers the insecurity stems from the misuse of employment law, as the analysis of the insecurity index shows, for many more it is simply an issue of being underpaid. One the quickest and simplest ways to provide extra security for millions of UK workers would be to increase the minimum wage. The current conservative government has increased the minimum wage each year and another rise to £9.50 per hour is planned for April 2022. But, with recent inflation levels and soaring energy bills this will equate to a real terms cut compared to a year before.

For workers in sectors without established bargaining power, the rate at which the minimum wage is set often also serves as an effective maximum wage. With a clear legal minimum for employers to rest on, and an increasing use of in-work benefits to top up people's wages, the number of workers whose wage was within a few pence of the legal minimum increased by almost 150% during the 20 years since its introduction in 1999.[82] Invariably, it is the lowest paid who's fates are directly tied to the legal minimum wage.In 2021, over 20% of hourly-paid workers earned within 20p of the minimum wage.[83]

With this in mind, the planned rise is not enough to even maintain current living standards, but if the government is serious about 'levelling-up' and reducing the precarity that blights our economy, they need far more ambitious targets. Trade Unions across sectors are in agreement on the need for a jump to £15 per hour. This jump would represent an ambition that matched the scale of the crisis, would get ahead of rising living costs rather than barely keeping pace, and would lift millions of families out of poverty.

80   Wall, '"Fire and Rehire" Tactics Rife at Firms That Are in Profit and Claiming Covid Cash'.

81   Walker, 'Anger as Ministers Block "Fire and Rehire" Bill in Commons'.

82   Low Pay Commission, '20 Years of the National Minimum Wage'.

83   Low Pay Commission, 'National Minimum Wage Low Pay Commission Report 2021'.

right to union access in all workplaces

A legislative change that does not directly increase a workers security, but would instantly increase their protection from and power against exploitative employers, would be to guarantee a right to trade union access in all workplaces. Indeed, in 2020 when providing support grants to small businesses, the Welsh government wrote directly to over 13,000 employers saying that they "expect employers who receive public funds to allow trade unions access and seek a recognition agreement where workers request it. We would like you to remind your staff about this and encourage them to find the right union".[84]

ORGANISING

If strategic litigation is limited by the army of lawyers paid to continually find ways around the precedents it sets, legislative change is made unlikely by the fact of a Conservative government that has proven hostile towards workers for nearly 12 years and shows no obvious signs of being displaced anytime soon.

But there is a route to winning protections for workers that doesn't rely on lobbying, expensive court cases or a change in government: organising.

Even before the pandemic, trade union membership levels had increased for 4 years in a row. Coming after nearly 40 years of consecutive decline, this represents a changing of the tide for trade unions and worker organising. This increase has only been accelerated by the pandemic. Not only has membership increased, so has engagement. Over the past year, each week has brought another victory for workers who have organised to fight back against low pay and poor working conditions. Below is only a small selection of those victories.

"I think it is the perfect time to leverage businesses and to demand, even just better wages. If businesses were offering a living wage, they would have applicants, they would have people working, like, for instance, me, if I saw pub advertising for living wage, I'd leave the job, I'm in just now and apply for it." - Caitlin, 25

"If you can reach people locally, and on an interpersonal level, in a community of mutual solidarity that uses unions for the legal support that they can offer, and their strategies and trainings in terms of how to be a shop steward or how to do a power structure analysis, that's all well and good, but the real power is only ever going to be on the shop floor." - Amardeep, 27

84   Mortimer, 'Let Trade Unions in, Welsh Government Tells Employers Receiving Public Cash'.

hovis factory

In May 2021, members of both Unite and the Baker's union, BFAWU, won an 8% pay rise after an 11-day strike at the Hovis factory in Belfast. Hovis, who produce 35% of all bread in Northern Island, had failed to agree to workers demands to be paid the same as Hovis employees in Great Britain. After not a single loaf of bread was baked for 12 days, management finally submitted to demands. As Unite regional officer Sean McKeever said, "This strike should never have had to occur; it reflected a total failure on the part of a management who repeatedly underestimated their own workforce." [85]

supermarket delivery drivers

In November, lorry drivers for two of the UK's biggest supermarkets won pay rises significantly above inflation. 140 Sainsbury's drivers[86] and 450 Morrison's drivers[87] won pay increases of 14% and 18%, respectively. In both cases, the pay rises came after Unite members ballotted for industrial action.

outsourced workers

Royal Parks, who manage London's parkland including Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, rely heavily on outsourced agency workers. Outsourcing work is yet another way for an employer to evade workers' rights and creates a two-tier system of employees. In December, after strike action in July, August and October, members of PCS union and predominantly black and migrant workers won contractual sick pay that matches the conditions of their directly employed colleagues.[88]

After years of campaigning from a very active Unison branch in Salford City, local care workers won a pay uplift from the council, taking them above minimum wage. But, in another illustration of the problems with outsourcing, one firm, Anchor Hanover, refused to pass the extra income from the council to their workers. In December after more organised protests, the workers won the pay rise they deserved.[89]

GMB has recently announced five days of strike action af four Berkshire hospitals

85   BBC, 'Hovis'.

86   Unite, 'South West Sainsbury's Shortage Fears Ended as DHL Drivers Agree Inflation Beating Pay Increase'.

87   Unite, 'Wincanton Lorry Drivers on Morrisons Contract Secure Huge Pay Increase'.

88   'PCS Wins for Royal Parks Cleaners'.

89   'Salford City Branch Wins £19m Pay Rise for Care Workers across England | Article | News'.

The has issued notice to NHS Property Services for industrial action at four Berkshire hospital sites where housekeeping, cleaning, catering and car parking services were recently privatised. NHS Property Services are proposing to change job titles, job specifications and bandings in a planned reorganisation of the entire workforce.

All of which would result in a weakening of the links to NHS pay rates.

university strikes

In late 2021 UCU members at over 50 universities went on strike to oppose unsafe work loads, falling pay, gender and ethnic pay gaps and the casualisation of work we have detailed earlier in this report. In a move that offers hope of a new approach to cross-union organising, both the CWU and RMT became vocal supporters throughout the strikes.

couriers

Barely a month goes by when food delivery companies like Uber Eats and Deliveroo, or more recently grocery delivery firms like Gorillas and Getir are not in the news because of striking workers or a new court case. Even when victories have directly followed legal proceedings, it is against a backdrop of regular and persistent industrial action organised by unions such as GMB, IWGB and the ADCU. Undoubtedly the pressure of an organised workforce is one of the factors dragging these firms towards better working conditions.

Analysis from the Fairwork research project[90] suggests that a new wave of courier companies, such as Just Eat and Pedal Me are pre-empting the court cases and strike action by moving away from the self-employment model. While these companies may still have a long way to go before being exemplary employers, the trend towards worker status is positive and clearly evidences the power that workers hold when they are organised.

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90   'Fairwork UK Ratings 2021'.
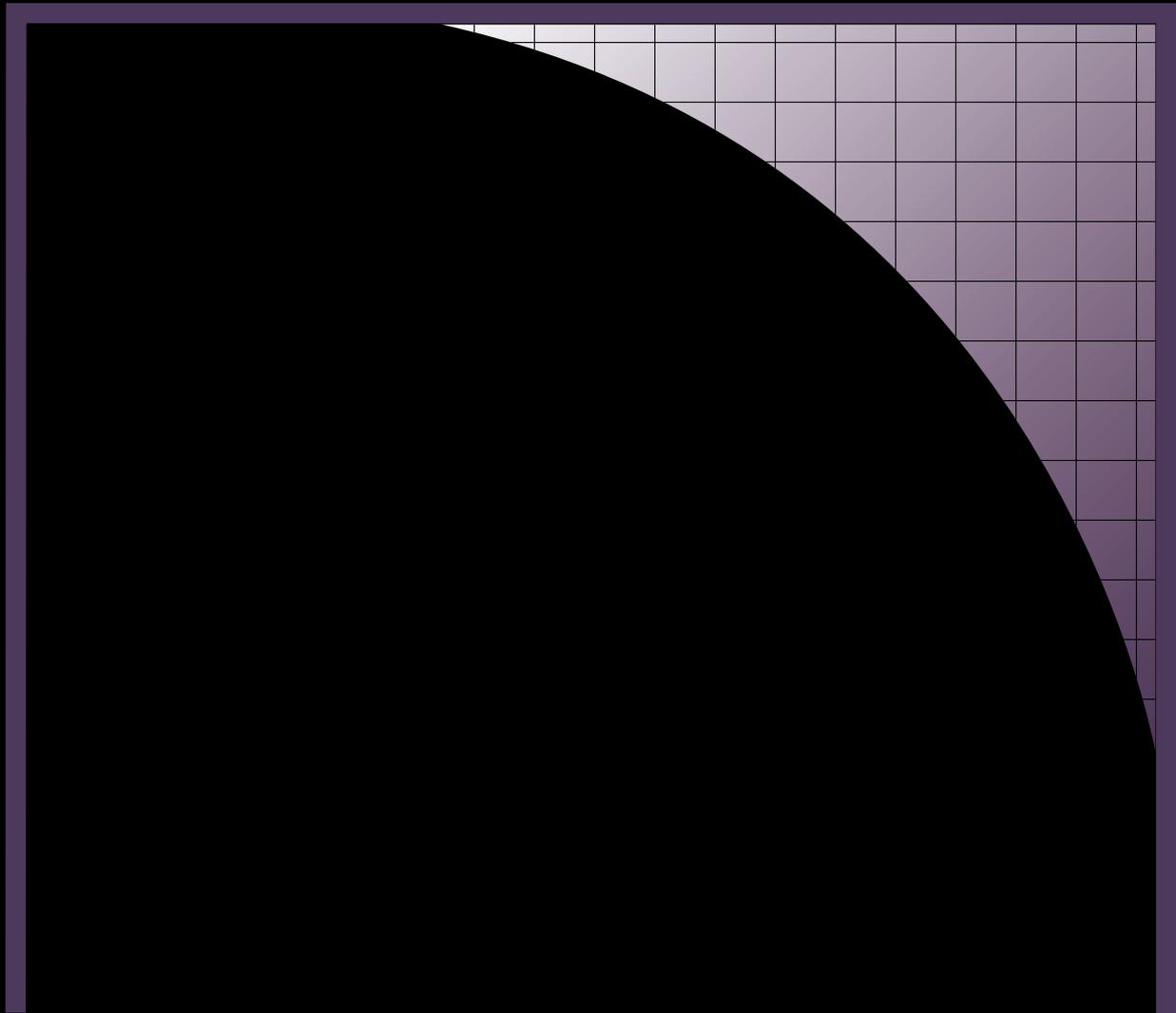
CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

Insecurity and precarity have formed an increasingly large component of our political discourse over the last 20 years. While this is seemingly in contrast to a narrative technological advancement, increased autonomy over our working patterns and falling unemployment rates, in reality they are all deeply intertwined. Platform work that began its proliferation through Uber and Deliveroo has, over time, been seen to exert a commercial advantage precisely by finding ways to evade the security that was built up by trade unions and employment law in the preceding decades. Unemployment has been replaced by various modes of quasi-employment, whether in the form of underemployment, bogus self-employment, zero or tiny hours contracts. These all serve profit from workers labour power without providing them the security which in the past was accepted as fair trade off. These models of employment are, directly or indirectly, a return to the piece work synonymous with the beginnings of the industrial revolution. Furthermore, the heightened level of competition created works to individualise the task of building a secure life, driving down wages and conditions.

Yet, while the growing gap in living conditions is implicitly recognised by the government's rhetoric of 'levelling up', they continue to stand by the significance of unemployment as a useful metric. There is a broad refusal to accept a shift in the make-up of the labour market which necessitates fresh responses. Never has the old adage, that the best way out of poverty is through work, been less true. New employment models, reduced state support, the continued reduction of public housing stock and the ongoing concentration of property ownership, all feed into the truth that employment no longer equates to security.

This report pioneered a multi-factor approach to measuring insecurity and has shown once more the unequal distribution of prosperity created by the UK economy. It follows previous research from CLASS in describing an economy that works for some but leaves countless more to fend for themselves.

Through our case studies, we have also shown the human impact of an insecure livelihood. We have heard how a constant sense of anxiety is the direct result of exploitative employment models and how, in the most extreme cases, they lead to the very real threat of physical harm.

We have also expanded the discussion around the 'gig economy' and shown the practices normalised by Uber and Deliveroo are now seeping into middle class professions like academia and the carework which forms the bedrock of our society.

Finally, we have seen that, in the face of both implicit and explicit anti-union behaviour from employers, workers are beginning to organise themselves around the new shape of our economy. Through a combination of direct action and strategic litigation, the veil of progress is being lifted, revealing a crude regression to brutal exploitation and the eternal truth that the only reliable protection against the power of big business [capital] is the collective power of workers.
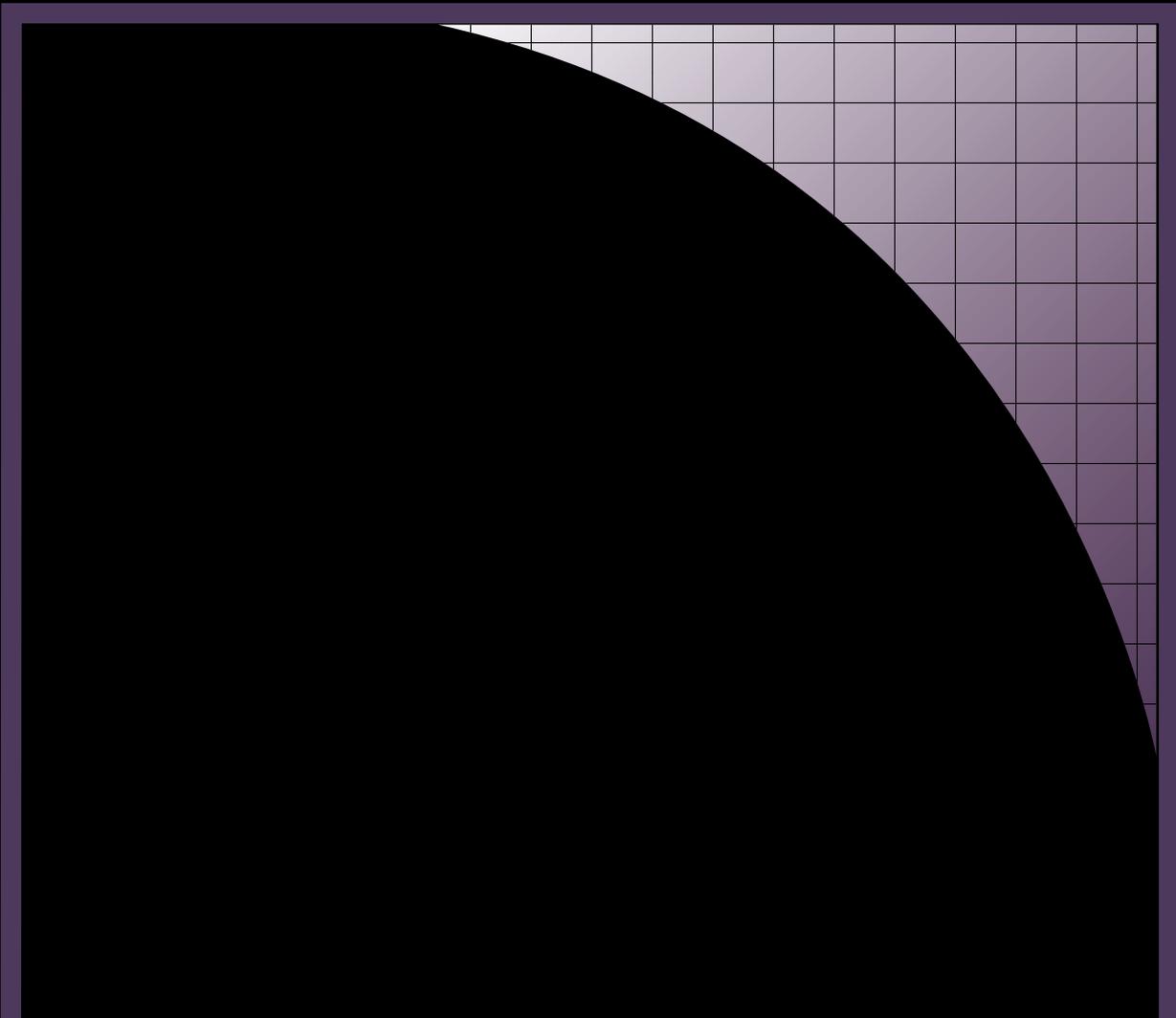
METHODO-
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APPENDIX

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

The insecurity index that has been developed for this report seeks to fill a gap between government datasets that fail to provide a holistic view of insecurity in a changing economy. However, due to its experimental nature, and precisely because it aims fill in gaps in official data, a number of assumptions and approximations have been made during the analysis. Those assumptions are laid out below. That said, it is our firm view that the insecurity index provides an important level of insight that is missing from official government data and previous analysis. The methodology provided should be taken as proposal that could be more robust over time.

DATASETS

The bulk of the data used in this report comes from the Labour Force Survey. These datasets are the raw data used by the ONS to produce summarised employment data. They are accessible via the UK Data Service[91] but require a registered account and data analysis software such as SPSS or STATA to view. In each case the Two Quarter Longitudinal datasets were used. In order to make a like for like comparison with the most up to date data, the latest quarter in each year was analysed.[92]

Each dataset has a different number of respondents and, in general, the number of respondents has decreased over time. To account for these changes each respondent's weighting was multiplied by the total weighting of all respondents across all datasets, divided by the total weight of all respondents in that year.

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91   Service, 'UK Data Service'.

92   Statistics and Office For National Statistics, 'QLFSLabour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, 1992-Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Dataset, July - December, 2005'; Office For National Statistics and Statistics, 'QLFSLabour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, 1992-Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Dataset, July - December, 2010'; Office For National Statistics, 'QLFSLabour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, 1992-Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Dataset, July - December, 2015'; Office For National Statistics and Statistics, 'LFSLabour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, 1992-Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Dataset, July - December, 2020'; Office For National Statistics and Statistics.

INDEX FORMULA

Each respondent's insecurity index is calculated using the following formula:

$$I = U + H + T + Z + S + Sc - LCD$$

Where:

U = 1 if unemployed and seeking work, else 0

H = 1 if living in privately rented accommodation, if paying off mortgage 0.5, else 0

T = 1 if on a temporary contract and would prefer permanent contract, else 0

Z = 1 if on zero-hours contract, else 0

S = 1 if on less than 20 guaranteed hours a week, else 0

Sc = 1 if working second job, else 0

LCD = Living Cost Delta = (Wage – Living Cost) / Pay

Note: It might seem that being unemployed could result in appearing more secure than, say, having a temporary, short hours contract. However, the minimal income as a result of unemployment more than offsets this.

WAGE ESTIMATION

A major issue when trying to account for people's wages is the fact that only around 15% of respondents provide their income. This is assumed to be because of the perceived personal nature of that information and respondents' general resistance to disclose their income.

Where respondents had not provided their pay, the figure was replaced with an average hourly wage for that sex, region, occupation and industry. However, even with the relatively large sample size overall, the sample size for any one group (say, females in London with an elementary occupation in the mining industry) is often not statistically meaningful, and occasionally contains no respondents at all.

In order to include a figure for income in each group, pay was approximated from the annual survey of hours and earnings (ASHE)[93]. This data is provided by the ONS but is summarised separately by industry and occupation. In each case, average hourly wage is provided for each region and sex. To estimate the average wage of each combination of occupational group and industry, we distributed pay in each occupational group according to average pay in each industry:

$$P_{IO} = P_I/P_T * P_O$$

Where:

P_{IO} = average pay in one occupational group and industry

P_I = average pay in that Industry

P_O = average pay in that occupational group

P_T = overall average pay

This process was repeated for each region, year and for males and females. In each case, the product of average pay and number of jobs for an occupational group and industry, divided by the total number of jobs in that industry remained equal to the average pay for that industry. At the same time the product of average pay and number of jobs for an occupation and industry, divided by the total number of jobs in that occupational group remained equal to the average pay for that occupational group.

This method assumes that pay is distributed similarly across occupational groups in each industry. I.e. That managers are paid more than elementary occupations in the hospitality sector as well as in the education sector. However, it does allow for the fact that managers in education are paid more than in hospitality. It also assumes that the distribution of jobs in different occupations follows the national average in all industries. I.e. that the same percentage of the hospitality workforce are managers as in the financial sector. Of all the assumptions made in this report, this is probably the furthest from accurate. However, it is almost certainly closer to the truth than applying either the average pay for an industry to everyone in that industry, the average pay for an occupation to everyone in that occupational group, or taking the average of the small sample sets created by looking at such specific sections of the LFS respondents.

Where a respondent is listed as unemployed, we used the rate of job

93   Office for National Statistics, 'Earnings and Hours Worked, Region by Occupation by Four-Digit SOC: ASHE Table 15 - Office for National Statistics'; Office for National Statistics, 'Earnings and Hours Worked, UK Region by Industry by Two-Digit SIC: ASHE Table 5 - Office for National Statistics'.

seeker's allowance (JSA) or universal credit for that time period, based on a respondents age, number of dependent children and whether they lived as a couple of single parents.[94]

LIVING COST CALCULATION

The basis of the living cost calculations is derived from the Resolution Foundation's living wage calculations. The living wage itself is calculated as two proposed hourly wages, one for London and one for the rest of the UK. However, before being boiled down to these figures, the calculations estimate the basic living costs of a household based on whether it has the income of someone single or of a couple and the number of children in different age brackets. This produces a dataset of living costs based on household type.

In order to improve the accuracy of the insecurity index, we took these datasets for each year and matched respondents to the closest available category: i.e. the living cost used for a single parent with three children is different to that used for a couple living together with no dependent children.

These datasets are available via the Resolution Foundation's annual reports, Calculating the Living Wage reports.[95] As the living wage was only introduced in 2016, previous years were extrapolated using historical inflation data.

2022 FORECAST

Whenever an insecurity index score is shown for 2022, this is a forecast based on copying the 2021 dataset and applying the following changes:

- Scheduled increases of 3.1% to Universal credit.[96]

- Forecast average wage increase of 3%

- January 2022's RPI of 8% to all living costs[97]

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94   IFS, 'Fiscal Facts'.

95   Cominetti, 'Calculating the Real Living Wage for London and the Rest of the UK'; Cominetti, 'Calculating the Real Living Wage for London and the Rest of the UK • Resolution Foundation'.

96   Kirk-Wade and Harker, 'Benefits Uprating 2022/23'.

97   Office for National Statistics, 'RPI All Items: Percentage Change over 12 Months: Jan 1987=100 - Office for National Statistics'.

These assumptions are perhaps pessimistic in taking the view that the RPI will remain high, and that average wage increase will not keep pace with the RPI. However, more optimistic forecasts were produced before the announcement of April's rise in the energy price cap and before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, which is widely expected to increase energy prices further than previously expected.[98]

This forecast all assumes that other factors impacting the insecurity index will remain constant - such as numbers of zero-hours and temporary contracts, and levels of private renting - which, in fact, will likely continue to increase.

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98   Ambrose and correspondent, 'How Vulnerable Is UK Energy System as Tensions Rise between Russia and Ukraine?'
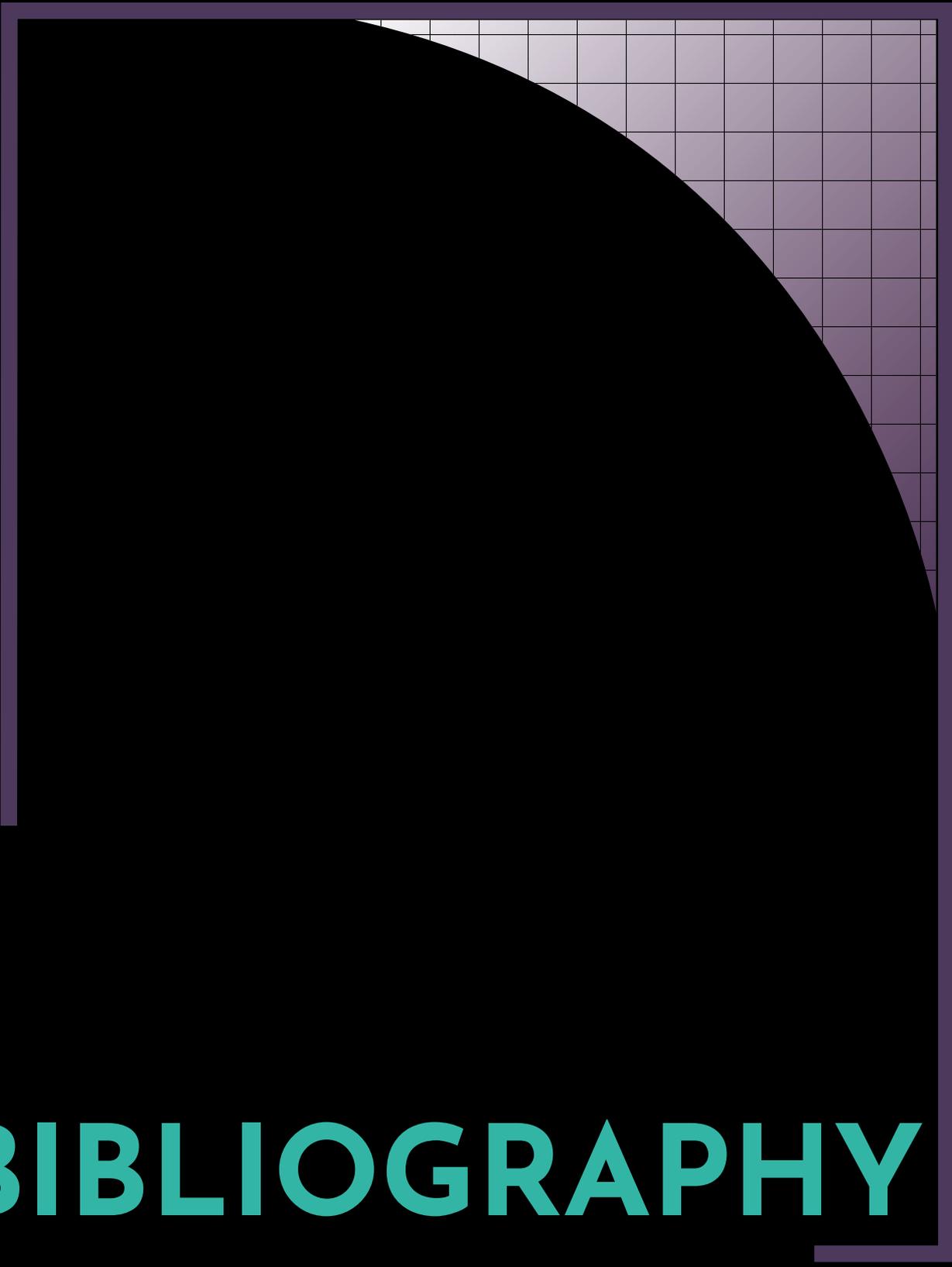
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