



Development Of The Healthy Work Collaborative:

Findings From An Action Research Study To Inform A Policy, Systems And Environmental Change Capacity Building Initiative Addressing Precarious Employment

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What is the issue?

Precarious employment (PE) is a key public health issue, affecting workers across many industries.^{1,6} Defined as employment that is insecure, unstable and uncertain, characteristics of precarious work often include but are not limited to a lack of benefits, unpredictable work schedules, low wages, hazardous conditions and unprotected labor rights. Traditional workplace approaches that attempt to improve worker health prove these efforts to be inadequate for workers, especially those in precarious work arrangements. Political, economic and social conditions create and perpetuate PE.³ Upstream approaches that address worker health and safety are needed to promote health equity.

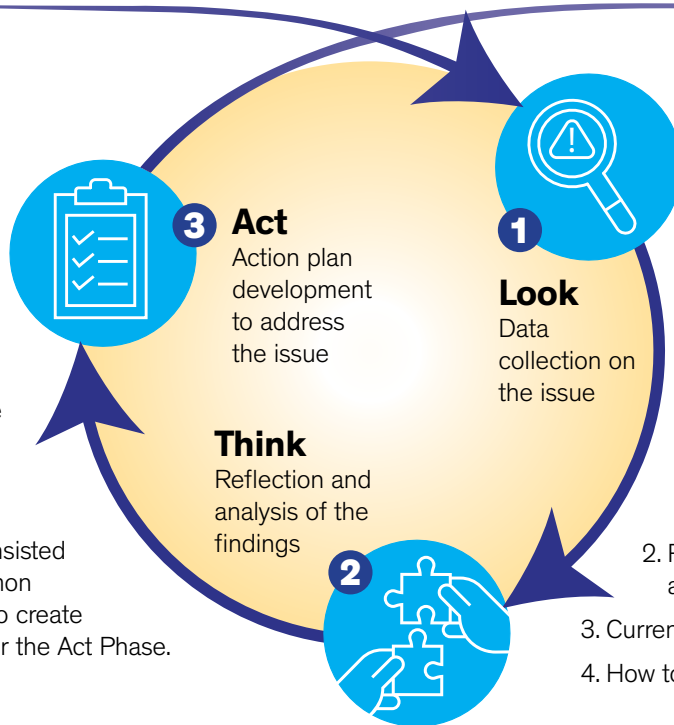
With these challenges in mind, additional research is needed to develop effective ways to address PE as a social determinant of health.

What was done and how?

In order to address the complexity of PE, The University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) Center for Healthy Work (CHW) developed an action research (AR) project to investigate pathways to healthy work. AR is a research design used to understand complex problems such as PE with the goal to take action.⁴ The design utilizes multiple cycles of Look, Think, and Act:⁵

The *Act* Phase consisted of developing the Healthy Work Collaborative (HWC), a PSE capacity-building initiative to address and improve worker health.

The *Think* Phase consisted of interpreting common themes in the data to create recommendations for the Act Phase.



The *Look* Phase consisted of interviews with stakeholders such as healthcare providers, labor rights advocacy groups, workforce development organizations, public health practitioners and government agencies to understand and develop initiatives that further healthy work through policy and systems change. The UIC CHW research team aimed to understand:

1. Participants' perceptions of PE and barriers to addressing PE
2. Participants' perceptions of their roles and approaches to addressing PE
3. Current initiatives to address PE
4. How to facilitate opportunities for healthy work

What was found?

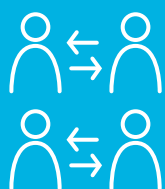


Health and Labor Perceptions of Precarious Employment in the Context of Health

- Both sectors described precarious employment as a rising trend to cut employer costs by hiring temporary and contractual employees
- Both sectors described the negative impact of precarious employment on the physical and mental health of workers
- Labor participants described how the structure and culture of work leave workers powerless and affect their standard of living
- Health sector participants mostly defined the impact of precarious employment as health-related
- Labor participants articulated the impact of precarious employment in detailed and profound ways

"I think that when you have transitions in work, when you're making a low wage, you're just surviving. . . Wellness is not even on your mind, it's survival. . . And there's no pathway to wellness in survival, there's just not . . ."

—Labor participant



Health and Labor Perceptions of Their Roles and Their Strategies to Address Precarious Employment

- The health sector's general role and focus remain on worksite health and wellness
- Health sector participants identified a desire to expand their role
- Labor sector strategies focused on the role of the employer and building worker power
- Both sectors noted interest in diverse partnerships and cross-sectoral approaches to address precarious employment
- Although both health and labor sectors acknowledged the importance of cross-sectoral partnerships, differences in a health versus labor approaches may challenge collaboration

"I think one guiding principle or maybe it is more of a strategy is base building and community organizing . . . and building power that low wage workers can use to gain even more workplace protections [including] supporting workers' leadership and . . . gaining skills as individuals and also gaining power as a group."

—Labor participant



Initiatives Are Under Way That Address Precarious Employment

Throughout the interviews, 184 initiatives were mentioned:

- The health sector mentioned 70 initiatives, mostly focused on addressing health outcomes
- Nearly twice as many initiatives (114) were mentioned by the labor sector, mostly focused on addressing contributors to PE and aimed at community and policy levels

"There are lots of people that are purists and they say, "Public health should just prevent disease . . . [but] is not supposed to be in everybody's life [or] to tell workers how to live. It's not supposed to tell business owners how to run their shops." So it's like we have a conceptual crisis going on in terms of the role of what public health is about."

—Public health participant



Use of Findings to Facilitate Development of a Health Promotion Initiative to Increase Healthy Work Opportunities Through Partnerships and PSE Change

The findings and feedback from participants resulted in the development of the [Healthy Work Collaborative](#), a joint effort between the labor and health sectors to address PE through a capacity building, PSE change initiative.

What does this mean and for whom?

The action research approach suggests a promising strategy to tackle the complexities of precarious employment. The approach allows for a combined effort between both groups to address precarious work. Such findings present a need for continued dialogue between the health and labor sectors to promote shared learning to create change. The Healthy Work Collaborative is an example of an action step in which the labor sector can be instrumental in supporting the health sector with knowledge and skills-building on policy and systems change strategies.

Covid-19 highlights the gravity of PE, as Black and Latinx communities, with a disproportionate number of residents employed in essential, but precarious work, have experienced the highest rates of death and illness.² The pandemic reinforces an undeniable urgency for partnership amongst the health and labor sector to address PE. More specifically, public health has an instrumental role in educating workers on the significant effects of work on health. Furthermore, public health must protect workers rights and health by establishing worker-centered guidelines for businesses and upholding the recommended protections from the federal government for workers under communicable disease laws. Lastly, multisectoral collaboration for policy and systems change should be promoted to improve the well-being of workers and their communities.



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