

Around a third of workers fear for jobs and pay, research says

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The scale of workers' insecurity since the economic crisis is revealed in research showing that 32% believed that there was a risk of losing their jobs and 38% were anxious that their pay would be cut.

Many workers also feared arbitrary dismissal and loss of autonomy and pay, as well as discrimination and victimisation by management.

Duncan Gallie, Professor of Sociology at the University of Oxford, and his colleagues analysed survey data on 2,949 people in Britain for a paper published in the journal *Work, Employment and Society*.

The data, from a representative sample taken in 2012, showed that when workers thought about the future:

- 7% thought it was very or quite likely they would lose their jobs in the next twelve months, and 25% thought there was some risk of this.
- 38% feared (were 'very' or 'fairly' anxious) that their pay would drop.
- 32% feared they would have less say in how they did their jobs.
- 25% feared their jobs would be changed to work needing less skill, and 23% feared their job would become less interesting.
- 19% feared they would be victimised by management and 18% that they would be discriminated against.

The researchers compared some of the findings with survey data from 2000 and 2001. This showed that the proportion who thought there was a risk they could lose their job had risen from 23.4% to 31.9% (a rise of 36%). Fear of victimisation had risen from 15.9% to 19.3% (a rise of 21%) and discrimination from 17.2% to 18.4% (a rise of 7%).

The researchers carried out statistical analysis of data from the survey, which was funded by the ESRC and the Commission for Employment and Skills, to isolate the factors behind the insecurity. They found that:

- When other factors were discounted, working in the public sector made staff more likely to fear losing their jobs than employees in the private sector. They were also more likely to fear that their working conditions would worsen in terms of lower pay, less autonomy or other factors.
- Being over 35 made workers more likely to fear losing their jobs, but not more worried about a deterioration in their working conditions.
- Being in a routine or semi-routine job made employees more likely to fear their working conditions would worsen.

- Human resource management practices such as setting targets and appraisals were significantly related to fears among workers that their working conditions would worsen, but did not have an effect on fears of job losses.

In their article, the researchers say: “Over the period 2006 to 2012, which saw the most severe recession since the 1930s, job tenure insecurity rose steeply.

“Employees older than 35 were significantly more worried about losing their jobs. This arguably reflects greater concern about family responsibilities among the middle aged and a worry about skill obsolescence.

“It was notable that by 2012 employees in the public service industries had significantly higher levels of job tenure insecurity than those in private sector industries. This new phenomenon doubtless reflected the cost-cutting programmes introduced by governments to reduce the deficits incurred in the wake of the banking crisis of 2008.”

The researchers also commented on the rise of insecurity about working conditions – also called job status insecurity – relating to fears of reduced pay, skills or autonomy.

“Routine, semi-routine and even lower supervisory and technical employees were significantly more worried about their positions within the organization than those in higher occupational classes. Class involves major asymmetries in decision-making power, with those in lower class positions having substantially less control over disruptive change to their working practices and employment conditions.

“There have been developments in managerial practices that may have accentuated insecurities about internal organizational change, in particular, the growth of human resource policies designed to improve job performance through closer monitoring of work outcomes through targets and appraisals and greater attention to raising skill levels. These are likely to imply stronger sanctions for under performance, increasing job status insecurity.”

Greater staff participation in their employers’ decision-making was recommended by the researchers, who were: Professor Gallie, Professor Alan Felstead, Cardiff University, Professor Francis Green, UCL Institute of Education, and Dr Hande Inanc, OECD Statistics Directorate, France.

“The view that employee participation could reduce anxieties relating to insecurity was strongly confirmed,” they said. “Higher employee participation was important for reducing both job tenure and job status insecurity. Union recognition, however, had no effect in reducing either type of job insecurity.”

- The paper is entitled ‘The hidden face of job insecurity’ and is published online in the journal *Work, Employment and Society* by SAGE and the British Sociological Association, at:

<http://wes.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/01/29/0950017015624399.full.pdf+html>

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Notes

1. The researchers used the British Skills and Employment Survey, which provides measures of workers' feelings about their working conditions (pay, autonomy and other factors, collectively called job status). This is a nationally representative survey of working people aged 20–60 years old conducted at approximately five-year intervals since 1986. The researchers used the survey carried out in 2012, which had a sample size of 2,949.

2. The researchers also used a separate representative survey of the workforce – the Working in Britain Survey – carried out in 2001, with a sample of 2,466, for past figures on fear of deteriorating work conditions.

3. The British Sociological Association's charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk