



'Peer' work as precarious: A qualitative study of work conditions and experiences of people who use drugs engaged in harm reduction work

A. Greer^{a,*}, V. Bungay^b, B. Pauly^c, J. Buxton^d

^a School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby BC, V5A 1S6, Canada

^b School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, T201-2211 Wesbrook Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 2B5, Canada

^c School of Nursing, University of Victoria, O Box 1700 STN CSC, Victoria BC V8W 2Y2, Canada

^d School of Population and Public Health, University of British Columbia, 2206 East Mall Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z3, Canada

ABSTRACT

In this study, we examine the qualitative accounts of people who use drugs engaged in 'peer' work in harm reduction settings across British Columbia, Canada. We found peer work was precarious, characterized by nonstandard or casual work arrangements, high job instability and insecurity, insufficient wages, and limited social benefits. Participants were reluctant to exercise their rights or negotiate work conditions, such as higher wages or more consistent work, out of fear of job loss. However, the flexibility of peer work was beneficial for some in that it worked within their life circumstances and provided a low-barrier entry into the labor market. If inequities in peer work are perpetuated, unrecognized and unaddressed, precarious work conditions may continue to undermine the potential benefits of harm reduction work for organizations, peer workers and the people to whom they engage with and support. This study adds people who use drugs to the many social groups that are impacted by precarious work conditions globally.

Introduction

Precarious work

Over the past 30 years, the nature of work has shifted globally. Employers are seeking greater hiring flexibility due to macro-level economic changes, including neoliberal globalization, technological advances, government deregulation, and austerity policies (Cunningham, Baines, Shields, & Lewchuk, 2016, 2017; Kalleberg, 2009, 2018; Standing, 2014). The labor force is increasingly diverse, with workers who are immigrants, women, and older (Kalleberg, 2009; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017; Standing, 2014). Specific sectors seem to be more representative of precarious work than others. For instance, the non-profit service sector is deeply impacted by funding cuts, contributing to a surge of unpaid work through volunteer work, unpaid internships, and unpaid overtime (Baines, Cunningham, & Shields, 2017).

Shifting economic conditions, such as those described above, are perpetuating precarious work conditions. Precarious work is characterized by nonstandard work arrangements, job insecurity, low wages, and a lack of social benefits (Campbell & Price, 2016; Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Kalleberg, 2009; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017). Nonstandard work arrangements are informal, temporary, and lack formal employment contracts, producing low worker control over wages, hours, working conditions, and future work (Vosko, MacDonald, & Campbell,

2009). Informal work arrangements also negate workers' rights or produce difficulty accessing them. Social benefits, such as sick leave and vacation pay, are limited or compromised. Under precarious work conditions, workers are vulnerable to exploitative wages and other forms of labor inequity (Jones, Ram, & Edwards, 2006; Lewis, Dwyer, Hodkinson, & Waite, 2015; Porthé et al., 2010; Premji, Shakya, Spasevski, Merolli, & Athar, 2014). As a conceptual framework, precarious work conditions emphasize the structural mechanisms driving insecure employment, such as work arrangements and employer relations, and point to the oppressive features of them (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017).

As a complement to precarious work as an objective set of work dimensions (e.g. informal, low wage), examining the subjective experience of work presents precarity as a social or relational condition of uncertainty and unpredictability (Campbell & Price, 2016). Outside the labor literature, precarity is an expression of insecurity from the unequal distribution of life conditions structured through socioeconomic and political institutions (Butler, 2006). Applied to work, precarity comes from the sense of insecurity that workers experience but extends to and is exacerbated by precarity in social life, such as housing and financial insecurity (Anderson, 2010a; Campbell & Price, 2016). Analyses of labor precarity point to worker anxiety (Mole, 2010), erosion of social belonging (Muehlebach, 2011), life plan disruptions (Allison, 2012), and powerlessness (Lorey, 2015). Millar (2016) notes that analyses on work precarity is a political activity, in that they "...open up

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: alissa.greer@sfu.ca (A. Greer).

the question of how precarious labor and precarious life intersect in particular times and places... shifting the question from what precarity is to what precarity does" (p. 5).

A large body of research has examined the dimensions, distribution and impact of precarious work. Analyses center on the nature of precarious work, employment relations and groups affected by it (Kalleberg, 2009), and the structural mechanisms driving insecure employment (Clarke, Lewchuk, de Wolff, & King, 2007; Premji, 2018). Globally, precarious work conditions are predominantly occupied by socioeconomically marginalized groups (Benach et al., 2014; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2017); (Standing, 2014) Vosko, 2006). In one international review, minority ethnic workers, people with disabilities, youth, and those recently incarcerated are among groups over-represented in precarious work (Benach et al., 2014). As Benach et al. (2014) and Premji (2018) suggest, most research on precarious work and its impacts have been quantitative. More qualitative studies are needed to provide a richer understanding of the pathways and mechanisms through which precarious work impacts certain groups.

Peer work

People who use drugs (PWUD) represent one group who may be vulnerable to precarious work conditions and labor inequity. PWUD have lower employment rates relative to other social groups globally (Sutton, Cebulla, Heaver, & Smith, 2004), which is partially explained by their exclusion from the labor market and structural factors that create inequities (Boyd et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2015). For example, loss of work among PWUD often coincides with a higher level of socioeconomic marginalization and drug use (Richardson, Mammel, Milloy, & Hayashi, 2019). Other research demonstrates the influence of sociostructural mediators of employment, such as the criminalization and stigmatization of drug use, as well as health and housing status (McCoy, Comerford and Metsch, 2007). In the labor market generally, being labeled or known to use drugs can create job loss or barriers to employment (Cebulla et al., 2004; Richardson & Epp, 2015; Sutton et al., 2004).

Although PWUD can face labor market discrimination, *peer engagement* is a unique labor context where they are engaged specifically for their lived or living experience of substance use. Over the past several decades, peer engagement was introduced through harm reduction and drug user movements to promote the opinions of PWUD in decisions that affect them (Allman et al., 2006). PWUDs expertise is utilized to enhance the relevance and acceptability of programs, advocacy, policymaking, and research in a variety of contexts (Gillespie, Lasu, & Sawatzky, 2018; Greer et al., 2016; Marshall, Dechman, Minichiello, Alcock, & Harris, 2015). Today, PWUD take on a range of roles in harm reduction work, including peer education, direct harm reduction service, facilitating group counseling, research assistance, and advisory committee participation (Marshall et al., 2015). However, peer engagement does not guarantee paid work. Peer workers engage as unpaid volunteers, contractors, or are paid through incentives such as transportation coupons or gift cards, and work alongside other staff who receive salaries, grants and social capital (Bardwell et al., 2018; Dickson-Gómez, Knowlton, & Latkin, 2003; Gillespie et al., 2018; Greer, Amlani, Pauly, Burmeister, & Buxton, 2018). As in other labor contexts (Richardson et al., 2015), PWUD may face labor inequities in harm reduction work.

The potential for inequity is concerning considering the uptake of peer involvement in publicly funded harm reduction programming. Amid the overdose crisis across North America, peer work has been propelled in to mainstream health and harm reduction organizations (Strike and Watson, 2019). Many overdose response strategies, such as overdose prevention sites, are staffed by peer workers (Kolla and Strike, 2019) Pauly et al., 2020). In these settings, peer workers lack emotional, financial and operational support, leading to a high degree

of pressure, burden, and trauma (Kennedy et al., 2019; (Kolla and Strike, 2019) Pauly et al., 2020). Researchers are starting to question the working conditions and ad-hoc manner of the involvement, organization and integration of peer workers (Bardwell, Kerr, Boyd, & McNeil, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2018; Kennedy et al., 2019; (Kolla and Strike, 2019)). Despite peer work falling under the banner of 'harm reduction', peer workers may not evade the socioeconomic marginalization and structural inequities that PWUD face in other employment contexts. There is a growing body of research analyzing the labor context of peer engagement, such as examinations of pay inequities (Greer et al., 2018), barriers to work (Guta, Flicker, & Roche, 2013), and inclusion (Michaud, Maynard, Dodd, & Butler Burke, 2016). Although these studies are about labor, they do not explicitly and deeply examine peer work conditions using unique and robust perspectives from labor studies, such as precarious work as a conceptual framework.

Study purpose

In the labor literature, more qualitative research is needed that focuses on the social location of workers and structural conditions that produce precarity and vulnerability to labor inequity (Campbell & Price, 2016). In the harm reduction literature, extant research prioritizes workers' emotional demands and supports but a need exists to examine peer work experiences, conditions and structural drivers of inequity. The purpose of this study is to take an in-depth, critical examination of the conditions of peer work in BC, Canada. Specifically, we examine the precarious characteristics of peer work and how workers experience them within the context of their life circumstances and labor inequities. Understanding peer work as precarious has important implications for the organization of peer work to promote labor and pay equity for PWUD.

METHODS

The current study materialized from a community-based study on peer engagement in 2016–2018 where the authors learned from peer research assistants and PWUD that labor equity was an issue that mattered to PWUD (Peer Engagement and Evaluation Project (PEEP), 2017). As well, the authors have a long history of direct experience of working alongside peer groups and workers, having observed issues with labor in peer work contexts and employed peer workers on research projects (Greer et al., 2018; Pauly and Buxton, 2020). These insights and experiences were the impetus of the current study.

In 2017–2018, data were collected from fifteen one-on-one qualitative interviews with PWUD recently engaged in peer work. The main inclusion criteria for participating in this study were: 1) aged 16 or older; 2) spoke English; 3) self-identified as a peer worker, defined as having lived or living substance use experience that informs their work within the past twelve months (i.e. outreach worker, community advisor). Peer work was defined as paid (i.e. part-time or full time employment, 'volunteer-for-stipend') as well as unpaid (i.e. unpaid volunteering) activities related to health and harm reduction services. We used purposeful sampling to identify and recruit people with a variety of perspectives and experiences (Patton, 2003). Recruitment strategies included word-of-mouth and advertisements at community health centers serving PWUD. Participants provided informed consent prior to the interview. Each received a \$20 CAD cash honorarium, refreshments and resources regarding employment rights.

We developed a semi-structured interview guide from our working knowledge of the subject area, theoretical perspectives, a literature review, and conversations with peer workers. The lead author (AG) conducted each interview. Questions generated descriptions about peer work conditions, experiences and differences from other workers. The interview guide was piloted in the first three interviews; after which, the study team met to discuss and integrate wording changes that facilitated dialog in subsequent interviews. PWUD and peer workers were

also consulted throughout the analysis to discuss the emerging findings. Sampling and questions evolved through concurrent data collection and analysis until we found a rich understanding of the complexities and nuances of peer work conditions and experiences. This understanding occurred after thirteen interviews. An additional two interviews were conducted to ensure saturation. Each interview concluded by asking five sociodemographic questions. Field notes captured any nonverbal communication, context and ideas related to the study aims. Audio recordings were transcribed and loaded into qualitative data management software, NVivo (Version 11, QSR International, n.d). We removed any personal information of participants (i.e. names, places) . Peer work in BC is a small community and to ensure participant anonymity, no identifying information (i.e. names, age, gender or region) is provided with participant quotes in this paper.

The thematic analysis was deductive and inductive (Braun and Clarke, 2006) ; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017), as we were interested in precarious work dimensions and open to broader interpretations about peer work. To enhance the trustworthiness of our analysis, we engaged in a rigorous process similar to that proposed by Nowell et al. (2017) which included prolonged and recursive engagement with the data, reflexive journaling, generating initial and revised codes, conceptual hierarchies and connections, memoing and diagramming about themes, and team analyses and debriefing. Incongruities between team member interpretations or views encouraged discussion and insight that helped refine the codes and themes (Barbour, 2001) Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis elicited a range of themes and findings; the themes relating to the peer work as precarious are presented in this paper.

FINDINGS

Participants varied by age, gender, ethnicity, region, peer work history, and substance use (Table 1), although most self-identified as middle-aged (35–54 years) and white. Participants' responses illustrated similarities and differences concerning their everyday life

Table 1
Characteristics of participants (N = 15).

| | n | % |
|-------------------------------|---------|----------|
| Age group, in years | | |
| 25–34 | 2 | 200713.3 |
| 35–44 | 5 | 33.3 |
| 45–54 | 6 | 40.0 |
| 55+ | 2 | 13.3 |
| Median | 44 | |
| Range | 27–60 | |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 8 | 53.4 |
| Male | 7 | 46.6 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Caucasian | 10 | 66.7 |
| Non-Caucasian | 5 | 33.3 |
| Residence by Health Authority | | |
| Vancouver | 4 | 26.7 |
| Island | 5 | 33.3 |
| Fraser | 3 | 20.0 |
| Interior | 1 | 6.6 |
| Northern | 2 | 13.3 |
| Time doing peer work | 5 | |
| < 2 years | | 33.3 |
| 2–5 years | 1 | 6.7 |
| 6–9 years | 5 | 33.3 |
| 10+ years | 4 | 26.7 |
| Median in years | 7 | |
| Range in years | 0.25–30 | |
| Substance use history | | |
| Current | 8 | 53.4 |
| Past | 7 | 46.6 |

circumstances. Thirteen participants were stably housed (i.e. rental housing, staying with family), although one participant was homeless and another in extremely precarious housing. All participants were impacted by poverty as described in their financial strain and struggle to meet their basic personal needs (i.e. food, shelter); although, one participant described themselves as “middle class.” Ten participants received social assistance as an income source. No participants engaged in employment outside of peer work.

Nonstandard (i.e. casual, informal) arrangements were the norm. Just four participants engaged in either full- or part-time formal employment, but all had past experience working casually. All participants intermittently engaged in ‘volunteer-for-stipend’ jobs, which involved short, often single task jobs (i.e. outreach) for small cash wages (i.e. \$5–10). Nonstandard work arrangements were typical in meetings or policymaking advising, as well as service and outreach roles. Four participants were currently or formerly engaged in peer work through a drug user organization.

Four interrelated themes best illustrated the precarious conditions and nature of peer work and inequity produced as a consequence or precursor to these conditions. We selected words used by participants as descriptors for the four themes: 1) “Sporadic and random”; 2) “A disposable labor force”; 3) “Poverty pimping”; 4) “There's no rights”.

“Sporadic and random”

Casual or informal work required peer workers to intermittently engage in multiple and consecutive positions followed by lengthy periods without work. Most participants expressed concern toward the uncertainty in these arrangements. Participants stated: “I hope there's more to come and not so sporadic and random”; and “[it'd be] nice to have some kind of surety of work”. The dissatisfaction with sporadic nature peer work was linked to the instability that came with unpredictable work hours, wages and locations, especially considering participants' need to earn an income and experiences of poverty.

There were several apparent consequences associated with the sporadic and random nature of peer work. It was difficult for people to make long-term plans or have financial or social stability. For example, one participant was contacted intermittently by multiple governmental and non-governmental organizations to consult on harm reduction policies and programs. Given the informal or casual arrangements, they would go months without work, which resulted in housing insecurity and interpersonal conflict. This participant explained:

Now got credit card debt up the ying-yang... We don't even know what's going on with [employer] at this point.... [spouse] said: “you gotta leave because you are lying to me.” Because I was borrowing money....part of the problem with that... because of [employer] scheduling, they didn't have any places to go, any work for me.

Nonstandard work arrangements contributed to accruing debts and interpersonal problems, therefore producing precarity in work and worker's personal life.

However, some participants desired nonstandard work arrangements. They liked the low-barrier and flexible features. One participant spoke about the positive aspects: “flexibility... short shifts, choice as to what kind of work you're going to do”. Peer workers could adapt peer work schedules to their life circumstances and preferences. Participants emphasized the having ‘choice’. One participant said: “having some options is really important. Having choice... things need to be weighed, pros and cons... I just know that we need to sit down and take all of those things in consideration”. This participant explains the important “things” to take into consideration includes the option to earn cash informally. Cash-based work was especially important for participants receiving income assistance, which has reporting requirements and earning limits. Informal, cash-based work lowered barriers for participants without a bank account who otherwise could not accept cheques or e-transfers. Informal work arrangements were not all negative but offered

some participants a flexible and low-barrier option for earning income.

“A disposable labor force”

Participants had a deep sense of insecurity produced from their work arrangements. This insecurity was linked to fear of losing work and a lack of control over work arrangements as well as power imbalances with employers. Nonstandard or informal arrangements enabled employers to be noncommittal to peer workers. Employers controlled peer workers' job futures, as they could hire, terminate, withhold, or change work at any time. Casual work arrangements produced an informal long-term probationary period where workers had to repeatedly prove their value. *“It's partly a control thing... doing stuff that they [employers] don't like they have an ability to go, okay, well, if you want to keep working here, stop doing this, this, and this”*, and another stated: *“the fear for our jobs is used quite often”*. The precarity of work relations created power imbalances between workers and employers – both in large health organization and in smaller non-profit and drug user organizations. Other participants spoke to this power imbalance:

They [peer workers] can all be arbitrarily fired at the drop of the hat and then rehired, just so they know that they have no rights... [supervisors were] letting people know who's in charge... that they shouldn't rely on anything... It's about power. It's about people getting a little fucking... crumb of it and hanging onto it... it's the only time they've ever felt better... having a little bit, a tiny bit of security... and being really insecure that they'll never find [a job] again.

Knowing that employers could terminate work at any time created a deep sense of vulnerability that was exacerbated by workers' financial insecurity. This insecurity could be used by some employers to control workers and work conditions, highlighting the power inequities created through their work arrangements.

Adding to peer workers' job insecurity was the awareness that they were easily replaceable; a situation reflected by issues of supply and demand within the peer labor sector. As captured by one participant, *“peers [were] treated like a disposable labor force or something”*, speaking to the precariousness of peer work existing within an ethos of worker expendability. Participants also spoke about the high unemployment rates among PWUD coupled with poor income security left people competing for the scarce paid work opportunities available in the health sector. *“The pool of them is a mile wide and an inch deep”*. Peer work was viewed as a “good” job; it was sought-out in a community where unemployment was high and earning opportunities were low. The supply and demand conditions of the peer labor sector contributed to power imbalances between workers and employers. As one participant stated: *“[employer] can make the argument: fuck you guys, we'll go down the block. We'll get a hundred more. And that's probably a legitimate argument from their point of view. Because it's true”*. Employers seemed to be aware of labor market conditions and control the few jobs and resources available to peer workers.

Participants expressed feeling powerless in these structural circumstances. Labor and power inequities were especially evident in participants' difficult decisions of whether to accept low paying, precarious, and exploitative work or go without. For instance, one participant reported ridicule and physical intimidation by an employer; yet, this person was reluctant to quit given a lack of other job options: *“I lasted 18 months. I don't know how I lasted that long. I'm a resilient character. And I just didn't have any other opportunities”*. Lack of choice and economic insecurity structurally constrained workers to accepting work precarity.

“Poverty pimping”

Pay standards for peer workers were low and variable. Some engaged in unpaid work or volunteering for no pay, while others earned

money from ‘volunteer-for-stipend’ or waged work. Wages were often under the provincial minimum of \$12.65 CAD per hour (Minimum wage 2020). Paid work was as low as \$3.00 CAD per hour, although others earned up to \$30.00 CAD per hour. Wages were variable across regions as well as the types of organizations represented, including large health organizations and smaller harm reduction agencies. Most participants expressed a desire for higher and consistent pay.

Participants noted the pay inequity between themselves and non-peer workers. One participant explained: *“sure, the [non-peer] program workers make, like, 23 bucks an hour, you're doing the exact same work and you're making 10 or 15 if you're lucky”*. Awareness of wage differences was discriminative and demeaning, devaluing peer work due to their social position. Speaking to this pay inequity, one participant said: *“I did all this shit and now I'm making a whole bunch of money because of it. I mean, that's a lot less stigmatizing than being, like, I did all this shit and I got a \$5.00 stipend for it”*. Pay in peer work was demeaning. Low wages were associated with the negative and oppressive impacts of being identified as a PWUD within institutions.

It was common that the wages workers received together with social assistance income did not meet the income to pay for housing and food costs, especially for those with children, partners, and pets. Poverty intersected with workers job insecurity in ways that magnified their precarity. The impact of any income challenged workers capacity to exercise agency out of fear of lost wages. One person explained: *“when people are really down they don't ask for much. Twenty bucks is a lot... when you're hard up you'll take what you're given”*.

Some participants expressed a belief that low wages enabled small non-profit and large government organizations to maximize their budgets by cutting personnel costs. Participants felt that employers saw them as *“a pool of cheap labor that can be exploited”*. There was a common view that employers intentionally exploited PWUD's economic precarity and asymmetrical power structures. Participants referred to this as “poverty pimping”:

They poverty pimp...[they have] such a high amount of people who are so desperate that you could just go out to [one street] and you could find five times the amount of people who would work for \$7 to \$10 an hour... They're not employable at other places. So why would you pay them value in the job they do?

This quote links peer workers' economic fragility to their job insecurity and low wages. Employers leveraged peer workers' socio-economic precarity to their benefit – to “poverty pimp” people. Other participants talked about poverty pimping:

I mean, cycling very, very, you know, poor and marginalized and oppressed groups of people, like, meat through a grinder... not only are they poverty pimping their clients. But they're doing it to their low, quote/unquote, low level, but the ones that are with the most work on the frontline.

This participant emphasizes how peer workers economic insecurity can be exploited to meet employers' interests at the expense of peer workers.

“There's no rights”

Peer workers lacked access to workers' rights and were unaware of what their rights included. Nonstandard arrangements systematically constrained access to rights as there was no formal employee-employer contract. Some said: *“there's no rights”*; and *“[peers] have no rights”*. These perceptions were concerning but reinforced by the numerous violations to provincial workers' rights reported by participants, including wages that were below provincial minimums, a lack of social benefits (i.e. sick and vacation pay), physical and verbal intimidation, and no access to safety standards. Another participant shared a unique perspective on the lack of access to workers' rights: that they were a

PWUD.

There's also the question of drug use at work and how that impacts people and that's one of the reasons why people get paid so less or much less.... if people are using drugs at work it's, like, okay, fine, you can use drugs. But you're not going to have any workers' rights or be paid a basic wage type of thing.

Negating workers' rights was seen as necessary in a work culture that tolerated PWUDs substance use needs. This quote underscores the structural vulnerability of PWUD produced from the criminalization of drug use – even in harm reduction work.

Many peer workers were simply not familiar with labor laws or employers' obligations. As one participant said: *"people don't know their rights within the government system... they've been vulnerable and had no opportunity to voice anything in their lives, their entire lives.... even knowing the dollar amount you're worth"*. Participants were aware of the vulnerability created from not knowing about workers' rights or how to access them. For instance: *"They don't seem to understand the workers' rights concept... there's a big need to explain that and...that kind of payment system"*. PWUD were vulnerable to pay and labor inequity. From the perspective of workers, employers could take advantage of this vulnerability.

Despite the barriers to access workers' rights, collective action to improve the work conditions was important for peer workers. Several suggested a "union" as way to promote workers' rights. When asked to clarify, most admittedly were unclear about the details or definition of a "union", but their descriptions provided insights into what it meant to them.

I don't know a whole lot about unions... but what I do know is that there doesn't seem to be any type of accountability in some of these non-profits and NGO's. Where if you do get yourself, you don't have a voice or you're scared if you do say something you're going to lose your job.

The idea of a union was about accountability and empowerment, or a way to collectively resist structurally constraining and inequitable work arrangements. Without understanding exactly what a union was, participants shared optimism towards a peer worker union and what it could mean for PWUD. Another participant described the potential for recognition and equity:

In Toronto... harm reduction union... they actually make money, you know. They don't make stipends. They make a wage.....Workers' rights and having a union comes in where you can school people on all this stuff and explain to them and help them understand what's going on... what people want to be paid and how they want to be paid and just taking back some of the power that's been gone.

Unions represented value, worth, access to workers' rights, and better work conditions. Unions could provide support to workers and ultimately promote equity and empowerment.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined qualitative accounts of peer workers' experiences in BC, providing rich insights into the work conditions and impacts of those conditions among PWUD. Precarious work conditions were evident in peer work, with informal arrangements, lack of benefits or workers' rights, and intermittent periods of joblessness or unstable jobs which elicited a high degree of insecurity. Dissatisfaction with work conditions linked to the challenges peer workers faced in terms of agency, social inclusion and economic security. Labor and power inequities undermined peer workers' agency, including their ability to choose and negotiate work conditions, benefits, wages, or rights. Many aspects of precarious work conditions also produced precarity in workers' lives. Precarious work was not characteristic of a particular type of organization but represented organizations big and small,

although variable across organizations and regions. However, not all aspects of peer work were viewed negatively. Some desired the flexibility of informal work and ability to earn cash-based stipends. Peer workers also saw the potential for collective action through unions and education about labor rights. Our findings have actionable implications for addressing equity in the organization of peer work moving forward.

The finding that peer work was characteristically precarious adds PWUD amongst a variety of marginalized groups constrained to precarious labor conditions globally (Benach et al., 2014; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017; Vosko, 2006). Much of the literature on precarious work has focused on people who are disabled, immigrants and refugees, youth, and women (; Jackson & Bauder, 2014 ; Porthé et al., 2010; Premji, 2018; Vosko, 2006; Vosko et al., 2009). Research examining the pathways to precarious work suggest that social location of groups channels them here (Premji, 2018). Similar to our findings, people experiencing poverty, who have limited access to workers' rights, embody cultural role expectations, and are unfamiliar with local and workplace customs are more vulnerable to being offered or accepting precarious work (Premji, 2018). To our knowledge, only one other study has situated PWUD as a social group represented in precarious work conditions, although this study was among youth in unspecified work settings (Morissette, Maranda, & Lessard, 2006). Researchers emphasize the role of management styles, selective recruitment procedures, and flexibility practices that structurally constrain youth who use drugs who felt "trapped" in precarious work (Morissette et al., 2006). Our study reinforces this notion of structural constraint, in that peer workers found it challenging to accept anything but precarious work given their socioeconomic insecurity, labor market exclusion and power inequity. These findings are concerning, given that constraint to accepting work that is poorly paid, informal and lacks benefits or rights may perpetuate PWUDs socioeconomic insecurity.

Unlike most studies on labor, our study uniquely demonstrated precarity experienced by workers, connecting dimensions of precarious work to the subjective experiences and interpretations of them. Layering and compounding feelings of precarity were evident in expressions of insecurity, uncertainty and instability and accentuated by workers' socioeconomic precarity. These multiple experiences of precarity in peer workers' work and personal lives echo previous research suggesting that 'layers' of precarity can exist, including precarious employment relations, precarious labor market conditions, economic precarity, and social precarity, which compound and interact in ways that impact worker agency and wellbeing (Wilson and Ebert, 2013). Other studies suggest that life circumstances, like socioeconomic insecurity, can "amplify" or "buffer" precarity (Campbell and Price, 2016), suggesting that the social and economic precarity among peer workers may be a significant mediator of precarity that is different for them relative to other groups.

The finding that peer work is precarious is concerning given the negative health outcomes associated with precarious work conditions. Extensive evidence suggests precarious work conditions lead to damaging mental and physical health impacts for various groups (Benach and Muntaner, 2007) Benach et al., 2014; (Clarke, Lewchuk, de Wolff and King, 2007) Lewchuk, Clarke, & De Wolff, 2008), which is related to the stress of insecurity and material deprivation as well as precarity from social and power inequities (Benach et al., 2014; (Clarke, Lewchuk, de Wolff and King, 2007)). Peer workers already face stress from high work demands and the opioid crisis, along with a lack of support in their work (Kennedy et al., 2019; Pauly et al., 2020). Nonstandard work arrangement may amplify those demands by restricting access to work benefits, such as extended health benefits and counseling, due to the lack of a formal employment relationship.

Working amid the opioid crisis, peer workers were positioned in roles that met provisional public health programming needs within a sector of strained resources and funding. Like other positions and evidence of precarious work in the non-profit service sector, workers are often impacted by funding cuts, which contributes to a culture of

volunteer or unpaid work, including overtime and doing work in their personal time (Baines et al., 2017). Salmon, Browne, and Pederson (2010) discuss the ‘microeconomics’ of partnerships with community using short-term, project-based positions in a context plagued with chronic underfunding. As they note, this context can contribute to oppressive economic conditions for socioeconomically marginalized PWUD, yet employers still struggle to secure sustainable funding programs. Recognizing these constraints, the funding context puts into question whether peer engagement can provide employment that is anything but precarious.

Despite the evidence of precarity in peer work, not all precarious work dimensions were viewed as negative. Some peer workers desired the flexible and cash-based work arrangements. Casual work was a low-barrier opportunity to earn supplemental income without jeopardizing social assistance income or having to commit to long-term work. This finding offers a distinct contribution to the labor literature. Researchers almost universally frame full-time standard employment as the ‘pinnacle’ of work arrangements (Benach and Muntaner, 2007), and make broad calls to eradicate work of the precarious kind (Standing, 2014). As (Campbell and Price, 2016) point out, “the literature continues to struggle with the implications of precarious work... the temptation to leap freely from precarious work to precarious workers (or precarious lives) should be resisted” (p. 336). The evident diversity in peer workers’ experiences suggest that a range of employment options – including formal or standard employment as well as casual or temporary work – would better reflect workers’ personal situations and promote the need for diversity and flexibility.

However, we also caution to normalize informal work arrangements in harm reduction work given the evident potential for pay and work inequity. Nonstandard work arrangements created power imbalances, negated the formal employment status and compromised agency and labor and pay rights. These findings are significant in light of repeated calls for increasing ‘low-barrier’ work for PWUD (Bardwell et al., 2018; Boyd et al., 2018). As we found, informal work can be precarious and inequitable. Without critically assessing the many ways that non-standard work arrangements can produce inequity, harm reduction work risks perpetuating the socioeconomic insecurities and inequities of PWUD. As such, we emphasize the need to sensitize employers to a range of worker preferences and to offer a variety of work means and options – including standard part-time and full-time employment as well as informal or casual work.

It is also clear from our study that workers’ have a desire to gain control over how work is done and what access they have to it. However, their path to control and resistance was fraught with risks and challenges. Peer workers had to consider how their behavior impacted their access to future income while simultaneously recognizing the need to collectively challenge restrictive and exploitative working conditions. Previous research suggests that individualized acts of resistance expose workers to discipline by employers, but that collective movements and unions offer support and politicize precarious work ((Lewchuk and Dassinger, 2016)). In our study, unionizing was less about access to specific work arrangements (i.e. higher pay or formal work) challenging employer control and more about the potential collective political movement involved. As (Lewchuk and Dassinger, 2016) state: “unions can give workers in precarious employment the tools to become a political voice in their own right” (p.155). Moving forward, locally unionizing peer work may have the potential to both symbolically and tangibly establish the workforce as legitimate, valued and deserving of rights, benefits and equity.

While this study offers many contributions, there are limitations. Since the time of collecting data, peer work has evolved within a rapidly shifting drug policy environment; therefore, some working conditions and experiences may vary from what we present here. Data were collected from a small sample of PWUD in the specific context of BC; therefore, does not reflect the full range of work conditions and experiences in peer work both locally and in other contexts. The extent of

precarious work conditions across the workforce in harm reduction is still unknown. Therefore, more research on the nature of peer work in various contexts is warranted.

In conclusion, our findings highlight that peer work is precarious in both its dimensions and experience. Peer work is not impermeable to the social, economic and labor inequities that PWUD face in labor contexts. Moving forward, the work conditions of PWUD should be a key indicator of equity in harm reduction work. Precarious work may be an ongoing issue unless adequate solutions to promote equity are implemented. If we wish to promote the meaningful involvement of PWUD through the work of peer engagement, there are necessary steps to ultimately improve the work conditions in these contexts. Employers must take an equity lens to the organization of peer work and gain insight into the impact of its conditions. To overcome deeply engrained inequities related to the social positioning of PWUD, this work will require deep and bold policy changes that demand a reconceptualization of how PWUD, including peer workers, are included, integrated and empowered in the workplace and labor market.

Declarations of Competing Interest

None.

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