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Precarious employment in public services

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SUMMARY

Previous NERI research has highlighted the pervasiveness of precarious employment practices across public services in Northern Ireland (Wilson, 2017). This finding came at somewhat of a surprise given that jobs to deliver public services have traditionally been associated as offering secure and decent-paid employment. Further scrutiny of these findings shows that insecure work is concentrated in the education and health and social work sectors. Within these sectors the evidence shows that insecure work dominates between professional occupations and caring, leisure and other service occupations.

Evidence of the extent of insecure work in the public sector would appear to represent the increasing use of contract and agency staff employed on Supply or Locum contracts. This has been encouraged by public sector cuts and a politics of austerity which has encouraged the increasing reliance on insecure workers in attempts to cut costs.

KEY POINTS

- Over 1 in 5 workers in the education sector is in temporary employment.
- Almost 1 in 10 workers in the health and social work sector are self-employed. Previous research has commented that the growth of self-employment and own-account work may owe to the spread of precarious forms of employment, with many of these workers being 'pushed' into self-employment.
- Indicative figures show that insecure workers in the education and health and social work sectors are concentrated in professional occupations, as well as in caring, leisure and other service occupations.
- The high levels of insecure workers within the education and health and social work sectors may represent the increasing use of agency and contract staff (so-called supply or Locum staff) as the recruitment of permanent staff within the public sector is restricted by austerity, and employers attempt to cut costs by increasingly relying on insecure workers.

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Research for new economic policies

Introduction

Previous NERI research has highlighted the pervasiveness of precarious employment practices across public services in Northern Ireland (Wilson, 2017). This finding came at somewhat of a surprise given that public service sectors have traditionally been associated as offering secure, decent-paid jobs. Moreover, there is a commonly held assumption that precarious employment practices dominate in particular sectors within the private sector, such as in the accommodation and food sectors or wholesale, retail and distribution sectors.

In seeking to further understand the nature of precarious employment within public services in Northern Ireland this *Research InBrief* examines further the extent of precarious employment within the education, health and public administration and defence sectors. In doing so we see that insecure employment arrangements are prevalent in each of these sectors, and are particularly widespread in the education and health and social work sectors.

Moreover, perhaps unsurprisingly, the available evidence shows that a substantive proportion of insecure workers who deliver public services are in low paid occupations, such as caring occupations. On the other hand, the evidence also shows that insecure work is also widespread in professional occupations. This is particularly concerning within the education and health and social work sectors given the high proportion of

such workers who are in professional occupations.

Data

The analysis in this *Research InBrief* draws on data from the 2017 July to September Northern Ireland element of the United Kingdom Quarterly Labour Force Survey. Analyses are restricted to those in employment (i.e. paid employees and self-employed workers) aged between 16 and 64.

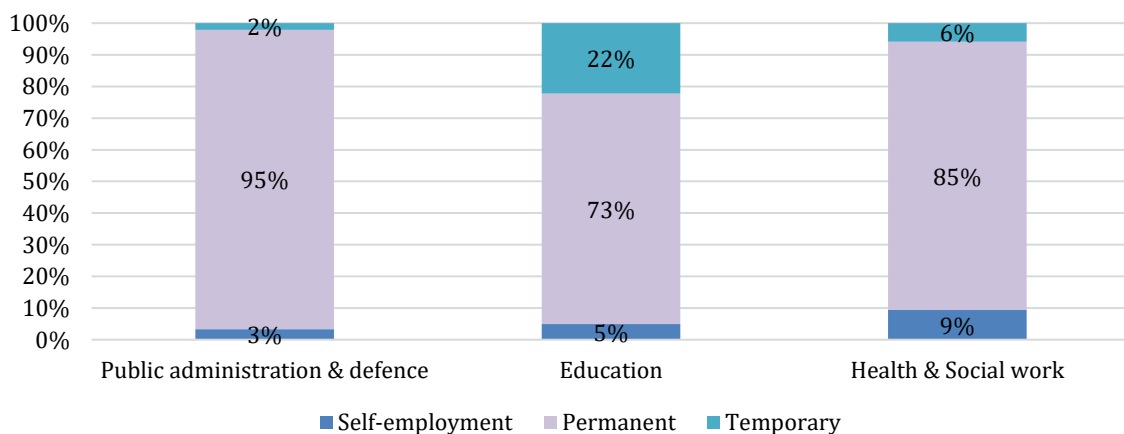
Analysis & Findings

In order to assess the extent and nature of insecure employment amongst those who deliver public services Figure 1 looks at the share of the labour market which is comprised of different employment arrangements in the public administration and defence, education and health sectors.

From this we see that permanent employment is the norm across each of the sectors. Permanent employment is particularly strong in the public administration and defence sector, where almost 95% of workers are permanently employed. The remaining 5% are either temporary or self-employed.

Starkly, however, over 1 in 5 (22.3%) of those employed in the education sector are working in temporary employment arrangements. A further 5% are self-employed.

Figure 1: Share of labour market by nature of employment arrangement in each sector



In the health and social work sector we find that almost 1 in 10 (9%) of workers are self-employed. 6% of health and social work sector workers are in temporary employment arrangements.

The high levels of insecure workers within the education and health and social work sectors is particularly striking given that these sectors have traditionally been associated as sectors which offer secure, decent-paid jobs. As such, these results may represent the increasing use of contract and agency staff employed on Supply or Locum contracts as the recruitment of permanent staff within the public sector is restricted by austerity and seeks to cut labour costs.

QLFS which for some sectors means we cannot report results with statistical certainty. However, by looking at the nature of employment relationships in different occupations across the entire economy and then at the occupational breakdown within the public service sectors we can delineate from this what type of jobs workers in insecure employment relationships within public service sectors are working in. In this sense, we can then utilise evidence from Table 1 and Figure 2 in tandem to paint a picture about the nature of insecure employment in public services.

Table 1 shows that temporary employment is highest in professional occupations;

Table 1: Share of labour market by nature of employment arrangement across occupations

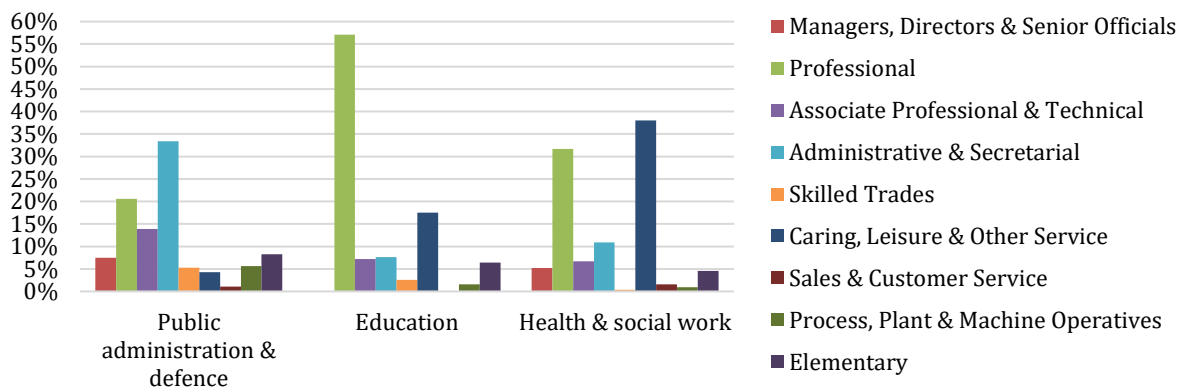
	Permanent	Self-employed	Temporary
Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	69%	30%	1%
Professional	79%	12%	10%
Associate Professional and Technical	79%	16%	5%
Administrative and Secretarial	92%	2%	6%
Skilled Trades	63%	36%	1%
Caring, Leisure and Other Service	80%	13%	7%
Sales and Customer Service	91%	3%	7%
Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	85%	12%	3%
Elementary	85%	6%	9%

What jobs do people in public services do?

Next, we look at the breakdown of different employment arrangements across the occupations. Ideally, we would be able to look at the three-way relationship between public service sector, employment

elementary occupations; caring, leisure and other service occupations; and sales and customer service occupations. As might be expected self-employment is highest in skilled trades occupations (36%) manager, director and senior official roles (30%). Nonetheless, over 1 in 10 of those in

Figure 2: Occupational breakdown across public service sectors



arrangement and occupation. This however is not possible due to sample size in the NI-

professional (12%), caring, leisure and other service occupations (13%), associate

professional and technical occupations (16%) are self-employed.

It is commonly thought that insecure working arrangements are dominated in low-paid occupations, such as sales and customer service occupations. However, these results show that insecure employment is prevalent right across all occupations, from low-skilled to high-skilled.

With this in mind, we look next at the occupational breakdown across public service sectors. Focusing first on the results for the public administration and defence sector we see that almost 70% of workers are dominated in one of three occupations: administrative and secretarial occupations (33.4%); professional (20.6%); and associate professional and technical (13.9%).

In the education sector we see that the vast majority of workers in either employed in either professional occupations (over 1 in 2) or caring, leisure and other service occupations (just less than 1 in 5). Workers in the health and social work sector are majoritively in either professional (31.7%) or caring, leisure and other service occupations (38%).

Evidence of the extent of insecure work within the education and health and social work sectors, alongside evidence of the high levels of these workers to be in professional or caring, leisure and other service occupations, as well as evidence that when we look across the whole labour force levels of insecure employment are relatively high within these occupations suggests that insecure employment in public services is polarised between high-skilled and low-skilled occupations.

A cursory glance at the occupations of insecure workers in the public sector?

And indeed, whilst we cannot report these results with statistical certainty a cursory glance at the numbers suggests this to be the case. Insecure workers in the education and health and social work sectors dominate in either professional or caring, leisure and

other service occupations. For example, in the education sector we see that just over 70% of temporary workers are in professional occupations. A further 17% are in caring, leisure and other service occupations.

In the health and social work sector we see that over 1 in 4 temporary workers are in caring, leisure and other service occupations. A further 1 in 4 are in administrative and secretarial occupations. In terms of health and social work sector workers who are self-employed we see that over 60% are in professional occupations, whilst a further fifth are in caring, leisure and other service occupations.

Conclusion

It is often predicated that public service workers have secure jobs and 'gold-plated' conditions. The evidence presented in this *Research InBrief* however calls to question this thesis, and demonstrates that not only is insecure working arrangements particularly prevalent in both the education and health and social work sectors. For considerable swaths of these workers their insecure working arrangements are coupled with low pay.

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