

Part 2

Monetary Policy, Fiscal Policy
and Labour Markets

Chapter

4

Insecure
employment:
Do we really
have a crisis?¹

Professor Mark Wooden



A claim pushed by the union movement and re-affirmed in a recent report by the Senate Select Committee on Job Security is that job insecurity in Australia has been rising steeply and has now reached crisis levels. This chapter examines data on an array of different indicators and can find very little evidence to support these propositions. Indeed, on many indicators, jobs in Australia have never been more secure. It is also argued that the introduction of measures designed to restrict and discourage non-standard forms of employment types may have unintended consequences and only serve to undermine employment prospects of some groups and reduce the job quality of others.

¹ This chapter uses data from a variety of sources, including Release 20 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (doi:10.26193/YP7MNU), which is conducted and managed by the Melbourne Institute on behalf of the Australian Government of Social Services. The findings and views reported here, however, are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Australian government, the Department of Social Services or the Melbourne Institute. The author also thanks Jeff Borland for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

INTRODUCTION

The labour movement has long been warning of the perils of insecure work. The claim is that many Australian workers are subject to unpredictable and fluctuating pay, irregular and unpredictable working hours, inferior rights and entitlements, lack of certainty over job continuity, and a general lack of control over their working situation. This, in turn, will feed into adverse consequences for the health and wellbeing of these workers and their families. Further, it is often claimed that the problem of insecure work in Australia has been worsening over time. Impetus to such claims was provided by the Senate Select Committee on Job Security (2022), with the Chair of that Committee referring to a 'steep rise in job security' and describing job insecurity in Australia as 'reaching a crisis point' (p. xiii).

This chapter will re-examine these claims. It will determine how insecure work has been defined and measured, and present data on a range of indicators that have been used in previous research as either direct measures of job insecurity or as indicators of the prevalence of insecure forms of work. It will demonstrate that almost all indicators reveal no signs of a trend rise in job insecurity over time, with some indicators suggesting the level of job insecurity in 2022 is at a low not seen since the early 1970s. The chapter then concludes with a brief assessment of policy options intended to curtail the incidence of insecure employment, and especially those the new Labor government took to the 2022 election.

WHAT IS MEANT BY JOB INSECURITY AND HOW IS IT MEASURED?

In the broadest sense, job insecurity is any form of uncertainty surrounding employment that reduces wellbeing. Most research, however, focuses on concerns and fears about employment continuity, and more specifically on the likelihood and consequences of involuntary job loss (Sverke et al., 2002b).

Given this focus on employment continuity, it follows that one type of indicator of trends in job security is the readily available labour force statistics that measure rates of employment, unemployment and labour underutilisation. If rates of employment are falling and rates of unemployment are rising it is to be expected that a growing proportion of workers would be concerned about employment continuity. Slightly differently, some researchers (for example, Neumark et al., 1999; Farber, 2010; Bachmann and Felder, 2018), including in Australia (for example, Wooden, 1998; Borland, 2001), have used changes in measures of job separation rates and the distribution in job tenure as a guide to underlying trends in job stability and, by implication, job security.

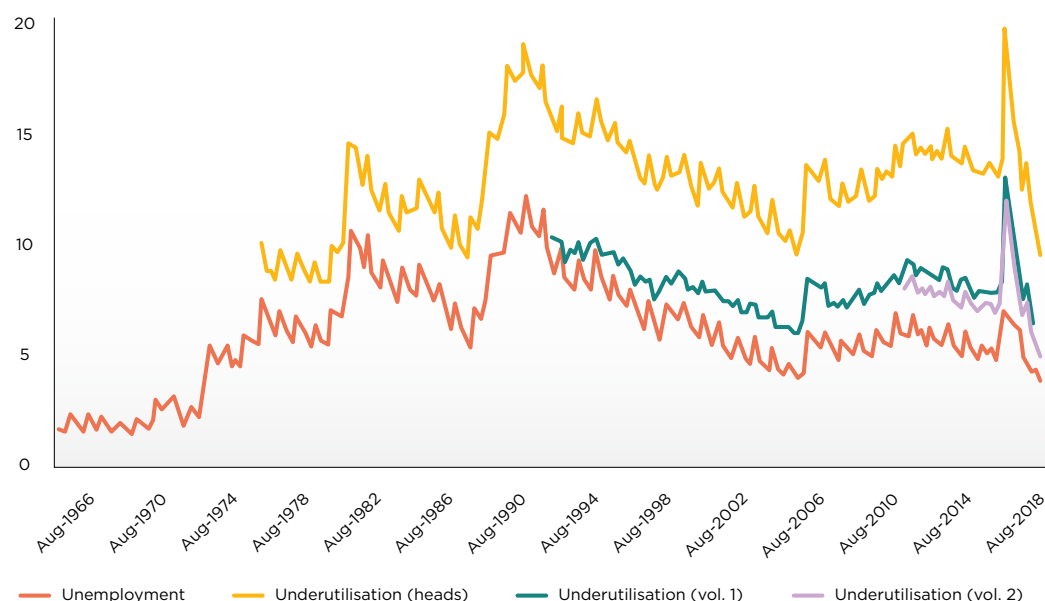
A very different approach involves the identification and measurement of various forms of so-called non-standard, and often temporary, forms of employment.² Given job insecurity is an inherent feature of many of these forms of employment, it follows that growth in their prevalence would imply a decline in overall job security, and arguably in job quality more generally (for example, Kalleberg, 2011, 2018; Standing, 2011). This theme that non-standard employment is synonymous with insecure, low-quality jobs permeates much of what is written in Australia on non-standard employment (for example, Campbell and Burgess, 2018; Carney and Stanford, 2018; Markey and Mclvor, 2018), and was at the centre of the Senate Select Committee on Job Security's (2022) report. In this literature, it is the nature of the employment contract that is of primary concern, with debate focused on what types of employment contracts should be described as insecure. At one extreme, insecure jobs are defined as all those that do not fall within the traditional definition of a 'standard' job, which, following Polivka and Nardone (1989, p. 10), is any job that does not involve full-time permanent wage and salary employment. This thus includes all forms of self-employment as well as all forms of part-time employment. Towards the other end of the spectrum, there is a long tradition, especially in Europe, of focusing attention on jobs that can be objectively described as temporary. Fixed-term contract employment is the most obvious example here.

Finally, there is a much larger literature, rooted mainly in the behavioural sciences, which begins from the premise that job security is inherently a subjective phenomenon. In this literature, objective employment status is just one among many influences on job insecurity, and possibly one that is not all that important. There is, for example, a long line of research in Europe which finds that, while the probability of job loss is much higher for workers on temporary employment contracts than for their more permanent counterparts, the psychological consequences of job insecurity for temporary workers are less severe (for example, Sverke et al., 2002a; De Witte and Näswall, 2003; De Cuyper and De Witte, 2005, 2007; Klandermans et al., 2010).

The most common measures of job insecurity employed in this type of research are concerned with the perceived threat of job loss and its consequences, with perhaps the main issue of debate being how to measure these constructs in surveys. There is widespread acceptance that job security/insecurity is a multi-faceted construct, implying the need for multiple indicators. A good example here is Hipp (2016), who distinguishes between three different dimensions of job security: (1) the perceived probability of job loss, or 'cognitive job security'; (2) the perceived availability of alternative job opportunities, or 'labour market security'; and (3) the absence of anxiety related to potential job loss, or 'affective job security'. It is also usually agreed that multiple-item measures will be superior to single-item measures. The latter, however, possess one practical advantage: they are much easier and less costly to administer. As a result, they tend to be more common.

² For an overview of the incidence of, and trends in, nonstandard employment around the world, see ILO (2016).

Figure 1.
Unemployment and labour underutilisation trends, Australia, 1966–2022 (quarterly).



Notes: Measures I and II of volume-based underutilisation are derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Labour Accounts respectively. The LFS figures relate to a specific reference week in the mid-quarter month, while the estimates from the Labour Accounts cover the entire quarter.

Sources: ABS, Labour Force Australia (6202.0), Table 1: Labour force status by sex, Australia—Trend, seasonally adjusted and original. ABS, Labour Force Australia (6202.0), Table 2: Underutilised persons by age and sex, Australia—Trend, seasonally adjusted and original. ABS, Labour Force Historical Timeseries, Australia—Labour force status by sex and marital status (6204055001TS0001), Table 4: Labour force status of the civilian population aged 15 years and over—1966–1977. ABS, Labour Force, Australia, Detailed (6291.0.55.001), Table 23a: Volume measures of underutilisation by state, territory and sex. ABS, Labour Account Australia (6150.0.55.003), Table 1: Total all industries—Trend, seasonally adjusted and original.

AGGREGATE LABOUR MARKET STATISTICS

Unemployment and underemployment

The first challenge to the notion that job insecurity has reached crisis levels in Australia lies in the official labour force statistics produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). As shown in Figure 1, the official unemployment rate (the orange line) in early 2022—3.8 percent in May (but 3.9 percent after seasonal adjustment)—was as low as it has ever been in almost half a century; the last time it was lower than 3.8 percent was 1974.³ Furthermore, the trend towards higher unemployment that was evident during the two decades commencing 1973 has been completely reversed over the last three decades.

An often-cited weakness of the standard dichotomy between employment and non-employment that underpins the construction of the unemployment rate is that a person only has to work one hour during the survey reference week to be counted as employed. It is thus now common to augment the unemployed with the number of underemployed persons (mostly persons working part-time who prefer to work more hours) to arrive at a total rate of labour underutilisation. The yellow line in Figure 1 depicts trends in this series. The levels are, by definition, higher and are still at rates higher than in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, there is no obvious upward trend over the period since 1980. The underutilisation rate rose dramatically in the recessions of the early 1980s and early 1990s and again during the COVID-19-pandemic-induced recession of 2020. The surge in the second quarter of 2020 was especially spectacular, but just as spectacular was the rapid decline that followed. The rate of labour underutilisation on this measure was, in mid-2022, about as low as it has ever been at any point in the last three decades.

A count of the number of underemployed persons, however, suffers from a similar weakness as counts of the number of employed and unemployed persons: to be counted as underemployed, a worker only has to express a preference for one additional hour of work each week. A superior measure of labour underutilisation that deals with this weakness is derived from the difference between the number of preferred hours per week and the actual number of hours worked per week by both the unemployed and the underemployed.⁴ Such volume-based indicators are also produced by the ABS, both in the Labour Force Survey (since 2014) and in its Labour Accounts (since mid-1994). The rate of underutilisation using these volume-based measures is shown by the turquoise and mauve lines in Figure 1. Again, there was a marked spike in the May 2020 survey. Nevertheless, the underlying trends in these series are not upwards, and in recent years are clearly downwards. Furthermore, the gap between the official unemployment rate and volume-based measures of labour underutilisation is relatively small (just over one percentage point in May 2022).

³ And in the figures for July 2022, it fell even further, reaching just 3.4 percent.

⁴ The volume-based underutilisation rate is the sum of the total number hours of labour sought by unemployed persons and the total number of additional hours of labour preferred by underemployed workers divided by the total number of potential hours in the labour force, where potential hours is comprised of the number of hours sought by the unemployed, the number of additional hours sought by the underemployed, and the number of hours usually worked by all employed persons. For more detail see ABS (2022).

Involuntary job separation rates

Another relevant indicator, and one that is more closely related to the threat of job loss faced by workers, is the rate of involuntary job separations. Such data are collected by the ABS in its Participation, Job Search and Mobility Survey, a supplement to the monthly Labour Force Survey that is now conducted annually.⁵ Trends in the rates of job losers and retrenchments are reported in Figure 2. A job loser is anyone who involuntarily ceased their last job in the previous 12 months, and includes retrenchments, redundancies, dismissals, and losing a job due to ill health or injury.

Both of these measures were in steady decline throughout most of the 1990s and 2000s. The rate of involuntary job separation reached a low of 5.9 percent prior to the GFC of 2008/09. After rising for a few years, it then resumed its downward path. This was briefly interrupted by the 2020 pandemic, but in the latest figures (for the 12 months ended February 2022) was standing at 3.9 percent, the lowest since 1981. The rate of retrenchment (that is dismissals because of economic reasons) has followed a similar but lower trajectory, and in the latest data was the lowest on record (just 1.5 percent).

In short, the likelihood of an Australian worker being involuntarily removed from their job was, at the start of 2022, both very low and less than it has been at any other time during the past 40 years.

Non-standard and insecure forms of employment

Even though rates of involuntary job loss have been declining, the proportion of workers employed in jobs that provide little or no guarantee of employment continuity might still be rising. Such claims have long been advanced by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (for example, ACTU, 2011) and are central to the Senate Select Committee on Job Security's (2022) report (the Senate Report). The main evidence provided by the Senate Committee in support of this view is ABS data on the proportion of employees in full-time permanent jobs (where permanency is proxied by the presence of paid leave entitlements). Between the early 1990s and the 2020 pandemic this proportion fell more or less continuously—from just over 70 percent in 1992 to just under 60 percent by 2018 (Senate Select Committee on Job Security, 2022, Figure 2.1, p. 18).

There are, however, at least two reasons why this use of ABS data is misleading. First, despite the Senate Committee placing much emphasis on the insecurity associated with self-employment, and especially independent contractors and gig workers, the self-employed are excluded from this particular set of numbers. This is significant given, as shown in Figure 3, the share of workers who are self-employed has been in long-term decline.

Second, the argument presented in the Senate Report rests heavily on the idea that permanent part-time jobs are inherently more insecure than permanent full-time jobs. As detailed in the secondary source relied upon by the Senate Committee (Gilfillan, 2021), the proportion of employees in permanent part-time jobs almost doubled between 1992 and 2021. The Senate Report seems to adopt the argument proposed by the Centre for Future Work that much permanent part-time work involves fluctuating and unpredictable hours, though seemingly without any real supportive evidence. Possible supporting evidence comes from the ABS Characteristics of Employment (CoE) Survey, yet another supplement to the ABS monthly population survey. In particular, responses to a question about whether income varies from one pay period to the next (reported in Table 1) shows around 22 to 23 percent of permanent part-time workers reporting that earnings vary, which compares with only 13 to 14 percent of permanent full-time job holders.⁶ However, the presence of this difference between full-time and part-time job holders should not be surprising. Variable earnings may be a consequence of paid overtime or extra hours being worked on an occasional basis, and both the scope and desire for additional hours is greater among part-time job holders. On the latter point, the CoE Survey data suggest that in the years preceding the pandemic (that is, 2018 and 2019) around 18 percent of permanent part-time job holders preferred more hours.⁷

A different depiction of the changing distribution of jobs by employment type from that presented in the Senate Report, but based on the same data sources, is provided in Figure 3. This figure separately identifies and enumerates both owner-managers (that is, the self-employed) and permanent part-time workers.

The proportion of jobs that are both full-time and permanent (again as proxied by the presence of paid leave entitlements, and represented by the orange bars in Figure 3) has indeed declined, though that decline came to an end in the early 2000s. Permanent full-time jobs accounted for just over 50 percent of all jobs in 2002, hovering around the 50 to 51 percent range ever since—in August 2021 it stood at 51.2 percent. The proportion of all jobs that are permanent (that is, including both full-time and part-time permanent job holders), however, is obviously higher, and more importantly, higher in 2021 than in 1992. In part, the recent high share may reflect both the loss of casual jobs during the pandemic and the low levels of temporary immigration. Nevertheless, prior to the pandemic the proportion of permanent jobs (63 percent in 2019) was little different from that in the early 1990s.

Fixed-term contracts

One problem with inferring the number of permanent employees from the number of employees in receipt of paid leave entitlements is that the latter includes many workers employed on a fixed-term contract basis, and by definition a fixed-term contract implies temporary, and thus presumably more insecure, employment. Questions identifying workers on fixed-term contracts are included in the CoE Survey and, as shown in Table 2, these data indicate that fixed-term contract workers represented 3.1 percent of all employed persons in August 2021. Furthermore, this proportion has been relatively stable over time. Some of this group, however, report not receiving paid leave entitlements and thus would be classified as 'casual'. Table 2 thus also shows the proportion of employed persons who report both having paid leave entitlements and being on a fixed-term contract. Removing this group from those workers reporting having paid leave entitlements provides us with the best estimate of the proportion of workers in secure, ongoing wage and salary employment—about 62 percent of all employed persons in 2021 (that is, the 51.2 percent in full-time employment with leave entitlements plus the 13.1 percent in part-time employment with leave entitlements minus the 2.4 percent in fixed-term contract jobs with leave entitlements). And again, rather than declining over time, this level is higher than two decades earlier—57.5 percent in 2001.

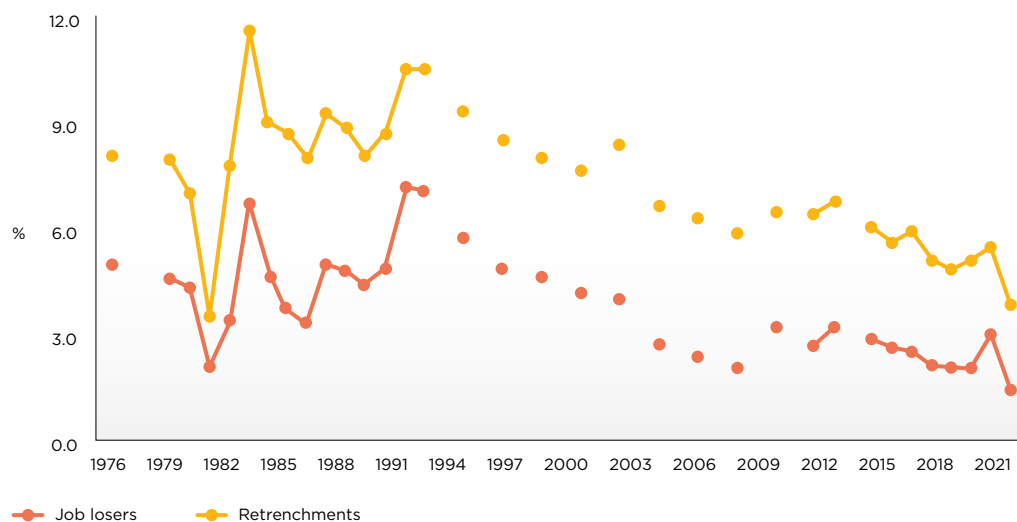
⁵ For earlier periods, collection was on an every-other-year basis.

⁶ Such a question was regularly included in the earlier Forms of Employment survey, but unfortunately the data needed to produce comparable proportions for earlier years are not reported on the ABS website.

⁷ Consistent with the trends on underutilisation reported earlier, this rate was noticeably higher in 2001 (21%) and noticeably lower in the most recent figure for 2021 (14%).

Figure 2.

Involuntary job separation rates, Australia, 1976–2022 (year ended February).



Note: All figures are calculated as a percentage of persons employed at time of survey.

Sources: ABS, Participation, Job Search and Mobility, Australia (6226.0), Table 1: Labour mobility, retrenchments and duration of employment. ABS, Participation, Job Search and Mobility, Australia, 2018 (6226.0), Table 17: Labour mobility: Time series, 1972 to 2018.

Table 1.

Employees reporting income varied from one period to the next (%).

Year (August)	With leave entitlements		Without leave entitlements	
	Full-time in main job	Part-time in main job	Full-time in main job	Part-time in main job
2014	14.2	23.1	45.8	55.4
2016	13.5	22.2	49.2	54.8
2018	12.8	21.5	44.3	54.5
2020	13.0	23.5	45.8	58.9

Source: ABS, Characteristics of Employment Survey (data extracted via Table Builder).

Table 2.

The prevalence of fixed-term contract workers (% of all employed persons).

	1998	2001	2006	2011	2016	2020	2021
All employees	3.2	3.2	3.7	3.4	3.2	3.3	3.1
Employees with paid leave entitlements	2.2	2.1	2.8	2.6	2.6	2.7	2.4

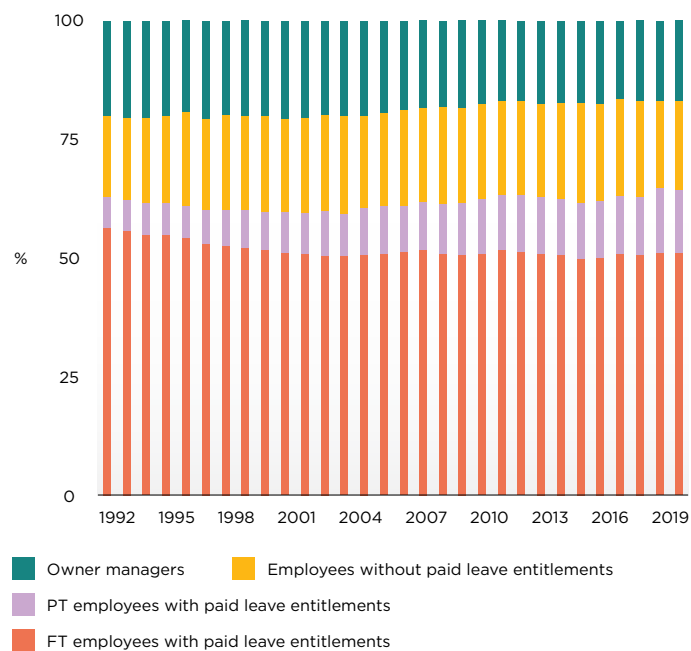
Sources: ABS, Forms of Employment Survey (6359.0) and ABS, Characteristics of Employment Survey (data extracted via Table Builder).

But what about the casualisation of the workforce?

The trends depicted in Figure 3 provide very little support for the widely espoused view that the Australian workforce has become increasingly casualised over time. According to the figures that underly Figure 3, the proportion of employed persons who are employees without paid leave entitlements, and thus can reasonably be assumed to be casual employees (represented by the yellow bars in Figure 3), has changed very little over the last two decades. Workers in such jobs represented 20 percent of all employed workers in 1998 and it was still 20 percent in 2018. As explained in Laß and Wooden (2020), there has been a marked rise in the casual employment share in Australia, but that rise occurred long ago, and especially during the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. If high rates of casual employment are symptomatic of a job insecurity crisis, then that crisis has been with us for a very long time.

It is also worth noting that movements over time in the casual employment share are not necessarily a good indicator of underlying changes in job insecurity. Most obviously, the casual employment share experienced a very large drop in the second quarter of 2020, but this does not imply a decline in job insecurity. Instead, this fall was a direct function of the recession that resulted from government responses to the pandemic, which in turn caused many businesses to temporarily cease or curtail operations (and which also excluded many casual employees from the protections offered by the JobKeeper program). This sharp drop was thus a reflection of an economic environment in which job insecurity was rising. Thankfully, the pandemic-induced recession was relatively short-lived and thus casual employment levels quickly recovered. Nevertheless, by May 2022 the casual employment share was still well below its pre-pandemic level. Whether this signals some structural shift towards a lower level of casual employment, however, is debatable. More likely it is a consequence of the impact of international border restrictions on the level of temporary migration.

Figure 3. Distribution of employment by type of employment, Australia, 1992–2021.



Note: Estimates are for the month of August each year, except over the period 2008 to 2013 where they are for November.

Sources: ABS, Australian Labour Market Statistics, July 2014 (6105.0), Table 1: Employment type: Employed persons by sex, full-time/part-time and age, August 1992–August 2007 and November 2008–November 2013. ABS, Labour Force, Australia, Detailed (6291.0.55.001), Table 13: Employed persons by status in employment of main job and hours actually worked in all jobs.

⁹ Similarly, the idea that many contractors may not be truly independent of the organisations using their services is also not new. The Australian Tax Office, for example, has a long history of challenging the legal status of contractors in the courts. There is also research dating back to the early 1990s that seeks to enumerate how many self-employed contractors are truly independent and how many are in a dependent relationship with the organisations to whom they are providing services (Vandenhoevel and Wooden, 1995).

¹⁰ The larger sample sizes in later years are a function of a refreshment sample added in Wave 11 (2011).

¹¹ This estimate rises to 0.8% when calculated as a percentage of employed persons aged 15 to 69 years.

Self-employment, contractors and gig workers

As noted earlier, another important trend depicted in Figure 3 is a slow and gradual decline in the proportion of workers who are self-employed—from just over 20 percent in 1992 to less than 17 percent in more recent years. This trend is particularly striking given the concern expressed by many regarding the growth in gig work and its potential to erode the working conditions of employees. So how do we reconcile this apparent contradiction between perception and evidence?

First, in the most recent discussion, gig work is equated with work obtained via digital platforms—new forms of work where workers and customers are connected directly via apps and other forms of digital technology, but where the provider of the digital platform can potentially exert significant control over working arrangements. But this is only a small subset of what might be described as gig work. The concept of independent workers being engaged to undertake work on a task-by-task basis has long underpinned the work of many self-employed, also termed ‘independent’, contractors.⁹ It may thus be that growth in digital platform work is just substituting for other forms of contracting. This certainly seems likely in the case of ridesharing services, which compete with the taxi industry where drivers (regardless of ownership) have historically always been deemed to be self-employed.

Second, most credible estimates still suggest digital platform workers represents a tiny fraction of the workforce. Until recently, the best survey evidence for Australia came from a study undertaken as part of the Victorian government’s Inquiry into the Victorian On-Demand Workforce. The results from this survey appear to

suggest quite high levels; 7.1 percent of respondents reported working through a digital platform at some time during the preceding 12 months (McDonald et al., 2019). However, this same survey revealed that when undertaking digital platform work, most devoted only a few hours a week to it; it was a full-time activity for just 2.6 percent of this group.

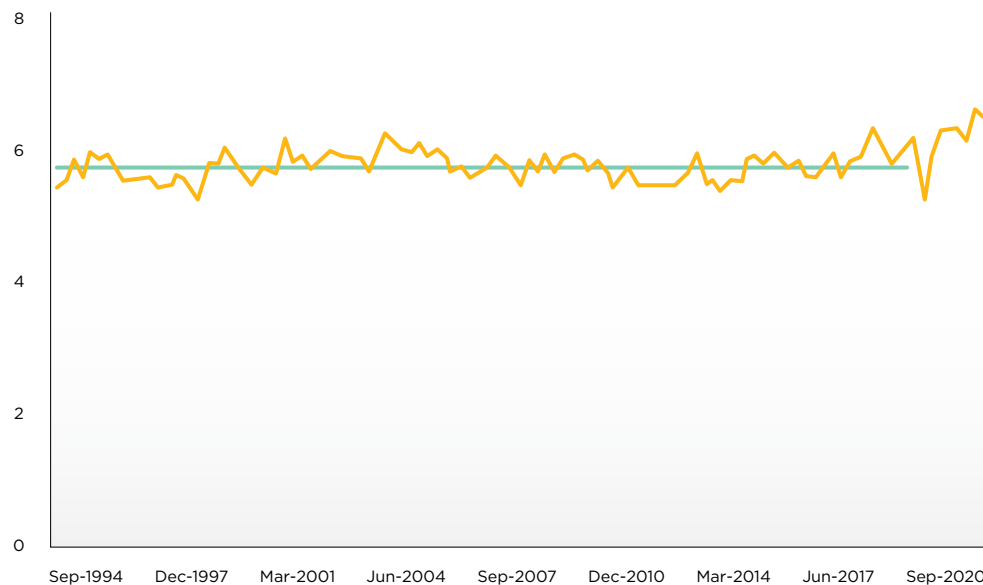
A weakness of this survey is that responses are very unlikely to be random. For a start, there was no obvious sampling frame—respondents were recruited online and quotas were used to ensure the sample replicated population characteristics with respect to age, gender and state. Further, a survey about digital platforms is more likely to attract responses from persons interested in digital platform work and thus we can expect the incidence of such work to be over-estimated. One study that is not beset by these problems is the longitudinal HILDA Survey. Data are collected via both interviewer- and self-administered methods from adult members of a randomly selected population of households in 2001 on an annual basis. Other adults who are co-residing with original sample members are added to the sample each year. Responding sample sizes vary from around 12,400 (in Wave 4) to almost 17,700 (in Wave 16).¹⁰ In 2020 it included, for the first time, a question identifying the undertaking of digital platform work over a four-week period. According to this source, just 0.6 percent of the adult population is estimated to undertake any form of digital platform work.¹¹ This estimate is, however, likely to be on the low side, possibly because it was conducted during a period when one Australian state was in lockdown, and almost certainly because recent immigrants are under-represented in the HILDA Survey.

Multiple job holders

The Senate Select Committee on Job Security (2002) also claims that multiple job-holding is an indicator of job insecurity, and points to evidence which the Committee suggests shows its incidence has been rising. But the evidence it cites and reports on, which comes from the ABS Labour Accounts, does not provide any support for the notion that the incidence of multiple job holding has been trending upwards. According to this source, prior to the pandemic the proportion of jobs that are ‘secondary’ varied between 5.2 percent and 6.1 percent with, as shown in Figure 4, little obvious sign of any long-run upward trend (a line of best fit results in a slope coefficient that is almost zero).

There has, however, been a rise in the incidence of secondary jobs during the post-pandemic recovery, reaching 6.5 percent by the end of 2021. It is this which the Senate Committee (and a number of submissions to their Inquiry) leap on as evidence of a rise in job insecurity. But it is very unlikely that this recent and modest rise in multiple job-holding has anything to do with more workers feeling more insecure in their jobs. Rather it reflects almost the exact opposite: it is a function of a very tight labour market where job vacancies are at a record high and where employers are struggling to recruit sufficient labour. Indeed, for some part-time job holders, work in a second job has helped them come closer to achieving their desired work hours (as reflected in the marked decline in underemployment noted earlier).

Figure 4. Secondary jobs as a proportion of all jobs, Australia, 1994:Q3–2022:Q1.



Source: ABS, Labour Account Australia (6150.0.55.003), Table 1: Total all industries—Trend, seasonally adjusted and original.

¹² A notable exception here is Borland (2001), who uses cross-section survey data on a measure of satisfaction with job security for Australia collected as part of the International Social Science Survey program over the period 1984 to 1996. He reports evidence of a marked decline in this measure during the period 1990 to 1993 when Australia was in the midst of a severe recession, but finds no evidence of a significant downward long-term trend.

¹³ The question format was slightly different in Wave 1 in that there was no use of optional text. This is denoted by the use of parentheses, which signals to the interviewer that it need not be read out if they think it unnecessary.

SUBJECTIVE JOB INSECURITY

Even if there has not been a marked change in the distribution of jobs by contract type, the proportion of workers, including those in permanent jobs, who feel more insecure in their jobs may have been rising.

Data and measurement

While there is a very large literature on subjective job insecurity and its consequences (for reviews, see Sverke et al., 2002b; De Witte, 2005; Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 2010; Jiang and Lavaysse, 2018), there is relatively little evidence on longer-run trends. This seems to be entirely due to a paucity of data. In Australia, however, the commencement of the HILDA Survey (Watson and Wooden, 2021) has gone a long way to filling this gap.¹²

Designed with a focus on work, family and income, the HILDA Survey provides multiple subjective indicators of job insecurity. First, and following Manski and Straub (2000), in every wave a probabilistic assessment of the likelihood of losing a job is included. Only posed to employees, the relevant question is: What do you think is the percent chance that you will lose your job during the next 12 months? (That is, get retrenched or fired or not have your contract renewed.)¹³

Respondents are required to give an answer between zero and 100. This provides a measure of what Hipp (2016) describes as cognitive job security/insecurity.

Second, and also based on the work of Manski and Straub (2000), this is immediately followed by a question about the likelihood of re-employment: If you were to lose your job during the next 12 months, what is the percent chance that the job you eventually find and accept would be at least as good as your current job, in terms of wages and benefits? This provides a measure of labour market security/insecurity.

Third, are measures of affective job security/insecurity. Unlike the previous two measures, which are administered by an interviewer, these are included in a separate self-administered questionnaire, and are part of a longer list of items about job characteristics. They are expected to be answered by anyone currently in paid employment, including both employees and owner-managers (the self-employed). For this analysis, however, owner-managers have been excluded.

There are three job security items, which are worded as follows:

1. I have a secure future in my job.
2. The company I work for will still be in business five years from now.
3. I worry about the future of my job.

Respondents choose a number on a seven-point Likert scale where the end-points are labelled 'strongly disagree' and 'strongly agree'.

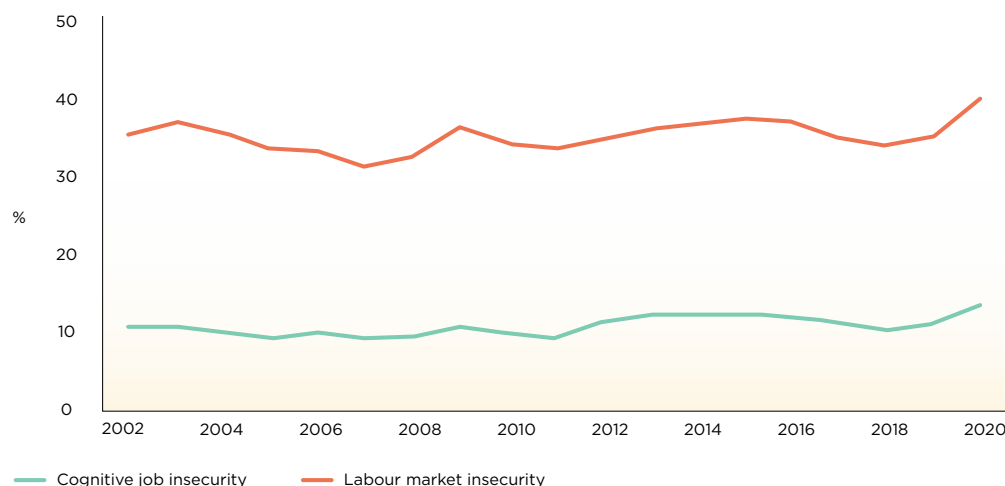
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¹⁴ Almost all interviews in 2020 were conducted by telephone rather than face-to-face, which was the norm in previous years.

¹⁵ For a more sophisticated treatment of these data, see Ribar and Wooden (2020).

Figure 5.
Trends in cognitive job insecurity and labour market insecurity—Employees.



Note: All estimates are weighted to account for survey design and non-random non-response and sample attrition.
Source: Unit record data from the HILDA Survey, release 20.

Trends

Figure 5 reports the mean values of our indicators of both cognitive job insecurity and labour market insecurity. Given the difference in the wording of the probability of job loss question in Wave 1, we commence the series in 2002. Furthermore, the labour market insecurity variable has been constructed as 100 minus the percentage probability of re-employment. This ensures that rises in both measures indicate a rise in insecurity.

As shown, the mean probability of job loss (cognitive job insecurity) varies between 9 percent and 12 percent for most of this period, before rising to 13.4 percent in 2020 during the first year of the pandemic (with most interviews conducted during the middle of the Victorian lockdown).¹⁴ The measure of labour market insecurity exhibits slightly more volatility, falling during the early 2000s before rising in 2009 in the wake of the GFC. It fell again in the late 2010s, though had not reached the pre-GFC low, before jumping up noticeably in 2020.

The mean level of labour market insecurity is also much higher than the level of cognitive job insecurity, signalling the potential importance of the cost of job loss as a key influence on job security.

Overall, it is difficult to identify any marked long-run trends here. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, levels of labour market insecurity were little different (and indeed slightly lower) than the levels recorded at the start of the century. Cognitive job insecurity on the other hand was higher, but the difference was relatively small (less than half a percentage point higher compared with the levels in 2002). In general, both series, but especially cognitive job insecurity, exhibit remarkable stability, and the variation that does exist seems to reflect variations in the state of the wider labour market.

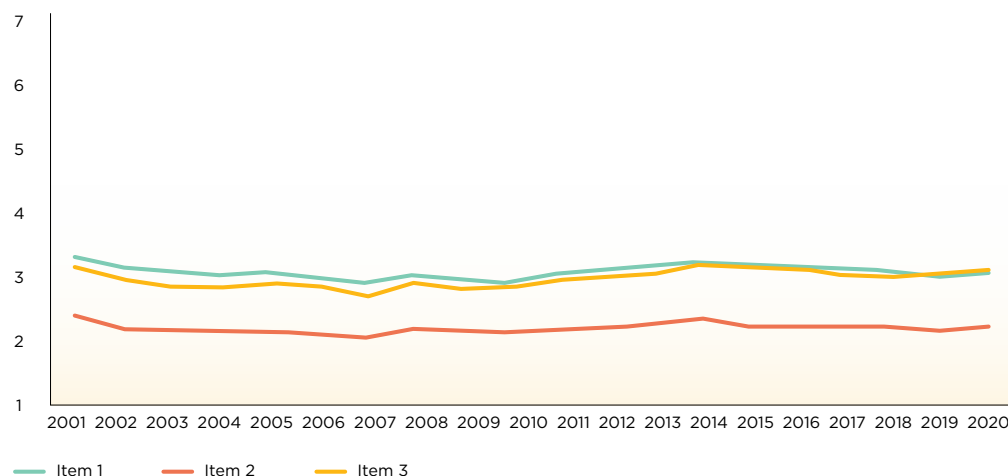
Turning now to affective job insecurity, Figure 6 reports mean values on each of our three questions. Responses to the two positively worded items have been

reversed, again ensuring that upward movement in all three signal a rise in insecurity (and conversely downward movements indicate declining insecurity).

Again, it is difficult to discern any noticeable long-term trend. There is a slight procyclical tendency, but the main feature of these data is how stable over time the mean scores on each indicator are.¹⁵ Interestingly, there is not the same marked rise in 2020 in these affective measures that there was for the cognitive measure.

These findings are also entirely consistent with recent evidence reported for Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States (Manning and Mazzeine, forthcoming). They too could find no supporting evidence in subjective data for the narrative that jobs today are more insecure than in the past.

Figure 6.
Trends in affective job insecurity—Employees.



Notes: All estimates are weighted to account for survey design and non-random non-response and sample attrition.

Item 1: I have a secure future in my job (reflected).

Item 2: The company I work for will still be in business five years from now (reflected).

Item 3: I worry about the future of my job.

Source: Unit record data from the HILDA Survey, release 20.

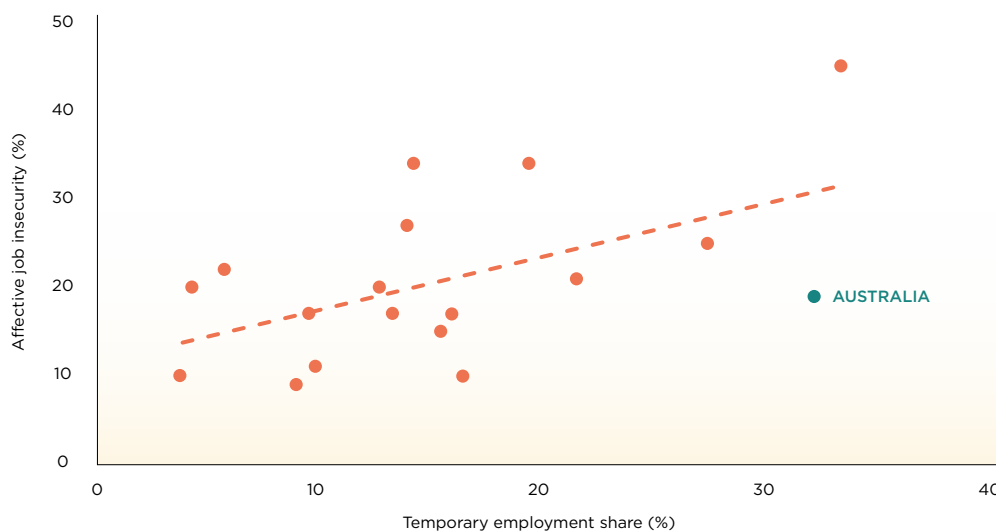
AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

A point often made is that Australia's levels of casual employment are very high when compared with other rich nations. This is true. Indeed, in many Western European countries, casual forms of employment are highly constrained, if not illegal.¹⁶ Despite this, the limited cross-national evidence that is available does not suggest that subjective levels of job insecurity are especially high in Australia.

Hipp (2016), for example, reports on the levels of subjective job security in a large number of OECD countries using data collected during the 2005 round of the International Social Survey Program. On each of these measures, Australia scored above (that is, better than) the multi-country average despite its high levels of fixed-term contract and casual employment. When we cross-tabulate these data with ILO data on the temporary employment share we find the expected positive cross-country correlation between subjective job insecurity and the temporary employment share. This can be seen in Figure 7 where the proportion of employees classified as not having high levels of affective job security is charted in a scatterplot alongside the temporary employment share.¹⁷ Note, however, that differences in the way temporary employment is measured and defined mean international comparisons can be misleading. Further, institutional contexts also vary widely: the low rate of temporary employment in the United States, for example, reflects a system where dismissal is relatively unregulated and thus the need for distinctions between permanent and temporary are far less necessary. In addition, the strength of this cross-country relationship can be greatly reduced by the omission or inclusion of particular countries (notably Spain, which is included in Figure 7, and Bulgaria, which is not).¹⁸

These concerns notwithstanding, Figure 7 suggests that in some countries, but especially in Australia, the relationship between levels of casual and temporary forms of employment on the one hand and subjective measures of job insecurity on the other, is weak. Despite Australia's relatively high level of casual employment, Australian employees on average have not (at least not in 2005) reported feeling noticeably more insecure in their jobs than employees in many other countries where rates of temporary employment are much lower.

Figure 7. Affective job insecurity vs % of employees in temporary jobs, 2005—Cross-national comparisons (selected OECD countries).



Notes: Affective insecurity is the weighted percentage of employees classified as not having high levels of insecurity, as constructed by Hipp (2016) and based on answers to a question about whether respondents 'worried about the possibility of losing [their] job'.

Temporary % is the number of temporary employees as a percentage of all employees, where temporary employees are workers engaged only for a specific period of time or on project- or task-based contracts, as well as seasonal or casual work, including day labour. There are, however, marked differences across countries in how this definition is interpreted and applied.

Sources: Affective job insecurity: Hipp (2016) based on data from the 2005 wave of the International Social Survey Program. Temporary %: ILOSTAT Explorer (accessible from <https://ilostat.ilo.org>).

¹⁶ For a summary of the different frameworks for regulating employment that exist in EU nations, but with a focus on 'on-demand' work, see Biletta and Cerf (2018).

¹⁷ This positive cross-country relationship is slightly weaker with Hipp's other two measures of subjective job insecurity.

¹⁸ Hipp (2016) provides data for 23 countries. The ILO, however, does not provide any data on temporary employment in New Zealand. Furthermore, to reduce clutter, the four Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia) were omitted.

POLICY OPTIONS

As I hope I have demonstrated, the weight of evidence provides no support for the narrative that levels of job insecurity in Australia have been rising in recent decades. Despite this, the Australian Labor Party went to the recent federal election with a policy platform—its Secure Australian Jobs Plan¹⁹—which is designed to provide Australian workers with more secure jobs.

Key elements of this policy include:

- extending the powers of the Fair Work Commission to cover ‘employee-like’ forms of work;
- amending legislation to provide for an objective test to determine when a worker can be classified as casual that better aligns with traditional common law definitions;
- ensuring that workers employed through labour hire or other employment arrangements such as outsourcing will not receive less pay than workers employed directly; and
- limiting the use of fixed-term contracts.

These proposals are all targeted at reducing the incidence of various forms of non-standard employment, but whether they will have any substantive effect on job security is far less obvious.

Space limitations prevent a detailed examination of these proposals, but a few observations follow.

Regulating gig work

The central issue here is how to determine whether a worker is an employee of a digital platform provider or a self-employed contractor who is simply accessing the functionality provided by that digital platform. This difficulty distinguishing between self-employed contractors and employees is a long-standing issue and one that to date has never been adequately resolved; disputes about this are typically settled on a case-by-case basis in the courts. The Fair Work Commission will thus face a similar dilemma and would likely also have to deal with these matters on a case-by-case basis. Obtaining consistent and fair outcomes across industry sectors, however, will likely prove elusive. For example, if ridesharing services operators are deemed employers

why would that not also apply to the tax industry more broadly given most (if not all) taxi companies have adopted the same type of app-based digital technology for connecting customers with drivers? Needless to say, taxi companies will argue that they provide a different type of service where drivers are less constrained, but from the customer perspective at least, these differences seem very small. More broadly, there is the risk that any new legislation will not just cover those working for the new digital platform providers who, as noted earlier, currently represent a tiny fraction of the Australian workforce, but extend to cover many other independent contractors.

A better definition of casual employment

In 2021, amendments were made to the *Fair Work Act* that, for the first time, provided a definition of casual employment in industrial law. Under this definition, a worker is defined as a casual employee if they accept a job offer with the understanding that ‘the employer makes no advance commitment to continuing and indefinite work according to an agreed pattern of work’. The current government’s position, however, is that this does not prevent the ongoing employment of casuals on a regular basis.

What alternative definition is to be proposed is not yet known, but any alternative faces the obstacle that the High Court (in *Workpac vs Rossato*) has made clear that, in their view, the existing definition aligns well with the common law definition.

Note further that the Act, as amended in 2021, already requires employers to offer to convert a casual employee to permanent status if they have been employed for at least 12 months and during the preceding six months had worked a regular pattern of hours. It is thus unclear how simply changing the definition will accomplish much. A change that might have more effect would be to strengthen the conversion provisions; for example, by shortening the qualifying period of employment and/or by further restricting or eliminating the grounds under which employers can seek exemption. That said, it is not obvious that the introduction of casual conversion provisions in either awards or the Act has had much effect yet on the level of casual employment.²⁰ Further, it is entirely possible that the only consequence of these provisions has been to reduce worker wellbeing; for example, by leading employers, in an effort to avoid these conversion requirements, to roster casual employees in ways that provide more variable and less predictable working hours that are less well aligned with worker preferences.

Same job, same pay

This initiative is targeted at the use of outsourced labour, and especially those hired through labour-hire companies. A concern here is that labour hire is too often used to undercut wages and conditions negotiated through enterprise bargaining.

While the principle of ‘same job, same pay’ might seem straightforward, implementing it in practice is likely to prove difficult. In many situations, simply identifying what the relevant job is that is being compared to, and then the relevant pay rate, is not straightforward. This might be relatively easy for jobs involving few skills or very routinised skills, but where the skills requirements are more complex, jobs are rarely the same.

And then there is the question of what is meant by pay. Is it just the base wage rate or does access to overtime and penalty rates need to be factored in? And what about non-wage benefits?

There is also the complication that employees of the same labour-hire firm could be working for multiple clients. Matching the rate of pay of a labour-hire worker to that of a comparable employee of the client firm will thus inevitably mean that comparable employees within the labour-hire firm will be earning different rates of pay.

The Labor Party policy also refers to this principle being applied not just to employees of labour-hire firms, but to other outsourced employment arrangements. This implies that it could be applied to self-employed contractors, but how will this work when they are not employees and thus face completely different tax arrangements from a PAYE employee? Requiring they be paid the same gross earnings as an in-house employee could, for example, result in the contractor earning much more after tax given their greater ability to claim expenses as business deductions. On the other hand, there are many additional costs (both financial and time-related) associated with managing a business. And would they extend such arrangements to labour located in other countries where living standards are so different?

Finally, and most significantly, this plan could undermine the ability of Australian employers to compete for skilled labour. While the stated objective is to ensure labour-hire workers are not paid less than other workers, it could also operate to ensure they are not paid more and thus undermine the ability of labour-hire firms to compete with unionised labour through offering higher wages. Indeed, taken to its logical extension, the notion of ‘same job, same pay’ would preclude workers with different levels of experience and skills, but working in the same job, being paid at different rates. More generally, this idea is at odds with the principle that individual workers should have the freedom to bargain their own wages and conditions.

¹⁹ <https://www.alp.org.au/policies/secure-australian-jobs-plan>

²⁰ It could be argued that the slightly lower rate of casual employment in 2022 when compared with the pre-pandemic level might be the result of conversions. However, it is difficult to disentangle any such effect from other changes, such as the decline in immigrant inflows, and especially of international students and other forms of temporary migrants, that resulted from the pandemic-induced border closures.

Caps on fixed-term contracts

Unlike other proposals, what is proposed here is very clear—to both limit the number of consecutive fixed-term contracts an employer can offer for the same role, and to place an overall cap on fixed-term contract employment of 24 months. Such restrictions are presumably intended to cause a substitution away from fixed-term contract employment to permanent employment. The danger, however, is that such measures, while achieving their objective of reducing the level of fixed-term contract employment, will be accompanied by either a substitution towards other forms of non-standard employment (for example, self-employed contractors) or a reduction in overall employment.

Similar measures have been introduced in some European countries, with one recent study conducted in The Netherlands finding that limiting fixed-term contracts to a cumulative maximum of two years resulted in higher rates of progression to permanent employment without any increase in unemployment levels (Kabatek et al., 2022). In contrast, a study of a reform in Spain that worked in the opposite direction, that is, restrictions on the use of fixed-term employment were lifted, found that the expected substitution away from permanent to temporary employment was accompanied by a sizeable increase in total employment (Aguirregabiria and Alonso-Borrego, 2014). Slightly differently, Cahuc et al. (2022) examine the impact of reforms introduced in Portugal that made it harder for larger firms launching new establishments to staff them with employees on fixed-term contracts. They find that the reforms had the unintended effect of reducing the number of new establishments and contributed to a decline in overall employment. The evidence is thus mixed with results perhaps specific to the institutional setting. This makes drawing lessons for Australia difficult, but they do suggest that serious consideration must be given to the possibility of unintended consequences.

Paid sick leave for casual employees

One proposal that is not part of the federal government's plan, but is being trialled in Victoria, is providing casual employees with access to sick leave entitlements.²¹ Under this scheme casual employees in specific occupations (where casual employment is widespread) are entitled to up to 38 hours of paid leave if sick or to care for someone each year. During the trial phase this is being funded by the Victorian government, but the intent is that in the future it be funded by an industry levy. Perversely, this type of scheme only serves to make casual employment more attractive and thus should work to increase casual employee numbers. Casual employees obtain an extra benefit without any offsetting reduction in pay (bearing in mind they are required to be paid a 25 percent pay premium), while employers have no incentive to reduce their use of casuals given the cost of the paid leave is either borne by taxpayers (in the first instance) or shared by all employers through an industry levy.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on an examination of a broad range of indicators, there is no evidence that there has been any trend rise in average levels of job insecurity in Australia over the last two decades. Similar conclusions have been drawn with respect to other advanced countries (Gallie, 2017; Manning and Mazeine forthcoming). Indeed, on some indicators—notably unemployment/underemployment and job separation rates—levels of job insecurity in Australia during the first half of 2022 were at record lows. That said, many Australians work in jobs that provide little or no guarantee of ongoing employment. Indeed, according to ILO data, among developed nations only one country—Japan—had levels of temporary and casual employment in 2019 that exceeded that in Australia. Nevertheless, these high levels have been with us for a very long time. Further, it is not obvious that the high level of casual employment in Australia has contributed to average levels of subjective job insecurity that are higher than that experienced in many other countries.

Despite this evidence, it is clear that many governments in Australia, but especially the new federal Labor government, are opposed to many non-traditional forms of employment, and thus are considering the introduction of measures that it is hoped will reduce the incidence of such forms of employment. However, there is the distinct risk that the introduction of measures designed to restrict and discourage such employment types may have unintended consequences and only serve to undermine employment prospects of some groups and reduce the job quality of others.

Finally, it needs to be recognised, as others have emphasised, that 'job insecurity is linked to job loss or unemployment' (LaMontagne et al., 2022). Job insecurity is, therefore, best enhanced by measures that either reduce overall levels of unemployment (and underemployment) or reduce the cost of unemployment. The latter is often overlooked but is of particular importance in Australia given one of the many features that sets Australia apart from most other rich nations is the high cost of unemployment. Our reliance on a very modest flat-rate unemployment benefit means that out-of-work income replacement rates are, with the exception of the long-term unemployed, comparatively low.²² Yet despite the concern with job insecurity, the current government has exhibited very little interest in raising unemployment benefit levels (let alone introducing some form of unemployment insurance system where out-of-work income would be more closely tied to previous earnings).²³

²¹ Since August 2020, the federal government has provided workers without paid leave entitlements access to lump sum payments of up to \$750 to help compensate for the loss of income caused by having to self-isolate or quarantine as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, or to care for someone who has COVID-19. This scheme, however, ceased on 30 September 2022.

²² Data available from OECD.stat, for example, show that in Australia in 2020, for the case of an average earner with two children and no working spouse, the net income replacement after two months in unemployment was 56 percent of previous earnings. This level was the equal fourth lowest in the OECD, with the only countries with a lower rate being the United States (43 percent), Greece (51 percent) and Hungary (54 percent).

²³ JobSeeker payments are automatically adjusted in March and September each year in line with Consumer Price Index movements over the preceding six months. However, in April 2021 the base rate of the JobSeeker payment was lifted by \$50 per fortnight, the first non-indexed increase since 1998.

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