

Job insecurity and its association with health among employees in the Taiwanese general population

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Abstract

As employers respond to intensive global competition through the deregulation of labor, job insecurity has become a widespread problem. It has been shown to have significant health impacts in a growing number of workers, but less is known about its social distribution, the mechanisms through which it may act, and the moderating effects of gender, socioeconomic position, and company size. Utilizing data from a national survey of a representative sample of paid employees in Taiwan, we examined the prevalence of job insecurity and its associations with psychosocial work characteristics and health status. A total of 8705 men and 5986 women aged between 25 and 65 years old were studied. Information on perceived job insecurity, industrial and occupational types, psychosocial work characteristics as assessed by the Job Strain model, and various measures of health status were obtained by a self-administered questionnaire. The overall prevalence of job insecurity was high (50%). Job insecurity was more prevalent among employees with lower education attainment, in blue-collar and construction workers, those employed in smaller companies, and in older women. Insecure employees also reported lower job control, higher job demands, and poor workplace social support, as compared with those who held secure positions. Regression analyses showed that job insecurity was strongly associated with poor health, even with adjustment of age, job control, job demands, and workplace social support. The deleterious effects of job insecurity appeared to be stronger in men than women, in women who held managerial or professional jobs than women in other employment grades, and in those working in larger companies than smaller ones. The findings of this study suggest that perceived job insecurity is an important source of stress, and it is accompanied with adverse psychosocial work conditions and poor health. High-risk groups were identified for further investigation.

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Introduction

It has been well documented that unemployment is strongly associated with increased mortality, morbidity,

and reduced quality of life (Hamilton, Rroman, Hoffman, & Renner, 1990; Morris, Cook, & Shaper, 1994; Bartley, Ferrie, & Montgomery, 1999). In today's economy when flexibility in the job market has been proposed as a prerequisite for economic efficiency and also as a solution for rising unemployment, the division between unemployment and various forms of marginal employment is becoming blurred, however. Especially in

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countries that have less regulated labor markets, jobs characterized by flexible and temporary work contracts, on piece-work basis, with lower benefit, poor work conditions and reduced job security might become even more prevalent. Some studies have suggested that prolonged exposure to job insecurity and threat of job loss might be even more harmful than the experience of unemployment itself (Arnetz et al., 1991; Heaney, Israel, & House, 1994; Aronsson, 1999).

We synthesized existing literature and proposed a causal model linking job insecurity to health, as illustrated in Fig. 1 (Fenwick & Tausig, 1994; McDonough, 2000). The deleterious effects of insecure employment may result from anxiety of potential job loss, as well as high levels of exposure to various types of work hazards, including heavier workloads, loss of job control, and decreased workplace social support (Benach, Amable, Muntaner, & Benavides, 2002; Benach, Benavides, Platt, Diez-Roux, & Muntaner, 2000; Benach, Muntaner, Benavides, Amable, & Jodar, 2002). There has been growing interest in recent years in studying the impacts of insecure employment on health. Most initial evidences originated from longitudinal studies of workplace closures or downsizing (Jenkins, MacDonald, Murray, & Strathdee, 1982; Joelson & Wahlquist, 1987; Mattiasson, Lindgarde, Nilsson, & Theorell, 1990; Arnetz et al., 1991; Ferrie, Shipley, Marmot, Stansfeld, & Davey Smith, 1995; Ferrie, Shipley, Marmot, Stansfeld, & Smith, 1998a, b; Ferrie, Shipley, Stansfeld, & Marmot, 2002). These studies were consistent in showing that the experience of job insecurity before actual job changes increased the risks of mental and physical illnesses. In addition, insecure jobs are also more likely to accompany with inadequate work conditions. It has been shown that organizational restructuring and downsizing resulted in worsening work conditions, including loss of autonomy and self-control, higher work demands with reduced manpower, closer supervision by management, decreased workplace social support, and wage cuts (Kivimaki, Vahtera, Pentti, & Ferrie, 2000; Kivimaki, Vahtera, Ferrie, Hemingway, & Pentti, 2001; Denton, Zeytinoglu, Davies, & Lian, 2002). In several recent cross-sectional surveys, persons who perceived high level of job

insecurity were found to have poor health (Domenighetti, D'Avanzo, & Bisig, 2000; McDonough, 2000), decreased safety motivation, and higher levels of workplace injuries and accidents (Probst, 2000, 2002; Probst & Brubaker, 2001).

Despite these important findings, some research questions remain to be solved. To our knowledge, there have been few studies attempting to evaluate both the direct psychological impacts of job insecurity and its indirect effects through accompanying structural inequalities in psychosocial work conditions. In addition, most studies up to date have focused on experiences in specific occupations or work organizations; little research have examined the social distribution of job insecurity in a wide spectrum of general working populations and in both genders. Furthermore, while the meaning of job insecurity and available social resources to cope with it may differ across socio-economic strata and between genders, to what extent the health-related impacts of job insecurity may be modified according to these variables has not been systematically evaluated.

Data from a large-scale national survey conducted in 2001 in a representative sample of Taiwanese employees allows us to address these issues. Especially, from an international aspect, findings from Taiwan may contribute in enriching job insecurity literature, because up until now studies concerning the health impacts of job insecurity have come almost exclusively from European countries and the United States. There have been few studies from less developed countries, and it is even rare to find studies conducted in Chinese populations.

Known as one of the Asia's "four little tigers", Taiwan experienced rapid industrialization and significant economic growth since the 1950s. During the period from the 1950s to the mid-1990s, Taiwan attained an average annual growth in the gross national product (GNP) of 8.6% and kept unemployment rates well below 2%. Since the mid-1990s, however, Taiwan's economy began to decline as consequences of intensified global competition. In 2001, the annual economic growth rate even dropped to a historical low of -2.2%, and the unemployment rate soared up to 4.7%. The main reason for unemployment had shifted

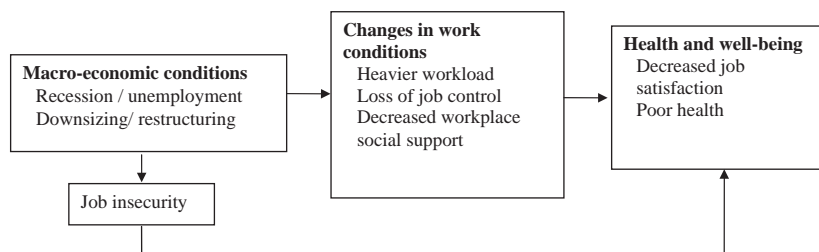


Fig. 1. Pathways linking job insecurity to Health.

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