

Ability to work from home and paid sick leave benefits by precarious employment and socioeconomic status

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Key findings

- More than one-third (34.7%) of all workers in Canadian provinces in 2016 reported that their job cannot be done from home, ranging from 30.6% to 42.1% across provinces (see Figure 1):
 - » Those who cannot work from home are most likely to be in retail, healthcare, accommodation/food services and manufacturing industries.
- More than half (58.0%) of all workers reported no employer-paid sick leave benefits, ranging from 50.7% to 61.4% across provinces (see Figure 1).
- Almost 10% of workers reported no employer-paid benefits, including sick leave benefits, ranging from 5.7% to 10.9% across provinces (see Figure 1).
- Almost 1 in 5 workers (19.2%) reported precarious (non-regular) employment.
- Workers who cannot work from home were more likely to be in the lowest income group and in precarious employment types:
 - » Over one third (38.0%) of workers who cannot work from home were in the lowest income group (see Figure 2a);
 - » Almost half (48.0%) of workers in the lowest income group reported that their job cannot be done from home (see Figure 2b).
- Workers who reported no paid sick leave benefits were more likely to be in the lowest income group and in precarious employment:
 - » Almost three-quarters of workers in the lowest income group reported no paid sick leave benefits (74.3%) (see Figure 2d);
 - » Workers in seasonal (81.2%), casual/on-call (76.1%) and contract (67.2%) employment were more likely to report no paid sick leave benefits than workers in regular employment (55.7%) (see Figure 3d).



Background

The public health response to COVID-19 in Canada, and around the world, has included a population-level shift to working from home in an effort to limit physical contact and slow the spread of infection. However, working from home is not feasible for everyone. This includes non-essential services where workers now face under- or unemployment, as well as essential services where workers face risks of exposure to infection directly in the workplace or indirectly in the community (e.g. while commuting to and from work).

Social benefits provided by workplaces, as well as emergency benefits provided by provincial and federal governments, are intended to help workers financially when faced with changes in their employment status. Further, employer-paid benefits, such as sick leave, are an integral part of the public health response by supporting essential workers to stay at home if they are ill or experiencing symptoms, thereby reducing the risk of workplace and community transmission of COVID-19.

The purpose of this project was to conduct an analysis of existing Statistics Canada survey data to estimate the number of workers who cannot work from home, and the number of workers without employer paid sick leave benefits. The purpose was also to investigate if the distribution of these workers varied by employment type and by socioeconomic status to highlight workers in vulnerable circumstances during a global pandemic.

Approach

The survey

This project used Statistics Canada's General Social Survey Cycle 30 with a focus on *Canadians at Work and Home*. The GSS collects data on social issues and living conditions among Canadians generally, and Cycle 30 on the relationships between work, home and health specifically. The cross-sectional survey provides a snapshot representative of the Canadian population aged 15 years and older residing in the 10 provinces. A single member of each sampled household is randomly selected to complete the questionnaire. The GSS Cycle 30 collected data on Canadians at work and home in 2016.

The survey sample

The GSS Cycle 30 included a total of 19,609 respondents, representing over 30 million Canadians. Of these respondents, 10,483 reported employment during the past 12 months (representing over 18 million Canadians, excluding self-employed). Of those who worked in the past year, 8,820 reported that they were currently employed (representing over 15 million workers, excluding self-employed workers).

Working from home

Respondents who reported working as a paid employee in the past 12 months were asked if they usually work any of their scheduled hours at home. The response of interest was that the job cannot be done from home (excludes self-employed workers).

Access to employer-paid benefits

Respondents who reported working currently as a paid employee (excluding self-employed) were asked if they had access to any one of eight benefits as part of their employment. The responses of interest were no to paid sick leave and no to all eight paid benefits including paid sick leave.

Individual income

Income information was obtained through a linkage to tax data for respondents who consented to this linkage. Income information was obtained for 90.6% of the respondents. Missing information for all other respondents was imputed by Statistics Canada.

Employment type

Respondents who reporting working during the past 12 months were asked to describe the terms of employment for their job as *Regular* (no contractual or anticipated termination date), *Seasonal* (intermittent according to the seasons), *Term* (has a termination date) or *Casual/On-call* (unpredictable schedule/hours of work).

Analysis

The percentages of workers who reported that they cannot work from home, did not have access to paid sick leave, and did not have any benefits were calculated by province of residence. The percentages of workers who reported that they cannot work from home, did not have access to paid sick leave, and did not have any benefits were calculated by employment type and individual income level. Percentages were weighted using Statistics Canada survey weights to generate estimates representative of the workforce aged 15 years and older in the 10 provinces.

What we found

Please see Figures 1, 2 and 3.

What do the results mean?

Workers in vulnerable circumstances, defined as those in the lowest individual income category and those working in non-regular or precarious employment, are more likely to be in jobs that cannot be done from home and more likely to have no employer paid sick leave benefits. As a result, workers in vulnerable

Figure 1 | Percent of Canadian workers who report they cannot work from home, have no paid sick leave, or have no benefits, by province and overall, General Social Survey Cycle 30 (2016)

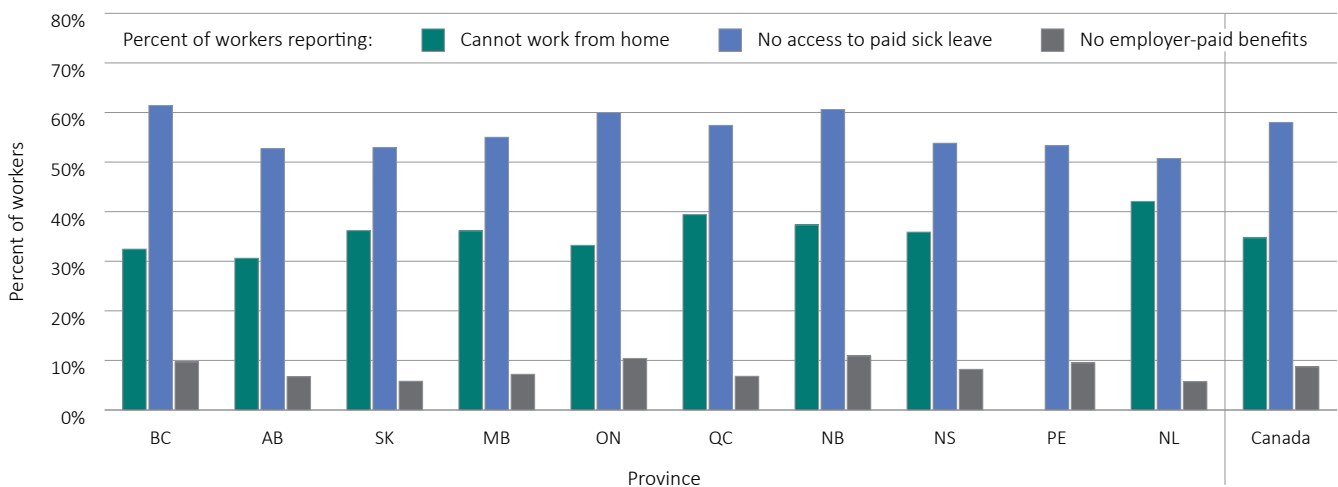


Figure 2 | Percent of Canadian workers who report they cannot work from home, have no paid sick leave, or have no benefits, **by income group**, General Social Survey Cycle 30 (2016)

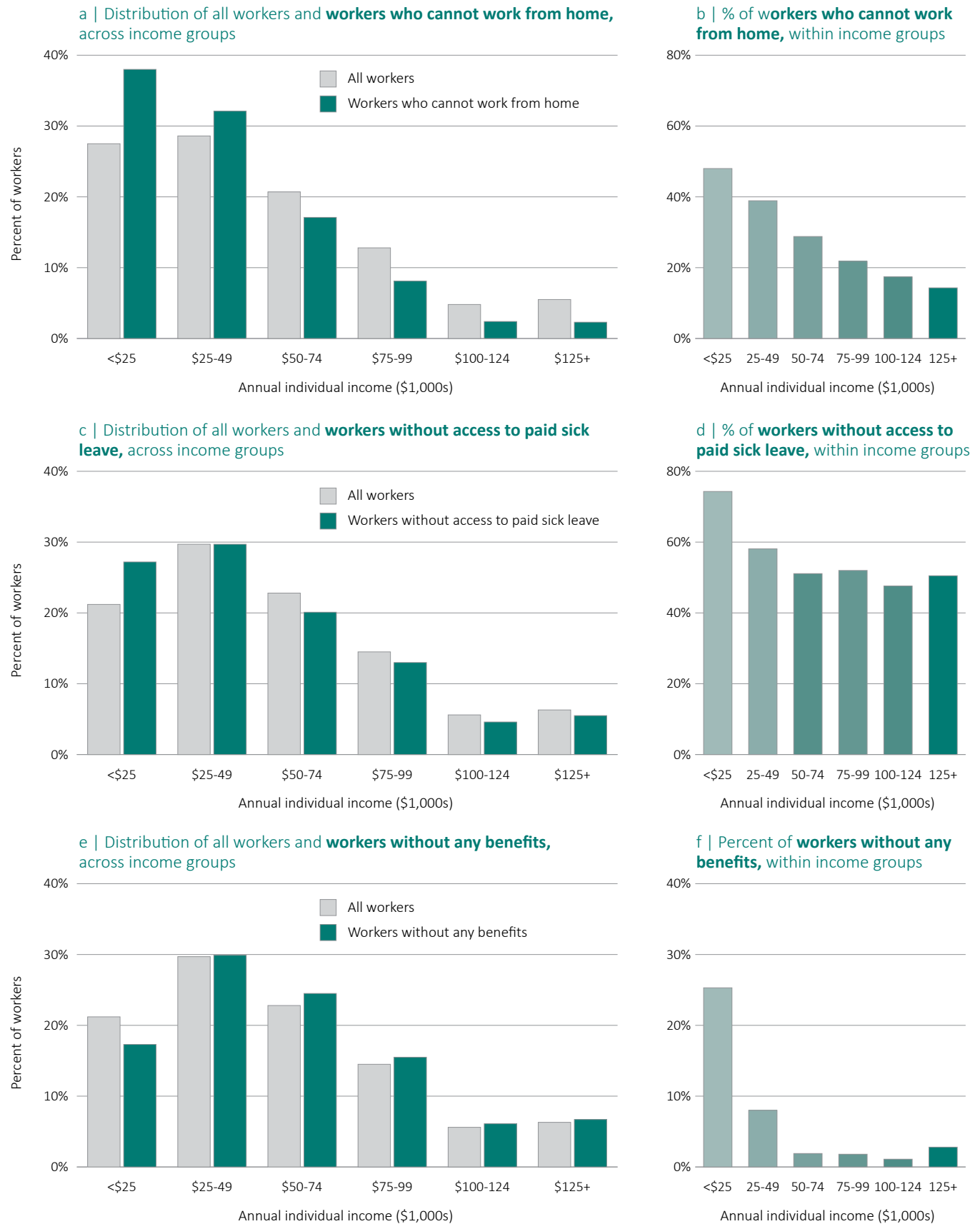
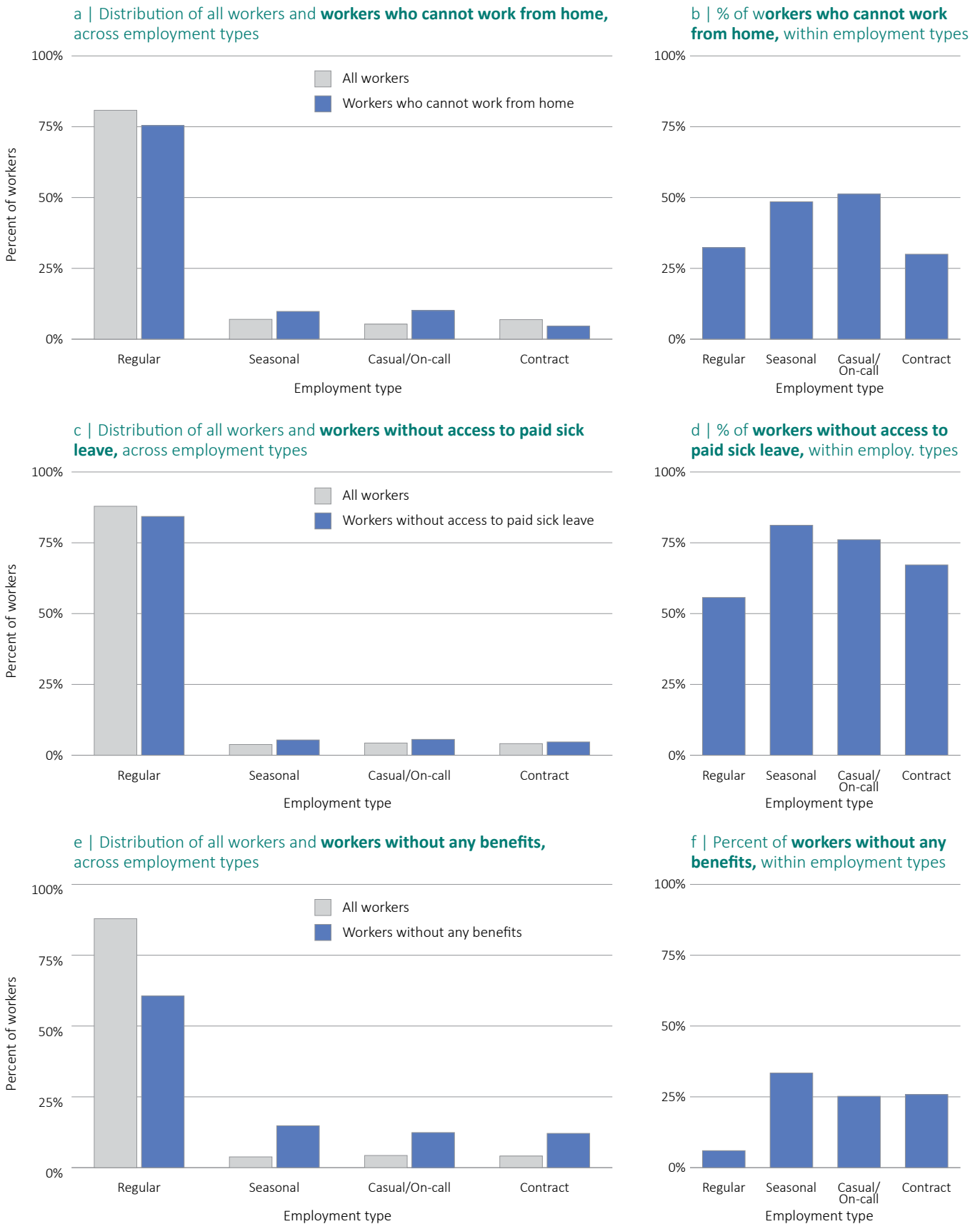


Figure 3 | Percent of Canadian workers who report they cannot work from home, have no paid sick leave, or have no benefits, **by employment type**, General Social Survey Cycle 30 (2016)



circumstances are more likely to be negatively impacted by public health measures during a global pandemic resulting in higher unemployment and increased risks of exposure. Emergency benefits have been implemented at the provincial and federal level to alleviate the impact of increased unemployment rates and sick leave benefits. However, workers with low income and precarious employment face challenging decisions about staying at home when ill or symptomatic because of a lack of paid sick leave benefits on an ongoing basis beyond the emergency pandemic benefits. The COVID-19 global pandemic has magnified inequities related to employment standards for workers in vulnerable circumstances that warrant change beyond emergency and temporary benefits.

More information

Please contact Sonja Senthana, Partnership for Work, Health and Safety Post-doctoral Fellow, at sonja.senthana@ubc.ca with questions about the methods of this study or Mieke Koehoorn, Partnership for Work, Health and Safety Co-Director, at mieke.koehoorn@ubc.ca with questions about the results or interpretation. General enquiries should be directed to Suhail Marino, Partnership for Work, Health and Safety Director of Privacy and Operations, at suhail.marino@ubc.ca.

About us

The Partnership for Work, Health and Safety (PWHS), between WorkSafeBC and the University of BC, is an innovative research unit that combines rigorous work and health research with effective knowledge translation.

PWHS brings together policy-makers, researchers and data resources from national and international organizations to address current and emerging issues of work-related health in Canada. Our research is aimed at improving understanding of the causes and consequences of injuries and illness, identifying high-risk industries and occupations, and investigating the effectiveness of interventions that improve worker health, prevent occupational illness and injury, and reduce work-related disability.

Our collaboration, based on best practices of knowledge transfer, enables researchers and decision-makers to work together to identify relevant questions, understand data, and produce useful information to effectively inform policy and practice.