

# Temporary Employment, Low Paid Work and Job Security amongst Young Irish Workers


Evidence from the UCD Working  
in Ireland Survey

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The authors thank Professor John Geary and Dr Maria Belizon for granting them access to the UCD Working in Ireland Survey data file upon which the current paper's analysis is based. They further thank John and Maria for their help and guidance in the preparation of the paper.

A woman with a headband is pouring coffee from a metal pitcher into another metal pitcher. She is wearing a dark apron over a light-colored shirt. The background is blurred, showing other people in a cafe setting. The entire image has a green color overlay.

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Temporary work is most common amongst  
young workers aged 16 to 24



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This is the third in a series of reports detailing preliminary findings from the *UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021*. This report looks specifically at issues surrounding the precariousness of young workers, including temporary employment, job security and low paid work.

## Headline Findings

### Temporary Work

- Temporary work is most common amongst young workers aged 16 to 24—a group including students working their way through college and teenagers working summer jobs. A third of this group are employed on a temporary contract.
- However, temporary work remains relatively high for those aged 25-34, a group that includes recent graduates, where 1 in 10 works on a temporary basis.

### Labour Market Security

- Levels of various forms of labour market insecurity are highest amongst young workers. We find that one in five young workers are simultaneously worried about losing their job, a reduction in pay and their ability to secure a new job.
  - Young workers are significantly less secure than their older counterparts about maintaining their current income level – almost half of the young workers aged 16 to 34 were worried about a reduction in pay.
  - Additionally, young workers are less confident than their older counterparts about their ability to secure a new job – again, almost half of young workers are worried about their ability to find a new job.
- Labour market security is unevenly distributed amongst young workers—though a third report feeling secure in terms of their job, income and employment prospects, another fifth of all young workers report feeling insecure in all of these areas. These insecure young workers are at significant labour market disadvantage to their secure contemporaries.

## Earnings

- Eurostat and OECD data show Ireland to have one of the highest rates of low pay in the EU and certainly in a high-income EU country context. Our findings are in line with the international evidence. Amongst young workers, where more than 3 in 10 employees aged 16 to 34 earn less than 20k per annum.
- In recent years Ireland has seen an increase in young people gaining tertiary level qualifications exceeding the EU average by 13%. Human Capital theory would expect this development to put upward pressure on pay and conditions for better qualified young workers. However, the evidence is mixed, suggesting a varied experience for young workers with third level qualifications, even those in full-time employment: just 18% of this group earn over €40k per annum; in addition, a significant portion or 17%, earn less than 20k per annum. This compares to 21% of full-time workers in this age group as a whole.

## The Context: Precarious Employment in the EU

**A**cross Europe, there is a growing concern with the expansion of precarious employment, particularly among young people (Eurofound, 2018). The increasing numbers experiencing precariousness have been linked to the longer-term labour market impacts of the global financial crisis and the ongoing decline in union density (Geary & Belizón, 2021). Additionally, much research shows that precariousness has far-reaching implications for young workers, including adverse outcomes in health, housing, and delay in family formation (Pembroke 2019).

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Temporary employment can be a stepping stone for young workers, allowing them the flexibility to explore their options; however, it is also associated with greater insecurity and significant labour market disadvantage. This is particularly the case when temporary employment is combined with other characteristics of precariousness such as low pay, low job security and a weak regulatory environment. However, it has been challenging to identify the drivers of precariousness from a policy perspective across Europe.

The European Commission has identified three drivers of precariousness, including economic change, institutional factors, and technological developments. First, economically, in the wake of the global financial crisis, employers and employees found themselves operating in a more competitive, less certain environment. As a result, new hirings increasingly took place on a temporary basis, and workers accepted these terms of employment, as to do otherwise would mean continued unemployment (Eurofound, 2018). The European Commission highlights several important institutional factors that exert influence on the levels and forms of precariousness - including a statutory national minimum wage, the effectiveness of active labour market policies, the redistributive element of the tax and social security system and the existence of collective bargaining systems. Finally, the European Commission points out the crucial role of labour market regulation - labour markets that afford higher levels of protection to workers against dismissal and discrimination and grant access to social and collective rights lower the risk of precariousness.



## Ireland in the EU

The following section briefly considers Ireland's position in the broader EU pattern of rising precariousness. There is considerable evidence that precariousness has been a growing issue for young Irish workers. For example, Nugent, Pembroke & Taft (2019) highlight the impact of the financial crisis and provide evidence for a rising share of atypical employment in new employment. Their research finds that in 2017 almost 2 in 5 (or 39%) workers aged 15-30 were in some kind of atypical employment. Additionally, the Labour Force Survey 2020 found that one-third of workers on fixed-term contracts indicated their reason for being in temporary jobs was they could not find a permanent position. Similarly, Pembroke (2019) found precariousness a growing issue, particularly (though not exclusively) for young workers.

However, it remains uncertain whether the decline in employment security should be understood as a response to the uncertainty of the crisis period or represents a long-term structural shift in the Irish labour market.

Other factors associated with precariousness, particularly the high incidence of low paid work and weak employment protections, have been issues of concern for young Irish workers (Pembroke 2019).

In a European context, Ireland is an outlier in terms of earnings inequality, market income inequality and has one of the highest shares levels of low paid work in the EU. Additionally, Ireland has comparatively weak employment protections and industrial relations in a European context.

Our consideration of the evidence derived from the *Working in Ireland Survey 2021* occurs at a crucial juncture. As Ireland transitions to a post-Covid labour market, prior research (Eurofound, 2018) suggests employers may default to temporary hiring practices in response to the uncertain economic climate. In addition, the OECD does not expect labour markets

in advanced economies to recover fully until 2024. Eurostat also points to the potential for a surge in involuntary flexible working arrangements, which will disproportionately affect young people and encourages member states to be vigilant in ensuring that legislative protections are enforced across the bloc. Given the possibility of loose labour markets in which a large pool of young workers competes for the same jobs and the potential for these developments to negatively impact the quality and security of employment, we present our initial findings from the *Working in Ireland survey 2021*.

## Concepts and Measurement

Labour market precariousness is characterised by several crucial indicators, including low pay, job insecurity, and limited social and employment rights protection. Following others who have investigated precariousness (Broughton et al., 2016; Eurofound, 2015) across Europe, we recognise the multi-faceted and complex dynamics of labour market precarity and acknowledge that due to the complexity of the phenomenon, it can not be captured by any single measure. For this reason, we provide our initial findings on several crucial indicators associated with precariousness, including objective and subjective metrics for the quality and security of youth employment. Objective measures include the incidence and distribution of temporary jobs and low paid work. We also include initial findings on subjective measures of young workers' security within the labour market across three dimensions; job, income, and future employment prospects. We provide subjective measures of security which were designed to capture the quality of work/ decent work.

There is no standard definition of precarious work. However, it is associated with several common characteristics such as uncertainty, low income and limited social benefits. The ambiguity in defining precarious work often leads to comparison with the Standard Employment Relation to identify the existence of precarity. The SER is defined as:

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- A stable, socially protected, dependent, full-time job, the basic conditions (working time, pay, social transfers) are regulated to a minimum level by collective agreement or by labour and/or social security law.

In Ireland, several forms of contractual relations are particularly susceptible to precariousness – part-time, zero-hour/ if-and when, temporary, and casual work. These contractual relations increasingly typify occupations where we find many young workers, such as sales and customer services and elementary occupations. For example, job security is typically defined as the perceived threat of job loss and discontinuity (De Witte et al., 2016). From a global perspective, the increased prevalence of non-standard employment, including temporary contracts, has lowered employment stability and overall social protection (Pembroke, 2019; Kalleberg, 2018). Moreover, much research shows a negative association between perceived job insecurity and the health and well-being of workers, their ability to function effectively on the job, and their occupational outcomes ([Berkman et al., 2014](#); [De Witte et al., 2016](#); [Sverke et al., 2002](#)).

The current report focuses specifically on temporary employment, low-paid work and job security with a focus on conditions for younger workers. We define young workers as those aged 16 to 34 years of age. While the standard ILO definition of young workers is those aged 16 to 24, our interest in educational attainment requires us to include recent graduates, who are typically older than 24 years, in the analysis. Where possible, we analyse the two age groups (16 – 24 years and 25 – 34 years) separately; however, limits in the sample size mean this is not always possible.

We define low paid work as below €20,000 (net) per annum. Due to the impact of the global financial crisis, the minimum wage remained unchanged in Ireland between 2007 and 2015. However, with the establishment of the Low Pay Commission in 2016, the minimum wage was reactivated as a policy tool, albeit many would argue a blunt one. A person aged 20 or



more earning the 2021 minimum wage of €10.20 per hour, working full time (39 hours per week) before deductions of income tax, USC and PRSI can expect to earn €20,685 per annum. This is equivalent to €1723 per month or €397.80 a week. Total deductions in a year amount to €1671, made up of €837 income tax, PRSI €600 and USC €234. Take-home pay after deductions is then €19,014 per annum, €1584 a month or €366 a week. Our measures roughly correlate to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) minimum wage measure - €20,685 per annum gross, which amounts to €19,014 net. The Living Wage in 2020, at €12.30 an hour, a 39 hour week over 52 weeks comes out at €24,944 gross and €21,832 net pre annum.

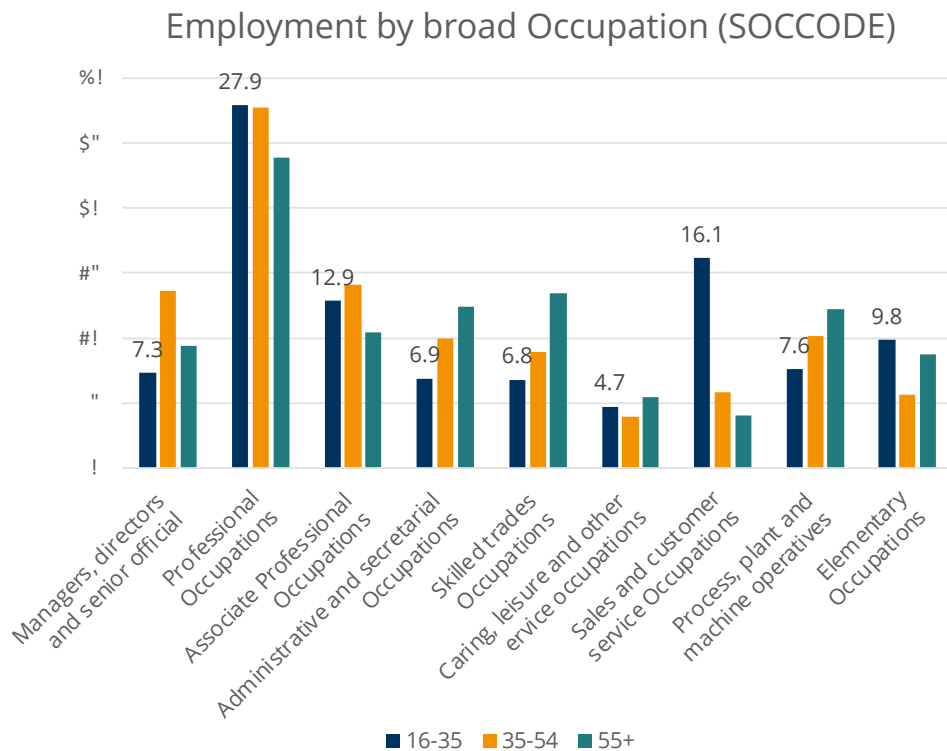
## Findings

### Occupations

**I**n terms of young people's position within the occupational structure of Irish employment, several findings from the *Working in Ireland Survey 2021* stand out.

Almost half (48%) of all employment for young people aged 16 to 34 are in 1) Management, 2) the Professions and 3) Associate professional occupations, with 27.9% in the Professions, the largest occupational group in Ireland. A career in any of these occupations typically requires a tertiary level qualification reflecting the increased participation of young people in third-level education. Similarly, a recent report from the OECD (2021) on trends in educational attainment amongst young workers ranks Ireland fourth overall, placing it 13% above the European average.

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The second-highest share of employment amongst young workers aged 16 to 35 (16%) is sales and customer service. However, most striking about the figures on employment in sales and customer service is the decline in the next age group (35-54), where the share drops to just below 6% of total employment. The significant difference in the share of employment between the two age groups suggests that sales and customer service is a transitory occupation and does not offer many opportunities for advancement.

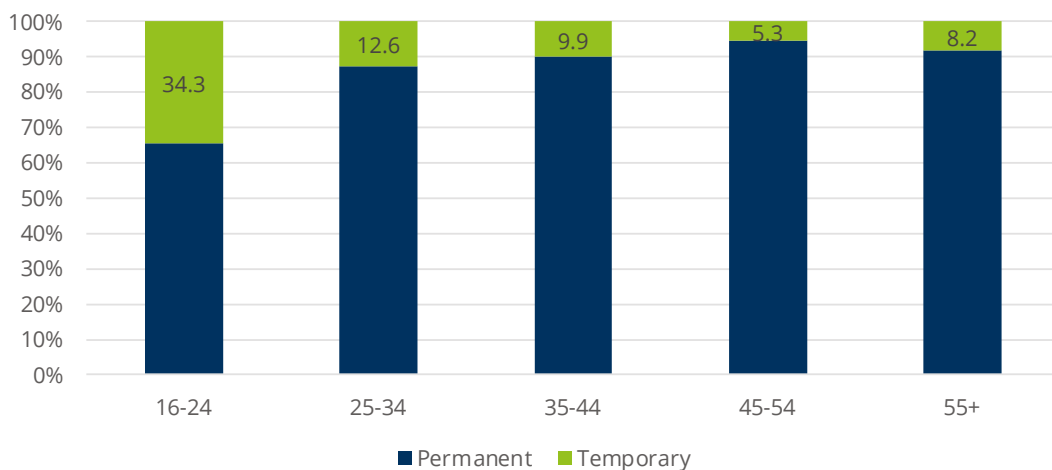
At 10% of total employment, elementary occupations make up the fourth-largest share of employment.

## Temporary Employment

About 1 in 8 of all Irish employees work on a temporary contract. This is particularly the case with young workers: a little over 1 in 3 workers under 25 years of age are employed on temporary contracts. By way of comparison, there's a marked decrease for the following two age groups, 25-34 (12%) and 35-44 (9%). The 45-54-year-old group was most likely to be employed permanently (95%).

A number of those on temporary contracts in the 16-24 group are likely students working their way through college, and the significant decrease in the share of temporary employment in the following age group (25-34) means that for many, the phenomenon is a steppingstone toward a permanent contract. However, the decrease between these two age groups happens from a high base, and a considerable portion or almost 13% of the 25 to 34 group are employed on a temporary contract.

Share of Permanent/Temporary Contracts  
Broad Age group



*The Working in Ireland Survey 2021* finds that 34% of young workers (16-24) are employed temporarily, which places Ireland in the middle of the distribution of temporary work across the EU-27 (Scuvée et al., 2015).

## Job Security for Young Workers aged 16 to 34

**I**n an attempt to gauge young workers' level of job security, we asked how anxious people felt about the possibility of losing their current job. We offered respondents four degrees of (in)security to choose from – very anxious, moderately anxious, not very anxious, and not at all anxious.

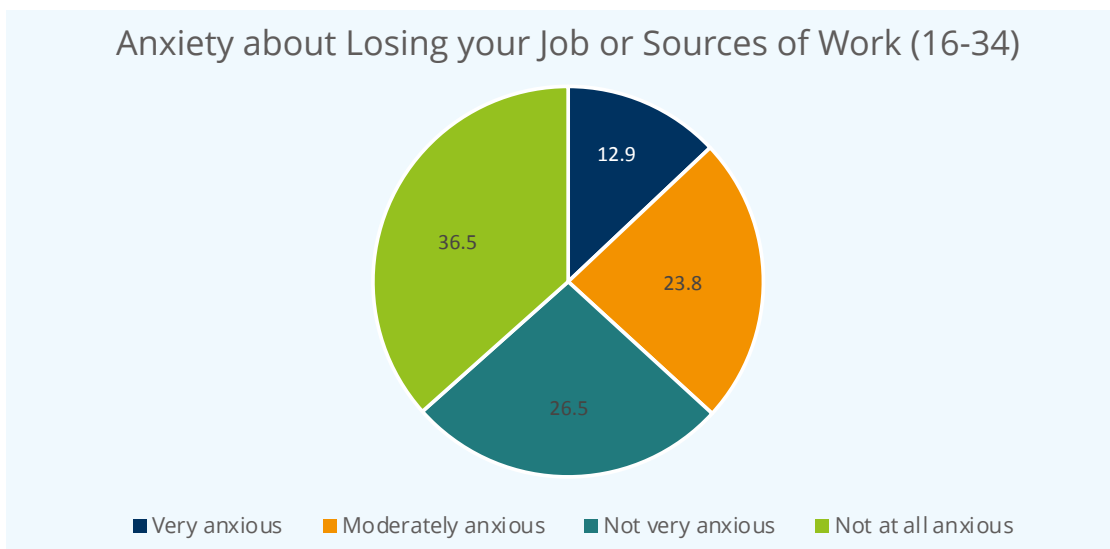
Almost four in ten or 37% of workers aged 16 to 34 reported high or moderate anxiety levels about losing

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their current job. Breaking this figure down, 13% of workers felt very anxious, and 24% felt moderately anxious.

Job security is defined as the perceived threat of job loss and discontinuity (De Witte et al., 2016). Therefore, by this definition, we can say that four in ten young workers have low to moderate job security.

However, results for the remaining 6 in 10 workers are more encouraging. For example, 36% of young workers have high levels of job security and are not at all anxious about losing their current job, and a further 27% are not very anxious.



Interestingly we find that differences in job security across the age cohorts are not particularly significant, though there is a clear trend related to age. For example, 13% of workers aged 16 to 34 report very high levels of anxiety about the loss of their current job, the corresponding figure for the next group aged 35 to 44 years is 11%, the following group of 45-54 years it's 10% and finally, in the 55+ group, the figure is 9%. Therefore, while there is a decline in job insecurity across the age cohorts, it is modest as 1 in 5 workers 55+ are either very or moderately anxious about losing their positions.

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Anxiety about losing your job or sources of work					
	all	16-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Very anxious	11.1	12.9	11.2	10.4	8.8
Moderately anxious	21.0	23.8	22.8	19.7	15.6
Not very anxious	24.8	26.5	24.3	25.2	22.1
Not at all anxious	42.6	36.5	41.1	44.3	52.7
Don't know	0.5	0.33	0.6	0.34	0.7

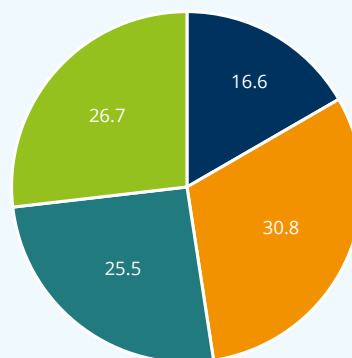
## Employment Security

This section presents our findings on the employment security of young workers. First, we asked workers how anxious they felt about their ability to find a new job and offered four possible answers – very anxious, moderately anxious, not very anxious and not at all anxious.

17% of young workers reported very high levels of anxiety. A further 31% reported moderate anxiety levels, meaning nearly half or 48% of young workers aged 16 to 34 are worried about their ability to find a new job should they lose their current one.

Over half of young workers aged 16 to 34 or 52%, had no anxiety or had very low anxiety levels about finding a new job, suggesting the labour market is close to evenly divided between young workers in terms of levels of employment insecurity.

Anxiety about Securing New Employment or New Sources of Work if you Lose your Current Job/Work (16-34)



■ Very anxious ■ Moderately anxious ■ Not very anxious ■ Not at all anxious

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Comparing findings across the age cohorts, we find employment insecurity was highest amongst young workers aged 16 to 34 and fell among older groups. For example, in the next group (35-44), 43% of workers reported being worried, and in the 55+ group, although still a large share, declined to 30%.

Younger workers have a larger share of employment in occupational structures, such as elementary occupations and sales and customer services with low entry requirements to low skilled jobs. Therefore, we would expect it to be relatively easy to secure a new position within these occupational structures. However, the data shows that 38% of young workers lack confidence in their ability to secure new employment.

### Earnings Security

**W**e asked workers how worried they were about a possible reduction in their current level of pay. We offered four possible levels of (in)security as response categories – very anxious, moderately anxious, not very anxious, and not at all anxious.

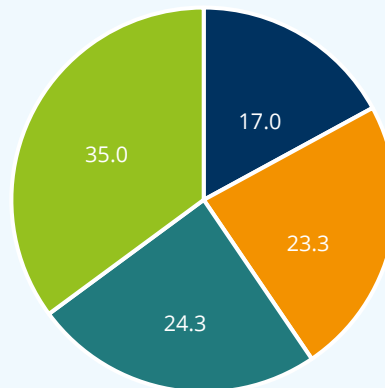
Income insecurity is a characteristic of labour market precariousness because uncertainty about weekly or monthly earnings makes it difficult to plan for the future, such as deciding whether you can afford to invest in buying a house or starting a family.

4 in 10 young workers aged 16 to 34 were worried about the possibility of a reduction in their current level of pay. Of the 40% that report some form of income security, 17% were very anxious about the loss of earnings, and 23% were moderately anxious.

The remaining 60% of young workers aged 16 to 34 reported either not being anxious or having very low anxiety levels.

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Anxiety about Future Pay Cut (16-34)



■ Very anxious   ■ Moderately anxious   ■ Not very anxious   ■ Not at all anxious

In terms of a possible reduction in pay, the evidence shows an important age component with the share of workers with anxiety declining for older workers. For example, the highest share (17%) of those who feel very anxious is among those aged 16-34, and we see a smaller share of 12% in the 35 to 44 age group, 11% in the 45 to 54 and 10% in the 55 + group. It is important to point out however, that almost one third of the oldest cohort of workers (55+) feel either very or moderately anxious of a future pay cut and this applies to 37.3% of workers across the board.

Earnings Security by Age

	all	16-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Very anxious	13.0	17.0	12.1	10.7	10.6
Moderately anxious	24.3	23.3	26.1	25.3	21.8
Not very anxious	23.2	24.3	21.0	27.2	19.5
Not at all anxious	38.5	35.0	39.4	35.7	46.5

## Labour Market Security

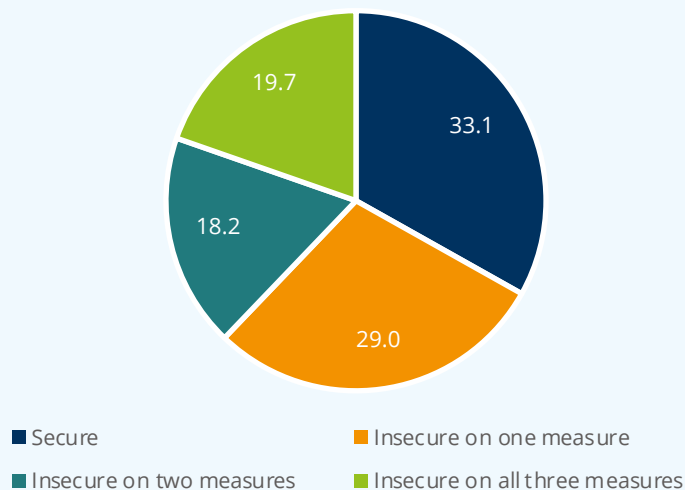
This section presents our findings on young workers experiencing multiple forms of labour market insecurity.

Labour market precariousness is characterised by multiple forms of insecurity, including a lack of job and income security (Vosko, 2010). By this definition, young workers who report experiencing two or more forms of labour market insecurity are at higher risk of significant labour market disadvantage. For example, much research shows a negative association between perceived job insecurity and the health and well-being of workers, their ability to function effectively on the job, and their occupational outcomes ([De Witte et al., 2016](#); [Sverke et al., 2002](#)).

In terms of the labour market security of young workers, several findings from the *Working in Ireland Survey 2021* stand out.

Firstly, 1 in 5 or 20% of young workers aged 16 to 34 reported being insecure on all three indicators – job security, income security and future employment prospects. This means a fifth of young workers are simultaneously worried about losing their current job and a possible reduction in income while also worrying about their ability to secure other employment.

Employees Labour Market Security (16-34)





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Additionally, a further 18% of young workers reported being insecure on two indicators, meaning 38% of young workers reported simultaneously experiencing multiple forms of labour market insecurity.

A third or 33% of workers aged 16 to 34 are secure on all three indicators- income, pay and future employment and can therefore be classified as having secure employment.

Given that labour market insecurity adversely affects workers' ability to function both on the job and in their daily lives, we can say that the 38% of young workers who report multiple forms of labour market insecurity are at a significant disadvantage over those 33% who report feeling secure.

## Low Paid Work

This section presents our initial findings on the incidence and distribution of low-paid work among young workers aged 16-34. For the purposes of this survey we define low pay here as under €20,000 per annum due to data constraints.

Three in 10 young workers aged 16 to 34 earn less than €20,000 per annum. For context, the gross earnings of a minimum wage worker working 39 hours a week, 52 weeks a year was €20,482. By way of comparison, the share of those working on low pay in the older age groups is striking. For example, among those aged 35 to 44, the low pay share falls to 19%, in the 45-54 group it is 18%, and finally in the 55 + group it is 23%.

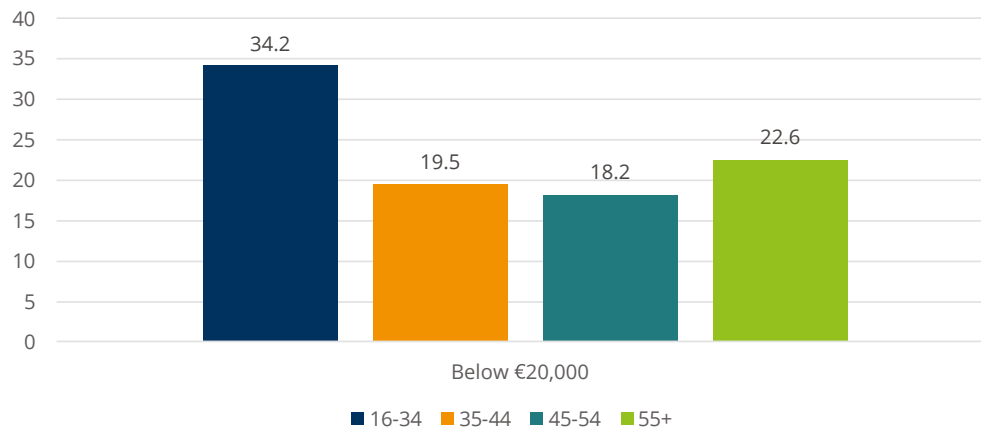
In 2019, the LFS survey found that nearly 3 in 10 employees aged 16-24 earned the national minimum wage or less. Due to differences in categorisation, direct comparison is not possible; however, we can say that this figure roughly correlates to our findings of slightly more than 3 in 10 employees aged 16 to 34 and confirms the continued proliferation of low pay amongst young workers marking Ireland as an outlier in a European context.

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1 in 5 or 20% of young workers aged 16 to 34 reported being insecure on all three indicators

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Share of low wage workers by broad age group

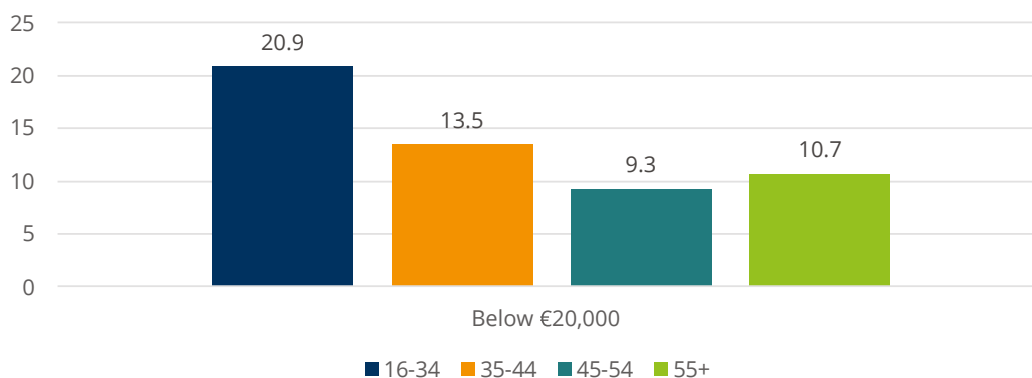


## Low Pay and Young Full-Time Workers

The age group we classify as young workers (16-34) is likely to contain at least some young people working through college or part-time, so we expect to find many of them working in low paid employment. Therefore, to remove the effect of this group, we measured the incidence of low paid work solely amongst full-time workers.

Over 1 in 5 young full-time workers under 35 earn less than €20k per annum. There is markedly fewer in this low pay group in the next age cohort (35-44), where low paid work accounts for 13% and a further decrease to 9% in the following group (45-54). Finally, we see a slight spike in low paid work for the over 55s, climbing to 11%.

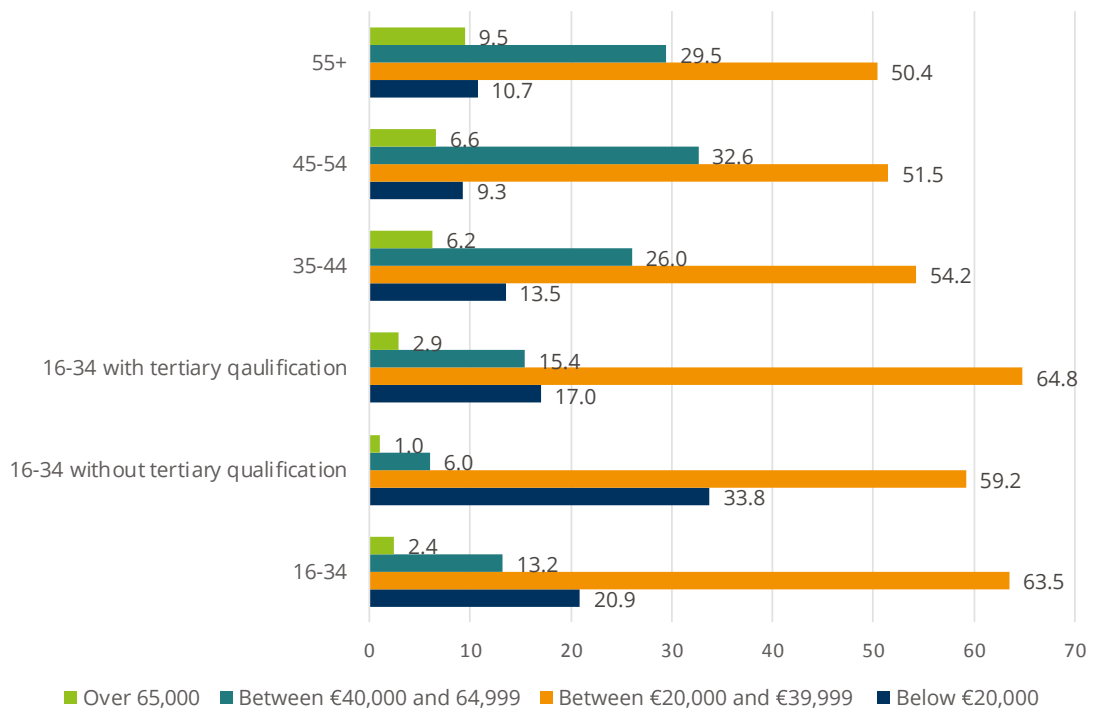
Share of Low Wage Workers by broad age group (Full-time)



## Tertiary Education and Low Paid Work

In recent years, a growing number of young Irish people have attained tertiary level qualifications. The OECD (2021) estimates that 58% of those aged 25 to 34 progressed to third-level education compared to an average of 45% in the OECD. From an international perspective, out of the thirty-eight countries covered in the report *Education at a Glance* (OECD 2021), Ireland ranked fourth-highest behind Canada, Luxembourg, and Japan.

Distribution of Earnings by broad age group (Full Time)



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We would expect this development to put upward pressure on pay and conditions for better qualified young workers, and we examine if this is the case. We use data for those in full-time work to limit the number of students working their way through college contained in the sample.

The picture of the relationship between earnings and educational attainment varies a great deal for young workers aged 16 to 34. For example, some young full-time workers with a tertiary qualification are well paid; about 18.5% earn more than 40k per annum; however, a significant portion or 17% earn less than 20k per annum.

To further limit the effect of students working in low paid jobs while studying, we looked at the group aged 25 to 34 in full-time work with a tertiary qualification. This group is more likely to contain a much higher number of recent graduates. Here the findings are even more striking, with 1 in 5 or 19% working for less than 20k per annum.

While 93% of workers who did not invest in tertiary education under 35 earn less than €40,000, this also applies to 82% of graduates.

## Conclusion

Against the backdrop of post-Covid labour market recovery and concern amongst international commentators with the potential for a surge in precarious forms of work, we present our initial findings on labour market conditions for young Irish workers. Specifically, we offer our findings on the occupational structure of youth employment and the incidence and distribution of temporary employment, labour market security, and low paid work.

A core feature of the concern amongst European commentators with a rise in precariousness has been the growing incidence of temporary work, particularly among young people. The *Working in Ireland Survey 2021* found that 1 in 3 young workers aged under 25 years works on a temporary basis. However, what is striking is that we also find a relatively high incidence of temporary work amongst the next age group, those aged 25 to 34, including recent graduates.

Furthermore, we find very high levels of labour market insecurity, particularly among young workers. Several findings relating to young workers' subjective experience of labour market security stand out. Firstly, job insecurity was high across all age groups, possibly contributed to by the exceptional circumstances (Covid-19) under which the survey was conducted. However, while job insecurity was widespread across the age cohorts, young workers reported significantly less income and employment security than their older counterparts. Whilst it is not possible at this early stage of the analysis to comment on why this should be so, it raises an area of concern that requires a more in-depth analysis and suggests that young workers are at a labour market disadvantage over their older counterparts.

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In addition, we found an uneven distribution of labour market security amongst young workers– for example, 20% of young workers reported being insecure on all three indicators we considered; job, income and employment security. A further 18% reported insecurity on two of these indicators. In total, 67% of young workers reported at least one form of labour market insecurity, while the remaining 33% reported being secure. The uneven distribution of security identified within the *Working in Ireland Survey 2021* suggests a polarisation in job quality, particularly the security of employment available to Ireland’s young workers that should be of concern to policymakers.

Finally, we examined if the recent expansion in third-level education among Ireland’s young people is associated with better quality and better-paid work. Again, our findings portray a complex picture. Firstly, the high share of professional and associate professional occupations amongst total employment for young workers (16-34) suggests that investment in education is shifting the occupational structure, and young people are reaping the rewards of tertiary qualification. However, the data on educational attainment and earnings within this age group are less conclusive. For example, 20% of those with tertiary education experience a significant educational premium earning more than 40k per annum. However, a very high share or 17% of young people (16-34) in full-time work with a tertiary qualification earn less than 20k per annum. Therefore, while some young people are reaping the benefits of third level qualifications, others continue to work in low-paying jobs. The relationship between low paid work and tertiary qualifications, particularly the high number of qualified young people in low-paid full-time jobs, should be an area of interest to policy-makers.

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## The UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021: A source of new evidence

The UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021 is the first major survey to examine people's work and employment in Ireland since O'Connell et al.'s (2010) study of The Changing Workplace. The UCD survey is also the only representative survey to comprehensively examine the quality of work during the Covid-19 Pandemic. It draws from a nationally representative sample of 2,076 people of working age in paid employment across the country. Both employees and self-employed workers were eligible for inclusion in the study. The survey was conducted between May and August 2021. The data were weighted for age, gender, region and economic sector to agree with the then most recent population estimates as derived from the Labour Force Survey (Q1 2021). Ipsos MRBI was commissioned by UCD to carry out the fieldwork for the survey. In this paper we focus on younger age groups. The sample includes 216 respondents in the 16-24 year old group and 397 between 25 and 34 years..

This report may be cited as: Gallagher, P. and Nugent, C. (2022), *Temporary Employment, Low Paid Work and Job Security amongst Young Irish Workers -Evidence from the UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021*, College of Business, University College Dublin.

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