How secure work can reduce regional inequality

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Abstract: This essay, which forms part of the Commentary on The Global Politics of Precarity and Insecure Work, provides an in-depth analysis of job insecurity across England's Mayoral Combined Authorities and its impact on regional inequality. It uses a new multi-dimensional measure of job insecurity, looking at this through the lens of three different ways in which people may experience insecure work. First, **contractual insecurity**, where people are not guaranteed future hours or future work. Second, **financial insecurity**, where people have unpredictable pay or their pay is simply too low to get by. Third, **lack of access to rights and protections** represents a concrete vulnerability. By addressing job insecurity through these measures, this contribution argues that it is possible to reduce regional inequalities and support economic growth and stability across England. Key findings include: 1) Prevalence of insecure work: Approximately 19.4% of the workforce in England's nine Mayoral Combined Authorities and Greater London, are engaged in severely insecure work. 2) Sectoral composition: Insecure work tends to be concentrated in specific industries, such as hospitality, retail, social care and services. However, in some localities, the hospitality sector offer more secure roles than in others, which appears related to higher value added and higher productivity. 3) Impact on local economies: Regions with higher levels of insecure work also show higher unemployment and economic inactivity rates. Insecure work is more prevalent in specific sectors such as hospitality, social care, and administrative services, with variations in the level of job security across different local economies.

Key words: *insecure work; regional inequality.*

Introduction

England is a highly unequal country (McCann, 2016; Gal & Egeland, 2018), which large interregional differences in productivity (Stansbury, Turner & Balls, 2023), wealth (Agrawal & Phillips, 2020), and health outcomes (Marmot, 2020). These are deeply entrenched differences which are suggested to run back as far as the mid-19th century and are not easily shifted (Martin, 1988). Successive government policies have aimed to narrow the gaps and more recently to 'level up' the country, but largely without success (Fransham et al., 2023).

This essay, which is part of the Commentary on The Global Politics of Precarity and Insecure Work, addresses the hitherto overlooked role that job quality and job security play within the economic and labour market dynamics which underpin these geographic inequalities and which, in turn, drive increased precarity in today's labour market. Ultimately, the high prevalence of insecure work is a national issue, but its effects are felt locally. Furthermore,

the degree and impact of insecurity may change across time and space as Mourad discusses in this commentary roundtable (Mourad, 2025). Therefore, this article examines differential levels of job insecurity across the nine English Mayoral Combined Authorities and Greater London, representing devolved administrations with different funding and governance models. It demonstrates that higher levels of job insecurity often coincide with higher levels of unemployment and economic inactivity and argues that measures aimed at reducing job insecurity in local areas may support economic growth.

National and local policy development

The UK Government has acknowledged the need to address job insecurity through its introduction of the Make Work Pay Plan and the proposed Employment Rights Bill in October 2024 (Department for Business and Trade, 2024a; Department for Business and Trade, 2024b). The Employment Rights Bill sets out proposals for primary and secondary legislation which seek to improve the rights and protections of workers (Department for Business and Trade, 2024b). Notably, the bill includes and goes beyond recommendations which were made years earlier by the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (Taylor, 2017) and marks a significant departure from the policy inaction and drift in the employment legislation landscape that has characterised the past decade and a half.

It is worth noting the flourishing of local initiatives in the absence of previous central government action in this area. A number of local areas (Hurrell, Hughes & Ball, 2017), as well as four Mayoral Combined Authorities (Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, North of Tyne and West of England) and Greater London have introduced voluntary employer schemes such as good or fair work charters. These charters seek to incentivise employers to raise employment standards, aiming to improve recruitment and retention and ultimately, and grow the local economy (Dickinson, Erickson & Sarter, 2023; Mamode, 2023), though evidence of their impact is so far limited (Dickinson, 2022).

Conditional on the outcome of the Employment Rights Bill consultation period and its implementation, the measures in the proposed bill are expected to predominantly impact workers and employers in low wage sectors such as retail, hospitality and social care (Department for Business and Trade, 2024c), in which insecure work is concentrated (Florisson, 2022a). This means the bill will be particularly impactful for local economies

where these insecure work sectors and jobs are concentrated. The potential positive impact is an improvement to the quality of employment in those areas, though employer organisations have warned of potential risks including a reduction in jobs whilst the changes take hold (CBI, 2025).

Data and methodology

The analysis in this paper uses the Office for National Statistics Labour Force Survey (LFS). The LFS is a household survey which contains rich employment and personal information of approximately 55,000 UK residents each quarter. This analysis uses Secure Access microdata from April-June 2013 (when the variable for the current geographical aggregation of local authorities became available) until April-June 2022.

The sample includes only those who are of working age as defined by the Office for National Statistics (16 to 65 years old) and who are in employment or self-employment. We furthermore focus on those who are resident within a given mayoral combined authority on the understanding that the majority of residents live and work within that area.

As described in more detail in Florisson (2022a), the measurement of insecure work in this article uses three dimensions of insecurity which are derived from the substantial literature around work precarity, amongst others (Olsthoorn, 2014 and Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018).

The first dimension of insecure work is **contractual insecurity**, which indicates those forms of work which fail to guarantee future hours or work. For this, I include indicators for temporary work and involuntary temporary work, and part-time and involuntary part-time work. The second dimension concerns **financial insecurity**, which covers instances where worker's pay is unpredictable or low. For this, I use proxies of having variable hours and pay, being underemployed (meaning workers want more hours for the same basic rate of pay), working a second job, as this if often an indication of low earnings in the main job, and earning less than two-thirds of the median wage, which is a common measure for low pay.

Due to the nature of the survey, the issue of wages deserves additional attention. Unfortunately, the UK Labour Force Survey collects earnings data only of a subsample of employees each quarter and foregoes self-employed workers entirely. Therefore, I use imputed median hourly pay from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings for each occupation at the 4-digit level of the Standard Occupational Classification.

Finally, the third dimension relates to the **lack of access to rights and protections** and is measured through solo self-employment and having job tenure of less than two years, both of which exclude workers from accessing full rights and protections as of the time of writing. All indicators are scored as binaries, where absence is scored as 0 and presence is scored as 1.

Using a Principal Component Analysis, each indicator is weighted according to their tetrachoric correlation with the other indicators, and I generate a single factor, which functions as a sliding scale of job insecurity (Florisson [2022b]). This is subdivided into three categories: secure work, low/moderately insecure work, and severely insecure work.

In 2022, approximately half of UK workers (47.2%) were in secure jobs which had none of the indicators of insecurity. One third (33%) were in low to moderate insecurity, which means they experienced mainly one form of insecurity, with a smaller group experiencing two or three forms of low weighted insecurity. The group of workers this article focusses on however, concerns the nearly one in five (19.8%, or 6.2 million) workers who experienced severely insecure work. These workers were in involuntary part-time or involuntary temporary work, or experienced multiple forms of more heavily weighted insecurity. Workers who are more likely to experience other forms of labour market disadvantage are also more likely to be in severely insecure work, including women, young workers, disabled workers and those from ethnic minority backgrounds. Although these factors play an important role in reproducing disadvantages for specific groups of workers, the sample sizes for the selected geographies under study are in most cases too small to be able to report demographic and intersectional differences in experiences of insecure work.

Insecure work and the health of local labour markets

About one in three English workers (11 million) live and work in the nine Mayoral Combined Authorities and Greater London and 2.2 million (19.8%) of these workers experienced severely insecure work in 2022. However, there are substantial differences in this experience as shown in figure 1 below. Nearly one in four workers (24%) in the Tees Valley Combined Authority experienced severely insecure work in 2022, which compares to one in five nationally (19.8%). In Tees Valley, this coincides with higher than average rates of economic inactivity, low wages and lagging economic growth (Florisson, 2023a).

[Figure 1]

Certain English combined authorities host clusters of sectors or industries that provide unique employment prospects for workers, such as the financial services sector in London, the life sciences sector in Cambridge or the all-year visitor economy in Liverpool. In contrast, other areas have fewer vibrant sectors capable of generating substantial employment opportunities, particularly in more rural economies and de-industrialised areas.

The availability of jobs in local areas influences residents' ability to secure good quality employment. In regions with limited job availability, individuals may need to travel farther to access higher-paying or more secure opportunities, which can inhibit particularly those with childcaring and caring responsibilities and those with health issues to access these roles (Florisson & Gable, 2023). In addition to this, some migrant groups experience additional barriers of entry to secure roles. This explains in part why migrant workers form a major component of the labour system of platform companies as other authors discuss in this commentary roundtable (El-Khazen, 2025; Tan & Ennis, 2025), which are characterised by casualised and insecure employment relationships.

Labour market participation also structures local opportunities. In some local economies, labour market participation is high, meaning a larger proportion of the population is engaged in paid work. For example, within the West of England Combined Authority, over four out of five individuals aged 16-65 are employed (80.9%). In other areas, participation is substantially lower. For example, in the Tees Valley Combined Authority only 69.7% of the working age population is in work.

A key factor in identifying areas characterised by severe job insecurity is the intersection of low labour market participation rates and limited job openings. In such regions, wages are generally lower compared to areas where both participation and job availability are higher (LGA, 2023). In local economies with reduced demand for workers, or where the demand is concentrated in low-skilled, low-paying jobs, the prospects for securing quality employment are diminished, and the incentives to remain active in the labour market are weakened. In other words, those outside the labour market may decide not to opt in due to lack of available options. This shows how actors develop their own responses to precarity (Morgana & Hickson, 2025). The primary determinant in this context is the strength of the local economy, which influences both the quantity of available jobs and the quality of those opportunities, including wage levels and security.

Link between insecure work and wider indicators of health of the local labour market

In order to estimate to what extent job insecurity is related to other indicators of health of local labour markets such as unemployment and economic inactivity (meaning not being in work and not looking for work), this analysis has pooled Labour Force Survey microdata across several years to enhance sample sizes, allowing to estimate the proportion of workers in severely insecure work by local authority. This is then correlated with rates of unemployment and economic inactivity among working-age individuals.

This analysis shows there is a positive correlation between being out of work and levels of severely insecure work. In a three-way correlation of unemployment, inactivity and severely insecure work by local authorities in England, there is as expected a considerable overlap between unemployment and inactivity (39%). Further, there is a 11% correlation between levels of unemployment and levels of severely insecure work and 17% between inactivity and insecure work. Furthermore, these results are robust when we remove outliers, such as: Middlesbrough (Tees Valley) and Hammersmith & Fulham (Greater London), where the rates of severely insecure work stand at 29.8% each, which is 10 percentage points above the national average. These results suggest that in places where inactivity and unemployment are higher, insecurity also tends to be higher. This can be explained to some extent by the premise that where there is a large presence of jobseekers, this may reduce the bargaining powers of workers to negotiate better terms and conditions for themselves, as it is easier to replace them. It is also due to the changing sectoral composition in post-industrial areas, whereby industrial jobs were lost and replaced with service sector roles, which have lower pay and less secure contractual terms.

[Figure 2]

Exploring local labour market dynamics in the Tees Valley

However, we must go beyond broad regional comparisons, as there tends to be even greater variation within regions than between regions (OECD, 2018). Results from this analysis show this is certainly reflected in rates of severely insecure work. Within the Tees Valley area

alone, which consists of five local authorities, the rate of severely insecure work is lowest in the local authority of Redcar and Cleveland at 19.3%, thereby falling below the English MCA average, but it rises to 29.8% in the urban centre of Middlesbrough. Middlesbrough has a history of de-industrialisation, and its largest sectors are retail and hospitality, accommodation and food services and health and social care — sectors which are characterised by low-paid, insecure work. Furthermore, in 2022, the unemployment rate was nearly double that of the national average (6.8% compared with 3.7%) and economic inactivity was 7.9 percentage points higher than the average (29.3% compared with 21.4% nationally) (ONS, 2023). In this example, we see that the level of severe job insecurity provides a strong indication of the health of the local labour market, alongside the more common indicators of unemployment and inactivity — highlighting that these factors are interrelated.

Low productivity areas are characterised by high insecurity

As the previous section indicated, the risk of workers' exposure to severely insecure work varies across regions and within regions and is closely linked to other indicators of labour market wellbeing. The real question is why we are seeing those differences. To some extent, the economic composition of a local area matters. In places where low-paid and insecure sectors dominate, we can expect to see higher average levels of severely insecure work. However, this does not explain the full extent of the difference between places. Rather, this analysis finds that there are substantial differences *within* sectors conditional on the value added of their activities. Therefore, while part of the variation in work insecurity between combined authorities can be attributed to differences in scale, it is also closely linked to the nature of the activities undertaken within each sector. For instance, 48% of workers in the accommodation and food sectors in the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority experience severely insecure employment, compared to 65% in Tees Valley and 61% in the West Midlands.

This disparity can be partly attributed to the nature of Liverpool City Region's hospitality sector, which is focused on serving corporate visitors, attendees of music and sports events, and both domestic and international tourists visiting cultural and heritage sites (Liverpool City Region LEP, 2018). The visitor economy in this region contributes an estimated £4.9 billion annually to the national economy and supports over 55,000 jobs (Growth Platform,

n/a). In contrast, the Tees Valley visitor economy is centred around walking and cycling tourism, visits to natural sites, industrial and railway heritage, and small festivals (Tees Valley Combined Authority, 2022). The culture and leisure sector in Tees Valley supports approximately 18,400 jobs and contributes an estimated £598 million to the national economy (Tees Valley Combined Authority, 2016). This comparison suggests that the hospitality sector in the Liverpool City Region engages in more "high value-added" activities and is less seasonal in comparison to Tees Valley's hospitality sector.

The relationship between economic value-added and work security is an important factor in understanding regional disparities in insecure work. High value-added activities, broadly defined, are more likely to provide secure working conditions, whereas lower value-added activities are more frequently linked to insecure employment. This can be explained by the fact that businesses generating higher value-added—indicating greater productivity—tend to be more profitable and capable of offering better wages and more stable employment conditions. In contrast, lower value-added activities, often characterised by lower productivity and narrower profit margins, are more frequently associated with insecure work, as businesses in these sectors have limited ability to provide high wages or stable working conditions. This difference between high and low value-added activities helps explain why workers in the same sector may experience different levels of job security. However, as Iazzolino's contribution in this commentary indicates (Iazzolino 2025), these regional differences are not only the result of sectoral composition but follow from broader transformations in economic structures, including the rise of the digital economy which is reshaping industrial relations, and which may make some local economies more susceptible to cost-cutting measures through insecure or casualised employment structures.

[Figure 3]

Similar jobs have different risks of insecurity across the country

The differences in levels of job security that we observe within high-risk sectors is also reflected in jobs with higher exposure to insecure work, such as routine and semi-routine jobs. Using the National Socio-Economic Classification of Occupations, this analysis shows that severely insecure work tends to be concentrated among self-employed workers and those

in routine and semi-routine jobs, which includes roles such as hairdressers, sales assistants and gym instructors.

[Figure 4]

However, even within these jobs, there are strong differences in the extent to which workers are exposed to severely insecure work across the country. For instance, although on average 35% of those in semi-routine jobs, such as cashiers, fitness instructors, dental nurses, and salespersons experience severely insecure work, this is substantially lower in Manchester, where 30% of semi-routine jobs are severely insecure. In contrast, the rate stands 9 percentage points higher in both West of England and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, at 44%.

[Figure 5]

Similarly, there are differences in the risk of being exposed to severely insecure work in routine jobs, which includes roles such as cashiers, hairdressers, floorers and bricklayers, cleaners and waiters. For instance, routine jobs in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are more insecure than similar roles in the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. This suggests that the kinds of work activities people do within these jobs, or the sectors they are based in, are important determinants for how insecure they tend to be. For instance, Greater Manchester has a large manufacturing and advanced engineering sector. Routine jobs, such as machine operatives in these sectors may require more training, skills and may pay higher than median pay and may be accompanied by higher levels of job security than semi-routine jobs that are concentrated in the retail or hospitality sectors. Across the UK, median pay in manufacturing was £616.40 in 2022 compared with £430 in retail and £259.40 in hospitality (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Although the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough MCA is also home to a substantial manufacturing sector, this is driven partly by advanced manufacturing in Cambridge and more niche manufacturing and agricultural technology manufacturing in the Fens (HM Government, 2019).

However, even within more senior roles, there are differences across English combined authorities. For example, lower managerial jobs, such as managers, bookkeepers and technicians are nearly twice as likely to provide severely insecure work in South Yorkshire (13.6%) and Tees Valley (14.1%) than they are in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough (8.4%). Again, this is likely related to sectors that these jobs are embedded in, and the kinds of activities that take place within these sectors, i.e., whether they add high value, such as trading crude oil, or whether they add low value, such as locally rendered services, like window cleaning.

[Figure 6]

Policy action to tackle insecure work and drive economic growth

To address insecure work and foster better employment opportunities in England, both central government and regional authorities play crucial roles. While central government must spearhead reforms to strengthen employment regulations and social security protections, regional Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) can also implement targeted initiatives. MCAs such as South Yorkshire, Tees Valley, and the West Midlands, which experience high levels of insecure work, stand to benefit significantly from such efforts.

Policy interventions to tackle insecure work can be categorised into supply-side and demand-side strategies. Supply-side policies enhance workers' skills and productivity, while demand-side measures increase the availability of quality jobs. Insecure work is often concentrated in lower-skilled occupations, where access to training is limited. Enhancing skills attainment is vital, particularly in regions with below-average levels of educational qualifications. However, skills retention poses a challenge, as skilled workers may migrate to areas with more diverse job opportunities. Thus, policies must address both skills development — such as training for low paid and insecure workers — and retention — particularly focusing on driving up the local quality of employment — to mitigate regional disparities in employment quality.

The UK’s highly centralised approach to skills policy often fails to address the distinct needs of local areas (Policy Connect, 2020). Localised skills development is essential to align training with the requirements of residents and employers, and to support individuals in

transitioning from insecure work to stable, well-paid employment. Recognising this, the *Levelling Up* White Paper (2022) introduced trailblazer devolution deals with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), granting them expanded powers over adult skills through the 2023 Spring Budget (Henderson, Dalton & Paun, 2023). These deals aim to align local skills systems with Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) and provide greater flexibility in implementing skills bootcamps to address sector-specific labour shortages.

Several MCAs already prioritise reducing insecure work through employment and skills strategies. Efforts such as the Mayor of London's *Skills for Londoners* strategy, underscore the potential of local control in addressing systemic skills gaps. The London strategy emphasises lifelong learning, targeted support for disadvantaged groups, and pathways for low-paid workers to secure better employment. Similarly, targeted programs like North of Tyne's Employability Plan focus on transitioning workers in insecure roles to more sustainable employment through skills training and collaboration with businesses. It is important to note that employer investment in skills training has declined over two decades, disproportionately affecting lower-paid workers. Combined authorities must therefore not only support individual training but also foster improvements in business management and productivity to bridge the skills gap and drive economic growth.

On the demand side, authorities in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, North of Tyne (now called North East), West Yorkshire and Greater London have established policies which aim to improve job security. Notable initiatives include employment charters, such as the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter and the London Mayor's Good Work Standard, which promote fair and secure work practices. Although MCAs like the West Midlands, South Yorkshire, and Tees Valley have not explicitly addressed severely insecure work in their strategies, they prioritise related measures, including skills development, leveraging public procurement to enhance job quality, and stimulating regional investment. However, these efforts could be strengthened by a more focused approach to driving up the quality and security of jobs in the area.

A key element to developing skills and driving up job quality and security is through investment. However, investment inequality remains a significant barrier to addressing regional disparities. While policies such as Free Ports and Investment Zones aim to stimulate economic growth, concerns persist over their effectiveness in generating genuinely new jobs

rather than displacing existing activity. Future investment strategies should explicitly prioritise the creation of high-quality, secure employment opportunities. A great example of this are initiatives such as Liverpool's 2018 Strategic Investment Fund, which incentivised businesses bidding for funds to demonstrate positive social impact. To achieve meaningful regional development, government and combined authorities must adopt a more integrated and long-term approach, ensuring investment aligns with the promotion of good work and economic resilience.

Concluding note

This commentary has provided new evidence on the relationship between severely insecure work and the overall health of local labour markets, highlighting the importance of tracking the rate of job security in local areas as a key economic and labour market indicator.

In places where the prevalence job insecurity is high, we tend to see lagging economic growth and sluggish performance. This is fairly intuitive, as we expect that stronger economies tend to provide more well-paying secure jobs than economies that are lagging. This makes it important to address the quality of employment among wider policy aims of growing the economy. Even if a given policy achieves a higher quantity of jobs in an area, these risks leaving the local population no better off if these jobs offer low wages, unpredictable hours and are not protected by strong employment rights and protections.

The new UK government, having come into power in July 2024, aims to raise the employment rate by 5 percentage points to 80%. This would require an additional 2 million people to join the labour market. But only aiming to increase the quantity of employment is not enough, rather, the quality of jobs must be improved to meet wider aims of increasing productivity, health and living standards in lagging areas and reducing regional inequalities.

The central government is in the process of updating and strengthening employment regulations through its Make Work Pay Plan and the Employment Rights Bill, within which we can expect to see measures implemented from 2026 onwards. These contain proposals which, if they are implemented and enforced appropriately, could reduce the levels of insecure work across the UK and would particularly affect local economies where insecure and low-paid work is prevalent. If the risk of employment contraction is mitigated, and job numbers are maintained, then the improvement of job quality and wages for local workers, could boost demand in local economies through improving the purchasing power of the local

population, and foster economic growth. This could chip away at the deeply entrenched regional inequalities in the UK, particularly if combined with ongoing support for the development of local economies.

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