

# TRACKING THE TRENDS SPOTLIGHT:

WORKING IN A POST-COVID  
WORLD



**edmonton**  
SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL

**2023**

# Acknowledgements

This report is published by the  
Edmonton Social Planning Council.  
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Published by:  
Edmonton Social  
Planning Council,  
#206 -10050 112 St NW,  
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2J1

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>p.4</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>What does the Tracker say?</b>	<b>p.5</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>People are getting back into work, but are those jobs good?</b>	<b>p.9</b>
	Work can be insecure	p.9
	Work affects one's social life	p.11
	Work can be dangerous	p.12
	People are being over worked	p.13
	Workers can lack agency	p.14
	Labour isn't always valued	p.15
<b>4</b>	<b>What does this all mean for well-being?</b>	<b>p.17</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Sources</b>	<b>p.19</b>

# INTRODUCTION

## Box 1:

**Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC) has been producing Tracking the Trends since 1989. This report has tracked a number of social and economic data in order to provide a comprehensive overview of Edmonton's social well-being and how it has changed over time.**

However, launched in 2021, ESPC began sharing the data traditionally reported in Tracking the Trends through our new Social Well-Being Tracker (the Tracker), which allowed us to update the data on a timely basis and provide new ways to interact with it.

As such, we have decided to discontinue Tracking the Trends in its original format, and instead use this report as an opportunity to take a critical look into our indicators. The indicators presented through Tracking the Trends, and now through the Tracker, are meant to investigate different elements of social well-being. However, social well-being is complicated. How do these indicators relate to well-being? What factors, not shared on the Tracker, influence this relationship? What are these numbers really showing?

Through this new Tracking the Trends report, each issue will spotlight one section of the tracker, and dive into how that particular set of indicators influences well-being. For this first edition, ESPC will take a look at employment trends. While increased employment rates have traditionally been seen as an indicator of increased community well-being, this edition will take a critical look at some of the systemic forces that influence these trends. When employment increases, what jobs are people getting? Are they stable and secure? What are typical working conditions? How does work make people feel? How does work influence one's personal life? All these questions influence people's well-being at work and into their lives in general.

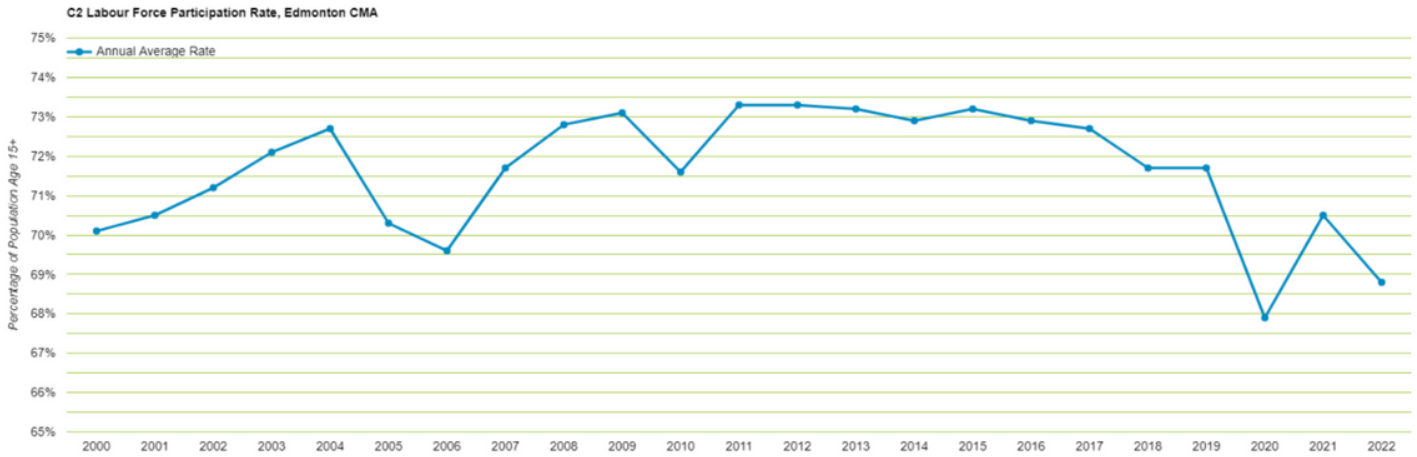
Throughout this report, you will find prompts to reflect on how these larger social forces affect your work and well-being.

# WHAT DOES THE TRACKER SAY?

## **A note on measuring employment:**

Unemployment refers to people who are not currently working but are available for work, temporarily laid off, searching for work, or about to start a new job within the next four weeks. People who are not currently working but not actively seeking work are not included in unemployment statistics – they are considered to not be in the labour force. The participation rate includes people who are either working or unemployed, as seeking work is considered to be participating in the labour market (Statistics Canada, 2023a).

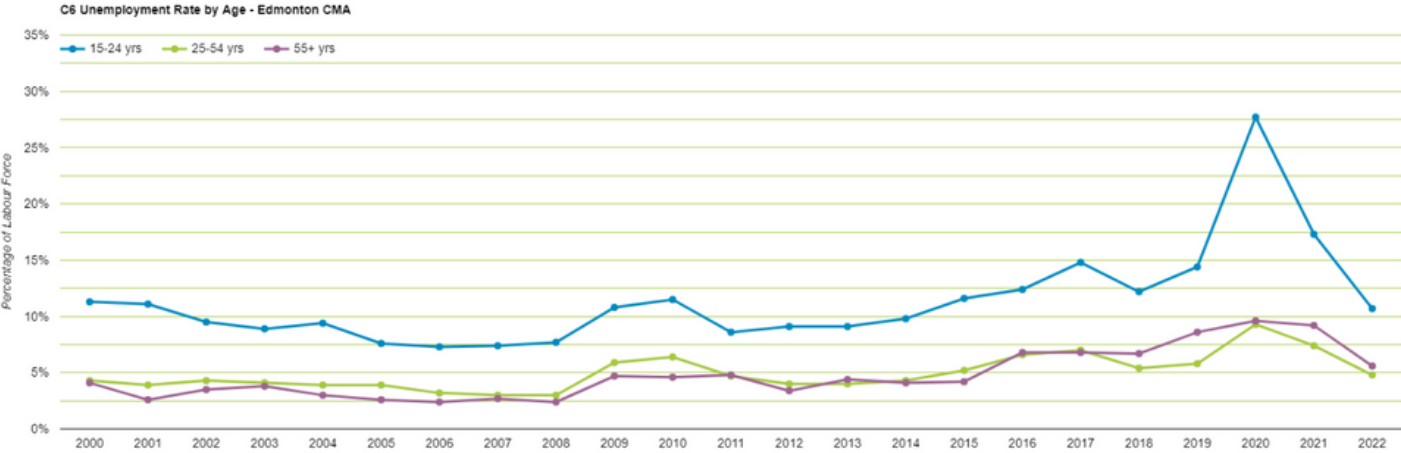
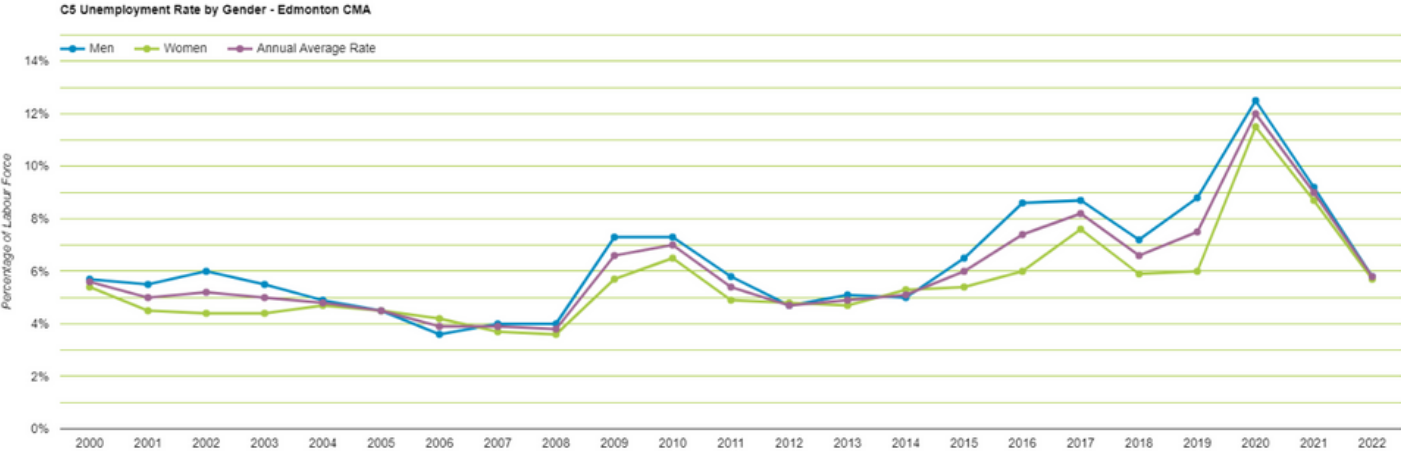
The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly altered employment patterns. In 2019, 71.7% of Edmontonians participated in the labour market. In 2020, this number dropped to 67.9%. Participation rates likely did not drop significantly during the pandemic because, although many people were not working, they were considered 'laid off.' (see box 1) Unemployment rates, on the other hand, changed dramatically. They skyrocketed from 7.5% in 2019 to 12% in 2020, and dropped significantly to 5.8% in 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2023a). Edmontonians were also unemployed for longer. In 2020, Edmontonians were, on average, unemployed for 17.2 weeks. In 2021, the average jumped to 26.3 weeks (Statistics Canada, 2023b).



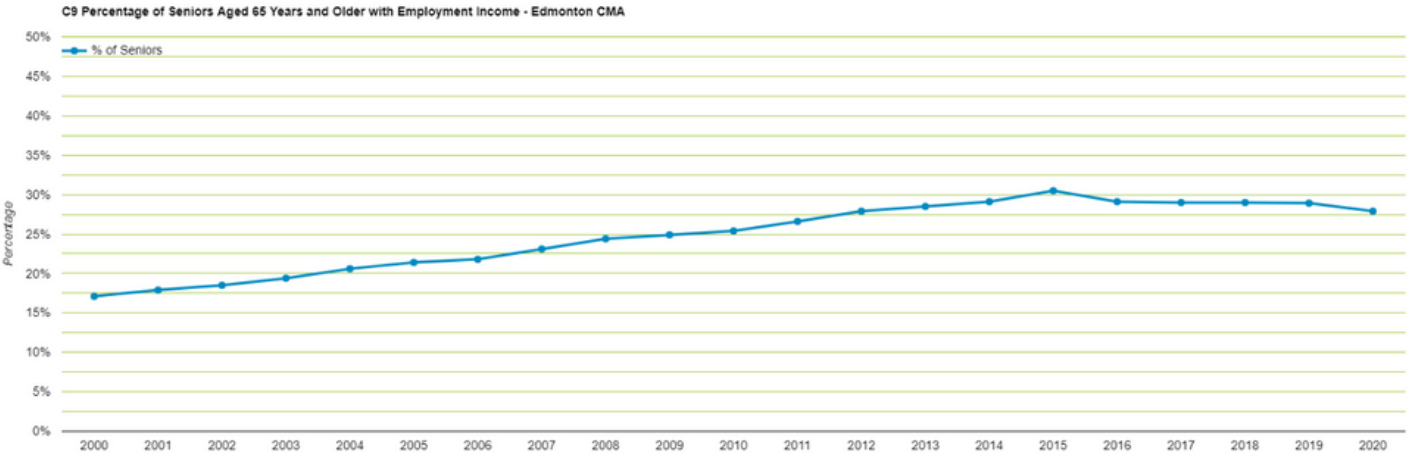
Different groups of people experienced unemployment during the pandemic in different ways. Youth have always experienced higher unemployment rates, but this trend has become exacerbated by the pandemic. In 2020, the unemployment rate for working age adults (25-54 years old) was 9.3%, and for youth (15-24 years old) it was approximately triple (27.7%). Although the youth unemployment rate has since dropped considerably (10.7% in 2022), it continues to remain higher than all other age groups (Statistics Canada, 2023a).

Males tend to experience higher unemployment rates than females. Before the pandemic, in 2019, women experienced an unemployment rate of 6% whereas the rate for men was 8.8%. The pandemic seemed to slightly close this unemployment gap. In 2020, men had an unemployment rate of 12.5% and women 11.5%. By 2022, the gap between men's and women's unemployment closed, women's unemployment rates were 5.7% and men's were 5.8% (Statistics Canada, 2023a).

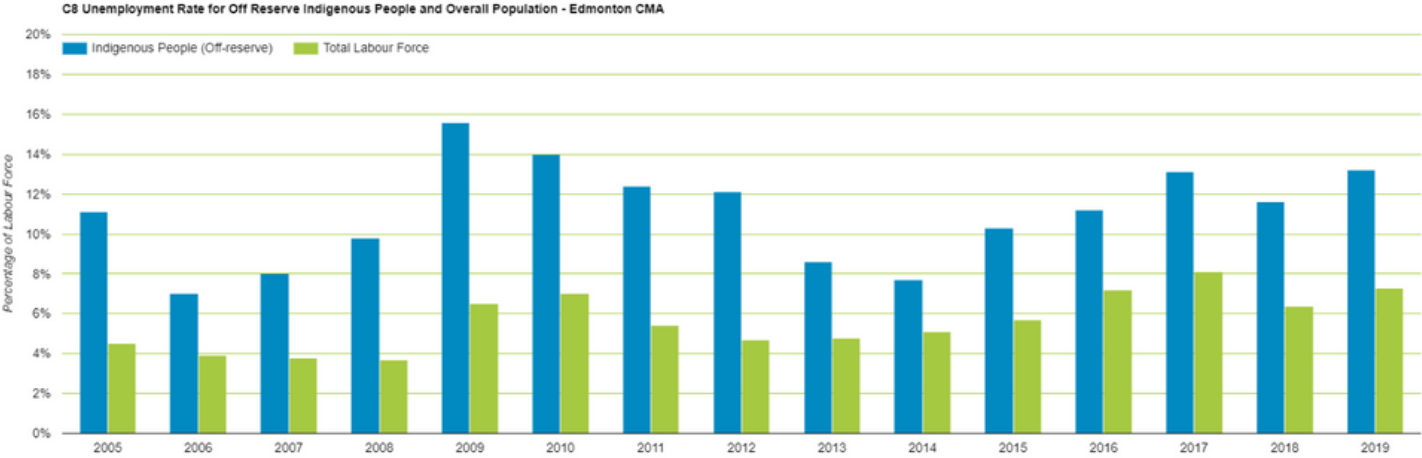
The closing of the gap between men's and women's unemployment rate can be partially explained by the fact that many women are leaving the labour force. In other words, they have left their jobs and are not planning on going back to work. In 2022, men in Edmonton had a labour force participation rate of 72.4% whereas women had a rate of 65.2% (Statistics Canada, 2023a).



More seniors have to work. It is a common understanding that you reach retirement age at 65. However, in 2020, 27.9% of persons over the age of 65 were working. This rate was not significantly impacted by the pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2022b).



Indigenous peoples also face employment inequalities. Unfortunately, the only data ESPC has predated the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, 13.2% of Indigenous peoples living off reserve in Edmonton were unemployed, compared to 7.3% of the overall population (Ministry of Labour and Immigration, 2022).





# PEOPLE ARE GETTING BACK INTO WORK, BUT ARE THOSE JOBS GOOD?

Edmontonians faced mass layoffs and job insecurity during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now we are seeing that people are getting back to work at levels comparable to before the pandemic, which many are praising as an indicator of progress. However, it is important to consider what jobs people are employed in, the quality of those jobs, and the influence jobs have on the rest of their lives.

As the following sections will illustrate, today's job market is filled with jobs that are insecure, lack benefits, do not leave time for a social life, are dangerous, are overworking people, do not provide workers with a sense of agency, and are not valued by larger society. So, is it really a measure of progress if more people are employed in this market?

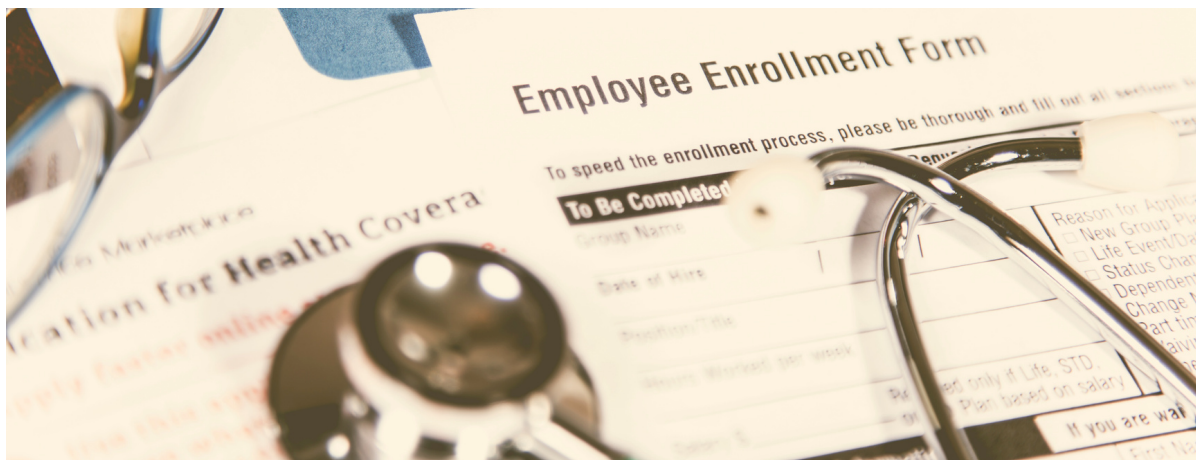
## Work can be insecure

In 2020, 19.5% of working Edmontonians worked part-time (Statistics Canada, 2022b). A downside of this data is that it does not differentiate between those who voluntarily work part-time and those who do not. For some, working part-time is an empowering decision – they may want to go to school at the same time, have more time for hobbies and leisure, or take care of competing home responsibilities. A Statistics Canada study in 2018 found that 29% of those who worked part-time did so because of school (this number jumped to 73% when just looking at those aged 15-24), and 28% did so because

of personal preference. While a similar proportion (24%) did so because they could not find full-time work, this does show that many people do choose to work part-time to pursue other interests (Patterson, 2018).

Others cannot find full-time work and may struggle to make ends meet. Working part-time means bringing home a lower income than those who work full-time. Based on data from 2021, the average hourly wage for a full-time employee in Canada was \$31.87 whereas for a part-time employee it was \$21.12 (Statistics Canada, 2022a), so not only are they working less hours, they also bring home less money per hour they work. In addition, part-time work tends to have inconsistent schedules. The number of hours, and subsequently, income, may change weekly, which makes budgeting and life planning difficult.

Folks who work part-time or in low-wage jobs are often not given health and dental benefits. A study out of Ontario found that fewer than one-third of people who made less than \$20,000 annually received benefits from their employers. By comparison, 92% of those who make between \$60,000 and \$80,000 have employer benefits. This is especially concerning given that those living on low incomes tend to have poorer health and are at higher risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and poor mental health (Wellesly Institute, 2015).



Currently, the Employment Standards Code – which establishes minimum working standards in areas like wages, hours worked, overtime, vacation, and others – does not cover all workers, particularly contract employees, sales workers, and gig workers (Alberta Federation of Labour, 2022), all of whom are

more likely to be working part time. This contributes to these workers insecurity at work as they do not have access to policies that would protect them from poor working conditions.

Job insecurity can come in the form of a lack of job permanency. An Angus Reid (2022) study found that 42% of Albertans are concerned that they or someone in their family may lose their job. Certain industries are more vulnerable to layoffs in tough economic circumstances. In 2020, for example, Alberta Health Services laid off thousands of workers, including nurses, laboratory technicians, and cleaning and food staff (Russell & Rusnell, 2020). Jobs in oil and gas, a large sector of employment in Alberta, are very vulnerable to larger economic trends such as changing oil prices. Layoffs may become even more common in the face of increased automation and a call to transition away from non-renewable energy (Seskus, 2021). Non-profit jobs also tend to be vulnerable, as short-term and inconsistent funding means workers may lose their jobs if their position does not continue to receive funding.



#### **REFLECTION PROMPTS:**

How secure do you feel in your job? What elements of your work life influence your sense of security?

### **Work affects one's social life**

Inconsistent hours also make it difficult to schedule activities outside of work. A study out of the United Kingdom interviewing people who worked multiple low-wage jobs in order to make ends meet illustrates this point well.

Participants discussed their difficulties doing regular household tasks such as laundry, cleaning, and grocery shopping due to long hours spent at their jobs and limited energy when they got home. Long hours also meant they had very little time to spend with their family members. Participants discussed challenges such as working opposite shifts to their partners so they were rarely home at the same time, or parents having to work so late they came home right when their children had to go to bed (Smith & McBride, 2021).

With an already limited ability to engage in regular household tasks, engaging in recreational activities is almost impossible. Participants in Smith and McBride's (2021) study discussed that they never got to go on vacation or buy themselves new clothes. Long hours, working nights, and having limited to no disposable income meant these workers didn't have the ability to go out with

friends. While these issues may seem trivial in the face of more pressing concerns – such as paying rent – they have long lasting impacts on low-income workers’ mental health and overall well-being. These folks spend most of their waking hours working and are denied the ability to do things that bring them joy.



### REFLECTION PROMPTS:

How do you feel after a long day at work? What is it like to engage in activities after work, such as necessary household tasks? Activities that bring you joy?

## Work can be dangerous

Workplaces may expose workers to hazardous work and unsafe conditions. Workers can get injuries from exposure to hazardous material, accidents involving heavy equipment, overexertion, and trips and falls, to name just a few examples. Workplace injuries may result in people having to modify the work they do, or they may have to leave work altogether (Government of Alberta, 2021). Moreover, workplace injuries may lead people to feel unsafe and insecure in their workplaces.

Agriculture and forestry had the highest disabling injury rate in 2019. The manufacturing, processing, and packaging sector (including meat packing) also had a high injury rate (Government of Alberta, 2021). In 2019, there were 129 workplace fatalities in Alberta. Of these fatalities, 47% were caused by occupation illnesses, 36% were caused by workplace incidents, and 18% were caused by motor vehicle incidents (Government of Alberta, 2021).

Government data only shows part of the picture, according to research from the Parkland Institute, almost 70% of disabling workplace injuries in Alberta go unreported. In reality, roughly one in five workers have been injured on the job; at least 408,000 Albertan workers experienced a workplace injury in 2016. The research also found roughly half of employers violate basic occupational health and safety (OHS) rules, and many workers are afraid that exercising their rights would jeopardise their employment (Barnetson & Turnbull, 2018).

These numbers suggest that there are a number of deficiencies in workplace protections in Alberta. In particular, there seems to be little enforcement of the Employment Standards Code, Labour Relations Code, and Occupational Health and Safety legislation. Many employees are experiencing unsafe

workplaces, and have few resources to protect their health and safety. In addition, the Workers Compensation Act does not currently address less visible forms of workplace injuries or illness, such as mental health impacts and the spread of disease like COVID-19 (Alberta Federation of Labour, 2022).



#### **REFLECTION PROMPTS:**

Do you feel safe at work? Do you have the means to protect yourself at work? How do these feelings influence your sense of well-being?

### **People are being over worked**

Canadians are experiencing burnout at astounding rates. “Burnout is a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress” (CAMH, n.d.). It causes people to feel helpless, emotionally drained, and unable to function. If not taken care of, burnout can morph into more serious mental health disorders such as anxiety or depression (CAMH, n.d.). Due to differences in measurement, incidents of burnout vary greatly from source-to-source, and as such we do not have reliable numbers on this phenomenon. A study by Mental Health Research Canada found 35% of Canadians are experiencing burnout at work (MHRC, 2021). Another found that 47% of Canadian workers feel exhausted on a typical workday. Yet another study found 84% of workers at Canadian organizations with 100 or more employees are suffering from career burnout, and 34% of those workers report high or extreme levels (Moore, 2022).

53% of Canadians report they are unable to reasonably balance the demands of work and personal life (MHRC). They may not have the time or energy to devote to their home, family, and personal lives. Smith and McBride (2021), discussed above, discussed how those working multiple low-wage jobs faced difficulty maintaining household chores, spending time with their families, and maintaining a social life due to long, demanding hours.



#### **REFLECTION PROMPTS:**

How would you describe your level of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion at work? How do these feelings impact your life outside of work?

## Workers can lack agency

Agency is important in making workers feel like their opinions and contributions are valued in the workplace. We spend a third of our days at work, we should feel like we matter there.

“Control” refers to the extent to which workers can actively participate in making decisions over the work they do and how they do it. “Demand” refers to the level to which workers have the capacity, resources, and support to accomplish tasks. Both the number of tasks a worker is given, and the nature of those tasks, matters (Hill & Cheff, 2022). Research has shown that people working in jobs that have high demand and low control – meaning they are assigned tasks they do not have adequate capacity, resources, or support to accomplish and have little control to make decisions about their work – are more likely to experience a host of mental health impacts, including exhaustion, depression, stress, anxiety, and depression (Hill & Cheff, 2022).

Feelings of agency are intimately linked with job security. People who are in low wage, insecure positions may have limited control over their work and may not reject high demand work out of the fear they may lose their jobs (Hill & Cheff, 2022). In other words, those with limited job security also tend to experience limited agency, which may make them feel like they do not matter.

It is important that workers have opportunities for skill development within their jobs (Hill & Cheff, 2022). Developing one's skills provides opportunities for personal growth and increases self-esteem. In addition, having an employer invest in an employee's professional development shows that the employer values them. Furthermore, opportunities for skill development leads workers to be more likely to stay in one job because they are not looking for better jobs elsewhere, which increases stability (Hill & Cheff, 2022).



### REFLECTION PROMPTS:

Do you have a say in the work you do? Do you have opportunities to learn and develop skills at work? What impact have these opportunities (or lack of opportunities) had on you?

## Labour isn't always valued

The division of labour, on an overly simplistic level, tends to be categorized in two ways: skilled and unskilled labour.

Skilled labour refers to a job that requires a certain amount of training or credentials in order to be carried out properly. This can include university level education (e.g. a degree or diploma), trade school, work experience, or an apprenticeship. Jobs deemed to be skilled labour vary significantly and can include positions such as plumbers, doctors, or lawyers. These jobs are said to be paid more than unskilled labour due to the investment of time and money to obtain these credentials (Indeed, 2022).

Unskilled labour refers to jobs where formal education and experience are not required to fulfill their duties. This can include jobs such as custodians, grocery store clerks, servers in restaurants. These types of jobs typically pay less than skilled roles and are perceived to be worked by those with little experience or credentials or those who are at the beginning of their careers (Indeed, 2022). Nevertheless, there is a trend of increasing employment of university-educated immigrants in so-called “low-skilled” employment. According to a Statistics Canada analysis, university-educated immigrants accounted for 70% of the growth in unskilled employment over the last 15 years, but only 38% of the growth in high-skilled employment. (Hou, Lu, & Schimmele, 2019)

Workers who have jobs deemed to be unskilled are disproportionately racialized, female, and/or migrant workers. This is largely because people with more social power – non-immigrants, males – are not willing to engage in jobs known by the acronyms DDD (dirty, dangerous, and demanding) and CCC (caring, cooking, and cleaning) that pay low wages (Bergfeld & Farris, 2020).



However, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged this traditional notion of the division of labour and the skills hierarchy. Many of the jobs typically considered “unskilled” were also the ones deemed “essential” in order to keep society functioning as everyone else was told to stay home to stop the spread of the virus. These essential workers included agricultural labourers, workers in food manufacturing, grocery store employees, waste collectors, cleaners, in addition to health care workers.

“Unskilled” jobs rely on a number of skills in order to complete the tasks effectively. Cooking burgers, serving tables, and cleaning bathrooms, all require skills that not everyone has. In addition to the physical demands necessary, there are also interpersonal and relational skills needed, especially within customer service and care worker positions. Nevertheless, the labour market does not value these skills the same way.



#### **REFLECTION PROMPTS:**

Is your job considered skilled or unskilled labour? Do you think this is a fair way to classify jobs? Why are some skills valued more than other skills within the labour market?





# WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN FOR WELL-BEING?

We have traditionally argued that increased employment rates in a community means better well-being. However, this edition of Tracking the Trends has illustrated that working does not always equal well-being. While more people may be working in Edmonton, there is a proliferation of jobs that are insecure, lack benefits, do not leave time for a social life, are dangerous, are overworking people, do not provide workers with a sense of agency, and are not valued by our larger society. **Is a society that is full of these jobs well?**

In order to determine the relationships between work and wellness, we need to take a look at the larger frameworks that determine how we think about work. Neoliberalism is a social, political, and economic regulatory system that calls for limited government involvement in the market and social life in order to promote individual responsibility and freedom. Neoliberal policies involve the privatization of public resources and services, the reduction of government regulations, and the shrinking of government involvement in welfare projects in order to push people to become independent (Harvey, 2005; Turner, 2014). In this system, our positions in life are often boiled down to personal choices, rather than looking at the larger social forces that shape our lives, such as systemic racism, ableism, and classism.

The jobs we work in are seen as a result of our choices, therefore, if we are in jobs that are insecure, dangerous, disempowering, it is because we just did not make good choices. We did not work hard enough to get a good job, or we made irresponsible decisions and thus deserve our fate. Indeed, when people complain about their unfair working conditions, they are often told to just get a better job.

In a neoliberal society, our worth is often determined by our work status. When we meet someone for the first time, one of the first questions asked is “what do you do?” assuming that ‘what they do’ tells us something about that person.

Historically, our surnames represented the professions people were engaged in (e.g. Smith in the English-speaking world meant blacksmith; Muller in Germany meant miller; Varga in Slovakia means cobbler) (Morgan, 2021). While people today are more freely able to choose their own professions, our jobs continue to define us.

Since work is such an integral part of our identities, when work is insecure, too demanding, is disempowering, is dangerous, this negatively affects our sense of self and overall well being. Insecure work has many negative mental health impacts that permeate into the rest of our lives; we feel an overall lack of agency, like our contributions do not matter, like we are disposable. Since our positions in life are often seen as the result of our choices, those who work in these insecure jobs are seen to be there because they were lazy or irresponsible, and these characterizations further erode their sense of self worth. Ironically, it is these same neoliberal logics that have rolled back worker protections, removed social supports, and created “bad” jobs.

Our job does not have to define us. While finding employment that is meaningful and enjoyable has its merits, we are so much more than our labour. We can be deliberate in our efforts to relax and socialize outside of our workspaces, pursue hobbies, join groups or clubs tied to common interests, and engage in activities that bring us joy (Morgan, 2021). In other words, we need to nurture our identities outside of work. That being said, if we work too long, if work exhausts us, if work erodes our self-esteem, we may not have adequate time or energy to engage in these meaningful activities. We need systems that allow us to create meaning and pursue wellness outside the narrow confines of work.

Fundamentally, we need a shift in mindset when it comes to the nature of work. As work currently stands, the contributions of workers keep society functioning, keeps a roof over a family’s head, and can provide a sense of purpose. However, there are too many jobs that are underpaid, place workers in unsafe conditions with few protections, and keeps them away from family and social connections. Edmontonians deserve security, to have an adequate standard of living, and to spend time with loved ones, form social connections, and engage in activities that bring them joy regardless of their work status.



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What would a society that shifts from this mindset look like?

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