**INJURED WORKERS WHO EXPERIENCE CHALLENGES RETURNING TO WORK: PATHWAYS AND CONSEQUENCES**

Report for the Centre for Research on Work Disability Policy

Submitted by:

Rebecca Gewurtz and Stephanie Premji, McMaster University

Linn Holness, St. Michael’s Hospital

*300 word lay summary*

**Introduction:** A significant minority of injured workers experience challenges returning to work after a work-related injury. However, the consequences of difficult return-to-work (RTW) trajectories on the lives of injured workers remain poorly understood. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of injured workers in Ontario who do not return to work successfully following a work-related injury. We examined the journeys of injured workers as they reflected on their workplace injury, their interactions with compensation and benefit systems, and their attempts at work reintegration.

**Methods:** Using an interpretive approach to qualitative research and maximal variability sampling, 11 injured workers and 4 service providers were recruited through partner organizations. Participants included workers from across sectors and a translator was hired to accommodate those who did not speak English. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Audio recordings were transcribed and coded to describe the trajectory of each worker. A constant comparative approach was used to identify key themes across the worker trajectories.

**Results:**The findings that emerged from the analysis capture the journeys of injured workers who experience challenging RTW trajectories and describe the implications for injured workers across all areas of their lives, including: (1) Interactions with workers’ compensation and other benefit systems; (2) Financial strain and family relationship; (3) Subsequent health concerns and pressure to return to work, and; (4) Stigma associated with being an injured worker.

**Conclusions:** The findings from this study highlight a group of injured workers who might need additional supports throughout the return-to-work process, and begin to shed light on their experiences attempting to return to work following a work-related injury. These findings can be used to inform future research that can guide policy and practice within the workplace and disability benefit systems targeting the needs of injured workers who do not successfully return to work.

Most workers who experience a work-related injury or illness recover and successfully reintegrate into the workforce. However, a minority of injured workers experience more complex and prolonged trajectories and are unable to return to or maintain employment [1]. The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of injured workers who have experienced challenging return-to-work (RTW) trajectories. The objectives were to understand the social, economic and health impacts of failing to return to work successfully on injured workers and their families, and how these challenging trajectories are shaped by individual, systemic, and social factors.

Using an interpretive approach to qualitative research [2], this research explores what happens to injured workers in Ontario, Canada when RTW is not successful. For the purpose of this study, unsuccessful RTW is defined as not returning to work as expected resulting in unemployment or underemployment, and becoming disconnected from the workers’ compensation system. This research was guided by the following three questions:

1. What are the social, economic and health implications of failing to successfully return to work on injured workers and their families?
2. How are workers’ experiences shaped by their interactions with disability benefit systems?
3. How are workers’ experiences shaped by physical, mental, or social vulnerabilities?

Following ethics approval from the Hamilton Integrated Research Ethics Board, eleven injured workers who had experienced unsuccessful RTW following a work-related injury and four service providers who work with injured workers experiencing challenges returning to work were recruited. Potential participants were recruited first through our community partners (two non-profit legal clinics and a community health centre in the Greater Toronto Area). Additional participants were recruited through support groups for injured workers in Ontario who agreed to circulate information about the study through their networks. We used maximal variability sampling to obtain as much diversity as possible in individual characteristics that may impact RTW, such as: the nature of injury, employment background, education level, age, and literacy. We included individuals with diverse experiences with returning to work, receiving workers’ compensation benefits in Ontario, and applying for and receiving government sponsored disability benefits and social assistance benefits. We included individuals with multiple or complex vulnerabilities such as those related to language, citizenship, and ongoing disability. In this regard, we specifically recruited participants who were newcomers and for whom English was their second language, and employed the assistance of a professional interpreter in one of the interviews.

## Findings

Reported here is a summary of the findings. The findings are currently being written up in further detail (including interview excerpts) as a manuscript for submission to a peer reviewed journal. The findings have also been presented at the 2016 Canadian Association for Occupational Therapists and Canadian Association for Research on Work and Health conferences.

**Participants**

The injured worker participants ranged in age from 35-69 years, although most were in their fifties. Almost all injuries were musculoskeletal. Time since injury ranged from 1.5 to 28 years, with a mean of almost 12.5. Eight were unemployed at the time of the interview and three were employed part-time. The service providers included a RTW coordinator (employer), an injured worker specialist (health), a labour relations officer (union), and a community legal worker.

The findings focus on the experiences of injured workers who fail to successfully return to work following a work-related injury, and highlight key challenges that were identified by both injured workers and service providers. The findings include an examination of the consequences of these challenges on the lives of injured workers. These findings are summarized under four themes: (1) Interactions with workers’ compensation and other benefit systems; (2) Financial strain and family relationship; (3) Subsequent health concerns and pressure to return to work, and; (4) Stigma associated with being an injured worker.

1. **Interactions with workers’ compensation and other benefit systems**

The nature of the injuries experienced by the injured workers who participated in this study varied. Some participants experienced traumatic events, requiring immediate medical attention, while others experienced a gradual onset of a cumulative and repetitive injury. All of the participants reported that they informed their employer of their injury; however, the timing of this reporting varied. The majority of the participants reported their injury immediately, especially when the injury was traumatic and required immediate medical attention. However, some participants described a period of trying to cope on their own, without acknowledging the injury or reporting it to their supervisor or employer.

Overall, accessing workers’ compensation was described by several injured workers as a challenging process. Some participants noted that the system used by workers’ compensation to categorize injuries was insufficient as it did not take into account the potential complexities of many injuries and circumstances. At times, this resulted in workers being required to return to work before they were ready, given the complex nature of their injuries and rehabilitation needs.

Due to the barriers and complications in accessing workers’ compensation benefits, most participants had experience accessing other benefit systems and supports. Participants described their interactions with Employment Insurance (EI), the Canadian Pension Plan (federal, contribution-based pension), Ontario Works (general welfare program), Ontario Disability Support Program (general welfare program for people with disabilities), Company-Sponsored Disability Plans, and food banks. A few participants noted that they were unable to secure any income support because of their unique situations and the rules surrounding each program. Participants whose claims were denied or discontinued by the workers’ compensation system expressed their confusion and disappointment since their injuries occurred at work. A few participants described how difficult it was to access other benefit systems as an injured worker. Even after many years, some participants were unsure what to do and where to turn to for ongoing financial support.

Injured workers who are also newcomers to Canada faced additional challenges trying to navigate the workers’ compensation system and other disability benefit systems following a workplace injury. Such issues were raised by both injured workers and service providers who highlighted challenges related to language and understanding eligibility criteria. These challenges intensified the confusion experienced by some participants and added to their vulnerability.

1. **Financial strain and family relationship**

All participants discussed the various ways in which failing to successfully return to work after injury led to significant financial burden. This resulted from costs related to lost wages, legal fees, and ongoing medical treatment for the original and subsequent injuries that were not covered by either the provincial health care system, the workers’ compensation system or other sources. The significant financial burden that resulted from these factors led, in some cases, to loss of housing and savings, credit card and other debt, and difficulty accessing essential items such as food.

All of the injured worker participants discussed the impact that their complex RTW trajectory had on their family relationships. Some highlighted the support they received from family that enabled them to keep going and persevere. However, even among those reporting positive familial relationships and support, some expressed apprehension about the lasting nature of these relationships given their difficult ongoing circumstances. Injured worker participants also discussed the negative impacts that unsuccessful RTW had on their families, including the strain on marriages and relationships with children.

1. **Subsequent health concerns and pressure to return to work**

Most injured worker participants discussed the subsequent pain, injury, or illness that they experienced as a result of stress, early and unsuccessful attempts at returning to work, and a lack of adequate accommodations at work. In some cases, participants associated their subsequent poor health with the workers’ compensation system. These subsequent health concerns included descriptions of psychological distress and mental illness. Depression and anxiety were quite prevalent in the experiences reported by both the injured worker and service provider participants. Most participants described depression resulting from the injury, chronic pain, and resulting disability. Some injured workers specifically linked their depression and distress to their interactions with the workers’ compensation system. Specifically, participants described rigid rules and processes within the workers’ compensation system that limited their options and access to supports and benefits that could support their recovery and RTW efforts. The experience of psychological distress and depression made it difficult for injured workers to engage in their daily activities, as well as activities related to their recovery and procedural responsibilities related to their claim. Depression also led to isolation and separation from their supports, including family and friends. The depression seemed to persist even years after the initial workplace injury.

Both injured workers and service providers discussed the ways in which injured workers were pressured to return to work before they were ready. Some of these pressures were internal, such as the need to make money. However, many were external. These external pressures came mainly from employers and the workers’ compensation system. Related to the pressure to return to work prematurely, injured workers discussed various ways in which their employers failed to provide them with the appropriate accommodations they needed in order to safely return to work. A repeated failure to provide these accommodations was one factor that facilitated participants’ subsequent injuries, at times forcing them to leave their jobs once again.

1. **Stigma associated with being an injured worker**

Stigma was a prevalent theme reported by the injured worker participants. Those who experienced a lack of appropriate accommodations at work described workplace stigma as one of the causal factors. Stigma was described by injured workers in two ways: First, stigma was described in relation to interactions with co-workers, employers, supervisors and the workers’ compensation board. Stigma was also described more generally, in terms of injured workers and people with disabilities. Workplace stigma centered on experiences attempting to return to work post-injury. Injured workers described overt harassment and discrimination, as well as covert actions such as refusing to provide appropriate accommodations. Participants also described more general social stigma that made it difficult for them to go back to work or feel good about themselves. This stigma extended beyond the workplace and many participants noted that they feared leaving their home because people often assumed that if they were too sick to work they should look sick and be unable to engage in other aspects of life.

**Discussion**

The findings from this research document the trajectories of a small sample of injured workers who do not return to work successfully following a work-related injury, and highlight the broad financial, social, and health consequences on individuals and their families. This is a population of injured workers whose experiences have not been widely documented as workers’ compensation boards typically do not follow injured workers after their benefits have been discontinued. The findings reported here highlight the prevalent and persistent nature of the ongoing financial, health, and social needs of injured workers that are often downloaded to other social support systems when workers’ compensation is no longer available. Overall, the participants described significant fear and uncertainty towards the future in terms of their financial and social security, as well as their ongoing experience of complex health challenges that had a significant impact on all aspects of their lives. Improved understanding of the experiences of injured workers with complex and unsuccessful RTW trajectories following a workplace injury is critical in order to better respond to their ongoing needs through income security and employment support programs. For example, there is need to examine how decisions about suitable retraining are made given the skills, competencies, and interests of each individual worker. Such efforts could improve work reintegration efforts provided through workers’ compensation boards.

Although this research offers initial insight into the experiences of injured workers and people who work with injured workers, the perspectives of families, employers and co-workers were not explored. Further understanding of the experiences of diverse stakeholders is critical. In particular, the findings reported here suggest that family members play critical roles in supporting injured workers whose benefits have been discontinued. Such circumstances can cause significant strain and stress on the family unit, leading to further insecurity and vulnerability. Understanding the role of family in the experiences of injured workers’ is emergent [3] and requires further attention.

## Conclusions

The findings highlight the need for further examination and tracking of injured workers who do not return to work successfully and become disconnected from the workers’ compensation system. There is a need to better understand the prevalence of injured workers on social assistance programs, and the extent of the pervasive poverty among injured workers that has been previously documented. The findings reported here highlight that injured workers who do not return to work as expected can face multiple vulnerabilities that further challenge their access to supports and resources. Beyond coordination, there is a need to examine issues related to how the needs of this sub-group are being met, identify opportunities for innovation, and explore a better way forward.

**Description of Partnership and Next Steps**

This work was completed in partnership with two legal clinics and a community health centre in Toronto, Ontario. Our partnership has evolved to include an additional legal clinic, advocacy groups for injured workers, and other researchers who are examining the experiences of injured workers who have unsuccessful RTW trajectories. Specifically, we have had several meetings with a group of injured workers, advocates, and researchers in Ontario who have completed a review of social assistance outcomes for injured workers (also funded through the CRWDP). We are now pursuing partnership opportunities through a SSHRC connections grant competition in 2017. See below for a table of our expanded partnership (beyond the current research team).

Expanded Partnership Members

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| --- | --- |
| John McKinnon | Injured Workers’ Consultants |
| Jennefer Laidley | Income Security Advocacy Centre |
| Terence Copes | Sudbury Community Legal Clinic |
| Steve Mantis | Ontario Network of Injured Workers Groups |
| Agnieszka Kosny | Researcher, Institute for Work and Health |
| Andy King | Independent Consultant |

Our next steps will include a peer reviewed publication (in development) and an application to the Feb. 2017 SSHRC connections grant competition. The purpose of the connections grant is to bring together Canadian and international experts, practitioners, policy decision-makers, students and scholars to exchange knowledge related to the intersection between the workers’ compensation system and social assistance programs. The goal of the series of events will be to initiate a dialogue, share current knowledge, and build a sustainable partnership that can be mobilized for ongoing research and action related to this sub-population of injured. We will host a 2-day main event, preceded by a prepatory consultation meeting and followed by a debriefing session to mobilize action and develop a future research agenda. The events will be hosted in Toronto but also livestreamed for those who cannot attend in person. We anticipate that our partnership will continue to evolve as we prepare the connections grant and plan the event. Although the Connections Grant will continue to have an Ontario focus, we will invite speakers and presenters from other jurisdictions (including Canadian and international experts) in order to learn about what is currently known about injured workers who do not return to work, available data sources in other jurisdictions, and how to best pursue this line of inquiry.

**References**

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