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Intertwined precariousness and precarity: Disentangling a phenomenon that characterises Spanish youth

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Abstract

The growth of non-standard employment has emerged as a crucial factor that contributes to delays and difficulties in young people's transitions to adulthood. Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of multidimensional measures of precariousness. This paper aims to investigate the phenomenon of precariousness holistically, using an original database of respondents in Spain from 20 to 34 years of age. Using a mixed-methods approach, we explore young people's understandings of precariousness and examine its key determinants and consequences. The findings illustrate the multidimensional nature of feelings of precariousness, with economic insecurity and work conditions being core elements. Our results point to precarity stemming from a combination of inextricably intertwined objective and subjective components, as well as work and economic dimensions.

KEYWORDS

mixed methods, non-standard employment, precarious work, precariousness, precarity, youth

INTRODUCTION

The neoliberal transformation of labour has been central to youth studies' debates since the 1980s (Furlong et al., 2017). Although non-standard employment is common at all ages, it overwhelmingly affects young people (Chung et al., 2012), with the notorious consequence of hindering their transitions to adult life (Bessant et al., 2018; Van de Velde, 2008; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Since the seminal contribution of Pierre Bourdieu's 'La précarité est aujourd'hui partout' (1997), social scientists have shown a growing interest in the destandardisation of labour and its consequences for perceived insecurity (Barbier, 2005; Castel, 2003; Sennet, 1998). Focusing on precariousness as an object of study implies analysing how the deregulation of job contracts generates new social fractures and inequalities associated with insecurity (Vosko et al., 2009). However, attention must also be paid to the economic consequences of work instability: the impossibility of maintaining a decent standard of living (Cantó & Romaguera-de-la-Cruz, 2023). Especially in the case of young people, this uncertainty might constitute a burden that impedes a successful transition to adult life (Bessant et al., 2018; Kalleberg, 2018; Van de Velde, 2008).

Thus, changes in youth transitions have been explained through the neoliberal transformations of

labour on young people's experiences and living standards (Bessant et al., 2018; Kalleberg, 2018). However, the various concepts used to do so (such as precariousness, precarious work or precarity) are neither theoretically nor empirically neutral. Indeed, each concept emphasises specific dimensions of the phenomenon while often downplaying others, generating a certain conceptual confusion in the analysis of precariousness.

This paper argues that the destandardisation of labour and its consequences on young people's lives have a multidimensional nature. But the generalised consensus on precariousness being multidimensional has not been translated adequately when operationalising the phenomenon. Notably, there is a critical misalignment between the objective indicators related to precarious work (e.g. having a non-standard contract) and a subjective-oriented approach towards feelings of precariousness (e.g. feeling insecure in one's own life) more applied in qualitative studies, where attention is given to subjects' perspectives (Armano & Murgia, 2013). This misalignment partially reflects the existing statistical sources available for studying non-standard labour, which do not usually offer indicators for comparing precarious jobs with individual perceptions of insecurity.

Consequently, the literature has fallen short in analysing the complexity of precariousness as a phenomenon, as well as separating the work-related dimension from its economic consequences. To close this gap, we investigate subjective perceptions of the consequences of unstable work, affirming that precarity is personally constructed and goes beyond work to affect the economic insecurity of the person (Barbier, 2005; Bourdieu, 1998; Castel, 2003). We argue that precarity, defined as the feeling of being insecure in one's own life, is determined by objective and subjective elements and labour market and economic elements. We also show empirically that these different dimensions are intimately related, interdependent and irreducible. We consider that having a measure for the subjective feeling of precariousness is fundamental to understanding the mechanism by which a non-standard contract translates into life insecurity.

While terms such as precariousness, precarity, non-standard work or job insecurity, among others, have sometimes been used in erratic and contradictory ways across disciplines, there is substantial agreement that the neoliberal transformation of labour as a social phenomenon involves both an objective dimension of employment that 'lacks standard forms of labour security' (Vosko et al., 2009, p. 2) and a subjective dimension related to how the person perceives and interprets their labour market conditions, as well as non-work-related dimensions such as economic insecurity (Antonucci, 2018). For conceptual clarity, henceforth, we will use *precariousness* to refer to the general phenomenon as an object of study in social sciences (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013), indicating the negative consequences suffered by people with non-standard employment.[1] We adopt *precarious work* to identify the objective dimensions associated with lack of employment security (Antonucci, 2018; Campbell & Price, 2016) and we use *precarity* to reflect the subjectively perceived feeling of being insecure, including not only the uncertainty deriving from work instability but also the incapacity to ensure a decent standard of living, touching debates that have used economic insecurity as their primary concept of reference (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024). Research has often assumed non-standard work in itself to be a sufficient indicator of precarity (Campbell & Price, 2016), while no systematic analysis exists of the complex meanings that young people associate with precariousness.

This article aims to contribute to narrowing these gaps. We propose a mixed-method analysis of the complexity of precarity, examining its subjective and objective dimensions and exploring its meanings beyond work. We use a strategy that allows us to integrate and highlight the multidimensionality and interdependence of the concept on three levels: young people's own definition of *precariedad*,[2] the determinants of precarity and the discourses and experiences young people attach to it. We study young people because we consider that they form the social group that is most exposed to precariousness as a new social risk (Chevalier & Palier, 2023). Young people have always been more vulnerable because of their lesser experience in the labour market (Antón-Alonso et al., 2023; Serracant, 2012). However, the destandardisation of labour occurring in Southern Europe over the last few decades has configured a new scenario in which economic insecurity, job instability and social vulnerability have increased and now affect young adults permanently (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024; Bessant et al., 2018; Tremmel, 2010). Disentangling the complex relationship between the dimensions of precariousness will allow us to understand this pervasive phenomenon among young people in Spain.

To do so, this paper discusses the conceptual and methodological debates on the neoliberal transformation of work and its related concepts, namely precariousness, precarious work, job insecurity, precarity and economic insecurity. Through an extensive literature review, we examine the definitions and operationalisations of

[1]Defined as such, precariousness is a consequence of the process of precarisation, which is the process by which labour has progressively lost protective regulation and has been increasingly exposed to the uncertainty of the market (Alberti et al., 2018).

[2]In Spanish, there is only one term *precariedad* that encapsulates the English precariousness and precarity.

precariousness that co-exist in the literature and contrast them with young people's understandings of the phenomenon. Our objective is to disentangle the forms and meanings associated with non-standard work while measuring the relevant factors that influence the feeling of living precariously. The empirical part of the paper seeks to demonstrate the conceptual and empirical multidimensionality and interdependency of precariousness by addressing the following three questions: (1) What are the main dimensions that young people use to conceptualise precariousness as a phenomenon? (2) What are the key determinants of subjective feelings of insecurity, what we call precarity? (3) How do the different dimensions associated with precarity shape young people's experiences and discourses?

Using primary data on youth in Spain (20–34 years old) collected in 2023, we offer an in-depth analysis of the multiple components of precariousness. The VulnYouth dataset is unique in that it was specifically constructed to capture the multiple dimensions of precariousness, to examine how commonly used indicators align with young people's experiences of precariousness and to question existing conceptualisations of it.

The Multidimensionality of Precariousness

Precariousness is now an established field of study in many social sciences, including sociology, political science, economics, psychology, management, geography and ethnography. Although they use different terms, scholars perceive the growing diffusion of non-standard work as a potential threat to the social model consolidated during the industrial era (Kalleberg, 2018). Despite recognising precariousness as a phenomenon that is neither new (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008) nor specific to the global North (Waite, 2009), the social relevance of precariousness and its impact on the perceived insecurity of workers has put it at the centre of the debate related to the neoliberal transformation of labour in advanced capitalist societies. The term precariousness gained momentum in the early 21st century, when precarious labour began to be considered an issue in advanced capitalist countries. Although a consensus on the use of the term(s) is yet to be reached across disciplines (Waite, 2009), the debate has mainly divided the concept into an objective dimension related to precarious work and a subjective dimension related to the perceived precarity of the person, going beyond a purely work-based definition of insecurity (Antonucci, 2018; Campbell & Price, 2016).

Regarding the objective dimension, defining precarious labour is not a straightforward task. Most definitions identify precariousness negatively by contrasting it with the permanent full-time dependent employment that constituted the norm during the industrial era (Betti, 2018; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Rubery et al., 2018). In labour studies, the Standard Employment Relationship (SER) indicates a permanent full-time contract as an employee; this allows the worker to access social benefits and statutory entitlements (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013). It protects workers from a purely market relationship, thanks to the combined protection offered by social policies and workers' rights (Rubery et al., 2018; Vosko et al., 2009). Conversely, non-standard work comprises all formal employment relations that are not SER, such as fixed-term contracts, part-time employment and self-employment. These jobs are commonly associated with lower pay (Helbling & Kanji, 2018), higher risk of unemployment (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013) and weaker access to workers' rights (Bazillier et al., 2016). While the term precarious work has been frequently associated with these types of jobs, scholars differ regarding the degree to which they accept that lack of security in a job determines precarious work.

However, at least theoretically, precarious labour does not only stem from non-standard work (Antonucci, 2018; Campbell & Price, 2016; Waite, 2009). Even workers with SER contracts might perceive their jobs as insecure if, for instance, their company is at risk of bankruptcy or downsizing or if they fear that they might be asked to work part time against their wishes (Sverke et al., 2006). In fact, a multidimensional definition of precarious work—such as that of Vosko et al. (2009)—also includes low pay and a lack of protection and control over conditions and as such can occur in all jobs. The EPRES Scale, proposed by Vives et al. (2015), aims to cover the multidimensionality of precarious work. It partially answer this need, but lacks a subjective evaluation of workers' perceptions of precarity.

The first contribution in this sense occurred when Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) proposed adding the concept of job insecurity to the study of labour. They were the first to include a subjective measure of precariousness, measured as how likely the person thinks it is that they will lose their job in the next 12 months. This would subsequently become the standard adopted in the psychological debate. Studies on job insecurity (Helbling & Kanji, 2018; Sverke et al., 2006) have mostly affirmed that employment (precarious or not) poses a potential negative threat to the well-being and health of a person only if the job is subjectively perceived as insecure (Allan et al., 2021). However, job insecurity defines and measures precariousness as a purely work-related phenomenon.

The first contribution to discuss the subjective perception of precariousness beyond work insecurity was

Sennet's (1998) seminal work on the personal consequences of work in contemporary capitalism, although there he used the term *flexibility*. In Europe, Bourdieu (1997) popularised the term *precarité*, firstly among activists fighting precarious labour, then in the academic debate (Choonara, 2020a). Bourdieu recovered a term he had applied in his studies in Algeria in 1963 to identify the objective status of informal and unstable work, but in his more recent *Contre-feux* (1998), he referred more explicitly to the existential condition of insecurity associated with precarious employment (Waite, 2009). The association between work /economic dimensions of precariousness was discussed from the very beginning of the French debate on non-standard work and extended in the Spanish and Italian literature in the following years (Barbier, 2005). The aforementioned definition of precarity extends the concept of subjective insecurity beyond work. Following this line of thought, precarity is an existential condition that affects the life perspective of a person in the medium and long term due to the inability to maintain a decent standard of living (Barbier, 2005). Following Bourdieu's approach, precarity can thus be defined as a condition of insecurity in which a precarious job threatens access to basic needs (housing, food, utilities and healthcare), driving people into economic insecurity (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024). If poverty is an objective condition based on insufficient material resources, economic insecurity is a subjective perception based on a person's incapacity to ensure a standard of living they consider decent (Cantó & Romaguera-de-la-Cruz, 2023; Maestripieri, 2023). That is, precarity goes beyond job insecurity, which is the fear of losing one's job or its desired characteristics (Allan et al., 2021) and extends to the detrimental effects experienced by workers who feel precarious in their lives (Alberti et al., 2018; Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013; Waite, 2009). Especially for young people, precarity implies a transfer of risk and responsibility to the individual (Antonucci, 2018) and may burden their transitions into adulthood (Bessant et al., 2018; Furlong et al., 2017; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Precarity for these young people includes an element of economic insecurity (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024), a term that is central to poverty studies (Waite, 2009).

Around the 2000s, the term was adopted and politicised by social movements in France (*precarité*), Italy (*precarietà*) and Spain (*precariedad*) (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). The international scientific debate subsequently adopted this neologism in English as *precarity* (Standing, 2011) and applied it as a heuristic tool for understanding the consequences of precarious work (Waite, 2009). In a contribution that popularised the term at the global level as a political slogan, Standing (2011) claimed that precarity had spawned a new social class, the *precariat*, exposed to insecurity in employment and life. Just a few years earlier, Judith Butler (2004, 2009) had developed a parallel line of thought exploring the meaning of precariousness/precarity as a fundamental ontological state of human beings. This examined vulnerability as relational, extending the meaning well beyond the discussion on the personal and economic consequences of non-standard work that characterised the French, Italian and Spanish perspective.

Although the growth in this feeling of precarity has not always been supported by data at least in neoliberal countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States (Choonara, 2020a), it is arguable that an ideology of adapting to market forces has become hegemonic in advanced capitalistic countries, with consequences on the way people subjectively perceive their relationship with employment. This implies a generalised fear of feeling vulnerable about holding onto one's job—with consequences that go beyond contractual instability (Choonara, 2020b), deriving in generalised subjective insecurity (Choonara, 2020a). This feeling might become more important than the employment contract in explaining why young people delay significant steps of their transition to adulthood, such as forming stable relationships or living independently (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024; Bessant et al., 2018; Kalleberg, 2018; Woodman & Wyn, 2015).

The literature on subjectively perceived insecurity related to non-standard employment is substantial. Waite (2009) distinguishes subjective and objective levels analytically. Arnold and Bongiovi (2013) highlight the subjective dimension of precariousness, at least in theoretical terms, as do others (Alberti et al., 2018; Armano & Murgia, 2013; Choonara et al., 2022). However, at the theoretical level, there is an important clarification to be made: not everyone in precarious work might perceive it as subjectively insecure—for instance, Campbell and Price (2016) propose the example of full-time students who hold part-time jobs in retail. Their work is objectively precarious, but its consequences on their precarity are limited, as many of the associated risks are cushioned by living with their families or having other sources of income. Antonucci (2018), focusing on a similar target, demonstrates how the welfare mix that the person can access is fundamental for determining their perception of precarity. Worth (2016) goes in the same direction, applying Butler's definition of precarity and demonstrating the importance of relations in determining young women's feelings of precariousness in Canada.

In order to fully understand precariousness as a phenomenon, it is key to introduce a subjective dimension. A precarious job does not necessarily make a precarious worker (Campbell & Price, 2016). People might opt for

non-standard work for several reasons and only feel precarious when their job does not match their aspirations and expectations. Based on this argument, we thus identify precarity as theoretically constituted along two axes: objective/subjective and work/economic. This distinction, which guides our empirical analysis, allows us to examine and clarify previous conceptions associated with the phenomenon of precariousness and allows a holistic understanding of the multidimensionality and complexity of this phenomenon among young people.

METHODS

This study explores the multidimensional nature of precariousness by focusing on two axes: subjective/objective and work/economic. Its three steps were a qualitative analysis of the meanings associated with precariousness, a quantitative analysis of the determinants of precarity, and another qualitative analysis, this time of the discourses associated with the experience of precarity. The quantitative part aimed to identify the dimensions (subjective/objective and work/economic) that help explain a person's experience of precarity, while the qualitative part explored the meanings associated with precariousness as a phenomenon, analysing how young people define it and how they experience precarity in everyday life.

As such, we applied a fully integrated mixed-method design in which interviewees' understandings of precariousness and the precarity they experience were investigated both qualitatively and quantitatively. Indeed, the methodological originality of our study lies in its capacity to combine multivariate models with a qualitative analysis of what respondents consider precarity to be (Verd, 2023), confirming the relevance of its multidimensionality (Vives et al., 2015).

Data

The research uses primary data on 3012 young people (20–34 years old) in Spain, of which 2302 were working at the time of the interview. We collected the questionnaires in February–March 2023 and organised a focus group with nine participants (April 2023) who had also participated in the survey. A specialised company found respondents to the survey that matched the requirements of the quota sample that we had established before administering the fieldwork.

The sample respected the distribution of the population by region and characteristics: gender, age, migrant background and urban/rural divide. In total, 210 questionnaires were collected face-to-face in deprived neighbourhoods to ensure sufficient representativity of the most vulnerable youth, usually more difficult to reach in online surveys. The other interviews were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire, which took, on average, 16 min to complete. As often happens with online surveys (McInroy, 2016), our resulting sample is somewhat skewed towards highly educated, older (30–34) young people. However, it fits our aim of assessing the relationship between different components of the phenomenon among young workers. See Table A1 for further details on the subsample of workers.

The questionnaires were explicitly designed to capture the multiple operationalisations of precariousness that co-exist in the literature, including indicators related to precarious work, job insecurity and economic insecurity. One of the most relevant indicators in our survey is our original measure for precarity. To measure this, we combined two questions. First, we asked respondents to give their own free definition of precariousness (with no text limit). We obtained 2500 valid answers to this question. Then we asked them to score the extent to which they feel precarious, ranging from 0 'not at all precarious' to 10 'I feel extremely precarious'. This variable has a mean of 4.35 and a standard deviation of 2.91. Of 3012 total respondents, this variable is missing in 606. We developed the first question to explore the generalised phenomenon of the precariousness caused by the destandardisation of labour in society and the second as a measure of precarity, that is, the subjective feeling of being precarious.

The nine focus group participants were chosen from among the survey's respondents, representing some of the most vulnerable profiles (e.g. people with disabilities or experiencing mental health problems, those entitled to a minimum income benefit or with care responsibilities). We applied an extreme case purposive selection sample (Patton, 1990) with the idea that inviting those most exposed to precarity could help us more easily identify how an objective contractual situation translates into perceived subjective insecurity and the consequences for the transition to adulthood. To choose the vulnerability profile, we mostly relied on the literature (Ranci & Maestripieri, 2022) and identified the personal characteristics or situations that might expose young people to precarity. We could choose the most appropriate profiles from the survey respondents who volunteered in the qualitative phase. Table A5 displays the characteristics of the focus group participants. They are diverse in terms of gender, age, place of residence (the focus group was held online, including people from all over Spain), and in other characteristics such as having informal jobs, health, housing, mobility and economic vulnerability that might affect their perceptions of precarity.

The focus group allowed us to understand more deeply how some of the most vulnerable survey respondents perceive precarity. The interview guide included questions on what precariousness means for the participants, how they experience precariousness in their lives and the consequences for their transition to adulthood, as well as any consequences on their mental health (the original scope of the project). This focus group was organised and structured to favour maximum interaction among participants and to reach a group consensus defining certain concepts—such as precariousness and precarity—that we considered relevant for our project.

Quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis was limited to working young adults for whom we had information on precarity and relevant controls ($n = 1534$). For a complete overview of the distribution of missing cases, see Table A2. We implemented step-wise linear regressions using the self-defined precarity scale as the dependent variable. Independent variables in the model were informed by the operationalisations of precariousness found in the literature. We used three main dimensions: contract type (main job), work-related insecurity and indicators of economic insecurity. The aim was to determine the extent to which each dimension identified in the academic literature contributes to young people's perceptions of precarity.

As for contract type, labour studies have traditionally identified the absence of a Standard Employment Relationship (SER) as a defining element of precarious work, while recent developments have highlighted the importance of involuntariness as a mediating factor (Maestripieri, 2023; Rubery et al., 2018). Accordingly, we distinguish four categories: (i) SER (Standard Employment Relationship)—all workers who have permanent, full-time jobs as employees; (ii) voluntary non-standard work—all temporary, part-time and self-employed workers declaring themselves to be voluntarily employed in those jobs; (iii) involuntary non-standard work—all non-standard workers declaring that they could not find a better (standard) job; (iv) informal and gig employment—those working without contracts or working through platforms.

The two variables (precarity and job contracts) are strongly associated. As shown in Figure 1 below, precarity is lowest among those with SER contracts and highest among those with informal and gig contracts. In this box plot, the variable is distributed by quartiles: the upper/lower lines indicate the minimum and the maximum, while the boxes' boundaries indicate the 25%/75% quartiles. The line in the middle of each box represents the average value of precarity within the specific group of workers.

We complement the information on contract type by including information on work-related insecurity as prescribed by Vosko et al. (2009). First, we measure employment vulnerability using four items on the EPRES Scale (Vives et al., 2015): 'I am afraid of asking for better work conditions', 'I am defenceless against unfair treatment', 'I will be fired if I do not do what I am asked' and 'I have been made to feel like it is easy to substitute me'. The scale ranges from 1 'Never' to 5 'Always'. We created an additive index, normalised from 0 (no vulnerability) to 1 (maximum vulnerability).[3] Although it was not originally formulated and tested for this end (Vives et al., 2015), the combination of these four items allows us to include information about working conditions, unfair treatment and empowerment of workers, which enables us to detect precarious work beyond non-standard contracts (Rubery et al., 2018; Vosko et al., 2009).[4] Secondly, we use a widely used measure of job insecurity (fear of losing one's job in the next 12 months) to reflect young people's own evaluations, aiming to distinguish between precarious jobs and precarious workers (Campbell & Price, 2016). Indeed, as discussed above, how the person perceives their job and their feeling of insecurity is crucial for identifying a condition of precarity. The first is an objective indicator of work-related insecurity; the second is a subjective indicator.

In relation to economic insecurity, precarity is often recognised as going beyond work. It includes the personal consequences of precarious work (or lack of work), operationalised in terms of difficulties in securing an adequate standard of living (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024; Cantó & Romaguera-de-la-Cruz, 2023). We use three indicators related to this dimension: ability to make ends meet, ability to meet an unexpected expense of 700€ (an EU indicator of deprivation) and housing. Regarding the unexpected expense, we distinguish between the young person meeting it on their own or with parental support. We consider making ends meet a subjective indicator of economic security and capacity to afford an unexpected expense and housing status objective indicators. Finally, in order to assess the association between difficulties in transitioning to adulthood and precarity,

[3]For a complete outlook of what is missing in this variable, refer to Table A3.

[4]We included the vulnerability dimension of the EPRES Scale as an objective measure, although its formulation is based on a person's subjective evaluation, the four items on the EPRES Scale measure some of the characteristics that Vosko et al. (2009) and Rubery et al. (2018) associate with precarious labour independently of contract type. For this reason, we consider it an acceptable proxy of the objective dimension of precariousness associated with precarious work.

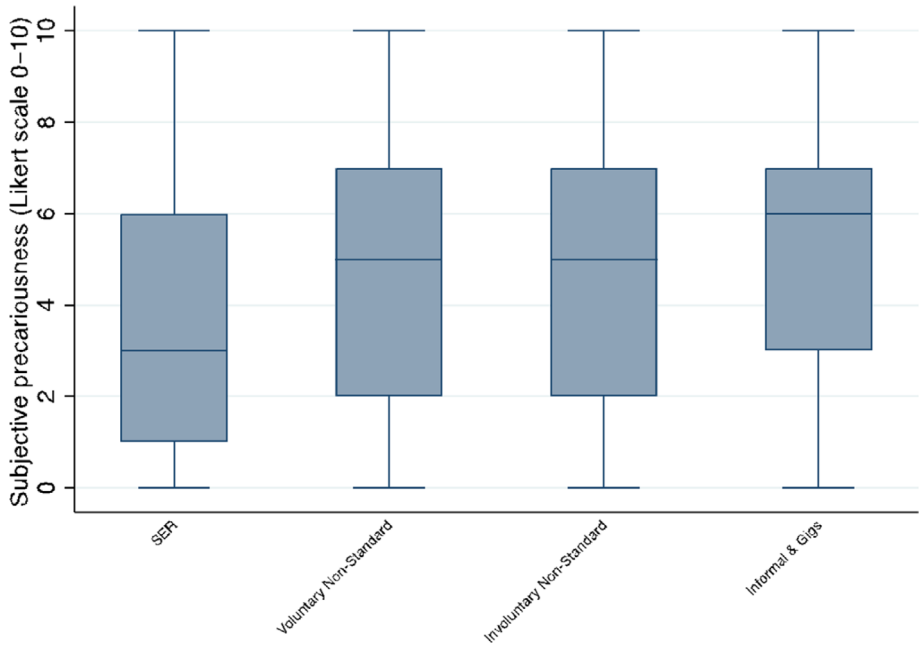

FIGURE 1 Box plot of the association between precarity and contract type. *Source*: Authors' processing of data from VulnYouth dataset (2023).

we include a variable on economic emancipation, which is whether young people feel capable of paying for things in their daily lives without the economic support of their parents.

Additionally, sociodemographic characteristics allow us to test for differences in precarity among social groups. We consider gender, age, migrant background, health status, household composition and the presence of children (under 12) in the household. Finally, we include three dummy variables that capture the qualitative definition provided by respondents: subjective, if the definition of precariousness includes elements related to emotions, personal feelings or subjectively constructed meanings; work-related, if the definition includes elements related to objective working conditions, and, economic, if the definition of precariousness includes elements that go beyond work, such as difficulties making ends meet or incapacity to access basic goods. We also interacted the latter.

Qualitative analysis

The qualitative part of our analysis aims to understand the meanings that young people ascribe to precariousness and, in particular, the role played by objective/subjective and work/economic dimensions. To achieve this, a two-step strategy was used, combining the later focus group discussion with the results of the responses ($n = 2512$) to the open-ended survey question 'What is precariousness for you?'

The content analysis of the open-ended question employed a two-step mixed-content structuring strategy (Mayring, 2014). In the initial deductive phase, the answers were coded according to the dimensions pre-established by the literature guiding our analysis. In the second inductive phase, the content was analysed again, using a bottom-up strategy to extract the main markers of each typology.

In the first phase, four non-exclusive categories were created that identified the presence of objective, subjective, work and economic dimensions within each respondent's definition. Following a preliminary definition of each category 10% of the responses were coded. This allowed the coding criteria to be refined, to establish final coding rules, including anchor examples (see Table A4). This coding process developed typologies of conceptualisations of precariousness based on the presence of the different dimensions in the definition, classifying respondents' definitions into six distinct types (see Table 1 in the Findings section). Considering that nearly all definitions contained an objective component, in creating the typology, all definitions containing a subjective dimension were grouped together, regardless of whether subjectivity appeared alone or combined with an objective component. After classifying all definitions, inductive content analysis was implemented to identify markers and underlying meanings associated with each conception of precariousness. Finally, the

resulting coding was introduced into the last regression model to ensure full integration between qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Grounded Theory methods (Charmaz, 2006) were used to analyse the focus group transcription, and the coding combines inductive and deductive approaches. The procedure thus entailed applying a coding system based on the categories previously used to describe the answer to the open-ended question, as well as creating new codes as analytical devices to encapsulate themes emerging from the discussion. The coding process was iterative and the analysis involved the repeated consideration of raw data. As a result, several themes were selected, exposing narratives related to precariousness, precarious work and precarity as deductive concepts applied to the focus group transcription. The two categories of the mutual constitution of precarity and precariousness as a generational marker of youth emerged inductively from the analysis. These narratives complement the previous analyses by exploring how participants experience precarity and build narratives about it.

RESULTS

How do young people in spain conceptualise precariousness?

Young people's perceptions of precariousness inform their own understandings of the phenomenon in myriad ways, sometimes not reflecting academic findings. Their replies underline that multidimensionality is key to their understandings. Table 1 presents the results of the coding across the two axes, objective/subjective and work/economic. Taking into account the two coded dimensions, the highest frequency conception is also the most restricted: linked only to objective aspects related to work. Even so, this conception reflects fewer than 30% of the answers. We thus note that the different dimensions appear in a fairly balanced way in these responses.

Almost all definitions contain an objective component, either explicitly or implicitly, so Table 1 does not distinguish those from exclusively subjective definitions. Even the definitions that focus primarily on the subjective aspects of perceptions or emotional discomfort include the idea that this subjective experience is linked to objective conditions (contract or other aspects). This fact reinforces the idea that precarious work is a necessary condition for feeling precarious, although not always sufficient on its own (Campbell & Price, 2016). Thirty per cent of definitions contain a subjective dimension; these also tend to be the longest and most elaborate. Given that survey fatigue tends to favour short answers, the subjective dimension may be somehow underestimated in the responses. This idea is supported by findings from the focus group (see section "how do young people experience precarity"), where interviewees had more opportunity to expand on their understandings and experiences of precarity, with subjective elements almost always present. In relation to the work/economic axis, the results also show considerable diversity in the conception of precariousness: 44% of the answers highlight work-related elements, while the rest make reference to economic elements. Among these, 22.1% of the definitions explicitly combine work aspects with non-work elements, such as unfulfilled basic needs, housing or life opportunities.

To delve into the meanings of young people's conceptions of precariousness and to ensure robust results, we conducted a second content analysis of the respondents' definitions using a more inductive strategy. We classified the definitions according to the dimensions identified and analysed the markers that appeared in the associated conceptualisations. These markers are analytical units associated with each type of conceptualisation and express the meaning linked to the strings of words written by the respondents. Table 2 presents the key meanings associated with each of the types of conceptualisations of precariousness and provides an illustrative example.

The detailed analysis of these definitions suggests that, even though young people emphasise different dimensions, they do not contradict each other but instead contain complementary aspects. This is especially evident in more complex definitions that incorporate several dimensions. As discussed above, all subjective definitions refer more or less explicitly to objective conditions, either work-related or not. However, what we observe by

TABLE 1 Dimensions in young people's definitions of precariousness. Full sample.

	Objective (only)	Both objective and subjective	Total
Work-related (only)	29.3% (676)	14.7% (338)	44.0% (1014)
Economic (only)	25.6% (591)	8.3% (191)	33.9% (782)
Both work-related and economic	15.1% (348)	7.0% (162)	22.1% (22.1)
Total	70.0% (1615)	30.0% (691)	100.0% (2306)

Source: Authors' processing of data from VulnYouth dataset (2023).

TABLE 2 Markers of young people's precariousness definitions by type of conceptualisation. Full sample.

Type of precariousness conceptualisation	Markers
Work-related objective definitions (29.3%)	• Labour conditions (salaries, temporality and non-standard contracts, long working days...) • Mismatch between job requirements and conditions • Other directly work-related aspects (difficulties to find a job, moonlighting jobs, overqualification, work-life balance...) Example: 'low pay and bad conditions'
Economic objective definitions (25.6%)	• Lack of resources or economic means (money, not making ends meet) • Not being able to subsist by oneself (independently from the family) • Not coping with regular expenditures (housing, food, household supplies, leisure, vacations) • Poor life conditions (in general or related to housing, nutrition, health, etc.). Example: 'difficulty to afford housing and living expenses such as food'
Both work-related and economic objective definitions (15.1%)	• Combination of elements from the two previous ones (usually without an explicit relation between them) • Bad jobs and/or insufficient salaries causing economic difficulties and/or lack of independence from the family Example: '(...) a situation where a person cannot save, as most or all their salary is spent on rent or mortgage, plus daily living expenses (petrol, food, car, clothes, leisure, etc.)'
Work-related subjective definitions (14.7%)	• Psychological aspects of the job (feeling fearful, defenceless, insecure, uncertain, exploited, unvalued, abused, unhappy...), often in connection with the working environment • Expressions linked to a normative conception of life and not meeting respondents' life expectations (future opportunities, undignified life, violation of human rights, a life not worth living, a life where one cannot have plans...) Example: 'accepting appalling terms and conditions of employment and feeling helpless and unable to improve those conditions'
Economic subjective definitions (8.3%)	• Economic insecurity, lack of resources with prominent psychological impact • Precariousness conceived as a state of mind, or as an individual situation linked to material deprivation and the lack of opportunities. Example: '(...) Not being able to get ahead alone. Having to share a flat to be able to leave your parents' house. Thinking all the time about the money you have left'
Both work-related and economic subjective definitions (7.0%)	• Combination of elements from the two previous ones linked to psychological well-being and a life not lived according to expectations (emancipation, freedom, security, dignity, personal development) Work not always as the main or original cause of precarity Example: 'for me precariousness is the state of mind where a person is not stable or content with anything. A person who is not happy, who does not like their job, who is exploited in their job, with a complicated family situation, in short, who has nothing and is not at ease with anything or anyone'

Source: Authors' processing of data from VulnYouth dataset (2023).

analysing the definitions in detail is that often, a lack of resources implicitly reflects a precarious work situation. In short, when we look at more complete, complex definitions, it becomes clear how precariousness can incorporate all these dimensions simultaneously as related and interdependent aspects of this phenomenon.

What are the main determinants of precarity?

To gain a deeper understanding of the determinants of perceived precarity, we explored its predictors through a set of nested linear models, presented in Table 1. The dependent variable took values from 0 to 10, with 10 indicating the highest level of precarity. Hence, positive values in the regression models were associated with higher reported precarity, while negative values represented the opposite. As described in the methodology, the models contained variables capturing the objective, subjective, work and economic elements of precarity. Model 1 contained sociodemographic variables and a variable indicating whether the person's definition of precariousness contains only work elements, only economic elements or both. The aim was to assess how perceptions of precarity vary across social groups. We know from the literature that the Spanish labour market is extremely

TABLE 3 Linear regression. Dependent variable: Likert Scale (0–10) measuring subjectively perceived precarity. Only workers, 1522 observations.

	Socio-demographics		Contract		Work-related insecurity		Economic insecurity	
	Coeff.	**SE**	**Coeff.**	**SE**	**Coeff.**	**SE**	**Coeff.**	**SE**
Age								
In years	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.02
Gender								
Women	0.48**	0.15	0.36*	0.15	0.33*	0.14	0.26*	0.13
Nonbinary/missing	1.28+	0.69	1.14+	0.63	0.70	0.61	0.21	0.53
Ref. Men								
Origin								
Migrant background	0.02	0.23	0.02	0.22	0.04	0.20	−0.23	0.19
Ref. Autochthonous								
Education								
ISCED 0–2	1.43***	0.34	1.32***	0.33	1.23***	0.34	0.56+	0.33
ISCED 3–4	0.66**	0.24	0.57*	0.24	0.44*	0.21	0.11	0.20
Still studying	0.54	0.35	0.24	0.36	0.04	0.34	−0.32	0.32
Ref. ISCED 5–8								
Health and Disability								
Having bad health/disabilities	2.05***	0.26	1.93***	0.25	1.04***	0.24	0.62**	0.23
Ref. Good health								
Household composition								
Living alone	−0.53*	0.24	−0.42+	0.24	−0.19	0.23	−0.33	0.23
Living in couple	−0.78***	0.18	−0.64***	0.18	−0.42*	0.16	−0.39*	0.18
Cohabitating with friends	−0.35	0.35	−0.27	0.34	−0.10	0.30	−0.37	0.32
Ref. Living in the family of origin								
Children								
The HH has a <12 years old minor	−0.19	0.25	−0.21	0.24	−0.18	0.23	−0.18	0.22
Ref. No children								
Definition of precarity								
Economic	−1.09***	0.19	−1.08***	0.19	−1.14***	0.18	−1.14***	0.17
Work-related	−0.60***	0.18	−0.60***	0.18	−0.69***	0.16	−0.58***	0.16
Ref. Work-related + Economic								
Contract								
Voluntary non-standard			0.84***	0.20	0.63*	0.19	0.40*	0.18
Involuntary non-standard			0.97***	0.18	0.74***	0.17	0.53***	0.16
Informal work or gigs			1.15***	0.36	0.64+	0.35	0.23	0.33
Ref. Standard employment relationship								
Vulnerability in job								
EPRES vulnerability					3.78***	0.28	3.25***	0.27
Likelihood to lose own job								
Unlikely					0.47**	0.16	0.43*	0.16
Likely					1.16***	0.21	0.91***	0.20
Very likely					1.30***	0.27	0.98***	0.26

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	Socio-demographics		Contract		Work-related insecurity		Economic insecurity	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
(Missing)					0.57^{+}	0.29	0.31	0.29
Ref. Very unlikely to lose job in the next 12 months								
Difficulties to make ends meet								
Able to make ends meet							1.07***	0.21
Ref. Unable								
Housing tenure								
Rent							0.35*	0.15
Free use							0.67**	0.26
Ref. Property (with/without loan)								
Ability to pay unexpected expenses								
Able to pay 700 euro alone							−1.22***	0.17
HH able to pay 700							−0.48*	0.22
Ref. Unable to pay								
Transition to adulthood								
Feeling economic independent from parents							−0.68***	0.18
Ref. No								
Constant	4.66***	0.72	3.67***	0.73	2.58***	0.69	3.56**	0.69
R^2	0.091		0.114		0.270		0.340	

Note: Models calculated with robust standard errors. In total, 1535 valid cases, no weight.
Significance: $^{+}p < 0.10$, $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$.
Source: Authors' processing of data from VulnYouth dataset (2023).

segmented and even more so after the recent labour reform (Verd et al., 2024). Contrary to our expectations, we found limited evidence of age, gender or origin effects on precarity in the models. Precarity increases with age, but the effect is not significant. On average, women show higher precarity scores than men, although the effect is halved once we account for contract type and economic insecurity. In other words, gender differences in precarity in our model largely reflect gender differences in objective working and living conditions. Similarly, in our sample, migrants do not have higher precarity scores (although we acknowledge that our migrant sample size is relatively small and we are unlikely to have captured the most vulnerable people). Additional analyses suggest that migrants in SER contracts report lower precarity compared to non-migrants, while those on involuntary non-SER contracts report higher levels. These opposing trends could explain the null result in our overall analysis. In sum, sociodemographic variables have a limited influence on perceived precarity (Table 3).

Other variables related to individual characteristics reflect increased labour market vulnerability, with a person's health emerging as one of the strongest predictors. Individuals who report having a limiting disability or (very) poor health exhibit substantially higher precarity scores. The effect is moderated when we include additional variables in the model, but remains strong.

Regarding housing, we observe a selection effect where leaving the parental home is associated with reduced precarity. Spanish youth tend to postpone independence and childbearing until they feel sufficiently stable economically, confirming previous field results (Ayllón, 2009; Lebano & Jamieson, 2020; Van de Velde, 2008). We find no effect of parenthood or the presence of children in the household, although it must be noted that only 11% of the sample have children.

Low educational attainment (ISCED 0–2, up to lower secondary education) is associated with higher precarity scores compared to having tertiary education, although the effect is small. The coefficient becomes non-significant once the non-work insecurity variables are added to the model. It is likely that the effect of education operates largely through working conditions and low salaries.

The final variable in this first model acts as a test to check whether feelings of precarity stem from or reflect

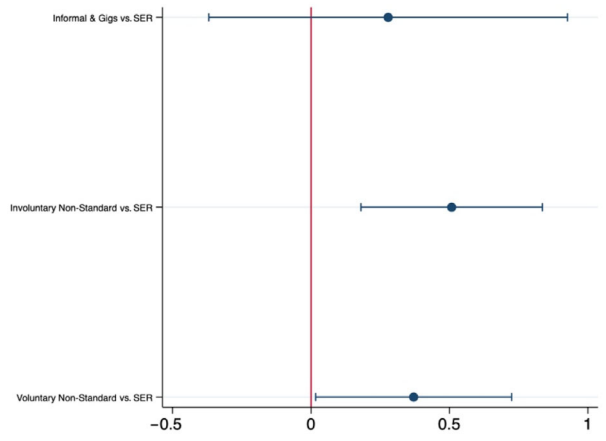

FIGURE 2 Marginal effects on precarity by contract type, linear regression model. *Source*: Authors' processing of data from VulnYouth dataset (2023).

different definitions of precariousness. This does not seem to be the case. While people's definitions vary, both work and economic definitions are associated with increased precarity. Definitions that contain both work and economic elements are associated with higher scores, and may corresponds to more detailed definitions among those affected. All in all, we find no clear association between the intensity of precarity and an individual's definition of precariousness.

Model 2 includes information on young people's contracts or lack thereof (informal and gig work). Additionally, for those with non-standard forms of employment (temporary, part-time and self-employed), we distinguish between voluntary and involuntary situations. There is a labour market element to precarity that is partially captured by contract type (see Figure 2). The results indicate a gradation where those in more precarious forms of employment, such as informal work and gigs, report the highest subjective precarity and those in SER the lowest. Interestingly, even when reported as voluntary, non-standard work involves an increased perceived precarity. That said, voluntariness is an important element in understanding precarity, since involuntary non-standard work compounds precarity. The coefficients remain positive and, except for informal and gig work, significant as other variables are introduced into the models, confirming that contract type is an appropriate (if partial) predictor of subjective precarity. The reduction in coefficients after controlling for economic variables suggests that part of the effect of contract type operates through economic insecurity.

Model 3 examines the role of other work-related indicators beyond contract types: job insecurity and vulnerability in employment as measured on the EPRES Scale. Vulnerability in employment has one of the highest coefficients in the model, much higher than those of contract type and emerges as a key component of precarity—although it is true that it is a normalised indicator with a maximum of 1. Job insecurity (the probability of losing one's job in the next 12 months) is also associated with increased precarity. Thus, even more than by their contractual situation, young people's precarity is affected by the extent to which they feel insecure or feel vulnerable in their jobs.

The final model, Model 4, includes the economic elements of precarity. Young people's feelings of precarity are strongly influenced by their standards of living and we find financial strain exerting a significant effect. Experiencing difficulties in making ends meet is associated with higher precarity. As for housing issues, housing insecurity can itself be a direct precursor of precarity, and also be an indirect indicator of socio-economic position as there are economic barriers associated with accessing housing. Rental and free use are both associated with higher precarity compared to ownership. Our model also contains information on the ability to meet an unexpected expense of 700€. This variable allows us to distinguish between individual and parental resources. We find that individual economic security (being able to afford unexpected expenses independently) has a stronger protective effect compared to young people only being able to do so with family support.

Finally, being economically independent of one's parents, a key marker of the transition to adulthood, is associated with reduced precarity. It is notable that economic independence has an effect on precarity even after financial strain and living arrangements are controlled for, reinforcing the notion that truncated transitions are a key element of precarity.

In conclusion, the results of our linear regression model depict precarity as a multidimensional phenomenon. Both economic and work-related factors influence the feeling of precarity, highlighting the value of defining precarity beyond contract type and beyond the labour market to include elements of vulnerability in employment and standards of living, as well as the ability to achieve independence from parents.

How do young people experience precarity?

The focus group discussion allowed a more in-depth examination of precariousness. The young people's narratives about precarity strongly acknowledged the multiple dimensions we identified with their subjective feelings. In them, the young people tended to entangle objective and subjective as well as work and economic dimensions in an inextricable manner, confirming both

the multidimensionality of precariousness (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024) and also that precarity is influenced by objective situations as well as subjective perceptions of a situation (Waite, 2009). Confirming previous results (Antonucci, 2018; Campbell & Price, 2016; Worth, 2016), non-standard work is not a sufficient condition to feel precarious; rather, a combination of life situation, primary networks and help received from welfare pillars determines the mechanisms by which employment generates precarity (Antonucci, 2018). One of our interviewees, an engineer employed on a SER contract in a large company, expressed anguish at feeling extremely precarious despite the objective condition of a permanent contract and the protection offered by higher education. This person felt vulnerable in their job, confirming the important role of employment characteristics beyond contracts (Rubery et al., 2018; Vosko et al., 2009) in generating precarity.

We illustrate this idea by considering two themes emerging from the analysis: young people's interpretation of precariousness and its impact on their transition into adult life. One of the interviewees, Fernando (33), develops the idea that for young people, precarity entails adult life never really beginning. This confirms previous results in the field, evidencing that young people in Spain found it extremely difficult to achieve independence from their parents, mostly due to the incapacity to reach financial stability due to low-paid work and inaccessible housing costs (Antón-Alonso et al., 2023; Serracant, 2012; Van de Velde, 2008). Fernando discursively combines the analytical dimensions of economic, work and subjective/objective elements to make sense of his experience.

> Now it looks like a degree is not enough, you have to do a master's, you have to do many things. Sometimes it doesn't look like even another master's is enough, you're 30 (or older) and you haven't even entered the labour market, you don't have any savings, you don't have a house, you're living with your parents, you've barely been able to enjoy anything, so for me that's frustrating... I agree that life just hasn't begun yet... [...]. Our parents, in the past, really, even when they were twenty-something, they were already living their lives, but right now it seems like very few people can do that....
>
> (Fernando, 33)

The strong association between precariousness and delayed transitions to adulthood was underlined in a conversation with six out of the nine participants discussing parenthood and having their own families. One of the women (aged 30) explained that she does not feel ready to have children and that any decision to have children would depend on stable work. The other participants (two men and three women) also expressed that precarity made it difficult to think about having children. In these cases, precariousness is articulated as an economic (objective, economic) obstacle but also as a psychological one, highlighting the role of subjective perceptions in determining delayed transitions. This finding aligns with previous contributions studying youth transitions in Spain, underlining the importance of traditional stages such as parenthood in defining the condition of being an adult (Van de Velde, 2008). In young people's narratives, the pervasiveness of precariousness has become an identity marker for new generations trying to become adults, struggling against the challenging circumstances determined by precarious work (Kalleberg, 2018; Standing, 2011; Tremmel, 2010).

> Regarding having children, it's quite tricky nowadays, because with salaries, rents, increases [in prices] that have occurred... Even if you want to have a [child], it's very difficult, it's very expensive, and you need to have mental, economic and work stability that allows you [to have children]: it's not just that you want to, you know; it's all difficult.
>
> (Yolanda, 31)

Far from being passive, young people in our study employ various strategies to navigate precarity's impacts in their lives. These strategies seek to address labour conditions and other aspects associated with precariousness, such as mental health or well-being (Kalleberg, 2018). To combat anxiety and low moods, some highlight self-care (e.g. Fernando, 33: 'to try to be positive and that our situation really does not become more precarious than it is, at least to try to find ways to disconnect'). These findings evidence the relationship that precarity plays in the rising level of mental health issues among people exposed to precarious labour (Kalleberg, 2009; Vives et al., 2015), especially young people (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006; Kalleberg, 2018; Bolibar et al., 2022).

To conclude, the focus group analysis uncovered experiences and discourses that support the interrelation of objective/subjective dimensions, work and economic factors in the open-ended question of the survey (see Section "How do young people conceptualise precariousness?") and confirmed by the quantitative analysis (Section "What are the main determinants of precarity?"). Young people's discourses show, first, that whereas work conditions are crucial to precarity, this is understood in

different ways that link economic and subjective comprehensions of the phenomenon in what we have called the mutual constitution of precarity. All the key predictors in the regression analysis, such as independence from parents, access to housing and the perception of being vulnerable in a job, matter in young people's feelings of being precarious. But what is more, these multiple dimensions appear inextricably linked in structuring the mechanism by which non-standard employment translates into precarity.

DISCUSSION

Precariousness is a widely used albeit often ambiguously defined concept (Campbell & Price, 2016; Waite, 2009). While some use precariousness to refer exclusively to labour conditions and measure precariousness in terms of job characteristics (Chung, 2019; Rubery et al., 2018; Seo, 2021), others use more comprehensive interpretations of the phenomenon to refer to subjective living conditions (Alberti et al., 2018; Armano & Murgia, 2013; Kalleberg, 2009; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Waite, 2009), regardless of a person's actual employment situation (Campbell & Price, 2016). From this perspective, one can feel precarious even in permanent employment (Choonara, 2020a). These scholars have used the concept of precarity to refer to this conceptualisation of the phenomenon, which goes beyond job insecurity (Allan et al., 2021), as it includes not only subjective stances but also economic dimensions (Antonucci, 2018; Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013; Campbell & Price, 2016; Choonara, 2020a; Verd et al., 2024; Waite, 2009).

This article has sought to overcome this ambiguity through an empirical analysis. By asking young people to provide their own definitions of precariousness and then evaluate their feelings of being precarious based on their definitions, we have avoided imposing our own interpretations on them. Our findings suggest that young people identify precariousness as having an objective and a subjective component, in line with previous studies (Antonucci, 2018; Campbell & Price, 2016). Furthermore, they relate it to both work and economic dimensions, as identified by the French tradition (Barbier, 2005). Our original contribution is to highlight the mechanism by which the factors interrelate. These four factors are intertwined irreducibly in a mechanism that generates the feeling of being precarious. We have called this the mutual constitution of precarity. How this mechanism works is exemplified in Figure 3.

Our qualitative analysis of the dimensions that young people associate with precariousness as a phenomenon shows how subjective/objective and work/economic dimensions mutually constitute a complex phenomenon. Young people's definitions transcend work and strongly associate precarity with living conditions. The in-depth analysis of them showed that the economic factors that they associate with precariousness are the elements that the scientific debate terms as vulnerability and economic insecurity (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024; Ranci & Maestripieri, 2022). It is thus insufficient to operationalise precariousness in terms of working conditions.

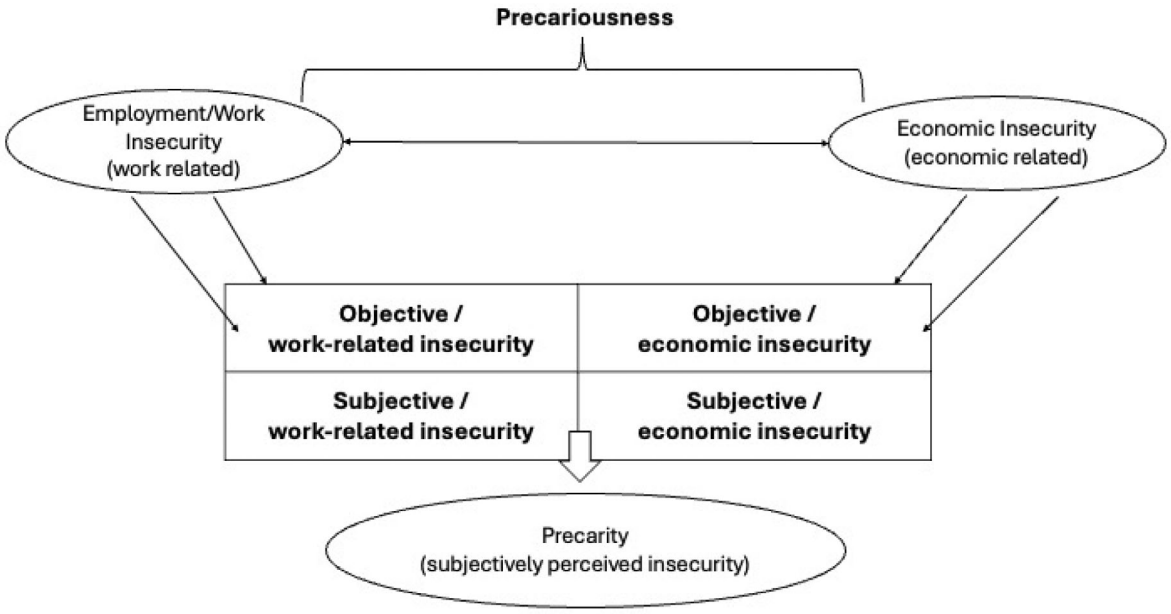

FIGURE 3 The mutual constitution of precarity. *Source*: Authors.

Researchers aiming to fully understand the impact of precarity need to complement employment indicators (such as contract types) with other measures of economic insecurity.

Our quantitative results illustrate this complexity and confirm our intuitions. Young people's employment affects their perception of precarity, but other dimensions are also critical. Both employment and economic indicators of insecurity are associated with young people's perceptions of precarity, with economic security playing a key role in reducing this feeling. Those with involuntary non-standard jobs are more likely to perceive themselves as precarious than voluntary non-standard workers and people employed under a SER. However, if young people perceive their jobs as vulnerable or fear losing them, this magnifies the effect of the type of contract. Significantly, people who feel vulnerable to being treated unfairly in their jobs, as measured by the EPRES Scale or who think they might lose their job in the next 12 months also feel precarious, independently from having a non-standard contract. Economic security (secure housing or a SER job) might limit perceived precarity, confirming once again the importance of welfare pillars in mitigating its worst consequences (Antonucci, 2018). Similarly, housing independence is positively associated with lower levels of precarity, although, as discussed above, this probably reflects a selection effect. Being able to afford to move out of the parental home operates as a good indicator of stability or lower perceived precarity.

The analysis of the focus group narratives confirms our interpretation. Our most significant contribution is that these multiple components (subjective/objective and work/economic) are mutually constituted in how young people talk about precariousness and experience precarity. When we ask young people what they think precariousness is, they combine work/economic dimensions with objective/subjective factors. When they discuss at length how they feel in the discussion promoted in the focus group, these multiple dimensions are spontaneously intertwined in their discourses about precarity. This finding reinforces the idea that precariousness as an emerging social construct has a multidimensional nature linked to difficulties experienced in living conditions: focusing only on precarious work leaves aside crucial elements.

Subjective insecurity, thus, is a fundamental factor that studies examining precariousness should consider (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013; Choonara, 2020a, 2020b; Choonara et al., 2018; Waite, 2009). At the same time, both the qualitative definitions and the multivariate results clearly link precarity to objective conditions, such as having a precarious job. Uncertainty about future employment, low pay and low social protection are other key components that explain self-assessed precarity scores (Seo, 2021). However, the association is not direct: subjective factors mediate the effect of a non-standard contract on perceptions of being precarious (Antonucci, 2018; Campbell & Price, 2016) and objective conditions might mean different things for different people (Jankowski, 2024). Young people develop their own representations of their situations and act on them, consequently delaying choices that might be risky when they have to support themselves independently (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024). Pervasive uncertainty and the fear of being trapped in precarious life conditions are common, even for those currently in permanent employment (Choonara, 2020b; Choonara et al., 2022). Indeed, subjective insecurity might be more important than objective conditions in exploring adulthood transitional outcomes (Furlong et al., 2017; Furlong & Cartmel, 2006). Future research should consider bringing together all these irreducible factors (subjective/objective/work/economic).

The literature on youth studies has shown how transitions into adult life are not only increasingly diverse but also longer (Furlong et al., 2017), particularly in Spain (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024; Antón-Alonso et al., 2023; Serracant, 2012). Our empirical evidence highlights that these delayed transitions can be attributed to young people's increasing difficulties in achieving security (Bessant et al., 2018). For instance, obtaining a stable job, accessing affordable housing, building an adult relationship and establishing an independent household takes longer than it did for previous generations (Wyn et al., 2020). In the words of our interviewees, precarity constitutes the reason for postponing independence and childbearing (Ayllón, 2009; Lebano & Jamieson, 2020). In Spain, Lozano and Rentería (2019) show that precarious work (including temporary, low-quality and low-paid jobs) has increased in the last three decades and, importantly, that exposure to precarious employment lasts longer than it used to, hindering transitions to adulthood (Van de Velde, 2008). The frustration this causes increases as significant markers of adulthood appear unachievable due to prolonged employment instability and economic insecurity (Acebillo-Baqué et al., 2024). But prolonged insecurity and uncertainty have consequences that go beyond work (Kalleberg, 2009) in the way people interact in communities, how they build their families and how they participate in political processes, partly explaining the recent rise of the extreme right among youth (Antonucci et al., 2023; Chung, 2019).

Precarity challenges the transition to adult life, with young people feeling that significant markers of adult life become delayed because of their incapacity to achieve secure economic independence. In this article, we have provided empirical evidence that, for Spanish youth,

delayed transitions might be related to the subjectively perceived precarity in their lives. For them, precariousness is more than a structural phenomenon: it is a generational identifier which defines a shared cohort identity, shaping their futures (Bessant et al., 2018; Morán & Fernández de Mosteyrín, 2017).

Limitations of the present study

This research is based on an exploratory study, supplementing primary data collection with an original new measure for measuring subjectively perceived precarity. As such, it suffers from several limitations, mostly stemming from the research design applied in this study. First of all, the study is not based on random sampling, but relies on non-probabilistic quota sampling. The interviewees were selected by a specialised company that conducts panel surveys. The respondents might have different characteristics from the general population, and although we have tried to correct for this by using quotas, we have still identified a certain skewness towards highly educated profiles and less representation among young unemployed people. Secondly, our data collection methods might involve the attrition of the respondents, which also influences the outcome of our study. That said, our scope is not to provide estimations but to identify mechanisms, so this study serves our scope.

As mentioned previously, our dependent variable (the extent to which a person feels precarious in life) is an entirely original measure and we cannot compare it with other secondary sources to measure the extent of our bias. However, we have included it as the dependent variable in our regression analysis and demonstrated its empirical validity by putting it in relationship with the most diffuse measures of employment instability and economic insecurity. We have found it to be related to subjective and objective dimensions, as well as to work and economic indicators. We consider this correlation an interesting contribution both at the empirical and the methodological level despite the limitations of our study. Regarding the qualitative analysis, conducting more focus groups or a series of in-depth interviews would have better grounded our formulation of the mutual constitution of precarity. However, funding limitations covered only one focus group and the number of interviewees remained limited.

Finally, the most important limitation of our study is the way in which we have defined the concepts used in the study (precarious work, precariousness and precarity), but we are confident of having contributed to clarifying how non-standard employment translates into precarity. There is no perfect definition for diverse and complex phenomena such as precariousness and precarity. As our survey only includes young people in Spain, we cannot generalise the mechanism of the mutual constitution outside that scope. In particular, we cannot specify if the mutual constitution of precarity is specific to young people or specific to the context of Southern European countries or an intersection of the two. More comparative research is needed to generalise our results.

CONCLUSIONS

This article investigates the structure of the perceived subjective feeling of precarity among young people in Spain. We focus on three research questions, using a mixed-method perspective to examine different aspects of the topic. The first research question delves into how young people conceptualise precariousness as a phenomenon. Our analysis classifies their answers on two axes: subjective/objective dimensions and work/economic aspects. The second research question explores the determinants of feelings of insecurity and we obtained empirical confirmation that indicators organised by the four mentioned dimensions are all key predictors of the extent to which a person feels precarious. Finally, the third question explores the mechanisms behind the consolidation of precarity and we developed the concept of the dimensions being mutually constituted. Instead of perceiving the two axes as separate, young people present precarity as a multidimensional and complex situation in which subjective and objective dimensions and economic and work elements are inextricable and irreducible in structuring their feelings of being precarious.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Survey's data will be available in open data from the funder's website starting from the end of 2024. Qualitative data will not be accessible for privacy reasons.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The Ethical Committee of the Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona have approved the research design and all the data collection tools.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

All participants have voluntarily participated in the study and they have signed an informed consent prior to involvement.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Descriptives, only workers.

	Precarity 7+	SER	Voluntary non-standard	Involuntary non-standard	Informal and gigs	Total
Gender						
Male	25.3%	53.6%	17.5%	23.5%	5.3%	988
Female	34.1%	39.5%	23.4%	30.3%	6.8%	1194
Non-binary (including missing)	37.5%	28.6%	38.1%	23.8%	9.5%	21
Age in class						
20–24 years old	31.3%	12.7%	40.2%	24.4%	22.7%	230
25–29 years old	32.5%	40.4%	22%	31.6%	6%	757
30–34 years old	28.6%	55.3%	16.6%	25%	3.1%	1216
Migrant origin						
Spanish background	30.5%	46.9%	20%	27.7%	5.4%	1891
Migrant background	28.8%	38.7%	26.4%	24.2%	10.6%	312
Household composition						
In family	33.9%	33.4%	25.4%	31.1%	10.1%	890
Alone	26.9%	51.4%	20.2%	24.3%	4%	247
In couple	27.7%	56%	16.9%	24.4%	2.8%	957
Living with peers	30.5%	45.9%	20.2%	26.6%	7.3%	109
Education						
ISCED 0–2	40.2%	37.5%	26.6%	25%	10.9%	128
ISCED 3–4	36.2%	39.5%	29.5%	24.3%	6.7%	268
ISCED 5–8	28.4%	50.1%	17.5%	29%	3.4%	1688
Still studying	36.6%	6.7%	43.7%	10.9%	38.7%	119

Source: #VulnYouth dataset, 2023.

TABLE A2 Sample: Missing, only workers.

	Missing cases
Precarity (measured with a subjective Likert scale 0–10)	388
Standard versus non-standard job	8
Gender	—
Age	—
Migrant background	—
Household composition	—
Education	—
Presence of children in the household	8
Bad/very bad health or any limitation due to disability	9
Individual income	246
Housing tenure	18
EPRES Scale	215
Job insecurity	172
Unexpected expenses	8
Economic independence	—
Subjective dimension—definition of precarity	418
Work-related—definition of precarity	414
Economic—definition of precarity	414

Source: #VulnYouth dataset, 2023.

TABLE A3 Sample: Missing distribution in EPRES Scale by type of contract, only workers.

Missing in EPRES	SER	Voluntary non-standard	Involuntary non-standard	Informal and gigs	Missing
No missing	929	391	546	116	6
Missing in EPRES 1 'demand better working conditions'	4	14	6	6	0
Missing in EPRES 2 'defenceless towards unfair treatment'	63	55	39	16	2
Missing in EPRES 3 'being fired for not doing what I am asked to do'	16	27	17	9	1
Missing in EPRES 4 'being easily replaced'	4	15	7	6	1

Source: #VulnYouth dataset, 2023.

TABLE A4 Open-ended question 'What is precariousness for you' coding criteria.

Code	Criteria	Anchor examples
Work-related	Explicit reference to work and jobs conditions and situations (salary, hours, type of contracts, temporality, stress, pressure...)	*Bajo sueldo y una jornada laboral demasiado larga* *Soy enfermera, y hasta hace unos meses, he estado con contratos precarios con duración (en muchas ocasiones) de un día. Trabajo con muchísima responsabilidad muy poco remunerado. Planteándome realmente si merece la pena seguir trabajando en esto. Hay otros muchos trabajos con menos responsabilidad que a final de mes cobran más que mi colectivo*
	Explicit reference to labour market barriers, problems or general characteristics (unemployment, youth access barriers to labour market, overqualification...)	*En cuanto a la dificultad de encontrar trabajo con facilidad recién acabado los estudios y no contar con la suficiente experiencia requerida para los escasos puestos que se ofertan* *Alta tasa de desempleo existente, con trabajo no poder independizarte, trabajos temporales*
Economic	General mentions to economic constrain: lack of resources, safety or well-being (*bienestar*), lack of money, wealth, poverty, difficulties to afford goods or services [Even if it appears as a consequence of labour conditions or situations]	*Es tener poco o menos de lo que se necesita o se considera normal* *(...) precariedad es tener que acudir a familiares para que te ayuden con los gastos, (no siendo una persona derrochadora, si no porque no se tiene lo suficiente para vivir), no poder hacer la compra y tener que acudir a centros donde dan comida y enseres de la vida. Precariedad es no poder llegar a fin de mes* *La precariedad es no llegar a fin de mes y saber que no vas a mejorar (...)*
	References to other specific aspects, usually consequences of economic constrains, related to housing, health, education, leisure... [Even if it appears as a consequence of labour conditions or situations]	*Vivir sin los recursos económicos suficientes para poder tener acceso a vivienda y alimentos* *(...) no poder vivir en un piso decente o en condiciones por sus elevados precios, o no tener acceso a servicios públicos como sanidad o alimentación por los bajos ingresos* *La precariedad es no poder hacer frente a los costes de una vida independiente, tanto a nivel básico (casa, comida, ropa, transporte, gastos del hogar...) Como a nivel de un mínimo de ocio y tiempo libre, sin tener que dedicar todo tu tiempo al trabajo por motivos económicos*
Objective	Any mention to, either personal or social, material conditions [implicitly there is always a reference to objective conditions. Generally, I code any little explicit reference—resources, conditions...]	*Bajas remuneraciones, contratos de trabajo temporales o con categoría profesional inferior a la que deber ser. En resumen, malas condiciones laborales y bajos salarios* *Precariedad es depender de las familias para poder estudiar o realizar cualquier actividad. Trabajar y no poder llegar a fin de mes ni ahorrar* *Vivir en un umbral donde careces de los recursos mínimos básicos para llevar una vida en condiciones aptas donde estén cubiertas las necesidades* *No poder hacer una vida normal con la inflación*
Subjective	Any reference to emotions, feelings and subjective perceptions such as instability, concern, fear, uncertainty, effort, dignity...	*La precariedad es, que a pesar de tener un trabajo que debería darte para vivir sin mayores preocupaciones, no te permite tener una vida digna y estable* *La precariedad es no tener seguridad de si mañana seguirás teniendo el mismo trabajo o me despedirán y no ser capaz de encontrar trabajo. También, por miedo a no saber si podrás encontrar otro trabajo, no se piden mejores condiciones en el trabajo actual por miedo a que te despidan y te reemplacen por alguien más barato* *Es vivir con miedo, no tener ilusión por nada y escuchar a la gente mayor meterse con las nuevas generaciones. (...)*

(Continues)

TABLE A4 (Continued)

Code	Criteria	Anchor examples
	References to psychological annoyance in jobs (stress, bad personal relations, not being recognized by the company, colleagues...)	*Cultura podrida de empresa, tratar a los empleados como niños, salarios bajos, poca flexibilidad, cultura del miedo, jerarquía muy marcada, horas extra no pagadas Condiciones laborales que no te permitan estar a gusto en tu puesto de trabajo mal trato por parte de compañeros o superiores, así como la falta de reconocimiento*
	References to job or life expectations, future wishes and opportunities	*Para mí es la incapacidad de alcanzar unas expectativas de vida concretas debido a las bajas posibilidades económicas. (...) Incapacidad para poder subsistir de manera adecuada y/o situación inestable que no permite hacer planes para el futuro La falta de oportunidades que sufrimos muchos de los jóvenes españoles, la situación actual en la que vivimos no nos garantiza un futuro estable tanto económica como psicológicamente. (...)*

TABLE A5 Main characteristics of the focus group participants.

Code name	Gender	Age	Selection criteria
Natalia	Female	21	Lives in a medium-sized town. Receives minimum vital income
Laura	Female	30	Lives in a medium-sized town. Cohabiting in couple, in a house-share
Ana	Female	31	Lives in a medium-sized town. Person with severe disability or in very poor health
Diana	Female	24	Lives in a village. Attributes a positive meaning to precariousness
Carla	Female	26	Lives in a rural area
Antonio	Male	34	Lives in a middle-sized town. Working in the informal sector
Aitor	Male	24	Lives in a village. Working in the informal sector
Fernando	Male	33	Lives in a city. He perceives himself as very precarious
Yolanda	Female	31	Internal migrant (from one big city to another one)