
Individual worker complaints continue to be the core foundation of employment standards enforcement in many Western jurisdictions, including the Canadian province of Ontario. In the contemporary labour market context where segments of the labour force may be disproportionately impacted by rights violations, and employment relationships are more diverse and often more tenuous than previously, the continued reliance on individual claims suggests a need to better understand the challenges associated with the investigation and resolution of claims involving ‘vulnerable workers’ in precarious employment situations. Using interviews with front-line Ontario employment standards officers (ESOs), this article examines the extent to which certain worker characteristics and employment situations perceived by officers as ‘vulnerable’ are identified by officers as significant constraints or barriers to investigation processes and outcomes, and documents whether and how officers address these constraints and barriers. The analysis also identifies the perceived influence of policy, resource and legislative requirements in shaping how officers deal with the more difficult and challenging cases, while also considering the extent to which the officers’ actions are understood by them as discretionary and guided by their particular orientations or concerns. In so doing, this article reveals challenges to the resolution of claims in precarious employment situations, the very place where employment standards are often most needed.