

Covid-19 Changes Work

Andy Nash

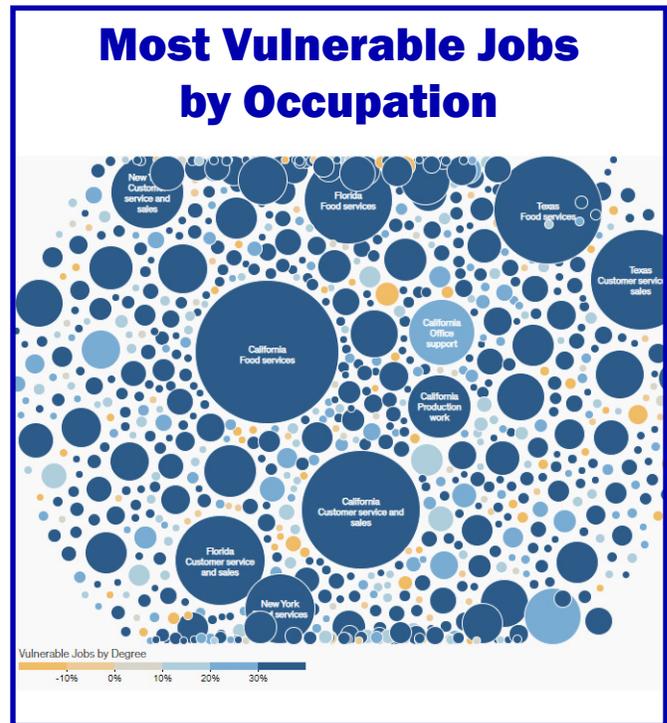
BEFORE YOU READ: The articles on pp. 50-57 talk about how work has changed for individuals in different industries. This article looks at macro changes in the economy and workforce. What is the value of looking at both micro- and macro-level changes?

Our nation’s slow and inconsistent response to the coronavirus has had a devastating impact on the workforce. As everything was eventually forced to close and people reduced their spending and traveling, many jobs dried up. Between mid-March and the end of May 2020, workers filed more than 40 million claims for unemployment benefits (that’s one in four workers), according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

Although 2.5 million jobs returned in May (mostly for workers who had been temporarily laid off from service jobs in bars and restaurants, hair salons, medical offices, etc.), many of those jobs may be lost again as the pandemic worsens. Small businesses that do not have enough money in reserve will not survive. Researchers estimate that four out of ten jobs will not come back.

The Job Gap

According to reporting in *Time Magazine*, the pandemic is exposing a growing gap between “college-educated workers, whose jobs can be done from anywhere on a computer, and less-educated workers who increasingly find themselves in jobs that require human contact or that can’t be automated or outsourced.” Many are essential service workers employed in health care, food supply, warehouse and delivery, transportation, grocery, or eldercare. These hourly and low-wage workers are the least likely to have paid sick days or the opportunity to work from home. They are reluctant to skip work if they are sick because they need the money.



Explore this interactive map showing the most vulnerable jobs by occupation and by state. <https://covid-tracker.mckinsey.com/vulnerable-jobs/industry-occupation>

The jobs most likely to be lost are in non-essential services (retail, restaurants, arts and entertainment, travel, etc.), although, amazingly, even nursing jobs continue to disappear as hospitals face budget cuts. Childcare jobs are also getting cut. Another area taking the brunt of the losses is public sector jobs (teachers, public health workers, public transportation workers, and construction labor). Well over 500,000 of these jobs were lost in April alone.

Who’s most impacted

Most of the newly unemployed are young people, people of color, and women. Race is a strong pre-

dictor of job vulnerability in large cities where the people working in retail, bars, restaurants, and government (public service) jobs are disproportionately nonwhite. Age is another predictor, as younger workers are more likely to work part-time and lack seniority. And women are vulnerable because they make up about two-thirds of the workers in the hardest hit industries. All of these workers face not only lay-offs, but reduced hours, pay cuts, and temporary unpaid leave (furlough).

What does the future hold?

Many of the changes in the ways we are living during the pandemic are likely to be permanent. The increase in remote work and the many learning and shopping activities that have moved online will, for example, create a great need for online systems and support jobs. Similarly, the shift toward more automation in areas such as manufacturing, warehouse work, and transportation, will lead to jobs in robotics and technical engineering. Training for these new jobs will need to be a priority.

But the majority of jobs will continue to be in the sectors that cannot be replaced by technology – where humans are required to help or care for others. Especially during the pandemic, these jobs need to have safe working conditions and many workers are starting to organize around this issue.

- Truck drivers have fought for sick-pay.
- City bus drivers have won the safety precaution of allowing riders to enter and leave through the back door (and therefore riding for free).
- Amazon workers have organized for safety precautions and paid time off for Covid-related needs.
- The union representing grocery store workers (the United Food and Commercial Workers, UFCW) negotiated temporary pay increases – “hazard pay” – for the first few months of the pandemic and then fought to maintain “hero pay.”



Workers and members of UFCW Local 21 protest the Fred Meyer supermarket (owned by Kroger) in Bellingham, Washington, after Kroger decided to eliminate the \$2 per hour bonus pay in May 2020. Read more about it here: <https://www.ufcw21.org/news/tag/hero+pay>

- Health care workers who are on the front lines of the crisis are organizing around the idea that they can’t keep their patients healthy if they, themselves, do not have healthy working conditions.

What Can We Do?

The only way to get the economy back on its feet is for people to have safe work and an income to pay for their basic needs. This will require government investment in jobs (in health care, for example), training programs, and unemployment support. It will also require creative organizing by workers to make sure that all jobs are safe and support workers through these uncertain times.

Andy Nash works at World Education and frequently writes for The Change Agent.

This article drew information for the following sources: <https://www.workforce.com/news/impact-of-Covid-19-on-hourly-low-wage-workers>; <https://www.umass.edu/employmentequity/Covid-19-recession-opportunity-reform-our-low-wage-economy>; <https://time.com/5795651/coronavirus-workers-economy-inequality/>; <https://www.marketplace.org/2020/06/17/which-jobs-are-coming-back-first-which-may-never-return/>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/28/unemployment-claims-coronavirus/>

AFTER YOU READ: Note one thing you already knew and one thing you learned from this article.