

# Essential Workers

## Pay Them, Protect Them, Empower Them

Adriana Herrera López

### BEFORE YOU READ:

1. What does *undervalued* mean? Do you think certain workers are undervalued? If so, who?
2. What does *fair share* and *proportionate* mean? (Add the prefix *dis* to *proportionate*. Now what does it mean?)
3. What does *overrepresented* mean? Can you name an occupation in which men or women or people of color are overrepresented?
3. Consider reading this article in conjunction with the one by Ellen Baxt (available in two levels: pp. 37-38 (level 4) or pp. 39-42 (level 8)).

### Essential Workers Have Been Undervalued

The virus affected my family. My cousin, who worked in a hospital in Colombia, got Covid. He gave it to his parents. They all almost died. My sister, who works as a cleaner in New York City, did not get Covid, but her workload increased a lot. Now she has severe back pain. These family members did essential work during the pandemic, and they paid a price.

Without a doubt, 2020 taught us many things, including: the people who do the vital jobs for society are often *undervalued*. These workers are



A woman holds a sign listing the Covid fatality rates for different ethnic groups in New York City. Why might the fatality rates be different for different groups? Share and discuss the reasons you can think of. Read the box below about health disparities. Photo used with permission from <https://protectnyheroes.org/>.

our essential workers. They are more exposed to infection. They work longer hours. Many of them do not get paid more for the extra risk they take. I am talking about women and people of color—particularly Blacks and Latinos. Society has long undervalued these workers. Now the pandemic has reminded us how important they are!

### Essential and Frontline Workers Are Mostly People of Color

In New York City where I live, people of color do more than their *fair share* of the essential work. They are *disproportionately* represented. According to one report from the city, 75% of all frontline workers are people of color. Black people are *overrepresented* in public transit, trucking and

### Health Disparities

A *disparity* is a great difference. What does the term *health disparities* mean? To learn more, see [Issue #28](#) of *The Change Agent*, especially “Unequal Access to Health and Wellness,” pp. 10-12. Also, explore the [Pandemic](#) and the [Mental Health](#) issues.

delivery services, healthcare, and childcare, food and family services. Latinos are *overrepresented* in cleaning services and as grocery store workers. In the U.S., 76% of the healthcare workers are women. Many of these women also take care of their families, so they have a double workload, which is especially difficult during a pandemic!

### Now They Are More Visible

The pandemic has made frontline workers more visible. Now, some people call them heroes. We should not hit the back button and go back to how it was before when these workers were invisible. They are the ones who take care of our health and our children. They make sure we have food and transportation. They drive trucks and deliver our mail and our packages. We should have laws and policies that make sure these workers earn a living wage and have safe working conditions. We should make their work visible. Life would not be possible without them. We should pay them, protect them, and empower them.

**Sources:**

- <https://Comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/new-york-citys-frontline-workers>
- <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/newyorkcitynewyork>
- <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/08/your-health-care-in-womens-hands.html>
- <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-policy-manifesto-for-paying-protecting-and-empowering-essential-workers/>

**AFTER YOU READ:**

1. What is the author’s main point? What evidence does she offer to prove it? Check her sources. Do they seem reliable? Why or why not?
2. Share your own perspective about who is under- and who is overrepresented in certain jobs.
3. What is the difference between making observations from your experience and collecting actual data? Why is it important to do both—observe what is around you *and* collect data about it?
4. To study more data and learn more about proportion in the context of frontline workers, read “Is It in Proportion?” on pp. 24-26 and do the activities.

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### Heroes Act!



“On May 5, 2021, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed the New York Health and Essential Rights Act (NY HERO Act) into law. The law mandates extensive new workplace health and safety protections in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the NY HERO Act is to protect employees against exposure and disease during a future airborne infectious disease outbreak.” — <https://dol.ny.gov/ny-hero-act>

Many unions and community organizations joined together to fight for this state law. Find out more at <https://protectnyheroes.org/>, including videos and infographics in English and Spanish.

Read the text on the next page and watch the video. What laws exist on a national level to protect essential workers? Find out more [here](#). Write to your legislator to let them know what you think.