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“Essential workers” in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic still struggle for livelihoods

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Abstract

After the start of the pandemic in March 2020, workers in the United States who continued to go into work – delivery workers, warehouse workers, farmworkers, healthcare professionals, and others who are not frequently in the limelight of the media – became known as “essential” and “frontline.” This entry depicts the way in which, between March and November 2020, such workers shifted in the public eye from an “invisible” class to a class resembling national “heroes,” but without all the crucial corresponding rights, livelihoods, and safety protections.

Keywords

United States; pandemic; mobile labor; workforce

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As the United States largely shut down in mid-March² – with schools closed, stay-at-home orders enforced, and remote work established as the new norm for many – a social and economic divide developed between classes of workers. On the one hand, an entire body of work became explicitly *immobile*, as many middle- and upper-class positions were shifted to purely remote. On the other, those workers who continued to go into work – delivery couriers, warehouse workers, farmhands, healthcare professionals, transit operators, and others who previously attracted perhaps less public attention – became known as “essential” and “frontline.” Without such *mobile* workers, the American economy would not have been able to run throughout the course of the pandemic.³

In March, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defined *essential workers* as “those who conduct a range of operations and services that are typically *essential* to continue critical infrastructure operations,” such as in meatpacking and poultry processing, agricultural work, health care, construction, child care, and critical retail.⁴ DHS’ definitions are meant to serve simply as guidance, and it is important to recognize that COVID-19 response efforts are “locally-executed, state-managed, and federally supportive.”⁵ In short, states establish their own executive orders that identify *essential industries* to continue with mobile, in-person operation.⁶ The decision of what industries are on “the list” is not self-evident: for example, the state of Pennsylvania chose to only allow “life-sustaining” business activities, while California chose to comply with DHS’ list with the addition of wineries; meanwhile, lobbying escalated at the state level as businesses sought to be placed on the *essential* list so that they could remain open, as was the case for golf courses in Virginia⁷ and NASCAR racing in North Carolina.⁸

The *essential worker* directives have played a significant role not only in determining which businesses remained in operation, but, also, in allocating protections to those workers still attending work in-person. By August, DHS indicated that its list of *essential workers* can now be most useful “in identifying the universe of essential workers that may require specialized risk management strategies to ensure that they can work safely [...] and planning and preparing for the allocation of scarce resources used to protect

² United States. President. 2020. *Proclamation on Declaring a National Emergency Concerning the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak*. Available online at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-declaring-national-emergency-concerning-novel-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-outbreak/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

³ For a cross-sectoral analysis of the role of essential workers and the risks they face during the pandemic, see: O’Donnell, Jimmy. 2020. Essential workers during COVID-19: At risk and lacking union representation. *Brookings*. Available online at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/09/03/essential-workers-during-covid-19-at-risk-and-lacking-union-representation/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴ National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL). 2020. *COVID-19: Essential Workers in the States*. Available online at: <https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/covid-19-essential-workers-in-the-states.aspx>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁵ National League of Cities (NLC). 2020. *How to Identify Your Community’s Essential Workers in Local Quarantine Orders*. Available online at: <https://www.nlc.org/article/2020/03/24/how-to-identify-your-communitys-essential-workers-in-local-quarantine-orders/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁶ McNicholas, Celine and Margaret Poydock. 2020. Who are essential workers? A comprehensive look at their wages, demographics, and unionization rates. *Economic Policy Institute*. Available online at: <https://www.epi.org/blog/who-are-essential-workers-a-comprehensive-look-at-their-wages-demographics-and-unionization-rates/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁷ Kelleher, Suzanne Rowan. 2020. Are Golf Courses Essential During the COVID-19 Crisis? It Depends on Where You Live. *Forbes*. 10 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/suzannerowankelleher/2020/04/10/are-golf-courses-essential-during-covid-19-crisis-it-depends-where-you-live/?sh=1e0a9cca1a24>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁸ Weaver, Matt. 2020. North Carolina Allows NASCAR Shops to Reopen as Essential Business. *Autoweek*. 24 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.autoweek.com/racing/nascar/a32261591/north-carolina-allows-nascar-shops-to-reopen-as-essential-business/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

essential workers against COVID-19.”⁹ On a state-by-state basis, businesses that remained open would be required by their states to provide PPE to workers such as sanitizers and masks, which, in turn, made them more dependent on the state in which they reside.¹⁰ All of these regulations ebbed and flowed amongst states between March and October.

In the months since the pandemic began, the category of *essential workers* has been publicly lauded as “heroes”: online concerts have been dedicated to them, banners have been hung in neighborhoods across the country in their honor, and their livelihoods have been brought to the forefront of the American consciousness. These workers not only account for the *mobile* workforce which stay-at-home orders did not apply, but, also, includes a large proportion of immigrant workers who have historically been mobile across borders. Nearly 70% of all immigrants in the US workforce are *essential workers*, as well as 74% of undocumented workers. In New York City – which refers to this category of workers as “frontline workers” – 50% of these workers are foreign-born, including 70% of building cleaning staff, 53% of healthcare workers and 53% of food and drug store staff.¹¹ Black workers account for one-in-nine workers in the entire U.S. workforce, but one-in-six “essential” industry workers.¹² This demographic breakdown exhibits how in practice, state policies around essential workers have greater effect on immigrants, people of color, and those of lower socio-economic status, who face greater risk of exposure due to their livelihoods.

Amidst the increased visibility of the essential workforce, broader of policies of workplace and livelihoods protection have not kept up. For example, a March study found that 55% of retail and food service workers do not have paid sick leave – either because “[the] employer does not offer it to any hourly workers; the benefit is conditional on job tenure or hours; [or] administrative or cultural barriers hinder full utilization of the benefit.”¹³ Less than 10% feel that they can take two weeks off for mandated quarantine without the risk of losing their job.¹⁴ Thus, although the pandemic inspired in a newfound recognition for mobile workers in the U.S., this social, public appreciation not yet translated to the substantial development of policies that secure adequate safety net institutions for all in the vulnerable workforce.

⁹ United States Department of Homeland Security. 2020. *Advisory Memorandum on Ensuring Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers Ability to Work During the COVID-19 Response*. Available online at: https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Version_4.0_CISA_Guidance_on_Essential_Critical_Infrastructure_Workers_FINAL%20AUG%2018v3.pdf. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). 2020. *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19*. Available online at: <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹¹ New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer. 2020. *New York City’s Frontline Workers*. Available online at: <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/new-york-citys-frontline-workers/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹² Gould, Elise and Valier Wilson. 2020. Black workers face two of the most lethal preconditions for coronavirus – racism and economic inequality. *Economic Policy Institute*. Available online at: <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹³ Schneider, Daniel and Kristin Harknett. 2020. Essential and Vulnerable: Service-Sector Workers and Paid Sick Leave. *The Shift Project, University of California Berkeley*. Available online at: https://shift.hks.harvard.edu/files/2020/04/Essential_and_Vulnerable_Service_Sector_Workers_and_Paid_Sick_Leave.pdf. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹⁴ Khullar, Dhruv. 2020. The Essential Workers Filling New York’s Coronavirus Wards. *The New Yorker*. 1 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.newyorker.com/science/medical-dispatch/the-essential-workers-filling-new-yorks-coronavirus-wards>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.