

PROTECTING BLACK WORKERS DURING THE COVID-19 RECESSION

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Photo by Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis via Getty Image

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Protecting Black Workers During the COVID-19 Recession

America's longest economic expansion on record¹ came to an abrupt and dramatic end with the arrival of a novel coronavirus in the United States. The first confirmed U.S. case of the new coronavirus disease—COVID-19—occurred in late January 2020. By March, major portions of the American economy had been shut down to prevent the spread of the disease.² A historically low quarterly Black unemployment rate of 5.6% at the end of 2019 shot up to a very high 16.3% rate in the second quarter of 2020 (Figure 2). Such a large and rapid increase in the Black unemployment rate is unprecedented. What is not uncommon, however, is for African Americans to be hard hit by a recession. While the specifics of the recession are extraordinary, policymakers already have the tools needed to mitigate the damage the recession will cause to Black workers—if they can put aside partisan politics.

We cannot fully recover economically, until we address the public health crisis. The good news is that, at the time of this writing, two vaccines have been approved for emergency use in the United States³ and distribution has begun.⁴ More vaccines are on the way (about 200 teams are working on producing vaccines).⁵ Nonetheless,

it is important to realize that the public health crisis is far from over. Coronavirus case numbers in the U.S. are extremely high and surging⁶ and because of logistical and sociological challenges,⁷ it is unlikely that sufficient numbers of people in the United States will be vaccinated to establish herd immunity until the end of the summer.⁸ This estimate for achieving herd immunity is predicated on the vaccination campaign going well, but so far it has not.⁹

This also means that the economic challenges we face are far from over. Currently, the U.S. economy is slowing down.¹⁰ It seems reasonable to expect that unemployment rates will remain high, if not rise again, over the year. For these reasons, although we have vaccines, we still need policies focused on mitigating the impact of the recession.

This Thurgood Marshall Institute brief provides an overview of the impact of the recession on African Americans in the labor market and the policies these workers need to address the recession's negative effects. It includes original analyses of Black essential workers and of Black and White unemployment rates. Black workers are more concentrated in particular industries

and occupations due to continuing patterns of inequality in the American labor market.¹¹ The policy recommendations in the brief are focused on these areas where Black workers are over-represented.

The recommendations are the following:

Protect the Health of Essential Workers

- Strengthen Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Regulations and Enforcement on COVID-19
- Provide All Essential Workers with Paid Sick Leave, Health Insurance, and Appropriate Vaccination Prioritization
- Maintain Safe Public Transportation to Work

Continue the Unemployment Insurance Reforms of Increased Payments and Broader Eligibility as Long as They are Needed

Provide Aid to State and Local Government, and the U.S. Postal Service

While the policy proposals focus on sectors of the labor market where Black workers are over-represented, it should be noted that these policies would benefit workers of all races. They would also speed the recovery from the recession and strengthen the American economy.



Top to bottom: Photo by Donell Woodson/Getty Images, Photo By Tom Williams/CQ-Roll Call, Inc via Getty Images, Photo by Donell Woodson/Getty Images

The COVID-19 Recession: Unprecedented and Unpredictable

The COVID-19 recession is unique. Most recessions are the result of factors internal to the economy, but this recession is the result of an external shock—the pandemic caused by a new coronavirus.¹² Because of this fact, the strength of the economic recovery is tied to how effectively we control and respond to the pandemic.

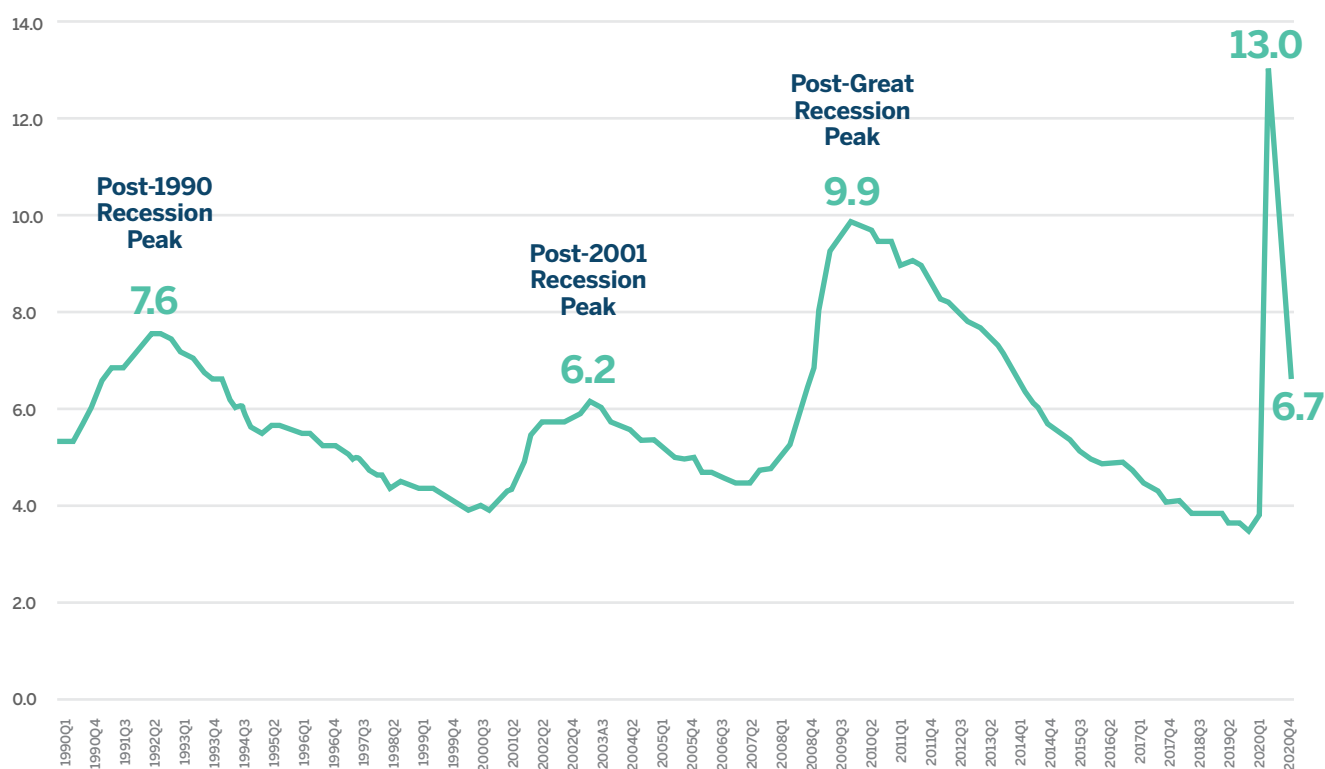
The development of two highly effective vaccines and probably several more on the way¹³ should not lead us to believe that the recession will end soon. Developing an effective vaccine is only one step in vaccinating the over 330 million people in the United States. Some argue that the hardest part of the vaccination process may not be developing a vaccine, but “[g]etting a coronavirus vaccine from loading dock to upper arm.”¹⁴ The companies that created the vaccines have to manufacture and then distribute hundreds of millions of doses to every corner of the country. This is a major logistical challenge especially since some of the vaccines require super cold storage temperatures. Then medical care providers have to overcome the fears and doubts of people who for various reasons might be opposed to receiving the vaccine. For example, in September of 2020, only about half

of African Americans adults said they would definitely get vaccinated for the coronavirus if a vaccine were available.¹⁵ Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, thinks that we may be beyond the pandemic by the end of 2021—if we can achieve mass vaccination.¹⁶ He stated, “by the time we get to the end of the summer, i.e., the third quarter, we may actually have enough herd immunity protecting our society that as we get to the end of 2021, we can approach very much some degree of normality that is close to where we were before.”¹⁷ In other words, we should expect to be living under a pandemic—and an economy hampered by a pandemic—for close to another year.

While we try to address the public health crisis, economic policy can help Americans endure the hardship of the COVID-19 recession. When we are beyond the pandemic, economic policy can help speed up or slow down the economic recovery. Unfortunately, the hyper-partisanship in American politics makes it difficult for leaders to enact both the public health and the economic policies needed to address the crisis. This challenge makes the trajectory of COVID-19 recession highly unpredictable.

Figure 1. Quarterly Unemployment Rate, 1990 to 2020

(in percent)



Source: Current Population Survey data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, public data series.

The COVID-19 Unemployment Shock

We use quarterly rates for this unemployment discussion. For African Americans, the monthly rate has a fair amount of “statistical noise.” Using quarterly rates allows us to focus on trends and not be distracted by random fluctuations in the data.

Looking at the national quarterly unemployment rate, we see that it peaked at 7.6% after the 1990 recession, at 6.2% after the 2001 recession, and at 9.9% after the Great Recession (Figure 1). The Great Recession received that label because at

that time it was the greatest economic downturn the country had experienced since the Great Depression. This fact should make clear that a 9.9% national unemployment rate is very high.

The unemployment rate for the COVID-19 recession blew past 9.9% to reach 13% in the second quarter of 2020. The unemployment rate reached 13% *despite \$2 trillion of economic stimulus* funding in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.¹⁸ Without that stimulus, the unemployment rate would surely have been even higher.

After a sharp rise in unemployment in the spring, there have been strong declines over the summer and fall. The second quarter unemployment rate was 13%, but it fell to 6.7% by the fourth quarter.

This unemployment rate is still high, however, and it does not provide the full story. The rate of job growth has decreased every month since June,¹⁹ and we ended 2020 with the economy again losing jobs—140,000 of them.²⁰ Nearly 4 million workers are jobless, but, because they have given up looking for work, they are not counted in the official unemployment statistics.²¹ The number of involuntary part-time workers in December of 2020 was nearly 2 million above the count a year earlier.²² These are workers whose work hours were reduced or who could only find part-time work although they wanted to work full-time.²³ None of these developments are signs of a strong economy.

While this broad picture is important, it masks significant differences by race and class. The Black unemployment rate is generally significantly higher than the national rate, and even higher still than the white unemployment rate. However bad the national picture looks; it is

worse for African Americans. Also, the economic recovery is proceeding at a different pace by income level. We will turn to these issues now.

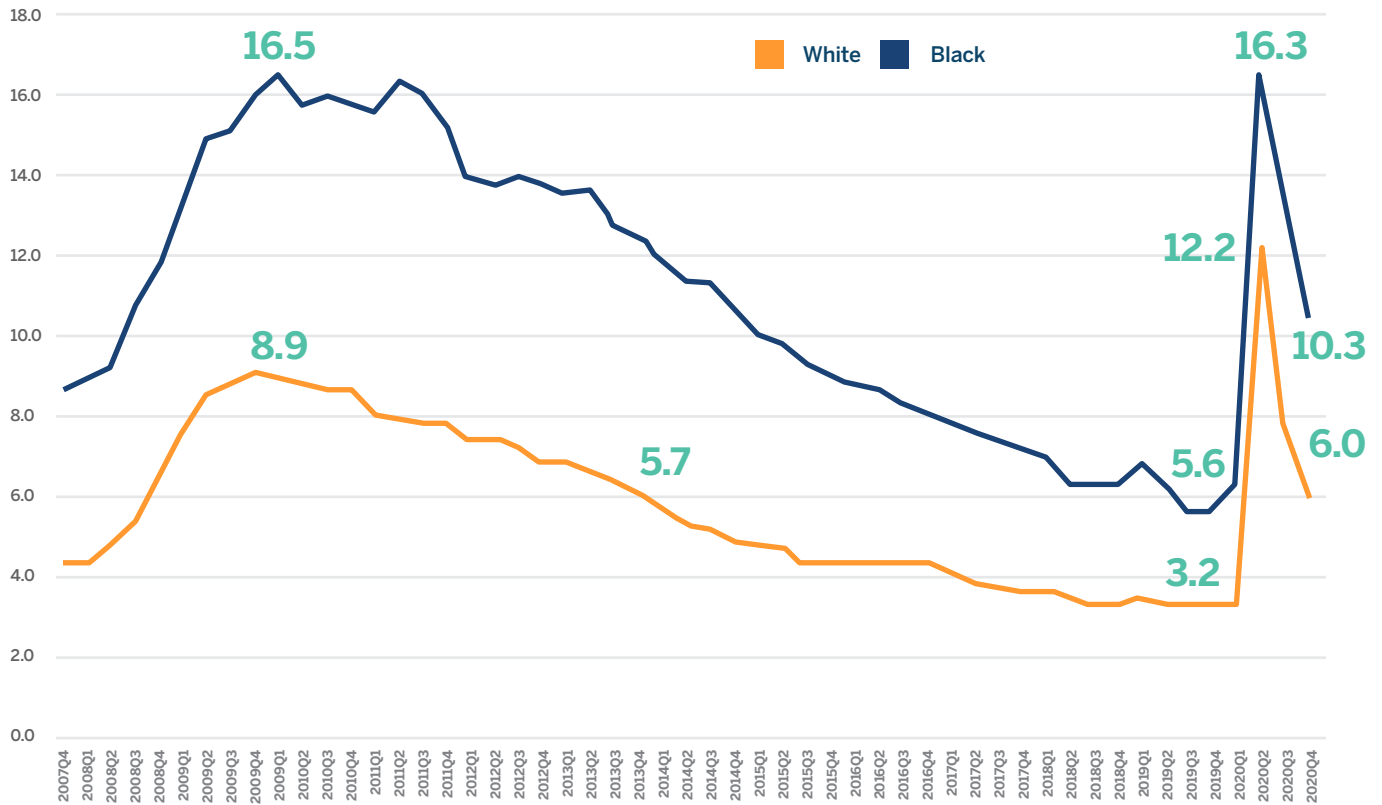
High Black Unemployment from 2007 to 2020

After the Great Recession, which began at the end of 2007, the quarterly Black unemployment rate peaked at 16.5% in the first quarter of 2010 (Figure 2). The rate hovered around 16% for over a year and then began a long decline starting in the fourth quarter of 2011. That decline ended in the fourth quarter of 2019 with the Black unemployment rate at 5.6%.

While it took over two years for the quarterly Black unemployment rate to rise to 16.5% following the Great Recession, it took only two quarters— half a year—for the Black unemployment rate to reach 16.3% from the start of the COVID-19 recession. Also, the gain from the start of the Great Recession to the peak unemployment rate was 7.8 percentage points, while the gain over the COVID-19 recession has been 10.7 percentage points. This is an extremely rapid rise in unemployment.

“ The Black unemployment rate is generally significantly higher than the national rate, and even higher still than the white unemployment rate. However bad the national picture looks; it is worse for African Americans. ”

Figure 2. White and Black Quarterly Unemployment Rates, 2007 to 2020
(in percent)



Source: Current Population Survey data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, public data series.

Although the Black unemployment rate at the end of 2019 was historically low (5.6%), it was not a particularly low rate for white Americans. As Figure 2 shows, in the fourth quarter of 2019, the white unemployment rate was almost half that rate (3.2%). Furthermore, white America had been living with an unemployment rate lower than 5.6% for nearly six years. In December of 2020—during the COVID-19 recession—the white unemployment rate was 6%, a rate very close to the historic low rate for African Americans.

In fact, if one looks at the quarterly unemployment rates from 1972 (the earliest date for Black unemployment data from the U.S. Bureau of

Labor Statistics) to the present, it is even clearer that an unemployment rate of 5.6% is not truly a low unemployment rate. The median white unemployment rate for the 49 years from 1972 to 2020 is 5.1%. In other words, for half of that time period, white Americans lived in an economy with an unemployment rate of 5.1% or less. The Black median unemployment rate for the same time period is 11.3%.²⁴

If we were to define 5.1% as the upper limit for “low unemployment,” Black Americans have never experienced low unemployment at any time in the last 49 years.²⁵ It is for this reason that it is fair to say that Black Americans live in an economy of a “permanent recession.”²⁶ Black



Photo by Noam Galai/Getty Images

America cycles between high unemployment and very high unemployment without ever achieving true low unemployment. Without low unemployment, Black communities are forever struggling with high poverty and economic underdevelopment, which simply feeds the large and expanding racial wealth gap in the U.S.²⁷

When we appreciate these facts, it becomes clear that while a historically low Black unemployment rate is better than a higher rate, we still have a major problem. By white standards, the lowest Black rate on record is actually still a high unemployment rate.

Wages and Unemployment and the COVID-19 Recession

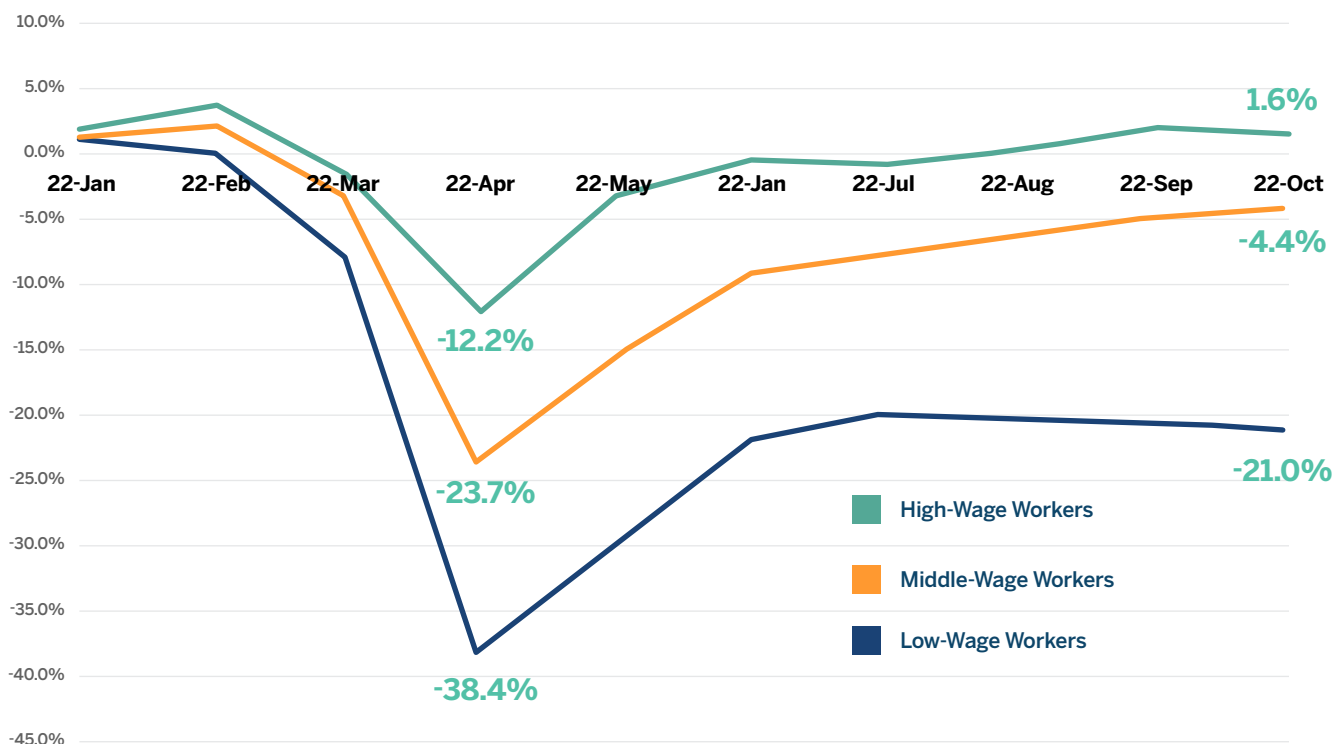
The experience of the COVID-19 recession has not been uniform. Some individuals were laid off or had their work hours reduced. Black workers are disproportionately in this group. The Black unemployment rate in the fourth quarter of 2020 was still 4.7 percentage points higher than it was

at the end of 2019 (Figure 2). The white rate was up 2.8 points. More than half of Black workers report a loss of employment income, but only approximately two fifths of white workers report the same.²⁸

Some workers have been forced to keep working largely in the same manner as they did before the pandemic and may even have had to increase their work hours. For these workers, this situation is positive in that the workers still have a job and an income, but, for some, it also comes with the risk of contracting COVID-19. For essential frontline workers who must interact in-person, not just with their co-workers, but also with the public, the risk of contracting COVID-19 is particularly high. Black workers are over-represented among these essential frontline workers.²⁹

Others are still working, but they have been able to shift to working remotely and avoid in-person contact with co-workers and customers or clients. Black workers are under-represented in this group.³⁰

Figure 3. Percent Change in Employment by Wage Category, January to October 2020



Source: Chetty et al., *Economic Tracker*, Opportunity Insights (Nov. 2020), <https://tracktherecovery.org/>.

Opportunity Insights’ Economic Tracker data provides more detail on these divergent trends by workers’ wages. Figure 3 shows the employment trends for low-wage, middle-wage, and high-wage workers. “Low-wage” refers to the first wage quartile or the first 25 percent of workers ranked by wage. “Middle-wage” refers to the two middle quartiles. “High-wage” is the fourth quartile. As the figure illustrates, the lowest-wage workers have been hardest hit. In October 2020, the employment level for low-wage workers was still down 21% from where it was in January. For high-wage workers, the job losses have been completely reversed. By October, this group was essentially back to the employment level that it had in January.

Black workers make up 11.9% of all workers, but they make up 14.3% of low-wage workers. The largest number of Black workers is in the middle-wage category. This category has two quartiles. Black workers make up 13% of middle-wage workers. The smallest number and smallest share of Black workers is in the high-wage category. Only 7.2% of high-wage workers are Black.³¹

When we think about who needs government assistance, we should focus on the workers in low- and middle-wage jobs. Black workers are being hard hit by the COVID-19 recession because they are disproportionately low- and middle-wage workers.

The Unpredictable Future of the Recession

In late spring and over the summer of 2020, there were signs of improving economic conditions as states reopened, but now that the number of coronavirus cases has risen to new heights, many states have had to reengage restrictions.³² This illustrates why it is hard to know what will come next for this recession. We will not be able to fully recover until we have control of the virus. So far, our political leaders have done poorly in terms of providing consistent and scientifically-based public health information to combat the virus. This failure of leadership has produced chaos and has made the U.S. public health response arguably the worst among rich nations.³³

The initial economic response of our leaders was far better than the public health response. The CARES Act quickly delivered important relief to the American public. It was by no means perfect, and anything enacted so quickly is likely to have flaws, but it did provide significant relief. Researchers at the Center on Poverty and Social Policy and Teacher's College at Columbia

University estimate that the Black poverty rate would have increased substantially over the spring and summer without the CARES Act. Now that the aid from the CARES Act has largely expired, we are beginning to see an increase in the Black poverty rate.³⁴

Because of multiple public health policy failures by many of our leaders, our economy is in worse shape than it could have been with adoption of a more effective program to counter the virus. Economic analysts are expecting a slow recovery.³⁵ Disagreements in Congress are resulting in limitations on the delivery of additional aid to Americans suffering from the continuing economic crisis.³⁶ The December 2020 stimulus package assumes that we are in an economic recovery,³⁷ but the December job numbers show that the economy is again losing jobs.³⁸ How well we respond to the public health and economic challenges of the pandemic will determine the length and depth of the recession and the amount of pain inflicted on Black households.



(Photo by Suzanne Kreiter/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)

Policies to Help Black Workers

Like all workers, Black workers need the government to follow scientifically grounded public health policies. Without a strong public health response, damage to the economy will be more severe. The government response has been inadequate so far.

Additionally, Black workers, like all workers, need the federal government to enact fiscal stimulus measures and to strengthen the safety net for families who are being hurt economically by the COVID-19 recession. Below are some specific policies needed to address the disproportionate risks and harm faced by Black workers.

Protect the Health of Essential Workers

African Americans are more likely to become infected with the coronavirus than white Americans.³⁹ There are strong reasons to believe that the fact that African Americans are more likely to be essential frontline workers plays a significant role in the frequency of transmission. Dr. Mary Bassett, Director of the François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University, argues that the higher rates of coronavirus cases among people of color “is about who still has to leave their home to work, who has to leave a crowded apartment, get on crowded transport, and go to a crowded workplace . . .”⁴⁰ If one looks at the demographics of frontline workers like grocery store clerks, nurses, cleaners, warehouse workers, and bus drivers, one finds that African American workers are over-represented.⁴¹

The following are important health-related policies needed to help Black workers avoid contracting COVID-19.

Strengthen OSHA Regulations and Enforcement on COVID-19

OSHA has been criticized and sued by labor advocates for failing to take strong action against workplaces with insufficient COVID-19 protections. Although OSHA has received nearly 10,000 coronavirus-related complaints, it has issued only slightly over 100 citations. Currently, nurses and other healthcare workers are suing OSHA for failing to keep them safe.⁴² Labor advocates in the meatpacking industry, however, feel that OSHA has done far better in keeping health care workers safe than those in the meatpacking industry. When OSHA does impose penalties on meatpacking firms, advocates see the small dollar fines as providing no incentive for firms to change their behavior.⁴³ *Mother Jones* magazine reports that the multi-billion-dollar meatpacking firm Conagra was fined \$2,121 in relation to a 42-case outbreak at its plant in Marshall, Missouri. Another multi-billion-dollar meatpacking firm, JBS, was fined \$13,494 in relation to a 348-case outbreak at its plant in Green Bay, Wisconsin.⁴⁴ OSHA has also recently stopped issuing press releases for its findings of workplace health and safety violations. Research suggests that negative publicity about workplace violations is an important factor in increasing compliance with health and safety rules in an industry.⁴⁵ OSHA should be required to issue press releases and otherwise publicly report workplace violations.

OSHA should make certain that workers are adequately protected from COVID-19 in the workplace. The agency should look to the more aggressive policies that have been enacted by some states,⁴⁶ and take the criticism from labor groups more seriously. Black workers are over-represented among essential frontline workers.⁴⁷ They need strong health and safety protections.

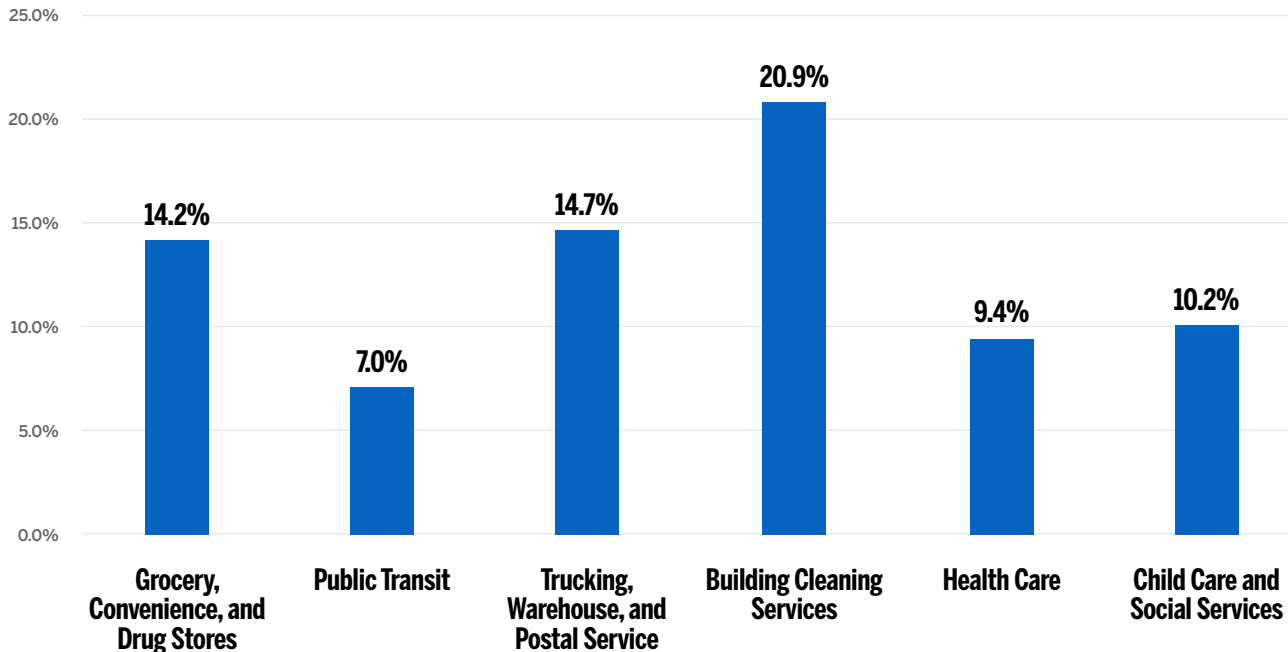
Provide All Essential Workers with Paid Sick Leave, Health Insurance, and Appropriate Vaccination Prioritization

People are more likely to work when they are sick if they do not have paid sick leave and health insurance.⁴⁸ When people cannot afford to miss work or to pay for health care, they are more

likely to ignore signs of illness or simply hope for the best when they are ill. It hurts us all to have workers with COVID-19 interacting in-person with co-workers and the public. Yet, this is likely occurring and feeding the pandemic.

Black workers are over-represented in all the frontline industries presented in Figure 4.⁴⁹ As the figure shows, in all of these industries, significant shares of Black frontline workers do not have health insurance. The lowest rate is seven percent for public transit workers. The highest rate is 20.9% for workers in the Building Cleaning Services industry. Even among workers in the Health Care industry, 9.4% are without health coverage. These healthcare workers are at a high risk

Figure 4. Percent of Black Frontline Workers without Health Insurance by Selected Industry, 2019



Note: Industry categories taken from Hye Jin Rho et al., Ctr. for Econ. & Pol’y Res., *A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries* 7 tbl.1 (Apr. 7, 2020), <https://cepr.net/a-basic-demographic-profile-of-workers-in-frontline-industries/>.

Source: Author’s analysis of American Community Survey data from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

of contracting COVID-19 and at a high risk of transmitting the disease to patients.⁵⁰

For the safety of the public and these individuals, all essential workers should have paid sick leave and health insurance. If health insurance cannot be provided by their employers, these workers should be granted Medicaid coverage, which would mean treating essential workers like they are essential, not expendable.

In September of 2019, then-President Trump issued an Executive Order to provide COVID-19 health care treatment for uninsured patients.⁵¹ While the program exists, it has two major flaws. First, many of the uninsured do not know that it exists, nor do many doctors.⁵² Hospital administrators also avoid informing patients about the program possibly because they are not clear on how to be reimbursed by it.⁵³ If only a few uninsured patients are able to learn about the program and use it, then the program is ineffective.

A second problem with the program is that COVID-19 must be the primary diagnosis in order for the patient to be covered for treatment.

If an individual has a heart attack brought on by complications from COVID-19, the medical diagnosis must indicate COVID-19 as the primary problem. If the heart attack is listed as the primary problem, then the medical treatment is not eligible for the program.⁵⁴ This and other eligibility restrictions make the program somewhat of a health insurance gambling system rather than solid health insurance coverage. An expansion of Medicaid to all uninsured essential workers would be a better solution than the Executive Order.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that states give health care workers and residents of long-term care facilities first priority for receiving COVID-19 vaccinations and non-healthcare essential workers second priority.⁵⁵ The ACIP's definition of non-healthcare essential workers include food workers, U.S. Postal Service workers, grocery store workers, public transit workers, and child care workers⁵⁶—occupations where Black people are over-represented.⁵⁷ It is important for states to seriously consider this prioritization in their vaccine distribution.⁵⁸



Photo by Ben Hastyl/MediaNews Group/Reading Eagle via Getty Images



Photo by Ethan Miller/Getty Images

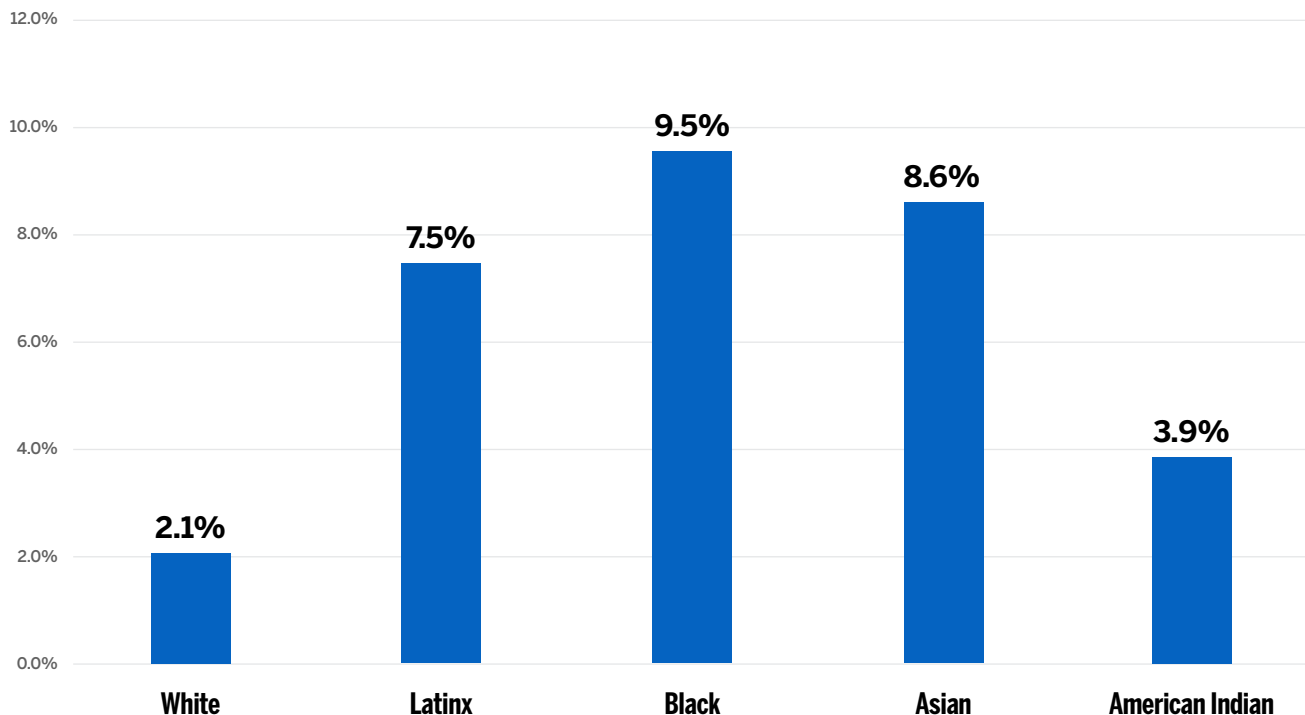
Maintain Safe Public Transportation to Work

We are still learning basic facts about the novel coronavirus. One area of contention is whether public transit should be considered a significant means for the transmission of the virus.⁵⁹ Conflicting findings in some recent research may be due to the fact that the transmissibility depends greatly on the specifics of the particular mode of public transit, including the length of time of the average trip, the degree of crowding, the prevalence of mask wearing, the amount of conversation among passengers, and the quality of the ventilation. All of these factors

may affect the ease of transmissibility. In some transit systems, conditions may facilitate the transmission of the virus; in others, conditions may work to thwart transmission. Studies of different types of transit systems may produce different findings.

Public transit is particularly important to African Americans, who have the lowest rate of personal vehicle ownership of any racial group in the U.S. and rely more on public transit for their daily transportation needs than most other groups.⁶⁰ Among essential frontline workers, African Americans have the highest rate of commuting to work by public transit (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Percent of Essential Frontline Workers Commuting by Public Transit by Race, 2019



Note: Industry categories taken from Hye Jin Rho et al., Ctr. for Econ. & Pol'y Res., *A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries* 7 tbl.1 (Apr. 7, 2020), <https://cepr.net/a-basic-demographic-profile-of-workers-in-frontline-industries/>.
Source: Author's analysis of American Community Survey data from IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

It is good that the December 2020 stimulus included funding for public transit.⁶¹ Transit systems need to work to reduce crowding and increase sanitation at a time when they are losing tremendous amounts of revenue due to lower ridership.⁶² Many essential frontline workers are low-wage workers who are, no doubt, still relying on public transit to get to work. Reductions in public transit because of financial strains caused by the pandemic will likely mean an increase in transportation costs for these low-wage workers.

In addition, African Americans disproportionately work in public transit. It is also important that public transit systems are maintained if we are to stem the loss of jobs for Black workers.⁶³ If transit systems are shut down, the lost jobs will add to the high African American unemployment. Policymakers should maintain adequate funding for public transit systems until the economy fully recovers.

Continue the Unemployment Insurance Reforms of Increased Payments and Broader Eligibility as Long as They are Needed

America's unemployment insurance system functions quite poorly in normal circumstances. In 2019, only about 30% percent of unemployed workers received unemployment insurance

benefits.⁶⁴ Several Southern states were among the worst performers. For example, in the fourth quarter of 2019, in Mississippi only 9.5% of those unemployed received benefits. In the top performing state, Massachusetts, 58.2% of those unemployed received benefits.⁶⁵ Significantly, even the top performing state falls far short of 100% coverage for unemployed workers.

The reforms of the CARES Act have greatly improved the unemployment insurance system. The Act increased the amount of the unemployment insurance benefits by \$600 per week. In most states, the unemployed are only allowed to receive benefits for 26 weeks. The Act allows unemployed individuals to obtain an additional 13 weeks of benefits if it is needed.⁶⁶ The Act also made it easier for "self-employed workers, including independent contractors, freelancers, workers seeking part-time work, and workers who do not have a long-enough work history to qualify" for benefits.⁶⁷ This expansion was not only good for the workers who received the benefits, it greatly benefitted the economy as the workers spent those dollars.⁶⁸

With some modifications, these reforms have been continued in the December 2020 stimulus.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, the stimulus only extends the reforms until March 14.⁷⁰ As mentioned above,

“Black Americans have never experienced low unemployment at any time in the last 49 years.”



Photo by EVA MARIE UZCATEGUI/AFP via Getty Images

Dr. Fauci estimates that we will not return to normal life until at least the end of the year.⁷¹ This means that we will likely be facing elevated unemployment rates and need the CARES Act unemployment benefits for most of the year.

African Americans consistently suffer from high unemployment rates, and large shares of Black workers are in the Southern states with weak unemployment insurance systems. Policymakers should permanently reform the unemployment insurance system so that it better helps the unemployed as well as the overall economy during recessions.

Provide Aid to State and Local Government, and the U.S. Postal Service

Generally, state and local governments are required by law to balance their budgets. During

recessions when they lose tax revenue, state and local governments have to cut their budgets and lay off public sector workers.⁷² Since the end of the summer of 2020, there have been increasing job losses in state and local governments while some other sectors have been recovering.⁷³

The federal government does not have the budgetary constraints of state and local governments. It can borrow money during downturns and address budget issues after the recession is over. At the moment, interest rates are low, so the cost of borrowing is also low.⁷⁴ The federal government should be borrowing and providing more aid to state and local governments so that they don't have to lay off workers and cut services.

Black workers are over-represented among America's public sector workers.⁷⁵ Thus,

support for the public sector or lack thereof has a significant impact on Black employment, with the most significant impact on the Black middle class.⁷⁶ To better endure the pandemic and have a strong recovery from the recession, policymakers need to provide ample support to state and local governments to limit layoffs of public sector employees.

At the federal level, Congress needs to provide more support for the U.S. Postal Service, where Black workers are over-represented in the Postal Service.⁷⁷ The Postal Service has been struggling financially for years because, although it has unique requirements—serve every address—unique financial obligations—pre-fund retiree health costs—and unique management—Congress and the White House—Congress wants it to perform financially as an average private business.⁷⁸ Congress needs to recognize the impossibility of these demands. In the short term, Congress needs to provide the funds necessary for the Postal Service to survive the recession. In the long term, Congress needs to address the errors and contradictions in the requirements that it has imposed on the Postal Service.

The Postal Service is another employer that has been an important source of good jobs for African Americans.⁷⁹ The share of Black workers in the Postal Service is about twice their share in the American economy as a whole.⁸⁰ If Congress allows it to fail, it will disproportionately add Black workers to the ranks of the unemployed.

Although vaccinations for COVID-19 have begun, there are still reasons to be worried about the physical and financial health of Black workers. African Americans continue to have the highest unemployment rate among America's major

racial and ethnic groups. Vaccinating everyone in the country presents a huge logistical challenge. It will take several months to accomplish this goal which means that we will have several more months of recessionary economic conditions. Policymakers need to prioritize the concerns and needs of low- and middle-wage workers because it is these workers who are being hurt the most by the recession. These workers are also disproportionately African American. Helping these workers will ultimately lead to a strong economic recovery for the country as a whole.

The recommendations are the following:

Protect the Health of Essential Workers

- Strengthen Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Regulations and Enforcement on COVID-19
- Provide All Essential Workers with Paid Sick Leave, Health Insurance, and Appropriate Vaccination Prioritization
- Maintain Safe Public Transportation to Work

Continue the Unemployment Insurance Reforms of Increased Payments and Broader Eligibility as Long as They are Needed

Provide Aid to State and Local Governments, and the U.S. Postal Service

Endnotes

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