



WORKERS AND COVID-19

The State of Working America in the Coronavirus Pandemic

BY DENNIS KALOB, PH.D.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, the research was clear: the lower your socioeconomic status, the greater the likelihood of poor health and premature death.¹ Difficult and sometimes dangerous jobs, low income, poor quality and cramped housing, lack of access to good nutrition, and high stress can inflict great damage—directly or indirectly—on the body and mind. Such living conditions are breeding grounds for all sorts of health problems, including heart ailments, high blood pressure, diabetes, and mental health challenges.

The poor and working class—and much of what passes for the middle class—are, in a word, **vulnerable**. Why this has been so in the richest country on earth with a GDP of \$20 trillion and thousands of millionaires and billionaires is a topic that deserves great attention. It can be simply stated, though, as a problem of inequality—the unequal distribution of the resources in this country. In terms of wealth distribution, the bottom half of the country's households collectively own just 1% of the nation's wealth.²

Having so little in a land of plenty has been taking its toll on working people and their families for decades, long before the appearance of COVID-19. This current crisis, which is both medical and economic, has slammed those already vulnerable, while it has further revealed their vulnerability to the rest of the nation and world.

What does it mean to be vulnerable? It could mean you are without a job, without savings to cushion the loss, and perhaps without any—or enough—assistance from the government to help you pay the bills. It may also mean losing health insurance...during the greatest national health crisis in a century!

Being vulnerable in a pandemic can also mean that you must go to work, because either your work is essential and/or your income is required in order to live. Those who went to work throughout the peak of the crisis typically risked their health and sense of well-being, and put themselves at greater risk of death.

These workers include nurses, doctors, nursing assistants, EMTs, nursing home personnel, and others in the medical field—some decently paid, others not.

The list of vulnerable workers also includes grocery store clerks, public transit employees, postal workers, food delivery people, meatpacking workers, and law enforcement personnel. Many of these workers who have risked their lives and health are lower paid and often without benefits such as paid sick days. And decent pay or not, many of these jobs are high stress and/or often unpleasant in the best of circumstances. During pandemic times, these workers also have to deal with even more stress driven by fear.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 9.2 percent of workers in the lowest income quartile are able to work from home, while 61.5 percent of workers in the highest quartile have that ability.³

Further, about one in four workers are without paid sick leave benefits, a problem greatest among those in lower income occupations and among those working part-time.⁴

Risk exposure clearly has a class dimension to it.

One of the special features of these past months is the appearance of protests demanding an end to the restrictions that were put into place to reduce COVID-19 infection spread and death. These protests, like the old Tea Party gatherings, have been encouraged and funded by conservative organizations and amplified by the right-wing propaganda machine known as “Fox News,” as well as by ultra conservative talk radio and conspiracy-heavy websites.⁵

For those of us influenced by Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and the importance of promoting the common good, these protests have been infuriating. Putting money and property rights ahead of public health and human rights might be within the tradition of conservative thought, but it is quite contrary to CST and any notion of the common good. What these folks are really asking for is that some of the most vulnerable people in the nation get to work to provide them with the services they demand—haircuts, massages, nice sit-down meals, and the like.

That being said, not all of those who have advocated for a quick opening of our country are conspiracy theorists or sociopaths. There are millions of people who fear for their futures and very lives—not in a medical, but in an economic sense. As I pointed out above, we live in a country filled with the vulnerable. Wealth, security, and comfort are enjoyed by a few, while the many live on the edge during the best of times and are certainly desperate now.

Protesting is a great American tradition, particularly given the fact that there have been ample reasons in our history to take to the streets in the defense of human rights and social justice. I have a sense of solidarity with all of those who are facing the horrid choice of our times: to go to work in order to survive economically, or to stay at home in order to reduce the risk of death. Many workers have faced such a Sophie’s choice throughout our history (coal miners come to mind). The ugly choices within the context of this pandemic bring into greater focus the sad reality of life that too many people face.

However, rather than demand an opening of business too early out of desperate economic concerns, what the protestors—and all of us—should have been doing is demanding that the country remain closed in order to protect our collective health AND for the government to provide ways to ameliorate the severe economic burden on the poor and working class. Some steps have been taken, such as the \$1200 checks and additional unemployment benefits, but many people need more help in order to survive economically. Such actions could include some or all of the following: temporary rent and mortgage relief, additional and expanded unemployment and SNAP benefits, forgiveness of student loan debt, paid sick days and paid medical leave for all workers, and, of course, universal healthcare (clearly nobody should be avoiding going to the doctor or stressed about paying for care during a pandemic).

The blatant mass vulnerability within our rich country should cause us to rethink all the ways we have organized our economy and society. Rather than having people serving the economy, we need an economy that truly serves the people—all the people—as the U.S. Catholic Bishops have said.⁶ Fortunately, we have it within our power to do the heavy lifting necessary to move our people from a state of frightening vulnerability to comforting security. I sincerely hope we will rise to the challenge.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Khullar, Dhruv and Chokshi, Dave A. (2018, October 4). Health, Income, & Poverty: Where We Are & What Could Help. *Health Affairs*.
- 2 Kent, Ana, Ricketts, Lowell and Boshara, Ray. (2019, August 14). *What Wealth Inequality in America Looks Like: Key Facts & Figures*. Open Vault Blog of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.
- 3 Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019, September 24). *Job flexibilities and work schedules: Data from the American Time Use survey*.
- 4 Desilver, Drew. (2020, March 12). *As coronavirus spreads, which U.S. workers have paid sick leave – and which don’t?* Pew Research Center.
- 5 Gabbatt, Adam. (2020, April 18). *Thousands of Americans backed by rightwing donors gear up for protests*. *The Guardian*.
- 6 National Conference of Catholic Bishops. (1986). *Economic justice for all: pastoral letter on Catholic social teaching and the U.S. economy*.