

# **A majority of workers are fearful of coronavirus infections at work, especially Black, Hispanic, and low- and middle-income workers**

Those facing risks are not proportionately  
receiving extra compensation

**Report** • By [Peter Dorman](#) and [Lawrence Mishel](#) • June 16, 2020

The majority of workers and roughly 70% of Black and Hispanic workers who are currently working onsite at their workplaces, and not at home, believe they face considerable risks from the coronavirus. These workers are not being provided sufficient protections on the job. Moreover, new polling commissioned by EPI shows that vulnerable workers are not receiving extra compensation proportionate to the risks they are being exposed to. Workers require and deserve both safety protections and extra compensation in these circumstances, and they should not be forced to choose between their health and having income.

## Risks on the job are high, especially for Black and Hispanic workers and low- and middle-income workers

There is widespread fear of risks from the coronavirus among workers who are working onsite at their workplace, instead of working from home, and these perceived risks are greater for those with the least power in the labor market.

For instance, a *Washington Post*–Ipsos poll (Craig and Guskin 2020) of those going to work (not working at home) shows pervasive fears among these workers:

- 68% are concerned about the possibility of getting sick.
- 58% are concerned about exposing members of their household to the coronavirus after being exposed at work.
- 49% consider that there is a large or moderate risk from doing their job.
- 36% think they have been exposed to the coronavirus at work.

By the nature of their jobs, many of these workers must interact with customers, suppliers, and co-workers.

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Therefore, keeping these workers safe on the job enables all of us to be safe.

The *Washington Post*–Ipsos poll (Craig and Guskin 2020) also found that Black and Hispanic workers employed outside their home faced greater risks. The poll asked workers who are working outside their homes whether they were concerned that they could be exposed to the virus at work and infect other members of their household. Those who said they were concerned included:

- 58% overall
- 50% of white workers
- 72% of Hispanic workers
- 68% of Black workers

These results indicate that among those working outside the home, Hispanic and Black workers are 44% and 36% more likely to fear risks from work, respectively, than white workers.

More Black workers also believe they have already been exposed to the virus at work: “Nearly half of black men think they may have already been exposed to the virus at work, compared with just over 3 in 10 white men” (Craig and Guskin 2020).

Similar results were obtained by the National Employment Law Project (NELP) using Google Consumer Surveys of 1,137 respondents from May 8 to May 11, 2020 (Tung and Padin 2020). When asked, “Have you gone to work outside your home during this pandemic, even though you thought it might be seriously risking your health or a family member’s health?” some 56% of respondents answered “yes.” Breaking down the responses by race, these are the shares of respondents who answered “yes”:

- White: 49%
- Black: 73%
- Hispanic: 64%

Breaking down the responses by income in 2019, the following shares of respondents answered “yes”:

- Less than \$29,999: 63%
- \$30,000–\$74,999: 58%
- Greater than \$75,000: 39%

It is clear that Black, Hispanic, and low- and middle-income workers who are going to work at their workplaces, not working at home, have far more fears of health risks than do higher-income or white workers who are working onsite at their workplace.

A recent survey by Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Suresh Naidu, Adam Reich, and Patrick Youngblood for the Roosevelt Institute (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2020) provides further confirmation of the extensive risks and racial disparities in risk:

Essential workers report being very concerned about the risk of infection at their jobs. But concern is spread unevenly across the workforce: Black, Latinx, and younger workers are substantially more concerned about infection risks than are white workers or older workers. These differences were considerable: Black essential workers were nearly twice as likely as white essential workers to express concern about infection risk. (2)

These concerns about risks will shape our ability to revive the economy as workers make choices about going to work while attempting to minimize the risks to themselves and their families, and these risks are being borne more heavily by Black and Hispanic workers and those with the least income. Public policy must pursue measures to rapidly reduce the proportion of the population who might be exposed at work and possibly infect others.

## How many receive extra compensation and who are they?

There has been a lot of publicity about companies rewarding front-line workers by giving them extra compensation, sometimes called hazard pay, during the pandemic. In a fair society and one in which employees have equal power relative to their employer, this would be the norm: Those who take on extra risk in order to do their job would be compensated for it even as we act to protect workers from that risk.

EPI commissioned questions on a recent poll to examine how many people received some kind of hazard pay and the demographic breakdowns of those receiving hazard pay. The Greenberg Quinlan Rosner online poll using the YouGov panel (YouGov 2020) from May 7 to May 17, 2020, surveyed 2,107 registered voters and provided 664 observations of workers whose “workplace is your usual place of employment (and not at home).” A sample of registered voters will be whiter, older, and more affluent than a sample of the general population. The small sample size (664) suggests we must exercise caution in making strong statements about differences between subgroups, but certain conclusions are nevertheless warranted.

We consider that workers received hazard pay if they answered that they “received extra pay or benefits because of the higher risks you face” in the form of “a one-time payment or bonus,” “a change in my rate of pay, either hourly, weekly, or otherwise,” or “some other financial benefit.” The results (see **Table 1**) show that about 30% of respondents working outside their home are getting this extra hazard pay. This also means, however, that 70% are not receiving a wage increase or bonus. However, the Black, Hispanic, and non-college-educated workers among those not working at home are somewhat more likely to receive hazard pay, though not in proportion to the perceived greater risks (as detailed above). For instance, more than 50% of workers who are currently employed outside of their home are concerned about bringing the coronavirus home, yet only 30% receive hazard pay (i.e., less than 60% of the number of those concerned about the risk). Likewise, some 71% of black workers employed outside their home are fearful of bringing the coronavirus home, but only 41% receive hazard pay.

Table 1

## Shares of workers receiving hazard pay, by demographic group

Descriptives	Received hazard pay	Number of observations	
		Weighted	Unweighted
<i>All</i>	29.5%	702	664
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	29.6%	382	339
Female	29.3%	320	325
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>			
White	26.8%	521	474
Black	40.6%	104	91
Hispanic	33.5%	47	46
<i>Education</i>			
Non-college-educated	32.9%	423	362
College-educated	24.2%	278	302
<i>Union status</i>			
Nonunion	29.3%	597	560
Union	30.6%	105	104

**Note:** Observations are from an online survey of 2,107 registered voters. Workers in the sample are those whose “workplace is your usual place of employment (and not at home).” Hazard pay is defined as extra compensation, in the form of a one-time payment or bonus, wage rate change, or other financial benefit, because a worker is facing increased risks on the job.

**Source:** Greenberg Quinlan Rosner online poll using the YouGov panel, May 7–17, 2020.

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Analysis of hourly wage changes in the Roosevelt Institute survey (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2020) also confirms a disjuncture between risks and pay:

[W]e find that the average worker reports a \$1.03 increase in nominal hourly wages [between] February [and late April/early May] and the median worker reports no increase at all.... [W]orkers who report higher levels of concern of infecting themselves at work were no more likely to report increases in hourly wages since February compared to workers who report lower levels of concern.... [E]ssential workers exposed to greater infection risk are no more likely to see wage hikes than are workers in counties with lower infection risk. In sum, there is little evidence that COVID-19 infection risk—whether measured subjectively or objectively—is related to changes in essential worker pay. (7–8)

This failure of workers to be fairly compensated for the risks they face runs contrary to what some economists expect in a market setting where employers and employees contract as equals: The theory of “compensating wage differentials” says workers are compensated for the extra risks they face on the job. The fact that this is not currently the

case is probably not surprising given the high unemployment environment that is certainly weakening workers' bargaining leverage. Then again, most workers have weakened bargaining power relative to their employer even in "normal" times, as decades of wage suppression and rising wage inequality attest. There are decades of evidence accumulated over a wide range of employment outcomes that what workers get depends on how much power and leverage they can exercise vis-à-vis their employer (Mishel et al. 2012; Dorman 1996; Dorman and Hagstrom 1998). Workers with in-demand skills, workers in tight labor markets, or workers experiencing racial favoritism or other forms of favoritism are more likely to get better work and be paid more for it.

As in so many other aspects of our society, the coronavirus has illuminated and exacerbated preexisting inequalities in the workplace. Conversely, the agenda that begins with fairness and support for workers confronting the virus recognizes that we need to ensure adequate safety protections on the job and compensate workers for the risks they experience. Labor markets are not responding to increased risks for essential workers—especially those with the least bargaining power, such as Black and Hispanic workers and low- and middle-income workers. The labor market's failure to respond to these risks indicates that public policy interventions are needed to raise labor standards.

## **Workers have low expectations of employers in a regulation-free environment**

Workers have very low expectations of their employers. Although a majority of workers are fearful of risking their families' health by going to work and roughly half believe they face moderate or high health risks on the job, EPI's poll indicates that only 8% are "dissatisfied" with the safety precautions taken by their employer to protect them from the risk of infection. The *Washington Post*–Ipsos poll indicates that 19% of those employed at their workplace think their employer has not done enough to ensure employees are safe where they work.

These results are not surprising given that there are no clear expectations of what employers are obligated to do to provide a safe environment during the coronavirus pandemic, since the Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) has not issued any standards. Nevertheless, we have seen a wide variety of strikes and other activities where workers are attempting to obtain protection from being infected by the coronavirus on the job. Moreover, the NELP survey indicates that more than 40% of workers have raised concerns about protections from the coronavirus directly with their employers. OSHA is failing to protect workers and by its failure to issue standards is likely suppressing worker expectations and limiting workers' own efforts to protect themselves.

# Conclusion

There is pervasive fear among workers of bringing the coronavirus home from work, especially among vulnerable workers with the least bargaining power, such as Black and Hispanic workers and low- and middle-income workers. These workers are not being protected by OSHA-established standards and they are also not receiving additional compensation in proportion to the risks they face. Workers are, however, being forced to work in order to sustain their families, and many are being denied unemployment benefits for not being willing to go to jobs they consider unsafe (Healy 2020). Workers are thus being forced to make unacceptable choices between economic sustenance and their health and their family's health, a squeeze targeted at those with the least power in the labor market. Policies to protect workers' health on the job as well as to provide decent pay and income maintenance are essential.

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