



Ono Kosuki, *Pensive black woman in mask standing on railway platform*, November 9, 2020, photograph, Pexels.com, <https://www.pexels.com/photo/pensive-black-woman-in-mask-standing-on-railway-platform-6000147/>

The Effect of COVID-19 on the Black Workforce in the US

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Before COVID-19 brought the world into a pandemic, Black Americans [1] and other minorities faced challenges against their rights, both as people and as workers trying to stay safe in the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these struggles over rights remained and, in some cases, worsened. Black Americans and other minorities have faced increased exposure to COVID-19 and their ability to succeed personally and professionally has been hindered more than before because of decreased protection, ongoing protests, and worse working

conditions since a large number of minorities hold service sector jobs. [2]

Before the Pandemic

Before the pandemic, the share of income going to the wealthy increased while the share of income going to workers fell. [3] Because of this growing gap, legislation has been proposed to increase the minimum wage to more evenly distribute wealth. A minimum wage increase would significantly benefit

the Black American population. The struggles facing the Black American population includes disproportionately low wages despite increased productivity. This issue has contributed in preventing the growth and success of Black Americans and foreshadowed the increased challenges they faced during the pandemic with working conditions, public identity, and personal growth. Once the pandemic started, these struggles only worsened and still have not been rectified.

During the Pandemic

As COVID-19 first appeared, there were many protests surrounding race-based inequality in US society, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, and other movements against white supremacy. While COVID-19 changed the daily lives of everyone during this time, "the pandemic and political events seemed to amplify feelings of risk, danger, and vulnerability." [4]

Despite legislation, like the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020 [5] and Ending Qualified Immunity Act [6], being proposed and some changes being made, the feeling of uncertainty and unease still remains.

Furthermore, the risk Black Americans faced during the pandemic in the workplace increased; "black workers were more likely employed in essential industries and occupations with frequent exposure to infections." [7] These industries include animal and meat processing, social assistance, and healthcare as well as many others. This increase in exposure led to decreased compensation and an increase in mortality rates for Black Americans. In many places, the mortality rates due to COVID-19 are not equal to the population of Black Americans in that region. For example, in both Louisiana and Michigan, the mortality rates were significantly higher than the population those rates were

attributed to. In Louisiana, the Black American population is 32%, despite making up 70% of the COVID-19 deaths. Likewise, in Michigan, the Black American population is 14%, but makes up 40% of COVID-19 deaths. [8]

This inequality between deaths and population is due to unfair working conditions exposing the Black American population to COVID-19 more than other groups of people. [9] While the Families First Coronavirus Act was created to provide workers with compensation for time off due to COVID-19, there is a large number of people who do not qualify for the compensation. Of these workers who do not qualify, 39% of them are people of color. [10]

Therefore, people of color, especially Black Americans, who already work jobs with high risk of exposure, now do not receive compensation for time off because of COVID-19 infection and illness. This can force workers to continue to work in unsafe conditions, and frequently work while sick. Furthermore, because this population has increased exposure to COVID-19, and less access to healthcare, they have higher mortality rates due to their contraction of the virus.

Resolution

The American dream that anyone can achieve success through hard work and determination has not been attainable for Black Americans and other minorities for a very long time. While the issues discussed above are specific to COVID-19, they are not isolated circumstances of the inadequacies in our country for working conditions, healthcare, and government policies towards Black Americans. Hopefully, we can take a long look at the deep-rooted issues facing our society, and help these marginalized groups get their chance to achieve their dreams.

Notes

- [1] In this paper, the term 'Black Americans' is used instead of 'African Americans' because all Black Americans do not identify as African American. More information on this can be found at the New York Times, Pew Research Center, and CBS News.
- [2] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor force characteristics by race and ethnicity, 2018," BLS Reports <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/race-and-ethnicity/2018/home.htm>
- [3] William E. Spriggs, "A Look at Inequality, Workers' Rights, and Race," *Law and Inequality* 36, no. 2 (2018): 233
- [4] Ellen D. B. Riggle, Laurie A. Drabble, Lauren A. Bochicchio, Angie R. Wootton, Cindy B. Veldhuis, Cat Munroe, and Tonda L. Hughes, "Experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic among African American, Latinx, and White sexual minority women: A descriptive phenomenological study," *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 8, no. 2 (2021): 151, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000510>
- [5] 116th Congress, "H.R.7120 - George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020," [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7120), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7120>
- [6] 117th Congress, "All Information (Except Text) for S.492 - Ending Qualified Immunity Act," [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/492/all-info), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/492/all-info>
- [7] Jordan Gemelas et al, "Inequities in Employment by Race, Ethnicity, and Sector During COVID-19," *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 9, (2022): 351, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-021-00963-3>
- [8] Keith C. Ferdinand and Samar A. Nasser, "African-American COVID-19 Mortality: A Sentinel Event," *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* 75, no. 21 (2020): 2748, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacc.2020.04.040>
- [9] Elis Gould and Valerie Wilson, "Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus—racism and economic inequality," *Economy Policy Institute*, <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>
- [10] Gemelas et al, 351