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Low wage labor and the undervalued essential worker through the lens of COVID-19

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Introduction

Over the course of the pandemic, it appears there has been a shift in public thought surrounding the importance of specific types of labor. We have seen certain jobs deemed as “essential work” during the past year. These are the people who put food on our tables, care for us and provide sanitation, transportation and medical attention, etc.. Many of these workers can also be classified as some of the lowest earners in our economy. Without these workers doing their jobs, we would have seen far greater consequences of disruption during the ongoing pandemic.

Essential workers have continued to work “in person” jobs. For this reason, these workers have faced some of the highest risks of contracting the virus, while typically receiving low reward. The previously mentioned newfound respect for essential work has not typically translated to higher reward for these workers. These are the people who kept certain parts of the economy running, often while they were offered little protection from the government, their places of labor and the public. In this project, I wanted to not only reflect on low wage labor and growing wealth disparities, but also on how this can be viewed in the current societal landscape of the pandemic. This project explores “essential labor” throughout the pandemic.



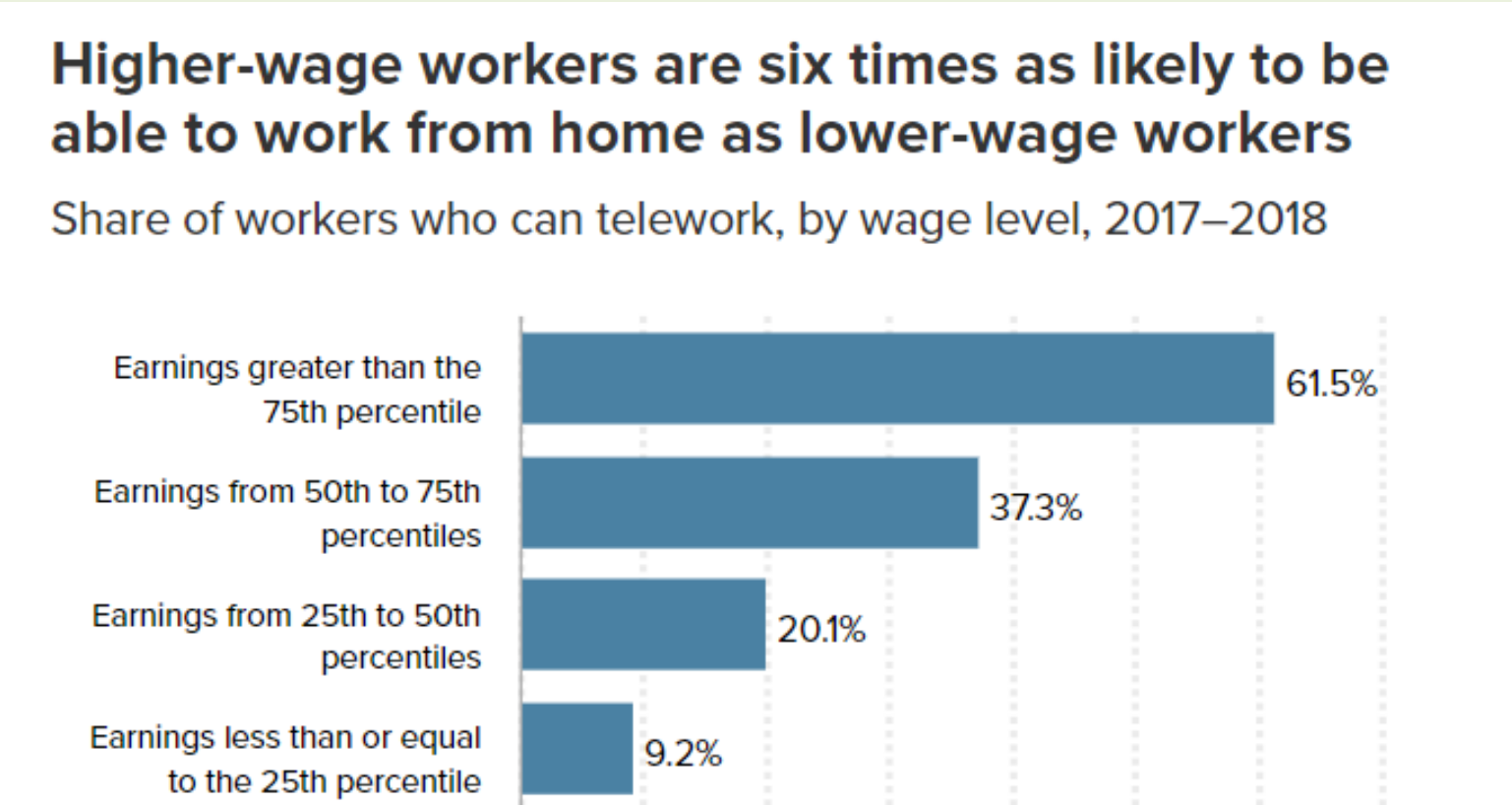
Failure to protect the essential worker

Between 1973 and 2013, worker productivity in the production / nonsupervisory sector grew 74.4%. Net productivity measures the growth of output for both goods and services produced per hour, not including depreciation. During this same time period, worker compensation for these jobs grew only 9.2%. This is greatly contrasted by the period from 1948 to 1973, where productivity and compensation grew at similar rates, of 96.7% and 91.3% respectively.

In the 1948 to 1973 period, workers productivity was rewarded with generally equal compensation. As workers became more productive, they earned more, and their standard of living rose.

In the 1970s, things began to change, productivity continued to rise while compensation began to stagnate. Income has grown a significant amount for the top 1% of earners. Since 1979, earnings of the top 1% have increased by 138% while for the bottom 90%, wages have only grown by 15%.

Many of the people who are at the frontline of the pandemic are also some of the lowest earners in our economy. Most of the jobs that had the capability to go remote were higher earning jobs.



Low wage employees earning less than or equal to the 25th percentile are 6x less likely to be able to work remotely than people earning higher than in the 75th percentile. The chart above shows the percentages of workers who are able to transition their work to a telework position. Lower earning people are less likely to be able to transition their work into virtual work.

Mask wearing and worker protection

Government

- The use of non-medical face masks to slow down transmission of the virus was first recommended by the CDC on April 3 of 2020. This was recommended alongside increased hygiene practices and social distancing.
- Masks were never enforced at a federal level, decisions for mask mandates were left up to states, some states left mask mandates up to counties and town
- Lack of unified enforcement left patches in protection to the public and workers
- Mask wearing became politicized



Vaccines and worker protection

- Vaccine roll out was also decentralized, some essential workers were low priority

Discussion

The government failed to enact a cohesive and unified plan to protect workers during the pandemic. The government failed to protect the people who were working to keep essential goods and services available to all. This predominantly affected lower earning workers.

Have things changed?

During peak times of the pandemic, some businesses put incentives into place such as increases in wage. It seems that they did this to mitigate issues with labor supply, as many of these wages have dropped as the pandemic fear has decreased, causing many people to go back to work.

Essential workers were offered some praises for their efforts during the pandemic. For the most part, their treatment and compensation has not changed.

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