

Policy Brief

Highest Risk, Hardest Hit: Essential workers still face hazards at work or unemployment

Summary: The pandemic and the public health response have resulted in two very different but still precarious experiences for high-risk/low-wage essential occupations. High unemployment among those occupations experiencing shutdowns has increased housing insecurity and the need for food stamps and temporary/emergency assistance. At the same time, other essential occupations still working have faced higher COVID infection risks and workplace outbreaks.

A September 2020 Labor Education and Research Center report¹ identified over 900,000 Washington workers in occupations that are both hazardous (high COVID-19 risks) and economically precarious. Women constitute 66.5% of these workers, and these occupations are disproportionately non-white. How has the pandemic impacted these workers? In this follow-up analysis, we examined 2020 applications for state assistance to workers and other measures to estimate key economic impacts.²

High job loss for many trades; others face new risks at work

The SARS-COV2 pandemic caused widespread unemployment in Washington.³ The Employment Security Department (ESD) received an average of nearly 40,000 initial unemployment insurance (UI) claims a week in 2020, compared to an average of about 6,500 initial claims a week in 2019. Unemployment trended down after April, but initial regular claims remain at elevated levels in January 2021 according to ESD.

Fourteen of our 26 high-risk, low wage occupational groups, with about 580,000 workers, filed a disproportionately high number of UI claims in 2020 compared to their share of the total workforce (See Table 1.)

Meanwhile 12 other occupational groups, led by retail sales, healthcare, information clerks, education and protective services had lower than average UI claims during 2020 as the pandemic boosted demand for these services. But COVID-related risk rose for many--workers' compensation claims rose for health care, social assistance, public sector and education in addition to documented outbreaks affecting retail, health/long-term care, hospitality, the service sector and agriculture and food processing.

TABLE 1

High-Risk/Low Wage Occupations Filing UI Claims at Higher Rates

- Animal Care and Service Workers
- Art and Design Workers
- Construction and Related Workers
- Cooks and Food Preparation Workers
- Entertainment Attendants and Related Workers
- Food and Beverage Serving Workers
- Dishwashers and other Food Prep and Serving Workers
- Food Preparation and Serving Workers, Supervising
- Construction and other management occupations
- Material Record., Schedule, Dispatch, & Distribution
- Motor Vehicle Operators
- Personal Appearance Workers
- Group Fitness and Personal Care and Service Workers
- Parking Attendants and Other Transportation Workers

1 Essential, Precarious and At Risk: Washington Workers in High Hazard, Low-Reward Jobs, Mulcahy, Baker and West (2020). <https://georgetown.southseattle.edu/sites/georgetown.southseattle.edu/files/inline-files/Essential-Precarious-and-At-Risk-Washington-Workers-in-High-Hazard-Low-Reward-Jobs.pdf>

2 In Mulcahy, West and Baker 2020, the detailed (6-digit) Standard Occupation Code was the unit of analysis; due to data limitations, the "Minor Occupational Group" (3-digit SOC) is used in this report.

3 The following analyses are based on data provided by WA ESD. See methods appendix in full report for discussion of issues with ESD unemployment data.

Job Loss Brings Higher Use of Food Stamps, TANF and Emergency Assistance

Analyzing 2020 weekly data, we found significant positive relationships between high unemployment and applications for food stamps (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and/or Consolidated Emergency Assistance (CEAP) in 22 of the 26 groups of workers in high-risk, low wage occupations.⁴

These 22 occupational groups cover 1,383,000 workers, including retail sales and grocery, food and beverage preparation and serving workers, pre-school teachers, drivers, distribution workers, and personal care and service workers.

Eleven groups (See Table 2) contributed significantly to both TANF and SNAP applications in Washington.

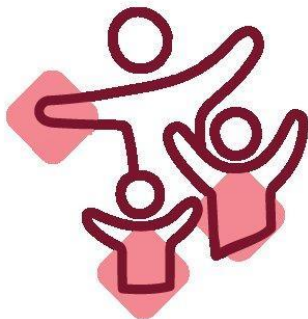
TABLE 2

High Unemployment Results in Food Stamp/TANF Need in Key Job Categories.

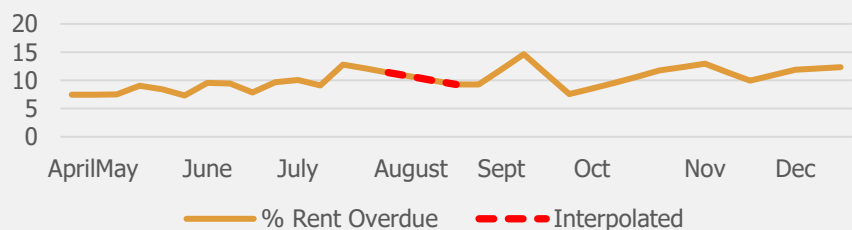
- Retail Sales Workers
- Financial Clerks
- Health Technologists and Technicians
- Security Guards and Protective Service Workers
- Group Fitness and other Personal Care Workers
- Personal Appearance Workers
- Art and Design Workers
- Information and Record Clerks
- Office Clerks and other Admin. Support
- Animal Care and Service Workers
- Nursing, Psychiatric, and Home Health Aides

Other Pandemic Impacts on Washington Workers

- Applications for Emergency and Disaster Assistance averaged about 2,200 per week in 2020, compared to an average of 19 per week in 2019.
- Applications for TANF/SFA & SNAP/FAP skyrocketed to more than double 2019 levels in March/April 2020.
- Fewer childcare options offered as childcare centers closed. Working Connections Child Care grants dropped steadily in 2020, with 7,000 fewer cases in Sept. 2020 than Sept. 2019.
- The number of COVID19-related workers compensation claims grew steadily after March 2020, especially for health care, social service, public administration and education occupations.
- In spite of statewide eviction moratoriums, housing insecurity among renters in WA increased steadily over 2020, with a peak in mid-September, when wholly 15% of WA renters reported being at least 1 month behind on their rent.



% of WA Renters Behind on Rent (Census Bureau PULSE data)



To download the full “**Highest Risk, Hardest Hit**” report, visit our website Publications Page: <https://georgetown.southseattle.edu/labor-education-research-center/research-and-publication>

⁴ Using a time series regression analysis.

