

# Seventy-five percent of US workers can't work exclusively from home, face greater risks during pandemic

June 23 2020, by Jake Ellison

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Jobs in which computer work is not important but interacting with the public is were 18.9% of the workforce, or 27.4 million workers, with a median income of \$32,000. Credit: Pixabay

About three-quarters of U.S. workers, or 108 million people, are in jobs that cannot be done from home during a pandemic, putting these workers at increased risk of exposure to disease. This majority of workers are also at higher risk for other job disruptions such as layoffs, furloughs or hours reductions, a University of Washington study shows.

Such job disruptions can cause stress, anxiety and other mental health outcomes that could persist even as the United States reopens its economic and social life, said author Marissa Baker, an assistant professor in the UW Department of Environmental & Occupational Health Sciences.

These workers also represent some of the lowest paid workers in the U.S. workforce, Baker emphasized.

The remaining 25% of U.S. workers, or 35.6 million people, are in [jobs](#) that can be done at home. These jobs are typically in highly-paid occupational sectors such as finance, administration, computer, engineering and technology. Even as the economy begins to reopen, these workers will continue to be better shielded from exposure to the virus, reduced hours, furloughs or joblessness and have an increased ability to care for a child at home—further growing the disparity between the top quarter of the workforce and the rest, the study found.

"This pandemic has really exacerbated existing vulnerabilities in American society, with workers most affected by the pandemic and stay-at-home orders being significantly lower paid and now also at increased risk for mental health outcomes associated with job insecurity and displacement, in addition to increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 if they keep going to work," said Baker.

"The most privileged workers will have a job that can be done at home, reducing their risk of exposure, and enabling them to continue to work

even as office buildings were closed. Unfortunately, only a quarter of the U.S. workforce falls into this category. The fact that these are some of the highest paid workers in the U.S. is no surprise," Baker added.

In the study, published June 18 in the *American Journal of Public Health*, Baker examined 2018 Bureau of Labor Statistics data characterizing the importance of interacting with the public and the importance of using a computer at work to understand which workers could work from home during a pandemic event, and which workers would experience work disruptions due to COVID-19.

Using these two characteristics of work and how important they are in different types of jobs, Baker's analysis determined four main groups of occupations:

- Work that relies on the use of computers but not as much on interaction with the public—jobs in business and finance, software development, architecture, engineering and the sciences, for instance—made up 25% of the workforce or 35.6 million workers. These workers had a median income of nearly \$63,000.
- Work that relies on both interaction with the public and computer use—such as positions in management, healthcare, policing and education, most classified as essential during the pandemic—comprised 36.4% of the workforce or 52.7 million workers. These workers had a median income of roughly \$57,000.
- Jobs in which interaction with the public and computer use are not important—construction, maintenance, production, farming or forestry—are 20.1% of the workforce or 29 million workers who make a median wage of \$40,000.
- Lastly, jobs in which computer work is not important but interacting with the public is—retail, food and beauty services,

protective services and delivery of goods—were 18.9% of the workforce, or 27.4 million workers, with a median income of \$32,000.

"The workers for whom computer use is not important at work but interactions with the public is are some of the lowest paid workers," Baker said. "And during this pandemic, they face compounding risks of exposure to COVID-19, job loss and adverse mental health outcomes associated with job loss."

As the economy reopens, some workers who have been unable to work at home but did continue to go to work during the pandemic—such as some healthcare workers, security guards or bus drivers—may now face layoffs as organizations adjust to reduced demand and economic pressures force layoffs, Baker explains. On the upside, workers in construction, manufacturing, production or freight transport who may have been laid off or furloughed during the pandemic will likely be some of the first industries to rebound and hire workers back.

However, the 18.9% of workers in occupations such as retail or food services, many of whom were laid off during the pandemic, may not have a job to go back to, further extending their job displacement and increasing adverse health effects associated with job loss. Those who are able to go back to work face a higher risk of exposure to the novel coronavirus still active in populations across the country.

Given the relationship between job insecurity or job displacement and mental health outcomes including stress, depression or anxiety, there could be a large burden of mental health outcomes among these workers.

"These results underscore the important role that work plays in public health. Workplace policies and practices enacted during a [pandemic](#) event or other public health emergency should aim to establish and

maintain secure employment and living wages for all workers and consider both physical and [mental health outcomes](#), even after the emergency subsidies," Baker said.

**More information:** Marissa G. Baker, Nonrelocatable Occupations at Increased Risk During Pandemics: United States, 2018, *American Journal of Public Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2020.305738](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305738)

Provided by University of Washington

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