



# PANDEMIC REPORT CARD: SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

JENNIFER STEPHAN

CLOSED DUE TO  
COVID-19



#### About the Author

Jennifer Stephan writes nonfiction books and articles for tweens and teens. Her work explores how people change and are changed by the communities and times in which they live. She earned a PhD in human development and social policy from Northwestern University and has worked as an education policy researcher. She lives outside Chicago with her husband and daughters.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# Economic Successes and Failures

In May 2020 Johnny Rivero stood in line at a Florida food pantry. It was his first time. At the end of March, the US Coast Guard veteran had lost his job working maintenance at a college when in-person classes were shut down. In the same week, his wife and adult daughter lost their jobs too. As reporter Eli Saslow details, the Rivero family had struggled to find money since then. They spent hours trying to navigate Florida's broken unemployment insurance system but without success. Rivero had even tried to sell his prized Yankees memorabilia. That morning, he arrived at the food pantry two hours early, but it was already crowded. "I'll wait all day if I have to, because this virus has left me with no other choice,"<sup>15</sup> Rivero told Saslow. In 2020 COVID-19 drove millions of hungry people into long lines at food banks across the country. Four out of ten visitors were there for the first time, according to Feeding America.

COVID-19 has battered and contorted the economy, leaving many businesses and workers, especially those from vulnerable groups, worse off. But the federal government's robust fiscal response helped prevent the worst outcomes for millions of people. Some workers have even discovered gold nuggets in the rubble. In 2021 record numbers of Americans quit their job, some with hope for a more rewarding future.

## **Job Loss and Heightened Risk for Some**

By the end of March 2020, the pandemic had cleaved American workers into three groups—the unemployed, essential workers, and those working from home. When fears of the virus and mandated shutdowns kept customers home, spending plummeted, and businesses laid off workers. In April the unemployment rate tripled to almost 15 percent, the highest rate ever recorded since data collection began in 1948. It exceeded 10 percent for four months. By January 2022 it had not yet fully returned to its pre-pandemic level. Unemployment has not been equally distributed. People of color, people without a four-year college degree, younger workers, and those in service jobs experienced higher rates of job loss. Forty-five percent of restaurant and bar workers lost their job in April 2020. For some people, the loss of a job meant losing health insurance during a health crisis.

Past research shows that people who lose a job not only lose income in the short run but are also more likely to have lower-paying and lower-quality jobs in the future. Skills can deteriorate over time, and unemployment can stigmatize a person. When a parent becomes unemployed, it can impact a child's academic achievement and mental health. Whether pandemic unemployment has similar long-term impacts is unknown. Many people lost their job in the pandemic, potentially making the unemployment less stigmatizing, and tremendous levels of government assistance may have helped soften the resultant hardship.

A second group of workers is made up of grocery cashiers, delivery drivers, health care workers, certain factory employees, and other essential workers. Essential workers retained their jobs but have confronted risky and difficult situations. A study led by researcher Hummy Song shows essential workers and their household members contracted COVID-19 at higher rates than other people in the spring of 2020. Although at greater risk of exposure, essential workers often have fewer resources to deal with sickness. Compared to nonessential workers, essential workers have lower household incomes and more difficulty paying basic



**“We’re essentially asking this least well compensated and most precariously employed workforce to take on the everyday management of a polarized and angry and dangerous public.”<sup>16</sup>**

—Daniel Schneider, sociologist

household expenses. As the pandemic has worn on, paid sick days temporarily extended at the beginning have expired, and some essential workers never had them. Staffing shortages brought on by quarantines and resignations strain employees. People frustrated by masking or product shortages sometimes turn their anger on essential workers. Sociologist

Daniel Schneider says, “We’re essentially asking this least well compensated and most precariously employed workforce to take on the everyday management of a polarized and angry and dangerous public.”<sup>16</sup> The workers Americans rely on the most have often borne the brunt of the crisis.

## **The Benefits and Challenges of Remote Work**

Remote workers made up a third group of workers. In May 2020 about one-third of Americans worked from home because of the pandemic. In December 2021, 11 percent of workers still worked from home because of the pandemic. For some remote employees, that has been a luxury, for some a burden, and for some a little of both. In addition to keeping safer, most remote workers say they saved a lot of time working from home and felt more connected to their family, according to a Morning Consult survey. But some remote workers struggled, including those who lacked adequate space or technology, people who felt disconnected from coworkers, younger workers who missed out on mentorship opportunities, and parents trying to juggle their children’s remote schooling with their own jobs.

Jessica Santos-Rojo was among the many working parents stretched too thin. In September 2020 the manager of a doctor’s office and single mother began remote schooling with a plan. She made space in the hallway for her preschooler to attend remote school. She set up computers for her kindergartner, third grader, and fifth grader in the living room. She knew it would be difficult,



*A volunteer loads food into the trunk of a vehicle on December 8, 2020, during a drive-through food distribution event. The event was hosted by the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank in Glendora, California.*

she told a reporter, but it became impossible. “I basically roam from desk to desk to help with their log-ins and passwords and all the other problems that come up. ‘Mama, I need help. Mom!’ I’m trying to do my job so I can pay all the bills,” she said. “Sometimes I go into the bathroom for a few seconds so I can take a breath or send an email.”<sup>17</sup> Santos-Rojo cut her hours to part time and still struggled to balance her children’s remote schoolwork and her job.

Santos-Rojo was not the only overwhelmed working mother. In heterosexual dual-career couples, child care responsibilities during the pandemic have typically fallen to mothers. Employment for women with school-aged children has dropped dramatically. Although most children have returned to in-person schooling, women are still missing from the workforce. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in December 2021 there were 1.3 million fewer women in the workforce than there were two years earlier, before the pandemic began.

Despite these difficulties, the pandemic has also had silver linings for some workers. The remote workaround has demonstrated that office employees can be productive working at home and with more flexible hours. Economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers believe that the pandemic has ushered in a new model of work. They say:

Necessity has forced change, and led each of us to re-imagine what's possible. And that reimagining has led workers to see more control for themselves, and better opportunities ahead. . . . The typical worker whose job can be done there is likely to continue working from home at least part of the time. The time saved (in billions of collective hours) and convenience (say, throwing in a load of laundry between meetings) generated benefits too great to give back.<sup>18</sup>

Half of people who worked from home during COVID-19 prefer a hybrid work model, working at home some days and in the office other days, according to a 2021 survey by a group of university researchers. Labor shortages have made some employers ready to listen.

## **Economic Relief for Americans**

In March 2020 policy makers watched COVID-19 race through New York City and lunge for the rest of the country. Uncertain of how deeply or quickly the virus would cut into the livelihoods of

Americans, Congress slung together fiscal packages to prevent the worst outcomes. “We’d never seen such a rapid and massive amount of stimulus being doled out by Congress, ever,”<sup>19</sup> says economist Gregory Daco. From March 2020 to March 2021, Congress passed legislation providing \$5 trillion for eco-

**“We’d never seen such a rapid and massive amount of stimulus being doled out by Congress, ever.”<sup>19</sup>**

—Gregory Daco, economist



## Eviction Moratoriums

As employment nose-dived in 2020, policy makers acted quickly to prevent families from losing their homes. In March 2020 the federal government banned evictions for certain tenants and home owners. When the legislation expired, most states and local governments implemented eviction moratoriums. Then in September 2020, as state and local moratoriums expired, the CDC ordered its own. The CDC argued that evictions during a pandemic are a public health matter. Without homes in which to shelter, the CDC said, evictions could lead to higher rates of COVID-19 transmission. Researchers at Princeton University estimate that federal, state, and local moratoriums have prevented at least 2.45 million eviction filings since the beginning of the pandemic. But some mom-and-pop landlords—who own about 40 percent of all residential units, according to the Brookings Institution—struggled to keep up with property taxes and maintenance bills when rent payments stopped coming in. These landlords often have low to moderate incomes themselves. In August 2021 the US Supreme Court ended the CDC's moratorium, saying the agency did not have the authority to implement it. Eviction moratoriums were one of many interventions during COVID-19 that had both winners and losers.

conomic relief for states and households and to stimulate consumer spending. Spending can help push an economy out of a ditch. When people spend money, businesses make money and can hire more workers, who then have more money to spend. Supplemental unemployment insurance, stimulus checks, and the Paycheck Protection Program were three major components of Congress's pandemic response.

Congress spent \$678 billion to enhance state unemployment insurance. Typically, workers who lose a job through no fault of their own can temporarily receive a fraction of their previous wages from the state while they search for a new job. The federal COVID-19 relief packages supplemented state unemployment insurance to cover more people for a longer time and with a higher payout. During April to July 2020, three-quarters of unemployed workers received more than 100 percent of their previous wages.

# SOURCE NOTES

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# ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

## **Ballotpedia**

<https://ballotpedia.org>

Ballotpedia is a nonpartisan encyclopedia of federal, state, and local policies. It includes detailed information on COVID-19 policies by state, including those related to masks, vaccination, school closures, and stay-at-home orders. It also summarizes arguments for and against COVID-19 policies.

## **Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count, *New York Times***

[www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html)

The *New York Times* has populated this site with the latest information and trends in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, deaths, and vaccinations for the United States. It allows users to drill down to state and county level and links to similar data for the world.

## ***In the Bubble with Andy Slavitt***

<https://lemonadamedia.com/show/inthebubble>

Andy Slavitt is a former senior adviser to President Joe Biden on COVID-19 and acting administrator at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. In his podcast, he interviews some of the most important thinkers and leaders in American public health, health care, and science about COVID-19 and the US response to it.

## **Kaiser Family Foundation**

[www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org)

The Kaiser Family Foundation is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that reports on national health issues. Its website provides survey results, reports, and videos that describe Americans' experiences and beliefs during the pandemic and how these have changed.

## **Pandemic Puzzle, Stanford University**

<https://pandemicpuzzle.stanford.edu>

In the fall of 2021, Stanford University hosted a virtual symposium to examine the American response to COVID-19 and how future responses could be improved. This website contains video recordings of interviews and panel discussions with dozens of experts from government, business, and health care who have worked at the forefront of the pandemic response.



# FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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