

# Noxious contracts and inequality: The hidden side of pandemic life

March 11 2021, by Melissa de Witte

---



David Grusky, director of the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality. Credit: Stephanie Garlow

We hear all the time that the pandemic has "cast a sharp light" on American inequality. And indeed it has. But it's not only exposed long-

standing inequalities in the American workforce, it's also created fundamentally new types of inequality, most notably a stark risk divide between workers in remote and face-to-face occupations, says Stanford sociologist David Grusky.

"We've suddenly created a vast swath of risky occupations and thrust them on a labor force that has few options and little choice but to take the offered terms," Grusky said.

This has given rise to the "[noxious contract](#)" that obliges workers—especially low-wage workers with little bargaining power—to accept risky working conditions. These are just some of the findings to emerge from Grusky's work through [the American Voices Project](#) (AVP), a joint initiative led by Stanford and Princeton University to understand how Americans are faring during the current crisis.

Over the past year, Grusky and his colleagues have studied the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on American lives through in-depth and immersive interviews. Unlike conventional surveys, the AVP study leads with a simple but disarming request—"tell me the story of your life"—and then steps back and listens as people share how they're faring. The study reveals experiences that surveys can miss because it follows the people's stories wherever they go.

Here, Grusky talks about these findings and other results that this study has unearthed—including reports about how the pandemic inspired compassion and self-reflection about one's own situation and privilege.

Grusky is the Edward Ames Edmonds Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences. He is also a senior fellow of the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research and the director of the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.

## **What are some of the major themes that emerged from this research?**

First off, we've validated a great many of the results that have come out of conventional surveys, such as troubling trends in food insecurity and [mental health](#).

But the real payoff takes the form of uncovering developments that surveys can't capture, especially when it comes to uncovering problems that people are afraid to expose or haven't themselves appreciated until they start talking and reflecting about what's happening to them. We've found evidence of incapacitating anxiety in some groups, profound disruption and chaos in everyday life and broken coping responses of the sort that aren't well captured in surveys.

The AVP's [first report](#) on youth and adolescents illustrates how immersive interviews can uncover a hidden side of pandemic life that may not show up in responses ticked off for a survey. The lead authors, Michelle Jackson and Joanna Lee Williams, have shown that we've missed the everyday mental health problems emerging among children whose well-meaning parents have sought to protect them by "locking them down." As one parent put it, "I've literally kept my kids in the house since February, they stay in the house, my husband and I are the only ones who leave." While their parents shopped, ran errands and went to work, the children were put under effective house arrest, a type of enforced stillness that's unusually challenging for children and led to overwhelming restlessness, boredom and depression.

## **Does the AVP mainly uncover the "bad stuff?"**

Although the hidden side of pandemic life isn't always a pretty picture, that's certainly not to say that it's all bad. Far from it. The AVP's [second](#)

[crisis report](#) shows, for example, that most Americans are meeting the pandemic with extraordinary fortitude, compassion and grace. The dominant—but largely hidden—everyday response is all about people stepping up and pulling together. This doesn't mean that we can necessarily rely on such fortitude holding up if the feared "fourth wave" emerges and the crisis protracts into next year. It certainly doesn't help in this regard that some groups are better protected from risks than others. Because the pain is being borne so unequally, there may come a time when protestations to the effect that "we're in this together" ring hollow.

## **I'm glad you've brought up the inequality of "pain-bearing." Could you tell us more about how the pandemic has exposed and changed inequality?**

As you've suggested here, the pandemic hasn't merely exposed long-standing inequalities, although it's certainly done that. It's also introduced a new risk divide between face-to-face workers who bear disproportionate health and economic risks and remote workers who are better protected from those risks. We interviewed a young face-to-face [worker](#) who lost her job when the pandemic hit, was "suffocating in bills" as a result and in desperation took a job in a nursing home, which is pretty much the riskiest workplace out there. The risks weigh heavily on her: "We have to work and make money, but is it really worth us losing our life?"

This is a textbook description of a noxious contract. Because there are bills to pay and jobs are hard to find, many workers have little alternative but to accept a contract that comes with nontrivial risk. Although noxious contracts of this type are as old as market economies, the pandemic has put them on steroids. The key problem: We've suddenly created a vast swath of risky occupations and thrust them on a labor force that has few options and little choice but to take the offered

terms. Worse yet, Black and Hispanic workers are especially likely to be faced with noxious contracts of this sort, given that they're more frequently working in risky face-to-face settings.

## **What can be done about this inequality? Given that COVID-19 was declared a national emergency almost exactly one year ago, is it time to ramp up our response?**

It's definitely time to ramp it up. When the job-safety crisis is appreciated for the fundamental problem that it is, it argues for comprehensive policy that targets not just job-creating but also job-safety. In many respects, President Biden has already begun developing such policy, most obviously by supporting a "hot economy" that undercuts the noxious contract by increasing employment opportunities and thus the power of workers.

It's not enough, however, to protect against new noxious contracts. It's just as important to recognize past sacrifices with a comprehensive [GI Bill for face-to-face workers](#). How might this new GI Bill be built? We can open up Veterans Administration health-care for face-to-face workers who are dealing with ongoing COVID-related health problems; we can adapt existing job-training initiatives and tuition-support programs for face-to-face workers who wish to develop their skills; we can provide supplementary hazard pay for low-income face-to-face workers, and we can subsidize the home purchases of face-to-face workers. If ever there were a moment to express gratitude to workers who have stepped up, it would be right now when the country is emerging from one of its biggest challenges since the original GI Bill was signed.

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Noxious contracts and inequality: The hidden side of pandemic life (2021, March 11)  
retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-03-noxious-inequality-hidden-side-pandemic.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.