

# COVID-19 inequality: poorest workers hit by worse outcomes

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We have not all been in this together. Oxford research shows COVID-19 has seen aggravated economic and mental health inequality. Credit: Shutterstock

We have not all been in this together, according to research from Oxford, which shows the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in aggravated economic and mental health inequality. The study, published by *PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America)*, shows lower paid workers have suffered disproportionately more economic hardship and more resulting mental health problems during the current crisis than their higher paid peers.

The paper, 'Economic Hardship and Mental Health Complaints during COVID-19', found that socio-economic inequalities were exacerbated during the lockdown. The most vulnerable members of the labor market were the most affected, with a steep occupational prestige level gradient. Low-prestige workers suffered more income and job loss, because of COVID-19, and they have suffered 'substantial' mental health consequences.

According to Dr. Dirk Witteveen, joint author of the study with Dr. Eva Velthorst of New York's Icahn School of Medicine, "Our analyses indicate the economic burden of the COVID-19 lockdown disproportionately fell on the shoulders of workers

in lower prestige-ranked jobs—those with lower-pay and lower-skill. They were confronted with a much greater risk of workload decreases, income loss, and job loss."

The Oxford sociologist continues, "We found that experiencing any of these COVID-19-induced economic hardships is predictive of higher probability of depression complaints and health anxiety. Moreover, this probability appeared to be about twice greater for individuals employed in lower prestige-ranked compared with people in middle- and higher-ranked jobs. 'The striking positive relationship between relative occupational position and expressing feelings of depression and health anxiety was not driven by individuals with a previous mental health diagnosis, or by those who were directly exposed to health risks in their jobs—i.e. essential workers.

"We, therefore, conclude that inequalities in the development of mental health complaints are, to a large extent, rooted in one's occupational position prior to the COVID-19 crash."

Today's study concludes there are several mental health consequences that were not just a result of the virus, 'The COVID-19 pandemic caused immense socioeconomic turmoil in the Spring of 2020, not only because of its imminent health threat but also as a result of necessary lockdowns and government-mandated suspension of much business activity. This means the COVID-19 downturn is not comparable to any recent recessions.'

The researchers stress: "Our findings emphasize the need to take into account structural inequalities in the labor market for understanding disparities in mental [health](#) outcomes."

The study sample contains 1,012 adults aged 25-64, consisting of individuals who are actively participating in the labor market. The data is

representative of active members of the labor force of six European nations that contained varying levels of COVID-19 burdens in terms of mortality and lockdown measures.

**More information:** Dirk Witteveen et al.  
Economic hardship and mental health complaints during COVID-19, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2009609117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2009609117)

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