

Who Are Essential Workers?

THE U.S. ECONOMY DEPENDS ON WOMEN,
PEOPLE OF COLOR, & IMMIGRANT WORKERS

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Essential workers are those whose jobs are critical to maintaining the core functions of public health, society, and the economy, and who cannot work remotely amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.
- There are an estimated 50 million essential workers—nearly a third of the American workforce.
- Essential workers are more likely to be women, people of color, and immigrants than are other workers.

HOW ARE WORKERS DESIGNATED AS ESSENTIAL?

Designating a worker as essential can be consequential for workers' access to paid sick days and leave,¹ and greater compensation,² among other potential rights and benefits.³ These designations also have significant implications for large portions of the American workforce as state and local governments consider expanding permitted economic activity, seek to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and prepare for possible future waves of the virus—or another pandemic altogether.

There are varying definitions of the term “essential” worker. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) created an advisory list outlining “Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers During COVID-19 Response,” based on industry type. The list “identifies workers who conduct a range of operations and services that are typically essential to continued critical infrastructure viability ... It also includes workers who support crucial supply chains and enable functions for critical infrastructure.”⁴ This list is merely suggestive and is meant to help state, local, tribal, and territorial governments implement their own policies regarding essential workers.^{5,6} This federal advisory list could classify up to 70% of all workers as essential.⁷

State, local, and tribal governments can determine which workers are essential, often through executive orders. State, local, and tribal guidelines should be informed by the DHS advisory list, but these governments have interpreted this list in different ways. Examples from Massachusetts and Minnesota show that states have different guidelines for classifying essential workers, and they have different processes for involving employers in these categorizations.^{8,9} Some localities, such as New York City, have used the terms frontline workers and essential workers interchangeably.¹⁰

This brief defines **essential workers** as those whose work is vital for the core functions of the economy and society and who cannot work remotely due to the nature of their jobs.^{11,12} These workers ensure continuity of functions critical to public health, wellbeing, safety, and economic and national security.^{13,14,15,16} This definition reflects the one put forth in the Heroes Act, which seeks to protect those workers most critical to societal wellbeing during, and after, the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷

This definition also aligns with the framework put forth by Senator Elizabeth Warren and Representative Ro Khanna in their Essential Workers Bill of Rights, in which they define essential workers as those who remain on the job amidst COVID-19 *and* lack the ability to telework during the pandemic.¹⁸ They list doctors, nurses, home care workers, healthcare workers, grocery store and drug store employees, domestic workers, food service workers, federal, state, and municipal employees, janitorial staff, farmworkers, delivery drivers, warehouse workers, transportation workers, and child care workers as essential workers.¹⁹ To estimate the size and composition of the essential workforce, we identify the workers listed in the Essential Workers Bill of Rights using an individual's occupation and industry in 2018 American Community Survey data.²⁰ We then provide a more detailed demographic analysis of selected occupations.

WHAT IS THE RACIAL, ETHNIC, NATIONAL ORIGIN, & GENDER BREAKDOWN OF ESSENTIAL WORKERS?

Essential workers, as compared to other workers, consist of a greater proportion of women, people of color, and immigrants. In 2018, we estimate there were nearly 50 million essential workers, which constituted 32% of the entire workforce. Similar research has estimated the size of the essential workforce to be between 49 and 62 million workers, though some approaches suggest this total could be as small as 31 million or as large as 97 million.^{21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26}

We estimate that 53% of essential workers are women, 44% are people of color, and 19% were born outside of the U.S. This suggests that women, people of color, and immigrants are disproportionately represented in the essential workforce, and thus face increased infection risks amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁷ We also find that 46% of all children in the U.S. live in households with essential workers.²⁸

These children are more likely to be Black or Latinx than are children who do not live with essential workers.²⁹

The following figures outline these findings in more detail:

- Figure 1 demonstrates that essential workers, compared to other workers, consisted of a greater percentage of women, immigrants, and people of color in 2018.
- Figure 2 highlights the share of essential workers in 2018 by type of work and demographic characteristics including sex, immigration status, and race/ethnicity. Certain types of work, including food production workers, household cleaners, home care workers, and janitorial staff consist of high percentages of workers who are female, immigrants, and/or people of color.
- Figure 3 highlights the share of essential workers in 2018 by race and ethnicity, and shows that Black and Latinx workers are disproportionately represented in the essential workforce.

Figure 1. Essential Workers are More Likely to Be Women, People of Color, & Foreign-Born than are Other Workers

Total Essential and Non-Essential Workers and Demographic Characteristics, 2018

Entire Workforce	Total	Female (%)	People of Color (%)	Foreign-Born (%)
Essential workers	49,803,000	53%	44%	19%
Non-essential workers	107,150,000	45%	35%	17%
Total	156,952,000	48%	38%	17%

Source: Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality's calculations using 2018 1-Year ACS PUMS Person File.

Notes: Differences between essential workers and non-essential workers by demographic characteristics are statistically significant. Workers are defined as civilians who were employed at the time of the survey. Essential workers are defined using a combination of industry and occupation code. People of color exclude those who identify as Non-Hispanic White.

Figure 2. Many Essential Jobs Rely Heavily on Female Workers & Workers of Color

Total Essential Workers by Job and Demographic Characteristics, 2018

Essential Worker Occupations	Total	Female (%)	People of Color (%)	Foreign-Born (%)
Total	49,803,000	53%	44%	19%
Doctors	2,350,000	57%	30%	19%
Nurses	4,340,000	88%	34%	15%
Home care workers	1,856,000	85%	59%	29%
Health care workers	5,153,000	80%	44%	16%
Drug store employees	1,122,000	69%	39%	16%
Household cleaners	391,000	95%	71%	63%
Food service workers	9,093,000	56%	51%	21%
Food production workers	366,000	38%	66%	37%
Janitorial staff	2,835,000	35%	53%	28%
Farm workers	1,542,000	21%	41%	31%
Delivery drivers	3,697,000	7%	43%	19%
Transportation workers	2,313,000	27%	47%	23%
Childcare workers	1,297,000	93%	44%	21%
Postal workers	522,000	45%	45%	13%
Grocery store workers	2,347,000	50%	41%	16%
Federal, state, and municipal employees	7,193,000	45%	37%	9%
Warehouse workers	3,395,000	27%	45%	16%

Source: Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality's calculations using 2018 1-Year ACS PUMS Person File.

Notes: Differences in estimates have not been checked for statistical significance. Workers are defined as civilians who were employed at the time of the survey. Essential workers are defined using a combination of industry and occupation code. People of color exclude those who identify as Non-Hispanic White.

Figure 3. Black & Latinx Workers Are Disproportionately Represented In the Essential Workforce

Share of Essential Workers by Race & Ethnicity, 2018

Entire Workforce	White	Black	Latinx	Asian	AIAN*	NHOPI#	Multiracial	Other
Non-essential workers	65%	10%	17%	6%	1%	0.1%	2%	0.2%
Essential workers	56%	15%	20%	6%	1%	0.2%	2%	0.3%
Total workforce	62%	12%	17%	6%	1%	0.2%	2%	0.2%

Source: Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality's calculations using 2018 1-Year ACS PUMS Person File.

*AIAN refers to American Indian and Alaskan Native.

NHOPI refers to Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

Notes: Differences in estimates have not been checked for statistical significance. Workers are defined as civilians who were employed at the time of the survey. Essential workers are defined using a combination of industry and occupation code. Race and ethnicity have been defined here as mutually exclusive categories. Latinx includes people of any race, whereas all other categories exclude people identifying as Latinx. Columns may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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ENDNOTES

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