

Profile of Essential Workers in Virginia During COVID-19



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Women, People of Color, and Immigrants Are Important Contributors in Front-line Virginia Industries

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The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that front-line, essential workers are vital for the functioning and well-being of our communities. The health care professionals working to keep people safe and healthy; the food service workers who ensure we have food on our tables; child care providers, and emergency personnel — these are just some of the workers providing essential services to keep the commonwealth running.

Many working people in certain essential industries in Virginia and the country as a whole are disproportionately women, immigrants, Black, and/or Latinx, according to recent analysis by the Center of Economic and Policy Research. Yet despite how critical front-line workers are, they often have low incomes and are at increased risk of getting sick as a result of performing high-contact work while protective equipment is in short supply.

Preliminary data is showing that the pandemic is not only a public health issue — it is laying bare some of the deep inequities we have as a commonwealth. Front-line workers have always been essential and will continue to be long after the pandemic, and it is important to recognize who they are in Virginia.

Here is a basic demographic profile of workers in these front-line industries.

Who are essential workers in Virginia?

According to recent analysis, more than 760,000 working people in Virginia, nearly 20% of all workers in the state, work in “essential” industries. Of these workers, 20% support their families with low incomes (an annual household income of less than 200% of the poverty level or \$43,440 for a family of three in 2020). These workers are employed by grocery stores, convenience stores, public transportation systems, and the postal service, or work in health care, child care, cleaning services, and other essential industries.

Both nationally and in Virginia, women are more likely to be essential workers. Around 66% of essential workers in the state are women, compared to 48% of all workers who are women. Women are particularly overrepresented in the child care and health care industries in Virginia,

making up 78% and 87% of the industries, respectively. Research has shown that many of these professions are low pay and often require women to risk their own health and safety due to close contact with others.

More than 4 in 10 workers in essential industries in Virginia are Black, Latinx, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, or some category other than white. Almost a third of all workers in essential industries are Black, far greater than their share of overall employment (19%). And people of color in the state are overrepresented in certain front-line industries. For example, 43% of all Latinx workers in essential industries do some kind of work in building cleaning services, far greater than any other racial or ethnic group. And workers in essential industries who are Black are overrepresented in the public

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transit, trucking, warehousing, and postal service industries.

Systemic racism in the areas of education, employment, housing, and transportation all overlap and has resulted in the fact that workers who are Black are overrepresented in front-line industries which are often lower paid and high contact, putting their health at higher risk during the pandemic.

Many workers in essential industries are also immigrants, making up around 16% of essential workers in Virginia. Immigrant workers are also overrepresented in building cleaning services, making up 42% of these workers. According to estimates from the Migration Policy Institute, there are about 175,000 undocumented workers living in Virginia.

Many undocumented immigrants work in essential industries, or work in sectors that have mostly shut down due to the need for physical distancing during the pandemic. Despite the fact that many undocumented immigrants do essential work and pay taxes, they are not eligible for the federal stimulus payments or unemployment insurance to help weather the pandemic. Virginia policy makers can help by providing direct financial assistance to those left out of the regular unemployment insurance program, whether through a new unemployment program, emergency cash assistance, or another mechanism.

There are also a number of essential workers in Virginia whose current legal immigration status is threatened by proposed federal changes. This includes 2,700 essential Virginia workers who were brought to the United States as children and have qualified for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, yet may lose that status if the DACA program is overturned by a court challenge this June. It also includes 6,700 essential workers in Virginia who have Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which has also been threatened with termination. These workers are risking their health to continue to assist their Virginia neighbors despite substantial uncertainty about their own future status.

Many essential workers have family care obligations. Over one-third of workers in essential industries in Virginia have at least one child in the home, and 16% live with a person aged 65 or older. While the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) allows some workers to access public health emergency leave if they are unable to work or telework due to the need to care for a child whose school is closed or if their child care provider is unavailable, those employed by large companies are still left out. Workers with children in Virginia would benefit from a broad paid leave program at the state level, so families can prioritize their health and well-being without facing financial costs.

Additionally, about 1 in 10 front-line industry workers do not have health insurance, a slightly larger share than all workers in the state. This is especially the case for those who work in building cleaning services — over one-third (35%) are uninsured. The FFCRA introduced a state Medicaid option to cover costs related to COVID-19 testing for uninsured individuals regardless of income or assets, an important first step in meeting the needs of Virginia's uninsured population. However, people who are undocumented are not eligible.

Front-line workers are essential to our communities

The pandemic has brought more attention to the workers that our communities cannot do without. They stock the shelves at grocery stores, take care of children, and provide health care services during these uncertain times. It is important to recognize who many of these workers are: women, people who are Black or Latinx, and immigrants, many of whom are being paid little despite their essential role in the labor force. Virginia should consider innovative solutions to care for and support these workers, such as providing hazard pay or additional compensation to all essential workers that is at least equal to a living wage in the region. These workers have always been essential, and meaningful recognition should persist long after the pandemic passes.

Virginia should consider innovative solutions to care for and support essential workers now and long after the pandemic passes.

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Characteristics of Workers in Virginia's Front-line Industries

	All Workers	All Frontline Industries	Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Stores	Public Transit	Trucking, Warehouse, and Postal Service	Building Cleaning Services	Health Care	Child Care and Social Services
All Workers (16+)	4,114,846	760,114	175,149	14,999	67,904	40,062	373,892	88,108
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Female	48.3	66.3	51	27	25	61	78	87
Full/Part-time								
Full-time	80.1	75.5	62	84	90	64	82	68
Part-time	19.9	24.5	38	16	11	36	18	32
Race/Ethnicity								
White	63.1	56.1	56	56	54	35	59	56
Black	19.0	27.6	26	33	33	21	28	28
Hispanic	9.3	8.5	8	7	7	43	5	10
AAPI	7.8	7.0	9	4	5	2	7	6
Other	0.8	0.8	1	1	1	0	1	1
Foreign Born	16.3	16.3	16	14	13	42	14	16
Education Level								
Less than high school	7.9	8.1	11	10	12	30	4	7
High school	22.2	25.2	36	39	41	37	17	21
Some college	29.1	35.3	36	32	34	24	37	32
College	23.6	18.5	12	12	11	7	23	24
Advanced	17.2	12.9	4	7	3	2	20	15
Age 50+	34.0	34.3	28	47	45	35	35	34
Home Ownership	67.0	63.9	61	69	68	50	66	64
Public Transit to Commute to Work	4.4	2.8	3	5	1	7	2	3
Compensation and Benefits								
Below poverty line	5.1	6.2	9	2	4	14	5	8
<200% poverty line	16.1	20.0	26	11	14	38	16	23
No health insurance	10.3	11.2	13	5	14	35	7	12
Family Responsibilities								
Child in home	35.5	35.2	33	33	30	39	36	38
Senior (age 65+) in home	14.8	16.0	18	20	17	18	15	17

Source: CEPR's Analysis of American Community Survey, 2014-2018 5-Year Estimates