

OLDER WOMEN AND OLDER BLACK WORKERS ARE OVERREPRESENTED IN HIGH-RISK JOBS

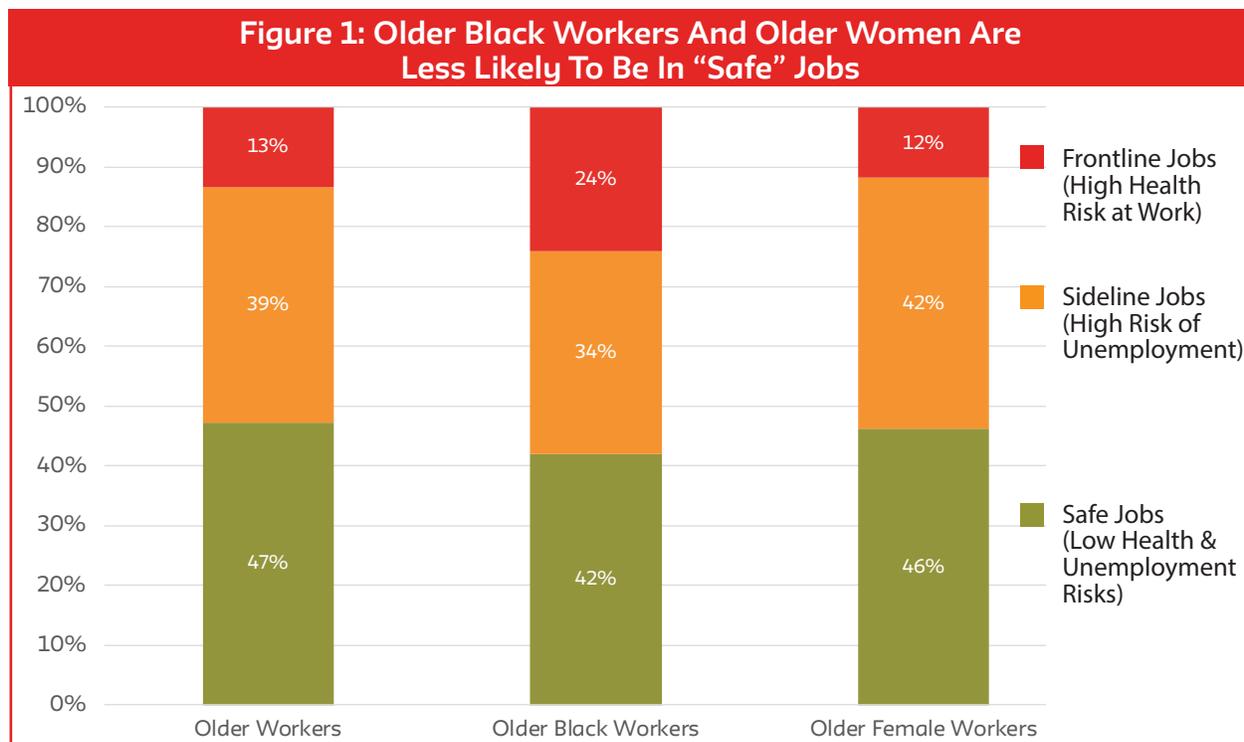
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ELEVATOR PITCH

The COVID-19 recession increased the risks of job loss and getting sick on the job and worsened the inequality in the distribution of job safety among older workers. Older women workers and older Black workers are underrepresented in safe jobs and overrepresented in jobs at risk for job loss and illness.

KEY FINDINGS

- Older women are overrepresented in jobs with high risk of unemployment.
- Older Black workers are overrepresented in all essential, “frontline” jobs and underrepresented in safe jobs.
- Prior to the pandemic, 40 percent of older Black workers in frontline jobs did not have access to paid sick leave.



Source: Authors' calculations from Current Population Survey (May 2020).
Note: Older workers, older women, and older Black workers are over the age of 50.

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COVID-19 RECESSION PUTS ALL OLDER WORKERS AT RISK, BUT SOME ARE MORE EXPOSED

All workers face two dire outcomes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and recession: getting ill at work or losing employment. Older workers, however, face increased health risks and more severe unemployment consequences. The deadly and debilitating effects of COVID-19 are amplified for older workers because their immune system gets weaker and pre-existing conditions increase with age.¹ Up to 86 percent of people between 55 and 64 have some type of pre-existing condition. Job loss, on the other hand, leaves older workers more vulnerable than younger workers to long spells of unemployment, lower future wages, and involuntary retirement.²

But not all older workers face the same levels of occupational health and unemployment risks. Like all resources, health, safety, and job security are distributed unequally, and marginalized groups enjoy a smaller share of them. The magnitude and the distribution of employment losses differ based on the types of jobs and different types of workers. Older Black and female workers are disproportionately represented in jobs that have high unemployment and health risks and are underrepresented in safe jobs with lower risks of illness and unemployment (see Figure 1).



FRONTLINE JOBS: BLACK OLDER WORKERS ARE OVERREPRESENTED

Workers in frontline jobs face increased health risks, especially if they don't have sick leave or necessary protective gear. The deadly and debilitating effects of COVID-19 are amplified for older workers.³ Overall, 6.8 million older workers are employed in frontline jobs, of which 1.2 million (18 percent) are Black older workers. Yet more than 24 percent of Black older workers are in frontline jobs, making them overrepresented in jobs with high exposure to the virus. This is especially true in the personal care and home health aide industry where 21 percent of workers over 50 are Black, while only 10 percent of all older workers are Black.

Black older workers on the frontlines are more likely than all Black workers to lack paid sick leave.⁴ Paid sick leave confers benefits to the

worker and the public (which is one of the reasons the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention keeps statistics on paid sick leave). Paid sick leave is a public health protection that allows sick people to stay home and prevents infection from spreading. In addition, paid sick leave indicates employers' attention to employees' health and safety. On average 40 percent of older Black frontline workers did not have paid sick leave before the outbreak.⁵ The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) made paid sick leave available to more workers, but many employers are exempt and coverage is limited.⁶ However, employers who previously didn't provide paid sick leave, which may indicate worker health and safety is not a high priority for them, may not provide other necessary means to make the workspace safe for older workers.

Table 1: Compared to Other Older Workers, Older Black Workers Are More Likely To Be In Frontline Occupations	
Type of Jobs	Older Black Workers' Share of Workers 50+
All Jobs	10%
All Frontline Jobs	18%
Healthcare Support Occupations	23%
Personal Care and Home Health Aides	21%
Transportation and Material Moving Occupations	18%
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance Occupations	15%

Source: Authors' calculations from Current Population Survey (May 2020).

Note: Individual occupations in the table are selected from Frontline occupations with high shares of older Black workers.

SIDELINE JOBS: OLDER WOMEN ARE OVERREPRESENTED

Employment opportunities declined most in non-essential occupations, especially in jobs at the bottom of the income distribution.⁷ Weekly job postings fell by more than 50 percent for non-essential occupations in which workers earn less than \$35,000 per year, with the deepest declines in low-wage jobs paying less than \$10,000 per year. Because older women are

the majority of workers in many of these low-paid jobs, especially in the service industry, they are overrepresented in sideline jobs (see Table 2). Over 9.2 million older women (out of 21 million older women workers) are at high risk of unemployment and losing employer-based health insurance.⁸

Table 2: Older Women Are More Likely Than Older Men To Work In Sideline Jobs

Type of Jobs	Older Female Workers' Share of Workers 50+
All Jobs	46%
All Sideline Jobs	49%
Office and Administrative Support	79%
Personal Care Services	74%
Education and Training	70%
Food Preparation and Serving-Related Occupations	67%
Sales and Related Occupations	47%

Source: Authors' calculations from Current Population Survey (May 2020).

Note: Individual occupations in the table are selected from sideline occupations with high shares of older female workers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Older Black workers are overrepresented among frontline workers, contributing to the disproportionate COVID-19 infections and deaths in the Black community. Forthcoming phases of relief legislation need to target communities of color, covering the cost of testing and treatment for infected patients.

For many older workers, unemployment means loss of health insurance. While all workers can be affected by the loss of health insurance after unemployment, it is especially dangerous for older Black workers with a higher likelihood of pre-existing health conditions. Reducing the Medicare age and making it people’s primary insurance will protect these workers and facilitate their employment by lowering the cost of health insurance for employers.

Historically, older workers and Black older

workers have experienced longer spells of unemployment and slower economic recovery.⁹ Extending and expanding unemployment benefits will ensure older workers’ well-being while unemployed and ensure they have a choice to refuse unhealthy, low-paying jobs. Meanwhile, we need better protective standards from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to make work safer and accessible for everyone, including older workers.

Forced retirement will rise as a result of the continuing health crisis and recession. Retirees without enough retirement assets — Blacks and women have lower retirement balances than white men — are likely to claim Social Security benefits at an earlier age further diminishing their retirement income.¹⁰ This will disproportionately affect older Black workers and women. Social Security benefits should be increased to offset the effects of COVID-19 recession.

APPENDIX

We categorize jobs into three groups based on:

1. The risk of unemployment, which includes occupations where workers will likely be on the sidelines (e.g., retail salespersons, food servers and machine assemblers). We used the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis definition of which occupations are considered highly prone to mass layoffs.¹¹ They are jobs that cannot be completed off-site (for a more detailed list, see Dingel & Neiman, 2020¹²). Workers in these jobs also are less likely to be salaried employees. Additionally using data from the Current Population Survey, we compared changes in employment by major occupational categories from March to April 2020 to identify groups that faced high levels of employment loss.
2. The risk of getting sick while working which include occupations on the front lines (e.g., janitors, truck drivers and personal care and home health aide workers).
3. Workers not facing the above risks are considered to be employed in “safe” occupations. They do not face particularly high risks of unemployment or falling ill include “knowledge workers” and people who do most of their work on computers — such as corporate executives, Information technology managers, financial analysts, accountants and insurance underwriters — are not facing particularly high risk of

Table A1: Number of Employed Workers in Each Job Category by Type of Workers (In Millions)

Occupational Category	All Workers	Older Workers (50+ Years)	Older Black Workers	Older Female Workers
All Jobs	137.8	47.7	5.0	21.8
Frontline Jobs	18.5	6.4	1.2	2.6
Sideline Jobs	56.7	18.8	1.7	9.2
Safe Jobs	62.9	22.6	2.1	10.1

Source: Authors’ calculations from Current Population Survey (May 2020).

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>

² Johnson, Richard (2020). "As Unemployment Surges, Older Workers Need More Help." Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/unemployment-surges-older-workers-need-more-help>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>

⁴ Latinx workers are least likely overall to have paid sick leave.

⁵ Authors' calculations based on Blewett, L. A., Rivera Drew, J. A., King, M. L., & Williams, K. C. W. (2019). IPUMS Health Surveys: National Health Interview Survey, Version 6.4 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS.

⁶ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/pandemic/ffcra-employee-paid-leave>

⁷ <https://www.policylink.org/our-work/economy/national-equity-atlas/COVID-workforce>

⁸ <https://www.epi.org/blog/12-7-million-workers-have-likely-lost-employer-provided-health-insurance-since-the-coronavirus-shock-began/>

⁹ <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2018/article/great-recession-great-recovery.htm>

¹⁰ <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/disparities-for-women-and-minorities-in-retirement-saving/>

¹¹ <https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2020/march/covid-19-workers-highest-unemployment-risk>

¹² <https://www.economicpolicyresearch.org/jobs-report/september-2018-unemployment-report-for-workers-over-55>

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