



## Policy Brief

# Essential Workers

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## About the Author

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## About the Grand Challenge

Inequality and exclusion are among the most pressing political issues of our age. They are on the rise and the anger felt by citizens towards elites perceived to be out-of-touch constitutes a potent political force. Policymakers and the public are clamouring for a set of policy options that can arrest and reverse this trend. [The Grand Challenge on Inequality and Exclusion](#) seeks to identify practical and politically viable solutions to meet the targets on equitable and inclusive societies in the Sustainable Development Goals. Our goal is for national governments, intergovernmental bodies, multilateral organizations, and civil society groups to increase commitments and adopt solutions for equality and inclusion.

The Grand Challenge is an initiative of the Pathfinders, a multi-stakeholder partnership that brings together 36 member states, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector to accelerate delivery of the SDG targets for peace, justice and inclusion. Pathfinders is hosted at [New York University's Center on International Cooperation](#).



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Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, Inclusive COVID-19 Relief Finance Paper. (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2021), available at <https://www.sdg16.plus/>

Budget 2021. Canada. Photo credit: Member of the maintenance department staff cleans the armchairs, tables and microphones in a room in the UN headquarters in Geneva. (CC BY-NC 2.0)

# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	4
<b>2. Defining Essential Work</b>	5
<b>3. Essential Work and Disadvantaged Communities</b>	6
3.1 Migrant Workers	6
3.2 Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic Communities	7
3.3 Informal Sector Workers	7
3.4 Women	8
<b>4. What We Can Learn from Other High-Risk Occupations</b>	9
<b>5. A New Deal for Essential Workers</b>	10
5.1 Stronger Social Safety Nets	11
5.2 Fair Employment	11
5.3 Enhanced Compensation	11
5.4 Why a Better Deal Need Not Distort Labor Markets	13
5.5 A Safe Work Environment	13
5.6 Overcoming Discrimination	13
5.7 Improving Mental Health	14
<b>6. Recommendations for Governments, International Agencies, and Other Partners</b>	15
<b>7. Conclusion</b>	16
<b>Endnotes</b>	17



# 1. Introduction

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the extent to which we rely on essential workers. Around the world health workers have been greeted by clapping, but this has not translated into improvements in their working conditions or pay. On the contrary, as COVID-19 cases and deaths have mounted, so too have the pressures and fatalities among health and other essential workers. In order to close the widening divide between the rhetoric and reality, this paper argues that a new deal is required for essential workers.

The pandemic has accelerated the shift to telework, with employees in a wide range of professions now working from home. While this is not without its shortcomings, it has offered a continuity of incomes and a protection from the threats posed by COVID-19. Essential workers, by contrast, have been compelled to travel to workplaces. Health and social care workers, cleaners, food industry workers, and a wide range of others have had no choice but to go to their workplaces as their jobs are considered essential to keep services and supply chains intact to prevent a wider societal.<sup>1</sup>

Goal 8 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda calls for the promotion of safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrants.<sup>2</sup> It highlights the importance of protecting labor rights, and that these need to be extended to those in precarious employment. Without tackling the challenges faced by essential workers, governments will be unable to fulfill their pledge to achieve decent, full, and productive employment for all women and men, including young people and persons with disabilities.

A new deal for essential workers is not only the right thing to do on ethical and other grounds. It is in everyone's self-interest. Without a new deal for essential workers, societies will not be able to respond to the intensifying cycle of crises that arise from an increasingly complex, interconnected, and unstable world. Whether it is a natural disaster, large-scale terrorism, geopolitical hostilities, or another pandemic, it is only a matter of time before society must again face down a crisis of unprecedented scale. To build resilience, we need a well-trained, deeply committed, and full complement of essential workers who will rise to the challenge. A new deal for these workers should be seen as a central tenet of creating more resilient economies, and an investment to reduce risk and future proof our societies.

Part of the challenge is that the crucible of essential work during a crisis falls disproportionately on those from disadvantaged backgrounds—migrant workers, ethnic minorities, those in informal employment, migrants, and women. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the unequal labor market outcomes faced by these groups. For many of us, this has led to reflection on whether this is a satisfactory picture in a world where such workers must bear an increasing share of the risk needed to keep the rest of us safe.

This paper begins by defining essential workers and laying out the key facts around the prevailing socioeconomic background for such workers. It then draws on the experience of mitigating and compensating for risks in other socially necessary but hazardous occupations, such as the military, and uses this to define the contours of what a new deal for essential workers should look like.



## 2. Defining Essential Work

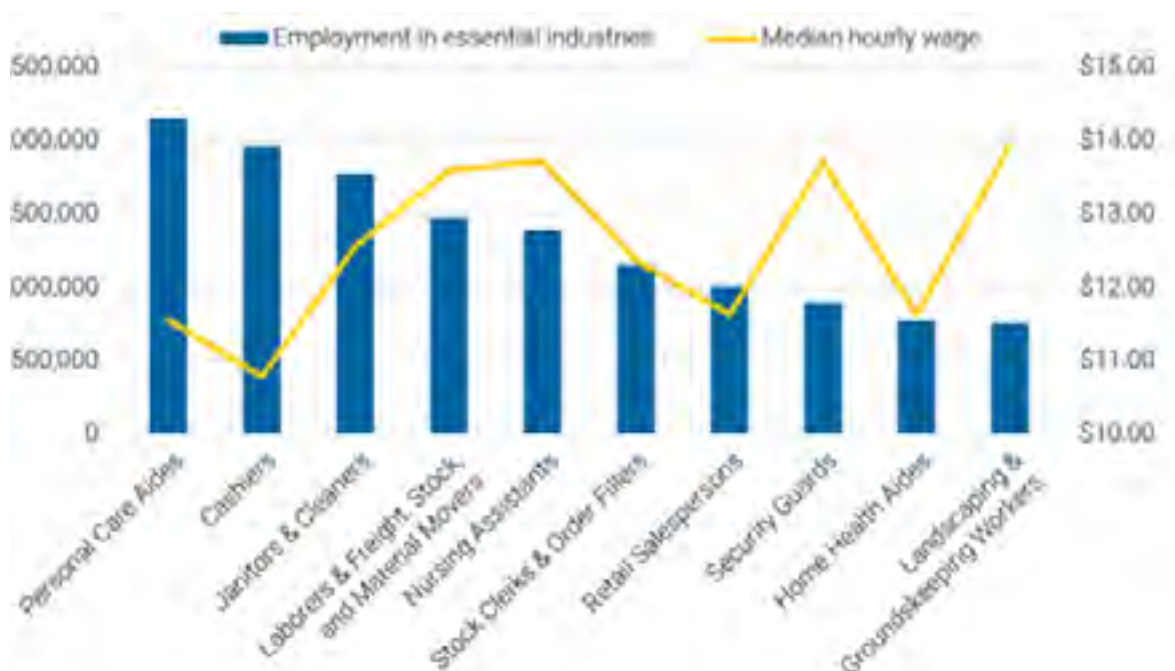
The definition of essential workers is not straightforward, and there are no universally accepted criteria for what constitutes essential work. Many occupations may claim that they undertake essential work, and indeed citizens rely heavily on a very wide range of jobs, including professions such as bankers, builders, and barbers.

The difference between ‘essential work’ and other occupations comes down to the impact on society if the work in question were to be suspended. While the temporary absence of various professions has certainly caused inconvenience during the pandemic, they have not precipitated the collapse of society. Moreover, the work most critical to the ongoing functioning of society tends to require the physical presence of employees, as for the most part these occupations involve either frontline services or manual labor, which in a pandemic has meant taking on far greater risk than the rest of the population. Telework has allowed many (though certainly not all) non-essential workers to continue making their living without putting themselves and their families in physical danger.

Workers considered essential during the pandemic include health and care workers, delivery drivers, cleaners, food industry workers, porters, teachers, police, and public transport employees. The context defines who is essential, and our framework does not imply that the same workers are essential in a pandemic as may be essential during a military conflict, climate emergency, nuclear accident, or natural disaster (though there are likely to be many overlaps). What the essential workers in these and other cases have in common is that they are taking a risk that is required on society’s behalf.

Part of what has proved troubling during the pandemic is that the essential workers, who are taking on an outsized share of risk, often work in many of the economy’s worst paid occupations (see Figure 1 below). This issue is compounded by the reality that the workers who fill these jobs tend to come from disadvantaged segments of the population, as we explore in the following section.

**Figure 1: Ten largest essential occupations with a median wage less than USD 15 per hour, 2018<sup>3</sup>**





## 3. Essential Work and Disadvantaged Communities

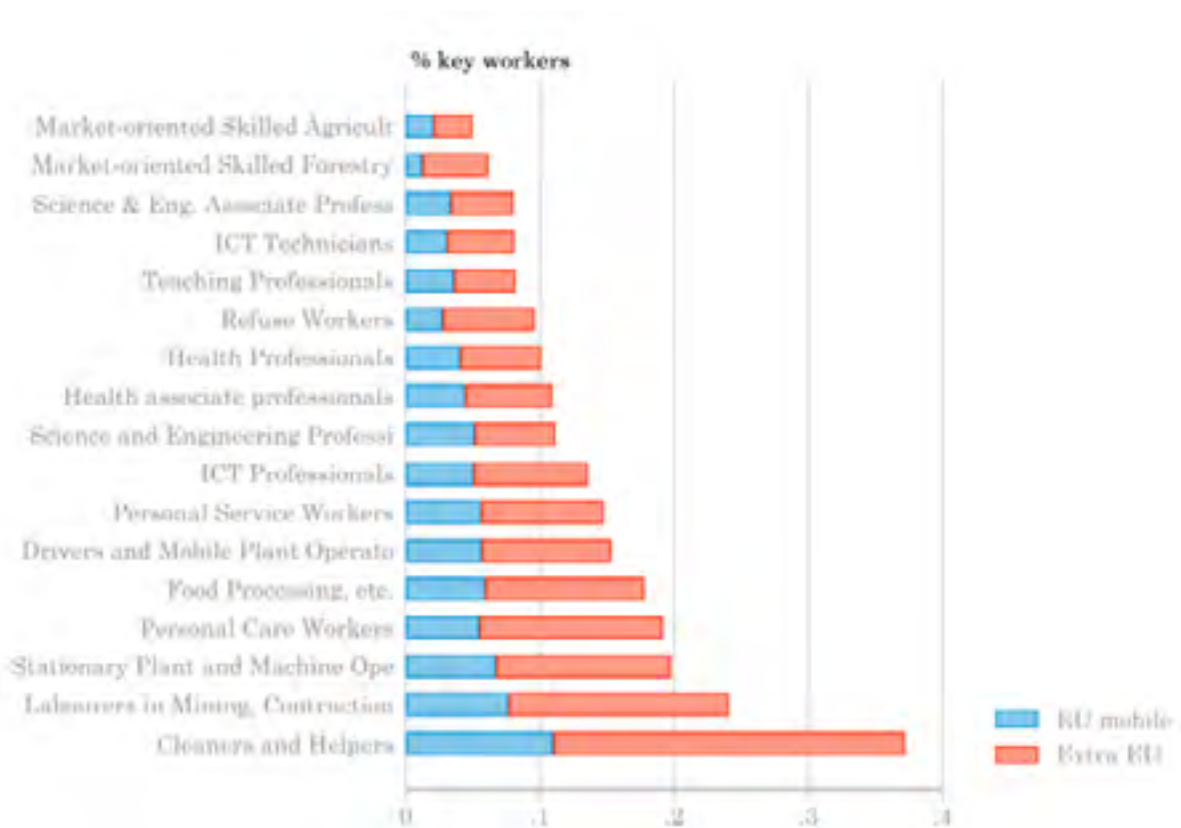
### 3.1 Migrant Workers

Migrant workers represent 4.7 percent of the global labor pool comprising 164 million workers, with nearly half being.<sup>4</sup> In many countries migrant workers represent a significantly larger share of the essential workforce. For example, one in seven employed in the United Kingdom's National Health Service holds a non-British nationality;<sup>5</sup> and more than half of those working in the UK's agriculture and food processing industries come from overseas.<sup>6</sup>

COVID-19 made migrant workers' fragile labor market arrangements more visible. Although many migrant workers are deemed indispensable to the economy, they frequently are in unprotected work characterized by low wages and a lack of social protection.<sup>7</sup> Migrant workers tend to live, commute, and work in crowded places, increasing their risk of acquiring and transmitting respiratory infections. The acute risks they face in meat and poultry processing facilities have been highlighted by the clusters of COVID-19 amongst migrants in facilities in the USA and Europe, which despite being hotbeds of contagion were not closed as they are regarded as essential.<sup>8</sup>

In some countries, migrant workers have also been explicitly locked out of access to healthcare. In Singapore and Thailand, migrant workers have frequently been excluded from COVID-testing services and have suffered from a significantly higher level of infection and mortality than the native populations.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 2: Share of immigrants among key workers, by occupation in European Union. The red bar represents the percentage of immigrants over total key workers for each occupation<sup>10</sup>**





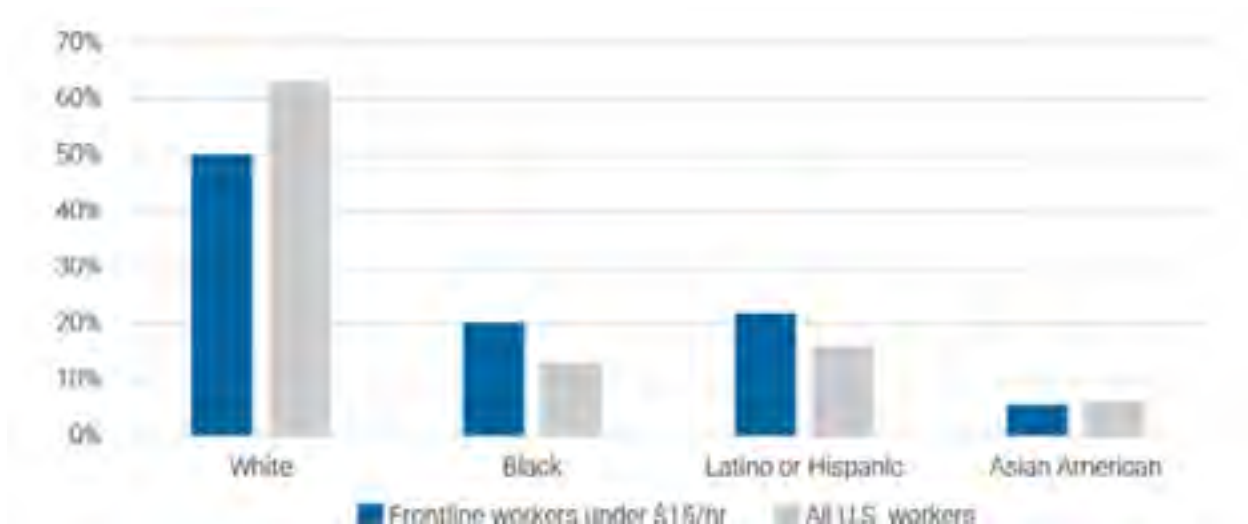


## 3.2 Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic Communities

In Europe, the UK, and the USA, death rates in Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) communities have been disproportionately high. Since people of BAME backgrounds are more likely to fulfill the role of essential workers—such as healthcare workers, food industry workers, cleaners, and public transport workers—the exposure to personal risk has been significantly higher than that of the average population.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, essential workers from BAME backgrounds tend to be paid less than their non-BAME counterparts for equivalent work. Additional factors that contribute to an increased rate of infection and mortality amongst BAME individuals in Europe, the UK, and US are that they on average live in more crowded living conditions, more frequently lack PPE, and as they are poorer, they have a greater need to continue work despite the increased risk.<sup>12</sup>

In the UK, while 21 percent of people employed by the National Health Service identify as BAME, 61 percent of health workers who died of COVID-19 were of BAME backgrounds.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 3: Half of frontline essential workers in low-paid occupations are nonwhite. Frontline workers in occupations with median wage under USD 15/hr in 2018<sup>14</sup>**



## 3.3 Informal Sector Workers

Informal employment represents an estimated 90 percent of total employment in low-income countries, 67 percent in middle-income countries and 18 percent in high-income countries.<sup>15</sup> Informal employment accounts for about 89 percent of employment in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2020).

Many jobs in major informal sectors—such as hospitality, home cleaning, and street markets—have been curtailed during the pandemic. Indeed, an estimated 1.6 billion informal sector workers are at risk of losing their livelihoods.<sup>16</sup> As a result, many of these workers have found themselves forced into essential services—one of the few areas of employment opportunity during the pandemic. However, essential workers in the informal sector face an even greater challenge than those in the registered workforce due to the weaker application of health and safety rules which may offer protection against disease in regulated workplaces (such as masks and sanitizers).

At the same time, many in the informal sector have continued working despite government restrictions, compelled by the absence of social safety nets and health protection, especially in low-income countries. Propelled by the need to earn an income to provide not only for themselves but also their families, many such workers, a large majority of whom are women, enter work relations that typically fall outside the scope of labor law and social protection.<sup>17</sup>



### 3.3 Women

An estimated ninety-six million of the 136 million workers in the health and social work sectors in enumerated countries are women. In virtually all countries, women constitute over two-thirds of the health and social workforce. Women have been the majority of front-line workers responding to the pandemic and have as a result been subject to greater risk. Additionally, the closure of schools, childcare, and other care facilities, has caused a sharp increase in the amount of time women spend on unpaid home and care work.

Community health workers, who are mainly women, play an important role in filling the gap in countries with a lack of health workers. While they should be integral to primary health care strategies, their integration into the health system and the communities they serve varies considerably across and within countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, 68 percent of community health workers, the overwhelming majority of whom are women, are unpaid. Moreover, the informal nature of their work puts them at greater risk of infection.

Women in informal employment and women migrant workers carrying out essential work experience increased levels of violence and harassment—in accommodation, at work, in quarantine facilities, or upon retrenchment and the return home. Gender-sensitive, rights-based policies and measures can help to prevent human and labor rights abuses.<sup>18</sup> When gender intersects with other discrimination, such as on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, age, disability, and/or HIV status, there is a risk that both gender disparities and intra-women inequalities are further widened.<sup>19</sup>



## 4. What We Can Learn from Other High-Risk Occupations

Societies have applauded essential workers, but this has not been translated into improved conditions of employment. To consider what adequate terms and conditions of employment for essential workers could look like it is instructive to examine examples of high-risk jobs which have been considered worthy of special and differential treatment.

The armed forces provide a model for how to protect and compensate workers facing severe personal risks in times of crisis. For example, the United Kingdom's military has a four-level approach to staff exposed to hazardous working conditions. Firstly, its employees are fully health insured. This includes dental insurance as well as free mental health advice and support in the form of counselling for military personnel and their families. Secondly, it offers those who have been on continuous operational service for four months or more "Rest and Recuperation (R&R)" leave. Thirdly, Operational Allowances are available to regular service personnel, mobilized reserves, and full-time reserve service personnel working in specified, typically higher risk, operational locations. The Operational Allowance, also known as "Hazard Pay," was created to compensate those employed in the armed forces for the increased risk they face when serving in hazardous conditions. At present, the average Operational Allowance of a six-month deployment amounts to GBP 5,281 (\$USD 6,500). Lastly, in cases of death or illness, the UK military provides no-fault compensation for its employees and their families.<sup>20</sup> The United States of America, which devotes 3.4 percent of its Gross Domestic Product to military expenditure,<sup>21</sup> not only provides its military personnel with publicly-funded pensions and healthcare, but also allows its veterans to get further education and training.<sup>22</sup>

The United Nations (UN) has a two-level approach for staff exposed to hazardous working conditions. Firstly, it provides its internationally and locally recruited staff who are required to work in duty stations where dangerous conditions prevail a special allowance, called danger pay, for up to three months.<sup>23</sup> According to the UN, such conditions constitute duty stations where staff are at high risk of becoming collateral damage in a war or active armed conflict, as well as in non-protected environments where staff are specifically at risk to their life when deployed to deal with public health emergencies.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, the UN utilizes a Rest and Recuperation framework by which staff members working under hazardous, stressful, and difficult conditions are granted regular periods of rest and recuperation of between six to twelve weeks.<sup>25</sup> The R&R framework aims to protect UN staff's health and well-being, while preserving the operational readiness of the organization.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to the additional compensation and leave provided by both the military and UN to their employees who face risky and stressful environments, only nineteen out of fifty-three member countries of the World Health Organization's European Region have paid one-time bonuses or other forms of financial compensation to health workers, since February 2020 when COVID-19 was declared a public health emergency in the international sphere.<sup>27</sup> The Federal Government of Germany paid nursing staff who were particularly burdened due to caring for COVID-19 patients with a one-time premium of up to EUR 1,000 (USD 1,220).<sup>28</sup> The French government has increased the salaries of its health workers during the pandemic by EUR 183 (USD 223) per month.<sup>29</sup> In the United Kingdom, not only have nurses not been adequately compensated for their risks, but they have also been required to work additional hours, have suffered from a chronic shortage of protective equipment and have been given what their representatives have seen as a derisory below inflation annual pay rise of 1 percent. While in the UK, a form of no-fault compensation has recently been made available to the surviving families of key workers who suffer fatal COVID-19 infections, it has been criticized as inadequate to the loss suffered, particularly as families of military personnel who died during working hours are offered considerably higher compensation.<sup>30</sup>

In the United States of America, Senator Elizabeth Warren and Representative Ro Khanna have proposed a ten-point "essential worker bill of rights,"<sup>31</sup> providing hazard pay for workers taking risks to provide essential services.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile in France, health workers who died in the pandemic are being awarded "died in the service of the Republic" status, which guarantees state financing for their partners and children. In announcing the new status, President Macron explicitly compared it to the status which previously was reserved for military and police who died in the line of duty, with this conferring on their children the obligation of the state to provide financial help for education and job training, including free schooling and scholarships. The extension of equivalent rights to the

survivors of those who have lost their lives in combatting COVID-19 was termed “an act of justice and fraternity” by the French President.<sup>33</sup>

A number of developing countries also support their essential workers at risk. Indonesia increased the salaries of those who have borne the brunt of the pandemic.<sup>34</sup> In addition to receiving an additional allowance of fifty percent of their basic monthly salary, the Ghanaian government has been providing health workers in Accra with free public transport and exempted them from paying taxes for three months in 2020.<sup>35</sup>

## 5. A New Deal for Essential Workers

Essential workers provide indispensable public goods during and outside a global pandemic.<sup>36</sup> To the extent that essential workers’ conditions of employment expose them, and in the case of infectious diseases also their families, to higher personal risk, the terms and conditions of their employment require rethinking. A new employment contract is required for essential workers which provides the generally underpaid workers with improved rights, benefits, and financial compensation at all times, with additional safeguards, benefits, and compensation when they face additional risks. The extent of the special terms needed for essential workers will vary according to the underlying systems that are already in place in societies and the capacity of societies to pay, as high income and low-income countries clearly cannot provide the same benefits. Everywhere, however, the dimensions of a new deal should include consideration of the adequacy or otherwise of social safety nets, social protection systems, terms of employment, compensation, training, and health and safety. Each of these dimensions to a new deal is considered in turn below.

### 5.1 Stronger Social Safety Nets

The first step in a new deal for essential workers is to ensure that robust social protections, including both income and health protection, are in place across all social groups in order to rebalance risk away from historically disadvantaged groups who make up a disproportionate share of essential workers.

COVID-19 threatens the lives and long-term livelihoods of people across the world. It is estimated that as many as an additional 140 million people in middle- and low-income countries are at risk of falling into extreme poverty.<sup>37</sup> Targeted social safety nets are required in all societies, with their capacity to support individuals tailored to the budgetary and institutional constraints of different countries.

Income safety nets can improve health, allow children to continue with schooling and replace part of lost income for poverty-stricken households. During the pandemic, or other crises, these transfers can counter the economic drag of growing unemployment by sustaining consumption and demand for economic output and services. This can generate positive multiplier effects during the recovery, as well as making moral and political sense, protecting those most in need and building trust in government.

Since March 2020, 151 countries have adapted, implemented, or planned income protection interventions, including cash transfers.<sup>38</sup> Low- and middle-income countries have been under intense fiscal pressure. In the absence of international support, declining aid, and an increasingly hostile actions by credit rating agencies, many have been unable to afford effective safety nets.

The pandemic has also exposed the adverse effects of gaps in the coverage of sickness benefits. A lack of coverage causes fear over losses of income during sickness due to the increased risk of poverty for lower-paid essential workers and their families. In addition, if workers cannot afford to miss work and self-quarantine, and continue to travel to their workplaces, the risk of contagion rises. This leads to a downward spiral in which poorer neighborhoods suffer higher rates of infection and are locked down, compounding the local impact of sickness and income losses.<sup>39</sup>

The global spread of COVID-19 is indicative of the growing threat of systemic risks.<sup>40</sup> Social safety nets become more important as risk rises. But strong social safety nets also are needed to encourage greater flexibility in labor markets, allowing individuals to transition from one job to another. The more that workers need to change jobs, the greater the role of safety nets in encouraging risk taking and entrepreneurship, as well as reducing inequality, as Denmark has demonstrated. In a world of rising risk, a robust safety net is a vital shock absorber which ensures that volatility in incomes and health does not lead to destitution and rising inequality. Risk increases poverty and inequality because while some can insulate themselves from shocks, those without resources are dragged down in a vicious circle of loss. The stronger the safety net, the greater the willingness of individuals to accept risks on behalf of society. Therefore, the first dimension of a new deal for essential workers is that if they lose their jobs or if they become sick or disabled, they can fall back on a strong safety net that covers everyone in society.

## 5.2 Fair Employment

Many essential workers are self-employed, gig workers, and employed temporarily or on a part-time basis. As a result, many neither enjoy the same level of protection against occupational hazards, nor have the same rights to paid sick leave or unemployment insurance as those with permanent and full-time contracts. If informal and migrant workers are unable to access the benefits that are afforded to other workers, their transition to formal and more protected terms of employment in terms of benefits and conditions of work is required. Regulatory frameworks need to ensure equal treatment of workers, regardless of their contractual status, and to the extent that certain groups of workers have weaker terms of employment which undermine not only their incomes but social protection and health and safety, this requires urgent attention.<sup>41</sup>

## 5.3 Enhanced Compensation

The COVID-19 pandemic has created hazardous conditions of employment for essential workers. When essential workers face new risks, they should receive additional compensation. McConnell proposes increases in the minimum wages of essential workers.<sup>42</sup> In addition, essential workers should be compensated for any harm caused by infectious diseases, such as COVID-19. Hazard pay, which provides additional compensation to essential workers while employed in dangerous conditions should be enshrined in legislation to ensure that those shouldering unavoidable risk on behalf of societies are rewarded fairly. The provision of adequate compensation, along with safety equipment and effective training is required, as well as support to families and the statutory provision of rest and holiday periods. This not only will improve the wellbeing and productivity of essential workers, but could make the professions more attractive and reverse the low morale, absenteeism, and physical and mental health which contributes to healthcare systems being overwhelmed.

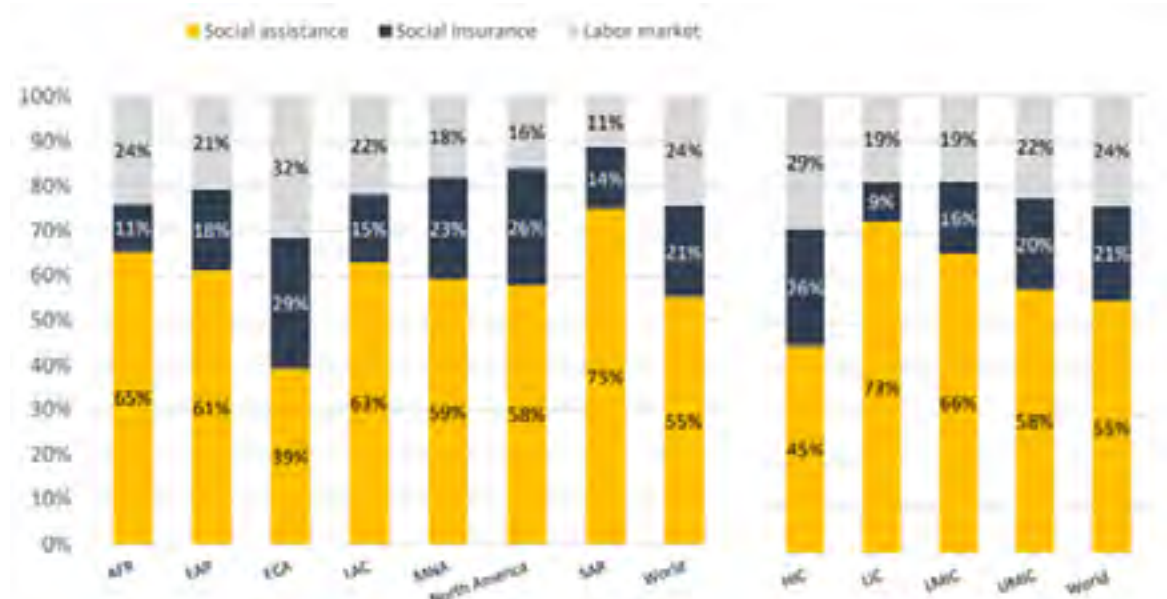
Essential workers not only suffer more harm due to exposure to the disease, but they take on a heavier burden than the general population to prevent the transmission of infection to their families. Due to the pressures to work overtime and the lack of benefits, such as Rest and Recovery, essential workers are under severe stress. According to a recent survey, 50 percent of healthcare workers in the UK reported that their mental health had deteriorated due to the pandemic and the strenuous working conditions.<sup>43</sup>

# Box 1: Policies to support adequate compensation of essential workers

Reduce workers' exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace
Income support to sick workers and their families
Income support to quarantined workers who do not receive it from other sources
Healthcare insurance support to provide healthcare access to all
Pension package which provides a basic income for elderly and retirees
Social security contribution waiver/subsidy
Support essential workers in dealing with unforeseen child or other care
Increase minimum wage of essential workers
Provide hazard pay to essential workers when work is risky
Provide Rest & Recovery benefits to essential workers
Provide protective equipment (PPE) which is effective at reducing risk
Remove distinction between formal and informal work in recognition of rights of workers and access to social security, health insurance and PPE.

According to the World Bank, social assistance accounts for 62 percent of global policy responses since March 2020, with cash transfers emerging as the most widely used form of social assistance.<sup>44</sup> The composition of social protection varies by country income groups and regions (see Figure 4). Social assistance represents nearly 90 percent of measures in low-income countries, while it is less than half in high-income settings. The presence of social insurance is aligned with income, ranging from 8 percent in low- to 31 percent in high-income countries. Similarly, active labor market programs vary between 3 and 21 percent across the income spectrum.<sup>45</sup>

**Figure 4: : Composition of social protection responses by components in regions and country income groups.** Social insurance programs entail paid sick leave, healthcare insurance support, pensions, social security contribution waiver/ subsidy and unemployment benefits. Active labor market programs and labor regulations include wage subsidies, training measures, labor regulation and shorter work time.<sup>46</sup>



## 5.4 Why a Better Deal Need Not Distort Labor Markets

One of the most common arguments against providing essential workers with higher wages or better terms and conditions of employment is that this would lead to distortions in labor markets. This argument is used by libertarians who believe that the free market alone should determine wages and conditions, and if people chose to work in low paid or risky occupations it should not be the role of a ‘nanny’ state or employers to intervene to improve their position. Progressive commentators for very different reasons at times argue that there is the potential to create an insider-outsider cleavage where a group of workers with bargaining power are able to protect their position, at the expense of outsiders such as workers in the informal or rural labor markets, or unemployed, who as a result are worse off, as they have to pay for more expensive services or are disadvantaged by doing the menial or even more dangerous work which is rejected by the recognized essential workers. A prime example of this is what has befallen the lowest caste in India, who are still removing human waste and cleaning sewers.

The libertarian arguments have for the past century, and more been shown to be without foundation and not led to either higher corporate or national economic growth, let alone to more equitable and cohesive societies. It also is evident that many of those that subscribe to the free-market arguments are the most vocal in advancing regulations which control entry to professions and which strictly circumscribe the terms and conditions of employment and limit the numbers in professions such as medicine, banking, accounting, architecture, law, and others.

The concerns of progressive commentators do however need to be reflected in the design of schemes which protect the interest of essential workers. These should be careful to not simply protect those in formal and unionized employment, but to extend beyond to informal workers. The minimum wages set and compensation provided should not be totally out of line with others who are experiencing risky conditions, such as those engaged in firefighting or active soldiers. It also is the case that there is a shortage of most essential workers during time of crises, so compensation which recognizes the dependence of society on these workers and their inherent riskiness would not be out of line with the need to attract more individuals from a wider and more diverse background into the jobs

## 5.5 A Safe Work Environment

The risks that essential workers face can be mitigated or aggravated by the adequacy or failures of measures taken to insulate them from the risks. The inadequacy of personal protective equipment (PPE), particularly in the first months of the pandemic greatly exacerbated the risks facing essential workers. In the UK, US and other wealthy countries many front-line health workers were unable to access even basic PPE, such as masks or gloves, and resorted to sourcing these. In the US, barely 35 percent of pharmacy workers, 30 percent of delivery workers, 17 percent of warehouse workers and 4 percent of fast-food workers reported that their employers had provided access to masks in 2020 themselves.<sup>47</sup>

The inadequacy of safety equipment puts the lives of essential workers at risk. As is the case in the military, or with fire fighters and in other dangerous work, it is imperative that essential workers receive adequate equipment and training in its use prior to entering dangerous situations. A failure to do so should be considered a breach of employment law, and the institutions or employers responsible should face liability for any resulting injuries, sickness, or death.

## 5.6 Overcoming Discrimination

Many essential jobs are among the worst paid, and the compulsion that low-paid essential workers feel when undertaking dangerous jobs reflects underlying inequalities in income and bargaining power in societies. These inequalities have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the UK, essential workers are more likely than average to be in the Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities; women; and born outside the UK.<sup>48</sup> Women, people of color, people with disabilities, people living with HIV, indigenous peoples, migrant workers, and those in the informal economy risk being further disadvantaged. To mitigate such risks, it is essential to enhance and enforce laws and policies on equality and non-discrimination in employment.<sup>49</sup>

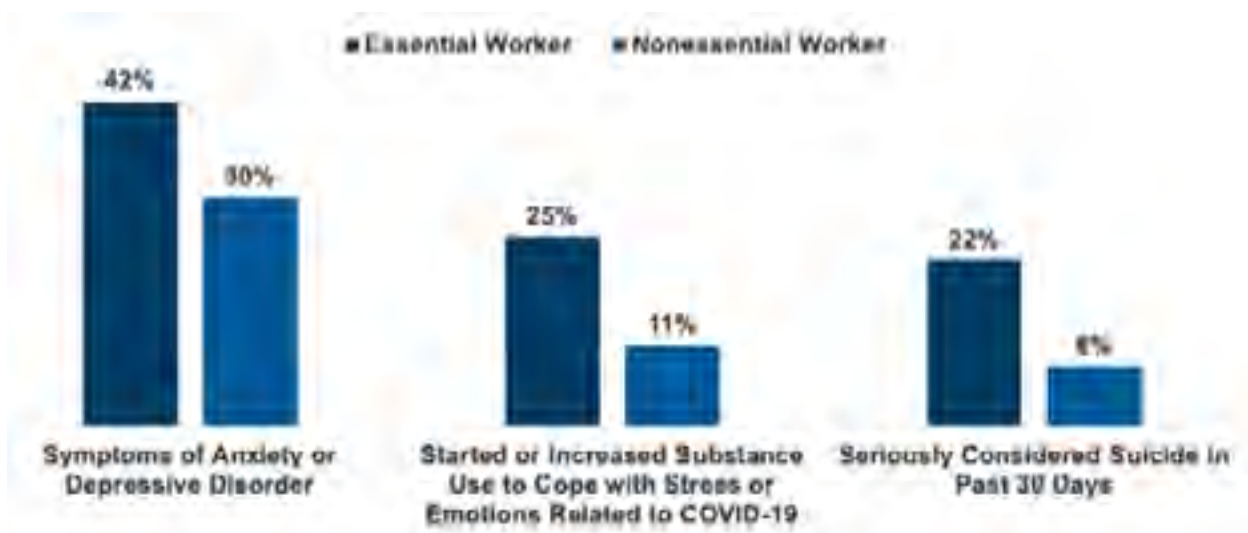


## 5.7 Improving Mental Health

Essential workers were already in a precarious position prior to the pandemic. In the US, more than half of these workers lacked access to paid sick leave.<sup>50</sup> During the pandemic, anxiety and depression has increased globally; in some countries it even doubled. The risk of poor mental health varies across multiple dimensions, such as age, gender, employment, and socio-economic status but is particularly acute among essential workers.<sup>51</sup>

The exposure of essential workers to more hazardous conditions, longer working hours, and poor working conditions, has added to their already consideration stress and mental ill health. In the UK, half of the surveyed NHS front-line workers reported that their mental health had deteriorated since the start of the pandemic.<sup>52</sup> In addition to improving pay, compensation, and the terms and conditions of employment, employers and government programs need to provide essential workers, experiencing symptoms of anxiety, trauma, exhaustion, and depression, with mental health support.<sup>53</sup> Beyond emergency measures, there is an urgent need to deliver stronger, more integrated policies and services to support essential workers' as well as the wider populations' mental health.<sup>54</sup>

**Figure 5: Among Essential and Nonessential Workers, Share of Adults Reporting Mental Distress and Substance Use, June 2020<sup>55</sup>**





## 6. Recommendations for Governments, International Agencies, and Other Partners

The range of shortcomings identified above point to the need for a new deal for essential workers, which gives substance to the claim that we hold them in high esteem and recognize the vital role these essential workers are undertaking for societies. What is required is nothing short of a comprehensive legally binding new deal for essential workers. This would tackle the key shortcomings identified in this paper, providing improved rights, wages, and benefits, as well as reducing the potential harm. It would place responsibility for safety, security, and training firmly in the hands of employers and workplaces. Enduring minimum standards are required, with additional levels of protection, pay, and rest automatically applicable during times of crises where essential workers face increased risks.

Governments need to create spare capacity among essential workers to ensure that there are sufficiently qualified workers to crises. They simultaneously need to ensure that during these crises, essential workers are not overworked and can take much needed rest and time off.

Policies towards essential workers are central to building resilience and creating societies which can withstand the increased frequency and intensity of future shocks which may emerge from climate change, financial crises, pandemics, and other sources. The only certainty is that all societies will face future crises. Better treatment of essential workers is a necessary condition of creating more resilience as well as fairer societies.

**The measures that need to be implemented to address the concerns of essential workers and build greater resilience in societies include the following:**

### 1. Social safety nets

The provision of adequate social safety nets which provide for a basic income as well as free health and education to lowest paid workers is required in all countries. This ensures that if people lose their jobs, they do not starve. The higher a country's level of income is, the greater the responsibility of governments is to cushion the economic and social impacts of crises. In low- and middle-income countries, debt relief and increased aid and development financing is required to create the fiscal capacity necessary to urgently meet public sector investment in social safety nets.

### 2. Social protection systems

Policymakers should implement programs that target informal sector workers and businesses and expand social protection programs to cover currently excluded marginalized groups. As nearly 40 percent of the world's population lack any effective health and social care coverage, those that can least afford it are compelled to make out-of-pocket payments. Governments should thus prioritize the closing of gaps in social and health care protection. Coverage of workers currently not covered needs to be anchored in national legal and policy frameworks, ensuring full compliance from all employers and workplaces with labor and social security legislation.

Countries with strong health and social protection systems in place can react relatively quickly to new challenges by scaling up existing protection mechanisms and by extending and adapting them to cover previously uncovered populations. Countries that do not have sufficiently robust health and social protection systems in place should be offered urgent international support to ensure an adequate and timely response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The pandemic has revealed and exacerbated long-standing mental health challenges, taking this out of the



shadows. To overcome this neglect, governments should strengthen mental health services in general, and especially for essential workers. The particular challenges experienced by certain groups, such as women and minority groups require special attention.

### 3. Terms of employment

Minimum wages should cover all workers. For essential workers the legislative framework needs to in addition include mechanisms to provide pay when conditions become hazardous. Maximum hours and minimum days off need to be stipulated as should the provision of health and safety and other training. The provision of adequate supplies of PPE and other safety equipment should be legally binding for all workers in front-line jobs, regardless of their employment status.

The timely introduction of measures to protect essential workers, such as the free provision of adequate personal protective equipment, including soap for handwashing, and training which ensures appropriate use of safety equipment, and following of safety guidelines should be required of all employers and workplaces.

As many essential workers face multiple layers of discrimination and stigma at work, strengthening occupational safety and health, adjusting work arrangements, and preventing discrimination and exclusion are indispensable components of a concerted health and employment policy response. Women, BAME communities, people with disabilities, people living with HIV, Indigenous peoples, migrant workers, and those in the informal economy risk being further disadvantaged as a result of the pandemic and its aftermath. Enhancing and enforcing laws and policies on equality and non-discrimination in employment is required in all countries, with this having positive spillovers for essential workers where minority groups and women are overrepresented.

### 4. Compensation

Governments should mandate a framework that automatically triggers hazard pay and no-fault compensation for workers and their families who suffer illness or death in the line of duty. The amount of additional compensation should be proportional to the risk and burden endured. Compensation in the event of harm should similarly be scaled to the suffering caused. It could be argued that essential workers should receive the same amount of compensation and hazard pay as those employed by the armed forces where the harms, risks, and burdens are equivalent and where they are taking on risks on behalf of society.

## 7. Conclusion

**T**he pandemic has served as a wake-up call by exposing serious gaps in social protection and health systems around the world.<sup>56</sup> Leaving no one behind is an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In responding to the COVID-19 crisis, societies have relied on essential workers who have placed their lives and those they are in contact with at risk.

The vital role that essential workers play in our society needs to be translated into a comprehensive new deal for essential workers. This should include minimum wages, social security and health coverage, sick pay, improved benefits, hazard pay, protective equipment and training, mental health support, and rest and recuperation entitlements. It is only in this way that we will be able to provide an adequate and fair reward for the sacrifices essential workers are making on all our behalf and build resilience in our societies to overcome this and future crises and to thrive.



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