

US workers and poor suffer widely disproportionate death toll from COVID-19, study finds

Kate Randall
5 April 2022

As the US death toll from COVID-19 climbs above 1 million, the government and its mouthpieces in the media continue to perpetuate the myth that deaths from COVID-19 are a generally natural phenomenon that authorities have been all but powerless to stop. According to this lie, SARS-CoV-2 has spread and killed without concern for the socioeconomic status of its victims.

However, a new report exposes the grim reality that among the more than 81 million Americans who have been infected by the deadly virus, the poor and those living in low-income communities have been far more likely to die. During the repeated COVID-19 waves that have struck down hundreds of thousands over the last two years, death rates were as much as five times higher in the poorest counties than in those with the highest median incomes.

The report was produced by the Poor People's Campaign in partnership with economists at the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network led by Jeffrey Sachs. Analyzing statistics from more than 3,200 US counties, the report compares the poorest 10 percent of counties with the richest 10 percent. And the results are staggering.

The study clearly shows that it is the working class—the low-paid, the unemployed, those in “essential” workplaces, those without health insurance, the rent-burdened—who have been disproportionately and devastatingly impacted by the pandemic.

As the authors write: “The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated preexisting social and economic disparities that have long festered in the US. Widespread and unequal distribution of wealth, income and resources prior to the pandemic created the conditions for many

of the negative outcomes associated with the virus.”

In other words, the immense class divide in US society has been further demonstrated by the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the millions of people who live in impoverished counties across America. Government policies have created poverty, hunger, hyper-exploitation on the job, unemployment and deplorable living conditions that have created the prime conditions for COVID-19 to fester and kill.

The report divides US counties into deciles, each representing approximately 10 percent of the population by income. It also provides valuable interactive maps and graphics that chart the course of the pandemic in these counties.

In the poorest decile, in which 42-94 percent of people live in poverty, the death rate is near double that of counties with less than a fifth of people live in poverty. Approximately 31 million people live in the poorest decile of counties studied.

Mingo County, West Virginia, is one of the lowest income counties in the US, with 52.41 percent of the population living under 200 percent of the federal poverty guideline, which stands at about \$36,000 for a household of two. The Appalachian state has been devastated by unemployment and the opioid crisis.

Mingo County's COVID-19 death rate is 470 per 100,000, ranking it in the highest quarter of counties. The county is 95 percent white and media income is \$32,746 with over half of its residents living under 200 percent of the poverty line. The official unemployment rate currently stands at 7.5 percent.

In **the Bronx in New York City**, 51 percent of county residents live under 200 percent of the poverty line. Over 60 percent of residents are rent-burdened,

paying more than 30 percent of household income towards rent. It is one of the most ethnically diverse counties in the US. Of its 1.4 million residents, 55 percent are Hispanic, 29 percent black, 9 percent white and around 5 percent Asian. It has a COVID-19 death rate of 538 per 100,000, which is among the highest death rates in the country. Many Bronx residents work in Manhattan, servicing New York City's wealthy elite.

By contrast, in **Fairfax County, Virginia**, one of the richest counties in the US, the median income stands at \$124,831, with 15.1 percent of people living below the 200 percent poverty line. The COVID-19 death rate stands at 115 per 100,000. Fairfax revolves around professional service and technology, with many employees working for the US government. The county hosts several intelligence agencies, including the CIA. It is also headquarters to seven of the Fortune 500 Companies.

Nearly three-quarters of the counties with the lowest median incomes and highest percentage of people living in poverty are in the country's Southeast and Southwest.

Wilkinson County, Mississippi, in the Deep South, has a median income of \$27,313. More than 60 percent of people there live below 200 percent of the poverty line. The COVID-19 death rate stands at 510 per 100,000 people. About two-thirds of the county's population is African American.

In **Gila County, Arizona**, in the Southwest, 44.68 percent of residents live below the 200 percent poverty line. The COVID-19 death rate is 641 per 100,000 people, one of the nation's highest. The county is 77 percent white and 15 percent Native American. Eighteen percent are Hispanic or Latino.

The COVID-19 death rate in **McKinley County, New Mexico**, is 786 per 100,000 people. The median income is \$33,834, and more than 61 percent lives below the 200 percent poverty line. Three-quarters of the county's population are Native American.

According to the report, the two most deadly periods for the pandemic have been the "third wave," of winter 2020-2021, accounting for nearly 40 percent of all deaths to date, and the ongoing Omicron wave, accounting for nearly 20 percent of deaths so far.

During the third wave, deaths rates were 4.5 times higher in the group of counties in the decile with the lowest median income compared to those with the

highest median income. Deaths rates were five times higher in the poorest counties during the Delta variant phase, while the Omicron phase has seen a death rate nearly three times higher in counties with lower median incomes.

While vaccination rates tend to be higher in wealthier counties, vaccination status does not explain all the variation across income groups, as in almost every decile, county vaccine coverage ranges from 85 percent or higher to under 5 percent.

The report aggregates data by connecting information about COVID-19 deaths to other demographic features, including income, race, health insurance status and other characteristics. It demonstrates the connections between poverty, race and the pandemic and seeks to show how "poverty, age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability and class intersect with COVID-19 outcomes."

As the county examples above demonstrate, however, it is class that is driving the misery of the COVID-19 pandemic. The poorest counties, which have suffered the most and seen the most deaths, vary widely by ethnic make-up, with socioeconomic class being the overriding factor.

As the report correctly states on the pandemic, "While US billionaires increased their wealth by \$2.1 trillion, or by 70 percent, many Americans faced eviction, hunger, and record unemployment." As in all aspects of social life, it is the working class that has been the main target of SARS-CoV-2, driven by the criminal policies of the ruling elite and the two big-business parties.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact