



Fighting the *Greater Recession*: All Time High Unemployment Levels and Sudden Record-Breaking State and Local Revenue Shortfalls

By Maria Nicole Bolaños

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SUMMARY

The Northeast-Midwest region along with most of the rest of America is experiencing an economic, health, and social crisis quite unlike any other it has experienced before. The Greater Recession of 2020 is upon us and is unlike previous recessions. For example, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted the physical and economic health of low-wage workers before others in the workforce, simultaneously exacerbating income, wealth and health inequality. What also distinguishes the Greater Recession of 2020 from those of the past, however, is its health shock character. The fusion of an economic recession with a mortally health-threatening viral pandemic has created a sudden strain on all elements of the state and local public sector, including especially the publicly financed health care system, K-12 and post-secondary education, transportation, and emergency services. These twin economic and health shocks have impacted state and local finances by vastly increasing costs and choking off tax and fee revenues as states follow federal guidance to reduce the incidence and spread of the COVID-19 virus.¹ The economic and public health repercussions will be felt for years if not decades to come throughout the region and across the country.

In order to mitigate soaring unemployment rates and the resulting income and wealth losses, the macro-economic management responsibility lies squarely with the federal government, which must act decisively to avoid macroeconomic management mistakes from past recessions if it is to ensure a reasonably swift recovery in 2021 and thereafter. The Federal Reserve has already deployed most if not all its available monetary policy tools of interest rate reduction and quantitative easing, etc., stabilizing capital markets, including the municipal debt markets on which the states and localities rely for cash flow and infrastructure financing. Unless it crosses a heretofore uncrossed Rubicon from monetary policy intervention to taking fiscal policy action (e.g. by making forgivable loans to private and/or public sector borrowers), the Federal Reserve can do little if anything further to combat the COVID recession and fulfill its twin responsibilities of maximizing employment and controlling inflation.

¹<https://www.epi.org/blog/without-federal-aid-to-state-and-local-governments-5-3-million-workers-will-likely-lose-their-jobs-by-the-end-of-2021-see-estimated-job-losses-by-state/>



Congress and the Executive branch have added considerable fiscal policy weight to the counter-recessionary effort, with enactment and implementation of the CARES Act and other temporary fiscal “band-aids.” However, one critical and rapidly escalating problem has not been addressed: the unrecoverable state and local tax and fee revenue shortfalls, and that failure threatens to undermine the counter-recessionary effectiveness of both the Federal Reserve’s monetary policy and the Congress’ fiscal policy. Two major pieces of legislation seeking to address that problem are waiting in the Congressional wings: The HEROES and SMART Acts.

STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVENUE SHORTFALLS

Even with the experience of past economic crises such as the Great Depression and the Great Recession to help guide policymakers on how to move forward, the distinctive global and U.S. impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will require a unique approach to recovering the economy. Already, state and local revenue shortfalls have resulted in major consequences including millions of furloughs and layoffs in the public sector. The Urban Institute recently released its Monthly State Tax Revenue Highlights which reveals a steep 20.9% decline in state and local government revenue for the month of May.² Based on a forecast including data from 27 states, the Urban Institute’s Tax Policy Center (TPC) similarly expects state tax revenue shortfalls will be \$34 billion in fiscal year 2020 and \$80 billion in fiscal year 2021.³ When expanded across all 50 states, that projection is expected to total roughly \$75 billion for FY 2020 and \$125 billion for FY 2021, summing to a whopping \$200 billion slash to state budgets.⁴

Northeast-Midwest Institute Senior Fellow for Public Finance Policy, Thomas Cochran, has commented: "From a macroeconomic stand-point, the fact that total state tax revenue has turned 'sharply negative,' as documented by the TPC, underscores the Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell's increasingly blunt warnings that the state (and local) revenue shortfalls and their accompanying budget cuts can only lengthen what is now best being characterized as either a 'swoosh' or a reverse square root shaped recovery.... Whatever label we use for this slow recovery, we know that it will mean prolonged pain for state and local governments."⁵

The local government sector is concurrently undergoing its own case of extreme fiscal distress. Localities employ as many as 14.5 million workers, the vast majority of which are first responders and teachers.⁶ Without

² https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/monthlystrh_may2020.pdf

³ <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/taxvox/covid-19-pandemic-could-slash-2020-21-state-revenues-200-billion>

⁴ <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/taxvox/covid-19-pandemic-could-slash-2020-21-state-revenues-200-billion>

⁵ <https://www.nemwseniorfellows.org/post/the-state-local-fiscal-tsunami-rolls-in-drowning-front-line-governments-in-red-ink>

⁶ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2020/05/26/485396/need-direct-assistance-local-governments-response-coronavirus/>



direct and flexible federal aid provided to local jurisdictions, millions of workers will be furloughed, laid off, or have their job pays cut. The Center for American Progress is recommending the federal government provide localities with at least \$400 billion in fiscal assistance, separate from and in addition to the aid being provided to states, which would help localities maintain pre-pandemic budgeted spending for labor, goods, and services through fiscal year 2021.⁷ CAP's reasoning for the need for local assistance is straightforward:

1. Local governments provide a substantial number of services for contending with the current public health crisis resulting from the pandemic including hospitals, first responders, health providers and departments, and testing for the virus;
2. Localities are facing massive revenue shortfalls as a result of the coronavirus crisis as sales tax, income tax, and property tax revenues rapidly decline; and
3. Approximately 35% to 40% of local revenue typically derives from intergovernmental transfers, most of which come from states which currently face their own budgetary shortfalls, meaning an even further budget crisis for localities.⁸

Thus, if the federal government does not act urgently to aid states and localities soon by replacing their non-recoverable tax and fee shortfalls, another 5.3 million aggregate public sector jobs are projected to be lost by the end of 2021.⁹ The positive impact of state and local government expenditures has an economic multiplier effect of $1.34 \times$ ¹⁰, demonstrating this public sector element's strong counter-recessionary capacity, but also underscoring its ability to magnify and prolong the recession if its pre-pandemic levels of revenue and expenditures aren't quickly restored.

SKYROCKETING UNEMPLOYMENT AND A COLLAPSING JOB MARKET

The rate and the total number of unemployment insurance claims that have been filed amid the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented when compared to previous U.S. economic crises. Countless Americans have lost their jobs due to the virus itself and government measures to contain its spread through stay-at-home orders and the shutting down of businesses. According to data gathered by the Urban Institute's State and Local Finance Initiative, within just the first week since the start of the COVID-19 recession, 2,932,764 claims had been filed

⁷ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2020/05/26/485396/need-direct-assistance-local-governments-response-coronavirus/>

⁸ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2020/05/26/485396/need-direct-assistance-local-governments-response-coronavirus/>

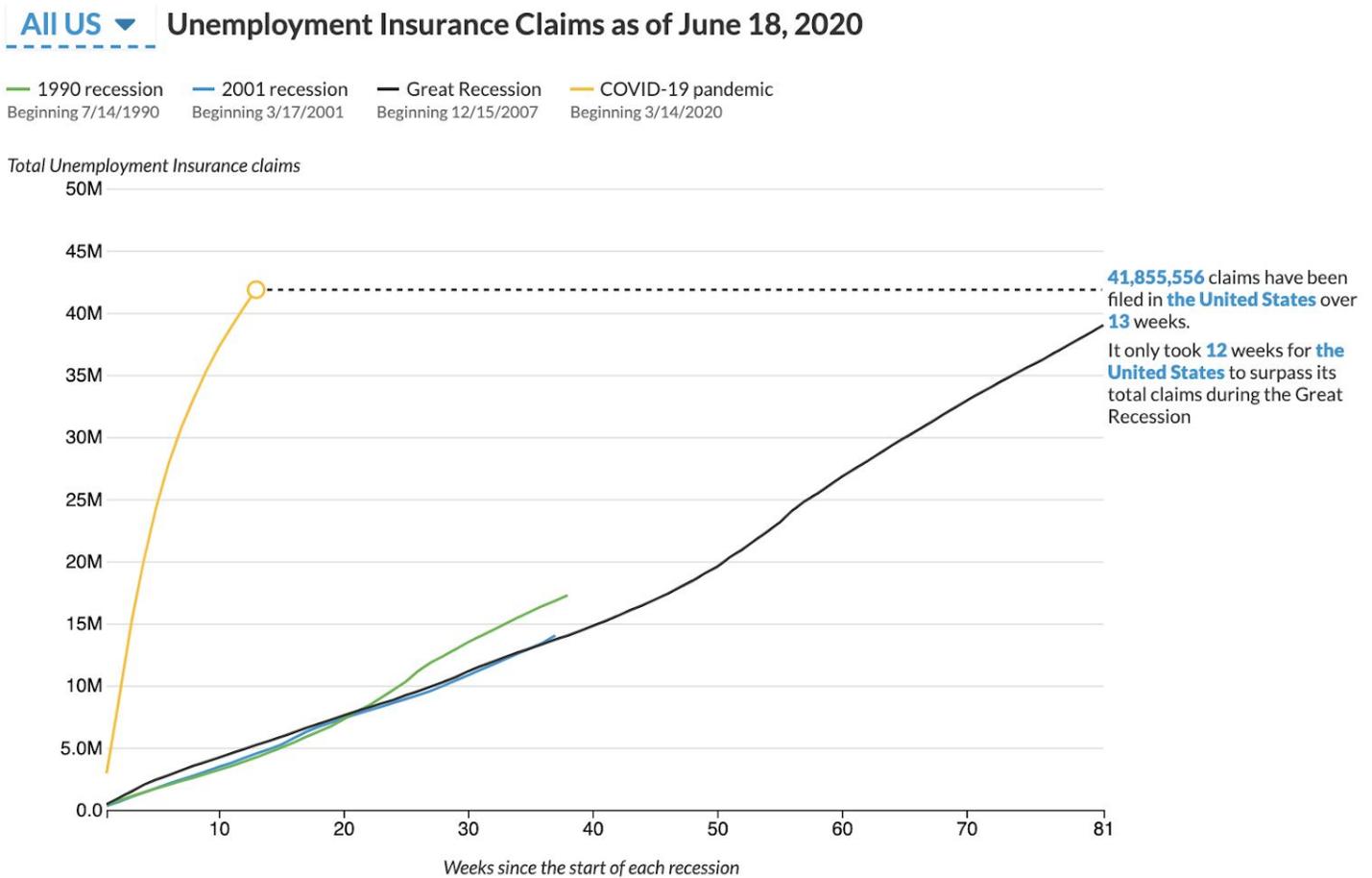
⁹ <https://www.epi.org/blog/without-federal-aid-to-state-and-local-governments-5-3-million-workers-will-likely-lose-their-jobs-by-the-end-of-2021-see-estimated-job-losses-by-state/>

¹⁰ Hagedorn, et al "The Fiscal Multiplier" NBER, 2019 (see: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25571> NB: other sources such as EPI typically cite a higher multiplier such as $1.5 \times$



-- the equivalent to the total number of claims that had been filed by week 6 during the Great Recession. Within a month after the start of the pandemic, 20,132,935 claims had been filed, a number that was not reached until week 51 during the Great Recession. By week 12 that total skyrocketed to 40,422,529 unemployment insurance claims and has continued to grow since.¹¹ As shown in Figure 1, below, it took a mere three months for the U.S. to surpass the total number of claims that were filed during the Great Recession.

Figure 1



Source: US Department of Labor.

Notes: Data are not seasonally adjusted. The start and end dates of Unemployment Insurance claims for prior recessions correspond to the economic downturn dates defined by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

¹¹ <https://www.urban.org/features/monitoring-state-unemployment-insurance-claims-during-covid-19-pandemic>



UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE CLAIMS BY STATE

While the total number of unemployment insurance (UI) claims remain collectively high, there has been wide and fluctuating variation of total and initial claims across all 50 states and the District of Columbia, See Table 1 and Figure 2, below. Among the five states with the highest total number of UI claimants throughout the COVID-19 pandemic over a time span of 13 weeks are California (5, 377, 078); Florida (2,797,797); New York (2,689,945); Georgia (2,598,778); and Texas (2,493,398).¹² While larger states are naturally expected to have higher numbers of UI claimants, it is important for policymakers to note that smaller states may have higher percentages of UI claims as a share of their total population, therefore possibly requiring more urgent fiscal assistance.

¹² <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/statistics/state-unemployment-insurance-claims>



Table 2

Weekly State Unemployment Insurance Initial Claims

[not seasonally adjusted]

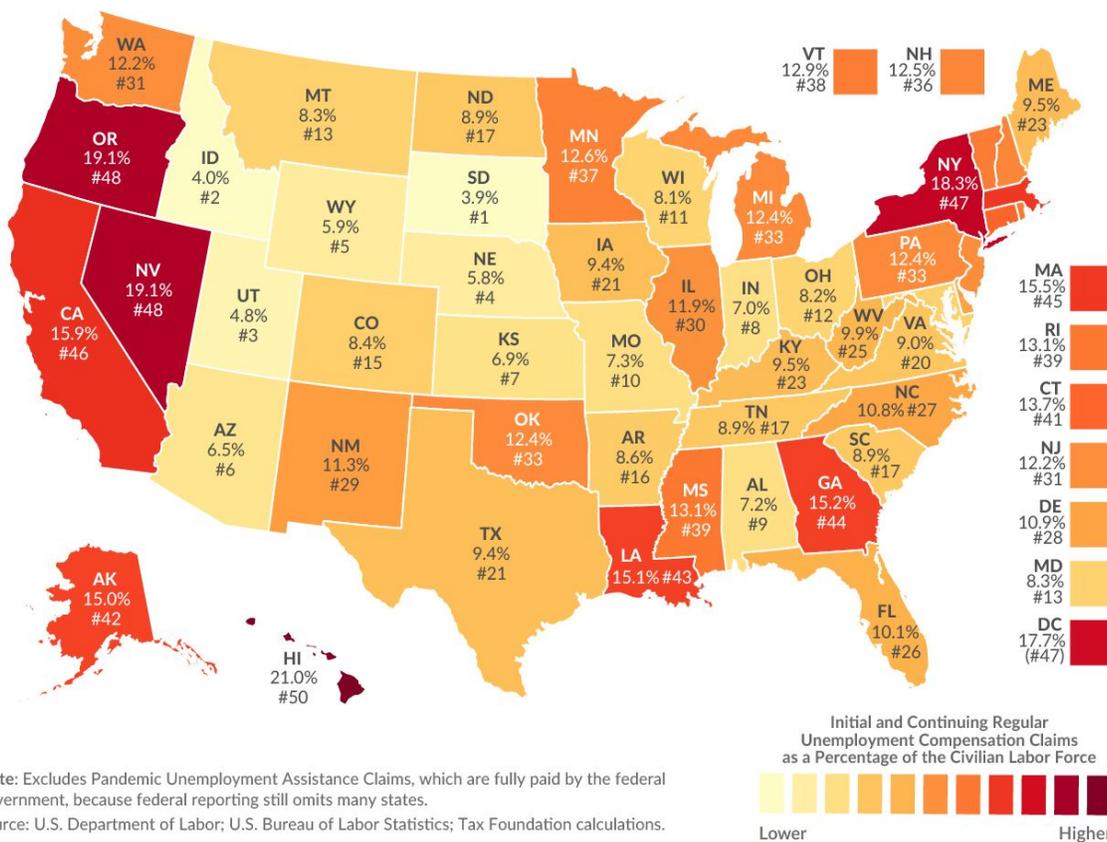
Reflecting week ended Report date	Most recent five weeks					COVID-19 Pandemic (16 weeks) Total	1990 Recession (38 weeks)	2001 Recession (37 weeks)	Great Recession (81 weeks)
	5/30/2020 6/6/2020	6/6/2020 6/13/2020	6/13/2020 6/20/2020	6/20/2020 6/27/2020	6/27/2020 7/2/2020		Total	Total	Total
United States, total	1,561,267	1,463,363	1,460,056	1,431,343	1,399,699	46,176,990	17,271,085	14,031,803	39,010,183
Alaska	7,081	6,797	6,757	6,467	6,437	144,141	61,881	58,700	142,168
Alabama	19,949	18,367	18,671	18,338	18,498	641,406	351,162	246,112	625,369
Arkansas	9,663	9,381	9,669	10,395	10,797	285,059	190,336	177,194	456,018
Arizona	24,367	22,419	25,886	26,328	26,627	755,342	110,773	182,816	544,668
California	255,836	241,424	284,494	277,362	267,123	6,204,137	2,669,536	2,000,351	5,165,979
Colorado	13,098	10,382	10,013	8,646	7,727	486,061	110,574	117,787	315,554
Connecticut	15,366	11,852	10,411	10,133	12,369	444,776	233,721	168,124	466,549
District of Columbia	3,385	3,065	3,073	3,132	2,538	115,959	34,359	14,846	36,581
Delaware	3,037	2,516	2,797	2,771	2,663	117,950	48,674	34,789	107,720
Florida	112,161	88,148	95,683	84,370	67,070	3,046,770	424,145	388,663	1,624,431
Georgia	135,254	131,997	125,725	117,485	103,590	2,946,809	440,626	445,309	1,317,813
Hawaii	7,338	7,248	7,178	8,192	7,734	287,321	42,351	82,723	162,206
Iowa	9,488	9,069	8,208	7,732	10,698	375,606	135,343	142,348	495,261
Idaho	3,953	3,631	4,285	5,417	4,705	167,266	83,946	80,543	252,153
Illinois	44,606	44,694	46,276	45,752	38,897	1,420,353	656,158	551,313	1,583,282
Indiana	22,931	24,017	29,331	44,827	24,086	863,247	361,099	260,054	1,068,184
Kansas	8,261	8,287	9,179	9,738	12,183	320,490	127,628	101,101	345,286
Kentucky	40,733	37,650	24,846	30,640	23,068	1,044,044	318,735	224,277	777,279
Louisiana	21,879	23,122	19,524	21,976	31,907	789,490	178,218	128,653	343,495
Massachusetts	45,142	30,411	30,005	29,699	26,755	1,093,119	460,758	316,256	794,507
Maryland	41,638	23,450	32,549	22,623	32,497	749,645	229,640	168,721	509,252
Maine	3,117	3,013	2,911	3,119	2,837	169,170	134,617	51,088	150,584
Michigan	27,836	21,293	19,641	38,309	34,470	1,686,506	1,148,068	670,986	2,032,917
Minnesota	28,311	24,696	20,487	19,373	19,886	821,357	203,799	206,525	581,489
Missouri	19,907	18,912	17,358	20,008	16,894	708,103	445,575	272,811	814,182
Mississippi	21,283	18,407	15,230	13,673	11,850	397,871	179,252	143,148	313,527
Montana	3,078	3,157	2,997	2,695	2,613	123,292	41,881	34,936	124,740
North Carolina	33,865	32,188	29,199	29,580	27,202	1,172,518	964,884	800,036	1,612,190
North Dakota	2,252	2,073	1,821	1,511	1,830	80,642	24,984	19,371	53,422
Nebraska	4,697	4,868	4,406	4,203	6,143	158,040	51,345	50,535	142,426
New Hampshire	6,303	6,431	5,413	5,163	5,285	233,920	64,901	44,713	127,205
New Jersey	23,166	26,438	33,027	27,992	46,711	1,309,305	506,434	369,511	1,082,543
New Mexico	5,290	5,111	4,945	5,083	6,113	186,170	47,741	43,889	132,251
Nevada	10,748	10,620	10,347	11,110	16,169	538,163	94,392	130,127	440,925
New York	93,799	95,150	89,031	89,834	93,797	2,961,458	1,026,712	811,295	2,136,694
Ohio	36,154	33,139	34,926	35,908	33,176	1,471,104	771,453	505,291	1,592,734
Oklahoma	77,525	84,779	58,613	18,405	7,562	801,259	134,671	86,612	252,007
Oregon	24,508	24,645	16,274	11,195	9,771	522,435	274,393	319,072	867,015
Pennsylvania	48,827	49,197	54,083	49,986	43,602	2,209,380	989,042	822,074	2,486,593
Rhode Island	3,518	2,641	4,014	3,229	3,357	187,221	107,976	59,021	167,950
South Carolina	23,188	19,853	17,611	17,654	16,062	664,242	355,816	331,037	732,458
South Dakota	880	1,065	910	644	799	56,245	13,399	13,740	39,543
Tennessee	20,908	19,413	20,506	21,544	25,843	673,279	423,373	323,353	793,447
Texas	89,676	94,723	89,547	96,593	117,244	2,797,610	575,190	700,743	1,652,433
Utah	5,382	4,803	4,915	4,965	4,850	194,728	49,640	66,326	198,518
Virginia	29,231	27,186	25,293	31,955	33,069	939,803	428,926	256,315	653,461
Vermont	1,650	1,859	1,389	2,163	1,814	77,147	42,882	28,532	91,945
Washington	30,677	30,217	30,793	33,266	29,889	1,440,818	411,936	436,760	985,827
Wisconsin	25,047	25,543	25,428	24,925	27,487	732,604	385,124	481,652	1,417,783
West Virginia	4,413	4,327	3,756	3,532	3,143	177,128	80,905	51,089	150,636
Wyoming	2,013	1,539	1,402	1,418	1,100	51,411	22,111	10,535	48,983

Source: US Department of Labor. Employment and Training Administration. Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims Data. July 2020.

Figure 2

Unemployment Compensation Claims as a Percentage of the Civilian Workforce

Initial and Continuing Regular Unemployment Claims as a Percentage of the Civilian Labor Force, June 20, 2020



Note: Excludes Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Claims, which are fully paid by the federal government, because federal reporting still omits many states.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; Tax Foundation calculations.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS BY RACE AND GENDER

Various measures of inequality – including calculations of income and wealth gaps between marginalized groups and their white counterparts -- have steadily risen for the past few decades. The COVID-19 economic recession has only exacerbated these inequalities along racial and class lines, and the COVID-19 illness and

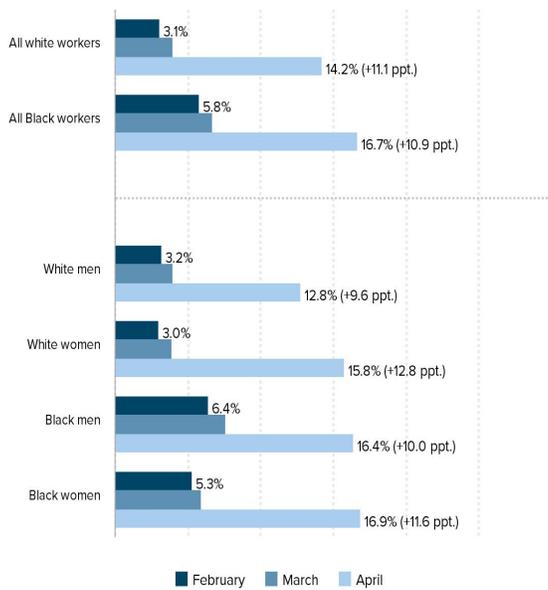


death rates are now underscoring the nation’s profound racial and socio-economic health gaps as well. Currently, we can distinguish three major groups within the U.S. workforce during the pandemic:

1. Those who have lost their jobs and face economic insecurity;
2. Those who are deemed ‘essential workers’ and face health insecurity as a result of risking themselves by going to work; and
3. Those who are working remotely from home and face neither economic nor health insecurity as severely as the first two groups.

While unemployment skyrocketed for Black and white workers in the COVID-19 labor market, the unemployment rate is higher for Black workers

Unemployment rates by race, and by race and gender, February–April 2020



Note: White refers to non-Hispanic whites, Black refers to Blacks alone.

Source: EPI analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey public data.

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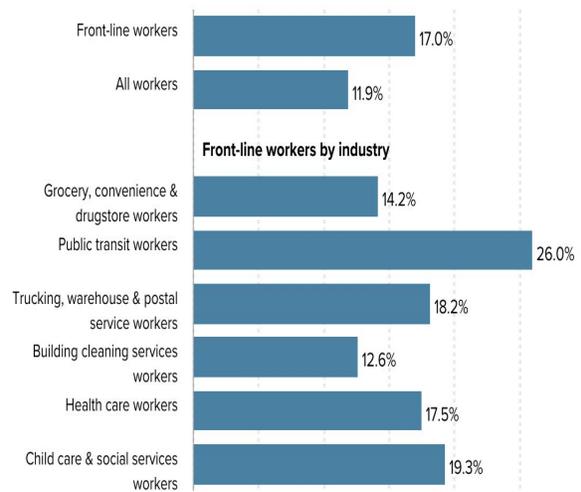
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Figure 3

Figure

Black workers are more likely than other workers to be in front-line jobs

Black workers as a share of all workers in a given industry



Notes: The front-line industry categories used here are the categories used in the CEPR report (see Source below for more information). Sample is a 2014–2018 five-year estimate.

Source: EPI analysis of data from the Center for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) report *A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries* (April 2020).

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Black individuals are much more likely to comprise the first two groups than they are the third, disproportionately suffering major job losses and comprising a disproportionate share of the essential workers that make our economy run even during pre-pandemic times. The Current Population Survey notes that although pre-pandemic unemployment rates were already unevenly distributed, COVID-19 has actually narrowed those racial inequalities by pushing white unemployment way up: the overall white unemployment level has reached an all-time high of 14.2% while the Black unemployment level has reached a whopping 16.7%.¹³ The significant gap between the two groups is due to the facts that historically, many workers and families from Black communities face underlying systemic economic conditions that create and have perpetuated gaps in wages, employment, internship job retention, and most glaringly: wealth accumulation.

Not only is there a substantial difference in the unemployment rate between Black and white individuals, but between genders as well. While white women face 15.8% unemployment rates during the COVID-19 pandemic — 3% more than their white male counterparts — the percentage of Black women who face unemployment is 16.9% — 0.5% more than their Black male counterparts and 1.1% more than their white female counterparts. Due to the intersectionality of their racial and gendered identity, Black women as a collective class seem to be hit the hardest economically during the coronavirus crisis.¹⁴

CORONAVIRUS AID, RELIEF, AND ECONOMIC SECURITY (CARES) ACT

The CARES Act, passed with bi-partisan support by Congress and signed into law in late March, has temporarily eased some of the revenue crunch that local and state governments are currently experiencing. The aid package allocated \$150 billion to assist state and local governments, but Dr. Ben Bernanke, a two-term former chairman of the Federal Reserve, contends it is not enough. Drawing from his experience at the Federal Reserve handling the previous global financial crisis that led to the Great Recession, he recalls that “As part of the recovery effort, Congress responded with a stimulus package of nearly \$800 billion. But that package was partly offset by cuts in spending and employment by state and local governments. Like today, with sharp declines in tax revenue as the economy slowed, states and localities were constrained by balanced-budget requirements to make matching cuts in employment and spending. This fiscal headwind contributed to the high unemployment of the Great Recession, which peaked at 10 percent in late 2009.”¹⁵ Not only are subnational governments limited by balanced-budget requirements, but much of the funding from the CARES Act is

¹³https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/?utm_source=Economic+Policy+Institute&utm_campaign=c4ab939a1f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_02_22_11_12_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e7c5826c50-c4ab939a1f-60789949&mc_cid=c4ab939a1f&mc_eid=7f4b5758fc

¹⁴ For example see; Hartmann, Huber, Rolfes-Haase, & Suh “The Shifting Supply and Demand for Care Work,” June 2019:

https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/C470_Shifting-Supply-of-Care-Work-Immigrants-and-POC.pdf

¹⁵<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/opinion/ben-bernanke-coronavirus-federal-aid.html?searchResultPosition=1>



restricted to pandemic-related expenses incurred by states and localities. Bernanke argues that the federal government can avoid making the same mistakes of the past by acting quickly to aid state and local governments.

HEALTH AND ECONOMIC RECOVERY OMNIBUS EMERGENCY SOLUTIONS (HEROES) ACT

In May, the House Democrats passed the \$3 trillion dollar package which would allocate \$1.1 trillion for state and local relief and provide a second round of stimulus checks to most family households.¹⁶ Unlike the CARES Act, the HEROES Act would consist of 50% more funding than the former and extend stimulus checks to American citizens with an immigrant spouse.¹⁷ The bill was practically declared dead upon arrival, however, in the Republican-led Senate which expressed hesitance to approve the bill, stemming from skepticism that the bill would be a “blue-state bailout.”

STATE AND MUNICIPAL ASSISTANCE FOR RESPONSE AND TRANSITION (SMART) ACT

In recognition of the federal government’s need for swift and methodical action, U.S. Senators Menendez and Cassidy and Representatives Sherrill and King have pushed forward the SMART Act — identical bills (S.3752 and HR6954) initially introduced in the Senate on May 18, and in the House on May 19 — which would provide \$500 billion in flexible emergency funding for state, local, and tribal governments.¹⁸ Unlike the HEROES Act which provides many types of tightly constrained categorical state and local relief, the SMART Act would assist subnational governments with largely flexible fiscal relief. With the exception of federal funds allocated towards tribal governments, funding under the SMART Act would be disbursed exclusively to states which are required to further issue one-third of that funding to localities -- half to counties and half to municipalities.¹⁹ The funding is distributed based on three simple factors:

1. State population size;
2. Each state’s relative share of COVID-19 virus cases present as of June 1, 2020; and
3. Relative revenue losses, “defined as the amount by which calendar year 2019 revenues exceed those for calendar year 2020”.²⁰

¹⁶ <https://taxfoundation.org/smart-act-state-and-local-aid/>

¹⁷ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/second-stimulus-check-would-you-get-one-or-not/>

¹⁸ <https://taxfoundation.org/smart-act-state-and-local-aid/>

¹⁹ <https://taxfoundation.org/smart-act-state-and-local-aid/>

²⁰ <https://www.cassidy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/cassidy-menendez-introduce-bipartisan-smart-fund-to-help-frontline-states-communities-in-covid-19-fight>



Using this non-categorical federal assistance, state and local governments can still adhere to their balanced-budget restrictions in order to continue delivering inter-government transfers and cover their revenue shortfalls. Even with accompanying federal bills such as the HEROES Act and the CARES Act, however, the billions of federal dollars provided through such policies may not be enough to lift the economy to pre-pandemic levels of employment, infrastructure investment, manufacturing, and retail sales.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure a quicker, long-term recovery of the economy, the federal government should provide fully flexible fiscal aid to the nation's subnational governments and it should do it soon if the worst possible macroeconomic and sectoral effects of the state and local tax and fee revenue shortfalls are to be avoided.

According to top infectious disease experts, including Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the U.S. is still in its first wave of coronavirus, despite virtually the Northeast-Midwest region's relative success in suppressing the virus' spread. With approximately 135,000 deaths and over two million infections and counting, Fauci asserts that the skyrocketing numbers of this robust first wave must stagnate before we even begin discussing a second wave.²¹ The relaxed lockdown measures and the failure to require masks nationwide has inevitably led to disease resurgence in various states across the nation. Fauci and most other public health officials agree that until we are able to find a vaccine, we must focus on overcoming this wave by following preventative measures such as requiring masks, shutdowns, and social distancing measures to contain the spread of COVID-19.

If the U.S. indeed still remains in its first coronavirus wave with more to come, the dire need for federal aid for state and local public services such as public safety, transportation, health, and education to mitigate the economic harm caused by the coronavirus pandemic will be crucial. Failure to provide adequate federal aid to our region's and the rest of the nation's subnational governments will only exacerbate the current recession and thwart the recovery. Congress should continue to closely monitor the state of our volatile economy and understand the significance of providing adequate aid to individuals, businesses, and state and local governments in order to speed and sustain a robust recovery in the future.

AUTHOR

²¹https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/worried-about-a-second-wave-of-coronavirus-were-still-in-the-first/2020/06/18/35d25e0d-863f-4735-9915-a88773bfd06f_video.html?utm_campaign=wp_the_finance_202&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpisrc=nl_finance202



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WEB RESOURCES

NASBO Budget and Fiscal Implications Monitor

<https://www.nasbo.org/resources/coronavirus-resources>

Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker

<https://tracktherecovery.org/>

The COVID Tracking Project

<https://covidtracking.com/>

Urban Institute State Economic Monitor

<https://apps.urban.org/features/state-economic-monitor/>

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