



Sign of the Times: Through the Lens of the Pandemic

JPIC Department School Sisters of Notre Dame Atlantic-Midwest Province

Economic Inequality

“The magnitude of a crisis is determined not just by the impact of the precipitating events, but also by the fragility of the system it attacks. Our society was especially vulnerable to this pandemic because so many Americans lack the essential liberty to protect their own lives and the lives of their families.”ⁱ

In the time of a pandemic, the importance of “liberty,” which can be understood as the capacity to protect one’s own life as well as the lives of others, cannot be understated. Yet, if anything, the siege of the coronavirus on the United States has cast light on the many inequalities that have thwarted the efforts of countless Americans to access sufficient protection. Economic insecurity has made it challenging for many workers to avoid contamination, obtain adequate healthcare when falling ill, and access the most basic social and economic resources required to support themselves, and those who depend on them. Similarly, while race is beginning to emerge as one of the factors that has contributed to the population’s vulnerability to COVID-19, it has been noted that systemic racism, across many sectors of our society, continues to limit access of people of color to the resources needed to sustain health. ⁱⁱ Underlying and longstanding disparities around financial security and race in U.S. society have brought into sharp contrast those who have had the means to withstand the assault of the virus, and those who have not.

Over the past decade, the wealth of the top one percent of U.S. households has surpassed the combined wealth of the bottom 80 percentⁱⁱⁱ. It is not surprising therefore, that nationwide, over 95% of workers in the financial industry receive paid sick leave, while the vast majority of low-wage workers in the food and hotel services industries do not.^{iv} Without sick leave, economically vulnerable workers have increased their vulnerability while, for example, delivering services like food to stay-at-home higher earning workers. Another particularly poignant example of the glaring disparities that the pandemic has brought to light is the case of EMT workers in the NY metropolitan area who recently testified that they earned less than \$38,000 annually and had no health benefits, despite the critical nature of their work. ^v

Although the U.S. Congress has provided limited, temporary relief to workers during the tenure of the coronavirus crisis, long-term policies to ensure a living wage and benefits in the U.S. are not yet on the horizon. As efforts to regulate campaign financing fail to restrict the influence of well-heeled donors on our government’s leaders, it has become increasingly evident that wealthier Americans are far more successful in influencing policy that supports their self-interests than are poor or middle-class voters. Under these circumstances, it is increasingly challenging to enact laws that will guarantee healthcare, decent housing, a living wage, and equitable access to education for all Americans.

Often, crisis is the driver of transformation. We hope that this will be the case as we begin to imagine our recovery from the coronavirus. The people of the United States and people everywhere, have been given an opportunity by the pandemic, to reflect on the values and priorities by which we want to live our personal lives while contributing to the common good. It is up to us to take the opportunity this crisis has provided to become a better, stronger, and more just people.

ⁱⁱ New York Times, OPINION by The Editorial Board, April 9, 2020

-
- ii <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/04/health-care-disparities-in-the-age-of-coronavirus/>
 - iii <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/06/25/six-facts-about-wealth-in-the-united-states/>
 - iv <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2020/03/11/amid-covid-19-outbreak-workers-who-need-paid-sick-days-most-have-least>
 - v <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/what-these-new-york-emts-are-seeing-as-they-respond-to-covid-19-cases>