

# State of Working Ohio 2021

## Meeting the moment



*Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority*

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# Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped Ohio's economy, forcing hundreds of thousands of Ohioans out of the workforce and exacerbating racial, gender and income inequality. Unprecedented federal stimulus helped to make this recession the shortest in history, as measured by Gross Domestic Product, but Ohioans who rely on their jobs for their sole source of income have yet to recover.

This year has also shown how, by coming together, we can overcome great challenge and use the lessons learned from it to craft a better world. This year's State of working Ohio 2021: Meeting the moment, finds that:

- Long-term trends show that Ohio's wealthiest and highest-paid hoarded pre-COVID prosperity. Unprecedented fiscal stimulus provides policymakers with the opportunity to reshape the economy so more people prosper.
- More than a year after COVID-19 displaced over 1 million Ohioans from their jobs, as of July of 2021, Ohio still had 269,000 fewer jobs than pre-pandemic.
- COVID-19 disproportionately forced low-paid Ohioans out of their jobs – skewing the wage data which shows a higher median wage last year. For example, there were nearly 25% fewer waitresses and waiters in Ohio than there were in 2019. The leisure and hospitality industry account for 28% of all the state's jobs destroyed during COVID.
- People who hold “essential jobs” are at higher risk for COVID exposure; are more likely to be Black or brown; and are also paid nearly 13% less than those with nonessential jobs.
- COVID-19 exacerbated long-standing structural barriers that hold down wages for Black, brown and immigrant workers and exclude them from job opportunities. Last year, at the median, white Ohioans were paid \$21 an hour compared to \$16 for Black Ohioans. At 15%, the unemployment rate for Black Ohioans was more than double the rate for white Ohioans, 6.8%.
- Ohio women were more likely than men to be laid off or forced to leave their jobs, reversing years of progress. Their employment-to-population rate fell from 55.6% in 2019 to 52.7% in 2020. At the median, women were paid \$18 an hour compared to \$21.50 for men.
- Many Ohioans couldn't count on their wages or traditional sources of income to make ends meet last year. They tapped credit cards, took out loans, sold assets and borrowed from family and friends. For many – both working and not – government stimulus payments were critical.
- Higher education and union membership improve working people's wages. The typical Ohio union worker was paid \$23.47 an hour compared \$18.46 for the typical nonunion worker. At the median, people with a bachelor's degree were paid \$30.17 an hour compared to \$16.95 for those with a high school diploma. Over time, a college degree has insulated some workers from pay decreases experienced by less educated workers. Yet a college degree doesn't make up for years of policies and practices that have excluded and exploited people of color. Black high-school grads and college grads are both paid 79-cents on the dollar compared with their white counterparts.



## Policy recommendations

- Lawmakers must protect working people's right to join in union - and can start by passing the federal Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act. The Act will make it harder for corporations to use union-busting strategies they have used in recent years to resist unions by intimidating workers.
- Raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour and including tipped workers by 2026 would increase wages for more than 1.56 million Ohioans and circulate an additional \$6 billion in the state's economy.
- Ohio should make college affordable to all Ohioans by substantially deepening investment in the need-based aid program, the Ohio College Opportunity Grant and implementing an equitable free college program through public universities and community colleges.
- State and local policymakers can use American Rescue Plan dollars to center working people with hazard pay for essential workers; enforcing wage and hour law; and ensuring the entire community benefits from public projects, not just the corporations that win the contracts.
- Federal policymakers should continue and make permanent stimulus programs that provided Americans with more financial stability like the expanded Child Tax Credit and pandemic unemployment assistance.

*Cleveland Teachers Union*



## Introduction

More than a year into the health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19, it is now possible to describe how the pandemic has reshaped the lives of Ohioans to date, anticipate its long-term consequences, and craft policy to ensure that all Ohioans who avoided or survived COVID-19 can emerge from the crisis stronger than before. It has been a difficult year-and-a-half. The luckiest Ohioans have endured only isolation. Others have suffered illness, lost jobs, and even lost loved ones. Data now available for 2020 show that Ohio's working people have faced innumerable challenges, compounded by years of policy choices that have directed resources to the wealthy few and corporations while pitting working people against each other based on race and gender.

Yet this year has also shown how, by coming together, we can overcome great challenge and use the lessons learned from it to craft a better world. One enduring feature of the pandemic has been the countless Ohioans who kept us all fed, cared for us if we were ill, and for our children so that we could go to work. A second feature should be that we never forget their vital work, or the risk and sometimes sacrifice they took on to get it done. We need public policies that demonstrate our gratitude to Ohio's essential workers with livable wages that dignify their work, safe workplaces and a voice on the job.

Another feature was the unprecedented fiscal stimulus the federal government directed to our state to prevent crisis for the roughly 2 million Ohioans who spent time without work, sustain consumer spending and make this the shortest recession in U.S. history. Federal policymakers learned from the slow austerity-burdened recovery from the Great Recession that government has a vital role in steering our economy through downturns and driving a rapid and vibrant recovery. We need to stay the course to keep this recovery on track long enough to reach everyone.

The pandemic remains with us. Weeks after COVID-19 seemed to be receding as a threat, daily cases surged again, prompting renewed uncertainties about when and how we will overcome the coronavirus. Ohio lawmakers have compounded this uncertainty and made COVID-19 more dangerous by circumscribing gubernatorial and local government powers to combat it through public health mandates. The consequences have been felt across Ohio, but working people, whether working on the frontlines at risk of exposure, or displaced from their jobs, have borne the brunt.

Already COVID-19 and the recession have created new realities for working Ohioans. Rapid recovery of corporate stock prices and real estate meant that the wealthiest recovered rapidly and — provided they were spared the

health impacts of the pandemic — emerged stronger than ever. But for the vast majority of non-elderly U.S. households, which rely on job earnings as their sole source of income, the labor market is the most important facet of the economy.<sup>1</sup> After the most recent recessions, Ohio has never fully recovered.<sup>2</sup> We cannot afford to repeat the policy errors that left vast swaths of Ohioans on the margins and struggling even before the latest downturn.

The unique cause of the COVID-19 recession — the need to control the pandemic and keep people safe — also meant that it affected economic sectors, wages and specific groups of workers differently from past recessions.<sup>3</sup> Working people tended to find themselves in one of three situations: as frontline workers with elevated levels of exposure; unemployed and dealing with loss of income; or able to work from home or otherwise insulated from exposure to the virus at work. Ohioans who could work from home were insulated from both the health dangers of COVID-19 and the economic risk of job loss.

The health risk is not over. New daily case counts — which were pushed in June to the low hundreds with the help of rapid dissemination of effective vaccines — are now on the rise again, with 3,227 cases reported on August 16 alone.<sup>4</sup> More than one in 10 Ohioans has now contracted COVID-19.

Frontline essential workers risked — and some lost — their lives doing the vital work that has carried us this far through the crisis. For those still working essential jobs, new recognition of how vital these workers are could help them win better wages and working conditions. Yet the danger that just weeks ago seemed like it might be under control is now on the rise again. And so far, calls for hazard pay or a permanent increase to poverty and near-poverty wages for some essential workers have gone largely unheeded by many policymakers.



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For other Ohioans, a crisis of unemployment remains as eviction and foreclosure moratoria expire and Unemployment Compensation (UC) benefits run out. As of July, Ohio remained 269,000 jobs short of our pre-COVID number in February 2020.<sup>5</sup> The job market remains unrecovered.

Ohioans who could shelter at home were spared risk of workplace exposure to COVID-19 and job loss, but even they will not all emerge unscathed. For many parents, working from home has meant juggling careers with unpaid care work. Women especially have faced the challenge of this extra work, and in some cases have had to reduce work hours or leave their jobs.

Ohioans of color have been and remain more likely to work in frontline essential jobs, facing higher risk of exposure to COVID-19 for themselves and their families. With the exception of Asian Ohioans, they have also faced higher COVID death rates. Men and women were equally likely to work as essential workers filling critical infrastructure roles in 2020, but occupational segregation meant that women held more of the jobs that were both high-risk and low-pay. Young people were more likely to hold jobs that were destroyed by COVID-19 and those who went to college are graduating into a battered economy with a smaller job market; with the partial recovery moving more quickly than in the Great Recession, it remains uncertain how long they will be adversely impacted.

More than a year into the ongoing crisis, this report uses 2020 data to examine the impact COVID-19 has had thus far on working Ohioans; identifies those hardest hit in the short term; outlines what we know about the still-unfolding long-term impact on the labor market; discusses how COVID-19 interacted with challenges we already faced — of growing inequality and increased strain on ordinary Ohioans — before COVID-19; and identifies broad policy interventions to tap this moment as a chance to reset, and rebuild a better economy than before: one in which every Ohioan can thrive.

## Key findings

**Job destruction is one the most enduring economic impacts from COVID-19.** COVID-19 displaced more than 1 million Ohioans from work in March and April of 2020. By July 2021, Ohio still had 269,000 fewer jobs than before COVID-19, setting us all the way back to June 2014.

**Higher median wage data reflect that low-paid workers were disproportionately laid off — not actual progress.** COVID-19 disproportionately forced low-paid Ohioans out of their jobs. Failure to understand this creates a deceptive story about wage trends. Last year's wage levels appear on the surface to break with a decades-long stagnation, but they do not measure a true improvement in the typical (median) worker's well-being. Instead, they reflect a change in the composition of who was still working after COVID-19 destroyed so many Ohioans' jobs. In short, low-paid Ohioans bore the brunt of layoffs, and this meant the group of workers sampled to determine wage levels was a higher-paid group to begin with.

**COVID-19 exacerbated race-based inequities.** COVID-19 exacerbated long-standing trends that have made Ohioans of color worse off than white counterparts in economic and health outcomes. Black, brown and immigrant workers were more likely to work frontline essential jobs, faced higher rates of illness and death from COVID-19, and were more likely to have their jobs destroyed by COVID-19.

**COVID-19 reversed progress made by Ohio women.** COVID-19 reversed decades of progress made by Ohio women in narrowing the wage gap and the gap in employment and workforce participation. Ohio women were more likely to be laid off or forced to leave their jobs early in the recession. For 2020, their workforce participation, which had been growing over the long term, fell sharply. Women were more likely to have to take on unpaid care work that disrupted their careers. This recession was distinct from the Great Recession in disproportionately harming women.

**Major stimulus from unemployment and direct payments insulated Ohioans, but many struggled while waiting months for help.**

Unprecedented federal stimulus in the form of UC, direct stimulus payments and massive aid packages to state and local governments, businesses and families has insulated many Ohioans from the worst economic impacts of COVID-19. By injecting billions into the Ohio economy, federal policymakers likely prevented the recession from dragging on months longer and creating more far-ranging economic destruction than it did. They also averted crisis for many Ohio working people and their families who lost their only source of income when they were laid off. Substantial federal supplements to UC — initially \$600 per week, and later \$300 — meant that some Ohioans had enough income for the first time. These and other stimulus measures pushed poverty temporarily to record lows.

**The main limitation on the stimulus's effectiveness was inconsistency.** This played out through administrative delays in delivering benefits; Congress allowing benefits to abruptly end, then the president or Congress implementing new ones; and states' decisions to opt out of benefits. The erratic policy response and distribution disruptions meant that even Ohioans whose total income rose during COVID-19 might go months without income. Today the emerging challenge is that these programs are abruptly ending.

**Long-term trends show that Ohio's wealthiest and highest-paid have disproportionately captured pre-COVID prosperity growth.** The Great Recession exacerbated that inequity, and early signs show that COVID-19 could do so, too. One positive sign is that unprecedented fiscal stimulus provides opportunity to craft a more equitable state economy.

**Ohioans' age and geographic region impact how they have been affected by the coronavirus recession, and how they fared before.** Young people who have graduated into previous recessions struggled to get established in their careers and faced long-term wage penalties, which could occur from this recession, too. Ohioans in Appalachia face lower pay and fewer opportunities.

**Federal policymakers are now allowing stimulus, which drove rapid partial recovery from the coronavirus recession, to expire.** This includes the enhanced federal unemployment benefits Ohio's Supreme Court is now deliberating after Gov. DeWine cut Ohioans off early; the extensions in eligible weeks; and eviction moratoria that prevented Ohioans displaced from work from also losing their homes.

# Unemployment

The U.S. and Ohio economies measured in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) have now fully recovered to pre-pandemic levels. The stock market has reached record heights. The National Bureau of Economic Research, which tracks the business cycle, declared the coronavirus recession over as of May 2020, making it the shortest recession on record.<sup>6</sup> But as measured by its impact on people, the recession is far from over. As of July 2021, there were 269,000 fewer jobs in Ohio than there were in February 2020. Because most Ohio families rely on employment earnings as their sole source of income, it is the labor market — not GDP or stock prices — that marks the most meaningful aspect of economic life.<sup>7</sup> And working people are still struggling.

It took seven years to restore the number of jobs destroyed in the Great Recession.<sup>8</sup> Ohio's poverty rate did not reach 2007 lows until 2019, just before COVID-19 caused another recession.<sup>9</sup> Following the 2001 recession, Ohio's median wage did not recover until 2018.<sup>10</sup> Ohio never fully recovered from the last few recessions.<sup>11</sup> This time has to be different.

Unprecedented fiscal stimulus has shown that with the right policy response, government can reduce hardship for ordinary Americans. This stimulus has rapidly and deeply driven down poverty, at least temporarily. Urban Institute researchers put Ohio's 2021 rate at 5.9% —

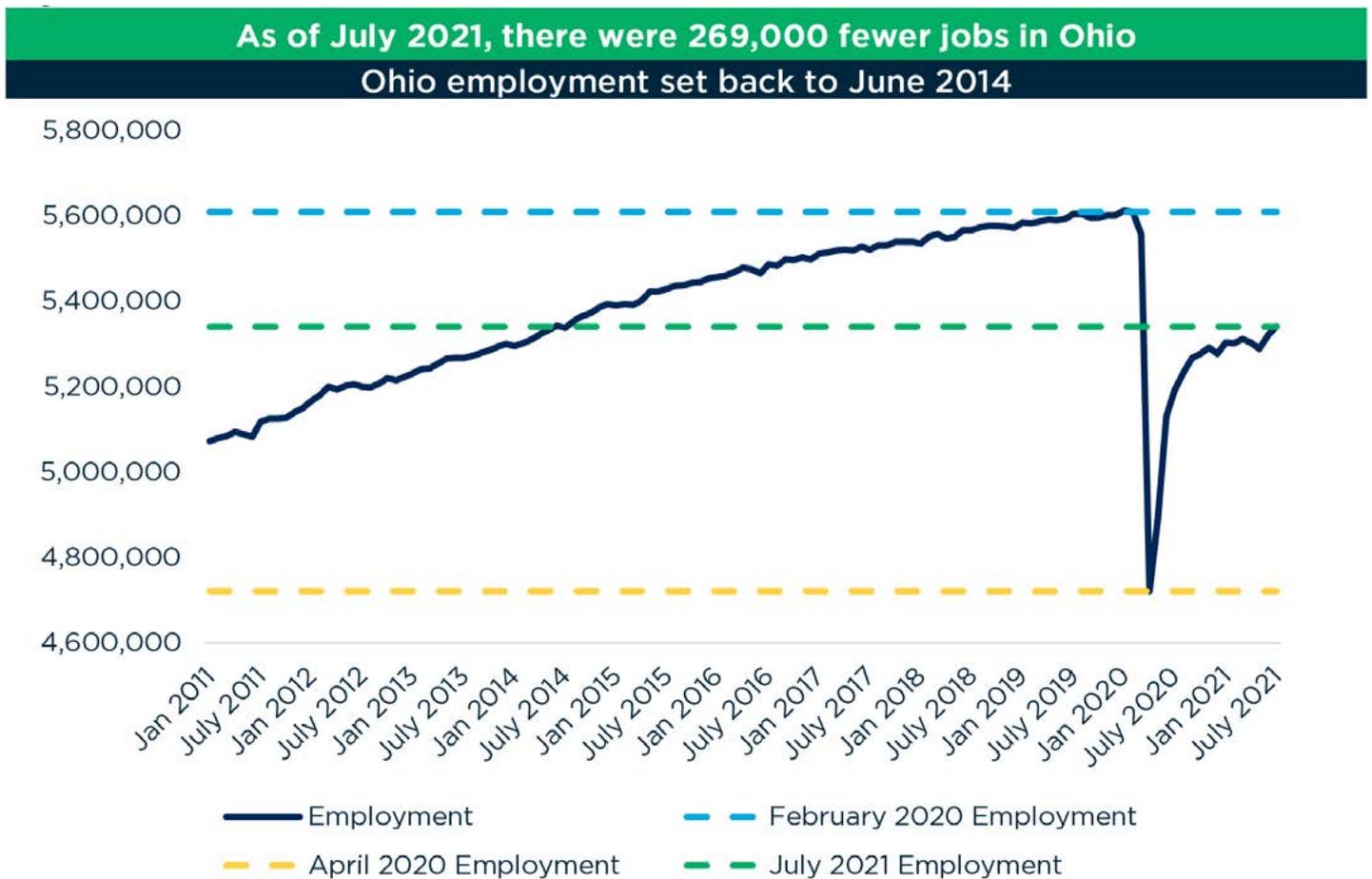
half the 2019 rate.<sup>12</sup> Such measures included \$600-per-week federal supplemental UC, which ended July 2020<sup>13</sup>; the emergency temporary benefit ordered by former President Trump from disaster relief dollars, worth \$300 per week in Ohio;<sup>14</sup> and the most recent round of \$300 supplements, which expired on Sept. 4. Gov. DeWine prematurely blocked unemployed Ohioans from receiving these benefits beginning in June 2021. After an appeals court overturned that decision, the matter is pending as of this writing before the Ohio Supreme Court. Also ending are the eviction moratoria overturned in August by the U.S. Supreme Court, enhanced SNAP benefits that provided food support, and insurance waivers on COVID testing. With these stimulus measures slated to abruptly end, thousands of Ohioans could be forced out of their homes and could find themselves unable to afford groceries or pay the bills. The poverty rate may spike again.

Sixteen months after COVID-19 sent Ohioans home to shelter in place — working from home if they could, unemployed if not, or braving the pandemic to come to work in a new and more dangerous landscape — Ohio's job market remained 4.8% smaller in July 2021 than it was in February 2020.<sup>15</sup> Gov. DeWine issued his stay-at-home order on March 22, 2020. By April, Ohio had 889,000 fewer jobs. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 2 million Ohioans would experience joblessness and

file state unemployment claims at some point, along with 1.2 million who claimed Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), some of whom were overlapping.<sup>16</sup> Ohio reached and surpassed the deepest job losses of the 2008 recession in a matter of weeks.

By July 2021, Ohio had 5,341,000 jobs, a level that took us back to June 2014 (5,343,700). See Figure 1. Compared with February 2020, there were 295,000 more Ohioans out of the workforce, and 317,000 fewer were working.<sup>17</sup> Ohioans of all backgrounds were swept up in this crisis, but job displacement played out differently for Ohioans based on their race, gender, age, and where they lived.

**Figure 1**



Source: Policy Matters analysis of C.E.S. data, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Most recent data available, seasonally adjusted.

As of this writing, Ohio's job recovery has posted two months of progress following six months without growth beginning in November 2020.<sup>18</sup> Those months followed a rapid partial recovery beginning in May 2020, as Ohio businesses that only paused for the health emergency resumed work and called back workers. Over the long term, Ohio has been on a similar growth path to the U.S. Ohio recovered slightly more quickly than the nation from June 2020 to March 2021 and is now trailing slightly.

Overall, while the U.S. recovered 96.3% of its pre-COVID job level by July, Ohio had recovered 95.2%.<sup>19</sup> See Figure 2. The second month of job gains may be a sign that Ohio's recovery is picking up much-needed momentum. At its current six-month average rate of 0.12% per month, it will take Ohio 43 months to restore our pre-COVID level of jobs; the U.S. is recovering at 0.48% per month. From its lowest level in April 2020 Ohio had regained 619,500 jobs by July 2021, while the U.S. had regained 16.7 million.

**Figure 2**

**Ohio recovery trailed nation in recent months**  
**Share of Ohio and US jobs compared with February 2020**



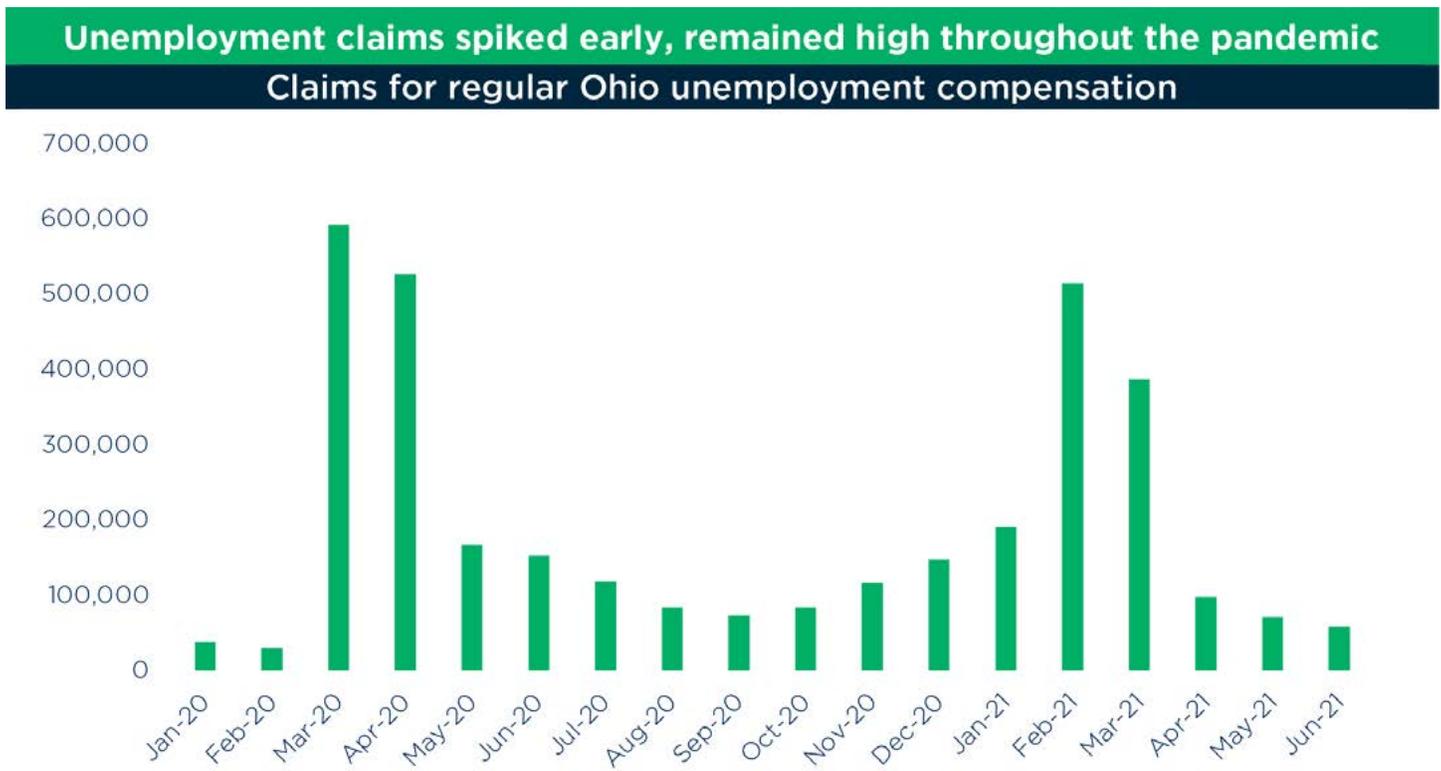
Source: Policy Matters Ohio from Current Employment Statistics, seasonally adjusted, Ohio Labor Market Information [https://ohiolmi.com/Home/DS\\_Results\\_CES](https://ohiolmi.com/Home/DS_Results_CES) and Bureau of Labor Statistics <https://www.bls.gov/ces/data/>.

Layoffs due to the COVID recession were not borne evenly by all Ohioans. Black Ohioans were twice as likely as white Ohioans to be laid off from their jobs last year, consistent with the long-term trend of the Black unemployment rate running roughly double the rate for white Ohioans. Women were more likely to be pushed out of the workforce than men in the early months of the pandemic, largely owing to the types of jobs they held, and were more likely to leave work to take on added caregiving tasks. Trends for both groups of Ohioans are discussed in detail below.

**Jobless claims**

More than 2 million Ohioans filed for regular unemployment benefits at some time during 2020. See Figure 3. The largest surge of state unemployment claims occurred in March 2020 in the wake of Gov. DeWine’s necessary public health order requiring many Ohioans to shelter at home: Ohioans filed 592,000 initial claims under the state system that month. A slightly smaller 526,000 filed new claims in April. A run-up in the number of claims flagged for potential fraud caused spikes in the data for February and March 2021, though reports so far from the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services (ODJFS) indicate that fraudulent payments of regular state unemployment benefits did not show an increase.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 3**



Source: Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Labor Market Information, “UC 237.CD – Monthly Claimant Demographics by County,” <https://ohiolmi.com/home/Uiclaims>.

The unprecedented scale of unemployment benefits, and the scope of Ohioans reached by them, served as a major mitigating factor protecting hundreds of thousands of Ohioans from crisis they would otherwise have endured, and continuing their consumer spending to stave off a major and lasting contraction. PUA covered Ohioans excluded from regular state benefits, including those who were self-employed or misclassified as such, gig workers and those whose income was too low to qualify for regular benefits. Some 1.2 million filed for PUA — a group partially overlapping regular UC claimants. Congress also extended the usual maximum of 26 weeks of benefits by another 53 weeks. Federal benefits provided unemployed Ohioans with an additional \$600 per week in benefits for some months before expiring; later action by Congress replaced that with \$300-per-week benefits, which were abruptly ended by Gov. DeWine in June, 10 weeks before their slated expiration. Ohio's 10th District Court ruled in August that Gov. DeWine exceeded his authority in prematurely ending federal jobless benefits.<sup>21</sup> Gov. DeWine has appealed the decision to the Ohio Supreme Court. At the time of this writing, it is unclear whether back payments owed to affected Ohioans will ever be paid. Altogether, ODJFS reported that between March 15, 2020, and July 26, 2021, more than 1 million Ohioans received regular unemployment benefits or federal extensions of them totaling almost \$12.4 billion. Separately, more than 1.2 million claimants got PUA benefits totaling nearly \$11 billion.<sup>22</sup>

The main limitation on the effectiveness of this support was inconsistency on the part of state and federal policymakers. While the scale of sudden unemployment was unprecedented, the erratic U.S. policy response and long-term underinvestment in the administration of the UC system meant that even Ohioans whose total income was not badly affected — or even

rose — during COVID-19 might go months without income. Many unemployed workers were unable to obtain benefits on a timely basis or received overpayments through no fault of their own. Many thousands of claims flagged for fraud were flagged incorrectly and are likely to receive ultimate — but delayed — approval.<sup>23</sup> Federal benefits are ending prematurely in early September even while Ohio's economy has hundreds of thousands fewer jobs than it did before the pandemic.

### **Workforce participation and employment share**

Many Ohioans left the workforce altogether. Ohio's Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) reached its lowest level on record by 2020, with 61.8% of Ohioans working or seeking work. Ohio's LFPR had never recovered from a pre-Great Recession high of 67.8%. As of July 2021, Ohio's civilian labor force, which includes those working and actively seeking work, was 5,604,000.<sup>24</sup> That meant 295,000 more Ohioans were out of the workforce, and 317,000 fewer were working, compared with pre-COVID levels.<sup>25</sup> Ohioans were out of the workforce for a number of reasons, including fear of exposure to COVID-19 and lack of childcare. Had more of these Ohioans returned to the workforce, our 5.4% reported unemployment rate would have been higher, since the rate ignores those who are neither working nor looking for work.

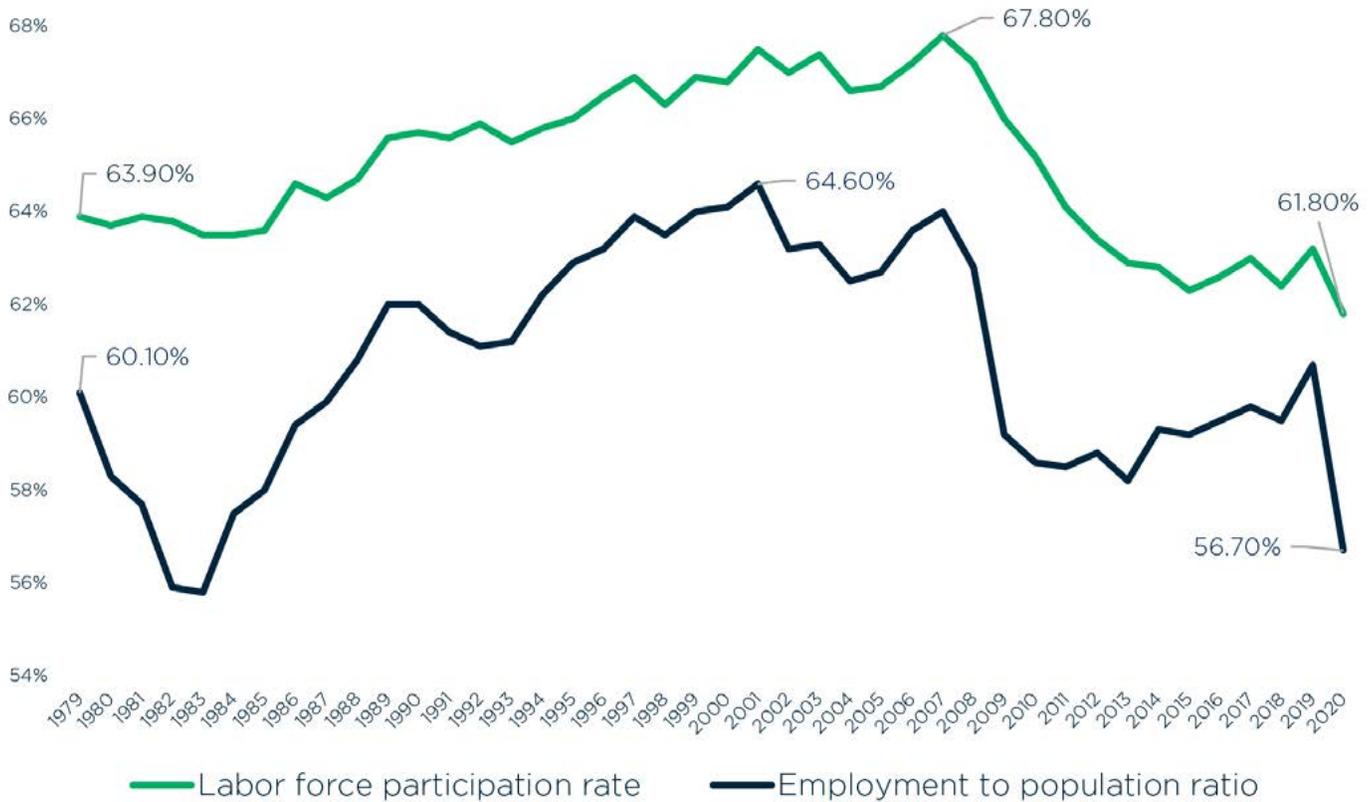
The Employment-to-Population ratio (E-Pop) never recovered from the Great Recession, either. E-Pop measures who is working as a share of the entire population aged 16+ who are not institutionalized or in the military. It's a useful labor market indicator, because it is unaffected by voluntary changes in labor force participation that can make the unemployment rate artificially low when many workers are sidelined.<sup>26</sup> After reaching bottom in 2013 at

58.2%, it mounted a bumpy climb to 60.7% in 2019. In 2020, it fell four points to 58.7%. It had been 37 years since such a small share of working age Ohioans were employed; the share reached 55.8% in 1983 due to the recession induced by Federal Reserve policy to reduce high inflation. E-Pop lows correspond to economic downturns. Our series ends in 2020, so it remains to be seen whether Ohioans

will return to work at the rate they previously did. What may be the most striking feature of Ohio's data is that Ohioans never returned to the workforce at the same rates following either the 2001 recession or the Great Recession. Their absence means that, looking at the unemployment rate alone, Ohio's job market may appear healthier than it truly is. See Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

**The share of Ohioans employed in 2020 was the lowest it had been in 37 years**  
**Workforce participation and employment share**



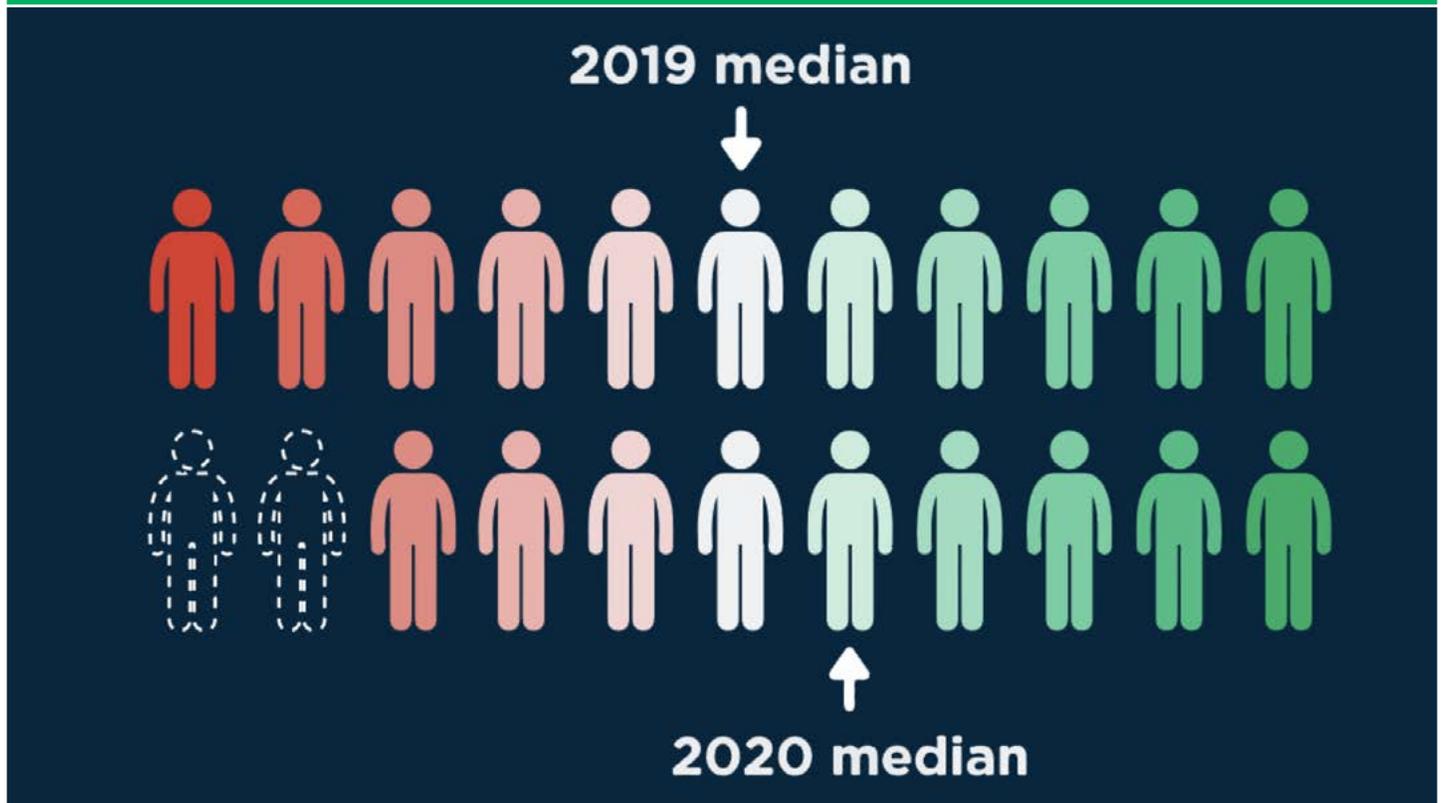
Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata.

# An economy distorted & restructured

Wage data cited throughout this report were higher for 2020 than for other recent years, and in many cases for all years. The overall median rose 5% year-over-year. Increases in some cases reversed long-term downward trends. Yet these figures are not good news; they do not represent improvements in the well-being of most Ohio workers. Instead, they reflect the fact that low-paid workers bore the brunt of job losses, leaving their better-paid counterparts as the only ones left in the employed workforce to have their wages counted.<sup>27</sup> It's critical to understand this fact, because failure to grasp it could lead policymakers to prematurely slow the economy or to reduce or eliminate monetary supports to Ohioans still facing crisis. In fact Gov. DeWine has already done so in his decision to end federal jobless benefits to unemployed Ohioans, a decision now pending before the Ohio Supreme Court as of this writing.

Figure 5

## Disproportionate layoffs in low-paying industries skew data on Ohio wages



*Wage growth is not normal for a recession. It would be a mistake to read the reported changes for 2020 as a sign of improved bargaining power or true wage growth for working Ohioans.*

Changes in the makeup of the employed workforce typically accompany recessions, but the effect for this recession was much stronger. Bureau of Labor Statistics researchers found that the lowest-paid workers faced the steepest job losses and that those losses persisted longest.<sup>28</sup> Data from employer and household surveys both confirmed this. Part of the reason low-paid workers faced the largest job losses is due to their concentration in industries disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus recession. Low-paying industries fell as a share of all employment, but the researchers also found that within industries, employers were more likely to cut low-paid workers than others; those within-industry cuts accounted for between 23% and 46% of April 2020 to May 2021 job loss among low-paid workers.<sup>29</sup> Nationally, the median hourly wage of workers in highly exposed sectors was \$15.00 for 2019, compared to \$21.50 for workers in other sectors.<sup>30</sup>

Ohio still had a shortfall of 68,300 pre-pandemic accommodation and food service jobs by June 2020. The leisure and hospitality sector has the lowest average wage of all the major industrial sectors. Waiters and waitresses were paid just \$9.56 per hour at the median in 2020. The leisure and hospitality industry lost nearly three times its share of jobs.<sup>31</sup>

Figure 6 shows how not just the number, but the mix of jobs in Ohio was changed by the COVID-19 recession. Looking at only the top 10 most common jobs in Ohio as of 2019 — a group that comprised 21.7% of all working Ohioans — employment fell in seven of those occupations: Fast Food and Counter Workers, Retail Salespeople, Laborers & Freight, Stock & Material Movers, Cashiers, Office Clerks, Home Health & Personal Care Aides and Waiters & Waitresses. Employment rose in three: Registered Nurses, Customer Service Representatives and Stockers & Order Fillers. Miscellaneous Assemblers & Fabricators, which ranked #11 in 2019, displaced Waiters & Waitresses from the top 10, mostly due to the large loss in the latter group (-21,900 jobs; 24.9%). Many of these workers were in essential occupations. Overall, Ohio had lost 5.7% of all jobs at the time these figures were compiled.

Overall, median wages rose 5% from 2019 to 2020, but when we focus on specific occupations, those increases are much smaller. Figure 6 also shows that in Ohio's most common jobs, wages changed from a loss of 1% for waiters and waitresses to a gain of 5% for stockers and order fillers. There were no large gains in other industries to pull the median up to 5%.



*Elvert Barnes /Flickr*

Figure 6

People in Ohio's lowest-paying jobs more likely to have been laid off in 2020								
Ohio lost jobs in all but three of the top 10 occupations								
Top 10 occupations 2020	2020 rank	2019 rank	2020 pay (hourly)	2020 pay as share of poverty	Change from 2019	2020 jobs	Change from 2019	Percent change from 2019
Fast Food & Counter Workers*	1	1	\$9.79	94%	+1%	151,650	-23,850	-13.6%
Retail Salespeople	2	2	\$11.96	115%	+4%	129,130	-19,340	-13.0%
Registered Nurses*	3	3	\$32.49	311%	+3%	129,090	3,620	2.9%
Customer Service Representatives	4	7	\$17.23	165%	+2%	117,710	7,690	7.0%
Laborers and Freight, Stock & Material Movers*	5	4	\$15.07	144%	+3%	115,370	-2,760	-2.3%
Cashiers*	6	5	\$10.85	104%	+4%	107,060	-10,380	-8.8%
Office Clerks	7	6	\$16.99	163%	+2%	103,930	-12,080	-10.4%
Stockers & Order Fillers*	8	10	\$13.33	128%	+5%	95,890	9,740	11.3%
Home Health & Personal Care Aides*	9	8	\$11.41	109%	+1%	91,910	-2,960	-3.1%
Miscellaneous Assemblers & Fabricators	10	11	\$16.76	160%	+1%	84,000	150	0.2%
Waiters & Waitresses	13	8	\$9.56	92%	-1%	66,060	-21,900	-24.9%
Red text indicates median job paid less than 130% FPL: A family of 3 would qualify for food aid						Red text indicates occupation lost jobs from 2019-2020		

Source: BLS, OES Survey, state estimates May 2019, and May 2020. <https://bit.ly/3jxOKuY>. Largest detail occupations in Ohio by employment. Median annual earnings shown as share of poverty threshold for a family of three in 2000 (\$21,960). Asterisk (\*) indicates likely "essential" occupation.

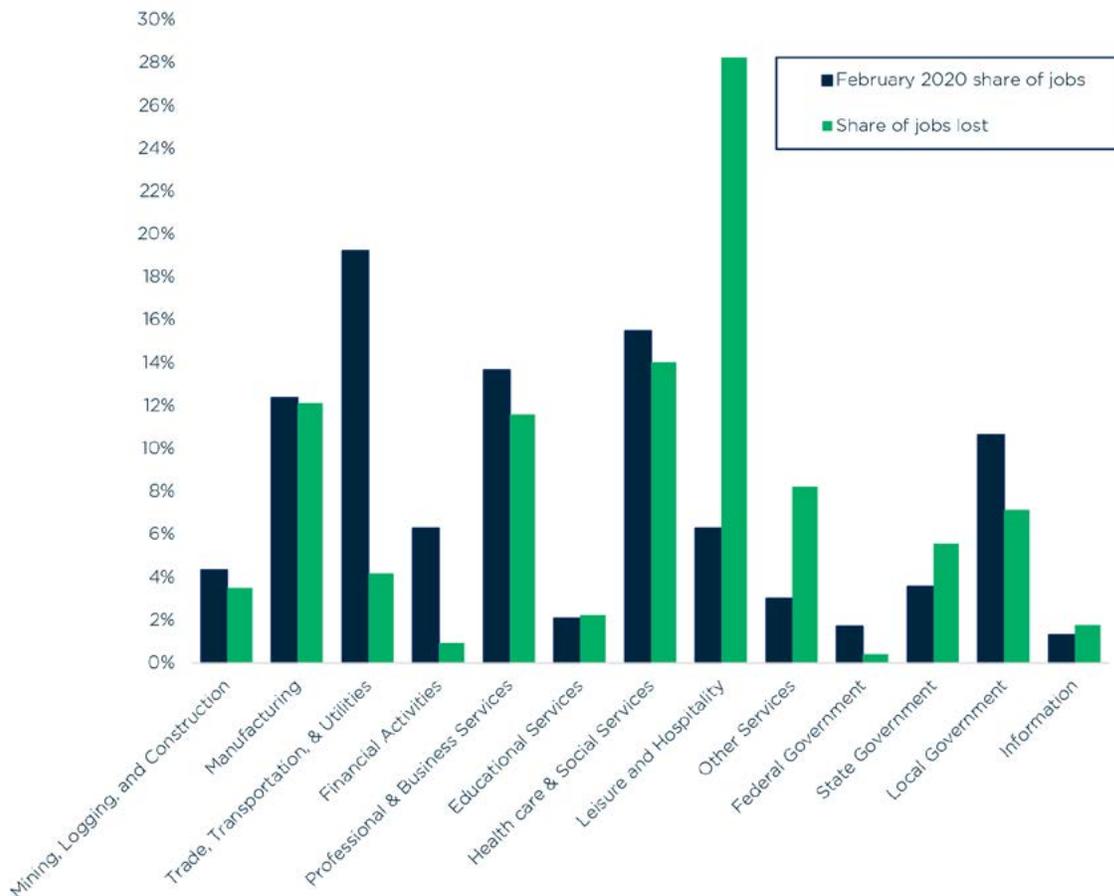
Brookings Institute researchers have found that the lowest-paid sector — hospitality — also gives workers the least opportunity for upward mobility.<sup>32</sup> When workers change jobs, they may move up, laterally, or in some cases, even down. Only 36% of occupational changes in hospitality are upward, compared with 66% in both utilities and professional services, sectors that are among both the highest-paying and most upwardly mobile. This research suggests that jobs that start out low-paying also tend to offer fewer opportunities to climb a career ladder to a higher-paid position without moving to a different sector. These trends were already in place before COVID-19.

**Industry**

Though most sectors lost jobs that remained unrecovered by June, those losses were heavily concentrated in some industries. Service sector industries bore more than their share of job loss. The leisure and hospitality industry comprised 6.3% of Ohio jobs as of June 2019. From its pre-pandemic level in February 2020 to June 2021, that industry has seen 28.2% of all job losses in Ohio, more than four times its share. The “other services” industry had 8.2% of losses for an industry that comprised 3.0% of jobs. State government jobs comprised 3.6% of jobs but 5.6% of job losses. This is especially egregious because this is the industry over which state policymakers have the most control, as a direct employer. While certain occupations grew — notably, certain healthcare jobs and jobs in the logistics industry that supported growing online retail trade — no industry had as many jobs in June 2021 as it had pre-pandemic in February 2020.

**Figure 7**

**Leisure and hospitality workers bore the brunt of COVID-induced layoffs**  
**Share of jobs as of February 2020, and jobs lost February 2020 – June 2021**



Source: Current Employment Statistics by Industry Sector, June 2021. Seasonally Adjusted, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, [https://ohiolmi.com/Home/DS\\_Results\\_CES](https://ohiolmi.com/Home/DS_Results_CES), retrieved July 19, 2021.

## More wealth for the wealthiest

While hundreds of thousands of Ohioans are still out of work, asset prices for corporate stocks and real estate recovered rapidly and have now soared to new heights, driving an uneven recovery in which the wealthiest are better off than ever, but working people continue to struggle.

The trend of the wealthiest capturing a growing share of total income has been under way since the 1970s. By 2015, Ohio's wealthiest 1% captured 15.8% of all income in Ohio. The average 1-percenter had an income of \$858,965, while the lowest income that fell within the wealthiest 1% was \$334,979.<sup>33</sup>

International Monetary Fund economists reported that policy responses to previous pandemics have led to increases in wealth inequality, and found early evidence that these trends have been more pronounced in the case of COVID-19.<sup>34</sup>

This trend accelerated in the wake of the Great Recession and spiked once more following COVID-19. By 2018, the wealthiest 1% in the U.S. had captured 45% of all income gains in the recovery from the Great Recession.<sup>35</sup> That outcome actually marked a more equitable long-term distribution of income growth than took place in the early recovery: In the first year of the recovery, the richest 1% captured 93% of all income growth.<sup>36</sup> This means there is still

time for policymakers to drive a more equitable recovery from the COVID-19 recession than we achieved after the Great Recession.

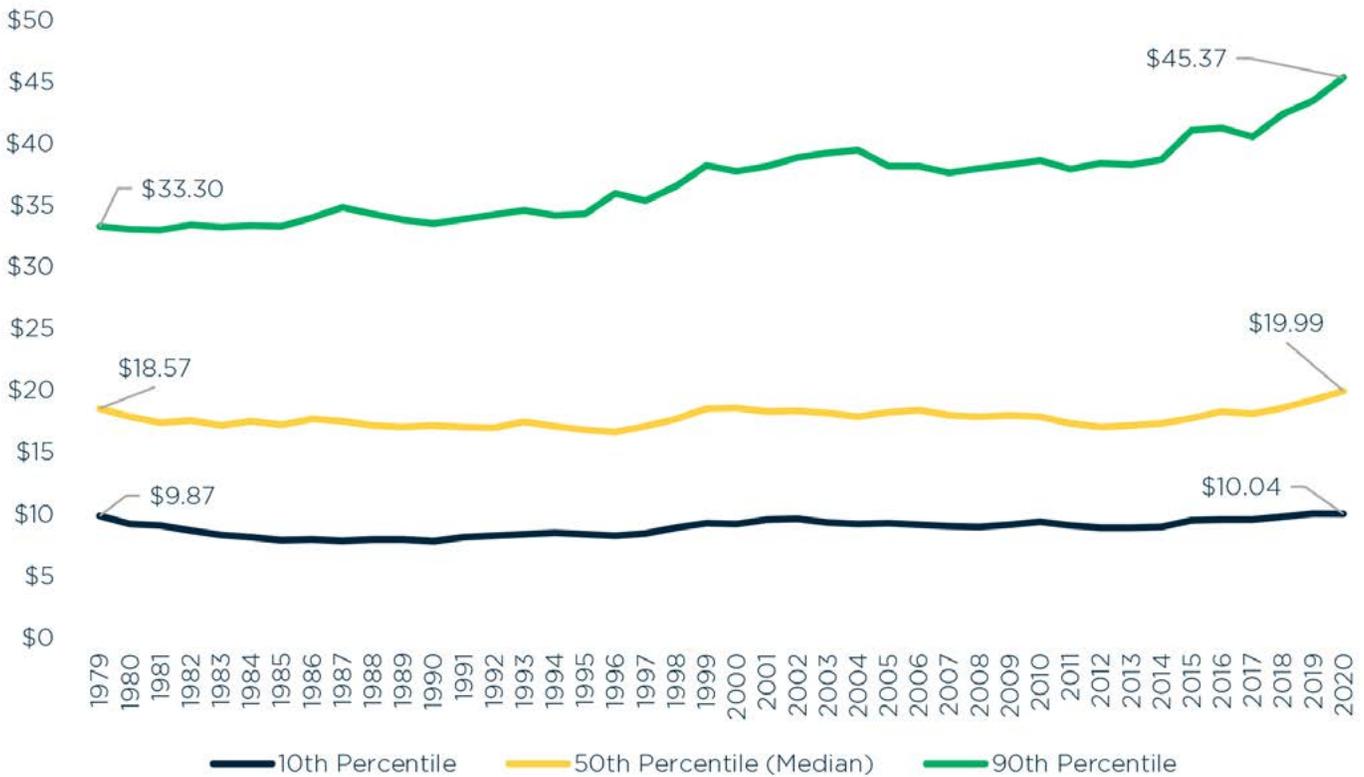
This trend of financial market and real estate recovery that left behind jobs has also exacerbated wealth inequity based on race. White people held 89.5% of corporate equities by the first quarter of 2021, while Black people held just 1.1% and Hispanic Americans — a rough proxy for Latinx people — held only 0.5%.<sup>37</sup> The remainder of stocks were owned by people of other races. The data do not specify the share of corporate equities owners who are foreign nationals.

### Diverging fates based on pay

Even among Ohioans who get most or all their income from wages, the post-COVID trend and the long-term trend alike favor the most highly paid people. While the 90th percentile worker — the one paid more than 90% of all workers and less than the other 10% — saw their income rise 36.2% from \$33.30 per hour in 1979 to \$45.37 in 2020, the middle earner saw theirs rise just 7.6% to \$19.99. The 10th percentile earner, who made less than the other 90% of workers, was paid just \$10.04 in 2020, an increase of only 1.7% over 40 years. All figures are given in real 2020 dollars adjusted for inflation. Only the highest-paid Ohioans have seen substantial pay growth over the last four decades. See Figure 8.

**Figure 8**

**Wages for the wealthiest Ohioans went up most. Wages for the lowest-paid were almost stagnant**  
**Ohio wages by percentile, 1979-2020**

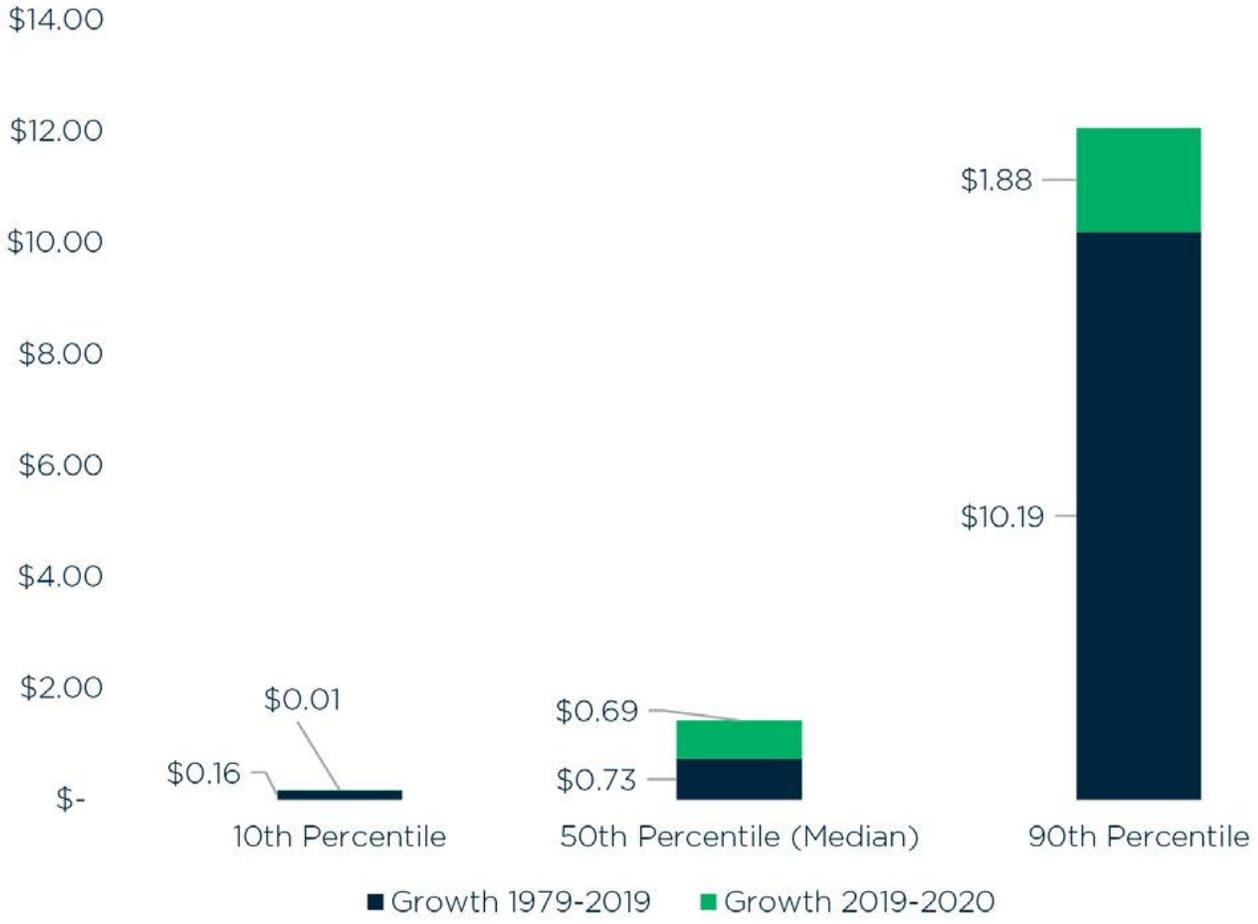


Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata, inflation adjusted to 2020 dollars.

Also noteworthy: Nearly half (48.6%) of all growth for those being paid the median wage took place in the single year from 2019 to 2020. Given the way the new makeup of the labor force has distorted wages, this fact raises concerns that many of these gains may prove to have been data irregularities and may not persist. This is a fact that could influence wage trends for all groups as reported in this paper. For people paid wages in the 90th percentile, the relative year-over-year increase was smaller (15.6%). However, the single year dollar increase for highly paid Ohioans exceeded growth for middle-income Ohioans for the entire four decades (\$1.88 versus \$1.42). The changing jobs mix likely heavily distorted highly paid Ohioans’ wages too. Low-paid Ohioans were paid just 17 cents more for the whole timespan, and their 1-cent bump year-over-year ending 2020 was not statistically different from zero.

Figure 9

**Single year accounted for much of Ohio's wage growth**  
**Could disappear as labor force returns to normal**



Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata, inflation adjusted to 2020 dollars.

**Household Pulse showed many Ohioans still struggling**

While the wealthiest rapidly recovered from the COVID-19 recession — if they suffered any loss at all — many ordinary Ohioans struggled tremendously in the early months of the pandemic, and many continue to struggle today. Figure 10 from the Census Bureau’s Household Pulse survey compares survey data from spring 2020 and spring 2021. The data show significant progress in Ohioans’ economic security since the worst months of the pandemic and many Ohioans benefiting from the unprecedented fiscal stimulus, but that we have not attained recovery.

Many Ohioans turned to stop-gap methods to meet living costs during COVID-19. In real-time surveys conducted by the Census Bureau between April and June 2021, roughly a quarter of Ohioans used credit cards to meet basic living costs. One in six drew down savings or sold assets. Among nonworking Ohioans, just 69.2% were able to use regular income, compared with 88.8% for those who were employed.<sup>38</sup> Many Ohioans had to turn to friends or family for loans: 12.7% of nonworking Ohioans and 7.3% of working counterparts did so.

The most notable changes from spring 2020 were that, among Ohioans who were not working, the share who had regular income rose 10.9 percentage points, while the share who used unemployment benefits fell 10.2 percentage points.

Figure 10

Many Ohioans had to turn to sources beyond their regular incomes to get by						
How Ohioans paid for living costs from April 14 to June 21, 2021						
	Employed Ohioans			Nonworking Ohioans		
	Count	%	Change from 2020	Count	%	Change from 2020
Regular income sources like those received before the pandemic	3,956,284	88.8%	-2.1%	1,994,913	69.2%	10.9%
Credit cards or loans	1,126,620	25.3%	1.4%	634,054	22.0%	-1.1%
Money from savings or selling assets or possessions	729,388	16.4%	-2.0%	512,567	17.8%	-3.8%
Borrowing from friends or family	324,817	7.3%	-0.2%	365,453	12.7%	0.7%
Unemployment insurance (UI) benefit payments	109,972	2.5%	-2.0%	191,413	6.6%	-10.2%
Stimulus (economic impact) payment	888,948	20.0%	5.6%	743,797	25.8%	0.9%

Source: Policy Matters Ohio analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse data, pooled weeks 28-32, <https://bit.ly/3kJGxDd>, accessed June 30, 2021, and weeks 9-12, accessed August 25, 2020. See Michael Shields, April Hopcroft and Siyang Liu, "State of Working Ohio 2020," [https://bit.ly/SOWO\\_2020](https://bit.ly/SOWO_2020), Table 1. Nonworking Ohioans includes those who are unemployed, and adults not in the labor force, including retirees. "Change from 2020" columns are percentage points.

Other data gathered by the Census Bureau through the Household Pulse in June and July, and analyzed by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, show that one in 10 Ohio adults (723,000 people) struggled to get enough food, 17% of Ohio renters (407,000) were behind on rent, and 28% of Ohio adults (2.3 million) had too little income to meet basic household costs.<sup>39</sup>

Ohioans also tapped safety net resources to get through the financial hardship from COVID-19. A fifth of working Ohioans and a quarter of nonworking Ohioans used stimulus payments; 6.6% of nonworking Ohioans and 2.5% of working Ohioans relied on UI benefits for some of their family's living costs. Such benefits could have comprised back payments received by Ohioans for their own prior bout

of unemployment as well as payments to other members of their household currently unemployed.

These challenges will get worse in the coming months. The moratorium on evictions issued by the CDC expired July 31, and the U.S. Supreme Court overturned President Biden's extension, leaving Ohioans who are behind on rent to face possible eviction.<sup>40</sup> Gov. DeWine prematurely ended federal enhanced jobless benefits of \$300 per week to Ohioans whose jobs were destroyed by COVID-19; that decision now stands before the Ohio Supreme Court, but even if the 10th District decision overturning it is upheld, jobless Ohioans will receive benefits only through the first week of September, when they expire.



*Ohio Organizing Collaborative*

## Essential workers

When most Ohioans were sent home to shelter from COVID-19, essential workers continued to go to work, providing the vital services all Ohioans relied on to get through the pandemic thus far. In doing so, they took on added risk of COVID-19 exposure to themselves and their families. This summer, vaccine access made frontline essential workers safer than they had been in prior months of the pandemic, but rising daily case counts show the danger of COVID-19 is not yet passed. Despite the new recognition of their value, and the safety risks they have taken on, many Ohio essential workers continue to struggle with wages that pay less than the cost of living, and 12.9% less, on average, than their counterparts in industries not classified as essential.<sup>41</sup>

The safety risks of going to work in a pandemic have not been borne evenly. While nearly three in 10 Ohio workers overall are in frontline essential jobs, Ohioans of color are more likely to work in essential jobs that place them at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 in the workplace.<sup>42</sup> Men and women are equally likely to work essential jobs, but women work more of the lowest-paid and highest-exposure jobs.



Figure 11

Women are more likely to hold low-paying essential jobs					
Essential jobs held by Ohio men and women					
Occupational group	Workers	Share female	Median wage: Women	Median wage: Men	Median woman's wage as share of median man's
Health Care	390,885	77.5%	\$16.66	\$24.84	67.1%
Government & Community Based Services	159,106	75.9%	\$21.37	\$33.94	63.0%
Communications & IT	100,848	61.8%	\$14.36	\$19.07	75.3%
Financial Sector	108,366	59.5%	\$21.38	\$37.45	57.1%
Food & Agriculture	286,718	38.5%	\$13.44	\$12.07	111.3%
Transportation, Warehouse, & Delivery	181,743	22.4%	\$19.35	\$20.00	96.7%
Commercial Services	191,326	16.7%	\$11.99	\$19.64	61.1%
Critical Manufacturing	82,677	12.1%	\$13.16	\$20.08	65.5%

Source: Economic Policy Institute Minimum Wage Simulation Model using data from the Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and Congressional Budget Office. See EPI Minimum Wage Simulation Model 2019. Dollar values adjusted by projections for CPI-U in CBO January 2020 projections.

The most common essential jobs in Ohio are in health care (391,000 workers), and food and agriculture (287,000). Health care jobs are also the most female-dominated, with women comprising 77.5% of all workers. Yet, while the health care industry offers well-paying jobs for doctors, registered nurses and other specialists, many health care workers, such as home health aides, are low-paid. Across the industry, women are paid 67 cents on the dollar compared with male counterparts.

The food and agriculture sector has the lowest median pay of Ohio's major essential job categories at just \$12.07. As of April, the United Food and Commercial Workers union reported 91,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 456 deaths among their ranks as of April.<sup>43</sup> Latinx Ohioans including documented and undocumented immigrants comprise many of Ohio's farm workers, a reminder that these are vital workers whom we all depend on, and who deserve workplace protections

and fair wages. Among the challenges farm workers face during the COVID-19 pandemic are crowded living conditions and crowded transportation to worksites, and limited access to handwashing stations.

Even when COVID-19 is at last behind us, the vital importance of essential workers' contribution to our communities will remain. The fact is, essential workers were essential before COVID-19, and will remain so after. ODJFS has implicitly recognized this fact in creating a new class of "top jobs" in addition

to the fastest-growing jobs list it previously produced.<sup>44</sup> In order to meet the threshold to be classified as an "in-demand" job, the job has to pay at least 80% of the median wage for the state. Yet the new top jobs include child care workers, home health aides, and others whom we depend on but whose low wages do not reflect the value of their work. Ohio policymakers should follow their designation of these workers as critical infrastructure workers with steps to ensure that they are fairly paid for their work.

## Who has been harmed



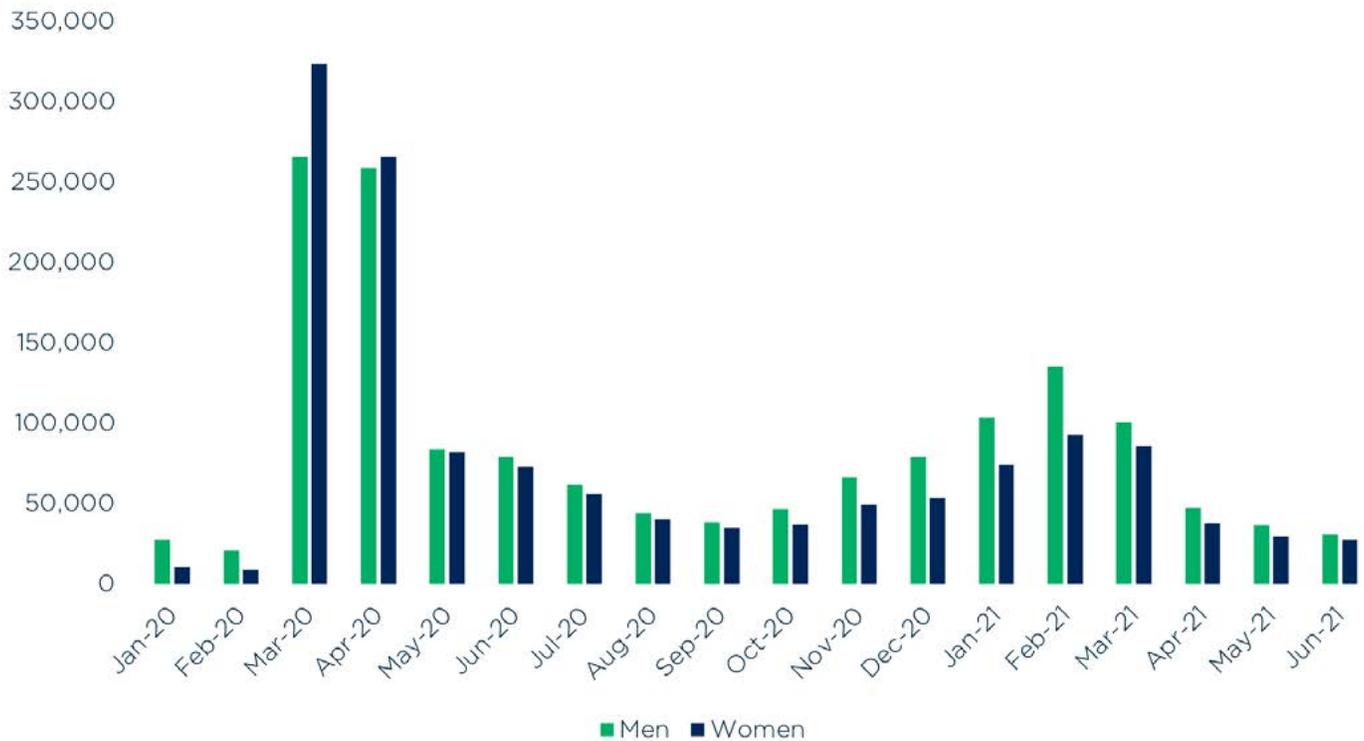
### Impact on women & men

Women have been especially harmed by the coronavirus recession. Besides working the frontline jobs most exposed to safety risks, women are also concentrated in low-paid service sector jobs that were more likely to be destroyed by COVID-19. And women took on more than their share of unpaid care work for loved ones who became ill, and children sent home from school and child care centers when they closed.

In March and April of last year, when new UC claims exceeded half a million each month, women were more likely than men to file claims. In other months, men were slightly more likely to file claims. However, men are more likely to work in jobs that have seasonal cycles in which periods of unemployment are routine. Note men's substantially higher claims in January and February 2020, before the effects of COVID-19 on the job market. Data in February and March 2021 also capture many filings that were flagged for fraud.

Figure 12

**At the beginning of the pandemic, women filed far more unemployment claims**  
**Ohio unemployment claims by gender, 2020**



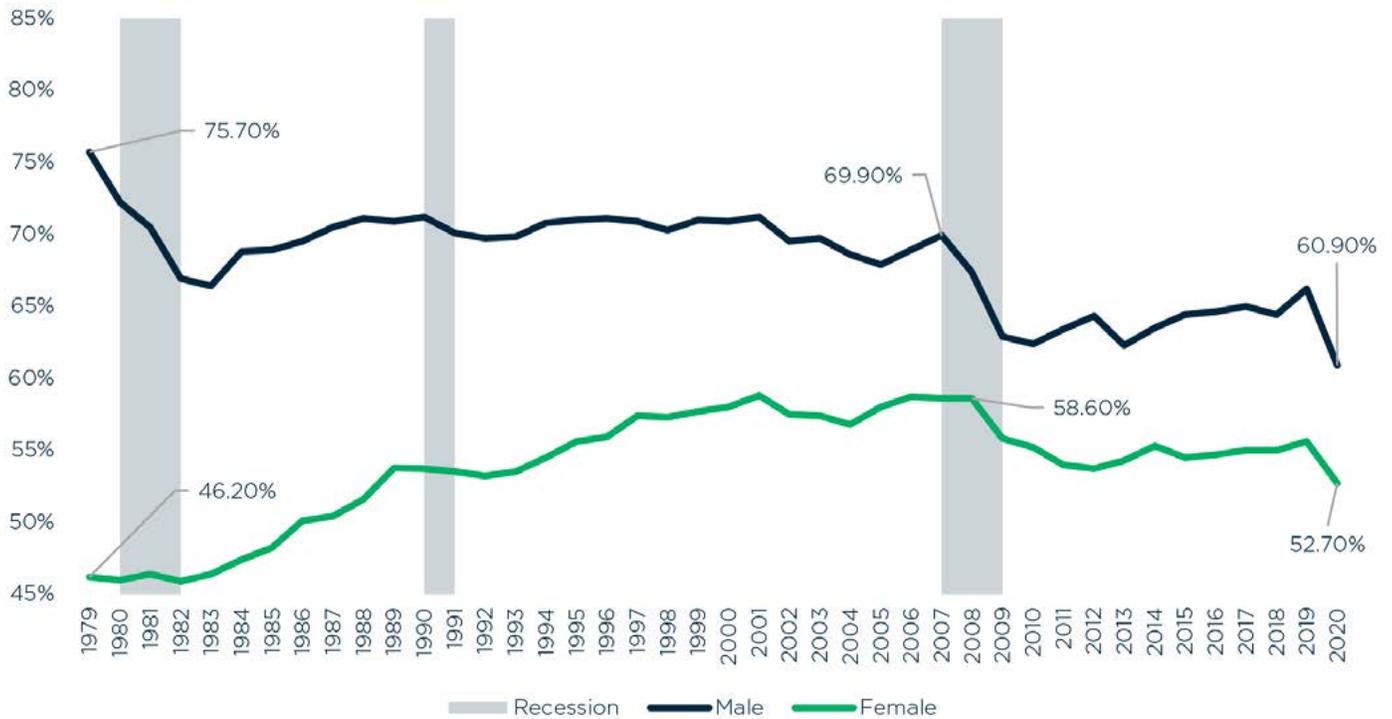
Source: Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Labor Market Information, "UC 237.CD - Monthly Claimant Demographics by County," <https://ohiolmi.com/home/Uiclaims>

The Institute for Women’s Policy Research has found that the Great Recession primed young women in particular to face an especially difficult time recovering from this recession by restricting opportunities for entry-level workers and concentrating women in low-paid service sector jobs.<sup>45</sup> Those jobs left young women and others with fewer resources to withstand any downturn, and they were more likely to be destroyed by COVID-19.

The share of both men and women working dropped steeply in this recession. Job losses exacerbated a trend in which a shrinking portion of men have been working since the peak of 75.7% in 1979. The share of men working fell off steeply in the 1979-1982 recessions caused by contractionary Federal Reserve policy, and in the Great Recession. The share has fallen off again after six years of slow recovery beginning in 2013, with 60.9% of men working by 2020, the lowest share on record. The Great Recession reversed growth in the share of employed women, which had generally gone up since a low of 46.2% in 1979. The coronavirus recession has further reduced the share of women working, from a pre-Great Recession 58.6% to 52.7% in 2020.

**Figure 13**

**Policymakers have allowed women to be pushed out of the workforce during COVID**  
**Employment-to-Population Ratio by gender**



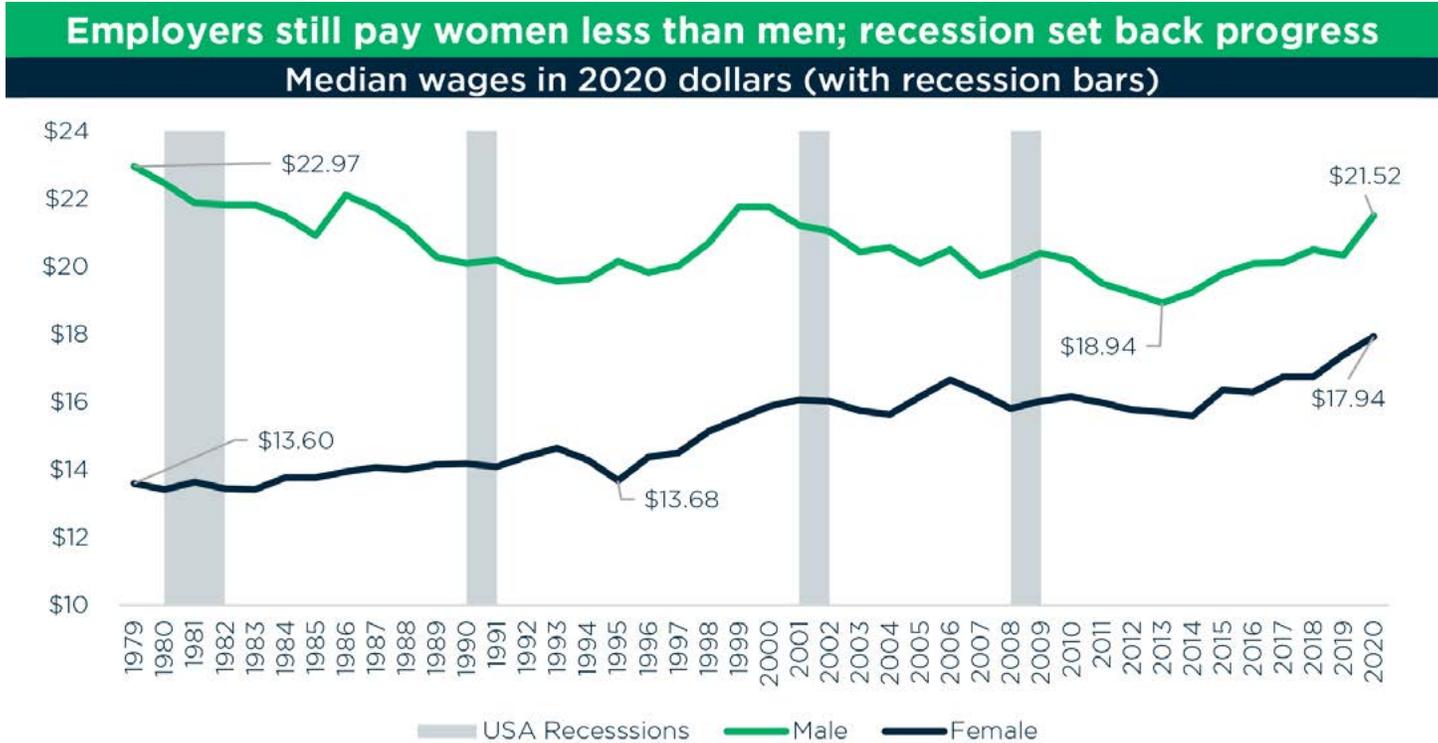
Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata, inflation adjusted to 2020 dollars.

**Median wages by gender**

Ohio employers continue to pay women just 83 cents on the dollar compared with men. However, the gender wage gap has narrowed by three-fifths (\$5.79). Today, women are paid less than men at the median by \$3.58 per hour, but in 1979 that figure was \$9.37 per hour. All figures are given in inflation-adjusted 2020 dollars. The narrowing of the wage gap is due to both growing women’s wages (which account for 75% of the change) and falling men’s wages (25%).

The coronavirus recession set back progress women were making toward equal pay. Year-over-year ending in 2020, Ohio men’s wages rose by \$1.17 per hour, while women’s rose by \$0.53. Like other wage figures reported here, this likely reflects a compositional change in who is working, not an improvement in the typical (median) worker’s well-being. Low-paid workers bore more than their share of the job losses from COVID-19 and the recession.

Figure 14



Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata, inflation adjusted to 2020 dollars.

For women, especially those with children, remaining connected to the workforce proved more difficult than for male counterparts. This attachment matters beyond the immediate months during which women experience lost employment income. Researchers found that for women who took even a single year off from the workforce in the 15 years ending in 2015, the typical woman was paid 39% less than her female counterpart who worked each of those years.<sup>46</sup> The ability to work from home during the pandemic helped women with children remain attached to the workforce. Compared

with fathers, mothers who worked from home got three fewer hours per week (39 hours for mothers and 42 hours for fathers).<sup>47</sup> For those who worked onsite at their workplace, mothers lost six hours (37 hours and 43, respectively). Yet this ability was a privilege reserved to a minority of workers. Nationally, those who could work from home tended to be disproportionately better paid, and disproportionately white.<sup>48</sup>

## COVID & race

### Median wages for Black and white Ohioans

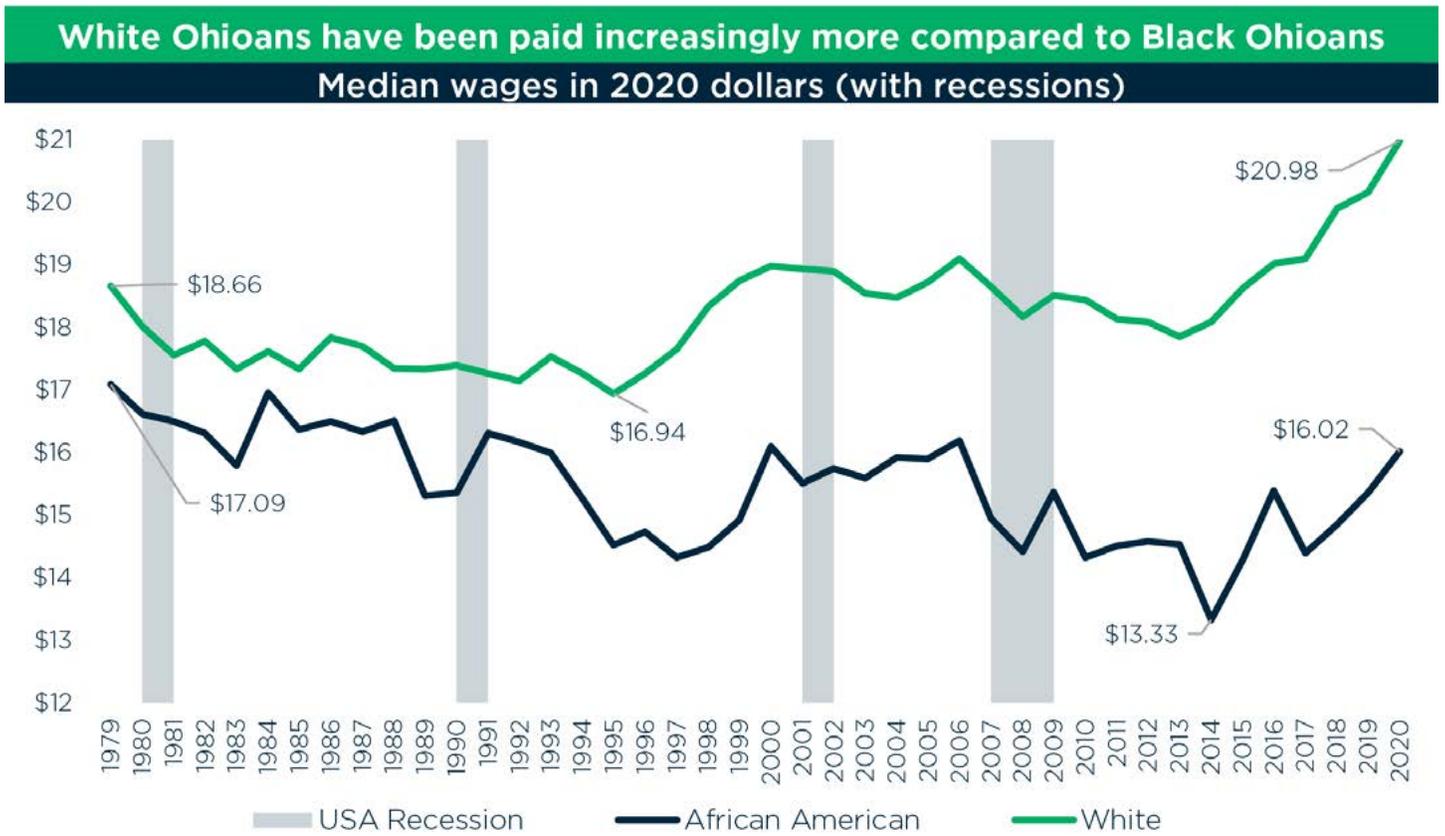
The amount white Ohioans were paid in excess of Black Ohioans' pay more than tripled between 1979 and 2020, from \$1.57 to \$4.96 an hour. In 1979, Black Ohioans were paid 92 cents on the dollar compared with white Ohioans. That rate peaked in 1988 at 95 cents on the dollar. By 2020, it has fallen to just 76 cents, a ratio that held since last year despite the large shift in wages from 2019 to 2020.

Often with policymakers' help, employers successfully pushed Black workers' pay down by \$1.07 per hour since 1979. Besides facing direct discrimination, Black Ohioans have been disproportionately harmed by deindustrialization exacerbated by pro-corporate tax and international trade policy;<sup>49</sup> legacy housing discrimination which has segregated neighborhoods<sup>50</sup> and — coupled with Ohio's unconstitutional local property tax model of school funding — has under-resourced predominantly Black schools;<sup>51</sup> and a criminal justice system that treats Black residents more punitively at every level of interaction and has attached hundreds of career barriers to having a criminal record.<sup>52</sup>



Figure 15 shows how Black workers' wages have been pushed down while white workers received overall — albeit volatile — pay increases. For both groups, the trendlines show a significant bump in pay from 2019 to 2020. It is important to realize that this is not a measure of actual growth in wages, but instead reflects a change in the mix of workers who kept their jobs — better-paid workers were more likely to still be working in 2020 than their lower-paid counterparts, who shouldered most of the job losses.

**Figure 15**

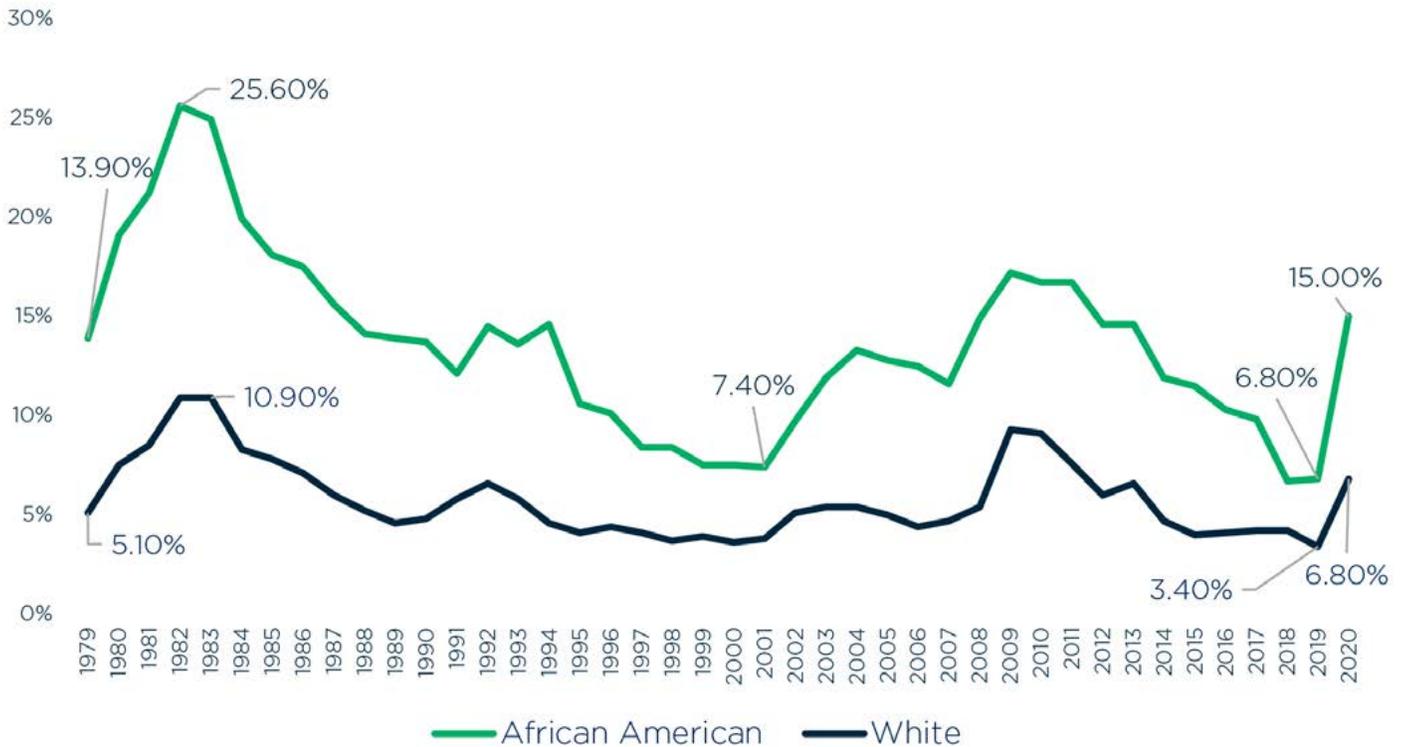


Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata, inflation adjusted to 2020 dollars.

Black Ohioans experienced much higher rates of joblessness than white counterparts throughout the last four decades and during COVID-19. The trend of Black unemployment running at double the rate of white unemployment has persisted since the 1940s: AFL-CIO chief economist William Spriggs has called it an equilibrium of the systemic racism baked into the labor market.<sup>53</sup> By the second quarter of this year, this rate had gotten even worse: Ohio’s unemployment rate for white residents was 4.0%; for Black counterparts it stood at 12.1%.<sup>54</sup>

Figure 16

**Systemic racism is baked into our labor market & has worsened**  
**Unemployment rates of Black Ohioans and White Ohioans**



Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata.

## Geographic impact



*Dan Keck / Flickr*

The impact of COVID-19 has differed for Ohioans based on where they live, as did the economic opportunities available before COVID.

Statewide, average per-capita income by 2019 was \$50,199. This figure was skewed upward by wealthy Ohioans. It also varied greatly by region. For Ohio's urban counties, the figure was a slightly higher \$50,603. Especially in urban counties, this single figure obscures significant inequality. Among Appalachian counties, per-capita income averaged just \$39,564. For counties that were neither urban nor in the Appalachia region, average per-capita income was \$47,190. Figures are not population-weighted; this means that each county is given the same weight within its group.

Figure 17 shows average per-capita income for Ohioans by county. Counties are color-coded to indicate whether they are Appalachian (green), urban (gray) or both (light blue – only Mahoning County). Other Ohio counties are marked in dark blue.



## Ohioans living in cities and urban counties

More than half (52.7%) of Ohio residents live in one of the 10 most populated of the state's 88 counties: Butler (Hamilton), Cuyahoga (Cleveland), Franklin (Columbus), Hamilton (Cincinnati), Lorain (City of Lorain), Lucas (Toledo), Mahoning (Youngstown and Warren), Montgomery (Dayton), Summit (Akron), and Stark (Canton).

Ohioans in urban communities have been deprived of opportunity as manufacturing industries migrated to suburbs and out of state, often with lavish tax incentives to entice them.<sup>55</sup> Housing segregation has meant that Black Ohioans disproportionately suffered the effects of this.<sup>56</sup> Today, Ohio cities also struggle following state policy change beginning in 2011 that dramatically slashed revenue for local governments and drained vital public resources. Those changes cost Ohio local governments over \$1 billion a year by 2017, compared with 2010 revenues.<sup>57</sup>

## Ohioans living in Appalachia

Ohio has 32 Appalachian counties; 17.1% of Ohioans live in Appalachia.<sup>58</sup>

Even prior to COVID-19, Ohio's Appalachian region struggled with limited job opportunities and industrial diversification, low wages, lower educational attainment than the state average, higher rates of poverty and poorer health outcomes. Appalachia is largely characterized by an extraction economy in which absentee landlords exert outsized influence and the people who live there lack political and economic power.<sup>59</sup>

The Appalachian region has long been dominated by corporations in extractive industries such as coal mining, natural gas drilling, and timber, but it has also been home to some of the most important labor battles in U.S. history. This year marks the centennial of the Battle of Blair Mountain, in which some 13,000 mine workers in West Virginia's Logan County took up arms in resistance against harsh treatment and union-busting from mine owners.<sup>60</sup> Mine workers revolted against corporate control over nearly every facet of their lives: They lived in company towns, were paid in "scrip," which could only be used in company stores, and faced unsafe working conditions. Blair Mountain is regarded as the largest labor uprising in U.S. history. The fighting and subsequent indictments initially reduced mine workers' union membership, but following New Deal protections, unionization grew.

Today Appalachia needs deep infrastructure investments to create sustainable jobs, and protections such as the PRO Act to again strengthen the bargaining power of working people in the region.

## Unemployment claims

Ohioans experienced different levels of joblessness based on where they lived. Across all counties, Ohioans filed one continuing unemployment claim for every 36 residents in June 2021. Yet this varied by county, and both urban and Appalachian Ohioans had higher claims numbers. Residents of urban counties were slightly more likely to file new and continuing unemployment claims than the state average (49 versus 46 new claims per 10,000 residents, and 310 versus 276 continuing claims). By June 2021, Appalachian residents filed more new claims per capita than the state average, but fewer continuing claims. Statewide, Ohioans filed 46 new claims per 10,000 residents, while Appalachians filed 52. Ohioans filed 276 continuing claims per 10,000 people the same month, while Appalachians filed 244.

## COVID impact by age

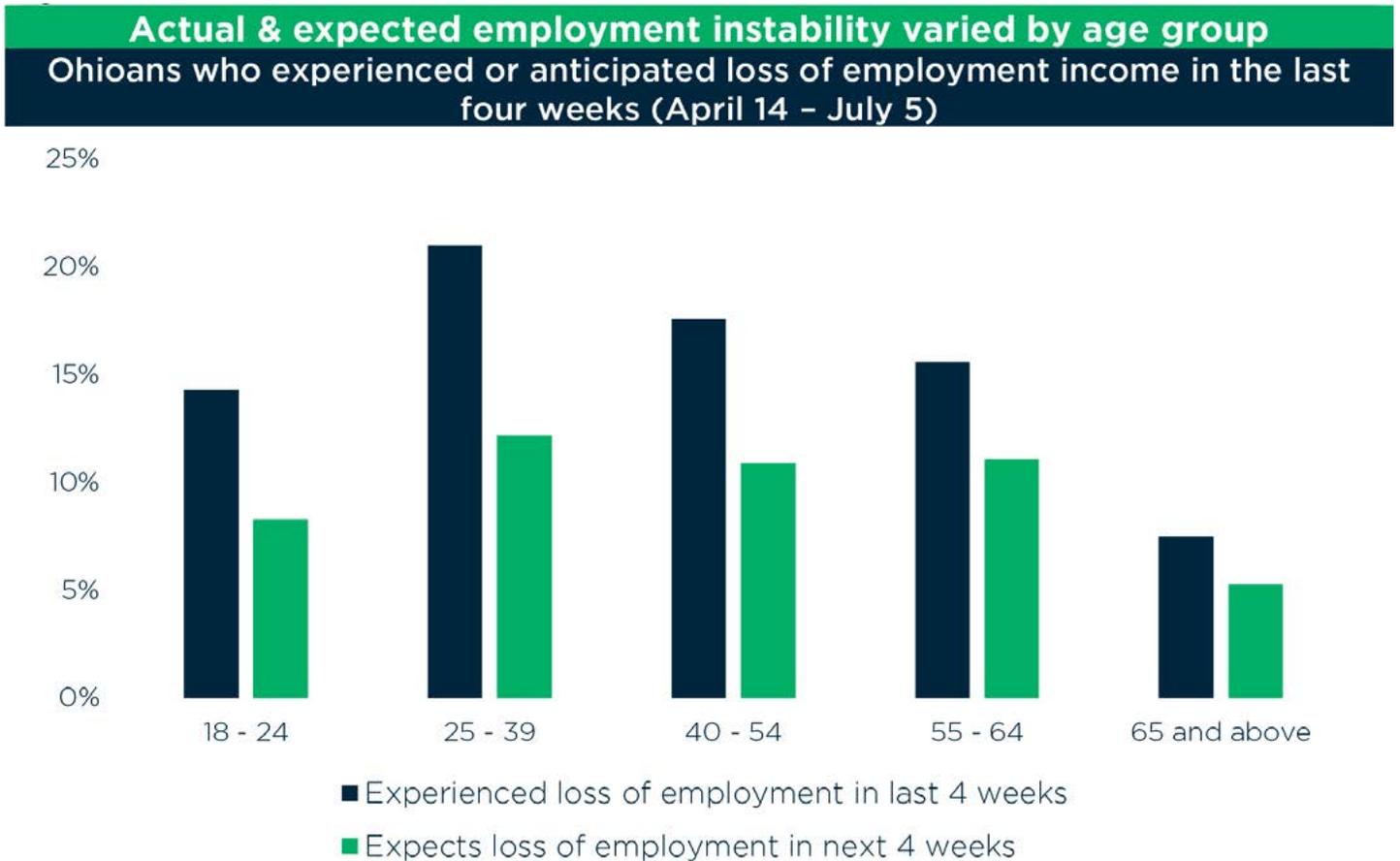


Paul Sableman / Flickr

The economic harm caused by COVID-19 has been especially intense for young workers.<sup>61</sup> Young people are often disproportionately harmed by economic downturns, but this recession has hit young workers even harder because they were clustered in the sectors of the economy most affected. Compounding this, those young people not yet employed when COVID-19 curtailed so many job prospects were largely blocked from receiving jobless benefits.<sup>62</sup> This includes much of the 2020 graduating class, who graduated in May into an Ohio economy with nearly 1 million fewer jobs than in February.

According to Household Pulse responses gathered by the Census Bureau from April 14 to July 5, Ohioans between 25 and 39 were most likely to both experience loss of employment income in the four weeks preceding their survey, and to anticipate loss of employment income in the coming four weeks. At 21%, this age cohort had the most people whose incomes took a hit. Ohioans in older groups were less likely to lose employment income, with only 7.5% of Ohioans aged 65+ experiencing an income reduction. Young Ohioans between the ages of 18 and 24 were the next least likely to have had employment income disruptions. Both groups may have had fewer members in the workforce initially. Anticipated employment income loss was similar for Ohioans across the three age cohorts spanning ages 25 to 64. The share of workers in these age groups expecting future income loss from employment ranged from 10.9% to 12.2% and substantially exceeded rates for older and younger workers. See Figure 18.

**Figure 18**



Source: Policy Matters Ohio analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse data, pooled weeks 28-33, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>, accessed July 15 2021.

Even before COVID-19, corporate-backed public policies were “hollowing out” the U.S. middle class — especially in Ohio and other Midwestern states where manufacturing corporations abandoned communities for lower taxes and fewer regulations, while policymakers stood by or in some cases helped. Manufacturing’s union workforce built and sustained the region’s middle class.<sup>63</sup> Brookings researchers identified a need for more “steppingstone” jobs: the kind that enable workers to attain upward mobility across life stages in their career path.<sup>64</sup> Instead, the researchers found that some 37.5 million U.S. workers are trapped in “sandpit” clusters, portions of the labor market in which most workers never move up.

It is as yet unclear what the long-term ramifications will be for young people whose careers were sidelined by COVID-19. Young people who graduated into the Great Recession experienced career disruptions projected to decrease their overall earnings for the rest of their lives. Those who graduated in prior recessions took about 10 years to catch up.<sup>65</sup> This time, most Ohio jobs rapidly rebounded in the summer and early fall of 2020, a sign that this job market could recover in a much shorter time than the seven years it took to recover from the Great Recession. Whether that growth continues will depend on how well policymakers continue to sustain policies that promote equitable growth; something Gov. DeWine has pulled back from in ending federal jobless benefits and in redirecting federal stimulus money to prevent unemployment taxes for employers. Young workers’ concentration in hard-hit industries, coupled with the fact that job growth stalled for six months beginning in November, both bode poorly for young Ohio workers.

Older workers have not gotten through the COVID-19 recession unscathed either. Nationally, 1.1 million workers over age 55 were pushed out of the labor force by COVID-19.<sup>66</sup> These are workers who may not be able to return to work. AARP reports that 67% of retirees miss out on their full Social Security benefit because they claim their benefit before reaching full retirement age.<sup>67</sup>

Policymakers must continue to drive economic recovery with expansionary fiscal stimulus projects and thoughtfully target spending to create quality jobs in sustainable industries. The Urban Institute has estimated that, with federal stimulus, Ohio’s poverty rate for 2021 will be 5.9%.<sup>68</sup> This is down from 13.1% in 2019, the lowest rate on record since before the Great Recession.<sup>69</sup> To achieve this during the immediate recovery from a recession at a time when jobs have yet to return is remarkable. It underscores the power of government when policymakers center people in their policy decisions. Yet it will also be temporary, as programs to benefit those hit hardest by the COVID-19 recession abruptly end.

# Tools for building worker power

COVID-19 arrived in Ohio after years of attacks on working peoples' bargaining power that held down their wages while directing growing profits to corporate executives and shareholders.<sup>70</sup> Too many Ohio workers simply did not have the resources to withstand the shock of the COVID shutdown.



For decades, certain politicians and corporate interests have executed a strategy to consolidate power themselves and block workers from their share of economic growth.<sup>71</sup> These efforts were supported by some policymakers who have too long treated workers and their employers — despite all the evidence to the contrary — as having equal power in negotiations to set the terms of employment.<sup>72</sup> A 2019 report found that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) charged employers with breaking the law in 41.5% of union campaigns, but underenforcement has meant they often went unpunished.<sup>73</sup> More than any other factor, the Economic Policy Institute found that declining worker power drove widening inequity during pre-COVID economic growth.<sup>74</sup>

This section examines factors that can enhance workers' bargaining power individually or collectively. While increasing educational attainment can help individual workers to fare better than their peers, even pay for Ohio's college grads has been held flat over the past two decades. Collective bargaining is another way workers can build power, but its effectiveness hinges on how much of the workforce unions represent. Ultimately, policymakers must recognize that working people meet their employers under highly unequal terms, and that policymakers therefore must pass laws to provide better balance in negotiations over wages and terms of employment.

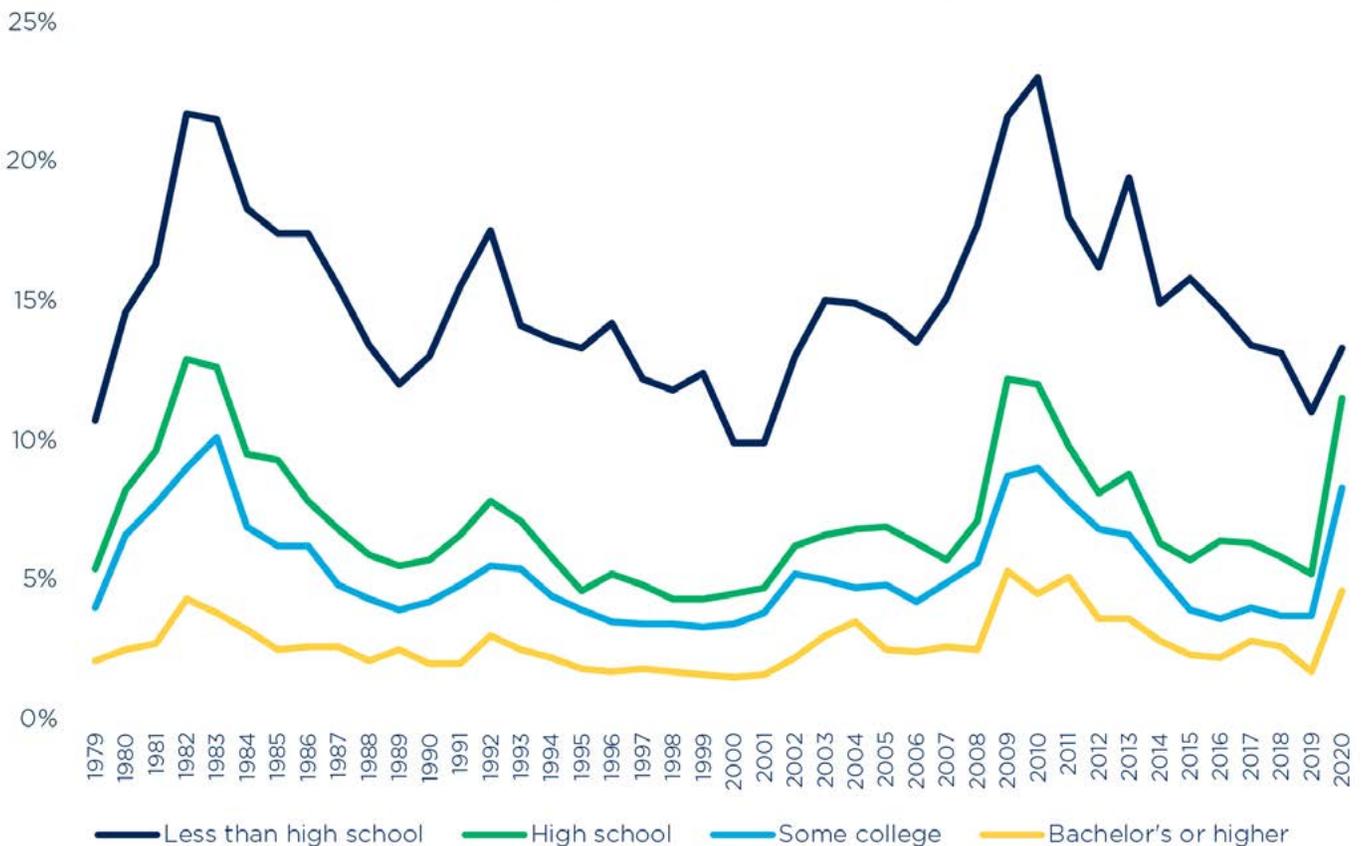
**Education**

Higher educational attainment provides workers with both increased job security and higher wages. From 1979 through 2020, unemployment for college grads never reached same-year levels for those with some college and no degree — a category that includes current students, those who completed a program such as a certificate that was less than a degree, and those who left college without finishing. The same trend held for Ohioans with some college as compared with high school graduates, and for high school graduates compared with those who have not completed a high school diploma. One notable observation from this trend is that unemployment levels moved in the same direction for all groups; that means this trend never shows a large-scale substitution of more highly-educated Ohioans for those with less education.

From 2019 to 2020, Ohioans with only a high school diploma experienced the sharpest spike in their unemployment rate, which more than doubled from 5.2% to 11.5%. This may indicate that the type of job held by high school graduates was more vulnerable to the COVID-19 downturn or public health closure. It could also reflect more highly educated workers having more opportunity to work from home.

**Figure 19**

**Ohioans with higher levels of education were less likely to be unemployed**  
**Ohio unemployment by education level, 1979-2020**



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau.

## Wages by education level

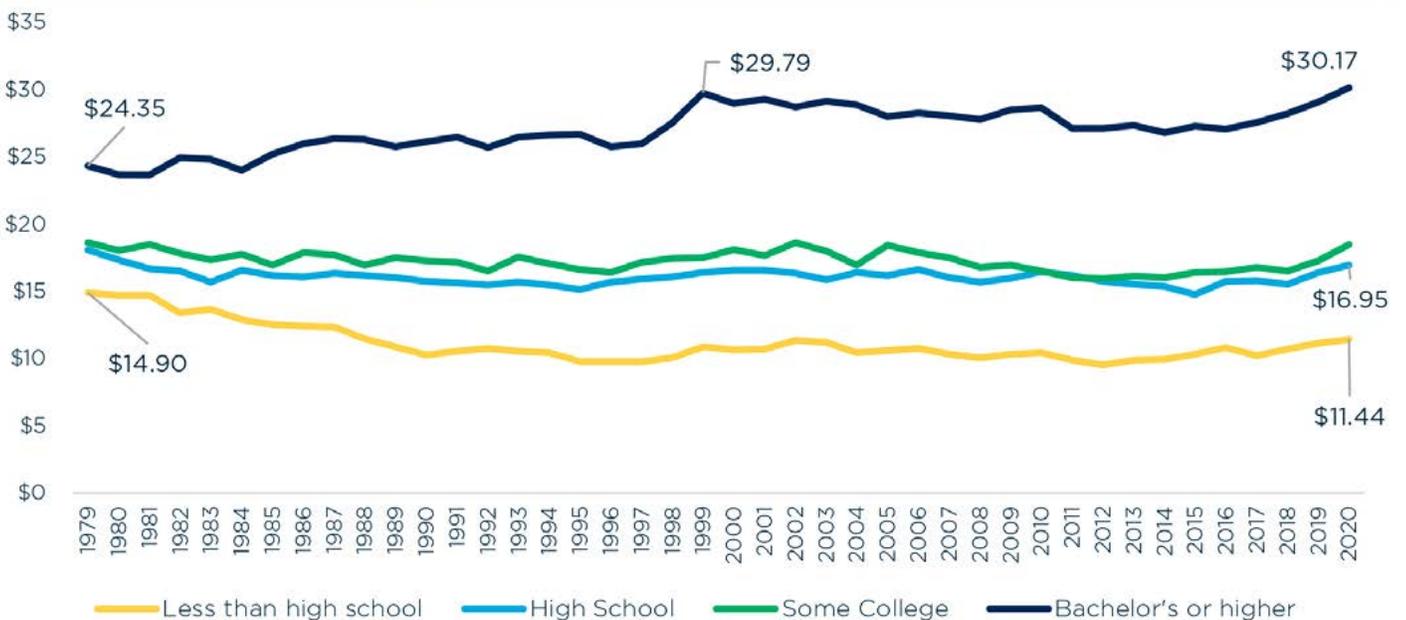
Hourly wages for bachelor’s degree holders in 2020 were the highest on record at \$30.17. Previously, their wages had peaked in 1999 at \$29.79. After a downward trend that reached bottom in 2014 and began to rise in 2017, wages for college grads have now seen three years of growth, at last surpassing their previous height. Once 2021 data are in, it will become clearer whether this is a continuing trend, or whether, like workers in general, lower-paid college grads were disproportionately laid off in ways that distorted wages for their cohort.

Since 1979, anti-worker policy choices have pushed down wages for people at every other level of educational attainment. High school graduates were paid \$18.09 in 1979 but \$16.95 in 2020. Wages for those with some college but less than a degree stayed nearly flat from \$18.63 to \$18.50. Those who have not completed high school had their wages pushed down the most, falling \$3.46 per hour from \$14.90 to \$11.44.

Figure 20

### 40 years of anti-worker policy hurt college grads the least, pushed wages down for working people in every other category

Wages by education level, 1979-2020



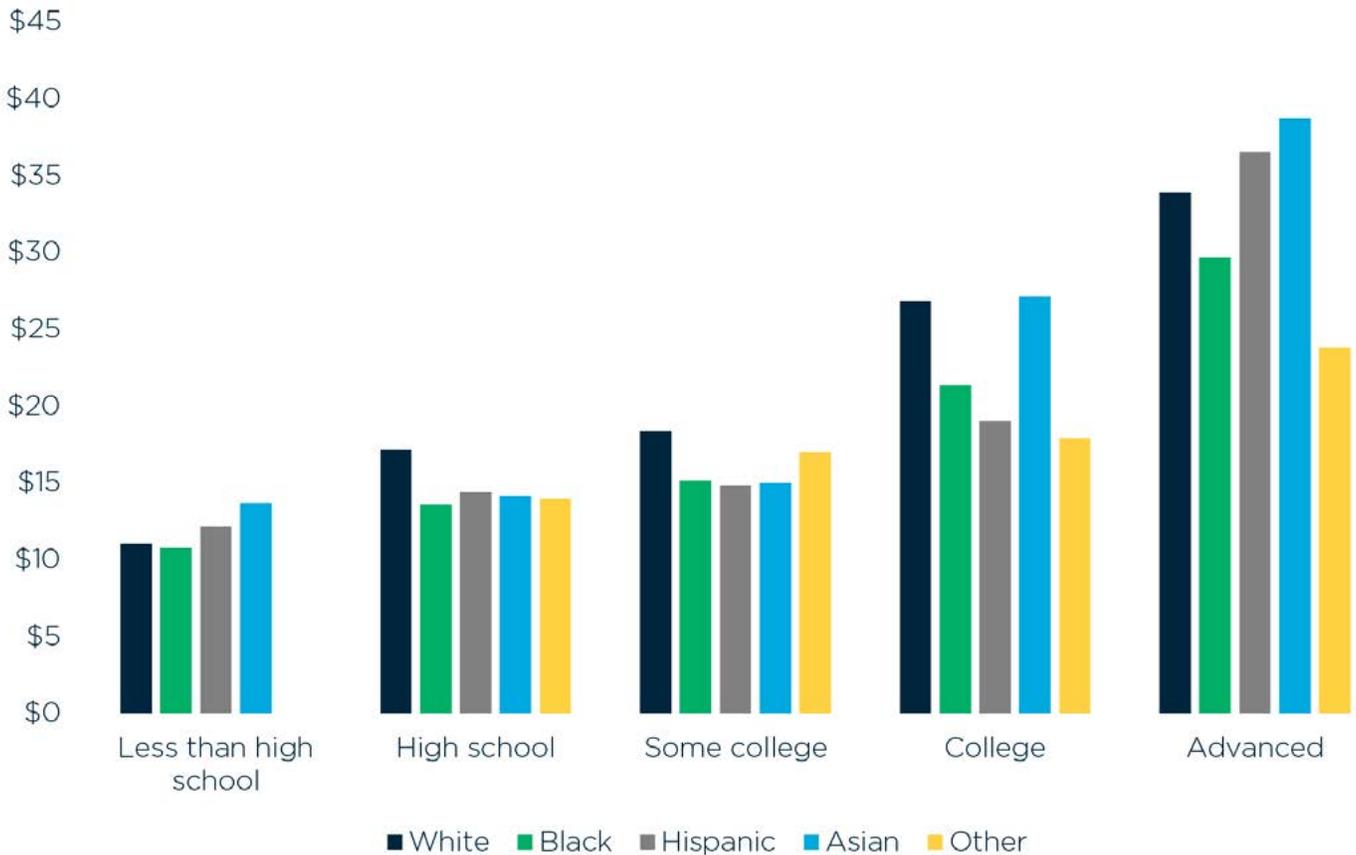
Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata, inflation adjusted to 2020 dollars.

Earning a college degree confers many advantages on Ohioans who can get one. It carried a wage premium in 2020 of \$13.22 per hour (78.0%) compared with a high school diploma alone, a rate that has more than doubled since 1979, when having a degree was worth an extra \$6.26 per hour (34.6%). All dollars are adjusted for inflation. Having a college degree insulated Ohioans against wage losses experienced by all other groups from 1979 to the mid-1990s, and has protected degree-holders from unemployment in every year data are available.

Yet racial disparities persist at all levels of educational attainment. In pooled data from 2018 to 2020, Black workers were paid less than comparably educated white counterparts at all levels of attainment. Higher educational attainment does not appear to narrow this gap: Black high school grads and college grads are both paid 79 cents on the dollar compared with comparably educated white counterparts. Among workers of color, only Asian Ohioans were routinely paid more than white workers, and this higher pay likely reflects restrictive immigration policies that tend to admit more privileged workers with more wealth and higher educational status.<sup>75</sup> Overall, these figures show an improvement over previous data when, from 2015 to 2017, Black high school graduates on average were paid \$1.81 an hour less than white workers who didn't finish high school.<sup>76</sup>

**Figure 21**

**Employers pay workers of different races differently at all education levels**  
Ohio wages by race and education level



Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata pooled years 2018-2020, inflation adjusted to 2020 dollars. Thanks to Julia Wolfe. \*Due to small sample size in the dataset, we are unable to report figures for indigenous Ohioans.

Though earning a college degree does not help Black Ohioans overcome the racism that keeps them from being paid fairly, it does confer a clear wage benefit compared with less educated Ohioans — in part because wages for those Ohioans have been driven down by anti-worker policies. Part of the solution must be to raise wages across all groups of workers, as discussed below. Another solution is to expand who has access to higher education. Ohioans from low- and middle-income backgrounds face significant affordability challenges to attaining a degree. These barriers exacerbate racial inequalities as Black and brown Ohioans are more likely to have modest means and struggle to afford college. For those who make it, student loan debt can hamper their ability to thrive; some 1.8 million Ohioans owe student loan debt, with an average debt around \$30,000.<sup>77</sup> Ohio lawmakers should substantially deepen investment the need-based aid program, the Ohio College Opportunity Grant,<sup>78</sup> and implement an equitable free college program through public universities and community colleges.<sup>79</sup>

## Unions

Because employers and workers bring highly imbalanced levels of power to bear when bargaining over wages, working conditions, and the way that work is structured, unions are a vital tool for working people to reclaim some bargaining power. Unfortunately, the same forces that make unions such an important tool for working people also make them harder to form and join. Policymakers, courts and other potential instruments of justice could mitigate this imbalance by bringing their own power to bear on the side of working people, but instead, many have allowed it to persist and helped it to grow worse.<sup>80</sup>

**Figure 22**



Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata.

Belonging to a union improves a worker’s wages, job security, workplace safety and countless other facets of work. Unions are both necessary and effective. Policymakers who want to improve workers’ quality of life must take steps to help more people in Ohio and across the U.S. to form and join them.<sup>81</sup>

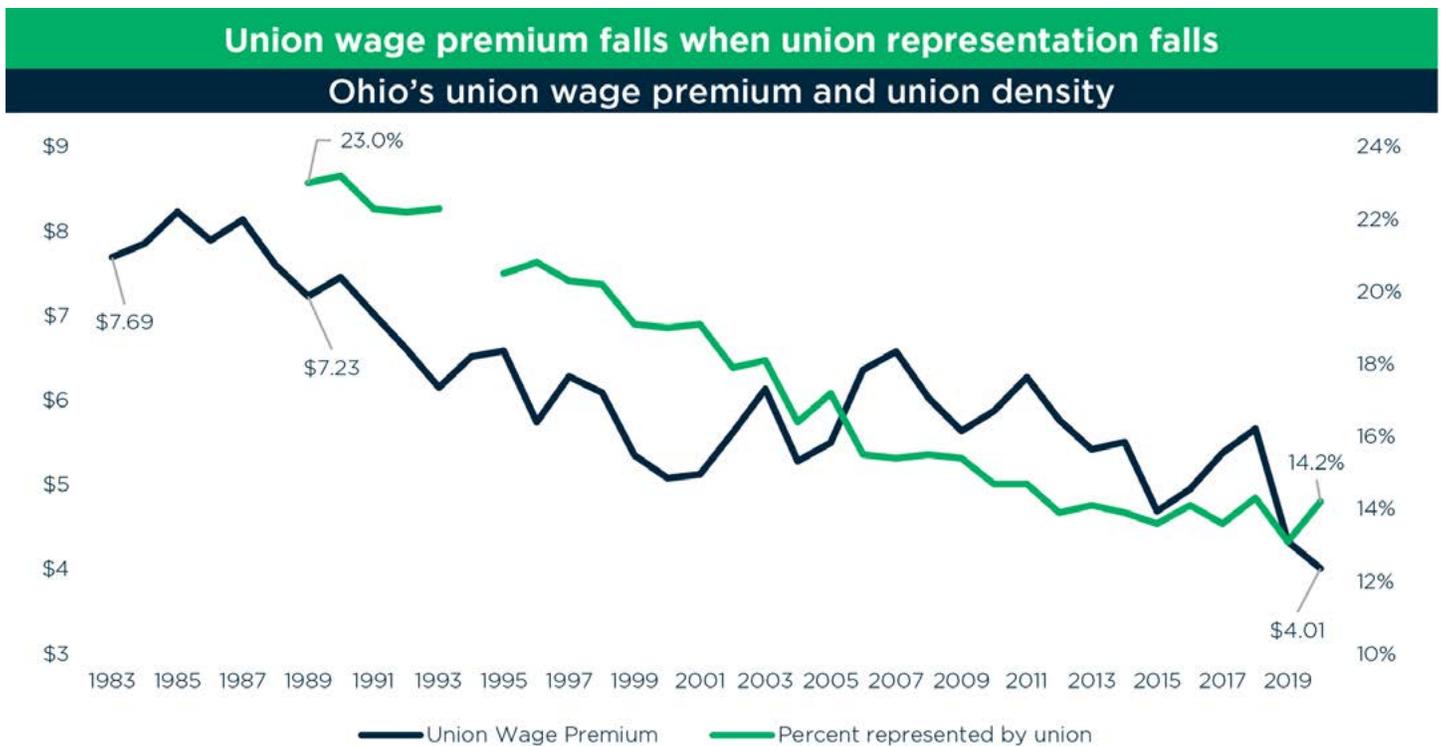
The typical Ohio worker represented by a union made \$23.47 per hour in 2020, compared with \$19.46 for non-union workers, a union wage premium of \$4.01 per hour (20.6%). Wages were not the only way unions made a difference in the working lives of Ohioans during the coronavirus pandemic. When COVID-19 destroyed millions

of U.S. jobs, unionized workers were able to negotiate for terms of furloughs or work-share arrangements that saved theirs.<sup>82</sup> Unions won hazard pay for Ohio prison guards;<sup>83</sup> West Coast grocery store workers;<sup>84</sup> and public sector workers in San Diego County.<sup>85</sup> Ohio unions launched a campaign last fall to make workplaces safer from COVID-19.<sup>86</sup>

Unions remain clearly a source of better wages, as Figure 22 shows. Yet as corporations and the politicians they back have steadily eroded the power of unions, the wage premium has fallen, too. Figure 23 shows how the Ohio union wage premium has declined with falling union density. From a 1985 peak of \$8.23 per hour (55.9%), when 23% of working Ohioans were represented by a union, the union wage premium fell by 2020 to its lowest level on record at \$4.01 (20.6%), when just 13.1% of Ohio workers had union representation. The union wage premium is not the total wage: It is the additional wage a worker is paid when that worker is represented by a union, compared with other workers who are not. By attacking the power of collective bargaining, corporations and policymakers effectively cut the union wage premium in half. Union membership as a share of employment had already been declining by the time the BLS began keeping state data; for the U.S., it was 34.8% in 1954.<sup>87</sup>

After falling to an all-time low of 13.1% in 2019, the share of Ohioans represented by unions rose to 14.2% in 2020. It is not clear from the data how much of this is due to increased union organizing, and how much is attributable to unionized workers being more successful in keeping their jobs.

**Figure 23**

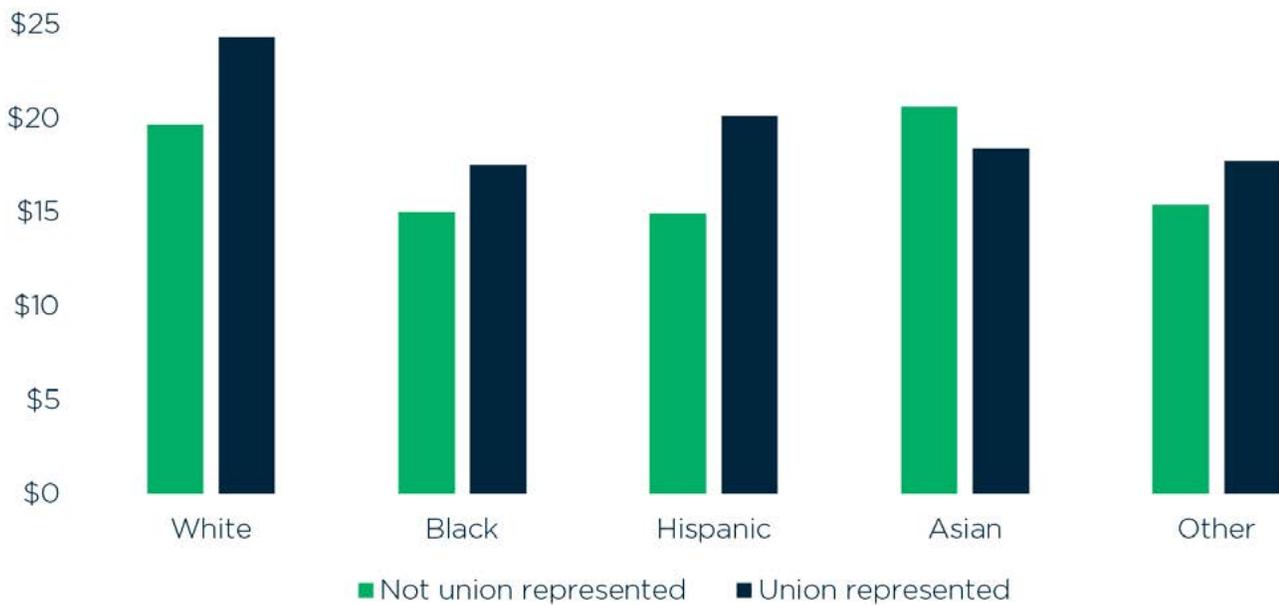


Source: Wages from EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata, inflation adjusted to 2020 dollars. Union representation from Bureau of Labor Statistics, Union Membership Historic Table, Ohio 1989-2020, Data unavailable for 1994. <https://bit.ly/2V3QL8H>.

Combined, these figures demonstrate that unions are a powerful force working people can wield in negotiations over wages and terms of work — but that that power is contingent. To be effective, unions must represent a significant share of workers, or at least a significant share in their field. Policymakers concerned with restoring a stable middle class and building an inclusive economy should prioritize making it easier for workers to form and join unions.

**Figure 24**

**Union membership improves wages for working people of all races**  
**Ohio union premium by race 2018-2020**



*Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey microdata pooled years 2018-2020, inflation adjusted to 2020 dollars. Thanks to Julia Wolfe.*

Being covered by a union resulted in a wage premium for workers across all races with the exception of Asian Ohioans, who, because of restrictive immigration policies described above, tend to skew highly educated.<sup>88</sup> If the figure controlled for education, we would expect to see union premiums for Ohioans across all races. For 2018 to 2020, Hispanic Ohioans — a close proxy for Latinx residents — had the highest overall and percentage wage premium at \$5.18 per hour (34.7%). White workers had the next highest premium. This sample was somewhat unusual in that, while Black Ohioans covered by a union benefit substantially, their union membership for these years does not narrow the wage gap compared with white counterparts. For women, the union premium is \$4.84 per hour (28.8%). For men, the premium is \$3.90 (19.3%).

# Recommendations



SEIU 1199

## Build worker power

### Help workers to form and join unions

For enough years during the mid-20th century, wage growth tracked so closely with economic growth that President Kennedy’s famous “rising tide lifts all boats” adage became synonymous with the age. That era drew closed so long ago that a new generation of workers has never heard this once-ubiquitous quote, much less can they identify with its meaning.

The fact that we saw this trend persist for some three decades is instructive. That wages tracked economic growth meant that by midcentury, we had at last found an engine for broadly shared and growing prosperity. Beginning in the 1970s, economic growth continued — albeit with the

disruption of stagflation — but wages flattened. This means that for workers, productivity is not the only ingredient to securing shared prosperity. The piece that has gone missing is bargaining power.

The federal Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act would make it easier for workers to form a union. Surveys have shown that most Americans support unions,<sup>89</sup> and that for every worker represented by a union, there are about four more who wish they were.<sup>90</sup> The trouble is that employers often fiercely resist workers’ efforts to form a union. In fact, they often do so illegally.<sup>91</sup> But they’re not often held accountable.

That's the problem the PRO Act addresses. Employers today use many strategies to undermine workers' efforts to organize. They drag out the process and delay elections to wear down workers' enthusiasm; under the PRO Act, workers with the NLRB would set election timelines.<sup>92</sup> Employers today force workers to listen to intimidating anti-union messages in "captive audience" meetings; the PRO Act would make them illegal. If an employer illegally fires a worker for unionizing, the worker has little recourse and getting justice can take months or years; the PRO Act would provide for court injunctions and immediate reinstatement of wrongfully fired workers. Today, employers rarely face consequences for fighting workers' right to unionize, even when they break the law; the PRO Act would give workers the right to sue their employers directly and make managers personally liable. This is only a sampling of issues addressed by the PRO Act.

Local policymakers can also make it easier for workers to form unions. Local governments can use public procurement and infrastructure building powers to mandate community benefit agreements (CBAs) for purchasing and construction contracts.<sup>93</sup> Ohio local governments will receive \$5.3 billion in American Rescue Plan funding. The infrastructure bill passed by the U.S. Senate would provide \$1 trillion more nationally.<sup>94</sup> CBAs are legally binding agreements that can require that the winners of public contracts agree not to oppose efforts by their workers to form a union; to pay a minimum wage of \$15 per hour and provide health benefits; ensure the workforce reflects the diversity of the community; ban the use of temporary workers for non-construction work; and implement "buy local, union and sustainable" policies.<sup>95</sup>

Being represented by a union confers a host of benefits on working people: better wages that are generally more equitable across race and gender; more likelihood of having paid sick time and family leave; more predictable scheduling; safer workplaces and more. For policymakers seeking to build a more just economy, making it easier to join or form a union is one of the most effective things they can do.

### **Pass a living minimum wage**

While helping working people form unions is a vital way policymakers can restore balance to employment relationships, setting a living wage floor is an even more direct way. Federal policymakers for decades allowed inflation to erode the value of the minimum wage, worth more than \$12 per hour at its peak in 1968. Ohio voters stepped in to restore some of that value and to peg the wage to inflation in 2006, but the Ohio minimum wage today is worth 28% less than it was at its height.<sup>96</sup> Working people who are paid the minimum wage have shared none of the growth that their work helped make possible over the past half-century. Instead, they have weaker wage protections than their grandparents enjoyed.

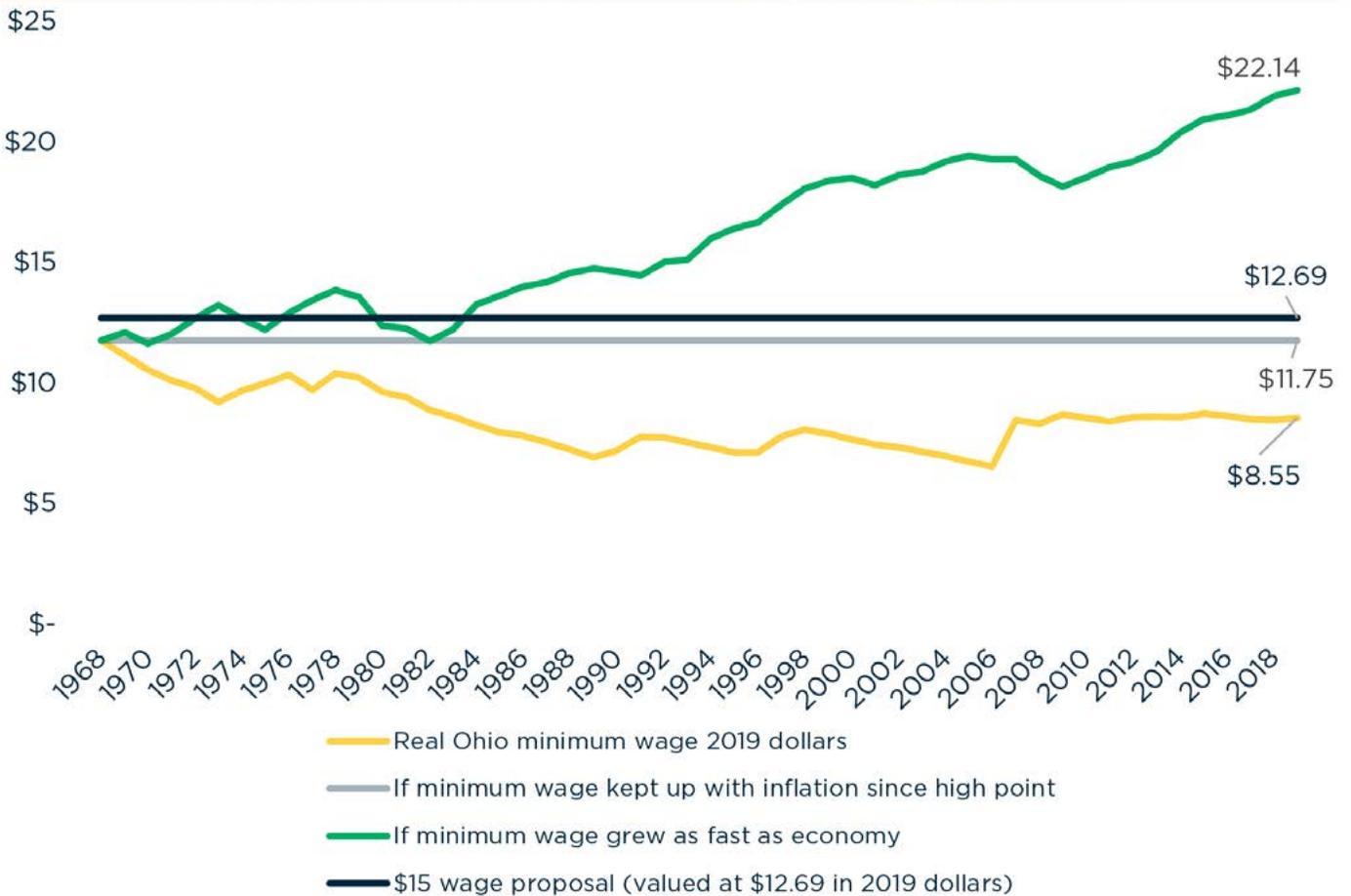
Had the Ohio minimum wage kept pace with economic growth, it would have exceeded \$22 per hour by 2019. For too long, many policymakers have thrown their weight behind corporations who already brought more power to bear in wage negotiations.

Everyone who works deserves a wage that covers the basic cost of living. In fact, no one should work for less than that, since the cost of living is the cost working people take on to supply their work to the labor market. Ohio

polycymakers should immediately follow the example of the nine states and D.C. — which together are home to 39% of Americans — that have raised their minimum wage to at least \$15 per hour. Policy Matters Ohio found that implementing a \$15 minimum wage by 2026 would benefit 1.56 million Ohioans.<sup>97</sup> By extending a single fair minimum wage to all Ohio workers — including those who now rely on tips for part of their pay — Ohio would generate \$6.1 billion in new annual wages, and the average impacted worker would take home an additional \$3,900 per year.

Figure 25

**A \$15 minimum wage would give workers more of the wealth they create**  
**Four models of Ohio’s minimum wage change over time**



Source: Policy Matters Ohio, using Ohio GDP from Bureau of Economic Analysis, minimum wage from Federal Reserve Economic Data. Note there is a discontinuity in GDP in 1997 due to change in the official measure. While these series should not be appended for purpose of measuring GDP levels, Policy Matters has linked them for benchmarking GDP change. 1969-1997 series has been multiplied by 1.0319 in keeping with the 3.19% higher figure in the 1997 measurement for the 1997-2019 data. This prevents overstating GDP growth. Effective minimum wage figure used for each year is the higher of the state or federal wage. Policy Matters has adjusted all figures for inflation to 2019 dollars using annualized CPI-U as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

## Build an equitable recovery

In the wake of the Great Recession, the wealthiest recovered almost immediately while low- and middle-income Ohioans languished for years. It took the job market seven years to recover the losses. Wealth became even more concentrated than before. We cannot repeat the policy mistakes that led to this failure.

Continued investment is needed to ensure that all Ohioans are included in recovery from the coronavirus recession. This must include an expanded Child Tax Credit and other income supports; affordable health care; paid family and medical leave to recover from an illness, care for a loved one, or welcome a new child; deep public investment in child care; and a robust safety net to help families with food or rent if they need it.<sup>98</sup> Ohio will receive an estimated \$31 billion in federal funds, in the form of stimulus checks for low- and middle-income residents; enhanced unemployment benefits for Ohioans whose jobs were destroyed by COVID-19; and money for public transit, schools, universities and college students; hospitals and health care centers; child care and other essential workers, and more.<sup>99</sup>

Ohio's state and local governments can direct federal stimulus dollars in ways that support working people. The American Rescue Plan alone sends \$5.4 billion to the state and \$5.3 billion to local governments over the next two years to help drive recovery. It should be used to support an inclusive recovery and to leverage the historic opportunity to address

long-standing inequities exposed and made worse by COVID-19. Regrettably, policymakers have directed a majority of the \$2.7 billion the state is getting this year to repay debt accumulated to the federal government to pay unemployment benefits. This is misdirected, since instead of providing pandemic relief to Ohioans, its main effect will be to reduce future business taxes.<sup>100</sup> This leaves local governments to step up and protect working people where the state has failed. Local governments could provide bonus or hazard pay to essential workers; require any businesses receiving ARP dollars certify compliance with labor laws; fund workplace rights enforcement and endow a fund to provide working people with workplace rights education and legal services; and mandate Community Benefit Agreements for infrastructure projects that require employers pay good wages and respect workers' right to join a union.<sup>101</sup>

Other top priorities should be to fund the 34-recommendation blueprint laid out by the Minority Health Strike Force to improve the health of Black, brown and Indigenous people; to support those families still struggling with lost income and jobs; and to make strategic investments in quality education, safe communities and economic dignity and stability for all.<sup>102</sup>

Combined with a focused effort to build worker power, these policies will help ensure that everyone is included in the recovery.

## Conclusion

More than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now possible to draw more conclusions about how the pandemic and recession played out in the lives of Ohioans, to better anticipate its long-term implications, and to use the lessons to implement better policies that will enable all Ohioans who have avoided or survived COVID-19 to recover from this crisis and emerge stronger than before.

We can't return to normal: Normal got us here, where the job market languishes as the stock market surges, and where those least resourced to withstand the impacts of COVID-19 are the most exposed and bear the greatest losses.

COVID-19 has shown us how much we rely on our fellow Ohioans who have worked through the crisis on the frontlines, taking on risk to themselves and their families to help all of us through. Frontline workers and all Ohioans who work deserve safe workplaces, a voice on the job, and pay that dignifies their work and meets the cost of living.

COVID-19 is also a wakeup call. The unprecedented fiscal stimulus with which federal policymakers met it is a reminder that government is the vehicle we use to solve problems and craft better communities together. When used to those ends, it is an incredibly powerful force. That stimulus is also an historic chance to craft a state where all Ohioans can thrive, as our new and lasting status quo. We cannot miss that opportunity.

## Acknowledgements

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