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Research February 18, 2021

Study Estimates Excess Deaths in US from COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment

Large Disparities Seen by Education, Race, Age and Gender

By [Laura Kurtzman](#)

Under any circumstances, job losses can lead to excess deaths from suicide, substance abuse and the loss of access to medical care. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, unemployment in the U.S. has reached highs not seen since the Great Depression, officially peaking at 14.7 percent in April 2020.

UC San Francisco researchers now have an estimate of how many people may have died as a result of pandemic-related unemployment, a number that adds to the nearly 500,000 deaths that have been directly attributed to the virus itself.



and deaths, but also addressing indirect social and economic consequences," said [Ellicott Matthay](#), PhD, a postdoctoral scholar with the [Center for Health and Community at UCSF](#) and first author of the paper published Feb. 18, 2021, in the [American Journal of Public Health](#).

The research team projected that the spring 2020 spike in unemployment in the United States would lead to 30,231 excess deaths among 25- to 64-year-olds in the ensuing 12 months. As with the deaths that were directly caused by the virus, those linked to unemployment have taken a disproportionate toll on Black people, men, older people (in the case of workers, those who were 45 and up), and especially those with the least education.

While about 37 percent of Americans aged 25 to 64 years have a high school education or less, this group accounted for a startling 72 percent of the deaths the researchers attributed to pandemic-related unemployment. Likewise, while Black people make up 12 percent of the working-age population, they comprised 19 percent of the projected excess deaths.

The 30,231 figure represents what the researchers said is their best estimate, based on recent studies of the risk of death associated with unemployment, as well as unemployment data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and mortality data from the National Center for Health Statistics during the pandemic.

Depending on the assumptions they put into their model, the number of deaths could be much higher or lower. If they assumed the April 2020 unemployment rate was just 10 percent, and that unemployment was half as harmful as has been seen in past recessions, their estimate fell to 8,315.





highest estimate using a different definition of who was participating in the labor force, and also that the effects of losing a job in the pandemic were three times as deadly, their estimate rose to 201,968.

The researchers emphasized that some excess deaths are preventable if the proper policies are put in place.

“We urgently need policies that protect workers and lessen the harms of unemployment, particularly policies that are crafted to support those experiencing the unjust double burden of both COVID-19 and unemployment,” Matthay said.

Authors: Matthay was joined in the study by [Kate A. Duchowny](#), PhD, MPH; and [Alicia R. Riley](#), PhD, MPH, both of UCSF’s Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics; and Sandro Galea, MD, DrPh, of the Boston University School of Public Health.

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