

Revaluation of working conditions and wages for essential workers

Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, EU Member States ensured that sectors and occupations classified as essential continued to provide the goods and services necessary for maintaining basic economic, social and health facilities. Frontline workers in these sectors and occupations were exempted from confinement measures and movement restrictions and often had to work in face-to-face situations.

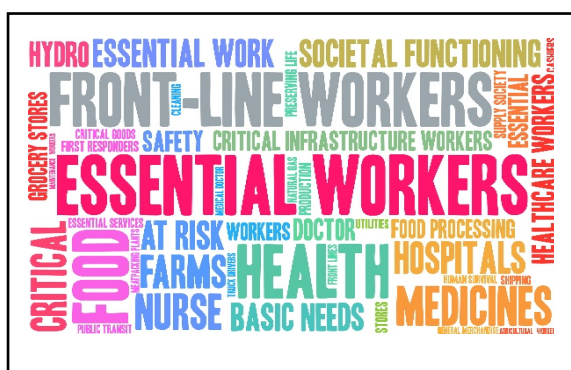
The [original full study](#)¹ explores the working conditions and risks faced by essential frontline workers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on women and migrant workers in low-paid, frontline occupations. It also provides an overview of EU and national measures adopted to support these workers during the pandemic. The study is based on desk research, a web-survey, interviews, and five country case studies (Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Romania).

Check out the [original full study](#) by scanning this QR code!



Key findings

In 2020 there were almost 79 million workers in essential occupations in the EU (42 % of total EU employment). Essential occupations vary in terms of tasks performed and skills required. High-skilled occupations account for almost half of all essential workers (49.5 %), medium-skilled ones for 32 %, and low-skilled occupations for 18 %. Women and foreign-born workers represent a relatively high proportion of essential workers in low-skilled occupations (54 % and 28 % respectively). The diversity of essential occupations and sectors is reflected in their very different working conditions, with a significant share (around 20 %) experiencing poor working conditions and low pay compared to the average employed population.



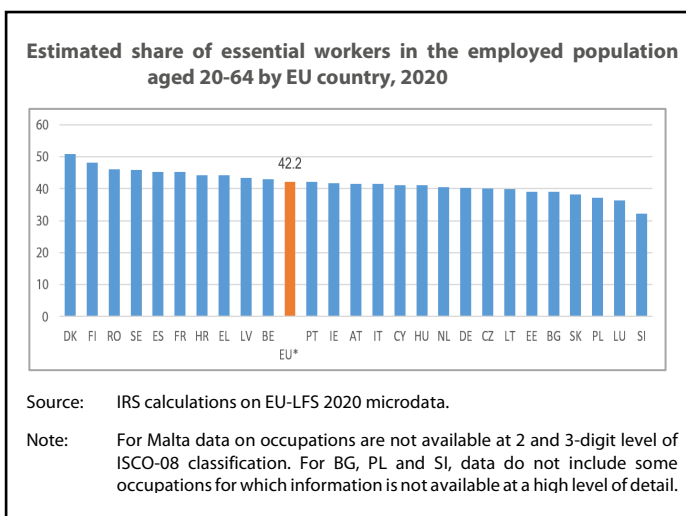
Frontline essential workers showed a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and higher mortality rates than non-essential workers, especially in the first wave of the pandemic. In addition, growing demand for labour and pre-existing labour shortages have increased workloads in sectors such as health and social care, agriculture, and road transport. Examples from country case studies also show that the pandemic has exacerbated violence against, harassment of and stigmatisation of frontline essential workers as potential infectors. Women and migrant essential workers were particularly hit compared to other essential workers. Women in frontline essential occupations faced

significant difficulties with work-life balance during lockdowns. Migrant workers, over-represented in occupations at high risk of contagion, have been more exposed than natives to the risk of contracting the virus. Their often precarious or irregular working and living conditions have moreover limited access to healthcare provisions, social protection, and COVID-19-specific financial support measures.



Policy responses. Most European countries introduced temporary emergency measures to support the working conditions and work-life balance of essential workers, although often not covering workers in non-standard or irregular positions. Other measures addressed labour shortages to ensure continuity of services through: (i) the mobilisation of a larger workforce, with derogations from migration and cross-country mobility ceilings, and emergency recruitment procedures; (ii) the remuneration and provision of rewards for essential workers; and (iii) temporary derogations from working time and leave provisions.

The social partners have had a crucial role in ensuring the implementation and enforcement of essential workers' rights on the ground. However, their action was limited in those sectors and occupations where non-standard or irregular positions are predominant and union coverage and collective bargaining are low or absent, like the agriculture, transport and food delivery, long-term care and personal care services.



At EU level, regulations and initiatives on the cross-border mobility of third-country and EU nationals employed in essential occupations have proven particularly relevant, although the pandemic has highlighted their shortcomings when it comes to supporting the working conditions and protecting the health of foreign-born essential workers.

Policy implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the structural weaknesses of essential sectors and occupations, and gaps in social protection systems, health and safety regulations, and regulations governing cross-border mobility and economic migration. To ensure the resilience and capacity of EU countries to face current and future emergencies, it is therefore necessary to: i) improve the social and economic recognition and working conditions of essential occupations to attract new workers and enhance retention; ii) ensure fair recruitment practices, working conditions, and effective social and health protection for all workers, including cross-border and migrant workers; iii) increase investments in essential sectors and occupations; iv) support social dialogue and social partners' action to provide all essential workers with a collective voice and support fair working conditions and v) adopt sector-specific regulations and policies to support the working conditions of essential workers in specific sectors and occupations.

The EU has a key role in supporting better working conditions and greater investments in essential sectors and occupations, for example through NextGenerationEU funding. Existing legal and policy instruments should however be better enforced and take into account the specificities of essential occupations and the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. An important issue is the regulation of cross-border mobility and the working and living conditions of third-country nationals and intra-EU mobile workers, as well as tackling undeclared or irregular work which is still widespread in some essential sectors.

¹ Samek Lodovici Manuela et al. 2021, *Revaluation of working conditions and wages for essential workers*. Publication for the committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/695491/IPOL_STU\(2021\)695491_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/695491/IPOL_STU(2021)695491_EN.pdf).

Disclaimer and copyright. The opinions expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the European Parliament. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy. © European Union, 2022.

© Image on page 1 used under licence from Adobe Stock

IP/A/EMPL/2022-06; Manuscript completed: January 2022; Date of publication: January 2022

Administrator responsible: Helen HOFFMANN; Editorial assistant: Mina DRAGANSKA

Contact: Poldep-Economy-Science@ep.europa.eu.

This document is available on the internet at: www.europarl.europa.eu/supporting-analyses.

Print ISBN 978-92-846-8911-8 | doi:10.2861/610666 | QA-07-22-019-EN-C

PDF ISBN 978-92-846-8910-1 | doi:10.2861/259816 | QA-07-22-019-EN-N