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Left Behind: Yachts, Dinghies, and Perceptions of Social Inequality in COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about how portrayals of American unity (i.e. “we’re all in this together”) have been received by essential workers on the front lines of the COVID risk divide, and how the pandemic may have contributed to perceptions of class inequality among lower-income workers. In this paper, we draw upon 192 in-depth interviews with precarious and gig-based workers in New York City. We find that during the height of the first wave of the pandemic, precarious workers often expressed frustration over class-based inequalities and antagonism toward elites. Many respondents expressed significant skepticism toward messages that the pandemic has brought Americans together. Instead, workers identified two distinct, class-based realities in New York: elite Americans are able to socially-distance in “mansions,” or on “yachts,” while precarious workers struggled to weather the storm in “dinghies.” Likewise, workers felt “abandoned” by wealthy owners and managers, who fled the city to socially-distanced homes in beach communities and surrounding suburbs. Our findings suggest that low-wage, high-risk workers articulate complex conceptualizations of inequality and convey grievances toward elites during the pandemic. This study contributes to broader literature on perceived inequality, the rise of noxious work, and the social consequences of COVID-19.

KEYWORDS

Noxious contract; coronavirus; COVID-19; class conflict; social inequality; risk

Introduction

Despite growing media attention toward income and wealth inequality, it remains unclear how Americans have made sense of socioeconomic disparities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though recent research on the effects of the pandemic on American social and political attitudes indicates that the pandemic has affected Americans’ beliefs about various forms of inequality (Chelsea, Paul Dimaggio, and Shepherd 2021; Hana, MacKendrick, and Cristina Mora 2020; Mijs, de Koster, and van der Waal 2022), most scholars have focused on how the pandemic has intersected with political identities to transform personal beliefs. As the pandemic reorganized the everyday experience of work, class remains a crucial and underexplored avenue for understanding how the coronavirus has affected Americans’ perceptions of inequality.

Economic inequality, defined as the unequal distribution of income and wealth among a population, has been rising in the United States since the 1970s (Neckerman and Torche 2007; Piketty 2014). While Americans express concern over growing inequality, most

underestimate inequality and assume upward mobility is typical (Hauser and Norton 2017; McCall 2013). A strong and growing belief in the meritocratic nature of American society acts as a means of justifying rising income inequality (Mijs 2021). How has the pandemic shaped these beliefs? As everyone is at risk of infection from COVID-19, the pandemic could be viewed as a “great equalizer” (Zakaria 2020). However, this risk is not evenly distributed among the population, with working-class communities especially vulnerable to the health and economic risks associated with the virus (Hawkins 2022). As noted by Grusky et al. (2021), the pandemic has created a new risk divide between the low-wage face-to-face workers who bear a disproportionate portion of the health and economic risks of the virus, and their white collar and professional counterparts who are able to safely work from home. This risk divide was even more stark in New York City in the early months of the pandemic as wealthy and upper middle class workers fled, while working class New Yorkers were stranded in the epicenter of the outbreak (Tully and Stowe 2020). In this paper, we ask, how do the precarious workers that were left-behind – both physically and financially – perceive inequality during the pandemic? Do precarious workers espouse concern over growing class inequality and social divisions, or do they express “stoic fortitude” (Grusky et al. 2021) and a perception that we’re “in this together”?

For this project, we draw on in-depth remote interviews and an online survey with nearly 200 precarious and gig-based workers conducted from April through June 2020. This time frame coincides with the first peak of the outbreak in the New York Metropolitan area, when half the world was under a stay-at-home order (Sandford 2020), and when still-employed precarious workers were often deemed essential and required to continue working (Nunn, O’Donnell, and Shambaugh 2020).

We find that contrary to the stoic fortitude and recognition that “we’re all in this together” among workers found by Grusky et al. (2021), most respondents expressed significant skepticism toward messages that the pandemic has brought Americans together. Workers were quick to identify that the lived experience of the pandemic was different for precarious and gig-based workers in comparison to their upper class professional peers. They repeatedly identified two distinct realities in New York City: Elite Americans are able to socially-distance in “mansions,” or on “yachts,” while precarious workers struggled to weather the storm in “dinghies,” as one worker put it. Participants also identified components of the noxious contract – where workers are pressured to accept risky working conditions because they lack negotiating power and resources – and expressed concern over the increased risks they faced during the pandemic (Grusky et al. 2021). In the following section, we frame our work within the larger literature on perceptions of inequality, workplace risk, and the rise of the noxious contract.

Literature Review

Perceptions of Inequality

Extensive research has documented the causes and consequences of inequality in the U.S. (Saez and Zucman 2014). However, less is known about how perceptions of economic disparities may have been affected by new class-based inequalities introduced during the pandemic. While COVID-19’s disruption of everyday life has been drastic and devastating, crises carry the potential for new opportunities to challenge long-standing and novel forms

of inequality in our institutions (Connell 2022; Williams 2021). For instance, individuals exposed to information about how the pandemic has worsened socioeconomic disparities have been found to be more likely to support measures to address inequality (Mijis, de Koster, and van der Waal 2022). The pandemic may therefore represent an opportunity to challenge new and long-standing forms of inequality.

Perceived inequality, rather than empirical measures of inequality, predicts support for redistributive policies (Engelhardt and Wagener 2014; García-Castro et al. 2021). Individuals who accurately perceive inequality and are concerned about rising inequality tend to be more supportive of graduated income taxes and government transfer (Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; McCall and Kenworthy 2009). Events which expose or heighten economic inequality, such as the pandemic, may therefore have important implications for future policy action.

Americans tend to underestimate inequality, assuming that wealth and income are somewhat evenly distributed across the population (Hauser and Norton 2017). Additionally, Americans overestimate the opportunity for upward mobility compared to Europeans (Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso 2018; Manza and Brooks 2020). Perceptions of national-level inequality are based, in part, on inequality in the local community (Cruces, Perez-Truglia, and Tetaz 2013; Ping and Garand 2010). Residents of states with high rates of income inequality are more likely to perceive inequality compared to those in states with lower levels of inequality (Ping and Garand 2010). Position in the social hierarchy also shapes perceptions of inequality (Grimes 1989). Those with higher levels of education and income are less concerned with inequality, which Corneo and Peter Grüner (2002) call the *homo-economicus effect*. Economic elites are less likely to accurately perceive inequality, be concerned with its expansion, or support redistributive policies (Hecht 2021). Liberals express more concern over inequality than conservatives (Chambers, Swan, and Heesacker 2015). Similarly, women and racial minorities are more likely to perceive inequality negatively and endorse redistributive policies (Kim and Lee 2018).

These patterns are paralleled in beliefs about the meritocratic nature of American society, with younger, wealthier white Americans more likely to see the U.S. as meritocratic than members of minority groups (Reynolds and Xian 2014; Xian and Reynolds 2017). However, belief in structural impediments to economic mobility has declined among racial minorities since the 1970s (Hunt 2007) and racial minorities are more likely to endorse both individualistic and structural reasoning in explaining economic inequality (Hunt 1996). In general, those who perceive society as mostly fair and meritocratic, and believe poor work ethic explains poverty, are less concerned about inequality and less supportive of governmental redistribution (Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Bénabou and Tirole 2006; Manza and Brooks 2020).

Among working class individuals, attitudes toward economic inequality are informed by their self-perception of their own social standing relative to others (Wilkinson 2002). Dolan (2007), for instance, finds that working class men's negative feelings toward income inequality stemmed from their experiences with mistreatment by those with higher incomes rather than the actual material difference in economic standing. Similarly, Roscigno and Hodson (2004) observe that workers' individual and collective acts of class conflict in the workplace are often predicated on experiencing consistent negative interactions with supervisors. Working class individuals are, however, more likely to compare themselves to other individuals with lower or similar incomes rather than those with greater incomes (MacLeod

et al. 2005). Avoiding evaluating their own economic positions relative to those with higher incomes acts as a means of boosting self-esteem, as working class individuals tend to view personal traits as the determining factors in economic outcomes.

Much of the survey data used to gauge perceptions of inequality fails to capture the complex and contradictory ways that people make sense of inequality and social divisions more broadly (Irwin 2016; McCall 2013). Recent experimental studies have been fruitful in drawing causal inferences about the link between exposure to information and perceived inequality (Kuziemko et al. 2015). However, fewer studies have examined the context in which assessments of social division are constructed, and the evidence provided to support these evaluations. For example, Irwin (2016) found that individuals express complex, sophisticated, and well-formed ideas about social hierarchies and the larger structural and historical forces shaping inequality.

Precarious Work and the Rise of the Noxious Contract

Neoliberal policies in Western nations have shrunk the number of stable, well-paying employment opportunities and forced a significant number of workers into low-paying, insecure work (Standing 2014). This group of workers, which Standing (2014:10) names the “precariat,” are defined by their reliance on, “temporary jobs; labor as casuals, part-timers, or intermittently for labor brokers or employment agencies” and consequently lack the economic security and long-term benefits of stable work (Phillipson 2015). While some scholars have questioned whether the precariat are a substantively distinct class (Wright 2016b), the general trend toward precarity within the workforce prior to the pandemic is well-documented.

Fudge and Owens (2006) describe precarious work as poorly-paid work that “departs from the normative model of the standard employment relationship” and cannot support a household. During stable economic times, precarious workers often experience low incomes and high levels of workplace instability (Glavin, Filipovic, and van der Maas 2019). This is especially true of “gig workers,” individuals who use digital “platforms” to find temporary, flexible work which lacks the stability and security of long-term employment (Vallas and Schor 2020). While some individuals use gig work as a means of supplementing their primary income, individuals dependent on the platform economy experience greater precarity due to a lack of employment benefits, increased reliance on positive feedback from customers, and report a sense of being stigmatized by the work (Ravenelle 2019; Rosenblat 2018). Workers who depend upon the gig economy as their primary source of income consequently report higher rates of psychological distress than other workers (Glavin and Schieman 2022; Schor et al. 2020). Meanwhile, during the pandemic, workers for grocery stores, drug stores, and food delivery services were deemed “essential” and asked to continue working, even though their face-to-face jobs may have carried increased risk of exposure to the virus.

Face-to-face workers in low-wage positions during the pandemic are engaging in what Grusky et al. (2021) call a “noxious contract,” in which workers are pressured to adopt risky working conditions because they lack the power and resources necessary to negotiate safer terms. This concentration of economic power is inherent to the capitalist system: employers and privileged employees are able to restructure the class system and organization of work to fit their collective needs (Wright 2016a). Structural forces often override even the moral

concerns of employers and managers when they are faced with dilemmas regarding placing employees in risky or unsafe working conditions (Hadjisolomou and Simone 2020). In the case of the pandemic, this power disparity has resulted in the restructuring of class around the unequal distribution of COVID-related risks and led to the rise of “noxious markets” (Pendyal 2021; Satz 2010).

Markets are considered noxious if they cause extreme harm to individuals in the exchange, harm to society, consist of exchanges between parties with unequal agency and knowledge, and exploit the vulnerability of a party (Satz 2010:97). While classic examples of noxious markets include prostitution, child labor, drugs, and human organs (Satz 2010; Sandel 2013), scholars have extended the concept to the media (Hendy 2013); private security (Loader, Goold, and Thumala 2014); and the “sharing” and gig economy (Slee 2017). The exchange of labor for high-risk, low-reward work subjects precarious workers to low wages and unsafe conditions, may further contribute to the rise of the precariat (Standing 2014), and may generate animosity between workers and elites who benefit from their services (Grusky et al. 2021; Slee 2017).

Labor markets during the pandemic have reflected many of the qualities of noxious markets as described by Satz (2010). COVID-related shutdowns, partnered with stay-at-home orders, led to a service economy meltdown. More than a million New Yorkers soon found themselves unemployed (McGeehan 2020), but the state unemployment system was woefully unprepared and applicants faced extensive delays, with some workers turning to gig work as a “side hustle safety net” (Ravenelle, Kowalski, and Janko 2021). As a result, for some workers, the choices made during the pandemic – such as taking jobs in food delivery or as grocery store essential workers – depended on “other market choices being blocked” (Satz 2010:101).

Based on this literature, Grusky et al. (2021) outline a number of facets of noxious contract work that increase the likelihood that high-risk workers develop class-based resentment including: if the risk involves significant harm, the level of risk is ambiguous, the work disproportionately burdens minority groups, the benefactor of their work is easily distinguishable, the risk is undertaken to achieve superfluous goals, or if the worker is potentially coerced into the position, (Grusky et al. 2021:3). The early days of the pandemic increased the opportunity for such noxious work, as employment became increasingly scarce and workers may have felt coerced into accepting high-risk positions out of necessity. While Grusky et al. (2021) found that the dominant sentiment among working and middle-class workers were those of “fortitude and stoicism,” their nationwide sample includes areas where the overall caseload and perceived risk of COVID was lower. Little is known about how lower-income workers located in an area with a high risk of COVID perceive their work during pandemic times.

Case Selection

As the epicenter of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States (Sandford 2020) and one of the most stratified cities in the United States, New York City is an ideal case for understanding how the pandemic-era class structure has influenced perceptions of inequality. The pandemic was particularly devastating to the New York community, with 23% of New Yorkers reporting that they knew at least one individual who had died of COVID-19 by mid-May 2020 (Czeisler et al. 2020). Working class New Yorkers bore the brunt of the virus, as cases were disproportionately high in neighborhoods with a large

concentration of essential workers (Phuong Do and Frank 2020). The experience of working through the grim and tumultuous early phase of COVID-19 was therefore highly salient for many members of New York's working class.

The pervasive and highly visible economic inequality in New York also strengthens its utility as a case for understanding how COVID-19 has affected perceptions of inequality. The city contains many highly populated and socioeconomically diverse neighborhoods, such as Brooklyn and Queens, where individuals across the income spectrum interact and inequality is highly visible. For instance, the top 1% of earners in Manhattan make 113 times the income of the bottom 99% (Sommeiller and Price 2018). New York is home to the largest number of billionaires in the globe (103) and some of the tallest, most expensive luxury residences, referred to as "Billionaires' Row," where single units have sold for over \$27 million (Marino 2016). The cost of living continues to outpace workers' wages, whose earnings have stagnated in the last decade (Zessoules and Madowitz 2018). Despite increasing integration, New York City is highly segregated by race and ethnicity, with 85% of blocks dominated by the same racial and ethnic group since 2000 (Alba and Romalewski 2012).

Research Methodology

The interviews and surveys informing this project were conducted between April and June 2020, when New York City was at the height of the first wave of the pandemic, and widely considered to be an epicenter of the outbreak (Sandford 2020). The data in this paper is part of a multi-phase panel study on the impact of the pandemic on gig-based and precarious workers. In each phase of the study, all participants are asked to complete a short survey in addition to being interviewed.

We recruited precarious and gig-based workers through multiple advertisements on Craigslist (listed under both gig and full-time work); posts on New York City-focused Reddit; posts on Facebook groups for gig workers, unemployed workers, and creative professionals; and snowball sampling. Workers were eligible if they utilized gig-platforms for work, or were currently or recently in precarious jobs such as retail, restaurant, or freelance work. Utilizing both advertising and referral sampling provided the research team the opportunity to speak with respondents with similar experiences across platforms, strengthening the team's ability to conclude that theoretical saturation had been reached.

Our use of interviews, averaging almost 90 minutes each, supplements previous survey-based research on changing perceptions of inequality during the pandemic (Chelsea, Paul Dimaggio, and Shepherd 2021; Hana, MacKendrick, and Cristina Mora 2020; Mijs, de Koster, and van der Waal 2022) by providing rich, qualitative data capturing the emotions and thoughts of precarious workers. During a time in which collecting in-person qualitative data collection has been difficult or impossible, remote interviews are uniquely able to illuminate how the workers most affected by the onset of the COVID-19 crisis have translated their lived experiences into new understandings of inequality and their own position in the class hierarchy.

The telephone interviews focused on open-ended questions: the worker's employment situation before the pandemic, and their current income source(s); how they became involved with gig-based or precarious work and the challenges they experienced continuing to work, looking for work, or applying for unemployment; and their perceptions of how

platforms, clients, and/or employers were handling the coronavirus and related restrictions. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using flexible coding (Deterding and Waters 2018), an iterative coding method that is well suited for collaborative and remote analysis of in-depth interviews. Surveys are utilized to ensure a more efficient gathering of demographic data and also for more detailed financial information that workers may need additional time to gather (e.g. monthly expenses, monthly income from various sources, number of months of savings [if any] in reserve).

Surveys were utilized to ensure a more efficient gathering of demographic data and also for more detailed financial information that workers may need additional time to gather (e.g. monthly expenses, monthly income from various sources, number of months of savings [if any] in reserve). The surveys are also used to quantitatively measure worker perceptions regarding their health risks at home and at work, access to personal protective equipment (PPE), concerns about the long-term impact of COVID on the economy and society, and self-rated political ideology, and to track the financial implications experienced by workers from COVID-19, including their current work status and impact on their income, over time (the focus of a future paper). Respondents were assigned pseudonyms and each was given a \$25 gift card incentive.

One hundred and ninety-two workers completed the interview and survey, including 60 creative freelancers; 28 non-medical low-wage workers; 33 restaurant workers; and three truck/warehouse workers. Fifty-three gig workers were included from platforms such as TaskRabbit, UberEats, Instacart, and Lyft, in addition to 15 non-platform based gig workers who secured work via websites such as Craigslist (see Figure 1).

	On-platform	Off-platform
1099 workers	Food delivery (e.g. UberEats, Grubhub, DoorDash, Postmates) (24); Dog walkers (i.e. Wag.com & Rover) (8); TaskRabbit workers (9); Uber/Lyft Via drivers (6); Shopper/pickers (i.e. Instacart & Shipt) (6); n: 53	Creative freelancers in film production, acting, modeling, photography, etc (60); Non-platform based gig workers (i.e. CraigsList) (15) n: 75
W-2 workers	*	Non-medical essential workers (13); Restaurant workers (e.g. cooks, servers, bartenders) (33); Low-wage workers (i.e. cleaning, childcare, call center, beauty services, etc) (15); Truck/Warehouse workers (3) n: 64

Figure 1. Platform participation and work categorization of participants (n: 192). *The vast majority of gig platforms pay their workers as 1099/independent contractors.

The sample was almost equally divided between women (51.6%) and men (46.8%) with 1.6% identifying as non-binary or another gender. Participants ranged in age from 19- to 64-years-old, with a median age of 30 and an average age of 33. Less than half (42.9%) of the respondents identified as white, with equal percentages (14.8%) identifying as Black or Hispanic, and 13.2% identifying as Asian. The survey classified “Hispanic” as a racial category, but respondents also had the option of identifying themselves with two or more racial categories. Of the remainder, 8.5% described themselves as multiple races, and 5.8% as a race not listed.

Slightly more than a third of respondents (36.5%) held a Bachelor’s degree, and 18% of respondents held a graduate degree or some graduate school experience. Nine percent held an Associate’s degree, 27% had some college experience, and 8.5% held a high school diploma. Nearly two-thirds (61.5%) of the participants earned less than \$40,000 per year (more than a quarter earned less than \$20,000), and almost a fourth (25%) of the interviewees made between \$40,000 and \$70,000 per year.^[1]

Findings

While research suggests that most Americans underestimate class inequality and that the pandemic did not increase class antagonism (Grusky et al. 2021), in our interviews with 192 precarious and gig workers in the New York metropolitan area, conducted during the height of the first wave of the pandemic, workers espoused and articulated significant concerns about class inequality. While workers sometimes identified the rhetoric of “togetherness” as an ideal, they often rejected the togetherness messaging as inauthentic marketing. In the following section, we discuss precarious New Yorkers’ perceptions of messages about the pandemic, and their understanding of the differing experiences – and risks – of lower-income versus wealthier workers during the pandemic.

Negative Perceptions of “Togetherness” Messages: “You Don’t Care. You Want to Keep Selling Stuff.”

Our precarious and gig-based workers respondents expressed significant skepticism toward messages that residents were “in it together,” commonly referring to these messages as “bullshit” or “marketing” messages intended to keep people spending money. As Curtis, 31, a music teacher and former marijuana delivery worker, explained it, “I hate [those] commercials with a passion. And I hate how they try to pretend that they’re on your side, and I hate how they try to pretend how they’re looking out for you. They don’t care about you. . . . they just want to siphon your money into their pockets.” For workers who experienced employment or underemployment, the fact that the “togetherness” messages were funded by companies or included advertising was viewed as particularly egregious.

Those are bullshit. That’s the biggest bullshit I’ve ever seen honestly. It’s just marketing . . . It’s always coming from a business standpoint. I don’t feel any better when I see that stuff. I’m just like, ‘that’s the biggest bullshit I’ve ever seen . . .’ They’re just trying to get people to spend . . . I understand that, but I don’t buy it. – Hannah, former server, current delivery driver, 21

A common perception was that the messages were less about caring about workers or customers, but were simply a means to turn a profit. As Katelynn, 24, a bartender turned cashier, explained: “I think they’re so contrived. I absolutely do not like them whatsoever. ‘Oh, we’re all in this together.’ It’s like ‘yeah, okay, we’re all in this together, buy my products.’ That’s all it sounds like.” The messages were seen as even more intolerable when the product for sale was particularly expensive. As Brandon, 28, temporary office worker explained, “I fucking hate that shit. It’s annoying. These corporations don’t give a shit. They don’t care. Put on people that are essential workers. Put on people who are dealing with tough times right now . . . I don’t need to submit to a corporation who is trying to sell me some \$30,000 truck being like, ‘Yeah, we care about you.’ You don’t care. You want to keep selling stuff.” This sense of anger is especially notable given that past research has found that lower-income people tend to have more positive attitudes toward television advertising (Hyeonjin, Reid, and King 2007; Shavitt, Lowery, and Haefner 1998).

These messages were also particularly jarring for respondents when they compared the togetherness rhetoric with how companies – and customers – were treating workers during the pandemic. Especially in the case of gig platforms, workers believed that the messages did not match the reality of how companies treated their workers. As Jesse, 31, a bike courier, explained, “It’s bullshit . . . I mean the one that I see all the time is for Lyft, and that’s a company that just is notorious for treating their employees like shit, and . . . recently just laid off lots of people, so it’s funny.”

Workers also expressed a sense that such messaging was out of touch with their personal experience and the challenges of being a precarious worker during the pandemic. Adira, 23, who turned to food delivery during the pandemic, explained:

If we’re really in this together, then why are the companies not paying out their workers? Caviar didn’t give us any hazard pay. And if we’re really all in this together . . . Maybe you could set a required amount of tip. You have to tip \$3, let’s say . . . If we’re all in this together, then how come I’m not seeing nobody else? Not the customers, not my workers, not from my company . . . Who are these people that are with me? Because I don’t see them.

While messages that were sponsored by companies were decried as “inauthentic” and focused on “selling stuff,” celebrity messages that were intended to foster a sense of “togetherness” also contributed to the sense of class divisions. As noted by Diermeier et al. (2017) and Perez-Truglia (2020), encountering compelling information about inequality is associated with greater concern and more accurate perceptions of economic inequality. For precarious respondents in the New York area, who often lived in small or crowded homes, celebrity messages that featured spacious living situations were especially reviled. As Randall, 22, a non-platform based gig worker, noted,

Ellen made this video where she was in a huge house, sitting in a fucking ballroom of a living room going, ‘We’re all in this together. And I’m so bored right now.’ It’s like, you have a fucking tennis court. What do you mean we’re all in this together? We are all in this together, because we’re worried about our rent, we’re worried about our living situation, we’re worried about our grandparents . . . If you’re struggling to pay rent that much and you hear, ‘We’re all in this together,’ it’s a middle finger. It’s a middle finger to the American people.

This sense that celebrities and influencers were out of touch with the experience of “ordinary people” has been echoed in the popular press (Lerman 2020), and has been noted by Duffy and Hund (2019) as a challenge commonly experienced by influencers.

Alya, 28, a furloughed grocery store clerk, also repeated that the commercials and media messages did not account for the experience of workers without large homes or the resources necessary to hire others to face the risk of grocery shopping. “When a lot of the celebrities got sick, like Tom Hanks, Idris Elba . . . and they were all talking about, ‘Oh, be safe. Self-quarantine, go to the other side of your house.’ You’re assuming I have another side of my house to go to You’re assuming I have a whole basement I can self-quarantine in,” Alya said. “You’re acting as if I don’t have parents and family and things like that to take care of I can’t afford for someone else to go pick up my groceries.”

For precarious workers, messages about “being alone together” and other messages that are intended to be both instructional (the best way to be together in the future is to be alone now) or uplifting (we’re all alone) may contribute to a sense of class antagonism by highlighting that upper income workers are often experiencing a different quarantine reality. Additionally many precarious workers who faced delays in securing unemployment or who turned to gig work as an alternative to unemployment stigma, experienced reduced incomes that pushed already aspirational purchases – such as a \$30,000 dollar truck – even further out of reach. The idea that the lived experience of the pandemic differed for precarious workers was a common topic in the interviews and may have contributed to increased concern over inequality and frustration with elites, as the next section will discuss.

The Impact of Inequality: “Some of Us are in Yachts, Some of Us are in Dinghies.”

Low-income neighborhoods were particularly impacted by the pandemic, with some of the highest rates of COVID-19 infection and persistent unemployment (Parrott 2021; Wilson 2020). This inequity did not escape the attention of respondents; as Brent, a 50-year-old restaurant chef noted, “There’s a huge divide between the haves and the have-nots . . . especially in New York City.” Or as Raven, 31, a dating profile ghostwriter, explained, “We are all in it together, but everyone’s in a different boat. If we’re all on the ocean, some of us are in yachts, some of us are in dinghies.” Meanwhile, Simon, 35, a former construction worker who turned to food delivery explained, “The only thing I think of that we’re in it together is the fact that more people are using sanitizer and stuff. Especially for gigs.”

While respondents often agreed that everyone was together in the sense of facing the threat of COVID, they were also quick to note that the lived experience differed by social class. As Hasan, 22, a former Uber driver explained, “We’re not all in this together, because a lot of people are in different situations. For the rich people, it’s really easy to survive in those situations, but for the ones that were earning from the day-to-day, it’s not really easy,” he said. “They’re doing good at keeping their family safe. And they’re not tense about money, or any type of those issues as much as daily gig workers or other daily wages persons are At least they’re able to feed their family within a timeframe. They don’t have to worry about their family.”

In addition to not facing the same financial challenges, the rich were seen as being able to purchase their safety as Lamar, 30, a cleaner and gig worker, observed, “I think we’re separated. The normal people are in this together, while the rich people are just spending their money, being safe.” This idea that the rich could purchase safety – while lower-income individuals were seen as the “essential workers” – keeping society running, even as they faced heightened health risks due to the pandemic – is at the crux of the noxious contract (Grusky et al. 2021).

Further contributing to this sense of class inequality was the idea that wealthier people could leave the city for safer environs. For some precarious workers, the idea of higher-income residents leaving struck close to home as they watched higher-income bosses and company owners flee the city. For lower-income workers who were unable to leave for second homes, this may have contributed to a sense of class antagonism. As Manuel, 53, explained, “We’re not all the same, because I know a lot of people that were living in Central Park West are not living in Central Park West now. Everybody drove out to the Hamptons, including my two bosses . . . Sometimes I look at it like abandonment. When people leave the city to go to other places, I feel abandoned sometimes.” The idea of being left behind to fend for herself was echoed by Isabel, 33, a restaurant server. As Isabel explained, when the restaurant she worked for closed, “the owners, they just left to their vacation house . . . They kind-of like forgot us.”

The sense of being “abandoned” or “forgotten” was heightened by the challenges that workers faced in trying to secure income during the pandemic. For instance, Manuel, an unemployed paralegal, became an Amazon “picker,” a worker who selects and packages groceries ordered by customers utilizing Amazon’s \$119 a year Prime shopping subscription service. Speaking about his bosses, he explained, “They’ve each got a house over on Fire Island. Do you really think that they’re going to do Prime Shopping [as a worker]? Of course not . . . They’re the customers.”

This sense that precarious workers were left even more precarious during the pandemic – left behind in the epicenter of the virus surge, trying to make ends meet, while the wealthy decamped to actual vacation homes – may have further contributed to the sense of the pandemic’s noxious contract.

The Noxious Contract: “Put Your Health at Risk for Us. We Need to Make Money.”

As noted previously, working class individuals understand economic inequality most saliently through social comparison (Wilkinson 2002), especially when such comparisons arise from negative lived experiences and unfavorable interactions with people of a higher class position (Dolan 2007; Roscigno and Hodson 2004). In short, negative experiences at work can be the catalyst for the formation of class-based resentments, especially when those experiences may involve the outsourcing of risk.

Workers, especially those who were engaged in gig-based work, were clear that working during COVID times brought an additional level of risk to work that was already often risky (Ravenelle 2019). Kareem, 22, a customer service representative who turned to food delivery work during the pandemic, explained that the delivery platform gave him an “essential worker” letter to present to the police if he was stopped when New York was under a stay-at-home order. But he was frustrated that platform support did not account for the additional risk of working during a pandemic. “It can just be like some type of incentive, like \$5 an hour or an extra \$2 for a job. It doesn’t have to be too much, too crazy extra, but they’re not giving anything,” he said. “I find that quite disappointing because this ain’t just working a normal day. You’re taking way more risk than you were if you were working a normal day, but they’re not acknowledging that.”

Low-income worker perceptions that face-to-face work during the pandemic came with a risk of significant harm and disproportionately burdened minority groups were not

unfounded. Low-income neighborhoods in New York were among those hardest hit by the pandemic. Rates of infection were highest in neighborhoods with the highest concentration of Black and Latino residents, such as Queens and the Bronx, compared to wealthier, predominantly-White neighborhoods in Manhattan. In fact, during the peak of the COVID outbreak in May 2020, eight of the ten zip codes with the highest rate of infection were predominantly Black or Latino (Czeisler et al. 2020; Schwirtz and Cook 2020); in Queens the rate of infection was double that of Manhattan. The median income in the Borough Park neighborhood of Brooklyn – where COVID deaths were nearly 50% higher than the city average – is approximately \$46,000, around 25% less than the citywide median (Mansoor 2020).

Taylor, 24, an former luxury beauty product salesperson, framed the experience of precarious workers not just as an issue of increased health risks, but also as being used to build wealth for the already wealthy – a superfluous goal where the benefactor was “easily distinguishable” (Grusky et al. 2021). “[It] is so ridiculous that celebrities and just the wealthy in general in America are looking down upon the rest of the working class and saying ‘Put your health at risk for us. We need to make money,’ she said. “Motherfucker. You have millions of dollars. What are you talking about? Why do I have to donate? But that’s capitalism.”

The divide between the significant risks experienced by the working class, and the safety experienced by the wealthy, was echoed by other workers. Oscar, 30, a restaurant worker, explained, “This pandemic shows a lot of the rich-poor disparity. The poor are taking the subways in from the outer boroughs. And they’re the ones risking their lives, serving people at the fast casual chains, and the restaurants, and things like that. The people who are well off, or people who have the needs, they all left New York.” Again echoing the earlier theme that residents who could leave did, Oscar further noted that the poor were taking “subways from the outer boroughs,” a phrase that connotes long commutes.

While overall subway ridership plummeted due to the pandemic and perception that the trains were unsafe (Office of New York State Comptroller 2020), smartphone data found that in many cities, lower-income workers continued to travel on public transit during the pandemic due to their status as essential workers. As Spencer, 29, a non-binary graduate student and adjunct college instructor turned Shipt worker, explained, it wasn’t just an issue of taking the subway daily, but that their gig work required multiple daily excursions. “People are getting nervous about taking the subway to and from work. I’m taking the subway a dozen times a day,” they said. “But the risk factor is just, it’s kind of bonkers So, having to take the subway a dozen times a day and to go [into] grocery stores, especially when the grocery stores just get . . . Some of them are just so tight and there’s just way too many people in there.”

Twenty-something Brandy, who worked in food delivery before the pandemic, and continued doing deliveries, further invoked the ambiguous risk of seeking food in nature, describing her job as “going out in the wild” to get food for people who were safely sheltering at home. Brandy described herself as struggling with the “togetherness” messaging, in part, because of the unequal risk taken on by workers and their families.

New Yorkers are really like pretty much, ‘Fuck you, get out of my way . . . And now it’s, ‘these people should come first because they’re sacrificing their lives and maybe their family’s lives for the greater good.’ I don’t think that’s ‘in it together.’ I think that’s them sacrificing.

While the phrase “sacrificing their lives” may first sound like hyperbole, data from the New York City Health Department found that residents in the poorest neighborhoods were dying from the virus at a rate that was more than double that of more affluent neighborhoods, a significant risk by any measure (Durkin 2020).

Additionally, the sense that the risk extended beyond workers to their loved ones was also echoed by other participants. “I’ve got to go out and find work because like I said, I got to buy food, hygiene products, cleaning products. I need to work,” said Abdul, a 27-year-old unemployed restaurant worker. “I’m terrified of bringing something home and being the main reason why my mom or my stepdad get hospitalized, God forbid die.” Likewise, Hannah, 21, a furloughed restaurant worker who turned to food delivery, provided an especially astute observation of the risks. Hannah attended a prestigious university in New York, while working part-time in the bar and restaurant industry. When the pandemic started, she was laid-off, and believing that she wasn’t eligible for unemployment assistance, she began working via food delivery apps. Her partner was an undocumented immigrant who, after being laid off during the pandemic, took a job at an Amazon warehouse near Philadelphia, necessitating a three-hour plus shuttle bus ride daily.

Hannah blamed her boyfriend’s job – and lengthy commute in a crowded van – for their positive COVID diagnoses. “They have no choice. They have to go out and they have to keep working those low wage jobs that kind of basically require them to be there in person,” she said. “They’re in really tough spots. They also don’t have the money so they have to do it.” Hannah’s discussion of how the workers “have no choice . . . have to keep working,” and a lack of funds means “they have to do it” and are “forced” clearly emphasizes how workers may be “potentially coerced into the position” (Grusky et al. 2021).

The perception of being forced into essential jobs was not just seen by their loved ones, but also by the workers themselves. Amir, 26, previously a small business owner, turned to food delivery when his entertainment focused business crumbled during the pandemic, and he faced extensive delays in getting unemployment assistance: “Even if I have to sacrifice my life right now, I have to make sure that everyone else is in good standing. That’s why I do what I do,” he said, noting that he wanted to be able to give the landlord at least a partial payment. Describing unemployment assistance as missing in action, Amir’s feeling that he has to work – even if he has to sacrifice his life – further points to the sense of coercion in the face of potential significant harm.

Discussion & Conclusion

Little is known about how Americans’ experiences of working during the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced how essential workers perceive economic inequality in the United States. Have messages regarding American unity (i.e. “we’re all in this together”) convinced face-to-face workers of the need for cross-class solidarity or has the COVID risk divide inspired a new collective consciousness among the working class? Work by Grusky et al. (2021) suggests that workers are less focused on class conflict and more likely to express sentiments of “fortitude and stoicism.” Yet, contrary to the stoicism reported by Grusky et al. (2021), we find that precarious workers within the New York Metropolitan area, during the height of the first wave of the pandemic, often expressed frustration over class-based inequalities and antagonism toward elites. Many respondents expressed significant skepticism toward messages that the pandemic has brought Americans together,

which several referred to as “bullshit.” Instead, workers felt “abandoned” by wealthy owners and managers, who fled the city to socially-distanced homes in beach communities and surrounding suburbs. Therefore, unlike Grusky et al. (2021), our findings suggest that the pandemic may have heightened working-class perceptions of economic inequality, and consequently created greater class-based tension among working-class individuals.

We suggest that the discrepancy in findings is partly the result of our study’s population of interest: gig and precarious workers in New York City. Whereas the American Voices Project data developed by Grusky et al. (2021) was based on interviews with 134 workers, conducted between April and August 2020, from 54 communities, and a range of socio-economic statuses, our data draw from 192 interviews conducted between April and June 2020 within the New York metropolitan area. The more progressive politics of New York City (DuPuis and Greenberg 2019) may have contributed to our findings of growing class tension among working-class New Yorkers as liberals report higher concern for inequality than other groups (Chambers, Swan, and Heesacker 2015). Several high-profile New York politicians, such as U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, have made economic inequality central to their political messaging, with some local politicians even embracing labels such as “democratic socialist.” These progressive currents in the New York City political sphere may have shaped the ways in which our respondents perceived the risk divide generated by the pandemic.

Additionally, our data collection occurred during the height of the first wave of the pandemic in New York City, when all non-essential workers in the state were under stay-at-home orders. Indeed, New York City’s Pause, which was announced on March 22, was extended multiple times, and the city did not start its Phase I (of four phases) re-opening until June 8, 2020. As a result, our data collection focused on a community that was widely described as an epicenter of the outbreak in the United States, and occurred during the height of COVID-19 risk in New York. Much like falling positive rates in some parts of the country may have obscured the rise of more contagious coronavirus variants, we argue that looking nationwide may serve to obscure heightened class conflicts in cities, such as New York, where the impact of the virus was severe. New York City was considered to be highly segregated even pre-COVID (Alba and Romalewski 2012) and during the pandemic, many New Yorkers with means – or simply those who could work remotely or shelter elsewhere – left the city (Tully and Stowe 2020). This may have contributed to low wage workers feeling “left behind.” Additionally, our focus on gig-based and precarious workers – many of whom were working in essential jobs immediately before or during the pandemic – provides a snapshot in time of a period when the risks of the noxious contract may have been especially evident to these workers.

This stark visibility of the disproportionate risk faced by low-wage face-to-face workers in New York City may have been more influential in driving class conflict than the introduction of the risk itself. Messages of “we’re all in this together” may resonate in communities in which everyone shares at least some of the risk of becoming sick, but with widespread accounts of upper class New Yorkers fleeing the city, sentiments of “togetherness” likely ring hollow. As previous literature has noted, among working class individuals, self-comparisons to others and interactions with members of other economic groups are more influential than the actual empirical reality of inequality in informing working-class perceptions of inequality (Dolan 2007; Roscigno and Hodson 2004; Wilkinson 2002). The contrast between our findings and the results of Grusky et al. (2021) supports this literature

and suggests that workers experiencing the reality of a “noxious contract” will not automatically grow resentful of their conditions without also possessing an understanding of the experiences of another, better-off group.

Finally, two additional reasons that our results may differ from Grusky et al.’s (2021) are the ages and socioeconomic status of our respective samples. Our sample, with a median age of 30, and an average age of 33, may be younger than the sample in the AVP, which has a median range of 40 to 64. Younger cohorts in the United States are increasingly in favor of addressing economic inequality through state redistribution of income and wealth from the rich to the poor (Van Heuvelen and Copas 2018), with the renewed focus on class politics among younger Americans even dubbed as representing a “millennial socialism” (Jelfs 2021). Therefore, the younger respondents in our sample may be more inclined to view the new risk divide from the pandemic as a form of class conflict, directing sentiments of anger instead of solidarity toward economic elites. However, it’s important to note that even older workers in our sample – such as Brent, a 50-year-old chef, and Manuel a 53-year-old unemployed paralegal – echoed these same sentiments. Additionally, our sample consists of three economically-precarious groups: gig-based workers; creative freelancers; and those who were already in precarious service work situations including restaurants and bars, retail, and childcare. With already precarious careers and often limited savings, these workers may have been especially vulnerable to the noxious contract and more likely to experience increased class antagonism.

This paper contributes to a growing body of research on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, namely how the coronavirus has contributed to perceptions of social inequality among working class Americans early in the pandemic. Although workers’ perspectives may change, given the association between perceived inequality and support for social policy, workers may be more supportive of redistributive programs going forward, particularly those who have benefitted from unemployment benefits (Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; McCall and Kenworthy 2009). Furthermore, growing resentment toward economic inequality among workers contributes to greater instances of individual and collective acts of class-conflict (Roscigno and Hodson 2004), a trend reflected in the “Great Resignation” (Scodellaro and Danielle 2022) and the wave of workers’ strikes that have occurred since the pandemic began (Scheiber 2021). This work also advances the literature on the risk divide between precarious and gig-based workers and their professional peers (Glavin, Filipovic, and van der Maas 2019). Finally, this work also furthers the conversation about how workers experience the noxious contract (Grusky et al. 2021; Slee 2017).

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