

State of Working
Vermont
2020

**with
pandemic
stories
supplement**



PUBLIC ASSETS
INSTITUTE

Introduction

In March 2020, almost overnight, businesses shut, schools closed, and jobs disappeared as we hunkered down to slow the spread of the hyper-contagious, deadly coronavirus. After a gradual reopening, infections spiked in the fall, and restrictions were renewed on socializing, travel, and business. If the future is uncertain, this much is clear: The COVID-19 pandemic ended the longest economic expansion in U.S. history, following the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009.

But when the COVID-19 recession hit, many Vermonters had still not recovered from the previous recession. While real (inflation adjusted) income for those at the top was up 8 percent, those at the bottom saw a 7 percent drop from 2007 to 2019. And there was no improvement in poverty or real median household income by the end of this recovery. To make matters worse, the financial crisis of 2007 followed three decades of stagnant income for many Vermonters along with rising health care, child care, and housing costs, and increasing inequality, as more and more wealth flowed to fewer and fewer people at the top.

Policy matters

The origins of COVID-19 are not fully understood. But we can attribute the effects of these economic downturns largely to one thing: policy. Three decades of income stagnation and rising costs for many basic needs are the result of tax cuts for the wealthy, slowing investment in public goods, and a waning government commitment to the rights of workers to organize and earn a living wage. The Great Recession erupted from disastrous policy: the deregulation of banking and finance to allow the growth of a runaway mortgage market whose collapse led to millions losing homes, savings, credit, and jobs. Better policy—a healthy stimulus program, new financial-industry rules, the Affordable Care Act—helped the economy recover.

The fate of Vermonters during the COVID-19 pandemic also reflects both wise and unwise government policy. In the spring Congressional Republicans and Democrats put their differences aside to pass a \$3.5 trillion stimulus package that rescued millions of workers, businesses, and families from calamity. Through expanded federal unemployment benefits and loans and grants to businesses, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act put cash in people's pockets, enabling many to stay home and stay safe and still feed their families. That money helped stave off a more serious economic decline.

The fate of Vermonters during the COVID-19 pandemic reflects both wise and unwise government policy

Introduction

In Vermont Gov. Phil Scott and legislative leaders anticipated the hardships families and businesses were about to suffer and acted more quickly than most states on child care, housing, and food aid. Vermont stepped up to provide hazard pay to frontline workers, stimulus payments to those left out of federal relief programs, and aid to businesses to adapt to pandemic conditions and cover new costs such as personal protective equipment.

In other ways, Vermont was ill prepared. Due to decades of underfunding, antiquated technology held up unemployment benefits. Patchy broadband service—another piece of infrastructure in need of investment—made remote learning difficult if not impossible for many children. Families subsisting paycheck to paycheck faced hunger and eviction when those paychecks ceased—a situation that could have been avoided by a state-mandated living wage and adequate investment in affordable housing.

Addressing inequities

The pandemic also exposed deep-seated structural inequities. Most glaring: Illness and death from COVID-19 have been highest among people of color, immigrants, low-paid essential workers who leave their homes to earn a living, people with disabilities, and the most marginalized, including the incarcerated, institutionalized, and homeless. Historic trauma, limited access to health care, and the daily stresses of poverty and racism have left these people most vulnerable. Women have also been hit harder than men. They have left the workforce in greater numbers to care for children at home. And of those who've kept their jobs, many do so at risk to their health, since women predominate in frontline occupations such as hospital work and home care.

COVID-19 delivers a lesson: Government plays a critical role not just in responding to crises but in helping people sustain health, security, and dignity in ordinary times. To redress the inequalities that history and our own decisions have created, we need to invest in the public good rather than serve narrow interests and commit to policies that equitably share prosperity and advance racial and social justice.

Contents: State of Working Vermont 2020

Part I. From the Great Recession to recovery, 2007 through 2019 [page 3](#)

Drawing on U.S. Census and other state and federal data, this section presents a long view of Vermont's economy from before the Great Recession in 2007 to the end of 2019.

Part II. The pandemic 2020: Federal and state response [page 12](#)

Vermonters received significant federal pandemic aid this year, which is detailed in this section.

Part III. Pandemic stories [page 14](#)

Vermonters tell their stories of how they've been faring since COVID-19 hit and what worries them now.

PART I

From the Great Recession to recovery, 2007 through 2019

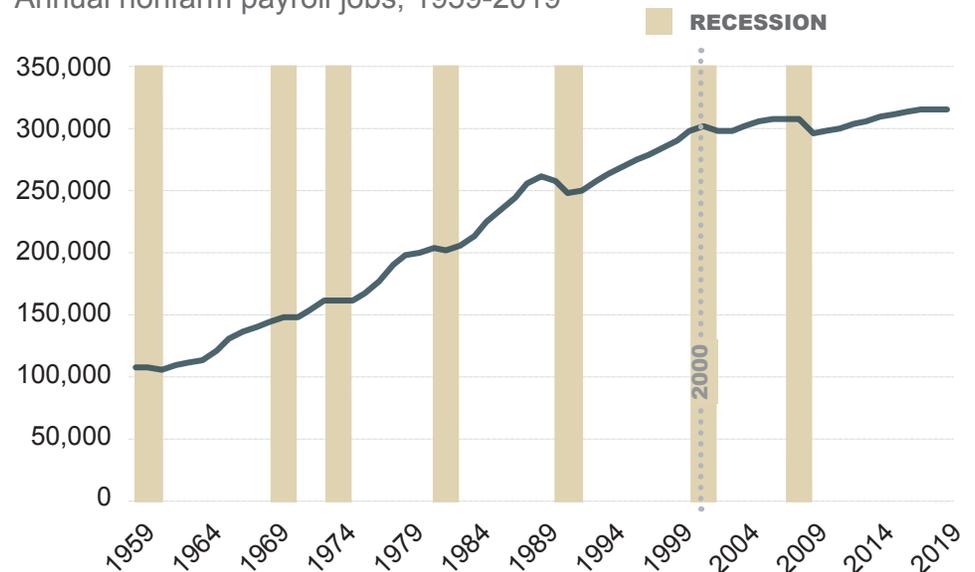
For 40 years, Vermont created an average of 4,700 new jobs a year. The best year, 1978, saw an increase of more than 12,000 new jobs. But after the turn of the century, job growth flattened. Vermont employers averaged fewer than 1,000 new jobs a year between 2000 and 2019. The high point was 2012, when 3,800 jobs were added.

NONFARM PAYROLL JOBS

The number of nonfarm payroll jobs is estimated through the Current Employment Statistics (CES) program, a monthly survey of employers conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics with the Vermont Department of Labor. This is the number of jobs, not workers. One worker can hold multiple jobs.

Since 2000, Vermont has seen slower job growth after recessions

Annual nonfarm payroll jobs, 1959-2019



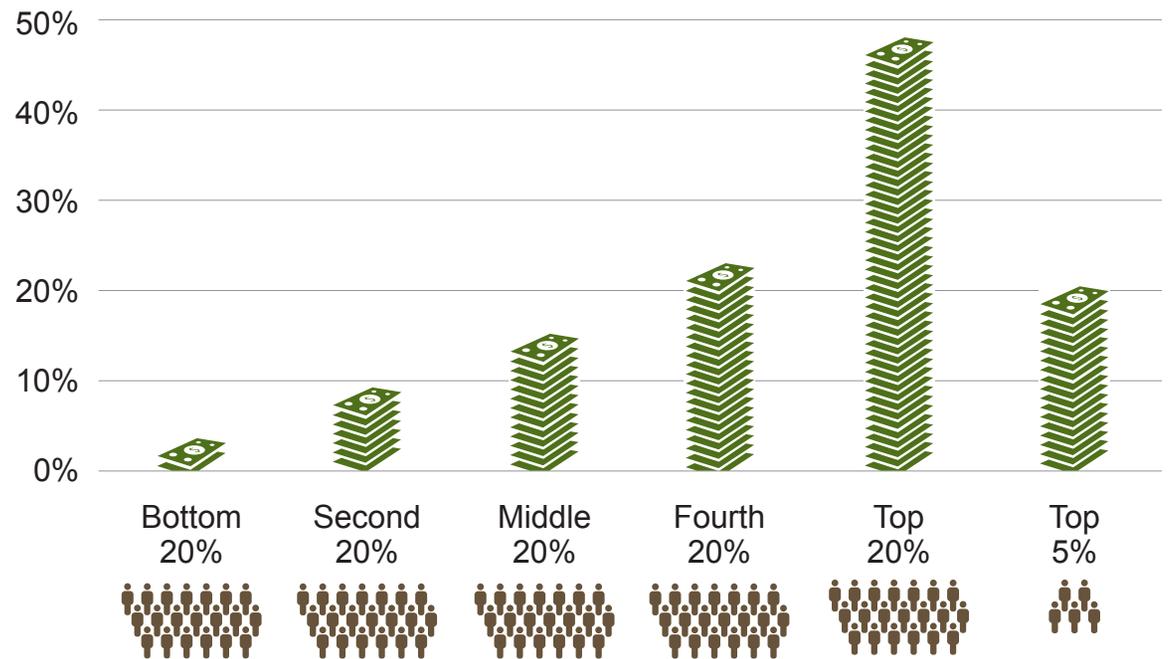
Data source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis/FRED
©2020 Public Assets Institute

INCOME INEQUALITY

Income distribution is one indication of how economic growth is being shared across a population. When a small group receives a disproportionate share of the income, it leaves less for everyone else. And research has shown that the concentration of income at the top hurts middle-income families.

Over the last four decades, there has been a dramatic upward redistribution of income in Vermont and across the country. In 2019, the top 20 percent of Vermont households received almost half (48.4 percent) of the income earned in the state. The top 5 percent of households got 20.7 percent. Average income for the top 20 percent of households had increased more than 8 percent since 2007, after adjusting for inflation. For the bottom 20 percent, average income was down more than 7 percent.

Half of all Vermont income was in the hands of the top 20% Aggregate share of income by income group, 2019



Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-year estimates, 2019
©2020 Public Assets Institute

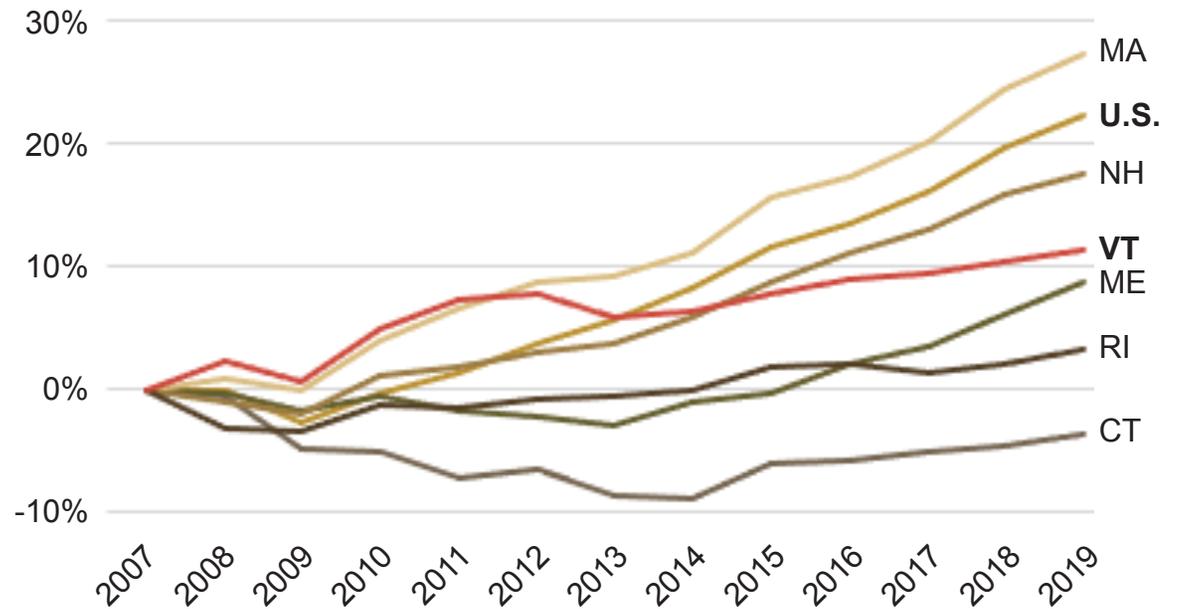
GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT

Gross domestic product (GDP) is the most commonly recognized measure of the economy. It is the nation's total output of goods and services. State GDP is the state's apportioned share of the national output. Real GDP is the total value of the goods and services after adjusting for inflation.

During the recovery after the Great Recession, Vermont's economy grew half as much as the nation's: 11.2 percent vs 22.2 percent, after adjusting for inflation. With the exception of Massachusetts, New England as a region also underperformed the U.S.

Vermont growth lagged behind the U.S., but came in third in New England

Cumulative growth in GDP, 2007-2019, adjusted for inflation



Data source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis
©2020 Public Assets Institute

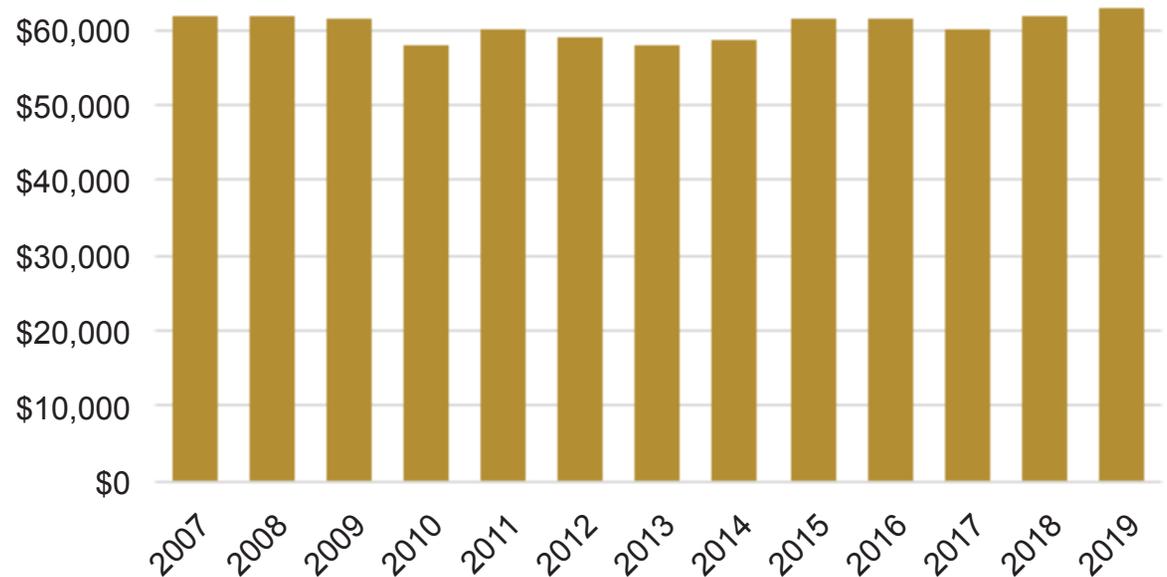
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

The U.S. Census collects income information about all people in a household 15 years old and over. This includes income from salaries and wages, investments, Social Security, and public benefits. Median income is the middle amount of annual income for a given category: Half have income greater than the median and half have less.

Median household income fell during the Great Recession and then rebounded slowly during the decade-long expansion. While Vermont's economy grew over the period, little of that growth trickled down to the typical Vermont household.

Long recovery did little for the typical Vermont household

Median household income, adjusted for inflation, 2007-2019



Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities analysis of American Community Survey 1-year estimates, 2007-2019

©2020 Public Assets Institute

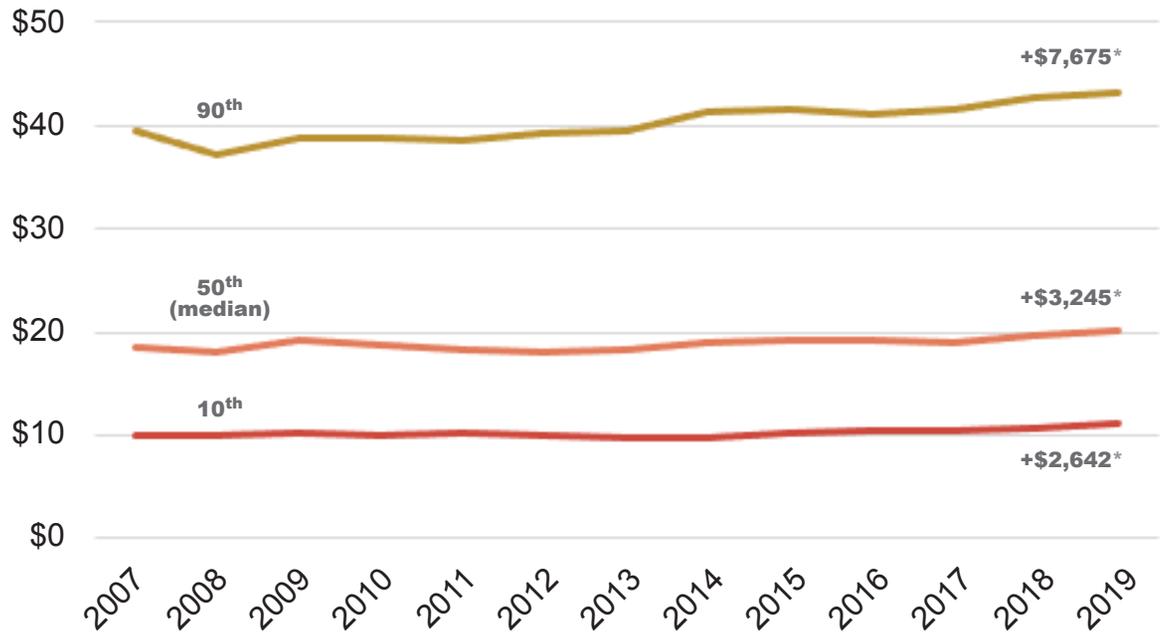
HOURLY WAGES

Hourly wage by percentile shows the share of workers making above or below a given wage at a particular time. At the 10th percentile, 10 percent of workers make less than that amount per hour and 90 percent make more. Each year the U.S. Census publishes hourly wages for selected percentiles. Salaries are converted to an hourly wage assuming a 40-hour week.

From 2007 to 2014, low wages barely budged. In Vermont, fixed statutory increases in the minimum wage from 2015 through 2018 allowed low-end wages to keep up with inflation and start to make some gains by 2019. Two more fixed increases are scheduled for 2021 and 2022, after which the wage will be pegged to inflation. Despite the modest growth in low wages, the annual wage gap between high-end workers and those at the bottom widened by more than \$5,000 from 2007 to 2019.

Low wages stayed flat for a decade before creeping up

Hourly wage by selected deciles, adjusted for inflation, 2007-2019



*Difference in annual wage from 2007 to 2019 for a full-time worker

Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey data
©2020 Public Assets Institute

PART I From the Great Recession to recovery, 2007 through 2019

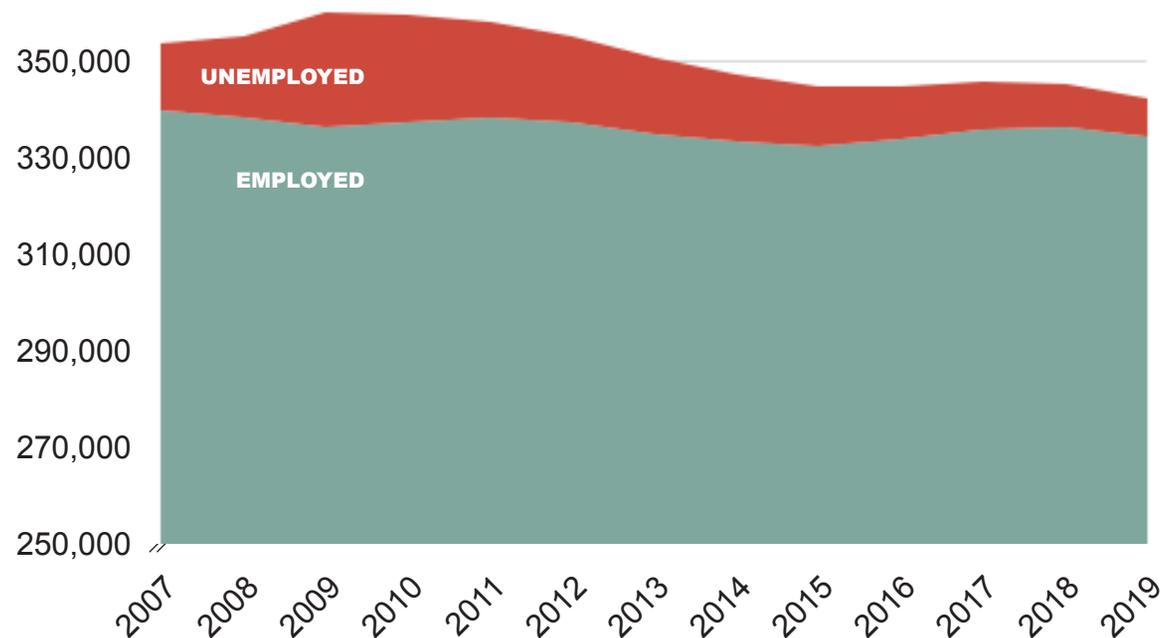
The nation's longest recovery left Vermont with fewer workers. In 2019, 342,226 Vermonters were working or actively looking for work—11,500 fewer than in 2007. Chittenden, Franklin, and Washington counties, which accounted for 46 percent of workers in 2019, saw their labor forces grow, but those gains were more than offset by declines in the state's other 11 counties. Vermont ranked fourth among the states in the share of population at retirement age (65 and older). The share of people of prime working age—35 to 54—shrank. And workforce participation dropped. These factors helped make Vermont one of 11 states, including three in New England, whose labor forces shrank between 2007 and 2019.

LABOR FORCE

Labor force is a count of people age 16 and over available to work. It includes people employed—payroll workers as well as self-employed—and those officially unemployed, which means they are out of work and actively looking for a job.

Vermont's labor force fell by 11,500 since 2007

Total labor force, employed and unemployed, 2007-2019



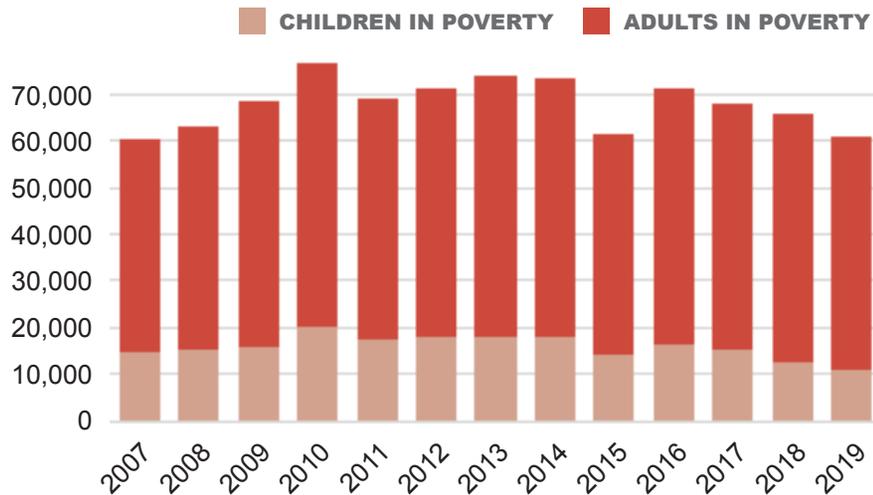
Data source: Vermont Department of Labor
©2020 Public Assets Institute

PART I From the Great Recession to recovery, 2007 through 2019

At the end of the recovery, Vermont didn't have much to show for its efforts to reduce poverty. The poverty rate came back down after it shot up in the Great Recession. But by 2019, there were just as many Vermonters in poverty as in 2007: more than 60,000. Child poverty fell to just under 10 percent from 11.7 percent in 2007—a decline of 4,000 children. Vermonters of color were more likely to live below the poverty line than white Vermonters.

60,000 Vermonters were still in poverty in 2019, but fewer children

Children and adults living in poverty, 2007-2019



Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-year estimates, 2007-2019 ©2020 Public Assets Institute

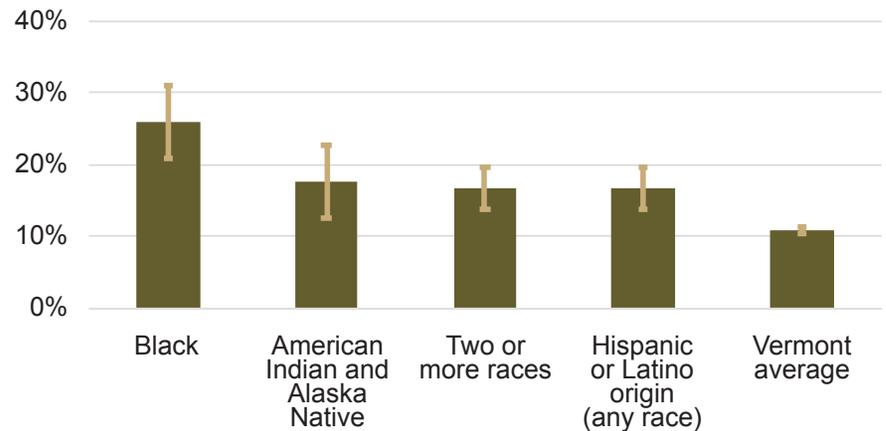
POVERTY

The poverty rate is the percentage of the population with income below the federal poverty threshold, determined by family size and makeup. The thresholds, established in 1963, are updated yearly by the U.S. Census Bureau. While the official measure has limitations, over time it indicates changes in the number of people who are considered poor. Income includes federal and state cash assistance.

2019 POVERTY THRESHOLDS

Family size	Annual income
One person:	
Under age 65	\$13,300
Age 65+	\$12,261
Two people:	
Under age 65	\$17,196
Age 65+	\$15,468
Three people	\$20,335
Four people	\$26,172

Black Vermonters had the highest poverty rate Poverty by race and ethnicity, with margin of error line, 2019



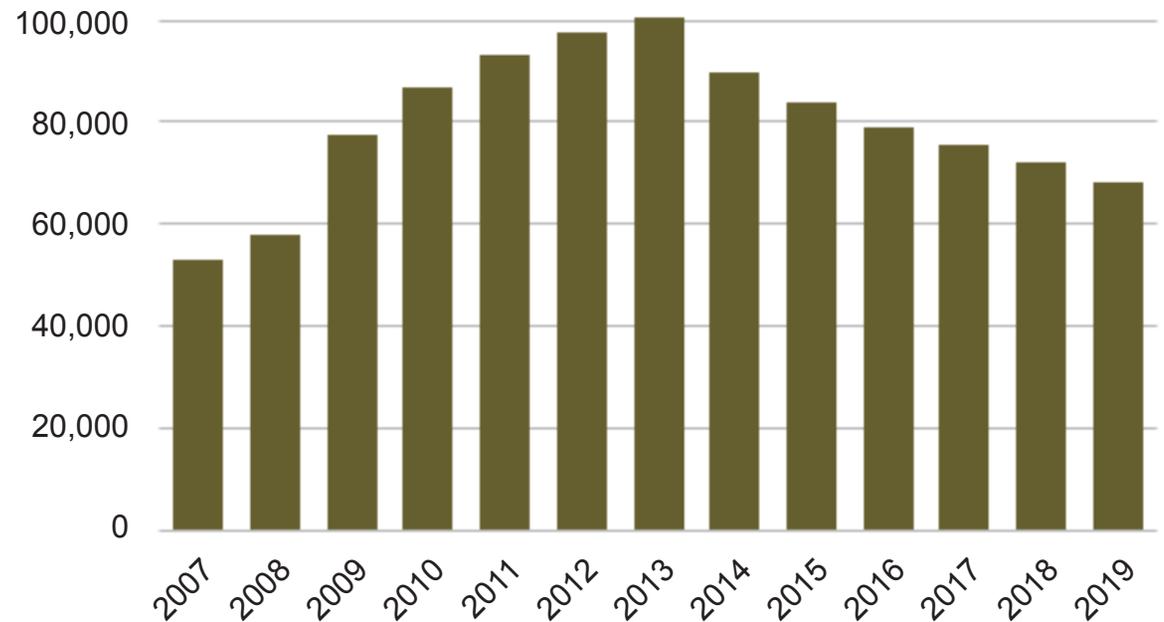
Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2019 ©2020 Public Assets Institute

3SQUARESVT PARTICIPATION

3SquaresVT participation is the number of individuals who receive benefits through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), called 3SquaresVT in Vermont.

In 2019, 15,000 more people were receiving help from 3SquaresVT than in 2007—a 30 percent increase. Program expansion coinciding with the start of the recession helped drive this increase. In 2009 more households became eligible after the income limit was raised from 135 percent of federal poverty guidelines to 185 percent—just under \$31,300 for a family of two in 2019. The state also enabled online applications in 2009.

Nearly 70,000 Vermonters received federal food aid in 2019 3SquaresVT recipients, annual average, 2007-2019



Data source: Vermont Department for Children and Families
©2020 Public Assets Institute

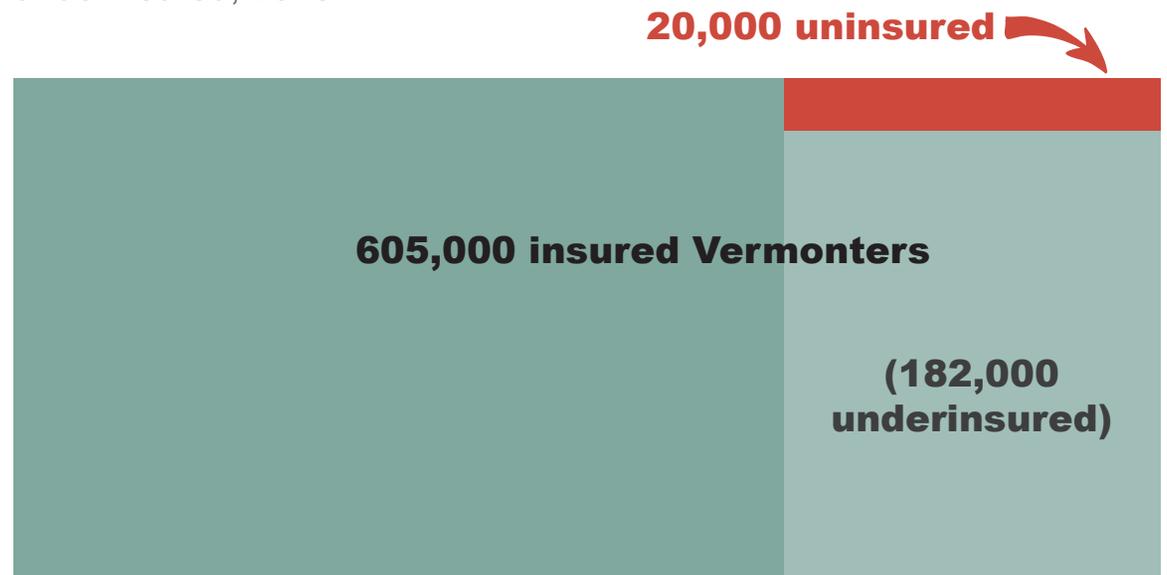
HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE

Health insurance coverage is the percentage of the population with either publicly funded or private health insurance or both.

A 2018 Vermont Department of Health study found that 97 percent of Vermonters had health insurance, one of the highest rates of any state. Vermont has been working to extend coverage for decades. In 1989, the state extended coverage to children through the Dr. Dynasaur program. Starting in 2006, it offered government-supported health insurance programs to adults, including through the 2010 Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. But all those efforts still left nearly 20,000 people without coverage in 2018. Another 182,000 Vermonters were considered underinsured, meaning more than a third of Vermonters under 65 could not afford either their deductibles or their current health care expenses, or they could face large bills if they required major medical treatment.

Health coverage was inadequate

Number of Vermonters who were insured, uninsured, and underinsured, 2018



Data source: Vermont Department of Health
©2020 Public Assets Institute

PART II

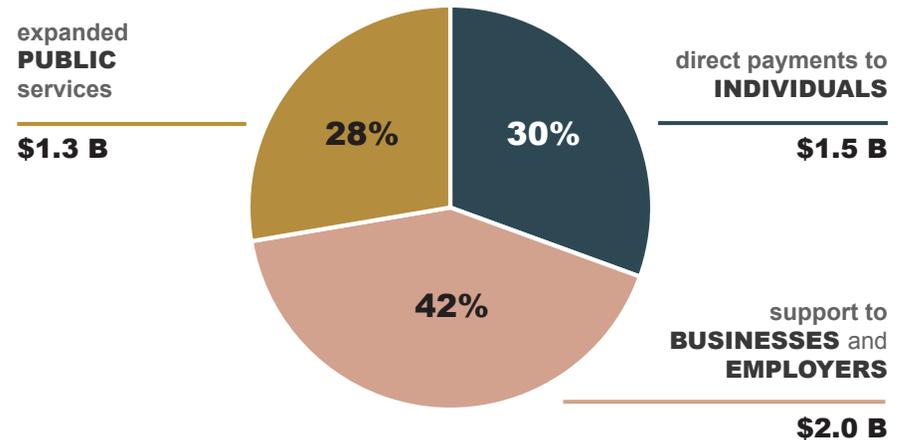
The pandemic 2020: Federal and state response

To mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government sent billions of dollars in aid to Vermonters through three streams: direct payments to individuals; support for businesses; and increased resources for agencies that provide public services. In all, Vermont received nearly \$5 billion—the equivalent of 14 percent of the state’s 2019 gross domestic product and nearly as much as the annual state budget. Included in that relief was \$1.25 billion from the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF), which the governor and Legislature could direct subject to certain restrictions. Vermont spent much of that money on public services, including health care, education, and housing, and also dedicated additional money to individuals and businesses through hazard pay and grants.

The two largest sources of individual support were expanded unemployment insurance (UI) and the one-time stimulus payments that went to most Vermonters. Nearly \$2 billion of federal support went to businesses in the form of loans and grants to protect Vermont jobs and the economy during the pandemic. The biggest was the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), which provided forgivable loans to 12,400 Vermont businesses across all sectors to protect a reported 116,900 jobs, at least temporarily. Half of the public services dollars went to the health care system. And the massive upheaval compelled the state to invent or adapt programs to meet Vermonters’ urgent needs, including food, shelter, and child care.

Vermont received \$4.8 billion in federal pandemic aid

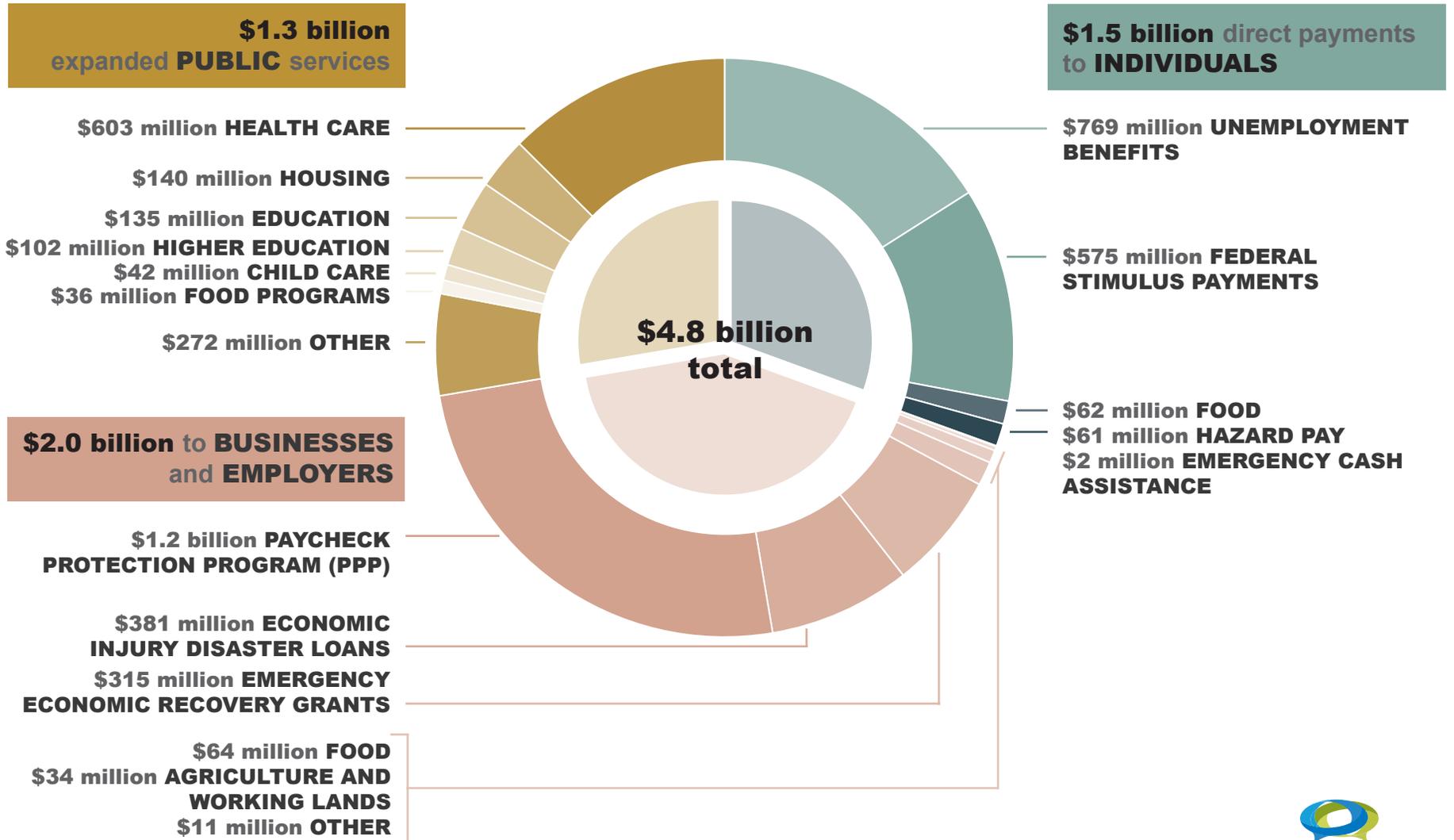
Total COVID-19 federal funding to Vermont, 2020



Data sources: Internal Revenue Service, Vermont Department for Children and Families, and Joint Fiscal Office
©2020 Public Assets Institute

Federal pandemic aid went mostly to unemployment, stimulus payments, loans and grants to businesses, and support for the health care system

Total COVID-19 federal funding to Vermont, by category and subcategory, 2020



Data sources: Internal Revenue Service, Vermont Department for Children and Families, and Joint Fiscal Office
 ©2020 Public Assets Institute

PART III Pandemic stories

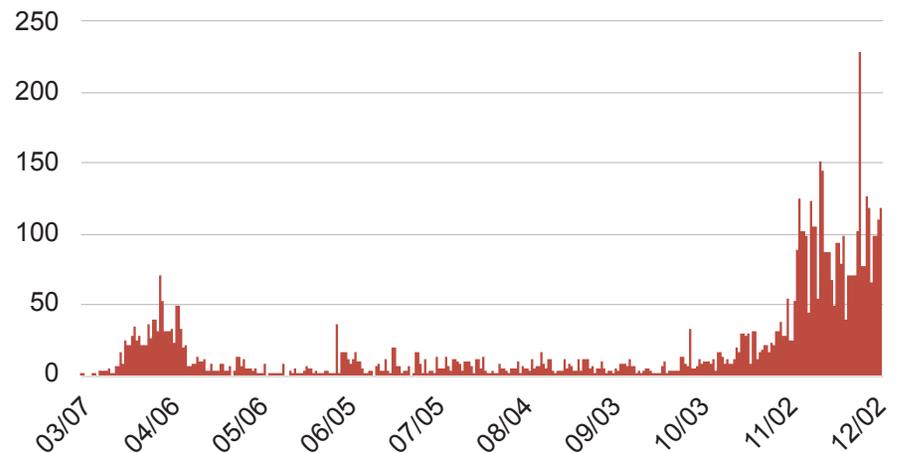
If there was one word to describe Vermonters' feelings during this unprecedented year, that word was *insecurity*. Insecurity about jobs, about food, fuel, and housing; insecurity about the future as savings shrink. Insecurity about the wellbeing and care of children and elders, the ill, and those who are vulnerable to illness.

The stories in this section are excerpted from interviews conducted by University of Vermont students and complemented by Public Assets' analysis of state and federal government data collected during the pandemic. The narratives showcase Vermonters' resiliency, the cohesiveness of the state's communities, and the strengths of its public services. They also reveal the need for sustained investment in those services—unemployment benefits, child care and health care, food, housing, and other supports for families—by both the state and the federal government, not just during crises but all the time.

Not evident in these stories, but obvious in both national and state data, are the unequal hardships the pandemic has visited on different groups of Vermonters. Like other economic or health hardships, COVID-19 has hit Black, Asian, Indigenous, and other Vermonters of color disproportionately hard. Historic, systemic racism means that people of

Vermont COVID cases spiked in the fall

New COVID-19 cases by day, 2020



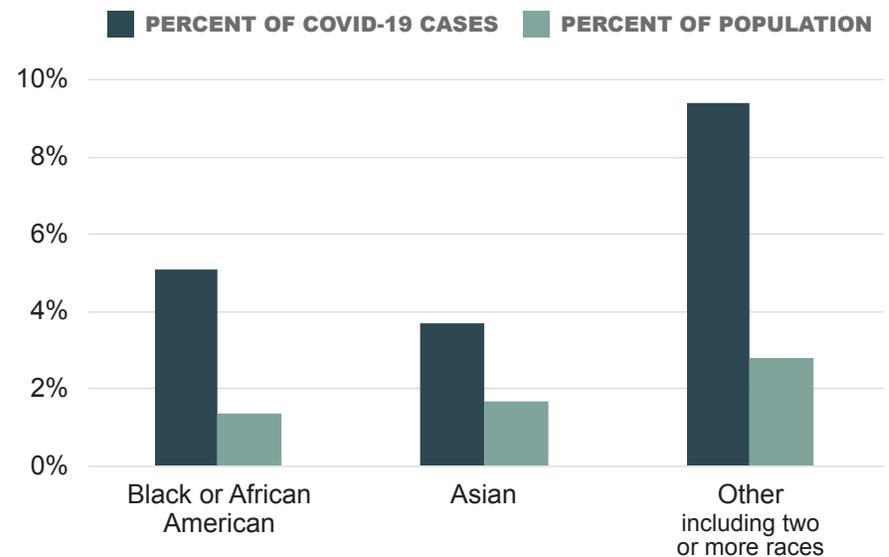
Data source: Vermont Center for Geographic Information
©2020 Public Assets Institute

color across the country face conditions that make them vulnerable to the virus, including overrepresentation in frontline jobs, limited access to health care, and more crowded housing. Women have been disproportionately affected by the absence of child care and exposure to contagion in high-contact essential occupations. While Vermont-specific data are not yet sufficient to understand all the factors at play here, the outcomes speak for themselves.

Because COVID-19 has affected people and communities of color so disproportionately, we sought to get the stories of a diverse range of Vermonters. Although we did not include the race or ethnicity of the people quoted in this section, and most did not want their photos published, about half of them identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color. We also sought diversity of age, sex, family situation, occupation, and place of residence. Some excerpts have been slightly edited for space and clarity.

Vermonters of color have suffered more than their share of COVID-19

Vermont COVID-19 cases and population by race, through Dec. 2, 2020



Data sources: Vermont Department of Health and the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-year estimates, 2019
©2020 Public Assets Institute

Work and business

Many Vermonters lost their jobs in the early days of the pandemic. Others lost hours or benefits or took on more duties for the same pay. New jobseekers were out of luck. Business owners strained to earn a living, keep their employees on, and adjust nimbly to new, possibly permanent, realities. To weather the storm, many took advantage of pandemic-related federal and state aid and programs.

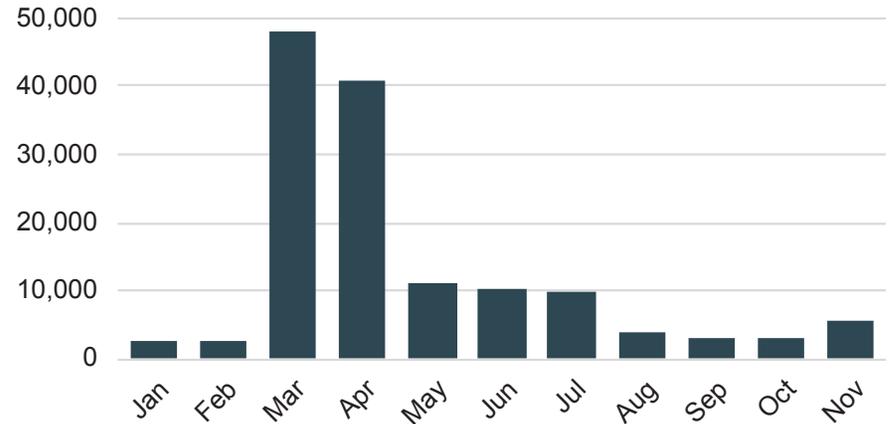
A company struggles, an employee counts layoffs

“The manufacturing company I work with has reduced its workforce by about two-thirds, so COVID has hit us pretty hard. It used to be a very robust, healthy family-owned company. We’d have a lot of overtime and employed over 150 people in the summer. But orders are down significantly, and now we’re down to like 30 people. I’m still at my same job, but my hours have been reduced to 32 hours a week. I really wonder if the company is going to make it through this.”

Eugene, computer manufacturing tool operator/
programmer and craftsman, Brandon

136,000 Vermonters lost work during the pandemic

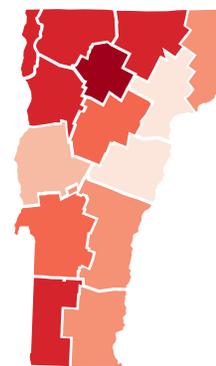
Monthly initial claims for unemployment compensation, Jan-Nov 2020



Data source: Vermont Department of Labor
©2020 Public Assets Institute

Employment fell in every Vermont county in 2020

Change in 11-month average employment, Jan-Nov, 2019-2020



County	Change
Addison	-4.0%
Bennington	-7.0%
Caledonia	-3.9%
Chittenden	-7.3%
Essex	-5.0%
Franklin	-7.1%
Grand Isle	-7.2%
Lamoille	-8.1%
Orange	-3.7%
Orleans	-7.7%
Rutland	-6.8%
Washington	-6.0%
Windham	-5.4%
Windsor	-5.0%

Data source: Vermont Department of Labor
©2020 Public Assets Institute

Prospects disappear, a student moves home

“I took the last semester off and I did some stuff for my health. And then around March I started to look for a job and lockdown hit. I was looking at marketing, government work, or public policy work. And I could simply not find a job whatsoever for months, because no one is hiring.

My savings got depleted quite a bit. I ended up moving back home to Brandon instead of staying up in Burlington like my initial plan. Whether the economy will be good enough to find a job this spring—that’s a big worry.”

Andrew, recent college graduate, Brandon

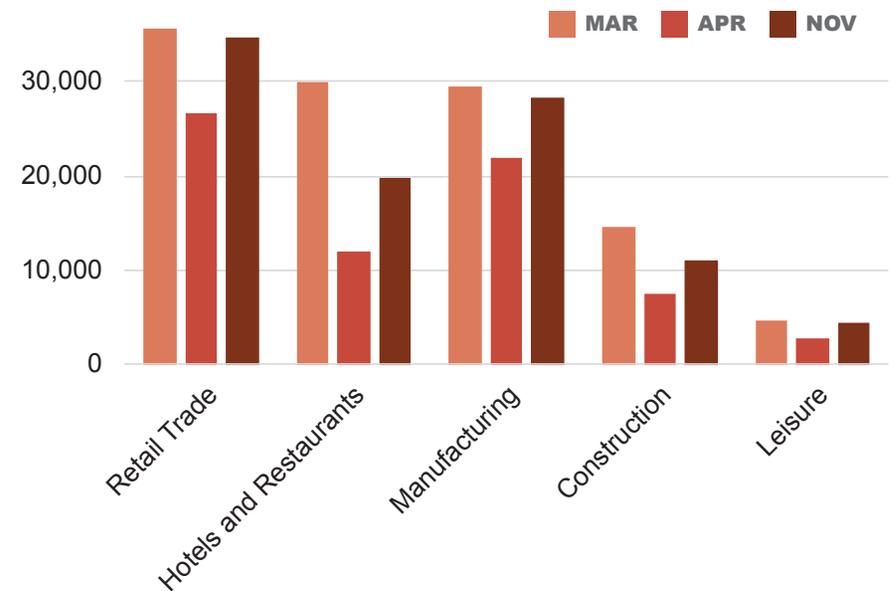
More work, stressful conditions

“There are five health centers and eight care coordinators; five chronic-care coordinators like me and three community resource coordinators. Everything went from in-person to phone. Then they also went virtual and they started working from home. My center wanted me in the building, so I was the only one of eight that was working in the building. I actually then had other duties. I had to do outreach calls, not just to patients that I already had on my caseload, but those that were the highest risk. And then when we were allowed to open up our doors, two of our nurses left. Which meant that I took on a role of staff nurse. So I was rooming patients as well as doing my care coordination job.”

Kathleen, registered nurse and chronic-care coordinator, Island Pond

After reeling, hardest-hit industries recovered some ground

Seasonally adjusted jobs in select industries, Mar, Apr, Nov, 2020



Data source: Vermont Department of Labor
©2020 Public Assets Institute

Full time to reduced time to temporary to . . . ?

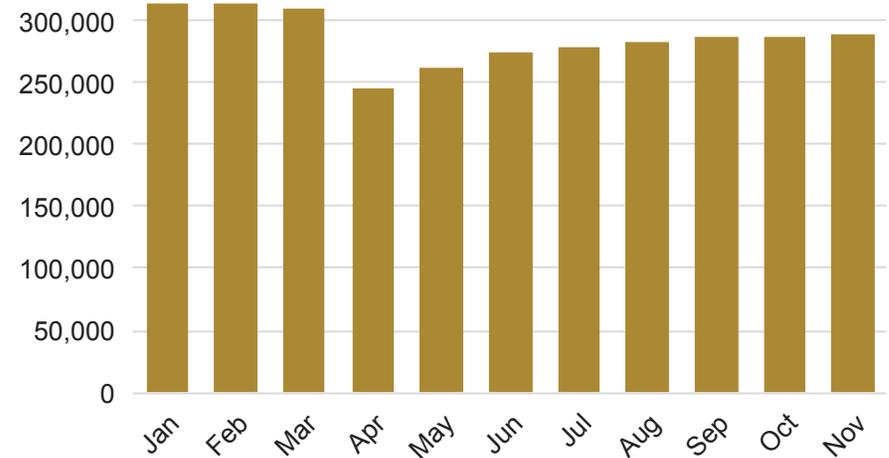
“At the environmental consulting firm, I was reducing my hours to 30 hours a week, but getting two-thirds pay for the 10 hours that I wasn’t working, which they just couldn’t sustain. Then I was let go at the end of June; they had to let several people go. Currently, I am working at UVM in a temporary hourly position. The loss with the new position is that I have no benefits. Fortunately my husband has the health care, so, we don’t have to worry about that. But the retirement benefits and also holidays and sick time and all of that is kind of a big deal.

My employer has told me that they are going to make my position a permanent position, but it is not yet. So there’s the anxiety of waiting for that to happen.”

Elissa, part-time working mother, Burlington

Vermont recovered some jobs lost in April, but they remained precarious

Seasonally adjusted nonfarm jobs, Jan-Nov 2020



Data source: Vermont Department of Labor
©2020 Public Assets Institute

Saving a job

“The place where I work got the PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] loan. That has really kept our organization afloat, which basically means I have a job still.”

Elaine, nonprofit employee, Burlington

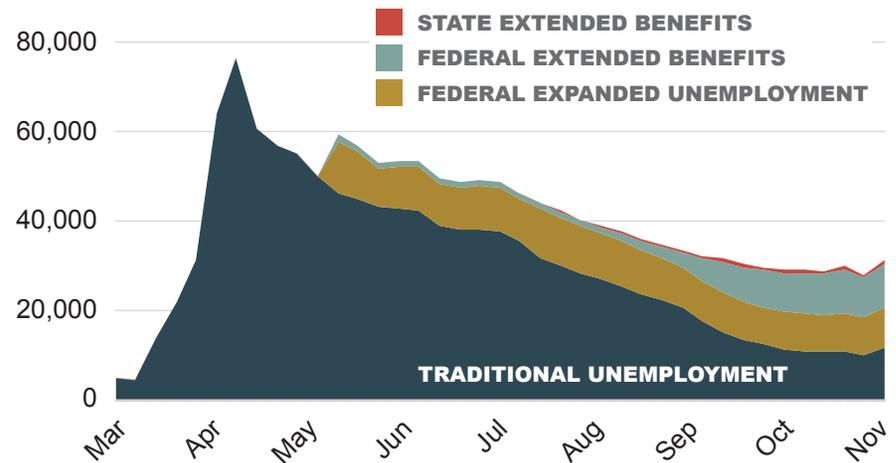
New business model

“Our days have changed in the sense that they’re no longer necessarily revolving around the motel business. Right now as a motel, we can rent up to 30 days and charge rooms and meals tax. As soon as somebody stays 30 days, then they become a tenant. And so we have requested, through the Restart Vermont program, help from a lawyer to get the proper wording and such. We really didn’t get into the business to become a landlord. But that’s our way of trying to move forward with our property and our business and make it sustainable and continue to be able to live here.”

Linda, innkeeper, Manchester

31,000 Vermonters still needed unemployment support

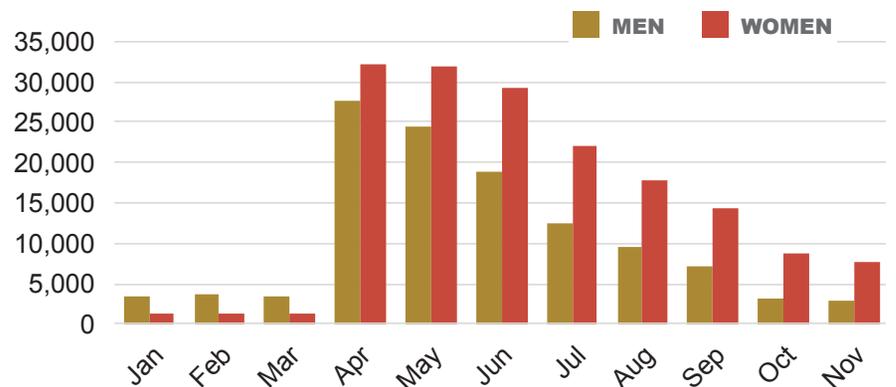
Continued unemployment claims in all programs, Mar-Nov 2020



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of U.S. Department of Labor data
©2020 Public Assets Institute

The pandemic hit women workers harder than men

Traditional unemployment continued claims, by sex, Jan-Nov 2020



Data source: U.S. Department of Labor
©2020 Public Assets Institute

Family life

When schools and child care providers closed in March, Vermont families faced the immediate crisis of taking care of 114,000 children full time. Across the state, a patchwork of solutions sprang up, from sharing care to relying on family to reducing work hours. Some summer camps and programs went forward; others chose not to. School reopening in the fall was not standardized either, with some districts opting for all-remote learning and most adopting a hybrid schedule; some were forced to close after reopening because of positive COVID-19 tests. Child care providers, facing additional health requirements from the state, uncertain demand, and reduced capacity, also had to adjust to this constantly changing reality.

Home with kids

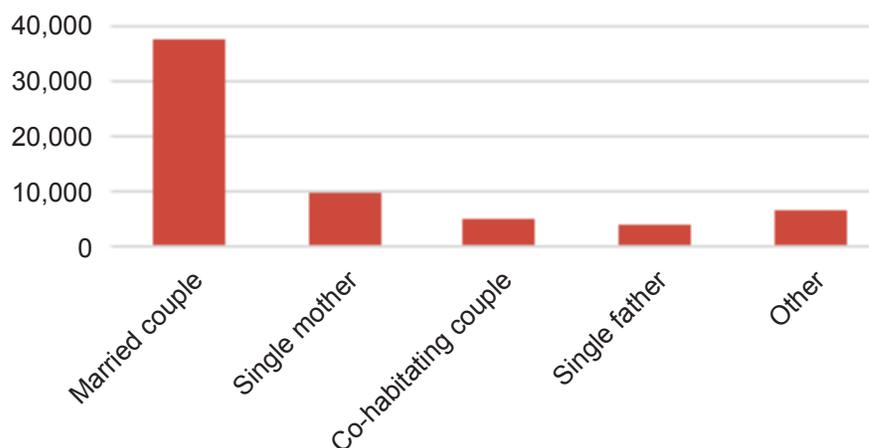
Caring for a child with special needs

“My son is 14 now; at the time he was 13. He receives special ed services and he’s not developmentally at the age where he could be left alone, home all by himself. So as soon as the schools closed, I could no longer work. Obviously emotionally, socially, those were really challenging times, like it was for everybody.

Even though businesses started to open up, I was not able to resume work until the first week in July, which is when camps started. When I returned to work, oddly enough, business is actually doing better than it was previously, so I am now working three days a week as opposed to two; some weeks I’m working four days. The one factor that will definitely play a part is if they do close the schools and my son needs to be home, then I’m not going to be able to work, which is anxiety provoking.”
Cathy, tortilla maker, single mother, Chittenden County

Schools and child care closures disrupted 64,000 households

Vermont households with related children under 18, by household type, 2019



Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-year estimates, 2019
©2020 Public Assets Institute

Child care bind

“Our daycare had to close today because they don’t have enough teachers. If somebody has to leave they can’t find people to hire, because they pay so poorly, because that’s just how the system is. But it’s now so expensive for the child care. And if they raised [workers’ pay] it would be even more expensive.

In the spring, we paid half of the weekly fee and the state paid the other half to the daycare centers so that they wouldn’t fold while things were closed. And that is remarkable. But more is needed.”

Elissa

The costs of remote schooling

“My two children are in high school. They went to totally remote learning from home and they are doing so now due to me being so high risk. And that required us to have to spend more money out of an already tight budget for higher-speed broadband Internet. That’s costing us about a hundred bucks more a month than what we normally would have had to spend.”

Peggy, disabled artist, White River Junction

CHILDREN IN VERMONT, 2019

Infants (0-23 months)	11,137
Toddlers (24-35 months)	5,922
Preschoolers (3-4)	11,984
Pre-K-Elementary school (5-9 years)	37,403
Middle school (10-14 years)	20,048
High School (15 to 19 years)	27,511
Total	114,005

Data source: U.S. Census Bureau
©2020 Public Assets Institute

Scrimping and saving

Reduced work hours or job losses, child care demands, and uncertainty forced many families to tighten their belts. And COVID-related restrictions also meant slashing spending on leisure activities—which devastated hospitality and entertainment businesses.

House or retirement?

“Financially, it’s definitely impacted a lot of choices I’ve had to make. I ended up withdrawing my retirement fund because I needed to. At the time where I was most financially vulnerable, everything started to fall apart in the house, the roof, I had a leak, I had to have the chimney replaced. I had to have major work done. So I’ve had a lot of big, big expenditures. Fortunately, my retirement was able to cover that. So now I don’t have a retirement, but I have a house that, you know, got the repairs that it needed to get done.”

Cathy

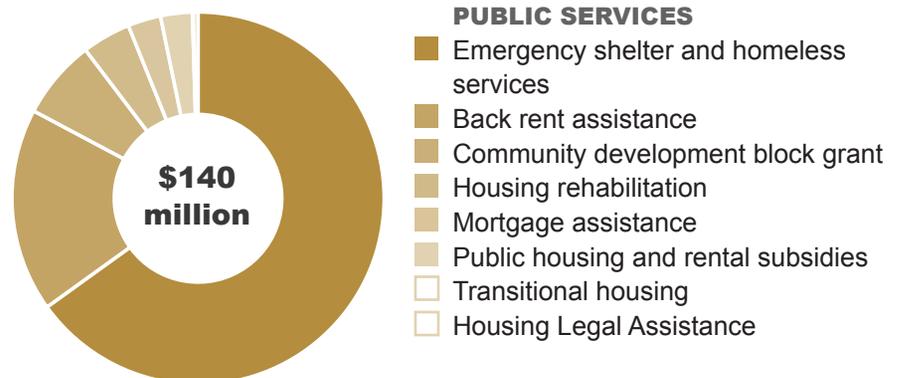
‘Crossing our fingers’

“I noticed it with my electric bill. I have two tenants and with the tenants being home all the time, my bills have gone up by \$100 every month. We’re both on Social Security now. It’s kind of tight when things like that go up. So we’re kind of crossing our fingers and hoping that it’s a mild winter.”

Jo Ann, retired with semiretired husband, Hartland

\$140 million kept Vermonters housed

COVID-19 federal housing relief funds, by program, 2020



Data source: Joint Fiscal Office
©2020 Public Assets Institute

No concerts, no restaurants

“I think other than going to a drive-in concert at the end of the summer, I didn’t see any live music, when normally I would probably see at least 20 concerts over the course of the summer. I didn’t step foot in a restaurant all summer. I did takeout maybe once a week. I think I maybe went to one brewery and sat outside. Except for maybe Black Lives Matter protests and things, I didn’t really see many people congregating in crowds. It just didn’t feel at all like a typical Burlington summer.”

Elaine

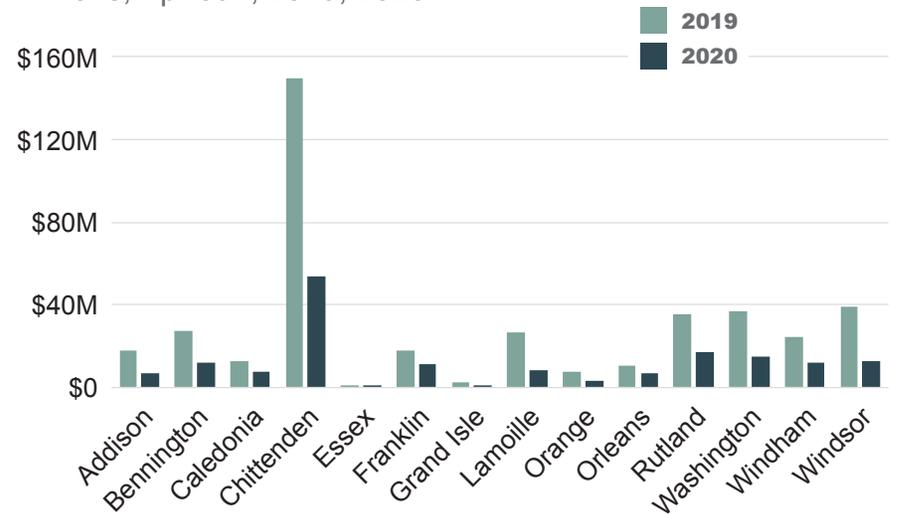
‘Barely getting by’

“COVID hit very close to home when our landlord died of it. And now we are in a limbo. His estate is selling the building. So we are looking at a potential rent increase within the next couple of months that we can’t afford to pay. And there’s no affordable housing here, because we’ve been looking, so I honestly don’t know what the future holds for our family, and it doesn’t look good at this point in time.

The people that are really hurting are the ones that were barely getting by before—low-income people on disability and Social Security.”

Peggy

Meals, rooms, and alcohol* sales plunged in every county Hotel and restaurant sales receipts, in millions, Apr-Jun, 2019, 2020



* Alcohol sales at bars and restaurants
 Data source: Vermont Department of Taxes
 ©2020 Public Assets Institute

Health care concerns

Families confronted a variety of health care challenges, making choices based not just on finances, but on protecting themselves and their loved ones.

Immunocompromised

“I have a chronic illness that makes me immune compromised. So I just read today there’s a shortage of some medications that are used to treat COVID patients, and one of those is a medication that I rely on. This happened earlier with hydroxychloroquine, which people with lupus use. And I have a friend who has that and was having a difficult time accessing it. So the fragility that we’re seeing in the health care infrastructure really worries me. Well, I got really sick during COVID, so I couldn’t access health care because I didn’t feel safe going to a hospital. I knew I was ill, but I didn’t know with what.”

Monica, higher-education employee, Hancock

In-home care risky, options few

“My older child has significant health needs. We rely on outside caregivers to come into the home, and with COVID it does not feel safe to do that. We have limited options. One option is that he could go into a residential setting, which is like a nursing facility, but depending on how the pandemic is going, the visitors are limited; if he was in residential care right now, we wouldn’t be able to visit him. So he’s 13, he’s developmentally disabled, and he doesn’t understand, and he’s vulnerable. I’m probably less worried about his health, because I think we will do what we need to do to take care of him, but I guess it’s all related, right? Like, I’m worried about his health and I’m worried about how my wife and I are going to work and take care of him.”

Hannah, nurse practitioner, Windham County

Between elderly parents and children with kids

“I definitely have concerns about my family. I did just have a stepfather pass away. I have a mother who is in assisted living with dementia, and I can’t go up and visit. It’s also very hard to watch my daughter and my grandkids try to start school in these circumstances and trying to help her out as much as I can, should their school have to close. And then, you know, trying to avoid exposure from us to them and vice versa.”

Linda

Mutual aid: Communities step up

Food for the hungry

“Three small towns in the valley just started a new nonprofit to help deal with food insecurity in our geographic region. So there were a lot of problems that had always been there, that just kind of got laid bare by COVID-19. I mean, we don’t have a lot of racial diversity in our area, but we have a lot of economic diversity. And we all are conscious of the fact that there are definitely people in our community that are struggling economically. I think a lot of people who were more privileged stepped up and helped to take care of those people that needed more assistance.

I am a proponent of grassroots organizing. But there’s only so much that we can deal with because of our size. So we need to really work with Montpelier to resolve those issues. And also, at the federal level, we’re not receiving support the way that we would like.”

Monica

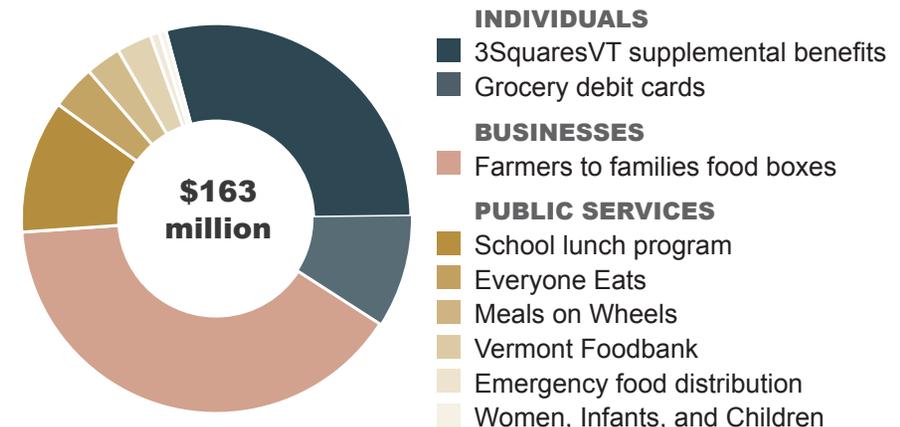
Toilet paper and firewood

“I know a lot of our restaurants were giving out toilet paper. There was such a shortage and no one was going to the restaurants. So they said, why not give the stuff away? I mean, we have people offering to deliver wood, or there’s a heating fund, it’s not even the town, it’s all donations. And if you need help, you contact one of the people and they’ll get you help or you tell somebody and they’ll tell somebody and they’ll tell somebody, and the next thing you know, somebody shows up with a cord of wood. So it’s nice. Yeah.”

Jo Ann

Vermonters have been relying on many food programs

COVID-19 federal food relief funds, by program, 2020



Data sources: Joint Fiscal Office and Vermont Department for Children and Families
©2020 Public Assets Institute

Conclusion: What government can do

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed both the grit and generosity of individuals, families, and communities and the indispensability of public services and supports, especially in emergencies. Many of our interviewees expressed relief and gratitude for that support this year. But one articulated with particular vividness what a little help from government can do for people: take the edge off the anxiety and pressure of living on a low wage, open up time to think and heal, and offer opportunities for a better life.

Kristina's story

“I work as a toddler teacher at a ski resort, in Fayston. At the beginning of April, we were taken off furlough and put at zero hours. I've been at zero hours since then, collecting unemployment. For furlough pay, we received our regular salary and then unemployment was about \$150 less than what I normally make a week. The major reasons for closing the center was the decrease in enrollment.

We're not sure what the company is going to do. The child care center is already operating at a loss. But they have stated if they can't offer work in your department, that they may be able to find something else for you at the mountain. I will probably do that because I can tell you that searching for jobs in this specific locale hasn't resulted in a lot of options. I haven't found remote work yet, but I have taken advantage of the free courses that the Community College of Vermont is offering. I have a degree in health science and I'm taking right now Medical Terminology and Introduction to Health Information Systems to try to utilize my degree more and maybe pursue a remote coding job.

A breather

My husband had emergency surgery last year in August, and he was recovering from that just about the time the pandemic started to hit in February, March. He was still quite tired, but like many others, he had to go back to work because we needed an income, and he had applied for disability but was denied. He works as a lodging technician, so he answers maintenance calls for any problems in the hotel. So when the pandemic hit, it kind of gave us a breather. We were able to focus on our own health and well-being and educational pursuits and we started to get a little bit more money coming in.

In the beginning when we were receiving the extra \$600 [unemployment benefit], my husband and I found ourselves in a better position financially than we were prior to the pandemic. We were able to pay some debt off and make repairs to our truck. We also purchased new phones, which we hadn't [done] since 2011. So those benefits afforded us the ability to go from not being connected and not having a vehicle, not being able to cover rent to paying bills, to getting a phone, making repairs on our vehicle. All of the essential life activities that are necessary to survive, we were able to do.

We don't spend anything other than our monthly expenses, our bills, electricity, storage unit, food, student loans. Some of the student loan programs are not charging interest right now, so that makes some of those payments more worthwhile.

My husband and I are taking courses through the community college right now. Vermont paid for the tuition for two of the courses. We were awarded an Internet subsidy of \$320. The college provided \$250 for medical care, \$250 to help with food costs, and \$500 for housing. So it's been a really great program to not only help you acquire new training and job skills, to help you get back in the market if your current job disappears. But it also will be supporting us financially, which is a huge help because we don't know what's going to happen next.

We don't spend anything other than our monthly expenses, our bills, electricity, storage unit, food, student loans

‘Return on investment’

Now that I’ve had such a long amount of time to dedicate to my health and educational pursuits, I am convinced that these are things that we need to value in our society and we need to take care of people in their times of needs. There’s a lot of negative connotations with doing that, because people will say those people will never want to go back to work, or we can’t afford to support them, or nobody needs that much time off.

But in the end, you look at the benefits of investing in people, the return on investment of that is greater than any costs that you would incur to allow people not just to recover from surgery, but maybe take some time off of work and really take care of themselves for a month or two out of the year. I mean, several other countries in the world do it and we just don’t do it. And you can see the results in your daily life. It doesn’t mean that work is not an important part of living in a civilized society. We all have to contribute and work. But at what cost? You see people struggling all the time. How much are we giving of ourselves and how much are we being rewarded with for our hard work?”

We all have
to contribute
and work. But
at what cost?
You see people
struggling all
the time

Acknowledgments

Public Assets Institute would like to thank Richard Watts of the Center for Research on Vermont in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Vermont (UVM) and his students Jonathan Barthe, Emmy Sobelman, Carter Neubiser, Andrew Jerome, and Leah Kelleher. They helped develop and carry out a survey and interviews of the working Vermonters included in this report. We'd also like to thank UVM student Hilary Nardone for making sense of the survey data.

A very special thanks goes to the Vermonters who shared their time and stories with us. They have helped us recognize and understand the human toll of the COVID-19 pandemic.

State of Working Vermont 2020 was created in conjunction with the Economic Policy Institute in Washington D.C. and was funded in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings presented in this report are those of the Public Assets Institute and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of either partner.



PO Box 942, Montpelier, Vermont 05842 • 802-223-6677 • publicassets.org