Workers accepting of risk divide in face of pandemic

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People who work remotely shoulder fewer risks during the pandemic than people who must work face to face. The American Voices Project interviewed workers on both sides of this risk divide. The project explored whether this change in the structure of work is leading to new types of interworker relations and conflict. The Federal Reserve Banks of Atlanta and Boston and the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality are co-sponsors of the project.

The American Voices Project, a national qualitative study, is monitoring the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on everyday life. It provides real-time reporting on how the country is faring, with a special focus on people of color, the low-income population and other groups that are being disproportionately affected. This second report in the series focuses on employment while the first explored the pandemic’s effect on young people.

For the employment report, researchers talked to people about their work, changes in income, strategies for making ends meet and policy recommendations. They also explored how workers are reacting to the differences in risk between face-to-face and remote workers. One might have expected unequal risk bearing to generate resentment and conflict. Instead, interviews showed a pattern of stoicism, fortitude and even acceptance of existing class inequalities and the disproportionate risks they entail.

Young people experience a time of stillness

In its first report, the American Voices Project focused on the experience of adolescence during the spring and summer of 2020.

Adolescence is a stage of development brimming with promise and expectation. It is a time of transition, a time when profound biological, neurological, psychosocial and emotional changes occur. By definition, adolescence entails movement.

But in 2020, COVID-19 interrupted lives and imposed restrictions. The report describes a period of stillness when the relentless activity of everyday life paused. That stillness imposed costs on young people, for whom 2020 represents lost opportunities and shattered dreams. But stillness also came with benefits for some, who gained time with family, learned new skills and
enjoyed time away from everyday stresses.

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