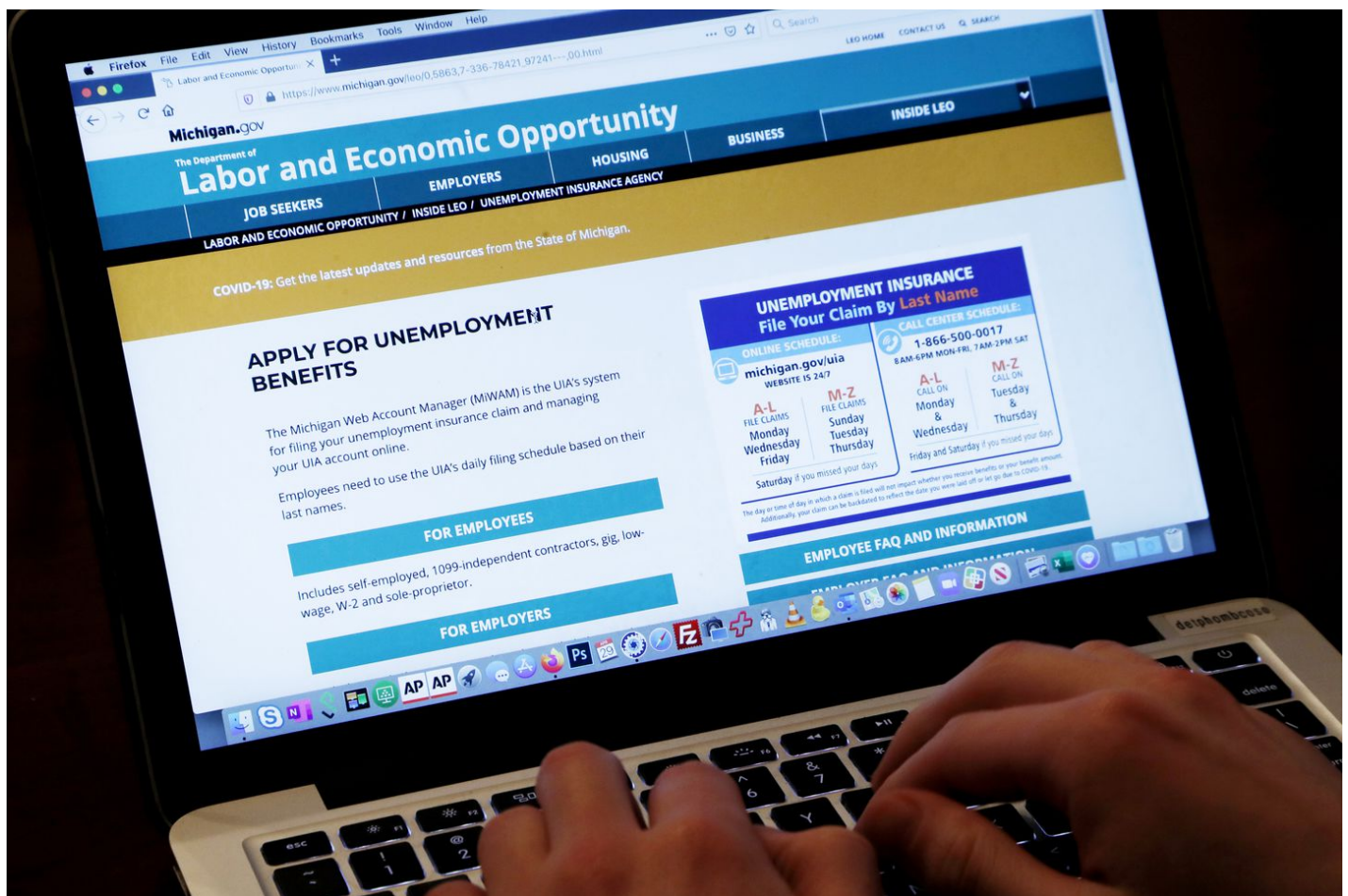


OPINION

Federal government needs to change how it releases unemployment data

There is limited data on how race and gender intersect in the economic aftermath of the pandemic.

By **Susan Smith Richardson and Xanthe Scharff** Updated April 30, 2020, 2:30 p.m.



An unemployed worker checks the state of Michigan unemployment site. CARLOS OSORIO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

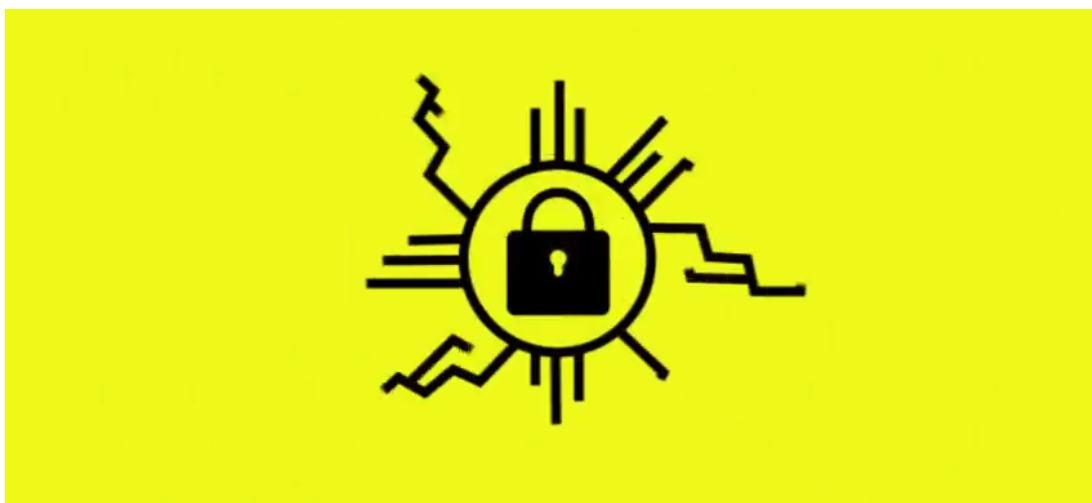
In the sweeping economic crisis fueled by the coronavirus pandemic, women and people of color are being hit particularly hard. Industries that disproportionately employ them — restaurant, hospitality, and services — were among the first to face large-scale layoffs.

Statistics from 17 states show that during the first weeks of the coronavirus crisis, in all 17 states women became the majority of employment seekers. The share of people who filed new unemployment claims who were women surged an estimated 8 to 33 percentage points above the norm in those states, according to [an analysis by The Fuller Project](#), a nonprofit journalism organization that focuses on issues that impact women.

Amid calls for health and race data, unemployment data is also vital, given that the economic impact of COVID-19 will be with us for many years to come, threatening to exacerbate longstanding gender and racial inequality in the United States.

In the restaurant, hospitality, and service industries, gender and race are inextricably linked. Many of the workers are women of color, reflecting their overrepresentation in the least-skilled, lowest-paying jobs in the economy. Women are nearly two-thirds of the 22.2 million workers in the 40 lowest-paying jobs in America, according to the [National Women's Law Center](#).

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Yet as the federal government spends trillions of dollars for relief efforts, we have limited data on how race and gender intersect in the economic aftermath of the pandemic. As a

result, the workers who are most vulnerable to this crisis may not receive the support they need.

Changing how the federal government releases unemployment data is a crucial starting point. Each month, states provide statistics to the federal government on the people who were receiving unemployment. The statistics provide demographic information, including gender, race, ethnicity, and age group.

The problem is this: The federal government only releases these unemployment statistics monthly, for a snapshot of the week of the month that includes the 19th, and it counts only those people who were already receiving unemployment — not people who applied but were denied benefits.

By the time the April statistics are released in late May, they will already be outdated. And the next snapshot leaves us without critical information about the 30.3 million unemployment claims filed over the past six weeks, after schools closed and states were shut down — two events that pushed people out of the workforce in droves.

The federal government should release weekly data from every state, and it should be released in a format that allows analysts and reporters to look at more than one demographic factor at a time. The states also collect other vital data that should be included, such as whether a person is receiving child support and claimants' reason for unemployment, such as lack of child care.

This data can tell us significant information such as how many single mothers filed for unemployment because they couldn't find childcare, how layoffs are affecting women of color in states like California where a large share of new claims are being filed, and why the share of people who are under 24 and are newly filing for unemployment is rising in a number of states.

While women are found at all levels of the economy — from CEOs to childcare workers — too many are still underpaid and concentrated on the sticky floor, far from the glass

ceiling. Forty-one percent of mothers were sole or primary breadwinners for their families in 2017, according to the [Center for American Progress](#). Yet American Indian, Alaska Native, Black, and Hispanic women still earn 25 percent less than white men due to institutional bias, and white women earn \$0.81 for every dollar a white man earns, according to [PayScale](#).

Information, not politics, should drive the relief efforts being shaped by legislators. Otherwise, funds cannot target those most in need, including income-insecure women.

Let's learn from past efforts. The [Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996](#) was one of the most important welfare efforts of the past 25 years. Yet, according to [anti-poverty experts](#), it resulted in more women of all races and ethnicities with children joining the ranks of the working poor. With steady use of state-level data, the bill could have been rolled out in a way that helped families. Instead, the law punted the job of maintaining the safety net from the federal government to the states, where legislators then used the money as they saw fit. In many cases, this led to states reallocating funds away from the women whom the federal bill meant to target.

The challenge today is even more complex. Americans are living with simultaneous public health and economic crises. Like race and gender, they intersect. Policy makers cannot approach responses from a single-issue framework and in the absence of vital information.

The data we need to close the tremendous gap in knowledge about unemployment is available. We just need the federal government to release it.

Susan Smith Richardson is CEO of the Center for Public Integrity. Xanthe Scharff is CEO of The Fuller Project for International Reporting.

