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HEALTH

Over Two Million Americans Aren't Working Due to Long Covid

Brookings Institution report says the loss of work translates into roughly \$170 billion a year in lost wages



By *Sumathi Reddy* [Follow](#)

Updated Aug. 25, 2022 1:05 pm ET

Between two million and four million Americans aren't working due to the long-term effects of Covid-19, according to a new Brookings Institution report released Wednesday.

The inability to work translates to roughly \$170 billion a year in lost wages, the report estimates. It follows a January Brookings Institution report that estimated long Covid was potentially causing 15% of the country's labor shortage.

The report estimates that roughly 16 million Americans of working age—between 18 and 65—have long Covid, which most groups and doctors define as wide-ranging symptoms that persist for months following an infection and can include shortness of breath, extreme fatigue and neurocognitive issues.

An estimated 10% to 30% of people with Covid develop the condition, according to studies and estimates from governments, hospitals, universities and doctors. It can occur after

even mild cases. Long Covid's impact is being felt on workplaces with employees not well enough to work and patients struggling to financially support themselves, as well as family members having to act as caregivers.

"Three million full-time-equivalent workers is 1.8% of the entire U.S. civilian labor force," said Katie Bach, a nonresident senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based think tank and author of both Brookings reports.

A roughly 1.8% reduction in the U.S. workforce is in line with estimates from other countries. In a May speech a former Bank of England committee member attributed a 1.3% drop in labor-force participation to "long-term sickness," citing long Covid.

Ms. Bach said she used data from the U.S. Census Bureau, which recently added four long-Covid questions to its June household survey. She also used a recent Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis study, a survey from the United Kingdom's Trades Union Congress, and a Lancet study from a long Covid advocacy group for the report.

David Cutler, a health economist and professor of economics at Harvard University, has also calculated the economic cost of long Covid. According to his estimates, the total cost is \$3.7 trillion.

He breaks the costs down to reduced quality of life, reduced earnings and increased medical spending.

"So if you say, is it worth it to spend \$50 billion on long Covid...there's almost no amount of money that you could spend that you could feel like is too much money," said Dr. Cutler.

Dr. Cutler, who has reviewed Ms. Bach's reports and said they are based on sound calculations, agreed that long Covid is contributing to a labor shortage. The labor force is roughly 600,000 workers smaller than in early 2020 and several million smaller if you adjust for the increase in population, according to Labor Department data.

Ms. Bach noted that the number of disabled people in the U.S. has gone up by two million during the pandemic, according to the Census Bureau's current population survey. Yet labor-force participation among the disabled has gone up, which may mean some long Covid patients are working in some capacity remotely.

David Putrino, director of rehabilitation innovation at Mount Sinai Health System in New

York City, said the Brookings report highlights what doctors see at long Covid clinics all the time.

“Long Covid definitely affects the ability to remain employed, and we’re definitely seeing a lot of people being denied short- and long-term disability and workers’ compensation despite the fact that they have a diagnosis of long Covid,” said Dr. Putrino.

Monica Verduzco-Gutierrez, professor and chair of the department of rehabilitation medicine at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and director of its Covid Recovery Clinic, said a lot of long Covid patients are having difficulties going back to work.

“That’s going to cost the economy a lot,” she said. “Study after study shows that a lot of the people who are affected are 40-year-olds, people who are working.”

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Corrections & Amplifications

The labor force is roughly 600,000 workers smaller than in early 2020. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the labor force is roughly 600,000 workers smaller than in early 2000. (Corrected on Aug. 25.)