

Public Policy Center

UMass Dartmouth

FRONTLINE WORKERS IN THE SOUTHCOAST:
A Data Brief from the Public Policy Center at UMass
Dartmouth

June 2020

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In an effort to combat the spread of COVID-19, people across the country are practicing social distancing by avoiding public places and working from home. As a consequence of forced shutdowns, many employees have been laid off for an indefinite period, or in the worst scenario, have lost their jobs entirely. As a result, the nation has become highly dependent on **frontline workers**; people whose essential jobs must continue functioning and cannot be done from home. These include workers in six important industries:

- **Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Stores:** stock and sell food, medicine, and other necessary goods
- **Public Transit:** maintain and operate the regional transit systems that get workers, customers, and patients to and from essential businesses
- **Trucking, Warehouse, and Postal Service:** stock, package, and ship necessities and other goods to essential businesses and homes
- **Building Cleaning Services:** clean, disinfect, and sanitize communal spaces and businesses
- **Select Health Care:** provide or support patient care in a healthcare facility or in the community
- **Social Services:** provide supportive and emergency services to those in or at-risk of entering crisis

The Public Policy Center (PPC) at UMass Dartmouth has prepared a data brief to better understand who is working on the frontlines during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Our analysis demonstrates the following:

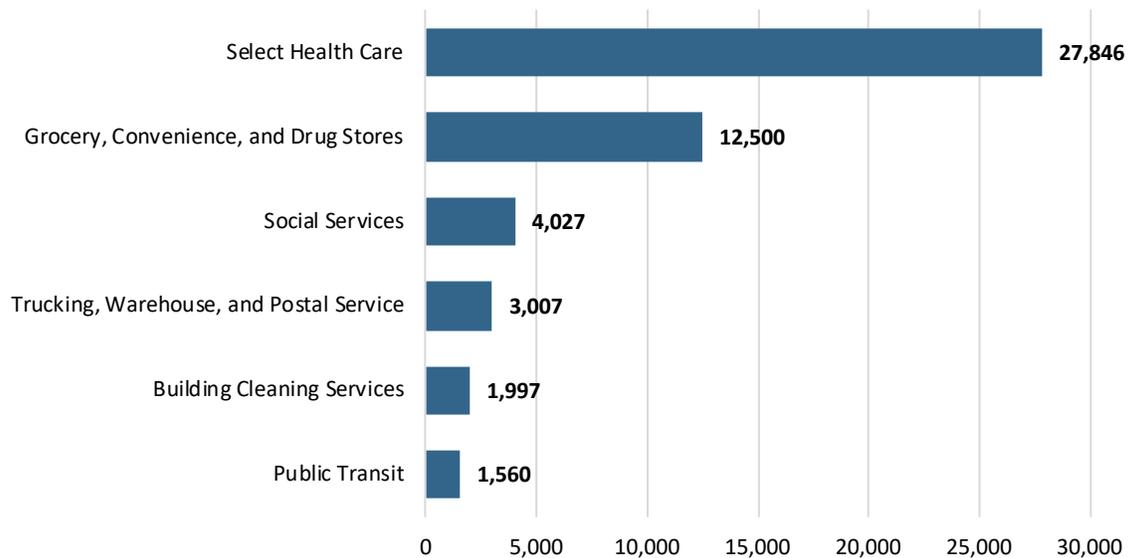
- Frontline workers represent 26 percent of the regional workforce.
- Compared to the regional workforce and other frontline industries, Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Store workers are more likely to be under 25 years old.
- Frontline workers are more likely to be women, particularly in the Select Health Care and Social Service industries.
- Compared to the regional workforce, frontline workers are slightly less likely to have children at home.
- Workers in the Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Store and Building Cleaning Services industries are more likely to be people of color and Hispanic or Latino than their counterparts in other frontline industries.
- Nearly three-quarters of frontline workers earn less than \$50,000 annually.
- One in ten frontline workers earns a wage that is at or below the poverty threshold for their household size.
- Workers in the Building Cleaning Services industry are considerably more likely to be immigrants and non-citizens, and they are more likely than their fellow frontline workers to lack health insurance.

¹ This analysis is based on the Census Bureau's 2014–2018 American Community Survey Public Use Microdata, which is the most recent data available. Therefore, these estimates may differ from the actual number of workers who are currently employed in frontline industries. See the Methodology section on page 12 for more information.

Frontline workers represent more than a quarter of the regional workforce.

As of 2018, approximately 50,937 people in the SouthCoast work in frontline industries, which represents 26 percent of the region’s total workforce. Comparatively, frontline workers account for 20 percent of the workforce in Massachusetts as a whole. Health care is one of the largest industries in the SouthCoast, and unsurprisingly during a healthcare crisis, the majority of the Southcoast’s frontline workers (55%) are employed in the Select Health Care industry (see Figure 1). The Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Stores industry is the second largest, while Public Transit, which in the SouthCoast primarily includes bus workers, is the smallest frontline industry.

Figure 1
Number of Workers in Selected Frontline Industries, SouthCoast, 2018

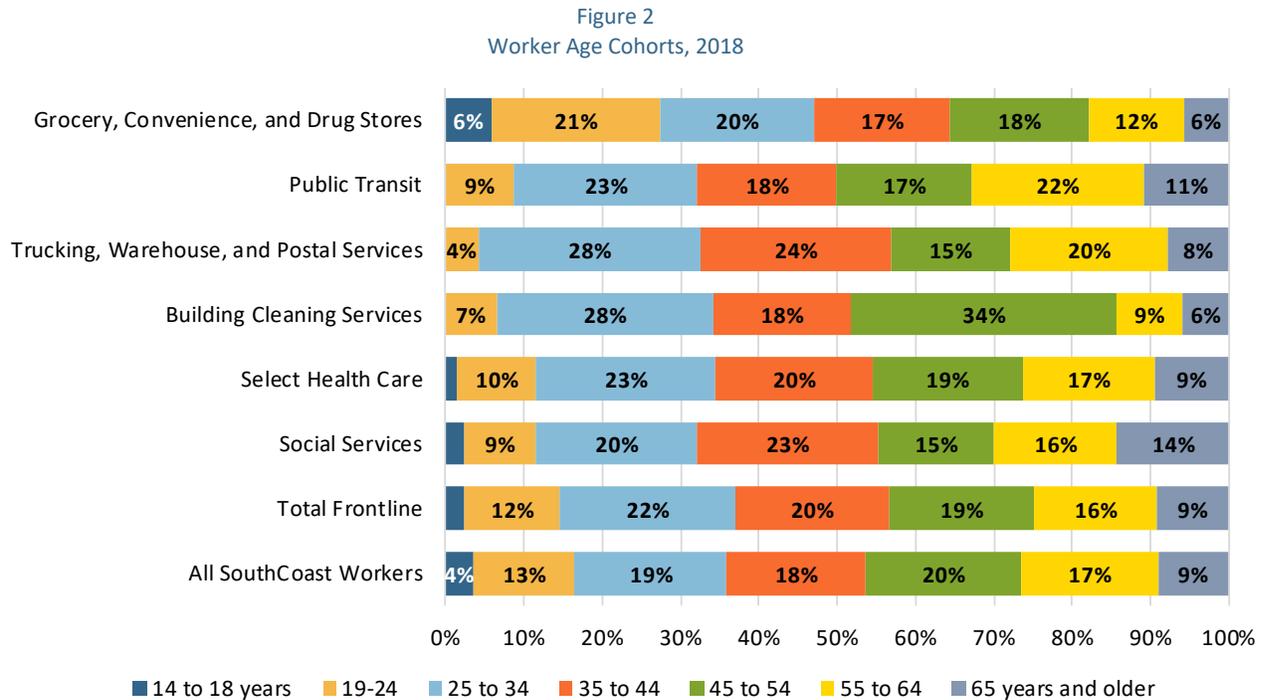


Source: American Community Survey 2014–2018 PUMS Microdata

Despite its size, the Social Services industry is playing a crucial role for the region by coordinating a community-driven response to the pandemic and the economic fallout that has followed. This has included providing services to the region’s homeless who are now unable to access public spaces, responding to the overwhelming increase in food insecurity that has followed furloughs and school closures, and supporting parents as they step into the role of crisis educators at home.

Compared to the regional workforce and other frontline industries, Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Store workers are more likely to be under 25 years old.

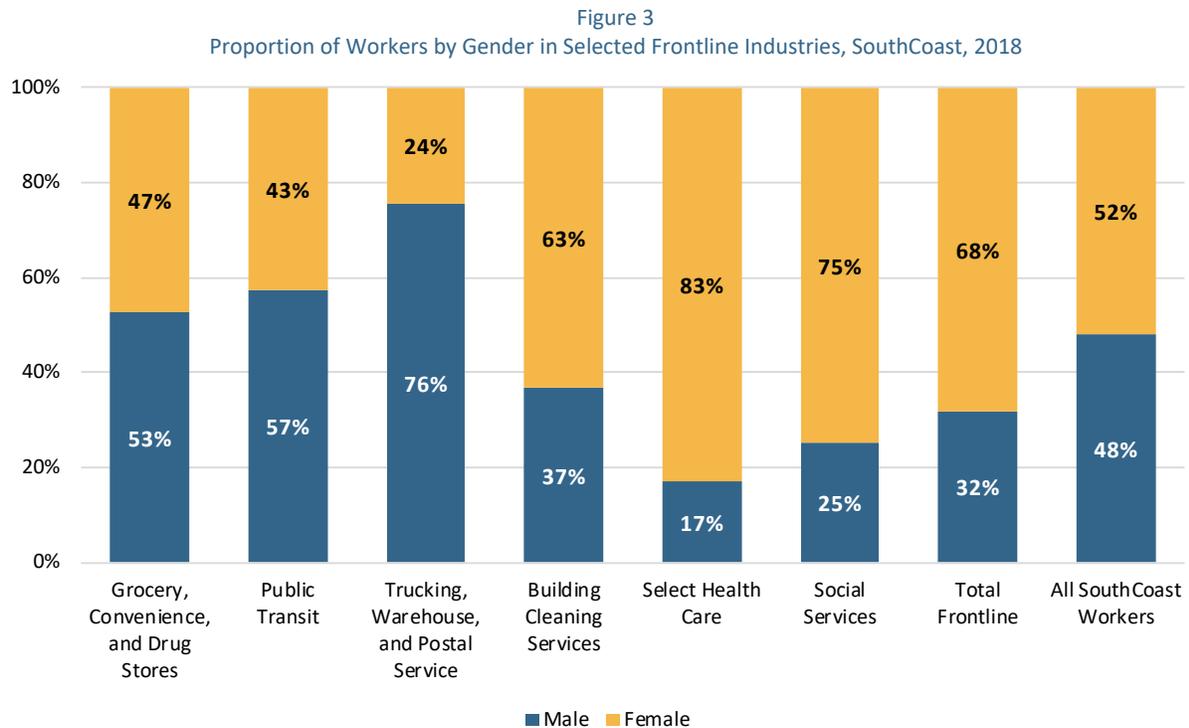
Figure 2 displays the age cohorts for frontline workers and the regional workforce over all. Most noticeable is the relatively high share of workers in the Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Stores industry who are under 25 years of age (27%, compared with 17% in the regional workforce). This industry, and retail in general, is a common sector for part-time employment, and attracts high school students and college-age workers. Indeed, the majority (59%) of frontline workers aged 14 to 18 years are employed in the Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Stores industry.



Source: American Community Survey 2014–2018 PUMS Microdata

Frontline workers are more likely to be women, particularly in the Select Health Care and Social Service industries.

Overall, the workforce of the SouthCoast is split almost evenly between men and women, but in the frontline industries, more than two-thirds of the workers are women (see Figure 3). This compares favorably to the statewide frontline workforce, in which women represent 65 percent of the workers. Workers in Select Health Care and Social Services industries are more likely to be women. Together, these industries employ 75 percent of all women working in a frontline industry.



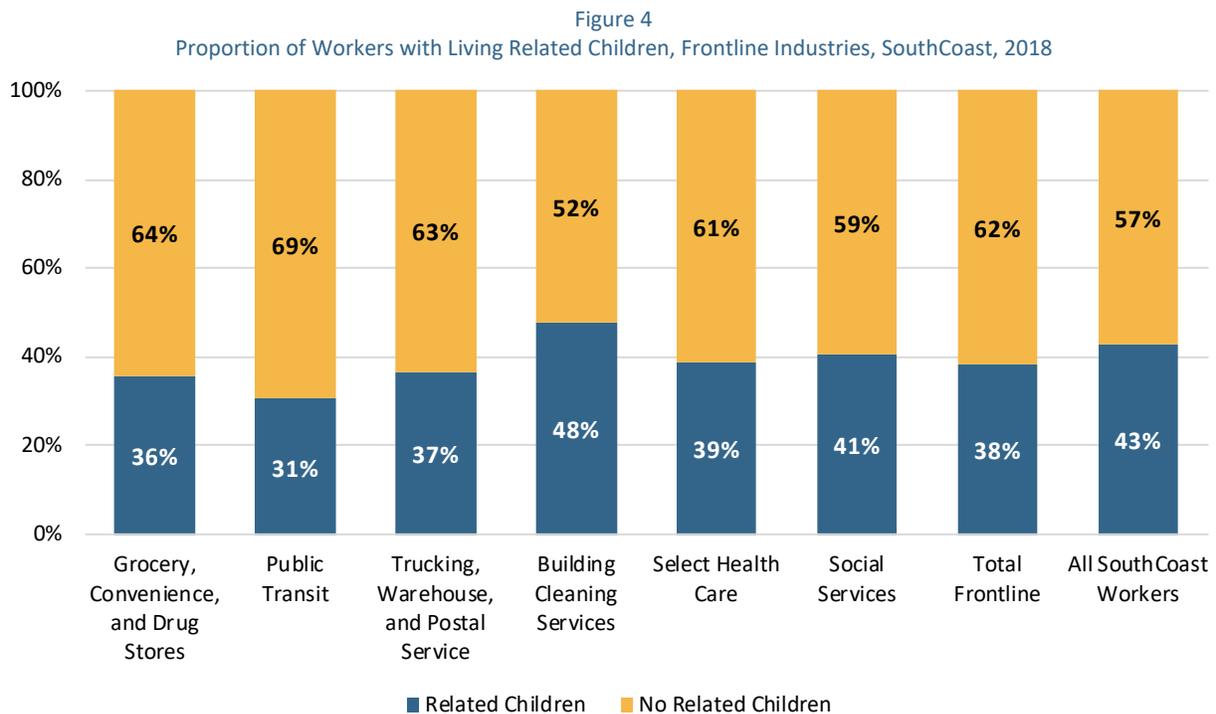
Source: American Community Survey 2014–2018 PUMS Microdata

In healthcare, this disparity puts women on the frontlines for the occupations most likely to interact with people testing positive for COVID-19. Indeed, as discussed in a recent national analysis of essential workers in *The New York Times*, women are more likely to work as cashiers in grocery stores and provide direct patient care in nursing homes, long-term care facilities, and hospitals, while men are more likely have managerial positions that require less direct contact with the general public.² Moreover, women are more likely to be caregivers for children and elderly family members. For example, nearly 5,000 workers in the Select Health Care industry are single mothers, which is 18 percent of the Select Health Care workforce.

² Robertson, C. & Gebeloff, R. (2020). “How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in America.” *The New York Times*. April 18, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html>.

Compared to the entire regional workforce, frontline workers are slightly less likely to have children at home.

School and daycare closures across Massachusetts have created childcare challenges for many families. This is especially true for parents working in frontline industries, who are unlikely to have the option to work from home, and who risk transmitting the coronavirus to their families when they return home from their shifts.³ In frontline industries in the SouthCoast, a smaller share of workers (38%) are responsible for related children than in the SouthCoast as a whole (43%). The Building Cleaning Services industry has the highest percentage of workers with related children at home, at 48 percent, while the Public Transit industry has only 31 percent of workers have children at home (Figure 4).



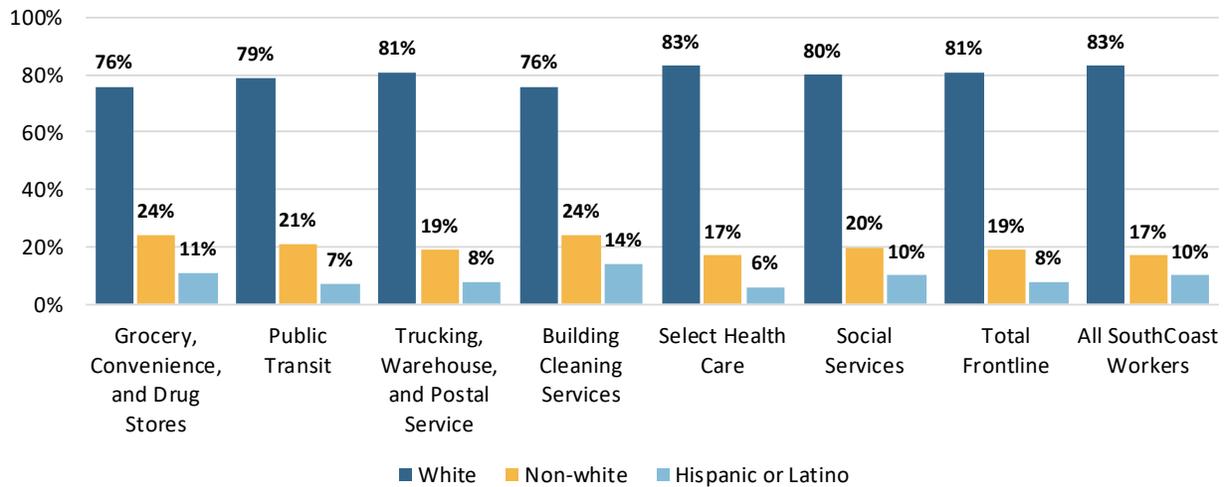
Source: American Community Survey 2014–2018 PUMS Microdata

³ Chen, A. & Bebinger, M. (2020). "Bringing Home Something Deadly: How Health Workers Are Isolating From Their Families." *WBUR*. April 3, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2020/04/03/bringing-home-something-deadly-how-health-workers-are-isolating-from-their-families>.

Workers in the Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Store and Building Cleaning Services industries are more likely to be people of color and Hispanic or Latino than their counterparts in other frontline industries.

The region’s frontline workers are more likely to be people of color, compared to the overall workforce (see Figure 5). Excluding Select Health Care, people of color are slightly overrepresented in the frontline workforce relative to their share of the total workforce. In particular, nearly a quarter of all workers in the Grocery, Convenience and Drug Store and Building Cleaning Services industries are non-white. The SouthCoast has historically been less diverse than the state as whole, and the frontline workforce is no exception. Statewide, people of color account for 25 percent of the frontline workforce, which, similar to the SouthCoast, is marginally higher than the share of people of color in the overall state workforce (21%).

Figure 5
Workers by Race and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity, SouthCoast, 2018



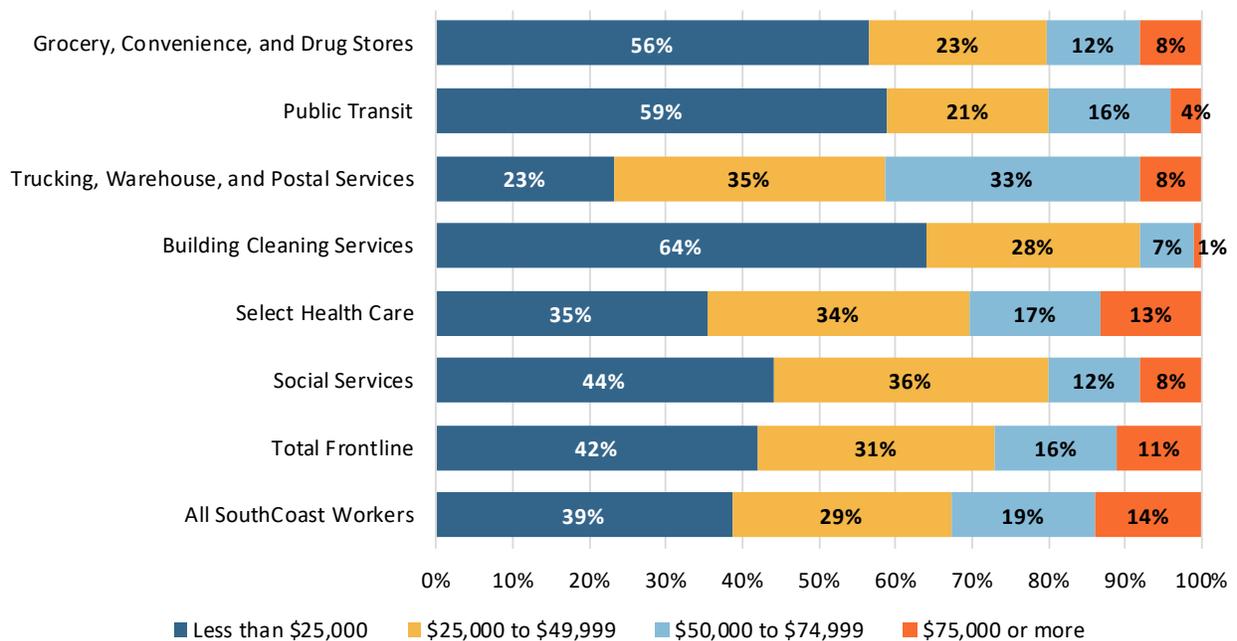
Source: American Community Survey 2014–2018 PUMS Microdata

“White” refers to people who identify as “White Alone” on the ACS and “Non-white” refers to all other race categories, include “Multiple Races.” Industry totals are greater than 100% because Hispanic and Latino ethnicity is not included the PUMS microdata for race, and was calculated separately.

Nearly three-quarters of the all frontline workers earn less than \$50,000 annually.

The average annual wage for all frontline workers in 2018 was approximately \$27,000, which compares to \$48,293 for all SouthCoast workers. The average annual wage for frontline workers may seem low, but it is due to some occupations paying the minimum wage and the presence of part-time workers. Figure 6 below groups all workers into income brackets, and demonstrates that nearly three-quarters of the all frontline workers (73%) earn less than \$50,000 annually. The Select Health Care and Trucking, Warehouse, and Postal Services industries have the highest shares of workers earning more than \$50,000. Workers in the Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Stores, Public Transit and Building Cleaning Services industries are most likely to earn less than \$25,000 annually, which is partially due to the concentration of part-time workers in these industries.

Figure 6
Workers by Average Annual Wage, 2018



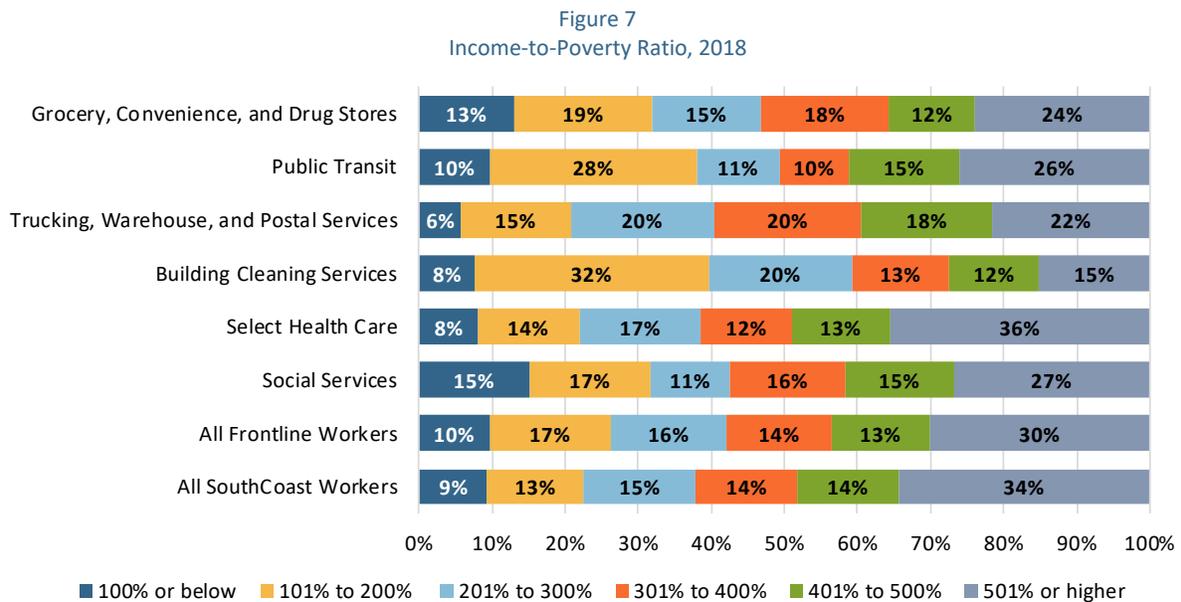
Source: American Community Survey 2014–2018 PUMS Microdata

Recently, some frontline health care workers coming into direct contact with COVID-19 patients have received hazard pay increases to compensate them for the risks.⁴ However, the minimum wage prevails for workers in other parts of the health care industry, such as personal care assistants, nursing assistants, whose jobs demand physical contact with patients, and for many workers in grocery, convenience, and drug stores who interact directly with the public for their entire shift.

⁴ Cho, D. & Markos, M. (2020). "Health Care Workers in Mass. to Receive Hazard Pay Amid Coronavirus Pandemic." *NBC News Boston*. April 13, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.nbcboston.com/news/local/health-care-workers-in-mass-to-receive-hazard-pay-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/2106619/>

One in ten frontline workers earn a wage that is at or below the poverty threshold.

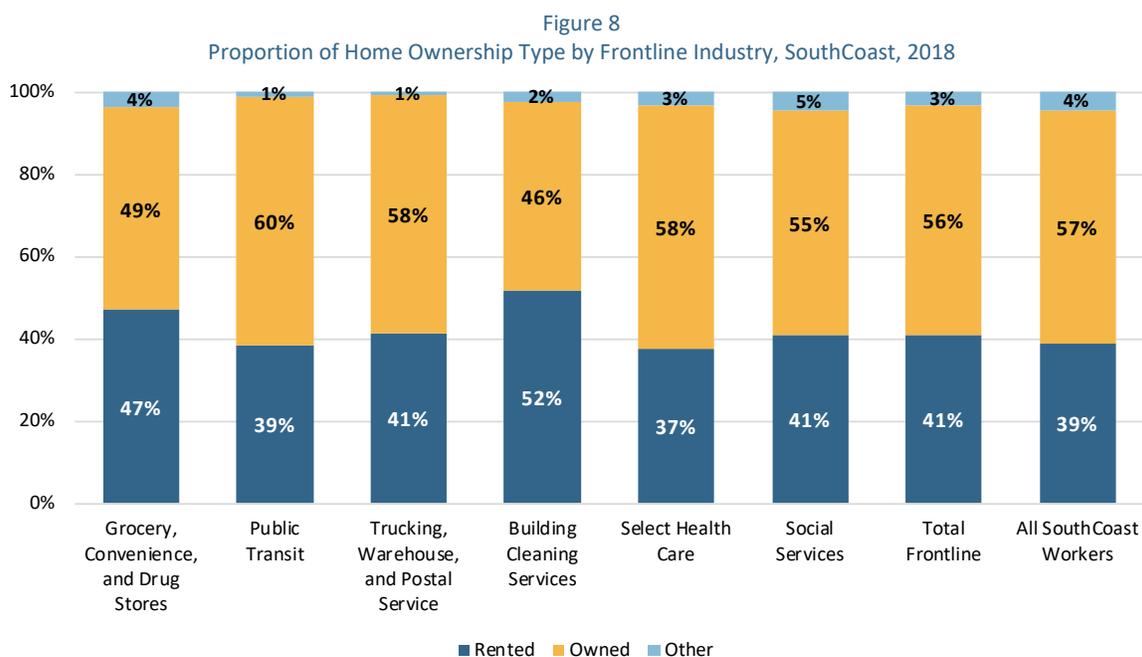
Figure 7 displays the income-to-poverty ratio for workers in the SouthCoast overall and in frontline industries, which is calculated by dividing a worker’s total income by the poverty threshold for their household size. Across the region, 9 percent of all workers have incomes that are either at or below the poverty threshold, while 34 percent have incomes that are over 500 percent of the poverty threshold for their household size. As a whole, in this metric, frontline workers look very similar to the regional workforce. Among the frontline industries, there are some exceptions, such as Public Transit and Building Cleaning Services, which both have considerably higher shares of workers with incomes at or below 200 percent of the poverty threshold (38% and 40%, respectively, compared with 27% of frontline workers overall).



Source: American Community Survey 2014–2018 PUMS Microdata

In terms of homeownership, frontline workers generally resemble the regional workforce.

As Figure 8 demonstrates, the majority (56%) of frontline workers in the SouthCoast own their homes, nearly the same share as the SouthCoast as a whole (57%). The frontline industry with the highest percentage of home ownership is the Public Transit industry, with 60 percent of workers owning their home. Conversely, the frontline industry with the lowest homeownership percentage is the Building and Cleaning Services industry, at just 46 percent. Comparatively, a smaller share (35%) of the statewide workforce rents their housing, which is not surprising, as renting is more common in the SouthCoast than the state.



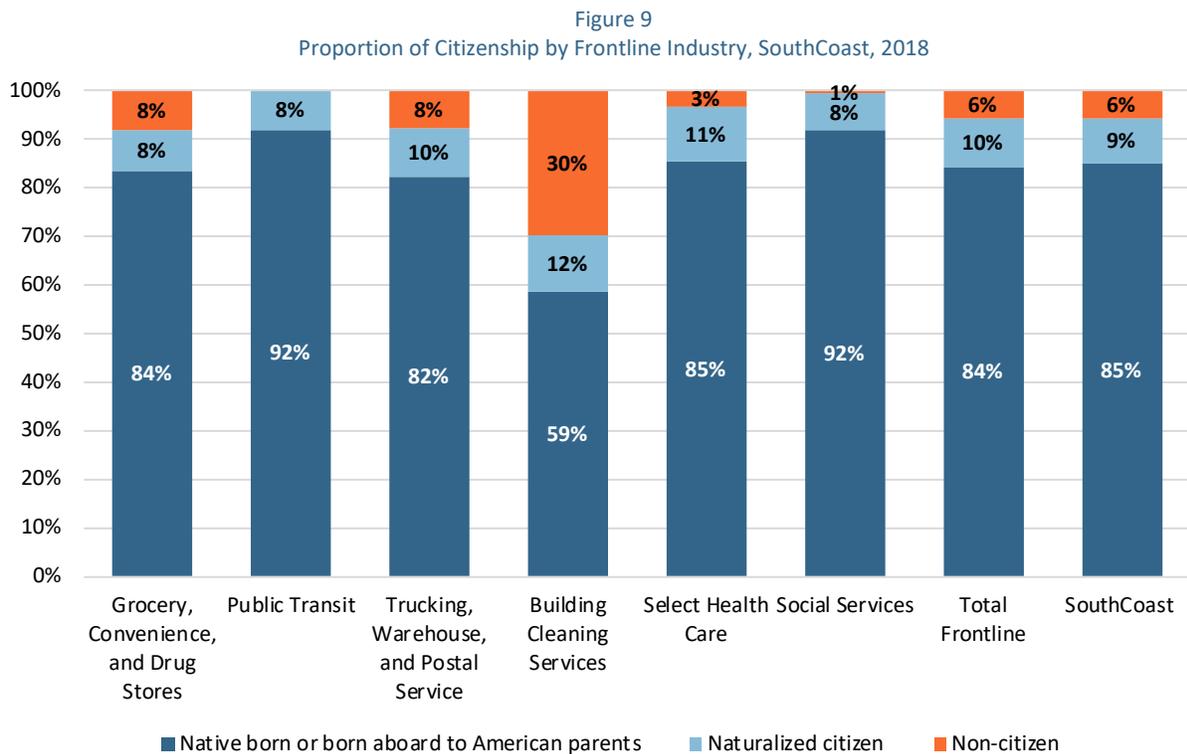
Source: American Community Survey 2014–2018 PUMS Microdata
“Other” refers to people living in group quarters and units occupied rent free.

Both renters and homeowners face challenges related to COVID-19. While many mortgage lenders immediately offered some form of forbearance for homeowners in response to economic fallout of the pandemic, until recently, renters in Massachusetts were not protected from evictions.⁵ This means that workers in frontline industries, out of fear of not being able to pay rent, may have been more likely to continue working even if they lacked proper protective equipment or were unable to maintain social distancing requirements at work. Additionally, there are still unknown impacts of delayed mortgage and rent payments. For instance, some of the homeowners discussed here are landlords, who depend on rent payments to pay down the mortgage on their rental properties. Delayed rental payments also mean that some landlords will be unable to reinvest in their properties, likely resulting in upkeep and repairs being deferred and contributing to the poor housing conditions common among the older tenement apartments found in New Bedford and Fall River.

⁵ Logan, T. (2020) “Baker signs bill blocking evictions during coronavirus crisis.” *The Boston Globe*. April 20, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/04/20/business/baker-signs-bill-blocking-evictions-during-coronavirus/>.

Workers in the Building Cleaning Services industry are considerably more likely to be immigrants and non-citizens.

Prior to the pandemic, the foreign-born population of the SouthCoast faces many challenges when engaging with the regional healthcare system, and this is particularly true for non-citizens and newly arrived immigrants, who face cultural and language barriers when engaging with many American institutions.⁶ Most of the frontline industries in the SouthCoast have proportions of citizenship similar to the SouthCoast as a whole, and slightly lower than the share of foreign-born workers in statewide frontline workforce (22%). The major exception is the Building Cleaning Services industry, in which 30 percent of workers are not U.S. citizens (Figure 9).



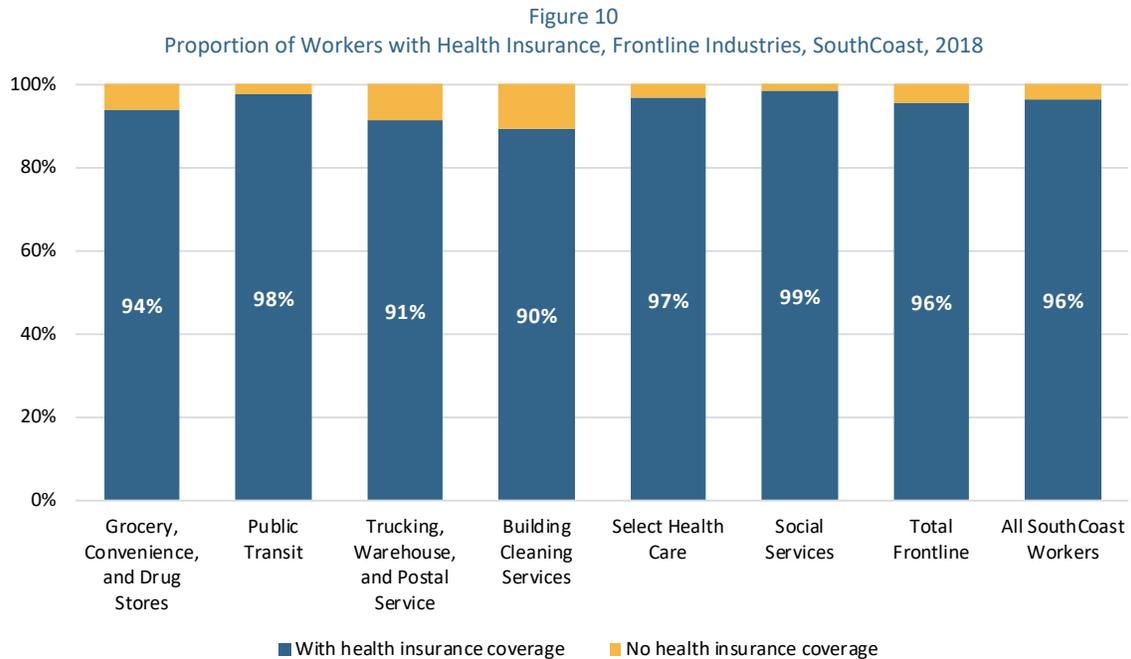
Source: American Community Survey 2014–2018 PUMS Microdata

⁶ This issue is discussed in greater detail throughout our 2019 Southcoast Community Needs Assessment, which is available here: http://publicpolicycenter.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Southcoast-Health-CHNA-2019-Final_PPC.pdf.

Workers in the Building Cleaning Services industry, who are also more likely to be immigrants and people of color, have the lowest rate of health insurance enrollment.

Massachusetts has high rates of insurance enrollment. Statewide, just 3 percent of frontline workers lack health insurance, and the rate for all workers statewide is the same. In the SouthCoast, the proportion of frontline workers who have health insurance is the same as it is for the total regional workforce—96 percent (see Figure 10). The Building Cleaning Services industry in the SouthCoast has the lowest proportion of workers with health insurance, at 90 percent. Meanwhile, the Social Services industry has the highest proportion at 99 percent.

Uninsured people are less likely to seek out preventative health care, and would therefore be less likely to be aware of pre-existing conditions that make them more susceptible to the coronavirus. Fortunately, Massachusetts has improved telehealth access and created a system for uninsured residents to receive COVID-19 related telehealth visits.⁷



Source: American Community Survey 2014–2018 PUMS Microdata

⁷ Muoio, D. (2020). “Massachusetts’ uninsured can access free COVID-19 telehealth visits via Doctor on Demand.” *Mobihealthnews*. April 24, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.mobihealthnews.com/news/massachusetts-uninsured-can-access-free-covid-19-telehealth-visits-doctor-demand>.

Methodology

This report relies on the U.S. Census Bureau’s 5-year American Community Survey 2014–2018 Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), which allows for manipulation and crosstabulation of census data. Importantly, the 2014–2018 PUMS is the most recent data available for this level of analysis, and therefore these estimates do not entirely reflect today’s circumstances that may have reduced employment numbers in these frontline industries, such as furloughs and layoffs.

For the most part, the regional definition used here conforms to the traditional definition of the SouthCoast, and excludes only Swansea. The data analyzed is limited to three Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs):

- **PUMA 25-04302, Central Bristol County:** Includes Fall River and Somerset
- **PUMA 25-04500, South Bristol County:** Includes New Bedford and Fairhaven
- **PUMA 25-04301, Outside New Bedford City & South Plymouth County:** Includes the towns surrounding New Bedford

The motivation to perform this type of analysis for the SouthCoast is based on the research brief “A Profile of Frontline Workers in Massachusetts” from Boston Indicators, wherein authors Luc Schuster and Trevor Mattos provide a demographic overview of frontline workers. Their definition of frontline industries originates from a definition developed by the New York City Comptroller’s Office. This report uses a modified version of this definition.⁸

The six frontline industries are made up of individual Census-defined industries. These are defined as follows:

Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Stores

- Grocery and related product merchant wholesalers (INDP=4470)
- Supermarkets and other grocery stores (INDP=4971)
- Convenience Stores (INDP=4972)
- Pharmacies and drug stores (INDP=5070)
- General merchandise stores, including warehouse clubs and supercenters (INDP=5391)

Public Transit

- Rail transportation (INDP=6080)
- Bus service and urban transit (INDP=6180)

Trucking, Warehouse, and Postal Service

- Truck transportation (INDP=6170)
- Warehousing and storage (INDP=6390)
- Postal Service (INDP=6370)

⁸ For more information please see: <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/new-york-citys-frontline-workers/#Methodology> and https://www.bostonindicators.org/article-pages/2020/april/frontline_workers.

Building Cleaning Services

- Cleaning Services to Buildings and Dwellings (INDP=7690)

Select Health Care

- Offices of physicians (INDP=7970)
- Outpatient care centers (INDP=8090), Home health care services (INDP=8170)
- Other health care services (INDP=8180)
- General medical and surgical hospitals, and specialty hospitals (INDP=8191)
- Psychiatric and substance abuse hospitals (INDP=8192)
- Nursing care facilities (skilled nursing facilities) (INDP=8270)
- Residential care facilities, except skilled nursing facilities (INDP=8290)

Social Services

- Individual and family services (INDP=8370)
- Community food and housing, and emergency services (INDP=8380)