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Out like a lion? March job report closed the books too early to see COVID-19's toll

The numbers: Seasonally adjusted data released today by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) show Ohio employers shed 39,700 jobs in March as Gov. Mike DeWine slowed the spread of the coronavirus by ordering many businesses to close. Total nonfarm jobs fell to 5,559,400, from a revised number of 5,599,100 in February.

March's numbers lag weekly claims filings. They were gathered during the week ended March 14, a day before Gov. DeWine closed restaurants and bars, and eight days before his stay-at-home order shuttered many more businesses. Thus, they don't yet reflect most of the effects of COVID-19. ODJFS reported yesterday that 158,678 Ohioans filed initial unemployment claims in the week ended April 11. Initial claims for the past four weeks of 855,197 exceed filings for all of 2018 and 2019 combined. Adams, Clinton, Logan and Union Counties experienced their highest filings last week. Policy Matters has [tabulated initial filings for each county](#).

The numbers from the monthly jobs report:

- Employers in goods producing cut 2,800 jobs in March as estimated over the week ended March 14. Manufacturers cut 1,200 jobs, construction firms shed 1,500, and mining and logging firms shed 100.
- Private service sector employers shed 36,300 jobs. The biggest recorded losses were in leisure and hospitality (-27,000). Trade, transportation, and utilities cut 4,400, educational and health services cut 2,200, other services cut 1,600, professional and business services cut 400 and information cut 200.
- Public sector employment fell by 600 jobs with cuts in state government jobs (-500) and federal government jobs in Ohio (-100). No change was yet reported in local government jobs.

Ohio's unemployment rate for March reached 5.5%, up from 4.1% in February. During the stay-at-home order, the unemployment rate will understate the true scope of joblessness, because it only counts those actively seeking work.

What it means: "Last month's jobless numbers don't yet tell the story of COVID-19's impact, since they were gathered so early in the month," said Policy Matters Ohio researcher, Michael Shields.

“Many more workers are already off the job following Gov. DeWine’s ‘stay-at-home’ order. They’re the folks working in jobs not classified as essential, and who can’t do their jobs from home. We want those workers at home to keep them and others safe. But if ODJFS doesn’t move quickly to push unemployment comp to them, then even those who work from home could see their jobs at risk from a drop in consumer spending.”

Solutions:

Get Ohioans the support they need: “The DeWine administration and ODJFS must do everything they can to get unemployment compensation to these folks as quickly as possible,” Shields said. “Governor DeWine made the right decision to protect Ohioans by closing businesses, but now he must take action to alleviate the pain. Many of the restaurant and bar workers sent home by Gov. DeWine over a month ago won’t be able to get benefits for another month. Ohio law excludes workers if they are paid less than \$269 per week. They’ll be covered now under temporary federal measures. ODJFS needs to move more quickly to get benefits to these and other newly eligible workers.”

“Supporting workers furloughed by COVID-19 is necessary to prevent a deeper contraction. Some workers are continuing to work because they can do their jobs at home. But if policymakers don’t ensure laid-off workers can continue to pay the rent and buy groceries, the livelihoods of those who are still working could be at risk as well.”

Fix the tax code: “Policy choices that prioritized the wealthy and corporations over families and workers have kept many Ohioans in a precarious position a decade after the last recession. Ohio leaders have misspent 10 years of prosperity on tax cuts for the wealthiest and tax breaks for special interests. In the recovery from this crisis, Ohio needs to rebuild our economy in a way that strengthens everyone. This time we’ve got to get it right.”