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## For the Poor, It was Just Friday: The Implicit Focus on Middle-class Habitus in Conceptualizing Disaster

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## ***For the Poor, It was Just Friday: The Implicit Focus on Middle-class Habitus in Conceptualizing Disaster***

*The importance of the academic study of disaster is in its potential application to policy and practice in times of dire circumstance and human suffering. In this paper, we situate the Covid-19 pandemic as an exemplar for an exploration of “disaster” using a framework that connects sociological theory and critical disaster studies. We use a Bourdieusian approach to situate the re-stabilization of the middle class habitus as implicitly central to disaster mitigation strategies. This theoretical approach illuminates the disconnect between critical disaster studies and on-the-ground disaster recovery approaches. It is this disconnect that leads to the disparate impact of disaster for the working and poverty classes. Through this analysis we suggest that policy-makers must engage with this discrepancy by shifting focus from the middle-class normative environment to the constant precarity of the working and poverty classes, either by centering them in disaster recovery policy or (preferably) by ameliorating the disaster-like conditions of the poverty class habitus overall.*

*Keywords: COVID-19, disaster, middle-class habitus, Bourdieu, disaster policy, poverty*

Former president, Donald Trump, declared a state of emergency in the US on Friday, March 13, 2020 (Executive Office of the President 2020). Since that time, the Coronavirus pandemic wreaked havoc with Americans’ everyday lives. This was nowhere more apparent than the disruptions that occurred when bars and restaurants were shut down, prohibiting our intake of cocktails and spirits. Changing the policy on to-go alcoholic drinks made the headlines as one of the ways we could survive this disaster. Thirty-one states included cocktails-to-go as a temporary relief measure at the beginning of the pandemic (half of these extended the law another 2-5 years and the other half made it permanent (Kindy 2021). Why was ensuring that people could continue to sip \$12 Mojitos at home so critical to disaster policy efforts? In this paper we will argue that to-go drinks, while seemingly superfluous, actually exemplify the normative focus on middle-class habitus in COVID disaster relief and recovery efforts. To get back to ‘normal’ means to re-establish the middle-class stability that underlies American culture; conversely this means sending some (the poor and working poor) back to the normal crisis of poverty.

The importance of the academic study of disaster is in its potential application to policy and practice in times of dire circumstance and human suffering. In this paper, we situate the Covid-19 pandemic as an exemplar for an exploration of “disaster” using a framework that connects sociological theory and critical disaster studies. We acknowledge that the timeframe of this pandemic creates an extended fluidity, with multiple phases and outbreaks spanning vastly different physical, social and political geographies. It is impossible to capture the true extent of the impact of the pandemic and all of the nuanced moving pieces in a paper such as this. It is also difficult to capture even a generalized American context as the disaster continues to unfold. However, we are approaching this work as an opportunity to stretch the conceptualization of disaster beyond the idea of a “short-lived” critical event. Even more critical is a call to demystify the development of disaster recovery policy by adding transparency to the centrality of middle-class habitus and stability.

## Background

### *Defining and Responding to Disaster*

Most academic research focused on disaster in recent years specifically defines and evaluates disaster as a social event rather than focusing on the physical event. This pattern begins in the early (classical) theories and definitions of disaster, being at least some part of Fritz’s (1961) definition and carried through in subsequent extensions of this definition (Perry 2018), and includes work by Turner (1978), Quarantelli (2000), and Drabek and McEntire (2003). Tierney (2019) describes this focus: “The severity of a disaster is measured not by the magnitude of the physical forces involved, but rather by the magnitude of its societal impacts.”

The complication of defining disaster has been the work of successfully separating the concept of disaster from “normalized” suffering. This is apparent in Fritz’s (1961) definition that focuses primarily on the interruption of “essential services” as the definitive impact of disaster. Turner’s (1978) definitional decision specifically separates the idea of the prior conditions from issues of fairness or equity, thus successfully making the term “disaster” conceptually separate from “everyday” social problems. In a largely accepted definition of disaster, Quarantelli (2000) outlines five specific features of a disaster: 1) sudden onset of conditions; 2) routine disruption; 3) unplanned implementation of actions to minimize disruption; 4) impact on life histories; and 5) valued social objects are threatened. In 2005, Quarantelli added that existing vulnerabilities pose increased risk during a disaster, which highlights “weaknesses in social structures or social systems.”

These definitional turns are important insofar as they are examples of the theoretical acrobatics necessary to disentangle the interruption of social order (described in outcomes like housing stability or access to sufficient food and clean water) from those same outcomes impacting poor and working class people with no precipitating event. In other words, these disaster definitions pathologize only these impacts on classes of people who otherwise enjoy a certain degree of stability in a given society as part of a disaster (middle and higher classes) and normalize these same conditions for those in more precarious classes.

This issue has been taken up by critical disaster theorists. In their introductory chapter to their book, *Critical Disaster Studies*, Horowitz and Remes (2021, 2-3) set out three core principles of critical disaster studies: disasters are interpretive fictions, disasters are political, and disasters take place over time. Hagen and Elliott (2021) offer two additional theses. First, they posit that disaster is not purely disruptive and should be understood as a part of “social reality.” Second,

they argue that “disasters are not pathological deviations from ‘normal’ so much as they are the most salient manifestations of the ways that the normal is in fact pathological.” Our theoretical approach to disaster in this paper is founded on these critical conceptualizations of disaster.

Much like the definitional process, disaster response policies are grounded in the normalization of middle class needs and demands (Hastings & Matthews 2015). Phibbs et al.. (2018, 2) describes this phenomenon, “If we understand disaster response as an extension of the policies and dynamics that resulted in the uneven distribution of risk, the details of which are effectively the minutiae of disaster construction, then the primary purpose of any response is to validate those earlier responses.” They go on to state that, while the disruption of disaster offers an opportunity to ask new questions, the design of disaster response leads necessarily to a “normative reply.” Thus, our failure to define disaster in a way that includes the day to day experiences of more “vulnerable” populations ensures that policies surrounding disaster will also focus specifically on re-stabilizing the disruptions in the social order of the middle class.

### *Classed Habitus and Disaster*

It is the classed aspect of disaster conceptualization combined with the power dynamics inherent in the definitional process that invites a conversation with sociological theory. Bourdieu (1977, 86) refers to *habitus* as “a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class.” This habitus (re)produces itself and its subjects through institutions, including the healthcare, education, and government/legal systems (where we encounter the concerted efforts to define disaster and ameliorate its effects). Institutions are tied to middle and upper class habitus through the occupational structure, with middle-class and upper-class individuals

inhabiting the key positions within institutional geographies. The working class and people experiencing poverty are tied to these geographies tangentially, if at all. It is within these institutional geographies that habitus is re(produced) in our interpretations of and approaches to disaster. Thus, the centrality of the middle and upper class habitus in the definitional and solution planning processes is guaranteed through these institutional ties.

The middle class experience has key characteristics including: professional careers/work, higher levels of education, and home ownership. In addition, the stability of the middle class can be described in terms of access to infrastructure services (like electricity, transportation, and telecommunications), housing, health care (including mental health services), adequate food, and safe water. This stability can also be seen in the social acceptance of key norms including practices, values, and daily routines. These things considered together create a powerful middle class habitus (Bourdieu 1984).

It is well documented, however, that the U.S. class structure has been growing increasingly unequal. The middle class can be identified as a combination of income at or above the household median and at least some higher education; this group was shrinking even before the pandemic due to stagnating wages, an increase in the service sector and the rise of gig jobs with low wages and no benefits, and tax cuts to the rich that have hollowed out social support. These structural changes led to the rise of economic inequality in both income and wealth, benefitting the top five percent of U.S. households at the expense of other classes. Income inequality has been increasing since 1980, with families at the top experiencing greater gains than all other classes. Wealth inequality is even greater; between 2001-2016 middle class median net worth shrunk by 20%, lower-income by 45% but upper-income households increased by 33% (Pew

Research 2020). Thus, even the middle-class may not be able to participate in a middle-class habitus.

However, this habitus is accepted as “legitimate” and forms the basis of structural expectations. The legitimacy of this habitus is dependent on its characteristic consumerism, which is required to maintain the habitus of the elite. Weininger (2005) explains the relationship between this legitimacy and the state or governing structure: “When classificatory schemes are simultaneously sedimented into dispositions and inscribed into the order of things (i.e. into discourse, institutions, and law), a “complicity” can develop between habitus and world which is profoundly recalcitrant to change.” In regards to the disruption of disaster, the distance between the normative middle class habitus and the requirements of the disaster environment renders that habitus ineffective (Weininger 2005). This phenomenon provides the necessary backdrop to understanding how middle class stability becomes the litmus paper by which disaster is socially constructed, disaster policies are developed, and successful recovery outcomes are measured. By labeling disruptions of middle-class habitus as ‘disaster’ we silently normalize everyday disruptions of the working class and poor.

### *Other Vulnerabilities*

While our focus in this paper is a class-based approach to disaster, we acknowledge that consideration of other areas of inequality is especially important in disaster research. For example, we know that women and men are impacted differently by disaster, especially in relation to the existing gendered division of labor. In the context of disaster, women are often the ones performing emotional labor, including creating a sense of normalcy for children and navigating systems to ensure access to daily living necessities (like food and water) for families.

Additionally, while women make up a significant portion of those volunteering in impacted communities, they are largely missing from the positions and locations of power where disaster planning occurs (Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek 2007).

The importance of intersectional analyses is apparent in the existing disaster literature. Many of the studies included in Benevolenza and DeRigne's (2019) review of impacts of disasters on vulnerable populations included some type of intersectional analysis focusing on groups with multiple connections to inequality. Fordham (2008) discusses intersectional analyses of disaster and concludes that "a sensitivity to difference is required." One example of this sensitivity is found in her discussion of age, class, and gender: "An elderly middle-class woman on her own in an isolated location, even if she has financial resources and insurance, is potentially as vulnerable and in need of help as a woman in a large working-class community without those resources but who has access to social networks."

Often, disaster research focuses on the differential impact of disaster on populations defined as "vulnerable" (Blaikie, et.al 1994; Tierney 2019). This approach is grounded in an attempt to draw attention to the disproportionate impact of disaster on people who may not have the necessary resources to easily or successfully navigate the impact of disaster. We would suggest that, while much of the research on disaster focuses on these vulnerable populations, this has not translated to recovery processes and policies, which continue to focus on re-stabilization of the middle class. The institutionalization of recovery policies are manifestations of society's need to keep "suffering in its place" (Remes 2019).

As an example, Fordham (2008) extrapolates the differences between middle and working class experiences of flooding in Scotland in 1993-1995. She found that the middle class were less



vulnerable to negative outcomes because they had resources available that allowed them to exercise choice and control. However, the highly valued individualism within the middle class can increase vulnerability. Whereas working class groups exhibited stronger community links and networks and familiarity with existing agencies already working in those communities.

Disaster responses that included relocation disrupted those ties. In this example, we can clearly see that the precarity of everyday life resulted in community and kinship ties that could potentially mediate the negative repercussions of disaster among working class people. However, the individualism associated with the middle class experience was the normative habitus, resulting in disaster recovery practices and policies that undermined the resilience present within the working class communities.

Similarly to Fordham, sociologist Alice Fothergill (2004) found that disaster recovery policy can destabilize working class communities. Respondents in Fothergill's research on the Grand Forks Flood of 1987 who sought to buy older homes in the downtown area with the Small Business Assistance (SBA) financing, were told those homes were not allowed coverage under the program. Instead they were forced to buy newer suburban homes, leaving many working-class respondents "house poor" and socially isolated from their neighbors.

In fact, restoring homeowners' property (regardless of the outcome) is a primary aim of disaster recovery efforts. Homeownership is a hallmark of middle-class stability and much of federal disaster funding goes to homeowners to rebuild property. After Superstorm Sandy, for example, renters experienced 43% of the damage but were initially targeted to receive only 22% of federal funding (University of Pennsylvania 2019). Even programs that allow for rental assistance still favor homeowners. The Individual and Households Program (IHP) administered by FEMA does

allot money to renters for funding for temporary rental or lodging assistance, but for owners it provides funding for permanent housing repairs and construction or home replacement (Department of Homeland Security 2021). After funds run out for renters, finding permanent homes or secure lodging is difficult. Even in normal times, though, many working class and poor renters have difficulty keeping up with rent payments and often face instability in securing housing (Desmond 2016), experiences that are comparable to disaster victims. However, only after the government formally declares social life a disaster is assistance more readily available through programs such as FEMA's IHP.

We are focusing our attention on the point of tension created by this existing literature. It is telling that, while vulnerable populations are studied widely in post-disaster impact research, these findings are not foundational to the development of policies designed in response to disasters. This phenomenon highlights the centrality of middle class habitus in these processes.

Using Covid-19 as an exemplar disaster, we suggest that by using the theory of habitus, we can evaluate the ways that class dominates the definitional processes and development of disaster response policies. Second, we hope to highlight the disconnect between recovery policies (focusing specifically on the stabilization of the middle class habitus) and disaster research (focusing primarily on the impact to already-vulnerable populations). Finally, we illustrate the impact of this disconnect on vulnerable populations.

## **Covid-19: An Exemplar**

*Precipitating Event and Widespread Disruption of Norms*

The virus we now know as Covid-19 was first identified from an outbreak of novel human pneumonia in Wuhan City, China beginning in December 2019 (Liu, Kuo, & Shih 2020). On March 11, 2020, the WHO officially recognized COVID-19 as a pandemic (Liu, Kuo, & Shih 2020). The primary route of interhuman transmission of COVID-19 is air-borne transmission (dos Santos 2020). At the time of the writing of this paper, globally there have been more than 476 million confirmed cases, nearly 6.1 million deaths, and nearly 11 billion vaccine doses administered (World Health Organization 2022). In the United States there have been more than 79 million cases and nearly a million deaths (World Health Organization 2022).

Since SARS-CoV-2 proved to be an airborne virus, preventing people from being in close contact to transmit the virus required widespread “lockdowns.” Focusing on the U.S. context, these lockdown measures began in March 2020 and included prohibitions on travel from outside of the United States, closings of “non-essential” businesses/services, stay-at-home orders, and mandates prohibiting gatherings of large groups. Following these “lockdown” measures, individual behavioral recommendations were made, including: mask-wearing, staying at home, maintaining at least 6 feet distance between people in public spaces, cleaning/disinfecting high-touch areas regularly, daily health monitoring, avoiding large gatherings, and later - vaccinations (CDC 2022).

These measures, many of which were also instituted across the globe, resulted in a global disruption in economic and social systems and constituted a disruption of norms. From the normative activities of going to work each day to spending time with friends and family, these changes threw the U.S. social system into disarray generally. Businesses across the United States clamored to figure out how to maintain productivity with a largely absent workforce. While various groups were impacted in different ways, vast numbers of people lost jobs, left the

workforce, lost hours/income, or moved to telework. Between March and September 2020, 2.6 million women and 1.7 million men left the workforce (Hsu 2020). Between May and July 2020 tens of millions of workers reported being unable to work at some point in the previous four weeks because their employer closed or lost business due to Covid-19 (49.8 million in May; 40.4 million in June; and 31.3 million in July). In addition to job losses, telework increased substantially across many industries throughout the year. In May 2020, 48.7 million people (constituting about 35% of the employed workforce) worked from home within the last four weeks. By December 2020 this number had decreased, but remained high at 24% of the employed workforce (35.5 million workers) (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021). As of this writing in 2022, Facebook is just now bringing its workers back into the office.

Working from home became the popular response for the non-essential workplace. Schools were forced to move online, making home the new classroom. At the same time, schools and colleges throughout the country moved to online platforms. The U.S. Census Bureau reported, in August 2020, that nearly 93% of households with school-age children reported some form of “distance learning”. Approximately 61% of daycare businesses have been closed at some point during the pandemic. While in-home daycare providers were able to bounce back a bit more quickly, long-term impacts are expected (Vesoulis 2020).

Retail stores and restaurants found it necessary to create or optimize online shopping with curbside pickup or delivery options. At the start of the pandemic, approximately 180,000 businesses indicated that they had closed (permanently or temporarily). By August 2020, that number was down to around 163,735: however, that number actually represented a 23% increase since July 2020. Hardest hit were restaurants (especially breakfast/brunch, Mexican, and sandwich shops), bars/nightlife venues, fitness locations, and beauty businesses (Yelp 2020). In

stores that did remain open, consumers were surprised throughout 2020 at the number of items that were absent or difficult to find. The pandemic disrupted supply chains at various points globally resulting in shortages of: computer chips, lumber, toilet paper and other paper products, aluminum cans, appliances, beans and grains, canned and frozen vegetables, over-the counter medications, and meat (Kaplan & Kay 2021; Matarese 2020).

Other institutions such as nursing homes, hospitals, and jails/prisons were disrupted. As the pandemic surged, hospitals were forced to create physical space for the high numbers of Covid-19 patients, canceling other appointments and procedures. Small businesses closed their doors, often eventually failing completely. Many people were left without income or were forced onto unemployment benefits. The fact that no one knew how long these measures would remain intact increased uncertainty and instability, undermining the middle-class habitus.

#### *Disaster Plans as Approaches to Regain Equilibrium for Middle Class*

Disaster preparedness plans focus first and foremost on critical health concerns, preservation of life, and emergency health services. Most also include maintenance or replacement of the following “necessary” services and resources: shelter, food, potable water, electricity, natural gas, transportation, and telecommunications (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019; U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2019). Organizations whose services include disaster relief (i.e. Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Red Cross) also focus on these systems. These infrastructure elements are considered “essential” in disaster response, but are often unattainable or unstable outside of disaster circumstances for those experiencing poverty. In other words, these elements are only deemed “essential” when those classes of people who have stable access to these resources have that access interrupted by an outside force. This

exemplifies the ways in which both the definition of and response to disaster is based on the normative stability of the middle class. Furthermore, recent research highlights the ways in which disaster response can contribute to maintaining and increasing inequality (Hagen & Elliott 2021).

The disaster recovery plans created in response to Covid-19 were multi-faceted. They included efforts to halt the spread of the pandemic, efforts to mitigate the economic impact, and attempts to build/maintain infrastructure. These policies are occurring at multiple levels: federal, state, local, and individual. Some of the mitigation strategies are part of the disorder (stay at home orders and business closures), while others attempt to minimize the negative impact of those mitigation strategies. It is the latter where we predominantly see the effort to stabilize the middle class habitus, which, in turn, supports the capitalist (elite) habitus.

The elite class in the United States has profited from our recovery and mitigation efforts. From online shopping platforms to moguls in the pharmaceutical industry, the elite have increased their wealth. Since 2020, the wealth of billionaires has increased by about one-trillion dollars (about a 35% increase). The number of billionaires in the U.S. has also grown, adding nearly 100 new billionaires (Peterson-Withorn 2021).

While state and local efforts are more specific, they are also more varied and extend beyond the scope of this article. We will focus predominantly on the health-based recommendations and federal policies that have been enacted as they represent a standard national response. We look specifically at the CDC guidelines and the six federal level legislative packages that have been passed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic: Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, Families First Coronavirus Response Act, CARES Act,

Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act, Consolidated Appropriations Act, and American Rescue Plan.

Some of the CDC recommendations for minimizing the spread of Covid-19 included stay-at-home orders, closure of non-essential businesses and agencies, social distancing/masking, cleaning/disinfecting of high-touch areas, masking, and vaccination. All of these interrupt the normative environment. However, they impact middle class and poor families differently. As mentioned previously, low-wage workers were disproportionately represented among those industries deemed essential, requiring them to continue working. Conversely, they were also most critically impacted by job losses in the restaurant and service industries. These mitigation efforts increased the vulnerability of poor and working class workers compared to middle and upper class workers. Not surprisingly, then, Jung, Manley, and Shrestha (2021) found that stay-at-home orders and other social distancing mandates, while effective for communities with lower levels of poverty, were not effective in communities with higher levels of poverty.

One policy that did help people from lower classes socially distance was the eviction moratorium. Prior to the pandemic, evictions for the working and lower classes were a normal part of their social experience. The eviction moratorium was designed to keep people in their homes to discourage public interactions in shelters and on the streets, as well as to allow for more time to raise the vaccination rate. Congress enacted a moratorium from March 2020 to July 2020 in the Cares Act Legislation and after that expired, the Centers for Disease Control issued orders to halt evictions under the Public Health Service Act starting in the Fall of 2020. Unlike the CARES Act, though, the CDC order only covered federally subsidized housing or properties with federally backed mortgages. These policies, however, were successful in keeping rates down; one study found that during the interim between the two bans, the rate of COVID cases

and especially mortality increased (Leifheit, et al.. 2021). With pressure from red state governments, the Supreme Court lifted the ban in August 2021 and since then evictions have continued apace.

Another approach to ending the pandemic was vaccinations. Studies have shown that there are disparities in vaccination rates, with BIPOC and poor people having lower rates of vaccination. Vaccine deserts have been identified and largely exist in poor and non-white areas (Williams et al. 2021; Lu, Gondi, & Martin 2021). Testing, especially early in the pandemic, was spotty in poor communities, compared to middle-class (especially white) neighborhoods (Servick 2020). Even after testing became more widely available, some with lower incomes avoided testing for a variety of reasons. People have reported making this decision at times to avoid school closures and mandated requirements to quarantine from workplaces (Rubin 2020).

One of the components of the federal Covid-19 legislation has been the stimulus checks for individuals. There have been several stimulus check releases throughout 2020 and 2021. Unlike most federal and state cash benefit programs, these included families with higher annual incomes (up to nearly \$200,000 in some cases). Means testing required no additional verification outside of information the Internal Revenue Service already had on file. People who do not regularly file taxes (adults with disabilities who receive Supplemental Security Income or people with very low or no income) were required to file additional paperwork to access their stimulus checks. Looking specifically at the first disbursement of stimulus payments, people with incomes of less than \$50,000 were more likely to use these payments for expenses, while those with higher incomes more often reported using the payments for savings or debt reduction. While higher income families and individuals did not qualify for these payments, it is important to note that households with incomes of less than \$25,000 were more likely than other incomes between



\$25,001 and \$99,000 to report that they had not received or did not expect to receive a stimulus payment. This was largely attributed to the confusion surrounding the additional steps required for non-filers (Schild, Garner, and Safir 2020). This highlights the ways in which the stimulus payments benefited middle income households very differently from lower income households.

Workplace policies included within the federal legislation includes programs like: emergency family and medical leave, emergency paid sick leave, paycheck protection, increased and extended unemployment benefits, Economic Injury Disaster Loan advance payments, small business loans, and money to mitigate the loss of revenue for restaurants, bars and other food/drink all protect the middle class habitus. They ensure that people still have access to pay when they are ill, caring for an ill family member, or unemployed due to Covid-19. Support for businesses helps re-establish access to goods and services expected by middle-class families. Legislation also focused on the restoration of the supply chain for household products and food that were damaged during Covid-19. This restored (to some extent) not only the consumption supply chain but also consumer choice. Localities and businesses have found new ways to continue their services despite the pandemic. Many stores have increased their curbside pick-up or delivery services. Thirty-nine states have changed laws and regulations to allow for to-go alcoholic beverages (Price 2020). Many states lifted restrictions early, which functioned as a way to protect consumption in those states (Armus et al. 2020).

### *Ending Disaster Policies that Helped the Poor*

Writing on the downslope of Omicron actually allowed us to witness how policies that helped the poor were removed in order to restabilize the pre-pandemic status quo. The lifting of the ban on eviction moratorium discussed above was just one example of the push to get back to middle

class ‘normal’. Another example is the fate of the Earned Income Tax Credit. During the COVID pandemic, Congress authorized monthly payments to households with children under 18 using advances on the Earned Income Tax Credit. Economists estimate these payments of \$250-\$300 per child kept 3.7 million children out of poverty in December 2021, did not depress parents’ employment, and did not add to the budget deficit as it was money already included in tax relief. However, Congress failed to renew this program as part of Build Back Better plan for the 2022 budget, and by January 2022 3.7 million children were back in poverty and their families were struggling even more under the weight of increased inflation (McCammon, et.al 2022). While it would have been relatively painless to extend this policy to continue to support these children, Congress dropped the policy after the pandemic disaster ‘crisis’ was declared over and returned these households back to the normal (disaster) of poverty.

An important federal policy response to the employment disruption of the disaster was the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation program, which increased unemployment payments by \$300 a week. Of course this policy did not help non-waged workers, but did support those working people who were unable to keep their jobs due to shutdowns and/or could not work from home. These additional payments were associated with improved outcomes in food insecurity, mental health, and access to health care to those receiving benefits (Berkowitz and Basu 2021).

However, when businesses had difficulty filling low-wage positions, red-state legislatures and businesses argued (without any detailed evidence) that this additional unemployment income kept people from filling jobs and thus clamored for the federal government to stop these additional payments. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce in May of 2021 stated:

The disappointing jobs report makes it clear that paying people not to work is dampening what should be a stronger jobs market. We need a comprehensive approach to dealing with our workforce issues and the very real threat that these unfilled positions poses to our economic recovery from the pandemic. One step policymakers should take now is ending the \$300 weekly supplemental unemployment benefit. Based on the Chamber's analysis, the \$300 benefit results in approximately one in four recipients taking home more in unemployment than they earned working (US Chamber of Commerce 2021).

These policymakers and business leaders wanted a return to the status quo where workers would return to their low-waged jobs to support the continued consumption of the middle-class and the continued profit-making of owners and executives; the Biden administration ended the plan entirely in September 2021.

In the latest development at the time of this writing, federal funds for free COVID testing and vaccinations, which allowed low income and poor residents access to important health services to treat individual health and community spread, are being eliminated.. Now that rates of infection are low and most of the US is loosening social distancing and masking mandates, the political will to cover these important services is waning. In late March 2022 and early April, The Health Resources and Services Administration stopped accepting claims for testing, treatment, and vaccination claims through the COVID-19 Uninsured Program and the COVID-19 Overage Assistance fund due to lack of sufficient funds.

For the poor, then, the end of these disaster policies is a return to the normal disruption of lack of health care, low wage, high risk jobs, and lack of affordable housing. For the middle and upper

classes, their ability to obtain to-go cocktails (in addition to retaining jobs and houses) has been restored.

### *Impact on Vulnerable Populations*

For those not solidly in the middle class (and who are considered “vulnerable” from the perspective of the social vulnerability frame), the pandemic reinforced already existing inequalities. Using an intersectional lens, we know that economic inequality is more likely to include BIPoC, women (especially single mothers), people with disabilities (PWD) and chronic health conditions, institutionalized people (including nursing homes and jails/prisons), the LGBTQIA+ community, and poor/working class people, who all experienced precarity prior to the pandemic but this insecurity intensified during the pandemic in terms of morbidity, unemployment, instability in housing, and increasing levels of poverty.<sup>1</sup>

### *Covid-19 Infections, morbidity, and deaths*

The most prevalent issue for “the vulnerable” was the increased risk of illness and death associated with many of these groups including Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPoC) communities, people with disabilities, poor people, and institutionalized populations. Even during “non-disaster” times, well-documented health disparities exist for these groups: they have less access to adequate or quality healthcare services; have higher rates of existing chronic health conditions and risk factors; and have less access to other health protective resources. Essential

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<sup>1</sup> *This article uses Covid-19 as an example for the re-framing of disaster mitigation and recovery policies within a Bourdieusian theoretical context that highlights the implicit focus of these policies on restoration of middle-class habitus, rather than interrupting the precarity and suffering of marginalized groups that has been normalized within and outside disaster situations. For a more nuanced look at the disparate impact of Covid-19 on marginalized populations, we urge readers to read the work of scholars who have focused specifically on these disparities.*

workers, especially people of color, experienced higher rates of COVID infection and death due in large part to these occupational risks (Do and Frank 2021). But even in normal times, people in the working class and BIPOC communities already experience negative health outcomes vis-a-vis the (white) middle class.

Research shows that people of color have experienced a higher risk of exposure, higher rates of positivity when tested, and require higher levels of care. Additionally, they have been shown to be more likely to die from Covid-19 than whites, even when other social factors (like socioeconomic status) were controlled for (Rubin-Miller et al.. 2020). People with intellectual disabilities were more likely to contract Covid-19, more likely to be admitted to the hospital and more likely to die following an admission compared to patients without intellectual disabilities (Gleason et al.. 2021).

Poverty and income have a potentially complicated relationship with Covid-19 spread and deaths. Jung, Manley, and Shrestha (2021) found that Covid-19 infections in the U.S. initially began in high-income counties (associated with international travel). In the following weeks, it spread rapidly to low-income counties, likely due to the employment of people from poor communities in the service economy serving higher income counties. Eventually a U-shaped curve emerged with low-income and high-income communities having higher rates of infection. Higher rates of infection are found in high-income communities that also have high population density, but low population density does not offer the same buffer for poor communities. Additionally, poor communities have the highest levels of deaths from Covid-19. It is likely that the primary drivers of this phenomenon are the existing disparities in pre-existing conditions, access to adequate health care services, and resource access.

Institutionalized populations also had higher risks related to Covid-19. These populations include people living in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, rehabilitation or other long-term hospitalizations, and jails/prisons. One important factor for all of these groups is that their living arrangements necessarily require that they be in contact with a large number of people on a regular basis. Their particular risk may be related to which type of institution they live in. For instance, prisoners already have high levels of health risks, including cardiac and respiratory illnesses. They also have a high level of illnesses like hepatitis. Elderly people living in nursing home settings are most often already experiencing illness and frail health and have compromised immune systems. Other people living in these types of facilities include people with acute mental illness, and people with high levels of physical or intellectual disabilities. People in these groups often have conditions that impact their ability to fully participate in or understand recommended safety measures. They often also suffer from high-risk health conditions. These health concerns have been exacerbated throughout the Covid-19 pandemic with outbreaks throughout these institutionalized populations. Available research suggests that the Covid-19 case rate for prisoners (state and federal prisons) was 5.5 times higher than that of the general population, and the crude death rate for prisoners was also substantially higher (Saloner et al., 2020). As of June 2021, the New York Times reported that 4% of all cases and 31% of deaths nationally had occurred in nursing homes.

As previously mentioned, occupational patterns have proven to be a significant driver of Covid-19 spread. Retail, food service, and health care workers, deemed 'essential' by the Department of Homeland Security in March 2020 (Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency 2020), were forced to continue working while many professional and technical positions were allowed to work from home. The work of people in food service, especially meatpacking and many retail

grocery workers, actually served to restore some stability for middle class folks to maintain their consumption of food. Counties with meatpacking plants, which employ many immigrants and are already some of the most dangerous workplaces, had COVID prevalence rates of 10 times other rural counties in March and April of 2020 (United States Department of Agriculture 2021). Grocery store retail workers were deemed essential and required to go to work, all the while putting their lives at risk and in the process creating record profits for stores. One study found that grocery store employees who had direct contact with customers such as clerks were five times more likely to test positive for COVID-19 and more likely to report depression and anxiety. Stores issued hazard pay, but the amounts varied wildly; some workers earned \$2.58 more an hour on average at stores like Target but only 95 cents an hour on average more at Amazon and 63 cents an hour at Walmart. Women and people of color are overrepresented in these jobs (Kinder, Stateler, & Du 2020).

Another important factor associated with increased inequality during Covid-19 has been the high levels of unemployment associated with closures and losses. According to the Congressional Research Service (2021), in April 2020, unemployment in the US reached 14.8%, the highest recorded rate. While some recovery has happened, by May 2021, aggregate employment was 7.3 million jobs below the pre-recession level. Various occupational sectors were differentially impacted with leisure/hospitality experiencing the largest number of job losses and highest levels of unemployment. In April 2020, the unemployment rate was nearly 40% in this sector. In May 2021, the rate remained the highest in this sector, at over 10%. It has also been found that within individual sectors, low-wage workers were disproportionately represented among those who had lost jobs (Bartik et al.. 2020). Persons identifying as Black or Hispanic, younger workers, and those with lower levels of education experienced higher unemployment rates and lower labor

participation throughout the pandemic. Unemployment peaked for white and Asian workers in April 2020, but continued to rise for Black workers through May 2020 (peaking at 16.7%) (Congressional Research Service 2021). In May 2021, Black unemployment remained higher than all other race/ethnic groups (9.1%). Hispanic workers (of all racial groups) had an unemployment peak of 18.5%.

Much of the existing research has focused on the impact of the pandemic on women specifically. As professional work largely moved to telecommuting, schools and daycares closed. Home became the space in which work, family, and education occurred simultaneously. It has been well documented that women perform more unpaid household labor than men, creating a huge impact on women. The pandemic brought these gender issues to the forefront as women attempted to juggle these responsibilities. Thirty-nine percent of women with children under the age of 18 in the household reported that it has been more difficult to juggle these multiple responsibilities (compared to only 28% of men) (Parker, Horowitz, & Minkin 2020). Fifty-seven percent of mothers report that their mental health has been worse during the pandemic (compared to 32% of fathers) (Hamel and Salganicoff 2020). Over the course of the pandemic, women often found it necessary to reduce hours, take time off, or leave the workforce completely (Gogoi 2021). Between February and April 2020, women lost more than 12.2 million jobs (National Women's Law Center 2021). The brunt of women's job and income loss has been borne by Black and Latina women (National Women's Law Center 2021).

Some research showed that men in these households initially increased the number of hours spent on household labor (Carlson, Petts, & Pepin 2020; Shafer et al.. 2020). Later, however, it seems that this novelty wore off and men returned to their pre-pandemic levels of household labor (Topping and Duncan 2020). For working class women, there were additional issues. Most



lower-paid work is not conducive to telecommuting (as mentioned previously), resulting in workers who had to continue going to work, risking exposure or hour reduction/job losses, and exacerbated by a lack of available childcare. However, across the board, women are often the ones who procure important resources for families, which was made more difficult throughout the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

Horowitz and Remes argue that often the best approach scholars of disaster can take is “to understand the politics and experiences of people who are most at risk and to join their efforts to build more just, equal, and safe communities (2021, 4).” In this paper we attempt to center the perspectives of the economically marginalized in COVID response policies in the U.S. We have argued that conceptions of disaster, including definitions, responses, and even who is making these decisions, must be critically interrogated. We have made a case that disaster response policies are designed to privilege middle-class habitus and experience, and to normalize and exacerbate the inequalities that marginalized populations experience every day. The reality of disaster is that we, as a society, have long ago accepted the widespread precarity experienced by the poverty class as normal. It is the disruption of the middle class habitus (and resultant potential interruption of the economic gains associated with their consumerism for the elite class) that offends us and drives the classification of and recovery from disaster.

While the focus on middle class stabilization is implicit, often going unnoticed by those in the middle or elite classes, the working and poverty classes can see that recovery policies are not designed for them. Their positionality within a system of inequality offers a specific standpoint from which to view disaster policy. In the case of Covid 19, those in the working and poverty

classes were more likely to be deemed an essential worker, requiring them to enter spaces of possible contagion regularly, increasing their risk of potentially lethal consequences. These same groups have less attachment to institutions like higher education, healthcare, and government. This lack of attachment is tied to lack of access to, the prevalence of gatekeeping by, and a history of exploitation from these institutions. It is no wonder that it is these groups who have resisted protocols like vaccinations, masking, social distancing, and widespread closure mandates. This is illustrative of how disaster cannot be successfully mitigated by continuing to focus solely on the stabilization of the middle-class habitus. At the most basic level, policy makers must take direction from critical disaster scholars to decenter the middle-class from disaster recovery. At the highest level, relevant bodies should shift focus to policy and legislation that level the playing field prior to what is considered to be a disaster, ameliorating the disaster-equivalent conditions under which the working and poverty classes struggle every day.

Since the declaration of Covid-19 as a disaster on March 13, 2020, the pandemic has, with its long-lasting presence (more than two years at time of the submission of this paper) offered an opportunity for critical examination. More specifically, it has allowed us to identify the disruption of primarily middle class norms highlighted by stability, routine, and continued consumption. Middle class work routines are based on predictability: a work week that is standardized; supports in place such as physical infrastructure (transportation, housing) to facilitate the transition from work to home; and receiving a steady paycheck. Middle class habitus also includes the consumption of goods and services on demand for payment. This includes access to wide varieties of foods and other goods as well as non-emergency, in-person, and elective health and mental health services. Most importantly, the stability of the middle class habitus allows for the expectation that one can plan for the short- and long-term for one's self

and family. In other words, life is predictable, one is in control of one's time and future. This structured reliability of the middle-class habitus is also essential to ensuring the continued economic growth of the elite. Throughout the pandemic each of these measures of middle-class stability was impacted and destabilized, and the mitigation and recovery strategies centered on restoring these services.

At the same time, the pandemic has, in some ways, exacerbated the precarity which is part of the working-class and poverty-class habitus. In other ways, some of the mitigation strategies have offered a taste of that stability that the middle-class enjoy in "non-disaster" times. Extended unemployment benefits, eviction protection, and stimulus payments allowed a modicum of relief from a few of the daily struggles of some in the working- and poverty-classes. However, these strategies have started to dissipate as the middle-class habitus has been largely restored. While the middle class were targeted by recovery policies, the pandemic became a financial boon for the elite. For the poor and working-class, it was just Friday.

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