How Grave and for How Long?

Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Workers in Tagbilaran City

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Why this research?

The provincial government of Bohol declared a quarantine on 13 March 2020 for five days and extending it further to 21 April 2020. The measure led to the mandatory temporary closure of several businesses and some business owners' deliberate decision to cease operations despite being exempted from temporary closure. Consequently, it led to the forced but unpaid leave of affected
employees. No one knows the extent of jobs lost, informal workers losing daily income, and the amount of losses suffered by businesses due to the closure.

In response to the provincial directives, the City Government of Tagbilaran imposed the same preventive measures as well. Different initiatives were implemented to cushion the impacts of the crisis, especially to the poor, e.g., distribution of relief goods, assistance to health workers, bringing city services closer to the people.

When this research was conducted in May 2020, researchers at the University of the Philippines have projected that the pandemic will peak in June and affect a maximum of 900,000 people. However, enhanced community quarantine measures could flatten the curve, and they recommended location-specific quarantine measures if a whole-of-country quarantine is not possible. But the capacity of local businesses to withstand prolonged closure is not known, and the overall impact of the pandemic on the local economy was not measured.

What do we want to know?

We wanted to know how the pandemic has impacted workers in Tagbilaran City.

The city is the political and economic capital of the island province of Bohol in the Philippines. It is home to roughly a hundred thousand people (105,051 inhabitants based on a 2015 survey), 63.9% of which are of working age.

Based on the 2015 survey, the city's working population is equivalent to at least 71,709 individuals.

During the enhanced community quarantine, all business establishments are ordered closed except those that are considered essential businesses. Those left open were public markets, slaughterhouses, supermarkets and grocery stores, hospitals and health facilities, pharmacies and drug stores, water-refilling stations, banks and financial institutions, public utilities, gasoline stations, funeral parlors, restaurants, media establishments, freight and cargo companies, agricultural supply stores, food manufacturing plants, hardware and construction supplies, BPOs, textile industry, laundry shops, and automotive/vehicular repair shops. When the city transitioned to general community quarantine, restaurants, service establishments, and other businesses as bookstores, accounting and legal offices, publishing and printing, are allowed to open but at 50% capacity.
As a consequence of forced closure, several employees and workers were negatively impacted. The closure of businesses makes it legal for employers to implement a no-work, no-pay policy. As an immediate effect, workers lost a significant amount of revenues, especially those who work for establishments that were ordered closed by the government.

How did the employees cope? What did they do? What assistance did they receive, and what else do they need? These are the questions we would like to answer.

**What did we do to answer our questions?**

We conducted an online survey for the whole month of June 2020. Due to mobility restrictions, online surveys were the only efficient means to gather data. We complemented the results of the survey with key informant interviews from survey respondents. A total of 302 employees from both public agencies and private companies responded to the survey.

Based on the survey results, almost 46% are government employees employed by national government agencies, local government units, hospitals, and other related public agencies or enterprises. Nineteen percent (19%) come from the education sector, while the rest are employed in the service sector, particularly tourism establishments, banks, and administration services.
Based on the results of the surveys, we conducted key informant interviews via phone, with 20 respondents coming from different sectors. The purpose of this was to gather more insights and qualitative data using the survey results as a basis. The results of these interviews were used to analyze the different variables we tried to explore through the survey of workers. A presentation of the results was made to key representatives from the city to validate the findings.

At the same time, we conducted a rapid job loss survey among the households in Tagbilaran City. The survey was conducted with the help of the office of the Barangay Affairs and Constituency Unit. The survey intended to assess how many lost their jobs as a consequence of the closure of businesses.

**What did we find out?**

1. 10% of workers lost their jobs, either permanently or temporarily. Of these, 5,154 jobs from the service sector were temporarily or permanently lost due to COVID-19.
At least 10 percent of the total working population of Tagbilaran City had their jobs temporarily or permanently affected. This is a direct consequence of the forced closure of establishments when the city was placed under Enhanced Community Quarantine.

Barangay Cogon has the most number of workers (1,784) whose jobs were temporarily or permanently suspended, followed by Booy (853 workers) and Poblacion II (682 workers). Across Tagbilaran City’s 15 barangays, those working in the service sector are the ones most affected by the pandemic. Five thousand one hundred fifty-four (5,154) jobs in the service sector are equivalent to 73% of total jobs lost when Enhanced Community Quarantine was imposed in the city.

Those working in the transport sector also lost jobs. At least 846 workers in the sector (from drivers of public utility vehicles to company drivers and tourist van operators) lost their primary source of income because of mobility restrictions. As expected, Barangay Cogon, the most densely populated barangay in the city, records the highest number of workers who lost their jobs.

2. Workers in the tourism sector were hit the hardest, while government employees were the least affected.

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How Did COVID 19 Impact Employees?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Income Affected</th>
<th>Workforce Affected</th>
<th>Job Loss / Suspension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>39.39%</td>
<td>82.83%</td>
<td>24.24%</td>
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For every 1 employee who lost his/her job and source of income, 3 more people are affected.

Four (4) out of ten (10) workers we surveyed experienced a significant decrease in income, while 2 out of 10 workers lost jobs temporarily or permanently. This is significant in terms of overall impact because, for every employee or worker who lost his/her job and source of income, at least three more
people reliant on him/her support are also affected.

Among the sectors, nine (9) out of ten (10) workers in the tourism sector felt the negative impact of COVID 19 on their income, work, or source of livelihood. This is followed by those working in the service sector where 5 out of 10 reported the same.

Only those working in the government were not affected by COVID-19, as most receive their salaries even with reduced working hours.

3. While negative impacts abound, workers also see positive effects of quarantine measures. However, the psychological impact is increasingly felt.

Employees and workers we surveyed felt that the top negative impacts of COVID-19 are a decrease in income (35.4%), difficulty in buying necessities (32.3%) and depression and anxiety (19.2%). Despite these, they also reported positive effects brought about by the pandemic. Because of limited movement, almost half (49.2%) reported that they now have more time for their families. Some (24.9) were able to pursue their hobbies like cooking, gardening, sewing, while others (22.6%) were able to find new ways of generating other sources of income.
However, the pandemic also started to impact workers' psycho-social and emotional health. A few workers report feelings of anxiety (35%) and depression (19%), increased quarrels at home (5%), and having bad dreams (4%).

At least 29% of employees and workers expressed the likelihood of getting depressed, while 26% of employees and workers are worried they might contract the virus. In terms of outlook, at least 21% of employees and workers see the likelihood of losing their jobs in the next six months.

4. Most coping mechanisms of workers and employees were focused on finding ways to recover lost income or reduce household expenses.

The pandemic has significantly drained worker's cash, and the expectation that community quarantines will last longer than expected prompted most of them to save resources and protect their liquidity. As such, to make up for lost income, the majority look for other income sources and set up temporary businesses like online selling and doing odd part-time jobs.
A majority also reduced their expenses, especially those related to recreation and entertainment, communication and utilities, and food. Quite a few (37%) resorted to borrowing money from friends and relatives (62%), cooperatives (16%), and even lending companies (14%).

5. Workers demand measures that will further protect their liquidity.

The top three assistance that workers and employees need are (1) payroll subsidy, (2) postponement of utility bills, and (3) low-interest loans. These measures can help them extend the amount of money they have and survive the pandemic.

Unfortunately, no one among the employees we surveyed received assistance through the Department of Labor and Employment's COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Program (DOLE-CAMP). However, almost everyone (90%) received assistance from the City Government of Tagbilaran. The remaining 10% are not qualified (e.g., they are not residents of the city).

DOLE CAMP has been reported to be grossly insufficient to meet the needs of qualified employees/workers. Based on DOLE's records, only 99 businesses out of the 16,529 registered businesses in Tagbilaran had workers who benefitted from the program.
6. **Workers are more concerned about their health and that of their loved ones.**

The top concern of employees and workers is contracting the virus that would lead to an increase in the number of COVID + people (3rd in rank) and, consequently, impacting the healthcare system's capacity to respond (5th in rank).

Financial insecurity due to job loss is their second most pressing concern, while economic recession is ranked 4th.

Based on focus group discussions with employees and workers, their ability to work is dependent on their health, and thus they fear that they or their family members will test COVID-19 positive. However, they too feel that economic recession, which will lead to a significant loss in jobs, is something that they dreaded happening.
7. Workers want the city government to focus on containing the spread of the virus.

When asked what the focus of the City Government of Tagbilaran should be, workers and employees surveyed prioritized the following:

a. containing the spread of the virus
b. supporting residents stranded in other locations
c. promoting mental health

During the survey, the number of cases in Tagbilaran City was still low, but total cases in Bohol province have been steadily increasing despite limited testing capacity. Also, it was evident in the discussions among medical experts that the healthcare system's capacity is very limited to respond to a surge in cases.

This finding is also very well related to item (6) above, where their top priority concern is contracting the virus.

8. Employees and workers expressed the likelihood of getting depressed, contracting the virus, or losing their jobs.

Outlook for employees is quite bleak. A significant number of employees and workers expressed the likelihood of getting depressed (29%), are worried they might contract the virus (26%), or that they will lose their jobs in the next six months (21%). These call for really concrete measures in combating mental health, containing the spread of the virus, and protecting jobs.
Based on interviews, the inability to go out (e.g., one household, one quarantine pass), the closure of places that were their sources of comfort (e.g., the church, beach), and the restrictions in meeting friends and relatives contributed to a certain sense of alienation, causing sadness and depression.

What are the policy and programmatic implications of this research?

Based on the research results, there are at least five policy and programmatic implications put forward to the City Government of Tagbilaran. We discuss these briefly below:

a. **Strengthening the health care system** has been the topmost concern of workers. This will require at least three things - beefing up testing capacity, strengthening treatment capacity, and strengthening the ability of frontliners to respond. The strategy to test, trace, isolate and treat will only work if testing capacity increases and the capacity of frontliners and health facilities will be improved. The capacity of health institutions in the city is inadequate to respond to a surge even in dengue cases as experienced in the past four years. While this is not a problem of the city alone, there needs to be a comprehensive planning process to deal with specific scenarios.

b. **Upholding transparent communications** is also one of the top concerns of workers. This means that the government is honest and accurate in reporting on the virus, particularly on the number of infected people, the status of response efforts, and the strict implementation of
health and economic measures. Workers appreciated the city government’s efforts in regularly connecting with residents through Facebook and its radio programs.

c. **Initiate measures to protect the most vulnerable households.** The research has shown that while most workers feel the economic impacts of COVID-19, it impacts workers differently depending on the sector they work in and the nature of their jobs. The tourism sector is the most affected. Contractual workers are badly hit. The city government needs to implement measures to protect workers from job loss, provide financial support, especially to more vulnerable households, and assist the most economically vulnerable, more particularly the children, indigents, and those with physical disabilities.

d. **Actively pursue mental health programs.** The inability of workers and all family members to go out and be confined only to their homes for an excessive period has negative repercussions on mental health. With churches closed, recreation activities temporarily suspended (e.g., beaches, parks, malls), and visiting friends and relatives forbidden, a programmatic approach to strengthen social systems and promote mental health is necessary.