

# Why governments have the right to require masks in public

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Requirements for consumers to wear masks at public places like retail stores and restaurants are very similar to smoking bans, according to three university experts.

In a paper published today (July 16, 2020) in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, the professors say mask requirements to stop the spread of COVID-19 should be considered "fundamental occupational health protections" for workers at stores, restaurants and other [public places](#).

"Both [tobacco smoke](#) and COVID-19 are air-based [health hazards](#) to workers who may be exposed to them for hours on end," said Michael Vuolo, co-author of the paper and associate professor of sociology at The Ohio State University.

"Requiring that members of the public wear masks is a form of workplace protection."

Vuolo, who researches the effectiveness of [smoking bans](#), wrote the article with Brian Kelly, a professor of sociology at Purdue University who is an expert on health policy, and Vincent Roscigno, a professor of sociology at Ohio State who is an expert on labor and worker rights.

The main argument typically made against a mask requirement, as was the case with [smoking](#) bans, is that it violates the individual liberties of Americans.

"But even the strictest individual liberty philosophies still recognize that those liberties only go to the point of harm against others," Vuolo said.

"It is clear that COVID-19 is a threat to workers who may be exposed to it and mask wearing can help minimize that threat."

The issue is also one of inequality, because many of the workers in service and retail industries are people who earn lower wages and are racial and ethnic minorities.

Mask requirements may be a key means to reduce the already evident inequalities in who gets COVID-19, the researchers said.

The risks of contracting COVID-19 for workers are, in some ways, even more insidious than those related to smoking, Vuolo noted.

"The risk from smokers is clear. But workers don't know who may have COVID-19 and who doesn't. That makes mask requirements for everyone even more important," he said.

Many business owners enforce smoking bans even when not required by law for a very good reason, according to Vuolo.

"Research has shown that workplace productivity is higher in workplaces that are seen as healthy and safe."

Vuolo said it is important to remember how controversial smoking bans were when they were first implemented. Now, they are hardly mentioned.

"No one is out there policing smoking for the most part. Health authorities could if they had to, but it is usually not necessary," he said.

"The way we got people to stop smoking in public was simply to make it abnormal. We could do a similar thing by making it abnormal not to wear a mask," he said.

If mask-wearing is required, it could become as normalized here in the United States as it is in east Asia. At some point, people may even consider wearing [masks](#) during normal flu seasons, Vuolo said.

But until that time, we need legal requirements to protect workers, according to the authors.

"Wearing a mask may seem like a nuisance, just like having to step outside to smoke may seem like a nuisance," Vuolo said.

"But both are a small inconvenience when compared to workers' rights to a safe work environment."

**More information:** Mike Vuolo et al. COVID-19 Mask Requirements as a Workers' Rights Issue: Parallels to Smoking Bans. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. July 16, 2020

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