

Perception of COVID-19 vulnerability hurts job prospects

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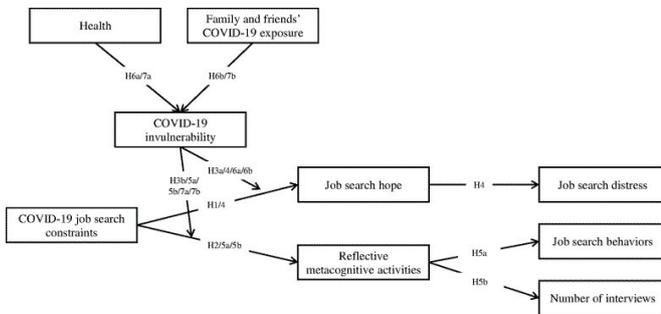


Figure 1. Hypothesized Model. Note. H4/H5a/H5b indicates moderated mediation hypotheses, and H6a/H6b/H7a/H7b indicates mediated moderation hypotheses. Credit: DOI: 10.1037/apl0000938

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the job market in ways policymakers couldn't have predicted 18 months ago. Among them is the creation of numerous job search hurdles for the unemployed, who also may be saddled with extrafamilial responsibilities at home that could potentially interfere with their ability to conduct a successful job search. According to a new paper co-written by a University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign expert who studies occupational stress and well-being, job seekers' self-perceived risk of catching and falling seriously ill from COVID-19 may take a significant mental health toll on their job search behaviors and ultimate employment success.

Job [search](#) constraints caused by the pandemic were linked to job search distress and fewer job search activities, such as submitting job applications—but that relationship depended on feelings of "invulnerability" to COVID-19, said Yihao Liu, a professor of labor and [employment](#) relations and of psychology at Illinois.

"We found that such a feeling of invulnerability

helps seekers stay hopeful in their job search and focus on refining their job search strategies—such as analyzing interview skills and thinking about how to best present themselves to employers—when they are faced with job search constraints like extra financial burdens and increased child care or elder care responsibilities," Liu said. "In the end, such hope and strategizing increases seekers' chances of securing employment."

"Job seekers' sense of invulnerability toward COVID-19—do they have an optimistic perception about how at-risk they are to catching COVID-19 and getting sick, or do they feel especially vulnerable to it? – is likely a resource-protecting cognition that individuals may adopt under an extraordinary environment, such as this pandemic," said Jaclyn Koopmann of Auburn University, a co-author of the study. "When job seekers feel less invulnerable, or more at risk to COVID-19, they are psychologically taxed, spending more of their internal energies or resources on worrying about their risk. So, they don't have the capability to overcome any challenges they face on the job search, whereas the more invulnerable can be adaptive. How invulnerable job seekers perceive themselves to be thus plays a big role in their employment situation."

After collecting three waves of data from 228 unemployed job seekers, the researchers found that those who had more [health risks](#) and knew a greater proportion of family and friends who contracted COVID-19 felt less invulnerable, thus making their job search constraints more harmful to their employment prospects.

"Job seekers who feel more susceptible to getting seriously ill from COVID-19 are the ones who we really want to highlight as a vulnerable population—not only for them getting sick from COVID-19, but also with respect to the difficulties they encounter during their search," Liu said. "With these two layers of obstacles in play, such job

seekers may find it particularly difficult to effectively regulate their search efforts and face great disadvantage and poorer outcomes in the search process."

"It's not a conscious decision on their part. They've just run out of bandwidth to do anything to counteract the difficulties they're facing or the energy it takes to adapt to the current employment situation," Koopmann said.

To alleviate job search constraints during the pandemic, the researchers said employers, employment agencies and employment programs ought to take proactive steps such as providing the option of virtual interviews and ensuring on-site and virtual interviewees go through similar evaluation protocols, as well as strictly adhering to mask mandates and other local public health measures during interviews and recruiting events.

"It would be ideal if employers and policymakers would consider the vulnerable job-seeker and make appropriate accommodations to help facilitate their search," Liu said. "It's also necessary for employers to be transparent about the level of health risks from COVID-19 that these [prospective employees](#) may face on the job, to ensure that it's consistent with both parties' levels of risk tolerance."

The paper was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

More information: Jaclyn Koopmann et al, Job search self-regulation during COVID-19: Linking search constraints, health concerns, and invulnerability to job search processes and outcomes., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000938](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000938)

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