Same Storm(s), Different Boats:

Disaster Impacts on Inequities and Environmental Injustices Among Workers Experiencing Disadvantage

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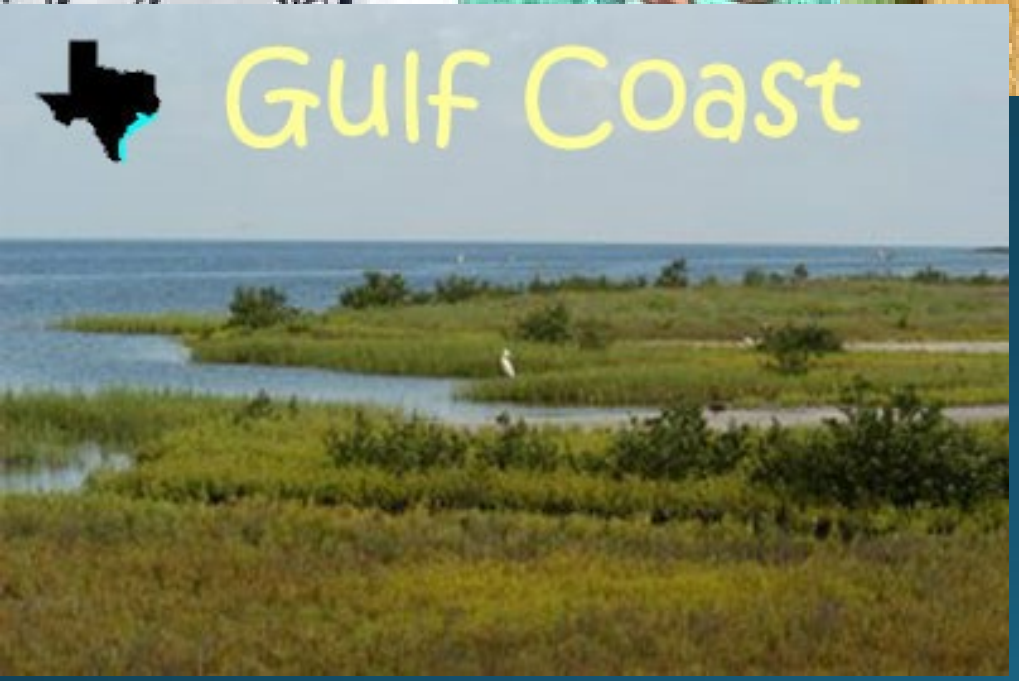
Context for Coastal Communities. . . It really is all about the environment



The Gulf of Mexico is the beating heartbeat of the American south, supporting fisheries, tourism and recreation, and a vibrant and diverse ecosystem. . .

Jean Michel Cousteau

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"Third Coast" Employment

- Gulf of Mexico region: vital economic engine for the nation
- Abundant natural and living resources provide basis for a thriving economy
  - Trillions of dollars provided each year to the U.S. economy
  - Millions of jobs in tourism, commercial fishing, oil and gas production, foreign trade, aerospace, shipping (Houston and New Orleans among world's largest ports), cruise tourism, and technology
  - Over 90% of U.S. oil and gas production occurs in Gulf
  - Gulf supports largest recreational fisheries in U.S.
- Tension between economic interests and health (individual, ecosystem, etc.)
  - Rising populations and tourism create stress on the same natural resources that provide the economic engine for the region

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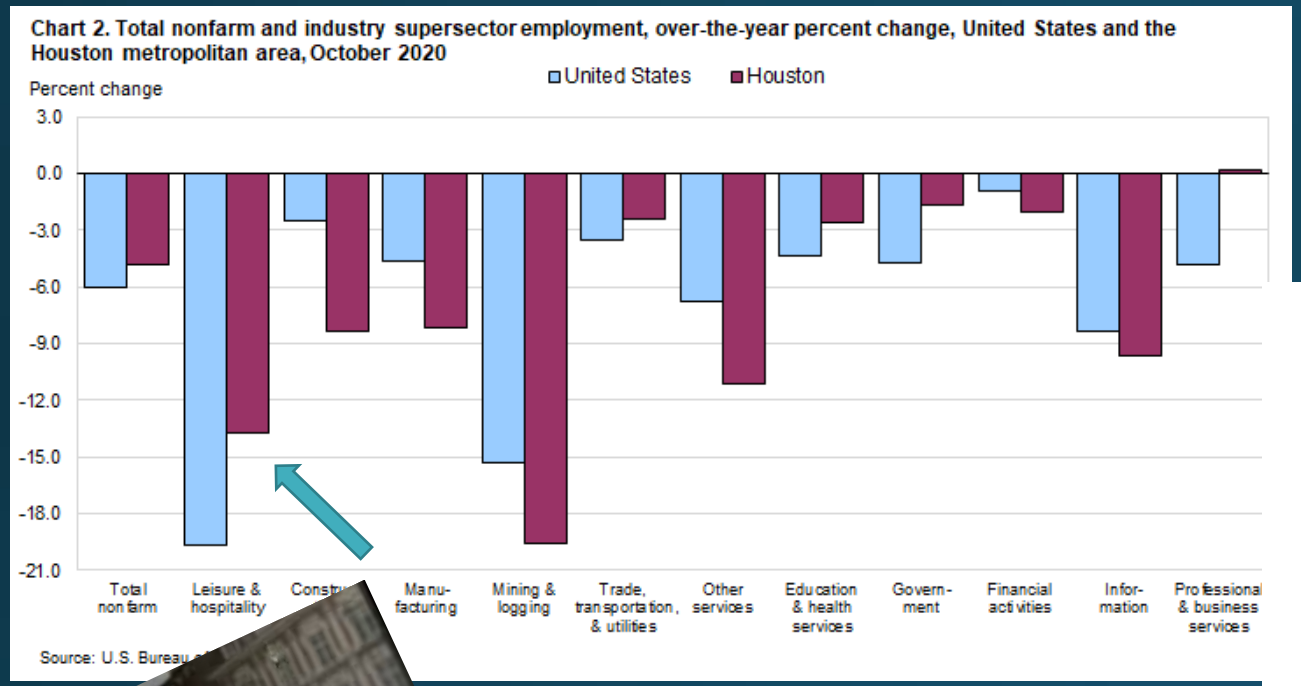
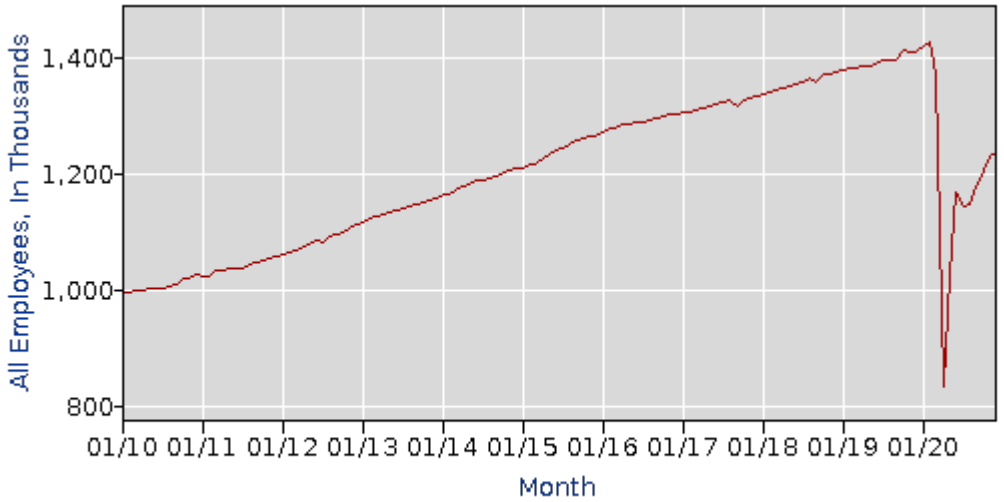
COVID-19 Impacts on Employment





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Impact of COVID on Tourism

- $519 billion decline in travel spending in the US this year will translate into a total economic loss of $1.2 trillion in economic output
- More than nine times the impact of 9/11 on travel sector revenue
- In 2nd quarter, travel-related jobs fell by 6.9 million and resulted in a total employment loss of 8.0 million jobs in the US (including indirect impacts)
- Decline of $80 billion in taxes will be realized as a result of travel declines in 2020
- Equates to a 45% decline in travel economic impacts for the entire year

- *The Impact of COVID-19 on the United States Travel Economy*, Oxford Economics

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COVID-19 Impacts on Vulnerable Communities

- Devastating for local employment--Non-essential businesses closed:
  - Hotels, short-term rentals, cruise ships, restaurants, bars, gyms, parks, shops and stores, recreational facilities, and many more
- Galveston/Houston area unemployment skyrocketed
  - Unemployment up to 14%
  - Overall loss of 228 K jobs, of which > 89 K jobs (25.7% decrease) were among leisure and recreational businesses
- Many workers with single or double incomes now acutely and potentially chronically unemployed
  - May have assets (but no income) precluding them from assistance
  - Loss of health insurance
  - Have no experience in accessing resources

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COVID-19 Obvious Inequities

- Disparities in prevalence and severity of COVID-19 in various communities
  - Virus higher or more lethal among communities of color
- Not all neighborhoods created equal
  - Sidewalks (or lack thereof) allow safe exercise opportunities
  - Parks and playgrounds (or lack thereof) allow children to get out of the house and socialize under safe conditions
  - Low crime and effective (and non-threatening) police presence enable residents to spend time out of doors with ability to social distance
  - Proximity to industry and/or heavily trafficked roadways may act as a deterrent to outdoor activities
  - Increased risk related to living in areas with higher levels of air pollution

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COVID-19 Inequities that are not as Obvious

- Service workers at highest risk of layoff/termination
- Many subject to eviction and increased risk of exposure and infection associated with combined (overcrowded) households
- Increased risk from taking higher risk jobs just to be employed
- Stress
- Food insecurity and impact on nutrition
- Lowest SES less likely to be able to work remotely
- Lack of access to reliable internet disproportionately precludes students of lower income households from remote schooling
- Children unable to access school breakfast/lunch programs
- Workers unable to afford testing or afraid to be tested for fear of losing job

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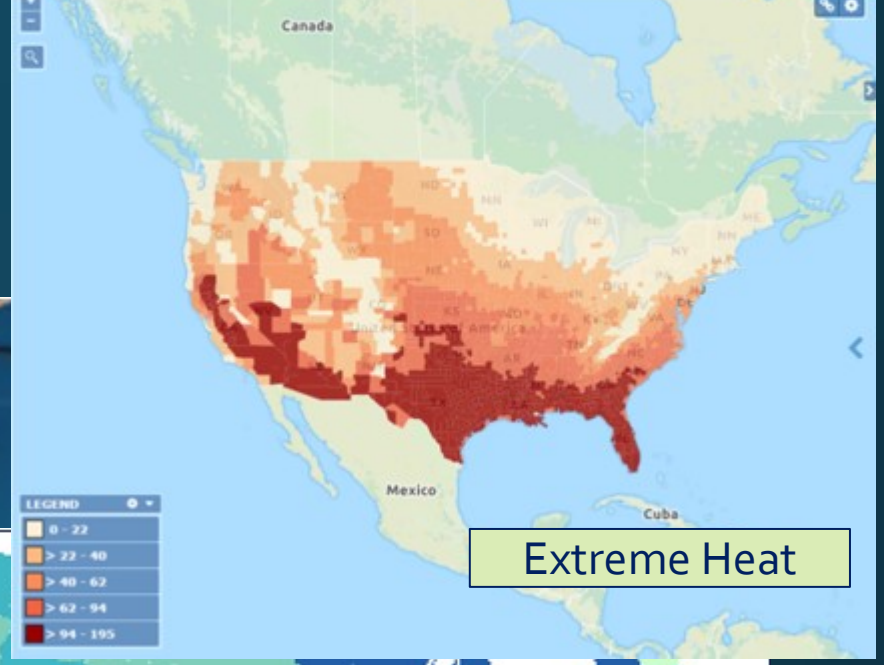
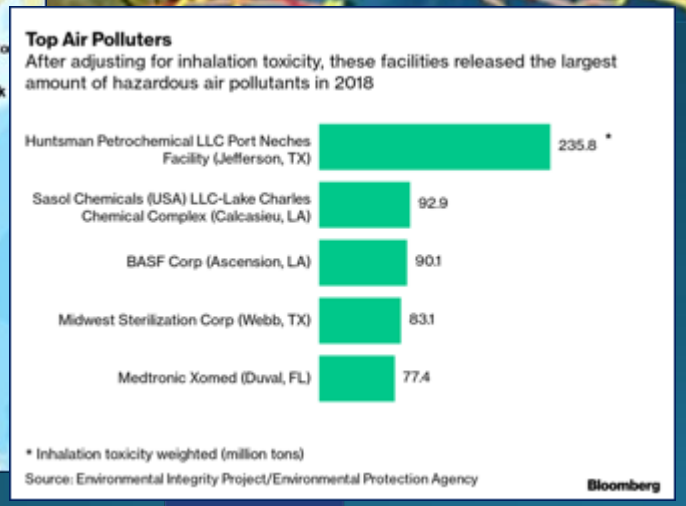
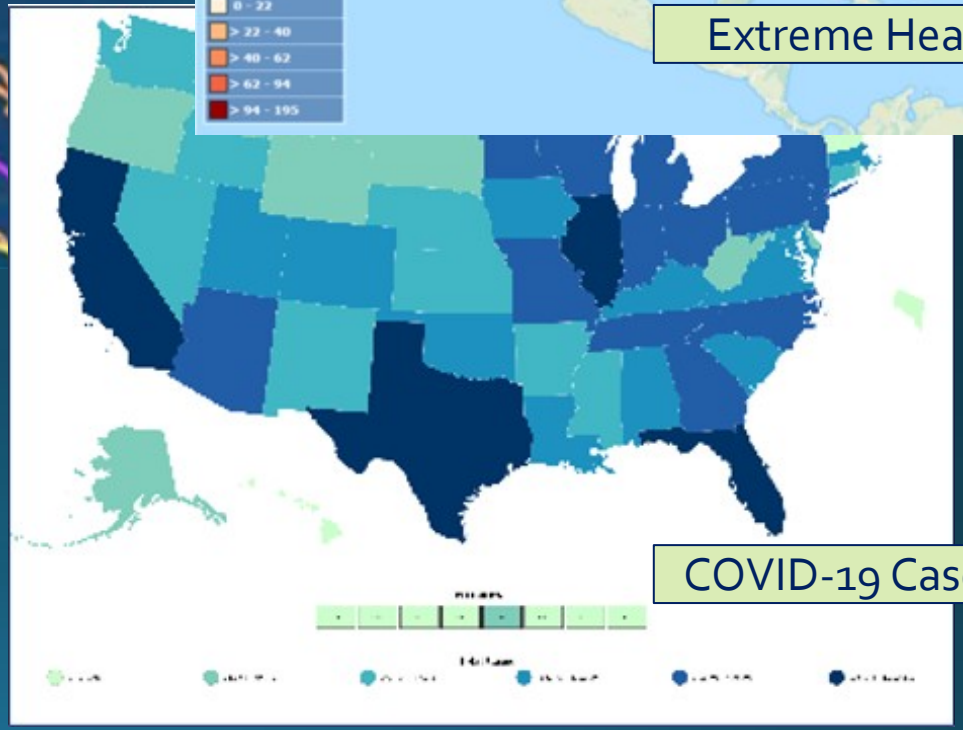
2020: A Year of Living Dangerously AKA Gulf of Mexico Firsts (and Worsts)

- COVID-19
- Extreme Heat
- Storms
- Industrial Pollution



Extreme Heat





COVID-19 Cases

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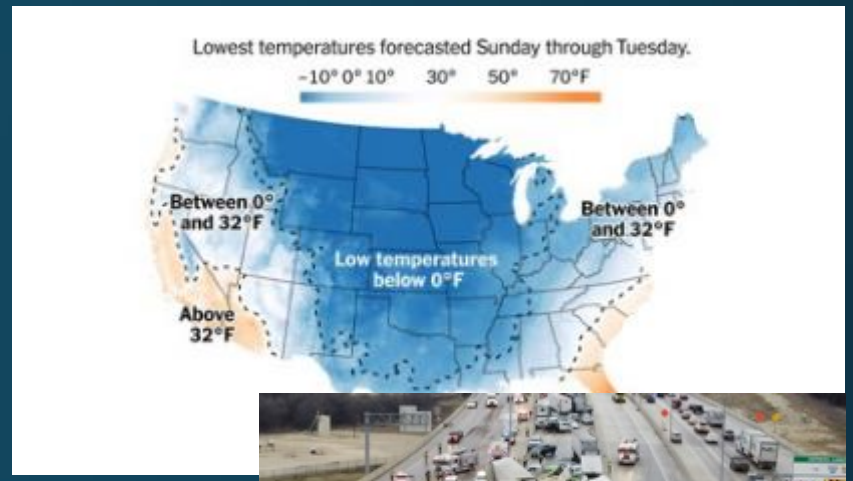
2021 (Demon Spawn of 2020)

- Emergent Issues from Winter Storm
  - Extreme cold: temperature extremes combined with ice and snow
  - Accidents: state largely unprepared for widespread ice - 160-car pile up in Ft. Worth
  - Power and Heat:
    - 4.3 M Texans without power for up to 3 days
    - Lower-income and people of color disproportionately impacted
  - Medical Care: Essential facilities spared power loss but impacted by loss of water, posing risk to staff and patients



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More Chronic Long-term Issues

- Natural Environment: many animals subjected to the elements froze to death. ~ 5 K sea turtles rescued; large-scale bat die-off will impact insect population and disease spread
- Water: As power was restored, water problems increased > 14.9 M Texans without water, including 62% of counties
- Food: Grocery stores forced to close due to lack of power, resulting in loss of refrigerated and frozen foods. Those able to reopen were quickly depleted of staples with delayed inability to resupp
- Biggest casualty: erosion of trust and faith in the systems on which we depend

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Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night. . .

- Context is Everything: All of these disasters, i.e., social turmoil, heat, cold, environmental pollution, are occurring within the context of COVID-19
- Hospitals and health care system already overloaded
  - Nowhere to send patients
  - Unable to adhere to standard hygiene protocols and provide safe care under impossible circumstances. No potties and no coffee!
- Inability to care for vulnerable without risk of overcrowding and exposure
- Mental health and stress
  - Even bare grocery store shelves are a trigger
  - Reminder of our vulnerability and lack of autonomy

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Winter Storm: Inequities on TOP of Inequities

- Workers unable to report for duty or working for closed businesses subject to:
  - Loss of wages or actual threat to job for failure to show up
  - Forced to use leave to cover missed hours or to go without pay
- Food insecurity (additional): with lack of electricity, food spoiled
  - Unsafe neighborhoods precluded movement of foods to outdoor location for preservation
  - Food banks decimated, unable to provide even necessities for most needy
- Effects of power outages
  - More well off financially able to stay in hotel or to own/purchase a generator
  - Risk of exposure in overcrowded shelters vs. risk of death from NOT seeking shelter

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Quiet Acts of Resiliency, and Kindness

- During COVID-19:
  - Galveston Restaurant Association fed unemployed workers for weeks
  - Some restaurants remained open with all employees on the payroll despite inability to serve food in-house. Locals began ordering catered lunches to be delivered every day to first responders and healthcare workers.
- During the storm:
  - Neighbors helped neighbors through welfare checks, provision of water, warmth, and hospitality
  - Citizens cleared roads/sidewalks to permit first responders to safely work
  - Healthcare workers and community employees worked double shifts without heat, sleep or coffee to provide health care and to restore water and power
- All those who reached out to provide food, funding, or encouragement

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COVID-19 Impacts on Inequities and Environmental Injustices Among Workers Experiencing Disadvantage: A Living Hell

Tales from Texas: Hell Froze Over

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