



Fact check: Has 50% of U.S. workforce been 'idled' by coronavirus?

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U.S. Rep. Dan Bishop has been one of North Carolina's most vocal opponents of Gov. Roy Cooper's stay-at-home order.

Bishop, a Republican elected in 2019 to represent southwest NC, has attended protests urging Cooper to "reopen" the state's economy. But in an interview on April 24, the congressman made a comment about the U.S. economy that caught our attention.

On Spicer & Co., the show of former White House press secretary Sean Spicer on the conservative Newsmax TV, he said "half the workforce in the country may have just been idled."

Here are his full comments:

"People who are elderly or who have underlying conditions that would subject them to the worst ravages of the coronavirus should take additional measures and, in fact, I don't object to government taking measures to see to it that those people are particularly protected," he said.

"But it's quite another step to utterly devastate the economic landscape in a way — and I don't know that I've seen a figure that better summarizes how bad it is, as the suggestion you just put up — that half the workforce in the country may have just been idled."

Is it true that half of the American workforce has been idled? And what “figure” is Bishop referring to?

According to Bishop’s spokeswoman, Hannah Hummelberg, the congressman was referring to a New York Times stat that Spicer mentioned earlier in the segment.

“The number of unemployment claims filed so far is equal to the total workforce, get this, of 25 states,” Spicer said.

Clearly, a chunk of the American population has filed for unemployment. But does it add up to half of the U.S. workforce? No.

Unemployment

By citing the New York Times stat, Bishop tied his definition of “idle” to unemployment numbers. So let’s put the Times’ stat in perspective.

There were about 160 million workers in the U.S. around the start of the year. That’s according to experts we interviewed, previous PolitiFact reporting, and numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Obviously, 26 million workers — the New York Times unemployment stat cited by Bishop — is not half of 160 million. So it’s wrong to suggest half of the U.S. is unemployed.

And it’s not “statistically sound” to equate 26 million workers with “half” of the country, said Ryan Bourne, the R. Evan Scharf Chair for the Public Understanding of Economics at the Cato Institute. Cato is a think tank that advocates for free markets.

And the New York Times comparison wouldn’t work with just any grouping of 25 states. In California alone, there are 19 million workers.

“Since our population is not spread evenly across the states, the working population of 25 states doesn’t provide an estimate of 50% of the national workforce,” said Tara Sinclair, associate professor of economics and international affairs at George Washington University.

Uncounted workers

The Times’ stat alone isn’t enough to support Bishop’s claim. So let’s explore other estimates of U.S. unemployment.

There are people that unemployment reports don't account for, such as those who are furloughed or who are working reduced hours.

Dean Baker, co-founder of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, said the number of people who filed for unemployment isn't complete. He said there are several million more people who either could not get their forms in or were ineligible.

(In North Carolina, for example, the phone lines at the state's unemployment office were so busy that many people claimed they couldn't get through to file claims.)

Baker thinks the number of unemployed Americans is somewhere between 20-25%, he said in an May 5 email. "I would be hesitant to use one much higher," he said.

CNN estimated that 43 million workers were either out of work or working reduced hours in April alone.

Public surveys

Bourne, the CATO expert, said Bishop's claim would only be valid if considered very broadly.

He referenced a poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation that said 55% of workers had either lost jobs, lost pay, lost hours, or been furloughed since Feb. 1.

The definition of "idled" is to not work or not do something. It's a reference to inaction. The Kaiser survey included people who lost pay, but might still be working.

"This, as you can see, highlights the scale of the economic impacts of the virus and response, but is a different claim entirely," Bourne said.

On April 21, three days before Bishop's claim, the Pew Research Center published a study on how the coronavirus response affected the wages of American workers.

About 28% said they or someone in their household has been laid off or lost their job. When asked if someone in the house had lost their job or taken a pay cut, 43% said yes.

Gross Domestic Product

Chris Lafakis, a director at Moody's Analytics, said the workforce can also be judged by the U.S. GDP. GDP measures the total value of goods and services produced in the U.S. over the course of a year.

It fell 4.8% in the first three months of the year (the first quarter), according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. The bureau's second quarter numbers run through June and are not yet available.

Deutsche Bank expects GDP to drop "nearly 40%" in the second quarter, according to Business Insider. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office almost mirrors that estimate, expecting a 39% drop.

"Most economists" don't expect GDP to dip by 50%, Lafakis said. Moody's expects GDP to decline 33% at an annualized rate in quarter two.

Our ruling

Bishop said "half the workforce in the country may have just been idled."

Bishop took a stat that's meant to illustrate the magnitude of unemployment and misused it to falsely say half of the country's workers are unemployed.

The U.S. workforce is roughly 160 million people. We found no official counts or expert estimates showing unemployment has reached half of that figure.

Bishop's claim is only valid if we consider that 26 million people is equal to the working population of a specific group of 25 states, or if we look past the definition of "idle" and consider Americans who weren't laid off, but whose wages were affected by the coronavirus outbreak.

His claim contains an element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give a different impression. We rate it Mostly False.