

# **Warehouse Employment as a Driver of Inequality in the Inland Empire: The Experiences of Young Amazon Warehouse Workers**

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The Inland Empire is currently one of the main logistics hubs, and centers of warehouse employment, in the nation. Logistics and warehouse employment in the region has been on the rise for the past four decades, contributing to the rise in the “just in time” global retail economy. Its rise was facilitated by the rise in offshore production and expansions in shipping containers, as well as local political efforts to attract new investments and jobs to the region, which was hard hit by a series of military and plant closures in the 1980s and 1990s and by the recession that began in 2007 when the housing market bubble burst.<sup>1</sup>

Previous research documents in quantitative terms the negative impacts of the concentration of employment in the transportation and warehouse industry for the region, especially for black and Latinx workers, who are disproportionately employed within it. Findings from the Center for Social Innovation’s report, *The State of Work in the Inland Empire*, suggest that the concentration of employment in transportation and warehouses contributes to low earnings and poverty in the region.<sup>2</sup> Other surveys and government statistics reveal that poverty-level wages, and precarious employment—whether through temporary agencies or seasonal contracts—are especially common among the region’s blue-collar warehouse workers, who also experience relatively high rates of work-related injuries.<sup>3</sup>

Amazon alone already has at least 16 distribution or fulfillment centers in place or under development in the region as of 2019. These are concentrated largely in San Bernardino and other cities in western Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. Altogether, these facilities have employed more than fifteen thousand workers; most facilities employ between 1,000-1,500 employees, with at least one (in Eastvale) employing more than 3,000.<sup>4</sup> Amazon has even invested \$50,000 in an “Amazon logistics and business management pathways program” at Cajon High

School in San Bernardino.<sup>5</sup> Its new pathways program and other related logistics management training programs at area colleges might help some graduates to become successful managers or entrepreneurs in the logistics industries or other sectors; actual outcomes of these programs deserve further assessment, which is beyond the scope of this paper. But even if they facilitate advancement for some, much of the region's youth remains employed as blue-collar warehouse workers.

Regardless of any formal logistics training programs, the high demand for warehouse workers in the region creates an informal "school to warehouse" pipeline through which tens of thousands of young people, most of whom are Latinx, become employed in warehouses. This paper examines the views and personal experiences of young blue-collar warehouse workers employed by Amazon in order to understand how that employment experience impacts their everyday lives and their opportunities for upward mobility. Young workers interviewed for this study report that their Amazon warehouse jobs drain their energy and distract them from their schoolwork; some also report negative impacts of warehouse employment on their mental and/or physical health.

### **Interview Sample**

Our research is based on an analysis of 36 in-depth interviews with current and former Amazon warehouse workers under 30 years of age, who were employed in Riverside or San Bernardino Counties. This set of interviews is part of a larger sample (including workers above the age of 30) carried out by a research team of students enrolled at the University of California, Riverside (UCR), and supervised by the first author. Interviews were conducted in several waves between July 2018 and July 2019.

Gaining access to low-wage workers that are vulnerable to employment retaliation by current or future employers is often difficult, so student researchers mainly recruited interviewees from among their friends, family members, co-workers, or other personal acquaintances. This is consistent with an approach commonly used by researchers studying low-wage workers and other types of vulnerable populations.<sup>6</sup> A few workers were recruited through announcements about the opportunity to participate in this study that were sent to an email list-serve of about 1,200 sociology majors. Informants were offered a \$20 gift card to compensate them for the time they spent doing the interview. Most interviews lasted about 25-40 minutes, but some were as long as 2 hours. Most interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed, but some interviews were summarized through notes, usually because workers did not want to be recorded. Pseudonyms were assigned to respondents to protect their identities.

Our interview sample is probably not representative of all young warehouse workers, or even all young Amazon warehouse workers. Compared to the characteristics of the region's blue-collar warehouse workforce,<sup>7</sup> greater percentages of our sample are women, native-born, have at least some college credit, and are employed in Riverside.<sup>8</sup> Even so, there was considerable diversity among these blue-collar warehouse workers in terms of their social characteristics and the characteristics of their jobs. Of the 36 respondents that were under the age of 30 at the time of their interview, the average age was 23. Of these, about 58% were between 18 and 24 years of age, while the remaining 42% were between ages of 25 and 29. In terms of race, 58% were Latinx alone, 11% were non-Hispanic whites, 3% were black alone, 6% were Asian alone, 19% were mixed race, and 3% identified their race as "other." The predominance of Latinxs in the sample (69% were Latinx, including mixed race Latinx) is consistent with the predominance of Latinxs in the region's labor force generally, and among blue-collar warehouse workers in particular.<sup>9</sup> Approximately 11% of participants were foreign-born while 56% were female. About 94% were single (including never married and divorced) while 6% were married. About 25% had at least one child under the age of 18. In terms of educational attainment, about 11% had a high school degree or GED, 11% had technical training or certification, 58% had some college, while 19% had a college degree or more.

In terms of their employment status, 22% of participants were currently employed by Amazon while 78% were former employees. On average, respondents were employed by Amazon for 15 months and had 25 months of experience working in the warehouse industry. About 33% were employed for over one year. About 11% of participants were employed more than once by Amazon. The most recent job of all but a few was entry-level "warehouse associate" or an equivalent position (most of whom currently earn \$15/hour), while 6% were employed as "process assistants" (who work alongside warehouse associates but are given some lower-level supervisory tasks for a few dollars more per hour). About 64% were employed in Riverside County, while 36% were employed in San Bernardino County. Two thirds were employed full time. Most were employed directly by the company, but 22% were employed through temporary agencies. While probably not representative of all young warehouse workers in the region, our interviews provide a revealing window into the everyday work experiences and views of a fairly diverse group of young Amazon workers employed on average for more than a year.

## **Interview Findings**

Many of the participants in this study appreciated the opportunity to work and to earn some money, and other benefits and opportunities offered to them by the company. Yet, earnings were fairly low, especially in comparison to the high costs of living in the region. Most of those currently employed as a warehouse associate, the most common occupation, were earning about \$15 per hour. Most of those interviewed reported that they lived with, and relied upon, other family members for financial support, especially help with housing costs, school costs, and/or assistance with free or low-cost child care. Working parents of minor children struggled to make ends meet, with at least 6 out of 9 of them reporting that they rely on Medicaid because it is more affordable for their family than the health insurance plan offered by Amazon.

Work-related injuries and mental stress can create serious barriers for young workers' upward mobility and employment prospects. When directly asked, about one-third of participants agreed that they had concerns about the impact of their Amazon job on their mental or physical health. When asked if they experienced pain and fatigue by the end of their work shifts, fully 91 percent agreed that they did. Many participants described how the strenuous nature of warehouse work and long hours of standing, walking quickly for miles in a day, and lifting goods created aches in the back, legs, hands, and feet. Among full-time employees, work shifts typically lasted ten hours or more. Although Amazon trains workers on safety procedures and provides emergency medical staff on site to help to prevent and respond to workplace injuries, warehouse associates are often expected to lift heavy boxes, reach up high or across large conveyor belts for items, engage in repetitive motions, and to work at a fast pace, all of which puts workers' physical health at risk.

Various participants reported personal experiences with various work-related injuries, such as cuts, bruises, and muscle strains, while working quickly or for long hours. As Paola put it, "It was a little too much for me physically. I had bruises all over my legs because of the boxes I was throwing around." Her mother encouraged her to quit, warning her that warehouse work would reduce her mobility and lifespan. Several former workers reported that they left their job due to work-related back problems or back injuries. For example, Jorge, who quit after working full-time for Amazon one summer, reported, "I only worked there for 3 months and I was already having back problems with it... I was 20 years old and I had back problems. That shouldn't happen." Several other former workers reported that they had experienced hearing loss because of too much exposure to noisy machinery at Amazon and inconsistent access to protective ear muffs. These reports are consistent with the relatively high rate of workplace injuries found in the warehouse

industry generally, and the disproportionately high rate of serious injuries found within 23 of Amazon's fulfillment centers (about double the national industry average); in Amazon's Eastvale facility located in Riverside County, this rate this rate was *four* times the national industry average.<sup>10</sup>

The job also strained workers' mental health. Participants described the stress associated with the pressure to "make rate," to work quickly with minimal errors, and to be electronically monitored, sometimes with scanners that malfunctioned. As Benjamin put it, "I was always scared every day to be fired because I wasn't meeting rate." Such stress seemed to be especially acute among working parents that supported young children. Workers also described the job as boring, repetitive, socially isolating, and/or deeply alienating. One Latinx worker described his warehouse job as similar to being a prisoner in "solitary confinement" for 10 or more hours per day. He had hardly any social interaction during working hours, could only view the sun through small windows during winter months, and observed mostly black and brown people around him.

Many others described a general lack of concern by the company for workers' welfare, or being treated like a number, or as highly disposable. For example, many participants described managerial obsession with, and constant electronic surveillance of, warehouse workers' "numbers"—their error rates, their productivity rates, "time off task," etc.—and observed the high turnover among those unable to "make rate." They also reported various instances of managerial disregard for the actual work-related obstacles—scanners that didn't work, barcodes that were damaged and hard to read, hard to reach or misplaced items, etc.—that sometimes made it difficult for workers to "make rate." Participants also described impersonal or very little communication with management due to their heavy reliance on digital technology to communicate, and the physical absence of managers on the floor, as well as pressure to "flex" up or down their work hours as needed, sometimes with little advanced notice.

In addition, young workers, both male and female, described instances of sexual and/or gender harassment among women within this male-dominated industry. Often harassment was facilitated by the isolating nature of warehouse work, where such behavior was not easily observed by others. They further reported frustrating difficulties with their attempts to resolve these matters through Amazon's Human Resources office.

Most participants did not view their Amazon warehouse job as providing valuable work experience that would help them in their future careers, and many college students described their warehouse employment as interfering with their ability to perform well in school. Most participants viewed their Amazon warehouse job as a short-term job—a way to earn needed

income for themselves or their family until they could obtain a better job or they could attain the education or training required for their chosen career. Besides three participants who did not yet have a dream job or a clear career path, and five others who were not asked or did not respond to that question, most (26) participants described various types of long-term career goals that were completely unrelated to their Amazon warehouse jobs. Five were interested in pursuing careers in social work or education, four in healthcare, three in law enforcement, four in the arts, two in journalism, three in biology or veterinary science; three wanted to own their own business or work in business administration, one had plans to join the military or public administration, and another one aspired to be an elected public official.

Only two out of the 36 participants described a desire for a long-term career within Amazon. Of the two, one (Paola) expressed a negative view of working for Amazon, reporting concerns regarding the intense pressure to work quickly, insufficient concern for worker safety, and the company's hostility towards unions. Paola told us, "I hope that one day I can go back to Amazon and change things." The second individual had originally intended to pursue a career as a buyer with Amazon, but after working with the company and interacting with other buyers, had become less certain about this career goal.

Although most participants had well-defined career goals, and some were already pursuing them, many of these young, low-wage workers faced various types of class and/or gender and family-related structural barriers that made it difficult for them to pursue their dream jobs. Some mentioned the lack of money to pay for school or to invest in their own business. Given the lack of affordable child- and elder-care in the United States, it is not surprising that some young women mentioned the need to take time off from school or work in order to take care of their young children, while other workers described quitting school or work in order to take care of adult family members who were disabled or sick.

Warehouse employment perpetuates economic inequality not simply because it pays poorly and is precarious, but also because it interferes with young people's ability to obtain a college degree, a critical step stone to higher paying careers in today's economy. Many of the participants—most of whom had at least some college—described the difficulties of being employed for Amazon and going to college at the same time, and how their work schedule—and/or exhaustion from work—interfered with their academic performance or motivation. Maria, who even tried Amazon's tuition assistance program that subsidizes the cost of an AA degree or a technical certificate program for full-time employees, reported that:

I find myself putting [my dreams] on hold. I was going to community college and then I started working.... I had other responsibilities popping up and I'm expected to be an adult. Then it's overwhelming and you feel like you do not have time anymore for school. I loved school and learning but once I started working, it felt like I put school on a back burner.

Although some college students, mostly those employed part-time or during the summer, described their Amazon job as compatible with their school schedules, those working long hours and/or night shifts often found their work schedules and/or work-related exhaustion made it difficult to perform well at school and to get sufficient sleep. Felipe, who worked a night shift and attended classes during the day, described his difficulty juggling work and school in this way:

[It] is dangerous, especially when you are driving home afterwards, that's dangerous.... We would work long hours, and it was always at the end of the day. You don't get much sleep... Lots of sleep deprivation. It's very dangerous.... I almost hit a pole once, because I passed out... Yeah, I didn't sleep. My sleep schedule would be between classes, from 11-1, and then I would go home and sleep from 2-7 or 4-7.

At least five student participants reported that they either quit their job in order to spend more time on their school work and/or get more sleep, or they were fired from their Amazon job because they missed too much work due to school. Various college student participants claimed that working for Amazon took a toll on their grades because it interfered with their schoolwork.

## **Conclusion**

Given the large concentration of low-wage, precarious warehouse jobs in the Inland Empire, youth in the region—especially those without college degrees—lack opportunities for gaining stable employment in high paying industries and occupations and obtaining the work experience, training, and higher education that would enable them to pursue their dreams of upward mobility. Asked if he would recommend his job as a warehouse worker, Samuel, a 24-year old Mexican American, concluded:

I would not recommend the job, because if you are young and you don't go to college then you'll get a warehouse job. That's what my brother does. He didn't want to go to college so he works a warehouse forty hours a week. During the year and a half he was in there, he got a reality check because all of his coworkers are middle aged men who gave their life to warehouses. Their body deteriorates. They would miss events, always at work... Warehouse jobs get you like that.

Even in the short-term, warehouse employment creates various challenges for young workers' upward mobility as it exposes them to risks to their physical and mental health. College students employed as warehouse workers, most of whom were Latinx or from other communities of color, found that their work schedules—especially those involving night shifts, erratic schedule changes, and/or work shifts lasting ten hours or more—along with work-related physical exhaustion, interfered with their academic success as it hindered their ability to regularly study, attend class, and/or get sufficient sleep.

The automation of warehouse and other logistics work, already being implemented by Amazon and other large employers, threatens to greatly reduce the demand for unskilled blue-collar jobs in the region over the long run. Without a commensurate rise in the demand for higher-paying jobs in the region, and greater investments in the educating and training needed to prepare young workers for such jobs, logistics automation threatens to exacerbate income inequality, unemployment, and underemployment in the Inland Empire. This is especially true given the centrality of logistics and warehouses to the regional economy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bonacich, Edna and Jake Wilson. 2007. *Getting the Goods: Ports, Labor, and the Logistics Revolution*. New York: Cornell University Press. Center for Social Innovation. 2018. *State of Work in the Inland Empire*. Center for Social Innovation, UC-Riverside. Available at: <https://socialinnovation.ucr.edu/state-work-inland-empire>

<sup>2</sup> Center for Social Innovation. 2018. *State of Work in the Inland Empire*. Center for Social Innovation, UC-Riverside. Available at: <https://socialinnovation.ucr.edu/state-work-inland-empire>

<sup>3</sup> Allison, Juliann, Joel Herrera, and Ellen Reese. 2015. "Why the City of Ontario Needs to Raise the Minimum Wage: Earnings Among Warehouse Workers in Inland Southern California." UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment. Research & Policy Brief. 36: 1-10.

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<http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2019/Future-of-Warehouse-Work.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Katzanek, "Here's how to apply for 2,000 new Amazon jobs," *Daily Bulletin*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.dailybulletin.com/2019/06/04/heres-how-to-apply-for-2000-new-amazon-jobs/> (accessed September 2019). Allison, Juliann. Forthcoming. "What Happens When Amazon Comes to Town?" In *The High Cost of Free Shipping: Amazon in the Global Economy*. London: Pluto Press.



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<sup>5</sup> Whitehead, Brian. 2019. "Amazon program at Cajon High offers students a path to careers in logistics." *San Bernardino Sun*, April 19. Available at: <https://www.sbsun.com/2019/04/19/with-support-from-amazon-these-cajon-high-students-are-receiving-a-crash-course-in-logistics>.

<sup>6</sup> Milkman, Ruth, Gonzalez, Ana Luz, & Narro, Victor. (with Bernhardt, Annette, Theodore, Nik, Heckathorn, Douglas, Auer, Mirabai, DeFilippis, James, Perelshteyn, Jason, Polson, Diana, & Spiller, Michael). 2010. Wage theft and workplace violations in Los Angeles: The failure of employment and labor law for low-wage workers. University of California, Los Angeles: Institute for Research on Labor and Employment. Retrieved from <https://www.labor.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/LAwagetheft.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Emmons Allison, Juliann, Joel S. Herrera, Jason Struna, and Ellen Reese. 2018. "The Matrix of Exploitation and Temporary Employment: Earnings Inequality among Inland Southern California's Blue-Collar Warehouse Workers." *Journal of Labor and Society* 21(4): 533-60.

<sup>8</sup> This is probably an artifact of our predominantly female team of UCR students that recruited and interviewed the workers.

<sup>9</sup> Emmons Allison, Juliann, Joel S. Herrera, Jason Struna, and Ellen Reese. 2018. "The Matrix of Exploitation and Temporary Employment: Earnings Inequality among Inland Southern California's Blue-Collar Warehouse Workers." *Journal of Labor and Society* 21(4): 533-60.

<sup>10</sup> Evans, Will. 2019. "Behind the Smiles: Amazon's internal injury records expose the true toll of its relentless drive for speed." *Reveal: The Center for Investigative Reporting*, November 25. Available at: <https://www.revealnews.org/article/behind-the-smiles/>

<sup>11</sup> Gutelis, Beth and Nik Theodore. 2019. *The Future of Warehouse Work: Technological Change in the U.S. Logistics Industry*. UC Berkeley Labor Center and Working Partnerships USA. Available at: <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2019/Future-of-Warehouse-Work.pdf>