

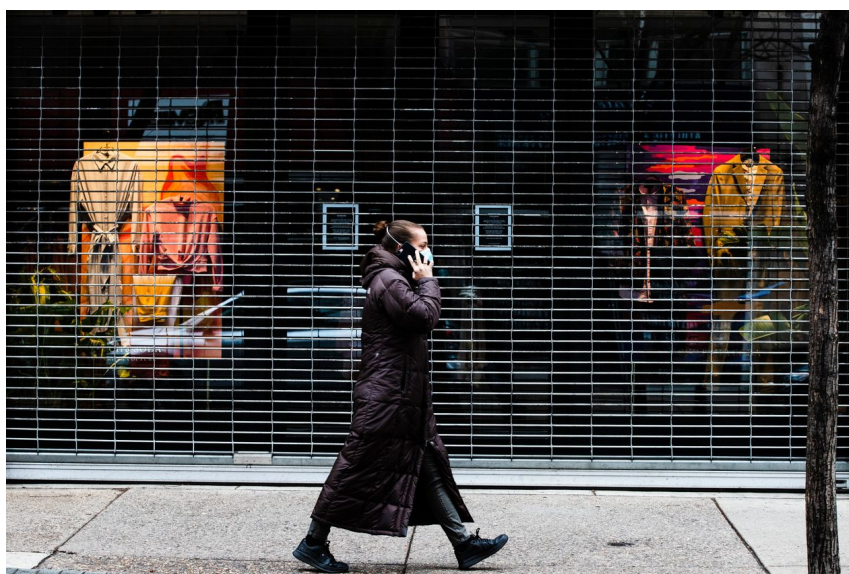
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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/pennsylvania-with-most-jobless-claims-in-u-s-could-foretell-high-numbers-elsewhere-11585323969>

## U.S. ECONOMY

# Pennsylvania, With Most Jobless Claims in U.S., Could Foretell High Numbers Elsewhere

Keystone state pushed workers to file for unemployment; avoided large disruptions like other states



A person wearing a face mask walks past a closed business in Philadelphia.

PHOTO: MATT ROURKE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

*By Kris Maher and Eric Morath*

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Pennsylvania, the nation's fifth-most populous state, recorded the largest number of unemployment claims in the U.S., an outside spike that suggests other states could report higher numbers ahead.

Jobless claims in the keystone state rose to 378,908 last week, up from 15,439 the prior week, as the state's economy reels from layoffs due to the novel coronavirus. The number of people filing for benefits represented nearly 5.8% of the state's labor force.

## Unemployment Benefits: What to Know About the Coronavirus Bill

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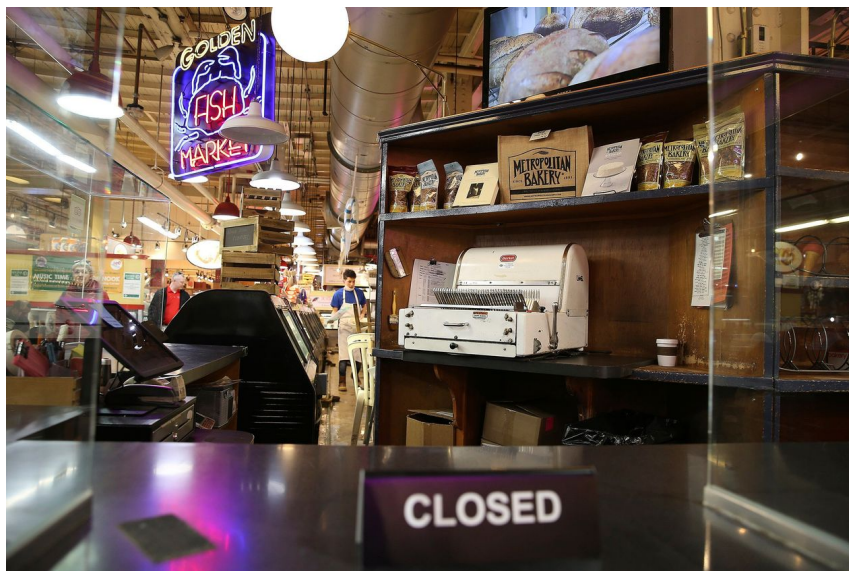
State officials said jobless claims were so high was because they actively pushed workers to file for unemployment benefits and didn't see the kinds of disruptions in filing other states experienced. Workers in many parts of the country complained they were unable to access websites and get through on phone lines, meaning other states may be accepting a high volume of delayed filings in the coming weeks. Also, workers still have plenty of time to file such claims, meaning numbers could rise everywhere as economic prospects dim due to the pandemic. Workers aren't required to file for claims the week they are laid off.

"I think Pennsylvania is indicative of what you're going to see elsewhere," said James Sweeney, chief economist at Credit Suisse. "I think you're going to see claims pick up in a lot of other states in the coming weeks, and that's pretty sobering considering the level we just saw."

Pennsylvania's numbers came out Thursday along with a record number of workers nationwide, nearly 3.3 million, filing for jobless benefits last week.

The state's experience suggests that the stresses facing the nation's unemployment system could grow in the months and weeks ahead, as other states catch up on processing claims and more workers pursue those benefits.

A spokeswoman with the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry said the state system didn't suffer major disruptions like those reported in states like California and New York. The state also relaxed the requirement that the unemployed be actively seeking work to qualify for benefits.



Metropolitan Bakery at Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia is closed due to the coronavirus crisis.

PHOTO: DAVID MAIALETTI/THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Holly Chapman, 62, of Jefferson Hills, Pa., said she filed a claim online last Tuesday after being laid off from a catering company when a spate of weddings and other events were canceled.

“I think because I was Johnny on the spot, it was relatively painless for me,” she said. She added that co-workers who waited a couple of days encountered delays, but were eventually able to complete their claims.

There’s also still plenty of time for workers to file claims. Some applying last week may have been laid off before the pandemic hit, but sought benefits as job prospects dimmed.

“This is more a question about why some other states don’t have bigger numbers at this point,” said Chris Briem, a regional economist at the University of Pittsburgh. “In the short term, all these numbers have to go up.”

Pennsylvania may have also had more claims because a larger share of its workforce was unemployed before the pandemic struck. The state unemployment rate in January was 4.7%, more than a percentage-point above the national average, ranking it 45th among states. Workers laid off earlier in the year for reasons unrelated to the virus can also apply for benefits, and maybe doing so now because many potential employers have closed.

Ohio had the second-highest number of claims with 187,784, narrowly ahead of California with 186,809. By contrast, in New York, which has nearly 7 million more residents than Pennsylvania, 80,334 workers, or about 0.8% of the labor force, filed for jobless benefits.

Most states provided an actual count of claims that they had received through Saturday. Ohio and Pennsylvania provided an estimated figure due to the large volume of claims they received, a U.S. Labor Department analyst said. Data for all states, including Pennsylvania and Ohio, are subject to revision in subsequent reports. State-level data tends to be volatile and is frequently revised.

Some in the state said Gov. Tom Wolf's decision to require broad closures of businesses considered non-life-sustaining contributed to the higher number of claims.

Thousands of businesses are still seeking waivers, saying they can operate safely by social distancing, said Gene Barr, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry. He said the group is trying to help reopen businesses that could aid with the response to the virus, like apparel manufacturers.

“The governor is walking a fine line between trying to protect health and keep the economy going,” he said. “There's no perfect bright line for that.”

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**Write to Kris Maher at [kris.maher@wsj.com](mailto:kris.maher@wsj.com) and Eric Morath at [eric.morath@wsj.com](mailto:eric.morath@wsj.com)**

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