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Coronavirus Will Be the Hardest for Gig and Service Workers in the U.S.

Kim Kelly

March 20, 2020

Box office numbers have long proven that U.S. moviegoers love a dystopia (even as the country has begun to resemble a real-life version of one), and in 2020, it turns out that the most relevant cinematic profile of our current moment came out seven years ago. *District 9* director Neill Blomkamp's sci-fi blockbuster *Elysium* introduced us to a stratified world in which the rich elite have decamped to a fabulous floating paradise called Elysium, where no one ever gets sick, while poor people labor and rot on the radioactive remnants of Earth below. The plot is not that important, but the stark image of the healthy haves and suffering have-nots was a perfect avatar for the United States' profit-driven, hypercapitalist health-care system. The rich have never had to suffer the way the rest of us do; even before the advent of modern medicine, the wealthy have always had a leg up (even if that just meant facing the Black Death with a full stomach).

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Kim Kelly is an anarchist columnist for *Teen Vogue*.

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Now, with the new coronavirus spreading across the globe and the death toll rising, people are coping as best as they can. Social media has been awash in jokes about self-quarantining and photos of barren shelves at Whole Foods and lines snaking through Trader Joe's. Journalists have kept busy opining about what a shift toward remote work might look like, while companies that peddle remote-access technologies watch hungrily. The more lighthearted threads of discourse belie a sense of uneasiness, even low-level panic, that's been building with each new troubling headline. Those who are at higher risk — the elderly, the immunocompromised, and people with other existing medical conditions — keep sounding the alarm, and most folks are keeping an eye on the situation, but one gets the distinct impression that there is a certain class of people who have not quite worked out how much they're supposed to *care* about any of it.

Tesla founder and Silicon Valley vampire Elon Musk broke the fourth wall to show the world (or at least his Twitter feed) how some of the ultra-rich really feel about the looming epidemic. "The coronavirus panic is dumb," he tweeted on Friday, amid news of elderly Washington State residents dying at their nursing home and cases spreading throughout Italy. He may as well have been wearing First Lady Melania Trump's notorious "I really don't care do u?" jacket. To someone like Musk, though, it *would* seem absurd to worry about something like the coronavirus; in his mind, it will never impact him or anyone in his immediate orbit beyond perhaps a canceled conference or two, so why should he care? The 48-year-old CEO is a billionaire who owns a number of mansions in and outside Los Angeles; neither he nor his family need to take public transit, or do their own grocery shopping, or leave their house for any reason. Thanks to his riches, Musk is living in a real-life Elysium.

And if by chance he does contract the virus, he can likely just pay for a level of health care that people like you and me cannot even fathom. His partner, musician Grimes, is currently pregnant, but

thanks to the couple's wealth and the unlimited resources it affords them, she will be spared from much of the coronavirus-related anxiety faced by less-privileged mothers-to-be.

The same goes for anthropomorphic blobfish Ted Cruz (R-Texas), who announced that because he was exposed to the coronavirus at a recent right-wing conference, he will be self-quarantining for 14 days. He has been praised for taking these precautions, but it bears mentioning that Cruz and his wife, Heidi, a longtime Goldman Sachs executive, have assets worth an estimated \$2 million to \$5 million, access to a gold-plated congressional health-care plan — and the option to work from home. Cruz, a 1 percenter with taxpayer-funded health insurance, has the luxury of choice, something that the vast majority of people in the U.S. will never experience. He and Musk and their families may not be in the same tax bracket, but as wealthy white people, they can breathe easy, secure in the knowledge that they can buy their way out of any potential problem.

Must be nice, right? Unfortunately for the overwhelming majority of people in the U.S., this reality is utterly out of reach. And there is a notable disparity between those who can afford to stockpile supplies (even in the case of rampant price-gouging) and those who struggle to afford the basics at the best of times. Location matters too: If supply chains are disrupted, people in rural or isolated communities will have an even harder time getting what they need or getting to the hospital if they fall ill, and those who lack internet access (like nearly one-third of rural households do) will have more difficulty participating in remote work or keeping track of a rapidly developing news situation.

Those with white-collar jobs may be able to stay home with zero consequences — and many are actively being encouraged by their employers to do so, but for many U.S. workers, this is simply not an option. Retail workers, hospitality workers, transit workers, fast food workers, delivery workers, home health-care workers, and drivers are only some of the public-facing professionals who are

at risk during an epidemic, yet they also have the hardest time taking time off work thanks to the precarity of their hourly wage and lack of benefits, such as paid sick leave. Labor unions like SEIU, AFSCME, AFT, and UNITE HERE have been pressuring for the federal government to take decisive action to protect workers, while worker-led organizations like Gig Workers Rising have been calling upon employers to lessen the financial burdens faced by gig workers deciding between going to work sick or losing income by staying home.

People experiencing housing instability are at increased risk of infection due to a number of factors. A lack of access to running water and soap plus crowded camp environments in many houseless communities has officials on the West Coast — where the outbreak has hit hardest — fearing the worst. For incarcerated people, the situation is even more dire. In many instances, they are packed into overcrowded environments, lack access to basic hygiene products or decent health care, and are denied the autonomy to take steps to avoid infection. In New York City, prisoners at the city's notorious Rikers Island jail complex are being tasked with manufacturing hand sanitizer — and if the epidemic reaches critical proportions, they will even be forced to dig graves for its victims.

The number of uninsured people is rising, and those who have coverage are still at the mercy of a predatory health insurance system and a government that isn't doing nearly enough to help them. Universal health care remains, incredibly, a controversial proposition. In places where coronavirus testing is available or even free, the costs associated with the test can be prohibitive. The Trump administration's response to the coronavirus outbreak has been wildly incompetent even by today's standards, and people will continue to die because of its cruel games. The rich may not care, but we do — and it's up to us to take care of one another and our communities, in sickness and in health, because we know for damn sure that the wealthy elite won't.