

Social class and the social impact of COVID-19

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Abstract

The economic, social and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are unequally distributed over different categories of the population. This article examines how the adverse economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are concentrated in specific vulnerable occupational classes in the Dutch labour market. We use the occupational class schema from Oesch (2006), that systematically distinguishes employed and self-employed workers, to examine the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. This approach fits well for the Dutch labour market with a high level of flexibilization. Just under two-thirds of all Dutch workers have permanent contracts; just over a third have some form of flexible work. We find that new vulnerable social categories experience most economic insecurity due to the pandemic: self-employed workers, not only low-skilled workers but also self-employed high-skilled professionals, and low positioned service workers, many of them working in temporary and/or flexible jobs. High-position employed workers experience the least economic insecurity in times of corona. More traditional vulnerable categories (production workers, office clerks, etc.) have a middle position. They experience more economic insecurity than their high positioned colleagues and bosses, but less than new vulnerable categories. Furthermore we find that economic insecurity goes hand in hand with less institutional trust and more political discontent. Only low-positioned production workers with relatively less economic insecurity, display rather high levels of distrust and discontent.

Introduction

The economic, social and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are unevenly distributed across different categories of the population. Research in various countries shows that people from lower-income classes are more affected by the virus and the COVID-19-induced restrictions (Baker et al., 2020; Hawkins et al., 2020; Holst et al., 2021). Research from Statistics Netherlands, for instance, shows that the death rate due to COVID-19 in the Netherlands during the first months of the virus outbreak was twice as high among the lowest-income group than among the highest-income group (De Visser et al., 2021). Lower-class individuals are more likely to have well-known risk factors (obesity, diabetes, etc.) that also play a role in COVID-19 infections, are more likely to have jobs involving higher risks of infection – e.g. construction, cleaning, personal services – and fewer options for working from home, and more often live in smaller houses in densely populated neighbourhoods, which may promote the spread of the virus (Baker et al., 2020; Cockerham, 2021; Patel et al., 2020).

The social divisions in preparedness to receive the corona vaccine will increase these socio-economic differences in the health consequences of COVID-19 (Engbersen et al., 2021).

COVID-19 has huge economic consequences for people, especially for flexible and self-employed workers. This concerns both 'traditional' vulnerable groups in the Dutch labour market (low-skilled workers) and 'new' vulnerable groups such as young and self-employed workers (including successful, high-skilled professionals). This typifies the highly flexible Dutch labour market (OECD 2019). Young workers often have flexible work contracts and are the first to be dismissed in times of crisis. Self-employed workers do not benefit from the certainty provided by permanent work contracts and lack social security in the event of job loss. Flexible workers who lose their jobs often become dependent on social assistance that is means-tested and aimed at the poorest households, which do not qualify for any other benefits. The self-employed are not insured against unemployment and – if they do not have other financial resources or a partner with sufficient income – must also fall back on means-tested social assistance.

The economic insecurity caused by the COVID-19-induced restrictions has contributed to declining trust in the national and local governments and crucial Dutch public health institutions (RIVM and GGD). The share of respondents who trusted the Dutch government plummeted from the high level of 69 per cent in April 2020 to only 49 per cent in March 2021. In addition, public discontent with the corona policies of the Dutch government increased. In March 2021, 40 per cent of our respondents agreed with the statement "the current corona measures cause more harm than they prevent" (XXX, 2021: 20, 31).

This article examines how the adverse economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are concentrated in specific vulnerable occupational classes in the Dutch labour market. The Dutch labour market is characterised by a chasm between people with stable jobs and a high degree of income security and people with insecure flexible jobs and little income security. However, the metaphor of the chasm is too imprecise to provide systemic insight into the economic consequences of COVID-19 for different occupational classes. To provide a more precise answer to the question as to which occupational classes have been particularly affected by COVID-19, we will use the occupational class scheme from Oesch (2006). As explained later on in this article, Oesch's class scheme provides an adequate measuring instrument for the analysis of the economic insecurities of traditional and new vulnerable occupational classes on contemporary labour markets. Holst et al., 2021 also used Oesch's class scheme to describe inequalities in work related health and economic risks of the corona pandemic.

In addition, our analyses include institutional trust and discontent with corona policies. Governments are enacting drastic social and economic measures to control and combat the corona pandemic, with severe consequences for certain occupational classes. Despite the economic support

measures implemented by the Dutch government, many people will have to look for other jobs. Flexible and self-employed workers are especially vulnerable, many small businesses fear bankruptcy. We expect that the most vulnerable socio-economic groups will have less institutional trust and be more dissatisfied with the Dutch corona policies than less vulnerable groups.

For our analyses, we used data from the third wave of our “social impact of COVID-19” panel study, which was conducted in the Netherlands in November 2020. Our sample contains information about more than 12,000 working respondents (N= 12,196).

Theoretical framework: occupational approaches to social class

Oesch developed his class scheme in discussion with the still-dominant sociological approach to social classes of Erikson and Goldthorpe (1993). Oesch’s main objection against their approach is that they position various professional classes and skilled and unskilled manual workers at the far ends of the occupational hierarchy and both self-employed and service workers somewhere in-between. This representation does not match contemporary post-industrial labour markets. Oesch (2006: 27-58) discusses three trends in contemporary labour markets which, in his view, make the Erikson/Goldthorpe-approach obsolete. For the Netherlands, we add a fourth dimension: the dominant flexibilization trend.

The first trend is the increased female labour market participation. Whereas Erikson and Goldthorpe (1993: 233; cited Oesch 2006: 41) still consider the male’s occupation as determining a household’s social position, Oesch (and many other contemporary class researchers) opts for an individual approach. This has consequences for the class distribution, because female workers are overrepresented in low-skilled, often flexible service work.

The second trend is the substantial increase in service work in advanced post-industrial economies. Whereas traditional class analyses (from Marx to Erikson & Goldthorpe) position these service workers in the middle of the class hierarchy, Oesch acknowledges the increasing differences between service workers: high-skilled professionals versus cashiers, delivery drivers, “McJob” workers; in short what Esping-Anderson (1993) called the “service proletariat”.

The third trend relates to the increased educational levels in advanced economies. However, as not all workers are high-skilled, there is a growing polarisation between high- and low-skilled workers; particularly, again, in the service industries (cf. Sassen, 2000; Goos, Manning & Salomons 2009).

Finally, particularly in the Netherlands, there is the dominant trend of labour market flexibilization in both high- and low-skilled positions: self-employed professionals (managers, IT specialists, knowledge workers) who deliberately opt for self-employment versus underpaid self-employed workers, who are paid per piece or per hour, without stable incomes. The Netherlands is

one of the leading countries in Europe in the use of temporary contracts. Furthermore, the proportion of self-employed workers – officially classified as “self-employed persons without staff” – in the Netherlands is among the highest, twice that of Germany (WRR 2020: 25; Kremer, Went, Engbersen 2021). The number of flexible workers in the Netherlands increased from 1 million 15 years ago to 2 million in 2018.¹ An additional 1.1 million people were self-employed. Together, these categories comprise 36 per cent of the active workforce in 2018 (WRR 2020:26).

Oesch’s occupational class scheme seeks to describe these new inequalities in contemporary labour markets by systematically distinguishing between a) the self-employed (including employers) and employed workers with three different “work logics” (technical, organisational, and interpersonal service) and b) higher and lower positions within each of these four labour market segments. This results in the following scheme of eight occupational classes (in italics common examples of each occupational class).

Figure 1. Oesch’s occupational class schema (eight classes) based on four different work logics

	<i>Self-employed</i>	<i>Employed</i>		
<i>Work logic/ Status</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Technical</i>	<i>Organisational</i>	<i>Interpersonal service</i>
<i>High status positions</i>	Employers/Self-employed (high) <i>Management and organization analysts, managing directors</i>	Technical(semi-) professionals <i>Systems analysts, software developers</i>	(Associate) managers <i>Government officials, management and organization analysts</i>	Socio-cultural (semi-) professionals <i>School teachers, social work professionals</i>
<i>Low status positions</i>	Employers/Self-employed (low) <i>Production clerks, Sales assistants</i>	Production workers <i>Elementary workers, truck drivers</i>	Clerks <i>Office clerks, production clerks</i>	Service workers <i>Shop assistants, teachers aides</i>

Source: after Oesch, 2006: 68

Oesch’s class scheme gives us an adequate instrument to identify more- or less-vulnerable occupational categories within the advanced European labour markets. The new vulnerable

¹ Comprising 985,000 workers with temporary contracts, 556,000 on-call and casual workers, 308,000 agency workers and 149,000 zero-hour contracts (WRR 2020: 26).

categories include, to begin with, self-employed workers – low-status self-employed workers in particular, but to a lesser extent high-status self-employed workers as well. Also (small) employers are at risk of bankruptcy in times of crisis. Another new vulnerable category is low-status service workers, a group that includes many females and young workers. Many of these workers have flexible work contracts (temporary, flexible working hours) and are likely to lose their employment in times of crisis, especially those working in the economic sectors that have suffered during the corona pandemic (catering, cultural industries, personal services, tourism, transport).

In addition to these new vulnerable categories, there are the traditional vulnerable categories, specifically low-status production workers. These low-status production workers – as well as low-status clerks – more often have permanent work contracts, and are therefore less vulnerable than low-status service workers and self-employed workers. However, they more often have to deal with unsafe working conditions – with a high risk of infection – and are often unable to work from home. This category may experience less economic uncertainty, but is very critical of the government's corona policy. The least vulnerable categories (the “winners” of the contemporary labour markets) are high-status technical, organisational and interpersonal service workers: technical (semi-) professionals, (associate) managers, and socio-cultural (semi-) professionals.

In this paper, we analyse the relationship between occupational classes and economic uncertainty during the corona pandemic. In addition, we analyse the consequences for public trust in the government and dissatisfaction with corona policy. In our empirical analysis, we focus on three adverse social and economic consequences of the current pandemic: economic insecurity, institutional trust and discontent with the corona policies of the Dutch government. We expect that the most vulnerable occupational classes experience more economic insecurity (hypothesis 1), have less institutional trust (hypothesis 2) and are more discontented with the governmental corona policies (hypothesis 3) than the more stable and secure occupational categories.

Data and methods

Data, sample and weighting

In this study, we used data from a large-scale online panel survey on the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands conducted by a Dutch election research institute named Kieskompas. To date, four survey waves have been conducted in April, July and November 2020 and March 2021 (XXX, 2020; 2021). For the analyses in this article, we only used data from the third survey, collected in November 2020.

For the data collection, Kieskompas used their national panel, which is a stratified random sample of the Dutch voting-age population (18+). The questionnaire was distributed among 48,329 panel members. Additionally, several cities participating in the research (Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam) implemented additional activities to include more underrepresented groups (low-educated, migration backgrounds). They disseminated an anonymous participation link for the survey in a targeted manner or fielded the questionnaire in their own city panels. Between 28 October and 13 November 2020, 19,577 Kieskompas panel members had returned the questionnaire (40.5 per cent response rate), while 3,487 respondents took the survey through the Amsterdam local panel and 2,121 completed the questionnaire via the anonymous participation links.

In order to make the results generalisable for the Dutch voting population, Kieskompas applied a weighting to the survey results. The results were weighted for gender, age category, region (Nielsen), level of education, migration background, and voting behaviour, in order to make the data representative with respect to these variables (within the categories used). This was done using iterative proportional fitting and a post-stratification method based on different population characteristics. Questionnaires with insufficient information about these characteristics were excluded from the sample. Ultimately, this resulted in a sample of 22,696 respondents. However, in our analysis, we included only working respondents for whom adequate information about their occupation was available (N= 12.196)

Measurements

This study contains three dependent variables. The first is *economic insecurity*. In the survey, respondents were asked whether they feared losing their employment (only employed participants), being unable to find a job (unemployed participants), or that their own business would go bankrupt (self-employed participants). All respondents were also asked whether they feared losing the majority of their income. Both items were rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all afraid*) to 4 (*the described event happened*) and were averaged as the indicator “economic insecurity”.

The second dependent variable is *institutional trust*. Respondents were asked how much they trust national and local authorities and major national and regional Dutch public health institutions (Dutch acronyms: RIVM and GGD). Respondents could indicate whether they had (very) much or (very) little trust in these four institutions (1-5). We take the mean score on these four items as a measure for institutional trust (Cronbach’s Alpha .88).

The third dependent variable is *discontent with corona policies*. Respondents were asked for their opinion about the corona measures implemented by the Dutch government. They could indicate whether they (very) agree or (very) disagree (1 – 5) with statements, such as “The Dutch government and media exaggerate the danger of corona” and “The measures cause more damage

than they prevent". The mean score of these items are taken as a measure for discontent with corona policies (Cronbach's Alpha .83). For the sake of certainty, we checked whether the items of the last two variables are not too much interrelated. The trust items and discontent items clustered independently in a PCA with varimax rotation and appeared to be independent constructs.

The central independent variable in our analyses is occupational class in terms of Oesch's (2006) class scheme. Respondents were asked to indicate their work situation (employed, self-employed with or without employees, unemployed) and their occupation (open question). The occupations were first recoded into the 4-digit ISCO-08 occupational classification, and subsequently into the eight occupational classes distinguished by Oesch (2006).² Only employed or self-employed respondents with known occupations were included in the analysis. This enabled us to distinguish high- and low-classified self-employed workers.

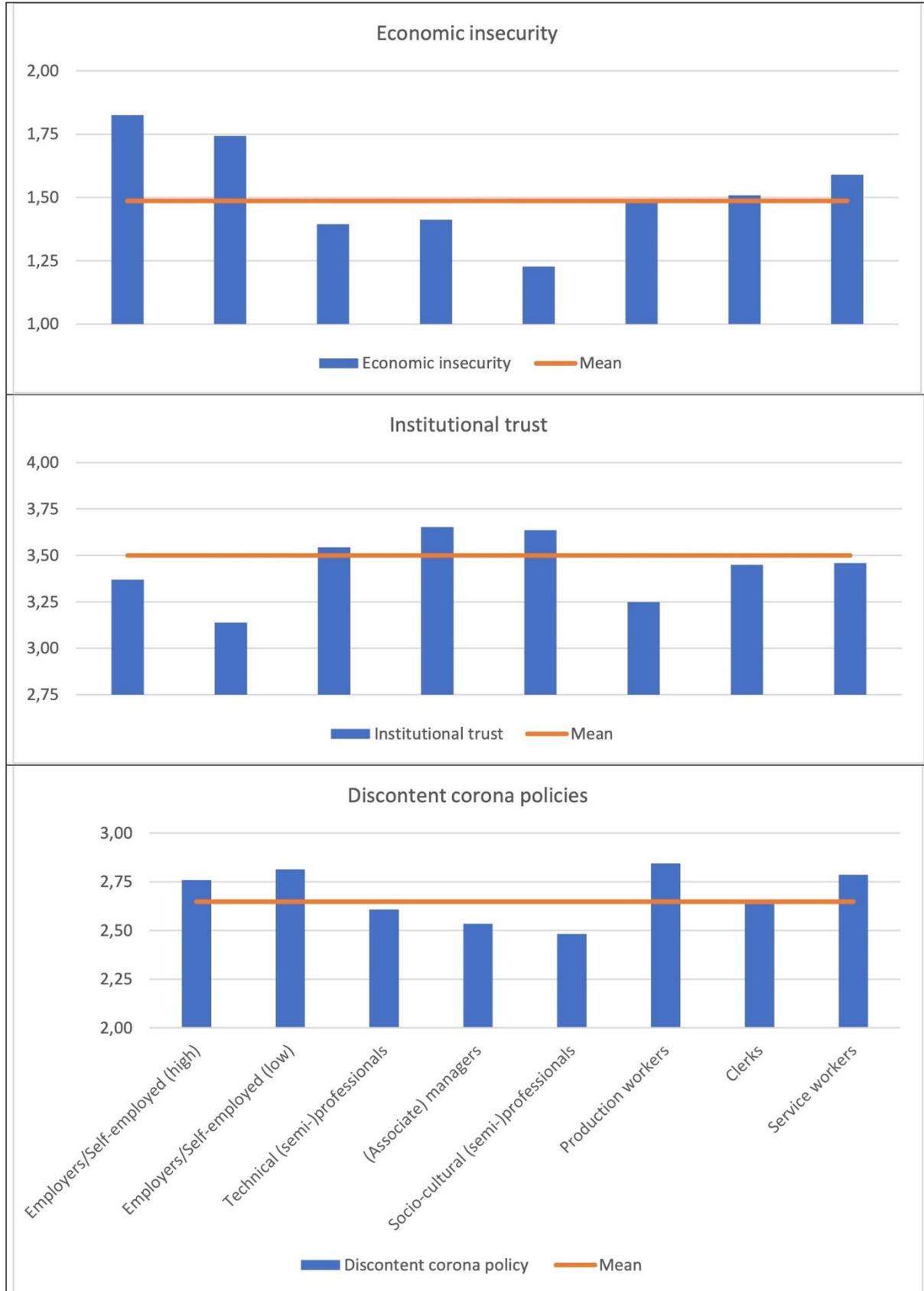
Finally, we controlled all outcomes for differences in the gender and age categories. Table 1 shows the descriptives of all variables used in our analyses.

Results: occupational class and the social impact of COVID-19

Figure 2 shows the mean scores (bivariate) of the eight occupational classes distinguished by Oesch (2006) on the three dependent variables in the analyses. Table 2 (Appendix) shows the results of our regression models. Our description of the results is based on the latter.

² For the latter, we used Oesch's own recoding scheme (see: https://people.unil.ch/danieloesch/scripts/Final_proposition_passage_ISCO08_Oesch_10_06_2014).

Figure 2: Mean scores for social impact of COVID-19 by occupational class (Oesch-8) (weighted)



At the top of Figure 2 is the experience of economic insecurity due to the pandemic, i.e. whether respondents fear or have already experienced loss of work and/or income. Figure 2 shows that both high- and low-status employers and self-employed workers, as well as service workers, experience more economic insecurity than average.

Table 2 (Model 1, Appendix) provides more detailed information. Whereas most other classes experience more economic insecurity than the technical semi-professionals (reference group), the betas of service workers and the self-employed, both low- and high-status (especially the latter), are considerably higher than those of production workers and clerks. This clearly shows that workers without permanent employment (or with flexible jobs) experience more economic insecurity due to the pandemic than both high- and low-status workers with mostly permanent positions. Of the latter, socio-cultural semi-professionals seem to be least affected by the economic insecurity caused by the pandemic. Model 1 also shows that women do not experience more or less economic insecurity than men and that the youngest age category (18-34) experiences more economic insecurity due to the pandemic than all older age groups.

The second part of Figure 2 shows class differences in institutional trust. As explained, we expected that workers in more vulnerable occupational classes would show less institutional trust. The outcomes largely confirm this expectation. Whereas associate managers display even more institutional trust than technical semi-professionals (= reference), most lower classes have less institutional trust. There are two exceptions to this pattern: clerks score only marginally lower on institutional trust than technical semi-professionals (= reference), and high-status self-employed workers have significantly less institutional trust than the other high-status classes. Despite the economic support programs for the self-employed implemented by the Dutch government, their trust in the government and in major Dutch health institutions is relatively low. One reason for this may be that they disagree with the criteria for support packages, such as the inclusion of the income of applicants' partners (partner test), the potential requirement to repay financial advances, and the fact that not all self-employed workers were eligible for state aid. Model 2 furthermore shows no gender differences in institutional trust, whereas the youngest age group again differs from all older age categories by displaying significantly more institutional trust. This is remarkable: although the youngest age group experiences the highest level of economic insecurity due to the pandemic, their trust in the authorities remains relatively high.

The third part of Figure 2 shows the differences in discontent with the corona policies of the Dutch government. Again, we expected to find more discontent among the more vulnerable occupational classes. The results in Figure 2 and Table 2 (Model 3, in the Appendix) generally confirm this expectation, subject to the same exceptions as discussed above. Production workers in particular are more dissatisfied with the corona policies. It is possible that unsafe and bad working conditions

are responsible for this. Clerks also display significantly more discontent with the government's policies than the higher-status groups, but less than the other low-status occupational classes. High-status employers and self-employed workers again stand out by displaying significantly more discontent with the governmental corona policies than technical semi-professionals (= reference) and other high-status occupational groups.

Concluding discussion

COVID-19 is not the great equalizer it was believed to be at the beginning of the corona pandemic. Presidents and prime ministers may contract the virus, but the health impact of COVID-19 has been much more severe for the poor and workers in precarious jobs than for other categories. The same is true of the economic consequences of the pandemic. This paper shows that specific vulnerable occupational classes were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19-induced restrictions. We used Oesch's (2006) occupational class scheme to outline these occupational classes and the extent to which they have experienced adverse economic and social consequences of the pandemic. The obvious limitation of this approach is that we only included working respondents in our analysis, excluding non-working housekeepers, the unemployed and pensioners.

We found that the occupational categories we assumed to be the most vulnerable did indeed experience the highest levels of economic insecurity: low-positioned service workers, often working in temporary and/or flexible employment, and especially self-employed workers, both low- and high-skilled. The pandemic has made clear that self-employed workers are a new vulnerable category in times of economic crisis. High-positioned employed workers (technical, organisational and socio-cultural), on the other hand, experience by far the least economic insecurity. More traditional vulnerable categories (low-positioned elementary or production workers, office clerks, etc.) hold a middle position between these extremes. They experience more economic insecurity than their high-positioned colleagues and bosses, but less than the new vulnerable categories. With regard to institutional trust and discontent with the Dutch corona policies, we found that – as expected – economic insecurity generally goes hand in hand with less trust and more discontent. The exception are low-positioned production workers. With relatively less economic insecurity, they display higher levels of institutional distrust and political discontent.

Comparing our results with the labour markets trends that motivated Oesch to develop his new class scheme, it is clear that the corona crisis reinforces these trends. A major trend identified by Oesch was the increase in service work. The occupational categories which suffer most due to the pandemic are low-positioned service workers and the self-employed, both low- and high-positioned.

The more traditional vulnerable categories of low-positioned production workers and clerks are less severely affected by the pandemic.

Another trend is the increased polarisation between high- and low-skilled workers. Our results make very clear that high-positioned (and mostly high-skilled) professionals suffer the least from the pandemic – that is to say, those that are employed. Self-employed workers (and employers) experience the highest level of economic insecurity due to the pandemic and display the highest institutional distrust and political discontent. This shows the gravity of the dominant trend of labour market flexibilization in the Netherlands. This article shows that the economic burden of the corona pandemic is disproportionately affecting both high- and low-positioned self-employed workers, as well as low-positioned service workers, many of whom work in temporary and/or flexible employment.

In our analysis, we found few gender differences – another trend described by Oesch. However, we should not forget that women are overrepresented in vulnerable occupations. After taking this into account, gender as such did not add anything further to our analysis. Age, on the other hand, is very significant. Our analysis clearly shows that the economic burden of the pandemic weighs heavily on the youngest age category, many of whom work in flexible and/or temporary employment or are self-employed.

In conclusion, we can say that the corona crisis has made the existing problems caused by the far-reaching flexibilization of the Dutch labour market more visible. The economic consequences of the pandemic are mainly absorbed by temporary and self-employed workers. Its economic impact and the limited financial support provided to self-employed workers by the Dutch government have revealed vulnerabilities in the Dutch labour market, showing the need to rethink the current social security systems and reform labour regulations to create stable employment for flexible workers and greater social security for the self-employed.

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Table 1. Descriptive outcomes (weighted data)

	Mean / per cent	Min.	Max.	N
Independent variables				
Occupational class				
Employers/Self-employed (high)	10,7%			1303
Employers/Self-employed (low)	4,4%			536
Technical (semi-)professionals	11,9%			1450
(Associate) managers	24,1%			2936
Socio-cultural (semi-) professionals	14,6%			1779
Production workers	8,3%			1012
Clerks	10,6%			1293
Service workers	15,5%			1887
Gender				
Male	52,8%			6444
Female	47,2%			5754
Age category				
18-35	31,2%			3800
35-49	33,9%			4134
50--64	31,1%			3795
65+	3,8%			468
Dependent variables				
Economic precarity	1,49	1	4	12196
Institutional trust	3,50	1	5	12123
Discontent Corona policies	2,65	1	5	11950
Total (N)				12,196

Table 2 Social impact by occupational class, gender and age category (linear regression, unweighted data)

	Model 1 economic insecurity			Model 2 Institutional trust			Model 3 Discontent policies		
	Beta	Sig	SE	Beta	Sig	SE	Beta	Sig	SE
Constant		**	0,020			0,029			
Occupational class (ref= tech. prof.)		*			***				0,034
(Associate) managers	0,005		0,020	0,056	***	0,028	0,001		0,033
Socio-cultural (semi-professionals)	-0,072	**	0,022	0,026		0,031	-0,008		0,037
Production workers	0,041	**	0,032	-0,067		0,046	0,065		0,054
Clerks	0,048	**	0,026	-0,027	***	0,038	0,031	***	0,044
Service workers	0,097	**	0,025	-0,052	*	0,035	0,068	**	0,041
Employers/Self-employed (high)	0,277	**	0,022	-0,047	***	0,031	0,065	***	0,037
Employers/Self-employed (low)	0,157	**	0,034	-0,058	***	0,048	0,067	***	0,056
Gender (ref= male)									
Female	0,013		0,012	0,000		0,017	-0,059	***	0,020
Age (ref= 18-34)									
35-49	-0,044	**	0,017	-0,040	**	0,024	-0,015		0,028
50-64	-0,069	**	0,016	-0,055	***	0,022	-0,099	***	0,026
65+	-0,119	**	0,025		**	0,036	-0,105	***	0,042
Adj. R 2	0,100			0,021			0,025		