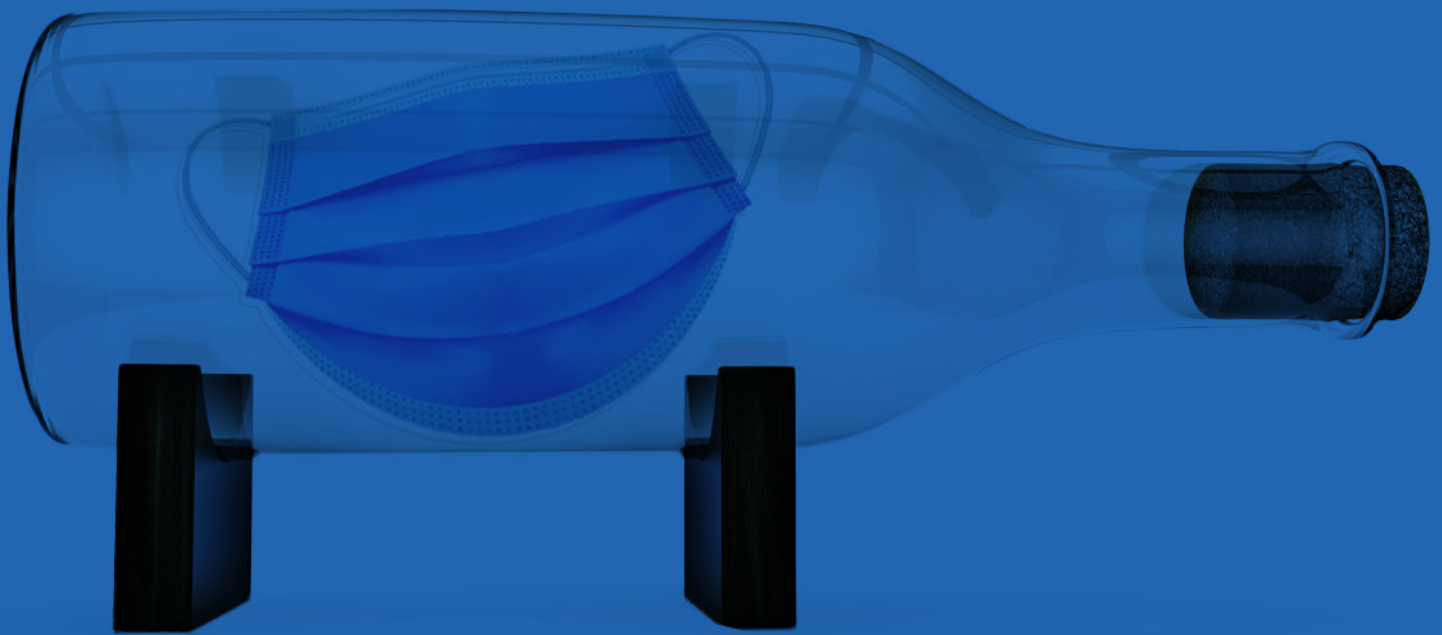


OCTOBER 2020

# ADRIFT:

## COVID-19 and the Safety of Seafarers

Joshua Tallis, Cornell Overfield, Kevin Inks and Cherie Rosenblum



# CNA

[www.cna.org/strategy](http://www.cna.org/strategy)

## **Distribution**

### **Approved for public release: distribution unlimited.**

This document represents a collaboration between an advisory group of retired flag officers and CNA analysts. CNA convenes such groups to combine the vast operational, tactical, and strategic experiences of senior officials with the analytic capabilities of our research staff. Past collaborations include those on national security and the threat of climate change, energy security and US defense policy, and water stress as a source of global stability.

**Approved by:**

**October 2020**

*Nilanthi Samaranyake*

Nilanthi Samaranyake  
Research Program Director  
Strategy and Policy Analysis

Request additional copies of this document through [inquiries@cna.org](mailto:inquiries@cna.org).

Cover image credit: Image created by Sue Mercer (CNA).

Copyright © 2020 CNA. All rights reserved.



23 October 2020

Seafarers are an integral, if often overlooked, workforce, people who are essential both to individual communities and to the global economy. From navies and coast guards, to commercial industries such as fishing, shipping, and tourism, a healthy and valued workforce at sea is central to global stability. The COVID-19 pandemic and its unintended side effects across the blue economy have disproportionately hit seafarers, from those lacking ready access to medical care at sea, to those suffering economic damages while stranded ashore. Port state obstacles to crew rotations, isolation due to COVID-19 social distancing guidelines, restricted shore leave, extended contracts, and erratic port state guidance directly endanger mariners' livelihoods and their mental health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored how readily these frontline workers can slip out of view. Mariners face immediate health risks from COVID-19 exposure, risks similar to those faced by nurses, delivery drivers, and grocery store clerks, but often serve without the dignity and resources that can come with being formally deemed essential. Yet efforts to safeguard mariners from COVID-19 differ depending on industry, in many cases with cost and risk falling squarely on the mariners themselves.

What emerges from this network of interlocking risks is the need for robust action across every stakeholder group—including the public—to safeguard seafarers and society while promoting dignity and stability for a critical workforce. This policy paper, reflecting ongoing work by CNA to understand these risks to mariners, is meant to contribute to a global conversation on the risks mariners face and some of the steps necessary to protect and sustain these vulnerable workers and the societies that rely upon them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Burke'.

VADM William Burke, USN (Ret.)

Board of Trustees, CNA

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lee Gunn'.

VADM Lee Gunn, USN (Ret.)

Vice Chairman, CNA Military Advisory Board

Page intentionally left blank

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

KEY THEMES OF THE CURRENT MARINER CRISIS .....	2
FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ..	3
Direct Health Risks to Mariners .....	3
Other Direct Risks to Mariners .....	4
Reverberating Effects of COVID-19 .....	5
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	6
ABOUT CNA .....	7

**Seafarers—the essential workers of the global trading system—are facing significant risks.** The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred a crew change crisis, in which employers have enacted strict leave policies and longer contracts, and port states have refused to allow mariners to disembark. As a result, more than 400,000 seafarers remain stuck on their ships.<sup>1</sup> Since March, seafarers and advocates have raised alarms about the mental and physical burden of these long watches. But as the pandemic approaches its first anniversary, the mounting toll on mariners is stretching beyond personal exhaustion and deeper into society and the entire blue economy. This policy paper, based on ongoing CNA analysis, surveys the direct and indirect effects of COVID-19 on seafarers, examines the follow-on effects on society, and recommends global solutions to protect maritime workers.

## KEY THEMES OF THE CURRENT MARINER CRISIS

**Seafarers face immediate health risks.** Across maritime sectors, an infection onboard can race through tightly packed crews who have limited ready access to medical care. For example, nearly 1,000 sailors tested positive for COVID-19 aboard the US Navy aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt* in March.

**Society faces health risks from maritime outbreaks.** COVID-19's immediate health risks can reach even the most remote locations by sea. Isolated communities serviced by long-haul ferries or government vessels (such as icebreakers in Canada's remote Arctic) depend on the blue economy for sustenance but may lack easy access to care facilities if the infection arrives.

**Not all industries can mitigate COVID-19 risks equally.** Navies and offshore energy sectors can maintain strict control over personnel movements and test frequently in order to sustain operations. However, mariners in more fractured industries such as commercial fishing work amid a patchwork of enforcement regimes. States or employers may have lax health standards or simply lack the oversight to implement safer work conditions for these industries.

**Mitigation measures against COVID-19 have mental health consequences for mariners.** Across maritime sectors, mariners face new mental health challenges because of pandemic precautions. Seafarers are often

isolated from the societies they support because of employers enforcing strict leave policies and extended contracts, or port states refusing crew changes. Early in the pandemic, crewmember calls to mental health helplines tripled compared to the year before.<sup>2</sup> Some mariners have gone on strike, and in extreme cases, some have taken their lives.

**An extended blue economy crisis would have wide social consequences.** The global system that the blue economy undergirds is straining. A collapse in the cruise industry would cut deeply in tourist-dependent coastal economies. A prolonged crew change crisis would deprive seafarer-producing societies of needed income. In every industry, the normalization of extended contracts and limited crew amenities could diminish interest in mariner careers, affecting the long-term training pipeline.

**Sustainable response requires a whole-of-society effort.** Industry, mariners, and local and national governments must cooperate to control both viral contagion and social upheaval in the blue economy. In 2021, they must implement thoughtful and compassionate policies to maintain trade flows and naval operations while sustaining seafarers and the communities they shape.

<sup>1</sup> CNA explored some of these themes at an August event, found at <https://vimeo.com/449398284>.

<sup>2</sup> Nidaa Bakhsh, "Crew Calls to Helplines Jump amid Health Crisis," *Lloyd's List Maritime Intelligence*, Aug. 18, 2020, <https://lloydslist.maritimeintelligence.informa.com/LL1133534/Crew-calls-to-helplines-jump-amid-health-crisis>.

## FINDINGS

Our study looked at ways industries and governments have **mitigated the spread of COVID-19** through the blue economy, while at the same time **jeopardizing the material and emotional wellbeing of seafarers**. In this new normal, governments, activists, and industry must cooperate to protect the men and women who labor at sea from economic and emotional harm, in addition to disease.

### DIRECT HEALTH RISKS TO MARINERS

**Mariners across the commercial fishing, transportation, and tourism sectors face elevated risks of COVID-19 exposure.** Confined spaces, interaction with non-crew members, and interpersonal contact in port put seafarers in these industries at particular risk of COVID-19 exposure.

**The size and diversity of the global commercial fishing industry makes industry-wide COVID-19 protocols difficult to enforce.** Fishing vessels combine dense inhabitation, close quarters, and limited medical care, which means the virus can quickly spread among crew. In one instance, 92 seafarers—nearly three-quarters of the crew—aboard a two-level processing trawler tested positive for COVID-19 after returning home.

**Consolidation in offshore energy eases mitigation implementation.** Despite crews operating on small platforms and in close quarters, the offshore energy industry has held COVID-19 at bay with strict screening before rotation. Wealthy, high-capacity energy actors in locales such as the United Kingdom, Alaska's North Slope, and Brazil have minimized cases. Failure to enforce policies introduces risk, however. In June, Nigeria had to evacuate the offshore Bonga oil field because of a COVID-19 outbreak.

**Military and government vessels can keep sailors safe, though with mental health effects.** Navies, particularly large ones like the US Navy, have maintained operations by screening crew and limiting contact with non-crew. Government research vessel operations, meanwhile, have significantly curtailed operations. Overall, governments have demonstrated the benefits of consolidation and control over crew behavior, but with potentially deleterious consequences for mental health and sailor retention due to long isolated deployments.

**The cruise industry faces a unique challenge.** In the early months of the pandemic, media reports highlighted outbreaks onboard cruise ships and their potential to spread the virus to US shores. Cruises stopped in response and made efforts to protect crews while attempting global repatriation efforts of more than 90,000 personnel by air and sea. Yet by mid-May 2020, more than 100,000 cruise line employees were still at sea as companies faced a global patchwork of restrictions limiting crews' freedom of movement.<sup>3</sup> In the effort to repatriate workers, some crewmembers reported missed paychecks, at least two committed suicide, and several staged hunger protests to demand faster return home.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Taylor Dolven, "100,000 Cruise Ship Crew Members Remain Trapped at Sea," *Tampa Bay Times*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.tampabay.com/news/health/2020/05/18/100000-cruise-ship-crew-members-remain-trapped-at-sea/>.

<sup>4</sup> "4 Workers Die in 10 Days on Cruise Ships with Stranded Crews," CBS News, May 12, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cruise-ships-workers-die-unclear-circumstances-stranded-crews/>.

## CONTAGION IN THE NORWEGIAN FJORDS



In June 2020, the company **Hurtigruten** restarted its cruise and ferry service along the **Norwegian coast** and then extended its route to the remote Arctic archipelago of Svalbard. The fleet, crewed with mariners from around the world, served a mix of international tourists and local commuters.

In late July, news broke of a COVID-19 outbreak aboard the line's *MS Roald Amundsen* in Tromsø. By mid-August, 71 crew and passengers had tested positive. Isolated Norwegian villages worried that a delayed response and continued ferry operations would spread COVID-19 to them.

Both official and internal investigations found **lax testing, health, and notification programs** onboard. The week of July 20, Norway averaged 14 new cases per day. Hurtigruten cases thus marked a significant share of national infections. It is unclear whether passengers spread the disease ashore, but the drama marked the beginning of Norway's moderate second wave.

**Medical care for commercial seafarers diagnosed with COVID-19 is limited.** Most commercial fishing and shipping vessels lack robust healthcare capacity. Furthermore, while operating far from shore or in remote areas, seafarers might struggle to receive care for severe cases. Even when portside, mariners report great difficulty in seeing doctors, whether for emergencies, checkups, or the discharge process.

**Protecting mariners from COVID-19 can negatively affect their physical and mental health.** Across sectors, company and country policies have limited (but not prevented) infection by all-but ending contact between ship and shore, including shore leave. Multiple US Navy ships have spent more than 200 continuous days at sea since March, breaking prior at-sea records at least twice. In more consolidated industries, such as cruise lines and offshore energy, pretrip quarantining and transportation for medical care may be easier to ensure. Yet mariners in shipping still struggle to disembark at the end of their regular contracts, and many have signed extensions. Some have been at sea for more than 12 months or denied back pay and overtime pay. Staffing levels are dropping to or below the legal limits. Some crews have

refused to sail because of these conditions, while others have suffered self-harm. Beyond the human tragedy, this simmering situation is ripe for costly, deadly mistakes.

## OTHER DIRECT RISKS TO MARINERS

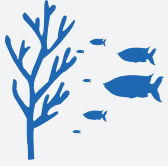
**The continuing crew change crisis results from disparate national policies.** To execute changes, manning companies and individual sailors must navigate a globally uncoordinated set of rules and requirements. Facing complexities and costs, manning companies still frequently fail to fulfil their legal obligation to repatriate mariners. The Maritime Labor Convention (MLC) prohibits continuous service by a seafarer for longer than 12 months. As of June 2020, 30 percent of mariners at sea had completed a contract, and 5 percent had been at sea for longer than 12 months.<sup>5</sup>

**Seafarers bear significant physical and economic costs of outbreaks and mitigations, but the economic consequences are spreading.** Although the MLC provides rules on pay and repatriation, reports have unearthed attempts to deprive mariners stuck at sea of their rights during the crisis. Ships, owners, operators, manning companies, and crews often hail from different

<sup>5</sup> As of October, those percentages are unclear.



## CREW CHANGE CRISIS AND AN OIL SPILL IN MAURITIUS



On July 25, *Wakashio*, a Panama-flagged, Japanese-owned bulk carrier, deviated from its usual trade route and ran aground off Mauritius. One thousand tons of bunker fuel spilled, marring Mauritian coastal beauty and damaging the fragile ecosystem that fueled a tourism industry and fed local fishers.

Reporting found that the ship's crew counted only 20, rather than the 24 mandated for its class and age. Three of the crew were on extended contracts—two had been aboard more than a year.

The specifics of the incident remain under investigation, but *Wakashio* shows the broader social effect of the crew change crisis. **Overwork can lead to exhaustion and exhaustion to mistakes.**

states with different laws. The result is often a complex legal web that enables abuse and discourages workers from organizing or challenging illegal behavior. Mariners stuck on shore are often losing wages because of lost work. Manning companies in major maritime states such as the Philippines warn that they face bankruptcy over higher costs without government aid.

**Labor violations (of international mariner rights conventions) have likely increased across shipping, tourism, and commercial fishing sectors.** As employers attempt to maintain global operations during the pandemic, seafarers face greater vulnerability to labor violations as contract extensions and prolonged physical isolation expose mariners to unfair practices under the guise of disease precautions.

**Discriminatory disembarkation policies can leave mariners stranded even when passengers are not.** In some cases, mariners face discriminatory crew change policies. States across the world have implemented policies limiting crew change solely to nationals. During the initial upheaval, however, some countries permitted cruise lines to disembark passengers (many of whom were from wealthy countries) while barring crew disembarkation from the same ships (many of whom were from poorer states).

## REVERBERATING EFFECTS OF COVID-19

**Economic shocks increase vulnerabilities while decreasing mariners' capacity to demand accountability.** In May 2020, carriers cancelled 13 percent of planned transatlantic sailings, and in June, they cancelled 9 percent. A global economic slowdown caused by the pandemic could reduce mariners' bargaining power, particularly for those in non-officer positions, and make mariners vulnerable to accepting employment from predatory agencies.

**The economic effect of COVID-19 is borne heavily by supporting communities.** In communities deeply reliant on commercial fisheries, offshore oil and gas operations, port operations, or maritime tourism, outbreaks on vessels can affect the wider economy. Idled cruise ships mean deep cuts in small tourism-driven economies, while the crew change crisis means that mariners who cannot get onboard vessels for work cannot contribute remittances to their families and home economies.

## PRECARITY IN THE PHILIPPINES



Around 600,000 Filipinos are seafarers, contributing billions each year in remittances to their national and local economies. The crew change crisis is driving both mariners and the manning companies that connect them to the global blue economy towards the edge.

COVID-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions upended work plans for individual Filipino mariners. Without work, often without wages, and sometimes stranded in major cities far from their hometowns, these men and women are relying on local and global unions such as the AMOSUP or ITF Seafarers for food, shelter, and care.

In May, Philippine manning companies asked Manila for funding to cover the protective equipment, quarantines, and transportation required to bring Filipino mariners home. The biggest association warned that these agencies **faced collapse without government aid**, which could deal another blow to struggling Filipino mariners.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

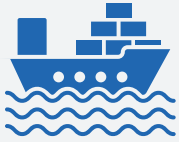
**DESIGNATE MARINERS AS ESSENTIAL WORKERS.** The largest flag states, port states, states of seafarers, and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) should collectively designate mariners in the commercial shipping, commercial fishing, and public safety sectors (at a minimum) as essential workers. This designation should make it possible to provide additional mobility and services to mariners supporting critical industries. Wealthy maritime nations—such as the United States, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Japan, Greece, Italy, Norway, and Singapore—can serve as moral leaders to mobilize and coordinate action.

**IMPLEMENT NATIONALITY-BLIND CREW RELIEF POLICIES.** Such policies should exempt mariners from general national travel restrictions. If expanded to include transportation and tourism crews, such policies would help reduce nationality-based disembarkation discrimination. Given the limited global cooperation on COVID-19 response, nationality-blind crew relief protocols represent an incremental goal for states that could lead to larger confidence-building measures.

**ESTABLISH A CONSOLIDATED INFORMATION-SHARING PORTAL ON HEALTH GUIDELINES.** Mariners often lack transparent access to current municipal and state health guidelines. The IMO should collaborate with national members, aid and relief nongovernmental organizations, and seafarer unions to develop a one-stop portal that national and local officials can continuously update to provide relevant health and visitation information to mariners. The IMO should prioritize the participation of major crew exchange locations to maximize the portal's utility in the current environment.

**IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPLEMENT LONG-TERM INDUSTRY SAFEGUARDS.** COVID-19 has highlighted structural weaknesses in the maritime economy's ability to balance physical health, mental health, and labor rights across sectors. Some recommendations related to the immediate crisis—including nationality-blind crew relief and essential worker designations—should be lasting. Implementers should design relief measures with a long-term perspective so that mariners will not

## DESPAIR IN THE US MERCHANT MARINE



The Military Sealift Command (MSC) provides crucial logistical lift for the US Navy. While sailors and officers crew Navy ships, civilian mariners (CIVMARs) crew MSC's logistics fleet. In March 2020, MSC announced a "Gangways Up" policy that prohibited CIVMARs from leaving their ships to protect them from COVID-19.

Some CIVMARs called the restrictions theater because they restricted their movements while allowing sailors and contractors to move on and off freely. A high-profile suicide called attention to whether the policy was **balancing the health of the fleet with the wellbeing of the mariners**. For now, the gangways remain partially "up."

be forgotten in future crises. They should also continue to identify other sector-level long-term structural changes.

**FINANCIALLY SAFEGUARD VULNERABLE SEAFARERS.** Mariners of all ages and across all industries often are not paid if they are not at sea. Junior mariners are likely the least capable of absorbing financial shocks. Abandonment by vessel owners who have run out of funds is endemic in the industry. The IMO, national members, and major seafarer unions should collaborate to endow emergency funds to soften external shocks via financial or in-kind assistance to mariners.

### ABOUT CNA

CNA is a nonprofit research and analysis organization dedicated to the safety and security of the nation. It operates the Center for Naval Analyses — the only federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) serving the Department of the Navy — as well as the Institute for Public Research. CNA is dedicated to developing actionable solutions to complex problems of national importance. With nearly 700 scientists, analysts and professional staff, CNA takes a real-world approach to gathering data. Its one-of-a-kind Field Program places analysts on carriers and military bases, in squad rooms and crisis centers, working side-by-side with operators and decision-makers around the world. CNA supports naval operations, fleet readiness and great power competition. Its non-defense research portfolio includes criminal justice, homeland security and data management.

For additional information, please contact Joshua Tallis, [tallisj@cna.org](mailto:tallisj@cna.org)



3003 Washington Boulevard | Arlington, Virginia 22201 | USA

[www.cna.org/strategy](http://www.cna.org/strategy)

APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE: DISTRIBUTION UNLIMITED. | CSI-2020-U-028490