

Why the coronavirus couldn't have come at a worse time for reeling Appalachian Kentucky

ELCOMB, Ky. — The two men sat on the covered porch of an aging mobile home along an Appalachian creek, a loud rain pinging off the sheet metal roof.

Joe Goans' four children were packed inside, shut out of school by the spreading coronavirus. He hadn't worked in two weeks, and his carpentry jobs had all canceled. One small consolation was that a yellow school bus wound each morning through the one-time coal camp with free meals for his kids.

Next to him, longtime coal miner Robbie Jonathan smoked a cigarette. He wasn't certain if his recent health problems were black lung, but he knew he'd be in trouble if he contracted the coronavirus.

"These here don't help none," he admitted as he took another drag.

Shaking their heads at some people failing to take the social distancing orders seriously, they agreed on one thing: The coronavirus, if it arrived in force, would cut deep in a place weakened by recent coal layoffs, floods and generations of poverty and poor health.

"It's about time for Jesus to come back," Jonathan said.

"I wish he'd hurry," Goans responded dryly.

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