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A Report By  
**UCLA** Labor Center

# Fast Food Frontline:

COVID-19 and Working Conditions  
in Los Angeles





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# About the Organizations

## **UC Berkeley Labor Center**

The UC Berkeley Labor Center is a public service project of the UC Berkeley Institute for Research on Labor and Employment that links academic resources with working people. Since 1964, the Labor Center has produced research, trainings, and curricula that deepen understanding of employment conditions and develop diverse new generations of leaders.

## **UCLA Labor Center**

For more than fifty years, the UCLA Labor Center has created innovative programs that offer a range of educational, research, and public service activities within the university and in the broader community, especially among low-wage and immigrant workers. The Labor Center is a vital resource for research, education, and policy development to help create jobs that are good for workers and their communities, to improve the quality of existing jobs in the low-wage economy, and to strengthen the process of immigrant integration, especially among students and youth.

## **UCLA Labor Occupational Health and Safety Program (LOSH)**

LOSH promotes safe and healthy workplaces through worker training and education, research, technical assistance, and policy analysis. LOSH initiatives focus on workers in high-hazard industries and low-wage jobs and those who are vulnerable by virtue of immigration status, language, or employment status. LOSH strives to reduce occupational health disparities and environmental injustice through direct worker engagement, leadership development, and capacity building. LOSH is part of the UCLA Center for Occupational and Environmental Health and the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.

## **UC Berkeley Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP)**

LOHP's mission is to promote safe, healthy, and just workplaces and to build the capacity of workers and worker organizations to take action for improved working conditions. We look broadly at the impact of work on health, and we advance the principle that healthy jobs—that pay a living wage, provide job security and benefits, protect against hazards and harassment, have reasonable workloads, and engage workers in the decisions that affect them—are a basic human right. As a university-based public health program, we accomplish our mission by providing training to effectively engage workers and worker organizations in advocating for better working conditions; conducting research to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, document the impact of health and safety hazards, and identify policy solutions; and supporting the development of protective policies that integrate public health research and expertise. LOHP is part of the Center for Occupational and Environmental Health at UC Berkeley.



## Executive Summary

The fast-food sector is an integral part of the food sector in Los Angeles, employing 150,000 Angelenos in 2019 and comprising over a third of Los Angeles's restaurant workers. In 2020, fast food work, as indoor work done in close proximity, placed workers at particular risk for COVID-19. Previous studies showed that even before COVID-19, fast-food workers in Los Angeles County faced disproportionately high rates of injury, workplace violence, harassment, retaliation, and wage theft. Further, research shows that COVID-19 safety protocols like paid sick leave, and compliance with those protocols, reduces the incidence of working while sick among frontline food service workers but such measures have been insufficient in the sector.

This study was commissioned by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) to understand the experience of fast-food workers during COVID-19 and more generally. The second of a two-part study, this report is based on 417 surveys and fifteen in-depth interviews with nonmanagerial fast-food workers in Los Angeles County conducted between June and October 2021. The following are key findings from the data collected:

### 1. Experience of Fast-Food Workers During COVID-19

COVID-19 profoundly impacted the lives and workplaces of fast-food workers in Los Angeles County, and fast-food workers had their own specific set of experiences and challenges related to COVID-19 guidelines, transmission, employer response, and protection.

## Protective Equipment and Safety Protocols

- ⌵ Most employers provided masks and gloves. Yet, half of workers reported that the number of employer-provided masks or gloves was insufficient or provided too infrequently. Nearly 40% purchased their own masks or gloves, and more than one in ten needed the supplies but could not afford to buy their own.
- ⌵ At the time of the survey, employers were not required to confirm customer vaccination status, and only 8% of workers reported that their restaurant checked for proof of customer vaccination. Half (51%) said their workplace relied on customer masks to protect them from unvaccinated customers, and 21% reported that their workplace did nothing to determine if customers were vaccinated.
- ⌵ After the mask mandate, 84% of workers said customers were required to wear one, yet many workers interviewed shared stories of unmasked customers.
- ⌵ Over half (53%) experienced negative interactions with restaurant patrons or co-workers over COVID-19 safety protocols, including being yelled at (34%), threatened (13%), and physically assaulted (4%).

## COVID-19 Transmission and Employer Response

- ⌵ Nearly a quarter (23%) of workers reported testing positive for COVID-19, and half (49%) knew about positive cases among their coworkers.
- ⌵ Half of workers (47%) worked in more than one part of the restaurant such as cashier, drive through, and food stations, increasing contact with customers and different coworkers.
- ⌵ Notification of potential transmission was haphazard. Employers rarely (42%) or sometimes (25%) notified workers of COVID-19 exposure in the workplace. A third (32%) said employers took no action of any kind to support exposed workers.
- ⌵ Fewer than half (47%) were allowed paid sick leave if they or a co-worker contracted the virus.
- ⌵ Despite two weeks (80 hours) of COVID-19 Supplemental Paid Sick Leave, the majority (66%) of workers did not expect to be paid if they tested positive for the virus, and half (53%) of workers did not think they would get sick time.
- ⌵ A third (38%) of workers and a fifth (21%) of co-workers brought up concerns about COVID-19 to their employer. Yet, 55% reported that the employer did not or only partly address the problem. Further, nearly one in five (17%) workers said they experienced some type of retaliation when asking for protection or taking leave, and 16% were not sure if they had.

## Economic and Health Impact of COVID-19

- ⌵ The majority of workers (91%) were somewhat or very concerned about another resurgence of COVID-19.
- ⌵ Workers experienced economic hardships during COVID-19. Nearly half (44%) did not have enough money to pay for groceries, and 43% missed rent or mortgage payment. A few (9%) had become housing insecure during the pandemic.
- ⌵ The majority of workers were concerned about COVID-19 and its effects on their economic and physical well-being including being able to financially sustain themselves if they got sick (55%) and they or a loved one having a medical condition that would put them at a greater risk (37%).
- ⌵ Most (66%) fast-food workers experienced an increase in their stress levels due to the pandemic. Many (42%) feared having to come back into the workplace. Workers experienced irregular sleep patterns (41%), depression (34%), and appetite change (23%).

## 2. Fast-Food Workers and Working Conditions

Fast-food workers face additional workplace challenges beyond and before COVID-19 related to an array of labor issues such as insufficient hours, wage theft, health and safety problems, harassment and retaliation.

### Wage, Hours, and Benefits

- ⌵ Most (59%) frontline workers worked thirty hours or less, with many (43%) reporting that the hours they received were insufficient. Almost half (47%) had another job in addition to their work in fast food.
- ⌵ Nearly two-thirds (63%) experienced wage theft, which included buying a uniform or equipment without reimbursement (45%), interrupted meal breaks (23%), denied meal or rest breaks (13%), and late paychecks (12%). In addition, of the fifth of workers that had overtime hours, 55% were not paid time-and-a-half for that work.

### Health and Safety and Workplace Harassment

- ⌵ Nearly a third (31%) of workers were not provided with paid sick time.
- ⌵ Over half (58%) of workers reported health and safety hazards such as insufficient staff to handle workloads (35%), unsafe floors (33%), broken equipment (27%), and pressure to work quickly (26%).
- ⌵ Forty-three percent experienced workplace injury or illness, such as burns (29%), cuts (25%), injury from lifting (10%), and assault (7%). Further, 40% faced difficulty paying bills as a consequence of their workplace injury.

- ∟ Half (49%) had experienced verbal abuse, and 13% had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.
- ∟ Many (37%) workers experienced violence, such as threats (25%), racial slurs (24%), assaults (10%), and robberies (4%).

## Raising Concerns about Workplace Issues

- ∟ More than one-quarter (27%) of workers raised concerns with their employer about their working conditions such as scheduling issues (46%), workload (42%), dangerous work conditions (36%), low wages (35%), and sick leave (32%).
- ∟ Of those who raised concerns, a third (36%) reported that their employer did nothing to resolve the issue, while 25% experienced retaliation such as having their hours or pay cut (19%) or assigned worse assignments (10%).
- ∟ Over a third (38%) of workers chose not to raise their concerns because they did not think it would make a difference (53%), or worried about retaliation such as losing their job (43%) or losing hours or wages (35%).
- ∟ More than a third of workers (32%) came together to address issues in the workplace, and 30% participated in a strike. Concerns raised during the strike or workplace demonstration largely went ignored by most (67%) employers though 18% faced retaliation for their participation.



## Recommendations

This report shows that fast-food workers faced dangerous and difficult working conditions, high transmission rates of COVID-19, and significant economic and health impacts. These findings show the need for policy intervention in the fast-food industry. Based on the results of the survey and interview, we make the following recommendations:



- 1. Enforce COVID-19 safety protocols and provide workers with adequate protection from retaliation and abuse for enforcing those protocols.** Fast-food workers need safe workplaces that conform to COVID-19 safety protocols, and workers must be free to address concerns. Workers should not have to choose between their paychecks and health. The LA County Department of Public Health should develop a targeted enforcement approach for this high-risk sector to ensure that safety protocols are appropriately followed.



- 2. Strengthen the fast-food worker voice in the industry.** As workers are principal stakeholders, their expertise should guide oversight and standards in the fast-food industry. Workers we spoke with had many concrete ideas for improving their conditions and morale, including better staffing ratios, pay, training, support for immigrant workers, and site-specific protocols to increase efficiency and customer satisfaction. Our findings show that workers seek greater decision-making power and authority over their work conditions without fear of repercussions.



- 3. Improve labor and health and safety practices in the workplace.** State and local government agencies should improve existing protections from wage theft, injury, retaliation, discrimination, harassment and unsafe working conditions. Workers need to feel safe and empowered to enforce their workplace rights. Continue to support the Public Health Councils program (in partnership with UCLA LOSH) which is designed to help with compliance and enforcement at worksites and policies such as LA County's anti-retaliation ordinance that protect workers from retaliation for reporting public health violations.



- 4. Support ongoing research in the fast-food industry.** Researchers should continue to document the work conditions in the fast-food industry on the local and state level.



## Introduction

Fast food—defined as restaurants in which patrons order or select items and pay before eating<sup>1</sup>—is an integral part of the food sector in Los Angeles. In 2019, fast food employed 4.5 million people nationwide,<sup>2</sup> including nearly 550,000 Californians and 150,000 Angelenos.<sup>3</sup> Our previous research found that the restaurant sector made up a tenth of the overall county workforce, and over a third of Los Angeles’s restaurant workers were employed in fast food.<sup>4</sup>

A growing body of research reveals workplaces, and food service in particular, to be a common vector of COVID-19 transmission.<sup>5</sup> Research published early in 2021 found that cooks had the highest increase in mortality—up by 39% from 2019—of any occupation during the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Occupations with frequent interactions with the public and close proximity among workers increase the likelihood of transmission.<sup>7</sup> This is the case for food preparation workers and servers, dominated by Latinx and Black workers, who are particularly vulnerable to workplace exposure.<sup>8</sup> Further, an analysis of fast-food worker complaints found that those worksites had multiple elements of noncompliance such as lack of adequate PPE, physical distancing, screening, and exposure notification.<sup>9</sup>

Recent research shows that COVID-19 safety protocols like paid sick leave, and compliance with those protocols, reduce the incidence of working while sick among frontline food service workers.<sup>10</sup> Employers in California needed to take affirmative steps to identify, evaluate, and correct COVID-19 workplace hazards, as set forth in 2020 by Cal/OSHA in its Emergency Temporary Standards.<sup>11</sup> Steps included screening employees for and responding to COVID-19 symptoms and cases, detailed notification requirements, industry- and site-specific practices for evaluating and controlling where COVID-19 transmission could occur, and paid time off for COVID-19 quarantine and treatment. In fast food, measures like masks for workers and customers and increased sanitation were required by state and county health authorities for much of the time period of this study.

Our previous report found fast-food workers to be among the most vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. Nine in ten fast-food workers in Los Angeles were workers of color, and nearly three-quarters were Latinx. Fast-food workers were poor, earning minimum or near-minimum wages that nevertheless accounted for 40% of their household income. These households were more than twice as likely as other workers to fall below the federal poverty line, and more than one-and-one-half times more likely to be uninsured. Low wages caused two-thirds to enroll in a safety net program—at a public cost of \$1.2 billion. Nearly seven in ten fast-food workers were women vulnerable to sexual harassment in the industry. Further, we reviewed studies that showed that even before COVID-19, fast-food workers in Los Angeles County faced disproportionately high rates of injury, workplace violence, harassment, retaliation, and wage theft.<sup>12</sup>

Franchising predominates in the fast-food industry. This model creates a layer of separation between workers and the parent companies, or franchisors, responsible for their working conditions.<sup>13</sup> Research suggests that this model may account for the disproportionately high rates of labor standards violations in the industry, as franchisors control how chains operate—such as prices, customer rules, and suppliers—but are not liable for what happens at individual sites. One study of the top twenty fast-food franchises shows that franchisee-owned restaurants had higher levels of noncompliance with minimum wage and overtime rates than their counterparts owned and managed by the franchisor, and attributed this behavior to the incentives built into a franchise model that promote noncompliance.<sup>14</sup>

## About This Study

This study was commissioned by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) to understand the experience of fast-food workers during COVID-19 and more generally. This study is the second part of the fast-food research project in collaboration with the UC Berkeley Labor Center, UCLA Labor Occupational Health and Safety Program (LOSH), and the UC Berkeley Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP). The research team collected 417 surveys and conducted fifteen in-depth interviews with nonmanagerial fast-food workers in Los Angeles County between June and October 2021. The survey and interviews focused on working conditions related to COVID-19 and labor issues. The data were analyzed by the UCLA Labor Center research team and compiled into this report.

This report presents findings in two sections: one specific to the experiences of fast-food workers related to COVID-19, and the other about workplace conditions more broadly. Part one focuses on COVID-19 and fast-food worker experiences with protective equipment and safety protocols, vaccination status, COVID-19 transmission, addressing concerns, and the economic and health toll of the pandemic. Part two focuses on hours and scheduling, wage theft, time off, health and safety, addressing concerns, and organizing efforts. The report concludes with a set of recommendations in response to the key findings.



## Part 1: Experience of Fast-Food Workers During COVID-19

COVID-19 presented singular risks for fast-food workers. This section explores how workers fared during the pandemic in terms of access to protective equipment, protocols for worker exposures, vaccinations, COVID-19 concerns, and economic impacts.

### a. COVID-19 Protective Equipment and Safety Protocols

A 2020 report from the UC Berkeley Labor Center showed that half of those working in food preparation and serving occupations work in “very close proximity” and the other half in “moderately close proximity” to other workers.<sup>15</sup> We found that one-third of Los Angeles’s fast-food establishments had more than twenty employees at an individual worksite, suggesting shared equipment, work spaces, bathrooms, and break areas.<sup>16</sup> One worker told us, “There’s definitely no social distancing, because the restaurant itself is really small . . . I don’t know how it could be improved, honestly, because the space that we have is really small.”

Such close quarters render protective equipment integral to reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Employers provided most workers with masks (82%) and gloves (85%). The most commonly distributed mask was surgical (44%) followed by cloth (29%). Many also received sanitation wipes and disinfectant sprays while plastic face shields were less common.

Table 1: PPE Provided by Employers

<b>Mask</b>	82% ›
<b>Gloves</b>	85%
<b>Hand sanitizer or sanitation wipes</b>	76%
<b>Disinfectant spray for surfaces</b>	61%
<b>Plastic face shield</b>	23%
<b>None of the above</b>	2%

**Of those that received mask, type:**

Surgical: 44%  
 Cloth: 29%  
 N95: 11%  
 Other: 16%



Yet, for half of the workers, the number of employer-provided masks or gloves was insufficient or provided too infrequently. Nearly 40% purchased their own masks or gloves, and more than one in ten needed the supplies but could not afford to buy their own.

Table 2: Purchased Own Mask or Gloves for Work

<b>Purchased own</b>	39%
<b>Could not afford to purchase</b>	11%
<b>Employer provided enough</b>	50%

Workers reported that their workplaces generally required all of their co-workers to wear masks (96%). Before July 17, 2021, Los Angeles County did not require customers to wear masks when indoors. During that time, just over half of workplaces required customers to wear masks. Yet even with mask mandates, compliance was not universal; just 84% of employers required customers to wear masks.

Table 3: Mask Requirements Based on Vaccination Status

<b>Requirements</b>	<b>Workers</b>	<b>Customers (before July mask mandate)</b>	<b>Customers (after July mask mandate)</b>
<b>Masks required regardless of vaccination</b>	96%	57%	84%
<b>Unvaccinated people only</b>	3%	7%	5%
<b>No one</b>	1%	36%	11%

Many workers interviewed shared stories of unmasked customers. One respondent, a Latinx cashier who also worked the drive-thru window, told us, “Many clients don’t wear masks. They say they will buy the things to go, but they stay there at the tables. People also arrive at the drive-thru without masks and, since they are in their cars, they think it’s offensive if we tell them to wear masks when they speak to us.”

Overall, workers were given time to wash their hands during their shift. The majority of workers (82%) reported that they were granted as much time as necessary.

Table 4: Time Allotted to Wash Hands

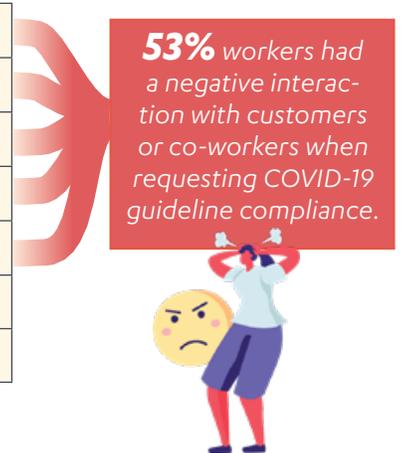
<b>Not given time</b>	1%
<b>Once during my shift</b>	4%
<b>Two or three times</b>	11%
<b>As many times as necessary</b>	82%
<b>Not allowed but employer provides hand sanitizer</b>	1%

As frontline workers, fast-food workers often carried out COVID-19 safety protocols beyond their job descriptions. One worker described her added responsibilities, highlighting the time-consuming work of sanitization: “We can’t do everything at once. Since COVID started, we all have to work a little bit more, due to how we have to sanitize literally everything. Door handles, everything. It’s harder.”

Adding to the strain on increased job responsibilities, over half (53%) of workers surveyed had negative interactions when they asked restaurant patrons or co-workers to follow COVID-19 safety protocols. About 40% noted that they were ignored when they asked the person to adhere to safety protocols. A third reported that the person yelled at them for requesting they wear a mask, and a tenth of workers were threatened. Further, 20% of customers or co-workers disregarded the worker’s request and chose to speak to a manager instead.

Table 5: Response of Customer or Co-worker when Asked to Follow COVID-19 Guidelines

<b>Refused to follow guidelines despite being asked</b>	40% ›
<b>Yelled at worker when asked to wear mask</b>	34% ›
<b>Talked to worker’s supervisor/manager</b>	20% ›
<b>Threatened worker</b>	13% ›
<b>Physically assaulted worker</b>	4% ›
<b>Other</b>	4%
<b>None</b>	46%



Many of the workers we interviewed recounted how commonplace it had become to deal with irate or uncooperative customers over issues of masking and social distancing. One worker described such an incident:

Oh yeah, it happens. It happened just yesterday when I was at work. A guy came in . . . and we have to tell him politely, “Sorry, but you have to wear a mask or we can’t take your order if you’re in the lobby.” And he said, “Well, give me a mask.” And I went, “I’m sorry, sir. But you know what? That’s not my responsibility.” There’s signs all over. And he threatened me and then told me to come from behind the counter. I told him, “Jesus loves you, have a great day, but I’m calling the police.”

Another discussed feeling abandoned by their employer in these tense situations, saying that at her restaurant, “It’s like *‘the customers are always right.’*” This principle—oft-cited in the context of service work—made for an impossible situation for workers, as they were simultaneously expected to police safety protocols that customers refused to follow.

## b. Vaccination Status and Checks

Overall, the majority of fast food workers received their vaccination, similar to Los Angeles County rates. Only a quarter had not been vaccinated.

Table 6: COVID-19 Vaccination Status

<b>Vaccinated</b>	70%
<b>Scheduled to receive vaccine</b>	3%
<b>Unvaccinated</b>	27%

Of those still unvaccinated, half cited personal beliefs as a reason for not receiving the vaccine, and one-fifth a medical reason. A tenth of workers were unable to get the time off from work to get vaccinated despite a legal requirement to provide paid sick leave to do so.

Table 7: Reasons for Not Receiving Vaccine

<b>Personal belief</b>	46%
<b>Medical reason</b>	18%
<b>Unable to take time off</b>	12%
<b>Concerned about cost</b>	3%
<b>No transportation</b>	1%
<b>Other</b>	18%

At the time of the survey, employers were not required to confirm customer vaccination status, and very few worksites chose to do this. Only 8% of workers reported that their restaurant checked for vaccination. Half said their restaurant relied on masks, and a fifth did nothing to determine if customers were vaccinated.

Table 8: Actions Taken to Determine Customer Vaccination Status

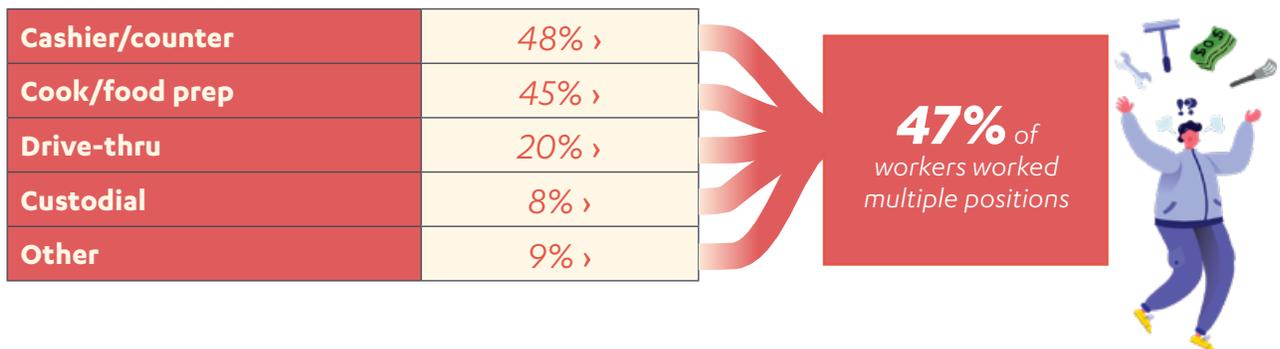
<b>Everyone wears masks</b>	51%
<b>Self-attestation</b>	14%
<b>Proof of vaccination</b>	8%
<b>Other</b>	6%
<b>None of the above</b>	21%

Discrepancies in enforcement between restaurant owners, managers, and assistant managers left workers in a bind. One interviewee who often worked the cashier station face-to-face with customers said that the owner made it clear that she “didn’t care” about the customer mask mandate. This manager was the only staff member who had refused vaccination. The assistant manager was more sympathetic and helped this worker feel safer while working. Contradictory and inconsistently enforced policies, the worker noted, made for an especially difficult and dangerous environment to navigate.

### c. COVID-19 Transmission and Employer Response

Food service workers face a high risk of COVID-19 transmission due to close proximity to co-workers, frequent interaction with customers, and poor indoor air circulation. Further, one in two workers in our survey rotated throughout the restaurant in multiple positions, from the front counter (48%), the drive through (20%), at the food and cooking station (45%), and in custodial positions (8%).

Table 9: Worker Positions



One worker explained that social distancing protocols required a new trade-off between safety and workload, recounting that his employer would leave the restaurant understaffed to “avoid overcrowding.” He said that these new policies meant “more responsibilities because sometimes the workload that was given to around three people is now assigned to just one person.”

Over three-quarters of workers were concerned about COVID-19 and its effects on their economic, physical, and mental health. More than half (55%) stated that contracting COVID-19 would prevent them from supporting themselves or their family. Over a third had a medical condition that would put them at a greater risk. Some workers expressed worry about the possibility of not getting their jobs back if they had to quarantine.

Table 10: Worker COVID-19 Concerns

<b>Unable to support self or family if contract COVID-19</b>	55%
<b>Worker or loved one had medical condition with greater risk</b>	37%
<b>Unable to get job back if quarantined</b>	23%
<b>No adequate ventilation</b>	10%
<b>Other</b>	7%
<b>No concerns about COVID-19</b>	21%

Even with certain safety protocols and protective equipment in place, workers risked disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 exposure and contraction. Nearly a quarter of surveyed workers reported testing positive for COVID-19, and half knew about positive cases among their coworkers. For comparison, the overall case rate for residents of Los Angeles County was roughly 15%, indicating a proportionally greater rate among fast-food workers.<sup>17</sup>

Table 11: Worker or Co-Workers Tested Positive for COVID-19

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Worker</b>	<b>Co-Worker</b>
<b>Yes</b>	23%	49%
<b>No</b>	77%	18%
<b>Don't know</b>	n/a	33%

Under Cal-OSHA's Emergency Temporary Standards for COVID-19 Prevention, employers must notify workers within one business day if they may have had close contact with a COVID-19 case, respond to outbreaks of three or more COVID-19 cases among employees, and provide free COVID-19 testing on paid time.<sup>18</sup> Prior to September 30, 2021, California's COVID-19 Supplemental Paid Sick Leave law required employers to provide paid sick leave to workers required or advised to quarantine, attend vaccine appointments, recover from vaccine side effects, and care for family members due to COVID-19.<sup>19</sup> And workers' compensation insurance is available to workers who contract COVID-19 on the job to cover the cost of medical treatment and wage replacement.

Workers reported a mix of action by their employers in response to COVID-19 cases among employees at the worksite. A quarter were unsure about their employer's response. Less than half said the worker was provided with paid sick leave, and nearly a quarter said the worker was allowed to quarantine—but without paid sick leave as required by law.

Table 12: Employer Response to a Positive COVID-19 Test among Workers

<b>Allowed worker to take paid sick leave</b>	47%
<b>Quarantine without pay</b>	23%
<b>Continue working without quarantine</b>	5%
<b>Other</b>	6%
<b>Not sure how employer responded</b>	28%

Only a third of workers said that they were provided with information about workers' compensation if they tested positive for COVID-19 due to an exposure at work.

Table 13: Employer Provided Workers' Compensation Information for Workplace Exposure

<b>Yes</b>	30%
<b>No</b>	70%

A third of respondents said that their employer took no action of any kind to support workers who may have been exposed. Fewer than half reported that employers notified other workers; 38% said that other exposed workers were allowed to quarantine; and 17% said they were provided with free testing.

Table 14: Employer Response Regarding COVID-19 Exposure

<b>Notified workers who might have been exposed within one working day</b>	48%
<b>Made sure exposed workers quarantined for 10 days</b>	38%
<b>Provided paid leave to exposed workers who could otherwise work</b>	19%
<b>Offered COVID-19 testing to exposed workers</b>	17%
<b>None of the above</b>	32%

Overall, employers failed to consistently notify workers of COVID-19 exposure. In fact, nearly half said they were rarely told, and a quarter were sometimes informed.

Table 15: Frequency of Employer Notification Regarding COVID-19 Transmission or Risk

<b>Rarely</b>	42%
<b>Sometimes</b>	25%
<b>Every time</b>	33%

Workers described deliberate obfuscation of potential exposure, which they experienced as a frightening ignorance of a health threat. One worker we interviewed recounted the fallout after a co-worker abruptly stopped coming into work after experiencing a number of symptoms consistent with COVID-19:

If someone got sick they did not notify you or send you to take the test . . . they never ordered a cleaning of the store or disinfecting. People came out sick and infected and we didn't know . . . [W]hen the manager died . . . we all demanded that they tell us if he had died of COVID . . . [T]hey said no, that it had been from a heart attack. But he had had all the symptoms of COVID when he stopped working because he felt sick. When he left he said he had the flu, a sore throat, all the symptoms of COVID. And yet they never sanitized the store.

Another worker received confirmation that management had failed to disclose a COVID-positive co-worker. “That time it was very scary because . . . they didn't tell us . . . [T]he girl came back and told us herself that she had tested positive. I didn't like the fact that they didn't want to tell us and they refused to tell us. We would ask and they'd be like, 'Oh yeah, she's sick. She's going to come in.' Stuff like that.” A few interviewees described how management became angry with workers when they revealed to their co-workers that they had tested positive.

Others described being “brushed off” when they asked about potential exposure, and the need to learn from one another, not management, about co-workers' COVID-19 status. “Management was looking out for itself,” said one worker. Another asserted, “They didn't want to tell us because if we were to get tested, that time that the test results would've come in, it would've stopped us from going into work. So we would miss, and that's what I think they didn't want to happen, for us to miss a couple days of work.”

#### d. Raising COVID-19 Concerns

Workers in our study expressed an alarming laxity in COVID-19 safety protocols in fast-food restaurants, such as failure to enforce masking mandates, provide paid leave, or alert workers to COVID-19 exposure. Workers who sought to enforce COVID-19 protocols on their own experienced customer abuse and retaliation from management.

Over a third of workers and a fifth of their co-workers had raised concerns related to COVID-19 with their employer.

Table 16: Raised Concern about COVID-19

<b>Worker</b>	<b>38%</b>
<b>Co-workers</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Did not raise concern</b>	<b>51%</b>

More than half of these workers had their concerns disregarded by management, with their issues partly addressed or not addressed at all.

Table 17: Employer Response to COVID-19 Concern

<b>Fixed the problem</b>	40%
<b>Partly addressed the problem</b>	42%
<b>Did not address the problem</b>	13%
<b>Other</b>	5%

**55%** reported that the employer did not or only partly address the problem



Workers we spoke with expressed frustration at employer inaction when they raised concerns. “I told my manager, ‘[I]f you guys don’t care [about enforcing the mask mandate], then I’m not going to be cashier. I refuse to have contact with people who are not wearing a mask.’ And then she told me, ‘Okay, if you’re going to be cashier, you’re allowed to enforce that stuff. You can do that.’” Employer apathy required frontline workers to enforce COVID-19 protocols, often facing physical threat and aggression.

For those who had a concern but did not raise it, over a quarter thought nothing would change and a tenth did not consider their issue serious. Half said that they did not have concerns.

Table 18: Reason Worker Did Not Raise Concern

<b>Don’t have concerns</b>	53%
<b>Thought nothing would change</b>	28%
<b>Didn’t think it was a serious issue</b>	12%
<b>Concerned about employer retaliation</b>	8%
<b>Immigration status</b>	3%
<b>Other</b>	9%

Workers feared retaliation for raising COVID-19 concerns, such as having their hours cut or being treated unfairly. Nearly a fifth of workers said they experienced some type of retaliation, and 16% were not sure if they had. Retaliation occurred after asking management for increased protections or temporary leave from work related to contracting the virus.

Table 19: Experienced Retaliation Due to COVID-19-Related Experiences

<b>Having COVID-19</b>	7% ›
<b>Asking for protections against COVID-19</b>	7% ›
<b>Asking or taking leave related to COVID-19</b>	8% ›
<b>No one has gotten COVID-19 or asked for protections</b>	4%
<b>I don't know</b>	16%
<b>Did not experience retaliation</b>	68%

**17%** of workers experienced COVID-19 retaliation



Workers we interviewed described how retaliation can often be hard to detect, and is sometimes doled out in a veiled or ambiguous manner, like demanding that workers do tasks well outside their job description (one was ordered to “hop in the dumpster and stomp the trash down”), generally ignoring them over the course of a shift, or even purposefully making a worker feel uncomfortable about their immigration status. More than one worker, however, recounted explicit examples of demotion following the registration of a complaint with management.

Eleven percent of respondents contacted the LA Department of Public Health if they had COVID-19 concerns or experienced an outbreak at their workplace. Only a tenth said they did not have any concerns.

Table 20: Worker filed a complaint with LACDPH

<b>Yes</b>	11%
<b>No</b>	79%
<b>Don't have any COVID-19 concerns</b>	10%

Across a number of our interviews with workers, it became clear that workers rarely felt empowered to raise their voices, but rather were encouraged—either implicitly or explicitly—to take on more work, suppress these feelings of dissatisfaction, and generally stay quiet. “We just put the weight on ourselves,” one worker said, “and I wish it weren’t that way.”

## e. The Economic and Health Toll of COVID-19

The majority of fast-food workers in Los Angeles County are women, people of color, working-class, and responsible for financially contributing to their households.<sup>20</sup> The impacts of COVID-19 on this workforce included loss of work, financial hardship, coping with illness, and the mental health toll of working through a pandemic.

Even with workplace protections and increased vaccinations, the possibility of new surges and variants continued to loom throughout the summer and fall. The majority of workers (91%) were somewhat or very concerned about another resurgence of COVID-19.

Table 21: Level of Concern about a COVID-19 Resurgence

<b>Very concerned</b>	61%
<b>Somewhat concerned</b>	30%
<b>Not concerned</b>	9%

Most fast-food workers experienced an increase in their stress levels due to the pandemic. Many feared having to come back into the workplace. Workers experienced irregular sleep patterns, depression, and appetite change.

Table 22: Impact of COVID-19 on Well-Being

<b>Stress level increased</b>	66%
<b>Afraid of coming back to work</b>	42%
<b>Sleep patterns changed</b>	41%
<b>Sad or depressed</b>	34%
<b>Appetite changed</b>	23%
<b>Less productive at work</b>	19%
<b>Other</b>	15%

After discovering that her employer had hidden a COVID-19 outbreak from her and her co-workers, one interviewee got her husband to anonymously report the matter to LACDPH, fearing retaliation if she filed the complaint herself. The agency inspected the workplace, and she experienced so much fear of losing her job that she began receiving mental health counseling at a public clinic. This same worker also had a stroke in relation to the additional stress of working during the pandemic, and was allotted fewer hours by her manager after she requested a schedule that was more accommodating during her recovery.

With longer shifts and an increasingly precarious financial situation during the pandemic, one worker we spoke with said that he had frequently resorted to providing his family with the free food offered by the restaurant owners. “Work was offering us free meals for our families. And normally I wasn’t eating the food. [Fast] food’s not the healthiest, but when you’re doing a 10 hour day it’s just easier to just bring it home.” While convenient and financially helpful, a diet of mostly fast food coupled with depression caused weight gain: “Well, I put on 35 pounds . . . I was depressed . . . I’m always tired because I’m always working.”

One of the main concerns for workers was the financial impact of having to take time off due to illness. Despite two weeks (80 hours) of COVID-19 Supplemental Paid Sick Leave, the majority of workers did not expect to be paid if they tested positive for the virus, and half of workers did not think they would get sick time.

Table 23: Pay and Sick Time Offered if Contracted COVID-19

Response	Continue to be paid	Can use sick leave
Yes	34%	47%
No	66%	53%

More than 60% of workers came from households with four or more people, many of whom also faced challenges during COVID-19.

Table 24: Number of People in the Household

1–3	39%
4–5	44%
6 or more	17%

A third of workers had a household member that had experienced job loss during COVID-19, and half of those people were still without work at the time of the survey. Even if still working, the majority of workers lived in households that faced income loss due to COVID-19.

Table 25: Job and Income Loss for People in the Household Due to COVID-19

Answer	Person in household lost job	Person who lost job still without work	Person in household lost income
Yes	32%	54%	62%
No	68%	46%	38%

Workers experienced economic hardships during COVID-19. Nearly half did not have enough money to pay for groceries and/or missed rent or a mortgage payment. A tenth had become housing insecure during the pandemic.

Table 26: Economic Hardship Due to COVID-19

Answer	Not enough money for groceries	Missed rent or mortgage payment	Lost housing due to COVID-19
Yes	44%	43%	9%
No	56%	57%	91%

One worker we interviewed depended on local food banks and was forced to take out a personal loan to support herself and her mother. Another’s father had to return to work despite recent surgery after her family’s sole source of income dried up. “[M]y mom . . . would sell food every Friday and that’s how she would get money. So when the pandemic hit, the sales went down . . . And my sister wasn’t working, but she was in high school, so my parents didn’t want her to work . . . [So] even fresh out of surgery, [my dad] had to go back to work and I started working at the pizza place.”



## Part 2: Fast Food Workers and Working Conditions

The fast-food industry is an economic juggernaut in the United States and especially in Los Angeles, which saw the fastest growth of fast food in the nation between 2009 and 2014.<sup>21</sup> Yet primary data about the industry are sorely lacking. In our first study, we outlined some key labor issues in the fast-food sector such as wage theft, health and safety, harassment and retaliation. Here, we offer a comprehensive look into the labor conditions beyond COVID-19.

Fast-food workers face an array of workplace challenges. More than half experienced wage theft, such as being paid late or unpaid overtime rates, denied meal breaks or reimbursement for uniforms or equipment. Workers also reported insufficient hours to make ends meet. More than half experienced a health and safety hazard, and 43% were injured at work. Half of workers faced verbal abuse, particularly from customers. Many also witnessed or experienced violence or harassment, such as racial slurs, assault, and robbery.

# Summary of Workplace & Labor Issues

## Wages, Hours, & Benefits

Wage Theft	63%
Did not get enough hours	43%
Did not receive paid sick time	31%



## Health and Safety

Experienced hazard	58%
Was injured at work	43%

## Harassment

Verbal abuse	49%
Experienced threats, slurs, assault or robbery	37%
Was retaliated against when raised concerns	25%
Sexual harassment	14%



## a. Hours/Schedule

About 60% of workers worked thirty hours or less, with most of these workers in the twenty to thirty hour range.

Table 27: Average Hours Worked Per Week

<b>1–10</b>	6%
<b>11–20</b>	15%
<b>21–30</b>	38%
<b>31–40</b>	36%
<b>More than 40</b>	5%

Four in ten reported that the hours they received were insufficient, and more than one worker in interviews expressed that a pay raise would alleviate the need for more hours.

Table 28: Received Number of Work Hours They Needed

<b>No, I didn't get enough hours.</b>	43%
<b>Yes, I got all the hours I needed.</b>	52%
<b>I got more hours than I wanted.</b>	5%

Scheduling is often a challenge in low-wage industries. Only a quarter said that they received the schedule they wanted all of the time. For three-quarters, schedules varied and they sometimes or never received their preferred schedule.

Table 29: Worker Got Work Schedule They Wanted

<b>Always</b>	24%
<b>Sometimes</b>	55%
<b>Never</b>	21%

Night shifts, workers told us, are not only more dangerous, but also more difficult. One worker described being regularly scheduled for the overnight shift, which was chronically understaffed (compared to what they understood to be overstaffed morning and lunch shifts) and often involved unpleasant and frightening interactions with intoxicated customers leaving the nearby nightclub. "I work from 6 pm to 4 am and I have to do the work of three or more people because there are no workers at night. For the same payment, it is not worth it." This worker, like others, suggested schedule changes to more evenly distribute workers across day and night shifts.

Like many workers in low-wage jobs, the hours and/or pay at one job was often not sufficient so they needed to juggle multiple jobs. A second job can also be challenging when working with erratic scheduling practices. Nearly half of workers reported having more than one job, and a tenth of workers had two or more jobs.

Table 30: Worker Has Other Paid Jobs

<b>0</b>	<b>53%</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>&lt;1%</b>
<b>4 or more</b>	<b>1%</b>

Often, fast-food work is dismissed as short-term, temporary work. About half of workers had been in the job for around one to three years; a quarter had been in this work for four or more years.

Table 31: Time Employed at Restaurant

<b>Less than 6 months</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>6 months to a year</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>1–3 years</b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>4–6 years</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>7 or more years</b>	<b>12%</b>

## b. Wage Theft

Wage theft occurred frequently among survey participants. Most common was buying a uniform, special shoes or equipment for which they were not reimbursed, followed by interrupted meal breaks. Others were paid late, or not at all for off-the-clock work. One worker we interviewed said that at her restaurant, working the night shift typically meant “punching your break, but not actually taking it,” because management chronically understaffed her shift.

Table 32: Experience of Wage Theft

<b>Experience</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>
<b>Required to buy uniform, special shoes or equipment without reimbursement</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Meal break interrupted</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>Denied meal or rest break</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>Paid late by employer</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>3%</b>

Worked after official end time without pay	11%	85%	4%
Worked before official start time without pay	7%	90%	3%
Paid less than legally required	7%	88%	5%
Asked to wait to cash check	6%	92%	2%

About a fifth worked more than forty hours in a week, but only half of them received overtime premium pay of a time and half for those hours.

Table 33: Experienced Overtime Violation

Worked overtime	21%
Was not paid a time-and-a-half regularly for overtime hours	55%

Overall, six in ten experienced some type of wage-related violation. One-third experienced two or more violations.

Table 34: Number of Wage Theft Conditions Experienced

1	31%
2–3	21%
4 or more	11%
None	37%



### c. Paid Time Off

Los Angeles County provides six days (48 hours) of paid sick leave per year, yet one-third of workers did not receive sick time.

Table 35: Worker Allowed Paid Sick Time

Yes	69%
No	31%

Even those who received paid time off received less than the legal minimum. Only 14% received the legal minimum of forty-eight hours of regular sick time, and only 14% received the eighty hours of Supplemental Paid Sick Leave required by law.

Table 36: How Much Paid Sick Time Is Allowed

<b>3 days or 24 hours</b>	41%
<b>6 days or 48 hours</b>	14%
<b>10 days or 80 hours for COVID-19</b>	14%
<b>Don't know</b>	24%
<b>Other</b>	7%

If a worker requested sick time, more than a third reported getting their paid time off approved; a tenth were denied. More than half had not requested any paid time off.

Table 37: What Happened If Requested Paid Sick Time

<b>Received paid sick time</b>	37%
<b>Employer denied paid sick time</b>	10%
<b>I did not request time off</b>	53%

#### d. Health and Safety Issues

Health and safety risks in the fast-food industry include exposure to harmful chemicals, hot grease, slippery floors, broken or damaged kitchen equipment, and pressure to work more quickly than is safe. COVID-19 has exacerbated these risks, as one-third of workers pointed to staff shortages that contributed to unsafe work conditions.

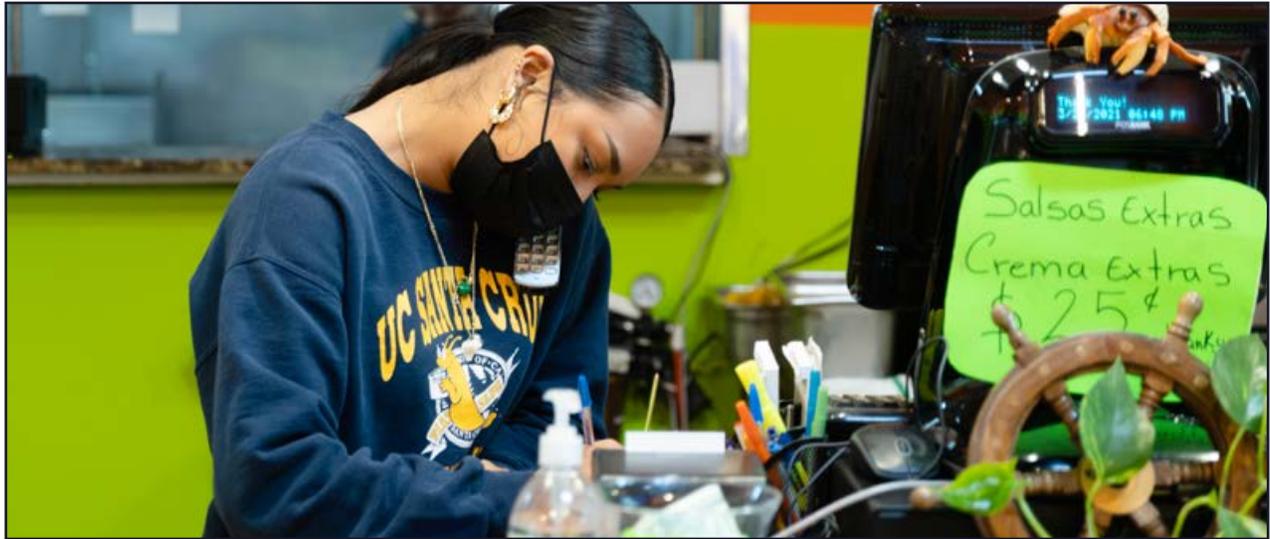
Table 38: Type of Health and Safety Hazard Experienced

<b>Too few employees to handle workload safely</b>	35% ›
<b>Wet, slippery, or oily floors</b>	33% ›
<b>Broken or damaged kitchen equipment</b>	27% ›
<b>Pressure to work more quickly than safe</b>	26% ›
<b>Not enough training to do job safely</b>	15% ›
<b>Missing or damaged PPE</b>	11% ›
<b>Exposure to chemicals</b>	8% ›
<b>Other</b>	6%
<b>None of the above</b>	41%



Safety concerns owing to workload abounded in our interviews with workers, who suggested that improved staffing ratios would alleviate workload and improve morale and safety. In interviews, workers shared that management was often reluctant to schedule the necessary amount of people it took to safely handle the workload during a shift. COVID-19 exacerbated this issue. One worker we interviewed described the

increased turnover at her workplace, with additional tasks being delegated to her as her coworkers left their jobs, including some that proved particularly challenging given her small stature: “I’m like 4’11”. I was carrying like 20 pounds of flour . . . the big boxes of six cans of sauce. It was really heavy work.”



The top injuries reported by workers in our survey in the past year are burns from hot oil, liquids, or equipment, and cuts and wounds from lifting or carrying items.

Table 39: Type of Injuries or Illnesses in the Past Year

<b>Burned by hot oil, liquids, or equipment</b>	29% ›
<b>Cut</b>	25% ›
<b>Hurt while lifting or carrying items</b>	10% ›
<b>Assaulted by a customer or co-worker</b>	7% ›
<b>Injured by a fall on a wet, slippery, or oily floor</b>	5% ›
<b>Breathing or skin problems due to chemical use</b>	4% ›
<b>Injured in another way</b>	7% ›
<b>Did not experience injury</b>	57%

**43%** of workers experienced an injury or illness in the past year



Only one fifth of respondents indicated that their employers provided them with a form to file for workers’ compensation following their injury, as required by law. Some workers had to pay for medicine or treatments without reimbursement, and a small portion missed work without pay.

Table 40: Result of Injury

<b>Provided form to file workers' comp</b>	20%
<b>Paid for medicine or treatments without reimbursement</b>	16%
<b>Missed work and not paid for time off</b>	13%
<b>Paid for medical care without reimbursement</b>	8%
<b>Supervisor mandated you to continue work</b>	8%
<b>None of these statements apply</b>	54%

Workers who experienced injury faced added economic insecurity. Four in ten injured had difficulty paying bills. Nearly a tenth lost their job entirely.

Table 41: Impact of Injury

<b>Difficulty paying bills</b>	40%
<b>Loss of job</b>	9%
<b>Loss of health insurance</b>	2%
<b>Other</b>	49%

## e. Harassment and Violence

Fast-food workers experienced frequent mistreatment from employers, co-workers, and customers. One in two experienced some type of verbal abuse. Nearly half experienced verbal abuse from a customer, and 14% experienced verbal abuse from an employer or supervisor.

Table 42: Experience Verbal Abuse from Employer, Supervisor, or Customer

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Employer or supervisor</b>	<b>Customer</b>	<b>Either employer or customer</b>
<b>Yes</b>	14%	46%	49%
<b>No</b>	86%	54%	51%

Many workers emphasized the frequency of customer abuse. Across our series of interviews, workers were blunt and direct on this point: “It’s very, very, very common”; it “happens every day, basically”; “verbal abuse from customers does happen quite often”; and it “happens more often than you would think.”

Workers provided explicit examples. “Me and my co-workers have been called stupid, we’ve been called dumb. We’ve been yelled at because they’re unsatisfied with whatever it may be.” One Latinx worker told us she had frequently experienced discrimination from customers, “Clients insult you every day . . . When you take orders and they don’t understand you, they always insult you and ask if there is someone who speaks English.”

Another Latinx cashier told us she often endured explosive reactions over trivial mistakes.

[S]ometimes they get mad at the slightest mistake. One time this lady was like, “Oh, so is there sauce in here?” I’m like, “Yeah, there is.” And she was so mad . . . she threatened me and she cussed me out . . . [S]ometimes it’d be the slightest thing and it’s like, ‘Okay, you could have just asked, or you could’ve just told me and I would’ve gave it to you.’ They’re crazy . . . or they already come in mad . . . And sometimes they’ll make petty comments or they’ll disrespect us in a way that they think is kind of slick.

Thirteen percent surveyed experienced sexual harassment, the majority of which was from customers. Five percent experienced sexual harassment from other workers.

Table 43: Experienced Sexual Harassment

<b>Co-worker(s)</b>	5% ›	
<b>Manager(s)</b>	2% ›	
<b>Customer(s)</b>	9% ›	
<b>None</b>	87%	

Workers shared stories of frightening and demeaning experiences of sexual harassment including working alone with a harasser at closing, “touchy” co-workers and managers, nonconsensual contact, and uncomfortable boundary-crossing. They suggested improved training for managers and co-workers regarding consent and professional boundaries.

Workers also experienced violence, including threats, intimidation, and racial slurs. A few workers had also experienced assault.

Table 44: Experienced Violence in the Workplace

<b>Threats or intimidation</b>	25% ›	
<b>Racial slurs</b>	24% ›	
<b>Assault</b>	10% ›	
<b>Robbery</b>	4% ›	
<b>Other</b>	9%	
<b>None</b>	60%	

We heard disturbing stories of severe abuse and violence or threats of violence. One worker told us he had been kicked and pepper-sprayed by customers. Another told a harrowing story of a volatile customer who arrived while she and another female worker opened the restaurant:

[O]ne Sunday where me [and] one of my co-workers opened together. And usually Sunday mornings are a little busy . . . while I went to get the phone, a customer came in [who] started screaming and threatening the other co-worker . . . He kept coming back in and out, in and out . . . I was afraid that he was going to

jump over the thing and hit her. So that was very, very scary . . . It's just two girls. Like what are we going to do? Obviously we can't defend ourselves, but like we're alone versus this guy. Both of us are pretty small persons. So obviously he could smack us and like we could get hurt. Yeah, that was a situation that was so scary.

Another significant finding that emerged over the course of our interviews with workers was their experience interacting with Los Angeles's growing unhoused population. These interactions were often unpleasant, and increased in frequency during the pandemic. Multiple workers described similar day-to-day realities at their restaurants, illustrating how fast-food restaurants have come to serve as critical infrastructure for LA's unhoused population, providing much-needed shelter and bathrooms, both of which the city has systematically failed to deliver. Fast-food workers deserve to be understood as front-line workers in LA's ongoing housing crisis.

## f. Raising Concerns about Workplace Issues

While COVID-19 concerns predominated, more than one-quarter of workers raised concerns about other working conditions.

Table 45: Raised Concerns about Working Conditions

<b>Yes</b>	27%
<b>No</b>	73%

Workers in our survey who sought redress felt overworked, underpaid, and unsafe. Unfavorable scheduling, overwork, and dangerous working conditions stood out among worker concerns, followed closely by inadequate pay. One in three workers who raised issues in management sought sick leave, and over a fifth sought redress for unpaid overtime.

Table 46: Type of Concerns Raised with Management

<b>Bad schedule/shift</b>	46%
<b>Made to work more</b>	42%
<b>Dangerous working conditions (non-COVID-19)</b>	36%
<b>Need a raise/pay too low</b>	35%
<b>Sick leave</b>	32%
<b>Unpaid wages (such as overtime)</b>	22%
<b>Discrimination</b>	19%
<b>Abuse or harassment</b>	17%
<b>Asked to wait to cash paycheck</b>	6%
<b>Other</b>	15%

The majority of workers who raised concerns did so by discussing the problem with their supervisor or employer; some asked a lawyer, union representative, worker center, or community group to make a complaint on their behalf.

Table 47: How was Concern Raised

<b>Discussed problem with supervisor or employer</b>	82%
<b>Asked lawyer, union rep, worker center, community group to complain to employer</b>	14%
<b>Filed complaint with agency (such as DOL or Cal/OSHA)</b>	8%
<b>Testified at a hearing/participated in an official investigation</b>	1%
<b>Other</b>	7%

The majority of people who raised concerns discussed the problem with their supervisor or employer. Some workers directly delegated management as a group. Their concerns went disregarded, or they faced retaliation by having their hours or pay cut. Of those who raised concerns, over a third reported that their employer did nothing to resolve the issue; some had their hours or pay cut; and others were given worse assignments as a form of retaliation by the employer.

Table 48: Employer Response to Concern

<b>Employer responded to concern to resolve the issue</b>	40%
<b>Employer ignored me/us and did nothing</b>	36%
<b>Cut you or co-workers' hours or pay</b>	19%
<b>Gave you or co-workers worse assignments</b>	10% ›
<b>Fired or suspended you or your co-workers</b>	4% ›
<b>Employer or supervisor threatened to fire you or co-workers</b>	4% ›
<b>Threatened to call police or immigration</b>	2% ›
<b>Harassed or abused you or your co-workers</b>	1% ›
<b>Other</b>	13%



Most workers experienced inadequate management responses when they raised issues. One cook, who delegated management with a cohort of other cooks to share their concerns, said, “[W]e thought we weren’t being given enough, not related to COVID, we weren’t being treated well enough. And we also thought that we are being underpaid. So we talked to the supervisor, but . . . it was not well taken care of as we had expected.”

Even extreme violence received insufficient management response. “There’s no security,” shared one worker, “If we are there alone, if things come to the point where it gets real bad, we have to call 911 and wait for them to come and protect ourselves, and defend ourselves.” This worker lamented the removal of security guards and wished to see them return.

Many shared frustration with what they perceived as managements’ rewarding customer abuse. “The issue is that the manager sees the customer scream at us or tell us something and she tries to make the situation better by giving them free food or free drink or stuff like that. So obviously they know that if they treat us bad, they’re going to get away with it and they’re even going to get an award for it.” Another offered, “[Customers] can come here, throw a tantrum . . . and you’re over here giving them a drink or a refund.”

Finally, one undocumented worker we spoke with expressed frustration over discriminatory treatment and fear of retaliation on the basis of immigration status. She explained that political education and access to social safety nets like unemployment insurance, currently unavailable to undocumented Californians, would enable her and her family to speak up with less fear of retaliation. “I feel like we definitely need to be louder about that topic because . . . we contribute to the economy. I think we’re just as deserving as everybody else to get something.”

Nearly one in four workers who experienced issues in the workplace did not speak up to raise those concerns with their employer.

Table 49: Had Problem but Did Not Raise Concern

<b>Yes</b>	38%
<b>No</b>	62%

Those who did not raise concerns felt that their voices would not be heard and that it would not make a difference, or they feared reprisals. In addition, some workers explained that they did not know whom to talk to or where to take the complaint.

Table 50: Reason for Not Raising Concern

<b>Did not think it would make a difference</b>	53%
<b>Afraid of losing job</b>	43%
<b>Afraid of getting hours or wages cut</b>	35%
<b>Did not know who to talk to or where to take complaint</b>	23%
<b>Other co-workers were disciplined for speaking up</b>	13%
<b>Fear due to immigration status</b>	7%
<b>Employers made threats that if they complained, they would be fired, reported to immigration, etc.</b>	3%
<b>Other</b>	13%

Workers shared that their fear of retaliation inhibited their willingness to address concerns, despite harrowing instances of harassment, abuse, and violence. In some cases, workers cited immigration status as a reason they did not feel comfortable speaking up, instead keeping quiet to keep their jobs and provide for their families despite clear safety violations or dangerous working conditions.

One worker shared that workers relied solely on one another to endure sexual harassment. “Crew members were leaning on each other, afraid to speak up or just didn’t feel comfortable speaking up.” This worker ultimately spoke up despite fear of retaliation. “[W]ith an issue as big as sexual harassment I just couldn’t not say anything. I was very worried that I would be retaliated against, like in pay cuts, but I know my rights as a worker and it’s things of that nature and having to suffer consequences like that, that’s just not acceptable.”

Many we spoke with enjoyed their jobs and their co-workers’ company but felt alienated from and even afraid of management. “I love the people that I work with but . . . when there’s just not a sense of teamwork, it makes it a little difficult to run a successful store.” Said another, “I often feel like some of us take on more than we need to rather than being able to communicate with our manager and say, ‘Hey, this is what I feel like we can really benefit from.’ We just put the weight [of retaliation] on ourselves [when we] try to take the lead and I wish it weren’t that way.”

## g. Addressing Workplace Issues Collectively

Across the country, workers in different industries have held nearly two hundred strikes in 2021.<sup>22</sup> Fast-food workers held strikes throughout Los Angeles over unsafe working conditions and better pay.<sup>23</sup> Nearly a third of workers in our survey came together to address issues in the workplace. One-third participated in a strike.

Table 51: Workers Collectively Addressing Issues

Response	Came together to address issue	Participated in workplace strike
Yes	32%	30%
No	68%	70%

The majority of workers (76%) said their employers were aware that the worker had participated in an action or talked to their co-workers about workplace issues.

Table 52: Employer Knew About Workplace Actions

Yes	76%
No	24%

Concerns raised during the strike or workplace demonstration largely went ignored by their employers. Eighteen percent faced retaliation for their participation.

Table 53: Employer Response to Participation in Actions

Employer ignored workers and did nothing	67%
Cut worker or co-workers' hours or pay	11% ›
Employer threatened to fire	5% ›
Threatened to call police or immigration	2% ›
Harassed or abused worker or co-workers	2% ›
Gave worse work assignments	1% ›
Fired worker or co-workers	1% ›
Other	27%





## Recommendations

This report shows that fast-food workers have suffered from high transmission rates of COVID-19 with inadequate protections, dangerous and difficult working conditions, and significant economic and health impacts. These findings show the need for policy intervention in the fast-food industry to enforce robust COVID-19 safety protocols that prevent worker and community transmission, and to promote basic labor standards such as protection from wage theft, retaliation, workplace violence, and harassment. Based on the results of the survey and interviews, we make the following recommendations:

- 1. Enforce COVID-19 safety protocols and provide workers with adequate protection from retaliation and abuse for enforcing those protocols.** Fast-food workers need safe workplaces that conform to COVID-19 safety protocols, and workers must be free to address concerns. Workers should not have to choose between their paychecks and health. The LA County Department of Public Health should develop a targeted enforcement approach for this high-risk sector to ensure that safety protocols are appropriately followed.
- 2. Strengthen the fast-food worker voice in the industry.** As principal stakeholders, worker expertise should guide oversight and standards in the fast-food industry. Workers we spoke with had many concrete ideas to improve their conditions and morale, including better staffing ratios, pay, training, support for immigrant workers, and site-specific protocols to increase efficiency and customer satisfaction. Our findings show that workers seek greater decision-making power and authority over their work conditions, without fear of repercussion.
- 3. Improve labor and health and safety practices in the workplace.** Government agencies should

improve existing protections from wage theft, injury, retaliation, discrimination, harassment and unsafe working conditions. Workers need to feel safe and empowered to enforce their workplace rights. Continue to support the Public Health Councils program (in partnership with UCLA LOSH) which is designed to help with compliance and enforcement at worksites and policies such as LA County's anti-retaliation ordinance that protect workers from retaliation for reporting public health violations.

- 4. Support ongoing research in the fast-food industry.** Researchers should continue to document the work conditions with the fast-food industry on the local and state level.

# Appendix A: Sample and Population Demographics

Table A1: Demographics of Survey Sample and Fast Worker Population in Los Angeles County

	Survey Sample	Fast-Food Worker Population*
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	64%	69%
Male	34%	31%
Transgender	<1%	n/a
Gender non-conforming, or genderqueer	<1%	n/a
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Latinx	67%	73%
Black	12%	5%
Asian	4%	10%
White	8%	10%
Native American	1%	2%
Other	2%	--
Multiple	6%	--
<b>Age group</b>		
16–18	2%	17%
19–24	24%	45%
25–39	37%	26%
40–64	28%	12%
65+	9%	<1%

\* 2017–2019 IPUMS American Community Survey (ACS) data.

## Appendix B: Methodology

Commissioned by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH), this study sought to understand the experience of fast-food workers during COVID-19 and more generally. This study is the second part of the fast-food research project in collaboration with the UC Berkeley Labor Center, UCLA Labor Occupational Health and Safety Program (LOSH), and the UC Berkeley Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP). The first report included extensive industry and policy analysis and analysis of government data sources. Those findings were published in a report in March 2021.

From June 28, 2021, and October 28, 2021, the UCLA Labor Center conducted online surveys of fast-food workers in Los Angeles County, California, who were eighteen years of age or older, and in a non-management position. For the purposes of this study, we defined fast-food workers as those who work in establishments where, even before COVID-19, customers order their food either at the counter or in a drive-thru lane.

The survey questionnaire comprised seventy-eight questions divided into six parts, addressing (1) current job and professional history, (2) how COVID-19 has impacted this job, (3) their workplace conditions, (4) safety protocols at their workplace, (5) their experience dealing with management, and (6) demographics. Surveys were conducted online using the Qualtrics platform, in both English and Spanish, and took approximately thirty minutes to complete.

Participants were recruited through community organizations including Fight for 15, Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance and the Restaurant Opportunities Center-Los Angeles. In addition, we purchased targeted ads through Facebook—identifying workers who had listed a fast-food restaurant or working in the food industry in their profile. Fifty-six percent of the total surveyed were recruited by our community partners, utilizing their existing networks within the fast-food industry, while the remaining 44% percent were fielded through social media advertising and completed a preliminary screening survey to verify their employment information.

Participants could fill out the survey through the online link. In addition, FF15 conducted surveys with workers over the phone and manually entered survey data into the online surveying platform on the worker's behalf. Each fast-food worker received a \$30 incentive upon completion of a valid and complete survey. Due to the online recruitment and advertised stipend, we received a significant amount of invalid surveys, which necessitated meticulous review of screening and survey data to ensure only qualified respondents were included in the final analysis. Surveys were excluded due to multiple submissions from identical IP addresses, submissions from outside of Los Angeles County, and submissions that were incomplete.

To ensure a well-distributed sample of workers, we limited our fielding and recruitment to a maximum of five workers from any single fast-food restaurant location. In total, we surveyed 417 fast-food workers across 118 companies at 342 individual workplaces. Forty-four percent of companies were chains or franchises with five or more total locations. Workplace data were used for tracking purposes only and were not connected to the survey data.

From our survey pool, we selected fifteen fast-food workers representative of our overall sample, from diverse backgrounds and with distinctive experiences in fast food, for follow-up interviews. Each interviewee received an additional \$50 incentive. These interviews ranged from ten minutes to over an hour and were conducted via telephone or video-conferencing software.

This study had some limitations, including, in particular, the difficulty of subject recruitment due to COVID-19 restrictions. Our sample skewed older and toward those connected to a community organization or union or through social media.

# Appendix C: Acknowledgments

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