

COVID-19 Has Exposed Underlying Injustices and Continues to Threaten the Health and Safety of Workers in Our Communities



Jessica E. Martinez, MPH

HOW HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECTED WORKERS OF COLOR?

Evelyn, an immigrant Latina worker and mother, works at a processing plant in North Carolina owned by Case Farms & Company that sells a billion pounds of poultry each year to customers such as Boar's Head, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Taco Bell.

When the pandemic began, Evelyn and her coworkers—a majority of whom are immigrants with limited English—stood shoulder to shoulder in the production line with no opportunity for social distancing. They were not provided with masks until workers began testing positive for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Even then, the company would not replace masks unless they were visibly torn.

Without adequate safety measures, more workers got sick, including Evelyn and her daughter. Forced to quarantine with no economic relief, Evelyn turned to the Western North Carolina Workers Center for support.

Evelyn and her coworkers formulated demands for more protective gear, sufficient pay, 2 weeks of paid sick leave, and regular workplace inspections. As of this writing, they continue to mobilize workers and the public to press for the safe working conditions they deserve.

Western North Carolina Workers Center is 1 of 24 affiliates of my organization, the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health (National COSH). National COSH groups across the country train workers about their workplace rights and advocate for safe working conditions.

Every day, National COSH groups receive hundreds of calls from workers such as Evelyn in low-paying jobs who are scared and desperately seeking help. Although no public agency is tracking deaths from COVID-19 among frontline workers, we know that thousands are dying after exposure in slaughterhouses, nursing homes, prisons, and other workplaces.^{1,2}

This deadly pandemic has revealed long-standing inequities deeply rooted in our society. Most of the calls we receive are from people of color whose economic

exploitation is sometimes compounded by their race and immigration status. Although some say the virus does not discriminate, the history of institutional racism and discriminatory policies impacts who lives and who dies.³

The threat posed by the virus has a greater impact on workers of color, immigrants, women, and the poor.⁴ These workers are disproportionately represented in many of what are now recognized as essential jobs: caring for our families and providing us with food, health care, sanitation, and other critical needs (Figure 1A and B).

Despite how important these jobs are to our communities, these workers frequently labor for low wages and lack important benefits. Many frontline workers do not have paid sick leave, so they may be forced to work even after becoming ill—always a risk but especially dangerous during a pandemic. In addition to the hazards confronted in the workplace, many of these workers lack adequate healthcare coverage⁵ and access to COVID-19 testing and may also face overcrowding at home and other adverse living conditions that increase their risk of exposure to infectious disease.^{6,7}

Adding insult to injury, workers such as Evelyn often face illegal retaliation by their employers when they speak up about safety problems. Imagine being fired for requesting a mask or for suggesting safer work protocols that will reduce your risk of becoming infected with COVID-19.

This is the reality for tens of thousands of workers across the country. As complaints of retaliation against whistleblowers skyrocketed during the pandemic, the response from the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was slow and inadequate.

According to an August 2020 report from the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Labor,⁸

From the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, Los Angeles, California

Address correspondence to: Jessica E. Martinez, MPH, National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, 74 Boston Avenue, Somerville MA 02144. E-mail: jessica@nationalcosh.org.

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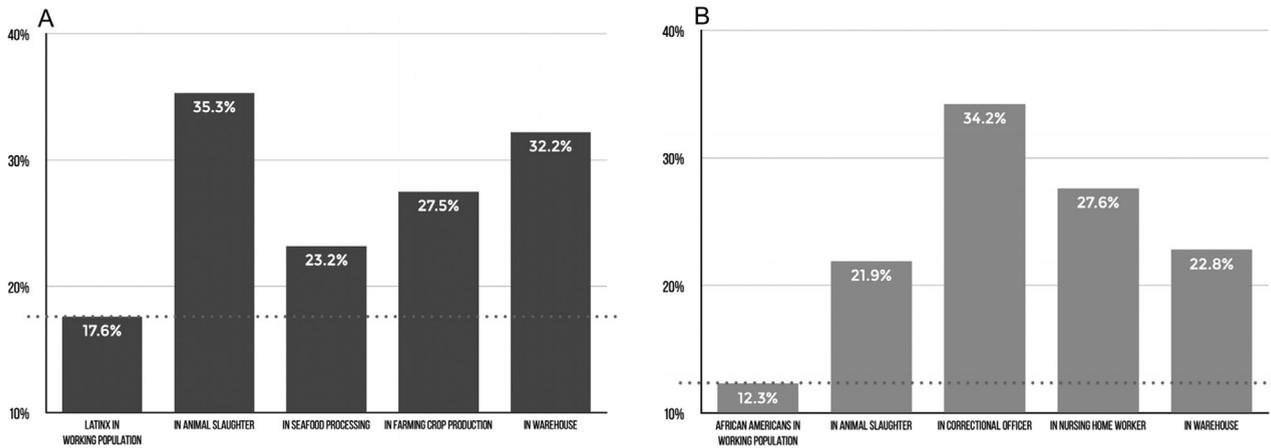


Figure 1. Essential industries. (A) Latinxs are overrepresented in high-risk essential industries. (B) African Americans are overrepresented in high-risk essential industries.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

whistleblower complaints increased sharply during the pandemic, but the number of OSHA staff assigned to investigate them actually decreased. It now takes almost 279 days to close a whistleblower investigation—or >8 months when a worker who has been illegally fired is unable to earn a living.

Although OSHA has the responsibility for enforcing federal safety laws in millions of private-sector workplaces, the agency has been chronically understaffed and under-resourced. The pandemic has brought this systemic failure into sharper focus. Between April and December of 2020, the agency received >12,000 complaints from workers about COVID-19–related safety conditions but opened inspections in just 333 cases: <3% of complaints received.⁹

In those few cases where an inspection did take place and an employer was cited for safety violations, the fines were often miniscule. In September, for example, after 6 worker deaths at JBS, a multibillion-dollar meatpacking company, OSHA fined the firm just \$15,615.¹⁰ These insignificant penalties do little to deter future violations and actually give companies an incentive to push workers to work faster and harder in extremely hazardous working conditions.

To protect vulnerable workers from the ravages of COVID-19 and other preventable workplace hazards, National COSH groups and worker leaders have collaborated on a new Agenda for Worker Safety and Health.¹¹ This worker-centered transformational vision, based on real experience in our workplaces, calls for stronger safety laws, protections against illegal retaliation, vaccine access for workers at high risk, a seat at the table for

workers in all policy discussions, and measures to address the ongoing racial and economic inequities.

As we developed this agenda, we had Evelyn and tens of thousands of workers in mind, who have kept our grocery stores stocked, our hospitals open, and our buses up and running and who have performed scores of other life-sustaining jobs during this terrible pandemic. The labor of frontline workers has kept us all alive; the least we can do is stand up for their right to earn a living without risking their own lives.

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