

2021/9

UC DAVIS ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER

# COVID-19 & DOMESTIC WORKERS

The COVID-19 pandemic is changing the rules of labor for almost everyone. For those who toil in low wage, essential jobs, the impact has been significant as the virus upends workers' health, hours and pay. Many of these workers lack health insurance, paid time off or the most basic rights in the workplace that so many of us take for granted.

In California, more than 2 million homes rely on the essential labor of housecleaners, nannies and home attendants. Domestic workers, who are mostly immigrant women of color, are the only group of workers excluded from the state's health and safety protections under the California Occupational Safety and Health Act.

This research project aims to figure out if these longstanding workplace issues, combined with changes on the job due to COVID-19, make domestic workers more vulnerable to the virus. This report is a look at data collected from September 2020 through April 2021.

**PREPARED FOR:**  
**THE CALIFORNIA DOMESTIC WORKERS COALITION**

September 2021

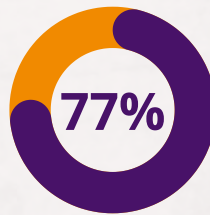
# RESEARCH TAKEAWAYS

More than three-quarters of employers did not provide masks—the most ubiquitous and accessible type of protection, and one of the most effective when properly fitted. Although domestic workers understood the importance of wearing one, the pandemic burdened them with significant financial losses that made purchasing safety supplies difficult. Employers put workers in further danger by not telling them about COVID risks when entering homes. Workers reported to advocacy organizations that employers sometimes asked them to disinfect living spaces without warning them someone in the home had COVID.

**3X**

## HIGHER COVID-19 INFECTION RATES

Domestic workers suffered from COVID-19 at triple the rate of the general population in California



### MASKS NOT PROVIDED

Percent of employers who did not provide any type of mask to workers who wore one



### NO COVID RISK INFO

Percent of employers who did not tell workers about risk of COVID exposure in homes



### NO SOCIAL DISTANCING

Percent of employers who did not mandate physical distancing indoors

# NUMBERS & STATISTICS

# 164

*total survey participants*

The **COVID-19 Survey for Workers** collected data from domestic workers before widespread vaccination or the emergence of the Delta variant in the United States. The majority of domestic workers interviewed for this research project were Hispanic (82%) women (95%) who worked as housecleaners, nannies and home attendants for seniors and people with disabilities.

COVID-19 affected domestic workers physically and emotionally with significantly higher levels of illness, more stress, greater job loss and fewer resources. Many of these workers were undocumented, which meant that they did not receive unemployment benefits or have access to other types of support despite being frontline workers.

## THE HEALTH IMPACT

72%

### WHO REPORTED HIGHER LEVELS OF STRESS RELATED TO HEALTH CARE COVERAGE

Nearly three-quarters of domestic workers were moderately (40%) or extremely (32%) stressed by changes to health care or health insurance during the pandemic.

33%

### THOUGHT THEY GOT COVID-19 FROM WORK

One-third of those who reported symptoms of COVID-19 believed they had been exposed on the job.

30%

### WITH A COVID-19 DIAGNOSIS

A significantly higher percentage of domestic workers reported that a healthcare provider told them they currently had or likely have had COVID-19 compared with 10% of Californians during the same period.

## THE ECONOMIC IMPACT

87%

### HAVE LESS WORK OVERALL

Domestic workers responded that they're working fewer jobs due to decreased labor demand.

36%

### HAVE LOST ALL WORK

These domestic workers lost all of their jobs, while another 47 percent lost some.

87%

### ARE WORKING FEWER HOURS

Domestic workers are vulnerable to changes in work hours due to employer cancellations during the pandemic.

29%

### HAVEN'T BEEN PAID FOR WORK

On top of everything else, outright wage theft by employers is a common problem for these workers.

67%

### ARE WORKING FOR LESS MONEY

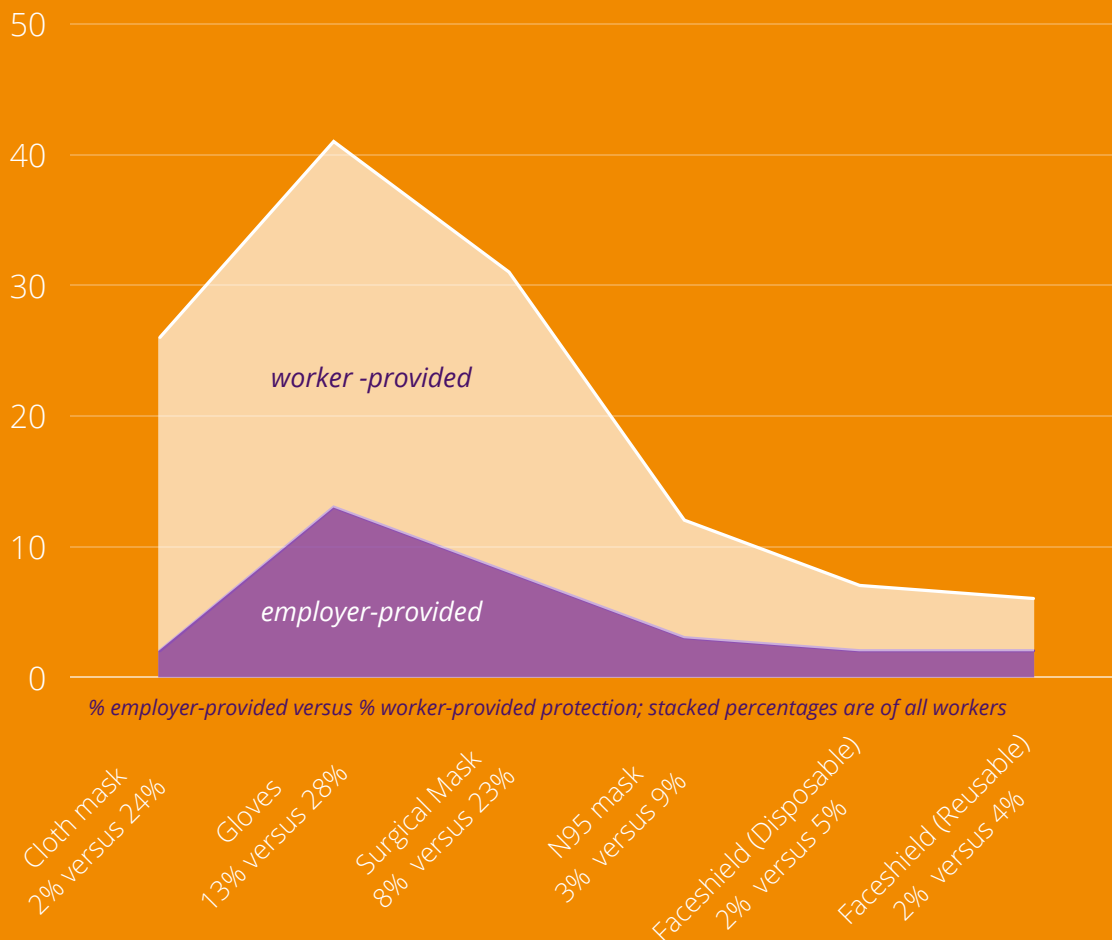
More than two-thirds of domestic workers have been laboring for less money during the pandemic. In contrast, other frontline workers received state-funded temporary hazard pay in 22 cities and counties across the state, which in most cases amounted to an additional \$5 per hour.

# EMPLOYERS DIDN'T OFFER ADEQUATE PROTECTION DURING PANDEMIC

Domestic workers said they had to provide their own PPE to protect themselves. Our data showed when employers did offer PPE, cloth masks were most desired by domestic workers but least provided by employers.

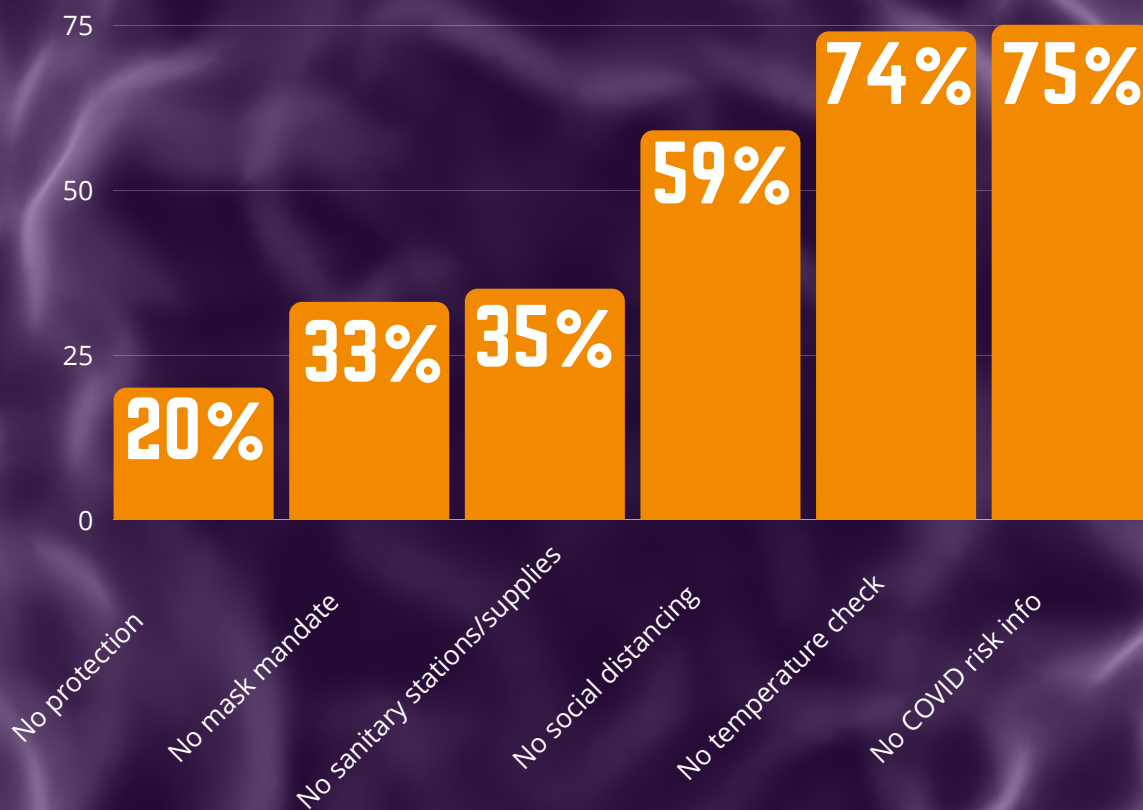
According to the CDC, a tightly fitted face mask is one of the best ways to protect yourself against SARS-CoV-2. Scientists recommend double masking, with a tightly woven fabric on top and an inner layer designed to filter out particles underneath.

## PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT PROVIDED BY EMPLOYERS & WORKERS



# EMPLOYERS DIDN'T OFFER ADEQUATE PROTECTION DURING PANDEMIC

## EMPLOYER PRACTICES



- 20% of employers didn't provide any protections listed
- 33% of employers didn't require mask while at work
- 35% of employers didn't offer workers hand washing stations or sanitation supplies
- 59% of employers didn't require physical distancing on the job
- 74% of employers didn't require temperature check before working
- 75% of employers provided no info about COVID-19 risks on the job

*Percentages are of those who were working*

## **No one is safe unless we all are, so why aren't domestic workers protected?**

As long as the pandemic rages on and the most vulnerable among us are at risk, we're all in danger of getting sick or dying from COVID-19. The virus is now thriving in unvaccinated people. As we've seen with the Delta variant, SARS-CoV-2 can mutate making our only source of hope—the vaccine—less effective even for those most protected. To defeat the virus it's critical to protect all workers equally.

# **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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**We recommend domestic workers receive the same protections and rights enjoyed by other workers and that:**

- ✓ Vaccines are free and available to all
- ✓ COVID-19 tests are free and available to all

**And all employers are required to follow CDC and OSHA COVID-19 guidelines for:**

- ✓ Physical distancing in workplaces
- ✓ Providing face masks and sanitation supplies
- ✓ Providing information on COVID-19 policies and procedures in workplaces
- ✓ Reporting COVID-19 illness or death in workplaces

# WORKERS' VOICES

"At one of the houses where I work, my employers did not tell me that they had COVID. It was only after the job that I realized that the husband had died, and they had hired me to clean up because they were going to have the reception for the wake. My life was at risk without knowing it. I too could have caught it and spread it to my own family." — *Carolina, Housecleaner, Los Angeles, CA*

"Throughout my 13 years that I have dedicated myself to housecleaning, I have experienced very difficult things. The pandemic has been the most difficult thing that I have had to live through. Without a mask, I have had to clean the bedroom of a person who was infected with COVID. An employer worries because they think that you can bring the virus from outside, but you don't know if the virus is inside their home." — *Yeni, Housecleaner, Pomona, CA*

"I always think of myself and my employers, but they don't think of me. I have had to buy my own gloves, my own masks. I have to protect myself. They don't think that I could catch it, or I could bring the disease home and spread it to my husband. I got sick in January, I got COVID and I had to stop working for a month." — *Norma, Nanny, Los Angeles, CA*

"It's hard to work without protection, especially since I have close contact with my patients. For example, with one of my clients, I wrote to his son about the supplies I needed, but he didn't give me gloves, so I just bought them for myself. My clients' protective equipment is not really complete. I just can't stop working, because of course, no work, no pay. But protective equipment is important to me, especially since I'm 68-years-old and I don't want to get COVID." — *Menchu, Homecare Worker, Hercules, CA*

*Testimonies provided by the California Domestic Workers Coalition*

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