

Resource Paper

Filipino American Essential and Frontline Workers Battling Multiple Crises: COVID-19, Economic Inequality, and Racism

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ABSTRACT

Despite being hailed as “heroes,” frontline and essential workers of the COVID-19 pandemic faced profound health, economic, and social challenges. Notably, the large representation of Filipino Americans employed in healthcare and other essential industries made them vulnerable to contracting and dying from COVID-19. Additionally, existing economic vulnerabilities among Filipino American subgroups and the backdrop of anti-Asian hate compounded the stress of imminent health threats. This policy brief highlights findings from the Work and Wellness among Filipino Americans during COVID-19 Study, a community-based participatory research project aimed to understand and address effects of the pandemic for Filipino American workers in California.

INTRODUCTION

Frontline and essential workers were overwhelmingly praised as the “heroes” of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet few truly understood or addressed the substantial health, economic, and social challenges they faced. Among frontline workers, the high representation of Filipino Americans employed in healthcare and other essential industries made

them vulnerable to contracting and dying from COVID-19 (Escobedo et al., 2022; Wong, 2020). During the early phase of the pandemic, the high fatality rates and heavy psychological toll of pandemic stress among Filipino nurses became more widely recognized (Escobedo et al., 2022; Morton, 2021). However, even before the onset of COVID-19, Filipino Americans—particularly women and immigrants—employed in home health and residential care, manufacturing, retail, food services, and other service-based industries faced economic hardships that worsened as the pandemic lingered (Gaitens et al., 2021; Nasol & Francisco-Mechavez, 2021). This all occurred against the broader backdrop of racism and xenophobic hate directed toward Asian Americans, including highly-publicized cases targeting Filipino Americans that created a climate of fear and anxiety about issues of community safety (Grossman, 2021; Yee, 2022).

Filipino Americans comprise the largest Asian American ethnic group in California, making the state home to four in ten Filipino Americans nationally (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023), yet their needs remain hidden when grouped among Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders as a whole. To address the lack of disaggregated race and ethnicity health surveillance data, this policy brief highlights key findings from the Work and Wellness among Filipino Americans during COVID-19 (WWF) Study, a community-based participatory research project aimed to understand and address effects of the pandemic for Filipino American workers in California.

STUDY DESIGN

This study was conducted as a partnership between UCLA and the Filipino Migrant Center (FMC), a Southern California-based organization that serves and organizes Filipino American migrant and low-income workers and their families. Originally born out of community-led mutual aid efforts at the onset of COVID-19, our community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach ensured equitable collaboration and shared power in the research process. We followed Indigenist principles as described by Walters and colleagues (2008) as a step toward decolonizing academic research practices in order to honor existing knowledge and strengths within the community, enhance academic accountability to conduct culturally relevant research, and ensure study findings contribute to meaningful change for community members. A more detailed account of the study's CBPR process is available elsewhere (Sangalang, 2022).

Results presented here come from focus groups with essential workers (n = 45 participants) and survey data (n = 410 survey participants) of Filipino American workers in California, collected between November 2021 and June 2022. Focus groups as well as surveys were conducted in English and Tagalog. Participants were recruited via social media, email, announcements at community events, and word of mouth. To be eligible for focus groups, participants needed to: (a) identify as Filipino or Filipino/a/x American, (b) be 18 years or older, (c) speak Tagalog or English, (d) live in California, and (e) be currently employed as an essential worker in the industries of health-care, retail, food services, caregiving, education, or cleaning/janitorial services. Survey eligibility criteria were similar, with the exception that participants could be employed in any industry (i.e. inclusive of essential and non-essential workers).

Among survey participants, 59 percent identified as female, 35 percent identified as male, and 6 percent identified as non-binary. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 83 years of age, with an average of 39 years of age (SD=15.88). Immigrant participants made up a majority of the survey sample (64 percent, aligned with recent U.S. Census Bureau estimates of foreign-born Filipino Americans nationally). The figure below highlights essential industries among survey participants.

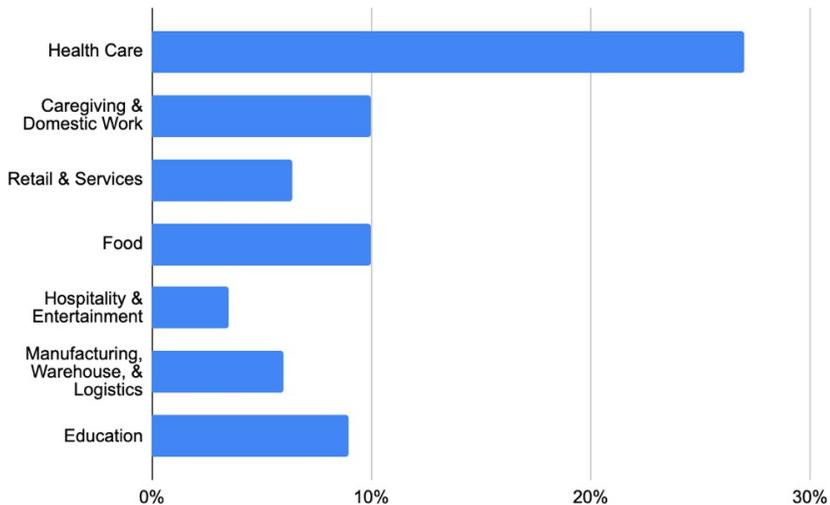


Figure 1. Essential and non-essential industries represented among Filipino American workers in California (WWE, n=410).

FINDINGS

Economic Hardship and Workplace Concerns

56 percent of survey participants earned 35,000 dollars or less annually, well below California's median income (41,870 dollars in 2019), and 38 percent of survey participants were concerned about not having paid sick or vacation days. With regards to aspects of wage theft, approximately 27 percent of survey participants expressed concerns about being paid less than minimum wage. Meanwhile about 21 percent of survey participants reported concerns about having wages withheld from one's employer, not being paid for overtime (i.e. extra hours worked), and being paid late. Focus group participants employed as caregivers in home healthcare reported economic exploitation, such as wage theft and emotional abuse, with one focus group participant stating she felt as if she was made a "slave."

COVID-19 Safety at Work

Over two-thirds (69 percent) of survey participants indicated they feared contracting COVID-19 at work, and a substantial majority (77 percent) reported they did not feel safe at work. Lack of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) contributed to a sense of demoralization among workers; one focus group participant stated, "If you're on the floor and you're reusing the same thing over and over and then COVID is everywhere, it doesn't really make you confident or feel safe working, putting that mask on over and over."

Health and Mental Health

Among survey participants who reported burnout symptoms, 49 percent experienced symptoms of physical and emotional exhaustion due to work stress a few times a month to a few times a year. Meanwhile, 40 percent experienced symptoms of burnout at least once a week or more; 12 percent reported feeling burnout everyday. About 32 percent of survey participants met criteria for possible generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and 20 percent met criteria for possible major depressive disorder (MDD). Healthcare workers were chronically exposed to trauma on the job. As one focus group participant who worked as an ICU nurse for several years stated, "I have never experienced this much death and dying."

Anti-Asian Racism

24 percent of all survey participants reported feeling treated with less respect a few times a month or more. Filipino American

healthcare workers, in particular, felt targeted for violence and labeled as “disease carriers” due to their race as well as occupation. One focus group participant stated, “Because of wearing scrubs. . . we’re [seen as] spreading the virus.” Older women focus group participants who relied on public transportation commonly experienced harassment. One participant shared an experience of assault on the way to work: “The people in the car said, ‘Asian.’ I immediately thought that there was hate for Asians going on. The other one came down from the car. Chasing me and throwing things at me. I was thankful that somebody came and blocked them, they even brought me to where I was working. I did not do anything at that time because I was trembling in fear.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Provide Economic Support and Workplace Protections

To provide tangible support for frontline workers who have risked their lives and the lives of their family members by reporting to work, we call on legislators to: support hazard pay for all essential and frontline workers, as well as implement year-round paid sick leave; empower regulatory agencies by ensuring adequate staffing to enforce and strengthen labor laws, as well as protect against employer retaliation; enhance the economic safety net and benefits for essential workers, including undocumented workers; and protect the right to collective bargaining and increase representation through unions.

Implement Workplace Safety Measures

To protect against COVID-19 and future outbreaks, we recommend that employers: provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), on-site (or time-off work to obtain) vaccine or booster shots and COVID-19 testing, and improved pandemic preparedness, safety protocols, and health literacy education – enforcing financial penalties for employers who do not comply.

Increase Access to Health and Mental Health Care

To address the physical and mental health fallout of the pandemic, we suggest: an increase of funding for culturally and linguistically appropriate as well as trauma-informed preventative, primary, and mental health care services; improved healthcare education and coverage for employees in low-wage and informal labor settings; and increased funding for organizations that provide community-based health programs serving Filipino Americans.

Prevent and Address Racial Violence

To counter anti-Asian racism, we support: the enforcement of laws and prosecution of those who commit hate crimes; increased partnership with and funding for local organizations that work directly with impacted Asian American and Pacific Islander communities affected by violence; greater violence prevention programs and resources for the workplace and the community at large, including bystander training; and stronger protections within public transportation systems, including education and training for transit operators to intervene.

Support Community-Based Organizations Servicing the Needs of Filipino Americans

Finally, we recommend increased state funding for community-based organizations to implement programming that supports Filipino American workers, including education on workplace rights, occupational safety, and capacity building for worker leaders.

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