

Concerns and perceptions of COVID-19 among meatpacking plant workers

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Study purpose and methods

A survey was conducted between May 7-May 25, 2020 of 637 meatpacking workers to assess their concerns and perceptions related to COVID-19.

We sought to understand:

1. how the work environment had responded
2. what informational or material barriers existed
3. what preventive strategies had been used outside of work

The survey was available online through RedCap, an electronic data capture tool, in English, Spanish, and French. It was promoted through media outlets (e.g., Telemundo Nebraska, Mundo Latino, Radio Lobo, El Perico newspaper), social media (e.g., Facebook), and community organizations.

The study was approved by the UNMC Institutional Review Board.



Demographic characteristics of participants

Variable	N (%)	M (SD)
Gender (n = 469)		
Male	199 (42.4)	
Female	268 (57.1)	
Non-binary	2 (0.4)	
Nativity (n = 469)		
United States	48 (10.2)	
Mexico	235 (50.1)	
El Salvador	35 (7.5)	
Guatemala	39 (8.3)	
Cuba	63 (13.4)	
Other	49 (10.5)	
Education (n = 416)		
Completed less than high school	182 (43.8)	
High school graduate	150 (36.0)	
At least some college or technical training	84 (20.2)	
English proficiency (n = 469)		
Limited English proficient	252 (53.7)	
English proficient	217 (46.3)	
Age (n = 467)		41.5 (10.3)
Number of people in household (n = 455)		4.2 (1.8)
Number of children in household (n = 442)		1.7 (1.4)
Plant tenure (n = 462)		7.7 (7.6)

* Other included Burma, Burundi, Colombia, Congo, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, Puerto Rico, Rwanda, Sudan



Perceived risk and experience with COVID-19

451 workers (72.4%) believed that they were at “high risk” for contracting COVID-19.

Only 41.6% had been tested at the time of the survey.

Some of the barriers they mentioned to testing included:

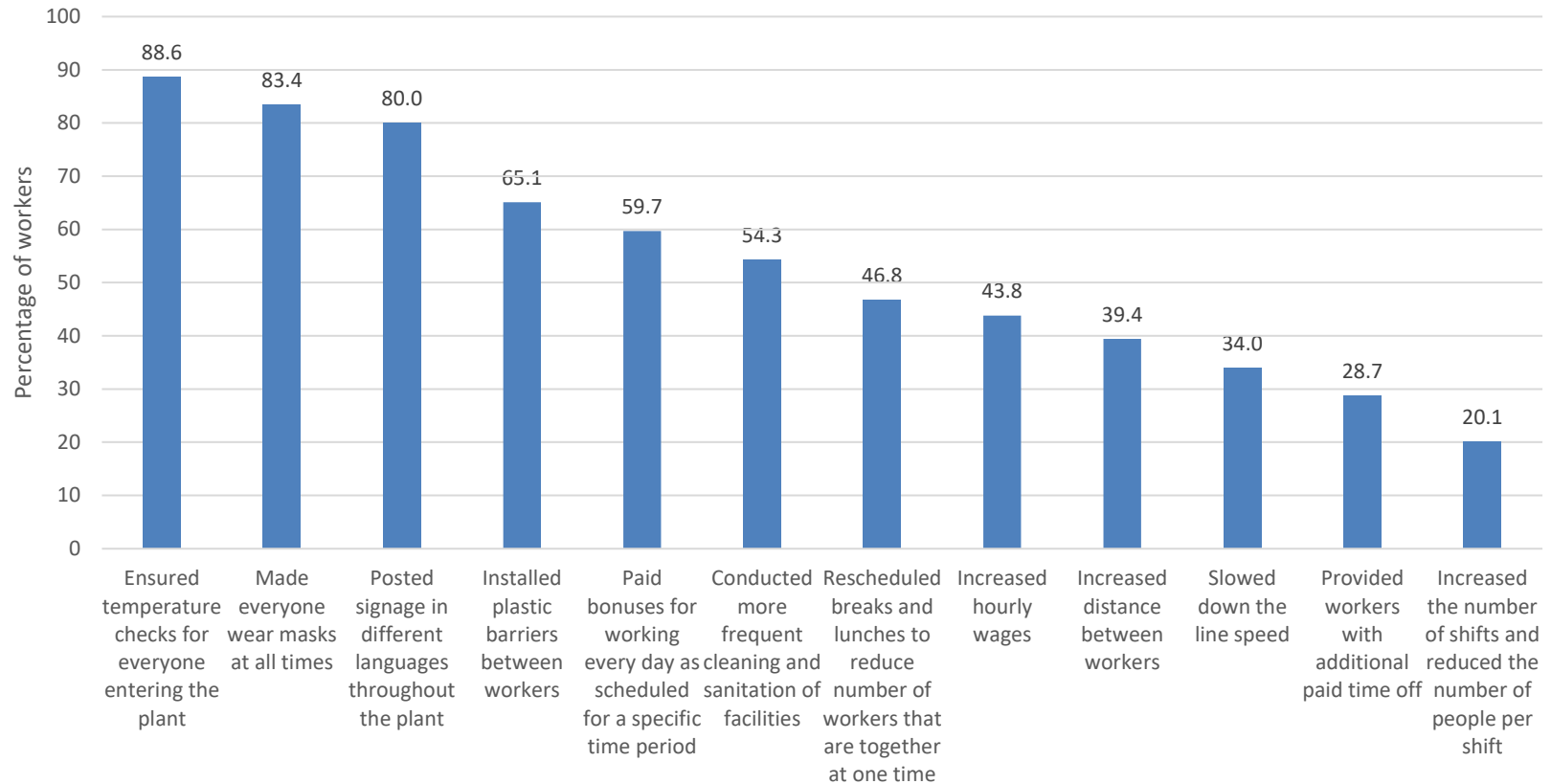
- Not sick so no need to be tested (43.5%)
- Unsure where testing locations were in their community (9.3%)
- Not sure what to do if they tested positive (9.3%)
- Cost of testing (8.2%)
- No testing available in their community (6.3%)
- Need to work so it would not matter (4.2%)
- Concerns about immigration status and testing (1.3%)

Some workers (31%) reported testing positive, having someone in their home who had tested positive, or reported that both they and others in their home had tested positive.

Nearly 90% of workers knew of coworkers who had tested positive for COVID-19.



Employer responses to COVID-19



NOTE: Percentages reported represent workers who responded 'yes' that their workplace had reacted in such a manner

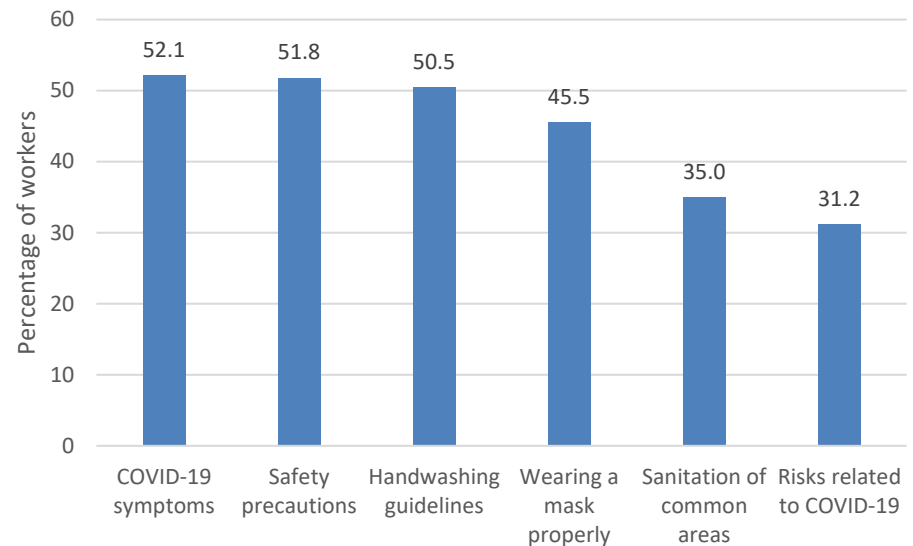


Perceived risk and experience with COVID-19

Over 70% of workers reported that their employer had provided some type of information related to COVID-19.

Other types of information requested by workers included:

- Prevalence of COVID-19 in the plant
- Contact tracing within the plant
- What to do if worker/coworker tests positive
- Importance of staying home if sick and employer policies to support quarantine/isolation
- Testing locations
- Return to work process
- Financial assistance if unable to work
- Safe carpooling



Information that is health literacy appropriate and in workers' primary language is needed.



Key themes from workers' testimonials

1. Workers described the plants to be places that consistently prioritized production over people.

"We do not trust the plants because they are only interested in their production."

"What I see is that it doesn't matter to the plant if one becomes ill. They care less and less. They only want production."

"I do not consider the plant where I work safe. They only care about filling their production, and they do not care about the health of their workers or the risks of it."

"They don't care about their workers. They only care about the money. Each person's life for them is just another cow."

"At work they are only concerned with production, not the people. Not even the President or the Governor care since we are mainly Hispanic. They want us to continue to work and don't care if we die."

"Aren't we essential workers? They should take better care of us and respect our lives more than money."



Key themes from workers' testimonials

Almost 42% of workers believed that supervisors were only interested in getting the job done fast and cheaply.

Workers mentioned that managers/supervisors pressure workers to make sure they aren't sent home by screeners, to come to work even if sick, and to return to work before 2-week quarantine/isolation period is over.

Worker comments on what they would like employer or supervisor to do:

"[I want the employer or supervisor] to slow down the speed of the line. There aren't people so we are doing the job of 5 people at the same speed. We work every day really hard with our masks really dirty from chicken shit and blood, and they don't want to give us a new mask...Supervisors are only worried about production and regardless they can't get it because the people are too tired."

"[I want the employer or supervisor] to pay our time out of work related to COVID-19, not just tell the media that they provide it to people who are infected."



Key themes from workers' testimonials

2. COVID-19 sparked fear and distress among workers.

“Well more than an experience, it is a worry because I cannot stop working and I am very afraid for the well-being of my family.”

“There are some coworkers, some people, that have died and that is what has affected me the most.”

3. Workers felt like their employers started to take action too late (if they had taken any action) and that the financial incentives provided by the plans motivated people to continue to work even if sick.

“There needs to be better oversight of staff health and working conditions and fear.”

“The information came when there were already positive tests and the measures came little by little. The delay in taking measures allowed the rapid spread.”

“I’m scared to go to work without knowing the exact number of cases there are. The \$30 [daily] bonus was useful in getting sick people to return to work. That puts us all in more danger.”



Key themes from workers' testimonials

4. Workers described being structurally vulnerable, leaving them with little recourse to be heard, seen, valued, and cared for by employers.

“Others are fearful due to their immigration status and the majority are scared that they won’t be able to pay their bills or lose their job. There are people in the plant who do not know how to read or write, older people, and that makes it more difficult to apply for help because they don’t know how to write and much less speak English, but the common denominator is they are scared to be without a job and pay their bills so they go to work sick.”

“We run and even more when they know that we cannot fight unemployment because there are a lot of undocumented working and they just have to keep quiet and keep working like this. It is not fair that this is this way.”

“We work out of necessity to provide what is necessary for our children, and now we are at risk only because the plants do not want to stop.”

“We need to work, but we also need them [employers] to take care of us.”



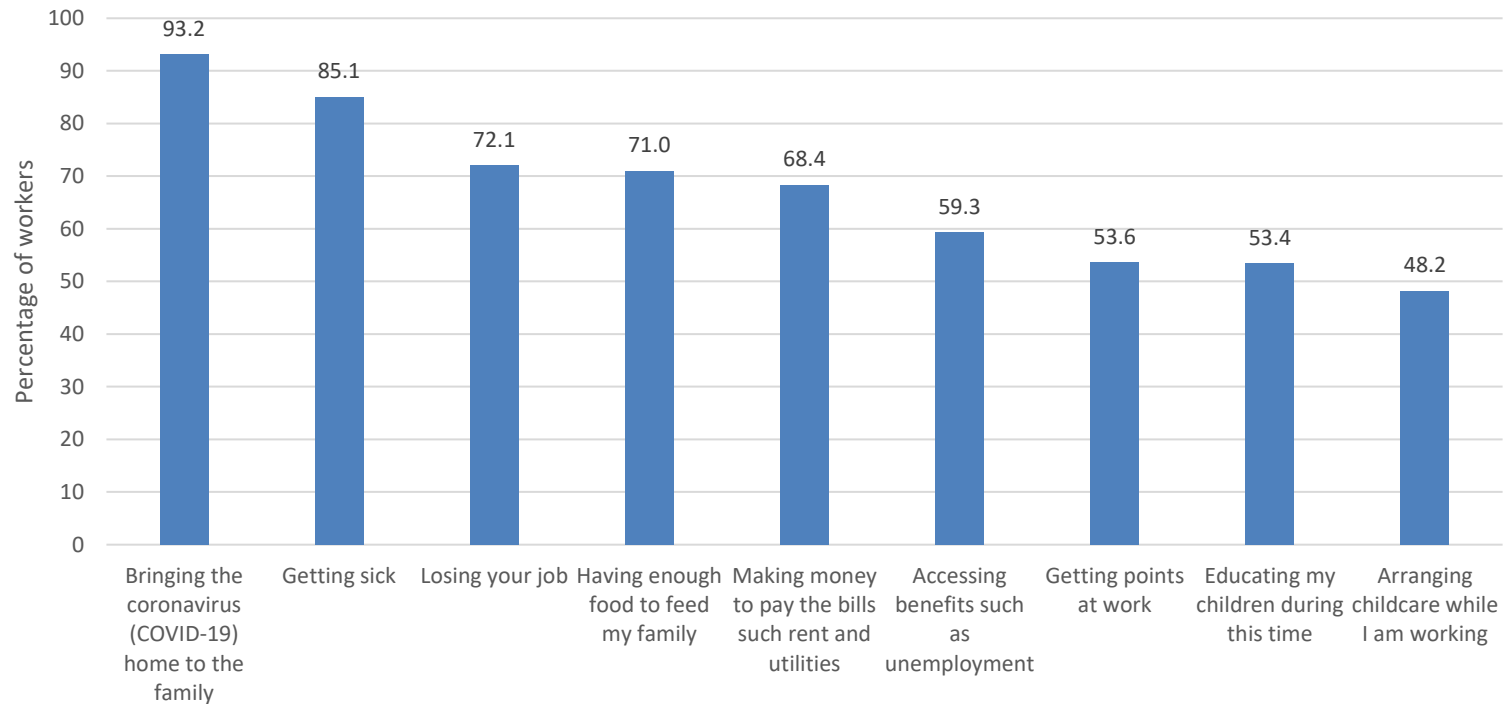
Workers' testimonials

“The Tyson logo says we are all a family. I don’t see a family now when we needed it the most. They didn’t protect us. Not even the union helped. A one-time bonus doesn’t help when we need compassion and not a call stating you need to come back to work.”





Workers concerns related to COVID-19's effect on their life



NOTE: Percentages reported represent workers who responded 'worried' or 'extremely worried' to each concern



Discussion

The majority of workers in our study believed that they were at high risk for contracting COVID-19 and were looking for the employer to take the lead in protecting and promoting their health; however, there was a pervasive belief that companies put production ahead of workers' well-being.

Workers noted that some changes had been made in their work environment, but there was still ample opportunity to enhance COVID-19 information dissemination and management based on the guidance provided in the *UNMC Meat Processing Facility COVID-19 Playbook* and through CDC/OSHA guidance.

Workers wanted more transparency. They wanted to know how the plants were working to reduce possible transmission and the number of positive cases among workers in the plant.

Workers were worried about bringing the virus home to their families and ensuring their financial sustainability during these difficult times. More community education and support are needed to mitigate these fears, promote preventive strategies, and assist in case there are temporary closures of plants.

Reducing and stopping the spread of COVID-19 is both a work and a community concern.



Protecting yourself from COVID-19 at work and outside of work (Educational flyer for workers)

Available in English, Spanish, Arabic, French, and Vietnamese

<https://www.unmc.edu/healthsecurity/covid-19/playbooks/meatpacking.html>

**Protecting yourself from COVID-19 at work**



**Use a face mask at all times**

- Avoid touching the front of the mask and don't push the mask down under your chin and let it hang around your neck
- Take off the mask carefully during lunch to eat. Remove by the ear loops and place on a paper towel with the outside of mask facing down.
- Change your mask everyday and it may need to be changed more frequently if it gets dirty or wet

**Wash or disinfect your hands**

- Wash your hands for 20-30 seconds
- Before putting on your mask and after taking it off
- Before you eat
- After you take off your gloves or use the restroom

**Avoid touching your face**

- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth
- Use the inside of your elbow or a tissue when you cough or sneeze

**Follow social distancing rules**

- Follow the flow of traffic through the plant like in the hallways and in the cafeteria
- Avoid getting together in large groups (e.g., during the screening process when entering the plant or in the locker rooms)

**Know your employer's policies**

- Will I be informed if a coworker near me tests positive for COVID-19?
- Will I be paid if I get sick or need to be quarantined at home?
- If I am sick, when can I return to work?

Obtain information from reliable sources like the CDC www.cdc.gov and the WHO www.who.int

**Protecting yourself from COVID-19 outside of work**

**Avoid carpooling if possible**

- Limit the number of people in the vehicle
- Make sure that there is adequate space between people in the vehicle
- Use a mask at all times when there are other people in the vehicle
- Improve air flow in the car by opening the window or placing air conditioning on non-recirculation mode

**Follow social distancing rules**

- Maintain 6-feet of distance between you and other people in public places
- Avoid visiting family members and friends in their homes
- Limit grocery shopping and other errands to once a week

**Wash your hands and disinfect common areas in the house**

- Wash your hands using soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces in the house

**If someone in your home is sick, practice everyday preventive actions**

- Keep the ill person in a separate room away from others in the household
- Follow recommended precautions and monitor your own health
- Keep surfaces disinfected
- Avoid sharing personal items
- Stay informed about what is happening in your community

**Know the symptoms**

Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure to the virus. If someone has some or all of the following symptoms, they may have COVID-19:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fever or chills
- Repeated shaking with chills
- Muscle pain
- Headache or sore throat
- New loss of taste or smell

**What should I do if I have symptoms of COVID-19?**

- Stay home and away from others in the house
- Notify your work if your schedule needs to change
- Call your local public health department, your doctor, or a clinic or get in touch with a community health worker
- Find a testing site and get tested

Obtain information from reliable sources like the CDC www.cdc.gov and the WHO www.who.int



Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the workers who participated in this study. We thank them for their time and hope that their perspectives will be used to tailor educational resources to reduce the transmission and disparities associated with COVID-19 as well as to improve health and safety conditions in the meatpacking industry.

We would also like to acknowledge the following organizations for their partnership and assistance in disseminating the survey: Heartland Workers Center, Latino Center of the Midlands, Nebraska Appleseed, Nebraska Migrant Education Program, Rural Community Workers' Alliance, and the Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health. We know that there were many others that assisted and shared the survey, and we appreciate their help as well.

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Questions?



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