

# Supporting Low-Wage Essential Workers' Nonwork Life in the Context of COVID-19



# Plan

- Who is an essential worker?
- What research has been done?
- Qualitative study on essential fast-food workers

Who is an essential worker?



# Who is an essential worker?

- Dept of Homeland Security: Essential workforce includes those who provide<sup>1</sup>
  - Public health and safety
  - Essential products
  - Other infrastructure support
- National rate of labor force working in essential industries = 45%<sup>2</sup>
  - ~46% of workers in Oregon are in “essential” industries
- Although worker status as essential determined by industry, exposure risk largely determined by occupation<sup>3</sup>

## Essential workers by industry, 2019

	Total	Percent of industry
<i>All essential workers</i>	55,217,845	100%
<i>Food and agriculture</i>	11,398,233	20.6%
<i>Emergency services</i>	1,849,630	3.3%
<i>Transportation, warehouse, and delivery</i>	3,972,089	7.2%
<i>Industrial, commercial, residential facilities and services</i>	6,806,407	12.3%
<i>Health care</i>	16,679,875	30.2%
<i>Government and community-based services</i>	4,590,070	8.3%
<i>Communications and IT</i>	3,189,140	5.8%
<i>Financial sector</i>	3,070,404	5.6%
<i>Energy sector</i>	1,327,760	2.4%
<i>Water and wastewater management</i>	107,846	0.2%
<i>Chemical sector</i>	271,160	0.5%
<i>Critical manufacturing</i>	1,955,233	3.5%



11 million in Food  
and Agriculture

1. McNicholas & Poydock (2020)

**Note:** Code for the definition of essential services used here is available upon request.

**Source:** Economic Policy Institute (EPI) analysis of Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group microdata, EPI Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 1.0.2 (2020), <https://microdata.epi.org>

# Vulnerable groups

- 50% of food and agriculture essential workers are people of color<sup>1</sup>
- ~70% of essential workers do not have a college degree
- More than 5 million (~20%) essential workers in the US are undocumented immigrants<sup>2</sup>
- 12% have union coverage<sup>1</sup>

# APA Stress in America

- 54% of essential workers said they relied on a lot of unhealthy habits to get through the pandemic<sup>1</sup>
- 29% said their mental health worsened
- 25% have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder since the pandemic started
- 75% said they could have used more emotional support than they received



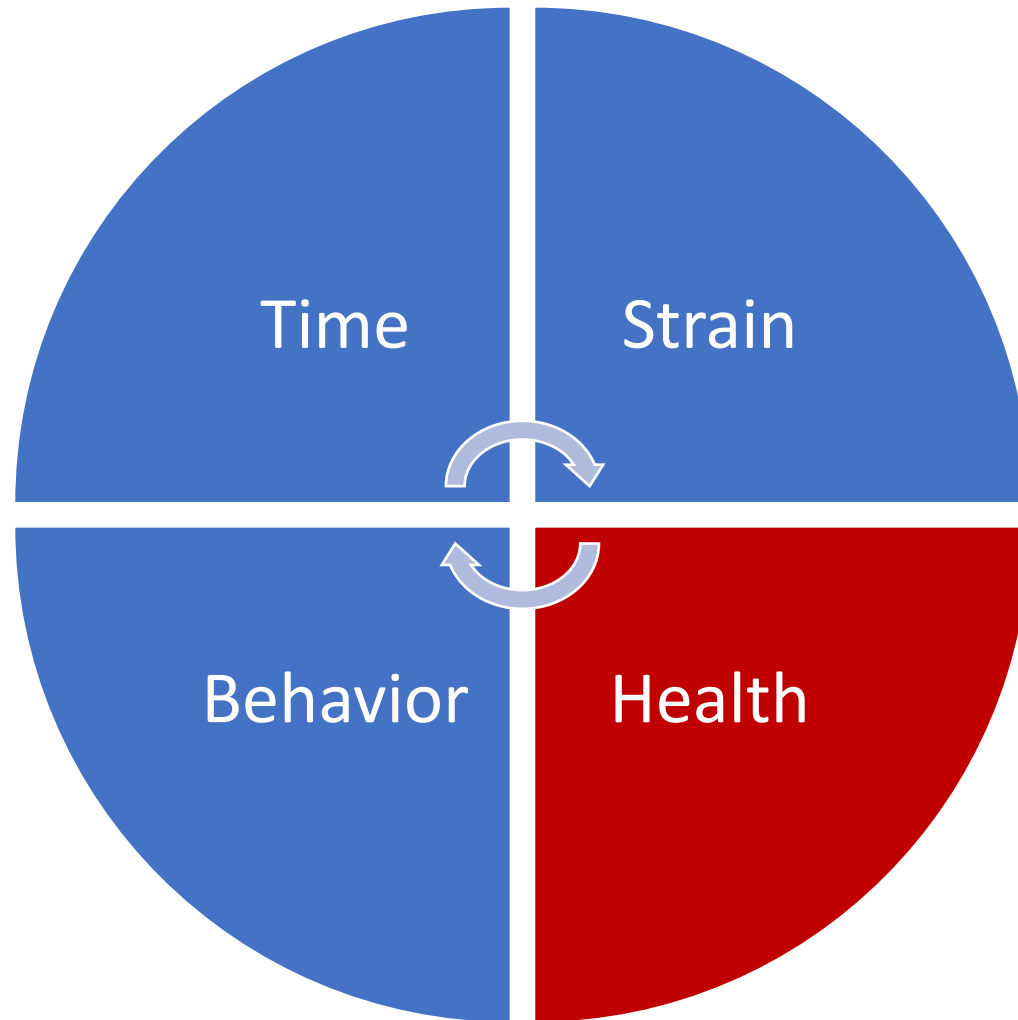
What research has been done on supporting nonwork lives of essential, low-wage workers?

# A focus on low-wage essential workers

- Half of Americans in low-wage occupations are essential<sup>1</sup>
- Experience a “family lockdown” but not a “work lockdown”<sup>2</sup>
  - Could lose their job or experience financial hardship if fail to report to work



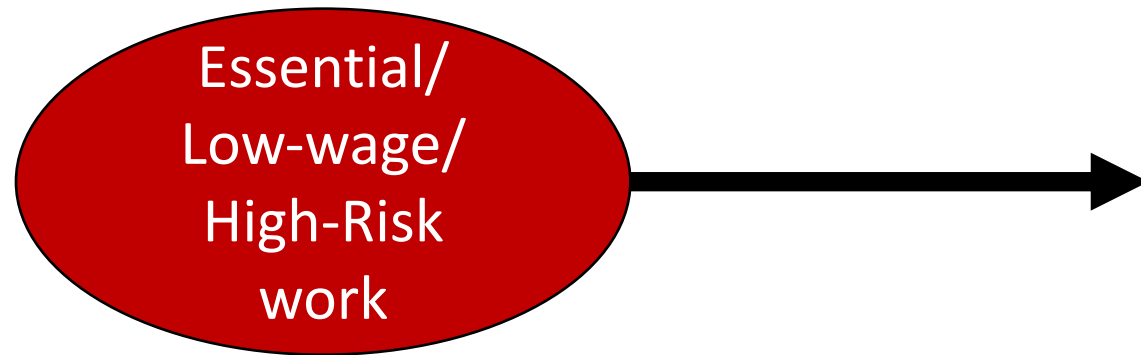
# Work-Family Conflict



# Existing Limitations

- Currently, few studies that focus on samples of low-wage essential workers
  - Many professional-level samples with higher incomes<sup>1,2</sup>
  - Many online samples<sup>3</sup>
  - Healthcare and first responders<sup>4</sup>
- Large focus on dual-earner couples and parents (and gender) and less research on other forms of family<sup>5</sup>

# Some research on special populations



Additional unpaid work for women of color outside of work<sup>2</sup>

Increased Discrimination for AAPI workers<sup>2</sup>

Black American Fathers<sup>1</sup>:

- 32% COVID diagnosis
- 21% family member diagnosis
- Higher family discord

Service Sector Workers Experience More Precarity<sup>3</sup>:

- Increase in hours and predictable schedules, but unpredictable tasks
- Increase in threats to bodily integrity
- Constant background of fear/anxiety
- Increases in emotional labor

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# Family-Supportive Supervisor Behavior (FSSB)<sup>1</sup>

Emotional  
Support

Instrumental  
Support

Role  
Modeling

Creative  
Work-Family  
Management



# Supporting nonwork lives of fast-food workers



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# Fast-food workers

- 4M counter workers and .5M cooks (\$11 per hour)<sup>1</sup>
- Deemed essential
- Often work non-traditional hours
- High financial stressors
  - 50% of the families of front-line fast-food workers enrolled in at least one public assistance program
  - Estimated 87% do not receive employee health benefits<sup>2,3</sup>



# Participants (n = 21)

- 18-43 years old
- 11 female and 10 male
- 9 White, 7 Black, 1 Asian, 1 Hispanic, 1 Native American, 2 Multi-Racial
- 14 different franchises
- Inclusion Criteria
  - Currently employed at least 6 months
  - Not full-time student
  - Calculated "low-wage" on state by state basis
  - 5 hours minimum of family care per week



# Qualitative Study Procedure

- Pilot tested interview protocol with 2 SMEs
- Semi-structured interview protocol with probes and process was iterative<sup>1</sup>
- Zoom/phone interviews
- February through April 2021 recruitment
  - Social media, undergrad classes, flyers, Reddit, Craigslist
- \$20 for hour long interview

# *What are the most significant work-family stressors lower-wage workers face?*

- Time
  - Difficulty with childcare
  - Not enough time with family
  - Household work (cooking, cleaning)
- Financial concerns
- Who do you turn to for support?  
Family members or friends or  
NOBODY

*I miss my kids, they miss mom. I mean, the kids are used to me working. I've worked their entire lives so they know that, um, mom works and mom pays the bills and mom supports them, or they can't have the things that they want or need. So, they understand that I have to work but, um, they still say 'It's not fair Mom, it's not fair.' Like, you know, it's not, it's not fair to them that I can't be with them as much as I want to be. Because I have to pay bills, and I have to work and-- I love to work though and they know that.*

– (female participant, non-managerial supervisor)

# *What supervisory behaviors do lower-wage workers interpret as supportive of their work-family lives?*

- Instrumental support
  - Scheduling
- Emotional support
- Not as much role modeling or creative work-family management

*They can be kind of hit or miss. Uh, there's time where he's willing to help out and he'll come in here for 10 hours with me. But there's other times where, you know, someone called out and he's made me work open to close because he didn't want to come in that day.*

– (female participant, non-managerial supervisor)

As another example, a participant shared that management would not let him leave work to attend his friends' funerals because he could not find a substitute for his shift: *"I've just had like, four of my friends die in the span of two weeks.*

*Wow, and I can't get off work."*

–(male participant, non-managerial employee)



# *What supervisory behaviors do lower-wage workers interpret as supportive of their work-family lives?*

- 5<sup>th</sup> dimension emerged:  
Financial Support

*So, like, if you're having an emergency, like mostly for hospital bills, you can talk to her, and she will help you - like she will pay you. Like you don't have to wait till the end of month... The manager will pay you before the time warrants, having a very valid reason. She finds it okay to pay you at that point.*

– (female participant, non-manager)

# *What coworker behaviors do lower-wage workers interpret as supportive of their work-family lives?*

- Instrumental
- Emotional
- Role Modeling
- Financial

*She would even spend her time to take me to her kid's therapist and she would take her time to come [to my] home if I was having a hard time with my kid and talk to him and try her tactics for her kid on my kid now... I could call her up and tell her 'He is behaving like this' and she could come to my house, even at night – and she does not live like in our neighborhood – but she would spend her money to come or maybe take a car drive to my house, or maybe it is after work and she's very tired. She's also having a family, but she would sacrifice her time come see my kid.*

– (female participant, non-manager)



# *Supervisor COVID Response?*

- Supervisors:
  - Understood their concerns and were flexible
  - Were completely unsupportive and added stress to their lives
- Staffing shortages resulted in supervisors putting more pressure on workers

*[The day I returned] I was thrown in the deep end. Uh, yeah, pretty much as soon as I got back, they're like, 'Oh, thank God, everyone gets three days off, except the people who had COVID.' And I'm just like, 'No! No!' Actually, when I got back to work the first day, the district manager's, like, 'Oh, did you have a nice little vacation?' I was like, 'I almost f\*\*\*\*\* died!' That's not a vacation. That – I required those two weeks off 'cause like, ugh. Chest pains through the roof."*

– (male participant, non-manager)

# Coworker COVID Response?

- COVID either brought them closer together or weakened positive relationships

*Yeah, everybody's a little more stressed. They're more observant... They're just kind of being standoffish, a little bit more – like they were just kind of thinking of their own situations. And more like the walls are up I guess.... They don't talk as much as they used to.*

– (female participant, non-manager)

# Recommendations for Organizations

- Scheduling support is most critical
  - No workers had autonomy to permanently help coworker with schedules
  - Quick turnarounds on scheduling requests
  - More proactive attempts at ideal schedules
- Hazard pay
- Time off to handle family-related issues
- Cross-training and performance management



# What next?

- Listen to workers
  - Especially those in essential, frontline, high risk occupations
  - How do workers from marginalized backgrounds face compounded stressors?
- Who are the exceptional supervisors and organizations?
- Fair wages, benefits, protections



Thank you!

Questions?

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