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**At the Frontlines of the Debate on Masks:  
Worker Experiences Enforcing COVID-19  
Safety Protocols**

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This report is part of the UMass Amherst Labor Center Working Paper Series. The Labor Center is one of the nation's premier graduate programs in Labor Studies. The Center also conducts research that explores the changing nature of work and workers' organizations, and what these changes mean for workers.

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The authors would like to thank Sophia Ventura for her research assistance with this project.



# At the Frontlines of the Debate on Masks: Worker Experiences Enforcing COVID-19 Safety Protocols

*Clare Hammonds  
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## Executive Summary

As coronavirus rates surge, enforcing masks and social distancing policies at work continues to be a political lightning rod. While there is widespread medical consensus that masking practices reduce the spread of the virus, stories of violence against workers attempting to enforce mask mandates have continued to make headlines around the country since Summer 2020. By August 2020, the CDC released guidelines directing store employees to avoid arguing with customers who are not wearing masks– for fear of provoking violence.<sup>ii</sup>

This research examines the experiences of workers in six states as they are asked to confront a public with mixed feelings about wearing masks and complying with other COVID-19 safety recommendations like social distancing. The research draws from a survey of 2,300 employees working in person the week of July 5th, which was near the height of the summer surge.

### Key findings:

- Roughly half (49%) of workers who have asked a customer or co-worker to comply with COVID policies indicated that there were issues with compliance, responding that this directive was only sometimes or rarely followed.
- The most resistance to masks and distancing occurred in retail and hospitality industries, and towards low wage workers. Sixty percent of workers earning under \$15 an hour reported compliance issues. By contrast, 39% of workers earning over \$21 an hour reported similar resistance.
- Among the six states surveyed, compliance issues were most acute in Michigan, with 56% experiencing compliance issues. They were least severe– but still substantial– in Massachusetts, with 38% experiencing compliance issues.
- There was widespread stress among workers who were tasked with enforcing mask and social distancing protocols. A department store worker in Michigan describes the stressful climate:  
*Politics and mask policy has driven customers to be furious with employees. We have been threatened, spit on, and screamed at due to mask policy and item purchase limits.*

- Employers did not have consistent policies around masks and social distancing, with some reluctant to enforce COVID practices for fear of losing business.
- Many workers reported that employers were dismissive of their concerns, and some described threats of retaliation. For instance, a gas station cashier who spoke to his boss about unmasked customers reported that his employer made no changes, instead explaining that he “threatened to cut my hours down to a few a week, unless I waited on unmasked customers.”
- Shifting the burden of enforcement from individual workers to broad employer policies of masks and social distancing, with support from government action, is an important step in protecting workers and reducing workplace COVID-19 transmission.

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the epidemiological evidence of the value of face coverings for preventing virus spread has evolved considerably. There is now widespread medical consensus that cloth face coverings reduce the spread of the virus. In response, more than 30 states have implemented some mandate requiring face coverings while in public.<sup>iii</sup>

While the opinion of the medical community on the value of masks is decided, public opinion has been far more split, with many people believing mask mandates to be a form of government overreach. This creates a complicated dynamic for the workers whose jobs require them to interact with the public. They are often forced to choose between accepting the health risk of contact with a potentially infected customer, or accepting the risk of violence that comes from enforcing an unpopular mandate.

Since Summer 2020, the stories of violence against workers attempting to enforce mask mandates have made headlines around the country. By August 2020, the CDC had released guidelines directing store employees to avoid arguing with customers who are not wearing masks.<sup>iv</sup> Among the recommendations are that two workers be assigned as a team to encourage COVID-19 prevention and to, “identify a safe area for employees to go to if they feel they are in danger.”

In this report we examine the experiences of workers in six states as they are asked to confront a public with mixed feelings about wearing masks and complying with other COVID-19 safety recommendations like social distancing. Data comes from a survey using paid Facebook advertisements to target workers who were at work in person between July 5 and 11th. The COVID-19 infection rates during that week were among the highest of the early pandemic, only to be surpassed by the rates that reemerged in late October 2020.<sup>v</sup> See the appendix for methodology.

Specifically we ask, if you have had to ask a customer or co-worker to comply with social distancing or mask guidelines, how often do they comply? Out of 2,300 survey respondents, 1,670 had asked a co-worker or customer to comply. Among them, roughly half (49%) indicated that there had been some issue with compliance, responding that customers or co-workers followed this directive only sometimes or rarely.

Despite the high number of workers who are experiencing issues with compliance, not all workers experience this in the same way. Workers reported differences by industry, wages, and state.

## Industry

Retail workers (64%) and hospitality workers (56%), which includes those in accommodation and food service as well as art, entertainment and recreation, are among the workers who are most likely to report that customers and co-workers did not always comply with requests to follow mask and social distancing requirements. These retail and hospitality workers were also

more likely to feel unsafe at work compared to other in-person workers, which is similar to our findings from Spring 2020 research.<sup>vi</sup>

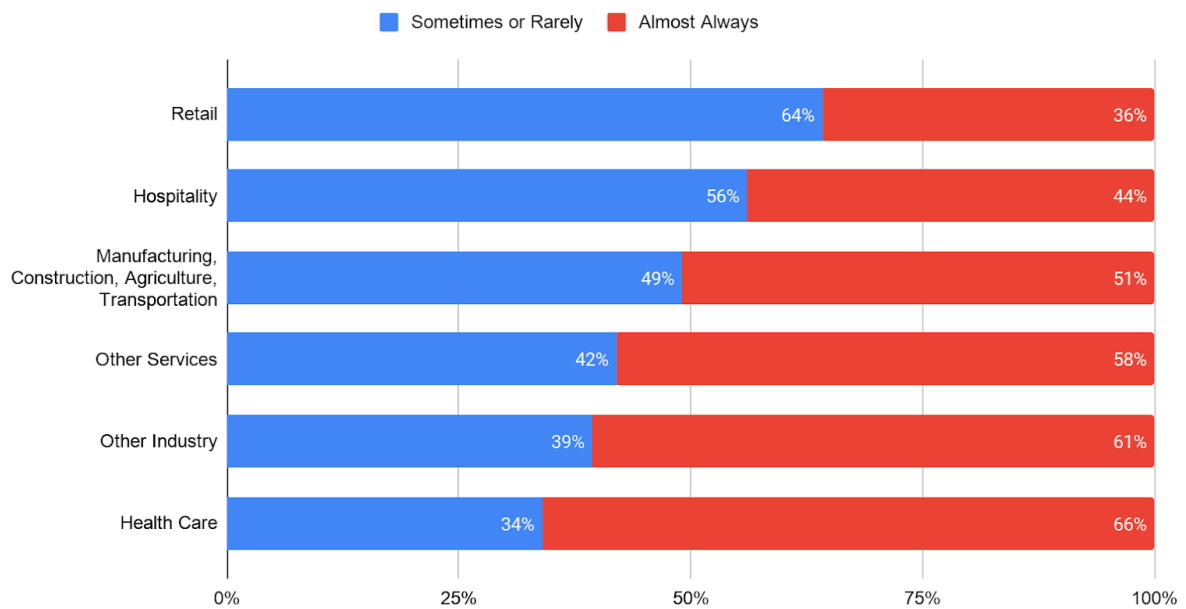
A 46 year old Asian man working in a restaurant casino described the very real dangers workers face when confronting customers:

*This morning at 5am we had 4 drunk people in the restaurant and were not wearing their masks. I went over to them and asked them to please put on your masks when you aren't eating or drinking. They got mad at me and told me to f-off and then one of the ladies got up and spit on me and asked to talk to the manager. When I told them that I was the manager one of the guys got up and started to pull his pants down when I stopped him. When security showed up to take care of the problem they asked the guy what he was going to do. He said that he was going to piss on me and the rules that you are enforcing on us. It is against the law -- we have rights. I told the man and security: yes you do but as the sign says we have the right to refuse service to any guest.*

Similarly, many retail workers experienced customers who refused to wear masks or follow social distance policies. A 25-year old white woman working in retail described why she was afraid to ask customers to wear masks:

*The customers are ruder now than before. Many of the customers and my coworkers do not wear masks correctly. We are afraid of asking someone to put on a mask due to the fact that people in the news have been shot over it at other stores.*

Worker evaluation of how often customers or co-workers follow requests to comply with mask or social distancing requirements by industry



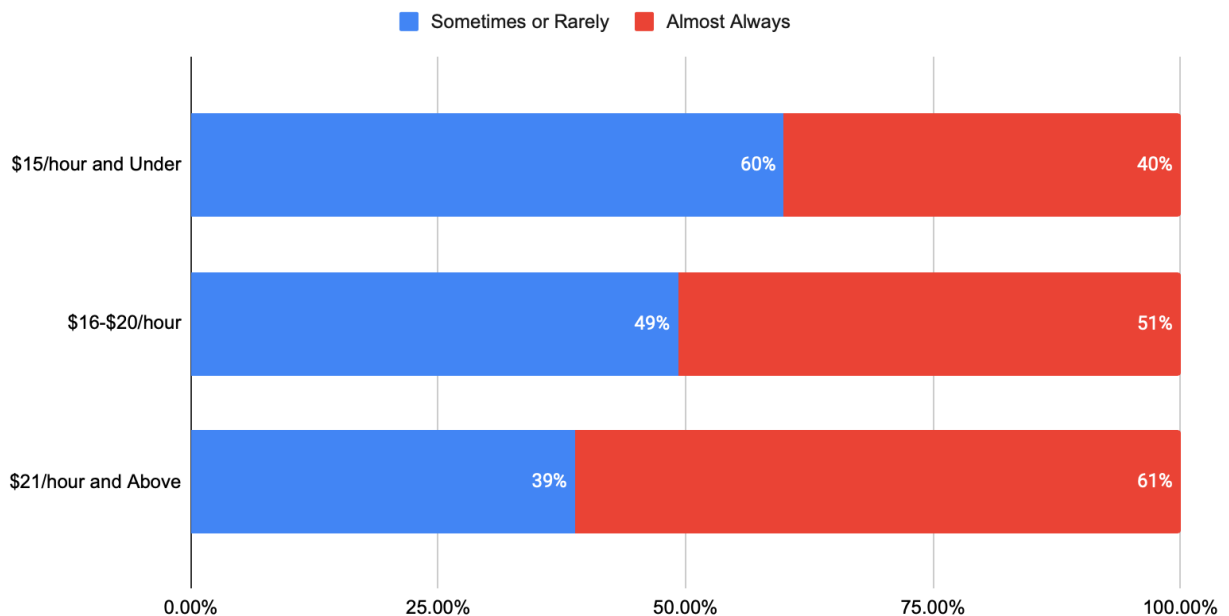
Health care workers experienced greater compliance. Even among health care workers, however, more than a third (34%) reported that patients or co-workers did not always follow requests to comply.

## Low Wage Workers

Low-wage workers are more likely to experience resistance to masks or social distancing than higher wage workers. Among those earning \$15 an hour or less, 60% reported that customers or co-workers only sometimes or rarely complied. By contrast, 39% of workers earning over \$21 an hour reported similar resistance.

These findings are similar to our earlier research, which found that low wage workers faced greater health and safety risks during COVID.<sup>vii</sup> Low wage workers often have less authority in the workplace, and also tend to work in service industries with high levels of customer interaction. Our prior research also finds that low wage workers face multiple other challenges as well, from more food insecurity, higher stress, and less access to paid sick leave. Dealing with customer resistance to masks and social distancing is yet another way that coronavirus contributes to inequalities at work.

Worker evaluation of how often customers or co-workers follow requests to comply with mask or social distancing requirements by wage



## State Differences

Workers had different experiences with mask and social distancing compliance depending on which state they work. We surveyed workers in six states: Massachusetts, Oregon, Nevada, North Carolina, Georgia and Michigan. All of these states had a mask mandate at the time of the survey with the exception of Georgia. Still, workers received different responses when trying to enforce mandates.

Workers in Massachusetts report the most compliance, with 63% of workers reporting that customers and co-workers almost always complied when asked and 38% reporting compliance issues

Workers in Michigan reported the lowest levels of compliance, with only 44% of workers reporting high levels of compliance and 56% reporting issues. Michigan has been among the states with the most resistance to coronavirus guidelines, garnering headlines for protest against coronavirus policies.<sup>viii</sup> This opposition spills into encounters with workers, with the majority of Michigan respondents reporting that they face compliance issues.

A night shift grocery store cashier in Michigan explains how the politicalization of masks plays out at his workplace:

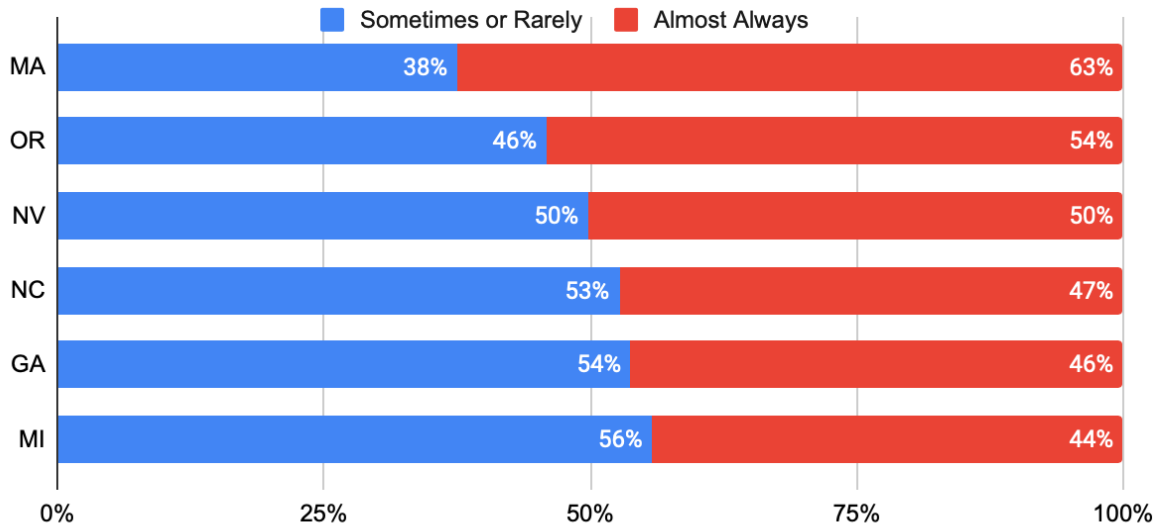
*In Michigan there is an executive order mandating the wearing of masks in public settings. Many customers in my part of the state are highly politicizing this mandate and refusing to wear masks on the grounds of "Medical Condition." Even though "Direct Threat" comes into play and the store could turn away customers for that, they don't...This situation has caused me more stress on this job than I've experienced in any other higher paying and higher skilled jobs that I've held.*

Similarly, a department store worker in Michigan describes the stressful climate:

*Politics and mask policy has driven customers to be furious with employees. We have been threatened, spit on, and screamed at due to mask policy and item purchase limits.*



## Worker evaluation of how often customers or co-workers follow requests to comply with mask or social distancing requirements by state



## Physical safety and stress when enforcing protocols

Many workers are concerned about contracting COVID-19 through their workplaces. However, contracting the virus is not the only safety concern: workers also worried about their physical safety and stress levels from enforcing mask and social distancing policies. They worried that their enforcement efforts would provoke anger, and result in verbal or physical attacks.

Many described the job of enforcing coronavirus protocols as extraordinarily stressful. Our prior research found that the vast majority of essential workers— 86%— reported increased work-related stress since the pandemic began.<sup>ix</sup> Part of this stress is driven by enforcing mask and social distancing protocols. A restaurant manager describes how stressful her job has become:

*It is my job to ensure people are complying and being safe, and some people resist. I have had to fire someone for refusing to wear a mask correctly at work. I had two customers get so mad that they punched my assistant manager, smashed our equipment and property, and tried to flee from the cops. Now we are pressing charges. The stress of just trying to keep everyone alive and healthy while dealing with hostile aggressive customers is too much.*

Some workers described fearing for their lives. A white man working at a department store describes fearing that he would need to defend himself:

*We are directed to not enforce the law. Customers often advance on staff and back them into a corner in order to badger staff for excessive amounts of assistance. When I have told customers to give me space, I have been verbally abused and threatened. I am worried that I will have to defend my life against someone who wants to push their*

*inappropriate behavior on me. I would like to be able to give customers an opportunity to comply with distancing, otherwise, have the authority to remove them from the area if they refuse.*

The stress over enforcing mask policies builds on the burdens of being low pay and the health risks of work during a pandemic. A 33-year-old hardware store worker in Massachusetts illustrates her wretched work situation:

*When I ask customers to wear a mask, as they are required to do, I am often met with animosity and anger. They tell me I'm infringing on their rights. I've had abusive phone calls from people saying our policy goes against the constitution. And we're not being paid anything extra or being treated with any care by our employers. We're considered an essential business and we're being paid like we're high school kids living at home and this money is for fun. My life is in danger and I'm being paid like I'm getting an allowance. I cry before and after work and then sit in a deep depression wondering what I can do to get out of this hell.*

## **Management enforcement and support**

Several described receiving little support from management, who were often seen as reluctant to upset customers, instead framing the issue as one of personal preference rather than public health.

A 31-year-old white woman working in a restaurant in North Carolina describes the message from her employer:

*I've been told each person's view of what is best practice for the pandemic is going to be different, so I should be understanding of a co-worker or customer's point of view even if my standards are higher.*

Similarly, a 45-year-old white woman employed at a grocery store in Massachusetts said:

*When I asked about people not wearing masks, I was told by my manager, "They should know. We can't ask."*

In other cases, companies pay lip service to mask and social distancing enforcement. A supermarket worker in Oregon explains:

*They have sent out memos and we have signs and commercials that play, saying customers and employees are required to wear masks, but it's not enforced whatsoever. They gave us hazard pay for 4-5 months then cut us off, while giving the top CEO a bonus... What would make things better? Enforcement of face coverings and social distancing, and some damn hazard pay, we make them millions if not more a year, it's the least they could do.*

Some workers described that even managers themselves do not wear masks. A paralegal reflects:

*Our boss left a box of masks on the counter. He wears a buff around his neck but never pulls it up.*

Some workers described feeling that employers are not enforcing mask and distancing policies because of financial concerns or priorities. A casino worker reflects:

*VIPs are treated differently. They don't have to wear masks and practice social distancing. Excuse from management is that the VIPs account for 60% of revenue for the casino.*

## **Voicing Concerns**

Some workers spoke to management about their concerns about masks and social distancing. These meetings were met with mixed results. Some workers were successful in convincing management to better enforce policies while others were not.

Reflecting on safety protocols, a fast food worker describes what happened when she and her coworkers spoke with management:

*We all agreed but our boss won't listen to us.*

A 26 year old white man working as a cashier at a gas station explains that he spoke with his boss about not allowing unmasked customers. He says that his employer made no changes and instead:

*threatened to cut my hours down to a few a week, unless I waited on unmasked customers. That's a risk against my rights for safety and that's retaliation for my statements. So I quit.*

Other workers, however, experienced support from management. A 44 year old woman in Oregon working at a thrift store says that she and her coworkers have spoken with management and that all of their "suggestions have been taken seriously." She goes on to explain:

*I am constantly getting customers that say I have medical reasons not to wear it. So I offer them accommodations to window shop outside, we allow NO ONE inside without a mask, even if they 'say' they are medically exempt.... I feel that my company is doing all they can to prevent the spread of covid in our shop. Unfortunately, being closed from March 13-June 11 has caused a hardship for our non-profit and they are selling outbuilding. I will be laid off at the end of August.*

## **Workers not wanting to wear masks**

While most workers expressed concerns about co-workers and customers not complying with mask and social distancing regulations, not all of the respondents shared this sentiment. Some workers described how difficult it can be to work all day with a face covering.

A 41-year old manufacturing worker in North Carolina described the challenges of the mask requirement. When asked what would improve his current work situation he responded:

*Getting rid of these awful mask rules. In manufacturing when the temperature is 120F plus, it is completely unacceptable to be forced to wear these ridiculous things*

*when there is no one in the immediate vicinity (6'). How about getting some hazard pay and quit paying every one extra to stay home while we have to work? If everything is as bad as everyone says then why are all of us "essential workers" not in the hospital or dead? Nothing has changed except making the essential workers lives harder.....*

Similarly, a woman from Georgia who works as a pharmacy technician at a large drugstore chain described how difficult masks has made her work:

*I have 1 sided deafness. Plexiglass panels have been installed, along with face masks on both employee & customer sides of the plexiglass panel, I simply CANNOT HEAR!!! Nothing has been done about it thus far. Also, I KEEP a sinus infection since we are mandated to wear masks up to 9 hours straight!! Ridiculous!!*

## **Conclusions**

As COVID-19 cases rise around the county, the struggle around masks is likely to continue. Frontline workers face some of the most serious risks from this mask conflict, as they work directly with the public day in and day out. Ironically, although wearing a mask is recommended by nearly every public health official, the sometimes violent resistance by the public has led the CDC to actually recommend that workers not try to enforce mask mandates. The findings in this survey have shown that it is low wage workers, who already had to shoulder many of the health and safety risks at work during this pandemic, who will continue to face the heaviest burden as a result. Employers, government officials, and workers themselves all have a role to play in addressing this issue and looking to create the safest possible work environment.

As the survey responses show, workers experience both customers who refused to wear masks as well as employers who did not actively support workers in enforcing protocols. Employers, for their part, are perhaps best positioned to be the first line of defense in protecting workers. Clear and consistent messaging around the issue of masks to customers as well as other employees is critical. This may often mean that employers themselves have to take on the enforcement role making masks a requirement of entry. Providing free masks to customers who may not have one as well as refusing entry to those who refuse to wear one should be the first line of defense.

State and local officials also have a key role to play here by enforcing local mask mandates and allowing workers to anonymously report safety concerns. Officials can create clear policies for employers, and mechanisms to enforce them. For example, in Ohio businesses must require customers and workers to wear masks. A newly created Retail Compliance Unit from the Ohio Bureau of Workers Compensation is charged with inspecting stores for compliance. Non-compliance could result in a 24 hour closure.<sup>x</sup> Similarly, in Utah, the State Labor Commission has begun enforcing rules that employees wear masks and that employers post clear signage for customers about masks, although they do not have the authority to actually enforce that directive among customers.<sup>xi</sup> In Massachusetts the Attorney General's office set up a COVID-19 hotline for workers to report concerns about workplace safety.<sup>xii</sup>

While workers themselves, as some of the survey responses showed, do not all share the same feelings about wearing masks, it is worker organizing that presents perhaps the best chance of addressing this issue, particularly where employers are reticent to set clear rules for customers. Since the start of the pandemic, there have been numerous examples of workers coming together to address safety concerns in the workplace. Demanding clear guidelines and enforcement protocols from their employers may be an important first demand.

## Methodology

This project uses paid Facebook advertisements to solicit respondents. With over 221 million users in the United States, Facebook has the largest user base of any social media platform. A growing body of research uses Facebook and other social media platforms to survey hard-to-reach populations. Probability sampling can be difficult for new, emerging, or hidden populations. Facebook's marketing program allows advertisements to target specific groups of people, including geographic areas. We use this feature to study emergent working conditions for a new category of worker: in-person workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This online strategy was particularly important to studying COVID-19, since in-person interviews were not possible.

The advertisement text said, "Are you at work? We want to hear from you!" Upon clicking, users were directed to a survey within the University of Massachusetts *Qualtrics* account that housed the *Massachusetts COVID-19 National COVID-19 Workplace Survey*. Respondents were invited to participate if they answered "yes" to the screening question: "Did you go to work in-person (not remotely) the week of July 5th - July 11th 2020?". The survey was open for one week, Sunday July 19 to July 26, 2020, and available in both English and Spanish. In total, 2,300 surveys were collected.

The survey asked a range of demographic, workplace, safety, and collective action questions, and used both closed and open ended questions. The main open ended question asked respondents to "Tell us about your work and life during COVID-19. What would improve your situation? Almost all respondents contributed qualitative responses. Some responses were short. Common short responses were or "Please wear a mask" or "Masks are hot." Many respondents, however, wrote at length about their work lives during COVID-19. These qualitative responses generated hundreds of pages of text, which we then used to identify major themes.

One concern with survey data is that respondents are representative of the population—in our case, in-person workers. Because the pandemic is new, we are unable to draw on established labor force surveys to capture the overall demographics of in-person workers. We know that layoffs and the ability to work from home have impacted groups differently. For example, white collar, professional workers are far more likely to be able to work remotely than service workers. Here we report the demographics and other key characteristics of survey respondents.

- Political views. Respondents represented a range of political views: 6% very conservative, 18% conservative, 31% moderate, 17% liberal, 9% very liberal, and 19% don't know.
- Wages. Including tips, 24% earned under \$15 an hour, 25% earned \$16 to \$20 an hour, 24% earned \$21-\$30 an hour, and 17% earned \$31 or more an hour.
- Gender. Respondents reported 55% women, 44% men, and 1% transgender.
- Race and ethnicity. The majority of respondents, 86%, were white (non-Latinx). Nine percent were Hispanic or Latinx. Black (non-Latinx) as well as American Indian were 2% each. Asian and Pacific Islander were less than 1%.
- Age. The mean age was 34 years old.
- Country of birth. Among respondents, 92% were born in the United States and 8% in other countries.
- Hours. Most respondents, 85%, worked over 30 hours in the week surveyed.
- Managers. Among respondents, 26% reported that they were managers.
- Union members. 12.7% reported that they were union members, which is close to the national average.
- Self employed. Only 7% were self employed or independent contractors.
- Workplace size. Almost half (48%) worked in settings with over 51 workers.
- Locations. About 25% worked in businesses with only one location; 39% worked in chains with over 20 locations.

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<sup>ii</sup>“Limiting Workplace Violence Associated with COVID-19 Prevention Policies in Retail and Services Businesses.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020, [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/business-employers/limit-workplace-violence.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/business-employers/limit-workplace-violence.html).

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<sup>iii</sup> Asmelash, Leah, et al. “Most States Now Require Face Masks to Reduce the Spread of Covid-19. These Are the Ones That Don’t.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 19 Nov. 2020, [www.cnn.com/2020/11/09/us/biden-mask-mandate-nationwide-trnd/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2020/11/09/us/biden-mask-mandate-nationwide-trnd/index.html).

<sup>iv</sup> “Limiting Workplace Violence Associated with COVID-19 Prevention Policies in Retail and Services Businesses.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Aug. 2020, [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/business-employers/limit-workplace-violence.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/business-employers/limit-workplace-violence.html).

<sup>v</sup> The New York Times. “Covid in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Mar. 2020, [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html).

<sup>vi</sup> Hammonds, Clare, Kerrissey, Jasmine & Tomaskovic-Devy, Donald. [Stressed, Unsafe, and Insecure: Essential Workers Need A New, New Deal](#). Center for Employment Equity and UMass Labor Center, University of Massachusetts. June, 2020.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Censky, Abigail. “Heavily Armed Protesters Gather Again At Michigan Capitol To Decry Stay-At-Home Order.” *NPR*, NPR, 14 May 2020, [www.npr.org/2020/05/14/855918852/heavily-armed-protesters-gather-again-at-michigans-capitol-denouncing-home-order](http://www.npr.org/2020/05/14/855918852/heavily-armed-protesters-gather-again-at-michigans-capitol-denouncing-home-order).

<sup>ix</sup> Hammonds, Clare, Kerrissey, Jasmine & Tomaskovic-Devy, Donald. [Stressed, Unsafe, and Insecure: Essential Workers Need A New, New Deal](#). Center for Employment Equity and UMass Labor Center, University of Massachusetts. June, 2020.

<sup>x</sup> Otte, Jim. “DeWine: Mask Mandate Will Be Enforced, Other Restrictions Coming; Bars, Restaurants, Fitness Centers May Be Closed.” *WHIO*, 12 Nov. 2020, [www.whio.com/news/local/dewine-mask-mandate-will-be-enforced-other-restrictions-coming-bars-restaurants-fitness-centers-may-be-closed/5GW74TFTUVFTDO5MROT4WUUMIY/](http://www.whio.com/news/local/dewine-mask-mandate-will-be-enforced-other-restrictions-coming-bars-restaurants-fitness-centers-may-be-closed/5GW74TFTUVFTDO5MROT4WUUMIY/).

<sup>xi</sup> Hayley Crombleholme. “Utah Labor Commission Set to Enforce New Statewide Mask Mandate.” *KUTV*, KUTV, 11 Nov. 2020, [kutv.com/news/local/utah-labor-commission-set-to-enforce-new-statewide-mask-mandate](http://kutv.com/news/local/utah-labor-commission-set-to-enforce-new-statewide-mask-mandate).

<sup>xii</sup> “Attorney General Offers Dedicated Labor Hotline & New Complaint Form to Report Workplace Safety Concerns As Massachusetts Re-Opens.” *Framingham SOURCE*, 20 May 2020, [framinghamsource.com/index.php/2020/05/20/attorney-general-offers-dedicated-labor-hotline-new-complaint-form-to-report-workplace-safety-concerns-as-massachusetts-re-opens/](http://framinghamsource.com/index.php/2020/05/20/attorney-general-offers-dedicated-labor-hotline-new-complaint-form-to-report-workplace-safety-concerns-as-massachusetts-re-opens/).