FACT SHEET: Latino and Immigrant Workers At Highest Risk of Death

Immigrants and Latinos comprised the majority of workers in California’s industries at highest risk of pandemic-related deaths.

A UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of state public health data finds that, during the first ten months of the pandemic, a majority of pandemic-related deaths (among workers aged 18-65) in California’s highest-risk industries were Latino (68%) and immigrant (58%).

A previous analysis identified California’s ten highest-risk industries—those with the highest increase in deaths between 2019 and 2020.¹

This analysis examined the race and nativity of pandemic-related worker deaths in such highest-risk industries—with the exception of bars.²

Latinos Workers at High-Risk. In March-December 2020, Latinos accounted for more than two of three (68%) pandemic-related worker deaths in the state's nine highest-risk industries (see table 1).

A Majority of Deaths in Each High-Risk Industry. Latinos accounted for the majority of pandemic-related deaths in each of the nine highest-risk industries: warehousing (59%), agriculture (95%), food processing (76%), wholesale trade (56%), restaurants/ food services (62%), nursing care (55%), landscaping (86%), grocery (including liquor and convenience stores) (52%), and building services (61%).

A Majority of All Worker Deaths. Latinos were also the majority of pandemic-related deaths among workers in all other industries (56%) (analysis not shown).

While Latinos comprised 53% of deaths among persons (aged 18-65) not in the labor force, they accounted for three in five (60%) of all California worker deaths (analysis not shown).

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¹ See UC Merced Community and Labor Center (2021).

² Bars were included with "all other industries" due to small cell sizes (some with less than 10 cases).
Immigrant Workers at Highest Risk. Immigrants accounted for most (58%) pandemic-related worker deaths in California's highest-risk industries (see table 2). Of the estimated 3,638 pandemic-related worker deaths in the state's highest-risk industries, 1,536 were immigrant (analysis not shown).

A Majority of Deaths in Five Highest-Risk Industries. Immigrants accounted for the majority of pandemic-related deaths in agriculture (83%), food processing (69%), restaurants/food services (53%), landscaping (81%), and building services (52%) (see table 2).

Nearly Half of Deaths in Three Highest-Risk Industries. Immigrants comprised nearly half of pandemic-related deaths in warehousing (46%), grocery (45%), and wholesale trade (42%).

Nearly Half of All Worker Deaths. Immigrants accounted for 43% of pandemic-related worker deaths in all other industries (analysis not shown). While immigrants comprised 35% of deaths among persons (aged 18-65) not in the labor force, they accounted for nearly half (48%) of all California worker deaths (analysis not shown).

Implications. This analysis on industry-level, pandemic-related deaths indicates vulnerable workers are at higher risk of pandemic-related death. One study on California pandemic-related deaths found Latinos to have the highest risk of death—particularly those foreign born and in essential jobs (Riley et al. 2021). Another found California workers in high-risk industries were more likely to not speak English; earn low-wages; and live in poverty (Macias et al. 2021).

Public education and outreach to low-wage, immigrant, non-citizen workers should emphasize worker rights, and workplace health and safety hazards and protections.

Additionally, public agencies regulating workplace health and safety should be adequately funded and staffed to ensure robust enforcement of standards across all industries, particularly those continuing to pose a high risk of COVID-19 spread. Staffing should reflect the many languages spoken by high-risk industry workers.

References

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Mission Statement
The UC Merced Community and Labor Center conducts research and education on issues of community, labor and employment, in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.