

Executive Summary

Between January and March 2021, the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNCTO) conducted a two-part community-based research project to reflect the experiences of working class frontline workers from the Chinese Canadian immigrant population in the Greater Toronto Area during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study consisted of a survey completed by 295 workers and community members across multiple job sectors, and a community-led storytelling and interview project connecting youth volunteers with other workers and community members in an intergenerational exchange. The focus of the study was to collect qualitative data to assess community issues and areas for possible reform.

The majority of workers surveyed are employed in low-wage and high-risk sectors with workplace health and safety concerns. Many are working in the sectors of health care (personal support workers and nurses in long-term care, homecare and hospitals), retail (frontline workers in grocery stores), restaurant, production (factory workers) and construction.

The study showed that factors such as immigration status, gender, age, low wages, unsafe work conditions, and lack of access to health care and income support impacted frontline workers in a myriad of ways and increased their vulnerability to health risks and socio-economic marginalization. This report reflects demands for more progressive and robust policy changes that prioritize increasing resources and protections for workers.

Main Findings

The data from this study reveals the following aspects about frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Frontline workers are working long hours for low wages under dangerous conditions.
2. Workplaces feel unsafe for the majority of frontline workers.
3. An overwhelming majority of frontline workers feel powerless to change their circumstances.
4. Frontline workers are suffering from high stress and other negative mental health impacts.
5. Workers are demanding meaningful policy and legislation changes that ensure working class families' equal access to decent and secure opportunities.

Summary of Recommendations

1. **Expand employment protection for all workers, in particular essential workers, workers with low income and workers in precarious employment conditions. In addition to living wages, workers deserve safe, fair and dignified work conditions.**

- Increase the statutory minimum wage to \$20.00 per hour to more closely align with a living wage in Ontario.
- Ensure all workers have access to guaranteed permanent paid sick days: 10 permanent paid sick days and 14 paid sick days during health emergencies.
- Expand employment protection to all workers regardless of their employment classification.
- Empower workers by amending Ontario's Employment Standards Act, 2000 to include protections against unjust dismissal, similar to the unjust dismissal protections under the Canada Labour Code.
- Ensure strong enforcement of labour law to protect the workers with precarious employment condition and who often facing various barriers exercising their rights under the law.

2. **Provide permanent free and accessible mental health care that is culturally appropriate and language specific for all workers as part of a COVID-19 just recovery plan.**

- Provide free, accessible, emergency and long-term mental health support that is culturally appropriate and language specific for all workers, including racialized and marginalized working class communities.
- Fund community-based education and resources to promote mental health and de-stigmatize mental illness in Chinese and Asian Canadian communities.

3. **Invest resources into Chinese Canadian working class communities to increase workers' capacities to fight for more just and equitable labour conditions.**

- Ongoing funding from all level of governments to support community organizations offering free and accessible migrant and workers' rights training programs, workshops, educational resources and initiatives focused on empowering working class communities.
- Invest resources to increase workers' capacity to unionize, organize and take collective action to win against employers, landlords, and state apparatus that harm them.
- Fund programs that support workers' representation, leadership and participation in directly shaping the conditions of their workplaces through a diversity of means, including: unionization, committee membership and civic participation.

4. **Status for All!**

- Develop immediate and comprehensive program to grant status on arrival and regularization program for permanent residency for all migrants, international students, workers and community members with precarious status.
- Immediately end all deportations and end immigration detention.
- End all legislation and practices that target migrant and racialized workers and implement Access Without Fear policies across the board immediately.
- Expand all income support programs to all workers regardless of their immigration status.

“ Vaccination would be ineffective if not everyone can access it ... if there is a threat of deportations and arrests, people will not risk taking it. Protecting everyone is a way of protecting Canada as well. Immigrants and refugees arrive in Canada from all over the world. They are not only Chinese. They need to be cared for too.”

— Anna
(Injured Worker)

Introduction

By the time he finishes for the day, it's almost 11 p.m. 6 days a week, he gives 12 hours each day to his job and loses over 4 more hours a day commuting to and from work.

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Mr. Xie — Grocery Store Worker (see pg. 38)

Chinese working class immigrant communities in Canada have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown by various community research studies, the pandemic has dramatically worsened economic and health inequalities which have already been on the rise in Canada for over three decades.¹ Disproportionate health risks, language barriers, exposures to racism, economic disparity and precarious immigration status are all vulnerabilities that have intensified during the pandemic. The refrain of “who is essential?” and “whose lives are valued?” reveals troubling fractures in the landscape of pandemic experiences across Canada. “Essential work” is sometimes depicted as “heroic”, but this obscures the reality that workers have few options and often have no choice but to put the health and the lives of themselves and their families at risk. Instead, workers need tangible, robust, direct and immediate support.

This report aims to highlight the experiences of work and life during the COVID-19 pandemic for Chinese Canadian frontline workers and discusses some social and policy changes that are necessary to adequately support Chinese Canadian immigrant working class communities. We focus on how Chinese Canadian immigrant frontline workers have been impacted by COVID-19.

Using findings from community research, outreach, storytelling and frontline support work, we have collected key findings that represent the demands



CCNCTO community members attending Stop Anti-Asian Hate rally in Toronto, March 2021.

and the needs of Chinese Canadian working class immigrant communities loud and clear. To move towards a just recovery, we must ensure immigrant working class communities in Canada have the tangible supports and protections they need. These include a legislated permanent 10 days of paid sick leave, a living wage for all workers, permanent resident status, access to healthcare and free, accessible mental health support for all workers.

This report should serve as a resource for governments, city councillors, policy makers, social service providers and community groups to better understand the lived experiences of Chinese Canadian and immigrant working class communities to implement progressive policies that protect all workers.

1. Barakat, Grace. (2021) One Year Later: Unmasking COVID-19.

www.issuu.com/islamicreliefcanada/docs/irc_report_unmasking_covid-19-update-v2?fr=sZjhmNTI1NzMzMdG

Important to read alongside the Fight Covid Racism Report

Recognizing that underlying structural inequities make racialized immigrant workers more likely to work in the frontlines, this report on the experiences of frontline Chinese Canadian immigrant workers is a continuation of the work carried out in CCNCTO's 2020 COVID-Racism report titled "A Year of Racist Attacks: Anti-Asian Racism Across Canada One Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic."² We suggest these two reports be read together, as one supplements the other. The COVID-Racism report showed that racist attacks are especially prevalent in restaurants, food and grocery establishments, where Chinese and Asian-Canadian frontline workers make up a significant part of the essential workforce. Attacks in these workplaces account for almost 1/5th of all incidents reported on covidracism.ca at the time of the report's publication.

The vulnerabilities frontline workers experience today are shaped by decades of systemic racism, policies rooted in structural inequality, border violence and exclusion in a political economy built off of settler-colonial extraction and labour exploitation. These experiences of Chinese Canadian immigrant frontline workers are reflective of a structural dimension of anti-Asian racism, an inherent part of the many interrelated facets of broader systemic racism in Canada. The model minority myth is a white supremacist labour-disciplining tool, which fragments workers across racialized communities, keeps Chinese and Asian immigrant workers silent and coerces us to keep our heads down.

2. Chinese Canadian National Council. (2020). "A Year of Racist Attacks: Anti-Asian Racism Across Canada One Year into the Covid-19 Pandemic." www.covidracism.ca



Overview of Community-Led Approach

This report is primarily based on lessons learned through CCNCTO's frontline worker support program, and presents a preliminary picture of various challenges faced by frontline workers. In the past year, we worked with more than 50 volunteers, members and staff to conduct outreach and develop supportive relationships with frontline workers in their workplaces, neighbourhoods and through community networks. Some have precarious immigration status, while some have citizenship but remain marginalized by race, class, and gender oppression. Many are low-income, employed in low-wage work and experience some degree of language barrier. Many are personal support workers (PSWs) and nurses in long-term care homes, hospitals, household and community settings, often through temporary help agencies.

Most work in grocery stores, restaurants, construction sites and production sites, as well as, in health care, child-care, domestic work, community work, retail and other service industries.

In this report, the term "Chinese Canadian" encompasses anyone who self-identified as Chinese and located in Canada, regardless of their immigration status. The term "frontline workers" refers to workers who perform work at the public facing or congregated workplaces and do not have the privileges working from home.



A CCNCTO outreach worker holding care packages speaking with a frontline grocery store worker.

Community-Led Survey

From our outreach work, we conducted a community-led survey to assess the current conditions and experiences of working class Chinese Canadian communities in the Greater Toronto Area. A Community-led approach centres workers' voices, lived experiences and their leadership in shaping narratives and policy directions. From January to March 2021, CCNCTO collected a total of 295 surveys from workers and community members. We asked 41 survey questions, which were designed together with CCNCTO members, frontline workers and staff through a collective process of meetings, consultations and feedback sessions.

The questions focused primarily on workers' experiences in the workplace, their income, homelife, feelings and opinions on current government measures, and the policies they would wish to support. The survey was then distributed through CCNCTO's member networks and to frontline workers we connected with during our COVID-19 frontline worker support program. We utilized both an online and printed paper survey to include workers and community members who do not use digital technologies and those with limited digital literacy and low access to internet and digital devices.

Out of the total number of 295 surveys, 204 surveys were filled out by frontline workers. 40% were healthcare workers, 16% were workers in the retail sector (largely from grocery stores), 21% were restaurant workers, and 9% were factory and production workers. Out of the 204 self-identified frontline workers, 135 are women, 65 are men and 4 did not disclose their gender.

Community-Led Storytelling Interviews

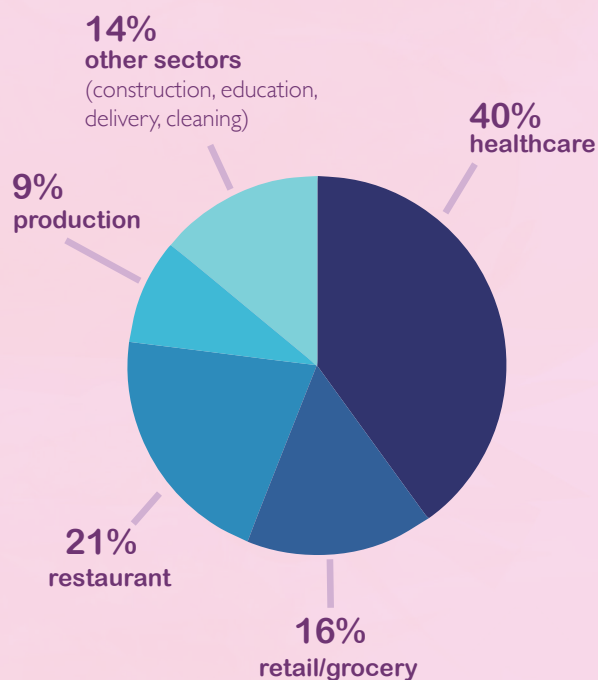
The stories of frontline workers told in collaboration with workers and youth members are also important to our study. Through over a year of worker organizing, we developed strong relationships of trust with a number of different workers, whose stories are included in this report. Storytelling serves as a way to engage workers in having their own voices represented in their own narratives and to share with readers the gift of hearing from workers themselves. Storytelling also helps to provide intersectional perspectives and diverse accounts on the struggles and experiences of workers in our community, and sheds light on how various issues affect frontline workers.

The process, content and format of the storytelling and interview project were led by youth members who were part of CCNCTO's frontline support program. Over the course of 2 months, they worked to solicit, converse, listen, interview, collect and write the included stories with workers in the community. Through collaborative storytelling between workers and our youth members, we were able to expand and deepen intergenerational relationships and produce a series of stories that document the lives and personalities of 11 valued members of our community in this difficult time. In total, we interviewed 13 workers in total and collected 11 stories.

Among the persons interviewed, one is a delivery courier, four are grocery store workers, one is a domestic worker, one is a cleaner, two are restaurant workers, one is a restaurant owner, one is a personal support worker, one is a renovation contractor, and one is an injured worker. These stories show the resilience, charm and daily lives of diverse individuals in the Chinese Canadian immigrant working class community. The collected stories also show how immigration status, class, age and gender play a role in shaping frontline workers' working conditions.

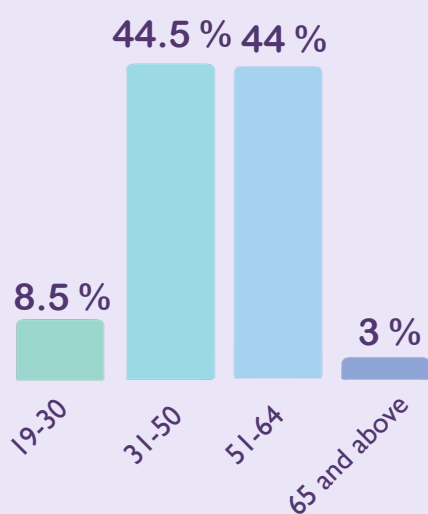
Of 295 community members who filled out the survey, 204 were frontline workers.

Percentages of frontline workers surveyed shown by sector

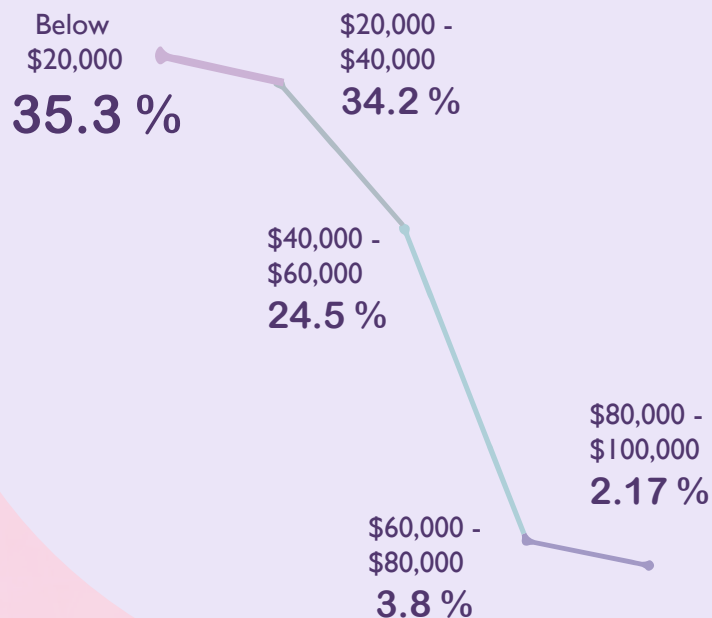


Demographics of Frontline Workers Surveyed

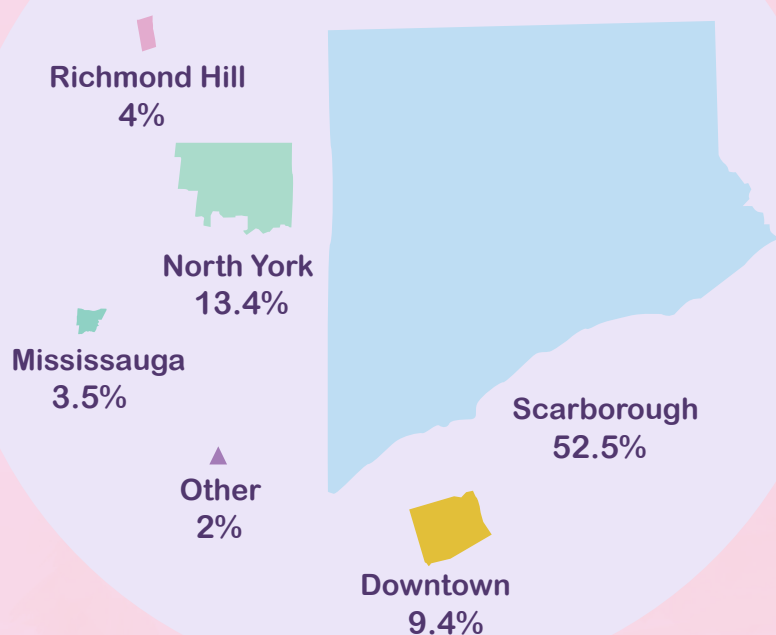
Age



Income per Year

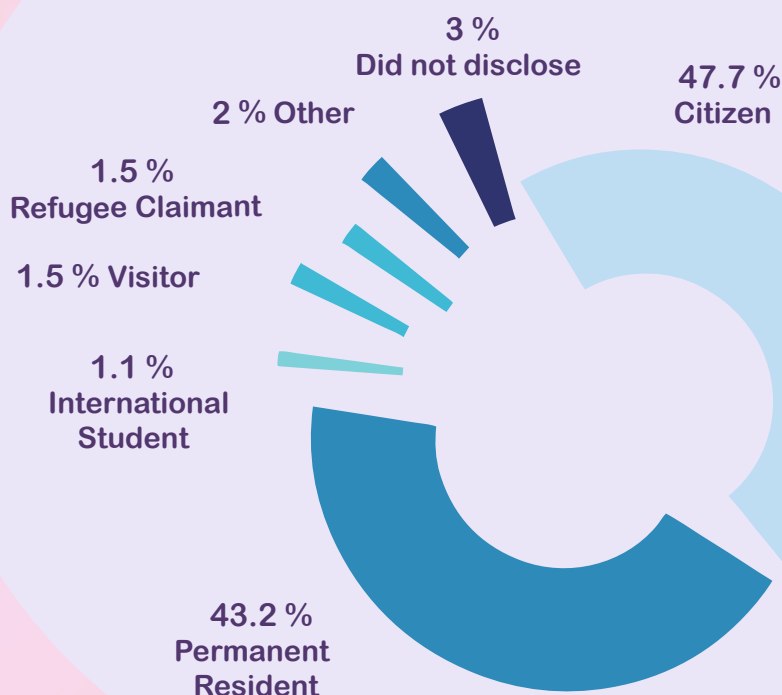


Neighbourhood



Percentage of workers surveyed shown by...

Immigration Status



Limitations

We recognize the limitations of this report. First, this report is community-led and is not a product of formal scientific systematic investigation, so the findings are not generalizable. The aim of this report is to center the lived experiences of Chinese workers by believing in the community's power in leading and shaping the narrative to build up the community power in the long run. By trusting the community's knowledge and capacity, this report has reached many marginalized workers who are usually being neglected from most of the academic and policy research. Second, the report can be strengthened by collecting more demographic data information and objective measurements. Specifically, it would be more informative to include basic demographics such as hourly wages, hours worked, sick leave eligibility, and change in wages during the pandemic. More objective information could better substantiate our subjective findings of workers' lived experiences presented in this report. Similarly, other demographic information such as immigration status, length of residency in Canada and countries of origin can help inform the wage gap between those with and those without status. These limitations are mostly resulted from the concerns of damaging our organization's relationships with the marginalized community. As we build up more trust with the community and have more resources to ensure the data collected could be owned and utilized by the community, we will strive to have a more comprehensive report in the future.

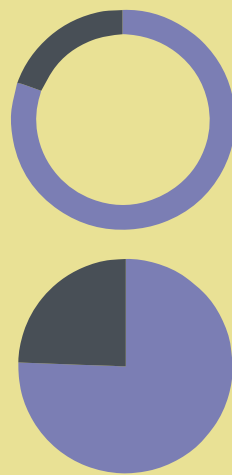
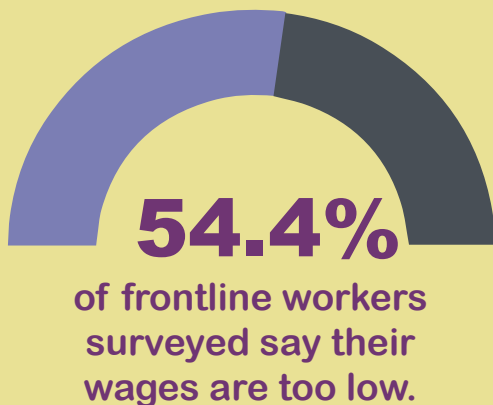
“The pandemic immensely impacted my work. Before the pandemic, many of my part-time colleagues and I worked in different long-term care homes to ensure that we earn the same income as full-time workers since many long-term care homes only provided part-time positions. With COVID-19 restrictions in place, we are only allowed to work at one fixed home, which is financially brutal for us. Take my situation for instance, I can only work two days a week. Just looking at numbers, my income has reduced by a lot”

— David
(Personal Support Worker)

Findings

1.

Chinese Canadian frontline workers are working long hours for low wages in dangerous conditions.



Low wage work had already been a significant issue for many Chinese Canadian and immigrant workers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which made workers vulnerable to both increased health and economic risks. It is well documented that racialized workers are overrepresented in low-pay and dangerous work.³ In the sectors where the majority of Chinese Canadian immigrant frontline workers are employed (i.e. grocery, retail, health care, food, production, and domestic), COVID-19 has exacerbated problems workers already face. Some of the problems include wage theft, low-wages, long hours, dangerous conditions, precarious terms of employment, lack of collective bargaining power and little access to worker protections and income security.

Low wages mean workers must work for longer hours, take on more shifts and work a greater

number of jobs. They are more likely to have longer commutes, take public transit, and have customer-facing service jobs where close contact with the public is required, and conditions are crowded and prone to COVID-19 outbreaks.

Low wages also create conditions of disposability where workers face greater risks of retaliation and other repercussions when they speak out. All of this results in an economic system where low wage workers are more likely to be forced into unsafe and dangerous work that disproportionately increase their exposure to COVID-19 and other health risks.

**69.4% of
frontline workers
surveyed were not
unionized**

3. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. (2021). "COVID-19: It's time to Protect Frontline Workers." *The Monitor*. www.monitormag.ca/index.php?p=articles/covid-19-its-time-to-protect-frontline-workers



58% of frontline workers report feeling financial stress during the pandemic. Low wages are one of the main causes of stress. An alarming majority of frontline workers (54.4%) expressed that the wages they are receiving are too low. 63.3% of food industry workers, 57.3% of healthcare workers, 58.5% of retail (grocery) workers and 26.3% of production workers who completed the survey felt their wages are not enough. Further, Ontario's mandatory pandemic pay increase only applies to certain essential workers. Independent care workers, restaurant workers, production workers and retail/grocery store workers are excluded from the mandatory pay increase while being labeled as "essential workers". **80.4% of frontline workers surveyed reported receiving no wage increases during the pandemic, with 95% of restaurant workers reporting no pay increase.**

To make matters worse, **a large majority of frontline workers (75.6%) who completed the survey reported they experienced some form of income loss during the pandemic.** More than 1 in 2 workers (56.8%) experienced income loss between 1-50% of their regular earnings, and a significant number of workers (18.8%) reported 50-100% income loss.

Although unionization did not seem to be a significant factor in determining how low-wage frontline workers in the various sectors experienced the pandemic, we note that **a large majority (69.4%) of frontline workers did not have collective bargaining power through unions.** Healthcare workers were the group with the highest percentage of union membership, making up 67.9% of the overall 30.6% of unionized workers. Only 16.7% of workers in the production sector belonged to a union and 0% of retail (grocery) workers were unionized.

Grocery workers also made up a substantial portion of frontline workers who felt the stress of low-wage work. **56% shared that they felt financial stress and 50% said they experienced psychological stress.** Nearly 1 in 10 grocery workers responded "yes" to being forced to work, and over 1 in 5 stated they were overworked. Reflecting these conditions, 78% of grocery and retail workers supported a minimum wage increase.

Statistics from Grocery Sector Workers Surveyed



Over half of grocery workers surveyed reported experiencing financial and psychological stress



1 in 5 grocery workers surveyed feel overworked

0 %
of grocery workers surveyed are unionized

Michael believes that most of these workplace issues existed before the pandemic. Low pay and long hours are widespread in the industry, as is a lack of labour code adherence on issues like minimum wage and vacation pay.... Before immigrating, I was under the impression that it would be easy to make a lot of money in the United States or Canada, says Michael, but after arriving, it seems like the life of an immigrant is spent scrounging for enough to eat.

Michael — Grocery Store Worker (see pg. 42)

2.

1 in 2
frontline workers
surveyed reported
feeling that their
workplaces are unsafe

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Jasmine's employer does not provide her and her co-workers with personal protection equipment (PPE), leaving them to supply their own N95 masks, face shields and gloves to care for clients. Because of the one-time-use nature of PPE, and the high volume used, acquiring what she needs to protect herself at work has amounted to a costly out-of-pocket expense. Workplace safety is a cause for concern that has generated additional psychological stress.

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Jasmine — Domestic Care Worker (see pg. 33)

Workplaces are unsafe for Chinese Canadian frontline workers.

Workplace safety is a concern for many workers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Work related accidents, injuries and long-term health impacts are issues many Chinese Canadian frontline workers face every day. Low job mobility and other barriers make racialized and immigrant frontline workers and those with precarious status more likely to experience unsafe work conditions. When they do, there are few resources and options available, especially when current labour laws do not protect workers from unjust dismissal. In the pandemic, **1 in 2 frontline workers surveyed reported that they feel their workplaces are unsafe.** 1 in 3 frontline workers reported they do not have enough PPE. Most are working in the healthcare sector, where **41.46% of workers in long-term care, hospitals and private care settings expressed they lacked adequate PPE.**

In comparison to men, **women are more impacted by the inability to improve unsafe and poor working conditions in their places of employment.** Amongst the frontline workers surveyed, 58% of women felt their workplaces were unsafe in comparison to 30.8% of workers who were men. In the food, healthcare, service and production sectors, frontline workers are predominantly women. In these sectors, workers were more likely to feel unsafe at work and less likely to receive a pay increase.

Our study found that women make up 68% of production workers and **58% of frontline production workers expressed concerns about an unsafe workplace.** According to our survey, three out of four (75%) production workers did not receive a pandemic wage increase. Respectively, 50 % of retail and grocery workers, 51.2% of healthcare workers and 45.5% of food sector workers also felt unsafe at work.

1 in 3 workers reported they lacked adequate PPE.

In the food, healthcare, service and production sectors, frontline workers are predominantly women.

In these sectors, workers were more likely to feel unsafe at work and less likely to receive a pay increase.

Workers' Perspectives on Workplace Safety by Gender

58%

of workers who identify as women feel their workplaces are unsafe

30.8%

of workers who identify as men feel their workplaces are unsafe

☞ This January, Anna and her husband both contracted COVID-19 from a meat processing plant in Mississauga where he and their second eldest son work [...] Anna's husband was the first to experience symptoms and he spent 3 weeks at home in recovery while the plant closed to contain the outbreak. For Anna, who had stopped working in March of last year, the symptoms were more severe. Because of her underlying conditions, everyone in her family was anxious and terrified, fearing the worst. Four months later, she is still suffering from the debilitating and prolonged consequences of the virus, such as difficulty breathing, fatigue and strain in her lungs when she tries to go up the stairs. ☞

Anna — Injured Worker (see pg. 47)

☞ The psychological state of nervousness and worry is exacerbated by the fact that he did not have a health card. Mr. Xie says that whenever someone gets too close to him or coughs in public, he would feel a pounding anxiety...As a grocery clerk stocking shelves, he is frequently approached by customers inquiring about where different products can be found. Although he doesn't speak English, Mr. Xie, being a person serious about his work, would use his phone to translate and communicate with customers. This kind of close contact at work makes him feel especially vulnerable during the pandemic. ☞

Mr. Xie — Grocery Store Worker (see pg. 38)

Statistics from Production Sector Workers Surveyed



58%

of frontline workers in the production sector surveyed expressed concerns about an unsafe workplace.

68%

of frontline production workers surveyed are women.

3/4

frontline production sector workers surveyed reported that they did not receive a pandemic pay increase.

3.

An overwhelming majority of Chinese Canadian frontline workers feel powerless to change their circumstances.

“

The foreman often used insulting words to abuse employees and constantly threatened to fire them...No matter how hard the work is and no matter how little you're paid, you have to abide by the foreman's every order, otherwise they'll curse at you or threaten to replace you. You have to do what you have to do to survive. Having some work is better than nothing.

”

Copy — Construction Contractor (see pg. 40)



70%
of frontline workers surveyed reported feeling incapable of improving unsafe work environments.



Nearly 3 in 4 Chinese Canadian women in frontline work reported feeling they do not have the power to improve unsafe conditions at work.

“ Do you feel you have the power to change unsafe conditions at work? ”

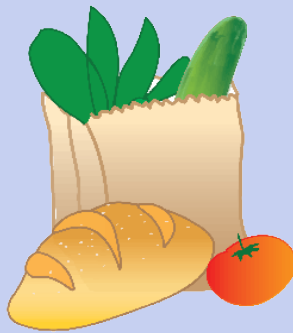
This is not uncommon in precarious work sectors as workers are not protected from unjust firing. In addition, a lack of enforcement from the government and low mobility in the job market all contribute to the sense of powerlessness in seeking changes in the workplace. Asked if they felt they had the power to improve unsafe work environments, the vast majority of workers responded no. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents feeling incapable and 5 indicates feeling capable, **70% of frontline workers responded with 1 and 2**, implying that they feel quite incapable of improving unsafe work environments.

74.4 % women in frontline essential work feel they do not have the power to improve unsafe conditions. 58.72% of men feel they cannot improve their unsafe conditions at work. **Feeling a lack of safety at work also increases with age**, but is significant in every age group. The age bracket with the lowest percentage of workers who feel unsafe at work is the 20 to 39 age group at 37%. At the 40 to 64 age bracket, this percentage rises to more than half of all workers, at 51.7%. **For workers 65 and above, 66.7% reported they feel unsafe at work.**

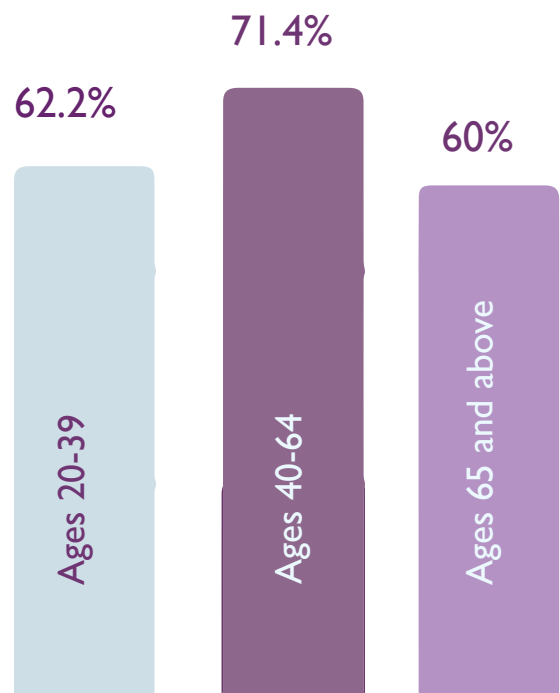
In all three age groups, the percentage of workers who feel powerless to change unsafe conditions at work are considerably high, ranging between 60% to 71.4%. Workers in the 20 to 39 age bracket

Workers between the ages 40 to 64 marked the highest at 71.4%. 60% of workers ages 65 and above recorded feeling incapable of changing unsafe work conditions.

Whether or not workers were unionized did not appear to make a substantial difference in relation to the overall prevalence of unsafe work conditions and how workers felt about their inability to address issues of workplace safety. This might reflect the encroachment of union power and the temporary order overriding of collective agreements issued by the Ontario government during the pandemic. It may also be due to the fact that **69.4% of frontline workers are not unionized** to begin with.



Workers who feel powerless to change unsafe work condition (by age group)



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When I asked Ah-De about his thoughts on this (his wife's termination), he said this wasn't a fight they could win. As newcomers without any other options, they had to take what jobs they could get. Ah-De said that in China, things would be different.

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Ah-De & Da-Zi — Grocery Store Workers (see pg. 36)

4.

Chinese Canadian frontline workers are suffering from stress and negative mental health impacts.

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Ms. A's relationship with her daughter has deteriorated from the confinement of the pandemic. Her daughter was also diagnosed with depression during the pandemic and has started taking a drug newly available in March. Whenever Ms. A thinks about this, she becomes upset, often causing her to lose sleep at night. 99

Ms. A — Restaurant Worker
(see pg. 32)

61.3%

of frontline workers feel too much stress at work.



61.3% of frontline workers reported they are under too much stress. Of all the workers interviewed, those in the healthcare sector (majority working as PSW, nurses and caregivers in long-term care homes, hospitals and private settings) were the most impacted, with over 75% of health care workers saying work in the pandemic is too stressful. **Production workers and retail (grocery stores) workers are also amongst the most affected by workplace pandemic stress, with 57.9% of production workers and 55% of retail workers reporting that they are feeling over stressed.**

With the exception of retail, the vast majority of workers across these sectors are women of colour. The uneven indicators of stress levels between two genders reflect the disproportionate exposure of women of colour workers to dangerous, low-pay, and stressful work conditions. **66.7% of frontline workers who identify as women reported experiencing too much stress**, while 53.8% of frontline workers who identify as men reported they experience too much stress. Workers who identified as women also tended to have more caregiving responsibilities in addition to work in the wage system.

A major source of stress and anxiety also comes from anxiety and concerns about the vulnerability elderly adults and other family members in multigenerational households. Such worries are often combined with the pressure of navigating confusing and everchanging school policies for their children, especially with regards to the adjustments around school reopening policies and the inadequate supports for students learning at home.

54%

of frontline workers are concerned about the future.

There is also a disparity in stress levels between unionized workers and non-unionized workers, where a higher percentage of unionized workers (78.3%) reported feeling too much stress. This likely reflects the higher concentration of unionized workers in the healthcare sector, as well as the dangerous, immediate and traumatic nature of the work performed by healthcare workers during COVID-19. By contrast, though still alarmingly high, 55.1% of non-unionized workers expressed feeling too much stress. **In the 40 to 65 age group, 68% of workers are overstressed, the highest rate of stress reported amongst all 3 age groups.** Between ages 20 to 40, 45% of workers report feeling too stressed and those ages 65 and above report the lowest rate of stress at 33%.

Another devastating impact of frontline work during COVID-19 is the ability to feel hope for the future. 54% of workers surveyed told us they are worried about the future. What impact the prolonged experience of stress and anxiety of high-risk work during COVID-19 will have on workers is a cause for concern. Robust **mental health care for workers across all sectors, and especially for those frontline workers most impacted by stressful work environments is urgently needed.**

Social determinants of health such as income support, job security, housing, workplace health and safety also have significant impacts on Chinese Canadian frontline workers' mental health.

“

Both before and during the pandemic, she takes care of her daughter by shopping for groceries and cooking for her. Tensions are high however, due to her daughter's illness and due to her own lack of status. She has had close encounters with the police and negative experiences with her landlord. During the pandemic, her fears have been doubly magnified. She is living in fear of contracting COVID-19 and getting evicted by her landlord.

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Ms. X — Cleaning Service Worker (see pg.35)

5.

Workers Are Voicing Their Demands

Frontline Workers Perspectives on Policies

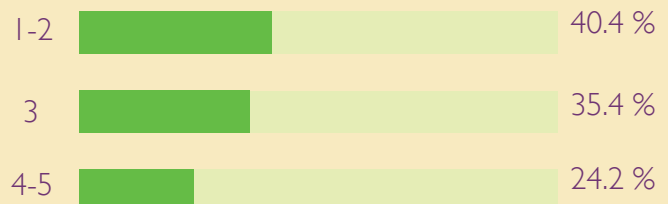
73%

of workers surveyed feel strongly that the government needs to do more to reduce the burden placed on essential workers.

We asked workers 14 questions related to politics and policies changes in Canada to get a better understanding of their perspectives on what they feel are most relevant to their lives. The responses of frontline workers collected here better reflect the realities and desires of Chinese Canadian and immigrant working class communities. What workers expressed through the community survey is that they are demanding meaningful policy and legislation changes that allow working class families' equal access to decent and secure opportunities. Workers desire transformative changes that prioritize working class communities, such as a statutory minimum wage increase, universal permanent paid sick days, better jobs for all marginalized groups, fair working class taxation, universal basic income, affordable housing, status upon arrival, infrastructure investment, and housing security through supports for low-income home buyers.

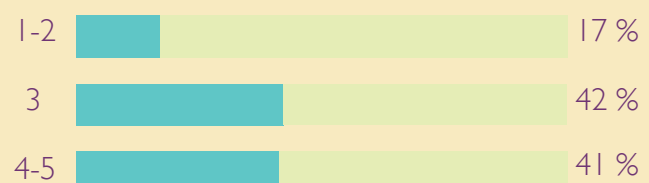
Perspectives on Pandemic Policies

1-5 from least satisfied to most satisfied

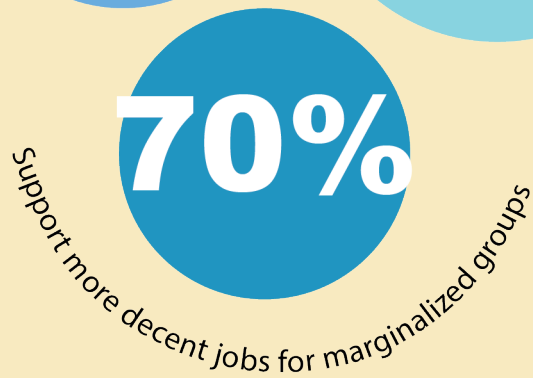
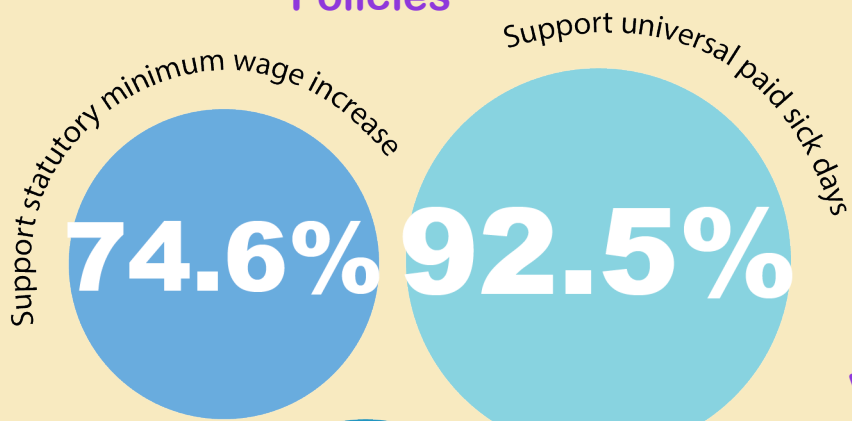


Perspectives on Pandemic Income Support Measures

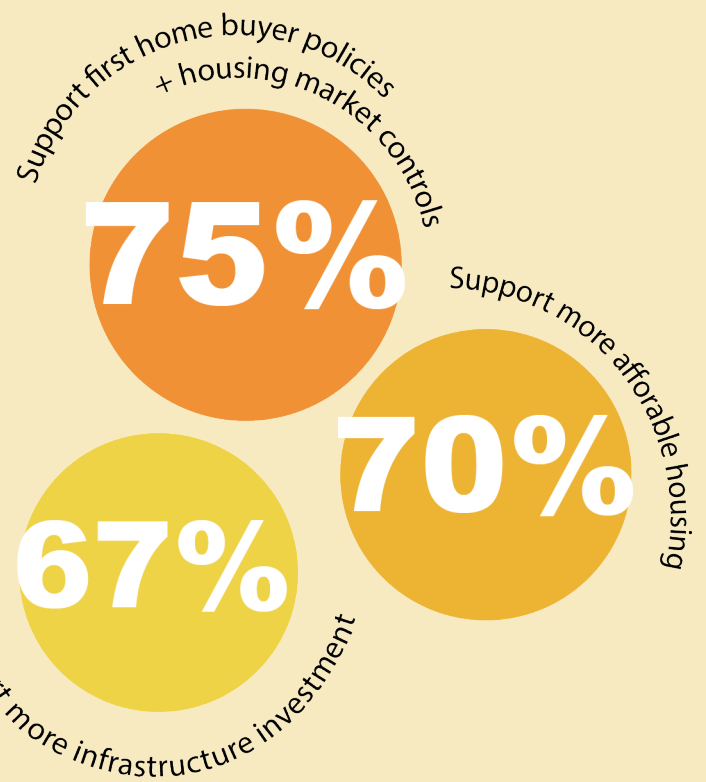
1-5 from least satisfied to most satisfied



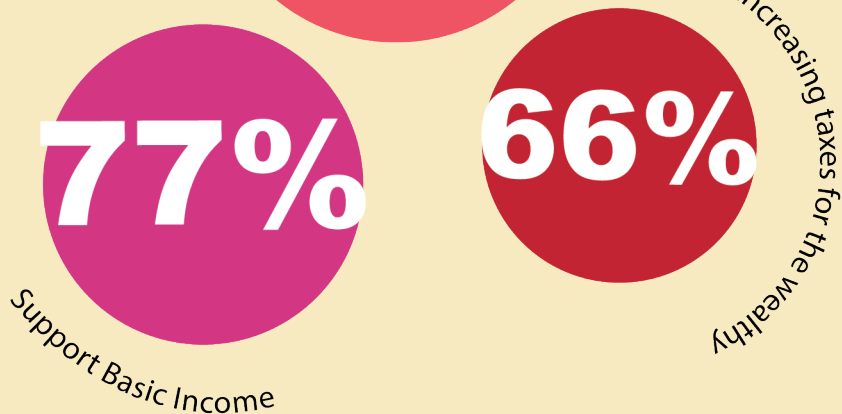
Views on Labour Policies



Views on Housing Policies



Views on Tax Reform + Income Support Policies



Views on Immigration Policies



“She took three buses to get to work everyday, followed by three buses to get back home. While she cannot remember exactly how much she got paid everyday, she estimates that she was paid \$10 an hour, lower than the legal minimum wage.”

— Ms. X
(Cleaning Service Worker)

Recommendations

Canada's COVID-19 response insisted essential workers were too important to stay home and stay safe, but also suggested that they were too disposable to be protected and compensated with living wages. A just pandemic recovery requires everyone to be able to live healthy, dignified and secure lives—including frontline workers. The community survey completed by frontline workers demonstrated a number of pressing needs that require immediate attention.

The results of the study provide the basis of the recommendations included in this report. The voices of Chinese Canadian frontline workers inform more robust and progressive policy changes that reflect the needs and concerns of Chinese Canadian working class communities themselves. Workers' stories contribute concrete examples of how structural issues such as anti-Asian racism, low-wages, precarious work conditions, housing insecurity, and disparities in language access, health, education, and immigration status are impacting their lives.

There is an urgent need for governments and community groups to take immediate measures to protect the health, safety and dignity of all frontline workers, with special attention to those who experience intersectional oppression and marginalization.

The following are five recommendations which reflect the findings of this report:



Expand worker protections now: Workers deserve safe, fair and dignified work conditions.

- a. Workers need fair compensation in line with a living wage — Increase the statutory minimum wage to \$20 per hour!** Low wages and income insecurity predispose frontline workers to long hours and to dangerous and precarious work with little capacity to assert their fundamental rights. The minimum wage in Ontario is currently \$14.35 per hour, which is grossly insufficient to cover basic costs of living in the GTA. The Ontario Living Wage Network calculates that the current living wage for Toronto is \$22.08. A mandatory legislated changes that increase minimum wage to \$20 per hour allows a worker to meet their basic needs and participate in community.
- b. Workers need guaranteed and permanent paid sick days now!** Ontario's temporary 3 day paid sick leave program during the pandemic is woefully inadequate. Ensure all workers have access to legislated universal and permanent paid sick days: 10 permanent paid sick days and 14 paid sick days during public health outbreaks. It is well documented that paid sick days protect workers and communities most impacted by COVID-19.
- c. Expand employment protection to all workers regardless of their employment classification.** This is especially important to many marginalized and racialized workers who are being misclassified as independent contractors and have no access to basic rights under labour law or full access to income support programs.
- d. Empower workers by amending Ontario's Employment Standards Act, 2000 to include protections against unjust dismissal, similar to the unjust dismissal protections under the Canada Labour Code.** Requiring cause for dismissal will increase job security and protections for workers, particularly low wage and non-unionized workers who feel powerless to change poor working conditions.
- e. Ensure strong enforcement of labour law to protect the workers with precarious employment conditions and who often face various barriers exercising their rights under the law.** Strong enforcement practices such as proactive investigation and penalty to employers are ways to increase workers' power to challenge unfair and unsafe employment conditions.

2) **Provide permanent free and accessible mental health care for all workers as a part of a just recovery plan.**

- a. **Provide free, accessible, long-term and emergency mental health support that is culturally appropriate and language specific for all workers, racialized working class communities.** A troubling majority of frontline workers reported experiencing too much psychological stress due to pandemic related work conditions. Prioritize mental health care for frontline workers as well as community members who lost their jobs or were unable to work during the pandemic. The existing mental health system places excessive barriers for those seeking care, including barriers to accessing culturally-sensitive care in an individual's desired language of care; barriers to accessing free programs in the community.
- b. **Fund community-based education and resources to promote mental health and de-stigmatize mental illness in Chinese and Asian Canadian communities.** Support workers' mental health by providing income support and financing relevant social and peer support.

3) **Invest resources into Chinese Canadian working class communities to increase workers' capacities to fight for more just and equitable labour conditions.**

- a. **Ongoing funding from all level of governments to support community organizations** offering free and accessible migrant and workers' rights training programs, workshops, educational resources and initiatives focused on empowering working class communities.
- b. **Invest resources to increase workers' capacity to unionize, organize and take collective action** to win against employers, landlords, and state apparatus that harm them.
- c. **Fund programs that support workers' representation, leadership and participation in directly shaping the conditions of their workplaces** through a diversity of means, including: unionization, committee membership and civic participation. This includes prioritizing worker power in decision making processes in workplaces, unions, local committees, and government bodies. Employers, unions and government bodies must take concrete measures to ensure the voices of racialized and marginalized workers are centred.

4) Status for All!

- a. **Develop an immediate and comprehensive program to grant status on arrival** and regularization program for permanent residency for all migrants, workers and community members with precarious status. Precarious immigration status puts workers in positions where they have fewer options and less power to change unfair and poor work conditions. The immigration system creates an additional layer of state and workplace violence on top of the problems that workers already confront.
- b. **Immediately end all deportations and immigration detention.** Deportation and immigration detention function as a state mechanism to silence workers and break up working class and migrant communities, while keeping workers in dangerous and precarious living and working conditions.
- c. **Stop all legislation and practices that target migrant and racialized workers.** Migrant and racialized workers are contributing daily to make our society function. No worker should be targeted by law enforcement or subject to racist laws that put them at risk. Workers must be supported to assert their rights and have full access to services provided by all levels of government without fear.
- e. **Ensure workers' full access to income support programs regardless of their immigration status.** This includes expanding unemployment support and basic income support to all workers (i.e. undocumented workers, migrant workers, international students, workers without work permit) who contribute to our society daily.

Conclusion

Chinese Canadian immigrant frontline workers, working class community members and low-income community members work in precarious, low-wage, dangerous conditions every day. They are treated as invisible and disposable. The health and economic impacts frontline workers experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect the daily violence of systemic racism. Anti-Asian racist attacks often involve overt acts of violence, but there are also structural incidents of racism enacted by the immigration system, labour exploitation, income insecurity, language exclusion and the denial of access to safety and to permanent resident status.

Due to limitations, this report does not provide a comprehensive account of workers' experiences across all sectors. However, we stand together with all the workers, including sex workers in our community. The struggles and aspirations of Chinese Canadian workers are real and important. More action must be taken to bring about the necessary policy and labour changes to improve the wellbeing and protect the lives of all Chinese Canadian and other marginalized workers. Most importantly, we must treat Chinese Canadian workers and community members with dignity and respect.