

COVID-19 disproportionately impacted Michigan health care and service workers early in pandemic

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A large percentage of Michigan workers continued to report to work despite the state's stay-home order and a disproportionate share of

COVID-19 cases among working adults in Michigan were in the health care and social assistance industries, according to a new University of Michigan survey.

"Our survey indicates that moving forward, we need to standardize the collection of industry and occupation data in national surveillance systems to identify high-risk industries early on to prevent workplace exposure and community spread," said Zoey Laskaris, a postdoctoral fellow at U-M's School of Public Health and lead author of the report.

"We also need to develop and update model standards on how to protect workers during outbreaks of airborne infectious agents and ensure that employers are held accountable for the [health](#) and safety of their employees. "

For their research, investigators used data from the Michigan COVID-19 Recovery Surveillance Study. MI CReSS is a partnership between the U-M School of Public Health and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to conduct [public health](#) surveillance and record Michiganders' experiences with COVID-19 using a representative sample of confirmed cases.

Researchers sampled 3,000 Michigan adults with COVID-19 onset prior to June 1, 2020, who were alive at the time of the study. From the initial sample, 869 respondents completed the survey and provided their employment status.

Employed respondents were predominantly female (56 percent), non-Hispanic White (50 percent) or non-Hispanic Black (25 percent), and 46 years old on average.

Of the 869 respondents:

- 73 percent were employed at the time of their COVID-19 diagnosis. Of those, 72 percent were required to physically report to work and 28 percent worked remotely.
- Among employed respondents who knew the source of their exposure, 61 percent said they were exposed at work.
- The most affected occupation was [health care](#) support, with 82 percent of employed respondents who knew their source of exposure reporting that they were infected at work.

"Most of the respondents in our sample worked in the health care and social assistance industry during the 'Stay Home, Stay Safe' executive order that suspended activities unnecessary to sustain and protect life. It is not surprising that essential workers were those most impacted by COVID-19 during that [time period](#)," said Laskaris, whose current research focuses on physical and mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on residents and autoworkers living and working in Michigan.

"We know that workplaces can be a source of exposure to the virus. And we know some key factors that might determine your level of risk including having direct contact with patients like [health care workers](#) do, having interactions with the public, or the requirement to work indoors or in small spaces with other coworkers.

"But despite all this knowledge, we really had very little information on how COVID-19 varied by occupation type, whether workers were exposed to the virus at work, and whether work exposure led to further community spread. This survey gives us a really unique look into the occupational consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which we really know very little about."

More information: Experiences of Working Adults with COVID-19 Onset Prior to June 1, 2020, in Michigan – September 13, 2021.

sph.umich.edu/mi-cress/reports.html

Provided by University of Michigan

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