

Covid-19 Impact on Household Cleaners in NYC

Economic and Health Precarity of
Immigrant Latinx Cleaners in NYC

March 2022



Mount
Sinai *Selikoff Centers for
Occupational Health*



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Executive Summary

In this report, we present data from a survey of household cleaners in NYC and Westchester conducted between **March 2021** and **June 2021**. As part of the Safe and Just Cleaners research project, we explored our study participants' rates of Covid-19 cases, the economic and social impact of the pandemic and longitudinal changes in mental and physical health outcomes.

Household cleaners face financial insecurity due to loss of job opportunities during the pandemic (80% of them reported a reduction in income), lack of health coverage, precarious working conditions, immigration barriers, stigma related to having Covid-19 while feeling afraid to release their covid-19 status. All these factors are associated with the significant increase in their stress and depression levels. Key Findings:

- At least 54% of cleaners had Covid-19 during the first year of the pandemic, a rate much higher than the general population.
- Many cleaners knew somebody that had Covid-19 and over half of them knew someone that died of Covid-19 which impacted their mental health.
- Many household cleaners were not eligible or could not take paid sick leave during the pandemic.
- The pandemic exacerbated the housing, food, and financial insecurity among household cleaners.
- Most cleaners had a positive attitude towards vaccination.
- Due to the rise in demand for use of disinfectants, household cleaners increased the use of disinfectants at their workplaces, and in their own homes.
- Cleaners rely on community-based organizations as sources for information about Covid-19 updates, and of non-government assistance.
- Levels of depression, stress, and perceived fair/poor health increased among cleaners due to the pandemic.

To address economic insecurity, Make the Road New York alongside many NY community organizations, is advocating to pass the **#Coverage4All** and **#ExcludedNoMore** policies, to mitigate the impact of the pandemic among immigrant essential workers, such as the cleaners of our study. **#Coverage4All** will provide access to a health insurance option for low-income New Yorkers who are excluded from eligibility for health insurance coverage because of their immigration status, and **#ExcludedNoMore** will ameliorate the economic insecurity thousands currently face, by creating a permanent unemployment program for undocumented essential workers.

Methods

Participation Rate

We reached out to the 402 household cleaners that had participated in our ongoing Safe and Just Cleaners study. These cleaners had been recruited through community-based organizations and street outreach in 4 boroughs of New York City and in Westchester between July 2019 and February 2020 to participate in our study’s baseline survey. That survey included assessing whether cleaners experience depression, stress or self-reported fair or poor health. For results from that initial survey see our report at www.safeandjustcleaners.org. In 2021, we recontacted these cleaners by telephone between mid-March and Mid-June and 296 of 402 participated (74%) in a survey about their experience during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Demographics

Latinx household cleaners in our baseline study in NYC and Westchester self-identify as women and tend to be middle-aged and immigrant, mostly from Mexico and Ecuador. They have lived in the US an average of 16 years. Additionally, 42% of household cleaners self-identified as Mestiza, 19% as Black or Afro-descendant, 12% as White, and 2% as Indigenous. One percent of them speak an Indigenous language at home, such as K’iche’, Quechua, Nahautl, or Mixteco.

- 42% Mestiza, or 2 or more races
- 19% Black or Afro-descendant
- 12% White
- 2% Indigenous or Native American
- 25% Don't know
- 2% Prefer not to answer



Impact of Covid-19 on Working and Living Conditions

Employment

Housecleaning is mostly conducted part-time, alone, in multiple homes, without a formal written contract and not well paid for the Latinx workers in our study. Many also reported wage and benefit abuses, likely influenced by a lack of formal written contracts. On top of the informality and precarious working conditions, household cleaners were directly impacted by the pandemic. Some of these workers kept working during the lockdown, while many others reported a decrease or loss of work hours due to their and clients' fear of infecting themselves or their families.

29% reported that they worked as a housecleaner during the March through June 2020 shutdown.

78% continued working as household cleaners after June 2020.

36% shared that they felt they could not take paid or unpaid sick leave due to fear of employer retaliation.

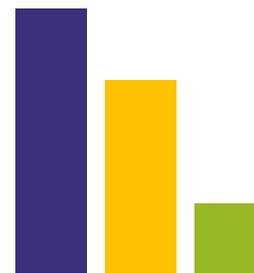
13% reported that their employer provided sick leave during the pandemic.

55% shared that they were either very or extremely concerned about whether they had enough clients to meet their needs during the pandemic.

HOURS WORKED

82% reported that their number of hours worked decreased during the pandemic.

Hours Worked



- 82% attributed reduction to fear of infecting own family
- 60% attributed reduction to clients' fears of infection
- 22% no longer worked after June 2020

Impact of Covid-19 on Working and Living Conditions

Socio-economic Impact

Many household cleaners are the primary economic support for their families, not earning enough income to cover their basic needs. They experience economic insecurity and live below the poverty level. The pandemic has exacerbated this situation, as many of them reported experiencing food and housing insecurity. Domestic insecurity, such as feeling unsafe in their home or being verbally abused by an intimate partner, has also been reported by some of these workers. During the pandemic many of them relied on the support provided by community organizations, such as Make the Road New York.

PRIMARY HOUSEHOLD WAGE EARNERS

45% reported being the primary wage earner in their household and are economically responsible for an average of 2 other household members.

POVERTY

100% of participants who were the primary family wage earner reported earning monthly wages lower than the 2021 Federal Poverty Level threshold of \$21,960 for a 3-person household².

MONTHLY INCOME FROM CLEANING AND OTHER WORK COMBINED

41% of all participants reported earning \$500 or less monthly.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ASSISTANCE

24% of participants sought assistance from a religious organization.

40% looked to community-based organizations for support.

Monthly Income



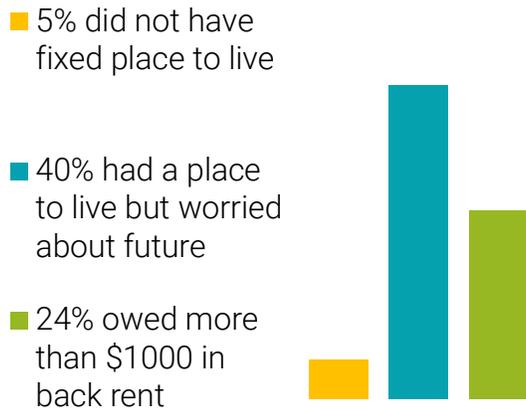
- 11% not working
- 41% earned \$500 or less
- 29% earned \$500-\$1000
- 15% earned \$1000+

Impact of Covid-19 on Working and Living Conditions

Socio-economic Impact

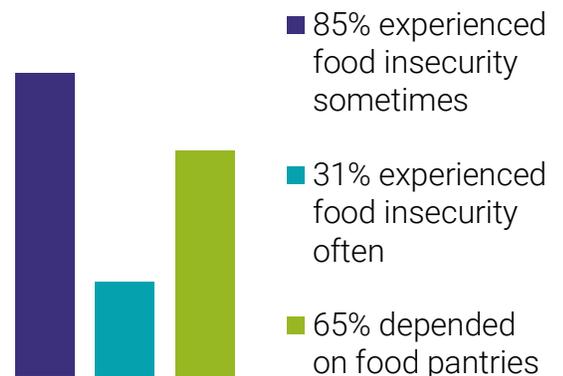
HOUSING INSECURITY

69% of participants reported housing insecurity. 24% owed more than \$1000 in rent. This is higher than the estimate by the U.S. Census of 9% of adults in New York who were not current on rent and have little to no confidence that their household could make their next rent or mortgage payment on time.³



FOOD INSECURITY

Some level of food insecurity was common (85%) as were extreme levels of food insecurity (31%) over the past year among participants.⁴ This is compared to the national and statewide average, of which only 10.2% and 15.4% respectively reported living in households where there was either sometimes or often not enough to eat in the last seven days⁵.



DOMESTIC INSECURITY

Domestic insecurity, such as feeling unsafe in their home or being verbally abused by an intimate partner, has also been reported by some of these workers. During the pandemic many of them relied on the support provided by community organizations, such as Make the Road New York

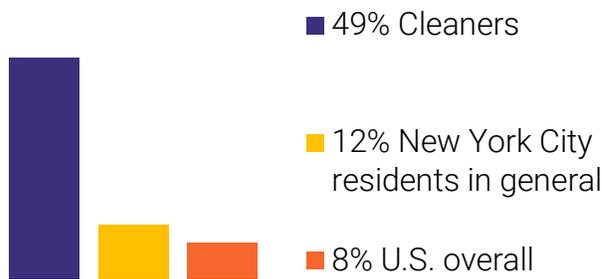
17% reported they felt unsafe inside their home.

12% disclosed they were verbally abused by someone with whom they had a romantic relationship.

Covid-19 Impact on Physical and Mental Health

Nearly half of the cleaners that participated in our study were uninsured at the start of the pandemic, which is disproportionately high in comparison with other groups.¹ Not having timely access to proper preventative and specialist care and specialist care puts these workers' health at risk and most likely will worsen their health.^{[6][7]}

LACK OF HEALTH INSURANCE



COVID-19

A significant portion of participants were personally affected during the first year of the pandemic, even before the increase in spread from the Delta and Omicron variants. The majority reported having Covid-19 themselves and belonging to a household with others who had Covid-19. Many participants also experienced the trauma of having family and friends who suffered or passed away from Covid-19.

54% reported they had Covid-19 sometime during the first year of the pandemic (up until their interview between March and June 2021). This rate is 150% of the rate in the general U.S. population at that time.⁷

61% reported other members of their household had Covid-19.

Covid-19 Impact on Physical and Mental Health

92% of those that reported having Covid-19 also lived with others that had Covid-19.

78% had family or friends who had Covid-19 outside of their household in the U.S or in another country.

51% had family or friends who died of Covid-19 outside of their household in the U.S. or in another country.

VACCINATION RATES

66% reported being fully vaccinated by June 2021.

WORKPLACE STIGMA

47% felt that if they were diagnosed with Covid-19 they would likely feel afraid or embarrassed to disclose this information to their employers.

Disinfectant Use and Covid-19

Many cleaners changed their cleaning practices following Covid-19 and reported using more disinfectants and bleach products. These products have been associated with health problems like asthma and skin rashes.⁶

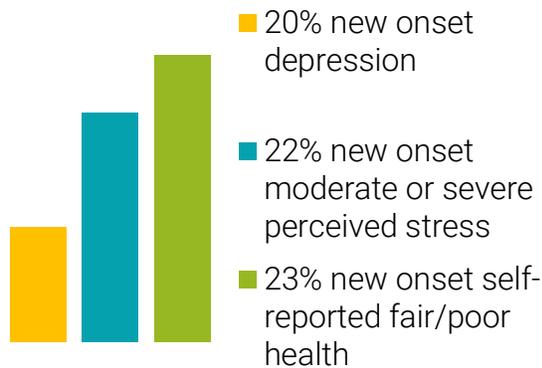
39% disclosed using more bleach.

68% reported using more disinfectants in cleaning in their home or at work after Covid-19.

Covid-19 Impact on Physical and Mental Health

Impact on Mental and Self-Reported Health

We compared the rates of depression, perceived stress, and self-reported health in our population before and during Covid-19.⁸



Social and Economic Factors Associated with Worsening Mental and Self-Reported Health.

We found that several factors both related to illness from Covid-19 and the social and economic consequences of Covid-19 were associated with worsening mental and self-reported health. Especially important were experiences of food insecurity, housing insecurity, and domestic insecurity which led to a doubling in the rates of mental and self-reported ill health.

DEPRESSION

After adjusting for pre-Covid-19 depression, we found at least a doubling of the odds of being depressed for cleaners who:

- Had Covid-19 (up till Spring 2021)
- Had a decrease in their income level
- Felt unsafe at home and/or romantic partner verbally abused them
- Experienced severe food insecurity

PERCEIVED STRESS

After adjusting for pre-Covid-19 perceived stress, we found at least a doubling of the odds of being stressed for cleaners who:

- Had a family member with Covid-19 (up till Spring 2021)
- Had a close family member or friend die of Covid-19 (up till Spring 2021)
- Were homeless or did not have a secure living situation
- Were severely food insecure
- Felt unsafe at home and/or romantic partner verbally abused them
- Were not yet vaccinated (Spring 2021)
- Felt afraid or embarrassed to disclose to their employer if they had Covid-19

FAIR/POOR SELF-REPORTED HEALTH

After adjusting for pre-Covid-19 self-reported health, we found at least a doubling of the odds of being in fair/poor health for cleaners who:

- Were the primary wage earner
- Lost wages because they had Covid-19 and couldn't work
- Were severely food insecure
- Felt unsafe at home and/or a romantic partner verbally abused them

Policy Recommendation

The data in this report illustrate how Covid-19 has disproportionately affected the immigrant Latinx household cleaner community and the particular impact it has had on their health, income, and housing situation. The Safe and Just cleaners study, provides strong evidence in support of two policy priorities: **#Coverage4All** a campaign that aims to create a health insurance option for low-income New Yorkers who are excluded from eligibility for health insurance coverage because of their immigration status, and **#ExcludedNoMore** a continuation of the **#FundExcludedWorkers** campaign that in 2021 successfully created a statewide fund for undocumented immigrants, who were not eligible for unemployment benefits. These proposed policy priorities would provide access to preventive and specialist health care, and economic relief to immigrants including the essential workers, such as the cleaners, that participated in our study.

#Coverage4All

The Safe and Just Cleaners study provides evidence that many of our research participants have been experiencing worse physical and mental health outcomes since the beginning of the pandemic. These same participants live with little to no medical care because of lack of access to health insurance.

This report also highlights the disproportionate infection rate among household cleaners, 54% of these workers had Covid-19 during the first year of the pandemic before the vaccine was available. Also, many of them lost their relatives due to the pandemic, and have experienced grief and stress, affecting their overall health. Moreover, the food and housing insecurity rates faced by these workers are extremely high and concerning. Our study also shows an association between these factors and an increase in their depression and stress levels, and how their self-reported health deteriorated.

“ Sometimes I experience pain and irritation in my eyes. I think that the pain is connected to my job as a cleaner and the exposure I have to harsh cleaning supplies. I have not been able to see an eye doctor because public hospitals have wait times that last 6-8 months and private clinics are out of my financial reach. I am worried about my eyesight. I would like to be seen for these problems, but it’s very difficult.”

—Reyna Tellez, Household Cleaner, member of Make the Road NY, Queens, NY.

Policy Recommendation

It is well known, that not having access to health coverage is linked to higher rates of chronic diseases, as individuals without coverage are more likely than their insured counterparts to avoid seeking necessary medical care for fear of the associated costs. Therefore, the associated cost of treating chronic diseases instead of providing preventive and specialist care is much higher.

The **CoverageforAll** policy recommendation would provide quality, affordable health insurance for low-income New Yorkers who are excluded from coverage due to their immigration status. The cost to the state is estimated at \$345 million per year to provide health insurance coverage to low-income immigrants who are currently not eligible due to their immigration status through a state-funded Essential Plan. It is estimated that approximately 46,000 individuals would enroll annually when the program is fully implemented. Many of our house cleaners would fall within the population that would benefit from this program.

Coverage4All is part of the Health Care for All New York coalition, and is driven by a coalition of community members, community organizations, health care providers, legal service providers, labor and immigrant groups, as well as health care consumer advocates, and led by Make the Road NY and the New York Immigration Coalition.

The Coverage4All coalition, and the cleaners from our study, are urgently demanding that Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York legislative leaders include the **#Coverage4All(A880A/S1572A) bill in the FY23 NYS budget**, which would expand lifesaving health coverage to undocumented immigrant New Yorkers. Our study provides data to support the need for these programs.



Covid-19 Impact on Household Cleaners in NYC

Policy Recommendation

#ExcludedNoMore

The pandemic's economic impact on immigrant essential workers is devastating. In New York, many household cleaners lost their jobs which left many of them unable to pay their rent or feed themselves and their families, despite providing frontline services by cleaning people's homes. The majority of our study participants reported working fewer hours than they did before the pandemic, with many of them facing financial and housing insecurity.

Exclusion from unemployment benefits also means that these workers have exposed themselves to the risk of contracting Covid-19 in order to have a source of income. In that regard, Covid-19 has exacerbated the need for a permanent alternative to unemployment for undocumented New Yorkers, who are usually excluded from government relief.

The Fund Excluded Workers (FEW) coalition successfully secured \$2.1 billion of funding in 2021 to provide the largest ever cash assistance program to excluded workers in the history of this country - and some of our study participants benefited from this program. However, despite this program's huge success and demand, it only covered a fraction of the total eligible workers. Regions outside of NYC did not get their fair share, and policy barriers kept thousands of eligible workers from applying. In fact, the fund was depleted faster than expected and about 173,000 eligible workers did not receive the benefit. Replenishing the Excluded Workers Fund would provide relief to the thousands still in line, and those who were unable to apply.

“ I work as a household cleaner, most of my jobs come through standing on a street near a train station known as “La Parada”. “La Parada” is a place where clients go to find a housecleaner for their homes. My job has never been stable, and it was even more difficult to have a source of income during the pandemic when some people were afraid of having people come into their homes. It was difficult for me to apply for the Fund for Excluded Workers last year because I found out about it late, and the funds finished quickly. These funds would have made a significant impact on my family’s life during such difficult times. There are many other people like me, single mothers who are domestic workers and undocumented who are suffering. People who are struggling to pay for necessities like rent, food, clothes, transport. It’s important for us to fight for a permanent unemployment solution and even a pathway to citizenship. We need to continue thinking about excluded workers.”

—Veronica, household cleaner, member of Make the Road New York, Queens, NY

Policy Recommendation

The huge demand and importance of expanding this program is undeniable, as many workers still await economic support to overcome the impact of the pandemic. This is why we strongly believe that the Excluded Worker Unemployment Program (**S8165/A9037**) will ameliorate the economic insecurity thousands currently face for the long term - and close the gaps in our social safety net for good. This legislative initiative will set up a permanent program to provide compensation to workers who lose a job or income and are otherwise ineligible for unemployment insurance, primarily undocumented workers and cash earners and self-employed workers below a certain income threshold. The program will provide a direct monthly payment to applicants who lose work and would make unemployment insurance accessible to approximately 50,000 workers per month.

The Fund Excluded Workers Coalition, driven by leading New York community and labor organizations across New York, urge that Governor Kathy Hochul and New York state legislators pass **S8165/A9037** to provide emergency relief. In doing so, we ensure economic stability for essential workers - including the cleaners in this study. Our study provides data to support this need.



Las Super Cleaners

Organizing Household Cleaners in New York

Las Super Cleaners group is a safe space for household cleaners, members of Make the Road New York, to meet, learn and work together to increase awareness about environmental toxins and health impacts among household cleaners to reduce exposure to harmful cleaning chemicals, and strive for transformation in their workplaces and personal well-being as women. This group was created in 2019 when research participants were invited to join educational activities. Since then, household cleaners meet monthly and are supported by Make the Road New York. These workers have been actively supporting different campaign initiatives and have been particularly advocating to pass the **#Coverage4All** legislation to provide health insurance coverage to low-income immigrants.



The Safe and Just Cleaners Research and Action Study

Our organizations came together in 2017 for this community-based participatory action research project. The survey was intended to understand Latinx immigrant household cleaners' use, knowledge, and attitudes about commonly used cleaning products to help document exposure levels to certain chemical components. Chemical exposure assessment and other initiatives are underway to generate safer work recommendations for household cleaners and their clients.

Meet the Three Partner Organizations

MAKE THE ROAD NEW YORK (MRNY)

MRNY builds the power of Latinx and working-class communities to achieve dignity and justice through organizing, policy innovation, transformative education, and survival services. MRNY operates community centers in Bushwick, Brooklyn; Jackson Heights, Queens; Port Richmond, Staten Island; Brentwood, Long Island; and White Plains, Westchester. With over 24,000 low-income members, MRNY tackles the critical issues facing our community: workplace justice, tenants' rights, immigrant rights, language-access, LGBTQ justice, public education, health care access, and immigration reform. The *Safe and Just Cleaners Study* belongs to the Workers' Health and Safety Program, which is directed by Deysi Flores, and is supported by Ana Gonzalez and Luisa Cuautle.

BARRY COMMONER CENTER FOR HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT AT QUEENS COLLEGE, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK (BCCHE)

BCCHE is an environmental and occupational health research center at Queens College, City University of New York. Our mission is to identify and help rectify environmental and occupational threats to human health. We emphasize a scientific approach to gather information and develop solutions and interact extensively with people and organizations that determine or are affected by policy choices. The *Safe and Just Cleaners Study* belongs to the Immigrant Worker Studies program, is directed by Dr. Sherry Baron, and supported by Dr. Isabel Cuervo. Current research and intervention studies examine the impact of COVID-19 on the health of low-wage, immigrant, and other insecure workers.

SELIKOFF CENTERS FOR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND THE INSTITUTE FOR EXPOSOMIC RESEARCH AT THE ICAHN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AT MOUNT SINAI

The Mount Sinai Selikoff Centers for Occupational Health are dedicated to providing cutting-edge clinical services with a focus on prevention to keep workers healthy and their workplaces safe. A multidisciplinary healthcare team diagnose and treat occupational diseases, evaluate the working conditions of our patients, and suggest measures to improve work environments. The Institute for Exposomic Research and its Occupational and Environmental Hygiene (OEH) Laboratory complements the Selikoff Centers' efforts by conducting research in occupational and environmental exposures and their impact on human health. The *Safe and Just Cleaners Study* is part of the OEH Laboratory directed by Dr. Homero Harari.

We would like to acknowledge the many partners, staff, and household cleaners themselves that have contributed to this report and study overall.

Endnotes

- ¹ *The Toll of Household Cleaning Work: Economic and Health Precarity of Immigrant Latinx Cleaners in New York*, a report by the Safe and Just Cleaners Study, March 2021 available at www.safeandjustcleaners.org
- ² "2021 Poverty Guidelines." *Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines/prior-hhs-poverty-guidelines-federal-register-references/2021-poverty-guidelines#guidelines>.
- ³ "Household Pulse Survey." *Housing Insecurity (Missed Payment and Low Confidence)*, United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=HINSEC>.
- ⁴ Hager ER, Quigg AM, Black MM, et al. Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. *Pediatrics* 2010; 126(1): e26–32.
- ⁵ "Household Pulse Survey." *Food Scarcity*, United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=FOODSCARCE&periodSelector=41&s_state=00036.
- ⁶ Archangelidi O, Sathiyajit S, Consonni D, et al. Cleaning products and respiratory health outcomes in occupational cleaners: a systematic review and meta-analysis *Occup Environ Med* 2021;78:604–617
- ⁷ Pei S, Yamana TK, Kandula S, Galanti M, Shaman J. Burden and characteristics of COVID-19 in the United States during 2020. *Nature*. 2021 Oct;598(7880):338-341.
- ⁸ We used the Cohen Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) the CES-D 10-item (CES-D) depression scale and the Self-reported health scale. Please see PSS: Cohen S, Kamarck T, Mermelstein R. A global measure of perceived stress. *J Health Soc Behav*. 1983;24(4):385-396; please see CES-D: Radloff, L. A self-report depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurements*. 1977;1:385-401; please see Zhao G, Okoro CA, Hsia J, Town M. Self-Perceived poor/fair health, frequent mental distress, and health insurance status among working-aged US adults. *Prev Chronic Dis* 2018;15:170523.

For more information, visit
safeandjustcleaners.org



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