



# WORKING ON THE EDGE

*A Survey of Low-Wage Workers in the Birmingham Area  
Amid a Global Pandemic*

Adelante Alabama Worker Center  
February 2021

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*A Survey of Low-Wage Workers in the Birmingham Area Amid a Global Pandemic*

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*Adelante Alabama Worker Center is a grassroots nonprofit organization that unites low-wage immigrant workers and their families in the Birmingham area to defend our rights, promote our dignity, and pursue justice for all. To learn more and get involved visit [www.adelantealabama.org](http://www.adelantealabama.org) or follow us on social media: @adelantealabama.*

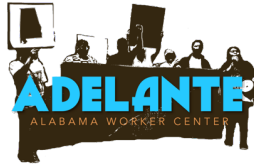
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report serves as a companion to Alabama Arise's *The State of Working Alabama 2021* Report and marks Adelante's first community-based research publication.



Arise's report is available at: <https://www.alarise.org/resources/state-of-working-alabama-2021>

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National Domestic Workers Alliance

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*This report is dedicated to the families of those who lost their lives due to COVID-19, worker abuse, and state-sanctioned violence, and to the workers who continue to struggle to provide for themselves and their families, and to fight for justice at work and in the streets.*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adelante convened worker leaders, advocates, and academic researchers to design and carry out the Birmingham Worker Survey in fall of 2020. The in-depth survey of over 200 low-wage workers—those making under \$15 per hour—in the Greater Birmingham Area revealed wages and working conditions before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey uncovered the following:

- **The pandemic has driven workers further from a living wage, and wage drops vary by gender, race, and citizenship status.** Low-wage workers of color reported lower wages on average—both prior to and following the pandemic—than their white counterparts. These same workers also had less formal education and more experience with incarceration, both factors that limit workers’ ability to obtain better, higher-paying jobs.
- **“Essential” is not the same as valued and protected.** While many applaud essential workers for keeping our economy going and risking their health to protect others during the pandemic, this sentiment does not translate to adequate wages or safe working conditions.
- Despite the severity of the COVID-19 health crisis, **many low-wage workers still do not have access to health insurance, paid time off, or even unpaid leave** for illness, family care, or quarantining. Instead, they are **forced to choose between their health and their livelihoods.**
- Even though some employers provide personal protective equipment (PPE), low-wage workers often must **disregard critical health and safety guidelines** in order to perform their jobs.
- **Workers labor under a double threat—the risk of coronavirus and the threat of retaliation from their employers.** Employers retaliate against workers who take steps to protect their own health and the health of others by threatening to call police or immigration officers, targeting workers or their coworkers with disciplinary action, and firing or suspending workers.
- Many low-wage workers continue to grapple with the systemic and residual impacts of COVID-19; **workers must turn to mutual aid, charities, and government assistance in order to provide for their families’ basic needs.**

Although many of these problems did not start with the current economic and public health crisis, **the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated longstanding inequalities faced by low-wage workers in Birmingham** and across the nation. Powerful employers and the government are failing on a systemic level to protect the basic health, safety and survival of workers—especially Black and Latinx workers and other workers of color—their families, and communities.

**WE CALL ON local, state, and federal government actors and Birmingham-area employers to take swift and broad-sweeping action to address the issues identified in this report.**

## INTRODUCTION

“Well,” Elisabeth sighed, “we don’t know what to do because they tell us to stay at home, but we need to leave to work, or we don’t eat. It’s that simple.” This is not just Elisabeth’s story—it is the reality for thousands of workers across Birmingham suffering under the weight of the coronavirus pandemic.

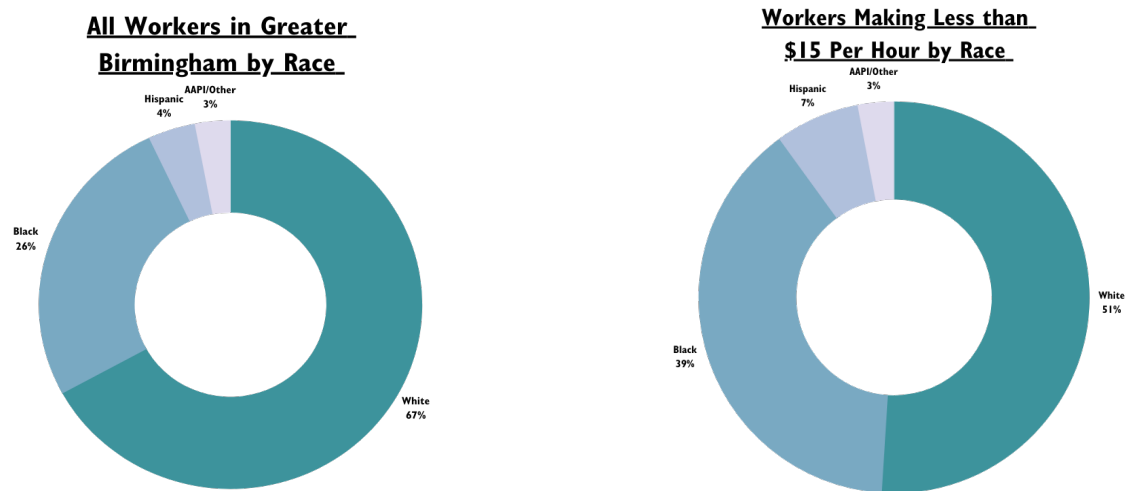
Long before COVID-19, Alabama was hostile territory for workers. Alabama is one of only five states with no minimum wage.<sup>i</sup> A complex web of state policies and constitutional provisions—everything from voter ID and anti-immigrant laws, to “right to work” policies and the grocery tax—help maintain political control and wealth in the hands of the state’s white elites while keeping Black, Latinx, immigrant, and working-class families disenfranchised and struggling to survive. The City of Birmingham, which was founded in the wake of the Civil War and quickly grew into an industrial powerhouse, was built on convict leasing, the exploitation of Black formerly enslaved persons and their descendants, immigrants, and poor white laborers. Birmingham is the site of many historic battles in the intertwined struggles for civil rights and worker power in the late 19th and 20th centuries. In recent years, city officials carried that legacy forward by taking steps to protect local workers, for example by raising the municipal minimum wage in 2016—only to be blocked by the state legislature.<sup>ii</sup> The already dire landscape for low-wage workers and their families living in the Birmingham area took a turn for the worse as the novel coronavirus began to spread in early 2020.



*Workers Juan, Fernando, and Juan at the new stadium construction site in downtown Birmingham*

Birmingham’s and the nation’s economy relies heavily on the labor of essential workers, typically defined as workers who “conduct a range of operations and services that are typically essential to continue critical infrastructure operations.”<sup>iii</sup> They labor in industries like food and agriculture, transportation, warehouse, delivery, and emergency services, among others.<sup>iv</sup> Despite their designation, “essential” workers in these

sectors are often synonymous with low-wage workers, known for being underpaid, disproportionately at risk for and exposed to COVID-19, and lacking access to job-related benefits that promote workplace and public health.<sup>v</sup> According to data gathered by the Economic Policy Institute, essential workers across most industries make less per hour than other workers, with disparities widening across education levels, gender, and race.<sup>vi</sup>



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of American Community Survey and Current Population Survey microdata, 2020

Workers in Birmingham making less than \$15 per hour are disproportionately Black and Hispanic/Latinx, at 39% and 7% respectively, compared to Birmingham’s overall workforce, which is 67% white, 26% Black, 4% Hispanic/Latinx and 3% Asian American or Pacific Islander. The coronavirus pandemic has intensified these racial disparities, as workers of color are especially susceptible to contracting, becoming sick, and dying from the virus relative to white workers.<sup>vii</sup> Coupled with poor policy choices steeped in systemic racism, like choosing not to expand Medicaid<sup>viii</sup> or passing state legislation preempting counties and cities from raising the wage floor,<sup>ix</sup> many low-wage Alabamians have been left to bear the weight of COVID-19 with little or no help from the state. As the Director of Economic Development for the City of Birmingham commented, “The pandemic has revealed the lethality of health disparities and the devastating consequences of valuing economic growth over economic development.”<sup>x</sup>

Dedicated to fighting for dignity, justice, and liberation for low-wage workers, Adelante Alabama Worker Center set out to study overall working conditions and the impact of the pandemic on Birmingham’s most vulnerable workers. The results of the Birmingham Worker Survey confirmed the long-standing challenges and grim realities faced by low-wage workers and their families. It also provided new, eye-opening insights into the details and extent of the crises Birmingham area workers are facing amid the pandemic. The data and stories we collected must inform immediate action. The survey results and policy recommendations included in this report provide a starting point for workers, community members, organizers, allies, and policymakers to work together to ensure that Birmingham’s workforce is protected and thriving, instead of struggling to survive.

## WHAT DID WE DO? METHODOLOGY

### DESIGN

A grassroots, member-led community organization, Adelante took a two-prong approach to the design and distribution of the survey, which included the input of experienced researchers and directly impacted workers.

- **Academic Advisory Council** – A small group of university professors and researchers across the nation helped Adelante identify a target population for the survey, edit and analyze questions, and ensured the integrity of our research methods and analysis.
- **Worker Leaders** – Local low-wage workers in Adelante’s network helped test and identify important concepts to be included in the survey. They also assisted with distribution and follow-up calls. Workers were compensated for their time.

### SURVEY

Adelante designed the survey with the help of the Academic Advisory Council, Worker Leaders, other social justice organizations, local professors, and validated survey tools. We took several questions directly from these sources and altered them to fit the context of the Birmingham Worker Survey:

#### ***National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA)***

- National Domestic Worker Survey
- NDWA COVID Impact Survey
- NDWA Survey-Sample Questions

#### ***Alabama A&M University***

- Community Survey–Manufacturing
- Worker Survey–Manufacturing

#### ***Arriba Las Vegas Worker Center***

- Solicitud de Apoyo Financiero: Fondo Familias Migrantes, COVID-19 (Financial Assistance Application: COVID-19 Migrant Family Fund)
- Encuesta de Jornaleros (Day Laborer Survey), Las Vegas-2017

Ultimately, the Birmingham Worker Survey consisted of 76 questions divided into the following sections:

- Welcome
- Screening Questions
- Demographics
- Industry & Wages prior to COVID-19 Pandemic (BEFORE March 2020)
- Industry & Wages as of October 2020 (CURRENT)
- Adverse Experiences at Work
- Adverse Experiences at Work Part II
- COVID-19 Pandemic (March 2020-Present Day)
- Follow-Up and Contact Information

A paid interpreter translated the survey into Spanish. English- and Spanish-language surveys ran from November 9 through December 21, 2020. The average time for completion ranged between 15-20 minutes. Adelante awarded participants who completed the survey with a \$5 gift card.

## DEFINITIONS & PARAMETERS

- **Target Audience:** For the purpose of this survey, Adelante considered low-wage workers those who are paid less than \$15 per hour. Fifteen dollars per hour was selected as the threshold based on recent social justice and policy campaigns that have swept across the South, like the “Fight for \$15,”<sup>xi</sup> which advocates for a \$15 per hour federal minimum wage.
- **Location:** “Birmingham” refers to the Birmingham-Hoover Metropolitan Area, which includes the City of Birmingham and more than 20 other municipalities.
- **Pandemic:** The survey also used a before and after the pandemic approach—with “pre-pandemic” classified as “prior to March 2020” (when the City of Birmingham issued its first stay-at-home order), and “during the pandemic” classified as “since October 2020”.

## TARGETED OUTREACH

The severity of the pandemic presented some challenges—namely, safety concerns related to the conduct of in-person interviews. Adelante turned to social media, as well as existing networks and partnerships, in order to reach participants. Conducted through the online survey platform Survey Monkey, the Birmingham Worker Survey premiered on all of Adelante’s Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages using targeted advertising. The ads were heavily promoted near hospitals in the University of Alabama at Birmingham system, manufacturing plants, like American Cast Iron Pipe Company, and large retailers like Walmart. Additionally, Adelante set parameters for individuals aged 15 and up, and other targeted measures, like education levels. The Spanish survey targeted similar demographics and locations, and included several locations with predominantly Latinx customers or workers, like the Mi Pueblo Supermarket. Finally, Adelante sent the survey link to several Birmingham-based social justice organizations to share on their social media and among their membership.

## FOLLOW-UP & CHALLENGES

**Follow-Up:** Respondents who noted that they would like to be contacted and those who left a phone number were contacted by Worker Leaders, who helped them complete their surveys over the phone.

### Challenges:

- Despite follow-up calls, it was difficult to contact many participants about survey completion. Additionally, the logistical challenges of the public health crisis led to less direct involvement from low-wage workers in the design of the survey than Adelante originally anticipated.
- We did not foresee the participation of automated bots in the survey. After accounting for their presence, the number of verified, complete responses dropped from 590 to 204.
- Responses from Asian Americans, American Indian or Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Multiracial/Multiethnic individuals were insufficient, totaling only 6 responses.
- The participants may not be a completely representative sample of all low-wage workers in the area. Nonetheless, the responses paint a vivid picture of the impact of COVID-19.



## WHAT DID WE LEARN? RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Adelante identified **204 complete responses** – 168 from the English-language survey and 36 from the Spanish-language survey. From these responses, we learned the following about low-wage workers in Birmingham:

### PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

**Race & Citizenship:** Nearly 16% of respondents identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 20% as Black or African American, 2% identified as more than one race/ethnicity, 1% as Asian or Asian American, less than 1% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 61% as white. Nearly 5% of survey respondents identified themselves as undocumented immigrants.

**Gender:** About 48% of respondents identified as “female.” Males represented nearly 51% while gender non-conforming or non-binary individuals comprised just under 1% of respondents.

**Incarceration Experience:** Just under 10% of respondents had spent time incarcerated in a juvenile, county, state, federal, or immigration facility, with about 3.5% of respondents noting that they were previously convicted of a felony.

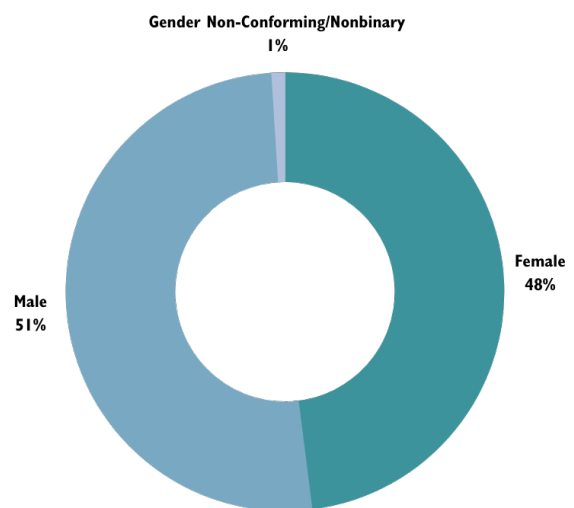
**Education:** Only about 19% of total respondents earned a bachelor’s or graduate/professional degree, while nearly 30% had “some college” education. Thirty-five percent had only a high school diploma.

- White respondents had higher levels of formal education: 24% obtained a bachelor’s degree and about 31% had some college education.
- Less than 3% of Black respondents (a single respondent) obtained a bachelor’s degree, 37% had some college education and 32% reported having only a high school diploma.
- Hispanic/Latinx respondents had the least amount of formal education, 56% obtained only a high school education and 19% had less than a high school diploma.

**Work Location:** The majority of respondents, 58%, worked in the City of Birmingham, 13% in Homewood, and between 6 and 7% in Hoover and Bessemer at least once during 2020. The other 16% worked throughout Greater Birmingham, in locations ranging from Pinson to Mountain Brook and Vestavia Hills.

Race/Ethnicity	# of Total Respondents	% of Total Respondents
Black or African American	41	20%
Hispanic or Latinx	32	16%
Multiracial or Multiethnic	4	2%
Asian or Asian American	2	1%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	<1%
White	124	61%
<b>Total</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Profile of Survey Respondents by Gender



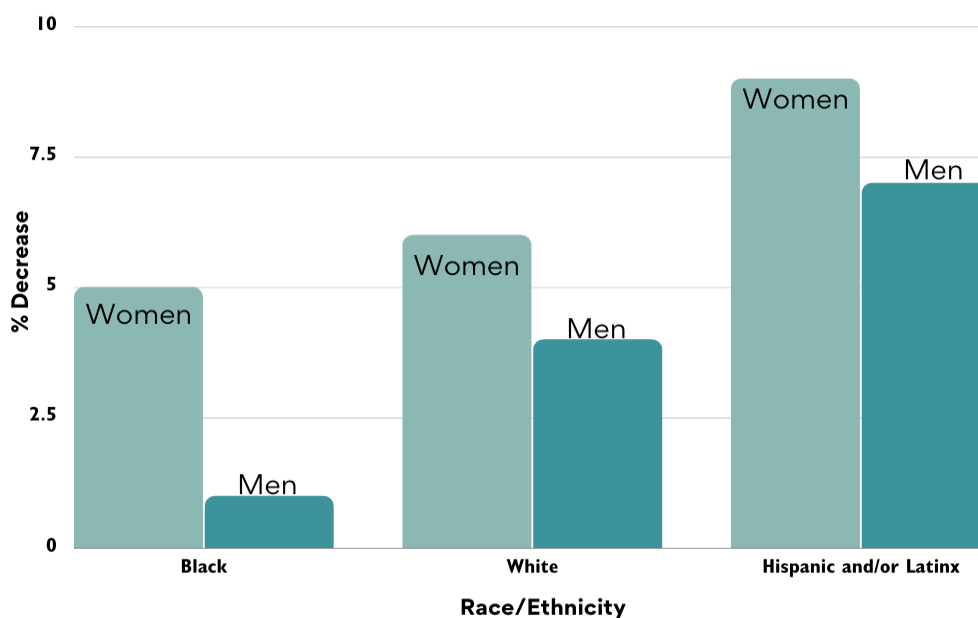
## UNDERPAID, UNDER- AND UNEMPLOYED: WAGES AND EMPLOYMENT

*"I lost my job in October, since then I have gotten some jobs in gas stations, but the salaries are very low. It's not that I want to have a luxurious life, I just want to have enough to live well and provide for my family." – Brian M.*

**Low and Dropping Wages, Lost Hours, Essential Industries:** Respondents who continued to work during the pandemic experienced dramatic drops in both average wages and average hours worked:

- On average, survey respondents earned \$10.72 per hour prior to the pandemic and \$10.04 since October 2020, a 6% decrease in wages.
- Participants worked an average of 37 hours per week prior to the pandemic, and 32 hours as of October 2020, indicating an almost 12% drop in hours worked per week.
- These figures do not even paint the full picture of workers' losses, and they do not include the respondents who reported earning \$0 in wages or working 0 hours during the pandemic.
- The following industries were the most common for those working as of October 2020: Restaurant/Fast Food/Food Services/Catering, Commercial Cleaning, Day labor, Manufacturing, Health Care, House Cleaning, and Construction/Remodeling/Demolition.

**Percent (%) Decrease in Wages by Race and Gender**



**Racial Wage Disparities:** Hispanic/Latinx respondents averaged the highest hourly pre-pandemic wages at \$11.14, but saw the largest percent decrease in wages, 9%, as their hourly wages fell to \$10.12. White survey respondents saw the second largest decrease in hourly wages from \$10.79 to \$10.24, a 5% drop. While Black respondents' average hourly wages only decreased 3%, they averaged the lowest wages both pre- and during the pandemic, at \$10.39 and \$10.07 respectively.

- Black and Latinx respondents had nearly two times more individuals economically dependent on them than white respondents.

*“Finding a job has been difficult since the pandemic started...I’ve had to sell food in order to pay my bills.” – Yuri C.*

**Women of Color Bearing the Brunt of the Crisis:** Women experienced a sizeable decrease of 6% in their hourly wages, from \$11.56 pre-pandemic to \$10.86 since the pandemic, compared to male survey respondents, who saw only a 4% decrease from \$9.88 to \$9.53 per hour.

- Disparities in income were also apparent across races. Hispanic/Latinx women experienced a staggering drop in wages—from \$11.23 per hour prior to COVID-19 to \$10.17 during the pandemic, a 9% drop. This was followed by white women, who experienced a 6% drop in wages, and Black women, who saw a 5% decrease.
- This compares to a 7% decrease in the hourly wages of Hispanic/Latinx men, from \$10.80, a 4% decrease for white men from \$9.91 to \$9.52, and a 1% drop in hourly wages for Black men from \$9.75 to \$9.64.
- Across all races, women who responded to the survey experienced higher decreases to their average hourly wages during COVID-19 than men.

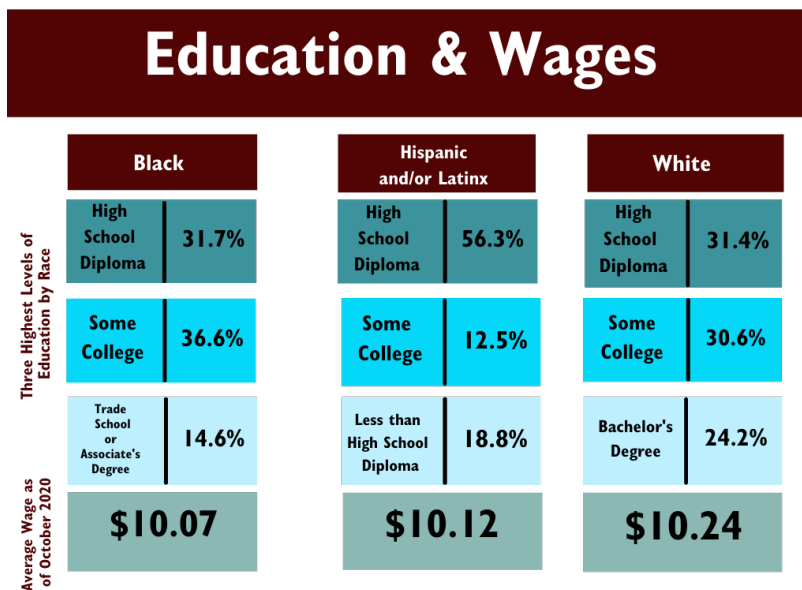
	Women's Wages		
	Black Women	Hispanic and/or Latinx Women	White Women
Average Wage Pre-COVID-19	\$10.91	\$11.23	\$12.31
Average Wage as of October 2020	\$10.34	\$10.17	\$11.64
Percent (%) Decrease in Wages	↓ 5%	↓ 9%	↓ 6%



*Adelante member and worker leader Maricela García*



**Undocumented and Unprotected:** Undocumented individuals reported more drastic decreases in pay than respondents as a whole, dropping from \$11.58 per hour to \$9.50, an 18% decrease.



### Lessons Learned:

- The pandemic has driven workers further from a living wage, and wage drops vary by gender, race, and citizenship status.** Though women earned more per hour than male respondents, they reported significantly higher drops in wages. Latinx women faced overwhelming drops in wages. Low-wage workers of color reported lower wages on average—both prior to and following the pandemic—than their white counterparts. These same workers also had less formal education and more experience with incarceration, both factors that limit individuals' ability to obtain better, higher-paying jobs. Black and Latinx low-wage workers also had more individuals depending on their wages, further widening the gap between their ability and the ability of their white counterparts to accumulate savings.
- "Essential" and "valued" are not the same.** While many applaud essential workers for the risks they take to keep our economy going, this sentiment does not translate to adequate wages or better working conditions. The majority of participants worked in essential industries like commercial cleaning, restaurant/fast food service, and healthcare, where there is a greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Yet, these "essential" workers are also low-wage workers, averaging pandemic wages of only \$10.04 per hour.



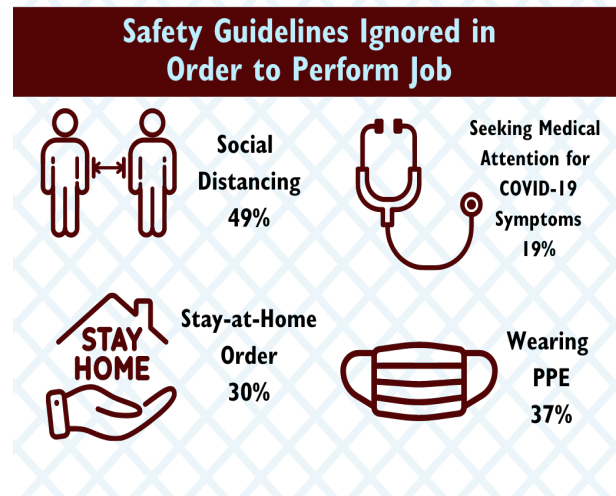
*A recipient of Adelante's Colwal Fund for Excluded Workers*

## THE UGLY TRUTH: WORKING CONDITIONS OF LOW-WAGE WORKERS

*“My whole family got sick from Covid, we were locked up at home. My partner has diabetes and that complicated his recovery. We do not know what to do anymore.” – Wanda B.*

**Health & Safety Rules Ignored:** Survey respondents indicated that they were forced to ignore the following health and safety guidelines in order to perform their jobs. The top practices that had to be neglected were social distancing (49%), wearing PPE (37%), stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders (30%), and seeking medical attention for COVID-19 symptoms (19%).

- Nearly 8% of low-wage workers believed that they contracted COVID-19 from a workplace, and 21% disclosed that a coworker had it.



A server in a Birmingham restaurant

### Personal Protection Equipment (PPE):

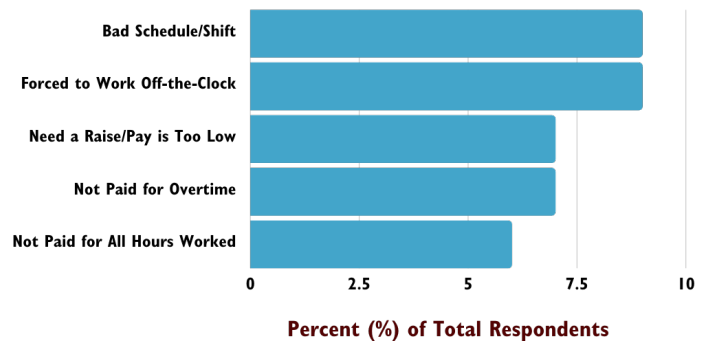
Many COVID-19 regulations advise the use of PPE to prevent or limit the spread of the virus. The survey asked workers to answer which types of PPE were most commonly provided by their employers.

- Masks were the most common, followed by gloves, and hand sanitizer.
- Approximately 6% of workers said that their employers provided no types of PPE.

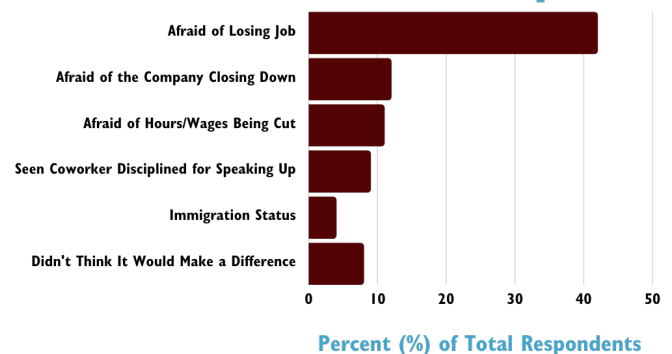
**Worker Abuse & Retaliation:** The survey also explored supervisor and employer retaliation against low-wage workers. Workers identified the following as the most common reasons they complained to their supervisor(s) or employer(s): bad schedule/shift, forced to work off the clock, need a raise/pay is too low, not paid for overtime, and not paid for all hours worked. The following were identified by workers as the most common reasons for NOT complaining: fear of losing job, fear of the company closing down, and fear of hours or wages being cut.

- Approximately 4% of workers said that they were afraid to complain to their supervisor or employer because of their immigration status.
- Top three forms of employer retaliation identified by workers: (1) threatening to call the police or immigration, (2) targeting workers by writing them up or disciplining them for minor violations, and (3) firing or suspending workers or coworkers.
- Approximately 44% of respondents said that fear of losing their job(s) deterred them from seeking medical care.

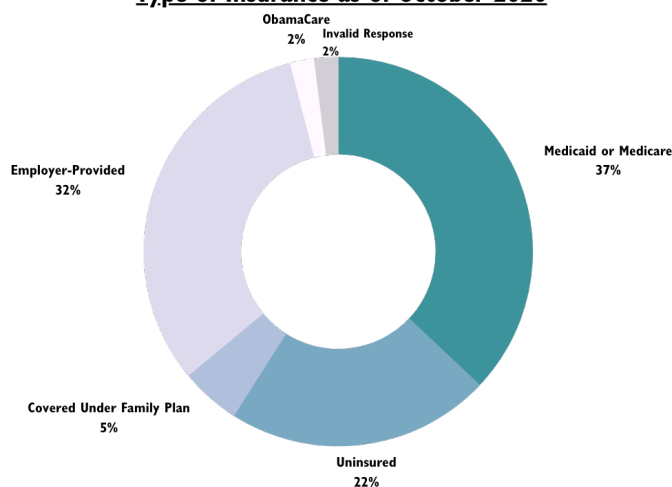
## Most Common Reason Workers Complained



## Most Common Reason Workers DID NOT Complain



### Type of Insurance as of October 2020



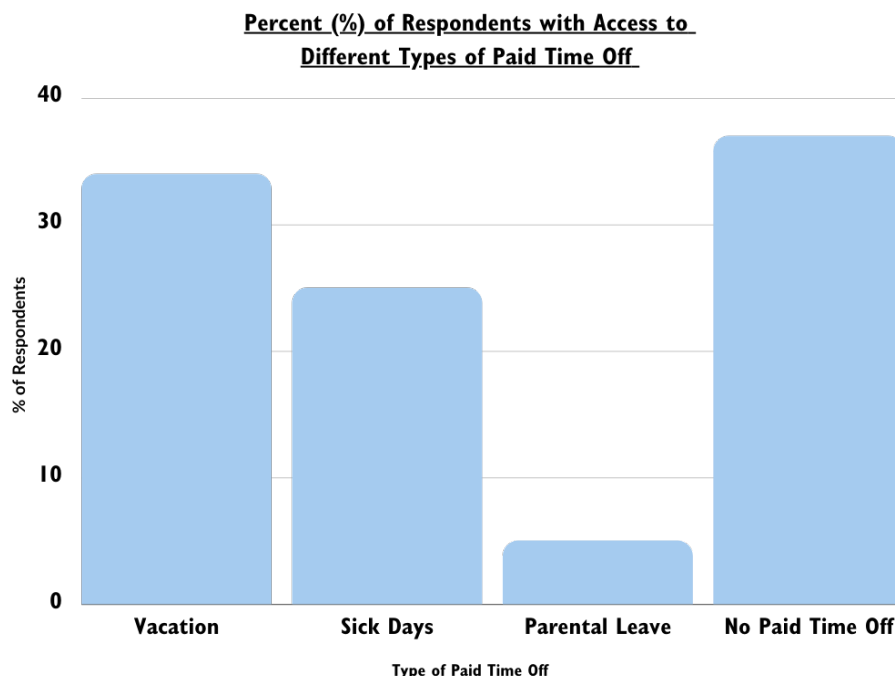
**Health Benefits:** During the pandemic, 37% of respondents reported being covered by Medicaid or Medicare, while 32% had medical insurance through their employer. About 5% reported being covered under a family member's plan.

- The number of respondents without insurance increased only by about 2% from the beginning of the pandemic.
- During the pandemic, 22% of respondents reported having no health insurance
- 75% of Hispanic/Latinx respondents had no insurance. Only 22% were covered by employer-provided insurance, Medicaid or Medicare.

*“In addition to losing my job, I lost my mother two weeks ago because of coronavirus. I have been surviving thanks to some jobs that one of my cousins found me, but I have never been in such a difficult situation”. – Courtney R.*

**Paid Leave:** About 37% of respondents’ employers offer no paid time off, which includes 39% of Black workers, approximately 47% of Hispanic/Latinx workers, and about 34% of white workers.

- Forty-four percent of white workers had access to paid vacation days, compared to just 3% of Hispanic/Latinx and 29% of Black workers.
- Only 5% of individuals indicated having access to paid parental leave.



**The Impact of COVID-19:** For some workers, COVID-19 impacted their workloads or their ability to work in general.

- Just over half of respondents, 57%, had their hours reduced due to the pandemic, and 23% had their workloads reduced. Nineteen percent of respondents noted their workload was increased due to the virus. Nearly 11% said their hours have been increased. About 11% of workers said if they did not show up to work, they would be fired.
- Approximately 11% cannot work because they must care for kids or family members, 10% were fired or laid off, and 9% were furloughed or forced to take unpaid leave.

*“My husband got the virus at work. He had to leave work for three weeks because he was so sick. Because I was taking care of him, I lost my job at the restaurant. It created a lot of debt for us that we haven’t been able to pay.”– Nancy V.*

**11% of Low-Wage Workers CANNOT work because they must care for kids or family members.**



## Lessons Learned:

- **Many low-wage workers must choose between their health and their livelihoods.** A large share of Birmingham workers making under \$15 per hour have no paid time off. Due to the transmissible nature of COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends those who present symptoms or are in close contact with someone who has contracted the virus quarantine for ten days or until they are able to see test results.<sup>xiii</sup> Without access to paid time off, many workers already struggling to make ends meet must choose between the risk of infecting others and supporting their families. Moreover, low-wage workers are employed in industries where it is hard to maintain social distance or where social distancing is not enforced, and therefore may contract the virus on-the-job. **If they contract the virus at work, they could be forced to take unpaid leave or even be fired for taking too much time off.**
- **Despite the severity of the COVID-19 health crisis, many low-wage workers still do not have access to health insurance.** Many low-wage workers rely on federal health insurance programs like Medicaid and Medicare, which are often subject to cuts in funding from state and federal governments. **Black and Latinx workers, who are also some of the most vulnerable to contracting COVID-19, are much more likely to be uninsured than their white counterparts.** Turnover in low-wage jobs is particularly high, so those whose health insurance is tied to their employment are particularly vulnerable to the volatile coronavirus economy.
- **Even though some employers provide basic PPE, low-wage workers often must disregard critical health and safety guidelines in order to perform their jobs.** They must take off their PPE, ignore social distancing protocols, and even forgo seeking medical attention for COVID-19 symptoms in order to keep their jobs.
- **Workers must deal with the double threat of the coronavirus and threats from their employers.** Worker organizing in low-wage industries is stifled by hostile employers and supervisors, especially in a “right-to-work” state like Alabama. Worker abuse ranges from more subtle tactics like bad scheduling, to more overt illegal tactics like forcing employees to work off the clock or withholding overtime pay. Employers retaliate against workers who speak up by threatening to call the police or immigration, writing up or unfairly disciplining them, and even firing or suspending workers without pay.



## **RIPPLE EFFECTS: THE FAR-REACHING IMPACTS OF COVID-19**

*“I am very worried about paying the bills. I had a very difficult time with my family during Christmas because I couldn’t buy gifts for my children.” – Charles W.*

**Applied for or Received Assistance:** The impact of COVID-19 has reverberated far beyond the wages and working conditions of low-wage workers, into other critical parts of their life. Of the 204 respondents, the following percentage applied for or received these types of assistance: food or goods donations (37%), unemployment benefits (13%), NDWA Coronavirus Care Fund (\$400 debit card) (6%), Adelante’s Colwal Fund for Excluded Workers (5%).



*Recipients of Adelante's Colwal Fund*

**Received a Government Stimulus Check:** The majority of low-wage workers who responded to the survey, 56%, did not receive an Economic Impact Payment or stimulus check.

*“People in my church have been incredibly supportive of us with food, but I still have debts and bills to pay. I was ashamed because I had to borrow money from my mother to pay for my son's medicine.” – Glenda P.*

#### **Lessons Learned:**

- **Many low-wage workers continue to grapple with the systemic and residual impacts of COVID-19.** With wages already suppressed, workers must turn to alternative sources of income and assistance, like unemployment benefits, donations, and help from nonprofit groups in order to continue providing for their families.
- **While stimulus checks relieved some of the immediate economic burdens of low-wage workers, they are not enough.** Research shows that those with less savings spent their stimulus checks almost immediately on household bills, rent, and other expenses, leaving little if any in workers' savings.<sup>xiii</sup> At \$600, the second round of checks left workers with even less of a safety net. **Over half of the Birmingham area workers that responded to the survey did not even receive a stimulus check.** It is clear that federal stimulus checks do not go far enough to support workers.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? RECOMMENDATIONS

Employers and appointed and elected officials at all levels of government **must act now** to protect and uplift workers. The following are Adelante's recommendations:

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT – CITY OF BIRMINGHAM & JEFFERSON COUNTY:

- **GIVE THE PEOPLE A VOICE IN CITY SPENDING** – The Birmingham City Council should work together with city residents to implement a participatory budgeting process, allowing low-wage workers and other impacted communities to shape the city's financial priorities.
- **REINVEST IN COMMUNITIES** – Prioritize the investment of city resources in services that benefit working-class families—especially Black, Latinx, and other workers of color—like mental health services, neighborhood-led development projects, and youth programs. Divest taxpayer resources from policing and jails, and prohibit the expenditure of city and county funds on immigration enforcement.
- **PROMOTE GOOD, CLEAN, LOCAL JOBS** – City and county government should leverage their full power and authority to bring large corporate employers and developers to the table to negotiate community benefits agreements that ensure good jobs for local workers and promote affordable housing, environmental sustainability, and other important values for local communities.
- **EDUCATE WORKERS AND EMPLOYERS** – The Birmingham Mayor's Office and other city and county agencies should collaborate with advocates to spearhead initiatives that educate both workers and employers on workplace rights and good labor practices, such as a High-Road Employer Certification Program and "Know Your Rights" trainings for workers.
- **FIGHT BACK AGAINST PREEMPTION AND INTIMIDATION FROM MONTGOMERY** – Local elected officials in Jefferson County should join forces with leaders across the state to take a public stand against the Alabama State Legislature and the Governor's attempts to block, roll back, or punish local efforts to raise the floor for workers.

### ALABAMA STATE LEGISLATURE:

- **REVERSE HARMFUL LEGISLATION** – Reverse harmful "right-to-work" state policies, end the preemption of progressive municipal legislation, and repeal past anti-worker preemption bills, like the Alabama Minimum Wage and Right to Work Act, which blocked Birmingham's minimum wage ordinance.
- **PASS PRO-WORKER POLICIES** – Pass legislation that guarantees just employment practices, like fair scheduling, paid parental leave, and a livable state minimum wage. Provide a recourse for victims of wage theft by passing legislation that establishes a statewide wage recovery program like the Wage Payment and Recovery Act in Illinois.<sup>xiv</sup>

### GOVERNOR KAY IVEY & STATE AGENCIES:

- **PROVIDE IMMEDIATE RELIEF FOR WORKERS AND FAMILIES IN CRISIS** – Use remaining unallocated federal coronavirus relief (CARES Act) funds to establish a statewide targeted stimulus program with the aim of decreasing immediate financial hardship and supporting low-wage workers and their families, regardless of immigration or employment status.
- **HOLD EMPLOYERS ACCOUNTABLE** – Vet employers to ensure they meet minimum labor standards before granting state tax incentives. Increase transparency and impose strict consequences for employers who receive tax breaks and do not follow through on creating safe, well-paid jobs for Alabamians.

- **PROMOTE HEALTH & SAVE LIVES** – Strengthen Alabama’s healthcare system by expanding Medicaid.
- **INVEST IN OUR WORKFORCE** – The Alabama Department of Labor should develop subsidized education and job training programs that support low-wage workers, provide career counseling, and offer cross-sector skills training.
- **IMPROVE ACCESS TO JUSTICE** – The Administrative Office of the Courts should streamline the process for workers to file wage claims in state court and make court forms, information and hearings accessible in multiple languages. Alabama’s courts have the power to hold employers, from small contractors to large corporations, accountable for wage theft and worker abuse.

## **FEDERAL GOVERNMENT:**

- **RAISE THE MINIMUM WAGE** – Raise the federal minimum wage to *at least* \$15 per hour, and ensure the inclusion of workers historically excluded from federal labor protections.
- **PROTECT VULNERABLE WORKERS** – Restore funding to the Department of Labor to ramp up its enforcement capacity. Pass legislation that provides universal health coverage for everyone who resides in the United States, regardless of citizenship or employment status.
- **CREATE A CLEAR PATHWAY TO CITIZENSHIP** – Permanently protect and legalize undocumented essential workers *now*. Establish a pathway to citizenship for all immigrants in the United States, without increasing interior enforcement or border militarization.

## **BIRMINGHAM-AREA EMPLOYERS:**

- **FOLLOW THE RULES** – Comply with existing local, state, and federal workplace safety standards in order to reduce the risk workers face. Specifically, enforce social distancing, masking, and hand hygiene guidelines for employees and customers.
- **IMPROVE WAGES & WORKING CONDITIONS** – Improve overall working conditions by paying employees a living wage and establishing paid leave, flexible scheduling, and other time-off policies, especially for employees who are sick with or exposed to COVID-19, must act as caregivers for others, or need to seek coronavirus-related medical care.
- **END WORKPLACE RETALIATION** – Create robust internal processes for workers to raise complaints about workplace issues without fear of retaliation.
- **ADDRESS SYSTEMIC INJUSTICES** – Implement steps to address wage and benefit gaps for women and Black and Latinx workers in your workforce.

## **WORKERS & COMMUNITY ADVOCATES:**

- **LEARN FROM LEADERS ON THE GROUND** – Identify and support worker-leaders already organizing, educating, and advocating in your community. Get involved in active campaigns for worker justice by local unions, worker centers, and community organizations, especially those who are focused on reaching vulnerable and historically excluded populations.
- **FIGHT FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE** – Take action in local wage theft and workplace abuse cases in your community through organizing, direct action, and legal recourse. Publicly name and shame bad businesses and corporations in your communities, especially those who repeatedly perpetrate worker abuses. Educate employers—especially small business owners—on how to provide a safe and healthy workplace, and recognize and patronize good employers who are doing right by their workers.
- **ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE** – Advocate at every level of government for lasting systemic change like higher wages, local hire agreements, participatory budgeting, and paid leave.



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