

ESSENTIAL WORKERS AND RISK FOR COVID-19: EXPERIENCES FROM THE MEAT PROCESSING INDUSTRY

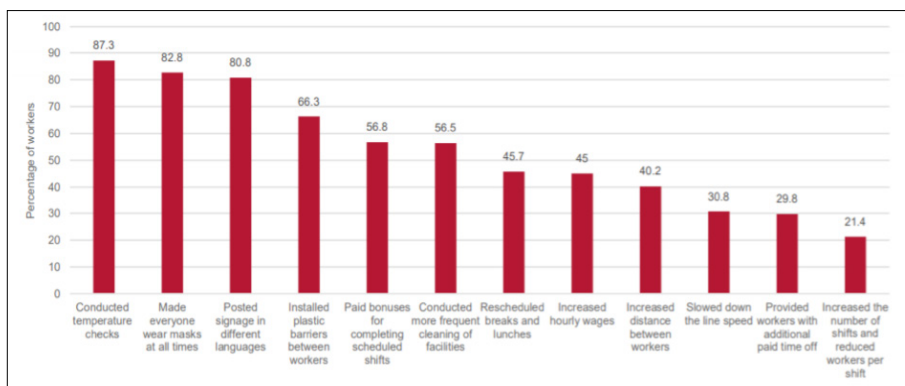
The meatpacking industry is important to Nebraska, employing 28,279 people in 2019. Many of these workers are Latinos, immigrants, refugees, and other people of color. Due to the current pandemic, the meatpacking industry was deemed “critical essential infrastructure” by the Department of Homeland Security, which in turn, made all meatpacking facility workers “essential workers.” As such, people had to continue to work even in conditions that increased their risk for COVID-19 such as being in close proximity with hundreds of other workers for long periods of time, often without adequate supply of personal protective equipment.

Unfortunately, meatpacking plants have been at the center of many large COVID-19 outbreaks across the country, which have disproportionately affected the Latino community. For example, in Douglas County, Nebraska, Hispanics/Latinos represent 16.3% of the population, but 33.7% of the COVID-19 cases as of September 16, 2020 and represented over 50% of the cases early this past spring. South Omaha (zip code 68107) home to the majority of meatpacking plants in in the area had the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases among all zip codes in the county. There have been multiple clusters of cases associated with these facilities, and as of early September 2020, there had been 1,512 cases and five death among meatpacking workers in Douglas County. The safety concerns related to meatpacking plants are not just isolated to Douglas County, but workers in other Nebraska communities including

Crete, Dakota City, Grand Island, Lexington, and Schuyler have also been affected. All across the United States and the world, there have been COVID-19 safety concerns in meat and other food processing facilities.

Between May 7-25, 2020, our team at the UNMC Center for Reducing Health Disparities conducted a survey of meatpacking workers throughout the Midwest region to assess their concerns and perceptions related to COVID-19. We found that more than 72% of workers reported feeling at high-risk for getting COVID-19. Most workers in Nebraska reported that their employers had taken some actions to try to stop the spread of COVID-19 in the plant like taking people’s temperatures as they enter the facility, making everyone wear a face mask while in the building, and posting multilingual signage. Regrettably, other effective infection prevention and control actions like increasing the distance between workers on the line, providing paid sick leave, restructuring shifts to reduce the number of people that are together at a time, and slowing down the speed of the line were much less frequently reported (Figure 1). Workers also noted that they were worried not just about getting sick but also about bringing the virus home and being able financial sustain their families. To learn more about the study and its results, visit: <https://www.unmc.edu/healthsecurity/covid-19/playbooks/UNMC-Meatpacking-study-results-1-page-bilingual.pdf>

Figure 1. Meatpacking employer responses to COVID-19 reported by Nebraska workers



NOTE: Percentages reported represent workers who responded ‘yes’ that their workplace had reacted in such a manner



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Meatpacking workers should be protected and as a community we have an obligation to support those who support us. At the federal level, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have issued [guidance to meat processing facilities](#) on protective measures to be taken in the plants, but this is only guidance and is not an enforceable standard. Furthermore, the guidance came in June, long after many of the large outbreaks had already occurred. Because of the lack of federal action, states and communities have been left to develop protections on their own for these workers. In states like Michigan, the Governor signed an executive order to require meatpacking companies to conduct COVID-19 testing for all workers, space employees six feet apart, mandate face coverings, and reduce production. Recently, Nebraska State Senator Tony Vargas sought to require key COVID-19 protections for meatpacking workers such as six feet of distance between workers, and an amendment outlining these strategies was added to LB 667. The Business and Labor Committee supported the measure, but the amendment was not heard on the floor before the legislative session adjourned.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the stark inequities in this country between various groups of people – especially those of racial and ethnic minorities. Throughout the United States, people of color are experiencing a disproportionate burden of COVID-19 cases and deaths. We need to be able to learn from these experiences and promote health equity and justice, especially for workers in meat processing and other essential workers moving forward. In our recent publication [“Invisible no more: The impact of COVID-19 on essential food production workers”](#) in the Journal of Agromedicine, we describe our experiences with meatpacking and how those can be translated to protections for agricultural workers. We highlight that solutions must span both the workplace and the community and

address the prevention-treatment spectrum to be effective.

Science continues to emerge on COVID-19; however, we already have some effective proven infection and control measures that can and should be taken reduce the risk of transmission (See [UNMC meat processing facility COVID-19 playbook](#) for more information). All workers deserve dignity and respect, and no workers should have to fear going to work or dying for a paycheck.



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