At Work in a Pandemic: Black Workers’ Experiences of Safety on the Job

Clare Hammonds¹ and Jasmine Kerrissey²

Abstract
Race and labor scholars have argued that precarious, dangerous work, along with the work of social reproduction, has long been disproportionately placed on Black workers. This research examines how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted essential in-person workers differently by race. Using data collected from approximately 8,000 respondents in five survey waves, we find that Black essential and in-person workers were far more likely to experience safety concerns on the job than white workers, from inadequate sick leave and protective gear in the early pandemic to customers who refused to mask in later months. This pattern extended to stress off the job, where Black workers were more likely to have experienced food, childcare, and housing insecurities. Black workers were also more likely to be interested in unionization. These findings point to distinct ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has collided with Black workers’ struggle for economic inequality and amplified existing patterns of labor market inequality.

Introduction
The spring and summer of 2020 saw the collision of the COVID-19 pandemic and some of the largest mass protests for racial justice in decades. The pandemic and the struggle for Black lives are themselves deeply intertwined. COVID-19 death rates for Black Americans throughout the pandemic were almost twice that of whites (Ford et al. 2020). And while some Americans were able to work from home during

¹Labor Center, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA, USA
²Sociology and Labor Center, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Clare Hammonds, Professor of Practice at the Labor Center University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA, USA.
Email: chammonds@soc.umass.edu
the pandemic, Black workers were far more likely than white workers to be in essential frontline occupations that continued to require in-person work (Blau et al. 2020; Kinder and Ford 2020). Using original survey data, this research explores the experiences of Black essential, in-person workers early in the pandemic. We first examine the experiences of Black essential workers in the state of Massachusetts in spring 2020, and then extend our analyses to in-person workers in six states as workplaces began to reopen. We situate these experiences in broader dynamics of race, precarious work, and safety that have characterized labor dynamics in the United States.

We first argue that the threats to health and safety, coupled with increased stress and anxiety both on and off the job meant that much of the essential work during the pandemic should be understood through the lens of precarious work (Loustau et al. 2021). Although health and safety are often cited as a component of precarious work, it remains an understudied dimension, and one that is tightly connected to racial dynamics as precarity itself is highly racialized. Split labor market theory contends that white workers have dominated the most secure and well-paid jobs—or the primary labor market. Black workers, and other workers of color, have had far less access to these better jobs. Rather, they have been subjected to the secondary labor market, which is populated with less safe, less secure, and lower pay jobs (Bonacich 1972; Branch 2011; Branch and Hanley 2018). Many of the jobs for workers of color, particularly women, in this secondary labor market involve the work of “social reproduction,” and include low pay and devalued work of care (Bhattacharya 2017). This work of social reproduction often falls into the category of “essential” work, if we use the lens of the COVID pandemic.

We then apply concepts of precarious, unsafe work to essential work during the pandemic, and argue that Black workers were disproportionately subject to these forms of work. Black workers faced the compounding effects of being more likely to be employed in low wage, precarious (and essential) jobs and to be subject to other forms of systemic racism outside of their workplaces. In addition to the barriers that Black workers have historically faced in their workplaces, Black workers also face discrimination in other ways, from redlining, underserved health attention, police brutality, and the strain that generational blockages to wealth accumulation place on families. These pressures generated a highly stressed, unsafe, and unstable position for many Black essential workers as the pandemic unfolded.

Combined, these workplace, interpersonal, and broader community pressures created a heightened series of issues for essential, in-person Black workers during the pandemic. In some ways, this argument is consistent with what some might expect during a health crisis: Black workers faced greater hurdles than their white counterparts. However, we argue that documenting and analyzing race dynamics is important to advancing the fields of labor and work. In doing so, we follow scholars who have increasingly called for greater research attention to race, gender, and intersectionality in the scholarship of precarious work (Branch and Hanley 2018; Misra 2021) as well as scholars who have argued that focusing on the conditions of Black workers specifically, is important due to the legacy of enslavement, Jim Crow, and other forms of systemic devaluation and exploitation of Black workers (e.g., Du Bois 1899; Vargas and Jung 2021; Morris 2015).
We conclude by turning to the role of unions. Much of the literature on precarious work points to the role of unions in creating more stable employment and allowing workers to bargain for better wages and working conditions that would improve their lives both on and off the job. It is here that we draw on the scholarship on the impact of unions, and in particular, the impact of unions on health and safety, to consider the intersection of race, health and safety, and unionization.

We use survey data to examine the experiences of Black essential and in-person workers during the early months of the pandemic. We conducted online surveys that used Facebook advertising to target essential, and later (as economies opened back up) in-person workers. Five surveys were completed between April and December of 2020, with over 8,000 respondents. We compare responses from Black workers to all other workers, all of whom were working in person during the period of the surveys.

The first two surveys (April and May 2020) focused on essential workers in the state of Massachusetts (Hammonds and Kerrissey 2020; Hammonds et al. 2020). These essential jobs included a broad range of industries and occupations from healthcare and retail, to transportation and warehouse workers. Little data on pandemic working conditions were available as early as April 2020, and these early glimpses into essential work help to document how issues of race, labor, health, and power collided at the onset of the crises. As economies opened up, we broadened the survey to in-person workers and to workers in six states (MA, MI, NV, NC, WA, GA). We conclude with a discussion on how some of the inequities we observe during this period could be addressed, and the implications for unions and worker organizing.

**Working Conditions and Disparities for Essential Workers**

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, a new body of scholarship has emerged to identify essential workers and also to understand the economic and health issues these workers faced. Taken together, these findings point to the ways in which the existing structural inequalities have continued to shape workplace disparities. Growing evidence suggests that workers of color faced disproportionate workplace health and safety issues during the pandemic.

These racialized effects were, in part, because workers of color were more likely to occupy frontline essential jobs, rather than work that was able to be done remotely. Blau et al. (2020), for example, found that on average, frontline essential workers were more likely to be racial or ethnic minorities and had less education and lower wages than other workers.

Similarly, an early analysis done by the Brookings Institute in summer 2020 showed that Black workers were overrepresented among frontline essential workers and were especially overrepresented in frontline essential jobs that did not pay a living wage (Kinder and Ford 2020).

This line of research has also made it evident that frontline essential workers were at risk for a variety of health and economic issues. A survey by Schneider and Harknett in May 2020, revealed that many large service sector employers had not put recommended protective measures in place to protect workers, noting that only 19% of
workers in their survey had access to masks. However, this survey did not examine how mask access may have differed by race (Schneider and Harknett 2020).

Following from this, the *Just Recovery Survey* administered in fall 2020 by the Color of Change, National Employment Law Project, the ILR Worker Institute and other organizations revealed that overall Black and Latinx workers were far more likely to have lost their job, experienced economic hardships, or know someone who died from COVID-19 compared to white workers. Significantly, Black and Latinx workers surveyed were also more likely to report concerns about employer retaliation for unsafe working conditions (Color of Change 2021).

The implications of these racial disparities are profound. In one of the first studies of COVID-19 mortality, Rogers et al. (2020) found a disproportionate number of deaths among non-Hispanic Black people relative to their distribution in state populations. This ranges from three to nearly six times higher than those of non-Hispanic white people. They attributed this finding to the disproportionate number of Black workers employed in essential occupations.

In this study, we extend this emerging COVID research to analyze Black workers’ experiences on the job during the pandemic in relation to precarious work, health and safety, and unionization. Building on research that has shown race to be a key component of precarity, as well as on calls by Loustaunau et al. (2021) to expand the conceptualization of precarity to include the impact of COVID-19, we argue that health and safety is a key component of precarity and that Black workers were more likely to experience precarious conditions during the early pandemic. Moreover, Black workers are more likely to be engaged in the work of social reproduction that would put them in the frontline essential jobs that experience the greatest COVID-19 exposure risk as well as to have less access to the financial resources to ease the burden of the social reproduction work that continues at home.

**Health and Safety in Precarious Work**

The rise of precarious work in the United States has been a central area of inquiry for social scientists. Precarious work is, “uncertain, unpredictable, and risky” from the point of view of the worker (Kalleberg 2009, 2). In precarious work, workers bear the risk of work, rather than employers or the government. Scholars have used a variety of measures to capture the rise of precarity. Elements of job security, including temporary, part-time, and independent contractor work arrangements, contribute to precarity. Other issues, including unpredictable scheduling, low wages, and weak labor protections, also contribute to precarity (Appelbaum et al. 2003; Kalleberg 2009; Katz and Krueger 2019; Schneider and Harknett 2019, 2022).

Although there is some emerging research in the field of public health that considers precarious labor as a determinant that affects workers’ social health and safety, little research examines how health and safety issues contribute to precarious work (Benach and Muntaner 2007, 2011). In addition, although a large subfield in labor relations examines health and safety, it typically does not view safety issues through the lens of precarity. However, the emergence of COVID-19 has thrust issues of health
and safety at work to the forefront of workplace concerns for many. At its core, unsafe workplaces create a risky situation for workers and are a critical component of precariousness. An umbrella review of research on precarious work conducted between January 2020 and May 2021 found that these workers were at greater risk of COVID-19 infections and fatalities than others in their communities (McNamara et al. 2021).

The early pandemic, with its health risks to essential, in-person workers, resulted in a sharp uptick of precarious work. Jobs that were formerly not considered particularly dangerous—like grocery clerk—were now much more precarious.

Based on in-depth interviews, Loustaunau et al. (2021) argue that COVID-19 has created a new dimension of precarity for low-wage workers as the threats to their physical body, fear, and emotional labor combined with increased work hours and more predictable schedules. We build on this connection between precarity and health and safety, and particularly how it relates to Black workers. This precarity lens gives us greater purchase in understanding both the scope of what precarity encompasses and how the evolving organization of work contributes to health and safety issues.

**Precarious Work and Black Workers**

An insight from the precarity literature is that workers of color, particularly Black and Latinx workers, are more likely to work in precarious jobs. For example, survey analyses show that Black workers are disproportionately at risk of unstable scheduling practices, compared to white workers, and more likely to hold temporary positions (Boushey and Ansel 2016; Howe 1986). When this occurs, it is often left to the individual worker to find ways to manage the impact of these unstable work arrangements (Alvarez et al. 2020). Still, much more research is needed to unpack the connections between precarious work and race.

Several foundational studies lay the framework for understanding the connections between precarity and Black workers in the contemporary era. Scholars have traced the roots of exploitation, race, and precarity. In the postwar period, the labor market was organized around good jobs (higher pay and stability) and a secondary labor market characterized by insecurity and poverty (Bonacich 1972; Boyle 1998). As Branch (2011) documents, racial dynamics structured which groups of workers were admitted to the primary labor market. Black workers and other workers of color were relegated to the secondary labor market. These trends continued into the twenty-first century. Using CPS data, Branch and Hanley (2018) show that Black workers have faced disproportionate rates of exposure to precarious work, and that historical routes to standardized employment (higher education) have broken down.

Some studies have connected precarity to Black workers’ health experiences (Davis 1981). Mullany et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study over five years, which found that African American men are disproportionately vulnerable to precarious work, which in turn contributed to adverse health outcomes.

Scholars have also called for deeper analyses of social reproduction, intersectionality, and precarious work (Branch and Hanley 2018; Misra 2021). Social reproduction theorists focus on the labor done to reproduce daily life, including in schools, hospitals,
and households. This reproductive labor, which is a cornerstone of contemporary capitalism, is disproportionately performed by women and workers of color and devalued (Bhattacharya 2017). COVID-19 has exposed the key role of both women and workers of color in the life-sustaining activities required to survive the pandemic, from health care workers to supporting children when schools moved online (Jaffe 2002). At the same time, it has brought to the forefront the limited strategies for social reproduction available to precarious and essential workers as they seek to secure food, housing, and childcare.

**Essential Workers, Race, and Insecurity**

Precarious conditions on the job often overlap with insecurities off the job. During the early pandemic, many people experienced food, housing, and childcare insecurities. Black families entered into the pandemic with levels of household wealth that were only a fraction of their white counterparts. Centuries of discriminatory policies from Jim Crow segregation to redlining and the denial of financial services meant that Black workers were less likely to have a financial buffer that would allow them to absorb the effects of the pandemic. At the same time, Black workers were more likely to be working in low-wage jobs. And, Black families faced more severe rates of COVID illness and death during the pandemic. These pressures combined to exacerbate the insecurities that Black workers faced off the job.

Even prior to the start of the pandemic, data on food insecurity reveal that Black families were more likely to experience food insecurity in a given year than white families. According to the US Department of Agriculture, 20% of Black households in 2018 had reduced or disrupted their eating patterns due to a lack of money to pay for food. This compared to only 8% of white families (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2018). Similarly, Black workers were also more likely to face housing insecurity. Multiple reports conducted during the pandemic found that people of color were more likely to experience housing insecurity during the pandemic, compared to earlier years and to white people (Cai et al. 2021; Lake 2020). Research by Almagro et al. (2021) found that Black workers disproportionately live in crowded housing, which increases their overall risk of exposure to the virus. A report by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (Cai et al. 2021) found that a full 44% of Black renters experienced housing insecurity in the early pandemic, compared to about a third of all renters. And, Black families were also more likely to experience childcare disruption during the pandemic. A report by the Center for American Progress found that 13.1% of Black families experienced childcare disruptions compared to 7.2% of white families (Novoa 2020).

In sum, prior research finds that Black families were more likely to experience food, housing, and childcare insecurities. However, these studies do not specifically examine whether essential workers, who were applauded as heroes during those early months of the pandemic, were also facing basic insecurities, and how those insecurities may have differed by race.
Unions and Health and Safety

We conclude with a consideration of how these precarious conditions may contribute to support for unions. In the first part of the twentieth century, the immense health and safety risks faced by workers in industries such as mining and steel led to increasing unionization rates, as workers looked for ways to improve conditions on the job. The labor movement also played a key role in the creation of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Mining Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), which are the two federal agencies that are at the forefront of the governmental response to protecting workers on the job.

Despite this important historical role, the empirical research on the relationship between unions and health and safety has been mixed. Studies in the construction industry have found a beneficial effect, no effect, and mixed effects for unionization (Dedobbeleer 1990; Gillen et al. 2002; Zullo 2011). As Morantz (2009) has pointed out, these mixed findings can largely be attributed to both errors in the coding of union membership rates as well as a selection bias resulting from the fact that, “while unions may prevent hazards, hazards may also attract unions” (Brown 1995, 21).

With that said, however, the research has been consistent in demonstrating that unions have a positive impact on reducing the number of fatalities and traumatic injuries (Morantz 2013; Zullo 2011). Morantz (2009) outlines several key mechanisms through which this occurs including: (1) educating workers about on-the-job hazards, (2) changing workers’ behavior, (3) inducing employers to reduce occupational hazards, (4) influencing the stringency of regulatory oversight, and (5) developing safety-related innovations. Sojourner and Yang (2020) examined over 70,000 unionization votes across three decades and unionized workers were more likely than non-union workers to speak up about health and safety issues in the workplace. Kerrissey and Schuhrke (2016) find that workplace fatalities are linked to the degree that workers are allowed and practice collective rights, such as unions.

In sum: unions have played important roles in fighting for the safety of workers. These dynamics can also be seen with the COVID-19 pandemic and workplace safety issues. Dean et al. (2021) find that school districts with strong teachers’ unions were more likely to establish mask guidelines. Media reporters have also posited that COVID-19 safety concerns have been driving interest in unions (e.g., Time Magazine, LA Times, NPR) (Abrams 2021; Greenhouse 2020; Pattani 2021). Some workers have struck over safety issues, including Amazon workers, janitors, and health care workers. Others have simply quit. A year and a half after the start of COVID-19 (Kerrissey and Stepan-Norris 2021), the U.S. experienced a surge in strikes, labor organizing, and a labor shortage.

Given the role of unions in establishing safety measures, we explore whether Black in-person workers see unions as a desirable path to improving work conditions. Black workers have higher rates of unionization than white workers, and at least in the public sector, union wages (or the additional pay bump for union members compared to non-union members) are particularly high for Black workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020; Kerrissey and Meyers 2021). The health and safety issues that stem from the pandemic may amplify the desire of Black workers to form unions.
Expectations

Drawing from these literatures, we expect to observe several trends. First, we expect to see higher health and safety concerns among Black workers, especially in the early pandemic when only essential workers were in person, and safety procedures were largely left to the discretion of employers. Second, we expect these disparities to extend to spheres beyond the workplace, particularly in housing, childcare, and food security. Finally, we expect that Black workers will be particularly likely to see unionization as desirable.

Research Design and Methods

This project uses survey data collected over five waves during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of the survey was to capture the experiences of essential and in-person workers as they navigated work in the early stages of the pandemic.

Three key concerns drove the research design. First, because of the pandemic, we needed to administer the survey online rather than in person. Second, we wanted to capture experiences early on in the shutdown, which meant that quickly obtaining IRB approval and deploying the survey was critical. Third, we aimed to recruit a new category of workers—essential workers—who were likely hard to reach.

Due to these concerns, we used paid, targeted Facebook advertisements to recruit respondents. With over 221 million users in the United States, Facebook has the largest user base of any social media platform. According to the PEW Research Center (2021), about 7 in 10 U.S. adults regularly use Facebook or 69%. There are not large differences in Facebook use by race or ethnicity. Among Black adults, 74% use Facebook, compared to 72% of Hispanic and 67% of white adults. There are also minimal differences by income. Low-income workers (those earning less than $30,000 a year) are at the national Facebook user average of 70%.

There are more substantial differences in Facebook use by age and gender. Older Americans are less likely to use Facebook, with the lowest reported usage among those over 65 years (50%). Because we focus on adults who are of working age, this under-representation of older Americans does not affect our results. Women are more likely to use Facebook than men, with 77% of women and only 61% of men.

A growing body of research uses Facebook and other social media platforms to survey hard-to-reach populations (Schneider and Harknett 2019a, 2019b). Probability sampling can be difficult for new, emerging, or hidden populations. Facebook’s marketing program allows advertisements to target specific groups of people. We use this feature to study emergent working conditions for a new category of worker: essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This online strategy was particularly important to studying COVID-19, since in-person interviews were not possible.

We used Facebook advertisements to target groups of workers in specific geographical areas. We began with essential workers in Western Massachusetts, which included four counties: Berkshire, Franklin, Hamden, and Hampshire. The next survey expanded its scope to target essential workers in all of Massachusetts. We began
with targeting Massachusetts for several reasons. As of late April, Massachusetts had the third highest COVID-19 case count of all states, with over 60,000 cases and 3,400 deaths. Western Massachusetts had not been spared. Two cities in Western Massachusetts ranked among the cities with the highest death rates in the country: Springfield at #7 and Greenfield at #11. Boston stood at #10 (New York Times, 2020). In addition, Massachusetts is among the states with the most generous employment laws in the United States, including higher rates of health insurance coverage, sick days, and minimum wage. In that sense, workers have stronger protections in Massachusetts than in other states (Hammonds et al. 2020).

As economies began to reopen in the late spring of 2020, we changed our focus in two ways. First, we changed from targeting “essential” workers to in-person workers. Second, we expanded our scope to include six states: Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Carolina, Nevada, and Washington. We selected these states because they varied by re-opening strategy, pandemic severity, and labor force characteristics. The last three surveys, administered in July, September, and December, include these six states.

For each survey wave, the advertisement text said, “Are you at work? We want to hear from you!” Upon clicking, users were directed to a survey within the University of Massachusetts Qualtrics account that housed the Massachusetts COVID-19 Essential Workers Survey. Respondents were invited to participate if they answered “yes” to two screening questions: “Are you working as of [week prior]?” and “Are you working in-person (not remotely)?” Surveys were available in both English and Spanish. Each survey wave was open for one week and solicited respondents who were working one week prior to the survey.

The survey included both closed and open-ended questions. The main open-ended question asked respondents to, “Tell us about your work and life during COVID-19. What would improve your situation?” Most respondents contributed qualitative responses. Some responses were short. Common short responses, especially early in the pandemic, were “I need PPE!” or “Please stay home.” Many respondents, however, wrote at length about their experiences as essential workers during COVID-19. These qualitative responses generated hundreds of pages of text, which we then used to identify major themes.

A key issue in survey data is how well the characteristics of the survey respondents compare to the population. Because statewide closures were unprecedented, no prior research at the start of the pandemic had analyzed the demographics of essential workers.

For the two Massachusetts surveys that were conducted when only essential workers were in-person, we aimed to compare our survey results with estimates of likely essential workers. To approximate this, we generated a list of essential industries in Massachusetts. At the federal level, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) released guidance on essential critical infrastructure workers. The Brookings Institute identified 33 additional industry classifications that fall outside of the DHS specification but were still likely working during the pandemic. These are largely critical manufacturing industries. The Brookings Institute estimates that combined, these industries employed roughly 34% to 43% of the total U.S. workforce before the pandemic (Kearney and Pardue 2020). Massachusetts-specific parameters were broader than guidelines released by DHS and included work such as garden centers, funeral homes, veterinary services, hardware stores, and restaurants. We identified additional
industry codes based on guidelines for essential services in the state of Massachusetts. Although we typically included all employment for each industry, for restaurants we excluded front-of-the-house occupations, such as waiters, bartenders, and hosts, because restaurants were restricted to take-out and delivery in Massachusetts. Using these industry codes, we estimated the characteristics of essential workers working in Massachusetts before the pandemic using the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is an ongoing survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, providing demographic, employment, and other data. We used the five-year survey, 2013–2018.

This method was only able to provide us with very rough estimates of essential workers’ characteristics. Numerous issues make a precise employment estimation difficult. For example, some businesses were allowed to be open, but opted to close, such as many dentists and restaurants. Furthermore, although restaurants were allowed to stay open for take-out and delivery, the Massachusetts Restaurant Association reported a 93% drop in restaurant employment during April. In addition, some essential service workers were able to work from home. Some medical workers, for example, were able to do telemedicine, and some public administration workers were able to work remotely or do a mix of in-person and remote. We are unable to capture these nuances. Although flawed, using the ACS to approximate COVID-19-related employment is a necessary check, since superior data were unavailable.

We estimated the demographics of these essential workers using the ACS and then compared them to the survey respondents. Because the actual employment patterns during COVID-19 are difficult to pinpoint, these estimates should be used with caution. We observed that the survey data are similar to ACS estimates for most demographic categories, including age, race/ethnicity, wages, and union membership.

When we expanded the survey to six states in July, states were in varying degrees of re-opening their economies. Thus, this approach of identifying essential worker categories and using ACS estimates was no longer possible. However, as we show below, the demographics of respondents did not vary greatly across surveys.

Table 1 reports key information for each survey. We have higher rates of women respondents than labor force statistics would suggest. One reason for this is likely that large proportions of women are essential workers, and women are particularly over-represented in healthcare. Reporting for the Census, Laughlin and Wisnieski (2021) show that 86% of healthcare support workers and 73% of healthcare practitioners are women. A second reason is that women are more likely to use Facebook than men, 77% versus 61% (PEW Research Center 2021). It is difficult to assess whether the higher response rate is driven by their essential employment or by their Facebook practices. As economies began to re-open, the percentage of women decreased, which likely reflects the entrance of men into non-essential in-person work, as well as because more women (than men) exited the labor force.

The percentage of Black respondents hovers between 2% and 3%. This rate is consistent across surveys and lower than the labor force participation rate for Black workers. Thus, Black workers are under-represented among respondents. Unlike later surveys conducted by other organizations, we did not over-sample Black workers (see discussion below). Roughly half of respondents are low wage, which we classify as earning under $20 an hour.
Our aim with this research is to describe basic patterns that the survey reveals. We opt to present the percent of respondents reporting for survey questions, rather than using regression analyses. Although this approach has some limitations, it is useful in depicting bivariate relationships in survey data.

We note several other potential limitations to this research design. By using paid Facebook advertisements, we opted to prioritize timeliness and the ability to reach new types of workers. We did not oversample by race or ethnicity and do not make claims that these surveys are representative of the entire population. Later surveys used a random sampling approach, in which they over-sampled workers of color and then applied weights to report on population dynamics. One such survey was conducted by a team of organizations, including the ILR Worker Institute, in the Fall of 2020, “Foundations for a Just and Inclusive Recovery.” This survey had a nationally representative survey of 3,100 workers. Although the methodology and the timing are different, we note that their findings are similar to ours in several arenas, including that Black workers are more concerned about retaliation for speaking up, have considerable safety concerns, and are more interested in unionization, compared to white workers. These similarities suggest that the surveys we conducted report accurate trends, despite having different methodological approaches.

### Findings: The Precarity of Essential Work

We begin by reporting trends on a key measure over the five surveys: low wages. We then analyze safety and security measures for essential workers in Massachusetts early on in the pandemic and follow with how safety and precarity evolved over time for in-person workers as economies reopened.

Many of the jobs categorized as essential in the early months of the pandemic displayed key indicators of precarity including low wages, lack of benefits, unpredictable work schedules, lack of workplace representation, and notably unsafe working conditions.
conditions. Even among all essential workers, however, Black workers were more likely than other workers to be in jobs characterized by some of the key dimensions of precarious work. For example, Black respondents were more likely to be low-wage, earning less than $20 per hour. Table 2 reports the percentage of workers earning low wages for each survey. Although the percentages vary by geographic area and time, the pattern shows that Black workers were more likely to be paid under $20 per hour—even when doing essential work.

One Black worker at a health care facility in Georgia expressed this frustration with his low wages, stating:

COVID has been horrible. I work everyday exposing myself and family to the virus with no hazard pay. Not even a raise!

Although he had been in precarious work before the start of the pandemic, job closures in particular industries, like commission-based sales, and a lack of access to overtime hours, had forced him into even more precarious working conditions.

**Health and Safety in the Early Pandemic**

Low wages were not the only obstacle that Black essential workers faced during the pandemic. Black workers also experienced more dangerous conditions. The first months of business and school closures that began in March 2020 were a period marked by great fear and uncertainty for essential workers who remained on the job. As state and local governments, employers, and customers tried to keep up with an ever-evolving understanding of how transmission occurred and the necessary steps for preventing spread, it was often the frontline essential workers who were left in the most vulnerable positions.

In the following sections, we focus on the early pandemic—April 2020—to better understand the health and safety experiences of Black essential workers during this volatile time. This survey asked essential workers about their experiences from April 24 to May 1. It was only conducted in Massachusetts (N = 2,832 respondents).

**Table 2.** Percentage of Respondents Paid Low Wages (<$20).

| Paid low wages (<$20) | Black workers | All other workers |
|----------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| April (W. Ma)        | 61%           | 47%               |
| May (MA)             | 58%           | 58%               |
| July                 | 76%           | 57%               |
| September            | 51%           | 39%               |
| December             | 56%           | 47%               |

Survey geographies: April (Western MA), May (MA), July, October, and December (MA, MI, NV, NC, WA, GA).
This survey captures an important period in the pandemic: the Massachusetts economy was shut, and only essential workers were in-person. It was also early enough in the pandemic that widespread regulations about health and safety had not been established. For the most part, employers were left to themselves to interpret and enforce best practices.

Our survey of essential workers in Massachusetts in April 2020 found that even among this group, the experiences of safety and access to basic safety measures varied in important ways. Although it is true that the majority of all respondents in April 2020 felt unsafe on the job (51%), the number was even greater for Black workers (57%).

Beyond a general sense of feeling unsafe on the job, Black workers were more likely to report not having access to basic safety measures. Figure 1 below breaks out several of these key measures. We see little difference in the ability to social distance between Black workers and all other workers. Roughly, two-thirds of these essential workers were unable to socially distance themselves.

However, the inability to practice social distancing is compounded by the lack of other basic safety measures. It is in these other measures that the precarious position of Black workers is revealed. Black workers had less access to these basic measures, including training on COVID prevention, access to masks, and access to regular hand washing.

Another dimension of health and safety is the ability (and encouragement) to stay home if sick. These policies enable workers to both care for themselves to not spread the virus to co-workers. Although a statewide COVID-related paid sick leave policy was later implemented, it was not in place at the time of the initial surveys in April and May 2020. However, Massachusetts did have a statewide paid sick leave policy, unlike most states at the time. This law, however, has several exclusions that left many essential workers outside the protections of the legislation, including those working in small employers.

In Figure 2, we see that Black essential workers were more likely to report that they did not have or were unsure whether they had access to paid sick leave during this critical time. In the May survey, for example, 31% of Black respondents reported that their employer did not offer this benefit compared to 19% of all other workers.

A Black worker in Massachusetts in May 2020, describes exactly how this lack of benefits contributes to the precarity of the job, “Something that would improve my situation would be if my employer paid for sick leave. For example, I had to stay home for a week because I was having symptoms and they didn’t pay me for that week I was out.”

Similarly, Black respondents also reported that their employers were less likely to encourage them to stay home if they were sick. For example, in the May survey in Massachusetts 19% of Black respondents said that their employer did not encourage them to stay home when they are sick, compared to 12% of all other workers. This combination—employers not consistently encouraging Black workers to stay home when sick and not providing that paid time off to make staying home feasible—exacerbated the already precarious positions that Black workers were more likely to face.

Although employment benefits like paid sick leave (and being encouraged to stay home if sick) differ from the other on-the-job safety measures we have described,
they are critical to making sure that workers are not coming to work sick and jeopardizing the safety of their coworkers. In this way, lack of paid sick leave is a dimension of health and safety that contributes to precarious work.

**Figure 1.** Percent of respondents who lacked basic safety measures April 24, 2020–May 1, 2020, Massachusetts Survey.

**Figure 2.** Percent of respondents with inadequate sick leave policies.
Insecurity Off the Job in the Early Pandemic

The lack of security experienced by Black workers also extended beyond the workplace to their experiences off the job. Entering the pandemic, Black families were less likely to have household wealth or high-paying jobs, compared to other groups. This meant that Black families were less likely to have a financial buffer as the pandemic spread.

One Black respondent explained the connection between security on the job and at home:

I’ve had two different jobs during covid. I’ve had to get a better paying job because of COVID. I’m still struggling because I cannot keep up with my bills since the job I left was commission based, I have bills that are still left unpaid. Overtime is non-existent so there isn’t an opportunity to make extra cash. I can’t get a second job because of obligations outside of work. I’m stuck in a hole I can’t tell whether it’s getting deeper or if help is on the way.

The absence of a financial buffer and the economic stressors of the pandemic combined to have serious impacts on food, housing, and childcare security of Black respondents. Across all three of these issues, Black respondents were more likely to report experiencing inequality than other workers. Figure 3 reports the percent of Black respondents with food, housing, and childcare insecurities, compared to other workers early on in the pandemic.

These same trends continued for Black workers who were on the job providing essential services in the first months of the pandemic. Among our respondents, 8%
of Black essential workers reported using a food bank or other community food support in the previous week compared to 3.5% of all other workers. Findings from a survey of predictors of household risks for food insecurity conducted in March 2020 similarly found that Black families with annual income under $100,000 were significantly more likely to be at risk for food insecurity (Lauren et al. 2021).

Housing insecurity was also a key issue for Black respondents. Although racial disparities in access to housing preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, this crisis worsened these inequities as Black workers are overrepresented in low-wage jobs and jobs that could not transition to remote work. Furthermore, recent research on racial disparities in COVID risk exposure has shown that Black workers disproportionately live in crowded housing, which increases their overall risk of exposure to the virus (Almagro et al. 2021). Among survey respondents, 21% of Black essential workers reported experiencing housing insecurity compared to 6% of all other workers. One Black woman working as a courier expressed the struggle for housing saying, “It’s sickening leaving for work every morning. I wish I made a few more bucks so I can obtain lodging while I work through this pandemic.”

Black respondents were also more likely to report experiencing childcare insecurity. Public schools in Massachusetts were closed on March 13, 2020 with all childcare centers shutting their doors a week later, on March 22. The scramble for childcare was immediately felt by essential workers who had to confront the lack of childcare options, combined with the greater risk of COVID exposure they face going to work. A full 40% of respondents in April 2020, reported experiencing childcare insecurity. However, childcare insecurity was even more severe among Black essential workers, with 71% of Black workers reported experiencing childcare insecurity.

One worker, a Black woman working as a phone operator at a health care facility in Massachusetts described these challenges explaining:

I am currently 29 weeks pregnant and the pandemic has added additional stress as we are unsure what it does to women and child. There is no improvement with my situation, to lose my job would be very bad at this moment. While continuing to work is equally stressful. The only upside would be to receive hazard pay during this time that would allow me to save for my maternity leave that will only be paying 60% of my salary. My spouse is working but lost one of his main income jobs due to the pandemic.

Feeling Safe as the Pandemic Evolved

In order to capture some of the evolving dynamics of essential workers’ experience on the job, we also conducted surveys in July, September, and December 2020. These survey waves expanded to five new states (MI, NV, NC, WA, GA) in addition to Massachusetts. They also mark a new period. By July, economies had either partially or fully re-opened. Therefore, while respondents were still restricted to in-person workers, they were not necessarily essential workers.

...
In the early months of the pandemic—when only essential workers were in person—the majority of workers did not feel safe. However, even in these early months, Black workers were less likely to feel safe, compared to other workers. These feelings were consistent with the health and safety issues that they were experiencing: Black workers were less likely to receive training, masks, sick days, and other basic COVID precautions (see Figures 1 and 2).

Unlike other workers, the experience of Black workers over time was not marked by increasing feelings of safety, despite a growing body of knowledge about virus transmission and the fact that many standards like masks had become widespread. Figure 4 shows the percent of workers who did not feel safe at their job during each out of five surveys. Black respondents reported feeling unsafe at work at higher levels than other workers throughout that period. Although the percentage of other workers reporting that they felt unsafe declined, it remained high for Black workers.

The voices of Black workers themselves in September 2020 give us some insight about this, pointing to employee fears of retaliation for communicating concerns as well as a general lack of transparency on the part of management.

One Black worker in our sample, a 44-year-old deputy clerk in Georgia, reported that she was afraid she would be fired or disciplined for expressing COVID-related concerns. She explained:

The employer hasn’t spoken with us about our concerns since COVID. The department head isn’t approachable and there have been no precautionary measures in place except posted signs from the CDC and markings on the floor. We should have had staggered, intermittent shifts because we have families. The facility should have been cleaned and

![Figure 4. Percent of respondents who do not feel safe at work.](image-url)
sanitized and we should have been given more pay as we were told that we’re essential workers.

Another Black woman, age 57, working in a warehouse in Georgia also expressed distrust in management explaining, “I want my employer to be honest about how many people at work have actually gotten the virus, so that I can assess my risk. I’m not really certain if they are telling us the true number of people who have had it.”

Customers’ Mask Compliance

The evolving nature of the pandemic led us to introduce a number of new questions and to expand the number of states included in the later rounds of surveys. One key safety issue for front-line essential workers was the enforcement of state and local mask mandates as well as employer-specific mask policies. As economies began to re-open in late spring 2020, national news outlets were reporting that some workers were experiencing push-back from some customers around mask compliance.

Beginning in July, we asked about the experiences of in-person workers with customer mask compliance. Lack of compliance created a two-fold safety issue. On the one hand, masks are a critical component of slowing the spread of COVID. Customers who refused to wear masks put workers at risk. On the other, some workers reported another safety issue: fear of verbal or physical abuse if they asked customers to use masks. A Black woman, age 27, in a retail store in Oregon reflects:

Customers are the disrespectful ones so maybe having a consequence when they don’t follow the guidelines would help. The anger and racial slurs because "they don’t want to wear a mask" is ridiculous.

Figure 5 reports experiences of in-person, customer-facing workers’ experiences with mask compliance. We found that in July and October, substantial numbers of respondents reported that customers only sometimes or rarely comply with mask requests. These percentages were higher among Black in-person workers, compared to all other workers. In both July and October, we see that close to 55% of Black respondents that were customer-facing experienced inadequate compliance. By December, which corresponded with a major surge in COVID cases and was still pre-vaccine, these percentages had dropped to near 40% for Black and all respondents.

Looking to Unions

Black respondents were more likely to express concerns over health and safety, be paid low wages, and experience widespread food, housing, and childcare insecurities off the job. In light of these conditions, how did Black respondents view unionization?

In the September and December surveys, we asked whether respondents would want a union in their workplace, with “yes,” “I don’t know,” “no,” and “already a union member” as possible answers. We exclude respondents who already are union
members, and combine “yes” and “I don’t know,” which we view as those who would want or would maybe want to unionize. In each survey, well over half of all workers expressed interest, answering either yes or I don’t know, reported in Figure 6.
Black workers expressed a higher level of interest in unions than other workers. In September, for instance, Black respondents (68%) were more likely than other workers (56%) to say that they would want or maybe want a union at their job (and, among those, 32% answered “yes” and 24% answered “I don’t know”). These findings are consistent with the “Just Recovery” survey, a nationally representative survey conducted in September and October 2020 (N = 3100) (not limited to in-person workers). This survey found that 62% of non-union Black workers would definitely or probably vote for a union at their job (Color of Change 2021).

Roughly two-thirds of Black in-person workers responded that they would possibly want a union. These numbers are far higher than the current rate of unionization in the United States, which stood at slightly less than 11% in 2020. This mismatch between actually unionized and interested in unionizing, is very large, suggesting that far more workers want to form unions than have been actually able to form them.

Conclusion

For the Black essential workers we heard from, the first months of the pandemic were marked by less access to basic COVID-19 safety measures and by greater insecurity in housing, food, and childcare than other workers. These workers felt more unsafe in their jobs than other workers and described their struggles with low wages and few benefits combined with the increased risks to their physical safety. Although these patterns of inequality are not new, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how precarious labor intersects with both race and health and safety.

As scholars continue to conceptualize precarity, our findings support the need for future research on precarity to consider not just the form of the work arrangements and social locations such as race and gender but also workers’ experiences of health and safety on the job. In an emerging pandemic, precarious work is not just that which lacks a regular employment relationship, but one where the worker has no ability to social distance, inadequate mask access, and no ability to stay home when sick. The inability to protect one’s physical well-being is thus a core dimension of precarity that needs to be further explored.

Our findings also connect precarious work to experiences of security off the job. Workers employed in precarious settings struggle to put together the resources to ensure that they have adequate housing, food, and childcare to engage in their own social reproduction. For many Black workers, for whom centuries of discrimination have created only a limited financial buffer with which to absorb the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to meet their family’s basic needs at home is also challenged.

These issues, of course, are not just theoretical ones. The impact of the pandemic has not been equal, and for the Black essential workers who have occupied frontline positions, addressing precarious employment is quite literally a matter of life or death. It is here that unions have a critical role to play in pressing for improved working conditions, by supporting Black essential workers as they come together to improve their own conditions on the job. In order to do this, the labor movement for its part must center the calls of
the movement for Black lives which has articulated this connection between the struggle for racial justice and the struggle for economic justice.

Our finding that Black essential workers are more likely to want to join a union suggests that this could be a powerful path forward in the economic recovery for Black workers. Although deeper structural reforms will be needed to address the overall precarity of many essential jobs as well as to address the factors that have pushed Black workers into some of the most precarious spaces in the labor market, strengthening and supporting collective bargaining for these workers will be critical. In the absence of unionization, workers and union community groups should also explore the possibility of alternative engagement models that could allow workers to more fully participate in confronting violations of health and safety standards (Delp and Riley 2015).

While the pandemic appears to be entering the endemic phase in late 2022, concerns for Black workers on the frontlines remain as relevant as ever. How the policy makers and the broader labor respond at this moment will likely have long-term consequences on both economic and racial inequality.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Author Biographies

Clare Hammonds is Professor of Practice at the Labor Center of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Jasmine Kerrissey is Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Labor Center of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.