

# Filipino American Essential & Frontline Workers Battling Multiple Crises: COVID-19, Economic Inequality, and Racism

**ASIAN AMERICAN & PACIFIC ISLANDER POLICY INITIATIVE**

Despite being hailed as “heroes,” essential workers on the frontlines of the pandemic have faced profound health, economic, and social challenges. Among frontline workers, Filipino Americans are disproportionately employed in healthcare and other essential industries, making them vulnerable to contracting and dying from COVID-19 (Wong, 2020; National Nurses United, 2020).

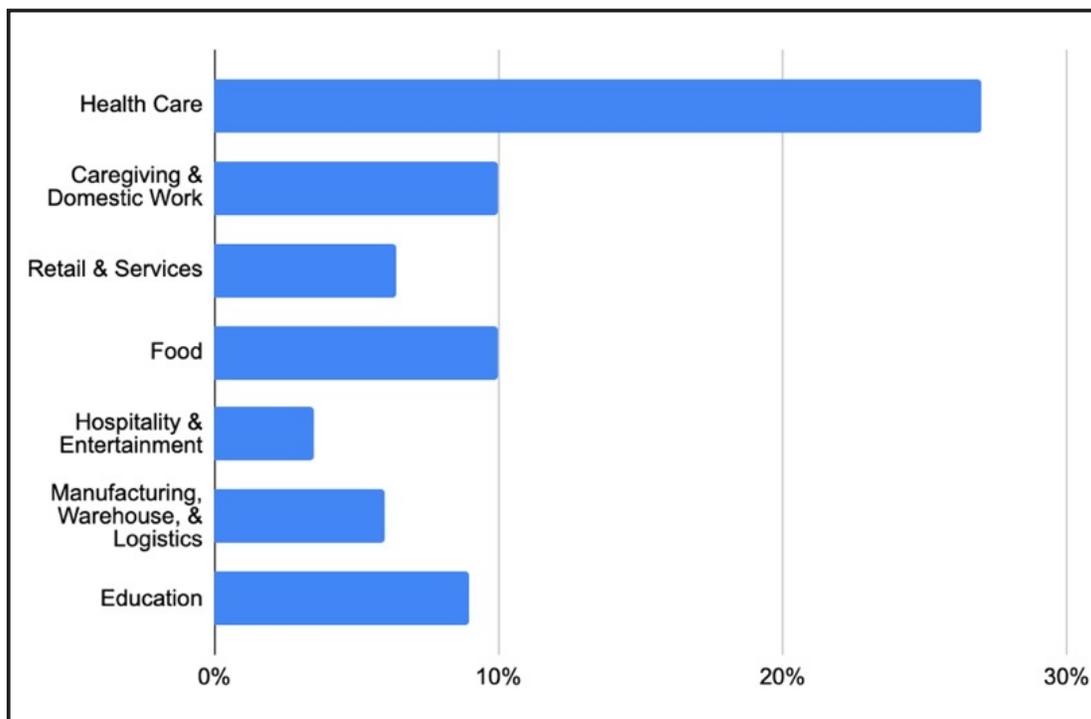
Since 2020, the high fatality rates and heavy psychological toll of pandemic stress among Filipino nurses have become widely recognized (Escobedo, Morey, and Ponce, 2021; Morton 2021). Yet, even before the onset of COVID-19, Filipino Americans – particularly women and immigrants – employed in service-based industries faced economic hardships that have only worsened as the pandemic lingers (Nasol and Francisco-Menchavez, 2021; Gaitens et al., 2021).

This has all occurred against the broader backdrop of racism and xenophobic hate directed toward Asian Americans, including highly publicized cases targeting Filipino Americans, leading to a climate of fear around issues of community safety (Yee, 2022; Grossman 2021). Filipino Americans comprise the largest Asian American ethnic group in California, yet their needs remain hidden when grouped among Asian American and Pacific Islanders as a whole. To address the lack of disaggregated race/ethnicity data, this brief highlights findings from the Work and Wellness among Filipino Americans during COVID-19 (WWF) Study.

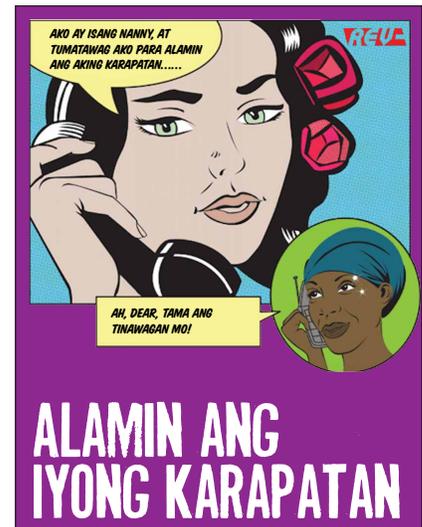
## Key Findings

Results come from focus groups with essential workers (n=42) and survey data of Filipino American workers (n=410), collected between November 2021 and May 2022). (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Essential and frontline industries represented among Filipino American workers in California.



- Economic Hardship and Workplace Concerns.** 55% of survey participants earned \$35,000 or less annually – well below California’s median income (\$41,870 in 2019) – and 38% are concerned about not having paid sick days. 19% of survey participants report concern about wage theft; focus group participants employed as caregivers in home health care reported economic exploitation (e.g. wage theft) and emotional abuse, with one participant stating she felt as if she was made a “slave.”
- COVID-19 Safety at Work.** 64% of survey participants fear contracting COVID-19 at work and the majority (58%) report they do not feel safe at work. Lack of adequate PPE has contributed to a sense of demoralization; one focus group participant stated, “If you’re on the floor and you’re reusing the same thing over and over and then COVID is everywhere, it doesn’t really make you confident or feel safe working, putting that mask on over and over.”
- Health and Mental Health.** 55% of survey participants experience symptoms of burnout a few times a month; about 11% report symptoms of burnout every day. Nearly two-thirds (65%) report feeling anxious, nervous, or on-edge and half (50%) reported feeling depressed and hopeless for several days over the last two weeks. Healthcare workers were chronically exposed to trauma on the job: as one focus group participant who worked as an ICU nurse for several years stated, “I have never experienced this much death and dying.”
- Anti-Asian Racism.** Filipino American healthcare workers, in particular, felt targeted and labeled as “disease carriers” due to their race as well as occupation. One focus group participant stated, “Because of wearing scrubs... we’re [seen as] spreading the virus.” Older women focus group participants who relied on public transportation commonly experienced harassment, with one sharing an experience of assault: “The people in the car said, ‘Asian.’ I immediately thought that there was hate for Asians going on. The other one came down from the car. Chasing me and throwing things at me. I was thankful that somebody came and blocked them, they even brought me to where I was working. I did not do anything at that time because I was trembling in fear.”



## Recommendations

- Provide Economic Support and Workplace Protections.** Reinstate hazard pay for all essential and frontline workers, as well as implement year-round paid sick leave; empower regulatory agencies by ensuring adequate staffing to enforce and strengthen labor laws, as well as protect against employer retaliation; enhance economic safety net and benefits for essential workers, including undocumented workers; protect the right to collective bargaining and increase representation through unions.



2. **Implement Workplace Safety Measures.** Provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), on-site (or time-off work to obtain) vaccine/booster shots and COVID-19 testing, and improve pandemic preparedness, protocol, and health literacy education – enforcing financial penalties for employers who do not comply.
3. **Increase Access to Health and Mental Health Care.** Increase funding for culturally and linguistically appropriate as well as trauma-informed preventative, primary, and mental health care services; improve healthcare education and coverage for employees in low-wage and informal labor settings; fund organizations that provide community-based health programs serving Filipino Americans.
4. **Prevent and Address Racial Violence.** Enforce laws and prosecution of those who commit hate crimes; fund and partner with local organizations that work directly with impacted Asian American and Pacific Islander communities; support violence prevention programs and resources for the workplace and the community at large, including bystander training; ensure stronger protections in public transportation systems, including education and training for transit operators to intervene.
5. **Support Community-Based Organizations Servicing the Needs of Filipino Americans.** Increase funding for community-based organizations to implement programming that supports Filipino American workers, including education on workplace rights, occupational safety, and capacity building for worker leaders.

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