FEBRUARY 2026



Part 2 of the Struggle to Strength series

OVERWORKED & UNDER PRESSURE

A Study of Supermarket Workers in Los Angeles and Orange County Koreatowns

KIWA WORKERS FOR JUSTICE

AAPI DATA

UCLA Labor Center

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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance

Established in 1992, KIWA empowers immigrant workers in Los Angeles through organizing, advocacy, and coalition-building, with a focus on Koreatown's restaurant and retail sectors, where low-wage immigrant labor from South Korea, Mexico, and Central America is especially vulnerable to wage theft and exploitation. To address these issues, KIWA bridges linguistic and cultural divides, develops alternative organizing models, and advances housing justice policies. As Koreatown employers expand into Orange County, KIWA has broadened its organizing to meet the needs of workers employed across multiple locations in both Los Angeles and Orange Counties.

UCLA Labor Center

The UCLA Labor Center believes that a public university belongs to the people and should advance quality education and employment for all. Every day we bring together workers, students, faculty, and policymakers to address the most critical issues facing working people today. Our research, education, and policy work lifts industry standards, creates jobs that are good for communities, and strengthens immigrant rights, especially for students and youth.

AAPI Data

AAPI Data is a leading research and policy organization producing accurate data to shift narratives and drive action toward enduring solutions for Asian American and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities. AAPI Data aspires to transform public and private systems to ensure that all AA and NHPI communities are recognized, valued, and prioritized.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LOS ANGELES & ORANGE COUNTY'S KOREATOWNS

1965

President Lyndon Johnson signs the Immigration and Nationality Act into law, which removes a quota system from US immigration policy, opening the door to immigrants from around the world.



Significant numbers of Korean American immigrants settle in Central Los Angeles and open small businesses along Jefferson Avenue, as well as in various parts of Orange County, and in particular Garden Grove. By 1970, Koreans in both counties make up over 60% of the total number of Koreans in the US. By 1980, the City of Los Angeles designates the neighborhood formerly known as Wilshire Center as "Koreatown" and erected signage to demarcate the area.

1970-1980

1992

In the wake of the Rodney King trial, civil unrest erupts in Koreatown and the surrounding areas that results in property damage and exacerbates racial tensions. KIWA, founded less than three months prior, organizes residents, workers, and business owners to help rebuild the neighborhood and resolve community divisions.





In 1994, the City's Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) designates the area as the "Wilshire Center/Koreatown Redevelopment and Recovery Project" to draw investment from the public and private sectors, which initiates a process of gentrification. By the early 2000s, Koreatown attracts growing numbers of young, white urban professionals, which in turn draw luxury housing development, bars, restaurants, and nightclubs.

1992-2010

2019

The Garden Grove City Council designates a two mile stretch of land on Garden Grove Boulevard, formerly known as the Korean Business District and the home to the annual Orange County Korean Festival, as "Koreatown." This becomes Orange County's first Koreatown.

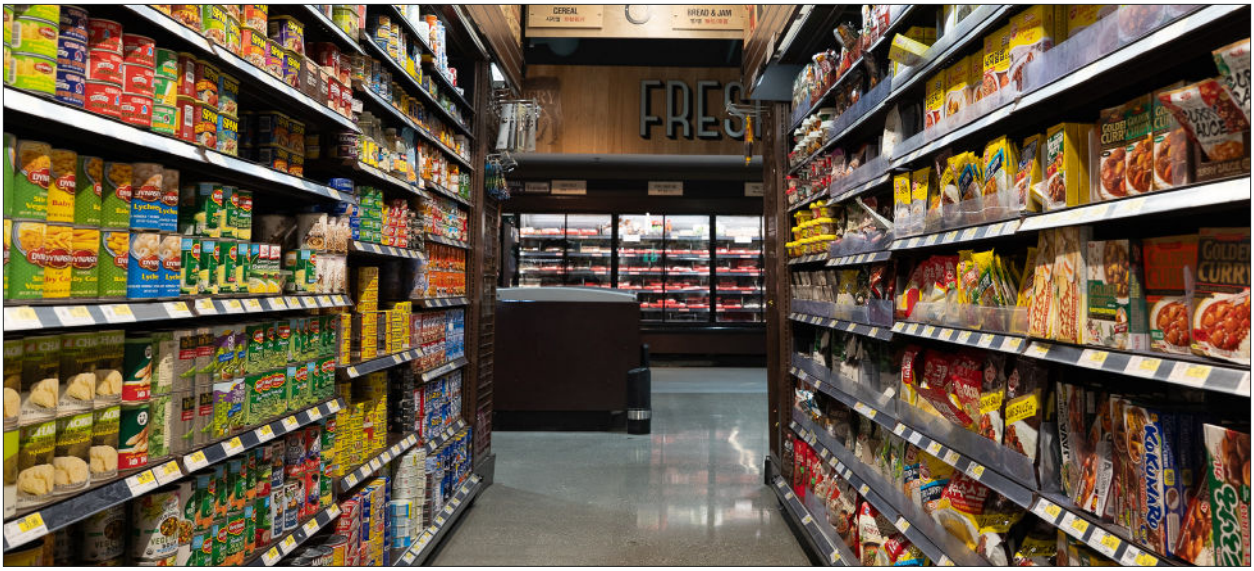




The City of Buena Park announces the official designation of the northern portion of the city as "Koreatown," in recognition of more than two decades of Korean-American culture and influence in Buena Park.

2023





I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Koreatown, one of Los Angeles' most diverse neighborhoods, has long served as a cultural and economic hub for immigrant communities, including large Latine and Korean populations. Supermarkets in these areas are key pillars of ethnic economies, providing culturally specific goods and acting as engines of economic growth. However, the growth and visibility of these markets often mask the precarious working conditions faced by frontline workers.

Koreatown's economic success in Los Angeles has led to the establishment of other Korean ethnic enclaves in Southern California. Most recently, the Orange County (OC) cities of Buena Park and Garden Grove designated their own Koreatown neighborhoods in recognition of the growing population of Korean American residents and concentration of Korean businesses in the surrounding area. While the designation "Koreatown" does not establish formal neighborhood boundaries, local and regional entities use this branding as a tool for economic development efforts.

With nearly 2,400 supermarkets across both counties, the sector employs over 100,000 workers, many of whom are low-wage, immigrant workers with limited labor protections. The following report examines the experiences of workers in supermarket establishments in the Koreatowns located in Los Angeles, Buena Park, and Garden Grove—areas that reflect broader trends in ethnic entrepreneurship, gentrification, and corporate consolidation.

This report, the second in the *From Struggle to Strength* series, was produced in collaboration with Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), the UCLA Labor Center, AAPI Data, and researchers from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona and California State University, Los Angeles. The study draws on 331 worker surveys, 20 interviews, and demographic and industry data to investigate the experiences of Koreatown supermarket workers. It reveals workplace violations, discrimination, wage theft, and precarity among a largely immigrant workforce, underscoring the urgent need for targeted policy interventions. The following are key findings from our research:



Koreatown supermarket workers are overworked and under pressure

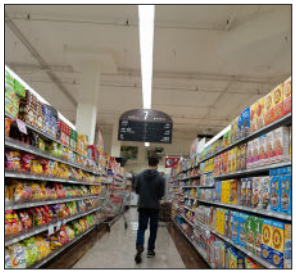
- Despite working full-time hours, many workers reported earning low wages and struggling to make ends meet.
- 78% of supermarket workers report working more than 35 hours per week; nearly 30% work over 40 hours.
- Most workers prefer stable full-time schedules of 36–40 hours, but 13% report significant week-to-week variation.
- 24% of workers reported being pressured to work faster than was safe.
- Workers often forego breaks or meals out of fear of reprimand from management.
- 15% of workers are asked to work on days off, straining family life and health.

Supermarket workers experience low and stagnant wages, as well as wage theft

- According to U.S. Census data, in 2023, the median hourly wage for frontline supermarket workers was $15.11 in LA County and $15.85 in OC—far below county medians.
- About 66% of all frontline supermarket workers in LA and 68% in OC earn low wages.
- 40% of workers experienced at least one form of wage theft, such as unpaid overtime or denial of breaks.
- Raises are rare and unrelated to tenure or performance.
- Nearly 27% of frontline supermarket workers in LA and 20% in OC live in overcrowded or severely overcrowded conditions.

Koreatown supermarket workers experience unsafe working conditions

- 14% of workers have been injured on the job.
- 24% of workers reported their employers do not offer health insurance. Among those offered plans, 73% are not enrolled; of those not enrolled, 46% cite affordability as the main barrier.
- Only 7% reported having retirement or pension benefits.



Koreatown supermarket workers face discrimination and abuse

- 13% of workers reported experiencing discrimination; 20% experienced verbal abuse.
- Discrimination is often tied to ethnicity or immigration status and reinforced through unequal work assignments and promotions, as well as language and cultural barriers.
- 53% of those abused or intimidated were targeted by managers and 50% by customers; response rates of abuse and mistreatment were highest among cashiers, a position that is also overwhelmingly composed of women.

Recommendations

The supermarkets of Los Angeles and Orange County Koreatowns are emblematic of broader trends in ethnic entrepreneurship and immigrant labor markets. Yet behind their cultural vitality lies a workforce under immense strain—working long hours for low pay, facing systemic discrimination, and living in overcrowded conditions. As Los Angeles prepares for major global events and renewed investment, this report calls for urgent action to ensure that immigrant supermarket workers are not left behind. By implementing the recommendations outlined below, city and county leaders can help create a more equitable, inclusive, and just economy in Southern California's Koreatowns.

1. **Invest in training opportunities and formalize paths for promotion and career advancement:** Create in-language training and promotion pathways to help workers build skills, improve job safety, and reduce discrimination in Koreatown's diverse supermarket workforce.
2. **Develop clear communication channels that appropriately address language barriers:** Establish multilingual communication systems and cultural competency practices to prevent favoritism, reduce conflict, and ensure equal advancement opportunities for all workers.
3. **Implement more equitable and transparent scheduling practices:** Provide stable, worker-informed schedules to support immigrant workers balancing multiple jobs, caregiving, and unpredictable hours.
4. **Raise wages and strengthen enforcement:** Strengthen wage enforcement to target non-compliant supermarkets with high rates of wage theft and discrimination; support worker centers in identifying violators.

5. **Improve health insurance access:** Address unsafe working conditions and mental health risks by improving affordable health coverage access and treating wage theft as a public health concern.

6. **Create protected spaces for workers to discuss working conditions:** Establish programs to ensure workers have opportunity to openly and safely discuss working conditions and possible solutions to mitigate the culture of fear that pervades low-wage industries.





II. INTRODUCTION

Koreatown, in Central Los Angeles, is one of California's most diverse and densely populated neighborhoods. It is home to many immigrant communities and a vibrant network of immigrant-owned small businesses—including restaurants, bakeries, cafes, and markets—that have long been central to its economy.

Since the 1980s, Koreatown has been both a workplace and home for immigrant workers. Despite its name, Koreatown has long welcomed migrants from Mexico and Central America, who today make up the majority of residents, along with a significant indigenous population. In recent years, the neighborhood's growth has spurred major real estate development. Large-scale projects, density-allowing zoning, public transit expansion, and relaxed alcohol sales regulations have fueled gentrification.[1] While rents have risen, most of its residents remain low income, and many live in overcrowded housing conditions.

Koreatown's economic success in Los Angeles has led to the establishment of other Korean ethnic enclaves in Southern California. Orange County now has designated "Koreatown" neighborhoods in Buena Park and Garden Grove, where many of the same restaurants and supermarkets found in Los Angeles' Koreatown have opened. While being designated as a "Koreatown" does not confer formal boundaries to a neighborhood, such branding is often part of an economic development strategy employed by local, municipal, and regional organizations.[2] Together, these Koreatowns anchor a growing concentration of immigrant workers and businesses integral to Southern California's immigrant economy.

In ethnic enclaves like these, supermarkets play a unique economic and social role in the community. They foster cultural identity and place attachment for immigrants while also attracting outsiders seeking unique ethnic goods and experiences. They also serve as community anchors, shaping social ties and collective action for immigrant populations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, supermarkets took on an even more important role as "essential businesses" and their "essential workers" kept communities fed during an economic shutdown and shelter-in-place orders. While the pandemic has since subsided, understanding the challenges still facing frontline workers in the supermarket industry is crucial to ensure equitable economic growth in the region. Moreover, with the 2026 World Cup and 2028 Olympics approaching, Los Angeles has an opportunity to ensure that investments benefit our local workforce.[3] The findings from this report suggest pathways forward.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

KIWA collaborated with the UCLA Labor Center, AAPI Data, and researchers from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona and California State University, Los Angeles to examine the conditions in the supermarket industry in Los Angeles and Orange County's Koreatowns. In particular, this study examines large, non-union supermarkets concentrated around the region's Koreatowns that employ a diverse workforce. The study centers on workers' experiences and draws from multiple data sources—including a review of existing literature, 331 worker surveys, and 20 worker interviews—to provide an in-depth overview of the supermarket sector and its workforce in the Koreatowns of Los Angeles, Buena Park, and Garden Grove. In addition, the report draws from the U.S. Census and other publicly available data sets in order to compare and contextualize the conditions facing Koreatown supermarket workers with the broader sector in the region (See *Appendix* for detailed methodology).

This report represents the second in the three-part *From Struggle to Strength* series. While the first report explored the challenges facing restaurant workers in Koreatown, this report highlights the experiences of supermarket workers in the Koreatowns of Los Angeles and Orange Counties.

The report is divided into five sections. The first provides a historical overview of the area and industry. The following three examine the supermarket sector and its workforce using government data, surveys, and interviews, covering economic and labor conditions. The report concludes with a set of policy recommendations to improve conditions for workers in the region.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LA AND OC KOREATOWNS

Los Angeles' Koreatown has experienced periods of significant demographic shifts since the 1960s. Racial tensions following the Watts Uprising and fear-driven narratives in popular culture spurred the exodus of the white middle class.[4] The Immigration Act of 1965 then led to an influx of Pacific Rim immigrants, including a growing Korean population that initially settled around Jefferson Avenue and later expanded north toward Olympic Boulevard. By the late 1970s, Koreans owned most businesses in the area, particularly along 8th Street, solidifying Koreatown as a center for Korean commerce.[5] At the same time, large numbers of Mexican and Central American immigrants settled across Los Angeles, including in Koreatown.

By the late 1980s, Koreans had established numerous small businesses, such as restaurants, markets, and laundromats, primarily along Olympic Boulevard, Wilshire Boulevard, and 6th Street. During this time, major corporations vacated office buildings on Wilshire, allowing Korean entrepreneurs to take root. As recognition of the neighborhood's Korean presence grew, the city formally designated it as "Koreatown." To bolster this identity, Korean developers and business leaders erected signage and hosted cultural events. However, Koreatown was never a predominantly Korean neighborhood. Even at its official designation, Central American, Mexican, and other East Asian immigrants made up a significant portion of its residents.

A pivotal moment in Koreatown's history was the 1992 civil unrest following the Rodney King trial. Although the upheaval temporarily depressed land values, the neighborhood experienced significant reinvestment in the following decades. Initially led by South Korean corporations, this development was further accelerated in 1994 when the City's Community Redevelopment Agency designated the area for revitalization.[6] By the early 2000s, luxury housing and high-end health spas began attracting young professionals, transforming Koreatown into a

thriving multiethnic enclave and commercial hub.[7] Today, its official boundaries stretch from Wilton Boulevard to Hoover Street and Melrose Avenue to 11th Street.[8]

Emerging Koreatowns have also developed throughout Orange County. In 2019, the Garden Grove City Council formally designated a two-mile stretch of Garden Grove Boulevard as "Orange County Koreatown," recognizing the area's growing Korean population and commercial activity.[9] Similarly, in September 2023, the City of Buena Park designated Beach Boulevard, from Rosecrans Avenue to Orangethorpe Avenue, as Koreatown.[10] According to a Korean American Chamber of Commerce of Orange County report, the Asian population of the county is expected to grow from 23.5% to 29.3%, with Korea-born residents the second largest Asian population in the County.[11] To ensure equitable growth in Southern California's Koreatowns, policymakers and advocates must address labor conditions and economic challenges in the neighborhood's dominant industries.





ENCLAVE ECONOMIES AND ETHNIC SUPERMARKETS

The economies of ethnic enclaves are made up of businesses owned by people from the same background, serving community needs like food, travel, or financial services while also benefiting from a strong supply of co-ethnic labor.[12] Ethnic supermarkets in particular are important because they offer familiar products, help immigrants feel at home, and create spaces for social connection. They can strengthen community identity and even motivate residents to resist unwanted neighborhood change.[13] At the same time, they attract outsiders looking for new foods or cultural experiences—what scholars call "cosmopolitan consumption."[14]

Koreatown in Los Angeles is often seen as a success story of immigrant business growth, supported by Korean banks, churches, and outside investment from South Korea.[15] This spurred redevelopment, new high-rise projects, and the arrival of major retail chains. Yet this success has often come at workers' expense. Ethnic supermarkets are frequently cited for wage theft, and research shows that employers may treat workers differently by race or ethnicity, with Korean workers sometimes receiving preferential treatment over Latinx or African American employees.[16] Still, other studies show immigrant business owners may mistreat workers regardless of background, with class differences undermining solidarity.[17]

Today, Koreatown is one of LA's most densely populated and fastest-growing neighborhoods, and new Koreatowns are emerging in Orange County, including Buena Park and Garden Grove.[18] In 2023, the South Korean government hosted the World Korean Business Convention in Anaheim for the first time in the convention's 20-year history, underscoring the rising economic presence of Korean businesses in the region.[19] This expansion raises questions about how the growth and consolidation of ethnic supermarket chains affect workers and the wider community.



III. SNAPSHOT OF THE SUPERMARKET SECTOR

OVERVIEW OF SUPERMARKETS IN LOS ANGELES AND ORANGE COUNTIES

Assessing the exact number of supermarkets and workers specifically located within the Koreatown neighborhoods of LA and Orange County is challenging because publicly available business data is often aggregated at the county or city level, rather than by neighborhood. While neighborhood-level directories and online mapping tools suggest Koreatowns host a mix of large chains and small, independent ethnic grocers, county-level data provides useful insight into the size, scale, and composition of supermarkets that serve these communities.

To approximate supermarket presence in Koreatown areas, we analyzed grocery store data by zip code, identifying approximately 55 grocery stores in Los Angeles Koreatown and 49 in the Koreatowns of Buena Park and Garden Grove in Orange County.[20] These counts reflect store presence, but do not provide information on the number of employees or store size. As a result, we use county-level data to provide broader context about the overall supermarket industry in the region.

Table 1: Number of Supermarkets in Los Angeles and Orange County Koreatowns, 2023

	No. Supermarkets
Los Angeles Koreatown	55
Buena Park and Garden Grove Koreatown	49

Source: Authors' analysis of U.S Census Bureau, County Business Patterns, 2023

Across LA and Orange Counties, supermarkets vary significantly in size, ownership, and workforce characteristics. Los Angeles County has a higher overall number of supermarkets, at 1,898, nearly four times as Orange County, at 505. In LA, many of these establishments are small, independent operations: nearly 44% employ fewer than 10 workers, compared to just 26% in Orange County. By contrast, Orange County has a higher share of large supermarkets, with 36% employing between 50 and 99 workers, compared to 21% in LA.

Table 2: Supermarket Size by Number of Employees in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, 2023

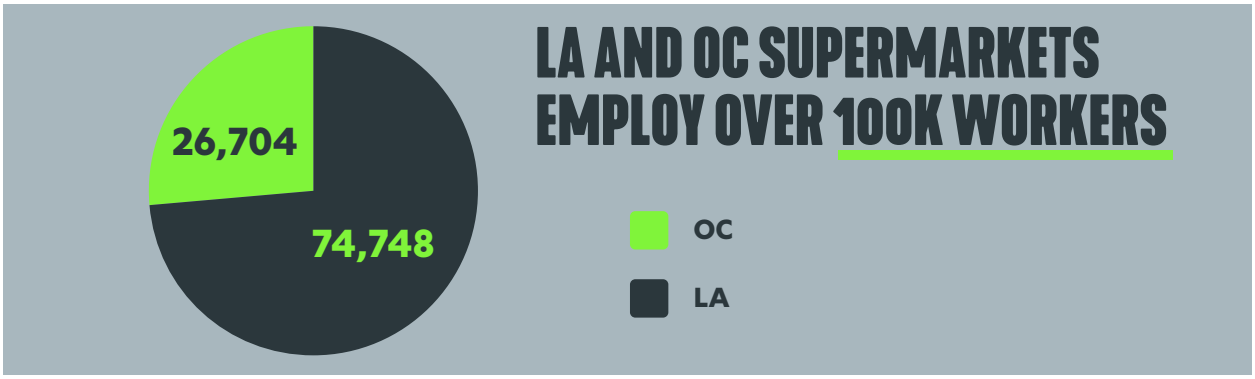
Business Size	LA County		Orange County	
< 5 employees	561	30%	91	18%
5 to 9 employees	259	14%	42	8%
10 to 19 employees	184	10%	47	9%
20 to 49 employees	230	12%	67	13%
50 to 99 employees	401	21%	180	36%
100 to 249 employees	260	14%	77	15%
Total	**1,898**	**100%**	**505**	**100%**

Source: Authors' analysis of U.S Census Bureau, County Business Patterns, 2023

SELECTED WORKER CHARACTERISTICS

According to 2023 County Business Patterns data, supermarkets in Los Angeles employed nearly 75,000 workers, while those in Orange County employed close to 27,000. These totals include all employees, from office workers to managers to frontline staff, and highlight the overall scale of supermarket employment in the region, exceeding 100,000 workers in both counties combined. Because employee counts are not available at the neighborhood level, these county totals are used to illustrate the size of the supermarket workforce in the region.

Figure 1: Supermarket Employment in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, 2023



Source: Authors' analysis of U.S Census Bureau, County Business Patterns, 2023

To examine worker characteristics more closely, our analysis uses the American Community Survey (ACS) 2019–2023 5-year sample to focus specifically on frontline supermarket occupations. These include cashiers, stocking and receiving clerks, food preparation workers, and laborers, among others. Because the ACS does not report place-of-work data at the neighborhood level, we use county-level estimates for Los Angeles and Orange Counties to approximate the characteristics of frontline supermarket workers in the region.

Frontline supermarket workers are generally younger than the overall working population, with 25% of LA County and 30% of Orange County workers between the ages of 18 and 24, compared with 10% and 11% for all workers in those counties. The estimated median age for frontline supermarket workers is 34 in LA and 33 in OC, compared to 40 and 41 for the overall workforce.

Table 3: Ages of Frontline Supermarket Workers and All Workers in LA and Orange Counties

Age	Supermarket Workers in LA County	Supermarket Workers in OC	All LA County Workers	All OC Workers
18–24	25%	30%	10%	11%
25–29	13%	13%	13%	13%
30–39	19%	14%	25%	23%
40–54	24%	21%	31%	32%
55–64	15%	<1%	16%	16%
65+	4%	5%	5%	5%

Source: ACS 2019–2023 5-year IPUMS

Supermarkets employ a diverse workforce, with Latine workers comprising 63% of workers in Los Angeles County and 51% in Orange County, compared to 47% and 39% of the overall counties' overall workforce. Asian workers make up 11% of frontline workers in LA and 14% in OC.

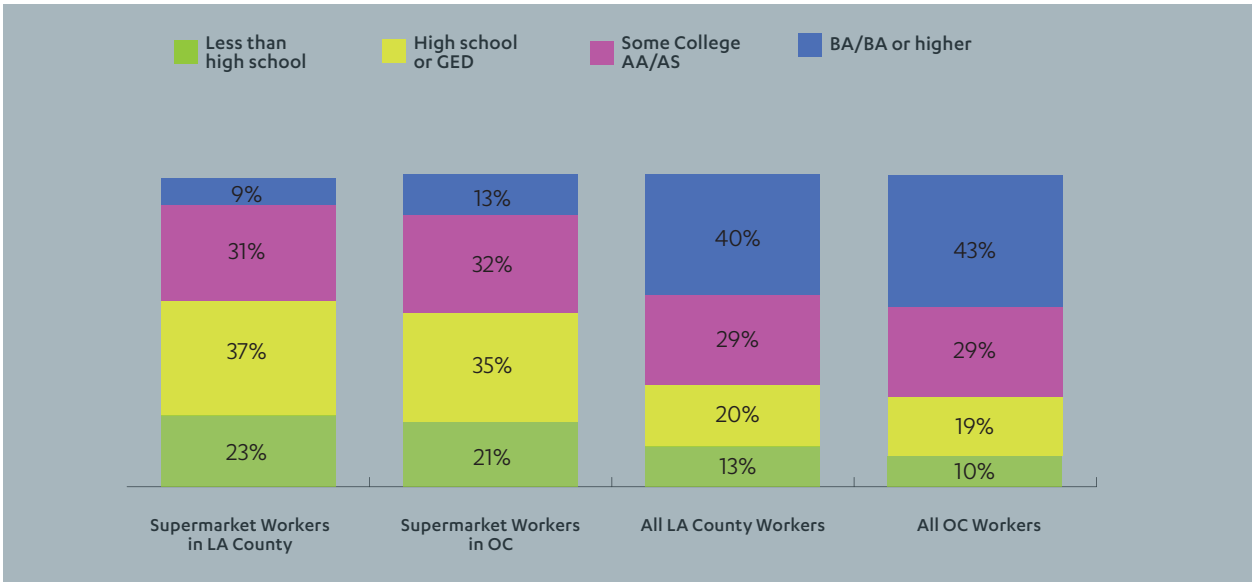
Table 4: Race/Ethnicity of Frontline Supermarket Workers and All Workers in LA and Orange Counties

	Supermarket Workers in LA County	Supermarket Workers in OC	All LA County Workers	All OC Workers
Latine	63%	51%	47%	39%
White	16%	28%	26%	35%
Asian	11%	14%	16%	20%
Black	7%	2%	7%	2%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	<1%	1%	<1%	<1%
Other and Multiracial	3%	5%	3%	4%

Source: ACS 2019–2023 5-year IPUMS

Supermarkets provide accessible employment opportunities for workers with a range of education levels, particularly those with a high school/GED degree or less. These workers represent 60% of frontline supermarket workers in LA County and 56% in Orange County, compared to 33% and 29% of the overall workforce in each county.

Figure 2: Educational Attainment Among Frontline Supermarket Workers and All Workers in LA and Orange Counties



Source: ACS 2019–2023 5-year IPUMS

IV. ESSENTIAL WORK, PRECARIOUS CONDITIONS

Supermarket workers in Los Angeles and Orange Counties have long faced demanding and often precarious working conditions. These frontline workers provide essential services, ensuring that communities have access to food and other necessities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, supermarkets became critical resources for communities during shelter-in-place orders, intensifying the workload and pace of work.[21] Even as the pandemic has subsided, many of these pressures have largely persisted.

Workers are often expected to balance multiple responsibilities simultaneously—stocking shelves, assisting customers, managing inventory, and staffing check-out registers—sometimes all within a single shift. Many also face unstable schedules, part-time hours, and/or reductions in shifts that force them to take on multiple jobs to make ends meet.

LONG HOURS AND OVERWORK

Many workers in our survey and interviews shared the heavy workloads they endure. Over three in four survey respondents (78%) reported working more than 35 hours per week, and nearly 30% work more than 40 hours per week. About 89% of workers prefer stable, full-time schedules of 36–40 hours per week.

Table 5: Actual versus Desired Weekly Hours

	Actual Hours	Desired Hours
Less than 20 hours	1%	2%
20–25 hours	5%	4%
26–30 hours	7%	4%
31–35 hours	10%	2%
36–40 hours	48%	51%
More than 40 hours	30%	38%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

Both full-time workers and part-time workers—who reported contending with short shifts and inconsistent schedules—described the feeling of being subjected to a cycle of overwork. Workers explained that part-time hours or last-minute scheduling changes at supermarkets often forced them to pick up shifts elsewhere, leaving

them exhausted and with little time for family responsibilities. About 13% reported that their schedules varied significantly from week to week, compounding instability that led to workers taking on second or even third jobs.

As one Korean worker in a managerial position explained, their supermarket often assigns shifts of only 4–5 hours. This required workers to take on other jobs, often leaving them little time to get from one job to another, with barely enough time to eat a proper meal because of their rush to make it in time with long commutes:

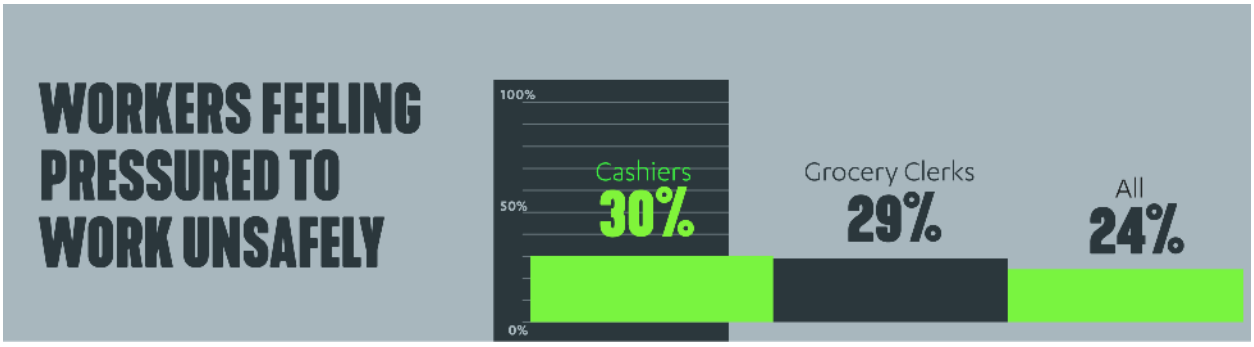
> *In the case of the Hispanic workers, [managers] would cut their hours, so they would have to run between two jobs. Couldn't you just give them more hours? Because they don't have enough hours, no wonder they have to run between two jobs.*
>
> *— Cashier*

About 16% of survey respondents work more than one job, primarily to earn additional income to make ends meet, or secure enough hours for full-time employment. One worker observed: "Many of my colleagues have two jobs. I have another one too because [my employer] only offers part-time jobs and nothing else. It's hard to sustain yourself like that."

WORKPLACE PRESSURE

Beyond long hours, supermarket workers often operate under intense pressure to work faster and efficiently. Nearly 1 in 4 workers (24%) in our survey reported feeling pressure from their managers to work faster than they felt was safe, particularly cashiers (30%) and grocery clerks (29%).

Figure 3: Workplace Pressure by Occupation



Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

Supermarket workers are also often overloaded with multiple workplace responsibilities that make one job feel like two. One worker described their routine in this environment:

> *From 12 to 12:30 is your lunch time. At 12:30, when you come back, you have to boil your oil to fry your fish that you washed from 12:30. You have an hour to fry the fish, then you have to package them and label them so that they are ready to sell. While you are there frying that fish, you are washing another type of fish, you have to clean to get ready to cook. While that fish is cooking, you are cutting fish for the next day. You are busy all the time there. You don't have a minute, not a second to stand there doing nothing. That's how it is always is. You don't rest, you don't rest, do you?*
>
> *— Kitchen manager*

Workers interviewed reported hesitating to take breaks because they know they will be reprimanded for leaving their post or leaving work unfinished. At times, workers' breaks will get interrupted by customers. When one worker explained to their manager how to address this situation to prevent it from happening, the manager ignored their idea. According to one customer service worker: "I told the general manager, 'Why don't you put a sign for us here saying that it is closed so we can sit down to eat our lunch and nobody bothers us?' But they said no. That it was wrong. So I gave up on eating. I just sit there and when a customer comes, I stand up.

This combination of being overworked and under pressure to perform out of fear of being fired or retaliated against means frontline workers may submit themselves to unsustainable workplace practices. Another worker described enduring poor treatment out of economic necessity:

> *We need help. There are places where they don't even have air conditioning. We work in the heat and everything. But out of necessity, one endures everything—even abuse. Necessity makes you endure it. And many times, not even talking. Why? Out of fear of being fired from work. One keeps quiet about many things.*
>
> *— Cashier*

This pressure from work follows supermarket workers home. For example, 15% of workers surveyed have been asked to work on their day off. During interviews, workers explained the toll this has on their children and families, who they are often unable to spend a lot of time with. According to one interviewee: "With this shift, I come in at 12 o'clock... and when I get home, it's 10 o'clock. So I don't have time to be with my family. I came in accepting that was going to be the case. But now we never have time to eat dinner together as a family."

ANTONIA,
CASHIER



Antonia migrated from Jalisco, Mexico to the United States 26 years ago, first settling in Arizona before moving to California in search of a better future. She arrived in Los Angeles under difficult circumstances—without family support, with a young son, and later facing the added responsibility of caring for her younger child, who was born with a chronic heart condition and requires constant attention. As a single mother, she has shouldered all responsibilities for her household, often without resources or community support.

Antonia's first years in Los Angeles were especially challenging. Soon after securing a job at a Korean-owned supermarket, she was struck by a car and severely injured, breaking her foot. Unable to work, she spent two years on disability while still struggling to pay rent and provide for her son. Desperate to return to work, she convinced her doctor to clear her and persuaded managers at the same supermarket to rehire her. She has now been employed there for about seven years.

Working as a cashier, however, has been extremely stressful for Antonia. She describes it as a job that demands constant patience, yet leaves workers unprotected against customer mistreatment and verbal abuse. Without support from management, cashiers are often left to endure disrespect in silence. On particularly difficult days, when a coworker is absent or registers are understaffed, Antonia is forced to handle long lines alone, which leaves her physically and emotionally exhausted. By the end of her shift, she returns home drained, yet she cannot rest—her son requires 24-hour care.

The toll of this work directly affects her family and community life. Antonia explains that the stress and fatigue prevent her from participating in community projects or giving back as much as she would like. While her aspirations include supporting families, strengthening her community, and creating a better environment for future generations, her job provides little encouragement or flexibility to make this possible. Instead, the demands of low-wage, high-stress cashier work limit her capacity to fully engage beyond survival.

Despite these hardships, Antonia remains committed to providing for her family and hopes that greater community support and workplace improvements will someday allow her to give more of herself to others.

V. WAGES AND WAGE THEFT

Low and stagnant wages are a central factor driving overwork and economic insecurity among supermarket workers. In our survey and interviews, Koreatown supermarket workers reported struggling to make ends meet, sometimes requiring multiple jobs, long hours, or unpaid overtime just to cover basic living expenses. Many workers earn wages well below a living wage for Los Angeles and Orange Counties, and wage theft or other violations further reduce their take-home pay.

LOW AND STAGNANT WAGES

According to the American Community Survey (ACS), median wages for frontline supermarket workers in Los Angeles and Orange Counties fall well below the countywide median for all occupations. Most frontline supermarket workers earn wages at or near the minimum wage. In 2023, the median hourly wage for frontline supermarket workers was $15.11 in LA County and $15.85 in OC, compared with $24.21 and $26.31 for all county workers, respectively.

Low wages are prevalent in the industry. About 66% of frontline supermarket workers in Los Angeles County and 68% in Orange County earned low wages, defined here as earnings below two-thirds of the median hourly wage for full-time workers (or less than $17.66 in LA County and $19.36 in OC in 2023). By comparison, the low wage rates for all workers was 33% in Los Angeles and 34% in Orange County.

Table 6: Median Wages and Low Wage Rates Among Frontline Supermarket Workers and All Workers in LA and Orange Counties, 2023

	Supermarket Workers in LA County	Supermarket Workers in OC	All LA County Workers	All OC Workers
Median hourly wage	$15.11	$15.85	$24.21	$26.31
Low wage rates (<$17.66 in LA and $19.36 in OC)	66%	68%	33%	34%

Source: ACS 2019–2023 5-year IPUMS

Workers in our survey reported similar wage trends. Respondents report a median wage of $17.25. For reference, the estimated livable wage for one adult in Los Angeles County is $27.81.[22] When asked what they considered to be a living wage, the median desired livable wage reported was $22 per hour.

Figure 4: Average Hourly Wage and Reported Livable Wage



Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

Survey responses also highlight a wage ceiling among supermarket workers in Koreatown, in that workers are paid similar wages regardless of their job tenure. Even those who have worked at the same supermarket for more than 5 years earn marginally more than newer workers.

Table 7: Average Current Wage by Job Tenure

Job Tenure	% of Workers	Median Current Wage	Received Raise
Less than 1 year	19%	$17.00	3%
1–5 years	44%	$17.09	30%
More than 5 years	37%	$17.50	31%
All Workers	**100%**	**$17.25**	**25%**

Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

Supermarket workers also report that raises are both infrequent and arbitrary. About 75% of frontline workers surveyed did not receive a raise in the past year. Many workers reported requesting wage increases from their managers and being denied, or promotion decisions being arbitrary. Some have worked at the same market for over a decade and only receive the bare minimum increase required by local or state laws: "I've been there for 15 years... And they haven't given me a raise in 15 years. Only 25 cents. 25 cents so they can help you. I mean, it's almost, it's almost a cent a year." One worker explained that management said pay raises based on performance would be inequitable, which they used as an excuse to maintain everyone close to the minimum wage. According to one respondent:

> *The [rent] has increased. But the salary remains the same, and there won't be a raise. [The supervisors] always talk to us: "Wait a while, you've been here a few months. Remember that in every job you are new, you have to wait a while to get a raise." But the rent, well, every year it goes up, it goes up and up more.*
>
> *— Custodian*

WAGE THEFT

In addition to low wages, Koreatown supermarket workers also experience wage theft. About 40% of workers surveyed have experienced at least one form of wage theft, including being paid below the minimum wage, being denied meal or rest breaks, or not being paid for overtime work. The most common form of wage theft reported was not getting reimbursed for purchasing one's uniform or supplies needed for work (24%). Workers interviewed described the excessive amount of work they are required to do off the clock, at the store, and even at home in order for the business to operate effectively. As one worker described:

> *When I go to work, I always arrive 10 or 15 minutes early, and we usually punch in 5 minutes before. Before punching in, I go inside and I make my rounds. On Thursdays, they switch out the products and change the sale items. So at home, of course, I go on Radio Korea and look at the sale items before I go into work.*
>
> *— Cashier*

Wage theft rates vary by certain population groups. Women reported higher rates than men (43% vs. 38%), and Guatemalan workers reported the highest rates among surveyed nationalities (52%). Cashiers experienced wage theft more frequently than other roles, with 47% reporting experiencing at least one form of wage theft.

Table 8: Wage Theft Rates by Gender, Select Nationalities, and Select Position

Gender	
Men	38%
Women	43%
Nationality	
Guatemalan	52%
Mexican	42%
Korean	25%
Occupation	
Cashiers	47%

Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

Impact of Low Wages on Workers' Living Conditions

Low and stagnant wages, combined with wage theft, directly affect workers' living conditions.[23] Many live in overcrowded or multigenerational housing, with ACS data showing that 27% of frontline supermarket workers in Los Angeles County and 20% in Orange County live in overcrowded housing, compared to 17% and 15% among all workers in the respective counties.[24] These housing estimates are based on ACS county-level data to approximate conditions for supermarket workers.

These findings are consistent with previous research on Koreatown restaurant workers in the *From Struggle to Strength* series, highlighting that many frontline workers in the service sector live in overcrowded housing in order to afford rent and other living expenses.

Table 9: Overcrowded Housing Among Frontline Supermarket Workers and All Workers in LA and Orange Counties

Overcrowding	Supermarket Workers in LA County	Supermarket Workers in OC	All LA County Workers	All OC Workers
Not overcrowded	73%	80%	83%	85%
Overcrowded	17%	13%	10%	10%
Severely overcrowded	10%	7%	7%	5%

Source: ACS 2019–2023 5-year IPUMS

Higher rates of overcrowding among supermarket workers are also reflected in the higher proportion of multigenerational households among this same population. The proportion of LA County supermarket workers

who live in multigenerational households (79%) is larger than for workers overall (65%). A similar pattern appears in Orange County, where 77% of supermarket workers live in households with two or more generations compared to 67% of all workers.

Table 10: Number of Generations in Household Among Frontline Supermarket Workers and All Workers in LA and Orange Counties

Generations in Household	Supermarket Workers in LA County	Supermarket Workers in OC	All LA County Workers	All OC Workers
1 generation	21%	23%	35%	33%
2 generations	61%	63%	53%	56%
3+ generations	18%	14%	12%	11%

Source: ACS 2019–2023 5-year IPUMS

About 60% of workers in our survey have children. Several workers we interviewed described how overcrowded housing conditions impacts them and their families. One worker described living in a one bedroom with their three children:

> *The truth is that I would like to have a comfortable apartment for myself, for my children, for them to be able to have their own little room where a table fits so they can sit down and study. It's very uncomfortable to be crowded in one place. But I can't afford more.*
>
> *— Cashier*

Living in overcrowded housing to afford the rent is a survival mechanism for workers facing low and stagnant wages. These housing conditions, shaped by workplace conditions, directly impact worker health. For example, one worker who shares a studio apartment with another coworker described that the combined stress of work and a crowded apartment has led to insomnia, which he has had to seek medical treatment for. However, healthcare benefits to cover such issues are often inaccessible.



VI. SAFETY AND BENEFITS

In addition to low wages and being overworked, supermarket workers also face a range of workplace health and safety challenges, and their access to benefits is also limited or unaffordable. Frontline supermarket workers are frequently expected to perform physically demanding tasks under pressure, often with minimal guidance or training. These conditions increase the risk of workplace injuries, and contribute to stress and burnout, which can negatively affect workers' physical and mental health.

WORKPLACE SAFETY

Supermarket work can be physically demanding and, at times, unsafe. According to our survey, 14% of workers reported having been injured while at work. Some of this is likely due to the pressure frontline workers are under to perform quickly. Nearly one quarter (24%) felt pressured to work faster than they thought was safe, and 1 in 5 (20%) respondents reported having not received enough training to perform their job safely. These safety ceoncerns were particularly acute among cashiers: 40% of workers who reported being pressured to work faster than felt safe were cashiers, and so were 46% of those who have been injured at work.

Figure 5: Workplace Safety for Koreatown Frontline Workers



Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey





Table 11: Injury Type Among Workers that Experienced an Injury

Type of Injury Sustained	% of Workers
Muscle strains or sprains	**62%**
Back injuries	**36%**
Cut or laceration	**15%**

Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

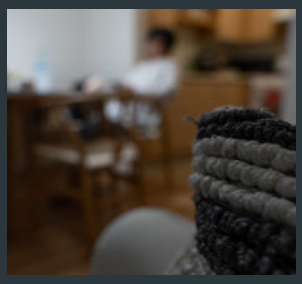
Interviews revealed that those who experienced on-the-job injuries at times did not receive required accommodations from their managers. According to one cashier manager: "I hurt my arm while I was working. I got something from EDD and I was able to get disability. Then the doctor told me to take five months off. So I was taking time off, but then [management] had the nerve to tell me that I needed to come back to work."

Another worker described getting sick on the job and being reprimanded by their supervisors as a result:

> *I got sick during work hours—my throat closed up. I had no voice and I had to go to the doctor. And [that weekend] I didn't come to work. Then [human resources] called me into the office and told me that he had given me a warning for getting sick at work. How is it possible that they are giving you a warning for getting sick during working hours?*
>
> *— Cashier*

SOO, CASHIER





Soo immigrated to Los Angeles from Incheon, Korea in the late 1980s, sponsored by her parents. Arriving during the early years of Koreatown's growth, she initially felt comforted by the familiar mix of Korean and American cultures. Over the years, she lived in Koreatown, Pasadena, and Glendale, as well as briefly in Virginia near her sister. While her parents and siblings eventually settled in Los Angeles, Soo's own path was marked by personal and economic hardship. After marrying and raising two daughters, she faced the death of her husband and the collapse of several small businesses she had attempted to run in Los Angeles's fashion district and the surrounding area. These setbacks eventually led her to take a cashier job at a grocery store in Koreatown.

Soo describes cashier work as tolerable in terms of basic tasks but deeply frustrating because of management practices and customer interactions. She notes that managers often apply rules unequally, being stricter with Latino workers out of fear of lawsuits while neglecting the rights of Korean workers. Benefits such as sick leave and vacation time are withheld unless employees fight for them. Additionally, managers discipline entire teams for one person's mistake instead of addressing individuals directly, creating an atmosphere of unfairness and mistrust.

The most stressful aspect of the job, however, is dealing with unreasonable or disrespectful customers without any support from management. When customers mistreat cashiers, managers fail to intervene, leaving workers to endure humiliation. As a result, Soo often ends her shifts feeling relief rather than pride, viewing the job solely as a source of income rather than as meaningful work.

Her schedule also prevents her from spending weekends with her family, straining her personal life. She feels her job does little to contribute to the community, in contrast to other markets that provide better benefits. Despite these frustrations, Soo focuses on staying healthy and living independently, and hopes one day to volunteer with children or seniors when she has more time. She also wishes for stronger labor participation in the Korean community, observing that fear and owner opposition have stifled union involvement.

ACCESS TO HEALTH INSURANCE

Compounding these safety risks, many supermarket workers lack adequate health insurance. According to the ACS county-level estimates, 13% of frontline supermarket workers have no insurance in Los Angeles County, compared to 10% of all workers. In Orange County, 11% are uninsured compared to 7% of all workers in the county. Employer-sponsored coverage is also less accessible: 45% of LA County and 38% of Orange County frontline supermarket workers do not receive employer-sponsored healthcare.

Table 12: Healthcare Access Among Frontline Supermarket Workers and All Workers in LA and Orange Counties

Health Insurance Access	Supermarket Workers in LA County	Supermarket Workers in OC	All LA County Workers	All OC Workers
Does not have insurance	13%	11%	10%	7%
Has insurance	87%	89%	90%	93%
Of those with insurance:				
↘ Employer-sponsored	55%	63%	68%	73%

Source: ACS 2019–2023 5-year IPUMS

Our survey found even higher rates of uninsured supermarker workers in Koreatown compared to ACS estimates: 24% of workers in our survey reported their employer does not offer health insurance, and of those who work for an employer that does offer insurance, 73% are not enrolled. Cost is the primary barrier: nearly half (46%) said that it was because the insurance plan was not affordable, and 38% are covered by another plan.

Table 13: Reasons Koreatown Supermarket Workers Do Not Enroll in Employer-Offered Health Plan

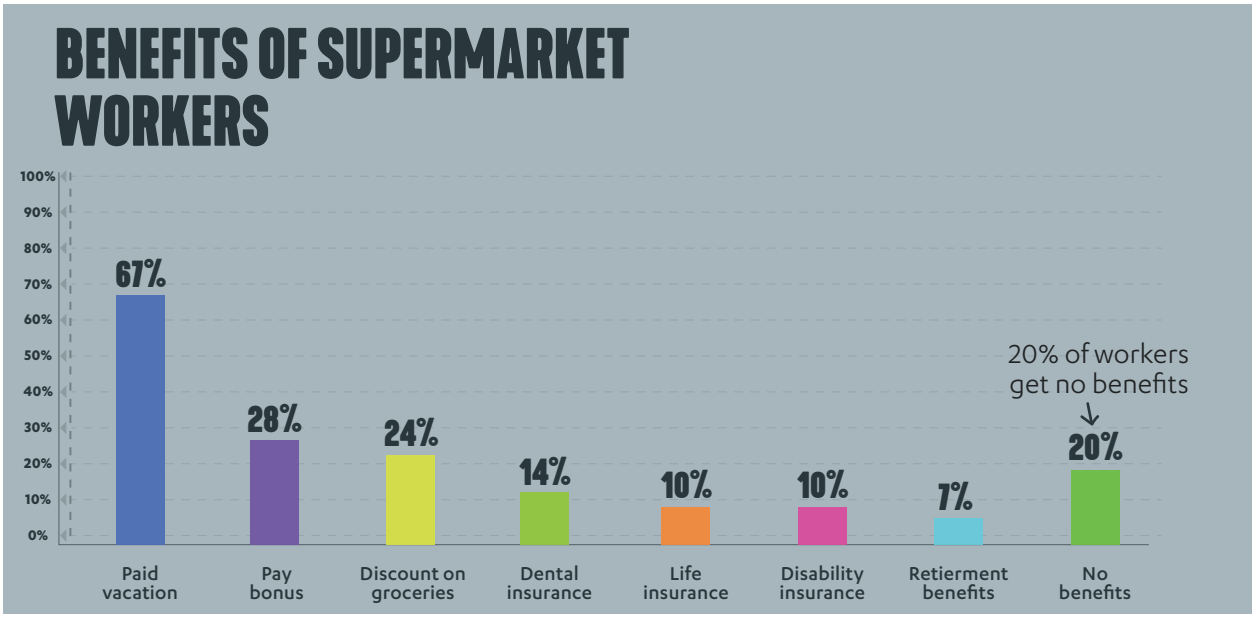
Reason for Not Enrolling in Employer Plan	% of Workers
The plan is not affordable	46%
Covered by a different plan (other job, spouse, etc.)	38%
Health insurance is not a priority for worker	7%
Not eligible (not enough hours, etc.)	3%
Other	6%

Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

OTHER BENEFITS

Beyond health insurance, access to benefits (both required and voluntary) like paid sick leave, vacation, and retirement savings is limited. Although it is legally mandated for employers to provide paid sick leave (even for part-time workers), only 24% of workers in our survey reported receiving paid sick days. Two-thirds of workers (67%) reported receiving paid vacation. Access to retirement savings is even lower: though California passed SB 1126 in 2022, requiring employers to provide access to retirement savings benefits,[25] only 7% of surveyed workers reported receiving a pension or access to retirement savings.

Figure 6: Benefits Received by Koreatown Supermarket Workers



Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

Despite the pandemic-era growth in public awareness of the safety hazards facing frontline workers, frontline supermarket workers in Koreatown remain woefully unprotected. Beyond the physical dangers they face in supermarkets, our findings indicate a variety of severe stressors that directly impact their health and well-being.

VII. DISCRIMINATION, TRUST, AND WORKPLACE TREATMENT

Koreatown supermarket workers face varied and overlapping forms of discrimination and workplace mistreatment from their employer, coworkers, and customers. These challenges shape workplace dynamics, erode trust between workers and management, and reinforce power imbalances that make it difficult for workers to advocate for themselves. These issues are both widespread and intersectional, affecting workers based on ethnicity, gender, and immigration status.

DISCRIMINATION AND UNEQUAL TREATMENT

The supermarket workforce includes workers of different nationalities and backgrounds. About 38% of frontline supermarket workers in LA County are born abroad. Of those, the majority are from Mexico, followed by El Salvador and Guatemala. In Orange County, the number of workers born abroad is significantly higher among frontline workers (34%) than workers overall (15%). Of those born abroad, the majority of both Orange County workers and frontline workers are from Mexico, followed by Vietnam and Korea.

Table 14: Countries of Origin for Frontline Supermarket Workers, LA County and OC

Nativity	LA County Supermarket Workers	Orange County Supermarket Workers
US Born	62%	66%
Foreign Born	38%	34%

Top 4 countries for those born abroad

Los Angeles		Orange County	
Mexico (47%)	El Salvador (10%)	Mexico (47%)	Vietnam (17%)
Guatemala (7%)	Philippines (5%)	Korea (5%)	El Salvador (3%)

Source: ACS 2019–2023 5-year IPUMS

Surveys revealed that 13% of workers have experienced some form of discrimination (based on ethnicity/national background, gender, sexual identity, etc.) at their workplace. Latine workers were disproportionately affected, representing 90% of those who experienced discrimination. Cashiers also experienced discrimination more frequently, accounting for 51% of those reporting such experiences.

According to interview responses, discrimination often occurs through how management delegated job assignments and schedules, when enforcing discipline and accountability, and when promoting people. For example, certain workers may be assigned more physically demanding or onerous tasks or given less favorable

work schedules. In other instances, managers may elect to not enforce disciplinary measures against workers who share their ethnicity, whereas they will adopt harsher punishments for those of another ethnicity. According to one respondent:

> *For example, I noticed that the manager is from El Salvador, and I'm not Salvadoran. Let's say I break down the boxes like this, but the other person—since he's from the same country—he can leave his boxes and the manager won't say anything. And it makes me angry because I'll tell him, "You're making me throw away these boxes because I'm not Salvadoran."*
>
> *— Produce clerk*

Workers' immigration status is also weaponized to foster obedience amid exploitative conditions. Several interview respondents noted that management often targets workers who are undocumented for harder workplace tasks because they know they are less likely to speak out about unfair conditions because of their precarious status in the U.S. As one put it:

> *What you start to realize is that they know who has papers and who doesn't have papers. And the ones who have papers, they let them do easier things or they don't demand as much from them. The ones that don't have papers, the ones that are struggling, they say, "Do this" and "Don't do that." But they won't say that to the others. And even [your coworkers] tell you, "Ah, it's because I have papers and you don't."*
>
> *— Produce clerk*

TRUST AND WORKPLACE TREATMENT

Beyond individual acts of discrimination, workers in our survey and interviews described a working atmosphere sometimes characterized by unfairness and low levels of trust. Over one-quarter (28%) of respondents described feeling underappreciated by management for doing a good job, 19% indicated that conflicts are not resolved fairly, and that work is not distributed fairly between coworkers (20%).

Table 15: Koreatown Supermarket Workers' Workplace Environment Perceptions

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Employees are appreciated for doing a good job	**49%**	**28%**	**23%**
Conflicts at work are easily resolved	**63%**	**19%**	**18%**
Work is typically distributed fairly between coworkers	**71%**	**20%**	**9%**
Management trusts employees	**55%**	**18%**	**27%**
Employees trust management	**51%**	**23%**	**26%**
Workers trust coworkers	**61%**	**20%**	**19%**
There is good cooperation between workers	**77%**	**12%**	**11%**

Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

JUAN, PRODUCE



Originally from Nicaragua, Juan migrated to the United States in 1989 to join his sister in Los Angeles. Adjusting to life in a new country was challenging—he faced language barriers, cultural differences, and the absence of close family. His first job was at a gas station, where he worked as a cashier for nearly three decades across two locations. Long night shifts eventually affected his health, contributing to high blood pressure, and when his last station closed in 2017, he sought new work.

Juan found a position at a Korean-owned supermarket. He began as a cleaner and then moved to produce. He prefers the produce role because it is far less stressful than being a cashier, both at the gas stations and in the supermarket. According to Juan, cashiers often encounter customers who may be rude or disrespectful, and it is difficult to defend yourself without risking reprimand from the bosses. This left him feeling powerless and under constant emotional strain. In contrast, produce work allows him to keep moving, focus on his tasks, and avoid confrontations.

His typical day starts early, with coffee before his shift, then restocking produce, greeting colleagues, and managing his section. Despite living alone, he stays in close contact with family in Nicaragua and volunteers with KIWA, which connects him to broader community issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point for Juan. With supermarket workers, or "essential workers," facing the enormous pressures of working during an economic shutdown and pandemic, KIWA organizers showed him how to organize his workplace around better wages, benefits, and safety. At the time, employees earned only minimum wage, had no paid vacation, and had limited resources like clean drinking water. Through collective action, they won a $4-per-hour raise, vacation pay, and improved workplace amenities. Juan describes a shift in atmosphere—workers now feel less fear, managers treat staff respectfully, and communication is more courteous.

For Juan, better conditions translate into greater motivation, job satisfaction, and the ability to support family back home, though he notes that six-hour shifts and high living costs remain limiting. His experiences have deepened his understanding of labor rights, housing issues, and union organizing, and he hopes that this knowledge will benefit younger generations.



In terms of trust, 23% of workers reported they feel workers do not trust management, and 18% said management does not trust employees. For example, some workers describe incidents where management distrusted employees' ability to handle money or other elements of job performance, and a general culture of surveillance and strict discipline. As one cashier described: "After I would finish working, the manager would send me a photo on Kakao[26] saying, 'How could you leave this undone like this?' So then I'd feel like I was going to have a heart attack. Like psychologically. So I was like, "No, I need to quit now."

Surveys and interviews revealed there are some tensions and conflict between workers of different ethnic backgrounds. These often result from language and cultural barriers and are exacerbated by management practices that further divide workers. For example, several interview respondents suggested that tension between Latine and Korean workers often stem from cultural differences and language barriers in the workplace. These communication challenges can transform small workplace tasks into larger, more complicated issues. According to one cashier: "I speak a little English. I think I can make myself understood. But they speak very little English. So what happens is they call the manager's closest friend who is Latino [to perform translation], so half the world has to understand the question you're asking."

Because the majority of the supermarkets in our sample are owned by Korean Americans, the managers tend to be overwhelmingly (if not completely) Korean as well. As a result, a feeling of differential treatment is often symptomatic of larger communication barriers. As one respondent said:

> *Emotionally, it does affect us. We don't have good conversations with the managers because they're Korean. There are times when one can't really express what one feels or they say something to you and you don't understand. You're left wondering: what did they say to me or what didn't I understand?*
>
> *— Cashier*

In addition, management employs practices that make workers feel surveilled by both management and their coworkers, creating an atmosphere of mutual distrust among workers:

> *I never told on anyone, like "Look, they're not working". But when I saw how [some coworkers] would tell my boss about any little thing—even for dropping a napkin or a piece of bread—[the managers] would come talk to you just to scold you and call you out. "You're paying me to work. You're not paying me to pass on information to you." That's what I told the manager. "And if you want to see what happened," I told him, "check the cameras."*
>
> *— Cashier*

However, in spite of this, surveys show that trust between workers was higher than between workers and management: 61% said they trusted their coworkers compared to 51% who said they trusted management. During interviews, Korean and Latine workers also reported feelings of interethnic solidarity because of their shared class status. Below are two examples:

> *We're in the same position. We're all just trying to make a living, to make our lives a little bit better. People are just struggling to make ends meet. There are some Latino folks who make money to send around $500 back to their hometowns.*
>
> *— Meat clerk*

> *As coworkers, we do trust each other. If any one of us is having a hard time, we'll help each other through it, we'll talk to each other, and we won't talk badly about one another. If a customer is giving you a hard time, we'll curse about the situation together. We have to deal with people like that multiple times a day. So we support each other as coworkers that way.*
>
> *— Cashier*

This sense of solidarity also stems from a shared experience as immigrants. For example, both Korean and Latine workers noted how management takes advantage of exploitative working conditions that workers have faced in their home countries, making it an excuse to continue to exploit them in the United States. As one worker put it: "They'll start implementing 'Korean working conditions' whenever they ask people to work harder. 'Hey, this is a Korean company, and you're a Korean person. You think you're American?'"

VERBAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE

In addition to discrimination, workers in our survey also reported experiencing intimidation and abuse. About 1 in 5 workers surveyed (20%) have experienced verbal abuse and 7% have been physically attacked at their workplace. Of those who experienced being verbally threatened, intimidated, or abused, 53% experienced it from managers, 50% from customers, and 17% from coworkers.

Figure 7: Sources of Verbal Threats, Intimidation, or Abuse Experienced by Koreatown Supermarket Workers



Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

Response rates of abuse and mistreatment were high among cashiers (31%), a position that is also overwhelmingly composed of women at the workplaces we examined (78% of cashiers surveyed are women). Several of the cashiers we interviewed reported experiencing verbal and sometimes physical abuse from customers. One

cashier described an incident where a customer became aggressive and grabbed the cashier by the shoulders, after accusing them of charging them incorrectly for an item.

When the cashier was able to explain that the customer had grabbed the wrong item and that they were charged accordingly, the customer did not apologize after physically accosting the cashier. According to one worker, management does very little to address these situations:

> *Physical abuse happens between us and the clients. Sometimes there are clients who go too far, and the managers do nothing. I say that should change. Some clients come and say, "Oh, why don't you want to give me this price?" And people get upset and start saying a lot of rude things. One day I gave a man his change, and since I gave him pennies, he threw them in my face.*
>
> *— Cashier*

Taken together, discrimination, abuse, and the concomitant low levels of trust between individuals create the broader conditions under which frontline workers operate. This workforce endures mistreatment and precarious working conditions because of fear of retaliation or the risk of losing their job or out of economic need. Reflecting these dynamics, nearly 77% of survey respondents reported that they had never raised concerns to their employer or supervisor about any of their working conditions or workplace treatment.



VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

This report highlights the everyday realities of supermarket workers in Los Angeles and Orange County's Koreatowns. While these neighborhoods are celebrated as centers of immigrant entrepreneurship and cultural vitality, the workers who sustain their supermarkets remain largely invisible. Despite being hailed as "essential" during the COVID-19 pandemic, their work is marked by low wages, unpredictable schedules, unsafe conditions, and discrimination.

Most workers remain underpaid and nearly half reported some form of wage theft. Many live in overcrowded housing or juggle multiple jobs simply to survive. Long hours and pressure to work at unsafe speeds further undermine well-being. Breaks are discouraged, schedules are unstable, and workers are often asked to work additional days without notice. Safety and health protections remain limited and many lack affordable health coverage. Even when employers offer insurance, high costs deter enrollment, while retirement benefits and paid leave are rare. Discrimination and abuse—often based on ethnicity or immigration status—compound these economic insecurities. These conditions strain family life, contribute to exhaustion, and put both physical and mental health at risk.

Our findings reveal the contradiction of Koreatown's success: supermarkets symbolize immigrant resilience and community identity, but rely on a workforce under constant strain. The recommendations that follow respond directly to workers' urgent needs—fair wages, stronger enforcement, safer workplaces, and opportunities for advancement—while also recognizing a broader opportunity for worker centers such as KIWA to help empower them. As Los Angeles prepares for global events like the World Cup and Olympics, policymakers, employers, and community leaders have the chance to ensure that growth and investment benefit the workers who keep Koreatown's supermarkets—and communities—alive.

1) Invest in training opportunities and formalize paths for promotion and career advancement

Supermarket workers in Koreatown report receiving limited training for their positions and arbitrary or unavailable pathways to promotion. Establishing a career pathing tool that allows workers to pursue opportunities for skills building and on-the-job training may not only improve performance, but can also enhance workplace safety. Particularly for highly diverse workforces like those in Koreatown, these pathways for internal mobility must be communicated clearly and in-language so as to prevent discrimination.

2) Develop clear communication channels that appropriately address language barriers

Similarly, in workplaces where multiple languages are spoken, it is crucial to ensure that communication breakdowns do not lead to acts of favoritism or outright discrimination—particularly when management's linguistic and cultural background differs from that of worker. Establishing these pathways requires not only employing interpretation and translation tools, but also being mindful of cultural differences.

3) Implement more equitable and transparent scheduling practices

For supermarket workers in Koreatown, many of whom juggle irregular shifts, multiple jobs, and caregiving responsibilities, flexible scheduling is important to incorporate to support a sustainable, community-rooted workforce. True flexibility should be designed to meet both business performance and the work-life needs of immigrant workers, giving employees a voice in how their schedules are structured.[27] Previous research shows that food retail workers in California, particularly workers of color in Los Angeles, often face last-minute shift cancellations, are sent home early without pay, and earn wages below the poverty line, even while working in a growing and profitable industry.[28] Adopting fair scheduling practices that meet the needs of the workers helps stabilize workers' lives.

4) Raise wages and strengthen enforcement

The findings from this study indicate that workplace conditions vary significantly across different supermarkets. This is particularly true for incidences of wage theft and discrimination. To address this, wage enforcement must be strengthened in this region and sector. Studies such as this one, as well as the organizing efforts of worker centers like KIWA, can effectively identify targets for local and state enforcement agencies. While KIWA has a track record of collaborating with the California Labor Commissioner's Office and the Los Angeles Office of Wage Standards, there is currently no relevant agency in Orange County responsible for wage enforcement. Orange County can learn from these other strategic partnerships so as to effectively maintain and raise working standards.

5) Improve health insurance access and public health oversight

While the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly subsided, Koreatown frontline workers still face a variety of workplace safety issues that stem from being overworked and under pressure to perform their jobs quickly, as well as experiencing mental health stressors that result from workplace abuse and economic insecurity. The vulnerability of workers in high-risk industries led to the creation of the Los Angeles Department of Public Health's Public Health Councils, a program that has ensured workers play an active role in enforcing public health standards in the workplace since 2021. However, no such program currently exists in Orange County,

where there is also a dire need to enforce public health standards. Moreover, while such programs continue to play a crucial role in monitoring workplace conditions, the findings from this study indicate that workers are unable to access health insurance due to their low wages. In that context, low wages and wage theft must be considered a public health risk, particularly in frontline industries.[29]

6) Create protected spaces for workers to discuss working conditions

This study illustrates that workers often endure wage theft, discrimination, and abuse because they are scared to speak up about working conditions out of fear of retaliation or losing their job. In this context, policies and programs that help workers establish spaces where they can openly and safely discuss workplace treatment are crucial to improving working conditions. To properly lift and enforce workplace standards, city, county, and state agencies should partner with worker centers and other community-based organizations to help workers create formal and informal worker-led committees and associations where they can safely discuss working conditions and dismantle the culture of fear that pervades low-wage industries.

IX. APPENDIX: DETAILED METHODOLOGY

This study draws on mixed-methods research conducted with workers in ethnic supermarkets located in Koreatowns in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, specifically in the cities of Los Angeles, Buena Park, and Garden Grove. The research was designed to gain deeper insight into the supermarket industry in these communities through the perspectives of the workers themselves.

Worker Survey

We conducted 331 surveys with supermarket workers across Koreatown neighborhoods in Los Angeles, La Palma, Buena Park, and Garden Grove. The surveys were administered in person by trained staff from KIWA and the UCLA Labor Center in Korean, English, and Spanish. Data collection took place outside workplaces, primarily along commercial corridors where ethnic supermarkets are concentrated, between May 2024 and March 2025.

Table A1: Distribution of Worker Surveys by County

County	No. Surveys	%
Los Angeles	266	80%
Orange	65	20%
Total	**331**	**100%**

Workplaces were not selected randomly. Supermarkets were selected based on being both non-union and large employers with prominent presences in the selected geographies. Survey opportunities depended on workers' availability and willingness to participate, as well as on the tolerance of management toward the research team's presence. This approach reflects the practical challenges of conducting field research in low-wage, high-turnover retail environments.

The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Workers who completed the survey received a $25 incentive in appreciation of their time.

The survey covered a range of topics, including demographic background, job tenure, wages, hours, how workers found their jobs, working conditions, and experiences with workplace safety and health. Surveys were analyzed using statistical analysis software.

Worker Interviews

In addition to the surveys, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with 16 workers from supermarkets in Los Angeles and 4 in Orange County. Interviewees were selected from the survey pool to capture a range of experiences and demographic backgrounds. The interviews were conducted in Spanish by researchers from Cal State LA, KIWA, and the UCLA Labor Center.

To ensure participant confidentiality and promote open conversation, all interviews were conducted in person at private, offsite locations. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to an hour and explored key themes identified in the quantitative survey, including wage theft, discrimination, job insecurity, workplace health and safety, and worker organizing. Workers who completed the interview received a $75 incentive for their participation.

Interview recordings were securely uploaded by interviewers and then transcribed and translated by the research team. Transcripts were coded by multiple researchers and analyzed thematically in Dedoose to identify patterns, contextualize survey findings, and elevate worker narratives.

Table A2: Worker Survey Respondent Characteristics

Gender	
Women	39%
Men	61%
Genderqueer/Non-binary/Non-conforming	<1%
Age	
18-29	24%
30-39	22%
40-54	31%
55-64	13%
65+	10%
Median	41
Racial/Ethnic Background	
Mexican	37%
Guatemalan	15%
Salvadoran	21%
Korean	18%
Other	9%
Nativity	
US Born	6%
Foreign Born	94%

Source: Koreatown Supermarket Workers Survey

Industry and Workforce Data

Industry Data

Industry-level data were drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 County Business Patterns (CBP), and Zip Code Industry Detail File, using NAICS code 44511-Supermarkets and Other Grocery (except Convenience) Stores. These data provide establishment counts, establishment size, and employment for supermarkets across Los Angeles and Orange Counties. To estimate the number of supermarkets in Koreatowns in Los Angeles and Orange County, we used the following zip codes:

- Los Angeles: 90004, 90005, 90006, 90010 and 90020
- Buena Park: 90620 and 90620
- Garden Grove: 92840, 92843 and 92844

These counts reflect store presence only and do not provide information on the number of employees or establishment size at the neighborhood level. County-level CBP data are used to provide broader context about the supermarket industry and workforce in the region.

Workforce Profile

To develop a demographic, family, and household profile of frontline supermarket workers, we used data from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates (2019–2023). The ACS is an ongoing annual survey of American households that collects information on population, employment, and social and economic characteristics. The data were retrieved from IPUMS-USA at the University of Minnesota, which harmonizes U.S. Census microdata for research use.[30]

Because ACS microdata do not include information on the specific location of employment at the neighborhood level (the smallest geographic unit available is the Place of Work PUMA, which covers all of Los Angeles County), we use county-level data to estimate the characteristics of frontline supermarket workers likely serving Koreatowns. areas. These estimates provide context for interpreting our survey and interview findings.

Variable Definitions

Supermarket Workers

Frontline supermarket workers were defined as U.S. civilians aged 16 and older employed in the supermarket industry (IND=4971). To focus on frontline occupations, we excluded managers, professionals, supervisors, and office workers.

Geographic definitions for regional analysis were based on workers' Place of Work Public Use Microdata Areas (PWPUMA):

- Los Angeles County: PWPUMA00=3700
- Orange County: PWPUMA00=5900

Low Wages

We computed the hourly wage variable for the ACS following the steps outlined by the UC Berkeley Labor Center.[31] Using the 2019–2023 ACS 5-year sample, we calculated the median hourly wage for full-time workers in Los Angeles County at $26.49 and Orange County at $29.04. Workers were classified as low-wage if they earned less than two-thirds of the full-time median wage in their respective county, equivalent to $17.66/hr in Los Angeles and $19.04/hr in Orange County in 2023.[32]

Rent Burden

To examine rent burden, a variable was computed using the definition provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Renters spending:

- 30% or less of their household income on rent are considered "not rent burdened."
- 31% to 50% of their household income on rent are considered "rent burdened."

- 51% or more of their household income on rent are considered "severely rent burdened."

The variables selected for rent burden were gross monthly rental cost of the housing unit and total money income of all household members age 15+ during the previous year.

Overcrowding

The variables selected for overcrowding include the number of person records that are included in the sampled unit and the number of whole rooms used for living purposes that are contained in the housing unit. Following the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of overcrowding, we categorized housing units into two groups:

- **Overcrowded:** More than one person per room (excluding bathrooms and kitchens).
- **Severely overcrowded:** 1.5 or more persons per room.

These categories were used to create a binary variable for analysis in this report, reflecting the degree of overcrowding in the housing conditions of surveyed workers.

X. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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