



# **Southern Service Worker Health and Safety Poll**

March 2023



**STRATEGIC  
ORGANIZING  
CENTER**

## Southern Service Workers Safety and Violence Survey March 2023

The SOC conducted a survey of fast food, retail and warehouse workers across the Black Belt about their experiences with and concerns about health and safety and violence on the job. The survey was conducted between March 6 and March 22 of 2023 and utilized advertisements on Meta platforms facebook and Instagram.

A total of 347 workers across 11 states completed the survey.<sup>1</sup> Of the respondents who provided demographic information, 77 percent identified as female, 21 percent identified as male, and two percent identified as non-binary.

### KEY FINDINGS

**1. Eighty-seven percent of southern service worker respondents have experienced a workplace injury in the last year.**

We asked southern service workers about whether they have experienced various forms of workplace injuries or illnesses in the last year. Nearly nine-in-ten respondents indicated that they had experienced at least one form of workplace injury/illness in the last year and 46 percent indicated they had experienced at least two types.

As shown in Table 1, the most common types of injuries/illnesses were from lifting or carrying boxes, garbage or other items or from falling boxes of merchandise, which more than half of all respondents reported experiencing in the last year.

**Table 1: Rates of Workplace Injuries or Illness Experienced by Southern Service Workers, by Type (n=347)**

Injury or Illness Type	Share of Respondents
Injury from lifting or carrying boxes, garbage or other items or from falling boxes and/or merchandise	53%
Cuts by knives, slicers, box cutters or other sharp tools	35%
Heat-related illness due to broken or malfunctioning air conditioners	32%
Burns by kitchen equipment, hot liquids or chemicals	27%
Injuries from wet or slippery floors	13%

The next most common included cuts from knives, slicers, box cutter or other sharp tools (35%) and heat-related illness (32%) due to broken or malfunctioning air conditioners, both of which were experienced by

about one-third of all respondents. Over a quarter of respondents (27%) indicated receiving burns from kitchen equipment (griddles, ovens etc.), hot liquids or from chemicals.

**2. Over half of southern service worker respondents (56%) reported observing serious health and safety hazards on the job.**

Southern service workers reported observing numerous safety hazards in alarming proportions. As depicted in Table 2, the most commonly observed hazard – observed nearly a quarter of respondents – were improperly stored boxes and merchandise (24%). The second most cited hazards involved lighting issues: 22 percent reported minimal, inadequate, or malfunctioning exterior lighting, including around dumpsters and in parking lots, and interior lights that automatically turn off, leaving workers to finish their work in the dark at time. One-in-five reported blocked aisles, passageways or fire exits. Nearly one-in-seven reported non-functioning restrooms for employees and 11 percent reported the presence of black mold or fungus.

**Table 2: Rates of Most Commonly Observed Workplace Safety Hazards by Southern Service Workers, by Type (n=347)**

Hazards	% of Respondents
Improperly stored boxes and merchandise	24%
Minimal, inadequate or malfunctioning exterior lighting outside (ie. by dumpsters, parking lot) and interior lights that automatically turn off	22%
Blocked aisles, passageways or fire exits	20%
Wet, slippery or greasy floors	19%
Missing or damaged personal protective equipment like gloves, goggles or aprons	14%
Non-functioning restrooms for employees	13%
Presence of black mold or fungus inside the store/facility	11%
Broken, damaged or malfunctioning kitchen equipment	10%
Obstructed views of the exterior due to stacked merchandise, overgrown shrubs or other obstructions	8%
Open wiring or other electrical hazards	5%

Further, of the respondents who reported observing these hazards, 31 percent reporting observing them at every or nearly every shift and nearly half (49 percent) reported observing them at least one shift a week.

Work pace and understaffing are also frequently cited as issues with 68 percent agreeing with the statement that “there are often too few employees to do the work safely at my job” and 51 percent agreeing with the statement that: “I frequently experience pressure from management to work more quickly than is safe.”

### 3. Forty-two percent of southern service worker respondents have experienced some type of violence or harassment in the last year.

We asked southern service workers about whether they have experienced various forms of physical violence and harassment or threats in the last year. More than four-in-ten respondents reported that they had experienced at least one type and 21 percent reported experiencing at least two types of violence or threats in the last year.

**Table 3: Rates of Workplace Violence Experienced by Southern Service Workers in the Last Year, by Type (n=212)**

Violence Type	Share of Respondents
Verbally abused, including racial, gender, homophobic, and ethnic slurs	35%
Verbally threatened with physical harm	15%
Sexually propositioned, shown explicit material or asked about my sex life	15%
I have been grabbed, groped, sexually assaulted or raped	11%
I have been physically assaulted (i.e. punched, shot, stabbed)	5%
I have been robbed	3%

As shown in Table 3, the most common types of violence include verbal abuse, including racial, gender, homophobic or ethnic slurs, which was experienced by 35 percent of respondents while one-in-seven were verbally threatened with physical harm (15%). Another 15 percent were sexually propositioned, shown explicit material or asked about their sex life and 11 percent were grabbed, groped, sexually assaulted or raped in the last year. Five percent have been physically assaulted and 3 percent were robbed.

Further, the survey asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with several statements about worker safety on the job. As depicted in Table 4, more than two-thirds of worker respondents agreed with the statements “I worry about my personal safety at my job” (69%) and “My employer’s ‘the customer is always right’ attitude places customer satisfaction above worker safety” (72%).

**Table 4: Southern Service Workers' Levels of Agreement with Worker Safety-Related Statements**

Worker Safety-related Statements	Agree	Disagree	n
I worry about my personal safety at my job.	69%	31%	132
My employer prioritizes my safety over sales/profit.	36%	64%	140
I do not raise safety issues at my job because I worry that management may retaliate against me by giving me fewer hours, a less desirable schedule or by suspending or firing me.	55%	45%	124
My employer's 'the customer is always right' attitude places customer satisfaction above worker safety.	72%	28%	140

Sixty-four percent of respondents indicated that they believe management puts profit before safety and 55 percent report that they do not raise safety issues at their job because of a fear that management may retaliate against them by giving them fewer hours, a less desirable schedule or by suspending or firing them.

**4. Seventy percent of southern service worker respondents did not report violent and threatening behavior to their employers for a variety of reasons.**

One-in-seven southern service workers did not report incidents of violent and threatening behavior to their employers for myriad reasons. As shown in Table 4, the most often cited reason, cited by 23 percent of service worker respondents who indicated they did not report incidents of violence or harassment that they experienced, is that they did not believe that management would investigate to provide support. Further, 21 percent of worker respondents indicated that they did not report out of concern that management may retaliate against workers for reporting and 14 percent indicated that they did not report these most recent incidents because they had reported previous incidents and management did not help them.

**Table 5: Southern Service Workers Reasons for Not Reporting Violent Incidents (n=119)**

Reason for Not Reporting	Share of Respondents
I didn't think management would investigate or provide support to me	23%
I was concerned management would retaliate against me by giving me fewer hours, a less desirable schedule or by suspending or firing me for reporting the incident	21%
I've reported incidents before, and management didn't help me	14%
I didn't know how or to whom to report the incident to management	11%
At least one member of management was the perpetrator of the incident	3%

When southern service workers did report incidents of violent or threatening behavior to their employers, 71 percent reported being dissatisfied with management's response.

**5. Seventy-eight percent of southern service worker respondents report additional staffing would help them feel safer on the job.**

**Table 6: Share of Respondents Supporting Various Safety Measures (n=170)**

Remedies	Share of Respondents who Suggested Safety Measures
Additional staffing	78%
Improved lighting on the exterior (i.e. by dumpsters and in parking lots)	35%
Company-provided accessible alert system that secretly signals distress to emergency responders (i.e. a panic button)	28%
De-escalation trainings	25%
Physical dividers or barriers to make it more difficult for customers to get close to employees	23%
Bells that indicate when new customers enter the store	22%
Security guards	18%

Of the respondents who suggested remedies to make their jobs safer, 78 percent reported that additional staffing would make them safer on the job. Improved lighting of the exterior on the store, panic buttons that secretly alert emergency responders (28%) and de-escalation trainings (25%) were all supported by at least a quarter of respondents who suggested safety measures.

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<sup>i</sup> The eleven states with share of responses in parentheses are: North Carolina (19%), South Carolina (13%), Alabama (13%), Tennessee (12%), Georgia (10%), Virginia (10%), Louisiana (9%), Florida (5%), Texas (4%), Mississippi (4%), and Arkansas (1%).