

Examining patterns of life-stress impacts caused by COVID-19 among US essential workers of color

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A new study published in the *Journal of the Society for Social Work & Research* examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on those

responsible for helping the United States continue to function during a national crisis.

In "The Impact of Life Stressors Associated With the COVID-19 Pandemic on Essential Workers of Color," authors Rachel W. Goode, Sarah Godoy, Mimi Chapman, Steven Day, and Todd Jensen note that among the approximately 50 million essential workers on the frontlines in the United States, about 53% identify as women, 44% identify as [people of color](#), and 19% were born outside of the United States. Essential workers of color had to cope with pandemic-related stressors such as illness and death of family and friends while fulfilling their professional duties. They were not immune to mental health challenges, either. Fewer Latinx and Black workers in the United States could work from home during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic than white and Asian American workers.

Furthermore, many of these workers did not receive paid [sick leave](#) and were a low priority for receiving personal protective equipment during the pandemic.

The study explores the impact of life stressors among a sample of essential workers of color during the pandemic and the associations between life stressors and sociodemographic characteristics, work, mental health, [substance use](#), and eating behaviors. The authors asked 319 essential workers of color to complete the Holms-Rahe Life Stress Inventory to examine whether any of a set of 43 life stress experiences occurred because of COVID-19, including the death of a spouse, a major change in living conditions, or being fired at work. They then used latent class analysis to examine patterns of clustering.

The authors categorized life stress experiences into six domains: difficult life events; conflicts/pressures; changes in work, finances, or education; changes in household or family; changes in behavior; and positive events.

"The results of this study make one thing very clear," the authors note. "Even while many essential workers coped well with COVID-related work demands and disruptions, others experienced significant amounts of stress during the pandemic." Overall, their sample over 65% African American, nearly 20% Native American/Alaskan Native, and 50% female—reported perceived stress and anxiety levels slightly above population-based levels even before the [pandemic](#).

These results highlight distinct patterns of life-stress impacts caused by COVID-19 among essential workers of color in the United States, with the highest rates observed in Native American/Alaskan Native participants. While most of the sample reported being minimally (53%) or moderately (35%) impacted by life-stress events because of COVID-19, 11% reported significantly more concerns with substance use, binge eating, and perceived stress. This most widely impacted group includes frontline workers who have a legacy of being highly marginalized, including those identifying as female (64%) and Native American (58%).

Participants who were Native American/Alaskan Native reported experiencing higher perceived stress during COVID-19 than other racial/[ethnic groups](#) in this sample. "Certainly, the [perceived stress](#) in our sample may reflect an overall state of vulnerability and fragility that has surrounded the economic and job prospects of Native American families," the authors wrote. "COVID-19 has further exposed the health and economic disparities affecting Native Americans."

"We hope that our study's findings will help guide future efforts to sustainably address the needs of those who are most vulnerable in our society, in part due to their work in positions essential to the nation's continued functioning," the authors conclude. "Social workers must consider how to implement policies to reduce the systematic challenges faced by those who are most marginalized."

More information: Rachel W. Goode et al, The Impact of Life Stressors Associated With the COVID-19 Pandemic on Essential Workers of Color, *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1086/723608](https://doi.org/10.1086/723608)

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