

Investigating Environmental Hazards Experienced by Fast Food Workers



Host: Fight for \$15 LA and a Union

Occupational Health Internship Program 2022

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Background



FIGHT FOR \$15

- FF15 is a political movement that began in 2012 with fast-food workers demanding \$15/hr and union rights in New York City
- Today, FF15 is active in over 300 cities and continues to fight for the health and safety of fast-food workers
- Directly worked with the SoCal team (LA + SD) but also got the opportunity to collaborate with their NorCal team

California's AB257- The Fast Recovery Act

Most fast food workers are adults with low income and few, if any, benefits who often work in poor conditions. Setting & enforcing standards in this industry is challenging due to the franchise model. Thus, AB-257 has been proposed.

- AB-257 would implement an independent council that will be in charge of setting industry-wide minimum standards, ensuring that workers participate in setting the terms at their workplace
- It also forces corporate fast food corporations to help franchisees create a safe workplace and pay workers higher wages

Objectives

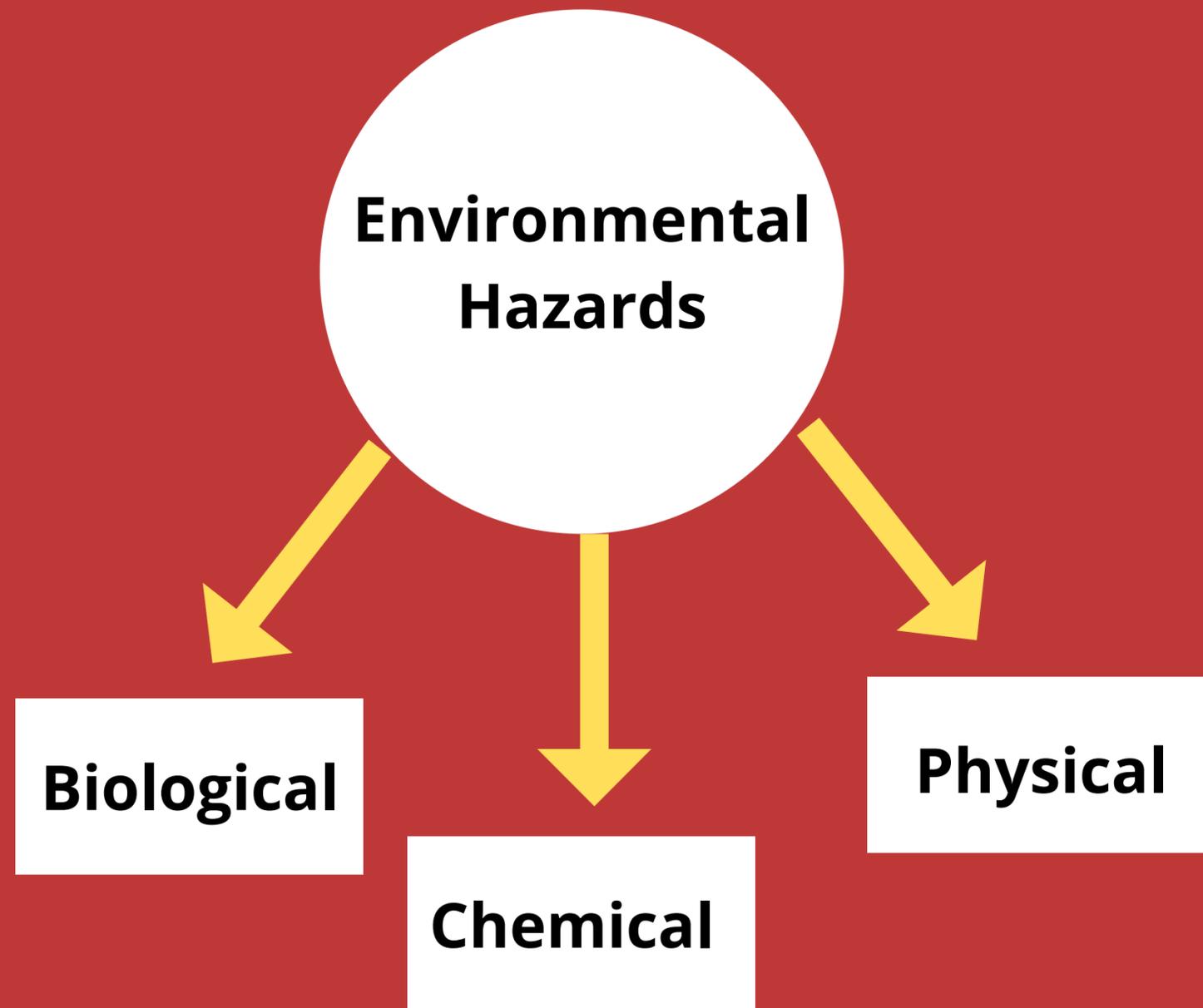
ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

- To highlight fast food workers' experiences with biological and chemical exposures
- To offer recommendations on how to minimize biological and chemical exposures in the workplace

EXCESSIVE INDOOR HEAT

- Investigate fast food workers' experience with heat indoors
- Investigate what mitigative measures are in place
- Investigate managements' role in this problem

Why focus on environmental hazards?



- Environmental hazards affect health in a number of ways, from acute responses (ex. heat stroke) to chronic diseases (ex. cancer)
- However, when we think of some of the types of environmental hazards, we do not associate them with being prevalent in the Fast Food Industry

Exposure to environmental hazards, particularly in the Fast food Industry, has not been fully documented. Further, worker health in relation to environmental hazards has not been fully explored.

Why focus on indoor heat?

HEAT EXHAUSTION	OR	HEAT STROKE
Faint or dizzy		Throbbing headache
Excessive sweating		No sweating
Cool, pale, clammy skin		Body temperature above 103° Red, hot, dry skin
Nausea or vomiting		Nausea or vomiting
Rapid, weak pulse		Rapid, strong pulse
Muscle cramps		May lose consciousness

CALL 9-1-1

- Get to a cooler, air conditioned place
- Drink water if fully conscious
- Take a cool shower or use cold compresses

Weather.gov/socialmedia
Weather.gov/heat

@SacramentoOES
SacramentoReady.org

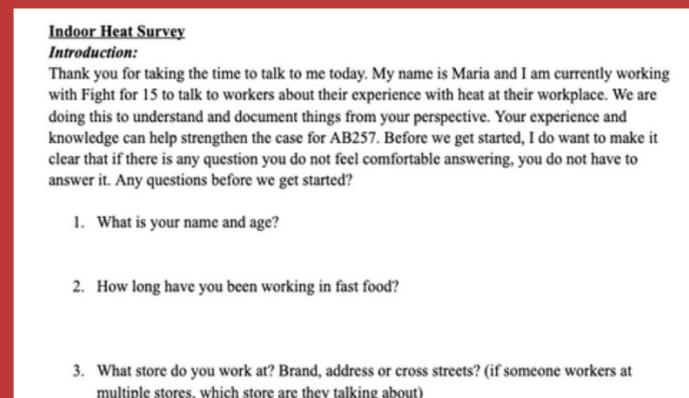
According to the 2021 LA County Climate Vulnerability Assessment:

- Occupations, such as fast-food workers, can expose workers to extreme temperatures without any mitigation strategies in place
- Labor organizations have raised that indoor temperatures in non-AC worksites can exceed outdoor temperatures at times
- Local workers' rights organizations have cited a common fear of retaliation that prevents employees from voicing concerns about heat

Very little to no data on how indoor heat affects fast food workers.

Methods

	A
1	Codename/ Parent Code
2	Gas Leaks
3	Sewage
4	Exposure to Excessive Smoke
5	Mold



- Exploratory research
- Facilitated by FF15 organizers, conducted **15** 1-1 interviews with fast food workers
- Analyzed **29** complaints filed by workers from 2020-2022 with County Health Offices & the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health (CAL/OSHA)
- Transcribed interviews & coded data based on key themes

Results: Sewage and Drain Issues

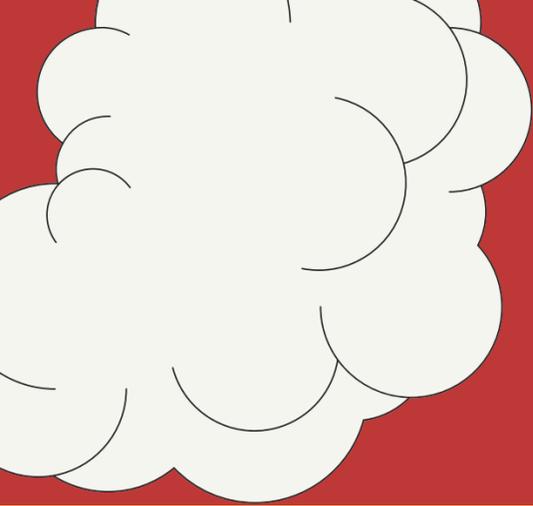


KEY FINDINGS:

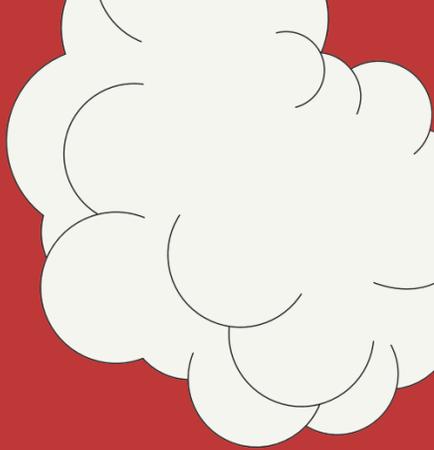
- Most workers filed complaints about sewer and drain backups coming from the restroom, the drain under the soda machine, the kitchen, the hallway, the lobby, the bathrooms, the break room, and outside where the driveway is.
- These backups have caused floods and **strong smells** of sewage.
- Workers commonly reported **headaches** and **nausea**.

"I have experienced about 100 of these floods. I am worried that exposure to sewer water and flood water could make me sick...The store has remained open during these sewer water and drainage floods. About 3-4 times a year there are sewer water backups in the store that smell terrible, like human waste."- **McDonald's Worker, Littlerock, CA**

"Most of us had to walk through this sewer water flooding. Several of us talked about how we couldn't concentrate on our work and that the smell and contamination were going to cause us harm. We were feeling symptoms including burning eyes, headache, nausea and difficulty breathing." -**McDonald's Worker LA, CA**



Results: Excessive Smoke Exposure In the Kitchen



KEY FINDINGS:

- Workers reported exposure to excessive smoke exposure; linked to the lack of ventilation in the kitchen and broken exhaust fans from fryers.
- Workers reported **headaches, coughing, stinging eyes, tightness in their chest and sore throat.**

"There is also a problem of lack of ventilation in the kitchen, and we get a lot of smoke in our faces and in our eyes, which affects our health. Some time around late 2019 or early 2020 McDonald's closed off the kitchen by adding a wall, so now the air doesn't flow through the kitchen the way it used to."

-McDonald's Worker Carson, CA

"When the exhaust fan for the fryers broke, and my coworkers and I were forced to work despite the overwhelming smoke, and I experienced a headache for 3 days, coughing and stinging eyes, tightness in my chest and a sore throat."

-McDonald's worker, Monterey Park, CA

Results: Gas Leaks

KEY FINDINGS:

- Workers stated that they were exposed to gas leaks from steamers and broilers.
- Workers reported **headaches** and **burning eyes**.

"The Pitco steamer that is used for steaming meat, cheese, chicken, beef and steak is leaking gas. Since I started working here about 3 months ago I have been asking why my eyes were burning."

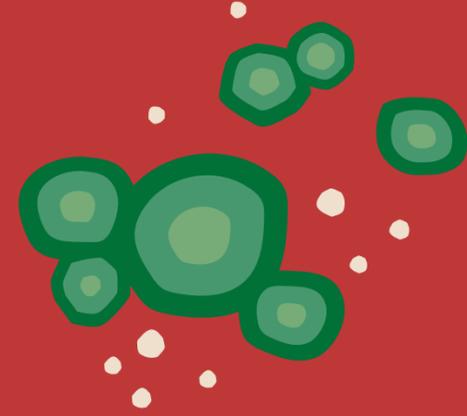
- **Taco Bell Worker, LA, CA**



"The broiler for hamburger patties has been leaking gas for a month... we are also worried about our health, and several kitchen workers are experiencing ongoing headaches from exposure to gas."

-**Burger King Worker, SD, CA**

Results: Mold



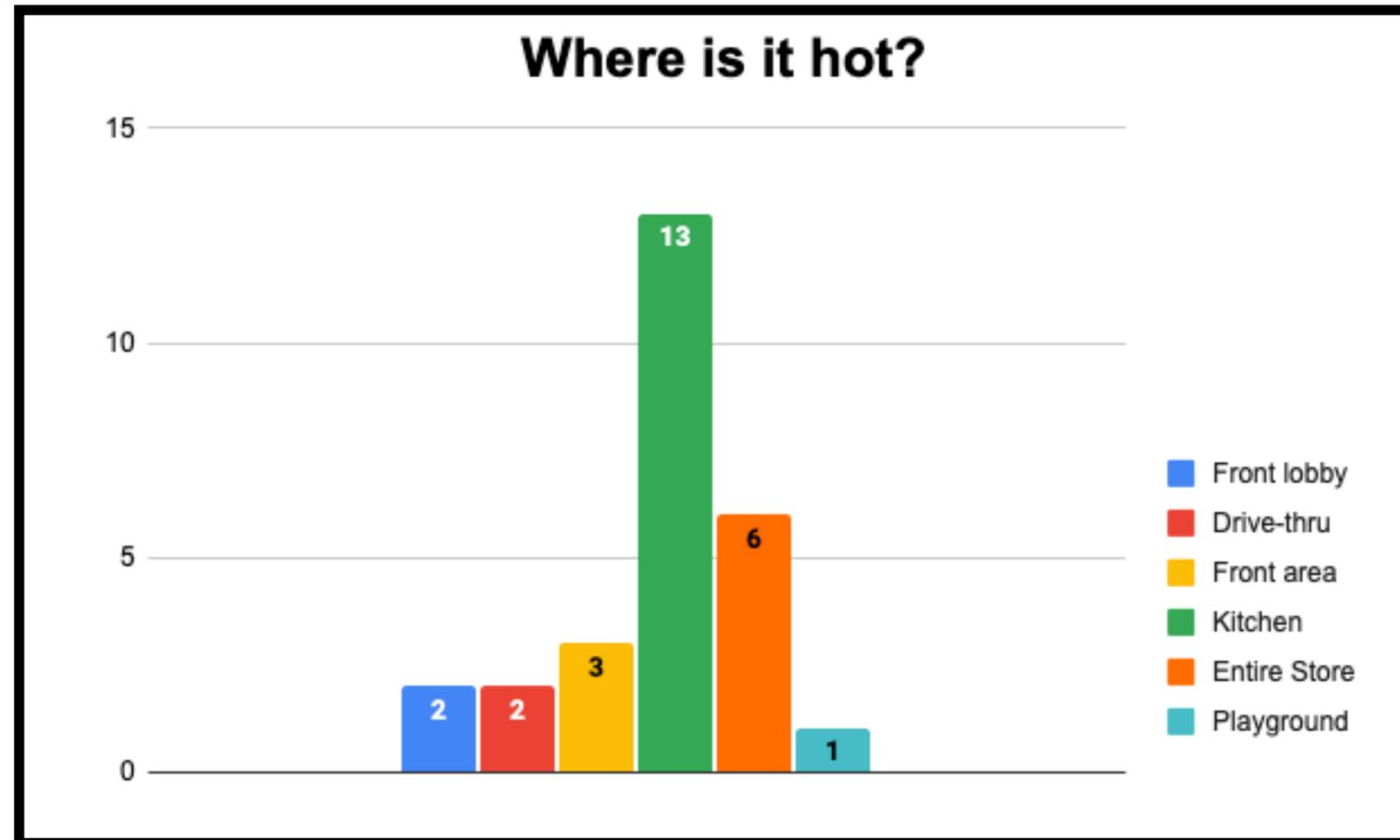
KEY FINDINGS:

- Mold was also reported to be in worksites.
- Workers **expressed concern** for their safety because they are aware that being exposed to mold has health risks.

"But it's like, somewhere within the store that had mold and I had no idea that was a part of the store." -**Taco Bell Worker, LA, CA**

"When I changed the soda machine cartridges recently, I found so much mold that it was difficult to even take out the parts I needed to replace. I do not feel safe now that I know how much mold is there because I am worried it could become airborne and affect me, especially since I am 7 months pregnant." -**Jack In The Box Worker, Sacramento, CA**

Results: Heat in the Workplace Pt.1



KEY FINDINGS:

- Most workers referred to the heat as **excessive** and an **ongoing** problem
- Most named the **kitchen** as the hottest area
- Majority of them felt that the store was **just as hot, if not more, than the outdoor** temperatures
- One worker reported temperatures as high as 102-105 F degrees in the kitchen

Results: Workers' Health

Heat-illness related symptoms reported by workers:	
1 symptom	40%
2 symptoms	36%
3 symptoms	16%
4 symptoms	8%

Due to the heat, did you ever...	
Required IV Fluids	N/A
Faint	1
Went to the hospital/sought medical attention	2
Stop working/take a cooling break	3
Leave a shift early	4
Can't leave work early due to financial need or fear of retaliation	10

KEY FINDINGS:

- Symptom most commonly reported: Excessive sweating followed by dizziness & headaches (tied)
- Workers reported that they need to "**put up**" with the heat and couldn't take any action due to financial need or fear of retaliation

Results: Managements' Role

Heat Illness Prevention

	Yes	No
Does management allow you & encourage you to take cooling breaks?	1	12
Does management allow you to & encourage you to drink extra water when it is too hot?	1	12
Does management train you to avoid heat illness?	N/A	12
Does management train you to identify symptoms of heat stress?	N/A	12
Does management train you on what to do if you or your coworkers have symptoms of heat illness?	1	10

	Yes	No
Have you complained/informed a supervisor about the heat?	19	2
If you experienced symptoms, was the manager informed?	9	1

**"Everyone complains to the manager about the heat, and the manager says, 'It is what it is' ".-
McDonald's Worker in Santa Clara**

**"The managers say, "Aguantate", which means "Put up with it".-
McDonald's Worker in LA**

**"The district manager came to the store and said, 'I don't know how you work under these conditions' but didn't do anything to help us".-KFC
Worker in SD**

Recommendations

- Bills/policies like AB-257 which give power and amplify workers' voices
- Stronger Cal/OSHA Regulations to keep employers accountable
- Probation period and regular visits consisting of in depth investigations specifically on stores that have multiple health and safety complaints filed against them
- More research on environmental hazards in the fast food industry and how it affects worker health
- Collaboration between organizations (Cal/OSHA and Cal EPA for example)

Give-Back Product

- Report on our findings which can be used to further strengthen the case for policies such as AB-257



Challenges



- Nature of our topics
- Finding times that worked with workers to do 1-1 interviews
- Busy time for FF15 as they got ready for AB 257
- Fast-paced environment that required us to be adaptable and flexible

Successes



- Opportunity to speak with fast food workers directly 1-1
- Relationships with organizers
- Witnessed first hand how workers are empowered
- Learned how organizations rally, educate, organize, and advocate for policies

Personal Reflections

"I am really touched by how committed everyone, from the workers to the organizers, are to improving conditions and making space for a population that has been historically excluded and dismissed."-Maria Rivera

"Being able to witness the workers and organizers see the fruits of their labor was definitely a powerful experience." -Perla Valencia

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ALL the organizers
ALL the workers!

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