

RATS, ROACHES, & ROT

Worker Rights and the Path to Safer Food in California's Fast Food Restaurants



Consumer Federation of America
California Fast Food Workers Union, SEIU

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Consumer Federation of America (CFA)

The Consumer Federation of America (CFA) is an association of non-profit consumer organizations that was established in 1968 to advance the consumer interest through research, advocacy, and education. Today, more than 200 of these groups participate in the federation and govern it through their representatives on the organization's Board of Directors.

<https://consumerfed.org/>



California Fast Food Workers Union, SEIU

The California Fast Food Workers Union, SEIU unites fast food workers across brands and locations, and it is the first of its kind in the country. This historic union builds on the 10 years of workers organizing in the state, which began with the Fight for \$15 and a Union. Our Union is fighting to achieve racial and economic justice and transform fast food jobs in the Golden State by fighting for fair pay, safe and healthy workplaces and a voice for all workers in the fast food industry. Through our fight for a voice on the job, we're showing low wage workers everywhere that when we organize, strike, and build a movement, we all can win a seat at the table and improve lives and our communities.

<https://californiafastfoodworkersunion.org/>

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FOREWORD

Foodborne illness can happen to anyone. We are all susceptible to the foodborne pathogens that lead to the deaths of 3,000 people in the U.S. each year and another 128,000 hospitalized.¹ Many survivors of foodborne illness suffer from long-term health consequences including chronic kidney disease, brain and nerve damage, and gastrointestinal disorders.² We know that restaurants are top venues for foodborne illness outbreaks, and that food worker illness, poor food handling and hygiene practices, and problems with cross contamination are among the key contributing factors to these outbreaks.³

In this groundbreaking report, we learn that serious food safety problems that pose risks to consumers, workers and the general public are widespread in California's fast food restaurants. In the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey, nearly half of workers report having experienced food safety hazards ranging from rodent and insect infestations and sewage floods, to improper food handling practices, inadequate handwashing and bathroom facilities, and other conditions that threaten the health and safety of fast food workers and customers alike.⁴ We also learn that fast food workers across the state face relentless pressure to come to work sick, including when they have symptoms like vomiting and diarrhea, despite public health laws requiring restaurant employers to exclude employees from work when they have such symptoms.⁵

We read the first-hand accounts of fast food workers left to fend for themselves when their employers ignore imminent health hazards: workers forced to kill rats with brooms when their fast food workplaces are overrun with rodents; workers using buckets as toilets for entire shifts or for days at a time when plumbing breaks down and management fails to make necessary repairs. Many fast food workers report that they lack adequate information and training on how to handle hazards, and don't know about the rights in place to protect workers who complain about these and other abuses on the job. We learn that those who report these problems often face employer retaliation, such as cuts to hours or firings, and that the fear of such retaliation deters many others from speaking up.

There are more than 630,000 workers in California's fast food restaurants.⁶ Eighty percent of these workers are people of color, sixty percent are Latino/a, and more than two thirds are women.⁷ Over a quarter of California fast food workers are immigrants.⁸ As attacks on federal workplace protections, heightened immigration enforcement and immigration-related threats put already vulnerable workers at increased risk of workplace hazards and abuses, workers in low-wage, high-violation industries like fast food urgently need training to ensure they know about their rights and how to uphold them.⁹

Amid unprecedented attacks on our nation's public health systems, from the dismantling of key food safety advisory committees,¹⁰ to the scaling back of critical programs like FoodNet, which plays an important role in the tracking and surveillance of foodborne illnesses,¹¹ states are burdened with greater responsibility for food safety oversight and enforcement. At the same time, state and local governments across the country are struggling with funding and resource challenges of their own.¹² In California, Cal/OSHA and local health departments across the state face chronic staffing shortages, leaving them unable to perform sufficient restaurant inspections, or adequately enforce food safety laws.¹³

In an environment of weakened oversight and inadequate enforcement, fast food workers find themselves on the front lines, tasked with protecting themselves, their coworkers, and customers against foodborne illness risks and other public health hazards. Without proper training and knowledge of their rights on the job, workers cannot take appropriate action to address unsafe situations or raise concerns about workplace problems without fear of retaliation. When this is the case, hazards go unabated and the costs to consumers and the public can be considerable.

By arming fast food workers with comprehensive training and support to ensure they are informed about their rights and have the resources they need to address health and safety hazards on the job, we can help prevent foodborne illness outbreaks and other hazards that impact us all. Support for these programs and other recommendations detailed in this report will help bridge the compliance and enforcement gaps that leave our communities vulnerable to risks, and empower workers to lead the way to safer food.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Every morning we had to spend the first half hour cleaning up after the rodents. Sometimes we didn't realize a bag of bread or box of packaging was bitten into or had droppings until we had already been serving out of it," describes Elias, who works at a Subway store in Los Angeles. "We would hear the rodents scurrying around while we work, and a customer would say, 'Hey, did you see that rat?' and we would feel like we were supposed to act surprised, but weren't surprised," adds Elias.



9/20/2024: Rodent in the dining area at Subway store in Los Angeles.

"I would worry all day that we missed some food with rodent bites or droppings, and that someone was going to get sick from the food, or that we would get sick. But it is not just the rodents, there are other hazards," states Elias. "When a liquid was seeping up from between the floor tiles in the kitchen, we reported it to the owner. She told us to ask a customer we know to fix it, and to offer him a 6" sub to do the job, she didn't want to pay a plumber."

Across California, fast food workers like Elias face hazards on the job that pose serious risks to the health and safety of workers, consumers and the general public. Sewage flooding in fast food kitchens; rodent

and insect infestations; pressure from management to work while sick with symptoms like vomiting and diarrhea; expired, rotten and moldy food served to customers; and improper food-handling and hand-washing practices are among the many food safety problems reported in the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey, a new survey of over 300 California fast food workers.¹⁴ This report details the results of this new survey, as well as new focus group research with insights from California fast food workers about their food safety experiences, and findings of a new review of county public health inspection records showing major food safety violations found in fast food restaurants throughout the state and across all major brands.

Conducted in July 2025 with 338 workers at more than 200 fast food locations across the state, the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey finds that nearly half (47 percent) of workers surveyed had experienced at least one serious food safety problem at their fast food jobs in the past year alone.¹⁵ The majority (53 percent) of workers who reported these issues said their employers did not address the problems in a timely manner, usually failing to do so because managers did not take problems seriously or said they were too expensive to fix. Most workers surveyed (60 percent) said that in the past year they or a coworker have worked sick with symptoms of communicable illness including vomiting, diarrhea, fever, sore throat or cough. Nearly all (97 percent) workers who said they reported to work sick in the past year said they did so because they were pressured by management to come to work sick, worried about retaliation, couldn't find anyone to cover their shift or couldn't afford to miss work.

Foodborne illnesses strike an estimated 48 million people in the United States each year,¹⁶ and most foodborne illness outbreaks – incidents in which two or more people become sick from consuming the same contaminated food or drink – occur at restaurants.¹⁷ Results of the new survey reveal that serious food safety and public health problems are widespread across California's fast food industry, exposing workers and consumers alike to risks for foodborne illness and other preventable health

and safety hazards.¹⁸ The Survey also finds that California fast food workers face pressure to work while sick with symptoms of infectious illnesses, despite the widely-known fact that worker illness is a leading cause of foodborne illness outbreaks in restaurants.¹⁹

Earlier research has found that California fast food workers often do not know about paid sick leave or how to access it when they are sick, and that employers frequently do not pay workers the paid sick leave they are owed, resulting in wage theft.²⁰ Many workers report that they lack training and information on how to prevent workplace hazards, and how to handle the health and safety problems they experience at their fast food jobs.²¹ Further, the threat of employer retaliation deters many fast food workers from reporting workplace violations and abuses.²²

California fast food workers are calling for trainings administered by qualified, independent organizations, to ensure workers understand their rights on the job and how to uphold them. In this high-violation, low-wage industry, such trainings are vital to ensure that workers know what to do when they face unsafe working conditions and other abuses, including those that present serious risks for consumers and the public.

Elias & coworkers blow whistle again on rodent infestation at Subway in Los Angeles



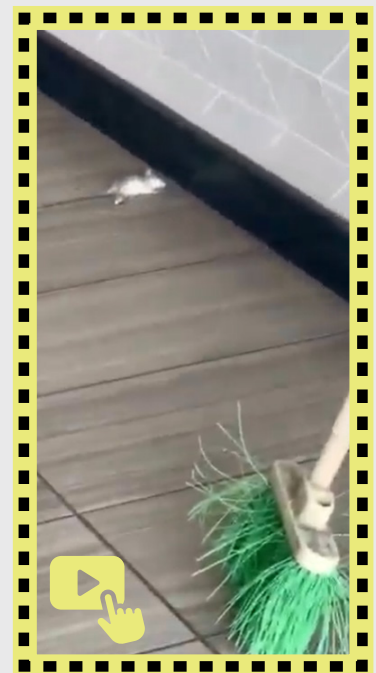
The rodent infestation at the Subway where I work was a problem for 2 years.

Last year when I told the franchise owner that a rodent bit into a bag of sauce, she told me to put a piece of tape on it and serve the sauce to customers.

My coworkers and I didn't know what to do until we learned about our rights from the California Fast Food Workers Union, and that we can contact the health department and CalOSHA if management ignores hazards.

We filed complaints about the rodents in October 2024. Around July 2025, the infestation got worse.

We killed the rodents with brooms when we could.



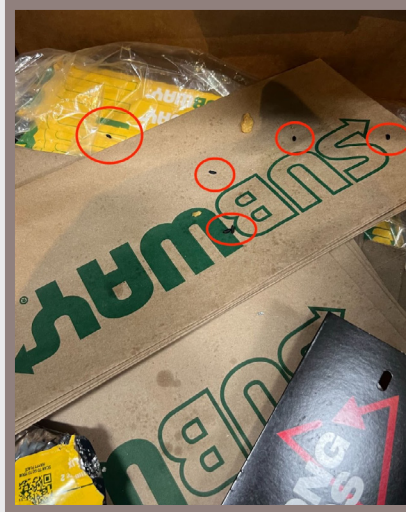
2024: Image from video of workers dealing with rodent infestation at Subway store in Los Angeles.

My coworkers and I tried to trick the rats into staying away by leaving the lights and radio on at night, but it didn't really work.

The rodents got into the bread, the paper products, the boxes of sweeteners, the avocados and the sauces.



8/22/25: Box of packets of sweeteners that we had been serving to customers before realizing that a rat had been inside the box.



8/22/25: We were serving customers using these sandwich bags until we realized the box was full of rodent droppings.



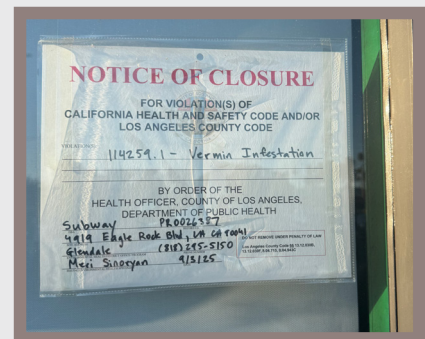
8/22/25: Rat-bitten bread found in the kitchen at a Subway store in Los Angeles.

On September 2, 2025 we filed complaints again.

The health department shut down the store, and we went on strike for safety when the store owner asked us to clean the store, without the training or PPE we needed to keep us safe.

We demanded that the store owner use a professional company to address the infestation.

– Elias, Subway worker, Los Angeles



9/4/2025: Los Angeles County Environmental Health Department closes a Subway store in Los Angeles after workers report a rodent infestation.

The new survey findings are supported by additional recent research from multiple sources that document widespread food safety problems and other public health concerns in California's fast food restaurants, and the dangers they present for workers, customers and communities across the state.

A new review of county public health inspection records and reports of county health department-ordered restaurant closures confirms that major violations of food safety laws are widespread in fast food restaurants across major brands in all parts of the state.²³ The review analyzed available records dated between 2022 and 2025 citing major violations and restaurant closures due to failed health inspections at restaurants in twenty of the largest franchised fast food brands operating in California in the state's twelve largest counties.²⁴ Within this sample, researchers identified nearly 250 incidents involving major health violations and/or closures at fast food restaurants across all brands and counties reviewed. Many of the incidents identified involved multiple major violations of health and safety laws, and over 75 percent of these incidents resulted in restaurant closures ordered by local health officials.²⁵

These likely represent only a small fraction of actual health violations at fast food restaurants in the jurisdictions included in the review, due in part to inadequate enforcement resulting from chronically understaffed local public health agencies.²⁶ The threat of employer retaliation against workers who report health and safety problems also contributes to the low rate of violations reported relative to the actual volume of health and safety hazards in California's fast food restaurants.²⁷ Often, workers do not report potential violations because they do not know how to do so effectively, and may not be aware of protections in place to safeguard against retaliation for workers who speak up about workplace problems.²⁸

A 2025 study conducted by public health students from the national Occupational Health Internship Program (OHIP), mentored by the Labor Occupational Health Program at UC Berkeley, consisting of three focus groups with fast food workers working at major fast food chains across northern and southern California yielded similarly concerning findings, with workers describing their experience of many hazards that put their health and safety at risk and create potential food safety risks for consumers.²⁹ Workers in the focus groups also expressed that workplace hazards and food safety problems often go unaddressed, and are frequently ignored by managers.

Since 2020, California fast food workers have filed more than 500 complaints with the support of the California Fast Food Workers Union, reporting health and safety hazards, wage theft, civil rights and child labor violations, and other abuses at their fast food jobs.³⁰ These include nearly 400 complaints filed with CalOSHA and local health departments documenting workplace health and safety hazards, many of which present risks for workers and consumers alike. The detailed accounts of many workers who reported such problems, often risking retaliation to speak up about hazards that posed serious dangers, are included throughout this report.

Workers who have filed complaints with support from unions and other independent organizations often report that the training, information, and resources they were provided made it possible for them to take action with their coworkers to speak out about unsafe conditions and to push for important changes at their workplaces. As attacks on federal workplace protections and the chilling effects of heightened immigration enforcement increase the threat of workplace abuses against those who are already vulnerable, California's fast food workers – the majority of whom are women and people of color, and over a quarter of whom are immigrants³¹ – urgently need training to ensure they know about their rights and how to uphold them.³² When workers know their rights and are empowered to speak up about problems at work, they are better equipped to protect themselves, their coworkers and customers from risks; and lead the way to safer workplaces and healthier communities.

KEY SURVEY FINDINGS:

2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey

Food safety problems that pose serious risks to the health and safety of consumers, workers and the general public are pervasive in California's fast food restaurants. Nearly half of all fast food workers surveyed report problems with food safety at their workplace.³³

47% Nearly half of all respondents report that they have seen at least one serious food safety problem at their fast food jobs in the past year alone. These include problems related to rats, mice, roaches, sewer flooding, expired, rotten or moldy food served to customers, lack of access to toilets, improper procedures related to handwashing, food storage temperatures or cross-contamination.³⁴

34% One in three have seen two or more of these food safety problems at work in the past year alone.³⁵

Food safety problems respondents have experienced in their fast food workplaces over the past year include:



29% of respondents said they have seen **sewage/sewer water** flooding while the store was open and preparing or serving food.³⁶

24% have seen **rats, mice, cockroaches or evidence of a vermin infestation** such as rodent droppings, and/or bites on food or food packaging in the store.³⁷



24% said **workers lacked access to a working toilet, lacked access to warm water for handwashing, and/or were not given enough time to wash their hands properly.**³⁸



21% have seen **cross-contamination and/or foods and/or foods not being stored at proper temperatures.**³⁹

16% said they have seen **expired, rotten or moldy food** served to customers.⁴⁰

Employers frequently fail to address problems in a timely manner

53% Over half of respondents who reported problems with rats, mice, roaches, sewer flooding, toilets, handwashing, food storage temperatures or cross-contamination said **management did not address the problem(s) in a timely manner.**⁴¹

82% Of respondents who said management did not fix food safety problems in a timely manner, 82% said **management did not fix the problem because they did not take the problem seriously, said it was not important, or said it was too expensive.**⁴²

Fast food workers often face pressure to work sick

60% Most workers surveyed said that in the past year they or a coworker have **worked sick with symptoms of communicable illness** including vomiting, diarrhea, fever, sore throat or cough.⁴³

47% Nearly half of fast food workers surveyed said that, in the past year, they have **reported to work even though they were sick.**⁴⁴

97% Nearly all workers who said they reported to work sick in the past year said they did so because they were **pressured by management to come to work sick**, worried about retaliation, couldn't find anyone to cover their shift and/or couldn't afford to miss work.⁴⁵

Workers who speak up about food safety often experience employer retaliation

37% Nearly 2 out of 5 respondents who **reported food safety issues at work** or asked for other changes to improve food safety said they **experienced retaliation** for doing so.⁴⁶

Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Improved Compliance.** Fast food employers must be brought into compliance with public health and workplace safety requirements, including food safety regulations provided in the California Retail Food Code, Cal/OSHA regulations, and other laws put in place to protect workers and the public, such as California's Paid Sick Leave law.
- **Strengthened Enforcement.** Enforcement of California's public health and workplace safety laws must be strengthened, including through full staffing of county departments of public health and Cal/OSHA.
- **Protections Against Retaliation.** Mechanisms to protect workers from retaliation for exercising their rights, including the rights to report hazards and to refuse work that is unsafe, should be strengthened at the state and local levels, so that workers are not forced to make impossible choices between their health and safety, and their livelihood.
- **Know Your Rights Training.** Fast food workers need Know Your Rights training, presented by qualified organizations experienced in providing robust workers' rights education to diverse communities, including low-income and foreign-born workers. This training must be provided in person, in an environment of trust, where workers feel safe asking questions.
- **Key Areas of Training.** Know Your Rights training must provide workers with information on rights and protections related to workplace safety and public health, including how to access paid sick leave, and what to do if management ignores food safety hazards, forces workers to work sick, or retaliates against workers, as well as other key workplace rights, protections, programs and benefits for fast food workers and their families.⁴⁷ Trainings should also include relevant information about the specific rights and protections available to workers regardless of immigration status.
- **Support for Pilot Training Programs.** Policymakers should support efforts to pilot independent Know Your Rights trainings for fast food workers, including proposed programs in the City of Los Angeles and Santa Clara County.

I asked the manager what to do about the rats in the store, and he said: 'You can play soccer with them.' Working in a store that is overrun by rats is not a joke.

When a worker raises a consumer health issue like contamination by rats, management should take the problem seriously, so we can serve safe food to our customers.

I am excited about the workers' rights training initiative in my County, Santa Clara, which will help fast food workers learn about our rights, and how to raise the alarm when consumer safety is on the line. All fast food workers need training like this.

– Blanca, Carl's Jr. worker, San Jose



ABOUT THE SURVEY

The 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey asked workers about their experience with problems related to food safety and working sick at their fast food jobs over the past year.⁴⁸ The Survey was conducted by bilingual outreach workers in July 2025 and included responses from a total of 338 workers from over 200 fast food locations in 67 cities across California. Respondents work at restaurants in 34 different major fast food brands including McDonald's, Jack In The Box, Burger King, Carl's Jr., Subway, KFC and Taco Bell. Workers were asked a series of in-depth questions about problems related to rats, mice and roaches; sewer flooding; expired, rotten or moldy food served to customers; lack of access to toilets; handwashing; food storage temperatures; cross contamination; and problems related to working sick in fast food. Workers were also asked about their employers' responses to these problems.



ABOUT CALIFORNIA FAST FOOD WORKERS

Over 630,000 workers are employed in California's fast food industry as of 2025.⁴⁹ Approximately 80 percent of these workers are people of color, 60 percent are Latino/a, and over a quarter are immigrants.⁵⁰ Two out of three are women.⁵¹ California fast food workers comprise the second largest low-wage industry workforce in the state.⁵²

California fast food workers experience frequent violations of their workplace rights and often face dangerous, unsanitary, and hostile working conditions. In just the past five years, with the support of the California Fast Food Workers Union, workers have filed more than 500 complaints with state and local agencies documenting health and safety hazards, wage theft, civil rights and child labor violations in California's fast food workplaces.⁵³ Numerous studies confirm that these hazards and abuses are pervasive.⁵⁴ Furthermore, workers who exercise their rights or complain about workplace problems often face firings, cuts to hours, and other disciplinary actions – despite legal prohibitions on retaliation.⁵⁵

Serious, widespread and preventable problems related to public health and consumer safety in California's fast food workplaces are among the foremost issues around which fast food workers

have organized to win improvements in their industry.⁵⁶ After more than a decade of organizing to address these and other workplace abuses, including through strikes by workers at over 450 fast food locations across California, fast food workers won a landmark victory with the passage of AB 1228 in 2023.⁵⁷ This historic law established the California Fast Food Council, which provides workers a seat at the table with employers and government to improve working conditions and standards in the industry, and set a new minimum wage of \$20 per hour in California's fast food industry, which went into effect April 1, 2024.⁵⁸

Fast food workers are now pressing for urgent action at the state and local levels to support policies and programs that strengthen protections for workers, consumers and the general public. These include programs to ensure workers have access to independent Know Your Rights trainings that provide them with the necessary information and support to properly address public health and food safety problems as well as other hazards and abuses at work, and to protect workers from retaliation for reporting these problems.

Major Health Violations and Ordered Closures at California Fast Food Restaurants, 2022-2025

A recent review of public health inspection records and reports of health department-ordered restaurant closures throughout California documents that county health departments have found major violations of food safety laws at fast food restaurants in top brands throughout the state, despite low rates of reporting due to “complaint gaps” and low numbers of inspections due to inadequate enforcement. Violations often go unreported by workers due to fear of retaliation and lack of knowledge about complaint processes,⁷⁰ and county health departments across the state face significant staffing shortages.⁷¹

The review surveyed available records dated between 2022 and 2025 in California's twelve largest counties, citing major health violations and restaurant closures due to failed inspections at restaurants in twenty of the largest franchised fast food brands operating in California.⁷² Researchers identified nearly 250 separate incidents involving major health violations and/or closures at fast food restaurants across all brands and counties reviewed, citing hazards including: vermin infestations, sewage and wastewater backup and disposal problems, lack of working toilets, improper handwashing facilities and practices, unsafe or adulterated food, unclean or unsanitary food contact surfaces and more.⁷³ Many of these incidents involved multiple major violations of

California's health and safety code. More than three quarters of the incidents resulted in restaurants being ordered closed by local health officials.⁷⁴

The incidents identified in this review likely represent only a small fraction of actual health violations at fast food restaurants in the jurisdictions covered, since the threat of employer retaliation against workers who report health and safety problems results in low rates of violations reported relative to the actual volume of health and safety hazards in California's fast food workplaces. Studies have found that fear of retaliation deters workers from reporting violations and that workers who do complain about workplace problems often face firings, cuts to hours, and other disciplinary actions.⁷⁵

Furthermore, inadequate enforcement due to chronically understaffed local public health agencies results in low rates of inspections and citations. In 2024, a Los Angeles County Health Department spokesperson said there were 160 field inspectors employed by the county at that time with 84 job vacancies in the department, significantly impacting the agency's ability to meet its inspection goals.⁷⁶ Inspectors conducted the recommended number of inspections for less than 1 percent of the county's 18,143 high-risk restaurants between July 2023 and June 2024; and as of August 2024, there were over 200 high-risk restaurants in the county that hadn't been visited by inspectors at all since at least July 2020. Alameda County has also faced a recent restaurant health inspector staffing shortage, resulting in a lack of timely inspections at restaurants without assigned inspectors, including an Oakland El Pollo Loco store where workers reported electrocution risks due to flooding in the kitchen among other hazards.⁷⁷

In addition to bolstering enforcement mechanisms (including through full staffing of county health departments), and strengthening anti-retaliation laws to protect workers who report workplace problems, state and local leaders must support industry-wide workers' rights training programs administered by qualified independent organizations. This will ensure that fast food workers know about their workplace rights and the laws put in place to protect workers, customers and the general public from health and safety risks, and what to do when they encounter hazards and abuses on the job.

ABOUT THE FAST FOOD INDUSTRY

California is home to approximately 48,000 fast food locations – about one-seventh of the industry’s 350,000 establishments nationwide.⁵⁹ The big fast food chains continue to earn strong profits, despite a challenging economic environment.⁶⁰ Operating profits were up by double or triple digits from 2019 to 2024 at all of the 10 largest publicly traded fast food chains with the most stores in California.⁶¹ These top 10 companies’ combined operating profits in 2024 totaled nearly \$26 billion – an increase of almost 40% in five years.⁶²

The fast food industry has grown significantly in California over the five years from 2020 to 2025, adding both jobs and restaurants.⁶³ Meanwhile, over the past decade, many of the fast food industry’s largest corporations have increased prices at rates that outpace inflation.⁶⁴ Fast food operators nationwide raised prices by more than 33 percent from the first half of 2020 to the first half of 2025,⁶⁵ significantly higher than the overall 24 percent inflation rate for the period.⁶⁶

Under the fast food industry’s franchise business model, global corporations set restaurant operating requirements, but individual franchisees are largely responsible for covering the costs to meet them.⁶⁷ This system of “fissured workplaces” creates financial disincentives for fast food franchisees to comply with workplace laws, and rewards operators who cut corners on health and safety protections or use wage theft and retaliation against workers as tools to control costs.⁶⁸

The failure of fast food employers across California to prevent and address food safety hazards exemplifies an industry-wide culture of noncompliance and disregard for the dangers it poses for workers, consumers and the general public.⁶⁹

In addition to strengthening enforcement mechanisms at the state and local levels to increase accountability across the board for employers who violate the law, industry-specific policy solutions are needed to ensure that fast food workers know about their workplace rights; know what to do when they experience food safety hazards and other abuses on the job; and are empowered to take action to protect themselves, their coworkers and customers without fear of retaliation.

THE WORKER/CONSUMER HEALTH NEXUS IN FAST FOOD:

RESULTS OF 3 WORKER FOCUS GROUPS

In July 2025, public health students from the national Occupational Health Internship Program (OHIP), mentored by the Labor Occupational Health Program at UC Berkeley, conducted three in-person focus groups with a total of 22 fast food workers working from eight major fast food chains in fourteen cities across northern and southern California.⁷⁸ Workers were asked a series of questions about the workplace hazards they witnessed or experienced, management responses to safety concerns they raised, their experiences feeling forced to work sick with contagious illness, and their recommendations on how to protect consumer health. The focus group findings illustrate how workers' rights and consumer protection are interconnected, with many of the management practices that present dangers for workers also contributing to food safety risks for customers.

Participants described their experiences of many workplace hazards that threaten worker health and safety and create potential risks for consumers, including sewage and sewer water flooding, rodent and cockroach infestations, unsafe food storage and food temperature controls, problems with cross contamination, and rotten, moldy and expired food being served to customers.



"[W]hat came out of the drains was almost with poop in the kitchen, in the kitchen... all they did was close [the lobby] so people wouldn't come in, but we were selling the food [through the drive thru] and it smelled so disgusting." - Worker 40, focus group participant



"When products are cooked, whether it's chicken for example, that's raw... [when] the glove change isn't done correctly, it can contribute to bacterial contamination . . . and I see that happens . . . well for the same reason of speed, that the food has to be delivered." - Worker 31



"What I see as unsafe is that sometimes... the product they put out for all the McDonald's food items, sometimes it's already expired and they still put it out. We [the workers] know that it's already spoiled, but the corporations, so as not to lose money, or the company where I work, they put out food that is already expired." - Worker 41

Participants also described fast food workers feeling required to work in food preparation environments while sick with symptoms of contagious illness, such as vomiting and diarrhea, and with pink eye. One participant described a coworker who had to work while sick with diarrhea, taking rushed bathroom breaks and following compromised hygiene protocols:

"[The manager] also forced her to work with diarrhea, she went to work and I just watched her as every time she felt the sensation of going to the bathroom she ran to the bathroom... if we're worried that we have to return to work many times maybe we don't even wash our hands well and we go [to the bathroom] and even though we put on the glove anyway it's dangerous because before putting on the glove you touch it."

- Worker 11



Participants detailed how food safety problems often go unaddressed, and are frequently ignored by fast food managers. Many described management responses to hazards that prioritized economic factors, such as minimizing operational costs, over health and safety. For example, participants described management requirements to keep labor costs low resulting in short-staffing and leading to worker accidents and injuries, and creating food safety risks such as cross contamination from lack of time for workers to wash hands and change gloves, as well as potential for unsafe food to be served due to shortened food cooking times. Participants also described how fast food employers prioritize keeping restaurants open for business and serving food quickly above all else, even when it requires forcing workers to work while sick with symptoms of contagious illnesses.

Many participants described feelings of sadness, frustration, hopelessness, exhaustion, worry, and anger over having their workplace safety and food safety concerns ignored by management, and being forced to work sick. Some described employers retaliating against workers, through actions like schedule cuts and firings, for raising safety issues at work and for using sick leave when sick.

Participants identified significant gaps in workplace safety training and described management practices that prioritize the completion of compliance documentation over actual training. Many described having to sign forms for training they did not receive, or training they did not understand, including information not provided in their native language.



The study identifies comprehensive training for fast food workers on workplace rights and how to uphold them as a critical solution to the problems identified by the focus groups. Such trainings would help fast food workers take appropriate action when employers ignore health and safety problems or retaliate against workers for speaking up about hazards and abuses on the job that present dangers for workers and consumers alike, the study concludes.

FAST FOOD, FOOD SAFETY, AND WORKERS' RIGHTS

Foodborne illnesses strike an estimated 48 million people in the United States each year, leading to 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 annual deaths, according to a report published in 2021.⁷⁹ Between 2011 and 2022, there were more than 9,000 reported foodborne illness outbreaks across the U.S.⁸⁰ These figures are almost certainly a significant undercount. As just one example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that for every case of foodborne *Salmonella* poisoning that is detected through laboratory testing, another 29 cases go unreported due to sick people who do not seek medical treatment or understaffed local officials failing to pass along the reports to federal officials.⁸¹

Complications from foodborne illnesses can last for months or indefinitely, and they can lead to more serious diseases such as meningitis, kidney damage, or hemolytic uremic syndrome, which can lead to kidney failure and brain and nerve damage.⁸² Researchers have estimated that chronic conditions may result from a foodborne illness in 2 percent to 3 percent of cases.⁸³ These conditions include irritable bowel syndrome, reactive arthritis, and autoimmune disease.⁸⁴ The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service puts the total cost of medical care, lost productivity, and premature deaths at as much as \$75 billion a year.⁸⁵

Researchers estimate that over 60 percent of foodborne illness outbreaks occur at restaurants.⁸⁶ In studying these outbreaks, food safety experts have identified several contributing factors for foodborne illness in restaurants, including factors related to worker illness, poor hygiene, improper food temperature control and cross contamination.⁸⁷ Results of the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey and supporting research detailed in this report make clear that the fast food industry consistently exposes consumers to foodborne illness risks. However, an empowered and informed workforce can lead the way to safer food.

Worker protections are critical to food safety. Paid sick leave laws, for example, shield consumers from highly contagious pathogens like norovirus.⁸⁸ Norovirus, the leading cause of foodborne illness in the United States, is responsible for 2500 outbreaks and roughly 20 million illnesses in the US each year.⁸⁹ Over 80 percent of norovirus outbreaks result from food prepared in restaurants and other commercial food service settings.⁹⁰ Food handlers can easily transmit norovirus via aerosols (e.g., from a sneeze) or even from traces of feces or vomit on their hands.⁹¹ An infected worker is most contagious when they are symptomatic, and so more likely inclined to stay home from work if allowed.⁹² But as this report makes clear, common staffing practices and failure to comply with sick leave laws can result in sick, highly-contagious workers exposing their coworkers and consumers to risk when they are forced to show up for work, a risk made worse by insufficient access to adequate handwashing and toilet facilities.

I was suspended indefinitely from my job at a Jack in the Box in retaliation for calling in sick for one day when I texted the manager that I had diarrhea and she still asked me to come in to work. In food service, we aren't supposed to work with diarrhea, but management sent me 6 text messages telling me to come to work sick anyway because there was no one to cover me.

– Lourdes, former Jack in the Box worker, San Jose

Management failures to ensure adequate sanitation can also result in foodborne illness risks in fast food restaurants. Rodent feces transmit bacteria like *Salmonella*, by some measures the most devastating foodborne pathogen, at an estimated annual public cost of \$17.1 billion in the U.S.⁹³ Inadequate refrigeration allows *Salmonella*, as well as many other foodborne pathogens — *Campylobacter*, *Clostridium perfringens*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, etc. — to grow to dangerous levels.⁹⁴ Sewage leaks introduce fecal contamination risk that may expose consumers to pathogens like Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*), with potentially deadly consequences.⁹⁵ Workers are the front line against these foodborne illness risks, but if they lack awareness of the processes for reporting workplace hazards and abuses or cannot raise concerns without fear of retaliation, consumers as well as the workers may end up paying a steep price.



Fortunately, California law gives fast food workers important protections against retaliation for protected activities such as reporting food safety problems or using sick leave.⁹⁶ But many workers are not aware of their rights under the law or the full extent of their responsibilities to ensure customers' food is safe. Effective training and empowerment of workers to speak out about management failures to comply with food safety and public health regulations can bridge the gap between the law's intent and the reality of a fast food industry franchise business model that incentivizes noncompliance.

As CDC epidemiologist Patricia Griffin once remarked of food service workers, "We place our lives in their hands, in the same way we entrust our lives to the training of airline pilots."⁹⁷ Numerous studies have shown that proper food safety training is essential to decrease incidences and overall rates of foodborne illnesses and outbreaks caused by restaurants.⁹⁸ Food safety knowledge by itself, however, only goes so far. Effective food safety training can change behavior and foster a "culture of food safety," in which minimizing foodborne illness risk is prioritized at every level of an organization⁹⁹ – but that only happens when workers understand their rights and are empowered to exercise them.



CONTRIBUTING FACTORS FOR FOODBORNE ILLNESS IN FAST FOOD

The CDC has identified three categories of contributing factors for foodborne illness outbreaks in retail food facilities including fast food restaurants:

contamination of food with foodborne illness agents; **proliferation** or growth of microbial agents in food; and **survival** of foodborne illness agents after a process that should have eliminated or reduced them.¹⁰⁰

“Contamination” relates to how pathogens and other hazardous agents get into or onto food.¹⁰¹ Contamination-related factors are the most common contributors to foodborne illness outbreaks at retail food facilities such as fast food restaurants.¹⁰² These factors include:

- **Sick workers:** Factors related to ill or infectious workers are the most common sources of foodborne illness outbreaks at restaurants.¹⁰³ A 2023 CDC study found that over 40% of foodborne illness outbreaks at retail food facilities with identified contributing factors were related to food contamination associated with ill or infectious food workers.
- **Cross-contamination:** Pathogens can be transferred to food from contaminated surfaces, other foods, and/or materials including food worker’s hands, cutting boards, preparation tables, utensils, sponges, cleaning cloths, etc.¹⁰⁴
- **Animal and environmental contamination:** Food may be contaminated by animal or environmental sources, such as from access by insects or rodents, dripping, flooding, or airborne contamination.¹⁰⁵

“Proliferation” relates to how pathogens already present in food are able to increase in numbers and/or produce toxic products before food is ingested.¹⁰⁶ Proliferation factors common in fast food and other restaurants include:

- **Improper temperature control during food preparation, service, or display:** Improper thawing (such as allowing frozen food to thaw at room temperature or leaving frozen foods in standing water for prolonged periods), prolonged

preparation time (such as extending preparation time by preparing too many foods at once), and foods being left out at ambient temperatures for prolonged periods of time may allow pathogens to multiply.¹⁰⁷

- **Inadequate holding temperatures due to improper practices or malfunctioning equipment:** Proliferation of pathogens can be caused by broken or malfunctioning refrigerators, coolers or steam tables resulting in inadequate food holding temperatures, and inadequate temperatures due to improper practices (e.g., overloading of refrigerators, overfilling of cold holding wells, and failure to turn on a steam table).¹⁰⁸
- **Improper cooling of food:** Foods refrigerated in large masses or large volumes of foods stored in containers may not cool properly, and foods stored in containers with tight-fitting lids or in crowded refrigerators can lead to inadequate air circulation, all of which may allow pathogens to multiply.¹⁰⁹
- **Extended refrigeration for unsafe amounts of time:** Bacteria can multiply over prolonged periods of time at ordinary refrigerator temperatures and grow to levels sufficient to produce toxins or cause illness (for example, *Listeria* growth after deli meat refrigeration for more than seven days).¹¹⁰

“Survival” relates to how foodborne illness agents already present in food survive when processes or steps that should kill pathogen populations or reduce them to below infectious levels fail to do so.¹¹¹ Survival factors for pathogens in fast food and other restaurants can include:

- **Inadequate time and temperature control during initial cooking, thermal processing or reheating:** Meats and poultry cooked to insufficient temperatures, and previously cooked foods reheated for insufficient periods of time are examples of factors that may fail to prevent the survival of pathogens.¹¹²

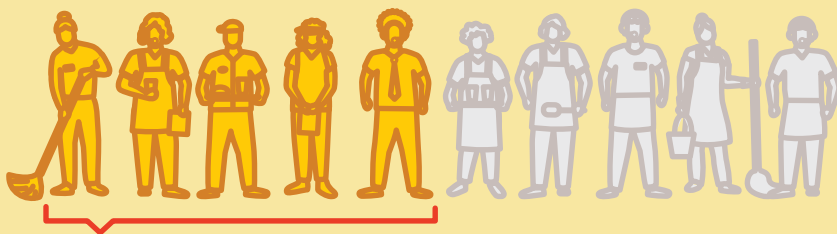
FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

Food safety problems that pose serious risks to the health and safety of consumers, workers and the general public are pervasive in California's fast food restaurants.

The prevalence of health and safety hazards and other workplace abuses in California's fast food industry has been well documented. The new research detailed in this report reveals that a range of unsafe conditions and improper practices common in fast food restaurants across the state present significant risks for consumers and the general public, as well as fast food workers.

The 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey finds that nearly half (47 percent) of all respondents report that they have seen at least one serious food safety problem at their fast food jobs in the past year alone. These include problems related to rats, mice, roaches, sewer flooding, expired, rotten or moldy food served to customers, lack of access to toilets, improper procedures related to handwashing, food storage temperatures or cross-contamination. One in three (34 percent) have seen two or more of these food safety problems at work in the past year alone.

The problems reported by Survey respondents indicate that major violations of the California Retail Food Code (CRFC), and other state and local laws put in place to protect workers, consumers and the public, are widespread throughout the state's fast food industry. The results of the Survey are consistent with findings of recent research investigating problems related to food safety and other public health hazards in fast food restaurants across California.



47% of fast food workers surveyed report that they have seen **at least one serious food safety problem** at their fast food jobs in the past year alone. These include problems related to ...



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey

34% of fast food workers surveyed have seen two or more serious food safety problems at work in the last year.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey

Yoshinoya workers strike over unhealthy conditions



Rosa and her daughter Julia, who both work at Yoshinoya

Management cuts corners on supplies and time for cleaning.

When we run out of supplies - gloves for handling raw chicken, dish soap, grill cleaner and oil - we have to make do by improvising:

We put plastic bags on our hands to use as gloves.

We wash the dishes without dish soap.

We use lemonade and water to clean the grill.

We fry in the oil after it has turned black.

Management also cuts corners on time for cleaning surfaces and equipment, and filtering the oil in the fryer.

Grease leaks from an uncleaned ceiling vent fan onto the surface where we cook the chicken.

We have seen cockroaches run around the cash register and they have been found dead in the kitchen, most recently in August (2025).

– *Julia, Yoshinoya worker, Los Angeles*



6/3/2025: The smoke that comes off the oil in the fryer causes Julia's throat to sting and eyes to burn.

FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

Sewage and Sewer Water Flooding

Sewer blockages, backups and overflows often result from accumulation of fats, oils and greases (FOGs) in pipes and inadequate maintenance of grease traps, as well as from improper disposal of food debris and solid waste, faulty or damaged plumbing, and water flooding from drainage issues.¹¹⁵ Because of the high volume of food prepared in fast food restaurants and disposal of significant quantities of FOGs, there is high potential for these materials to build up in fast food plumbing systems, causing sewage backups and overflows.¹¹⁶ This often happens because restaurants do not have adequate FOG control measures in place, such as grease traps or interceptors.¹¹⁷

Sewage and flood waters can contain feces, rotting food, chemicals and disease-causing organisms which can contaminate food service facilities and easily cause food-borne illnesses.¹¹⁸ Specifically, sewage and sewer water flooding introduce fecal contamination risk that may expose consumers to pathogens like Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*), with potentially deadly consequences.¹¹⁹ Due to these serious risks, the California Retail Food Code requires food facilities to comply with requirements for proper disposal of sewage, wastewater and other liquid waste to prevent contamination.¹²⁰ Public health guidance states that if flooding or sewage back-up in a restaurant can not immediately be contained and cleaned up, the facility should be closed until further notice.¹²¹ However, many fast food workers report that the restaurants where they work remain open and continue to serve food to customers while contaminated water and human waste flood kitchens, restrooms and other areas.

29% of respondents said that in the past year they have seen **sewage/sewer water flooding** while the store was open and preparing or serving food.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey¹²²

Sewer water flooding, roaches, rodents, food temperature issues, we have all these problems at El Pollo Loco where I work.



Sewer water comes up out of the floor drains in the kitchen and all around, and it smells terrible. These kinds of clogs in the plumbing happen a lot in fast food, because of all the oil and grease.

The customers can see the sewer water flooding and they say, "Hey, do you know about the flooding here," and we say, "Yes, we know." I feel embarrassed about it. We are supposed to shut the store down if there are imminent hazards like this—it is a must for our safety and the safety of customers. All the training videos I have seen say that legally we have to shut down. But the general manager told me I couldn't shut the store down. I think they just want to keep the store open to make money. They bring in Clorox before inspections, so it smells clean, but we aren't supposed to use Clorox, and we weren't trained to use it safely.

Cooking at the grill one day, I looked up at the ceiling and all I saw was roaches. When you make the food, you want it to be something you would feed your family, and I see all those roaches and I don't know where they have been.

I saw a dead rodent next to the computer. I can't really tell the difference between a rat and a mouse, so I'm not totally sure what I saw, but I told the manager, and he said he didn't see anything, and I was like, 'You don't see the dead mouse right there?' and I thought to myself, if there is one there could be two or three or more. The problem is the lack of deep cleaning. One day I decided to do some deep cleaning and I moved the grill and I saw moldy chicken and piles of brown stuff that smelled so bad I almost threw up.

I worry most about the chicken. Chicken is the most dangerous food you can serve if it isn't prepared correctly. We marinate the chicken, and we have a certain number of minutes before we need to take it out of the marinade, put it in the bin, date it and refrigerate it. We aren't supposed to let the chicken sit for a long time and get warm, that is dangerous, but it happens.

We need training on how to work and prepare food safely. Sometimes management tells us we have to sign documents that we had a training, even though we didn't have the training. Training is only part of the answer, we also need to know what to do if management ignores the training, or tells us to do things that aren't safe for us, or safe for the customer.

– Juan, *El Pollo Loco* worker, Los Angeles

FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

Rats, mice, roaches and other evidence of vermin infestation

The presence of rodents, insects, and other pests in fast food restaurants is a problem often reported by workers, and a growing public health concern in California as rising temperatures and frequent summer heat waves have been linked to rising rodent populations and increased cockroach infestations.¹²³ Vermin infestations in food service settings pose serious risks to workers and consumers, since disease-carrying pests can contaminate food and surfaces, potentially causing foodborne illness.¹²⁴ In the recent review of public health inspection records at fast food facilities in California's twelve largest counties, vermin infestation was the major violation cited most frequently.¹²⁵ Over 40 percent of incidents involving major health violations at fast food restaurants identified in the review involved vermin infestations. Of these, 92 percent resulted in health-department-ordered restaurant closures.

Under the California Retail Food Code, all food facilities must be kept free of vermin (cockroaches, mice, rats, and similar pests that carry disease).¹²⁶ Vermin infestation, defined as the presence of vermin within the food facility as evidenced by actual live bodies, fresh droppings or vomitus, urine stains, or gnaw marks, that could result in contamination to the food, equipment, packaging, or utensils, is considered an imminent health hazard under the law, as it poses a significant and immediate public health threat, and requires immediate corrective action.¹²⁷

24% of survey respondents reported that they have seen **rats, mice, cockroaches or evidence of a vermin infestation** such as rodent droppings, and/or bites on food or food packaging in their fast food workplaces in the past year.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey¹²⁸

McDonald's store in Oakland was closed for weeks after Elizabeth and coworkers notified Health Department of rat infestation

Rats were running around the kitchen for months, taking bites out of food we were preparing.

We thought there was nothing we could do about it.

When management saw a worker take a picture of a rat in the kitchen, they told us if we were caught taking pictures or videos we would get a warning or be fired.

Soon after, management put up a sign: "No Video No Photos No Recording"



12/15/2023: Image from video of rat at bacon station.

Management also told us that if anyone found out about the rats, then OSHA would come and close the store and we would all lose our jobs.

We learned from the California Fast Food Workers Union that it is illegal for management to threaten us or retaliate against us for reporting rats or other hazards.



February 2024: Rat stuck in food warmer at McDonald's store in Oakland.¹²⁹



Health department closed a McDonald's in Oakland due to rat infestation.



Rats got caught in traps and stuck in kitchen equipment.

We killed the rats with brooms when we could.

We filed complaints with the health department and CalOSHA, and we went on strike to protest the unsafe conditions.

The health department shut down the store until McDonald's got rid of the rats, and repaired and sanitized the store.

– Elizabeth, McDonald's worker, Oakland

FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

Lack of Access to Toilets and Handwashing Facilities; Improper Handwashing Practices

The spread of germs from the hands of food workers to food is a common cause of foodborne illness outbreaks in restaurants, accounting for nine of ten outbreaks in which food was contaminated by food workers, according to the CDC.¹³⁰ Under the California Retail Food Code, food workers must be provided with clean, unobstructed handwashing facilities that are accessible for use at all times.¹³¹ Handwashing facilities must be equipped with adequate warm water, soap and sanitary towels or heated air-drying devices.¹³² Sinks used for food preparation, warewashing or service sinks used for the disposal of liquid waste are not to be used for handwashing.¹³³

Management must permit food workers to wash their hands every 30 minutes and additionally as needed, including: immediately before engaging in food preparation; after using the toilet; after coughing, sneezing, eating, or drinking; after handling soiled equipment or utensils; during food preparation, as often as necessary to remove soil and contamination and to prevent cross-contamination when changing tasks; when switching between working with raw food and working with ready-to-eat food.¹³⁴ Workers are required to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and warm water for at least 10-15 seconds in many specific situations.

Clean toilet facilities in good repair must also be provided and conveniently located and accessible for use by workers during all hours of operation at retail food facilities.¹³⁵

24% of survey respondents said workers lacked access to a working toilet, lacked access to warm water for handwashing, and/or were not given enough time to wash their hands properly.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey¹³⁶

Celeste & coworkers learn about their rights and file complaints reporting overflowing toilets, rats and other hazards



The Burger King where I work has 2 restrooms, one for the customers and one for the workers. When the customers clog up their toilet, our toilet floods too, and we can't use it.

When the toilets flood, we have to pee and poop in a bucket. It isn't sanitary. It isn't healthy. No one wants to pee and poop in a bucket. This has been happening several times a year, it goes on for days before management fixes it. It is unsanitary — it is not safe for us, and it is not safe for the customers.

My coworkers and I learned from the California Fast Food Workers Union that when management ignores hazards that can impact food safety and worker safety, we can reach out to the health department and CalOSHA for help.

2/4/2025: Image from video of rain coming through ceiling onto packaged buns at a Burger King store in San Jose.

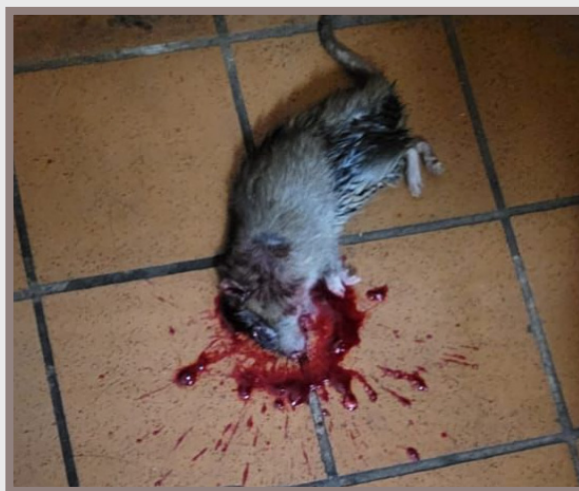


We filed complaints about rain pouring through the ceiling and light fixtures onto food, rats in the store, and other hazards.

– Celeste, Burger King worker, San Jose



2/4/2024: Umbrella protects cash register from rain inside the drive-thru.



1/23/2024: Rat killed with a broom.



Image from video of rain dripping through ceiling onto electronics, potentially causing electrocution and fire hazards.

FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

Cross Contamination and Potentially Unsafe Food Served to Customers

Cross contamination is the transfer of harmful pathogens to food from other foods, surfaces, and utensils, which often happens due to improper handling of foods such as raw meat, poultry and eggs.¹³⁷ Cross-contamination in fast food restaurants can happen when bare hands or dirty gloves come into contact with ready-to-eat foods; dirty bare or gloved hands are used to clean equipment or food prep surfaces; dirty equipment or utensils come into contact with ready-to-eat foods; or raw animal foods contaminate ready-to-eat foods (such as in a refrigeration unit).

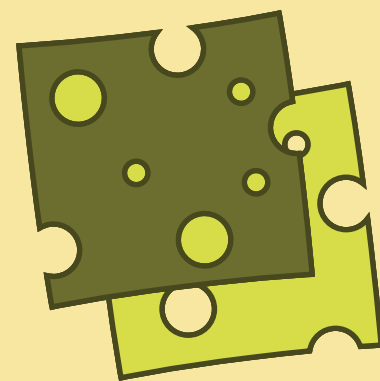
In addition to contamination related risks, the proliferation of pathogens in or on food also presents risks for foodborne illness. This can occur in food that is stored improperly, such as being left in a refrigerator for too long or stored at an improper temperature. *Listeria*, the third leading cause of death from foodborne illness in the United States,¹³⁸ is often associated with deli meats and other commonly refrigerated foods. The longer a food is stored in the refrigerator, the greater the chance for *Listeria* to grow.¹³⁹

The California Retail Food Code states that all food in restaurants must be free from adulteration and spoilage; obtained from approved sources; protected from dirt, vermin, unnecessary handling, droplet contamination, overhead leakage, or other environmental sources of contamination; and otherwise be fully fit for human consumption.¹⁴⁰ The law also includes specific requirements regarding the protection of food from cross contamination.¹⁴¹

21% of survey respondents reported that they have seen cross-contamination of foods and/or foods not being stored at proper temperatures in the past year.



16% of respondents said they have seen expired, rotten or moldy food served to customers.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey¹⁴²

Estela & coworkers report rat infestation and lack of systems to manage perishables at Jack in the Box store where they work



At the Jack in the Box where I work, there is no system to manage perishables.

After we threw away a tray of expired chicken, the store manager said, "Why did you throw it [the chicken] away! If it doesn't look bad, don't throw it away." Can you believe it? Management wants us to judge how safe the chicken is by how it looks, not by the date!

A co-worker wanted to throw away a box of rotten lettuce, and the manager said, "You all are throwing away a lot, that is not ok, because the store loses, you have to review it and still use the good parts."

This Jack in the Box is also infested with rats, and they get into the food.

For example, on August 13, 2025 a coworker reached into the half-empty bag of bread that was currently in use and being served to customers, and pulled out a piece of rat-bitten bread.

Management instructs us, “If it looks good, use it.” They do not allow us to throw away the bags or boxes of food that rats have bitten into or entered. We have to sort through the containers of rat-bitten food and only throw away the pieces where we notice rat bites, and serve the rest.

My coworkers and I learned from the California Fast Food Workers Union that we can blow the whistle about these hazards. We started thinking about it very seriously, and we found our courage to file complaints with the Placer County Health Department and CalOSHA, because we are scared for the health of the people who eat here, especially the children.

– *Estela, Jack in the Box worker, Roseville*



8/13/2025: Rat-bitten bread. At the beginning of her afternoon shift, a coworker reached into the half-empty bag of bread that was currently in use and being served to customers, and pulled out this piece of rat-bitten bread.

FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

Employers frequently fail to address problems in a timely manner, dismiss hazards as unimportant or too expensive to fix.

The fast food industry operates on a business model that creates pressure for managers to keep stores open, no matter what, while keeping costs as low as possible.¹⁴³ This model creates dangerous conditions for fast food workers and consumers alike, through management practices such as keeping staffing levels low and deferring necessary maintenance and repairs.

Low staffing levels force workers to do more and move faster, raising the risks of improper food handling and poor handwashing and hygiene practices, as well as accidents and injuries.¹⁴⁴ Employers' failure to repair and maintain facilities and equipment also threatens worker and consumer safety.¹⁴⁵ In health and safety complaints, fast food workers often report that their employers refuse to pay for necessary repairs for things like kitchen equipment and plumbing.¹⁴⁶ Poorly maintained plumbing is more likely to back up, creating potential for sewage flooding. A broken refrigerator may result in food being stored at unsafe temperatures. Both present food safety hazards and risks for foodborne illness.¹⁴⁷

53% of survey respondents who reported problems with rats, mice, roaches, sewer flooding, toilets, hand-washing, food storage temperatures or cross-contamination said management did not address the problem(s) in a timely manner.



Of respondents who said management did not fix food safety problems in a timely manner,

82% said management did not fix the problem because they did not take the problem seriously, said it was not important, or said it was too expensive.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey^{148, 149}

When it rains outside, water leaks through the ceiling and drips onto the prep line where we work

making burritos and tacos, soaking through our hats, bouncing off our arms, and landing on the food. Rain drips through the ceiling for hours, and by the end of the day our hats and visors are soaked.



We talked to management about the leaky kitchen ceiling around April 2024, when the leaks first started, and they said they would send someone to fix it. In December 2024, I reminded the manager that the ceiling had been leaking and they should fix it before the rainy season started again. The manager said they would fix it, but in March 2025, it rained and the kitchen ceiling leaked water on us again.

– Wilber, Taco Bell worker, Culver City



9/6/2024: Workers at a Taco Bell in Culver City placed stickers on ceiling tiles to try to block rain water from leaking through the roof above the food prep line.

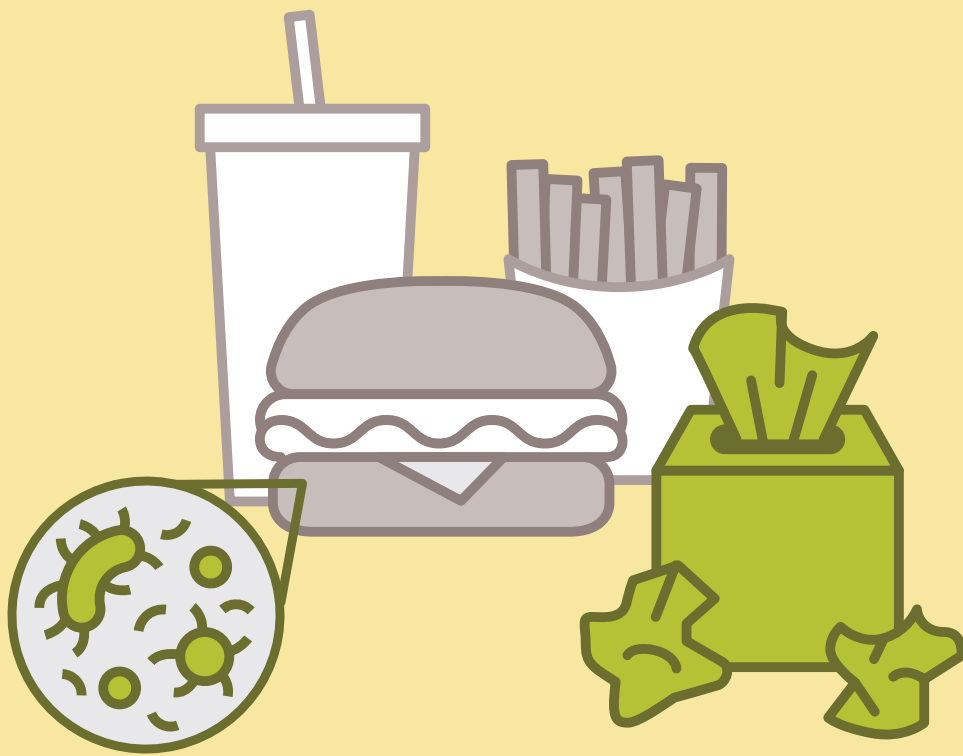
FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

Working Sick

Contamination of food by ill or infected workers is a top contributing factor to foodborne illness outbreaks.¹⁵⁰ For example, restaurants are the most common setting for outbreaks of norovirus (the leading cause of foodborne illness in the US), and sick workers are most often the source of contamination.¹⁵¹

Under the California Retail Food Code, employers must notify local health officials when food workers report certain symptoms of communicable diseases (such as vomiting and diarrhea) and/or diagnoses of foodborne illnesses such as Norovirus, Hepatitis A, Shigella, Salmonella, and Shiga-toxin producing E. coli.¹⁵² Management must also ensure that workers with such symptoms or diagnoses are restricted from working with exposed food, equipment, and utensils until cleared to return by the local regulatory authority.¹⁵³ Workers with influenza-like symptoms (cough, fever, sore throat, or runny nose), or those diagnosed with any type of influenza must also be restricted from working with exposed food, clean equipment and utensils.¹⁵⁴

60% of workers surveyed said that in the past year they or a coworker have worked sick with symptoms of communicable illness including vomiting, diarrhea, fever, sore throat or cough.



47% of respondents said that, in the past year, they themselves have reported to work even though they were sick.

Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey ^{155,156}

I reported to work at Wendy's recently and told the store manager I was sick with diarrhea, and she responded, "If you have to go to the bathroom, go quickly," and sent me to work in the kitchen.



The store manager told us, "Don't think you can get sick and get paid your sick days." Management has to practically see you dying to let you go home sick.

The kitchen equipment breaks down frequently, and management delays repairs and says it is too expensive to fix it permanently, or replace it. The grill was broken and leaking gas for a year. Management told me to light the grill with a piece of paper. I said, "What if it explodes in my face?" My coworkers and I are organizing with the California Fast Food Workers Union and we are learning about our rights. I filed a complaint about the gas leak with CalOSHA in December 2024, and then management finally replaced the grill.

Recently on an afternoon shift a customer asked me for extra parmesan cheese, so I went to the fridge to get it, and I saw the fridge was broken again, the parmesan was moldy, and at that point only half the parmesan was left in the bag. I know if it isn't blue cheese, it isn't supposed to be blue. I threw away the moldy parmesan cheese, but what about everything else in that fridge? There are so many other hazards at this Wendy's. The roof leaks, and when it rains, water rains down inside the store. The oil in the fryer is black. The customer restroom is like a pig pen and the toilet frequently overflows.

My coworkers and I worry about retaliation if we speak up about anything. The manager gets angry easily. She yells and screams and uses foul language with us. Fast food workers like us need to be able to call off work sick and report hazards to management without fear of being screamed at, disregarded or retaliated against.

– Romualda, Wendy's worker, Oakland

FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

Pressure to Work Sick

Public health experts emphasize that many foodborne illness outbreaks can be prevented by ensuring that food workers do not work when they are sick.¹⁵⁷ But California fast food workers are often forced to work sick due to pressure from management, lack of staff coverage, fear of retaliation or concerns about loss of income.

97% of workers surveyed who said they reported to work sick in the past year said they did so because they were **pressured by management to come to work sick**, worried about retaliation, couldn't find anyone to cover their shift and/or couldn't afford to miss work.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey¹⁵⁸

UCLA epidemiologist and physician Timothy Brewer explains that disease outbreaks at retail food establishments are “likely to be a local contamination — meaning somebody is sick and comes in to work because they can’t afford not to be at work, and then they contaminate the food.”¹⁵⁹ For this reason, Brewer says, it’s important to examine “policies in place around people being sick and coming to work, and do workers have the opportunity to stay at home if they are sick.” Paid sick leave, in particular, can “reduce the pressure for people who can’t afford to lose income to come to work when they shouldn’t be at work.”

In California, most workers, including those in fast food, are entitled to take at least 40 hours of paid sick leave each year.¹⁶⁰ This includes full-time, part-time and temporary workers who work at least 30 days within a year for the same employer in California and complete a 90-day employment period before taking any paid sick leave. Under the law, workers can take paid sick leave for themselves or a family member, for preventive care or diagnosis, care or treatment of an existing health condition, among other specified circumstances.

However, multiple studies have found that California fast food employers frequently fail to provide workers with paid sick leave as required by state law. A 2022 survey found violations of paid sick leave laws to be the most common form of wage theft experienced by California fast food workers, with 59 percent of respondents reporting problems in this area.¹⁶¹ A 2022 study on conditions in the Los Angeles fast food industry found 31 percent of workers surveyed received no paid sick leave at all, and 86 percent of those who did get paid sick leave received less than the legal minimum amount.¹⁶²

When a worker calls me to tell me they are sick with vomiting or diarrhea, I tell them to stay home, and I notify the General Manager to fix the schedule, and he tells me to tell them to drink Pepto Bismol and make them



come to work, and he often calls them directly to make them show up. They come to work sick because they are scared, they are trying not to lose their hours or their job. They cut days from your schedule if you miss work. I know about this first-hand.

Sometimes the customers complain, they see people sneezing and coughing and they say, "Why is he working sick?"

Yesterday, a worker called me and said, "I am sick, I have a fever, I don't feel like working," and I sent a message to my boss that a worker was out sick, but I assumed he would show up anyway because the GM would call him and pressure him to come in to work.

I have worked in fast food for a long time. Most of the time, management doesn't care if you are sick or not, you have to show up, you have to work your hours.

– Edith, fast food worker, Los Angeles

Afraid to report...

There is only one toilet at the fast food store where I work, and when it gets clogged up, my coworkers and I have to work the whole night shift without a toilet.

We find our own solutions - some workers pee outside, and some put a plastic bag over a bucket and use it as a toilet. It isn't hygienic for food service workers to use a bucket as a toilet.

When the toilet breaks, I do not drink water during my shift, which isn't healthy, and puts me at risk of infection and dehydration.

I feel like there is nothing I can do about it, because I am scared that if I speak up, management will cut my hours or fire me, and I can't afford to lose this job. I lost my previous fast food job when management retaliated against me for calling in sick for 4 days when I injured my knee. When I returned to work, management cut my schedule from full time down to just 13 hours, and then they transferred me to a store so far from my home that I had to drive two hours to get there - the shifts were so short it was hardly worth the cost of gas. I fell behind on my rent and my light and water bills. I don't want that to happen to me again.

Retaliation in the fast food industry is fierce, and frequent, and employers are getting away with it.

– *Fast food worker, Los Angeles*



FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

Retaliation against workers who speak up about food safety

Though violations of health and safety laws are widespread in California's fast food restaurants, these problems often go unreported.¹⁶³ Retaliation can deter workers from reporting workplace violations, as workers who do complain about workplace problems often face firings, cuts to hours, and other disciplinary actions.¹⁶⁴

Prior research has found that California fast food workers often do not feel they can ask their employers to address health and safety problems without fear of retaliation.¹⁶⁵ Although state laws prohibit employers from retaliating against workers who report health hazards and who refuse to work under unsafe conditions, such retaliation is common in fast food.¹⁶⁶

37% of survey respondents who reported food safety issues at work or asked for other changes to improve food safety said they **experienced retaliation** for doing so.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Food Safety Survey

Fast food workers often face impossible choices between working under conditions that present dangers for workers and consumers, and risking their jobs to report such hazards or refuse unsafe work.¹⁶⁷ And many workers are unaware of the laws that protect them from retaliation for exercising their rights to speak up about health and safety violations, and other workplace abuses.

Comprehensive workers' rights trainings can help ensure that fast food workers know about their rights to speak up about health and safety at work, and know what to do when employers disregard hazards or retaliate against them for reporting problems.¹⁶⁸

Massiel and coworker fired for reporting flood emergency at Jack in the Box

When fast food workers raise complaints to protect ourselves and our customers, we can be retaliated against and even fired. That is what happened to me and my coworker.

For years, when it rained, water dripped on us through the ceiling and the light fixtures while we worked at the grill and the fryer, and where we washed dishes. We worried the roof would collapse.

Then, every time it rained hard, sewer water also flooded up from the floor drains while we were preparing food. We tried to serve the drive-thru customers and deal with the flooding at the same time.



Image from video of flooding in the kitchen at Jack in the Box store in Hayward causing food safety hazards, as well as fire, electrocution and other worker safety hazards.



12/18/2023: Above: Image from video of worker preparing food with water coming down through roof and up from floor drains in the kitchen at a Jack in the Box in Hayward.

It was a food contamination hazard, and also an electrocution hazard, a fire hazard and worker safety hazard.

During a heavy rain, we took videos of the rain coming down through the roof and coming up the floor drains where we were preparing food. We showed how we had to constantly try to sweep the water out the back door.

Two days later, we filed complaints with CalOSHA and the Health Department about the flooding, because management ignored the problem.

Three days later, management fired me and one of my coworkers.

I was out of work until May, I had to borrow money to feed my daughter and to pay rent.

When it flooded like this, my coworkers and I complained to management about the sewer flooding and the rain coming through the roof, and management would tell us it was fixed, but obviously it wasn't fixed.

Electric cables were running through the flooding sewer water, which is a fire hazard.

The smell of rot from the floor drains was horrendous. We had no PPE or training on how to deal with something like this. Our shoes and clothes got soaked. Sewer water entered the freezer and froze on the floor, causing a coworker to lose her balance and slip on the ice.

Fast food workers need to be able to stand up for our own health and safety, and for the health and safety of the customers, but it shouldn't mean losing our jobs and putting our families on the brink of homelessness.

– Massiel, former Jack in the Box worker, Hayward



12/18/2023: Massiel's daughter holds her photo.

OVERVIEW: KEY FOOD SAFETY AND PUBLIC HEALTH REGULATIONS FOR CALIFORNIA FAST FOOD FACILITIES

CALIFORNIA RETAIL FOOD CODE - KEY PROVISIONS

Fast food restaurants and other retail food facilities are regulated under a portion of the California Health and Safety Code known as the California Retail Food Code (CRFC).¹⁶⁹ The CRFC sets science-based standards for the purposes of safeguarding public health and ensuring that food provided to consumers is safe, unadulterated, and honestly presented.¹⁷⁰ The CRFC is primarily enforced by local environmental health departments, with oversight from the California Department of Public Health, Food and Drug Branch.¹⁷¹ Key provisions of the CRFC that apply to fast food establishments include:

Knowledge and training. Restaurant management and food workers are required to have adequate knowledge of, and proper training in, food safety as it relates to their assigned duties.¹⁷² Any food employee who prepares, stores or serves food must obtain a California Food Handler (CFH) card after attending and passing a food safety training course from an accredited organization.¹⁷³ Additionally, the owner or a designated employee of any food facility that prepares, handles or serves non-prepackaged, potentially hazardous food must obtain a Certified Food Protection Manager (CFPM) certificate, achieved by passing an examination from an accredited organization.¹⁷⁴ Any such food facility must have at least one certified CFPM. Required elements of knowledge for CFPM¹⁷⁵ certification include: methods of preventing food contamination; relationship between time and temperature; major contributing factors for foodborne illness; relationship between personal hygiene and food safety; procedures for cleaning and sanitizing equipment and utensils; and major food allergens and the symptoms of a reaction.¹⁷⁶

Communicable disease: reporting, restrictions, and exclusions. Management must notify the local health agency when they are aware that two or more food employees are concurrently experiencing symptoms of acute gastrointestinal illness and/or when notified that a food worker has a diagnosis of foodborne illnesses such as Norovirus, Hepatitis A, Shigella, Salmonella, and Shiga toxin-producing E. coli.¹⁷⁷ Management must also ensure that workers with such symptoms or diagnoses are restricted from working with exposed food, equipment, and utensils until cleared to return by the local regulatory authority.¹⁷⁸ Workers with influenza-like symptoms (cough, fever, sore throat, or runny nose), or those diagnosed with any type of influenza must also be restricted from working with exposed food, clean equipment and utensils.¹⁷⁹

Handwashing and hygiene. Workers must be provided with clean, unobstructed handwashing facilities that are accessible for use at all times.¹⁸⁰ Handwashing facilities must be equipped with adequate warm water, soap and sanitary towels or heated air-drying devices.¹⁸¹ Sinks used for food preparation, warewashing or service sinks used for the disposal of liquid waste are not to be used for handwashing.¹⁸² Management must permit food workers to wash their hands every 30 minutes and additionally as needed, including: immediately before engaging in food preparation; after using the toilet; after coughing, sneezing, eating, or drinking; after handling soiled equipment or utensils; during food preparation, as often as necessary to remove soil and contamination and to prevent cross-contamination when changing tasks; and when switching between working with raw food and

working with ready-to-eat food.¹⁸³ Workers are required to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and warm water for at least 10-15 seconds in many specific situations.

Protection from contamination. The CRFC states that food must be manufactured, produced, prepared, compounded, packed, stored, transported, kept for sale, and served so as to be pure and free from adulteration and spoilage; obtained from approved sources; protected from dirt, vermin, unnecessary handling, droplet contamination, overhead leakage, or other environmental sources of contamination; and otherwise be fully fit for human consumption.¹⁸⁴ Management must provide adequate preparation facilities; ensure suitability and proper cleaning and sanitization of utensils and surfaces used for food preparation; and ensure proper separation of raw foods from ready-to-eat foods, among other requirements for protection against contamination.¹⁸⁵

Time and Temperature. The CRFC sets specific time and temperature standards to prevent the proliferation and survival of pathogens in potentially hazardous foods. These include specifications for proper hot and cold holding temperatures, proper implementation and use of time as a public health control, proper cooling methods, proper cooking time and temperature, and proper reheating procedures.¹⁸⁶

OTHER RELEVANT REGULATIONS

Workplace Safety Regulations. Many workplace health and safety regulations protect consumers as well as workers in fast food restaurants. Cal/OSHA enforces workplace health and safety regulations in California's fast food restaurants and requires employers to develop and maintain an effective written Injury and Illness Prevention Program (IIPP) to ensure the safety and health of workers while on the job. The IIPP must contain elements including identifying and mitigating hazards, training and injury response.¹⁸⁷ Other Cal/OSHA requirements that protect the health and safety of consumers as well as workers include provisions for hazard communication, hand protection, and workplace violence prevention.¹⁸⁸

California Paid Sick Leave (PSL). Established in 2015 and updated January 1, 2024, California's Paid Sick Leave (PSL) law allows most workers to take up to at least 40 hours of paid sick leave each year.¹⁸⁹ Paid sick leave is available to full-time, part-time and temporary workers who work at least 30 days within a year for the same employer in California and complete a 90-day employment period. Under the law, workers can take paid sick leave for themselves or a family member for preventive care or diagnosis, care or treatment of an existing health condition, or for qualifying reasons if they are a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking. Family members include the employee's parent, child, spouse, registered domestic partner, grandparent, grandchild, sibling or designated person. Preventive care includes annual physicals or flu shots. A worker may decide how much paid sick leave they want to use (for example, whether they want to take an entire day, or only part of a day). Under certain circumstances, crime victims can also use paid sick leave at employers with 25 employees or more. Under the PSL, an employer generally may not deny a request for sick leave if the worker has accrued leave and may not retaliate against a worker for taking sick leave.

Protection from Retaliation. California's Labor Code prohibits employers from retaliating against workers who report safety or health hazards, institute or testify in any proceedings relating to the workers' rights to safe and healthful working conditions, exercise any rights under the federal or California law relating to occupational health and safety, or participate in an occupational health and safety committees.¹⁹⁰ Workers are also protected in most cases if they report a work-related fatality, injury, or illness, and for requesting access to occupational injury or illness reports or records.

FEDERAL ATTACKS ON PUBLIC HEALTH AND CRISIS OF ENFORCEMENT DEMAND WORKER KNOWLEDGE AND EMPOWERMENT

As fast food employers cut corners on safety protections, federal funding for training, education and surveillance around food safety has been slashed. In recent years, the FDA has reduced funding for the Office of Inspections and Investigation (the department responsible for training of food safety investigators and inspections at the federal, state, and local levels) by about 65 percent.¹⁹¹ Reuters further reported in May 2025 that the FDA had laid off additional food safety staff, while the Trump Administration moved to disband the Justice Department's Consumer Protection Branch, which handled enforcement of U.S. food and drug safety laws.¹⁹² And in July 2025, the CDC's Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network (FoodNet) reduced its required reporting to just two toxins — salmonella and Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* — meaning campylobacter, cyclospora, listeria, shigella, vibrio, and *Yersinia* may now go without tracking.¹⁹³ "It's not like the wheels have fallen off the bus," remarked Rutgers University food science professor Donald Schaffner, "but all the nuts are off and the bus is going downhill."¹⁹⁴

Federal cuts have shifted more responsibility for food safety onto state and local governments, but many local agencies face funding and staffing challenges of their own, in some cases leaving only a handful of staffers responsible for covering thousands of restaurants,¹⁹⁵ potentially allowing restaurant operators to further cut corners on food safety.¹⁹⁶ "Some states have the infrastructure to run their own inspection programs, but many do not, and those that do may apply different levels of rigor," Christine Bergman, a professor of nutrition and food science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and a former USDA Agricultural Research Center chemist, said in May 2025.¹⁹⁷ "This may lead to uneven enforcement. This lack of uniformity could erode public trust in the safety of the food supply, especially if outbreaks or contamination events become more frequent or harder to trace."

In California in particular, Cal/OSHA has faced staffing issues for years, a shortage that only worsened following the onset of the COVID pandemic.¹⁹⁸ And inspector shortages kept growing even as the pandemic waned. Between February 2019 and December 2024, despite a major hiring push in 2024,¹⁹⁹ the share of Cal/OSHA field compliance inspector positions that were vacant rose from 12.5 percent to 43 percent.²⁰⁰

In 2024 a Los Angeles County Health Department spokesperson said there were 160 field inspectors employed by the county at that time, with 84 job vacancies in the department, and that the shortage was significantly impacting the agency's ability to meet its inspection goals. Inspectors conducted the recommended number of inspections for less than 1 percent of the county's 18,143 high-risk restaurants between July 2023 and June 2024, and as of August 2024 there were over 200 high-risk restaurants in the county that hadn't been visited by inspectors at all since at least July 2020. Alameda County's health department also admitted in 2024 that some restaurants may not

be receiving timely health inspections because of a lack of sufficient agency staffing.²⁰¹ “Restaurant inspector staffing shortages are a challenge for many jurisdictions across the state,” the department said in a press statement.

A 2017 analysis of health inspection records for San Diego County retail food facilities found that more than 99 percent of routine inspections resulted in ‘A’ grades.²⁰² The data show thousands of facilities maintained ‘A’s despite inspectors finding up to 10 violations, including major violations that may pose imminent health hazards, such as food being held at unsafe temperatures and vermin infestations. A study of restaurants in Los Angeles found that restaurant managers often aim only to meet the bare minimum food safety requirements; food establishments that had low but passing scores showed minimal improvement over time.²⁰³

As the Trump administration takes aim at food safety programs and weakens federal oversight of the nation’s food systems, state and local enforcement mechanisms must be strengthened, including through full staffing of Cal/OSHA and county public health departments. But enforcement alone is not sufficient to safeguard against foodborne illness outbreaks and other threats to the health and safety of food service workers and consumers.

Food workers, like those in California’s fast food restaurants, are often the last line of defense against foodborne illness outbreaks and other hazards that threaten the health and safety of customers and broader communities. When workers lack adequate training and knowledge of their rights on the job, or cannot raise concerns about workplace problems without fear of retaliation, the costs to consumers and the public can be profound.

While California law protects workers against employer retaliation for things like reporting food safety problems or using sick leave, many workers are unaware of their rights under the law and the actions they can take to protect themselves, their coworkers and customers. Ensuring that fast food workers are informed about their rights, in a language and manner they understand, and have the tools needed to exercise those rights, will help prevent and address hazards and abuses that present risks for workers and consumers alike, and empower workers to lead the way to safer food and healthier communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improved Compliance. Fast food employers must be brought into compliance with public health and workplace safety requirements, including food safety regulations provided in the California Retail Food Code, Cal/OSHA regulations, and other laws put in place to protect workers and the public, such as California's Paid Sick Leave law.

Strengthened Enforcement. Enforcement of California's public health and workplace safety laws must be strengthened, including through full staffing of county departments of public health and Cal/OSHA.

Protections Against Retaliation. Mechanisms to protect workers from retaliation for exercising their rights, including the rights to report hazards and to refuse work that is unsafe, should be strengthened at the state and local levels, so that workers are not forced to make impossible choices between their health and safety, and their livelihood.

Know Your Rights Training. Fast food workers need Know Your Rights training, presented by qualified organizations experienced in providing robust workers' rights education to diverse communities, including low-income and foreign-born workers. This training must be provided in-person, in an environment of trust, where workers feel safe asking questions.²⁰⁴

Key Areas of Training. Know Your Rights training must provide workers with information on rights and protections related to workplace safety and public health, including how to access paid sick leave, and what to do if management ignores food safety hazards, forces workers to work sick, or retaliates against workers, as well as other key workplace rights, protections, programs and benefits for fast food workers and their families. Trainings should also include relevant information about the specific rights and protections available to workers regardless of immigration status.

Support for Pilot Training Programs. Policymakers should support efforts to pilot independent Know Your Rights trainings for fast food workers, including proposed programs in the City of Los Angeles and Santa Clara County.

The same shortcuts that make working in fast food unsafe for the workers can make the food unsafe for the customers.

At the Wingstop where I work, management was saving money by having us clean the ventilation fans by ourselves, while we were cooking food, instead of paying a specialized company to do it after hours. It was very dangerous. **You could slip and fall into the boiling oil or onto the hot grill, and we could see the mist from the degreasers we sprayed settle in the fryer oil.**

It gave me a feeling of panic to do that cleaning. We weren't trained to do that kind of heavy cleaning, and we didn't have PPE. We had a lot of other problems, too. We had an assistant manager who was drinking alcohol openly during work, and using vulgar language toward us, saying things like, "Stop standing around like a bunch of penises." We asked him to be more respectful, and he told us we should appreciate that he treats us so well, because when he was first learning to work in restaurants the manager would hit him in the head as punishment.

I made a report to the district manager about these hazards, but instead of fixing the problems, they retaliated against me. They gave me a warning for arriving late to work a few times, meanwhile the assistant manager continued with his inappropriate behaviors. I know it is not ok to arrive at work late, but I couldn't afford housing so I was homeless at the time, and I had problems with transportation, so a few times I did arrive at work late, but I am a good, responsible worker. After I reported the hazards, the assistant manager brought a gun to work and showed it to me, and I took that as a threat. Twice the LAPD came and arrested him while we were working. Eventually he stopped coming back to work.

After we talked to the Union, we learned what we can do about management ignoring hazards and retaliating against us. **We filed a CalOSHA complaint and went on strike, and then finally management hired a professional company to clean the vent fans. It was a victory for us, and for our customers.**

Fast food workers like us need independently administered Know Your Rights trainings, to know what to do if management ignores worker safety or food safety, or retaliates against us for speaking up about hazards.

– Edgar, Wingstop worker, Los Angeles



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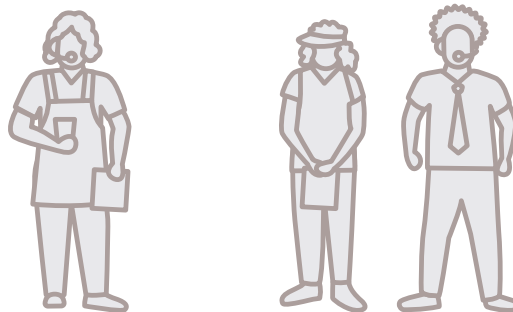
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