

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS IN THE FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY



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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

Occupational Health Internship Program (OHIP)

Established in 2004, the Occupational Health Internship Program strives to train, mentor, and inspire future occupational safety and health professionals. Through their summer internship program, interns are placed with worker organizations and unions to investigate health and safety concerns in underserved or high-hazard industries. OHIP is housed within the Association of Occupational and Environmental Clinics (AOEC) and funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

UCLA Labor Occupational Health and Safety Program (UCLA LOSH)

LOSH works on education and training, research and policy, and community outreach in order to promote healthy and safe worksites. LOSH strives to serve workers in high-hazard industries, low-wage jobs, and workers who are vulnerable due to immigration status or language barriers. For this study, we worked directly with Dr. Kevin Riley, LOSH Director, who provided guidance on the research methods and policy implications.

Fight for \$15 and a Union

Fight for \$15 and a Union is a movement that began in 2012 with fast-food workers demanding \$15/hr and union rights in New York City. The movement quickly spread to other major cities across the U.S., including Chicago and Los Angeles, with workers winning raises for more than 26 million people across the country and securing, or on the way to securing, a \$15 minimum wage in 10 states. Today, the organization is active in over 300 cities and 60 countries across six continents. The Fight for \$15 and a Union continues to not only fight for a \$15/hour wage everywhere, but also for the health and safety of fast-food workers. The authors of this study collaborated with the Southern California site, which includes Los Angeles and San Diego, but due to the collaborative nature of this organization, we also worked with members from Northern California.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



With over half a million people working in fast-food, the fast-food industry is one of California's largest and fastest-growing industries (UCLA Labor Center, 2022, p. 7). 80% of the state's fast-food workforce is made up of people of color with 60% of them being Latinx (Jacobs 2021). Yet, California's fast-food workers have few benefits, earn low wages, and are twice as likely to fall below the federal poverty line (UCLA Labor Center, 2022, p. 2). Additionally, fast-food workers are subjected to a number of safety and health hazards that historically have been dismissed or unaddressed (UCLA Labor Center 2021, p. 6). In this growing industry, many painful realities of unlawful labor practices and violations to basic health and safety standards are hidden.

Several issues that affect workers in the fast-food industry have been brought to light recently, including wage theft, violence, sexual harassment and retaliation, but one that deserves its own focus is environmental hazards (UCLA Labor Center, 2022, p. 3). Various types of environmental hazards can be present in the fast-food industry, and existing research has generally overlooked hazardous exposures to sewer water, sewer gas and drain back-ups; excessive smoke; gas leaks and mold; as well as exposure to excessive indoor heat.

The present study was done as part of the Summer 2022 Occupational Health Internship Program (OHIP) with guidance on research methods and policy implications from Dr. Kevin Riley, Director of the University of California, Los Angeles Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program (UCLA LOSH), and in collaboration with Fight for \$15 and a Union. The aim of this research was to investigate the environmental hazards fast-food workers in California are exposed to. The study consisted of two parts. The first was the identification of environmental hazards found in fast-food worksites. The second was a specific focus on indoor heat, due to the growing concern that this hazard will become worse with the changing climate. Through an exploratory approach, a qualitative lens was implemented in nine one-on-one interviews with fast-food workers and was combined with an analysis of 23 health and safety complaints fast-food workers submitted to agencies such as California Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA) and County Public Health Departments. Of the in-depth interviews, one focused on environmental hazards broadly, and eight focused on indoor heat. The interviews were conducted from June 27 to July 26, 2022. From the health and safety complaints, 19 worker testimonials pertained to indoor heat and 10 worker testimonials pertained to environmental hazards. These complaints were submitted from August 2020 to July 2022.

The following are key findings of this study:

1. Fast Food Workers' Experience With Biological and Chemical Hazards

Workers identified a number of biological and chemical hazards in the workplace.

These include:

a. Biological & Chemical Hazard - Sewer Water, Sewer Gas & Drain Issues

The most common reported biological and chemical hazards by workers were sewer water, drain backups, and sewer gas exposure in their work areas. Workers reported experiencing headaches and nausea due to these exposures.

b. Chemical Hazard - Excessive Smoke

The second most common biological and chemical hazard reported by workers was exposure to smoke. Workers described that they experienced headaches, coughing, stinging eyes, tightness in the chest and sore throat as a result of being exposed to excessive smoke.

c. Chemical Hazard - Gas Leaks

Gas leaks from broilers and steamers were also reported by workers. Not only did these gas leaks induce physical symptoms in workers, it also placed them in danger due to the explosive potential of gas. Workers shared that they informed managers of the hazard. At one location managers simply told workers to drink water instead of fixing the root cause of the issue.

d. Biological Hazard - Mold

Workers also reported the presence of mold in their worksites, both in kitchen equipment and in the building. Workers reported voicing concerns to management regarding the mold but no immediate action was taken.

2. Fast Food Workers' Experience With Indoor Heat-A Physical Hazard

a. Heat in the Workplace

Most workers who filed complaints about heat or were interviewed regarding their experiences with heat referred to the heat as excessive and an ongoing problem. Most named the kitchen as the hottest area, followed by the entire store. A majority of them felt that temperatures inside the fast-food store were just as hot, if not more so, than the outdoor temperatures, including during heat waves.

b. Mitigative Controls Present in the Workplace

A majority of the testimonials from fast-food workers interviewed and heat-related health and safety complaints filed by fast-food workers we reviewed mentioned that the heat was due to problems with the AC system or inadequate AC systems. Further, workers who had fans present in the workplace reported that the fans were mostly ineffective in cooling the workplace. Lastly, most workers reported not being allowed to take cooling/water breaks or regular legally-required rest breaks, and not having proper training on heat illness prevention.

c. Workers' Health

Excessive sweating, dizziness, and headaches were the most common symptoms workers reported experiencing due to the heat, with one workers reporting fainting due to the heat. Over 90% of workers in the combined heat interview and complaint group reported experiencing at least one heat-related symptom. However, workers reported feeling that they were unable to take any action, whether taking a cooling break or leaving work early, in fear of retaliation and due to financial need.

d. Managements' Role

A significant number of workers reported that they informed their managers about the heat problem; a lesser number reported informing their managers about heat-related symptoms they experienced. This may be due to a couple of reasons. First, workers reported that fear of retaliation prevented them from voicing concerns. Next, workers experienced management either invalidating their concerns or dismissing them entirely. Workers frequently reported in complaints and interviews that managers show blatant disregard for workers' well-being.



Recommendations

This report highlights a variety of environmental hazards fast-food workers are experiencing in their worksites. Based on our findings, we recommend:

1. Policies such as AB-257 which amplify workers' voices

Through our findings, we identified environmental hazards that are difficult to address through the current existing regulatory structures at Cal/OSHA and local health departments. Policies like AB-257 allow workers to have a say in setting industry-wide standards to ensure their health and safety and provide an alternative mechanism to address these hazards all the while giving workers' a voice in the matter (FAST Recovery Act, 2021).

2. Support for Cal/OSHA's Heat Standard for Indoor Worksites

We believe this standard to be essential and necessary to address present heat conditions as well as serve as a mitigative strategy to protect workers from a changing climate.

3. Collaboration Between Occupational Health and Environmental Health Organizations

Our findings support the relationship between occupational health and environmental health. Thus, we believe the industry can benefit from implementing and increasing collaboration between occupational health and environmental health organizations.

4. In-Depth Investigations and Probation Periods for Stores with Multiple Complaints

Through our findings, we found several examples of multiple complaints that had been filed against the same worksites to no avail. Thus, we propose the implementation of probation periods that include regular unannounced visits conducted to inspect stores and ensure that they are compliant with health and safety standards.

5. Further Research

Additional research is needed on the relationship between environmental hazards, the fast-food industry, and the effects on workers' health.

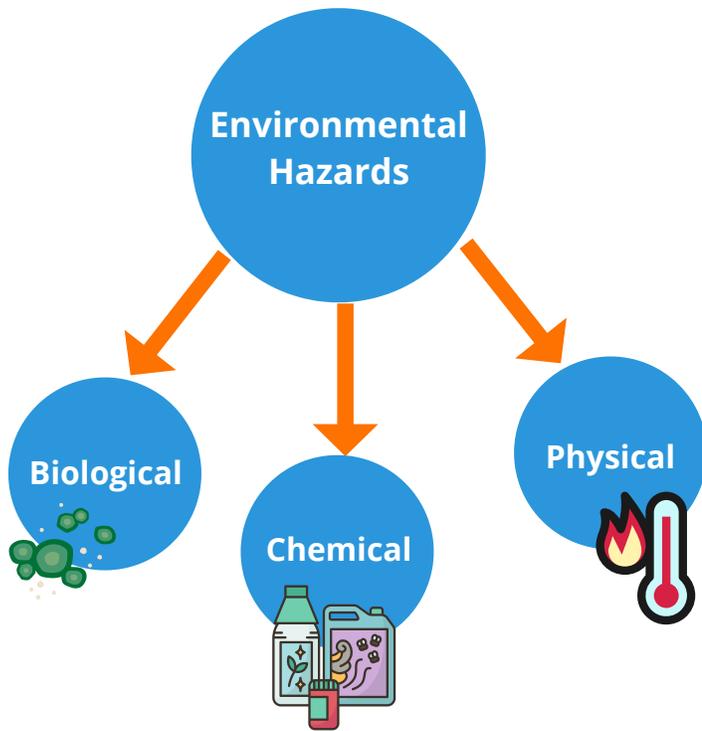
INTRODUCTION



With over half of million Californians employed in fast-food, the fast-food industry plays an integral role in California's economy (UCLA Labor Center, 2022). A closer look into these numbers show that California fast-food workers are typically people of color, low income, and two thirds of the workers are women (Jacobs, 2021). The fast-food industry is known for providing workers with low wages that impede workers from being able to provide for the basic needs of themselves and their families (Bellew et al., 2022, p. 4). Making matters worse, workers are forced to work in dangerous work environments that pose a risk to their health and safety. Previous studies have found that fast-food workers are often at risk of burns, slips and falls, and exposure to harmful chemicals that cause high rates of injuries (UCLA Labor Center, 2021, p. 6). Studies have also cited issues with workplace violence, retaliation, sexual harassment, and wage theft (UCLA Labor Center, 2021, p. 3).

However, the environmental hazards in the fast-food industry, beyond chemical spills and physical injuries, have not been properly assessed. Environmental hazards can affect workers' health in a number of ways, from acute responses (eg. heat stroke) to the onset of chronic diseases (eg. cancer). The type of environmental hazard present at the worksite varies depending on the job. Thus, in order to anticipate and be better prepared, each job site, as well as the actions of each job, must be assessed.

Environmental hazards are typically classified into three categories: (1) Biological, (2) Chemical, and (3) Physical. Biological hazards include, but are not limited to, fungi (mold), blood borne pathogens, bacteria, communicable diseases, etc. Chemical hazards include, but are not limited to, gasses, vapors, fumes, dust, fibers, and mists. Lastly, physical hazards include, but are not limited to, temperature, noise, radiation, and repetitive/awkward motions.



Vulnerability and susceptibility to environmental hazards can be compounded by certain demographic factors such as one's socioeconomic status, race, and age. The connection between vulnerability and other compounding factors is definitely concerning considering that about 60% of fast-food workers in California are Hispanic and Latinx—a population that studies have shown is more vulnerable to specific environmental hazards due to historic policy practices (Jacobs 2021, Our County 2021).

Excessive Indoor Heat (A Physical Environmental Hazard)

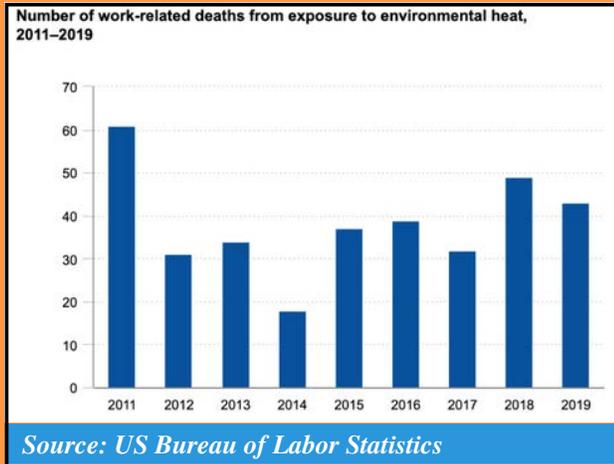
Every year the United States is experiencing hotter and drier temperatures for longer periods of time. Consequently, concern for heat-related illnesses has grown. Heat-related illnesses are induced from a combination of internal body heat from doing work and external heat exposure from the environment (MNDLI 2009, p. 1). The adverse effects of heat-related illnesses occur due to the body's inability to cool itself, which can result in severe and life-threatening impacts. Further, heat can also exacerbate pre-existing health conditions, such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases (Our County 2021, p. 40). Lastly, extreme heat appears to impact mental health, with studies showing correlations between extreme heat and depressive thoughts, insomnia episodes, and impaired cognitive function (Our County 2021, p. 40).

Certain populations are at greater risk for heat-related adverse effects, and there are disparities in the distribution of these risks. These populations include:

- Pregnant people and children
- Elderly people
- People of color
- People of low socioeconomic status
- People with disabilities
- People with pre-existing medical conditions
- People working in vulnerable occupations

Excessive Indoor Heat (A Physical Environmental Hazard) Cont.

Vulnerable Occupational Groups



From 2011-2019, 344 workers died due to environmental heat exposure (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Additionally, a study of California Workers' Compensation data found that temperatures significantly increased workplace injuries, accounting for approximately 20,000 injuries per year (Park et. al, 2021, p. 3). According to the authors, hotter temperatures significantly increase the likelihood of injuries for both indoor and outdoor occupations and can cause injuries, such as slips, falls, and mishandling of equipment,

not directly related to heat-related illnesses. (Park et. al, 2021, p. 2). In the workplace, extreme heat can also impact productivity, thereby impacting the economic livelihood of workers (Our County 2021, p. 46). When considering vulnerable occupational groups, heat-related adverse health impacts are often thought to only affect outdoor workers during hot days or extreme heat waves (Our County 2021, p. 48). However, workers in other occupations, such as manufacturing, transportation, and fast-food, frequently work in very hot temperatures without sufficient mitigation strategies in place (Our County 2021, p 48). Labor organizations have raised the issue that indoor temperatures in non-air conditioned worksites can exceed outdoor temperatures at times, resulting in dangerous working environments (Our County2021, p. 48). Further, local workers' rights organizations have cited a common fear of retaliation present in employees that prevents them from voicing concerns about heat stress (Our County 2021, p. 48).

Although exposures to environmental hazards pose a health risk, this topic has not been properly assessed in the fast-food industry. When health and safety are mentioned the focus is usually on issues pertaining to food safety, ergonomics, workplace violence, exposure to chemicals (like cleaning substances), and injuries (such as slips, cuts and burns) (YWSR 2009). These are important issues to mitigate and educate workers on. Nonetheless, this limited framework hinders worker safety by disregarding the many additional biological, chemical, and physical hazards fast-food workers face. Additionally, there is currently limited information available regarding worker health effects in relation to these environmental hazard exposures.

Beginning to understand and acknowledge the relationship between environmental hazards and worker health is important for a number of reasons. These include the current state of poor compliance with reporting requirements; the latency period between exposure and onset of some diseases; and, with the expected increase in hot temperatures, some issues are only expected to get worse. Lastly, by knowing and documenting which environmental hazards are present, we can better anticipate, prevent, and mitigate adverse health effects.

ABOUT THE STUDY



This report presents the findings of in-depth interviews conducted with fast-food workers, along with additional analysis drawn from complaints filed by fast-food workers with the Division of Occupational Safety and Health of California (Cal/OSHA) and County Public Health Departments. The in-depth interviews were conducted from June 27, 2022 to July 26, 2022. The complaints were filed from August 2020 to July 2022. Nine one-on-one interviews with fast-food workers, eight for indoor heat and one for environmental hazards, and 29 worker testimonials, acquired from 23 complaints filed by workers, were analyzed.

These findings are based on statements by workers from several fast-food chains, including McDonalds, Carl's Jr, Jack in the Box, Burger King, Taco Bell and KFC. The fast-food workplaces are located in the San Francisco, Sacramento, Los Angeles and San Diego metropolitan areas. This report presents findings from workers in various positions, such as cashier, fry cook, cook, supervisor, and some with multiple positions.

This report is divided into three parts:

- (1) Fast-food workers' experience with Biological and Chemical Environmental Hazards
- (2) Fast-food workers' experience with Indoor Heat-A Physical Environmental Hazard
- (3) Recommendations including a brief review of current policies

PART 1: BIOLOGICAL AND CHEMICAL ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

This section explores fast-food workers' experience with biological and chemical environmental hazards. The findings of this section are based on 11 worker testimonials, 10 of those acquired from complaints filed by workers and one from an in-depth interview.

a. Biological & Chemical Hazards - Sewer Water, Sewer Gas & Drain Issues

Sewer and drain backups and sewer gas exposures were the most common hazards among the biological and chemical hazards reported. Drain backups were reported to be coming from places such as the restroom, the drain under the soda machine, the kitchen, the hallway, the lobby, the bathrooms, the break room, and outside where the driveway is. These backups resulted in floods and strong smells of sewage. As a result, workers commonly reported headaches and nausea. In her sixth health complaint to the Los Angeles County Public Health Department, one worker explained that sewage floods were a frequent occurrence, among other health and safety hazards. She stated:

"There is an ongoing problem with sewers and drains backing up and causing flooding in the restaurant, which happens about 10 times a year...I have experienced about 100 of these floods. I am worried that exposure to sewer water and flood water could make me sick...The store has remained open during these sewer water and drainage floods. About 3-4 times a year there are sewer water back-ups in the store that smell terrible, like human waste."

- McDonald's Worker, Littlerock, CA

In their complaints to county offices and Cal/OSHA, workers described how these issues affected their ability to perform their job because they were worried about the risks of working directly with sewer water at their feet or in different spaces in their workplaces. Workers expressed that fixing drain issues to prevent ongoing floods was an urgent need that was unmet by the stores.

b. Chemical Hazard - Excessive Smoke

The second highest reported hazard among the biological and chemical hazards reported was exposure to excessive smoke. Workers reported that they experienced headaches, coughing, stinging eyes, tightness in the chest and sore throat due to excessive smoke exposure. A McDonald's worker shared their experience of excessive smoke exposure due to the lack of airflow.

They shared:

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

- McDonald's Worker, Carson, CA

In another example, a worker described that a broken exhaust fan was the root cause of excessive smoke in her workplace. She stated:

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

-McDonald's Worker, Monterey Park, CA

Additionally, some workers highlighted that management offered them water to help mitigate the exposure to excessive smoke. Yet, workers stated that drinking water was not the best approach to combating smoke exposure. These workers wanted the issue of excessive smoke to be corrected by providing proper ventilation.

c. Chemical Hazard - Gas Leaks

Workers at two locations stated that they were exposed to gas leaks from kitchen equipment, and that management did not take action to protect worker health and prevent a potential explosion until after complaints were filed by workers with CalOSHA . Workers endured headaches and burning eyes as a result of the gas exposures. A Taco Bell worker described in his interview how he was unaware that they were being exposed to a gas leak. He stated:

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

- Taco Bell Worker, Los Angeles, CA

Another worker also shared that gas leaks impacted their health. They disclosed:

***"The broiler for hamburger patties has been leaking gas for a month...we are also worried about our health, and several kitchen workers are experiencing ongoing headaches from exposure to gas."
-Burger King Worker, San Diego, CA***

Not only are these gas leaks dangerous to a worker's health, they are also an imminent danger. These gas leaks place workers' lives at risk because they can cause an explosion. Despite workers' deep concern about their safety, it can be seen that their health and safety is jeopardized by their employers' negligence. The long time frames these gas leakages were ongoing show a disregard for worker safety and health.

d. Biological Hazard - Mold

Mold was reported to be in two worksites. Workers expressed concern for their safety because they are aware of the health risks that follow mold exposure. A Jack in the Box worker said that she was surprised to learn that there was mold in her workplace. She emphasizes:

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

Another worker, from a Taco Bell in Los Angeles, shared during their interview that several workers saw mold in the building and told management about it, and that management did not immediately protect them from the hazard. Further this worker disclosed that his coworkers voiced their concerns about the mold problem. However, despite more workers voicing their concerns nothing was done immediately to mitigate the mold in the store. The workers were exposed to a safety risk by their employers' failure to keep the work environment free from mold.

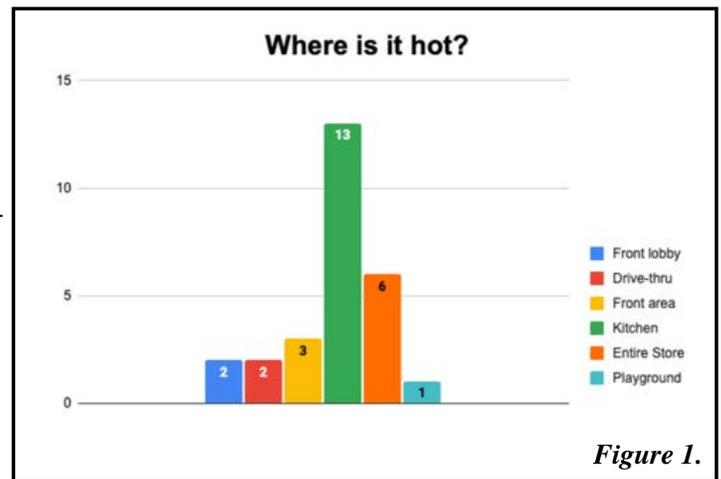
PART 2: EXCESSIVE INDOOR HEAT-A PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARD

This section explores fast-food workers' experience with indoor heat, assesses mitigative measures in place and workers' health in relation to heat, and explores managements' response to the problem of excessive indoor heat. The findings of this section are based on 27 worker testimonials, eight from in-depth interviews and 19 acquired from 13 complaints workers filed.

a. Heat in the Workplace

"Just as hot, if not more, than the outside"

The word “**excessive**” was commonly used to describe the heat inside the stores. In her complaint, one worker used the word “**calientísimo**”-super hot - when describing her store. Another worker shared how he and his coworkers would tell each other “**Welcome to Hell**” at the start of every shift due to the heat. The kitchen was most commonly named as the hottest part in the store, followed by the entire store (*Figure 1*). Additionally, multiple workers



reported that indoor temperatures felt just as hot, or even hotter, than outdoor temperatures during heat waves. On top of that, workers felt excessively hot even in winter and during the evening times when outdoor temperatures were much cooler. In her complaint, a Burger King worker from Sacramento shared how on a day when it was 111°F degrees outside, inside the store it felt just as hot as outside. This observation was shared by various workers, including a McDonald's worker from Santa Clara. The McDonald's worker from Santa Clara shared that the front area, where she works, felt hotter than the outside temperatures that averaged in the 80s and 90s. To her, her worksite feels hot even when she arrives at work for her 5pm shift, when the temperature is a bit cooler outside.

When describing their worksites, some workers shared:

“It is 98 degrees outside today and it feels hotter inside the kitchen where I work, because there is no breeze inside and the grill and fryer next to the grill are very hot”.-Jack in the Box Worker, Santa Clara, CA

“Even if it's not super hot outside, it can be super hot in the store, especially in the kitchen.”-McDonald's Worker, San Jose, CA

A few workers were able to validate this feeling of indoor temperatures being excessive with digital thermometer and/or store thermostat readings. One example of this was a Jack in the Box worker in San Diego. During his interview, the worker recalled that the kitchen at his job reached **102-105°F**. Similarly, in her complaint, a Burger King worker in Sacramento reported that the thermometer in the back of the store was reading **92°F** in the evening time. In their joint complaint, two McDonald's workers in San Jose reported that during the month of November, the temperature in the kitchen was **above 90°F** even though the temperature outside was only 71°F.

Multiple workers recalled being questioned by customers regarding the heat. One worker shared:

"A customer asked me, 'How can you stand being here for even 5 minutes?'. I told him, 'I need to pay my bills'."
-Carl's Jr Worker, San Francisco, CA

Workers from Burger King and McDonalds had similar experiences. A Burger King worker from Sacramento said on a hot day in which the outside temperature was 90°F nearly every customer told her that it was hotter in the store than outside.

"Ongoing Known Problem"

Eighteen workers out of 27 cited excessive heat in the workplace as an ongoing, known, or constant problem. Ten of them were able to estimate how long the problem has been going on. This ranged from two weeks to eight years. In her complaint, a McDonald's worker from San Jose said that the problem with heat has been terrible since she started working at that location, which was eight years ago. Others referred to the heat as a "longtime problem" and one that has been present "for as long as we can remember".

b. Mitigation Strategies Present in the Workplace

Air Conditioning Systems

Twenty-four workers out of 27 said the heat in the store was related to issues with air conditioning systems. Most commonly cited was the AC being broken, followed by AC that worked in some areas, AC not being turned on, and, lastly, two workers were unsure why the store was hot but believed it was AC-related.

Table 1.

Reason	% of Workers
AC broken	66%
AC partially works	22%
Supervisors don't turn on AC	4%
Unknown	8%

Cooling Fans

Eight workers out of 27 reported having fans in their workplace at some point. Most workers reported that the fans did not help very much to cool them down. In some cases, workers reported that the fans made them feel worse as they were blowing hot air directly on to them.

One worker, in their complaint, stated:

"There is a fan in the front lobby area, but the air from the fan is very hot and I think it makes it worse."

-McDonald's Worker, Santa Clara, CA

Heat Illness Prevention Plans/Training

Table 2.

Heat Illness Prevention	Yes	No
Does management allow you & encourage you to take cooling breaks?	1	14
Does management allow you to & encourage you to drink extra water when it is too hot?	1	14
Does management train you to avoid heat illness?	N/A	13
Does management train you to identify symptoms of heat stress?	N/A	13
Does management train you on what to do if you or your coworkers have symptoms of heat illness?	1	11

Although only applicable for outdoor workers, Cal/OSHA's Heat Illness Prevention standard requires employers to provide training, water, shade, and planning in order to prevent heat illness (Heat Illness Prevention in Outdoor Places of Employment, 2005). Thus, the prevalence of cooling breaks, water breaks, and heat illness training was analyzed. Most workers reported receiving no cooling or water breaks, and no training on how to prevent, identify, and respond to heat illness. Some of their experiences, as reported on their complaints, are shared below:

"Management has not provided any training or implemented any plan, such as water and cooling breaks, to reduce exposure to excessive heat and prevent indoor heat illness."

-McDonald's Worker, Santa Clara, CA

"I try to drink water to stay hydrated, but the manager told me to stop drinking so much water because then I have to go to the bathroom."

-McDonald's Worker, Oakland, CA

"We aren't allowed to take water breaks or cooling breaks...there is no one to cover us, so we also aren't allowed to take the 10-minute rest break as required, which could also be an opportunity to drink water."

-Burger King Worker, Campbell, CA

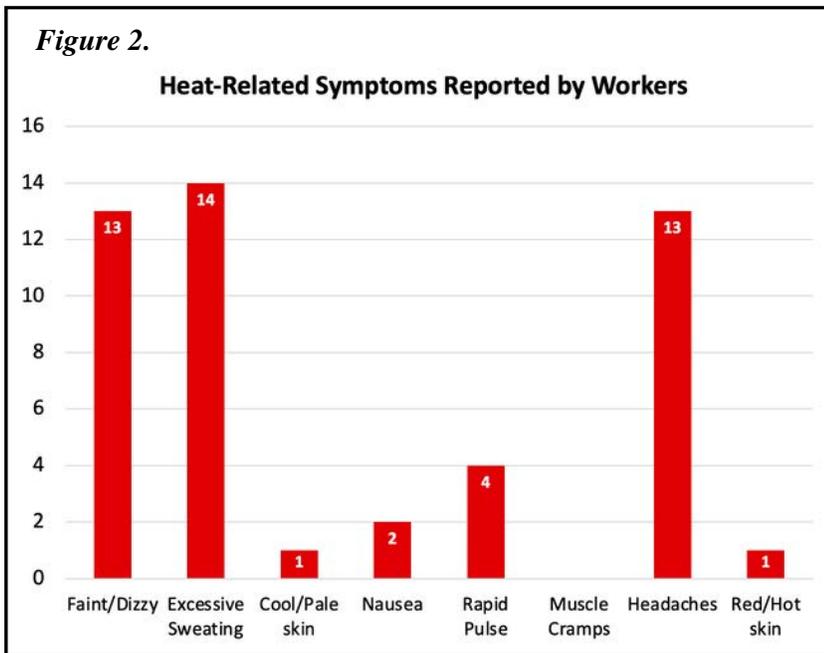
c. Workers' Health

"Constant Discomfort"

Twenty-five out of 27 workers reported feeling at least one heat-related symptom. Out of those 25, 40% reported one heat-related symptom, 36% reported two symptoms, 16% reported three symptoms, and 8% reported four symptoms (*Table 3*). The most common symptoms reported by workers were: excessive sweating, dizziness and headaches (*Figure 2*).

Table 3.

Heat-Related Symptoms Reported by Workers	% of Workers
1 symptom	40%
2 symptoms	36%
3 symptoms	16%
4 symptoms	8%



Although the symptoms varied in severity, most shared the feeling of being constantly uncomfortable during their shifts. Additionally, multiple workers shared how uncomfortable they felt because they were sweating so often. One worker, during his interview, shared that he would sweat so much that he would have to change his shirt two to three times a shift.

Some workers shared:

*"I am six months pregnant, and the excessive heat in the store makes me feel terribly uncomfortable."
-McDonald's Worker, San Jose, CA*

*"I told my manager that I couldn't work in this heat due to my heart condition. I constantly felt uncomfortable and chest pain."
-McDonald's Worker, San Francisco, CA*

"Must Put Up With the Heat"

When workers were asked if they ever experienced certain scenarios, such as leaving work early due to the heat, 10 of the 27 who were interviewed about heat or filed heat-related health and safety complaints expressed that they could not leave work early (**Table 4**). Commonly cited reasons were financial needs or fear that management would then cut their hours. Some workers shared the following statements:

Table 4.

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

*"I have never left work early, because I need the money, so I have to wait and put up with it."-
McDonald's Worker, Oakland, CA*

*"No one goes home early because we are scared to talk to the supervisor and we need the hours."-
McDonald's Worker, San Jose, CA*

d. Managements' Role

Table 5.

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

"Climate of Fear"

Although a significant number of workers in this sample informed supervisors about the heat condition (**Table 5**), the fear of retaliation was still present in both study participants and their coworkers. Even during one of the interviews conducted, the worker was uncomfortable disclosing their last name and worksite address due to the fear of her employer finding her statements. When describing their work environment, some workers shared:

"...there is a climate of fear where coworkers do not speak up and take action for safety, for fear of having hours and/or days cut from our schedule."-McDonald's Worker, San Jose, CA

*"We are all experiencing problems with excessive heat, but everyone is afraid to speak up, because of fears of retaliation and losing our jobs."-
McDonald's Worker, Oakland, CA*

*"[there's] a workplace climate where coworkers keep heads down, don't speak up...and don't speak up about safety."-
Carl's Jr, San Francisco, CA*

"Management's Blatant Dismissal of Employees' Concerns/Well-Being"

Workers repeatedly experienced management dismissing or invalidating their concerns regarding excessive heat. One worker shared: “They [management] never asked us how we are doing when it’s hot. That makes me feel like management has very little regard for my health”. Likewise, another worker shared a similar sentiment saying, “management doesn’t care if it is too hot for workers”. One worker cited manager’s indifference as the reason why they didn’t bother informing managers whenever they felt heat-related symptoms.

However, a significant number of workers shared that they did try asking or reporting the heat to their supervisors, which often led nowhere. A few workers reported that management would make promises, that either the AC would be turned on or get fixed, but that it never happened. Multiple workers reported that their managers would say “I already submitted a request for the AC to get fixed” but it never happened.

Furthermore, workers shared that managers would invalidate their concerns. For example, a McDonald’s worker from Santa Clara shared that whenever she asked the manager about the heat, the manager would tell her that the AC is already working. On the other hand, other workers reported that their supervisor simply told them that the store was not hot.

A Burger King worker from Sacramento shared her experience that when she requested to leave early as she was feeling dizzy and lightheaded, her manager threatened to write her up and then carried through on that threat when she could no longer take it and left anyway.

The following are some workers' testimonials in relation to managements' involvement:

"Everyone complains about the heat, and the manager says 'It is what it is'."

-McDonald's Worker, Santa Clara, CA

"The managers say, 'Aguantate' which means 'Put up with it.'"

-McDonald's Worker, Los Angeles, CA

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

-KFC Worker, San Diego, CA

PART 3: RECOMMENDATIONS

This report shows that fast-food workers are being exposed to a variety of environmental hazards; from smoke (chemical hazard) and mold (biological hazard), to excessive heat (physical hazard). Further, this report shows that the workers have voiced their concerns to their superiors but conditions have yet to improve. Based on our results, our recommendations are as follows:

1. Policies such as AB-257 which amplify workers' voices

Through our findings, we identified environmental hazards that are inadequately addressed through the current existing regulatory structures at Cal/OSHA and local health departments. Policies like AB-257 allow workers to have a say in setting industry-wide standards to ensure their health and safety and provide an alternative mechanism to address these hazards. Workers know what is happening in this industry and need a voice in setting and enforcing standards. Additionally, AB-257 ensures greater accountability from fast-food corporations.

California's AB-257: The Fast Food Accountability and Recovery Act

Setting and enforcing standards in the fast-food industry is challenging due to a number of reasons. Thus, AB-257 has been proposed (FAST Recovery Act, 2021). AB-257 would:

- Create a 13-member Fast Food Sector Council in the Department of Industrial Relations chaired by the state Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development and including representatives from the Division of Occupational Safety & Health, the Division of Labor Standards Enforcement, the Department of Industrial Relations, fast-food franchisors, fast-food franchisees, fast-food workers and their advocates. This council will be tasked with setting industry-wide minimum standards.
- Hold fast-food corporations jointly accountable with franchisees for establishing safe working environments.



2. Support for Cal/OSHA's Proposed Heat Standard for Indoor Worksites



Cal/OSHA's Proposed Indoor Heat Illness Prevention Standard

In 2017, Cal/OSHA began the process of developing a heat standard for indoor workers. Under this standard, some of the things employers would be required to do are (Heat Illness Prevention in Indoor Places of Employment, 2019):

- Maintain indoor temperature and heat index below 87 degrees when employees are present
- In high radiant heat work areas, such as a kitchen, employers would be required to maintain the temperature below 82 degrees or have employees wear clothing that restricts heat
- Implement Heat Illness Prevention Training/Plans
- Provide water and access to cool-down areas maintained below 82 degrees

There's been some pushback from stakeholders; one of them being the California Restaurant Association (CRA). The CRA has cited concerns with lowering heat in kitchens violating food codes, asserted that employees have readily access to water, and that annual training of employees at each workplace may not be necessary because some workers have more than one job. Our findings, however, show an urgent need for this standard. The heat in fast-food stores was excessive, workers reported not having readily accessible water due to current health codes and not being allowed to take cooling/water breaks as needed or even legally-required rest breaks, and a general indifference seen in management towards workers' well-being and a climate of fear and retaliation against workers who do speak up.

Further, our findings show that temperatures in the kitchens are not just a result of hot ovens and other radiant sources, but mainly due to inadequate or broken AC equipment. As temperatures keep rising due to climate change, this standard will serve to protect workers and customers who use facilities from future climate-related health risks.

3. Collaboration Between Occupational Health and Environmental Health Organizations

For the industry, we recommend initiating or increasing the collaboration between occupational health and environmental health organizations, such as Cal/OSHA, Cal/EPA, and/or County Public Health Departments. In January 2021, the EPA and OSHA signed an agreement supporting coordination on chemical exposure reviews. Under this agreement, a framework was developed to better coordinate and communicate between each other on exposure to chemicals in the workplace (U.S. EPA, 2021). We believe partnerships like this one can be applied to other environmental hazards in worksites, such as the ones discussed in this report.

4. In-Depth Investigations and Probation Periods for Stores with Multiple Complaints

We found that there are stores that have multiple complaints about hazards in the workplace that affect worker health and safety. This shows that stores are not being compliant with labor standards. Therefore, we propose in-depth investigations and a probation period for stores with multiple complaints. Through this probation period, regular visits would be conducted to inspect stores and ensure that they are compliant with health and safety standards.

5. Further Research

We found existing research on hazards in the fast-food industry has generally overlooked hazardous exposures to sewer water, sewer gas and drain back-ups; excessive smoke; gas leaks and mold; as well as exposure to excessive indoor heat. Further research is needed to identify the full range of environmental hazards in fast-food workplaces and to quantify their effects on workers' health.



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