



Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on NYC Transit Workers: Pilot Study Findings

Robyn Gershon, DrPH | October 2020



A pilot study on transit workers was conducted by researchers at the NYU School of Global Public Health. The objective was to better understand the potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the health and wellbeing of Transport Workers Union (TWU) members (NYC transit workers) and to make recommendations to improve on-the-job safety.

In August, 2020, a brief anonymous survey link was sent to a convenience sample of TWU members (approx. 3,000). In a little over three weeks, more than 700 transit workers responded, with completed questionnaires obtained from 645 workers. The demographics of the survey participants mirror the demographics of the larger Local 100 membership in terms of gender (predominantly male), race and ethnicity (predominantly Black and Hispanic), and age (average 51 years).

Key Findings:

Possibly many more transit workers were infected than previously thought.

- Nearly one-quarter (24%) of the sample reported a history of Covid-19 infection. This was determined by answering “yes” to *one or more* of the following questions: (1) told by their doctor that they had Covid infection; (2) had a positive Covid diagnostic test; (3) had a positive Covid antibody test, and/or (4) was hospitalized with Covid -19 infection. People who reported a history of Covid infection were significantly more likely to have known a co-worker who had tested positive. People who had to stay in home quarantine because of a known exposure at work were also significantly more likely to report a history of Covid infection.
 - This proportion of self-reported Covid infection is much higher than the NYS data shared by Governor Cuomo on May 13, 2020, where 14.2% of transit workers in downstate tested positive for Covid-19 antibodies, indicating that they had been infected with the Covid virus at some point. At the time, 19.9% of New York City's general population and 12.2% of downstate healthcare workers had antibodies.
 - The reason for higher results in our survey might include, for example, the fact that the survey was conducted two months after the antibody test results were reported in May. Also, our study did not include any antibody testing and relied solely on self-reported responses.
- There was no difference noted in Covid infection rates based on transit division (bus vs. subway, race, ethnicity, gender, or age). There was a slight tendency of female bus drivers to report Covid infection compared to female subway workers.
- A sizeable proportion (38%) had to be on home quarantine because of exposure to Covid-19.

Nearly all (90%) transit workers in our August 2020 sample were concerned about getting sick at work.

- They were significantly more fearful of contagion at work compared to contagion outside of work (in the community).
- A substantial portion of the sample (roughly 4 out of 10) have one or more underlying health problems that could increase their risk of adverse Covid infection outcomes.
- Nearly three-quarters (72%) are fearful of long-term health impacts of Covid-19 infection.

- Their most serious concern is about passengers not wearing masks.
- There is also fear because of difficulties maintaining social distancing from co-workers and lack of mask use of some co-workers.

System-wide symptom monitoring and tracing

- Roughly half the participants said they are aware of symptom monitoring, workers being sent home because of having symptoms, or workers being sent home because they may have been exposed at work.

Availability of PPE, safety supplies, and sanitary protocols

- These were significantly more available in July/August 2020 compared to the time before NYC Pause (March 22, 2020).

Over 70% are fearful for their safety at work.

- Cause of fear included: riders not wearing masks; riders getting angry when asked to wear a mask; riders attacking them if asked to wear a mask; riders attacking them if they don't enforce mask use on other riders.

Mental health/quality of life problems related to the pandemic were not uncommon.

- More than half (60%) reported feeling "nervous, anxious, on-edge, and cannot control worrying."
- A number (15%) reported feeling "isolated, down, depressed or hopeless."
- Sleep problems were reported by 10%
- A very high proportion (91%) knew someone at work who had gotten infected with the Covid-19 virus, and 76% personally knew someone at work who had died.

Lack of trust was evident.

- Only 30% intend to receive the Covid vaccine when it becomes available; 32% say they would not take it and 38% are not sure. The main reason for not taking it or being unsure was the *lack of trust* in its safety.
- The main sources of trusted, reliable information included: personal healthcare provider, CDC, Governor Cuomo, and the TWU leadership. A sizeable proportion said they no longer trust *anyone*.

Sources of strength during this challenging time

- Their main sources of strength were their family and friends and their faith.

Research Team:

- Robyn Gershon, DrPH, Clinical Professor of Epidemiology, NYU School of Global Public Health
- Alexis Merdjanoff, PhD, Clinical Assistant Professor of Social and Behavioral Sciences, NYU School of Global Public Health
- Rachael Piltch-Loeb, PhD, Postdoctoral Preparedness Fellow at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Associate Research Scientist at NYU School of Global Public Health
- David Vlahov, PhD, RN, FAAN, Professor, Yale School of Nursing and Yale School of Public Health
- Beverly-Xaviera Watkins, PhD, Disparities Researcher
- Jonathan Rosen, MS, Industrial Hygienist
- Martin Sherman, PhD, Project Statistician, Professor Emeritus, Loyola University, Maryland