

Mapping the Impacts of COVID-19 on Hotel Workers in the GTA

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INTRODUCTION

In the midst of a pandemic, the impacts of employment and working conditions on health have never been clearer. Racialized and low-income female workers are more likely to be working on the frontlines and have disproportionately borne the harms of the pandemic—particularly economic hardship and job loss.¹

The hotel and accommodations sector is one of the hardest-hit industries. Hotels have continued providing frontline, labour-intensive services to the public throughout the pandemic while also experiencing historically low occupancy levels resulting in mass layoffs.^{2,3} This raises occupational health and safety concerns for workers still on the job as well as job and income insecurity concerns for laid-off workers—both of which have significant impacts on workers' health and well-being. It is also a highly segmented labour force with lower-paid cleaning staff, for example, who are predominately female, racialized, immigrant, or migrant workers.⁴ This raises health equity concerns that must be understood and addressed.

The purpose of this report is to:

1. identify the emerging health and health equity impacts of COVID-19 on hotel workers in the Greater Toronto Area, particularly with regard to occupational health and safety and job and income security;
2. understand the adequacy of existing policies and protections aimed at supporting the health and well-being of workers; and
3. highlight opportunities for addressing emerging health and health equity impacts and any inadequacies that may exist with policies and protections. Highlighting opportunities and inadequacies will help to flag issues for stakeholders—policymakers, unions, employers, and social service providers—concerned with the health of hotel workers.

BACKGROUND

An overview of hotel workers in the GTA and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the industry

In 2018, 26,120 Toronto GTA residents were employed in the accommodations industry (i.e., businesses that provide short-term lodging to travelers, including hotels and motels).⁵

Immigrant workers are overrepresented in the accommodations labour force, including hotels. In 2018, 64.7 percent of accommodation employees were landed immigrants* compared with 49.0 percent of all GTA employees.⁶ Overall, the percentage of female accommodations workers (45.0 percent) is comparable to the GTA average (47.6 percent).

However, when looking at the makeup of common occupations employed in accommodations and hospitality industries, it is clear how segmented this labour force is by gender, immigrant status, and race. For example, most light-duty cleaners in the city of Toronto are female, racialized, immigrant or migrant workers who make well below the average annual income of other hotel occupations and other Toronto workers (see Table 1). In contrast, accommodations service managers make on average more than double that of cleaners and are more likely to be white and Canadian-born compared to other hotel occupations and Toronto workers.

Table 1: Demographics by occupations in city of Toronto/Toronto Public Health region (2016 Census Data compiled by ONET/PHO)⁷

	Light duty cleaner (including hotel housekeepers)	Hotel front desk clerks	Support occupations in accommodations, travel and facilitates set up	Accommodation service managers	All occupations in the city of Toronto
Number	3,355	1,505	285	995	1,419,225
Percent female	79%	51%	11%	51%	50%
Percent visible minority	87%	66%	77%	42%	47%
Percent immigrant	89%	52%	67%	42%	48%
Percent non-permanent resident	3%	6%	0%	4%	3%
Median income	\$20,572	\$32,861	\$27,629	\$42,160	\$45,202

* The language ‘landed immigrant’ is used interchangeably with ‘permanent resident’.

Another feature of the accommodation sector in the GTA that is relevant to working conditions and occupational health and safety is relatively high unionization rates. Although more than half of workers in accommodations are not unionized, workers in accommodations in the GTA are much more likely to be unionized (41.2 per cent) compared to all GTA workers (18.0 per cent).⁸ Union representation in the GTA hotel sector is fragmented. UNITE HERE Local 75 represents a significant number of hotel and hospitality workers in the GTA but several other unions also represent hotel workers such as Unifor and UFCW Canada.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on hotels and workers

Although hotels have been permitted to stay open throughout the pandemic, federal and provincial restrictions aimed at curtailing the pandemic have significantly restricted hotel operations. This has included significant federal travel restrictions, border closures, and intermittent provincial restrictions on inter-provincial travel to (and within) Ontario. These restrictions have had a significant impact on the demand for hotel rooms.^{9,10} Provincial restrictions on indoor dining, amenities, and large events such as weddings and conferences have also impacted hotel operations.¹¹

These restrictions and reduced demand have resulted in significant job losses for workers in accommodation. Hotels laid off many workers at the start of the pandemic in 2020, and employment in the accommodation industry continues to rise and fall in line with public health restrictions. Overall annual average employment in the accommodations industry across Canada fell 30 per cent between 2019 and 2020, with 56,000 workers losing their jobs.¹² Canada lost more than half a million jobs since the beginning of the pandemic, and more than two-thirds of these jobs are in accommodations and food services.¹³

While many hotel workers were laid off, some have continued to work at hotels throughout the pandemic as many buildings were turned into voluntary isolation centres or mandatory traveler quarantine facilities. The Public Health Agency of Canada, the Ontario government, and local public health units established approximately 1,000 hotel rooms for individuals who cannot self-isolate at home.¹⁴ In February 2021, the federal government began requiring that international travel arriving in Canada by air complete a mandatory three-day quarantine in a government-approved hotel, including at least 19 hotels near Toronto Pearson Airport.¹⁵

This report aims to better understand how the health and well-being of hotel workers may have been impacted during COVID-19 in the Greater Toronto Area while highlighting distinctive working conditions and impacts on lower-paid positions within the industry including housekeepers who clean guest rooms.

METHODS

This report was informed by:

1. a policy environment scan to understand the relevant existing and changing legal and policy frameworks; and
2. consultations with select subject matter experts to better understand the COVID-19 context and adequacy of the policy response in practice.

The policy scan included a review of the existing and new protections that are available to workers through Ontario's *Employment Standards Act, 2000*, S.O., c. 41 [ESA] and *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, R.S.O. 1990 c. O.1 [OHSA] as well as a review of the *Health Promotion and Protection Act*, R.S.O. 1990 c. H.7, which guides public health responsibilities and powers. The scan also included a review of relevant COVID-19 federal and Ontario plans, and guidance provided by the government, public health, the hotel sector, and occupational health and safety organizations. This information was used to inform the consultations with subject matter experts.

Ten subject matter experts were consulted to better understand the COVID-19 context and how existing protections aimed at supporting the health and well-being of hotel workers may work in practice. Subject matter experts were identified and selected based on their expertise in at least one of the following three areas: 1) the hotel and accommodations sector; 2) occupational health and safety; 3) job and income security. Their knowledge and experience ranged from providing direct support to workers, to advocacy, and engaging in relevant research and policy work. Questions focused on the impacts of COVID-19 on hotel workers in the GTA, the adequacy of existing protections and supports, and what more could be done to better support the health and well-being of hotel workers. The findings from the consultations and analysis are presented below.

FINDINGS

This report is divided to focus on two important employment-related drivers of health for hotel and accommodation workers in the GTA:

1. occupational health and safety concerns for workers who continued working during the COVID-19 pandemic
2. health impacts of job and income loss for hotel workers who lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

Each section includes a description of the key supports and protections, an overview of emerging health impacts of COVID-19 for hotel workers, an assessment of the adequacy of existing supports and protections, and opportunities to protect workers' health.

Occupational health and safety

Ontario workers have a right to be safe as possible from health hazards at work. Exposure to COVID-19—an infectious respiratory disease that has caused significant suffering, death, and long-term illness—is a workplace hazard that requires employers take adequate precautions and controls to reduce risk of exposure for workers.¹⁶

Ontario's *Occupational Health and Safety Act* lays out the responsibilities and rights of all workplace parties with the goal of protecting workers from health and safety hazards at work.¹⁷ While the Act includes enforcement mechanisms, it also relies on self-compliance through strong internal responsibility systems [IRS] in workplaces. IRS are grounded in the idea that everyone has a role to play in keeping the workplace safe. Employers are responsible for establishing a strong IRS system, ensuring workers are aware of hazards, and taking every reasonable precaution to protect workers. Employees are responsible for participating in OHS programs, reporting hazards, and working safely. Most workplaces need to have a joint health and safety committee made up of both workers and managers who are supposed to ensure the effectiveness of the internal responsibility system. Three rights are also given to workers under OHSA, including the right to stop or refuse work that employees believe is unsafe without reprisal from their employer.

In addition to OHSA, the *Employment Standards Act* outlines employment rights for most employees working in Ontario. It includes standards related to minimum wage, hours of work, sick days, leaves of absence, severance pay, and termination of employment/temporary layoffs.¹⁸ In April 2021 the ESA was amended and the COVID-19 Worker Income Protection Benefit was created.¹⁹ This temporary program requires employers to provide up to three days paid sick leave to employees for COVID-19 related reasons (e.g., get tested, wait for results, self-isolate, get vaccinated, care for relatives).

The Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development is responsible for ensuring compliance and investigating complaints related to OHSA and the ESA.^{20,21} They have also been working with the Ministry of Health and Public Health Ontario to provide support and guidance to employers on precautions they should take to protect their workers from the virus (e.g., precautions around cleaning and disinfectants, personal protective equipment (PPE), and social distancing).²² In addition to general guidance provided to all workplaces by the provincial government and local public health units, sector specific guidance has also been provided by some local public health units,²³ health and safety associations,²⁴ unions,²⁵ and hotel and lodging associations.²⁶

Risk of COVID-19 exposure for hotel workers

Many subject matter experts pointed to the fact that certain hotel staff, such as housekeepers who clean guest rooms, must go in to work to perform their roles and responsibilities and face risks of COVID-19 workplace exposure if proper control measures are not in place. While at work they may be in contact with other hotel staff and with guests who have been exposed to or are considered to be at risk of having COVID-19 and may therefore have increased exposure.

Experts also highlighted that hotel workers may face additional COVID-19 exposure during long public transit commutes to downtown Toronto hotels, and risk further transmission to their families and communities, particularly if they live in housing arrangements where they are in close contact with others (e.g., apartment complexes, intergenerational living).

Subject matter experts described that those who are currently working often do not want to put themselves at risk but have little choice as they rely on the income to meet their needs. They also noted that those who are not currently working have concerns about returning and expressed that this could lead to hotel workers seeking employment elsewhere causing retention and re-hiring issues for the sector.

Potential physical and mental health harms of COVID-19

If workers are not adequately protected from COVID-19 exposure at work, it can lead to adverse physical health impacts as a result of COVID-19 infection. Subject matter experts explained that hotel workers in Toronto are worried and fearful of infection at work, particularly those who are older, have pre-existing health conditions, and/or have families to care for.

In addition to the harms of infection, one expert also raised that a lack of workplace precautions can lead to adverse mental health impacts. Ontario research suggests that workers with perceived unmet COVID protection needs (i.e., an infection control procedure, appropriate PPE) are more likely to have greater levels of anxiety and depression.^{27,28}

Beyond COVID-19 exposure: Potential health impacts of cleaning and workload intensification for hotel housekeepers

In addition to COVID-19 infection, experts raised another pre-existing but unresolved OHS issue that the pandemic could exacerbate: injuries and illness due to intense cleaning workloads and exposure to cleaning agents for hotel housekeepers.

Hotel housekeeping is a physically demanding job. Existing research indicates that there is a significant association between increasing workload and musculoskeletal pain (e.g., back pain, neck pain) among hotel housekeepers.^{29,30}

In response to COVID, a number of infection control procedures have been recommended by the province³¹ and hotel industry³² including increasing cleaning frequency of commonly touched surfaces and using specific types of cleaning agents.

Experts were concerned that if housekeepers' workloads (i.e., room quotas) are not reduced to allow them to safely complete additional cleaning tasks, hotel housekeepers could face increased risks of workplace injury and strain. They also expressed concern about the potential impact of more hazardous cleaning chemicals on workers' physical health (e.g., skin reactions) if they are not adequately trained and protected.

Adequacy of occupational health and safety protections

Experts pointed out that hotel workplaces have different cultures and resources which affects the value placed on occupational health and safety and the amount of time, energy, and money invested in it. When it is valued and the workplace's internal responsibility system works well, then many OHS issues can be identified and resolved. But when it is not valued and the system fails (e.g., workplaces do not have adequate OHS policies and procedures in place, workers are not aware of their rights, or workers do not feel safe identifying hazards to managers or stopping unsafe work) employees are at greater risk of workplace injury and illness, which is supported by Ontario research on occupational health and safety vulnerability.³³ This raises concerns about the safety of workers from COVID-19 exposure as well as exposure to cleaning chemicals and harmful workloads.

Several experts indicated that precarious employment conditions (e.g., temporary, contract, and part-time positions) diminish the effectiveness of OHS protections and the internal responsibility system in practice. The more fearful workers are of losing their hours or jobs, the more difficult it is for them to raise occupational health and safety concerns and exercise their rights.

While employers are prohibited from firing employees who exercise their OSHA rights, in practice employers can later let workers go without cause, which is permissible under the Employment Standards Act. Thus, employment legislation may not adequately protect workers in practice. Experts also explained that when workers do raise concerns, for example about cleaning workloads and chemicals, they are more easily dismissed or go unaddressed which may discourage them from raising future concerns and lead to continued unresolved occupational health and safety risks.³⁴

Adequacy of public health guidance

Experts communicated that there has been challenges around information overload. There have been multiple sources of information from different actors, and although some public health messaging has been clear and consistent, some messaging has not which may make it difficult for employers to know exactly what they need to do.

They also expressed that there has been a lack of guidance on minimum requirements to reopen and on how to effectively implement infection control procedures (e.g., physical distancing, staggered schedules, or plexiglass).

Over the course of the pandemic, information on how COVID-19 has shifted, with increasing confirmation of the airborne nature of transmission. Further, participants noted that there were many unknowns about how COVID-19 is transmitted and controlled (e.g., size of aerosol particles, distance travelled, and transmission through ventilation systems). An expert spoke to the need for more precautionary direction and requirements for workplaces in light of this uncertainty at the time.

In light of COVID variants, provincial reopening, and potential increasing hotel occupancy rates, there are a number of opportunities to better support hotel workers by:

1. preventing COVID transmission
2. understanding and mitigating the mental health strain of working during the pandemic that early studies have demonstrated³⁵
3. protecting both unionized and non-unionized hotel housekeepers against injuries due to historic and COVID-19-related intensification of workloads and exposure to cleaning chemicals.³⁶

Further mitigation of COVID-19 exposure and infection in the workplace

One expert noted that it would be helpful to have clearer and consistent information on the minimum requirements needed for workplaces to reopen and increase occupancy, along with guidance and examples on how to implement the requirements. This would help employers to better understand and carry out the requirements, as well as employees to recognize when they are not being met. This is important first and foremost to prevent COVID-19 transmission but also to address the mental health strains associated with workers feeling inadequately protected.

Another expert indicated it would be beneficial for governments to better consult relevant industries when making decisions about infection control procedures. They explained that this would help to leverage their expertise, facilitate buy-in, and ensure consistency in messaging and implementation.

Further, it was recommended that the precautionary principle be adopted in cases where COVID-19 science is uncertain or still developing. This would mean that infection control procedures are implemented and maintained until there is definitive proof that they are not needed in order to better protect the health and safety of all.

Experts highlighted that more is needed to prevent workers who have COVID-19 from coming to work. Many pointed to the continued absence of and need for adequate, permanent, provincially legislated paid sick days so that those who have symptoms are able to stay home and self-isolate without losing income. Some experts also suggested that there is a need for rapid testing in workplaces to help identify workers who are asymptomatic.

Several experts talked about the importance of prioritizing vaccinating frontline workers in spring 2021 to help protect all essential workers from infection and reduce the spread of COVID-19 in workplaces and beyond.

Protect housekeeping workers from workload intensification now and throughout recovery

Workers, researchers, and unions have raised concerns about the musculoskeletal strain and chemical exposure of cleaning workloads for hotel housekeepers before the pandemic—and many experts we spoke with were concerned that COVID-19 related cleaning protocols could intensify these harms. Employers, joint health and safety committees and representatives, and unions all have a role in identifying and addressing any occupational hazards related to cleaning workloads.

Subject matter experts highlight the role unions should take in thoroughly reviewing cleaning protocols to ensure they are safe and conducting additional training to ensure staff know how to implement protocols and use the cleaning products properly. Experts also suggested unions review workers' workloads, continue their efforts to reduce them through collective agreement bargaining, and ensure that any gains made regarding workload during the pandemic are maintained. They noted that the hotel industry has a history of trying to do more with less and expressed concern that hotels will keep staffing levels low to help with their economic recovery

Some hotel union representatives indicated that they have been reviewing the return-to-work plans of employers and identifying what needs to be improved or enforced. They also mentioned that they have many occupational health and safety training opportunities for union members.

However, it was noted that not all unions have the same capacity and that non-unionized hotel workers may not have the same review and training opportunities. This may leave those workers particularly susceptible to cleaning and workload intensification and workplace injury and strain.

Improve adequacy and effectiveness of the internal responsibility system

Experts suggested the IRS system can be improved, in part, by employers and others in positions of power instilling a culture of safety in the workplace. If employers prioritize workers health and safety, encourage communication and participation in health and safety efforts, and take positive actions as a result of the efforts, it can empower more workers to raise their concerns and exercise their rights. This can contribute to a more effective internal responsibility system.

However, experts also noted it is imperative to address the underlying conditions of precarious employment that create fear and prevent people from defending themselves from occupational health and safety risks. Experts indicated that this would require a systemic approach that improves employment legislation to better support the health of all workers.

Impacts of COVID-19 on job and income security of hotel workers

Massive job loss, income insecurity and uncertain return to work

One of the most direct and significant ways that the pandemic has impacted hotel workers is through sudden mass job loss. Experts spoke about the sudden layoffs in spring 2020 within the hotel sector in response to very low occupancy rates and limited operations during the pandemic. Overall, annual occupancy rates for Toronto hotels are estimated to have fallen from 75 per cent in 2019 to 28 per cent in 2020 because of the pandemic.

Experts described that some hotels closed completely while many remained open with significantly limited operations and reduced staffing levels. For many hotels, the number of housekeeping staff is determined by occupancy numbers and room cleaning quotas. As room occupancy dropped, hotels let go housekeeping staff.

Job loss has contributed to income and financial insecurity and stress about covering basic costs. Experts raised concern about how job loss has contributed to stress and negative mental health impacts and impacted workers' ability to meet basic needs—housing, food, medication—due to income loss.

Experts spoke about the considerable uncertainty faced by laid-off hotel workers during the pandemic and projected that the recovery would be slow. The uncertainty felt by workers would remain due to continued restrictions on international travel and large gatherings. As a result, many laid-off workers still do not know when or if they will be called back to their jobs.

Job search challenges for laid-off workers

Some laid-off hotel workers are looking for new jobs or are participating in retraining programs, and some are facing specific barriers. For example, some hotel housekeepers who have worked for many years do not have job-searching experience. Some face barriers to getting hired despite years of experience because they do not have high school equivalency. A number of experts were concerned as a result about the potential for these laid-off workers, including those who were in unionized jobs, to be pushed into more precarious and lower-paid jobs.

Some subject matter experts flagged the need to consider the trajectories of older hotel housekeepers who may feel unsafe returning to work during the pandemic due to health concerns or who may not be able to handle increased COVID-19 cleaning workloads. With limited private and inadequate public pension income prospects, these workers could be at risk of being pushed into more precarious cleaning or care jobs if they are unable to return to hotel cleaning jobs.

Adequacy of existing supports and policies

Responsive federal income supports met emergency needs

In response to significant job loss across Canada the federal government introduced several emergency financial supports for workers and businesses in April 2020. The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) provided taxable monthly payments of \$2,000 for workers who were directly impacted by job or significant income loss due to COVID-19.³⁷ In September 2020, CERB recipients were transitioned to Employment Insurance (EI) or to the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) for workers who were ineligible for EI regular benefits.³⁸ The Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) was introduced for employers who had reduced revenue due to pandemic to partially subsidize employees' wages with the aim of encouraging rehiring and preventing further job loss.³⁹

Many subject matter experts highlighted the value of federal emergency income supports, particularly the Canada Emergency Recovery Benefit (CERB), over the first year of the pandemic; these supports allowed many hotel workers who were laid off to meet their emergency needs. Statistics Canada reported high CERB uptake amongst accommodations and food services workers with two-thirds (66.6 per cent) of workers in those sectors receiving CERB payments between March-September 2020—the highest uptake of any sector in Canada.⁴⁰

While CERB payment often did not completely replace employment income levels, experts highlighted how, compared to the pre-pandemic Employment Insurance program, CERB provided more adequate income levels (i.e., \$2,000 per month). They also highlight that CERB was more accessible for hotel workers who can have seasonal variation in hours.⁴¹ While the federal government responded to initial calls to expand eligibility for the CERB,^{42,43} migrant and undocumented workers without valid social insurance numbers were ineligible to apply⁴⁴ which left some hotel workers without any federal income supports throughout the pandemic.

Experts did note that the uncertainty of whether federal emergency income supports would be extended throughout the first year of the pandemic contributed to worker stress about income security and ability to plan. Looking forward, many experts expressed concerns about workers' income security in the future due to expectations of an uneven and slow recovery for the hotel industry. Some flagged the likelihood that the pandemic will have ongoing negative impacts on these workers' financial stability, debt levels, and ability to cover basic needs resulting in food insecurity and evictions in the future.

A few subject matter experts reflected that there was uneven uptake of the federal government's Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) program by employers in the hotel sector.⁴⁵ While employers can apply to CEWS to receive wage subsidies with the goal of retaining and rehiring employees, some hotel employers were not willing or able to apply or used the subsidy to subsidize remaining employees but did not rehire laid-off workers.

Protections for laid-off workers

There are a number of important additional supports that unions have been negotiating for laid-off hotel workers such as extension of recall rights and retaining access to extended health benefits. Recall rights in collective bargaining agreements mean that employers are required to call back laid-off workers.

A number of experts highlighted that the problematic lack of recall rights in Ontario's *Employment Standards Act* that means non-unionized workers who were laid off at the beginning of the pandemic are now left with no protection as former employers have no obligations to rehire them.

While federal income supports provided financial support, workers with extended health benefits were still at risk of losing those benefits when they were laid off, which could make it challenging to afford necessary medications. Some unions successfully negotiated to have employers continue benefits for laid off workers.

A number of subject matter experts spoke of the responsive and innovative ways that unions, community groups, and service providers responded to the crisis to support laid-off workers with immediate needs, referrals, and navigation of available supports. The Hospitality Workers Training Centre for example has been offering rapid response supports as well as a range of tailored job retraining and job search supports. This includes targeted retraining and active outreach and partnership with employers to support the transition of laid-off hotel housekeepers to cleaning positions in other sectors.⁴⁶

Opportunities to better protect the job and income security of hotel workers

There are many unknowns facing both hotel workers and employers. A strong consensus from subject matter experts was that while the hotel industry will recover eventually, they do not expect there will be a full recovery in Fall 2021. Many factors could impact the nature of recovery of hotel jobs: the prevalence of COVID in Ontario, provincial and federal travel and gathering restrictions, and domestic and international travel demand. Many predicted a slow recovery that would impact various workers within the sector differently. For example, while domestic travel restrictions may ease, restrictions on large events may stay in place for longer which would impact event staff. In the face of uncertainty, experts suggested a number of steps that can and should be taken to buffer workers in hard-hit industries.

Ensure adequate long-term federal income supports into recovery

Experts emphasized the need to extend adequate federal income supports beyond Fall 2021 to address the potentially prolonged recovery. Experts also supported making all Employment Insurance reforms permanent to address the considerable and inequitable gaps in the system that, for example, disproportionately excluded low wage workers.⁴⁷

Target responsive job retraining and job creation efforts

Experts spoke to the need for targeted retraining for laid-off hotel workers that is tailored to their needs (e.g., skilled housekeeping staff without high school equivalency) and labour market needs.

Job training without job creation is not sufficient to help displaced workers. Some spoke to the need for governments to invest in job creation that responds to the gendered nature of the pandemic recession.

Introduce recall rights and strengthen working conditions through employment standards

Subject matter experts highlighted that the lack of provincially legislated recall rights left laid-off workers without protections if their employers decided to permanently lay them off and rehire someone new.

Many raised the importance of union's bargaining strong collective agreements with decent working conditions in the face of pandemic-related economic pressures. They spoke to the continued need for decent wages, extended recall protections, extended health benefits, and worker retention in order to continue high service standards and a healthy labour force into the recovery.

In the context of many workers needing to find new jobs, they raised the need to address the underlying conditions of precarious work and ensure workers are transiting into decent jobs. They highlighted key changes to Ontario's Employment Standards Act that are needed: more and permanent paid sick days, increased minimum wage, and recall rights. Experts also highlighted the need for extended health benefits, particularly those that cover the cost of medications, and how a comprehensive national pharmacare program would help to address this.

NEXT STEPS: TOWARDS A SHARED AND SAFE RECOVERY

While some accommodations and food services jobs have returned as of summer 2021 as public health restrictions loosen across the country, employment is still the furthest behind (18%) pre-COVID levels of any Canadian industry.⁴⁸ Many hotel workers have been hard hit by job loss due to the pandemic and face continued uncertainty about when and if they will be called back to work. Others have kept hotels operating through the pandemic, including hotels supporting important public health efforts such as quarantine hotels for both international travelers and individuals who could not isolate at home.

This report highlights a number of concerning ways the pandemic could adversely impact these workers: COVID exposure, mental health strain, and workload strain and injury for hotel housekeepers, and permanent job loss, income insecurity and job precarity for those laid-off.

This research highlights the limitations of current policy responses and protections that in turn hinder their effectiveness and may leave some hotel workers particularly vulnerable to the adverse health impacts of the pandemic.

For example, Ontario's occupational health and safety framework, which involves workers in raising OHS concerns, is weakened when workers can be let go without cause due to gaps in employment standards. A lack of provincially legislated recall protections as well as federal wage subsidies that do not require employers recall workers mean that rather than returning to work, workers could be replaced by new and lower-paid workers. Unlike federal emergency income supports like CERB and CRB, without permanent reform the Employment Insurance system will continue to leave low paid workers behind who are disproportionately ineligible.⁴⁹ Retraining and job creations recovery efforts will not help hard-hit workers unless targeted to their needs, particularly for older workers and workers without high school education.

Without strengthened employment and OHS protections and targeted worker support, retraining and job creation, it is unlikely that recovery from the COVID pandemic will be a just, shared, and safe recovery for the workers who have been most impacted. This will perpetuate the inequities that have been laid bare over the past years. However, there is a tremendous opportunity to further understand and address these emerging concerns and to support and protect health of hotel workers and other hard-hit workers. The experts consulted in this work provided a helpful start to understanding these concerns and identifying opportunities to better support worker health.

Moving forward, it is important to involve impacted hotel workers to ensure that policy responses are adequate and appropriate to their needs and context. There is also an imperative to reflect on and address the underlying systemic inequities and policy gaps that make workers vulnerable to ensure the health and well-being of all workers is supported and protected moving forward.

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