

# COVID-19 Safety Measures Update

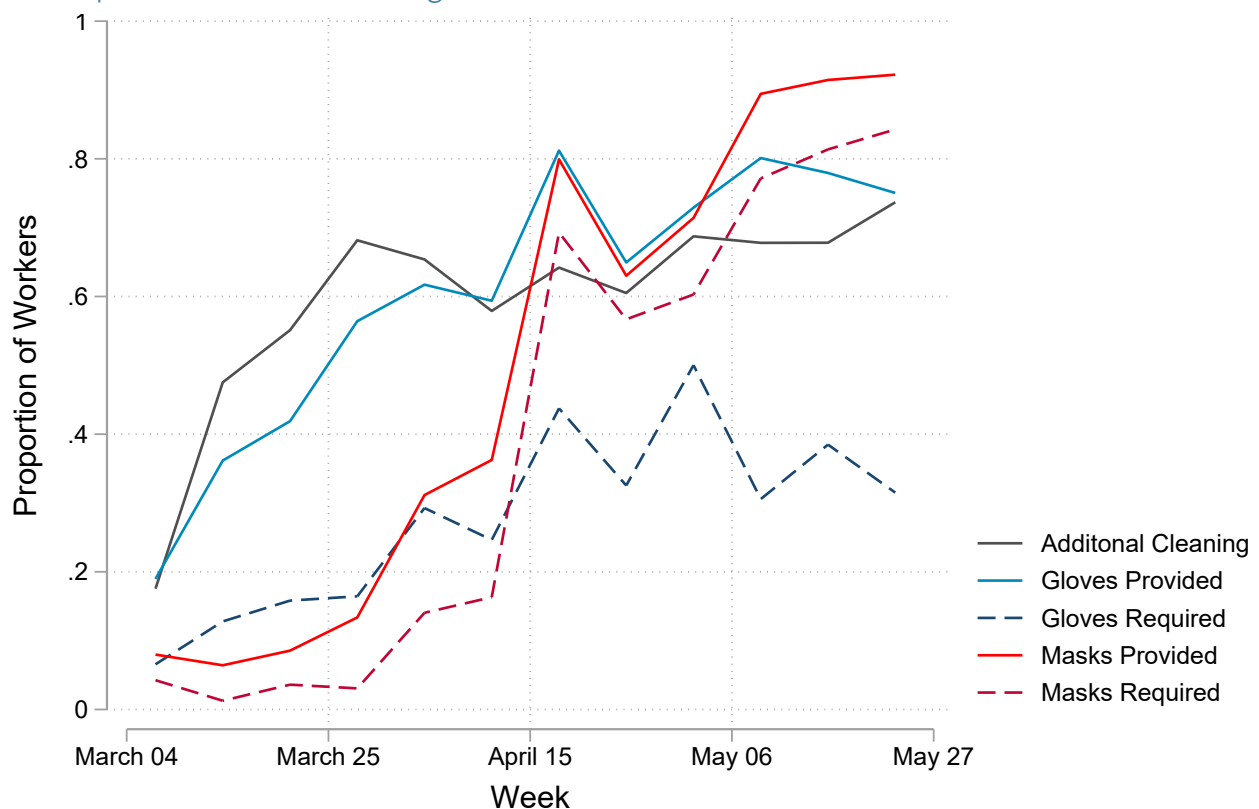
COVID-19 has made service sector jobs much more dangerous. But, while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released guidelines to prevent infections in the workplace, employers were largely left to adopt measures at their own discretion. Scattered reports suggested that these efforts often fell short, especially early in the pandemic and that substantial variation in the adoption of safety practices persisted across states and firms.

Between March of 2020 and May of 2020, The Shift Project surveyed 12,231 service sector workers employed at 107 of the country’s largest retail, food service, grocery, hardware, and delivery and fulfillment firms. The Shift Project then collected an additional 11,651 responses from service sector workers employed at 71 firms between September and November of 2020. These surveys allowed us to peer inside firms and compare across

states to describe changes in safety measure adoption as public understanding of the pandemic grew.

We document that employer provision of masks and requirements that employees wear masks were slow to be implemented in the first weeks of the COVID19 pandemic. However, by late May of 2020, employee masking requirements were reported by a large majority of workers employed at the largest food service and retail companies in the United States. Among large employers whose employees we surveyed twice over the course of the Spring of 2020, each one saw increases in the share of workers reporting mask requirements. However, this share varied significantly across sectors, across firms, and even between firms within sectors. In food service and retail, in particular, at some employers, as many as a third of workers still reported that masks were not required of workers. Mask mandates were also imposed

**Figure 1** Adoption of Infection-Reducing Measures Over Time



unevenly across states, with faster and higher rates of mandate in the Mid-Atlantic and New England states. While employer requirements that employees wear masks became quite widespread by late May of 2020, workers still faced considerable hazards at work as late as November of 2020. Specifically, significant shares of workers reported that customers only sporadically masked and that they were unable to socially distance from other people at work. These hazards were particularly pronounced at food service employers.

## Changes in Adoption of Health and Safety Measures Over Time

Early responses to COVID-19 emphasized glove provision and additional cleaning as workers at large service sector firms reported significant increases in both through the month of March. Requirements to wear gloves significantly lagged glove and mask provision and especially mask requirements were rare at large firms through early April.

But, by mid-April and then through May, mask provision by employers rose sharply to nearly 80% of work-

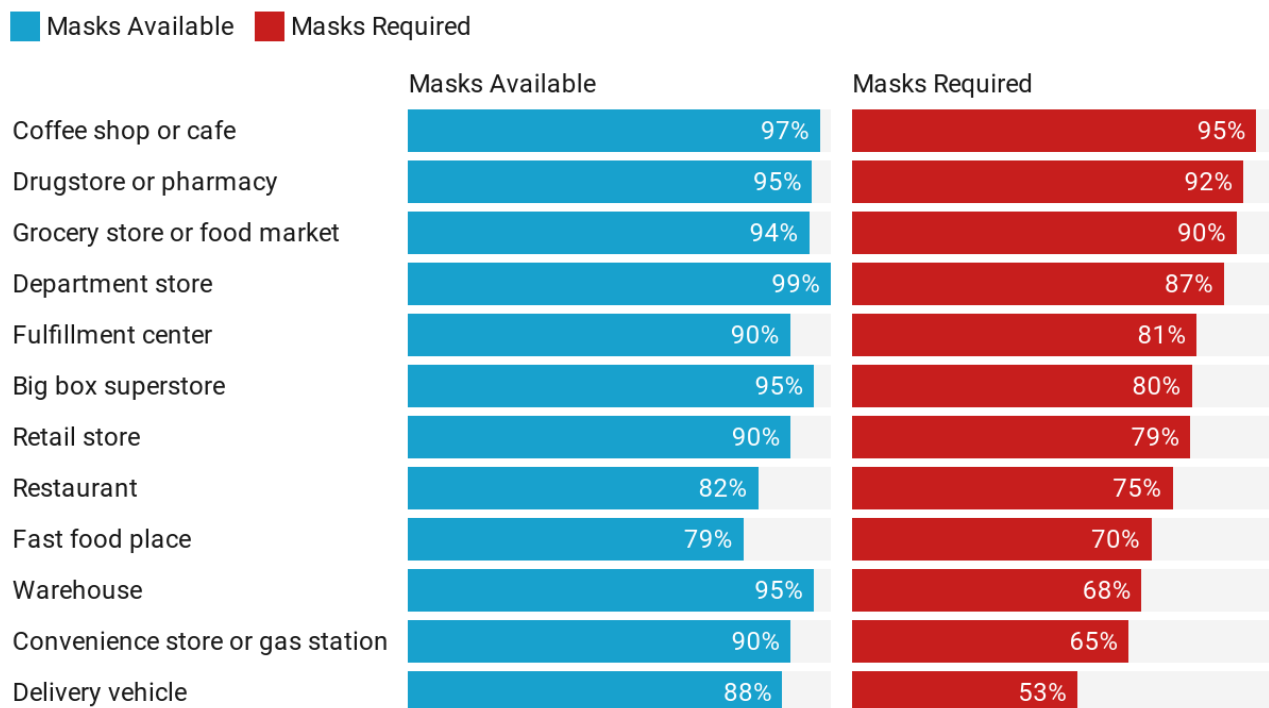
ers and mask requirements rose substantially as well, reaching 60% of workers by mid-April. Figure 1 shows this sharp increase in mask provision and requirements in April, which corresponded to an emerging understanding that non-surgical face coverings prevent infections. By May, respondents reported high levels of mask provision (89%), mask requirements (79%), glove provision (77%), and additional cleaning (70%). Requirements to wear gloves remained low and leveled off at around 37%. For the rest of this brief, we focus on mask-related safety measures as we now understand the importance of airborne transmission as a major source of COVID-19 infections.

## May Mask Adoption by Industry

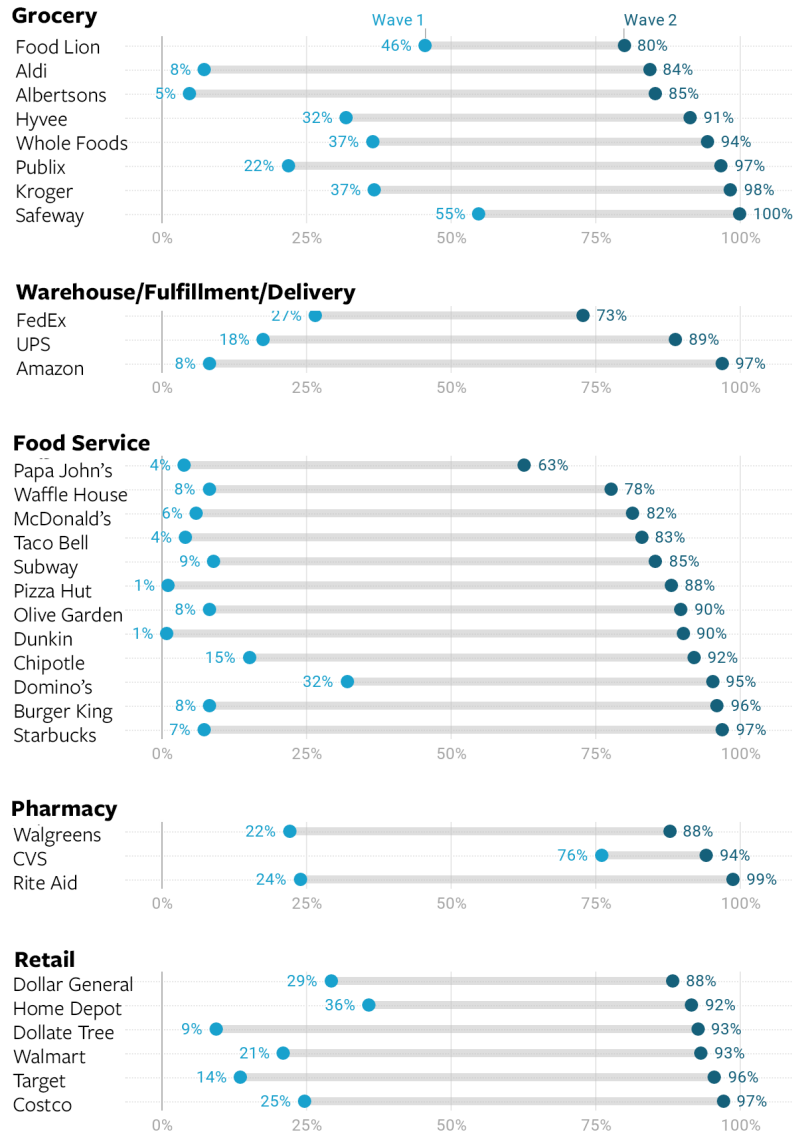
By May, retail and service-sector industries largely converged on relatively high rates of mask provision. There were lower rates of mask requirements and more variation between industries. Restaurant and fast food industries stood out as having both relatively low mask provision and requirement rates.

Figure 2 displays the provision of masks and adoption of mask requirements in May 2020 by industry. With

**Figure 2** Mask Adoption in May by Industry



**Figure 3** Masks Available in Wave 1 and 2 by Employer



the exception of the restaurant, fast food, and delivery vehicle industries, workers in each industry reported mask provision rates at or above 90%. Mask requirement rates were lower and more varied between industries from a low of 53% for delivery vehicle workers to 95% for coffee shop or cafe workers. Convenience store and gas station workers reported the second lowest rate of mask requirements at 65%.

The low mask requirement rate for warehouse workers coincided with lower rates of customer interaction. Workers who said they never interacted with customers were 13 percentage points less likely to have mask requirements. Many warehouse

workers said they never interacted with customers (41%) while a tiny portion of workers in almost every other industry reported no interactions with customers (1 to 4%). However, many fulfillment center workers also said they never interacted with customers (58%), but reported high rates of mask requirements (81%). We did not, however, ask respondents about their level of interactions with co-workers. A low level of customer interactions did not explain low rates of mask requirements for delivery vehicle, convenience store or gas station, fast food, and restaurant workers. Over 80% of workers in each of these industries interacted with customers always or often.

## Changes in Adoption Over Time by Employer

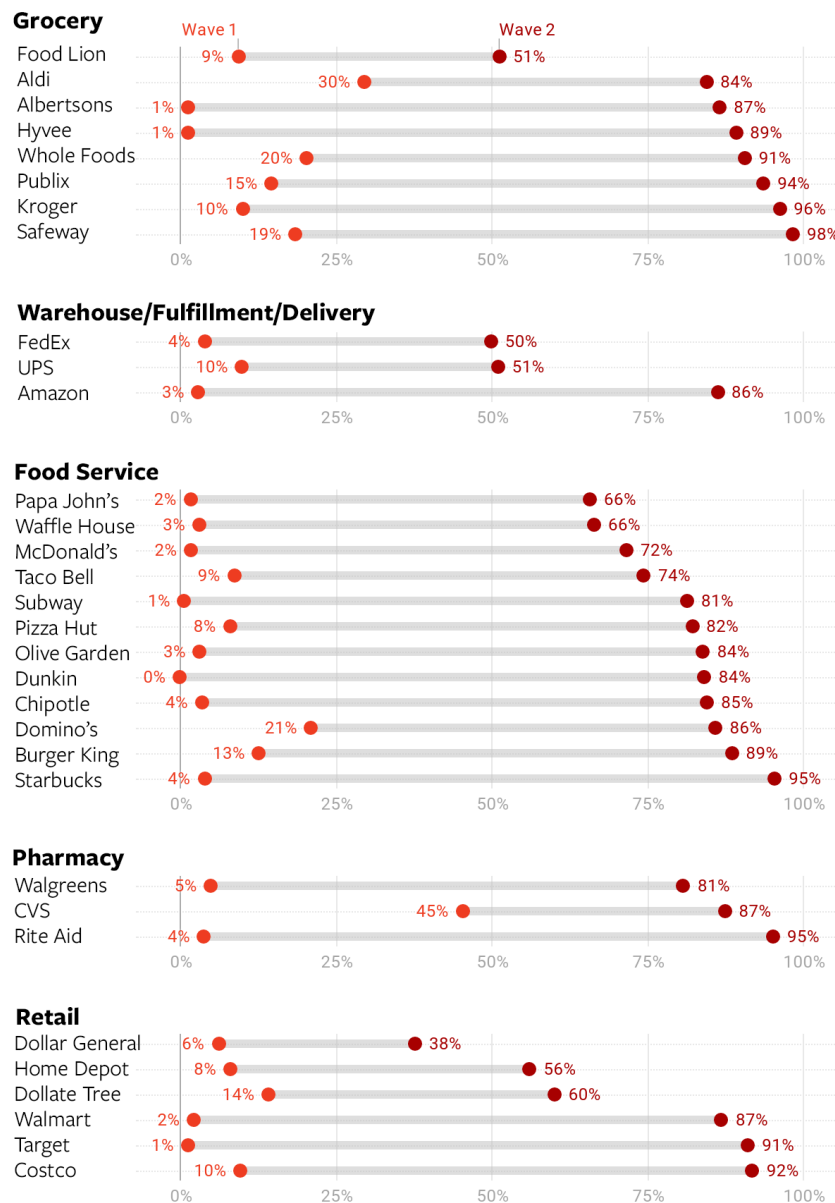
We surveyed 8,422 workers at 32 of the largest retail and food service firms at two points in time - once early in the COVID-19 pandemic (average survey date was April 1) and once later in the spring of 2020 (average survey date was May 20). Only employers with 30 or more respondents in each wave are shown.

Within each industry, there was more variation in mask provision in the first wave compared to the second wave. Figure 3 shows that by late April and May of 2020, more than 80% of workers at almost

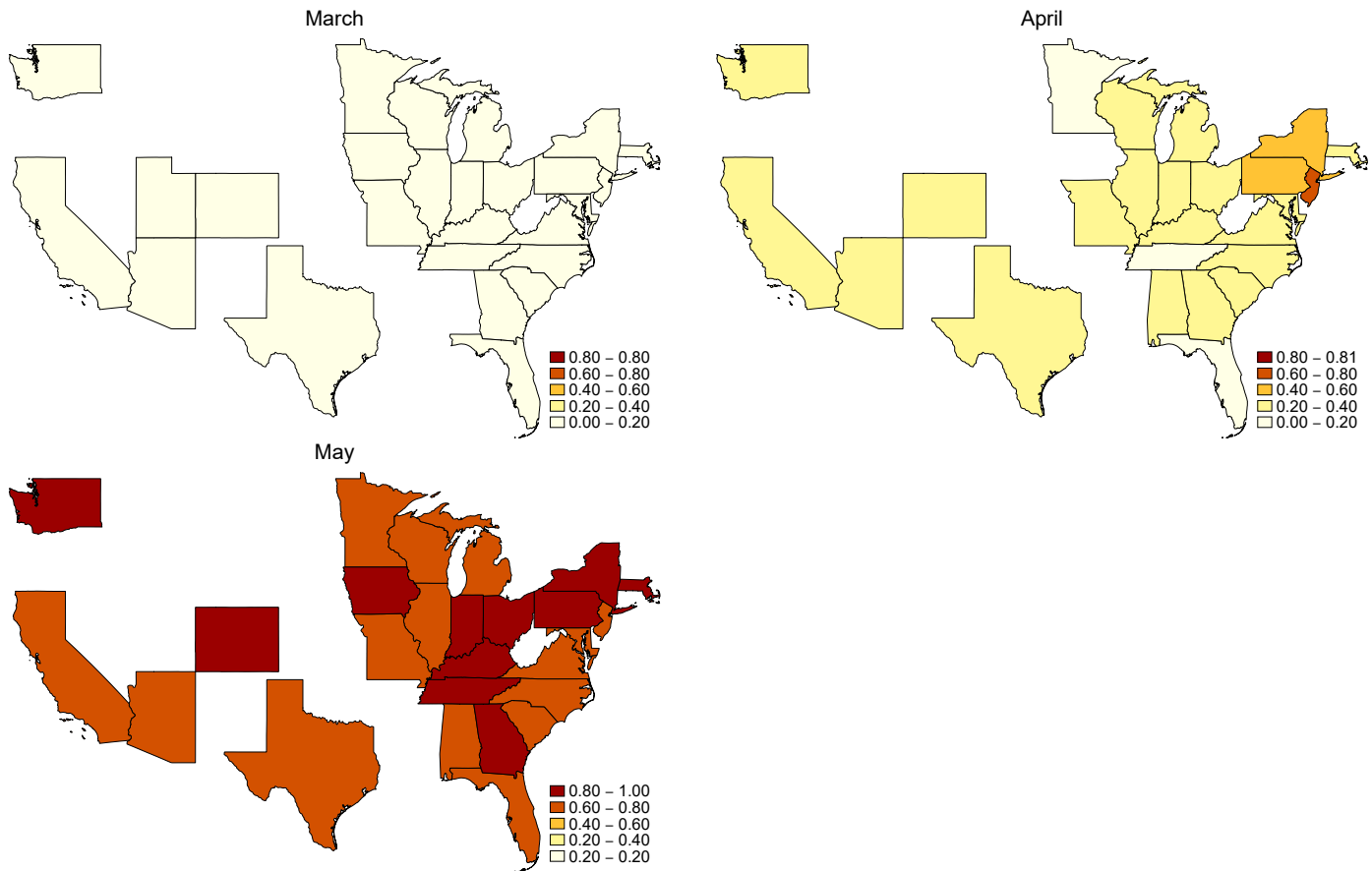
every firm reported employer mask provision. Among food service employers, only Waffle House and Papa John's stood out for having fewer than 80% of their workers report employer mask provision. Of warehouse, fulfillment, and delivery workers, UPS had the smallest share workers reporting mask provision at 73%, despite a larger share of UPS workers reporting mask provision than FedEx and Amazon workers at the first wave.

There was a great deal of variation in worker reports of employer mask requirements between employers of the same industry. Figure 4 shows that in each industry, there were employers at which more than 80%, if

**Figure 4** Mask Requirements in Wave 1 and 2 by Employer



**Figure 5** Employee Mask Requirements by State and Month



not above 90%, of workers reported employer mask mandates in late April and May. Some employers, however, appeared to lag behind other employers in their industry. Among grocery employers, a substantially smaller share of workers at Food Lion reported mask requirements, at 51%.

Two of the three employers in the warehouse, fulfillment, and delivery group had low shares of workers reporting mask requirements: about half of workers at FedEx and UPS reported mask requirements. In comparison, Amazon workers reported mask requirements at a rate of 86%.

Workers at four of the twelve food service employers reported rates of mask requirements below 80%: Papa John's (66%), Waffle House (66%), McDonald's (72%), and Taco Bell (74%). Starbucks stood out as having a much higher share of workers reporting mask requirements at 95%.

Although a larger share of CVS workers reported employer mask requirements in the first wave than

at Walgreens and Rite Aid, workers at all three pharmacy employers reported mask requirements between 80% and 95% in the second wave.

Finally, the retail sector was split into high- and low-share employers. Dollar General, Home Depot, and Dollar Tree workers reported mask requirement rates between 38% and 60%. On the other hand, Walmart, Target, and Costco workers reported mask requirement rates between 87% and 92%.

## Regional Variation in Employee Mask Requirements

Figure 5 displays the proportion of respondents that reported employee mask requirements by state and month. Only state-months with 50 or more respondents are shown. In March, aggregating to the state-level, in no state did more than 10% of workers report that their firm had a mask requirement. By April, the share of workers reporting that their employer had a mask requirement had increased in most states, but especially in the Mid-Atlantic. By May, in every state more

than 50% of employees reported that their employer had a mask requirement. Some states in the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest and South had the highest adoption rates, above 80%. When grouped by division, New England and Mid-Atlantic respondents reported higher rates of employee mask requirements. Overall, the Northeast region of the United States had the highest rates of mask requirements by May.

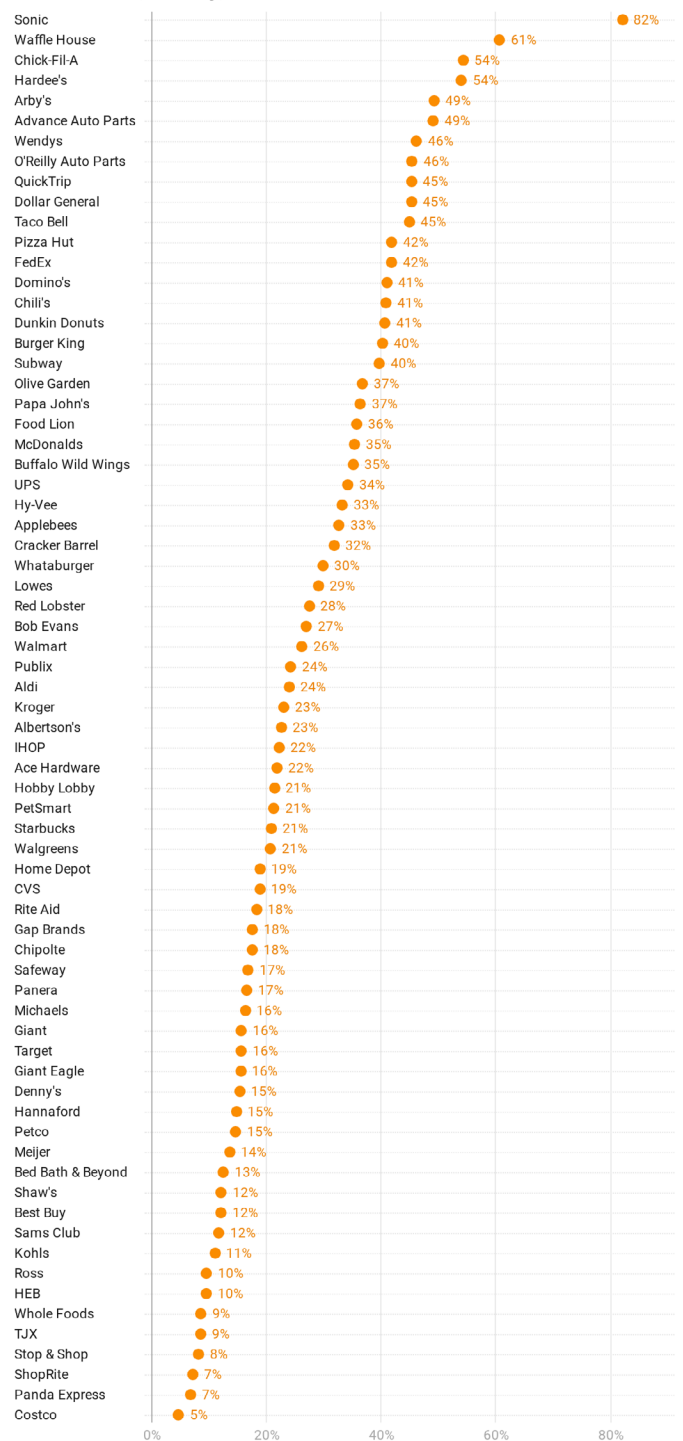
## Customer Masking and Social Distancing by Firm

In the Fall of 2020, we surveyed an additional 11,651 workers at 71 large service sector firms. In this survey, we asked workers about how often customers wore masks and how often they were able to practice social distancing at work (maintaining at least 6 feet from other people). Across firms, 72% of workers report that customers always or often wore masks, with 28% reporting that customers did so only sometimes, rarely, or never. Social distancing proved somewhat more challenging, with 59% reporting that they could always or often maintain 6 feet of social distance from other people at work, and 41% reporting that they could do so only sometimes, rarely, or never. Put together, we find that 16% of workers reported that customers only sometimes, rarely, or never work masks and that they could only sometimes, rarely, or never socially distance.

However, these averages disguise significant differences across employers. Figure 6a shows the share of workers by employer who reported that customers at their workplace only sometimes, rarely, or never wore masks. The lack of customer masking is highest for food service workers, with more than 40% of workers at many of the food-service firms reporting a lack of customer masking. Figure 6b plots the share of workers by employer who reported that they were only sometimes, rarely, or never able to socially distance from other people while at work. Though not without exception, this hazard is most common at food service employers as well. Putting these two practices together, in Figure 6c we see that as much of a third of workers at food service employers, including Sonic, Waffle House, Chick-Fil-A, Wendy's, Arby's, and Taco Bell, report that customers have low rates of masking and that they have limited ability to socially distance.

**Figure 6a** Customer Masking by Employer

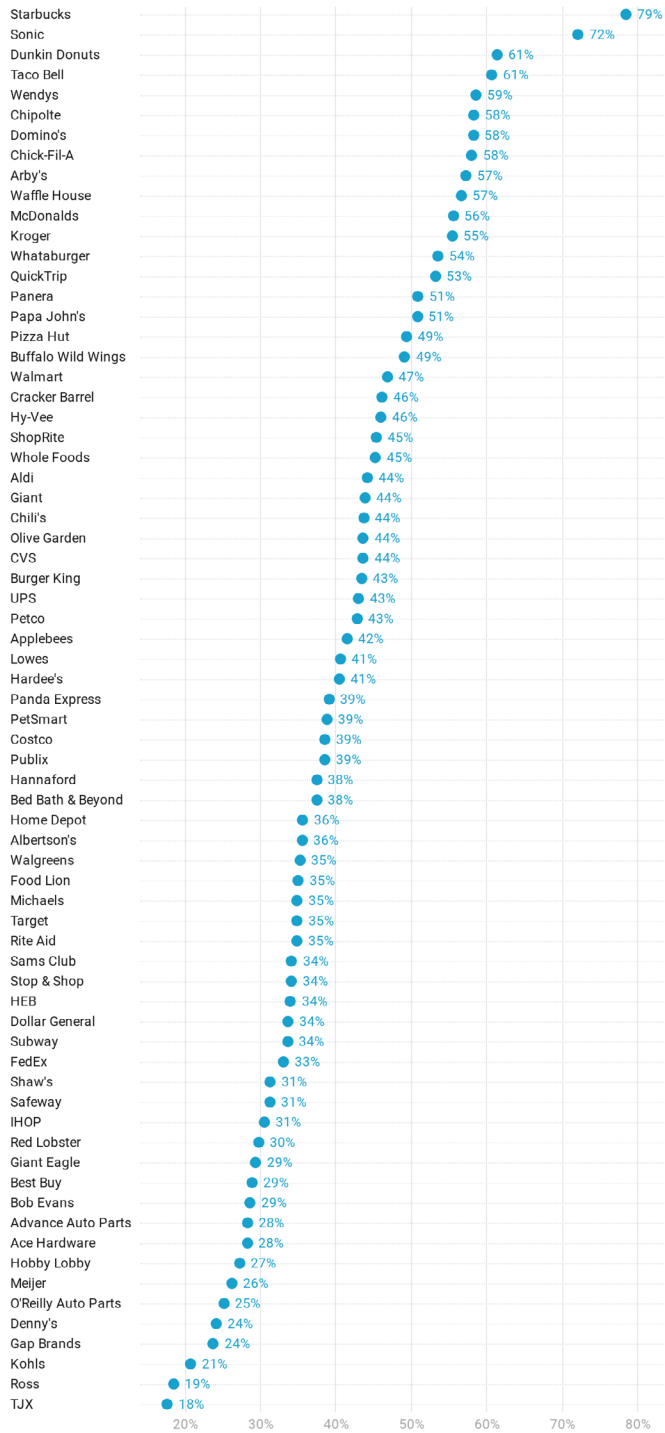
### Share of Workers by Employer Reporting that Customers Only Sometimes, Rarely, or Never Wear Masks



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**Figure 6b** Employee Social Distancing by Employer

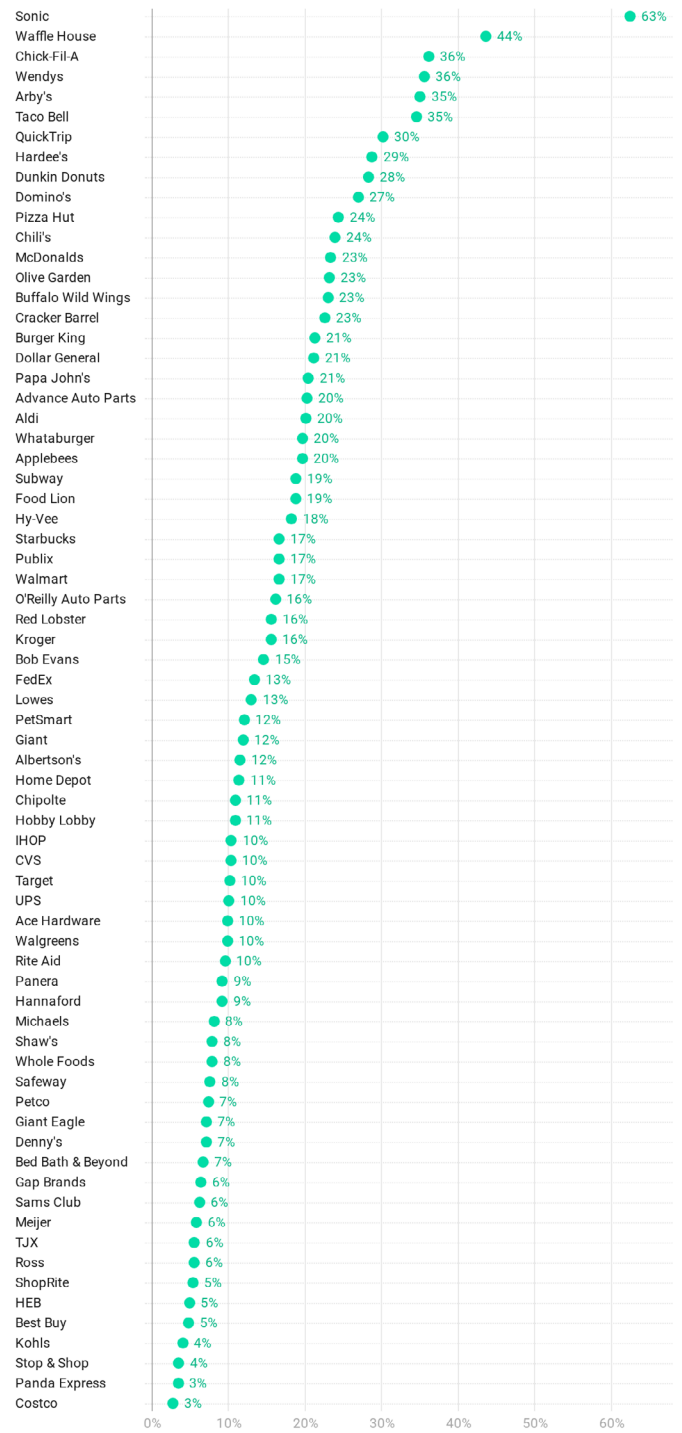
**Share of Workers by Employer Only Able to Practice 6' Social Distancing Sometimes, Rarely, or Never**



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**Figure 6c** Customer Masking and Employee Social Distancing by Employer

**Share of Workers by Employer Reporting Low Customer Masking and Limited Ability to Socially Distance**



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Workers at these same firms provided detailed accounts of the workplace conditions that all too often made them feel unsafe. Time and again, respondents to our survey emphasized insufficient mask wearing among customers and the difficulties they faced in maintaining social distancing.

“We only recently starting asking guests to wear masks, but we can’t enforce it. There are still guests that shop with no mask. Guests don’t follow the 6ft rule and will step closer into your face if you try to distance yourself.”

**Female big box retail worker, 33 Florida**

“Shortly after guest is seated, they take off their mask. To be able to serve, I am inches from people who do not have masks on. General manager often has her mask pulled down under the nose or under the chin. A few employees have mask under the nose. Back of restaurant rarely has masks on and if they do, worn improperly. Employees do have masks available to them if needed, and they all wear them when the director of operations comes in.”

**Female casual dining worker, 65 Minnesota**

“They aren’t as strict about enforcing masks and kicking out people who don’t cooperate as they should be. The longer the pandemic goes on the less they seem to take enforcing things seriously.”

**Female retail worker, 22 Pennsylvania**

“My store is the size of an average living room and we have 15+ employees there is no possible way to social distance”

**Male fast food worker, 22, Illinois**

“Customers have no respect for space. I feel they see workers as less than human, forgetting that they are not robots built-in-store and have real lives they go home too. People stand too close, harass us about wearing masks, and disregard our safety by not wearing masks or taking precautionary measures. Because of this I have fallen sick and am awaiting covid test results that I have a strong feeling will be positive.”

**Female grocery worker, 20 Michigan**

## Conclusion

Employer provision of masks and requirements that employees wear masks were slow to be implemented in the first weeks of the COVID19 pandemic. However, by late May of 2020, employee masking requirements were reported by large shares of workers employed at the largest food service and retail companies in the United States. Among large employers whose employees we surveyed twice over the course of the Spring of 2020, each one saw increases in the share of workers reporting mask requirements. However, this share varied significantly across sectors, across firms, and even between firms within sectors. In food ser-

vice and retail, in particular, at some employers, as much as a third of workers still reported that masks were not required of workers. Mask mandates were also communicated unevenly across states, with faster and higher rates of mandate in the Mid-Atlantic and New England states in particular. While employer requirements that employees wear masks became quite widespread by late May of 2020, workers still faced considerable hazards at work as late as November of 2020. Significant shares of workers reported that customers only sporadically masked and that they were unable to socially distance from other people at work. These hazards were particularly pronounced at food service employers.



**Helen Ho** is a PhD candidate in Public Policy at Harvard University.

[helen\\_ho@g.harvard.edu](mailto:helen_ho@g.harvard.edu)

**Daniel Schneider** is Professor of Public Policy and of Sociology at Harvard University.

[dschneider@hks.harvard.edu](mailto:dschneider@hks.harvard.edu)

**Kristen Harknett** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, San Francisco.

[kristen.harknett@ucsf.edu](mailto:kristen.harknett@ucsf.edu)

*The authors gratefully acknowledge the work of Rebecca Wolfe, Connor Williams, Eli Munn, and Megan Collins in the preparation of this report.*

*The Shift Project gratefully acknowledges funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the W.T. Grant Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundations.*

## Methodological Appendix

The Shift Project has collected survey data from hourly service sector workers employed at large retail and food establishments since the fall of 2016. This brief focused on a subsample of 12,231 hourly workers employed at 107 of the largest service sector firms who were interviewed between March 7 and May 28th, 2020 and a second sub-sample of 11,651 workers surveyed between September and November, 2020.

The survey data collection was national in scope and the survey sample included respondents from all 50 U.S. states and Washington, D.C. Uniquely, The Shift Project data identified the firm at which each respondent worked and contained substantial numbers of respondents at each of the firms. The average number of respondents per firm in the spring of 2020 was 114 and was 164 in the Fall of 2020.

The Shift Project recruited survey respondents using online Facebook/Instagram advertisements, targeted to workers employed at large retail and food service employers. Those who responded to the Shift survey invitation were automatically routed to a survey landing page where they were asked to consent to participate in the study, then began the online self-administered survey using the Qualtrics platform. As an incentive, those who completed the survey and provided contact information were entered into a lottery for a gift card. The survey included modules on job characteristics, work schedules, demographics, economic stability, health, parenting, and child outcomes. To screen out invalid survey responses we used an attention filter (a question that instructed respondents to select a particular response category to verify the accuracy of their responses).

The survey recruitment approach yielded a non-probability sample of workers, which may differ from the broader population of service sector workers. Therefore, the estimates in this brief may differ somewhat from the broader population of workers. To mitigate this potential bias, we have applied weights that adjust our sample to reflect the universe of service sector workers in the United States. These weights were constructed in two stages.

First, we constructed survey weights to adjust the demographic characteristics of the Shift survey sample to match the demographic characteristics of service-sector workers in the American Community Survey (ACS) for the years 2008-2017. We aligned the ACS sample with the Shift sample by selecting workers in the ACS who were employed in the same occupations and industries as the Shift sample.

Second, to ensure that our sample accurately reflected the distribution of employment types among large retail and food-service employers, we used data from the Reference USA database of U.S. establishments. The RefUSA database contained a detailed listing of all retail and food establishments nationally. RefUSA contained the size of the workforce for each establishment, which we aggregated up to the firm level. Then, using the aggregated RefUSA employer data, we weighted our Shift survey sample to match the distribution of workers by firm.

In our analysis of the trends in COVID-related health and safety procedures, we estimated weighted (using the combined demographic and employer size weights) unadjusted descriptive statistics. In the weekly figures, the points were plotted on the first day of the analysis week, which did not correspond to a calendar week. The first analysis week started on Saturday, March 7, 2020.

In our tabulations of differences by industry, we grouped responses by the respondent-reported industry. We weighted responses using the combined demographic and employer size weights. Only industries with 50 or more respondents in May were shown.

In our analysis of differences by employer, we focused on a subsample of 8,422 hourly service sector workers

employed at firms that were surveyed twice during the Spring of 2020. We limited the analysis to firms that had 30 or more respondents in each wave. Thirty-two firms were included in the analysis, with an average number of respondents of 248 per firm. The average survey date for the first round was April 1st and the average survey date for the second round was May 20th. On average, the two waves were separated by 50 days. In our tabulations, we applied the demographic weights, but not the second-stage employment size weight calculated from the RefUSA data.

In our regional analysis, we weighted responses using the combined demographic and employer size weights.

In our analysis of customer masking and social distancing, we do not weight the data.

For a detailed discussion of The Shift Project data collection, methodology, and data validation, see Schneider, D. and K. Harknett. 2019. "What's to Like? Facebook as a Tool for Survey Data Collection." Sociological Methods Research. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124119882477>.