

Prioritizing Safety in Home Care During COVID-19: Frontline Worker Perspectives

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OBJECTIVES

- Home care workers help older individuals and those with disabilities with functional and health-related tasks¹
- To understand the safety-related experiences of home care workers during COVID-19
- To identify opportunities (e.g., programs, policies) to strengthen the home care sector long term

POPULATION STUDIED

- 39 personal care attendants (PCAs) employed directly by consumers
- 44 home care workers employed by agencies
- Largely representative of Massachusetts home care workforce except in age and education

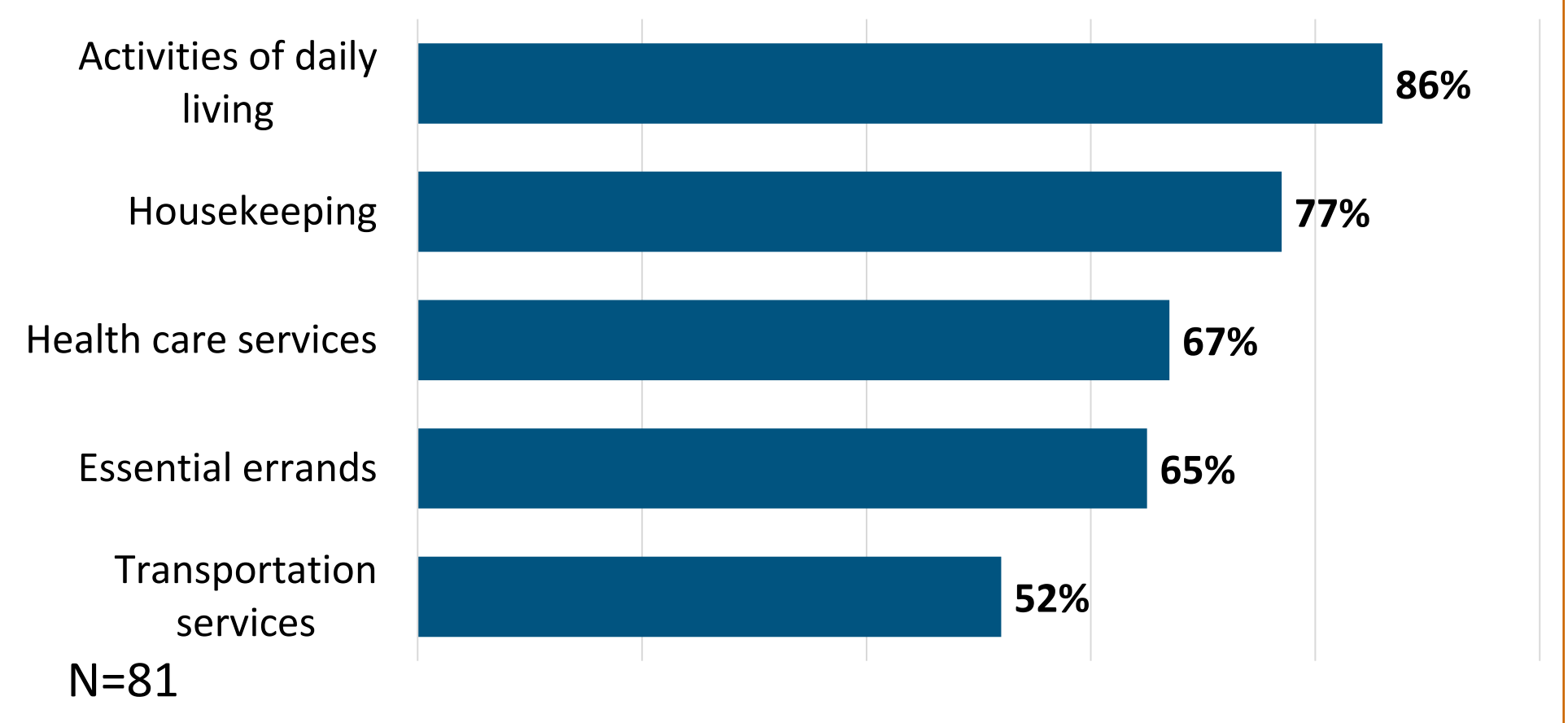
METHODS

Mixed-methods study including semi-structured focus groups and survey questions.

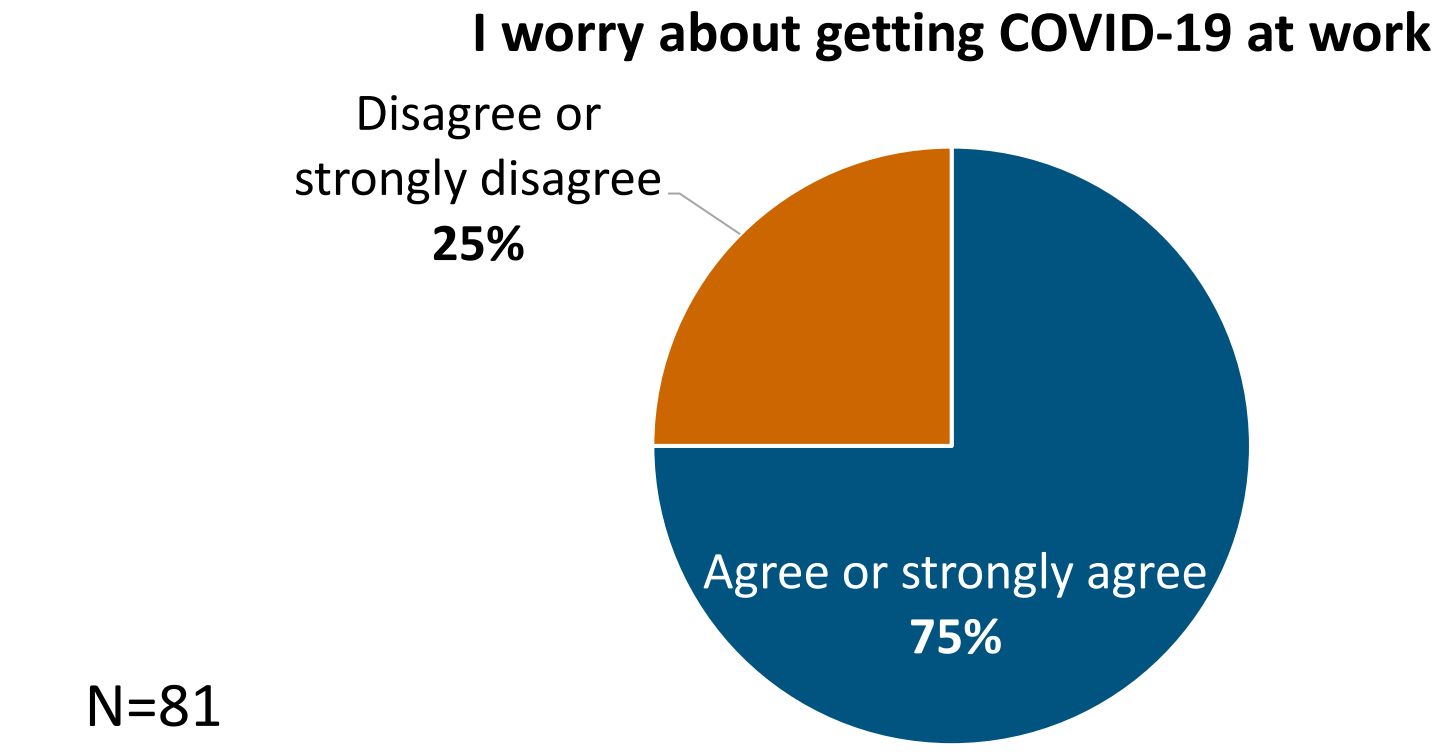
- Focus group discussions:** Following previous methods,² hypothetical scenario-based questions about a home care worker providing care during COVID-19
- Survey assessed** experiences working during COVID-19 and perceptions about safety at work
 - Primarily Likert scale response options, from strongly disagree to strongly agree; dichotomized into agree and disagree
- Qualitative analysis:** Thematic content analysis identified major and minor themes; 3 coders reached consensus on themes

SURVEY RESULTS

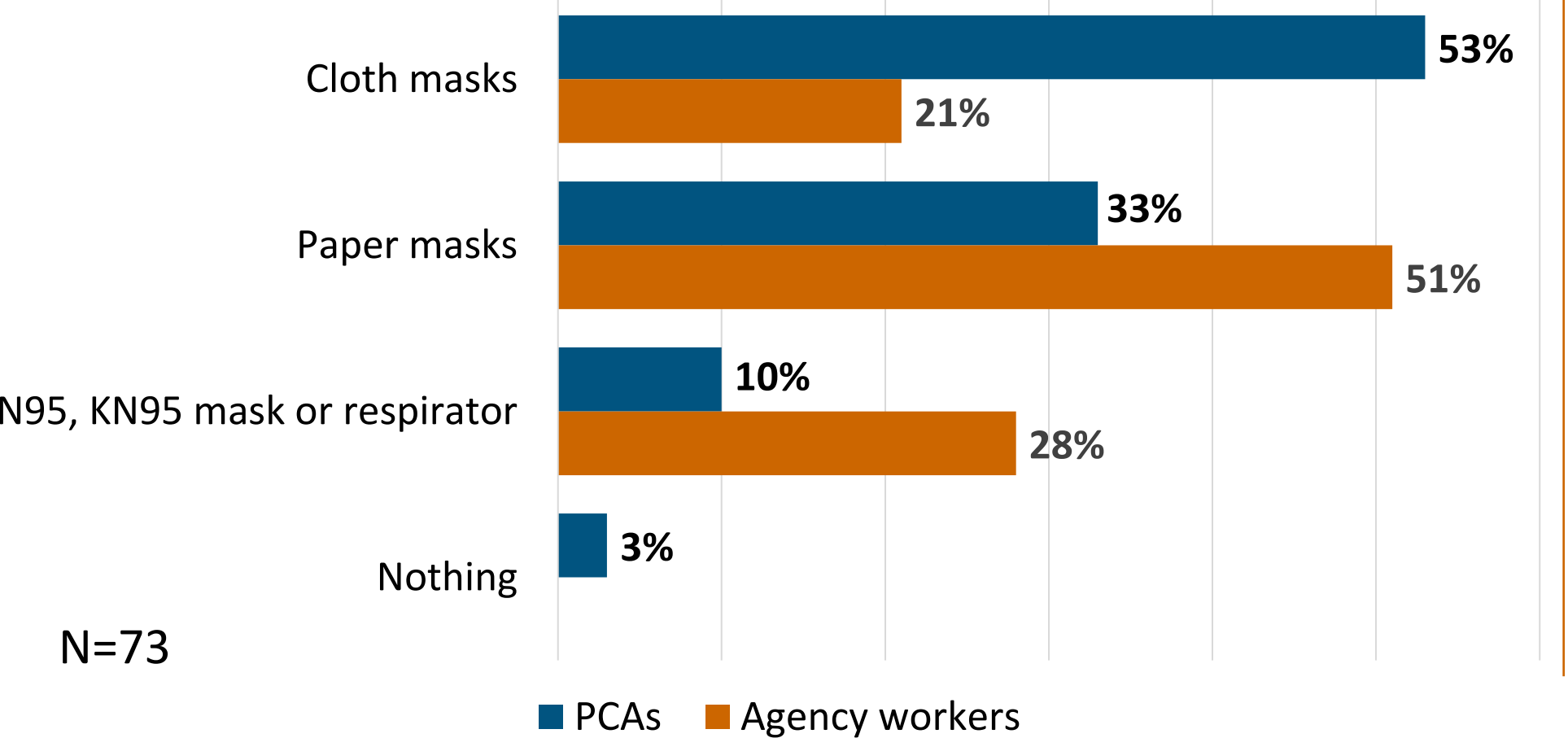
Home care workers help with essential tasks that do not allow for social distancing



Home care workers worried about COVID-19 exposure



A greater percentage of PCAs relied on cloth masks than agency workers



FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION RESULTS

Theme	Quotes
Risking COVID-19 exposure to meet client/consumer needs	<p>"I think [most home care workers] would just see the person anyway 'cause they wouldn't want to leave them without their shower or whatever it is they were going to be doing with them that day. I think most aides are very good caretakers, you know, they want to be sure that that person doesn't get missed." (agency worker)</p> <p>"Because if they can't get out of bed without me coming in, I am gonna suit up in PPE and take care of them." (PCA)</p>
Limited access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing	<p>"Maybe once a month, they send me an email with a link and ... I am allowed to request gloves, masks, sanitizing wipes, sanitizer, but these things are limited and first come first served. So there are times when I'll get a package, and I'm like, 'Oooh, I got gloves and masks,' but it'll be just like 20 masks because they didn't have gloves available." (PCA)</p> <p>"[Agencies] should be incentivized to test every employee. Ideally, it should be every day... And I feel like testing is the part that we're really not doing enough of, especially for folks in our business. I know [clinicians] in my agency... that haven't been tested the entire pandemic. Not once." (agency worker)</p>
Limited control over clients'/consumers' COVID-19 precautions	<p>"[They say] this is my house, I dress the way I want to, I do what I want to... I have heard a lot of stories since COVID, where they say you can't come back if you want me to wear a mask." (PCA)</p> <p>"I think we've all had cases where you've been in the house, and... then somebody comes in and they go, '... my neighbor was over again this morning [hugging] me and she has COVID.' And they say it casually, like it's not a big deal." (agency worker)</p>
Reliance on trust/dialogue to maintain safety	<p>"I see like 30 patients a week and none of my patients, [their family, or my family members have]... gotten sick and I think that's because me and my clients, I've had them for a while, we're kind of on the same page. We appreciate helping each other." (agency worker)</p> <p>"Every single day starts with a conversation about our risks. My risks, her risks, other contacts. And it's the only way we've kept our sanity through it." (PCA)</p>

DISCUSSION

Summary of findings:

- Home care workers were deeply committed to caring for their clients/consumers during COVID-19, despite taking on higher exposure risk by doing so.
- They often had to navigate COVID risks with limited resources (e.g., insufficient PPE and testing) and limited control over clients'/consumers' attitudes and behaviors about COVID risk.
- To mitigate risks, home care workers relied on a transparent and trusting relationship with their clients/consumers, when possible.

Implications:

- Home care workers should be prioritized in public health strategies addressing pandemics such as COVID-19, including mass testing, PPE distribution, and vaccination.
- Policies on a statewide and agency level should work with workers and clients/consumers to help protect the safety of this critical but vulnerable workforce.

Limitations:

- Vaccination was not explored.
- Participants were recruited through the agencies and the PCA union; independent workers were not included.

REFERENCES

- Reckrey JM, Tsui EK, Morrison RS, et al. Beyond functional support: the range of health-related tasks performed in the home by paid caregivers in New York. *Health Aff* 2019;38(6):927-933.
- Fain BA, Koonin LM, Stoto MA, et al. Facilitating access to antiviral medications and information during an influenza pandemic: engaging with the public on possible new strategies. *Biosecur Bioterror* 2014;12(1):8-19.