



The mission of the California Labor Lab is to extend the pursuit of health and safety for workers in traditional employment to those in a wide range of alternative arrangements in partnership with affected communities.

Data Brief #15: Exposure to Workplace Surveillance among California Workers

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Overview

Workplace surveillance, also referred to as employee monitoring, is defined as any instance of an employer tracking and recording an employee's actions (Kayas, 2023). Employers often justify their use of surveillance by emphasizing their need to evaluate employee performance and work quality (Glavin et al., 2024). Surveillance can also be a pragmatic way to ensure compliance with workplace regulations and safeguard worker safety (Ciocchetti, 2011; Sebastian et al., 2025). However, employee monitoring, especially when excessive, is associated with decreased worker well-being, increased stress, and heightened job pressure (Pandey & Pravesh, 2025; Glavin et al., 2024).

While surveillance used to consist of direct supervision of work activities, technological advancements have allowed for more expansive monitoring of workers (Mateescu & Nguyen, 2019). Now, employers can access information about their workers' location off-site, keystrokes, and the sites they are accessing at any given moment (Mateescu & Nguyen, 2019). Since the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, these various forms of workplace surveillance have only become more widespread (Pandey & Pravesh, 2025).

To better understand the current status of workplace surveillance, this Data Brief reports on the prevalence of exposure to work speed monitoring and fear of job loss related to

monitoring among California workers using data from the California Work and Health Survey (CWHHS).

Survey Background

The CWHHS focuses on understanding the relationship between work and health, with a special emphasis on Californians who engage in nontraditional work arrangements. The first iteration of the survey was conducted between 2022 and 2023. During this period, data were collected from 4,014 participants aged 18-70. Participants answered questions about their work status, working conditions, and various dimensions of their well-being. Among these items were a series of statements related to experiences at work, including the following:

1. The person or business I work for keeps track of how quickly I am working to complete my job tasks
2. I fear that I will lose my job if I do not work fast enough to complete my job tasks
3. I fear that I will lose my job if I take any time for a break from my job tasks

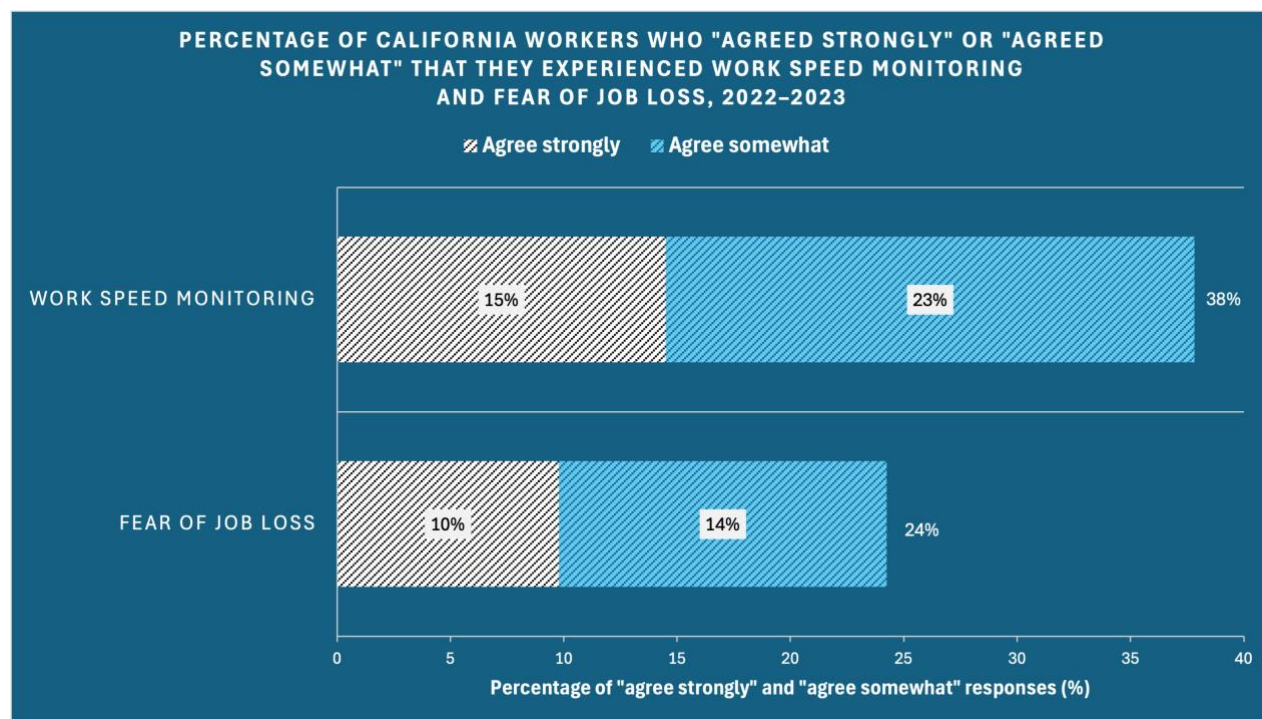
Response options included a Likert scale with the following options: agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, and disagree strongly. Respondents answered these prompts if they indicated that they had worked in the past 7 or 30 days prior to completing the survey. Responses to the first statement were used to assess perceived exposure to work speed monitoring. Answers to the second and third statements were combined to examine experiences of fear of job loss in relation to work speed monitoring. For the primary analysis, any affirmative response (agree somewhat or agree strongly) to these statements was treated as exposure. A second analysis was also conducted, treating only “agree strongly” as the exposure.

Prevalence Among All Workers

Among individuals who worked in the past week or month, around 38% were exposed to work speed monitoring. This represents around 7.2 million Californians. Additionally, around 24%

of workers, or 4.6 million Californians, experienced fear of job loss surrounding work pace or taking breaks.¹

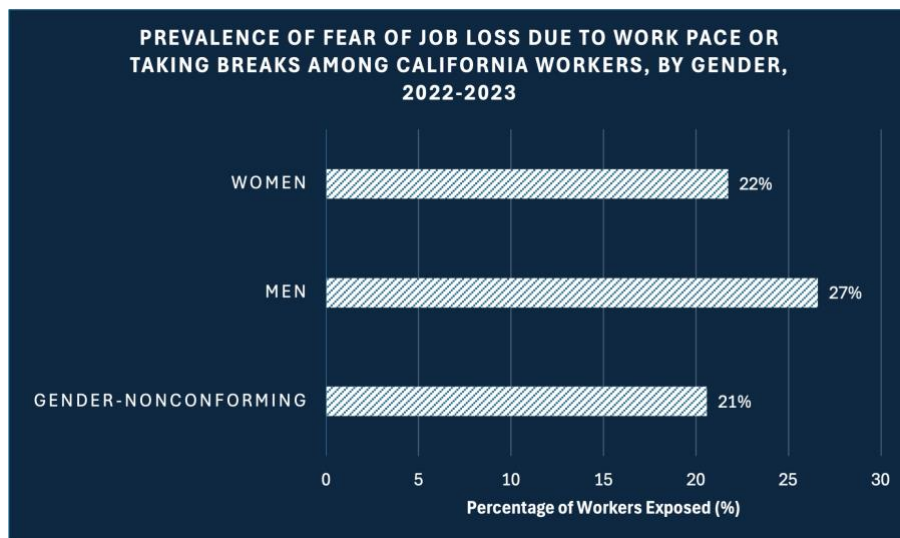
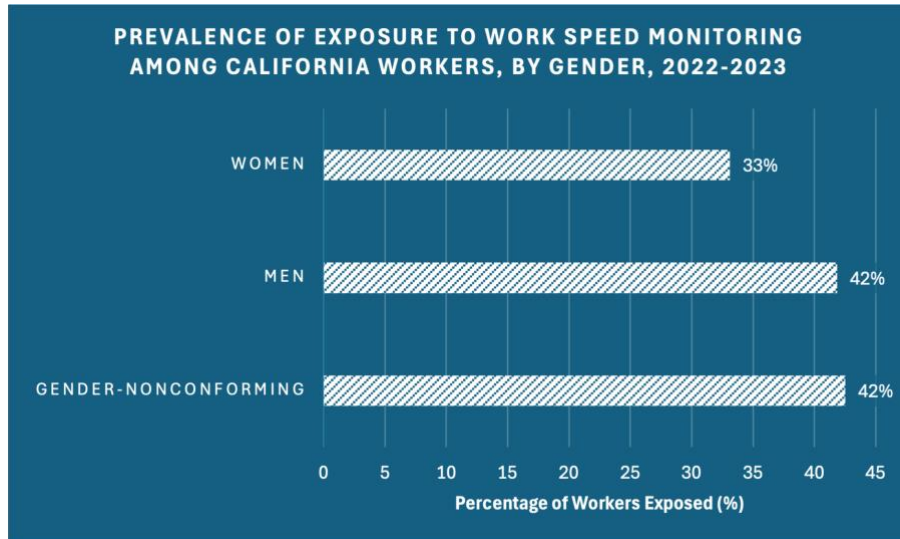
Response Distributions. When the data were broken down by response options, results show that 15% of workers responded “agree strongly” to the statement inquiring about experiences of work speed monitoring. A higher percentage (23%) responded with “agree somewhat.” Similarly, for the statements regarding fear of job loss due to work pace or taking breaks, 10% of workers responded with “agree strongly,” and 14% responded with “agree somewhat.”



¹ Figures derived using the estimated 19.0 million Californians who worked in the past week or month prior to interview.

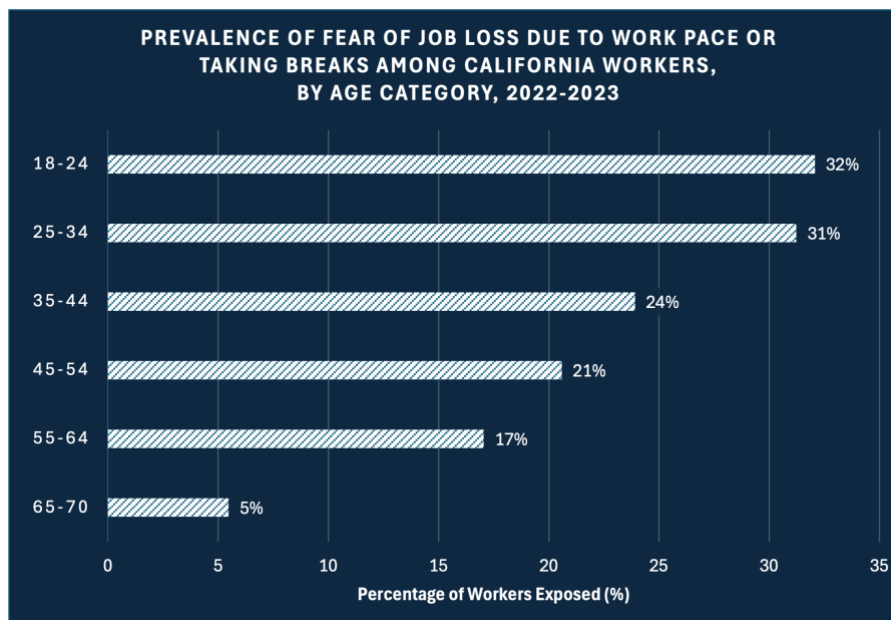
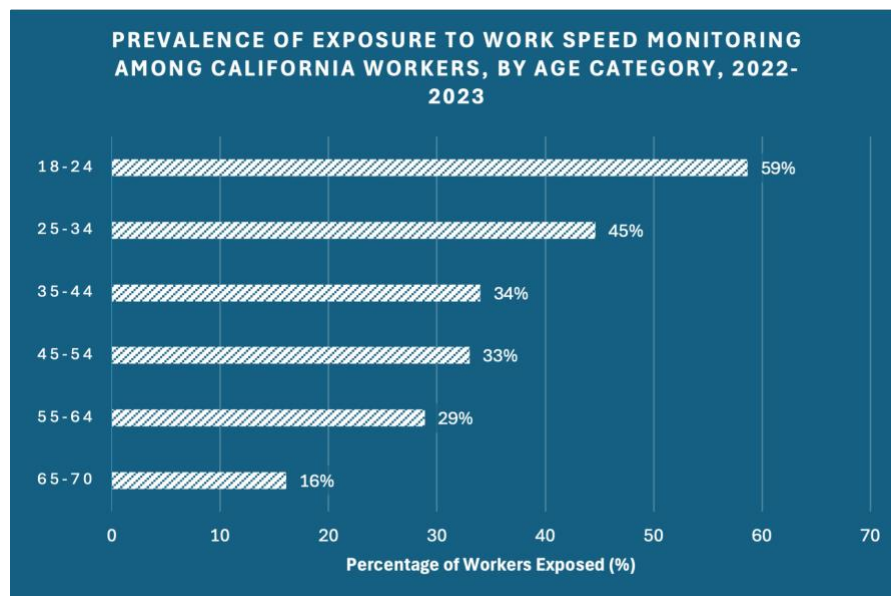
Prevalence Across Demographic Characteristics

Gender. Work speed monitoring was most common among men (42%) and gender-nonconforming individuals (42%).² Men were also most likely to experience fear of job loss due to work pace or taking breaks (27%).



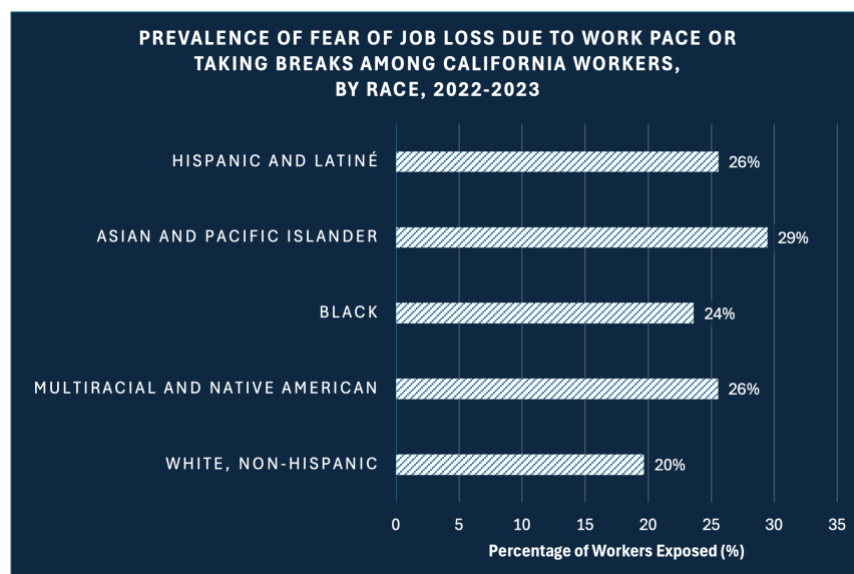
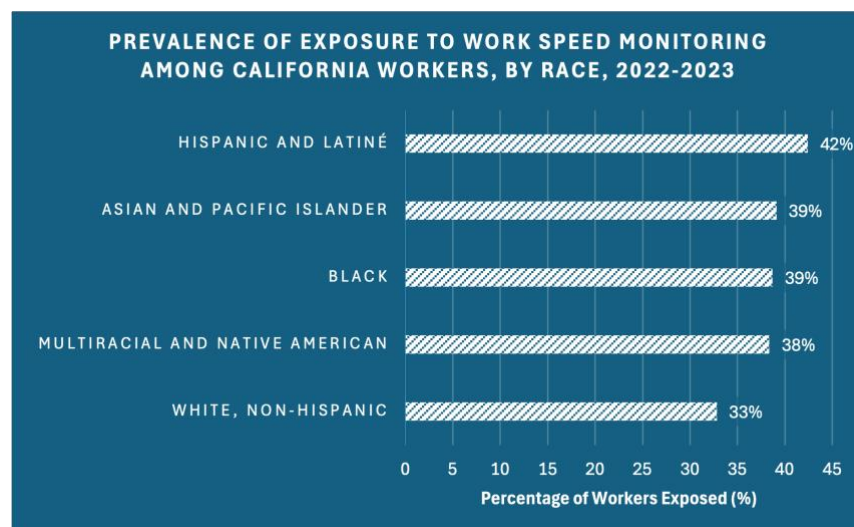
² As gender-nonconforming individuals were an extremely small part of our sample, the standard error for this proportion is .12, as opposed to 0.02 for men and women.

Age. Prevalence of exposure to work speed monitoring decreased with age, with a stark gap between younger and older workers. Workers aged 18-24 were over 2.5 times more likely to be exposed to work speed monitoring than workers aged 65-75. Fear of job loss due to work pace or taking breaks followed the same downward trend as age increased. However, the differences between age categories were much less drastic until the 65-70 age group, after which there was a steep decline.

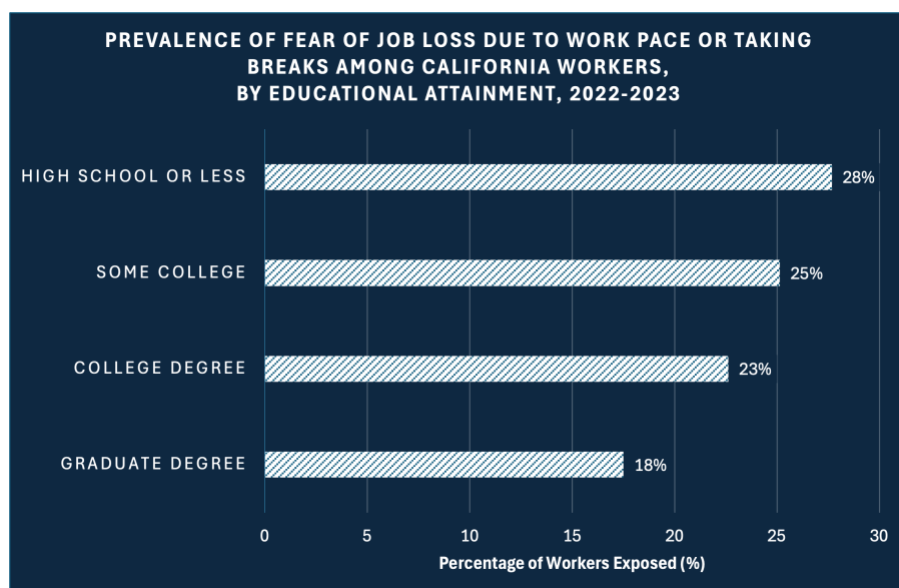
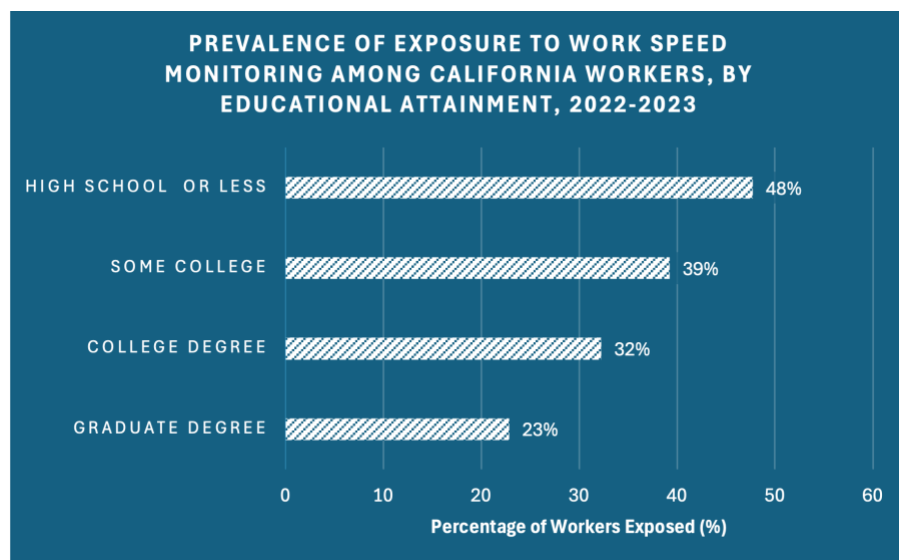


Race. Exposure to work speed monitoring was most prevalent among Hispanic and Latiné workers (42%) and least prevalent among white, non-Hispanic workers (33%). However, the

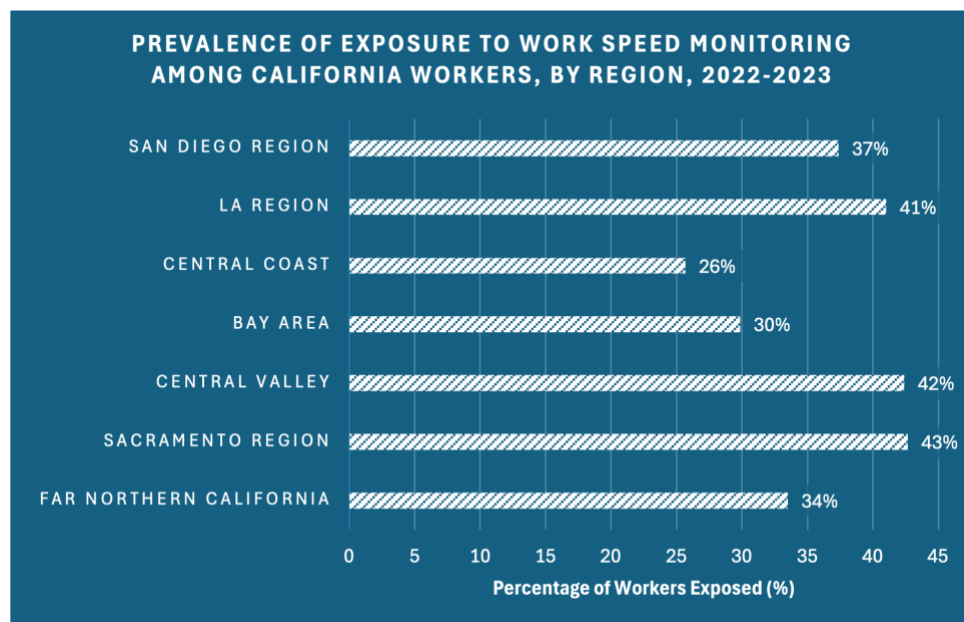
differences in proportions across race categories were relatively small. Fear of job loss followed a slightly different pattern: white, non-Hispanic workers (20%) were least likely to report it, while Asian and Pacific Islander workers (29%) were most likely to report it. Although similar to work speed monitoring, the differences between the groups were not strongly pronounced. When the exposure was limited to “agree strongly,” the trends for both work monitoring and fear of job loss changed slightly. Most notably, Black and Hispanic/Latiné individuals reported the highest levels of work speed monitoring exposure (20% and 19%, respectively), while Asian and Pacific Islander individuals experienced much lower levels of exposure (12%). Asian and Pacific Islander workers were also less likely to report fear of job loss (10%) than Black (13%) and Hispanic and Latiné (13%) workers in this version of the analysis.



Education. Prevalence of exposure to work speed monitoring and fear of job loss declined with increasing education levels. Individuals with a high school degree or less were around twice as likely as workers with graduate degrees to experience work speed monitoring. Fear of job loss showed a similar, slightly less pronounced pattern, with a 10-percentage-point difference in exposure levels between workers with a high school degree or less and those with a graduate degree.



Region. Data from the survey were divided into seven regions: Far Northern California,³ the Sacramento region, the Central Valley, the Bay Area, the Central Coast, the Los Angeles region, and the San Diego region. Workers in the Central Coast were notably less likely to experience work speed monitoring (26%) or fear of job loss (15%) than residents of other regions. The Sacramento region (43%), Central Valley (42%), and LA region (41%) had the highest levels of exposure to work speed monitoring. As for exposure to fear of job loss, Northern California workers (31%) experienced the highest levels in the State. That being said, the associations between region and both work speed monitoring and fear of job loss were not statistically significant.

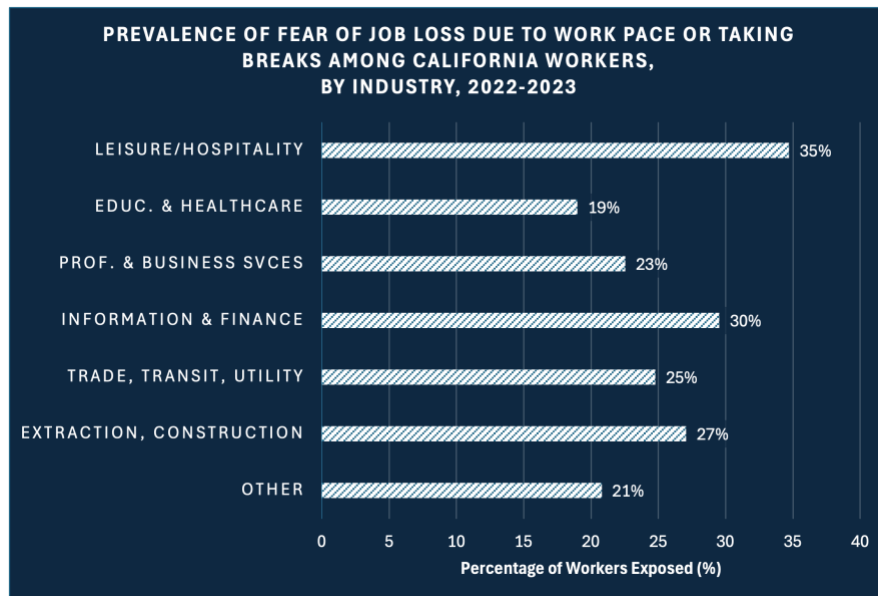
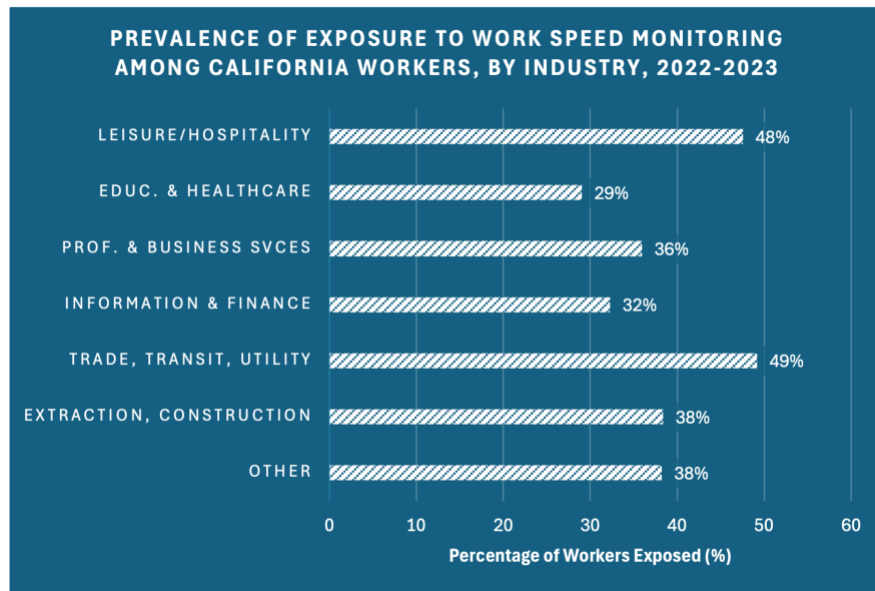


³ This region comprises 17 counties, including Yuba, Mendocino, and Nevada.



Prevalence Across Job Characteristics

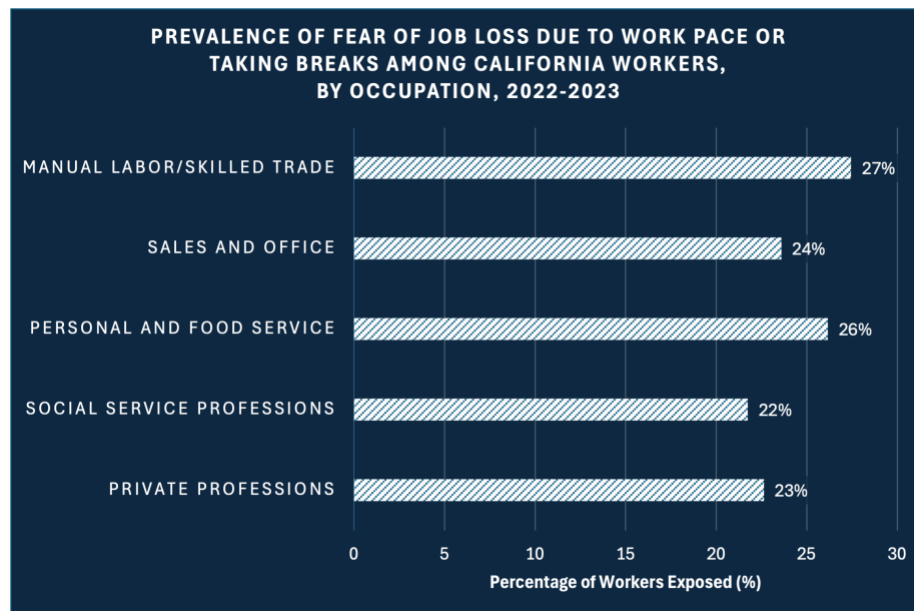
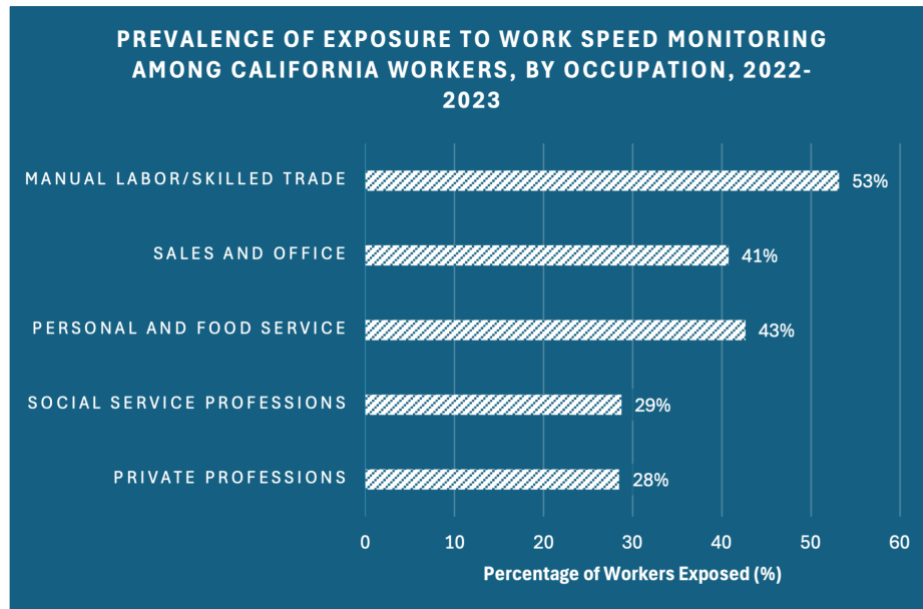
Industry. Workers in the trade, transit, and utility industries (49%) were among the most likely to be exposed to work speed monitoring, along with those in the leisure and hospitality industries (48%). Workers in the leisure and hospitality industries (35%) also reported the most fear of job loss. Individuals who worked in the education and healthcare industries were the least likely to experience both work speed monitoring (29%) and fear of job loss (19%). When the fear of job loss exposure was limited to “agree strongly,” trends varied slightly, with the extraction and construction (13%) and trade, transit, and utility (13%) industries experiencing the highest levels.



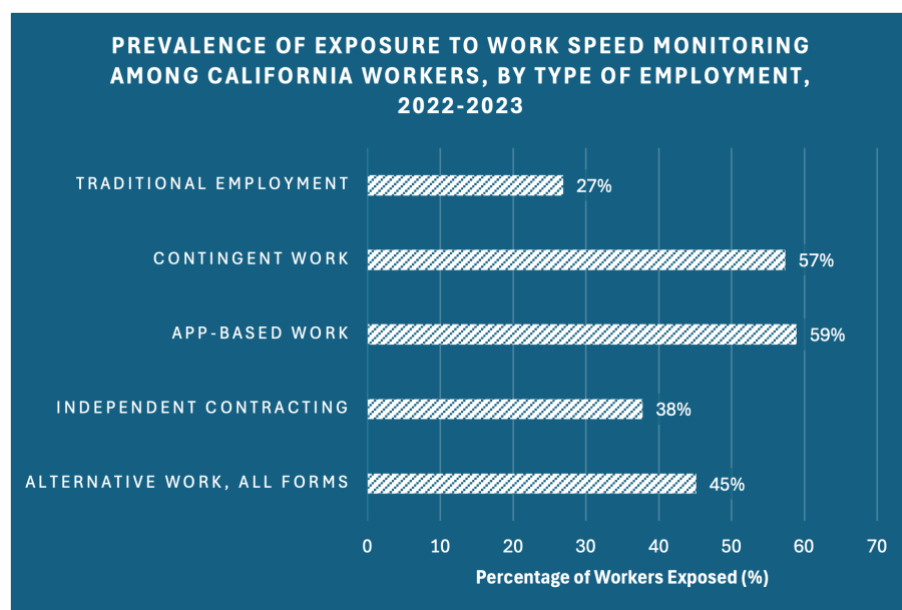
Occupation. The majority of individuals in manual labor and skilled trade occupations (53%) experienced work speed monitoring compared with less than a third of workers in social service occupations (29%) and private professions (28%).⁴ Differences in fear of job loss were less pronounced across occupation. Workers in manual labor and skilled trade

⁴ Defined as management, business, STEM, and legal occupations

occupations (27%) had the highest level of exposure, along with workers in personal and food service occupations (26%), while workers in social service professions (22%) had the lowest. However, the relationship between occupation and fear of job loss was not statistically significant.



Types of Employment. Individuals engaged in traditional work arrangements⁵ were the least exposed to work speed monitoring (27%) and fear of job loss (17%). Those engaged in app-based work⁶ (59%) and contingent work⁷ (57%) were highly exposed to work speed monitoring. These two groups of workers were also the most likely to experience fear of job loss (34% and 42% exposed, respectively). Among independent contractors,⁸ around 38% were exposed to work speed monitoring, and 23% were exposed to fear of job loss. It is important to note that neither the association between work speed monitoring nor the fear of job loss and independent contracting was statistically significant. Workers in any form of alternative work, including work through a temporary employment agency, on-call work, independent contracting, or subcontracted work, were slightly more likely to be exposed to work speed monitoring (45%) and fear of job loss (27%) than independent contractors alone. However, there was also no statistically significant association between alternative work and fear of job loss.

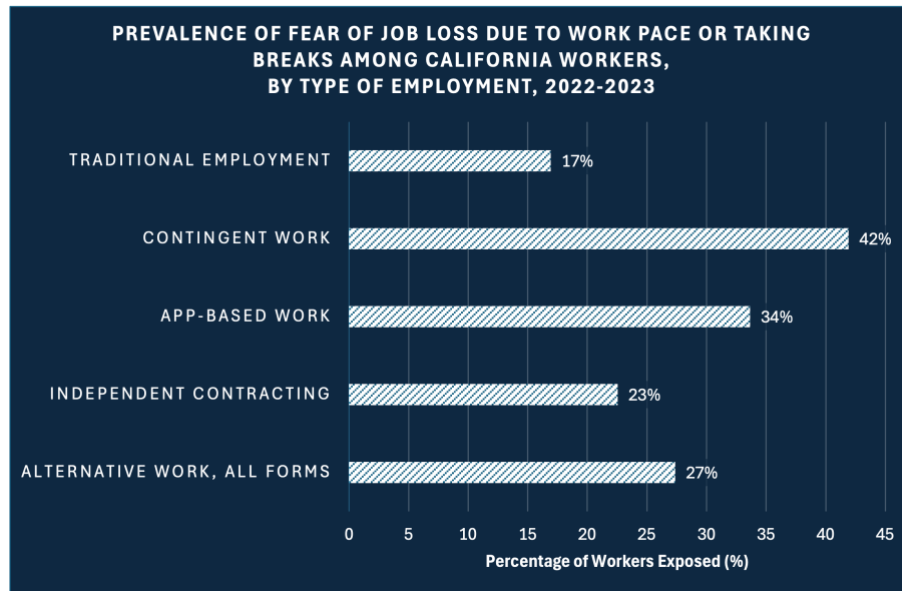


⁵ Workers were categorized as engaging in a traditional work arrangement if they held a single, permanent, full-time, full-year job, were formally hired by their employer, and worked a regular day shift.

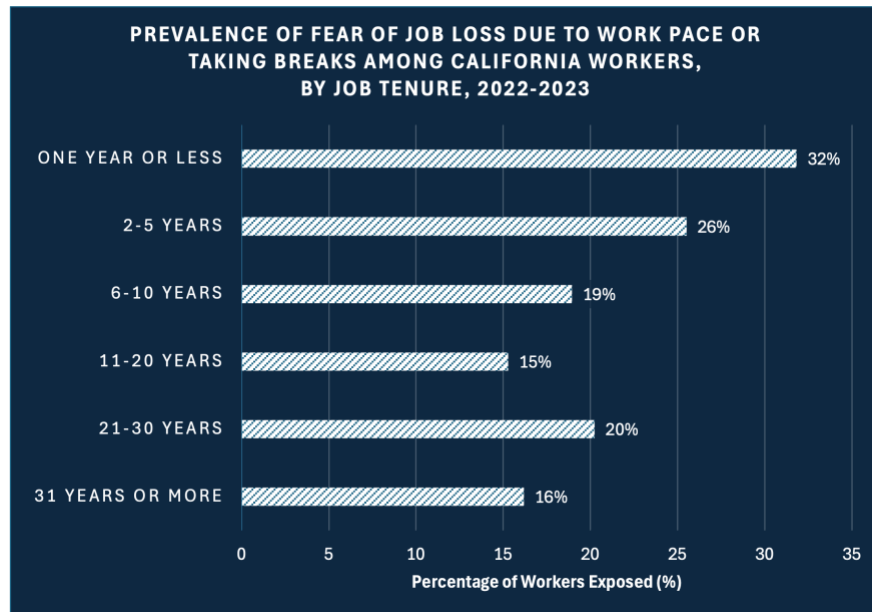
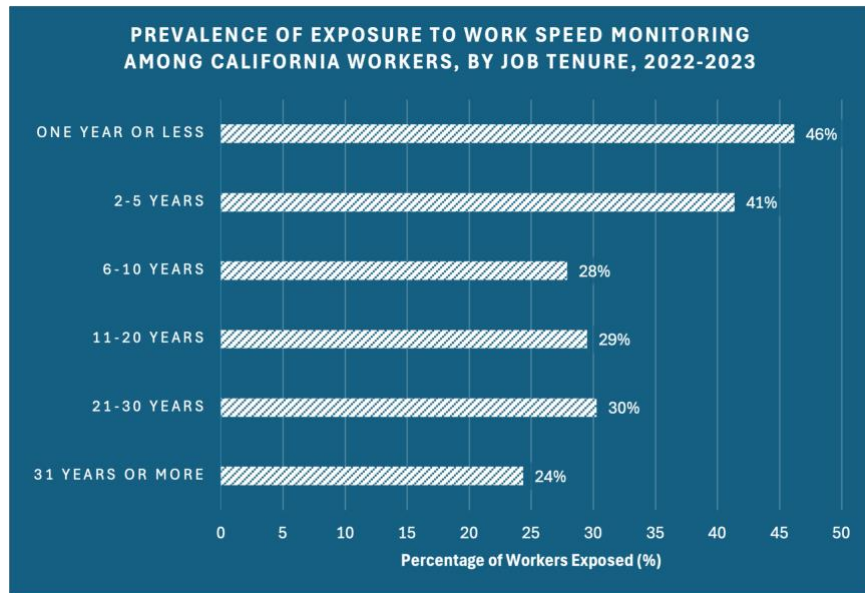
⁶ Defined as work where jobs, clients, and payment are coordinated through an app.

⁷ A designation given if a worker cannot work at their current job as long as they wish.

⁸ A designation given to workers who are self-employed or work for an entity they own and self-identify as an independent contractor, consultant, or freelancer



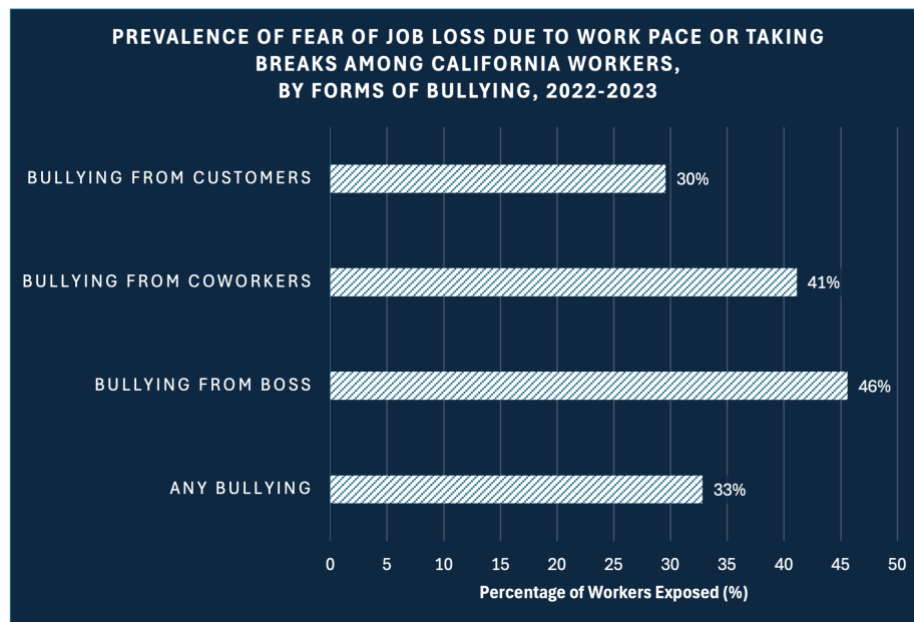
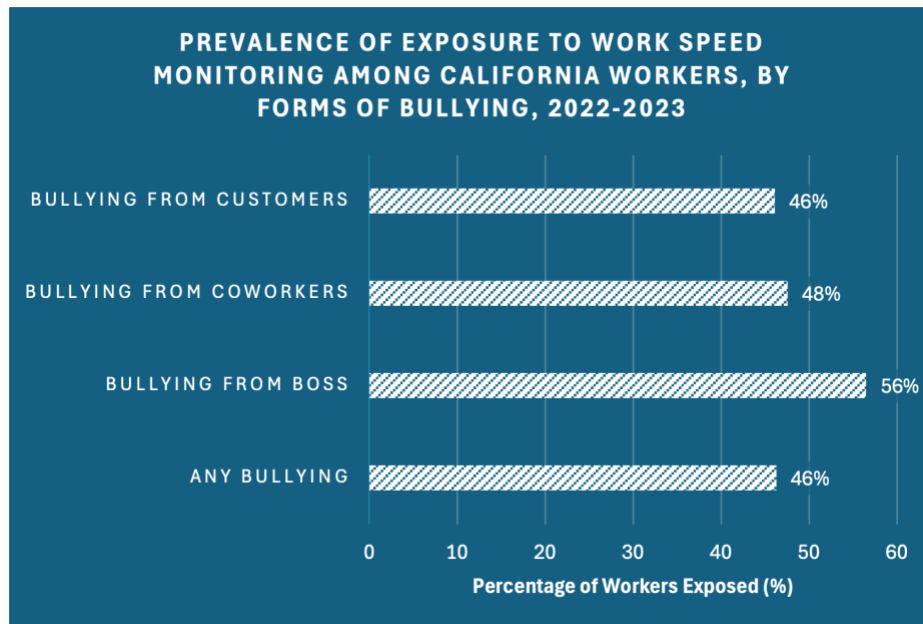
Job Tenure. Exposure to work speed monitoring and fear of job loss roughly followed a downward trend as job tenure increased. More specifically, exposure to work speed monitoring sharply declined after the 5-year mark and fluctuated slightly across the remaining categories. Similar to the pattern across age groups, there was a large difference in exposure to work speed monitoring between workers who had worked for a firm 1 year or less (46%) and those who had worked for a firm for 31 years or more (24%). This difference was slightly smaller for fear of job loss, with 32% of workers who had worked for a firm for 1 year or less being exposed, compared with 16% of workers who had worked for a firm for 31 years or more. When the exposure was set to “agree strongly” only, the difference between these two groups was less pronounced. For both work speed monitoring and fear of job loss, instead of a noticeable decline in the last category, there was an increase in exposure among individuals working at a firm for 31 years or more.



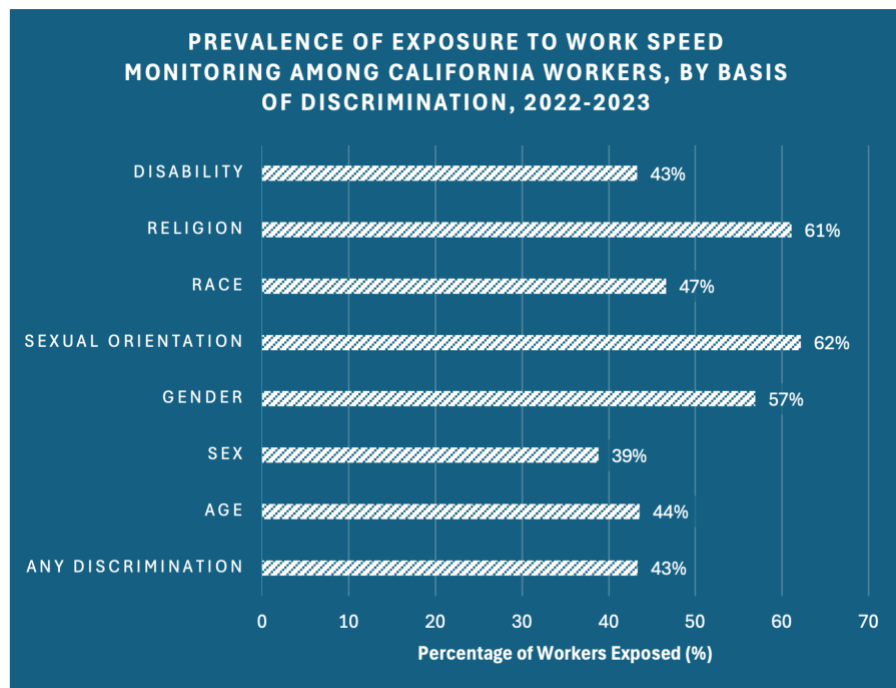
Bullying.⁹ Among individuals who experienced bullying at work, exposure to work speed monitoring was highest among those who were subjected to bullying from their boss (56%).

⁹ In the CWHS, bullying was defined as "things like being humiliated, constantly criticized, or excessively teased." Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they experienced bullying from their supervisor, co-workers, and customers, using the following scale: never, occasionally, or frequently. An individual was considered to have experienced bullying if they responded with "occasionally" or "frequently."

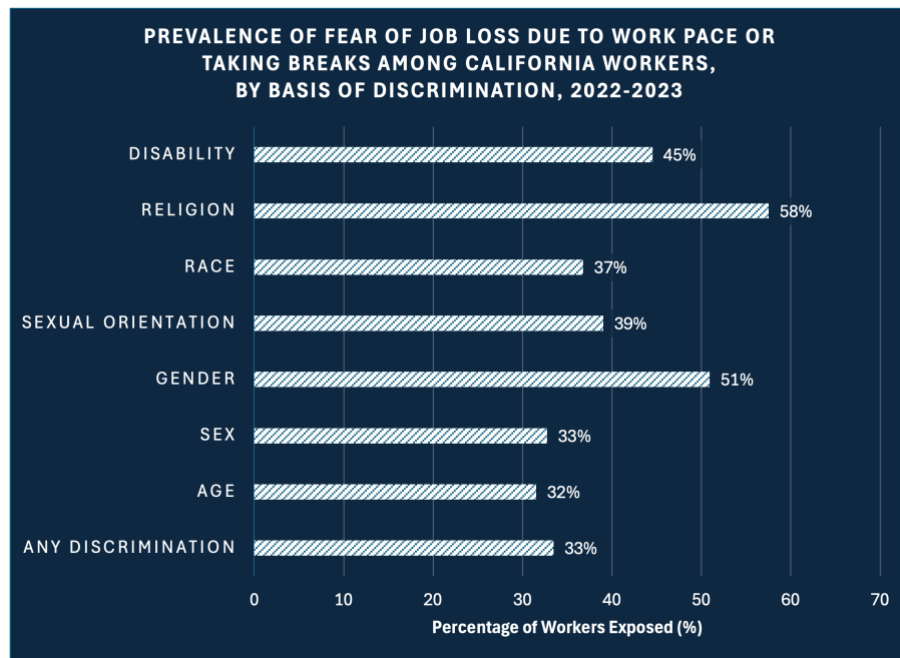
Reported fear of job loss was also highest among workers who experienced this form of bullying (46%).



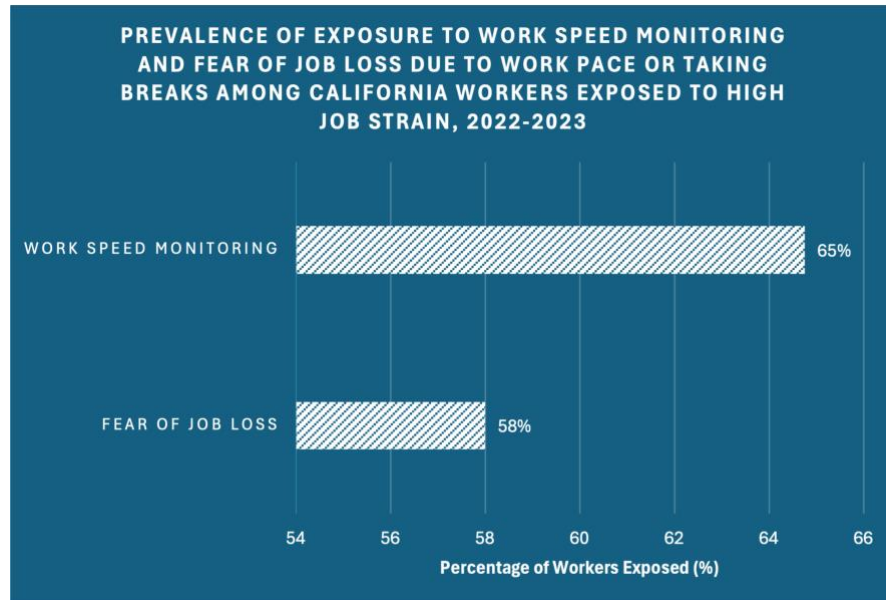
Discrimination.¹⁰ Among workers who experienced any kind of workplace discrimination, 43% were exposed to work speed monitoring. Exposure levels varied between the different bases of discrimination, with individuals who experienced workplace discrimination because of their sexual orientation (62%) and religion (61%) being the most likely to experience work speed monitoring. Similarly, a majority (58%) of workers who were discriminated against based on their religion experienced a fear of job loss.



¹⁰ Discrimination was defined as being fired, not hired, or not promoted because of an element of one's identity. Respondents were asked about each element separately and could respond with either "yes" or "no." This question was asked of all participants who had ever worked and was not tied to a specific job.

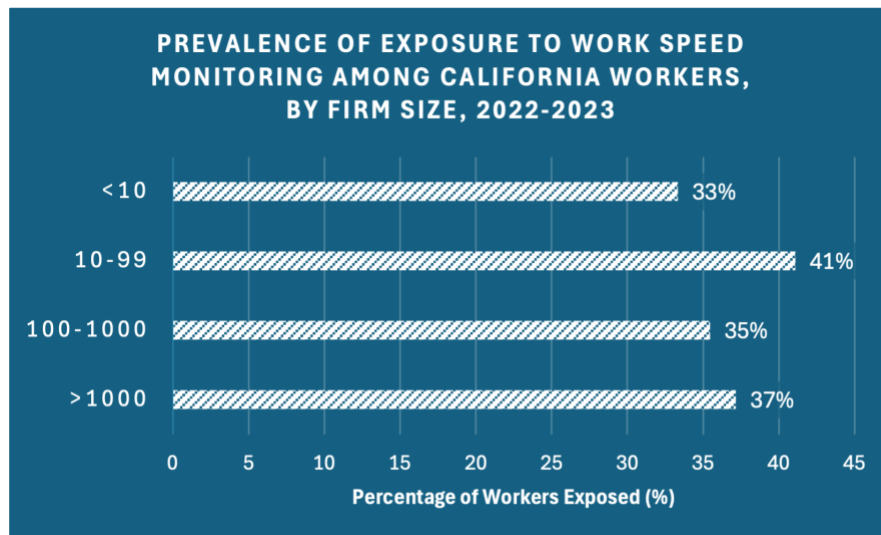


Job Demands and Control. Among individuals who reported high job demands (e.g., heavy workloads) and low decision latitude (i.e., freedom over how the work is done), 65% were exposed to work speed monitoring, and 58% experienced fear of job loss.



Firm Size. Subtle differences in exposure were observed across firm sizes. Individuals working at micro firms (<10 employees) were the least likely to be exposed to work speed monitoring (33%). In contrast, individuals working at small firms (10-99 employees) were the most likely to be exposed (41%). For fear of job loss, workers at micro firms were also the

least likely to report it (21%), and individuals at mid-sized firms were the most likely to be exposed (28%).



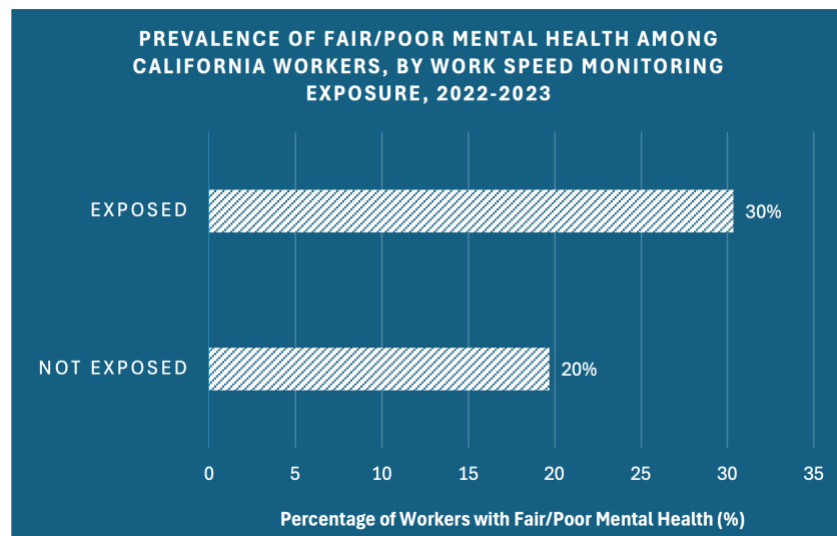
Union Status. While union membership is commonly cited as a mechanism for protecting workers from workplace surveillance (Tung et al., 2025; Garden & Oswalt, 2024; Velazquez, 2023), there was no difference in exposure to work speed monitoring between union and non-union members. There were also only minimal differences in exposure to fear of job loss.

Remote Work. With the rise of electronic monitoring, remote workers have been subject to more surveillance (Andrade et al., 2026; Ackermann, 2025). However, our data show that 43% of in-person workers reported their work speed was monitored, compared to only 32%

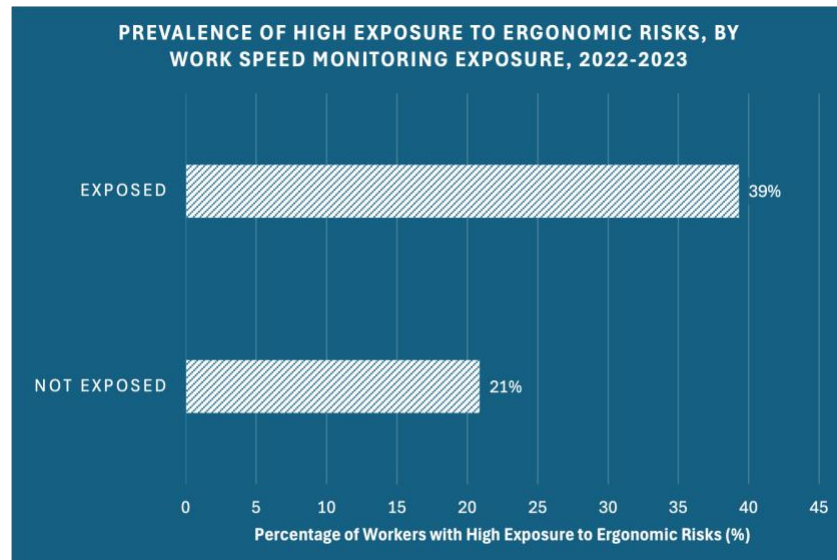
of people who engaged in remote work. There was no difference in reports of fear of job loss between remote and in-person workers.

Workplace Surveillance and Health

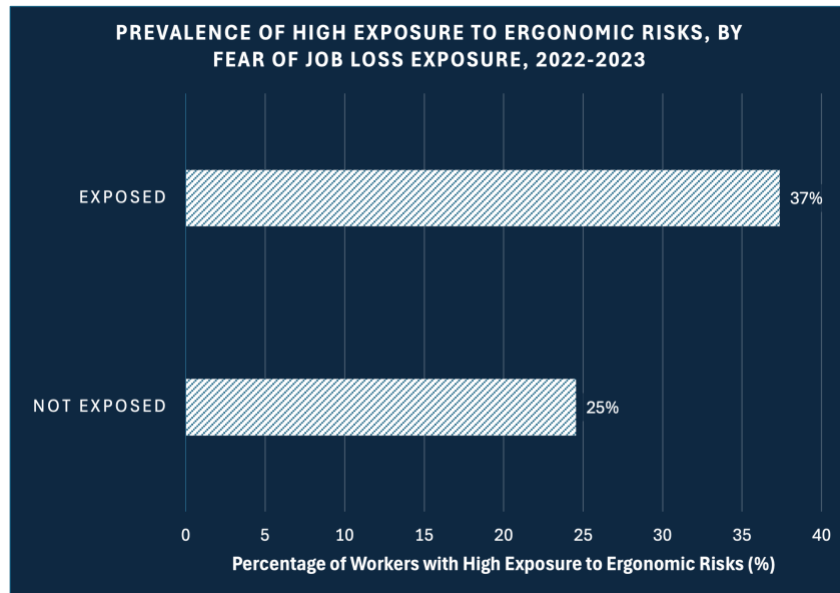
Mental Health. The CWHHS asked respondents to rate their mental health on the following scale: excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor. Among workers who were exposed to work speed monitoring, 30% reported fair or poor mental health. In comparison, 20% of workers who were not exposed to work speed monitoring reported fair or poor mental health. Those who were exposed to fear of job loss were also more likely to indicate a lower mental health rating, with 36% reporting fair/poor mental health, as opposed to only 20% of workers who were not exposed to fear of job loss.



Ergonomic Risks.¹¹ Exposure to ergonomic risk factors, such as the use of vibrating or powered hand tools and prolonged sitting, is associated with an increased risk of musculoskeletal disease and work-related injuries (Rugulies & Krause, 2005). Among workers exposed to work speed monitoring, 39% had high exposure to ergonomic risk factors, compared with 21% among workers not exposed to work speed monitoring. Similarly, among workers exposed to fear of job loss, 37% experienced high ergonomic risk factors at work, compared with 25% among individuals who did not experience fear.



¹¹ Within the CWHS, a section was dedicated to listing a variety of ergonomic risk factors and asking respondents to select the frequency of their exposure using the following options: a lot, sometimes, or not at all. Response options were assigned numeric values, and responses for each respondent were scored and tallied to create a general ergonomic risk factor variable. Respondents who fell within the 75th percentile of scores and above were considered to be highly exposed to ergonomic risk factors.



Conclusion

Around 1 in 3 Californians who worked in the past week or month prior to interview were exposed to work speed monitoring, and around 1 in 4 were exposed to fear of job loss due to work pace or taking breaks.

Higher levels of perceived exposure to work speed monitoring and fear of job loss were observed among men compared to women, younger workers compared to older workers, and less educated workers compared to those with more advanced degrees. In addition, workers with shorter job tenure were more likely to report exposure to work speed monitoring and fear of job loss than those with longer job tenure.

Hispanic and Latiné workers were the most likely to experience work speed monitoring across racial categories, and Asian and Pacific Islander workers were most likely to experience fear of job loss. White, non-Hispanic workers were the least likely to experience either exposure.

When looking at geographic trends, Californians in the Sacramento region, Central Valley, and LA region had the highest levels of work speed monitoring exposure in the State. Workers in Far Northern California reported the highest levels of fear of job loss.

Workers in the trade, transit, and utility industries, as well as the leisure and hospitality industries, were highly exposed to work speed monitoring. Individuals in the leisure and

hospitality industries were also highly likely to experience fear of job loss. As for occupation, workers in manual labor and skilled trade experienced the highest levels of work speed monitoring and fear of job loss. Additionally, workers at small firms were the most likely to report work speed monitoring, and workers at medium-sized firms were the most likely to experience fear of job loss.

Salient trends in exposure prevalence were observed across the different types of employment. For example, a majority of Californians engaged in contingent and app-based work had their work speed monitored. Workers who engaged in this kind of work were also the most likely to report fear of job loss among the various employment categories.

Workers who experienced mistreatment in the form of bullying and discrimination reported elevated levels of work speed monitoring and fear of job loss. Also, workers who were exposed to high levels of job strain were more likely to experience work speed monitoring and fear of job loss.

There was also a clear pattern between experiences of work speed monitoring and fear of job loss and ratings of mental health. Findings show that workers who were exposed to work speed monitoring and fear of job loss were more likely to report fair or poor mental health status than workers who were not exposed to these factors. Additionally, workers who experienced work speed monitoring or fear of job loss reported higher exposure to ergonomic risk factors than those who did not.

Although many conversations about workplace surveillance focus on remote workers' increased exposure, our results show that in-person workers were more likely to report experiencing work speed monitoring. Union membership is also commonly discussed as a means of protection against workplace surveillance. However, in our analysis, we found little to no difference in exposure to work speed monitoring and fear of job loss between workers with and without union membership. These results may reflect the ongoing erosion of union power (Milkman, 2020).

Although employee monitoring is a common practice, it can have deleterious effects on worker health. With technological advancements occurring at ever-increasing speed, it is crucial now more than ever to protect workers from these harms and foster healthy, trusting work environments.

About the Survey

The California Work and Health Survey (CWHHS) used a random sample of cell phones to develop its study cohort of 4,014 working age Californians. The CWHHS was administered between November 2022 and May 2023 by telephone interviewers or completed on-line at the respondents' choice. Both the telephone-administered and on-line surveys could be completed in English or Spanish. The survey covered current employment status, working conditions among the employed, health status, and economic well-being. The results were weighted to reflect known characteristics of the working age population of California.

Learn more:

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