



Washington State Janitorial Workload Study

Appendix A:

Focus Group Report

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Appendix A: Formative Research

Focus Group Report

Acknowledgments

A special thank you to all of the brave janitors who decided to share their studies. Thank you to SEIU6, Entre Hermanos, Spokane Alliance, and all the other community organizations that assisted us with our recruitment efforts. We were able to facilitate the focus groups thanks to their support and guidance.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Janitorial work is labor intensive, demanding, and often exposes workers to physical and psychosocial hazards that increase the risk of work-related injuries (Teran & vanDommelen-Gonzalez, 2017). In Washington State, prior research suggests that janitors are at higher risk of injury than most other occupations (Smith and Anderson, 2017). In order to better understand the workplace and hazards faced by janitors, additional research was needed. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 6, Property Services NW, which represents more than 7,000 janitors, security officers, airport passenger service workers, and allied industries workers in Washington State, has advocated for the Washington State Legislature to improve janitors' work conditions for several years. In 2018, the Washington State Legislature instructed and funded the Department of Labor & Industries' (L&I) Safety & Health Assessment & Research for Prevention (SHARP) program, to research and assess janitors' work conditions (State of Washington, 2018). This budget proviso led to the Washington State Janitorial Workload Study. Focus Groups were instituted as exploratory work to identify pressing health and safety needs for Washington State janitors, using their own words, expertise, and experiences. Janitors' own expert knowledge of their working conditions and needs were solicited to help determine priorities for the design and implementation of the study.

Methods

This report presents a summary of nine exploratory focus groups conducted in Washington State with forty-six janitors; the primary purpose of these focus groups was to hear from janitors about their safety and health needs, and to better understand their working lives. Data collection was initiated in September 2018 and concluded in June 2019.

Five focus groups were facilitated in Seattle and four in Spokane. Five focus groups were facilitated in Spanish and four were facilitated in English. All but one of the nine focus groups was composed of union-represented janitors. Almost half (48%) of the focus group participants were Latino, and evenly split between men and women, although women were more likely to identify as Latina (73%) and the men as White (67%). Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service; Spanish language focus groups were transcribed first into Spanish, then into English. Focus group facilitators reviewed all transcripts for completeness and accuracy, in addition each group had a researcher taking notes, to add to the transcribed records. No personally identifiable information was collected, and participants were instructed not to use proper names in the meetings. All focus group participants were given a small token of

appreciation (\$25 gift card). The Washington State Institutional Review Board reviewed the materials, methods and protocols of this study, and deemed it as exempt research.

Janitor Safety and Health Findings

Researchers in SHARP created a general focus group guide that centered around three main themes:

1. Top safety and health challenges at work
2. Work organization, workload and pace
3. Workplace policies, training and reporting injuries

Within each topic area, several clarifying questions were asked, and participants were encouraged to bring up additional issues not addressed in the guide. Among the topics brought up by participants were:

1. Lack of adequate supplies and working equipment
2. Interpersonal issues with supervisors and coworkers
 - a. Harassment, bullying and discrimination
 - b. Claims suppression/intimidation; and how well these efforts work against immigrant janitors.
3. Issues with pay, sick leave, and overtime

In addition to concerns, focus group participants provided examples of how they cope and even thrive in their work, regardless of the challenges. These issues of resilience and pride are presented throughout the report.

Due to the complex nature of qualitative analyses and the timely need to present the results of our exploratory focus groups, this report focuses on major results and provides quotes from participants to tell their story of working in the janitorial sector in Washington State.

Among the forty-six janitors who participated in these focus groups, almost all shared similar examples of being overworked, rushing to get the job done, and not being given enough supplies as well as being forced to use broken equipment. All of these issues have resulted in a stressed out, frustrated labor group, that is often working while sick or injured. Among the more common coping mechanisms mentioned were support from coworkers (helping each other out), as well as support from the union (such as formally presenting their complaint to the union for action). In addition, the union was mentioned as being very helpful in accessing information about their rights, and presenting this information to non-English literate janitors.

Overview of concerns brought up by participants in the focus groups:

- Safety Climate Concerns

- Lack of management commitment to safety
 - Lack of safety and health training
 - Lack of safe equipment, PPE, and supplies
 - Unsafe and unmanageable workload, fast pace, stress and fatigue
 - Abusive supervision and discrimination
- Unlawful business practices: Wage and hour violations

Key recommendations from focus group janitors:

- Periodic workplace safety inspections
- Improve company policies and procedures for workplace safety and health
- Training for supervisors and janitorial staff
- Language appropriate safety and health training for janitors
- Provide equipment in good working order; regular maintenance of equipment
- Provide personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Adequate quantity of cleaning supplies
- Evaluation and improvement of workload and work organization runs.
- Job sites need routine checks to identify where extra help is needed to prevent workers from taking unsafe risks while completing their work
- Task assignments rotation, to help prevent injuries caused by repetitive motion
- Prevent and reduce abusive supervision and discrimination
- Increase enforcement of labor standards

The janitorial industry is rich with diversity, and in our recruitment efforts, we identified 25 different primary languages. Time and resource constraints limited us to only English and Spanish language focus groups, so there may be gaps in the information we received and the key issues identified, due to the lack of cultural and linguistic diversity amongst participants.

Conclusion

The most common issue raised in almost all of the focus groups centered on poor safety climate, namely, lack of management commitment to safety, lack of safety and health training, the lack of adequate staff, equipment, PPE, and supplies, abusive supervision, and the amount of work janitors are tasked with. There were also multiple examples of additional workplace stressors contributing to unsafe workplaces and a concerning violation of worker rights regarding wage and hour violations and discrimination.

The focus groups were just a small sample of janitors in Washington State, but they presented a clear need for systematic evaluation of the work janitors do, the training they receive and a call for increased oversight of the workplace. Addressing these issues is problematic within the janitorial industry, due in large part to the complex nature of their worksites (e.g. multiple layers of responsibility, which may include: building owners, management companies, building tenants, and janitorial employers – all of whom may play a role in determining worksite conditions). Responsibility for safe workplaces and how companies will ensure legal protections should be standardized and written into janitorial and tenant contracts.

The results of these focus groups highlight that janitors report being at a high risk of injury due to several factors, including the pace of the work, and the expectations of supervisors and company management. Additionally, janitors in our focus groups describe numerous incidence of harassment, bullying, and discrimination; and most felt helpless to prevent or report these. Increased education on worker rights will help, but only if there are meaningful ways to uphold those rights, and investigate these complaints. Nonnative and nonunion janitors appear to be especially vulnerable to abusive workplaces.

Focus Groups: References

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Washington State Janitorial Workload Focus Groups

Janitorial work is labor intensive, demanding, and often exposes workers to various psychosocial and physical hazards that increase the risk of work-related injuries (Teran & vanDommelen-Gonzalez, 2017).

The Washington State Legislature requested for SHARP (Safety & Health Assessment & Research for Prevention) to conduct a study to assess the work conditions of janitors in Washington. SHARP is a workplace safety and health research and prevention program within Washington State's Department of Labor & Industries. The goal is to identify workplace hazards to improve janitors' occupational health and safety.

In terms of the work context, many workers in the janitorial industry are low wage, immigrant workers with limited English and work while isolated. These janitors are more vulnerable to exploitation and harassment in the workplace (Costa, 2018; 2019; Kerwin D., 2013; Fine, 2017; Kerwin & McCabe, 2011). Fears linked to that vulnerability became a thread that was encountered through all aspects of the research from study design, to recruitment, in our analysis, and in reporting the study findings.

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The questions for the focus groups revolved around three broad themes. Those are:

- general health and safety,
- workload/work organization/pace,
- policies/trainings/reporting.

Data collection initiated in September 2018 and concluded in June 2019. SHARP researchers facilitated the focus groups. These were about an hour long, and were facilitated in English or Spanish. The study team had three bilingual staff (i.e., English and Spanish) who facilitated the Spanish focus groups. All of the participants provided informed consent and received a \$25 gift card for participating in the focus groups to thank them for their time and contribution to the study. All of the focus groups were recorded; identifiers were removed from transcripts during the coding process.

Recruitment

SHARP researchers chose to focus on English and Spanish speaking janitors for the focus groups to make best use of our team's Spanish bilingual skills and relationships in the Latino community in Washington.

Community-based recruitment strategies were used to disseminate various recruitment materials to reach janitors and inform them of the study. Research staff drew on relationships they had formed with organizations from previous work experiences and involvement in different projects. These relationships were strengthened and new ones were developed to build rapport with the communities in the janitorial industry. In addition, these organizations reviewed study recruitment materials and made recommendations to improve recruitment efforts.

SEIU Local 6 (janitorial union), Spokane Alliance (a non-partisan and non-profit alliance), Entre Hermanos (a nonprofit servicing Latinx communities), and other organizations were instrumental in connecting researchers with other community partners and provided assistance with recruitment efforts (e.g., hosting us during their radio shows). All of the focus groups were facilitated in community organization offices.

Analysis

The focus groups conducted in Spanish were translated and transcribed by a professional transcription service. The five researchers who facilitated the focus groups participated in the data analysis. The team used a qualitative consensual research (QSR) approach for the analysis including developing a codebook, discussing coding issues, and developing the thematic structure (Hill et al. 1997; 2005). A qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, was used to assist with the analysis. The coding team met multiple times throughout the coding and analysis steps to ensure that everyone was following the same coding protocol, to clarify questions, and to create and refine an analysis codebook. After coding was completed, verification of the coding ensured coding consistency across themes.

Study Findings

What follows is a presentation of the research findings. The focus remains on the strongest themes identified during the coding process. Each section provides a brief summary that captures the overall theme. We elaborate on each theme and include representative quotes selected during the analysis.

Safety Climate

Safety climate is a strong theme found consistently across all focus groups. We define safety climate as individuals' shared perceptions of the various ways that safety is valued in the workplace. A large body of research over the past 35 years demonstrates that safety climate is an important predictor of safety behavior and safety outcomes such as injury and illness (Casey et al., 2017).

Specific concerns janitors brought forward in the discussions include the safety climate dimensions of poor leadership commitment to safety, little or no job safety training, hazard identification and resolution, and personal protective equipment provision. In addition, unmanageable workloads, fast work pace, and abusive supervision and safety generated heated discussions in the focus groups. Participants noted that if a company provides safety training, it is generally more concerned with checking off items on a checklist rather than specifically helping each employee become proficient in the specifics of hazard identification and injury prevention. Janitors mentioned that a lack of proper job training results in workers incorrectly applying cleaning chemicals. Moreover, janitors reported that management often disregards hazardous chemical labeling; this increases the risk of incidents and injury.

Table 1 below presents a snapshot of the safety climate dimensions and key focus group findings related to each dimension.

Table 1. Safety Climate Summary Findings from Janitor Focus Group Responses

Safety Climate Dimensions	Focus Group Key Findings
Management Commitment to Safety	<p>Owners, managers, and supervisors lack safety commitment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor safety communication and leadership • Discourage janitors from reporting safety issues • Retaliate against janitors for reporting safety concerns • Pressure injured workers to continue working
Safety Training – Policies, Practices	<p>Many in the industry lack proper job and safety training on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to use PPE • How to properly use and label hazardous chemicals • How to safely clean biohazards/pathogens (i.e., blood, viruses, bacteria, etc.)
Safe Equipment, PPE, and Supplies	<p>Companies do not provide safety information and safe equipment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PPE is not provided by companies • Lack of cleaning supplies • Missing hazardous chemical labeling • Cleaning equipment, maintenance, and supply needs are dismissed
Safe Workload and Pace	<p>Supervisors use various tactics to increase workloads and pace:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overwhelming janitors with unmanageable workloads • Understaffing contributes to work overload and injury risk • Pressure to work faster • Pressure to work unpaid overtime to complete work overload
Relationships and Safety	<p>Poor relationships compromise janitors' ability to work safely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress from abusive supervision creates safety hazards • Supervisors show a lack of concern for janitors - pressuring them to work while sick or injured
Reporting Practices for Safety	<p>Janitors are uninformed about safe work practices and unaware of how to report hazards and work-related injuries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisory claim suppression • Management discourages reporting safety issues • Janitors are retaliated against for reporting

Note: PPE: Personal Protective Equipment

Management Commitment to Safety

Janitors shared their concerns regarding injury and illness in all of the focus groups. Almost all janitors shared a general concern for a lack of a safety climate including a leadership commitment to safety in their work place. This includes leader attitudes that injuries are not always preventable and that “*accidents happen*” and that it is normative to work through an injury without reporting it or seeking medical attention. Janitors described workplaces that lacked hazard identification, assessment, prevention, and control procedures. Companies did not provide safety training, encouragement, and other support needed for janitors to work safely. Our analysis revealed that janitor perceptions of their company safety climates were that supervisors typically encouraged janitors to accept injury risks and discouraged reports of hazards and injuries.

“Well, I actually got injured one night. I seriously thought I split my skull. I was grabbing a garbage can; the door was closed behind me. I walked right – I called my supervisor and you know what he did? He goes, ‘Yeah, I’ll be over there later. We’ll fill out an accident report.’ He never showed up. I brought it up the next day. He goes, ‘Oh, it’s no big deal.’ That’s how – they don’t care.”

“But chemicals are the worst hazard we have. And if you do report an injury – I waited five hours before they took me to the emergency to get attended to. It was at the discretion of the supervisor. She wanted my job finished first.”

Moreover, janitors did not seek medical care due to a safety climate that fostered fear of retaliation and termination. Janitors reported regular exposure to hazardous conditions in indoor and outdoor work environments. They noted that their risk of injury escalates due to time constraints, unmanageable workloads, heavy, awkward lifting, lack of personal protective equipment, and isolated work for long periods.

In the context of poor safety climates, janitors reported various recurring work-related injuries. These include musculoskeletal injuries, including arm, wrist, back, and hip injuries from repetitious, fast-paced job tasks such as vacuuming, mopping, and lifting multiple heavy trash bags and barrels. Janitors stressed that supervisors pressure injured workers to continue working, ignoring their pain and need for time and medical care to heal.

“The repetitive motion of doing that can actually cause – I’ve seen people with things wrapped around. And there was one coworker I had – he’s no longer there. I would see him sit down, and wrap a cloth around his wrist because he said he was in pain.”

“But for seven years, I moved 300 pounds around on two wheels, and I did seven of them bins a night at that time. So, my body, like the other gentleman said, my body paid for that.”

“Now, my arm is bad; I can’t take the pain in my arm, the pain and all of that doesn’t let me sleep.”

A participant describes their experiences with a poor safety climate.

“It’s all kind of – they do the paperwork and everything, but they don’t do anything to make it any easier to not have the injury again. They won’t listen to workers or what you do, and any of that stuff. You still go back in the same situation. You go home maybe for a while and heal up a little bit, and you’re thrown right back into the fire again, doing the same thing you were doing before.”

This participant points out some of the issues and how to address them.

“But as far as safety, I think – Let’s put it this way. They are lagging. They need stiffer regulations. Or inspections.”

Safety climate is strongly influenced by manager expectations, communication of safety messages, and actions taken to ensure a safe workplace. These actions include all aspects of the work from safety attitudes conveyed by supervisors, training, personal protective equipment, reporting practices, workload, work pace, and response to injury that promotes worker recovery and healing that might rightfully require a worker’s compensation claim. Participants described a number of ways that poor safety climates and manager commitment to safety created safety hazards and injury.

Safety Training

Janitors pointed out that many in the industry lack training. This includes job and safety training supervisors and janitors should be receiving. They asserted that management does not provide job descriptions, safety policies, safety orientations, and safety training to new employees or stand-by employees. This leaves them uninformed about safe work policies and practices and unaware of how to report hazards and work-related injuries. Janitors reported that they do not receive blood borne pathogen training or other biohazard training, as well as the personal protective equipment they need to prevent infections, illnesses and injuries while cleaning hospitals and medical labs.

“So, they never told us that we had to use special attire or anything there. In fact, I know the person, and they said that they just go in with plastic gloves, and your own shoes that you use every day. So, sometimes there’s blood, in the [hospital] that gets accumulated. So, to me, I think it’s very sensitive, to be cleaning that. And many people go and don’t know what it is. They just know that they have to clean, so they have to clean. But in reality, I don’t think everyone knows the danger there.”

New janitors reported receiving little orientation of all the spaces and things they have to clean or where cleaning supplies and equipment are located. This in combination with lack of safety training and fear of asking their supervisors questions that might identify them as inexperienced and a target for replacement, increased their risk for injury. Janitors pointed out that managers do not provide the necessary safety information in Spanish or other languages to limited English proficient workers.

Janitors also reported that managers blame them for poor job performance while not offering the required trainings. They also explained that management uses supervisors as substitutes for absent workers, which compromises employee safety training and monitoring of cleaning supplies and equipment. Moreover, while under pressure from supervisors to complete more tasks, janitors explained that their stress levels increase. This forces them to rush in an attempt to keep up with the unmanageable workloads, which subsequently increases their risk for injury.

“Since I started, I’ve not once been given any training. When I talked to my boss, not the supervisor, the one above the supervisor, uh, he told me that I wasn’t able to get the job done. So, I told him at that moment, ‘Okay, so give me training because, since I started, I haven’t been trained. If you want me to get the job done in the time you want, maybe the way I work doesn’t work. Train me again.’ And no, never [received training].”

Janitors reported that supervisors do not receive any trainings, this includes training in employee supervision and leadership skills. This lack of training means janitors must deal with supervisory incompetence and the consequences that come with that. Supervisors lack the janitorial industry knowledge and skills needed to train employees in their basic job duties. As a result of this practice, janitors take on the added responsibility of training new co-workers, sometimes while experiencing language barriers. Supervisors who lack communication skills training are rude, insulting, and verbally hostile towards subordinates. They also lack knowledge of equipment maintenance. Janitors advocated for supervisors to receive training to fulfill their role in employee safety. Janitors expressed dismay with companies that have rolled back training standards, demonstrating indifference towards safety.

“So, a lot of companies aren't doing it. I've had to train managers of companies that come out of school because they studied finance and studied this. They don't understand the reality of cleaning offices. . . They don't understand cleaning a bathroom. They don't have an idea nor how to empty a trash can and they push their work off on others.”

In another concern related to training and safety, janitors described management as unresponsive to their cleaning equipment, maintenance, supply, and training needs. Most janitors reported, *“being forced”* to work with worn and damaged vacuum cleaners, inadequate cleaning chemicals and other supplies with job performance and safety consequences.

“The vacuum does what it’s supposed to do. For your safety, it shuts off, and you’ll smell it or you’ll feel your vacuum hot. What you want to do is unplug. Okay, they say they’re fixing it. What they do is they hardwire, or straight wire that switch, put the defunct switch back on there, and say, “It’s all good,” and you’re – and then two days later, the vacuum’s actually smoking.”

Specifically, janitors reported supervisors' failure to train workers in hazardous chemical communication and the safe handling of cleaning chemicals and chemical wastes. In their comments, they noted that companies do not provide appropriate cleaning supplies, first aid kits, and necessary personal protective equipment, which often forces janitors to improvise with less effective substitutes.

“But chemicals are the worst hazard we have. And if you do report an injury – I waited five hours before they took me to the emergency to get attended to. It was at the discretion of the supervisor. She wanted my job finished first.”

When janitors and their supervisors miss safety training, workers are left uninformed about safe work policies and practices and are placed at greater risk for injury. Janitors lack the information they need to report hazards and work-related injuries, and they are retaliated against when they share safety concerns with their supervisors. Janitors are also afraid to request personal protective equipment.

Safe Equipment, PPE, and Supplies

Janitors expressed a lack of confidence in management taking their safety issues seriously, which leaves them feeling compelled to complete job tasks using risky or less effective alternative means including working without emergency aid kits needed to care for minor injuries. Janitors feared supervisor retaliation for reporting equipment or supply issues. Janitors stressed that working with inadequate or broken cleaning equipment takes more time. This forces them to work harder and faster to finish their duties, which increases their risk of exposure to hazardous cleaning equipment, chemicals, and environmental conditions.

“For example, (when equipment is) in bad condition then one works double the amount of time and eh– also the mops are two three little cloths that the old mops already has, and it also fights you a lot so that you mop double. . . They don't give you mask for the chemicals, when you finish vacuuming you end up with the dirt in your face.”

In sum, our data suggest that company practices frequently compromise janitors' health and safety. Janitors identified safety issues that their companies are responsible for addressing including a lack of safety trainings and trainings that meet the language needs of Janitors with limited English, and failure to provide necessary equipment, maintenance, parts, cleaning supplies, and PPE. The safety issues reported by janitors contribute to the likelihood of hazard exposures and incidents that negatively affect janitor health and well-being on the job.

Unsafe Workloads and Pace

One of the strongest themes that emerged from our data was work overload and its impact on janitors' health and safety. Janitors in every focus group reported supervisor overburdening with work, adding work but with no additional staff provided to complete it.

Janitors attempted to keep up with the additional tasks by increasing their pace. However, rushing increases their risk for injury, which many reported in the focus groups. In addition, many janitors pointed out that their employers and supervisors actively discouraged them from taking their paid rest and lunch breaks required by law. Janitors requested a workload and task assignments reassessment and adjustments made to a reasonable and safe level.

A strong majority of janitors reported increased workloads, added tasks, and expectations on their jobs. Janitors reported work conditions including understaffing, no extra time allotted to complete the additional work tasks, and no overtime pay compensation for working beyond their shift to complete tasks. Janitors stated that they are expected to clean entire buildings with square footage almost doubling over last five years or so. For example, some janitors reported that six full-time janitors and a janitor working 5 hours per day must now clean a building that used to have 15 full-time janitors to clean it.

“When we started out, it was like 3,500 sq. ft. per hour. And you can get everything clean at least, maybe dust it real good at least once a week. Then it went up to like 4,000 or 5,000, and yeah, you know. At least you still vacuum and get the main stuff done. I’ll give you an idea what we’re doing now. A three bedroom, one bath, house is 1,500 sq. ft. They want us to clean 6,000 sq. ft. per hour. That’s four of those houses every hour, and they want the same work done when we were doing 3,500 sq. ft. per hour.”

Our analysis revealed that nearly every janitor pointed out that heavier work demands increased their risk of injury and attributed this to the fast work pace. As one janitor commented below.

“You are giving me 20 bathrooms, more than 200 offices... And that’s why the workers, all of us get injured, backaches, joint pains, everything, because of overwork because everyone here is overworked, and I told the general manager.”

“Back when we used to do like 35 or 4,000 sq. ft., we ranked in the top ten in fewest injuries in all the offices. When we started jumping to 5,000, 6,000, we all of a sudden dropped to 113th, about 115th in injuries, we had that many injuries.”

Another janitor describes the cumulative effect of repetitive heavy lifting and subsequent injury.

“One of my problems I’ve had is heavy lifting, and for 22 years I’ve repeatedly done the same stuff and I’ve got injuries from it.”

Inadequate staffing was another safety-related practice that most janitors reported as problematic and contributing to an unsafe and unmanageable workload. For example,

when their coworkers are out on leave, management often does not provide enough workers to cover the gap in staffing. Janitors suggested that additional hiring should increase staffing levels in these situations. Another concern brought up by janitors is the expectation that when other teams need help with their work, they should provide it, but cannot because of pressure to keep up the fast pace. They have no spare time to provide the needed assistance.

“We have a team, but we can’t even get help, because they’ve got to do their work too, you know. You don’t get help at all.”

Janitors also discussed a team cleaning approach used by some companies and noted the issues that came with it. Having a “*deadbeat partner*” meant a janitor had to carry the greater burden of the workload including the greater risk for injury.

“Because they didn’t want the team cleaning. . . So, we had a well-oiled machine going until they said let’s do team cleaning, and then pfft; it all fell apart . . . there had been people that had worked for 20 years by themselves, knew how to do it, had a rhythm. All of a sudden they got deadbeat partners.”

On the other hand, a team that works well together may provide a higher level of safety. They split up tasks and with several workers, help is close by for tasks that require heavy lifting or awkward postures for a sustained period of time.

“In my building we figure it out as a team. What are your points that you wanna do this, this, and this? And then I’d be like, ‘Well, I wanna do this, this, and this.’ So, we just kinda made it up as we went. As we came to the building we just said okay, this is my job; this is your job; this is your job. And that’s how we split it up.”

Even so, most janitors pointed out that they feel isolated when working alone. The rare interaction with a coworker was welcome and shifts with no one to share a few words with were difficult to bear. In addition, working in isolation increases risk for injury if help is not available with a difficult task or heavy lifting.

Consequences of Unmanageable Workloads

Stress due to unmanageable workloads was a strong theme across all focus groups. Janitors reported that the supervisor mistreatment created a hostile work environment and was a key stressor. Supervisors’ use various types of mistreatment to intimidate and manipulate janitors including insults, work scapegoating (i.e., being blamed for something they did not do), work sabotage, yelling, and threatening job security.

“I have personal issues with my foreman. She screams and yells a lot.”

Janitors reported that those behaviors are used to pressure them into working faster and to pressure them to take on more work. It was reported that some supervisors use all of those tactics while others use a combination of them. Janitors shared that dealing with

their supervisors' mistreatment was the most stressful part of their job. Janitors explained that this stress spills over into their personal lives.

"They don't try to take care of you, of that excessive burden, that's what it affects, because you already know when you choose a job, it's at night and maybe I'm not going to have the same spirit to take care of my family please help us, because we're already screaming. We're already desperate because, uh, we're humiliated, we're loaded with work, so it's not fair to have a lot of stress at work."

Janitors reported constant pressure to complete unmanageable workloads. This creates a lot of tension for workers. Psychosomatic pain such as neck pain is a common stress-related complaint.

"No, and you can't work like that. You can't work with a person who is stressing you out daily, daily, or continuously."

"I tell my husband, "It seems I have a cat here with claws like this because of how much my neck hurts."

The stress experienced from these abuses pushes many janitors into skipping their paid breaks and their lunch in order to attempt to keep up with unmanageable workloads and to avoid becoming a target.

"There have been times I haven't taken 10-minute break. I'd take a 10, 15 – I wouldn't take my first break; I'd take a 15-minute lunch, but clock out for the half hour but take 15 minutes. And there have been times I've taken 15 minutes out of an eight-hour shift to make sure I got stuff done on time."

One of the biggest stressors for janitors is not being able to take time off when they are sick or want a vacation. Janitors especially feel stressed when supervisors have a history of firing people who asked for days off; some supervisors approve the requested leave and terminate the employees when they return to work.

"They don't have to say it considering the amount of pressure they have us under. You are afraid of asking for time off because what if you come back and don't have a job anymore? Also, related to the example she just gave you, where she was laid off without any sort of notice."

Fatigue is another consequence of work overload discussed by many participants. Janitors reported not having enough time meet their supervisors' unrealistic expectations. and discussed how unmanageable workloads result in physical and emotional exhaustion that leaves them feeling constantly tired and depleted. Janitors frequently described how work-related fatigue negatively affects their home life, leaving them too tired to engage with family members and to perform domestic chores.

“When you leave work and come home you don't even want to get out of the car.”

“Well, it affects a lot because you can't be watching the family because you want to rest.”

“Oh yes, you don't take care of them because what you want is to arrive and land in bed, the next day you don't want to get up or make them food either, you don't want to do what you do at home because you are very tired, you don't want to move anything because, if you get tired of your house because you are going to die at work, that is, it affects you emotionally.”

“You wake up. And you're already going back to work in an hour. I've had that happen; I'm just – I'm too tired and I stress easily. And that's part of the reason why I was gonna try to get some counseling. I'm not ashamed to admit it”

In conclusion, janitors reported unmanageable workloads as a detrimental managerial practice that produced high-risk job conditions such as working off the clock to complete some tasks before the regular work shift, working under pressure and understaffed, and working very fast without recovery time from rest breaks. The participants explained that these work conditions contributed to an increased number of injuries as well as cumulative bodily stress injuries due to heavy or repetitive lifting and working in awkward postures. A hostile work environment due to abusive supervision was also discussed as a strong stressor that resulted in negative health outcomes such as musculoskeletal pain, headache, and fatigue that compromised their engagement with family life.

Workplace Relationships and Safety

Abusive supervision

Work relationships and safety emerged as a strong theme in our analysis with most janitors in agreement that their interpersonal interactions with supervisors could be characterized as disrespectful, even hostile, and contributing to safety hazards. Janitors reported that their supervisors created problems instead of helping resolve complaints. Problematic supervisor behaviors included spreading rumors, work sabotage to justify firing a worker, and pitting workers against each other to set them up to compete for cleaning supplies and equipment. Janitors reported that they view these behaviors as manipulative. Additionally, janitors reported supervisors' manipulating workers through fear tactics, for example, threatening a janitor with job termination to motivate increased speed and productivity on the job.

Janitors noted a lack supervisory empathy or humanity for worker safety and sickness. Supervisors threatened workers to show up on the job when they were ill, creating a public health risk. Supervisors criticized without offering any constructive feedback. Many janitors mentioned that their only contact at the company is through their supervisors. Some shared that they do not know their supervisors at all. For many janitors, there is

little time to build a positive relationship with their supervisor when the only time they hear from their supervisor is due to a complaint made against them. In an environment of abusive supervision, supervisors may also have little interest or expectation that they should lead by positive example, building respectful relationships with employees to motivate their best work.

Janitors reported disrespect and harassment from their supervisors and the people in the buildings they clean. This includes giving unfair warnings and prohibiting janitors from using communal spaces such as the dining room. The disrespect janitors reported in the focus groups occurred quite often in the form of subtle microaggressions as one janitor described,

“They treat you like you are nothing – (you) belong to them.”

And another janitor explained the treatment as,

“Disrespecting like we are not human beings, you know. . . When you’re trying to say something, they stop you – to not say [it].”

Often a more intense mistreatment, abusive supervision, was described by janitors as linked to supervisor fear tactics aimed at pressuring them to work faster and get more work done. *“I had a supervisor who taught me – or a foreman – took me aside and said, ‘You know, I could find something on anybody, no matter how good they are.’”* The intimidation also contributes to fear of reporting work injuries. A supervisor told a janitor *“You’re on your own.”* when a janitor cut himself while working. Supervisory intimidation included threatening a janitor’s job when a participant revealed the following,

“He [supervisor] snapped his fingers and he said, ‘If you don’t do your job quickly, you know what can happen to you... You’re going to fly.’... so I am afraid to report anything that happens to me at work... I have to remain quiet even when I injure myself.”

Under conditions of abusive supervision, a Spanish-speaking janitor who can also speak English explained that due to fear and the hostile work environment, she forgets how to speak English with her supervisor. Finally, a number of janitors expressed fear for their safety in case of an emergency, because their supervisors do not allow them to have their cellphones while working in isolated, dangerous environments.

Discriminatory Harassment

Janitors reported discrimination from managers or supervisors as well as witnessing discriminatory harassment against another janitor due to their immigration status. This was discussed in a majority of the focus groups with acknowledgement that non-English speakers were treated differently compared to native English speakers. Language barriers made it more difficult for janitors to advocate for themselves and this, in turn,

increased janitors' vulnerability to exploitation, mistreatment, and wage theft. Some janitors also reported discriminatory harassment based on age. Research has documented that stressful work environments take a toll on worker overall health (Truxillo, Cadiz, & Hammer, 2015; Lee, et al., 2016; Costa, 2019; Cho, Williams Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013).

In a comment on her experience of discrimination, a Latina immigrant with limited English skills reported being paid \$14.50 per hour while her co-workers are being paid \$15. She confronted her employer about the wage issue, and he made an excuse for the pay difference.

"I think that there's racism there, right? Because this man I was working with – a new employee just started and he's going to pay him more because he speaks English"

Nonnative janitors expressed a strong fear of retaliation from their supervisors and fear of immigration authorities. These legitimate fears stop them from advocating for themselves and from reporting discriminatory harassment incidents or work injuries. Janitors reported being afraid to report work injuries or violations to Labor and Industries because of uncertainty about how government agencies work in the United States. They expressed the fear that the agency works with the Department of Homeland Security. Janitors described the following means used to manipulate and exploit them: threats of deportation, threats of firing, being pressured into not submitting worker compensation claims, wage theft through time loss/misreporting, and being paid lower wages than other English-speaking janitors and documented versus undocumented janitors. As one janitor noted,

"You are undocumented and you are afraid to report that you injured yourself."

A second janitor corroborated this in another focus group discussion,

"Many people have fear that in talking with the Department of Labor and Industries, um, they're going to get involved with immigration (authorities)."

Undocumented janitors explained that they are willing to withstand inhumane work conditions to keep their jobs in order to provide for their families. They do not report unlawful business practices or file claims for workplace injuries because they must keep the job they have.

"For me you're (employer) going to retaliate for two things. One, because they don't have social security (retaliation against undocumented workers). They have their job and they have the opportunity to be in the union, and they say well, the truth I don't want to (report) because if they fire me and I don't have social security, where am I going to get a job?"

The workplace safety climate that focus group participants described included abusive supervision and, for marginalized janitors, discriminatory harassment. These psychosocial stressors add up to a pattern of stressors that, taken together, may contribute to poor work and health outcomes for janitors. One resource that mitigates the stress exposure harm is social support and coworkers were a source of support for some janitors, especially those that worked in teams.

Coworker Support

In more than half of the focus groups, janitors reported having diverse experiences with their coworkers. Janitor focus group participants described relationships that included a range of mostly positive and supportive interactions to some negative and harmful interactions. A lack of needed and wanted support was also mentioned, but this was mainly due to support that could not be provided by coworkers because of staff shortages or working in isolation.

Many janitors discussed helping their coworkers when they saw them struggling, explaining that they sought to assist injured janitors, to help each other with unexpected added tasks (e.g., breaking down boxes, lifting heavy objects), and to prevent burnout.

“You gotta go find them and say, “Okay, take that off. I’m taking over on the backpack. Give me the list of all the areas. I’ll knock this out,” you know – and let them do their stuff...Because if you kill your crew off with foul equipment, where are you gonna get another backbone crew of women that know how to detail?”

“I go and help him sometimes because he can’t lift these just over-glut of heavy garbage recycling (bags or bins?) and all that. And they don’t care because they’re not the ones doing it. We are.”

Janitors also took the initiative to train new coworkers supporting and coaching them to learn the job and work safely.

“We give the training ourselves to those who come in. Those that are – are already in the building. Because, the supervisor does not take their time to give that type of training.”

At a more basic level, janitors helped their new coworkers document their work hours and clock into the system. This type of instrumental support has a positive effect on janitors’ coping with entering into what participants described as “toxic” work environments. Additional practical support included encouraging each other to submit workers’ compensation claims or make doctor appointments to address work-related injuries. This type of support is crucial, as janitors mentioned a general lack of knowledge of workers’ compensation benefits and company discouragement of seeking information or filing injury claims.

Unlawful Business Practices: Wage and Hour Violations

A consistently reported concern among janitors across all focus groups was unlawful company practices. This included different types of wage theft, retaliation for using sick leave, and worker's compensation claim suppression. Some janitors explained that employers do not communicate the dollar amount earned per hour that they are paid. This lack of knowledge creates a context for vulnerability to employer exploitation.

Wage theft was one of the most commonly reported forms of exploitation. According to many janitors, keeping up with their unmanageable workload demands forces them to "put in work time before clocking in" For example, one janitor commented, "I started 15 minutes early for five years." Janitors also reported relationship problems with their foremen, who tend to side with the supervisor's agenda.

Janitors emphasized that increasing workloads, staff shortages, and last-minute requests force them to work overtime. Janitors pointed out that their overwhelming workloads do not allow them to take their meal and rest breaks. Janitors shared that their supervisors discourage them from taking their breaks. They clock out for lunch and are not able to take their break or are only able to take a partial break.

"It's not a question that she's not doing the job...she's not getting breaks and that's against the law...it's not a question that she doesn't want to do the job, it's a question that they have a lot of work and she doesn't finish on time, she doesn't have time to take breaks."

Janitors expressed a strong sense of injustice for not receiving overtime payments.

"Oh, we don't wanna pay you overtime, but you gotta get that done.' And they won't bring anybody else in to help you get it done in your eight-hour shift."

Some janitors reported missing hours from their paychecks.

"We worked together and what a surprise, she got even fewer hours than I did and he was very upset. She said, "It's not fair. They are paying me these many hours." I said, "What? You worked more hours than I did." And as far as I know, they have to pay us for the same hours because we are coworkers." And he said, "They paid me for these many hours and it's not possible."

Other janitors, working in another company, reported wage theft through a new payment system; they were also discouraged from entering their overtime into the system.

"I went to the office and I told the lady, I told her you know what? Here I am missing hours, I said, because I punched in right and she said "no, it's that you just worked these hours. I said, "No, I worked all my time, and here, you owe me hours."

Janitors also reported that their employer deducted the sick leave from their pay check.

“When I got hurt, they took out \$125 out of my check, of each check. Imagine. For three years. But, I didn’t know that – that they had to take that out. And I told them, “Why are you taking out \$125?” What they answered – what they said was to sign, to sign the paper, it’s to pay the other person who is going to do your job.”

Janitors noted workers’ compensation problems in almost all of the focus groups. This includes claim suppression and participants reported that supervisors discouraged janitors from submitting claims. Additionally, janitors described a reluctance to file claims due to fears of retaliation, potential costs, and their immigration status. In the focus group discussions, participants said they are told to visit specific doctors who tend to claim that injuries acquired at work are not work related and that their employer refuses to pay for their claims. Furthermore, many supervisors refuse to file claims because this adds to their workload, which they are motivated to limit by not taking on additional tasks. Janitors reported that it takes months or years for claims *“to go through.”* This causes financial burdens due to medical expenses they must pay while not working due to the injury. One participant volunteered that they nearly lost their home in this way. Spanish speaking janitors expressed much concern over problems with LNI claims due to language barriers and fear.

Janitors pointed out that many of the workload issues are rooted in poor management of contracts. They requested task assignments to be reevaluated and redefined. Janitors noted that square footage is not an accurate way to measure workloads, stating, *“You can’t evaluate workloads on size, on square footage,”* explaining that they are required to walk the area multiple times to complete all the assigned tasks (e.g., vacuuming, mopping, taking out trash, etc.). It is especially difficult to complete their work when odd/difficult tasks (e.g., cleaning up after restroom accidents, parties, vomit, dividing trash into recycling bins, etc.) are added. Work accumulates.

“We’re forced to – well, pick and choose in what we do because we just don’t have the time to do the full job that we’re supposed to be doing”

Janitors reported that unfair contracts are being signed. The customer expect janitors to do more than what they can. Janitors requested that contracts be renegotiated to make sure expectations from all the involved parties are being met.

“The customer... start dwindling what they’re willing to pay for vs. what they want, okay? Then the company [should] go back to their office, and they do their numbers, and the company makes their numbers match what this person wants, and they’re all happy.”

“It’s called renegotiation. Well, here, we don’t have – in the janitorial field. In the

janitorial field, we don't have renegotiation. It's, no, we agreed to do this. Now we're going to make you do this, and you – does that make sense?"

Janitors reported that extra tasks are added after contracts have been completed and agreed to.

"It is a contract for a service. It's not a contract to – once we sign it with you, you can do whatever you want to do, and you can add whatever you want to add. And that is what happens in the janitorial industry, across the board."

Janitors primarily emphasized that unrealistic expectations and extra tasks added to completed contracts were problematic. In their view, the work overload appeared to add pressure to supervisors with little to no training in how to handle these situations; in turn, supervisors resort to using intimidation tactics to force janitors to work extra and harder, while discouraging union involvement. Moreover, janitors expressed that it is not fair for their employers to ask them to complete tasks that are not related to their jobs (e.g., clearing snow, picking up trash in the driveway, construction work cleanup, etc.). Some janitors with many years of experience in the industry understood issues around contract violations. Janitors requested that contracts be honored as written and redrafted if extra work is requested after the contract is signed.

Consequences of Unlawful Practices

During the focus groups, janitors described themselves as vulnerable to exploitation and discussed how unlawful business practices affect their wellbeing. This includes being discouraged from or not being allowed to take their meal and rest breaks. Having time to rest and recover is crucial for injury prevention (Arlinghaus, et al., 2012). Overwhelming workloads and staff shortages do not allow janitors take lawfully required breaks. Janitors reported retaliation from their supervisors for attempting to take their breaks.

Janitors revealed how their fears of retaliation force them to ignore their health concerns and doctor visits. They reported not being allowed to use sick leave even during medical emergencies or after requesting it months in advance. Janitors mentioned being threatened or fired for requesting and using sick leave. Some janitors reported not being paid for the sick leave they used. Others reported not disclosing where they injured themselves to avoid involving Labor and Industries out of fear of retaliation for filing a workers' compensation claim.

"I also want to raise that my complaint is also not to force us. An example is that when we get sick we get in trouble. . . I got sick. I presented my papers of illness, and the foreman calls me by telephone, that I had to come in because they had nobody to do it, I came that night but at 11 that night I had to leave because the vomiting. I told him, crying, . . . I have some dizziness that I can't, I'm going to fall

and it's going to be worse if I fall here and they made me work. 'We're sorry, but we don't have anyone, there's no one to do the work.' ”

“For example, last year I also had a problem. I asked for a sick day and they took the hours from the sick days you have available but I was not paid for that day.”

“I have been going to therapy at Sea Mar and everything. But I – I said, for the same reason I said that I had injured myself at home because I was afraid that they would report me and fire me”

Having missing hours or being a paycheck behind causes various financial problems for janitors. They are forced to deal with accumulating late fees for bills and overdraft fees for their bank accounts.

“That was this pay period that it happened, right? I'd already budgeted for everything we were going to pay, hadn't I? And I had one bill left, this one I had to pay, I told him "no look, with both checks it will be possible to cover everything", and when I look at my check I told him you know what? I'm telling you, no. That bill I sent, the bank still charged me the surcharges, because it didn't cover it.”

To summarize, our findings related to unlawful practices highlight janitors' harmful work experiences. These include reported wage theft, unpaid overtime, denied rest breaks, and workers' compensation claim suppression. These stressors negatively affected janitors' overall health and well-being. The marginalized workers that experience exploitation find themselves in daily precarious job conditions.

Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The janitors we spoke to conveyed a great deal of specific and detailed information about their workplaces and the challenges they confront to complete their work safely and stay healthy in spite of exposures to hazards. This knowledge is of great value to policymakers and others who are in a position to act on behalf of workers, especially those workers who are marginalized in multiple ways. A concise summary of concerns and recommendations from the janitors who participated in the safety and health study reflect their contributions.

Overview of concerns brought up by participants in the focus groups:

- Safety Climate Concerns
- Lack of management commitment to safety
 - Lack of safety and health training
 - Lack of safe equipment, PPE, and supplies
 - Unsafe and unmanageable workload, fast pace, stress and fatigue

- Abusive supervision and discrimination
- Unlawful business practices: Wage and hour violations

Key recommendations from focus group janitors:

- Periodic workplace safety inspections
- Improve company policies and procedures for workplace safety and health
- Training for supervisors and janitorial staff
- Language appropriate safety and health training for janitors
- Provide equipment in good working order; regular maintenance of equipment
- Provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Adequate quantity of cleaning supplies
- Evaluation and improvement of workload and work organization runs.
- Job sites need routine checks to identify where extra help is needed to prevent workers from taking unsafe risks while completing their work
- Task assignments rotation, to help prevent injuries caused by repetitive motion
- Prevent and reduce abusive supervision and discrimination
- Increase enforcement of labor standards

The janitorial industry is rich with diversity, and in our recruitment efforts, we identified 25 different primary languages. Time and resource constraints limited us to only English and Spanish language focus groups, so there may be gaps in the information we received and the key issues identified, due to the lack of cultural and linguistic diversity amongst participants.

Conclusion

The most common issue raised in almost all of the focus groups centered on poor safety climate, namely, lack of management commitment to safety, lack of safety and health training, the lack of adequate staff, equipment, PPE, and supplies, abusive supervision, and the amount of work janitors are tasked with. There were also multiple examples of additional workplace stressors contributing to unsafe workplaces and a concerning violation of worker rights regarding wage and hour violations and discrimination.

The focus groups were just a small sample of janitors in Washington State, but they presented a clear need for systematic evaluation of the work janitors do, the training they receive and a call for increased oversight of the workplace. Addressing these issues is problematic within the janitorial industry, due in large part to the complex nature of their

worksites (e.g. multiple layers of responsibility, which may include: building owners, management companies, building tenants, and janitorial employers – all of whom may play a role in determining worksite conditions). Responsibility for safe workplaces and how companies will ensure legal protections should be standardized and written into janitorial and tenant contracts.

The results of these focus groups highlight that janitors report being at a high risk of injury due to several factors, including the pace of the work, and the expectations of supervisors and company management. Additionally, janitors in our focus groups describe numerous incidents of harassment, bullying, and discrimination; and most felt they had limited avenues to prevent or report these. Increased education on worker rights will help, but only if there are meaningful ways to uphold those rights, and investigate these complaints. Nonnative and nonunion janitors appear to be especially vulnerable to abusive workplaces.

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Sub Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

A. General Health Safety – process – participants will list hazards and assign priority; the top 3 will be discussed in more detail.

- 1) What are your top health and safety concerns?
 - i. Prompt if needed with types of concerns – chemicals, slip-trip-fall, pace of work, etc.
 - b. Please give us some example of what happens to make this a problem (describe the incident)?
 - c. How could this work be done more safely?

B. Work Organization, workload and pace

- 2) How is work organized to clean one floor/area?
 - a. Probes:
 - i. How many people are needed?
 - ii. How are tasks divided?
 1. Gender differences?
 2. Help & support vs. work alone?
 - iii. Do you do the same task every day?
 - b. Can you get everything done in one shift/on time?
 - i. Do you have special strategies for getting work done when there is too much to do?
 - c. What is the most difficult task you do?
 - i. Do you rotate tasks?
 - ii. What is the rotation schedule?
 - d. What is your workload like? (i.e., light, medium, heavy?)
- 3) What is the difference between team cleaning and zone cleaning?
 - a. Probes:
 - i. If you do team cleaning, what are the specialist jobs?
 - ii. What do you call them and what do you do as a specialist?
- 4) How often do you meet with your supervisor?
 - a. When? Where? Alone or as a team?
 - b. What do you talk about when you meet with them?
 - i. Probes: assign tasks, etc.
 - c. If you have a problem, can you go to your supervisor and get help?
 - i. Probe: Does he/she assign work fairly? Treat each person fairly? Handle conflict well?
 - ii. Probe: if there is too high a workload, can you say something?

- d. Do you have a lead team member, and what are their tasks? (Aside from supervisor – what are differences in what they do?)
- 5) How often are you understaffed?
 - a. How do you deal with that?
 - 6) Have you had any problems with pay?
 - a. Probes: overtime, problems getting paid, lunchbreaks
- C. Policies, training, & reporting
- 7) What safety training have you received to do your job, and when/where did/do you receive it?
 - a. Probes: Are you trained on using new equipment, on how to use new chemicals, on doing new job tasks, ongoing to new locations?
 - 8) Do you know how to report a work-related injury?
 - a. Probe: Do you get help filing an injury incident report?
 - b. Are you discouraged from reporting?
 - 9) What causes you the most stress on the job? (What is the most frustrating thing? The thing that is still bothering you after you go home after work?)
 - a. Probes: getting things done, physical demands, getting along with others
 - b. Probes: Night shift impact on family life? Lack of sleep?
- D. Wrap-Up
- 10) As mentioned, the study is made up of different things like this focus group, interviews, observations and a state-wide survey. What would be a good way to promote these things? (and remember that you will be given a \$25 gift card each time you participate).
 - a. In addition, what is the best way to get ahold of janitors?
 - b. We are finished asking you the questions we had. However, before we end, is there anything you would like to share with us?