

The Language of COVID-19: Psychological Effects of the Label 'Essential Worker' on Spanish-Speaking Adults

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Abstract : Objectives: Focusing on the reported levels of depressive symptoms from Hispanic individuals in the U.S. during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we analyze the psychological effects of being labeled an 'essential worker/trabajador(a) esencial.' We situate this attribute within the complex context of how an individual's mental health is linked to work status and his/her community's attitude toward such a status. Method: 336 Spanish-speaking adults (Mage = 34.90; SD = 11.00; 46% female) living in the U.S. participated in a mixed-method study. Participants completed a self-report Spanish-language survey consisting of COVID-19 prompts (e.g., Soy un trabajador esencial durante la pandemia. I am an 'essential worker' during the pandemic), civic engagement scale (CES) attitudes (e.g., Me siento responsable de mi comunidad. I feel responsible for my community) and behaviors (e.g., Ayudo a los miembros de mi comunidad. I help members of my community), and the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (e.g., Me sentía deprimido/a. I felt depressed). The survey was conducted several months into the pandemic and before the vaccine distribution. Results: Regression analyses show that being labeled an essential worker was correlated to CES attitudes ($b = .28, p < .001$) and higher CES behaviors ($b = .32, p < .001$). Essential worker status also reported higher levels of depressive symptoms ($b = .17, p < .05$). In addition, we found that CES attitudes and CES behaviors were related to higher levels of depressive symptoms ($b = .11, p < .05, b = .22, p < .001$, respectively). These findings suggest that those who are on the frontlines during the COVID-19 pandemic suffer higher levels of depressive symptoms, despite their affirming community attitudes and behaviors. Discussion: Hispanics/Latinxs make up 53% of the high-proximity employees who must work in person and in close contact with others; this is the highest rate of any racial or ethnic category. Moreover, 31% of Hispanics are classified as essential workers. Our outcomes show that those labeled as trabajadores esenciales convey attitudes of remaining strong and resilient for COVID-19 victims. They also express community attitudes and behaviors reflecting a sense of responsibility to continue working to help others during these unprecedented times. However, we also find that the pressure of maintaining basic needs for others exacerbates mental health challenges and stressors, as many essential workers are anxious and stressed about their physical and economic security. As a result, community attitudes do not protect from depressive symptoms as Hispanic essential workers are failing to balance everyone's needs, including their own (e.g., physical exhaustion and psychological distress). We conclude with a discussion on alternatives to the phrase 'essential worker' and of incremental steps that can be taken to address pandemic-related mental health issues targeting US Hispanic workers.

Keywords : COVID-19, essential worker, mental health, race and ethnicity

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