

## Research Article

# The Phenomenon of Informal Workers in Housing Projects During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract.

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced alterations in the real estate market. Since the pandemic, housing development in Indonesia has been negatively impacted, especially labor, which was crucial to the success of housing development. In addition, most workers in housing developments are informal workers who behave differently than formal or permanent workers. This study aimed to examine the phenomena of informal workers in housing developments during the COVID-19 pandemic using qualitative phenomenological approaches. Ten informal worker informants, five project supervisor in-formants, and two housing developer informants were chosen for in-depth interviews based on a preset criteria. In housing construction projects, implementing the health protocol and compliance with Occupational Health and Safety rules increased the awareness of informal workers. The fact that informal laborers prioritize health and safety during the COVID-19 outbreak is encouraging for building developers. Thus, the risk of housing construction projects decreases, and it is hoped that the government's program to build one million homes will be successful. In addition, the government can create incentive-related policies for informal employees who implemented the health protocol during the COVID-19 outbreak.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, health and safety, housing project, informal workers

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## 1. Introduction

Fulfilling housing needs for the people of Indonesia has been the government's target since 2011, especially for people who do not have proper housing. The Ministry of Public Works and Public Housing (PUPR) stated that in early 2021 it was estimated that the homeownership backlog was 7.6 million, and there were still 2.3 million uninhabitable houses for renovation [1]. So that as many as 11 million households are immediately programmed to have decent housing through the One Million Houses Program [2]. This program requires good synergy between the government, housing developers and the community.

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Therefore, there are very open business opportunities for property developers with flats and landed houses. In addition, it is also supported by the government's commitment to improving the community's quality of life by having a decent and healthy home [3]. This commitment is realized in the form of four programs, namely the Housing Financing Liquidity Facility (FLPP), Savings-Based Housing Financing Assistance (BP2BT), Subsidy for Advance Payments (SBUM) and Public Housing Savings (Tapera) [4].

However, the one million houses program has not been able to run according to the target due to the Covid-19 pandemic that has hit the world and Indonesia. The pandemic has dramatically impacted the development of housing and property as a whole. Based on data obtained from CNBC Indonesia, there was a decline in house construction in 2020 and the target of one million houses were not achieved. Even at the end of August 2021, around 60% of the progress has been achieved. Housing developers supported almost 30% of this gain [5].

Despite the uncertain conditions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, housing development projects, both small and large, are still being sought to survive and grow [6]. Housing developers meet the community's needs and government programs by building healthy and straightforward landed houses. However, developers face several challenges in the current pandemic, such as limited sales or market demand and construction project management related to labour resources. Moreover, the need for a healthy landed house is significant because of the restrictions on social activities so that most activities are carried out at home.

To move the housing sector, the government has provided a tax incentive stimulus program policy to help developers survive during the pandemic [7]. Meanwhile, in managing labour resources as one of the success factors for implementing housing, it is still the developers' responsibility. Housing construction projects are indeed small-scale projects compared to infrastructure projects, so the management of the workforce is different.

In the management of small-scale project construction, there is a shift from traditional to modern due to the rapid development of technology [8]. In modern construction management, management is an art that directs and coordinates all resources throughout the project life cycle in order to obtain optimal final results in terms of cost, quality, time and environmental management [9]. However, due to cultural and environmental differences, modern construction management cannot be fully applied to housing projects in Indonesia. Human resource management in modern construction management is adopted from culture and environment that is different from the culture in Indonesia.

Human resource management in Indonesian housing construction projects is still inseparable from traditional construction management. Because it still maintains the culture and environment of the local area, where developers develop their area, for the management of their workforce. This is a characteristic of traditional construction management as a cultural heritage transmitted to the next generation informally [10]. One of them is the management of informal workers who are still related to local culture. In housing construction projects, informal workers make up the majority of human resources.

In the condition of the Covid-19 pandemic that is now engulfing various parts of the world and Indonesia, it has also greatly affected the mobilization and health priorities of informal workers in housing construction projects. Implementing strict health protocols in all walks of life in various fields is a government priority to reduce the spread of the virus. Informal workers who make up most resources for implementing housing construction projects are usually low-educated and do not have certificates of expertise, or skilled workers must fulfil these requirements. The behaviour of informal workers tends to be difficult to accept changes or cultural shifts.

Human resources are essential in implementing construction work, so understanding and managing an effective workforce in construction projects is essential [11]. A strong department of human resources is the most valuable asset in the twenty-first-century construction industry [12]. Construction workers, also known as informal workers, exhibit the same patterns and characteristics in every developing country [13]. Low-level residential housing workers in Indonesia are seasonal workers from the countryside who work on construction projects for a set period of time, similar to general construction workers. Several previous studies have revealed the situation of informal construction workers [13-15].

In recent years, fewer farmers have been undecided about returning to agriculture, as most of the fields and rice fields have been reduced due to conversion to other land uses. Furthermore, due to a lack of skills and qualifications, the majority of farmers work as independent contractors, moving from one construction project to the next [15,16]. This structure is used for both small-scale and large-scale housing projects undertaken by multinational developers.

Thus, based on these conditions, the purpose of this study is to explore phenomena related to the behaviour of informal workers in housing construction projects during the Covid-19 pandemic. They knew how the behaviour and perceptions of informal workers are currently necessary for construction projects to meet implementation targets that housing developers and the government have determined.

## 2. Material and Methods

This study employs qualitative research methods to generate new insights based on established phenomena. Qualitative research, according to Creswell and Clark, is a method for investigating informants' perspectives on a specific phenomenon [17]. This study is expected to reveal informant experiences in attempt to comprehend the views of informal workers on construction management implementation, why something occurred, how it actually occurred, as well as how to succeed. The viewpoint is from the perspective of informal workers seeking discoveries and information that will benefit science. Qualitative research sheds light on a problem that quantitative studies commonly overlook [18].

According to various phenomenological perspectives, Schutz phenomenology is the best approach [19]. The phenomenological approach was chosen for this study because it is predicated on the understanding that the element under investigation is a personality who interacts socially with other people, and thus the phenomenological research is appropriate for revealing this. Schutz demonstrated that a person's social actions reflect diminished past experiences, and that comprehension of these actions is influenced mostly by the autonomous human influence, as well as by the impact of other people and the surrounding socio-cultural environment.

Informants were recruited from five housing development projects in East Java Province with a workforce dominated by informal workers. The informants were chosen using the snowballing method based on their more than ten years of experience as informal workers. With the company's approval, ten informal workers were chosen as critical informants, five project manager informants, and two housing developers to validate the field's data field. The number of informants was limited due to data concentration from five key informants, with whom the data now also showed a lot of evidence similarity, therefore no additional informants were required. In overall, the participants are males between the ages of 30 and 50, with a high school diploma as their highest level of education.

In the form of questions, the research instrument is intended to aid researchers in uncovering the desired information. There were 10 main questions. However, answers from informants are often broad, which allows for the unfathomable to be plainly articulated. As a guide for researchers, the instrument was designed to keep them focused on their observations and not stray into unneeded areas of study. Respondents gave their answers orally, and all information was documented. After that, all of the information that was collected is collated and analyzed as data. A brief introduction

and explanation of the research aims are followed by a thorough investigation of the informant's background and why he became an informal worker. Questions are asked and answered in a non-prescriptive manner.

Several themes emerged from the transcription and analysis of the interviews. When the information has been collected, it is compared to the published literature, researcher notes, observations made during the study, and other available data [17]. There was also a triangulation of data that involved checking the collected information against the information collected in the form of notes, images, or videos to guarantee the replies from the informants were accurate. For further confirmation, five separate informants were randomly re-interviewed for triangulation. As a last note, there is no significant difference between any of these solutions. It is possible to establish context, characterize processes, and evaluate theoretically by asking questions and comparing facts [20]. A transcript based on interview results, interpretation, and combining the data with coding to arrive at a theme is stepped in the data analysis process. Next, it will be talking about a primary theme based on the outcomes of this data study.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The remarkable spread of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19), marked by the number of cases and deaths, has increased and spread across regions and countries and impacted political, economic, social, cultural, defense and security aspects, as well as welfare. Society in Indonesia, including the impact on residential housing development companies. In business terms, the company is faced with conditions to survive with the decline in business performance due to the virus [7]. The same is true for housing construction project workers, the majority of whom are informal workers. Two informants stated that the pandemic initially caused fear of losing their jobs and the economy because of the growing issue of social restrictions. The Indonesian government did impose massive social restrictions at the beginning of the pandemic that entered Indonesia in early 2020.

Several informants also stated that they had concerns about the certainty of continuing their work in housing construction projects. However, what is feared is not the case in the project they are working on because their informal leader can negotiate with the developer and keep the project going. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that the foreman, as the leader of informal workers, has a significant influence and is a determinant of the satisfactory implementation of housing construction jobs

[8]. The possibility of the leadership to influence informal workers in the line of work is critical to a successful of the company's development goals [15].

However, there is an interesting phenomenon, as stated by the housing project supervisor informant. They said that the informal workers they supervised had better behaviour changes in complying with occupational health and safety regulations. This positive behaviour change was also stated by housing developers, that informal workers are more orderly in implementing occupational health and safety at project sites such as always wearing masks and other personal protective equipment.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic had occurred, informal workers were very disorganized in wearing personal protective equipment when carrying out construction work. The simplest example is the use of project gloves and helmets. Project supervisors said they often encountered such disobedience when controlling work and had been reprimanded and even given sanctions, but the informal workers continued to do so. The housing developers also say that this is the habit of informal workers. After being reprimanded, informal workers will immediately wear the required personal protective equipment, but this does not last long; the next few days, when there is no supervision, they will repeat the disobedience.

However, informal workers' behaviour has changed after the Covid-19 pandemic, where the primary cause is a virus that is easily transmitted through the air. So, the government has issued Health rules or protocols to prevent and reduce the spread of the virus, which applied in all business sectors, including housing construction projects. Informal workers who were initially disorganized and obedient to occupational health and safety implementation became more obedient.

Most of the informal workers stated that they were the family's breadwinners and that it was their responsibility to provide for the family. The threat of the Covid-19 virus, which results in death, has become a severe concern for informal workers. Fear of losing their lives and worrying about the future of their families are the main factors for them to implement Health and Safety at work better than before the pandemic.

Six informal workers gave almost the same statement that during this Covid-19 pandemic, they became more aware of the importance of maintaining health and safety in carrying out construction work. A simple example is always wearing a mask and other personal protective equipment such as shoes and work helmets. Although, they say that the use of personal protective equipment can limit movement at work. However, the factor of protecting themselves and fellow workers from contracting the Covid-19 virus is the main trigger for ignoring the inconvenience caused by wearing personal protective

equipment. They still uphold the local culture such as “tepo seliro” and have a high sense of family towards their colleagues and superiors [21].

For housing development companies, this phenomenon is a motivation to be more enthusiastic about implementing occupational health and safety. Informants from housing developers stated that the behaviour of informal workers reduces work risk and is expected to increase the work motivation of informal workers. Housing developers themselves have supported the government’s program to implement the health protocol by providing quality personal protective equipment free of charge to informal worker leaders or sub-contractors to distribute to workers.

Previous quantitative studies in Indonesia show that the disobedience of informal workers is a significant factor in the unsuccessful implementation of occupational health and safety with the risks that also significantly impact the workers themselves [22-24]. Although the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a slowdown in residential property development, the findings of this study indicate a positive change in the behaviour of informal workers, namely an increase in the application of occupational health and safety system.

## 4. Conclusion

The discussion in the previous sub-chapter shows that informal housing construction workers during the pandemic prefer to strictly implement Health protocols because of concerns for their survival and that of their families contracting the Covid-19 virus. This condition has a positive impact on increasing the application of Occupational Health and Safety regulations for housing construction projects and reducing project work risks.

However, this research is still in the early stages of understanding the phenomenon of informal housing construction workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Further research is expected to examine implementing Health protocols on increasing worker productivity in housing projects. In addition, quantitative testing can be carried out to measure the relationship between the findings of this study and worker productivity. The findings of this study are expected to be important information for stakeholders in housing development and the success of the one million houses program targeted by the government. Furthermore, it is hoped that the government will implement policies to provide incentives for informal workers who followed the health protocol during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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