

Protecting Those Who Feed Us

How Employers, Government, and Workers' Organizations Can Protect the Health, Safety, and Economic Security of Food Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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Acknowledgements

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About the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute and its Good Food Jobs Projects

Since its founding in January 2016, the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute (the “Institute”) (based at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy in Harlem, NYC) has combined research, teaching, advocacy, and action to solve urban food problems. The Institute provides evidence to inform municipal policies that promote access to healthy, affordable food and a more equitable and sustainable food system.

Thanks to the support of the Johnson Family Foundation, this mission has flourished through our Good Food Jobs Project (GFJP), which has mapped, nurtured, and seeks to grow good food jobs across New York City. These jobs, which pay decent wages, offer benefits and career advancement, and contribute to making healthier food more accessible in low-income communities, are a stark contrast to the reality that many food sector employees face.

In 2018, the Institute launched two programs dedicated to the growth of good food jobs. First, [*Guide to Growing Good Food Jobs in New York City*](#) highlighted the work of Community Development Corporations (CDCs) and Settlement Houses (SHs), identifying models for integrating workforce development and healthy food access. We identified five models for this integration and explored their potential for cultivating good food jobs: (1) Youth Development and Food; (2) Institutional Food; (3) Food Retail Workforce; (4) Community Chefs; and (5) Food Business Incubators. We also identified a need for academic and training programs that would offer a pathway to food sector work. Therefore, we also launched in 2018 the Good Food Jobs Training Program (GFJTP). The GFJTP provided youth ages 18-24 with culinary and job readiness training, preparing students for good food jobs careers.

In [2020](#) and [2021](#), the Institute partnered with the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy at Teachers College and the New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food system, including on food workers, in New York City. This year the Institute begins a project to explore how CUNY can better support and advance the careers of its many students working in the food sector.

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated communities within New York City, across the United States, and throughout the world, but its effects have been particularly challenging for “essential workers,” individuals whose labor was necessary for the continued functioning of everyday life [1]. Throughout the pandemic, these workers were expected to continue to show up to their jobs. While all essential workers faced risks from traveling to and from work and as a result of exposure to possibly infected co-workers and customers, food workers in particular faced significant risks to their health and safety. This workforce, largely composed of women, immigrants, and people of color, has historically received low wages, inconsistent hours, little opportunity for advancement, and few benefits [2,3,4].

To comprehensively document this unparalleled moment in history and to elevate the diverse voices of the NYC food system, Institute researchers collected data from three sources:

- An online survey of more than 100 frontline NYC food workers
- Interviews with 10 key stakeholders, including staff of labor unions, food businesses, and community-based organizations that support the NYC food workforce
- A literature review of more than 100 relevant news and research articles highlighting the working conditions of food workers in NYC during the pandemic.

Key Takeaways

- Essential workers had trouble obtaining unemployment benefits and were unable to leave their jobs if they felt unsafe.
- City, state, and federal governments provided limited guidance regarding COVID safety practices. Therefore, most workers lacked access to a full range of protections.
- Though food workers had access to paid sick leave, many were hesitant to use it. At the same time, fewer than half of surveyed workers reported quarantine mandates or exposure alerts by their employers.
- The mental toll of COVID-19 on NYC food workers was just as heavy as the physical health effects. Almost every surveyed worker reported elevated levels of job-related stress during the pandemic.
- More food workers are unionizing, and public approval of labor unions is up, creating future opportunities to better protect these workers.
- Food sector employers are currently experiencing a labor shortage. Meanwhile, food workers are asking for increased wages and benefits, including health insurance and childcare, to recover from COVID-19 and sustain their lives.
- The NYC food workforce is composed mostly of people of color and immigrants, and the Black Lives Matter movement has increased the public’s awareness of racial inequities, including those present in the food industry. Companies are increasingly launching anti-racist and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

Introduction

New York's food sector has more than 40,000 food businesses employing approximately 500,000 workers [4]. While more than half of these workers are restaurant employees [5], other food sector laborers perform a wide variety of jobs, from cashiering at grocery stores to selling food from street carts to working in large warehouses as packers. The businesses they work for are mostly small and independently owned, compared to other cities which rely on national chains [4]. This workforce, largely composed of women and people of color, has historically received low wages, inconsistent hours, little opportunity for advancement, and few benefits [2,3,4]. The industry, particularly the food service sector, has also faced significant issues of occupational segregation. Women and Black and Latinx workers are often paid less for the same position as their white male counterparts or are not selected for higher-paying jobs such as restaurant servers or bartenders due to racial bias [6,7,8].

By April 2020 the unemployment rate rose to 14.8% nationally, the highest it had been in recent history [9]. By June, NYC's unemployment rate had exceeded the national rate, with workers of color facing far higher unemployment rates than their white counterparts [10]. 21.1% of Asian, 23.7% of Black, and 22.7% of Latinx New Yorkers were out of work compared to 13.9% of white residents [11]. NYC's restaurants, a booming industry that provided more than 300,000 jobs pre-pandemic, faced COVID-related safety restrictions that cut the workforce by more than 70% [5]. Yet due to federal guidance regarding essential critical infrastructure workers [1], many food sector employees were required to continue working.

While workers took pride in being “essential,” particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, for many this feeling was replaced over time with stress and fears of contracting COVID as the pandemic progressed. As one union representative said in an interview,

“You will find the same (food worker) who felt this empowerment, being so essential and so important to keep your food on the table...started to experience more stress as they began feeling ignored...There were still fears and risks of contracting the virus and getting coworkers sick and worst of all, going home and getting everyone you live with sick and potentially dying. (Workers) felt like the general public did not think of them as essential workers anymore.”

For many employees, the health risks required to maintain one's income resulted in a drop in morale, especially when the public began to take for granted that frontline workers would be on the job. Workers who quit during this time had trouble obtaining unemployment insurance due to their essential status, because unlike those furloughed or laid off due to the economic fallout of the pandemic, essential workers who left their jobs due to fears of safety were deemed to have quit voluntarily [12]. At the same time, workplace protections to mitigate risk of COVID exposure were often inadequate. Mandates regarding mask-wearing, social distancing, quarantining, and other safety measures were often in flux, leading to confusion, disagreement, and a feeling of endangerment. Early in the pandemic, the food industry was one of the hardest hit by PPE shortages, and some grocery store managers even refused to allow workers to wear masks and gloves, believing that doing so would panic customers [13,14,15].



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In the midst of the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 served as a catalyst for many anti-racist demonstrations across the country and brought new attention to the stark racial inequities in food worker pay, benefits, working conditions, and health and safety. In some cases, food workers and their organizations joined the mobilizations launched by Black Lives Matter, adding urgency and power to the campaigns initiated to protect food workers from COVID. For example, *Los Deliveristas Unidos*, a group of primarily Latinx food delivery workers, organized against a lack of protections that denied them the same rights as the workers employed by the restaurants they delivered from. Considered independent contractors, food delivery workers were prevented from using restaurant bathrooms or handwashing stations [16].

Additionally, many workers felt that they were paid insufficiently and even reported that their tips were stolen by the companies that employed them [17]. *Los Deliveristas* organized rallies in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, and their efforts led the New York City Council to introduce a new legislative package for these “gig workers” [18]. Now, restaurants are required to allow food delivery workers to use the bathroom, and delivery apps are required to offer minimum payments per trip and provide workers with receipts to avoid wage theft [19].

Prior to the pandemic, the #MeToo movement called attention to the sexual harassment and discrimination experienced by women workers. With many female workers and many small

businesses where laws against gender discrimination were more difficult to enforce, the food sector faced high rates of these problems.

In June 2021, more than a year after the initial stay-at-home order, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) released an emergency temporary standard (ETS) requiring employers to comply with strict workplace safety protocols [20]. The new standards set by this ETS included employer-provided PPE, mask mandates, cleaning and ventilation standards, COVID-19 screening protocols, social distancing requirements, notification of COVID exposure, and paid sick time for employees who tested positive, were exposed, or were getting vaccinated. However, these OSHA guidelines applied only to employees in the healthcare sector, despite the efforts of food worker advocacy groups and unions to have them apply to all frontline workers.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the call to improve employment opportunities, wages, and working conditions for food laborers was stronger than ever. So too was the need to identify the unique challenges exacerbated by the crisis. Faced with this task, Institute researchers sought to answer the following questions:

- 1. What are food businesses, especially those employing low-wage workers, doing to protect their workers during the pandemic and beyond?*
- 2. What are city, state, and federal agencies doing to protect the health and safety and economic security of these workers?*
- 3. What are workers organizations, labor unions, and other such organizations doing to protect the health and safety and job security of these workers?*
- 4. What more could businesses, government, and labor organizations do to address issues of health, safety, and economic security of food workers?*

To answer these questions, we gathered information from three sources: an online survey of more than 100 frontline NYC food workers, interviews with key stakeholders, including staff of labor unions, food businesses, and community-based organizations that support the NYC food workforce, and a review of relevant news coverage and more than 50 research articles highlighting the working conditions of food workers in NYC during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further details about these methods are provided in Appendix A.

Based on an analysis of our findings, this guide describes positive innovations developed by employers, government agencies, and worker organizations in response to the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis, as well as problems that require more effective responses. The guide aims to connect readers in the food system to organizations and agencies that can provide support on job safety, mental health, food security, financial security, and other issues.

What major challenges have food workers faced during COVID-19?

Our recent survey of more than 100 food workers in NYC uncovered various challenges these individuals experienced at work during the pandemic. Most survey respondents acknowledged that they were entitled to paid sick leave through legislation by New York State and City governments (See “A History of Paid Sick Leave in NYC”). Yet, many of these frontline food workers reported that they were hesitant to take time off from work due to illness or to care for a sick loved one. Early in the pandemic, sick workers- most of them uninsured- struggled to obtain COVID tests or doctor’s notes, and employers retaliated against workers who could not provide proof of illness [24].

Union representatives participating in our stakeholder interviews shared that one of the companies whose workers they represent would purposely avoid disclosing COVID-19 exposure with employees. The worry was that exposed workers would also request paid sick time to quarantine, and the business would have to temporarily close. They also explained that the Just Cause Law, a ruling preventing termination without reason, was only recently passed and only protected fast food workers [25].

A History of Paid Sick Leave in NYC

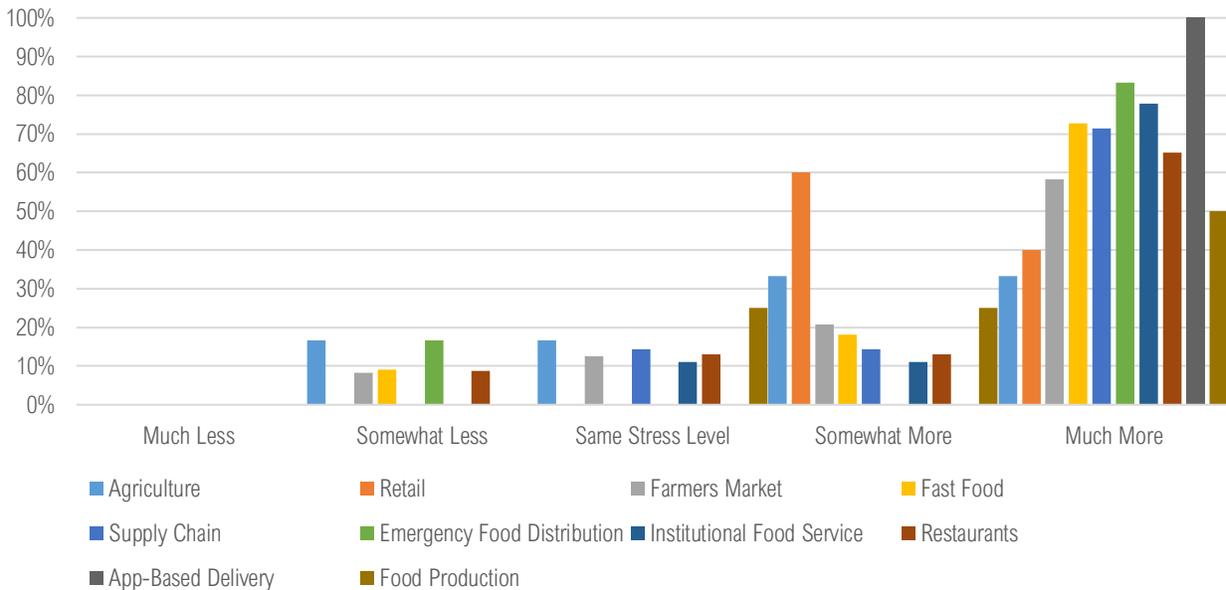
2014: All private employers with 5 or more employees must provide up to 40 hours of paid sick leave. Domestic workers (home care workers, house cleaners, etc.) and small businesses (4 or fewer employees) are exempt. Leave is accrued at a rate of 1 hour per 30 hours worked [21].

2021: Domestic workers must now be provided with 40 hours of paid sick leave. NYS law requires small businesses with a net income of \$1 million or more to provide paid leave and employers with 100 or more employees must provide up to 56 hours of paid leave [22].

NYS Emergency COVID-19 Paid Sick Leave Law: All public and private sector workers ordered to quarantine are entitled to sick leave paid by the employer in addition to accrued sick leave as outlined above. Workers may also get additional paid leave for COVID-19 vaccination [23].

In fact, our survey results found, 29% of supply chain, 17% of emergency food distribution, 13% of retail, and 9% of fast-food workers stated that if they didn’t come to work while sick, they would lose their jobs. These groups also reported high levels of stress, as shown in Figure 1. Overall, app-based delivery (100%), emergency food distribution (83%), institutional food service (78%), and fast food (73%) workers faced the highest levels of COVID-related stress among those surveyed.

Figure 1. Job-Related Stress Compared to Pre-COVID by Food Sector Identified in Survey Responses



Our findings also highlighted inconsistencies in COVID safety protocols. Almost every food sector expert we interviewed shared frustrations about the lack of clarity and consensus from the city, state, and federal government on COVID safety recommendations. As shown in Table 1, the food workers we surveyed were asked to share which COVID-19 mitigation protocols were implemented at their places of work. Notably, most respondents reported that the safety measures that were in place were well-enforced by management; however, they also noted that the full range of CDC recommended protocols were not implemented by the majority of NYC food businesses [26]. Measures such as regular testing, exposure alerts, and quarantine mandates were identified as being implemented by fewer than half of respondents.

Table 1. COVID-19 Safety Measures Identified in Survey Responses

COVID Safety Measure	Percent of Survey Respondents who Identified this Measure in their Workplace
PPE Provided	75%
Clean and Disinfect More Often	63%
Social Distancing	62%
Hand Sanitizer Station	61%
Safety Reminders	45%
Implement More Rigid Cleaning Protocol	42%
Limit Amount of People Allowed into Business	42%
Screen Employees' Temperatures and Symptoms	41%
Enforced Quarantine Mandates	36%
Take Patrons' Temperatures	34%
Training/Education of Safety Protocols	31%
Exposure Alerts	22%
Protective Barriers/Dividers	21%
Additional Handwashing Stations	17%
Regular COVID Testing	11%



Image credit: Uriel Mont, Pexels

The majority of NYC’s restaurant workers were furloughed when the pandemic hit [5]. These service workers, largely dependent on tips for their wages, have historically faced barriers to accessing unemployment insurance. Before COVID, service workers had the lowest rate of unemployment benefit use out of any occupation [27]. High rates of wage theft and under-reported cash tips mean that these workers often do not meet the minimum wage requirement set by New York State [28]. As restrictions slowly lifted and businesses reopened, restaurant workers were mandated to return to work or lose what unemployment insurance they were able to receive, as those who voluntarily quit their jobs do not qualify for the federal benefit [8,12]. Yet the majority of these same workers also faced a 50% reduction in their tips, significantly reduced hours (often 10 hours a week or less), and lackluster COVID-19 risk mitigation protocols [8]. In fact, 71% of Black tipped workers reported that customers reduced their

tips when the workers enforced safety guidelines, leading many to have to choose between their safety and their income [29]. And the risk to health and safety was significant. Across the general US population, Black and Latinx individuals were almost three times as likely to be hospitalized for COVID-19 infection and twice as likely to die from the virus [30].

What protections and supports have been most beneficial?

Stakeholders from B Corp food businesses, for-profit companies that consider the impact of their businesses on their workers, customers, suppliers, community, and the environment [31], community-based organizations, labor unions, and emergency food distribution groups highlighted some of the best protections in the sector. Not only did these groups describe protective equipment and other basic safety measures provided to employees to keep infection rates as low as possible, many highlighted less common and more innovative measures. These included implementation of new “COVID Czar” roles, individuals who stay up to date on the latest COVID safety recommendations and ensure that these recommendations are implemented, temporary business closures, purchasing additional culinary tools to discourage sharing that might spread germs, and using “incident badges” which sense when a staff member is too close to another and records the interaction for contact tracing purposes. Interviewees of organizations with COVID Czars listed more protective measures introduced to their organizations than those without the position.

Interviewees also reflected on financial incentives provided to workers during this difficult period. These included “unofficial” hazard pay, such as permanent wage increases, gift cards, emergency funds, and free MetroCards or ride sharing app trips. One organization, a culinary training program, had to suspend in-person classes and rapidly adapted to virtual programming. Fully online, staff held financial coaching sessions and provided assistance with unemployment, SNAP, and other benefit enrollment applications. They also set up and promoted a fundraiser to distribute emergency funds to their students. Finally, this company partnered with an organization to provide [free or low-cost health care regardless of insurance status](#). It is important to note that the majority of food businesses, such as groceries and restaurants, have not had this opportunity to go virtual. However, all workers could potentially benefit from essential needs resources.

Caring food organizations have also provided new mental health resources in the wake of COVID-19, including more comprehensive mental health coverage within existing health insurance packages, free counseling services for workers, resource guides, and classes such as meditation sessions. These businesses also combatted low morale by encouraging team building initiatives, such as group check-ins. One respondent said that for their team of emergency food distributors, “*the program kept us alive.*” The organization, composed mostly of volunteers, gave workers a sense of purpose and human connection.

Finally, the growing awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement prompted many businesses to examine how their practices perpetuate White Supremacy. Said one stakeholder,

“Last spring a lot was going on including the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the corporate reckoning with Black Lives Matter and that movement...It's hard to talk about one without the other, they're very intertwined.” Exemplary food organizations have launched anti-racist initiatives and Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) measures. Some have also contracted external racial equity consultants to audit their businesses and provide recommendations.

Looking ahead, what challenges remain? What do food workers need most from their employers to recover from the pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic is not over, other pandemics may emerge in the future, and food workers continue to serve in low-paying, insecure jobs. Survey respondents were asked to provide their opinions of what workers in the food sector need most in the short term to recover from the impact of COVID-19. Answers varied, but the most common response involved increased income, whether from a permanent pay raise, increased hours, hazard pay, or another stimulus check. Said one respondent, *“I believe if we are given higher pay we would be able to work harder and love our jobs more.”*

Improved health and safety measures were the second most common response, suggesting that though those COVID risk mitigation protocols highlighted in Table 1 were reportedly well-enforced, many workers would have liked more consistent and thorough safety measures, such as enforced quarantines and exposure alerts.

New trends suggest that many food sector workers are transitioning to new fields. According to One Fair Wage, more than half of New York State’s restaurant workers are considering leaving the industry entirely because of low wages and health risks, especially as tipped food workers make subminimum wages [32]. As an employee of a culinary training program in NYC noted, *“How can we ethically and reasonably tell people to join a sector that's not going to treat them well or (give them the) opportunity to grow and make the wages they want to make in order to support their families?”*

One clear way to mitigate the growing labor shortage is to provide workers with living wages and competitive benefits. Large chains, like McDonald’s and Chipotle, are raising hourly wages [33], but health insurance and other essential benefits are largely being ignored. Childcare is a significant need for food workers. With children home from school due to COVID, this need became even more significant. Childcare costs can amount to half or more of a minimum wage worker’s paycheck, leading many to wonder whether staying home is a better option. Employer-paid stipends or universal free or subsidized childcare alleviate this pressure.

Collective bargaining efforts may also become more common. While most food sector employees do not belong to labor unions, more and more workers have been organizing. In the US, support for labor unions is the highest it’s been since 2003 [34], and union representatives are noting that in the wake of COVID-19, there is more bargaining potential than ever before. Labor union SEIU Local 32BJ was a crucial actor in the fight for food delivery workers’ rights alongside *Los Deliveristas Unidos* [16]. Additionally, our survey results

highlighted in Figure 1 suggest that food production workers- a group with a high rate of labor union membership- experienced less job-related stress during the pandemic than other sectors.



Image credit: Jon Tyson, Unsplash

Based on our findings, we recommend that food sector employers looking to improve the safety, wellbeing, and financial security of their staff take the following steps, in tandem with supporting the policy recommendations highlighted in the next section:

1. ***Provide workers with a living wage.*** *A \$15 minimum wage is not enough to sustain the average New Yorker, and the risk of exposure to illness- including but not limited to COVID-19- should be compensated. We recommend that employers use the [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#), referenced in our Resources section below, to determine fair wages for staff.*
2. ***Offer employees a competitive benefits package, including health insurance.*** *Get ahead of the worker shortage and inspire employee loyalty by compensating your workers' essential labor with comprehensive benefits. We also recommend supporting advocacy efforts for universal healthcare which will remove the burden from employers to provide this essential benefit.*
3. ***Communicate paid sick leave policy and encourage its use.*** *New York City and State law requires most food businesses to offer 40 hours of paid sick leave for employers*

with fewer than 100 employees and 56 hours for businesses with 100 or more employees [23]. However, our findings suggest that food sector workers have been hesitant to use these allotted hours. We recommend that employers clearly communicate the rights of their workers to use paid sick leave, and encourage workers to use the time they have accumulated. Labor laws are only useful if workers believe that their employers will follow them and that they will not lose their jobs in the process. By opening a dialogue about labor rights within the workplace, employers can foster trust and ensure compliance with the law.

4. ***Communicate clearly and enforce strictly recommended health and safety measures.*** *Though OSHA’s new emergency temporary standard (ETS) applies only to healthcare workers, we encourage food sector employers to use the guidance as a model for their own businesses. This includes providing PPE, requiring masks, social distancing, adhering to sanitizing and ventilation standards, screening employees and patrons for COVID-19, and notifying all employees of COVID exposures. Remember, COVID-19 may not be the last public health crisis in our lifetimes, so continue to evaluate and modify these measures over time.*
5. ***Support the essential security and mental health needs of employees.*** *Actively share resources, including those promoting [SNAP enrollment](#), [low-cost healthcare](#), and [affordable housing](#) with employees. Additionally, both survey and interview respondents agreed that the emotional ramifications of the pandemic, including the fear of being unable to stay home when ill, were just as hard-hitting as the physical health effects. The significant workplace stress levels experienced by food sector workers can be mitigated by providing workers with mental health resources and other supports, like group discussions and team building events. See below for a more comprehensive list of resources.*
6. ***Encourage labor union membership.*** *With public approval of labor unions higher than it has been in nearly two decades [34], employers increasingly recognize the value of unions. Union representation bridges the gap between administration and workers, and our research suggests that union membership may mitigate workplace stress. An organized workforce also experiences less turnover, a benefit for both workers and managers.*
7. ***Mandate anti-racism training for staff and develop robust diversity and inclusion guidelines.*** *The food workforce is largely composed of people of color, and occupational segregation pushes Black and Latinx workers into the lowest paying jobs, often tipped positions that make subminimum wage [8]. These workers have been tipped less during the pandemic [29], and overall, COVID-19 has hit America’s Black and Latinx populations the hardest [30]. Fostering environments that can identify and reduce racially-disparate practices that endanger workers of color can help to reduce the higher COVID burden on these populations. See below for anti-racism resources, including racial equity consultants and training.*

Policy Recommendations

We make the following City, State, and Federal policy recommendations, intended to strengthen the food system of NYC and beyond:

- 1. Allow essential workers who elect to stay home during states of emergency to collect unemployment insurance.** *As highlighted above, essential food workers were ineligible for unemployment insurance if their places of employment stayed open. This put many at risk of losing their lives for the sake of their livelihood. In times of future crisis where working is life threatening, we urge legislators to allow essential workers to elect to stay home if they feel their workplace is unsafe. For now, we recommend removing barriers like minimum salary requirements, which disproportionately shut out tipped workers [28].*
- 2. Clearly outline and enforce federal, state, and city health and safety measures for this and future public health crises.** *We encourage OSHA to expand their ETS to food sector employers, requiring employer-provided PPE, mask mandates, cleaning and ventilation standards, COVID-19 screening protocols, social distancing requirements, notification of COVID exposure and paid sick time for employees who test positive, are exposed, or are getting vaccinated.*
- 3. Expand the Excluded Workers Fund.** *The Excluded Workers Fund was a lifeline for many undocumented workers who were ineligible for government relief. The fund was depleted just a few months after it launched [37], and we urge Governor Hochul to expand the Fund in the next budget cycle, so that every excluded worker is covered.*
- 4. Enact protections for fast food workers across all food sectors.** *Policies such as Just Cause, and the Fair Workweek Law only apply to fast food workers. We propose that all food workers, regardless of sector and business size, be granted these protections.*
- 5. End sub-minimum wage for tipped restaurant workers.** *We urge New York State legislators to pass One Fair Wage [32], ensuring ALL of New York's food workers receive at least \$15/hour, even if they are tipped workers.*

The Excluded Workers Fund

The Excluded Workers Fund was a \$2.1 billion financial assistance initiative designed to provide relief to undocumented workers and others who were excluded from unemployment benefits and stimulus checks. The Fund had two tiers of benefits: Tier 1 paid up to \$15,600 (the approximate amount of money those on unemployment insurance received during the pandemic) and Tier 2 paid up to \$3,200 (on par with the three rounds of stimulus checks). Eligibility for the two tiers was based upon the applicant's ability to prove that they had been working prior to the pandemic [36].

6. **Protect the rights of gig workers and delivery drivers.** *We are heartened by the recent package of food delivery app laws enacted by the New York City Council [18], and we hope that this legislation is used as a framework for other municipalities across the country.*

7. **Support Medicare for All.** *Many food workers are uninsured, resulting in health disparities and potential risks to public health. Recently, food laborers have left the industry in search of positions with better pay and benefits. A single-payer universal healthcare system would provide more stability for food workers without putting additional financial burdens on employers.*

Protections for NYC Fast Food Workers

Who is a Fast-Food Worker? A fast-food worker is anyone who is employed by a business that is part of a chain which primarily serves food or beverages, offers limited service, and is one of 30 or more national establishments [35].

Fair Workweek Law: NYC fast food workers must be provided with their work schedules at least 2 weeks ahead of time, and these schedules must be stable week-to-week. Workers are entitled to premium pay for schedule changes made less than 14 days ahead of time and for any “clopening” shifts [25].

Just Cause Law: Effective 7/4/2021, NYC fast food workers cannot be fired or lose hours without reason and without multiple disciplinary warnings in a year. Underperforming workers must receive retraining. If fired, laid off, or given a reduction in hours, workers must be provided a written explanation [25].

Resources

Support for Employers/Building Stronger Businesses:

- [Restaurants Advancing Industry Standards in Employment \(RAISE\)](#) - ROC United
- [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#)

Racial Equity and Inclusion:

- [DEI Consultants and Training Organizations](#) - Philanthropy New York
- [Black-Owned Food Businesses](#) - The Little Beet
- [Joonko Diversity Job Recruitment Tool](#)

Culinary Training/Workforce Development Programs:

- [Advance and Earn](#) - The Stanley M. Isaacs Neighborhood Center
- [Hot Bread Kitchen](#) - Bridge programs and workforce training (focusing on culinary training) for immigrant women and women of color
- [Emma's Torch](#) - Paid Culinary Training and Apprenticeship for Refugees
- [CHOW Free Hospitality Training](#) - ROC United

Safety, Health Care, and Mental Health Resources:

- [New York State Health Plan Marketplace](#)
- [NYC Care](#) - Low-cost and no-cost health care services for uninsured New Yorkers
- [NYC Well](#) - Crisis Hotline for NYC: 1-888-NYC-WELL (1-888-692-9355) or text "WELL" to 65173
- [Digital Mental Health Resources Relating to COVID-19](#) - NYC Well
- [NYC Well App Library](#) - Mental Health Apps and Online Tools
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#): 1-800-273-8255
- [The Trevor Project](#) - Crisis Resource for LGBTQ+ Youth: 1-866-488-7386 or text "START" to 678-678
- [SAMSA \(Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Hotline\)](#): 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- [NYS DOH Office of Addiction Services and Supports \(OASAS\) Dashboard](#)
- [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#): 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or text "START" to 88788
- [Childhelp National Abuse Hotline](#): 1-800-422-4453
- [Safe Horizon](#) - NYC-based Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, Human Trafficking Resource for Victims: 1-800-621-HOPE (4673)
- [Self-Harm Crisis Text Line](#): Text "HOME" to 741741

Essential Needs Access Resources:

- Coalition for the Homeless - [Resource Guide](#)
- Hunger Free America's [Benefit Access Team](#): 646-355-1475
- Hunger Solutions [Nutrition Outreach and Education Coordinator](#) finder and SNAP [online eligibility tool](#)
- Hunger Solutions [SNAP Student Eligibility Checklist](#)
- Access NYC helps New Yorkers [determine their eligibility](#) and apply for public benefits.

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Appendix A: Methods and Sources of Evidence for this Report

Method	Source	Goal
Conduct an online survey of frontline food workers who were employed during the COVID-19 pandemic.	137 food businesses, community-based organizations, and others were invited to share the online survey with their staff and program participants; 109 eligible workers responded.	Identify the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on frontline food workers, as well as assess successes and challenges faced by food businesses in supporting the wellbeing of their staff.
Interview stakeholders from a variety of community-based organizations, food businesses, and worker advocacy groups dedicated to the wellbeing of frontline food workers.	Interviewed staff from 10 stakeholder organizations, including labor unions, food businesses, and community-based organizations.	Highlight the work of organizations dedicated to supporting the wellbeing of essential food workers in the wake of COVID-19 and beyond, and identify common obstacles.
Identify and assemble articles that provide insight into the experience of food workers in NYC from the start of the pandemic to present.	Scan 104 news coverage and research articles highlighting the working conditions of food workers in NYC during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Summarize common challenges and trends in working conditions of NYC food businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the impact of city, state, and federal policies. Highlight innovative measures implemented to improve these conditions.

Appendix B: Food Workers' Survey

An online survey was developed to assess the impact of COVID-19 on frontline NYC food workers' physical and mental health, financial security, safety, and job satisfaction. Respondents were paid for their time with a \$20 gift card.

Leveraging existing partnerships with food businesses, culinary and workforce training programs, institutional food service providers, labor unions and workers' organizations, and community-based organizations, 137 different organizations were contacted to recruit for the survey. We received 109 eligible responses; below, a table of respondent demographics can be found.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

Category	Distribution of Survey Participants
Race	Black or African American 20.3% Asian or Pacific Islander 13.5% Latinx 15.2% White or Caucasian 33.9% Multiracial or Biracial 3.4% Native American or Alaskan Native 5.1% A race/ethnicity not listed here 8.4%
Ethnicity	Hispanic 28.4% Not Hispanic 71.6%
Food Sector	Restaurant/Dining 19.5% Retail 12.7% Food Production 6.8% Fast Food 9.3% Institutional Food Service 7.6% Other 2.5% Farmers Market 22.9% Supply Chain 5.9% App-based Delivery 2.5% Emergency Food Distribution 5.1% Agriculture/ farm worker 5.1%
Gender Identity	Male/Man 39.8% Female/Woman 54.2% Gender Non-Conforming/Genderqueer 4.2% I Prefer to Self-Identify 1.7%

Connection to CUNY	I am currently a CUNY student 18.6% I have no connection to CUNY 30.5% I was a CUNY student in the past 33% I currently work at a CUNY school 11% I worked at a CUNY school in the past 5.1% Other 0.8%
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The majority of survey respondents reported receiving between \$15 and \$20/hour across job type, with the exception of agriculture workers, 50% of whom received between \$20 and \$39/hour. 12.5% of food production workers, 26.1% of restaurant workers, 16.7% of emergency food distribution workers, 27.3% of fast food workers, 7.7% of food retail workers, and 16.7% of agriculture workers reported that they received less than \$15/hour. The only respondents who reportedly received more than \$40/hour were food production workers (12.5% of food production workers made this much) and farmers market employees (4.2%).

Appendix C: Stakeholder Interviews

We conducted confidential interviews with ten stakeholders from a variety of community-based organizations, food businesses, and worker advocacy groups to more deeply understand the impacts of COVID-19 on the employment status, wellbeing, working conditions, and financial stability of NYC food workers. Three interviewees were from emergency food distributors, two from food businesses, three from labor unions, and two from culinary training programs. The ten conversations were transcribed and the content was coded into the following common topics: Health & Safety, Financial/Job Security, Impact of City, State, and Federal Policies, and Opportunities for Growth.

Health & Safety

Half of the interviewees disclosed that there were positive COVID-19 cases among the food workers they worked closely with. All but one of those interviewees shared that some employees passed away from the virus. Unsurprisingly, all of the organizations interviewed referenced the protective equipment and other safety measures provided to employees to keep infection rates as low as possible. Two of these organizations even employed “COVID Czars” tasked with keeping up with safety recommendations and implementing them onsite. Notably, more than half of the interviewed organizations spontaneously mentioned the mental health of food workers when asked about employee health and safety.

Financial/Job Security

Only one of the ten interviewed organizations mentioned being able to provide employees with health insurance. Six of the ten interviewed organizations referenced expanded paid sick time, particularly in the case of a positive COVID case. Only three of the interviewed organizations were able to provide employees with hazard pay.

Impact of City, State, and Federal Policies

By far, the most commonly cited critique of government initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic was lack of clarity and consensus on safety recommendations. Many interviewees also commented on vaccination rollout. Said one respondent, *“It was bananas that they opened for indoor dining on Valentine’s Day when it was still bad and there were so many restaurant workers who hadn’t even had the opportunity to get vaccinated...Some people had the first dose and nobody had a second dose. That was a wild decision on Andrew Cuomo’s part and I think some pooling of workers’ and owners’ thoughts around those things would have been better than what happened.”*

Opportunities for Growth

All of the interviewees were eager to share their plans for the future of their organizations. Growth of virtual curriculums, internal processes, staff, and business locations were discussed. When asked about current food worker needs and opportunities to improve labor conditions, 100% of interviewees called for increased wages. Four stakeholders mentioned the need for improved benefits, especially health insurance and childcare.