Describing the Experiences of NYC Food Workers During COVID-19 and Beyond: A Mixed Methods Study
As the pandemic moves into yet another stage, this study seeks to highlight the ongoing needs of workers in New York City’s food sector.”

NEW YORK FOOD 2025

This research brief is one part of a 5-part series of research briefs published as New York Food 2025, a collective pursuit by the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center, the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, and the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute to examine the effects of the pandemic on New York City’s food policies and programs and propose specific policy measures the NYC Mayor and City Council can consider and implement to build a stronger, healthier, more just, and sustainable food system in New York City. This series of briefs builds on our group’s earlier report, New York Food 20/20: Vision, Research, and Recommendations During COVID-19 and Beyond, on the impact of the pandemic on New York City’s food system and food workforce.

Background

New York City has approximately 40,000 food businesses employing more than 750,000 people, making this sector a major contributor to the city’s economy.¹,² The food workforce, largely composed of women, people of color, and immigrants, has historically received low wages, few benefits, few workplace protections, little job security, and limited opportunities for advancement. Food and beverage jobs are among the lowest paid, with an average annual salary of $31,500. Nationally, only 55% of food service industry employees have access to paid sick leave even though they have been deemed essential workers.³ The rapidly growing number of platform-based gig workers delivering groceries and meals for companies like Instacart and GrubHub are currently classified as independent contractors, not employees, and as a result are not protected by minimum wage and overtime laws, and don’t receive paid sick leave and other benefits that employees are entitled to.⁴ Platform-based delivery workers also face risks such as physical harm, mental stress, low compensation, and precarious work status.⁵,⁶,⁷ Recently more media attention has focused on the plight of food workers, leading to increased scrutiny of local, state, and federal policies and protections intended to support employees in this sector. As the pandemic moves into yet another stage, this study seeks to highlight the ongoing needs of workers in New York City’s food sector.

During the COVID-19 pandemic food workers found themselves with an impossible choice: “risk their livelihoods or risk their lives.”⁸ Assessing and understanding the variety of job, wage, and benefit protections afforded to food workers prior to, during, and in the aftermath of the pandemic can help NYC address shortcomings in the current system, thereby preventing workers’ rights violations in the future and encouraging the expansion of food worker protections more broadly. Moreover, because job security, food security and healthcare access are linked, a better understanding of food worker experiences can also help to reduce food insecurity, increase diet quality, and improve health care access among food workers.

This study extracts key learnings from the experiences of NYC’s food workers who worked throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and documents several key problems facing many groups of food workers both before and during the crisis. These problems include low pay, limited benefits, inadequate health and safety protections, challenges to mental health, obstacles to unionization, and inadequate workforce training and development. The extent of these problems varied substantially by food workforce sector, and factors such as unionization and worker status determined the extent to which worker protections and pandemic assistance were experienced by different groups.
Purpose

This research builds on previous works published by the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute and its colleagues, including NYFood2025: Ensuring All NYC Food Workers Have Safe Working Conditions, the Right to Organize, and Sufficient Pay and Benefits and 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. These reports describe NYC food worker experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, assess to what extent job, wage, and benefit protections were experienced by the food work force, and consider what is needed to improve their working conditions moving forward. This study adds insight by considering these issues through the lens of the differing needs of different categories and sectors of food workers within NYC’s food workforce.

Study Overview

This mixed methods study presents findings from:

- A review of 100+ documents detailing labor statistics, news reports, and other publications related to food workers in New York throughout the pandemic;

- Surveys of more than 100 NYC food workers, conducted between June–August 2021, representing a range of food sectors (agriculture, emergency food distribution, farmers’ market, fast food, food production, restaurant/dining, institutional food service, supply chains, food retail, and app based food delivery) detailing their experiences working through the first 18 months of the pandemic including topics such as pay, weekly hours worked, benefits, sick leave, COVID protections, employer safety measures, perceived precarity, general job stress, and financial, physical and mental health concerns;

- In-depth interviews with 20 key stakeholders (staff of labor unions, food businesses, and community-based organizations that support the food workforce) about the essential status of food workers, workplace conditions and safety, the right to organize, wage protection, health benefits, and unmet worker needs.

Two research assistants conducted a literature review by systematically searching peer reviewed and grey literature between January 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021, using the CUNY library network and global online search engines (e.g., Google and Google Scholar.) A full search strategy for this review and a list of publications reviewed can be found in Appendix A.

Surveys were conducted online using Qualtrics software. Quantitative analysis of survey data was done using Microsoft Excel. Interviews were conducted by phone/Zoom and were audio recorded and transcribed. Food workers received $20 electronic gift cards to compensate them for participating in the survey. Once transcribed, researchers coded the interviews with a multi-pass method, coding against predetermined and emergent themes.
Results

A full reference list of 69 documents included in a literature review can be found in Appendix A. A final sample of 109 NYC food workers participated in a survey about their experiences, and 20 key stakeholders were interviewed. A detailed breakdown of demographic characteristics of survey respondents can be found in Appendix B. Key findings from these efforts are described below.

The literature suggests five major types of problems facing multiple categories and sectors of food workers within NYC’s food workforce during the pandemic: health and safety risks, pay and benefits, living conditions, labor rights, and training and workforce development. See Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Health and safety risks</td>
<td>Risk of COVID-19 infection at workplace or in traveling to workplace, lack of adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), lack of enforcement of health and safety rules, safety problems due to short staffing or long hours, mental health problems such as stress, anxiety and depression related to other health issues and financial precarity, extended and irregular hours leading to work/family conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Pay and benefits</td>
<td>Periods of unemployment, layoffs, low wages, limited or no health insurance to address pandemic-related and other threats to health, inadequate sick leave, no fixed work schedules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Labor rights</td>
<td>Active employer opposition to unionization, challenges of worker organizing in small workplaces, inadequate enforcement of labor rights laws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Living conditions</td>
<td>Difficulties paying rent, affording food, finding health care, securing reliable child care, supervising children locked out of schools, navigating complex decision making related to workplace COVID-19 exposures and quarantine recommendations with immediate family needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Training and workforce development</td>
<td>Limited workforce development in this sector, few career pathways, limited training on workers’ rights and health and safety.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings from Food Worker Surveys and Stakeholder Interviews

The food worker surveys and stakeholder interviews expand on the pandemic-related food systems problems identified in a comprehensive search of the literature, and give human voice to the experiences of NYC food workers during COVID-19.

Health and Safety Risks: COVID protections in the workplace

Most food workers surveyed had access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and other protections at their place of work. Table 2 describes COVID-19 safety measures food workers experienced in the workplace. Of note, fewer than 60% of workers reported that their employers had instituted 5 or more of these 15 safety measures. However, the majority of respondents reported that the safety measures and protections employers implemented to protect workplace safety were well enforced. Many individuals described the concern that vaccines weren’t readily available to food workers even though they were an important measure of COVID-19 protection. Said one respondent, “Restaurants are expected to employ one half of the city and feed the other but weren’t offered vaccines until months after others, despite being told to reopen.” Emergency food providers also commented that they were unable to get vaccinated at the same time as other food service workers and had to wait several weeks longer to qualify. One reported that they felt the government had deemed their work not “essential enough.”

Table 2. Reported COVID-19 safety measures in the workplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COVID-19 safety measure</th>
<th>% Workers who identified this measure at workplace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PPE Provided</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean and Disinfect More Often</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Distancing</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand Sanitizer Station</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety Reminders</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement More Rigid Cleaning Protocol</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limit Amount of People Allowed into Business</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen Employees’ Temperatures, Symptoms</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforced Quarantine Mandates</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take Patrons’ Temperatures</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training/Education of Safety Protocols</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure Alerts</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective Barriers/Dividers</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Handwashing Stations</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular COVID Testing</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported 5 or more of these measures</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notably, more than half of the 20 stakeholders interviewed for this study identified unprompted the mental health of food workers as an employee health and safety concern. Indeed, there was consensus among many interviewees that the mental health ramifications of the pandemic were just as hard-hitting as the physical health effects. Organizations reported that worker stress was high (Figure 1), and some employees left their positions due to fear of contracting the virus and spreading it to their loved ones. Unclear and rapidly changing safety guidelines at the start of the pandemic increased this emotional load. Once guidelines were clarified, the source of stress shifted to the inability of workers to protect themselves from non-compliant customers. Six organizations interviewed began to provide mental health resources in the wake of COVID-19, including improved health insurance, free counseling services for workers, resource guides, and classes such as meditation sessions.

### Pay and benefits

Most survey respondents reported receiving an hourly rate of pay between $15–$20, demonstrating that most food workers surveyed receive the NYC minimum wage of $15 hourly.9 Hazard pay for essential food workers was discussed often among interviewees. Some organizations elected to provide “unofficial” hazard pay, in the form of gift cards, emergency funds, and free MetroCards.

Food workers were asked to describe what workers in the food sector need most to recover from the economic impact of COVID-19. Answers varied, but the most common response was increased income from a pay raise, increased hours, or hazard pay. One respondent said, “I believe if we are given higher pay we would be able to work harder and love our jobs more.” This comment is particularly salient given recent reports of widespread difficulty food workforce employers experience hiring and retaining employees.10,11,12,13

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**Figure 1.** Survey findings on job-related stress compared to pre-pandemic, by food sector. (N=109)

Figure 1 shows that the proportion of workers in this sample who report much more job-related stress than they did before the pandemic varied widely by sub-sectors of the food workforce. Workers in app-based delivery and emergency food sectors, for example, reported much higher pandemic levels of job-related stress than workers in retail or food production sectors.
Labor Rights

While 46% of food workers surveyed for this study reported having health insurance from their employer during the pandemic, half of those reported receiving health insurance from their employer after the pandemic began. With regard to access to sick leave, many food workers surveyed reported that they were unlikely to take time off from work due to illness or to care for a sick loved one. In fact, 29% of supply chain, 17% of emergency food distribution, 13% of retail and 9% of fast-food workers stated that if they did not come to work while sick, they would lose their jobs.

Most survey respondents were not represented by a labor union. Only institutional food service (100%) and food production (87.5%) had a large proportion of respondents who were union members. Most respondents who were unionized also reported receiving paid sick leave and health insurance benefits through their jobs.

Living Conditions

Food workers surveyed for this study reported concerns related to their living conditions while working during the pandemic. Specifically, food workers reported how often in the last year they worried about being able to afford having enough food, being able to afford rent, and being able to afford health care (Table 3). Food workers worried most (responding “often” and “very often”) about affording health care and rent, and reported lower levels of concern about affording enough food. About 4 in 10 of the food workers surveyed worried “often” or “very often” about being able to afford food, rent or health care, a measure of the precarious economic circumstances experienced by these workers.

Training and Workforce Development

Though food workers were not surveyed explicitly about training and workforce development needs, several survey respondents referred to these topics when asked about critical needs of the food workforce to recover from the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent said that what the sector needed most was “financial and business training.” Another respondent indicated that the sector needed “more qualified workers so that when others get sick or leave, we can continue to work with integrity.” Others simply suggested that “personal development” and “more training” would be important.

Table 3. Survey findings on percent concerned about living conditions during COVID-19 (N=109)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Somewhat often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Very often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worry about being able to afford having enough food</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry about being able to afford rent</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry about being able to afford health care</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NY Food 2025
Conclusions

The methods employed for this study, including the survey of a non-representative sample of 109 food workers, cannot fully describe the varied conditions that COVID-19 imposed on the hundreds of thousands of food workers working in NYC throughout the pandemic or how they experienced those changes; further research will be needed to achieve that goal. Despite this, four critical findings emerge from this effort. First, across the many sectors of NYC’s food workforce, the pandemic exacerbated several key problems facing many groups of food workers both before and during COVID-19. These include low pay, limited benefits, inadequate health and safety protections, challenges to mental health, obstacles to unionization, and inadequate workforce training and development. Second, this study demonstrates that the extent of these problems varied substantially by sector. For example, while food workers in the restaurant sector reported high concern related to job stability and adequate income, their peers in the retail and grocery sectors reported job stress linked to their physical and mental well-being. Third, many food workers surveyed for this study were not unionized, but respondents who did report union membership received paid sick leave and health insurance through their employers at a higher rate than their non-unionized peers suggesting the importance of unionization as a protective measure during crises. Fourth, the growing gig workforce (i.e., app based delivery workers) classified as independent contractors experienced continued exclusion from certain employee protections and government assistance, putting them at greater health risk and financial precarity. In addition, other reports show that gig workers lack protections from arbitrary dismissal, safeguards from occupational hazards, can’t access certain benefits, and lack the right to organize afforded to more traditionally employed food workers.14

Early in the pandemic, workers risked their health at workplaces still in the process of creating health and safety protocols.15,16 In contrast to what has been reported in other studies,17,18,19,20,21 food workers surveyed for this study reported a high degree of satisfaction with the implementation of protective measures and policies in their places of work. Consistent with the literature,22,23,24,25,26 our survey found that in the early days of COVID-19 many workers, particularly in the restaurant and hospitality sector, faced economic insecurity related to job loss, reduction in hours, or lower wages. These findings indicate that while workers felt physically protected from disease while at work, they experienced a sense of precarity with respect to job security and income stability. The media has widely reported a reluctance by unemployed food workers to return to working conditions of low pay, little job security, few benefits, and few workplace protections. Starting in early 2021, restaurants and fast-food chains began to offer economic incentives to promote employer recruitment and retention in response to worker shortages.27,28,29,30
City, state, and federal policy expanded worker assistance to bolster food worker health, safety, and economic security throughout the pandemic, including unpaid and paid sick leave, increased protection from arbitrary firing, and mandatory cleaning protocols. Other forms of assistance indirectly supported food workers, such as early vaccine eligibility and financial relief. Policies such as extended unemployment, child tax credits, increased SNAP benefits also supported food workers during this period, though most of those temporary increases/benefits have since expired. Though expansive, assistance has been uneven, with notable exclusions of many small business employees, independent contractors, and undocumented workers, resulting in calls for more sweeping and long-term forms of relief. In response to shortcomings by both businesses and government, workers' organizations continued to raise awareness of workers rights violations, while also advocating for and helping to provide additional protections.

This study adds to the growing body of literature documenting the ways in which different categories of food workers have had to navigate an environment of increasing financial precarity and health risks while providing critical services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This research also provides unique insights into the food worker experience in New York City, as it presents data collected more than a year into the pandemic from diverse participants in the food workforce. The timing of this study, along with its scale, supports a long-view perspective on food worker pandemic experiences, while also giving informed insight into what is needed to support food workers sufficiently in the future. Further, this study specifically reflects the experiences of NYC food workers and worker support organizations at a time when there is municipal policy and media attention in support of food workers. Further studies are needed to assess how these attitudes, beliefs, and practices have changed in response to more recent pandemic developments.

Taken together, these findings suggest that NYC will need a sophisticated approach to improving the working conditions, well-being, and basic rights of food workers. Some policies will need to protect the food workforce, and other low wage workers, as a whole—while other policies are needed to resolve specific conditions of various sub sectors such as food workers, food delivery workers, and restaurant workers. Specifically, increases to union membership and support for organizing can contribute to a more robust return to work and more sustainable working arrangements for food workers and their employers. This study endeavored to answer the question: “What do food workers need most now to recover from the pandemic?” When surveyed directly with this query, food workers most frequently reported a need for increase in income. The second most common response was improved health and safety measures, suggesting that though the existing COVID mitigation protocols highlighted above were reportedly well-enforced, many workers would have liked more consistent, thorough, and long term safety measures. Ensuring that these sorts of health and safety measures remain in place in the future, as needed, should be a top priority for policymakers.
Implications for Policy

The findings from this study can directly inform recommendations for employers and policy makers that will enable them to address the problems identified in our survey, interviews and the literature review as shown in Table 1. In turn, these recommendations will help support a strong rebound of employment and improvement in working conditions in the food sector. This will accelerate progress towards several of the goals described in our companion report on food workers in *New York Food 2025*. These include:

**Goal 4:** *Promote recovery, growth, and resiliency that builds a more robust, sustainable, and equitable infrastructure for New York City’s food distribution, retail, and service economies.* Put simply, there is no NYC food system without NYC food workers. Food workers are the fabric of the system’s infrastructure. This study underlines the importance of developing policies that support a more equitable food sector workforce to promote overall food system recovery, and resiliency, and highlights the need to ensure safe working conditions, an expansion of fair pay, access to adequate benefits, and a comprehensive strategy for workforce development in the food sector.

**Goal 5:** *Ensure that all food workers, including city-contracted food workers and food delivery workers, have safe working conditions, the right and ability to organize, and livable wages.* This study found that despite their essential worker status, food workers in NYC continue to receive low wages, limited benefits, and limited job security.
Appendix A: Literature Review Search Strategy

The literature review examined over 100 sources that discussed the working conditions of food workers from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to the present. Data sources reviewed included news articles; government statements; reports; and peer-reviewed articles. The review largely drew from new articles and local outlets, such as The New York Times and The Gotham Gazette. The review also examined reports from research and advocacy organizations such as One Fair Wage and the UC Berkeley Food Labor Research Center, as well as government press releases and statements from The NYS Office of the Comptroller and The NYC Mayor’s Office. The search examined sources published from March 2020, which marked the beginning of the pandemic in NYC, to October 2021.

Keywords used during the search drew from three different areas centered on food workers, the pandemic, and location. Keywords for food workers included “food workers” “food service workers” “grocery workers” “food vendors” “restaurant workers” “gig workers” “independent contractors” and “fast food workers.” Keywords for the pandemic included “COVID-19” “COVID19” and “pandemic.” Keywords for location included “New York City” and “New York State.”

Literature Review Key References


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3 “A Persistent Legacy of Slavery: Ending the Subminimum Wage for Tipped Workers in New York as a Racial Equity Measure.” One Fair Wage, July 2020.  


Literature Review Key References (cont.)


Literature Review Key References (cont.)


Literature Review Key References (cont.)


Literature Review Key References (cont.)


Literature Review Key References (cont.)


## Appendix B

<table>
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<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<td><strong>Race/ethnicity</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Black or African American 20.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian or Pacific Islander 13.5%</td>
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<td>Latinx 15.2%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>White or Caucasian 33.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiracial or Biracial 3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native American or Alaskan Native 5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food sector</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retail 12.7%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Food Production 6.8%</td>
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<td>Fast Food 9.3%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Institutional Food Service 7.6%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Other 2.5%</td>
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<td>Farmers Market 22.9%</td>
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<td>Supply Chain 5.9%</td>
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<td>App-based Delivery 2.5%</td>
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<td>Emergency Food distribution 5.1%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Agriculture/ farm worker 5.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender identity</strong></td>
<td>Male 39.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female 54.2%</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Gender non-conforming 4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prefer to self-describe 1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic</strong></td>
<td>yes 28.4%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>no 71.6%</td>
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