



NATIONAL
DOMESTIC
WORKERS
ALLIANCE

**6 MONTHS
IN CRISIS**

The Impact of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers

OCTOBER 2020

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Summary

By adapting a chatbot into a survey tool, in March 2020 NDWA Labs began surveying domestic workers every week to learn how the pandemic was affecting their lives and livelihoods. More than 20,000 Spanish-speaking cleaners, nannies and homecare workers have responded to our surveys at least once. These weekly check-ins with domestic workers gave us a unique view into how the rapidly changing conditions of the COVID-19 crisis were affecting our country's most vulnerable, essential workers. In this report we share findings from 6 months of research—25 weekly surveys—covering everything from employment and income to parenting challenges and access to government benefits and relief. We discuss our methodology and how we've adapted a popular chat technology into a rigorous research tool.

Spanish-speaking domestic workers who responded to our surveys experienced a rapid and sustained loss of jobs and income. This resulted in housing and food insecurity, which were still prevalent in September. The overwhelming majority of our respondents are mothers, and most of them are the primary breadwinners in their household. Most of the survey respondents did not receive unemployment insurance or the CARES Act's \$1200 stimulus check from the federal government. The lack of a social safety net, and the exclusion of many of them from government relief and benefits has left them even more vulnerable than they were before COVID-19.

Our findings demonstrate the deep impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers, including:

- By late March, more than 90% of workers lost jobs due to COVID-19
- The percentage of workers without any jobs is still nearly four times the percentage before COVID-19
- Between two and three percent of respondents worked 31 to 40 hours per week during the pandemic, compared to more than 33% before COVID-19
- The vast majority of domestic workers did not apply for unemployment insurance, mostly because they did not believe they qualified
- For six consecutive months, more than half of workers were unable to pay their rent or mortgage

Introduction

On the evening of March 13, 2020, as it became clear that COVID-19 infection was rapidly spreading in the United States, NDWA Labs sent a message to 59,159 domestic workers throughout the country, greeting them by first name and then asking, “are you worried about coronavirus?” By the morning of March 14, 11,558 had replied. Yes, they were really worried.

Since 2018 NDWA Labs, the innovation arm of National Domestic Workers Alliance, has been experimenting with using a chatbot to find and engage domestic workers at scale. Partnering with the social movements lab Accelerate Change, the Labs succeeded in rapidly growing a chatbot for Spanish-speaking domestic workers. By 2020, La Alianza, as the chatbot is known, was offering news and resources in Spanish to more than 200,000 domestic worker subscribers. Mostly house cleaners, but including nannies and homecare workers as well, Alianza subscribers live in all 50 U.S. states, D.C. and Puerto Rico. We believe it is the largest digital aggregation of Spanish-speaking domestic workers in the country.

The possibility of adapting La Alianza into a formal large-scale survey research tool was apparent from the start of our work with the chatbot but not fully tested until this year. The chatbot team originally planned to develop a monthly worker survey research tool in 2020. When the severity and rapidly changing conditions of the coronavirus crisis became clear, we quickly pivoted to a weekly survey.

From March 13 through September 18, we delivered 25 weekly surveys through the Alianza chatbot, averaging 18 questions, and sent to an average of more than 56,000 domestic workers each week. As discussed in the Methodology section below, we worked closely with our internal team and external academic partners to ensure high standards in collection and analysis.

Domestic workers are a disaggregated and historically low-wage workforce. We built our chatbot using Facebook Messenger. We are not aware of another medium that currently allows one to meet domestic workers where they are at scale the way that Messenger does. Domestic workers are already users of Facebook and Messenger. We don’t have to persuade to download the app; we don’t have to train in how to use it; we don’t have to encourage workers to open it; and the pathway for engagement is already familiar—read a message in Messenger, click a button that goes to a website, or opens a Facebook post where you can write a comment. The advantage of this access and familiarity cannot be overstated, especially with a population who often work in informal markets and invisibilized areas of our economy.

That said, Facebook and Messenger are noisy. Domestic workers are receiving content from numerous sources, messages from both friends and other pages/companies. They may also have limited ability to access messages. With almost no exceptions, they are viewing that content on smartphones and likely smartphones with limited data plans and lower speed connections, and possibly shared with family members.

The success of NDWA Labs' adaptation of Messenger as a survey tool relies not only on accessibility (workers have Messenger on their phones and available data to open, read and respond) but also on trust and relevance (Alianza messages are messages they choose to engage with). Hand in hand with our experimentation to develop questions that produced high-quality data, we also experimented with questions that could build a relationship with respondents. Our goal was for workers to experience answering the questions and receiving information and resources through the surveys as a form of care.

Checking in with the same workers week to week, we quickly gathered a dataset that

“Thanks a lot for the advice. Everyday I learn more, and a thousand thanks for all the information is nourishing, and I feel very safe, listened to and cared for”

– INGRID

we understand, in terms of scale and repeated observations, to be unprecedented in the informal market of domestic work. Collected data ranges from regular measurement of employment status, housing and food security to one-time questions about safety, parenting, feelings of self-efficacy, and bargaining for better wages and working conditions.

In this report we share findings from the first six months of this survey—a week to week snapshot demonstrating that COVID-19's economic effects on a national population of domestic workers were immediate, devastating and sustained.

Focus on Spanish-speaking immigrant workers

Domestic workers in the US represent a range of racial, ethnic, language, immigration status, and country-of-origin identities. And while each of the main domestic work occupations shares the work location of a private home, working conditions can vary based on the type of work (caregiving versus cleaning), the number of employers one has and hours one works, whether one is hired directly by a family or through an agency or online platform, whether one travels to work or 'lives-in' inside the employers' home. For some workers,

these categories are fluid, with work that shifts between cleaning and caregiving, live-in and live out.

This report focuses on Spanish-speaking domestic workers, 72% of whom report working primarily as house cleaners, with the other 28% working primarily as caregivers of children (17%) or of elders and people with disabilities (11%).

We use the term “Spanish-speaking” to describe these workers, based on the fact that we communicate with them exclusively in Spanish. We have not yet collected data on racial or ethnic identity from respondents. However, when citing data from external sources, we use the Latinx population as a comparison group, as we believe it is the best reference group for respondents’ demographic.

According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI)’s analysis of Current Population Survey (CPS) data, 29% of US domestic workers are Latina, and house cleaning is the domestic worker occupation with the highest share of Latina workers (62%).¹ The EPI analysis also found that 51% of house cleaners were foreign-born noncitizens, a rate that is more than double that of domestic workers overall (20% of whom were foreign-born noncitizens).

Because our surveys are conducted inside a social media product, whose privacy policies we do not control, we deliberately do not collect data on immigration status. While we cannot say what percentage of our respondents are immigrants², and what percentage of those are undocumented, we craft the survey questions, information and resources we deliver via the chatbot with the needs of undocumented workers in mind. We think it is reasonable to conclude that a significant percentage of our survey respondents are immigrants.

Methodology

Survey Experience for Respondents

From March 13 to September 18, weekly surveys were sent through Facebook Messenger to a group of subscribers in NDWA Labs' La Alianza chatbot. Each survey had a series of baseline questions at the beginning followed by time-variant questions asked every week or every-other week, followed by one-time questions.

Baseline questions asked for information such as the typical weekly income a worker had before COVID-19, or the number of years they had worked as a domestic worker. Some baseline questions were asked the first week we surveyed, while others were added in later weeks. Baseline questions were asked only once per respondent. Once the respondent answered a baseline question, any future survey they responded to would begin with the first question that was unanswered by them, whether a baseline or time-variant question.

The time-variant questions were asked every week or every other week (e.g. number of weekly jobs, hours worked, and weekly income). Finally, the surveys concluded with some one-time questions about specific themes, such as government benefits, childcare, and working conditions.

At the end of each survey, subscribers were invited to access different resources. For example: relevant news articles, access to free services (e.g. financial coaching, assistance to apply for food stamps, tax filing assistance), or invitations to the Coronavirus Care Fund—the National Domestic Workers Alliance's COVID-19 relief fund. These resources were not intended as incentives to respond to the surveys. Subscribers were not notified of these offerings until after they completed the questions, and chatbot subscribers who did not participate in the surveys also were invited to the same resources.

The Alianza chatbot is associated with a news website and Facebook page. Worker quotations in this report were transcribed from public comments by workers on our Facebook page, and then translated from Spanish to English. We attribute the quotes with first name only to protect the privacy of our respondents.

Sampling

Every time a worker subscribes to our messaging, the software that powers the chatbot automatically and randomly assigns that subscriber to an AB split group. All AB split groups are roughly the same size. To select our survey cohort, we chose 40 AB split groups to get a random sample of La Alianza subscribers.

The surveyed cohort changes slightly every week, due to a few subscribers blocking messages from us (less than 1% per week) and becoming unreachable. Additionally, some new subscribers to the chatbot are randomly added to the survey cohort if our software assigns them to one of the 40 survey cohort AB split groups. For the first 12 weeks, the surveys were sent to everyone within the survey cohort, representing around 80 thousand workers. After noticing declining response rates likely due to survey fatigue, we implemented a rotation sample system.

Rotation groups

The same survey cohort was randomly divided into four different rotation groups, A, B, C, and D. Starting with our June 12 survey, two of the four rotation groups received the survey every week. This reduced the number of survey recipients each week by about half, to roughly 40 thousand workers. Each rotation group got the survey for two consecutive weeks, and then did not receive the survey the following two weeks. The chart below shows the rotating sample schedule:

	Week 01	Week 02	Week 03	Week 04	Week 05
Group A	Surveyed	Surveyed	Break	Break	Surveyed
Group B	Break	Surveyed	Surveyed	Break	Break
Group C	Break	Break	Surveyed	Surveyed	Break
Group D	Surveyed	Break	Break	Surveyed	Surveyed

We introduced rotation in order to increase response rates and reduce the time burden on respondents. After implementing the rotation sampling method, we saw an increase in response rates. The higher response rate was stable through the last survey included in this report, even though the surveys became slightly longer over time. Survey Delivery

Survey Delivery

Surveys were sent at the end of each week. On Thursday evenings, we sent a test survey to roughly 20% of the weekly survey sample. On Friday mornings, we analyzed the data from the test and reviewed the survey build in the software to check for errors. In most weeks, no corrections were made between the pretest and the larger survey send. After we confirmed the quality of the survey, we sent it to the rest of the survey sample on Friday. We closed responses and collected data on Monday.

Each week's survey was sent only once to each individual in the survey cohort, without further nudging or offering incentives to respond. There were three weeks we did not have a survey. One was due to NDWA Labs' summer break, and the other two were due to platform limitations which prevented us from sending messages on our regular schedule. These weeks are represented in report figures with dotted lines or proportional spaces.

Response Rate

Throughout the 25 surveys, we had an average response rate of 4.4%, and an average completion rate of 41%. The response rate is measured as the percentage of people who completed the survey with respect to people to whom the survey was sent, and completion rate is the percentage of people who completed the survey with respect to people who began the survey. We had an average of more than 1300 completed surveys per week.

An average of more than 3300 (10.7%) of the workers who received the survey each week began answering questions. Surveys had an average of 18 questions, including baseline questions. The longest survey had 30 questions. Key repeated weekly questions, such as employment and income questions, were asked first after the baseline questions. Thus we had more than the average 1300 responses for most of these key questions each week.

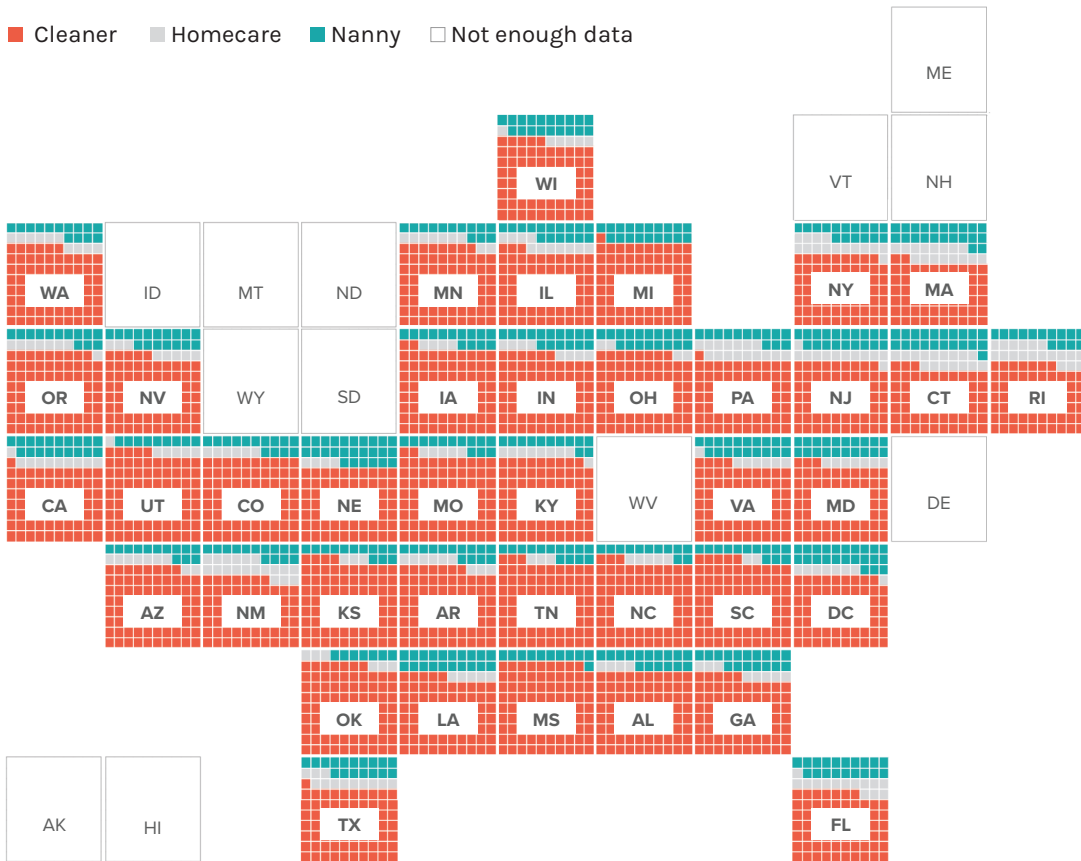
Data Overview

The data in this report corresponds to 62,596 observations from 20,769 unique respondents. We include responses up until Survey 25, which was sent on September 18, 2020. Due to rounding, some percentages in the figures presented do not add up to 100. For this analysis, we exclude individuals who first subscribed to our messaging after March 31, 2020. This is to ensure that the data throughout the six months reflects the population that was already engaged in our La Alianza chatbot before the pandemic started. We also excluded respondents who started responding to a survey, but in that week did not answer the following question: "How many jobs did you have last week?" This question was one of the first time-variant questions asked each week after a respondent completed a series of one-time baseline questions.

Ninety-nine percent of respondents are women, and 89% of them are mothers of children 5 years and under, or of children in grades K-12. More than 3 in 4 workers said their income is the main source of income in their household (Figure 3), and close to half of workers have worked for their oldest employer between 1 and 5 years (Figure 4). Nearly two thirds of workers have worked as domestic workers for 5 years or more (Figure 5). House cleaners represent the majority of workers in our sample, and before COVID-19 they had a slightly higher hourly wage compared to homecare workers and nannies (Figure 6).

FIGURE 02

Geographic distribution of surveyed domestic workers by occupation

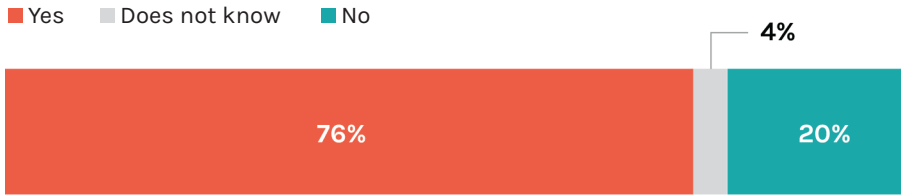


Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, 2020

FIGURE 03

More than 3 in 4 workers said their income is the main source of income in their household

Worker's income is household's main income

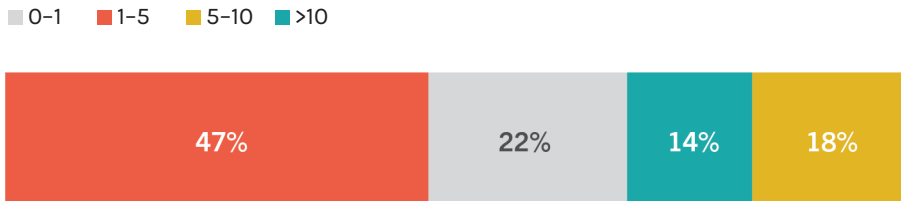


Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, 2020

FIGURE 04

Close to half of workers have worked for their oldest employer between 1 and 5 years

Years worked for oldest employer

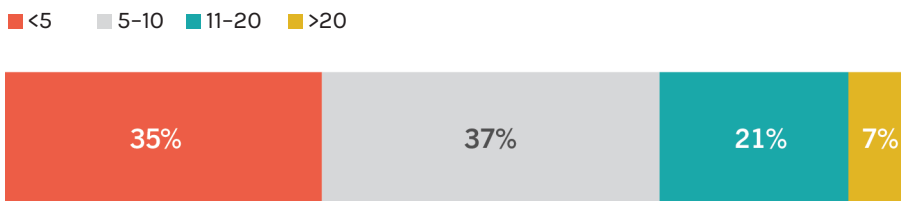


Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, 2020

FIGURE 05

Nearly two thirds of workers have worked as domestic workers for 5 years or more

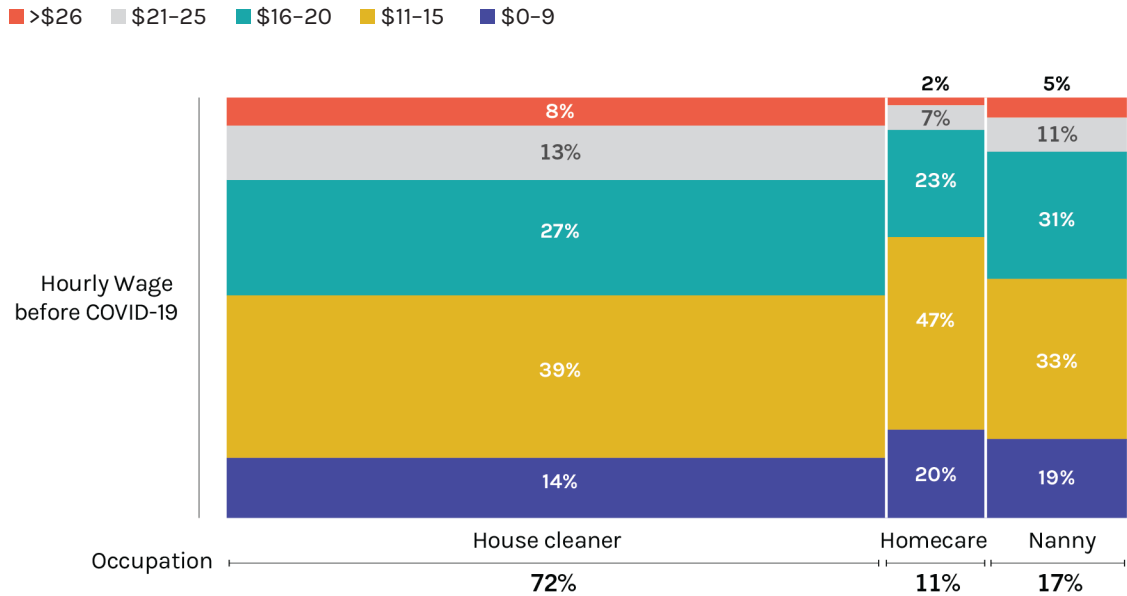
Years worked as domestic worker



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, 2020

FIGURE 06

House cleaners represent the majority of workers, and before COVID-19 they had a slightly higher hourly wage compared to homecare workers and nannies



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, 2020

Employment

Survey respondents rapidly lost all their jobs. Six months into the pandemic, respondents have not yet recovered their usual work load, and many are still out of work.

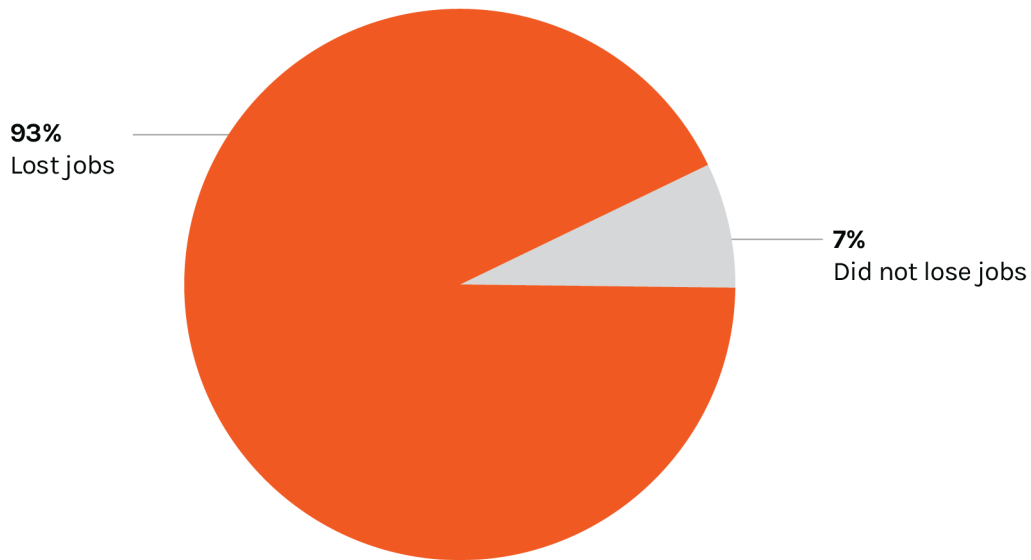
“I was working well but since this virus started my work dropped to zero I am a single mother with 2 children. I don’t know much about technology, I don’t know how to look for help online but here I am still hoping that all this will improve.”

– HALEY | TEXAS

In March, as soon as several US cities and states began implementing stay-at-home orders, domestic workers started losing all of their jobs.⁴ In late March we started asking respondents how many jobs they had in a given week.

FIGURE 07

By late March, more than 90% of workers lost jobs due to COVID-19



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, March 27, 2020

More than half of respondents had already reported zero jobs that week, and over 90% of respondents lost jobs due to COVID-19 (Figure 7).

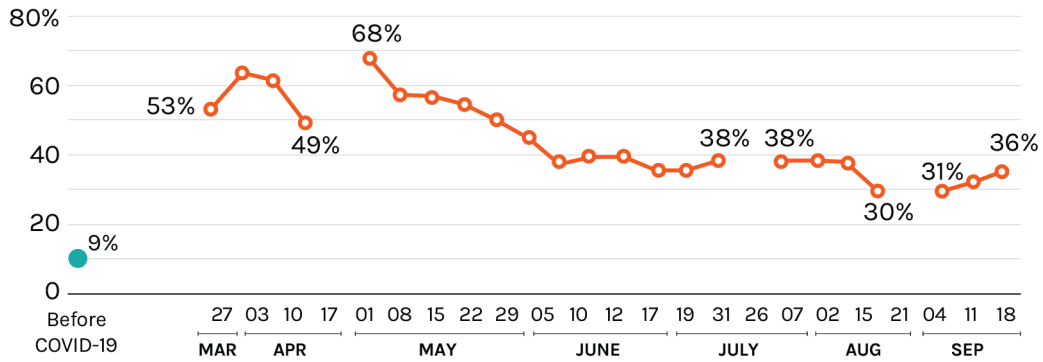
The situation worsened later in the Spring, reaching its highest point in early May, when close to 7 out of 10 respondents were out of work. There was some improvement during the following months, with fewer than 4 in 10 respondents out of work each week starting in mid-June. However, six months into the crisis, respondents were still doing much worse than before the pandemic. In the last week we collected data for this report the percentage of workers without jobs was still four times the percentage before COVID-19⁵ (Figure 8).

Respondents who did have work during the first six months of the pandemic were also worse off than before this crisis. In mid-September more than 7 in 10 respondents were still working fewer jobs, and more than half were working fewer hours, than before the pandemic.⁶

FIGURE 08

The percentage of workers without jobs is still four times the percentage before COVID-19

Percentage of workers with zero jobs per week

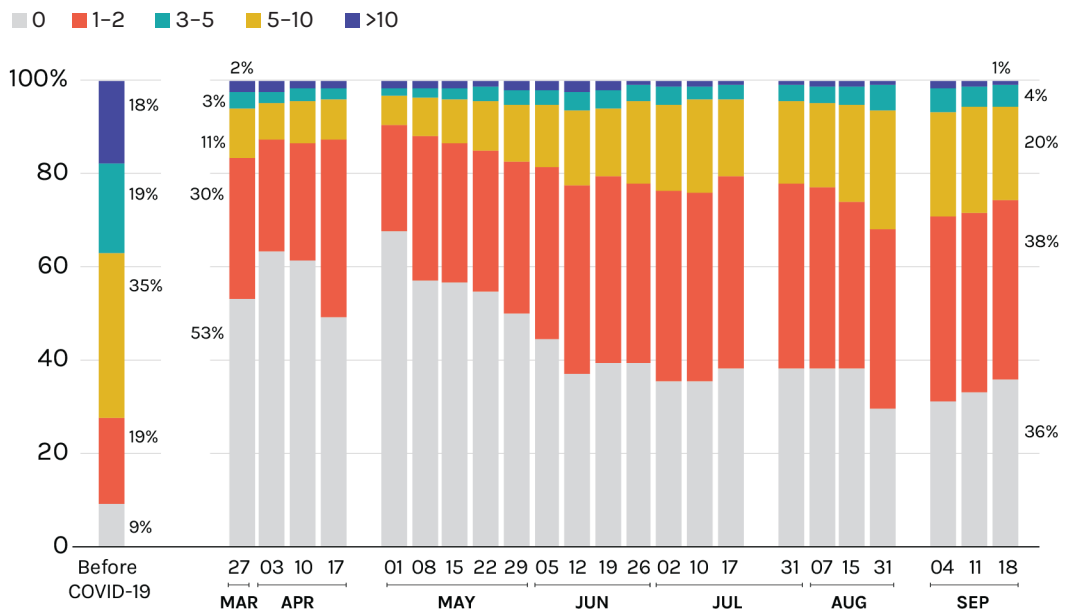


Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, March 27-September 18, 2020

FIGURE 09

Compared with before COVID-19, in mid-September twice as many workers had only 1 or 2 jobs

Percentage of number of jobs per week

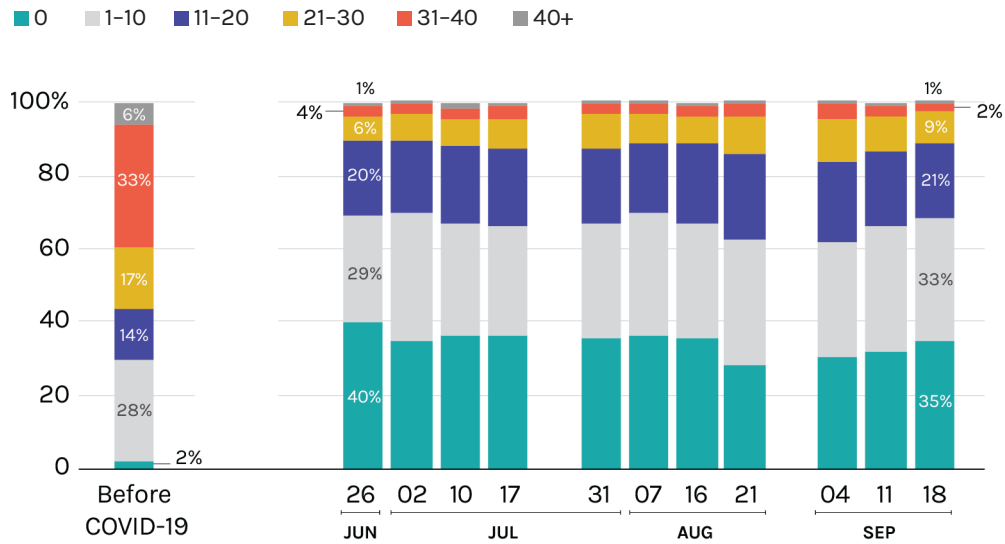


Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, March 27-September 18, 2020

FIGURE 10

Between two and three percent of respondents worked 31 to 40 hours per week during the pandemic, compared to 33% before COVID-19

Percentage of hours worked per week



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, June 26-September 18, 2020

FIGURE 11

Both part-time and full-time workers saw their hours fall during the pandemic compared with before COVID-19

Hours worked in week of last answered survey

	0	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	>40
0	1.5%	0.4%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%
1-10	10.9%	9.9%	3.6%	1.5%	0.7%	0.2%
11-20	4.5%	4.9%	2.9%	1.1%	0.2%	0.1%
21-30	5.0%	6.1%	4.3%	1.7%	0.3%	0.0%
31-40	10.0%	8.7%	8.4%	5.0%	2.0%	0.3%
>40	1.4%	1.0%	1.4%	0.9%	0.5%	0.3%

Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, July 10-September 18 2020

Compared with before COVID-19, in mid-September twice as many workers had only 1 or 2 jobs (Figure 9). In terms of hours worked, between two and three percent of respondents worked 31 to 40 hours per week during the pandemic, compared to 33% before COVID-19 (Figure 10). This fall in hours compared with prior the pandemic was true for both part-time and full-time workers (Figure 11).

While the law does not mandate employers to pay domestic workers for cancellations or last-minute shift changes, that is often the only channel for domestic workers to have an income when they lose work. During the pandemic, some employers continued to pay domestic workers for lost jobs, but most did not. By mid-April, nearly three-quarters of workers did not receive any compensation when their jobs were canceled (Figure 12).

In addition to lost income, respondents were unsure of whether they would be asked to go back to work, or when that would happen. In late March, 2 in 3 respondents did not know if their employers would give them their jobs back after the pandemic. We asked a series of questions to try to understand how employers were communicating with the domestic workers they had suddenly stopped employing. For example, had they called to check in on how the workers were doing? By mid-April, 45% of workers who lost work were not contacted by their employers at all after the cancellation (Figure 13). Of those who did hear from their employers, in 44% of instances employers were contacting them to cancel additional jobs.

FIGURE 12

Nearly three-quarters of workers did not receive any compensation when their jobs were canceled

Number of employers paying for canceled work

■ 0 ■ 1-2 ■ 3-5 ■ 5-10 ■ >10



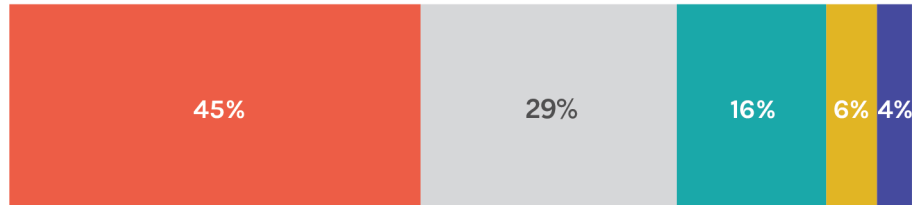
Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, April 17, 2020

FIGURE 13

Nearly half of workers who lost work were not contacted by their employers at all after the cancellation

Number of employers who contacted workers

0 1-2 3-5 5-10 >10



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, April 17, 2020

Our Data In Perspective

Our COVID-19 survey population of Spanish-speaking domestic workers, many of whom are immigrants, sits at the intersection of several particularly vulnerable groups. Official unemployment statistics reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) throughout the COVID-19 crisis show higher unemployment rates for Latina and Black women, foreign-born women, and workers with less than a High School education.⁷

BLS unemployment statistics from September 2020 show little change in unemployment rates—which were still in the double digits—for Latino and Black adults compared with August 2020. Meanwhile, there was a decrease in unemployment rates for white and Asian adults, as well as for the broad population of adult men and adult women.⁸

Our survey data is not directly comparable to official unemployment statistics,^{9,10} but it shows the depth of this economic crisis for domestic workers, who are often underrepresented in official economic indicators. Most domestic workers who are not working right now likely lack an alternative source of income, regardless of whether they are currently looking for work or available to work. Domestic workers are less likely than other workers to have health or retirement benefits, and they are excluded from some core labor protections, such as the National Labor Relations Act, as well as from Federal anti-discrimination laws.¹¹ Nearly 9 in 10 survey respondents are mothers, and 3 in 4 are the primary breadwinners in their household. As discussed later in this report, job losses may translate almost immediately into housing and food insecurity for domestic worker families.

Income

Domestic workers are far from recovering the income levels they were used to before the current crisis. This is particularly alarming considering that, even before COVID-19, domestic workers earned less than the average US worker, and were three times as likely to be living in poverty. According to EPI analysis, the median domestic worker earned \$12.01 per hour, compared to \$19.97 per hour for other workers.¹²

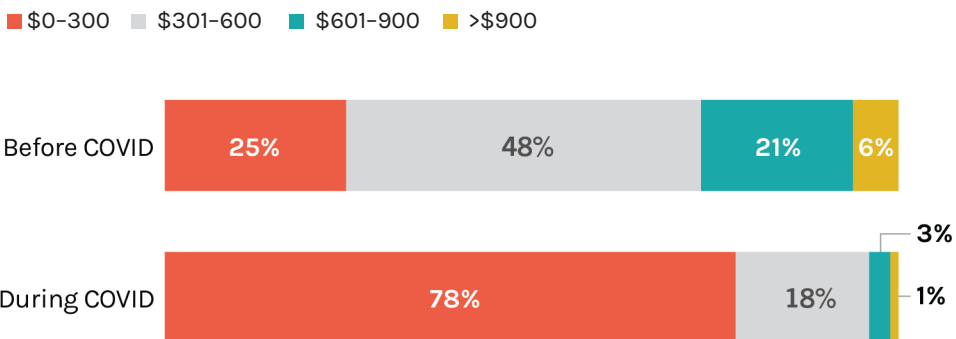
“I have been in this country for 25 years and for the first time in my life I have been 7 weeks without generating income to my home and how sad. One here lives every day because it helps her relatives and you cannot save as one should, but thank the Lord that we are safe. I got depressed, but you have to know how to win and lose the battles.

– ANA | CALIFORNIA

Prior to the pandemic, 25% of workers earned between \$0 and \$300 in their best week. During the pandemic that number has jumped to 78% (Figure 14). The maximum weekly income reported by survey respondents did not change significantly throughout the six months covered in this report.

FIGURE 14

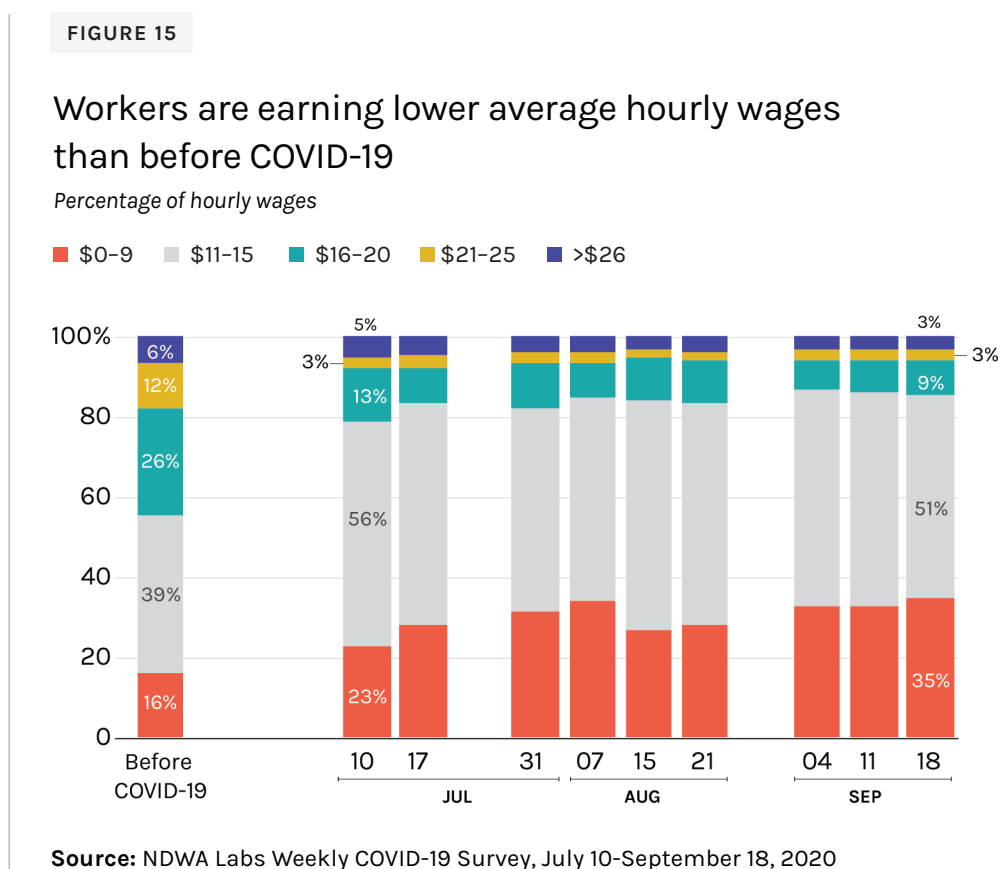
Prior to the pandemic, 25% of workers earned between \$0 and \$300 in their best week. During the pandemic that number has jumped to 78%.



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, 2020

The data from our surveys suggests that this reduced income is due not only to a decrease in jobs and hours worked. We also saw a decrease in hourly rates. In mid-September, the latest data presented in this report, more than half of respondents were still earning lower average hourly wages than before COVID-19 (Figure 15).¹³

Domestic workers may be accepting lower rates from new employers. Working in other people’s homes, domestic workers’ bargaining power is often limited even in the best of circumstances. However, some respondents report that their regular employers are paying them less than before the pandemic.



In mid-September, 22% of respondents who worked for employers they had before the pandemic reported those employers paid them less than before COVID-19. Of these respondents, 58% said their employers paid them less by reducing their hours, 28% said they reduced their pay, and 10% said their employers reduced both their pay and their hours.¹⁴

COVID-19 relief and government benefit access

“Most of the people supported me financially for about two months, until the end of May; But in reality the person still does not want cleaning, I do not know if it is because of fear or the economic situation or others are moving from the city to the outskirts of the city and all this complicates the work for us and that we do not have a financial aid”

– BLANCA

Immigrant essential workers have been on the front lines of the pandemic crisis. These workers and their families have been excluded from much needed federal COVID-19 relief, including cash payments, nutrition assistance, and COVID-19 testing and treatment. This exclusion amplified and worsened the precarity of their situation in this moment of unprecedented crisis.

Respondents expressed the need for COVID-19 relief packages that included them. In early August, we consulted workers on their priority for a COVID-19 relief package negotiation at the federal level. The top ranked choice was free COVID-19 testing and treatment for all those uninsured regardless of immigration status. Access to childcare support for working parents was a close second. The third top choice was access to food for low-income people.

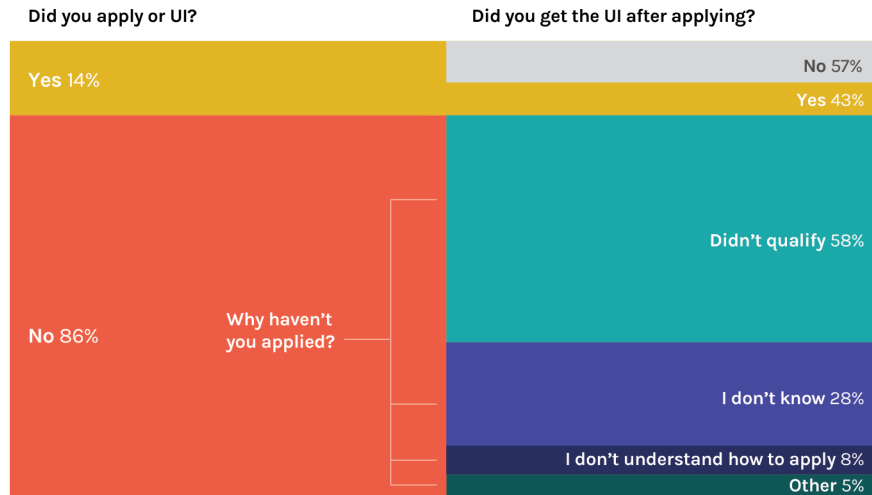
Respondents' lack of access to government benefits is showcased by the low proportion of respondents who applied to and received Unemployment Insurance. The vast majority of domestic workers did not apply for Unemployment Insurance, mostly because they did not believe they qualified (Figure 16).

Despite their staggering loss of jobs and work hours, by mid-June, only 14% of respondents had applied for Unemployment Insurance. Of the few respondents who applied, less than half received the insurance. Of those who did not apply, more than half said they knew they were not eligible, and nearly 3 in 10 said they did not know if they were eligible.

Most respondents were also left out of COVID-19 relief payments. By early September, less than a third of workers received the CARES Act \$1200 stimulus check (Figure 17). This is a considerably lower rate compared to recipients in the broad US population. According to the Urban Institute, by mid to late May, nearly 7 in 10 adults reported they had received the payment. It is also a significantly lower rate compared to Latino adults (64%) and Latino adults in families with noncitizens (54%)¹⁵

FIGURE 16

The vast majority of domestic workers did not apply for Unemployment Insurance, mostly because they did not believe they qualified

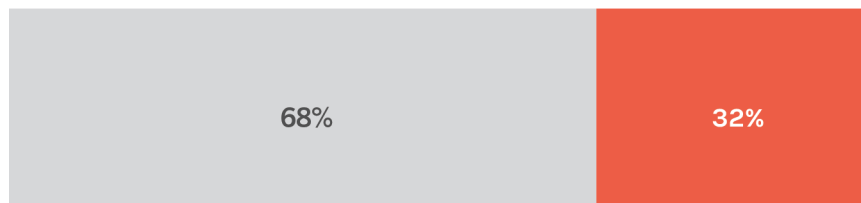


Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, June 19, 2020

FIGURE 17

Less than a third of workers received the CARES Act \$1200 stimulus check

■ Didn't receive ■ Received



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, September 14, 2020

Housing and food insecurity

Without work or access to benefits and relief, most surveyed domestic workers rapidly became housing and food insecure. 3 out of 4 of these respondents are the primary breadwinners in their household, and almost 9 out of 10 of them are mothers of young age or school aged children.

“I have not worked since March 17, my employers canceled because of the virus, and I stayed at home for 4 months out of fear. I was very scared, I am a single mother, I have a daughter of 13, I do not receive help from either the father or the government. I am very worried. The amount of debt for rent goes up.”

– ROSA | NEW YORK

More than 8 in 10 respondents rent their homes (Figure 18). By late March, 47% of respondents either did not have (4%) or were unsure if they would have (43%) a place to live in April. From April through September, for six consecutive months, more than half of workers were unable to pay their rent or mortgage (Figure 19).

FIGURE 18

More than 8 out of 10 respondents rent their homes

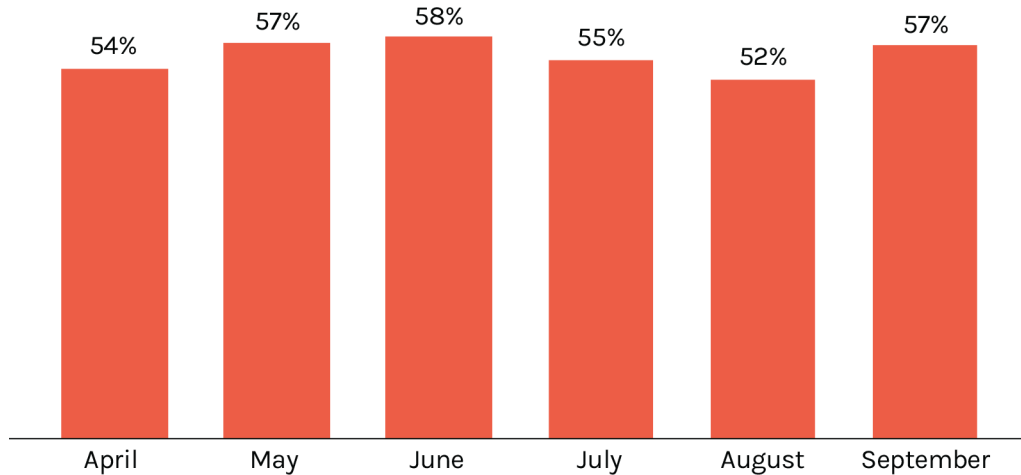
■ Rent ■ Own ■ Live with family ■ Other ■ Shelter



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, April 3, 2020

FIGURE 19

For six consecutive months, more than half of workers were unable to pay their rent or mortgage



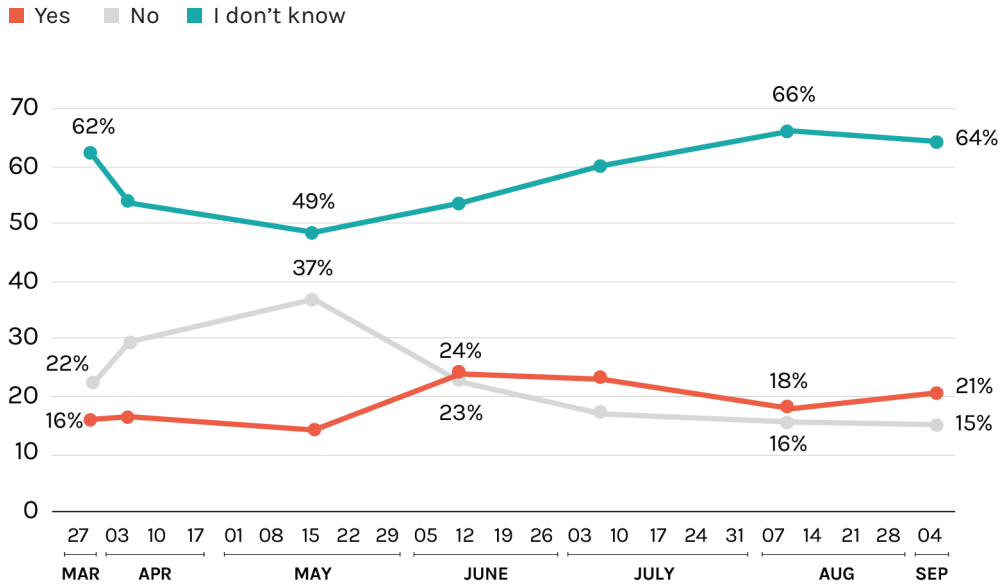
Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, April 3, May 8, June 5, July 2, August 7, and September 4, 2020

Most respondents were also food insecure throughout the pandemic. A growing share of workers are unsure about their ability to afford food in the next two weeks (Figure 20). In April, when we asked respondents about access to a food bank, fewer than 30% of respondents said they had a food bank nearby. Fourteen percent of respondents said they did not have a food bank nearby, and more than half of workers do not know if they have a food bank nearby (Figure 21).

FIGURE 20

A growing share of workers are unsure about their ability to afford food in the next two weeks

Percentage of workers who can afford food in the next two weeks

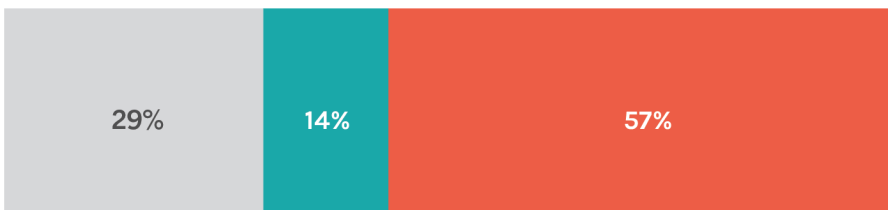


Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, March 27, April 3, May 8, June 5, July 2, August 7, September 4, 2020

FIGURE 21

More than half of workers do not know if they have a food bank nearby

Legend: Has food bank nearby (grey), No food bank nearby (teal), Does not know (red)



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, April 3, 2020

Mothers and Childcare during COVID-19

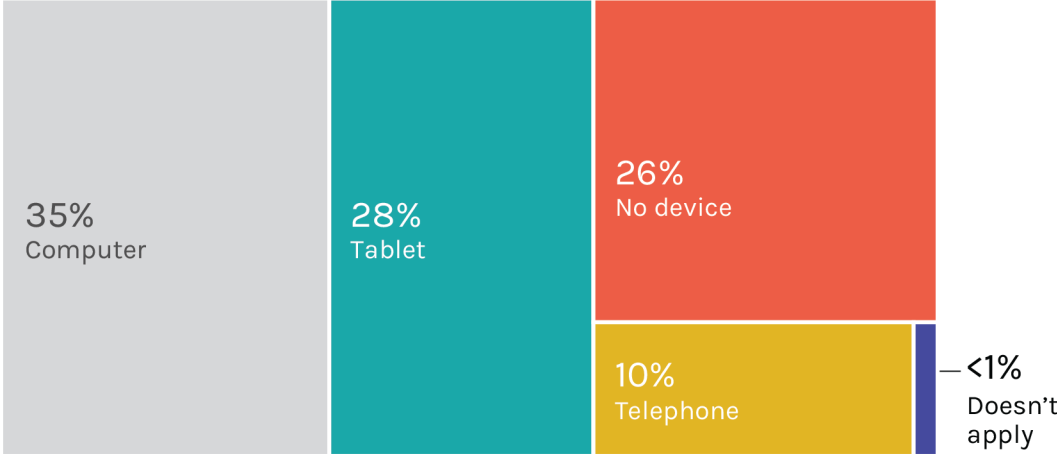
The COVID-19 recession has been termed a “shecession”¹⁶ due to its disproportionate impact on women. In addition to being hardest hit by job loss, the closings of in-person schools and child care centers brings an added burden to mothers and women who care for others. The COVID-19 crisis has forced domestic workers to choose between staying home to care for their children and prevent COVID-19 infection, and trying to find high-risk work in a slowing economy to be able to make ends meet.

Nearly 9 out of 10 respondents are mothers of young children, or of school-age children. In early August, 93% of respondent mothers with children 5 and under told us their childcare arrangements had changed since the pandemic began. As mentioned above, respondents chose access to childcare support to working parents as the top 2 priority for a COVID-19 relief package negotiation at the federal level.

In addition to navigating childcare, mothers now have to accommodate remote learning for school-aged children. This requires substantial resources that not everyone has access to. In late July, more than a quarter of workers lacked a device for their children’s remote learning. Ten percent had only their phones to assist children with remote learning (Figure 22).

FIGURE 22

More than a quarter of workers lack a device for their children’s remote learning



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, July 31y, 2020

Health and Safety at Work

Domestic workers are excluded from some core labor protections, including the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA).¹⁷ This lack of protection is especially concerning given the health risks of the pandemic. Given the lack of clear guidelines, domestic workers were left to negotiate workplace safety on their own. They often lacked Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and many of them do not have medical insurance or access to medical care.

Due to COVID-19, we all were advised by health experts to stay home and avoid indoor contact with individuals outside our own household. For domestic workers, who work in other people's homes, this meant either losing work completely—in most cases without an alternative source of income—or facing a risk of COVID-19 infection.

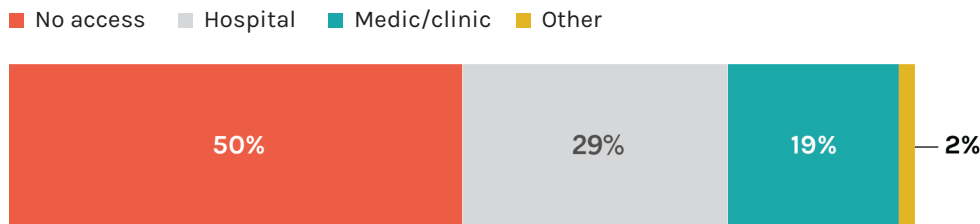
Respondents often did not have access to PPE. In early April, over 2 in 3 respondents did not have access to face masks. Even if they did have PPE, domestic workers still had to negotiate with employers to make sure their employers' behavior did not put the workers at risk. The power dynamic is usually shifted towards employers in these negotiations, given that domestic workers are isolated at work in other people's homes. This is especially true during an economic crisis, when workers have few job alternatives. In addition to this, immigrant workers are often reluctant to ask for anything that could put them at risk of retaliation from their employer.

By mid-September, 6 in 10 respondents had asked their employers to do something different to protect them from COVID-19 at work (e.g. for them to wear a facemask or keep physical distance).

In the event they became ill, half of workers do not have access to medical care (Figure 23). When we consulted workers on their priority for a COVID-19 relief package negotiation at the federal level, the top ranked choice was free COVID-19 testing and treatment for all those uninsured regardless of immigration status.

FIGURE 23

Half of workers do not have access to medical care



Source: NDWA Labs Weekly COVID-19 Survey, March 27, 2020

Conclusion

This report shares the results of our first six months of experimentation with adapting a Messenger chatbot into a national survey tool, and our findings on what Spanish-speaking house cleaners, nannies and homecare workers have experienced during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis.

Domestic workers are essential to our economy, yet they have been underrepresented in official economic data. This invisibility exacerbates the cycle whereby essential workers are excluded from relief, pathways to citizenship remain closed, and the people caring for homes and families are left unprotected and unable to make ends meet.

We hope this data helps bring to light the urgency of making domestic work jobs into good jobs. We must give domestic workers a real shot at economic security and opportunity. That means having policies to ensure that domestic workers are paid higher wages, have access to benefits like paid sick days, paid family and medical leave, health insurance, and are offered a path to legalization and citizenship.

We also hope that it demonstrates that the choice not to count workers in the informal economy is a choice. It is possible to develop tools to bring more of our country's essential workers into our month-to-month, and week-to-week, understanding of the economy. Our experience has shown that the tools that can expand that knowledge most effectively are ones that not only adapt technology in creative ways, but that begin with listening and caring.

Notes

¹ Economic Policy Institute (2020), Domestic Workers Chartbook <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the-demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/>

² When we use the term “immigrants,” we refer to foreign-born individuals, both documented and undocumented.

³ For ordinal variables, we define the median as the typical value. For categorical variables, the mode is chosen as the typical value.

⁴ Domestic workers, and particularly house cleaners, usually work for multiple employers.

⁵ In the surveys, we asked respondents to recall several characteristics of their work for a typical week before the COVID-19 pandemic started. These include: jobs per week, hours worked, weekly income, and weekly income in their best week. Comparisons to ‘before COVID-19’ use these questions as baselines.

⁶ We constructed an underemployment indicator to show when a worker reported a lower range of jobs in a given week, compared to their baseline range of jobs before the pandemic. We constructed a similar indicator using respondents’ weekly hours worked. The majority of respondents have been underemployed by both measures every week with available data.

⁷ Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2020, Employment Situation Summary <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.toc.htm>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ The survey data in this report does not tell us how many respondents were available to work and actively looking for jobs. These are two pieces of information which are included in the official unemployment rate calculations by BLS. Since completing data collection for this report, NDWA Labs has begun experimenting with additional survey questions to measure availability to work among domestic worker respondents.

¹⁰ Recent discussions point to a potential underestimation of the true unemployment rates in official statistics. Underestimation is likely greater for women, immigrants, Asians, and people without a bachelor’s degree. Adjusted unemployment rates correcting for such errors could be up to 5 points higher than the numbers reported

by BLS. For Latino and foreign-born adults, this would mean an unemployment rate of 20% or higher in May 2020. See Kochhar Rakesh, 2020, Unemployment is higher than officially recorded, more so for women and certain other groups <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/30/unemployment-rate-is-higher-than-officially-recorded-more-so-for-women-and-certain-other-groups/>

¹¹ Economic Policy Institute (2020), Domestic Worker Chartbook <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the-demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/> For a longer discussion of domestic workers and retirement benefits see Shayna Strom, The Century Foundation (2017) “Toward a More Secure Retirement for Domestic Workers.” <https://tcf.org/content/report/toward-a-more-secure-retirement-for-domestic-workers/>

¹² Ibid

¹³ When domestic workers join the chatbot they are asked their typical hourly wage. We constructed an indicator for whether a worker reported a lower range of hourly income in a given week, compared to their baseline hourly wage range, reported when they first subscribed to our messaging. The majority of respondents have earned a lower hourly wage every week since we added the hourly wage question in early July.

¹⁴ The remaining 4% of workers responded “Other reason” when asked how their employers reduced their pay.

¹⁵ Urban Institute (2020), Who Did Not Get the Economic Impact Payments by Mid-to-Late May, and Why? https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102565/who-did-not-get-the-economic-impact-payments-by-mid-to-late-may-and-why_1.pdf

¹⁶ This term was first used by C. Nicole Mason, president and chief executive of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

¹⁷ Economic Policy Institute (2020), Domestic Workers Chartbook <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the-demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/>

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About National Domestic Workers Alliance & NDWA Labs

The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) is the nation's leading voice for dignity and fairness for the millions of domestic workers in the United States.

Founded in 2007, NDWA works for respect, recognition, and inclusion in labor protections for domestic workers, the majority of whom are immigrants and women of color.

NDWA is powered by over 70 affiliate organizations and local chapters and by tens of thousands of members. Domestic workers in all 50 states can join NDWA and gain access to member benefits, connection with other workers, and opportunities to get involved in the domestic worker movement.

NDWA Labs is the innovation arm of NDWA. NDWA Labs experiments with the ways technology can organize domestic workers and transform domestic work jobs into good jobs by bringing respect, living wages, and benefits to an invisible, undervalued, and vulnerable part of the economy.

**NDWA
LABS**

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