

# Low-Wage Workers Speak Out:

The Emerging Future of Work Is Not  
Improving Their Jobs

Shriver  
Center on  
Poverty  
Law



# Low-Wage Work Is a Racial Justice Issue



LATINO MEN

*make up*

**10%**

OF EMPLOYED WORKERS

*but make up*

**61%**

OF DRYWALL INSTALLERS,  
CEILING TILE INSTALLERS,  
AND TAPERS

*where they earn on average*

**\$32,091/year**



LATINA WOMEN

*make up*

**7%**

OF EMPLOYED WORKERS

*but make up*

**42%**

OF MAIDS  
AND  
HOUSECLEANERS

*where they earn on average*

**\$18,919/year**

Although **40%** of the Chicago metro area's population is Black or Latinx, Black and Latino/a/x workers receive **85%** of the area's blue-collar temp work assignments.



#### BLACK WOMEN

*make up*

**6%**

#### OF EMPLOYED WORKERS

*but make up*

**32%**

#### OF HOME HEALTH AIDES

*where they earn on average*

**\$23,803/year**



#### BLACK MEN

*make up*

**6%**

#### OF EMPLOYED WORKERS

*but make up*

**15%**

#### OF LABORERS AND FREIGHT, STOCK, AND MATERIAL MOVERS,

*where they earn on average*

**\$27,364/year**



# **Why we wrote this report**

## **Fundamental shifts in the labor market over the past 25 years have changed the way that many of us work**

These shifts include increased use of technology to hire, schedule, and manage workers and significant growth in part-time, gig, or temporary work. But the lowest income workers have failed to see significant gains from these changes.

Most low-wage workers continue to struggle with lack of benefits, few health and safety protections, and income and job security. Improving the working conditions of the lowest paid workers would significantly improve the financial stability and economic mobility of workers of color.

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“Government should do more to ensure that everyone who pays taxes, including immigrants like myself, have access to essential resources and protections on the job.”  
—Diego, a day laborer

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We interviewed over 30 low-wage workers—including nannies, day laborers, rideshare workers, and warehouse workers—to learn more about their workplace concerns and experiences.

**This paper:**

- lifts up the voices of low-wage workers in Illinois to raise awareness of the challenges facing them, and
- proposes policy solutions designed to ensure that all workers have “good jobs” that enable them to take care of themselves and their families.

Visit [povertylaw.org/future-of-work](https://povertylaw.org/future-of-work) for the full report.



# **What Workers Told Us: Wages**

## **Illinois's minimum wage is insufficient to meet a family's basic needs**

The living wage for a single adult supporting two children in the Chicago metropolitan area is \$44 per hour. None of the workers we spoke with earns a living wage.

## **Several hundred thousand Illinois workers do not receive even a minimum wage**

Tipped employees, primarily women working in restaurants and bars, can earn as little as \$7.20 per hour, or 60% of the full minimum wage.

## **Low wages are compounded by other issues that affect workers' overall earnings**

Some workers cannot get full-time hours even if they want them; others are compelled to work hours without pay, under pressure from the individuals they work for; still others must pay a significant amount to cover work-related costs, all of which comes out of their salary.

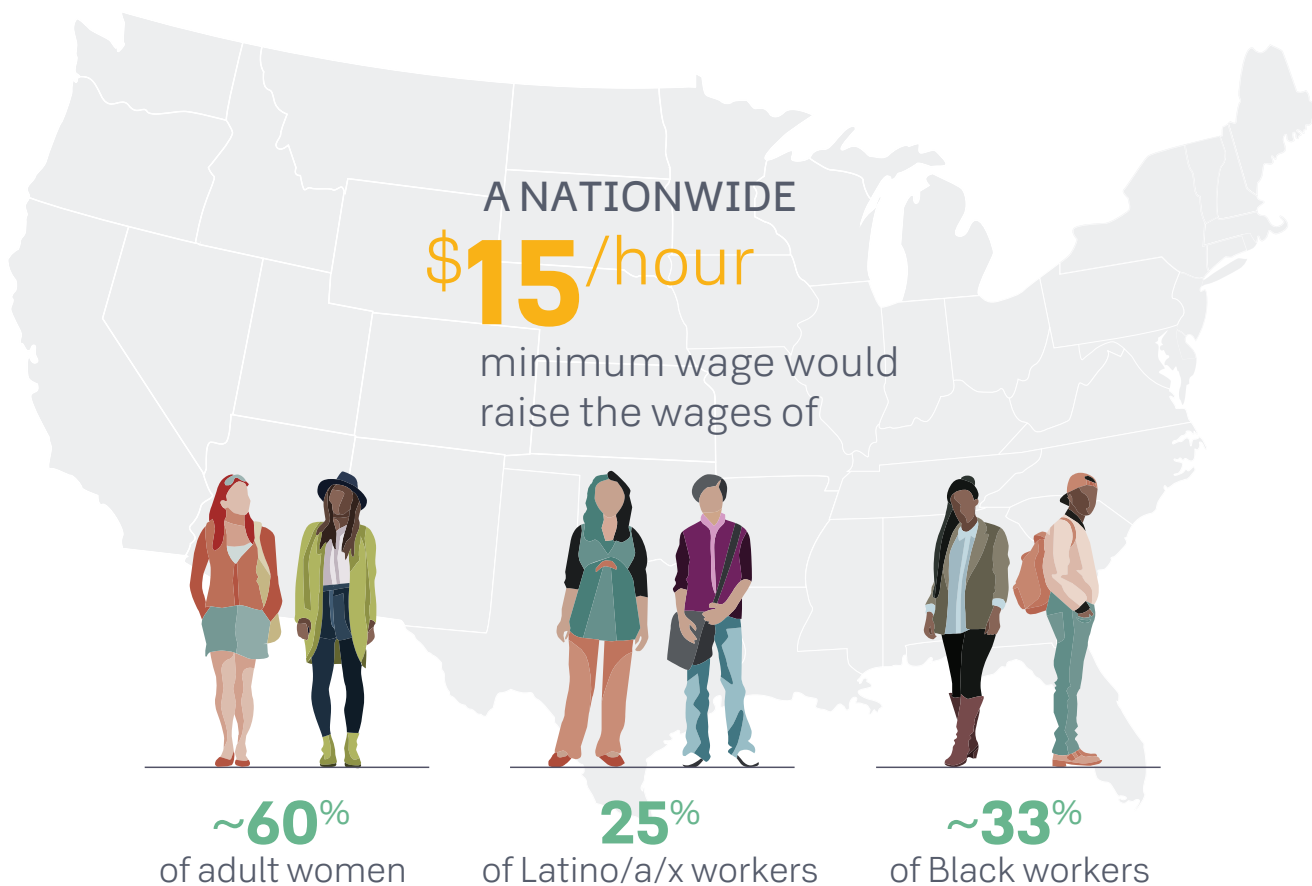
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“The cost of gas has increased, and it’s just a fact, they’re taking more and more out of our pockets and putting it into the company’s pockets, at a time when we need it the most. It’s just making it difficult for us to survive.”

—Martín, a rideshare driver

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## Low Wages Disproportionately Affect People of Color







# **What Workers Told Us: Benefits**

**Benefits are crucial to allow workers to both perform their jobs effectively and take care of themselves and their families**

Necessary benefits include sick and vacation leave, paid time off for longer term family and medical leave, health insurance, and retirement benefits. Workers must also be able to receive compensation for injuries sustained on the job.

**Low-wage workers are unlikely to receive needed benefits without a mandate that they be provided**

Indeed, 1.5 million workers in Illinois classified as employees do not have access to even one day of sick leave.



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“I’m a single mom of three kids, one of whom has special needs. I have to take them to school, the doctor, and therapy appointments. My employers have often been unwilling to accommodate my schedule.”

—Alicia, a nail technician

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BLACK WOMEN SUFFER

**\$3.9 billion**  
each year

in lost wages while on leave



# **What Workers Told Us: Health and Safety**

## **Low-wage workers commonly face health and safety issues on the job**

More than 2.8 million non-fatal occupational injuries and illnesses were reported by U.S. employers in 2019. Workers we spoke to raised health and safety concerns such as exposure to toxic cleaning supplies in poorly ventilated spaces, or not being able to take lunch or rest breaks without risk of being fired.

## **The COVID-19 pandemic made work more dangerous for many low-wage workers**

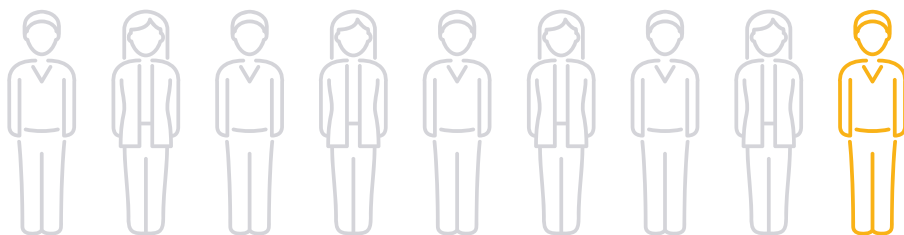
This risk has been disproportionately borne by workers of color, who are overrepresented in frontline “essential” work settings. Yet, over two years since the pandemic began, there is still no federal enforceable standard to protect workers from COVID-19 in the workplace.

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“When you go into work, you’re there to do a job, and you’re getting paid to do that job, but you are more than just that packer, you’re more than just that receiver, you are somebody’s mother, father, you are somebody’s brother or sister.”

—Teddy, a warehouse worker

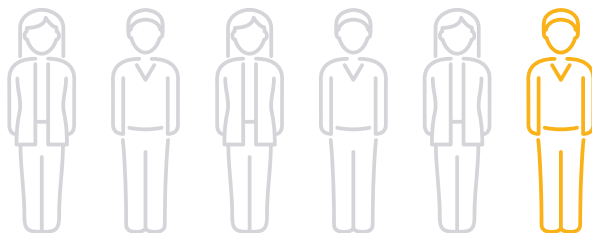
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Black workers make up **1 in 9** workers overall but **1 in 6** frontline “essential” workers who are more likely to be exposed to COVID-19

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# **What Workers Told Us: Income and Job Security**

## **Low-wage workers often feel at risk in their workplaces**

At-will employment grants employers inordinate control over workers' livelihoods, undermines their bargaining power and ability to speak out at work, and perpetuates long-standing racial and gender inequities. Further, at-will firings reinforce systemic racism in the workplace.

## **Many workers are not eligible for unemployment insurance because they are considered independent contractors or do not work a full-time job for one employer**

Black and Latino/a/x workers are also overrepresented in app-based jobs, where they are frequently misclassified as independent contractors. Moreover, many workers are ineligible due to their immigration status, which reinforces racial inequity.

## Workers often accept working conditions that they know are bad because speaking up comes at too great a cost

A third of Illinois workers say that fear of being fired or disciplined prevents them from raising workplace health and safety concerns to their employer, and more than two in three workers report they or a co-worker have worked when sick or injured to avoid being fired.

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“As long as these companies are allowed to exploit us, they will continue to do so.” —Art, a delivery driver

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## Over the last 30 years

Unemployed black workers were



**24%** less likely to receive unemployment benefits than their white counterparts



# **Key Policy Recommendations**

**Illinois policymakers can shape the future of work to increase racial equity and protect low-wage workers from harm. Based on our conversations with workers, Illinois should:**



## **Provide paid time off for all Illinois workers**

All workers deserve a guaranteed minimum of paid vacation and sick days.



## **Ensure that all workers have access to paid family and medical leave**

At some point in their working lives, nearly all workers will need to take significant time off to care for themselves or a family member.



### **Provide all workers with portable benefits**

Portable benefits are connected to an individual worker, rather than a particular employer, so they can be taken from job to job without interruption in coverage or loss of funding.



### **Implement a permanent guaranteed income program in Illinois**

A baseline guaranteed income would ensure financial security for all Illinoisans, forcing fewer workers to stay in bad jobs to make ends meet.



### **Require “just cause” to terminate a worker**

Employers should be required to have a reason to fire a worker and to provide severance pay to terminated workers.

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See the full list of recommendations at  
**[povertylaw.org/future-of-work](https://povertylaw.org/future-of-work)**





# **Thank you to our partners**

**The following worker centers helped us  
organize focus groups of low-wage workers  
across Illinois, whose stories we gathered  
for this white paper.**

- Alliance of Filipinos for Immigrant Rights and Empowerment (AFIRE)
- Arise Chicago
- Chicago Workers Collaborative
- Latino Union of Chicago
- The People's Lobby
- Warehouse Workers for Justice

The Shriver Center on Poverty Law fights for economic and racial justice. Over our 50-year history, we have secured hundreds of victories with and for people living in poverty in Illinois and across the country. Today, we litigate, shape policy, and train and convene multi-state networks of lawyers, community leaders, and activists nationwide. Together, we are building a future where all people have equal dignity, respect, and power under the law.

Join the fight at [povertylaw.org](https://povertylaw.org)



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