

160 DAYS \$0 PANDEMIC RELIEF

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE LATINX IMMIGRANT WORKFORCE TO STATEN ISLAND'S ECONOMY BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC



Cornell University, ILR Worker Institute, La Colmena Community Job Center
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The Contribution of the Latinx Immigrant Workforce to Staten Island's economy before and during the pandemic.

A report by The Worker Institute at Cornell ILR and
La Colmena Staten Island Community Job Center

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HOME & WORK
TWO WORDS THAT SHOULD NEVER
BE IN THE SAME SENTENCE

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Executive summary

La Colmena

New York City workers and communities have been weathering the impacts of a public health and economic crisis of unprecedented magnitude in U.S. history within the last 100 years. This report focuses on the experiences of predominantly Latinx undocumented immigrant workers in the County of Richmond, also known as Staten Island. The workers who were surveyed already faced precarious working conditions prior to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

A range of structural socio-economic factors contribute to the inequities behind the disproportionate negative impacts of the pandemic on people of color and immigrants in Staten Island. For working-class immigrants, a key factor is their concentration in low-wage sectors of the economy, and under non-standard work arrangements that largely exclude them from the legal protections that regular employees enjoy. These workers are also exposed to safety hazards in industries with high injury rates such as construction, and lack adequate access to health care.

Workers also report that although they experienced an increase in discriminatory incidents in and outside their workplaces, legal remedies remain scarce.

Key findings include:

- Despite their economic and social vulnerabilities, working-class immigrant workers continued to play a crucial role in sustaining the economy and vibrancy of Staten Island communities as the COVID-19 pandemic developed. They spend more than 91% of their income on housing and basic consumer goods, serving an essential source of revenue for local businesses. Through consumption expenditures, tax contributions, and cultural heritage and creativity, immigrant Staten Islanders have revitalized business districts and communities that were previously economically depressed.
- 98% of workers did not qualify for any form of pandemic relief or unemployment benefits. A study by the Fiscal Policy Institute found that undocumented immigrants contribute \$40 billion to New York State's GDP.¹ 75% didn't work for an average of 120, 160 days, or they are still unemployed, they have accumulated 4-6 months of debt in rent. La Colmena Community Job Center remained open to address the survival needs of the families. More funding for Worker Centers is needed.
- Staten Island undocumented immigrant workers labor in precarious face-to-face industries. 48% of workers hold temporary jobs, and 45% provide childcare services and perform maintenance work in private homes in Staten Island. The lack of formal employment contracts and job security due to their immigration status left workers more vulnerable to job losses at the onset of the pandemic. Comprehensive immigration reform

[6] The Contribution of the Latinx Immigrant Workforce to Staten Island's economy before and during the pandemic

and protections for undocumented workers to ensure their safety during NY State's reopening phase are more necessary than ever before.

- 45.3% of workers surveyed by La Colmena indicated they worked for individual persons in private homes. Workers who are temporary, self-employed (likely misclassified as independent contractors.), or work for individuals, fall within the category of non-standard workers, and may lack basic labor and employment protections. They may be excluded from coverage under unemployment insurance, health insurance, family leave, sick leave, and workers compensation laws.
- Immigrant workers may be unable to form a union or sue their employer for harassment or discrimination in the workplace, which many survey respondents reported having experienced. Workers classified as independent contractors and temporary domestic workers in New York State lack coverage under wage and hour, and workplace safety laws. Nearly two in three (65.7%) foreign-born workers in Staten Island work in essential industries. Nine of the ten industries in Staten Island with the highest number of immigrant workers are considered essential industries. Given that these frontline immigrant workers are overrepresented in essential industries such as healthcare, food services, home healthcare, and transportation networks where remote work arrangements are not feasible, they may be at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19.
- The exploitative working conditions that immigrant workers experienced prior to the COVID-19 crisis, including high instances of wage theft and discrimination, and a lack of formal work contracts, workplace protections, and paid sick leave, will persist and deepen during the reopening plan in the absence of policy changes, pandemic relief, and state-wide initiatives that would adequately address these issues.
- 88% of surveyed workers were unemployed for 3 months, losing their jobs between February and the beginning of May. The vast majority of these workers (97.5%) did not qualify for unemployment benefits, and did not receive government stimulus checks under the CARES Act (96.4%).
- Key measures must be taken to ensure the safety of immigrant workers and the wellbeing of their families and communities. Such measures include legalization of status, access to health care, ensuring employers provide protective equipment, access to government relief programs, and improved labor and employment protections.

This report provides the first analysis of the working and living conditions of undocumented working class Latinx immigrants in Staten Island, identifying their unique vulnerabilities, and highlighting their efforts to engage in mutual aid-support systems to weather the crisis. The research presented in the report results from the joint efforts of The Worker Institute and La Colmena Community Job Center. La Colmena is a community-based organization working to empower day laborers, domestic workers, and other low-wage immigrant workers in Staten Island through educational, cultural, and economic development efforts. The findings of this report are based on worker surveys conducted by La Colmena Community Job Center organizers before 2018 and after May/June 2020, the onset of the COVID crisis. The Worker Institute researchers provided technical assistance, analyzed survey and census data, and co-authored the report with La Colmena.



Introduction

Over the past six years, Staten Island represented in many respects a microcosm of the political and social climate of the United States. It was the only New York City borough where Donald Trump won the majority of votes in the 2016 presidential election. In addition, it became the epicenter of New York's racial injustice crisis with the killing of Eric Garner by an NYPD officer in 2014. Nonetheless, this largely white and politically conservative borough is home to more than 110,000 immigrants (23.2% of the island's population), many of whom are among the 124,000 Staten Islanders who are people of color.

The immigrant communities of Staten Island contribute to the sustainability and vibrancy of the island's economy. Staten Island's foreign-born population was the fastest growing minority population in the city, with a 41 percent increase in immigrants over 15 years (2015). In the case of undocumented immigrants, a study by the Fiscal Policy Institute found that they contribute with \$40 Billion to New York State's GDP.² Nonetheless, people of color in Staten Island like many immigrants from Latin America endure the consequences of structural economic and racial inequality. As in the rest of New York and the country, this persistent inequality resulted in the disproportionate health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Staten Island's low-income and non-white communities. With the aggravation that there is no Public Hospital in Staten island.

Like the rest of the city, Staten Island has endured extreme economic impacts due to Covid-19 and the shutdown of businesses. The April 2020 employment rate in Staten Island was 14.0%, three percent points higher than that of Manhattan. As of the week of May 23, 55,876 unemployment claims have been filed in Richmond county. However, this data may

We have paid taxes for 17 years, and we are left out of any government help, also my 2-year-old citizen granddaughter cannot receive help. We have been picking up La Colmena groceries. We have been helping our neighbors. As immigrant workers we are more exposed to the virus because we don't have the choice to stay home, we need to bring food to the table. I don't discriminate against whom we help, I think we are all brothers and we feel the same pain. If I can be useful to save a life, this is how I see my work. We are all the same.

Ana, domestic worker

underestimate the impacts on immigrant workers in Staten Island, particularly undocumented immigrants, who have been left out from federal relief programs created for the pandemic such as stimulus checks, pandemic unemployment assistance, and the paycheck protection program.³

Because their employment is largely contingent and in low wage sectors, Staten Island's low-wage immigrant workers are not only vulnerable to losing employment during the crisis, but lack the basic safety and health protections they need to abate risks of infection. The data analyzed in this report indicates that immigrant workers in low-wage sectors would continue to be vulnerable during the pandemic and reopening of the economy, as their employers do not always provide the required personal protective equipment, and because they lack access to health care.

Most of these vulnerable workers labor in occupations where working from home is rarely an option.⁴ Additionally, many immigrant workers are essential workers. A previous national study found that immigrant workers are over-represented in occupations that are critical in the fight against the pandemic, including medical personnel, home health aides, and retail store pharmacists.⁵ According to data from the U.S. Census, nearly two in three (65.7%) foreign-born workers in Staten Island work in essential industries.⁶

Most disturbingly, high rates of uninsured residents in Staten Island means that workers may be unable to obtain proper medical care if they get sick, increasing the long-term health impacts of COVID-19. Immigrant workers may also face discrimination when accessing health care and may not receive the necessary treatments.⁷ Among all the measures that the Trump administration has pursued to constrain legal immigration, there is the “public charge rule,” which forces citizenship applicants to disclose their use of public benefits to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (“USCIS”) Immigrants who hope to become U.S. citizens may be reluctant to seek public benefits during the COVID-19 crisis out of fear that such services could have a negative impact on their applications. Although the USCIS has issued guidance that applicants’ use of public benefits will not be considered in the adjudication of their applications in response to an injunction issued by the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, citizenship applicants may nonetheless feel nervous about accessing essential services. Immigrants are also sometimes afraid of attending medical appointments for fear of deportation.

The goal of this report is to shed light on the unique vulnerabilities and contributions of Staten Island’s undocumented immigrant workers, which became more visible and exacerbated during the COVID crisis. With the re-opening of New York State’s economy, workers are going back to work but remain unprotected as they were before the pandemic.

This study explored three main questions:

- What were the immigrant workers and communities’ economical situation and contributions before the COVID crisis?
- How has the pandemic affected the workers economy and health and how will they persist during reopening?
- What policy changes are needed to address the inequities underlying these vulnerabilities during re-opening and in the long run?

Additionally, this report examines the role of the worker center La Colmena in providing relief to Staten Island’s immigrant workers families, and empowering them to develop mutual aid and support systems.

According to data from the U.S. Census, nearly two in three (65.7%) foreign-born workers in Staten Island work in essential industries



Methodology

In order to address the above research questions, this study used survey data collected by La Colmena Community Job Center before and after the onset of the pandemic, as well as tabulations of data from the American Community Survey, and the US and NYS Labor Departments. These data sources served as a baseline to observe the impacts of the pandemic on a range of socio-economic variables. The pre-COVID participatory action research and survey was conducted by La Colmena in 2018, with technical support from the Worker Institute. This survey used participatory action research and convenience and snowballing techniques. As organizers surveyed La Colmena members, who in their turn referred

potential respondents from their own networks. The total number of responses for this survey was 300. The second round of worker surveys was conducted by La Colmena between May 26 and June 6, 2020 as part of its emergency relief efforts, including more than 700 respondents. This survey also involved a convenience sampling technique. Additionally, this study incorporates qualitative data that brings workers and community leaders' perspectives to bear on the key issues. All the worker quotes in this report originate from interviews conducted between March 26 and June 10, 2020. All worker data has been anonymized.



Maria Abeja, a community leader

**“Without community, there is no liberation.”
—Audre Lorde**

On March 7th, Maria received a text message saying, “I think it’s better if you stay at home.” This message came from one of her weekly employers. One by one, all of her employers cancelled work for her.

Maria Abeja is a community leader and member of La Colmena Community Job Center in Staten Island. She is a founding board member and the current chair. She also helped found the Love and Learn Childcare cooperative. She lives in Staten Island with her family, including her husband, sons, and daughter-in-law, who all lost their jobs the same week as Maria. The family also helps her granddaughter in Mexico to complete studies to become a doctor. Maria’s family migrated to the U.S. from Mexico 17 years ago.

They have worked jobs in construction, restaurant, domestic work, and garment work. They have been paying their taxes for the past 17 years, but are still not eligible for any government help—not even for their American granddaughter. Immigrants’ families have been left out of all the government pandemic relief programs. Despite being a hard working family, they do not qualify for unemployment insurance. Nonetheless, this situation has not stopped Maria from immediately starting to sew masks for essential and immigrant workers in her community, using seed funds from MakerSpace SI and La Colmena. Maria

and a group of women, part of the Mujeres Liderando committee at La Colmena, begin sewing at 7 am each day, and do not stop working until 1 am. María Abeja is always thinking about building community and creating mutual aid circles with other workers. She runs Zoom meetings with a domestic worker group at Mt. Carmel Church every other Thursday, sharing safety tips on how to return to work. She strategizes with Love and Learn Childcare Cooperative on how co-op members can protect themselves and their loved ones.

Every Wednesday, while the line to get the food pantry starts going around the corner, on the second floor of La Colmena, the mask-making women prepare the orders, exchange patterns and teach each other, while keeping physical distance. They have fabricated over two thousand masks already, giving them away to essential workers and recently making some income from sales. These women leaders were the same organizers who delivered the baseline survey for this study.

Who is going to do the deep cleaning, the heavy lifting when the city reopens? “The immigrant women, the immigrant workers,” asserts Yesenia Mata, La Colmena Executive Director. Immigrants are essential.

Profile of immigrant Staten Islanders

Although Staten Island's population is predominantly White (74% of total of 476,143), a large population of non-white residents and immigrants live in the island. More than ten percent of the population is Black, 8.6% is Asian, and 18.4% identifies as Latinx. Immigrants (or the foreign born) represent 23.2% of the island's population (or almost one out of four Staten Islanders).

Much of this report focuses on Staten Island's Community Board 1, the location of La Colmena, which includes the areas of Port Richmond, Stapleton, and Mariner's Harbor. This district has the largest concentration of immigrants at 25.3% of all its residents. This district also shows greater racial and ethnic diversity with Whites representing 54.2% of the population, Blacks 23.5%, Latinxs 29.8%, and Asians 8.6%.

Immigrant workers in Staten Island labor in a variety of industries and occupations, some of which have predominantly immigrant workforces. Major industries with more than 50% foreign-born workers include services to building and dwellings (63.3%), taxis and limousines (63.3%), and home healthcare (56.2%). The construction industry (42.1%) and skilled nursing facilities (42.0%) also employ a large percentage of immigrant workers. In terms of occupations, house cleaners (74.9%), nursing assistant (53.2%), personal care aides (53.2%) and construction laborers (52.2%) are major occupations with high concentrations of foreign-born workers. This data indicates that many professions and industries in Staten Island are segregated by race and national origin, with foreign-born workers concentrated in industries with low pay and precarious work arrangements. Additionally, the industries and occupations in which immigrant workers, and particularly the undocumented,

concentrate require face-to-face work, Staten Island Immigrant population grew 40% in the last 15 years.

Profile of La Colmena Day Labor member

Most of La Colmena members are day laborers. Day labor is work done where the worker is hired and paid one day at a time, with no promise that more work will be available in the future. It is a form of contingent work. A day laborer could work in construction, moving, landscaping, and cleaning. Since the job is one day a time, they could perform different jobs. Some of them are not able to get jobs for all the days of the week. 75% of La Colmena members work in Staten Island, 48% work in private homes as gardeners, cleaners, nannies, movers, painters or home improvement workers.

La Colmena also functions as a hiring site for workers in general providing a fair contract. There is a corner one block from the centers where workers wait to be picked up by contractors or private home owners to be hired. La Colmena also organized domestic workers and incubated a nanny cooperative, with a fair contract for their jobs. Day laborers are almost always misclassified as independent contractors, often with no paperwork and no withholding for taxes or benefits, although they should be classified as employees.

23.2% of the Staten Islanders are immigrants

Figure 1.1: Staten Island Immigrant Workers by Occupation

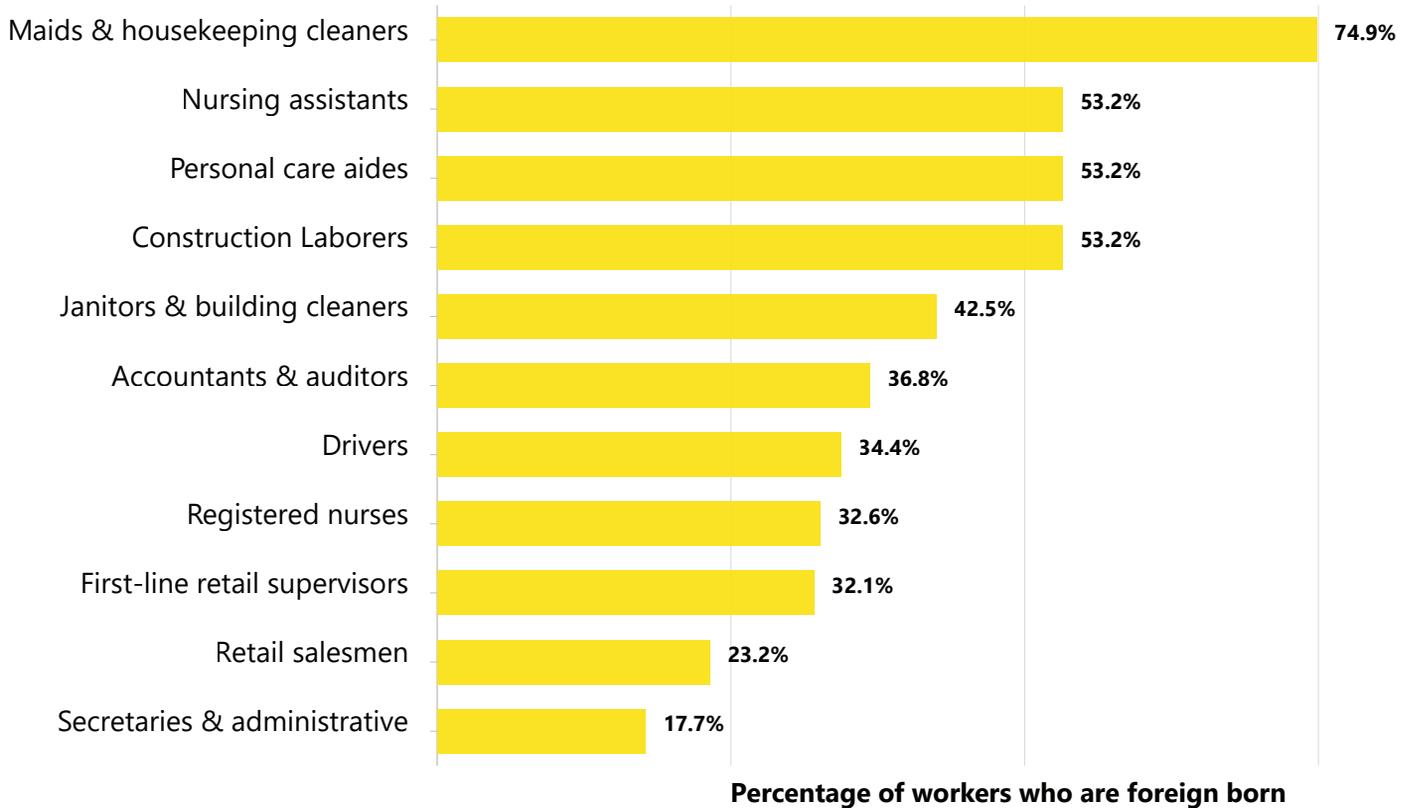
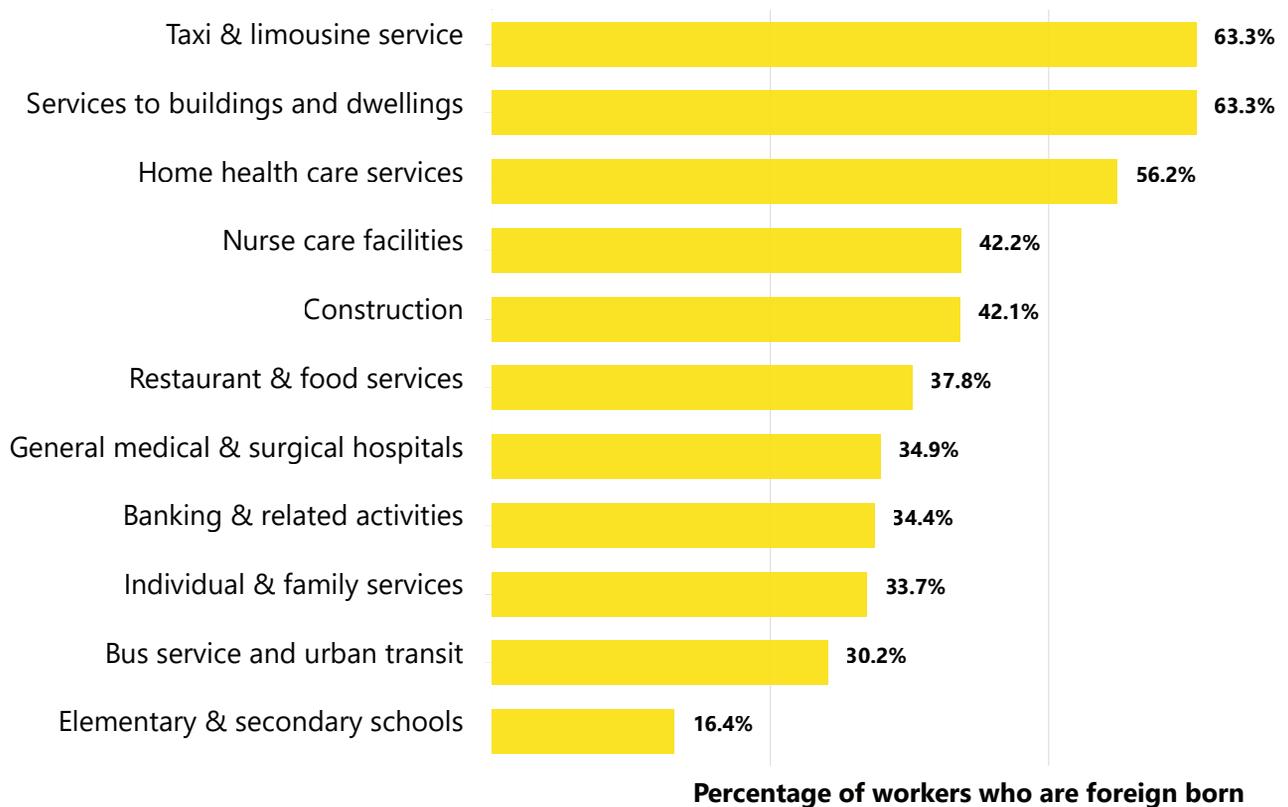
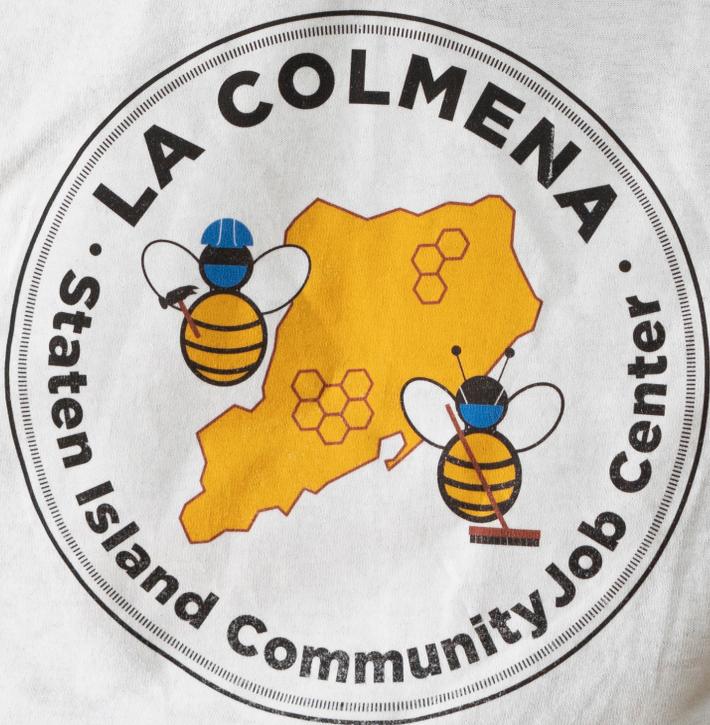


Figure 1.2: Staten Island Immigrant Workers by Industry



Source: American Community Survey, 2014-2018



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La Colmena’s pre-Covid survey: Profile of respondents

Over a period of three months in 2018, La Colmena conducted a PAR process and survey of the economy and working conditions of undocumented Latinx immigrant workers in Staten Island. This survey provided a deeper look than the census data, particularly for the immigrant population that government agencies and other institutions might consider to be hard to reach.

This section offers a profile of this survey’s respondents. More than three out of four workers surveyed (77.4%) were between the ages of 30 years and 59 years. Only 4.0% of workers were 60 years and older, while 18.6% were 29 years and younger. The gender distribution showed a fairly even division with 50.3% male, 47.9% female, and 1.5% non-binary workers (0.3% refused to answer).

Nearly every worker, 98.1% of workers surveyed, were foreign born, and 80% were born in the country of Mexico. Census data indicates that Mexicans are the largest national group among immigrants in Staten Island (see Table Foreign Born by Place of Birth). Many other surveyed workers were born in Latin America including Guatemala (5.6%), Colombia (3.1%), and Ecuador (3.1%).

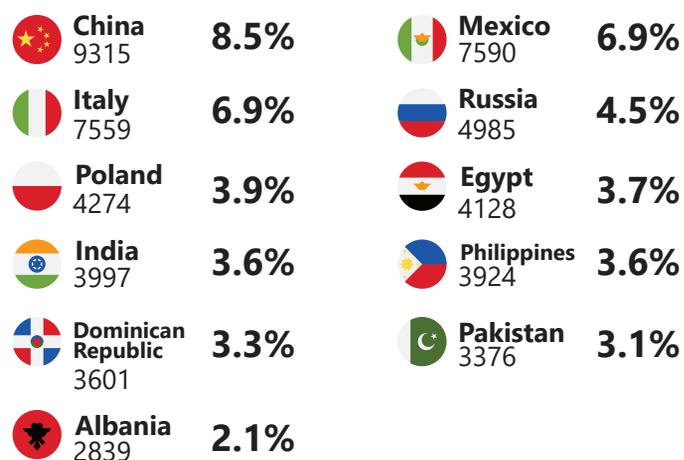


Figure 1.3: Country of Origin
Source: American Community Survey, 2014-2018

The vast majority of workers (93.0%) lived in Staten Island. A slightly smaller percentage, 76.8% of respondents, worked in Staten Island, indicating a number of workers travelled outside the Borough for their jobs. Other common locations of work included Brooklyn (8.9%), Manhattan (6.9%), and New Jersey (4.0%).

80% of surveyed workers were born in Mexico

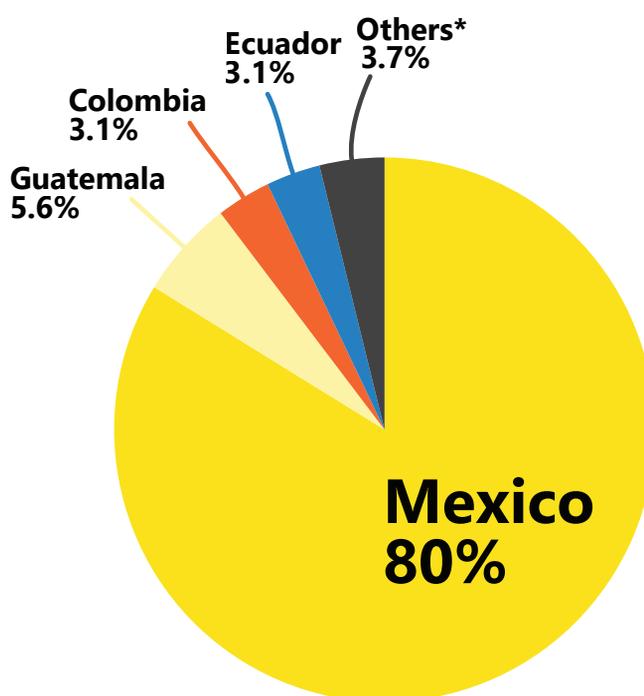


Figure 1.4: Foreign born by place of birth
Pre-Covid Survey 2018

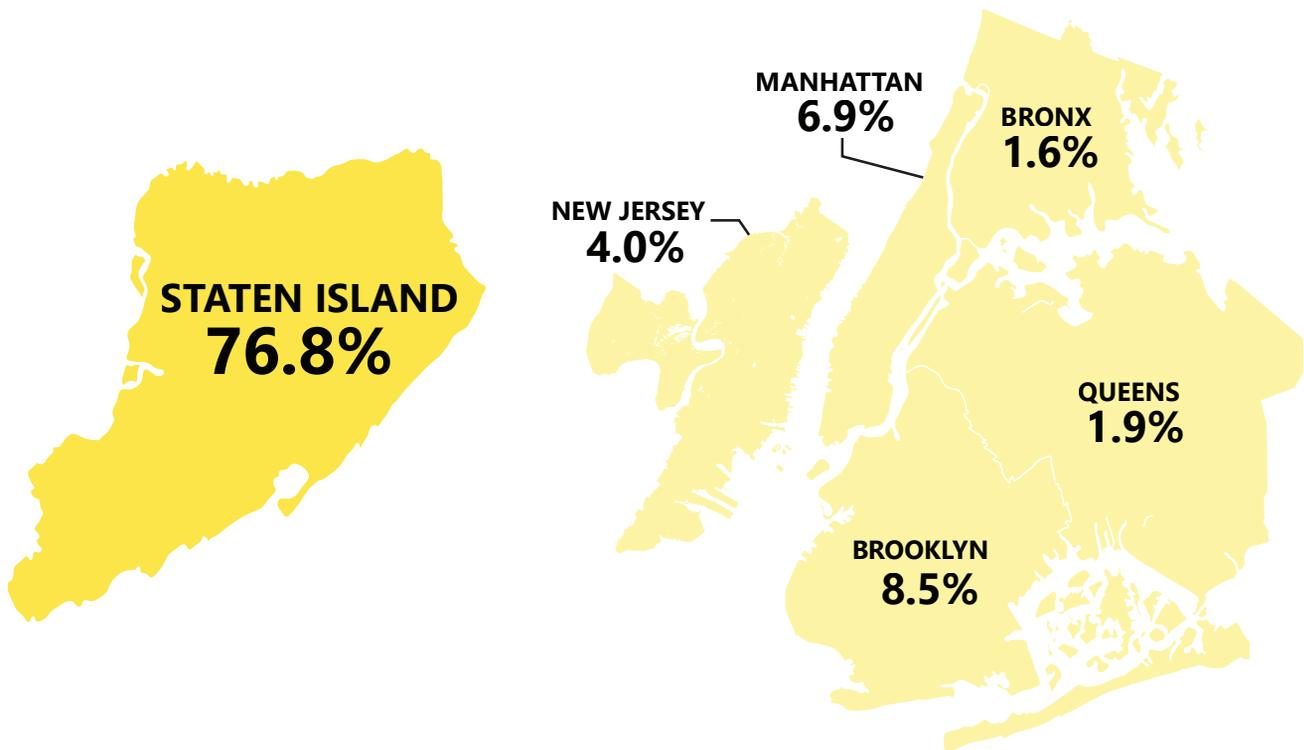


Figure 1.5 Location of work
Source: Pre-Covid Survey

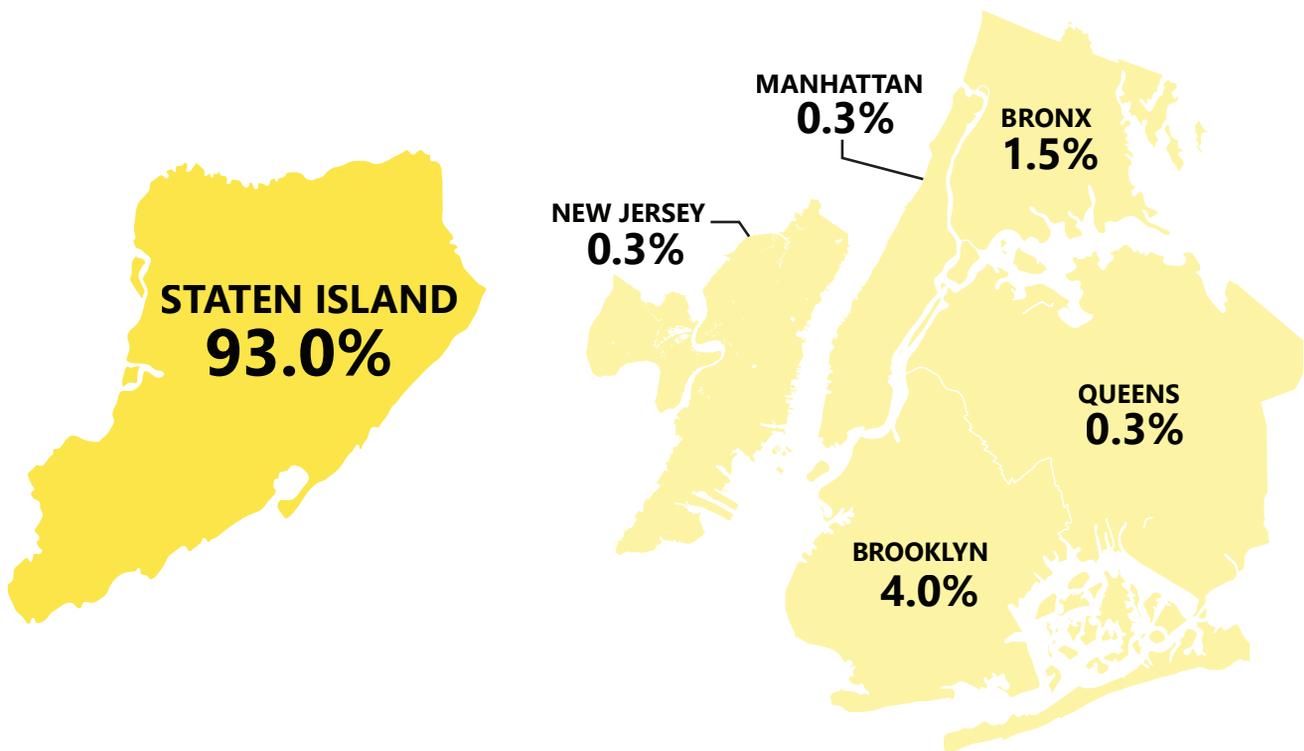


Figure 1.6 Location of home residence
Source: Pre-Covid Survey

Respondents worked in a variety of occupations, sometimes across industries, although concentrated in manual and technical labor and the service industry. Nearly one in four (24.2%) workers worked in construction, while almost one in five (17.7%) worked as domestic workers. Service occupations such as restaurants (9.3%), retail (9.0%) and nail salons (5.5%) represented a significant part of the workforce surveyed. Other types of industries with a smaller percentage of respondents included drivers (5.2%) and elder and child care (4.5%). These results are consistent with the data from the American Community Survey and the NYC Mayor’s Office for Economic Opportunity, which showed that immigrant workers concentrate in industries in which work cannot be performed remotely.⁸

Immigrant workers are concentrated in industries that cannot be performed remotely

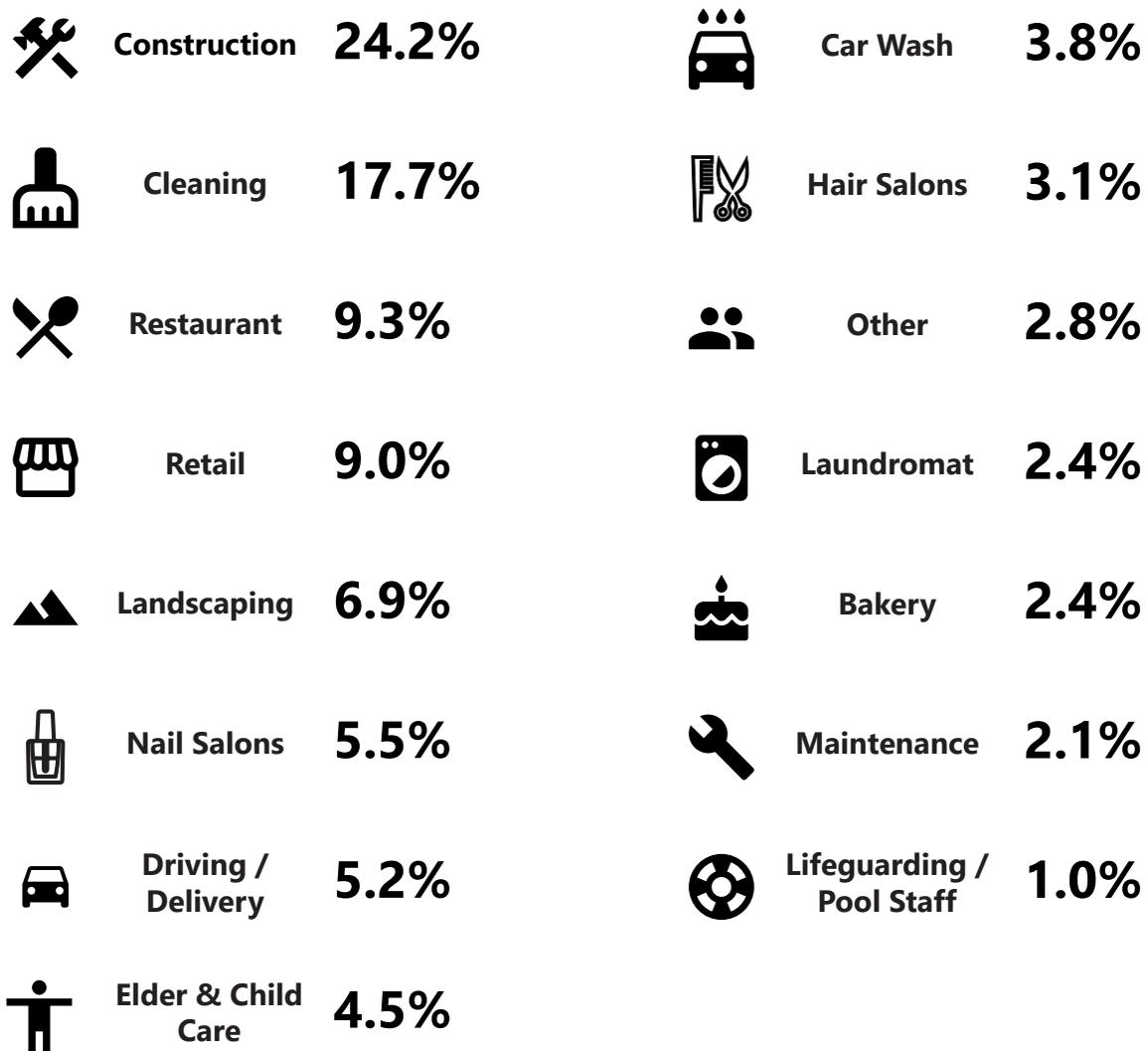


Figure 1.7 Industry of work
Pre-Covid Survey 2018

Pre-existing vulnerabilities

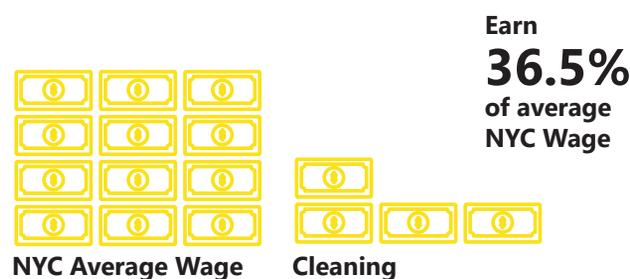
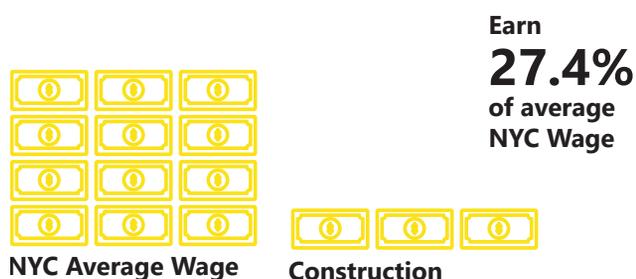
A range of social and economic factors contributes to the structural inequities that underlie the disproportionate negative impacts of the pandemic on immigrants in Staten Island. This section examines such factors using data from La Colmena’s pre-COVID survey, as well as from the American Community Survey.

Surveyed workers’ wages were well below NYC averages

Workers surveyed by La Colmena prior to the crisis were severely underpaid compared to workers across New York City. In all major job categories, participants’ best weekly average salaries were below the average weekly earnings in New York City for their industry. About 54 percent of surveyed respondents worked in cleaning, maintenance, retail

or landscaping industries. Sometimes cleaning in the winter, landscaping and construction in the summer. In these industries, respondents earned at least 50% less than the average wage in New York City.

In construction, where almost one in four respondents held jobs, workers earned 27.4% of the weekly average wage in New York City, approximately \$1100 less per week than the average worker. Even in laundromats, carwashes, and hair salons, where workers earned over 90% of the earnings of an average NYC worker, wages remained extremely low. In hair salon work, the highest earning industry for the survey, workers earned \$557 per week. Over a total of fifty weeks, this weekly wage equates with \$27,850 dollars a year. For the lowest earning industry, maintenance, workers received \$318 per week or \$15,900 a year. In both industries, workers earned below \$30,000 a year, the amount earned by a person working forty hours a week for fifty weeks



Industry	Surveyed Average Salary	QWEC Weekly Earnings for Same or Similar Industries in NYC	Percentage of Surveyed Average Earnings to QWEC Weekly Earnings
Construction	\$432	\$1,574	27.4%
Maintenance	\$318	\$903	35.2%
Cleaning	\$326	\$893	36.5%
Retail	\$392	\$848	46.2%
Landscaping	\$506	\$865	58.5%
Elder Care and Child Care	\$357	\$594	60.1%
Bakery	\$396	\$600	66.0%
Restaurant	\$443	\$606	73.1%
Driving / Delivery	\$552	\$692	79.9%
Nail Salon	\$362	\$403	89.8%
Laundromat	\$433	\$471	92.0%
Car Wash	\$539	\$572	94.2%
Hair Salon	\$557	\$580	96.0%

275 listed of n=283, Pre-Covid Survey 2018, QWEC 2018

Figure 2.1 Comparison of surveyed worker wages to NYC average

at a minimum wage job in New York City. Despite holding three or four different jobs, many La Colmena workers do not work a minimum of 40 hours per week. This highlights the disparity of payment since they earned much less than their counterparts across the city.

Connected to low-wage work, poverty rates among non-white and immigrant Staten Island residents remain high. American Community Survey (ACS) data reveals that 13.4% of foreign-born residents in Staten Island live in poverty. Further breaking down poverty by race reveals the stark inequalities that exist in Staten Island. Although 9.9% of white residents live in poverty, 12.5% of Asian and 26.7%

of black Staten Islanders live in poverty, more than two and a half times the rate for white residents. In addition, 23.0% of Latinx residents live in poverty, including more than one in three (36.1%) Latinxs with Mexican heritage are the largest demographic group represented in the survey.

Unemployment rates in Staten Island were also higher for immigrants and people of color than for whites prior to the COVID crisis (see Table 2.2 below). Low-wage work, unemployment, and underemployment are key factors contributing to the vulnerability of immigrant, Latinx and Black workers in Staten Island.

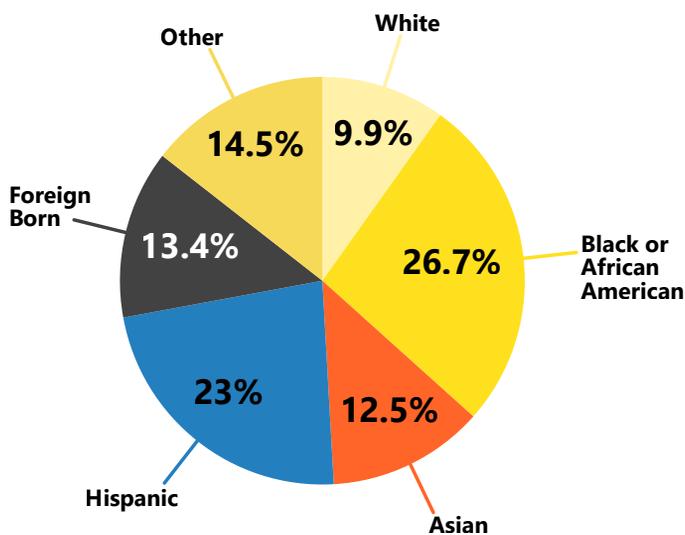


Figure 2.2: unemployment rate by race, ethnicity, and nativity in Staten Island
2014-2018 ACS Average Estimates

Survey respondents are likely to face precarious work conditions and lack basic protections

A large number of surveyed workers faced precarious work conditions, as they lacked basic labor and employment protections. Nearly half of surveyed workers indicated they were temporary workers with little long-term job stability, a proportion that is well above the 1.8% of total workers who work on a temporary basis in New York State (see table below). This survey result suggests that low-wage immigrant workers in Staten Island are 27 times more likely to work temporarily than individuals in the overall state workforce. Immigrant workers in Staten Island tend to have non-standard work arrangements. Census data shows that foreign-born workers are almost twice as likely to be self-employed. However, these statistics do not reveal the practice of misclassification of workers as independent contractors.

Furthermore, 45.3% of workers surveyed by La Colmena indicated they worked for individual persons

in private homes. Workers who are temporary, self-employed, or work for individuals, fall within the category of non-standard workers, and as such may lack basic labor and employment protections. They may be excluded from coverage under unemployment insurance, health insurance, family leave, sick leave, and workers compensation. They may be unable to form a union or sue their employer for harassment or discrimination in the workplace, which many survey respondents reported having experienced. Workers classified as independent contractors and casual domestic workers in New York State lack coverage under wage and hour, and workplace safety laws.⁹

Largely because of the contingent or casual nature of their employment, many of the surveyed workers did not reach the thresholds required to qualify for basic protections such as overtime pay, and benefits such as paid leave time. Only 18.3% of respondents indicated they received overtime pay consistently, and 15.4% indicated they received it sometimes. Nine out of ten workers (88.9%) did not receive paid vacation.

45.3% of workers surveyed by La Colmena indicated they worked for individual persons in private homes

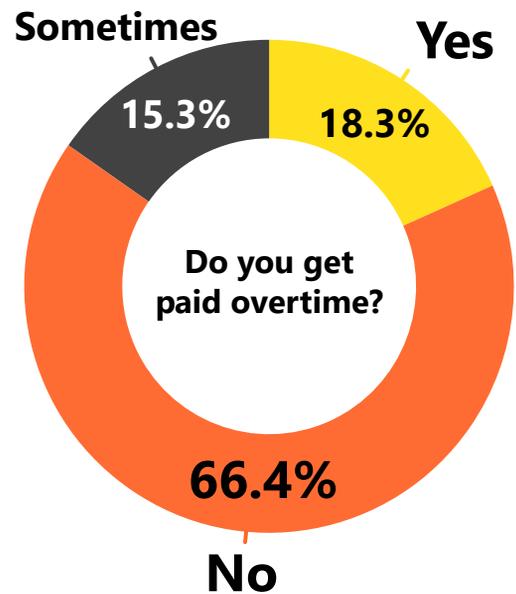
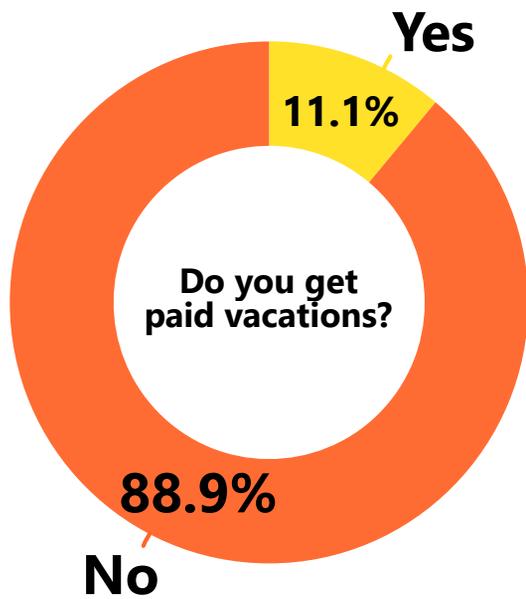
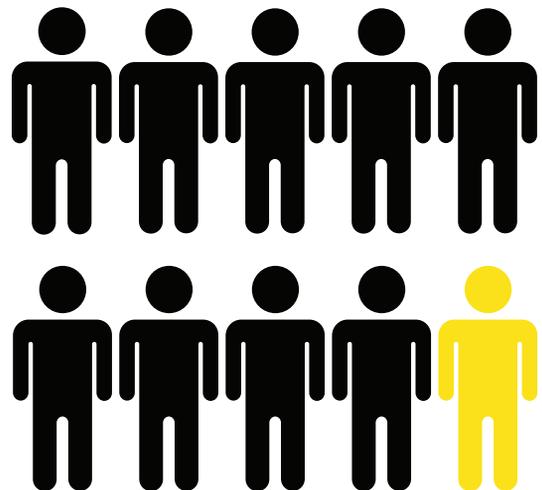


Figure 2.3: Workers lack basic protections and benefits
Pre-Covid Survey 2018

Nine out of ten workers (88.9%) did not receive paid vacation



Is your main job permanent or temporary?

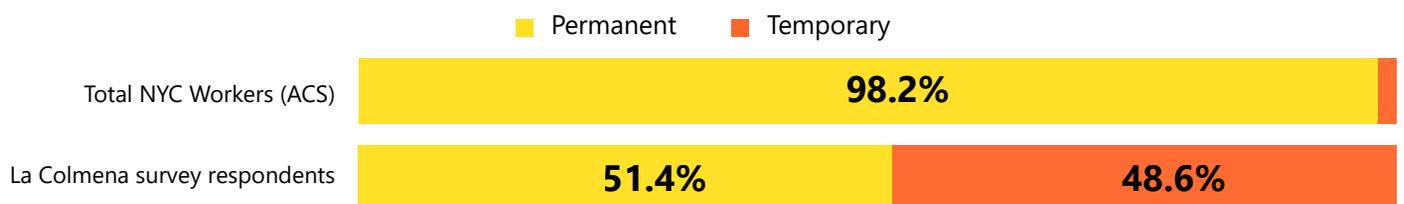


Figure 2.4: Temporary and Permanent Workers
Pre-Covid Survey 2018, 2017 ACS March Supplement

Wage theft and other workplace issues

Nearly one in four workers surveyed (23.8%) reported having experienced wage theft. According to survey results, employers may have owed \$549 on average in unpaid wages, which for the average surveyed restaurant worker represented approximately one and a quarter week of work. In addition, one in ten workers surveyed (9.2%) stated that their employers did not give them the tips paid by customers. The wage theft experiences of low wage immigrants in Staten Island are not isolated cases, as previous research has estimated that this issue might impact 2.1 million workers in New York State, amounting to over \$3 billion in lost worker revenues per year (including but not limited to violations of minimum wage and overtime laws). According to estimates by the Economic Policy Institute, non-compliance with minimum wage laws only might impact nearly one in five low-wage workers in New York.

Survey participants also reported other issues such as not getting break time. Twenty-nine percent reported not receiving a lunch break or a 30-minute break after five hours of work. Ten percent reported receiving breaks only sometimes. A female domestic worker said in an interview, *“I work eight hours, always in a rush, without a break, eating when I can”*.

1 in 4 respondents reported wage theft.



2 in 5 respondents sometimes or never receive 30 minute breaks

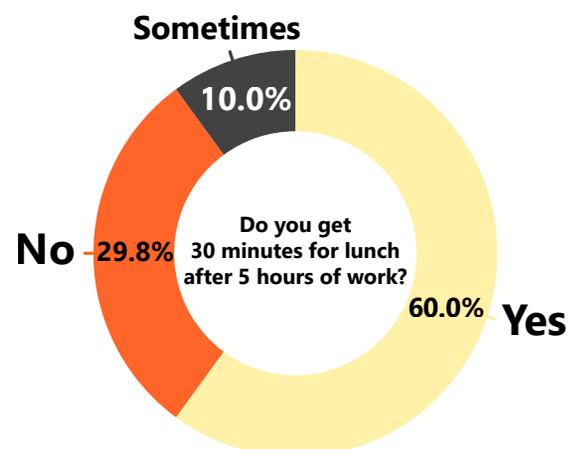
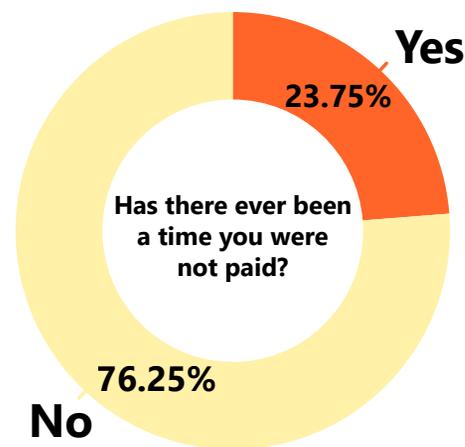
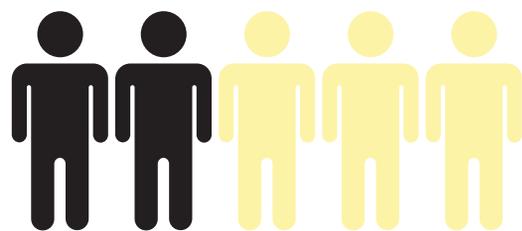


Figure 2.5: Wage theft Break Violations Pre-Covid Survey 2018

Surveyed workers faced discrimination

Almost 44% of workers surveyed by La Colmena reported having experienced some form of discrimination in the workplace or elsewhere. Nearly four out of five respondents indicated (79%) discrimination occurred because of nationality, race, or language. In an individual interview, a female domestic worker reported suffering from “daily microaggressions” and that her employer used her immigration status to intimidate her. A day laborer interviewed claimed that employers become intolerant of his language barriers, and co-workers become dismissive of him, which may pose safety risks in potentially hazardous situations, particularly in construction work. More than 82 percent of those reporting experiences of discrimination indicated that such instances had increased since the 2016 elections. Worker interviews revealed that racism and xenophobia existed in the workplace and beyond, acting as another driver for persistent inequality and poverty in Staten Island. A study participant reported that a stranger threw a bottle at him on the streets and used fowled language telling him to go back to Mexico.

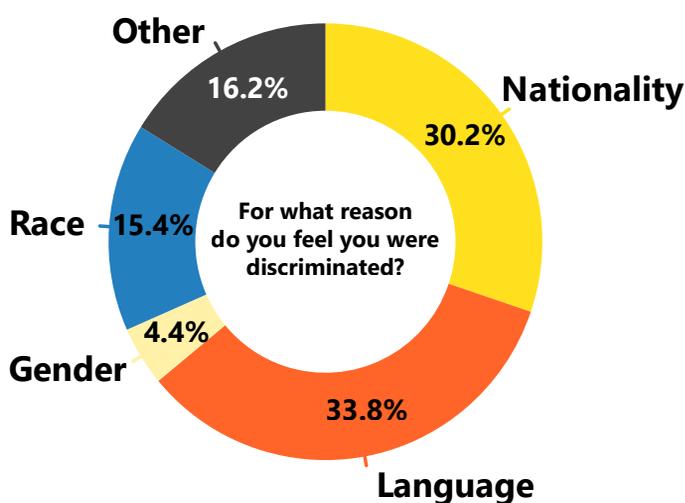


Figure 2.6: For what reason do you feel you were discriminated?

Source: Pre-Covid Survey

Almost 44% of workers surveyed by La Colmena reported having experienced some form of discrimination in the workplace or elsewhere.

High cost of living expenses for Low-wage and immigrant workers in Staten Island.

Transportation

Compounding the effects of low pay, high costs of living was prevalent among workers surveyed by La Colmena. Thus, 44.14% of workers paid more than \$40 a week in transportation costs. On average, workers paid \$56.14 a week or approximately \$225 per month for transportation. Workers travel long distances, sometimes using multiple mediums of transport to reach their work. Nearly one in four respondents (23.2%) worked outside of Staten Island, although only 7% of workers lived outside of Staten

Marta is a nanny from Colombia leaving with her husband, two sons and parents-in-law in Staten Island.

She stopped working on March 15, the family employer told her since they will be at home they don't need her anymore. They paid her one more week and nothing more.

In her household, three of the four adults got sick with Covid. She went to the emergency room at the Staten Island University Hospital. She could not breathe and had excruciating pain; they gave her Tylenol and told her to rest at home. Her husband works in construction and was sick for 3 weeks.

They exhausted their savings on April rent, and they do not have enough savings to cover their May rent. They do not qualify for the help; they only receive groceries from food banks. She has two kids to homeschool, her mother in law has been a great help, and the only one that did not get sick.

She has felt discriminated against in her neighborhood, she felt eyes on her all the time, when she is doing groceries and playing with the kids outside.

Island, indicating a number of workers made longer treks between boroughs or outside the boundaries of the city.

Unlike NYC's intricate transit system below and above ground connecting four of the five boroughs, Staten Island's public transportation is lacking. With only one subway line that runs along the east coast side of the island, bus lines with limited hours and the Staten Island Ferry, none of these transportation systems operate overnight. As an alternative to this system, many communities rely on group private taxis, or local car service (UBER/LYFT require credit cards that many immigrant workers do not have).

To go across the Island from the South shore to the North shore could take up to two hours using public transportation.

ACS data reveals the inequalities that exist within transportation in Community District 1 of Staten Island (Port Richmond, Stapleton, and Mariner's Harbor). In Community District 1, foreign-born workers spend 45 minutes travelling to work, 5% more than native born workers. These long travel times increase the burdens on workers and keep them away from their homes. They also raise the cost of living for many workers who often spend thousands of dollars a year travelling long distances between their work and home.

Rent

High costs of rent in the NYC metropolitan area create additional burdens on workers. Census data shows that in Community District 1, foreign-born residents pay an average of \$1,118 per month in rent. These kinds of costs can easily consume most of the amount earned by surveyed workers in low-wage work. A worker in a restaurant who works fifty weeks a year would earn \$22,150 per year. The average costs of just rent and transportation for a foreign-

Weekly cost of transportation paid by respondents

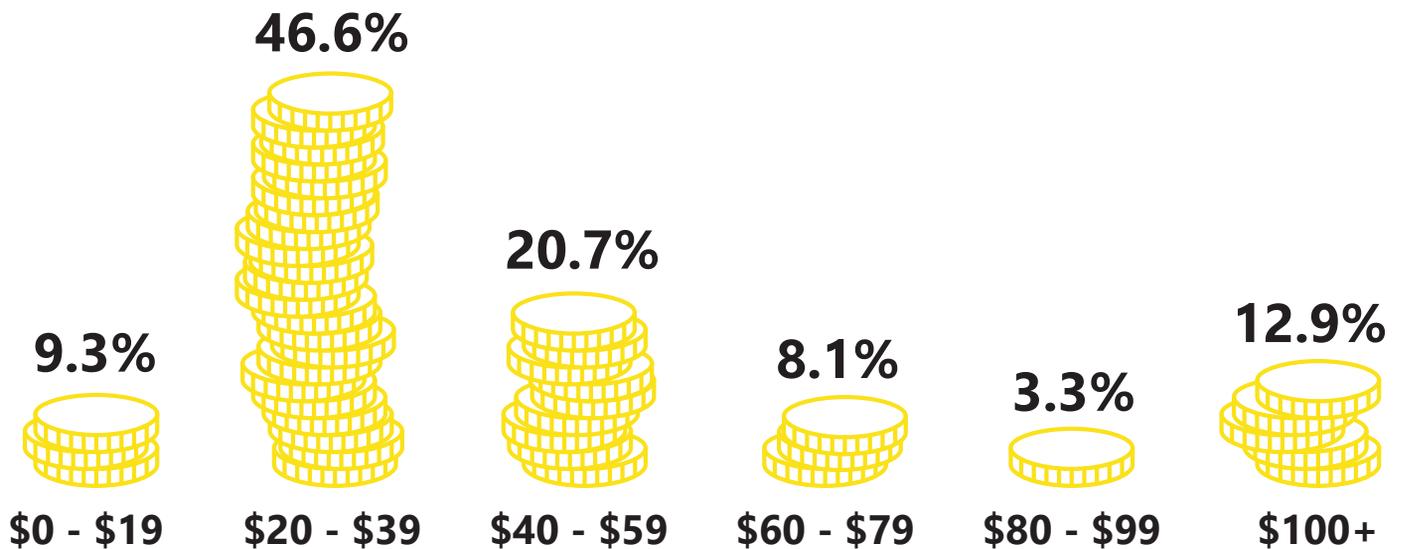


Figure 2.7: weekly cost of transportation paid by respondents (\$)
 Source: Pre-Covid Survey

born worker per year would equate to approximately \$16,116. Therefore, this worker would pay 72.8% of their income on housing and transportation alone. This leaves \$6,034 each year to pay for a myriad of other costs such as groceries, utilities, health costs, protective equipment, and childcare needs.¹⁰

There is a tendency for new immigrants to settle in areas where family members or others within their networks are already established, increasing local demand for cost-efficient and flexible living arrangements. 80% of Mexican respondents are from the area of San Jeronimo, Puebla. At the same time Immigrant families are multigenerational, and include extended family, as a group, is the only way to afford a rental. Staten Island neighborhoods are suffering from a high foreclosure rate (56%). Staten Island’s homeowners are benefiting from the security of rental income earned from an immigrant family in a basement apartment. The combination of low-paid and contingent work with high costs of living is a key factor explaining high poverty rates among Latinxs and immigrant communities in Staten Island.

Nonetheless, these expenses also constitute immigrant workers’ contributions to the economy of the island. This suggests that despite their vulnerabilities, these workers have played their part in sustaining the economy and vibrancy of Staten Island communities.

Therefore, this worker would pay 72.8% of their income on housing and transportation alone

Safety and health issues & lack of access to health care

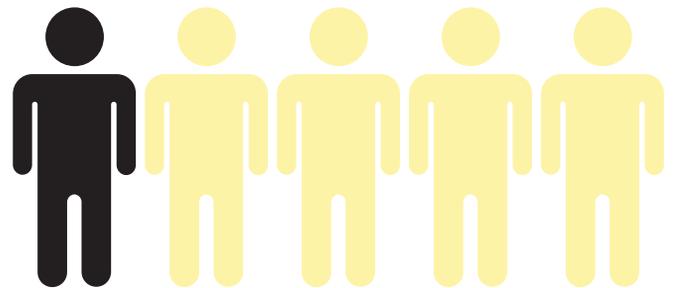
Data from both La Colmena's Pre-Covid Survey and the Census indicate that immigrant workers in Staten Island face significant health and safety challenges before the pandemic. They have few or no protections on the job (especially those working in private homes 45%), are exposed to safety hazards in high-risk industries, and lack adequate access to health care.

About one in five (or 19%), workers surveyed by La Colmena in 2018-19 reported being hurt on the job. Many respondents often worked in the construction industry, where rates of injuries and fatalities are higher than most other industries, particularly for immigrant populations that face language barriers or lack adequate safety training.¹¹ The survey results also showed that when workers were injured on the job, they have to cover the cost. Of those injured,

88.3% did not receive workers' compensation, demonstrating how precarious and non-standard work leaves many without government protections. In 71.7% of cases, employers did not pay for any medical treatment, and in 40% of cases, workers themselves directly paid for medical costs. These findings showed how the lack of protections that many non-standard workers endure, and the weak enforcement of existing safety regulations, place the burden onto workers who already struggle to make ends meet.

Most workers who responded to the La Colmena survey must pay the cost of bringing their own protective equipment to the workplace. Only 39.9% of respondents said their employer paid for their protective equipment. When workers provided their own protective equipment, it cost them an average of \$468.53 each year. In addition to the safety risks, employers' practice of not providing personal protective equipment generates substantial financial costs for working people. This finding indicates that

1 in 5
respondents
has been hurt
on the job



88.3%
did not receive
workers
compensation



40.0%
paid their own
medical costs



71.7%
of employers
did not pay for
medical expenses

34.7% of the respondents don't receive protective equipment



employers were shifting the burden of workplace health and safety onto their workers before the pandemic. This finding also suggests that employers would continue this practice during the reopening in the absence of appropriate government imposed safeguards and enforcement.

Adding to the challenges of safety risks and lack of protections, immigrant workers in Staten Island have limited access to health care and insurance coverage. Census data revealed significant stratifications in healthcare coverage in Staten Island. While only 2.6% of native-born residents do not have health coverage, 11.5% of foreign-born residents are uninsured (more than four times the rate for the native-born). Almost 10 percent of Latinx Staten Islanders are uninsured, which is double the average rate for Staten Island as a whole. Census data also confirms that immigrant workers of Mexican origin, who represented the majority of respondents for La Colmena's pre-covid survey, are at most risk of lacking access to health care, as more than one in four (27.0%) of them lack any kind of health insurance in Staten Island.

For undocumented workers the challenges are more severe, as they do not qualify for public healthcare, except for Medicaid for pregnant women and

emergency Medicaid for those who meet certain requirements.¹² Compounding these challenges is the fact that Staten Island is the only one of the five boroughs in New York City that does not have a public hospital.

Mirta was one of five nail salon workers who contracted COVID-19 after being exposed at their workplace. . All of the employees, undocumented with no health insurance, ended up going to the same private doctor who charged them \$150 each for pneumonia shots and an antibiotics prescription. Later at night, Mirta still had a high fever and was short of breath. Pedro, her husband rushed her to the University hospital, she spent the night, was stabilized, and was sent back home. At home, she lost her senses of smell and taste, forced to spend at least two weeks in bed while in excruciating pain. She was never tested. Her employer did not offer any paid sick leave.

"Many workers were sent back home from the hospital. I have felt discriminated against, ever since the current president was elected. I feel like I have lost my freedom, there is always something traumatic that weighs on my shoulders, and I am always afraid of issues with immigration. I cannot believe that people see us as criminals, when we are making an honest living. We are here because of our need to survive. We came from extreme poverty. We are not stealing anything from anyone."

Pedro, Day Laborer.



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Impacts of COVID-19 on Immigrant Staten Islanders

As part of New York City, Staten Island has been at the center of the pandemic. As of August 11, 14,724 cases of Coronavirus were confirmed in Staten Island, infecting approximately 2.8% of the total population of the Island. The crisis has led to 2,187 patients being hospitalized on Staten Island with 837 people dying due to the virus.¹⁴

As everywhere else in New York and the country, the distribution of COVID-19 cases in Staten Island has been far from equitable.

Areas with higher poverty rates, larger populations of immigrants and people of color have been affected much more severely than other sectors of the island. Port Richmond, on average has a 31% higher infection rate, a 48% higher death rate, and an 18% higher rate of individuals testing positive for Covid-19 than South Beach Tottenville. Individual neighborhoods show even larger disparities. Zip Code 10302 of Port Richmond, located in Community District 1, has a 59% higher infection rate, a 89% higher death rate, and a 38% higher percentage of people who tested positive, as compared to Zip Code 10308 of South Beach – Tottenville in Community District 3.¹⁵

The remainder of this section discusses the findings from an Emergency Relief survey that La Colmena conducted in Staten Island between May 26 and June 3rd, 2020. The findings of this survey are consistent with previous research that identifies immigrant workers of Latinx origin as being at higher risk of experiencing health and economic issues as a result

of COVID-19, and as more likely to be excluded from essential relief aid due to their immigration status. Figure 3.1 shows residents by zip code for the 727 individuals who sought relief and responded to La Colmena's post-Covid survey. 87% percent of respondents live in the northern areas of the island, which also correspond to the areas in which most Latinx and immigrant populations reside, poverty rates are highest, and impacts of COVID in terms of cases and deaths were the most severe. In many ways, these survey results offer an in-depth profile of the most vulnerable Staten Islanders.

Areas with higher poverty rates, larger populations of immigrants and people of color have been affected much more severely

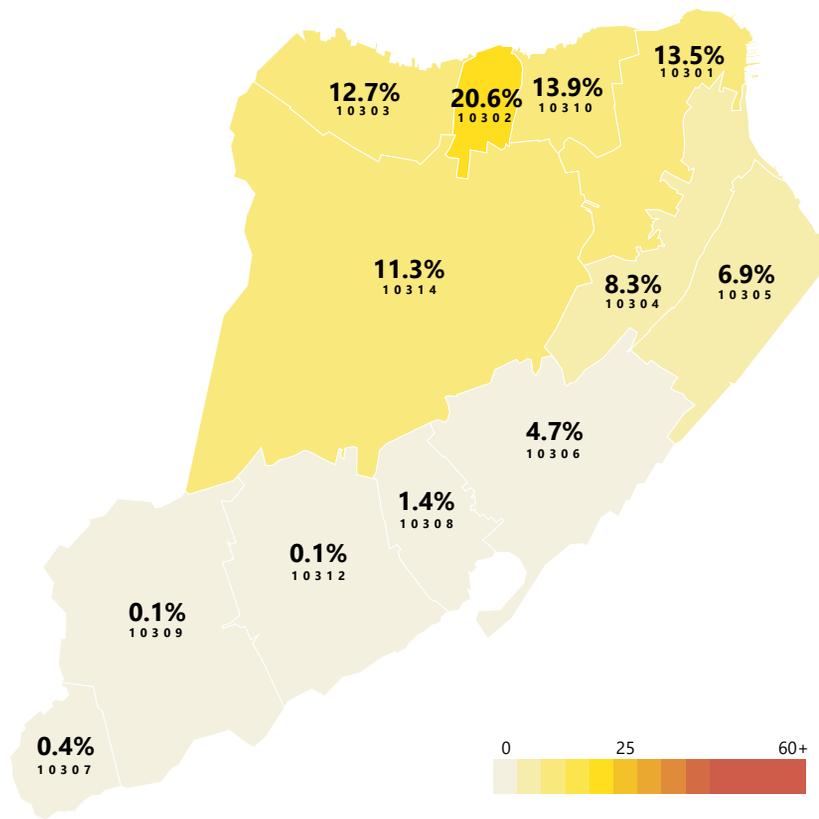


Figure 3.1: Map of emergency relief respondents by zipcode

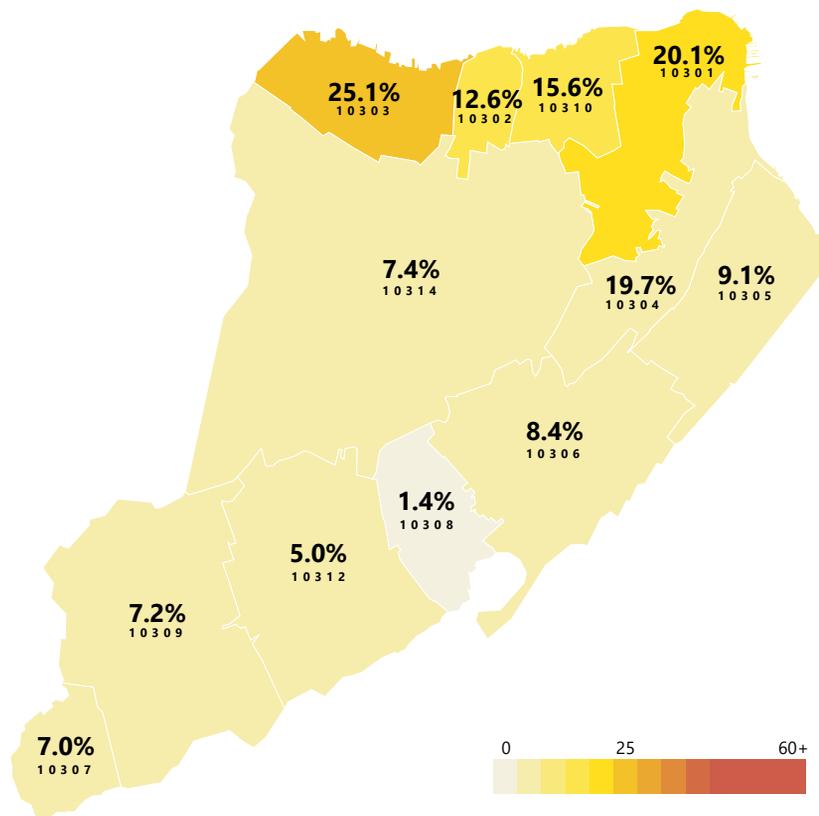
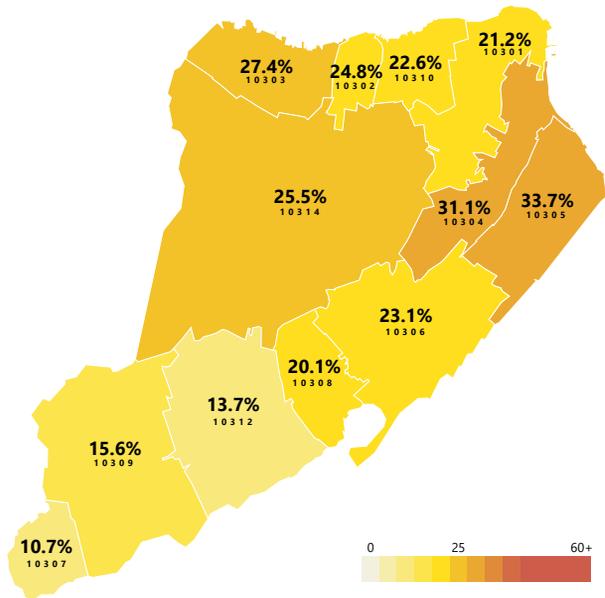
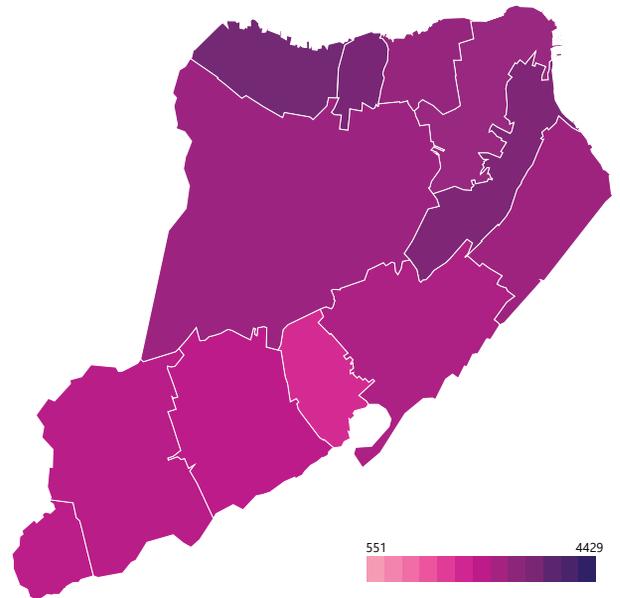


Figure 3.2: Map of family poverty rate in Staten Island

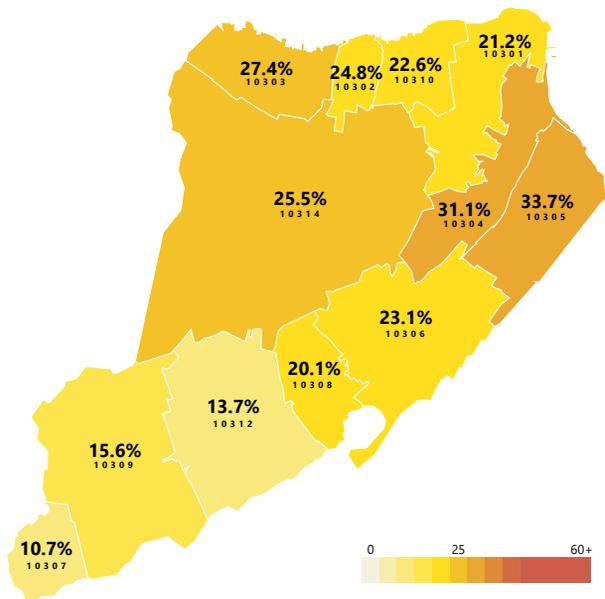
Figure 3.3: Maps of Staten Island by poverty, demographics and Covid-19
 NYC Department of Health



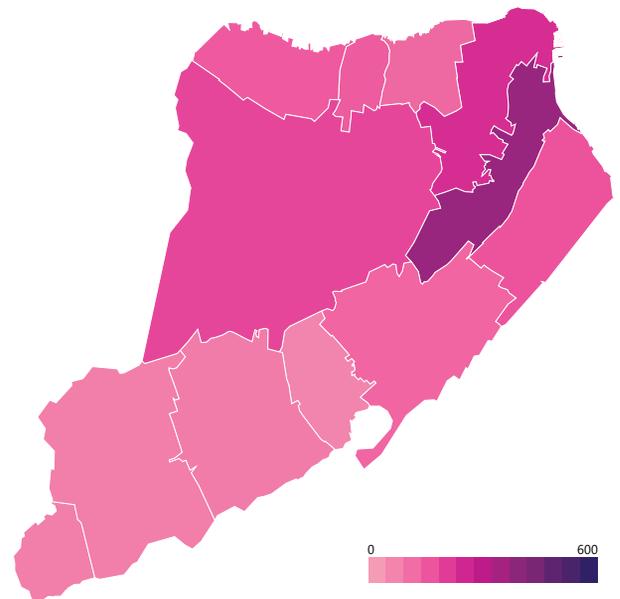
Foreign born population of Staten Island



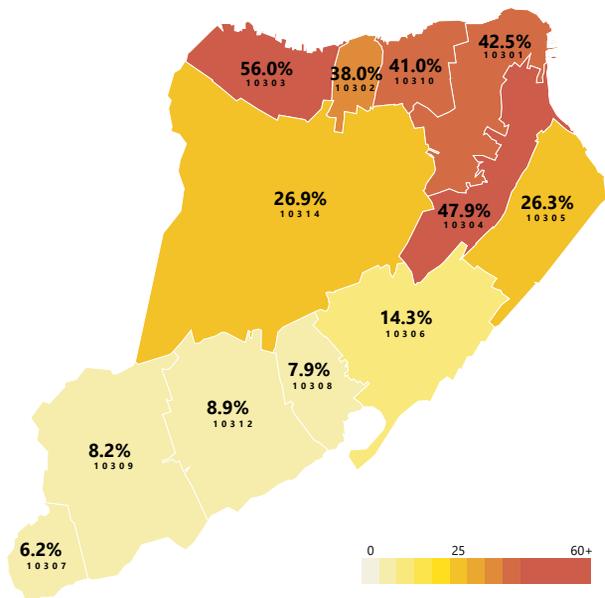
Covid-19 case rate in Staten Island



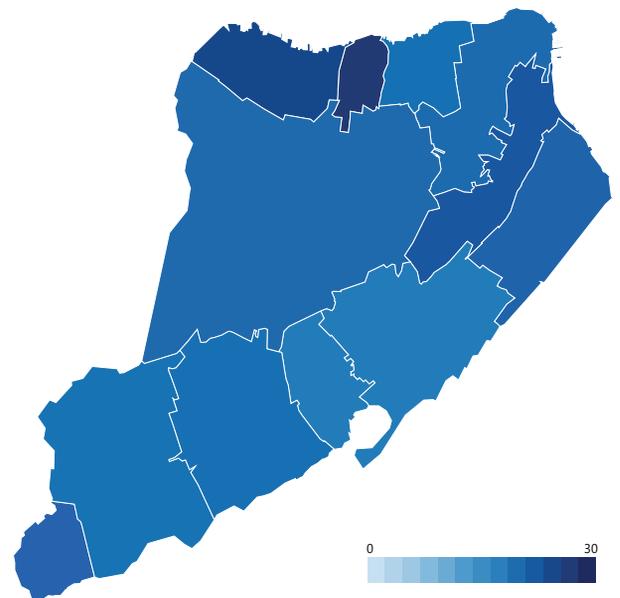
Latinx population of Staten Island



Covid-19 death rate in Staten Island



Non-white population of Staten Island



Covid-19 positive test rate in Staten Island

More than 87% of the relief seekers were not working at the time of the survey, with 88% of unemployed respondents being out of work for five or more weeks (losing their jobs between February and the beginning of May). The vast majority of these workers (97.5%) did not qualify for unemployment benefits, and did not receive government stimulus checks under the CARES Act (96.4%). Only work-authorized employees are eligible to receive relief under the CARES Act. Even if a work-authorized employee in a mixed-immigration status family receives economic assistance through the CARES Act, it would not be sufficient to offset the negative impacts of multiple job losses within the family.. Only about two percent of La Colmena’s respondents qualified for unemployment benefits, and less than one percent were actually receiving such benefits as of June 6th. These results confirm previous research by community-based organizations and think tanks, which indicated that immigrant workers have been the most severely impacted by the pandemic in New York City. A report by Make the Road surveyed the impact of Covid-19 on immigrants from across NYC, including Northern Staten Island. Their data showed that 88% of NYC immigrant workers lost their jobs due to Covid-19, with only 5% receiving unemployment benefits. 16 Reports by the Urban Institute and the Center for New York City Affairs found that Latinx and low-income workers were more likely to lose jobs, work hours, or income because of the Covid-19 crisis. The Center for New York City Affairs estimated that Latinx workers would be disproportionately affected by job losses due to the pandemic, experiencing 32% of jobs lost while representing 26% of New York City’s private sector workforce. These findings for these studies on Staten Island’s immigrant workers are not unusual in their experiences of the crisis.

La Colmena’s relief survey results showed that the majority of immigrant workers who lost their jobs during the crisis worked in face-to-face and low-wage industries, in which work cannot be performed remotely, including housekeeping, construction, and restaurants (see Figure 3.7). This finding also

confirms existing research by the Mayor’s Office of Economic Opportunity, which indicated that the most vulnerable immigrant workers, specifically the undocumented, are overrepresented in occupational sectors that require physical presence in the workplace. Some such occupations include Construction and Painter/Paper Hangers (33% of the workforce is undocumented), Dishwashers and Cooks (27.2% undocumented), and Maids and Housekeepers/Cleaners (24.8% undocumented).

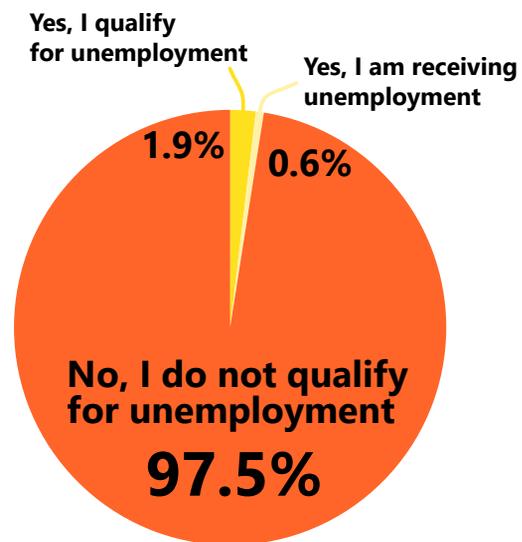


Figure 3.4: Qualification and status of unemployment benefits
Source: Post-Covid Survey

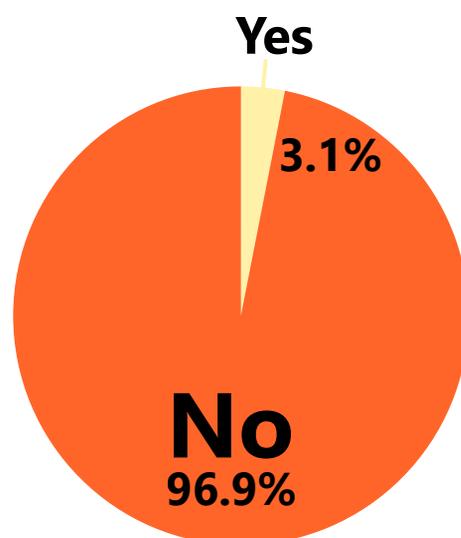


Figure 3.5 Status of Stimulus Check
Source: Post-Covid Survey

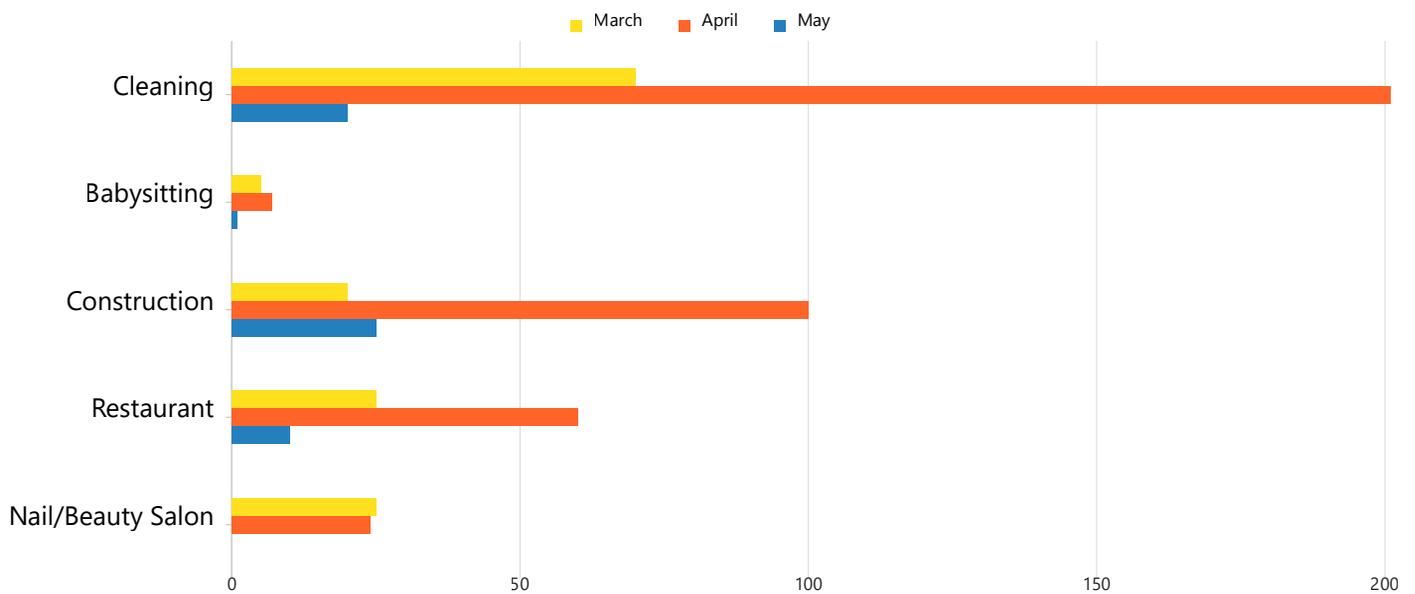


Figure 3.6 Unemployed workers by industry and by month when job loss occurred
Source: Post-Covid Survey

Another factor that increases the socio-economic vulnerability of low-wage immigrant workers involves their family composition. Almost 28% of La Colmena’s relief survey respondents were single heads of household, 66.3% had families with four or more members, 71% had children under 18 years of age, and 6% had a family member with a disability. In terms of the health impacts of the crisis, change for %respondents, 17% reported having been infected with Covid, and 43% reported that a family member had died of Covid-19.

The vast majority of these workers (97.5%) did not qualify for unemployment benefits



Figure 3.7: Size of family
Post-Covid Survey 2020

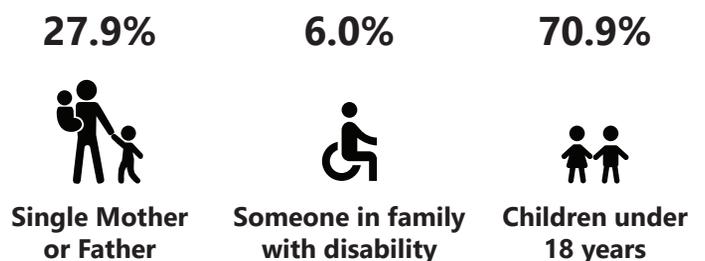


Figure 3.8: Family structure
Post-Covid Survey 2020



Worker Centers' Fundamental Role

Worker Centers provide support and resources for the most marginalized workers such as the undocumented immigrants. They constitute an alternative form of labor organizing that addresses the needs of those systematically neglected by labor unions and left uncovered by basic employment laws. They often offer legal assistance, labor rights education, workforce development, and hiring sites with facilities for workers. These organizations have helped workers market themselves in informal labor markets and have aided in wage theft cases. La Colmena, which provides services to some of the most overlooked workers in New York City, often severely underpaid and in poor working conditions, embodies this idea of a workers' organization looking to meet the needs of the city's most marginalized populations.

As the only immigrant rights organization open on Staten Island during the pandemic, La Colmena has and continues to provide relief and organizing for immigrant workers most impacted by the pandemic. Indeed, 98% of La Colmena surveyed members from Staten Island have been left out of federal and state relief programs after losing their jobs. La Colmena has attempted to fill this void by offering aid and empowering workers and their community.

La Colmena has begun providing direct assistance to thousands of immigrants on Staten Island. La Colmena has raised money to prepare and distribute meals with proper and safe health conditions. Since the pandemic began each week, the organization distributed more than 6000 meals to those who have lost their incomes. For those especially at risk, food was delivered directly to their doorstep. Community members also donate food as part of this effort and consistently distribute Mexican tamales, tacos, sweet bread, coffee, and other food and drinks.

Thousands of families on Staten Island have indicated they need direct funds to pay basic living expenses and rent. La Colmena has worked with a variety of organizations including the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, Qualitas of Life Foundation, New York Immigration Coalition, National Domestic Worker Alliance, and the Open Society Foundation to respond to these needs. With the help of these organizations and foundations, \$1.1 million has been distributed to undocumented workers. Over 1,200 families on Staten Island have received cash assistance. In addition, La Colmena raised money to help cover some of the funeral expenses for families of COVID-19 victims. Although this funding has aided workers and community members across Staten Island, these funds are simply not enough for the scale of this crisis. La Colmena is working with other worker centers and community organizations to build a statewide excluded workers fund that will provide financial assistance to those left out of relief programs such as undocumented workers.

Despite the pandemic, the Staten Island community remained empowered and informed through a series of workshops and training. La Colmena virtually provided information on tenant rights, immigration, unemployment, and worker's rights. Remotely, members of the community were enrolled to receive medical coverage. While following safety procedures and practicing social distancing, OSHA health and safety courses were being offered on-site.

With many losing their jobs during the pandemic, members of Mujeres Liderando organized a mask-making mutual aid project. Like many undocumented workers, the women from Mujeres Liderando did not qualify to receive unemployment insurance due to their immigration status. Since the mutual aid project began, 3,000 masks were fabricated by the women.



50% of these masks were donated to essential workers or given to organizations such as NAACP. The New York City Public Advocate has recognized these workers for their contributions.

In distributing food, delivering hot meals, organizing cash donations, aiding workers in applying for unemployment and healthcare, and sewing masks, La Colmena has helped the community weather the storm of the pandemic. However, these efforts cannot match the wide reaching economic and health impacts of Covid-19, and much more must be done in order to provide for workers.

La Colmena Community Job Center as a first responder created a mutual aid support network in

collaboration with its members to reach out to the excluded community. With a weekly food pantry, delivering hot meals, organizing cash donations, and aiding workers with unemployment and healthcare applications. La Colmena has relentlessly looked out for the community and continues preparing the immigrant workforce for the challenges ahead.

La Colmena has relentlessly looked out for the community and continues to prepare the immigrant workforce for the challenges that lay ahead. The root of all the issues with the immigrant workforce is the lack of status. The rational solution is a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants who continue to contribute to this country. Justice and dignity for immigrant workers.

Ottenville

Sta





Conclusions and recommendations

The findings presented in this report revealed the need to address the structural racial, social and economic inequities that underpinned the disproportionate negative impacts of the COVID crisis on the Latinx immigrant community in Staten Island and across the country. Far from being a public burden, immigrant communities constitute a strong contributor to the economy and labor force of Staten Island. A path to legalization will protect undocumented workers, and policy changes and private sector initiatives are needed to ensure a safe and fair reopening for all workers, achieve long term and sustainable economic recovery, and ensure the well-being of all Staten Island communities.

The critical issue affecting immigrant workers and their families is the lack of regular or authorized immigration status. There is a need for a comprehensive immigration law reform that would provide a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants who continue to contribute to the economy and the cultural wealth of this country. This is the policy tool that is fundamental for immigrant workers to achieve justice and dignity in their workplaces and the broader society.

We propose the following recommendations for consideration by policymakers and private sector stakeholders:

- Extend labor and employment protections to workers laboring under non-standard work arrangements, such as those likely misclassified as independent contractors, and housecleaners who are currently classified as casual domestic workers.
- Provide workers compensation coverage to non-standard workers, and consider classifying COVID-19 as an occupational disease.
- Establish guidelines for the highest level of workplace safety during reopening, and provide resources to implement and enforce such safety measures. Revise current federal and state occupational safety regulations to provide protections for non-standard workers and those working for individual employers.
- Establish funds for economic relief for workers excluded from state and federal relief packages, and provide access to relief to all workers regardless of immigration status.
- Invest in the transportation system in order to decrease travel expenses and commuting times for low-income workers and residents.
- Explore the opening of a public hospital in Staten Island (the only borough that lacks a public hospital in NYC), and create programs that will increase access to health care for all Staten Islanders, regardless of income levels, race, ethnicity, and immigration status.
- Develop joint public-private sector efforts that include community-based organizations such as La Colmena to implement programs that support the working class and immigrant communities.



Appendix

About the organizations

ILR Worker Institute

The Worker Institute at Cornell engages in research and education on contemporary labor issues, to generate innovative thinking and solutions to problems related to work, economy and society. The institute brings together researchers, educators and students with practitioners in labor, business and policymaking to confront growing economic and social inequalities, in the interests of working people and their families. A core value of the Worker Institute is that collective representation and workers' rights are vital to a fair economy, robust democracy and just society.

Website: <https://www.ilr.cornell.edu/worker-institute/>



La Colmena is a community-based organization founded in 2014, working to empower day laborers, domestic workers, and other low-wage immigrant workers in Staten Island through organizational, educational, cultural, and economic development. La Colmena is committed to providing immigrants with the tools they need to become leaders who can speak and advocate for themselves and their communities. The organization is committed to educating and empowering the immigrant community of Staten Island by providing the tools needed for immigrants to become leaders who can speak and advocate for themselves. La Colmena serves a diverse community of individuals and families with roots in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Peru. Many clients come from rural areas in some of the most difficult places in the world to survive, have low levels of literacy and speak indigenous languages.

Website: <https://www.lacolmenanyc.org/>

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