

[sdfoodvision2030.org](https://sdfoodvision2030.org)

**Objectives 1-4 address major, interrelated challenges that San Diego County farms, fisheries, food businesses, and workers face in bringing food from farm and ocean to plate.**

#### **OBJECTIVE 01**

Decreasing land in agriculture, declining fisheries, climate change impacts, limited succession planning among aging producers, and disparities in farmland ownership all threaten the future of long-term food production in the region.

#### **OBJECTIVE 02**

Market concentration within every sector of the food system decreases opportunities for small and midsize farms, fishing operations, and food system businesses to be viable.

#### **OBJECTIVE 03**

Major increases in food imports—in combination with market concentration—makes it challenging for local food products to make their way to grocery stores, corner stores, and restaurants.

#### **OBJECTIVE 04**

Wage stagnation over the past 40 years and low wages for food system workers limit the ability of our most essential workers to lead healthy, comfortable lives, and pursue viable careers.

# OBJECTIVE 04

## Elevate Wages and Working Conditions, and Improve Career Opportunities

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### STRATEGIES AT A GLANCE

- Support coordinated efforts and collaboration to improve the lives of food system workers
  - Invest in food system jobs and career pathways
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# Introduction

Essential but often invisible, food system workers nourish us on a daily basis. Not only do they grow, raise, catch, and produce food, they also package, process, store, stock, sell, and deliver it. They take orders, prepare food, serve meals, and clean up messes. Hailed as heroes and “[essential workers](#)” at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, food system workers literally feed the nation, keep the lights on at our favorite places, and witness life’s milestones and crises from the frontlines.

And yet, across supply chains, food system workers—and their working conditions—are often hidden as they labor in fields, on waterways, in processing facilities, and in the backs of restaurants and stores. They receive some of the lowest wages—and the most minimal health care, retirement, and paid leave benefits—of any sector of our economy. As a result, food system workers disproportionately depend on public benefits like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). They also experience some of the highest fatal injury rates of any occupation: Commercial fishing reports the highest fatal injury rate in the country, with truck driving and agricultural labor seventh and ninth highest, respectively.

The majority of food system workers are people of color and immigrants, and receive significantly lower wages than those working in White-dominated occupations. Food system jobs are often perceived as undesirable and have been devalued for years. Despite a long and rich history of organizing efforts among workers, jobs in the food system fail to offer economic security, adequate protections<sup>1</sup>, and career mobility. Rights to organize are unprotected and participation in unions is actively discouraged. These conditions often perpetuate a state of vulnerability for workers across the food system.

<sup>1</sup> Food Chain Workers Alliance, February 2021, [We Are Not Disposable: Food Workers Organizing on the COVID Frontlines](#).



Despite being acknowledged as essential, many food system workers feel expendable. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified existing challenges for food workers, including low wages, limited benefits, inadequate workplace protections, heightened food insecurity, and increased threats of detention.



# IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON FOOD SYSTEM WORKERS IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

In San Diego County and across the country, COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted food system workers, especially workers of color.

## Virus Exposure

Research conducted by the UC San Diego Division of Infectious Disease and Global Public Health found that counties with a higher percentage of farmworkers and a higher percentage of people living in poverty were significantly associated with a higher rate of death from COVID-19.<sup>2</sup>

Research covering March 2020 through October 2020 in California found that the pandemic increased general mortality rates by 22% compared to historical periods, but by 39% for food and agricultural workers (including cooks and bakers, the highest increase of any occupational category), and by 59% specifically among Hispanic food and agriculture workers.<sup>3</sup>

As COVID-19 outbreaks spiked in food processing and manufacturing facilities across the country, the CDC found that Hispanic/Latinx people were disproportionately impacted.<sup>4</sup> In San Diego County, [reporting from KPBS](#) revealed the following:

- 208 outbreaks took place at San Diego County restaurants, the second largest number of COVID-19 outbreaks from March to November 2020 after nursing homes.
- 67 grocery stores in San Diego County experienced COVID-19 outbreaks. Among grocery stores, Walmart, Costco, and Target had the most outbreaks. Grocery store workers in San Diego County expressed that store cleaning protocols and capacity limits were inconsistent and the number of workers with COVID-19 was averaging 20 a day in January 2021.<sup>5</sup>
- 12 food processing and manufacturing facilities in San Diego County had COVID-19 outbreaks from March to November 2020.<sup>6</sup>

## Job Losses

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 217,000

people were employed at over 20,000 food system businesses in San Diego County (See Table 1 for an employment breakdown).<sup>7</sup> In April 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted employment in San Diego County’s largest food system category, as 59,000 people who work at restaurants, fast food places, and bars lost their jobs (Figure 1).

Food service and drinking places, along with casinos, saw the biggest employment losses of any occupational category due to COVID-19. From a peak unemployment rate of 15.2%, employment levels have gradually increased over the course of the pandemic but are still 30,000 below where they were in December 2019. Unemployment data by race or ethnicity are not available at the county level; however, nationally and in California, Hispanic/Latinx, Black, and Asian Americans experienced higher rates of unemployment than White Americans.

## Food Insecurity

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, food system workers<sup>8</sup> were twice as likely to use SNAP than all other workers. The [San Diego Hunger Coalition](#) estimates that rates of food insecurity in San Diego County doubled in May 2020, with the highest concentrations of growth in low-income and communities of color. Virus exposure, unexpected and unpaid time in quarantine, rising childcare costs as a result of school closures, insufficient government aid, and significant job losses, especially for farm and food workers, left many unable to pay for basic necessities, including food.

## Access to Relief

The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) was created by the federal government to provide direct incentives to businesses to support workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In California, the “Accommodation and Food Services” industry—which includes restaurants, fast food, and bars—received 6%, the largest portion of PPP loans among all industries in

FIGURE 1

<sup>4</sup> Waltenburg, Michelle A., et al., January 2021, [“Coronavirus Disease Among Workers in Food Processing, Food Manufacturing, and Agriculture Workplaces.” Emerging Infectious Diseases. 27\(1\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> Rivas, Alexis, January 8, 2021, [“Grocery Workers Say Stores Inconsistent in COVID-19 Safety Measure.” NBC 7](#)

<sup>6</sup> Trageser, Claire and Katy Stegall, December 21, 2020, [“Here’s Where COVID-19 Outbreaks Have Happened in San Diego County.” KPBS](#)

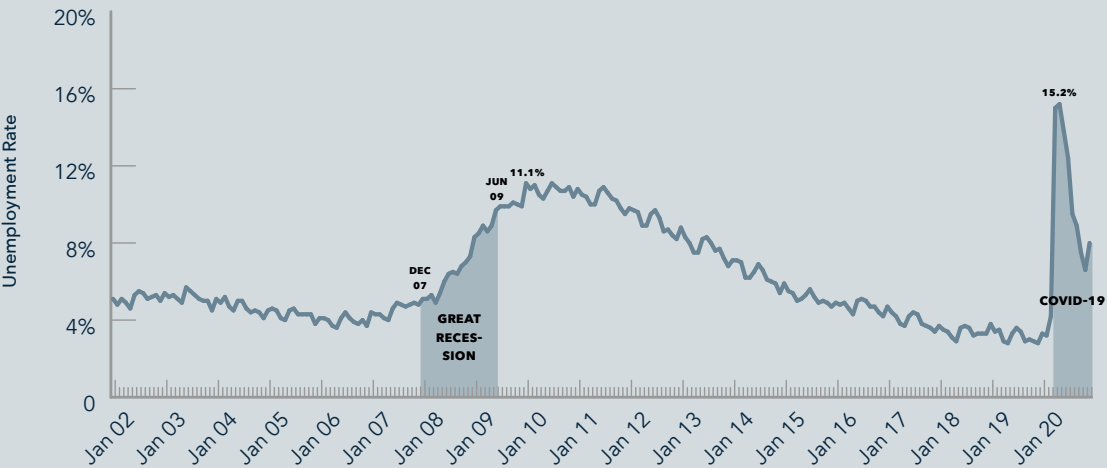
<sup>7</sup> This estimate is based on aggregated employment and annual pay data from several sources: the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Covered Employment and Wages](#), the [U.S. Census Bureau Nonemployer Statistics](#), the [USDA Census of Agriculture](#), and a [special analysis](#) of Social Security numbers of farmworkers in California. Covered employment refers to employees who are eligible for unemployment insurance and benefits from unemployment insurance programs. Nonemployer refers to businesses that have no paid employees. Combining these two data sources provides a more comprehensive count of food system employment. Since covered employment and nonemployer data undercount farmer and hired worker employment, estimates from the Census of Agriculture are used. Finally, since farm worker employment is difficult to estimate, a special analysis of valid documentation and Social Security numbers provided to employers is used to estimate the number of farm workers in San Diego County.

<sup>8</sup> [Link](#)

<sup>9</sup> Page, Eric S., December 9, 2020, [“San Diego Got \\$6 Billion in PPP Loans. Who Got Them?” NBC San Diego. ProPublica, March 24, 2021, Coronavirus Bailouts: Approved Loans for California Organizations](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Link](#)

## San Diego County COVID-19 Unemployment Rate



Source: California Employment Development Department, Labor Market Information Division, <https://www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov/geography/sandiego-county.html>.

the state. In San Diego County, thousands of food businesses benefited from PPP loans to cover payroll for their workers and other fixed costs; however, evidently, loans were not granted equitably. Federal loan and business data provided by the journalism nonprofit Reveal’s Reporting Networks and reported by KPBS show that businesses in San Diego County’s majority White census tracts received 61% of PPP loans, whereas businesses in majority Hispanic/ Latinx census tracts received less than 12%.<sup>10</sup>

The Reveal analysis shows rates of businesses receiving loans in South County’s low-income, communities of color—including Imperial Beach, Skyline, San Ysidro, Nestor and Paradise Hills—all at 5% or below, whereas in White-majority, North County communities—including Carlsbad, Poway, Torrey Highlands and Encinitas—96% to 99% of eligible businesses received PPP loans.

The primary reason for this discrepancy is the same reason minority-owned businesses have always struggled in the United States: the banking system. Because PPP loans were routed through the Small Business Administration (SBA), which has been funding small business ventures since the 1950s, many businesses found they needed to have an existing relationship with an SBA lender to qualify for the PPP loan—something most small

businesses owned by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). Additionally, the need to provide extensive financial documentation, complete lengthy applications, and be highly computer literate in order to complete the application process has always been a barrier for BIPOC business owners.

Similar barriers existed for small farms and fisheries. While farmers and fishermen were eligible to apply for relief and small business loans, including PPP and the SBA’s Economic Injury Disaster Loan and Grants (EIDL), most programs did not reach businesses. San Diego County farms and fisheries are small and employ few workers, so the impact of PPP was limited. Additionally, although farmers became eligible in the second round, the first round of EIDL, disbursed during the most critical first weeks of the pandemic, were initially not made available to farmers.

Moreover, most federal aid packages consistently left out



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undocumented workers. In response, the State of California created a \$125 million Coronavirus Disaster Relief Assistance for Immigrants fund for undocumented adults that was expected to reach 150,000 people. While this support was welcomed and gratefully received, the COVID-19 Farmworker Study (based on a statewide California survey of 915 farmworkers and 63 interviews that included San Diego County farmworkers) noted several challenges in accessing this aid, including inconvenient agency office hours, lack of information, geographic distance, scheduling conflicts, language barriers, and transportation challenges.<sup>11</sup>

Under California’s one-time, state-funded disaster relief assistance effort, qualifying adults could receive \$500 in direct assistance, with a maximum of \$1000 in assistance per household—critical relief, but only a drop in the bucket for most families. The aid was largely exhausted by July 2020, and future bills did not include additional direct financial aid.

A national survey of 2,800 restaurant workers in May 2021 found that 53% were considering leaving their job since the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-existing conditions in the restaurant industry—low wages and tips, sexual harassment, racial inequities—were the top reasons cited for workers leaving their jobs.

Lifting up wages, working conditions, and career pathways for our region’s food system workers is essential.

<sup>11</sup> Bade, Bonnie, Sarah Ramirez, and Dvera Saxton, 2021, [CQES Phase Two Preliminary Report: Always Essential, Perpetually Disposable: California Farmworkers and the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), [COVID-19 Farmworker Study](#)

<sup>12</sup> One Fair Wage, U.C. Berkeley Food Labor Research Center, May 2021, [It’s a Wage Shortage, Not a Worker Shortage](#)

# Core Challenges

The core challenges to elevating wages and working conditions and improving career pathways in San Diego County are:

- Addressing Wage Atagnation and Low Wages
- Increasing Benefits And Workplace Protections
- Expanding Participation In Labor Unions
- Transforming Immigration Policies



# Addressing Wage Stagnation and Low Wages

For the past four decades, wage growth for the vast majority of workers in the United States has been slow, uneven, and unequal. The earnings of the bottom 90% of U.S. wage earners grew by only 24% over the past 40 years, while the top 1% of wage earners saw a 158% increase and the top 0.1% of wage earners experienced a 341% increase (Figure 2).<sup>13</sup>

There are many reasons for wage stagnation and low wages, including our rising dependence on cheap imports, increased automation, and the growing impact of “monopsony power”—the ability of companies to depress wages due to lack of competition for workers.<sup>14</sup> Other reasons include the lack of growth in the federal minimum wage, declining union memberships, and financial deregulation that has led to enormous growth in the compensation of managers.<sup>15</sup> A growing informal economy, declining manufacturing and production jobs, and increasing service sector jobs are also implicated.<sup>16</sup>

## GENDER AND RACIAL WAGE GAP

While the majority of workers in the United States have been impacted by rising wage inequality and wage stagnation, women, BIPOC communities, and hourly wage earners in particular have been disproportionately affected. Nationally, the gender and racial hourly wage gap has barely moved over the past 20 years. Women, Black Americans, and Hispanic/Latinx Americans tend to have hourly earnings that are closer to White men at the lower end of the earnings spectrum, but the earnings gap progressively grows at higher wages (Figures 3 through 5).



<sup>13</sup> Gould, Elise, February 20, 2020, “[State of Working America Wages 2019](#),” Economic Policy Institute

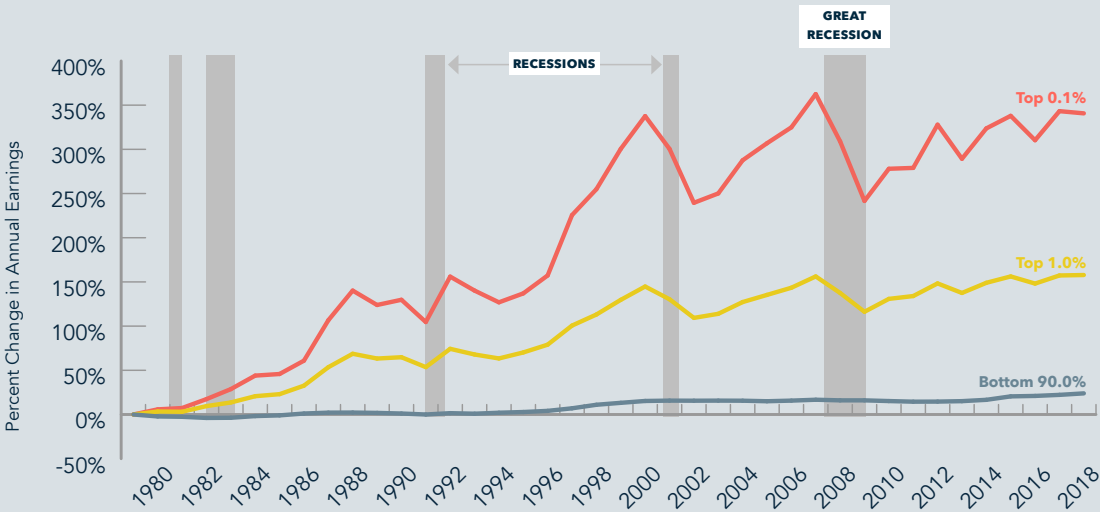
<sup>14</sup> Benmelech, Efraim, Nittai K. Bergman, and Hyunseob Kim, December 2, 2019, “[What’s Causing Wage Stagnation in America?](#)” KelloggInsight, Agriculture. Benmelech, Efraim, Nittai K. Bergman, and Hyunseob Kim, February 2018, “[Strong Employers and Weak Employees: How Does Employer Concentration Affect Wages?](#),” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series

<sup>15</sup> Mishel, Lawrence, January 6, 2015, “[Causes of Wage Stagnation](#),” Economic Policy Institute

<sup>16</sup> Desilver, Drew, August 7, 2018, “[For Most U.S. Workers, Real Wages Have Barely Budged in Decades](#),” Pew Research Centre

FIGURE 2

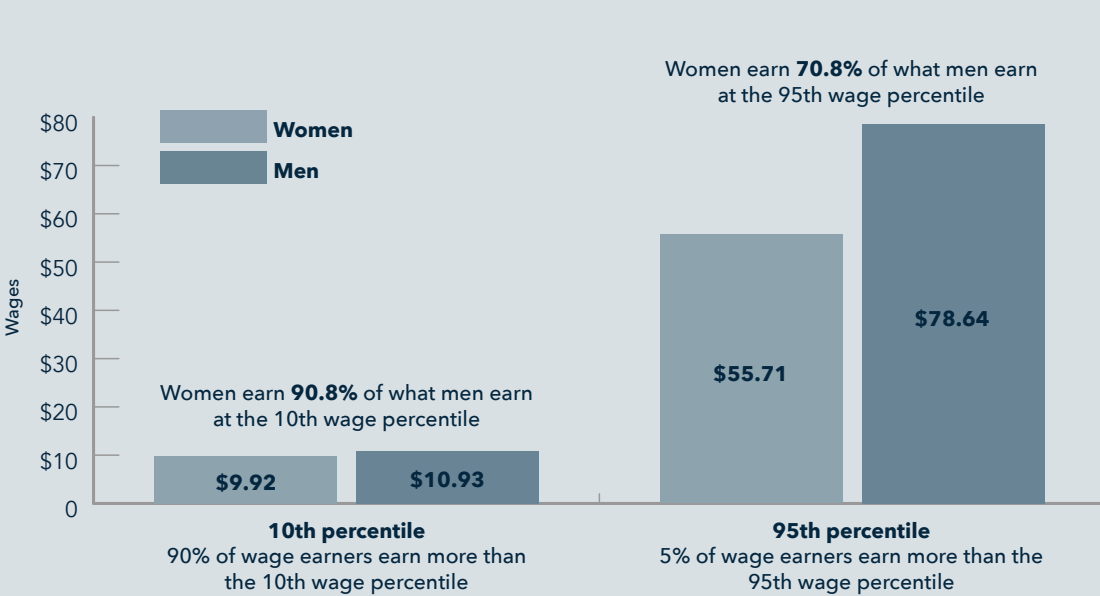
Cumulative Percent Change in Real Annual Earnings in the United States



Source: EPI analysis of Kopczuk, Saez, and Song, *Earnings Inequality and Mobility in the United States: Evidence from Social Security Data Since 1937* (2010), Table A3, and Social Security Administration wage statistics, as constructed by Mishel and Kassa; see “Top 1.0% of Earners See Wages Up 157.8% Since 1979” (December 2019).

FIGURE 3

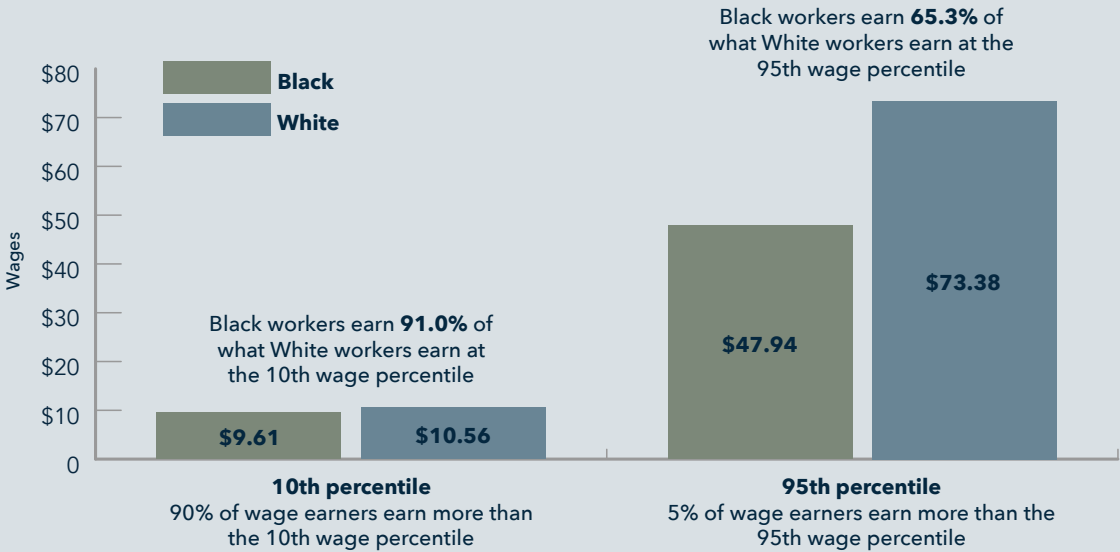
U.S. Wage Disparities Between Women and Men, 2019



Source: Gould, Elise, February 20, 2020, *State of Working America Wages 2019*, <https://www.epi.org/publication/swa-wages-2019/>.

FIGURE 4

U.S. Wage Disparities Between Black Workers and White Workers, 2019



Source: Gould, Elise, February 20, 2020, [State of Working America Wages 2019](#).

<sup>17</sup> [Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, Ending Jim Crow in America's Restaurants: Racial and Gender Occupational Segregation in the Restaurant Industry](#)

<sup>18</sup> San Diego Workforce Partnership, August 16, 2019, [Challenges and Opportunities for Retail in San Diego County](#)

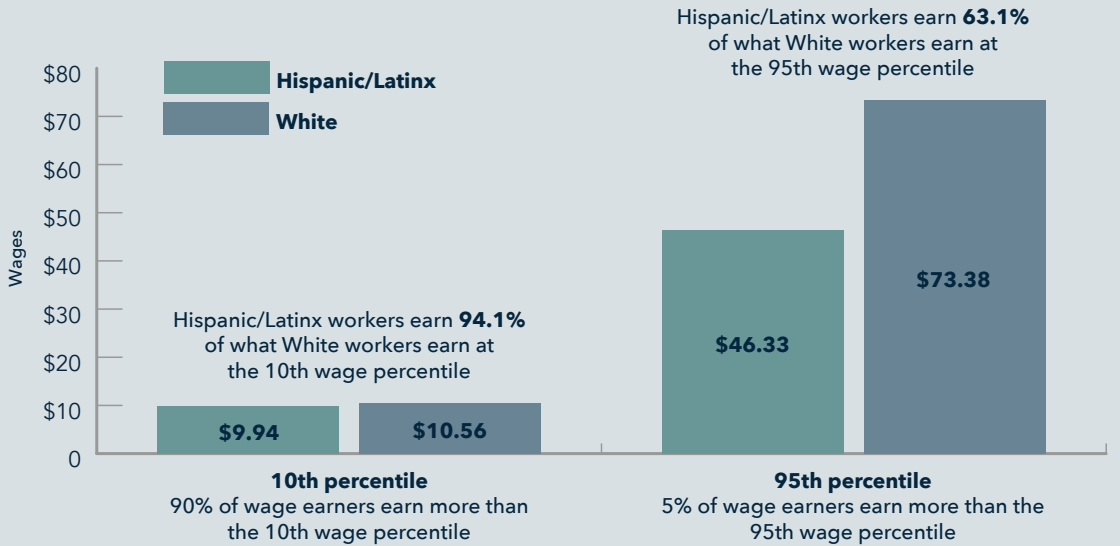
National research finds that occupational segregation—disproportionate rates of representation of race, ethnic, and/or gender-based groups in different job titles—is a reality in the food system. The restaurant industry, in particular, is “effectively segregated by race and gender by a partition between livable-wage server and bartender positions and poverty wage busser, runner, and kitchen positions, and between limited service (fast food), full service casual, and full service fine-dining restaurants.” Despite California’s progressive reputation, occupational segregation and wage inequality are significant. For example, Hispanic/Latinx Californians make up 52% of all restaurant employees but 65% of back-of-the-house workers.

The [San Diego Workforce Partnership](#) (SDWP) found that national trends of gender and racial hourly wage gaps are also apparent in San Diego County’s retail sector. The SDWP analysis shows that women working in retail earn less than men, and work fewer hours—likely a consequence of the disproportionate obligation placed on women to prioritize childrearing and family obligations. The good news, according to the SDWP, is that while women in retail are paid less on average, they don’t appear to be excluded from higher-earning occupations. The same SDWP study found that in retail, occupations mainly staffed by white workers are significantly higher-earning than those staffed by nonwhite workers.<sup>17</sup>

Analyzing wage gaps by race shows that BIPOC San Diegans are much more likely than White San Diegans to work in low-wage occupations, including many food system jobs (Figure 6).

FIGURE 5

U.S. Wage Disparities Between Hispanic/Latinx Workers and White Workers, 2019



Source: Gould, Elise, February 20, 2020, [State of Working America Wages 2019](#).

FIGURE 6

Total Occupation Wages by Percent White in San Diego County



Source: Adapted from “[Challenges and Opportunities for Retail in San Diego County](#),” San Diego Workforce Partnership.

SDWP research reveals that 8% of variation in median wages across occupations in San Diego County can be attributed solely to the portion of White workers of the particular occupation.<sup>18</sup> That figure grows to 25% when both White and Asian workers are included. In other words: higher wage jobs tend to employ White and Asian workers, while lower wage jobs tend to employ Hispanic/Latinx and Black workers.<sup>19</sup>

If we look at the percentage of White workers for only food system occupations, we find that 29% of the variation in median wages can be attributed to the racial composition of the occupation (Figure 7). For example, we see that back-of-the-house occupations like fast food cooks (73% BIPOC), restaurant cooks (72% BIPOC), and food preparation workers (67% BIPOC) are overwhelmingly BIPOC and low wage. Front-of-the house jobs like waiters and waitresses (54% BIPOC) and bartenders (36% BIPOC) have slightly higher wages.

WAGES FOR FOOD SYSTEM WORKERS IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

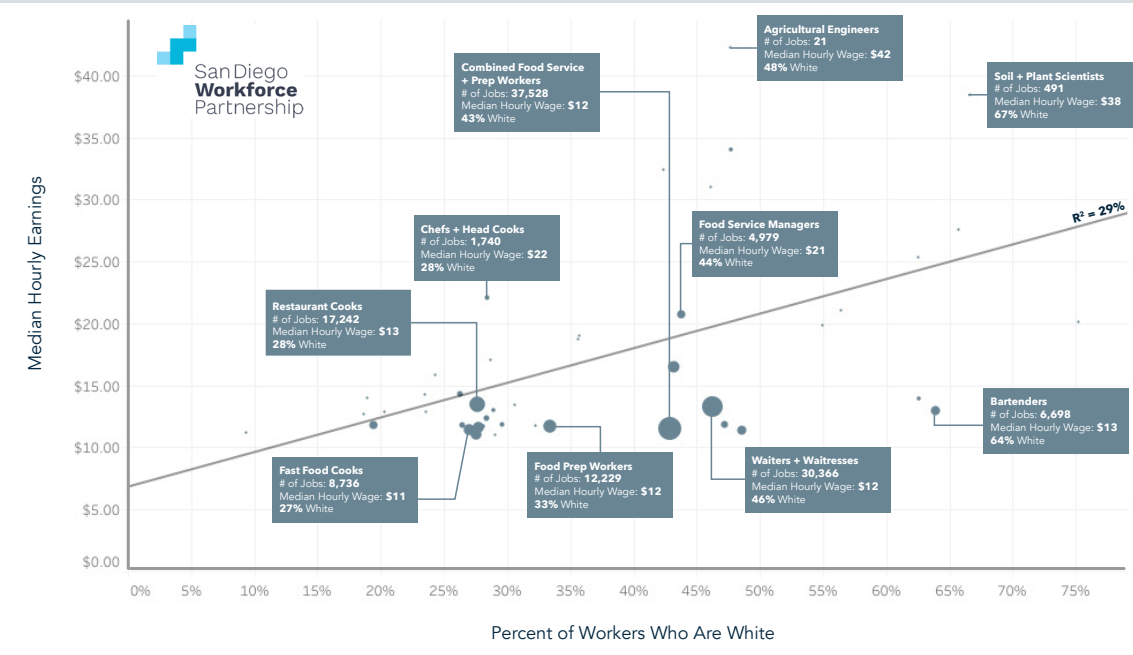
Nationally and in San Diego County, food workers have the lowest median hourly wages (\$13.15) of any major occupational category (Figure 8).



<sup>19</sup> Enemark, Daniel, September 16, 2020, “San Diego’s Racial Equity Gap: How We Got Here.” San Diego Workforce Partnership

FIGURE 7

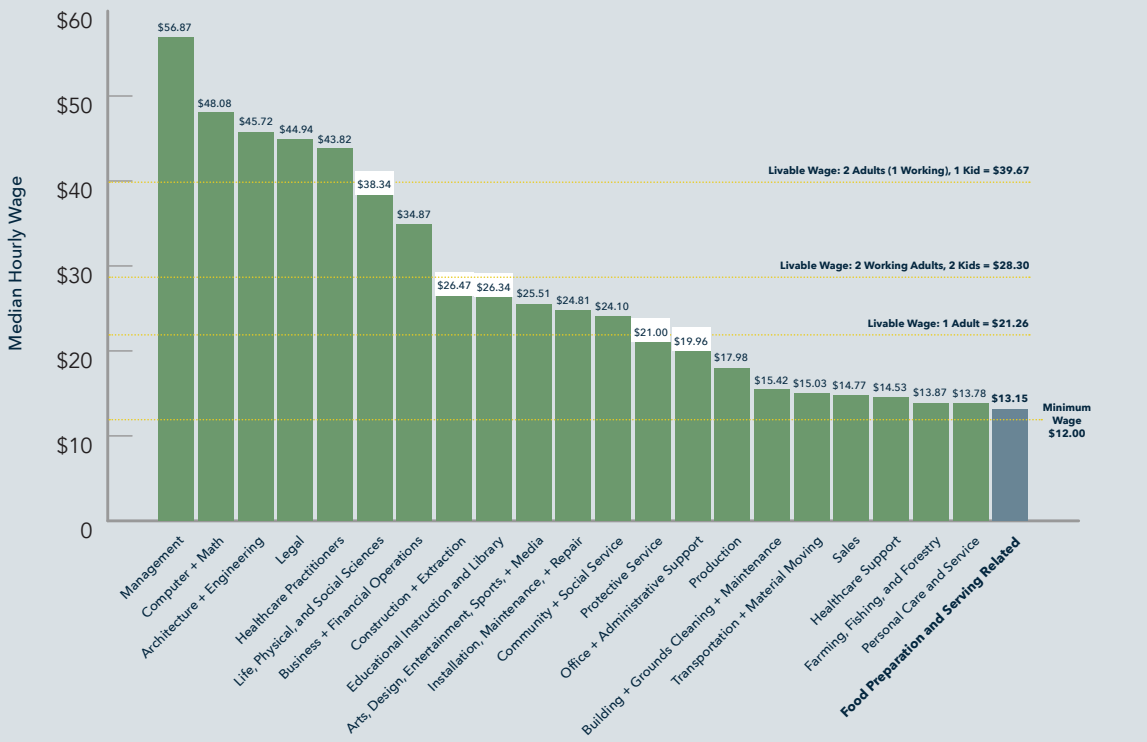
U.S. Wage Disparities Between Hispanic/Latinx Workers and White Workers, 2019



Source: Adapted from “Challenges and Opportunities for Retail in San Diego County,” San Diego Workforce Partnership

FIGURE 8

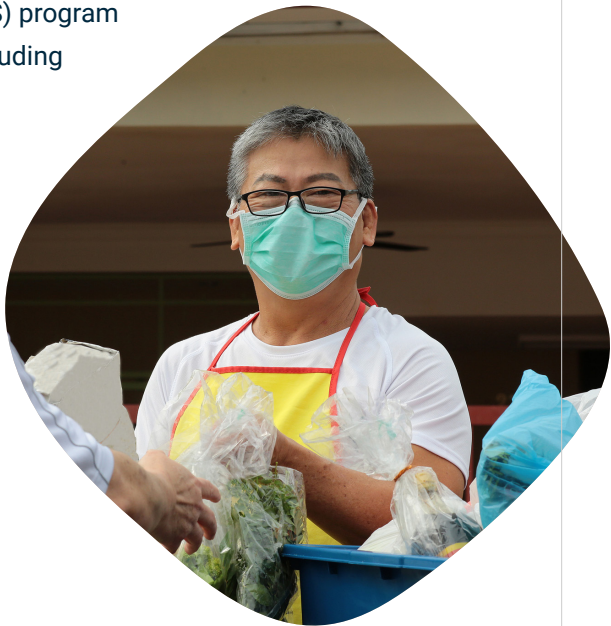
Median Hourly Wages in San Diego-Carlsbad by Major Occupational Title, 2019



Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, May 2019 Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates: San Diego-Carlsbad, CA. Livable wages: Living Wage Calculator, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



The Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) program generates wage estimates for nearly 800 occupations, including many food system jobs. Data for the San Diego-Carlsbad metropolitan area shows that median hourly wages for all food system jobs were above California’s 2019 minimum wage (\$12), but most were well below livable wage levels (Figure 9).



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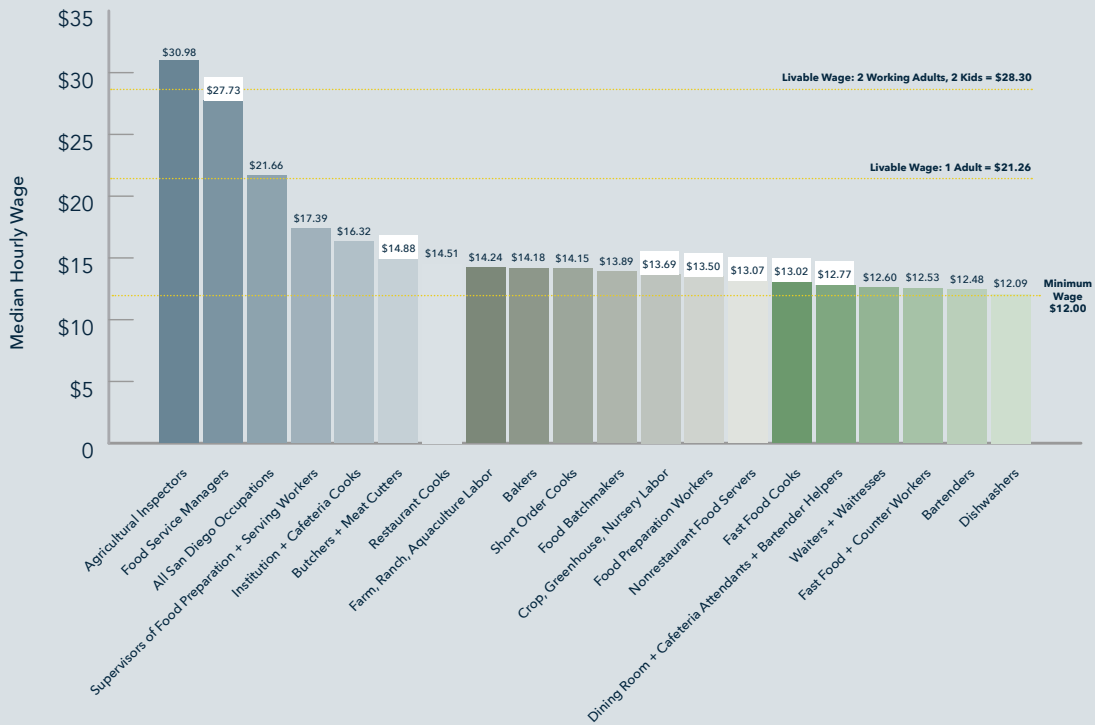
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FIGURE 9

Median Hourly Wages in San Diego-Carlsbad by Major Occupational Title, 2019



Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, [May 2019 Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates: San Diego-Carlsbad, CA](#). Livable wages: [Living Wage Calculator](#), Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Note: data for Chefs and Head Cooks for 2019 was suppressed.

Food service occupations, particularly at restaurants and bars, are disproportionately dependent on tipping for wages. Research highlights five ways that tipping encourages racism, sexism, harassment, and exploitation:

- **Tipping reflects and amplifies racial inequality:** White servers and bartenders make more than other groups.
- **Tipping encourages racial profiling:** Racial profiling over expected tips leads to differential treatment for BIPOC, particularly Black, customers.
- **Tipping widens opportunity gaps between White Servers and BIPOC servers:** White servers are more likely to be employed at fine dining restaurants.
- **Tipping fosters high sexual harassment rates:** In particular, women working in restaurants in states with lower minimum wages for tipped employees report higher rates of sexual harassment than women who work in states with one minimum wage.
- **Tipping encourages worker exploitation:** Food services, like restaurants, have the largest amount of back wages owed of any industry.<sup>20</sup>

The widespread prevalence of wage theft, the denial of wages or employee benefits rightfully owed to an employee, exacerbates the already low wages for food system workers. Wage theft can be conducted by employers in various ways, including failing to pay overtime, violating minimum-wage laws, misclassifying employees as independent contractors, taking illegal deductions in pay, forcing employees to work “off the clock,” not paying annual leave or holiday entitlements, or simply not paying an employee at all.

A survey of 2,770 workers—including many food system workers<sup>21</sup>—conducted by the Center on Policy Initiatives also found that unpredictable scheduling practices implemented by employers made it challenging for people to plan family activities, social engagements, medical appointments, shifts at second jobs, class attendance, and other important life obligations.<sup>22</sup>

### MOST FOOD SYSTEM WAGES DO NOT PROVIDE AN ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING

The Economic Policy Institute's (EPI) Family Budget Calculator measures the income a family needs to attain a modest yet adequate standard of living. They estimate community-specific costs for 10 different family types in all counties and metro areas in the country. EPI considers their family budgets a more realistic measure of economic security compared to the federal poverty line and the Supplemental Poverty Measure. They estimate that one adult with no children would need about \$47,000 for a modest standard of living in San Diego County, while two adults and two children would need nearly \$98,000. The average annual salary for all industries in San Diego County in 2019 was about \$63,000. Most food system jobs in the region do not meet the EPI family budgets (Table 1).

Table 1: San Diego County Food System Employment, 2019

Category	Employment	Average Annual Salary
Budget required for modest standard of living for 1 Adult with No Children in San Diego County		\$46,834
Budget required for modest standard of living for 2 Adults with 2 Children in San Diego County		\$97,547
Average Annual Salary in Private Sector, All Industries		\$62,674
FOOD PRODUCTION		
Fishing	347 (2018)	\$76,691 (2018)
Support Activities for Crop Production	1,226	\$30,278
Support Activities for Animal Production	968 (2017)	\$36,864 (2017)
Total Farm Operators*	8,703	\$53,690
Hired Farmworkers*	12,335	\$30,800 (Crop, nursery, greenhouse) \$31,430 (Ranch, aquaculture)
Hired Farmworkers**	14,700	Not estimated
FOOD AND BEVERAGE MANUFACTURING		
Food Manufacturing	6,855	\$42,479
Bakeries and Tortilla Manufacturing	3,366	\$33,795
Breweries***	2,884	\$41,001
Food Product Machinery Manufacturing	76	\$58,031

Category	Employment	Average Annual Salary
DISTRIBUTION AND STORAGE		
Grocery and Related Product Merchant Wholesalers	5,678	\$56,654
Farm Product Raw Material Merchant Wholesalers	120	\$133,391
Beer, Wine, and Distilled Alcoholic Beverage Merchant Wholesalers	1,252	\$79,699
Farm Supplies Merchants Wholesalers	225	\$51,172
FOOD AND BEVERAGE STORES		
Supermarkets and Other Grocery Stores	25,362	\$30,423
Convenience Stores	2,268	\$22,318
Specialty Food Stores	2805	\$28,007
Beer, Wine, and Liquor Stores	1,900	\$20,492
Food, Health, Supplement Stores	371	\$36,320
Warehouse Clubs and Supercenters****	10,493 (2016)	\$32,057 (2016)
Vending Machine Operators	397	\$49,904
FOOD SERVICES AND DRINKING PLACES		
Full-Service Restaurants	67,147	\$26,018
Limited-Service Restaurants	48,624	\$20,015
Cafeterias, Grill Buffets, and Buffets	1,198	\$20,535
Snack and Nonalcoholic Beverage Bars	12,086	\$19,621

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Category	Employment	Average Annual Salary
FOOD SERVICES AND DRINKING PLACES		
Food Service Contractors	4,119	\$33,518
Caterers	2,322	\$27,660
Mobile Food Services	362	\$21,677
Drinking Places	4,268	\$23,064
COMMUNITY FOOD SERVICES		
Community Food Services	335	\$37,099
AGRICULTURAL MARKET AND COMMODITY REGULATION		
Federal Government	48	\$90,378
State Government	128	\$64,350

**Source:** U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages.

**Note:** Overall, our estimates undercount the number of food system jobs and businesses since they exclude a variety of service providers (e.g., nonprofit organizations, educational institutions) or supporting businesses.

\* Data on the number of farmers and farmworkers comes from the USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture; annual salary estimate comes from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics.

\*\* 2014 estimate based on Social Security Numbers for 829,000 hired farmworkers in California.

\*\*\* Data for Beverage Manufacturing (312) has been suppressed since 2013.

\*\*\*\* Data for Warehouse Clubs and Supercenters has been suppressed since 2016.

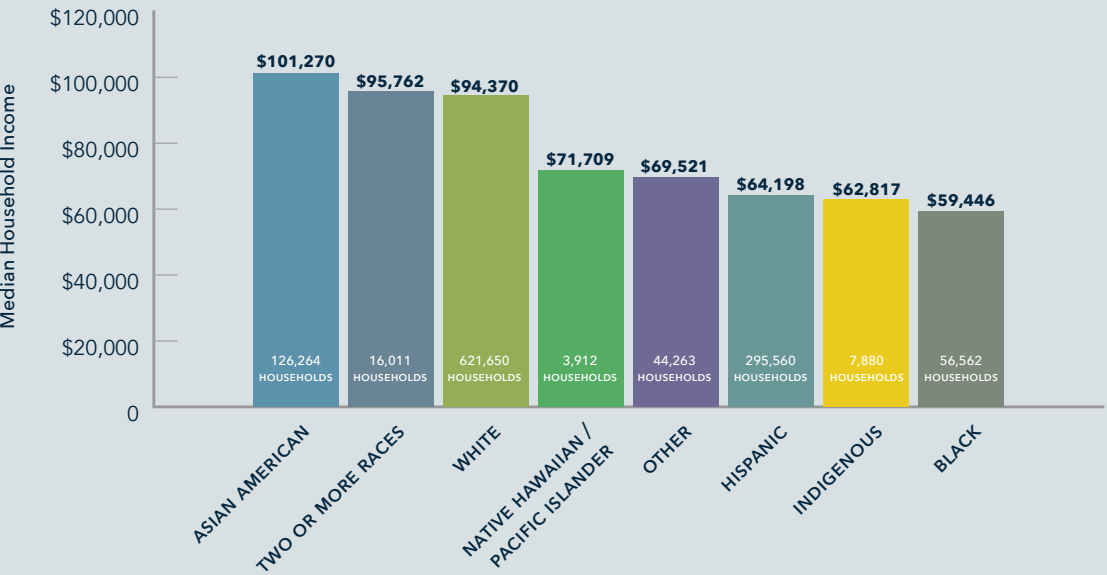
## THE HIGH COST OF LIVING IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

San Diego County is an expensive place to live. As in other parts of the country, wages in the region have not kept pace with the rising cost of living. Increases in the cost of rent often follow rises in the minimum wage and eliminate any potential gains. Communities of color, many of which are food system workers, are disproportionately impacted.

In San Diego County, Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latinx have significantly lower median household incomes (Figure 10) and are more likely to rent their homes (Figure 11).

FIGURE 10

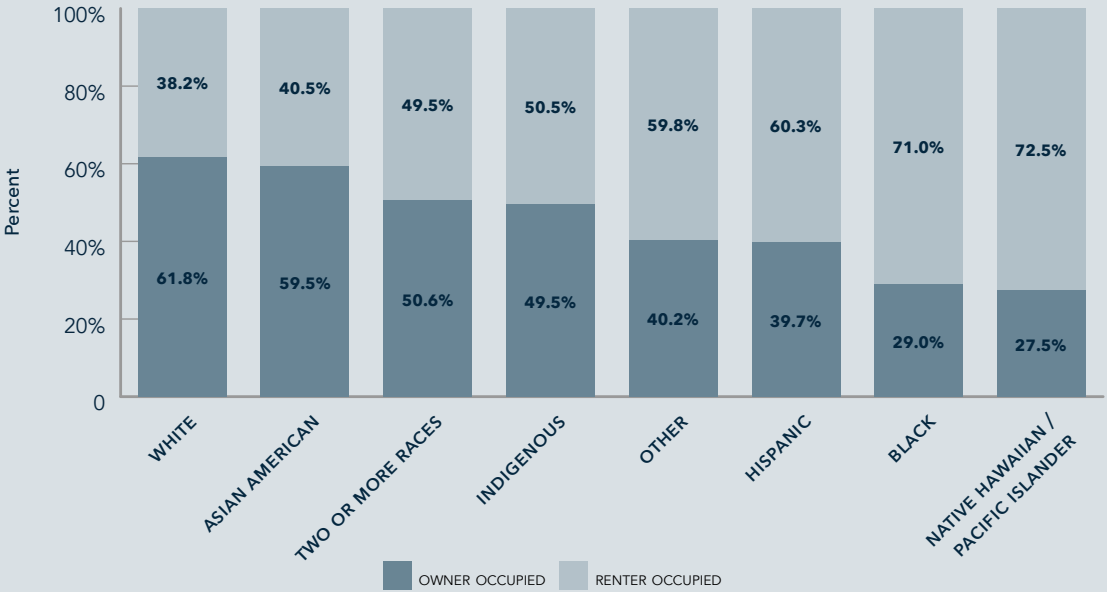
San Diego County Median Household Income by Race/Ethnicity



**Source:** Census Reporter, [Median Household Income in the Past 12 Months \(In 2019 Inflation-adjusted Dollars\)](#), Table B19013.

FIGURE 11

San Diego County Median Household Income by Race/Ethnicity



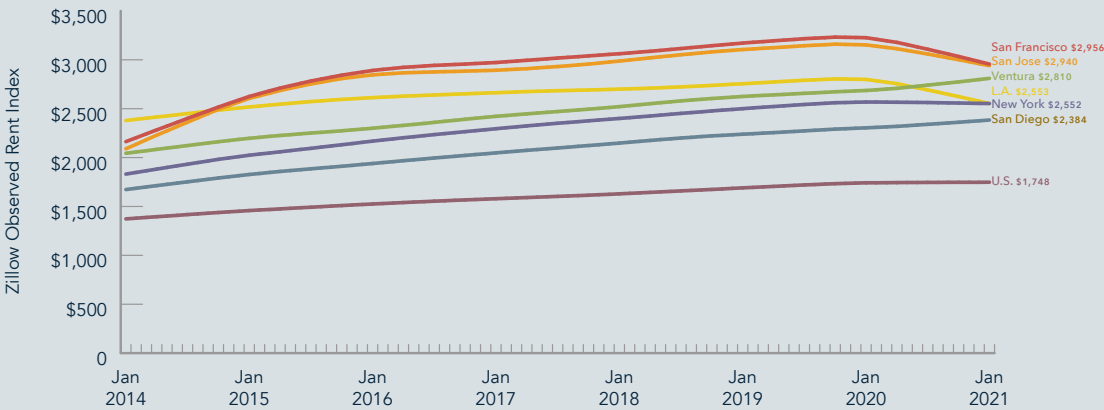
**Source:** United States Census Bureau, Table B25003 [Tenure, 2019: ACS 5-Year Estimates](#).



Zillow estimates that the San Diego metropolitan region has the fifth highest observed rents in the country (Figure 12).

FIGURE 12

Southern California Family Budget Calculator



Source: Zillow, March 22, 2021, Zillow Observed Rent Index, <https://www.zillow.com/research/data/?kbid=93121>.

According to the Economic Policy Institute's (EPI) [Family Budget Calculator](#), San Diego County residents require the third largest family budgets in Southern California, after Ventura and Orange counties (Table 2).

Table 2: Southern California Family Budget Calculator

County	1 Adult, No Children	2 Adults, 2 Children
Ventura	\$48,633	\$105,269
Orange	\$49,564	\$105,269
San Diego	\$46,834	\$97,547
Los Angeles	\$42,825	\$92,295
Riverside	\$37,753	\$79,675
San Bernardino	\$36,159	\$76,956
Imperial	\$35,012	\$74,628

Source: Economic Policy Institute, [Family Budget Calculator](#).



High Road Kitchens

Mikey Knab runs three restaurants and works with more than 800 restaurant owners. He hates to tell you this, but those breadsticks aren't free. Neither is having accessible housing, childcare, and insurance, but he doesn't often have to tell people that.

He's not shy about dispelling myths about the food industry whenever he gets a chance, but widespread biases continue. His personal mission is simple: Everyone deserves a living wage for their honest and earnest labor. That means the dishwasher, the barback, the hostess, the sous chef, the janitor.

But paying workers a living wage and giving away free or drastically discounted food items, like flashy, inexpensive specials, aren't compatible.

"The race to the bottom is not only hurting restaurant owners. Workers are hurt very badly by this," Knab said. "To find a way to make your food cheaper, you have to source it less responsibly, and cut the costs that you can control, which often means taking it from labor, the one variable that owners feel we have the most control over."

Seeking justice in the restaurant industry didn't become Knab's lifelong passion until college. It happened by accident, but it wasn't a mistake.

He had just finished a literature degree at UC San Diego and was in the process of applying to doctoral programs when he was sidetracked by an opportunity to work with his friends, who had recently taken over the well-loved [Ponce's Mexican Restaurant](#). He loved that the family-owned business was a valuable contributor to the community—not just in terms of providing vital jobs for its workers, but also a place for celebrations, sustenance, and socializing.

He took over the operations of Ponce's in 2007 and soon opened new restaurants in Portland, OR and San Diego's North County.

Knab has a vision for restaurant employees being able to afford living near their place of work. At Ponce's, he strives to pay all employees livable wages so that this is possible. It's a radical concept because restaurant employees, especially back-of-the-house, historically receive extremely low wages. Low staff wages are not caused by a lack of empathy from many restaurant owners. For many, it's a lack of confidence that customers, higher-status



employees, and the restaurant community at large will care enough about lower-paid workers to not question necessary changes to compensation and menu pricing, and being more vocal about larger policy challenges, that would make more equitable pay possible.Knab does not lack this confidence.

His program, [High Road Kitchens](#), conceived in response to COVID-19, provides a combination of public and private dollars to restaurant owners who commit to ensuring livable wages and increased equity for their employees when the industry fully re-opens in 2021. Restaurants in the program also commit to providing food on a sliding scale to low-wage workers, health care workers, first responders, and others in need. Finally, they follow High Road employment practices—specifically wage, race, and gender equity in recruitment, hiring, training, and promotional practices.

"The pandemic has revealed a pathway to a new future for the service sector," the program's website says. It launched with a first cohort of 50 independent restaurants in California, with the support of Governor Newsom.

[RAISE: High Road Restaurants](#) is the broader network organization under which the High Road Kitchens program falls, which Knab also oversees. It houses additional programs and strategies for achieving the long-term vision of transforming the service sector. The network provides resources and training to its member restaurants, monthly conversations, peer-to-peer learning opportunities, consumer education resources, and connects a nationwide community of like-minded owners committed to taking care of their employees.

Supported by [One Fair Wage](#), both the High Road Kitchens program and RAISE: High Road Restaurants network are on a mission to ensure that all workers have a secured, dignified job with a clearly communicated path to growth.

While Knab has his sights set high with the nationwide High Road family, he is still dedicated to the people and places that make up his home community. He serves as the Board Chair for [Business For Good San Diego](#), saying, "I love being a part of Business For Good San Diego because it allows me to serve my community in more significant and meaningful ways. I feel immense satisfaction from knowing that we work hard to change policies that improve the lives of the people living in our communities."

■

Increasing Benefits and Workplace Protections

Limited benefits and workplace protections are prevalent across many food system jobs. According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s most recent National Compensation Survey, food service workers consistently ranked the lowest compared to all other occupational categories in terms of the number of workers having access to retirement benefits, healthcare benefits, paid holidays, paid sick leave, paid vacations, paid personal leave, paid funeral leave, paid military leave, and paid family leave.<sup>23</sup>

As a result of low wages and limited benefits, many food system workers, especially workers in food preparation and service, are disproportionately dependent on public benefits. A [U.C. Berkeley Labor Center study](#) of frontline fast food workers found that 87% did not receive health benefits through their employer, and that over 50% were enrolled in one or more public benefit programs, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), CalFresh (California’s SNAP program), Food Assistance, or Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT)—and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

Based on an 11-state analysis by the [U.S. Government Accountability Office](#) (GAO), restaurants and other eating places—a category that includes establishments ranging from sit-down restaurants to fast food franchises and independent pizza shops—employed the largest percentage of working adult Medicaid enrollees in five of six states that provided data. This category also employed the largest percentage of working adult SNAP recipients in seven of nine states that provided data.<sup>24</sup> Walmart was one of the top four employers of SNAP and Medicaid beneficiaries in every state. McDonald’s was in the top five of employers with employees receiving federal benefits in at least nine states.

The annual cost for public assistance to families of fast food workers alone was about \$7 billion, with an additional \$1 billion in SNAP benefits and \$1.91 billion in Earned Income Tax Credit payments.<sup>25</sup> There is compelling evidence that raising the federal minimum wage could raise the annual earnings of low-wage workers and reduce federal expenditures on public assistance programs by between \$13.4 billion and \$31.0 billion.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to providing limited benefits, many food system jobs are also prone to dangerous conditions. Across all occupations, fishermen experience the highest fatal injury rate, truck drivers seventh highest, and farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers (including farmworkers) ninth highest.<sup>27</sup> A 2015 study estimated that 79% of fast food workers had been burned and 87% had experienced some type of injury.<sup>28</sup>



During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA) highlighted the failure of employers and government agencies to provide workplace protections to minimize worker exposure to the virus. Specifically, FCWA identified that farm employers across the country were not universally complying with CDC or state guidelines, regularly disinfecting workplaces, providing sanitizers, masks, or gloves, or making any changes so that farmworkers could work at a safe distance from others. FCWA also highlighted that workers did not receive

additional compensation in spite of the extra risks they were taking.<sup>29</sup>

The COVID-19 Farmworker Study, both [Phase 1](#) and [Phase 2](#), found similar issues for California farmworkers, including challenges with sanitation, hygiene, safety training, social distancing, anxiety, and barriers to health care.<sup>30</sup>

Undocumented workers experience further challenges. While most federal and state labor laws, including those regarding wages and safety training, protect all workers equally, regardless of immigration status, many undocumented workers either do not know these rights or are afraid to report any abuses for fear of deportation.

<sup>26</sup> Zipperer, Ben, David Cooper, and Josh Bivens, February 2, 2021, [“A \\$15 Minimum Wage Would Have Significant and Direct Effects on the Federal Budget.”](#) Economic Policy Institute

<sup>27</sup> United States Government Accountability Office, July 2015, [Federal Low-Income Programs: Multiple Programs Target Diverse Populations and Needs](#)

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 16, 2020, [Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries Summary, 2019, Table 5. Fatal Work Injury Rates Per 100,000 Full-Time Equivalent Workers by Selected Occupations, 2019](#)

<sup>29</sup> Hart Research Associates, March 16, 2015, [Key Findings From a Survey on Fast Food Worker Safety](#)

<sup>30</sup> The County of San Diego Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures (AWM) partnered with the California Department of Food and Agriculture to host outreach and distribution events to protect agricultural workers’ health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. As of May 2021, AWM has provided about 830,552 pieces of personal protective equipment and sanitizing supplies at no cost to local farmers since the start of the pandemic. AWM continues to conduct outreach with the local agricultural community for COVID-19 testing and vaccinations to ensure these services are reaching critical workers of our local food system.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, September 2020, [National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2020](#)  
Note: statistics for other food system occupations were not available.

<sup>24</sup> United States Government Accountability Office, July 2015, [Federal Low-Income Programs: Multiple Programs Target Diverse Populations and Needs](#)

<sup>25</sup> Allegretto, Sylvia, et al., October 15, 2013, [Fast Food, Poverty Wages: The Public Cost of Low-Wage Jobs in the Fast-Food Industry, U.C. Berkeley Labor Center](#)



Commentary

Informality and Food Work

PASCALE JOASSART-MARCELLI, PROFESSOR OF GEOGRAPHY, URBAN STUDIES PROGRAM DIRECTOR, SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

For many workers, long-term job security, employment benefits, and work protections are a thing of the past. As our economy bounces from crisis to crisis, a growing number of people earn a living through freelancing, temporary gigs, or what is known as informal work—labor arrangements characterized by the lack of enforcement of existing legal or social protections. Economic informality preys on vulnerable workers, including immigrants, people of color, and women who face significant barriers of entry into formal jobs, and exacerbates their vulnerability by removing the safety net to which they are entitled. About 30 million people work informally in the United States and this number has been rising, especially since the great recession—a fact that does not bode well for the anticipated post-COVID recovery.

Nowhere is informal labor more widespread than in the food economy. Regardless of the approach used to measure this elusive phenomenon, food services consistently emerge as the occupation with the most informal workers. Informality is also common in farming, food retail, and food manufacturing. In San Diego, there may be as many as 65,000 informal workers in the food economy alone.<sup>32</sup> From fields to food processing plants and restaurant kitchens, a large proportion of workers are hired “under the table.” This includes undocumented workers picking fruits for agricultural corporations and earning less than the minimum wage, factory bakers working night shifts without breaks or overtime pay, cooks in high-end restaurants working while sick because they would otherwise not be compensated and possibly lose their job, and misclassified food delivery workers pushed into self-employment through sub-contracting. Informal labor also comprises self-employed workers operating unreported businesses, such as some street vendors, home-based cooks, and growers, although such occupations represent a small fraction of the informal economy.

COVID has exposed rampant informality within the food industry, revealing the extensive lack of protections that have caused many food workers to get sick and die. In fact, economic informality



is one of the biggest risk factors as witnessed in the disproportionately high rates of mortality among restaurant, grocery, and farm workers in California, most of whom are Latinx. While some of us are able to telework and have groceries and meals delivered to our door, food workers have to show up for work to get food on their own tables and keep the economy going, whether or not they are provided with adequate protections.

The informalization of the food industry did not happen by accident. It is the result of economic restructuring and policy decisions that have created both a supply of vulnerable labor and a regulatory vacuum where it became easier (and cheaper) for employers to avoid existing laws.<sup>35</sup> For example, decisions to dismantle welfare, ignore or remove hard-fought labor protections, incarcerate massive numbers of people, prioritize shareholders over workers, reject universal healthcare, and fail to pass immigration reform have all contributed to the production of a very precarious workforce for whom informal work may be the only option to make ends meet. Such policies are based on the false notion that economies strive on low-cost labor. If instead, we were to consider the wellbeing of workers and their communities, we would support policies to curb informality while encouraging entrepreneurship. We could begin by enforcing existing regulations—not to punish the poor and criminalize their livelihoods as is often the case, but to protect them. It also involves envisioning creative ways to formalize informal jobs by organizing street vendors, streamlining business permitting processes, improving access to credit, providing technical assistance, creating pathways to citizenship, removing barriers to employment, and reweaving the social safety net that has been unraveling since the 1970s. There is no better and more urgent place to start than the food system: We all depend on it.

■ Expanding Participation in Labor Unions

Labor unions play an important role in uplifting the wages and working conditions of all workers. They uphold the right of workers to organize and collectively bargain. They protect against wage theft and harmful immigration policies. They raise wages, decrease gender and racial wage gaps, provide better benefits, and increase job security.

Research has shown the many benefits of unions. Women, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx who are represented by unions earn more money than those who are not represented by unions. Union workers are also more likely to have employer-provided health insurance and paid sick days.<sup>36</sup> Economic sectors with higher unionization rates experience lower rates of job loss than sectors that are largely non unionized.<sup>37</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, unions helped workers negotiate enhanced safety measures, additional premium pay, and paid sick time.<sup>38</sup>

Despite a long and rich labor organizing history, opposition to unions has increased over the years and consequently, the number of unions have decreased. Weak protections from the National Labor Relations Board, union busting, and anti-union campaigns have all played a prominent role in the decline of unions.<sup>39</sup>

Today, Amazon and many of the largest employers in the country are actively surveilling and retaliating against union organizing drives.<sup>40</sup> Many companies are also increasing their reliance on independent contractors, allowing them to dramatically reduce workplace benefits and protections. Unsurprisingly, the share of income going to the wealthiest individuals in the country has increased at the same time that union membership has decreased and wages have stagnated for most workers (Figure 13).



<sup>4</sup> Yea-Hung Chen, Maria Glymour, Alicia Riley, John Balmes, Kate Duchowny, Robert Harrison, Ellicott Matthay, Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo. 2021. [Excess Mortality Associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic among Californians 18–65 years of Age, by Occupational Sector and Occupation: March through October 2020](#). *MedRXiv*

<sup>35</sup> Pascale Joassart-Marcelli. 2019. [Neoliberalism, Globalization, and the Magnification of the Informal Economy](#)

<sup>36</sup> McNicholas, Celine, et al., August 25, 2020, [“Why Unions Are Good For Workers—Especially in a Crisis Like COVID-19.”](#) Economic Policy Institute

<sup>37</sup> McNicholas, Celine, Heidi Shierholz, and Margaret Poydock, January 22, 2021, [“Union Workers Had More Job Security During the Pandemic, But Unionization Remains Historically Low.”](#) Economic Policy Institute

<sup>38</sup> McNicholas, Celine, et al., August 25, 2020

<sup>39</sup> McNicholas, Celine, Heidi Shierholz, and Margaret Poydock, January 22, 2021

<sup>40</sup> Streitfeld, David, March 16, 2021, [“How Amazon Crushes Unions.”](#) The New York Times

<sup>31</sup> Pascale Joassart-Marcelli. 2019. [The New Normal: Freelancing, Hustling and Informal Labor](#)

<sup>32</sup> Pascale Joassart-Marcelli. 2021. The \$16 Taco: Contested Geographies of Food, Ethnicity, and Gentrification. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press

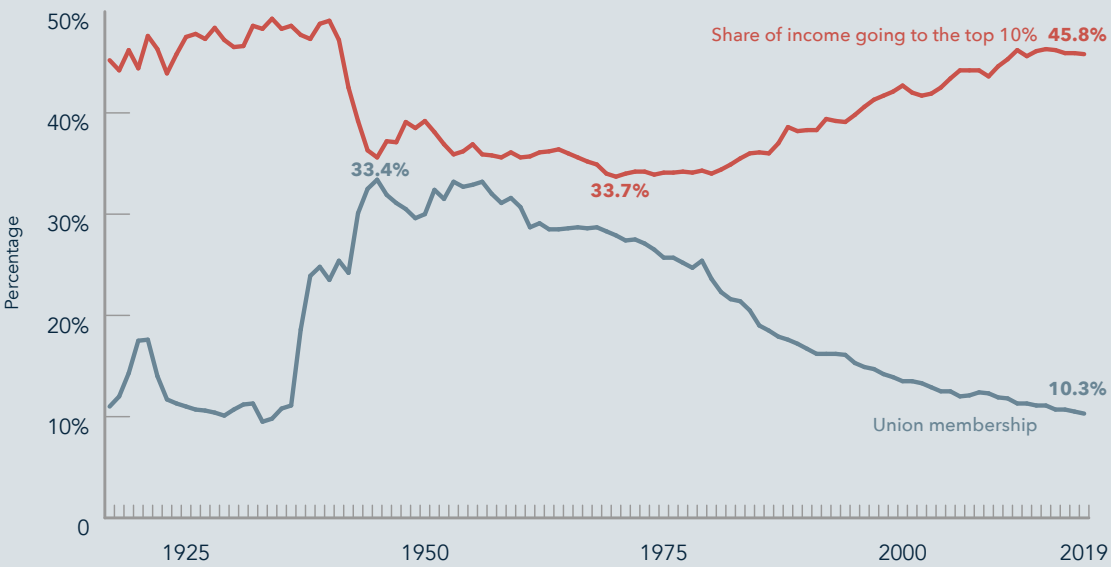
<sup>33</sup> Pascale Joassart-Marcelli. 2020. [The Pandemic Exposes Dangers of the Informal Economy. Foreign Affairs. May 18](#)



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FIGURE 13

Decrease in U.S. Union Membership and Increase in Income Inequality

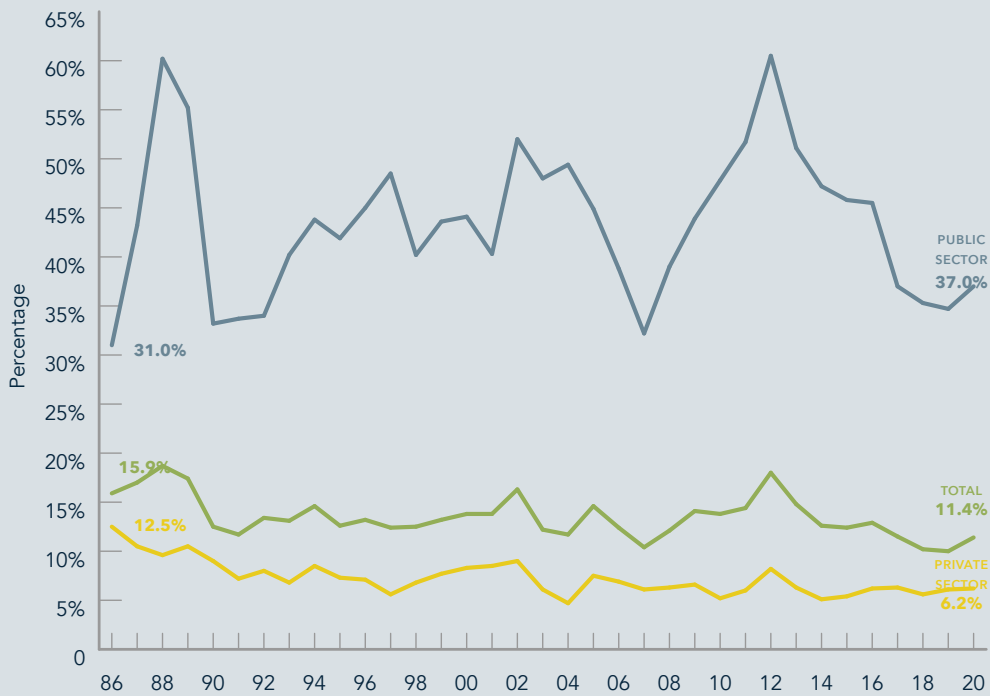


Source: McNicholas, Celine, Heidi Shierholz, and Margaret Poydock, January 22, 2021, [Union Workers Had More Job Security During the Pandemic, But Unionization Remains Historically Low](#), Economic Policy Institute.

Although detailed information on union membership in San Diego County is limited, trends have shown that total union membership has decreased, primarily in the private sector, from 33.7% in 1986 to 11.4% in 2020 (Figure 14).

FIGURE 14

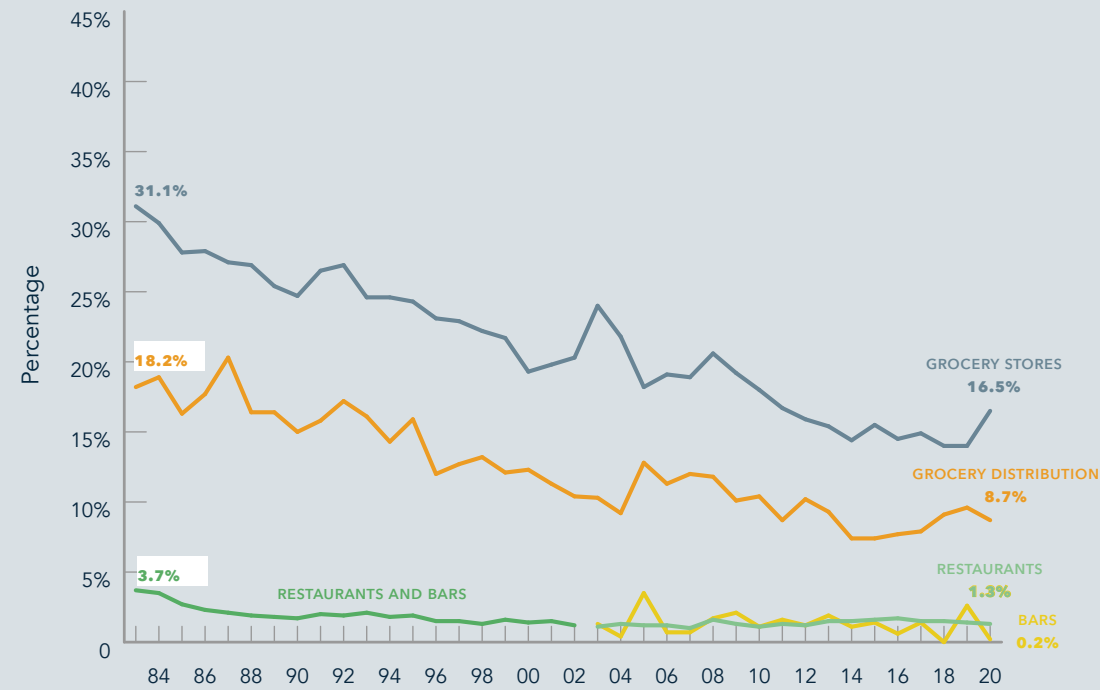
San Diego County Union Membership in Public and Private Sectors



Source: Current Population Survey, Outgoing Rotation Group Earnings File, prepared by Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson at [www.unionstats.com](#).

FIGURE 15

National Retail Food Union Membership

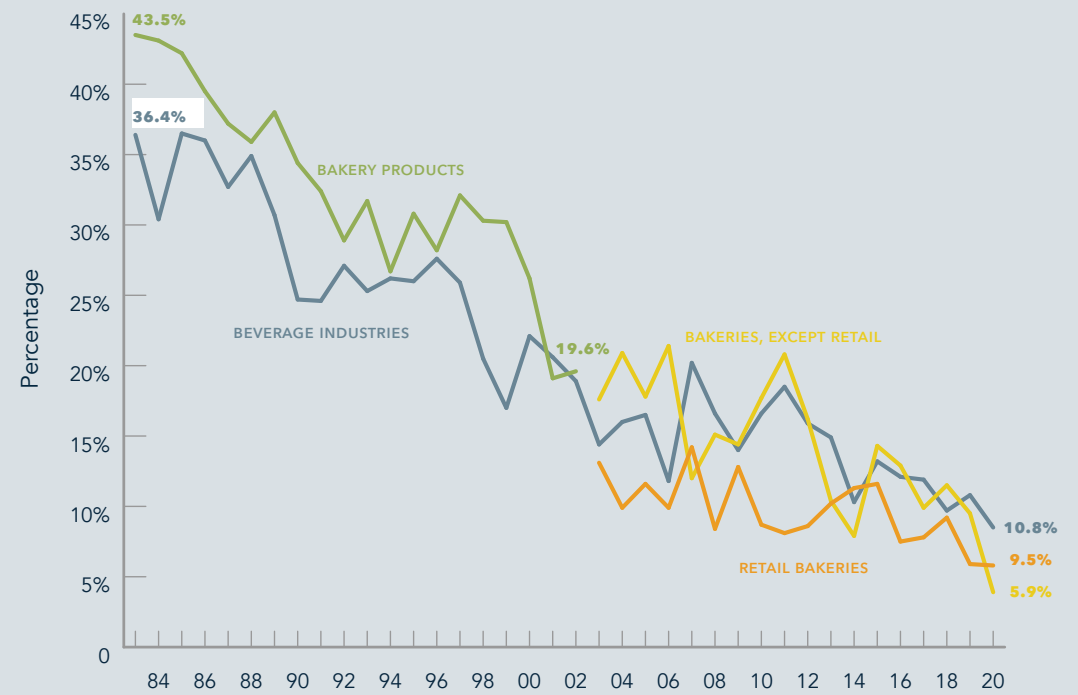


Source: Current Population Survey, Outgoing Rotation Group Earnings File, prepared by Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson at [www.unionstats.com](#).

Given San Diego County’s low rates of union membership in the private sector, it is likely that the national trends of declining union membership in food retail (Figure 15) and manufacturing (Figure 16) are prevalent here as well. Nationally, union membership has decreased from 31.1% in 1983 to 16.5% in 2020 at grocery stores and 18.2% in 1983 to 8.7% in 2020 at grocery distributors. In beverages and bakeries, the two sectors that comprise the majority of food processing and manufacturing jobs in San Diego County, there have been dramatic decreases in union membership: from 36.4% in 1983 to 8.5% in 2020 within beverage industries, and 43.5% in 1983 to 5.8% at retail bakeries and 3.9% at all other bakeries.

FIGURE 16

National Food Manufacturing Union Membership



Source: Current Population Survey, Outgoing Rotation Group Earnings File, prepared by Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson at www.unionstats.com.

Farmworkers, especially undocumented workers, have been historically excluded from most national labor protections. In California, in spite of allowing farmworkers the right to unionize and providing remedies for workers who are unjustly fired, the [Agricultural Labor Relations Act](#) remains largely unused.<sup>41</sup> Membership in one of the largest farmworker unions, [United Farm Workers](#), has plummeted from about 70,000 members in the 1970s to about [7,500 today](#). Reasons for the decline in union membership among farmworkers include employer intimidation, worker turnover, the growth of farm labor contractors in hiring, and the fact that many farmworkers are undocumented and do not want to risk exposure.<sup>42</sup>

Transforming Immigration Policies

Immigrants—documented and undocumented alike—play an essential role in our food system, with 3.8 million immigrants making up more than one in five food system workers. In California alone, 980,038 immigrants work in the state’s food system, making up 42.5% of its immigrant workforce.<sup>43</sup>

Table 3: Immigrant Workers in the U.S. Food Sector

	Number of Immigrant Workers	Percentage of Food Sector Workers
Food Sector, Overall	3,806,511	21.6%
Agriculture	546,383	27.6%
Food Processing	500,085	28.7%
Food Wholesale Trade	212,048	24.4%
Grocery Stores and Supermarkets	528,811	16.6%
Restaurants and Food Service	2,019,184	20.5%

Source: [NAE Analysis of 1-year sample from the 2018 American Community Survey](#)

Immigrants are essential members of our communities, and yet, national immigration policies have failed for years to allow them to safely enter the country and adequately compensate and protect them.

Agriculture in particular relies heavily on farmworkers from Mexico, who comprise 69% of total farmworkers in the country. It is estimated that over half of farmworkers are unauthorized to work in the United States.<sup>44</sup> Even though 77% of farmworkers have lived and worked here for more than 10 years,<sup>45</sup> they are “always a step away from derision,

detention and deportation” due to anti-immigrant rhetoric, actions, and policies that have stigmatized and penalized them.<sup>46</sup> With the creation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in 2002, border enforcement and deportations have increased over the last couple of decades. Farmworker demographics within the United States have also changed. The average farmworker today is older, more likely to be living with a spouse and family, more likely to be female, and less likely to move between regions in America.<sup>47</sup> The insecure citizenship and immigration status of many farmworkers often results in a lack of economic and political power and leaves them and their family members vulnerable to exploitation.

Immigration policies have a direct impact on wages and working conditions in the food system. Current policies fail to provide legal status, safe living and working conditions, fair wages, and pathways for career advancement. Essentially, they fail to treat immigrant workers with respect and dignity.

Transforming immigration policies will dramatically affect how immigrant workers are treated, and consequently, how all workers are treated.

<sup>41</sup>Pawel, Miriam, July 16, 2019, “[The Sad Lesson From California](#),” The New York Times

<sup>42</sup>Wozniacka, Gosia, May 7, 2019, “[Less Than 1 Percent of US Farmworkers Belong to a Union. Here’s Why.](#),” Civil Eats

<sup>43</sup>New American Economy Research Fund, “[Covid-19: Immigrant Workers Are Essential in Securing U.S. Food Supply Chain](#).”

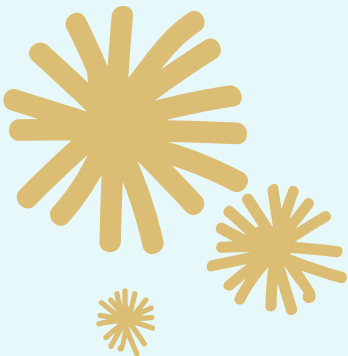
<sup>44</sup>Wainer A. Briefing paper 12. 2011. [November 24, 2014]. [Farm workers and immigration policy](#)

<sup>45</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, [Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey \(NAWS\) 2015-2016: A Demographic Profile of United States Farmworkers. Research Report No. 13](#)

<sup>46</sup>Corchado, Alfredo, May 6, 2020, “[A Former Farmworker on American Hypocrisy](#),” The New York Times

<sup>47</sup>Fan, Maoyong, Susan Gabbard, Anita Alves Pena, and Jeffrey M. Perloff, April 9, 2016, “Why Do Fewer Agricultural Workers Migrate Now?,” American Journal of Agricultural Economics, 97(3): 665-679, doi: 10.1093/ajae/aau115

# The Opportunity



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Elevate Wages and Working Conditions, and Improve Career Pathways

Strategies

- 01
- SUPPORT COORDINATED EFFORTS AND COLLABORATION TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF FOOD SYSTEM WORKERS
- 02
- INVEST IN FOOD SYSTEM JOBS AND CAREER PATHWAYS  
ENCOURAGE CREATIVE STRATEGIES THAT FARMERS AND FISHERMEN CAN IMPLEMENT TO INCREASE PROFITABILITY

Food system workers in San Diego County—mostly women, people of color, and immigrants—receive low wages, have limited workplace protections, experience dangerous working conditions, hold few rights to organize, and have limited opportunities for career mobility. In the case of undocumented food and farmworkers, they also experience a daily fear of detention and deportation.

At the same time, food system workers are the backbone of our food economy. They keep us fed and are essential for life.

Many arguments for improving conditions and reducing poverty among food system workers rest on the moral case for doing so. But there is also an economic case. A food system that treats its foundational workforce as essential, skilled, and valuable—and compensates workers so that they may thrive—can create fulfilling jobs, reduce job turnover, increase families’ economic security and consumer spending, develop responsible businesses, forge a creative and competitive market, grant low-income communities sovereignty to revitalize neighborhoods and restore land, and reduce healthcare and public assistance costs.

In the wake of COVID-19, our food system and how we treat food system workers stand at a crossroads. As corporate food chain employers face expanding needs for labor, and local and

independent food service employers are forced to lay off their workforce, what may follow is a forced labor migration into an increasingly consolidated food system. A swell of newly listed employment vacancies is aimed at vulnerable and desperate workers, including many jobs listed as 1099 positions, which offer workers few protections, rights, or benefits. This potential shift stands to have even more ominous implications for workers, communities, and local economies across the country.

Recognizing the true cost of undervaluing essential labor has never been more important. Lifting wages for all food system workers, improving working conditions, and creating equitable and dignified pathways for career advancement, greater equity, and business ownership is vital in San Diego County.

Strategies

01

## EXPAND FOOD SYSTEM BUSINESS SUPPORT SERVICES

Transforming long-standing institutions and policies that exploit food system workers will require strong coordination and deep collaboration across sectors. While unions are still the primary mechanism for advancing worker rights, developing coalitions of organizations advocating for economic and social justice can go a long way toward improving the lives of food system workers in San Diego County.

Key strategies for supporting our region’s food system workers include the following:

- Setting livable minimum wages
- Providing guaranteed basic income <sup>48 49</sup>

Continued on next page

<sup>48</sup>As of April 19, 2021, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti is proposing a guaranteed basic income pilot program in his upcoming budget. Under the proposal, dubbed "BIG: LEAP" (Basic Income Guaranteed: L.A. Economic Assistance Pilot), 2,000 Angeleno families at or below the federal poverty line would receive \$1,000 a month for one year, no strings attached. If successful, the Los Angeles pilot would serve as a major proof-of-concept for direct cash assistance that is divorced from the work requirements attached to many safety net programs for poor Americans, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit.

<sup>49</sup> Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED) project and Mayors for a Guaranteed Income are two programs that aim to provide low-wage earners, a category that disproportionately includes food workers, with a guaranteed income. While universal basic income (UBI) initiatives provide cash payments to all community members whether or not they are economically disadvantaged, guaranteed income projects like SEED aim to reduce income inequality by specifically giving direct support to financially fragile constituents. After a successful pilot in Stockton, several cities are considering following suit.



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Elevate Wages  
and Working  
Conditions, and  
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- Increasing labor protections and benefits
- Protecting rights to organize
- Protecting the legal status of immigrants, documented and undocumented
- Creating pathways to citizenship
- Closing racial and gender inequities
- Ensuring access to safe and affordable housing
- Creating opportunities for career advancement
- Promoting worker ownership

Increasing collaboration between [San Diego Workforce Partnership](#), [Employee Rights Center](#), the [Center on Policy Initiatives](#), [San Diego & Imperial Counties Labor Council](#), [High Road Kitchens](#), [Business For Good San Diego](#), the [FarmWorker CARE Coalition](#), [Vista Community Clinic](#), other food system organizations like the [San Diego Food System Alliance](#), and national organizations like the Restaurant Opportunities Center United, One Fair Wage, RAISE High Road Restaurants, Fight for \$15, Fair Food Program, Food Chain Workers Alliance and Heal Food Alliance is an important strategy. Along with private businesses, government, and philanthropy, this coalition of organizations can collectively advocate for livable wages, worker rights and benefits, and explore strategies for employee ownership and worker cooperatives in San Diego County.

### FarmWorker CARE Coalition

While the agricultural world relies on hardworking migrant farmworker communities, these communities remain some of the county's most vulnerable as they exist in a labor system that is not designed to meet their needs or the needs of their families. Farmworkers suffer a higher rate of diabetes due to a lack of medical follow-up and dietary issues. Some workers only get paid if they show up to work, and others may not have access to refrigeration or ways to heat up food during the day. In these situations, meals need to be portable and therefore, often rely on heavily processed convenience foods.

Skin conditions are another issue. Farmworkers know they are exposed to chemicals, even on organic farms (as many organic properties are adjacent to conventional farms). Skin is foreign to workers and they rarely think of engaging in

protective behaviors. Many workers simply accept that they will be exposed to harmful chemicals on a daily basis.

In the last year, COVID-19 exacerbated the inequities for more than 5,000 migrant farmworkers and their families who call North County home (despite the common misconception that farmworkers are largely undocumented workers, over 60% are permanent residents). The mission of the [FarmWorker Care Coalition](#) (FWCC) is to recognize these farmworkers as a vibrant part of the San Diego County community and to improve their living, working, and health conditions, and access to health, social, and educational services.

"Our work became increasingly more important due to the lives at risk. The pandemic also brought more awareness of the need to support farmworker communities. Our hope is that with increased awareness there is also recognition that we cannot

only dedicate resources during times of an emergency, but that our country should come together to find a proactive and sustainable approach to bring and keep resources to serve our farmworker communities," said Herminia Ledesma, Program Manager for Vista Community Clinic (VCC). Ledesma oversees VCC's Migrant Health and Community Engagement Programs and focuses on improving access to healthcare for migrant workers and their families, as well as leading Community Health Worker (CHW) training programs and the facilitation of community organizing, advocacy, and peer education efforts.

FWCC represents the combined efforts of several local community-based organizations and institutions. Efforts include taking healthcare to the field through mobile immunization and screening clinics. "Our primary role is bringing agencies serving farmworkers in North County San Diego together so we can connect farmworker communities to resources, especially food access through programs like CalFresh and local food distributions," she explained. "Even transportation is a barrier to accessing resources, so we focus on going out to agricultural sites."

The farmworker community takes an active role in these efforts thanks to the Poder Popular program, which employs a group of resident leaders who live and work in the communities and serve as eyes and ears for FWCC. The team has grown to a group of over forty Lideres (Leaders) in the City of Vista, Oceanside, Fallbrook and Escondido. Their efforts range from health education and promotion to policy and advocacy for environmental changes for healthier communities. This partnership allows FWCC's work to remain centered on meeting needs that come directly from the community. Perhaps just as important, the Poder Popular program has enabled the coalition to gain the trust of the communities they seek to serve.

"The communities we serve are often systematically disenfranchised. We are often doing the work of breaking down these systems to make resources accessible to communities, while at the same time providing direct services," said Ledesma. "Community trust and sustainability in our efforts have been two key factors that have really contributed to the success of the coalition. The partnership with Poder Popular and each of the connections with our coalition members, have grown our trust with the community."



The comprehensive outreach goes beyond the fields, extending to migrant families at their schools, apartment complexes, and even at La Posada, a homeless center that has dedicated beds for farmworkers. One best practice they have found is using text messaging campaigns to deliver health education through platforms like Whatsapp. The farmworkers themselves are committed to working hard and making the most of every opportunity. Though owning a farm may be unattainable in such an expensive place, education provides a stepping stone for their children that can open doors intergenerationally. For most, at this point, survival is the primary focus.

The clinic is a particularly successful example of the long-term trust that has been cultivated. "It is a peer to peer education model. Community health workers helped with the skin cancer screenings out in the field, led the focus groups, and conducted interviews. Our health workers give patients their personal cell phone numbers. They have built close relationships."

FWCC's vision for the future is increased support and sustained access to resources for farmworkers in San Diego County. "The services provided to farmworkers are at no cost to farms, yet we are not always able to gain access to reach workers.," Ledesma explained. "Vista Community Clinic has provided backbone support, but to grow our coalition, and diversify our efforts, we also need sustainable funding that recognizes the importance of this work, not just for ourselves, but for our partners."

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EXPAND FOOD SYSTEM BUSINESS SUPPORT SERVICES

Most jobs for food system workers pay low wages, have limited protections and benefits, and few opportunities for career advancement. It’s no wonder, then, that these jobs are largely viewed as undesirable, especially for young people considering career pathways.

Yet, food system workers are vital to our communities, and creating dignified and meaningful jobs for them is essential. Uplifting wages and working conditions now for existing food system workers is necessary for creating pathways for future generations to pursue careers in the field. This means investing in food system workers, providing livable wages, workplace protections, pathways to gain equity, and educational and training opportunities. It’s also important to cultivate a public narrative about food system work that presents these jobs as the invaluable, highly skilled, and fulfilling positions that they are.

Investing in Food System Jobs

The California Workforce Development Board recently launched the High Road Training Partnerships Initiative (HRTPI), focusing on equity, mobility, and job quality for workers. They developed a framework that centers workers and builds partnerships between workers, employers, worker organizations, and communities to create greater equity and prosperity across the state. Cultivating employers and partnerships that follow the High Road model and support all food system workers in San Diego County is a clear strategy.

The San Diego Workforce Partnership (SDWP) has also advocated for a paradigm shift away from a low investment approach—where labor is a cost to be minimized—to a high investment approach—where labor is an essential resource worthy of investment. A high investment approach recruits and retains workers, provides training and identifies advancement opportunities, and attempts to hire and promote a diverse workforce. Providing greater education to food system employers around the high investment approach could go a long way in the region.

SDWP also advocates for population-specific initiatives that meet the unique needs of each population and individual. In particular, they have been calling for a career jumpstart program for Black women in San Diego County that would test whether a program that provides training and wrap-around services to retail workers or no-strings cash payments will make a

bigger difference in addressing inequality. Another example of a population-specific initiative is High Road Kitchens, launched to support restaurant workers in San Diego County as a response to COVID-19. Creating more population-specific initiatives to invest in food system workers in San Diego County is a key strategy moving forward.

Expanding Career Pathways

Although most jobs in the food system pay low wages, many higher wage positions exist. Formalizing and supporting career pathways and mobility, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity, across various food system sectors is a key strategy. Outlining the potential for career advancement is an important first step. For example, a pathway from prep cook to chef in restaurants, from general clerks to managers in grocery stores, and from farmworkers to farm owners in agriculture. Educational and training programs to support career mobility are also essential.

Developing programs for those entering the workforce is also an important strategy for cultivating a pipeline of food system workers. San Diego County currently has a few food system-based workforce development programs, Kitchens for Good, MAKE Projects, Second Chance Youth Garden, and Archi’s Institute for Sustainable Agriculture.

Kitchens for Good works with San Diegans transitioning from incarceration, homelessness, substance abuse, and other challenges, and provides culinary and hospitality training, as well as the life skills they need to launch meaningful careers. MAKE projects provides refugee and immigrant communities with paid job training programs that prepare them for food system culinary careers. The Second Chance Youth Garden offers a six-week garden-based job training program. And Archi’s Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, in partnership with Cal Poly Pomona, offers a six-week, fully accredited agricultural certificate program, training military veterans to succeed in the sustainable and organic agriculture industry. Investing in these programs and new initiatives to support food system career development is a key strategy in the region.







## Kitchens for Good

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Elevate Wages and Working Conditions, and Improve Career Pathways

Becky Arrolando spent 26 years in a cycle of addiction, gangs, incarceration, and homelessness. Then, in 2017, while staying at a sober living home post-incarceration, she met an apprentice enrolled at Kitchens for Good who told her about the opportunity to gain skills, self-confidence, and a job.

“At Kitchens for Good we believe that all food has power and all people have potential,” said Jennifer Gilmore, CEO of the nonprofit, whose aim is to prepare individuals who are transitioning from homelessness, incarceration, and foster care for careers in the culinary and hospitality industry. Because of the stigma attached to being unemployed, having gaps in work history, or lacking transferable skills, many system-impacted individuals are left with few options and none of the social support needed to re-enter the workforce and find stability. This has resulted in unemployment rates of 27-48%. KFG is working to change those numbers through a combination of technical career education, career coaching, life skills classes, and paid employment.

Becky applied and was accepted into Kitchens for Good’s culinary apprenticeship program and after her training, she was placed in a job at Guahan Grill. Within 18 months she was promoted and given raises five times in a career transformation that changed her life. Becky opened a bank account for the first time, saved up enough to buy a car, and got back in touch with her kids after being estranged from them during a decade of addiction. Becky also transitioned off of CalFresh and Medical, moved out of a sober living home and into her own apartment, and her parole status was downgraded from “high control” to “low risk.” “The program taught me so much more than cooking,” Becky said. “It taught me how to

manage money. It taught me how to interact with people in a professional and personal way. It taught me hope. And, most of all, it taught me self respect.”

The program has proven to be a win-win for employees, employers, and even parole officers. “Ten to twenty probation officers attend every graduation,” explained Aviva Paley, a social entrepreneur who oversees the marketing and fundraising efforts for Kitchens for Good. “We make them look good and vice versa. We recruit students from other service agencies—parole, probation, sober living homes, homeless shelters—because they experience the biggest employment challenges and the greatest need is workforce skills and job placement. What makes us really unique is that it’s a vocational program with a trade.”

KFG successfully equips apprentices to not only get jobs but to begin a career that disrupts the cycle of poverty and incarceration. There are three apprenticeship tracks: Culinary, Baking, and Food Service Management. Regardless of the track, all programs begin with a ten-week career readiness and workforce training course (360 hours), which is followed by 17 months (2,400 hours) of paid on-the-job training with employer partners. The training and employment services are paired with ongoing career coaching, case management, and support. Over the last five years, KFG has helped launch over 300 apprentices’ careers and supported them as they advanced in the hospitality industry and reached their personal and professional goals.

“Initially KFG was about jobs,” said Gilmore. “But what we found was that we were training people for jobs that are paying below a living wage. We had to ask ourselves, what is our end goal? Careers are more meaningful and we wanted to create a ladder. We were able to move in that

direction through the apprenticeship program.”

After completing her apprenticeship certificate, Becky became the Restaurant’s General Manager and she now hires other apprentices to work in her kitchen and provides them ongoing mentorship and support. “Project Launch has given me my life back,” she said. “Not only to help myself but so that I can help others who have struggled just like I have.”

“The hospitality industry makes up 11% of all jobs in San Diego County, and their number one challenge is finding well trained personnel,” Gilmore added, noting that KFG students are employed in many of the top fast casual and fine dining restaurants in San Diego, not in fast food restaurants. “The trend that we hear is that our students are really hungry to learn and they tend to be hard working. The pitfalls tend to be soft skills - showing up late,

anger management.”

Kitchens for Good’s vision for the future is to see a thriving food and hospitality industry in which businesses and the community members work together to advance the wellbeing of workers, the environment, and community health. This includes paying hospitality and food workers a livable wage and ensuring fair and equitable labor practices that offer advancement opportunities. “We support our students earning a livable wage, which leads to lower turnover,” Gilmore said. “But there is tremendous fear in the hospitality sector around offering a livable wage and passing the cost on to customers. On the other hand, there’s a labor shortage for these jobs. It’s a reality that San Diego County restaurants are going to have to deal with.”







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Elevate Wages and Working Conditions, and Improve Career Pathways

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## MAKE Projects

Food can bridge divisions in ideology and politics while sparking animated conversations like nothing else. Everyone eats, and taste buds don't discriminate.

Even timid eaters will salivate for Sri Lankan butter cake with lime drizzle, Jordanian pickles, Ugandan sauteed corn, and talapaw, a traditional dish from the Karen State of Myanmar.

Those international items are among the items offered in culturally themed Family Meals available from the team at MAKE Projects, who is creating a more inclusive San Diego food industry by preparing refugees and immigrants to gain a profession there. MAKE stands for Merging Agriculture, Kitchens, and Employment, and the organization champions eating well while doing good.

The program leads CHOP Kitchen, a 12-week early employment program for low-income refugee and immigrant women that not only prepares them for the ins and outs of working in a U.S. commercial kitchen, but encourages them to preserve and uplift their cultures, through offering menus designed by the participants themselves. "Locally-sourced and globally inspired" is the phrase that is most often reiterated.

"Our customers can take pride in the fact that contributing their business forms the basis for our training program—the production of our meals and dining experiences provide essential, real-world experience our participants need to prepare for entry into the workforce," explains Anchi Mei, Executive Director of MAKE Projects.

"Our greatest challenge is helping our clients overcome and bridge the ever-widening income, employment, and educational gaps in our disparate economy and society," she says.

It is hard for any low-income family in San Diego to pay rent, utilities, and provide nutritious food for their household while also attempting to complete educational and job training. The pandemic has only compounded that reality. Corporations consolidating goods and services and turning to automation and e-commerce en masse have not supported essential workers and created new challenges for those new to the workforce.

"Now imagine doing all that after surviving and fleeing war and persecution, and finally arriving in the United States with only what you can carry," Mei says.

She explained that the locally-sourced, globally-inspired vision for MAKE Projects isn't just about their menu.

"It also happens to reflect many of our shared world visions and ethos for how to be a positive change agent with all that is troubling and turbulent in our world," she says. "Which is to say, there is a lot about climate change, democracy building, and income inequality we need to tackle. Let's start with real solutions here in our local community and local economy."

MAKE Projects is focused on developing into a thriving food business that will provide transitional and permanent employment to over 1,000 refugee and immigrant youth in the next five years. In 2021, they officially became their own independent, full-fledged social enterprise after originally being incubated by the International Rescue Committee.

In addition to operating a brunch cafe on Saturday mornings, weekly Family Meal delivery, and CHOP Kitchen, MAKE Projects also includes Youth FarmWorks, a 6-week paid internship program for youth to intern on the MAKE marketing team and explore the different worlds of digital media, publishing, farming, and business. Interns develop the organization's weekly newsletter, social media posts, quarterly magazine, and support the community supported agriculture (CSA) program.

The program also operates other career-focused educational programs, a cultural center, marketplace, and a thriving urban farm in the heart of North Park. The program's impact—having graduated 161 job trainees from 26 countries—hints at its long-term viability, if supported by elected officials, government agencies, and a private sector that recognizes the value of San Diego's working-class and immigrant populations.

"There are so many great stories," Mei said. "And skills acquired from the program can be transitioned outside of the food industry too. We recently worked with a Haitian participant who said she gained so much confidence through CHOP Kitchen that she has upgraded her career plans to now pursue nursing while she works as a patient aide in a senior care facility."

"This program taught me how to cook, communicate, and interview, and now I can become a chef," says Nicole Bonane, a trainee who completed the program in 2020. "I'm now working with Urban Corps and getting my GED."



Encouraging workforce development programs for disconnected youth is another strategy for expanding career pathways in the food system. Rates of youth disconnection—young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school and not working—have been growing over the years. According to [Measure of America](#), San Diego County ranked 20th in the country for metropolitan regions with a minimum of 20,000 disconnected youth. In particular, the border region (i.e., Otay Mesa), the rural, eastern part of the county, southeastern San Diego, El Cajon, and Escondido have the highest rates of youth disconnection.

Conducting a comprehensive workforce needs assessment and creating more opportunities for connections between food system employers and potential employees is one way that organizations can mitigate the likely increase in youth disconnection due to the COVID-19 pandemic in San Diego County. [Michigan](#) and [Vermont](#) have both conducted in-depth assessments of employer and worker needs and have articulated career pathways and resources for students.

Vermont also has a [job listings board](#) that covers all types of food system occupations. A similar resource in San Diego County—that also includes internship and apprenticeship opportunities—could significantly support those looking to expand or enter the food system workforce.

## From Elevating Wages and Working Conditions, and Improving Career Pathways for Food System Workers, to Integrating Nutrition and Food Security

The majority of food system workers receive low wages and limited benefits. As a result, food system workers are disproportionately dependent on public benefits like Medicaid and SNAP. Advancing a paradigm shift toward high investment, where labor is a resource to be valued and invested in, can reduce the number of San Diegans who are food insecure or dependent on public assistance. Integrating nutrition and food security programs can maximize the reach and effectiveness of existing safety nets. Together, these objectives move us toward a food system and economy that works for everyone.



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