

IT'S A WAGE SHORTAGE, **NOT A WORKER SHORTAGE**



Why Illinois Restaurant Workers
Are Leaving the Industry, and
What Would Make Them Stay

MAY 2021

One Fair Wage

UC Berkeley Food Labor Research Center

OVERVIEW

“I worked in the service industry for the past 15 years. With the wages that are going on now, I will not return to work unless things change. With our health benefits and with the regular minimum wage, no one can survive. If things don’t change, no one will return to work.”

—CHRISTINE THURMAN
Restaurant Server
Illinois

“We believe in One Fair Wage. Keeping individuals poor doesn’t help any of us. But to offer a fair wage, everyone must be on board. We can’t be the only restaurant on the block that increases prices to cover higher wages. To be fair to everyone, this needs to be a mandate. The rest of America must understand that there is a higher cost to preparing food and making sure that our employees are not working for a poverty level wage. It has never been fair that a waiter/waitress/ bartender works five hours and walks away with \$300 while the kitchen staff work ten hours for \$100. Without a mandate that tips are shared and that everyone must make a fair wage, we will never make it equitable for everyone. Without increasing wages and working conditions, workers will not come back to our industry, and that would be the worst possible outcome.”

—BETH WAGNER
Owner, Honky Tonk BBQ
Chicago, IL

The COVID-19 outbreak has had devastating impacts on the restaurant industry, with 6 million workers and about 90,000 in Illinois losing work temporarily or permanently.^{1,2} Tipped restaurant workers, who are over two-thirds women, reported facing dramatically decreased tips and increased health risks and harassment in restaurants during the pandemic. This report documents the massive exodus of workers from restaurants, their reasons for leaving, and what would make them stay.

The pandemic has had devastating impacts for women and mothers in particular, with many economists dubbing the crisis a “she-cession.”³ Even prior to the pandemic, working mothers already bore the brunt of domestic duties and were heavily concentrated in low wage jobs.^{4,5} As one of the largest employers of women and one of the largest employers of subminimum wage workers, the restaurant industry plays an outsized role in perpetuating inequality among women, particularly women of color.^{6,7} Not only must these women endure one of the lowest wages in the country, but also experience higher levels of sexual harassment than any other industry in the country.^{8,9} This report documents workers’ experiences of the pandemic, and also how it has motivated many of them to leave the restaurant industry altogether.

KEY FINDINGS

- Over half (53%) of Illinois workers report that they are considering leaving their restaurant job with the pandemic and three-quarters (75%) say they are leaving due to low wages and tips. Women service workers in Illinois were far more likely than both the national sample (57 v 53%) and men in Illinois (36%) to report that they are leaving. ‘Low wages and tips’ was by far the most popular reason for leaving the industry, more than 40 percentage points higher than the second most popular reason – COVID health risks.

- **It's a wage shortage, not a worker shortage.** Illinois workers were significantly more likely than the national sample to report that a full, stable, livable wage would make them stay at their job (84% v 78%). A 'full, stable, livable wages' was by far the most popular factor that Illinois workers reported would make them stay at their job, over 30 percentage points higher than the second most popular factor – paid sick leave.
- **Workers in Illinois are leaving the industry not only because tips are down and pay is too low, but also the risks and harassment are far too high, and women in Illinois are suffering these impacts more than men.**
 - ◆ In Illinois, workers report contracting COVID at higher rates than the national sample (23% v 21%). Women in Illinois report contracting COVID at a rate 35 percent higher than their male counterparts in the state.
 - ◆ Illinois workers were far more likely to report tips decreased with the pandemic (91% v 87%) and that their tips have decreased by half or more (78% v 69%) than the national sample. Women, in particular, were more likely to report that their tips have decreased with the pandemic (92% v 88%) and that they had decreased by more than half compared to men (77% v 76%).
 - ◆ Women in Illinois were also significantly more likely to report that they knew someone who contracted the virus (94% v 87%) and that they were within six feet of at least one unmasked person during their shift compared to men (77% v 65%).
 - ◆ Illinois workers were more likely than the national sample to report feeling reluctant to enforce COVID safety measures (65% v 60%). Women, in particular, faced greater rates of hostility in response to enforcing public safety measures compared to men in the state (77% v 67%).

THIS REPORT is based on an Illinois pool of over 140 surveys of food service workers conducted online and over the telephone from October 20, 2020 to May 1, 2021. We emailed the surveys to the over 260,000 applicants to the One Fair Wage Emergency Fund starting in October 2020, and collected responses until May 1, 2021, by which time hundreds of workers in the state had already responded. Of those who responded, 144 reported that they were currently employed, and were thus able to answer most of the survey questions about restaurant employment during the pandemic.

According to recent estimates, over half of restaurant workers and 69% of tipped workers in Illinois are women.¹⁰ Reflecting the fact that Illinois restaurant and tipped workers are more likely to be women than restaurant workers nationally, three-quarters (75%) of all Illinois respondents were women and 45% were people of color. Nearly 70% (68%) of all the respondents and 76% of women report that they had children. Women are thus bearing the brunt of the low wages and tips, health risks, and COVID concerns outlined by workers in this report.

SURVEY DEMO BOX

144
ILLINOIS SURVEY
RESPONDENTS

75% WOMEN
68% HAVE CHILDREN
45% PEOPLE OF COLOR
33% BLACK
15% LATINX
31% LGBTQIA+



TABLE 1

Summary of Restaurant
Worker Retention Survey

DESIRE TO LEAVE CURRENT JOB

	NATIONAL	ILLINOIS
Report they are considering leaving their job since COVID-19 outbreak	53%	53%

WHY WORKERS ARE LEAVING THEIR JOBS

Due to low wages and tips	76%	75%
Due to concerns about COVID-19 safety	55%	44%
Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from customers	39%	35%
Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from coworkers and/or management	26%	27%
Moving to a different city, state, or country	5%	8%
Moving into a new position within the restaurant industry	4%	4%
Transitioning to a different industry	31%	35%

WHAT WOULD MAKE WORKERS STAY AT THEIR JOB

Full, stable, livable wage	78%	84%
Increased hours	36%	43%
Paid sick leave	49%	52%
Better COVID-19 safety protocols and enforcement	41%	32%
Health benefits or insurance	44%	51%
An improved working environment with less hostility from customers, coworkers, and/or management	45%	39%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 10/20-4/21

TABLE 2

Summary of COVID-19 Health and Customer Harassment Impacts on Restaurant Workers

RESTAURANT EMPLOYEE EXPOSURE TO COVID-19

	NATIONAL	ILLINOIS
Has personally contracted COVID-19	21%	23%
Knows someone who has contracted COVID-19	95%	92%
Of those who know someone infected, percent who knows someone who has died from COVID-19 or COVID-19 Complications	50%	49%
Employees who report that one or more employees at their restaurant has contracted COVID-19	74%	73%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person at least once during their shift	53%	74%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person 30 or more times during their shift	38%	30%

CUSTOMER HOSTILITY, HARASSMENT, AND IMPACT ON TIPPING

Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19	87%	91%
Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19 by at least 50% or more	69%	78%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	80%	74%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior on a weekly basis from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	49%	41%
Felt reluctant to enforce COVID-19 safety protocols upon customers out of concern that customer would tip less	60%	65%
Has experienced or witnessed a noticeable change in overall levels of unwanted sexualized comments from customers	47%	40%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 10/20-4/21

WHY RESTAURANT WORKERS ARE LEAVING THE INDUSTRY & WHAT WOULD MAKE THEM STAY

TABLE 3
Summary of Restaurant
Worker Retention Survey

DESIRE TO LEAVE CURRENT JOB

Report they are considering
leaving their job since COVID-19
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53% NATIONAL

53% ILLINOIS

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health
Survey Data collected 10/20-4/21

PRE-PANDEMIC TURNOVER IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

The restaurant industry has always had one of the highest turnover rates in the country and it has only increased in recent years.¹¹ In 2019, the turnover rate for the accommodations and food services industry was 78.6%.¹² Multiple studies have found that one of the main reasons restaurant workers decide to leave their job is to pursue a position that pays a higher wage.^{13,14} When restaurant workers are taken care of, they stay longer, are more productive, and provide better quality service.¹⁵ However, despite all the evidence that a livable wage would reduce turnover and increase productivity for restaurants, the National Restaurant Association (“the Other NRA”) and its local affiliates, one of most powerful trade lobbies in country, continues to lobby against measures to increase the minimum wage and eliminate the subminimum wage for tipped workers.¹⁶

MASS EXODUS DUE TO LOW WAGES AND DECREASED TIPS

The restaurant industry’s pre-existing economic instability, sexual harassment, racial inequities, and consequent high turnover rates in the restaurant industry were all worsened during the pandemic. As described in the following section, with COVID-19, the restaurant industry’s low wages were compounded with dramatically reduced tips and increased hostility, harassment, and health risks, resulting in over half (53%) of all Illinois restaurant workers and 57% of women surveyed report that they are considering leaving their jobs. When asked to choose all applicable reasons for leaving, nearly half also indicated that this was due to COVID concerns, but the most popular reason for leaving the industry by far was low wages and tips. Three-quarters (75%) of all Illinois workers and 79% of women indicated that low wages and tips are causing them to leave restaurant jobs.



TABLE 4
Summary of
Restaurant Worker
Retention Survey

WHY WORKERS ARE LEAVING THEIR JOBS

	NATIONAL	ILLINOIS
Due to low wages and tips	76%	75%
Due to concerns about COVID-19 safety	55%	44%
Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from customers	39%	35%
Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from coworkers and/or management	26%	27%
Moving to a different city, state, or country	5%	8%
Moving into a new position within the restaurant industry	4%	4%
Transitioning to a different industry	31%	35%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 10/20-4/21

WHAT WOULD MAKE RESTAURANT WORKERS STAY

When asked to choose all applicable factors that would make them stay in restaurants, earning a full, stable, livable wage was by far the most popular factor that restaurant workers indicated would make them stay at their job – again, not surprising, given the dramatic decline in tips. Over three-quarters of all workers and 84% of Illinois workers chose a full, stable, livable wage as a reason to stay, significantly higher than any other factor. If restaurants hope to retain a significant portion of the workforce, the nation must enact a livable wage policy that allows workers to remain in restaurants.

TABLE 5
Summary of
Restaurant Worker
Retention Survey

WHAT WOULD MAKE WORKERS STAY AT THEIR JOB

	NATIONAL	ILLINOIS
Full, stable, livable wage	78%	84%
Increased hours	36%	43%
Paid sick leave	49%	52%
Better COVID-19 safety protocols and enforcement	41%	32%
Health benefits or insurance	44%	51%
An improved working environment with less hostility from customers, coworkers, and/or management	45%	39%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 10/20-4/21

WHY WORKERS ARE LEAVING: COVID-19 IMPACTS ON TIPPED RESTAURANT WORKERS

During the pandemic, nearly 90,000 restaurant workers in Illinois lost their jobs; much more than in previous recessions, these employment losses have fallen mostly on women.^{17,18} Restaurants and other public-facing businesses that were shut down for COVID-19 safety have high concentrations of women. In addition, the closure of

schools and daycare facilities, and the implementation of remote learning, have increased childcare needs for women, who continue to bear the brunt of childrearing even when they are the primary breadwinners in the household.¹⁹ This challenge is particularly hard on women in the restaurant industry, who are concentrated in the majority in tipped occupations earning a subminimum wage.



Despite current industry arguments that workers are not returning to work because they are choosing to stay home and collect unemployment insurance, most tipped workers reported that they either could not access these benefits or earned much less than they should have. This also led to complications with their tips not being recognized as income. By late spring of 2020, a majority of tipped workers experienced difficulty accessing unemployment insurance due to

their low wages.²⁰ Women tipped workers experienced even greater challenges when applying for unemployment insurance due to their subminimum wage than their male counterparts, and also higher rates of home and food insecurity. Over 60% of women in Illinois reported they were either unsure or did not qualify for unemployment benefits, compared to 58% of their male counterparts. As a result, the vast majority of Illinois women (94%) reported they were unsure or unable to pay for their rent or mortgage and 78% of women could only afford groceries for 2 weeks or less, compared to 92% and 79% of men, respectively.²¹

TABLE 6
Impact of COVID-19
on Tipped Service
Workers

	NATIONAL APPLICANTS	ILLINOIS APPLICANTS	IL WOMEN APPLICANTS	IL MEN APPLICANTS
Do not qualify or are unsure if they qualify for unemployment insurance	61%	62%	63%	58%
Unable or are unsure whether they can pay their rent or mortgage	92%	93%	94%	92%
Can only afford groceries for 2 weeks or less	79%	78%	78%	79%

Source: One Fair Wage Tipped Worker Survey Data collected 10/20-2/21

LESS TIPS, MORE HOSTILITY AND HARASSMENT

After facing severe challenges in accessing unemployment insurance at relatively higher rates than other workers, many workers felt compelled to return to work in restaurants before they felt safe doing so.²² When they returned, they were asked to do more for less. Most workers (91%) in Illinois reported that their tips have decreased since the pandemic and nearly 80% of workers report their tips have decreased by half or more.

Women in Illinois faced far greater declines in tips and were more likely to report regularly receiving a lower tip from customers due to COVID-19 safety enforcement than men. The vast majority of women (92%) reported that their tips declined since COVID-19 and over 70% report that their tips decreased by 50% or more. Because many women in the restaurant industry already have some of the lowest wages in the country and lacked access to not only unemployment insurance, but also supportive work-family policies, the pandemic had amplified the pre-existing inequality in the industry.

TABLE 7
Summary of
COVID-19 Health
and Customer
Harassment
Impacts on
Restaurant
Workers

CUSTOMER HOSTILITY, HARASSMENT, AND IMPACT ON TIPPING

	NATIONAL	ILLINOIS
Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19	87%	91%
Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19 by at least 50% or more	69%	78%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	80%	74%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior on a weekly basis from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	49%	41%
Felt reluctant to enforce COVID-19 safety protocols upon customers out of concern that customer would tip less	60%	65%
Has experienced or witnessed a noticeable change in overall levels of unwanted sexualized comments from customers	47%	40%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 10/20-4/21

Restaurant workers have become the de facto public health marshals, enforcing critical masks and social distancing protocols in one of the pandemic's most dangerous environments, according to the Centers for Disease Control.²³ A major source of restaurant workers' inability to protect themselves and enforce critical health and safety protocols with customers, and in 43 states, is the subminimum wage for tipped workers, because it requires workers to derive a substantial portion of their income from customer tips. During the pandemic, these workers' reliance on tips from customers has made it nearly impossible to enforce critical social distancing and mask rules on these same customers.



The majority of the workers surveyed in Illinois (74%) reported that they have experienced customers becoming hostile to staff for following public health guidelines, such as insisting upon wearing a mask. Women were more likely than men to witness or experience such hostile behavior from customers on a weekly basis in response to enforcing these public health protocols. Unsurprisingly, 65% of workers in Illinois report feeling reluctant to enforce COVID-19 protocols out of concern that customers would reciprocate with aggression, hostility, and lesser tips. This feeling is based on real experience; over 70% of Illinois workers (72%) report having received a lesser tip than

normal after enforcing COVID-19 protocols on customers. Of those workers, 42% report that receiving a lesser tip for enforcing these protocols is a weekly experience. Simultaneously, restaurant workers are presented with the impossible task, and losing battle, of policing the customers who directly subsidize their wages. The outcomes are even more significant for workers of color, with Black tipped workers reporting far greater decline in tips and more punishment for trying to enforce social distancing and mask rules in the form of lesser tips than their white counterparts.²⁴ The subminimum wage for tipped workers thus created an impossible situation in which workers were forced to enforce public health rules on the same customers from whom they had to get tips to survive.

With the pandemic, fewer customers and lessened tips has increased the power dynamic between male customers and women servers, forcing many women, particularly those with children, to tolerate even higher levels of sexual harassment than before. Hundreds of women have reported that they are repeatedly asked to remove their masks so male customers can judge their looks and their tips on that basis.²⁵



INCREASED HEALTH RISKS

It should come as no surprise, given the high-risk environment and workers' inability to enforce social distancing and mask rules given their dependence on customer tips, that restaurant workers report extremely high levels of exposure to COVID-19 and infection and death of co-workers due to this exposure. Nearly a quarter of workers in Illinois reported having contracted COVID-19 themselves (23%) and 92% knew someone who had contracted the virus; nearly three-quarters (73%) reported that someone in their restaurant contracted the virus. The majority (74%) of all Illinois workers report that they are in contact with maskless individuals at least once during their restaurant shifts.

These alarming statistics were worse for women – not surprising given the data above indicating that women were more often punished in the form of lower tips for enforcing COVID-19 safety measures to protect their health and others. Women surveyed in Illinois were significantly more likely to report that they had contracted the virus; a rate 35% higher than men in the state. Women in Illinois were also more likely to report they were within six feet of maskless individuals.

TABLE 8
Summary of
COVID-19 Health
and Customer
Harassment
Impacts on
Restaurant Workers

RESTAURANT EMPLOYEE EXPOSURE TO COVID-19

	NATIONAL	ILLINOIS
Has personally contracted COVID-19	21%	23%
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Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person at least once during their shift	53%	74%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person 30 or more times during their shift	38%	30%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 10/20-4/21



CONCLUSION: ALL WORKERS NEED ONE FAIR WAGE NOW

Illinois workers are more likely than the national sample to report that they will need to see increased wages – and a full minimum wage for tipped workers, with tips on top – before they will return to working restaurants. Compared to 66% of the national sample, nearly three-quarters (72%) of workers in Illinois answered ‘yes’ to signing on to the following statement:

“I do not want to return to work in a restaurant until we have One Fair Wage – a full minimum wage with tips on top – and the necessary safety protocols to keep us safe! If I do return to work before One Fair Wage becomes law, I cannot guarantee that I will enforce social distancing and mask rules with customers because I need to be able to get tips from those same customers. I call on my congressional representatives to take action!”

Restaurants received significant relief in the COVID-19 package passed by Congress in March 2021. However, in order to reopen and recover, restaurants will need to be able to find enough willing employees to reopen at full capacity. With more than half of all workers reporting that they are considering leaving their restaurant jobs and more than three quarters indicating that the primary reason is low wages and decreased tips, it is clear that we must raise workers’ wages nationwide in order for consumers to enjoy the vibrant restaurant industry they experienced pre-pandemic.

The mass exodus of workers from the restaurant industry is clearly greatest among women, who are the extreme example of what a ‘she-recession’ means. Since the pandemic, women – disproportionately women of color – have suffered the most in job losses economy-wide and have borne the added responsibilities of child care while many schools remain closed.²⁶ A recent poll by Marketplace found that 63% of women are the primary person in their household responsible for supervising their children’s remote school during the pandemic compared to only 29% of men.²⁷ Women who

work in the restaurant industry in particular already typically lack accessible and affordable childcare options to take on more desirable shifts, have among the lowest wages in the country, and with the recent outbreak have had the compounded role of enforcing safety protocols needed to protect the public while facing economic retaliation and sexual harassment from the very people they are trying to protect.²⁸ This report's findings highlight that this vulnerability is not new and that it is exacerbated in every way by their dependence on tips to make up a majority of their wage.



Forced to find ways to entice workers to stay in the industry and buoyed by the recent momentum generated by federal momentum to raise the minimum wage, many independent restaurant employers are proactively raising their wages. However, they cannot raise wages alone; employers need the level playing field that federal policy change would create. The Raise the Wage Act, which would finally eliminate slavery's legacy of the subminimum wage for tipped workers and increase the minimum wage to \$15 for all workers, is now a COVID emergency, not only for service workers themselves but also for the long-term economic stability of their families, the communities that rely on them, and restaurant industry itself.

As the research shows, mothers in the restaurant industry are especially in need of a livable wage to better cover their childcare expenses and provide for their families. These women have borne the brunt of the crisis, and those who are tipped workers have experienced a significant decline in their tips while taking on the compounded role of public health enforcement. If the nation wants to ensure both economic recovery and public health, these workers must be paid the full minimum wage with tips on top, enabling them to enforce safety protocols and reject dangerous and demeaning sexual harassment from customers. One Fair Wage – an equal and just wage with tips on top – must be enacted as permanent law now.

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