

WE ARE DROWNING



New York Tipped Workers' Crisis of Stagnating Wages,
Decreasing Tips, and Skyrocketing Cost of Living

APRIL 2025



Introduction

“Most essential workers are struggling to pay rent and buy food. The cost of living is high, the salaries are low... It is impossible to save money. As workers in the service industry, we are the backbone of New York State’s economy, yet our wages have stagnated while the cost of living continues to soar. This imbalance forces many of us to make impossible choices—like whether to heat our homes or buy groceries—leaving us in a constant state of financial insecurity.”

—Dee Marie Nessel, New York Tipped Worker

In the lead-up to the 2024 election, Gallup reported that “The economy ranks as the most important of 22 issues that U.S. registered voters say will influence their choice for president.”¹ This was particularly acute for New York’s restaurant workers, whose base wages range from \$10.35 to \$11 an hour, compared to the statewide minimum wage for all other workers of \$15.50 to \$16.50 an hour.²

A direct legacy of slavery, the subminimum wage for tipped workers impacts a workforce of nearly 318,000 service workers who have a median income of just \$18,625 a year, including tips.³ Tipped workers in New York are 62 percent women and 26 percent people of color. Ending the subminimum wage for tipped workers would positively impact the entire New York restaurant industry, which employs 688,000 workers statewide.^{4,5}

New York’s tipped workers’ demand One Fair Wage — a full minimum wage with tips on top — and the campaign for full wages nationwide has resulted in historic wins for workers in Washington, DC, and Chicago, Illinois. As a result of the current crisis in the cost of living, this fight has now escalated to a fever pitch in the New York state legislature.

KEY FINDINGS

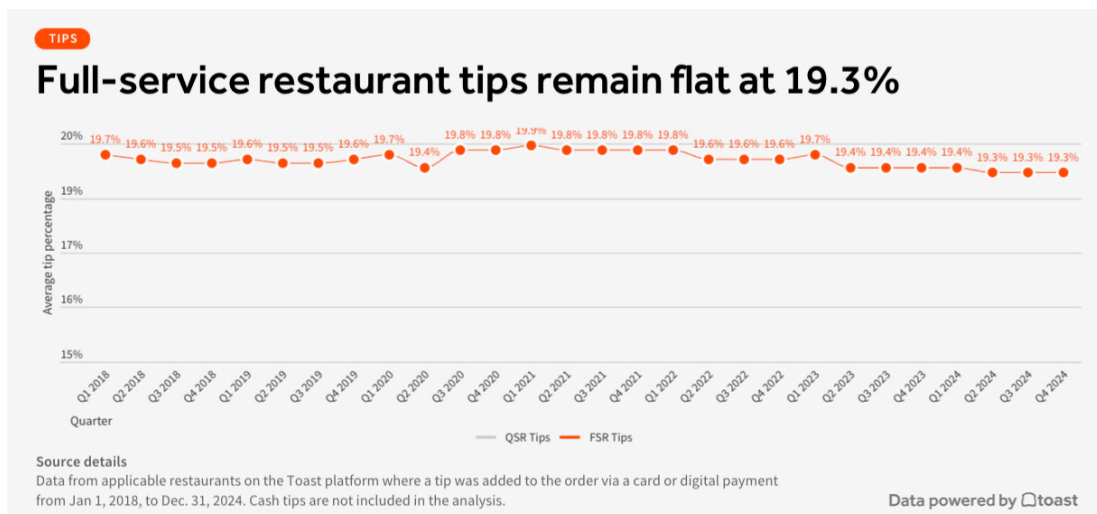
1. Tipping rates are at a six-year low even as New York tipped workers’ cost of living has skyrocketed.
2. Chicago and Washington, D.C. have raised tipped workers’ wages after the pandemic in response to the significant increases in the cost of living. These wage increases have resulted in significantly higher incomes for tipped workers, both in terms of wages and tips, while restaurant employment has remained constant. In Chicago, labor costs have increased for restaurants by only 3 percent — roughly the same as inflation.
3. States and cities that require a full minimum wage with tips on top for tipped workers, including Chicago, continue to show steady restaurant establishment and job growth rates, even with skyrocketing inflation. Even New York State itself has raised tipped workers’ wages by nearly one third (32%) over the last five years since the pandemic while full-service restaurant employment has continued to grow.

1 | TIPPING RATES DROP TO 6-YEAR LOW AS COST OF LIVING CONTINUES TO CLIMB

The average tip as a percentage of a bill at full-service establishments nationwide has hit a 6-year low. According to data published by Toast, tipping at full-service establishments from Q1 2018 to Q1 2023 remained fairly consistent at 19.7 percent or higher (going as high as 19.9 percent). Since 2023, tipping has declined to 19.4 percent for every quarter, and tipping has fallen to a six-year low of 19.3 percent for the last three quarters of 2024.⁶

TABLE 1

Quarterly Full-Service Restaurants Average Tip as a Percentage



Source: Toast Data: Holiday Parties Fuel Catering Boom for Restaurants. (March 2025)⁷

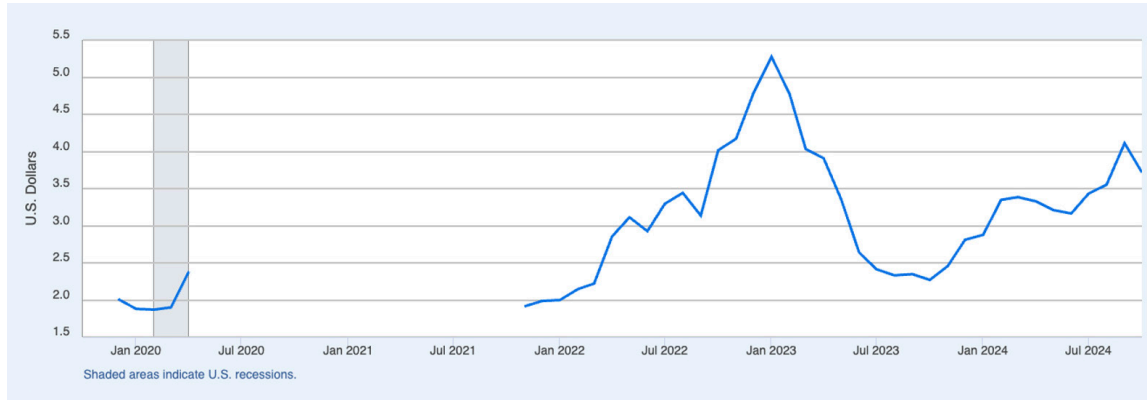
Even worse, Toast surveyed over 1,500 restaurant customers in February of 2024 and found that 29 percent stated they are declining to tip more often.⁸ Some journalists have attributed this nationwide decline in tipping to tip creep or tipflation, describing the growth of tipping across multiple sectors that makes customers feel as if they are being asked to tip too often.⁹ When Toast asked why people may not tip, the top five answers were all related to customers' frustrations with being asked to tip in environments in which they did not tip before.¹⁰

While tipping rates have declined, the cost of living has continued to rise. The rate of inflation was nearly 5 percent in 2021, surpassed 8 percent in 2022, and stayed at about 4 percent in 2023.¹¹ According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the current inflation rate using the Consumer Price Index is just shy of 3 percent.¹² Overall, inflation as measured by CPI over the last five years has increased 23 percent.¹³

Some costs have increased at a faster rate than general inflation. Rents nationally increased at a faster rate than inflation at 27 percent since February 2020.¹⁴ Food prices have also outpaced inflation at 28 percent since February 2020.¹⁵ There have also been extremes. In the Northeast, the price of eggs was 198 percent higher in October 2024 than it was in February of 2020.¹⁶

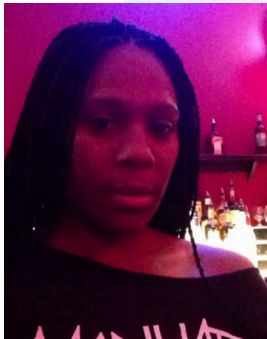
TABLE 2

Average Price: Eggs, Grade A, Large (Cost per Dozen) in the Northeast Census Region



Source: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹⁷

Thus, over the five years since the pandemic, tipping averages have declined by 3 percent, the cost of living has increased by 23 percent, the cost of eggs has increased by 198 percent, and the subminimum wage is just 67 percent of the full minimum wage.



“I have been working in the service industry for 11 years. I love working in this industry, but it is really hard to plan for the future because of the volatility of the income we receive. Relying on tips means that my wages are never stable, even though I work hard and provide quality service. I have had to decide which bill to pay and which will be late. Having to make this decision over and over the past 11 years has hurt my credit which exasperates my financial situation, most recently causing my car to be repossessed. Having one fair wage would allow me to have financial security and a guaranteed income that I can rely on each pay period to help me budget, reduce my debt and save for the future.”

—Malika Henderson, New York Tipped Worker



“I have worked in the restaurant industry for 16 years. I started when a cousin who was a bartender got me to work as a busser/food runner. The industry used to be a thriving place but after covid and the current administration it has been difficult to stay afloat economically. As a restaurant worker who used to visit friends in the industry it has been hard to support each other because we are trying to make ends meet. Many of us have two or three jobs to make ends meet, leaving us very little time to spend time with our families, or doing things that bring us joy of fulfillment. 8 hours of sleep, 8 hours of work, and 8 hours of personal time is something few of us are able to enjoy because we work in an industry that treats us like we’re sub human. One Fair wage with tips on top would mean financial stability, an ability to invest in education and a future and an ability to support our local economies.”

—Juan Carlos Romero, New York Restaurant Worker

2 | THE CHICAGO EXPERIENCE: RAISING WAGES TO MEET THE COST OF LIVING

Small business employers in Chicago who were compelled to raise wages to recruit and retain staff led the fight to win One Fair Wage in the Windy City and played a major role in the ultimate passage of the bill. The decline in tipping averages, combined with the increased cost of living, has compelled many restaurant employers in Chicago and statewide in Illinois to voluntarily raise pay to recruit and retain staff who are able to earn enough to make it worth working in restaurants.

Restaurant Dive reported last December that the payroll processing company ADP found that “Base wages have grown in absolute terms by 66% for tipped workers.”¹⁸ In fact, as a result of small business employers voluntarily raising wages and increases in the minimum wage, restaurant workers’ income in many states rose faster than inflation. Illinois, where Chicago is implementing full wages, and the state has increased the subminimum wage from 2020 to 2023 saw restaurant workers’ income rise faster than inflation.

In fact, restaurant worker incomes appear to follow changes to the minimum wage set for tipped workers. Illinois increased its subminimum wage by \$1.80 from 2020–2023 and saw average annual income for all workers in establishments rise 29 percent.^{19,20} While New York raised its subminimum wage by less, \$1.60, during that same period and did see their restaurant workers’ average annual incomes increase, but also by a smaller percentage than Illinois, at almost 25 percent.

The alone could be a coincidence, but New York and Illinois’ restaurant worker incomes also appear to correlate with the total dollar amount of the minimum wage set for tipped workers. The subminimum wage in New York in 2023 was \$1.65 per hour more than the subminimum wage in Illinois, and while New York workers saw incomes increase at a slower rate, their total average annual income is higher. New York’s annual average income for restaurant workers was \$34,076, compared to Illinois’s \$27,435.²¹



“I’m so happy that the Chicago City Council has passed One Fair Wage. It’s been really hard to find people, we’ve been raising wages to recruit staff. This new law will create a level playing field and signal to all workers that it’s worth coming back to work in restaurants.”

—Terri Evans, Owner, Windy City BBQ, Chicago

While more research is needed, these early figures show a positive correlation between raising tipped worker minimum wages and the average income of all restaurant workers. Chicago shows how increases to the subminimum wage and lifting workers into full wages is a minimum increase to an employer’s expenses.

In Chicago, the new law has required an 8 percent increase in tipped workers' base wages each year, but has only increased total labor costs for the restaurant industry by only 3 percent a year — roughly in line with current annual inflation.²²

It is important to remember that the law is not requiring an 8 percent increase on an establishment's entire labor force. In practice, the law requires a much smaller increase to an employer's bottom line. According to Square, 62 percent of workers in the Chicago restaurant industry already make at least the full minimum wage before tips.²³ Since this affects only 38 percent of these businesses' workforce, an 8 percent raise for these workers only represents a 3 percent increase in labor costs for the industry.

3 | RESTAURANT WORKER TIP INCOME, ESTABLISHMENT, AND EMPLOYMENT CONTINUES TO GROW IN FAIR WAGE STATES AND CITIES AND EVEN AS NEW YORK STATE HAS RAISED TIPPED WORKERS' WAGES

Previous research has found that all workers at restaurants see higher wages in fair wage states compared to subminimum-wage states.²⁴ However, research published by Toast and the payroll company ADP shows that tipped workers in particular in cities that are phasing in a full minimum wage with tips on top are seeing real increases in their overall income, including wages and tips.

Toast specifically examined national tipping data from September 2023 to September 2024 and compared it to the tipping rates of the fair wage state of California, along with Chicago and Washington, D.C. two places that have begun to phase in fair wages for tipped workers.²⁵ Toast found that “Despite being paid the highest hourly wage, tips per hour in California increased the most. Servers made a median of \$24.10 in tips per hour in September 2024, a 5.8% increase from a year prior.”²⁶ Toast also showed that while tips have had seasonal fluctuations throughout the year, there has been no collapse in tipping in these areas.²⁷



In a recent report issued in December 2024, ADP examined tipped worker income, including both wages and tips, over the last 4 years in 10 metro areas, including the Washington, D.C., and Chicago Metro areas. While parts of these metro areas include places not implementing fair wage laws, ADP still found positive results: “Chicago workers had the fastest four-year pay growth, at 49 percent, driven by an increase in median base pay of more than 100 percent, from \$5.21 to \$11.02 an hour. Median tipped wages increased 37 percent during the same window, the third-highest growth.”²⁸

ADP also found that places with higher median base pay, including two metro areas in Florida that have increased tipped worker pay for the last three years, have maintained similar hourly amounts of tips as places with much lower median base pay.²⁹

The recent ADP data matches government data showing that restaurant workers in fair-wage states in 2021 made on average \$2,419 in wages and tips more than workers in

subminimum wage states.³⁰ This difference increased by over \$766 by 2023 to an annual wage gap of \$3,184.92, with the average annual income of a restaurant worker in a subminimum wage state being \$25,113.23 while in fair wage states, the average annual income was \$28,298.14.³¹

Research comparing fair-wage states to subminimum-wage states shows that fair-wage states have maintained strong growth rates in the number of restaurant establishments and workers. California, for example, has experienced a 12.9 percent increase in small business restaurants compared to a 5.4 percent increase in small business restaurants in Illinois from January 2020 to February 2022.³²

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages data of food services and drinking places show that from 2021 to 2023, the number of restaurant establishments in the 50 states and the District of Columbia increased by 38,637 or 5.8 percent from 665,743 to 704,380. The number of restaurant establishments in subminimum wage

states grew from 537,130 to 567,975 or an increase of 5.74 percent, while fair wage states grew at a faster rate at 6.05 percent from 128,613 to 136,405.³³

From 2021 to 2023, employment in fair wage states outpaced subminimum-wage states by 4 percentage points.³⁵ Subminimum wage states saw employment in these establishments increase by 13 percent (8,709,708 workers in 2021 to 9,813,752 in 2023), employment increased by 17 percent in fair wage states (1,949,942 workers in 2021 to 2,272,162 in 2023).³⁶

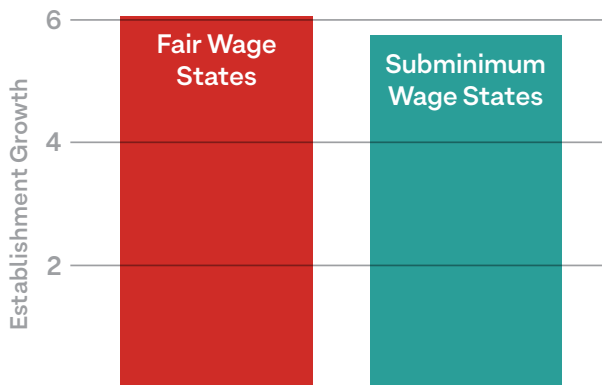
While enough time has not passed to draw final conclusions in either place, US Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that in the short time, Chicago and Washington, D.C. have started raising tipped workers' wages, the number of workers in establishments has remained consistent.³⁸

Data from Washington, D.C. shows that restaurant employment in the District has remained constant; in fact, in February 2025, DC restaurant employment hit 30,000 the highest number of restaurant jobs since the pandemic shutdown.

Serious economists examine longitudinal studies covering several years of data to understand how changes to the minimum wage may or may not change employment. For example, researchers at Cornell University looked at wage increases over a 20 year period and found "the results of this study confirm previous findings, namely, that the relatively

TABLE 3

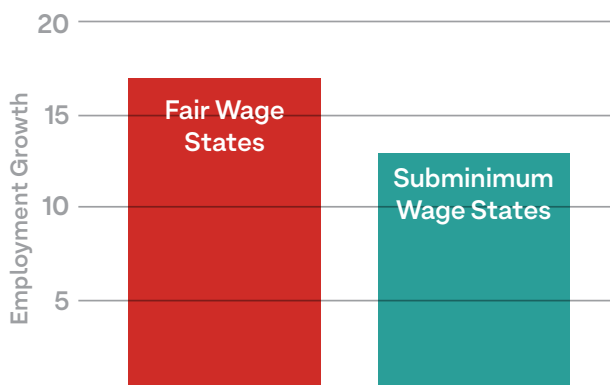
Restaurant Establishment Growth in Fair Wage Vs Subminimum Wage States



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (Sept, 2024). Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages. Private, NAICS 722 Food services and drinking places, All States and U.S. 2021- 2023 Annual Averages, All establishment sizes.³⁴

TABLE 4

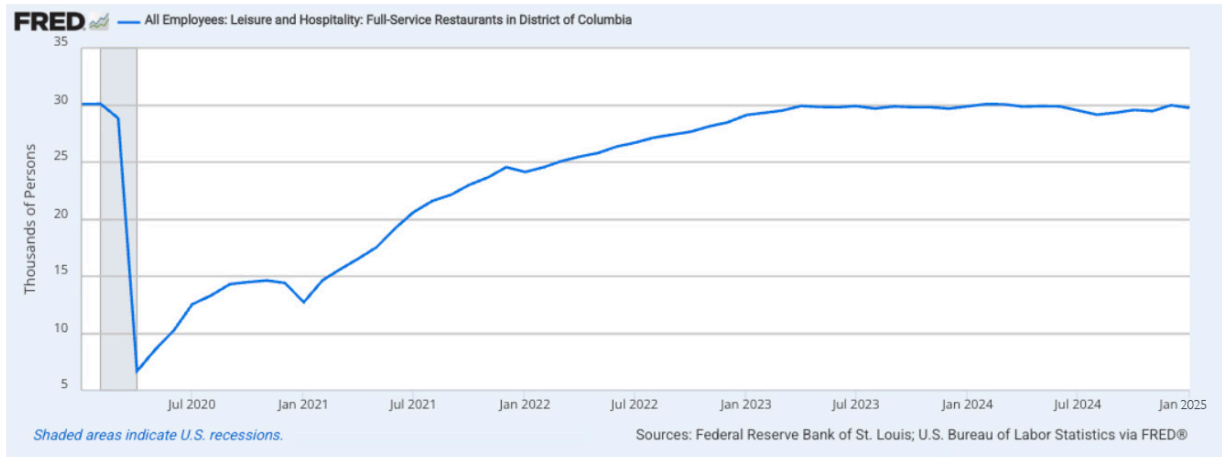
Restaurant Employment Growth In Fair Wage Vs Subminimum Wage States



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (Sept, 2024). Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages. Private, NAICS 722 Food services and drinking places, All States and U.S. 2021- 2023 Annual Averages, All establishment sizes.³⁷

TABLE 5

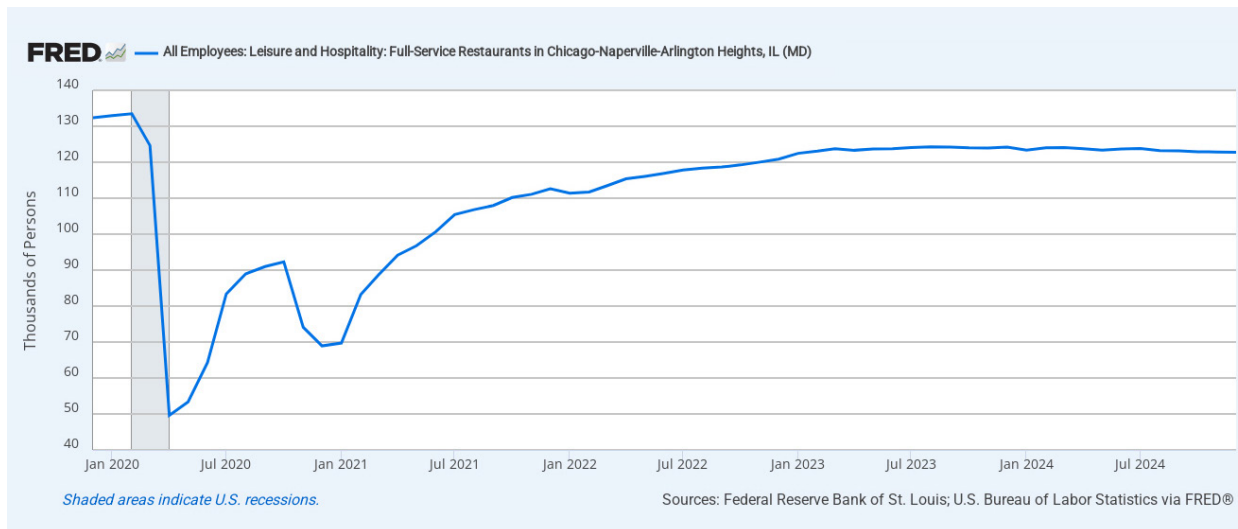
All Employees: Leisure and Hospitality: Full-Service Restaurants in District of Columbia Over 5 Years



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis date accessed March 26, 2025.³⁹

TABLE 6

All Employees: Leisure and Hospitality: Full-Service Restaurants in Chicago-Naperville-Arlington Heights, Illinois Over Five Years



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, date accessed March 26, 2025.⁴¹

modest mandated increases in employees’ regular and tipped minimum wages in the past twenty years have not had large or reliable effects on the number of restaurant establishments or restaurant industry employment levels, although those increases have raised restaurant industry wages overall.”⁴⁰

Similarly, although not enough time has passed to draw conclusions, Chicago restaurant employment has remained constant even after the passage of the One Fair Wage legislation in October 2023.

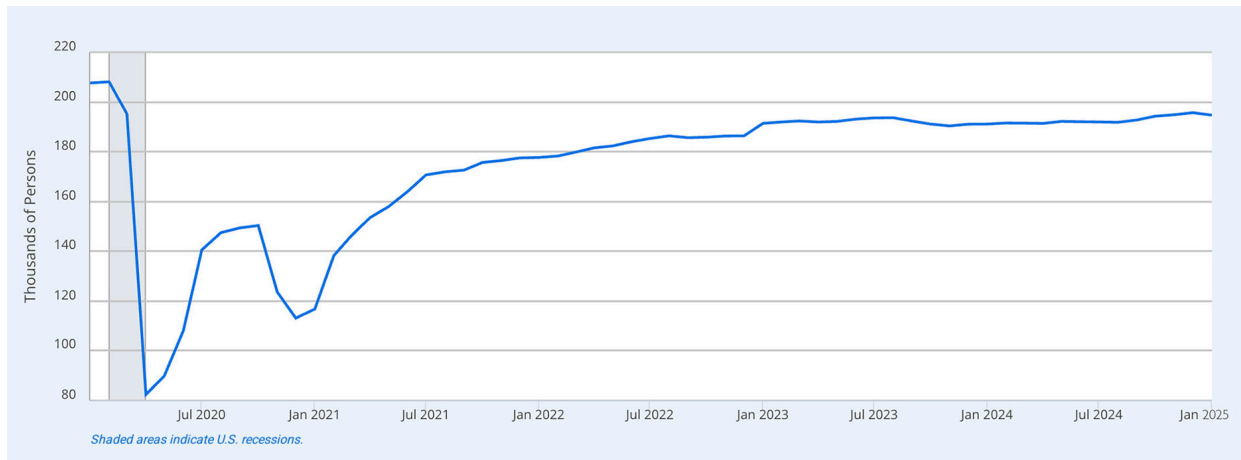
If we wish to look at a longer period of wage growth, the state of Florida has been raising tipped worker wages every September over the last three years, from \$5.54 to \$9.98, and will eventually hit \$11.98 while the full minimum wage will reach \$15.⁴² The state has seen

employment increases from August 2021 to January 2025 with Food Services and Drinking Places employment in Florida adding approximately 65,000 jobs — an 8 percent increase.⁴³

Illinois also shows that raising tipped workers’ wages will not hurt restaurant employment. Illinois itself has increased tipped worker pay from \$5.50 in January 2020 to \$9 in 2025.⁴⁴ Similar to Chicago, the state has seen steady post-pandemic employment and overall, the state’s employment is trending upward.⁴⁵

TABLE 7

All Employees: Leisure and Hospitality: Full-Service Restaurants in Illinois Over 5 Years

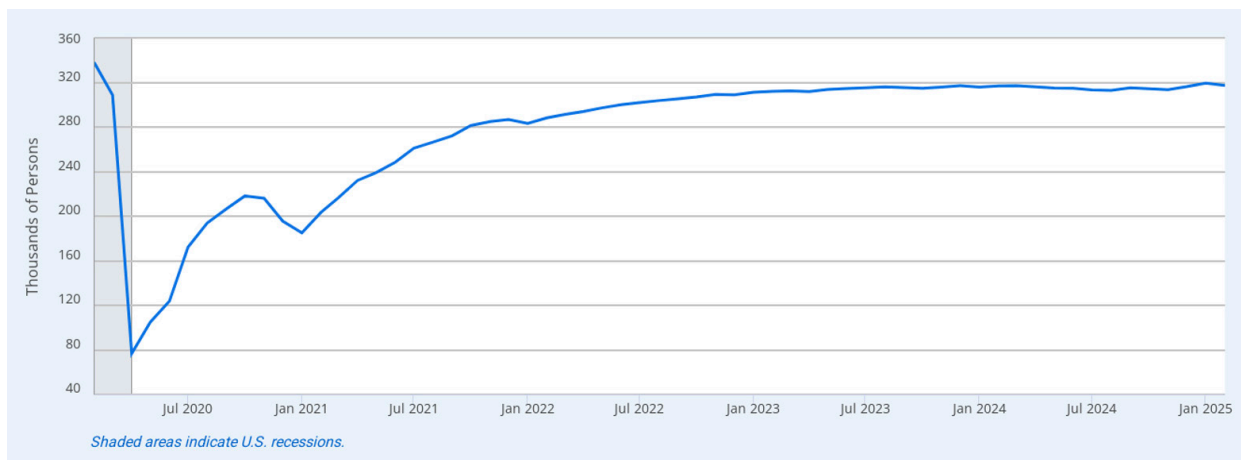


Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, date accessed March 26, 2025.⁴⁶

New York itself has lifted tipped worker pay from \$7.85 in 2020 to \$10.35 by 2025, and has seen employment rise after pandemic shutdowns and hold steady since.^{47,48} This data shows that tipped worker wages can increase without hurting restaurant employment or the number of establishments, but the increasing cost of living in New York and decreasing tip rates necessitate this wage continuing to rise more rapidly until these workers are paid the full statewide minimum wage with tips on top.

TABLE 8

All Employees: Leisure and Hospitality: Full-Service Restaurants in New York



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, date assessed April 17, 2025.⁴⁹

Conclusion

For the last fifteen years, New York tipped workers have been advocating for One Fair Wage, making many of the arguments outlined in this brief and many more. The subminimum wage for tipped workers is a direct legacy of slavery that has forced a workforce that is overwhelmingly women to tolerate the highest levels of economic insecurity and sexual harassment of any industry because they must tolerate inappropriate customer behavior in tips. They have pointed to the experiences of the seven states that have already ended the subminimum wage for tipped workers and have positive restaurant establishment, employment, and tipping growth rates.

But now, the skyrocketing cost of living, combined with the decline in tipping and stagnant wages, has raised the challenge of the issue to crisis proportions. It has compelled small business restaurants across the state to raise wages voluntarily, and many have joined forces with workers to call on the state to pass legislation to end this legacy of slavery immediately.

End Notes

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