2021 Overview: Domestic Workers Economic Situation

FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY OF SPANISH-SPEAKING HOUSE CLEANERS, NANNIES AND HOMECARE WORKERS

MAY 2022

NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE

NDWA LABS

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, NDWA Labs developed our La Alianza news chatbot into a groundbreaking research tool that surveys thousands of Spanish-speaking domestic workers every week, producing first-of-its-kind data for a workforce that is essential, but overlooked, in mainstream economic analysis.

As part of this ongoing research, we produce regular reports on Spanish-speaking domestic workers' economic situation and working conditions. In October 2020, we released a report which showed, 6 months into the pandemic, how domestic workers had been impacted by this crisis. We found devastating job loss, low wages, and economic insecurity at alarming levels.

At the worst point since we started surveying, in early May 2020, nearly 7 in 10 domestic worker respondents reported zero jobs in a weekly survey. After May 2020, we started seeing employment gains but economic insecurity was still rampant. Each month we surveyed during 2020, more than half of domestic worker respondents told us at the beginning of the month that they faced housing insecurity.

Starting in 2021, we released a monthly Economic Situation report on the same day as the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Jobs report release. The present report shares an overview of our learnings from monthly Domestic Worker Economic Situation Reports throughout 2021.

NDWA Labs' survey research prioritizes building trust with domestic workers, centering their experience in our data collection efforts. This guides our decisions on which questions to ask, which not to ask, and when and how to ask them. Each survey experience in the chatbot begins with a news offering and ends with additional news and resources. As part of the data collection process, we gather suggestions and insights for what information and resources workers would value in future news articles and chatbot conversations.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

- The share of jobless respondents declined gradually throughout 2021, from 34% in the first quarter to 22% in the last quarter. However, by the end of 2021, joblessness for domestic worker respondents was still more than twice the rate of joblessness before COVID.

- Even as respondents started to find work, 7 in 10 domestic worker respondents were underemployed, wanting more work than they had.

- Despite an increase in employment, a high share of respondents continued to face housing and food insecurity, with 44% reporting housing insecurity in the last quarter of 2021, and 74% reporting some level of food insecurity.

- Wages improved slightly throughout the year, with the share of respondents earning $15 or less per hour decreasing from 89% in the first quarter of 2021 to 85% in the last quarter. However, the distribution of wages was still far from where it was before the pandemic.

- The typical respondent of our surveys is a house cleaner. She is a Latina woman, 30-49 years old, and speaks Spanish as well as a basic level of English.

About Domestic Work

Domestic workers are the nannies, homecare workers, and house cleaners whose work is essential to our economy, and yet they are one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups of workers. They work in other people's homes, which often means they are isolated from other workers and vulnerable to exploitation. Many groups of domestic workers are excluded from labor rights and protections. Many La Alianza subscribers, like many other domestic workers, have additional language barriers, which may exacerbate the difficulties bargaining with their employers.

Domestic workers, particularly house cleaners, often have multiple employers. This means they may have to schedule several jobs in a given week in order to make ends meet. Even before COVID-19, domestic workers earned less than the average US worker and were three times as likely to be living in poverty.[1]

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[1]Economic Policy Institute (2019), *Domestic Workers Chartbook*

EMPLOYMENT

The share of jobless respondents declined gradually throughout 2021.[2] However, by the end of 2021, joblessness for domestic worker respondents was still more than twice the rate of joblessness before COVID.

In the first quarter of 2021, an average of 34% of respondents said they had zero hours of work in a weekly survey. By the fourth quarter of 2021, that number had declined to 22% of respondents out of work. For comparison, before COVID, 9% of respondents reported having zero work hours.

The trends for joblessness among domestic worker respondents of NDWA Labs' La Alianza surveys during 2021 were generally consistent with unemployment trends reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) nationwide.[3]

- With few exceptions, the US general unemployment rate, and the unemployment rate for Latina women reported by the BLS, moved in the same direction as the joblessness rates we saw for surveyed domestic workers month to month during 2021.[4]

- Racial disparities in unemployment rates, as reported by the BLS, persist. The unemployment rates for Black and Latinx adults remain notably higher than the rates for White adults.
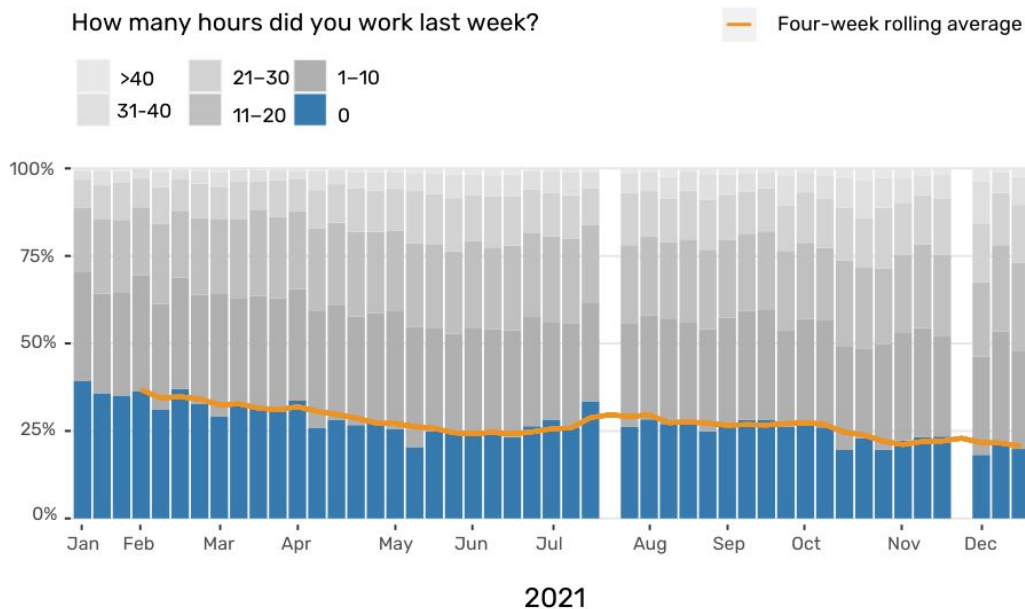
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[2]On average during 2021, 80% of respondents who were out of work said they were available to work during the survey week.
[3]The share of joblessness for domestic workers is not directly comparable to the unemployment rate nationwide. Unlike unemployment rates, joblessness for domestic workers may include people who are not working but are currently unavailable to work, or not actively looking for jobs.
[4]Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), Labor Force Statistics (CPS)

EMPLOYMENT

Joblessness among surveyed domestic workers decreased from an average of 34% in the first quarter of 2021 to an average of 22% in the fourth quarter of 2021

How many hours did you work last week?

— Four-week rolling average

>40   21–30   1–10
31-40   11–20   0

n = 73,157 total responses in 2021. Some workers responded in multiple weeks | Source: NDWA Labs' La Alianza Weekly Survey, January 15 – December 17, 2021 | Note: The rolling average is calculated using four consecutive calendar weeks. For weeks where we did not survey and we lacked data for a given calendar week, the rolling average is calculated using 3 weeks of data.

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Even as respondents started to find work, the vast majority of domestic worker respondents were underemployed, wanting more work than they had.

By December 2021, when we saw the lowest joblessness rate since the start of the pandemic, 70% of respondents who had at least one hour of work in a week said they wanted to work more hours.

- **Most respondents, whether or not they had current work, were actively looking for additional jobs.** In December 2021, 78% of domestic worker respondents told us they had looked for new work in the previous 30 days; and 74% said they had asked at least one of their regular employers to go back to work in the previous 30 days.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

Housing and food insecurity remained high.

While we saw an improvement from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, a very high share of respondents were still experiencing housing and food insecurity.
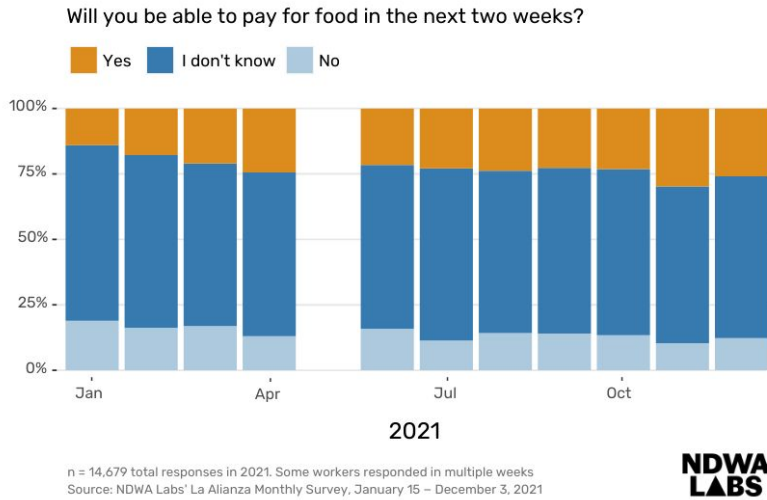
- In the last quarter of 2021, an average of 44% of respondents were unable to pay their rent or mortgage at the beginning of the month, down from 54% in the first quarter.

  - For reference, Household Pulse Survey data collected from December 1-13, 2021 puts housing insecurity in the US at 6.4%, measured as adults in households who are not current on rent or mortgage payments and who have slight or no confidence that their household can pay next month's rent or mortgage on time.[5]

- In the last quarter of 2021, an average of 74% of respondents either did not know if they would be able to afford food in the following two weeks, or were sure they would NOT be able to. This represented a decrease from 83% in the first quarter of 2021.

The share of surveyed domestic workers facing housing insecurity ranged from 41% to 57% in 2021.

Were you able to pay your rent or mortgage this month?

Yes ▢ Does not apply ▢ I could not (orange)

n = 14,875 total responses in 2021. Some workers responded in multiple weeks
Source: NDWA Labs' La Alianza Monthly Survey, January 15 – December 3, 2021

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The share of surveyed domestic workers facing food insecurity ranged from 70% to 86% in 2021

Will you be able to pay for food in the next two weeks?

■ Yes ■ I don't know ■ No

n = 14,679 total responses in 2021. Some workers responded in multiple weeks
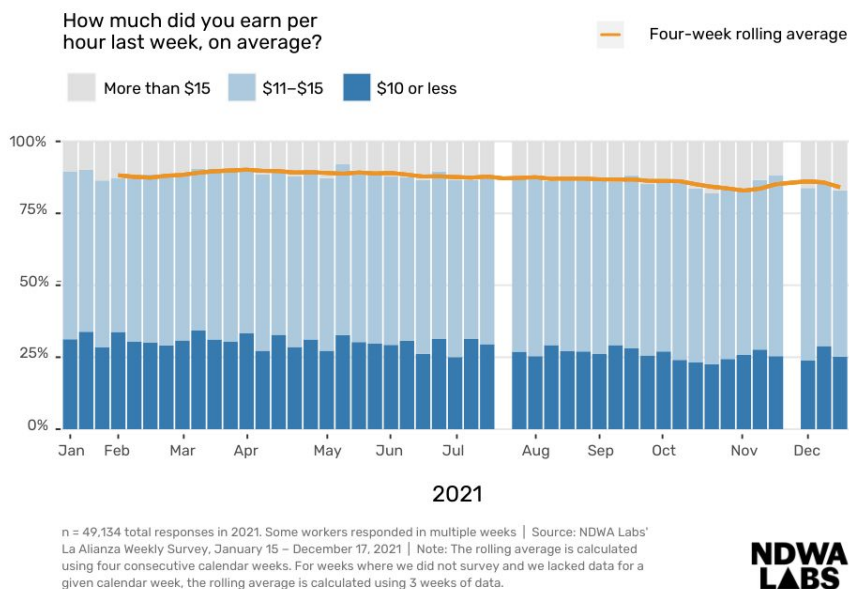Source: NDWA Labs' La Alianza Monthly Survey, January 15 – December 3, 2021

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WAGES

With some improvements, the distribution of wages is still far from where it was before the pandemic.

In the last quarter of 2021, an average of 85% of domestic worker respondents earned $15 or less per hour, down from 89% in the first quarter. However, this remains much higher than the 55% who reported earning $15 or less per hour before COVID-19.

Wages improved slightly in 2021. On average, 89% of domestic worker respondents earned $15 or less per hour in the first quarter, compared to 84% in the fourth quarter.

How much did you earn per hour last week, on average?

■ More than $15 ■ $11–$15 ■ $10 or less — Four-week rolling average

n = 49,134 total responses in 2021. Some workers responded in multiple weeks │ Source: NDWA Labs' La Alianza Weekly Survey, January 15 – December 17, 2021 │ Note: The rolling average is calculated using four consecutive calendar weeks. For weeks where we did not survey and we lacked data for a given calendar week, the rolling average is calculated using 3 weeks of data.
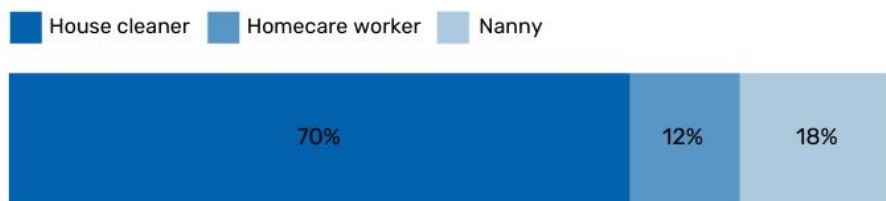
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RESPONDENT PROFILE

During 2021, La Alianza surveys had more than 13 thousand unique respondents who completed a full survey, and over 62 thousand completed surveys. Respondents live in at least 48 U.S. states, DC, and Puerto Rico.[6]

The typical (median) respondent of our surveys is a house cleaner. She is a Latina woman, 30-49 years old, and a Spanish-speaker who also has a basic level of English.
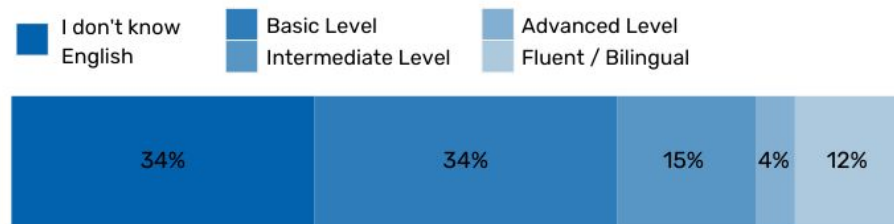
All domestic workers who responded to our surveys are Spanish-speakers, and 99% identified as Latina. The vast majority of respondents are women. 7 in 10 respondents are house cleaners and most respondents are in the 30-49 year age range. Nearly 7 in 10 respondents during 2021 either do not speak English (34%), or reported having a basic level of English (34%).

What is your primary occupation?

House cleaner	Homecare worker	Nanny

| 70% | 12% | 18% |

n = 19,756 unique respondents in 2021 | Source: NDWA Labs' La Alianza Weekly Survey, January 15 – December 17, 2021

How would you describe your English level?

I don't know English	Basic Level / Intermediate Level	Advanced Level / Fluent / Bilingual

| 34% | 34% | 15% | 4% | 12% |

n = 363 unique respondents in 2021 | Source: NDWA Labs' La Alianza Weekly Survey, October 22 – December 17, 2021
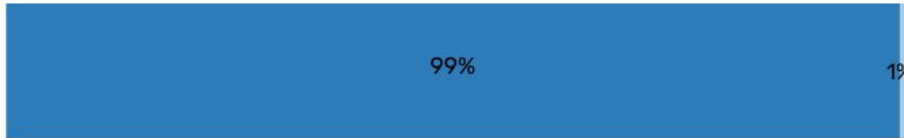
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[6]On the first survey they respond to, workers are invited to share the zipcode of their place of residence, which is then used to assign their state of residence. We have collected the state of residence for 83% of respondents.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

What is your gender?

▉ Female   ▉ Male

99%	1%

n = 19,741 unique respondents in 2021 │ Source: NDWA Labs' La Alianza Weekly Survey, January 15 – December 17, 2021

What is your age group?

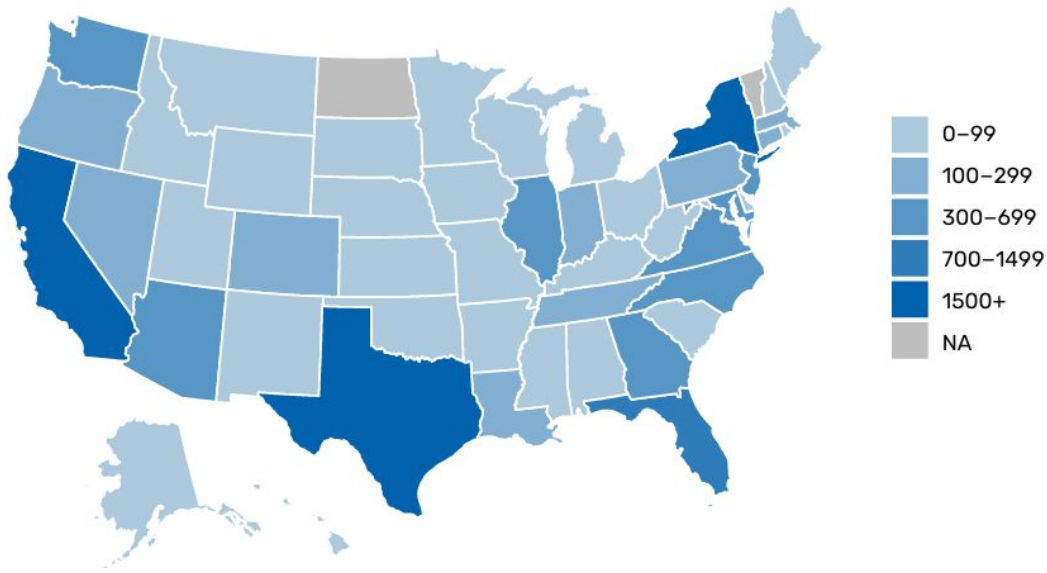▉ Less than 18   ▉ 18–29   ▉ 30–49   ▉ 50–64   ▉ 65 or more

4%	7%	54%	34%	1%

n = 13,566 unique respondents in 2021 │ Source: NDWA Labs' La Alianza Weekly Survey, January 15 – December 17, 2021

Surveyed domestic workers live at least in 48 states, DC, and Puerto Rico

0–99
100–299
300–699
700–1499
1500+
NA

n = 16,413 unique respondents in 2021 │ Source: NDWA Labs' La Alianza Weekly Survey, January 15 – December 17, 2021

ABOUT THE SURVEYS

NDWA Labs surveys Spanish-speaking domestic workers each week, via La Alianza, a Messenger chatbot. Every time a worker subscribes to our messaging, the software that powers the chatbot automatically and randomly assigns that subscriber to one of 100 randomized groups. All groups begin at roughly the same size.

Our full survey cohort contains a subset of 52 groups which are a random sample of more than 90 thousand La Alianza subscribers. This same cohort is further divided into four randomly assigned rotation groups, each with 13 groups. Throughout 2021, each rotation group got the survey for two consecutive weeks, and then did not receive the survey the following two weeks.

Questions about age range, ESL, place of residence, and occupation were asked only once to each respondent; hours worked and hourly wages are asked weekly, and questions around food and housing security are asked monthly at the beginning of the month.

The data presented in this report comes from 47 weekly surveys during 2021. There were more than 62,000 fully completed surveys during 2021, which includes both new and repeated respondents, from more than 13,000 unique respondents.

At the end of each survey, La Alianza provides respondents with relevant news articles and resources in Spanish. To learn more details about NDWA Labs' La Alianza survey of Spanish-speaking domestic workers, see this report.

For questions, please contact us here.

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www.ndwalabs.org

La Alianza is a product of NDWA Labs, the innovation partner of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. NDWA Labs experiments with the ways technology can organize domestic workers and transform domestic work jobs into good jobs by bringing respect, living wages, and benefits to an undervalued and vulnerable part of the economy.