

New York's Essential Workers Overlooked, Underpaid, and Indispensable

April 8, 2020

THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS HAS PUT A NEW FOCUS ON “ESSENTIAL WORKERS,”

people who are bringing deliveries to our homes, working in supermarkets and convenience stores, keeping the public transportation system functioning, providing social services and childcare, and working in the healthcare industry.

These essential workers have always played a critical role in keeping our communities running. At a time when many streets are eerily empty, however, we can see all the more clearly who is still out there making sure people get food on the table, helping them get to the places they need to despite the coronavirus, and continuing to provide daily care for those who require assistance.

The following new analysis by the Fiscal Policy Institute for the first time shows demographic detail about who essential workers are in New York State. Overall, FPI finds that essential workers are disproportionately likely to be women, immigrants, Black, and Latinx.

The report looks at the state as a whole, New York City, the Hudson Valley, and upstate New York (counties in the Capitol region, and north and west of those counties).¹ The analysis is based on extending a prior analysis by New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer around the state and around the country.² Data for the

report were prepared for the Fiscal Policy Institute by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, which released a parallel report for the United States as a whole.³

It is high time to make
sure essential workers
are treated with
respect and dignity.

While social media posts thanking essential workers for their contributions are nice, we need to take action toward making sure that essential workers are treated with respect and dignity in this time of crisis and beyond. Many essential workers support themselves and their families on very low incomes. And, in this moment of crisis, they need but are not getting adequate protective equipment. Nurses unions are protesting,⁴ and janitors in hospitals are not getting the training or protective gear they need.⁵ Some grocery store clerks, Amazon warehouse workers, and Instacart delivery people are threatening to walk off the job if they do not get masks or even soap.⁶

New York State Data

According to the new analysis, there are 2.2 million “essential workers” in New York State. Twenty-two percent of these essential workers support their families on low incomes, with family incomes of less than 200 percent of the poverty level.

New York State Women, Immigrants, Blacks and Latinx Workers Are More Likely to be Essential Workers

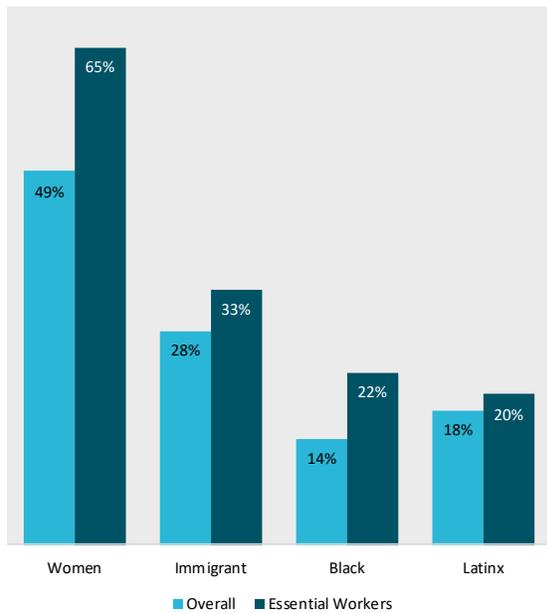


FIG. 1 Source: American Community Survey 2018 5-year data, analyzed for the Fiscal Policy Institute by the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

Women are far more likely to be among these essential workers than men.

Women make up 49 percent of workers employed overall, yet they are 65 percent of essential workers.

Immigrants are also highly represented among essential workers, making up 28 percent of the workers employed in New York State overall, and 33 percent of essential workers.

Blacks, whether U.S.-born or immigrants, make up 14 percent of the workers employed in the state, and 22 percent of essential workers.

And, Latinx workers make up 18 percent of the workers employed statewide, and 20 percent of essential workers.

New York City Data

There are one million front-line workers in New York City. Of these, 24 percent support their families on low-incomes, with a family income below 200 percent of the poverty level.

New York City Essential Workers: Nearly 2/3 Women, Over Half Immigrants, 1/3 Black, Nearly 1/3 Latinx

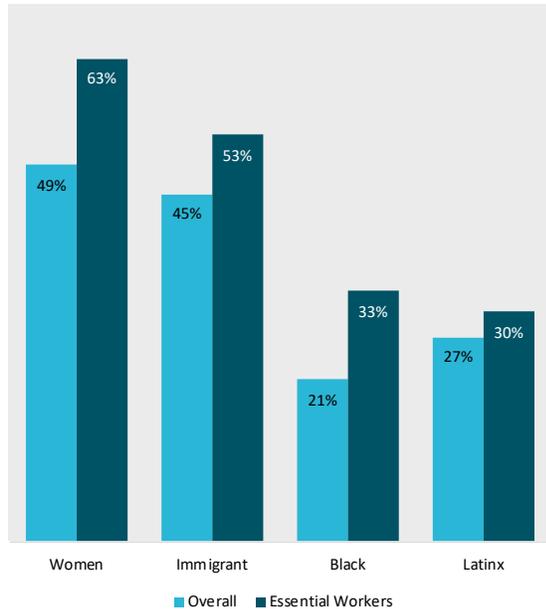


FIG. 2 Source: American Community Survey 2018 5-year data, analyzed for the Fiscal Policy Institute by the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

about a third of essential workers are Latinx: 30 percent of essential workers are Latinx, compared to 27 percent of all workers.

These data follow the analysis of New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer's report, "New York City's Frontline Workers."⁷ FPI uses the term "essential workers" to mean the same thing as "frontline" workers.

Almost two thirds of essential workers in New York City are women. As in all regions of the state, women are far more likely to be essential workers than men. Women make up 49 percent of workers employed in New York City overall and 63 percent of essential workers.

Most New York City residents employed in essential jobs are immigrants—53 percent of the total. That is due to the disproportionate number of immigrants in essential jobs, but also due to the fact that immigrants are in general a far bigger portion of the overall employment in New York City than statewide: immigrants make up 45 percent of overall New York City resident employment.

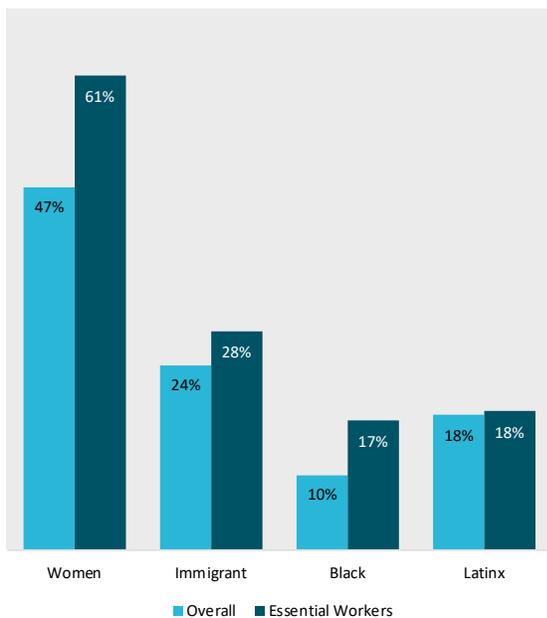
A third of all essential workers in New York City are Black, a far greater share of essential workers than their share of overall employment (21 percent). And

Long Island Data

On Long Island, there are 311,000 essential workers. Eleven percent of essential workers support their families on low-incomes, with a family income of less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Women, immigrants, and Blacks are significantly overrepresented among essential workers on Long Island. Women make up 61 percent of essential workers and 47 percent of employed workers overall. Immigrants make up 28 percent of essential workers and 24 percent of employed workers overall. And Blacks (whether born in this country or abroad)

Long Island Women, Immigrants and Blacks Are a Disproportionate Share of Essential Workers



make up 17 percent of essential workers and 10 percent of workers employed overall. Latinx workers are a significant share of both all workers and essential workers, 18 percent of both, and they are more than twice as likely to be workers in building cleaning services.

FIG. 3 Source: American Community Survey 2018 5-year data, analyzed for the Fiscal Policy Institute by the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

Hudson Valley Data

In the Hudson Valley there are 32,000 essential workers. Seventeen percent these workers support their families on low-incomes, with a family income under 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Women, immigrants, Blacks and Latinx workers are overrepresented among essential

Hudson Valley

Women, Immigrants and Blacks and Latinx Workers Are a Disproportionate Share of Essential Workers

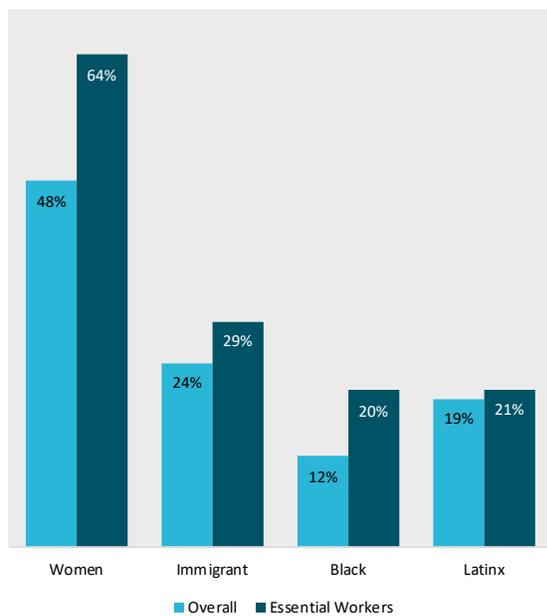


FIG. 4 Source: American Community Survey 2018 5-year data, analyzed for the Fiscal Policy Institute by the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

workers in the Hudson Valley. Women make up nearly two thirds (64 percent) of essential workers, far more than their 48 percent share of employed workers overall. Immigrants are 29 percent of essential workers and 24 percent of employed workers overall. Blacks (whether born in this country or abroad) make up nearly double the share of essential workers as their share of the population: 20 percent compared to 12 percent. Latinx workers are also more likely to be essential workers in the Hudson Valley, where they represent 19 percent of overall workers and 21 percent of essential workers.

The Hudson Valley in this analysis consists of the Hudson Valley south of the Capitol region: Westchester, Rockland, Putnam, Dutchess, Orange, Sullivan and Ulster counties.

Upstate New York Data

In Upstate New York, there are 311,000 essential workers. Of these, 22 percent support their families on low incomes—families with incomes under 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Women, Blacks and Latinx workers are disproportionately likely to be essential workers in Upstate New York. Women and Blacks stand out in particular. Women are nearly two thirds (66 percent) of essential workers, while they are 49 percent of employed workers overall. Blacks (whether born in this country or abroad) are 10 percent of essential workers and 6

Upstate New York Women, Blacks, and Latinx Workers Are a Disproportionate Share of Essential Workers

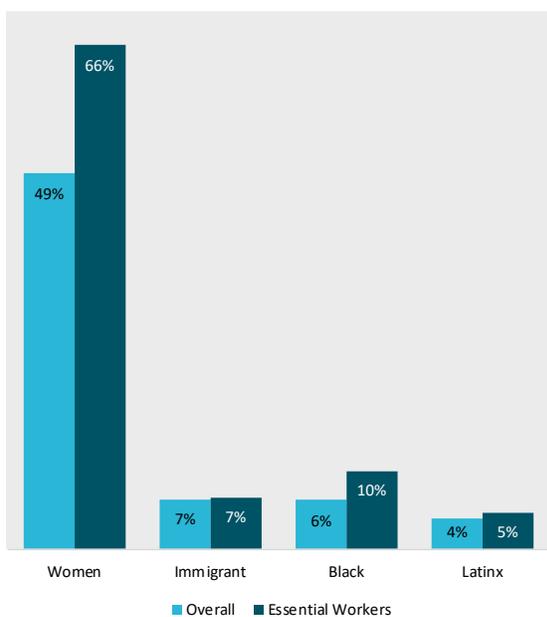


FIG. 5 Source: American Community Survey 2018 5-year data, analyzed for the Fiscal Policy Institute by the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

percent of people employed overall. And Latinx workers make up 5 percent of essential workers, slightly more than 4 percent of working people overall. Immigrants make up 7 percent of both overall employed workers and essential workers, and they are disproportionately likely to be in some of the essential industries, such as building services (11 percent) and health care (8 percent).

In this analysis, Upstate New York includes the Capitol Region and all areas north and west of the Capitol Region: all areas north or west of Ulster, Sullivan, and Dutchess counties.

Methodology

The data in this report were supplied to the Fiscal Policy Institute by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), and this report is being released in conjunction with the Center's national report, "A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries."

The profile uses the most recent estimates of data from the American Community Survey, using a sample that includes data from five years, including 2014 to 2018. The demographics of the essential workers is unlikely to have changed in any substantial way in the years since the survey, and using a data set that includes five years of ACS data helps ensure that sample sizes are sufficient to produce reasonably precise estimates by industry at the state level.

To define "essential industries," CEPR use the same six industry groupings as the New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer did in his recent profile, "New York City's Frontline Workers." In this report, FPI uses the term "essential" workers rather than "frontline" workers, but the two concepts are the same and are defined by the same industry groups.

The "frontline" or "essential" industry groups, each of which includes one or more specific industries (as classified using the Census Bureau's Industry Codes), are:

- **Grocery, Convenience, and Drug Stores:** Grocery and related product merchant wholesalers (4470), supermarkets and other grocery stores (4971), convenience stores (4972), pharmacies and drug stores (5070), and general merchandise stores, including warehouse clubs and supercenters (5391).
- **Public Transit:** Rail transportation (6080) and bus service and urban transit (6180).
- **Trucking, Warehouse, and Postal Service:** Truck transportation (6170), warehousing and storage (6390), and postal service (6370).
- **Building Cleaning Services:** Cleaning services to buildings and dwellings (7690).
- **Healthcare:** Offices of physicians (7970), outpatient care centers (8090), home health care services (8170), other health care services (8180), general medical and surgical hospitals, and specialty hospitals (8191), psychiatric and substance abuse hospitals (8192), nursing care facilities (skilled nursing facilities) (8270), and residential care facilities, except skilled nursing facilities (8290).
- **Childcare and Social Services:** Individual and family services (8370), community food and housing, and emergency services (8380), and child day care services (8470).

CEPR's initial analysis includes all U.S. workers in these six essential industry categories, but no workers in essential occupations that are outside of these six categories. As a result, the estimates exclude some workers in occupations (but not industries) that should clearly be considered part of this essential category, while also including some workers who are not in frontline occupations, even though they are in frontline industries. For example, a police officer is a frontline occupation in a non-frontline industry, while a school bus driver is a non-frontline occupation (at least in areas where schools are closed) in a frontline industry (public transit). Still, the vast majority of workers in the six essential industries are essential workers.

By David Dyssegaard Kallick

David Dyssegaard Kallick is deputy director of the Fiscal Policy Institute and director of FPI's Immigration Research Initiative.

End Notes

¹ Hudson Valley includes Westchester, Rockland, Putnam, Orange, Sullivan, Ulster, and Dutchess counties. "Upstate New York" includes all counties north and west of those counties.

² New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer, "New York City's Frontline Workers," March 2020.

³ Hye Jin Rho, Hayley Brown, and Shawn Fremstad, "A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries," Center for Economic and Policy Research, April 7, 2020.

⁴ Michael Gartlans, "New York Hospitals Must 'Prepare Now' to Work Without Protective Gear: Health Department," Daily News, April 3, 2020.

⁵ "In Fight for Masks, Hospital Janitors Sometimes Come Last," New York Times (Reuters), April 6, 2020.

⁶ Steven Greenhouse, "Is Your Grocery Delivery Worth a Worker's Life," March 30, 2020, New York Times Op-Ed page.

⁷ See above, "New York City's Frontline Workers."

Recommendations

Short-Term

- Ensure that all essential workers have personal protection equipment to help them do their jobs safely.
- Make testing for COVID-19 is readily available.
- Provide free transportation and free childcare to essential workers.
- Make hotel rooms or other facilities available for workers who come from other areas to serve as essential workers in New York.
- Pressure employers to pay adequate wages to essential workers.

Longer-Term

- Improve the federal aid package so that it includes undocumented immigrants in its aid to workers.
- Make sure all workers are included in New York laws regarding minimum wage, overtime, sick days, and paid family leave. That includes gig workers, domestic workers, misclassified workers (like Uber or Lyft workers that the companies consider “independent contractors rather than employees”), farm workers, and undocumented immigrants.
- Honor the dignity of labor. This pandemic spotlighted the workers that we can't do without. Retaining this recognition could fuel major policy changes that uplift workers and improve their lives.
- Close the pay gap for women, immigrants, and people of color. That means equal pay for equal work, and improving pay in jobs where they are disproportionate share of employment.
- Expand public funding for child care, public transportation, hospitals, public health, and other areas of essential work so they are not chronically straining even in “normal” times and quickly overwhelmed in times of crisis.
- Support voting by mail and funding for census outreach for hard to count communities. The census and elections will still take place even as we face this public health and economic crisis, yet the same groups that are overrepresented as essential workers are underrepresented in the census and at the polls.

Updated April 10, 2020