

Food Chain Workers in 2025



February, 2025

Labor & Exploitation in the Food System

From production to processing, distribution, retail, and service, there are **nearly 28 million workers in the U.S. food system**, more workers than any other industry. Over 19 million of them are in frontline (non-managerial) positions, accounting for 29% of all frontline workers.

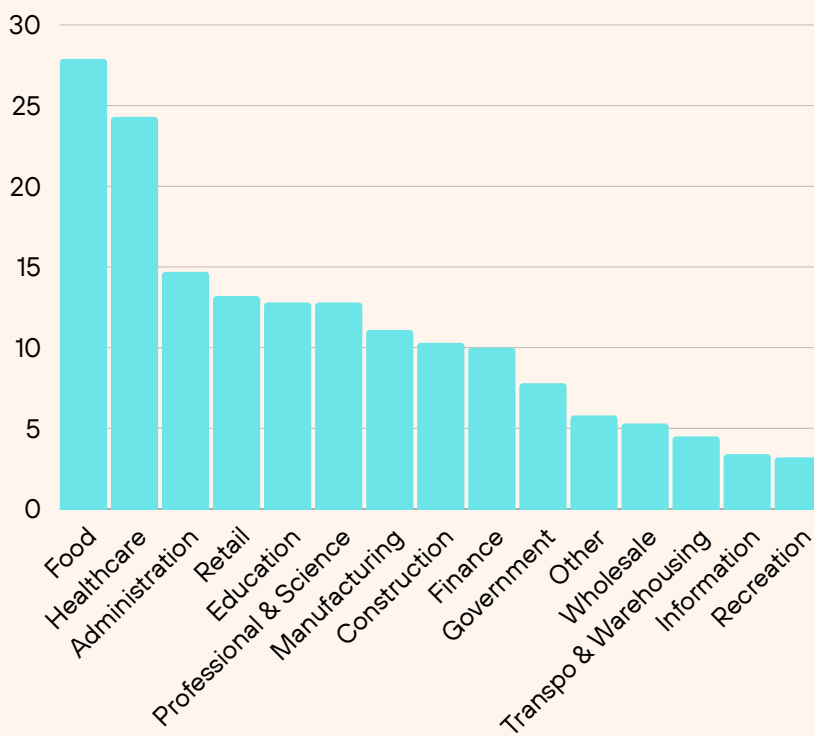
In our updated research, we found that food workers fare worse than nearly all other workers by basically any measure that we looked at.

Low wages, high rates of injury, high rates of food insecurity, and low unionization are just some of the trends that continue to make food work some of the most exploitative in the country.

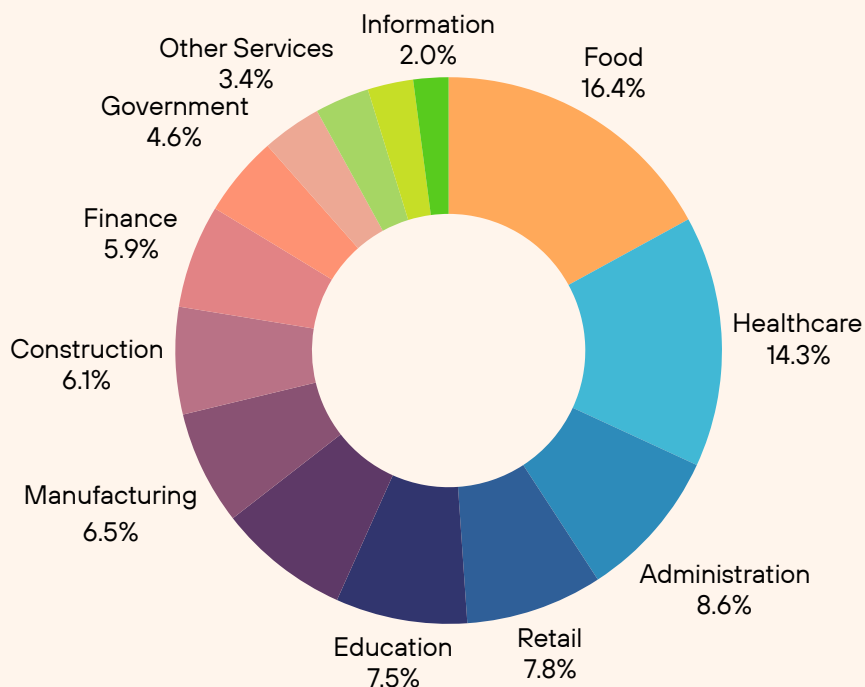
U.S. Employment

The food system has the **highest number of workers** in the United States

Total Employment in the Millions by Industry, 2023



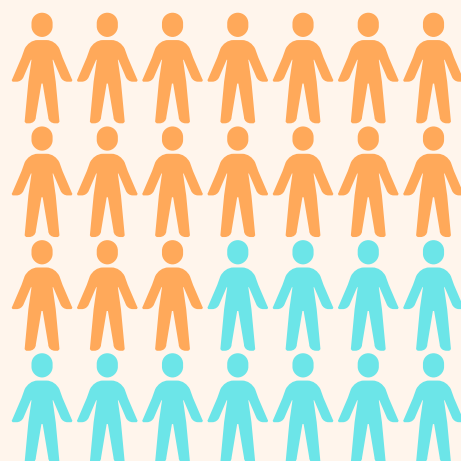
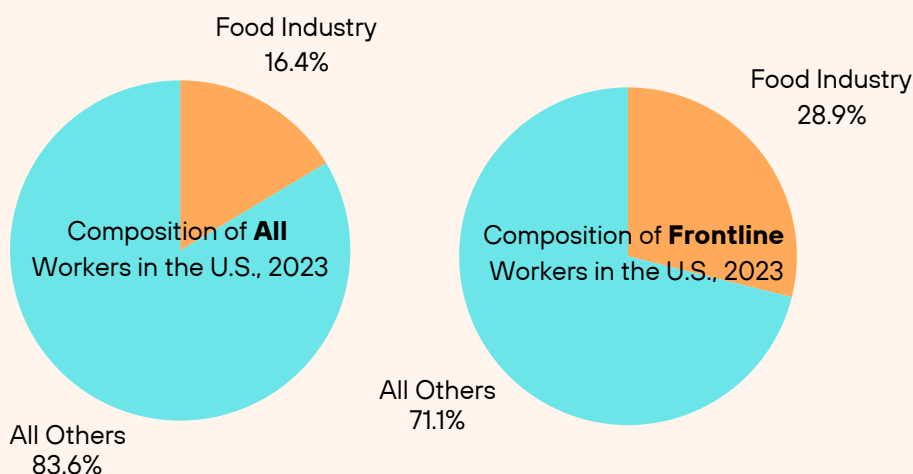
Total Employment by Industry, 2023



Change in Food Workers by Sector, 2016-2023



Out of all frontline workers in the U.S., **more than one in four** work in the food system.

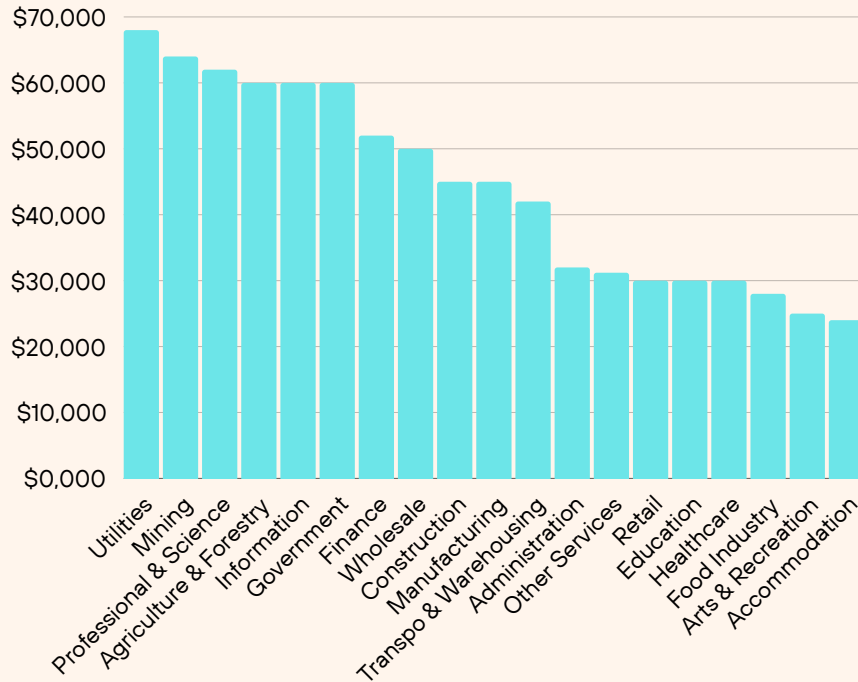


Out of **~28 million** workers in the U.S. food system, nearly **70% are in frontline jobs** — twice the rate of other industries.

Food Worker Wages

Frontline food workers continue to be among the lowest paid workers in the U.S., earning a **median income of \$28,000 per year.**

Median Income: Food Workers vs All Other Industries, 2023

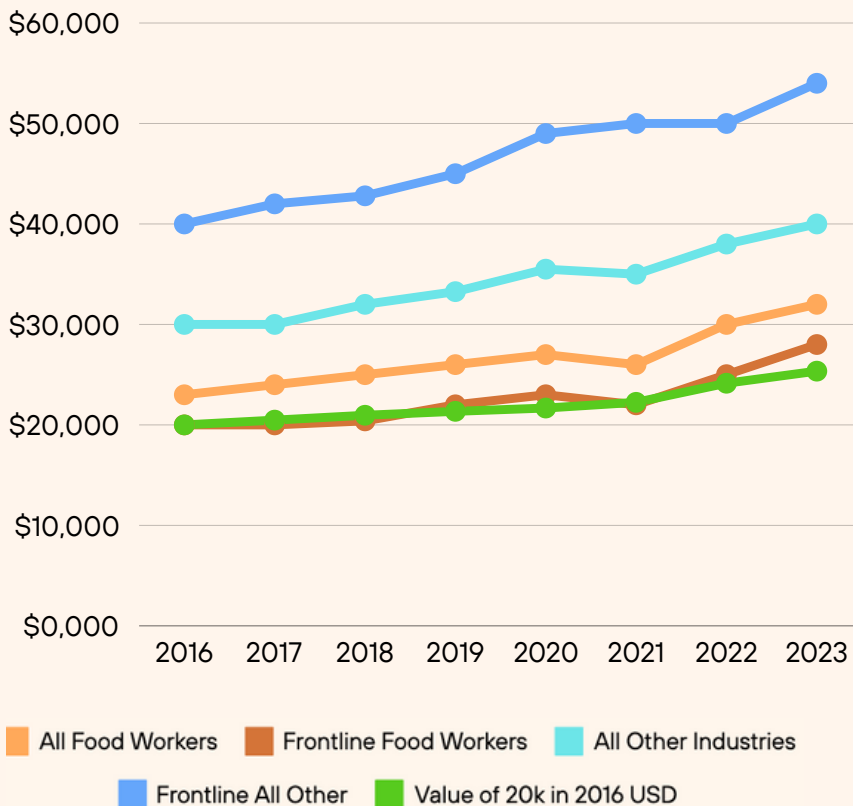


CEO-to-Worker-Wage Index, 2023

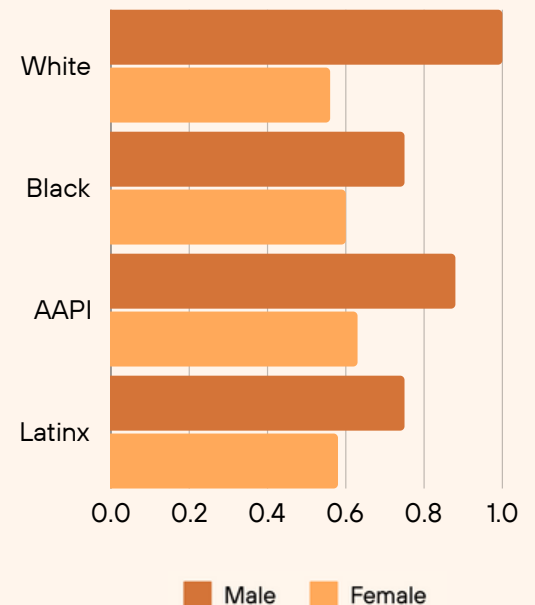


Across all races, women in the food industry earn, on average, **66% of what men are paid.**

Median Income: Food Workers vs All Other Industries, 2016-2023

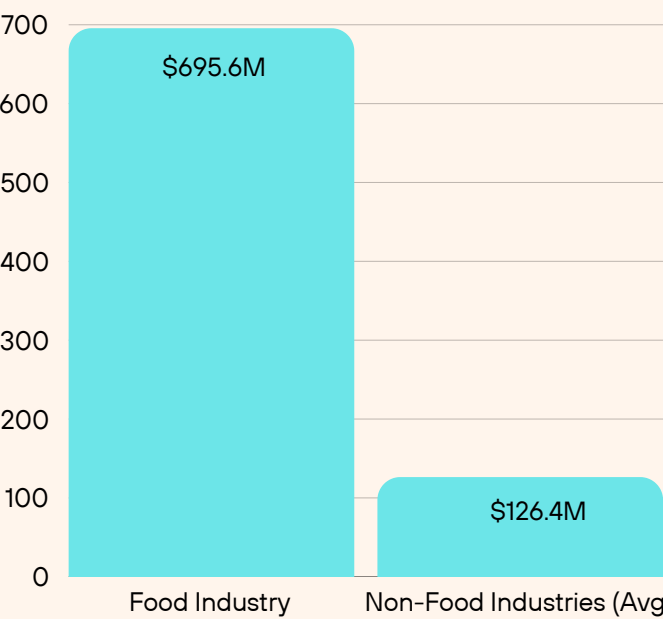


Racial & Gender Income Gap, 2020 - 2023



Wage theft is a major problem across the food system.

Total Back Wages Owed by Industry, 2010 - 2023



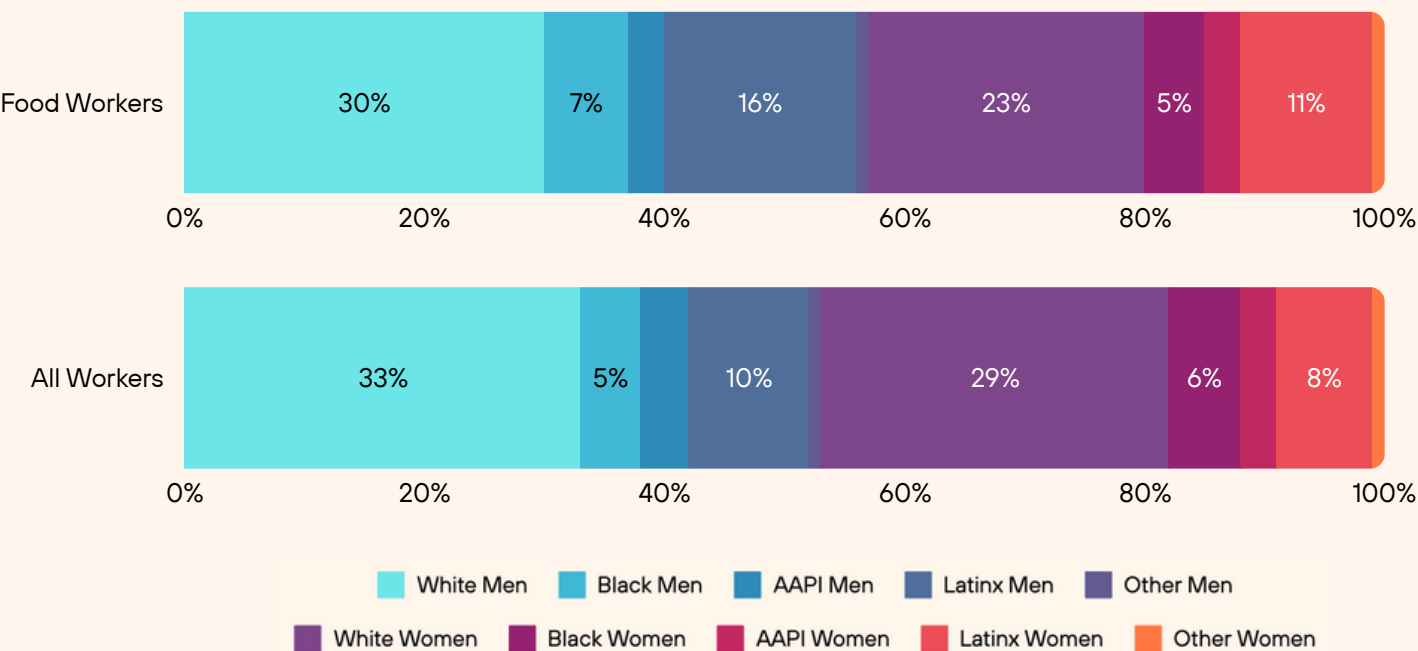
Every year since 2010, the U.S. DOL Wage & Hour Division has deemed that more dollars must be paid back to workers in the food industry than any other industry.

Over the same time period, there have been **twice as many wage and hour violations in the food industry as the industry with the second highest violations, and seven times the average of all non-food industries.**

Food Worker Demographics

Frontline food system workers are **more likely to be women of color, people of color, and immigrants** than the general workforce.

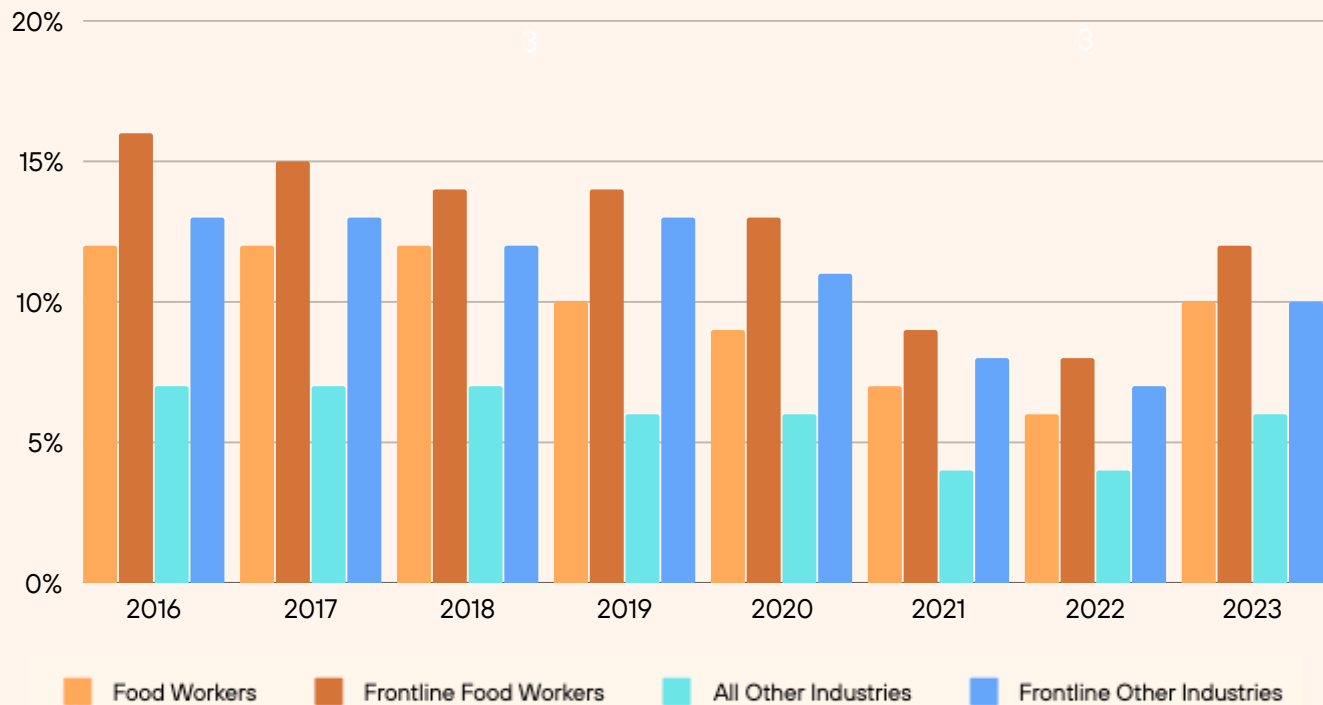
Workforce Distribution by Race & Gender, 2020 - 2023



Poverty Among Food Workers

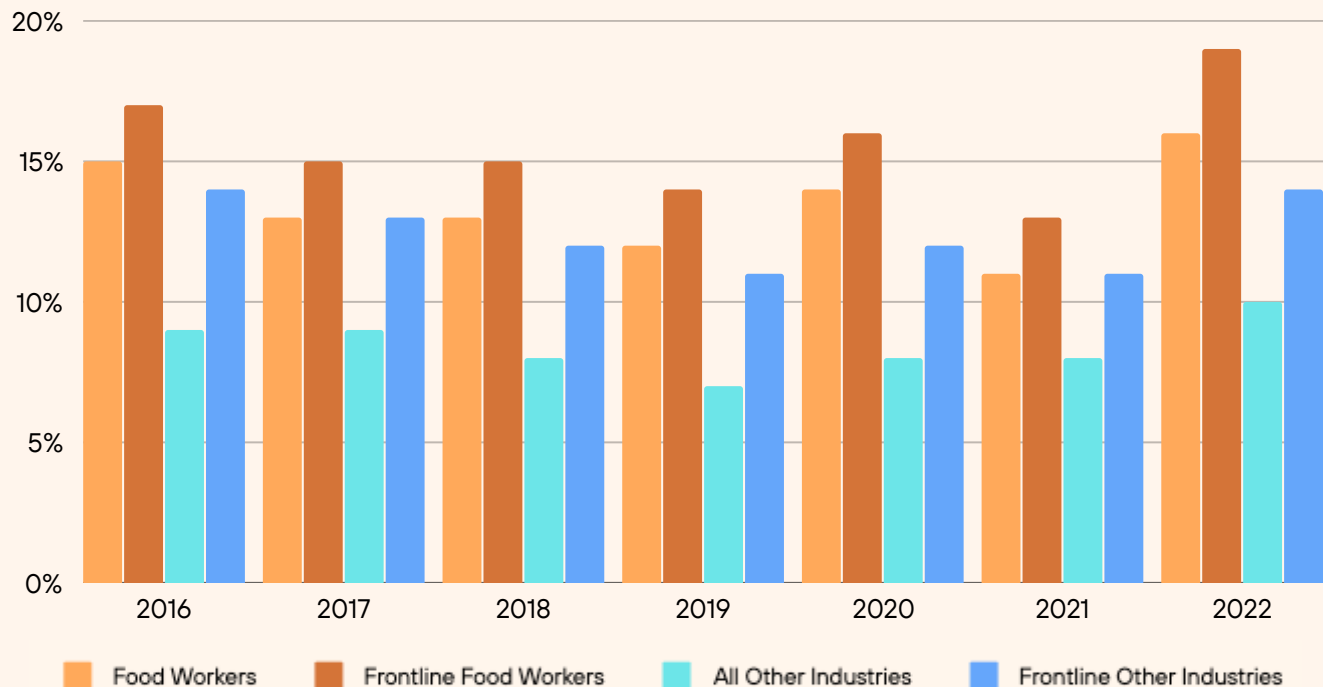
Compared to workers in other industries, frontline food workers are **68% more likely to live below the poverty line.**

Rate of Poverty for Food Chain Workers and All Other Industries, 2016 - 2023



Food workers are **more likely to be food insecure** than workers in any other industry.

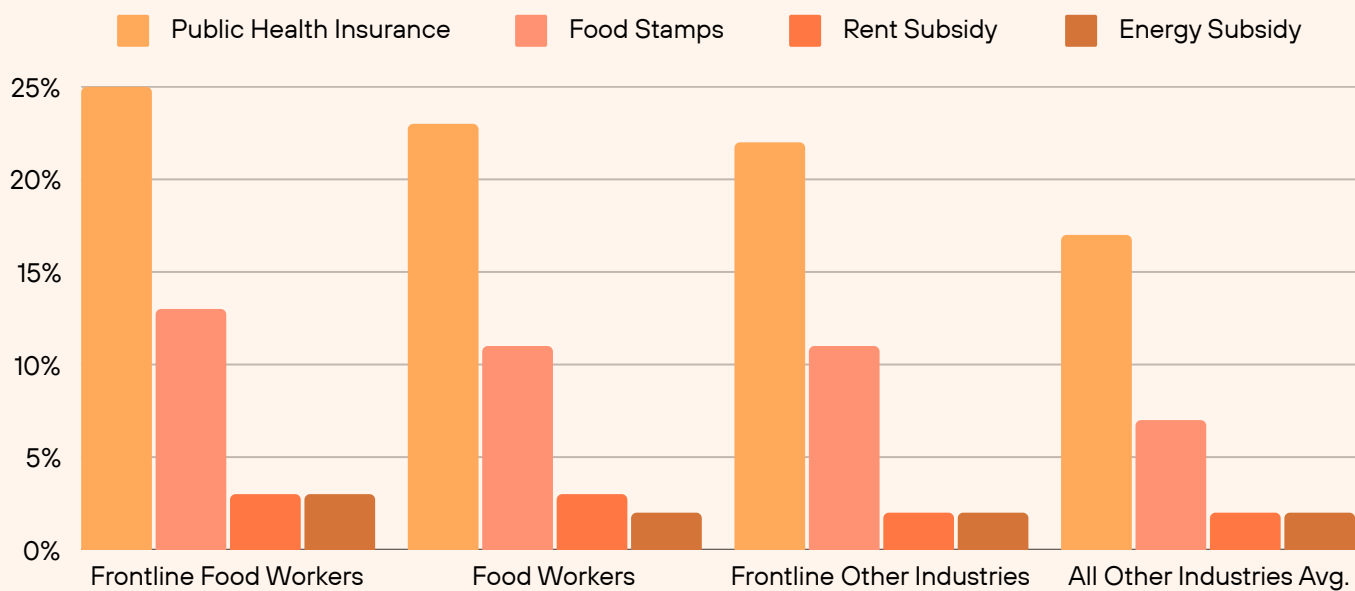
Rate of Food Insecurity among Food Workers vs. All Other Industries, 2016-2022



In 2022, frontline food workers were **93% more likely to be food insecure** than non-food workers, with nearly 1 in 5 frontline food workers being insecure.

Food workers are **60% more likely to rely on SNAP**, 53% more likely to rely on energy subsidies, 35% more likely to rely on public health insurance, and 13% more likely to rely on rent subsidies.

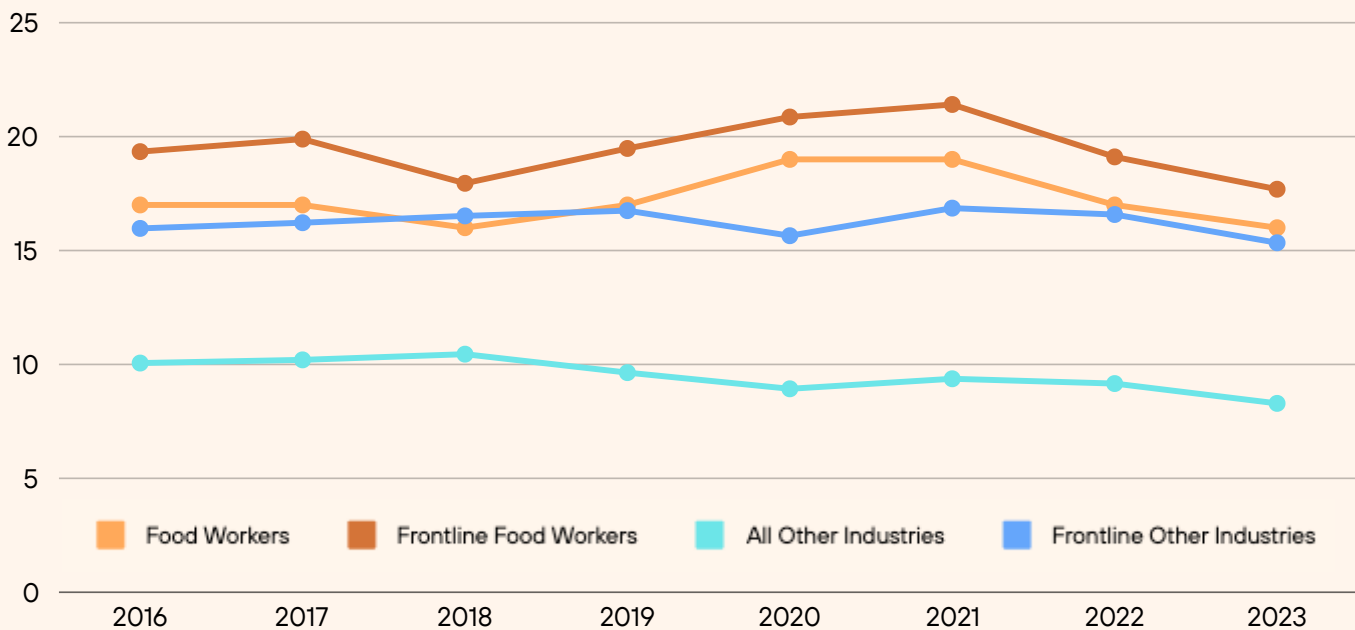
Public Assistance for Food Chain Workers & All Other Industries, 2023



These **federal programs are usually not available to undocumented workers** nor, in some states, formerly incarcerated workers or the unemployed.

Food workers are also **81% more likely** to be without healthcare coverage.

Percent Without Healthcare Coverage, Food Chain Workers and All Other Industries, 2016-2023



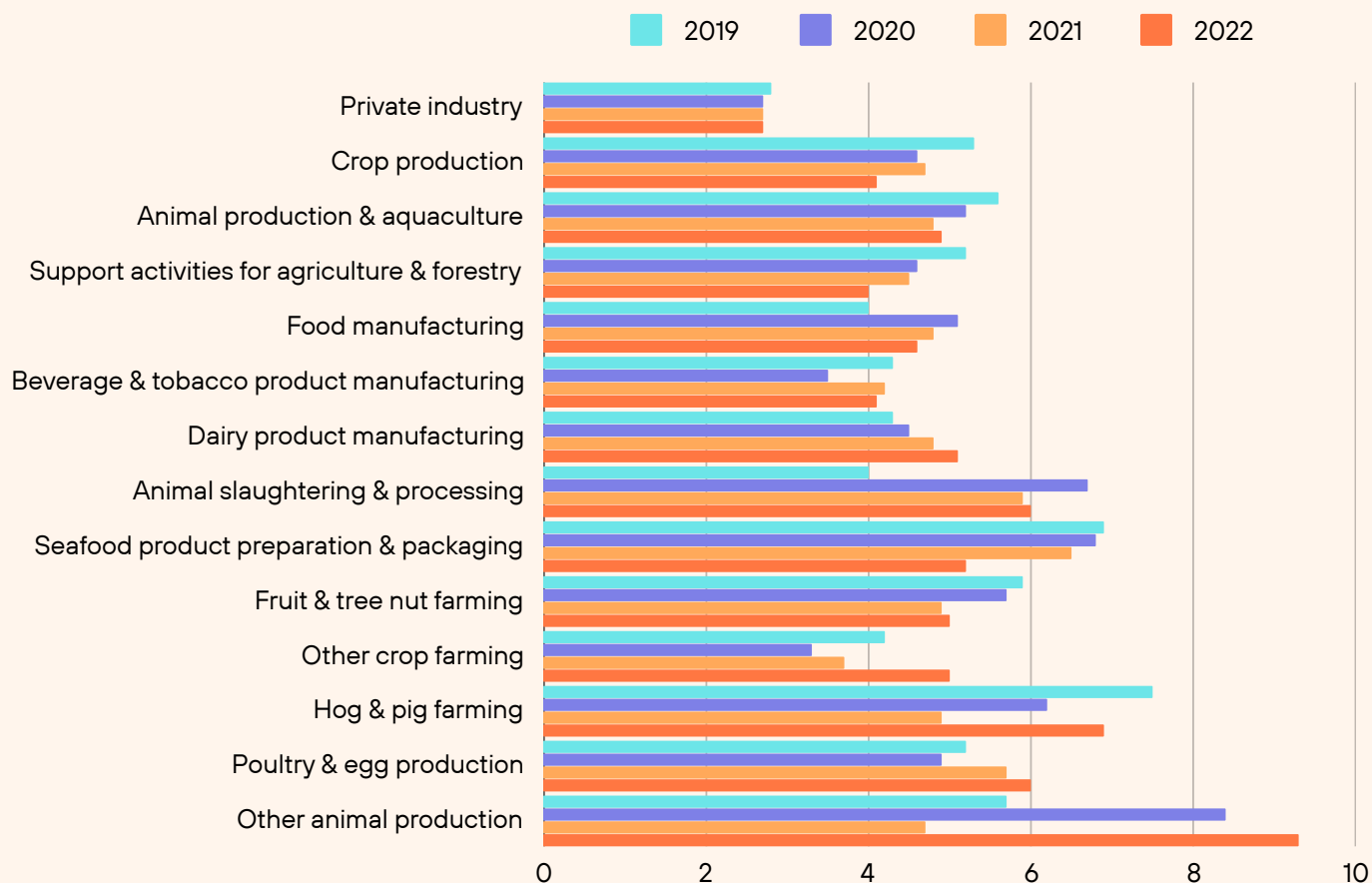


Aaron Hughes

Worker Injuries

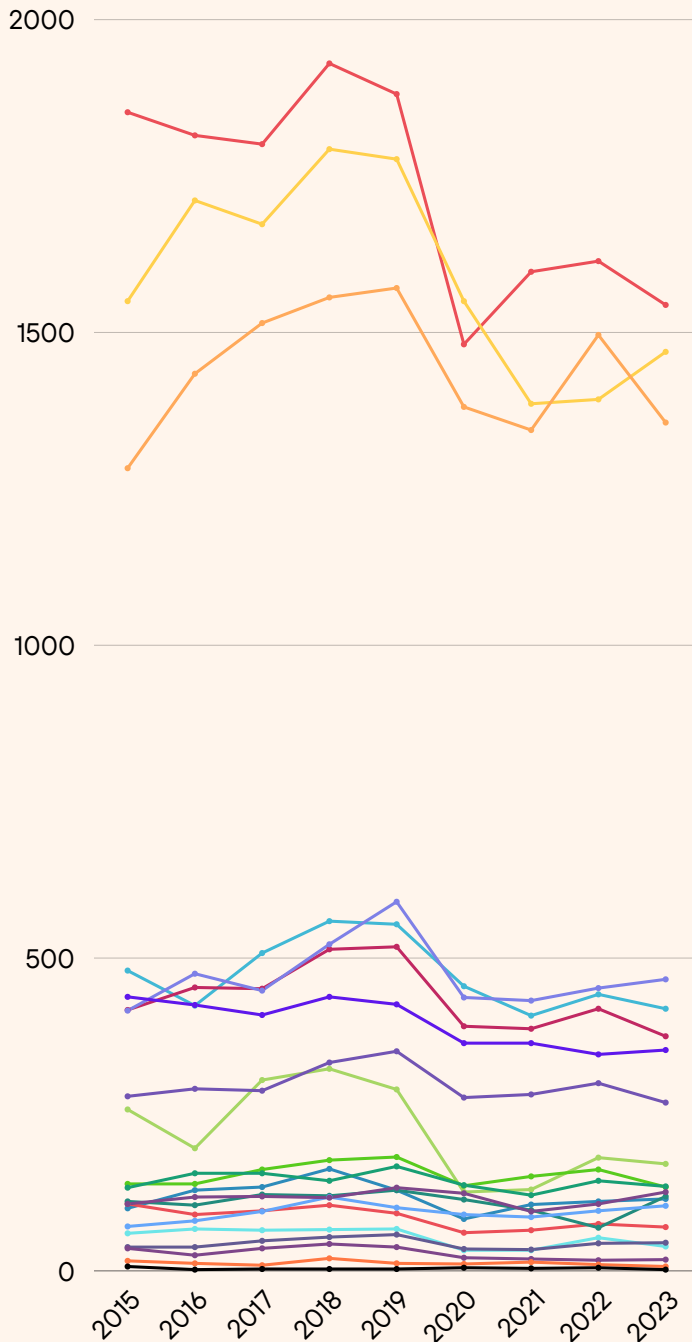
Compared to the average worker, rates of workplace injury among workers in food manufacturing and food production are **50-80% higher**. Workers in animal production are **3 times more likely** to be injured.

Rate of Injuries per 100 Workers, 2019-2022

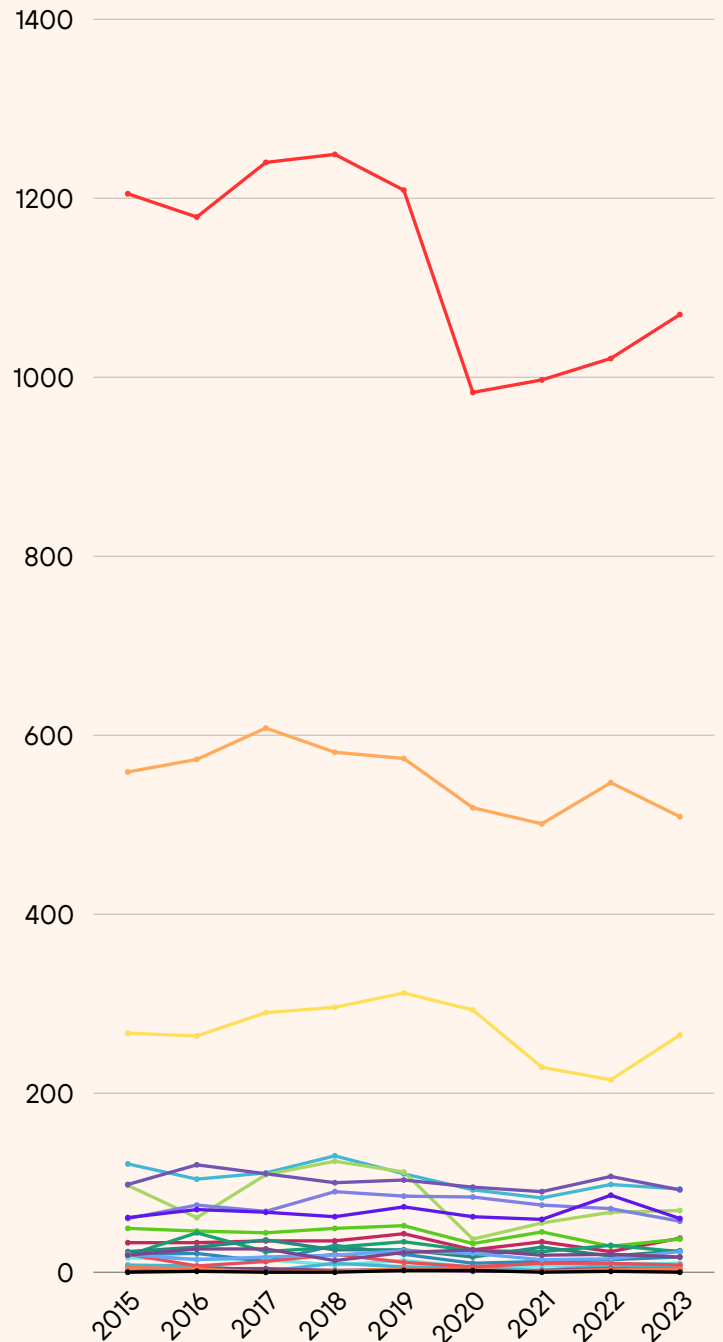


Since 2015, the food industry has had the second most workplace injuries resulting in an **amputated body part** (averaging 550+ per year), and third most injuries resulting in **hospitalizations** (averaging 1,400+ per year).

Workplace Injuries Requiring Hospitalization by Industry, 2015-2023



Workplace Injuries Involving Amputated Limbs by Industry, 2015-2023

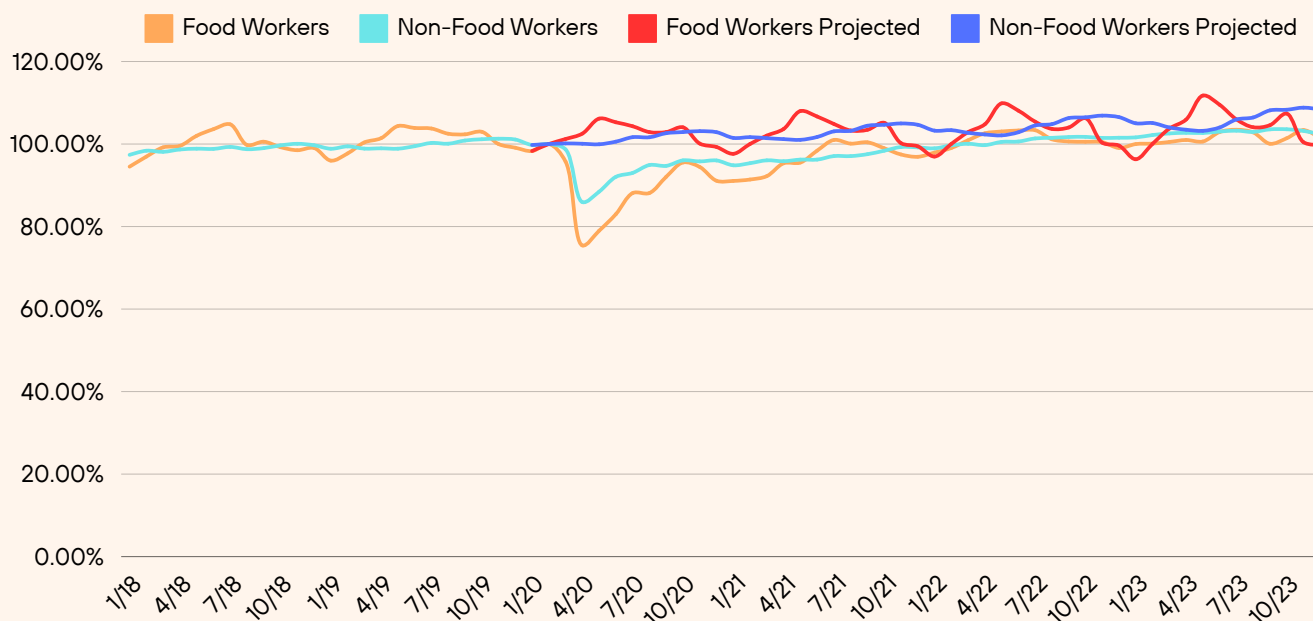




Impacts of the Pandemic

Food worker employment dropped 24.5% from February to April 2020, versus 14.1% for non-food workers over the same period. Food worker employment was also more than **15% below projected levels** from April to August of 2020, while non-food worker employment never dipped that low.

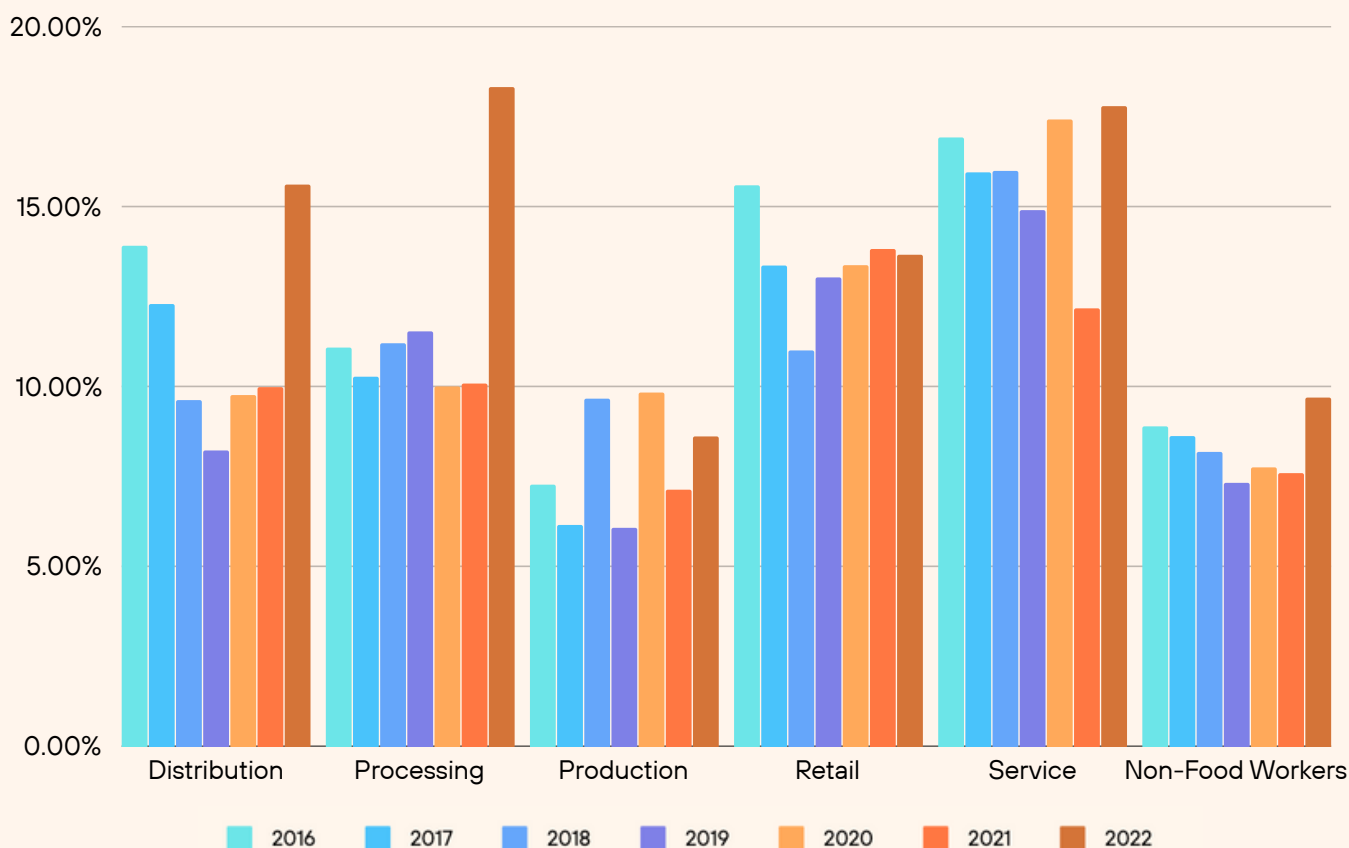
Employment Levels for Food Workers & Non-Food Workers, 2018-2023
(Plus Projected Rates Based on 2017-2019 Average Employment Growth Rates)



Unemployment in the food industry also recovered more quickly, pointing to **food workers returning to work sooner** than other U.S. workers. Despite this, it took two years before employment consistently matched pre-pandemic levels.

In 2019, food insecurity in the U.S. had fallen each year for nearly a decade. Since then, that trend has reversed, with food insecurity rates rising 22% for the country as a whole, **33% for food workers, and 96% and 87% for food workers in distribution and processing sectors.**

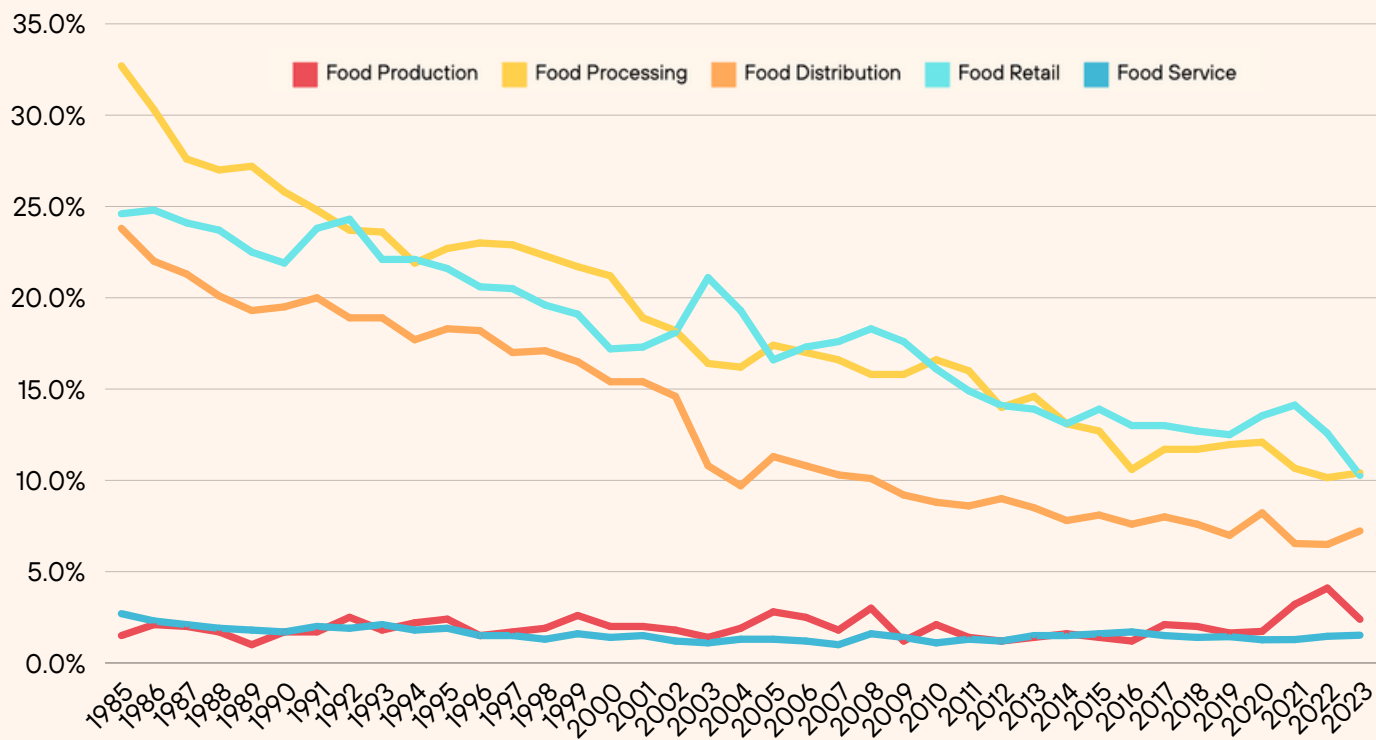
Rate of Food Insecurity Among Food Workers, by Sector. 2016-2022



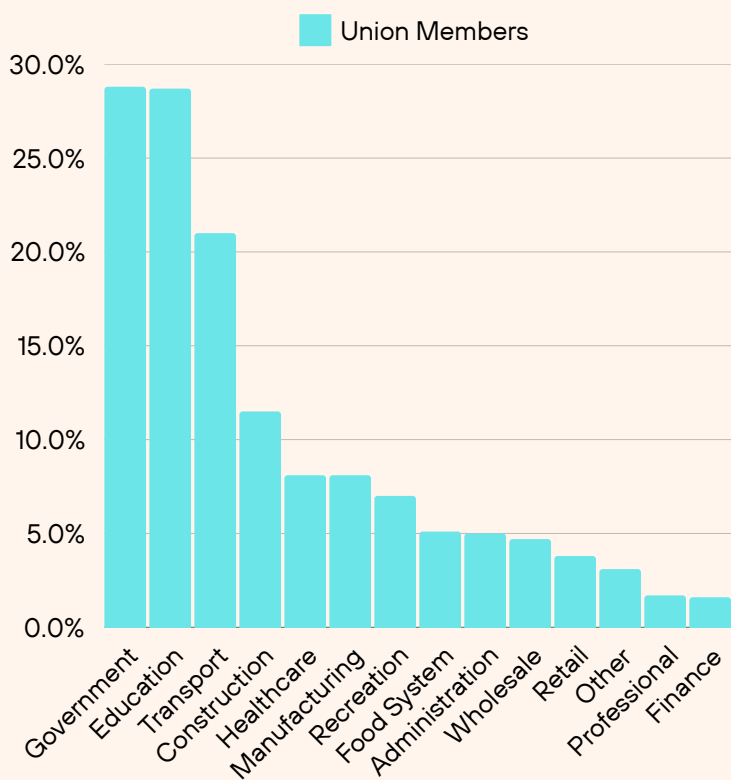
Unionization

Less than 6% of food workers are protected by a union contract.

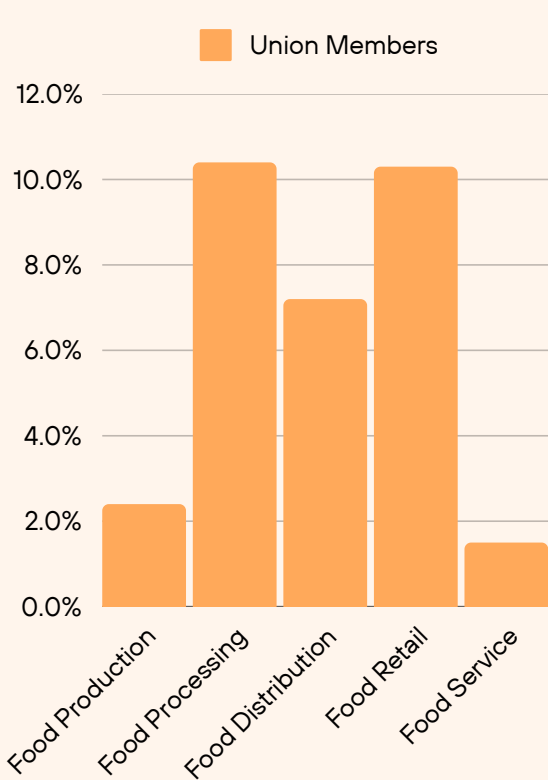
Union Density by Food Chain Sector, 1985-2023



Union Density by Industry, 2023



Union Density by Food Chain Sector, 2023



Conclusion

This data underscores the necessity of building worker power across the food chain. **The Right to Organize** our workplaces is fundamental and central to building power. That means the ability to exercise that right in fair and safe working conditions, without fear of harassment or retaliation by employers or the government. In order to build that power, the organizing work of FCWA and our members is grounded in the following principles:

1. **Just Wages**
2. **Health & Safety**
3. **Fair Work Standards**
4. **Migrant Justice**
5. **Racial, Gender and Global Justice**
6. **Solidarity, Bread & Roses**
7. **End Labor Exploitation of Incarcerated People**

Learn more about the FCWA's organizing platform at foodworkersorganize.org.



Food Chain Workers Alliance analyzed Bureau of Labor Statistics data from the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, and Occupational Employment Statistics, Current Population Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, as well as the U.S. Department of Labor's, Wage and Hour Compliance Action data.

For more information about this data, contact Winston Moore at winston@foodchainworkers.org.

For all other inquiries, contact Elizabeth Walle at elizabeth@foodchainworkers.org.