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Overcooked & Underserved: The Challenges of Koreatown's Restaurant Workers

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OVERCOOKED & UNDERSERVED

THE CHALLENGES OF KOREATOWN'S RESTAURANT WORKERS

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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA)

Founded in 1992, KIWA's mission is to build the power of immigrant workers in Los Angeles and beyond. Through organizing, policy innovation, and strategic partnerships, KIWA strengthens workers' collective capacity to transform workplaces and shape the social, cultural, and economic development of our communities.

UCLA Labor Center

The UCLA Labor Center believes that a public university belongs to the people and should advance quality education and employment for all. Every day we bring together workers, students, faculty, and policymakers to address the most critical issues facing working people today. Our research, education, and policy work lifts industry standards, creates jobs that are good for communities, and strengthens immigrant rights, especially for students and youth.

Report Contributors (Alphabetical Order)

Brady Collins is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Cal Poly Pomona and Policy and Research Manager at KIWA. He teaches courses on urban governance and public policy and studies gentrification, multiethnic enclaves, and urban policy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Koreatown, Los Angeles, is a multiethnic enclave and globally known cultural and commercial hub in part because of its restaurant industry. With over 700 restaurants in roughly two square miles—many of which are full-service—Koreatown is also a booming nightlife and tourist destination. In recent years, the City of Los Angeles and other civic and business leaders have profited from its growing popularity, which has translated into the development of luxury housing and hotels and an influx of urban professionals.

The spine of the restaurant industry in Koreatown is its workforce, which is primarily composed of immigrants—documented and undocumented alike—from South Korea, Mexico, and Central America. Some workers in this field have arrived recently, while others have been working in the neighborhood for decades. This workforce largely resides in Koreatown, where there is an abundance of rental housing and, in particular, older housing stock that is rent-stabilized and relatively affordable. So, despite the fact that the neighborhood is undergoing a long period of gentrification, it remains a largely low-income community of renters. In this sense, Koreatown is a landing place for migrants seeking a new home in the City, and its restaurants are often a pathway into the workforce.



As a multiethnic enclave, Koreatown's local economy has historically been made up of small mom-and-pop establishments that hire only a handful of workers. With the influx of foreign capital investment from South Korea, the neighborhood's economy has undergone corporate consolidation. Local and international restaurant chains have emerged, dominating the local restaurant industry. Nevertheless, many workers have faced substandard working conditions and workplace exploitation for decades. While the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA) and its allies have made powerful advances in improving workers' rights, restaurant workers remain vulnerable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the perception of the restaurant industry and the "essential" status of its workforce. During the economic shutdown, many remained at work despite dangerous public health risks in order to earn wages to help sustain themselves

and their families. Many risked deadly infection to simply pay their rent.

KIWA launched this study in collaboration with the UCLA Labor Center, Cal Poly Pomona, and San Diego State University researchers to better understand the labor and housing conditions of immigrant workers in Koreatown's restaurant sector and the policy options available to improve them. This report is based on existing literature, policy reports, 338 worker surveys, 12 worker interviews, and an analysis of publicly available demographic, labor, and industry data. The following are key findings of our research.

Koreatown's Restaurants and the Workers That Sustain Them Are a Vibrant Part of Los Angeles

- **Koreatown has a high density of restaurants** compared to other neighborhoods in Los Angeles County. There are 704 restaurants and eating places in Koreatown, employing nearly 9,700 workers.
- **Employment in larger establishments has accelerated.** Most workers are now employed in larger restaurants, with 60% of workers working in restaurants that have 20 or more employees.
- **The vast majority of restaurant workers in Koreatown are immigrants.** Over two-thirds of workers were born abroad—mostly in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Korea—and more than half are non-citizens.

Workers Experience Low Wages and Unfair Wage Practices

- **Most restaurant workers are full-time and earn low wages.** 77% of restaurant workers in Koreatown are full-time, compared to 54% of restaurant workers in Los Angeles County. 72% of restaurant workers in Koreatown earn low wages, less than two-thirds of the median hourly wage for the county.
- **Restaurant workers experience unfair practices around tips.** Interviews with workers found practices such as withholding tips, unfair management of tips, or probationary periods before distribution of tips.
- **Restaurant workers face a wage ceiling.** Worker survey responses showed how wages remained stagnant even with tenure.

Koreatown Residents Face Housing Risks

- **Restaurant worker households** are at, or near, poverty. Over half of Koreatown restaurant workers are at, or below, 200% of the poverty threshold.
- **Restaurant workers are housing** insecure. Almost half (46%) of Koreatown restaurant workers are burdened by rent, and those who are not tend to live in overcrowded conditions. Over half of the housing units they occupy are overcrowded, and many are severely overcrowded.



72% OF RESTAURANT WORKERS IN KOREATOWN EARN LOW WAGES, LESS THAN TWO-THIRDS OF THE MEDIAN HOURLY WAGE FOR THE COUNTY.



Recommendations

The City's economy benefits greatly from the clustering of restaurants in Koreatown and the neighborhood's reputation as a culinary and nightlife destination. As the industry continues to expand, it is crucial that policymakers and restaurant owners ensure that workers—the backbone of the local economy and a frontline workforce during public health crises—have quality jobs and strong labor protections. The following are recommendations for key stakeholders to improve workplace standards and protections and to foreground ongoing efforts towards housing stability.

- **Establish an industry standards** board to set and enforce minimum standards in Koreatown's restaurant sector. Industry standards boards bring together workers, employers, and government agencies to set, monitor, and enforce labor standards in specific industries.
- **Develop a Koreatown commercial** corridor ordinance. City Council can adopt a geographic and industry-specific ordinance that raises workplace standards while also encouraging economic development and preserving the multiracial identity of the neighborhood.
- **Strengthen partnerships between** worker centers and enforcement agencies. Partnerships between worker organizations and relevant public agencies can lead to more effective enforcement, identifying influential bad actors and providing assurances for more equitable businesses.
- **Expand the worker-led Public Health Councils** Program. Workers must continue to play an active role in monitoring and enforcing public health standards without fear of retaliation.
- **Integrate workplace justice into** anti-displacement and homelessness prevention strategies. Working conditions and wage insecurity are directly connected to housing insecurity, displacement, and homelessness.



1. INTRODUCTION

Koreatown, a neighborhood located in Central Los Angeles, is one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in California and the densest neighborhood west of Manhattan. It is characterized by a high concentration of various immigrant populations, many of whom are forced to live in overcrowded spaces to afford increasingly out-of-reach housing prices. It is also marked by a wide range of immigrant-owned small businesses, such as restaurants, bakeries, cafes, and specialty supermarkets located in common commercial corridors.

Despite its name, Koreatown is also the first stop for many migrants from Mexico and Central America. In any one of the neighborhood's many strip malls, one can find a mix of Korean, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Oaxacan restaurants and eateries. The workforce across these establishments is similarly diverse, and it is not uncommon to hear a combination of English, Spanish, and Korean—as well as Zapotec, Mam, Mixtec, and K'iche'—spoken in a single space. Ever since Koreatown established itself as an multiethnic enclave in the 1980s, a multitude of immigrant workers have lived and worked in the community.

In addition to holding the highest concentration of Korean individuals outside of Korea, Koreatown is also home to other Asian populations, including a growing Bangladeshi community.¹ According to the US Census, the Bangladeshi population in Los Angeles County grew 200% between 2000 and 2020, from about 1,700 people in 2000 to an estimated 5,000 in 2020.² In recognition of the prominent Bangladeshi population in Koreatown, the City Council designated a portion of 3rd Street in Koreatown as “Little Bangladesh” in 2010.³ Nevertheless, the majority of residents in Koreatown are Latinx (51%), largely of Mexican and Central American descent (e.g., Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Honduran).⁴ Moreover, there has been notable growth among indigenous communities in Los Angeles County (e.g., Zapotec, K'iche', Chinatec), many of whom live and work in Koreatown.⁵

For over 40 years, Koreatown has remained an economic hub for immigrants, and its resilience as an urban ethnic enclave is significant in the context of suburbanizing immigration. In the early twentieth century, many ethnic minority populations—particularly those in the middle class—left the inner city for suburban communities as they entered the mainstream economy.⁶ These “ethnoburbs” allowed upwardly mobile immigrant communities to maintain an ethnic concentration of restaurant and retail establishments despite their departure from the inner city. Nonetheless, Koreatown, located in Central Los Angeles near Downtown, continues to attract both ethnically-mixed populations of white-collar professionals and low-wage workers.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF KOREATOWN

1965

President Lyndon Johnson signs the Immigration and Nationality Act into law, which removed a quota system from US immigration policy, opening the door to immigrants from around the world, namely East Asia and Latin America.

2010-TODAY

Koreatown gains a worldwide reputation as a cultural hub and nightlife destination due to its depiction in the media and efforts by local stakeholders to market the neighborhood and attract tourists. As gentrification continues, Koreatown also remains the first stop for subsequent waves of immigrants from South Korea, Bangladesh, Mexico, and Central America, among others.

1970-1980

Significant numbers of Korean American immigrants settle in Central Los Angeles and open small businesses along Jefferson Avenue in Central Los Angeles, gradually moving north towards Olympic Boulevard. By the late 1970s, Koreans were operating the majority of businesses in this area and many thousands of immigrants from Mexico and Central America were settling in the area.

1992-2010

In 1994, the City's Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) designates the area as the "Wilshire Center/Koreatown Redevelopment and Recovery Project" to draw investment from the public and private sectors, which helps initiate a process of gentrification. By the early 2000s, Koreatown attracts growing numbers of young, white urban professionals, which in turn draws luxury housing development, bars, restaurants, and nightclubs. At the same time, a significant Bangladeshi population begins settling around 3rd Street, on the northern end of Koreatown.

1980-1990

As part of a larger process of white flight, many large corporations—including Union Bank, Texaco, IBM, and Getty Oil—vacate their respective office buildings along Wilshire Blvd. At the same time, Korean entrepreneurs continue consolidating along major commercial corridors in the area, especially Olympic Blvd, Wilshire Blvd, and 6th St. The City of Los Angeles designates the area as "Koreatown" and erects signage to demarcate the area.

1992

In the wake of the Rodney King trial on April 29, 1992, civil unrest erupts in Koreatown and the surrounding areas that results in significant property damage and exacerbates racial tensions among overlapping ethnic groups. KIWA, founded less than three months prior, organizes residents, workers, and business owners to help rebuild the neighborhood and resolve community divisions.



Koreatown's ever-growing reputation as a commercial and cultural hub has, of course, attracted real estate development. Several mega-development projects, the expansion of the Metro line, and the City's liberal granting of conditional use permits for on-site sales of alcohol have made Koreatown a site of rapid development and gentrification.⁷ Much of this new development, which is occurring in the midst of a building boom in Los Angeles, is concentrated in Koreatown because the area's community plan allows for much higher density construction than other parts of the City. With the World Cup and Olympics coming to Los Angeles in 2026 and 2028 respectively, Los Angeles has an opportunity to ensure the influx of public and private investment, as well as the sales tax revenue generated by tourists, benefits underserved communities. Otherwise, mega-sporting events such as these will further marginalize local residents, as they often do.⁸

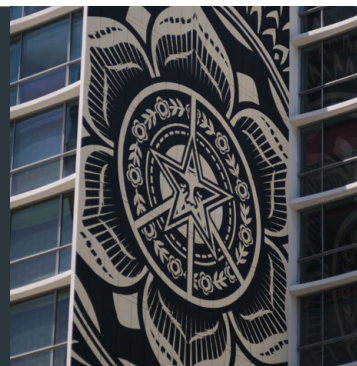
Despite its evolution over the decades, Koreatown remains an immigrant community. While increases in median rent and household income are similar to averages throughout the county, the majority of Koreatown residents remain low income. What makes this neighborhood unique, and the center of Los Angeles' immigrant economy, is the sheer concentration of both immigrant workers and employment opportunities. The combination of a dynamic supply of immigrant labor and a growing influx of capital investment makes Koreatown an ideal testing ground for new approaches to equitable, worker-led economic development. It is crucial that those who live and work here, as well as the immigrant entrepreneurs that invest in the workforce and the community, benefit from the neighborhood's economic growth.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

KIWA partnered with the UCLA Labor Center and researchers at Cal Poly Pomona and San Diego State University to launch this study to gain a deeper understanding of Koreatown's restaurant industry through the experiences of workers and the neighborhood's residents. This report is drawn on existing literature, policy reports, 338 worker surveys, 12 worker interviews, and an analysis of publicly available demographic, labor, and industry data to present an overview of the restaurant industry and workforce in Koreatown and Los Angeles. The report consists of five sections. The first provides a history of the area and the industry and notes current issues based on existing literature. The next three sections use government data, surveys, and interviews to profile the restaurant sector and its workers in Koreatown, the economic and labor conditions of the workers, and the living conditions and threats to housing security. The report concludes with a series of policy recommendations.

About the Koreatown and Los Angeles Census Data Samples

To understand worker demographics and labor conditions, we use data from the American Community Survey. Unfortunately, place of work data at the neighborhood level is unavailable in the dataset. We utilize data on restaurant workers who are residents of Koreatown to draw inferences about the experiences of Koreatown workers. These inferences are based on several key pieces of information. First, based on the worker surveys conducted by KIWA, a significant number of Koreatown restaurant workers surveyed also live in the neighborhood. Second, transportation mode data on Koreatown residents indicates that many walk or commute a short distance by bus to work. Third, according to previous studies, Koreatown is not only a community of low-income residents but is also an employment hub for low-wage workers.⁹



BRIEF HISTORY OF KOREATOWN

The neighborhood was once known as the "Ambassador District" because of the iconic Ambassador Hotel on Wilshire Boulevard. By the 1960s, however, the persisting racial tensions from the Watts Uprising, compounded by fear-mongering in popular culture, sped the out-migration of the white middle class from the Koreatown area.¹⁰ With the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, unprecedented numbers of immigrants from countries located on the Pacific Rim arrived in Southern California. Korean immigrants began concentrating around Jefferson Avenue and gradually moved north towards Olympic Boulevard in the subsequent decade. By the late 1970s, Koreans were operating the majority of businesses in this area as well as on 8th Street, cementing the neighborhood as the center of Korean commercial activity.¹¹ At the same time, many thousands of residents from Mexico and Central America crossed the US-Mexico border and settled in neighborhoods throughout the City.

By the late 1980s, a significant number of Korean immigrants had settled in Koreatown, many of whom opened small businesses, such as restaurants, markets, liquor stores, and laundromats. These entrepreneurs consolidated along Koreatown's commercial corridors, especially Olympic Boulevard, Wilshire Boulevard, and 6th Street. On Wilshire, the major commercial artery of the area, this coincided with



many large corporations—among them Union Bank, Texaco, IBM, and Getty Oil—vacating their respective office buildings. This, then, allowed Korean merchants and entrepreneurs to establish themselves more firmly.¹² Studies of Koreatown from this period highlighted the importance of family and social networks in forming systems of mutual aid that allowed small, immigrant-owned businesses to thrive.¹³

In recognition of the growing visibility of Korean entrepreneurs, the City officially designated the area as “Koreatown.” To further promote the neighborhood as a Korean enclave, coalitions of Korean developers and real-estate promoters began erecting “Koreatown” signage and organizing parades and other Korean cultural events.¹⁴ Koreatown, however, was never a predominantly Korean community. In fact, even as it received designation as “Koreatown,” Koreans represented a minority of the immigrant population.¹⁵ At that time, sizable immigrant populations from Central America, Mexico, and other parts of East Asia were settling in the area.



Koreatown’s recent history is also marked by the 1992 civil unrest that occurred in the aftermath of the Rodney King trial, in which four police officers were acquitted of what clearly constituted excessive and racist force during a traffic arrest. Although the unrest temporarily depressed land values in the area, Koreatown has been infused with massive reinvestment over the past two decades. While the pace of development was originally shaped through investment by South Korean corporations,¹⁶ in 1994 the City’s Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) designated the area as a redevelopment project area (the “Wilshire Center/Koreatown Redevelopment and Recovery Project”) in an attempt to draw further investment from both the public and private sectors.¹⁷ And in the early 2000s, the emergence of high-end health spas and luxury housing development attracted a growing number of white, young urban professionals.¹⁸ Once considered a few commercial streets surrounding Jefferson Boulevard, by 2010 Koreatown had blossomed into a booming multiethnic enclave and an important commercial center.¹⁹ According to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, the neighborhood’s boundaries stretch as far west as Wilton Boulevard, as far east as Hoover Street, as far north as Melrose Avenue, and as far south as 11th Street.²⁰



As it has gentrified, Koreatown has developed a worldwide reputation as a cultural hub and a nightlife destination. This is largely due to its depiction in the media and efforts by city stakeholders to attract tourism. In today’s post-industrial economy, marketing restaurants and other cultural amenities attracts professionals with higher levels of education and disposable income.²¹ These tactics are employed by the “urban growth machine”—a coalition of developers and city agencies, as well as auxiliary players such as universities and business associations—that can increase the exchange value between land and property.²² Today, the neighborhood is known as an exotic destination where tourists and locals alike can experience both the diversity of Los Angeles as well as authentic Korean culture, as seen on shows like *Anthony Bourdain’s Parts Unknown* in 2013 and the *New York Times’ “36 Hours”* in 2015.²³

Koreatown continues to attract waves of immigrants and low-wage workers in the restaurant sector. The business community directly benefits from the commodification and branding of Koreatown and the easy access to low-wage labor. Once known as a mosaic of small mom-and-pop eateries, Koreatown in 2023 is a regional commercial center characterized by density and diversity, real-estate speculation, and a highly dynamic labor market. It is crucial, therefore, that policymakers and advocates alike examine the working conditions in the area’s dominant industries to better grasp the challenges and opportunities implicit in the neighborhood’s economic growth.

KOREATOWN & MULTIETHNIC ENCLAVES

In order to understand the social, economic, and cultural role Koreatown plays within the City of Los Angeles, one should briefly know the history and theory of multiethnic enclaves more generally. Scholars generally agree that these spaces are the result of three prerequisites:

1. a large number of immigrants with prior business experience;
2. accessibility to sources of capital; and
3. the availability of workers.

Early studies of these spaces observed that they were often demographically homogeneous and severely segregated from the economic and housing possibilities of “the mainstream economy.”²⁴ They incorrectly argued that, over time, as minorities adapted to American culture, they would depart the inner city and enter into more predictable forms of labor.²⁵

Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, many scholars abandoned this assimilationist perspective and have since found that ethnic populations generally employ shared identities and geographies, which may help encourage joint cultural activities and the voicing of a meaningful mutual politics.²⁶ Labor relations, of course, influences the development of “multiethnic enclave economies,” and successful enclaves compete directly in the general economy despite their spatial segregation from other urban commercial centers. Some suggest that cultural preservation allows marginalized ethnic populations to organize themselves with the goal of moving up the socioeconomic ladder.²⁷

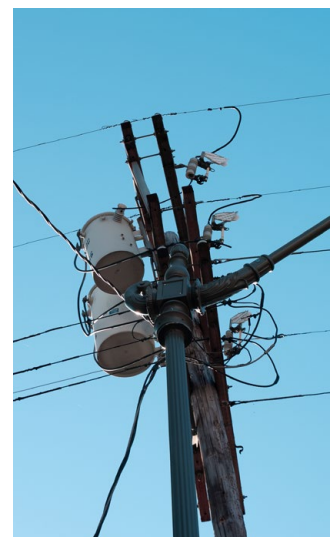


The emergence of ethnic enclaves located in the suburbs, or “ethnoburbs,” further challenged this outdated notion of the traditional enclave in that they were no longer located near the urban core and were increasingly multiethnic. At the same time, the ethnic concentration of immigrant populations in suburbia—and, in particular, Asian American populations—slowed the process of immigrant assimilation while still allowing upwardly mobile ethnic minorities

to access neighborhoods with better housing and schools.²⁸ Yet the blossoming of ethnoburbs in metropolitan areas across the US has made clear that the integration of “others” into the mainstream economy is contingent on specific demographics and geographies. For example, ethnoburbs composed of African Americans and Latinx people did not experience the same access to white-collar professions and wealth-building that Asian American ethnoburbs did.



In this context, Koreatown remains a fascinating case study due to its endurance as an inner-city enclave economy comprising wide-ranging—and ever-expanding—residential and commercial diversity. On one hand, its ethnic economy persists: Koreatown has a thriving restaurant and retail sector that is driven by immigrant entrepreneurs and immigrant workers. On the other hand, its economy has become increasingly implicated in global flows of capital that have transformed the neighborhood through real-estate development and speculation.²⁹ Foreign banks have helped attract international restaurant chains and accelerate corporate consolidation among local, formerly mom-and-pop restaurants.³⁰ And, because Koreatown continues to serve as the first stop for undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America, there is a durable supply of low-wage labor that moves between the formal and informal sectors.³¹ Under these conditions, Koreatown remains a unique urban ethnic enclave for its sheer diversity and increasingly globalized economy.



KOREATOWN IMMIGRANT WORKERS ALLIANCE

Founded in 1992, KIWA's mission is to build the power of immigrant workers in Los Angeles and beyond. Through organizing, policy innovation, and strategic partnerships, KIWA strengthens workers' collective leadership to transform our workplaces and shape the social, cultural, and economic development of our communities. Much of KIWA's work aims to address the exploitative working conditions in the restaurant and retail industries in Koreatown, which rely heavily on low-wage immigrant workers from South Korea, Mexico, and Central America, many of whom were and still are undocumented. These workers, as well as domestic workers and others in the informal economy, are explicitly excluded from the National Labor Relations Act—and therefore have been ignored or overlooked by labor unions historically.³² This workforce has also grown tremendously in the US as a result of the 1976 Immigration Act and its restructuring of the economy, in which post-industrial sectors—such as domestic workers, restaurants, hospitality, and other service industry jobs—have flourished. In Los Angeles, these jobs are also sites of various and significant labor violations, especially wage theft.³³ Because of its geographic, industrial, and multiethnic analysis, KIWA offers an alternative model of workplace organizing that builds power and solidarity among immigrant workers across linguistic and cultural barriers.



KIWA has long considered the link between workers' rights and housing insecurity. As this report will show, the workers KIWA organizes are often those who also struggle to afford rent and thus avoid displacement. For this reason, KIWA has been involved for over a decade in affordable housing production, as well as housing justice and tenants' rights policy advocacy. In 2014, KIWA developed "Casa Yonde," a 52-unit affordable housing complex in Koreatown that includes a clear percentage of units for transition-aged youth and formerly homeless individuals. Along with its housing justice and labor allies, KIWA has also helped develop and pass numerous affordable housing initiatives, such as Measure JJJ in 2016 and Measure ULA in 2022, the latter of which will create funding for new models of permanently affordable "social housing."³⁴

In the past ten years, worker centers and their union allies have also helped pass policies to empower and protect workers in the low-wage economy. For example, in 2016, a coalition of unions and worker centers helped pass SB 588, which emboldened the Labor Commissioner to enforce judgements against employers for nonpayment of wages and prevented businesses from using subcontractors and distorted reporting to avoid paying unresolved back wages. In addition, when the City voted to increase its minimum wage, worker centers and their labor allies successfully passed the Los Angeles Office of Wage Standards Ordinance, which created a new Office of Wage Standards (OWS) within the Bureau of Contract Administration of the Department of Public Works. The OWS is tasked with enforcing violations of wage theft in Los Angeles, establishing penalties and granting authority to the City's Police Commission to deny, revoke, or suspend a police permit issued or requested by an employer found to have committed wage theft. The OWS has also partnered with worker centers across the City, including KIWA, to disseminate information about the minimum wage and wage theft to workers and small businesses in immigrant communities.

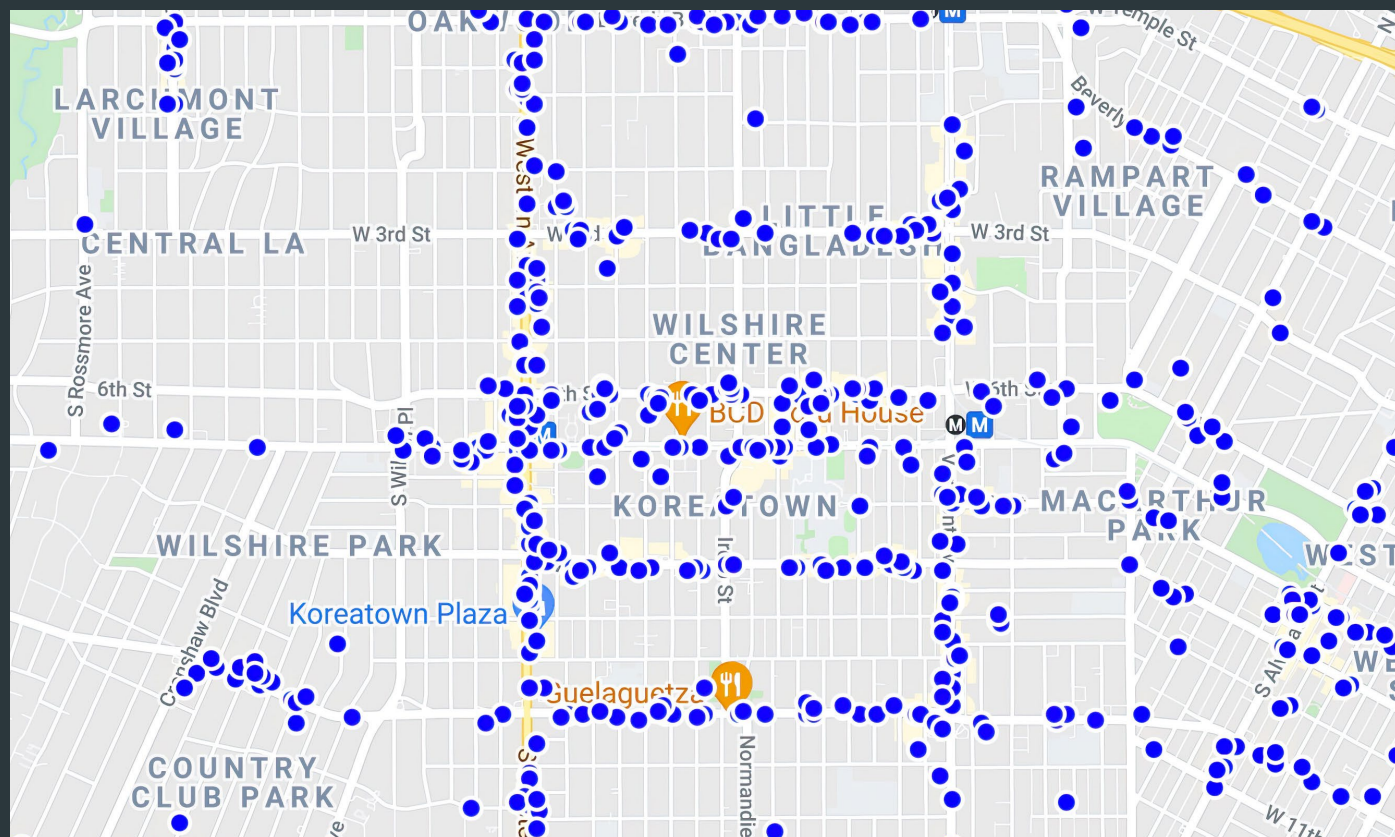
While these achievements have improved conditions in restaurants and other low-wage industries in the City, much more needs to be done to support fair and dignified working conditions. The deep supply of low-wage labor in Koreatown and the presence of undocumented workers means that workplace exploitation abounds. As a result, the restaurant sector in Koreatown today is how it has been for decades: dense, diverse, and thriving on the surface. At the same time it has also changed substantially in key ways. The sections that follow examine the vulnerabilities of Koreatown's restaurant workers within this context.



2. THE RESTAURANT SECTOR & KOREATOWN WORKERS

Koreatown's restaurant sector is intimately intertwined with Los Angeles' immigrant communities and their ability to achieve upward mobility. As has been mentioned, Koreatown is well known for its extreme concentration of restaurants. It not only has the highest density of jobs in the city, but also is where many of Los Angeles County's low-wage workers live. As such, Koreatown's residential community and restaurant sector workers overlap significantly. The restaurant sector also attracts significant numbers of citizen and non-citizen workers. For many job-seeking immigrants from South Korea, Mexico, and Central America, this neighborhood is their entry point into the workforce and the community in which they attempt to build their new lives.

Figure 1: Geographical Distribution of Full-Service Restaurants in Koreatown, Los Angeles



Source: Open Data Portal³⁵

RESTAURANT SECTOR IN KOREATOWN AND LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Koreatown is unique in that it is a thriving commercial center that is also a low-income community. As has been the case throughout much of the neighborhood’s recent history, Koreatown remains one of the neighborhoods with a high density of restaurants in Los Angeles County.³⁶ Based on 2020 County Business Pattern data, there are 704 restaurants and eating places in Koreatown, employing nearly 9,700 workers.³⁷

Table 1: Number of Restaurants and Estimates of Employees in Koreatown

	Less than 5 employees	5-9 employees	10-19 employees	20-49 employees	50-99 employees	Total
Number of restaurants	267	154	145	109	28	704
Median number of workers	2.5	7	14.5	34.5	74.5	
Estimated total number of workers	668	1,078	2,103	3,761	2,086	9,695

Source: County Business Pattern 2020

In fact, 10% of all business establishments in Koreatown are restaurants and 3% of restaurants in all of Los Angeles County are in Koreatown.



Table 2: Establishments in Koreatown and Los Angeles County

Restaurants in Los Angeles County	18,708
Restaurants in Koreatown	704
Any establishment in Koreatown	6,742

Source: County Business Pattern 2020

The restaurant density below in figure 2 is only matched by other affluent regional commercial hubs, such as Hollywood, Downtown Los Angeles, and Santa Monica. Areas of Los Angeles County with similar socioeconomics to Koreatown in South LA and East LA have significantly less restaurant density.

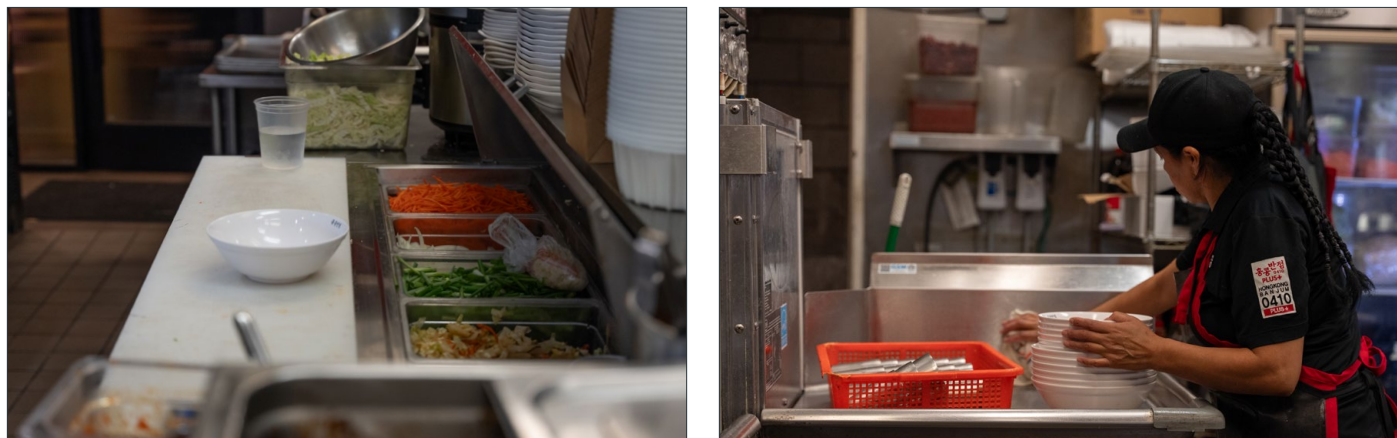
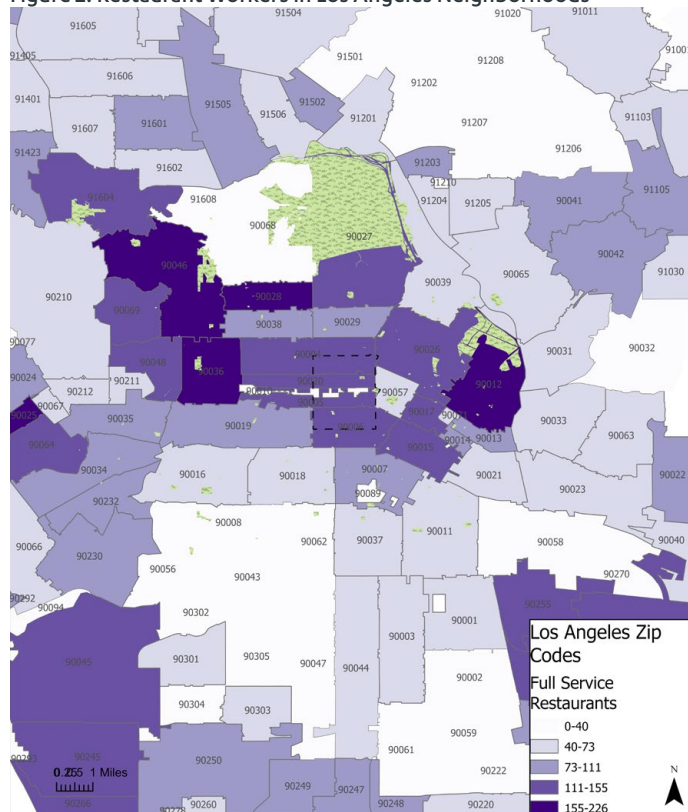


Figure 2: Restaurant Workers in Los Angeles Neighborhoods



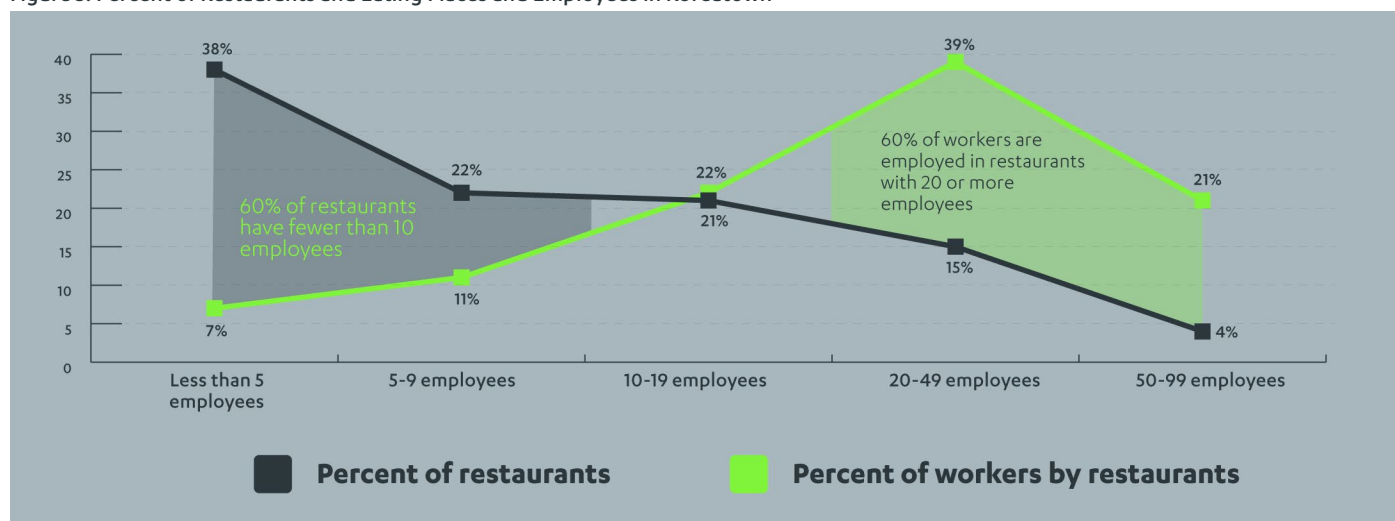
Source: AJ Kim | Restaurant Density in Los Angeles Neighborhoods |

AMONG THE MOST RESTAURANT-DENSE NEIGHBORHOODS IN LOS ANGELES



However, these data also indicate that the local economy has changed significantly in recent decades. Although Koreatown first emerged as an immigrant community comprised of mainly small mom-and-pop entrepreneurs,³⁸ the majority of workers in the neighborhood are now employed in larger establishments. While more than half (60%) of the restaurants have fewer than 10 employees, most workers are employed in the larger restaurants, with 60% of workers working in restaurants that have 20 to 99 employees.³⁹

Figure 3: Percent of Restaurants and Eating Places and Employees in Koreatown



Source: County Business Pattern 2020

BRIAN LEE



Brian is the founder and owner of Open Market, a small restaurant in Koreatown that specializes in sandwiches, coffee, and wine. He opened the restaurant with his wife and two business partners in April 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and he works as the restaurant’s manager every day. To Brian, serving his community and treating his workers with respect is more important than making a profit. “If you make money the sole driver of your business, you end up starting to disregard everything else that people can love about your restaurant,” he says. “A large part of why our culture is the way it is because we treat everybody—all of our employees and all of our patrons—as if they are our friends.”

To Brian, the effects of Los Angeles’ affordable housing crisis are present in all aspects of his work. As the number of unhoused individuals in Koreatown has grown, he has done what he can to serve them food, because he believes they are also part of the social fabric

of the neighborhood. The housing crisis has also informed his pay rate: He pays above minimum wage and offers his workers health care stipends. To him, someone shouldn’t have to spend half of their income on rent or work multiple jobs and “side hustles” in order to afford housing. “We constantly raise our salaries because it is what our employees need. It is hard to ignore that labor is the highest cost on our balance sheet, but it is a burden and a responsibility for business owners to be able to prioritize the right costs in our business,” he says. “A lot of people think about raising wages only when it’s earned, and I don’t think that’s the right model for treating employees like real people and real neighbors.”



He envisions a service industry where a worker can have a career that supports them throughout their life, improving their craft every day and earning a livable wage. “There is a restructuring that we need to do as a society to put money in the right places.”

TOP INDUSTRIES IN KOREATOWN

In addition to Koreatown being extremely restaurant-dense, a significant number of the neighborhood’s residents are employed in the restaurant industry. According to the 2017-2021 American Community Survey, there were 59,437 workers in Koreatown, with the 8,914 working in restaurants and bars representing a considerable part of the overall working population in Koreatown.

Table 3: Top Industries Employing Koreatown Residents

Restaurant and bars	15%
Retail	12%
Healthcare and social assistance	8%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	7%
Construction	7%
Administrative support, waste management, and remediation service	7%
Personal and repair services	7%

Source: American Community Survey 5-year sample 2017-2021

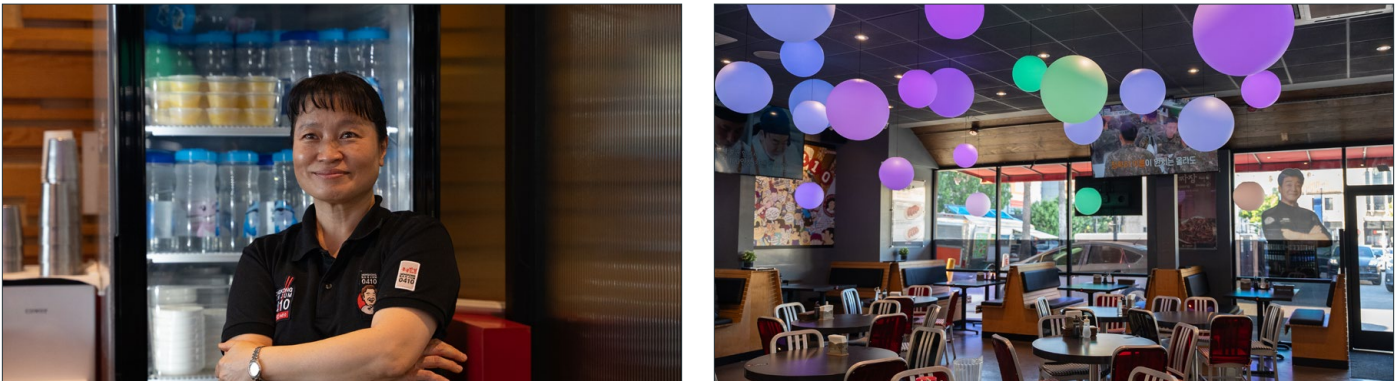


It is worth noting that the restaurant sector encompasses many occupations, from food cooks and servers to delivery people and janitors. There are over 300,000 restaurant workers in Los Angeles County. Of these, 200,000 workers occupy direct service jobs on the restaurant floor, such as cooks, servers, and bussers. There are nearly 7,000 frontline Koreatown workers, meaning workers who interact face to face with members of the public. These direct service occupations dominate the restaurant industry in both Koreatown and Los Angeles County.

Table 4: Overview of Restaurant Workers that Work in Los Angeles County

Restaurant workers in any occupations that work in Los Angeles County	309,857
Current restaurant workers in direct service occupations	206,218
Koreatown resident workers in any occupation in restaurant	8,724
Koreatown resident workers in direct service restaurant occupations	6,965

Source: American Community Survey 5-year sample 2017-2021



PROFILE OF RESTAURANT WORKERS

The demographics of Koreatown’s frontline restaurant workers further illustrate the neighborhood’s role as the center of the City’s immigrant economy. Latinx and Asian workers make up the majority of restaurant workers living in Koreatown, comprising 91% of workers. Koreatown workers are more likely to be male, compared to overall county workers. The median age for Koreatown workers is 34 years old. About half (41%) are under the age of 30, but almost a quarter of workers are over the age of 45. Koreatown’s workforce and residential population remain highly ethnically diverse.

Table 5: Demographics

	Koreatown	Los Angeles County
Gender		
Male	74%	57%
Female	26%	43%
Age		
16-30	41%	49%
31-45	37%	29%
46-60	19%	18%
More than 60	3%	4%
Race/Ethnicity		
Latinx	75%	64%
Asian	16%	15%

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White	5%	14%
Black	1%	3%
Other	3%	4%

Source: American Community Survey 5 year sample 2017-2021



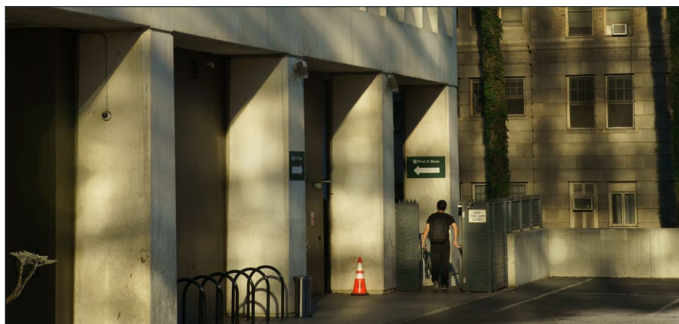
IMMIGRANT ECONOMY DIVERSE WORKFORCE

Additionally, only a quarter of Koreatown workers are US-born, with nearly three-quarters of workers born abroad and over half not citizens. The number of non-citizen Koreatown workers is almost double the number of non-citizen Los Angeles County restaurant workers. Of those born abroad, the majority are from Mexico, followed by Guatemala, El Salvador, and South Korea. The median number of years in the US is 17 years, with a range of new arrivals and long-term residents.

Table 6: Nativity/Citizenship and Countries of Origin

	Koreatown	Los Angeles County
Nativity/Citizenship Status		
US-Born	26%	53%
Born abroad, naturalized	11%	13%
Born abroad, not a citizen	63%	34%
Top 4 countries for Those Born abroad		
Mexico	51%	53%
Guatemala	15%	7%
El Salvador	13%	10%
South Korea	11%	3%

Source: American Community Survey 5 year sample 2017-2021





3. ECONOMIC & LABOR OVERVIEW

While the restaurant industry both in California and nationwide has made pivotal advances in improving working conditions by strengthening protections against wage theft, workplace exploitation persists. Despite the fact that most restaurant workers are paid minimum wage, the vast majority are paid at a scale far below the median income for the area. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurant workers—deemed “essential” to society and the economy—were forced to endure public health risks to earn a wage and support their families. This section documents the persistent and emerging vulnerabilities facing restaurant workers.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND HOURS

Because the restaurant sector in Koreatown is the entry point to the workforce for many low-wage immigrant workers in Los Angeles County, the sector benefits from a strong supply of workers committed to full-time work. The majority of all restaurant workers are employed, with over two-thirds working full-time hours. Koreatown residents who work in restaurants were more likely to be working full-time hours than restaurant workers more broadly in Los Angeles County.

Table 7: Koreatown Restaurant Worker Labor Force Participation and Employment Status

Labor Force Participation	
In the labor force	92%
Not in the labor force	8%
Employment Status	
Employed	96%
Unemployed	4%

Source: American Community Survey 5-year sample 2017-2021

Table 8: Restaurant Workers Full-Time/Part-Time Status

	Koreatown	Los Angeles County
Part-time (1-34 hours)	24%	46%
Full-time (35 or more)	76%	54%

Source: American Community Survey 5-year sample 2017-2021

LOW WAGES AND WAGE STAGNATION

The majority of Los Angeles restaurant workers earn low wages (defined as two-thirds of the median area wage). This is considerably higher than the rate for all workers in the county at 34%, as well as for frontline workers, half of whom earn low wages. In 2010, research by the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment showed that workers in various low-wage industries were often victims of wage theft, which is when workers are paid less than the minimum wage or experience other violations, such as being denied meal or rest breaks.⁴⁰ Worker centers and their labor allies have passed state and local minimum wage policies that strengthen protections against wage theft, as well as enforcement against unlawful employers.

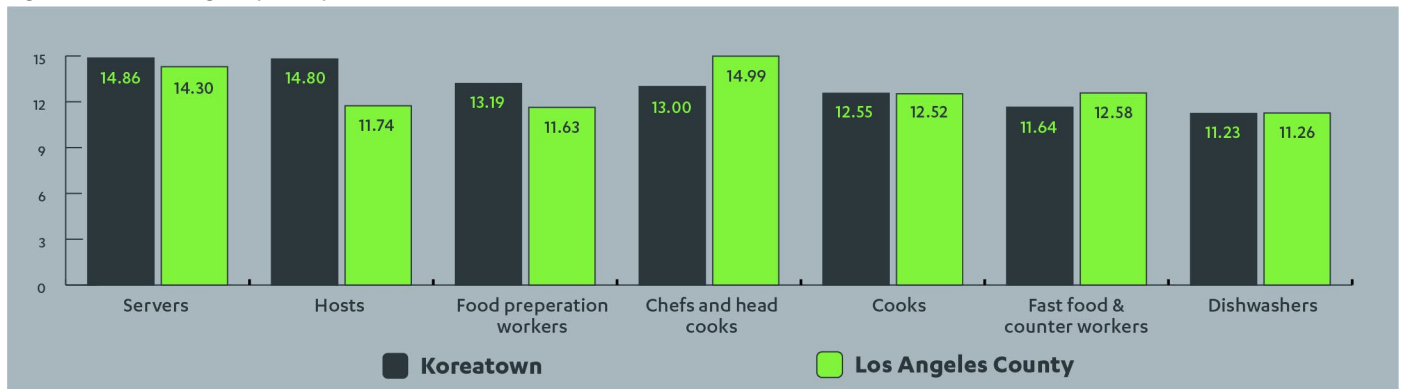
Table 9: Percentage of Workers Earning Low Wages

	Koreatown	Los Angeles County
Low wages	72%	70%
Above low wages	28%	30%

Source: American Community Survey 5-year sample 2017-2021

Most of the frontline occupations in the industry pay low wages, with little variation in median wages across different occupations. Overall, restaurant workers earn less than the median wage of \$15.86 for frontline workers in Los Angeles County.

Figure 4: Median Wages By Occupation



Source: American Community Survey 5-year sample 2017-2021

TIP STEALING

In addition to low pay, workers that we interviewed described the withholding of tips, unfair management of tips, or probationary periods before distribution of tips. Restaurant workers at two popular Korean BBQ restaurants describe the tipping system as manipulative: One explained that new employees are “on probation” and do not receive tips during this period. They also described a “half-tip” policy whereby a manager might retaliate for a perceived mistake by putting an employee on half their tips for a week.⁴¹ Tip theft also allows employers to utilize favoritism to divide workers. Rather than pooling and splitting tips systematically, employers can offer the illusion of “punishments” and “rewards” by giving certain workers a higher portion of the tips.

Employers engaging in tip theft are often able to evade the recent regulatory successes of the labor movement in California. Wage theft is primarily combated at the local and state levels: implementation and administration of the minimum wage are the purview of the newly created Office of Wage Standards in the Bureau of Contract Administration, and enforcement of labor law is the responsibility of the California Department of Industrial Relations. Tip theft, however, is regulated by the US Department of Labor (DOL). In 2020 and 2021, the DOL completed a set of rules as a part of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to update regulations for tipped workers.⁴² However, the DOL and local and state agencies have less experience collaborating with worker centers in investigating and enforcing tip theft.

HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCERNS

Restaurants tend to be fast paced, and workers often navigate limited space and hazards, such as slippery floors, open flames, and heavy boxes. Yet many workers lack access to healthcare and paid time off. For instance, a 2022 UCLA study of fast food workers in Los Angeles found that nearly a third of workers were not provided with paid sick time, and over half reported health and safety hazards in the workplace.⁴³ Nearly half of Koreatown restaurant workers did not have access to any type of health coverage—a higher rate than their counterparts elsewhere in the county.

Table 10: Health Insurance

	Koreatown	Los Angeles County
Has health insurance	53%	76%
Does not have health insurance	47%	24%

Source: American Community Survey 5-year sample 2017-2021

EUN SUN CHOI



Eun Sun works as a server at a restaurant in Koreatown that specializes in noodles. She has been there for about five years. Before working as a server, she and her husband owned a small business at a nearby swap meet alongside dozens of other mom-and-pop businesses. However, the building was demolished to make room for a seven-story apartment complex. “The dreams of small business owners and their employees went up in smoke,” she says. “I really enjoyed working there.” After they lost their business, she found a job as a server.



Having grown up in South Korea, it was not easy for Eun Sun to adapt to life in Los Angeles, where she is living alongside people from different countries. The language barrier creates a lot of communication challenges for her. For that reason, she appreciates working in Koreatown, where she can find banking and postal services in Korean: “Working in Koreatown feels like home and gives me energy.”

Eun Sun enjoys serving in restaurants. “When I see older customers enjoying their meals at the restaurant, it gives me a sense of fulfillment,” she says. However, in order to afford to live here, Eun Sun and her husband live very frugally. They eat at home frequently and save as much money as they can. According to Eun Sun, although the minimum wage has increased, her tips have decreased.



Eun Sun has also witnessed the neighborhood change significantly over the years. “Many people who have moved from other places now reside in our neighborhood, often seeking new job opportunities,” she explains. She feels that the population of those living and working in Koreatown is always growing, and she has had to work more and more hours in order to afford rent: “To make a living in the United States, we have no choice.”

SNAPSHOT FROM THE KIWA WORKER SURVEY

Survey data offered us further insight into the working conditions of restaurants in Koreatown. While originally known for its mosaic of small mom-and-pop establishments, in recent decades, Koreatown has become a nexus of local restaurant chains and corporations that own multiple restaurants, which concentrates economic power in the hands of a few dominant business owners who employ hundreds of Koreatown workers. KIWA conducted surveys in these establishments in order to better understand these working conditions.

Workers surveyed had a range of tenure, with over one-third at their current job for less than a year and one-quarter for more than five years.

Table 11: Job Tenure of Restaurant Workers in Koreatown

Less than one year	35%
1-5 years	40%
More than 5 years	25%



Source: KIWA Worker Survey 2020 and 2022 (N=283)

Most of these workers were employed full time or nearly full time, with over two-thirds working 30 hours or more.

Table 12: Weekly Work Hours for Restaurant Workers in Koreatown

1 to 19 hours	14%
20 to 29 hours	13%
30 to 39 hours	36%
40 hours	21%
41 or more hours	16%



Source: KIWA survey 2020 and 2022 (N=296)

Low Wages and Wage Ceiling

Almost all of the surveyed workers earned low wages. At 94% it is higher than the census data.

Figure 5: Low Wages



Source: KIWA Worker Survey 2020 and 2022 (N=203)



The survey also showed how restaurant workers in Koreatown face a wage ceiling, in which workers—regardless of tenure—are paid the same amount. Workers in interviews repeatedly indicated the static nature of wages in the industry.

“ALWAYS THE MINIMUM. WE ARE ALL PAID THE MINIMUM. I HAVE BEEN HERE TEN YEARS AND IT IS STILL THE SAME.”

—Koreatown restaurant worker⁴⁴



Table 13: Median Wage by Job Tenure

Job Tenure	Median Hourly Wage
Less than one year	\$16.00
1-5 years	\$15.25
More than 5 years	\$16.00

Source: KIWA Worker Survey 2020 and 2022 (N=176)

A lack of clarity around wages and job growth can allow employers avenues for exploitation. For instance, some can reward workers in ways that encourage favoritism and discrimination. Rewards often include providing favorable shifts (i.e., opening vs. closing shifts) or liberty from certain unfavorable tasks (e.g., cleaning unsanitary areas). An informal rewards system allows employers to avoid offering promotions while incentivizing obedience, even under substandard working conditions.

This form of a wage ceiling is technically legal. The employers in this study appear to adhere to the minimum wage law. A wage ceiling allows them to remain compliant with wage and hour laws while still significantly improving their profit margins by keeping labor costs as low as possible over extended periods of time. Under a wage ceiling, tip theft is an even more powerful tactic to exploit workers by giving them a “reward” without offering them a wage increase.

COVID-19 Risks

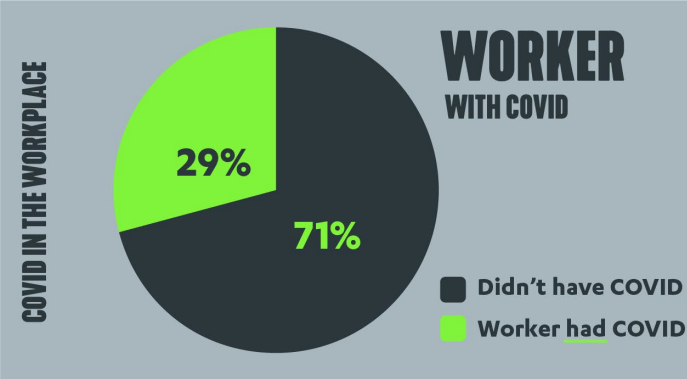
Workplaces were a common vector of COVID-19 community transmission, and service jobs such as restaurant work were especially vulnerable. Food and agricultural workers had the highest increased mortality rate of any occupation during the pandemic.⁴⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated the vulnerabilities of restaurant workers, who received a new title during the pandemic: “essential workers.” Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is subsiding overall, the number of cases and hospitalizations among essential workers remains high.

In a national survey of restaurant workers conducted during the first year of COVID-19, nearly one-half (44%) reported that at least one or more of their coworkers had contracted COVID-19.⁴⁶ A 2021 UCLA survey of fast food workers in Los Angeles found similar rates of workplace exposure. Nearly a quarter (23%) of workers surveyed reported testing positive for COVID-19, and half (49%) knew about positive cases among their coworkers.⁴⁷



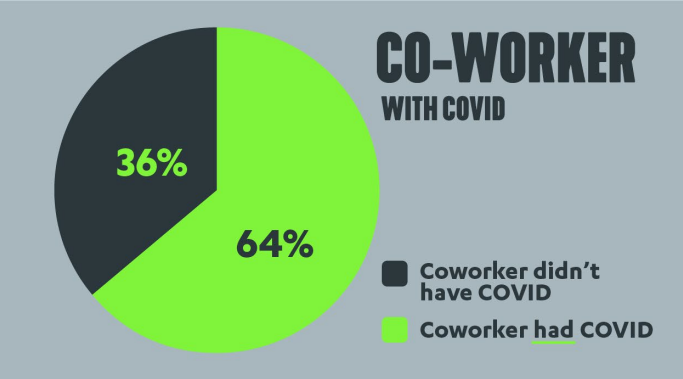
These findings were similar to those in Koreatown, where 29% of respondents reported having COVID-19, and nearly two-thirds knew of a coworker who had COVID-19.

Figure 6: Koreatown Restaurant Workers That Contracted COVID-19



Source: KIWA Worker Survey 2022 (n=131)

Figure 19: Koreatown Restaurant Workers That Had a Coworker Contract COVID-19



Source: KIWA Worker Survey 2022 (n=88)

During COVID-19, retaliation and fear of retaliation were heightened. Many workers were afraid to speak out when they were sick for fear of retaliation from their employer. One restaurant worker said, “We try not to talk about COVID, even to each other. The boss doesn’t want to know.”⁴⁸ In this context, essential workers face an impossible choice: stay home from work to remain healthy and protect their families from infection, or go to work in order to earn a wage and pay their rent but put themselves and their families in harm’s way. In a 2022 study of fast food workers in Los Angeles, over a third expressed concerns about COVID-19-related issues, with over half saying their issue was not resolved by management.⁴⁹

For all participants, sporadic health and safety precautions during the period of both surveying and interviewing (2021–2023) were reported at work. Restaurant workers continued to request access to resources and information related to COVID-19, and importantly, many interview subjects indicated that during pandemic peaks, they were primarily responsible for purchasing masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE). This population of workers is also extremely vulnerable to public health risks since most lack health insurance.

“THERE WASN’T ANY PROTECTION. WE ALL DID IT OURSELVES. WE BOUGHT OUR OWN MASKS AND HAND SANITIZER.”

—Koreatown restaurant worker⁵⁰



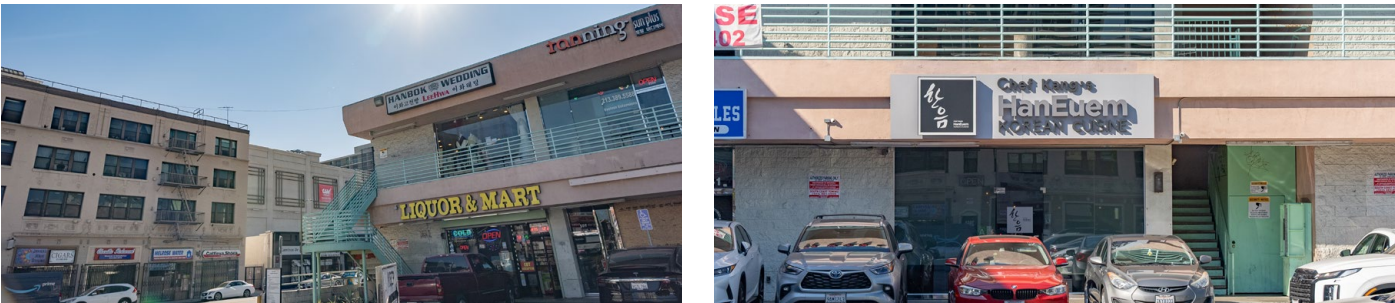
Social Networks

The survey focused on those employed in restaurants in Koreatown. We found that the majority were also living in the neighborhood, signaling that Koreatown provides both employment and residency for workers.

Figure 7: Worker Residency



Source: KIWA Worker Survey 2022 (n=162)



Social networks play a role in Koreatown restaurants’ hiring practices. A majority found their positions through someone they knew, such as a family member or other acquaintance. These dense networks allow for dynamic labor markets; restaurants and other low-wage industries cluster in Koreatown because of the concentrated supply of labor.

Table 14: Pathways to Employment Among Koreatown Restaurant Workers

Personal network (e.g., friend, partner, acquaintance)	65%
Applied directly or online	24%
Referral (e.g., friend, manager)	6%
Other (e.g., customer, owner)	5%

Source: KIWA Worker Survey 2022 (n=127)





4. KOREATOWN RESIDENTS & HOUSING RISKS

GENTRIFICATION AND DISPLACEMENT

As Koreatown's reputation as a nightlife and cultural destination has grown, so have signs of gentrification, with new bars, clubs, and luxury amenities, such as spas and sports centers, appearing along its commercial corridors.⁵¹ Studies have documented that there are disproportionately more conditional use permits and liquor licenses granted in Koreatown compared to other neighborhoods in the City, which has helped facilitate business expansion in the district, particularly for restaurants and bars.⁵² The neighborhood attracts both Korean and non-Korean tourists and visitors. As wealthier residents move into Koreatown, the development of luxury housing and hotels has grown significantly, which both directly and indirectly displaces low-income residents.⁵³ Direct displacement occurs when a resident is involuntarily forced to move because their building is being demolished, sold, or renovated and turned into condominiums. Indirect displacement occurs when a resident voluntarily moves because of rising housing costs or other factors that make their neighborhood less affordable or desirable.

Because Koreatown contains several Metro light rail stations and a variety of rapid transit bus lines, it has attracted a significant amount of transit-oriented development (TOD). Proponents of TOD note that the concomitant development of dense, pedestrian-friendly environments adjacent to transit amenities can incentivize the creation of socially vibrant neighborhoods, as well as improve air quality.⁵⁴ In 2016, City of LA voters passed Measure JJJ, a measure which incentivized dense development in areas within a half-mile of transit as long as they include a percentage of affordable units.⁵⁵ The new ordinance has successfully increased the numbers of affordable units to Koreatown, but it has also encouraged disproportionate development in the neighborhood compared to other parts of the City because of the sheer concentration of transit and the economics of the local housing market.⁵⁶

There is also evidence that the number of corporate landlords in Koreatown has grown in recent years.⁵⁷ Unlike small, mom-and-pop landlords, these companies also rely on appropriating additional value from increasing land prices to reap higher rent revenue. Low-income tenants in neighborhoods where land is predominantly owned by corporate landlords, such as Koreatown, face higher risks of displacement compared to other communities in Los Angeles.

Because of the vulnerabilities they face in the workplace, restaurant workers in Koreatown are also particularly at risk of displacement due to gentrification. Low wages and wage theft are inextricably linked to gentrification and displacement.⁵⁸ Over half of Koreatown restaurant workers are at or near the poverty threshold—with household incomes that are under 200% of the poverty threshold—and wages for Koreatown restaurant workers have not kept pace with the rise in rent and general cost of living.

Table 15: Poverty status

	Koreatown	Los Angeles County
Below 100%	13%	13%
100-199%	37%	26%
200% and higher	50%	61%

Source: American Community Survey 5-year sample 2017-2021

RENT AND OVERCROWDING

The majority of restaurant workers who live in Koreatown are unable to purchase their homes. Almost all workers are renters, and nearly half are rent-burdened or severely rent-burdened. Accordingly, over half of the housing units in Koreatown are overcrowded or are severely overcrowded.⁵⁹ For those in an industry that is at high risk for outbreaks, returning home to an overcrowded home is likely to increase the spread of COVID-19 and the risk of COVID-19 deaths.⁶⁰

Table 16: Rent and Overcrowding

	Koreatown	Los Angeles County
Rent vs. Own		
Rent	98%	67%
Own	2%	33%
Rent Burden		
Not rent-burdened	54%	47%
Rent-burdened	24%	28%
Severely rent-burdened	22%	25%
Overcrowding		
Not overcrowded	41%	71%
Overcrowded	22%	17%
Severely overcrowded	37%	12%

Source: American Community Survey 5-year sample 2017-2021

In order to afford rent, families often overcrowd in small studio or one bedroom apartments. The majority of Koreatown restaurant workers live in households with two or more families, and more than half of the households are multigenerational (e.g., two or more generations) that include four or more individuals.

Table 17 : Family and Household

	Koreatown	Los Angeles County
Household Size		
1	9%	6%
2-3	39%	36%
4 or more	52%	58%

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Number of Families in Household		
1 family	79%	82%
2 or more families	21%	18%
Multigenerational Household		
1 generation	42%	26%
2 or more generations	58%	74%
Children		
Children in the household	35%	33%
No children in the household	65%	67%

Source: American Community Survey 5 year sample 2017-2021

JOSE MISAEEL FRAIRE



Born in Mexico, Jose Misael is 24 years old and has lived in Koreatown for close to two years. He lives with three other roommates in a single apartment, where they sleep in bunk beds to have more space. All three roommates hold two jobs each at local restaurants, so they spend little time together in the apartment. “It’s an apartment only for sleeping,” says Jose Misael. His main goal is to save money so he can help support his family back in Mexico.



He likes living in Koreatown because of how close it is to his jobs, how many bars and entertainment venues there are, and the proximity to

Hollywood. But he wishes it wasn’t so expensive, so he didn’t have to work two jobs. On his days off, he goes to the park to relax. He gets around on a scooter because he doesn’t own a car. His days off are rare: “I would like more time off to be with my family, and I wish I could spend money rather than saving all the time.”



Jose Misael has been living in overcrowded housing for many years. Before this apartment, he lived in another with six people. Eventually overwhelmed by how little space there was, he spoke with his uncle to help him find another place to live, which is how he found his current apartment. “This apartment is also very, very small. A single bedroom for all four individuals.” He wishes he had a bit more privacy in his home. “One day I want to have a little house that has much more space.”

The housing stock in Koreatown is also considerably older than that of the rest of the county; nearly half of the residential buildings occupied by restaurant workers are 74 years or older, and 29% are between 44 and 73 years old. Notably, while the neighborhood continues to attract new development, there is a concentration of rent-stabilized units in Koreatown that are under threat of demolition.⁶¹ And because of the high incidence of overcrowding, the effects of displacement in Koreatown are more significant.

Table 18: Age of Koreatown Buildings

	Koreatown	Los Angeles County
Age of Building		
74 years or older	49%	27%
44 to 73 years old	29%	47%
24 to 43 years old	15%	19%
10 to 23 years old	7%	7%
Less than 10 years old	<1%	<1%

Source: American Community Survey 5-year sample 2017-2021





5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish an Industry Standards Board to Set and Enforce Minimum Standards in Koreatown's Restaurant Sector

The conditions low-wage workers face under a wage ceiling are difficult to regulate under the existing labor code because employers are free to set wages as they see fit (while abiding by minimum wage law) and are not required to offer pathways to promotion. However, industry standards boards can directly improve industry-specific workplace conditions by bringing together workers, employers, and government agencies to set, monitor, and enforce labor standards. Industry standards boards can address a range of labor conditions, including wages, working hours, safety, training, and opportunities for promotion. In Koreatown's restaurant sector, such boards could improve pay scales and empower workers in the workplace by allowing workers to help set standards for their industry and provide innovative strategies for improving standards in a way that complements recent successes in strengthening minimum wage laws.

Recent research has shown that industry standards boards can help close the pay gap between men and women and improve base standards for minimum wage and paid leave.⁶² They are also flexible in that they can adjust standards to account for different levels of training, expertise, or tenure. And because industry standards boards involve workers, they can also integrate new strategies to address noncompliance with labor standards, such as mandating workers' rights training for workers and managers and expedited dispute resolution, as well as resolving issues like excessive overtime and lack of paid time off.

Because local and state governments have the ability to mandate boards in particular industries, industry standards boards are becoming more popular. California, New Jersey, and New York all currently have sectoral board laws. In 2015, the State of New York used industry standards boards to raise fast food workers' wages to \$15 per hour. In 2018, Seattle created an industry standards board for domestic workers that established a set of recommendations for the industry. Los Angeles should similarly develop and pass an ordinance that requires an industry standards board in the restaurant sector, which would include a broad mandate to improve wages and working conditions, ensure board members are selected in ways that are representative and democratic, and provide boards with the authority to gather relevant information through hearings and investigations.⁶³

2. Develop a Koreatown Commercial Corridor Ordinance

Los Angeles also has the authority to raise working conditions within a specific industry and geography. In 2006, the City Council's Trade, Commerce, and Tourism Committee held a special meeting to discuss the local economy surrounding LAX, specifically the hotel industry on Century Boulevard. The Committee recognized that the hotels in the LAX area represent 20% of all hotel rooms in the City and have a high occupancy ratio, while room rates remained relatively low. These lower hotel revenues translate into lower wages for hotel employees and have a significant impact on revenues and crucial services in the City.

In conjunction with the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) and other labor allies, the City agreed to develop and adopt related ordinances that would boost both hotel revenues and working conditions for hotel workers. Specifically, the three ordinances mandated living wages for hotel workers,⁶⁴ stronger measures around worker retention,⁶⁵ and the ability for workers to collect some of the service charges added to banquets and other large events.⁶⁶ The three ordinances set the boundaries for these rules to a newly created Century Boulevard Property Business Improvement District (Century Corridor PBID), where hotel businesses were concentrated.

As this report documents, the restaurant sector in Koreatown similarly provides a significant revenue stream to the City, as the neighborhood is a tourist attraction for visitors from around the world. Improvements in workers' wages and retention, as evidenced by the Century Boulevard ordinances, would meaningfully enhance the livelihoods of thousands of working families. The Wilshire Center Business Improvement District has been operating in the Koreatown community since 1995 and could serve as the geographic overlay for a series of ordinances that improve working conditions for restaurant workers. To help encourage restaurants to do business in an area with high labor costs, the ordinances can also include measures that lower barriers to entry for new restaurants and help cut operating costs for the small, often immigrant-owned independent businesses that give character to the neighborhood.



3. Strengthen Partnerships Between Worker Centers and Enforcement Agencies

Improving working conditions in Koreatown's restaurant industry requires strengthening existing partnerships between worker organizations and enforcement agencies—and forging new ones. KIWA works with a range of relevant government agencies to enable agency officials to more effectively identify influential, egregious bad actors that violate labor codes and that drive standards down in key low-wage industries. In particular, KIWA and other organizations have participated in the California Strategic Enforcement Partnership with the California Labor Commissioner's Office for several years. Strategic partnerships such as this result in more effective use of government resources and improved enforcement outcomes. In addition, effective identification of key bad actors can also relieve pressure on surrounding businesses, making it easier for them to maintain and raise standards. These partnerships draw upon worker centers' years—or in some cases, including KIWA's, decades—of industry expertise and community-rooted worker engagement. The partnerships range from informal to formal and can evolve over time. When funded, such partnerships provide a means for sustained, deeper engagement.

4. Expand Workplace Public Health Councils Program

The COVID-19 pandemic forced Americans to confront the reality that essential workers in the restaurant and grocery industries are the backbone of our economy. Though restaurants struggled during the pandemic, Koreatown's restaurant sector proved extraordinarily resilient. A root cause of this resiliency is the restaurant workforce. Its workers, often living in overcrowded conditions and struggling to make ends meet, had to make an impossible decision: stay home to remain healthy but lose direly needed wages or work but risk infecting themselves or others.



Overcrowded living conditions among Koreatown restaurant workers were frequently tied to COVID-19 outbreaks. Disease is plainly endemic in restaurants—patrons congregate around tables and don't wear masks while eating. The vulnerability of workers in high-risk industries led to the creation of the Los Angeles Department of Public Health's Public Health Councils in 2021.⁶⁷ This program has ensured workers play an active role in monitoring and enforcing public health standards in the workplace. KIWA has served as a community partner to this program since its inception and has already created 19 public health councils in high-risk industries. Nonetheless, as this report shows, workers in the restaurant industry continue to face retaliation for confronting the obvious.

Public health council programs must be extended, expanded, and centered in communities like Koreatown, where workers both live and work in high-risk settings. Forty-two percent of homes in the neighborhood, an epicenter of the restaurant world of Los Angeles, are overcrowded and have experienced an extraordinary 12 cases of COVID-19 for every 1,000 residents.⁶⁸ As the county continues to record the highest number of deaths related to the virus (> 35,366) and cases (> 3,697,797) in the nation in 2023, the sustaining and critical role of certified worker organizations in supporting public health is as urgent as ever.⁶⁹



5. Integrate Workplace Justice into Anti-Displacement and Homelessness Prevention Strategies

While addressing the affordable housing and homelessness crises in Los Angeles has been a goal of policymakers for decades, little progress has been made in actually preventing displacement and homelessness.⁷⁰ Increasing the supply of affordable housing and the preservation of existing affordable housing continue to be crucial. However, policy changes to improve housing production and preservation also continue to face significant political barriers. Housing production efforts are also slow to be realized and thus will take time to yield measurable results when it comes to improving housing security for low-income families.

This report clearly indicates that the precarity restaurant workers face in the workplace translates directly into housing insecurity. Low wages, wage theft, and tip-stealing put restaurant workers into a situation where they overcrowd in housing in order to simply afford rent. The lack of alternative affordable housing options requires that workers tolerate a wide range of workplace exploitation—which can include retaliation, harassment, and poor public health and safety conditions—just to survive. It is therefore crucial that policymakers consider measures that strengthen workers' rights as a key component of anti-displacement and homelessness prevention strategies.



APPENDIX A: DETAILED METHODOLOGY

Data Source: US Census Data

Industry Data

For industry data, we used the following government sources: US Census Bureau, 2020 County Business Patterns, and Zip Code Industry Detail File, using:

- ↳ The following NAICS code: 7225 Restaurants and Other Eating Places
- ↳ The Koreatown zip codes 90004, 90005, 90006, 90010, 90020

Workers and Resident Data

We used the US Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimate (2017–2021), an ongoing annual survey of American households, to gather worker characteristics such as economic status, demographics, health, and social benefits. The data were retrieved from IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org, which harmonizes US census microdata.

Defining Restaurant Workers

The estimates for restaurant workers includes US civilians that are over the age of 16 and currently employed (e.g., working for wages and self-employed; unemployment and labor force participation data points only included for Koreatown residents who are restaurant workers).

- They must work in the:
 - ↳ Restaurant and other food services industry (IND 8680)
- Within the following occupations:
 - ↳ Chefs and head cooks (OCC 4000)
 - ↳ First-line supervisors of food preparation and serving workers (OCC 4010)
 - ↳ Cooks (OCC 4020)
 - ↳ Food preparation workers (OCC 4030)
 - ↳ Bartenders (OCC 4040)
 - ↳ Fast food and counter workers (OCC 4055)
 - ↳ Waiters and waitresses (OCC 4110)
 - ↳ Food servers non restaurant (OCC 4120)
 - ↳ Dining room and cafeteria attendants and bartender helpers (OCC 4130)
 - ↳ Dishwashers (OCC 4140)
 - ↳ Host and hostesses, restaurant, lounge, and coffee shop (OCC 4150)
 - ↳ Food preparation and serving related workers all other (OCC 4160)
- For Koreatown restaurant workers, due to unavailability of place of work data on the neighborhood level, we use place of residency.
 - ↳ Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) code 3733
- For Los Angeles County restaurant workers, we used place of work.
 - ↳ PUMA 2000 onward (PWPUA00) code 3700
 - ↳ For employment/unemployment, we use County PUMA 3700

Low Wages for Census Data

We computed the hourly wage variable for the ACS following the steps outlined by the UC Berkeley Labor Center.⁷¹ We calculated the median hourly wage for full-time workers in California at \$25.62, using the 2017–2021 ACS 5-year sample. Following the UC Berkeley Labor Center's methods, we define workers as low-wage if they earn less than two-thirds of the full-time median wage.⁷² For California, the cut off is \$17.08.

Rent Burden

To examine rent burden, a variable was computed using the definition provided by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Renters spending:

- 30% or less of their household income on rent are considered “not rent burdened”
- 31% to 50% of their household income on rent are considered “rent burdened”
- 51% or more of their household income on rent are considered “severely rent burdened.”

The variables selected for rent burden were gross monthly rental cost of the housing unit and total money income of all household members age 15+ during the previous year.

Overcrowding

The variables selected for overcrowding, include the number of person records that are included in the sampled unit, and the number of whole rooms used for living purposes that are contained in the housing unit. Using the US Census definition for overcrowding, the variable created for the current report consists of two categories:

- Overcrowded, which is defined as a unit or room occupied by more than one person, excluding bathrooms and kitchens.
- If there are 1.5 or more persons per room, they are considered to live in severely overcrowded conditions.

Worker Survey

Surveys were conducted by KIWA staff and part-time canvassers, who spent several months in 2020 and 2022 walking commercial corridors in the neighborhood and distributing surveys at workplaces. Workplaces were not selected randomly—the ability to survey workers depended on whether workers were willing and able to talk to us and whether management tolerated the presence of our team. A total of 30 restaurants were surveyed, collecting a sample of 338 restaurant workers in Koreatown. A total of 260 surveys were collected during 2022, and 78 were collected in 2020. The survey asked questions related to their tenure, hours, and wages as well as how they got their job, COVID-19 exposure, and basic demographic information.

Given the challenges of surveying the restaurant workers, the response rate varied for some of the questions asked, as some restaurant workers did not get to finish the survey or may have skipped some questions. Surveys asked workers various questions about their job (e.g., occupation, pay, hours, etc.), as well as demographics and their exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace.

Low Wages for the Survey Data

Using the ACS 2017-2021 5 years sample cutoff for low wage (\$17.08) and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics’s CPI inflation calculator (https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm) from January 2020 to January 2022, low wage in 2022 was determined to be \$18.61.

Worker Interviews

AJ Kim (SDSU) conducted interviews with a smaller section of survey respondents between March and July of 2022. Half of our interviewees were randomly sampled based on the larger pool of survey participants, and half of our interviewees were referred to us by key informants (N=12). A gift card of \$75 was offered to each participant for a 60 minute interview. Respondents were primarily selected from the Koreatown restaurant industry, and represent a mix of occupations, including bussers, dishwashers, front-of-house servers, prep cooks, and chefs, and include interviews with KIWA staff members. The mix of participants selected for in-depth interviews were approximately 50% Korean and 50% Latinx (Mexican, Salvadorean, Guatemalan) and all were foreign-born and primarily monolingual non-English speaking. Most respondents were also non-citizen residents of Koreatown. The interviews are part of a larger study with Co-PI Jennifer Chun, UCLA. Study info: “Pandemic Relief Gaps and Community Responses: Immigrant Workers in Informal Jobs in Los Angeles’ Koreatown and Little Saigon” IRB#21-001964.

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