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Authors

Waheed, Saba
Wong, Michele
Whelan, Megan

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Profile of Domestic Workers in California



UCLA Labor Center

About the Organizations

UCLA Labor Center

For more than 50 years, the UCLA Labor Center has created innovative programs that offer a range of educational, research, and public service activities within the university and in the broader community, especially among low-wage and immigrant workers. The Labor Center is a vital resource for research, education, and policy development to help create jobs that are good for workers and their communities, to improve the quality of existing jobs in the low-wage economy, and to strengthen the process of immigrant integration, especially among students and youth.

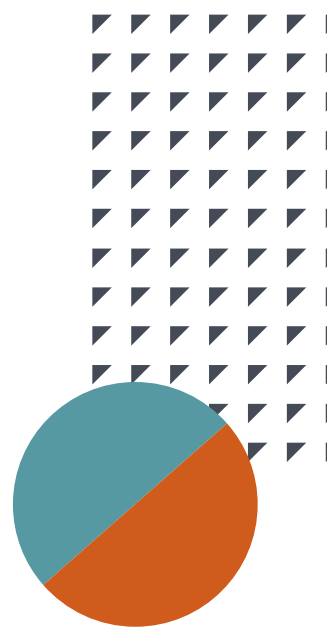
California Domestic Workers Coalition

Founded in 2006, the California Domestic Worker Coalition (CDWC) is the state's leading voice for the more than 300,000 domestic workers in California. Led by domestic workers, the CDWC is a statewide alliance of community-based organizations, domestic employers, worker centers, labor unions, faith groups, students, and policy advocates who work together to confront a history of exclusion from basic labor protections and to advance the rights and dignity of domestic workers and their communities across the state.

Reader Accessibility: The report uses a 14-point font to support readers with low vision, and all images include descriptions for screen readers.

Cover Image Description: Domestic worker holding a spray bottle and cloth, posing in front of a mural.
Photo by Mark Tuschman.

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Introduction

Domestic work is an indispensable part of American life. Domestic workers provide childcare, homecare, and housecleaning services to support families, individuals, older adults, and people with illnesses or disabilities. Essential to the functioning of our economy and a more caring and sustainable future, domestic workers ensure our children, aging grandparents, and loved ones who are managing chronic illnesses or disabilities receive the assistance they need to live healthy and dignified lives. However, this work remains largely excluded from basic employment protections and benefits that can ensure the health and safety of domestic workers.

This report is part of a series of UCLA Labor Center studies that capture the experience of workers and employers in the domestic work sector.¹ This industry lacks the structure common to others, and the resulting absence of regular and predictable practices leads to wide variations in work and pay arrangements. Studies have shown that domestic workers also experience wage theft, health and safety violations, and harassment.² A recent survey of domestic workers found workplace risks similar to those of nurses in hospital or cleaners in commercial buildings.³ Unlike other low-wage industries, domestic work is hidden behind closed doors and lacks government oversight or support. In addition, household employers often do not consider themselves as such or see their homes as workplaces.

Based on our analysis of government data from the most recent 5-year sample (2014–2018) of the American Community Survey (ACS), this research brief provides a profile of domestic workers in California—who they are, where they live and work, and the economic vulnerabilities they face due to their employment status, low wages, and lack of benefits.



Image Description: Smiling employer in a wheelchair and a home-care provider facing the camera, with a park in the background.

A few key findings:

- **The domestic work sector** is staffed primarily by immigrant women of color. Many studies have connected the gendered and racial makeup of the industry to the lack of legal protections, low pay, and workplace vulnerabilities. In 2018, three quarters of domestic workers were Latinx, Asian American/Pacific Islander, or Black women. Over half were foreign-born (58%), with the majority from Mexico (41%), the Philippines (11%), and El Salvador (10%). The vast majority of domestic workers were middle-aged or older.
- **The majority of domestic workers** (80%) labored year-round—47 or more weeks a year—and about half worked full-time.
- **The majority of domestic workers** were low-wage earners (77%). The median wage for domestic workers was \$10.79 per hour, barely half of what all other workers in California earned.

Domestic work is essential work. The current COVID-19 pandemic and its risks to domestic workers and employers makes the need for employer education, worker protections, and health and safety regulations in the home even more urgent and vital.



Image Description: Woman sitting in chair, smiling for camera.



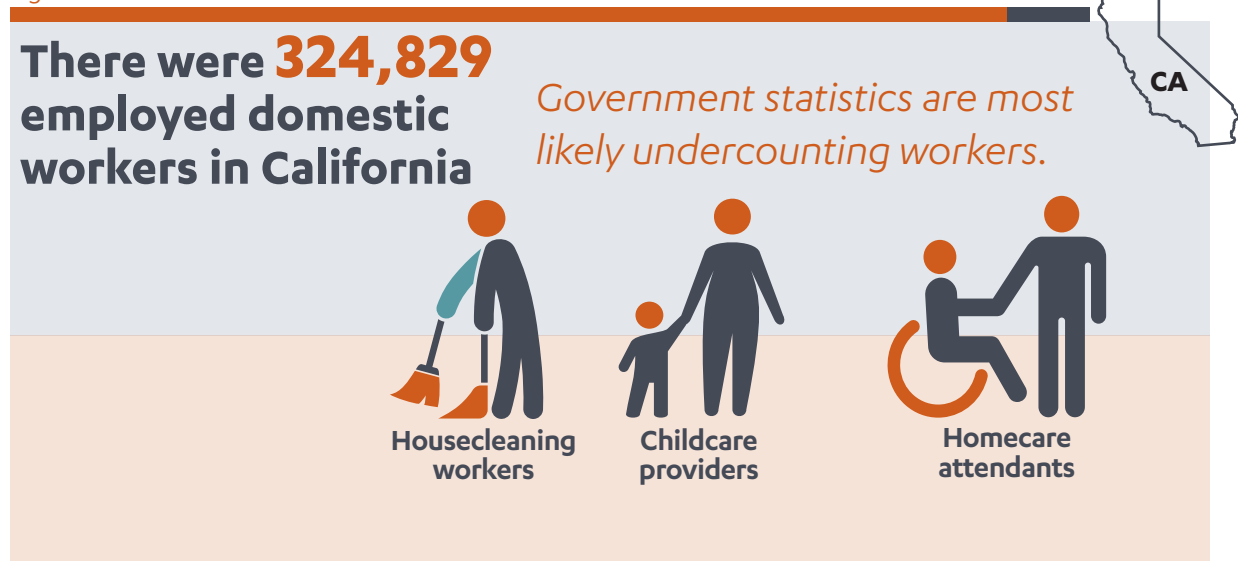
Image Description: Older adult with eyes closed, hugging a person.

Overview of Domestic Workers

Estimates of Domestic Workers

There were approximately 325,000 domestic workers in California in 2018. As with other domestic worker estimates, the analysis of the ACS data is likely to be an undercount due to underrepresentation of immigrants in national surveys and the large proportion of domestic workers who are paid “under the table” and are therefore less likely to report their work.⁴ In our analysis, this undercount may be especially prominent among house cleaners in California, who make up the largest share of immigrant women. A 2015 report on domestic worker employers estimated that 2 million households in the state hire for domestic work services.⁵

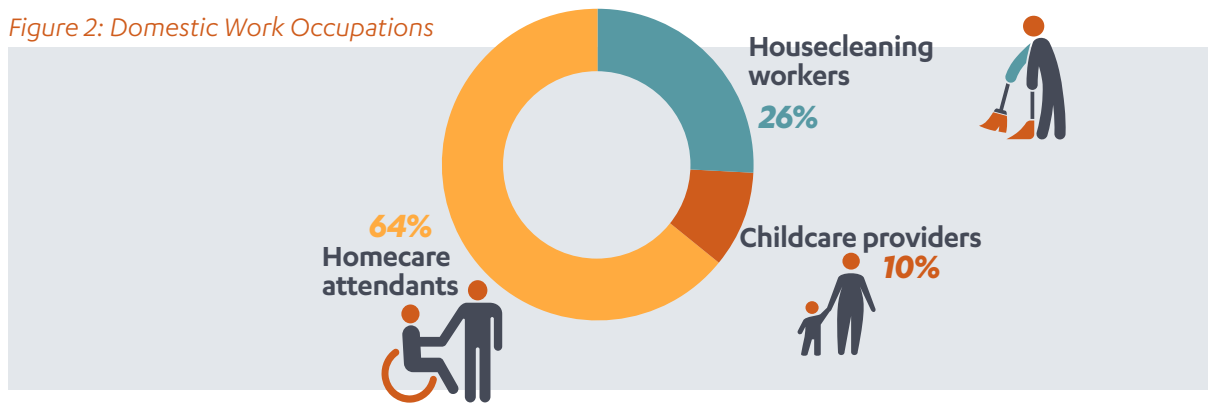
Figure 1: Estimated Number of Domestic Workers in California in 2018



Occupations

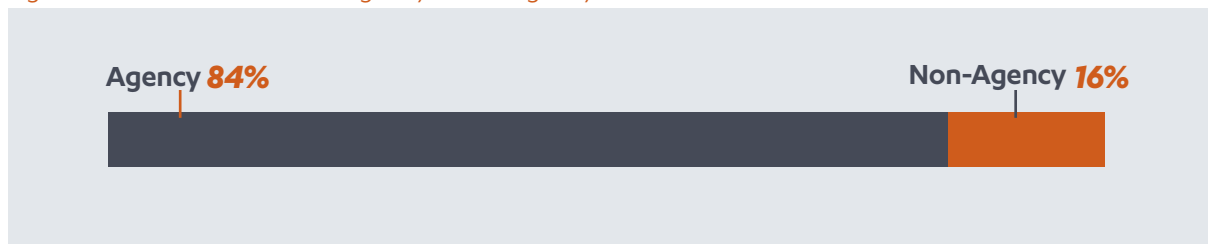
Domestic workers provide essential care for older adults and people with illnesses or disabilities, help care for children, and clean homes. More than half were homecare attendants—home health and personal care aides who provide daily living assistance—and the rest were house cleaners and childcare providers.

Figure 2: Domestic Work Occupations



The vast majority of homecare attendants were employed through licensed businesses that include private and government agencies. There were also nonagency, independent homecare attendants who are directly hired by their employers, often family members.

Figure 3: Home Attendants in Agency or Nonagency Jobs



Labor Force Participation and Economic Status

Labor Force Participation

The labor workforce is a broader category that includes both employed and unemployed workers who are looking for work. Those not in the labor force may be retired, in school, caring for children or family members, or not looking for work. Nationally, about two thirds of workers were in the labor force; among domestic workers, 83% were active in the labor force.

Figure 4: Labor Force Participation

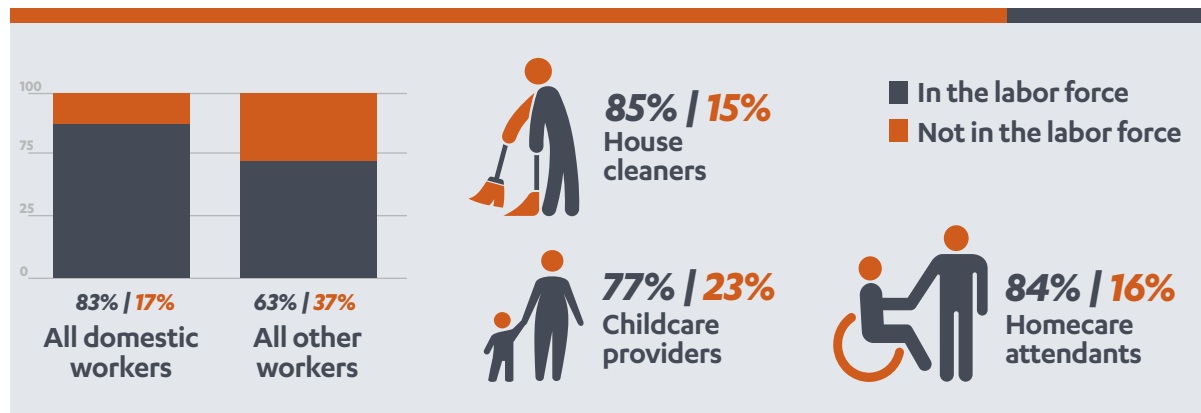
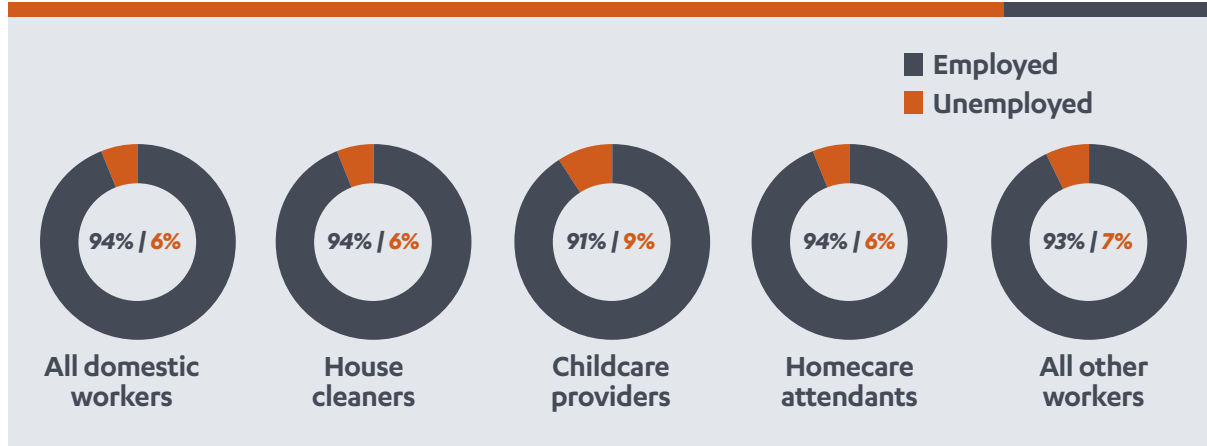


Image Description: Workers proudly lining up.

Employment Status

Of the domestic workers in the labor force, the majority were employed at rates similar to the national rates. These data points do not reflect the job losses due to COVID-19. According to the National Domestic Workers Alliance survey, 72% of workers lost employment during the pandemic.⁶

Figure 5: Employment Status



Full Time and Full Year

Only about half of domestic workers worked full time (35 hours or more a week)—a much lower rate than other workforces. The majority of domestic workers reported working year-round (47 or more weeks per year). Homecare attendants and house cleaners had higher rates of full-year work than childcare providers.

Figure 6: Full-Time and Full-Year Work

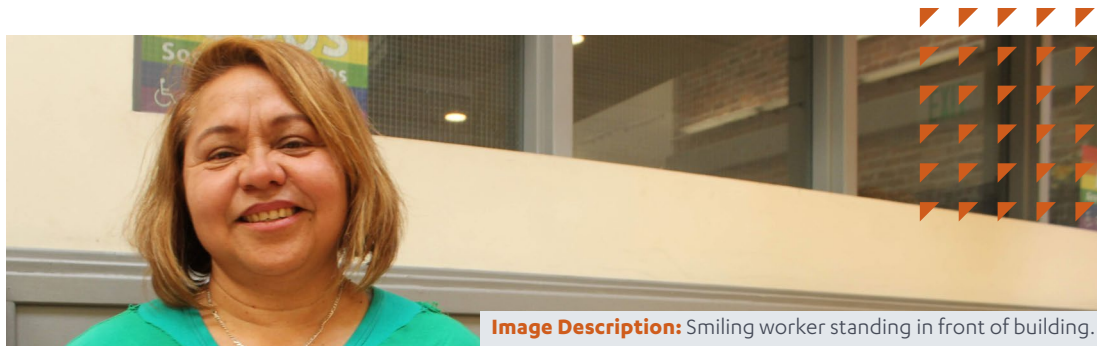
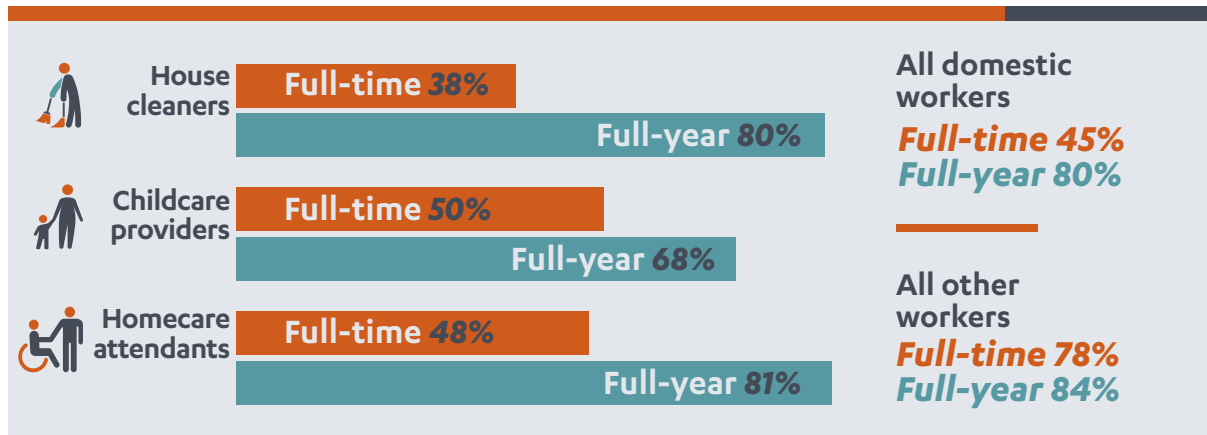


Image Description: Smiling worker standing in front of building.

Employment Type

Half of California’s house cleaners and childcare workers reported being self-employed, a much higher rate than other workforces.

It is likely that the estimate for employees is an undercount, as misclassification becomes increasingly common across various service industries.⁷ Many workers who report as self-employed are not running their own businesses nor do they have the power to set their terms of work, such as duties, hours, and wages. Misclassification allows employers to treat their workers as independent contractors, who do not have access to basic labor rights like minimum wage, overtime pay, work breaks, and other standard workplace protections and benefits.⁸

Figure 7: Employee and Self-Employed Status

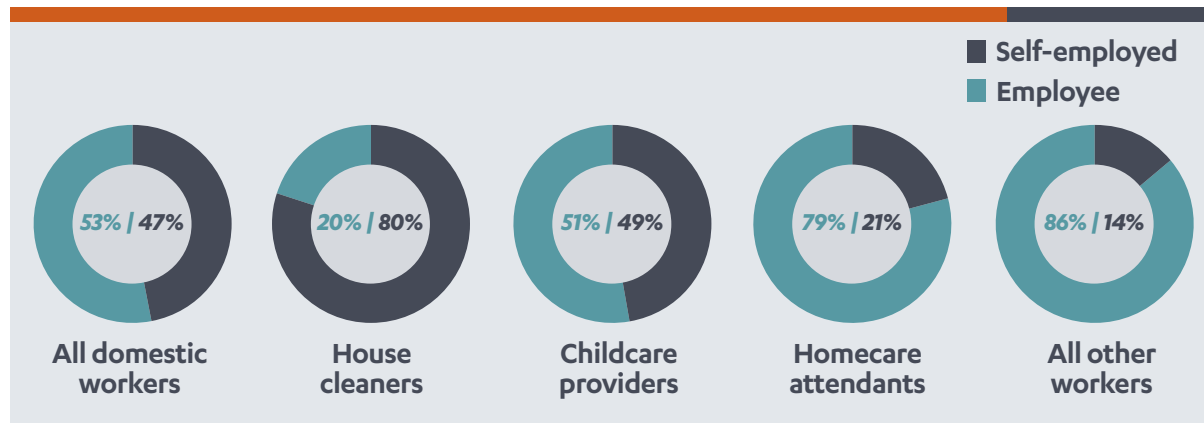


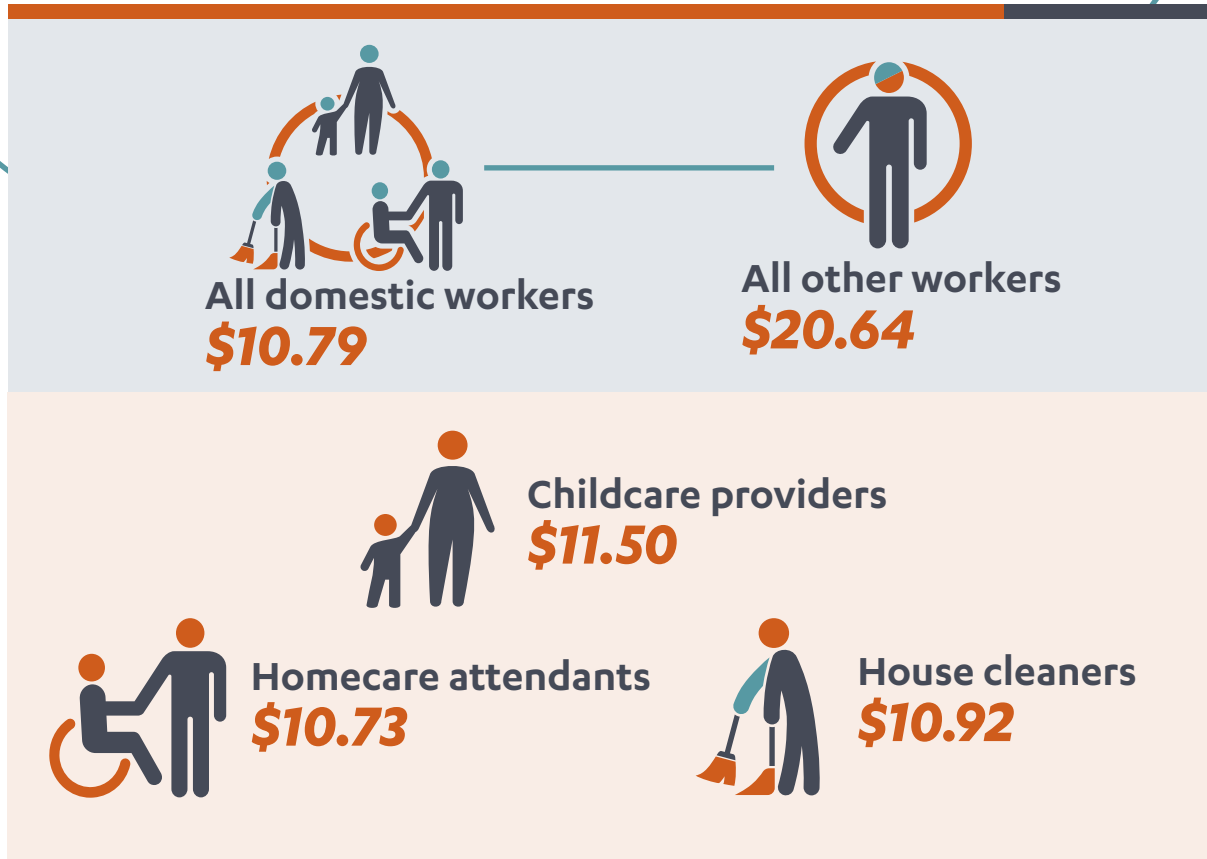
Image Description: Smiling worker in an office, in front of drawings on the wall.

Wages

Median Hourly Wage

Domestic work, like other service sectors, is primarily characterized by low-wage jobs. Domestic workers earned only half of the median hourly wage.

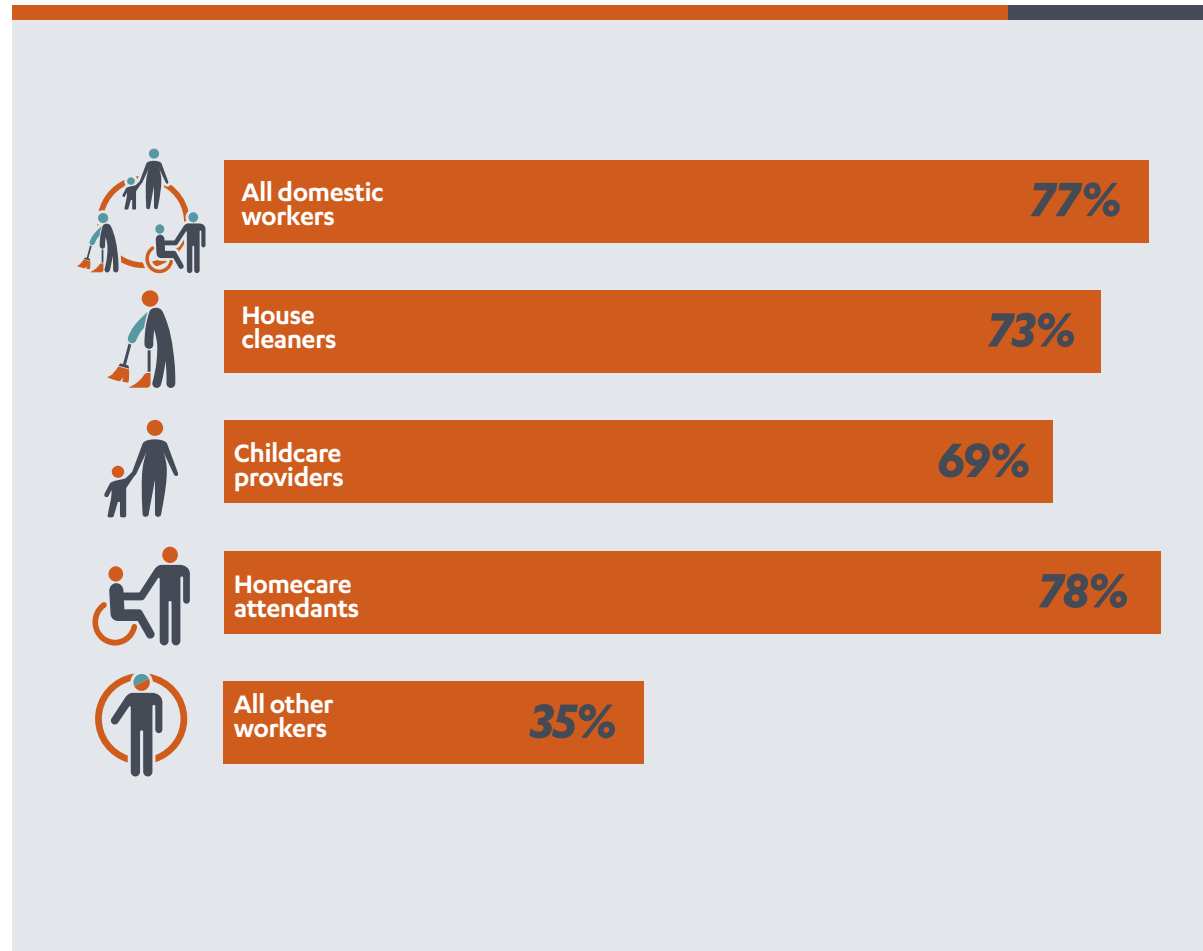
Figure 8: Hourly Wages



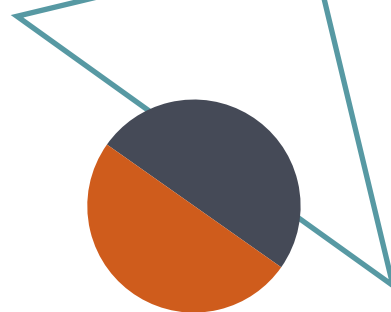
Low Wages

We define low-wage workers as those who earn less than \$15.29 an hour, which is two thirds of the 2018 median wage for full-time workers in California. Domestic workers were much more likely than other workers to earn low wages. Across the domestic work occupations, three quarters are low-wage workers, compared to a third of non-domestic workers.

Figure 9: Low-Wage Status



Place of Work by County



Domestic workers were employed throughout the state, but nearly two thirds were working in the Southern California region, with a third in Los Angeles.

Figure 10: Place of Work by County

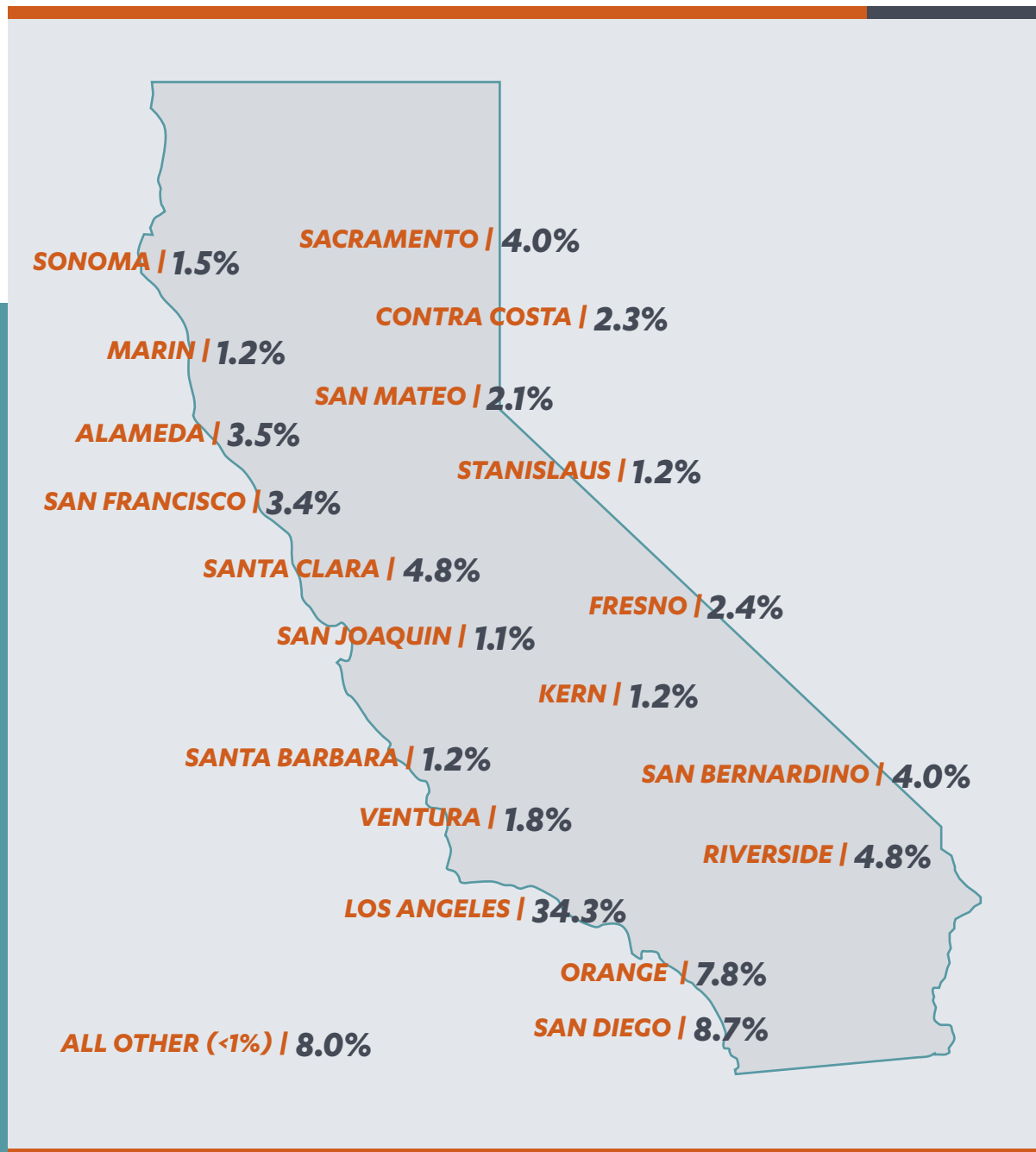




Image Description: Worker and employer in front a bookshelf, smiling at the camera.

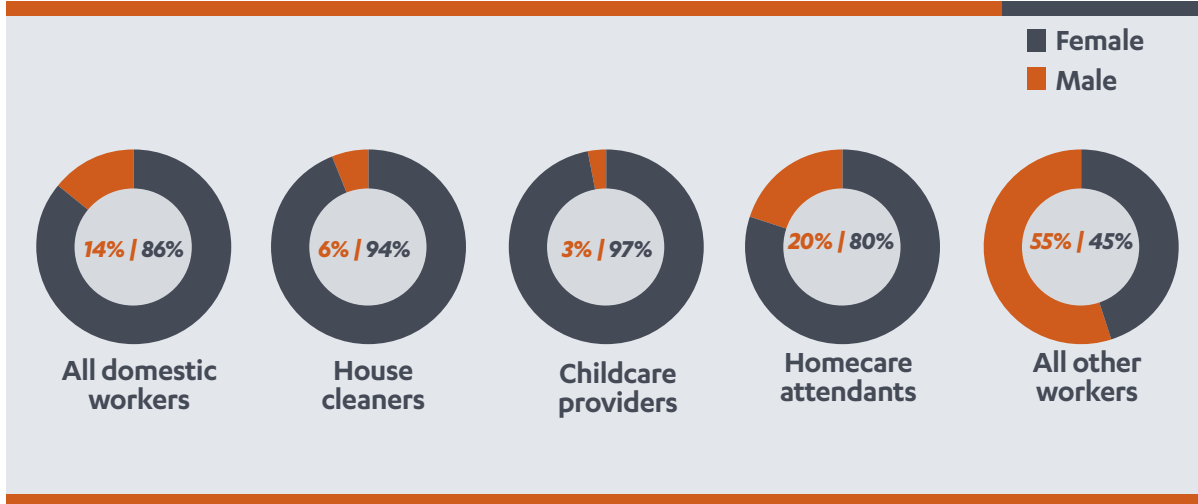
Worker Characteristics

The domestic work sector is staffed primarily by immigrant women of color. Many studies have connected the gendered and racial makeup of the industry to the lack of legal protections, low pay, and workplace vulnerabilities.⁹

Gender

Women made up the vast majority of the workforce, nearly double those in other sectors. Nearly all of the workers in childcare and housecleaning were women. Only one fifth of homecare attendants were men.

Figure 11: Domestic Workers by Gender



Race/Ethnicity

Latinx workers constituted the highest share of workers across all domestic work occupations, with the greatest number in housecleaning. Childcare work was shared mainly between Latinx and White workers, while homecare work was more evenly distributed among Latinx, White, Asian American/Pacific Islander, and Black workers.

Table 1: Domestic Workers by Race/Ethnicity

Race/ethnicity	All domestic workers	House cleaners	Childcare providers	Homecare attendants	All other workers
Latinx	51%	87%	49%	36%	37%
White	23%	9%	39%	26%	40%
Asian	16%	2%	7%	24%	15%
Black	8%	1%	2%	11%	5%
Other	2%	1%	3%	3%	3%

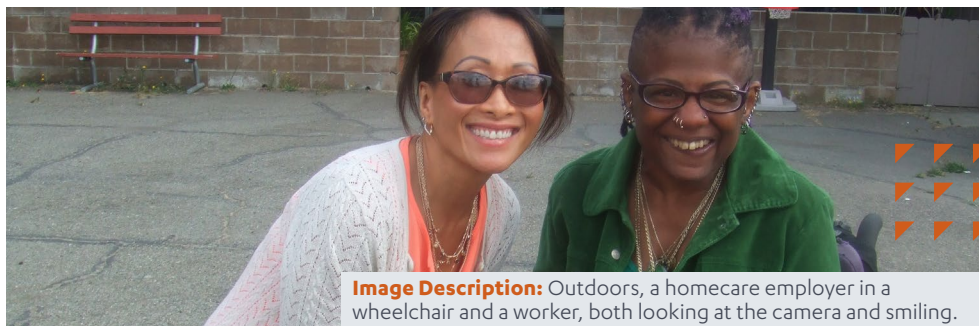


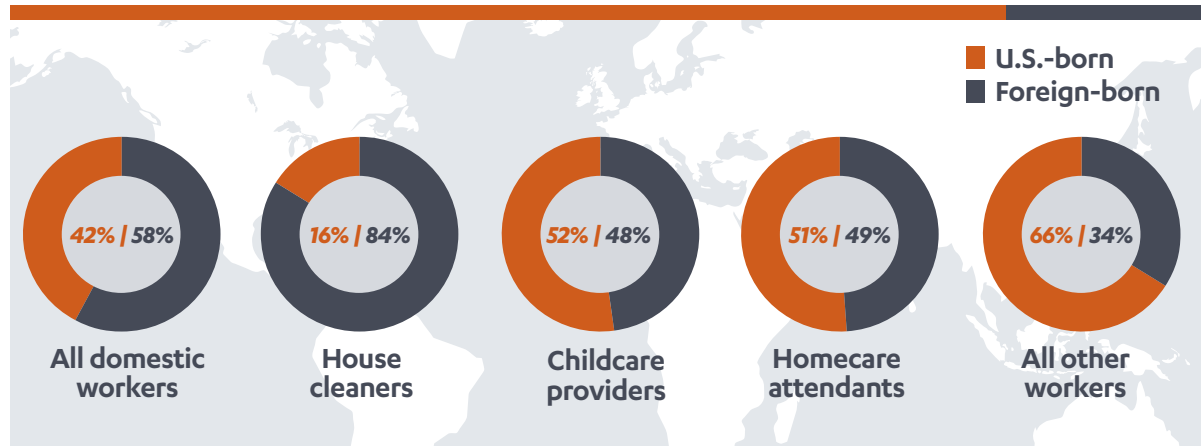
Image Description: Outdoors, a homecare employer in a wheelchair and a worker, both looking at the camera and smiling.

Domestic work is an important source of income for workers of color, particularly Latinx workers in California. As much recent research has shown, members of racial and ethnic minority groups are at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and experiencing severe illness. The impact has been especially high among Indigenous, Black, and Latinx populations, who are four times more likely than White people to get COVID-19.¹⁰ Communities of color face increased risk and need protective equipment and comprehensive benefits to stay healthy and safe.

Nativity

The majority of California domestic workers across all occupations were born outside of the United States, and more than 8 out of 10 house cleaners were foreign-born.

Figure 12: Nativity



The majority of immigrant domestic workers in California were from Mexico and were particularly concentrated in the housecleaning sector. Domestic workers from the Philippines were more likely to be homecare attendants. The third largest group of domestic workers were from El Salvador.

Table 2: Top 10 Countries of Birth for Foreign-Born Workers

Country of Birth	All domestic workers	House cleaners	Childcare providers	Homecare attendants	All other workers
Mexico	41%	61%	33%	28%	40%
Philippines	11%	<1%	3%	19%	8%
El Salvador	10%	16%	13%	5%	4%
Guatemala	6%	12%	11%	2%	3%
China	5%	<1%	3%	8%	5%
Vietnam	4%	<1%	1%	7%	5%
Korea	1%	<1%	1%	2%	3%
Iran	1%	<1%	<1%	2%	2%
Honduras	1%	2%	3%	<1%	1%
Peru	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%

Years in the United States

Though many domestic workers immigrated, the majority had been in the United States for many decades. The median number of years spent in the United States for foreign-born domestic workers in California was 23.

Table 3: Years in the United States of Foreign-Born Workers

Years in the U.S.	All domestic workers	House cleaners	Childcare providers	Homecare attendants	All other workers
0–5	7%	4%	16%	8%	8%
6–10	10%	7%	11%	10%	9%
11–15	12%	14%	11%	12%	13%
16–20	13%	15%	12%	12%	15%
21+	58%	60%	50%	58%	55%



Image Description: At home, an employer drinking from a cup and a worker sitting side by side.



Age

Domestic workers skew older, with a median age of 48 compared to 40 for other workers. Childcare providers were more likely to be younger while house cleaners included the lowest number of young workers. Because domestic work is an important source of employment for older workers who are at greater risk for severe illness or death from COVID-19, there is a pressing need for more protections and benefits for workers.¹¹

Table 4: Age

Age	All domestic workers	House cleaners	Childcare providers	Homecare attendants	All other workers
16–30	17%	8%	46%	17%	28%
31–45	28%	37%	21%	25%	33%
46–60	39%	44%	25%	40%	29%
60+	16%	11%	8%	18%	10%
Median age	48	47	33	49	40



Image Description: Two adults leaning in and smiling for the camera.

Education and Language



Image Description: Smiling worker listens to someone speak.

Educational Attainment

Over two thirds of domestic workers had a high school education or more. Educational attainment levels were higher for childcare and homecare attendants.

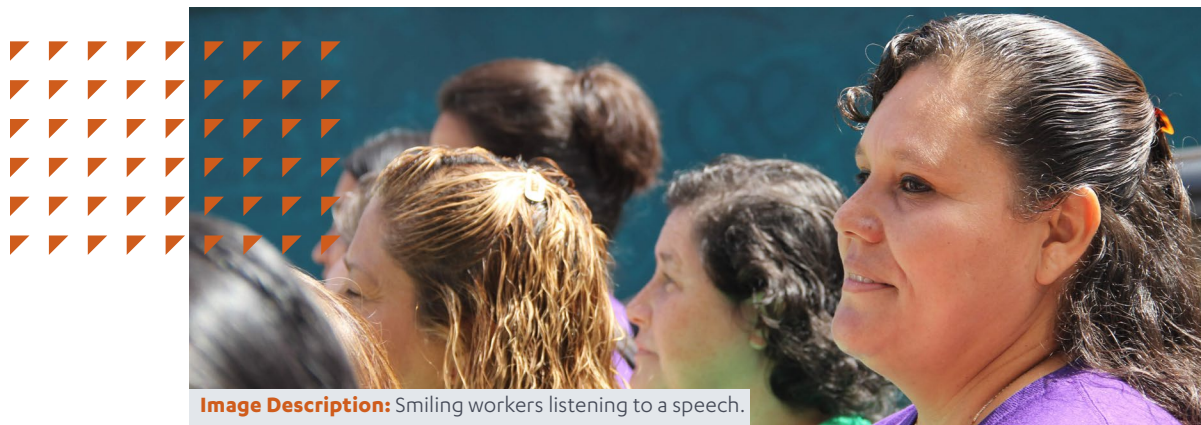
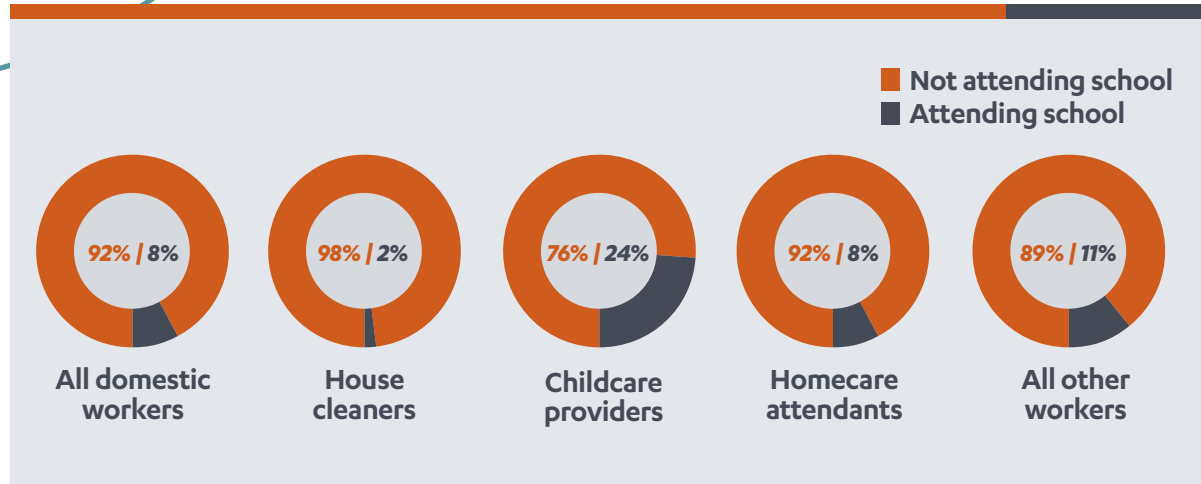
Table 5: Educational Attainment



Degree	All domestic workers	House cleaners	Childcare providers	Homecare attendants	All other workers
< high school degree	31%	56%	19%	22%	12%
High school degree	28%	27%	24%	29%	20%
Some college or associate's degree	29%	13%	37%	35%	32%
Bachelor's degree or higher	12%	4%	20%	14%	36%

A few domestic workers were in school. Childcare providers were most likely to be in school, with about one quarter enrolled.

Figure 13: Student Status of Domestic Workers



Language Proficiency

English language proficiency varied among domestic workers, with more than half reporting that they speak English well enough and 42% speaking little or no English.

Table 6: English Language Proficiency for Foreign-Born Workers

English Proficiency	All domestic workers	House cleaners	Childcare providers	Homecare attendants	All other workers
Little to none	42%	57%	31%	34%	25%
Proficient	27%	25%	29%	28%	23%
Very proficient or fluent	31%	18%	40%	38%	52%

Household

A little over half of domestic workers had at least one child in their home, and house cleaners were most likely to have a child in the household.

Figure 14: Child Status

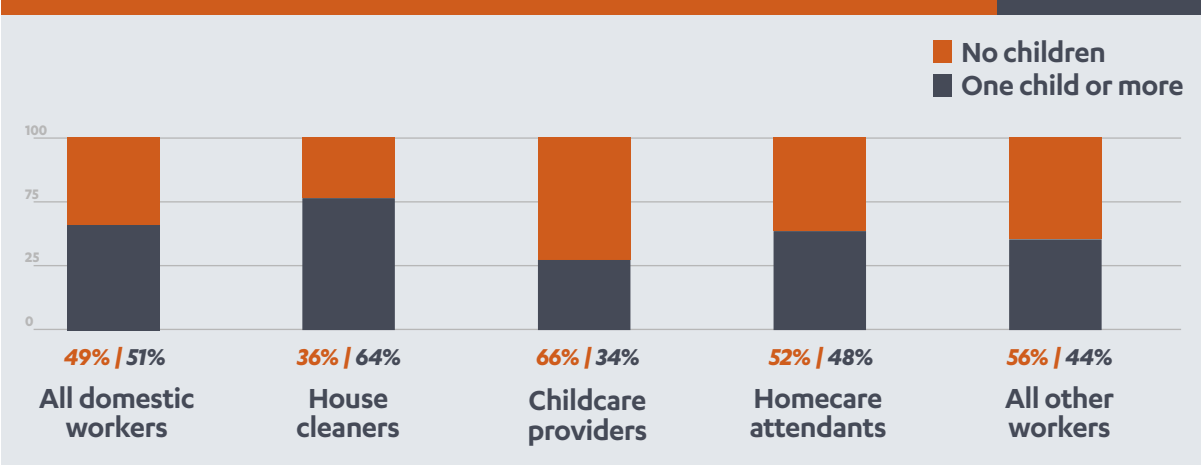


Image Description: Seated woman looking at child smiling and waving at the camera.

Technical Appendix

Data Source

Figures and tables in this research brief use data from the American Community Survey (ACS), an ongoing annual survey of American households by the U.S. Census Bureau. The ACS 5-year estimate (2014–2018) is pulled from IPUMS-USA extract, which harmonizes U.S. census microdata.¹²

Variable Definitions

Low Wages: We computed the hourly wage variable for the ACS following the steps outlined by the UC Berkeley Labor Center.¹³ We calculated the median wage for full-time workers in California at \$20.52, using the 2014–2018 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.¹⁴ For California, the cutoff is \$15.29.

Domestic Workers: Broadly, the estimates for domestic workers included those who are U.S. civilians and currently employed, except for the unemployment and labor force participation data points. While we acknowledge that there are other types of domestic work, such as cooks, gardeners, and drivers, they are beyond the scope of this report. Using the industry, occupation, and worker classification system in the ACS dataset, domestic worker occupations are defined as follows:

- **House cleaners** perform a range of duties in private households, including cleaning, vacuuming, washing dishes, and doing laundry. To generate the numbers for house cleaners, we restricted the estimate to those working in the “Private household” (Census industry code 9290) and classified as “Maids and housekeeping cleaners” (Census occupation code 4230).
- **Childcare providers** take care of children in the home. This estimate focuses on work that is performed in “Private household” (Census industry code 9290) or through “Employment services” (Census industry code 7580) by “Childcare providers” (Census occupation code 4600) and excludes those who perform work in childcare centers or homes that offer child day care services.
- **Homecare attendants** include home health and personal care aides who perform a variety of services, including household chores, assisting with medication, and helping with personal care needs. We included those who are paid directly by household employers and those who are agency-based:

- **Nonagency-based homecare attendants** are (a) in the “Private household” industry (Census industry code 9290) and in the “Home health aides” (Census occupation code 3601) or “Personal care aides” (Census occupation code 3602) occupations; or (b) in “Employment services” (Census industry code 7580) and classified as “Personal care aides” (Census occupation code 3602).
- **Agency-based homecare attendants** are in either “Home health care services” (Census industry code 8170) or “Individual and family services” (Census industry code 8370) and classified as “Home health aides” (Census occupation code 3601) or “Personal care aides” (Census occupation code 3602).

For the domestic worker occupations, we limited our study to those who work for wages (private and nonprofit) and are self-employed (incorporated and not incorporated; census class of worker codes 22, 23, 13, and 14). For homecare attendants, we also include federal, state, and local government workers (census class of worker codes 25, 27, and 28).

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Notes

¹ Lucero Herrera et al., *Struggles and Support: California's Homecare Employers* (Los Angeles: UCLA Labor Center, 2017), <https://www.labor.ucla.edu/publication/cahomecareemployers/>; Tia Koonse et al., *Crisis in Care: How Conditions in Home Care Put Families and Workers at Risk* (Los Angeles: UCLA Labor Center, 2016); Saba Waheed et al., *Profile, Practices and Needs of California's Domestic Work Employers* (Los Angeles: UCLA Labor Center, 2016), <https://www.labor.ucla.edu/publication/domestic-employers-report/>.

² Linda Burnham and Nik Theodore, *Home Economics: The Invisible and Unregulated World of Domestic Work* (New York: National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2012), <https://domesticworkers.org/sites/default/files/HomeEconomicsReport.pdf>.

³ Verónica Ponce de León et al., *Hidden Work, Hidden Pain: Injury Experiences of Domestic Workers in California* (Los Angeles, UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program, 2020), <https://osh.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/37/2020/06/Hidden-Work-Hidden-Pain.-Domestic-Workers-Report.-UCLA-LOSH-June-2020-1.pdf>.

⁴ *Immigration Statistics: Information Gaps, Quality Issues Limit Utility of Federal Data to Policymakers*, report to congressional requestors (Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office, July 1998), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/160/156316.pdf>; Leslie Forde, "Paying Nannies under the Table Is the Norm," *Slate Magazine*, May 18, 2018, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/05/child-care-man-nannies-feel-forced-into-under-the-table-pay.html>; Julia Wolfe et al., "Domestic Workers Chartbook: A Comprehensive Look at the Demographics, Wages, Benefits, and Poverty Rates of the Professionals Who Care for Our Family Members and Clean Our Homes," Economic Policy Institute, May 14, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the-demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/>.

⁵ Waheed et al., "Profile, Practices and Needs," 3.

⁶ "Coronavirus' Economic Impact on Domestic Workers," National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2020, https://domesticworkers.org/sites/default/files/Coronavirus_Report_4_8_20.pdf.

⁷ Jeounghee Kim, "Informal Employment and the Earnings of Home Based Home Care Workers in the United States," *Industrial Relations Journal* 51, no. 4 (July 2020): 286, <https://doi.org/10.1111/irj.12299>; Annette Bernhardt, Ruth Milkman, and Nik Theodore, "Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers: Violations of Employment and Labor Laws In America's Cities," National Employment Law Project, September 21, 2009, <https://www.nelp.org/publication/broken-laws-unprotected-workers-violations-of-employment-and-labor-laws-in-americas-cities/>; David Weil, *The Fissured Workplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁸ "Misclassification of Employees as Independent Contractors: 2016 Fact Sheet," Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO, June 15, 2016, <https://www.dpeaflcio.org/factsheets/misclassification-of-employees-as-independent-contractors>; Robert Habans, *Is California's Gig Economy Growing? Exploring Trends in Independent Contracting* (Los Angeles: UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, 2016), <https://irle.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Is-Californias-Gig-Economy-Growing-Exploring-Trends-in-Independent-Contracting.pdf>; "Independent Contractor (Self-Employed) or Employee?", Internal Revenue Service, updated November 9, 2020, <https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/independent-contractor-self-employed-or-employee>; Koonse et al., *Crisis in Care*; Weil, *Fissured Workplace*, 10.

⁹ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor," *Signs* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1992): 2; Burnham and Theodore, *Home Economics*.

¹⁰ Christianna Silva, “Why Latinx People Are Hospitalized from COVID-19 at 4 Times the Rate of Whites,” NPR, July 1, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/07/01/885923635/why-latinos-are-hospitalized-from-covid-19-four-times-the-rate-of-white-american>; “Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), updated July 24, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>; Aaron van Dorn, Rebecca E. Cooney, and Miriam L. Sabin, “COVID-19 Exacerbating Inequalities in the US,” *World Report* 395, no. 10232: 1243–1244, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30893-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30893-X/fulltext).

¹¹ “Older Adults,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), updated November 27, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>; Elizabeth J. Williamson et al., “Factors Associated with COVID-19-Related Death Using OpenSAFELY,” *Nature* 584 (July 8, 2020): 430–436, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2521-4>.

¹² “U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research,” IPUMS USA, accessed May 22, 2019, <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/index.shtml>.

¹³ See methods outlined in Jeremy Welsh-Loveman, Ian Eve Perry, and Annette Bernhardt, “Data and Methods for Estimating the Impact of Proposed Local Minimum Wage Laws,” UC Berkeley Labor Center, June 16, 2014, <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/data-and-methods-for-estimating-the-impact-of-proposed-local-minimum-wage-laws/>.

¹⁴ Annette Bernhardt, Ian Perry, and Lindsay Cattell, *Low-Wage California: 2014 Chartbook* (Berkeley: UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2015), <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2014/chartbook.pdf>.

Profile of Domestic Workers in California

