

# FOUNDATIONS FOR A JUST AND INCLUSIVE RECOVERY

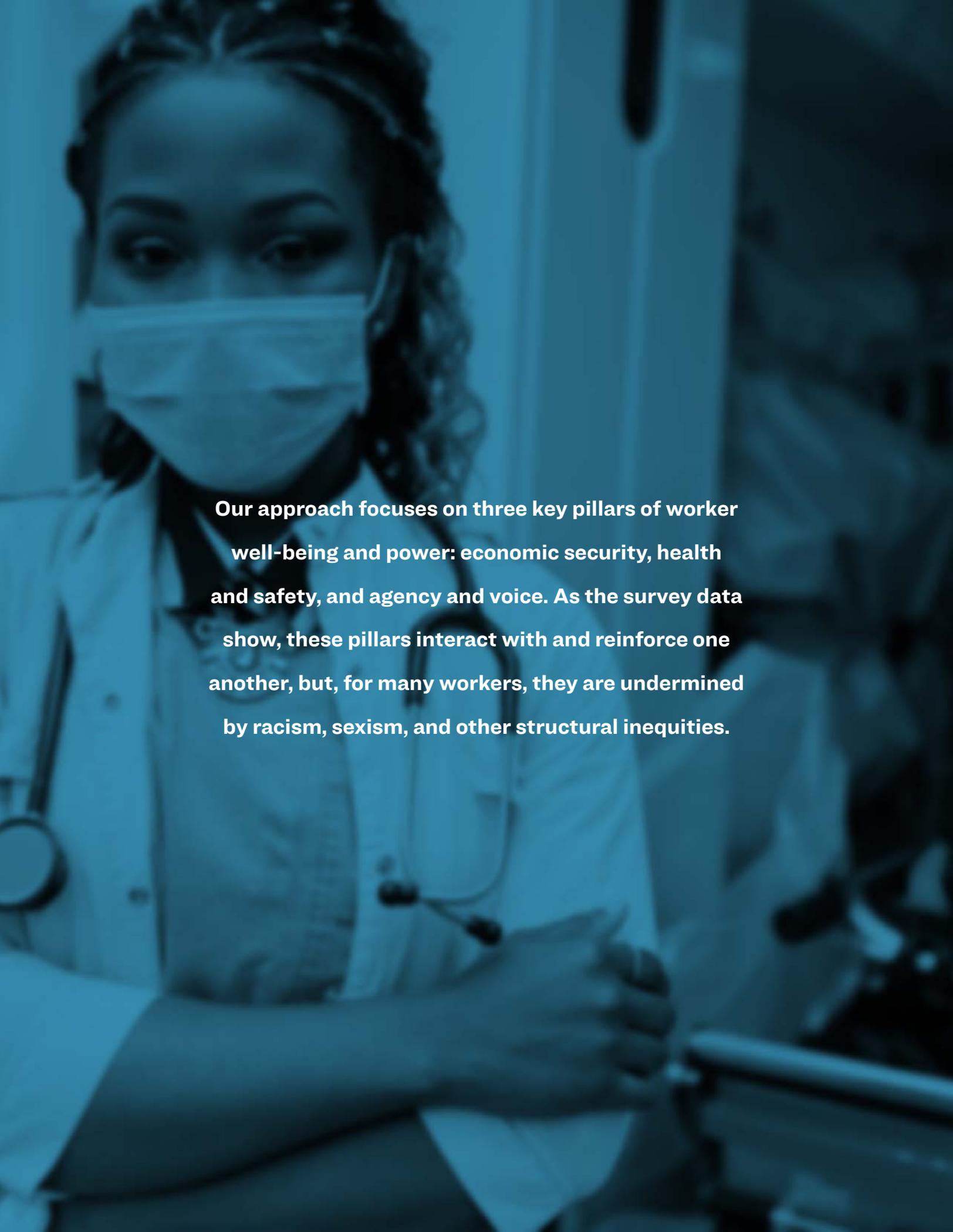
ECONOMIC SECURITY, HEALTH AND SAFETY, AND  
AGENCY AND VOICE IN THE COVID-19 ERA





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**Our approach focuses on three key pillars of worker well-being and power: economic security, health and safety, and agency and voice. As the survey data show, these pillars interact with and reinforce one another, but, for many workers, they are undermined by racism, sexism, and other structural inequities.**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Just Recovery Survey** measures the experiences and responses of U.S. workers—particularly underpaid and frontline workers, Black and Latinx workers, and women workers—amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and related recession, and gauges the interaction of these crises with structural racism and sexism. This collaborative research project aims to highlight the urgency of structural reforms that advance racial, gender, and economic justice in this moment and beyond, for communities that have been in struggle against unjust systems and policy decisions over generations.

Over the past year, the United States has faced a set of intersecting crises that have shaken our nation to its core. Times of crisis are accelerants of social change, and action by policymakers and other power holders must respond to demands for justice and inclusion, lest we further entrench inequities that have been deepening for years. Our survey results suggest that policymakers must directly confront the deeply rooted structural inequities that have long existed in this country. A *just* recovery must:

- Support workers and build worker power;
- Hold accountable actors who perpetuate structural inequities; and
- Develop cross-cutting strategies that take into account the challenges people are facing in all areas of their lives.

The Just Recovery Survey was administered in September and October of 2020 using a nationally representative sample (n=3,100) with an oversample of Black and Latinx respondents. Those included in the survey indicated that they were in the labor market or might rejoin it in the future. Our approach focuses on three key pillars of worker well-being and power: **economic security, health and safety, and agency and voice**. As the survey data show, these pillars interact with and reinforce one another, but, for many workers, they are undermined by racism, sexism, and other structural inequities.

# KEY FINDINGS

## ECONOMIC SECURITY

- **Employers and government agencies are denying workers, and Black workers in particular, access to critical unemployment supports.** Thirty-four percent of Black workers, 26% of Latinx workers, and 14% of white workers who applied for unemployment assistance were denied it.
- **Employers are denying workers, and Black workers in particular, access to paid sick and paid family leave.** Twenty-eight percent of Black workers who applied for paid sick leave or paid family leave said their employer denied their request, compared to 9% of white workers.
- **More women than men, particularly Black and Latinx women, anticipate losing paid work due to unpaid caregiving responsibilities.** Large swaths of Latinas (52%), Black women (44%), and white women (34%) said unpaid care would negatively affect the amount of paid work they were able to do for the rest of 2020, compared to 30% of all men and 26% of white men.
- **Employers are committing wage theft during the pandemic and stealing wages from Black workers at higher rates than from white workers.** Eight percent of all workers reported that their employers denied them wages they had earned. The share of Black workers who reported experiencing wage theft (14%) was more than twice that of white workers (6%).
- **Banks and landlords are targeting Black workers for eviction and foreclosure at higher rates than white workers.** Since March 2020, banks and landlords were much more likely to have subjected Black workers to eviction, foreclosure, or notice of either, than white workers (10% vs. 2%). Among the lowest income quartile, half of Black and Latinx workers (50% and 51%), and 39% of white workers were concerned about losing their homes in the next year.

**The Just Recovery Survey adds to a growing body of evidence pointing to the need for immediate interventions to curtail the effects of the pandemic and deeper structural reforms.**

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## HEALTH AND SAFETY

- **Workers across the board, but especially Black and Latinx workers, are experiencing devastating death tolls in their personal networks.** Forty-two percent of Black workers and 40% of Latinx workers, compared to 23% of white workers, said they knew someone who died from COVID-19 at the time of the survey.
- **Workers of color—and Black women in particular—fear that if they become seriously ill, healthcare providers will subject them to substandard care due to their race.** Almost half of Black workers (48%) and many Latinx (29%) and Asian (15%) workers expressed fear about receiving substandard healthcare due to their race if they become seriously ill, as opposed to 4% of white workers. Among Black workers, women (55%) were substantially more likely than men (38%) to report such concerns.
- **Black and Latinx workers are most concerned about employer retaliation for speaking up about unsafe workplace conditions.** Thirty-four percent of Black workers and 25% of Latinx workers reported concerns about employer retaliation, compared to 19% of white workers.

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## AGENCY AND VOICE

- **Black and Latinx workers, and Black women in particular, are concerned about voter disenfranchisement.** Black and Latinx workers expressed significant concern over problems at the polls or with mail-in voting leading to their votes not being counted in the 2020 election (68% and 62%, respectively). Compared to 57% of workers in general, 71% of Black women workers reported concerns about their votes not being counted.
- **The vast majority of respondents support racial and gender justice social movements.** A majority of workers of all races expressed support for the Black Lives Matter movement (61%) and #MeToo (64%).
- **Almost two-thirds of non-union Black and Asian workers would vote for a union, but they are less likely than white workers to currently belong to a union.** Sixty-two percent and 61% of non-union Black and Asian workers, respectively, said that they would definitely or probably support a union at their job, compared to 42% of white workers and 44% of Latinx workers. However, union membership stands at 8% to 12% across these groups, woefully out of step with these levels of support.

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## THREE PILLARS CONNECTED

- **Workers who reported more concern about maintaining steady work for the rest of 2020 were also more likely to report fear of retaliation for speaking out about unsafe working conditions.** Almost half of workers expressing the highest concern about maintaining steady work reported fear of retaliation (44%), compared to 14% of workers expressing the least concern.
- **Workers who reported more concern about maintaining steady work also reported higher levels of wage theft.** Twenty-two percent of workers expressing the highest concern about maintaining steady work reported wage theft, compared to 3% of workers who were least concerned.
- **Non-union workers who experienced unjust actions by their employers (such as wage theft) were more likely to express support for unions.** Over 60% of non-union workers who reported wage theft, for instance, said they would vote for a union at their job; by comparison, 41% of non-union workers who have not reported wage theft said they would vote for a union.

Previous crisis responses have often reinforced structural exclusion and inequity even as they have bolstered economic security and agency for some. In this critical moment of transition, policymakers must not repeat the mistakes of the past. Showing the significant, often compounding impacts of race, gender, and socioeconomic status on people's basic well-being and economic trajectories, the results from the Just Recovery Survey add to a growing body of evidence pointing to the need for immediate interventions to curtail the effects of the pandemic and deeper structural reforms.

## INTRODUCTION: INEQUITIES LAID BARE

Over the past year, the United States has been engulfed in multiple crises that have shaken our nation to its core, taking lives, disrupting livelihoods, and revealing—and deepening—long-standing divisions by race, gender, income, and wealth. A pandemic that has disproportionately ravaged the health and well-being of communities of color, an economic crisis that has struck hardest at the employment and financial security of many who were already struggling, a spate of killings that has brought into sharp relief the epidemic of police violence against Black people in the United States—these compounding crises have generated intense harm in the moment while calling up long histories of collective trauma and struggle. And as all of this has occurred, some of the wealthiest in this country have seen their fortunes soar—in some cases through profiteering on the pandemic and exploiting public stimulus funds.

While the events of the last year have exacted an immense economic and social toll, they have also mobilized millions. Amid unprecedented challenges, a record number of people voted in the recent national election. Workers have stood up for their rights by walking off their jobs in the face of unsafe working conditions. Thousands of people have shown up in their streets and communities to express support for social movements that aim to shift the needle on equity, inclusion, and freedom from violence. Mutual aid has flourished.

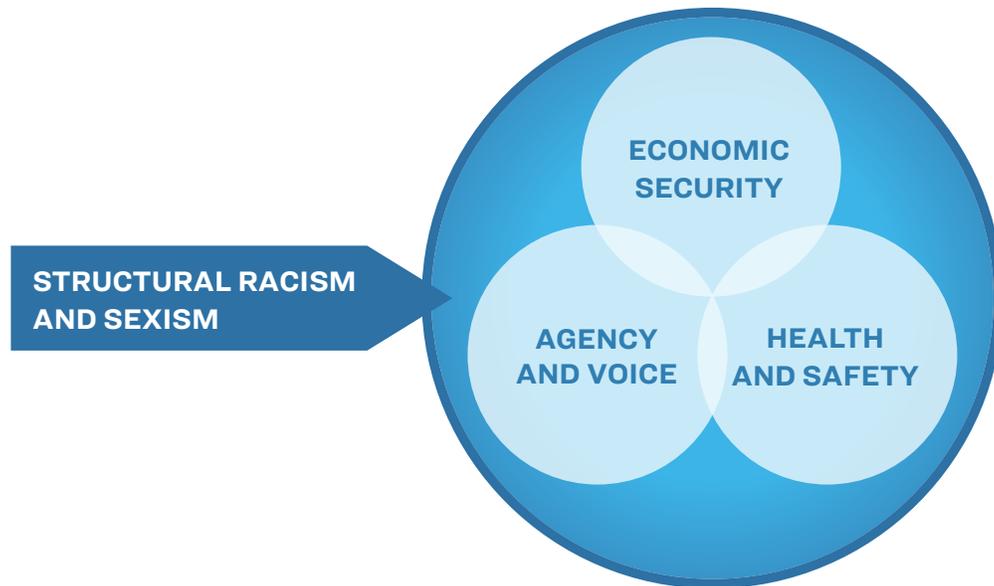
Times of crisis, like the one we are in, often bring needed social change. **We are now at a tipping-point moment: after a failed initial crisis response that has deepened inequity and material insecurity for millions, policymakers have an opportunity to correct course, advancing an inclusive and worker-centric approach that addresses the challenges we face today and helps provide a path to a more inclusive economy and society over the long term.**

To inform the path ahead, the Just Recovery Survey measures how U.S. workers—particularly low paid and frontline workers, Black and Latinx workers, and women workers—are experiencing and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and related recession, and gauges the interaction of these dual crises with long-standing structural racism and sexism.

**In particular, we explore three key pillars of worker well-being and power:**

- **Economic Security:** How are current conditions affecting employment and income from paid work? To what degree do working people have access to the benefits they need to navigate current conditions? Are working families able to afford the basic necessities? Do providers of unpaid care have the support they need to attain economic security through paid work?
- **Health and Safety:** Can people access the healthcare they need? Do they receive equitable treatment across different institutional domains, including the healthcare system and the world of work? Are workers able to stand up for protections against COVID-19 in the workplace?
- **Agency and Voice:** Are workers interested in and able to participate in collective action at work? Can people participate in the political process, and what are the values and principles that animate them?

**DETERMINANTS OF WORKER WELL-BEING AND POWER**



Showing the significant, often compounding impacts of race, gender, and socioeconomic status on people’s basic well-being and economic trajectories, the results from the Just Recovery Survey add to a growing body of evidence pointing to the need for immediate interventions to curtail the effects of the pandemic and deeper structural reforms.

The next section of the report describes our survey design and methodology, our analytical approach, and the specific outcomes we measure relating to economic security, health and safety, and agency and voice. We then share the results of our analysis, teasing out the compounding impacts of race, gender, and income, with a particular focus on the outsized challenges confronting Black and Latinx women and workers of color within the lowest pay and income quartiles. Finally, in the concluding section, we draw on our findings to articulate three organizing principles that could help guide a recovery in the direction of greater justice.

# SURVEY METHODOLOGY & DESIGN

The instrument for the Just Recovery Survey was developed with input from the Alianza de Campesinas, Arise Chicago, Gig Workers Rising, Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance, Make the Road New York, National Black Worker Center Project, National Domestic Workers Alliance, ONE DC, Restaurant Opportunities Center, and Workers Defense Project. These 10 organizations represent workers—primarily Black, Latinx, and Asian, and many of them women—in a wide range of occupations, industries, and work arrangements across the United States.

The survey was designed to examine multiple indicators within three broad and overlapping determinants of worker well-being and power in the COVID-19 economy and beyond: economic security (including access to paid work and steady income, access to unemployment supports and paid leave, ability to pay bills and maintain steady housing, and unpaid care and paid work tradeoffs); health and safety (including impact of COVID-19 on personal networks, access to healthcare, and workplace safety); and agency and voice (including workplace collective action, civic engagement, and political participation).

The Just Recovery Survey was administered by the survey research firm SSRS in September and October of 2020 using its online SSRS Opinion Panel, in coordination with the Cornell Survey Research Institute. The survey included respondents from 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia who indicated that they were not retired or permanently out of the labor market. Black and Latinx respondents were oversampled to allow analysis of variables by race (n=3,100 total; n=1,783 white/other respondents; n=722 Hispanic respondents; and n=595 Black respondents). The survey was conducted both in English (n=3,020) and Spanish (n=80). Survey weights were developed and applied to provide estimates representative of the U.S. adult population 18 years of age and older in the labor market and with internet access. The mean survey completion time was 13.6 minutes.

SSRS Opinion Panel participants are recruited randomly based on nationally representative address-based sampling combined with targeted recruiting for hard-to-reach demographic groups in the Omnibus survey platform, a nationally representative bilingual

random digit dialing telephone survey. In all, 5,382 panelists were invited to participate in the survey, which was administered online. Participants received modest incentives in the form of an electronic gift card. A base weight was first developed to account for the probability of selection into the survey panel and then further weighted to match population targets, including sex by age, sex by education, race and Hispanic ethnicity, Census region, civic engagement, and population density. The design effect for this survey was 1.95 overall, and the survey margin of error is 2.5. All differences reported are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or higher, unless otherwise noted.

Throughout the report, we refer to survey estimates by a variety of important subgroups. Here, we briefly define how we have constructed those subgroups:

- **Race and Ethnicity:** We code respondents as White, Black, Latinx, Asian, or other based on SSRS’s panel-reported ethno-racial survey item. The White category includes only those respondents who identified as Non-Hispanic. The Black category includes respondents who identified as both Hispanic and Non-Hispanic. The Latinx category includes respondents who identified as Hispanic (excluding those who said they were both Black and Hispanic, who were included in the Black category). The Asian category includes respondents who identified as Non-Hispanic; due to sample size, data on Asian respondents is not reported for all items. We code as “people of color” those respondents who identified as Black, Latinx, Asian, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native, or a combination.
- **Gender:** We code respondents as women and men based on survey responses to a preexisting question in the SSRS Panel (the sample size for gender-nonconforming individuals was not large enough to report results).
- **Income:** We use SSRS’s panel-reported household income item, which has the following categories: <\$15k, \$15k-<\$25k, \$25k-<\$30k, \$30k-<\$40k, \$40k-<\$50k, \$50k-<\$75k, \$75k-<\$100k, \$100k-<\$150k, \$150k-<\$200k, \$200k-<\$250k, \$250k or more. We divide this variable into quartiles, which correspond to the following categories: Less than \$40k, \$40k-<\$75k, \$75k-<\$100k, and \$100k or more.
- **Earnings:** We use an item that asks workers who performed paid work since January 2020 to estimate their weekly earnings in wages or salary, before taxes, from their most current or most recent main job. We then drop observations that report above the 95th percentile, which is \$5,300 per week. We divide this variable into quartiles, which correspond to the following categories: \$500 or less, \$504-\$902, \$924-\$1,500, \$1,501 or more.

- **Frontline Workers:** We use an item that asks workers about their main occupation using Standard Occupational Classification categories, and code as “frontline” those respondents in community and social service, healthcare practitioners, healthcare technical, healthcare support, protective service, food preparation and serving, building and grounds cleaning and maintenance, personal care and service, sales and related, farming, fishing and forestry, construction and extraction, production, and transportation and material moving occupations. Frontline workers are those within industries deemed “essential” by government authorities during the pandemic whose jobs required work outside the home during the time period of the study, and who were routinely in close physical proximity to coworkers and customers.

# FINDINGS

Worker economic security, health and safety, and agency and voice are three foundational pillars of a just and inclusive economy that centers worker well-being and power. Below we report on multiple indicators that bear on these pillars. We also indicate how these pillars reinforce each other.

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## ECONOMIC SECURITY

Choices made by policymakers and employers have long denied economic security to large segments of the U.S. workforce and have underwritten durable racial, gender, and class injustices. The pandemic has disrupted livelihoods on a scale that might have seemed unimaginable just a year ago and worsened long-standing structural inequities that prevent many working families from meeting basic needs. In this section, we explore the myriad ways that the pandemic and associated recession have affected workers' economic security, as measured by access to paid work, the ability to balance unpaid family care needs and paid work, access to unemployment and paid leave supports, and the ability to pay household bills and maintain steady housing.

Our findings draw out differences by income, race, and gender in the toll of job and income losses—and the phenomenon of wage theft, in which employers steal workers' wages. As workers contend with school shutdowns and disruptions to the long-term care system, findings indicate the uneven impact of unpaid caregiving responsibilities on people's employment decisions and prospects, with particular implications for women in general, and women of color in particular. We also examine access to unemployment benefits and paid sick and family leave. The weakness of these benefits in the United States relative to other economically advanced nations in the pandemic context (and in general) has been well documented,<sup>2</sup> and our results put a finer point on racial and gender disparities in accessing those benefits that have been made available in this country. Finally, we examine variation in the ability of working families to pay bills and meet basic needs such as housing, which is all the more necessary for basic security and well-being given the nature of the public health crisis.

Our findings show that workers who had already been struggling due to a hollowed-out public safety net and weakened federal protections fell further behind as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded amidst a wholly inadequate and uncoordinated response.

## ACCESS TO PAID WORK AND STEADY INCOME

The Just Recovery Survey adds to evidence of the impact of the pandemic on employment, indicating that more than a fifth of people (22%) **lost a job or were placed on furlough** between the start of the pandemic in early March and late October when data collection for the survey was completed. It also sheds additional light on disparities in who is being affected by disruptions to paid employment. Thirty percent of those in the bottom pay quartile experienced these work disruptions, as opposed to 12% in the top pay quartile. Workers across the board endured job losses: 25% of Latinx workers, 24% of Black workers, and 22% of white workers lost a job or were placed on furlough (these differences are not statistically significant).<sup>3</sup> Frontline workers were more likely than workers not classified as frontline to have lost work during the pandemic; this phenomenon may seem counterintuitive, but it is consistent with the reality that many of the workers who have been deemed essential in this pandemic have often been in low-quality, precarious jobs—jobs that are particularly vulnerable during crises. More than 29% of frontline workers lost a job, were placed on furlough, or both, compared to 19% of workers not classified as frontline.

Disparities in **income losses from paid work** were even more dramatic during the period we studied. A third (33%) of all workers experienced income losses between March and October 2020. Nearly twice as many of those in the bottom pay quartile (44%) lost income from paid work as those in the top pay quartile (23%). Nearly half of Latinx and Black workers (45% and 42%, respectively) lost income—substantially higher numbers than the 28% of white workers who did. And there were large racial disparities within the bottom pay quartile: 64% of Latinx workers and 52% of Black workers within this bracket lost income, compared to 36% of white workers. Excluding physicians and other healthcare workers with professional degrees, frontline workers were more likely than workers not classified as frontline to have lost income during the pandemic; a third (33%) of frontline workers lost income during the pandemic, compared to 28% of workers not classified as frontline. Two out of five (41%) frontline workers of color have lost income during the pandemic.

A troubling number of those who have been working during the pandemic have not been paid what they are owed, exposing continuing gaps in enforcement of basic wage and hour laws. Previous work has shown that such **wage theft** by employers—the crime of denying workers the full wages they are owed—is a widespread

**PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED WAGE THEFT SINCE MARCH 2020**



if often hidden problem, particularly in low-paid occupations and industries.<sup>4</sup> Our survey results show that between March and October 2020, 1 in 11 workers (9%) experienced at least one of four key forms of wage theft: not being paid for all hours worked, not being paid at the correct wage rate, being denied tips, or having the cost of personal protective equipment deducted from pay. Black workers (14%) and Latinx workers (11%) reported higher rates of wage theft than white workers (6%) during this period.<sup>5</sup> Employers were also more likely to steal wages from workers considered frontline during the pandemic than those not classified as frontline. Excluding physicians and other healthcare workers with professional degrees, 11% of frontline workers reported that their employers stole wages from them during the pandemic, compared to 7% of workers not classified as frontline.

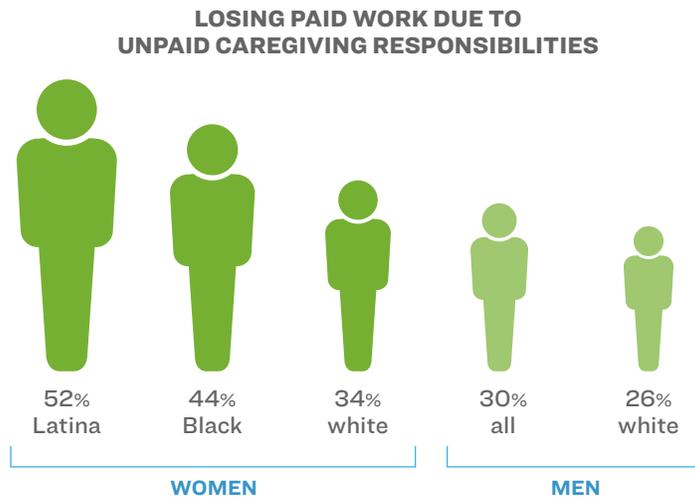
### **BALANCING PAID WORK AND UNPAID CARE LABOR**

With a growing body of evidence showing that the pandemic is reversing hard-fought gains by women in labor force participation,<sup>6</sup> our survey results speak to the gender disparity in recent **increases in unpaid family caregiving responsibilities**. Among those who already provided such care, 57% of women reported increases in unpaid care, as opposed to 48% of men. Women in the highest household income quartile (70%) were substantially more likely to report increases in unpaid family care than women in other pay brackets, including in the bottom quartile (53%)—a pattern that may be explained in part by the greater likelihood that their pre-pandemic care arrangements were disrupted by social distancing mandates and guidelines, or because they were more likely to work in jobs that could be done remotely.

Our survey results on the *impact* of unpaid care on employment in the pandemic context show that women, people of color, those with lower incomes, and frontline workers are disproportionately affected—and that Black and Latinx women have experienced particularly acute effects on their ability to work. Seventeen percent of women and 12% of men said COVID-19 had caused them to take **unpaid time off from work** or give up a job in order to provide childcare, eldercare, remote-learning, or home-schooling support. Those in the bottom household

income quartile (23%) were also more likely than those in other income quartiles, including the top income quartile (10%), to have to take time off from work, as were workers of color (20%) versus white workers (11%). Twenty-eight percent of Latinx women and 27% of Black women took time off to provide care, while 12% of white women did.

Similar patterns emerged when people were asked about the likelihood that unpaid care for children, parents, elders, or other loved ones would affect the amount of paid work they did for the rest of 2020. Forty percent of women and 30% of working men said unpaid care was likely to negatively affect **future work prospects** in this manner, along with 45% of people in the bottom income quartile versus 22% in the top quartile, and 41% of workers of color versus 30% of white workers. Over half (52%) of Latinx women, 44% of Black women, and 34% of white women said unpaid care would affect the amount of work they were able to do.<sup>7</sup> Our results speak to the importance of supporting caregivers in ways that enhance their economic agency, and the kinds of disparities that are entrenched when such support falls short.



### ACCESS TO UNEMPLOYMENT SUPPORT AND PAID SICK AND FAMILY LEAVE

Unemployment insurance has provided vital—if often patchy and incomplete<sup>8</sup>—assistance to workers whose jobs have been disrupted by the pandemic. Our survey indicates that, *among workers who reported a job or income loss since the beginning of the pandemic*, lower-paid workers were especially likely to have applied for the various state and federal unemployment compensation programs. Those in the bottom pay quartile (54%) were more likely than those in the top pay quartile (41%) to have **applied for one or more forms**

**of unemployment assistance**, as were Black workers (61%) relative to white workers (51%). However, Asian workers who reported a job or income loss were less likely to apply for unemployment assistance (29%) than white workers. Within the bottom pay quartile, Black workers (47%) were far more likely to have applied for support from one or more of these programs than their white counterparts (27%).

Black and Latinx workers and low earners were more likely to need unemployment benefits—but they were also more likely to see their **claims for unemployment assistance denied** between March and October 2020, reflecting the difficulties in accessing a complicated set of programs with weak administrative resources and where employers may contest worker claims for benefits. Among those who applied for some form of unemployment support, 22% of those in the bottom pay quartile saw their claims denied, as opposed to 10% in the top pay quartile. Thirty-four percent of Black workers and 26% of Latinx workers applying for these benefits were denied, a substantially higher share than the 14% of white workers who were denied.<sup>9</sup> And women were more likely than men to have their unemployment insurance claims denied (24% vs. 16%).

In addition to unemployment insurance, paid sick and family leave is another important benefit that allows workers to take time off of work due to illness or to provide family care without foregoing pay. These benefits prevent “presenteeism” by workers and students and protect the health of workers and customers or members of the public with whom they interact.<sup>10</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, paid sick and family leave has become even more important to preventing the spread of the virus and permitting workers to fulfill new family caregiving responsibilities.

In our survey, nearly 1 in 3 (31%) workers report that they do not have access to paid sick and family leave. During the pandemic, such leave has not been fully and evenly accessible to workers whose employers technically offer it; this is the case despite the Families First Coronavirus Response Act providing reimbursements to employers for various types of COVID-related leave between April and December 2020. Of workers who have filed requests for paid sick and family leave during the pandemic, 13% have been denied it. Workers with children younger than age 18 were more likely to request leave than those without (31% vs 24%). Black workers (28%) were three times more likely than white workers (9%) to have had requests for paid sick and family leave denied during the pandemic. Troublingly, employers of frontline workers were more likely to deny paid sick and family leave requests than employers of workers not classified as frontline. Over 20% of frontline workers report that their employers have denied a request for paid sick or family leave during the pandemic, compared to 7% of workers not classified as frontline.

## PAYING BILLS AND MAINTAINING STEADY HOUSING

The fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic—including the work disruptions addressed above—have only added to the economic precarity that millions of households were already experiencing. According to our survey, 14% of households with labor force participants had **trouble paying rent, utility, credit card, student loan, medical, and other household bills before the pandemic started**. Of households in the bottom income quartile, 23% had trouble paying bills, compared to 11% of those in the top quartile. Black workers (20%) were more likely than white workers (13%) and working women (17%) were more likely than working men (12%) to report that their household had trouble paying bills before the pandemic began.

Layered on top of the challenges some families were already facing, the Just Recovery Survey shows that 42% of households experienced **increased difficulties paying household bills as a direct result of the pandemic**—challenges that could carry a range of potentially long-lasting consequences. And the pandemic is worsening inequality: households that had trouble paying bills before the pandemic began were 25% more likely than households that were financially secure to face increased difficulty paying bills during the pandemic. The pandemic's financial fallout is starkly uneven along lines of race, gender, and income. Within the bottom household income quartile, 65% of workers of color and 52% of white workers experienced increased difficulties paying bills. A larger share of women (45%) than men (38%) reported increased challenges covering household expenses.

For some families, one immediate ramification of financial challenge has been **eviction and foreclosure**, at a time when maintaining a steady and secure home environment is particularly critical for basic health and well-being, including protection from COVID-19. Structural racism and class inequalities loom large in shaping these patterns.<sup>11</sup> In the Just Recovery Survey, the share of Black workers (10%) who experienced or received notice of eviction or foreclosure was four times that of white workers (2%). Nearly 1 in 10 of those in the bottom household income quartile reported living in households that have experienced or received a notice of eviction or foreclosure during the pandemic (9%), compared to 1% of those in the top household income quartile. Landlords and banks were more likely to subject frontline workers to eviction, foreclosure, or notice of either than workers not classified as frontline (5% compared to 2%).

As the economic crisis continues, and with eviction moratoriums lapsing across the country,<sup>12</sup> many workers expressed **concern about housing insecurity** in the coming year. Forty-two percent of Black workers, 39% of Latinx workers, and 21% of white workers expressed some level of concern that their household would face eviction or foreclosure during that period. Forty-four percent of those in the bottom household income quartile shared such concerns, and 15% in the top income quartile did. Frontline workers were more likely than workers not classified as frontline to be concerned about losing their homes in the next year (30% compared to 24%).

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## HEALTH AND SAFETY

The pandemic has also underscored how health disparities are connected to inequities within the world of work, as underpaid workers and workers of color more frequently confront unenforced labor standards and are deprived by employers of basic health and safety protections. We asked a number of questions designed to measure personal proximity to COVID-19 mortality, access to healthcare, and safety issues in the workplace. Below, we report on the disparate health impacts of the virus by looking at differences in experiences of COVID-19-related deaths within friend and family networks.<sup>13</sup>

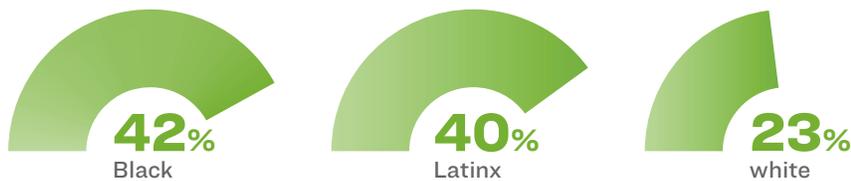
Looking at inequities within the healthcare system, we examine disparities in losses of employer-sponsored health insurance.<sup>14</sup> With a substantial body of evidence showing that cost is often an issue for both the insured and the uninsured, we also report on results concerning healthcare affordability. And we build on long-standing discussions about structural racism in healthcare, which have intensified under the pandemic conditions and amidst current social movement organizing.<sup>15</sup> Our survey results accord with the many stories from the pandemic that tragically attest to confrontations with racism at the point of care—particularly by Black people whose serious health situations are allowed to escalate without proper medical intervention, often leading to preventable death.<sup>16</sup>

Our survey results related to workplace health and safety speak to a context in which federal and state regulators have insufficient resources for inspecting and enforcing standards, and legal protections for workers who report concerns and violations to safety agencies are minimal and unevenly applied.<sup>17</sup> We look at worker fears around reporting health and safety violations to regulators given the possibility of retaliation from managers and supervisors—an issue that is especially troubling amidst a pandemic. Moreover, in a high-unemployment labor market where jobs are scarce, we look at how labor market vulnerability is connected to fears of employer reprisals, potentially locking workers without good exit options into unsafe workplace situations.

## HEALTH AND ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Racial disparities in the toll of COVID-19 have been widely reported,<sup>18</sup> with Black, Latinx, indigenous, and some Asian communities experiencing a disproportionate share of **virus-related infections and deaths** due to the generational impact of structural racism in health institutions, the labor market, and other systems.<sup>19</sup> Our survey results reflect this uneven toll. Forty-two percent of Black workers and 40% of Latinx workers, compared to 23% of white workers, said that someone they knew—an immediate or extended family member, friend, or acquaintance—had died from COVID-19 or a suspected case of COVID-19 during the period we studied. These results only scratch the surface of disparate health-related impacts of COVID-19.

### KNOW SOMEONE WHO DIED FROM COVID-19



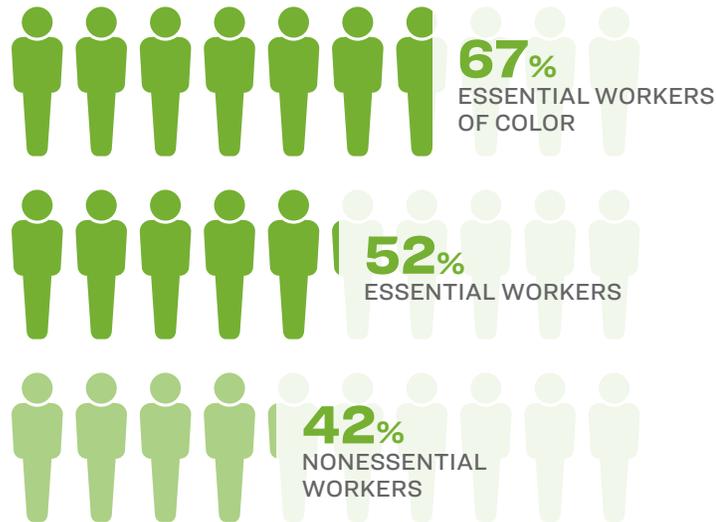
In a context where most people obtain healthcare insurance through their employer, our results show the starkly uneven impact of massive job displacement on **losses of employment-sponsored insurance**. The survey results show that about a quarter of workers (24%) who reported a job loss also lost their health insurance versus 4% who didn't report a job loss. Those in lower pay quartiles were more likely to experience losses of employer-sponsored coverage—10% of those in the bottom pay quartile, as opposed to 3% in the top quartile. Excluding physicians and other healthcare workers with professional degrees, frontline workers were more likely than workers not classified as frontline to have lost employer-provided health insurance during the pandemic (8% compared to 5%).

More broadly, in a system where access to quality healthcare continues to be shaped heavily by ability to pay, our results illuminate how race and class structure **healthcare affordability**. A higher share of workers of color (60%) than white workers (39%) said they could not afford the care they need if they became seriously ill, and workers in the lowest pay quartile (58%) were far more likely than those in the highest pay quartile (20%) to say they could not afford care. Racial disparities were pronounced even among the lowest paid workers: in the bottom pay quartile, 69% of workers of color say they could not afford the care they need, compared to 49% of white workers. While frontline workers bear heightened risk of contracting COVID-19, they were also more likely than workers not classified as frontline to be

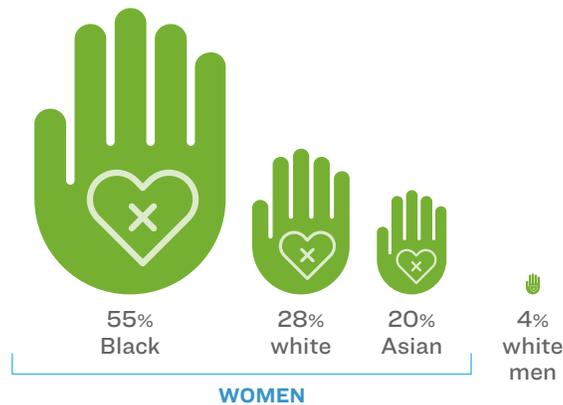
concerned about being unable to afford the cost of healthcare should they fall sick: more than half (52%) of frontline workers—including two-thirds (67%) of frontline workers of color—said they could not cover their healthcare costs in the event of serious illness, compared to 42% of workers not classified as frontline.

Last, we probed workers’ concerns about discrimination in their healthcare treatment as a result of their race. Forty-eight percent of Black workers, 29% of Latinx workers, and 15% of Asian workers voiced fear about receiving **substandard healthcare due to their race** if they become seriously ill, as opposed to 4% of white workers. Among Black workers, women (55%) were substantially more likely than men (38%) to report such concerns. There has been important

**CONCERN OVER INABILITY TO COVER HEALTH CARE COSTS IN THE EVENT OF ILLNESS**



**FEAR OF SUBSTANDARD HEALTH CARE DUE TO RACE IF THEY BECOME SERIOUSLY ILL**

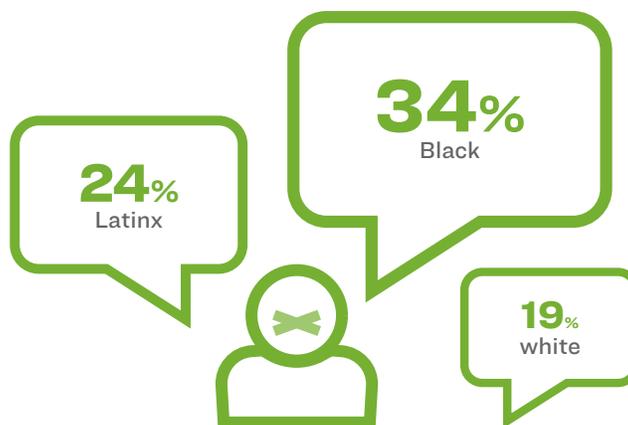


work addressing the particular challenges facing Black women as they navigate healthcare institutions—a reality brought home by the tragic death of Dr. Susan Moore in December 2020.<sup>20</sup> More than a third (35%) of frontline workers of color expressed concern that they will receive substandard healthcare due to their race, compared to 6% of white frontline workers.

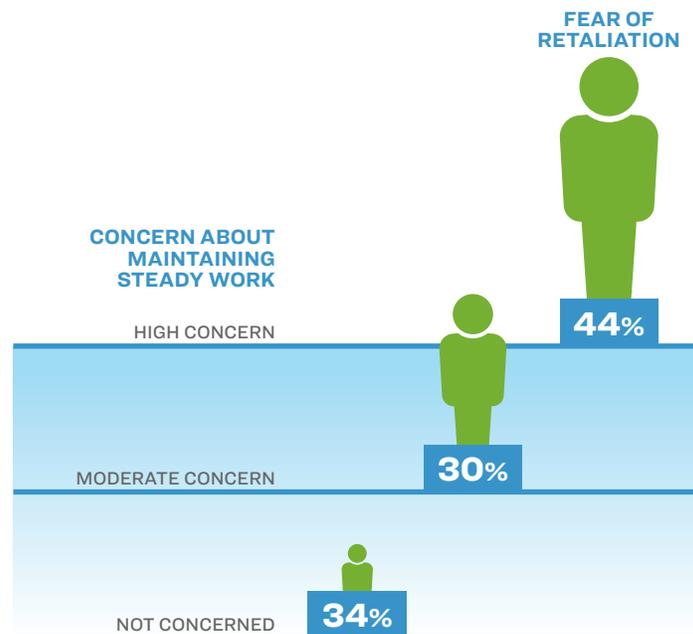
## WORKPLACE SAFETY

This crisis has underscored our interdependence as workers, within and between sectors; frontline workers across industries have made clear that worker health is public health. Workplaces can serve as major sites of COVID-19 transmission—both between coworkers and between workers and members of the public—especially in the absence of strong safety standards and whistleblower protections enforced by government and worker organizations. We have seen workers speak out to grave consequence,<sup>21</sup> with many fearful of reporting health and safety violations to regulators given the possibility of retaliation from their managers and supervisors. Employer and policymaker choices that create an environment of fear around whistleblowing on workplace safety issues leave workers, their families and communities, and the broader public at risk, especially during a pandemic. We measured the prevalence of concerns about retaliation related to workplace safety, and identified a significant minority of workers who were concerned about possible **retaliation for speaking up about working conditions or refusing to work under unsafe or unhealthy working conditions**. These fears were concentrated among Black and Latinx workers (and especially women of color), low-paid workers, workers in occupations that bring them into regular contact with members of the public, and workers

### CONCERN ABOUT EMPLOYER RETALIATION FOR SPEAKING UP ABOUT UNSAFE WORK CONDITIONS



**CONCERN ABOUT MAINTAINING STEADY WORK WITH FEAR OF RETALIATION FOR SPEAKING UP ABOUT UNSAFE WORK CONDITIONS**



who did not have other labor market options.

Overall, more than a fifth (22%) of respondents said that they feared retaliation from employers for either speaking up about unsafe or unhealthy working conditions or refusing to work in those conditions. Rates of concern varied by race: 19% of white workers reported concern, compared to 34% of Black workers and 25% of Latinx workers. White men reported the lowest levels of concern (at 16%), while Black men, Black women, and Latinx women reported the highest rates (37%, 31%, and 28%, respectively). There were additionally striking differences in fear of retaliation by usual weekly earnings, with over 23% of workers in the lowest earnings quartile reporting concern, compared to 14% of workers in the highest earnings quartile.<sup>22</sup>

Last, we identified very large differences in concern about retaliation by workers' concern with **maintaining steady work** for the rest of 2020. More than 4 in 10 workers who reported being "very concerned" with maintaining steady work for the rest of the year were also worried about retaliation from their employers (44%), compared to just 14% of workers who were not at all concerned about maintaining steady work. This suggests that labor market vulnerability may be closely tied to workers' abilities to voice concerns with their working conditions: if workers do not have strong labor market alternatives outside of their current job, they may be more fearful of doing anything that could risk their employment status—

and therefore be less comfortable taking steps to deal with unsafe working conditions.

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## AGENCY AND VOICE

The final determinant of worker power and well-being that we explore in the survey is worker voice and agency, measured by people's ability to make individual choices and exercise collective power in different contexts, ranging from the workplace to the political arena.

In the workplace, recent decades have seen a degradation of worker power in the United States, including the slow erosion of union power and density driven by factors such as structural changes in the economy, shifts in public policy (e.g., implementation of right-to-work laws), and anti-union actions by employers.<sup>23</sup> Our findings on health and safety bring home some of the consequences of workers not having a voice on the job, and being treated by employers as commodities rather than as whole people deserving of basic rights.<sup>24</sup> But the pandemic has also spurred many workers across different industries into action to demand workplace protection, employer accountability, and the right to organize—workers facing long-standing racialized and gender exclusions from basic employment and organizing rights. Our survey enables us to gauge interest in unionization and other forms of collective action and how it varies across the labor force based on race, occupation, and other factors.

The past year has also seen seismic events in the political sphere. The Presidential election brought unprecedented voter turnout despite all the barriers posed by the pandemic. Yet, it also highlighted the ongoing and deeply embedded problem of voter suppression,<sup>25</sup> and we report on survey results showing how concerns about votes not counting differ sharply along racial lines. Alongside the electoral campaigning of 2020, millions of the people in the United States attended protests or found other ways to voice their support for the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>26</sup> Like the #MeToo movement that has advanced a national conversation on sexual harassment and gender discrimination,<sup>27</sup> the reckoning prompted by the Black Lives Matter movement has extended to a variety of institutional arenas, including the world of work. Below we report survey results that capture the degree to which support for these contemporary movements extends across different social groups and ideological affinities.

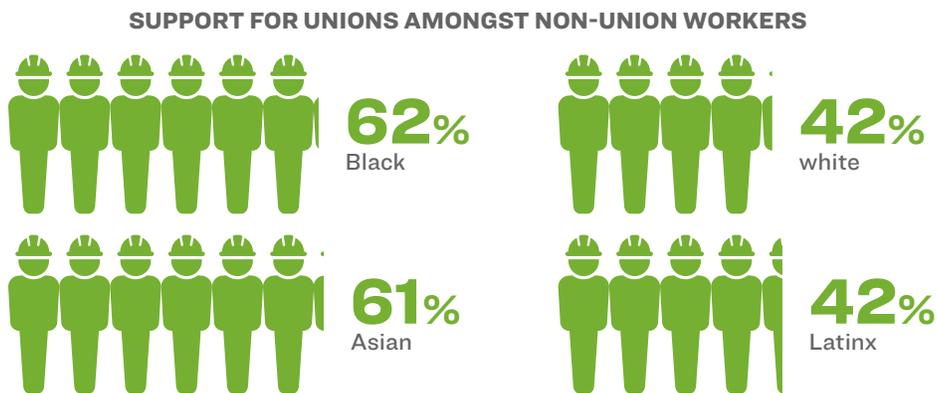
## WORKPLACE COLLECTIVE ACTION

As part of the set of questions we asked on workplace voice, we asked respondents who were not currently in a labor union if they would vote for a union if an election were held in their workplace as a behavioral indicator of support for the labor movement. Consistent

with recent polling over the past several years, around half (45%) of non-union respondents reported that they would either “definitely” (20%) or “probably” (25%) vote for a union. Fourteen percent reported they would probably vote against the union, 17% reported that they would definitely vote against the union, and 23% reported that they were not sure. This broad support for unionization among currently non-union workers helps to make clear that low and declining union membership is not the result of a lack of worker interest, but rather obstacles presented by employer opposition and outdated labor laws. Indeed, if all the workers who say they would vote for a union at their workplace were indeed in a union, the unionization rate in the workforce would be dramatically higher, at 40% to 50% instead of 10%.

While worker interest in unionization was high overall, it was especially high among Black workers. Sixty-two percent of non-union Black workers and 61% of non-union Asian workers said that they would definitely or probably support a union at their job, compared to 42% of white workers and 44% of Latinx workers. Despite the stronger support for unions among Black and Asian workers, they are not more likely than white workers to currently belong to a union, meaning that the gap between the representation workers want and the representation they currently have is especially large for the Black and Asian labor force. In addition to race, workers in lower-paid jobs were especially likely to be supportive of unionization: 49% of workers in the lowest earnings quartile reported union interest, compared to 36% of workers in the highest quartile. Support for unions among non-union workers was roughly equivalent for women and men overall (46% vs. 45%), but higher for Black (60%) and Asian (67%) women as compared to white men (41%).

Several other segments of the workforce also expressed strong support for unionization. In particular, personal care workers, protective service workers, healthcare support staff and technicians,



arts and entertainment workers, and community and social services workers were especially likely to say they would vote for a union at their jobs, in industries that are disproportionately women. In addition, perceptions of how their employers were handling COVID-19 also mattered: workers who did not agree their employer had taken adequate measures to address the pandemic were about 10 percentage points more likely to report interest in unionization than workers who agreed their employer had done so (52% versus 42%).

## POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

People of color—especially Black people, and Black women in particular—have historically played a pivotal role in deciding the outcome of U.S. Presidential elections. In 2020, Black voters turned out in high numbers in key swing states’ major vote centers, such as Atlanta, Detroit, and Philadelphia, despite serious concerns about their votes being counted.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, even with efforts to combat voter suppression that helped to increase turnout in Georgia and other states, the Just Recovery Survey shows that, on the eve of the election, there were significant racial disparities in these concerns: 68% of Black workers, 62% of Latinx workers, and 53% of white workers were concerned about problems at the polls (e.g., lines being too long, voter ID issues, name not being on the voter rolls) or problems with mail-in voting (e.g., not receiving a mail-in ballot on time) preventing their vote from counting.

The Just Recovery Survey also offers some evidence on how people view current social movements pushing for racial and gender equity. Nearly two-thirds of working people had a favorable view of the #metoo movement (64%) and the Black Lives Matter movement (61%). Moreover, the #metoo movement was seen favorably among most liberal and moderate men, and the Black Lives Matter matter was seen favorably among most liberal and moderate whites, pointing to broad-based support for these movements.



**61%**

of workers support the Black Lives Matter movement



**64%**

of workers support #MeToo

## THREE PILLARS CONNECTED

Our results speak to a number of important issues related to economic security, health and safety, and agency and voice. And these pillars are interrelated and often reinforcing. Indeed, as recent cultural conversations around sexual harassment in the workplace have made abundantly clear, unsafe workplaces can stifle workers' voice and economic security. Experiences of employer mistreatment and challenges to worker safety can also have a mobilizing effect on worker agency and voice.

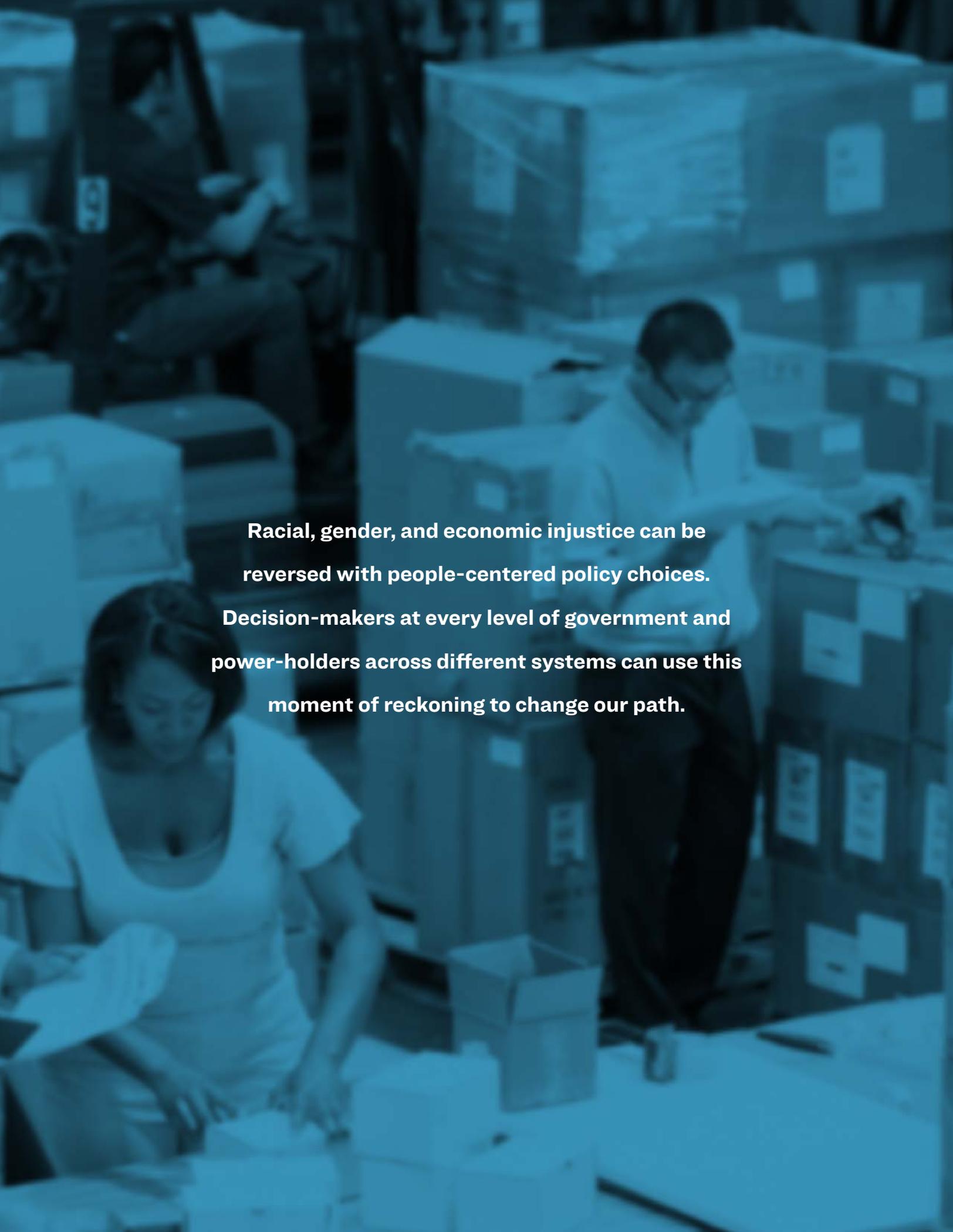
Findings from the Just Recovery Survey show that near-term employment precarity was associated with a higher rate of reported wage theft and greater level of concern about retaliation for taking action to ensure workplace safety during the pandemic. Among workers with the highest level of concern about maintaining steady work in the next year, 22% reported experiencing wage theft during the pandemic, compared to 3% of workers least concerned about unemployment. And among workers expressing the most concern about maintaining a job through the coming year, 44% reported fear of retaliation for speaking out about unsafe working conditions, compared to 14% of workers expressing the least concern.

### SUPPORT FOR UNIONS AMONGST NON-UNION WORKERS



Survey data indicate that non-union workers who experienced unjust actions by their employers (like wage theft) were more likely to express support for unions. Over 60% of non-union workers who reported wage theft, for instance, said they would vote for a union at their job; by comparison 41% of non-union workers who did not report wage theft said they would vote for a union.

Taken together, these findings underscore a crucial point: COVID-19 has weakened the systems and supports workers have access to, thereby magnifying the importance of these linkages. Exposure to risk in one aspect of workers' lives can impact them in multiple and overlapping ways. Supporting the ability of workers to assert agency and voice can help to mitigate that risk and advance a more just and inclusive recovery.



**Racial, gender, and economic injustice can be reversed with people-centered policy choices. Decision-makers at every level of government and power-holders across different systems can use this moment of reckoning to change our path.**

## CONCLUSION:

# FOUNDATIONS FOR A JUST RECOVERY

At a time of transition during a crisis that worsens by the day, results from the Just Recovery Survey add to a growing body of evidence pointing to the need for immediate interventions to curtail the effects of the pandemic *and* deeper structural reforms that address underlying inequities. Previous crisis responses have often reinforced structural exclusion and inequality by race, gender, and class, even as they have bolstered economic security and agency for some. The New Deal era that emerged out of the Great Depression saw passage of landmark labor and employment protections, for example, but agricultural and domestic laborers were excluded to appease Southern white elites intent on denying power and protection to Black workers.<sup>29</sup> Income assistance for single mothers was also expanded during this period, but women of color were denied these benefits at significantly higher rates than white women.<sup>30</sup>

The racial, gender, and class disparities in how people are faring are sadly predictable, given the U.S. government's anemic response to the current pandemic-induced crisis, deep inequities that long predated the current moment, and the institutional inheritance that continues to frame how policy in this country gets made and implemented by political leaders. It is no accident that women of color and communities of color are frequently experiencing the most brutal impacts.<sup>31</sup> But racial, gender, and economic injustice can be reversed with people-centered policy choices. Decision-makers at every level of government and power-holders across different systems can use this moment of reckoning to change our path. Our survey results point to several important ways in which policy and organizing could take on long-standing social injustices and improve conditions for all working people:

- **SUPPORT WORKERS AND BUILD WORKER POWER.**

The focus should be on the challenges faced by workers who bear the greatest health and economic risks. Because most families derive their income from paid employment, we must support people's ability to work under safe and fair conditions, join with coworkers to have a meaningful say in the terms of their work, and seek recourse in case of employer violations of worker rights. Worker power is a necessary countervailing force to unaccountable government actors and institutions and extractive

corporate practices that perpetuate structural inequities and preclude broad-based prosperity and opportunity in this country.

- **HOLD ACCOUNTABLE ACTORS WHO PERPETUATE STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES.** Because women of color and low-income people of color are suffering many of the harshest economic and health impacts of the crisis, we need an approach that addresses racial, gender, and class disparities and their often converging effects on people’s well-being and life chances—and such an approach will help to improve conditions for all who are struggling.<sup>32</sup> Responses to this crisis must actively confront actors, policies, and practices that perpetuate inequity, discrimination, and exclusion in the public and private sectors. The labor market and the healthcare arena are two areas addressed in this report where such a reckoning is needed.
- **DEVELOP CROSS-CUTTING STRATEGIES THAT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE CHALLENGES PEOPLE ARE FACING ACROSS ALL SPHERES OF THEIR LIVES.** The unprecedented scope of the current crisis means it is critically important to break down siloed responses and connect the challenges people are confronting at work, at home, in the treatment room, and at the ballot box. Disadvantage or dislocation in one realm of life all too frequently spills over into others. Voice at work, for example, can lead to more predictable hours and important policies such as paid leave, allowing workers to care for themselves and their families without foregoing pay. We need approaches that connect these dots, building the agency and power of workers across multiple dimensions.

Results from the Just Recovery Survey demonstrate the profound and often compounding challenges that working people in the United States—particularly Black and Latinx workers, women and people of color, and workers in underpaid jobs—are navigating in the workplace and beyond. Our results also highlight some of the ways in which these experiences are having a mobilizing effect.

This research is an offering in deep solidarity with workers and their intersecting fights for economic, racial, and gender justice across the country. This group of partners will remain focused on worker well-being and power through the pandemic and its aftermath, and will work to support cross-cutting, equity-focused interventions that advance a just recovery—one that supports lasting security, safety, and agency for all people.

## ENDNOTES

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# AUTHORS

## **RAKEEN MABUD**

*TIME'S UP Foundation*

Rakeen Mabud is the director of research and strategy at TIME'S UP Foundation. In this role, she is responsible for developing a strategic research agenda that generates inclusive, innovative, and effective solutions for creating safe, fair, and dignified work for workers across the economy. Rakeen has a deep background in economic policy and is an expert on the 21st century workplace, including how the policy choices we make intersect with gender, race, and other social and economic inequalities. She was previously a fellow at the Roosevelt Institute and the director of Roosevelt's 21st Century Economy and Economic Inclusion programs. She also served as a political appointee in the Obama administration, where she worked on domestic policy in the Treasury Department. Her writing has appeared in The Guardian, The Hill, Ms. Magazine, The Daily Beast, and Teen Vogue, and she is a regular contributor at Forbes. Rakeen received her B.A. in Economics and Political Science from Wellesley College. She holds a Ph.D. in Government from Harvard University.

## **AMITY PAYE**

*Color Of Change*

Amity Paye is director of communications at Color Of Change and oversees the organization's media strategy, placement, and outreach. Before transitioning into social justice public relations work, Amity spent 10 years reporting on Black youth in social justice for large national outlets. She has since led strategic communications with organizations such as the Black Youth Project and 32BJ SEIU and serves on the board of Samara Collective, a women-led communications co-op. Amity also owns land in upstate New York that she and her husband are turning into a communal gardening and artist space.

**MAYA PINTO***National Employment Law Project*

Maya Pinto is a senior researcher and policy analyst at the National Employment Law Project, where her research and policy work focuses on labor standards and employment relationships in low-paid occupations and industries, racial equity in labor markets, and corporate regulatory capture. Maya has more than a decade of experience doing strategic research and policy work at labor and community organizations, including the Service Employees International and the Alliance for a Greater New York. Her research has been used by policymakers, advocates, and organizers across the country to improve standards and build power for workers in the building services, trucking, waste management, personal care, home care, domestic work, and construction sectors. Her work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, National Public Radio, *The Intercept*, and *The Nation*. She has a B.A. in Development Studies from Brown University and an M.Sc. in Urbanization and Development from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

**SANJAY PINTO***The Worker Institute at Cornell ILR*

Sanjay Pinto is a fellow at The Worker Institute at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, co-directs the Unions and Worker Ownership Program at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, and conducts applied and strategic research with economic justice and philanthropic organizations. He began his career writing about white supremacist movements for the Southern Poverty Law Center before working as a union researcher at the national and local levels with the AFL-CIO and SEIU. His current work focuses on models that build power for direct care workers, survivor- and worker-led responses to workplace sexual harassment, the use of digital tools to advance worker organizing and labor rights, and the confrontation of racial capitalism with the ideals of political and economic democracy. Sanjay has taught courses on labor, political economy, and public policy at Columbia, Princeton, and Rutgers. He has a B.A. in Sociology from Amherst College, an M.Sc. in Development Studies from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a Ph.D. in Sociology and Social Policy from Harvard.

# PROJECT PARTNERS



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Color Of Change is the nation's largest online racial justice organization. We help people respond effectively to injustice in the world around us. As a national online force driven by over seven million members, we move decision-makers in corporations and government to create a more human and less hostile world for Black people in America.



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National Employment Law Project is a non-partisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts research and advocates on issues affecting underpaid and unemployed workers. For more about NELP, visit [www.nelp.org](http://www.nelp.org). Follow NELP on Twitter at @NelpNews.



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The Worker Institute at Cornell ILR works to advance worker rights and collective representation through research, education, and training in conjunction with labor and social justice movements. We seek innovative solutions to problems faced by working people in our workplaces and economy today.

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A man in a dark jacket is looking down at a clipboard he is holding. He is in a kitchen or food service area, with a stack of white boxes in the foreground. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and kitchen equipment. The entire image has a blue tint.

## **ABOUT THE SURVEY**

The Just Recovery Survey, on which this report is based, was developed with input from the Alianza de Campesinas, Arise Chicago, Gig Workers Rising, Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance, Make the Road New York, National Black Worker Center Project, National Domestic Workers Alliance, ONE DC, Restaurant Opportunities Center, and Workers Defense Project, with support from the Labor Innovations for the 21st Century (LIFT) Fund.



[media@colorofchange.org](mailto:media@colorofchange.org)  
[colorofchange.org](http://colorofchange.org)  
🐦 ColorOfChange



[nelp@nelp.org](mailto:nelp@nelp.org)  
[nelp.org](http://nelp.org)  
🐦 NelpNews



[hello@timesupnow.org](mailto:hello@timesupnow.org)  
[timesupfoundation.org](http://timesupfoundation.org)  
🐦 @ timesupnow



[workerinstitute@cornell.edu](mailto:workerinstitute@cornell.edu)  
[ilr.cornell.edu/worker-institute](http://ilr.cornell.edu/worker-institute)  
🐦 workerinstitute