

# Working in NYC



Results from the  
2017 Empire State Poll



**Consumer  
Affairs**  
Lorelei Salas  
Commissioner



Cornell University  
ILR School

**THE WORKER INSTITUTE**  
ADVANCING WORKER RIGHTS AND COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATION

# Working in NYC: Results from the 2017 Empire State Poll

Bill de Blasio  
Mayor

Lorelei Salas  
Commissioner

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## Acknowledgments

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## Background

Under the leadership of Mayor Bill de Blasio, in 2016, New York City established the Office of Labor Policy & Standards (OLPS), the largest municipal labor standards enforcement office in the country. Housed within the Department of Consumer Affairs, OLPS enforces the City's labor standards laws and seeks to improve conditions for low-wage and vulnerable workers, regardless of immigration status. As part of its founding mission, OLPS is charged with conducting research on labor market conditions and the challenges facing working New Yorkers. OLPS uses research to inform the public about the state of workers' rights and guide the Office in developing enforcement strategies and innovative policy reforms. OLPS has a particular interest in understanding how enforcement gaps, contingent work arrangements, and economic inequality may frustrate workers' attempts to get ahead.

## About the Survey

In early 2017, OLPS and the Worker Institute at Cornell partnered to add a series of questions to the Empire State Poll, a representative phone survey of 800 New York State residents conducted annually by the Cornell Survey Research Institute.

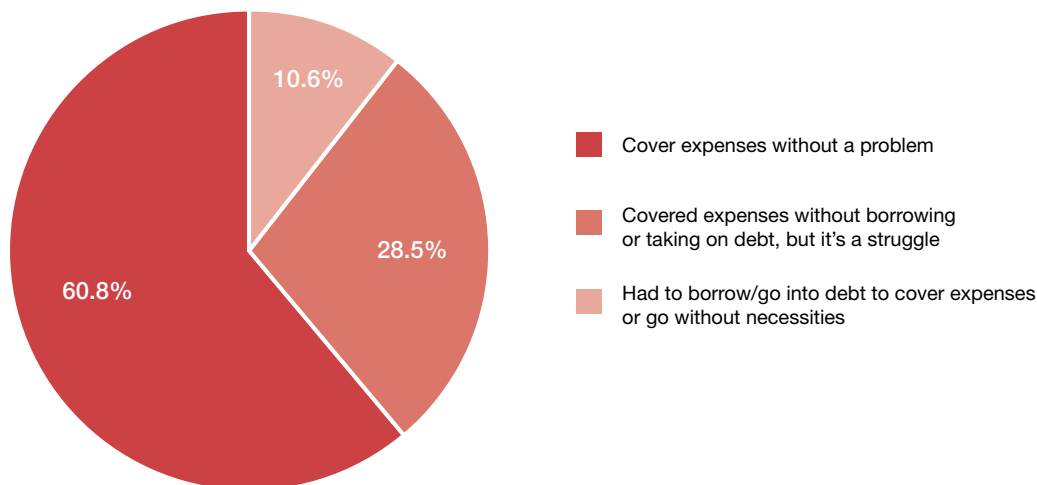
The survey questions developed by OLPS and the Worker Institute addressed a range of issues related to inequality, working conditions, and the role of city and local government in protecting immigrants and defending worker rights.

Interviews for this year's Empire State Poll were conducted between February and April 2017. Key Findings are based on interviews with 277 New York City residents, including 174 who were employed at the time of the survey. See the Appendix for more information.

## Key Findings

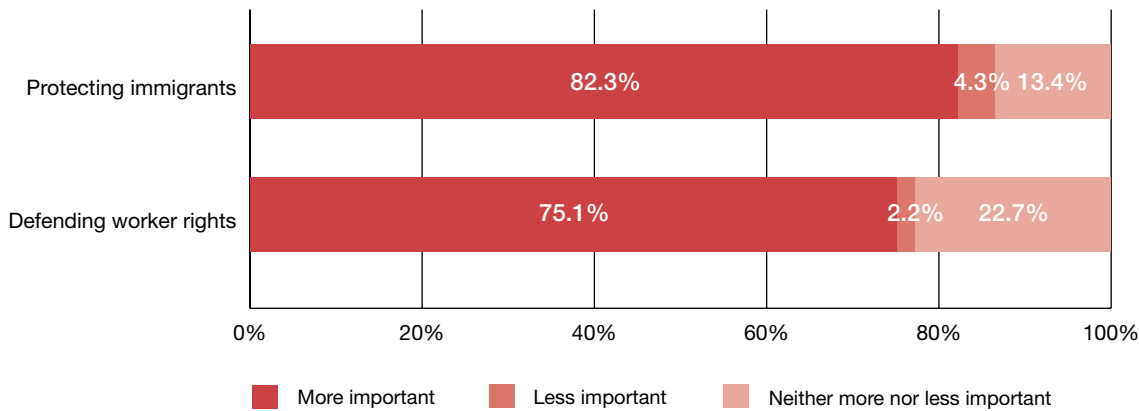
The survey results paint a vivid portrait of the challenges that many working New York City residents face, including reported violations of wage and hour law and difficulties around work schedules. The results also show that around 2 in 5 New Yorkers struggle to cover basic household expenses (see Figure 1 below), and that an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers would like their City government to do more to protect immigrants and defend worker rights following the 2016 presidential election (see Figure 2 on page 5).

**Figure 1: How NYC households fare in covering basic expenses**



Note: Numbers reflect rounding.

**Figure 2: NYC residents' views on the role of local government following the 2016 election**



**Many New Yorkers experienced possible employment-related legal violations in the past year.**

- 13 percent of working NYC residents say they were not paid what they were owed.
- 10 percent say they did not receive paid sick leave.<sup>1</sup>
- 10 percent say they experienced harassment at work.
- 6 percent say they were paid below the minimum wage.

**Many New Yorkers work in non-standard work arrangements that leave them without access to steady income or a range of work protections and benefits.**

- 29 percent of working NYC residents do not work full time on a year-round basis. This includes 21 percent who work part time, and 8 percent who work on a seasonal, temporary, or contract basis.
- Nearly 1 in 6 working NYC residents are paid either as independent contractors (10 percent) or in cash or by check with no tax reporting (6 percent).

**Many working New Yorkers face scheduling-related challenges.**

- Most working NYC residents are happy with the hours they typically work (64 percent), but there are many who would like to work more hours (14 percent) or fewer hours (22 percent) if they could.
- A majority of New Yorkers say their schedules are more or less the same from week to week (55 percent). Many (32 percent) report that their schedules vary, but that they maintain control of their working hours, and some (13 percent) say that their schedules vary without their being able to exert control over their working hours.

**Most working New Yorkers think the economy is tilted in favor of a few at the top.**

- A large majority of working NYC residents (67 percent) believe that “it’s mainly just a few people at the top who have a chance to get ahead” in today’s economy, with a much smaller share (33 percent) saying that anyone “can get ahead.”

<sup>1</sup> Almost all workers in New York City are covered by the Paid Sick Leave Law. The Law took effect in April 2014 and provides workers with 40 hours of sick leave per year to care for themselves or a family member. The time must be paid if the employer has five (5) or more employees.

## Discussion

New York City's labor market has improved significantly in recent years. Through the first five months of 2017, the city's unemployment rate averaged 4.2 percent, the lowest level since the late 1960s. Wages have been rising, and they should continue to rise for many workers as a series of state minimum wage increases go into effect at the end of 2017, 2018, and 2019.<sup>2</sup>

Still, the survey findings suggest that many New Yorkers continue to struggle financially, and that most working New Yorkers believe today's economy is not one in which everyone has an equal chance to get ahead. And, despite minimum wage increases, the extension of paid leave requirements, and other City and statewide labor standards reforms, the survey results reveal legal enforcement issues that are particularly acute for New Yorkers on the lower end of the income spectrum.

The survey findings also indicate that, even as unemployment has decreased and labor force participation has risen to its highest level in many years, a sizable share of working New Yorkers are in non-standard work arrangements, such as independent contractor arrangements or part-time work, which leave them without dependable hours, income, or benefits. Responding to this set of challenges requires discussion of multiple approaches—increasing access to predictable and full-time hours, strengthening protections and benefits for all workers, and further developing benefit arrangements that are not tied to a person's current employment status.

The poll results provide useful insight not only into existing problems faced by New York City workers but also the kind of response that New Yorkers would like to see from their City as the national political environment shifts. The fact that significant majorities of New Yorkers think it is more important for local government to protect immigrants and defend worker rights following the 2016 presidential election suggests broad public support for efforts by OLPS and other City agencies to help forge a more just and inclusive New York City.

### **Particular challenges for New Yorkers on the lower end of the income spectrum**

New Yorkers with household incomes under \$50,000 are more likely to confront various work-related and financial challenges compared to those with household incomes above \$50,000. For example, they are:

- 2.9 times more likely to experience wage theft.
- 2.5 times more likely not to receive paid sick leave.
- 3.4 times more likely to have to go without things they need or borrow/go into debt to cover basic household expenses.

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<sup>2</sup> Parrott, James. Setting the Context for the Minimum Wage Increase in New York State and New York City. July 2017. Workforce Professionals Training Institute. Available at: <https://philanthropynewyork.org/sites/default/files/resources/Monitoring-Min-Wage-Brief-July2017.pdf>

## Appendix: Selected Survey Findings with 95 Percent Confidence Intervals\*

Question (N = number of respondents)	Possible responses	Proportion responding
Following the 2016 presidential election, how important do you think it is for your city or local government to protect workers' rights on the job? (N=277)	More important than before the election Less important than before the election Neither more nor less important	.751 [.696, .799] .022 [.010, .048] .228 [.182, .281]
Following the 2016 presidential election, how important do you think it is for your city or local government to protect immigrants? (N=277)	More important than before the election Less important than before the election Neither more nor less important	.823 [.773, .864] .043 [.025, .075] .133 [.098, .179]
How are you paid at your primary job? (N=174)	Hourly wage as a W-2 employee Salary as a W-2 employee Paid via 1099 Personal or vendor's check with no tax reporting In cash None of the above	.356 [.288, .431] .460 [.386, .535] .098 [.061, .152] .017 [.060, .053] .046 [.023, .090] .023 [.009, .060]
Which of the following best describes your main job? By main job we mean the one at which you usually work the most hours. (N=174)	Full-time, all year round Part-time, all year round Temporary Seasonal or part year Contract or on call	.707 [.634, .770] .213 [.158, .280] .034 [.015, .075] .011 [.002, .045] .034 [.015, .075]
Have you experienced any of the following work-related problems in the past year? (N=174)	Paid below the minimum wage Yes No Not paid what I was owed Yes No Subject to harassment or discrimination at work Yes No Did not receive paid sick time Yes No	.063 [.035, .111] .937 [.889, .965] .126 [.084, .185] .873 [.815, .916] .103 [.066, .156] .896 [.841, .934] .103 [.066, .159] .896 [.841, .934]
Are you satisfied with the number of hours you work in a typical week? (N=173)	No, I would like to work more hours No, I would like to work fewer hours Yes, I am happy with the hours I currently work	.144 [.099, .205] .219 [.163, .287] .638 [.563, .706]
Which of the following best describes your schedule? (N=173)	My schedule is more or less the same from week to week My schedule varies from week to week, but I have control over my hours My schedule varies from week to week, and I *don't* have control over my hours	.549 [.474, .622] .324 [.258, .398] .127 [.085, .186]
Which comes closer to your view? In today's economy, everyone has a fair chance to get ahead in the long run, or in today's economy, it's mainly just a few people at the top who have a chance to get ahead? (N=174)	Anyone can get ahead Just a few people at the top have the chance to get ahead	.333 [.267, .407] .667 [.593, .733]
Over the past year, was your household income sufficient to cover your family's basic expenses (for example, rent or mortgage payments, car or other transport costs, food, childcare, and healthcare, to name a few)? (N=273)	My household was able to cover its expenses without a problem My household was able to cover our expenses without borrowing or taking on any additional debt, but it was a struggle For all or part of the past year, my household had to go without things we needed or borrow money from someone, take out a loan, or go into credit card debt to cover our basic expenses	.608 [.549, .665] .286 [.235, .343] .106 [.075, .149]

\*Bracketed values are 95 percent confidence intervals. These intervals can be understood as estimated ranges of the plausible values that might be obtained were all New Yorkers to be surveyed.

