THE STATE OF WORKING EAST BAY, 2015-2019

UC BERKELEY LABOR CENTER

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Acknowledgments

About the authors

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Suggested citation

Executive summary

This report examines the state of work in the East Bay prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] We find that even before the pandemic, when the economy was strong by conventional economic metrics and had recovered from the Great Recession, many East Bay workers were earning low wages, housing cost-burdened, and struggling to make ends meet, with workers of color in particular making wages too low to support themselves and their families. The report shows that a return to a pre-pandemic economy is not enough to sustain many East Bay workers and their families. Black and Hispanic workers in particular fared worse than all workers in nearly every metric. Major findings include:

- One in four East Bay workers earned low wages. That is, they earned less than two-thirds of the median full-time hourly wage compared to all workers in the state. However, over a third of Hispanic and Black workers earned low wages.

- One-fifth of Hispanic workers and 17% of Black workers lived in "near poverty"—that is, in families earning 200% or less of the federal poverty threshold based on their family size–compared to 12% of all East Bay workers. Most workers in or near poverty worked all year and over half worked full-time.

- East Bay workers struggled with self-sufficiency. Two out of three Black workers, three out of four Hispanic workers, and one in two Asian or Pacific Islander workers earned an hourly wage too low to support a family of two children and two working adults, even when assuming a partner worked full-time and earned the same wage. Overall, more than half of East Bay workers earned wages too low to support a family.

- Over one-third of East Bay workers were housing cost-burdened. Workers of color and those with lower household incomes struggled with paying too much on rent. Workers in lower-income households in particular saw a dramatic increase in the share of income spent on rent between 2015 and 2019.

Earnings, income, and poverty

This report updates the analyses in the report "The State of Work in the East Bay and Oakland,"[2] authored by the East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy in 2012.[3] That report documented that East Bay workers were struggling with low wages, poverty, and growing inequality due to the Great Recession. We examine the state of work in the East Bay during 2015 to 2019, a time of economic growth and perceived prosperity.[4] Our findings do not agree with these perceptions. We find that East Bay workers earned low wages, were housing cost-burdened, and struggled with self-sufficiency during this period.

We use data from the American Community Survey restricted to workers employed at least half the year and at least 10 hours a week,[5] we find that during the years 2015 to 2019 East Bay workers' median annual earnings from employment were $53,672.81, with a median hourly wage of $26.34 and an average hourly wage of $33.81. However, there were stark disparities in earnings between racial and ethnic groups (see Exhibit 1).[6] For example, Hispanic women earned a median hourly wage of $17.70 compared to $37.53 for white men.[7] This represents a wage gap of 47.2%, indicating the median Hispanic woman earned less than half that of the median white man. For Black men ($23.36) and Black women ($21.44), their median hourly wage was less than two-thirds that of the median for white men. Asian and Pacific Islander women's median hourly wage ($26.62) was 70.9% that of the median for white men. Although median hourly wages, both overall and for different racial/ethnic groups, were higher than the 2019 state minimum wage ($12 an hour) and local minimum wages in the East Bay ($13.50 in Alameda County, $13.80 in Oakland, $15.00 in Richmond, $15.59 in Berkeley, and $16.30 in Emeryville[8]), the exorbitant cost of living in the Bay Area made it challenging for workers to make ends meet, especially workers of color and their families.

Additionally, there were striking disparities in total household income by race and ethnicity (see Exhibit 2). Over a quarter of white (27.0%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (26.8%) workers had household incomes over $200,000 annually, double the percentage of Hispanic (10.1%) and Black (11.6%) workers. At the lower end of the distribution, the percentage of Black (9.7%) and Hispanic (8.1%) workers with the lowest levels of household income (under $25,000) was double that of Asian/Pacific Islander (4.4%) and white (4.0%) workers.

Exhibit 1. Median hourly wage by race/ethnicity, in 2019 dollars and with wage gap
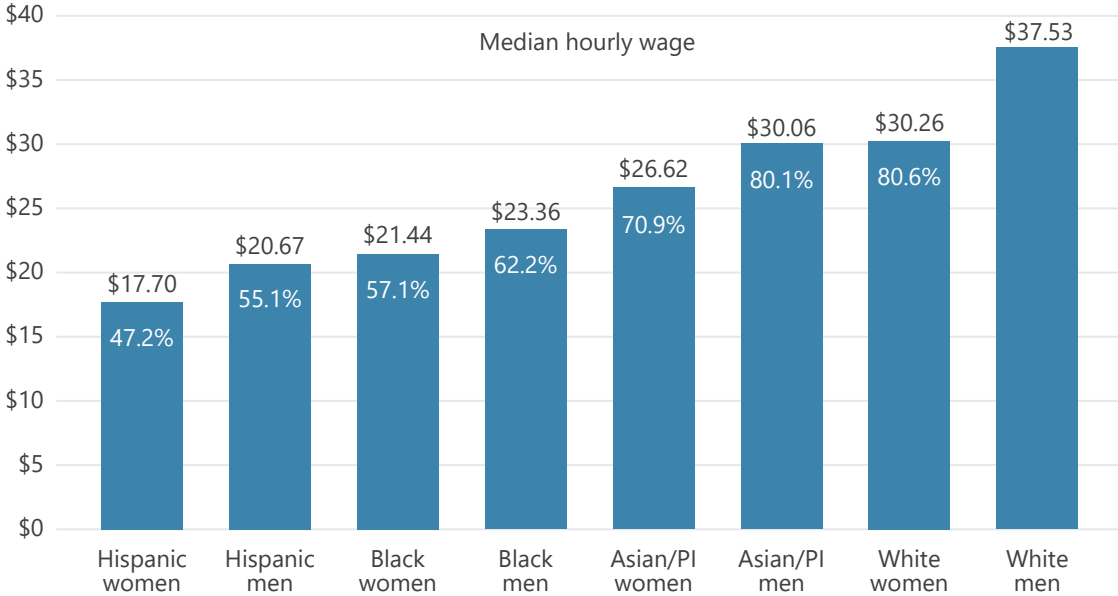
Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.

Exhibit 2. East Bay household income by race/ethnicity, in 2019 dollars

Hispanic

Income	%
Under $25,000	8.1%
$25,000 to $49,999	17.4%
$50,000 to $74,999	17.7%
$75,000 to $99,999	14.6%
$100,000 to $124,999	12.0%
$125,000 to $149,999	9.2%
$150,000 to $199,999	10.9%
Over $200,000	10.1%

Black

Income	%
Under $25,000	9.7%
$25,000 to $49,999	18.8%
$50,000 to $74,999	16.1%
$75,000 to $99,999	13.6%
$100,000 to $124,999	11.8%
$125,000 to $149,999	8.3%
$150,000 to $199,999	10.0%
Over $200,000	11.6%

Asian/ Pacific Islander

Income	%
Under $25,000	4.4%
$25,000 to $49,999	9.3%
$50,000 to $74,999	11.6%
$75,000 to $99,999	11.1%
$100,000 to $124,999	11.3%
$125,000 to $149,999	9.5%
$150,000 to $199,999	15.9%
Over $200,000	26.8%

White

Income	%
Under $25,000	4.0%
$25,000 to $49,999	9.4%
$50,000 to $74,999	10.7%
$75,000 to $99,999	12.1%
$100,000 to $124,999	11.0%
$125,000 to $149,999	9.6%
$150,000 to $199,999	16.1%
Over $200,000	27.0%

Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.
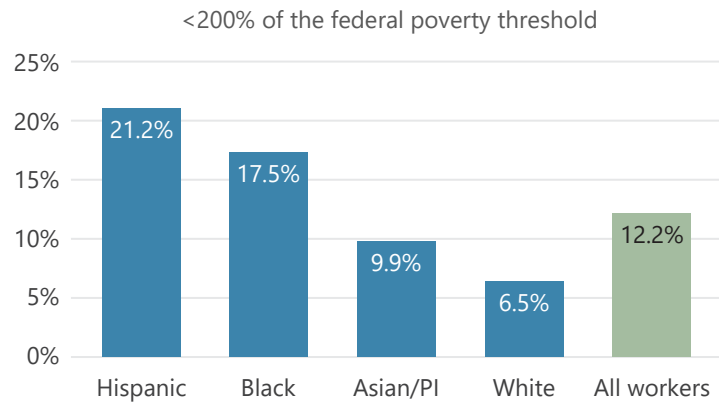
Earnings and income in context

We used several different methods to analyze the economic well-being of East Bay workers. A widely used measure established by the U.S. government is the federal poverty threshold. Using this measure, we find 12.2% of East Bay workers lived in "near poverty"—that is, in families earning 200% or less of the federal poverty threshold based on their family size. However, the percentage of East Bay Hispanic workers near poverty was almost double at 21.2% (see Exhibit 3). Low wages are an important explanation for near poverty status in the East Bay. Those living near poverty averaged an hourly wage of $12.47 but worked on average 35 hours a week (median was 40 hours a week) and over 80% worked all year long.

Another way to analyze how East Bay workers were faring economically is to estimate the size of the low-wage worker population. We define a "low-wage worker" as someone earning two-thirds or less of California's median full-time wage, which in 2019 was $16.05.[9] Using this definition, we find that 26.0% of East Bay workers were low-wage earners. However, again there were stark racial, ethnic, and gender disparities (see Exhibit 4). Overall, 38.7% of Hispanics earned low wages. Broken down by gender, 44.3% of Hispanic women earned low wages compared to 34.8% of Hispanic men. Additionally, a third of Black workers (33.9% of Black women and 31.9% of Black men) and around one in four Asian/Pacific Islander workers (26.0% of Asian/Pacific Islander women and 21.9% of Asian/Pacific Islander men) earned low-wages compared to about one in six white workers (19.7% white women earned low wages compared to 14.7% of white men).
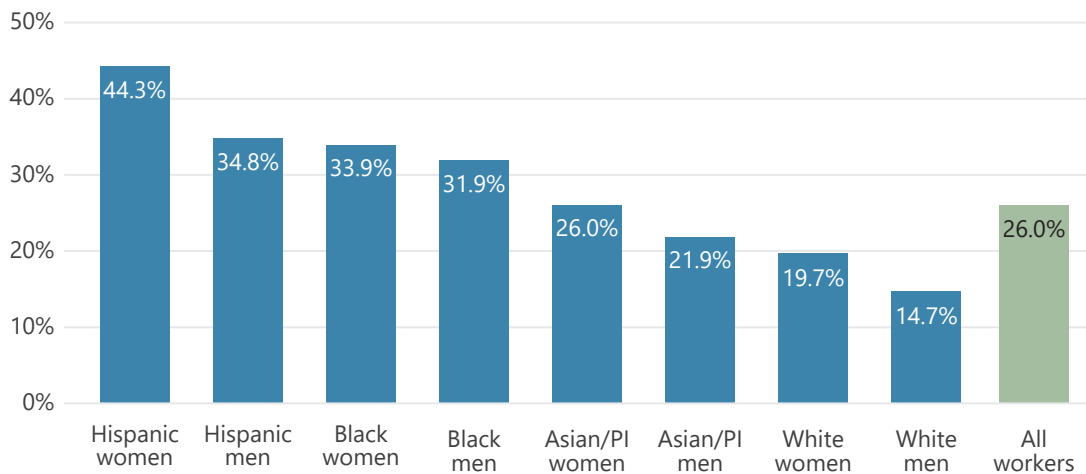
The previous two measures provide some utility for assessing the economic wellbeing of workers, but they do not fully account for the costs of living and therefore underestimate how many workers struggle to make ends meet. The MIT Living Wage Calculator,[10] offers state- and county-level estimates of the wages a worker would require to meet their family's basic needs where they live. For example, a single adult working full time in Alameda or Contra Costa would need to earn $21.75 (in 2019 dollars) to make ends meet and a family of two full-time working adults with two children would each need to make at least $30 an hour. Using this calculator, we estimate that 40.2% of East Bay workers or around 362,500 workers earned a wage too low for a single full-time working adult to support themselves (see Exhibit 5). For working adults with children in the East Bay, the situation was more dire–around 75% and 85% of workers earned an hourly wage too low for a single parent to support one child or two children, respectively. More than half (57.0%) of East Bay workers or around half a million earned too low a wage to support a family of two adults and two children, even with a partner working full time. Our analysis once again shows racial and ethnic disparities (see Exhibit 6). More than half of Asian/Pacific Islander workers (53.4%), over two-thirds of Black workers (68.5%), and three-quarters of Hispanic workers (76.2%) earned wages too low to support a family of two working adults and two children.

Exhibit 3. Percent of East Bay workers in families earning less than 200% of the federal poverty threshold by race/ethnicity
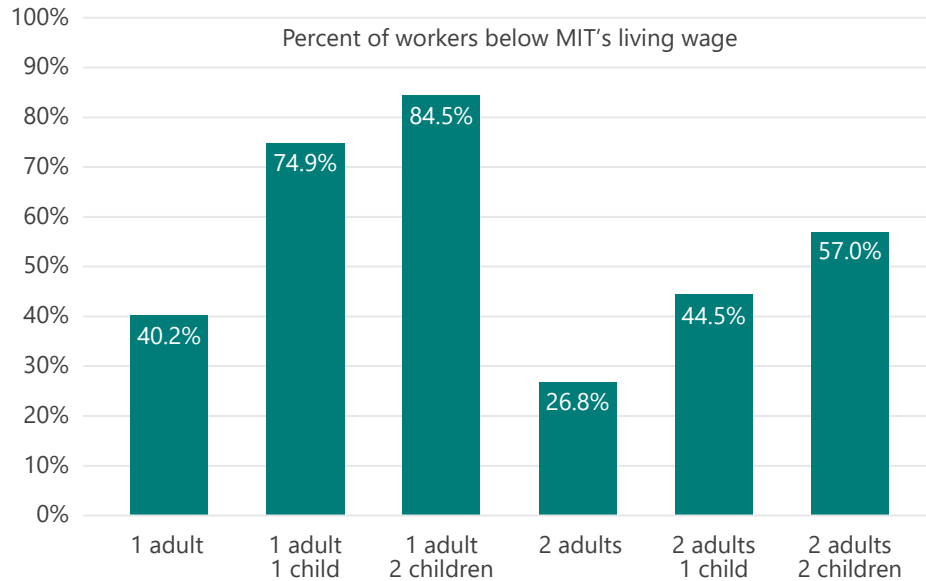
<200% of the federal poverty threshold

Category	Percent
Hispanic	21.2%
Black	17.5%
Asian/PI	9.9%
White	6.5%
All workers	12.2%

Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.

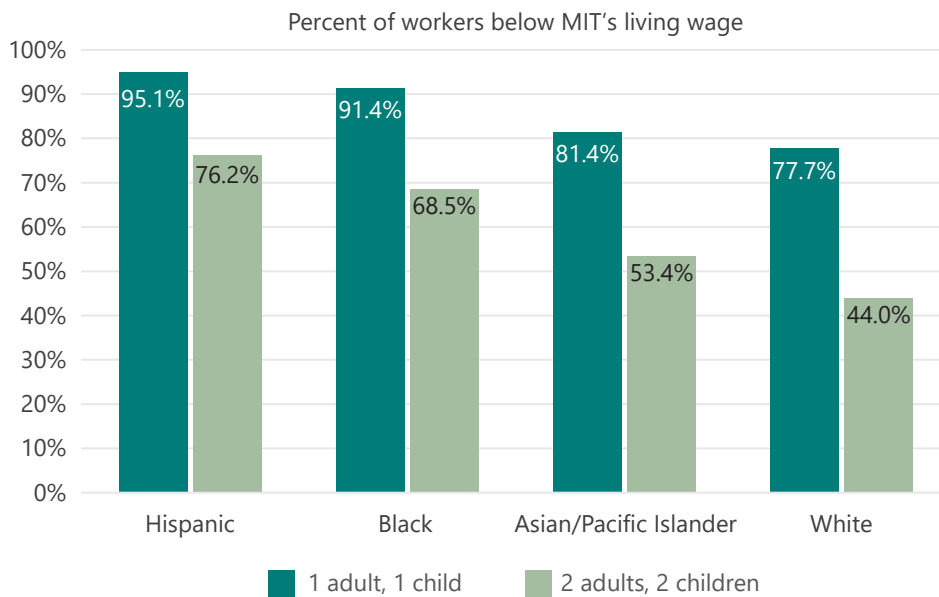## Exhibit 4. Percent of East Bay workers earning low wages by race/ethnicity

Category	Percent
Hispanic women	44.3%
Hispanic men	34.8%
Black women	33.9%
Black men	31.9%
Asian/PI women	26.0%
Asian/PI men	21.9%
White women	19.7%
White men	14.7%
All workers	26.0%

Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.

Exhibit 5. Percent of East Bay workers making hourly wages too low to support various family sizes

Percent of workers below MIT's living wage

Family size	Percent
1 adult	40.2%
1 adult 1 child	74.9%
1 adult 2 children	84.5%
2 adults	26.8%
2 adults 1 child	44.5%
2 adults 2 children	57.0%

Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.
Note: Analysis includes a single adult supporting up to two children and two working adults supporting up to two children.

Exhibit 6. Percent of East Bay workers making hourly wages too low to support a family, by race/ethnicity

Percent of workers below MIT's living wage

Race/ethnicity	1 adult, 1 child	2 adults, 2 children
Hispanic	95.1%	76.2%
Black	91.4%	68.5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	81.4%	53.4%
White	77.7%	44.0%

Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.
Note: Analysis includes a single adult supporting up to two children and two working adults supporting up to two children.

Low-wage industries and occupations

We examined the concentration of low-wage workers by industry and occupation (see Exhibits 7 and 8). Workers earning less than two-thirds of California's median full-time wage ($16.05 in 2019 dollars) were employed in all major industries in the East Bay, but were particularly concentrated in retail trade, accommodation and food services, and health care and social assistance (Exhibit 7). These three industries employ 30% of all workers, but account for almost half of all employed low-wage workers. As seen in Exhibit 8, top occupations for low-wage workers were sales and related, office and administrative support, food preparation and serving related, material moving, and healthcare support. These five occupations employ about a third of East Bay workers but account for half of all employed low-wage workers.

Hispanic, Black, and Asian/Pacific Islander workers tended to be overrepresented in low-wage occupations relative to their proportion in the workforce overall (see Exhibits 9 and 10). Hispanic workers and women were overrepresented in low-wage food preparation and serving occupations. Hispanic, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and women were overrepresented in low-wage health care support occupations. Hispanic workers were overrepresented in low-wage building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations. Asian/Pacific Islander workers and women were overrepresented in low-wage personal care and service occupations.

Occupational segregation refers to the unequal distribution of workers into occupations based on race, ethnicity, sex, immigration status, and other social characteristics.[11] It is a product of biased social norms, limited social networks, reduced educational opportunities, systematic exclusion, and discrimination. The continuing existence of occupational segregation helps explain disparities in earnings among racial, ethnic, and gender groups such as those seen in this report.

Exhibit 7. Top 10 industries employing low-wage workers in the East Bay

Industry	Median hourly wage*	Share of ALL East Bay workers employed in the industry	Share of LOW-WAGE East Bay workers employed in the industry
Retail trade	$17.35	10.4%	18.4%
Accommodation and food services	$13.84	6.6%	15.6%
Health care and social assistance	$28.29	13.8%	12.3%
Educational services	$26.41	9.8%	8.4%
Manufacturing	$30.24	10.7%	7.8%
Administrative and support and waste management services	$18.96	4.2%	6.3%
Other services, except public administration	$20.22	3.9%	5.7%
Construction	$26.46	6.2%	5.4%
Transportation and warehousing	$24.53	4.4%	4.6%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	$44.34	10.0%	3.0%

Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.
* 2019 dollars

Exhibit 8. Top 10 occupations employing low-wage workers in the East Bay

Occupation	Median hourly wage*	Share of ALL East Bay workers employed in the occupation	Share of LOW-WAGE East Bay workers employed in the occupation
Sales and related	$20.24	9.1%	13.8%
Office and administrative support	$22.08	11.1%	12.5%
Food preparation and serving related	$13.44	5.0%	12.3%
Material moving	$15.29	3.5%	7.4%
Healthcare support	$15.87	3.3%	6.6%
Production	$20.80	5.0%	6.4%
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance	$15.96	3.1%	6.0%
Educational instruction and library	$25.47	6.2%	5.6%
Construction and extraction	$24.52	4.6%	4.8%
Personal care and service	$13.17	1.9%	4.7%

Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.
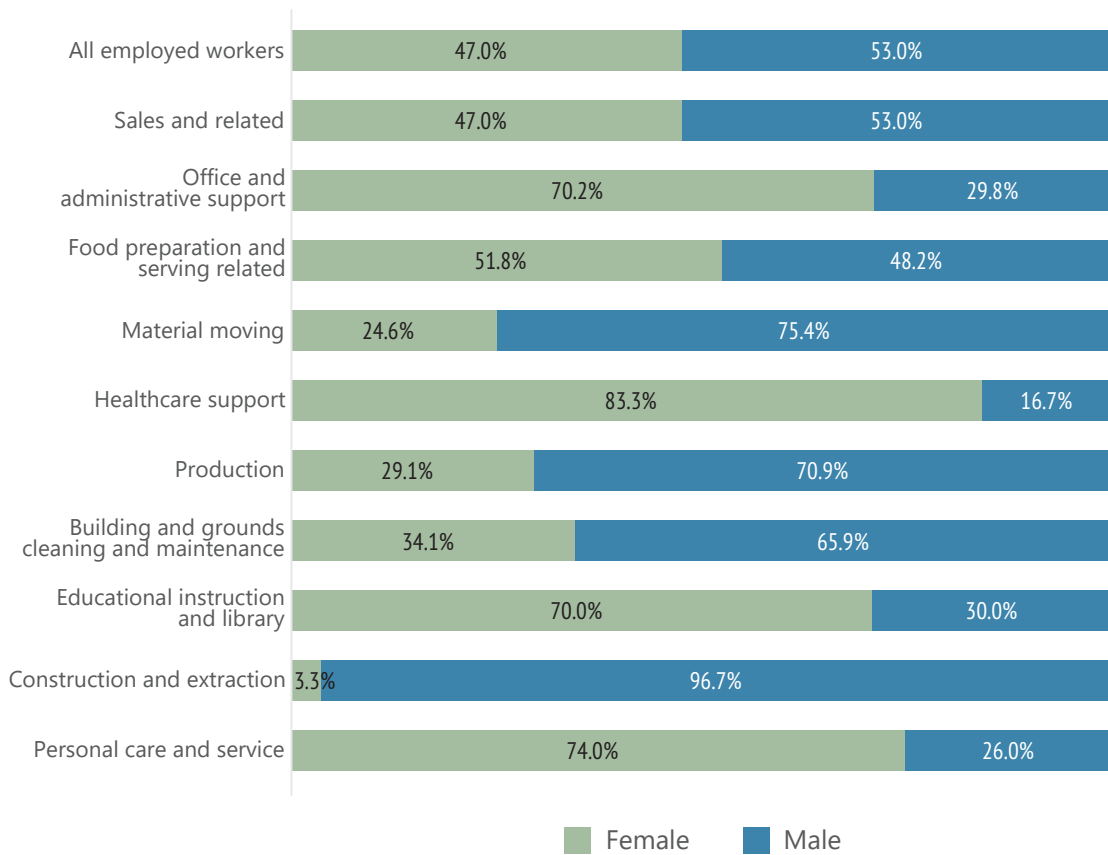* 2019 dollars

Exhibit 9. Occupation composition by race/ethnicity in the top 10 occupations employing low-wage workers in the East Bay
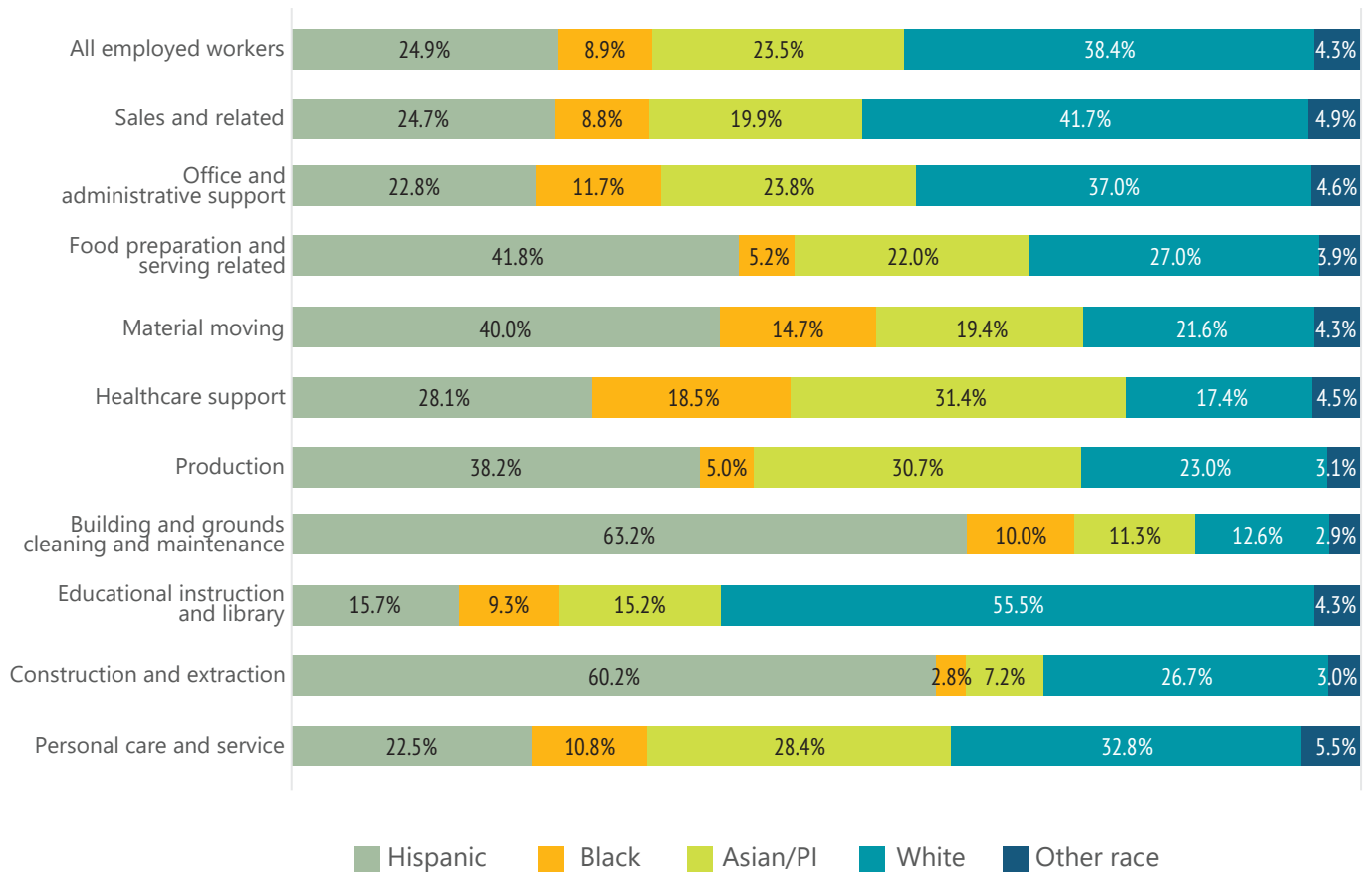
Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.

Exhibit 10. Occupation composition by gender in the top 10 occupations employing low-wage workers in the East Bay

Occupation	Female	Male
All employed workers	47.0%	53.0%
Sales and related	47.0%	53.0%
Office and administrative support	70.2%	29.8%
Food preparation and serving related	51.8%	48.2%
Material moving	24.6%	75.4%
Healthcare support	83.3%	16.7%
Production	29.1%	70.9%
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance	34.1%	65.9%
Educational instruction and library	70.0%	30.0%
Construction and extraction	3.3%	96.7%
Personal care and service	74.0%	26.0%

Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.

Housing cost-burden among East Bay renters

A key challenge to worker self-sufficiency is housing affordability. While a majority of white and Asian/Pacific Islander workers were homeowners (63.7% and 67.1% respectively), less than half of Hispanic and Black workers owned their homes (47.8% and 42.5%). About four in ten East Bay workers were renters (41.3%); among these, more than one out of three (35.8%) lived in housing cost-burdened households[12] defined as spending more than 30% of their household income on rent, and one in eight (12.9%) were severely housing cost-burdened (defined spending more than 50% of household income on rent). Not only are Hispanic workers and Black workers more likely to be renters, but these worker/renters are disproportionately housing cost-burdened (see Exhibit 11).
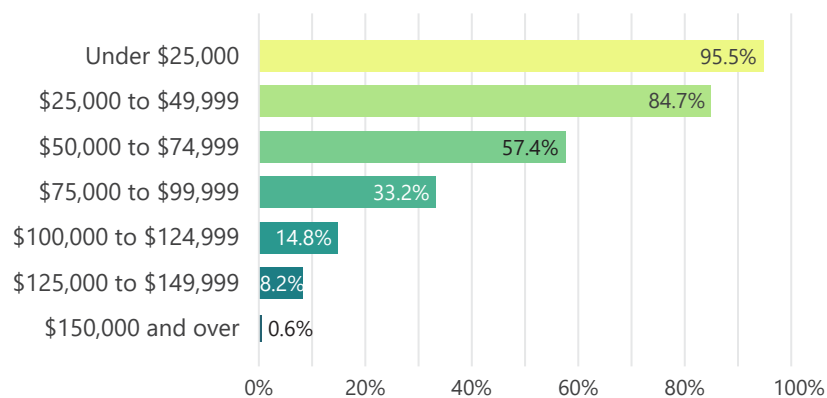
Exhibit 11. Percent of East Bay worker/renters housing cost-burdened, by race/ethnicity
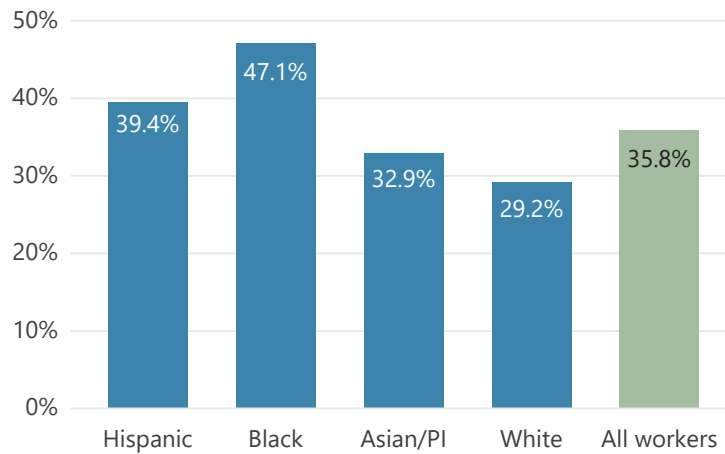
Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.

Housing cost-burden for renters is a function of both low earnings and rising rents. Two-thirds of housing cost-burdened worker/renters worked full-time with a median hourly wage of $15.62 and a median annual household income of $50,906. In contrast, worker/renters who were not housing cost-burdened had a median hourly wage of $26.70 and a median annual household income of $125,284. Exhibit 12 shows that a majority of worker/renter households with incomes less than $75,000 were housing cost-burdened, and a third of households with incomes between $75,000 and $100,000 were housing cost-burdened.

Exhibit 12. Percent of East Bay worker/renters housing cost-burdened, by household income, in 2019 dollars
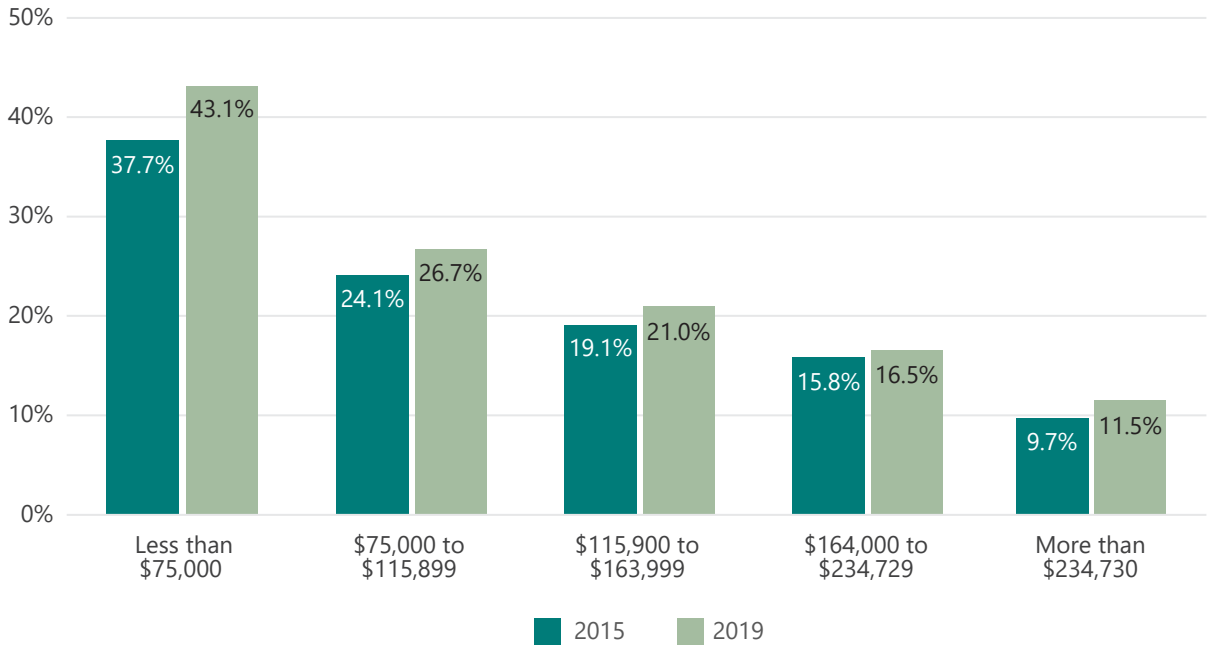

Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey 5-year Sample.

We find that between 2015 and 2019, the rental costs of one-bedroom, two-bedroom, and three-bedroom apartments increased by 23.2%, 20.8%, and 11.9% respectively. Over that same time period, median hourly wages for East Bay worker/renters increased by 13.1%, and median household income increased around 18.9%. For East Bay worker/renters, the median proportion of household income that workers spent on rent across the 5 years remained relatively flat at around 24% (the average around 32% percent) and the proportion of housing cost-burdened workers held steady at around 36%.

However, this was not the case for low-income East Bay worker/renters households, in which the share of median household income spent on rent increased dramatically between 2015 and 2019. Households earning less than $75,000 saw an increase from 37.7% to 43.1% in the share of their income going to rent (see Exhibit 13). Increasing wages is crucial to addressing housing cost-burden and promoting self-sufficiency. However, it is likely not to be enough. Work by Agarwal, Ambrose, and Diop (2019) suggests that while minimum wage increases reduce tenants' struggle to pay their rent, these effects are short-lived as landlords subsequently raise rents in response to wage gains.[13] Increasing earnings is a necessary step to fighting the rental affordability crisis in the East Bay, especially for workers of color, but additional supports are needed to address rising rents and cost of living.

Exhibit 13. Median rent-to-household income ratio by quintiles of household income, in 2019 dollars

Source: Labor Center analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015-2019 American Community Survey 1-year Samples.

Conclusion

This report updated the analyses in the 2012 "The State of Work in the East Bay and Oakland" report, authored by the East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy, that documented the struggle of East Bay workers with low wages, near poverty, and growing inequality due to the Great Recession. In this update, we examined the state of work in the East Bay during 2015 to 2019. Though these were years of economic growth and perceived prosperity, we nonetheless find that one in four East Bay workers earned low wages, 12.2% were in or near poverty, and over half did not make a wage sufficient to support a family of two adults and two children, even assuming a partner worked full-time and earned the same wage. These problems were particularly acute for workers of color. As we work toward recovery from the economic downturn caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, our report demonstrates that a return to a pre-pandemic economy will not be adequate for many East Bay workers and their families to achieve self-sufficiency. An upcoming report will examine the impact of Covid-19 on the state of work in the East Bay.

Methods and sources

Primary analysis relies on data from the American Community Survey (ACS) 2019 5-Year sample. Analysis of housing cost-burden among East Bay workers and renters uses additional data from ACS 1-Year samples for 2015-2019. The ACS samples are restricted to 16- to 64-year olds, with non-zero earnings in the past year, who were not self-employed or unpaid family workers, who were at work last week or had a job but were not at work last week, and worked at least 27 weeks in the previous year and at least 10 hours a week. The ACS sample includes individuals who worked in Alameda County or Contra Costa County in California. The weighted sample includes just under a million workers (n = 905,933). Around 80% of individuals who worked in Alameda or Contra Costa Counties were also residents of the East Bay.

The ACS does not include an hourly earnings measure; we therefore construct the hourly wage measure by dividing the worker's annual earnings by the product of usual hours worked per week and weeks worked last year. The ACS annual earnings variable includes wages, salary, commissions, and cash bonuses or tips from all jobs, before tax deductions. We trimmed hourly wage outliers by dropping wages less than $0.50 or greater than $100 in 1989 dollars.[14] We then smoothed the hourly wages with a function that randomly adds or subtracts between $0.00 and $0.25 to each hourly wage. All earnings, income, and rental rates are in 2019 dollars.

Racial and ethnic categories included in this analysis were composed in the following ways. Workers identifying as Hispanic regardless of race were assigned as Hispanic. The remaining categories include non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Asian and Asian Pacific Islander, and non-Hispanic white. Due to smaller sample sizes some analyses do not include workers in the "other" category which generally includes Native Americans, those identifying with two or more racial groups, or as "other race" not specified.

We use the MIT Living Wage Calculator[15] to identify the percentage of workers who do not earn a living wage or a self-sufficiency wage. The MIT Living Wage Calculator estimates a self-sufficiency wage for full-time working one- and two-adult households with up to three dependent children for different regions

taking into account basic needs such as food, child care, medical expenses, housing, transportation, and other miscellaneous needs and estimates. We adjusted MIT's 2022 self-sufficiency wage estimates for Alameda and Contra Costa Counties for each family type to 2019 dollars. We then compared workers' hourly wages to each threshold to determine the percentage of East Bay workers who did not earn a wage sufficient to make ends meet for different family structures including: one-adult households, two-adult households (assumes both adults are working full time), single parent households with one or two children, and two-adult households with one or two children (assumes both adults are working full time). The table below provides the living wage thresholds for each family type in 2019 dollars.

Exhibit 14: MIT Living Wage thresholds for Alameda and Contra Costa Counties in 2019 dollars for different family sizes

Family size	Alameda County	Contra Costa County
1 adult	$21.75	$21.75
1 adult, 1 child	$44.42	$43.72
1 adult, 2 children	$55.92	$54.52
2 adults	$16.37	$16.37
2 adults, 1 child	$23.91	$23.56
2 adults, 2 children	$30.71	$30.01

Note: Analysis includes a single adult supporting up to two children and two working adults supporting up to two children.

We calculated the percentage of working renters who were housing cost-burdened by creating a ratio of rent costs relative to total household income. Homeowners and those paying "no cash rent" were excluded. Workers living in households spending more than 30% of their total household income on rent were considered housing cost-burdened and those spending more than 50% of their total household income on rent were considered severely housing cost-burdened. Identifying workers, families, or households spending more than 30% of their household income on rent is a long-used and easy-to-understand standard for estimating housing cost-burden. However, it is important to understand the ways in which this measure is limited. Because the measure is a simple ratio of rent costs relative to household income the measure is agnostic to different levels of income, household size, or expenses. There may be important questions about whether a housing cost-burdened higher-income household is as equally housing cost-burdened as a lower-income household or if housing cost-burdened households with children are as equally cost-burdened as single adult households. Additionally, the 30% standard cannot account for households that may avoid being housing cost-burdened by living in poor-quality housing, commuting longer to work, or living in overcrowded conditions. For history, critiques, and alternatives to the rent-ratio standard check out Airgood-Obrycki, Hermann, and Wedeen (2022),[16] Belsky, Goodman, and Drew (2005),[17] HUD (n.d.),[18] and Stephen Ezennia and Onal Hoskara (2019).[19]

Endnotes

1   In this report, we define the East Bay as consisting of the counties of Alameda and Contra Costa.

2   EBASE. "The State of Work in the East Bay and Oakland." East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy, 2012. https://workingeastbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/State-of-Work-in-the-East-Bay-and-Oakland-2012.pdf.

3   EBASE. "East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy." https://workingeastbay.org/.

4   According to data available from the Federal Reserve, between 2015 and 2019, the U.S. economy grew 8%, income per person grew 9%, the stock market grew at a rate of 9% per year, while inflation was under 2% per year. FRED. "Federal Reserve Economic Data." https://fred.stlouisfed.org/.

5   See methods section for sample information.

6   See methods section for details on racial and ethnic group categorization.

7   In this report, the term "white" refers to non-Hispanic individuals that self-identify their race as white.

8   UC Berkeley Labor Center. "Inventory of US City and County Minimum Wage Ordinances." *UC Berkeley Labor Center* (blog), 2023. https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/inventory-of-us-city-and-county-minimum-wage-ordinances/.

9   To learn more, see our "Low-Wage Work in California Data Explorer" at https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/low-wage-work-in-california-data-explorer/ which utilizes this method of defining "low-wage worker. "Low-Wage Work in California Data Explorer."

10   MIT. "Living Wage Calculator," 2023. https://livingwage.mit.edu/. For more information on wage levels required to earn a living wage in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator, see Exhibit 14 in the Methods section of this report.

11   Zhavoronkova, Marina, Rose Khatter, and Matthew Brady. "Occupational Segregation in America." Center for American Progress, March 29, 2022. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/occupational-segregation-in-america/.

12   Our estimate of housing cost-burdened workers is lower than other studies likely due to our sample selection restrictions. See methodology section for discussion.

13   Agarwal, Sumit, Brent W. Ambrose, and Moussa Diop. "Do Minimum Wage Increases Benefit Intended Households? Evidence from the Performance of Residential Leases." Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 2019. https://www.philadelphiafed.org/consumer-finance/mortgage-markets/do-minimum-wage-increases-benefit-intended-households.

14   This step follows the methodology from: Economic Policy Institute, "Methodology for Measuring Wages and Benefits," State of Working America Data Library, February 21, 2019, https://www.epi.org/data/methodology/.

15   MIT. "Living Wage Calculator," 2023. https://livingwage.mit.edu/.

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