

OCTOBER 2019

# CAFETERIA FOOD SERVICE WORKERS IN MASSACHUSETTS

An Analysis of an SEIU Local 888 Member Survey

Prepared by the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Labor  
Center

## ABOUT THIS SURVEY

In September 2019, just over 1000 cafeteria workers represented by SEIU Local 888 in Massachusetts were asked to complete a 30 question survey about their employment conditions. The survey was administered in person as well as through an online form collected by SEIU Local 888 staff. A total of 322 surveys were completed. This was an approximately 33% response rate across the 21 school chapters and two veterans homes represented. The survey was then analyzed by faculty and students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Labor Center. A complete copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A.

# JOB SECURITY & TURNOVER

For most of the cafeteria workers who responded to the survey, these jobs are a steady, albeit incomplete, source of employment. Over 50% of the respondents had worked in their position for over 5 years. Fewer than 9% had been at their job for less than a year.

Despite this length of employment, more than 37% of respondents have jobs in addition to their cafeteria position and almost a fifth (18.7%) said they would like more hours than they are given. This is likely due to the high incidence of part-time work. Among those who responded to the survey 41% reported working fewer than 30 hours a week, and 12% working fewer than 20 hours per week.

## WAGES & BENEFITS

Worker pay is low for school cafeteria workers. Nearly three quarters (74.5%) of the respondents make less than \$18.00/hour, with a full quarter (25.7%) earning under \$15.00/hour.

Since the food service workforce in elementary and secondary schools in Massachusetts is overwhelmingly female (92.4%), this issue of low wages becomes an important gender equity issue. (i)

While a significant number of workers (74.5%) reported access to healthcare, a solid 10.6% of respondents remain ineligible because they do not work enough hours.

Not all of the workers who have healthcare also have dental and vision. A smaller number of respondents reported having access to these benefits, 64.8% and 52.1% respectively.

(i) Data compiled from the U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (2013-2017). Calculations on file with author



**75%**

*Percent  
of respondents  
earning less than  
\$18.00/hour*

## HEALTH AND SAFETY

Food service work can involve a range of safety and health hazards including cuts, burns and slips and falls. When asked about how safe they felt at work, 30% percent of respondents reported that they did not always feel safe at work.

One result of this is a high rate of reported injuries on the job. A total of 35% reported having at least one injury on the job. This is very high compared to the 3% national incidence of injury and illness on the job for food service workers. (ii)

Table 1 below shows the percent of respondents reporting various types of health and safety issues in the workplace.

(ii) OSHA, Incidence rates of nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses by industry and case types, 2015, NAICS Code 722, at <https://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/osh/os/ostb4732.pdf>

**Table 1: % of Respondents Reporting Health and Safety Issues**

High Heat	28.0%
Improperly trained co-workers	21.4%
Heavy lifting without enough staff	21.4%
Slippery Floors	21.7%
Low Ventilation	17.7%
Unclear procedure for emergency	4.7%
Improperly stored chemicals	2.5%

## STAFFING

Three quarters (74%) of respondents have experienced an understaffed cafeteria at least once or twice a month. Eighteen percent describe this as a chronic problem with the cafeteria always understaffed.

As a result of this understaffing, 65.5% of respondents have covered the duties of another staff member at least a few times a month. This problem of understaffing is exacerbated by the fact that the vast majority (70%) of workers report that they are not compensated when this happens.

## TRAINING

Ten percent of respondents do not receive adequate training, and nearly half (47.7%) reported that they do not feel they receive regular training that would help them excel in their job and be prepared for career advancement opportunities.