



Wages, Job Quality, and Housing Affordability among California's School Food Service Workforce

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California has several policy and legislative initiatives aimed to improve school nutrition, including the universal meals program known as School Meals for All.¹ The 2022–2023 state budget allocated more than \$2 billion in funds to support School Meals for All, school food infrastructure, staff training, and food procurement efforts, including a farm-to-school grant program. Besides helping to address ongoing food insecurity affecting as many as 3.2 million US households with children in 2023 (among 18 million total households experiencing food insecurity),² providing students with access to healthy school lunches can improve a host of student life outcomes (Jia et al. 2020). California needs a skilled and stable school food service workforce to support universal meals delivery, local sourcing, and scratch cooking efforts. This report answers key questions about the wages needed to afford basic one-bedroom housing and the job quality of California public school food service occupations, and it shares insights from school food service workers.

Nationwide, the school food workforce faces several challenges. For many key positions, pay is relatively low. In 2019, non-administrative school food service positions paid \$13.17 per hour for a part-time food service assistant to \$17.50 per hour for a cafeteria or food service manager (Billings, Bryan, and Donovan 2022). A detailed 2023 survey of Wisconsin school food service workers found

workers in most positions and districts were rent burdened (Healthy School Meals for All 2023); median non-managerial wages ranged from \$13.60 per hour to \$15.80 per hour, with only one reporting district providing a good wage (above 1.5 times a poverty-level wage for a family of four). When adjusted for inflation, school food service workers' wages nationally were lower in 2018–2022 than in 2008–2012 (Hinkley 2024). Many districts or programs experience staffing shortages, which the COVID-19 pandemic worsened, with nine in ten school meal programs reporting staffing shortage challenges in 2024 (School Nutrition Association 2024; Hinkley 2024).

[The wages in this industry don't satisfy my family's needs] because we're not 12-month employees. We're 10-month, that's why most of these women are married and have the pleasure of having a husband, second income, but [if they are] single they have to get another job ... it doesn't really help in California ... versus the rent and all the stuff that we have to pay.

—School food service foreperson

These challenges may be heightened in California, which has the highest median housing costs of any state.³ The most expensive component of a family's budget is typically housing, and school food workers who cannot afford it may leave for other occupations that pay more, heightening staffing shortages. Turnover and vacancy rates are high in California public school food services, and district directors reported being concerned about having enough staff to meet student meal needs (Food Insight Group 2024). California is currently implementing new minimum wage legislation in several sectors that may impact worker choices and worsen staffing shortages in lower-paying occupations. First, California Assembly Bill 1228 (AB 1228) established a \$20 per hour minimum wage for all fast-food workers, which took effect in April 2024.⁴ Early research since the implementation of that law shows benefits to workers and minimal job loss in the fast food industry (Reich and Sosinskiy 2024). Some economists predict heightened stress on other food service jobs, especially those with low pay and high turnover.⁵ California also passed Senate Bill 525 (SB 525), which will gradually implement a \$25 per hour minimum wage for all workers in the health care field.⁶ Some entry-level health care occupations, such as certified nursing assistant, require less than two months of training and no academic degree and could be competitive alternatives to some entry-level public school food service occupations, which typically pay less than \$20 per hour in California.

Overall job quality (including pay) is intimately tied to a lack of workforce equity in many ways. Women and people of color disproportionately work lower-paying, lower-quality jobs, resulting in occupational crowding (the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of a certain demographic group such as women or Black people in certain occupations) and occupational segregation (the unequal

distribution of demographic groups across jobs) (Biu et al. 2023). Initiatives to improve pay equity in occupationally segregated (and historically undervalued) occupations have been shown to reduce racial equity gaps.⁷ Occupational segregation by race and especially by gender are present in food service occupations, along with associated pay disparities (Hinkley 2024; Biu et al. 2023). These disparities are reflected in levels of scratch cooking in California, where districts with majority students of color have less access to scratch cooking and pesticide-free foods, which are often healthier than alternatives (Vincent et al. 2020). School food service workers may also experience crowding and segregation by age, with a median age of 52 compared to 28 for other non-school food service workers (Hinkley 2024).

This brief uses a variety of data sources to answer the following questions:

- What is the discrepancy between pay in school food service occupations in school year (SY) 2023–2024 and what is needed to afford basic one-bedroom housing in California? We use basic housing affordability as a proxy for a family-sustaining wage.
- How do the quality of school food service occupations in California compare with other occupations in the state? We measure quality using metrics of wages, hours and schedule, health insurance and retirement benefits, injury rates, on-the-job training, and autonomy.

The answers to these questions have implications for the sustainability of these occupations, with lessons that are applicable to California and other states or communities facing similar circumstances. Furthermore, a strong and stable workforce will help California achieve its healthy food policy goals, thereby improving child health outcomes and decreasing equity gaps in access to healthy school lunches (Vincent et al. 2020). We find that school-based workers in city and suburban districts all earn substantially less than what is needed to afford one-bedroom housing in their localities. Workers in rural and town districts earn less overall but are nearer to (or above) what is needed to afford local one-bedroom housing. Compared with other mostly low-paying, low-quality, entry-level occupations in California, the school food occupations of assistant or general helper, cashier, and dishwasher each score below other food service, health care, and child care occupations.

Data Sources and Methods

Table 1 shows the data sources we used. Our team conducted a web-based survey of all California school districts during early 2024.⁸ The survey asked about food service occupational characteristics, the use of scratch cooking, and staffing models. Only the workforce characteristics are used in this analysis. In total, there were 108 public district responses out of approximately 940 districts in the state (11 percent response rate). The survey asked about 16 different school food service occupations, and appendix tables A1 and A2 show the district characteristics. Seven of the occupations were “school-based,” meaning each school within a district has those employees. The other nine occupations were “district-based,” meaning those employees work at district-level facilities instead of individual schools.

TABLE 1
Data Sources

Source	Metrics	Geography	Analysis
Workforce Survey of CA School Districts	California school food service occupational characteristics (wages, hours, and benefits)	California	Housing wage, job quality
Survey of public-school food service workers	Perspectives of California public school food service workers	California	Quotes and insight
National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) housing wages (2023)	Wages needed to afford housing	California	Housing wages
CA Employment Development Department (EDD) (2020–2030)	California-specific entry-level educational and training requirements	California	Job quality
Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) (2023)	Median wages by occupation; number of workers in occupations and industries	California	Job quality
Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS) (2023)	Percent of workers where on-the-job training (OJT) is required	National	Job quality
California Department of Education (CDE)	District size and characteristics; statewide school nutrition program data	California	Job quality
ONET Work Context (2023)	Percent full-time workers; working a regular schedule; autonomy	National	Job quality
BLS Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses (SOII)	Occupational injury rate per 100 workers	National	Job quality
Current Population Survey (CPS/CPS-ASEC) (2023)	Retirement offered; health insurance offered	National	Job quality

Note: Each data source uses the most recent available year.

To provide context from the lived experience of hourly school food service workers in California, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews. Participants were recruited via a brief survey. Of 77 respondents who indicated they would be willing to be interviewed, 21 participated in 60-to-90-minute semi-structured remote interviews. Participants were selected to represent diverse demographics (age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, and union membership) of the school nutrition workforce in California. They represented various geographic locations, school district sizes, urbanicity/rurality, and types of food service programs (packaged meals versus scratch cooking). Interviews took place until saturation was reached on key research questions, followed by transcription and coding using an inductive/deductive codebook. Representative perspectives from those interviews are included throughout this brief.

We use publicly available county- and metropolitan-level data from the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) to estimate the hourly wages needed to afford basic housing of at least one bedroom in each district.⁹ NLIHC data were merged with the school food service workforce survey data by locality (county or metropolitan area).¹⁰

To examine job quality, we use publicly available data on occupational characteristics which we compared with the school-based food service occupations tracked in the workforce survey. Wherever possible we used occupational data for California specifically, and otherwise used nationally available

data. Comparison occupations are defined by their six-digit Bureau of Labor Statistics Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes; however, some occupational characteristics are only available at the four-digit, and in some cases, two-digit SOC code levels.¹¹ To match up with mostly entry-level school-based occupations, the comparison occupations were restricted to occupations where the typical entry-level education was up to a postsecondary non-degree award, and no required job training or short-term on-the-job training. The entry-level education and job training data are from the 2020–2030 California Employment Projections.

We use methods outlined in Katz et al. 2022 and Biu et al. 2023 to generate job quality scores for school nutrition occupations and comparison occupations. For each occupation, eight metrics of job quality are calculated. Each metric is compared with the median metric to generate a ratio. Medians are weighted to the prevalence of each occupation in California, meaning more common jobs will contribute more heavily to the median for each job quality metric. To avoid any one metric having an outsized impact on the final score, each score is normalized between 0 and 1. The final job quality score is the sum across the eight normalized metrics of job quality for a maximum possible score of 8 and a minimum score of 0, with no occupation scoring a 0 or an 8. Occupations from the workforce survey are aligned with publicly available data to the best extent possible and scored against the same median benchmarks.

Prior uses of this framework have incorporated several other metrics we chose to omit, including union coverage and job security. California is one of the most heavily unionized states, including the surveyed public school food service occupations (Bivens et al 2017). Occupation-level data on union coverage was not available for California, and union membership rates were far higher among surveyed school food service occupations when compared with national-level union coverage by occupation. We chose to omit two metrics of job security (projected ten-year change in total employment and unemployment rate), as these were not measured by our survey and could interact with California-specific trends we likewise could not measure. We also use insurance and retirement offered, rather than uptake, to more closely match the workforce survey data.

Limitations

- **Hourly wages versus annual earnings.** The survey directly measured hourly wages for each occupation; however, many school food workers are part-time and part-year.¹² This may limit their total or annual earnings (Hinkley 2024), which could further impede their ability to afford housing. In many cases, the hourly wage analysis *overestimates* what workers can afford when considered annually. This topic is discussed in further detail below and in appendix figures A8 and A9.
- **Not considering household wages.** Some workers may be able to afford basic housing due to their partner’s earnings and their overall household earnings.
- **Unmeasured or different priority job quality factors.** Many factors influence worker choices and perceived job quality. This work accounts for a subset of those factors measurable using

publicly available data. Some of those unmeasured factors may be more important to some workers compared with the factors we use. Also, measured quality factors such as part-year schedules could be positive to some workers and negative to others, depending on preference.

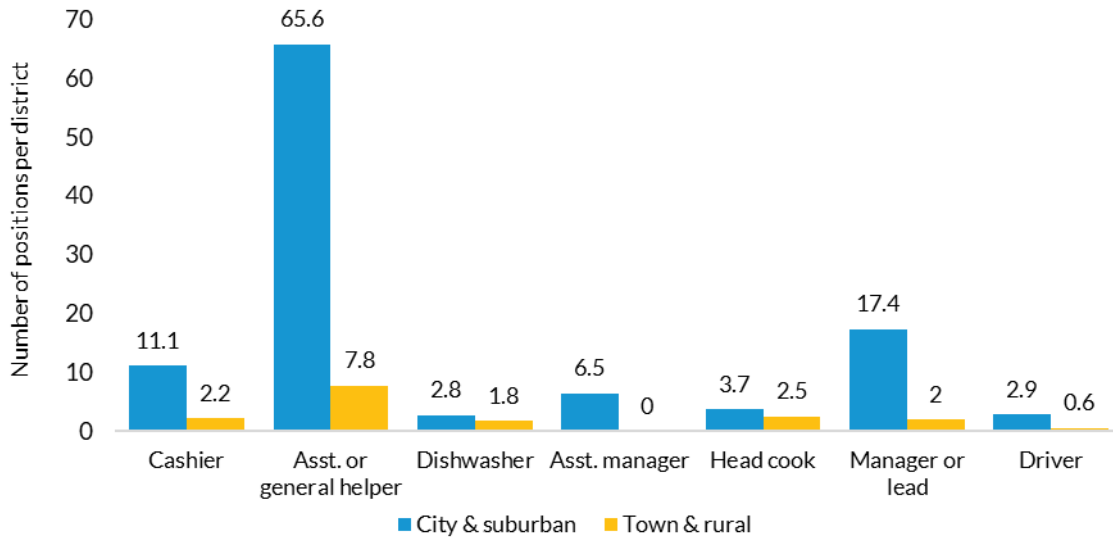
- **Publicly available data to fill survey gaps.** School food service occupations were matched as closely as possible to publicly available data, but differences in definitions across sources may result in some unmeasured variation in job quality scores. Injury rate and autonomy metrics were not directly measured by the survey and national data from comparable occupations were used to estimate those metrics in the analysis of job quality in the food service workforce. The percentage of school food service workers who receive professional development beyond the mandated minimum was compared with the percentage of workers with required on-the-job training, which may slightly overestimate the comparison occupations relative to school food service occupations.

Affording Basic Housing

For each public school food service job, what hourly pay is needed to afford basic housing? This section contains reports of median hourly wages and adjustments across California districts that would be needed to ensure that an individual in the lowest paying occupation in each public district could afford a local one-bedroom dwelling (referred to here as “basic housing”). Our analysis considers school-based jobs separately from district-based jobs and considers city or suburban districts separately from town or rural districts, as defined by the California Department of Education.¹³ Although outsourcing to food service vendors is a relatively common practice nationwide in school food service operations and has a yet unknown effect on wages and retention (Hinkley 2024), most of the public school districts who responded to this survey are self-operated (91 percent, 2 missing). Figures 1 and 2 show the average number of positions per district for school-based and district-based occupations, respectively, by city and suburban and by town and rural districts. Assistants and general helpers are by far the most common occupation across all district localities.

FIGURE 1

Number of School-Based Food Service Positions by Occupation and District Type

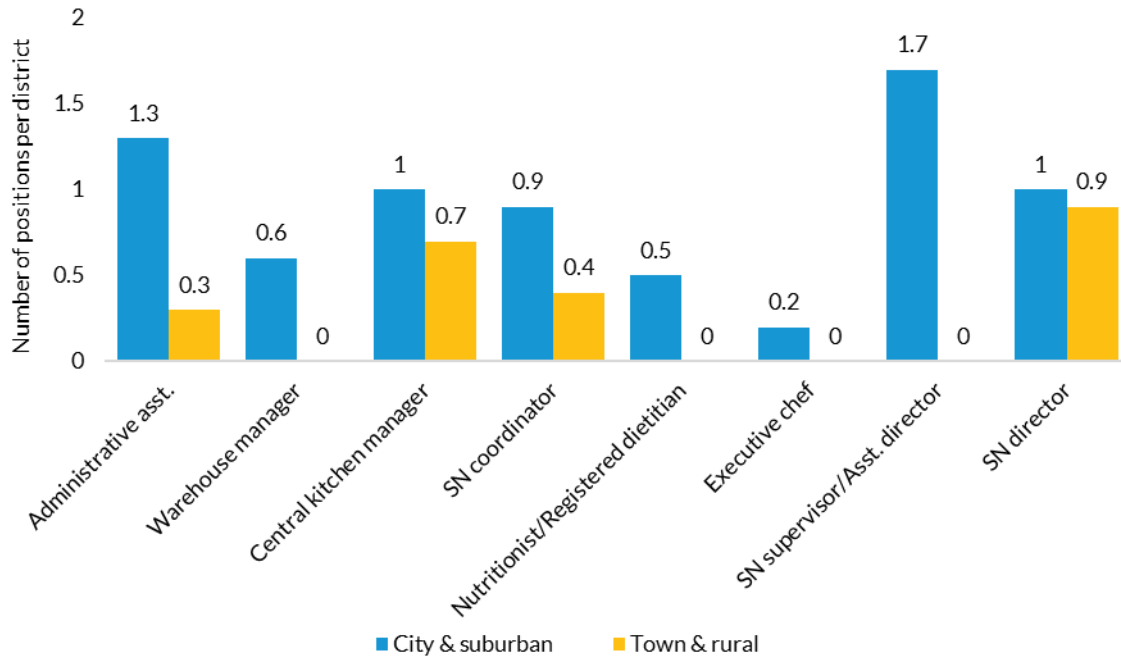


Source: Workforce survey, CDE.

Notes: N = 47 city and suburban districts; N = 33 town and rural districts. Asst. = assistant.

FIGURE 2

Number of District-Based Food Service Positions by Occupation and District Type



Source: Workforce survey, CDE.

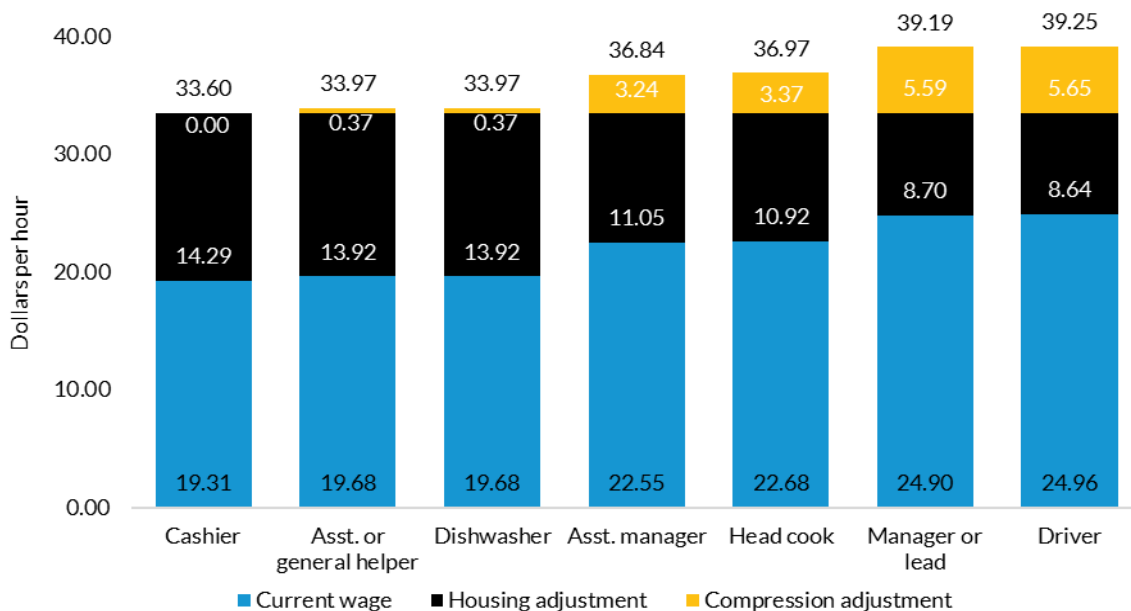
Notes: N = 47 city and suburban districts; N = 33 town and rural districts. Asst. = assistant. SN = school nutrition.

“Mostly the people that work here ... we all depend on the husband’s full-time job. We get insurance from the husband because the husband work for [a corporation]. That’s why the moms can do this job. The people that don’t have that luxury, they work two jobs.”

–School food and nutrition assistant

Nearly all (94 percent) of surveyed city and suburban districts had one or more job that paid below the basic housing wage in their locality. Figure 3 shows the median wages of public school-based food service occupations in urban or suburban California districts during the school year (SY) 2023–2024. It shows a housing adjustment for the wages each occupation would hypothetically need to pay for a worker to afford basic housing in those locales. We also implement a compression adjustment to show what pay is hypothetically needed to preserve the gaps between each occupation as measured by the workforce survey, so that all occupations do not pay the same.¹⁴ The lowest paying occupation of cashier pays \$19.31 per hour, which is \$14.29 per hour below what is needed to afford basic housing in those locales. The highest paying school-based occupation of driver earns \$24.96 per hour, which is \$8.64 below what is needed to afford basic housing. School-based occupational compression adjustments range from \$0.37 to \$5.65 per hour per occupation.

FIGURE 3
Wages in SY 2023–2024 and Wages Needed to Afford Basic Housing in School-Based Food Service Occupations in City and Suburban California Districts



Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 47 districts (workforce survey). Housing adjustment N = 435 (NLIHC and CDE). Asst. = assistant. Top labels show the total hypothetical wage when considering current wage, the housing adjustment a worker would need to afford a local one-bedroom dwelling, and a compression adjustment to preserve the pay scale.

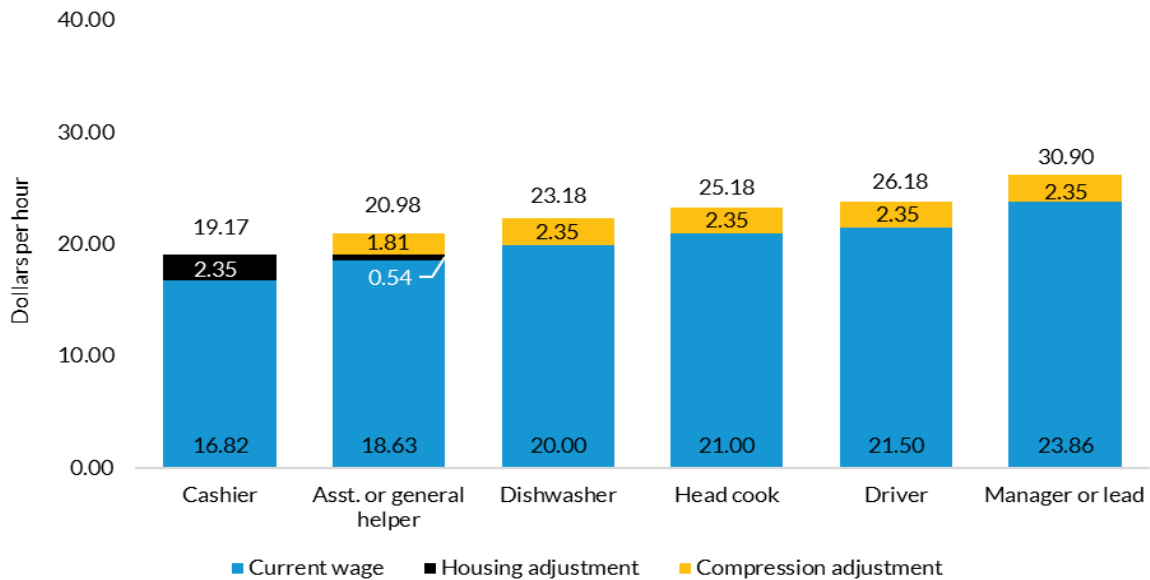
About half of town and rural districts (55 percent) had a job that paid below the basic housing wage. Figure 4 shows SY 2023–2024 public school-based food service occupation wages and basic housing and compression adjustments in town and rural districts. Housing in those districts is less expensive than in city and suburban districts, and workers are much closer to being able to afford basic housing (despite earning marginally less). The median wage needed to afford basic housing is \$19.17 in these locales—substantially lower than for city and suburban districts. The hierarchy of hourly pay is similar in town and rural districts, although managers and leads were relatively higher paid than their counterparts in city and suburban districts. Cashiers and assistants or general helpers each require a housing adjustment to afford basic housing (\$2.35 and \$0.54 per hour, respectively), while other occupations are above the median housing wage. For occupations paying above the basic housing wage, the compression adjustment (\$2.35 per hour) ensures they retain the same gap to other occupations as before the housing adjustments.

I think food service worker is definitely underpaid, undervalued because people ... [do] not realize we are responsible for students' health. We have to make sure all the milk, food, arrive at the right temperature. We are very important to keep our children healthy. People are misunderstanding about lunch lady is undereducated or they cannot find other job that's why they became a lunch lady.

—Food and nutrition assistant

FIGURE 4

Wages in SY 2023–2024 and Wages Needed to Afford Basic Housing in School-Based Food Service Occupations in Town and Rural California Districts



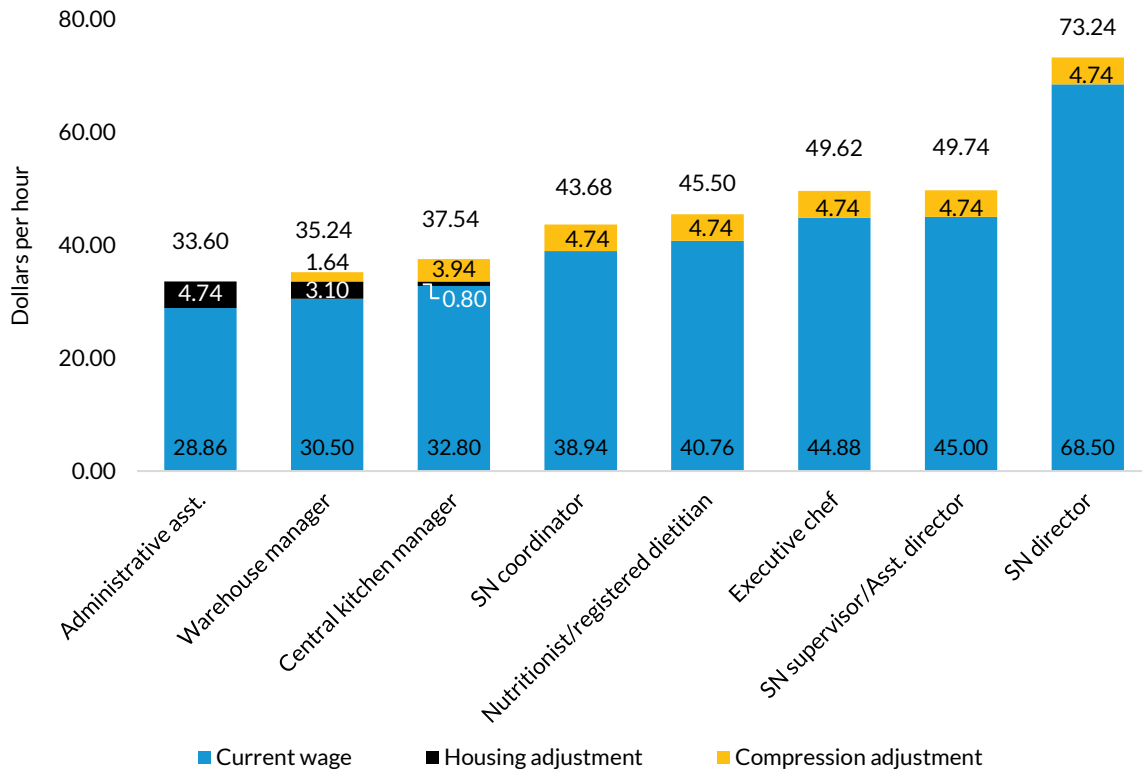
Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 33 districts (workforce survey). Wages needed N = 504 (NLIHC and CDE). Asst. = assistant. Top labels show the total hypothetical wage when considering current wage, the housing adjustment a worker would need to afford a local one-bedroom dwelling, and a compression adjustment to preserve the pay scale. The assistant manager position is not displayed because all town and rural respondents indicated they had zero positions in that occupation.

District-based food service occupations often pay more than the wage required to afford a one-bedroom dwelling in their locality, but half of those in urban or suburban districts (52 percent) had one or more district-based occupation paying below the local housing benchmark. Figure 5 shows the current wages and wages needed to afford basic housing among district-based occupations in city and suburban California districts. District-based occupations pay substantially higher than school-based occupations, with the lowest paying being administrative assistants (\$28.86 per hour) and the highest being directors (\$68.50). Still, across city and suburban districts, the lowest paying occupation does not pay for basic housing without a \$4.74 per hour adjustment. Warehouse managers (\$30.50 per hour) and central kitchen managers (\$32.80) also earn below the housing wage.

FIGURE 5

Wages in SY 2023–2024 and Wages Needed to Afford Basic Housing in District-Based Food Service Occupations in City and Suburban California Districts



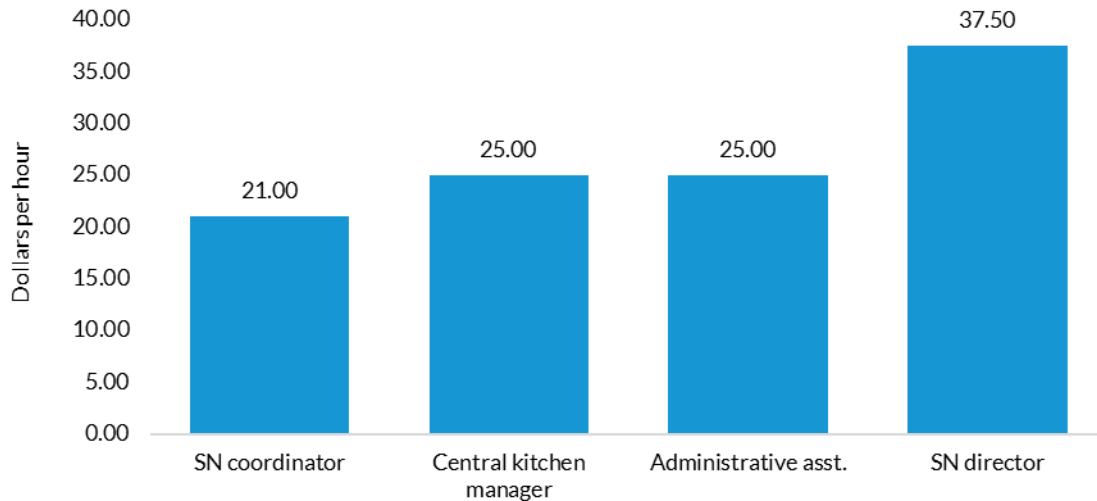
Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 35 districts (workforce survey). Wages needed N = 504 (NLIHC and CDE). Asst. = assistant. SN = School Nutrition. Top labels show the total hypothetical wage when considering current wage, the housing adjustment a worker would need to afford a local one-bedroom dwelling, and a compression adjustment to preserve the pay scale.

One third (34 percent) of town or rural districts had a district-based occupation that paid below the local housing benchmark. Figure 6 shows wages among district-based occupations in town and rural California districts. Town or rural districts reported fewer occupations and positions, and generally operate with only a few district-based employees. Across the four occupations that were sufficiently common, each currently pay above the hourly wage needed to afford basic housing (\$19.17 per hour). The lowest paying occupation is school nutrition coordinator (\$21.00 per hour) while the highest paying is school nutrition director (\$37.50 per hour). These are substantially lower wages than their corresponding positions in city and suburban districts, but are relatively higher when compared with the basic housing wage in their locality.

FIGURE 6

Wages in SY 2023–2024 in District-Based Food Service Occupations in Town and Rural California Districts



Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 44 districts (workforce survey). Wages needed N = 435 (NLIHC and CDE). Asst. = Assistant. SN = School Nutrition. The occupations of nutritionist/registered dietitian, warehouse manager, farm-to-school coordinator, school nutrition supervisor/assistant director, and executive chef are not shown due to both the small number of average positions per district and the corresponding lack of wage data.

For some occupations, hourly wages may substantially overestimate what level of housing the worker can afford. Our survey did not directly measure annual worker earnings and only approximately measured full-time status and full-year status.¹⁵ Using a set of assumptions,¹⁶ we estimate annual earnings for each occupation across all districts and find that housing affordability is likely substantially lower when considering that many school food occupations are part-time and part-year (appendix tables A8 and A9). This most acutely affects the commonly part-time school-based occupations of dishwasher (95 percent part-time), cashier (89 percent part-time), and assistant or general helper (77 percent part-time). In city and suburban districts, those occupations each earn approximately \$20,000 per year. When compared with the \$69,880 median annual earnings needed to afford one-bedroom housing in those locales, those occupations would need a \$49,000 per year increase to afford basic housing—or a 3.5-fold increase. That is much larger than the 1.7-fold increase that results from the hourly wage perspective above.

Rural and town districts have a similar but less significant gap, with cashiers earning approximately \$14,900 per year, dishwashers earning \$17,300 per year, and assistants or general helpers earning \$18,100 per year when accounting for part-time and part-year status. The median annual earnings needed to afford a one-bedroom apartment are \$39,880 in those locales, meaning each occupation would need a \$21,800 to 25,000 increase to afford basic housing (or a 2.2 to 2.7-fold increase). Based on survey data and a review of publicly available information (such as collective bargaining agreements),

the number of hours worked and the months of work in part-year contracts vary by district and occupation, and therefore these values are approximate. However, it is clear that hourly wages *overestimate* what housing workers can afford, in some cases by a substantial amount.

Job Quality in the California Entry-Level Workforce

For each public-school food service occupation, how does their total compensation and job quality compare with other occupations in California? Table 2 shows job quality scores of the seven school-based public school food service occupations (highlighted in orange) as compared with other occupations in the 70th percentile of most common entry-level occupations in California.¹⁷ Most of the comparison occupations have relatively low pay, and many struggle with high turnover and low retention, such as certified nursing assistants.¹⁸ There are several categories of comparison entry-level occupations:

1. those in food services (highlighted green),
2. those in other industries (such as retail), and
3. those in education and school support, but not in food services (such as childcare workers and school janitorial staff).

TABLE 2

Job Quality of Public-School Food Service and Comparison Occupations for the Most Common Entry-Level Occupations in California

Occupation	Hourly wage	Full-time hours	Regular schedule	Health insurance	Retirement	Injury rate	On-the-job train.	Autonomy	Quality score
Executive secretaries and executive admin. asst.	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.3	0.5	1.0	0.4	0.8	5.5
Self-enrichment teachers	0.2	0.1	0.6	1.0	0.9	0.6	0.6	1.0	5.1
Shipping, receiving, and inventory clerks	0.2	0.9	1.0	0.7	0.6	0.1	1.0	0.7	5.0
Manager or lead (SFW)	0.3	0.9	0.0	0.8	1.0	0.1	1.0	0.8	4.9
Security guards	0.1	1.0	1.0	0.3	0.5	0.1	0.9	0.8	4.8
FLS of office and admin. support workers	0.6	0.7	1.0	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.7	4.7
Licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses	0.7	0.7	0.9	0.6	0.5	0.0	0.7	0.5	4.6
Postal service mail carriers	0.5	0.4	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.2	0.9	0.4	4.5
Social and human service asst.	0.3	0.6	0.8	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.9	0.6	4.4
Secretaries and admin. asst.*	0.3	0.6	1.0	0.3	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.6	4.4

Occupation	Hourly wage	Full-time hours	Regular schedule	Health insurance	Retirement	Injury rate	On-the-job train.	Autonomy	Quality score
Office clerks, general	0.2	0.7	1.0	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.8	0.3	4.4
Assistant manager (SFW)	0.2	0.7	0.0	0.6	0.9	0.1	1.0	0.8	4.4
FLS of transportation and material moving workers**	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.8	0.9	4.4
Head cook (SFW)	0.2	0.9	0.0	0.8	1.0	0.1	0.9	0.5	4.3
Receptionists and information clerks	0.1	0.8	0.8	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.9	0.6	4.2
Cooks, short order	0.1	0.6	0.7	0.3	0.2	0.8	0.9	0.5	4.2
Customer service representatives	0.2	0.8	0.9	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.8	0.2	4.2
Medical assistants (+)	0.3	1.0	1.0	0.4	0.4	0.1	0.8	0.3	4.2
Cleaners of vehicles and equipment	0.0	0.8	0.9	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.8	0.8	4.2
Medical assistants	0.2	1.0	1.0	0.4	0.4	0.1	0.8	0.3	4.1
Driver (SFW)	0.3	0.8	0.0	0.8	0.9	0.0	0.9	0.4	4.1
FLS of production and operating workers	0.7	0.2	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.1	0.5	0.8	4.1
FLS of mechanics, installers, and repairers	0.9	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.1	0.0	0.8	4.0
Counter and rental clerks	0.1	0.3	0.7	0.4	0.3	0.5	1.0	0.6	4.0
Protective service workers, all other	0.1	0.5	0.9	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.6	0.9	3.9
Cooks, private household	0.8	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.9	0.7	3.9
Sales and related workers, all other	0.3	0.3	0.6	0.7	0.4	0.0	0.9	0.6	3.8
Child care workers	0.1	0.5	0.9	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.9	0.8	3.8
Packers and packagers, hand	0.1	0.9	0.7	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.8	0.3	3.8
Automotive service technicians and mechanics	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.6	0.8	3.8
FLS of construction trades and extraction workers	1.0	0.5	0.6	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.2	0.8	3.7
Stockers and order fillers	0.1	0.5	0.7	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.9	0.6	3.7
Industrial truck and tractor operators	0.2	0.3	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.9	0.7	3.7
Dental assistants (+)	0.3	0.3	1.0	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.4	3.6
First-line supervisors of retail sales workers	0.2	0.4	0.9	0.4	0.3	0.0	0.5	0.8	3.6
Home health and personal care aides (+)	0.3	0.8	0.9	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.8	0.3	3.6
Dental assistants	0.3	0.3	1.0	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.4	3.6

Occupation	Hourly wage	Full-time hours	Regular schedule	Health insurance	Retirement	Injury rate	On-the-job train.	Autonomy	Quality score
Amusement and recreation attendants	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.7	0.7	0.4	1.0	0.4	3.6
Bartenders	0.0	0.2	1.0	0.2	0.1	0.4	0.9	0.7	3.6
Nursing assistants (+)	0.3	0.8	0.9	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.8	0.3	3.5
Property, real estate, and community association managers	0.6	0.2	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.5	0.8	3.5
Exercise trainers and group fitness instructors	0.4	0.0	0.6	0.2	0.2	1.0	0.5	0.7	3.5
Food service managers	0.6	0.3	0.9	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.4	0.7	3.5
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	0.1	0.9	0.9	0.2	0.2	0.0	1.0	0.3	3.5
Janitors and cleaners***	0.1	0.5	0.9	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.8	0.8	3.5
Cooks, institution and cafeteria	0.2	0.5	0.9	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.7	0.5	3.5
Nursing assistants	0.2	0.8	0.9	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.8	0.3	3.4
Dishwashers	0.0	0.3	0.9	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.8	0.7	3.4
FLS of food preparation and serving workers	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.1	0.7	0.8	3.4
Cashiers	0.0	0.3	0.8	0.4	0.3	0.3	1.0	0.3	3.3
Hosts/hostesses****	0.0	0.3	0.8	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.9	0.4	3.3
Home health and personal care aides	0.0	0.8	0.9	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.8	0.3	3.3
Recreation workers	0.1	0.4	0.8	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.9	0.7	3.3
Laborers and freight/stock/material movers, hand	0.1	0.3	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.0	0.8	0.5	3.2
Dining room/cafeteria attendants and bartender helpers	0.0	0.9	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.9	0.3	3.1
Fast food and counter workers (+)	0.1	0.2	0.8	0.2	0.1	0.2	1.0	0.5	3.1
Retail salespersons	0.0	0.1	0.9	0.4	0.3	0.1	0.9	0.4	3.0
Food preparation and serving related workers, all other	0.0	0.5	0.8	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.9	0.5	3.0
Fast food and counter workers	0.0	0.2	0.8	0.2	0.1	0.2	1.0	0.5	3.0
Chefs and head cooks	0.5	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.1	0.6	0.5	3.0
Light truck drivers	0.2	0.3	0.8	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.8	0.4	2.9
Driver/sales workers	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.9	0.4	2.9
Food servers, nonrestaurant	0.1	0.6	0.7	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.5	0.6	2.8
Food preparation workers	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.9	0.4	2.8

Occupation	Hourly wage	Full-time hours	Regular schedule	Health insurance	Retirement	Injury rate	On-the-job train.	Autonomy	Quality score
School nutrition assistant or general helper (SFW)	0.1	0.3	0.0	0.3	0.7	0.1	0.9	0.5	2.8
Cooks, fast food (+)	0.1	0.1	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.9	0.2	2.8
Cooks, fast food	0.0	0.1	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.9	0.2	2.7
Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers	0.4	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.4	0.8	2.6
Landscaping and groundskeeping workers	0.1	1.0	0.5	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.0	2.6
Construction laborers	0.4	0.8	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.6	0.4	2.6
Waiters and waitresses	0.0	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.1	0.3	1.0	0.1	2.6
Cashier (SFW)	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.3	0.6	0.3	0.8	0.3	2.5
Dishwasher (SFW)	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.6	0.1	0.4	0.7	2.2
Manicurists and pedicurists	0.0	0.2	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.6	2.0
Farmworkers and laborers****	0.0	0.4	0.4	0.1	0.6	0.0	N/A	0.2	1.7

Source: Workforce Survey, EDD, OEWS, BLS, ORS, ONET, ACS, CPS.

Notes: (+) = adjusted to estimate CA minimum wage increase. Asst = assistant; Admin = administrative; FLS = first-line supervisors. * Except legal, medical, and executive; ** Except aircraft cargo handling supervisors; *** Except maids and housekeeping cleaners; **** Restaurant, Lounge, and Coffee Shop; ***** Crop, Nursery, and Greenhouse. In each column, lower values are shaded light blue and higher values are shaded dark blue. School-based survey occupation; Other food service occupation. N/A = Missing. Licensed practical and vocational nurse has a wage above \$25 per hour and is therefore not adjusted to account for California minimum health care wage legislation. Dental assistants do have a projected increase in wages, but due to rounding, the final score is the same.

Most key entry-level occupations are comparable to or above some school food service occupations with regard to their job quality metrics. The lowest scoring school-based occupations are dishwasher (2.2), cashier (2.5), and school nutrition assistant or general helper (2.8). Those occupations score low in the categories of wages, full-time hours, regularly scheduled (full-year) work, health insurance, and injury rate.¹⁹ The highest scoring school-based occupations were manager or lead (4.9), assistant manager (4.4), head cook (4.3), and driver (4.1). School-based head cooks scored higher than short order cooks (4.2), due in large part to their benefits scores. School-based cashiers and dishwashers scored below cashiers (3.3) and dishwashers (3.4) in general, largely due to a low share of school-based workers on regular full-year schedules. It is important to note that some workers may view a part-year schedule as an advantage.

School-based public food service occupations generally score low on hourly wages, full-time work status, regular schedule, health insurance availability, and injury rates. The highest scoring school-based occupations were competitive with many other entry-level occupations in California. However, the relatively lower-scoring school nutrition assistant or general helper (2.8) occupation was by far the

most common occupation across districts, representing the largest share of school nutrition workers. That job scored below childcare workers (3.8), stockers and order fillers (3.7), janitors and cleaners (3.5), nursing assistants (3.4 currently or 3.5 with projected minimum wage), retail salespersons (3.0), and fast food and counter workers (3.0 currently or 3.1 with projected minimum wage). School food service cashiers and dishwashers scored even lower, and dishwashers were only above manicurists and pedicurists (2.0) and farmworkers and laborers (1.7) among the 70th percentile of most common entry-level occupations in California.

Like the issues we run into when we're hiring and we're doing our interviews is it's just not enough ... if they can go to a fast food restaurant or a hotel ... and get a part-time job that guarantees more money and more hours versus a school district job where you're capping out at about three to five hours [per day] and it's still lower pay, they always take the former than the latter. They need to redesign that to make it more appealing to a wider variety of candidates.

—District operations manager

Recent increases to the minimum wage in California in fast food and health care industries have a marginal effect on overall job quality across all eight metrics in our analysis. Table 2 shows hypothetical adjustments for new California minimum wage laws in fast food (\$20 per hour) and health care (\$25 per hour) occupations. We assume each occupation below the new minimum wage would have *at least* the new minimums as their median wages, with those adjustments noted with a (+) in table 2.²⁰ Fast food occupations are minimally affected by the change, with their scores increasing by 0.1 each. Entry-level health care occupations are more affected by the minimum wage increase. These occupations can have short and affordable training requirements of eight weeks or less (Loprest and Sick 2023) and may be tempting alternatives for some school food service workers. Home health and personal care aides increase by a score of 0.3 and 16 ranking spots on this list, and nursing assistants and medical assistants also move up several rankings. These changes could affect worker choices, especially considering that our unweighted job quality scale does not consider that wages may be the highest priority for many workers.

District-based public school food service occupations are not shown in table 2, but when included, they occupy the top spots. This is not unexpected, as those occupations pay more and require more experience than most of the entry-level comparison occupations.²¹

I would definitely change other people's perspective, so they realize how difficult a job it really is ... I would like to see the wages increase some. It is a hard job ... harder than I think most people realize.

—Head cook/kitchen manager

Recommendations

- Districts and policymakers should consider the wages workers need to afford basic housing, especially in city and suburban districts where housing is more expensive. Workers who cannot afford housing may struggle, and affording housing is a key criterion of a good job or family sustaining wages. Meeting housing affordability benchmarks could reduce turnover and vacancy rates, which currently strains many districts and poses a challenge when implementing scratch cooking (Food Insight Group 2024; Hinkley 2024).
- Conversely, school food service jobs in rural and town districts may pay closer basic housing benchmarks, their pay is also lower overall, with the median salary of the most common occupation being \$18.63 per hour (assistant or general helper). Therefore, compared with city and suburban districts, they may experience higher competition with fast food and health care workers who will earn at least the state minimums of \$20 per hour and \$25 per hour, respectively, which could raise turnover or vacancy rates in those districts.
- It is important to consider the implications of part-time, part-year work. Recent research shows substantial disparities in the pay and retention outcomes of part-time, part-year public school food service employees (Food Insight Group 2024; Hinkley 2024). The focus on hourly wages almost certainly overestimates the housing that many workers can afford on an annual basis, especially school-based heavily part-time workers such as assistants or general helpers (i.e., cafeteria workers), cashiers, and dishwashers. Our estimates show that annually these workers fall much further below the benchmark needed to afford basic housing than they do on an hourly basis.
- In districts that struggle with retention and vacancy rates, it may be helpful to consider the job quality metrics and what is offered by “competitive” occupations, such as entry-level health care, child care, janitorial work, retail, and fast food work. Other food service jobs that pay more may also be competitive, even if their overall job quality scores are similar to public school food service jobs.
- Providing benefits or worker supports that increase job satisfaction and job quality in low-scoring areas could increase worker retention and reduce vacancy rates. Aside from wages, policymakers and district leadership should consider increased opportunities for full-time or full-year work (where possible), injury and illness prevention strategies, and increased health

insurance availability as ways to improve the quality of entry-level school-based food service occupations (such as assistant or general helper, cashier, and dishwasher).

Notes

- ¹ “California Universal Meals Overview,” California Department of Education, October 10, 2024, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/cauniversalmeals.asp>
- ² “Food Security Status of U.S. Household in 2023,” Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, September 4, 2024, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics/>
- ³ Robin Rothstein and Chris Jennings, “Examining The Cost of Living By State in 2024,” Forbes Advisor, July 15, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/mortgages/cost-of-living-by-state/>
- ⁴ “AB-1228 Fast Food Restaurant Industry: Fast Food Council: Health, Safety, Employment, and Minimum Wage,” 2023–2024, Assembly Bill No. 1228, September 28, 2023, California Legislative Information, https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB1228.
- ⁵ Levi Sumagaysay and Shreya Agrawal, “New California Laws Raise the Minimum Wage for Two Industries. Others Could See Pay Hikes, Too,” CalMatters, December 21, 2023, updated June 19, 2024, accessed October 31, 2024, <https://calmatters.org/economy/2023/12/minimum-wage-2024/>.
- ⁶ “SB-525 Minimum Wages: Health Care Workers,” Senate Bill No. 525, October 16, 2023, California Legislative Information, https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB525.
- ⁷ Eve Mefferd and Justin B. Doromal, “How Wage Supplements Can Help Address Racial Inequities in the Early Care and Education Workforce,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, August 16, 2024, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-wage-supplements-can-help-address-racial-inequities-early-care-and-education>.
- ⁸ The survey was conducted using Qualtrics and had a completion incentive available, although not all districts could accept the incentive. The survey took 30 to 60 minutes to complete. The survey results are unweighted in this analysis.
- ⁹ We also carried out the analysis using standards of zero-bedroom (i.e., studio apartment) and two-bedroom dwellings. It should be noted that one-bedroom dwellings are barely family-sustaining, with pressures on family space. Appendix figures A1 through A7 include findings for zero- and two-bedroom dwellings.
- ¹⁰ Using data from the California Department of Education, we determined which school districts were in a small, medium, or large city. This applied to 19 districts. Each of those districts was compared with the NLIHC housing wages for the corresponding metro area. Assigning the metro area to city-based districts was done manually.
- ¹¹ See BLS’ “Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics,” https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_stru.htm.
- ¹² For each occupation in this report, the survey recorded whether they were part-time or full-time. The survey also collects the share of full-time and part-time staff who are contracted to work a full 12 months.
- ¹³ The median wage needed to afford basic housing in city districts is \$34.89 per hour (N = 141) and in suburban districts it is \$33.60 per hour (N = 294). The median wage needed to afford basic housing in town districts is \$19.15 per hour (N = 156) and in rural districts it is \$19.17 per hour (N = 348). We grouped city with suburban districts and town with rural districts because of their similar housing wages and to maximize survey sample sizes, which were 17 city districts, 30 suburban districts, 16 town districts, and 17 rural districts.
- ¹⁴ An alternative way to calculate the compression adjustment is to preserve the *ratio* of each occupation to each other, as measured by the workforce survey. Doing so avoids compression between position, but results in slightly larger increases in wages needed for the higher-paying occupations.
- ¹⁵ For each occupation in this report, the survey recorded whether they were part-time or full-time. The survey also collects the share of full-time and part-time staff who are contracted to work a full 12 months.
- ¹⁶ We assume that full-time staff work 40 hours per week or 2,080 hours per year, and part-time staff work 20 hours per week or 1,040 hours per year, if on a full-year contract. We assume part-year staff work 10 months

(meaning no summer food service work), or 83.3 percent of the total work of full-year staff. In some districts, occupations are a mix of full-time and part-time and full-year and part-year, and in those cases we weighted annual earnings by the share of each category and the associated assumptions. We carried out annual earnings estimations for each occupation in each district, as opposed to at an aggregate cross-district level.

- ¹⁷ Supplemental document shows the full 165 occupation list from the 20th percentile of California occupations.
- ¹⁸ Nathan Sick, “Strategies to Improve the Certified Nursing Assistant Workforce Crisis,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, January 31, 2023, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/strategies-improve-certified-nursing-assistant-workforce-crisis>.
- ¹⁹ The dishwasher occupation scored a similar value (3.3) using publicly available data, scoring higher on full-time hours but lower on retirement benefits. Increased retirement benefits could reflect high union membership rates among public school dishwashers (81 percent), although the California-specific dishwasher union membership rate is not known. The cashier occupation also scored a similar value (3.2) using publicly available data, with slightly higher full-time hours, health insurance, and OJT scores but slightly lower wage and retirement scores.
- ²⁰ Once the legislation is fully implemented the median wages will almost certainly be above the minimum wages of \$20 and \$25 per hour, as workers cannot earn less than those amounts but will most likely sometimes earn more. Therefore, the estimates we report here are likely underestimates.
- ²¹ See “CA Requirements for Hiring a New Director,” <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/pd-pshiring.asp>.

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Appendix

TABLE A1

California Public School Food Service Occupational Characteristics, Wages, Schedule, and Benefits

Occupation	Staff number	Hourly wage (\$)	Full-time	Full-year	Retirement/pension	Disability	Insurance			
							Health	Dental	Life	Vision
Man./lead (S)	10.7	24.66	0.76	0.26	0.86	0.82	0.83	0.85	0.85	0.86
Asst. man. (S)	4.1	22.55	0.6	0.36	0.75	0.9	0.74	0.79	0.79	0.92
Head cook (S)	2.9	22.00	0.72	0.25	0.86	0.86	0.84	0.86	0.86	0.86
SN asst./General helper (S)	37.8	19.00	0.23	0.23	0.63	0.51	0.52	0.59	0.59	0.51
Dishwasher (S)	2.2	20.00	0.05	0.37	0.52	0.36	0.43	0.48	0.48	0.46
Cashier (S)	7	18.78	0.11	0.34	0.58	0.63	0.46	0.58	0.58	0.75
Driver (S)	2.2	23.88	0.65	0.28	0.78	0.86	0.84	0.88	0.88	0.86
SN director (D)	0.9	51.00	0.92	0.30	0.97	0.98	0.97	0.97	0.97	0.96
SN supervisor/Asst. director (D)	1.1	45.00	0.99	0.31	0.91	0.94	0.94	0.97	0.97	1
SN coordinator (D)	0.6	33.68	0.9	0.37	0.93	0.91	0.96	0.96	0.96	1
Central kitchen man. (D)	0.9	28.00	0.89	0.25	0.85	0.81	0.85	0.85	0.85	0.87
Executive chef (D)	0.2	44.88	1	0.38	0.82	N/A	0.91	0.91	0.91	1
Nutritionist/registered dietitian (D)	0.3	40.76	0.8	0.31	0.73	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.7
Warehouse man. (D)	0.4	29.47	1	0.31	0.93	0.95	0.97	0.97	0.97	1
Admin. asst. (D)	0.9	28.72	0.87	0.32	0.94	0.93	0.91	0.94	0.94	0.94

Source: Workforce survey.

Notes: (S) = school; (D) = district; Man. = manager; Asst. = assistant; SN = school nutrition. All values are fractions, other than median hourly wage column.

TABLE A2

California Public School Food Service Occupational Characteristics, Paid Time and Dues

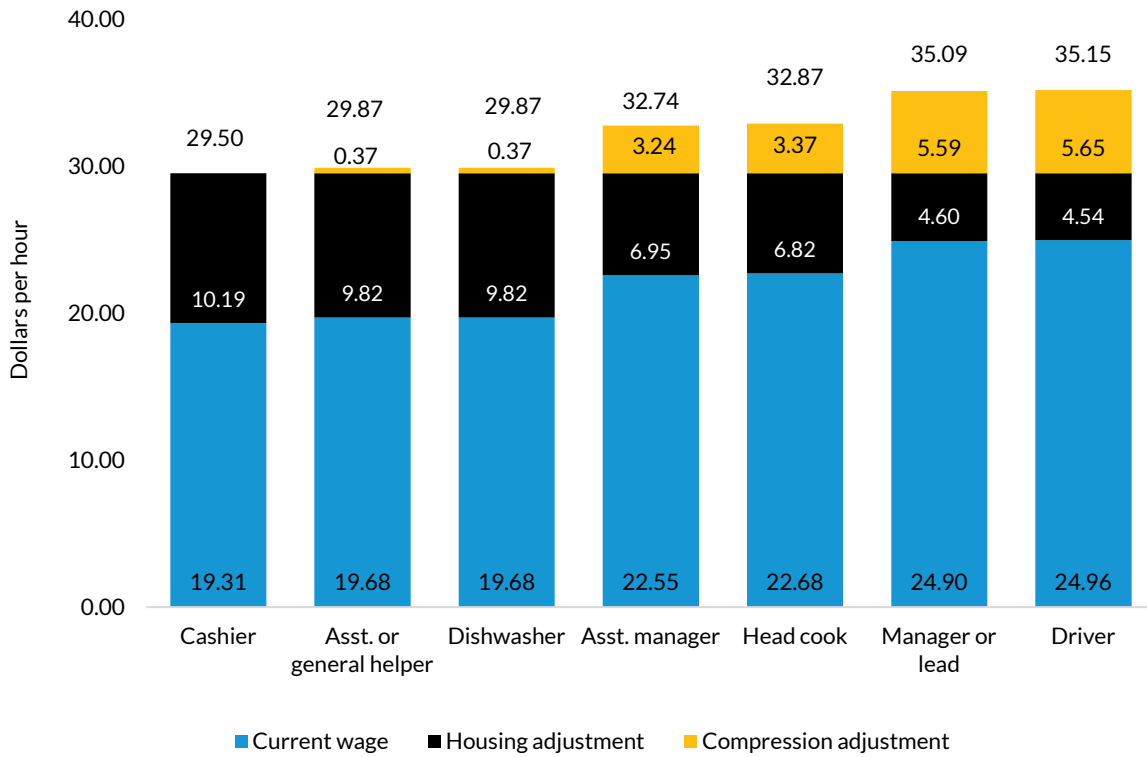
Occupation	Paid time				Dues	
	Sick leave	Professional dev.	Bonus pay	Vacation	Union	School Nutrition Association (SNA)
Man./lead (S)	0.92	1	1	0.83	0.97	0.77
Asst. man. (S)	0.9	1	1	0.79	1	0.67
Head cook (S)	0.96	0.95	1	0.81	0.96	0.88
SN asst./general helper (S)	0.91	0.94	0.94	0.71	0.93	0.24
Dishwasher (S)	0.71	0.73	0.8	0.56	0.93	0.29
Cashier (S)	0.77	0.92	0.83	0.6	0.9	0.38
Driver (S)	0.94	0.96	1	0.72	0.97	0.63
SN director (D)	0.94	0.98	1	0.97	0.89	1
SN supervisor/asst. director (D)	0.91	1	1	0.94	0.95	1
SN coordinator (D)	0.89	1	1	0.92	0.94	1
Central kitchen man. (D)	0.91	1	1	0.87	1	0.92
Executive chef (D)	0.82	1	N/A	0.8	0.83	N/A
Nutritionist/registered dietitian (D)	0.87	1	1	0.8	1	0.86
Warehouse man. (D)	0.9	1	1	0.93	0.95	1
Admin. asst. (D)	0.91	0.96	1	0.91	0.9	0.89

Source: Workforce survey.

Notes: (S) = school; (D) = district; Man. = manager; Asst. = assistant; SN = school nutrition; N/A = insufficient sample. All values are mean fractions.

FIGURE A1

Wages in SY 2023–2024 and Wages Needed to Afford Zero-Bedroom (i.e., Studio) Housing in School-Based Food Service Occupations in City and Suburban School Districts

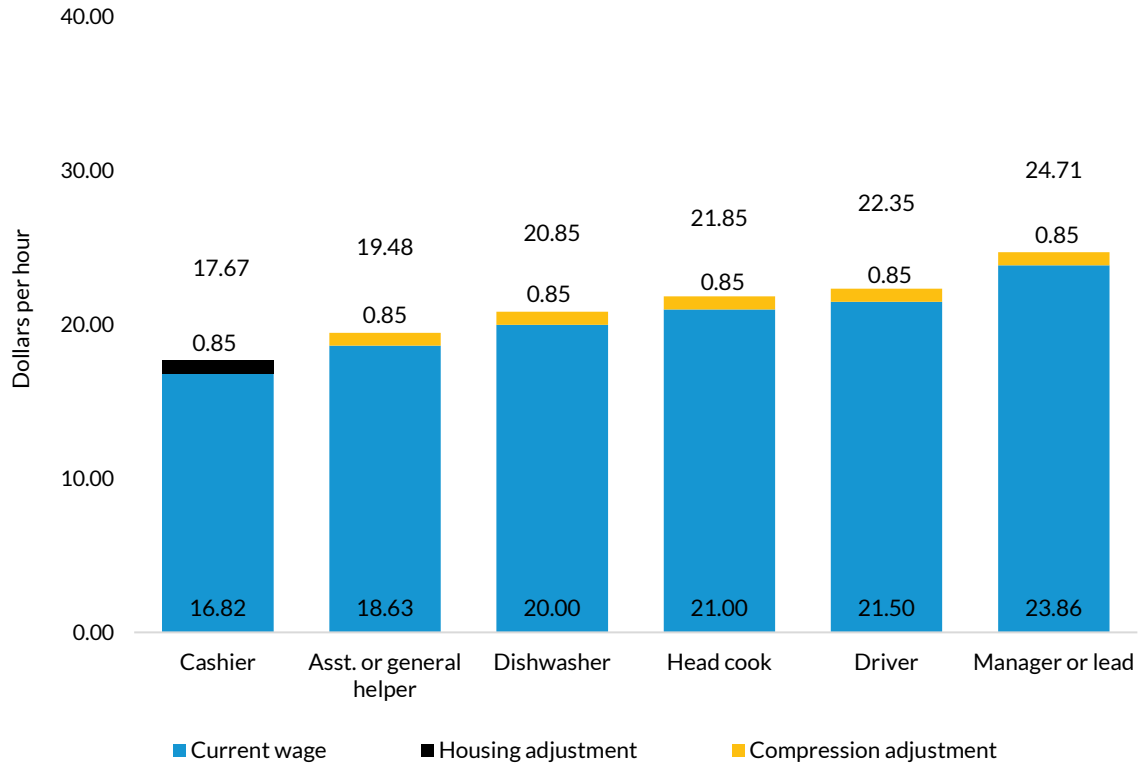


Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 47 districts (workforce survey). Wages needed N = 435 (NLIHC and CDE). Asst. = assistant.

FIGURE A2

Wages in SY 2023–2024 and Wages Needed to Afford Zero-Bedroom (i.e., Studio) Housing in School-Based Food Service Occupations in Town and Rural Districts

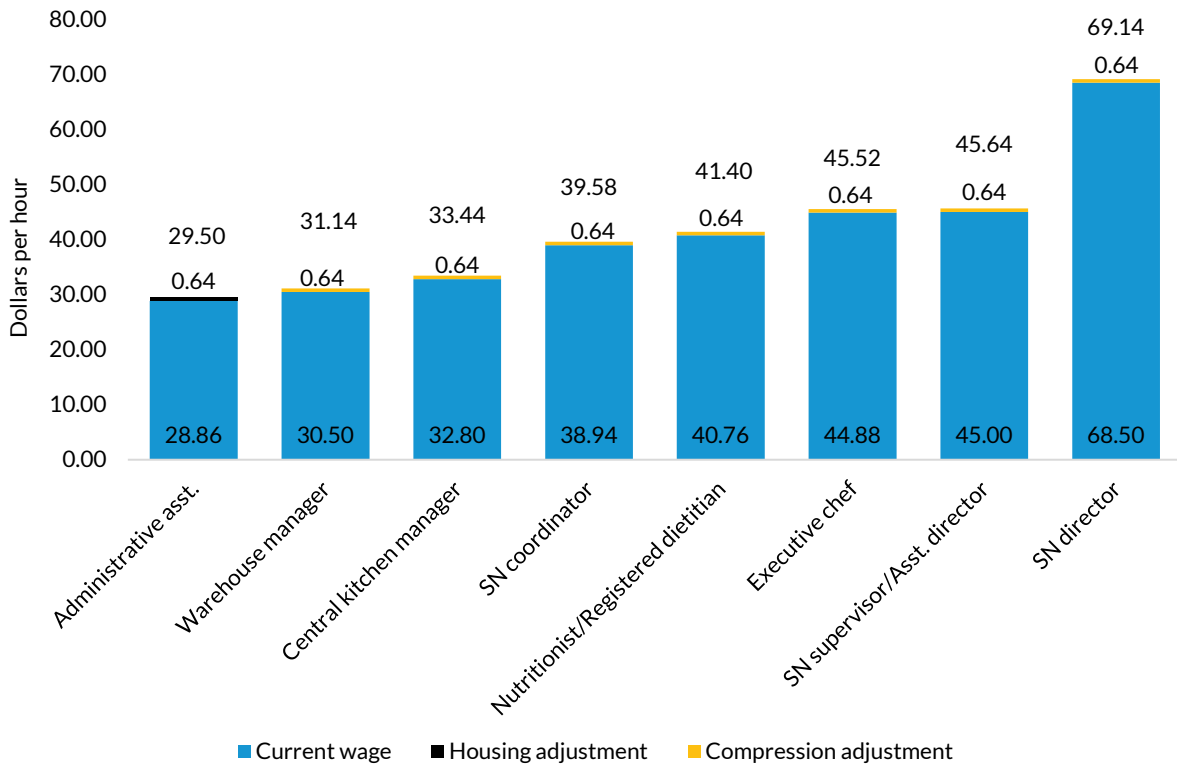


Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 33 districts (workforce survey); wages needed N = 504 (NLIHC and CDE); Asst. = assistant.

FIGURE A3

Wages in SY 2023–2024 and Wages Needed to Afford Zero-Bedroom (i.e., Studio) Housing in District-Based Food Service Occupations in City and Suburban Districts



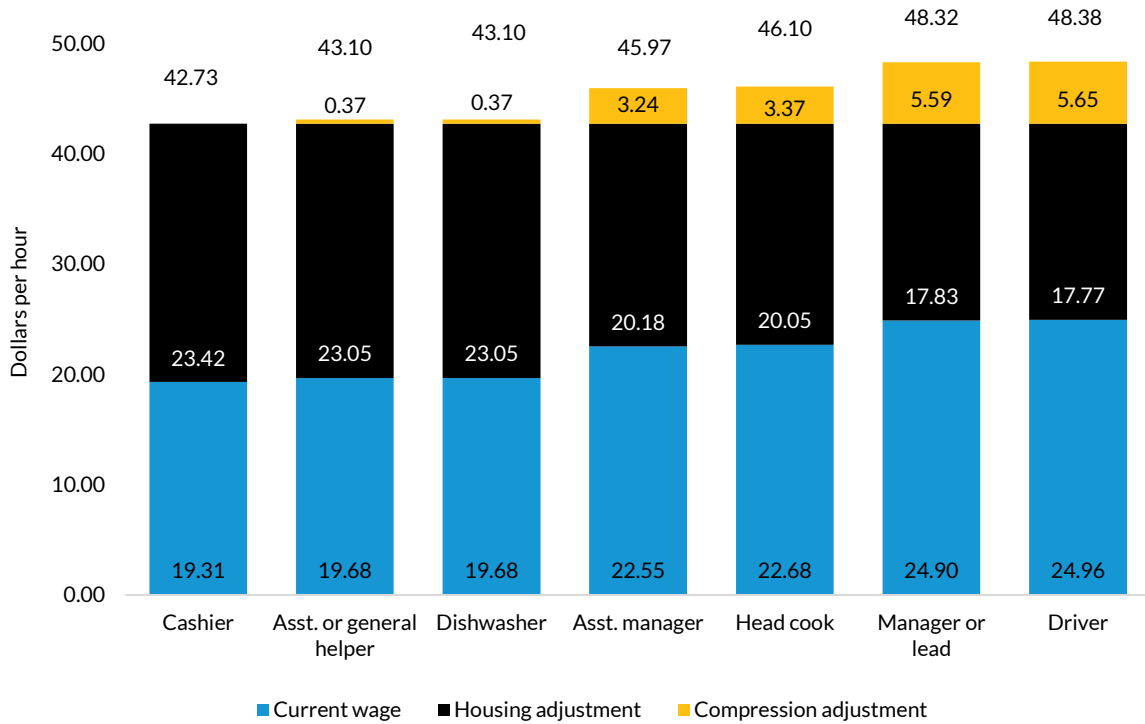
Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 47 districts (workforce survey); wages needed N = 504 (NLIHC and CDE); Asst. = assistant.

Note: District-level wages are above the threshold to afford zero-bedroom dwellings in town and rural districts. The wages in figure 4 show those values.

FIGURE A4

Wages in SY 2023–2024 and Wages Needed to Afford Two-Bedroom Housing in School-Based Food Service Occupations in City and Suburban School Districts

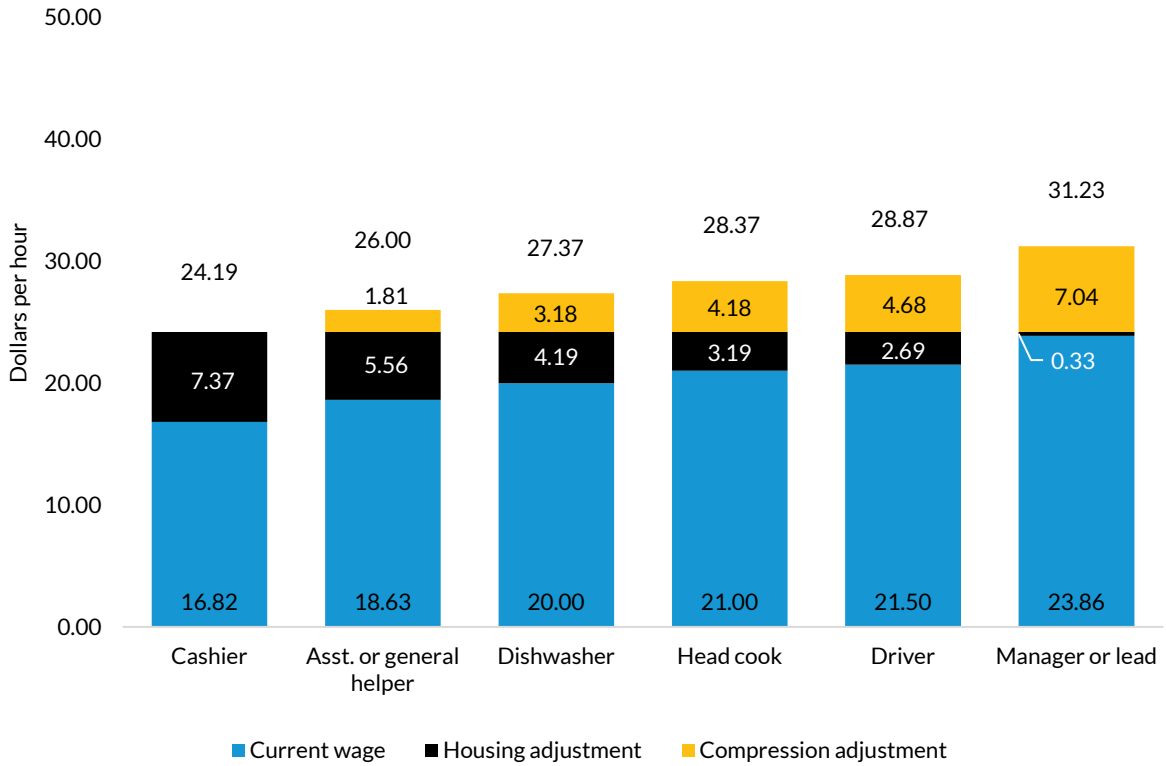


Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 47 districts (workforce survey); Wages needed N = 435 (NLIHC and CDE); Asst. = assistant.

FIGURE A5

Wages in SY 2023–2024 and Wages Needed to Afford Two-Bedroom Housing in School-Based Food Service Occupations in Town and Rural Districts

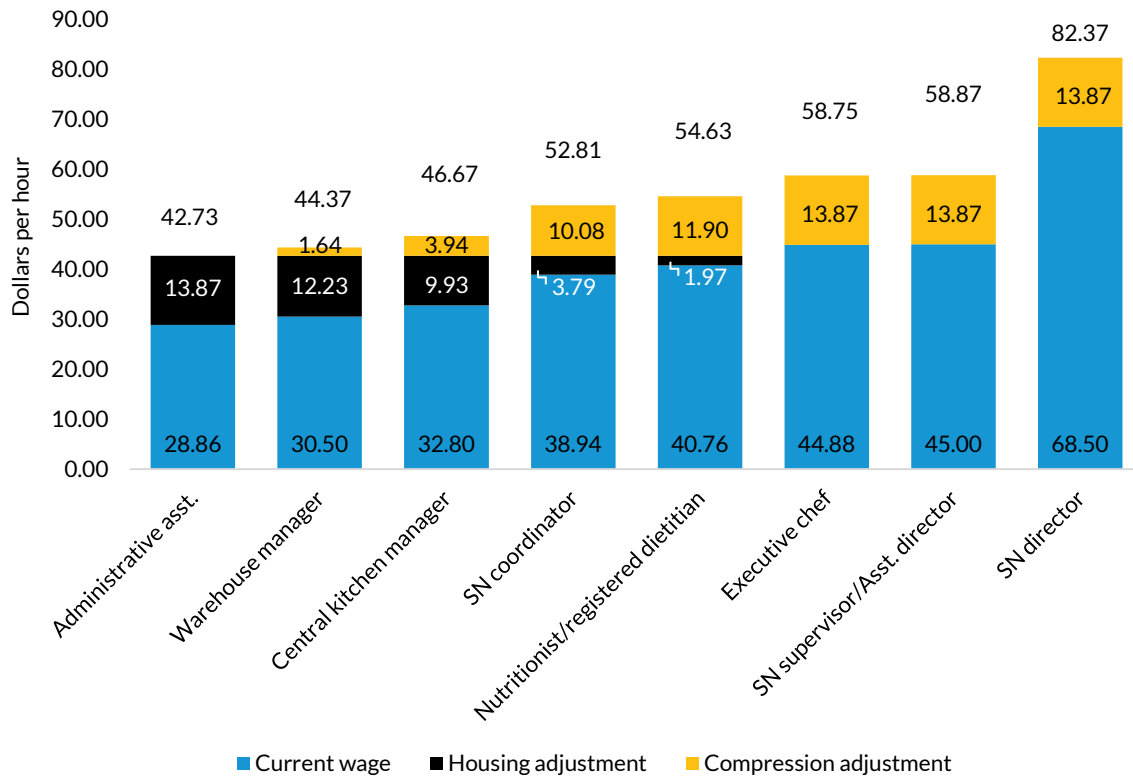


Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 33 districts (workforce survey); Wages needed N = 504 (NLIHC and CDE); Asst. = assistant.

FIGURE A6

Wages in SY 2023–2024 and Wages Needed to Afford Two-Bedroom Housing in District-Based Food Service Occupations in City and Suburban Districts

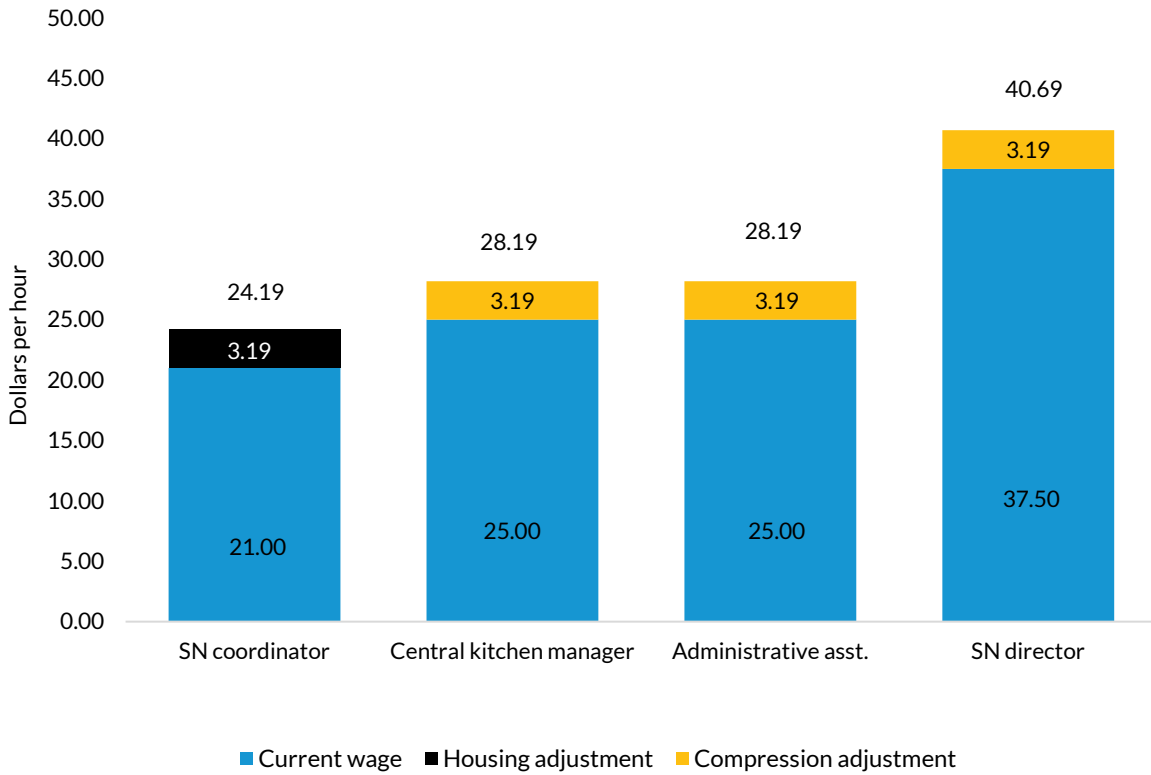


Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 47 districts (workforce survey); Wages needed N = 435 (NLIHC and CDE); Asst. = assistant.

FIGURE A7

Wages in SY 2023–2024 and Wages Needed to Afford Two-Bedroom Housing in District-Based Food Service Occupations in Town and Rural Districts

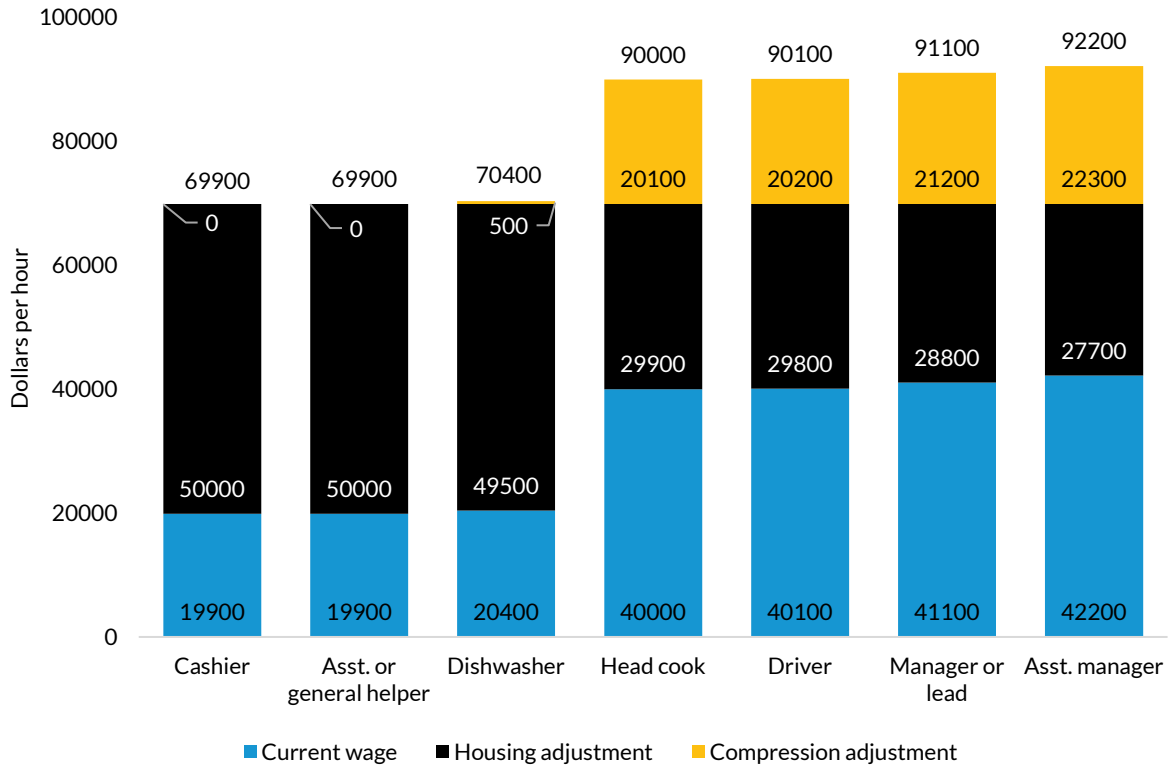


Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 33 districts (workforce survey); Wages needed N = 504 (NLIHC and CDE); Asst. = assistant.

FIGURE A8

Approximate Annual Earnings in SY 2023–2024 and Annual Earnings Needed to Afford One-Bedroom Housing in School-Based Food Service Occupations in City and Suburban Districts

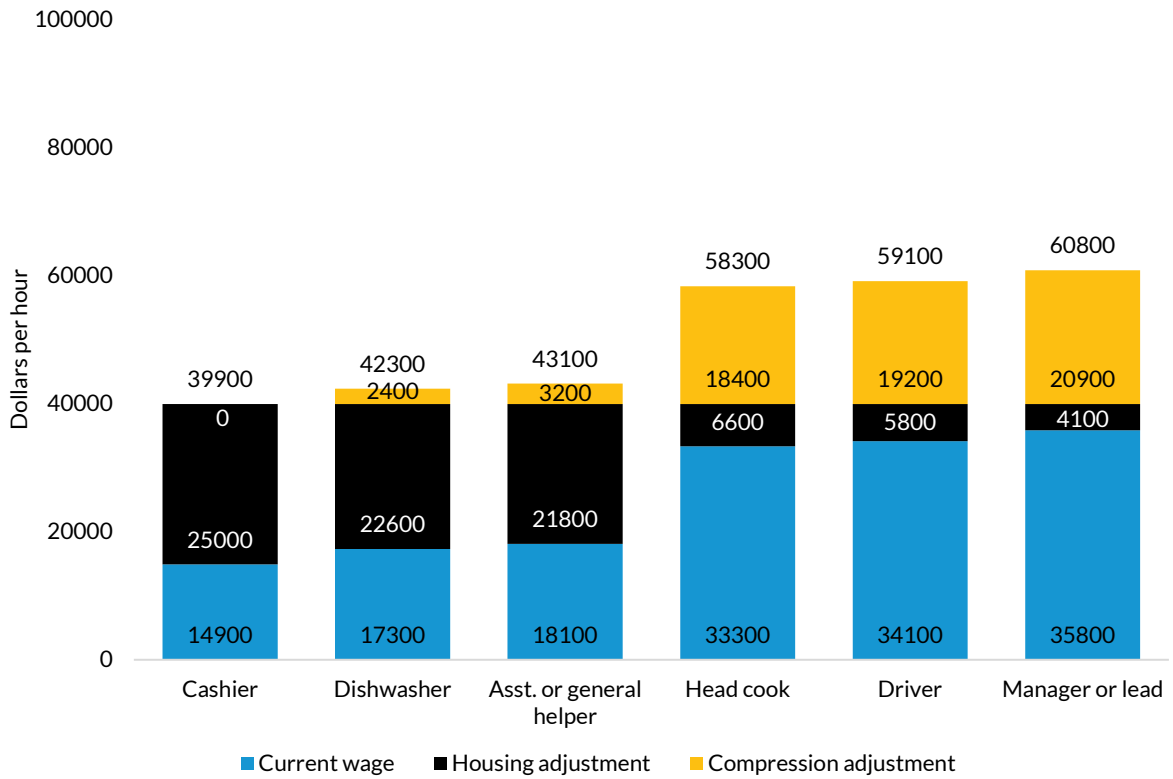


Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 47 districts (workforce survey); Wages needed N = 435 (NLIHC and CDE); Asst. = assistant.

FIGURE A9

Approximate Annual Earnings in SY 2023–2024 and Annual Earnings Needed to Afford One-Bedroom Housing in School-Based Food Service Occupations in Town and Rural Districts



Source: Workforce survey, NLIHC, CDE.

Notes: Current wage N = 33 districts (workforce survey); Wages needed N = 504 (NLIHC and CDE); Asst. = assistant.

About the Authors

Nathan Sick is a senior research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute. He has more than 10 years of experience in workforce development, postsecondary education policy research, and program evaluation. He also has extensive experience as an analyst and in the design, implementation, and support of data collection methods, such as surveys and web-based applications. Sick's work focuses on the future of health care career pathways, particularly in the sustainability of entry-level direct care work and the costs of training. His work explores ways to close equity gaps and improve job quality for marginalized or disadvantaged workers who are trying to start a career and earn a family-sustaining wage. Sick is also interested in research to make postsecondary education more flexible and accessible to all and more closely connected to high-quality career opportunities, particularly for parenting students, who often balance school with work and child care responsibilities. He has an MS in chemistry from the University of Chicago.

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ABOUT FOOD INSIGHT GROUP

Food Insight Group is an applied food systems research organization that leverages data and stories to inform progress. We partner with academic institutions, government agencies, nonprofit partners, and communities to develop policy-relevant research and evaluation.



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