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HUNGRY FOR GOOD JOBS: FOOD SERVICE WORKERS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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SARA HINKLEY
A REPORT FROM THE
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Summary

This report provides an overview of the working conditions and characteristics of public school food service workers, in comparison to other relevant workers in public schools and other food service workers. It is organized as follows:

1. Policies governing school meals: The background and funding structure of school meal programs;
2. The public school food service workforce: Occupational structure of school food service work; characteristics;
3. Income and economic wellbeing: Incomes, Access to benefits, family poverty, and household incomes;
4. Differences across states: Variations in working conditions and compensation by state;
5. Outsourcing school meals: What we know about the degree of outsourcing in school meals and possible impacts on the public school food service workforce.

We hope this information is valuable to policymakers and administrators seeking to understand how the working conditions of this workforce affect schools' ability to staff their food service programs, improve nutritional standards, and support family-sustaining jobs.

Key Findings

- The number of school food service workers has declined over the past decade, although not uniformly across states. This decline has occurred despite expanded school meal programs supported by pandemic-era federal funding. The long-lasting budget austerity sparked by the Great Recession, declining public school enrollment, a drop-off in meal consumption, and increased outsourcing could all be contributing to employment decline.
- Overall, there has been a steady decline in the number of school lunches served over the past two decades, a trend that resumed after the disruptions of the pandemic (with the exception of states that have maintained funding for universal meals).
- The adoption of "scratch cooking"—preparing meals from scratch instead of purchasing pre-made meals—varies widely, in part because of staff shortages. Many schools lack the infrastructure and staff to make scratch cooking a reality, meaning that improved nutritional standards may be difficult to accomplish unless staffing challenges are resolved.
- School food service workers are significantly older than the overall workforce (median age of 52 compared to 28 for other food service workers) and almost entirely female (93%). They are more likely to be Black or Latino than the overall workforce.
- The median hourly wage for school food service workers is just \$12.78 and has declined slightly (in real terms) since 2008-12. They earn less than other food service workers (\$13.08), and well below other classified workers (\$16.98) and institutional cafeteria workers (\$16.01).

- School food service workers are more likely to work part time than other public school staff and workers generally, which affects both their annual income and their eligibility for health and retirement benefits. While part-time seasonal work may appeal to a small subset of these workers, surveys suggest that many would like to work more hours and be able to qualify for benefits.
- School districts have struggled to staff school nutrition positions, along with other classified positions and teachers. An aging workforce means these hiring challenges will only get worse, especially if school food service jobs continue to lag behind similar work in offering decent pay and benefits.

Definitions

Within public schools, the benefits of public sector work are distributed unevenly among different workers. The workforce is primarily divided into two groups: “certificated” workers (teachers, psychologists, and school and district administrators) who have a specific educational certificate or license, and “classified” workers, including bus drivers, janitors, special education support, and school nutrition. (Classified workers may have other specialized training or education, such as nurses, nutritionists, accountants, and construction workers.) Certificated workers predominantly have college degrees, work full time, and are much more likely to be white in comparison to the overall workforce. Classified workers are much more likely to be part time and much less likely to be white. For part-time workers, access to benefits may be out of reach even as a public employee, and the inaccessibility of full-time, year-round work erodes many of the benefits that other public sector workers enjoy.

Introduction

Lunch in the cafeteria has been an integral part of the U.S. school day for over a century. The policies that shape public school meal programs have changed significantly over the past century, driven by trends in nutrition, worker training, public funding, the availability of convenience foods, and the growth of global food service contractors, among other factors. **What has not changed is that the vast majority of people cooking and serving meals to students are women earning some of the lowest wages not just among public sector workers, but across occupations and industries.** Food service jobs in public schools have the potential to serve as an entry into public employment with good benefits, rewarding work, and job stability. Unfortunately, the seasonal and part-time nature of this work, and its persistently low pay, means that many of these essential workers lack economic security for their own households.

Today, nearly all public schools offer lunch, and a growing number offer a breakfast or snack. The availability of nutritious meals has been linked to many positive benefits for students, particularly for the millions of children who arrive at school hungry. Federal funding subsidizes all or part of the costs for students from low-income households, and a growing number of state programs provide additional funding to allow all students to receive meals for free (Food Research & Action Center 2023).

School lunch programs were originally organized by women to provide free or low-cost meals to children from immigrant and poor households, and to ensure that students had access to safe and nutritious food (J. E. Gaddis 2019). As with many jobs that are (or were once) primarily performed by women—including teaching, housecleaning, and childcare—compensation and job structure is a legacy of the outdated notion that women’s wages are not vital to household income. Despite the fact that women’s incomes provide vital support to a majority of American households, jobs perceived as “women’s work” continue to drive the gender wage gap across the economy (Schieder and Gould 2016). Compounding this, food service work has always been particularly undervalued (Allegretto et al. 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed attention to the important role that schools play in children’s lives outside the classroom, including daily nutrition. Public schools and their staff demonstrated their capacity to provide an effective meal and nutrition delivery system to students and families who needed help to get food while schools were closed. The pandemic significantly disrupted school meal services and posed unprecedented challenges for food service staff. Many schools shifted to alternate models of getting food to students (such as bagged meals) or adapted ways to serve traditional meals while complying with public health guidance. Districts received federal funding to provide universal free meals from mid-2020 until the 2022-23 school year, but rising costs left many cafeteria funds depleted.

The pandemic also revealed the precariousness of the staffing situation. This older workforce was typically the first to return to school buildings and interact with coworkers and students, risking their health long before vaccines were available (J. Gaddis and Rosenthal 2020). Since the pandemic, many districts have faced significant staffing challenges, along with intermittent food shortages, supply chain issues, and rising commodity prices (Lieberman 2021). The tight labor market of the past few years has meant fewer people are willing to take low-wage, part-time work, including school food service and school bus driving. Some districts have even hired students to serve meals (Miranda 2022).

These are not challenges that districts can resolve on their own. As more states elect to cover the costs of continuing universal free meals, policymakers will need to understand and address issues of staffing, infrastructure, and fiscal sustainability. Schools have made important progress in serving more children nutritious and affordable meals, but unless the working conditions of the people preparing and serving those meals are improved, much of that progress is at risk of being undone.

Previous Research

This report builds on and updates a rich body of research into the working conditions of public school food workers. In 2010 the UC Berkeley Labor Center published a report on this workforce—including participation in public benefit programs and the possible impacts of an increased wage floor—using 2008 ACS data (Jacobs and Graham-Squire 2010). In 2022 the Congressional Research Service (CRS) published a comprehensive report on the public K-12 food service workforce using ACS 2015-2019 data (Congressional Research Service 2022). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has recently funded several research projects (USDA Food and Nutrition Service 2024). The School Nutrition Association (SNA), a professional membership association of school food service directors, also conducts regular surveys on compensation, benefits, and issues facing employers of these workers on compensation and benefits (School Nutrition Association 2020).

We also draw on Jennifer Gaddis' rich body of work on the history of the school food service workforce and the relationship of private companies to the school meal program (J. Gaddis and Coplen 2018; J. E. Gaddis 2019). There has also been research on specific localities: e.g., New Jersey, Wisconsin (Healthy School Meals for All and Gaddis 2023), and Baltimore (Gelles et al. 2022).

More recent research has focused on the challenges posed by vacancies and staff turnover, trends that are compounded by working conditions we discuss in this report (de la Cour 2023; 2022; Hickey and Cooper 2022; Lieberman 2021). The Food Insight Group recently published a study on vacancies and turnover of food service workers in California school districts that is vital reading for anyone studying this workforce (Food Insight Group 2024).

Data and Methods

To analyze the working conditions and characteristics of school food service workers, we use one-year American Community Survey (ACS) samples from two five-year periods: 2008-2012 and 2018-2022. Our demographic and wage analysis uses five-year combined data to ensure sufficient sample sizes, but we use one-year data to look at employment trends. We also reference Current Population Survey (CPS) and Occupational Employment Statistics (OEWS) data for unionization and occupation counts.

Identifying Public School Food Service Workers

Our analysis focuses on the food service workers directly employed by K-12 public school districts. To identify these workers in Census data sources, we select "elementary and secondary schools" as industry (7860 in the 2012 Census Industrial Classification System & NAICS code 611100, a subset of educational services) and public sector employment. We do not include private elementary/secondary

schools, which are not required to participate in meal programs, but charter schools are reflected in our universe.¹ We used the same occupation list as the Congressional Research Service (2022) in their analysis.

This universe excludes some workers who support district food programs but are not identifiable as such in the data, for example, cashiers, drivers, warehouse managers, secretaries, and general administrators. Most of these workers perform multiple functions, and some may be funded in part or whole by general funds rather than cafeteria funds. Other studies of school food service workers use district surveys to identify all staff supporting food service programs, leading to larger estimates of workforce size.

We exclude self-employed, unemployed, and family workers. Following the methodology used by the Congressional Research Service (2022), we exclude those who worked fewer than 5 hours a week or 27 weeks in the past year; that amounts to 12.5% of the workforce in 2018-22. We adopt this exclusion to enable comparison with previous research and to exclude those with minimal attachment to the workforce. (See Methods and Sources below for more details on our data and methodology.)

Comparison Worker Groups

We compare the demographics and economic outcomes of school food service workers to several other groups of workers. These comparison groups represent comparable jobs in other industries, as well as other occupations in public schools. They are:

- Other classified workers in public schools (e.g. custodians, clerks, teacher assistants, health assistants—excluding construction staff);
- Certificated workers in public schools (teachers, librarians, counselors—excluding administrators);²
- Other food service workers, i.e., workers in the same set of occupations, but employed in the food service industry. This industry includes food service contractors (who may be serving public school districts), but primarily includes restaurants or other private eating establishments;
- Other institutional cafeteria workers (e.g., hospital or government cafeterias);
- All other workers, with the same minimum hours per week and weeks per year.

1 A little under 9% of U.S. K-12 students attended private school in fall 2021, the last year for which there is national data. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Private School Universe Survey (PSS), 2011–12 through 2021–22. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2023*, table [205.20](#).

2 Certificated refers to positions that require some form of state licensing or certification.

1. Policies Governing School Food Service

State and national policies governing the funding and structuring of school meal programs, as well as minimum wage laws and labor protections, affect the working conditions, outsourcing, and demand for school food service workers. State and federal policies that regulate food purchasing and nutritional requirements for the school meal program also affect the required skills, demand for, and training of food service workers.

Public school meal programs are overseen by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and governed by the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act (CNA) of 1966. The most recent significant update to the CNA was the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA), which added training requirements for staff, funding for training, additional funding for meals, and expanded the USDA's authority to set nutrition standards.

School meals are funded primarily through the federal government's National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). Most of that funding is in the form of cash reimbursements per meal served, with some additional funding for purchasing federal food commodities and paying for administration costs. Within the contiguous United States, the per-meal reimbursement rates do not vary by place,³ despite significant differences in labor and supply costs between regions (J. E. Gaddis 2020).

There are three reimbursement rates for meals, based on students' income eligibility: free, reduced-price, and full-price. The NSLP per-meal reimbursements for the 2023-24 school year range from \$0.40 (for paid lunch) to \$4.50 (for free lunch).⁴ In addition to these reimbursements, districts receive money from the student fees for full- and reduced-price meals, and student purchases of extras like chips, cookies, and drinks. A 2019 study reported that 57% of school food service revenues are from federal reimbursements, 20% from student meal payments, 6% from state and local funds, 6% from discounted USDA commodities, and 11% from sales of snack items (United States Department of Agriculture and Mathematica Policy Research 2019). Districts also receive support for buying some foods: the USDA purchases commodities and distributes them to federal nutrition assistance programs that in turn distribute them at low or no cost to school meal programs. There is a state cost-matching requirement, and some states elect to provide additional funding to district food programs on a per-meal basis (Code of Federal Regulations 2023). As of this writing, 8 states have authorized funding for universal free meals for all students (covering the difference between the USDA reimbursement and actual district costs)—California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont (Food Research & Action Center 2023). Districts also indirectly subsidize school meal programs with general funds, by paying for the administrative overhead and occasional work of staff who have other duties, such as facilities and maintenance staff and financial clerks.

To understand the financial incentives districts face when managing food service programs, it is important to note that federal reimbursements alone do not cover the actual cost of providing meals. A 2019 study by USDA found that the average cost of producing a lunch was between \$0.49 and \$2.70 more per meal than the reimbursement rate, depending on whether administrative overhead is factored in (Billings and Congressional Research Service 2023, 21).

3 Alaska and Hawaii have higher reimbursement rates.

4 <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/rates-reimbursement>

There are some restrictions on how federal funds are spent, but in general it is up to districts to distribute funds between labor and supply costs, which can put pressure on wages when food costs go up (as happened dramatically during the recent years of high inflation and supply shortages), or force districts to choose between food quality and staffing costs. Federal cash reimbursements must go into a fund separate from a district's general fund, so most districts use a cafeteria fund for meal programs. This accounting structure aligns with the common expectation by district leadership and the public that a district's food program be self-sufficient and not drawing general funds away from core educational services.

Because schools can set their own meal prices and federal reimbursement rates do not cover the actual cost of serving meals, and because there are significant economies of scale in food service, financial sustainability depends significantly on the number of students eating meals. Labor and administration costs, as well as investments in cooking equipment to prepare fresh meals, are more cost-effective when spread over a large volume of meals. For the same reasons, school meal contracts are more lucrative in large urban districts with high levels of free/reduced lunch participation.

The USDA also provides funds for breakfast, summer, and after-school meals, which can expand the need for full-day and year-round workers. Significantly fewer schools participate in the School Breakfast Program than the lunch program. Summer food programs are primarily limited to rural areas or areas with high percentages of low-income children; after-school snacks and meals are funded in areas where at least 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Program Participation

The number of meals served in public schools has declined significantly since 2008, as has the share of students paying full price, both of which put fiscal strain on meal programs. With many schools closed in 2020 and 2021, the number of meals served dropped precipitously. In 2022—likely because of continued universal free meals—that number recovered to pre-pandemic levels, only to decline again in 2023 (Billings and Congressional Research Service 2023). Over that same time period—2008-2022—public school enrollment grew by 1%.

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, schools were reimbursed for free meals to all students regardless of income eligibility and were also allowed to offer pick up and delivery of meals while schools were closed (normally, school food must be eaten on campus). During this period, schools served as one of the most efficient ways to get food to people that needed it; many districts operated (and some continue to operate) household food distribution in addition to serving meals in school facilities.

Despite the temporary influx of federal funding, district cafeteria funds often declined during the pandemic. Costs from the provision of universal free meals that were not covered by federal reimbursements, the inability to sell revenue-boosting snacks, rising food prices, and supply chain issues all drove many districts to spend down cafeteria fund reserves and even draw on general funds.

Figure 1. School lunch trends (2008-2023)

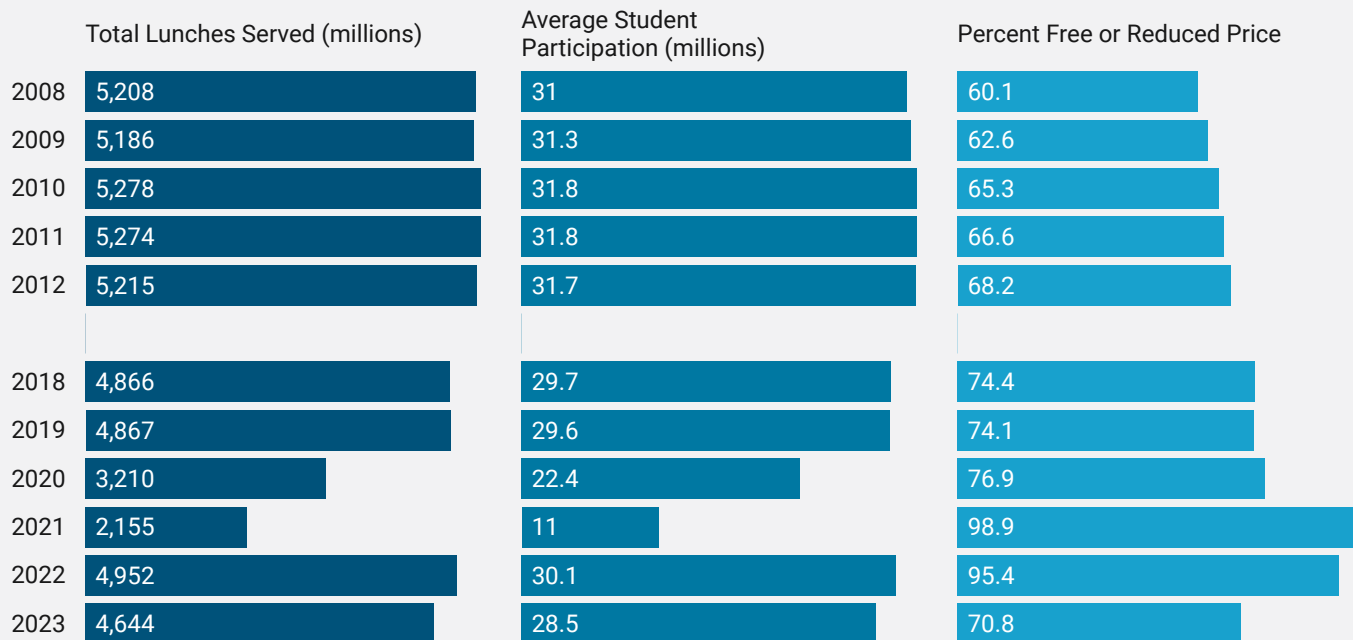


Chart: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: National School Lunch Program Annual Summary Tables • Created with Datawrapper

When the federal support for universal free meals expired, several states picked it up; as of June 2024, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont offer free meals to all students (covering the gap between cost and federal reimbursement). It is too early yet to discern the effect of these state policies on employment trends in those states.

Nutritional Standards and Staffing

The type of meals being prepared and served—and how that work is distributed across a supply chain—also drives the size and structure of the food service workforce. The expanded nutritional standards adopted in 2010 were part of a policy trend toward more “scratch” preparation of meals, in an effort to reduce reliance on pre-prepared heat-and-serve meals (J. Gaddis and Coplen 2018). This shift requires more staff, as well as additional training and equipment. Districts’ access to funding for such infrastructure varies widely; one study has found that many districts lack adequate infrastructure to make this shift (Center for Cities + Schools and Conscious Kitchen 2020).

Staffing shortages also limit districts’ ability to prepare and serve fresh food, which in turn may reduce student participation, cutting into program revenues and making scratch cooking more difficult to accomplish. Investments in scratch-cooking equipment and fresh ingredients are not enough to support this important nutritional goal—there must also be investments in staff development and retention. For many districts, staffing challenges pose a significant obstacle to serving fresh food (Food Insight Group 2024).

2. The Public School Food Service Workforce

The public school food service workforce has been shrinking steadily since 2008; in 2022, there were 208,266 such workers according to ACS data, a 22% decline from 268,206 in 2008 (Figure 2). We note that estimates of the workforce size vary by public data source, making it challenging to compare available studies. The UC Berkeley Labor Center 2010 report cites an estimate of 420,000 workers in K12 schools—350,000 public and 70,000 working for private contractors (Jacobs and Graham-Squire 2010). The CRS 2022 report estimates that there were 339,000 workers in food service operations in elementary and secondary schools, including both public and private sector (they use ACS data from 2015-2019). Occupation Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) data shows 396,480 such workers in 2009 (2008 is not available) and 312,890 in 2022, but OEWS includes all jobs (while ACS reports only a worker’s primary job) and includes workers below our minimum threshold for hours and weeks worked. Current Population Studies Outgoing Rotation Groups (CPS ORG) estimates 298,873 in 2008-12 and 246,164 in 2018-22; CPS sample sizes are much smaller than ACS.

Workforce Size and Employment Trends

Regardless of these differences, all data sources confirm a significant decline in the size of the workforce: CPS ORG shows a decline of 18%, OEWS 24%. Several factors could be contributing to this decline:

- Significant and long-lasting downsizing of local government after the Great Recession; most areas of local government employment had not recovered to 2009 levels when the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020 (Hinkley 2020);
- A decline in school lunches served: from 5.2 to 4.6 billion from 2012-2023 (Figure 1);
- Changes in staffing levels because of increased use of heat-and-serve meals;
- Increased district outsourcing of food service programs.

Occupational Structure

The occupational structure of public school food service is about 20% in supervisory or management-level positions (including both district and site-level supervisors), with 80% working as cooks, servers, food prep, and dishwashers. Some staff work primarily in a district office or central kitchen, with most working at a school site (for more on how work is typically structured see School Nutrition Association 2020).

Figure 2. Public school food service employment

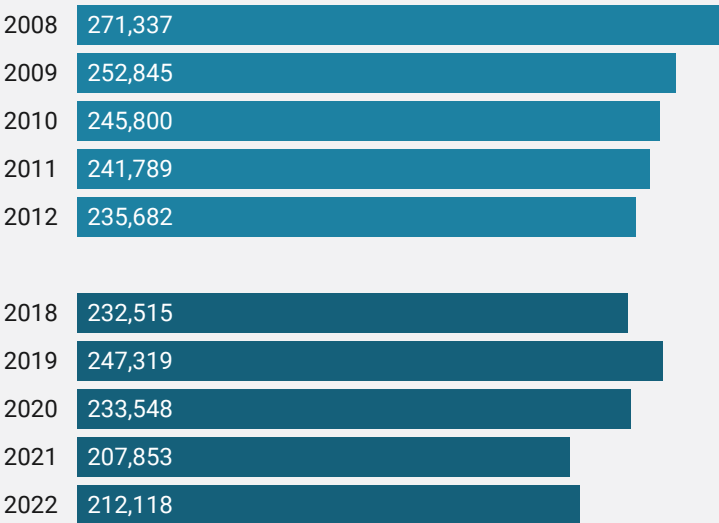


Chart: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: ACS 1-year 2008-2012 and 2018-2022 • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 3. Public school food service employment by occupation

Occupation	2008-12	2018-22
Food service managers	11,656	11,252
Ag. and food science technicians	61	117
Dietitians and nutritionists	5,289	5,827
Chefs and head cooks	3,515	3,600
First-line supervisors (food prep & serving)	28,045	26,208
Cooks	107,937	95,829
Food preparation workers	25,389	29,823
Fast food and counter workers	6,007	4,616
Food servers*	15,285	12,752
Dining room and cafeteria attendants	43,671	34,553
Dishwashers	2,711	2,159
Total	249,566	226,736

* Sum of employment in occupational codes for Food Servers, Waiters and Waitresses, Hosts and Hostesses, and All other

Table: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: ACS 1-year samples 2008-2012 and 2018-2022 • Created with Datawrapper

Characteristics of School Food Workers

- The school food service workforce is significantly older than the overall workforce and is aging more rapidly. The median age has risen from 50 (2008-12) to 52 (2018-22), compared to 41 for the overall workforce in both periods. The share of workers age 55 or over has risen from 34% to 41%, nearly twice the share of all other workers.
- The workforce has significantly lower educational attainment than most workers. Just over 7% have a four-year degree, compared to 38% of all other workers and 23% of other classified workers. Almost 13% did not finish high school. Half have only a high school degree, compared to less than a quarter of all other workers.
- The workforce is less than 55% white in 2018-2022: it is about 22% Latino, 17% Black, and 4% Asian, similar to the rest of the classified workforce. Since 2008-12, the workforce has become less white and more Latino. Managers are more likely to be white (64%) than other workers.
 - Racial and ethnic composition does vary significantly by state, with much higher rates of Latino participation in California, Colorado, Florida, and Texas, and higher shares of Black workers in New York and Southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia), when compared to the overall workforce.
- The workforce is overwhelmingly female, although that has declined very slightly over the decade (from 95% to 93%). Men are more likely to be in supervisory positions: food service managers are 11% male and chefs and head cooks are 19% male.

Figure 4. Characteristics of food service and comparison workers (2018-2022)

	School food service	Classified	Certificated	Food service	Other cafeteria	All other workers
Median age	52	50	42	28	39	41
Share of workers who are:						
55 or over	41%	37%	18%	9%	24%	23%
Female	93%	75%	76%	52%	61%	47%
White	54%	58%	74%	49%	49%	60%
Black	17%	15%	9%	12%	21%	12%
Hispanic	22%	21%	11%	28%	19%	18%
Asian	4%	3%	3%	7%	6%	7%
Education						
Did not complete high school	13%	6%	0%	21%	14%	7%
High School / GED	50%	32%	1%	35%	36%	24%
Bachelor's degree or higher	7%	23%	95%	10%	18%	38%

Table: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: ACS 1-year samples, 2018-2022 • Created with Datawrapper

3. Economic Wellbeing

Public sector jobs have historically been a pathway to economic stability for workers who otherwise face barriers to self-sufficiency, such as low educational attainment and employment discrimination. For many lower-paid service jobs, such as building service occupations, the public sector offers better wages and benefits than similar private sector jobs. Public sector workers are also more likely to have access to employer-provided health and retirement benefits, including defined benefit pensions. Wage differentials between the public and private sector have fluctuated, with recent gains by private sector workers closing that gap (Maciag 2022). In some occupations, private sector workers may earn more, while public sector employers continue to offer better health and retirement benefits. The advantages of public sector work are tied in part to unionization (Morrissey and Sherer 2022); less than 27% of school food service workers are covered by a union, compared to 60% of certificated staff (CPS ORG 2018-2022).

Access to Full-Time Work

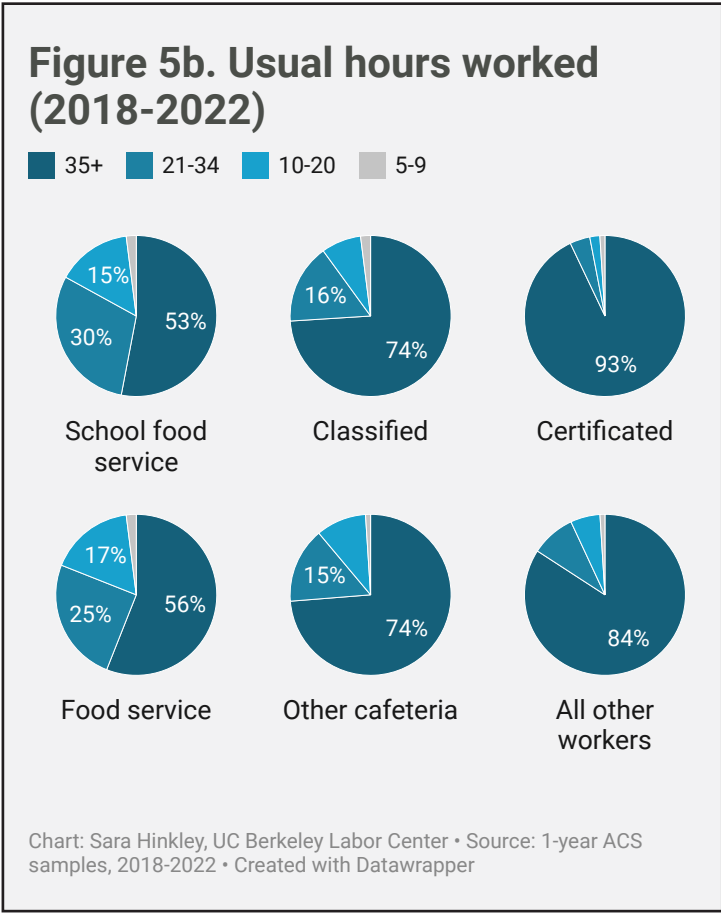
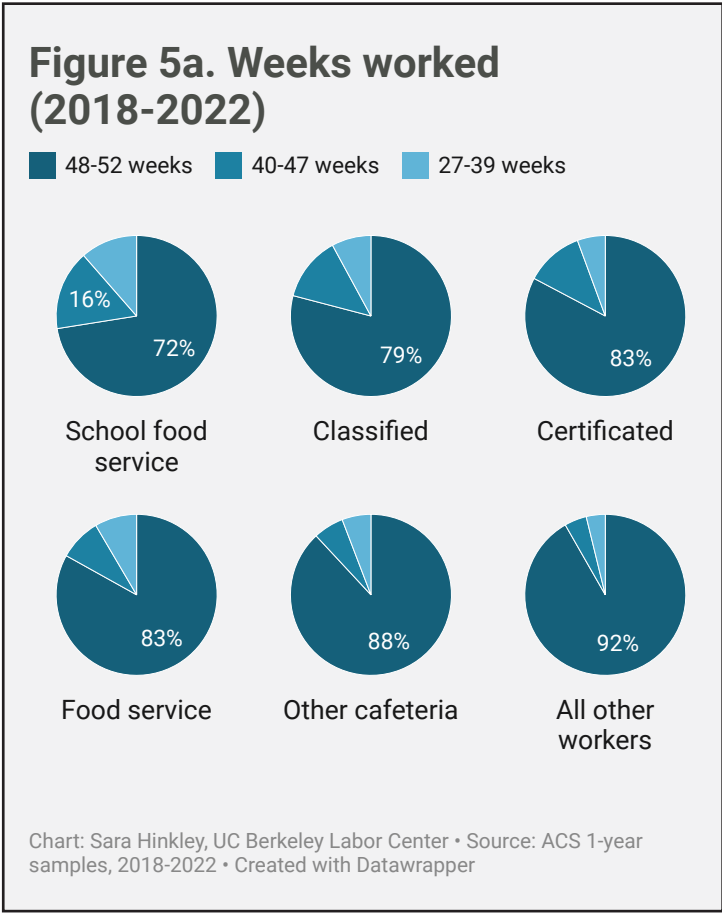
Like bus drivers, school nutrition workers are often employed part time and seasonally. Meals are prepared and then served over a period of a few hours rather than a full day; the level of meal

preparation and whether a school offers breakfast or after-school meals significantly impacts how many staff hours are needed. Because most districts do not operate summer meal programs, workers may not be paid for several weeks or even released and rehired.

In the early stages of school meal programs workers often worked eight hours a day, but as programs moved to more packaged food in the 1970s, shift lengths were also reduced. Gaddis attributes this change as a way to reduce labor costs as program funding was cut, as well as to the “colonization” by corporations of school food programs (J. E. Gaddis 2019, 55). Today, school nutrition workers are far more likely to work part time than other public school workers, and at rates similar to private sector food service workers. Just over half are full time (35 hours or more)—compared to 75% of other classified workers and 85% of all workers. More than 17% work fewer than 21 hours a week, similar to private sector food service workers. This means that many do not work enough hours to qualify for district benefits such as health care or pensions. An SNA survey in 2019 found that an average of 30.8 hours was needed for full-time status (School Nutrition Association 2020, i).

It is possible that expanded meal programs and scratch cooking are beginning to provide workers with more access to full-time work. There was a shift from 2008-12 to more full-time work: 72% of school food service workers worked 48-52 weeks in 2018-22, compared to only 58% in 2008-12. The share of workers working fewer than 21 hours shrank slightly from 21% to 17%.

There is ample evidence that school food service workers would like to work more hours and that districts believe that the prevalence of part-time work hurts their ability to recruit and retain workers (see e.g. Healthy School Meals for All and Gaddis 2023).



Hourly and Annual Income

School food service workers are among the lowest paid workers in public schools. Median wages are less than \$13 an hour and have risen slightly (in real terms) since 2008-12. Their hourly wages are comparable with other food service workers, and well below other classified workers and institutional cafeteria workers. Median annual income has increased since 2008-12—likely reflecting the modest increases in hours worked—but is still well below all other comparison groups. California recently implemented a law requiring fast-food workers to be paid \$20 an hour. More than two-thirds of California school food workers earned less than \$20 an hour in 2022; districts have already raised the alarm about their growing inability to compete with fast-food companies for workers (Beam 2024).

These wages are well below standard measures of what constitutes a living wage—that is, what’s required for a household to be self-sufficient and afford basic needs. The MIT living wage calculator, for example, sets \$20.53 as a living wage in North Carolina for two working adults with just one child.⁵ And those calculations assume a full-time job, which is not the case for most of these workers.



5 MIT living wage calculator: <https://livingwage.mit.edu>

There is some variation by occupation: supervisor positions earn more, but even food service managers—positions that often require a college degree and training in nutrition—have median earnings of less than \$40,000 a year.

Benefits

The predominance of part-time, seasonal work also means that school food service workers are less likely to have access to employer-paid retirement and health benefits. Many public workers—especially those in unions—have access to defined benefit retirement plans and health benefits that employers contribute to. Our analysis suggests that these workers are much less likely to have access to the benefits that most public schools offer full-time employees. Seven percent do not have any health insurance, and more than 23% rely on public health coverage (Medicaid or Medicare).

The combination of low wages and inadequate hours means that many school food workers must rely on public benefit programs to support their families, not just public health care. We use a statistical model to estimate the share of school food service workers who rely on certain public programs, including Medicaid, EITC, and SNAP (food stamps).⁶ Families with a public school food service worker are nearly twice as likely to be receiving the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC); almost half of families participate in a public benefit program of some type, compared to less than a third of all workers. In Texas and Florida more than half of school food service worker families are receiving the EITC.

Figure 8. Median earnings by occupation (2018-2022)

Occupation	Median hourly wage	Median annual income
Food service managers	\$19.10	\$37,669
Dietitians and nutritionists	\$16.84	\$26,032
Chefs and head cooks	\$14.84	\$26,032
First-line supervisors of food prep and serving workers	\$15.02	\$28,112
Cooks	\$12.09	\$17,992
Food preparation workers	\$12.02	\$16,624
Fast food and counter workers	\$11.66	\$14,302
Food servers*	\$12.13	\$15,892
Dining room and cafeteria attendants	\$11.44	\$16,661

*All values in 2023 dollars * Includes Food servers and Waiters & waitresses*

Table: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: ACS 2018-2022 1-year samples • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 9. Health insurance coverage (2018-2022)

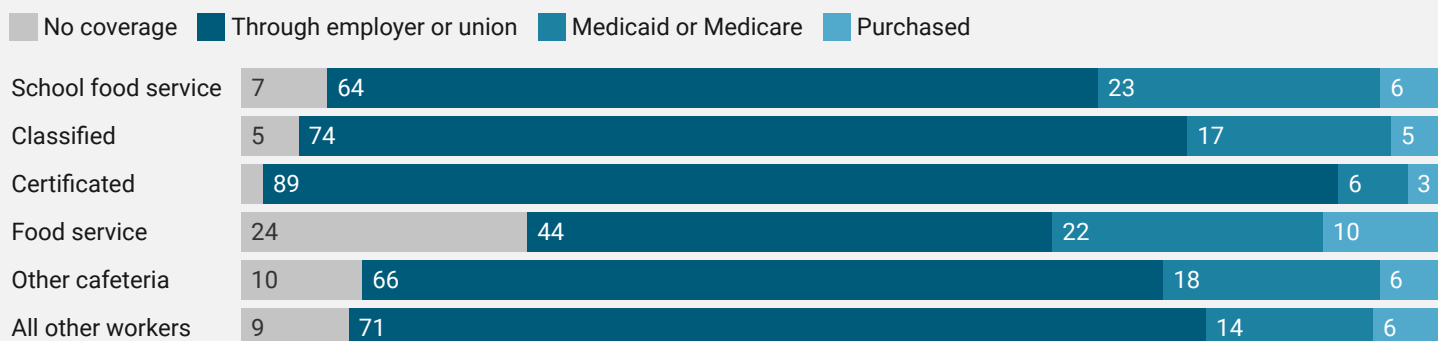


Chart: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: ACS 1-year samples 2018-2022 • Created with Datawrapper

⁶ For details about our methodology see Jacobs, Ken, Kuochih Huang, Jenifer MacGillvary, and Enrique Lopezlira. "The Public Cost of Low-Wage Jobs in the Arizona Construction Industry," March 24, 2022. <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/the-public-cost-of-low-wage-jobs-in-the-arizona-construction-industry/>.

Figure 10. Public program participation (2018-2022)

	All workers		Public school food service workers			
	United States	United States	California	Texas	New York	Florida
Any program	28%	45%	48%	52%	45%	52%
EITC	21%	40%	35%	53%	37%	54%
SNAP	10%	17%	18%	19%	19%	26%
Medicaid (adult)	15%	20%	38%	5%	34%	10%
Medicaid (CHIP)	10%	17%	22%	20%	18%	17%

Table: Aida Farmand, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: For methodology details see <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/the-public-cost-of-low-wage-jobs-in-the-arizona-construction-industry/> • Created with Datawrapper

Family and Households

The family and household size and composition of public school food service is similar to those of other workers. They are more likely to have been married than all other comparison groups (likely because of the higher age distribution). They are just as likely to have a child at home as all other workers, although less likely than any comparison groups to have a child under five at home. Household and family sizes are similar across all groups of workers.

Figure 11. Household and family characteristics (2018-2022)

	School food service	Classified	Certificated	Food service	Other cafeteria	All other workers
Child at home	21%	20%	30%	14%	16%	21%
Child under 5 at home	1%	3%	8%	5%	4%	6%
Household size 3+	61%	60%	61%	68%	57%	57%
Never married	16%	22%	21%	64%	47%	33%

Table: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: ACS 1-year samples 2018-2022 • Created with Datawrapper

School food service workers are more likely to be in families experiencing near-poverty—30% have household incomes less than 200% of federal poverty level, compared to 14% of all other workers and 18% of other classified staff. Their median household income is equivalent to households with a food service worker, and just two-thirds the median household income of all other worker households, lower than all other comparison groups (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Household income and family poverty

	Median household income 2012	Median household income 2022	% Families < 200% of poverty level (2022)
School food service	\$75,338	\$69,861	30%
Classified	\$95,349	\$87,859	18%
Certificated	\$131,782	\$127,808	4%
Food service	\$80,927	\$69,766	35%
Other cafeteria	\$82,876	\$72,656	27%
All other workers	\$113,912	\$102,246	14%

All values in 2023 dollars

Table: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: ACS 2018-2022 1-year samples • Created with Datawrapper

More than one-quarter of three-person households with a public school food service worker earn less than \$50,000 a year, compared to just 11% of all other workers and 15% of other classified workers.

Figure 13. Annual income of 3-person households (2018-2022)

■ Under \$50,000 ■ \$50,000 to \$99,999 ■ \$100,000 and over

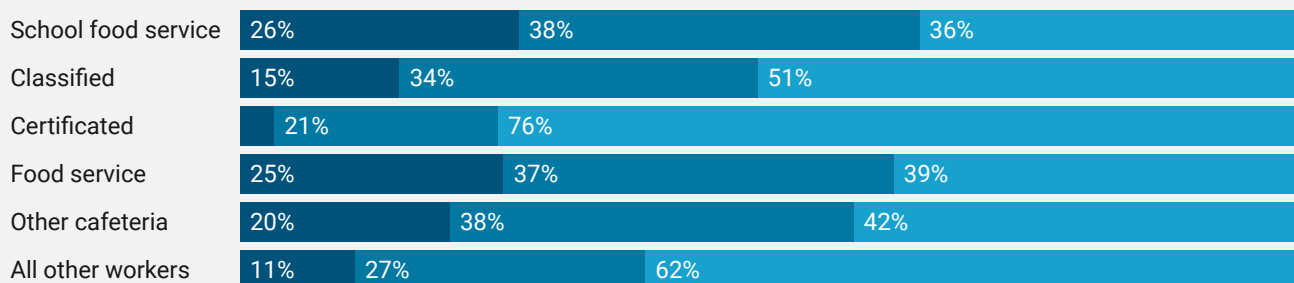


Chart: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: ACS 2018-2022 1-year samples • Created with Datawrapper

4. State Differences

Policy variations by state can have significant impacts on this workforce. Labor laws (e.g., minimum wages, right to work or unionization) and the structure of benefit systems for public employees will affect the economic outcomes of people working in school food service. State regulations governing procurement and outsourcing, nutrition and preparation guidelines, and state supplemental funding, can affect overall staffing levels and job quality.

- Workers in Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama are more likely to be full time (35 hours or more); those in Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Indiana are less likely. A similar pattern holds for weeks worked: in Alabama 90% of food service workers worked 50-52 weeks; while Georgia, Louisiana, and Kentucky it was 85%, and only slightly lower in Oklahoma and Texas.
- Although the workforce has declined significantly nationwide, a small handful of states increased employment, while others saw double-digit decreases. In some cases that is explained by student enrollment changes or the expansion of state-funded free meals (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Employment & student enrollment for select states (2008-2022)

	2018-22 employment	Employment change	Enrollment change
Alabama	5,297	-11.3%	0.5%
Arkansas	2,973	-28.6%	1.3%
California	24,651	4.4%	-5.2%
Colorado	3,722	-0.3%	3.1%
Florida	12,683	-13.6%	6.2%
Georgia	9,186	-20.8%	3.3%
Illinois	6,314	-15.2%	-10.3%
Indiana	6,276	9.2%	-0.4%
Iowa	2,628	8.1%	3.0%
Kansas	2,387	-14.0%	-0.1%
Kentucky	5,841	7.4%	-4.1%
Louisiana	4,578	-6.2%	-2.9%
Maryland	3,803	-9.2%	3.2%
Massachusetts	4,552	4.7%	-3.4%
Michigan	4,230	-18.6%	-8.5%
Minnesota	3,792	34.3%	3.7%
Mississippi	3,131	-13.7%	-9.9%
Missouri	3,802	-13.8%	-3.0%
New York	11,023	-10.5%	-5.8%
North Carolina	7,607	-21.5%	1.2%
Ohio	7,140	-8.1%	-3.2%
Oklahoma	4,238	-10.7%	4.9%
Pennsylvania	5,176	-32.8%	-4.3%
South Carolina	3,894	-14.3%	7.4%
Tennessee	6,044	-14.7%	-0.3%
Texas	27,408	-5.1%	8.6%
Virginia	7,185	-14.4%	-0.6%
Washington	3,177	-20.3%	3.5%
Wisconsin	3,783	-2.7%	-4.8%

Includes only states with sample sizes above 150 in both periods

Table: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: ACS 2008-12 and 2018-22 1-year samples; National Center for Education Statistics • Created with Datawrapper

There are significant differences in hourly and annual earnings by state. Hourly wages are highest in California and New York, followed by Massachusetts, Washington, and Minnesota (Figure 15). Not coincidentally, these are states with high rates of public sector unionization and higher state minimum wages. Earnings are lowest in Southern states, where public sector unions have minimal presence. Annual wages follow a slightly different pattern because of the variation in rates of part-time work. High hourly wages in California, for example, do not translate into comparably high annual earnings. This difference illustrates the importance of both livable hourly wages and access to full time employment in helping school food service workers achieve self-sufficiency.

5. Outsourcing School Meals

A significant share of public school districts use private contractors to provide all or some aspects of their food service programs. The USDA permits districts to contract with private food service companies and regulates the terms of such contracts (United States Department of Agriculture 2023). The USDA permits two fee structures: a fixed-price amount per meal, or actual cost reimbursement. Contractors—which are primarily for-profit entities—can also sell revenue-generating items to increase their profitability. Food service contractors are required to comply with the same personnel standards as school district employers, including continuing education and training. Contracts can be no more than one year and can be renewed annually.

States can set additional requirements for outsourcing—for example, California requires that food service outsourcing not cause the elimination or displacement of school district employees, or have an adverse impact on wages and other employment conditions (California Department of Education 2011). And districts can set contract terms relating to working conditions and employment, such as staffing minimums, equivalent compensation and benefits,

Figure 15. School food service earnings by state (2018-2022)

	Median hourly wage	Median annual earnings
Alabama	\$10.98	\$20,386
Arkansas	\$9.84	\$16,661
California	\$17.16	\$21,842
Colorado	\$12.89	\$20,241
Florida	\$11.82	\$18,202
Georgia	\$10.36	\$17,474
Illinois	\$13.02	\$20,305
Indiana	\$12.97	\$15,743
Iowa	\$12.13	\$18,847
Kansas	\$11.66	\$18,202
Kentucky	\$10.81	\$16,867
Louisiana	\$10.30	\$18,535
Maryland	\$14.33	\$21,867
Massachusetts	\$15.28	\$20,826
Michigan	\$12.50	\$16,661
Minnesota	\$14.90	\$20,262
Mississippi	\$9.56	\$16,661
Missouri	\$11.20	\$16,661
New York	\$17.13	\$26,988
North Carolina	\$12.45	\$18,202
Ohio	\$13.24	\$17,992
Oklahoma	\$9.90	\$16,686
Pennsylvania	\$14.58	\$17,520
South Carolina	\$12.25	\$20,241
Tennessee	\$11.21	\$15,619
Texas	\$10.79	\$18,743
Virginia	\$12.40	\$17,878
Washington	\$15.64	\$23,543
Wisconsin	\$13.74	\$17,878

Includes only states with a sample size over 150 workers

Table: Sara Hinkley, UC Berkeley Labor Center • Source: ACS 1-year samples 2018-2022 • Created with Datawrapper

and retention of existing workers. Districts can set requirements in a request for proposals (RFP) to select contractors that will pay adequate wages, offer benefits, and implement other strategies for reducing staff turnover and maintaining program quality.⁷

Districts that outsource food service cite a variety of motivations, including wanting to reduce costs and to outsource responsibility for an activity not core to their educational expertise (Beem 2011). A case study of contracting out food services in Florida and Nebraska found that staffing challenges were also an impetus, as well as new nutritional regulations (Ebdon and Chen 2017). Not all costs can be eliminated: districts often must continue to pay a food service manager to oversee compliance with nutritional requirements and service levels, even if they contract all other aspects of their meal programs.

As in many areas of the public sector, there is mixed evidence about whether outsourcing produces expected cost savings or successfully insulates districts' general funds from cost overruns. A 2023 study of food service contracting in Pennsylvania found that expected cost savings failed to materialize, even when contractors cut their own costs—in part because those savings were kept as profits rather than reinvested in the program (Polson and Kovach 2023). There is also evidence that contracting out reduces nutritional quality, both because contractors will try to cut spending on food and because they often seek to generate revenue by selling low-nutrition snacks. Districts that end outsourcing arrangements cite quality deterioration (student complaints) and cost increases as reasons for ending the practice (Adefeso 2002).

The USDA found that in 2017-18 26% of School Food Agencies (SFAs—typically a school districts) reported using a Food Service Management Company (FSMC) to manage some or all of their food program. More than half of those said that the FSMC managed all aspects of procurement (United States Department of Agriculture 2021). A 2019 USDA study (based on 2014-15 data) found that large districts (25%) were more likely to outsource than small ones (19%) (United States Department of Agriculture and Mathematica Policy Research 2019, Volume 1, 36). Contracting also varied by geography: nearly 50% of mid-Atlantic districts contracted out, but less than 1% of Southeast districts. Jacobs and Graham-Squire (2010) cite a 2009 SEIU estimate that New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Arizona, Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania account for over 50% of outsourcing. A 2009 study of New Jersey found that 64% of districts in that state contracted out food services (McCain 2009).

We cannot determine how much of the employment decline in school food service is attributable to contracting out. Even within individual states there is little centralized data on food service contracting. We cannot directly identify food service contractors in our dataset due to data limitations.⁸ We do know there has been significant growth over the past 20 years by the largest food service contractors serving public schools, particularly the top three: Aramark, Chartwells (part of Compass), and Sodexo, but these companies have broad portfolios across the service contracting sector (Komisar 2011).

7 Illinois adopted legislation in 2022 that allowed districts to issue requests for proposals (RFPs) for food service contracts rather than being required to choose the lowest responsible bid.

8 The ACS does not identify industry to the specific NAICS code (722310) for “Food service contractors” or its parent code (722300) “Special food services.” We can only narrow down to its parent code, which includes all restaurants.

It is also difficult to assess the impact of contracting out on the wages and working conditions of the sector, because of the difficulty of identifying workers and the data that is available is inconclusive. OEWS data from 2022 shows lower mean hourly wages for cooks (institution and cafeteria) in elementary and secondary schools than in special food services.⁹ Overall, our analysis suggests that wages for school food service workers have already fallen behind comparable private sector workers. However, private sector food service workers (including those who work for food service contractors) are significantly less likely to have health insurance, so it is likely that outsourcing drives a decline in overall job quality.

6. Conclusions

While there have been improvements over the past decade in the hours and weeks offered to school food service workers, this workforce remains one of the lowest-paid in the public school system. The people our schools rely on to prepare healthy meals for the majority of public school students have seen a deterioration in real income over the past decade, even as their work increases in complexity and its importance gains renewed recognition. As food service programs settle into a post-pandemic equilibrium, researchers should continue to study whether expanded state funding for universal free lunch or scratch cooking programs produce improvements in access to full time work.

Like many areas of the public sector, school food service has not recovered well from the cuts made during the Great Recession. Public school enrollment declines in recent years have counteracted some of the expanded staffing needs generated by a shift to more fresh food. Despite these declining staffing needs, vacancies are a persistent challenge for districts. With an aging workforce and declining or stagnant earnings, attracting workers to school food service will be increasingly difficult. These shortages have real impacts on student wellbeing. Improvements in nutritional standards and plans to increase the number of meals cooked from scratch will be exceedingly difficult to accomplish if districts cannot attract and retain a trained workforce. That's not possible without being able to offer competitive wages and the quality benefits that keep workers tied to the public sector.

9 <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes352012.htm>

Methods and Sources

Our workforce analysis relies on data from the American Community Survey 2008-2012 and 2018-2022 one-year samples. The ACS sample is restricted to workers with non-zero earnings in the past year, who were not self-employed or unpaid family workers. The ACS does not include an hourly earnings measure; we therefore follow standard practice and 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. 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/>. All dollar values are inflated to 2023 dollars using the Consumer Price Index.

ACS data downloaded from: Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Matthew Sobek, Daniel Backman, Annie Chen, Grace Cooper, Stephanie Richards, Renae Rodgers, and Megan Schouweiler. IPUMS USA: Version 15.0 American Community Survey (ACS) one-year samples. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V15.0>.

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Institute for Research on Labor and Employment
University of California, Berkeley
2521 Channing Way
Berkeley, CA 94720-5555
(510) 642-0323
laborcenter.berkeley.edu



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About the Author

Sara Hinkley, Ph.D., is the California Program Manager for the Center for Cities + Schools at the University of California, Berkeley. Prior to this she was a policy research specialist at the UC Berkeley Labor Center. She has published research on public finance, economic development, job quality, education, and workforce development.

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