

Section 4. Issues Affecting Low-Wage Workers

from

All in for a Thriving Connecticut

Opportunities to Support Upward Mobility for the State's Immigrant Families

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4 Issues Affecting Low-Wage Workers

Immigrants play a vital role in the low-wage workforce in Connecticut. Immigrants made up 28 percent of the low-income workforce in the state as of 2019–23, though they were only 20 percent of the low-income population.⁶¹ Notably, all of the growth in the size of the low-wage workforce in the state between 2006–10 and 2019–23 came from immigrant workers, without whom the low-wage workforce would have shrunk, slowing economic growth.⁶²

Looking at the main occupational categories of low-income immigrants in Connecticut, the largest share in 2019–23 (39 percent) worked in service occupations, followed by 17 percent in production, transportation, and material moving occupations, and 16 percent in natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations.⁶³ The specific occupations that were most common among low-income immigrant workers were maids and housekeeping cleaners, janitors and building cleaners, cashiers, construction laborers, and nursing assistants. However, the share of all low-income immigrants in each of these jobs was low (between 4 and 5 percent), indicating that low-income immigrants fill a wide range of occupations. Connecticut is also host to between 7,000 and 20,000 farmworkers each year, working in agriculture (tobacco, fruit orchards, vegetable farms) and dairy farms.⁶⁴

Despite the critical role they play in the state’s economy, immigrant workers, particularly low-wage workers, face persistent problems such as wage theft, unpredictable schedules, and discrimination. Notably, many of these issues also affect U.S.-born workers, so taking steps to address them would benefit native-born and immigrant workers alike. However, immigrant workers often face compounding challenges, including limited English proficiency, a lack of understanding of their rights in the workplace, and tenuous immigration statuses that can put them at risk of employer retaliation if they file a complaint. The chilling effect on immigrant workers’ ability to assert their rights, coupled with insufficient state mechanisms to investigate and address reports of labor violations, poses a key challenge for state policymakers and threatens to undercut working conditions for all workers in the state.

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A. Top Issues Facing Low-Wage Immigrant Workers in Connecticut

Immigrant and other low-wage workers in Connecticut face a range of challenges, from wage theft to unsafe or hazardous working conditions to unpredictable or varying scheduling. The agencies tasked with inspecting workplaces to ensure compliance with wage and hour, workplace safety, and other laws

61 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), pooled for 2019–23.

62 MPI analysis of pooled 2006–10 and 2019–23 ACS data.

63 MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data.

64 University of Connecticut, “Migrant Farm Worker Clinic Experience” (presentation, UConn Health, Farmington, CT, 2019).

are underfunded and overstretched, leaving long backlogs of unresolved complaints. Still, the state has made headway on some aspects of workers' rights, particularly in raising the minimum wage, though some workers are left out.

Minimum Wage

In 2019, Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont signed legislation tying the state's minimum wage to the percentage change in the federal employment cost index, meaning that the minimum wage must be adjusted each year.⁶⁵ Most recently, this increased the minimum wage from \$15.69 to \$16.35 per hour, starting on January 1, 2025.⁶⁶ From 2019 to 2023, Connecticut's wage growth was highest for low-wage workers (11.4 percent), likely due in part to the increase in minimum wage in the state.⁶⁷ Minimum wage laws cover workers regardless of immigration status, though unauthorized immigrants may not always be aware of their rights under the law. The minimum wage applies to agricultural workers and some domestic workers, but live-in domestic workers, casual babysitters, and those who provide "companionship services" to the elderly are not eligible.⁶⁸

As in most states, base minimum wage rates are lower for tipped workers than for non-tipped workers, but their tips must bring them to the minimum hourly wage or their employers are responsible for bridging the difference.⁶⁹ Labor rights advocates have argued, however, that tipped workers do not always receive their full minimum wage and fear speaking out and risking their jobs. Legislation to extend the same minimum wage to tipped workers, known as the "One Fair Wage" bill, has failed to come up for a vote in the legislature.⁷⁰

Ground Zero: Limited Capacity at the Connecticut Department of Labor

Connecticut's Department of Labor (DOL) faces fiscal constraints and a lack of sufficient staff, causing immense backlogs in complaints filed with DOL that are waiting for an investigation. Since 2017, the amount of wages recovered by DOL for workers who were underpaid has dropped precipitously after a period of relative growth since the 1980s.⁷¹ In 2024, just \$2 million in wages were recovered for Connecticut workers, slightly higher than the record low of \$1.9 million in 2023, but still considerably down from the \$8.9 million in 2017.⁷² A state audit conducted in 2021 and 2022 found that as of May 2023, DOL had more than 800 cases that had not been assigned for investigation.⁷³

65 State of Connecticut, *An Act Increasing the Minimum Fair Wage*, H.B. 5004, 2019 legislative session (January 9, 2019).

66 Office of Governor Ned Lamont, "Governor Lamont Announces Connecticut's Minimum Wage Will Increase to \$16.35 on January 1, 2025" (press release, September 27, 2024).

67 Patrick R. O'Brien, *The State of Working Connecticut 2024* (New Haven: Connecticut Voices for Children, 2024).

68 Agricultural workers ages 14–18 may be paid lower wages, with the minimum depending on the size of the operation, and workers ages 14–18 in other industries may be paid less than the state minimum wage during their first 90 days of employment. See Human Resource Consulting Group, "Connecticut Minimum Wage for 2025" (news release, January 1, 2025).

69 Human Resource Consulting Group, "Connecticut Minimum Wage for 2025."

70 Gabby DeBenedictis, "What to Know about CT Proposal to Eliminate Tipped Minimum Wage," CT Mirror, March 4, 2024.

71 José Luis Martínez, "Wage Theft Complaint Backlog Grows, but Dept. of Labor Lacks Staff," CT Mirror, August 4, 2024.

72 Martínez, "Wage Theft Complaint Backlog Grows."

73 State of Connecticut, Department of Labor, "Audit Summary: Department of Labor, Fiscal Years Ended June 30, 2021 and 2022" (fact sheet, State of Connecticut, Auditors of Public Accounts, Hartford, 2024).

Experts interviewed for this study noted that fiscal constraints in the state have meant that proposals to increase the number of DOL employees fail in the state legislature. In fact, the number of wage investigators and agents at the Connecticut DOL fell from 29 in early 2015 to 21 in June 2024.⁷⁴ The result is that workers wait six to eight months for a case to be assigned to an investigator, with even longer waits for an actual investigation. Staffing shortages also mean that DOL conducts very few prospective audits, meaning that if workers are not comfortable reporting abuses, they are very likely to go undiscovered. One interviewee noted that this creates ripe opportunities for employers to commit wage theft, given that accountability measures are virtually nonexistent.⁷⁵ When employers pay subminimum wages for immigrant workers or require long hours without paying overtime, this can put downward pressure on wages for all workers in the state, U.S.-born workers included.

Workers' Compensation and Workplace Conditions

In Connecticut, as in many states, workers are eligible to receive workers' compensation as a result of a workplace injury, regardless of their immigration status.⁷⁶ However, some benefits that require recipients to be "ready, willing, and able" to work may not be available to immigrants who are not legally authorized to work in the United States. And even when they have rights on paper, many immigrant workers, particularly unauthorized immigrants, fear the potential immigration consequences of presenting their workers' compensation claims. Many also struggle to navigate the bureaucratic workers' compensation process without an attorney.⁷⁷

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More broadly, immigrant workers often face persistent hazardous or unsanitary conditions in the workplace. Immigrants work at higher rates than U.S.-born workers in jobs in construction, landscaping, and meat processing, where injuries are more common. Labor leaders interviewed during this study spoke of immigrant workers being assigned work involving dangerous chemicals or materials without proper protective gear or

training on the harms of exposure.⁷⁸ Throughout the state, news stories have also documented examples of immigrant workers having their employment terminated after raising concerns about health and safety issues in the workplace.⁷⁹ Such occurrences create a chilling effect, making others wary of raising issues

74 Martínez, "Wage Theft Complaint Backlog Grows."

75 Author interview with union official, December 12, 2024.

76 State of Connecticut, Workers' Compensation Commission, *Workers' Compensation Information Packet* (Hartford: Workers' Compensation Commission, 2022); *Victoria Dowling v. Sol V Slotnik et al.*, No. 15711 (Supreme Court of Connecticut, May 26, 1998); *Angel Tuba Saquipay v. All Seasons Landscaping of Ridgefield, LLC*, No. 6332 CRB-7-19-5 (Compensation Review Board of Connecticut, January 31, 2020).

77 Maricarmen Cajahuaringa, "CT Undocumented Workers Say They Face Challenges While Navigating Workers' Compensation," CT Mirror, February 10, 2024.

78 Author interview with labor organizer, October 25, 2024.

79 Maricarmen Cajahuaringa, "An Immigrant Worker Alleges Unsanitary Working Conditions and Low Wages at a Stamford Grocery Store," Connecticut Public Radio, August 3, 2023; Elizabeth L. T. Moore, "Injured New Haven Migrant Worker Disputes Eviction from Employer's Housing: 'We Also Have Rights,'" *New Haven Register*, February 26, 2024.

due to fear of retaliation, and leaving workers to suffer the detrimental health impacts of poor workplace conditions.

Issues Affecting Domestic Workers

Immigrants are greatly overrepresented in in-home employment, comprising more than one-third of all low-wage workers who provide in-home care services in Connecticut.⁸⁰ The great majority of Connecticut's immigrant in-home care workers—90 percent—are women. Nationally, in-home care workers may be excluded from certain minimum wage, anti-discrimination, and other workplace rights. Following the path five other states (California, Hawaii, Massachusetts, New York, and Oregon) had taken at the time, in 2015, Connecticut passed its own Domestic Worker Bill of Rights.⁸¹ The bill expanded domestic workers' rights to bring sexual harassment and discrimination complaints against their employers to the state Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities. Subsequent state legislation in 2021 mandated that employers develop a written agreement with workers on their hours, pay, responsibilities, and access to any paid days off.⁸²

Most domestic workers in Connecticut have access to the state minimum wage and to overtime pay, but those who live with their employer or provide companionship care are excluded. Due to major gaps in domestic workers' understanding of their rights under Connecticut law, in 2021, the state legislature appropriated \$200,000 to support nonprofit organizations' efforts to educate domestic workers about their workplace rights.⁸³ In 2024, the state enacted legislation that provides paid sick leave for all workers in the state, including domestic workers, with the provision reaching workers who are the sole employee of a particular employer starting in 2027.⁸⁴ In the wake of the murder of a home health aide in 2023, Connecticut established a state safety grant program to cover the costs of safety escorts and safety training for home health aides and technology to help aides access safety information about a client and to contact local law enforcement if needed.⁸⁵

Inconsistent Schedules for Hourly Workers

Low-wage workers throughout the state also often face challenges associated with unpredictable scheduling practices. This is particularly prominent in fast food and retail businesses, where employers are not bound to a set schedule and may change schedules last minute, creating uncertainty for their workers. Such scheduling practices affect workers' ability to arrange needed child care or care for other dependent family members, to balance multiple jobs, and to reliably earn enough to pay rent, buy groceries, or afford basic utilities.⁸⁶ Immigrants made up 35 percent of low-income workers in Connecticut's service sector

80 MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data.

81 State of Connecticut, *An Act Concerning Domestic Service and the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities*, SB 446, Public Act No. 15-246 2015 General Assembly (June 30, 2015).

82 State of Connecticut, *An Act Concerning Provisions Related to Revenue and Other Items to Implement the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023*, Senate Bill No. 1202, 2021 General Assembly (2021).

83 Brenda León, "As Connecticut Expands Labor Protections, These Volunteers Educate the Most Vulnerable Workers," Connecticut Public Radio, September 22, 2022.

84 National Domestic Workers Alliance, "Connecticut Legislature Expands Paid Sick Leave, Marking Major Victory for Domestic Workers and Other Excluded Workers in CT" (press release, May 14, 2024).

85 State of Connecticut, *An Act Concerning the Health and Safety of Connecticut Residents*, SB 1, Public Act No. 24-19, 2024 General Assembly (May 21, 2024).

86 Make the Road Connecticut, "Letter from Barbara Lopez to the CT State Legislature," March 11, 2024.

in 2019–23,⁸⁷ making them a notable share of workers likely to be affected by such variable scheduling practices.

Legislation introduced to the Connecticut legislature in recent years would require employers with at least 500 employees to post work schedules two weeks in advance and to notify workers of schedule changes as soon as possible. The bills would also require employers to pay workers for cancelled or rescheduled work hours. Such bills have not yet come up for a vote in either chamber of the legislature.⁸⁸

B. Recommendations

Addressing immigrant workers' access to safe worksites, predictable work schedules, and protections against wage theft and other workplace abuses can improve not only their working conditions but also those of U.S.-born workers in the state. Connecticut has made headway on certain worker protections, and there is a strong advocacy base in the state for other expanded protections. The following recommendations could offer guidance to policymakers seeking to ensure that the proper mechanisms are in place to address workplace malpractice.

1. The state should make funding Department of Labor investigations a priority.

Budget constraints and a lack of political will have been equally blamed for the staffing shortages and immense backlogs in wage theft recovery at the Connecticut DOL. This has caused a significant reduction in recovered wages for workers throughout the state and created an environment in which employers may feel free to exploit workers. Investing in the necessary staff and budget to address the backlog of cases, ensure that new cases are heard in a timely manner, and conduct some randomized inspections is imperative. Connecticut could also consider prioritizing investigations for larger employers that operate in sectors where evidence nationwide shows that wage and hour compliance rates are lower, in order to have the biggest impact on working conditions in the state.⁸⁹

2. State officials should ensure immigrant workers have meaningful access to enforcement mechanisms to address workplace abuses.

Even if enforcement mechanisms are in place and adequately resourced, they will not yield the desired results unless workers—immigrant and U.S. born alike—are able to use them to report abuses. This includes wage theft, workers becoming injured on the job or facing unsafe conditions, and cases in which tipped workers earn less than the minimum wage and their employers do not make up the difference. Connecticut officials could do more to ensure that immigrant workers can access enforcement systems that are culturally competent, provide meaningful language access for those with limited English proficiency, and help them to understand and assess any risks they might face if they do not have durable legal status in the country.

⁸⁷ MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data.

⁸⁸ State of Connecticut, *An Act Concerning Predictable Scheduling*, SB 413, 2024 General Assembly, Reg. Sess. (2024); State of Connecticut, *An Act Concerning Advanced Notice of an Employee's Work Schedule to Certain Employees*, SB 831, 2025 General Assembly, Reg. Sess. (2025).

⁸⁹ Andrew Elmore and Muzaffar Chishti, *Strategic Leverage: Use of State and Local Laws to Enforce Labor Standards in Immigrant-Dense Occupations* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018).

3. State-level organizations, nonprofits, and public entities should prioritize workers' rights education for immigrant communities.

One of the major hurdles to safeguarding workers' rights within Connecticut is the lack of knowledge among workers regarding what rights they are entitled to, regardless of their immigration status. Mistrust of government entities and fear of employer retaliation, job loss, or deportation can also keep immigrant workers, particularly those who are unauthorized, from speaking up about poor treatment or conditions in the workplace. While state agencies provide and disseminate information on workers' rights, they are not the primary source of information for many immigrant communities. Nonprofits, places of worship, and educational systems can play a role in educating immigrant workers about their rights in the workplace and about the systems that exist to help protect those rights.

4. The Connecticut attorney general's office could consider beefing up its enforcement of state labor laws, to supplement the work of the state DOL.

States around the country, including California, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, have established workers' rights units within their state attorney general's office in order to dedicate specialized staff and resources to enforcing laws related to minimum wages, overtime pay, sick leave, workplace safety, child labor, and misclassification of employees as independent contractors, among other labor issues. The attorney general's office in Connecticut has a labor division,⁹⁰ but its duties are divided between defending the state before administrative bodies and in court and enforcing labor standards.

The Connecticut attorney general's office does not have jurisdiction for criminal prosecution, but it could more forcefully prosecute civil violations of labor laws, targeting employers who may take advantage of immigrants unaware of their labor rights.⁹¹ Attorneys general across the country have won large settlements to secure back pay or restitution for workers and hundreds of thousands of dollars in civil penalties to states.⁹² High-profile cases with sizable settlements can send a clear message to employers that breaking labor laws has real consequences, potentially deterring illegal and abusive practices. Local district attorneys across Connecticut could also consider taking a more active role in enforcing labor laws.

⁹⁰ Connecticut Office of the Attorney General, "Sections," accessed July 15, 2025.

⁹¹ Connecticut Division of Criminal Justice, "What Is the Difference between the Division of Criminal Justice (and the Chief State's Attorney) and the Attorney General?" updated May 17, 2024.

⁹² See, for example, Terri Gerstein, *How District Attorneys and State Attorneys General Are Fighting Workplace Abuses: An Introduction to Criminal Prosecutions of Wage Theft and Other Employer Crimes Against Workers* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2021); District of Columbia Office of the Attorney General, "Attorney General Schwalb Announces Seven Settlements Protecting DC Workers and Important Workplace Rights" (news release, February 28, 2025).