GIG WORKERS, FREELANCERS, AND INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS

New shifts in the economy, old stories of worker-employer power, and what gig workers need to thrive

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Though gig workers, freelancers, and independent contractors have received increasing attention in recent years, the conditions of their work and their needs remain not well understood. Moreover, the enormous social and economic upheaval of the past several years exposed how vulnerable gig workers are to employment fluctuations and challenging working conditions. Delivery workers and independent contractors worked throughout the pandemic without paid time off or guaranteed unemployment benefits.

Previous research has shown that gig workers should be separated into (at least) two groups: low-paid service workers who are potentially misclassified; and gig workers who fulfill more of the characteristics the New York State Department of Labor says "true independent contractors" should enjoy, including setting their own hourly rates. This report provides in-depth information from over 400 survey respondents from Western Queens in these two groups, to document:

- The wide variety of occupations in which gig and independent contractor work is prevalent, from for-hire drivers, construction workers or day laborers, barbers and salon workers, to artists, administrative assistants and software designers;
- The lived experience of gig workers, including the shape of their workweeks, how many hours and how many days a week they work, and their overall economic precarity;
- Their career ambitions, workforce needs, and challenges in navigating the job market;
- Their workforce training and education needs; and
- The support systems they rely upon, including social, educational, and professional services that are often not tailored to the needs of the most vulnerable precarious workers.

This report follows up on the first Astoria Project report, which offered an in-depth account of the economic, social, and mental health impacts of Covid-19 on workers in Astoria. It synthesizes survey data from 415 gig workers, freelancers, and independent contractors from Western Queens, centered on the neighborhoods of Astoria, Sunnyside, Woodside, Long Island City, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, Corona, and Ravenswood. It also draws on a series of focus groups, conducted between September and December 2023.

Just over half of the survey respondents fall into what we term the service, administrative, and construction gig worker category; the remainder represent the professional, education, and arts gig worker category. This report highlights the particular working conditions of these two groups and underscores their shared needs.

KEY FINDINGS

- **The Gig Work Week: Gig workers tend to work full-time weeks, with high unpaid additional work time in job searches. Respondents most frequently spent five days a week doing gig work, with a median of eight hours worked on a normal workday.**
    - Gig workers use both online platforms and traditional job market intermediaries to find work: Two-thirds relied on gig work as their primary source of income, while one-third regularly performed gig work in addition to their payroll jobs.
    - A majority of gig workers (60 percent) relied on online platforms to find jobs, while 40 percent used temp agencies, networks of existing clients, or other interpersonal relationships.

- **Gig workers, independent contractors, and freelancers experience high economic precarity and reliance on social assistance, and look to mutual aid or public services to meet basic needs. (Workers from all occupations use a variety of terms to refer to themselves; we generally use "gig workers.")**
    - Some 50 percent of respondents said that gig work income was essential for meeting their basic needs but only just over 45 percent said they were able to regularly cover their household costs through a combination of gig work and other income or assistance, including from nonprofits, charities, or friends and family.
    - Over one-third of gig workers said they were not confident or only slightly confident they would be able to pay the next month's rent or mortgage.
    - Nearly half (48 percent) said they qualified for some form of public assistance, including SNAP, WIC, TANF, Medicaid, or childcare support. Rates of eligibility were highest among Black respondents (55 percent); uncertainty about eligibility was highest among Hispanic or Latino respondents (54 percent).

- **Educational, Training, Mutual Aid & Workforce Needs:**
    - Among top barriers to taking payroll jobs were: difficulties navigating the job market or job search process, finding work with flexible schedules, having the right educational certifications, accessing childcare, and language challenges.
    - More than three-quarters of respondents said they had utilized public assistance or mutual aid in the past month. Services that workers relied upon included programs that supplied basic needs (food and clothing), as well as library lending services that allowed gig workers to check out computers or digital tools for their work.
    - Respondents highlighted a need for greater financial literacy, business and tax support, and job search programs. Gig workers who purchased their own supplies reported finding it challenging to file business-related expenses in their tax filings.

- **Labor Standards Violations:**
    - Gig workers are at the margins of the labor force and are subjected to frequent labor violations. Over half of respondents had filed a labor complaint with the New York City Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (32 percent), the New York State Department of Labor (17 percent), or a union or another worker-representing group (six percent) about working conditions. Workers from many occupations said they had filed such complaints, including nurses or health workers (82 percent), software developers and designers (75 percent), cleaners (58 percent), and delivery workers (49 percent).
    - These high rates of work-based complaints underscore the importance of a regulatory environment that gives workers legal standing in such cases and clear rules that protect gig workers, independent contractors, and freelancers from wage theft, late payment, and unfair labor practices or unsafe working conditions.

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Adhikaar
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ANSOB Center for Refugees
Al-Iman Mosque
Astoria Food Pantry
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INTRODUCTION

Why we need to know more about gig workers, freelancers, and independent contractors in New York City in order to provide effective social support, workforce training, career development, and more effective labor standards protections

The terms "gig worker," "freelancer," and "independent contractor" capture a wide range of workers and working conditions. The New York State Department of Labor has defined independent contractors as workers who are free from supervision, direction, and control in the performance of their duties. Independent contractors also set their own schedules and typically set or negotiate their own rates of pay. In these cases, working as an independent contractor means acting as a small business of one person.

True independent contractors are free from control of the hiring company, work for multiple employers, and set their own pay rates. These workers tend to be drawn from higher-earning industries, such as consulting, finance, technology, or design and marketing.

On the other hand, workers who should be considered employees but are misclassified as independent contractors, exercise none of these forms of control over their work. Previous reports have shown these workers tend to be in low-paid industries, such as transportation, delivery work, and personal care services[1]. The broad category of independent contractors and gig workers therefore includes workers who are low-paid and likely misclassified, as well as those that are higher-paid and have sought out non-traditional work, with certainly some permeability between these categories.

Gig workers in the United States face significant challenges in accessing traditional worker protections, primarily because such protections are often tied to traditional employment relationships. Unlike conventional employees, workers who operate as independent contractors, freelancers, and through non-traditional employment forms lack access to employer-provided benefits like health insurance, unemployment insurance, and workers' compensation. This gap reflects a widening misalignment between a growing category of unprotected workers and the legal and policy frameworks established for the traditional category of employee.

1 See J. Parrott and L.K. Moe, "For One in 10 New Yorkers, "Independent Contractors" Means Underpaid and Unprotected," Center for New York City Affairs, June 2022. https://www.centernyc.org/reports-briefs/one-in-10-new-york-workers-independent-contractor-means-underpaid-and-unprotected?rq=misclassified

Gig workers, freelancers, and independent contractors engage in a diverse range of work that spans many industries. They play an increasingly important role in a number of occupations across the New York City economy. They include drivers for ride-share companies, delivery personnel for food and retail services, nurses, freelance writers, graphic designers, and web developers, as well as independent consultants in fields such as marketing, legal services, and financial planning. The gig economy can also encompass creative professionals like photographers, musicians, and artists, essential parts of the care economy, such as informal childcare and elder care workers, as well as personal and domestic service workers, from barbers to cleaners, spent more than three hours commuting on a normal workday.

The growth of gig work for either full-time or supplementary income underscores a significant transformation in the labor market. The increase in platform-mediated gig workers became especially pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic (Garin et al. 2023). This reflects both new shifts in the economy and old stories of worker-employer power imbalances.

On the one hand, the economy is shaped by technological advancements and changing work preferences, suggesting a future where gig work could play an even more central role. On the other, gig workers represent a new form of exploitation, as online companies rely on workers for the equivalent of full-time (or more) work hours, while not offering either traditional worker protections, or the powers to control the pace of their work or set hourly pay rates (both characteristics of true independent contractors according to the New York Department of Labor)[2]. This makes it crucial to understand gig workers' needs and the challenges they face.

Gig workers are underserved by existing workforce and social support programs. The previous Astoria Project report explored the multifaceted impacts of Covid-19 on employment, health, and well-being in Astoria, Queens. This new investigation looks more closely at the evolving dynamics of the gig economy within this community. Here, we focus on the specific workforce issues and social needs of gig workers by investigating:

- *What does a workweek look like for a gig worker in different occupations? How many hours per day and days per week does a typical independent contractor or freelancer work?*
- *What are the workforce and training needs gig workers express interest in?*
- *What levels and types of economic precarity do gig workers in different occupations experience?*

In this report, we show that gig workers in different industries, with different kinds of jobs, have unique needs, but also that gig workers as a group share challenges, needs, and grievances. This situation provides advocates, policymakers, and political leaders the

2 New York State Department of Labor, "Independent Contractors," https://dol.ny.gov/independent-contractors.

opportunity to tailor programs for individual sectors and to think broadly about regulatory approaches to benefit this larger group of workers.

To accomplish this, we conducted a survey of 415 gig workers, freelancers, and independent contractors from Western Queens, centered on the neighborhoods of Astoria, Sunnyside, Woodside, Long Island City, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, Corona, and Ravenswood.

Respondents to the survey represent the expanse of the gig worker landscape. They fall into two broad categories. Just over half were service, administrative, delivery, transportation, and construction workers; the remainder included professional, educational, and arts workers.

Those in the first category are more likely to include workers who are potentially misclassified and for whom closer regulation would mean higher wages and better labor protections, including minimum wages, paid time off, and unemployment compensation. However, as this survey shows, gig workers as a group experience high levels of economic precarity and reliance on public assistance and mutual aid. Even professional-class independent contractors likely experience uncertainty and unevenness in their earnings, as well as higher administrative burdens in dealing with tax and legal questions. Low-paid independent contractors who face language barriers and difficulty navigating the job market, as well as high rates of unpaid time spent commuting and searching for work, report even greater economic insecurity and eagerness for more forms of educational, tax, legal, and basic needs support.

Figure 1

Gig worker broad categories

Professional, educational, and arts workers	Respondent Count
Arts workers, Actors, Audio or Visual/Film Production Worker	49
Software Developer, Digital Marketer or Web/Graphic Designer	44
Consultant, Financial Services, and other Management Services	36
Writer/Editor	22
Nurse or Other Healthcare Worker	10
Substitute Teacher	7
Adjunct Professor/Instructor	4
Total	172
Percent of total respondents	42%
NA	7
Percent of total respondents	2%

Gig worker broad categories

Service, administrative, delivery, and construction gig workers	Respondent Count
Food, Grocery, Or Package Delivery Driver (Deliverista)	57
Physical/Day Laborer, Handyman, or Construction workers	38
Cleaner	34
Rideshare/Taxi Driver	27
Administrative Worker/Assistant	23
Child or Elder Care Worker	22
Cosmetic/Salon Worker	13
Home Healthcare Worker	12
Personal services, incl. coaching, physical therapy, and catering	4
Dog Walker or Other Animal Caretaker	
Total	230
Percent of total respondents	56%

The growth of the gig economy has highlighted the pressing need for new workforce protections and programs. Gig workers often operate without the safety nets available to traditional employees, such as health insurance, unemployment benefits, workers' compensation, and paid leave. In focus groups, we learned from leaders of a major non-profit service provider that most of the gig workers they served were part-time and did not qualify for benefits. The precarious nature of gig work underscores the urgency of providing not just immediate relief but long-term stability and security.

Focus groups revealed the vulnerability of workers, especially immigrant and undocumented workers, to predatory employment practices. One worker said, "The experiences that I've had have been mostly negative, precisely because I don't have papers. You have to trust someone else to pay you and you work and spend money, and have no guarantee." Another worker pointed out that, "When you come from a different country, you don't know how things work. It sounds simple to other people, but especially when you get into the work field, the W2s, I-9s, 1099s, it's just so overwhelming."

Many workers expressed a desire to learn more about their rights, about navigating New York City's bureaucracies and existing workforce programs, and about how to improve their "soft" employment and business skills. Workers felt they had to learn and figure out how to access everything themselves.

The lack of access to essential benefits and protections for gig workers highlights a critical gap

in the current employment and social safety nets. Addressing this gap requires enforcement of existing labor laws, new laws to curb the misclassification of workers as independent contractors, and the creation of regulations to address gaps in protections for gig workers.

In response, New York City has initiated various programs aimed at supporting gig workers. This includes granting them access to benefits typically reserved for traditional employment. Additionally, New York City is pioneering in establishing minimum pay standards for independent contractors, starting with for-hire vehicle drivers in 2018 and, more recently, delivery workers, and exploring the creation of a portable benefits fund to offer social insurance and other benefits.[3]

Recent legal settlements have required online for-hire driver platforms to provide paid sick leave for drivers. A New York State Department of Labor settlement has affirmed the eligibility of drivers and Uber Eats delivery workers to receive unemployment insurance.[4] These and other measures, such as prohibiting non-compete and forced arbitration clauses in freelance contracts and launching public awareness campaigns about workers' rights, seek to enhance the rights and security of gig workers.

In addition, groups of gig workers themselves have been organizing collectively in pursuit of basic labor rights. "Deliveristas Unidos" is one example. It is a group of food delivery workers who since the pandemic have been organizing in response to danger and discrimination on the job. They have also campaigned against attempts by Uber, DoorDash, and Grubhub to subvert minimum wage standards and tipping practices. This underscores the importance of engaging with workers throughout policy development, especially monitoring and evaluation post-implementation, and anticipating how profit-motivated platforms will respond and adapt to such legislation.[5]

3 See, for example, J. A. Parrott et al., "The New York City App-Based Driver Pay Standard," CNYCA, 2018. https://www.centernyc.org/the-new-york-city-app-based-driver-pay-standard-revised?mc_cid=80c36c5e43&mc_eid=f076c27c0e

4 See, for example, the Office of the New York State Attorney General, "Lyft and Uber Settlements," https://ag.ny.gov/lyft-uber-settlement

5 Ángel Melgoza, "NYC Food Delivery Workers Fight for Rights," Ojalá, February 2024. https://www.ojala.mx/en/ojala-en/nyc-food-delivery-workers-fight-for-labor-rights

I. WORK WEEK

Gig Workers work full-time weeks, with high unpaid additional work time in job search and commuting

Survey respondents made clear that most need to either earn a living from full-time gig work or rely on gig work to compensate for inadequate pay from another full-time job. And while many gig workers prize flexibility, responses to this survey suggest they work at least as much as full-time employees. Their work routines resemble those of W2 workers. Respondents most frequently spent five days a week doing gig work, with a median of eight hours per day worked on a normal workday. (See Figure 2.) Moreover, given that 35 percent of respondents said they regularly worked as a gig worker in addition to a payroll job (the remaining 65 percent said they only worked as a gig worker, freelancer, or independent contractor), and the hours of work reported referred only to their gig work, many of these respondents were working in excess of 40 hours per week.

Figure 2

How do gig workers find work? Nearly 60 percent of respondents said that they found gig work online, with the remainder relying on a temp agency, a network of known firms/clients, or other interpersonal relationships. These habits differed by occupation, with salon workers and rideshare drivers the most likely to find work using an online app or platform. By contrast, personal services (coaches, physical therapists, and caterers), substitute teachers, and arts workers (including actors and producers) were most likely to use temp agencies or other interpersonal networks. (See Figure 3.) These results underscore that gig work, independent contractor work, and freelance work are not only mediated by online platforms, but continue to rely on other more traditional job market intermediaries.

Figure 3

How do gig workers find work?

Occupation	Using an online/app platform	Via a temp agency, a network of known firms/clients, or other interpersonal relationships	Total Number respondents
All Occupations	**61%**	**39%**	**405**
Cosmetic/Salon Worker	85%	15%	13
Rideshare/Taxi Driver	80%	20%	25
Dog Walker or Other Animal Caretaker	78%	22%	9
Child or Elder Care Worker	77%	23%	22
Home Healthcare Worker	75%	25%	12
Adjunct Professor/Instructor	75%	25%	4
Software Developer, Digital Marketer or Web/Graphic Designer	68%	32%	44
Food, Grocery, Or Package Delivery Driver (Deliverista)	61%	39%	56
Nurse or Other Healthcare Worker	60%	40%	10
Cleaner	59%	41%	34
Consultant, Financial Services, and other Management Services	57%	43%	35
Administrative Worker/Assistant	57%	43%	23
Physical/Day Laborer, Handyman, or Construction workers	53%	47%	38
Writer/Editor	52%	48%	23
Arts workers, Actors, Audio or Visual/Film Production Worker	49%	51%	49
Substitute Teacher	33%	67%	6
Personal services, incl. coaching, physical therapy, and catering	0%	100%	4

Nearly 51 percent of respondents who found work online said they spent "a significant amount of unpaid time on online platforms searching for jobs." (An additional 20 percent said they were unsure how much time they spent this way and less than 30 percent were confident they did not spend a significant amount of time in this fashion.) Gig workers also reported spending a large amount of time commuting. On a typical workday, 28 percent spent more than three hours commuting; another 26 percent said they spent between more than two hours commuting. Notably, 55 percent of substitute teachers, 47 percent of salon workers, and 45 percent of childcare or elder care workers, spent more than three hours commuting on a normal workday.

II. BASIC NEEDS

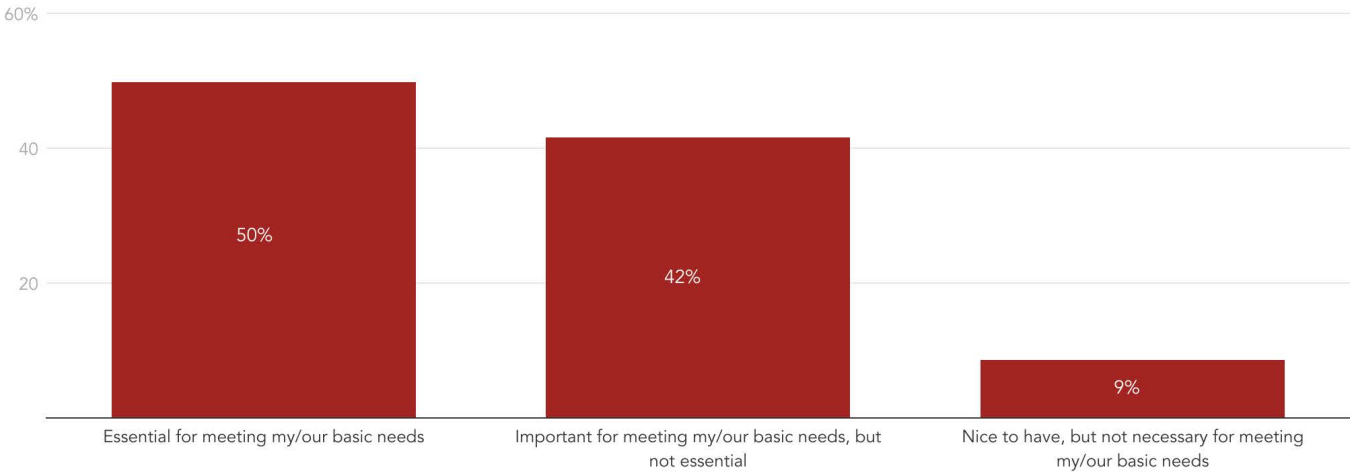
Gig workers, independent contractors, and freelancers experience high economic and housing precarity

One debate at the center of creating policy both to support gig workers and to regulate employee misclassification is how central gig income is to workers' overall earnings. For some, gig earnings provide their sole or primary source of income. For others, gig work is a supplementary or even seasonal source of income that may fit in around school or another full-time, W2 or payroll job.

This survey captured responses from workers who rely solely on gig work for income as well as those for whom it supplemented a W2 or payroll job. For both groups of respondents, gig work earnings were important, with 50 percent saying it was essential to meeting basic needs.

Figure 4

Importance of gig work income for meeting basic needs



Respondents painted a complex picture of how they pieced together enough monthly income to meet basic needs. Just over 45 percent said they were regularly able to cover household costs through a combination of gig work and other income or assistance, including from nonprofits, charities, or friends and family. (See Figure 5.) Just over 40 percent said they were able to regularly cover their costs from gig work alone, while 13 percent said they struggled to make ends meet, even when adding income from gig work to all other available sources of income. Over a third said they were not confident or only slightly confident that they would be able to pay the next month's rent or mortgage payment on time. (See Figure 6.)

Figure 5

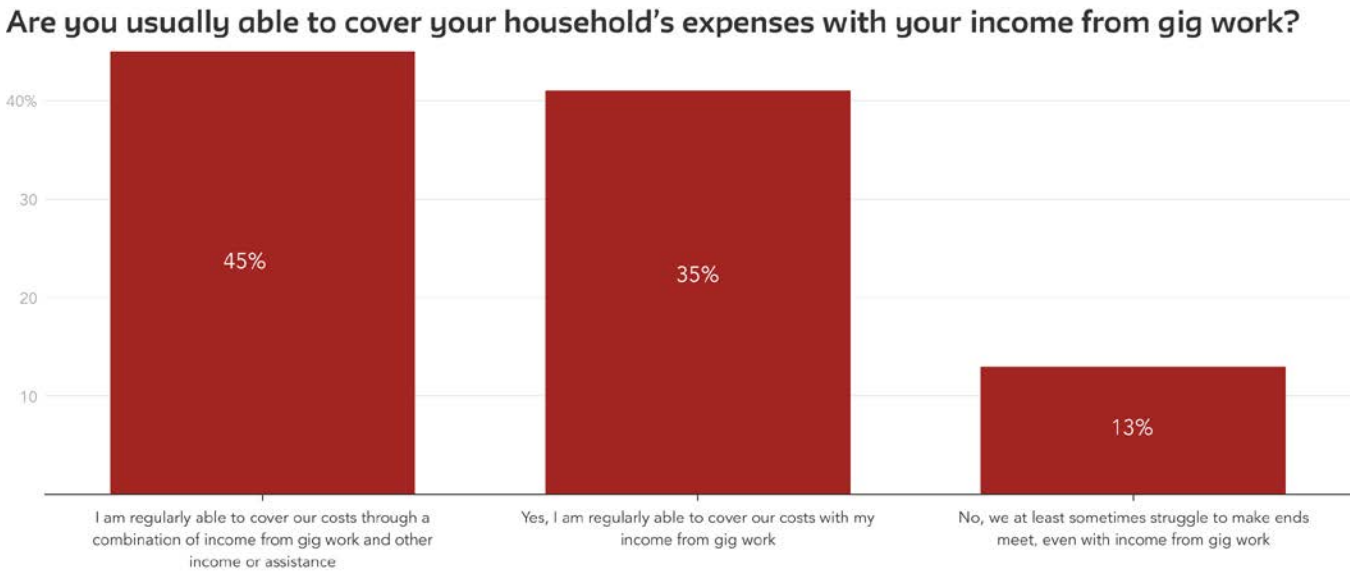
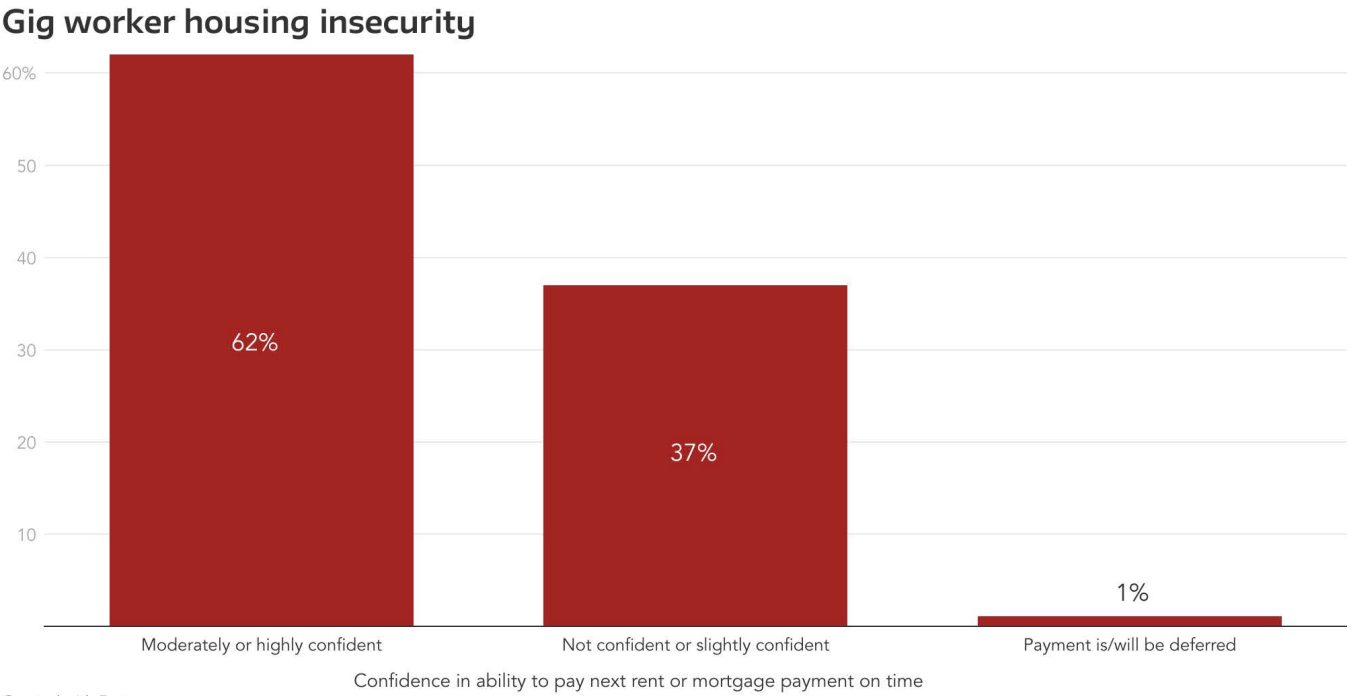


Figure 6



III. BUSINESS NEEDS

Business needs, tax challenges, and the absence of financial supports for gig workers, freelancers, and independent contractors

Gig workers are a broad category that include likely misclassified workers as well as those who prefer to have nontraditional work contracts. In considering their business needs, tax challenges, and financial literacy training, it is critical for advocates to tailor their trainings to different categories of gig workers. While enforcement and know-your-rights trainings may help some misclassified workers access benefits to which they are entitled, other professional and middle-wage independent contractors may be most benefited by having a better grasp of the tax, legal, and business implications of taking on independent contractor work.

The New York State Department of Labor has defined independent contractors as workers who are free from supervision, direction, and control in the performance of their duties. Independent contractors also set their own schedules and typically set or negotiate their own rates of pay. In these cases, working as an independent contractor means that an individual is acting as a small business of one person.

Purchasing (or financing the purchase of) supplies required for gig work, figuring out how to file business expenses on income tax forms, and requesting reimbursement from businesses are all time-consuming, complicated tasks for gig workers. Eighty percent of survey respondents reported that they filed business expenses related to their gig work as part of their tax filings, but many expressed both difficulty in fulfilling these tasks and a desire to find more resources for assistance.

Gig workers reported a range of supplies that they purchased, from cell phones and software licenses to cleaning supplies and specific kinds of insurance required for their work. Topping the list were laptops and cell phones, which were common purchases across a wide range of occupations, from delivery workers to consultants. (See Figure 7.)

Other supplies were more closely linked to particular occupations; 33 percent of respondents who said e-bikes were purchased were delivery workers (followed by 15 percent of construction workers or day laborers). Some 40 percent of respondents who purchased computer equipment worked in technology or the arts. Rideshare driving was the most common occupation among respondents who said they purchased a specific kind of insurance or licensing for their work. By contrast, writers and arts workers were among those who most frequently needed to rent space. (See Appendix II for a full breakdown of occupations and supplies purchased.)

Figure 7

Most common supplies purchased for gig work

Supplies	Count
Computer/Laptop	145
Cell phone for work use	140
E-bikes, scooters, or other micro mobility devices	84
Cleaning supplies	87
Supportive software or apps	82
Public transportation passes	78
Safety equipment, e.g. helmets, reflective safety vests	56
Construction supplies	49
Printer	51
Vehicle fuel, e.g. gasoline, batteries/recharges	48
Types of insurance or licensing specific to my work	44
Rented office/studio/other workspace	38

Respondents could select multiple answers.

Overall, 42 percent of respondents said they paid for supplies themselves. For dog walkers, this rate was over 44 percent. It was also high for many white-collar freelancers, including software freelancers; nearly 50 percent said they paid for their own licenses and equipment, as did over 80 percent of writers and editors.

IV. PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Gaps in the social assistance, workforce, training, and social support networks for gig workers

Public Assistance: Usage and Challenges

We asked respondents about their broad need to access public assistance, including healthcare and childcare. Nearly half (48 percent) said they qualified for some form of public assistance, including housing assistance, childcare assistance, SNAP, WIC, TANF, or Medicaid. An additional 39 percent said that they were unsure if they were eligible for those programs. Rates of eligibility were highest among Black respondents (at 55 percent); rates of uncertainty about eligibility were highest among Hispanic or Latino respondents at 54 percent. More than a third said they did not know if they were eligible for SNAP (also known as "food stamps"), WIC, TANF, Medicaid, housing assistance, or childcare assistance. This highlights a need to educate these workers about the programs that are available to them and their household.

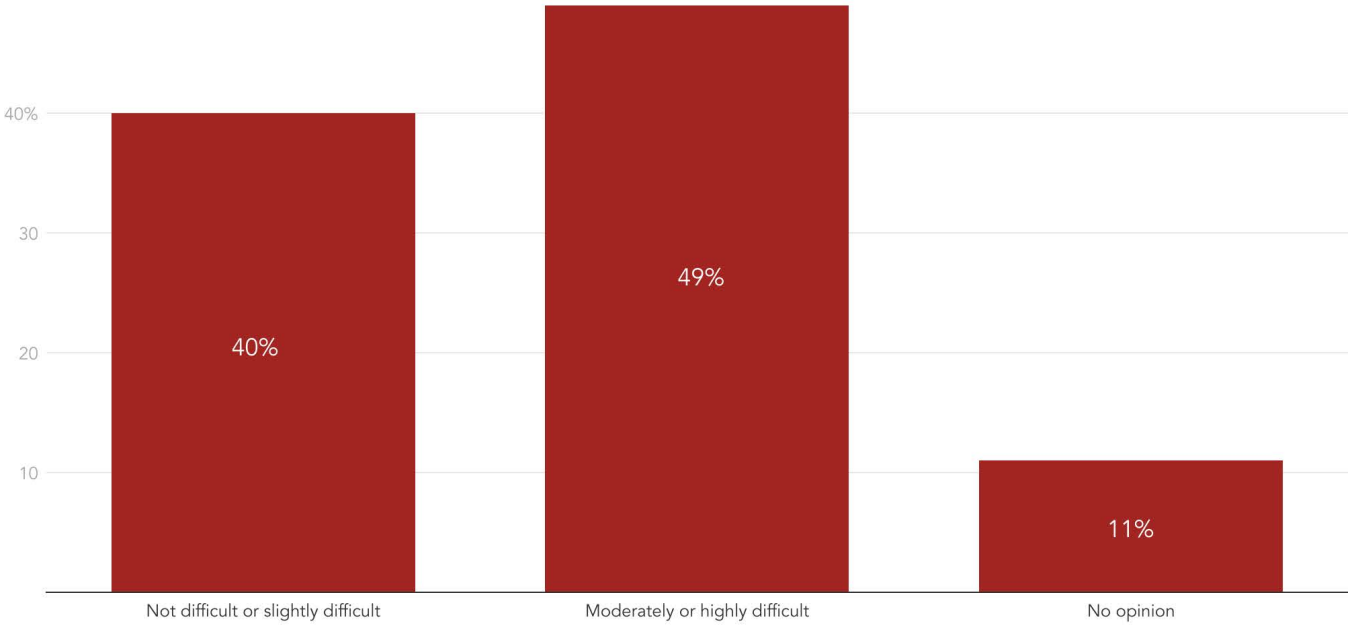
Nearly half of gig workers said they found it difficult to do the paperwork and meet other requirements of maintaining eligibility for public assistance. (See Figure 8.) This problem was greatest among a mix of white collar and low-wage jobs, including software developers and digital marketers (83 percent), substitute teachers and adjunct professors (65 percent), writers and editors (57 percent), delivery workers (56 percent), nurses (56 percent), and rideshare drivers and day laborers (50 percent).

New Yorkers seeking to access public benefits, generally at HRA Job Centers or food stamp offices, face a range of obstacles, including long wait times, requests for return or repeat office visits, confusing communication about rules and regulations, and problems associated with benefits being incorrectly terminated. These barriers can be exacerbated by language barriers and made especially difficult for those in non-standard work situations. Since the pandemic, wait times for public benefits have lengthened and the number of New Yorkers in need has increased.[6]

6 "Benefits Access in New York City," New York City's Mayor's Office of Opportunity (2018); L. Melodia, "While New York City's economy is back to pre-pandemic job levels, rising public assistance demand highlights the need for State and City action to increase income for city's residents," CNYCA 2023; "Barriers to Benefits: A Survey of Clients at New York City Human Resource Job Centers," 2008. https://www.nyc.gov/html/records/pdf/govpub/moved/pubadvocate/HRASurvey.pdf.

Figure 8

Difficulty maintaining eligibility for public assistance

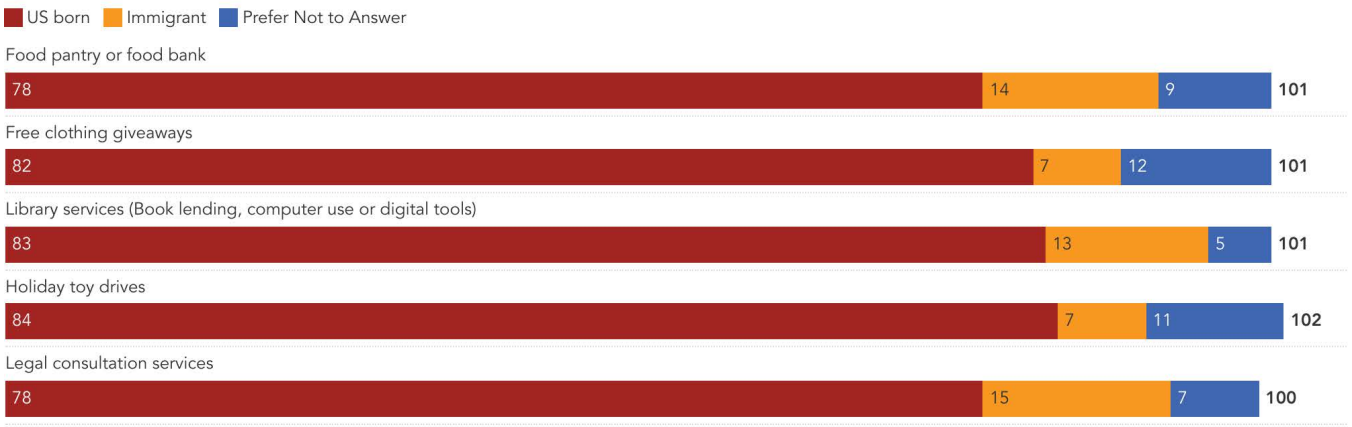


Mutual Aid: Usage and Challenges

Over three-quarters of gig worker respondents (78 percent) said they had utilized public assistance or mutual aid in the past, from food pantries to tax preparation services. (See Figure 9) Topping the list were services that helped workers meet basic needs, like food and clothing. Also high on the list were the library lending services that allowed gig workers to check out computers or other digital tools useful for their work. Most workers who utilized public assistance were US-born.

Figure 9

Utilization of Public Assistance or Mutual Aid



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Note: respondents were able to select multiple answers.

Rates of public assistance and mutual aid usage were much higher among native-born gig workers (85 percent) than among immigrants (48 percent). (This survey did not ask whether immigrants were naturalized citizens.) Utilization rates were higher among gig workers who spoke Mandarin (90 percent) or English (78 percent) at home compared to those who spoke Spanish (44 percent) in their households. Nearly a quarter of Spanish speakers said they had never used these services but were interested in doing so. Spanish speakers were also three times as likely as English speakers to say they were not interested in using public assistance or mutual aid. (See Figure 10 & 11.)

Figure 10

Rates of public assistance or mutual aid usage

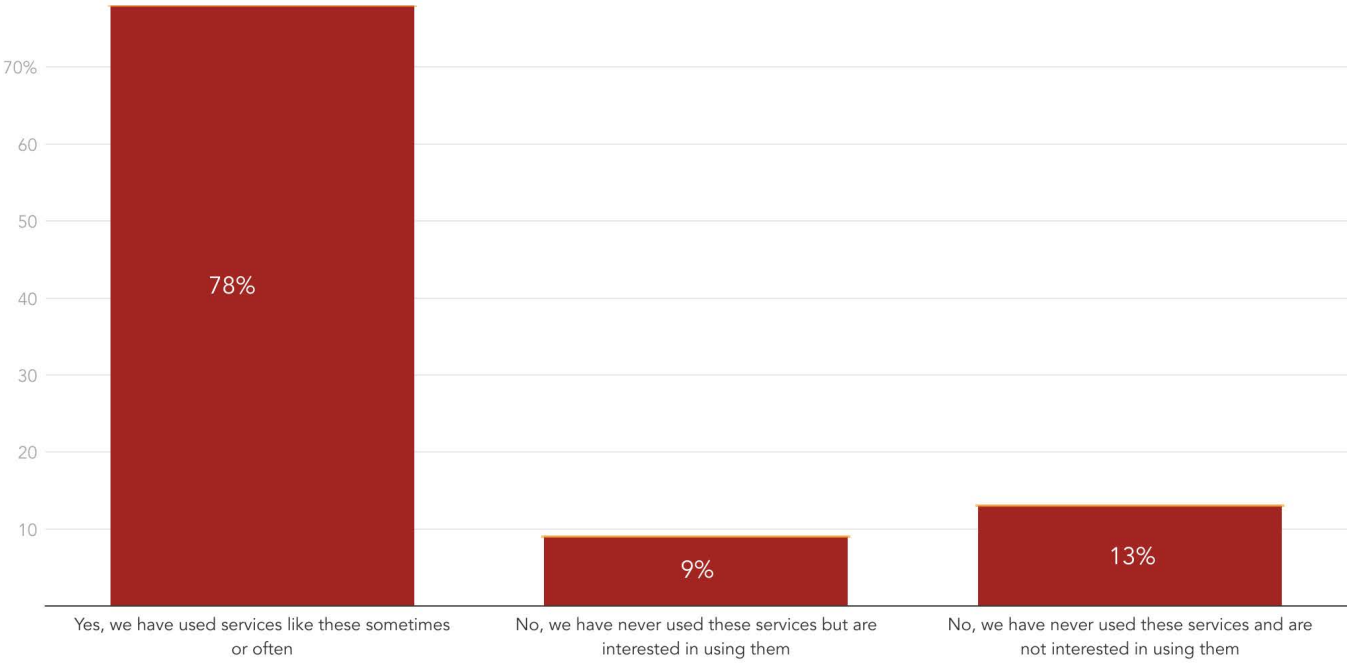
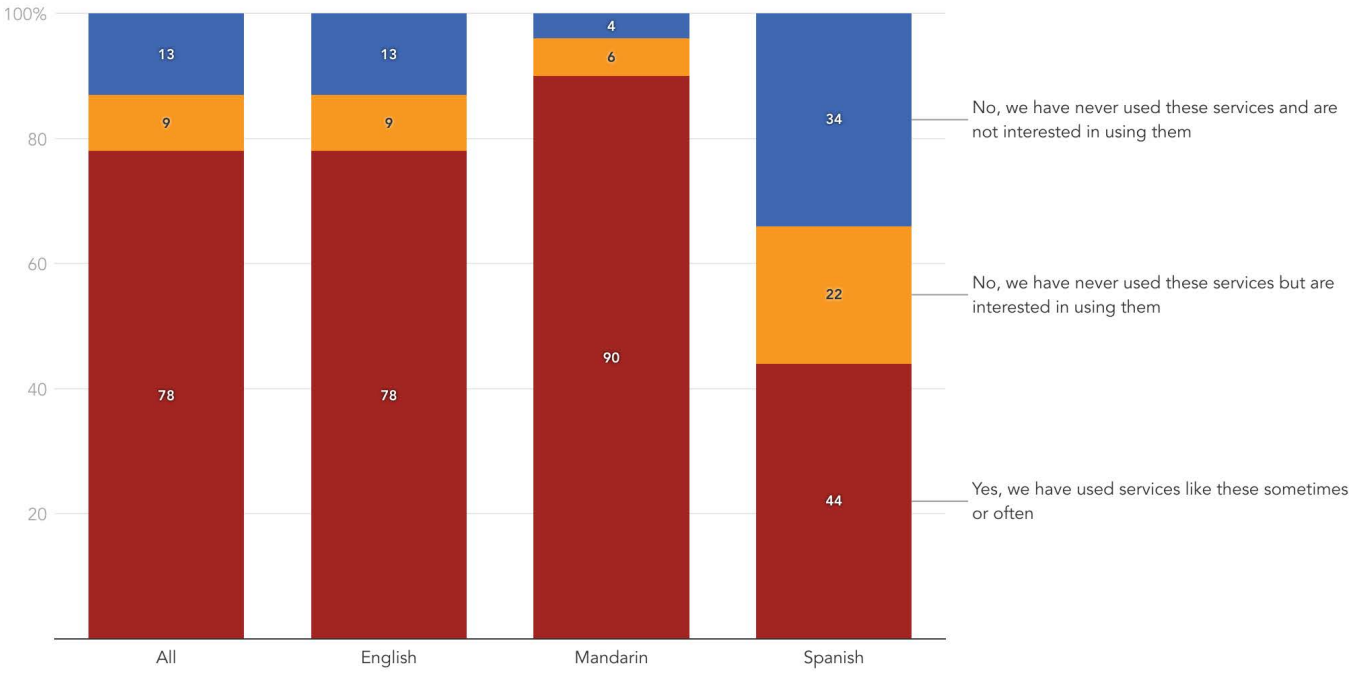


Figure 11

Rates of public assistance or mutual aid usage by primary language spoken at home



V. LABOR COMPLAINTS

Focus group conversations revealed that workers were interested in learning more about their rights and ways of reporting labor violations. Our survey revealed that many workers were already doing so.

Focus group conversations found that workers expressed fears about retaliation for reporting such violations. One gig worker said, "As much as they say there's not going to be retaliation, there is, and these big companies know what they can do. They have legal workforces behind them, they know what they can get away with and the little guys, we don't." Another worker pointed out that it was difficult to know whom to complain to, saying, "There are intermediaries and it becomes impossible for you to act if you don't have, for example, the name of a person or the name of the company." One worker said, "There needs to be somebody workers can go to [to] voice their thoughts independent of HR, because HR works for the company. They're being paid by the company." All these workers felt that the decks were stacked against them, not knowing to whom they could make complaints and who would take those complaints seriously. And yet, many filed labor complaints despite these doubts.

In this survey, we found that more than half of the gig worker respondents filed a complaint about their working conditions. Of the 415 survey respondents, 254 had filed at least one complaint about their working conditions. They reported making complaints to the New York City Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (32 percent of those filing complaints), New York State Department of Labor (17 percent), or a union or another worker-representing group (six percent). (See Figure 12.)

All Occupations: Labor Complaints

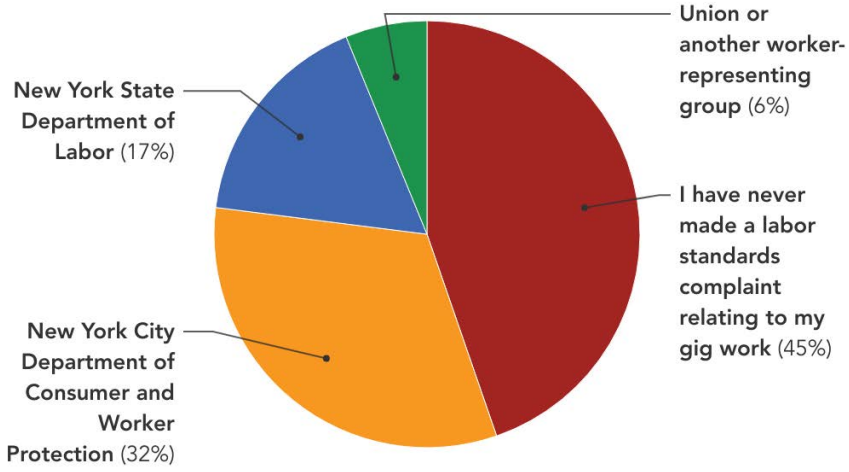


Figure 12

These findings underscore the importance of a regulatory environment that gives workers legal standing to levy complaints about their working conditions. Over the past 10 years, the City and State have passed a number of measures to protect gig workers and offer them ways to redress labor violations. The City's 2017 Freelance Isn't Free Act requires that freelancers

receive written contracts and provides protection against late or non-payment. (The State Legislature later adopted a statewide version of this act.) Additionally, the City's Taxi and Limousine Commission adopted a minimum pay regulation for app-based for-hire vehicle drivers, such as those working through Lyft and Uber. In 2021, the City Council enacted a range of protections for app-based restaurant food delivery workers concerning wage theft, access to restaurant bathrooms, and minimum compensation standards.

Despite these measures, this survey demonstrates that gig workers remain vulnerable to workplace violations. Workers in some occupations reported startling high rates of labor complaints. For example, 18 of the 26 childcare or eldercare respondents said they had filed a labor complaint. Nearly 50 percent (32 of 65) of delivery worker respondents said they had done so. (See Figure 13.) Professional workers also had employment-related complaints, with nearly three-quarters of software developers and digital marketers having filed a labor-related complaint. These high rates suggest that legislation like the Freelance Isn't Free Act And a regulatory and enforcement environment tailored to gig workers are critical.

Figure 13

Gig worker respondents who had filed a labor complaint

Occupations	Percent of respondents
All Occupations	55%
Food, Grocery, Or Package Delivery Driver (Deliverista)	49%
Arts workers, Actors, Audio or Visual/Film Production Worker	34%
Software Developer, Digital Marketer or Web/Graphic Designer	75%
Physical/Day Laborer, Handyman, or Construction workers	40%
Consultant, Financial Services, and other Management Services	62%
Cleaner	58%
Rideshare/Taxi Driver	49%
Administrative Worker/Assistant	46%
Writer/Editor	53%
Child or Elder Care Worker	70%
Cosmetic/Salon Worker	69%
Home Healthcare Worker	74%
Nurse or Other Healthcare Worker	82%
Dog Walker or Other Animal Caretaker	63%
Substitute Teacher	48%
Adjunct Professor/Instructor	74%
Personal services, incl. coaching, physical therapy, and catering	0%

VI. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Workforce development: interest in training and switching careers

Why do workers take gig jobs? And what prevents gig workers from finding a payroll or W2 jobs? Respondents listed a number of challenges. Some focused on the poor quality of payroll jobs available to them, or the inflexibility of 9-5 scheduling. Others identified problems with accessing childcare or care for other dependents, or accommodating school pick-up and drop-off times. (See Figure 14.)

Workers expressed strong desires for education and training programs, and also welcomed guidance about how to find and navigate those programs. As one worker in a focus group said, "I think we need more case managers or job helpers or just guidance on how to begin the process. Because workers are just fighting for the odd job, and they have to feed their kids and themselves." Another worker pointed out that, "Many of the drivers don't have a lot of education, they don't really have good knowledge of the language, and they don't have any financial or organization skills for themselves."

Focus groups revealed that gig workers were keenly interested in digital literacy and entrepreneurial and professional skills. Many indicated that they felt these skills might help protect them against the precarious nature of gig work. In one focus group, a worker highlighted his focus on digital literacy classes, but his difficulty navigating the class without his own laptop, saying, "For me it's got to be computer skills. The 21st Street library has a class on Tuesday, and a GED program as well. The only problem was I had to go check out a laptop and sit there. But that's what I've got to do to get my skills up there." In another focus group, public housing residents reported that they looked to arts education classes to both find entrepreneurial opportunities and also create a form of community among highly precarious, low-income workers.

Workforce training and organization programs therefore have an important role to play. The second-most common barrier that gig workers listed was difficulty navigating the job market or job search process. Cleaners, day laborers, handymen, construction workers, as well as writers and arts workers (including video and audio producers) ranked the job search process as their most daunting barrier. Others felt blocked by lacking sufficient education or job certification credentials.

Both of these barriers could be addressed by developing better communication networks or hubs aimed at connecting current gig workers to existing workforce training and support across New York City. Another response would be programs specifically aimed at workers who do not know how to transition out of gig or independent contractor positions.

Figure 14

Top Barriers to Taking Payroll Jobs

Barrier	Count
Inflexibility of schedule compared to gig work	56
Difficulty navigating the job market or job search process	55
Lack of educational requirements or certifications	26
Difficulty accessing care for children or other dependents	17
Difficulty with English language	15

Note: respondents were able to select multiple answers.

When gig workers were asked whether they would prefer to take a payroll position doing the same work they already do versus shifting to another industry, the majority preferred finding a payroll job in their existing occupation (65 percent). This group included high proportions of film and TV producers, software engineers, and graphic designers.

The remainder would prefer to switch industries or occupations in search of a payroll job. In this group, 44 percent of food, grocery, or package delivery workers (often organized under the name Los Deliveristas in New York City), would prefer to find a direct-hire position in another occupation or industry. Home health aides, childcare workers, and dog walkers also preferred switching occupations or industries.

Gig workers outlined a number of needs that could be addressed by workforce training and nonprofit support programs. Nearly one-third expressed interest in free legal consultation services (including housing and immigration lawyers), free tax services, or both. This interest was highest among immigrant respondents. Only five percent of gig workers said they were uninterested in either. (See Figure 15.)

Figure 15

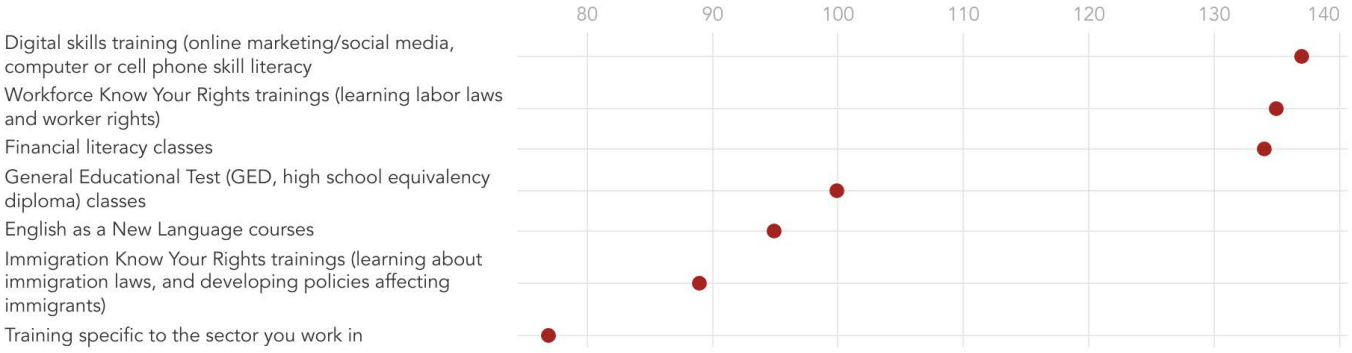
Interest in Information Services and Career Development Courses

Courses	Count
Digital skills training (online marketing/social media, computer or cell phone skill literacy	137
Workforce Know Your Rights trainings (learning labor laws and worker rights)	135
Financial literacy classes	134
General Educational Test (GED, high school equivalency diploma) classes	100
English as a New Language courses	95
Immigration Know Your Rights trainings (learning about immigration laws, and developing policies affecting immigrants)	89
Training specific to the sector you work in	77

Finally, gig workers expressed interest in a range of information services and professional courses for career advancement. (See Figure 16.) Topping the list were digital skills training, including online marketing, using social media, or basic computer and cell phone skills. Close behind was "know your rights" trainings about labor laws and worker rights, as well as "immigration rights" classes. Respondents also expressed strong interest in classes in financial literacy, English as a new language, and GED or high school equivalence classes.

Figure 16

Interest in Information Services and Career Development Courses



Workforce "know your rights" trainings was a top request among delivery workers, day laborers and construction workers, and administrative assistants and financial consultants. This suggests that a broad array of workers is uncertain about labor laws and their rights. Perhaps unsurprisingly, designers, software developers, and web marketers placed digital skills training at the top of their educational interests; arts workers and handymen or construction workers also ranked this need highly. Both cleaners and rideshare drivers ranked financial literacy and English as a second language classes as their highest demands, while childcare and eldercare workers put financial literacy and GED classes at the top of their lists.

CONCLUSION

This report traces aspects of the work life, career ambitions, and needs of the growing number of gig workers, freelancers, and independent contractors from Western Queens, centered on the neighborhoods of Astoria, Sunnyside, Woodside, Long Island City, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, Corona, and Ravenswood. These workers largely fall outside the traditional protections and benefits of being an employee. Because gig work now appears across a wide range of occupations, from delivery worker, cleaner, and childcare worker to consultant, graphic designer, and writer, understanding the working conditions and needs of this growing group of workers is essential to creating policy, support programs, and enforcing the labor protections necessary to allow workers to continue to thrive in New York City.

Why do workers take gig jobs? And what prevents gig workers from finding a payroll or W2 jobs? Our survey showed that workers face many challenges. Some respondents focused on the poor quality of payroll jobs available to them, the inflexibility of 9-5 scheduling, difficulty accessing childcare or care for other dependents, and accommodating school pick-up and drop-off times for their children.

The survey revealed that gig workers and independent contractor respondents had high rates of filing labor complaints, to the New York City Department of Consumer and Worker Protection, the New York State Department of Labor, and with unions or other worker-representing groups. This indicates that they experience high rates of labor violations, and underscores the importance of clear regulation, enforcement, and pathways for redress.

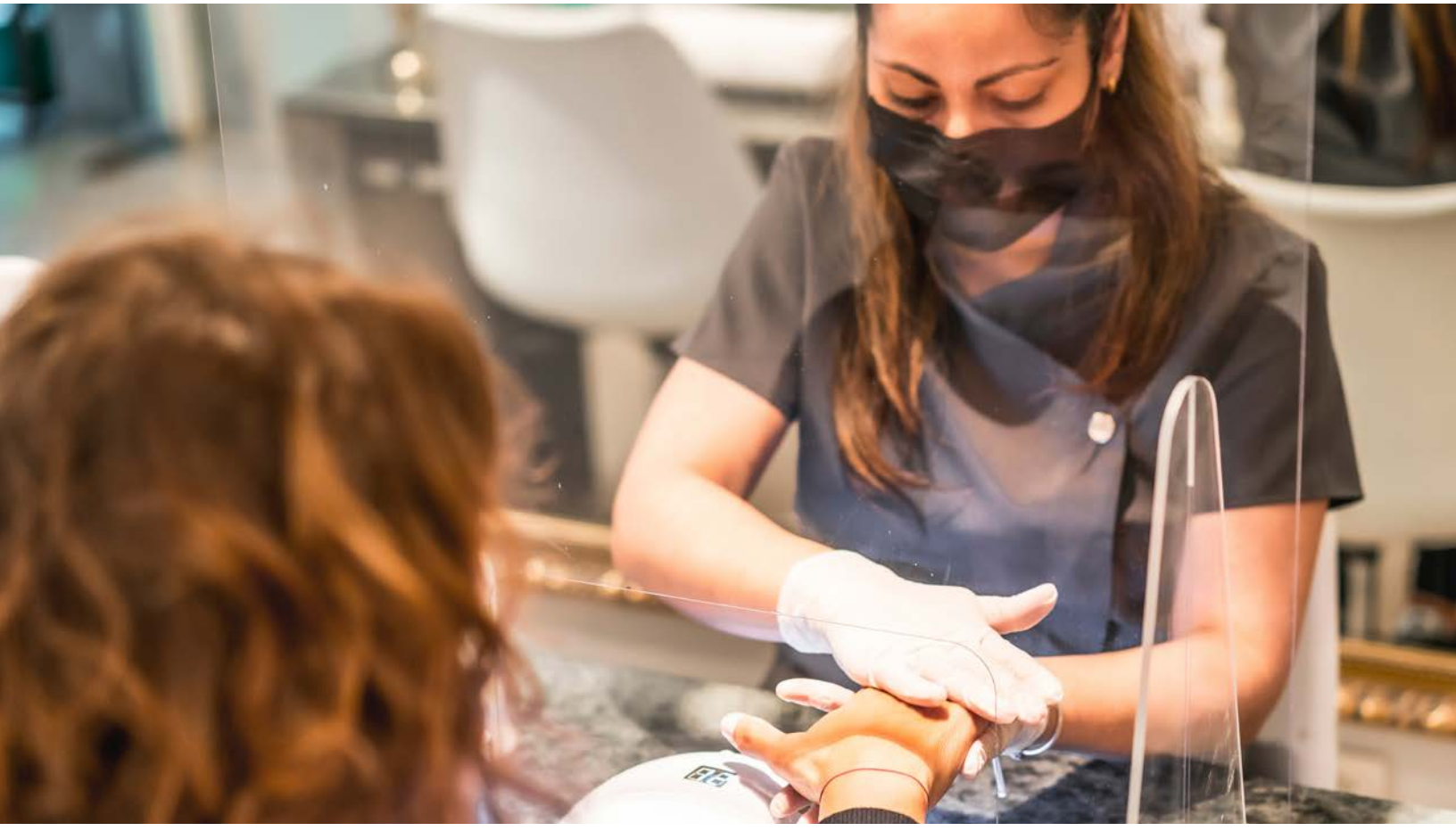
Previous research has shown the importance of clear rules and active regulation for protecting gig workers in a wide range of industries. The 2010 State Construction Industry Fair Play Act, which created a presumption of employment to clarify the conditions under which a worker could be considered an independent contractor, set clear standards for enforcement and resulted in a 34 percent reduction in construction misclassification in New York City over the following decade.[7] Additionally, while New York City has not directly addressed the issue of employee misclassification, it has enacted several local laws to protect independent contractors, including the Freelance Isn't Free Act, the City's for-hire minimum pay standards, and labor protections for app-based food delivery workers.

Overall, this survey showed that gig workers, independent contractors, and freelancers reported that they relied on income from gig work to make ends meet, even if gig work was a supplement to other sources of income (from a payroll job, for example). A majority of gig

7 J Parrott and LK Moe, "For One in Ten New Yorkers "Independent Contractor" Means Underpaid and Unprotected," Center for New York City Affairs, June 2022. https://www.centernyc.org/reports-briefs/one-in-10-new-york-workers-independent-contractor-means-underpaid-and-unprotected?rq=misclassif

workers also tend to rely on help from social assistance programs or mutual aid programs for themselves and their families. Moreover, across a range of different occupations, gig workers reported high rates of economic precarity and housing insecurity, especially among delivery workers, drivers, and childcare workers, and among workers of color and immigrants.

We found moreover that immigrants tend to utilize public assistance at a lower rate than native-born workers, in part because they reported lower rates of awareness of the social supports available to them. Gig workers expressed high interest in tax and legal services that would help them navigate the complex business and bureaucratic environment of being an independent contractor. We found that many gig workers would welcome training to help them advance in their current occupations or switch to being a payroll employee. This suggests some of the important roles that nonprofits, training centers, and workforce programs can play in supporting the growing and vulnerable category of gig workers in New York City.



APPENDIX I

Methods

This study employed an anonymized survey hosted on Qualtrics, disseminated through a network of over a dozen non-profit, workforce, and community-based organizations in Western Queens, including the neighborhoods of Astoria, Sunnyside, Woodside, Long Island City, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, Corona, and Ravenswood, targeting gig workers, independent contractors, and freelancers. The survey ran from September to December 2023. The survey launched simultaneously in English, Spanish, Arabic, (simplified) Mandarin, and Bangla/Bengali, with promotion from elected official and local organization partners. Outreach was directed by the Consortium of Worker Education's Noah Meixler (Director, Astoria Worker Project) and Daniela Jaramilla Cardona. We implemented filters to ensure data integrity, excluding responses from bots, international IP addresses, or those completed in under three minutes. Incomplete surveys with less than 10 percent of questions answered were also removed. This resulted in 484 total responses. To accurately represent Queens' demographics, we re-weighted our data against the 2021 5-year American Community Survey Census, applying a 25 percent reduction to responses from white participants and increasing immigrant responses by 25 percent. Detailed demographics of our refined survey sample are available in Appendix II.

APPENDIX II

Respondents occupational and demographic summary tables

Figure 1

Occupational Breakdown

Occupation	Count	Percentage
Food, Grocery, Or Package Delivery Driver (Deliverista)	57	14%
Arts workers, Actors, Audio or Visual/Film Production Worker	49	12%
Software Developer, Digital Marketer or Web/Graphic Designer	44	11%
Physical/Day Laborer, Handyman, or Construction workers	38	9%
Consultant, Financial Services, and other Management Services	36	9%
Cleaner	34	8%
Rideshare/Taxi Driver	27	7%
Administrative Worker/Assistant	23	6%
Writer/Editor	22	6%
Child or Elder Care Worker	22	5%
Cosmetic/Salon Worker	13	3%

Continue in next page

Nurse or Other Healthcare Worker	10	2%
Dog Walker or Other Animal Caretaker	9	2%
Substitute Teacher	7	2%
Adjunct Professor/Instructor	4	1%
Personal services, incl. coaching, physical therapy, and catering	4	1%
NA	7	-
Total	418	100%

Figure 2

Demographic Breakdown by Gender

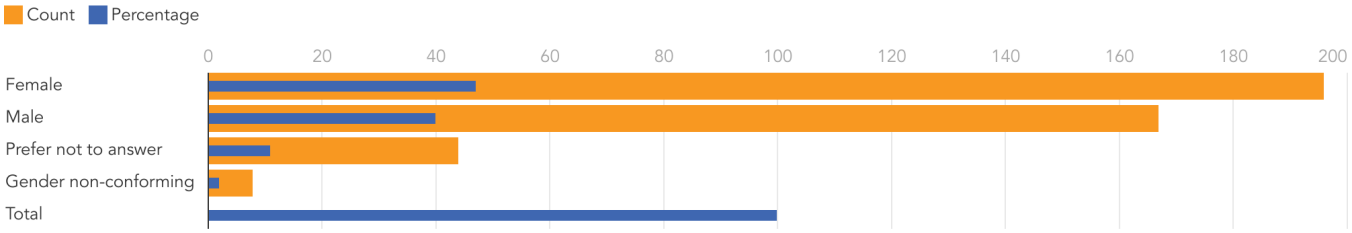


Figure 3

Demographic Breakdown by Race/Ethnicity

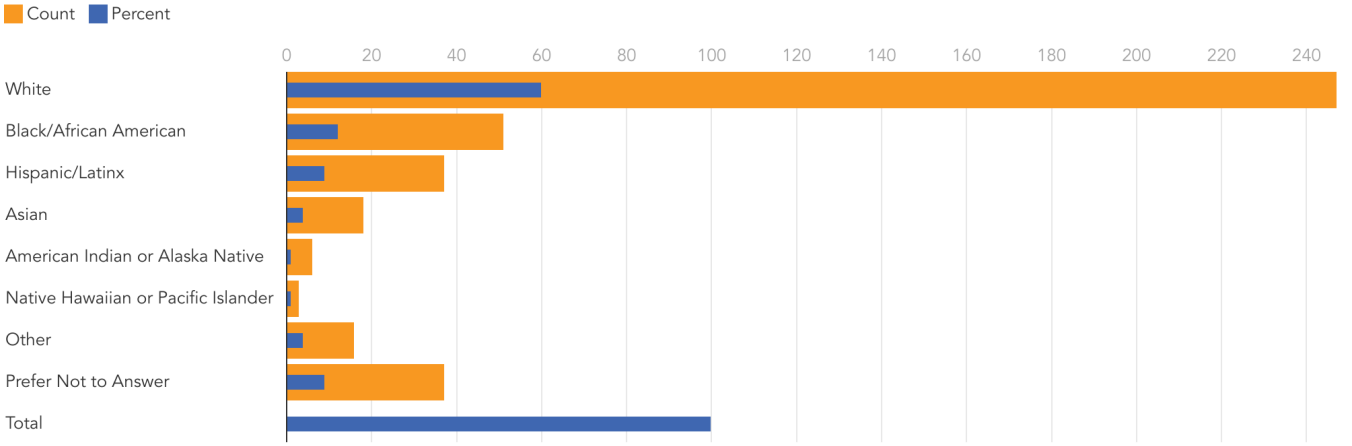


Figure 4

Demographic Breakdown by Nativity

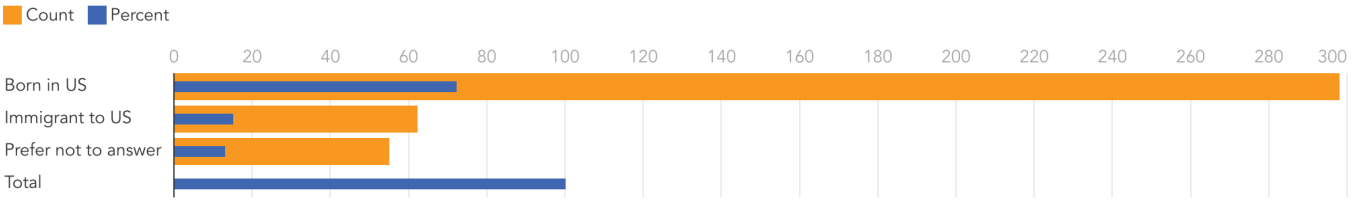
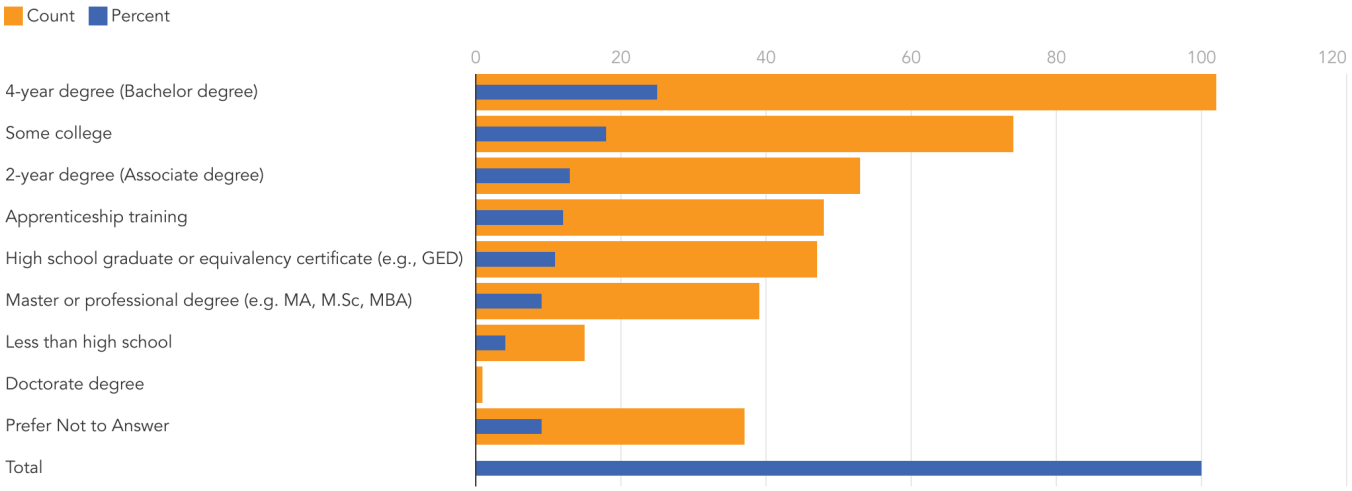


Figure 5

Demographic Breakdown by Education



Note: These demographic breakdowns reflect the filtering (i.e. excluding responses from bots, international IP addresses, those completed in under three minutes and incomplete surveys with less than 10 percent of questions answered) and weighting (i.e. 25 percent reduction to responses from white participants and increasing immigrant responses by 25 percent) of responses outlined in Appendix I.