

Housing and Food Insecurity among Resort Food Service Workers
in Orange County, CA:
Results from a Worker Survey

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Executive Summary

In the wake of COVID-19, workers in Orange County’s resort sector struggle daily against the challenges of food and housing insecurity. We surveyed workers employed by a food services company operating in Anaheim’s Disneyland Resort Park in August 2023 about their basic needs. Our findings reveal that housing instability is a prevalent fact-of-life among these workers. Alarming, we also found that high percentages of these food service workers regularly face hunger and food insecurity.

In the face of high living costs and lower wages, workers feel pushed to the edge. Over 60 percent of workers responded that they are “always” or “usually” worried or stressed about having enough money to pay their rent or mortgage. More than a third (36%) have gone hungry within the last year. One in seven workers reported that they would not be able to pay for all their basic living expenses during the month of the survey. The median wage for these workers is only \$17.15 per hour, and over a quarter of them work second jobs to make ends meet.

Lastly, our findings underscore the ethnic and racial dimensions of economic inequality: 94 percent of workers identify as a person of color. A full three-quarters of the workforce identifies as Latino.

Hardships faced by food service workers at Disneyland Resort:

FOOD INSECURITY

- 64% reported needing to cut the size of their meals or skip meals because they could not afford to buy food.
- 36% experienced hunger because they did not have enough money to buy food within the last year.
- 20% receive food from food pantries and food banks on a monthly basis.

HOUSING INSTABILITY

- 15% were homeless at least once within the past 12 months.
- 45% had to borrow money, including taking a credit-card cash advance, to make a rental or mortgage payment within the past 12 months.
- 24 % had been fined for late or nonpayment of rent or mortgage within the past year; 9% had been threatened with eviction or foreclosure.
- 21% reported that they had to move in with a family member or friend at some point during the last 12 months because they could not afford their rent or mortgage.

Food Services Worker Survey: Purpose and Scope

Covid struck an outsized blow to Orange County's tourism economy. Between 2019 and 2021, employment in Orange County's Accommodation and Food Services sector decreased by nearly 23 percent. Employment in Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation sector decreased by 20 percent.¹ As the Orange County economy finds its footing through the post-COVID recovery, we sought to learn more about how workers in sectors essential to Orange County's tourism economy were faring, particularly those on the frontlines of the recovery in lower paid jobs.

In August 2023, we surveyed workers employed by a food service company operating in Anaheim's Disneyland Resort Park about their basic needs. Our survey aimed to document the housing, food, and transportation issues facing workers employed in the tourism industry, particularly workers in the food services sector. Our survey included a set of standard questions used in housing and food insecurity surveys. Many of our questions are the same as those used by governmental agencies to quantify housing conditions, including the nuances and diversity of housing precarity and homelessness (e.g., living in transitional housing, staying with friends or family, being unsheltered). Similarly, we asked a variety of questions about food insecurity to capture a range of conditions, from being hungry to cutting the size of meals. Finally, we asked about other issues associated with employment, such as child care, transportation costs and commuting, and overall living expenses.

Our findings reveal that the post-COVID recovery has not delivered relief for frontline workers in Orange County's resort economy. For workers at Sodexo Disney, housing precarity and instability is a prevalent fact of life. Alarming, we also found that these food service workers regularly face hunger and food insecurity. Workers struggle daily to make ends meet. They fear missing housing payments. For some, the fear becomes a reality: 15% had been homeless at some point during the last year; 9% had been threatened with eviction or foreclosure. For 25% of Sodexo Disney workers, one job is not enough to meet their basic needs.

Our survey findings raise critical questions about the true costs of living in Orange County and reveal the hardships that workers undergo to make the magic happen, day in and day out, for Orange County's resort economy.

Data and Methods

The study's findings are drawn from a survey of currently employed food service workers at Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, California, carried out in August 2023. The survey response rate was 48 percent (n=76). Workers surveyed include baristas, cashiers, cooks, grill cooks, food service workers, utility workers, and warehouse drivers.

Researchers requested contact information for the 158 workers employed by Sodexo, a food services firm that contracts with Disneyland to provide food services at eating establishments within the park, from the union representing this workforce. Due to the closed shop arrangement,

¹ Virginia Parks and Youjin Kim (2023). "[Orange County Worker Profile](#)." Report by the UCI Labor Center produced for the Orange County Community Economic Resilience Fund (CERF). Calculations based on American Community Survey data using the 2019 and 2021 1-year estimates.

researchers received contact information (phone and mailing address) for all workers employed by Sodexo at Disneyland Resort as of May 2023. Researchers first contacted workers by text with a link to the online survey. Workers were prompted to provide their phone number which served as a unique identifying code, ensuring that only eligible workers could access the survey and respond only once. Researchers mailed a flyer with information about the survey and a QR code to workers several days later. A third text was sent by researchers a week after the flyer mailing. Text and mail outreach provided multiple methods of contact if a phone number or address had changed since May 2023. Thirteen percent of mailed flyers were returned by the post office. The researchers received no responses from text messages indicating wrong phone numbers. However, four workers on the original list could not access the survey because they had new phone numbers. Researchers provided new identifying codes allowing these workers to access the survey. Following the first three contact attempts by researchers, the union disseminated the survey QR code flyer on the researchers’ behalf. The survey was available in English and Spanish. All survey responses were de-identified and anonymized.

The robust sample size provides a representative sample of workers at Sodexo Disneyland. Distribution across job classifications provides another measure by which to evaluate sample representativeness. Our sample distribution closely follows the distribution by job classification reported in the contact list of 158 workers—within one percentage point for each classification—for 3 of the 7 job classifications. Our sample underrepresents cashiers by 2 percentage points and baristas by 5 (9.2 of the sample compared to 14.6 percent of the workforce). It overrepresents food service workers by 3 percentage points. Cooks are represented at twice the workforce rate in our sample, but their small absolute numbers (n=6) mitigates against a disproportionate influence on overall descriptive statistics.

Who are Resort Food Service Workers?

Food service workers at Sodexo Disney are overwhelmingly Latino (75%). Ten percent identify with two races or more, 6 percent as white, 4 percent as Asian, 3 percent as African American, and 1 percent as Native American/American Indian (Table 1). More than half identify as male (57%), and 43 percent as female. The average age of food service workers is 37 years old. The median age is 32 years old. The oldest worker is 77 years old; the youngest, 19 years old. Food service workers at Sodexo Disney have an average tenure of over four years on the job. The worker with the longest tenure has worked for Sodexo Disney for 16 years.

Table 1. Racial and Ethnic Demographics

| | Percent |
|------------------------------------|---------|
| African American | 3% |
| Asian | 4% |
| Hispanic | 75% |
| Native American or American Indian | 1% |
| White | 6% |
| Two or more races | 10% |

Hourly wages at Sodexo Disney range from \$17.15 to \$25.20. The average hourly wage is \$18.70. The vast majority (57%) of Sodexo Disney workers earn \$17.15 per hour, making this wage rate the bottom of the range and the median wage. Approximately 35 percent of Sodexo Disney workers earn more than \$20 per hour.

About one-quarter of Sodexo Disney workers work another job (24%). Just under 10 percent of these workers reported missing a shift at Disneyland in the last 6 months because of another job.

Food Insecurity

Having enough food to eat is a widely shared hardship among Sodexo Disney workers. In the past 12 months of this survey, 64 percent reported needing to cut the size of their meals or skip meals because they could not afford to buy food. Nearly a third of workers regularly skip or cut the size of their meals, reporting that they do so every month.

Table 2. Food Insecurity: Skipping or Cutting Size of Meals

In the last 12 months, did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

| | Percent |
|-----|---------|
| Yes | 64% |
| No | 36% |

Alarming, 36 percent of food service workers reported going hungry because they did not have enough money to buy food within the last year. Yet only 16 percent of workers receive social assistance in the form of food stamps, CalFresh, SNAP, or WIC. Within the last year, 20 percent of workers received food from a church, food pantry, or food bank. Among these workers, 60 percent depend upon food pantries on a monthly basis, visiting at least once to several times a month.

Table 3. Food Insecurity: Frequency of Skipping or Cutting Size of Meals

How often did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

| | Percent |
|---------------------------------|---------|
| Almost every month | 31% |
| Some months but not every month | 36% |
| Only 1 or 2 months | 33% |

Housing Insecurity

The vast majority of Sodexo Disney workers are renters (87%). Very few (7%) own their homes. A handful of workers (4%) live with a family member or friend and do not pay rent. One worker reported being unhoused at the time of the survey. Almost half of all workers (49%) live in housing situations where three or more people help pay the rent or mortgage. Twelve percent live in situations where five or more people contribute to housing costs. Slightly less than one-quarter (23%) of food service workers are solely responsible for the rent or mortgage of their homes.

The precarity of these workers’ housing situation and the ever-present specter of homelessness is captured in the following statistic: Nearly one in six workers (15%) were homeless at least once within the past 12 months. For each of these workers, their spell of homelessness coincided with their employment at Sodexo Disney. One worker reported being unsheltered within the last month, in addition to living in transitional housing such as a motel. Three more reported “other” temporary housing conditions, not including moving in with friends or family. Twenty-one percent, or one-fifth, reported that they had to move in with a family member or friend at some point during the last 12 months because they could not afford their rent or mortgage.

Nearly a quarter of the workforce (24%) had been fined for late or nonpayment of rent or mortgage within the past year. For some, the consequences were harsher: 9 percent had been threatened with eviction or foreclosure. Economic precarity for these vulnerable workers requires a desperate juggling act to keep a roof over their heads: 45 percent had to borrow money, including taking a credit-card cash advance, to make a rental or mortgage payment within the past 12 months.

Anxiety about housing costs is widespread. Over 60 percent of workers responded that they are “always” or “usually” worried or stressed about having enough money to pay their rent or mortgage (Table 4). This includes workers who have lived at their same address for years. Survey respondents reported cramped living conditions and continually rising rents. One worker has lived at the same address for over 20 years but wrote, “I live with 14 people in one house. I would like to be able to move out.” Another worker reported that their rent increased by 10% this year. Despite high housing costs and lower wages, the vast majority of workers receive no housing assistance. Only two reported having Section 8 housing. Two more reported living in subsidized apartments.

Table 4. Housing Stress

During the past 12 months, how often would you say you were worried or stressed about having enough money to pay your rent or mortgage?

| | Percent |
|-----------|---------|
| Always | 41% |
| Usually | 20% |
| Sometimes | 28% |
| Never | 12% |

Child Care, Health Insurance, and Transportation

Nearly two-thirds (62%) of Sodexo Disney workers have children under the age of 18. At least 58 percent pay for child care for their children while they work at Disneyland. Within the past six months, about half of the workforce with children under the age of 18 reported missing at least one shift at work because they could not find adequate child care. Eight percent of workers reported missing work more than four times due to the lack of child care.

Less than half (44%) of Sodexo Disney workers are covered by a health insurance plan. Another 42 percent rely on Medicaid or Medi-Cal assistance. Nearly 13 percent of Sodexo Disney workers have no health insurance coverage.

Only 26 percent of Sodexo Disney workers have opted into the Sodexo Disney health insurance plan. The remaining percentage of workers with health insurance coverage are either part of an insurance plan provided by a family member (14%) or have purchased it privately (4%). Of those not covered by Sodexo's health insurance plan, 35 percent cited that the plan was too expensive and that they could not afford it. Another 35 percent of workers reported that they did not need the Sodexo Disney plan because another plan or assistance program covered them (this includes workers on Medicaid). Approximately 8 percent reported that they are ineligible for coverage due to their working status.

More than a third of all Sodexo Disney workers spend over an hour commuting to and from work each shift (35%). Six percent report spending over two hours commuting per shift. Some workers manage long commutes by staying with friends, sleeping in their cars, or renting a hotel room between shifts, rather than going home (8%). For low-wage workers, transportation costs add up. More than a third (35%) incur steep transportation costs: 18 percent report costs of \$60 to \$80 each week; 17 percent report costs of over \$80. These workers must devote wages earned during three to five hours of work each week to cover their weekly transportation costs.

Economic Precarity

In the face of high living costs and lower wages, workers feel pushed to the edge. One in seven workers reported that they would not be able to pay for all their basic living expenses during the month of the survey. Nearly half must borrow money to pay rent. The vast majority rely on food pantries regularly to feed themselves and their families. As our survey results show, workers make daily choices between basic needs to make ends meet. They go hungry. They risk eviction. They find themselves homeless. They work multiple jobs. They must turn to public benefits and charity for medical care and food.

Conclusion

Workers central to the recovery of the Orange County tourism economy are struggling to meet their basic needs. Our survey of food service workers at Anaheim Disneyland reveals alarmingly high levels of hunger, food insecurity, and housing insecurity. Sodexo Disney food services workers are overwhelmingly Latino and parents with children under the age of 18. They are not short-term workers cycling through jobs. Rather, the average Sodexo worker is 37 years old and has worked for Sodexo for four years. They are nearly all are renters squeezed by rising rents and overcrowded housing conditions. These workers regularly worry about their ability to pay bills, feed their families, and keep a roof over their heads.

After spending hours at work preparing and serving food for others, these food service workers experience hunger on a regular basis. More than a third of workers surveyed reported that they had gone hungry because they did not have enough money for food within the last year. Twenty percent relied on food pantries or banks to feed themselves and their families within the last year; among these workers, the majority receive food from food pantries several times a month.

Housing precarity and instability is a prevalent fact of life among these workers. Fifteen percent reported being homeless at least once within the past year. More than one-fifth of workers surveyed reported that they had to move in with a friend or family member at some point during the last 12 months because they could not make their rent or mortgage payment. For nearly half the workforce, their working wages come up short when the rent bill comes due: 45 percent had to borrow money, including taking a credit-card cash advance, to make a rental or mortgage payment within the past 12 months.

In the face of high living costs and lower wages, workers feel pushed to the edge. Over 60 percent of workers responded that they are “always” or “usually” worried or stressed about having enough money to pay their rent or mortgage. One in seven workers reported that they would not be able to pay for all their basic living expenses during the month of the survey. A full quarter of the Sodexo Disney workforce works another job to make ends meet.

A robust post-Covid recovery for the Orange County economy requires tending to the economic well-being of its workforce. Living wages are an antidote.