

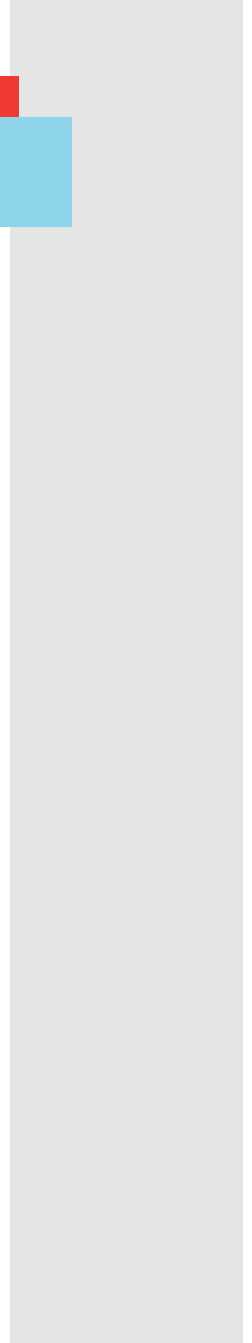
“I FEED EVERYONE ELSE’S CHILDREN BUT STRUGGLE TO TAKE CARE OF MINE”

The Story of Chicago Public School Lunchroom Workers

A REPORT BY UNITE HERE LOCAL 1



SEPTEMBER 2025





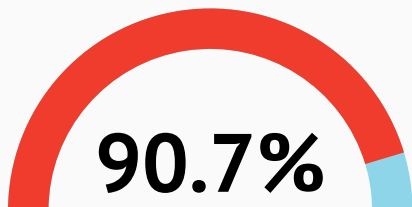
Who are Chicago Public School lunchroom workers?

As Chicago families were getting ready to send their children back to school this Fall, **Chicago lunchroom workers were already hard at work throughout the city's 634 schools preparing for students return.**ⁱ

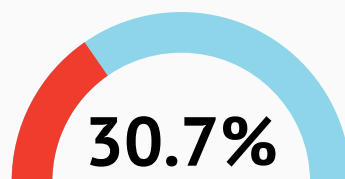
Chicago Public School lunchroom workers, which include lunchroom attendants, cooks, associate lunchroom managers and porters, **prepare and serve 270,000 meals every day for about 325,305 Chicago Public School children.**^{ii iii}

In 2019, there were about 2,170 CPS lunchroom workers represented by UNITE HERE Local 1. Today there are **1,805 CPS lunchroom workers** represented by UNITE HERE Local 1, a **16.8% decrease from six years ago** and a **44% decrease from 2005 staffing levels.**

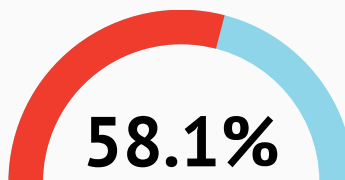
Who are Chicago Public School lunchroom workers?



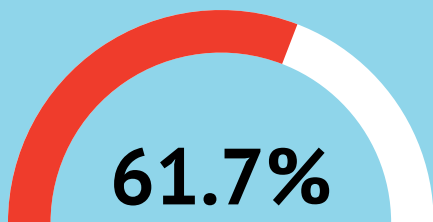
90.7% of CPS lunchroom workers are **people of color**.^{iv}



Hispanic/Latinx

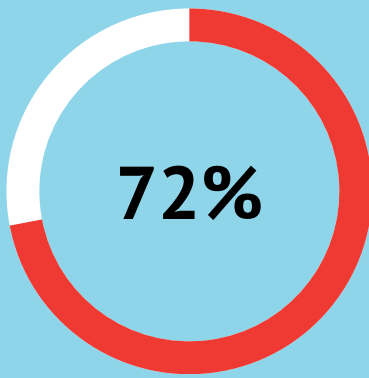


Black/African American



61.7% of CPS lunchroom workers **live in the South and West Sides of Chicago**.^v

How much do CPS lunchroom workers earn?



As of June 2025, 72% of CPS lunchroom workers made **\$18.42 or less per hour.**^{vi}



What do CPS lunchroom workers have to say about their economic situation?

UNITE HERE Local 1 received survey responses from 626 of approximately 1,805 CPS lunchroom workers between April and June of 2025.



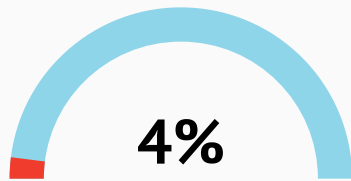
“Our wages are so low that I’m not making enough to save for my retirement. I’m forced to work more than one job for six months out of the year and I don’t get enough sleep. I don’t mind working hard and I love seeing the kids every day. I just want to get the proper respect and the proper pay that I deserve.”

Letia Downing-Lowe
Lunchroom Attendant
Eli Whitney Elementary School
10 years of service

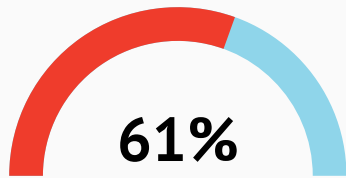
CPS lunchroom workers face financial hardship



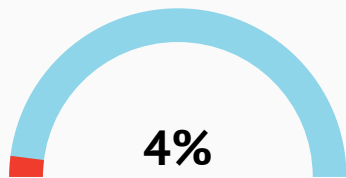
88% of surveyed CPS lunchroom workers reported having trouble paying for at least one of the following in the past 3 months: food, housing, heat and electricity, medical needs, transportation, childcare, and/or debt.



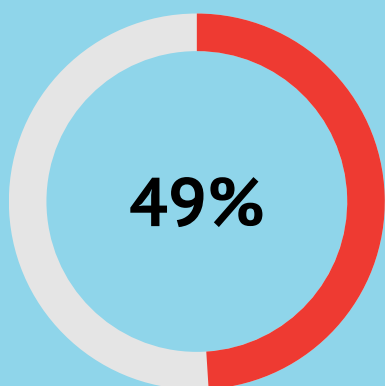
Less than 4% of surveyed CPS lunchroom workers reported 'never' struggling to afford basic necessities like food, housing, healthcare costs.



61% of surveyed CPS lunchroom workers rated their financial situation as 'poor' or 'very poor'.

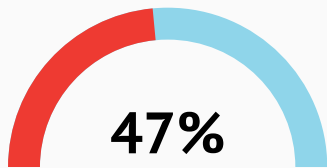


Less than 4% of surveyed CPS lunchroom workers rated their financial situation as 'good' or 'very good'.

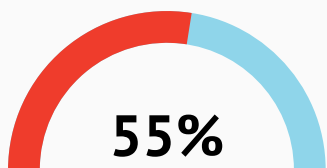


Nearly half (49%) of surveyed CPS lunchroom workers reported **'often' or 'always' struggling to afford basic necessities** like food, housing, healthcare costs.

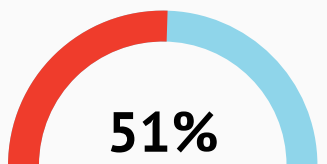
CPS lunchroom workers struggle with housing costs



47% of surveyed CPS lunchroom workers reported having **trouble paying for housing** in the past 3 months.



55% of surveyed CPS lunchroom workers reported having **trouble paying for heat and electricity** in the past 3 months.



Over half (51%) of surveyed CPS lunchroom workers reported that they **plan to move** in the near future due to an increase in housing costs.

“I started as a volunteer at Sandoval Elementary School when my children were small and attended school there. Though my kids are grown with their own families, I stayed because I love to cook for the students. I take pride in making sure that their food is ready so they can be nourished and successful in their studies.

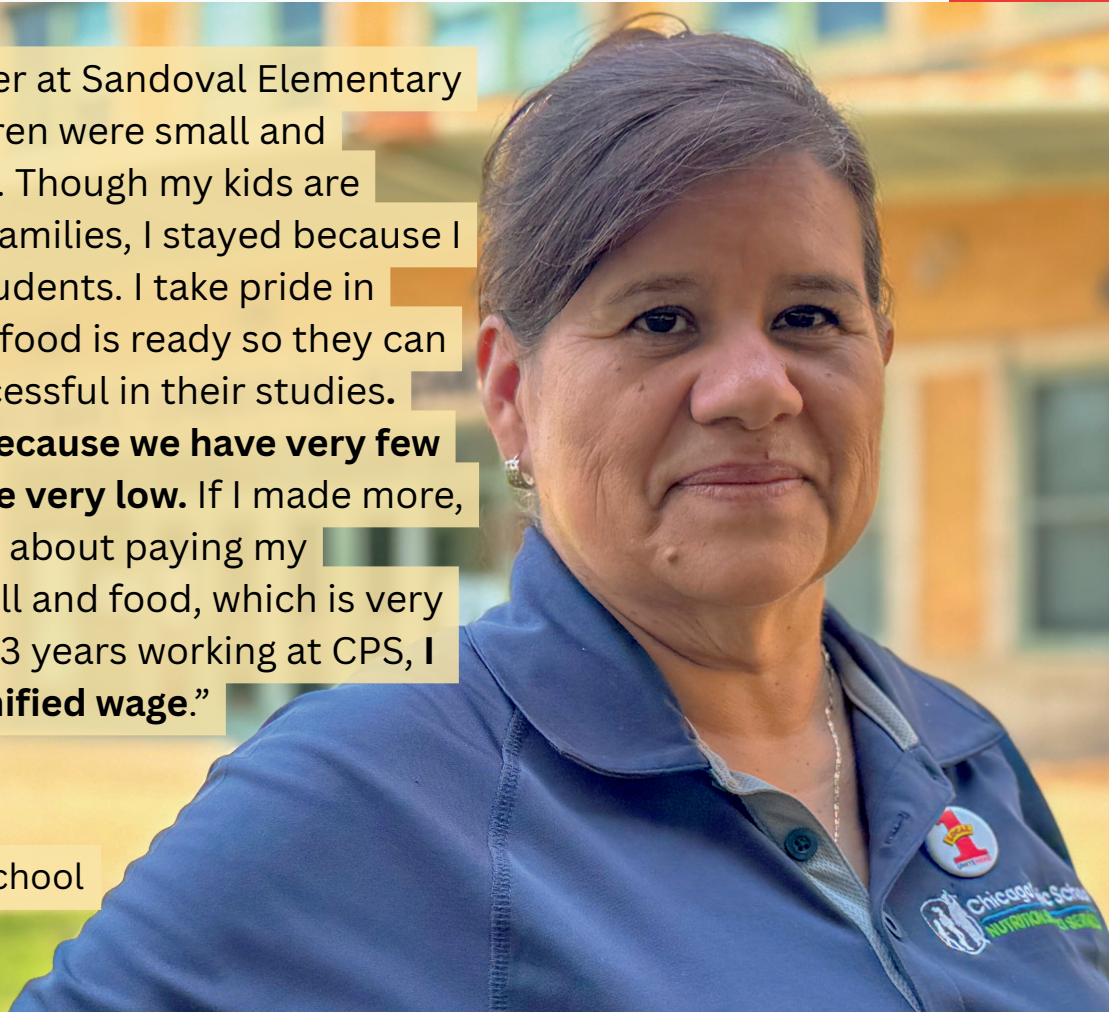
But the work is hard because we have very few staff and the wages are very low. If I made more, I would feel less stress about paying my mortgage, the water bill and food, which is very expensive now. After 23 years working at CPS, **I deserve to have a dignified wage.”**

Maria Astorga

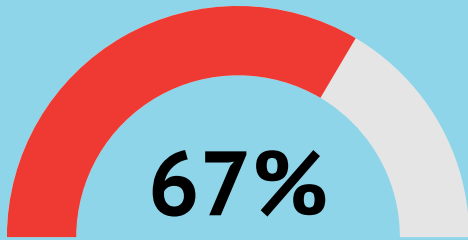
Cook

Sandoval Elementary School

23 years of service



CPS lunchroom workers have difficulty affording food



67% of surveyed CPS lunchroom workers reported having **trouble paying for food** in the past 3 months.



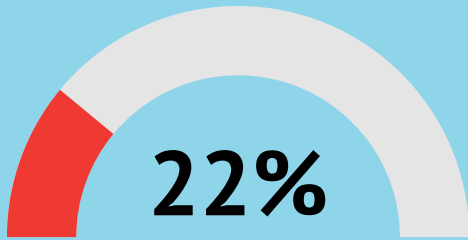
“I’ve been with CPS for 25 years. My husband and I don’t have enough to cover the things we need. The mortgage is hard to pay. Groceries are hard to buy. **We must eat day by day. Having to chosen between groceries and bills is painful.** Everything is so expensive now, sometimes I must rely on my youngest to help us out with money. I spend all these years working and feel like I still have nothing.”

Irma Garcia

Cook

James Russell Lowell Elementary School
25 years of service

CPS lunchroom workers have difficulty affording food



22% of surveyed CPS lunchroom workers reported that their families have visited food banks.

“Sometimes I must go to a food bank to make sure I can feed my daughter. That part is heartbreaking because I feed everyone else’s children but struggle to take care of mine.

Having to choose between food and bills isn’t fair to us.

Through all my struggles, I serve the students with a smile on my face.”

Ivery Pierre
Cook

Marquette Elementary School
6.5 years of service





Endnotes

i Stats and Facts, Chicago Public Schools,
<https://www.cps.edu/about/stats-facts/>, accessed August 11, 2025.

ii Stats and Facts, Chicago Public Schools,
<https://www.cps.edu/about/stats-facts/>, accessed August 11, 2025.

iii School Food Survey, Chicago Public Schools,
<https://www.cps.edu/campaigns/school-food-survey>, accessed
August 11, 2025.

iv Employee demographic information provided by Chicago Public
Schools as of May 1, 2025.

v Employee demographic information provided by Chicago
Public Schools as of June 3, 2025.

vi Wage information provided by Chicago Public Schools as of
June 3, 2025.

