

TAKEN FOR A RIDE

**POVERTY AND FOOD *INSECURITY*
AMONG WORKERS
AT UNIVERSAL STUDIOS HOLLYWOOD**



BY
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TAKEN FOR A RIDE: **POVERTY AND FOOD *INSECURITY*** **AMONG WORKERS AT** **UNIVERSAL STUDIOS HOLLYWOOD**

report by
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Universal Studios Hollywood, the self-described “Entertainment Capital of L.A.,” has long been a draw for both Los Angeles tourists and Southern California residents. Covering over 400 acres centered on the oldest surviving film studio in the United States, Universal Studios Hollywood promises its guests “fun and memorable experiences that bring movies to life.”² The theme park, and its associated retail dining district called City Walk, are a thriving business and major source of revenue for the park’s owner, NBCUniversal.

Hidden from guests’ view, however, are the living conditions and daily struggles of the over 6,000 service, retail, and other workers on whom Universal Studios Hollywood relies to make this environment possible. For the bartenders, baristas, cooks, bakers, food stand attendants, servers, runners, ride operators, retail workers, parking attendants and valets, toll booth attendants, tour guides, park services workers, and many others who staff the park, Universal Studios is far from a magical experience.

This report is based on a survey completed by 1,330 Universal Studios Hollywood workers. Our sample represents nearly a quarter of the average year-round workforce in the two largest groups of workers at the park: a unit of food service workers represented by UNITE HERE Local 11 and a unit of retail workers, tour guides, and a variety of other positions represented by IATSE B192. Both unions collaborated on this project. We complemented these surveys with detailed qualitative interviews with approximately twenty workers and with company data.

KEY FINDINGS

Universal Studios pays more than two thirds of its workers the minimum wage, and even long-tenured workers are paid only slightly more.

- ↘ The average wage among Universal workers was \$17.65 per hour. Many workers make less, with about 67% of workers earning the minimum wage.
- ↘ Among employees who have worked at Universal for more than ten years, the average wage was only \$21.38 per hour.
- ↘ Only five percent of the employees covered by our research made over \$20 per hour, and only 0.6% made more than \$30 per hour.

A strong majority of workers reported struggling to make ends meet, with more than a quarter taking on a second job.

- ↘ Sixty-seven percent of Universal workers report not earning enough money to cover basic expenses like food, housing, and utilities each month. Affording basic expenses remains a challenge even for respondents who have worked at Universal for more than ten years. In fact, 46% of respondent workers who were hired at Universal before 2003 still do not earn enough money to cover basic monthly expenses.
- ↘ For some workers, making ends meet requires a second, third, or even fourth job. 21% of Universal workers have a second job, and 6% report needing a third or fourth. For those who do take on additional jobs, hours vary, with some workers working over 40 hours per week. Forty-one percent of workers with additional jobs work more than 20 hours per week just at their second job. Sixty-nine percent of workers with more than one job already work 30 hours or more at Universal.

Many Universal Studios workers face housing insecurity, including homelessness.

- ↘ Universal workers are less likely to own a home and more likely to experience homelessness than the average Los Angeles County worker. Only five percent of Universal workers own their own home. Most Universal workers are renters: 65% of workers pay rent for their own apartment or room. Another 24% live with family or friends but do not contribute to housing costs.
- ↘ Among those who rent, making payments each month is a challenge for many. Five percent of workers report that they or the people they live with are always late with rent payments. Another eight percent are often late, and 30% are sometimes late. This leaves 43% of Universal workers who rent in precarious housing situations.
- ↘ Ten percent of workers hired in 2021 or earlier reported experiencing homelessness in the last several years. This includes nine percent who self-reported being homeless and one percent who reported experiencing circumstances that fit Los Angeles County's definition of homelessness, such as living in a car, couch surfing, or living in a shelter.
- ↘ Many others reported being at risk of losing housing: 44% of Universal workers reported that they worry about being evicted from their current housing.

Universal Studios workers reported alarming rates of food insecurity and hunger.

- ↘ Forty-three percent of the workers surveyed responded that there were times in the past 12 months when they were hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money for food.
- ↘ Over half of workers, 53%, reported cutting the size of their meals or skipping meals because there was not enough money for food in the last 12 months, and 50% responded that they sometimes ate less than they should because there was not enough money for food.
- ↘ A strong majority of workers, 60%, responded that the statement “The food that I bought just did not last, and I didn’t have enough money to buy more” was sometimes or often true for their household in the last 12 months, with 26% responding that it was “often true.” Sixty-two percent responded that the statement “I couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals” was sometimes or often true for their household in the last 12 months, and 33% reported that it was “often true.”

A quarter of Universal Studios workers turn to public assistance for food.

- ↘ Twenty-five percent of the Universal Studios workers surveyed have received benefits from a food stamp program, CalFresh, SNAP, WIC, a food bank, or another food donation program. These are needs-based programs; a household of four would qualify for CalFresh, for instance, if its gross monthly income was \$4,418 or less.³

Most Universal Studios workers commute long distances, in part because they cannot afford to live closer to work.

- ↘ Twenty-six percent of Universal workers reported commuting over an hour each way, nearly twice the number of Los Angeles County workers who report such long commutes.⁴ Only 54% of Universal workers commute less than 40 minutes to work, as compared to 70% for all Los Angeles County workers. While there are many reasons a worker may live further away from work, many Universal workers reported feeling no choice but to do so because of their inability to afford housing closer to the theme park.
- ↘ For those who do use a vehicle, gas prices can be difficult to manage. Thirty-two percent of workers estimate that their transportation costs \$40 to \$60 per week, 23% estimate \$60 to \$80 per week, and 18% estimate over \$80 per week.
- ↘ Rather than deal with the time, cost, and unpredictability of commuting, some workers choose to stay closer to work by staying with friends, renting a hotel room, or sleeping in their car. Seventeen percent of workers report using one of these alternative options rather than returning home and commuting every day.

Universal Studios workers with children struggle to afford childcare and other necessities for their families.

- ↘ Of the Universal Studios workers surveyed who have children, 31% percent (459) responded that they pay for their children’s care while they are at work.
- ↘ Of these parents who pay for childcare, a little over 25% report not earning enough money for basic expenses. Twenty-six percent report often or sometimes running out of food and not having money for more. Nine percent of these parents reported worrying about being evicted from their residence very often or somewhat often.
- ↘ The burden of paying for childcare falls especially heavily for single parents, who represented 23% of the parents surveyed. In interviews, several of these single parents and a number of single mothers of small children reported that they struggle to find a place for their children while they are at work, and also that it is difficult to provide adequate

food and housing for them. Several of the single parents interviewed live in a one-bedroom apartment with two or more children. One single mother of three children is currently homeless, sleeping with them in the living room of her friend.

- ↘ At Universal Studios, 50% of workers with children have missed a shift because they could not find adequate childcare. Eight percent of workers with children reported missing shifts often or very often because they could not find childcare.
- ↘ Universal Studios provides no subsidized childcare for employees.

Universal Studios workers also reported being unable to obtain basic healthcare or struggled to afford it.

- ↘ Universal offers health insurance, but this policy is not available to all employees: 31% of respondents stated they were not eligible for Universal’s plan based on their working status. Fifteen percent of Universal’s workers remain uninsured and another 31% rely on Medicaid or Medi-Cal rather than use Universal’s insurance.
- ↘ Of those workers on Universal’s insurance, 39% felt that it was impossible to afford the plan’s monthly premiums. Eighteen percent reported they had to give up other necessities to pay for health insurance premiums each month.
- ↘ Universal’s employee handbook instructs guest service workers to be “guest-ready at all times” and to “smile and have fun.” However, despite Universal Studios offering a health insurance plan, in the past 12 months 34% of respondent workers reported that they were not able to afford basic dental care or checkups, 27% could not afford glasses or contacts, and 27% could not afford mental healthcare or counseling. A further 16% could not afford prescription medicines, 12% could not afford specialist attention, and 18% could not afford followup medical care. Overall, 55% of surveyed workers could not afford one or more of these medical expenses in the past 12 months.

UNIVERSAL STUDIOS WORKERS REPORTED ALARMING RATES OF FOOD INSECURITY & HUNGER



RECOMMENDATIONS

Raise the minimum wage for workers at theme parks and related businesses.

Many jurisdictions have adopted higher minimum wages for workers in specific sectors. For example, the City of Los Angeles has set higher minimum wage levels for airport workers, hotel workers, healthcare workers, and workers employed by city contractors. The profound struggles workers at Universal Studios Hollywood have reported in providing for housing, food, healthcare, transportation and other basic needs provide strong reasons for policymakers to consider establishing a higher minimum wage that includes major theme park workers.

Consider a surcharge to pay for workforce housing for theme parks and other tourism workers.

The inadequate stock of affordable housing is, of course, one of Los Angeles's most serious problems, and a perennial challenge to addressing it is the need for funding to pay for the construction of affordable housing. To address these problems, Los Angeles County (or State of California) may consider requiring that major theme parks or other tourist attractions impose a fee on guests that would generate funds for affordable workforce housing.

Require onsite childcare for theme parks and other large tourism employers.

Many large institutions, such as USC, UCLA and state and federal buildings in downtown Los Angeles, have onsite childcare facilities. The County of Los Angeles could consider mandating major theme parks and other major businesses in the tourism sector to provide such facilities to support their employees or otherwise support their access to childcare.

Condition tax subsidies for theme parks and studios on payment of fair wages and benefits to service workers.

State-level legislators may consider amending the Film Tax Credit to serve the goal of contributing to the state's broader economy by conditioning eligibility for the tax credit on adherence to certain basic labor standards, such as livable wages. Such a policy would ensure that tax credits are not provided to companies which are costing the state additional resources, because their lowest-wage employees must rely on food stamps and other forms of public assistance.



**MANY JURISDICTIONS
HAVE ADOPTED *HIGHER*
MINIMUM WAGES
FOR WORKERS IN SPECIFIC
SECTORS**

BACKGROUND ON UNIVERSAL STUDIOS HOLLYWOOD

HOLLYWOOD

Universal Studios Hollywood, the “Entertainment Capital of L.A.,” has long been a draw for Los Angeles tourists and residents. Spanning over 400 acres and containing the oldest surviving film studio in the United States, Universal Studios Hollywood promises its guests “fun and memorable experiences that bring movies to life.”⁵ Its studio tour; theme park, spanning 80-acres of rides and shows in different themed “lands;” and an adjacent three-block retail, dining, and entertainment district called Citywalk, seek to immerse visitors in “the magic and glamour of Hollywood movie-making.”⁶

Hidden from guests’ view, however, are the living conditions and daily struggles of the over 5,000 service, retail, and other workers on whom Universal Studios Hollywood relies to make this environment possible. For the bartenders, baristas, cooks, bakers, food stand attendants, servers, and runners; retail workers; parking attendants; tour guides and park services workers; and wardrobe workers, Universal Studios is far from a magical experience.

A majority of the 1,380 Universal Studios Hollywood workers who took our survey are struggling to pay rent and put food on the table. While workers report taking pride in providing an experience of fun and adventure for Universal Studios Hollywood guests, many are earning the minimum wage of \$15.96 an hour, and most report being overworked, severely underpaid, and barely able to make ends meet.

History of Universal Studios Hollywood

Universal Studios Hollywood’s origins date back to 1915, when German émigré Carl Laemmle opened his new studio, Universal Film Manufacturing Company, to tourists on a 250-acre converted-farm in the Fernando Valley. Visitors could tour what was then the world’s largest motion picture production facility to see films in production, as well as stunts and special effects shows. This venture ended with the introduction of sound recording and the need for quiet film sets.⁷

In 1964, two years after the Music Corporation of America (MCA) acquired the studio, Universal Studios once again opened to the public for tours. MCA’s Universal Studios Tour, like its earlier iteration, featured similar attractions and showed visitors how motion pictures and television programs were made. This pulling-the-curtain-back experience provided a new, unique, and profitable form of entertainment.⁸

Over the next few decades, the success of Walt Disney’s movie-based theme park, Disneyland, opened in 1955, spurred Universal Studios Hollywood to adopt a similar theme park form and structure, with stand-alone rides, shows, and attractions. What distinguished Universal’s theme park was that its attractions were associated with popular motion pictures, including its signature *Jaws* animatronic attraction in the 1970s. In 1989, MCA also opened

Universal Orlando Resort and theme park, which, along with Universal Studios Hollywood, gained increasing numbers of visitors in the 1990s with “Jurassic Park,” “ET Adventure,” and “Back to the Future: The Ride.” Universal’s parks featured “lands” replete with movie-themed restaurants and stores, making dining and buying merchandise part of the “immersive” experience that brought visitors closer to beloved films.

Between 1990 and 2000, as Universal moved from a number of different parent companies, its theme parks continued to expand. In 1990, MCA was acquired by Matsushita Electric, and Universal was subsequently sold to Seagram and then to the French global media conglomerate Vivendi Universal Entertainment (Vivendi SA). In 2004, a merger of Vivendi with U.S. television network National Broadcasting Co., Inc. (NBC), a subsidiary of General Electric, Co. (GE), brought Universal under the ownership of NBCUniversal. In 2011, Comcast bought NBCUniversal.

Corporate Structure

NBCUniversal is a global media and entertainment conglomerate focused on the development, production, and marketing of entertainment, news, and information. NBC Universal has three primary divisions: media (comprised of television and streaming platforms), studios (film and television studio production and distribution operations); and theme parks (governed by a subsidiary called Universal Parks & Resorts).

Universal Parks & Resorts includes five theme parks across four resorts: Universal Studios Hollywood, Universal Orlando Resort in Florida, Universal Studios Japan, and Universal Beijing Resort. It also includes Universal Studios Singapore, licensed by Universal but owned by a company in China. Three additional theme parks are at various stages of development (in Florida, Texas, and Beijing).

Finances

In 2020, after closures and restrictions due to the Coronavirus pandemic, NBCUniversal’s theme park division lost revenue. But since the reopening of the parks starting in 2021, and with the opening of Universal’s new Beijing park, the Parks & Resorts division has rebounded. Between 2020 and 2021, revenue jumped 14.2 percent and profit has followed. Adjusted EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization) for the first three quarters of 2022 was \$1.9 billion, just surpassing pre-pandemic levels.⁹ The third quarter of 2022 marked the segment’s highest adjusted EBITDA on record, and the fourth quarter earnings were \$2.1 billion, the highest on record for Universal Parks & Resorts, with an overall total earnings of \$7.5 billion.

By the end of 2021, Universal theme parks produced the strongest financial growth numbers of NBCUniversal’s three primary divisions. In its financial report for 2022, Comcast showed a nearly 50% increase in revenue from 2021, driven by theme park attendance.¹⁰ The company attributed these gains to “high attendance levels and customer spending at its resorts in the US and Japan, with visitor numbers surpassing pre-pandemic levels.”¹¹

This trend has continued into 2023. In February, Universal Studios Hollywood opened Super Nintendo World, the first theme park attraction in the U.S. to “bring a video game to life,” and the success of *The Super Mario Bros.* movie drove attendance to the park.¹² Comcast’s first-quarter reports for 2023 show that although overall first-quarter revenue fell by 4.3% (from \$31.01 billion in 2022 to \$29.69 billion), its theme parks division has thrived, due in large part to Universal Studios Hollywood. In the first quarter of 2023, Comcast’s theme parks generated \$658 million in EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization, which represented a 46% increase year over year).¹³ Comcast Chair and Chief Executive Officer Brian Roberts credited Universal Studios Hollywood and the success of *Super Mario Bros.* with the company’s “momentum.”¹⁴ Later this year, Universal Studios Hollywood will likely drive more revenue when it opens another new attraction, an immersive experience connected to the video game and TV-

show adaptation *The Last of Us*, as part of its Hollywood Horror Nights experience.¹⁵

Comcast is ranked 29th among Fortune 500 companies.¹⁶ Its corporate annual proxy statement from 2022 includes salaries of the top five highest paid executives:

- ↳ In 2022, Chairman & CEO Brian Roberts earned \$32,069,850 (comprising a base salary of \$2.5 million; stock awards of \$13.4 million; options awards for \$8.4 million; and a cash bonus of \$7.5 million).
- ↳ Jeff Shell, CEO of NBC Universal, was set to earn \$43 million.¹⁷
- ↳ Michael Cavanagh, Comcast president and CFO, earned \$40,481,722.
- ↳ David Watson, CEO of Comcast Cable, earned \$21,944,406.
- ↳ Dana Strong, CEO of Sky, earned \$15,244,683.¹⁸

The disparity between the pay received by these and other executives and the increasing profitability of the theme park contrasted with the low pay workers receive is stark, as reflected in the findings presented below.

**THE PROFITABILITY OF THE
THEME PARK CONTRASTED
WITH THE LOW PAY
WORKERS
RECEIVE**

IS STARK —————



RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the sections that follow, we outline the key findings of our survey, in-depth interviews, and additional research. These cover workers' ability to meet basic needs; housing insecurity and homelessness; food insecurity; access to healthcare; commute times; access to childcare; and questions of fair treatment and respect.

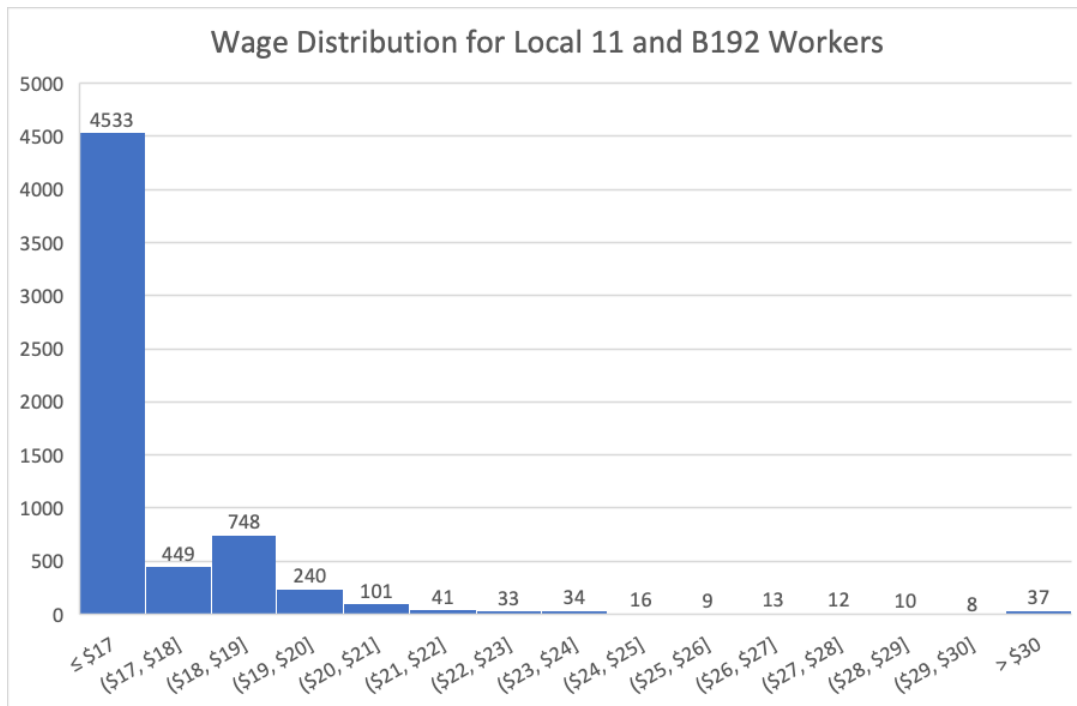
WAGES AND MAKING ENDS MEET

“I FEEL LIKE I WORK NONSTOP AND BARELY HAVE ANY MONEY TO LIVE.”

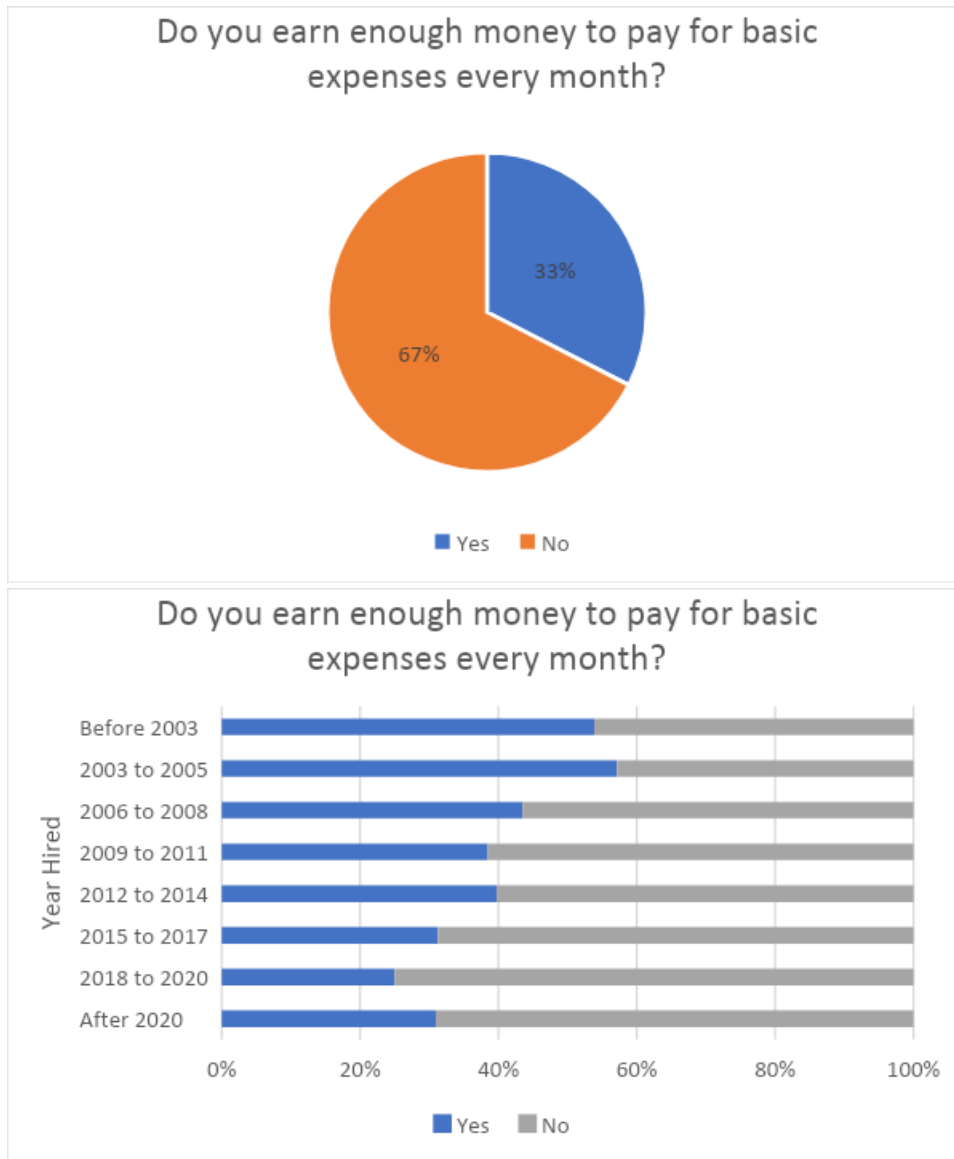
-Full-time baker

The average wage among Universal workers is \$17.65 per hour. Many workers make less. About 76% of IATSE Local B-192 workers and 49% of Unite Here Local 11 workers make minimum wage, amounting to 67% of total workers. Others earn just above the minimum wage; for example, among the Local 11 unit, 57% of workers earn \$17.25 or less (\$0.30 above the County minimum wage). Among Local B-192 workers, 80% earn \$17.25 or less.

Among employees who have worked at Universal for more than ten years, the average wage is only \$21.38 per hour. In fact, only 5% of the unit makes over \$20 per hour, and about .6% of the unit, or 35 total workers, makes more than \$30 per hour. According to the Low Income Housing Coalition,¹⁹ a worker in Los Angeles County would need to make \$33.60 per hour to afford a one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles County. Only four Unite Here Local 11 members and less than 20 non-management workers in the entire park make at or above this wage.



Given their wage levels, Universal workers struggle to keep up with basic expenses as the cost of living increases.²⁰ Over two-thirds, or 67%, of Universal workers report not earning enough money to cover their basic expenses each month. Affording basic expenses remains a challenge even for respondents who have worked at Universal for more than ten years. In fact, 46% of respondent workers who were hired at Universal before 2003 still do not earn enough money to cover basic monthly expenses.



As wages remain low, the cost of living continues to prove challenging for Universal workers to meet.

“Not much has changed at Universal, including our pay. Meanwhile the cost of food, gas, rent, everything is increasing. We live paycheck to paycheck. We deserve to make a living wage.”
-Full-time worker

“I’m poorer than when I first started, and we do more work due to low staff.”
- Full-time stand attendant

"In the last nine years, I've seen Universal Studios grow, but the employee benefits and pay do not reflect how much the park has grown. The cost of living has changed in the area in the last nine years and the pay does not keep up with that...It's quite sad...as I love this park."

-Full-time food stand attendant

As discussed further below in the section on Food Insecurity, many workers – fully one quarter of the respondents – turn to public benefits like SNAP or WIC to fill the gaps left by Universal's wages.

This is true even for many veteran workers: More than one in seven workers at Universal hired before 2003 still rely on public benefits to make ends meet.²¹

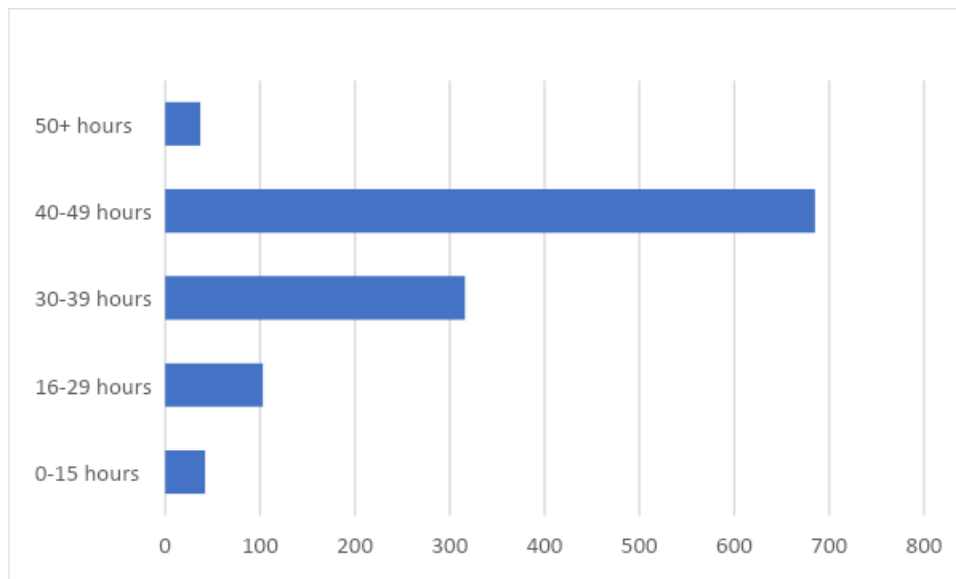
Despite struggling to cover expenses, most (62%) of respondent workers work more than 40 hours per week. Another 27% work between 30 and 40 hours per week. In interviews, workers explained that even working overtime may not be enough to cover expenses.

"It's been a little tough trying to stay on top of my bills; I put in overtime but sometimes it just isn't enough."

-Full-time baker

"I like the work that I have here, but the pay is too little for me to help my family at home. I have to do overtime almost every day to help my family, leaving me exhausted every day."

-Full-time food stand attendant

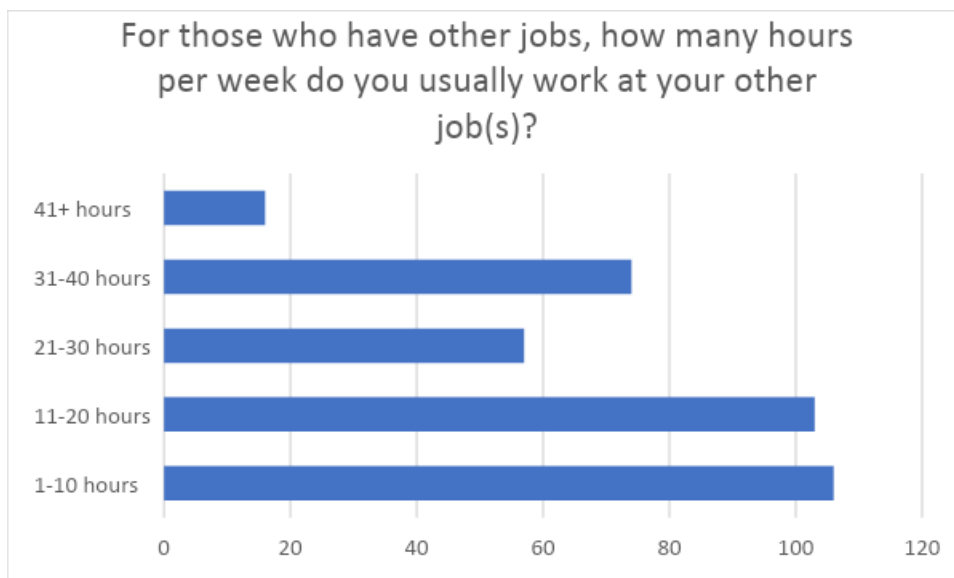
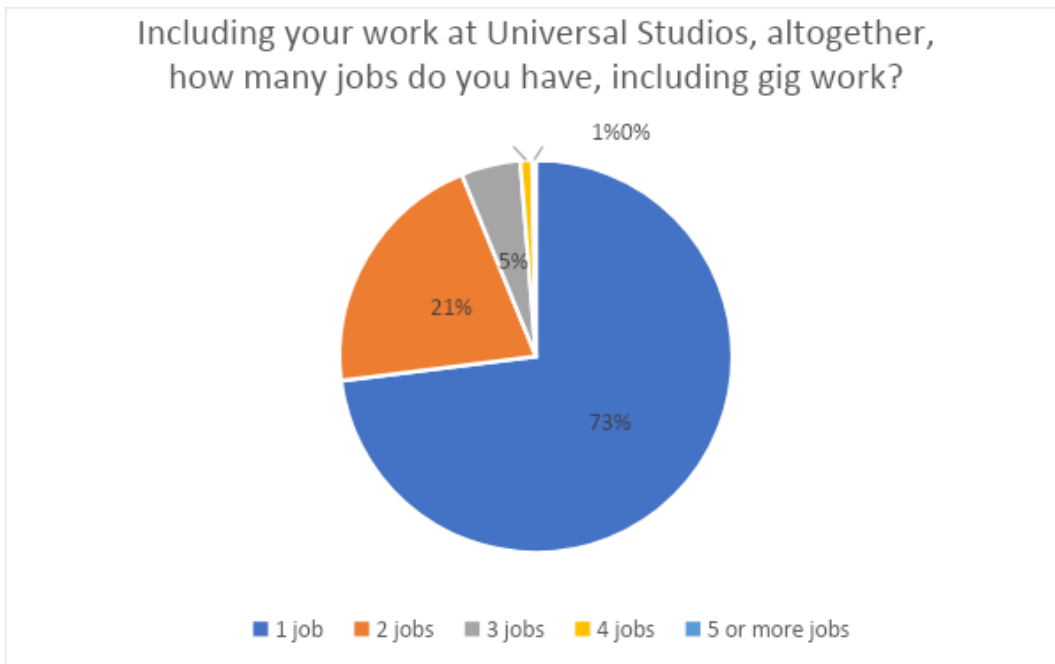


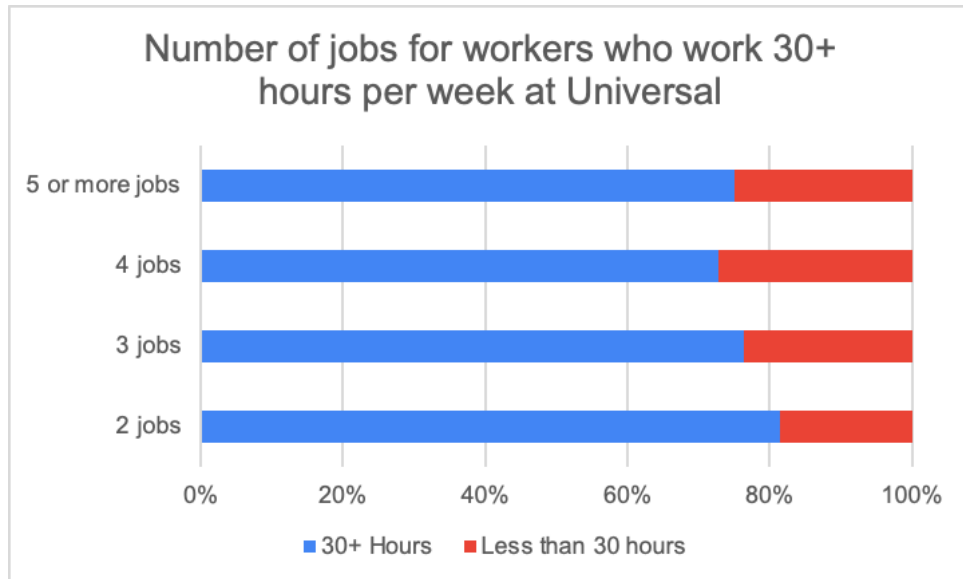
For some workers, making ends meet requires a second, third, or even fourth job. Twenty-one percent of Universal workers have a second job, and six percent report needing a third or fourth job. For those who do take on additional jobs, hours vary, with some workers working over 40 hours per week. Forty-one percent of workers with additional jobs work more than 20 hours per week just at their second job. Sixty-nine percent of workers with more than one job already work 30 hours or more at Universal.

In interviews, workers explained that second and third jobs are a necessity to meet their basic needs, and lamented how much they had to work to pay their bills.

“Even though I have been here 11 years and...work here for 40 hours a week, I am still not able to pay my bills with this job, which is why...my entire career here I have had two to four other jobs that I have to work to pay my bills. I am very concerned about getting a living wage...It is clear to me that Universal as a company does not care for their employees, the ones who are making sacrifices in their lives to do the work it takes to make the profits for the company and its shareholders.”

-Part-time dispatcher/tour guide





Workers interviewed for this study highlighted how the challenges of the rising cost of living and low wages increase the stress they already feel about raising a family, caring for loved ones, and gaining an education.

“Right now I have my daughter who’s ill, so for the past two years I’ve only been working [at Universal]...It used to be easier with my son helping me, but he’s been on disability for his back and now I don’t have the help anymore. I’ve been having to buy my own groceries, and my daughter is on dialysis, it’s hard to leave her alone. The wage of \$20 an hour is not cutting it... With each check, I have to choose to pay the gas or the light...what to pay first in order not to get cut off... They’ve all gone up...”

-Full-time production kitchen worker, single mother of two adult children

“I can work a full 40 hours and still never feel like there is enough money to save for my future. I keep my rent extremely low compared to most L.A. residents, but I am always on the brink of being completely broke. My credit card bills are rising higher and I can’t seem to catch up. I’ve often known that I need to find something else to be able to sustain me and move me into the part of my life where I may be able to afford children one day.”

-Part- to full-time tour guide

“As much as I have enjoyed this place, it doesn’t pay enough to have it be my only job even if I wanted it to be. I have school tuition and other bills to pay, excluding transportation.”

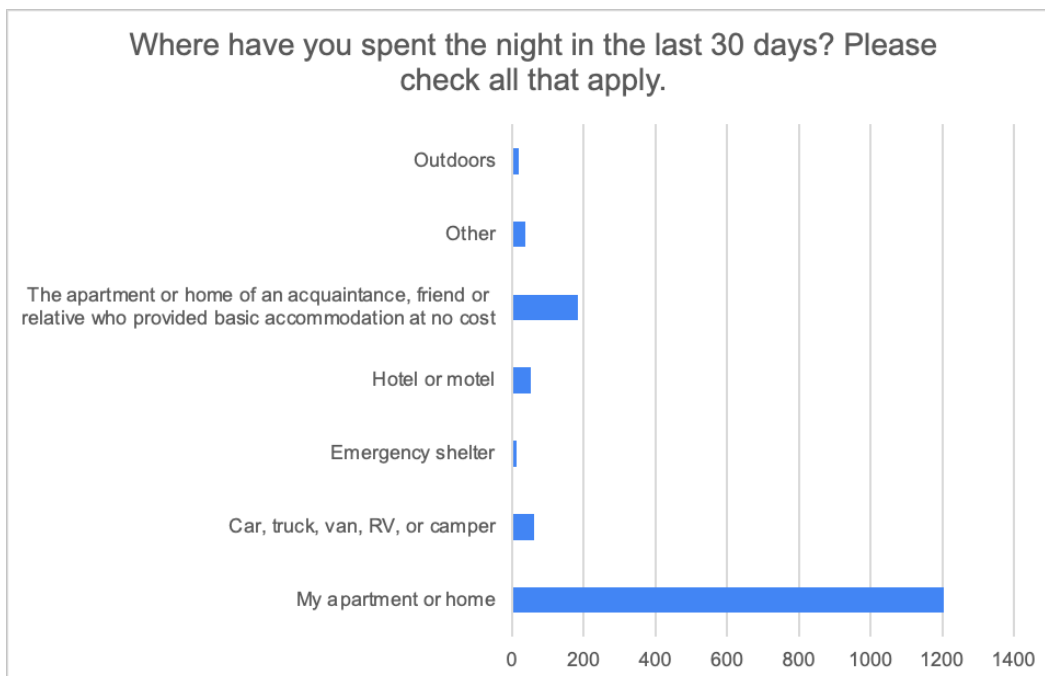
-Part-time food stand attendant who has second job

HOUSING INSECURITY AND HOMELESSNESS

“WHERE I LIVE NOW IS BASED OFF MY INCOME [\$18/HOUR], SO IT’S AFFORDABLE HOUSING... WE JOINED A LOTTERY FOR THE APARTMENT AND I WAS LUCKY ENOUGH TO WIN AN APARTMENT HERE... I DON’T FEEL SAFE IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD... JUST ON MONDAY, SOMEONE WAS SHOT RIGHT OUTSIDE MY APARTMENT COMPLEX.”

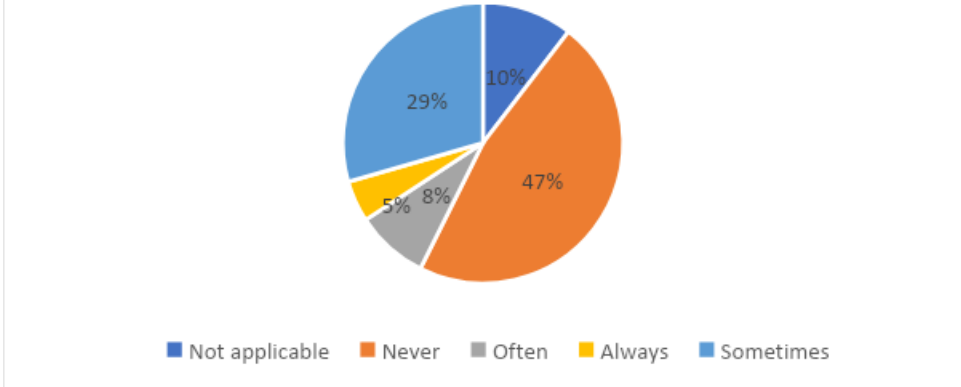
-Full-time cook and mother

Universal workers are less likely to own a home and more likely to experience homelessness than the average Los Angeles County worker. Only five percent of Universal workers own their own home. By comparison, 46% of homes in Los Angeles County are owned by their occupier.²² Most Universal workers are renters—65% of workers pay rent for their own apartment or room. Another 24% live with family or friends but do not contribute to housing costs.



For Universal workers who rent, making payments each month is a challenge for many. Five percent of Universal workers report that they or the people they live with are always late with rent payments. Another eight percent are often late and 30% are sometimes late. This leaves 43% of Universal workers who rent in precarious housing situations.

Since living at your current residence, how often have you or the people you live with been late with a rent payment?



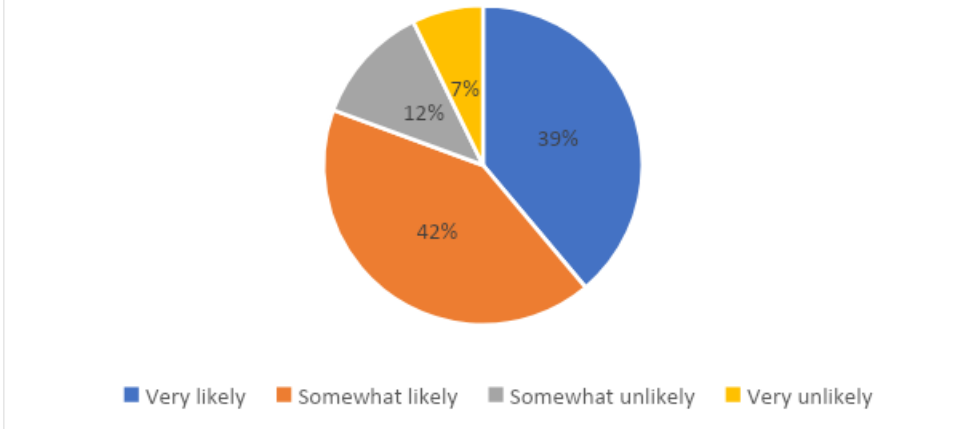
Many workers are in insecure housing situations. Nineteen percent of Universal workers felt it was somewhat or very unlikely that they would be able to make their mortgage or rent payments that month. Just under half, or 44%, of Universal workers worry about being evicted from their current housing from time to time, somewhat often, or very often.

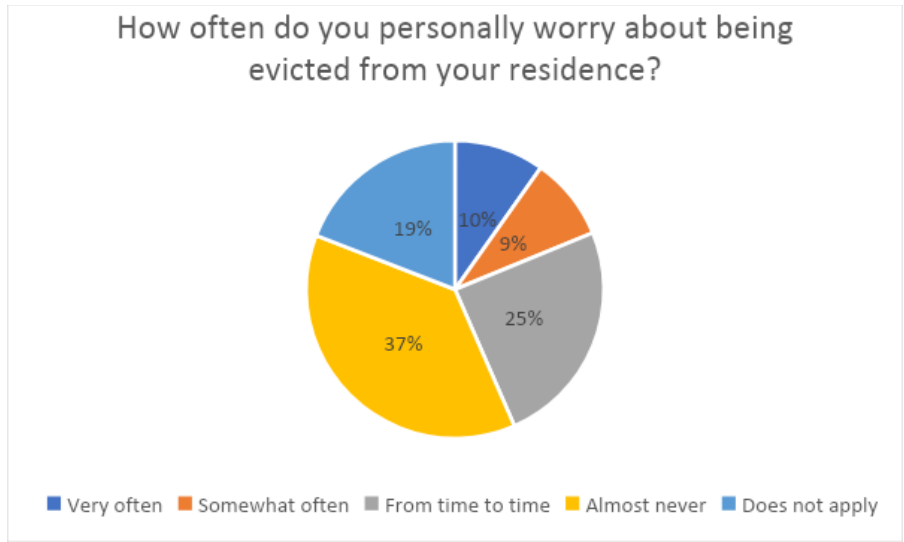
In interviews, workers described the stress of facing eviction despite working full-time.

“There have been many times throughout my employment at Universal Studios Hollywood where I was working 40+ hours during peak season, but still late on paying rent and also have almost been evicted twice because of it. The only reason I still work here is to maintain my health insurance.”

-Part-time studio guide

How likely is it that you will be able to pay for your housing (rent/mortgage) this month?



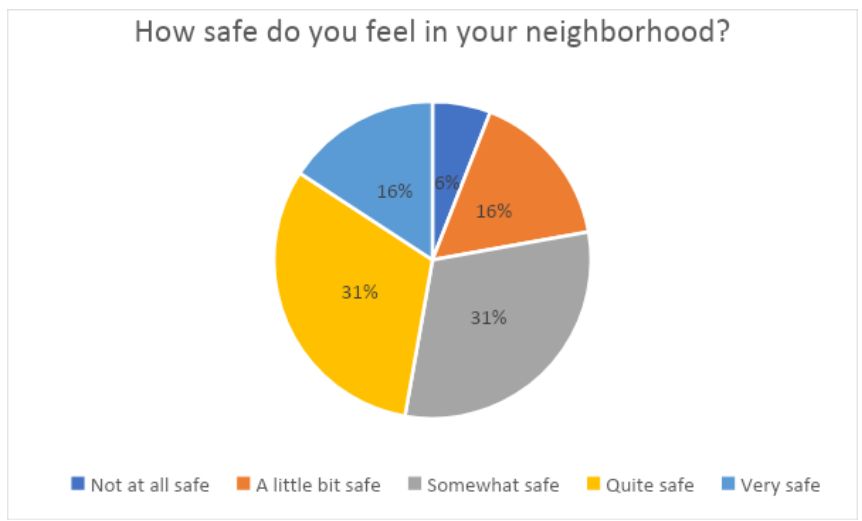


In addition to struggles keeping their housing, many workers face unsafe conditions in the neighborhoods where they can afford to live. Forty-seven percent of Universal workers report feeling quite or very safe in their neighborhood. 16% of respondents reported feeling a little bit safe, and six percent report feeling not at all safe in their neighborhood.

One worker described the stress of dealing with precarious housing and an unsafe neighborhood while trying to raise children.

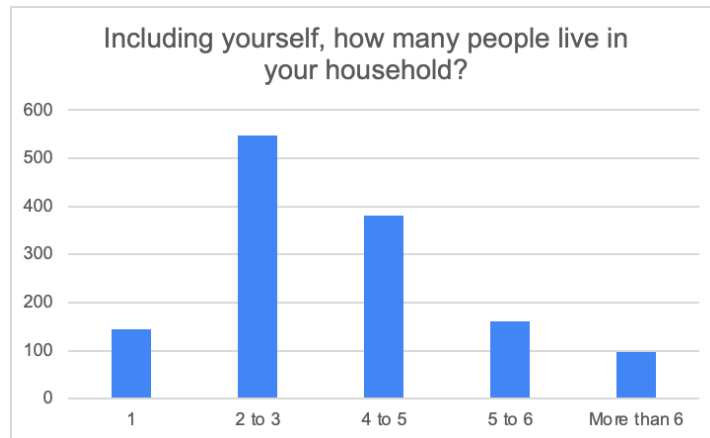
“I was having problems with my rent...I’m a single mom [of three children]. I would be struggling to make my rent. \$975 for a one bedroom. That’s the only one I could find, all the rents are going high. I luckily found it because a friend told me it was going to be vacant. It was in the bad side of town, there were shootings there, people doing drugs outside my door, breaking into cars. Just in one year, there were six to seven shootings there... I was having problems paying rent... I got evicted October 15, 2022 ... Right now, this month I’ve found someone to rent us their living room. I pay them \$500 a month...I didn’t want to lose everything so I rented a storage space. I pay almost \$300 a month for storage.”

-Part-time food stand attendant



Because of high living costs, many universal workers choose to live with others to make ends meet. Only 11% of Universal workers live alone. By contrast, 19% of Universal workers live with four or more other people in the same home.

In our interviews, workers described their frustration at not being able to afford to live on their own while working at Universal. One full-time attraction host commented, “Working at Universal gives me just enough to get by with four roommates. There is not enough pay to live, just scrape by.”



For workers who were hired at Universal in 2021 or prior, ten percent of workers surveyed have been homeless in the past two to three years. This includes nine percent of workers who self-reported being homeless,²³ and another one percent who described circumstances meeting Los Angeles County’s definition of “homeless,” including living in a car, couch surfing, or living in a shelter.²⁴

Workers in interviews explain that their wages are not enough to afford housing when they are already struggling.

“When I started working [at Universal Studios] the time was really hard. We were living in motels and places like that... for a good six to seven months... Now I live in a one-bedroom apartment with four growing children... aged three to the oldest, fourteen, who is autistic... Rent is \$1,300 a month... It’s not a super safe place for my kids, the sooner I can get out of there the better. It’s not ideal for my kid’s future.”

-Full-time baker at Universal, single mother of four

“There have been a few times I stayed in my car...I usually stay in the [Universal] parking garage...I have my family and they are there to support me as much as they can...but I don’t want to take advantage of that. I don’t want to take advantage of their hospitality”

-Full-time ride operator



“IT’S EITHER PAY MY BILLS OR EAT.”

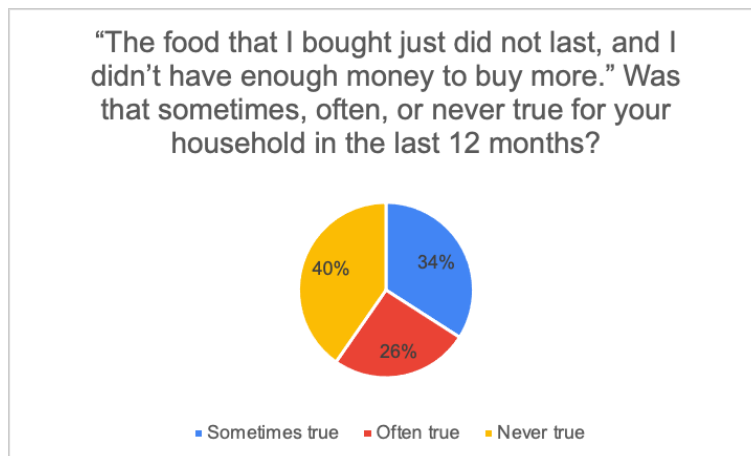
-Full-time back-of-house lead for cook

Food security is a key indicator of well-being in the United States. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security for a household as “access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.”²⁵ The low wages of Universal Studios Hollywood workers, combined with soaring costs of food, transportation, housing, and utilities, have made it difficult for most to have reliable access to sufficient, quality food each day. From 2020 to 2021, world food prices rose to their highest levels since 2011, and from 2022 to 2023, groceries surged 11.3% in cost.²⁶ A majority of the over 1,300 workers surveyed are food insecure.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”²⁷ In 2021, 10.2% of U.S. households were “food insecure,” meaning that households fell into one of two categories: “low food insecurity,” in which “households reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quality of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted” or “very low food insecurity,” meaning that “at times during the year eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money and other resources for food.”²⁸ In 2022, 20% of Californians (8.4 million people) were food insecure, and over two million of those individuals are in Los Angeles County.²⁹

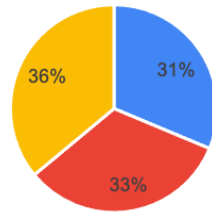
Based on the measurements of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, over half of the Universal Studios Hollywood Workers surveyed are food insecure. Our survey drew on the metrics provided by the USDA to measure food security and found that in every category, Universal Studios Hollywood workers struggled.³⁰

A majority of workers, 60%, responded that the statement “The food that I bought just did not last, and I didn’t have enough money to buy more” was sometimes or often true for their household in the last 12 months, with 26% responding that it was “often true.”



A majority, 64%, responded that the statement “I couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals” was sometimes or often true for their household in the last 12 months, and 33% reported that it was “often true.”

**“I couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals”
Was that often, sometimes, or never true for
your household in the last 12 months?**



■ Sometimes true ■ Often true ■ Never true

Fifty-three percent of workers reported cutting the size of their meals or skipping meals because there was not enough money for food in the last 12 months, and 50% responded that they sometimes ate less than they should because there was not enough money for food.

“I’m constantly worried about being able to make rent and pay my bills. Currently, I’m worried my power is going to be cut off this month because I haven’t been able to afford to pay the bill for several months, despite cutting my food to one meal a day to try and save money.”

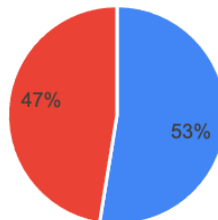
-Regular full-time/part-time worker

“I have had a tough time paying for everything I need, so I’ve had to give up some dinners and hope I don’t run out of gas on the way home.”

-Full-time ride operator

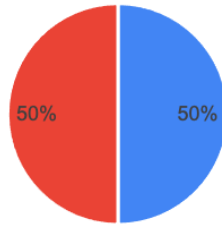
Forty-three percent of the workers surveyed responded that there were times in the past 12 months when they were hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money for food.

**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?**



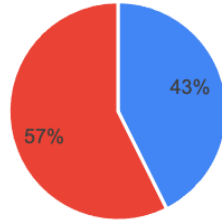
■ Yes ■ No

In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food?



■ Yes ■ No

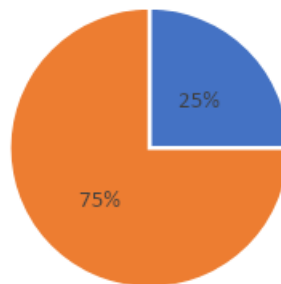
In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?



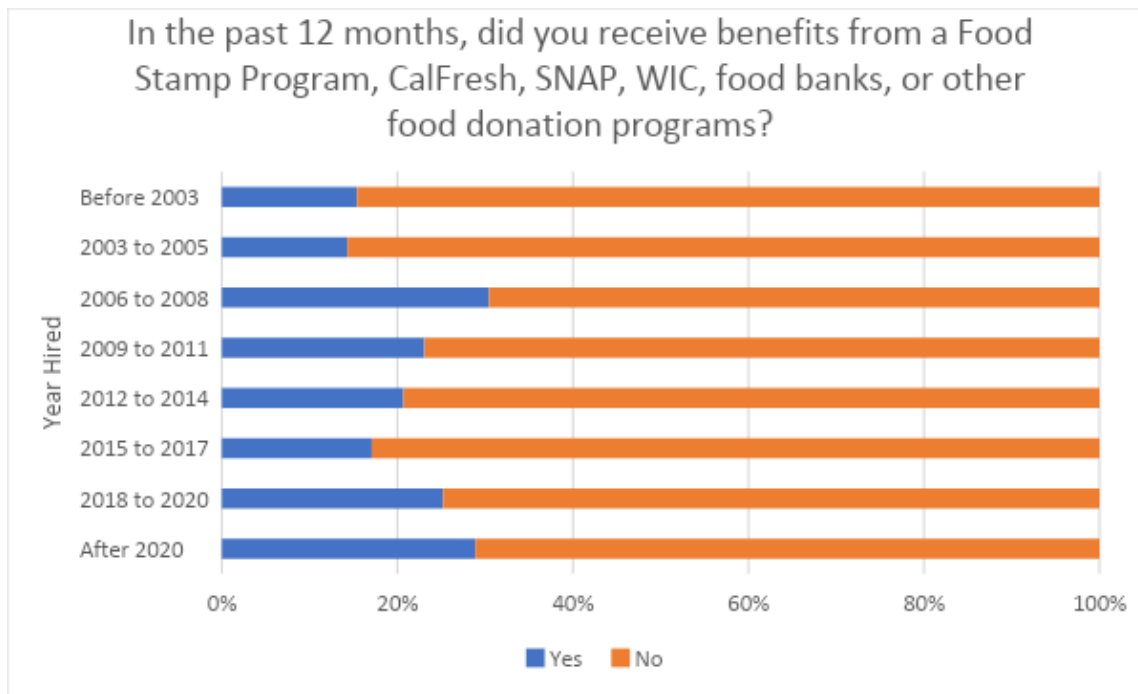
■ Yes ■ No

As alluded to above, 25% of the Universal Studios workers surveyed have received benefits from a food stamp program, CalFresh, SNAP, WIC, food banks, or another food donation program. These are needs-based programs. A household of four would qualify for CalFresh, for instance, if its gross monthly income was \$4,418 or less.³¹ Fifteen percent of workers at Universal hired before 2003 still rely on these public benefits to make ends meet.

In the past 12 months, did you receive benefits from a Food Stamp Program, CalFresh, SNAP, WIC, food banks, or other food donation programs?



■ Yes ■ No



The benefits that workers gain from these programs are not always enough to eliminate food insecurity.³² In addition, these programs are not always available to those who need them. Several workers surveyed reported that they had applied for these programs but had not been eligible, perhaps because their incomes were slightly higher than the threshold or for other reasons.

Universal Studios Hollywood subsidizes food for some workers, providing food vouchers for them to obtain food during their meal break from customer-facing outlets. However, prices of food have risen at Universal Studios, while their meal voucher values have not. One bartender explained, “They keep raising food prices, but not our vouchers, which results in spending more on food.” Another worker, a food stand attendant, explained, “Our food vouchers only cover \$9.50, but there is almost nothing besides the kids menu that the vouchers will cover, so most of us go hungry because we can’t afford to pay out of pocket for the food that continues to climb up in price, often twice a year.” A baker stated, “Our food vouchers don’t cover enough for a meal anymore.”

Nonetheless, this source of subsidized food at work is vital to these workers, and for some it is their only meal. One full-time cart cook explained that for a while, most of her daily subsistence came from the food vouchers provided at work. Another, a full-time lead barista, explained, “I live off of my one daily free meal at work most days.” One food server said, “Some people depend on their meal vouchers, but we can’t even [afford to] buy the food that they serve.”

Other workers’ testimonies about experiences of food insecurity and their difficulties paying for food along with other necessities:

“There are plenty of days when I’m hungry and heading home [from work], and I’m feeling the hunger pains. I do try to eat at home, but because of the situation and only so much space in the kitchen, I don’t have the time to prepare a meal fully, because that involves a lot of noise... I often pick up something at the 99 cent store and eat it in my room and not put it in the fridge. Sometimes for dinner, I just grab some boxes of unsalted saltines and snack on that while watching TV and drinking water... I have to try to save money where I can right now.”

-Full-time food stand attendant who is renting a room from a friend

"I have to shop for bargains [for food], I get coupons, see what's on sale, I get whatever's on sale. So we can eat... I'm lucky if I don't finish my lunch at work, then eat that for dinner. It's hard to make ends meet and buy food...I have to live with my mother... I give rent to her, I do all the cooking and cleaning in the house...I can barely afford to help out with the utilities."

-Full-time cook

"I just can't afford to pay for a lot of things that are necessities...Groceries are expensive and someone always gives up their meal or eats leftovers so everyone else can eat."

-Full-time matron

**THE BENEFITS THAT
WORKERS GAIN FROM
THESE PROGRAMS ARE NOT
ALWAYS ENOUGH TO
ELIMINATE FOOD
INSECURITY**

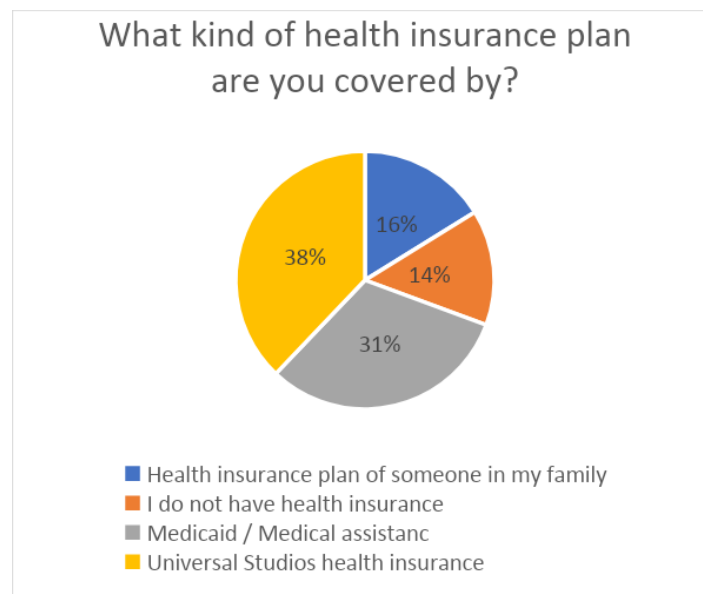


ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

“I’VE BEEN WORKING WITH UNIVERSAL FOR [OVER] 11 YEARS...NOW THAT I AM OLDER, I HAVE TO WORK TWO JOBS IN ORDER TO KEEP A ROOF OVER MY HEAD. MY DENTAL PLAN DOESN’T COVER MY PROCEDURE FOR BRACES OR EVEN AN X-RAY. I CAN’T GO TO THE GYM ANYMORE ... THE BENEFITS THAT UNIVERSAL HAS ARE TOO EXPENSIVE.”

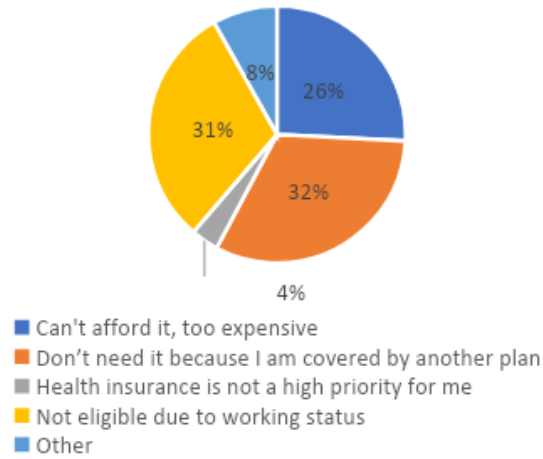
-Full-time lead cook

Universal offers health insurance, but this policy is not available to all employees. According to Universal’s Handbook, a union worker must average 30 hours of work per week for the past year in order to qualify for health insurance.³³ This policy can be particularly challenging for new employees or for single parents who can only work part-time. Thirty-one percent of respondents stated they were not eligible for Universal’s plan based on their working status. Fifteen percent of Universal’s workers remain uninsured and another 31% rely on Medicaid or Medi-Cal rather than using Universal’s insurance.



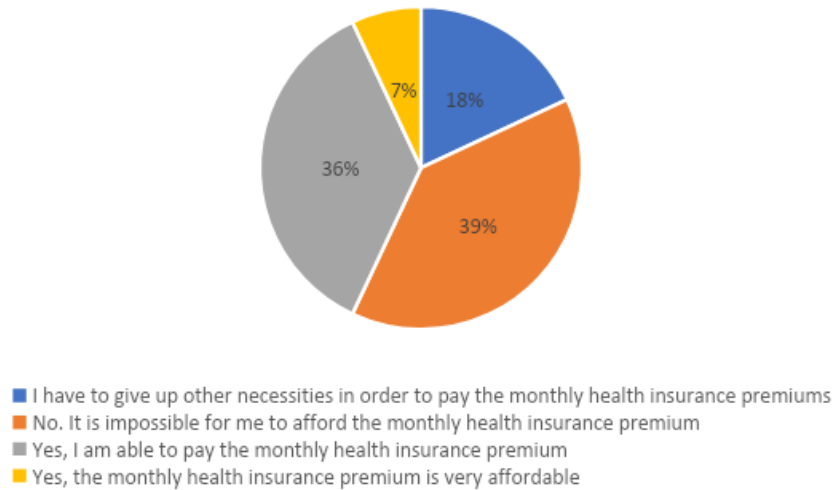
For some workers, the premiums under Universal’s insurance plan are prohibitively high. Twenty-six percent of Universal workers not covered by company insurance reported that they were not covered because the plan was too expensive. A further 31% were not covered because their working status left them ineligible.

If you are not covered by Universal Studios health insurance, why not?

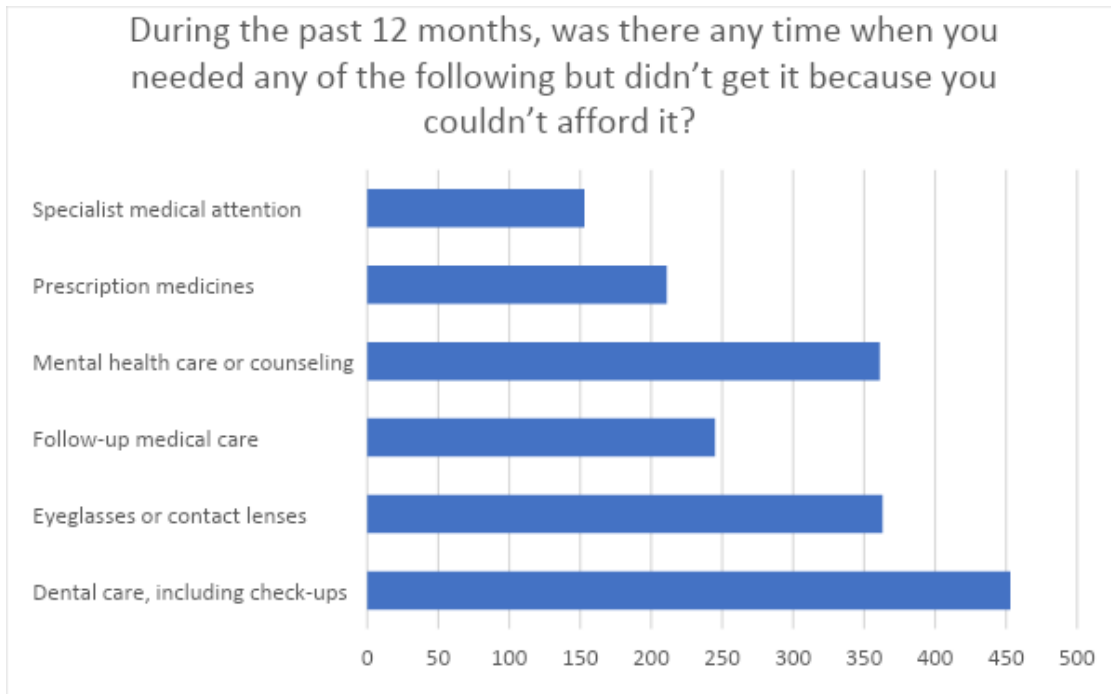


Of those workers on Universal’s insurance, 39% felt that it was impossible to afford the plan’s monthly premiums. Eighteen percent had to give up other necessities to pay for health insurance premiums each month.

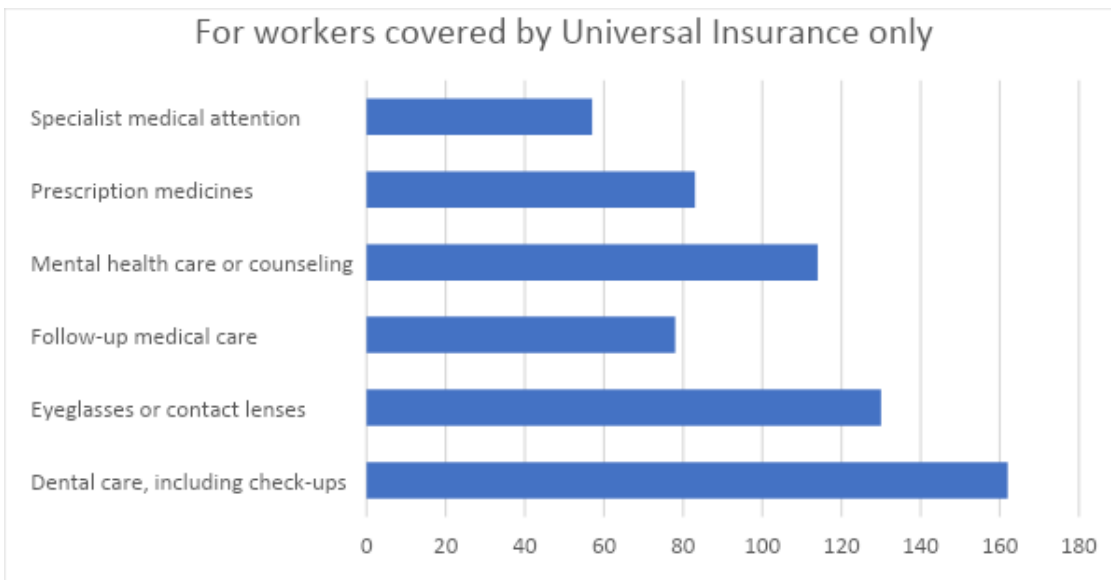
If you are covered by Universal Studios health insurance, are you able to afford your health insurance premium every month?



Despite Universal’s insurance offering, many workers are not able to afford basic medical care. Universal’s employee handbook instructs guest service workers to be “guest-ready at all times” and to “smile and have fun.” However, in the past 12 months, 34% of respondent workers were not able to afford basic dental care or checkups, 27% could not afford glasses or contacts, and 27% could not afford mental healthcare or counseling. A further 16% could not afford prescription medicines, 12% could not afford specialist attention, and 18% could not afford followup medical care. Overall, 55% of surveyed workers could not afford one or more of these medical expenses in the past 12 months.



Even for workers covered by Universal's insurance, affording basic medical expenses is a challenge. Thirty-four percent of those covered by insurance could not afford dental care, 28% could not afford eyeglasses or contacts, 17% could not afford followup care, 24% could not afford mental health care, 18% could not afford prescription medicines, and 12% could not afford specialist medical attention.



Employees interviewed for this study explained that workdays at Universal can be exhausting and physically taxing, leaving them tired and sore or even in pain when they get home. Without access to proper medical insurance and care, these workers have few options to treat the emotional and physical toll of their job.

"I'm paying \$12 a week for medical insurance, but then I have to pay out of pocket for a nerve medicine. I have a compressed nerve in my left hip... I have carpal tunnel... from punching out the dough, then frying the dough. There's a lot of constant repetitive motion that both of my wrists are doing. I feel some pain in my right wrist, but...there are some days when I can't bend my left wrist 45 degrees just reaching across to grab something, I can't pick up a pitcher of water because the weight is too much for my left hand... [and] I have to get a infected tooth removed. It should have been removed in February [three months ago], but I didn't have 600 tax-free dollars that I could just use...I'm in constant pain in my mouth. It's managed because I take a ton of ibuprofen throughout the day, but it's not good to do that long term... I have pain in both knees, and the x-ray showed no arthritis, but I need to lose weight. The doctor says go to weight management, go to the gym, but who's going to pay for that? Who's going to buy the food for the healthy meals, the gym membership?... A gym membership, I can't afford that. That is a luxury. I can't buy fresh food and make meals. That is a luxury."

-Full-time food stand attendant

"I'm a lead and live paycheck to paycheck, imagine my ride-ops who are making less. It's not fair and I barely make enough for food. This job gives me so much anxiety and stress, so I should be paid to cover my mental health medication and doctors."

-Full-time ride-op lead



**EVEN FOR WORKERS
COVERED BY UNIVERSAL'S
INSURANCE
AFFORDING BASIC
MEDICAL EXPENSES IS A
CHALLENGE**

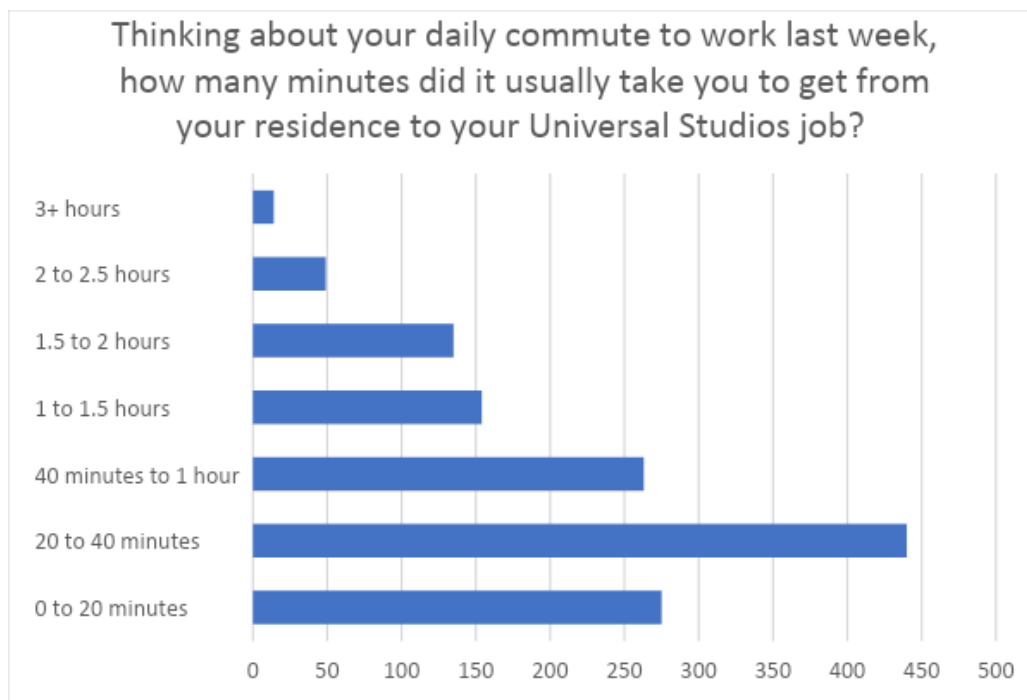
LONG COMMUTES TO WORK

“WITH GAS I DIDN’T HAVE ENOUGH TO FILL UP, SO I WOULD HAVE TO WALK TO WORK...THE WAY THAT I GO IS VERY DANGEROUS BECAUSE IT DOESN’T HAVE A SIDEWALK. WHEN I’M GOING IN AT 5 O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING...I HAVE TO WAKE UP AN HOUR EARLIER AND I AM ALWAYS LOOKING OVER MY BACK BECAUSE THERE’S NO SIDEWALKS. PEOPLE ARE SPEEDING AT THAT TIME.”

-Full-time retail worker

Many Universal workers face long, unpredictable, or even unsafe commutes to work. While there are many reasons a worker may choose to live further away from work, including to be closer to family or for a preferred neighborhood, many Universal workers have no choice but to live far away, as housing prices near the park rise beyond their wages.

The majority of Universal employees commute less than 40 minutes each way to work. However, while 70% of all Los Angeles County workers commute for less than 40 minutes to work, only 54% of Universal workers experience a similar commute. Twenty-six percent of Universal workers commute over an hour each way. Universal workers commute over an hour to work at nearly twice the rate of average Los Angeles County workers.³⁴



In addition, Universal workers are less likely to use a personal vehicle and more likely to use public transportation than the average L.A. County worker in 2021. Seventy-nine percent of Los Angeles County workers commuted by

car in 2021, compared to 55% of Universal workers.³⁵ While less than five percent of Los Angeles County workers commuted by public transportation in 2021, 29% of Universal workers rely on public transportation each day.

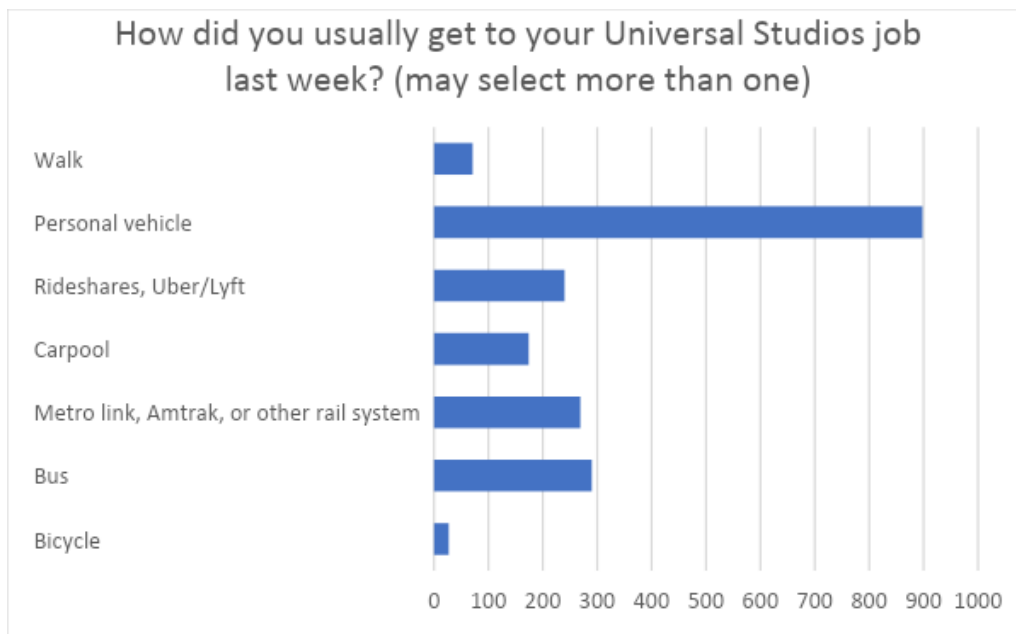
Other workers have to take expensive app-based rides like Uber or Lyft to supplement inconsistent transportation.

“It sometimes can be difficult coming to work because I don’t live all too close and I have to leave two hours prior to make it to work on time. I have to take a bus and train to come to-and-from. When I get off late, sometimes the train isn’t running or it’s just really dangerous to take public transportation at night, so I take rideshares and it’s \$25 a ride. That adds up so quickly. There have been times where I had to call off work because I didn’t have money to make it to work.”

-Part-time patio host

“I don’t drive, I Uber to work...It’s \$25 there and \$25 back. I live in Panorama City...I get paid \$15.96 an hour... With the \$1,500 in rent [for a one-bedroom], it’s not enough.”

-Full-time restaurant worker at Super Nintendo, single mother of two

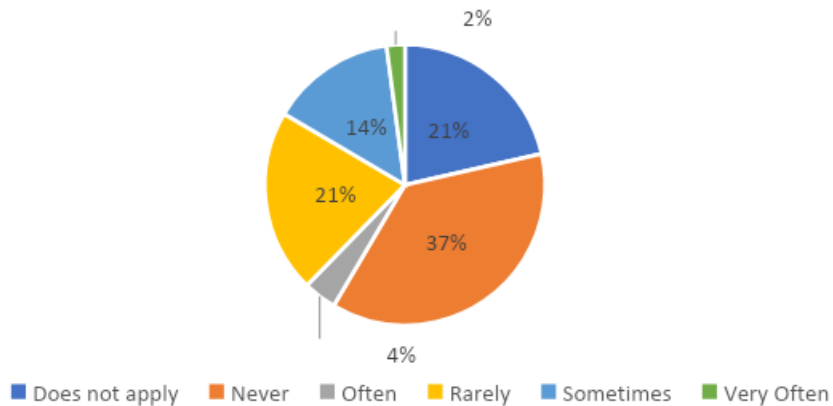


Traffic, public transportation delays, and other commuting challenges lead some workers to arrive late to work, resulting in disciplinary action. In the last year, 15% of Universal workers reported sometimes missing a shift altogether because they lacked reliable transportation. Another six percent reported missing shifts often or very often based on a lack of transportation.

“Getting to work on the metro takes over an hour. It’s not always the fastest. Sometimes I leave where I live and make it in an hour, and sometimes longer. I have been late to work because of metro delays. I leave three hours before my shift in case of delays -- sometimes 3.5 hours.”

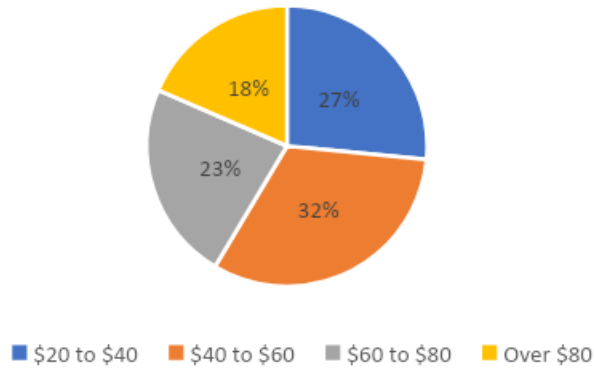
-Lead retail sales clerk

In the last year, how often have you missed a shift at Universal Studios because you lacked reliable transportation?



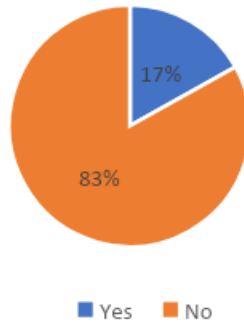
For those who do use a vehicle, gas prices can be difficult to manage. Thirty-two percent of workers estimate that their transportation costs \$40 to \$60 per week, 23% estimate \$60 to \$80 per week, and 18% estimate over \$80 per week.

What would you estimate is the average cost of your transportation each week (including gas, rideshare, bus/metro fare)?



Rather than deal with the time, cost, and unpredictability of commuting, some workers choose to stay closer to work by staying with friends, renting a hotel room, or sleeping in their car. Seventeen percent of workers report using one of these alternative options rather than returning home and commuting every day.

Rather than commute to your residence between your shifts at Universal Studios, do you ever stay with friends, sleep in your car, or rent a hotel room, etc.?



Workers interviewed for this study emphasized the challenges and frustration they felt from a long and expensive commute to a job that could not pay their bills.

"The work experience was pretty good at first. After about a month of working at minimum pay, living an hour away, it became really pricey and worrisome on how I'm going to pay for my gas when I pay \$120 in gas every two weeks."

-Full-time retail associate who has a second job in addition to Universal Studios

"My...issue is the travel...[It takes] about 40 mins to an hour, five days a week [to get to work], gas is about \$40-\$60."

-Full-time food stand attendant

"It has been great, but the pay isn't worth it, especially when I have to drive 40 minutes to an hour to work. If we made a bit more, I would be able to cover gas expenses and get food."

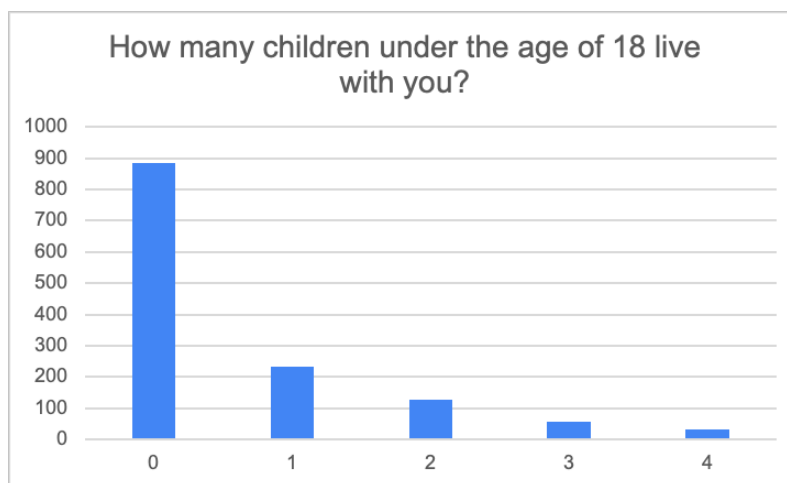
-Full-time ride operator

“I WAS PAYING FOR CHILDCARE AND THAT WAS LEAVING ME WITH NO MONEY FOR ROUGHLY A MONTH AND THEN I WAS ABLE TO HAVE MY MOM TAKE CARE OF [MY THREE-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER] IN EXCHANGE OF PAYING FOR HER RENT, AND I STILL WAS LEFT SHORT WITH RENT... I HAVE TO DROP OFF MY DAUGHTER IN MY MOM’S HOUSE [BEFORE WORK]...THE COMMUTE CAN TAKE OVER AN HOUR, AND I PAY \$50 A WEEK TO FILL MY GAS TANK.”

-Full-time cook and parent

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) defines “affordable” childcare as that which costs families no more than seven percent of their household income. Reports, however, find that childcare costs are often over a quarter of household income on average and “unaffordable for the majority of U.S. families.”³⁶ Annual childcare costs range from \$11,000 to \$13,000 in California, a state that is ranked the fourth most expensive state in the U.S. for daycare of infants and the fifth most expensive state to hire a babysitter.³⁷

These costs are extremely burdensome for many workers at Universal Studios. Thirty-four percent of Universal Studios workers surveyed (around 455 workers) live with a child under the age of 18, and 16% live with two to four children under the age of 18. These workers struggle to sustain not only their own lives, but also the lives and well-being of the children and dependents with whom they live.



A number of parents interviewed for this survey reported that the cost of daycare for their children was out of reach, and that accessibility of childcare was also a challenge. The burden is even harder on single parents, which represents 23% of the parents surveyed (104 individuals).

In interviews, several of these single parents and a number of single mothers of small children reported that they struggle to find a place for their children while they are at work, and also that it is difficult to provide adequate food and housing for them. Several of the single parents interviewed live in a one-bedroom apartment with two or more children. One single mother of three children is currently homeless, sleeping with them in the living room of her friend.

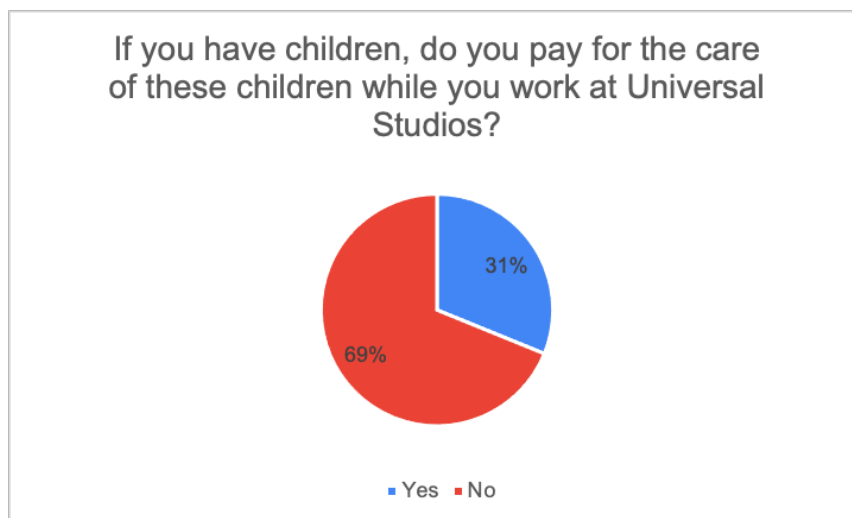
"I had to start working three days [rather than full-time] at Universal because I had no one to watch my daughter. She wasn't going to school. My others were...We've been homeless since October and I have no one to watch them."

-Part-time food stand attendant, single mother of three

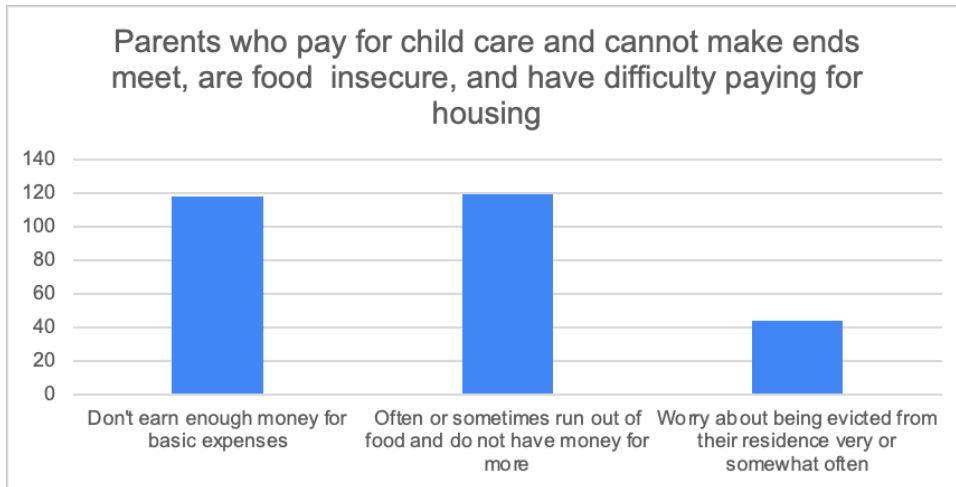
"When I first started at Universal, I didn't have any children, so I was able to survive with the pay, but now I have children and it's hard to afford decent living expenses with the inflation and our wages being stuck for many years on only cents in raises. It's very hard to make ends meet and often have to give up certain things to be able to buy the necessities."

-Full-time food stand attendant

Of the Universal Studios workers surveyed who have children, 31 percent (459) responded that they pay for their care while they are at work.



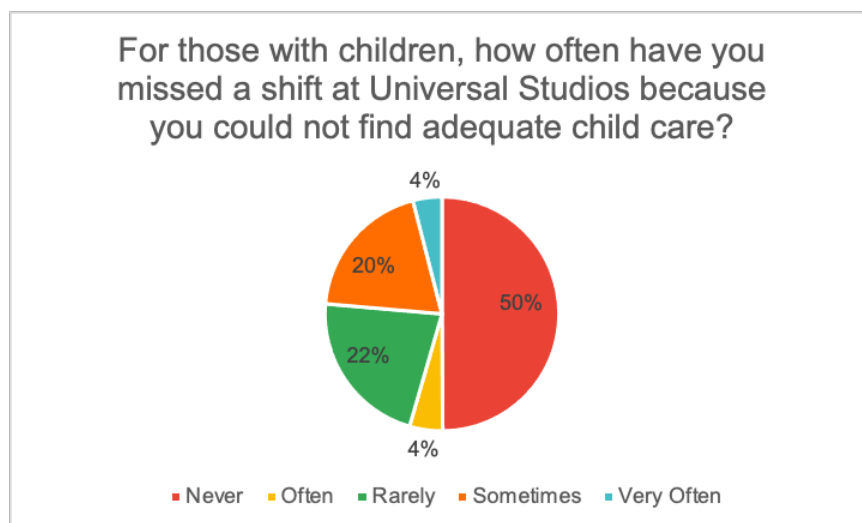
Of these parents who pay for childcare, a little over 25% (nearly 120 of them) report not earning enough money for basic expenses. Twenty-six percent (120 people) report often or sometimes running out of food and not having money for more. Nine percent (over 40) of these parents reported worrying about being evicted from their residence very or somewhat often.



Some Universal Studios workers interviewed said that they have sought public assistance for childcare in programs like the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) Child Care Program, which provides subsidized services for welfare program participants and low-income families.³⁸ However, these programs are often not accessible. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of families who qualify for childcare programs could not obtain them because there were not enough slots. During the pandemic, when 8,500 childcare centers throughout California closed, this situation became worse, and research has shown that women and women of color are disproportionately affected.³⁹

Many workers are forced to reduce their hours of work or leave work because it is not possible to obtain childcare, which creates even greater economic precarity for them and their families. Of the 459 respondents with children, 42% work fewer than 40 hours a week.

At Universal Studios, 50% of workers with children have missed a shift because they could not find adequate childcare. Eight percent of workers with children reported missing shifts often or very often because they could not find childcare.



Universal Studios provides no subsidized childcare. The company grants job-protected leaves of absence for family and medical care, up to 12 weeks in any 12-month period, in accordance with the Family and Medical Leave Act, but this time is unpaid. In accordance with the state law for Pregnancy Disability Leave, employees of Universal Studios have a right to take job-protected unpaid leave for a pregnancy-related condition. The Universal Studios handbook notes that employees on medical or family leave may be eligible for California’s Paid Family Leave program, which includes up to six weeks of partial pay (55% of weekly wage up to a maximum benefit).⁴⁰

Many workers who have children while working at Universal Studios have suffered from lack of pay during their time on maternity leave. One full-time VIP guide recalled, “I felt no support during maternity leave. Even though I qualified for FMLA, I barely could pay bills. I had a very traumatic birth with lots of complications and followup hospital stays. Wish Universal provided maternity pay. I have to go back to work barely able to pay for childcare even with a full-time schedule and two other jobs.”

Other workers’ testimonies reinforce the difficulties of obtaining childcare on top of mounting costs for housing, food, and other necessities:

“I now have a three year-old son and have to restrict my availability [working] because childcare is too expensive.”

-Part-time to full-time studio tour ambassador

“There’s not enough pay to cover simple living expenses. I’m barely able to cover gas and childcare monthly.”

-Part-time retail clerk and single parent

“[When] I started working here I was a father of one and single. Working at Universal Studios was good for the place I was in life. Since then, I have gotten a big family and needed a different place to live. If it wasn’t for my girlfriend living with me, I couldn’t be able to afford rent, food, and daily living expenses.”

-Full-time warehouse lead



OTHER WORKERS’ TESTIMONY REINFORCE THE DIFFICULTIES OF OBTAINING *CHILDCARE*

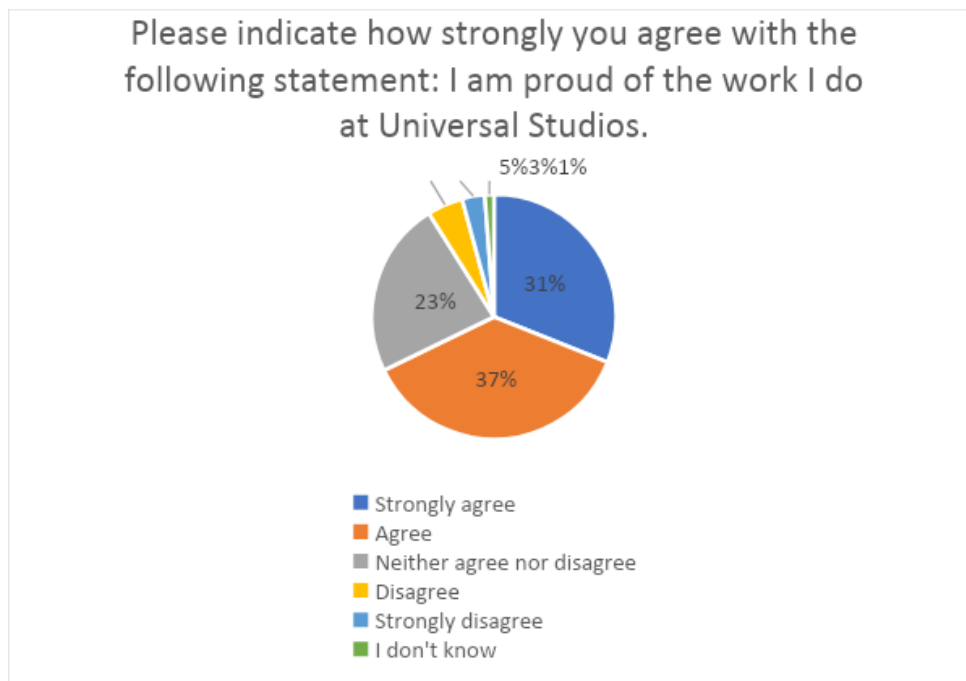
FAIR TREATMENT AND RESPECT AT WORK

“IT FEELS LIKE HERE AT UNIVERSAL, THEY SAY...“UNIVERSAL CARES,” BUT WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO IT, THOSE BELIEFS RARELY EVER SEEM TO BE PUT INTO ACTION. WE DO NOT FEEL PROTECTED OR CARED FOR BY THE COMPANY. THEY ARE VERY TRANSPARENT IN THE IDEA THAT HOW MUCH IS MADE TRUMPS THE WELL-BEING OF ITS WORKERS.”

-Part-time production assistant who has another job in addition to Universal

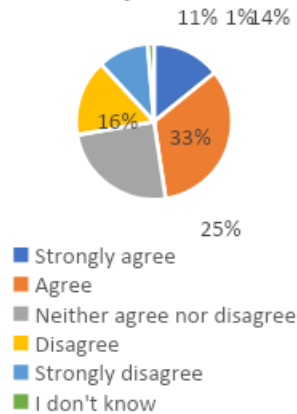
Most Universal employees are proud of the work they do at the park, but many still feel that they are not treated fairly or with respect.

The majority of employees, at 68%, agree with the statement “I am proud of the work I do at Universal Studios,” with 37% saying they agree and 31% saying that they strongly agree. Only eight percent of employees disagree or strongly disagree.



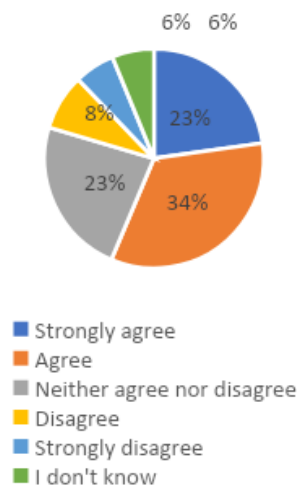
However, less than half of respondent employees agree or strongly agree that they are treated fairly on the job. Sixteen percent disagree and 11% strongly disagree with the statement “I am treated fairly on the job,” leaving 25% neutral.

Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: I am treated fairly on the job.



While over half of employees agree that “There is equal access to the best jobs for workers of different races and ethnicities,” some still disagree. 14% of workers disagree or strongly disagree that there is equal access to work based on race.

Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: There is equal access to the best jobs for workers of different races and ethnicities.



Workers interviewed for this study explained that low pay and poor benefits contributed to their feelings of disrespect at work.

"I realized that management or the higher ups only care about money...They don't see the daily struggles the workers face."

-Part-time food stand attendant who lives with mother and three sisters, who cannot afford the monthly health care premium and is on Medicaid

"I feel like the company just doesn't care as much anymore about employee morale. We used to have so many benefits and perks working here and I feel like the quality has gone down since starting here in 2017. From team member previews where they don't even give out food anymore, our holiday gifts get smaller and we rarely have screenings of Universal movies anymore...The company boasts record breaking quarters but can't pay us a living wage. I'm grateful for the job and its flexibility and all the people I've met, but in general Universal just feels like a corporate machine that doesn't actually care about its employees."

-Full-time tour guide

"Here at Universal, they say they have beliefs they feel strongly about. [One] being, 'Universal cares.' But when it comes down to it, those beliefs rarely ever seem to be put into action. We do not feel protected or cared for by the company. They are very transparent in the idea that how much is made trumps the well-being of its workers."

-Part-time production assistant

With all the challenges they face, from pay, to housing, to food, workers struggled to reconcile their love for the park with their dire economic situation. As one worker put it:

"In the last nine years, I've seen Universal Studios grow, but the employee benefits and pay do not reflect how much the park has grown. The cost of living has changed in the area in the last nine years and the pay does not keep up with that...It's quite sad...as I love this park."

-Full-time food stand attendant

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we outline steps that policymakers and other stakeholders can take to address the circumstances of the theme park workers described in this report and to aid workers in similarly situated workplaces.

Raise the minimum wage for workers at theme parks and related businesses.

Our principal policy recommendation is that the County of Los Angeles and statewide legislators consider enacting a minimum wage for theme parks and closely related businesses. As discussed above, a large majority of workers at Universal Studios earn the minimum wage. As a result, increases to the applicable minimum wage could provide significant benefit to these and similarly situated workers. The current minimum wage for workers in unincorporated parts of Los Angeles County (which includes the location of Universal Studios) is \$16.90 per hour; the current statewide minimum wage in California is \$15.50 per hour. The profound struggles that workers at Universal Studios Hollywood have reported in providing for housing, food, healthcare, transportation and other basic needs demonstrate the need for a higher minimum wage.

Such a step is also supported by scholarship more broadly. For example, MIT’s widely cited calculator finds that the hourly rate that an individual in a household must earn to support himself or herself and their family—a “living wage”—in Los Angeles County is as follows: For a household with two adults working full-time, a living wage is \$23.98 for a family with one child and \$30.15 for a family with two children. For a single parent with one child, a living wage is \$43.81, and for a single parent with two children, it is \$56.68.⁴¹ These wage levels are well above the existing Los Angeles County minimum wage rate.

Many jurisdictions have adopted higher minimum wages for workers in specific sectors. For example, the City of Los Angeles has set higher minimum wage levels for airport workers, hotel workers, healthcare workers, and workers employed by city contractors.⁴² These and similar higher minimum wages are supported by a number of policy considerations, which would likewise support a higher minimum wage for workers at theme parks and related businesses.

Low wages can also burden the public sector by requiring the use of government resources through safety-net programs. This is vividly reflected in our finding that one quarter of the workers we surveyed have over the last year used needs-based benefits from a food stamp program, CalFresh, SNAP, WIC, food banks, or other food donation programs.

Additionally, low wages can also have negative impacts on the local economy because they restrict workers’ purchasing power. As reviewed in this report, two-thirds of workers reported being unable to pay for basic life necessities, representing foregone purchases that would otherwise contribute to local economic activity.

Higher minimum wages are often justified where covered employers benefit from government assets and investments. This is again the case with major theme parks like Universal Studios, which benefit from major governmental infrastructure investments such as a dedicated metro stop and special zoning privileges that grant deviations from ordinary restrictions on the use of land.

Finally, as reviewed above, governments sometimes consider whether a particular industry can more readily absorb the impacts of increases to the minimum wage than the economy writ large. Here, as reviewed at the outset, theme parks like Universal Studios are part of some of the country’s largest and most profitable corporate conglomerates.

Mandate a customer surcharge to pay for workforce housing for theme park and other tourism workers.

As reviewed in this report, one of the most significant problems workers at Universal Studios reported was affording housing. Many workers reported experiencing housing insecurity, including evictions and fear of eviction, and sometimes homelessness. Others reported being forced to live significant distances from work, and as a consequence, having long commutes by car—a problem which contributes to traffic and pollution in the region.

The inadequate stock of affordable housing is, of course, one of Los Angeles’s most serious problems, and a perennial challenge to addressing it is the need for funding to pay for the construction of affordable housing. To address these problems, the County (or State) may consider requiring that major theme parks or other major tourist attractions impose a fee on guests that would generate funds for affordable workforce housing. Many local governments already impose a temporary occupancy tax (TOT) on hotels and short-term rentals. A surcharge or fee attached to guest admissions tickets to generate funds for workforce housing would be along the same lines. This concept has been discussed in policy circles and has been proposed in the City of Santa Monica for hotels.

Require onsite childcare for theme parks and other large tourism employers.

Another major problem identified by workers was obtaining affordable care for their children while they are at work. Many large institutions, such as USC, UCLA and state and federal buildings in downtown Los Angeles, have onsite childcare facilities. The County of Los Angeles could consider mandating major theme parks and other major businesses in the tourism sector to provide such facilities to support their employees or offering financial support to obtain care offsite.

Such a step would build on recent efforts to support working parents in California. At the beginning of the pandemic, for example, Governor Newsom issued an executive order that made it easier for preschools, family child-care homes, school districts, after-school programs and others to provide childcare for essential workers.⁴³ This executive order provided access to subsidized child-care for Nurses, doctors, grocery store workers, police, and other essential workers, regardless of their income. Soon after, in August 2020, the L.A. City Council voted to provide relief to low-income working families struggling to keep up with childcare costs.⁴⁴

Condition tax subsidies for studios and related businesses on payment of living wages and benefits to service workers.

California spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year through its Film Tax Credit, which is intended to encourage the production of motion pictures in the state. The program has cost the state approximately \$330 million each year from 2015 to 2020 and will cost the state another projected \$330 million each year through its scheduled expiration in 2025. The program was recently renewed for an additional five years, through 2030.⁴⁵

Importantly, while it seems clear that the Film Tax Credit has helped the state retain film production, the California Legislative Analyst's Office has raised questions about the extent to which the program has contributed more broadly to the state's economy. In a report issued in February 2023, the agency observed that "the best available evidence suggests that we cannot be confident that the economic benefit of film tax credits exceeds alternative uses of state funds."⁴⁶ One of the arguments made in favor of the policy is that the motion picture industry pays above-average wages. The quality of film writing and production jobs is currently the subject of ongoing strikes by actors and writers, raising serious questions about existing compensation in film production. This report shines a light on low-wage jobs in another part of the film industry: ancillary businesses that are closely tied to motion picture production like theme parks or public tours located at film studios. While not the subject of this report, there are likely other low-wage jobs at studios and other parts of the industry that are not unionized, such as food preparation and service jobs, where wages are similarly low.

One policy approach that state-level legislators may consider to ensure that the Film Tax Credit does serve the goal of contributing to the state's broader economy would be conditioning eligibility for the tax credit on adherence to certain basic labor standards, such as minimum wage levels. Such a policy would ensure that tax credits are not provided to companies which are costing the state additional resources because their lowest-wage employees must rely on food stamps and other forms of public assistance.

METHODOLOGY

Goal of Study

This study focuses on poverty among workers at Universal Studios in California. Many low-wage workers, including those in the restaurant and service work at Universal Studios, have been experiencing housing and food insecurity. These and other hardships have increased in the face of steep increases in costs of food, gas, and other necessities. We conducted a quantitative written survey of Universal Studios workers as well as qualitative oral interviews to yield statistically representative estimates of the scope and prevalence of poverty-type living conditions among this workforce. The questions in the survey instrument, interviews, and other research ascertained workers' wages, their abilities to sustain basic personal needs, and the degree of access to quality housing, food, and healthcare, among other necessities.

Survey Instrument Development and Pre-Tests

Our goal was to obtain accurate, statistically representative estimates of inadequate (or lack of) housing, food security, and other poverty-type living conditions of workers at Universal Studios. We created a draft survey instrument with quantitative survey researchers and analysts at the UCLA Labor Center. They provided us with feedback and helped us to combine repetitive questions and discard irrelevant ones.

We first tested the survey by giving it to two UNITE HERE Local 11 shop stewards to ensure that the questions were written clearly and understandably, that the format was organized in a comprehensible way, that the survey itself did not require too much effort or time for the respondents, and that the platform operated smoothly and without technical problems. Once we finalized the survey and database, we submitted the project to and received approval from the UCLA Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Survey Implementation

We gave the survey to small groups of workers these shop stewards had convened. These workers, who were on breaks or had finished their work days, took the survey using tablets provided by the union. In these small groups, we also trained around thirty worker leaders to enlist their coworkers to take the survey during breaks or after work. We provided wording they could use when they enlisted coworkers to take the survey: that the survey would take about ten minutes to fill out and was being conducted by the UCLA Labor Center and UNITE HERE Local 11 about living and working conditions, and that all identities would be kept confidential. We emphasized that people could only take the survey one time, and suggested that before handing respondents the tablet, the leaders make sure that they had not already taken the survey. We advised the leaders that they could help respondents fill out the survey if they wanted their help, and could read the questions out loud to respondents and fill in the answers that the respondents gave them. We then did a role play, having the leaders practice disseminating the survey to us, as respondents, to ensure that they understood the process, and to answer any questions they had. We replicated this training process with IATSE Local B-192 worker leaders. These leaders circulated the survey to workers for several weeks.

The survey result was highly successful. We had **1,330** respondents among the UNITE HERE Local 11 and IATSE Local B-192 bargaining units, representing **22%** of the total universe of about 6,000 workers at the peak of the park's employment each year and about **27%** of the approximately 5,000 year-round workforce. While worker responses came from our own survey, data regarding workers' wages came from a dataset of employees' wages and tenure obtained from the union collaborators, encompassing all 6,284 currently employed workers in both units.

Qualitative Oral Interviews

Before and after launching the survey, we conducted extensive interviews with nineteen UNITE HERE Local 11 and IATSE workers, the majority of whom were food service workers and had worked at Universal Studios Hollywood for several years. Local 11 and IATSE put us in touch with several workers who were willing to talk with us about their living and working conditions, and whose schedules were compatible with ours for an hour-long interview. We provided a consent form ensuring confidentiality for each interview. In our interviews, we covered many of the same questions as our survey, focusing especially on workers' access to affordable and reliable food, housing, childcare, and transportation. The interviews provided an opportunity to follow up on some of these issues, to ask for more detail about these and other issues, to learn about problems they faced that were perhaps not covered in the survey, and to gain a more holistic sense of individual workers' lives and challenges. After getting results from the survey, we conducted followup interviews with several workers from both UNITE HERE Local 11 and IATSE who had responded that they had experienced homelessness to learn more about the circumstances surrounding their experiences.

About the UCLA Labor Center

The UCLA Labor Center believes that a public university belongs to the people and should advance quality education and employment for all. We bring together workers, students, faculty, and policymakers to address critical issues facing working people today. Our research, education, and policy work lifts industry standards, creates jobs that are good for communities, and strengthens immigrant rights, especially for students and youth. For more information, see www.labor.ucla.edu.

About the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (UCLA IRLE)

The UCLA IRLE is a multidisciplinary research center dedicated to research, teaching, and service on labor and employment issues. Through the work of its units – Labor Studies, UCLA Labor Center, Labor Occupational Safety and Health program, and Human Resources Roundtable – the Institute forms wide-ranging research agendas that carry UCLA into the Los Angeles community and beyond. For more information, see <https://irle.ucla.edu/>

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ENDNOTES

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