



After the Bell:

A Portrait of High School Workers in California

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UCLA Labor Center

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Executive Summary

In 2021, over 150,000 California high schoolers were employed at some point during the year. On top of having to navigate the personal and academic challenges of high school, these young workers play a significant role in California's economy, especially in the retail and restaurant service industries. Understanding which high school students work, how much they work, and how much they are paid is critical for comprehending California workplace conditions. *“After the Bell: A Portrait of High School Workers in California,”* the latest brief released by the [UCLA Labor Center](#) as part of its “State of Young Workers in California” research initiative, analyzes the demographics and work conditions of high school students who work using 2017–2021 American Community Survey data.

This brief is an extension of the UCLA Labor Center's report [“California's Future is Clocked In: The Experiences of Young Workers,”](#) which explored the experiences of all California young workers ages 16–24.

Overview and Context of High School Workers

High school workers represent a unique subset of young workers, with distinct patterns of employment, education, and social service reliance. In 2021, 8% of the 2.11 million young workers in California were enrolled in high school, amounting to over 150,000 high school workers.

For some high schoolers, working while in school is a way to earn additional spending money, gain necessary career networks for later employment, and become acclimated to the world of work. But for many others, work is not optional: Many need employment to help their households pay for expenses, childcare, and groceries; save for the rising costs of college; and afford other essentials. For these high school workers, employment and education often make competing claims on their time.

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About This Study and Methodology

This brief presents data on high school workers in California. It is an extension of the analysis presented in the UCLA Labor Center's report, [California's Future is Clocked In: The Experiences of Young Workers](#). In particular, it provides data on and discusses the implications of their demographics, industries of employment, and wages. It also takes a closer look at hour-intensive high school workers defined as high school workers who work 20 hours per week or more.

This analysis primarily draws from the 2017-2021 American Community Survey. We define high school workers as those employed in California and enrolled in high school at the time of survey. In total, this comes out to slightly above 156,000 high school workers in the state. Of this subset, roughly:

- 20% were 16 years old,
- 38% were 17 years old,
- 30% were 18 years old, and
- 12% were over the age of 18.

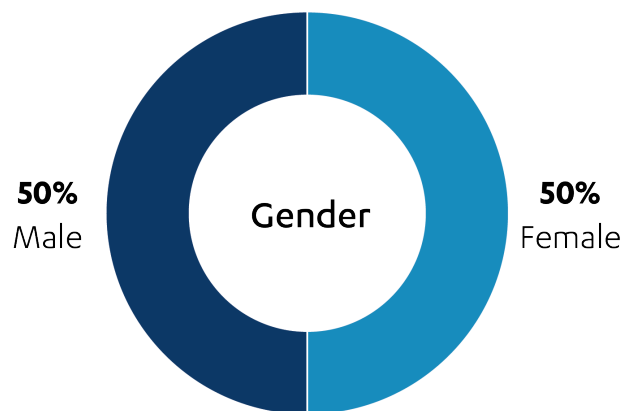


Findings

Demographics

The demographic profile of high school workers is similar to that of the total population of young workers from ages 16-24, with some notable differences. In 2021, there was roughly the same proportion of female high school workers to male high school workers.

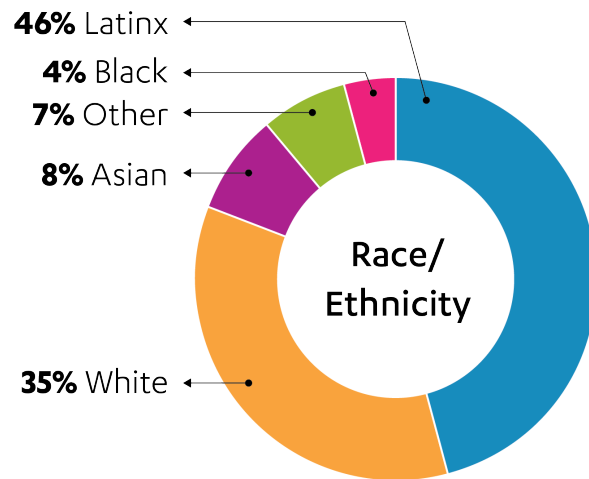
Figure 1: High School Workers by Gender, 2021



Source: Authors' analysis of the 2017–2021 American Community Survey.

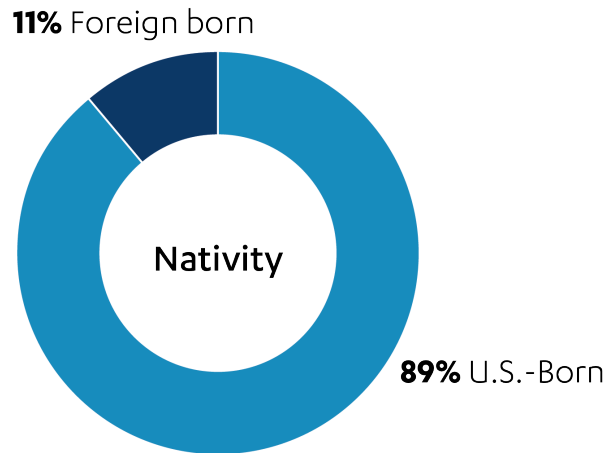
Students of color comprise 65% of all high school workers, and nearly 1 in 2 high school workers are Latinx (46%). The proportion of high school workers who are white (35%) is larger than the proportion of all high school students in California who are white (25%). This smaller proportion of Latinx, Black, and Asian workers in the high school pool may be explained by disparities in access to jobs for high school students.¹

Figure 2: High School Workers by Race/Ethnicity, 2021



Source: Authors' analysis of the 2017–2021 American Community Survey.

From our dataset, a significant proportion of high school workers are immigrants: 1 out of 10 high school workers were born outside of the United States. Facing greater institutional barriers than US-born workers, immigrant workers—and especially undocumented workers—have lower educational attainment and are more likely to work in dangerous occupations.² They also face additional vulnerabilities in the workplace: they can be more susceptible to labor violations, such as wage theft or unsafe working conditions, as they may fear immigration status-related retaliation from employers if they make complaints about these violations.³

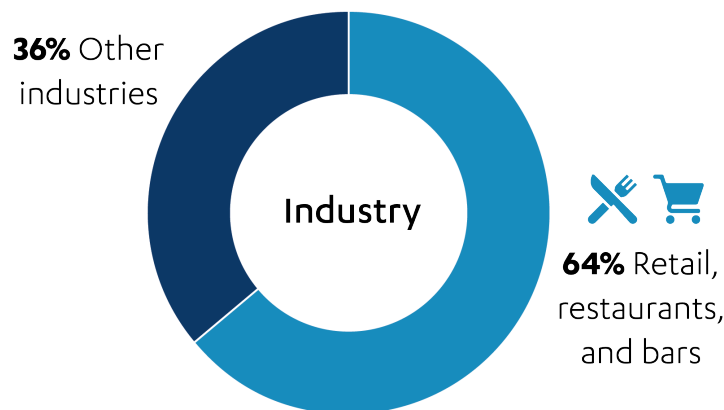
Figure 3: High School Workers by Nativity, 2021

Source: Authors' analysis of the 2017–2021 American Community Survey.

The overwhelming majority of high school workers in California attend public schools (93%), which is roughly proportional to overall public school enrollment in the state.⁴ This suggests that efforts seeking to aid high school workers would be most effective by using public schools as sites of intervention.

Employment Trends

Most high school workers in California work in the retail and restaurant service industries. The sector with the next largest concentration of high school workers was arts, entertainment, and recreation, at 9%.

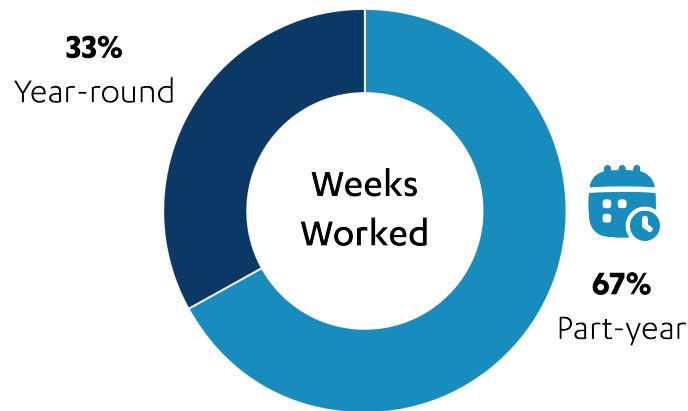
Figure 4: High School Workers by Trade, 2021

Source: Authors' analysis of the 2017–2021 American Community Survey.

In addition, these fields are among the top industries for wage theft claims in California.⁵ High school workers, many working their first job, may be unaware of their rights and/or fearful of advocating for themselves, thus making them especially vulnerable to worker rights violations.

Two-thirds of high school workers were seasonally employed (worked less than 245 days in the calendar year), working seasonally as opposed to working year-round.

Figure 5: High School Workers by Weeks Worked, 2021

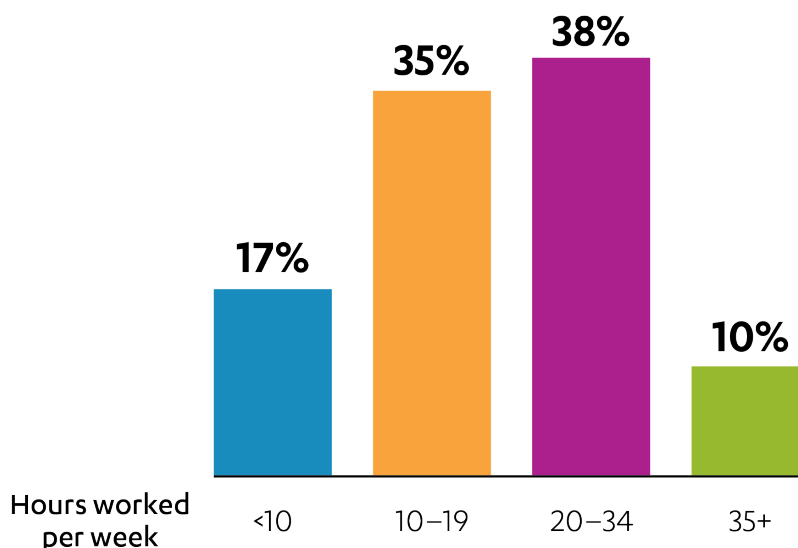


Source: Authors' analysis of the 2017–2021 American Community Survey.



The vast majority (90%) of high school workers worked part-time (less than 35 hours per week), though there is considerable variation in the number of weekly hours worked.

Figure 6: High School Workers by Weekly Hours Worked, 2021



Source: Authors' analysis of the 2017–2021 American Community Survey.

Research shows that working more hours can affect academic performance and persistence.⁶ This has important equity implications because, as discussed further in the next section, the number of hours high school workers work is stratified by race, gender, and class background.

Further, given that high school workers are concentrated in the retail and restaurant service industry, which regularly features unstable scheduling practices⁷ and overtime violations,⁸ there is likely an undercount of actual hours worked week by week. Unpredictable scheduling can impair workers' ability to, for example, complete school work, seek other employment opportunities, or fulfill caregiving responsibilities.⁹

A high proportion of workers enrolled in high school and college make low wages, defined as two-thirds of the median hourly wage for full-time workers. California's median hourly wage for full-time workers was \$26.90 in 2022; two-thirds of that wage is \$17.93. Over three-fourths (77%) of high school (and college) workers earned low wages, compared to 64% of all young workers aged 16–24. This difference suggests there may be a “pay penalty” for high school workers.

A “pay penalty” refers to a circumstance where a worker or a class of workers receives less compensation for the same work because of factors such as discrimination or unequal bargaining power.

Figure 7: High School and College Workers by Low Wages, 2022

Source: Authors' analysis of the 2022 Current Population Survey.

Moreover, out of all the age groups studied of young workers enrolled in school, typical high school-age job seekers (ages 16–18) had the highest rate of unemployment: 14.7% in 2022 compared to 6% for the 19–24 age cohort. Despite sharing similar motivations and needs for work and income, high school workers appear to have a more difficult time accessing employment and livable wages than other young workers.

Intensive High School Workers

Some high school workers are finding plenty of hours to work. In 2021, 48% of high school workers worked 20 hours or more per week.

Research shows that these hour-intensive high school workers face different obstacles than their high school counterparts working less than 20 hours per week: Working intensive hours can hamper these workers' ability to pursue academic and extracurricular opportunities.¹⁰ Understanding who these workers are and how their work life is structured is important, as it can give us a sense of how they experience high school, including social implications and issues of economic inequality.

Hour-intensive high school workers were more likely to be male, while moderate-hour high school workers were more likely to be female. The gendered patterns of intensive work align with extant literature on the distribution of unpaid care work in households; high school girls are often responsible for taking care of children and elderly family members while navigating school work and part-time jobs.¹¹

Table 1: High School Workers by Hours, Gender, 2021

	Moderate Hours	Intensive Hours
Male	47%	52%
Female	53%	48%

Source: Authors' analysis of the 2017–2021 American Community Survey.

Hour-intensive high school workers are more likely to be Black and Latinx, and much more likely to be foreign-born than those who work moderate hours. Over 60% of hour-intensive high school workers are Black and Latinx, while just 25% are white. Foreign-born workers comprise 13% of intensive-hour high school workers, compared to just 9% of moderate-hour high school workers. The racialized component of hour-intensive high school work indicates that many high school workers of color have less time to pursue avenues of opportunity (e.g., education, training, and extracurriculars) than white high school workers.¹²

Table 2: High School Workers by Hours, Race, 2021

	Moderate Hours	Intensive Hours
White	42%	28%
Black	3%	4%
Latinx	37%	56%
Asian	10%	6%
Other	8%	6%

Source: Authors' analysis of the 2017–2021 American Community Survey.

Intensive-hour high school workers are much more likely to live in households under the 200% federal poverty line (FPL). The “Federal Poverty Line” is a common definition of economic distress—indicating households that struggle to afford basic necessities such as food and healthcare. In 2021, the 200% poverty line was \$53,000 for a family of four.¹³ Nearly 30% of intensive-hour high school workers live in households below this line, compared to 22% of moderate-hour high school workers. This provides one explanation for why intensive-hour high school workers work more: they live in households where additional income streams are needed to afford expenses.

Hour-intensive work also differs from moderate-hour work in terms of scheduling, industry, and wages. Hour-intensive high school workers are more likely to work year-round than the average high school worker: 41% of hour-intensive workers held year-round employment compared to 26% of moderate-hour high school workers. Rather than working limited periods of substantial hours, hour-intensive workers are more likely to experience the burden and time constraints of these hours all year round.

Finally, hour-intensive high school workers are also more likely to work in sectors that are more physically demanding, such as healthcare and social assistance, waste management and remediation services, transportation and warehousing, and construction. Higher rates of high school employment in these industries suggest that young high school workers face additional challenges such as greater fatigue during the school day and potential injury.¹⁴



Table 3: High School Workers by Hours, Top 10 Industries

	Moderate Hours	Intensive Hours	Total
Restaurant and Bars (722)	44%	46%	45%
Retail Trade (44-45)	18%	21%	19%
Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation (71)	11%	7%	9%
Educational Services (61)	8%	2%	5%
Personal and Repair Services (811-812, 814)	3%	3%	3%
Health Care & Social Assistance (62)	2%	3%	2%
Waste Management & Remediation Svcs. (56)	2%	3%	2%
Transportation & Warehousing (48-49)	1%	3%	2%
Construction (23)	1%	2%	2%
Agriculture, Mining, Utilities (11, 21, 22)	1%	2%	1%

Source: Authors' analysis of the 2017–2021 American Community Survey.



Conclusion

High school workers face unique challenges as a subset of the young worker population. For most high schoolers, these jobs are their first introduction to the workplace and can provide important opportunities to gain skills and experiences for future employment, build savings, and develop career networks. However, high school workers also face vulnerabilities in the workplace.

Given their lack of work experience, high school workers are largely employed in low-paying jobs in the retail and restaurant service industry. These fields can be rife with workplace violations, and high school workers, unaware of their rights or fearful of making complaints, may be vulnerable to employer violations. Additionally, child labor laws are being weakened across the country, as in Arkansas, where children under 16 no longer have to receive the Division of Labor’s permission to be employed.¹⁵

In addition, many high school workers are employed for intensive hours while trying to complete educational requirements. The data show that hour-intensive work is more concentrated in demanding industries and is racialized and classed. These young, less privileged workers stand to benefit greatly from higher education and other pathways of opportunity, but the necessity of earning an income to contribute to household earnings often puts competing demands on their time. Policy solutions aiming to support these high school workers should protect their ability to continue earning an income while facilitating their participation in education and other pathways of opportunity. Programs that offer work-related educational credits can ease the time constraints placed on these workers.¹⁶

Lastly, [Assembly Bill No. 800 \(AB-800\)](#) requires all public schools, including charter schools, to annually provide information during the week of each year recognized as “Workplace Readiness Week,” to students on their rights as workers. Beginning in August 2024 the bill requires that any minor seeking a work permit must also receive a document that explains their labor rights. Considering the more than 150,000 high school workers in the state, this bill is critical to protecting the labor rights of young workers across California.

Acknowledgments

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Vivek Ramakrishnan, Andrew Rock, Lucero Herrera, Janna Shaddock-Hernández, and Sophia L. Ángeles (2024). After the Bell: A Portrait of High School Workers in California. UCLA Labor Center.

Endnotes

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A woman with dark hair, wearing a blue denim jacket over a black hoodie and grey pants, is smiling and reaching up to a high shelf in a library. She is holding a book with a blue cover that has 'GOO' and 'ARS' visible on it. The library shelves are filled with books, and the lighting is bright and even.

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