

# FOOD SERVICE WORKERS & THE FOOD STAMP CRISIS

The People Who Feed Us Can't Feed Themselves



## OVERVIEW

With nearly 14 million workers, the restaurant industry is one of the largest and fastest-growing employers in the United States — and also the lowest-paying.<sup>1</sup> The federal subminimum wage for tipped workers is just \$2.13 an hour, leaving restaurant workers twice as likely as other workers to rely on food stamps to eat.<sup>2</sup> Now, amid the government shutdown, about 2.1 million restaurant workers are at risk of losing their SNAP benefits — and, with them, their ability to feed their families.<sup>3</sup>

These are the workers who power local economies by cooking and serving our food, yet they still can't afford groceries themselves. As SNAP funding dries up, the people who feed America are being left to go hungry.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Widespread Dependence on Food Assistance

- › **The restaurant industry is the lowest-paid workforce in the United States** — the result of decades of lobbying by the National Restaurant Association (“the other NRA”), which has fought to block wage increases and preserve a subminimum wage for tipped workers of just \$2.13 an hour.<sup>4</sup>
- › Because of these poverty-level subminimum wages, **2.1 million restaurant workers nationwide rely on SNAP to eat** — nearly **twice the rate of other U.S. workers**.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, the industry that claims to “feed America” runs on wages so low that its own workforce cannot feed their families.

### Racial Inequities

- › **People of color make up 53%** of all restaurant workers on SNAP.<sup>6</sup>
- › **Black and Latino workers are more than twice as likely** to rely on food assistance.<sup>7</sup>

The wage crisis in restaurants is also a racial justice crisis — a system designed to depend on underpaid labor from workers of color.

## Gender Inequities

- › Nationally, **women make up 54% of all SNAP recipients**, while **in the restaurant industry that number rises to nearly 60%.**<sup>8</sup>
- › **One-third of all restaurant workers** on SNAP are women of color.<sup>9</sup>

Low pay in restaurant and tipped jobs keeps women trapped in a cycle of work, hunger, and dependence on public aid.



## CONCLUSION

These findings expose a deep moral contradiction at the heart of America's economy: the people who feed us cannot afford to feed themselves.

Millions of working Americans — including more than two million restaurant employees — earn so little that they qualify for food stamps. The “other NRA” has fought to keep it that way, preserving a subminimum wage that guarantees permanent insecurity for millions.

Ending the subminimum wage and raising base pay across the service industry to a true living wage would immediately reduce hunger, restore dignity to work, and lift hundreds of thousands of families out of poverty.

## REFERENCES

One Fair Wage analysis of American Community Survey data, 2019–2023 5-Year Sample. Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Megan Schouweiler & Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 12.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V12.0>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS), May 2023; Current Employment Statistics (CES), 2023.

One Fair Wage and Restaurant Opportunities Centers United. Ending a Legacy of Slavery: How the Subminimum Wage for Tipped Workers Perpetuates Race and Gender Inequity. 2021.

David A. Fahrenthold and Talmon Joseph Smith. “How Restaurant Workers Help Pay for Lobbying to Keep Their Wages Low.” The New York Times, January 17, 2023 (updated June 20, 2023). <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/17/us/politics/restaurant-workers-wages-lobbying.html>

1 As of 2023, BLS data shows that the accommodation and food services sector employs approximately 14.3 million workers, and the restaurant subsector accounts for roughly 13.6–13.8 million of these jobs. The median hourly wage for “Food Preparation and Serving-Related Occupations” is \$14.00, the lowest of any occupational group in America. Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS), May 2023; Current Employment Statistics (CES), 2023. See also One Fair Wage and ROC United, Ending a Legacy of Slavery: How the Subminimum Wage for Tipped Workers Perpetuates Race and Gender Inequity (2021).

2 One Fair Wage analysis of American Community Survey data, 2019–2023 5-Year Sample. Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Megan Schouweiler & Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 12.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V12.0>

3 One Fair Wage analysis of American Community Survey data (ACS 2019–2023, IPUMS USA v12.0)

4 David A. Fahrenthold and Talmon Joseph Smith. “How Restaurant Workers Help Pay for Lobbying to Keep Their Wages Low.” The New York Times, January 17, 2023 (updated June 20, 2023). <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/17/us/politics/restaurant-workers-wages-lobbying.html>

5 OFW analysis of ACS 2019–2023 (IPUMS USA v12.0).

6 OFW analysis of ACS 2019–2023 (IPUMS USA v12.0).

7 OFW analysis of ACS 2019–2023 (IPUMS USA v12.0).

8 OFW analysis of ACS 2019–2023 (IPUMS USA v12.0).

9 OFW analysis of ACS 2019–2023 (IPUMS USA v12.0).