HIGH STAKES

THE STATE OF THE CALIFORNIA CANNABIS WORKFORCE

MAY 2025

UCLA Labor Center

CANNABIS WORKER COLLAB

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear community,

The cannabis industry in California stands at the intersection of economic vitality and workforce diversity. Yet, this critical sector remains largely invisible in official government data, making it difficult to capture essential demographic and labor information. Workers are dispersed across the supply chain—across agriculture, manufacturing, retail and transportation—in sectors that are often vulnerable to workplace health and safety and labor violations.

This report zooms in on cannabis workers to understand their experiences on the frontlines of growing, delivering and selling this plant, which serves medicinal and recreational uses. As the first comprehensive examination of California's cannabis workforce, this report lifts up the labor conditions and opportunities shaping this emerging sector. Through interviews with hundreds of workers, we now have a detailed profile of a thriving, young and diverse workforce that shares a commitment to the plant and its potential. This report also documents the dangerous work conditions that are common in these sectors, and the particular vulnerability of workers to violence and harassment unique to the cannabis market.

Following the research justice model, the study was codesigned with cannabis workers and key stakeholders, such unions, community based organizations, and social equity groups. Their voices are integral to both the findings and proposed solutions, underscoring the importance of listening to those most impacted by this work. What comes through clearly in the voices of workers throughout this report is an appreciation for the product and their colleagues, and a desire to stay and grow in this industry. The data shows that California's cannabis industry can set the standard for other sectors across the state, becoming a national model where economic growth and workplace justice come together. By centering worker experiences and needs, we can establish a foundation that prioritizes worker well-being alongside industry growth.

So, let's listen to the workers, and provide the interventions and support that create an industry with pathways to quality careers, including union-protected positions, family-supporting wages and workplace safety. Cannabis work is work, and this workforce deserves dignity, respect, and fair working conditions.

In solidarity,

Saba Waheed
Director, UCLA Labor Center

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seven years into the official launch of the adult-use market, cannabis is at a crossroads in California. Rapid cycles of booms and busts, rushes and slowdowns, and threats and opportunities have made for an industry that, despite many changes, still brings significant value to the state and stands as an expanding source of economic development. Often missing from the story of the industry's shifts are workers, who in 2024 were estimated to number at least 78,618 in the legal market alone. Considering that this represents only a portion of the sector, cannabis jobs could easily reach into the hundreds of thousands. These workers' labor persists even as prices fluctuate, and they bear the pressures to produce in ways that meet consumer needs, regulator and community expectations, and owner-operators' visions and limits in funds. Workers hold the key to translating this wealth into local communities, via wages, benefits, training, and more, multiplying the value of this industry.

The California Cannabis Worker Collab was initiated to address the gaps in data regarding the conditions, aspirations, and experiences of cannabis workers, recognizing that decisions affecting this community were often made without their input but also that workers could help ensure an industry that contributes to California on multiple fronts. Through a research justice model guided by our community advisory board of labor and equity groups throughout the state, we built a team of worker researchers who conducted more than 1,111 surveys, collected more than 50 in-depth interviews, brought the findings to stakeholders in seven in-depth data "seshes," and created a wide-ranging instagram presence that included 25 live episodes on key issues facing workers and the industry.

We learned some important trends that only confirm the potential of cannabis to contribute, but the challenges that must be addressed head-on.

Who Are Workers

Cannabis workers are overwhelmingly young, diverse, and attracted to a range of opportunities in the field. Our survey reached 38% Latina/o workers, 22% African American or Black workers, 11% Asian or Pacific Islander and 4% Native American or Alaskan Indian. With such diversity, cannabis workers prove to include larger proportions of nonwhite workers - most especially Black or African American - than in the California population overall (65.7% nonwhite population statewide, with 5.6% Black). Cannabis workers also represent a significantly younger workforce, predominantly under 40, with at least 21% surveyed between 18 and 24 and another 68% between 24 and 39. Women also made up 49% of our sample. Importantly, workers were 4% nonbinary and 1% transgender. and overall, 23% LBGTQ+ workers.

Depending on the sector, cannabis work involves a wide range of interactions, most of which fall under two main categories: working directly with people or with the plant. Coming from a wide range of backgrounds, industries, and experiences, workers reported highly inconsistent implementation of workplace training. Only 32% felt very prepared from the initial training they received.

Just over 50% of cannabis workers received some form of training on the medical uses of cannabis during their tenure at their job. Working with consumers requires significant knowledge of cannabis products, effects or medical application, and consumption methods. Historically, cannabis dispensaries have played a critical role in the delivery of informal medical care, starting with the medical marijuana movement's roots in the HIV/AIDS crisis and supporting people with a range of conditions and disabilities. Workers also battle misinformation, in part passed through the internet and otherwise encouraged by contemporary marketing. At the same time, workers shared the ways they patch together such knowledge on both the medicinal uses of cannabis and complex cultivation techniques, with much significant initiative.

WAGE AND BENEFITS

The median wage for cannabis workers in our sample is $19.50/hour. For cultivation and delivery, the average was slightly higher ($21.00) and retail dipped a bit lower. Though relatively higher for retail, these wages do not add up to a living wage in most of California. Survey data showed the effects of these low wages had real effects on basic needs. Nearly 43% of women, 29% of men and 81% of gender nonconforming workers we spoke to said they had trouble paying for food or groceries within the last year. 31% of women, 19% of men, and more than 50% of gender-nonconforming workers we spoke to had to rely upon SNAP/food stamps. The gap between relatively higher wages and a living wage also informed why, aside from those who worked for another cannabis job (24%), another third had an additional paid job outside of the cannabis industry.

Wage theft remains significantly high across the regulated and unlicensed cannabis sectors, with at least 63% of workers experiencing it in some form. These include interrupted meal breaks, being paid late, and being asked to work before or after clocking out of work. When we break down the wage theft data, we see that Black or African-American cannabis workers experience wage theft at a higher rate (68%) compared to the overall sample wage theft rate among those who identified as white (60%).

MANAGERIAL TENSIONS

Cannabis workers tend to work in smaller environments with a very intertwined relationship to their managers and owners. Aligned with qualitative research in the industry, several interviews noted that such close relationships in part are shaped by patterns that occurred during the medical cannabis era, where owners, managers, and workers developed a sense of closeness due to shared risks in the face of police and other violence. Yet at the same time, 38% of workers said they noted that their managers would make decisions about scheduling, pay raises, or promotions based on these personal relationships. In interviews, words like favoritism, nepotism, and personalism were frequently mentioned around hiring, discipline and scheduling.

Across our interviews, employees also flagged the ways in which technology meant to protect like security cameras, may also be incorporated into surveillance of workers, in ways that affect their work security and sense of autonomy, and break down trust. Other technologies, such as facial recognition for timekeeping, disproportionately disadvantage dark-skinned employees.

WORKER HEALTH AND SAFETY

Cultivation exposes workers to numerous environmental hazards—including chemicals, heavy equipment and different air, water and temperature extremes related to indoor, greenhouse, or outdoor production. Among the most common conditions reported were back and neck pain (46%), followed by skin blisters, rashes, or skin infections (31%). The various skin injuries, as well as reports of bleeding or abrasions (21%) and chemical burns (21%), may link to hazardous products such as pesticides or corrosives like ammonia (mixed in formulas for plant growth), as well as the kinds of scars that often come with working with plant matter and equipment. A less discussed element was eye strain (30%), which relates most often to the intensive lights that mirror the intensity of the sun in order to artificially induce the plant growth cycle. The intensified lighting and exposure to chemicals noted above may also be connected to the fact that a quarter (24%) of cultivation workers reported consistent headaches or migraines. Nearly the same amount (24%) reported asthma or allergies that were induced by the workplace.

Retail and delivery workplaces also face significant safety issues, some of which are specific to cannabis. Importantly, nearly one-third (32%) experienced back or neck pain, pointing to the physical demands of retail and delivery. For delivery workers, one-fifth (20%) experienced car accidents on the job. Some workers reported that car maintenance was inconsistent, putting their safety at risk.

Given the cash-only business, cannabis workers in the regulated sector were more likely to experience a burglary (23%) compared to 14% for unlicensed. 16% of all workers also experienced robberies. Police raids and accompanying violence are common in both the regulated and unlicensed sector, with 14% of raids occurring in licensed facilities, compared to 17% for unlicensed shops. Long hours, high-stress environments, and unpredictable interactions take a toll on workers' mental health.

Gender, sexuality, and race were key determinants in workers' experiences of violence, and an overall climate where more socially and economically marginalized workers felt devalued or hampered from moving up. Over a quarter (27%) of women and 13% of men reported experiences of sexual harassment on the job. Others shared how these forms of harassment were not simply tolerated by customers but perpetuated from the top down. More than 34% also experienced or witnessed racial slurs, and 28% homophobic or transphobic comments.

PROMISING DIRECTIONS

Despite the lack of a formalized system, cannabis industry workers consistently demonstrate enthusiasm for deeper training and professional growth. For cultivation workers, interest was high for multiple kinds of training; the primary interest was greenhouse management (75%), as well plant breeding, mold control, and testing product (69%). For retail workers, the primary interest in training were the medical use of cannabis (77%), testing product (71%), and inventory and waste (65%). At each of our worker "seshes," expanding training opportunities was always in the top three areas where workers would invest, alongside better wages and health benefits.

Approximately 20% of those we surveyed were union members—a significantly high percentage when we consider that the rest of the state's private sector unionization rate was roughly 11% in 2024. Aside from the ability to address workplace concerns, the "union difference" for workers showed up most in mobility, according to our survey. While many aspects of our survey and interviews showed the challenges workers faced in experiencing growth or mobility, 69% of those who are in a union indicated they have received a raise at their current job, compared to 50% of those who are not in a union. Workers detailed in interviews union contracts that included annual raises of $1 per year contractually. Union workers were also significantly more likely to receive health benefits: 65% of cannabis workers receive health insurance through their employer, compared to 41% who are non-union members, as such benefits have been written into numerous contracts.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Changes in the industry have affected workers' ability to learn and experiment with different techniques, and commercialization has also meant following trends within larger corporate agriculture. As others also shared, commercialization in some retail settings has threatened to reduce contact time with patients, to force speedup, and to make workers push products (especially ones with higher THC concentrations) as marketing rather than as genuine care.

But across our different data (including our worker seshes), the solutions in cannabis seem close at hand, making the industry's development less of an impossibility and more an ever-present reality. As a whole, cannabis workers' experiences shared throughout this project continually brought us back to two elements: people and the plant. Indeed, this project constantly reminded us that if we begin with listening— to the genuine, human stories of frontline workers, not to mention managers, operators, patient-consumers and others—the potential to realize genuine solutions for a California cannabis industry that grows opportunities for all might go from the seeds of hope to a true harvest.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Average cannabis wages rest above general retail and delivery wages, but still aren't enough to make ends meet in California.

- The cannabis workforce is highly skilled, with workers earning a median hourly wage of $19.50, above California's minimum wage and above median wages in retail and delivery.
- Delivery and cultivation workers earn a higher average wage of $21, which in delivery is in part shaped by the requirement to hire employees, not contractors.
- Nearly 43% of women, 29% of men, and 81% of gender nonconforming workers we spoke to said they had trouble paying for food or groceries within the last year.
- More than 62% of workers experience some form of wage theft, such as late pay (29%) or being asked to do unpaid work (13%).
- Both median wages and wage theft appear to be consistent across the licensed and unlicensed markets

Cannabis workers have unionized at high rates, winning them raises, health benefits, and a voice on the job.

- Unionization rates among cannabis workers are significant, with approximately 20% of surveyed workers reporting union membership, at rates much higher than overall unionization in California and in retail or agriculture overall.
- While many aspects of our survey and interviews showed the challenges workers faced in experiencing growth or mobility, 69% of those who are in a union indicated that they have received a raise at their current job, compared to 50% of those who are not in a union. In interviews, workers detailed union contracts that included annual raises of $1 per year.
- Union workers were also significantly more likely to receive health benefits: 65% of cannabis workers receive health insurance through their contracts, compared to 41% of non-union members.

Cannabis workers are overwhelmingly young, diverse, and attracted to a range of opportunities in the field.

- Our survey demonstrates that the people of color are over-represented in this workforce, comprising a majority—38% were Latina/o, 22% Black, and 11% AAPI.
- Women made up 49% of workers interviewed; additionally, 4% identified as nonbinary and 1% transgender. LGBTQ+ individuals made up 23% of workers.
- The workforce skews younger: 21% were 18–24 and 68% were 25–39.
- 93% of workers expressed a desire for more opportunities to grow in their cannabis careers.
- Between 70 and 80% of workers are seeking in-depth training on cultivation techniques and medical cannabis care, key aspects that can improve both environmental impact and public health.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Cannabis workplaces are still shaped by the drug war—including those being required to carry cash plus interrelated patterns of gender and racial inequality that leave workers vulnerable to violence and significant mental health stress.

- 27% of women reported sexual harassment, which interviews suggest most often comes from bosses, managers, and customers.
- More than one-third of all workers also experienced racial slurs or intimidation, and 28% experienced homophobic or transphobic comments, which came from upper management, other workers, or customers.
- Needing to carry massive amounts of cash due to federal banking regulations, nearly one-third of workers experienced robberies or burglaries at work.
- 15% of licensed workers were also subject to violent police raids—only slightly higher in unlicensed sectors, leaving many feeling highly vulnerable and on edge.
- All of these experiences leave workers with increased mental health stressors: they describe fear, anxiety, and severe emotional exhaustion from the environment.

With widely varying implementation of safety practices, workers are facing hazardous safety conditions.

- 85% of respondents expressed a need for stronger health and safety protections in the industry.
- Nearly half of cultivation workers experience back and neck pain, with nearly a third experiencing skin blisters or infections and eye pain or strain from the production process.
- One-fifth (20%) of delivery workers experienced car accidents in the last year, with multiple reporting little maintenance of the company-provided car.
- More than 60% of all delivery workers reported being pressured to conduct deliveries faster than was safe.
- More than 68% of retail and delivery workers experienced not enough staff on shift.
- While some protections, such as baseline OSHA training, are required in licensed operations, only 45% of workers received such information.

INTRODUCTION

Every day in California, cannabis workers cultivate a home-grown multi-billion dollar industry, honing the agricultural technologies, patient care and customer service practices, manufacturing innovations, and more that transmute the plant into myriad applications, from medicine to recreation. But this labor—often invisible in the headlines about a tumultuous industry—began far before the commercialization of cannabis. In the lead up to California's authorization of medical cannabis in 1996 via Proposition 215, cannabis workers were integral to providing frontline care to those suffering from life-threatening illnesses, including HIV/AIDS, cancer, and chronic pain. Cultivators honed practices like aquaponics while developing strains and methods of bringing out qualities like cannabidiol (CBD) to meet specific health needs, such as safe products for children with debilitating epilepsy. With the legalization of adult use in the state via Proposition 64 in 2016 (and the market's launch in 2018), these workers have taken on an even wider set of roles in an industry that in 2024 alone brought nearly $775 million in tax revenue to California. Across these transformations has been one of the most expansive yet rarely discussed unionization efforts: workers have organized not just to change their workplaces, but for a collective voice in shaping legalization after medical cannabis to be able to continue to fulfill aspirations of serving patients while pursuing long-term career paths.

Yet whether it's in public media, policy debates, or research, workers have been strikingly absent from the cannabis story—leaving pressing questions of not just who they are and what they do, but how they see the industry's present and future. Given the leading role that California plays in cannabis culture, production and politics—and the ever-urgent search for new economic drivers of the California dream—it's clear that cannabis workers may hold the key to more than just their industry, but to the future of work in the Golden State.

Snapshot of the Cannabis Industry in California

Seven years into the official launch of the adult-use market, cannabis is at a crossroads in California. Rapid cycles of booms and busts, rushes and slowdowns, and threats and opportunities have made for an industry that, despite many changes, still brings significant value to the state and stands as an expanding source of economic development. The transformations in the industry redefined the industry into a bifurcated market: licensed businesses that have received approval to operate from the state Department of Cannabis Control and a local county or municipal agency, as well as unlicensed businesses operating without approval from local or state agencies.[1]

Retail licensed businesses have been growing in the state after a slow start in the first years of legalization, expanding the number of outlets to more than 1,500 statewide (with some drops in traditional hubs, like Alameda County).[2] The overall value of the industry increased in 2024 after a few years of decline to more than $1.03 billion, suggesting that production is growing.[3] By production, we mean the actual cultivation and harvesting of dry flower (dried raw cannabis) including the leaves, stems, and trims, not any conversion of this product via manufacturing. This expansion contributes to an overall increase of 7.5% in the nominal value of the industry since 2023.[4] When we expand to the overall multiplication of the value brought through interrelated product sales, cannabis exceeded nearly $5 billion in gross receipts in 2024, bringing tremendous tax revenue to the state.[5]

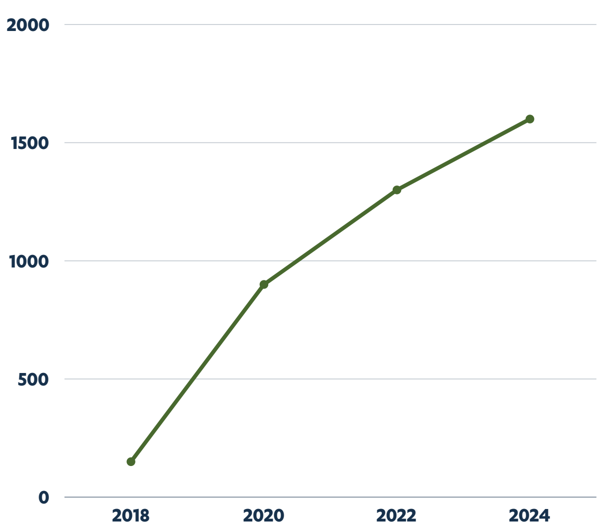
THE GROWTH OF THE CALIFORNIA CANNABIS INDUSTRY

2023-2024

According to the California Department of Cannabis Control's California Cannabis Market Outlook 2024 Report,

OVERALL INDUSTRY VALUE INCREASED TO $1.03 BILLION RESULTING IN OVER $5 BILLION IN GROSS RECEIPTS.

> **FIGURE 1:** GROWTH OF CALIFORNIA CANNABIS RETAIL OUTLETS FROM 2018 TO 2024



Source for Figure 1 & 2: ERA Economics LLC. 2025.

> **FIGURE 2:** GROWTH OF CALIFORNIA CANNABIS RETAIL OUTLETS FROM 2023 TO 2024

>1,500

Industry production value rebounded in 2024, increasing 7.5% since 2023

At the same time, cannabis businesses are seeing wholesale prices in 2024 down 57% from the peak wholesale price of 2020. With it, the total value of licensed cultivated production has fallen since 2020. Most significantly, the overall number of cultivation licenses saw a large drop, suggesting significant consolidation in who is making the increasing tons of cannabis in the licensed market. The more than 10,828 inactive licenses outpaced the number of active ones (8,214), with more than 7,100 inactive cultivation licenses.[6]

According to estimates, the licensed cultivation market provides some 40% of the cannabis consumed in the state.[7] Middle-range estimates suggest that the unlicensed market produces some 11.4 million pounds; by contrast, the licensed market produced about 1.4 million pounds. A significant portion of the unlicensed production travels out of the state, though Californians continue to consume in increasing numbers, with some estimates suggesting nearly 20% of the population now consumes cannabis in some form.[8] Meanwhile, the retail market has persisted in a wide range of forms, from unlicensed dispensaries to operations tucked into smoke and other shops to a range of delivery operations active via social media and other channels. In Los Angeles, the largest retail hub in the state, hundreds of dispensaries have persisted. Importantly, the lines between licensed and unlicensed have proven to be far more blurred than often advertised, with products often moving into the unlicensed market, and retail or delivery operations linked.[9]

As consumption grows from the legal and unlicensed markets, concerns have grown not just about the economic impacts of cannabis, but also its health and social impacts. Reports of unsafe products and recalls have raised concerns among different actors about how cannabis can impact public health.[10] Questions of rising THC rates raise other concerns, though research on this continues to be done.

With such increasing volumes of production and value, the question is, who is driving this value and who benefits? Often missing from the story of the industry's shifts are workers, who in 2024 were estimated to number at least 78,618 in the legal market alone.[11] Considering that this represents only a portion of the sector, cannabis jobs could easily reach into the hundreds of thousands. These workers' labor persists even as prices fluctuate, and they bear the pressures to produce in ways that meet consumer needs, regulators' and community expectations, and owner-operators' visions and limits in funds. Workers hold the key to translating this wealth into local communities, via wages, benefits, training, and more, multiplying the value of this industry. Workers spend locally, learn, invest, and live in California's communities, giving them the chance to also contribute their knowledge and grow in numerous intersecting industries, such as health, food production, and biotech.

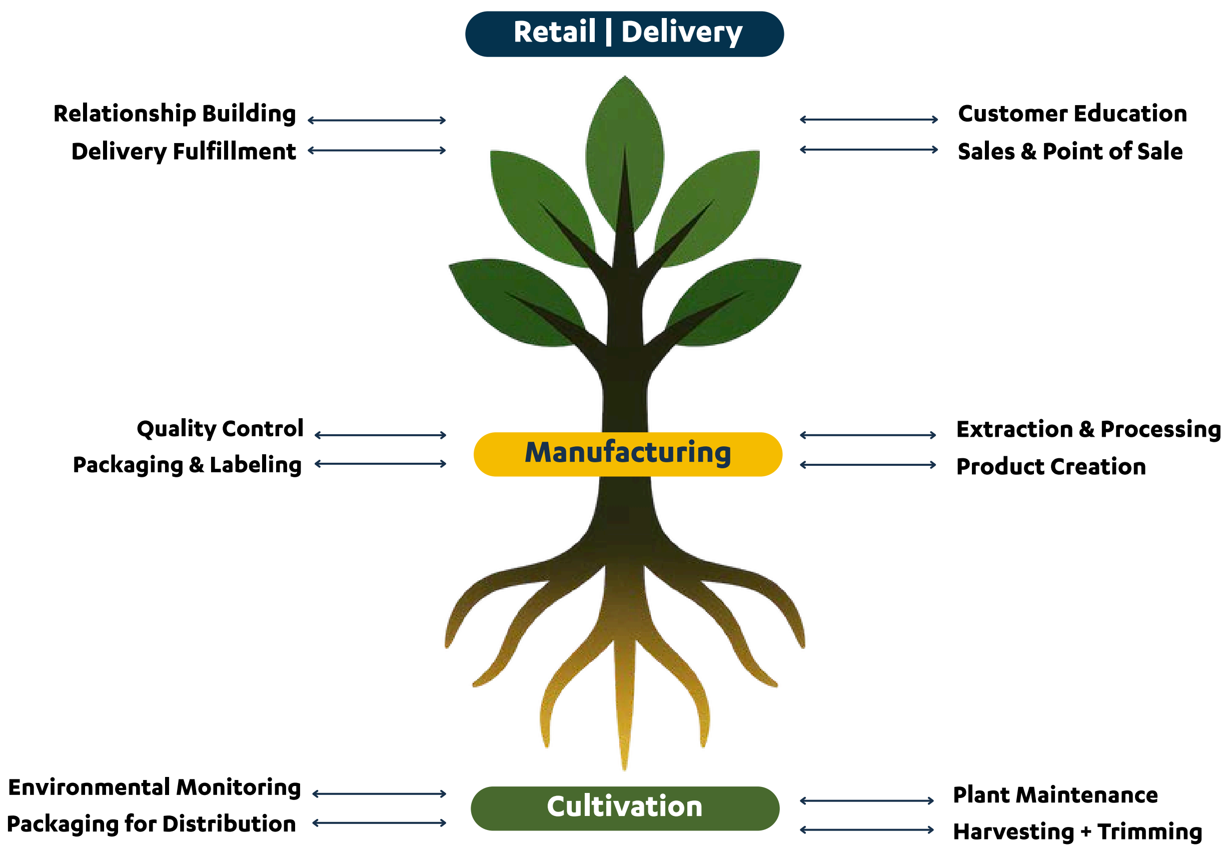
CANNABIS WORKERS AND THE WORK

Data on who cannabis workers are, how they work, and what drives and defines their work is limited. The U.S. and California Departments of Labor do not collect specific data on licensed cannabis workers, and the unlicensed sector is wholly invisible. Local and state cannabis licensing agencies must rely on very basic reporting from cannabis companies on who their workers are. Investigative journalism into questions like underground production often relies on police and sheriff accounts, or draws from extreme incidents of trafficking and violence.[12] While important, they miss the story of hundreds of thousands whose labor makes cannabis work.

Cannabis workers stand as an important but invisible part of this story. They are key to producing safe and sanitary cannabis products and also essential to helping consumers navigate questions like how to gauge the levels of THC or other cannabis components or what are proven ways to use cannabis as medicine. As we'll discuss, workers overwhelmingly expressed the desire for better training to help consumers make safe and healthy choices about cannabis.

FROM SEED TO SALE: Key Work Areas In Cannabis

> **FIGURE 3:** KEY WORK AREAS FOR CANNABIS WORKERS BY SECTOR



Every cannabis worker, from seed to sale, serves a unique and important role in ensuring that the product provided is safe, high quality, and utilized in ways that can enhance health, recreation, and/or well-being. For example: Cultivation workers describe close and intensive relationships with the plant itself, drawing from the science and art of agricultural production. From watering, tending, providing nutrients, and handling anything else the delicate plant needs to thrive, they also ensure harvesting and preparing for distribution, often using manual, intensive techniques.

Manufacturer workers help convert the plant into a wide range of products, from edible food and drink items to different extract forms, including crystalline dabs, shatter and waxes, vape cartridges, lozenges, sprays, pills, tablets, and much more. Connecting the production to retail are testing labs, which ensure product safety and distribution networks (that have seen significant consolidation) that bring the plant to a wide range of retail outlets.

Retail workers are the most public-facing part of the cannabis supply chain, sharing knowledge of the plant with consumers and patients and helping them select cannabis products. They cultivate relationships with community members and patients and serve as critical one-on-one educators and consultants on what may help the receiver relieve menstrual cramps or migraines, feel creative, or achieve feelings of euphoria. Included in this work are delivery workers, who bring the plant directly to the homes of consumers, either working through brick-and-mortar outlets or via delivery-only companies that crisscross the state (including in the dozens of California counties that do not allow cannabis retail licensing).

New research indicates that cannabis workers' love for the plant and the community they foster is a connecting factor in their labor force.[13] Yet as they ride the rollercoaster of contraction and growth and opportunity and obstacles, cannabis workers face numerous daily challenges in maintaining the ability to realize their hopes for the industry. But their success can hold the key to increasing the industry's positive impact on local households, communities, and state jurisdictions. As we'll explore in this report, some of these issues dovetail with the larger challenges faced by workers throughout the state, such as the cost of living and safety in agriculture overall. But there are also numerous unique issues that cannabis workers face that require both urgent action and innovation.

An in-depth understanding of cannabis worker experiences in California at this critical juncture suggests that - despite the macro-level challenges - the industry is being held together by a population of engaged, predominantly younger workers seeks to contribute to their economies and to society.[14] The innovations that workers have already modeled on the ground, both prior to and after legalization, have led to expansion in areas like regenerative agriculture, the health science of the plant, and more.[15]

Workers have also played a critical role in directing the industry via unionization. Unions such as the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which represents retail, food production, and pharmaceutical workers, entered the cannabis conversation at the behest of workers, operators and patients at a critical moment in the 2010s. Medical dispensaries were expanding especially in hubs like Los Angeles, but faced increasing raids and policing.[16] UFCW locals began to highlight for policymakers the critical role of dispensaries in meeting the needs of HIV/AIDS, chronically ill, and other patients, in coalition with patient advocacy groups. They also began to unionize primarily retail shops, since for the most part legislation left a loophole in which cultivation did not technically exist as a regulated enterprise, as opposed to non-profit cooperatives or dispensaries.

Unions also offered the opportunity to include worker voices in shaping the multiple iterations of regulation regarding adult use, both in the development of Proposition 64 and subsequent state legislation to establish the wider regulated market. As such, they were able to include key measures such as baseline health and safety training, and restrictions around subcontracting essential functions that have forestalled “Uberization” of delivery and the use of gig worker models that degrade worker’s rights. In 2020, unions like UFCW and allied industry groups came together again to ensure that cannabis laborers were named essential workers, guaranteeing temporary hazard pay, sick pay, and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in part due to their continued medical role. The Teamsters have also reached cultivation, delivery and distribution workers, and both unions have impacted numerous state cannabis markets - helping bridge the conversation on cannabis from New Jersey to California.

However, the baseline understanding of the cannabis workforce produced in current research leaves numerous critical questions unanswered. In part, this report was launched as an opportunity to understand how the roll-out and cementing of regulation—including worker protection policies like safety training mandates—are actually shaping worker experiences. As the state seeks to assess the impact of the industry, we know little about the economic value brought to local communities beyond tax revenue and jobs. This means not just understanding wages and benefits, but also who has access to such jobs, how they persist (or not), and what their goals are. And even in the unregulated sector, which continues to be raised as a source of potential harms and loss to communities and operators alike, data is lacking on what keeps those working at the front lines of these unregulated shops showing up and what it’s actually like (beyond the narratives produced by police and sheriffs). Seven years into the launch of California’s adult use market, we are at an important juncture to understand the pathways, practices, and potential that underlie cannabis work, and to make sense of how this essential work can expand the value it produces for communities across the state.

METHODOLOGY

The California Cannabis Worker Collab was initiated to address the gaps in data regarding the conditions, aspirations, and experiences of cannabis workers, recognizing that decisions affecting this community were often made without their input. With support from the Department of Cannabis Control, our work was grounded in the Data Center's research justice framework championed by the UCLA Labor Center and the Center for Advancement of Racial Equity (CARE) at Work. This approach recognizes the importance of placing cannabis workers at the forefront of the research process. At the foundation, we built a community advisory board of fourteen labor and equity organizations, which helped guide the creation and implementation of surveys, interviews, and interactive data sessions that broadly covered aspects like job conditions, training, health and safety, and socioeconomic factors, and also participated in the process of analyzing data and shaping final recommendations

Over the course of the project, a dedicated team of 20-plus worker researchers was formed to ensure effective outreach to cannabis workers across California. Regional survey quotas were determined through extensive spatial analysis of licensed and unlicensed business data. Through the course of outreach, worker researchers visited more than 425 cannabis worksites (some multiple times) and 70-plus cannabis events, and worked with community partners to recruit participants. They then conducted individualized survey sessions for the first 700-plus surveys; these sessions lasted between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours, taking participants through the extensive survey.

Understanding the need for a social media presence and the opportunity to conduct education that could support cannabis workers, the team also launched the Cannabis Worker Collab Instagram and a multi-month Cannabis Workers Know Instagram Live series. This series included more than 25 episodes that covered a range of themes and featured engaging interviews with workers, owner-operators, and community groups, attracting more than 500 followers and more than 2,500 impressions a month. Engaging with participants on multiple platforms and formats not only provided data but also helped in educating workers about their rights and available resources.

This expansive process of outreach allowed our team to obtain comprehensive and representative data, culminating in over 1,111 completed surveys. As surveys drew to a close, we also collected 50-plus in-depth, semi-structured interviews that delved deeper into areas flagged by workers and community advisors from the initial survey data. We then brought the findings to stakeholders in six in-depth, interactive cannabis worker "seshes" across the state. These included opportunities to identify which data felt most pressing for the public, which questions arose, and what participants felt were priorities in policy and practice recommendations.

This report, then, is the culmination of a three-year effort where we have had the opportunity to delve deeply into the challenges and aspirations of cannabis workers, crafted through collaboration among a diverse team of researchers, community members, and advisory organizations. The report is not just a collection of data, but a representation of the voices and experiences of cannabis workers, indebted to not just the worker researchers and advisors, but also to the thousands who shared their time, stories, and visions for a changing California cannabis industry.

In what follows, we share our findings—bridging the survey, interviews, and worker seshes—in four interconnected parts:

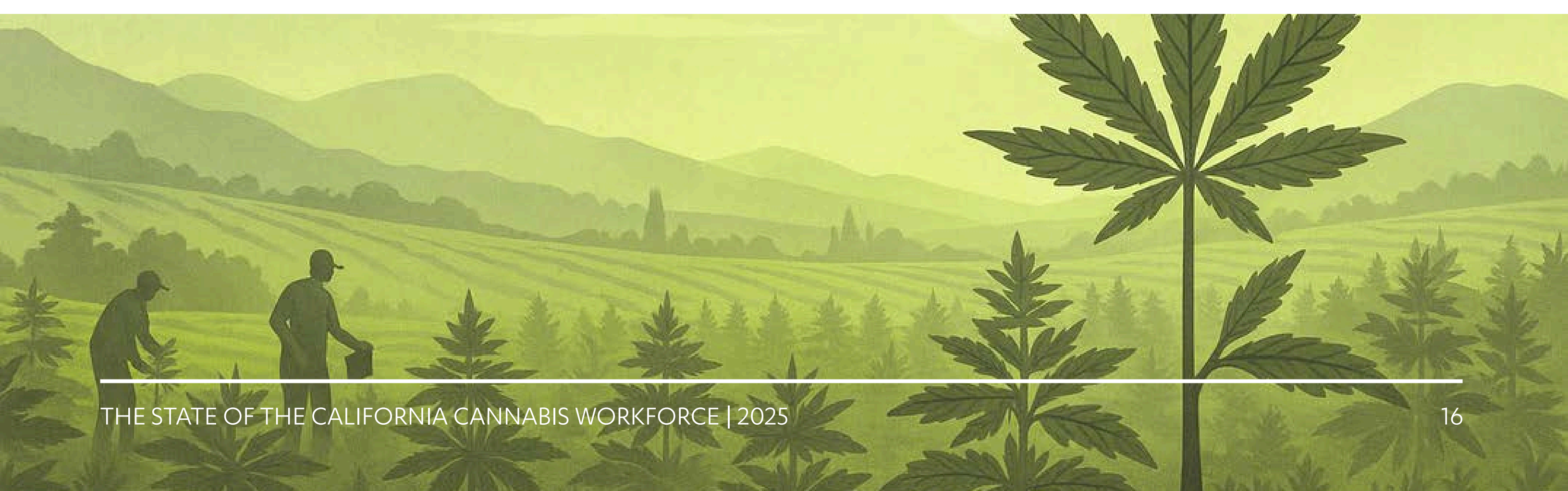
- We start with the who, why and how of cannabis, introducing the demographics of this diverse workforce and a sense of the divergent pathways that bring many, mostly young workers to this industry. The data also helps us understand workers' initial training experiences and workforce development needs.

- We then dive deep into the workplace conditions of cannabis, from wages and benefits to scheduling and surveillance. We find an industry that shows promise in terms of higher-than-median retail or service wages. But, not unlike other agricultural or retail work, wage theft is high. And what are often deep and personal ties in cannabis do not always translate into better conditions, but are instead tied to larger patterns of favoritism, nepotism, and a lack of incorporation of workers' needs.

- Cutting across sectors, workers also continually drew our attention to health and safety, which we expand upon in the third section. Some of the conditions described, including exposure to dangerous chemicals, mirror those in related agriculture. But workers also shed light on numerous unique challenges, including glaring light exposure for indoor production, threats of robberies from the predominance of cash, police raids, and more.

- Our tour of the data closes with understanding home-grown solutions in cannabis that speak to the desire of workers to work with each other—and to collaborate better with management. In addition to workforce development, workers sought to expand the high unionization rates to have a voice in their workplace, and evidence from our survey showed that unions do indeed impact mobility and the ability to be heard in a cannabis workplace. Workers have already navigated changing dynamics through a sense of solidarity that expands to patients, a tremendous asset for future change. And managers also proved that there are ways to build more collaborative cannabis businesses.

- These findings and our in-depth engagement informed our closing section, a set of recommendations for policymakers, businesses, community and labor organizations, and even the everyday consumer. We close out with a long-term vision set out by workers and drawing from other industries, mapping how stakeholders can come together to grow cannabis into an industry that works for all of California.



SECTION ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE WORK AND WORKERS

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CANNABIS WORKER

Cannabis retail work stands out in distinct ways from other forms of sales that, depending on who you ask, may look more like pharmacy, healthcare, or another form of intimate, personal labor. Examining the rhythms and dynamics of retail work through a worker's lens helps spotlight the many tasks that dispensary workers perform across a long day.

Cannabis retail workers and delivery workers may be ready to go before the sun has come out. Before a shop opens, dispensary workers are there to ensure that a store is stocked, spotless, and welcoming, often in accordance with various regulations (for legalized shops) that dictate security and product protocols. As customers trickle in, budtenders greet them, ready to guide them through the various products and to understand their needs and preferences. Whether the consumer is a cannabis connoisseur or trying it for the first time, the budtender or consultant tailors recommendations to their desired experience.

Like a restaurant, the shop tends to move in multiple layers. Due to regulations, cannabis workspaces in retail often employ security workers and greeters who check IDs. The "back of house" includes a wide range of inventory workers who process incoming items and deal with the tightly controlled products, including refilling shelves. One worker explained that this means tighter communication is often required between the front and back of house, informing inventory of customer needs. Depending on the size of the business, there may be specific roles addressing these, or these may be intermixed with a concierge, budtender, or other role.

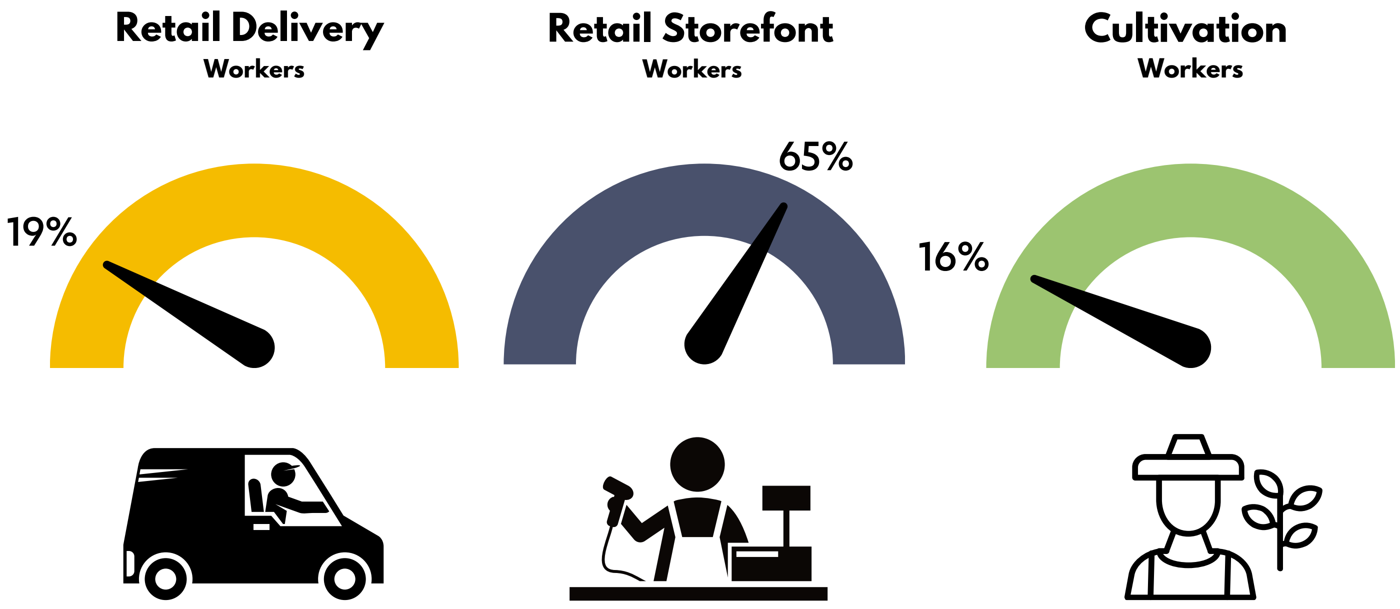
As the pace ebbs and flows, workers navigate cash handling, inventory management, restocking shelves, and filling online sales. As closing time approaches, workers complete their final sweep, ensuring that everything is ready for the next day.

Understanding cannabis workers starts with understanding the who, why, and how of cannabis work. In this first section, we explore one of the most often speculated upon questions of cannabis, the demographics of the workforce, finding a young, diverse population in search of opportunities. The pathways to cannabis prove equally diverse, from seeking to impact the community to just needing to survive in a changing economy. Once on the job, cannabis workers shared their training pathways (or lack thereof) and an important set of hopes regarding far more comprehensive training that can foster opportunity as well as better outcomes for consumers and business owners alike.

Who are Cannabis Workers?

While estimates are scarce, what is clear in licensing data is that retail and cultivation represent the largest sectors of the workforce—and in this case, 65% of respondents worked in retail storefronts, 19% were in retail delivery, and 16% were in cultivation. While the cultivation proportion may be a smaller percentage of the assumed size of the cannabis workforce, it's also important to note that many of the thousands of smaller cannabis cultivation licenses may have no employees, so in our estimate, we were able to capture a representative sample of cultivators that formally employ. Importantly, we initially focused our survey on workers who had no power to hire/fire and no ownership in the business. In the last phase of surveying, hearing from many about the lack of training and the fact that there were many managers who were in a position with minimal powers to discipline but not ultimately to make human resource decisions, we included a small subset of middle managers to understand their unique role in a changing industry.

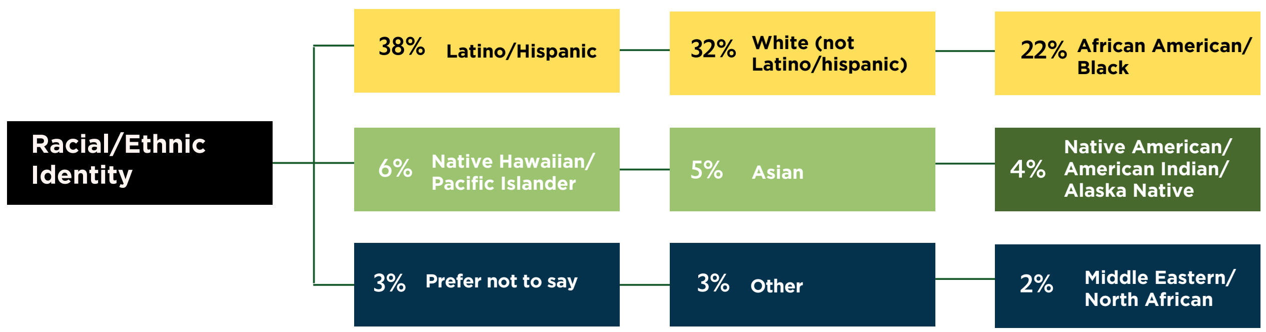
> **FIGURE 4:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS SURVEYED BY SECTOR



Cannabis workers are overwhelmingly young, diverse, and attracted to a range of opportunities in the field. They include significant numbers of Black, Latina/o and AAPI workers; LGBTQ+ workers; women; and formerly-incarcerated people, though the gap between the promise of opportunities for those affected by the drug war and the opportunities they can access is still high. Workers also skew significantly younger. They come to cannabis from various pathways, including being locked out of other opportunities, seeking stability or security, or having experienced the benefits of medical cannabis either directly or in their family. And overwhelmingly, they view cannabis as a career, but also see significant gaps in training and direct opportunities to move up in the industry and to contribute better via cannabis-related science and health.

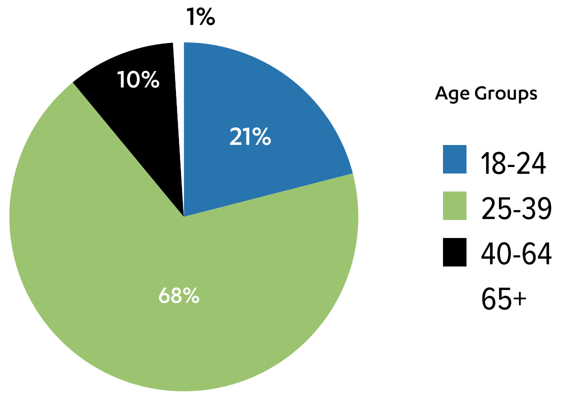
While numerous social movements have taken on the inequalities in ownership in cannabis, the patterns among workers differ dramatically and represent significant diversity, including from communities affected by the War on Drugs. Our survey reached 38% Latina/o workers, 22% African American or Black workers, 11% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 4% Native American or Alaskan Indian. With such diversity, cannabis workers prove to include larger proportions of nonwhite workers - most especially Black or African American - than in the California population overall (65.7% nonwhite population statewide, with 5.6% Black).[17]

> **FIGURE 5:** RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITIES OF WORKERS SURVEYED



Cannabis workers also represent a significantly younger workforce, predominantly under 40, with at least 21% surveyed between 18 and 24 and another 68% between 24 and 39.

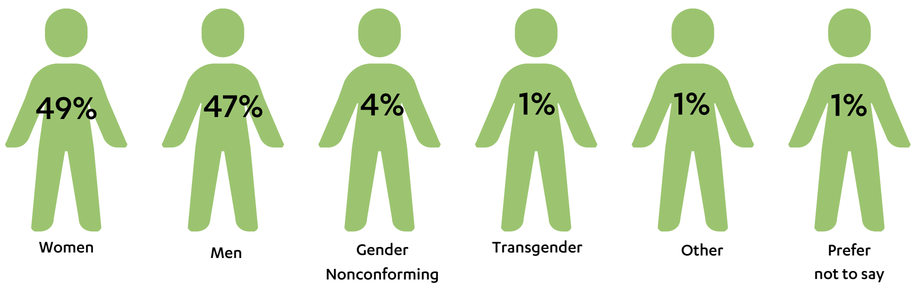
> **FIGURE 6:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS SURVEYED BY AGE GROUP



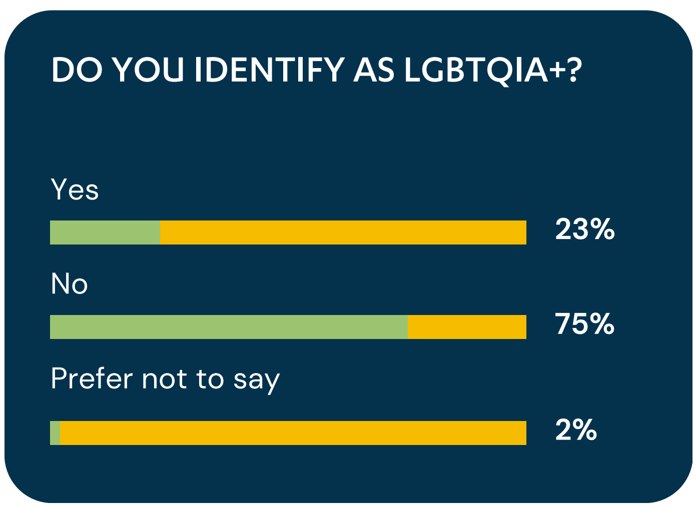
Women also made up 49% of our sample. Importantly, workers were 4% nonbinary and 1% transgender.

Overall, 23% identified as LBGTQ+ workers. This represents a much larger share than the overall state population, which the UCLA Williams Institute approximates as 5.3% of residents in California.

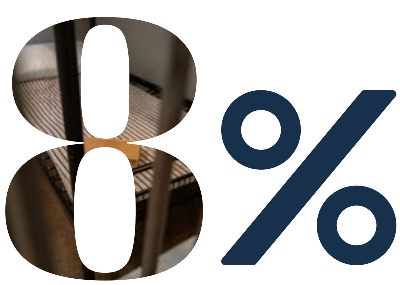
> **FIGURE 7:** GENDER IDENTITIES OF WORKERS SURVEYED



> **FIGURE 8:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBTQIA+



It's important to note that even with such diversity, there have been barriers to formerly-incarcerated workers, especially in accessing the growing number of legal market jobs.



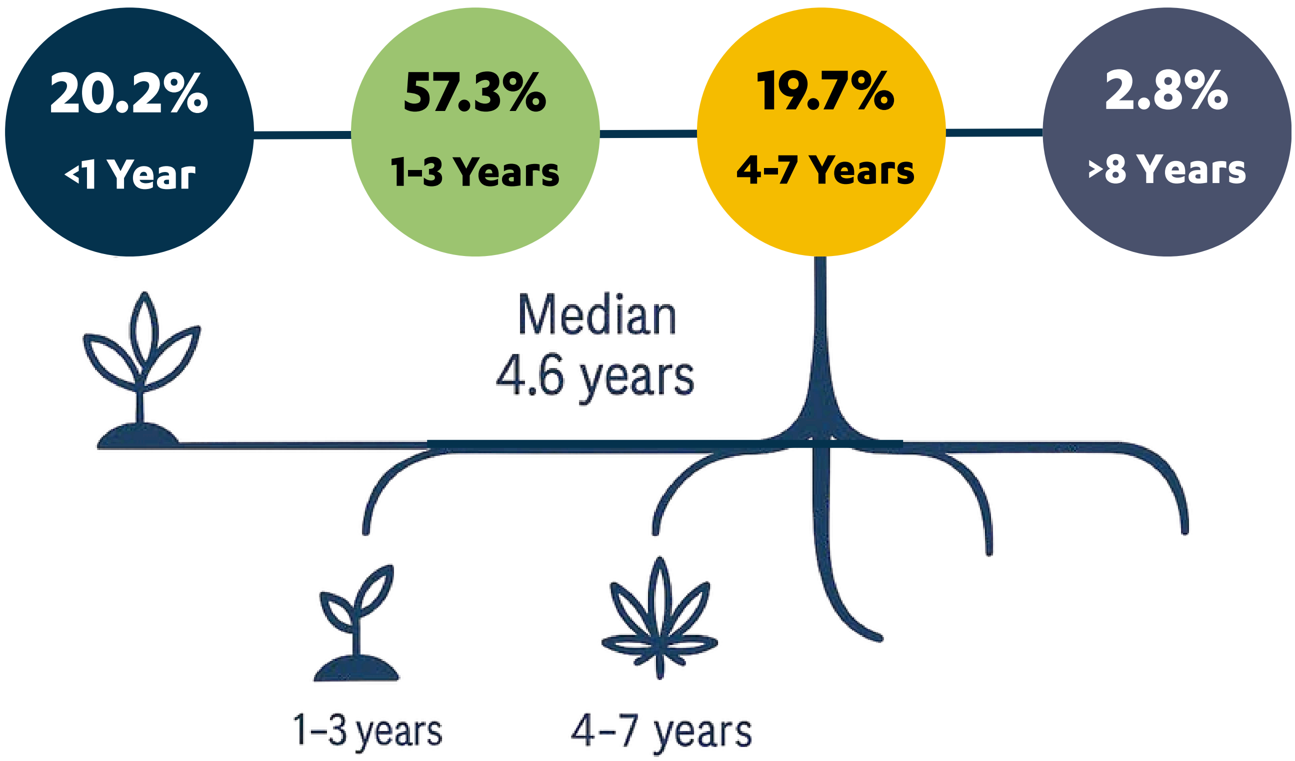
of cannabis workers have been formerly-incarcerated

Pathways Into the Cannabis Industry

What brings these diverse workers into a transforming industry such as cannabis? Workers have a range in how long they have been in the industry and their current job: many have been there for a while, with some just starting out. This diversity creates a rich tapestry of experience within the workplace, combining institutional knowledge with fresh perspectives. Our survey found that about one-fifth started their current job within a year, with almost a quarter who had been in the current job for more than four years. Duration in the industry spanned a bit longer as well: the workers in the sample had been working a median of 4.6 years in cannabis overall.

Q: How many years have you worked in this industry?

> FIGURE 9: MEDIAN LENGTH OF TIME WORKERS HAVE WORKED IN THE INDUSTRY

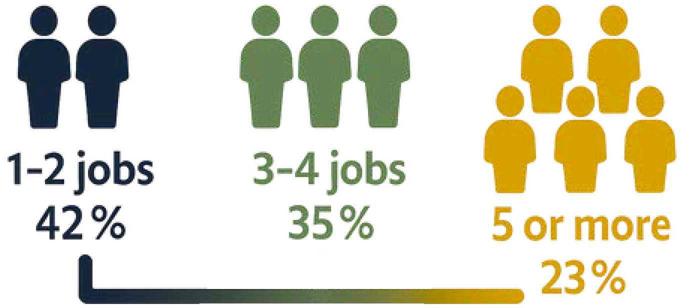


Many workers moved around within the industry, as well as working for different companies. More than half of workers (58%) have held a previous cannabis job before the current one. Almost a quarter of these workers have worked at at least five other cannabis businesses prior to their current employment. Additionally, a third of workers report having held three to four other cannabis jobs across their career trajectory.

Most often for these workers, such movement across jobs in cannabis happened regarding a sense of how their work was being valued—whether directly in terms of being underpaid (74%), being overworked but undervalued (70%), or seeing little opportunity for growth (68%). Difficult boss relationships also affected why 58% of respondents chose to leave their job, and just over half also experienced an unhealthy work environment. A relatively large number (40%) also saw their employers close, which is a relatively distinct feature of a cannabis industry experiencing rapid consolidation by many measures. Importantly, these factors did not drive many from the industry, but instead had them seeking better opportunities in the hopes that another job in cannabis could address concerns like being valued, rewarded with growth, or being safer.

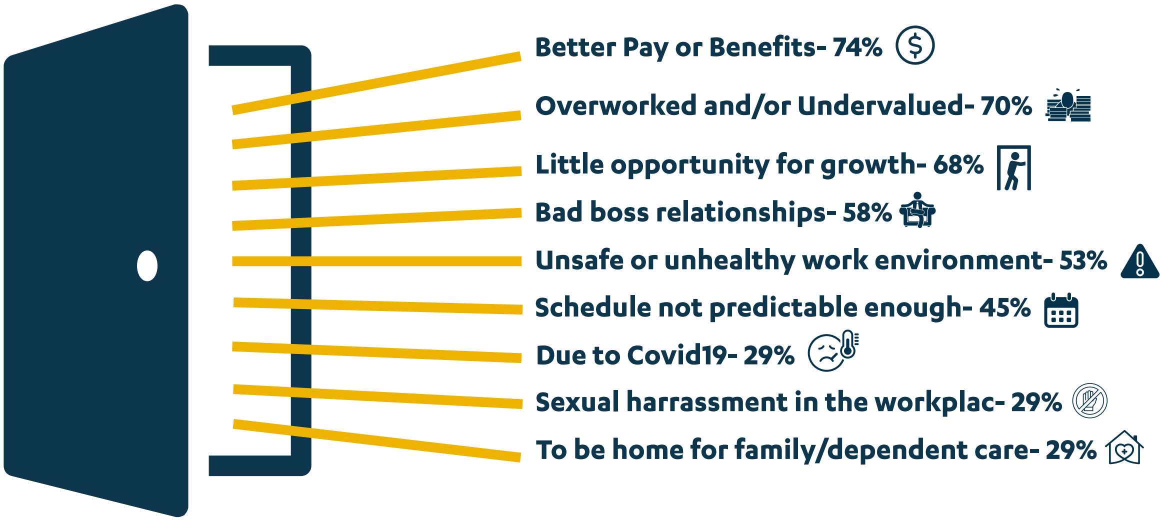
NUMBER OF PREVIOUS JOBS IN THE INDUSTRY

> **FIGURE 11:** NUMBER OF PREVIOUS JOBS WORKERS HAVE WORKED IN THE INDUSTRY



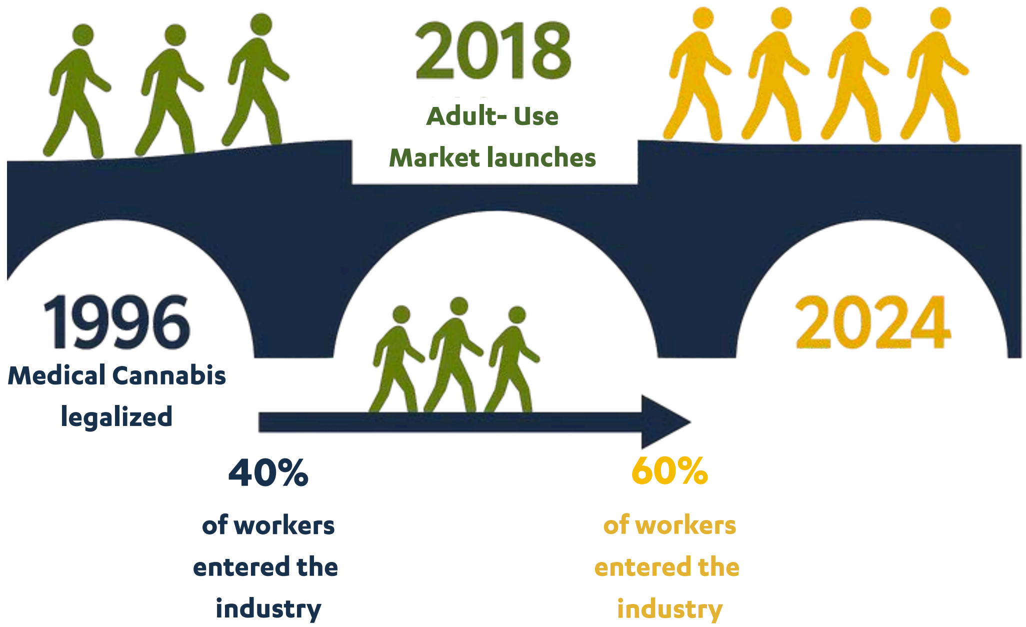
Q: Why did you leave your last cannabis job?

> **FIGURE 10:** REASONS WHY WORKERS LEFT THEIR PREVIOUS CANNABIS JOB



The year 2018 marks the official launch of the "adult-use" market in California; 60% of those who held more than one previous job had entered after legalization. Meanwhile, 40% of those surveyed came from the industry's medical cannabis years and therefore had persisted through the transition. This demonstrates how the industry post-2018 was by no means starting "from scratch" or with a new workforce.

> **FIGURE 12:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO MOVED FROM CA MEDICAL CANNABIS INTO ADULT USE CANNABIS



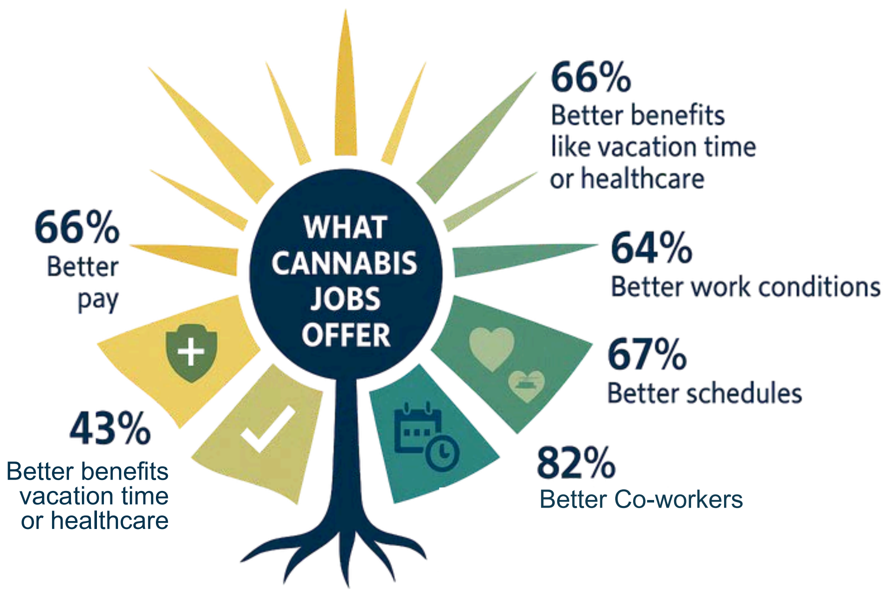
Workers are actively integrated into various parts of the supply chain. To qualify for the survey, workers had to have their primary job in retail or cultivation—but it turns out that many were working across the industry on a regular basis. About a quarter of workers (24%) had more than one current job in the cannabis industry, which included 31% in manufacturing, 44% in cultivation, and 43% in testing. Given the high number of retail employees we spoke to, this means many had their foot in another sector. In our worker "seshes," we also spoke to many manufacturing and testing workers who came from retail and cultivation, speaking to much circulation across the supply chain.

The cannabis industry has served as an important employment gateway for workers who faced barriers in the job market. Over a quarter (26%) reported they had trouble finding jobs in another sector before joining the cannabis industry. Black workers were particularly more likely to have experienced discrimination in other sectors, with 36% of Black surveyees reporting having trouble finding work outside of cannabis (versus 28% of white workers, 19% of Latina/o workers, and 18% of other workers). Several interviewees discussed in further detail discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or sexuality when looking for work in other sectors. This aspect of the industry highlights its potential social impact beyond economic measures, serving as an employment pathway for those who have been systematically excluded from opportunities in other sectors.

The majority of respondents (86%) who had worked in other jobs outside of cannabis found that cannabis offered better relationships with their coworkers, more accommodating schedules, and better pay. This speaks to workplace practices and cultures in cannabis that address common pain points experienced by workers in other employment settings. One retail worker shared, "When I was [working] at the hospital I could not have afforded this state... and I was doing way more work, way more labor... But cannabis [work] had me—has me—so comfortable... I dreamed of being able to help my siblings. Now I can."

Q: Does cannabis offer any of the following compared to other jobs you've had?

> **FIGURE 13:** WHAT SETS CANNABIS JOBS APART (ACCORDING TO WORKERS)



Workers pathways to the industry were shaped by movements for medical cannabis in California, which were led by HIV/AIDS advocates, disability justice advocates, and other communities in the 1990s forward. One long-term worker explained,

> **"I came to the cannabis industry during the activism movement of [Prop] 215 and medical... I don't think affordable, safe access has been fully done... so for me I believe that there's still work to be done... I see that as a career opportunity for myself.."**

Others entered cannabis with the hopes of also developing their own business, as part of a long-term career track. One sales rep shared,

> **"It's more of a career... I'm trying to build my own path as an entrepreneur... I took the time to get a certification in cannabis... hosted my first cannabis-centered event... [I] create cannabis content."**

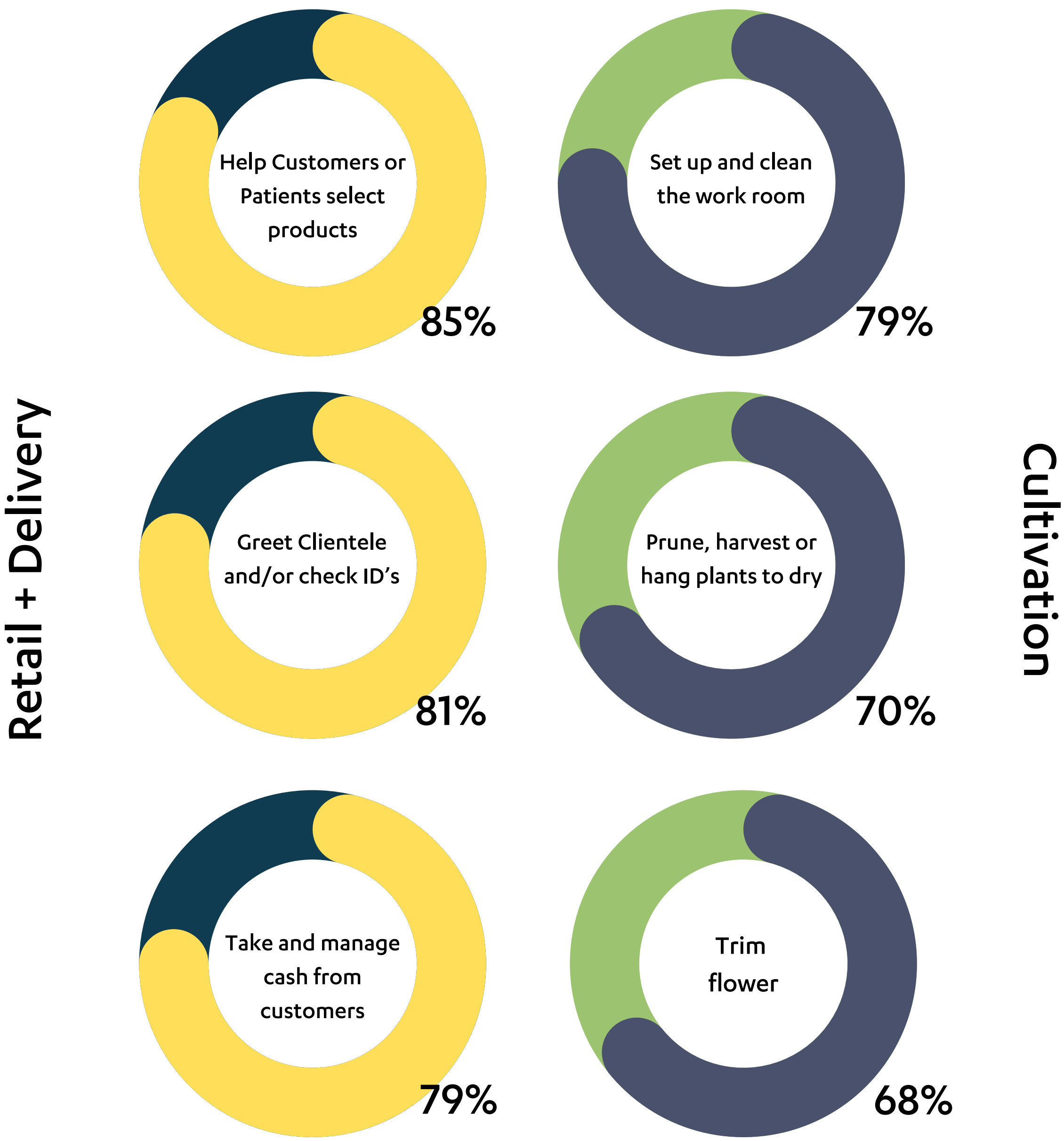
Though the industry has a range of workplace issues, worker interviews showed how cannabis offered something "more." So while roadblocks to other opportunities may have pushed many into the sector, once there, some found something valuable for themselves – the people and the relationships to them being high on the list.

GREEN SKILLS + DAILY DUTIES

Depending on the sector, cannabis work involves a wide range of interactions, most of which fall under two main categories: working directly with people or with the plant. Underscoring this reminds us that cannabis is a kind of work that involves a significant amount of manual and interpersonal labor.

For retail workers, the primary duties completed were helping customers or patients select products (85%), greet clientele or check IDs (81%), and take and manage cash from customers (79%). In cultivation, work primarily included setting up and cleaning the work room (79%), pruning or harvesting plants to hang to dry (70%), or trimming flower (68%).

> **FIGURE 14:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS REPORTED SPENDING TIME ON SPECIFIC TASKS PER SECTOR



80%
of workers surveyed work in licensed businesses

9%
of workers surveyed work in unlicensed businesses

11%
of workers surveyed were unsure of the business' license status

Depending on the sector, cannabis work involves a wide range of interactions, most of which fall under two main categories: working directly with people or with the plant. Underscoring this reminds us that cannabis is a kind of work that involves a significant amount of manual and interpersonal labor.

For retail workers, the primary duties completed were helping customers or patients select products (85%), greet clientele or check IDs (81%), and take and manage cash from customers (79%). In cultivation, work primarily included setting up and cleaning the work room (79%), pruning or harvesting plants to hang to dry (70%), or trimming flower (68%).

The day in the life excerpts take us through a bit more of this, but looking deeper at these duties, we see several key trends emerge. The first is that workers have had to be ready for and engage in a wide range of work to adapt to a changing industry, and one in which hyper-specialization is rare and much work happens in smaller teams. These trends may be influenced by the long history of cannabis as a small-scale, decentralized industry that often operated through cooperative structures, such as small cultivation teams. In interviews, workers expressed a sense of pride with a recognition that these duties that they have committed to expand beyond cannabis itself. For example, one cultivation worker described the range of skills attributed within and across roles:

> **"I've gained hospitality skills, I've gained sales skills, I've gained management skills, marketing skills, compassion, health and wellness, herbalist skills. I've learned gardening skills. I've learned homesteading skills, permaculture skills, sustainability, yeah, aquaponics, hydroponics, you know, nutrients, you know, all kinds of different things as far as like, I've done a little bit of everything from cultivating on farms to, you know, the retail space and everything.... So I had an opportunity to really become fully rounded on the industry and some of the processes."**

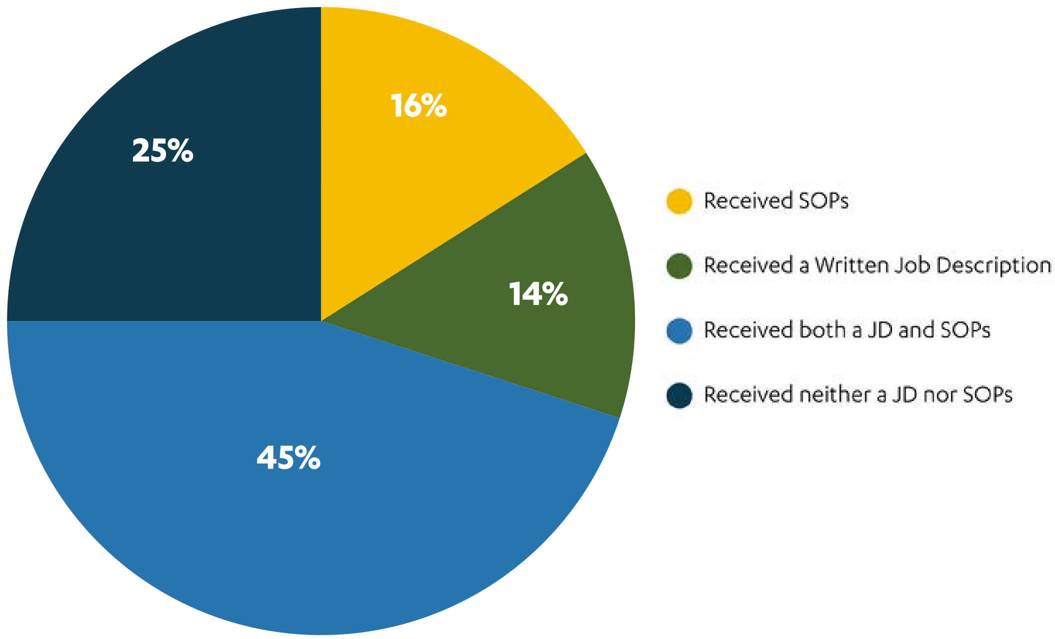
Another retail worker described:

> **"I was basically literally your Jane of all trades there. I was your office manager, receptionist, administrative assistant, I was their inside sales representative. I was your errand girl and delivery girl. You know, I deliver our products to the shops. I set up our merch. If there were a patient appreciation day, I would be the one, you know, on site to give samples and give the promos to the patients and things like that. I really want to say it's the best cannabis job that I've had because I learned so much about the industry there. I learned so much about the plant there."**

While many workers expressed a willingness to commit to learn new skills and expand their job responsibilities within the cannabis industry, significant gaps exist in formal workplace training and key building blocks such as job descriptions. One quarter of respondents reported not receiving basic employment guidelines such as written job descriptions or standard operating procedures. The contrast between workers' enthusiasm for skill development and the industry's negligible provision of formal support to ensure this happens highlights a gap around clear career pathways, which we discuss below.

Q: Did you receive a job description or standard operating procedures (SOP) when hired?

> **FIGURE 15:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO RECEIVED STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES, A JOB DESCRIPTION, BOTH, OR NEITHER

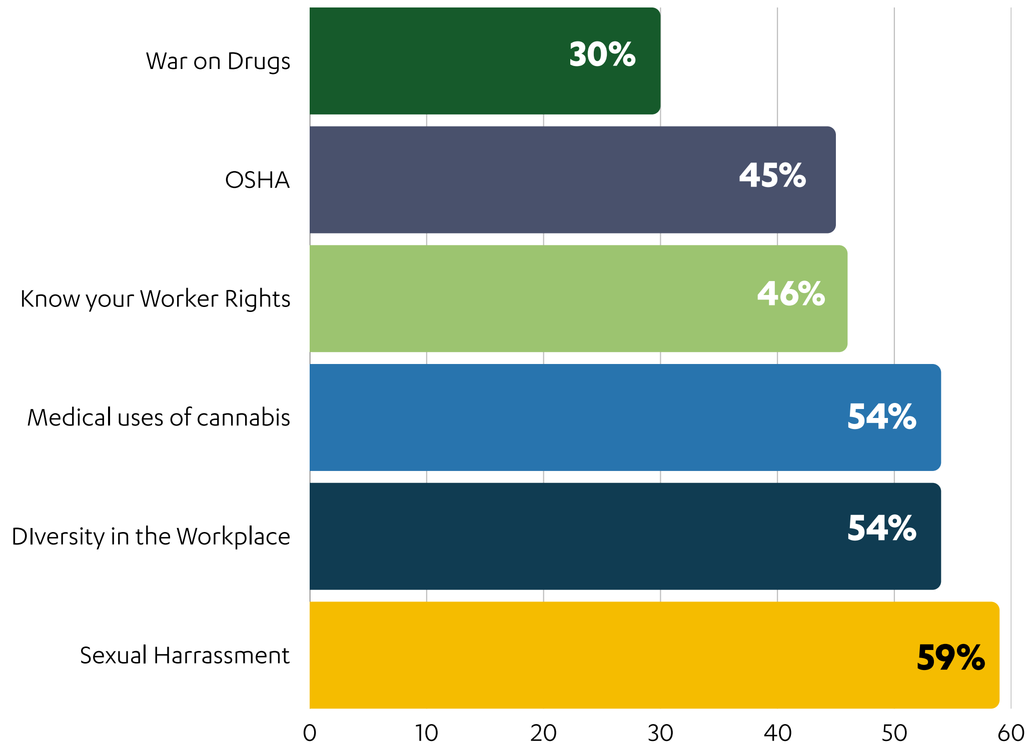


NAVIGATING FROM A WIDE RANGE OF BACKGROUNDS

Industries and experiences, workers reported highly inconsistent implementation of workplace training. Only about half of workers receive instruction in areas mandated by the State of California, such as health and safety protocols and sexual harassment policies. In part, this is shaped by the gap between licensed and unlicensed shops, with the former being far more consistent in providing the mandated training.

Q: Did you receive any training at work in any of the following areas?

> **FIGURE 16:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO RECEIVED TRAINING IN THESE SPECIFIC AREAS



More than half of workers we spoke to did not have access to the California Occupational Health & Safety (Cal/OSHA) 30-hour training, which offers a baseline for fundamental protections and hazard awareness. This rate was especially high for retail, at 64% who did not, and much lower in cultivation, where 36% did not. This in-depth training is mandated for at least one supervisor or employee at each cannabis licensed business, but the realities of hazards and health issues in cannabis discussed at length in Section III suggest that more workplaces might benefit from it.

Workers received a mix of training formats even on mandated training. For example, 54% of those who received Cal/OSHA-30 training did so in an in-person class, which is a preferred modality, while the rest received training in video or online formats. Sexual harassment training was overwhelmingly via video or online formats.

But where it became clear this mix of approaches did not add up is in employees' experiences. Only 32% felt very prepared from the initial training they received. In interviews, multiple workers indicated they were "not properly trained properly before starting on their own." In part, this reality is shaped by the fact that there is no formal education system for cannabis workers. One budtender put it bluntly:

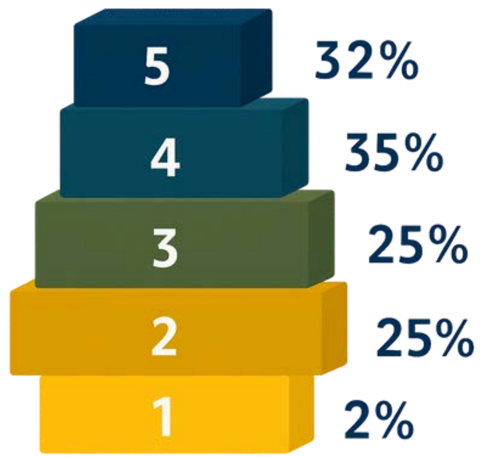
"There isn't a university or a degree you can really get to be like, hey, I know everything about weed."

Q: On a scale of 1 to 5, how prepared were you to succeed in your job after your initial onbarding?

Beyond state-mandated or baseline training, workers particularly sought on-going training on essential areas, including medicinal product use, advanced cultivation techniques, and workplace diversity. They also noted few conversations or support on areas including the war on drugs, education, and worker rights, despite their relevance to the emerging regulated sector.

Just over 50% of cannabis workers received some form of training on the medical uses of cannabis during their tenure at their job, 41% of which came from a class from an employer, 31% from a vendor, and the remainder either from a video, online program, or another format. This may shape the fact that at least 77% of retail workers hope for more training on the medical uses of cannabis.

> **FIGURE 17:** HOW WORKERS RATED PREPAREDNESS FOR SUCCESS UP0N ENTERING THEIR JOBS



For retail workers, differing managerial models also mean that each shop has their own approach to what their role entails. One shared,

> **"Some people really get it on the dot, but there's a lot of shops where it is just people selling weed and not caring about educating patients."**

Workers recognize in various ways that the patient/consumer relationship is complex, and that there may be a wider range of factors that affect what different strains and forms of cannabis will result in for users. Another budtender explained,

> **"Just because something works doesn't mean it's the right thing for you."**

Working with consumers requires significant knowledge of cannabis products, effects or medical application, and consumption methods. This goes from the basics of indica versus sativa to the most effective edibles for cancer patients with diabetes. For retail workers, 86% responded that they provide products specifically to support customers' health and well-being. A budtender explained,

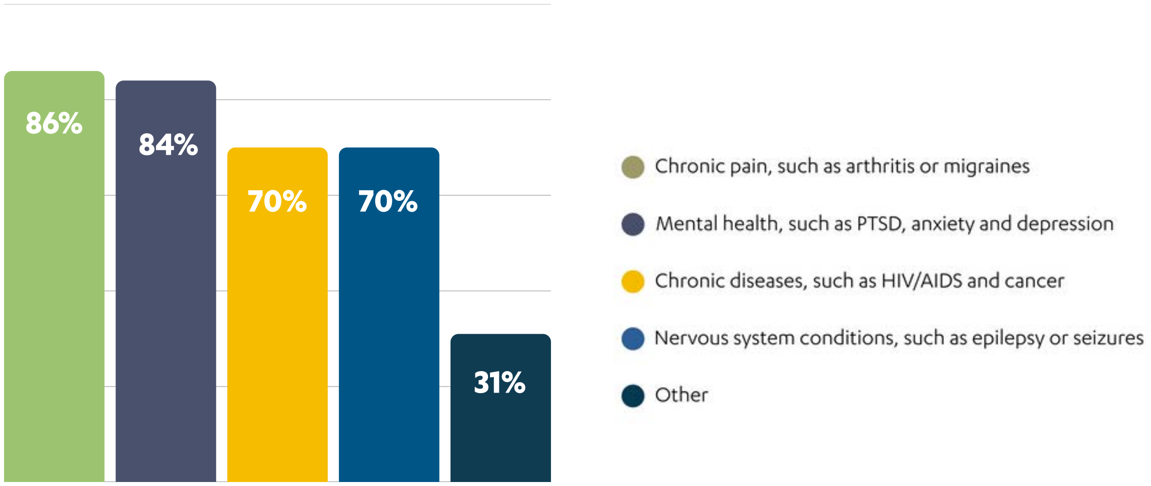
> **"A lot of the questions we get are the basics of cannabis and how to use it for different things and how it works in your body, how it interacts with other things. I mean, it's all the scientific side of cannabis, I would say, is the biggest portion of questions that we get."**

Another retail worker explained:

"I am just a regular budtender there, so I pretty much spent my entire day just on the sales floor... I work with a lot of different customers who have a lot of different needs, who have a lot of different methods of consumption as far as cannabis is concerned. So I lend any knowledge or expertise that I might have on certain products or certain different levels of cannabis consumption to different customers as they're coming in throughout the day."

Q: Have you provided services to help customers deal with any of the following conditions?

> FIGURE 18: DIFFERENT CONDITIONS CUSTOMERS REPORTED USING CANNABIS FOR



Historically, cannabis dispensaries have played a critical role in the delivery of informal medical care, starting with the medical marijuana movement's roots in the HIV/AIDS crisis and supporting people with a range of conditions and disabilities. For many decades, cannabis has had to operate as a grassroots science when it comes to health. Budtenders and other frontline workers have shared information regarding the effectiveness of different strains and methods of consumption for multiple decades, with information that only today is getting formalized and studied as prohibitions on scientific research have shifted. While the internet has provided an important infrastructure for sharing this knowledge among different workers, it still requires significant initiative from workers, which many reported they are willing to take in order to better inform consumers. One budtender explained:

> **"In general, knowledge [is most important]. Knowledge about all of the products and the different types of cannabis that you can get pretty much. I think that going in I knew bare minimum, but I wasn't also given more information or resources to kind of learn. I had to learn on my own."**

Workers also battle misinformation, in part passed through the internet and otherwise encouraged by contemporary marketing. Chief among the frustrations workers had was the importance of THC count. "What's the THC count? (laughs) Literally worst question ever," a worker laughed.

At the same time, workers shared the ways they patch together such knowledge on both the medicinal uses of cannabis and complex cultivation techniques, with much significant initiative. These practices have persisted since before legalization, and they include personal experience, including serving as caretakers for loved ones or friends utilizing cannabis; internet research; and on-the-job learning or whatever insights they can pick up from coworkers. As another worker explained,

> **"Everyone kind of has their own background knowledge... those kinds of experiences shape your knowledge on weed."**

Multiple workers also shared how they would spend much off-the-clock time trying to understand the properties of cannabis, including different qualities like terpenes and molecular properties in cannabis (THC-A, CBD, etc)

While, as noted, many workers have spent time in different aspects of the industry or doing a wider range of duties than anticipated, formal training on this was lacking within companies or across the industry. As one worker put it,

> **"Everyone should be able to be cross-trained... so that we can pull people in on days off or move people as needed."**

While workforce development has come up in numerous areas of worker experience, it's important to understand that many managers also requested additional training to support them. More than three-fourths of managers across sectors we spoke to were seeking more training in employee management and development. 64% of retail/delivery managers and 74% of cultivation managers were seeking a deeper understanding of accounting and purchasing procedures and strategies.

Safety also figured significantly into the training and workforce development needs.

In the next sections, we'll go from how workers got started to how it's going. We'll explore the ups and downs of everyday life in the cannabis workplace. And as we close we'll look to where policy, practice, and individual action can come together to support better workforce development and conditions—affecting not just employees but consumers and the industry's potential to contribute economically, socially and towards a healthier California.

SECTION TWO: WORKING CONDITIONS

A Day In The Life of a Cultivation Worker

Cannabis cultivation work often starts before the sun rises. For outdoor and greenhouse cultivation, work cycles start before dawn to be able to meet the changing demands of the California sun and wind. With the development of indoor grows, cultivators have harnessed technology to increase to a 24-hour production cycle in some places. Some workers shared that their second or third job in the industry in cultivation is precisely because they can clock out of retail and clock into a cultivation warehouse for a nighttime or graveyard shift to be able to tend to artificially-sunlit plants and production.

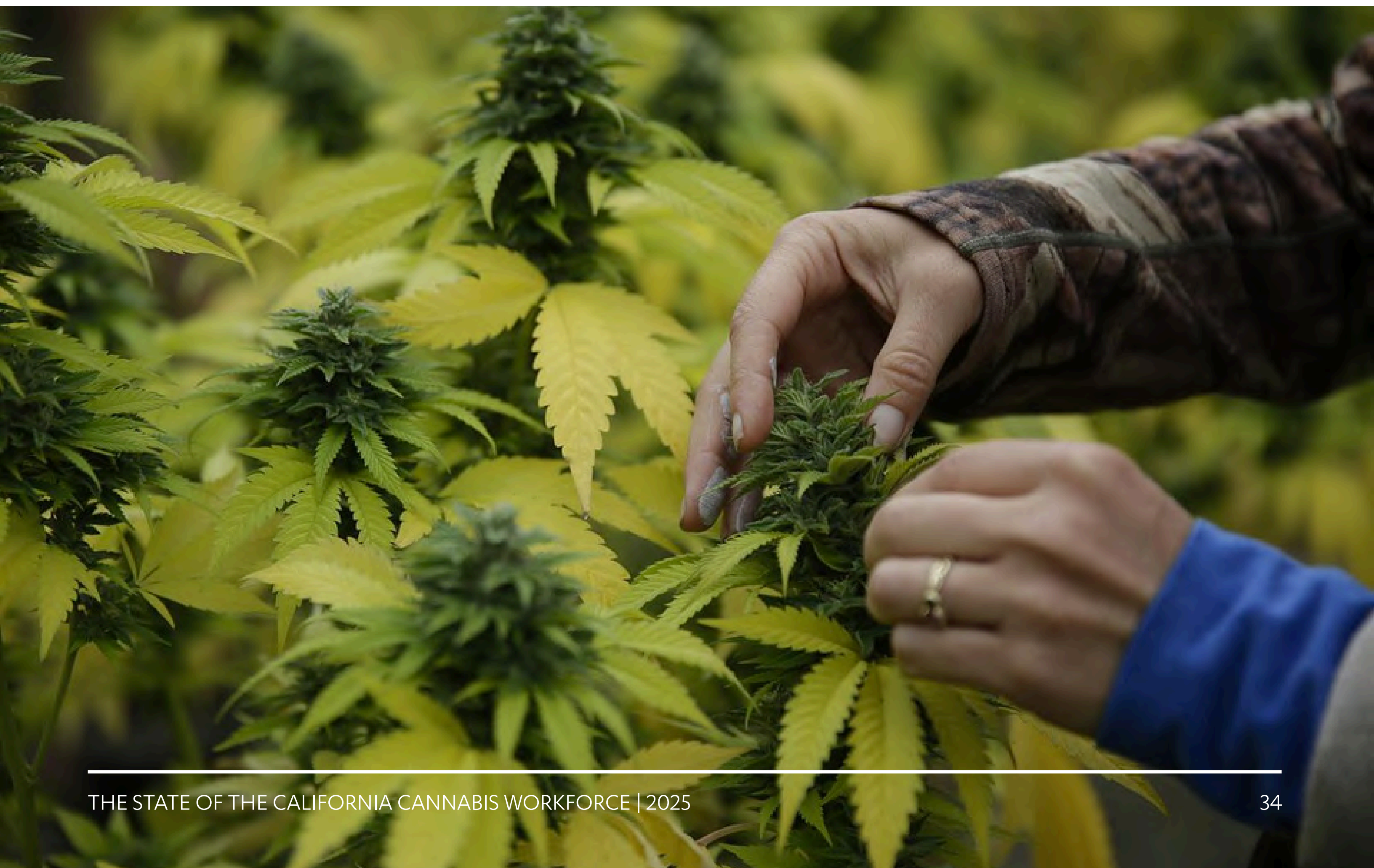
Whether on an outdoor farm or an indoor site, a cultivation worker's first task is to assess the environmental conditions. What that environment is can differ drastically based on the outdoor versus indoor versus mixed-light or greenhouse setup. For some, their first stop is the greenhouse or other cultivation area where they carefully check the temperature, humidity, and moisture of the plant medium, as well as the light schedule, making any necessary adjustments for optimal growing conditions. For other workers, especially indoor, production is broken down further to often include "mother" rooms for the originating plants, clone rooms, and "veg" or vegetation rooms for initial growth stages (often in the six week range). These latter rooms are the ones for the teen plants, so they require significant amounts of light—often running 18 hours a day. Finally, the flower room, often the largest, is where plants enter the last stage before harvest, which fully depends on the different techniques and species themselves. Part of this initial assessment (across both indoor and outdoor) is checking for and eliminating pathogens like mold and pests, which can easily destroy months of work—and often can multiply faster in highly-controlled settings where there are no natural predators. Complex fertilizers and different mixes of nitrates and other plant food may be fed in and require the technical knowledge of workers who prepare these often proprietary and ever-changing mixes.

Regardless of the setting, the next task for a cultivation worker is often tending to the plants themselves. Whether it's pruning, training, or transplanting, each involves careful work to ensure biological stability and consistency. They work methodically, assessing each plant's needs; many cultivators we interviewed referred to plants as their "babies" for the level of care needed. Workers may take cuttings or sort through them to see which is ready for the next step. The process of assessing when a plant is ready has everything to do with understanding the specifics of hundreds of cannabis strains, each have their own flowering patterns, colors, and scents that consumers and patients seek.

When plants are assessed as ready (through any number of measures), cultivation workers are on the front lines to harvest, dry, cure, and preserve the mature plant. Trimmers manicure the flowers according to the potential production needs, such as developing mass trim for extracts of specifically tailored buds that will dry to the right perfection. This harvest and drying stage is also a delicate one, where plants pulled too early may be sold prone to mold (too "sticky"), and such issues may become more prevalent with pressures to accelerate production cycles to meet supply needs. When plants reach the right dried stage (which in an outdoor setting is seasonal, but in an indoor one may be constantly cycled), trimming for market may require a larger workforce to do this delicate work. Workers shared that the actual spaces for trimming work vary dramatically, from rows of cardboard boxes and bags, to well-organized tables and supplies.

The final stages of production—depending on where the flower ends—includes careful quality control. With much stricter controls in the legalized market, this means weighing and packaging, setting aside certain products for testing, branding, labeling, and so forth.

Some workers may spend their time in just one part of this delicate circuit of production, for example, solely assigned to monitoring and growing in the veg room. Others may circulate through. Regardless of where they work, as their shifts draw to a close, workers are often tasked to clean up their work areas and complete their final rounds, checking on the plants and site one last time.



The everyday conditions in cannabis speak to a complex mix of opportunity and challenge. While on one hand cannabis may offer relatively higher wages to current retail and service jobs, some of the benefits of this are muted by issues with wage theft, scheduling, unsafe work speed-up, lack of understanding of the complexity of the work by new owners, and new middle-manager dynamics dismissing worker contributions/knowledge. Yet frontline and managerial workers alike also spoke to numerous ways that more collaborative approaches led to better success in the workplace, including in production and service delivery. Their experiences and ideas open pathways to improving conditions rooted in both expanding the understanding of labor law fundamentals and furthering managerial training and worker voice.

$19.50 is the median wage of the CA cannabis workers surveyed

The median wage for cannabis workers in our sample is $19.50/hour. For cultivation, the median was slightly higher ($21.00) and retail dipped a bit lower. But relative to the median wage in retail sales in California ($18.01 in Q1 2024)[18], this showed a significant bump. Delivery workers averaged $21.00 as well, much higher than app-drigen industries. Importantly, the median wage in cannabis was consistent in the licensed and unlicensed sectors, showing that the promise of better wages may have informed why and how people were willing to take risks within this sector.

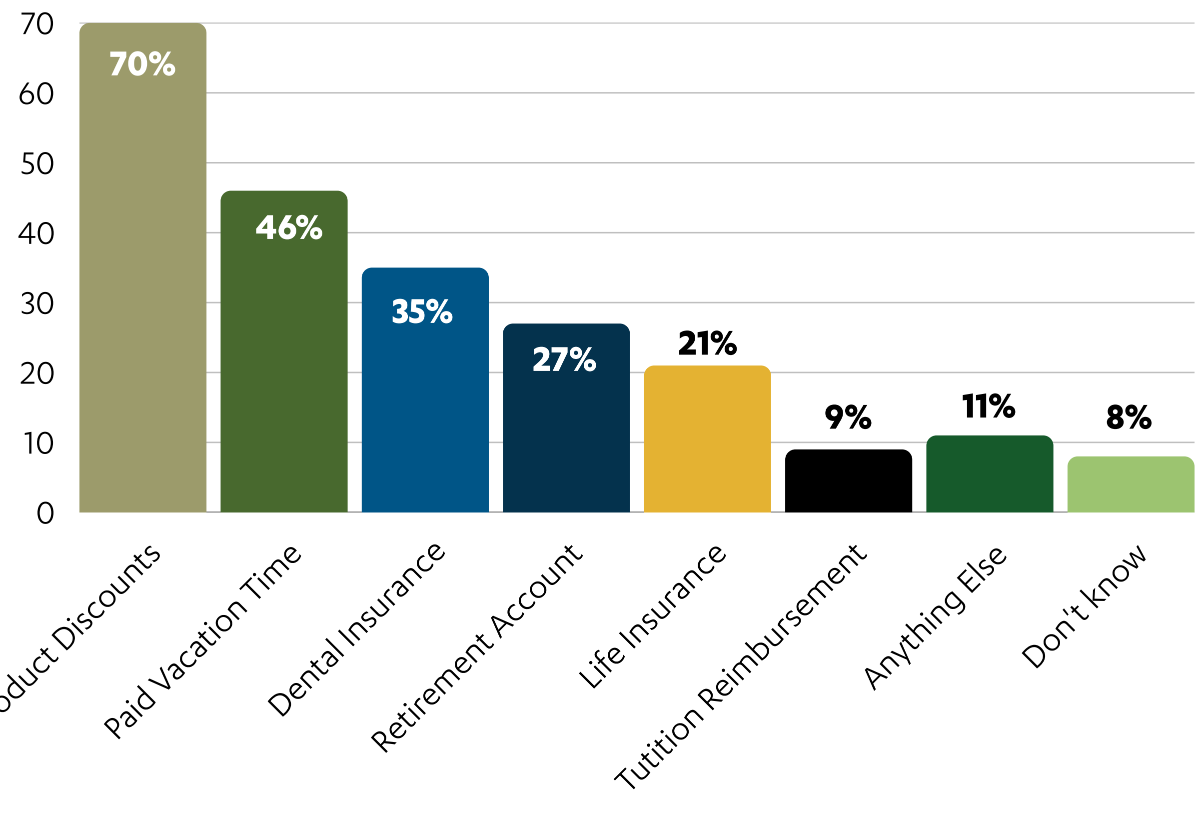
$21.00 is the median wage of the CA cultivation workers surveyed

$21.00 is the median wage of the CA delivery workers surveyed

Though relatively higher for retail, these wages do not add up to a living wage in most of California, which, according to MIT's Living Wage Calculator, begins at $28.72 for a person with no dependents.[19] As is the case for many low-wage workers across industries, many cannabis employees also talk about living "paycheck to paycheck." Survey data showed the effects of these low wages had real effects on basic needs. Nearly 81% of gender-nonconforming workers, 43% of women, and 29% of men we surveyed reported difficulty affording food or groceries in the past year. Additionally, more than 50% of gender-nonconforming workers, 31% of women, and 19% of men reported relying on SNAP/food stamps. (While we can surmise that factors including the overall gender wage gap, the obligations women hold in households, and economic inequality affecting trans and gender non-conforming groups affect this, the differences in gender and wages do require deeper future research.)

Q: Does your employer offer any of these benefits?

> **FIGURE 19:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO REPORTED RECEIVING VARIOUS BENEFITS



In interviews, workers describe that with insufficient earnings from these jobs and the rising cost of living in California, cannabis workers are sometimes paying to work. One worker stated,

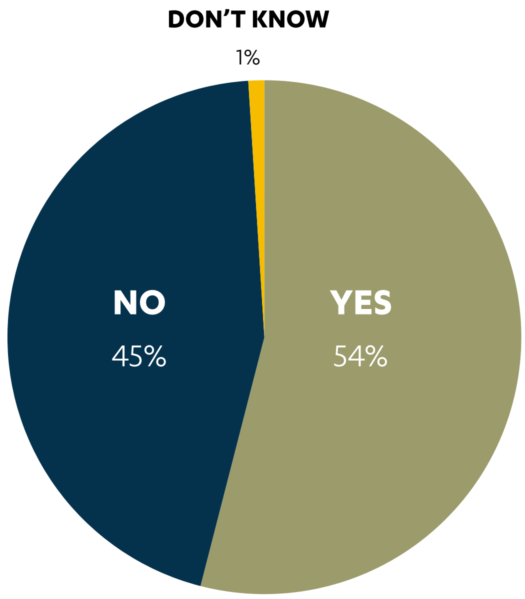
> **"At the end of my time [there]... I was losing money working...compared to what I was making at the beginning. [My wages] barely kept up with [rent and gas] inflation."**

Adding to the point about commute cost, another cultivation worker said they would drive "45 minutes to an hour... to this minimum wage job." [20]

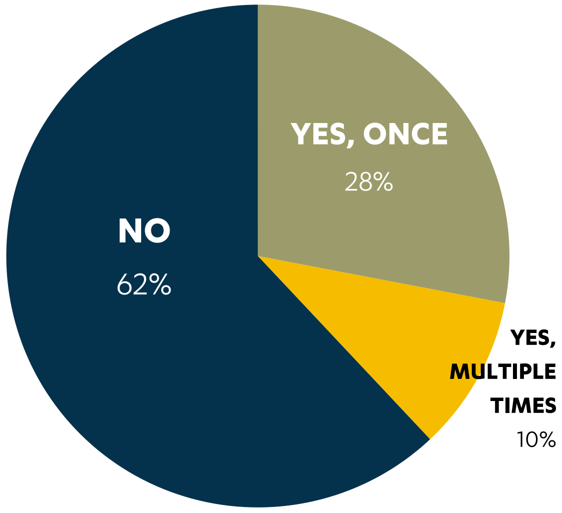
Raises or increases in wages across one's time in the industry were consistently a concern for many workers. Almost half of workers had not received a raise at their current job, and while this may be due to length of tenure, insufficient wages and a lack of raises were key drivers for workers leaving their jobs. One retail/delivery worker reported wage increases of $1 each of the three years they've been there so far. Whereas a cultivation worker reported that although their pay was mostly based on production,

> **"Depending on how that company runs it, if they want to be a little nicer to you and not stingy with their money, they'll give you like another $50 added to your check."**

> **FIGURE 20:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO REPORTED RECEIVING A WAGE INCREASE OR PROMOTION DURNG THEIR TENURE WITH THEIR EMPLOYER



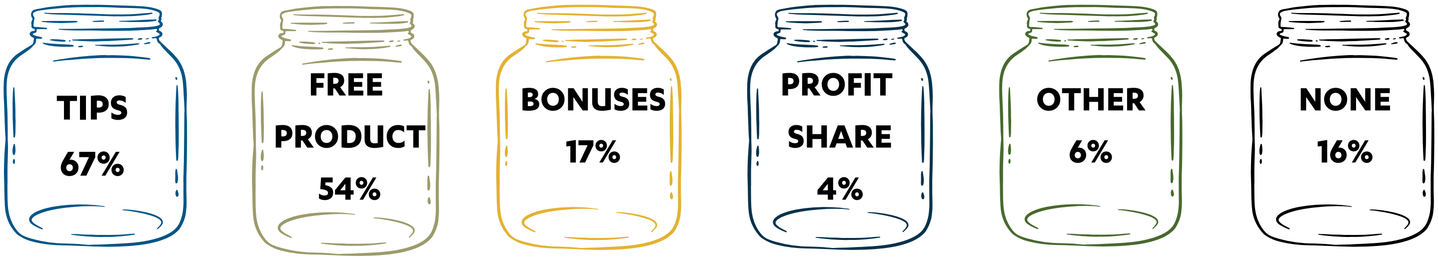
Workers who received a raise



Workers who were promoted

Incentives in the cultivation space are especially evident during "the trim season," in which bonuses can be set in accordance with meeting trim goals. (At least 30% surveyed who received bonuses got them due to meeting these production metrics). As one cultivation worker shared, their income could thus vary dramatically by season: they could report a monthly income of "$6,000 to $8,000" during the on season, yet the off season would result in only about $1,000 a month. It's important to note that such trim bonuses come only with intense work-cycles that are linked to health and safety concerns listed in Section III.

> **FIGURE 21:** ADDITIONAL INCENTIVES WORKERS REPORTED RECEIVING, ACROSS ALL THREE SECTORS



Bonuses helped many cultivation workers.

Tips proved an important supplement for retail workers. One budtender shared,

> **"I would say that's the only reason I stayed at that job for so long was because tips ended up sometimes being like half or more of a paycheck."**

Another worker said their "sales manager...admitted to me he was taking home less money [than] I was...because he wasn't taking home tips." The tips were not the only income workers reported as different, if not better, from other types of employment. Beyond wages and pay, benefits in cannabis mostly fell to cannabis product discounts (70%), and then dropped to less than half the sample for paid vacation (46%), dental (35%) and a retirement account (27%).

The gap between relatively higher wages and a living wage also informed why, aside from those who worked for another cannabis job (24%), another third had an additional paid job outside of the cannabis industry. One retail worker shared the need for additional work:

> **"I don't feel financially secure in this job. [It's] so extremely stressful, and now I'm trying to pick up the pieces and look for new work or look for new opportunities and still try to make it work there. "**

Another worker described how,

> **"Especially in California, of all places, you have to have two jobs on that wage to secure housing."**

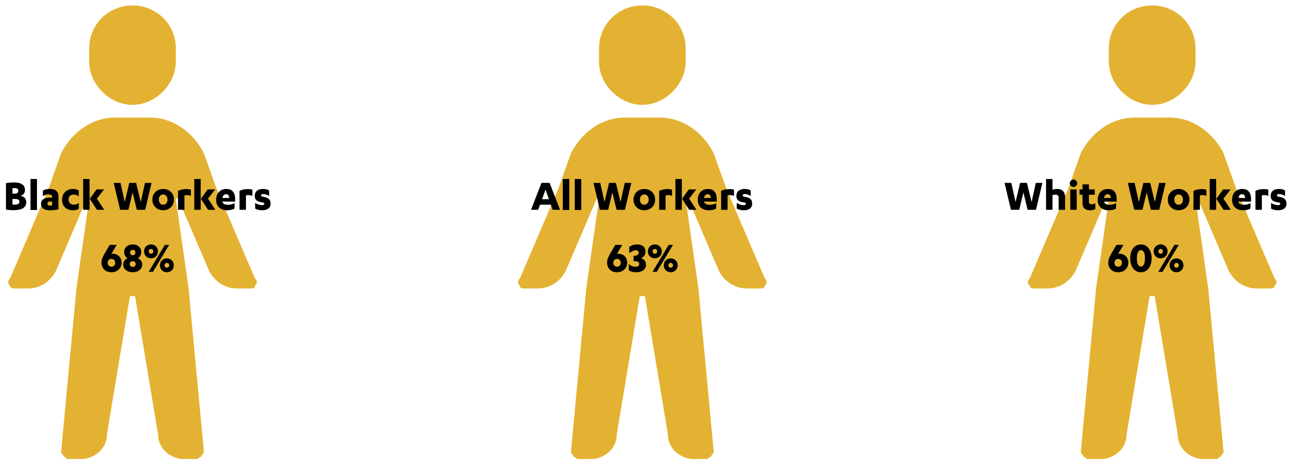
Wage Theft

Wage theft remains significantly high across the regulated and unlicensed cannabis sectors, with at least 63% of workers experiencing it in some form. These include interrupted meal breaks, being paid late, and being asked to work before or after clocking out of work.[21] To simplify it, wage theft can be defined as employer's failure to pay workers what they have earned or what they have been promised.[22]

When we break down the wage theft data, we see that Black or African-American cannabis workers experience wage theft at a higher rate (68%) compared to the overall sample wage theft rate among those who identified as white (60%). One interviewee suggested that this was shaped by the marginalized position of workers of color:

> **"I do think that the owners exploit their workers by taking advantage that ... majority of their workers are people of color who are living under the poverty line and need this income, and so they take advantage of that."**

> **FIGURE 22:** PERCENTAGE OF BLACK, WHITE AND/OR ALL WORKERS WHO EXPERIENCED WAGE THEFT



Looking at the different types of wage theft, more than a third of workers (37%) had their meal breaks interrupted, and 14% were denied a meal or rest break altogether. One cannabis worker shared,

> **"There were time periods where we were understaffed, and it was just me and one other budtender, so we would like work back to back, or I think – no, maybe we'd work the whole day and then have like an hour long break."**

Employment law mandates that employers provide an uninterrupted 30-minute unpaid break when workers are scheduled for more than five hours in a day, with a 10-minute break for every four hours worked.[23]

Our data shows that 29% of cannabis workers have been paid late by an employer, 14% do not receive a pay record at all, and 13% have been asked to do unpaid work during an internship, training, or trial period at their job. Workers shared how they were paid late, or they would attempt to cash checks that would bounce. One worker said, "The worst part is the fact that they paid me late twice, and it's super part-time, like non-livable wages in LA."

Another worker described their experience of wage theft:

> **"So we had a timesheet, a form, just fill in our hours. To be honest, it didn't matter. We would do all this and then when the pay date would come, we'd get a check and I'd go to the bank and they would say there's no money in the account. It just was very cruel, to be honest. Struggling, you've got a family, or just single, whatever you're doing, but you need your money, right? So that was one of the roughest things about working there, is not being paid."**

In this workplace, the owner would often disappear during pay week, making it impossible to directly address missed pay. This particular form of wage theft may be more unique to cannabis: in interviews, we learned how this practice of bounced checks (or delayed pay) carried over from the pre-Prop 64 market and the informal kinds of practices in unlicensed operations. Considering how many workers we surveyed struggled with food or housing, even one missed paycheck could have significant effects.

Despite legal protections requiring water and rest breaks, enforcement is weak (in and beyond cannabis), and many workers feel they must advocate for themselves. A worker said:

> **"It's lenient out there, but they kind of expect us to fend for ourselves. If we don't ask, they don't tell. If we don't speak up, they're not going to do anything about it."**

In addition, workers experience overtime violations and often do not receive the additional pay required when working overtime hours. Half of the workers surveyed had worked overtime (50%), and 24% of those workers were not paid the overtime rate (with 4% not paid anything at all for that time). One cannabis worker described,

> **"I think the worst part was working, you know, 11 hour days and not being paid overtime."**

They also learned that their manager had been hiding the fact that they could claim sick time, demonstrating a broader pattern of labor violations.

› **FIGURE 23:** TYPES OF REPORTED INCIDENCES OF WAGE THEFT

Overtime Violations

> **FIGURE 24:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO REPORTED WORKING OVERTIME VS THOSE WHO WERE PAID FOR IT

The cannabis industry, similar to many retail and agricultural sectors, exhibits troubling rates of wage violations that impact workers' financial security. Regardless of whether operations are licensed or unlicensed, or struggling with the "start up" nature of this industry or other high regulatory costs, all cannabis businesses are subject to established workplace laws. These data signal structural issues around labor compliance throughout the industry, which create financial burdens and undermine economic stability for workers - and their households.

SCHEDULING AND FAVORITISM

As noted in the previous section, better pay and improved schedules were key drivers for workers transitioning to the cannabis industry from other sectors. Overall, workers reported that managers were likely to accommodate their preferred schedules. Workers described that routine practices were to post a schedule for two weeks to a month with some amount of notice, and shifts were pretty consistent. Fewer workers indicated that they had the autonomy to set their own schedules. This lack of scheduling control is common in many frontline jobs.

Of the workers surveyed...

44% were able to make their own schedules

67% had managers who often did not grant schedule requests

Further, workers noted other scheduling challenges. Over half had been called to work on their day off, and two-thirds reported inadequate staffing levels in the retail stores. In interviews, some workers noted that they were expected to show up to work with little notice or risk getting fired. A dispensary worker noted,

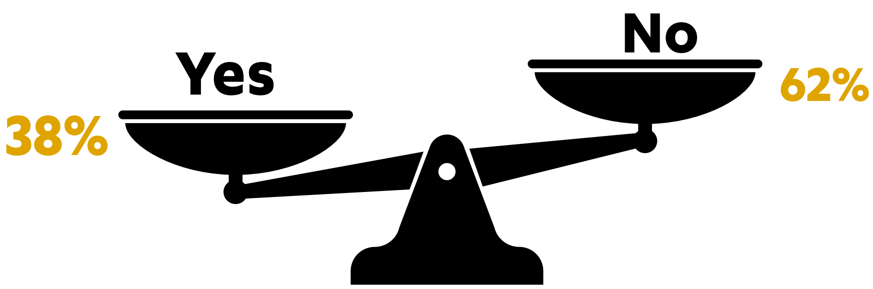
> **"We do get two week schedules at a time, but there will be times where, you know, your schedule does change, your days off do change, and unfortunately we don't always get a heads up in regards to that."**

Fair scheduling practices have been a significant concern in retail jobs, and in the last few years, unions and community organizations have worked to establish baselines regarding the kinds of notice given.[24] Cannabis workers described similar concerns regarding arbitrary schedule setting, in which personal relationships could determine when you were asked to work. In some cases where hours were more scarce, this had an effect on how many hours each worker received.

Cannabis workers tend to work in smaller environments with a very intertwined relationship to their managers and owners. Aligned with qualitative research in the industry, several interviews noted that such close relationships in part are shaped by patterns that occurred during the medical cannabis era, where owners, managers, and workers developed a sense of closeness due to shared risks in the face of police and other violence.[25] Developing trust among a small core was critical, and some owner-operators, managers and workers characterized their worksites as a "family." [26] Yet at the same time, 38% of workers said they noted that their managers would make decisions about scheduling, pay raises, or promotions based on these personal relationships.

Q: Have you seen your supervisor or owner favor other staff based on their personal relationships for things like scheduling, pay raises or promotions?

> **FIGURE 25:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO HAVE WITNESSED A SUPERVISOR OR OWNER OFFER INCENTIVES BASED ON PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP STATUS



Several shared that indeed their coworkers were quite literally family – and that managers and owners often hired and promoted relatives directly. As one worker put it, "It's hard to move up in the industry. I feel like it's already kind of determined. Usually it's like family or people they know, like nepotism." Another Black sales worker shared:

> **"As a woman of color I am constantly used for input on how to do things without proper compensation. Nepotism in this industry is a huge problem, and most of these businesses are family-owned and run. Be ready to work hard for very little pay..."**

Importantly, nearly half of the managers we surveyed (49%) said they found work through someone they know, suggesting that access to such supervisory and higher-paying positions may indeed be shaped by personal relations.

In interviews, words like favoritism, nepotism, and personalism were frequently mentioned around hiring and discipline the other area where these words came up the most was with scheduling. As one dispensary worker laid out, their location was,

> **"Struggling now that the owner's parents have come in, and they are putting their little claws and their two cents into everything, and they're the ones who started cutting our hours, making our schedules, doing all these changes... they are not listening, because they're making changes that they think are helpful, but they're not really doing anything."**

As the above signals, favoritism and nepotism influenced not only shift assignments but also the total number of hours workers received, often resulting in reduced hours for some. Another dispensary worker explained:

> **"Towards the end we had hired on this manager, and I don't know, we didn't get along that well... she like changed the schedule and put me down to like one day a week... I brought my concerns to the GM and the manager, and they were just kind of like, it is what it is... Yeah, that's about the point where I put in my two weeks. It was always like, how am I supposed to survive off of one day a week?"**

Some managers also noted that they were given more input in scheduling than budtenders were, and worked amongst themselves to determine their options. A retail manager explained that:

> **"The scheduling for supervisors, for managers is what we call ourselves, does get scheduled a little differently than the budtenders."**

In this way, they:

> **"Try to coordinate with other co-managers on taking turns on who will work the graveyard shift, who will work the weekends. At most we're working at least four to five days, so we will try to kind of split that up."**

Several managers interviewed said that they tried to solicit input on availability from budtenders and noted that being in close communication led to more successful scheduling.

Technology & Surveillance

Cannabis has never been a fully offline venture, even pre-legalization, from advanced hydroponics to sophisticated networks of technology to move product. But legalization has brought the rapid adoption of new technologies that affect workers' lives, from METRC track-and-trace to certain automations in cultivation processes, like trimming, adopted in part from commercial agriculture. Across our interviews, employees also flagged the ways in which technology is meant to protect may also be incorporated into surveillance of workers, in ways that affect their work security and sense of autonomy, and break down trust.

For example, security cameras are ubiquitous in cannabis, required for licensing to cover most operations with recording (and widely used for protection in unlicensed shops). But, workers also noted that such cameras at times led to a dynamic where they were being watched for disciplinary purposes and not to actually improve work procedures or customer service:

> **"A majority of the time, the managers wouldn't come out and help. They'd just stay in the office watching cameras but wouldn't assist us when needed...the last shift I worked at, I walked out halfway through because we were understaffed. ... The three managers and the higher-ups were just chilling in the office while they were there [during a] Code Red. Code Red is what we call when there is a line out the door."**

Even further, several interviewees noted the impact of global outsourcing of backend operations for cannabis delivery logistics and service. This meant that delivery workers out in the field were calling in to global call centers, reaching people who might have no geographical familiarity, a gap which led to significant issues. One worker recounted how:

"The entire customer service team in the U.S. was fired and outsourced to a company in India."

Then, when seeking information on a customer's order or the customer refusing to pay, he couldn't get any real assistance and was often left stranded.

"I'm driving around LA, looking for help, and it's not their fault, but they don't know the names of any of the places... some even think LA is the whole state. So the help desk is not able to help you with anything."

Another delivery worker described how apps for deliveries at times would take orders from as far as five or six hours away, and how one manager told them that "even if it was a glitch, just do it." (It's important to note that such technologies may in fact violate cannabis regulations that require employees be hired to conduct essential operations in California).

Other technologies, such as facial recognition for timekeeping, disproportionately disadvantage dark-skinned employees. One Black worker at a cultivation facility described the challenges of using discriminatory technology at her dispensary:

"We have to clock in on an iPad, which scans our faces... but a lot of us have issues with it. For example, I'm dark-skinned, and the way it's set up—in the corner, with poor lighting—the system doesn't recognize me."

When this worker noticed that her income had been impacted by these timekeeping errors, the burden of proof fell to her to identify the hours missed and rectify the mistakes created by biased technology.

More generally, the facial recognition clock-in system spoke to the ways that certain companies set up automated timekeeping and payroll systems that seemed to underscore a lack of trust in employees. One delivery worker explained,

"I had to clock in and out [on the operating system] inside the store because they didn't have it set up properly. That was tough for me—I had to park two cars, mine and theirs, and keep an eye on both to avoid tickets. Every time I clocked in for work, out for lunch, or back in after a break, I had to [drive back] inside. And on top of that, my mileage was tracked through the app we used."

Under this system of timekeeping, the delivery worker felt that the burden of accuracy and accountability fell mostly on the employee. They also spent most of their meal break having to park cars and in transit, losing out on the actual rest. Supposedly advanced technological systems like the aforementioned set up to manage payroll and timesheets were logistically flawed and created more potential for wage theft or other violations, such as missed breaks.

This is not to discount the importance of technology for managing safety, the supply chain, and other aspects that may indeed improve outcomes for workers and consumers. But the experiences of workers speak to the need for input and collaboration, as those who use this technology the most and are affected by it in terms of human resources, in order to develop systems that work for everyone.

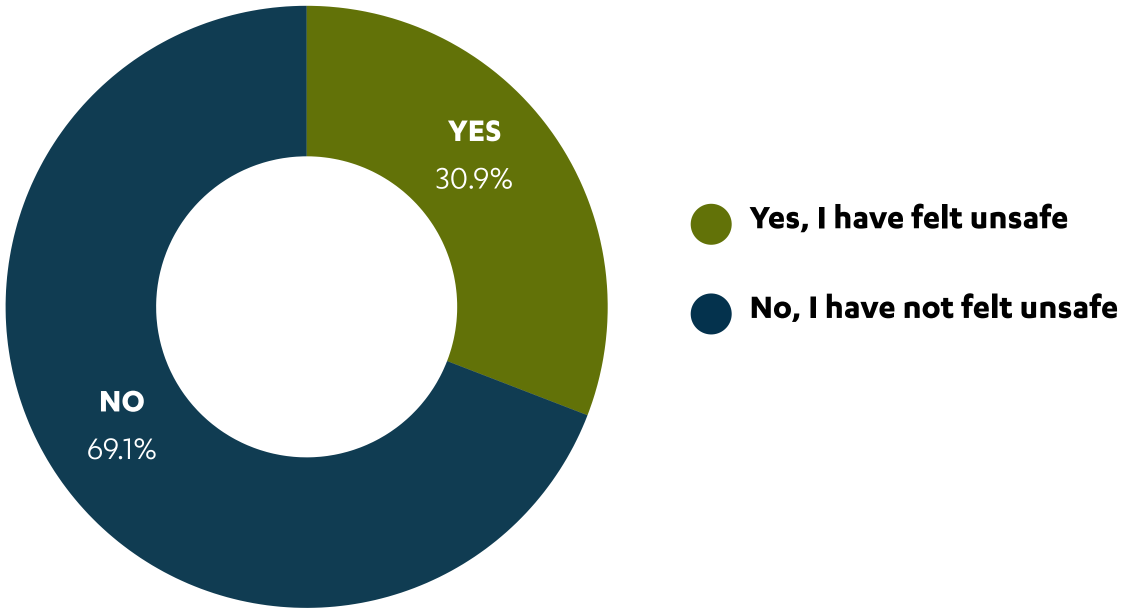
SECTION THREE:
HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF WORKERS AND INDUSTRY

Safety and health was an ever-present concern for workers, cutting across regulated and unlicensed spaces and cultivation, retail, and delivery categories. Workplace safety not only shaped individual risks for workers—and the physical scars and mental stressors they bore—but also impacted retention and other workplace operations. Some of these workplace safety challenges mirror issues with the provision of safe procedures, protective equipment and supports, and the risks of work-speed up in comparable industries like agriculture and tech-driven delivery. Others, though, are unique to cannabis, including the high rates of robberies created by the requirements to function on a cash basis, the policing of the industry, and the in-depth care work being done on the shop floor for a variety of consumer health concerns, all of which bear heavily on worker mental health.

Cannabis workers face significant occupational health and safety needs across all sectors—cultivation, retail, and delivery. According to survey results, 85% of respondents expressed a need for stronger health and safety protections in the industry. How these challenges appear varies significantly by sector, as well as the lack of consistency among employers in engaging in training, protections, and other preventative measures. Overall, nearly a third of workers have felt unsafe at their cannabis job.

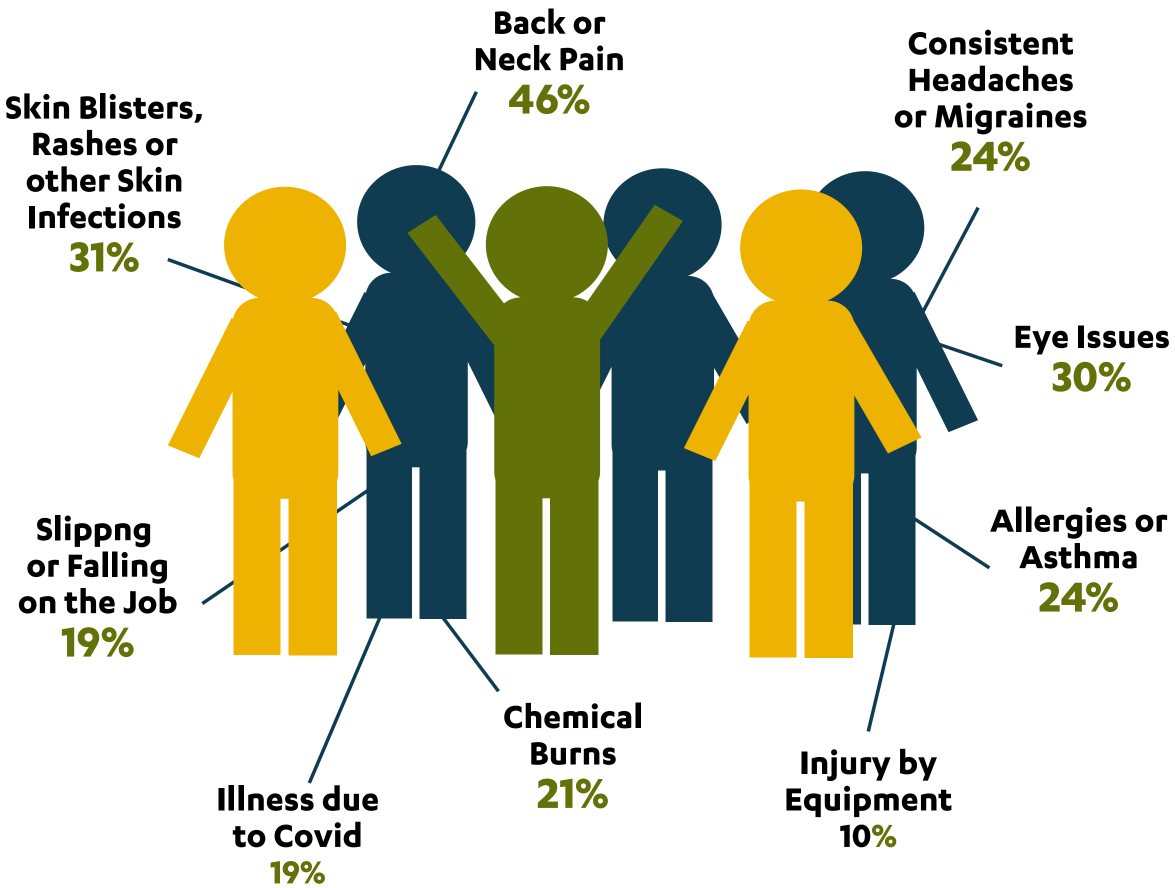
Q: In the past year, did you feel unsafe at your cannabis job?

> FIGURE 26: PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO REPORTED FEELING SAFE AT THEIR CANNABIS JOB



INJURIES OR MEDICAL CONDITIONS CULTIVATION WORKERS NOTED

› **FIGURE 27:** PERCENTAGE OF CULTIVATION WORKERS WHO REPORTED INJURIES OR MEDICAL CONDITIONS FROM THE JOB



Cultivation work exposes employees to a range of highly-intensive physical demands and environmental hazards —including chemicals, heavy equipment and different air, water and temperature extremes related to indoor, greenhouse, or outdoor production.

Among the most common conditions reported were back and neck pain (46%), followed by skin blisters, rashes, or skin infections (31%). The former may be related to the various physical demands of the tasks, from moving and lifting heavy containers to working in tight spaces with highly meticulous labor. For example, a grow room may feature multiple large and heavy racks stacked high with plants, through which workers must carefully navigate while moving these massive objects. The various skin injuries, as well as reports of bleeding or abrasions (21%) and chemical burns (21%), may link to hazardous products such as pesticides or corrosives like ammonia (mixed in formulas for plant growth), as well as the kinds of scars that often come with working with plant matter and equipment.

A less discussed element was eye strain (30%), which relates most often to the intensive lighting that workers operate; the lights are meant to mirror the intensity of the sun in order to artificially induce the plant growth cycle. (More technically: some deliver electromagnetic radiation with spectral composition and photosynthetic photon flux specifically geared to cannabis plants.)[27] Enclosures, often without proper eyewear, have been known to injure eyes; even though these shift to mimic sun cycles, they can also disrupt a worker's circadian rhythm.

The intensified lighting and exposure to chemicals noted above may also be connected to the fact that a quarter (24%) of cultivation workers reported consistent headaches or migraines. Nearly the same amount (24%) reported asthma or allergies that were induced by the workplace. Additionally, cannabis worksites can include mold and a significant amount of plant matter. Most indoor operations also rely heavily on HVAC systems, which are meant to combat the heat to allow plant growth, but without proper filtering, they can actually worsen asthma and respiratory issues. (In fact, a 2022 lawsuit identified air and filtration systems as causing the death of a cannabis worker in Massachusetts.)[28] Other researchers have documented the specific hazards in parts of the cultivation process, including seasonal trimming in outdoor grows, which requires significant isolation during the season, repetitive motion, and non-stop production cycles.[29]

WHAT CULITVATION WORKERS EXPERIENCE ON THE JOB

37%

Unsafe exposure to chemicals pesticides, or molds

34%

Too few employees to handle the workload safely

31%

Missing or damaged equipment including personal protective equipment

26%

Wet or slippery floors

18%

Violent incident

17%

Accident with equipment or vehicles

The context of disaster only exacerbates safety risks in cannabis. Extreme heat waves further dehydration, heat exhaustion, and long-term health consequences. These struggles mirror the broader exploitation of farmworkers across California, whose workplace protections exist on paper but are often poorly enforced. Cal/OSHA mandates access to water, shade at 80°F, and cooldown breaks, yet many cannabis workers lack the training or support to exercise these rights.

One worker captures the frustration of these conditions:

> **"Yeah, I don't know, I think those people just want to pay someone $15 an hour just to shut the f**k up and be grateful. But it's 100 degrees outside, and we've been working all day. The same labor laws apply here as they do anywhere else—we deserve rest breaks."**

A seasonal trimmer and cultivator shared how working in relentless heat with poor nutrition and constant dehydration led to thyroid issues. The combination of inadequate breaks, lack of access to proper meals, and extreme temperatures took a severe toll on their health.

When asked what would improve the conditions in cultivation, one worker shared:

> **"I would say safety measures. There's a – like unless whoever you're working with is the person that is doing safety measures, a lot of the bosses they just – they don't care. I mean, it's a field, it's a farm, so really not tripping on the meat and potatoes of everything that's happening there."**

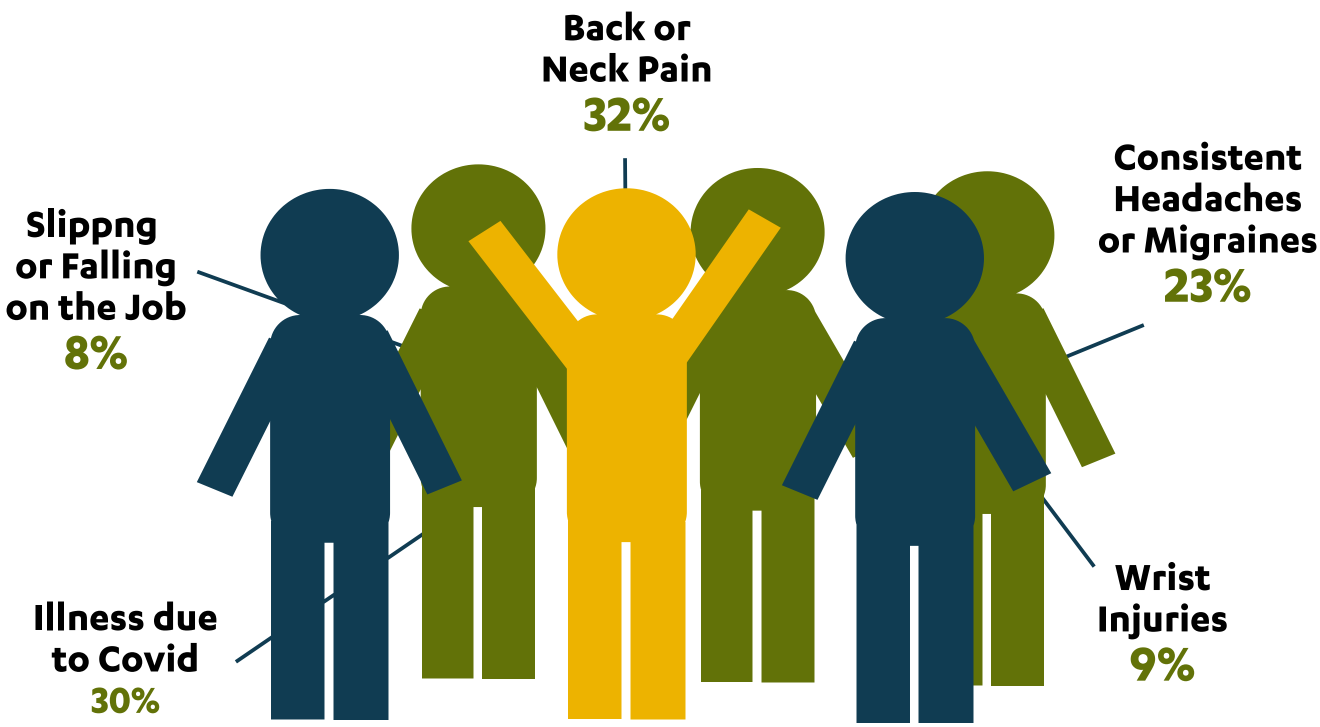
Retail & Delivery Safety

Retail and delivery workplaces also face significant safety issues, some of which are specific to cannabis. Importantly, nearly one-third (32%) experienced back or neck pain, pointing to the physical demands of retail and delivery, which can include standing for long hours, lifting and moving heavy objects, and other demands that are often neglected given the setting. One budtender shared,

> **"Well, apparently I broke my back five years ago, never even knew it. I was at the shop. It was the only thing I could think when I hurt my back was at the shop, so I would say it's done a number on my physical health. Mental, I mean, not really myself, but my wife will tell you that it affected her mental... because of sometimes there's strenuous hours."**

Injuries or Medical Conditions Reported by Retail Workers

› FIGURE 28: PERCENTAGE OF RETAIL WORKERS WHO REPORTED INJURIES OR MEDICAL CONDITIONS FROM THE JOB



For delivery workers, one-fifth (20%) experienced car accidents on the job. Some workers reported that car maintenance was inconsistent, putting their safety at risk. One delivery driver noted,

> **“I had brought up concerns because the car kept—the light kept turning on for the tires… they kind of ignored it. I felt like they were bothered by that when I was just trying to let them know.”**

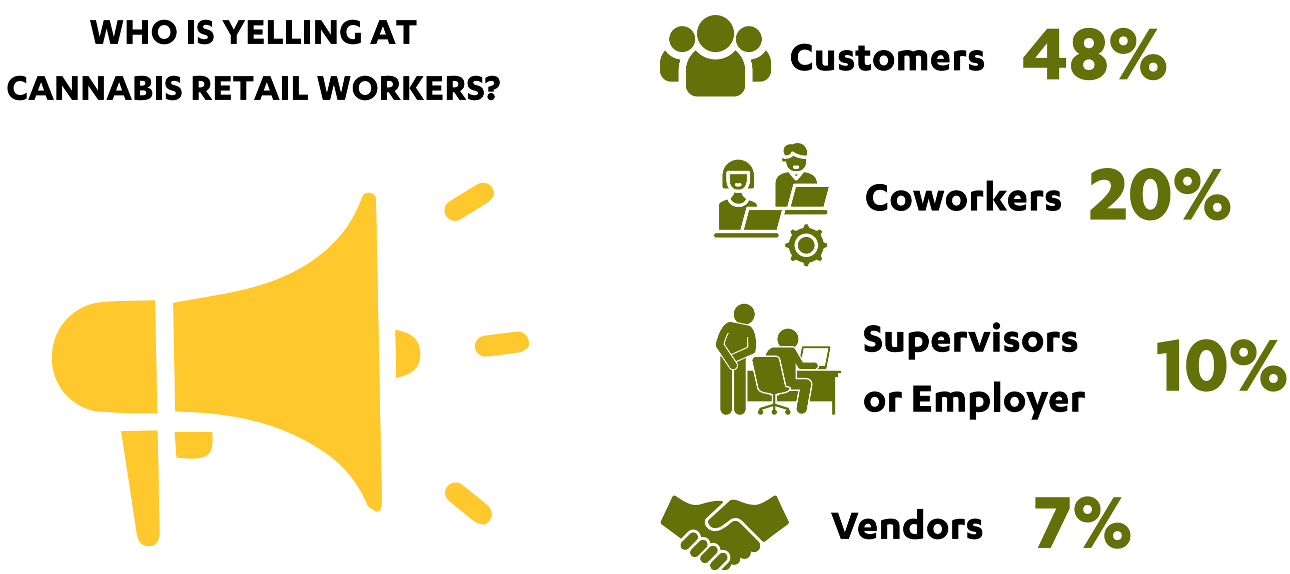
Another shared how once there were maintenance issues, even on company-issued cars, the worker was responsible for upkeep and obtaining the servicing, and was taken off schedule until it was fixed. At the same time, he explained,

> **“They never gave people any advice on how to keep their cars up, to get the oil changed and all that, it’s kind of crucial.”**

of Cannabis Delivery Drivers have had a car accident while on the job

Beyond physical health concerns due to the work itself, cannabis workers also face significant safety risks due to workplace violence, particularly in retail and delivery. 71% of retail and delivery workers reported encountering hostile interactions with customers or vendors, including racial, gender, and other harassment, discussed below.

› FIGURE 29: WORKERS WHO REPORTED BEING DISRESPECTFULLY YELLED OUT BY VARYING GROUPS



Cannabis workers in the regulated sector were more likely to experience a burglary (23%) compared to 14% for unlicensed. 16% of all workers also experienced robberies. Owners and operators have brought attention to these practices, which some have discussed as a wider pattern of police neglect and the high prevalence of cash in these businesses.[30] Less discussed is that workers—including security workers—are front line in dealing with both the prevention and consequences of these incidents. Interestingly, we found in our recommendations sessions that workers did not often prioritize security spending as an area for investment, perhaps recognizing that much is already being spent on security systems with little avail, or due to a lack of trust in traditional answers for security (i.e. more police).

The risk of armed robbery was particularly prevalent for delivery workers, who travel alone with significant amounts of cash and cannabis. Multiple delivery drivers described being targeted in purposeful, dangerous ways:

> **"Someone that used to work for [redacted] was leaving somewhere, and someone like hit her car, like just a tap so you would get out to exchange information, and they pointed guns at her, stole her vehicle, stole everything in it."**

Sales representatives, a more invisible part of the cannabis supply chain, also found themselves the target of robberies. One recounted:

> **"I did get robbed once... I went into a restaurant and they just broke into my car and stole all my stuff —my demo table, my supplies... They thought they were stealing a bunch of weed."**

Police raids and accompanying violence are common in both the regulated and unlicensed sectors, with 14% of raids occurring in licensed facilities, compared to 17% for unlicensed shops.

One worker detailed the experience:

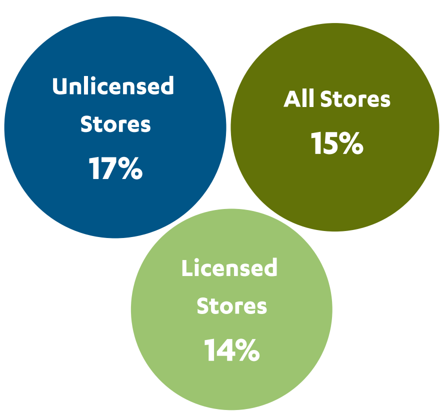
> *"It was an incredibly awful experience. The police entered the premises with guns drawn as if we were expected to be armed and dangerous. I had a shotgun pointed at me. Telling me to put my hands where they can be seen while the whole room was being yelled at...This situation that happened at my previous job was because a live scan wasn't updated, which led to non-compliance, which led to the police raiding the store. Being handcuffed in front of customers made me feel like a criminal. At the time we were unionized and because of the union, we didn't have to go to court."*

Another retail worker recounted the violence and potentially illegal police behavior under a raid.

> **"[My coworkers] were scared... [T]he cops stole all the money out of their wallets...They came... [in] scary... riotgear. They hauled them all out, and they [told us,] 'You guys are going to jail, you're going to prison."**

In other words, violence on the job from police carried with it numerous emotional, physical, and even financial effects.

›**FIGURE 30:** WORKERS WHO EXPERIENCES POLICE RAIDS WHILE ON THE JOB



Emotional and Mental Health on the Shop Floor

The cannabis industry, like many service jobs, can be both physically and emotionally draining. Long hours, high-stress environments, and unpredictable interactions take a toll on workers' mental health. One delivery driver explained, "It has impacted my mental health sometimes because… working 10 hours a day is just – it gets exhausting sometimes, and you're just running back and forth. Like, I do get drained."

The isolation and uncertainty of the high-risk nature of cannabis, detailed above, also lead to consistent fear and stress. Another worker shared the vulnerability of delivering the product:

> **"It gets scary for me too, because some people are not quite honest and don't want to pay up at that time. It gets scary, and I wish I could be with somebody I was delivering [with], but they don't allow that, so yeah, it's just me sometimes."**

For those in cultivation, the repetition of tasks like trimming can push workers into a mental fog, leading to emotional breakdowns. The long, monotonous hours leave them alone with their thoughts, with no real outlet for stress:

> **"People break down in these moments… There's times where I'm crying and trimming through it… it's very stressful. You're stuck in your mind, mentally alone while you're working."**

Another shared how the cultivation work rhythms often meant skipping meals and sheer exhaustion:

> **"I forget to eat a lot… My mental… it is really draining, because the hours are so long sometimes and a lot of times I catch myself like getting really tired just standing up."**

For some, the job carries an added weight: the fear of workplace violence and legal repercussions. One worker in the unlicensed sector spoke about the constant anxiety of being in a precarious legal and social space, with little protection from their employer or government:

> **"Honestly, it has impacted my mental health a lot, just the fear of being incarcerated… and the possibility of a robbery occurring. It is common for dispensaries to be burglarized… I know that this isn't a long-term career for me."**

Another worker recalled a particularly distressing incident at their sister shop, where a delivery driver was robbed and shot. They shared how the company sent only two emails about it, with no discussion about safety plans or protocols. This lack of response created an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear:

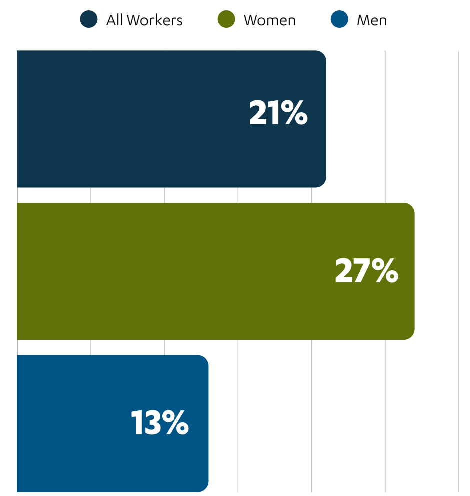
> **"I think that incident really set the tone for how work is. On a typical day, it's not as extreme, but I think the fact that those types of things are hanging over your head—like a possibility for something weird or crazy might happen—I don't know how it's going to go. And that was always a possibility for your day. I think that just made it really chaotic."**

The workers' concerns speak to the possibility that more transparent and collaborative communication and working together on safety planning might resolve some of these mental health stressors, while also allowing for developing solutions together to keep everyone safe.

Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Violence

Gender, sexuality, and race were key determinants in workers' experiences of violence, and an overall climate where more socially and economically marginalized workers felt devalued or hampered from moving up. Over a quarter (27%) of women and 13% of men reported experiences of sexual harassment on the job.

› FIGURE 31: PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL HARRASSMENT BY GENDER



One worker shared,

> **"I've been sexually harassed multiple times on the job. I've dealt with men smacking my ass. That's happened more than once."**

Being "super friendly" in what is often a very personal exchange in budtending was often misconstrued as "flirting," another worker shared, leading to unsafe situations. Workers recounted experiences where inappropriate sexual behavior is repeatedly overlooked until it escalates severely. One budtender shared a pattern of increasing harassment by a customer:

> **"He came in one time, probably inebriated on something else, and was straight up like verbally sexually harassing my coworker in front of other people. Like just out of this world. And it wasn't until that third time that he was banned."**

Others shared how these forms of harassment were not simply tolerated but perpetuated from the top down. A budtender shared:

> **"The owner was heavily sexually harassing—borderline sexually assaulting—people, which is disgusting."**

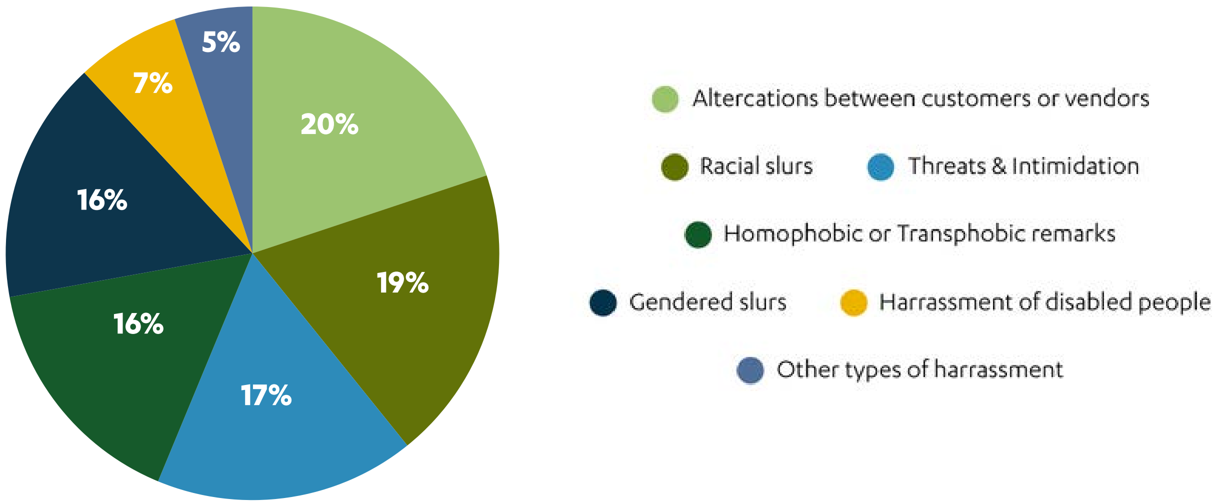
The expectation that women or femme budtenders perform in a sexually suggestive way, which had been particularly prevalent pre-legalization, persisted. One unlicensed shop worker explained,

> **"They do make our budtenders dress up in kind of sexier attire... a halter top and a metallic mini skirt... a lot of our girls were uncomfortable."**

Another worker explained that they were not against women feeling comfortable with their sexuality, but that the non-consensual nature of these practices left women dependent on performing in this way to keep their jobs.

More than 34% also experienced or witnessed racial slurs, and 28% homophobic or transphobic comments. One worker even shared how racial slurs targeted their identity were left on the walls of the workplace.

> **FIGURE 32:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO REPORTED VARYING INCIDENTS OF HARRASSMENT ON THE JOB



Many of these experiences were not due to just one of these factors, but were what we can call intersectional—where forms of discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, and/or ability harm workers in different ways. Another sales worker shared how her boss questioned her ability to perform based on her voice:

> **"My boss] made it kind of seem like my voice ...affected my customer service. Being, you know, Latina... I have an accent."**

Other Latinas described how they felt that being "brown and a woman," they were "not taken seriously."

Despite the high number of queer and trans people working in cannabis and the histories of LGBTQ+ organizing in cannabis for medical marijuana, some workers still did not feel safe disclosing their identity. One budtender shared,

> **"As someone who does identify as queer... the space can be very homophobic. I have to be careful with who I share my identity with."**

Another described how a trans coworker was not treated "with grace," and that owners and managers acted like the trans person's presence was an inconvenience or problem to be dealt with.

Workers also highlighted how even where more visible violence was not present, race, gender, and sexuality shaped hiring and everyday treatment. Multiple workers believed there was a tacit effort to hire women of color, particularly Latinas, due to their economic and social vulnerability. A budtender who herself was Latina shared:

> **"They specifically hired mostly Latinas in a very calculated power dynamic thing... girls who were willing to work their asses off for almost nothing."**

Another worker in cultivation in rural Northern California noted how the few Black workers hired were constantly subjected to demeaning attitudes from management and fired quickly for minor infractions.

From the Top Down: Managerial Approaches

The different physical and mental health hazards, including a wide spectrum of violence, raise the question of what managers and owners can do to improve workplace safety. Some workers even noted retaliation for speaking up regarding workplace safety. One retail worker called OSHA due to an unrepaired bathroom that was closed down without repair, and was leaking toxic fumes, causing headaches on the shop floor. In response, they found themselves facing consistent retaliation from managers—who had initially ignored the issue and refused to take responsibility for ensuring that the plumbing was repaired.

Another major concern with management practices was the ways that understaffing (noted in Section 2) could exacerbate any range of safety issues, from isolation and the vulnerability that it creates to unsafe production operations. One delivery driver suggested that changing staffing arrangements, including allowing delivery people to travel together, might ease risks:

> **"Driving... gets scary for me too, because some people are not quite honest and don't want to pay up... I wish I could be with somebody when I'm delivering, but they don't allow that."**

Delivery and cultivation employees also highlighted how trim quotas, delivery timing quotas, and other forms of employee speedup also ramped up safety issues. More than 60% of all delivery workers reported being pressured to conduct deliveries faster than was safe (30% most of the time and 29% some of the time).

> 60% of all delivery workers reported being pressured to conduct deliveries faster than was safe

30% reported being pressured MOST of the time

29% reported being pressured SOME of the time

The converging mental and physical health stressors, including contributing factors like speedup, seemed to play a critical role in employee turnover. As noted in Section I, more than half of all workers (53%) left their prior cannabis jobs due to unsafe or unhealthy work environments. More than 70% of workers left their jobs due to feeling overworked and undervalued. These feelings of being overworked may also align with concerns with scheduling issues, noted above, such as the expectations of being able to come in with little or no notice.

Questions of management practices and the need for more training (discussed in Section 1) open a door to understanding that despite many of the unpredictable factors in cannabis, such as robberies or police raids, there are still tangible ways to move forward and create cannabis workplaces that are safe and healthy for all, including consumers.

The Question of the Unlicensed Market

The persistence of the unlicensed market has been a significant question in California – and workers know this more than anyone. Approximately 20% of our sample worked full-time in the unlicensed retail, delivery or cultivation. 24% we spoke to who held another job in the industry at the time, and interviews revealed this often included unlicensed work. At the same time, more unlicensed workers appeared to have held just 1-2 jobs in the industry prior (54% compared to 39%), while licensed workers had held more jobs; in interviews, it was suggested that over time, many migrate towards licensed opportunities where available.

While many depend on this sector for their livelihoods, most often, when police, sheriffs, or others describe these, they are painted as hotbeds of crime. Little evidence backed the narratives of weapons, other drugs, or extraordinary trafficking. Statistically, we saw little difference in some key indicators – including wages, sexual harassment, reasons for staying in the industry (including factors like working while in school), interests in training, and most demographics - between workers in licensed and unlicensed shops.

One area where differences were common was the lower likelihood of standard operating procedures or written job descriptions in unlicensed shops. (38% in unlicensed received neither, versus 21% in licensed). In interviews, the lack of formalization of payroll and training appeared as expected:

> **"Like we didn't get any trainings like that, and I didn't expect it, because I knew going into it; I was like well, this is an unlicensed operation."**

In retail, particularly in what's commonly called "trap" shops, several described that it was more common to not check IDs or where the practices of selling flower directly from jars persist. Workers in unlicensed shops were also less likely to have training on the medical uses of cannabis.

In unlicensed cultivation, the use of piece-rate, where workers are paid by the amount they produce, was also uniquely prevalent. One worker shared,

> **When I work with unlicensed cultivators or just, you know, outdoor growers it wasn't an hourly thing. It was based on production. So however much I got done for the day is what I was going to get paid for."**

Such could be seen as contributing to the pressures to produce faster than safe, noted in Section III. Several worker health hazards were higher in unlicensed cultivation, particularly injuries with skin blisters (48% in unlicensed versus 24% in licensed), and neck/back pain (63% in unlicensed versus 38% in licensed).

But, most commonly, many we spoke to felt they could not turn to any authorities when they experienced issues like violence or harassment on the job, nor were they able to unionize. The latter may have contributed to a lack of mobility, where more than 73% described never being promoted or getting a raise in unlicensed operations (versus 59% in licensed operations).

What also became clear is that there is no one model of unlicensed shops. Another budtender shared,

"[Some are] just like mom and pop shops that have, you know, they're selling a controlled substance, but a lot of them, you know, are doing the best that they can to follow all the regulations and are really nice places... I feel like smaller shops and unregulated ones can get a little bit more judged from the outside."

Another worker described some operators as simply trying to move as much product as possible directly from growers before getting shut down.

Coming from diverse areas of the state, workers also explained that the shop's presence as unlicensed was shaped by the fact that in some municipalities in the state, there is no or very limited retail licensing. As one budtender shared,

"Where there's only one or two options as far as dispensaries, the unlicensed places kind of help bridge that gap."

Another worker shared:

"It wasn't unlicensed because the guy didn't want to get licensed. It was unlicensed because the rules keep changing, and like you know, he was like 'I tried to follow all the rules and then all of a sudden they change one thing'."

But the operator could not afford to make such changes to stay licensed. Others even shared that the lines of operation were far more blurred, and that much product passes through from licensed operations.

The data and range of experiences offered a more nuanced narrative than the sensationalist stories of raids on unlicensed operations. This is not to deny the issues within these workplaces but to suggest that there is a far wider set of realities experienced by workers, requiring deeper engagement and more conversations across sectors to develop solutions to fully transition California's market in ways that address the common hopes workers hold across licensing lines, such as serving patients and consumers and supporting longer-lasting careers.

CONCLUSION: COMING TOGETHER IN CANNABIS

Hearing from workers at the front lines makes clear that the significant potential in cannabis—from a passion for people and the plant to a diverse and energetic workforce—is matched by its deep challenges, from significant safety hurdles to a lack of consistency on wages, scheduling, and other basic practices. Across our surveys and interviews, it became clear that there were also seeds of potential ways forward already growing in the industry—a spirit of collaboration that has appeared in formal unionization processes but also everyday solidarity. Cannabis workers have shown their commitment to the industry and they ensure its success most often by showing up for each other, as well as for managers, owners, and consumers.

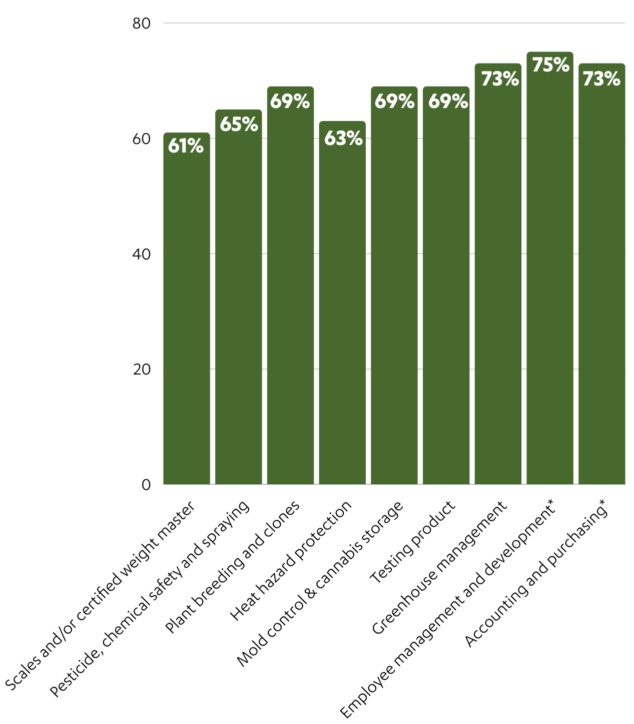
DEEPENING DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING

Despite the lack of a formalized system, cannabis industry workers consistently demonstrate enthusiasm for deeper training and professional growth. They are actively seeking opportunities to expand their skill sets and advance their careers within the sector. But few formal pathways exist to pursue such learning that can lead to opportunities in and beyond cannabis.

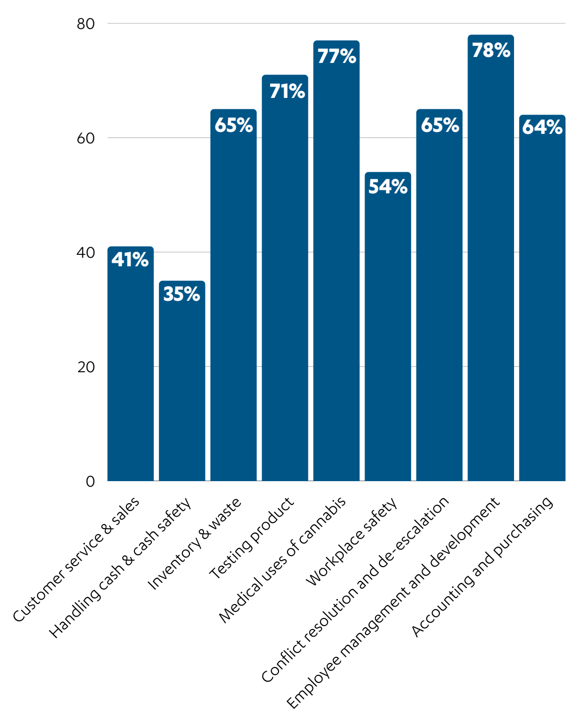
For cultivation workers, interest was high for multiple kinds of training; the primary interest was greenhouse management (75%), as well as plant breeding, mold control, and testing products (69%).

For retail workers, the primary interest in training was the medical uses of cannabis (77%), testing products (71%), and inventory and waste (65%).

› **FIGURE 33:** AREAS IN WHICH **CULTIVATION** WORKERS EXPRESSED WANTING MORE IN-DEPTH TRAINING



› **FIGURE 34:** AREAS IN WHICH **RETAIL** WORKERS EXPRESSED WANTING MORE IN-DEPTH TRAINING

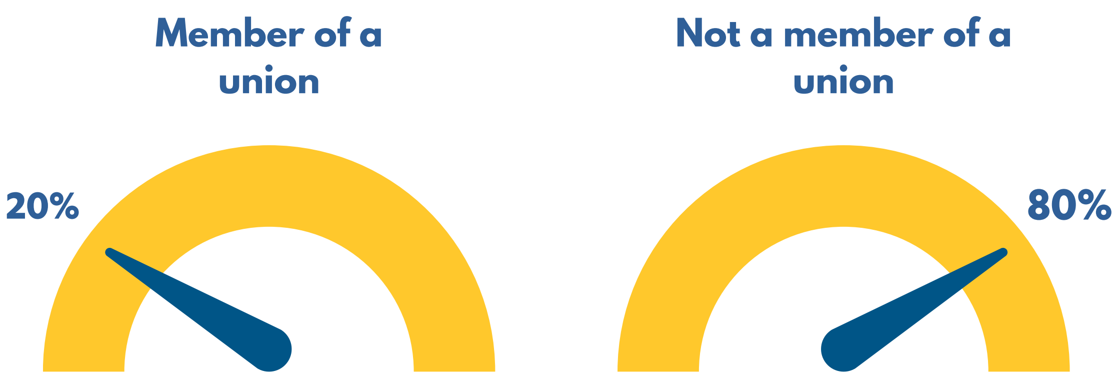


At each of our worker “seshes,” expanding training opportunities were always in the top three areas where workers would invest, alongside better wages and health benefits. And in fact, in the largest event (126 participants) we did, training placed first. Given the immense knowledge already developed through grassroots science and health work for the past decades, we can also surmise that formal training programs - including potentially community college coursework, apprenticeships, or certifications - would benefit highly from the leadership of cannabis workers. Their willingness to teach others has been clear and offers real opportunities to build:

> **“Consumers need to understand that their expectations for a budtender is extreme. We aren’t doctors, or trained in any special way besides each person doing their own research.... My customer interactions are literally just tutoring at this point.”**

THE UNION DIFFERENCE

› **FIGURE 35:** PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO REPORTED BEING A MEMBER OF A LABOR UNION



Just over 50% of workers we spoke to said that they had significant workplace concerns to raise with their employer and manager, but chose not to do so. Among those who did raise a concern in the last 12 months, 46% went directly to their employer, while 13% went directly to a union rep. Those who went to the union representative had a much higher percentage of getting their concern addressed.

43% brought up concerns to a supervisor or manager

13% brought up concerns to a union representative

7% brought up concerns to someone else

46% of workers did not bring up concerns when they had them

One frontline receptionist shared how a new, younger manager had been unsure of the job responsibilities and that their lack of understanding had caused “a lot of friction between a lot of people.” She explained that:

> **“I felt uncomfortable to talk to him, I made sure that I would have a union rep present so that anything that I said was not misconstrued or taking out of context.”**

This experience stood out to her:

> **“I’ve never really had to work a job that way where I’ve had to have somebody kind of like representative be there, present… I think that it’s nice that they’re there and actually when we actually use them as a resource, we’re getting the benefit that we are contributing to.”**

In other words, unions have become an important way for employees to communicate their concerns—from safety to pay, and even at times helping to provide or recommend training for managers and supervisors.

Approximately 20% of those we surveyed were union members—a significantly high percentage when we consider that the rest of the state’s private sector unionization rate was roughly 11% in 2024 (hovering near 6% in retail work or a much lower 1.4% in agriculture). The largest portion of these were members of the United Food and Commercial Workers, followed by Teamsters—each having varying locals, or chapters based in a given geography, that include cannabis workers in their mix of industries.

Aside from the ability to address workplace concerns, the “union difference” for workers showed up most in mobility, according to our survey. While many aspects of our survey and interviews showed the challenges workers faced in experiencing growth or mobility, 69% of those who are in a union indicated they have received a raise at their current job, compared to 50% of those who are not in a union. Workers detailed in interviews union contracts that included annual raises of $1 per year. Union workers were also significantly more likely to receive health benefits: 65% of cannabis workers receive health insurance through their employer, compared to 41% who are non-union members, as such benefits have been written into numerous contracts.[31]

What accounts for the transformationally high rate of cannabis? In part, unions played a critical role in the shaping of the industry’s legalization, organizing workers in the medical cannabis industry in key areas of the state such as Los Angeles, Sacramento, Long Beach and Oakland/San Francisco, even during the period from 2011 to 2017 when the industry was growing rapidly. In the leadup to that, unions also won important protections for workers that are unique to the industry, including the requirement that the industry hire employees only (and not contractors) for key roles like delivery, preventing Uber or Doordash-style policies that make unionization challenging and tend to lower working conditions. Secondly, policies protect the right to form a union in cannabis by encouraging “labor peace agreements, or mutual agreements that employers will not interfere in unionization and that unions will maintain a peace towards not striking. These policies are in part meant to protect the safety and integrity of the supply chain. But it’s also important to recognize that unions have frequently sat down with employers to build legislative solutions for policy and helped advance more comprehensive efforts to shape regulation in ways that make sense to owner-operators as well, including in some cases supporting social equity organizing and training efforts.

SOLIDARITY, FROM THE PEOPLE TO THE PLANT

Where workers have not had the chance to unionize, 52% of workers said they are interested in coming together with their coworkers to talk about workplace concerns, and 13% said they didn't know. The formal structure of the union seemed to dovetail with another common element of workplace culture in cannabis: solidarity. More than 66% of workers said they knew most, if not all, of the employees at their worksite. Workers shared how they were also supporting each other in different ways that included spotting each other on cash and sharing food. One retail security worker shared,

> **"We all helped each other out. At lunches when some of us were short on money, we would – or we would all go together, get a big pizza or we would all do – what are we going to eat today?"**

The same security worker shared how, even though they were formally excluded, other workers informally looped them into celebrations and care.

One individual explained the importance of this culture of compassion and collaboration in their workplace, stating:

> **"We communicated real good with each other. I definitely felt closer and safer talking about things with my coworkers. It wasn't just about the work; we could be open about stuff going on in our lives, and that made the environment feel a lot more supportive. You could bring things up, and people would listen."**

These relationships among coworkers reflect the diversity and depth of experiences noted at the start of this report. Another budtender shared:

> **"There were so many beautiful, brilliant, interesting, unique, wonderful people... I loved my coworkers, and they loved me back. It was a really great, welcoming environment. We would laugh, listen to music, and just chill together. I wouldn't have expected such a fun and diverse group in this industry.... We were like a little community. We all had our own roles and responsibilities, but we found ways to make the time go by quicker together. Whether it was listening to music or joking around, it felt like we were in it together."**

At times, this culture of solidarity meant coming together in instances where they had not yet unionized. This was especially true in unlicensed workplaces. As one cultivation worker shared:

> **"Sometimes, you know, we would be advocating for ourselves, and that really brought us together. There were moments when we were both getting paid less than we were promised, and when we finally talked it out, we decided to go to management together and negotiate. That experience of having to fight for what we were owed really bonded us, and it showed me how important it is to stand together in the workplace. There was this sense of solidarity, especially during tough times."**

Some of this solidarity was built by a shared culture regarding cannabis, as well as experiences of supporting those outside of the workplace with medical cannabis and related health needs. Several described how they cared for family facing terminal and other illnesses through cannabis, deepening their relationship to the work. One worker shared:

> **"My dad's been smoking his whole life. Weed got him through the pains. I have had family members with cancer, they went through all the medications. We ultimately – cannabis ultimately helped them through it... they didn't necessarily survive through it in all cases. I have a couple who are in remission. Not saying cannabis did it, but that – ultimately that natural medicine is what is helping people."**

Deep relationships also translated and linked to the passion many had for the plant itself, which shaped their desire to improve conditions for consumers, workers, and all who participate in this economy. A young worker described:

> **"My relationship to the plant, though, is very personal. I find that just being around the plant energetically is healing. I find that having access to the plant where people can engage with it, smell it, touch it—that is one of the fundamental core values of cannabis and what it does for people... So I think, yeah, my relationship with the plant is very personable, and it goes deeper, that I feel like kind of a steward or a champion for it in this industry, more than it's a job."**

The passion for the plant might also inform the ways many workers quoted in Section I described their off-the-job time learning this science, trading knowledge of techniques, seeds, and plant science among other workers, through the internet, and other mechanisms.

What's a Good Manager?

A sense of connection and solidarity—and even shared mission—also shaped stronger relationships among managers and workers. One worker noted that learning from their manager's grounded understanding of the trade was invaluable:

> **"Like we would talk about all these things and like, he was definitely motivated not only to like make a profit, but he was motivated to like, understand these plants and like, grow them. That's why he was so set on doing these like organic practices, because he's like, I'm not just trying to pump out plants and, like, products."**

This worker also shared how their manager innovated in regard to practices that would lead to more sustainability, including solutions regarding the "overlooked" issue of leaves left behind by trimming and how to recycle them. He also asked workers to track their own experiences with the plant via a notebook and gathered knowledge of which strains produced different effects. Even further, workers were also given more "free rein" in designing production processes and gradually attaining leadership in different roles. In the opinion of the worker, this relationship to the plant, as well as the education provided to workers and the input sought from them, led to a better product that was not only well-liked by customers but was also "very clean."

Further, the small and intimate nature of this sector, combined with some of the affinities described in this report, meant that there were also many moments of manager-worker solidarity in seeking better working conditions. For one budtender, this spirit had permeated early medical cannabis shops but was under threat with commercialization:

> **"We had room to grow.. For them to have been a newer company at the time, I would say the unity and the guidance in the beginning was definitely right. They made people feel welcome to come to each other, talk, get an understanding. That was in the beginning. But then you also have the—like with all big companies, in my opinion—you get to a point where they stop really listening to the people beneath them, and it's kind of like, my show, my way, let's go."**

From a sales worker's perspective, employees succeed in their job by having time built in to attend to details relevant to accounting and customer relations, and by having an open door to managers regarding mistakes made and resolving them together. As the worker put it:

> **"I think that would be my biggest thing is, like, oh, like, someone let me do six orders and then told me that it needed to be like a different pricing, and I can't just, like, easily go and fix that. So it would just be the fact that, like, me and my other coworker are trying to get the other people in the sales team on the same page, to be a little more thorough... If it's not something I can easily, like, talk to someone about, or if I'm trying to, like. make sure I'm wording it right, and I'm not, like, seeming like I'm attacking someone... I'll go... like my boss and he'll either help me, like, word it in a way where it doesn't, like, step on anybody's toes or sound too harsh or he'll just, like, talk to them. [Together] we'll just address it there and then call it a day."**

One manager shared how their experiences at the frontlines, first in a part-time position, were critical in understanding what does not work. This included aforementioned practices with remote management from a supervisor in Barbados, overseeing a warehouse via surveillance technology, and a rigid top-down hierarchy. But as they moved into another company and position as overseeing brand ambassadors (which included elements of preparing products for the field), they sought a different approach:

> **"As a manager. I was getting paid amazing, but I also felt bad for my team... I'm still working as an employee side by side with them in most cases unless I have too much documentation or something like that. The wages that some of them were getting, even though it was minimum wage for the company or whatever, I felt like they deserved more, and I had to fight so hard for some of them to even get a raise, and ultimately they just let a lot of people go because they weren't willing to give the raise, because the employees started complaining, like, hey, I'm busting my tail."**

Interviewees, survey data- and prior research suggest - that cannabis companies have engaged in practices where they began to hire many managers from external fields with legalization. (And in fact, we found that managers' lengths of time in the industry were not significantly higher than other employees.) But the experiences we heard offer the possibility that promoting from within for more diverse home-grown managers may prove of significant value to the business overall.

WHAT COMES NEXT

About 30% of workers we spoke to were employed in social equity businesses, which are operated (per state and municipal licensing standards) by those affected by the war on drugs in one form or another. But interviews also warned that diversity may be shrinking and the ownership further consolidating. At least 16% of workers saw ownership change hands in their tenure at their current place of employment (and 11% were not sure), evidencing an industry experiencing rapid changes. (To note, at least 66% of workers said they know the owner of the business for which they work.) Many workers noted in both seshes and interviews that more can be done to ensure diversity in ownership, especially as the new "C-Suite" culture takes hold:

> **"The cannabis industry is a growing industry that has shops that care about their workers, but there are also shops that don't care about their workers. There are negative and positive aspects of the cannabis industry. First there needs to be more diversity among the CEO's or owners for inclusivity to happen."**

Changes in the industry have affected workers' ability to learn and experiment with different techniques, and commercialization has also meant following trends within larger corporate agriculture. A cultivation worker described:

> **"I think there's always been a want and a desire and an effort to be more sustainable, more permaculture, more regenerative, you know, closed loops with some of the small farmers. I've also, you know, in my time really seen it go in a very big Big Ag direction...with the expansion of monoculture farming."**

As others also shared, commercialization in some retail settings has threatened to reduce contact time with patients, to force speedup, and to make workers push products (especially ones with higher THC concentrations) as marketing rather than as genuine care. As one worker shared bluntly:

> **"There are too many tech bros in the industry that try too hard to make cannabis this 'cool' thing when it's just a medicinal herb. It's why cannabis stores are starting to look like Apple Stores. The industry needs to stop bringing in people who are about business over the quality of the product."**

But across our different data (including our worker seshes), the solutions in cannabis seem close at hand, making the industry's development less of an impossibility and more an ever-present reality. As a whole, cannabis workers' experiences shared throughout this project continually brought us back to two elements: people and the plant. As one cultivator shared:

> **"If we didn't have cannabis to link us together, we would never meet each other, know each other, or anything like that, but cannabis brings us together, because that's the common ground that we really realize that we're not as different as we think, and a lot of our stories are very aligned, just different scenarios. We judge each other naturally as human beings, and cannabis brings a lot of people you would never expect to be together, together."**

Indeed, this project constantly reminded us that if it begins with listening—to the genuine, human experiences of frontline workers, not to mention managers, operators, patient-consumers, and others—and with a commitment to bringing people together, then meaningful understanding and transformation can follow.

From those seeds of dialogue, we have the potential to grow genuine solutions for a California cannabis industry that cultivates opportunity and well-being for all.

For Policymakers & Regulators

Provide licensing incentives (such as fee remission) or tax breaks for employers that pay workers above a living wage (regional, but rarely below $25/hr) and offer benefits.

Develop pathways to worker-owned cooperatives in licensing structure and within the funding mechanisms for equity (i.e., local grants from the DCC).

Shift from criminal to civil enforcement in cannabis, and take guidance from workers in enforcement. Halt the involvement of police and sheriff enforcement and move to a civil inspection model that facilitates co-enforcement alongside workers and protects workers who know the issues best. Include pathways to legal market job opportunities.

Mandate integrative, certified training for all cannabis workers—with state support. These can cover essential knowledge about cannabis biomedical/health properties, cannabinoids, terpenes, cultivation (including sustainability), safe handling, and workers' rights. Provide tax incentives for employers who partner with apprenticeship programs.

Support public (community college or nonprofit university) courses or certifications in cannabis studies, ensuring that workers can gain comprehensive and accredited knowledge and even access cooperative options.

For Employers

Ensure retention and business success by increasing wages to a living wage and adding benefits. Rather than viewing labor costs as a burden, employers should recognize that higher pay and benefits, such as paid time off, parental care, sick leave, health insurance, and dental insurance, offer a significant return on investment.

Strengthen communication and collaboration with employees on health and safety. Work to develop joint solutions that can include hazard mapping, de-escalation, and mental health supports.

Develop clear mobility pathways that hire from within and incentivize success, beyond product. Tap into worker talent in various higher-paying and different roles. Encourage cross-training, including in vertically integrated organizations, as workers thrive in these settings.

Labor and Community Organizations

Develop peer-to-peer short educational content and longer-term workshops training on worker issues via social media and other easy-to-access channels, regarding topics like harassment, asking for a job description or raise, break basics, and more.

Strengthen partnerships with unions and equity groups through co-developing worker cooperative solutions. Work together to develop alternative worker governance models and open ownership pathways, especially in cultivation and manufacturing.

Build towards labor or community-based worker hubs that specifically reach out to unlicensed workers, including providing labor protections and pathways to licensed opportunities. Labor unions or community-based organizations providing services like expungement would be ideal to lead this work, assisting in the filing of wage/hour claims and pursuing individual employment harassment cases, providing know your rights training, and linking to potential certification programs.

Community Members

KNOW WHO YOU ARE BUYING FROM	ASK YOUR RETAIL WORKER QUESTIONS	TIP YOUR RETAIL AND DELIVERY WORKERS	LOOK FOR THE UNION AND EQUITY LABEL	SUPPORT INITIATIVES THAT EMPOWER AND PROTECT WORKERS

A Long-term Vision for Collaboration

Construct high-road formal apprenticeships that connect employers, unions, and public higher education institutions, specifically addressing the wraparound needs of formerly incarcerated communities and providing structured pathways for upward mobility.

Invest in public education on cannabis through a worker-led "promotora" model via community health worker certification. This dissemination model, piloted in Latin America, empowers workers to provide culturally-relevant education on cannabis uses to communities and can even be integrated into peer-to-peer worker training. This model builds a critical bridge between relevant communities and state agencies, especially given mistrust of these institutions when it comes to drug education.

Build toward a worker-driven model of social responsibility that engages workers in co-enforcement, creates a premium for high-road employers, and gives unions and community equity groups a seat at the table. Include an independent oversight board that engages unions, community members, and employers in being able to monitor workplaces and conducting audits, while setting overall standards that match industry realities. These can help temper/shape regulations that often seem arbitrary to employers while also supporting expanding the economic impact and opportunities from cannabis.

Sustain supply chain relationships that create a market premium for good actors and sanctions for repeat violators who then lose access to key retailers, and that give smaller worker-led enterprises a fair chance to succeed in an increasingly consolidated sector.

APPENDIX A: Methodology

This project was developed with an awareness that policy, industry, and community decisions about cannabis were being made with little data-backed understanding of the labor conditions and aspirations of cannabis workers. For such data to be actionable, it would need the direct leadership of cannabis workers; otherwise, it would risk replicating their relative invisibility. The California Cannabis Worker Collab was launched, rooted in the research justice approach practiced by the UCLA Labor Center and Center for Advancement of Racial Equity (CARE) at Work developed by the DataCenter. This model is a “strategic framework that seeks to transform structural inequities in research” by centering community voices as experts and leveraging different forms of knowledge, co-producing knowledge that, from its inception, can support social change.

With the generous support of the Department of Cannabis Control (DCC)’s Academic Research grants, we had the key funding to build this project. As a first step, we built a small and nimble research team housed at the UCLA Labor Center with the partnership of CARE at Work. Organizations representing cannabis workers and stakeholders tied to cannabis social equity were invited to participate in a community advisory board that, from the onset guided the process of developing the goals, scope, and strategy for this research. (For a full list of partners, see subsequent section).

Community advisor organizations were then invited to participate in a series of conversations to develop the California Cannabis Worker Surveys, in which worker-members and advocates from their groups were invited to facilitate conversations that directly shaped not just the questions asked, but the response options and format. After piloting the survey and taking feedback from workers, a final survey of more than 150 questions was created, that covered Job Background (entry, exit, duration, etc), Training, Supervision, Scheduling/Pay/Benefits, Career Ladder, Hardship, Work Conditions and Challenges, Health and Safety, Business Characteristics, and Demographics.

Targets for the survey were set based on estimates of the number of legal and unlicensed shops; the former were created from a review of licensing data provided by the DCC, and the latter using geographic data analysis via Google. This information was utilized to understand the geographic and numerical concentration estimates of cannabis businesses, and with this data, quotas for key regions in the state were built to build a representative sample.

We expanded our team by hiring 20 surveyor researchers with industry experience, located throughout the state, who would lead the implementation and interpretation of the survey. This team included numerous current workers with a range of cultivation, retail, and delivery experience, with local teams built in direct proportion to our established regional quotas set for a representative sample.

The 20-plus members of the community surveyor team were essential to guiding the outreach strategies to be able to reach cannabis workers where they are: in their workplaces, cannabis events, community sites, and more. The team met on a biweekly basis for more than a year, working in regional teams while sharing strategies, feedback, and ideas. Understanding the need for a social media presence and the opportunity to conduct education that could support cannabis workers, the team also launched the Cannabis Worker Collab Instagram and a multi-month Cannabis Workers Know Instagram Live series. This series included more than 25 episodes that covered a range of themes and featured engaging interviews with workers, owner-operators, and community groups, with more than 500+ followers and more than 2,500 impressions a month. Surveyors visited more than 425 cannabis worksites (including some multiple times) and 70-plus cannabis events.

To create data that was relevant and engaging, including getting feedback and continuing to hone the questions and overall plan for the project, the initial 700-plus surveys were conducted one-on-one by surveyors in person, via Zoom, or on the phone. The remaining 400 or so included online surveyors, after we had perfected our process for screening out potential bots and survey "farms." The risks of this were especially high as each participant was offered a $40 online gift card to compensate them for their time completing 150-plus questions. Survey completion time could last between 30 minutes to 1 hour, and all workers were also given a resource page at the end to help connect them to agencies relevant to issues raised in the survey, such as support for sexual harassment or information on mental health supports.

As we reached our goal of 1,111 surveys, meeting our regional quotas, our worker-surveyors and community advisors analyzed key themes from the data and identified the overarching findings, as well as the key areas where deeper answers were needed. This informed the creation of a semi-structured interview guide that directly built upon our findings to gain deeper insight into the situation of cannabis workers and specific policy-related questions that workers pointed to as urgent, including experiences with training, harassment, health and safety on the job, and specific equity questions related to race, gender, status as parents, and other aspects of their work. We then reached back out to those surveyed via social media and in-person networking to speak to 51 workers in interviews that lasted from 1 to 2.5 hours.

Data analysis included training cannabis workers in coding and interpreting results, though ultimately, due to funding logistics, we did have to shift to a smaller team of worker-researchers. Findings were shared through six interactive "Cannabis Worker Seshes" gallery walks in the target regions that engaged more than 210 cannabis workers and community members. Each "sesh" featured a walk-through, guided tour of the visual data, recorded testimonials, and immersive activities that highlighted survey and interview data. These interactive, multi-hour experiences solicited feedback on what workers thought were the most important or relevant aspects of our findings, what resonated and what felt extraneous or needed further research, and importantly, what policy recommendations emerged for them from this data and their experience. We also had resources available for workers from different agencies and organizations, based on the needs expressed in the survey and interview.

One of our interactive feedback activities was a "tip jar" installation, where each jar represented a workplace priority: Better Wages, Deeper Training, Health Benefits, Increasing Job Safety, More Career Opportunities, and Stronger Security. Across five of the six events where we hosted the full installation, the Better Wages jar consistently collected the most money.

The final writing of this report, incorporating the survey, interviews, gallery walk, and feedback data, was led by the cannabis worker surveyors and UCLA Labor Center and CARE at Work researchers. The policy recommendations crafted from these conversations were then vetted by our community advisory board, which also had oversight on the overall presentation of the final data and approach taken in this report.

This report is a product of nearly three years of intensive collaboration, and is indebted to the team of 21 worker-researchers, 3 UCLA Labor Center-affiliated graduate student researchers, 2 undergraduate researchers, and 14 community advisory board organizations (and their multiple members who supported), as well as numerous administrative, communications, and support staff at the UCLA Labor Center and CARE at Work. It would not have been possible without the thousands of workers who took their time to share their stories, struggles, and aspirations for a better industry, as well as for not just a cannabis industry but a California that works for all.

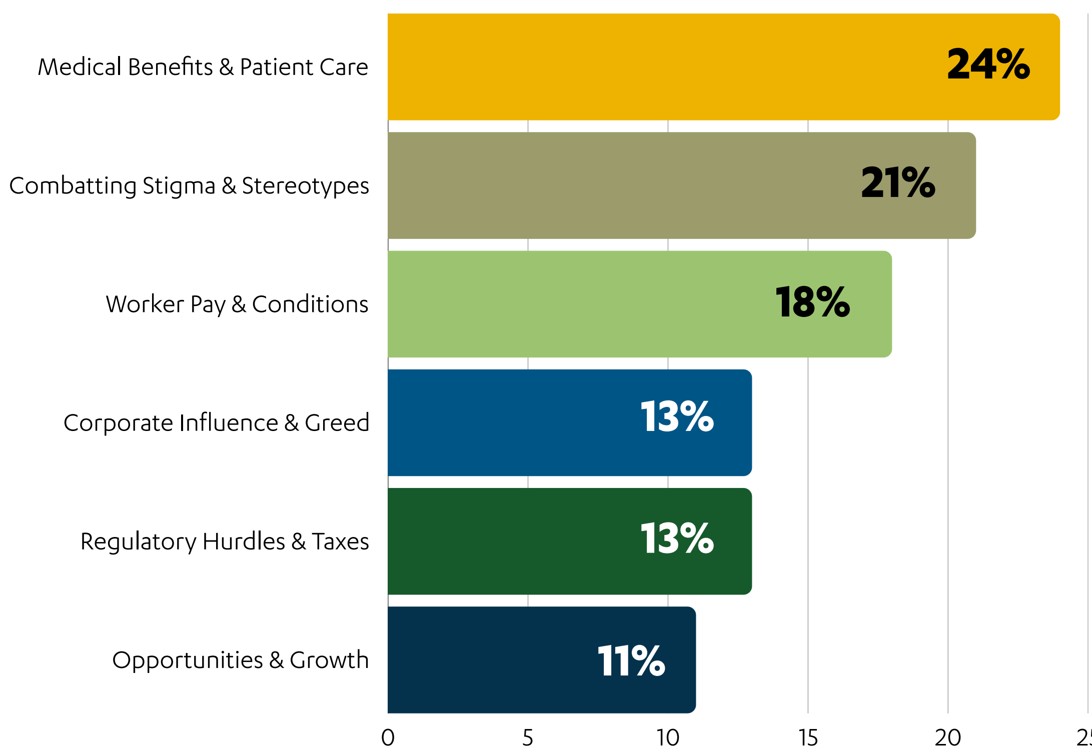
CANNABIS WORKER RESPONSES

Nearly 70% of survey participants answered the final question in the survey:

"What do you think the public should know about cannabis?"

From the 700+ responses, six themes were identified based on recurring keywords utilizing a word cloud through machine learning. These were then verified through a manual search of all the quotes. The chart below ranks the prevalence of each theme; and the following section features a selection of representative quotes to ensure that we give space for worker's voices and what they wanted to convey directly to the public.

> **FIGURE 36:** EMERGING KEY THEMES FROM CANNABIS WORKER RESPONSES



Combatting Stigma & Stereotypes

“[Cannabis] is just like any other industry [but it] gets a bad rap because, for so long, it was criminalized. But there are very dedicated and ethical people that work in this industry that want fairness and justice and to break the stigma and stereotypes about it[...]”

“A lot of people have stereotypes on budtenders that they are just stoners. We are not Cheech and Chong. Budtenders are some of the hardest working people I know. Some of us are using this job to fuel our passions (actors, etc) This is the most emotionally draining job I've ever had and I put up with it everyday without letting it get to me which is hard.”

“The cannabis industry and everyone involved in it deserves more credit/positive acknowledgement than they receive. Scientific or medical integrity isn’t appreciated as it should be. Because it’s federally illegal it’s been difficult for people to get accessible AND credible education on cannabis[...]Stigmas are created for a reason[...]”

Medicinal Benefits & Patient Care

“[...]We do genuinely care. It's not as easy as people think it is, but it is incredibly rewarding, especially when helping out medicinal patients. We can really make a difference.”

“It's not always about getting high. It's about getting healed.”

“[Cannabis is] not much different than [other] recreational forms of consumption but it's tough because of the medical standpoint. The two worlds/stances coming together in this one space. I don't think recreational consumption is bad but it shouldn't discredit the legitimate medicinal reasons that people consume too.”

Worker Pay & Conditions

“It is a serious job that requires accuracy and hard work[...] Workers need to be treated with a lot more respect. When the public is shopping, they should behave the way they would in any state regulated establishment.”

“As budtenders [...] we like helping people, however the behind the scenes with employers, makes it hard to serve the community. There are some dispensaries that do not deserve [their license...]”

“Consumers need to understand that their expectation for a budtender is extreme. We aren’t doctors, or trained in any special way besides each person doing their own research. I urge the public to do the research before coming in. My customer interactions are literally just tutoring at this point.”

Corporate Influence & Greed

"[Cannabis] is one of the safest substances that is yet the most highly taxed and regulated here. It is doing a disservice. It is potentially a waste free product but because of packaging, creates so much waste. Not enough education on a federal level (industrial applications that can be really helpful for global issues like climate). We need to get smarter about it."

"Where it is now seems like it is very much corporate because it takes so much money and power to make it in the cannabis business, which leads to a lot of inequality throughout the industry. As great as it is that it has become legalized[...] it's as corrupt as most retail corporations."

"Majority of the people running this industry don't care about equity, social justice, medicinal usage, or the impact that cannabis has had on the lives of people. They only care about making profits in a new industry and taking advantage of the lack of regulations in how employees are treated."

Regulatory Hurdles & Taxes

"In my opinion the taxes are ridiculous and it would be really cool to see where all this tax money is going to. It doesn't seem like it's being used to make LA/CA cleaner, safer or better, so the public should be inquiring more."

"[...]Taxes are gonna keep going up if people continue to vote for these tax hikes. There is a lot of knowledge to be had about the products you're consuming. it's important to understand the laws surrounding cannabis and to know your brands if you want to have the best experience possible"

"It is not perfect, nothing ever is, but the industry is continuing to grow slowly. The [only] things holding it back are the compliance laws and black market cannabis, which is thriving more than ever."

Opportunities & Growth

"It's what you make it. There's a lot of opportunities in cannabis. You just have to find your opportunity"

"[...]People end up staying because of the good relationships they build with other workers. It should be the same with the management staff."

"It's a great job to get to know your community !! We need to have better benefits and pay to make this job a career instead of a gig :)"

PARTING THOUGHTS

It's become a bit of cliché at this point to talk about the California dream, and all its contradictions. We often hear of cannabis through this lens: green entrepreneurial investment, progressive possibilities, innovation and equity. And, on the other hand, the burden of high taxes, over-complex regulations and impossible rents hamstringing potential.

But, what we often miss in the California story is the workers who cultivate the fields, services and relationships upon which these dreams rely. And cannabis is no different. Part of what motivated this project is a hope to amplify untold stories of how innovation, ideas, and imagination defining cannabis - from production to patient care - have relied on the extraordinary efforts of workers. It is this labor force who must navigate the hardships of high costs of living and wage theft. It is these workers who have stared down the barrels of guns – including from police and sheriffs – and lost livelihoods in their commitment to support people and the plant.

If there is California cannabis dream to be realized, it must include the vision and dreams of workers. It requires some of our most unique assets as a state – labor and grassroots justice movements, community colleges, sustainability experts and more. It asks us to move beyond the ideas that for one of us to win others have to lose – or that innovation requires inequality. It requires us to remember that to truly succeed, we cannot leave anyone behind – not unlicensed workers, not those still locked up due to the drug war, not the youth with the backpacks who once carted weed across the state nor the indigenous communities who have long tended the lands upon which we plant.

The good news is that when we listen to workers, we can see that a growing economy that provides opportunity, solidarity and care altogether isn't so far away. This project is built on such relations. It hinged upon our 14 powerful labor and equity community advisor partner organizations who collaborated upon a vision and guided it. It thrived due to the 21 inventive and collaborative worker - researchers and surveyors from across the industry who built every part of this project, including my rigorous and brilliant co-authors, as well as our determined research analysts and students. It is indebted to behind the scenes support of all the UCLA Labor Center and IRLE, not to mention the supportive staff at sesh sites. It grew from the patient funding by the Department of Cannabis Control.

Most impressively, it was only possible with the time and care of 1,111 surveyees, 50+ interviewees and countless others who dialogued deeply with us in dispensaries, cultivation sites, and diverse events throughout the state.

So, from the depths of my heart, my sincerest appreciation to each and every person (and plant) who built with us the first-ever California Cannabis Worker Survey. These pages are just the start: the story that comes next, the world we cultivate from these seeds, is up to us together. And if the last three years have taught me anything it's that only our imagination can hold us back, and our interconnections will hold us together as we forge a better future.

In solidarity,

Visiting Researcher, UCLA Labor Center
Assistant Professor, Urban Sociology & Policy @ CSU Long Beach

END NOTES

1. License categories include retail (sometimes including delivery), delivery, manufacturing, cultivation, distribution, testing and consumption lounges; as of 2023, of the 58 counties and 483 municipalities in California, only 240 approved any cannabis businesses of any form. California State Auditor's Office. 2023. "2023-116: Local Cannabis Permitting." **https://www.auditor.ca.gov/reports/2023-116/**
2. ERA Economics LLC. 2025. California Cannabis Market Outlook 2024 Report. California Department of Cannabis Control. Published at: **https://cannabis.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/03/California-Cannabis-Market-Outlook-FNL.pdf**
3. Note that these numbers are just one estimate, though an official one commissioned by the DCC. See ERA Economics LLC 2025.
4. Robert, Chris. 2025. "Legal California cannabis production increases by double digits, report says." MJBiz Daily. **https://mjbizdaily.com/legal-california-cannabis-production-grows-but-illicit-market-thrives/**
5. CDTFA. 2025. California Tax Revenues. Accessed April 2025. **https://www.cdtfa.ca.gov/dataportal/dataset.htm?url=CannabisTaxRevenues**
6. Black, Lester. 2025. "'Complete failure': California pot industry hits another grim milestone." SFGate. **https://www.sfgate.com/cannabis/article/complete-failure-calif-pot-industry-dead-licenses-20165785.php**
7. ERA Economics LLC 2025.
8. ERA Economics LLC 2025.
9. Rowe Policy and Media (Forthcoming). Lessons Learned and Best Practices for Suppressing Cannabis Businesses. Produced for the LA Department of Cannabis Regulation.
10. Lupkin, Sydney. "Could legal weed make you sick? Here's how California tries to keep it safe." NPR. **https://www.npr.org/2025/03/24/nx-s1-5239985/marijuana-recreational-weed-safe-contaminants-california**
11. Barcott B and Downs D. 2025. Vangst Jobs Report 2024. Vangst. **https://www.vangst.com/2024-jobs-report**
12. For example, see: The Guardian. July 28, 2023. "Trafficking Victims Endured 'Horrible Conditions' in US Illegal Drug Operation." **https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jul/28/california-human-trafficking-illegal-marijuana-business**
13. Chlala, Robert. (2020.) "Misfit medicine and queer geographies: The diverse economy and politics of cannabis in carceral Los Angeles." Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space 38(7-8): 1180–1197.
14. Chlala, 2020.
15. Chlala, Robert. (forthcoming). "Cannabis and the Undercommons of Care: Producing Fugitive Value in Punitive Los Angeles." ACME Critical Geographies Journal.
16. Chlala, Robert, Mallinson, D.J., & Hannah, A.L. (2024). Green Rush: The Rise of Medical Marijuana in the United States. NYU Press.
17. Johnson, Hans et al. 2025. "California's Population: Factsheet." Public Policy Institute of Caliofrnia. **https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-population/**
18. **https://labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov/data/oes-employment-and-wages.html**
19. See: **https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/06**

20. While many workers commute for work, we should consider this into the context that cannabis businesses are particularly unevenly distributed in the state due to local control. Under current regulations, counties and cities can choose to either license or ban cannabis, so work concentrates in a divergent manner.
21. According to the California Department of Industrial Relations (DIR), the following are some practices by employers that are considered wage theft: being paid less than the minimum wage; restricting workers from taking meal breaks, rest breaks, and/or preventative cool down breaks; not paying workers agreed upon wages such as overtime; owners and managers stealing tips; not accruing and not allowing workers to take paid sick leave; not reimbursing workers for business expenses; unlicensed deductions from paychecks; bounced paychecks; and not receiving wages in a timely manner. See California Department of Industrial Relations, “Examples of Wage Theft,” accessed August 8, 2024, **https://www.dir.ca.gov/dlse/Examples_of_Wage_Theft.html.**
22. "Wage Theft," Los Angeles Worker Center Network, accessed August 8, 2024, **https://laworkercenternetwork.org/wage-theft/.**
23. California Department of Industrial Relations, “Wages, Breaks, and Retaliation,” accessed August 8, 2024, **https://www.dir.ca.gov/smallbusiness/Wages-Breaks-and-Retaliation.htm.**
24. Sharma, P., Stepick, L., Shadduck-Hernández, J., & Waheed, S. (2022). Time theft in the Los Angeles retail sector: The need for new labor standards and a fair workweek. Labor Studies Journal, 47(1), 28-55.
25. See also Chlala, 2019.
26. Chlala, 2025.
27. **https://www.shine.lighting/products/cannabis-grow-lights/**
28. **https://www.insurancejournal.com/news/east/2023/11/29/749766.htm**
29. **https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10777608/**
30. For example, see: **https://www.kcrw.com/news/shows/greater-la/weed-gaza-hammer/cannabis-robberies**
31. Collective bargaining contracts negotiated by workers can include workers not just in one work location, but in the case of multi-location, multi-license operators like Stiizy or Eaze, they can be negotiated and applied to numerous sites at once.

Photos courtesy of Canva and iStock.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Advisory Board

Jim Araby & Zach Gayner
UFCW Local 5
Maribel McKinze, Brent Beltran & Grant Tom
UFCW Local 135
Andrew Hausermann, Joe Hernandez, Matt Bell, Ciara Hall, Darion Wilson & Chase
UFCW Local 324
Reggie Edwards, Kathy Finn, Ed Guttierez, Danny Garcia & Bertha Rodriguez
UFCW Local 770
Ana Gaeta & Yesenia
UFCW Local 1167
Hector Saldivar, Mark Ramos & the SPUR Crew
UFCW Local 1428
Kristin Heidelbach
UFCW Western States
Adam Vine & Tauheedah Shakur
Cage Free Cannabis
Malaki Saku Amen
California Urban Partnership/Institute for MORE
Lanese Martin & Eliana Green
Hood Incubator (closed)
Felicia Carbajal, Danny Rodriguez, Traz Co, Ollie Pettit-Perez, Alex Tron
The Social Impact Center
Whitney Beattie, Nina Parks & Amber Senter
Supernova Women
Abraham Gallegos & Randy Korgan
Teamsters Local 1932

Sesh Collaborators

Thank you for the generously donated space and support in realizing these events.

Cannabis Capitol
Club Kindness
Crisp Lounge
CSULB Sociology
Groundfloor Echo Park
Life Development Group
Meadow SF
PuffCo

Other Supporters

Berkeley Cannabis Research Center
Ishaq Ali
Timeka Drew
Toni Forge, Esq
Chevon Holmes
Kirby Johnson
Dr. Kojo Karam
Darius Kemp
Clara Mejia-Ortiz
Dr. Manuel Pastor
Dr. Paulo Pereira Jr.
Dr. Michael Polson
Ambar Quintanilla
Brad Rowe
Jess Steever
Jean Tong
Dr. Dilara Üskup
Rigo Valdez
Matt Wilson

CONTRIBUTORS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Principal Authors

Renee Victoria Arana (she/ella) is a community health scholar and ecofeminist dedicated to health equity. Her work centers cannabis equity as both a public health strategy and a labor rights issue, with a focus on improving workplace conditions across the industry. She is committed to empowerment through education and passionate about bridging healthcare gaps and fostering sustainable, community-led solutions.

Mskindness Batchelor-Ramirez, M.Ed is an educator, coach, and best-selling author with over 20 years of experience teaching and leading across classrooms, communities, and emerging industries. She is the Executive Chancellor of Life Development University and founder of Club Kindness, a cannabis-inclusive education network. Her work in workforce development focuses on building inclusive, learner-centered training programs that prepare individuals for success in high-growth sectors. Her latest book, Mastering the Pathways to Self-Love, and her signature program, The Self Love Academy, help women reclaim their voice, worth, and joy through intentional, heart-centered work.

Rob Chlala, PhD is an Assistant Professor of Urban Sociology and Policy at California State University Long Beach, and visiting researcher at the UCLA Labor Center. Rob has conducting collaborative, on-the-ground research with cannabis workers, equity organizations and unions since 2012, shaped by his own roots in the industry. His research on the Los Angeles cannabis industry is captured in an upcoming book manuscript, and he has also consulted for LA County, City and other jurisdictions on interrelated issues. He completed his PhD in Sociology at the University of Southern California in 2021. His engaged research centers deep partnerships with, including training for, front-line communities and mobilizes creative media to explore abolition, solidarity economics, and everyday value-creation to make cities livable for all.

Madison Hernandez (she/her) is a proud queer Californian artist, researcher, and community event organizer. She founded the Cannabis Support Group, a mutual aid series uplifting cannabis labor and consumer culture through education, advocacy, and care. Yay Cannabis! Her work embodies leadership through service—a value shaped at Mount Saint Mary's University, where she earned a B.S. in Sociology with minors in Film & Media and GIS. Her vibrant art practice parallels her research, inviting collective imagination toward a Green Future rooted in equity, liberation, and self-determination. Her interdisciplinary approach bridges labor, public health, and cultural expression with an unwavering commitment to people-powered change.

Monica Macias is a Research Analyst with four years of experience in community-based participatory research. Her journey began as an undergraduate research intern for the UCLA Labor Center, where she worked alongside a team of researchers to examine how retail workers were impacted by unstable work schedules in Los Angeles. Taking part in this study inspired Monica to use research as a tool for action. After the UCLA Labor Center, Monica transitioned as a Research Assistant at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs on projects evaluating issues including housing, policing and public education. Monica uses her research expertise to enact change in the communities involved.

Saba Waheed is Director of the UCLA Labor Center. In her time at the UCLA Labor Center, Waheed built the research infrastructure for, and led, more than 40 studies in partnership with low-wage workers. Among these was the first-ever study of domestic work employers, a multi-year study of workers and learners, and the first national study on nail salon workers and owners. Waheed is also an award-winning radio producer and writer. Previously, Waheed was a part of the shared leadership team and the research director of DataCenter, and a researcher at the Urban Justice Center. Waheed received an MA in Anthropology from Columbia University and a BA in English and Religious Studies from UC Berkeley.

Surveyor-Researchers

Alexandra Deblanca
Angie Corona
Christian Marquez
Daniel Montero
Delic
Gracie Morgan
Jae (Jennifer) Smith
Jaidyn Alvarez-Brigance
Janet Hernandez
Jennifer Martinez
Jody Johnson, Esq.
Jonathan Edwards
Kurt Donado
Leslie Bernardino
Noelle Correia
Ramona Chatman-Morris
Ritz Garcia Chavez
Rocky Garcia

UCLA Labor Center & IRLE Staff

Simone Frank
Maisha Kalam
Evelyn Godinez
Luz Hernandez
Lily Hernandez
Lucero Herrera
Dwayne Jackson
Tia Koonse
Tala Oszkay Febres-Cordero
Victor Narro
Jamie Reniva
Janna Shadduck-Hernández
Andrea Slater
Déjà Thomas
Silvia Vazquez
Emily Jo Wharry
Chris Zepeda-Millán

Graduate Researcher

Juan Solis

Copyeditor

Hilarie Ashton

Undergraduate Researchers

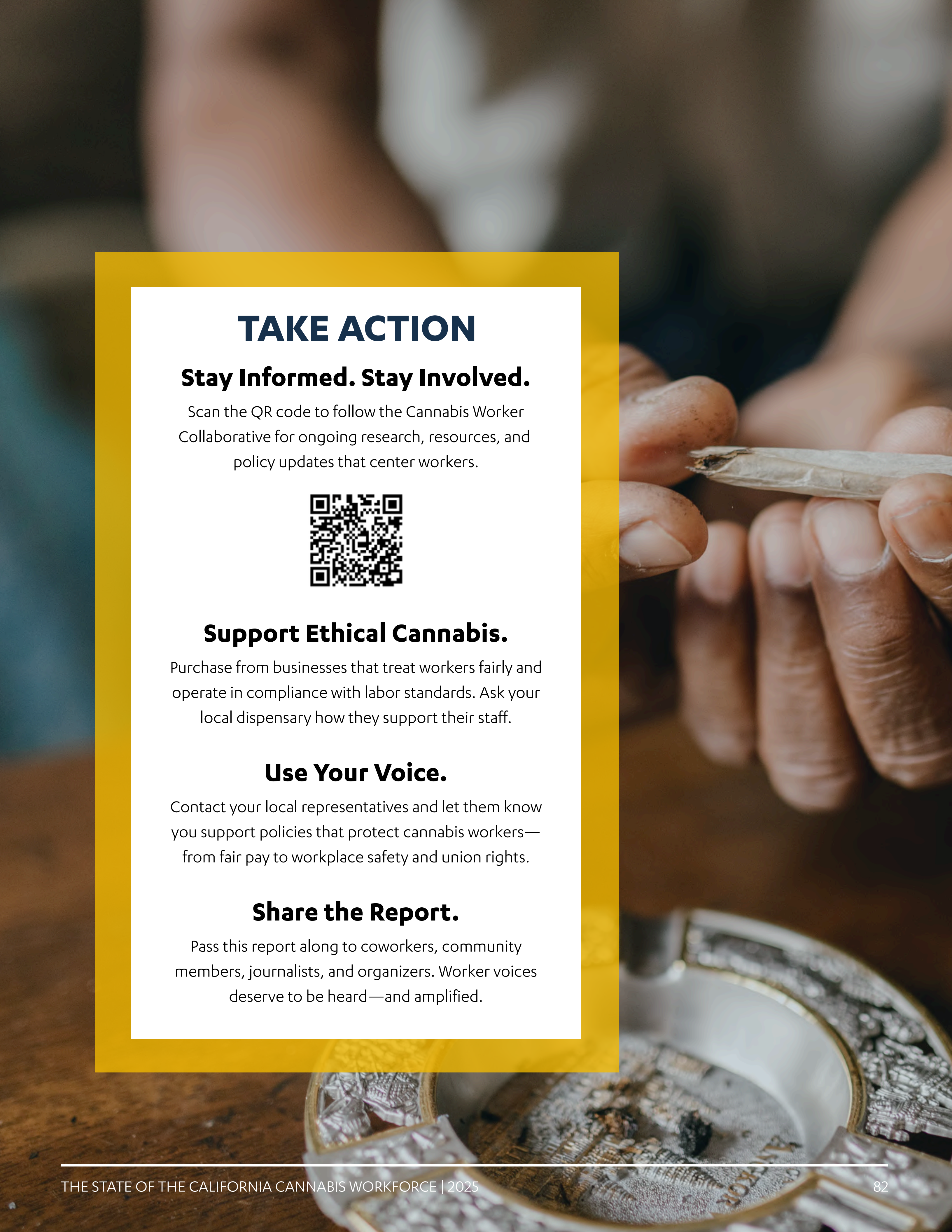
Jonathan Lopez
Hina Malik

ABOUT THE UCLA LABOR CENTER

Established in 1964, the UCLA Labor Center believes that a public university belongs to the people and advances cutting-edge research, education, and service guided by our core values: economic equity, racial and immigrant justice, and worker power and solidarity. Through our signature approaches and methodology that employ research justice, narrative storytelling, student and leader-to-movement pathways, and culturally and racially responsive evaluation, we partner with workers, unions, worker centers, students, and impacted communities to advance economic justice across California, the nation and globally.

ABOUT THE CANNABIS WORKER COLLAB

The California Cannabis Worker Collab was initiated to address the gaps in data regarding the conditions, aspirations, and experiences of cannabis workers, recognizing that decisions affecting this community were often made without their input. With support from the Department of Cannabis Control, and guided by 14 community advisory labor and social equity groups, our work was grounded in the Data Center's research justice framework championed by the UCLA Labor Center, and seeks to advance knowledge for a global cannabis industry and California that works for all.



TAKE ACTION

Stay Informed. Stay Involved.

Scan the QR code to follow the Cannabis Worker Collaborative for ongoing research, resources, and policy updates that center workers.

Support Ethical Cannabis.

Purchase from businesses that treat workers fairly and operate in compliance with labor standards. Ask your local dispensary how they support their staff.

Use Your Voice.

Contact your local representatives and let them know you support policies that protect cannabis workers—from fair pay to workplace safety and union rights.

Share the Report.

Pass this report along to coworkers, community members, journalists, and organizers. Worker voices deserve to be heard—and amplified.