

# The Other Side of the storm:

What Do Black Immigrant Domestic Workers in  
the Time of Covid-19 Teach Us About Building a  
Resilient Care Infrastructure?

**PAY, PROFESSIONALISM & RESPECT DATA BRIEF: JUNE 2022**

Presented by The Institute for Policy Studies in partnership with  
National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) We Dream In Black Program



## Foreword

Two years ago, at the start of a global pandemic, the world watched as the winds of COVID-19 intensified storms that had long ago made landfall on Black immigrant domestic workers. Our health care systems were overwhelmed. The nation's economic inequities continued to leave workers at various intersections — race, gender, and citizenship status — behind. And as the nation boarded up windows in preparation for quarantine and a new way of life, domestic workers were shuttered out of their employers' homes or faced with the impossible choice of choosing their jobs over the health and safety of their own families.

Already experiencing racist systems, gendered violence, the dangers of our country's inhuman immigration policy, and a threadbare system of support for working families, new storms were converging and threatening to actualize the constant fear that Black immigrant domestic workers would be left even further behind. In 2020, over 800 domestic workers from Massachusetts, Miami-Dade, Florida, and New York, New York responded to our National Domestic Workers Alliance **We Dream in Black Domestic Worker Survey** and revealed this devastating truths: Black immigrant domestic workers were some of the hardest impacted by the pandemic. In every state surveyed, 70% of Black immigrant domestic workers revealed they had lost their jobs (45%) or received reduced hours and pay (25%).

A year after our original report, the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) Black Worker Initiative partnered again to survey the same three regions, and members from Matahari, Miami Workers Center & We Dream in Black New York, to see how one year of the pandemic affected domestic workers. Today, as the nation reports one million COVID-related deaths and inflation and care policy blocks make our already precarious supports strained, we have a better understanding of how deeply Black immigrant domestic workers are impacted and exploited during a global health and national economic crisis, and we have a clearer vision of what is needed to secure the safety and wellbeing of Black domestic workers and all working people.

Today, data collected for part two of our research, **The Other Side of the Storm: What Do Black Immigrant Domestic Workers in the Time of COVID-19 Teach Us About Building a Resilient Care Infrastructure**, is the reinforcement we welcome to highlight how critical it is to invest in a care infrastructure that centers the domestic workers who make all other work possible. The data you are about to see will crystallize one key point: domestic workers can no longer wait for care. A year after our original survey, the prognosis hasn't shifted drastically, and so, our policymakers must make long-term decisions to ensure that care jobs are safe, well-paying, and family-sustaining. Domestic workers are essential — we need more than well wishes and applause to ensure they can live and work with dignity and respect.

**Jenn Stowe**

*Executive Director, National Domestic Workers Alliance*

## Introduction

**W**ith the persistent reality of COVID-19 virus resurgence, our nation's policymakers have turned their attention to making investments that strengthen the resilience of our families, communities, and the national infrastructure in the face of inevitable calamities due to climate change and future public health and economic crises. **Those policy decisions and investments must begin with funding vulnerable people and systems that work to secure the safety and wellbeing of all of us. This means investing in Black immigrant domestic workers who are an essential part of the care infrastructure.**

The swift and devastating consequences of the global pandemic in the United States in early 2020 laid bare a number of irrefutable realities. First, while the pandemic affected everyone in America, its impact was more severe among low-income families, Black, Latinx, and other communities of color. Second, our physical survival and economic recovery from the increasingly frequent and severe public health and environmental and economic crises hinge not only on the strength of our physical infrastructure but on our human-based “care infrastructure” — doctors, nurses, first responders, and other essential workers like direct care and domestic workers.

In the early months of the pandemic, healthcare and other essential workers rightfully received media coverage and support for the role they played — often at life-threatening risk — to protect, care for and save the public. But there was one sector of this essential care infrastructure whose experiences went unnoticed: domestic workers. These essential workers are a vital and often invisible workforce within the healthcare and broader care economy. It is disproportionately composed of women of color and immigrants who care for the elderly, children, and people with disabilities and make work possible for those who must work away from home.

Before the pandemic, the majority of domestic workers had no healthcare or other benefits. They were largely not protected by workplace laws, and the most vulnerable among them — Black immigrant domestic workers — feared or could not access resources that were being offered to help individuals and families survive illness, job loss, potential eviction, and hunger.

Recognizing the vulnerability of this invisible and essential care infrastructure, the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) commissioned the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) to survey and conduct focus groups between May and June 2020 with Black immigrant domestic workers from Matahari, Miami Workers Center & We Dream in Black New York in three areas — Massachusetts, Florida's Miami-Dade County, and New York City — to understand how the growing, multidimensional public health and economic crises in America and around the globe were affecting them.

The data brief, entitled [Notes from the Storm: Black Immigrant Domestic Workers in the Time of -COVID-19](#), confirmed that these essential workers were experiencing high job loss, housing insecurity, and health and safety vulnerability due to a lack of healthcare, personal protective equipment (PPE) — worker protections afforded to other essential and care workers.

In 2021, IPS returned to the same three regional areas to survey and conduct focus groups with Black immigrant workers. In 2020, over 800 Black immigrant domestic workers responded to the survey. In 2021, the survey attracted over 1,000 respondents. The 2021 survey, focus groups, and interviews with domestic workers reinforced what we learned at the beginning of the pandemic — Black immigrant domestic workers who lived at the nexus of racialized, gendered, citizenship-statused, and classed vulnerability pre-pandemic faced even greater vulnerability to exploitation, wage theft and lack of safety with deadly circumstances.

**Kim Freeman Brown & Marc Bayard**

*Institute for Policy Studies*

## All Locations: Massachusetts, Miami-Dade, FL and New York, NY

The survey was conducted in February 2021 from the same pool of domestic workers invited to participate in the 2020 survey. Interviews were conducted in March 2022.

### Three geographic areas:

New York City, the Greater Miami, Florida area, and Massachusetts, primarily in and around the city of Boston.

**New York City:** 350 (41%)

**Massachusetts:** 227 (27%)

**Greater Miami:** 69 (8%)

**Other:** 204 (24%)

**Total number of respondents:** 1,083

### Who are Black immigrant domestic workers?

**Eighty percent (80%) of survey respondents were Afro-Caribbean (56%) and African (24%). The remaining 20% of respondents identify as Afro-Latina (5%), mixed with Black (3%), Indo-Caribbean (3%) or did not disclose their race and/or ethnicity (9%).**

**New York City:** 70% Afro-Caribbean, 9% African, 5% Mixed with Black, 5% Indo-Caribbean, 4% Afro-Latina

**Massachusetts:** 59% African, 32% Afro-Caribbean

**Miami:** 48% Afro-Caribbean, 27% Afro-Latina, 16% African

**Nearly a quarter (23%) of survey respondents are undocumented** and represented the single largest group by immigration status among all respondents. Naturalized citizens (20%) and legal permanent residents or green card holders (8%) were the second and third largest groups respectively. Twelve percent (12%) are in the U.S. on work permits or another authorized employment arrangement. Nearly a third of respondents (29%) did not disclose their immigration status (15%) or reported that none of the offered immigration status categories applied to them (14%).

**New York City:** 35% undocumented, 23% naturalized U.S. citizens, 19% legal permanent residents/green card holders

**Massachusetts:** 22% undocumented, 23% naturalized U.S. citizens, 28% have a work permit or employment authorization (most did not reveal)

**Miami:** 16% undocumented, 44% naturalized U.S. citizens, 22% have a work permit or employment authorization (most did not reveal)

“Two workers I know have died. One worker got COVID at work from her boss’s children. She was from Haiti and undocumented and didn’t have health insurance. She was afraid to go to the hospital and she died. We buried her.” — June, 58, elder care worker, NDWA Organizer, Miami, FL

### The pandemic has exposed vulnerable workers to new dangers.

*“I was going to get a check-up for COVID from my doctor. Appointments at the time were really hard to come by. My employer wanted me to come back before my doctor’s appointment. I didn’t want to go from clinic to clinic, doctor to doctor. I told them, ‘If you can’t wait for me, get another nanny. My health is important right now and I just couldn’t go back.’” — Anonymous Nanny, [New York, NY]*

### Difficulty finding new work.

Thirty-seven percent (37%) of respondents said that they had difficulty finding a new job during the pandemic.

**New York City:** 32%  
**Massachusetts:** 18% (and 20% got a new job with lower pay and working conditions)  
**Miami:** 34%



Of respondents have to work in environments where they or others have COVID. Lack of paid time off and lack of health benefits force vulnerable workers to work while sick or around those who can make them sick.

**New York City:** 28%  
**Massachusetts:** 61%  
**Miami:** 46%

### Facing Eviction and Disruption in Utility Services.

In 2020, 65% of respondents feared eviction or disruption of utility services. In Feb 2021, 41% of respondents confirmed that their fears had actualized and they were forced to move, faced eviction or disruption in utility services due to their inability to pay rent or other bills during the pandemic. Here are numbers by location of Black domestic workers who experienced eviction or disruption of utility services in 2021:

**New York City:** 31%  
**Massachusetts:** 36%  
**Miami:** 41%

### Emotional Wellbeing.

Respondents expressed experiencing stress, nervousness and depression in response to the question, “How would you describe your emotional wellbeing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?”

**New York City:** stress and anxiety  
**Massachusetts:** fear, sadness, discomfort, stress  
**Miami:** stress, anxiety and depression

## Black immigrant domestic workers – particularly undocumented workers and housekeepers – are vulnerable workers.

### Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) work without an employment contract.

Additionally, 8% of respondents don't know whether or not they have a work contract or not, which makes them as vulnerable as those without a contract.

**New York City:** 67%

**Massachusetts:** 52%

**Miami:** 73%

### Undocumented workers are more likely to work without an employment contract

than their documented peers.

**Undocumented workers without a contract:** 80%

**Documented workers without a contract:** 61%

### House cleaners are more likely to work without an employment contract

than other domestic workers.

**Housecleaner:** 82%

**Nanny:** 66%

**Direct care:** 61%

### The majority of respondents (78%) have not received benefits from their employers

during the pandemic such as paid time off or paid medical or health insurance.

**New York City:** 69%

**Massachusetts:** 77%

**Miami:** 93%

### Overall, disaggregating by immigration status and industry reveals numbers that comport

with the preceding statistics. The most vulnerable groups here are undocumented workers and housecleaners.

**Documented:** 76%

**Undocumented:** 80%

**Nanny:** 70%

**Direct care:** 82%

**Housecleaner:** 86%

## A path out of the storm. What Black immigrant domestic workers want and need.

“We should get some form of short term health care; and, we shouldn't have to come to work sick. Some people just do that. I could get your sickness and carry it home to my family. But you don't want to give me time.” – Marlene, 76, semi-retired direct care provider for the elderly, New York, NY

### Black immigrant domestic workers want and need health insurance.

Fifty-seven percent (57%) of survey respondents identified health insurance as the benefit they most desire.

*“Domestic workers deserve to have the same privileges as other workers, like health insurance. A lot of us don't have that. Everything others get in other professions like health care and paid time off, we should get the same thing.”*

— Barbara, 60, Nanny, Boston, MA

**New York City:** 56%

**Massachusetts:** 56%

**Miami:** 70%

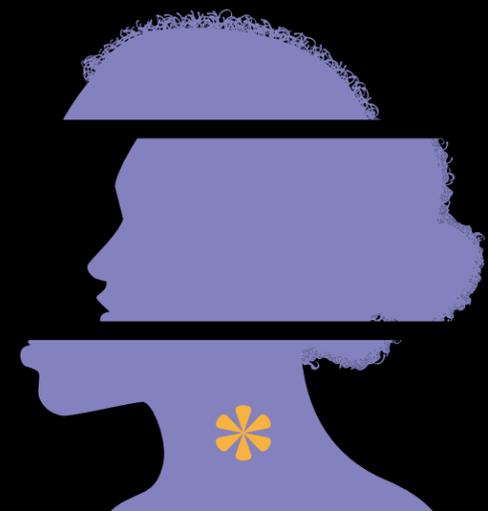
### Caregivers want benefits that allow them to care for themselves and their families.

Respondents also see retirement benefits (46%) and paid sick leave and medical leave (44%) as benefits that would make their jobs better.

**New York City:** 56% retirement benefits, 49% paid sick leave and medical leave

**Massachusetts:** 43% retirement benefits, 49% paid sick leave and medical leave

**Miami:** 58% paid sick leave and medical leave, 57% paid time off



# Recommendation: A Call for National Domestic Workers Bill of Rights

It took a global pandemic for our nation to realize that domestic workers and many other workers, largely in low-paid service jobs, overrepresented by immigrants, disproportionately women, and women of color are essential to our economy. Yet, domestic work is devalued, largely unprotected in the workplaces, and many continue to be excluded by core workplace laws and benefits at the federal and state levels. Undocumented workers experience greater vulnerability and exploitation due to their immigration status.

**In the context of Covid-19, it is unacceptable that these essential workers who are a part of the human infrastructure that makes the work of others possible and ensures the strength and resiliency of our families and communities lack even the most basic labor rights.**

When survey respondents were asked what they needed and wanted to make domestic work a good job, they named the following:

- 1. Raise the wages for home healthcare and childcare workers across the country.**
- 2. Provide free childcare for working families.**
- 3. Provide free healthcare for anyone who cannot afford it.**
- 4. Pay family caregivers who take care of a relative full-time.**
- 5. Create a pathway to citizenship for all immigrants.**

It is time to provide all domestic workers a path out of the storm that has been battering these essential workers with racial, gender, and economic injustices since long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Black immigrant domestic workers have been in the eye of this storm.

These survey responses affirm the need for Congress to act to invest in child care, Medicaid's home and community-based services (HCBS), and other health care initiatives. The investment in HCBS would raise wages and standards for home care workers, enable unpaid caregivers to be compensated for their labor, and expand services to people with disabilities and older adults.

It is time for Congress to act to pass the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights to increase protections, raise standards, and provide benefits as respondents reported a lack of written contracts and lack of paid time off.

Lastly, respondents underscored the importance of creating a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, which we know is critical for transforming care jobs into good jobs and for Black immigrant domestic workers to achieve economic security.

Shoring up protections for Black immigrant domestic workers and domestic workers more broadly is about strengthening a care infrastructure that will ensure that all of our families make it to the other side of the storm.



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**NATIONAL  
DOMESTIC  
WORKERS  
ALLIANCE**

**WE DREAM  
IN BLACK**

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