

An Overview of the Impacts of New York’s Excluded Workers Fund

Paola Echave, Elaine Waxman, Hamutal Bernstein, David Dyssegaard Kallick, Poonam Gupta, Julio Salas, Luis Gallardo, and Ashleigh-Ann Sutherland

January 2023

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, state governments acted to make up for gaps in federal emergency safety net programs, particularly for people left out of aid programs because of their immigration status.¹ In 2021, New York State established the largest initiative to fill this gap: the \$2.1 billion Excluded Workers Fund (EWF). The fund provided residents who had lost work but who had not received unemployment insurance—primarily immigrants who are undocumented—with assistance on par with what other workers received in unemployment benefits for the year. Through the fund, 130,000 New York workers received one-time payments of \$15,600, about 40 percent of the total 305,000 estimated to be eligible. To better understand the successes and shortcomings of the program, the Urban Institute and Immigration Research Initiative conducted a survey of individuals in the population targeted for aid (see box 1). The researchers worked with community-based organizations (CBOs) to reach out to people who would have qualified for EWF.

The first part of this project was a qualitative study, “Finally, We’re Being Recognized’: Stories and Perspectives from Applicants to the Excluded Workers Fund.”² Our research team interviewed 9 CBOs and 15 workers on their experience with the EWF; we found that the fund helped workers make ends meet during a period of severe job loss and could pay back rent and other bills, repay debt incurred during the pandemic, and stabilize their housing. Here we share the findings of the second phase of the project, a large-scale survey. Participants had a range of racial backgrounds and countries of origin, with geographic representation in Long Island, New York City, the northern suburbs of New York City, and Upstate New York (see box 2). These findings are intended to help inform advocacy efforts and future legislation, as states and localities across the nation consider implementation of permanent unemployment benefit programs for excluded workers.

To see the corresponding brief, “Expanding Inclusion in the Social Safety Net: Impacts of New York’s Excluded Workers Fund,” click [here](#).

¹ Smith, Robert C., Manuel Castro, Andrés Besserer Rayas, and the NICE team. 2020. *Immigrant Serving Organizations: Key Partners with Government to Help Those Worst-Hit and Least-Served through the Lifecycle of the Pandemic*. New York: New Immigrant Community Empowerment & Baruch College.

² Waxman, Elaine, David Dyssegaard Kallick, Poonam Gupta, Paola Echave, Luis H. Gallardo, Julio Salas, and Hamutal Bernstein. 2022. “Finally, We’re Being Recognized’: Stories and Perspectives from Applicants to the Excluded Workers Fund.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

BOX 1

Research Approach

- Urban Institute and Immigration Research Initiative partnered with ten immigrant-serving CBOs across New York that had both upstate and downstate representation, as well as variation across racial and ethnic categories: African Communities Together, Brooklyn Chinese-American Association (BCA), Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), Justice for Migrant Families (JMF), Midstate Education and Service Foundation (MESF), MinKwon Center for Community Action, New York Communities for Change (NYCC), Street Vendors Project (SVP), the Workplace Project, and Workers Justice Center of New York (WJCNY).
- The partner organizations recruited survey participants by reaching out to their members and communities.
- The survey was fielded between June 21 and July 27, 2022.
- Respondents took the survey online, by telephone, or were assisted by a CBO.
- The survey was available in Arabic, Bangla, Chinese, French, English, Korean, and Spanish.
- Participants received a \$25 Visa gift card for completing the survey.
- Partner CBOs received a stipend, between \$2,500 and \$5,000, depending on their role.

Key Findings

- **Rent and food were the top two uses of the fund. Meeting basic needs to carry people who lost work through the depth of the COVID-19 pandemic recession was the goal of the program, and for recipients of the fund, this was a success.** Sixty-six percent of recipients said that they used most of the benefits to pay overdue or back rent and 29 percent said they used most of it for food.
- **Receiving EWF opened up new possibilities for earnings and well-being. Approximately one in five recipients reported that they could invest in something that helped them with their current job while about 15 percent reported taking job training.** Forty-one percent reported they could make appointments for checkups or other medical services. Fifteen percent could improve their living situation (new apartment, new neighborhood; figure 1). Some could enjoy activities such as enjoying leisure time (25 percent) or visiting out-of-town family and friends (12 percent).
- **Receiving EWF led to several other positive activities supporting economic mobility and community engagement.** Twenty percent reported applying for an ITIN (figure 2); 44 percent participated in rallies, marches, or other activities to fight for a second round of funding; 45 percent took part in community activities like volunteering; and 36 percent advocated for improvements at their workplace like better COVID-19 safety or wages.
- **Material hardships are common among undocumented immigrants, but those who received the EWF were buffered from the most severe impacts of poverty.** About 68 percent of EWF

recipients reported being food insecure in the 30 days prior to the survey versus 84 percent of respondents who did not receive the fund (figure 3). At the time of the survey, nonrecipients were more likely to report that they were still paying debt or loans received during the pandemic compared with EWF recipients (59 percent versus 47 percent).

BOX 2

Demographic Characteristics of All Survey Respondents

- Six hundred sixty-seven people were invited to take the survey, and 408 responded (61 percent response rate).
- Seventy-three percent of respondents applied for EWF. Among those who applied, 73 percent had received it and 27 percent had not.³ Among recipients, 95 percent received tier 1 (\$15,600) and 5 percent received tier 2 (\$3,200) benefits.⁴
- Seventy-eight percent of respondents lived in New York City, and 19 percent lived elsewhere in the state. This broadly matches the distribution of undocumented immigrants in New York.⁵
- Participants were from 35 countries of origin. Fifty-four percent of participants took the survey in Spanish, 10 percent in French, 13 percent in Korean, 12 percent in Chinese, 1 percent in Bangla, 9 percent in English, and less than 1 percent in Arabic.
- Seventy-two percent said they were undocumented or likely undocumented at the time of the survey.⁶

For more information on the demographic characteristics of the respondents, see the full brief.⁷

³ There are two people who applied, but did not say whether they got it.

⁴ This closely matches administrative data, which showed 99 percent of recipients received Tier 1. See New York State Department of Labor. 2021. “New York State Excluded Workers Fund White Paper.” New York: New York State Department of Labor.

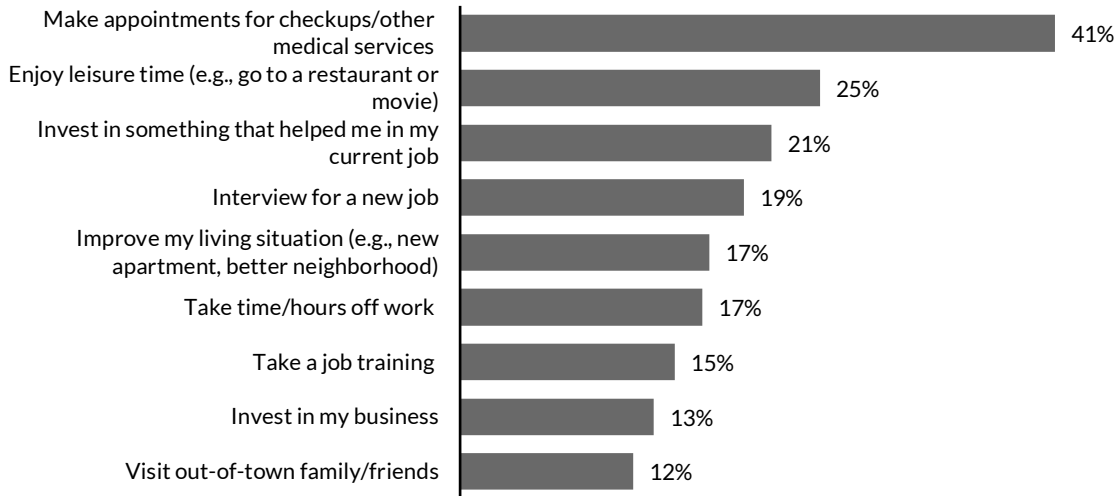
⁵ This also closely matches administrative data, which showed 79 percent of recipients lived in New York City.

⁶ Thirty-four percent preferred to not specify their citizenship or immigration status. We consider these respondents likely to be undocumented. Though potential limitations exist in this method, we felt it was appropriate given the target population, and the method is consistent with approaches taken in the field of immigrant research (see references above). See also Bachmeier, James D., Jennifer Van Hook, and Frank D. Bean. 2014. “Can We Measure Immigrants’ Legal Status? Lessons from Two US Surveys.” *International Migration Review* 48 (2): 538–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12059> and Young, Maria-Elena De Trinidad, and Daniel S. Madrigal. 2017. “Documenting Legal Status: A Systematic Review of Measurement of Undocumented Status in Health Research.” *Public Health Review* 38 (26). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40985-017-0073-4>.

⁷ Waxman, Elaine, Hamutal Bernstein, David Dyssegaard Kallick, Poonam Gupta, Paola Echave, Julio Salas, Luis Gallardo, and Ashleigh-Ann Sutherland. 2023. “Expanding Inclusion in the Social Safety Net: Impacts of New York’s Excluded Workers Fund.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

FIGURE 1

Activities of Excluded Workers Fund Recipients after Applying, 2022

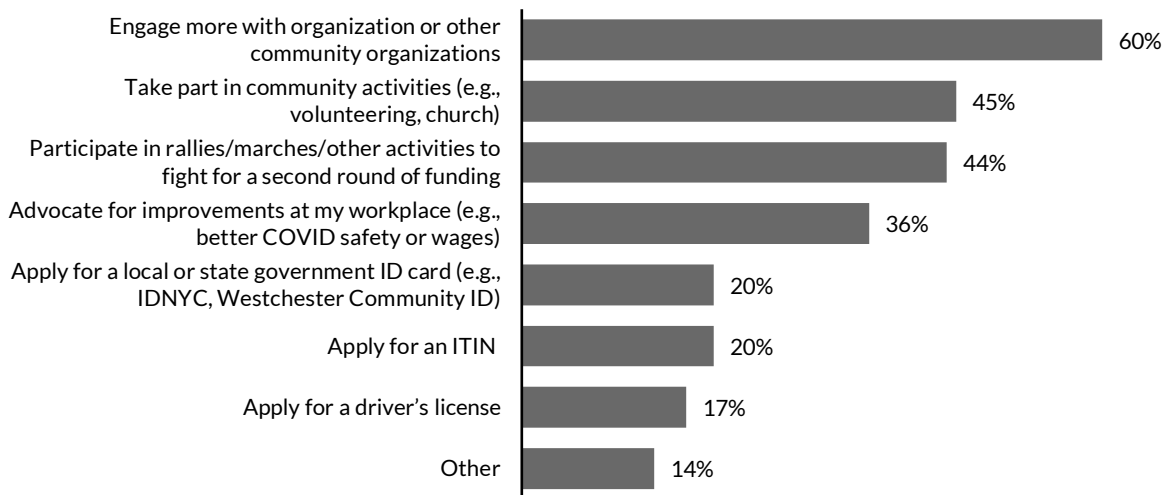


Source: Urban Institute and Immigration Research Initiative Excluded Workers Fund Survey, June 21 to July 27, 2022.

Notes: EWF = Excluded Workers Fund. Estimates are unweighted. We asked 217 EWF recipients (2 percent of recipients have missing information), “At any point after you applied for EWF, did you do any of the following activities?”

FIGURE 2

Community Engagement Activities by Excluded Workers Fund Recipients after Applying, 2022

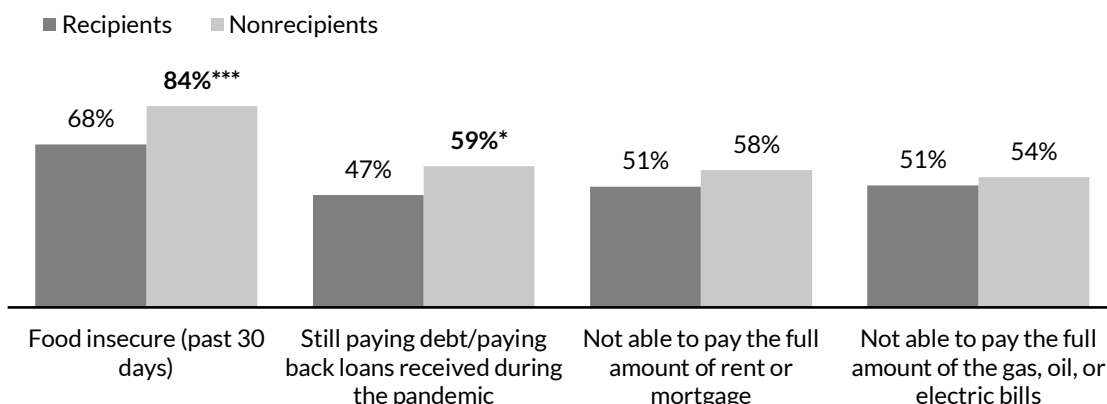


Source: Urban Institute and Immigration Research Initiative Excluded Workers Fund Survey, June 21 to July 27, 2022.

Notes: EWF = Excluded Worker’s Fund; IDNYC = Identification New York City; ITIN = individual taxpayer identification number. Estimates are unweighted. We asked 217 EWF recipients (2 percent of respondents have missing information), “At any point after you applied for EWF, did you also do any of the following?”

FIGURE 3

Ongoing Material Hardships by Excluded Worker Fund Receipt, 2022



Source: Urban Institute and Immigration Research Initiative Excluded Workers Fund Survey, June 21 to July 27, 2022.

Notes: EWF = Excluded Workers Fund. Estimates are unweighted. The sample size for this figure is composed of 217 recipients and 189 nonrecipients.

*/**/*** Estimate is significantly different from recipients at the < .05/.01/.001 level using two-tailed tests.

Conclusion

The EWF provided crucial support to immigrant workers and their families. Recipients could cover basic household expenses and pay off money they borrowed during the COVID-19 pandemic. These expenditures also provided a benefit for the communities where EWF recipients live, stimulating economic growth when it was urgently needed. This is promising for New York and good news for the 10 other states and the District of Columbia that provided one-time unemployment aid to excluded workers during the pandemic.⁸ In follow-up to these emergency programs, some states are considering filing the gaps in unemployment compensation. In June 2022, Colorado acted to create an annual fund providing state-only coverage (separate from the state-federal unemployment system) to people who do not qualify for unemployment insurance because of their immigration status. In New York, another proposal goes further—covering self-employed and freelance workers, domestic workers, day laborers, people leaving incarceration, and immigrants who are undocumented. This bill is a top priority for some of the leading grassroots advocacy groups in the state in 2023. And states are moving to close gaps in other safety net programs. The earned income tax credit is now available to immigrants who file income tax returns using ITINs in eight states and the District of Columbia.⁹ The clear success of the EWF demonstrates that, with the right combination of government commitment, community partnership and data privacy assurance, safety net programs can cover individuals and families who can be challenging to reach.

⁸ Dyssegaard Kallick, David, Andrew Stettner, Ashleigh-Ann Sutherland, and Samantha Wing. 2022. “Providing Unemployment Insurance to Immigrants and Other Excluded Workers: A State Roadmap for Inclusive Benefits.” New York: Immigration Research Initiative and the Century Foundation.

⁹ “Map of States that Offer Earned Income Tax Credits (EITCs) to ITIN Filers,” National Immigration Law Center, accessed November 11, 2022. <https://www.nilc.org/issues/taxes/tax-credit-itin-filers/>.

Acknowledgments

This case study was funded by the Robin Hood Foundation and Open Society Foundations, and is part of a larger joint evaluation project of the Urban Institute and Immigration Research Initiative. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban and the Immigration Research Initiative to advance their missions. We are indebted to the CBOs that aided in connecting us to workers, including the Fund Excluded Workers Coalition, African Communities Together, Brooklyn Chinese-American Association (BCA), Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), Justice for Migrant Families (JMF), Midstate Education and Service Foundation (MESF), MinKwon Center for Community Action, New York Communities for Change (NYCC), Street Vendors Project (SVP), the Workplace Project, and Workers Justice Center of New York (WJCNY). We also acknowledge assistance from Landmark Associates for their translation services and from Research Support Services for helping conduct interviews and phone surveys. The authors gratefully acknowledge assistance from Robert Smith and Tim Triplett and thank Alex Dallman for her careful editing. Finally, we acknowledge and are grateful to the workers to took part in the survey.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders, or to the Immigration Research Initiative. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban or IRI experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at www.urban.org/fundingprinciples.



500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024
www.urban.org



115 East 9th Street
New York, NY 10003
www.immresearch.org

ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

Copyright © January 2023. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.

ABOUT THE IMMIGRATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE

Immigration Research Initiative is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank on immigrant integration, looking at issues of economic, social, and cultural inclusion of immigrants in the United States. IRI is attentive to how immigrants fare in the United States and to how the receiving communities fare as they change, with particular attention to the implications for race, gender, and income equity.