



COVID-19 Crisis and Cannery in New York City, USA: Lasting Impacts and an Agenda for Recovery



Key Findings

Ability to work and earnings: The canning sector is resilient but vulnerable – canners are back to work for more days per week than before the beginning of the crisis, and are earning more than pre-crisis levels, however at \$31 a day these earnings remain far below the NYC poverty threshold.¹

Loss of savings: Despite a recovery in their ability to work and earn, canners experienced losses in 2020 and had to rely on asset-depleting strategies to cope. 96% of canners reported an inability to build back any savings lost over the past 12 months.

Mental and physical health concerns: Respondents identified mental and physical health concerns as the principal area of impact from the COVID-19 crisis. This included COVID-19 infection, fear of infection and mental health issues, such as anxiety and isolation.

Relief for some, others excluded: 72% of canners received cash relief from the government during the COVID-19 crisis. Migration status was the main reason canners were blocked from accessing relief.

Recommendations

1. **Expand the NYS Bottle Bill:** Expand the types of beverage containers marked for redemption (liquor and wine bottles, non-carbonated drinks); this will increase waste diversion, recycling rates, and canner earnings.
2. **Ensure economic justice for canners:** Increase the redemption value of beverage containers from 5 cents to 10 cents per piece in recognition of canners' labour. Increase the handling fee to 5 cents so they can be paid for sorting labour.
3. **Support community-centered redemption centers:** Support the creation of non-profit redemption centers like Sure We Can across New York's five boroughs, in all communities, especially in low-income and racially and ethnically marginalized communities.
4. **Recognize canners as stakeholders and as essential green workers:** Acknowledge NYC's 4,000 to 8,000 canners as important environmental agents and prioritize their participation in extended producer responsibility (EPR) policy making and solid waste management decision-making, including the decriminalization of informal recycling.
5. **Extend social protection to canners:** Increase access to mental health support and social services, including affordable housing and food aid, affordable child care centers close to places of work, and affordable elderly care.

¹ For context, the NYC "poverty line" or poverty threshold was \$35,044 annually for a two-adult, two-child household. Earning \$31 a day (at an estimated 5 days per week) would result in annual earnings of \$7,440, 80% below the official threshold. See [2018 Poverty Report](#).

Background

COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy is a WIEGO-led longitudinal study that assesses the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on specific groups of informal workers and their households.² Using a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews, Round 1 assessed the impact of the crisis in April 2020 and mid-year 2020 compared to February 2020 (the pre-COVID-19 period).³ Round 2 was conducted in mid-year 2021 to assess how workers were experiencing COVID-19 resurgences and ongoing economic strains, and to what extent (if any) they had recovered. This report presents the summary findings of Round 2 of the study in New York City with canner members of Sure We Can (SWC). In June 2021, researchers surveyed 33 of the original respondents to assess how their situation had changed roughly a year after the initial survey. Fourteen additional respondents were surveyed to replace previous Round 1 respondents who could not be contacted.⁴ Researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with 3 cannery members to capture detailed stories of how workers are coping in New York's "post-COVID-19" context.

Canners in New York City: 2020 to 2021

There are an estimated 4,000 - 8,000 cannery members, who collect, sort and redeem deposit-marked containers to earn money, in NYC.⁵ Cannery members represent many underserved populations in NYC, including racially or ethnically marginalized groups, undocumented immigrants, seniors, people experiencing mental or physical disabilities, the chronically homeless, and those who are frequent movers.

The 900 cannery members who rely on the Sure We Can recycling center and community space each year are overwhelmingly people of colour. This majority population consists of Latinx (55%), Black (24%) and Asian cannery members (18%). At least one-third are over the age of 60, and over 80% of cannery members in the community live below the poverty line. Canning provides critical income for their households and a sense of purpose for those who have no other work or are socially or linguistically isolated.

² Study cities are Accra (Ghana), Ahmedabad (India), Bangkok (Thailand), Dakar (Senegal), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Delhi (India), Durban (South Africa), Lima (Peru), Mexico City (Mexico), New York City (USA), Pleven (Bulgaria), Tiruppur (India).

³ Results from Round 1 in New York are available at www.wiego.org/publications/covid-19-crisis-and-informal-economy-street-vendors-new-york-city-usa

⁴ All findings that compare Round 2 findings to Round 1 findings consist of unbalanced panels, meaning that they include all participants from Round 2 and all participants from Round 1. For this reason, findings may not represent changes experienced by individual respondents.

⁵ See Eunomia's report on "[Employment and Economic Impact of Container Deposits – New York](#)"

COVID-19 in New York City: Key Dates

March 20, 2020: Non-essential businesses ordered to close. Although the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) considers the redemption of containers an essential service, NYC officials relaxed enforcement of violations at facilities unable to fulfil redemption operations.

March 22, 2020: “NYS On Pause” begins, requiring all non-essential workers to stay home.

April 2020: Sure We Can closes for three weeks to promote the health and well-being of canners, staff and the community. Bottle redemption at Sure We Can is 80% *below* 2019 data. Sure We Can re-opens once safeguards are put into place.

April 12, 2020: The 7-day average for daily COVID-19 deaths for New York City residents peak at 829.

June 3, 2020: Redemption facilities expected to resume operations to be in compliance.

October 2020: Canner leaders on the Canner Advocacy Task Force (CATF) begin holding regular meetings to build leadership among canners and advocate for canner interests.

April 6, 2021: All New York residents over 16 become eligible for COVID-19 vaccination.

April 2021: At Sure We Can, bottle redemption rate is 12% *below* 2019 rate.

June 2021: At Sure We Can, bottle redemption rate is 16% *above* 2019 rate for the first time since February 2020.

Study Dates and Sample

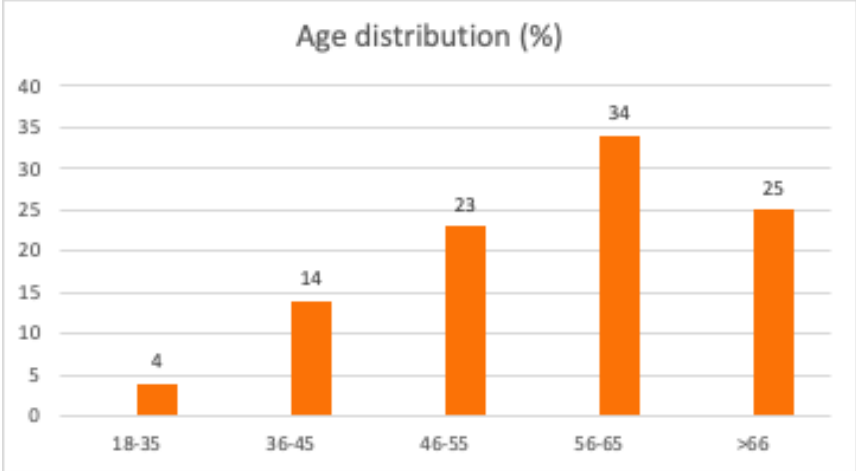
Dates of study in New York City

- Round 1: June/July 2020
- Round 2: June/July 2021

	n	%
Women	22	47
Men	25	53
Total	47	100

Migration status: Just over half (51%) of respondents reported being from a different country, 13% reported being born in the United States but in a different city and 36% were from New York City.

Age: Most respondents were older than 55, reflecting the high number of seniors in the canning community.

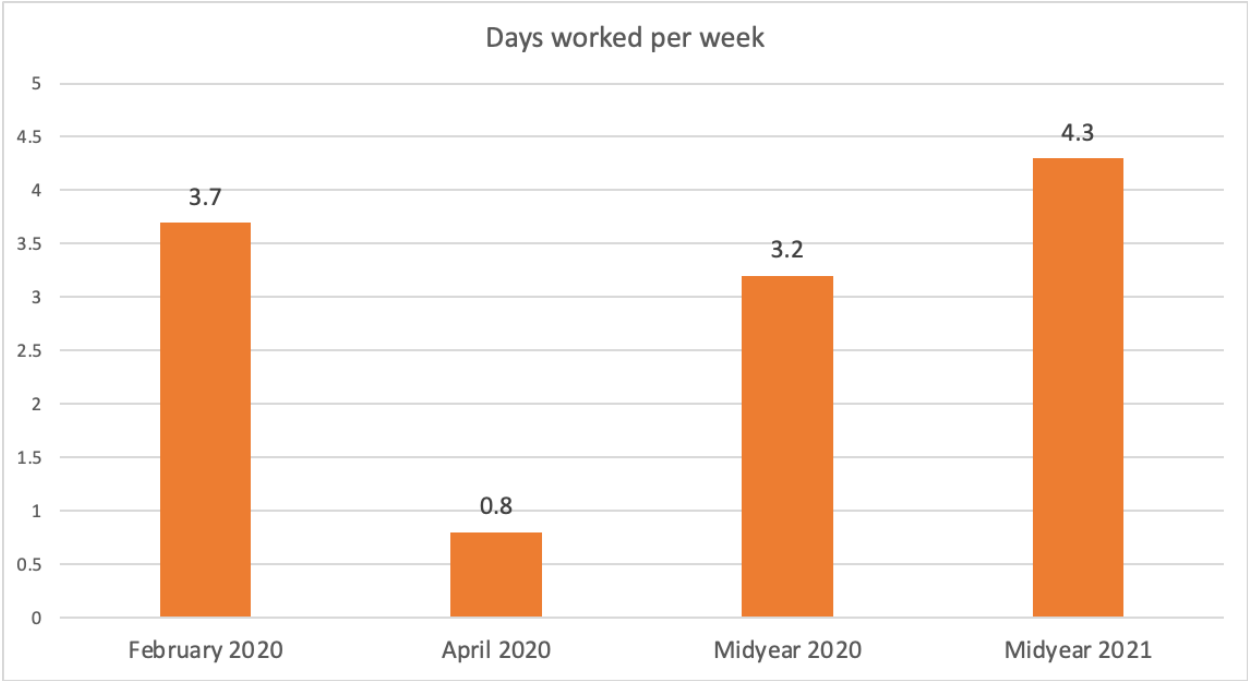


Findings

Work, Earnings and Food

Work

Survey results from 2021 show a mixed picture in terms of canners' ability to work as they did before the COVID-19 crisis. Among 47 study participants, 6 respondents had switched to a new sector of work, and one respondent had left the workforce. However, for the 85% of respondents for whom canning is still their primary source of livelihood, average days worked per week had steadily increased during the crisis period, and are now higher than before the crisis.



Note: Respondents were asked to report work days in the last seven days, including days they worked part-time.

Findings suggest that the majority of canners who are working are able to do so consistently, while a smaller group has experienced chronic disruptions. 66% of canners reported zero months during which they had to miss 10 or more days of work, while 23% reported having to miss 10 or more days of work for four months or more.

Respondents who stopped working temporarily or permanently did so mainly because of health concerns – either because they were ill or were afraid of becoming ill. These concerns, in addition to mental health concerns and isolation, were together cited as the single most important impact from the pandemic by the majority of respondents. Fears about contracting the virus or of friends or family getting sick changed canners' behaviour, in some cases affecting their work, and in some cases leading to isolation and anxiety.

Earnings⁶

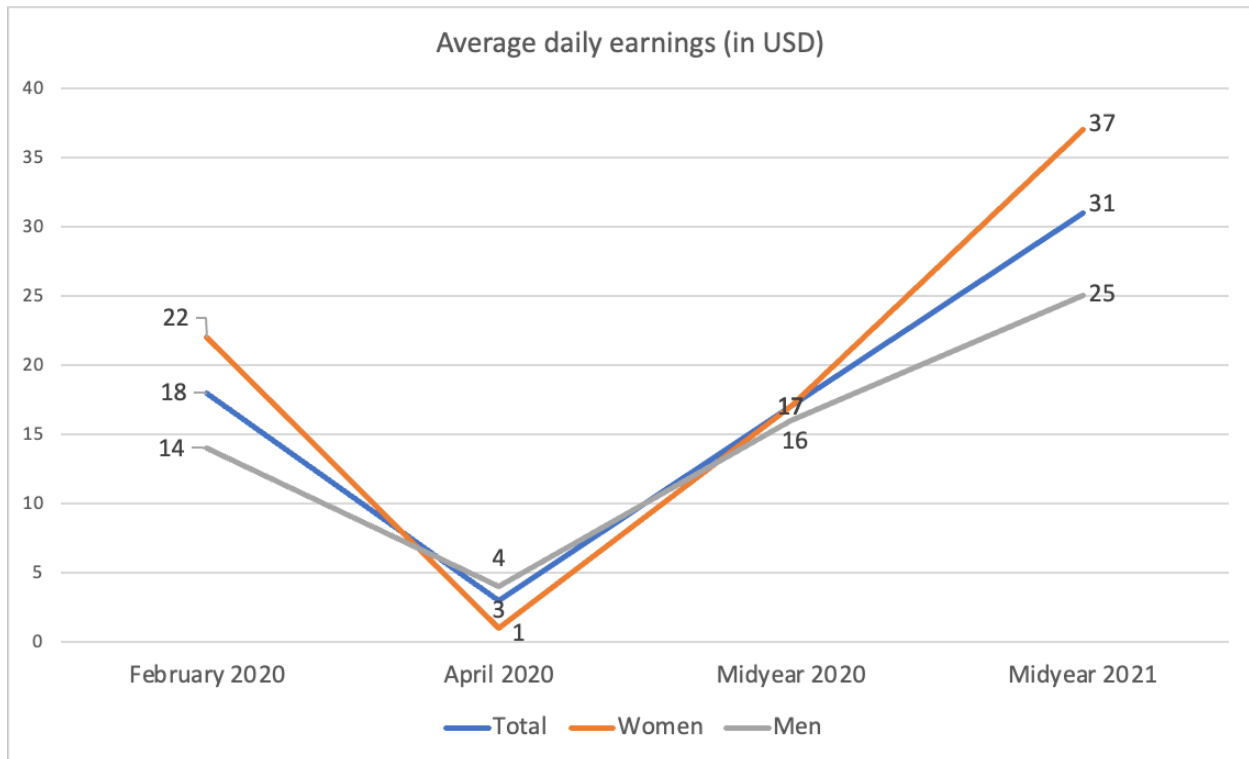
As ability to work has increased, earnings have continued to recover as well. During New York's summer of 2020, with 80% of canners working, canners were earning on average \$17/day. A year later, 96% of canners were able to work, and average daily earnings increased to \$31/day. This likely relates to the city's overall recovery – with events back on, the city's population increasing as old residents move back and new ones move in, and more bars and restaurants open, the supply of recyclable materials increases. It is important to note also that even before the pandemic, canners' earnings varied with seasons – winter typically means lower supply and lower earnings, and summer is the opposite.

However, even with this modest increase in mid-year 2021, canners' daily earnings remain critically low – approximately 80% below the official poverty threshold for a two-adult, two-child family in New York City. While some canners use canning to complement other sources of income, for others it is their primary source of income, which means that many members of the canning community are living in extreme poverty, regardless of any uptick in supply of recyclable materials.

Also, despite the apparent increase in earnings, 42% of canners reported having less household income than before the COVID-19 crisis.

As they did before the pandemic, women continue to earn slightly more than men – \$38/day for women compared to \$25/day for men. This is likely because more women work as canners as their primary source of income than men.

⁶ All earnings data include Round 2 respondents who have stopped working entirely and/or respondents who were not working in the previous month, whose days of work and earnings are set to 0. All earnings data are reported as gross earnings and do not account for costs of purchasing stocks or other inputs. Earnings data include only what individuals earn from their primary occupation, not from other sources.



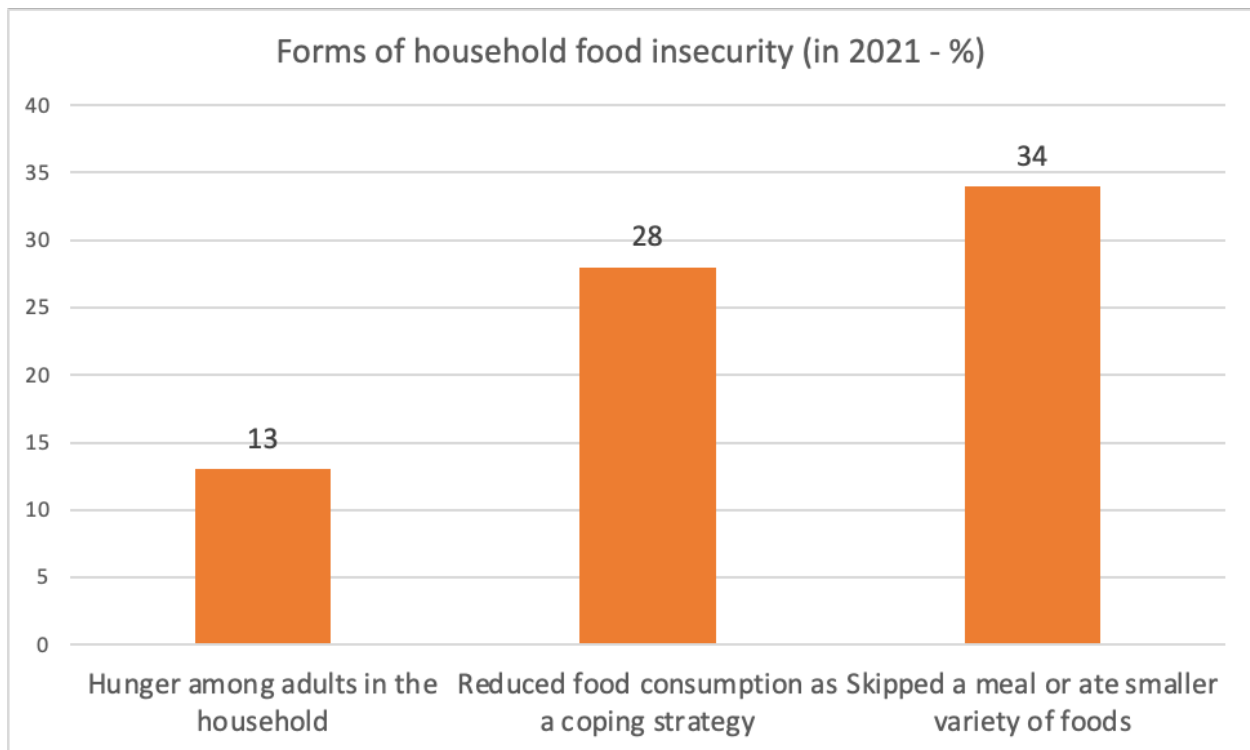
Note: All earnings data includes Round 1 respondents who have stopped working entirely and/or respondents who were not working in the previous month, whose days of work and earnings are set to 0. All earnings data is reported as gross earnings and do not account for costs of purchasing stocks or other inputs.

Unlike last year, now the canners are much better and have more income. More people are coming...people work a lot because before they brought less and now they bring more and they even come to Sure We Can up to twice per day. - Rosa, Sure We Can Staff Member

Food Security

13% of respondents reported hunger⁷ among adults in their household. Additionally, over one-third said that they or other household members had skipped a meal in the last month or eaten a smaller variety of foods than they would have liked. These findings suggest that respondents struggle with food insecurity in terms of volume and choice of foods.

⁷ Respondents were asked whether in the last calendar month any adults or children in their households had “gone hungry because there wasn’t enough food?”



Health and Safety

Respondents highlighted physical and mental health tolls as being COVID-19’s most important impacts for them. Fears of COVID-19 infection affected respondents’ ability to work, and increased anxiety levels and sense of isolation.

As one 67-year-old male canner explained, “I was traumatized by the news. I was so afraid of getting sick and being admitted into the hospital that I had to disconnect our TV. I lost weight and couldn’t sleep. It was only until I began to pray that I felt fine.”

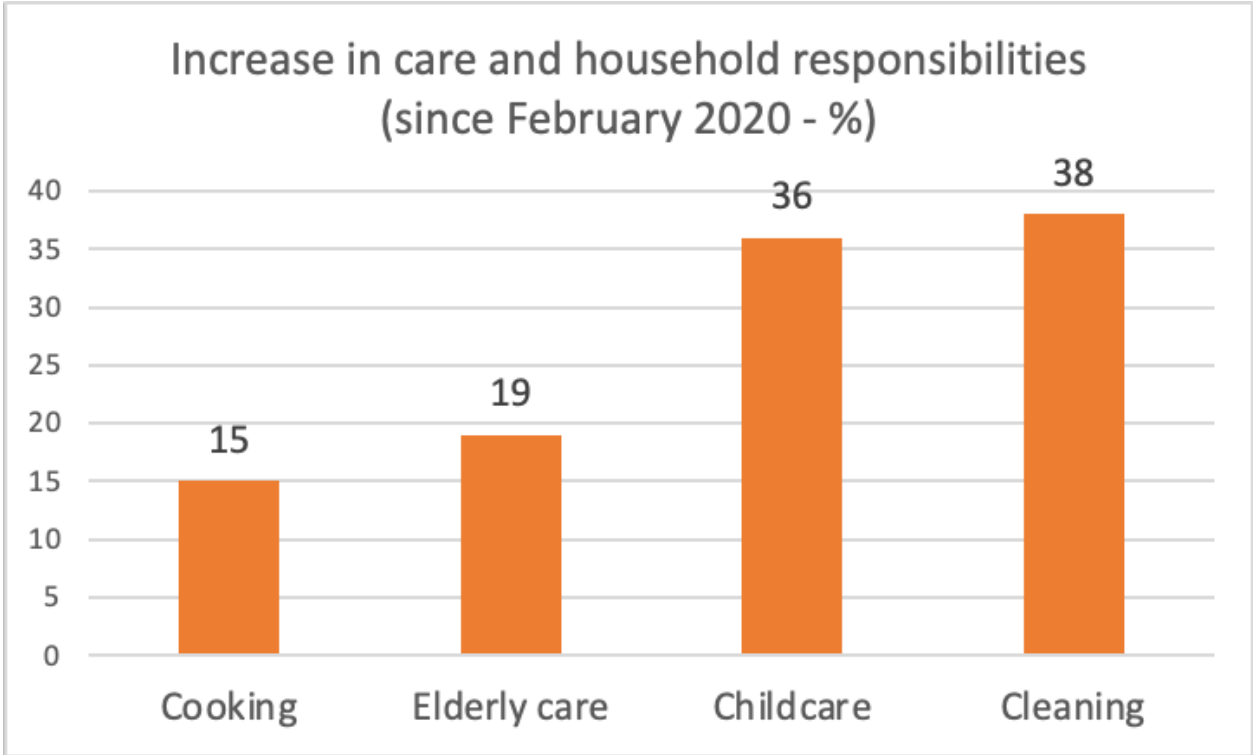
Among respondents working actively as canners at the time of survey, 100% reported using personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks (100%) and gloves (89%). The main source of PPE was Sure We Can, while half of the canners bought their own PPE, and about one-third acquired PPE from government sources.

19% of respondents said that they or a household member had received a positive COVID test result in the last 12 months. 70% of all respondents had been vaccinated or were scheduled to be vaccinated; a rate that is lower than New York City’s overall rate of vaccination for adults.⁸ The small number of unvaccinated respondents said they had concerns about side effects and effectiveness, or that they simply felt they did not need a vaccine, suggesting that a degree of vaccine hesitancy remains in the canning community.

⁸ The percentage of NYC adults having received at least one dose was 87.0% on Nov. 10, 2021. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data-vaccines.page>

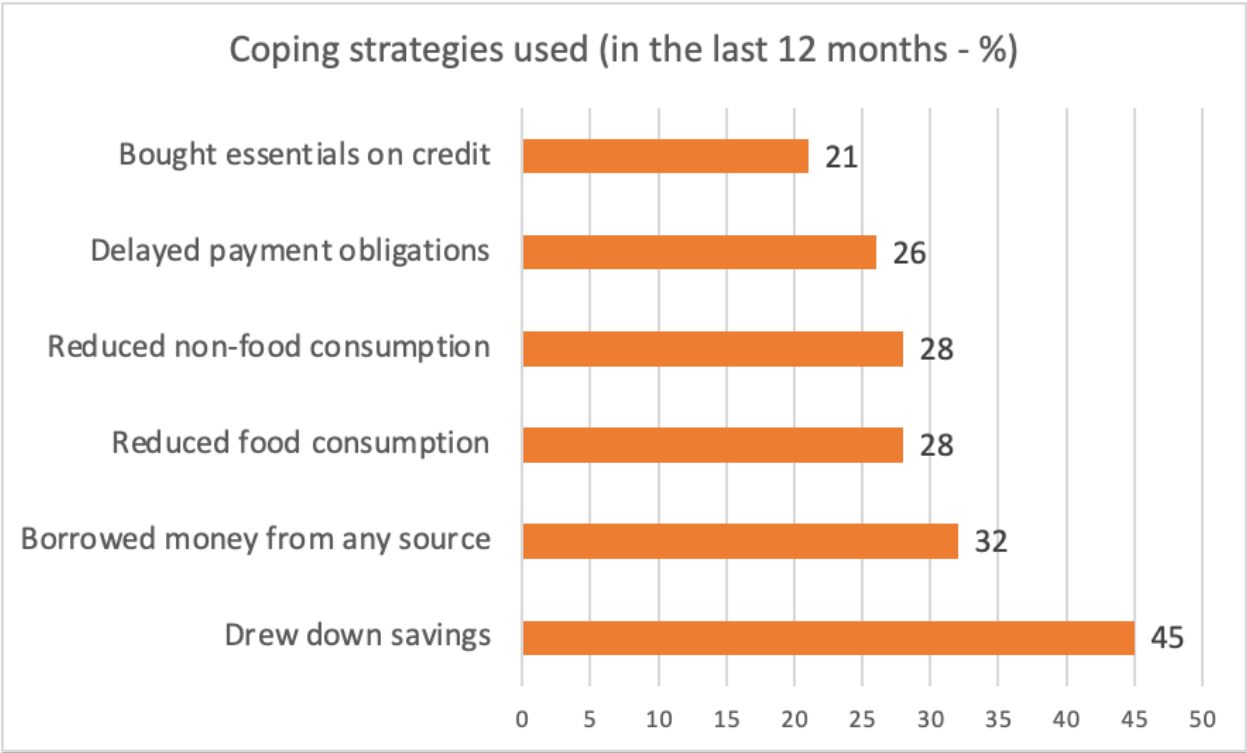
Household Stress

The pandemic also brought an increase in unpaid work. 29% of respondents reporting increases in care responsibilities since February 2020 said that one or more of these had prevented them from working and the same percentage said care responsibilities made working more difficult and caused them to work fewer hours compared to before the pandemic.



Adaptation and Coping Strategies

79% of respondents took one or more coping strategies to help their households survive the crisis. These included drawing down savings (45%), borrowing money from any source (32%), reducing food consumption (28%), reducing non-food consumption (28%), delaying payments (26%) and buying essentials on credit (21%).



** Respondents could select more than one response*

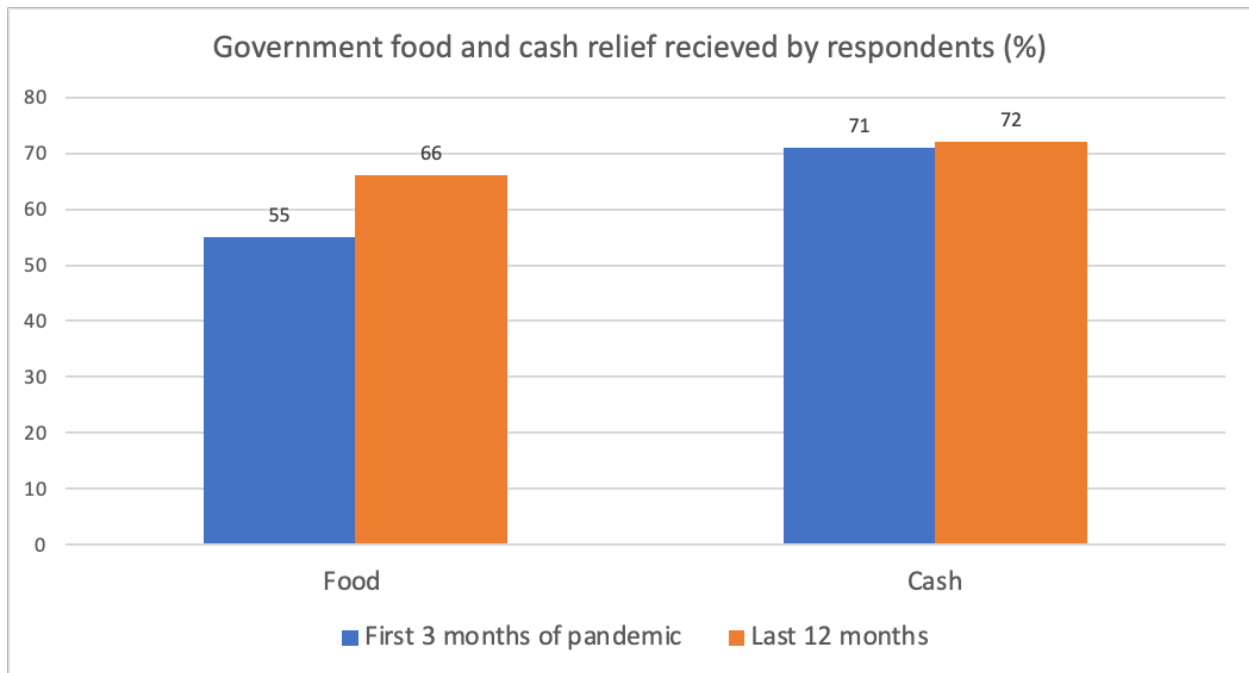
Many of these strategies deplete existing assets or put households into debt. Among those respondents who had drawn down their savings since the start of the pandemic, 96% said they had not replaced any of those savings.

Relief Measures

By Government

In the first 3 months of the pandemic 71% of canners had received cash relief. This did not significantly increase over the last 12 months, with 72% of canners now reporting having received relief. For those who did not receive relief, the main barrier was eligibility, as access to stimulus checks was only accessible to US citizens. More than half of respondents reported being born outside the US, and many may have been locked out of relief due to lack of documentation.

Access to food relief had increased over the past year more than access to cash. 55% of canners reported receiving food relief in the first 3 months of the pandemic, which increased to 66% in the past year.



Rental assistance failed to reach the canning community. Only 2 canners reported receiving support with rent or utilities during the past year.

By Sure We Can

With cooperation from community organizations and New York City, since the start of the pandemic Sure We Can has provided:

- mutual aid totalling \$40,000
- over 100,000 items of PPE, including face coverings and gloves, to canners and community members
- multi-lingual COVID-19 educational resources to canners and community members
- facilitated conversations about the pandemic at community events
- hosted a mobile vaccination clinic

Study participants noted the positive role Sure We Can has played in supporting canners throughout the pandemic:

Everyone pretty much knows everyone else. We know we all face the same conditions every day. We face the legal situation, not just the health issues. It is pretty much everything you have wrapped up. It is the canning lifestyle. [Sure We Can] helps out because if it weren't for recycling cans and bottles I'd be recycling actual metals – copper, aluminum – and that is really hard work. This place always shows support for their clients in a lot of ways, including parties and bringing food. - Woman Canner

I received money, a lot of support, love, kindness and respect. The people who work here are caring and treat people with dignity and respect. I received masks and gloves from SWC. - Woman Canner

This is the best place there is, here there is help, they give you financial help, they give you clothes, the food that the children eat, here there is a lot of help than in other places where they mistreat and pay less. - Rosa, Sure We Can Staff Member

Recovery and Beyond: Informal Worker Needs and Demands

When asked what support was needed from the government, respondents called for:

6. **Expand the NYS Bottle Bill:** Expand the types of beverage containers marked for redemption (liquor and wine bottles, non-carbonated drinks); this will increase waste diversion, recycling rates and canner earnings.
7. **Ensure economic justice for canners:** Increase the redemption value of beverage containers from 5 cents to 10 cents per piece in recognition of canners' labour. Increase the handling fee to 5 cents so they can be paid for sorting labour.
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What canners need – in their own words

- "Raise the price of containers, bottles, from five cents to ten cents, so that people can live just a little more comfortably." – Woman canner
- "The government should increase the amount of money paid per bottle and can; waste pickers should have an increase since they are helping the environment." – Woman canner
- "The government should help SWC so that SWC continues to exist; we have *abuelitos* (grandparents) that work here; if SWC wasn't here, where would they work?" – Woman canner
- "We need more redemption centres like Sure We Can, a place focused on dignifying canning and serving the community and a place to hang out and feel like you belong." – Man canner
- "More assistance because the recyclers are the ones cleaning the streets; years ago there was a lot of garbage in the streets because the people would drink in the streets and

leave their bottles, but recyclers clean the streets; the people don't do their part to maintain the streets clean; the government hasn't supported the recyclers who clean the streets.” - Man canner

- “Find canners other employment, help them deal with addiction. Help them with housing. Help with mental health issues that canners face.” – Man canner



Canners marched in the People’s Climate March on September 20, 2020, in New York City to raise awareness of their contributions to combat climate change. Photo: C. Hegel

“Well, the government should go out and look for us, call us and ask us where the Recyclers are? There must be recognition of recyclers’ work, help us to clean the cities, the streets. We are helping the planet and the government should ask us for our opinions.” – Canner leader

COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy is a collaboration between the global network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and local partner organizations representing informal workers in 12 cities: Accra, Ghana; Ahmedabad, India; Bangkok, Thailand; Dakar, Senegal; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Delhi, India; Durban, South Africa; Lima, Peru; Mexico City, Mexico; New York City, USA; Pleven, Bulgaria; and Tiruppur, India; with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC/CRDI), Canada. The mixed-methods longitudinal study includes survey questionnaires of informal workers and

semi-structured interviews with informal worker leaders and other key informants, all conducted by phone. For more information, visit wiego.org/COVID-19-Global-Impact-Study.

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies.

Visit www.wiego.org.

Sure We Can (SWC) supports the local community, particularly its most vulnerable residents, and promotes social inclusion, environmental awareness and economic empowerment. Each year, Sure We Can diverts approximately 12 million bottles and cans from New York City's waste stream, distributing over \$700,000 annually to more than 900 canners, who are overwhelmingly low-income immigrants and people of color, some of whom struggle with homelessness and disability. Sure We Can also conducts urban gardening, education and outreach, composting, and single-use plastic upcycling. Our motto is "Where Everyone Counts," and it is an important part of our mission to empower those who make a living doing stigmatized work, particularly canners, who collect, sort and redeem deposit-based containers for a living. We are a recycling center, community space and sustainability hub. For more information, visit www.surewecan.org



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Cover Photo: Canners arriving at Sure We Can, the only non-profit bottle redemption center in New York City. Photo Credit: Carlos Rivera