

## Waste Pickers During the COVID-19 Crisis: Pathways of Impact and Recovery in Five Cities



By Jenna Harvey

## WIEGO Resource Documents

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## Key Points

**A year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, market shifts had exacerbated waste pickers' structural disadvantages, and their earnings had not recovered to pre-pandemic levels:**

- By mid-2021, the vast majority – 89% – of waste pickers were back at work, but monthly earnings lagged behind at 78% of pre-COVID-19 levels. Earnings recovery was gendered: men waste pickers had recovered 92% of pre-COVID earnings, compared to 67% for women.
- By mid-2021 market shifts – particularly decreased supply – had worsened over the previous year, with 70% of waste pickers reporting that access to waste had become more difficult than in mid-2020. Increased competition and physical barriers to accessing waste supply were becoming entrenched, and waste pickers expressed concern over the long-term viability of their livelihoods. Stigma, discrimination and harassment from authorities exacerbated these challenges.

**The pandemic increased waste pickers' existing occupational health and safety risks, and waste pickers organized to equip themselves with personal protective equipment (PPE) in the absence of government support:**

- In mid-2021, 31% of waste pickers reported heavier physical labour and 41% reported an increase in exposure to medical waste compared to pre-crisis conditions.
- 98% of waste pickers reported using PPE in mid-2021, and 77% of these respondents reported having purchased the equipment themselves.

**Earnings losses exacerbated existing vulnerabilities for waste pickers. In the absence of adequate government relief coverage, workers experienced increasing food insecurity and a reliance on asset-depleting coping strategies:**

- In mid-2021, 62% of waste pickers had received no food relief, and 65% had received no cash relief from their governments.
- Indicators of food insecurity – adult and child hunger, and changes to diet – were higher for waste pickers than for any other sector in the [COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy Study](#). In mid-2021, 64% of respondents reported skipping meals or eating a low variety of foods in the past month.
- To cope with earnings losses and lack of relief, some waste pickers relied on asset-depleting strategies: 49% of waste pickers borrowed money and 33% drew down savings to cope. Of those who had drawn down savings since the start of the pandemic, 80% reported an inability to replace these.

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## Introduction

Over the COVID-19 period, WIEGO, working in collaboration with member-based organizations of workers and their allies, assessed the impact of the crisis on different groups of informal workers, including waste pickers, through a longitudinal multi-city [study](#). The two rounds of the study included a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews, both conducted by phone. Round 1 assessed the impact of the first wave of COVID-19 and associated restrictions in April 2020 and mid-2020 compared to February 2020 (the pre-COVID-19 base line). Round 2 assessed how informal workers experienced successive waves of the virus and ongoing economic strains between mid-2020 and mid-2021, and to what extent (if any) they had recovered work and earnings by mid-2021 (compared to February 2020).<sup>1</sup>

This report presents findings from the eight study cities where waste pickers were part of the sample: Accra, Ghana; Ahmedabad, India; Dakar, Senegal; Delhi, India; Durban, South Africa; Lima, Peru; Mexico City, Mexico; and New York City, United States of America. This unique dataset provides evidence and insights on the degree and pathways of impact of the COVID-19 crisis on waste pickers.

Following a note on methodology and the sample characteristics, this report is structured as follows: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on waste pickers' ability to work and earnings is tracked through three periods – the period of harshest restrictions on movement in April 2020, mid-2020 when most restrictions had been relaxed, and mid-2021 after a year of resurgence, new restrictions and market changes. The following section describes the impact of the crisis on waste pickers' health and safety. The report then describes the crisis impact on food insecurity and details waste pickers' access to government relief and the strategies they used to cope. It concludes with a summary of waste pickers' demands for a just recovery.

## Methodology

This report draws from interviews with 590 respondents, 345 of whom were interviewed in both 2020 and 2021 rounds. Round 1 surveys were conducted between June and July 2020. Round 2 surveys were conducted between June and August 2021, in all study cities except Delhi and Ahmedabad, where they were conducted in September and October 2021 due to the severe Delta variant outbreak in India. It also draws on in-depth interviews with workers and their organization leaders, conducted between August and October 2021. (For full details on methodology, see [WIEGO, 2022](#)).

**Table 1: Sample of waste pickers by city and gender**

City	Total number of respondents	Percentage of women respondents
Accra	49	33
Dakar	94	63
Mexico City	43	46

<sup>1</sup> For more details on the study methods and sample, see WIEGO 2022

Lima	61	43
Delhi	59	22
Ahmedabad	53	100
Durban	105	40
Bangkok	61	57
New York City	65	49

The samples were designed to reflect the key characteristics of the membership of the informal worker organizations partnering in the study: a purposive quota approach. The findings are thus indicative rather than representative of waste pickers in each city.

### Sample characteristics: Divergent work arrangements, shared vulnerabilities

Waste pickers work in cities across the global North and South, contributing to the reduction of waste accumulation in landfills through their labour (with proven impact on the reduction of GhG emissions, and other environmental benefits) ([WIEGO and Green Partners, 2019](#)). In some cities, waste pickers serve as the only source of recycling services. Despite these contributions, waste pickers generally receive no support from governments in the form of pay for their services, social or legal protections, support to mitigate health risks and improve working conditions, or to access productive resources (sorting space, equipment, PPE). Waste pickers' exclusion is often exacerbated by societal stigma and discrimination.

Although many commonalities exist among waste pickers across contexts – both in terms of their contributions and their vulnerabilities – the sector is highly heterogeneous in terms of work arrangements. Markets for waste also vary across contexts that shape the materials waste pickers primarily collect, including: plastics, aluminum, glass, paper, scrap metal or used household appliances. The sample of waste pickers surveyed for the WIEGO study reflects this diversity:<sup>2</sup>

- In **Dakar**, waste pickers surveyed were members of the Bokk Diom association, a collective of dumpsite waste pickers working at the Mbeubeuss landfill, the largest open dump in West Africa. Waste pickers at Mbeubeuss primarily pick plastics (and some scrap metal when possible) from waste arriving at the landfill, and sell to middlemen who are located on site.<sup>3</sup>
- In **Accra**, waste pickers surveyed – members of the Kpone Waste Pickers Association – are also dumpsite waste pickers. Historically they have worked at the Kpone landfill, but during the pandemic they were displaced and relocated

<sup>2</sup> These descriptions reflect characteristics of waste picker groups surveyed pre-pandemic – some working arrangements shifted over the course of the crisis

<sup>3</sup> WIEGO documents the work of Bokk Diom and the threats waste pickers in Senegal face as part of its ongoing work. For more information on the waste pickers in this study, see [Waste Pickers Organize Into a Cooperative: Will Senegal Include Them in its Waste Management Plan?](#)

to a smaller, proximate site. Like workers in Dakar, they primarily pick plastics, as well as some scrap metals, also selling these to middlemen set up on site.<sup>4</sup>

- In **Durban**, waste pickers surveyed were not organized into a membership-based organization but were associated with the non-profit organization Asiye e Tafuleni, which supports informal workers in a range of sectors in Durban, including street vendors and market traders around the Warwick Junction market. Waste pickers in Durban are itinerant or street waste pickers, engaging in collection from households and private businesses. Some waste pickers have agreements with businesses to allow them to collect their waste and, for many businesses, waste pickers are the primary source of recycled waste collection. In Durban, waste pickers have historically collected paper and scrap metal and are increasingly collecting plastics. They sell their waste at buy-back centres, many of which are owned by the municipality.
- In **Mexico City**, waste pickers surveyed are not part of a membership-based organization (they have been actively discouraged from organizing through repressive tactics) ([Espinosa, Saffron and Abizaid, 2018](#)). These workers, referred to as *voluntarios* (volunteers), work side by side with formally employed municipal waste workers in municipal household waste collection. However, unlike municipal workers, they receive no pay or protections and are forced to cover all their own costs. They earn only from tips provided by households and the sale of some recycled materials they are able to collect through the course of household collection, which they sell at buy-back centres.<sup>5</sup>
- In **Lima**, waste pickers surveyed formed part of multiple associations, which correspond to specific geographic areas of the city. These associations hold permits from the municipality that allow them to conduct household waste collection along designated routes. However, they receive no pay, protections or support for productive resources from the municipality. They earn from selling the materials they collect to buy-back centres.
- In **New York City**, waste pickers (referred to as canners) surveyed form part of the redemption centre and community organization Sure We Can. These canners collect aluminum cans from households, businesses or street litter, and sort and redeem their cans for cash at redemption centres like Sure We Can and others. The work of canners in New York City is facilitated by a legislative framework – referred to as the “Bottle Bill” – which establishes a fixed price for can redemption in New York state.
- In **Ahmedabad**, women waste pickers surveyed form part of the membership-based organization Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA). Before COVID-19, they collected waste in two ways – some women had permission from the municipality to collect waste from the city’s dumpsite, and some collected waste from residential colonies to sell to scrap dealers. The primary market for waste in Ahmedabad is for paper and cardboard.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the Kpone Waste Pickers Association and their displacement from the dumpsite during the pandemic see: [Ghanaian government leaves waste pickers to fend for themselves amidst COVID-19 pandemic](#).

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive overview on the *trabajadores voluntarios* in Mexico City, see: [Trabajadores invisibles dentro del servicio de limpieza de la ciudad de Mexico](#)

- In **Delhi**, waste pickers surveyed were associated with the Bal Vikas organization. Most waste pickers in Delhi are involved in door-to-door collection, while others work collecting waste from dumpsites. Typically in Delhi, male waste pickers are involved in collection, while women waste pickers sort waste at home or out of small workshops.
- In **Bangkok**, waste pickers surveyed are from the Poonsap Community in Sai Mai District and Soi Sua Yai Uthit in Chatuchak District. Waste pickers in Bangkok are generally self-employed workers who collect and sort waste directly from private or public bins. In some cases they purchase materials from households or shops for sorting and re-sale at buy-back centres.

**Table 1: Sample of waste pickers by city and gender**

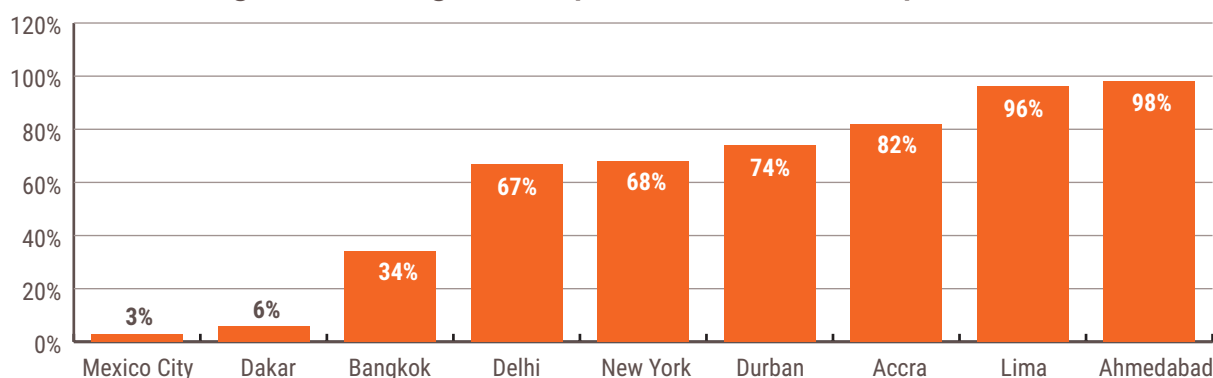
Employment arrangement	Cities
Self-employed, dumpsite waste pickers	Accra and Dakar
Self-employed, itinerant street waste pickers (along primarily household collection routes designated by municipality)	Mexico City and Lima
Self-employed, itinerant street waste pickers (mix of household and commercial collection, outside of municipal arrangements)	New York City, Bangkok, Durban, Delhi

## COVID-19 Restrictions, Barriers to Work and Impacts on Earnings

### April 2020: Abrupt loss of work and earnings

After the onset of the pandemic, in April 2020, when some of the strictest restrictions were in place, 60 per cent of all waste pickers surveyed were unable to work. Median monthly earnings for waste pickers across cities during this time was zero. In no city were waste pickers declared essential service providers.

**Figure 1: Percentage of waste pickers unable to work in April 2020**



However, the ability of waste pickers to work varied significantly by city. For example, work was more accessible to dumpsite waste pickers in Dakar, where many workers live on or around the site, and where there was relatively no oversight from authorities that would have prevented them from working. In contrast, in Accra, many workers had to travel from their homes to the dumpsite, which made access to work impossible for many because of mobility restrictions.



In Mexico City, although waste pickers were not officially declared essential workers (as they are not recognized by the city), they work side by side with essential municipal waste workers. So throughout the city's period of strictest restrictions, *voluntarios* went to work as usual, maintaining the stability of the solid waste management system in the process, at their own risk, with no recognition or benefits.<sup>6</sup>

In New York City and Bangkok, although mobility restrictions did not explicitly prohibit waste pickers from collecting, workers had limited options for collection (with business closures presenting a significant barrier in Bangkok) and sale (redemption centres were closed for nearly a month in New York).

In cities with the heaviest lockdowns<sup>7</sup> that involved severe restrictions on movement for anyone other than designated essential workers (Lima, Delhi, Ahmedabad and Durban), waste pickers reported actions by the state to undermine their place in the waste value chain, often by force. The use of violent enforcement was particularly common in Delhi and Durban, where 48 per cent and 59 per cent of waste pickers reported law enforcement prevented them from working during lockdown periods, respectively.

Despite possessing permits for waste collection pre-COVID-19, waste pickers in Lima were not designated essential service providers during the city's first draconian lockdown and were prohibited from working entirely during this time, while larger, private companies were given access to their routes.

In Durban, waste pickers reported the municipality began collection from shops where they would have previously had access. Workers who attempted to work during the initial lockdown period faced harassment, violence and even confinement against their will by authorities. As one waste picker explained: *"Enforcement agencies were using COVID-19 regulations to intensify harassment on recyclers but not providing any solution ...."* At least three waste pickers reported being forcefully confined in "COVID-19 camps" where they did not receive adequate food or water. As one worker explained, *"[We were] prevented from hustling and forcefully kept in the COVID-19 camps and not taken care of properly, under-fed and [provided] no blankets."*

The initial lockdown in Indian cities was one of the harshest in the world. In Ahmedabad, while restrictions on movement were in place, the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) took actions to cut waste pickers out of the supply chain by closing access to their two main collection points – revoking previous permissions for dumpsite picking and initiating municipal collection in residential colonies previously covered by waste pickers. Access to sorting spaces was closed and policed. As one waste picker explained: *"Before, the women collected garbage from the societies and then sold it in the evening for their livelihood. Because of the AMC vehicle coming in each society for garbage collection, women are unable to find waste anywhere. The municipality has closed off these women's work."*

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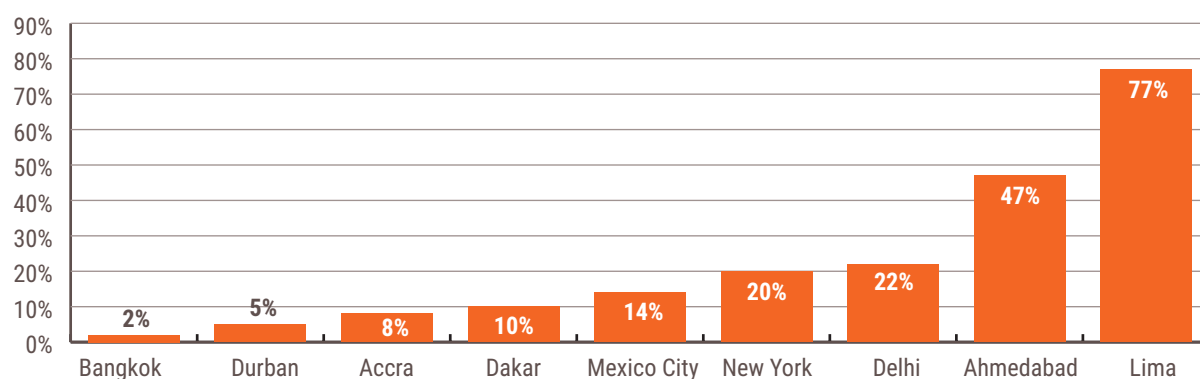
<sup>6</sup> For more see: "[Los rifados de la basura, héroes invisibles?](#)"

<sup>7</sup> See [WIEGO 2022](#) for full details on city lockdowns

In Delhi, as was reported in many Indian cities, stringent restrictions on mobility were often enforced with police violence. As one woman waste picker plainly reported: “During lockdown, no one was allowed to go out for anything, and we were beaten by the police if we did.”

### Mid-2020: Market slowdown, stigma and new sources of competition complicate recovery

Figure 2: Percentage of waste pickers unable to work in mid-2020



By mid-2020, when restrictions had been eased in most cities, the majority of waste pickers (78 per cent total) were back to work. Among those who did not return to work, health concerns (48 per cent of respondents) and restrictions on movement (46 per cent) were cited most frequently as barriers to return. Notably, Lima’s lockdown period extended into mid-2020, preventing most waste pickers there from returning. Heavy restrictions were also still largely in place in Indian cities.

The impact of restrictions on earnings at the start of the crisis was severe. However, by mid-2020, waste pickers had closed this gap by half – recovering 48 per cent of pre-COVID-19 earnings. However, earnings recovery must be understood in the context of the waste picker sector being characterized by extremely low baseline earnings – pre-COVID-19 earnings for waste pickers were lower than those of any other sector in the study. A reduction of earnings by half for a worker earning USD2 a day could represent vastly different outcomes in terms of food security, for example.

Earnings recovery was complicated by a range of market factors, which were further exacerbated by stigma and discrimination against the sector by state and non-state actors. Waste pickers who could work returned to a transformed market landscape, with both supply and demand-related challenges posing formidable barriers to recuperation of earnings. Some of these came from shifts in waste value chains brought on by the pandemic, while others were the result of government actions to shut off workers’ access to waste.

**Lack of access to waste supply:** Even for waste pickers who could move freely, most could not secure the same access to waste as they had before the pandemic – 72 per cent of respondents reported more difficulty in accessing materials in mid-2020 than pre-crisis. Waste pickers across cities reported a common reason for reduced access as the inability to secure waste from private businesses, some of which were generating far less waste, while others remained closed or were blocking access to waste pickers

in favour of private or municipal collection. Stigma and discrimination against waste pickers and police harassment compounded these access issues.

For example, in Durban, a ban on liquor sales dealt a heavy blow to recyclers by cutting into the supply of bottles. At the same time, new municipal collection routes continued to complicate access to waste for recyclers, and some waste pickers reported businesses refusing them access due to stigmatization: “[We are] unable to access most private properties because of the stigma that we ‘roam around’. Waste generators are becoming hostile towards recyclers.” Another waste picker added: “Most of the areas where we access our recyclables do not allow us to collect waste anymore, when we try and collect the police take our recyclables away and say we are littering.”

A similar situation played out with household collection in Ahmedabad. As described above, the AMC took over collection in many residential colonies, and this was exacerbated by residents’ refusal to allow waste pickers to enter. As one SEWA organizer explained: “The biggest fear right now is that the sisters don't have any work. Even in society [residential societies], they were not allowed to pick papers. Right now they have found an excuse that the waste pickers will come in the society and spread the disease. They tell the waste pickers that they ‘go everywhere’ due to which they will spread the disease.”

Waste pickers collecting on dumpsites had a window into the city’s overall consumption patterns – and, due to a slowdown in commercial activity during the pandemic, waste pickers in Accra noted less waste arriving at sites and a predominance of organic waste, which was of no value to them.

**Lack of demand and reduction in prices:** Whatever materials waste pickers were able to collect, they reported a second layer of difficulty in finding a buyer and an acceptable price. Some buy-back centres remained closed mid-year or were buying less or not at all – 57 per cent of all waste pickers reported that the number of waste dealerships or buy-back centres had decreased. Seventy per cent of all waste pickers reported a drop in prices during this period. Only in New York (where the price for can redemption is established by law) was this not the case. Extra costs (for example, for transport, storage, security or PPE) created an extra burden for about one-quarter of workers.

In Ahmedabad, one organizer attributed the drop in demand to buyers’ uncertainty about the larger market for materials, and even their own health concerns: “The scrap shop owner is not accepting the material collected by the waste picker because they are not able to sell it further in the supply chain. Not all the scrap shop owners have opened their shops. Because the garbage is taken from anywhere, no matter how many places are touched, the bags are filled from anywhere, so they also feel the fear of disease.”

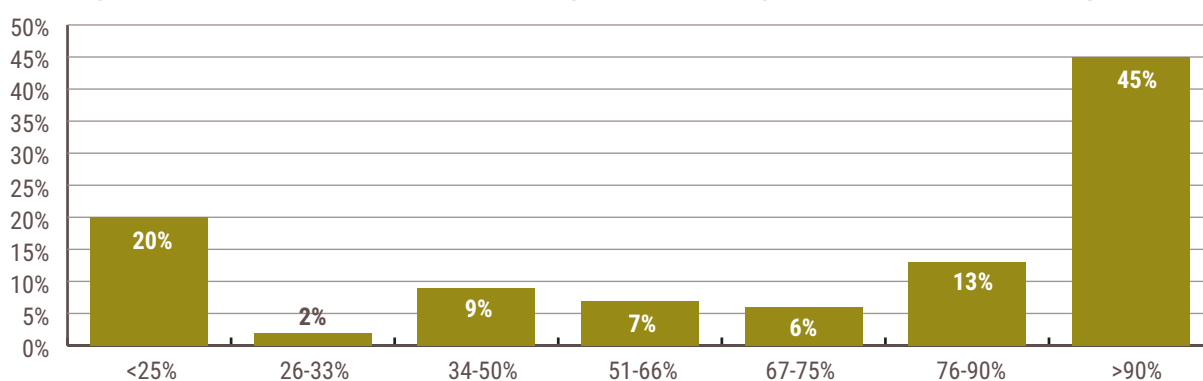
In Accra and Dakar, workers reported a shift in the market away from plastics and towards paper, which has a lower price point. Workers also reported that middlemen at landfills were exploiting their position to lower prices to unsustainable levels, which for lack of options workers were forced to accept or store their waste and wait: “The disease has caused us a lot of difficulties because in Mbeubeuss [dumpsite] there is plastic, but we can no longer export it, so we are having difficulty selling the product, and the intermediaries are taking advantage to lower the prices. So, we are obliged to sell at this price because we need it to support our family.”

## Mid-2021: Hardening of structural market shifts present long-term threats to livelihoods

From mid-2020 to mid-2021 study cities experienced rolling resurgences of the virus and implemented a variety of public health measures in response, with the most stringent restrictions on movement again in Lima, Delhi, Ahmedabad and Durban. Some cities, notably Bangkok, Delhi and Ahmedabad, experienced a more acute health crisis in 2021, with higher infection rates than in 2020, posing new risks for waste pickers unable to sustain stay-at-home orders.

Despite ongoing barriers to working and earning as before, by the time of the second survey in mid-2021 (and September 2021 for Delhi and Ahmedabad) almost all (90 per cent) of waste pickers reported the ability to work, more than any other sector covered by the study.<sup>8</sup> By this time, waste pickers had recovered 78 per cent of pre-COVID-19 monthly earnings. However, levels of recovery were uneven across cities (and within cities along gender lines, as will be explained in more detail at the end of this section). As Figure 3 shows, while 45 per cent of waste pickers had recovered more than 90 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 earnings, more than one-third had recovered only 50 per cent or less.

**Figure 3: Distribution of mid-2021 earnings as a percentage of pre-COVID-19 earnings (%)**



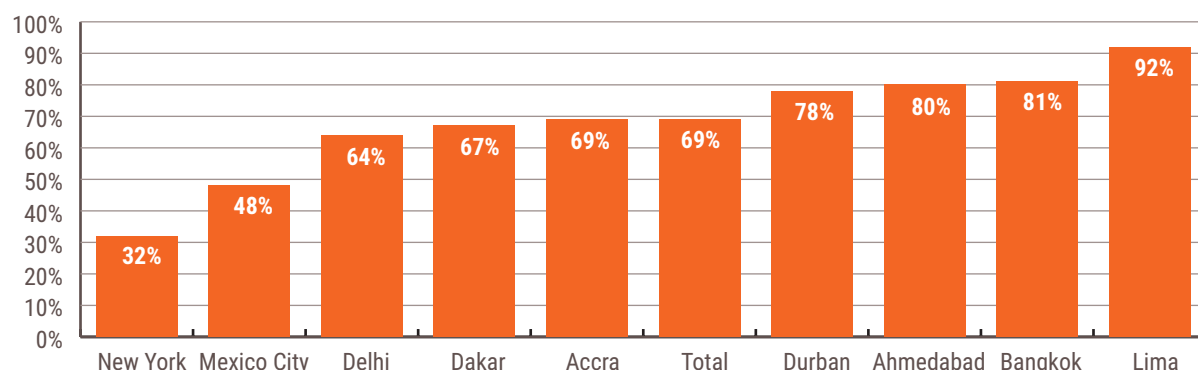
In mid-2021, in contrast to mid-2020, indicators of demand for and prices of recyclable materials had improved: 61 per cent of waste pickers reported the number of buy-back centres open had either stayed the same or increased, and 59 per cent reported prices for materials had either stayed the same or increased. However, access to waste supply had become worse.

Specifically, in mid-2021, almost 70 per cent of waste pickers reported that access to waste was more difficult than it had been a year prior. In qualitative interviews, waste pickers attributed the drop in supply to a worsening of market trends that had started in 2020 – including reduced quantities of waste due to decreased consumption, competition from other actors, and state actions to block access, including violent enforcement. As in 2020, the four cities with the strictest lockdown measures in 2021 (Ahmedabad, Delhi, Lima and Durban) reported the highest rates of police harassment preventing waste pickers from accessing waste (ranging from 13 per cent in Lima to 30

<sup>8</sup> As of mid-2021, 82% of domestic workers, 80% of street and market vendors, and 57% of home-based workers reported ability to work.

per cent in Durban). In these four cities in particular, actions to block access to space often were accompanied by actions to block access to critical space for sorting.

**Figure 4: Percentage of waste pickers reporting difficulty in accessing waste in mid-2021 compared to June 2020**



While competition from other workers was mentioned as a factor driving down earnings, competition from the private sector and from the state represented more acute threats to workers' livelihoods, particularly for workers in Accra, Dakar, Ahmedabad, Lima, Durban and Delhi. These threats – specifically municipal and private-sector actors undermining collection routes and blocking access to spaces previously occupied by waste pickers – had been set into motion the previous year, and by mid-2021 many waste pickers expressed anxiety not only about the continued short-term consequences of these threats, but also about the future of their livelihoods.

For example, in Lima, although waste pickers successfully advocated for the right to work as service providers during the city's second full lockdown period in February 2021, private companies already had started to undermine their collection routes during the first lockdown, when waste pickers were denied the ability to work. The situation was exacerbated by a decision by the municipality in 2021 to enter into an agreement with a private recycling firm that would increase the company's access to recycled household appliances, a major source of earnings for waste pickers. As one waste picker leader explained: *"The businessmen ... they have made their agreement with the municipalities so that they enter our areas and collect everything, giving incentives to households, using loudspeakers so that they can collect everything ... such as irons, washing machines, radios. For the recyclers it is dangerous because they are not going to give us any of that, only everything that is little bottles, cardboard, pieces of paper and glass. Do you think that's what we're going to live on?"*

By mid-2021, governments in both Accra and Dakar had taken actions to close dumpsites where waste pickers had an established presence for decades. In Accra, waste pickers were abruptly displaced from the Kpone Landfill and relocated to a proximate site also slated to be closed, with no consultation or assurances of livelihood safeguarding. In Dakar, the Senegalese government announced the closing of the Mbeubeuss landfill in June 2021, not immediately displacing workers but creating an existential threat to their livelihoods. Waste pickers in both cities expressed uncertainty about the future of their work. As one waste picker in Accra explained: *"The next few months, that is what we are struggling with – the closure of the dumpsite. That is what every day ... There is not a single*

*day that we will not think of it. Looking at the trending news, that any moment from now ... So the next few months, our worry is the dumpsite closure and what happens next.”*

These actions by governments to effectively shut out waste pickers from the waste value chain were initiated during a time of sanitary crisis and mirror similar actions by governments across cities to evict street vendors and close access to public spaces for livelihood purposes (Harvey, 2020). At the same time, even as governments systematically closed access to waste, in some cases waste pickers described government actors’ realization of the essential nature of waste pickers’ work – without which waste value chains in many cities cannot properly function. For example, one waste picker in Delhi reported the growing tension between the state’s violent repression of waste pickers’ access to work and the need for their critical services: *“They’re being beaten up by the police in order to come to work, [and] even after taking the risks to come to work, they’re not getting their profits. So they didn’t go to work for a few days. Then the agencies ... called them and told them to come to work because people are having a lot of difficulties ... since they can’t come out of their homes ... how can they throw away the garbage?”* In no other city does this paradox of exclusion and dependence play out as starkly as in Mexico City, where the city government has yet to issue workers service contracts despite their service side by side with municipal workers throughout the pandemic period.

In a context of increasing threats and decreasing access to waste for the sector as a whole, women waste pickers were hit particularly hard – the crisis exacerbated the pre-existing gap between women and men waste pickers’ earnings. By mid-2021, men waste pickers had recovered 92 per cent of their pre-COVID earnings, compared to 67 per cent for women. This reflects gendered aspects of waste pickers’ livelihoods. For example, in Accra, existing hierarchies at worksites privilege men’s access to higher-value waste. In Delhi, women waste pickers are more likely to be involved in sorting waste while men are more likely to be involved in public collection – leaving women more vulnerable to sorting-centre closures. In Dakar, waste picker leaders explained in interviews that women waste pickers are less likely to be self-employed and more likely to work for another waste picker. As one waste picker leader explained of women waste pickers in Dakar: *“Access to materials is more difficult, especially for the women who go to the dumpsite. Sometimes you meet women with their children who work all day but when they come down, they don’t have anything to buy to eat. The situation is degrading and really difficult for some.”*

## **Health and Safety Challenges**

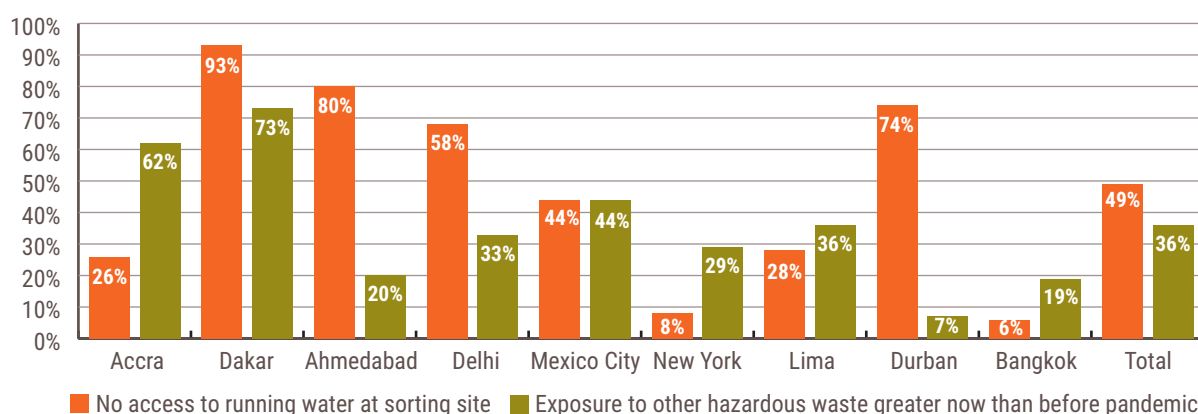
As a sector, waste pickers face a range of occupational health and safety risks, including exposure to harmful substances or chemicals, ergonomic risks from repeated movements and heavy lifting, risk of injury or harm from vehicles or heavy equipment, and risk of violence related to stigma or harassment. Health risks vary depending on the type of workplace. For example, on any given day, dumpsite waste pickers may face risks from harmful fumes, fire outbreaks or structural collapses of the sites where they work, which in some cases may be many storeys high and past their engineered capacity (as is the case for sites in both Accra and Dakar). As WIEGO’s 2018 health risk mapping in Brazilian waste picker cooperatives showed, even in more controlled environments, waste pickers face ergonomic hazards from repeated movements and taxing physical labour (Ogando, 2018). Waste pickers across the sector face risks of injury from the

materials they sort – from medical waste, contaminated food waste, needles, or glass, among other things.

Physical risks are heightened by a lack of adequate workplace infrastructure – running water, proper equipment, secure storage sites, etc. – with many street and dumpsite waste pickers operating with no built infrastructure at all, other than designated sorting sites that they have created themselves. In sum, waste pickers across cities and different types of work sites faced a high level of existing occupational health and safety risks before the pandemic, which were exacerbated by the crisis – 61 per cent of all waste pickers reported greater occupational health and safety risks than compared to the period before the pandemic.

Specifically, in 2021, 36 per cent of workers reported their exposure to hazardous materials had increased during the pandemic, with figures varying greatly by city (see below). Waste pickers in Dakar, who work at a dumpsite with no supportive infrastructure, reported both the highest rates of greater exposure to hazardous waste and the lowest access to running water.

**Figure 5: Percentage of waste pickers reporting no access to running water at sorting site and greater exposure to other hazardous waste by city in mid-2021**



In addition to inadequate infrastructure, waste pickers do not typically have access to health and safety training or equipment through an employer or through the government, even when they are working along government-designated collection routes (as is the case in Lima and Mexico City).

The pandemic context exacerbated these existing health and safety risks and created a critical need for access to PPE for workers to have some safeguard against contaminated waste. An organizer in Ahmedabad described the compounding health risks for waste pickers during this time: *“There is a risk of diseases due to the medical waste .... Another issue was that the workers would often get injured by the needles and syringes dumped in the waste. The coming generation does not want to do this work.”*

Indeed, the crisis may have had the impact of exacerbating existing risks as well as introducing new risks around COVID-19 exposure. In mid-2021, 31 per cent of waste pickers reported heavier physical labour and 41 per cent reported an increase in exposure to medical waste compared to pre-crisis conditions. Women waste pickers

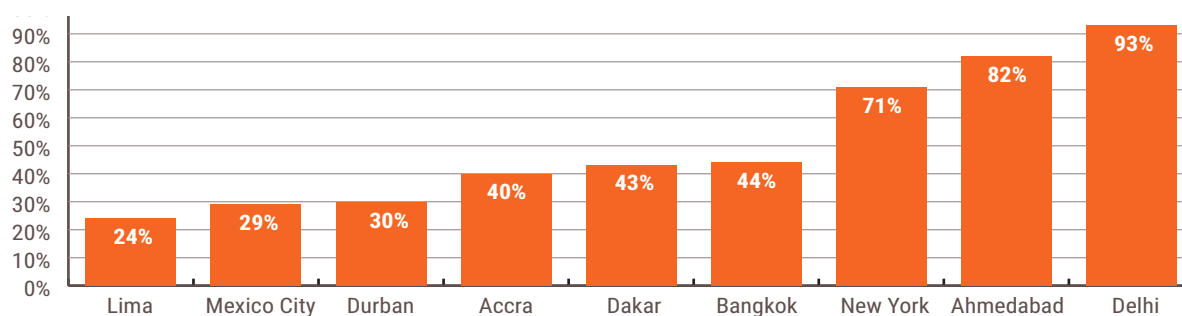
reported slightly higher exposure to medical waste – 46 per cent compared to 35 per cent for men.

Fear of COVID-19 infection was reported as a barrier to work for 45 per cent of waste pickers in mid-2020 and 24 per cent of waste pickers in mid-2021. In addition, waste pickers across cities reported increasing stigmatization of their sector as associated with the virus, leading in many cases to prohibition of access to waste or sorting sites (as is detailed in the previous sections). As one waste picker leader from Ahmedabad explained about the double burden of risk of exposure and stigma, *“the women workers of this sector have higher possibilities of getting affected from disease. Their family members used to tell them that you will bring the disease home and make others ill. People would make us go away by saying that people like you come here and make others sick, do not come here and spread the disease.”*

In the absence of government support, waste pickers organized to put in place occupational health and safety measures, often at their own expense. Ninety-eight per cent of waste pickers surveyed reported using PPE in mid-2021, and 77 per cent of these respondents reported having purchased the PPE themselves. Many waste pickers reported the pandemic had brought about an increased awareness of occupational health and safety and, especially at the outset of the pandemic, workers’ organizations served as critical sources of information for their members on COVID-19 protection.

However, several waste pickers pointed out the significant financial strain that procurement of PPE created for workers. As one waste picker leader from Accra explained: *“Because of the nature of the work we are doing, the protective gears must be something that we have in a large quantity that, at least, we can use it and change it often. So if I would say we need support, that would be some PPEs that we’ll need for our work. Yes, because buying it every day with your little income is very, very challenging.”*

**Figure 6: Vaccination rates by city in mid-2021**



Waste picker vaccination rates varied by city, with Indian cities reporting the highest levels of vaccination, likely because the survey was carried out there immediately following vaccination campaigns by the government of India and organizations of informal workers, who played a major role in facilitating access. Barriers to vaccination reported among waste pickers included lack of information or misinformation, as well as lack of access. In Bangkok, one waste picker leader reported digital barriers to gaining access – as vaccine access required online registration.



## Food Insecurity, Access to Relief and Coping Strategies

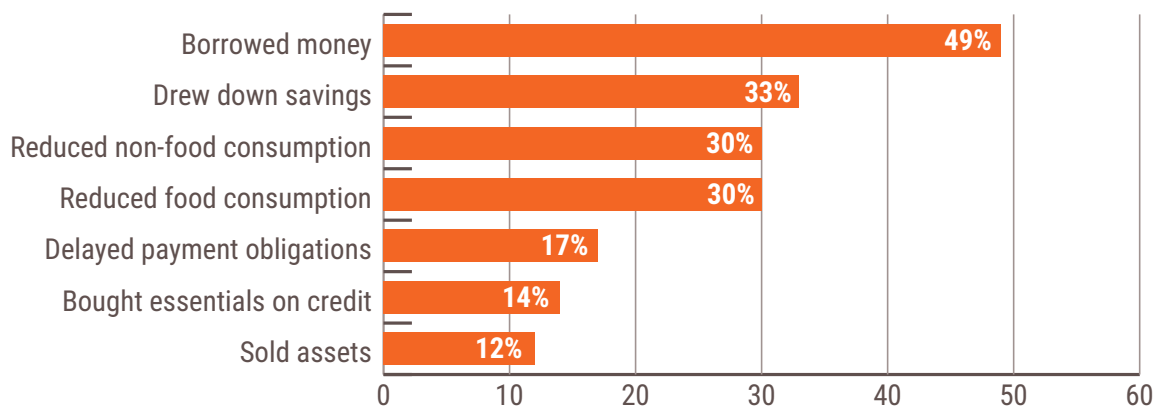
### Rising food insecurity and inadequate government relief

Earnings losses led to food insecurity for many waste pickers' households. In mid-2021, 38 per cent of waste pickers reported adult hunger in their households in the last month, and 32 per cent of respondents with children in their homes reported child hunger.

Food insecurity is also reflected in change in behaviour and diet adaptations, which may provide a clearer indicator than incidence of hunger, due to stigma associated with answering questions about hunger, and especially child hunger. On this measure, food insecurity was more pronounced, with 64 per cent of respondents reporting skipping meals or eating a low variety of foods in the last month. One-third of waste pickers reported reducing food consumption as a coping strategy to reductions in earnings.

Despite the fact that more waste pickers were back at work in mid-2021 than any other sector covered by the study, on every measure of food insecurity – adult and child hunger and diet adaptations – indicators for waste pickers were higher than for other sectors. In Ahmedabad, food insecurity was a major area of focus in qualitative interviews, with one waste picker leader explaining: *“I don't even want to talk about the food insecurity. We have closely experienced the situation. Whenever we think about it, our eyes get moist with tears. The women would tell us that, ‘we can remain hungry, but we cannot see the children and elderly without food’. What could the women paper workers do, if they did not get work?”*

**Figure 7: Coping mechanisms undertaken by waste pickers between mid-2020 and mid-2021 (74% of sample reporting)**



Food insecurity also was reflected in workers' coping strategies – one-third of workers reported reducing food consumption as a measure to cope with reduced earnings. However, the most common coping strategy among waste pickers was borrowing money – reported by almost half of workers. For those who reported drawing down savings as a coping strategy, 80 per cent reported a total inability to replace any of these savings since the start of the crisis.

A full 90 per cent of workers reported taking on other work in the month prior to the survey, with cleaning/care/housework being the most common form. As one waste picker in Ahmedabad explained of the pressures leading her to take on additional work: *“I think about who will look after my children if I die. My father-in-law is quite old and I have to take care of him, too. Considering him and my children, I took up domestic work mopping floors.”*

Despite devastating earnings losses, government relief in the form of cash and food was only available for waste pickers in some cities and, where it was available, it was often described as inadequate for meeting basic needs. In mid-2021, 62 per cent of waste pickers had received no food relief, and 65 per cent had received no cash relief. Relief access varied significantly by city. Cash relief programmes were made available to workers only in New York, Lima and Durban, while food relief was reported by a majority only in New York, Delhi and Ahmedabad.<sup>9</sup>

### **Collective coping strategies and MBO support in accessing relief**

In a context of devastating losses for an already vulnerable sector and lack of adequate government support, workers' organizations played an important role in supporting their members during the crisis. In Accra, the Kpone Waste Pickers Association provided a space for collective coping strategies to take shape – workers started a practice of collective savings that is made available for members on a rotating basis. As one worker explained: *“So every week, maybe a group of 10, will [come together and say], ‘Oh, every week, we’ll pay this amount, we’ll gather it and give it to one person.’ So it’s one way that we are also using to make savings for ourselves ....”* Also in Accra, workers described new forms of cooperation to collectively accumulate and sell goods as a way to increase bargaining power with middlemen: *“Earlier on I said that first, we don’t work as a group, but for now, you can see people who combine, maybe three or four people putting their goods together. So as they put it together, they have a large quantity, and when the buyer comes to buy, because the quantity is very huge, sometime they push the price a bit because they know that they have a large quantity.”*

In Indian cities, waste pickers reported on the outsized role that their workers' organizations played in facilitating access to food relief programmes. For example, in India, food rations were available but only accessible to those with ration cards. SEWA in Ahmedabad and the waste pickers' organization Bal Vikas in Delhi played a critical role in supporting workers to assemble the necessary documentation to access the rations. As one SEWA organizer in Ahmedabad explained of SEWA's efforts: *“They were able to run their houses by the wheat, rice provided by the government under the ration card yojana. Our women leaders helped many of these women workers to get their ration card renewed and got their names added with the store owners by providing required document for the process. SEWA leaders from all the areas have worked really hard to help the workers to receive free ration.”*

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<sup>9</sup> For more detail on specifically what cash and food relief programmes were made available by city, see [WIEGO Working Paper No. 43](#)

## Waste Pickers' Demands for Recovery

The COVID-19 crisis laid bare waste pickers' structural disadvantage within the solid waste management system. Without secure access to collection routes and sorting sites, waste pickers can be shut out from their work overnight. Without infrastructure and equipment, they often are forced to sell to middlemen who pay less than market prices. And without the provision of protective equipment, they are exposed to dangerous conditions. Waste pickers' demands for government action in both 2020 and 2021, across cities, reflected long-standing priorities, including provision of safe and secure worksites, protections, and improved terms and conditions of work. Waste pickers also drew attention to the need for immediate provision of PPE, relief and access to loans.

Additionally, some waste picker leaders outlined agendas for integration into solid waste management systems on supportive terms, reflecting their visions for the formalization of their livelihoods in a way that is supportive, rather than punitive.

For example, in Accra and Dakar, where governments announced plans to close dumpsites, waste pickers have started organizing around a set of demands that would strengthen their position within waste value chains. As one waste picker explained, the status quo in Accra places waste pickers in a constant state of precarity – without space for sorting they are forced to rent on exploitative terms: *“The status that we have, where we store our materials away from the landfill, it's under somebody's control, and we have to pay the person every week or month. If we do not pay, he threatens to burn your items or move your items from the land.”* Similarly, without equipment to process the materials they collect, they cannot sell them directly at market. As a result, waste picker leaders in Accra outlined concrete steps the government could take to improve their conditions and market access, including provision of sorting space and processing equipment. In parallel, waste pickers from both the Kpone Waste Picker Association in Accra and Bokk Diom in Dakar have been piloting household collection services and have formed cooperatives to lobby for service collection contracts.

In Lima, where waste pickers are facing new competition from private-sector actors, leaders called for government intervention to enforce the law that is meant to protect their work and to prevent unfair competition: *“In the same way I say to the businessmen, service companies that enter our zone and also take our resources and our work ... No, practically it is a total violation of our Law ... they must also respect us as we respect others. And the businessmen really want to have their RAE [higher-value-added recyclable material] also, they should look for their own space to source it, so as not to clash with the formalized recyclers, so it should be in an orderly manner.”* In addition, they demanded sorting space to enhance their bargaining power: *“We urgently need a collection centre, where we can all gather our materials and will be able to sell in quantity and get a better price.”*

In Mexico City, the pathway to formalization as individual service providers is more straightforward than in any other city – as they already work side by side with municipal waste workers on routes assigned by the city, indistinguishable to much of the public. Waste picker leaders there repeated long-standing demands for individual contracts for the work they do: *“Cleaning workers should be formalized because, first of all, it is a right, they have a very noble activity, it is necessary, they even generate savings with that labour and they also make significant contributions to the environment by recycling. Only with the recycling made, it is estimated that between 70 and 60 per cent is recycled, they do not go to landfills, so I think that for all these elements and for everything we are talking about, I would formalize them right away.”*

These visions for formalization offer governments a roadmap for creating decent work, reducing pollution and increasing recycling at a time of ongoing economic and environmental crises.

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## About WIEGO

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](http://www.wiego.org).