



Working Under Covid-19:

Experiences of Nail Salon Workers in California,
New York, Pennsylvania & New Jersey

UCLA Labor Center

 **VIETLEAD**
Viet leadership in solidarity



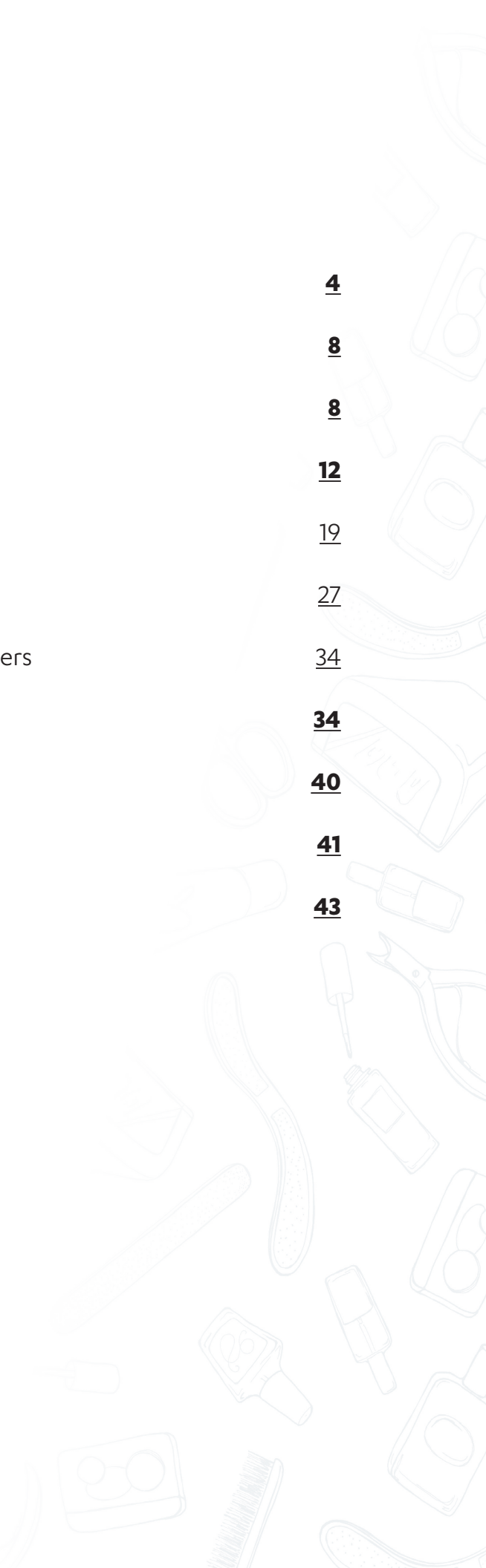
CALIFORNIA
HEALTHY NAIL SALON
COLLABORATIVE

Liên Hiệp Ngành Móng Tay Lành Mạnh

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About the Organizations



Adhikaar for Human Rights & Social Justice

Adhikaar, meaning “rights” in Nepali, is a women-led community and workers’ center that provides direct services to the Nepali-speaking community and organizes low-income workers and impacted community members to promote social justice and human rights. We create access to information, build community leadership, and grow collective power to win rights for our communities, and dignity and equity for all.



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California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative

Founded in 2005, the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative (CHNSC) is a statewide grassroots organization that addresses social justice issues faced by the nail salon’s working class, female, Vietnamese immigrant workforce. It promotes the health, safety, and rights of the nail salon workforce to achieve a more sustainable and just industry. CHNSC plays a vital role in community empowerment, leadership development, and organizing.



VietLead

VietLead is a grassroots community organization in Philadelphia and South Jersey that is creating a vision and strategy for community self-determination, social justice, and cultural resilience. It is staffed and led by community members who are committed to working from love and solidarity for over 25 years.

UCLA Labor Center

UCLA Labor Center

For more than fifty years, the UCLA Labor Center has created innovative programs that offer a range of educational, research, and public service activities within the university and in the broader community, especially among low-wage and immigrant workers. The Labor Center is a vital resource for research, education, and policy development to help create jobs that are good for workers and their communities, to improve the quality of existing jobs in the low-wage economy, and to strengthen the process of immigrant integration, especially among students and youth.



Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has destabilized the nail salon industry in the U.S. When it first appeared here in March 2020, a slew of local, statewide, and national policies called for shelter-in-place and stay-at-home orders to curb the spread of the virus. These policies effectively shut down in-person and non-essential businesses in the service industry, including nail salons. Nail salons in the U.S. are predominantly small businesses, made up of mostly Asian immigrant women, and these closures uniquely devastated both workers and owners. Both have experienced challenges throughout the pandemic, including accessing governmental relief funding to reopening and operating salons with a reduced flow of clientele. Yet, issues concerning labor, health, and safety in the sector predate the pandemic and have only intensified since the pandemic's start.

The experience of nail salon reopenings and in-person nail services has varied across the U.S. over the past two years, especially given the changing dimensions of regional vaccine and testing access and vaccine hesitancy as well as the emergence of new COVID-19 variants such as Delta and Omicron. These dynamics affected customer flow, salon worker rehiring, and ultimately, the viability of these businesses.

The need to shore up salon workplace safety and cleanliness has imposed an increased financial burden on both salons and their manicurists. As the industry continues to reel from the pandemic, it not only needs new practices to ensure health and safety. It also needs innovative strategies that reimagine a just recovery and a path toward upward mobility for its workforce.

Three community organizations that have worked with nail salon workers, Adhikaar for Human Rights & Social Justice, the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative (CHNSC), and VietLead, launched this research to better understand the experiences of salon workers during COVID-19, the changes in the industry in this timespan, and how to best address nail salon workers' current concerns. This brief is a portrait of national trends in the nail salon sector during COVID-19. It compiles surveys, interviews, and focus groups from three regions in the four states across the U.S. with the most nail salons across the country—California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York.

Each organization designed their own surveys that addressed conditions since nail salons have reopened, including: wages, hours, clientele flow, PPE protocol and access, health and safety compliance, and financial concerns in the pandemic. The analysis is based on a total of surveys from 427 workers, including 158 surveys from California, 222 from New York City, and 47 from Philadelphia and New Jersey regions. Because they used unique survey instruments, not all questions went to each respondent, so data points across the region are distinct. Also, each region conducted focus groups or interviews of 13 workers to gain an in-depth understanding of salon worker's feelings, experiences, and responses during the pandemic.

While the regions are distinct, these surveys demonstrate the uncertainty that salon workers have faced in reopening, as well as the need for updated PPE and clear safety protocol and serious financial concerns. The following are key comparative findings from the research:

Nail salon workers returned to a sector with reduced employment and business.

- Workers in California (70%) and Philadelphia and South Jersey (66%) reported that their salon reopened with 5 or less employees. In New York, about half (45%) reopened with 5 or less, and 40% with 6 to 10 workers.
- All the regions reported a decline in work. In New York, 80% of workers worked with reduced hours, and 51% in Philadelphia and South Jersey also worked less hours. In California, most workers had only worked 10-20 hours a week (41%). In addition, three quarters of California workers found that business was slow since reopening.

Nail salon workers' health and safety required new protocols once back at work.

- At the time of the surveys, a majority of workers received face masks and face shields from their employers in all regions, including three out of four workers in California (76%) and New York (75%).
- At least half of salon workers also received plexiglass dividers for their desks in California (59%), while almost all did in Philadelphia and South Jersey (94%).
- Workers reported mixed results about receiving gloves from their employers—with three-of-four in California (76%), over four-fifths in New York (85%), and over half in Philadelphia and South Jersey (59%).
- Physical distancing measures were especially implemented in California (99%) and Philadelphia and South Jersey (94%).
- Salons in California (100%) and Philadelphia and South Jersey (94%) allowed for disinfecting between customers.

Nail salon workers' income was impacted, despite the ability to return to work.

- Workers overwhelmingly did not receive hazard pay in the pandemic in California (95%) and Philadelphia and South Jersey (96%).

- Earnings stayed the same or decreased in all regions since reopening. 8-in-10 workers' pay decreased in California.
- Workers also found themselves financially insecure or uncertain about their ability to pay for food in California (63%) and in Philadelphia and South Jersey (55%).
- Workers in Philadelphia, South Jersey, and New York qualitatively noted a strong increase in work tasks.

Prior to the pandemic, nail salons were a growing industry shaped by immigrant women's innovation. As the industry reels from the impact of the pandemic, we must ensure a just recovery with continued commitment to safe and quality jobs for nail salon workers.

The following are key recommendations:



- 1. Provide recovery-related short-term relief and long-term solutions for nail salon workers and the industry as they continue to bear the long-term effects of the pandemic.**



- 2. Ensure that strong worker protections are in place as the industry continues to recover from COVID-19.**



- 3. Support policies and initiatives for language justice in the nail salon sector.**



- 4. Conduct further participatory research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond as the industry adapts.**



- 5. Promote broad based systemic change to address anti-Asian racism through comprehensive strategies. Broad approaches include prevention, education, and services that center healing, safety, and racial solidarity, and should not contribute to criminalization or the carceral state.**



Introduction

Nail salons are a cornerstone for services of beauty, pampering, and indulgence. Manicuring nails involves a customer and a worker sitting in close proximity to each other, with their hands meeting across a table, for an in-person service. The nail salon sector in the U.S. was transformed by Asian immigrant and refugee women in the 1980s who helped make the service widely available and affordable.¹ The first policy report on the national nail salon sector, [Nail Files: A Study of Nail Salon Workers and Industry in the United States](#), showed that in 2016, the industry was 74% Vietnamese and is also made up of Black, Chinese, Korean, Latinx, Indian, Nepali, Tibetan, and Filipinx workers. Despite a few regional chains, the sector is mostly mom-and-pop run, with over 90% of salons having 10 or fewer staff.²

Nail salons are also a low-wage industry, with 78% of workers having earned low-wages in 2016.³ This rate was more than double the rate of low-wage workers in the U.S.⁴ Specifically, the hourly median-wage for full-time nail salon workers was \$11.23.⁵ Nail salon workers also faced a host of labor issues such as: poor working conditions, being paid less than minimum wage, not being paid at all, misclassification, humiliation at the workplace through video surveillance or tip docking for minor transgressions, and exposure to toxic chemicals from cosmetic products in poorly ventilated spaces.⁶ Workers often worked long hours, with one or two days off during the week, did not have fixed break times, and lacked paid sick days.⁷

COVID-19 has hit communities and industries differently, and has upended nail salons, devastating both owners and workers. A UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge report found that one-in-four employed Asian Americans work in hospitality and leisure, retail, and other services; it noted that the unemployment rate for those in hospitality and leisure as well as in other services was a staggering 40% by July 2020.⁸ Additionally, by December 2020, Asian American women experienced the highest jobless rates compared to Black, Latinx, and white women; nearly half (44%) of unemployed Asian American women were out of the workforce for 6 months or more during the pandemic.⁹

The pandemic has also made clear the importance of beauty service work to U.S. society. For example, aggrieved white protestors called to reopen the economy at the beginning of the pandemic with signs demanding, “I want a haircut.” Yet actual nail salon workers—who are a predominantly immigrant, Asian workforce—were placed at risk with the choice of either returning to work in conditions of heightened COVID-19 exposure or staying home and losing income.¹⁰ The racialized and gendered dynamics of having to work and risk infection or lose pay in a global pandemic highlights how nail salon worker’s lives are devalued. Even before COVID-19, manicurists already had to navigate difficult customer service conventions where the customer is always right, in addition to managing employer demands. Both demonstrate how the salon is also built on a hierarchy between manicurist and customer as well as employee and employer that structures workers’ agency in beauty service work.¹¹

Furthermore, the racialization of the COVID-19 virus itself has spurred racist, xenophobic, and sexist tensions and harassment often localized at businesses with in-person services and interactions. In early and mid-2020, the then U.S. President repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as either the “China virus” or the “Kung Flu.” Additionally, in May 2020, California’s governor falsely stated that a nail salon was the first place of COVID-19 community spread in the state, sparking worry throughout nail salons, already struggling, for future business.¹² While hate incidents are famously underreported, cities like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles saw a 262%, 140%, and 80% increase in anti-Asian hate incidents that were reported in 2020.¹³ The violent attacks at three spa and massage parlors in Atlanta in March 2021 that killed eight people, six of whom were Asian immigrant women, demonstrate an egregious form of this racialized and gendered hate at the intersection of work and service economies.

Last, the pandemic has also exacerbated and worsened existing issues in the nail salon sector. When local, regional, and national safer-at-home and shelter-in-place policies took place, two categories of workers were created: essential workers and non-essential workers. However, the types of work considered non-essential had vastly different experiences. Unlike other service jobs named essential work that continued to operate in person, such as healthcare, grocery and retail, and unlike other non-essential jobs that moved online--beauty service work and nail salons were completely shut down with the inability to operate virtually. Salon workers struggled to access unemployment insurance, either through issues of misclassification, language barriers, or unfamiliarity with the process. Salon owners also had difficulty receiving Paycheck Protection Program small business loans. Additionally, once salons reopened, workers had to decide between working in-person and potentially exposing themselves to COVID-19, or receiving no income.¹⁴

About this Brief: The Need for Regional, Industry-wide Information

Three community organizations that have worked with nail salon workers, Adhikaar for Human Rights & Social Justice, the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative (CHNSC), and VietLead, launched this research to better understand the experiences of salon workers during COVID-19, the changes in the industry, and how to address nail salon worker’s current issues and concerns. This brief captures national trends

in the nail salon sector during COVID-19. It compiles surveys, interviews, and focus groups from three regions in four states across the U.S.—California, New York City, and Philadelphia/New Jersey. These three regions also represent the four states with the most nail salons across the country—California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York.

Each of the organizations designed their own surveys that addressed conditions since reopening, including: wages, hours, clientele flow, PPE protocol and access, health and safety compliance, and financial concerns in the pandemic. The analysis is based on 158 surveys from California, 222 surveys from New York City, and 47 surveys from Philadelphia and New Jersey, for a total of 427 nail salon workers. Different survey instruments meant that not all questions went to each respondent, so data points across the region may look differently. In addition, each region conducted focus groups or interviews for a total of 13 workers, to gain an in-depth understanding of salon worker’s feelings, experiences, and responses during the ongoing pandemic.

As nail salons face the impact of COVID-19 and attempt to recover, this brief offers a pathway for economic security as it identifies policy strategies for industry-wide impacts to transform nail salon workers’ conditions. It aims to highlight national trends, but understand the interplay of local nuances—such as city or state-specific tiers of closures, when and how reopenings occurred, and mask and vaccine mandates—with ongoing industry practices and everyday manicuring tasks.

The brief documents key findings from each region, drawing from nail salon workers and owners. Section 1 documents patterns from across California, Section 2 documents patterns within New York City, and last, Section 3 documents patterns within Philadelphia and adjacent New Jersey. Each regional section highlights three main issues: salon reopenings, PPE and COVID-19 protocols, and financial support and impact. The brief concludes with national recommendations.

Findings



1. California Nail Salon Workers

About the California Study

From December 2020 to May 2021, the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative (CHNSC) and the UCLA Labor Center conducted online and phone surveys of 158 nail salon workers in California as well as four interviews in June and July 2021. The following are select quantitative and qualitative points related to the nail salon reopenings, PPE protocols, and financial impacts drawn from the full report, [Reopening During COVID-19: The Experiences of Nail Salon Workers and Owners in California](#).

Salon Reopening

Pandemic-related salon closures devastated nail salon work, and once salons were able to reopen, manicurists who returned to work came back to a completely changed environment, from the total number of staff to the availability of work hours. One salon worker who has been in the industry for five years noted the drastic changes on operations during their first week back at the salon: “I was back to work yesterday but there were no customers” (Interview 3). As such, most nail salons notably restarted their operations with a reduced staffs of five or less. Additionally, nail salon workers returned to the salon with a dramatically less number of available work hours at the salon. The number of workers working 20 or less hours a week doubled, with 75% of workers compared to 37% before the pandemic.

Overall, manicurists noted the diminished business after nail salons reopened. A different salon worker reflected on the way life in the pandemic has changed customers’ lives and beauty culture, saying, “My nail salon is in an office zone. Due to the pandemic, people are working at home, so there are no customers coming to my salon” (Interview 4). Three-quarters of workers reported that their salon had been slow during the previous week.

Another way salons seemed to deal with the financial impact of reopening and a decrease in customer flow was to raise prices. Almost half (44%) of workers surveyed indicated that the price of services at their nail salon increased since reopening between \$1 to \$10 per service.

Table 1.1 CA Salon Staffing, Hours, and Business Since Reopening

Number of workers in the salon	
5 or less	71%
6–10	26%
More than 10	3%

Average number of hours worked	
0–9 hours	31%
10–20 hours	44%
21–30 hours	17%
31–40 hours	6%
More than 40 hours	2%

Customer flow	
It's been extremely busy	2%
It fluctuates between busy and slow	23%
It's been slow	75%

Salon prices	
Increased	44%
Decreased	12%
Stayed the same	44%

Source: CHNSC Worker Survey 2021

PPE and COVID-19 Protocols

In California, when nail salons and other places of beauty service work were allowed to reopen, the state had advised many changes such as mask-wearing among workers and customers, frequent handwashing, cleaning and disinfection, and maximizing physical distancing.¹⁵ For nail salons, this often meant reconfiguring their layout and reducing the number of workstations.

Three-quarters of workers received masks, face shields, or gloves from their employer, and only a third received goggles. In terms of other protective equipment, over half reported having plexiglass dividers between stations. All workers reported having the ability to disinfect their workspaces between each client, and receiving frequent breaks to wash their hands. Nearly all workers reported having their workstations set up six feet apart.

One of the workers interviewed offered insight about how the implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures at their salon went well. The worker said, “The salons where I am working, they are doing fine; we are doing all the protocols that we are supposed to do such as washing hands constantly, taking off used gloves, putting on new gloves, wearing masks, and being cautious of everything that we do” (Interview 2). A different worker however, became fearful of her workplace because at the time, the customer mask mandate had changed; even though all the workers wear masks, customers did not have to anymore and the owner would not say anything without state restrictions. She had to focus on herself as a protection strategy, saying that “the pandemic is still spreading in other areas, so I will keep wearing masks” (Interview 3).

Additionally, not all workers have received PPE from their employers. Many have had to purchase their own using their earnings from the salon. “I have to buy all that stuff on my own,” one worker shared. She continued, “They [my employers] say all other nail salons do not provide supplies for employees either. For W2 [workers], we are still sharing 45-50% of our profit, so they do not want to spend on the supply for us” (Interview 3). Having to purchase their own PPE imposed a significant burden on workers, who were already seeing their paychecks squeezed with fewer work hours and fewer customers in nail salons. Additionally, at the time CalOSHA COVID-19 emergency temporary standards required employers to provide face coverings; they also recommended employers evaluate PPE as needed.

Table 1.2 CA COVID-19 Safety Protocols

PPE provided by employer	
Masks	76%
Face shield	76%
Gloves	76%
Plexiglass dividers at workstation	59%
Goggles	30%

Other protective measures	
Workstations 6 ft apart	99%
Frequent break for handwashing	99%
Disinfect workspace between clients	100%

Source: CHNSC Survey 2021

Financial Support and Impact

Though nail salons in California reopened at different times based on their county, they all reopened prior to vaccine availability and with a paucity of public health research on COVID-19. Yet, most workers did not receive any hazard pay for working under higher risk conditions. As a result, they received zero additional financial support despite working in very close contact with clients for extended periods of time within small-business settings. More than 9 in 10 workers reported they did not receive hazard pay or an increase in pay while working during COVID-19.

Workers were making less than they did before the pandemic. The majority (83%) of workers reported a reduction in their earnings. This was due to reduced hours, customer flow, and tips, as well as increased worker costs for PPE. They also may not have received any form of additional pandemic compensation, like hazard pay. While workers were back on the job, they still had difficulty paying for essential household expenses, such as food, housing, and other necessities. Nearly 60% of workers

struggled to afford these expenses. One worker conveyed that while her salon was closed, she picked up any temporary job she could—being on call at Amazon, a job at a school district—“whenever they [the temp agency] had a job open, they called me” (Interview 2). Once her salon had reopened, the pandemic had undercut her previous salon-based income, so she had to keep one of the temp agency jobs to make ends meet. The impact has been significant as the virus upends workers’ hours and pay.

Due to the reduced hours, increased costs, and decreased pay, nail salon workers reconsidered whether they wanted to stay in the industry at all. Describing the increase in a worker’s expenses for PPE against the lack of customers, one manicurist shared, “Now, although the COVID-19 pandemic is over and the salon is open again, I want to quit my job. It is because supplies are so expensive while we have no customers. Everyone is still afraid of the pandemic” (Interview 3). Another nail salon worker conveyed how ageism has played out in the context of how hard the nail salon sector has been hit—making it difficult to both stay in her current job or find another salon job. She said, “I am too old to change to another salon. Other salons don’t hire more workers either. Actually, I was trying to apply for some salons but it did not work. I was also looking for different kinds of jobs too, but I do not have much of a chance due to age” (Interview 4).

Some salon workers did leave the industry, due to ongoing issues that were exacerbated in pandemic. For example, one nail salon worker could no longer face the existing health issues at her salon. Having worked in the industry for 20 years, the worker developed severe physical reactions to the chemicals in cosmetics. The worker noted, “I was allergic to chemicals in the nail products. My skin would peel off then I had to bandage 10 fingers every night after work. I endured this symptom for 10 years until it was slowly healed.” When the salon she worked at had closed for over a year because of the pandemic, she realized she was “so sick” that she could “not go back to work in the nail industry anymore” (Interview 1).

Table 1.3 CA COVID-19 Financial Support and Impact

Pay increases	
Hazard pay	5%
An increase in pay	4%
None of the above	93%

Unemployment	
Applied for UI	91%

Earnings since reopening	
Increased	2%
Decreased	83%
Stayed the same	15%

Ability to pay for food for the next month	
Yes	37%
No	7%
Not sure	56%

Source: CHNSC Survey 2021





2. New York Nail Salon Workers

About the New York Study

From August 2020 to January 2021, Adhikaar conducted phone surveys of 222 nail salon workers across New York City. Additionally, in September 2021, they conducted a focus group with 4 workers. The following are select qualitative and quantitative points related to the salon reopenings, PPE protocols, and financial impact.

Salon Reopening

When nail salons were allowed to reopen in New York in summer 2020, only about half of nail salon workers were able to return back to work. In the focus group, a salon worker described how her former workplace had severely reduced their total number of staff when they reopened, which meant she lost her job: “before everything was shut

down, I had just started a job at a new salon with 18-20 staff, but when they reopened, they only decided to go with 6-7 staff, so they did not call me back” (Participant 2). Half of nail salons had 5 or less staff working, while 40% had 6-9 people working.

The nail salon workers who did get rehired often fell along lines of age, instead of years of work experience. One salon worker noted, “nowadays, salons look for young women but where can they find only young people? They say workers who worked for 20–25 years are old now. If so, they are also old right? This is the situation, and we are surviving like this” (Participant 1). Ageism in the nail salon sector existed before the pandemic, where nationally, in 2016, only one-third of manicurists were between the ages of 45 to 64.¹⁵ Yet, the pandemic has only exacerbated such issues.

In addition to reduced staff, nail salon workers returned to their workplaces with a reduced number of available work hours. Overall, 80% of workers experienced a decreased number of work hours compared to before COVID-19. A nail salon worker commented that the salon’s diminished number of client appointments have lessened her total work days and hours: “customer flow has decreased, so I only work for 2-3 days a week. If they have a lot of appointments, they call me, otherwise they don’t. Some weeks, I have work, and some weeks I don’t” (Participant 4). The uncertainty of scheduled hours has extended from days with no work into weeks with no work.

Overall, workers echoed the difficulty of being able to access any job in the nail salon sector since the pandemic. One worker shared her challenges with finding another salon job given that her salon had not reopened: “after COVID-19, we [salon workers] can’t find a job. My salon is closed because of COVID-19. I’ve been looking for a job and it’s hard to find one. Many nail salons have closed...Even if we get to work [at a salon] for 2-3 days a week, it’s not that easy... They only give us 4-5 hours a day, and then ask us to go home. There are so many problems after COVID-19. The nail salon worker’s job is in trouble” (Participant 1).

Table 2.1 NY Salon Staffing and Hours Since Reopening

Went back to work after July 6, 2020	
No	54%
Yes	46%

Number of technicians	
5 or less	45%
6–9	40%
10+	15%

Work hours changed for those working	
Hours have decreased	80%
Hours have increased	2%
Hours are the same	18%

Source: Adhikaar Survey 2021

PPE and COVID-19 Protocols

Prior to the pandemic, the state of New York had already required salon owners to provide N95 or N100 respirators and protective nitrile gloves to workers since 2015, due to chemicals from professional grade salon products that mix within an enclosed salon.¹⁶ When nail salons were allowed to reopen in June and July 2020, salons were initially required to limit presence to 75% of maximum occupancy, socially distance except during a manicure/pedicure, have customers and employees wear masks, and provide employees with masks at no cost. Additionally, New York instituted hygiene, cleaning, and disinfection requirements, including that salons disinfect most manicure and pedicure tools like bowls, baths, and drying tables after each use, and limit the sharing of objects or touching of shared surfaces.¹⁷

Most nail salon workers reported receiving face masks and shields, gloves, and face shields (Note: we did not ask survey respondents explicitly if they had received N95 masks, only face masks. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most received surgical masks). Altogether, only a third reported that their salons were supplying workers with a full set of PPE such that included masks, shields, gloves and gowns. A tenth of workers did not receive any PPE at all.

In addition, nail salon workers noted that the new safety protocols were put in place unevenly. At the focus groups, workers noted receiving dividers at manicure and pedicure stations alongside temperature checks, hand sanitizer availability, and mask enforcement. However, each salon had different implementations and practices. For example, one worker appreciated the attention to masks in the pandemic but was concerned that not all salon owners actually required them: “Masks have been mandated, that’s a good thing. But other friend’s salon’s don’t follow such rules. If all salons follow the rules, including owners, then that will make it easier for workers” (Participant 1). At another salon, the owner did not let the salon workers wear gloves, unless a customer had a callus. A salon worker believed that the owner thinks customers do not like gloves, and also that the owner did not know about any gloves requirements before and during the pandemic (Participant 2). Owners not following masking rules nor providing N95 respirators—despite existing regulations for professional grade face coverings before the pandemic—highlights a lack of concern for worker’s health and safety, let alone for protection from COVID-19.

Additionally, workers expressed tension because the new disinfection protocols for both their own workstation and the rest of the salon are falling onto them; such tasks have been added on to their existing tasks, while bearing the brunt of salons being short staffed. One worker noted that, “the salon has only hired a few staff, and the staff must take all the customers. On top of that, we must clean everything. That’s why we have a workload increase” (Participant 4). Another salon worker echoed the difficulty: “Now, it’s tough. A technician must do everything including the laundry, cleaning, and the bathroom” (Participant 3). Passing disinfection protocol and cleaning tasks onto the salon worker has added on much more tedious and time-consuming work than before the pandemic.

Even more so, workers described how they seek to avoid arguments when tension may stem from a sense of actual versus perceived cleanliness. The same worker commented that at times customers ask for a workstation to be recleaned. They said, “Sometimes a customer doesn’t see us cleaning because we cleaned it as soon as the previous customer left...We just spray and clean it again to satisfy them rather than arguing with them and saying that it was already cleaned” (Participant 3). Such tasks increase their workload and their emotional labor—as they manage their customer’s fears and perceived sense of safety at the same time.

Table 2.2 NY COVID-19 Safety Protocols

PPE provided by employer	
Gloves	85%
Face masks	78%
Face shields	75%
All: face mask, face shield/goggles, gloves, gown/smock	33%
No PPE provided by employer	11%

Source: *Adhikaar Survey 2021*

Financial Support and Impact

Half of nail salon workers were able to come back to work at the same pay rate, though as mentioned earlier, they still experienced reduced hours. A manicurist’s wage is complicated based on employee classification status and the higher rates of misclassification as an independent contractor in the nail salon industry. In New York City, two major changes in employment law occurred during the pandemic for nail salon workers, with an eye towards uplifting and simplifying worker’s rights. First, the minimum wage increased to \$15 an hour for employees in 2021, and second, the tipped minimum wage for salon workers was also eliminated. Previously, if you were a tipped service worker, your wage could be broken down into a cash wage plus a tip credit.¹⁸

Because these changes occurred during the pandemic, it was unclear for some workers to understand their rights. Also, some employers continued to create multiple pathways to pay their employees, furthering the confusion and perhaps not meeting legal standards. For example, each of the four workers in the New York focus group explained the distinct ways that they are being paid. One worker in particular shared that “they give us \$13.50 per hour plus commission, but if we take \$15 per hour, we don’t get commission” (Participant 3). The worker may be describing the older system of cash wage plus tip credit, the correct rate of minimum wage, tip theft, or a form of misclassification.

Additionally, the amount of total income a manicurist makes is dependent on the salon’s customer flow and the number of customers a specific nail salon worker gets in a day for tips or commission. In the focus group, the same salon worker mentioned that because she is able to work on busy days— Fridays and Saturdays—she may make a base pay plus \$60-\$70 in tips on those days. However, at her salon, this amount is now without any commission that she would have earned on services that require special treatments. Another salon worker responded to her, saying that that rate a day is good, but it is not what she makes: “it’s not the same in other salons. Where I work, we only make \$20-21 [a day]. We get 3-4 customers. We don’t make much” (Participant 1). Both instances demonstrate cases where not only is the pay structure confusing, but ultimately, even with tips or commission, salon workers are still not earning enough to make ends meet.

Moreover, workers have had to cut into their income to pay for PPE or other salon-based materials. Some salons do provide gloves and other materials to their employees. However, other salons do not and instead make workers buy gloves or reuse files, buffs, and emery boards, despite having higher prices for services (Participant 2). However, New York’s Cosmetology Board had disallowed reuse of emery boards prior to the pandemic.¹⁹ Because employers are passing the cost of certain PPE materials on to them, what income workers do earn now goes into pandemic-based safety expenses.

Governmental pandemic benefits were a core part of a worker’s financial security and health when unable to work in the pandemic. Such financial support temporarily allowed workers to choose their health over risking their lives for in-person work.

One salon worker noted that unemployment insurance allowed them to get food on the table: “When I was receiving benefits, I was okay because I was able to pay rent and it was enough to eat. But now, since the benefits have stopped, we need to find a job because we must pay rent” (Participant 1). Yet, not all salon workers were able to access governmental benefits on time or at all. They shared that they manage the expenses by either having support of a husband/partner, siblings or sharing rent costs with roommates.

Despite the need for income, some salon workers dropped out of the workforce due to lack of safe childcare options. One worker said, “after COVID-19, most of the moms who have small kids haven’t worked” (Participant 3). Weighing school closures and the COVID-19 exposure risks of bringing childcare into the home against the difficulty of even finding safe childcare, the worker assessed that, “moms are not able to work full time” (Participant 3). The lack of childcare for this workforce further destabilized financial choices to return to work, that otherwise would have provided needed income.

Last, between the oppositional and economic choice of either staying out of work versus facing the health impact of contracting COVID-19, nail salon workers considered leaving the industry entirely. One worker described their fear and uncertainty of working with new and emerging variants, as “because of the Delta variant, I’m nervous and confused on whether I should go to work. Sometimes I think, I shouldn’t go. Then again, I think I should go because we must eat, we must live... If the number increases, then I must stop. The main thing is to be alive rather than be hungry. I’m not sure whether to continue or not” (Participant 3). Another salon worker who did return to work was met with industry-wide economic instability and seasonality. She said, “when I was receiving unemployment I was okay. But now, I think I need to change my job... Especially in the winter, the salon gets slower. Even those who worked full time, 5-6 days in the summer, only get 2-3 days in the winter”

(Participant 2). Nail salon workers are returning to much physical, mental, and economic uncertainty— their own fears of COVID-19 coupled with the seasonality of nail salon work hours and new variants.

Table 2.3 NY COVID-19 Financial Impact

Pay rate change since returning to work	
Pay rate decreased	3%
Pay rate increased	42%
Pay rate is the same	55%

Source: Adhikaar Survey 2021



3. Philadelphia and South Jersey Nail Salon Workers

About the Philadelphia and South Jersey Study

From July 2020 to October 2020, VietLead conducted online and phone surveys of 47 nail salon workers in Philadelphia and South Jersey. In addition, in September 2021, they conducted a focus group with 5 workers. The following are select qualitative and quantitative points related to the salon reopenings, PPE protocols, and financial impact.

Salon Reopening

Most nail salon workers were able to return to the salon once they opened. However, workers felt the impact of the change of business, from changes in staffing to increase in new pandemic-related work tasks. In the focus group, one worker noted, “When the salon reopened last June, it was very difficult for us in the first months. We had

to do more work while everyone was still confused. However, it is going better now” (Participant 4). Another worker echoed the overall shift at work, “when I came back to work, everything had changed. It is unlike before” (Participant 5). Workers returned to fewer staff at the workplace and less hours. Two thirds reported that nail salons had 5 or less staff working. In addition, half found that they had less hours than before COVID-19 while 43% were able to work the same number of hours. A fifth of workers were working less than 15 hours and half were working between 16 and 30 hours.

Furthermore, most nail salons were met with reduced customer flow, and while some saw an eventual increase in clientele, none have seemed to return to normal operations. Nearly 9 in 10 workers said that they had less clients than before the pandemic. According to one salon worker, “the only difficulty is that customers are less than usual, so the income is decreased” (Participant 1). Another salon worker saw a shift in customer slowdown once new safety protocols were adopted and post-vaccination socializing patterns had seemed to change: “Customers feel more confident coming to our salon, especially after getting fully vaccinated. Nail salon workers are also used to the safety protocols. The salon’s activity is going back to 70-80%” (Participant 4). While the municipal health and safety regulations, alongside vaccine practices have changed confidence, the nail salon sector in Philadelphia remains impacted.

Salons responded to the pandemic’s decreased customer flow and increased supply costs by making changes to their business model and pricing. Almost three quarters of workers reported that their salon had to increase the price of their services. In the focus group, several salon workers commented on the rising prices of supplies and the impact on the salon, as “supplies are very expensive, but we have to accept that” (Participant 5). Another salon worker noted the limits to the cycle of raising salon prices to match supply prices: “of course we can raise our prices to cover the extra costs, however if the price increases too much, the customer will not come. I am afraid of that” (Participant 3). Bringing customers back and keeping them returning remains a key issue in the pandemic.

Table 3.1 PA Salon Staffing, Hours, and Business Since Reopening

Returned to work	
Yes	2%
No	98%

Number of employees	
2–5	66%
6–9	26%
10 or greater	9%

Number of hours compared to before COVID-19	
Change week by week	4%
Less hours	51%
More hours	2%
Stayed the same	43%

Average hours per week	
0–9 hours	8%
10–15 hours	13%
16–30 hours	51%
30–40 hours	11%
>40 hours	17%

Number of clients compared to before COVID-19	
Decreased	87%
It fluctuates	9%
Stayed the same	4%

If salon prices increased	
Yes	72%
No	17%
Not sure	11%

Source: VietLead Survey 2020

PPE and COVID-19 Protocols

Nail salons were allowed to reopen in Philadelphia and New Jersey in June 2020. Initially, in both areas, salons were suggested to run by appointment and at a reduced capacity.²⁰ Salons also had masking requirements that were lifted in summer 2021 for vaccinated individuals.²¹ One worker, who started nail salon work after the pandemic began, commented that “the salon is very clean, safe, and hygienic...Besides manicure and pedicure skills, I am taught how to clean up and disinfect the tools and working area” (Participant 2). In terms of new safety tools and materials, most workers reported getting desk dividers. Half of workers said they received face masks and half received face shields. Altogether, only a third of workers were supplied with all of the different PPE such as goggles, face shields, hand sanitizers, masks, gloves and plexiglass dividers. Workers did note that the salons were good about other protective measures such as limiting the number of customers and providing enough space to disinfect their work stations. One worker affirmed the balance of their confidence in their workplace and their own need to protect themselves at the salon, based on changes in the salon layout and their own hand-washing practices: “The salon owner and workers know how to prevent and protect themselves when working with customers...I have to be careful when working with customers to protect myself” (Participant 1).

Workers in the focus group captured how enforcing a customer’s mask-wearing was mixed and difficult, likely due to the lack of a mask mandate for vaccinated customers. For some workers, asking customers to wear masks has been contentious, “When I asked those customers to wear masks, they even yelled at me. [...] If the salon owner accepted customers not wearing masks, I could not reject serving them” (Person 1). At another salon, the worker notes that the owner asked all customers to wear masks and had signs on the door and the front counter. It still caused a difficult scene/ reaction, “Some customers complained and refused to wear masks as they got fully vaccinated; however my salon owner would refuse to serve them. Sometimes, salon workers wanted to keep those customers, but my owner did not give any exception. She did not want to break the salon regulation, because if we served one customer who was not wearing a mask, other customers would do the same” (Participant 4).

Importantly, workers noted the increase in their specific work responsibilities once salons reopened, due to an increase in safety-related measures. One worker shared, “When I came back to work, there was more work to do. For example, I have to guide customers to sit one seat apart, clean the chairs right after serving customers, and make sure to ask customers to wash their hands” (Participant 3). Another worker commented on the adjustment this required, “Honestly, it was difficult for us to remember all the steps at first. We rushed to clean up sometimes; however, customers appreciated it because they know that our salon workers cared for safety.” (Participant 4). Overall, workers have noted that such tasks mean longer work days; they must clean their chairs and work areas before going home, and stay to make packages for the next day, or come in earlier each morning now to prepare tools (Participant 4). Given the increase in tasks, some workers have thought about quitting or have quit, but they ended up in jobs that were less careful and were then infected (Participant 4).

An increase in cleaning tasks meant an increase in time per service task as well as to set up the stations. Referring to pedicure time, one worker said, “In the past, I could do the pedicure for both legs in 1 hour; however, now it takes 30-40 minutes for one leg because there are many things to clean” (Participant 3). Another worker echoed this sentiment, “It takes more time to serve a customer” (Participant 5).

Table 3.2 PA COVID-19 Safety Protocols

PPE provided by employer	
Face masks	54%
Face shields	54%
Desk dividers	94%
Gloves	59%
All: glasses, face shields, hand sanitizer, gloves, face masks, desk divider	35%

Other protective measures	
Limit the number of customers allowed in the salon	94%
Always allows enough time between clients to disinfect the workspace	94%

Source: VietLead Survey 2020

Financial Support and Impact

In Philadelphia, the majority of workers did not receive any type of additional pay to compensate for the work they did during the pandemic. Furthermore, very few workers received a pay bonus and almost all did not have access to paid sick time.

Specifically, workers in the focus groups shared that they had difficulty accessing pandemic related benefits unless they were connected to a community or legal aid organization. A few workers sought support in filing for unemployment benefits, including at VietLead, which eased the process. One worker describes how other salon workers in her community did not know they were eligible to get benefits or did not apply for unemployment insurance right away and lost out on several weeks of pay. Another worker mentioned that she did not know where to ask for help, and when she realized it, it was already time for her to go back to work, and thus, “I did not receive any benefits during the pandemic” (Participant 4).

Last, salons workers described how part of their income now went into purchasing safety supplies, like gloves. A salon worker noted, “[One] difficulty is that the price of supplies is rising. Although the salon owners pay for materials and equipment, the nail salon workers still have to buy some stuff such as gloves” (Participant 2). At that time, workers shared that gloves have increased from around \$100 to now \$125 a box. Another salon worker echoed the financial impact of this dilemma, “All the suppliers have increased their prices, but I still have to buy them for my work. Things have changed completely. My income is the same as before, not reduced; however I have to do more” (Participant 5). Between purchasing supplies, and an increase in tax, salon worker’s reduced income is worth less for themselves yet it must go for more at the salon.

Table 3.3 PA COVID-19 Financial Support and Impact

Increase earnings	
Hazard pay (bonus during COVID-19 period) or pay increase	4%
None of the above	96%

Employment benefits	
Bonus	4%
Paid sick leave	2%
Nothing	94%

Ability to cover food, rent/mortgage or other necessities for the next month	
Yes	45%
No	13%
Not sure	43%

Source: VietLead Survey 2020



Recommendations

As COVID-19 continues, the nail salon industry's predominantly Asian immigrant women workforce face much strain. Workers in particular have been in a precarious position. They scrambled to return to their old jobs, while concerned about their physical and mental health and safety due to the pandemic and increased Anti-Asian sentiment. Even when able to return, workers experienced economic loss with reduced hours and less clientele.

Workers have a strong sense of the changes they would like to see. One worker in California said "I think there should be a program to support nail salons to get over the current situation" (Interview 1). A worker in New York noted similarly, "The government should help us because, first, in COVID-19, we are unable to get a job. The government should support solutions for this situation" (Participant 1). Last, in Philadelphia, a worker echoed this need for financial and other support: "In COVID-19, we have to bear the extra cost to protect customers and each other" (Participant 5).

The following are recommendations to policymakers to ensure that the national nail salon sector can effectively recover while strengthening worker's health, safety, and rights:



1. Provide recovery-related short-term relief and long-term solutions for nail salon workers and the industry as they continue to bear the effects of the pandemic.

- a. Create industry-specific recovery grants for the nail salon sector, including commercial rent support for small business owners. Fund recovery planning for small businesses with incentives and support for those who rehire their pre-pandemic staff.
- b. Provide financial relief for all workers who have yet to be able to return full-time to the sector due to barriers in accessing their old jobs. Prioritize relief for undocumented workers who do not have access to benefits.
- c. Provide financial assistance to pay for child care to ensure low-wage salon workers receive quality support. Increase affordable child care centers with strong health and safety protocol in the local communities of salon workers.



2. Ensure that strong worker protections are in place as the industry continues to recover from COVID-19.

a. National Recommendations:

- i. Protect salon workers of color from the bearing the disproportionate burden of toxic exposures because of where they work by passage of the The Cosmetic Safety for Communities of Color and Professional Salon Workers Act of 2021 (HR5540). This bill would create cosmetic safety protections for women of color and professional hair, nail and beauty salon workers – 2 vulnerable populations who are most at risk of unsafe exposures because of the toxic chemicals in the products marketed to them or commonly found in their workplaces.

- ii. Reinforce COVID-19 health and safety precautions to safeguard the health of all workers, including in periods between COVID-19 surges and in anticipation of future variants.
- iii. Reinforce workplace labor laws to remind nail salon employers of their responsibilities and remind workers of their rights, with any information provided in language as well as accessible for those with limited literacy.
- iv. Expand all OSHA protections to all workers regardless of worker classification.
- v. Provide more resources and staffing to OSHA, CalOSHA, state DOL, or other relevant local agencies to fully enforce workplace labor laws in COVID-19 and beyond.
- vi. Require that government agencies provide appropriate PPE, including N95 masks and nitrile gloves at wholesale or free cost for nail salon employers to provide to their staff at no cost.
- vii. Prioritize nail salon workers for early vaccine eligibility phases in future waves, alongside other high-risk and high-exposure workforces, to ensure the safety of salon workers, clients, and community.
- viii. Require that state and local government agencies partner with and fund community based organizations that have long standing and trusted community relationships to navigate COVID-19 relief and economic recovery.

b. California:

- i. Establish programs and policies that empower key stakeholders like workers and employers to inform high road labor and business practices that improve working and labor conditions across the industry. These programs and policies would prioritize long term stability and sustainability for workers and owners and a just economic recovery for all.

c. New York:

- i. Empower workers and employers to recommend policy solutions to the unique needs and challenges of the industry through passage of the Nail Salon Minimum Standards Council Act (S8166/A9398), creating a council of nail salon workers, employers and public representatives to recommend sector-wide standards. The policy will also establish an independent committee to recommend a fair minimum pricing model for the industry to raise the floor for all.
- ii. Hold nail salons accountable for non-compliance with labor laws and level the playing field for responsible businesses through passage of the Nail Salon Accountability Act (A2307/S4638), that seeks to reform the business licensing process to hold employers accountable and shift competitive advantage to salons that are complying with the law. The policy would link the state business licensing process with compliance with labor and health and safety laws and provide mandatory new trainings for workers and business owners.

d. Philadelphia:

- i. Create a budget for worker safety training and certification programs to establish a Philadelphia Healthy Nail Salon Recognition Program. This will ensure city-community partnerships that increase worker safety in the nail salon industry. The budget for these programs will foster workplace health and safety protections through trainings and training materials, recommendations for less toxic cosmetics ingredients, and practices to minimize exposure to hazardous chemicals.



3. Support policies and initiatives for language justice in the nail salon sector.

- a. Sponsor workforce development training for nail salon workers with limited-English proficiency.
- b. Require that each state Cosmetology Board and local municipality provide accessible in-language technical assistance and support to the nail salon workforce. Languages should be inclusive of who makes up the nail salon workforce.
- c. Fund media and communications outreach for timely and culturally-accessible dissemination of information to the nail salon industry.
- d. Fund worker centers and community centers that hold licensing technical assistance and support for salon workers



4. Conduct further participatory research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond as the industry adapts.

- a. Support more participatory research on the nail-salon industry and workers with both national and regional analysis in collaboration with community organizations.

- b. Investigate more sector-wide policy models for the industry that are grounded in worker's conditions and that promote a just economic recovery.
- c. Continue to study the health and safety standards in the nail salon, including respiratory conditions, ventilation, and any reproductive and bodily impacts.



5. Promote broad based systemic change to address anti-Asian racism through comprehensive strategies. Broad approaches include prevention, education, and services that center healing, safety, and racial solidarity, and should not contribute to criminalization or the carceral state.

a. California:

- i. Address the street harassment of women and vulnerable communities through community centered public health prevention initiatives, such as a recent bill introduced in California to prevent street harassment (AB 2549). This bill would require the CA Department of Public Health, in collaboration with communities on the ground that are most impacted, to conduct a public education campaign to raise awareness of street harassment as a public problem, conduct a statewide study on street harassment, and defines street harassment in the health and safety context - not in criminal law.

Appendix A: Demographics

Table A.1: Survey Sample Demographics

Age	CA	NY	PA
18–24	2%	13%	11%
25–34	14%	21%	19%
35–44	32%	21%	30%
45–54	32%	38%	35%
55 or older	24%	6%	5%

Gender	CA	NY	PA
Female	88%	87%	86%
Male	8%	11%	12%
Gender non-conforming	4%	N/A	N/A
Other	N/A	2%	2%

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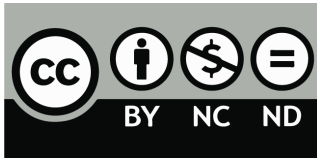
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