COMMUNITY DATA SPOTLIGHT
UCLA LABOR CENTER

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TOPICS Employment, Safety, Health, Poverty

ABOUT

For more than 50 years, the UCLA Labor Center has created and disseminated 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.

DATA NEEDS

The UCLA Labor Center identifies an urgent need for detailed ethnicity information within labor and employment data. Comprehensive, disaggregated data is essential for organizations and government agencies to advocate for better working conditions and economic mobility for people in communities of color, including Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). This data is needed at the national, state and local levels. The UCLA Labor Center needs disaggregated data at the county level to produce actionable insights, in response to county-specific policies and enforcement, and due to county-specific concentrations of AAPI populations and industries.

UCLA Labor Center conducts research in a broad range of industries, including the restaurant, grocery, janitorial, home care and personal services sectors. For illustration, this brief details the experiences of workers in the nail salon industry. In March 2024, the UCLA Labor Center and the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative[1] released *Nail Files: A Study of Nail Salon Workers and Their Industry*.[2] Their goal was to develop a comprehensive profile of the nail salon workforce in California, emphasizing labor conditions and potential policy solutions to improve labor standards and economic mobility. Research questions included:

- What are the demographic characteristics of nail salon workers?
- What are their employment outcomes — for example, type of employment, wages, hours worked?
- How might employment outcomes vary by demographic and household characteristics — for example, immigration status, years in the United States, English proficiency, home ownership status, poverty status, number of people in the household?

For this study, the UCLA Labor Center primarily relied on the American Community Survey (ACS) and Current Population Survey (CPS), supplemented by the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) for information on key industries. The research team focused on demographic variables, employment outcomes, and some household characteristics (including house tenure, reliance on public assistance, and children in the household) to elucidate the impact of low wages and precarious labor conditions on workers and their families. The researchers found that nail salons and other personal care services industries have a high concentration of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) workers, substantiated in key statistics:

- Nail salon workers tend to be women (85%), Asian (84%), and immigrants or refugees (81% were born outside of the United States). Among those born outside of the United States, 82% were born in Vietnam.
- Most nail salon workers are middle-aged, with the largest concentration of workers 45–60 years old, skewing older compared to California workers in other fields.

- A majority (80%) of nail salon workers are paid low wages, with an hourly median wage of $10.94 (which is below California's $13.00 minimum wage mandated in 2021 for businesses with up to 25 employees).
- Almost a third of nail salon workers are self-employed, which is triple the average for all other industries in California.
- Housing and food security are a concern for 65% of workers who are rent-burdened or severely rent-burdened, for 19% who live in overcrowded households, and for 15% who receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

All these findings together helped UCLA Labor Center researchers determine the types of interventions needed to promote better working conditions and economic mobility for workers. For example, the study shows that most workers receive low wages and many may be misclassified as self-employed contractors rather than employees, thereby indicating need for greater enforcement of labor laws. Local and state agencies would benefit from partnering with worker centers and Vietnamese-serving institutions to initiate contact with nail salon workers to ensure that they are aware of educational materials and that enforcement resources are culturally appropriate and available in their primary language. Further education to help nail salon workers elevate their skills for potential advancement constitute another key intervention point. Because many nail salon workers are monolingual Vietnamese speakers, education programs and career-building opportunities must be made available to fit the specific needs of this community. California's AB2444[3] seeks to address this need. UCLA Labor Center research highlights the need for multi-stakeholder partnerships to develop comprehensive programs that help owners achieve labor law compliance, including education on sustainable business practices, fair pay, scheduling, benefits and worker advancement opportunities.

Nail salon worker in California (Photo: Joyce Xi)

The ability to identify Vietnamese Americans in the nail salon industry was critical to the nuanced understanding of the language and cultural needs of this segment of the workforce. This research illuminates the importance of disaggregated data in all survey and administrative data, including the American Community Survey (ACS), Current Population Survey (CPS), and the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW). This data is essential at the state and county levels, because labor enforcement and protections often start locally. **Disaggregated data is critical to assessing and ensuring labor law compliance and fair wages for communities of color in the United States.**

1 https://www.cahealthynailsalons.org

2 Huynh, J., Sharma, P., Waheed, S., Fu, L., Herrera, L., Nguyen, M., & Porter, C. (2024). Nail files California: A study of nail salon workers and industry. UCLA Labor Center and California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative. https://www.cahealthynailsalons.org/reports/nail-files-california

3 Introduced February 13, 2024, by Assembly member Alex Lee (24th District, which includes parts of Alameda and Santa Clara counties). https://a24.asmdc.org/press-releases/20240213-bill-ensure-labor-law-education-nail-salon-industry-introduced

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