

# Racial Discrimination, Sexual Harassment, and Intimate Partner Violence and the Workplace: Results from the 2024 Empire State Poll

## Worker Institute Policy Brief September 2025

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Workplace discrimination, harassment, and gender violence continue to be issues of concern to workers in New York State and across U.S. workplaces. This brief presents analysis of results of the 2024 Empire State Poll<sup>5</sup> concerning rates of racial discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace, as well as experiences of intimate partner violence and their impacts at work. The brief also discusses how people respond to such situations, with a particular focus on what actions union members have taken. While rates of unionization have been falling throughout the United States, New York State remains one of the most unionized workforces across the country, with 20.6% of New Yorkers belonging to a labor union as of 2024, second only to Hawaii.<sup>6</sup>

As reported previously,<sup>7</sup> New York State (NYS) has been recognized as a leader in addressing sexual harassment through legislation and policy initiatives, with the most recent changes in the law aiming to make grievance and complaint processes more accessible and survivor-centered. However, workers who report racial discrimination or sexual or gender violence in the workplace continue to face significant consequences for their wellbeing and their careers, as the way workers experience the impact of these phenomena is often shaped by workers' economic and workplace position and by their race/ethnicity, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other facets of identity.

Labor unions have a unique role in addressing issues of racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and intimate partner violence in the workplace. While non-unionized workers can report issues and seek accommodations with human resources or their supervisor, many workers might not understand their rights under the law and/or might not trust the internal HR process—particularly if the perpetrator is a direct supervisor or someone

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5 See the appendix at the end of this brief for a description of the Empire State Poll's methodology.

6 Bureau of Labor Statistics. January 28, 2025. "Table 5. Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by state – 2024." < <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t05.htm> >; for comparison, 22.8% of the ESP's 2024 sample are members of a labor union.

7 Pinto, S., Wagner, KC, and West, Z. 2019. "Stopping Sexual Harassment in the Empire State: Past, Present, and a Possible Future." The Worker Institute, Cornell University; Wagner, KC and West, Z. 2023. "The Impact of Sexual Harassment and Gendered Violence on Working New Yorkers." The Worker Institute, Cornell University.

with more authority. For unionized workers, unions can potentially facilitate the process by which workers can seek redress for immediate harm, including by those with power and authority over their work and working conditions.

Unions have a role to play in reducing instances of racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and gender violence in the workplace via their collective bargaining agreements and grievance procedures, which create additional access to union-specific means of responding to such issues. Union-specific avenues include reporting incidents to a union representative, such as a steward or business agent, and using union grievance procedures, wherein members can report issues and seek solutions, including reprimanding offending parties. Unions can further negotiate specific language in their collective bargaining agreements to include policies against discrimination, harassment, and retaliation, mandate that union officers uphold such commitments, and specify the processes of reporting such conduct.<sup>8</sup> While recent reductions in federal funding have impacted organizations and resources available to victims, complainants can seek restitution through other means, including state and local laws and union grievance procedures. Union procedures have the benefit of providing an accessible means of addressing issues without the complications and delays of court cases and other such legal proceedings.

Further, unions can serve as vectors for training and education on wider societal issues and their impacts on the workplace. Unions often require that their members attend trainings on occupational health and safety and to further develop their skills. Some unions have begun mandating that their members receive training on issues including discrimination, harassment, and intimate partner violence (IPV), which can increase knowledge of these issues and their related reporting mechanisms and otherwise improve workplace culture.

The Worker Institute has a long history of helping unions and NYS policy leaders develop strategies to confront workplace sexual harassment and gendered violence in the workplace. In this brief we provide context and recommendations grounded in the knowledge of survivors, advocates and researchers who have been grappling with these issues for decades. We are ready to continue to serve as a source of information, strategy, training and education to make NYS workplaces a welcoming and thriving place for all workers.

## RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Workplace racial discrimination can include, but is not limited to differential treatment, offensive remarks about someone's race, the display of racially insensitive symbols, and physical violence,<sup>9</sup> and may come from supervisors, coworkers, customers, and other parties.<sup>10</sup> Such discrimination may also occur when applicants apply for jobs, leading to disparities in hiring and compensation.<sup>11</sup> The cumulative effect of discrimination, both in and out of the workplace, can have significant effects on people's physical and mental health as well as their opportunities for economic advancement.<sup>12</sup>

Over one-third of respondents of color (36.1%) reported experiencing racial discrimination in the workplace, compared to 13.2% of white respondents.<sup>13</sup> Overall, 23.6% of ESP respondents indicated that they have experienced racial discrimination in the workplace, including 4.8% at their current job, 16.6% at their previous

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8 Avedaño, A. 2018. "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Where Were the Unions?" *Labor Studies Journal* 43(4):245-262.

9 U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. "Race/Color Discrimination." < <https://www.eeoc.gov/racecolor-discrimination> >

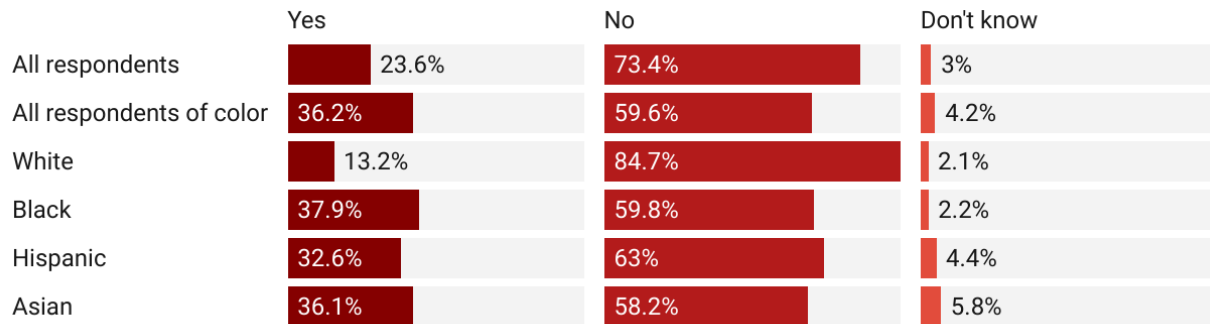
10 Lang, K. and Spitzer A.K. 2020. "Race Discrimination: An Economic Perspective." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 35(2):68-89.

11 Bertrand, M. and Mullainathan, S. 2003. "Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment in Labor Market Discrimination." NBER Working Paper 9873.

12 Small, M.L. and Pager, D. 2020. "Sociological Perspectives on Racial Discrimination." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34(2):49-67.

13 The difference in rates of workplace racial discrimination between white respondents and respondents of color is statistically significant ( $P \leq .0001$ ).

## Have you ever experienced discrimination on the job because of your race or ethnicity?



Universe: All ESP respondents [n=2,682 weighted observations]

Subsamples: White [n=1,470], Black [n=372], Hispanic [n=475], Asian [n=245]

Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

job, and 2.2% at their current and previous jobs. Additionally, 3% said that they did not know if that had experienced racial discrimination.

ESP respondents took a variety of approaches to respond to incidents of workplace racial discrimination, the most common of which included reporting to an employer representative, such as human resources or a supervisor (34.3%), telling a coworker, (28.2%), and confronting the perpetrator (24%). Contacting a lawyer or community organization (4.5%) and calling the police (0.7%) were less common. Among the ESP's subsample of union members who have experienced workplace racial discrimination at their current job, 15.4% reported the situation to a union representative, while 36.9% of union members reported to an employer representative.

## SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Workplace sexual harassment can include, but is not limited to, differential treatment, offensive remarks about one's sex or gender, unwanted sexual advances, and unwanted physical contact.<sup>14</sup> As with workplace racial discrimination, sexual harassment can also lead victims to leave their jobs, have decreased performance, as well as decreased physical and mental health.<sup>15</sup> Across all ESP respondents, 22.3% have experienced workplace sexual harassment, including 3.5% at their current job, 16.8% at their previous job, and 2% at both their current and previous jobs. An additional 2.1% said that they didn't know if they've experienced workplace sexual harassment.

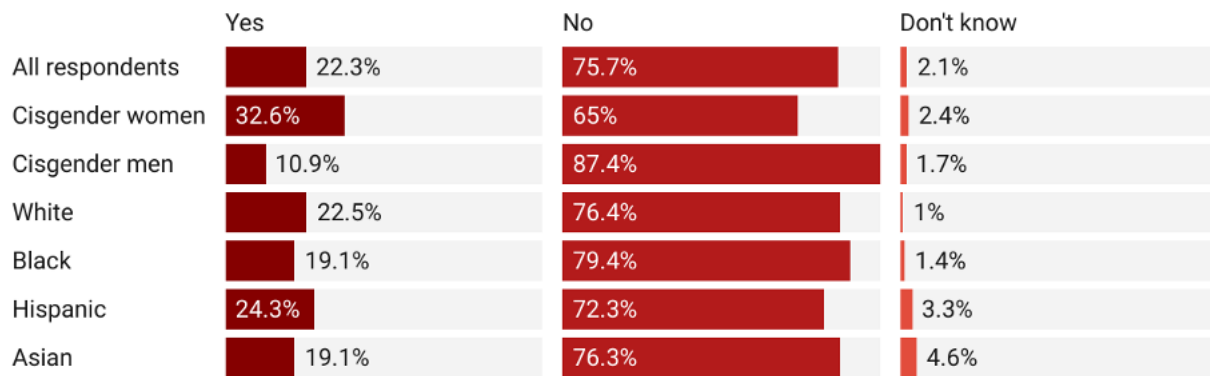
A significant difference emerged across genders, with 32.6% of cisgender women who reported experiencing workplace sexual harassment compared to 10.9% of cisgender men.<sup>16</sup> Union members reported higher rates of sexual harassment at their current jobs (7.8%) compared to non-union members (2.2%); in contrast, non-union members have higher rates of having experienced sexual harassment at their previous jobs (18.4%) compared

14 U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. "Sexual Harassment." < <https://www.eeoc.gov/sexual-harassment> >

15 Cortina, L.M. and Areguin, M.A. 2021. "Putting People Down and Pushing Them Out: Sexual Harassment in the Workplace." *Annual Review of Organization Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 8:285-309.

16 The difference between cisgender men and cisgender women is statistically significant ( $P \leq .0001$ ).

## Have you ever experienced sexual harassment or inappropriate sexual behavior from a co-worker, work supervisor, client, customer, or business partner?



Universe: All ESP respondents [n=2,682 weighted observations]

Subsamples: Cisgender women [n=1,368], Cisgender men [n=1,296], White [n=1,470], Black [n=372], Hispanic [n=475], Asian [n=425]

Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

to union members (11.3%).<sup>17</sup> Hispanic respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment in their current jobs (6.6%) at higher rates compared to white respondents in their current jobs (2.5%).<sup>18</sup>

Similarly to racial discrimination, respondents who have experienced workplace sexual harassment responded to such situations primarily by reporting to an employer representative (35.1%), telling a coworker (29.43%), and confronting the perpetrator (26.4%). Less common approaches were contacting a lawyer or community organization (3.7%) and calling the police (2.4%). Within ESP's subsample of union members who have experienced workplace sexual harassment at their current job, 14.4% reported the situation to a union representative, while 20.9% reported to an employer representative.

## INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Intimate partner violence (IPV)<sup>19</sup> refers to violence between relationship partners and can include physical, emotional, financial, sexual and other forms of abuse or controlling behavior. Nearly one-fifth (18.3%) of ESP respondents reported having experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetimes. One-quarter (25.6%) of cisgender women have experienced IPV compared to 10.3% of cisgender men.<sup>20</sup> Hispanic respondents reported the highest rates of IPV (24.3%) while Asians reported the lowest (8%).<sup>21</sup>

17 The difference between union members and non-union members is statistically significant ( $P \leq .0001$ ).

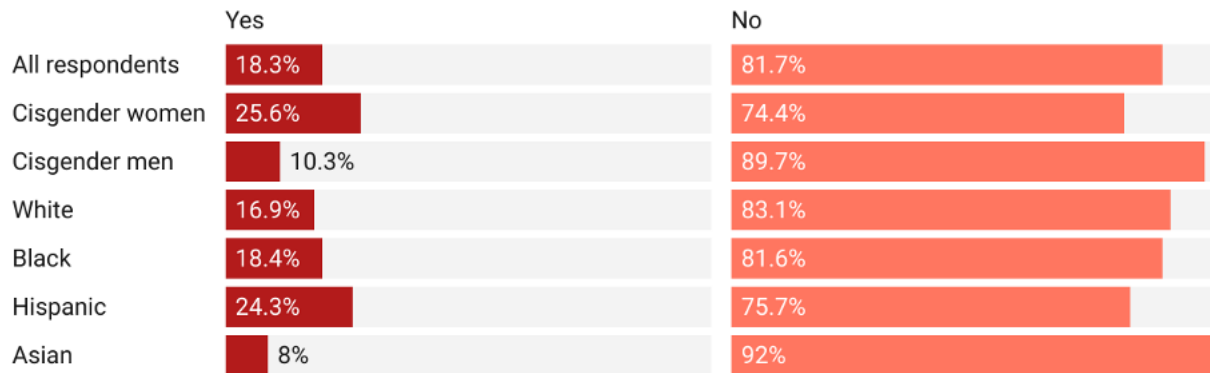
18 The difference between racial groups is statistically significant ( $P = .0021$ ).

19 Intimate partner violence may also be referred to as domestic violence, though IPV specifies that the violence occurs between relationship partners (e.g., married couples, cohabitating couples, or non-cohabitating couples).

20 The difference in rates of IPV between cisgender men and women is statistically significant ( $P \leq .0001$ ).

21 The difference in rates of IPV between racial groups is statistically significant ( $P = .0006$ ); the differences between Black and Hispanic respondents is negligible.

## Have you ever experienced intimate partner violence or controlling behavior by an intimate partner?



Universe: All ESP respondents [n=2,682 weighted observations]

Subsamples: Cisgender women [n=1,369], Cisgender men [n=1,296], White [n=1,470], Black [n=372], Hispanic [n=475], Asian [n=425]

Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

While IPV may commonly be thought of as confined to the privacy of people's homes, the violence and its effects can emanate into the workplace. An abuser may come to the victim's workplace, contact them excessively over the phone, or ask the victim's coworkers to monitor and surveil them. The effects of such abuse, whether committed at home, in the workplace, or elsewhere, can include missing work, injuries, illness, decreased ability to concentrate, and changes in temperament.<sup>22</sup> Among ESP respondents who have experienced IPV, 44.2% reported that the situation impacted their employment in some way.

Additionally, 9.3% of ESP respondents report having experienced both workplace sexual harassment and IPV in their lifetimes. 14.4% of cisgender women have experienced both, compared to 3.9% of cisgender men.<sup>23</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Support women's committees and similar employee resource groups.*

In the wake of the Trump administration's policies on DEI, some organizations and workplaces have begun dismantling resources for employees based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities.<sup>24</sup> The Trump administration has also announced intentions to shut down the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, referring to it as a "relic of the past" and "ineffective."<sup>25</sup> While such a closure would require Congressional approval, the Department of Labor has given the Bureau no funding and plans to eliminate staff—effectively closing it.

22 Workplaces Respond to Domestic and Sexual Violence: A National Resource Center. 2024. "Is it Domestic or Sexual Violence?: Recognizing the Potential Signs."

23 The difference in rates of experiencing both workplace sexual harassment and IPV between cisgender men and women is statistically significant ( $P \leq .0001$ ).

24 Yam, Kimmy. January 27, 2025. "Trump's anti-DEI executive orders target employee resource groups, federal workers say." <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/trump-anti-dei-orders-target-federal-employee-groups-rcna189212>>

25 Baio, Ariana. June 6, 2025. "Trump looks to close 105-year-old department that supports women workers despite insinuating it would stay." <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/womens-bureau-close-department-of-labor-b2765266.html>>

However, such committees, resource groups, and similar entities provide employees with important resources and means for advocacy that aim to address their unique needs. In addition to promoting a sense of belonging and inclusion in the workplace, such groups can also improve workers' sense of engagement with their workplace<sup>26</sup> while providing workers with means to collectively advocate for improving workplace policies and relevant legislation, develop educational programming, and access funds for professional development.<sup>27</sup> Such activities have found success in addressing issues of racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and intimate partner violence.<sup>28</sup> Further, the presence of such groups and activities can help make unionized occupations more attractive to younger workers and mobilize them to become more involved within and beyond their workplaces.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Increase state, local, and philanthropic investment in research.***

In addition to dismantling employee resources, the Trump administration has begun cutting federal funding for research studies that address issues of DEI, such as research examining whether social phenomena impact groups differently based on race, gender, or other characteristics.<sup>30</sup> In response, some workplace studies have stopped collecting demographic information on their respondents, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation in order to avoid funding loss. However, this brief and other studies demonstrate that racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and intimate partner violence affect groups at different rates; we also know that their impact is shaped by individuals' identities and positions. Such differences need to be taken into account when designing policies, trainings, and other interventions to address incidents and promote broader changes. In order to continue conducting research into disparities and unique experiences based on social characteristics, non-federal bodies must fill the funding gap without limiting researchers on what they can study.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

While the Empire State Poll has asked respondents what actions they took in response to situations of racial discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace, questions remain as to whether such actions were effective and what goals individuals have in responding to harassment and discrimination. Similarly, the Empire State Poll did not ask union members why they may have chosen to report to an employer representative rather than their union representative, as was found in results for both racial discrimination and for sexual harassment. Further, a statewide representative survey such as the Empire State Poll cannot assess whether the introduction of new initiatives or policies in workplaces and/or labor unions, including language in collective bargaining agreements, is effective; this requires specific evaluation studies.

Another important question is whether workers understand the complex web of federal, state, local, and workplace policies surrounding these issues. While New York State has been a leader in passing legislation against harassment, particularly after the beginning of the #MeToo movement (such laws have included updating definitions for workplace harassment, strengthening anti-retaliation laws, and increasing financial

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26 Cencki, A.T., Zimmerman, J., and Bircan, T. 2019. "The Effects of Employee Resource Groups on Work Engagement and Workplace Inclusion." *The International Journal of Organizational Diversity* 19(20):1-19.

27 LaTour, Jane. 2015. "A Guide to Organizing Women's Committees: Everything You Need to Know to Make a Difference!" The Worker Institute, Cornell University.

28 Gray, L.S. and Figueroa, M. 2014. "Women's Committees in Worker Organizations: Still Making a Difference." The Worker Institute, Cornell University.

29 Canadian Union of Public Employees. March 7, 2025. "Our union's future is ours: Perspectives from CUPE's young workers." < <https://cupe.ca/our-unions-future-ours-perspectives-cupes-young-workers> >

30 Noguchi, Yuki. March 21, 2025. "Trump wants to erase DEI. Researchers worry it will upend work on health disparity." < <https://www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2025/03/21/nx-s1-5335599/trump-dei-research-cancer-rural-whites> >

compensation to be paid out by employers),<sup>31</sup> it is unclear whether workers throughout New York State are aware of such state- and local-level protections.

To address these outstanding gaps in knowledge, the Worker Institute is developing further research into issues of harassment and IPV, as well as questions about workplace culture, trust in reporting mechanisms, and knowledge of relevant state, local, and workplace policies. The Worker Institute plans to partner with labor unions in New York State to conduct in-depth investigations into issues of harassment and other forms of workplace violence in order to better recommend solutions for training, education, policy development, and collective bargaining.

## APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

The **Empire State Poll (ESP)** is an annual survey of labor and employment across New York State conducted by Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. The survey was administered online and by phone in English and Spanish. The data were collected by SSRS between August 14-30, 2024. A total of 2,686 respondents participated in the 2024 poll. The ESP uses a blended sampling design that combines randomly selected respondents from SSRS's probability-based Opinion Panel ( $n = 1,043$ ) as well as opt-in respondents from their nonprobability panel partner, Dynata ( $n = 1,643$ ). Respondent recruitment was targeted to ensure a representative sample of NYS residents by age, race, and region across both sample sources. SSRS's Encipher Hybrid calibration methodology weights each respondent to correct for selection bias based on their sample source. Respondents were further weighted on several key indicators<sup>32</sup> to calibrate results to definitive demographic sources<sup>33</sup> in order to improve the generalizability of results to the residential adult population of New York State.

This report presents weighted crosstabulations of data from the Empire State Poll. Analyses were conducted using Stata statistical software, version 19, and data visualizations were created using Datawrapper. Testing for statistical significance was conducted by using Rao-Scott corrected chi-square tests, with the threshold for significance set at  $P < .05$ , the commonly accepted research standard. Tests for statistical significance by gender were performed only on cisgender respondents, due to the low number of transgender and gender non-conforming respondents. Tests for statistical significance by racial/ethnic group were only performed on white, Black, Hispanic, and Asian respondents, due to the low number of respondents who identified as Native American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, as two or more races, or as an "other" race; tests for statistical significance between white respondents and all respondents of color include all respondents, regardless of the size of their individual groups.

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31 Johnson, A., Ijoma, S., and Kim, D. 2022. "#MeToo Five Years Later: Progress & Pitfalls in State Workplace Anti-Harassment Laws." National Women's Law Center.

32 In addition to sample source, key weighting indicators included: age, civic engagement, education, gender, internet usage frequency, interview mode, political party identification, race/ethnicity, and region.

33 The ESP was calibrated to the American Community Survey 5-Year 2018-2022 Estimates (U.S. Census Bureau), the 2023 Current Population Survey (U.S. Census Bureau), the September 2021 Current Population Survey Volunteering and Civic Life Supplement (U.S. Census Bureau), and the National Public Opinion Reference Survey (Pew Research Center).