The Empire State Poll:
A Portrait of Work in New York State from 2003-2024

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Introduction

For over 20 years, Cornell University's Empire State Poll (ESP) has taken the pulse of New York State residents' public opinion. Now administered through the Center for Applied Research on Work at the ILR School, the poll continues to ask many general opinion questions, with an increased focus on work. The result is over two decades of rich data on the issues most important to state residents, their views on the state economy and government, as well as key indicators of New York's labor market, among other things.

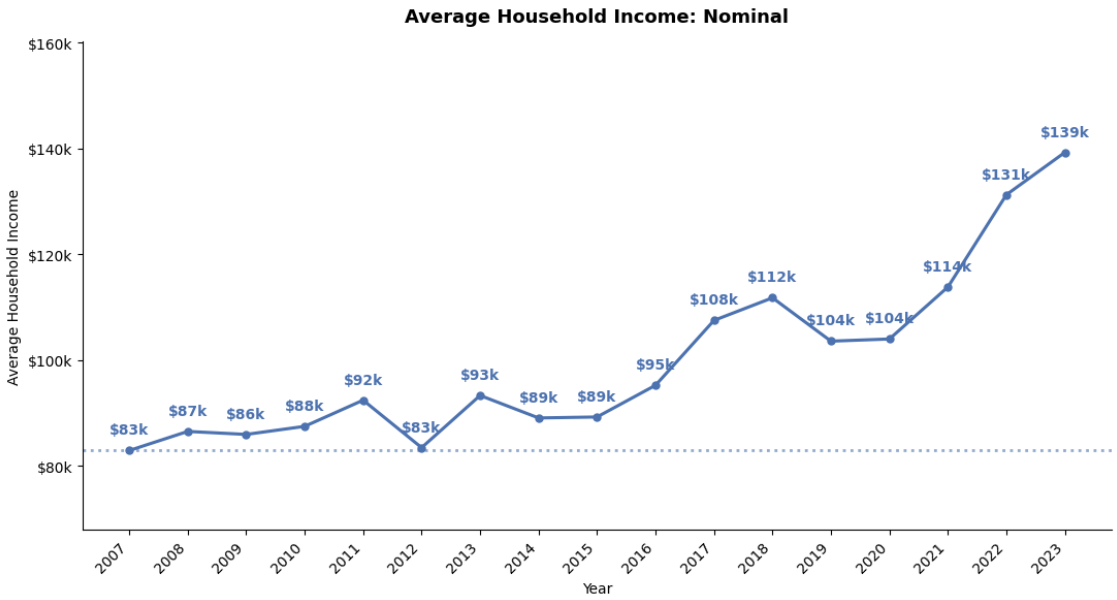
Under CAROW and ILR, we have been tracking key employment indicators to help capture the portrait of work in New York State. ESP data from 2003 through 2024 illustrates how the structure of work has remained consistent over time with full-time employment the most common arrangement, but with a significant rise in gig work and a decline in average hours worked after the pandemic. It also shows that real household income growth in the state has slowed in recent years, while inflation has risen. Perhaps relatedly, cost of living now dominates respondents' key concerns, eclipsing other priorities such as the environment. Alongside this trend, respondents' outlooks on their personal finances and on the state economy have grown increasingly pessimistic, and trust in institutions has declined.

Taken together, our findings point to clear steps policymakers and others can take to alleviate some of the economic anxiety emerging in the data, which are outlined at the end of the report.

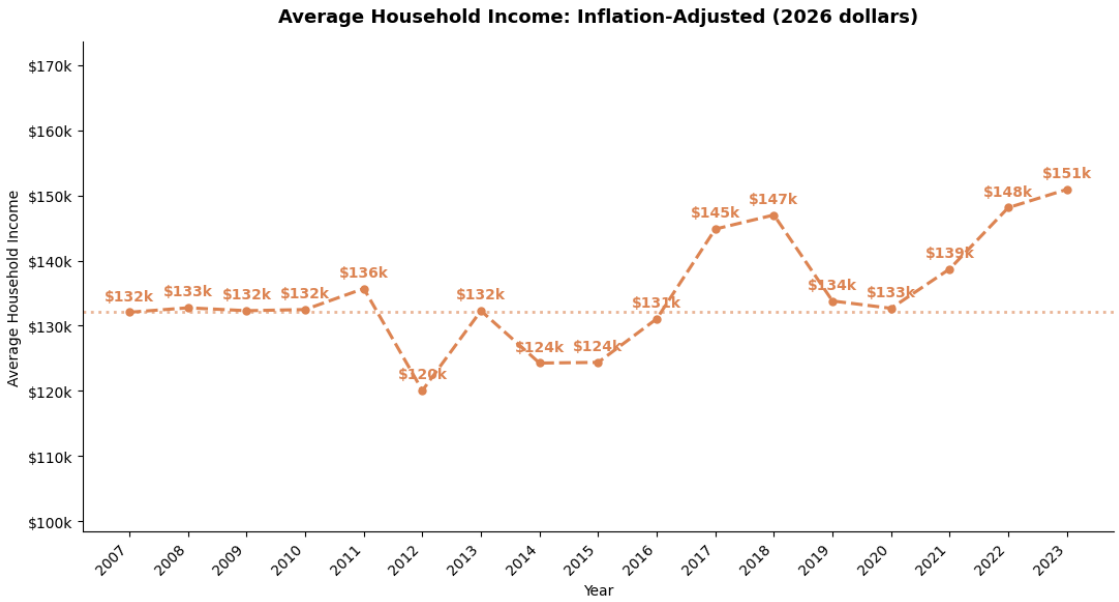
Income Growth Isn't What It Seems

Analyzing income trends over time helps uncover some of what's behind the general picture of economic anxiety we are seeing.

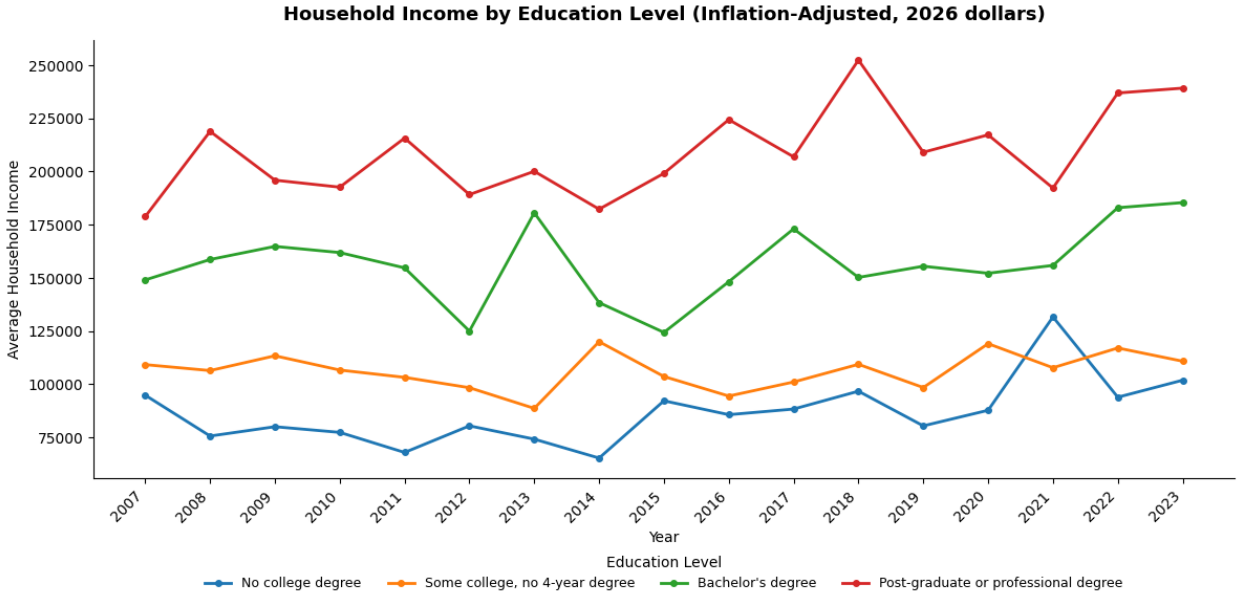
ESP data shows that average nominal household income in New York State has grown substantially over the past two decades — from roughly $83,000 in 2007 to nearly $140,000 by 2023, an increase of nearly 68%. However, this upward curve flattens considerably after adjusting for inflation, showing a limited increase in real purchasing power by only 14.3%.[1] This is consistent with broader national trends: Pew Research Center reported that median weekly wages grew by only about 12% in real terms between 1999 and 2025, despite more than doubling in nominal terms over the same period.[2] Several dips are observed in the inflation-adjusted series. The first two occurred in 2012 and 2014, with income rebounding within one to two years. The third dip occurred in 2019, with a decline of roughly 9.0% following the peak in 2018. The average income level remained suppressed through 2020 and likely reflected economic impacts of the pandemic. The average income level started to recover in 2021 and continued to increase afterwards, though the pace of growth showed signs of deceleration by 2023.



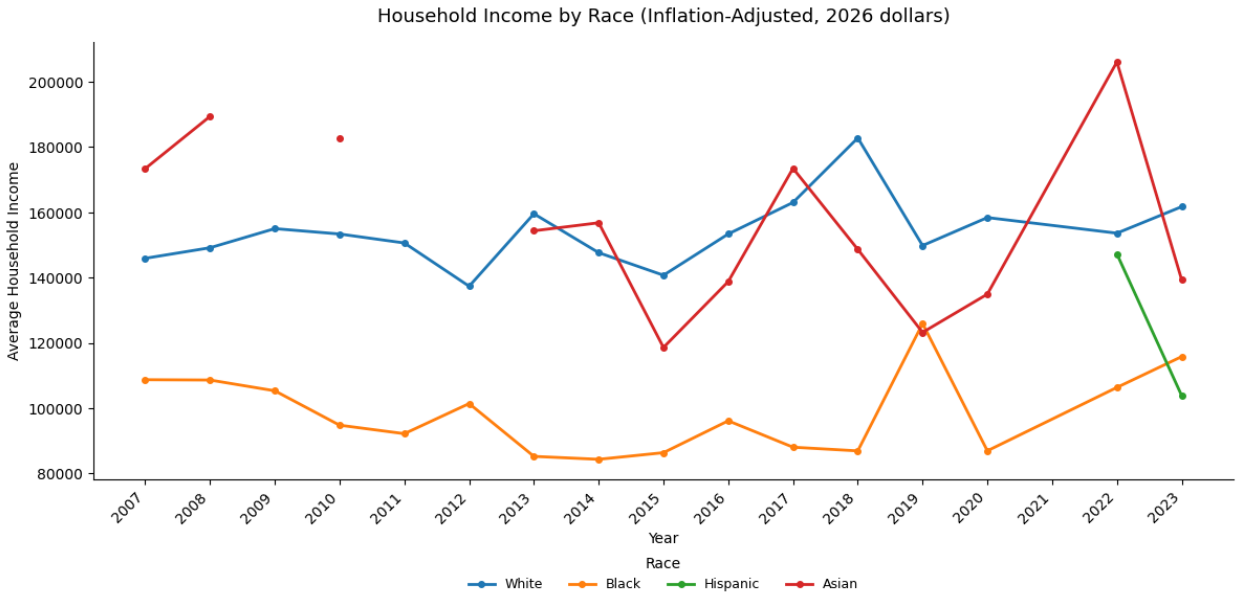
[1]ESP household income data for 2024 uses pre-defined income brackets rather than open-ended responses, which compresses the upper end of the income distribution and makes direct comparison with prior years unreliable; 2024 income figures are therefore excluded from trend analyses.
[2]DeSilver, 2026.



Households from all education backgrounds seem to have experienced a slow increase in annual income. The education premium persists, but it is less stable than commonly assumed. After the Great Recession, income for all education categories decreased for at least 5 years. Interestingly, after the pandemic, while people with postgraduate or professional degrees experienced a shock and earned less, households with no college education saw an uptick.

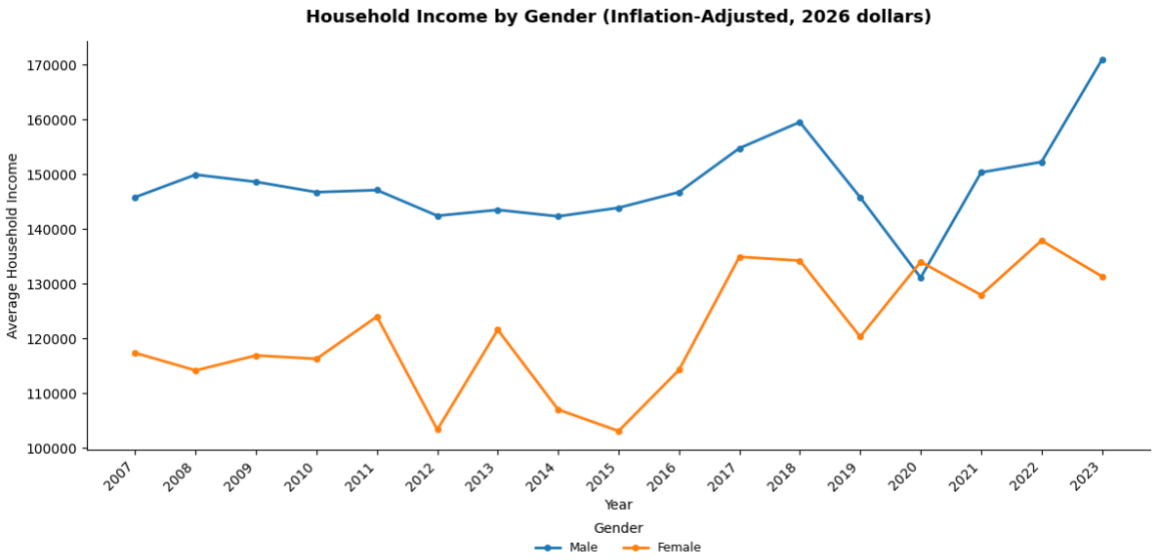


Examining household income by race and gender reveals similar patterns. By race, white and Asian households show broadly comparable income levels, but only the white group displays an observable upward trend over the years; the income trend for the Asian category appears more volatile without a clear direction. Black households report consistently lower income relative to these two groups, with declines in some years followed by partial recovery and an upward trend since the pandemic.[3]



When looking at gender, household income remained relatively stable through the early 2010s, followed by a gradual upward trend with moderate fluctuations in the years thereafter. Males consistently report higher average household income than females throughout the report period, with an overall average gap of approximately $27,300 (in 2026 dollars). Notably, the gap narrowed sharply in 2020, when male average income dropped briefly below female average income. The gap widened again afterwards.

[3] Race and ethnicity categories with fewer than 10 respondents in a given year are omitted from the graph. Asian: omitted in 2009, 2011, and 2012 due to insufficient sample size (n = 6, 9, and 6, respectively); all other years from 2007–2020 have n ≥ 12. Hispanic: omitted in all years, 2007–2020, due to insufficient sample size (no respondents were surveyed in 2007, 2011, 2014, 2015, and 2018, and the remaining years ranged from n = 1 to 8).



Shifting Priorities: The Rise of Cost of Living as Key Focus

To understand what is important to state residents, the ESP asks the question "In your opinion, what do you think is the single most important issue facing New York State as a whole?" Looked at in aggregate, the responses to this question can help inform the actions of policymakers and other institutional decisionmakers.

Top Concerns Facing New York State

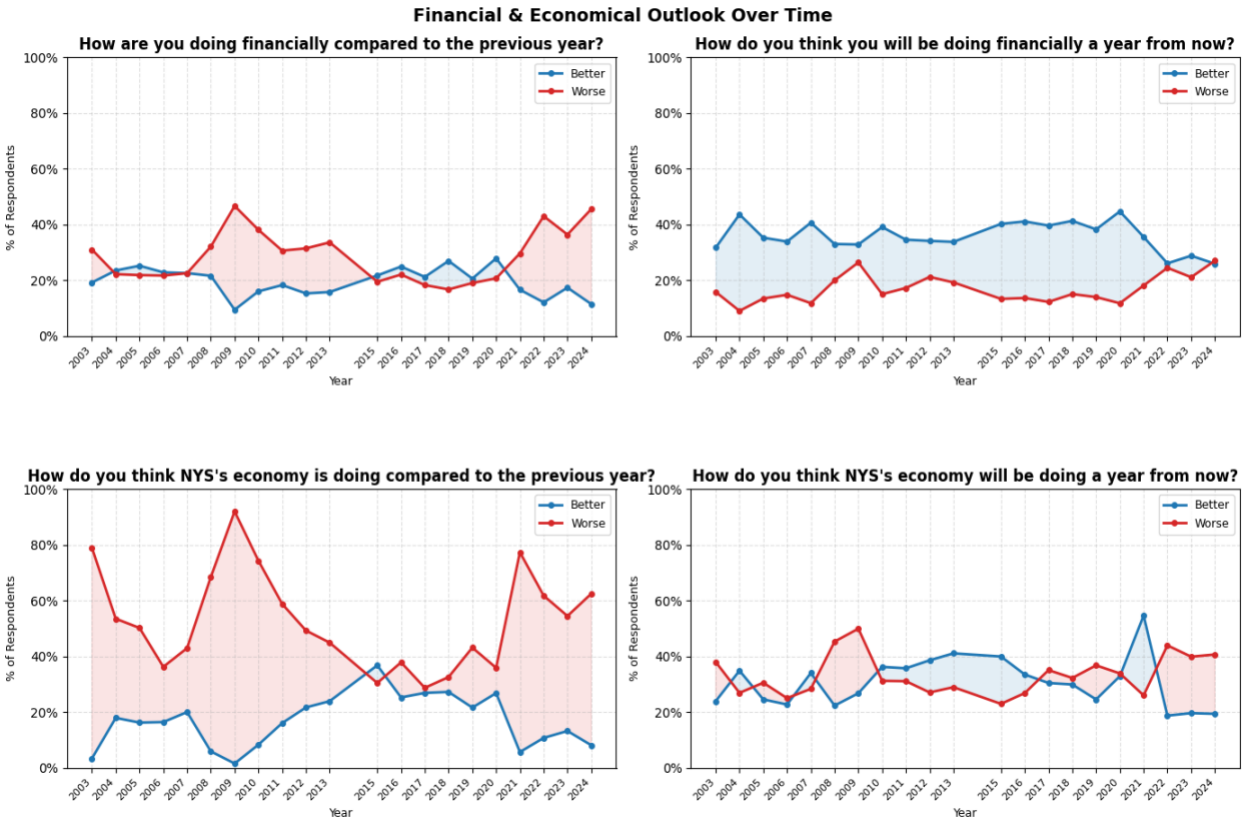
Issue	2003-2007 Pre-Recession	2008-2013 Post-Recession	2014-2019 Pre-Pandemic	2020-2024 Post-Pandemic
Employment	17.0%	22.1%	12.1%	1.2%
Economic Growth	4.4%	21.8%	10.6%	7.3%
Cost of Living	0.7%	2.9%	9.9%	27.2%
Environment	35.7%	1.6%	2.8%	0.5%
Taxes	2.8%	11.5%	15.5%	8.5%
Government Budget/Accountability	6.9%	16.0%	6.8%	6.4%
Other	4.0%	6.6%	13.3%	7.1%
Education	10.8%	7.1%	10.0%	2.9%
Safety	1.1%	3.1%	6.4%	19.8%
Health Care	6.8%	5.3%	6.6%	1.3%

In analyzing the ESP data, it appears the limited real income growth for most New York state residents alongside rising costs has impacted what respondents' view as the most pressing concern for the state. From 2003 to 2006, "environment" consistently ranked first, cited by 35–45% of respondents. After the financial crisis in 2008, "employment" and "economic growth" rose to the top. After the economy recovered in the 2014-2019 period, "taxes" became the number one concern. Since the start

of the pandemic, “cost of living” has emerged as the top concern, possibly related to the rising inflation rate (see Appendix A for specific annual inflation rates). Meanwhile, “safety” came in as the second top concern.[4]

Financial and Economic Sentiment Declines

The ESP asked respondents whether their households were better off, worse off, or the same financially as compared to one year ago, as well as to offer an outlook on their financial future in one year. Respondents were also asked to compare the current state of the NYS economy to where it was one year ago, and their outlook on the state economy one year from now.

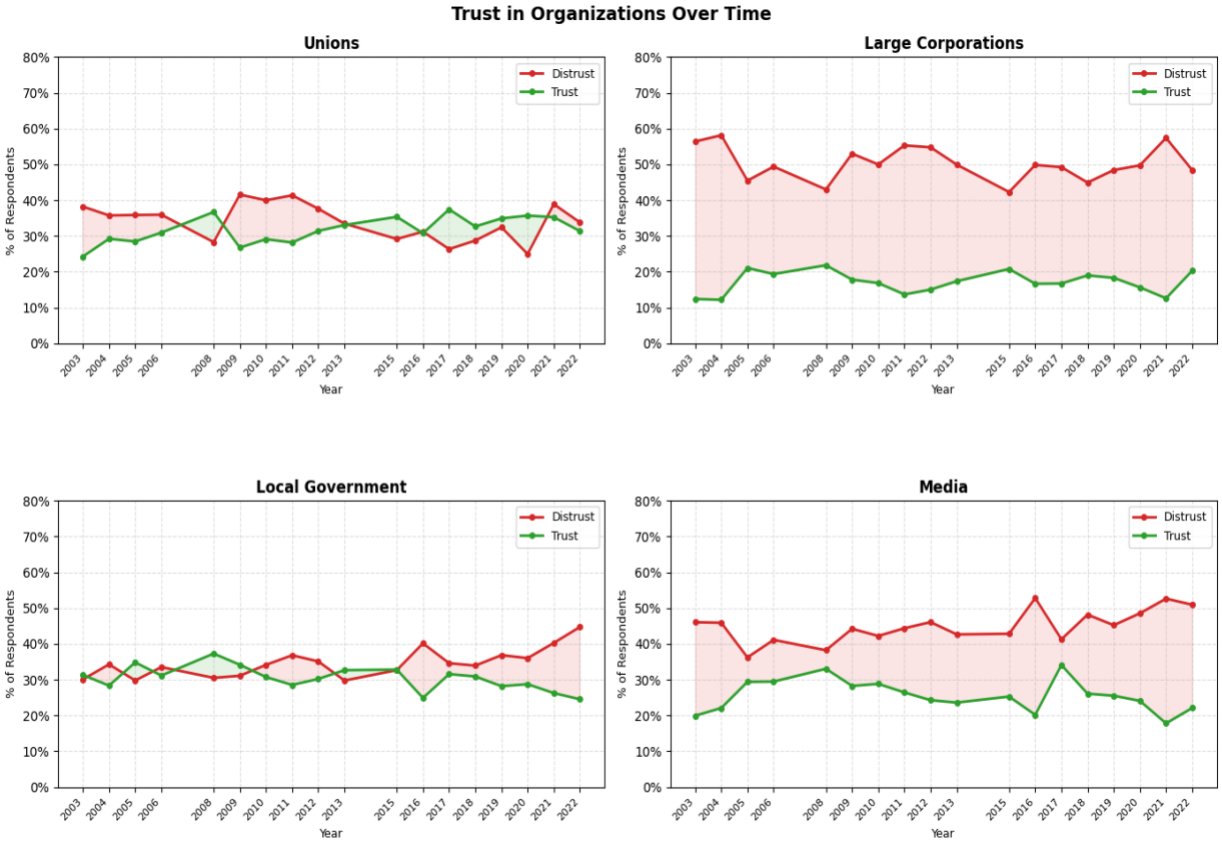


Trends from these outlooks reinforce the picture of growing economic anxiety. Historically, a majority of residents assessed their personal finances as roughly stable year to year, with 40–60% reporting no change. Two major exceptions stand out. During the 2008 Great Recession, the share reporting their

[4] Similar response categories from different survey years were merged into consistent labels (see Appendix B). Only concerns appearing in at least 5 of the 22 survey years were retained. Years were grouped into four time periods. Within each time period, each concern's weighted percentage share of all valid responses was calculated. The top 10 concerns shown are those with the highest average weighted percentage across all four time periods, listed in alphabetical order.

personal finances as worse jumped sharply, which corresponds with the "economic growth" concern. A similar pattern emerged around the pandemic. In 2022, negative sentiment reached its highest levels again, with over 40% of respondents reporting being worse off financially than the prior year. This trend has continued through 2024. Correspondingly, during these periods, the share of respondents optimistic about their financial future declined while pessimism increased. We see these general trends repeated in greater magnitude for the state economy questions. These financial difficulties likely explain why “cost of living” has become the top concern for ESP respondents.

Trust in Institutions Wanes



Against this backdrop of stagnating real incomes and rising cost-of-living anxiety, how has trust in major institutions changed? The ESP tracks respondent trust in various types of institutions, including: large corporations, unions, local government, and media.[5] Overall, the patterns across these four institution types point to low public trust, with some nuanced differences. Trust in unions declined sharply in 2009 following the Great Recession, then recovered unevenly through the 2010s, with trust exceeding distrust in most years from 2013 onward. Trust in unions peaked in 2017 and remained

[5] Beginning in 2023, the trust-related questions were revised to focus exclusively on government institutions (city local government, state legislature, the governor's office, and the Court of Appeals), replacing the prior battery which covered corporations, unions, local government, and media. As a result, trust trend analyses are limited to 2003–2022.

high through 2020, before reversing sharply in 2021, coinciding with the pandemic's aftermath. Trust and distrust rates for local government fluctuated close to 30% before a sharp change in 2016, when trust fell to 24.9% and distrust jumped to 40.2%. Trust in local government briefly rebounded in 2017 but has been declining ever since, while distrust has increased, widening to a 20% gap by 2022. Trust in large corporations has remained persistently low throughout the report period. Distrust in corporations consistently exceeds trust by a wide margin, with trust typically in the 10–15% range. Similarly, trust in media has declined to its lowest level in recent years, and distrust rates have been consistently high.

Regression analysis reveals a significant relationship between economic perceptions and institutional trust.[6] Results show that economic pessimism is significantly and negatively associated with trust across all four institutions (all $p < .001$). Residents who believe the state economy has worsened report lower trust regardless of the institution in question. The magnitude of these effects varies in a meaningful way. Local government shows the strongest association ($\beta = -0.371$), likely because residents perceive it as most directly responsible for local economic conditions. This aligns with the fact that "government accountability" was listed among the top 5 concerns for multiple years. Meanwhile, unions show the smallest effect ($\beta = -0.213$), suggesting that trust in unions is comparatively more resilient to economic pessimism.

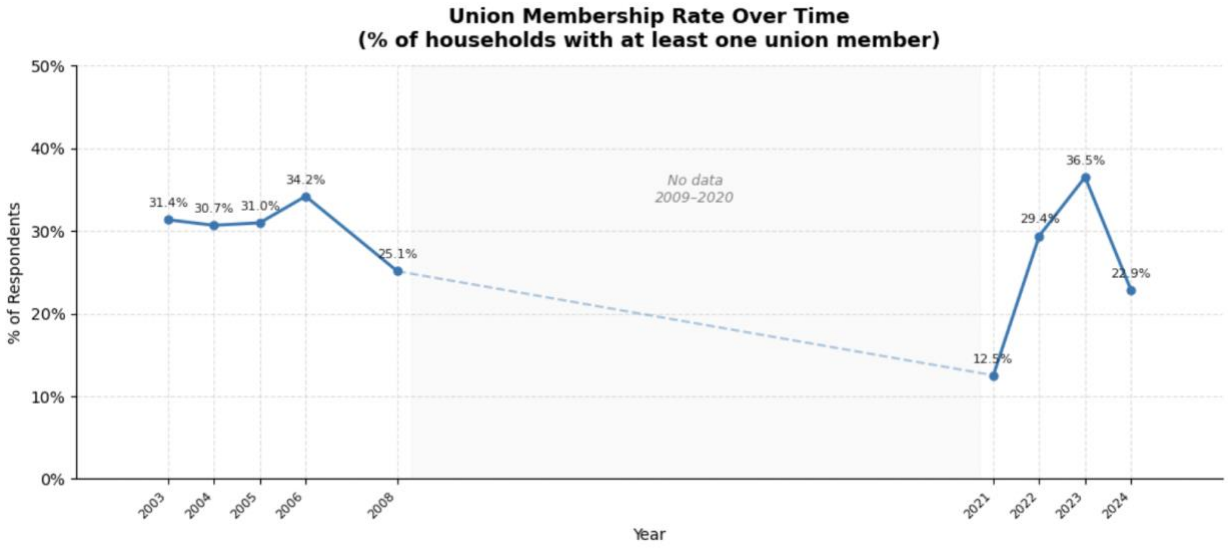
Union Membership Remains High Despite Fluctuations

Union membership is often looked to as an indicator of the health of a democratic society, and the ESP has included a question on it for a number of years. In general, New York state consistently has one of the highest rates of union membership in the country. In 2024, for example, the national proportion of union membership was 9.9%, whereas it was nearly 20.6% for New York.7 A closer look with ESP data shows that the percentage of New York households with at least one union member has fluctuated over time.8 The rate was exceptionally low in 2021 (12.5%) but it recovered in 2022. Between 2022 and 2024, overall union membership followed an inverted U-shape, with the share belonging to a union ultimately decreasing from 29.4% to 22.9%

[6] A weighted least squares regression was estimated for each institution using respondents' retrospective assessments of the NYS economy as the primary predictor, with controls for age, education, gender, race, party identification, and year fixed effects.

[7] BLS, 2025.

[8] Question wording for union membership varied substantially across years, limiting direct comparability. No union membership question was asked between 2009 and 2020. From 2003–2006, the question combined respondent and household membership into a single Yes/No item ("Do you or a household member belong to a union?"), except in 2004, when respondent and household membership were asked as two separate items. In 2008 and 2021, the question asked only about the respondent's own current membership (simple Yes/No). From 2022 onward, the question was redesigned to distinguish between public-sector union members, private-sector union members, and members of a (non-union) worker association. The latter are excluded from the union membership rate shown here.



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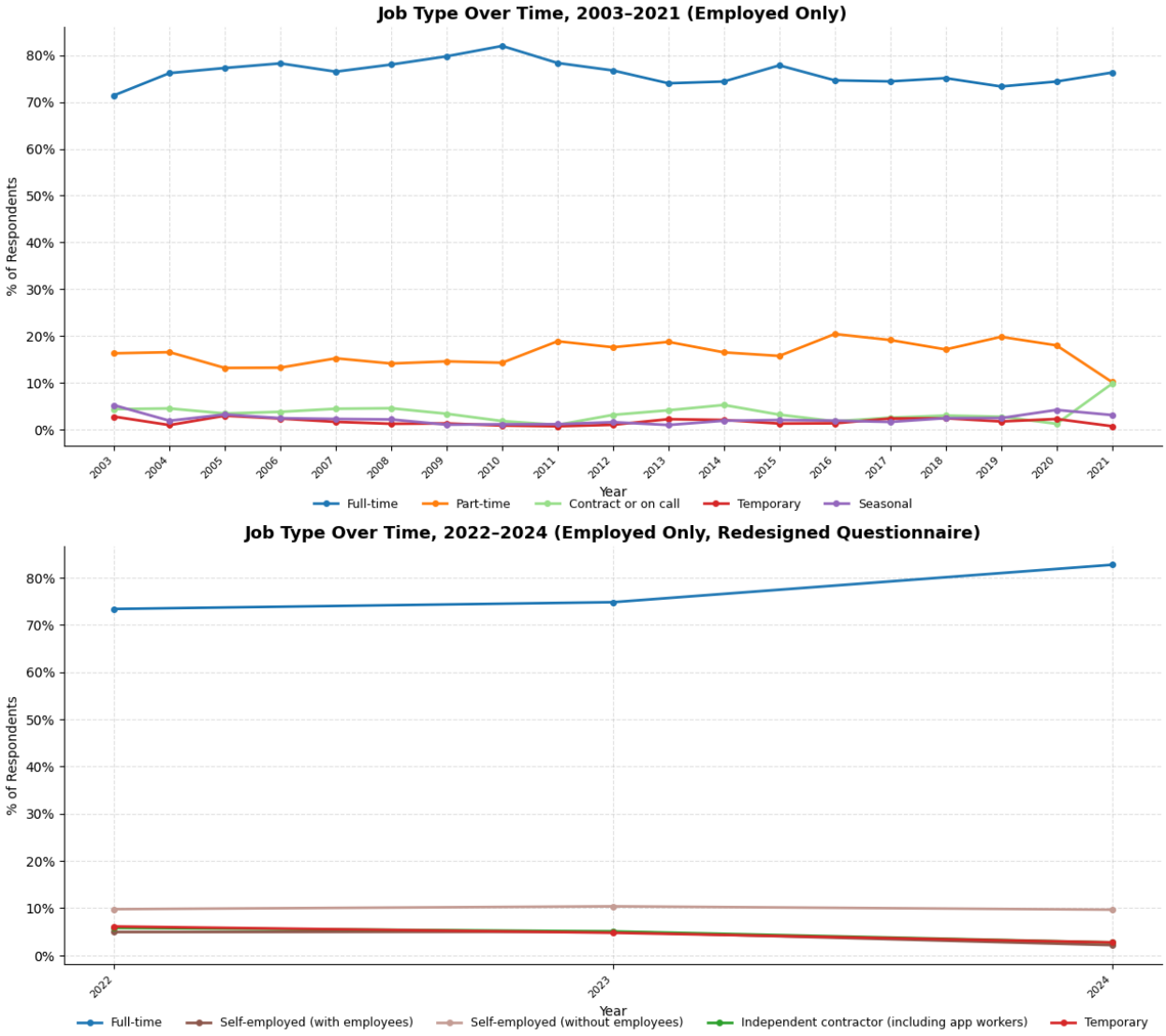
Employment Structure Reflects Changing Job Market

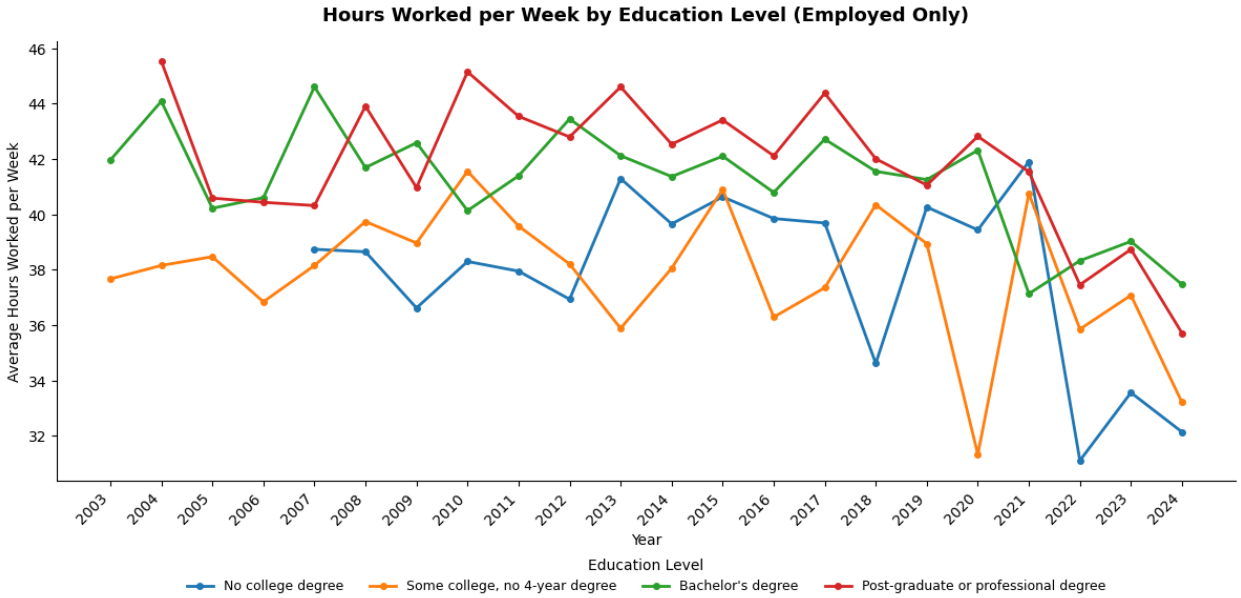
The Poll asks about job type to get a sense of what work looks like for residents across the state and how it is changing. Throughout the report period, full-time employment remained the dominant work arrangement, accounting for roughly 70–82% of employed respondents. In 2003–2021, "contract or on-call" workers held a small and fairly flat share for most of the series before rising sharply between 2020 and 2021. This timing is consistent with COVID-19's dual effect on the labor market: pandemic-era demand for delivery and other app-based gig work increased, while many traditional jobs were disrupted or eliminated. In response, the job-type question was revised in 2022 to capture this shift, adding the new category of "self-employed" workers (with or without employees) and explicitly including app workers in the "independent contractors" category. Under the redesigned question, "self-employed" workers without employees occupied about 10%, while "independent contractors (including app workers)" took up about 5%. To gain more granularity, a dedicated gig-work question was then added in 2024, based on which we calculate that roughly 13.4% of respondents identify as gig workers. Because the survey's job-type question was redesigned in 2022, we present this trend for two separate periods below.[9]

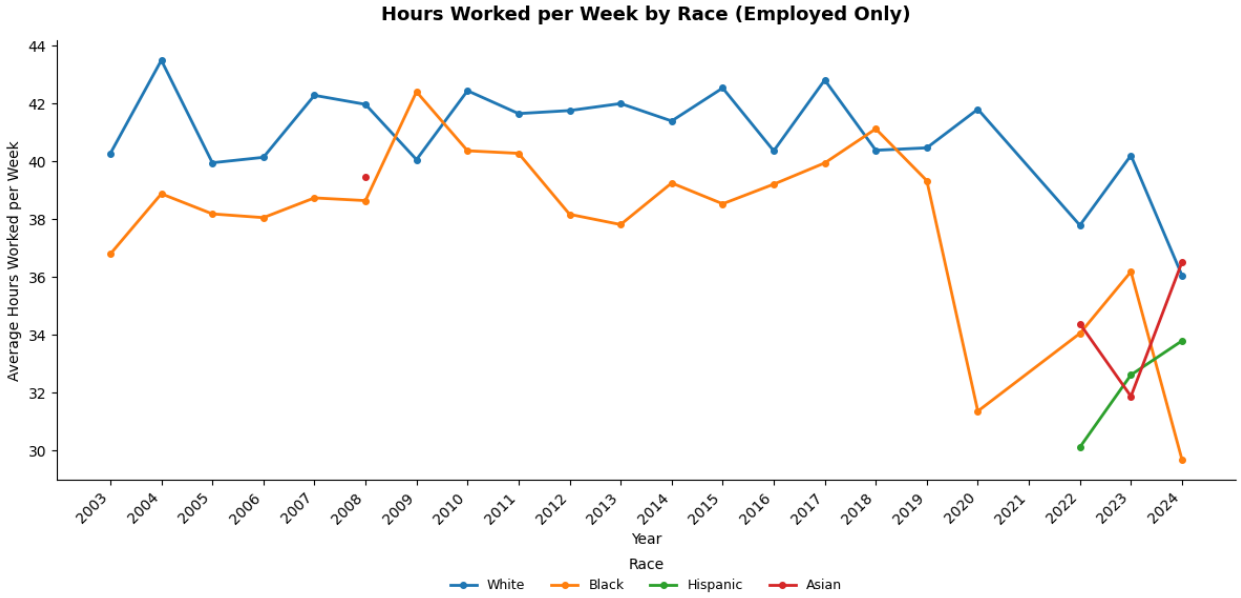
[9] Job type classifications changes are as following: Prior to 2022, categories were "Full-time, all year round," "Part-time, all year round," "Contract or on call," "Temporary," and "Seasonal or part year." Beginning 2022, the category "independent contractors" was specified to explicitly include "app workers," and the other categories were changed to "Direct employment/through an employer," "Temporarily Employed through an agency," "Self-employed (without employees)," and "Self-employed (with employees)." Trend lines are shown separately for each period, and cross-period comparisons should be interpreted with caution.



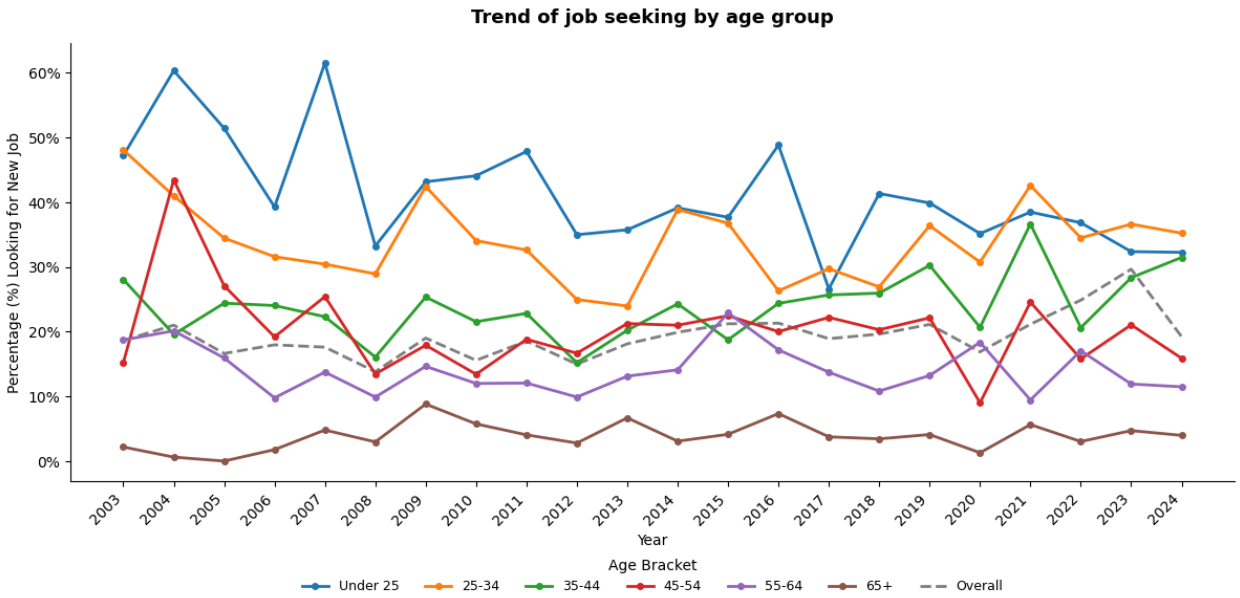
An examination of hours worked per week shows that overall, average hours worked remained relatively stable across all groups prior to 2020, hovering around 38–45 hours per week. Following the pandemic, however, working hours decreased across all education levels and racial groups, with average hours falling to approximately 28–38 hours by 2024.[10]

[10] The "No college degree" category in 2003 and the Hispanic category in 2009 and 2019 had fewer than 30 valid responses and are thus omitted from the graphs.





Regardless of job type, most workers are not actively looking for a new job, and overall, job-seeking decreased by 10.4% in 2024. Among those who are looking for a job, younger workers take up a larger proportion. Following the pandemic, however, there was a noticeable increase in job searching among workers aged 25–54, possibly reflecting elevated unemployment and broader labor market disruption during that period.



Limitations and Future Directions

Since several ESP survey questions (including household income (2024), job type (2022), union membership, and institutional trust) were redesigned during the report period, year-over-year comparison should be interpreted with some caution. Encouragingly, the overall sample size of the ESP has gone from 800 in 2003 to now over 2,600 today, and along with it, the Hispanic and Asian sample sizes have grown substantially. This increase should support more reliable subgroup analysis going forward. Future waves of the survey would benefit from maintaining consistent question wording and continuing to prioritize the representation of smaller demographic subgroups.

Conclusion and Implications

Taken together, the findings outlined in this report point to steps policymakers and organizational leaders can take to address the economic anxiety New York residents are experiencing. We know that real household income growth in New York State has slowed in recent years alongside particularly high inflation in 2021-2023, and this appears to have reshaped residents' concerns toward cost of living. Respondents' outlooks on their personal finances and the state economy have also grown more pessimistic, and have been associated with decreased trust in institutions. At the same time, the structure of work has shifted, with the rise of gig workers and a decline in average hours worked after the pandemic.

To help address these concerns, state policymakers can take measures to ensure the minimum wage aligns with living wage estimates, expand and strengthen programs that support basic needs like housing and childcare, and strengthen the unemployment insurance system to ensure that more

vulnerable individuals are eligible. It is also crucial to work with local and community leaders to address local-level issues.

Employers can also take steps to address residents' anxieties by working to provide cost of living adjustments that keep pace with inflation and exploring options to bolster benefits for things like childcare, transportation, and savings.

Given the lack of trust the data shows in institutions, businesses and local government should invest in transparency and communication initiatives to rebuild the public's trust. In addition, there is also a role the media can play to highlight the erosion of worker protections and counter the perception that hardship is the fault of the individual.

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Appendix A: U.S. Annual Inflation Rates, 2003–2026

Year	CPI (Annual Average)	Inflation Rate (%)
2003	184.000	-
2004	188.908	2.67
2005	195.267	3.37
2006	201.558	3.22
2007	207.344	2.87
2008	215.254	3.82
2009	214.565	-0.32
2010	218.076	1.64
2011	224.923	3.14
2012	229.586	2.07
2013	232.952	1.47
2014	236.715	1.62
2015	237.002	0.12
2016	240.005	1.27
2017	245.121	2.13
2018	251.000	2.44
2019	255.653	1.81
2020	258.856	1.25
2021	270.973	4.68
2022	292.626	7.99
2023	304.703	4.13
2024	313.698	2.95
2025	321.962	2.63
2026	330.145*	2.54

*January-May average only.

BLS, Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U), https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CPIAUCSL

Appendix B: Categorization of Survey Responses for "Most Important Issue Facing New York State"

Grouped category	Original categories
Economic Growth	Economic Growth (economy), State Economy
Taxes	Taxes (specify what type), State Taxes, Taxes
Other	Other (specify ...)
Health Care	Health Care Insurance/Costs, Health care
Government Budget/Accountability	State Budget, NYS budget, NYS Government (Accountability/Efficiency), NYS government
Safety	Gun control, Crime, Public Safety
Cost of Living	Housing (Affordability/Availability), Housing, Cost of Living, Cost of living (including inflation)
Economic Inequality	Economic inequality (including poverty), Wealth inequality (including poverty)