Millions of American food workers struggle to make ends meet in low-paying jobs. They have little hope of advancement in their field of work, and rarely receive healthcare benefits. They often go to work even when they are sick because they can’t afford to take time off and their employer doesn’t offer sick pay.

This is the bleak picture Advocacy group Food Chain Workers Alliance paints with their recent report based on a survey of more than 600 workers nationwide.

And the disturbing statistics are making headlines; from the LA Times article “Few American food industry workers treated well, report says” to the Mother Jones piece, “Only 13.5 percent of food workers earn a living wage.”

This number – 86 percent earning below a “living wage” is the focus of several news stories, as well as the introduction to the survey results.

“More than 86 percent of workers reported earning subminimum, poverty, and low wages, resulting in a sad irony: food workers face higher levels of food insecurity, or the inability to afford to eat, than the rest of the U.S. workforce.”

The Food Chain Workers Alliance considers a “living wage” to be 150 percent higher than the poverty level, with an average salary of more than $18 an hour.

“According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), the Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom unit in the United States is $959. A full-time food service worker, working 40 hours per week, would have to earn $18.25 an hour to afford the two-bedroom unit. Our survey data show that eight out of 10 food system workers sampled earn less than this.”

That’s more than I made as a temp. worker in New York City six years ago, and cheaper than the two-bedroom apartment I shared with a roommate in Brooklyn. Granted, I did not have children to support. But conversely, in my recent apartment search in Kansas City, I found many two-bedroom apartments available for less than $600.

Despite the perhaps unrealistic classification of a “living wage,” the anecdotes and other statistics the survey reveals still show many problematic situations. For example, 23 percent of those surveyed reported that they are paid below minimum wage, even though it is illegal. More than 80 percent had never received a promotion, and almost 80 percent do not have sick days or don’t know if they do.

Earning the industry average of $9 to $10 wouldn’t be so bad if there was the possibility of earning more in the future, and if the worker could be assured a positive working environment.


“Unfortunately, the majority of these workers take home crummy wages and few benefits, according to a new report from the Food Chain Workers Alliance. Perhaps most strikingly, among workers surveyed by the FCWA, only 13.5 percent made a liveable wage (an amount
FCWA defines as higher than 150 percent of the regional poverty level). And not a single agricultural worker of around the 90 surveyed said they earned enough to live on.”

“The Food Chain Workers Alliance survey results echo sobering realities about jobs across what the FCWA calls "the food chain": a vast network of laborers in the production, processing, and distribution of food. In 2011, the lowest-paying jobs nationwide, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, were combined food preparers and servers and fast food cooks; restaurant servers and hosts, farmworkers, baristas, and food preparers didn't trail far behind (and all made it in the bottom twenty).”


“A coalition of food labor groups” / put “livable wages” in quotes.

http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/breaking/ct-fast-food-workers-jun06,0,3795723.story

http://www.latimes.com/business/money/la-fi-mo-food-industry-workers-20120605,0,1730541.story

“Few American food industry workers are treated well, report says”


“Survey: Food workers face economic bind”

“ ‘The top-paid eight CEOs in the food system, after combining their salaries, stock options and benefits, earn $200 million, equal to what 10,300 food system workers earn,’ said Joann Lo, executive director of the Los Angeles organization. ‘So the money is there. They're just not spreading the wealth.’

Lo said she hopes the report will raise awareness about the plight of these workers at a time when consumer interest in where their food comes from is strong.

Philip Martin, a labor economist at UC Davis, has estimated that if field workers were paid 40 percent more — lifting them above the federal poverty line — the cost to consumers would only be about $15 more a year at the check-out stand, Lo said. ‘That's pretty negligible.’ ”


“More than 86 percent of workers reported earning subminimum, poverty, and low wages, resulting in a sad irony: food workers face higher levels of food insecurity, or the inability to afford to eat, than the rest of the U.S. workforce.”

-what’s truly a livable wage? ($960 a month is not the cost of a 2 bedroom apartment everywhere)
-sponsored and conducted by an interest group

-perhaps the survey is more legitimate because workers may have felt freer talking to people they knew were working for their benefit

-but still the survey reveals a big section of the population working in subpar conditions. The numbers speak for themselves.

And none of the 90 agriculture workers surveyed said they earned enough money to live on.???

- 23 percent of those surveyed received below minimum wage.
- 81 percent never received a promotion
- 79 percent do not have sick days or don’t know if they do
- 83 percent don’t receive health insurance from their employer
- 57 percent were injured on the job or developed a health problem due to their work

Only 13.5 percent of food industry workers receive a “living wage,” according to a survey released yesterday by the advocacy group Food Chain Workers Alliance.

Members of the alliance conducted the survey, speaking with more than 600 workers nationwide. Those surveyed worked in all areas of the food industry, from agriculture to restaurants.

The online introduction to the survey calls the statistic “a sad irony” because food workers often have difficulty being able to afford the very food they work with. According to the survey, 13.78 percent of food workers are on food stamps, compared to 8.32 percent of all workers in the country.

Other statistics from the survey include:

- 81 percent never received a promotion
- 79 percent do not have sick days or don’t know if they do
- 83 percent don’t receive health insurance from their employer
- 57 percent were injured on the job or developed a health problem due to their work

It’s important to note the potential for bias in the research; the survey was conducted by an advocacy group with the intent of promoting worker rights. But it could be argued that the workers interviewed might have felt more comfortable telling the truth of their situation to someone they knew had their best interests at heart.
Millions of Americans struggle to make ends meet in low-paying jobs. They have little hope of advancement in their field of work, and rarely receive healthcare benefits. They often go to work even when they are sick because they can’t afford to take time off and their employer doesn’t offer sick pay.

It’s a well-known problem that has no easy answers.