

The State of Labor in New Jersey

A Profile of Organized Labor in the Garden State

A Report from the Labor Education Action Research Network

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Executive Summary

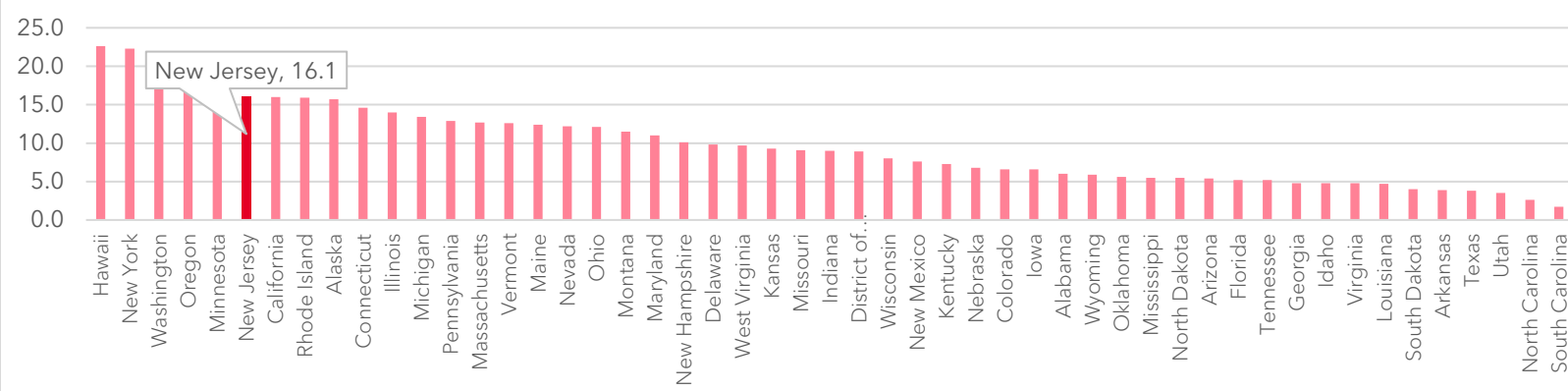
Key Findings

- **New Jersey's unionization rate currently stands at 16.09% based on the 2019-21 average.** Our findings show that overall unionization among all workers in the state grew by 0.66% from the 14 months prior to the onset of COVID to the 21 months after the COVID shutdown (March 2020).
- **Public sector union members continue to comprise a majority of NJ union members,** and their share of union membership has grown since the last edition of this report (2018).
- There appears to be a **blue collar-white collar divide** when looking at unionization trends in the public vs. private sector. Most private sector union members are located in production occupations, while most public sector union members are found in professional occupations.
- Public administration (52%), transportation and utilities (33%), education and health services (29%), and construction (24%) are the most highly unionized industries in New Jersey.
- Education instruction and library (53%), protective service (48%), installation, maintenance and repair (33%), and production (25%) occupations are the most highly unionized occupations in the state.
- Similar to national trends, **Black workers remain more likely to be union members than white and other non-white workers.** Black men have the highest union density among all workers in the state, and they made the highest gains in unionization during the pandemic. Private sector union membership remains slightly more diverse than in the public sector.
- **Black workers experienced a decline in union density over the course of the pandemic.** In particular, Black women—who have the highest union density among female workers—saw declines in unionization by over 3% during the pandemic.
- **Women declined as a share of both public and private union members during the pandemic.** Having previously reached a majority of all union members in 2019, pandemic employment declines among women seemed to push women into a minority status as a share of union members.
- The pandemic caused a slight decline in union density among parents, but this was driven almost exclusively by a decline in unionization of mothers. **Union density among mothers fell by almost 2% while fathers and non-parents gained density during the pandemic**
- On average, full-time unionized workers in the state make 10% more in wages than non-unionized workers. **Hispanic and Black workers as well as women reap some of the greatest economic benefits from having a union in their workplace.**

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Figure 1. Total Union Density (%) by U.S. State



Union density in the United States in 2021 is only a fraction of what it was in the years immediately following World War II. Organized labor hit its highwater mark when 35% of workers belonged to a union in 1953. Today just 10.3% of all workers are unionized in the US, with the rate even lower in the private sector—just 6.1%. Public sector workers have fared better and maintain a unionization rate of 33.9% nationally. Looking at Figure 1, we can see that New Jersey workers have maintained higher unionization rates than most other states, with total union density at 16.1%—making it the sixth most unionized state in the U.S.⁴

The current report will explore recent trends in unionization in the state of New Jersey. Unlike previous State of Labor reports issued by LEARN, this report captures a tumultuous period in the U.S. labor market—the year leading up to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the year immediately following its onset. Unemployment during this period reached levels that were higher than the Great Recession of 2008-2012. In the wake of the pandemic, many workers in essential industries have refused to accept what they have deemed to be inadequate jobs, or they have opted to exit the labor market all together. Citing health and safety concerns, low pay, and a lack of respect, workers who remained in the labor force have initiated organizing drives in service and retail industries at levels not seen in recent history. Yet still others with already unionized shops have opted to engage in work stoppages to achieve much-needed wage gains during a period of exceptionally high inflation.

To capture some of the effects of the pandemic on unionization, this report uses a series of data comprised of the 24 months starting in January 2019 and ending in December 2021.⁵ This approach provides a large enough sample to look at the overall trends in unionization across the entire period as well as to make comparisons of the period immediately preceding and immediately following the COVID shutdown which began in March of 2021. As with previous State of Labor reports, data is drawn from the U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS) Outgoing Rotation Group data. The report will outline unionization rates, union wage premiums, and changes pre- to post-COVID for various groups of workers, including by sector, industry, occupation, and demographic characteristics.⁶

UNIONIZATION BY SECTOR

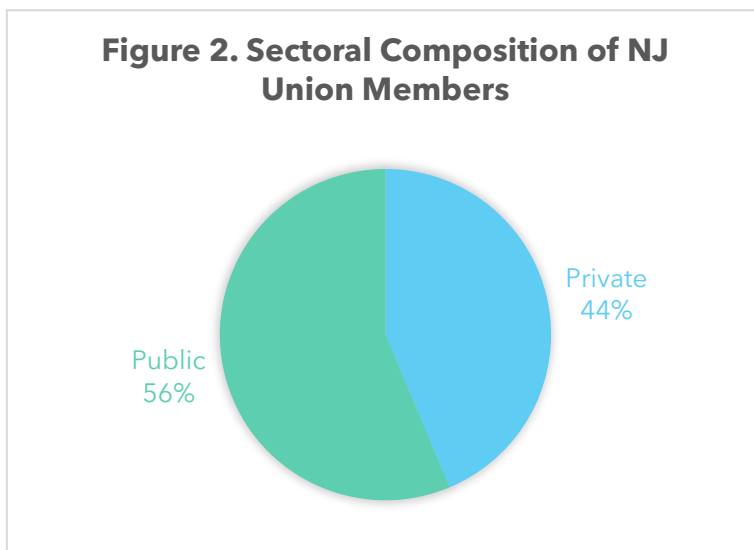
Table 1 presents the unionization rates of New Jersey workers across all sectors as well as by each individual sector. As we can see, the overall “total” union density for the state of New Jersey in the years 2019-2021 is 16.09%, about 6% higher than the U.S. average. Union density within the private sector is also higher in New Jersey than the national average but is still just 8.3%. Similar to trends in the U.S. as a whole, unionization rates in New Jersey are considerably higher in the public sector than in the private sector, although this distinction is more pronounced in New Jersey than at the national level. Nationally, union density in the public sector is more than five times the density of private sector workers;¹ in New Jersey public sector density is more than eight times the rate of private sector density. Total public sector density, consisting of federal, state, and local workers is 59.63% in New Jersey. Looking more closely at the public sector, we can see that federal employees in New Jersey are unionized at 38.89%, state workers at 58.99%, and local/municipal workers at 63.72%—patterns that have not changed much since the last report.

Table 1. NJ Union Density by Sector, 2019-2021

	2019-21	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID	Change
Total	16.09	15.74	16.4	+0.66
Private Sector	8.3	8.07	8.5	+0.43
Public Sector: Total	59.63	57.89	61.22	+3.33
Public Sector: Federal	38.89	39.68*	38.27*	-1.41*
Public Sector: State	58.99	58.38	59.51	+1.13
Public Sector: Local	63.72	60.61	66.75	+6.14

Note: estimates denoted with * should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100

Despite the higher union density in the public sector, the private sector labor force remains significantly larger, accounting for nearly 85% of all employed workers in the state. Reflective of this difference in size, Figure 2 reveals that about 56% of all union members in NJ are public sector workers and 44% are private sector workers. A similar trend exists nationally where a slim majority of union members come from the public sector despite its much higher unionization rate than the private sector.



¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022, January 22). Union members summary. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>.

COVID-19 Effects on Unionization by Sector

The COVID-19 pandemic and the related economic shutdowns required to slow the spread of the disease had enormous impacts on labor markets across the U.S. Many industries switched to remote work, others experienced mass layoffs, while others still that were deemed “essential” witnessed high rates of exposure, illness, and even death—disproportionately among low wage workers and workers of color. The trends were similar in New Jersey and not only impacted levels of employment but also rates of unionization.

Overall, union membership in the state experienced a small uptick over the past few years, due in part to the “denominator decline” effect brought on by pandemic-related employment reductions.² Figure 3 shows that union density in the state now stands at slightly over 16% of the workforce, jumping over half a percentage point during the pandemic. The private sector experienced a slightly smaller gain, rising by about 0.4% pre-COVID to post-COVID, now standing at 8.5% of the private sector workforce.

Figure 3. Pandemic Changes in NJ Union Density

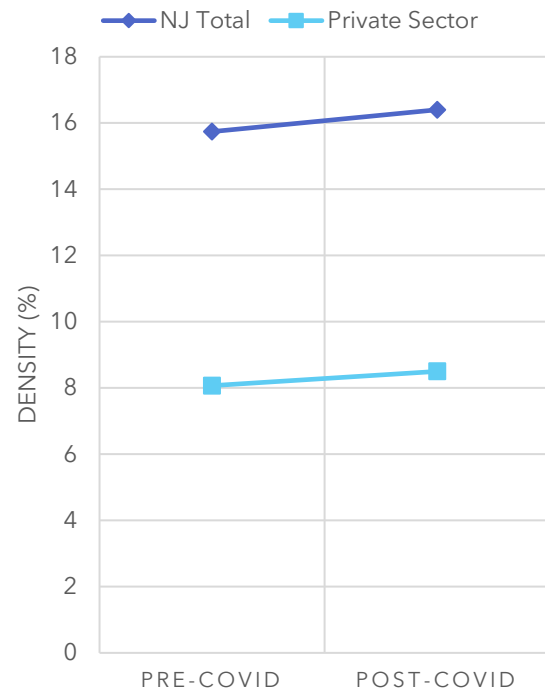
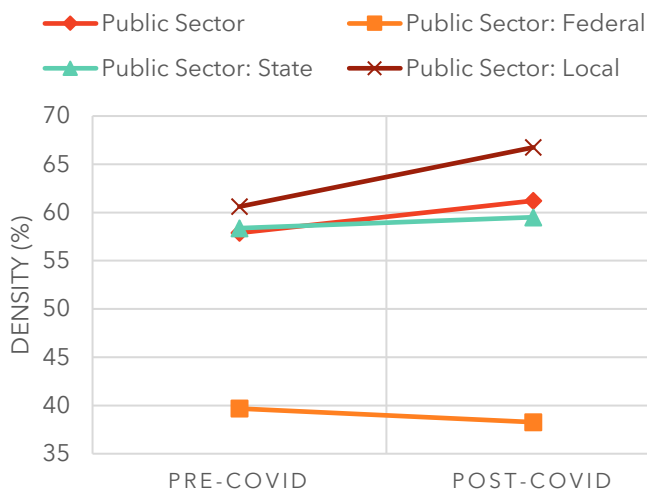


Figure 4. Pandemic Changes In NJ Public Sector Union Density



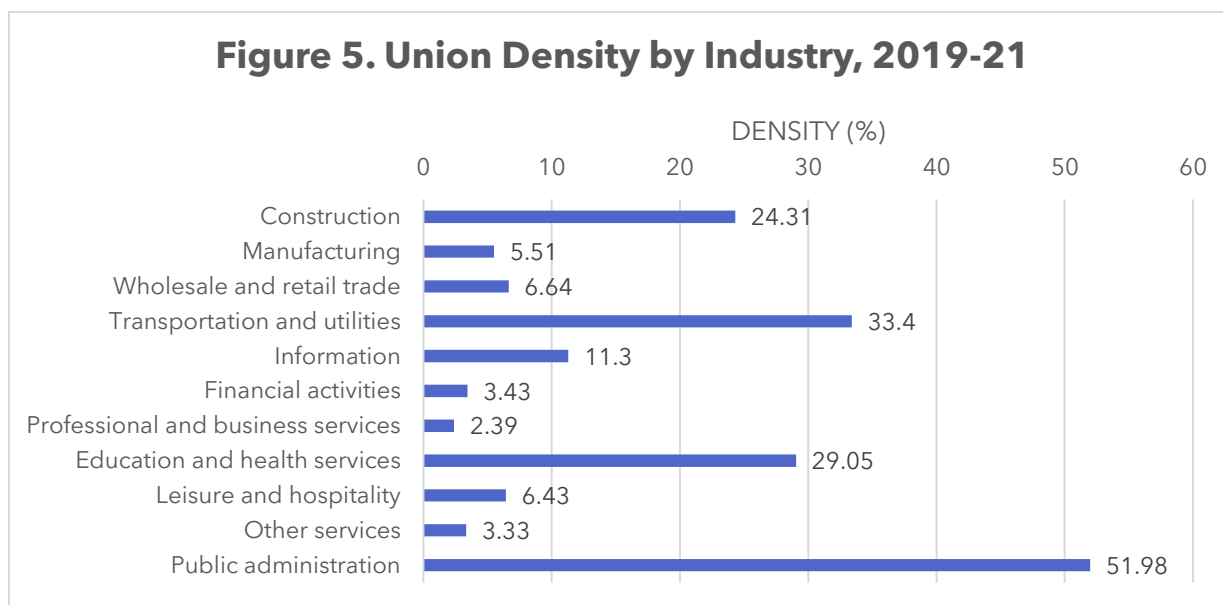
Note: Federal projections derived from potentially non-representative samples

In the public sector, even larger gains in union density were made. Figure 4 shows that overall union density in the public sector rose by over 3% from the period before to the period after COVID and seemed to be significantly driven by a 6% increase in union density of public sector workers at the local/municipal level. State-level public sector workers also saw an increase in their union density by over 1%. Federal workers in the state seemed to experience a slight decline, although it is important to underscore that federal worker estimates should be read with caution due to the small sample size.

² McNicholas, C., Shierholz, H., & Poydock, M. (2021, January 22). “Union workers had more job security during the pandemic, but unionization remains historically low.” *Economic Policy Institute*. <https://files.epi.org/pdf/218638.pdf>.

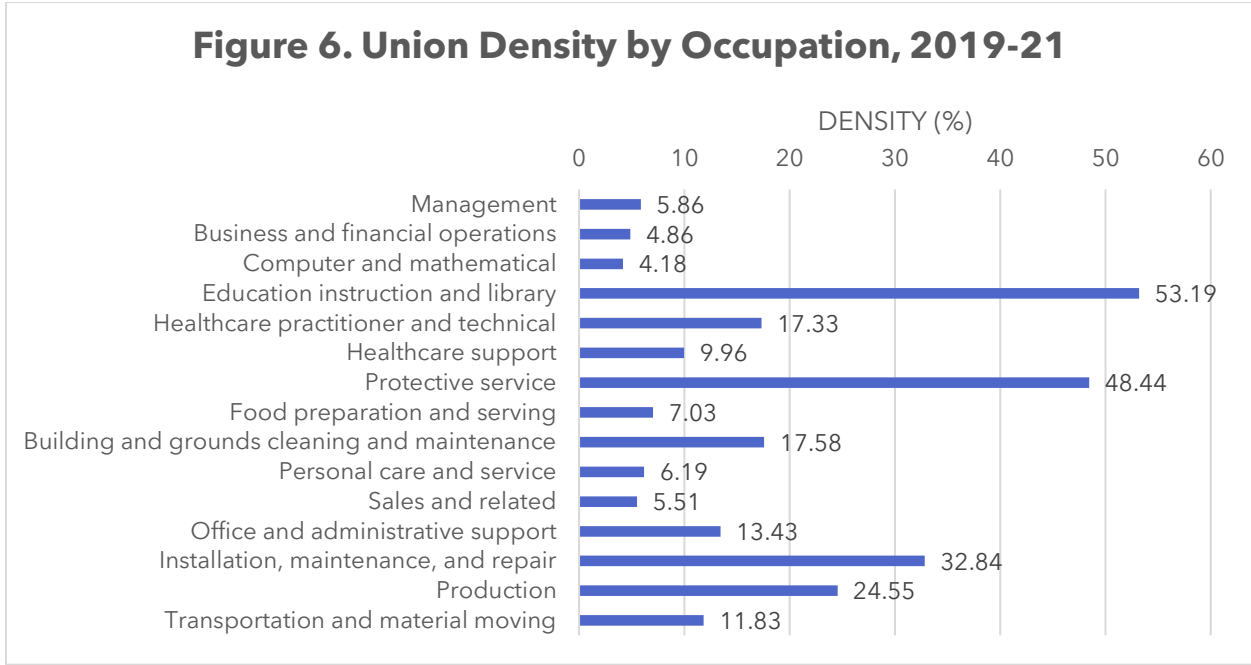
UNIONIZATION BY INDUSTRY & OCCUPATION

A central question that has plagued the labor movement for decades is how to organize the currently unorganized. Answering this question involves examining a lot of factors, but it ultimately requires understanding what industries and occupations are under-represented by unions, as well as the current footholds labor has that could be leveraged to reach these workers. Looking at all sectors, Figure 5 shows that public administration, transportation and utilities, and education and health services are New Jersey's most highly unionized industries. Some of the least union-dense industries in NJ include professional and business services, other services, and financial activities.



On a more granular level, we can also see similar trends when looking at union density by occupation. Figure 6 (on the next page) shows that education instruction and library, and protective service occupations both have about 50% union density, and these occupations are primarily comprised of public sector workers. These two occupations also have the highest union density at the national level.³ Installation, maintenance, and repair, and production occupations also have about a quarter to one third of workers organized into unions in New Jersey—occupations located mostly in the private sector. Occupations including computer and mathematical, business and financial, and sales and related currently have some of the lowest levels of union density in the state, tracking closely with national trends. Overall, eight occupations in New Jersey have a density level that is higher than the national average and six are higher than the state average. Seven occupations have a density level lower than 10%.

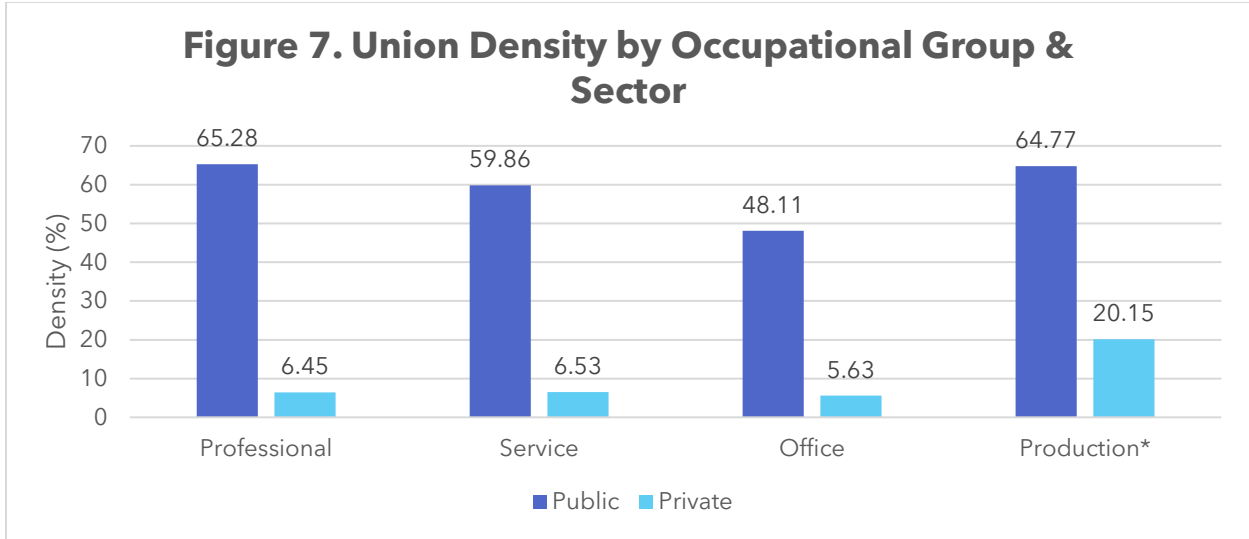
³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022, January 22). Union members summary. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>.



Grouping together occupations based on broader characteristics, we can gain better insights on what types of occupations union members are located in, as well as pandemic trends in these distributions. Table 2 displays how we combined similar types of occupations into broader groups in order to understand changes over time during the pandemic.

Table 2. Occupational Groups

Occupational Group	Constituent Occupations
Production	Construction and extraction Installation, maintenance, and repair Production Transportation and material moving
Service	Healthcare support Protective service Food preparation and serving related Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance Personal care and service
Office	Sales and related Office and administrative support
Professional	Business and financial operations Computer and mathematical Architecture and engineering Life, physical, and social science Community and social service Legal Education instruction and library Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media Healthcare practitioner and technical
Management (public sector only)	Management



*Management and production groups estimates in the public sector should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100

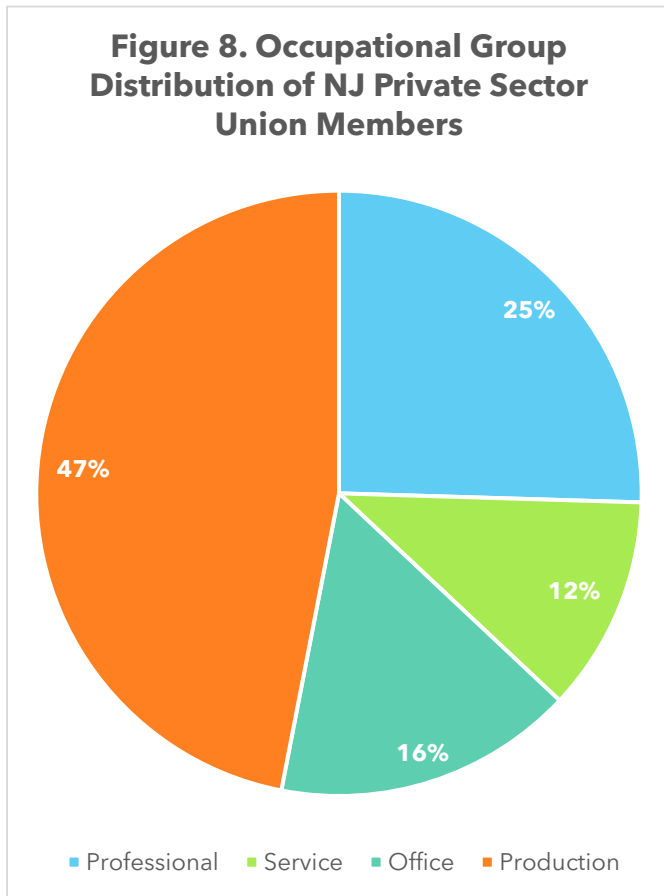
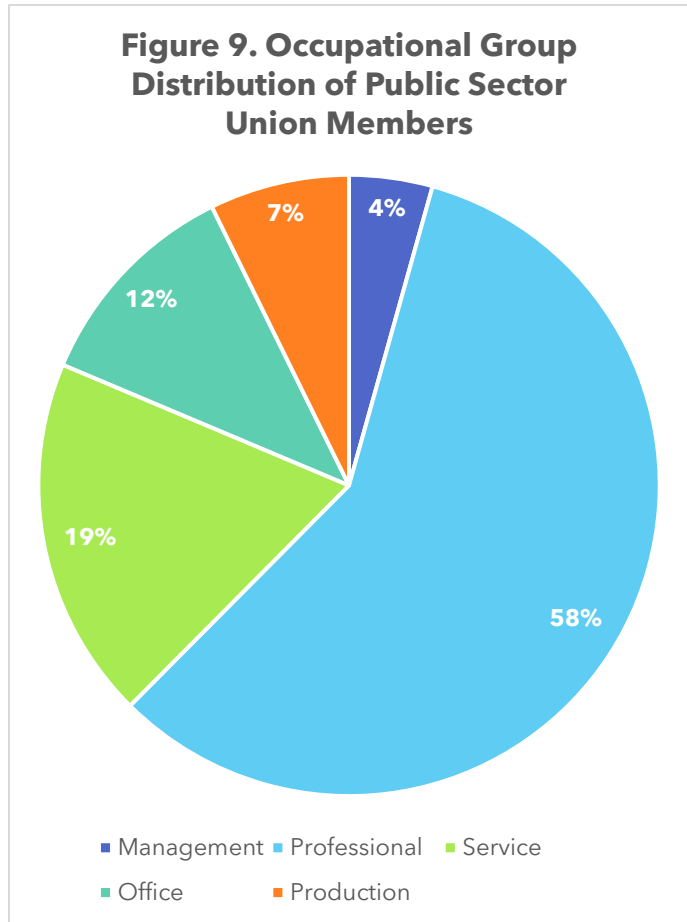


Figure 7 displays density among these occupational groups. As we can see, production occupations have the highest density (20.15%) in the private sector, while professional occupations have the highest density in the public sector. Management occupations have a lower density in the public sector than other occupations—there are no data for the private sector due to legal restrictions on the right to organize.

In terms of the distribution of union members within these occupational groups, the “blue/white collar divide” seems to align with the public and private sector division among union members. Figure 8 shows that most private sector union members are found in production (47%) and professional occupations (25%), while Figure 9 on the following page shows that a vast majority of public sector union members are found in professional (58%) occupations and service (19%) occupations.

While overall support for unions has grown during the pandemic,⁴ numerous scholars have noted how the over-representation of professional government workers in the public sector have contributed to new lines of attack against public sector unions. In his book, *What Unions No Longer Do*, sociologist Jake Rosenfeld argues that the near-complete absence of private sector unions in the U.S. is a large factor in why the labor movement (and any kind of liberal-labor coalition that still exists) is relatively impotent in fighting back against the increasingly virulent attacks against unions from the conservative right. Public sector workers are generally more educated, more politically engaged, and more likely to vote for Democrats, even before they form or join unions. As labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein argues, “they are a Democratic party constituency, but unionism per se had little to do with it.”⁵ These factors could play an important role in shaping the future of the NJ labor movement, especially as we continue to live through a period of extreme polarization.



The history of private sector unionism shows how union membership has had a much more profound impact on the political outlook of these workers, and the gradual decline of unions in the private sector has provided an increasingly large constituency of private sector workers for the right to exploit and turn against their counterparts in the public sector. In many ways, the Christie administration provided a model for how conservative forces can exploit divisions in the state labor movement for their own anti-union agenda. While Christie was able to secure support from a number of private sector unions with the promise of increased job creation, he went on the offensive against public sector unions, particularly teachers’ unions.⁶ Overall, the continued protection of labor’s largest current foothold in the state (public sector unions) seems largely dependent on whether or not NJ unions are able to make in-roads in the private sector and overcome any existing divisions between unions in both sectors.

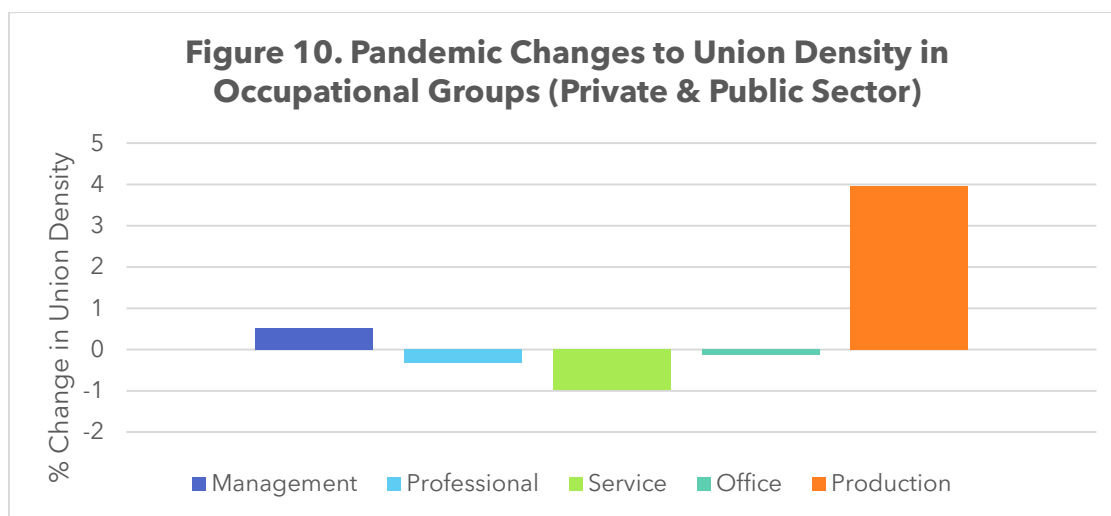
⁴ Brenan, M. (2021, September 17). Approval of labor unions at highest point since 1965. *Gallup*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/354455/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx>.

⁵ Lichtenstein, N. (2002). *State of the union: A century of American labor*. Princeton University Press.

⁶ Murphy, J. P., Strothers, A. S., & Lugg, C. A. (2017). Jersey-style neoliberalism: Governor Christopher Christie, crony capitalism, and the politics of K-12 Education. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92(1), 115–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1265339>.

COVID-19 Effects on Unionization by Industry & Occupation

Grouping together both private and public sectors, we can see that union density growth in production occupations may be a significant driver in the overall growth of NJ union density during the pandemic, which should be explored further. A variety of factors could be at play here. On the one hand, workers in critical industries during the pandemic may have had more relative job security than other parts of the workforce. On the other hand, private sector union density, while low, is still primarily confined to production occupations. In this way, potential job losses in these industries may have inflated the density of union workers, who were most likely protected from layoffs by strong collective bargaining agreements, or at the very least the ability to negotiate to minimize job loss. Overall, Figure 10 shows that the production group’s union density grew by nearly 4% pre-COVID to post-COVID, while professional, service, and office occupational groups declined by less than 1% each. Interestingly, we observed a slight uptick in management union density—about half a percentage point gain during the pandemic. This uptick may largely be driven by the public sector, where supervisor organizing rights tend to be less restricted than in the private sector under the National Labor Relations Act.



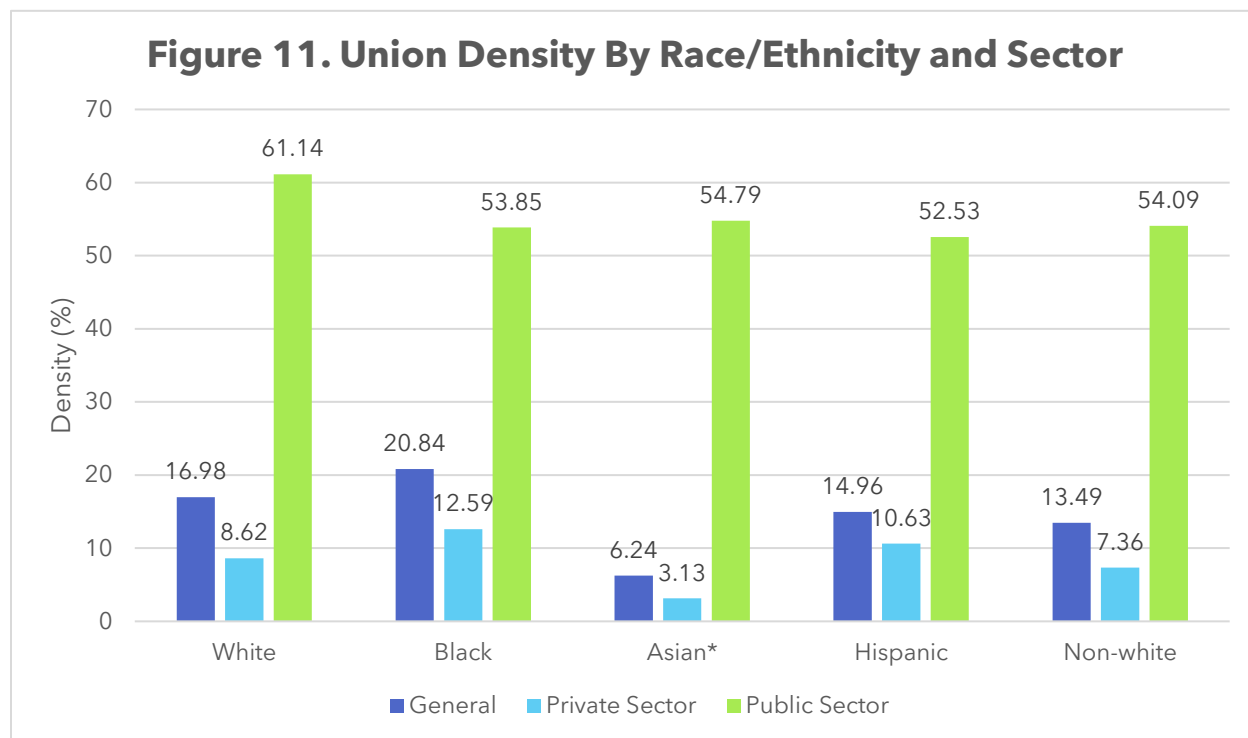
UNIONIZATION BY DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Since the last issue of this report, the racial uprisings of the summer of 2020 have brought into sharper focus the institutional inequalities in the labor market along the lines of race and gender, and unions are by no means immune to these forces. While the history of the U.S. labor movement includes many instances of racism, misogyny, and exclusivity, there are also many examples of unions engaging in anti-racist, feminist, pro-immigrant, and other social justice work. New evidence also points to a direct correlation between falling union membership and the rise in white racial resentment politics in recent

decades.⁷ Understanding trends in the racial and demographic characteristics of NJ unions, particularly during the pandemic, is key to ensuring that the state’s labor movement is answering calls for racial and gender justice and building a more inclusive multiracial working-class movement.

Among major race/ethnicity groups, Figure 11 shows that Black workers in NJ continue to have the highest union density compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Moreover, Black union density in the state is almost *double* the 2021 national average of 11.5%.⁸ Hispanic workers in the Garden State also outperform their national average of 9%. In the private sector, both Black and Hispanic workers have higher union density than white workers, and non-white workers from other racial and ethnic categories trail closely behind white workers. However, in the public sector, these positive diversity trends get effectively reversed. White workers in the public sector have the highest union density among any racial/demographic group, outperforming most other categories by 6-8%.

This is a particularly interesting dynamic; especially as public sector unions are some of New Jersey’s largest. One would imagine that strong anti-discrimination and civil service protections in public sector hiring would create a more diverse workforce from which to organize from. However, our analysis of 2019-21 data shows that white workers (as well as Asian workers) are slightly overrepresented in the state’s public sector, while Black workers are slightly underrepresented compared to the total workforce. Other factors could include the racial concentration of workers in particular occupations, such as educators vs. municipal workers. However, even demographic differences in the workforce



* Asian public sector estimates should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100.

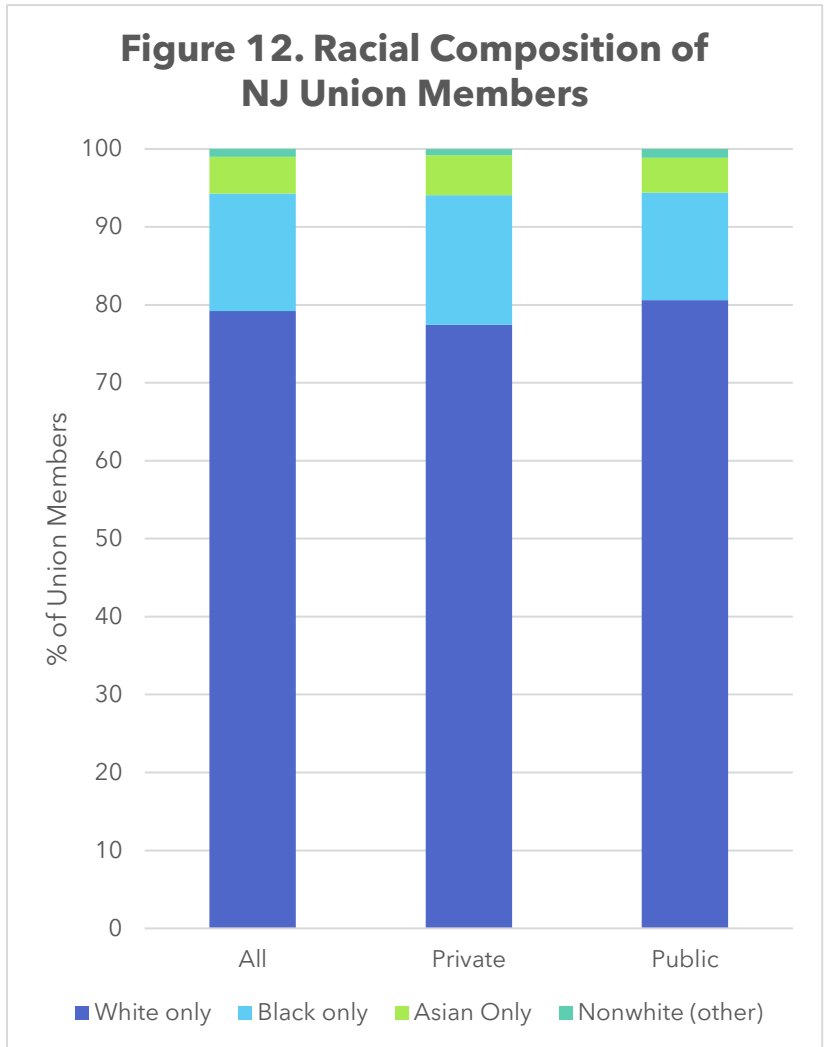
⁷ Frymer, & Grumbach, J. M. (2021). Labor unions and white racial politics. *American Journal of Political Science*, 65(1), 225–240. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12537>.

⁸ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022, January 22). Union members summary. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>.

do not fully explain why non-white workers seem less likely to be unionized than white workers. These results should be further explored by both researchers and public sector unions in the state.

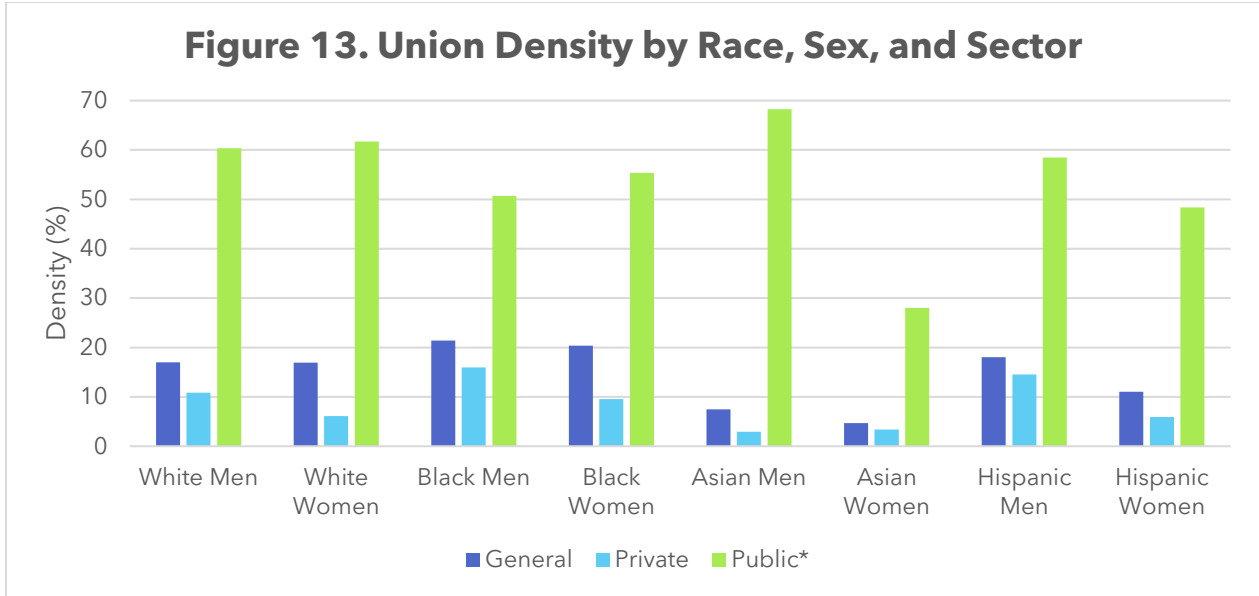
The racial union density statistics also reflect the trend in the racial composition of union members. As seen in Figure 12, while Black workers comprise a little over 11% of the total workforce, they make up 15% of all union members and nearly 17% of union members in the private sector. However, their share of public sector union membership stands at less than 14%. Non-white workers are more represented in public sector unions than in private sector unions, while Asian workers are slightly less.

Taking a more intersectional look at union density, Figure 13 shows union density by race/ethnicity, sex, and sector. The dark blue bars represent overall union density while the light blue are for private sector and the green are public sector, respectively. Looking at overall trends, we can see some variation in density across the sectors by demographic characteristics, but overall, the public sector remains more highly unionized than the private sector for all categories of workers.



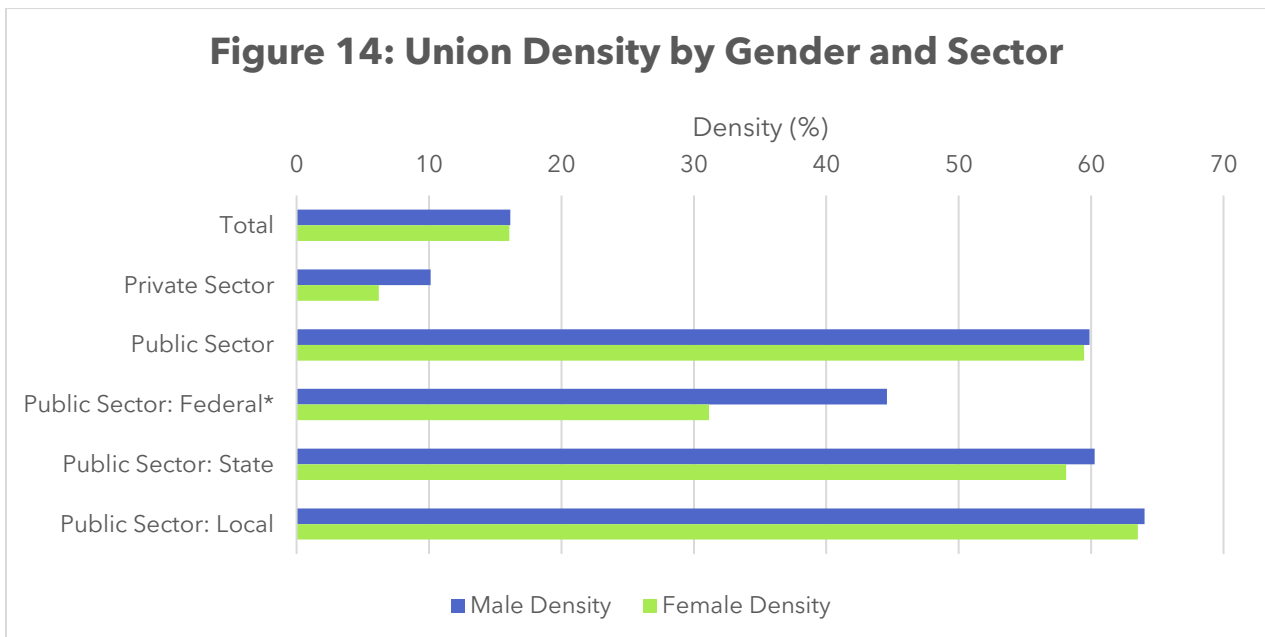
Looking more closely, we can see that Black men have the highest levels of union density in the private sector (15.97%) and among all sectors (21.41%). Black women trail closely behind in their density among all sectors (20.36%), but these women have only 9.5% density in the private sector. Hispanic men are also closely behind Black men in terms of density in the private sector, standing at 14.53% and among all sectors (18.04%). We see the lowest levels of union density among all sectors in Asian women (4.68%), and Asian men have the lowest levels of union density in the private sector (2.93%).

The public sector density statistics discussed above are also reflected in the race and gender breakdowns here, although it is difficult to make concrete conclusions, as most of the public sector tabulations listed here are potentially non-representative given the narrower samples. We can say that white women and white men both lead in union density in the public sector. In addition, while Black women outperform white women in density in the private sector, the reverse is the case in the public sector.



Note: *Public sector estimates for Black men, Asian men, Asian women, Hispanic men, and Hispanic women should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100

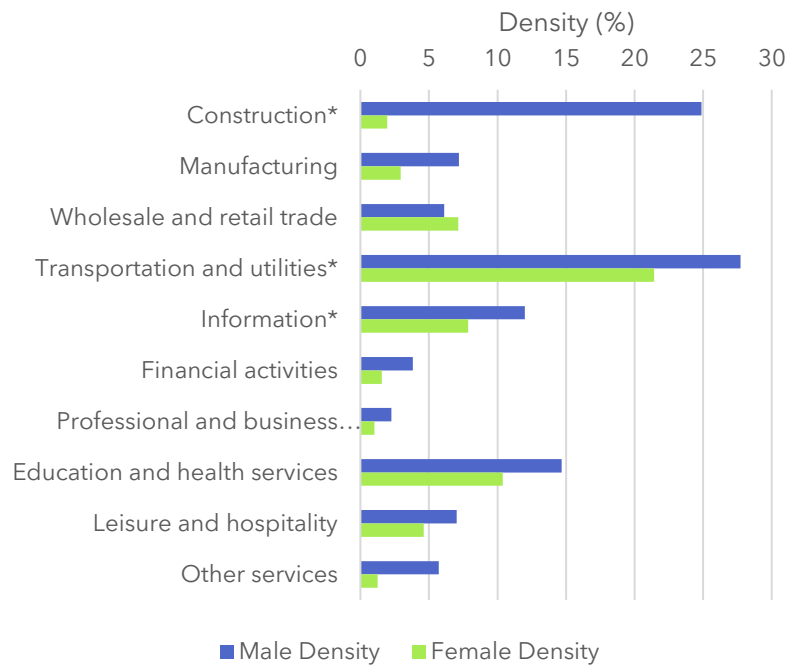
Union density by gender, displayed below in Figure 14, shows that men and women are roughly even in terms of their overall union density. However, male density in the private sector continues to outpace female density. Men slightly outpace women in terms of union density in the public sector, particularly at the federal level. However, as seen in the next section, these advantages seem to be largely driven by gains made during the pandemic. While female union density has been steady or slightly up during the pandemic, male union density has increased at more rapid rates in both the public and private sectors.



*Federal public sector estimates for both men and women should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100.

Reflecting the overall union density picture in private sector industries, Figure 15 shows that men outpace women in union density across almost all private sector industries except wholesale and retail trade. Interestingly, we can see a fairly significant density advantage for men in the education and health services industry. However, looking at the density of *public sector* education and health services workers specifically, we can see a significantly different picture. Figure 16 shows how public sector women have much higher union density than men in this industry, at both the state and local level, where women have a very impressive 84.86% union density.

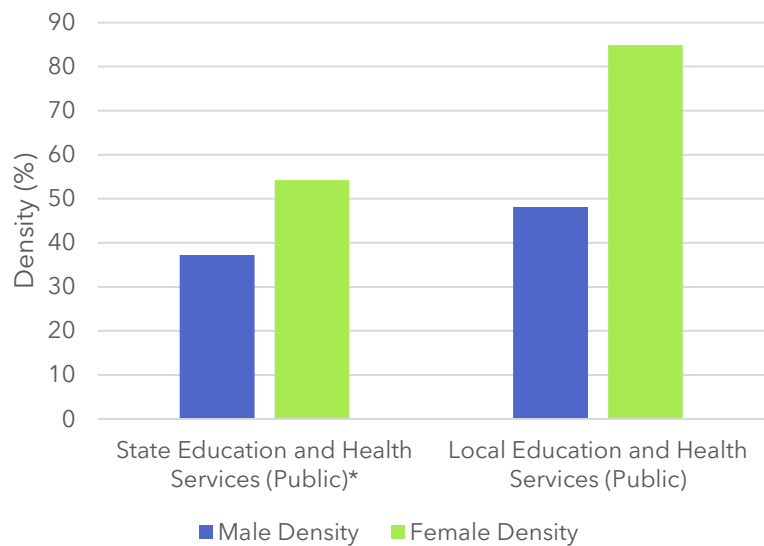
Figure 15. Union Density by Gender in Private Sector Industries



*Female estimates in construction, transportation and utilities, and information should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100.

In terms of the distribution of union members in private sector industries, we can see trends that reflect the long history of gender segregation of employment in particular industries. In Figure 17 on the next page, we can see that male union members are located primarily in construction and transportation and utilities industries. In contrast, over half of unionized women in the private sector are located in education and health services. Wholesale and retail trade also remains a prominent industry for female union members. These distributions may also point to why male union members overtook women both in terms of density and as a share of all union members during the pandemic. From the sectoral data, we know that

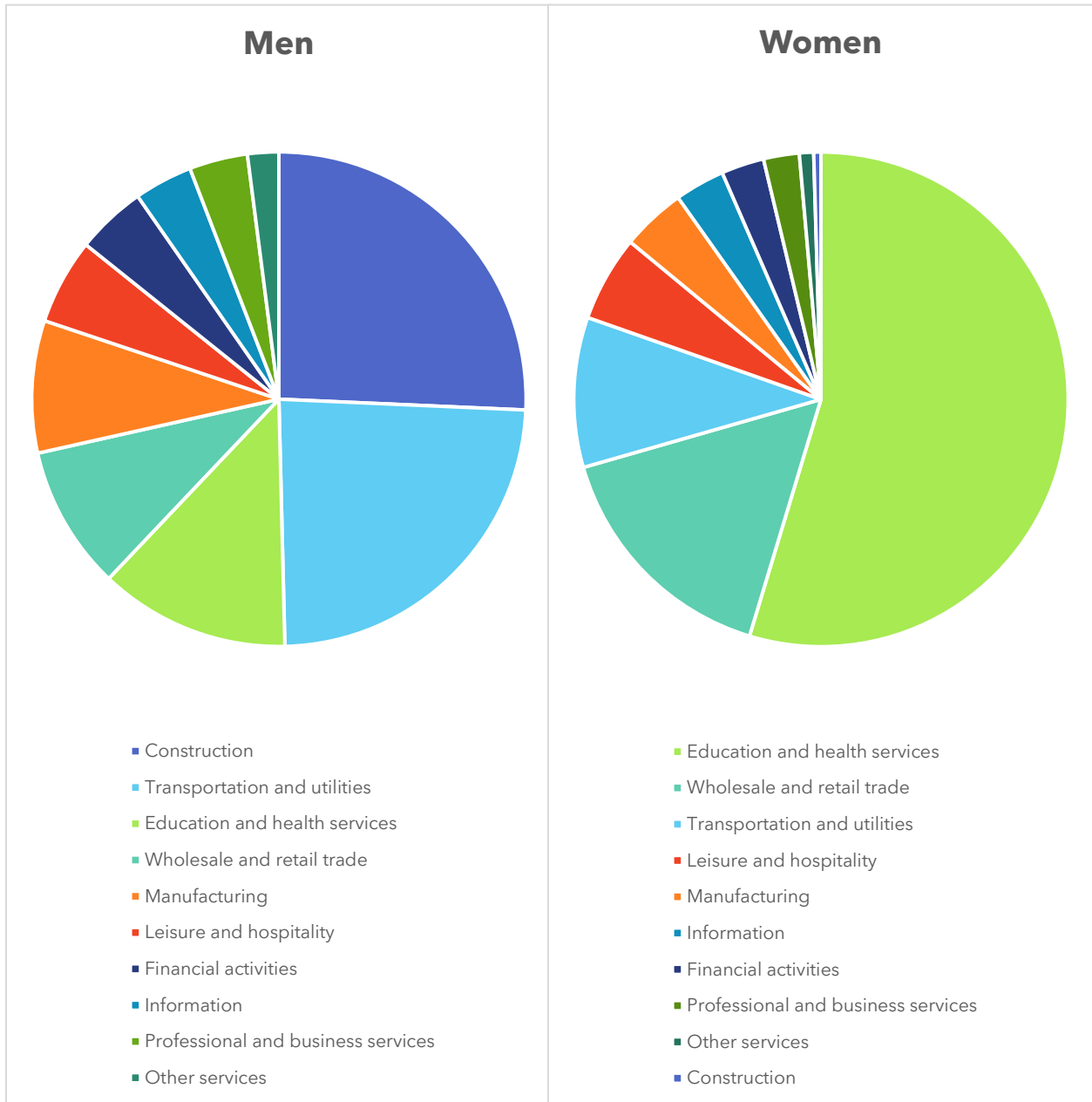
Figure 16. Union Density of Public Sector Education and Health Services Workers by Gender at the State and Local Levels



*Male estimates at the state level should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100.

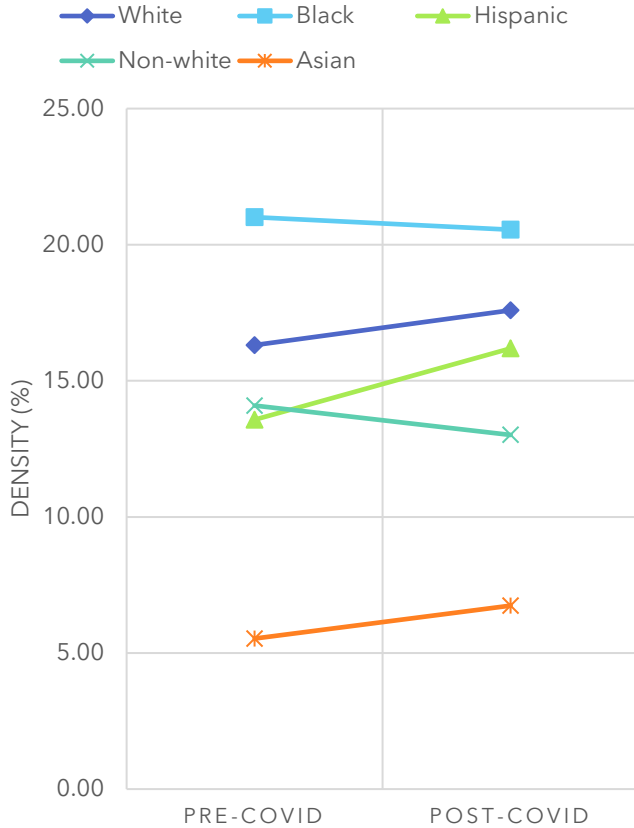
production-related occupations grew significantly in union density during COVID-19, and this includes the top two industries for male union members. Overall, it seems clear that the occupational landscape in the state remains quite gendered, and that has hurt female union membership during the pandemic.

Figure 17. Distribution of Union Members by Gender in Private Sector Industries in NJ



COVID-19 Effects on Unionization by Demographic Characteristics

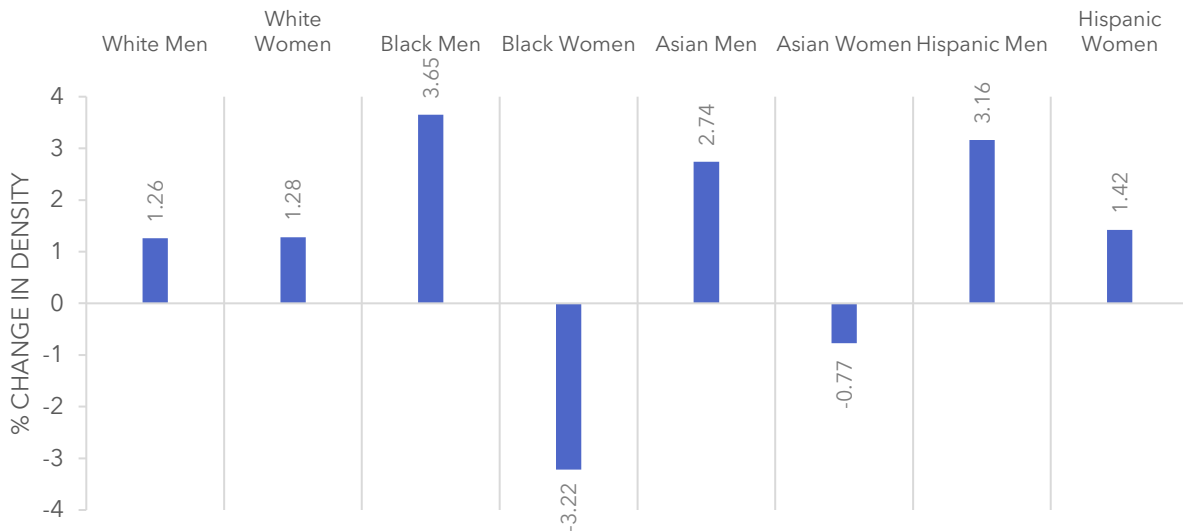
Figure 18. Pandemic Change in Union Density by Race/Ethnicity



In addition to demographic differences in union density and characteristics, we also observed fairly significant differences in how the pandemic impacted unionization within different demographics. Looking at changes in union density during the pandemic, Figure 18 shows that both Black and non-white workers saw declines in union density, while white and Asian workers gained in union density by over 1%. Impressively, Hispanic workers saw a gain in unionization by nearly 3% pre-COVID to post-COVID. This bucked national trends which showed that Hispanic workers lost ground in union density by about 1% between 2020 and 2021.

Understanding these changes from an intersectional standpoint, we can see some interesting trends. One important finding shown in Figure 19 is that the slight decline in Black union membership during the pandemic seems to be largely driven by unionization declines in Black women

Figure 19. Pandemic Changes in Union Density by Race/Ethnicity & Gender



workers. Black male and female union density effectively went in opposite directions during the pandemic, with Black men gaining density by 3.65% and Black women declining in union density by 3.22%—the largest decline among all categories. Among all race and gender categories, Black men and Hispanic men seemed to have the largest gains in density during the pandemic.

In terms of pandemic changes to the racial composition of the labor movement in NJ, Figure 20 highlights declines in both Black and white workers in unions but gains by non-white workers. In other words, while the share of Black workers in unions declined during the pandemic, union membership did not necessarily become less diverse. Asian sample sizes here were too small to provide any accurate comparisons.

As described in the previous section, while men currently outpace women in terms of union density in the state, this seems largely driven by the pandemic. According to national BLS data, while the number of individual male union members remained steady last year, the number of unionized women declined by nearly 200,000 nationally.⁹ In this way, raw losses in unionized women may have exceeded any relative gain that women’s union density would have received from the broader contraction in the workforce during the pandemic. Figure 21 shows how, despite women leading men in union density pre-pandemic in both total union density and public sector density, they are now roughly even in with men total density and trail male density by about 3% in the public sector.

Figure 20. Pandemic Changes in Racial Composition of Union Members

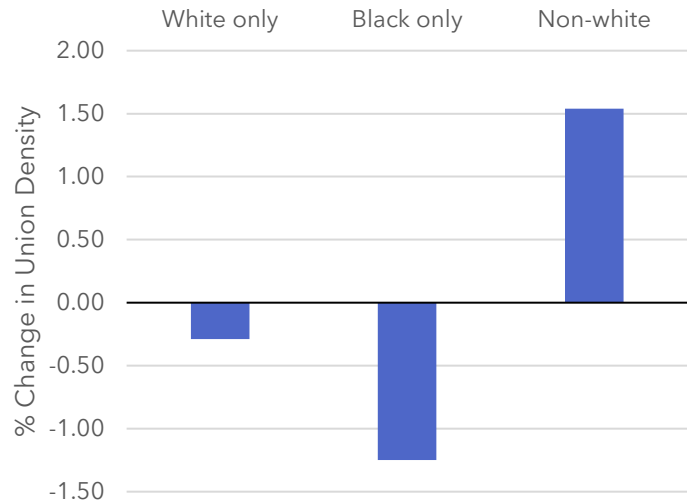
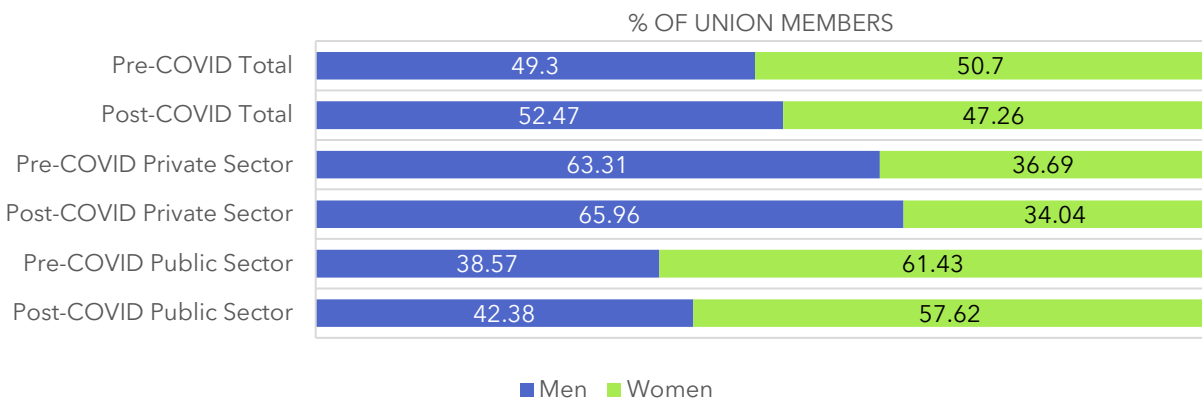


Figure 21. Pandemic Changes to Union Density by Gender



⁹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022, January 22). Union members summary. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>.

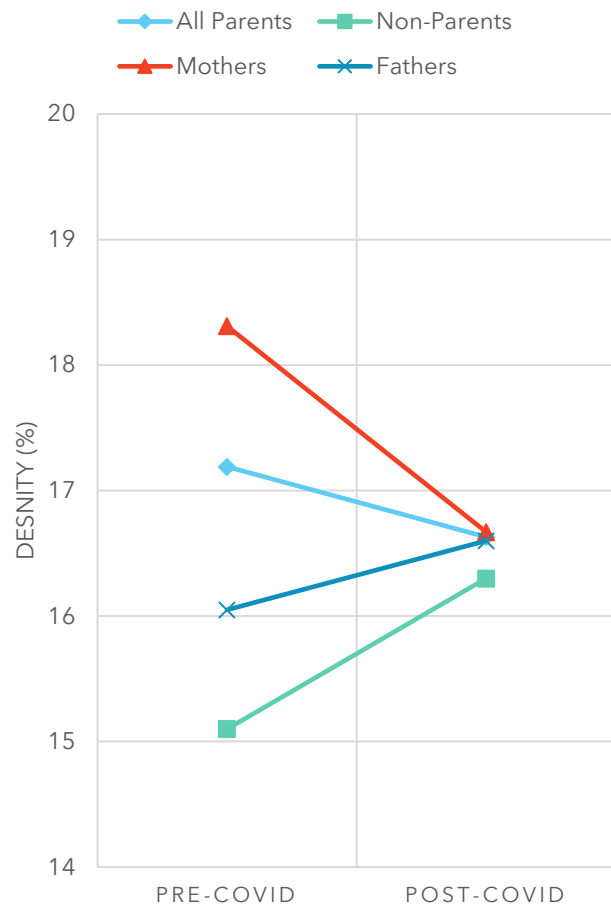
Figure 22. Pandemic Changes in Gender Composition Of NJ Union Members



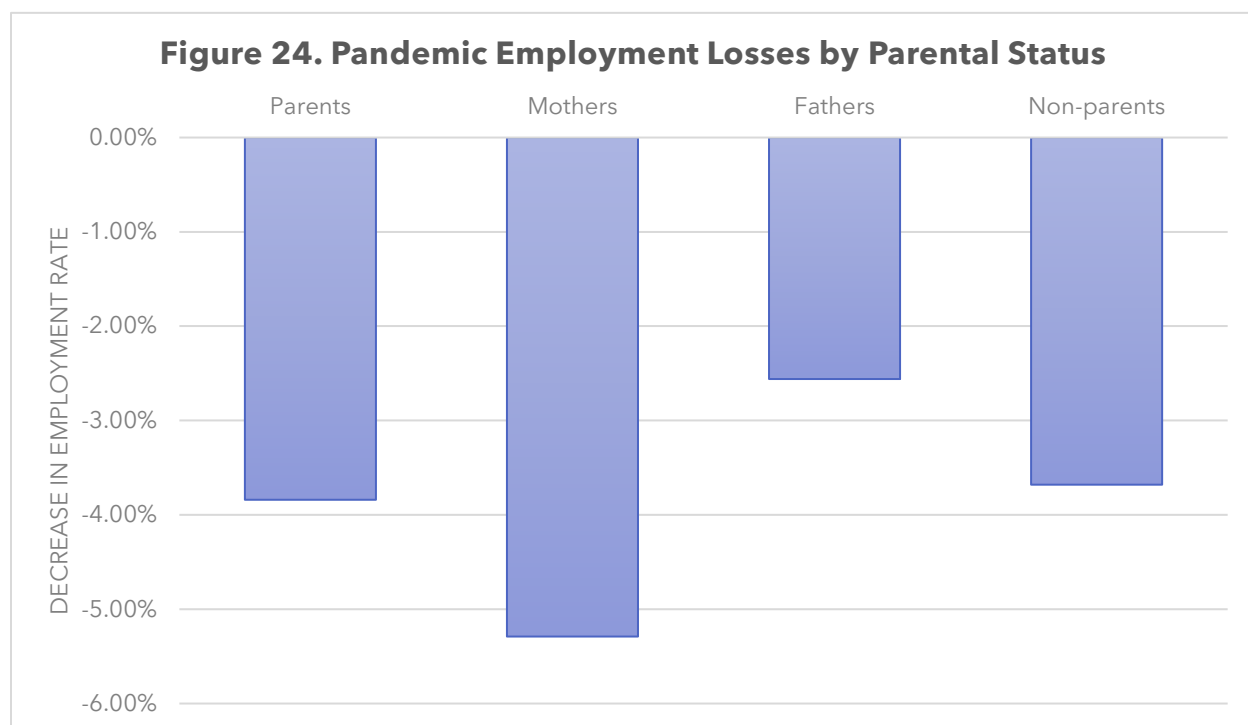
Reflecting the pandemic changes in union density, COVID-19 appears to have had a significant effect on the gender composition of union membership. Figure 22 shows how, pre-COVID, women comprised a majority of union members in the state, reflecting long-term trends showing slower declines in unionization rates for women than men. However, pandemic-related changes to workplaces and the labor market seem to have at least temporarily reversed these trends. Women now comprise a minority of union members in the state. In the private sector, women were already under-represented in the ranks of union members, but their share has declined since the pandemic began. In addition, while women continue to be over-represented among public sector union members, their share has also declined post-pandemic.

It is no secret that the pandemic has fundamentally challenged the division of labor in most U.S. households, putting more burdens on women and caretakers, and often disrupting (or completely halting) their paid employment. These trends can also be seen in changes in employment and union density among parents during the pandemic. Looking at parents, Figure 23 highlights how union

Figure 23. Pandemic Changes in NJ Union Density of Workers by Parental Status



density among mothers fell by almost 2%, while density among fathers and non-parents rose by about 1%. While density among all parents declined by about 0.6%, this slight decline appears to be driven entirely by the decline in density among unionized mothers.



Other analyses conducted during the pandemic have found that mothers were more than 3 times more likely than fathers to lose their employment.¹⁰ Unpartnered mothers in particular experienced severe employment declines, falling by 9% nationally in the first six months of the pandemic.¹¹ In New Jersey, as Figure 24 shows, employment declines for mothers during the pandemic were more than double the declines seen by fathers. In addition, Figure 25 (on the next page) shows how Hispanic mothers in particular were the most impacted, seeing an employment decline of over 7% pre-COVID to post-COVID.

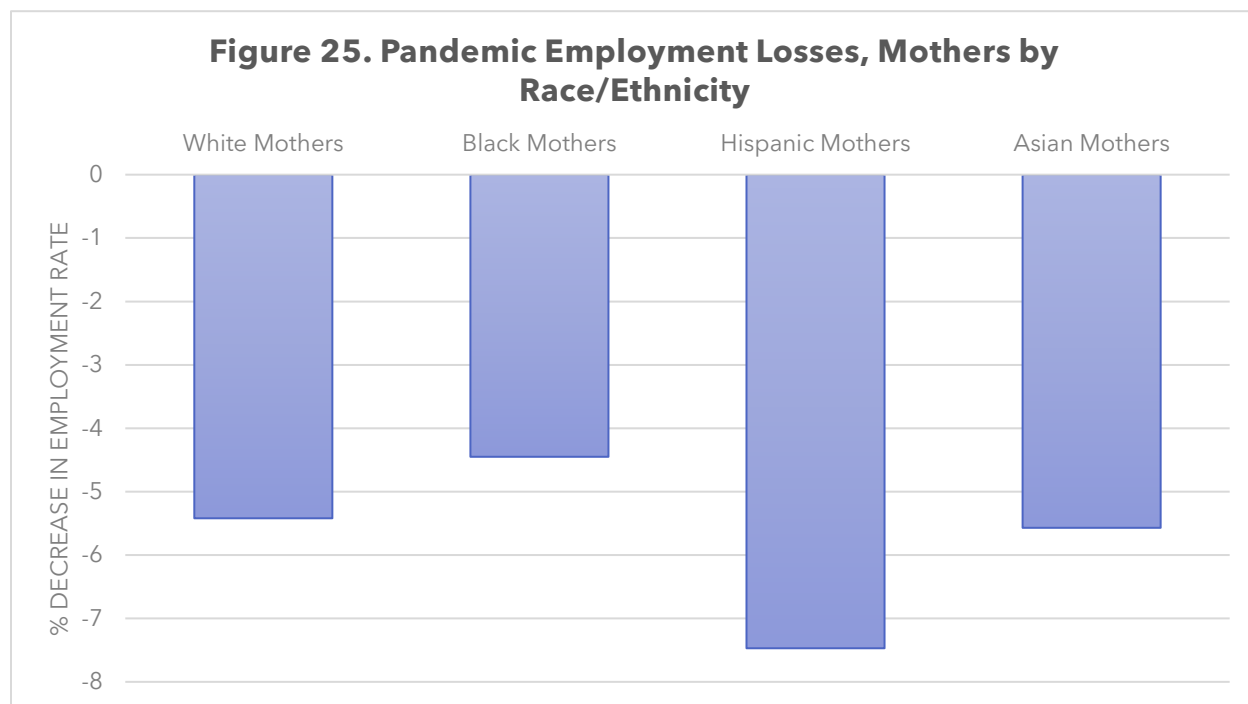
Numerous studies have highlighted how unions have been key vehicles for securing vital caregiving necessities at the bargaining table for workers who would otherwise not have access to these benefits, including paid parental leave, childcare subsidies, and more.¹² However, it seems that even these kinds of benefits secured by NJ unions could not overcome the immense pressures placed on mothers during the pandemic, particularly when children were schooling remotely. Continuing to push for (or expand) these kinds of benefits at the bargaining table should hopefully protect unionized mothers from future disruptions in the labor market. Moreover, as women continue to struggle to re-enter the

¹⁰ Henderson, T. (2020, September 8). Mothers are 3 times more likely than fathers to have lost jobs in pandemic. *Pew Charitable Trusts*. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/09/28/mothers-are-3-times-more-likely-than-fathers-to-have-lost-jobs-in-pandemic>.

¹¹ Barroso, A. & Kochar, R. (2020, November 24). In the pandemic, the share of unpartnered moms at work fell more sharply than among other parents. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/24/in-the-pandemic-the-share-of-unpartnered-moms-at-work-fell-more-sharply-than-among-other-parents/>.

¹² Park, T.-Y., Lee, E.-S., & Budd, J. W. (2019). What do unions do for mothers? Paid maternity leave use and the multifaceted roles of labor unions. *ILR Review*, 72(3), 662–692. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793918820032>

workforce,¹³ a caregiving-centered bargaining agenda as well as supportive public policy should help encourage more mothers to rejoin the ranks of the state’s labor force and labor movement.



UNION WAGE PREMIUM

We look next at the difference in pay rates for union vs. non-union workers across a variety of job and personal characteristics. We caution readers that these numbers are just for the sake of comparison as they do not simultaneously take into consideration the full range of factors that may shape differences in wages across various occupations and demographic characteristics. Limited sample sizes prevent us from digging into more granular analyses.

Looking at Table 3, we can see that on average full-time unionized workers in New Jersey made over 10% more than their non-unionized counterparts between 2019 and 2021. Part-time workers appear to benefit even more from having a union, earning more than 53% higher wages each week, driving the total union wage premium for all workers (part-time and full-time) up to nearly 21%. It is unclear if the significant premium for part-time workers is due to higher pay rates for unionized shops or if issues related to scheduling and minimum hours are driving the difference.

Unionized workers in local governments seem to be receiving the highest wage premium amongst the sectors. Again, we caution readers as this could be a result of which municipal occupations are more likely to be unionized. Along gender lines, women benefit significantly from having a union, earning 19% more than their non-union counterparts. Looking at race and ethnicity, Hispanic workers and

¹³ Tucker, J (2022). Men have now recouped their pandemic-related labor force losses while women lag behind. *National Women’s Law Center*. <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/January-Jobs-Day-updated.pdf>.

Black workers benefit the most from having a union in their workplace, earning over 25% more than their non-union counterparts. Young workers also seem to be strongly benefitting from unionization in terms of wages, but these estimates should be read with caution as the sample size was below the threshold of 100. Looking more closely at a few industries and occupations, private sector construction workers make over 30% more with a union while service sector workers make nearly 11% more with a union. Public sector education and health and protective service workers make over 34% more when they are unionized.

Table 3. NJ Union Wage Premium Rates, 2019-2021

Category	Non-Union Weekly	Union Weekly	Union Wage Premium	Pct. Diff
All Workers	\$ 1,035.97	\$1,277.57	\$ 241.60	20.89%
All Full-time Workers	\$ 1,205.48	\$ 1,335.42	\$ 129.94	10.78%
All Part-time Workers	\$ 383.98	\$ 662.99	\$ 279.01	53.30%
Full-time Only, Detailed				
Private Sector⁺	\$ 1,142.27	\$ 1,255.97	\$ 113.70	9.95%
Public Sector	\$ 1,174.22	\$ 1,409.78	\$ 235.57	20.06%
Public Sector (State)	\$ 1,161.49*	\$ 1,341.69*	\$ 180.20*	15.51%*
Public Sector (Local)	\$ 1,118.22	\$ 1,451.63	\$ 333.41	29.82%
Men (All)	\$ 1,319.61	\$ 1,389.00	\$ 69.39	5.26%
Men up to \$2,465 (2x NJ Median)	\$ 1,092.38	\$ 1,236.80	\$ 144.42	12.4%
Men up to \$1.232 (NJ Median)	\$ 746.78	\$ 828.14	\$ 81.66	10.33%
Women (All)	\$ 1,071.81	\$ 1,275.90	\$ 204.09	19.04%
Women up to \$2,465 (2x NJ Median)	\$ 963.11	\$ 1,172.92	\$ 209.81	19.65%
Women up to \$1.232 (NJ Median)	\$ 718.02	\$ 813.83	\$ 95.81	12.51%
White	\$ 1,198.07	\$ 1,384.29	\$ 186.22	15.54%
Black	\$ 810.40	\$ 1,045.85	\$ 235.45	25.37%
Hispanic	\$ 887.00	\$ 1,124.92	\$ 237.92	26.82%
Young (16-24yrs in age)	\$ 732.30	\$ 1,026.87*	\$ 294.56*	40.22%*
Prime (25-65yrs in age)	\$ 1,248.69	\$ 1,361.23	\$ 112.54	9.01%
Construction (private)	\$ 1,070.73	\$ 1,457.22	\$ 386.49	30.58%
Service Sector (private)	\$ 1,060.87	\$ 1,175.57	\$ 114.70	10.81%
Education and Health (public)	\$ 1,118.35*	\$ 1,517.46*	\$ 399.11*	35.69%*
Protective Service (public)	\$ 1,254.96*	\$ 1,683.40*	\$ 428.44*	34.14%*

⁺Private sector weekly wages are derived only from occupations with sufficient sample size to avoid any potential skewing as a result of outliers - non-eligible managerial occupations excluded.

* Estimates should be interpreted with caution due to low sample size (N <100).

Taken together, we can see that despite declining union density in recent decades, union workers still earn more on average than their non-union counterparts. When workers have the ability to bargain collectively over wages, they tend to bring home a greater percent of the value they produce with their labor.

CONCLUSION

Despite a minor uptick in unionization resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains uncertain whether the long-term trend of slow union decline has been halted or if this is merely a “blip” on the historical radar. Massive economic shifts, including deindustrialization, globalization, neoliberal privatization, deregulation, and the rise of hostility toward unions among employers are many of the factors that have contributed to union decline.

We hope that our findings here provide insights into how the pandemic has impacted unionization in New Jersey as well as offer some strategic guidance to the Garden State’s labor movement. The numbers in this report do not point to a certain strategy to move forward, but they do highlight groups that have lost ground during the pandemic, and thus who is most likely in need of organizing in the current moment. Moreover, we have tried to emphasize the crucial need for more organizing in the private sector—not just as a way to bolster the overall labor movement, but also as a way of protecting labor’s currently strong foothold in the public sector. While the current political conditions in the state are squarely pro-union, surviving a future resurgence of anti-union political forces necessitates increasing union density in the private sector—a task that will require collaborations across organizations and across sectors.

Increasing employment in industries with low levels of unionization and high levels of employer resistance will further contribute to declining unionization rates. Expansion of employment in highly unionized industries will bolster union density. And of course, new union organizing will help to bolster union density. Given current labor laws and high levels of employer opposition, new organizing in the private sector has become increasingly difficult, to say the least. Changes to federal labor law could influence the ability of workers to more easily organize into unions and negotiate over wages, hours, and working conditions.

However, more unions (and workers themselves) are finding it possible to overcome these barriers and win, especially as workers have a bit of an upper hand in the current labor market. What the next few years will hold is uncertain, but current levels of unrest and new union organizing offer a twinkle of hope for those in support of a stronger labor movement in the U.S. as a means of reducing high levels of income and wealth inequality—especially along the lines of race and gender. An equitable, just, and pro-worker future for the Garden State will ultimately depend on whether the state’s labor movement can take the small window the pandemic has opened for increased unionization and transform it into a gate to funnel thousands (even millions) of new workers into unions.

NOTES

- i. “Union density” denotes the proportion of all full-time, nonagricultural, wage and salary workers who are union members in a region, occupation, or industry. Data for the state rankings displayed in Figure 1 are from Hirsch and Macpherson, 2022.
- ii. The “2019-21” data discussed here and shown in the figures and tables throughout are the averages for the 24 months merged into one data set. All results are calculated for employed civilian wage and salary workers aged 16 and over. We followed the sample definition and weighting procedures described in Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson, *Union Membership and Earnings Data Book* (Washington D.C.: Bureau of National Affairs, 2018). New in this edition of the report are comparisons based on averages from the periods immediately before and immediately following the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020. “Pre-COVID” data discussed here and shown in the figures and tables throughout represents averages for January 2019-February 2020, while “post-COVID” data represents the averages for March 2020-January 2021. The same definition and weighting procedures are used for these comparisons, just restricted to smaller datasets. We also understand that these divisions are somewhat arbitrary in that the pandemic has not been eradicated and continues to impact the labor market in the U.S. and around the world.
- iii. To ensure reliability, given the limitations of the CPS dataset, we have attempted to restrict unionization rates only for subgroups that have a minimum of 100 observations. Subgroups such as individual occupations and racial categories that fall below this threshold are combined into larger groups (e.g., “nonwhite” as opposed to black, Asian, etc.) to provide projections. In some cases, for subgroups that fall slightly below our reliability threshold, we have still reported these tabulations but indicated that they should be interpreted with caution as they may be derived from non-representative samples.

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DATA APPENDIX

*Red cells in the following charts indicate sample size of <100

Table A-1. Sectoral Composition of NJ Union Members, 2019-21 (Figure 2)

Sector	% of union members
Private	44%
Public	56%
Federal	7%
State	28%
Local	64%

Table B-1. NJ Union Density by Industry, 2019-21 (Figure 5)

Industry	Density
Construction	24.31
Manufacturing	5.51
Wholesale and retail trade	6.64
Transportation and utilities	33.4
Information	11.3
Financial activities	3.43
Professional and business services	2.39
Education and health services	29.05
Leisure and hospitality	6.43
Other services	3.33
Public administration	51.98

Table B-2. NJ Union Density by Occupation, 2019-21 (Figure 6)

Occupation	Density
Management	5.86
Business and financial operations	4.86
Computer and mathematical	4.18
Education instruction and library	53.19
Healthcare practitioner and technical	17.33
Healthcare support	9.96
Protective service	48.44
Food preparation and serving	7.03
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance	17.58
Personal care and service	6.19

Table B-2. NJ Union Density by Occupation Continued...

Sales and related	5.51
Office and administrative support	13.43
Installation, maintenance, and repair	32.84
Production	24.55
Transportation and material moving	11.83

Table B-3. NJ Union Density and Union Member Distribution by Occupation Group & Sector, 2019-21 (Figures 7-9)

Private Sector		
Occupation Group	Density	Distribution
Professional	6.45	24.05
Service	6.53	10.87
Office	5.63	15.16
Production	20.15	44.32

Public Sector		
Occupation Group	Density	Distribution
Management	36.17	4.34
Professional	65.28	58.11
Service	59.86	18.9
Office	48.11	11.37
Production	64.77	7.28

Table B-4. Pandemic Changes to NJ Union Density in Occupational Groups (Figure 10)

Occupation Group	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID	Change
Management	5.59	6.1	+0.51
Professional	20.47	20.15	-0.32
Service	17.52	16.54	-0.98
Office	10.02	9.89	-0.13
Production	20.81	24.77	+3.96

Table C-1. NJ Union Density by Race/Ethnicity and Sector, 2019-21 (Figure 11)

Category	Density				
	White	Black	Asian	Hispanic	Non-white
General	16.98	20.84	6.24	14.96	13.49
Private Sector	8.62	12.59	3.13	10.63	7.36
Public Sector	61.14	53.85	54.79	52.53	54.09
Public Sector: Federal	32.29	41.67	68.18	20	52.08
Public Sector: State	62.26	53.76	36.36	58	52.07
Public Sector: Local	64.8	57.14	54.55	56.82	57.14

Table C-2. Racial Composition of NJ Union Members, 2019-21 (Figure 12)

CPS Racial Category	All	Private	Public
White only	79.21	77.43	80.59
Black only	15.04	16.64	13.79
Asian Only	4.75	5.11*	4.47
Nonwhite (other)	1.00	0.81	1.15

Table C-3. NJ Union Density by Race/Ethnicity & Gender by Sector, 2019-21 (Figure 13)

Race & Gender Category	General	Private	Public
White Men	17.01	10.82	60.34
White Women	16.94	6.1	61.69
Black Men	21.41	15.97	50.7*
Black Women	20.36	9.52	55.38
Asian Men	7.48	2.93	68.29
Asian Women	4.68	3.37	28
Hispanic Men	18.04	14.53	58.46
Hispanic Women	11.05	5.94	48.39

Table C-4. NJ Union Density by Gender & Sector, 2019-21 (Figure 14)

Sector	Male Density	Female Density
Total	16.13	16.06
Private Sector	10.13	6.21
Public Sector	59.89	59.46
Public Sector: Federal	44.58	31.15
Public Sector: State	60.26	58.11
Public Sector: Local	64.04	63.53

Table C-5. NJ Union Density by Gender in Private Sector Industries, 2019-21 (Figure 15)

Industry	Male Density	Female Density
Construction	24.88	1.96
Manufacturing	7.19	2.93
Wholesale and retail trade	6.11	7.13
Transportation and utilities	27.73	21.43
Information	12	7.87
Financial activities	3.82	1.56
Professional and business services	2.25	1.03
Education and health services	14.67	10.39
Leisure and hospitality	7.01	4.62
Other services	5.71	1.26

Table C-6. NJ Union Density of Public Sector Education and Health Services Workers by Gender at the State and Local Levels, 2019-21 (Figure 16)

Category	Male Density	Female Density
State Education and Health Services (Public)	37.23	54.26
Local Education and Health Services (Public)	48.13	84.86

Table C-7. Distribution of Union Members by Gender in NJ Private Sector Industries, 2019-21 (Figure 17)

Industry	Men	Women
Construction	25.7	0.47
Education and health services	12.47	54.67
Financial activities	4.58	2.8
Information	3.82	3.27
Leisure and hospitality	5.6	5.61
Manufacturing	8.65	4.21
Other services	2.04	0.93
Professional and business services	3.82	2.34
Transportation and utilities	23.92	9.81
Wholesale and retail trade	9.41	15.89

Table C-8. Pandemic Changes in NJ Union Density By Race/Ethnicity (Figure 18)

Race/Ethnicity	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID	Change
White	16.31	17.59	+1.28
Black	21.01	20.55	-0.46
Hispanic	13.57	16.19	+2.62
Non-white	14.09	13.01	-1.08
Asian	5.53	6.74	+1.21

Table C-9. Pandemic Changes in NJ Union Density By Race/Ethnicity & Gender (Figure 19)

Race/Ethnicity & Gender Category	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID	Change
White Men	16.35	17.61	+1.26
White Women	16.28	17.56	+1.28
Black Men	19.36	23.01	+3.65
Black Women	22.01	18.79	-3.22
Asian Men	5.86	8.6	+2.74
Asian Women	5.13	4.36	-0.77
Hispanic Men	16.3	19.46	+3.16
Hispanic Women	10.73	12.15	+1.42

Table C-10. Pandemic Changes in Racial Composition of NJ Union Members (Figure 20)

Racial Category	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID	Change
White only	79.25	78.96	-0.29
Black only	15.76	14.51	-1.25
Non-white	4.99	6.53	+1.54

Table C-11. Pandemic Changes to NJ Union Density by Gender (Figure 21)

Category	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID	Change
Men Total	15.49	16.67	+1.18
Women Total	16.07	16.05	-0.02
Men Private Sector	9.82	10.4	+0.58
Women Private Sector	6.2	6.22	+0.02
Men Public Sector	56.45	62.9	+6.45
Women Public Sector	58.84	60.05	+1.21

Table C-12. Pandemic Changes to Gender Composition of NJ Union Members (Figure 22)

Period & Sector	Men	Women
Pre-COVID Total	49.3	50.7
Post-COVID Total	52.47	47.26
Pre-COVID Private Sector	63.31	36.69
Post-COVID Private Sector	65.96	34.04
Pre-COVID Public Sector	38.57	61.43
Post-COVID Public Sector	42.38	57.62

Table C-13. Pandemic Changes in NJ Union Density of Workers by Parental Status (Figure 23)

Parental Status	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID	Change
All Parents	17.19	16.63	-0.56
Non-Parents	15.1	16.3	+1.2
Mothers	18.31	16.67	-1.64
Fathers	16.05	16.6	+0.55

Table C-14. Pandemic Changes in NJ Employment Rate by Parental Status (Figures 24-25)

Parental Status	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID	Change
Parents	97.59	93.75	-3.84
Mothers	97.19	91.90	-5.29
Fathers	97.97	95.41	-2.56
Non-parents	95.23	91.55	-3.68
White Mothers	97.83	92.41	-5.42
Black Mothers	94.18	89.73	-4.45
Hispanic Mothers	96.16	88.69	-7.47
Asian Mothers	96.69	91.12	-5.57