

# New report explores worker experiences with climate-friendly New York state solar jobs

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New York state solar construction workers—whose numbers are expected to grow rapidly to meet climate goals—are transient, may not receive benefits and are subject to racial disparities in pay, finds a new report from the Climate Jobs Institute (CJI) at Cornell University.

[The work](#), titled "Exploring the Conditions of the New York Solar Workforce," surveyed more than 260 solar installation and maintenance

workers. The exploratory study is the first to focus on workers' experiences, seeking to bridge gaps in government and industry data that relies on surveys of solar employers.

The authors identified significant issues that they said warrant further study as the state accelerates its buildout of solar infrastructure. They also found a prevalence of paying workers per panel installed, a practice that could incentivize unsafe conditions in the pursuit of productivity; and that more than half of respondents considered stimulant use a problem on New York solar work sites.

"It is essential to make sure that these jobs are not the kind of low-wage, low-quality employment that can exacerbate inequality," said Avalon Hoek Spaans, assistant director of research at CJI. "Workers' perspectives are integral to the creation of public policy and programs that protect and uplift the working class of both New York state and the country and will help ensure that the climate transition is just and equitable."

Solar installations in New York increased by more than 2,000% over the past decade, but at the end of 2023 the state's capacity (less than 6 gigawatts) was one-tenth of its projected need by 2050, according to the report.

Estimates of the number of New York solar construction workers ranged from 11,500 in 2022 to more than 14,500 in 2023, according to industry and government reports. But accurate counts are difficult, according to CJI, because those reports may include multiple types of employees—also including sales and services, for example—and may double-count people who worked for more than one employer.

Among the workers CJI surveyed—almost exclusively nonunion, full-time workers directly employed by solar companies between December

2021 and September 2023—more than 40% had at least two solar employers, and nearly a quarter worked for three or four. About two-thirds relocated to New York for solar jobs, mostly with large national companies, and more than 70 said they lived in one of 23 other states, including 53 from as far as California.

Among the report's other key findings:

- Nearly 60% of the workers surveyed reported that they did not receive benefits. Black and Hispanic workers were more likely than white workers to report not receiving benefits.
- More than 30% of respondents said they were paid per panel installed, rather than as hourly or annual employees.
- Installation workers for utility-scale [solar projects](#) were the least likely to be paid an annual salary and less likely to report longer tenures with their main employer.
- White workers paid an [annual salary](#) made nearly twice the median rate of their Black and Hispanic counterparts. Black workers were more likely to report receiving payment in cash compared to other workers.
- Black workers were most likely to indicate that they had experienced wage theft while working on a New York state solar project, but workers of color were least likely to formally [report](#) wage theft.

**More information:** ILR Climate Jobs Institute, [Exploring the Conditions of the New York Solar Workforce](#) (2024)

Provided by Cornell University

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