

COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy: Canners in New York City, USA



Chicago, an informal worker and board member at Sure We Can, redeems cans during the pandemic.
Photo credit: Carlos Rivera

Key Findings

- 1 Most canners were put out of work during the height of the COVID-19 crisis in New York City, with 68% out of work in April, and average daily earnings in April at only 15% of pre-crisis (February 2020) earning levels.
- 2 Women canners have been disproportionately affected by the crisis, as demands on their time for household responsibilities have increased and their earnings have been slower to recover.
- 3 Canners have been deeply impacted by the COVID-19 health crisis – 20% had a member of the household with COVID-19. Many canners reported struggling to maintain mental health in the face of insecurity about the future, illness and death of family members, and mounting bills and expenses, among other impacts.
- 4 Personal protective equipment (PPE) usage is high among canners – 80% reported using PPE in June/July. However, lack of affordable, sustained access to PPE threatens the health of canners, their families and the community.
- 5 Most canners received cash relief from the government, but 29% did not. Even among those who did receive relief, many reported struggling to cover expenses, especially housing expenses.
- 6 The canning sector is resilient, and most canners (80%) were back at work by June/July with earnings approaching pre-crisis levels. However, earnings were unsustainably low to begin with (\$18 pre-crisis daily average) and costs and risks for canners have increased since the start of the crisis.

Supportive policy should build on canners' resiliency and address persistent economic and social vulnerabilities, particularly among canners who do not qualify for public support. This document concludes with a set of recommendations for how city and state government can take action now to support NYC's canning community.

Background

COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy is a WIEGO-led 12-city longitudinal study that assesses the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on specific groups of informal workers and their households. Using a survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews, Round 1 assessed the impact of the crisis in April 2020 (the period of peak restrictions in most cities) and in June/July 2020 (when restrictions had been eased in most cities)¹ in comparison to February 2020 (pre-COVID-19). Round 2 will assess continuing impacts versus signs of recovery in the first half of 2021, compared to the pre-COVID-19 period and Round 1. For Round 1 of the study in New York City, USA, researchers surveyed street vendors and canners who are members of the Street Vendor Project and Sure We Can.

This report presents the summary findings for the canners surveyed at Sure We Can, a not-for-profit recycling center and community space in Brooklyn, New York. In addition to providing canners a supportive space for pursuing their livelihoods (through provision of can redemption services and storage space), Sure We Can serves as a center for canner organizing and advocacy.

Results for NYC street vendors are presented in a separate report available at wiego.org/covid-19-global-impact-study.

Canners in New York City

In NYC, there are an estimated 8,000-10,000 “canners” - people who collect, sort and redeem deposit-marked containers to earn money.²

Canners represent multiple underserved populations in NYC, including undocumented immigrants, the elderly, people experiencing mental or physical disabilities or homelessness, and those who are frequent movers. The 800 canners who rely on the Sure We Can recycling center and community space each year are overwhelmingly people of color. This majority population consists of Latinx (55%), Black (24%) and Asian canners (18%). At least one-third are over the age of 60, and over 80% of canners in the community live below the poverty line. Canning provides critical income for their households, and a sense of purpose for those who have no other work or are socially or linguistically isolated.

Canners were not formally designated as essential workers in New York City, despite the critical environmental service they provide.

“As long as the city continues with recycling, sanitation workers are essential workers. And we are doing the same work!”

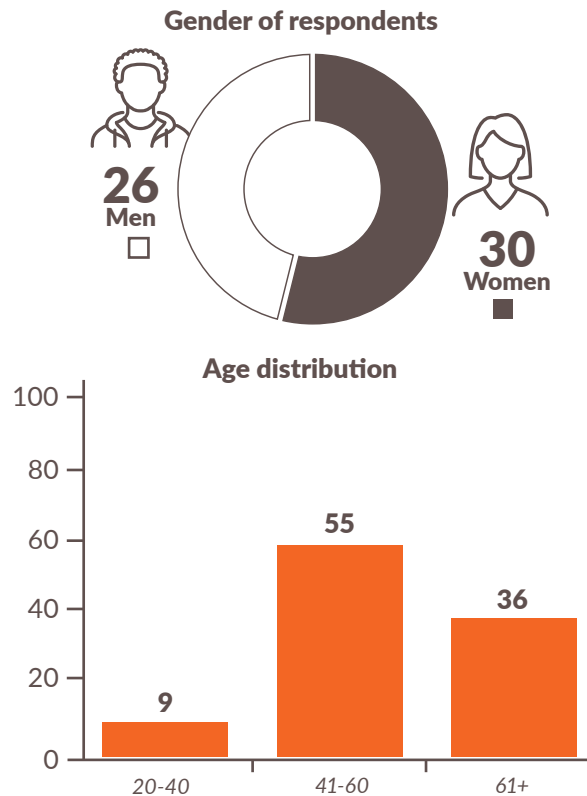
– Ana Martinez, Co-Founder of Sure We Can

“The city should recognize that we’re doing a valuable service and that they acknowledge it in some way, shape or form. To be acknowledged for doing something positive and great is important. That’s it, just being acknowledged.”

– Chicago, Canner and Sure We Can Board Member

¹ The reference period for June/July when the survey was conducted was the “last seven days” before survey interviews.

² See Eunomia’s report on [“Employment and Economic Impact of Container Deposits – New York”](#).



The sample³ is representative of the broader Sure We Can canner community, which is very diverse and includes many immigrants from Latin America and Asia. Over half – 55% – of respondents in the sample were born outside the United States.

Pre-COVID-19 daily earnings: Before the pandemic, canners earned an average of \$18 daily. Average pre-crisis daily earnings of male canners were 36% less than those of women (\$14 versus \$22). This earnings differential does not mean that women get paid more for canning than men – the price for can redemption is the same across the sector. Rather, this differential may reflect that women canners collect in higher volumes than men, as they rely more on canning for their livelihood and to support dependants.

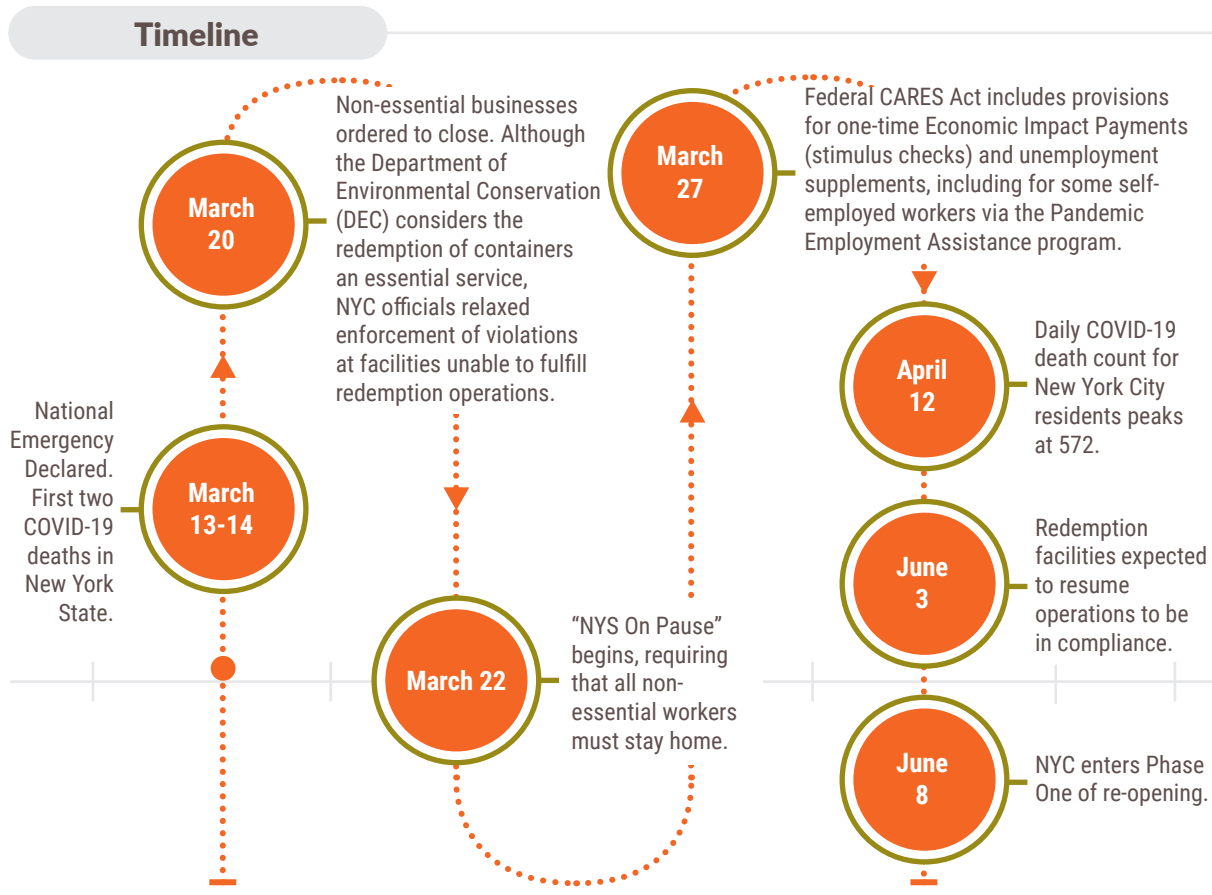
Dates: Phone surveys and in-depth interviews were conducted in June and July 2020.

³ The survey sample is intended to reflect the composition of SWC's constituency and is not necessarily representative of canners in New York City more broadly. There are no statistics on canners in New York City from which to draw a representative sample.



Sure We Can was founded by canners and provides a supportive space for NYC's canners, the majority of whom are people of color, immigrants, and people in low-income households. During the COVID-19 crisis, SWC implemented new safety procedures, including directing the flow of workers around the redemption center, and provided PPE to canners. Photo credit: Carlos Rivera

Policy responses to COVID-19

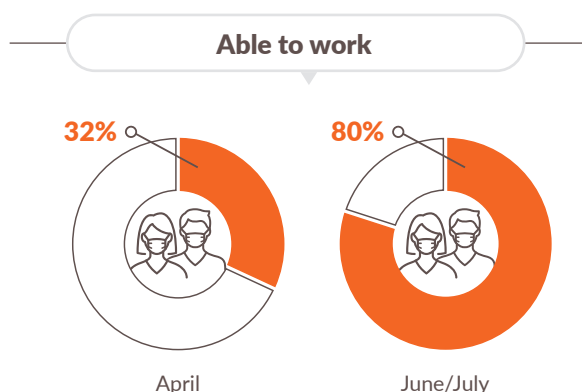


Work, Income and Food

Impact on work

The COVID-19 crisis is a disaster for New York's canner community. Like other low-wage and informal workers in New York City, canners face a crisis of work, income, housing, debt and health, compounded by the lack of a supportive regulatory environment and stigmatization of their work.

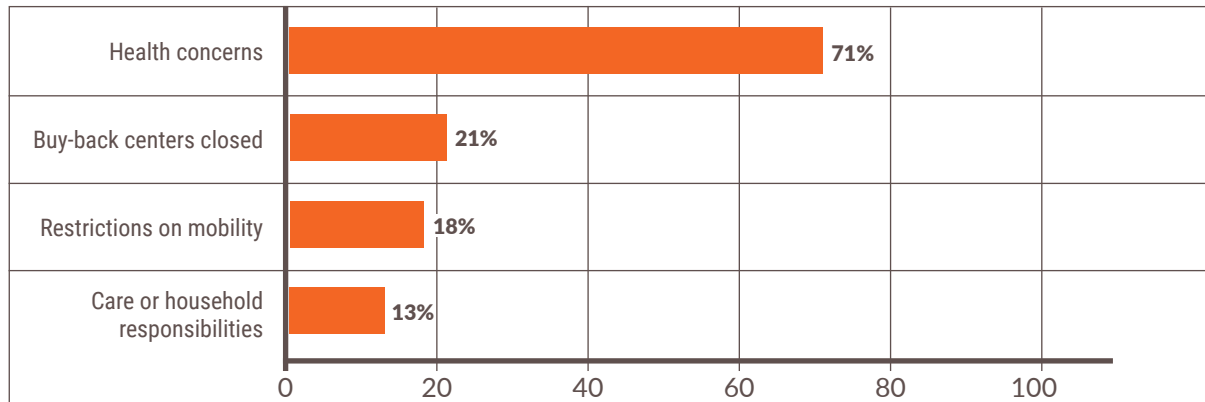
The crisis for canners started in March as redemption centers closed and many workers started to become ill or fear for their health. By April, 68% of respondents had stopped working. By June, canners' livelihoods started to recover, but not fully – 80% were back at work, but only for 3.2 days a week, compared to 3.7 days a week before lockdown measures were put in place. Decreased tourism and restaurant closures have cut in half the number of cans and bottles available to be redeemed.



"It's not anything that we can just sit down and feel sorry for ourselves about, because we have to do this. We just have to get out there and do it, or else we're going to end up with nothing. Without a roof over your head, you can't eat. So we can't think about what can happen. Just try to protect ourselves as best as we possibly could, and keep it going."

– Chicago, Canner and Sure We Can Board Member

Main reasons for not working, April 2020



The principal reason that canners were not able to work in April was concerns about their health. This group includes both canners who were worried about becoming ill and canners who did become ill and were unable to work as a result. In addition, nearly one-quarter of canners faced challenges in redeeming their cans because of redemption center closures. Public health restrictions presented a barrier for some canners who were concerned about being prevented from working by authorities during the city-wide lockdown. Others were unable to work because of increased care responsibilities at home, including care for children home from school and family members who were ill.

“The virus has impacted my family very badly. Since my Mom was unable to work we suffered financially. Also a lot of us in the house stayed home because some of our family members were getting sick.”

– SWC canner



Chinese canners

Chinese canners were especially impacted by the pandemic. Fear of harassment and of contracting COVID-19 decreased their participation in canning during the pandemic, and many Chinese canners are reluctant to return to canning. Outreach to Chinese and Chinese American communities, especially the elderly and linguistically isolated, is required.

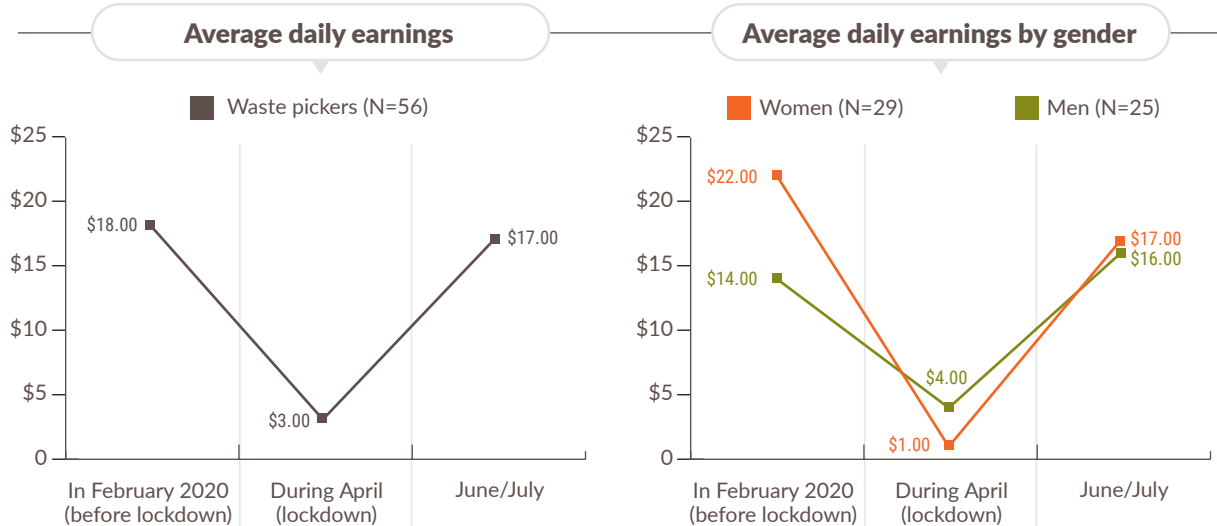
“The Chinese community, which is not the biggest but the most regular of workers in our group, they completely disappeared by mid-March...they were following how serious it was in China, they were afraid.”

– Ana Martinez, Co-Founder of Sure We Can

Chinese canners sorting containers together.
Photo credit: Carlos Rivera

Impact on earnings

In April (peak lockdown), canners were earning only 15% of their average February (pre-pandemic) daily earnings, with 76% of respondents earning zero dollars. By June/July (with restrictions eased), the average income of respondents was 92% of their average February (pre-pandemic) daily earnings, with 15% of them still earning zero dollars. However, women's earnings have been slower to recover than men's – probably because increased care responsibilities in the home have reduced their time for canning.



Income earning data indicate that the canner sector is resilient, yet remains vulnerable because of canners' very low earnings. Also, although canner incomes have largely returned to pre-pandemic levels, canning is seasonal - in previous years, canners earned twice as much in the summer as they do in the winter.

"Another factor was they [canners] pick up a lot from restaurants, bars and events, and the fact all of this has been closed for months, that means less income for most of them. So they pick up more from residential areas, like cans for example. They had an almost regular volume of cans but glass almost disappeared. Now, little by little, it is coming back, but closing businesses was harmful because it was a source of income for them."

- Ana Martinez, Co-Founder of Sure We Can

Canning contributes to the growth of the local economy and decreases environmental pollution.
Photo credit: Carlos Rivera

Workers' Health & Safety

Canners at Sure We Can are predominantly Latinx and Black – the two groups that city data show have died from COVID-19 at twice the rate of white New Yorkers. While 20% of respondents reported that someone in their household had COVID-19 or COVID-19 symptoms, this is likely to be an underestimate, since respondents had the option to skip this sensitive question and because of difficulty reaching canners especially impacted by the pandemic. Many canners described falling sick themselves, having sick family members, or losing family or friends to the virus.

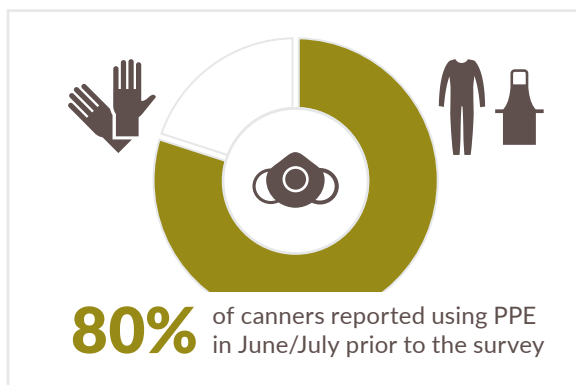
“Two family members of mine died. My father died. I cut into my savings every time I have to pay rent because if not they’ll kick me out.”

– SWC canner

Many respondents also reported negative mental health impacts due to compounding economic, health and emotional pressures, including the inability to pay rent, illness, and fear and insecurity about the future.

“[It has been an] emotional rollercoaster ride and the physical aspect of being hit with COVID. My body is ok, but my emotional wellbeing is vulnerable. I got COVID and had to think of my elderly parents living in Canarsie. I’m still recovering mentally.”

– SWC canner



Canners recognize the importance of using PPE to protect their health as well as that of their family and community. Many canners used PPE before the pandemic. The pandemic increased use of PPE and is now widespread in the canning community. At the time of the survey, 60% of canners reported that they procured PPE themselves, 14% reported that they had been provided with PPE by the government, and 14% received PPE from Sure We Can.

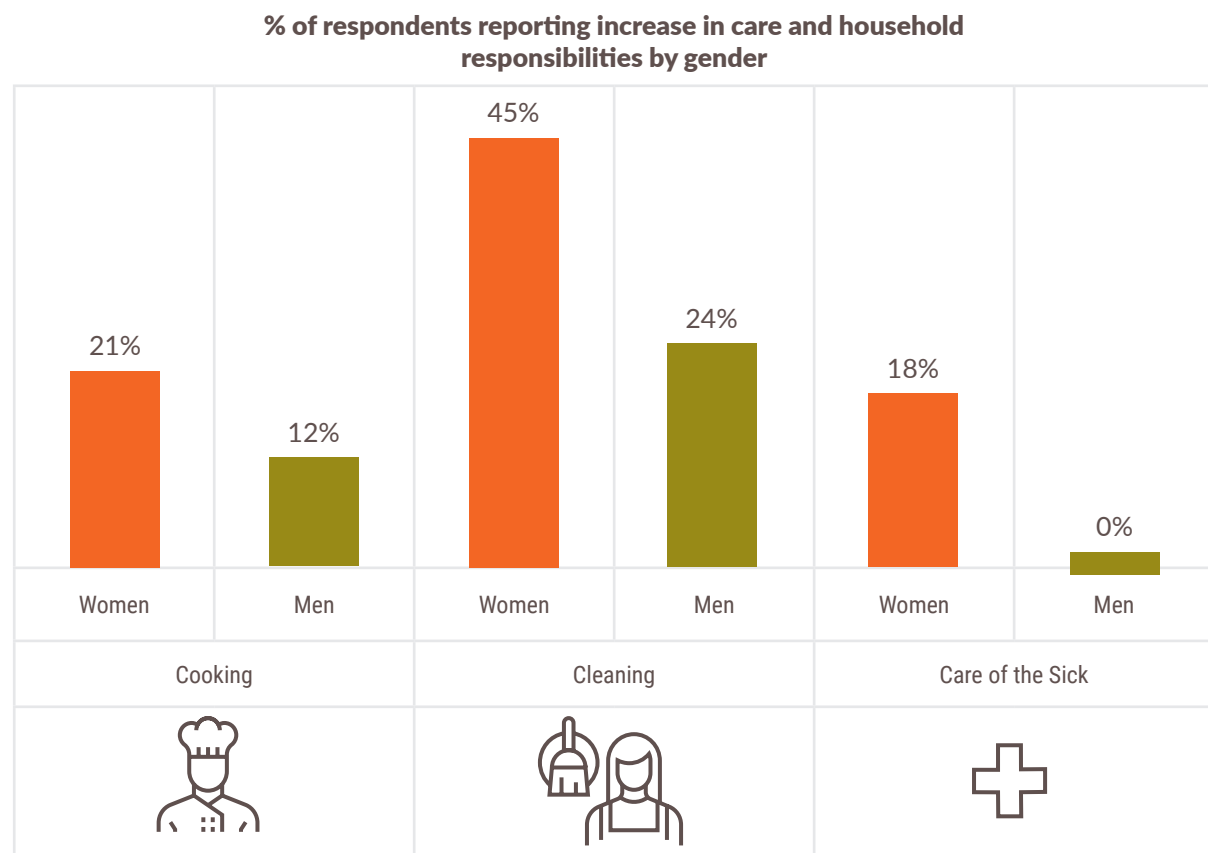
Since PPE is costly and can be inaccessible to canners, especially over the long term, Sure We Can is partnering with the City of New York to distribute free PPE to canners and community members. To date, Sure We Can staff and canners have distributed more than 100,000 face coverings to community members. Additionally, Sure We Can provides canners access to toilets, running water and soap. At the time of the survey, 98% of canners reported using masks and 87% reported using gloves in the week prior to the survey. However, with reduced earnings it could be difficult for canners to maintain consistent use of PPE over the long term – this is a critical area of need for government support.

“The good [Sure We Can] is doing is giving gloves and masks. They are important to a canner because many don’t have enough money to purchase them because the disposable masks cost \$2 and many are of low quality.”

– Rosa, Sure We Can staff

Household stress

While incomes have shrunk, the pandemic has led to a rise in unpaid household labor. This was particularly the case for women canners, which illuminates the unequal gendered impacts of the pandemic.



“One member is 82. She was already taking care of her husband but the daughter and sons have asked her not to can anymore because the risks are high. But also because they are wanting her to take care of their daughter.”

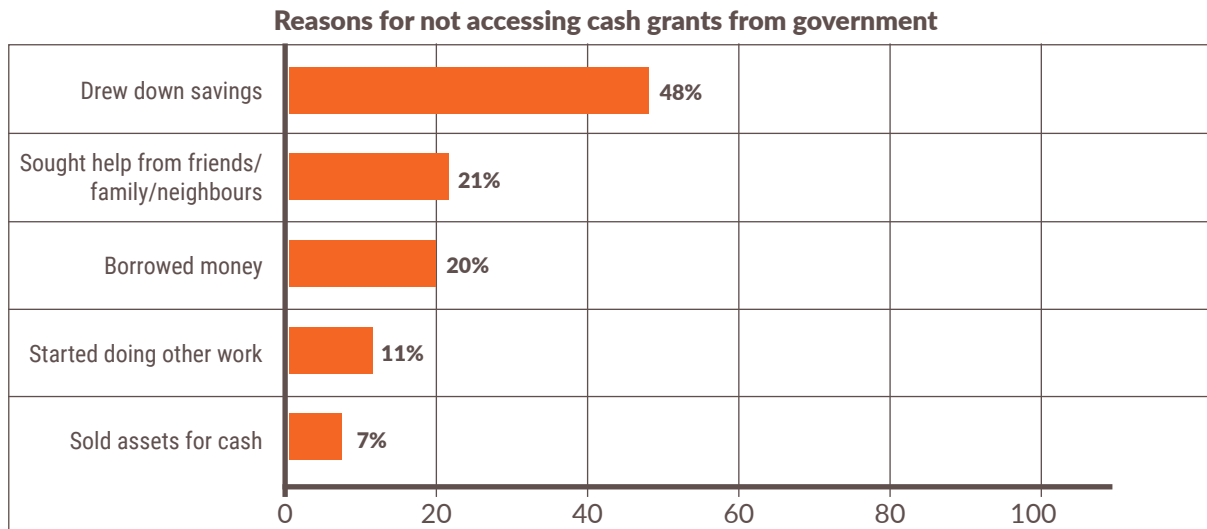
– Ana Martinez, Co-Founder of Sure We Can



Photo credit: Carlos Rivera

Coping Strategies and Adaptations

The pandemic has exacerbated canners' already marginal economic position. Decreased earnings forced canners to resort to several survival strategies. Approximately one-half of the surveyed canners drew down savings and many others sought economic assistance from family, friends and other sources.



"Our community is one of the most resilient you could find."

– Ana Martinez, Co-Founder of Sure We Can



Canners are required to wear face masks and practice social distancing at Sure We Can.
Photo credit: Carlos Rivera

Relief measures

Government relief

29% of canners did not receive cash grants from the government

45% of canners did not receive food assistance from the government

Many of Sure We Can's canners were not eligible for stimulus checks or unemployment grants. Immigration status was a barrier to accessing support for many canners – 58% responded that they were “not eligible” for government support, leaving them without a cushion to fall back on at a time of crisis. However, support from the Robin Hood Foundation and Hispanic Foundation helped to fill this gap – permitting Sure We Can to distribute mutual aid to 400 canners.

“We pay taxes but we receive no support from the government. We don't have social security and we don't get unemployment.”

– SWC canner

Relief by Sure We Can

The pandemic has challenged Sure We Can to support canners in ways and at a scale it has not done before. In addition to providing a redemption center and community space for canners, the organization provides free PPE (e.g. masks and gloves), food and mutual aid. Sure We Can has partnered with the NYC Test & Trace Corps to provide culturally relevant peer-to-peer education and information about preventing COVID-19 transmission and access to testing resources.

“[I come to Sure We Can because of] the togetherness of people and the positive hope to the community their center brings. It's a safe haven...I care about the environment and I want everyone to recycle. It is important.”

– SWC canner

A Roadmap to Recovery for Canners in NYC

Looking to the future, canners expressed a strong desire to continue to work and to improve their working conditions. This points to an urgent need for the city and state government to take action in supporting canners as workers in the circular economy sector. Canners continue to contribute to NYC's zero-waste goals without recognition or a supportive policy environment. In 2019 alone, canners at Sure We Can redeemed over 12 million single-use containers (e.g. glass bottles, aluminum cans, plastic bottles) from waste receptacles and city streets, diverting these recyclable materials from landfills and routing them back to beverage distributors for reprocessing. What makes this work possible is the 1982/2013 New York State Returnable Container Act, also known as the “Bottle Bill”, which mandated a consumer deposit on some single-use beverage containers. Most NYC consumers do not return containers or redeem their deposit, which makes canner collection vital.

Going forward, we must:

- **Increase and expand NY's existing bottle bill as an economic recovery and environmental measure:** Senate Bill S2129A proposes to expand the types of containers covered by the current bill. In addition to what the bill currently proposes, we recommend 1) increasing the redemption fee to 10 cents to promote redemption and compensate canners for their critical recovery work, and 2) increasing the handling fee to 5 cents to strengthen the redemption infrastructure.
- **Recognize canners as stakeholders in NYC's urban waste management system and in emerging EPR systems:** NYC must recognize the estimated 8,000 to 10,000 informal canners who play a vital role in the circular economy. By diverting renewable materials from landfills, and diverting redeemable materials from the (taxpayer-funded) recycling system to the

(corporate-funded) redemption system, this green army saves New York City money and contributes to zero-waste goals. City officials and the sanitation department (DSNY) should recognize canner rights of access to trash containers and bags, and contribute to efforts to dignify this work. Proposed Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) legislation at the state level should include canners as stakeholders.

- **Keep canners safe and healthy:** Low-income workers like canners often lack access to affordable Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to keep themselves, their families and their communities healthy. NYC should continue to provide free PPE, education and testing outreach to the canner community through the NYC Test & Trace Corp Program. Beyond COVID-19, policymakers should support efforts to make the collection and sorting of returnable containers less hazardous for canners.
- **Support Sure We Can's effort to find a permanent home:** The ability of Sure We Can to provide a safe space for canners and to advocate for their rights and well-being is jeopardized by the current lease agreement, which terminates in early 2021. An allocation from the NYC Council Capital Fund would be used to create a land trust for sustainability work and ensure that Sure We Can remains a long-term partner in the city's efforts to build the circular economy and meet zero-waste goals while increasing access to green jobs for poor and marginalized workers.

“So often, our most vulnerable communities get left behind at budget time. I hope the City will put its support behind community-based programs, like this one, that build sustainability from the grassroots.”

- New York State Senator Julia Salazar



Canner Chicago C. heads back home after a long day's work. Canners must play a key role in promoting a healthier, greener, and more vibrant future. Photo credit: Carlos Rivera

COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy is a collaboration between Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and partner organizations representing informal workers in 12 cities: Accra, Ghana; Ahmedabad, India; Bangkok, Thailand; Dakar, Senegal; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Delhi, India; Durban, South Africa; Lima, Peru; Mexico City, Mexico; New York City, USA; Pleven, Bulgaria; and Tiruppur, India. Data on informal recyclers, referred to here as “canners”, in New York City were collected from in-person and phone questionnaire surveys and interviews completed in English and Spanish in June and July 2020. Participants were recruited from Sure We Can by research team members representing the canner and non-canner communities. Round 2 will be conducted in the first half of 2021. For more information, visit wiego.org/COVID-19-Global-Impact-Study.

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.

Sure We Can supports the local community, particularly its most vulnerable residents, and promotes social inclusion, environmental awareness and economic empowerment. Each year, Sure We Can diverts approximately 12 million bottles and cans from New York City’s waste stream, distributing over \$700,000 annually to more than 900 canners, who are overwhelmingly low-income immigrants and people of color, some of whom struggle with homelessness and disability. Sure We Can also conducts urban gardening, education and outreach, composting, and single-use plastic upcycling. Our motto is “Where Everyone Counts,” and it is an important part of our mission to empower those who make a living doing stigmatized work, particularly canners, who collect, sort and redeem deposit-based containers for a living. We are a recycling center, community space and sustainability hub. For more information, visit www.surewecan.org

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