

Unmasking Times Square: Highlights from a Needs Assessment of Times Square Workers

Researchers from the Center for Court Innovation conducted a needs assessment survey of the Times Square worker populations most likely affected by new city regulations. The primary goal of the survey was to understand the needs of this population.

Background

In the spring of 2016, the New York City Council authorized new zoning regulations in Times Square, intended to address media reports of aggressive behavior by some costumed characters. These regulations target commercial and entertainment activity in the pedestrian plazas on Broadway between 41st and 53rd Streets. Specifically, ticket sellers, panhandlers, and performers who solicit tips for photographs are now restricted to “Designated Activity Zones.” Individuals in violation of the new laws are likely to have their court cases heard at the Midtown Community Court (“Midtown”), a neighborhood-based court that handles most misdemeanor cases arising in the Midtown, Manhattan area. Operated by the New York court system in concert with Center for Court Innovation, Midtown offers defendants an array of social services and community restitution opportunities in an effort to meaningfully address the problems that underlie criminal behavior.

Survey

The goals of the survey were to understand the needs of this population and, in turn, to recommend targeted interventions and services that Midtown might build into its programming. This survey was not designed to elicit perceptions and perspectives of the public, law enforcement, and others who may have different views. One hundred Times Square workers were surveyed in June and July 2016.

PROFESSION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS



Working in Times Square

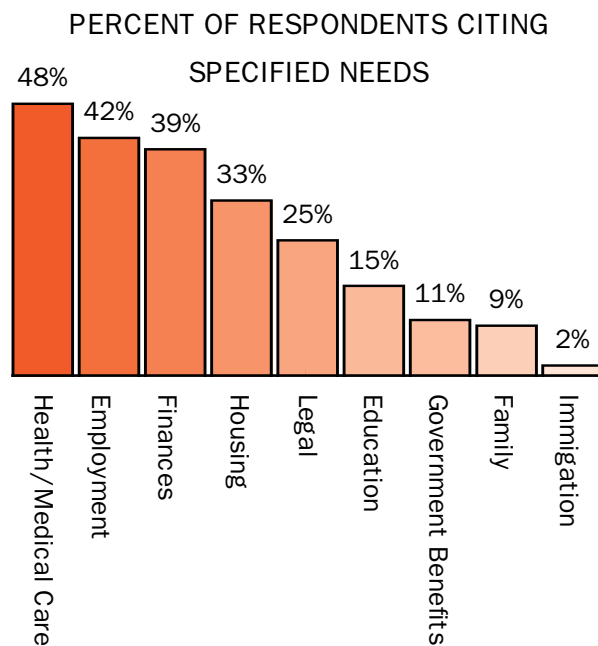
Other Employment: The majority of respondents do not have another job (63%).

Schedule & Earnings: Many work in Times Square at least five days per week (70%). Respondents reported low pay and fluctuating earnings.

Job Satisfaction: Sixty-one percent of respondents enjoy that their work involves meeting and interacting with tourists. Many also like having a flexible schedule (34%), autonomy (32%) and the atmosphere of Times Square (31%).

Job Drawbacks: Respondents cited several negatives to their work, including the new zones and related regulations (51%), negative police interactions (46%), unkind tourists (40%), and competition between performers (33%).

Suggestions for Improvement: Specifically, respondents indicated the need to improve communication between the workers and city officials (e.g. soliciting input for future legislation affecting Times Square). They also requested that the city clarify the role of workers for tourists, for example with signs.



Needs

Health/Medical Care: The most frequently-cited need was related to medical concerns or access to health care (48%). Almost half of respondents reported that they do not have health insurance (41%) or are unsure if they do (6%).

Employment & Finances: Forty-two percent of respondents indicated recent employment problems, and 11% started to work in Times Square after losing a previous job. Respondents also reported financial issues (39%), with many referencing the instability of this work.

Housing: One-third of respondents cited needs relating to housing, often mentioning high housing costs and difficulty paying rent. Many reside in New Jersey (40%).

Nationality and Language: Over half of the respondents (54%) were born outside of the U.S. Although not estimated here, surveyor observations revealed a sizable population of Times Square workers who do not speak English as a first language and/or are not fluent in English.

Recommendations and Next Steps

The Midtown Community Court should connect Times Square workers to appropriate services, informed by reported needs. Health care and insurance, employment, housing, and financial referrals should be priorities. Midtown staff could also distribute general resource information to the Times Square population through outreach, using printed materials and/or a community partner fair.

Community players should work together to ensure more consistent understanding and enforcement of the zoning regulations and to explore additional suggestions for improving conditions in Times Square. City officials could consider clarifying the regulations (including developing and distributing comprehensive, multi-lingual informational resources); and the police could consider ensuring more uniform enforcement of the rules through training.

Future research and data collection should strive to better understand this population. This survey did not attempt to capture possible mental health or substance use issues; future research should seek to fill this gap. Additionally, the Midtown Community Court could continue needs assessment efforts with those who enter the court in order to ensure that alternative service mandates are appropriate.

For More Information

Download a copy of the report:
<http://bit.ly/TimesSqWorkers>