

# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ASIAN EMPLOYMENT IN NEW YORK CITY

## Asian Americans Face Record Job Losses



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# Introduction

The far-reaching economic impact of COVID-19 has been felt across the nation, but has been particularly harmful to New York City's Asian American workers and their families. Nationally, Asian American unemployment rates increased from 2.5% in February 2020, to 14.5% in April 2020, to 15% in May 2020<sup>1</sup>, the greatest rate of increase among all racial groups across the country.

The Asian American Federation's report will focus on what is happening locally in New York City. There is limited data on the current Asian American employment at the local level. The best survey on employment by Asian ethnicity for local areas is the American Community Survey. However, it only releases annual data in the fall and winter of each year; therefore, this report will use available local data to gauge the impact of COVID-19 on employment among Asian New Yorkers.

First, we will look at the growth in state unemployment claims by Asian Americans. Next, we will use data from the American Community Survey to estimate how reliant each Asian community in New York City is on specific industries for jobs. Finally, we will look at the most recent employment reports to measure year-to-year changes in job loss for April and May to see the impact of COVID-19 on industries that Asian New Yorkers have traditionally relied on for employment.

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<sup>1</sup>Seasonally adjusted unemployment rates, US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.  
<https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab2.htm>

# Key Findings

- The growth in Asian New Yorkers filing for unemployment claims outpaces all other groups. Asians went from filing hundreds of claims a month to tens of thousands of claims a month.
- Many of the industries that employ low-income Asian workers were hardest hit by job losses, including apparel manufacturing; beauty and nail salons; laundromats; food services; taxi and rideshare; and retail.
- Each of the many Asian ethnicities that make up New York City's population depend on a unique mix of industries for jobs, and all of them were deeply impacted by job losses within their communities.
- Key policy recommendations include providing in-language assistance to unemployed Asian New Yorkers; designing workforce development programs to help increase economic opportunity and diversify the types of jobs sought out by Asian New Yorkers, especially new immigrants; and extending the social safety net to encompass New Yorkers of all backgrounds.

# Unemployment Claims By Asian New Yorkers Grew Faster than Any Other Group

The far-reaching economic impact of COVID-19 has been felt across the nation, but has been particularly devastating to New York City's Asian American population.

One of the fastest-growing racial groups in the United States, Asian Americans comprise over 16% of the population in New York City and 10% of New York State. Asian

TABLE 1

## YEAR-TO-YEAR CHANGE IN INITIAL UNEMPLOYMENT CLAIMS IN NEW YORK STATE

Week ending in:	Year-to-year change in unemployment claims	
	Asians	All Claims
April 2, 2020	6,517%	2,580%
April 11, 2020	10,210% <sup>2</sup>	3,109%
April 18, 2020	6,103%	1,591%
April 25, 2020	4,915%	1,075%
May 2, 2020	2,916%	600%
May 9, 2020	4,150%	1,489%
May 16, 2020	4,960%	1,798%
May 23, 2020	3,124%	1,398%
May 30, 2020	1,537%	539%

Source: New York State Department of Labor

<sup>2</sup> Unemployment insurance (UI) claims data for April (week ending 4/11) reported an increase of 10,210% in the number of Asians filing. This was due to pandemic unemployment assistance (PUA) claimants who were approved for PUA, after UI rejection, and then included in initial UI claims data. However, the state modified the application process in mid-April for PUA claimants to be deemed eligible. Subsequently, PUA claimants were not included in the initial UI claims as reflected in May and June claims data.



New Yorkers depend disproportionately on industries and sectors of the economy that have been forced to close or scale back as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, unemployment claims by Asian New Yorkers compared with this time last year have grown two to five times faster than all unemployment claims as shown in

Table 1. Our analysis will: 1) show the reliance of the Asian American workforce on particular industries by examining the concentration of Asian workers in each industry in New York City, and 2) explain job losses among the pan-Asian communities in New York City by drawing upon industry employment loss data.

## Working Class Asians Bore the Brunt of Job Losses

Several industries with a large Asian worker presence saw large year-to-year employment losses. Table 2 shows the industries where Asian Americans made up 20% or more of the workforce.

TABLE 2

### YEAR-TO-YEAR JOB LOSSES AMONG INDUSTRIES WITH LARGE ASIAN WORKFORCES

Industry	% of Workers in Industry Who Were Asian	% Loss in Industry-Wide Employment from April 2019 to April 2020	% Loss in Industry-Wide Employment from May 2019 to May 2020
Apparel Manufacturing	43.9%	-52.8%	-41.0%
Personal and Laundry Services	30.5%	-62.1%	-58.1%
Apparel, Piece Goods, and Notions Merchants	25.8%	-30.2%	-34.2%
Food Services	25.0%	-72.5%	-64.4%
Accounting, Tax Preparation, Bookkeeping, and Payroll Services	23.4%	-7.1%	-12.0%

TABLE 2: CONTINUED

Industry	% of Workers in Industry Who Were Asian	% Loss in Industry-Wide Employment from April 2019 to April 2020	% Loss in Industry-Wide Employment from May 2019 to May 2020
Transit and Ground Passenger Transportation	22.7%	-35.9%	-42.7%
Health and Personal Care Stores	22.7%	-11.6%	-11.6%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	22.3%	-12.1%	-11.1%
Computer Systems Design and Related Services	22.2%	-6.3%	-5.4%
Credit Intermediation and Related Activities	20.7%	-1.4%	-3.5%
Traveler Accommodation	20.6%	-56.8%	-71.6%
Securities, Commodities, Funds, Trusts, and other Financial Investments	20.5%	-2.1%	-2.8%
Architectural, Engineering, and Related Services	20.3%	0.0%	-0.8%
Agencies, Brokerage, and other Insurance-Related Activities	20.3%	-1.9%	-1.5%

Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year Public Use Microdata, New York State Department of Labor

The mandated closing of restaurants due to the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the Asian community. In normal times, one in 10 Asian workers in New York City was employed in the restaurant and food services industry. One in five Asian workers

who lives in poverty depended on food service jobs. Over 10,000 Asian workers were also employed in transit and ground passenger transportation, health and personal care stores, and traveler accommodation – all industries that lost over 10% of the jobs from year to year.



# Every Asian Group Hit Hard by Job Loss

Diving deeper into the data allows us to see the concentration of specific ethnic groups in particular industries, and helps to trace the economic impact of job loss on specific Asian ethnic groups in New York City.

## BANGLADESHI AMERICANS

Around 20% of all Bangladeshi workers in New York City were employed in the food service industry. During the COVID-19 shutdown, jobs in food services took a nosedive of 72.5% in April 2020 based on year-to-year employment. Of the 18% of all Bangladeshi workers in the transit and ground passenger transportation industry, most were in the taxi, limousine, and rideshare segment. As noted in Table 2, the transit and ground passenger transportation industry lost an enormous number of jobs in April and May 2020. Within the retail trade industry, Bangladeshis were employed by food and beverage stores and healthcare and personal stores. Food and beverage stores, which include grocery stores, saw a decrease in year-to-year jobs of

10.4% from April 2019 to April 2020. The healthcare and personal stores industry, which includes pharmacies and drugstores, had an 11.6% decrease in year-to-year employment for both April and May 2020.



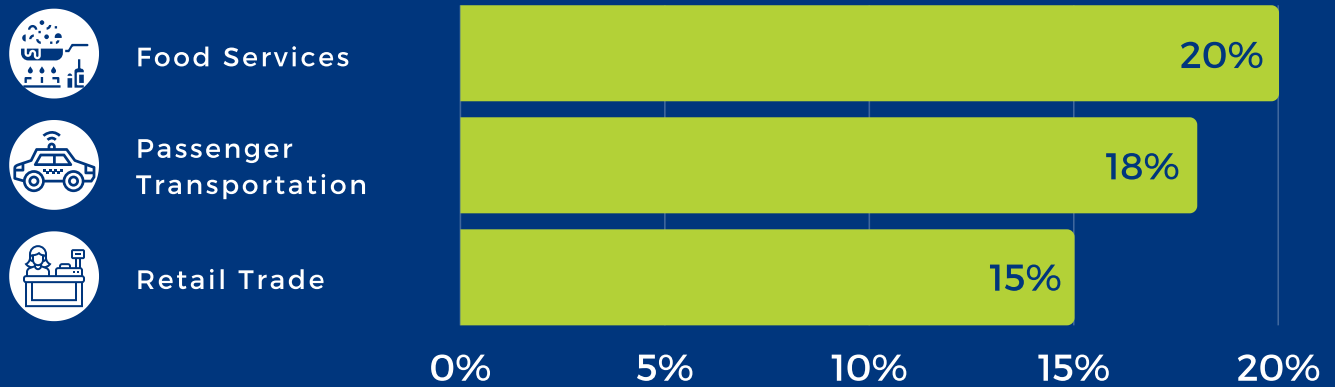
My husband has worked in restaurant kitchens for over 20 years. All the standing and hard work caused him a lot of health problems, but he still worked... until COVID-19. He hasn't worked since the first week of March and with his diabetes and other problems, I'm scared for him to go even if they open again. I looked for a job for myself, but no one is hiring. We haven't been able to pay rent for two months.

— Wife of a Bangladeshi restaurant worker in the Bronx



CHART 1

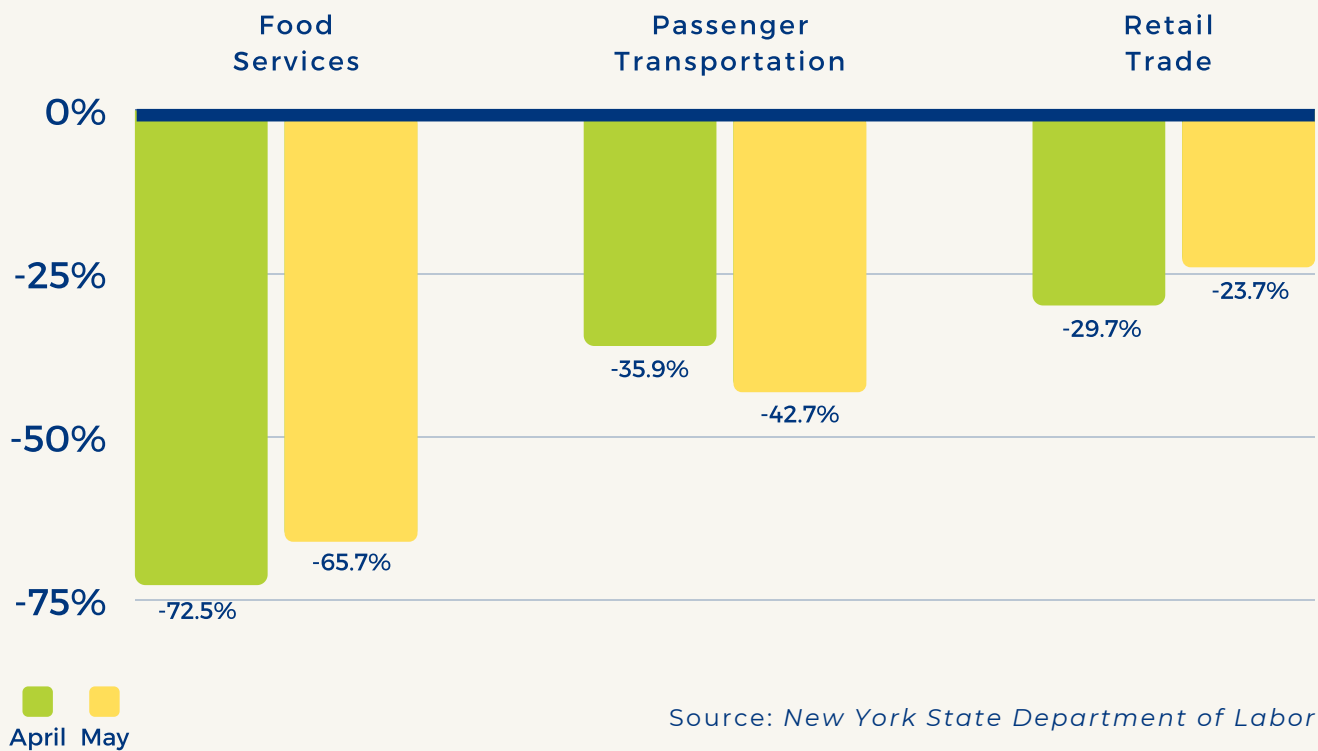
## OF THE TOP INDUSTRIES EMPLOYING BANGLADESHI NEW YORKERS...



Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year Public Use Microdata

CHART 2

## ...FOOD SERVICES, TRANSPORTATION, AND RETAIL LOST THE MOST JOBS



Source: New York State Department of Labor

# CHINESE AMERICANS

The Chinese American community in New York City was particularly vulnerable to jobs lost due to the shutdown of businesses because they are largely employed in non-essential industries, such as food services, personal and laundry services, and apparel manufacturing. Chinese American workers depended heavily on the food services sector, particularly restaurants, where they are typically owners or employed as line cooks, busboys, or wait-staff. Since mid-March, many restaurants have

been closed or offered limited take-out, delivery services, and outdoor dining. Personal and laundry services and the garment industry were also initially hard-hit by the shutdown of businesses. Within the personal and laundry services industry, Chinese workers were concentrated in beauty salons, nail salons, and other personal care services, which had to be closed and lost more than half their jobs. The garment industry suffered from broad job losses for Chinese Americans; as noted in Table 2, apparel manufacturing lost 52.8% of jobs in April, followed by 41% in May, when compared to the same months in 2019. Meanwhile, the professional and business services industry, which employed 12% of Chinese workers, experienced employment loss at 13.1% based on year-to-year employment in April 2020. Lastly, Chinese health care workers were employed in hospitals and home health care services, the latter of which lost 4% employment.

All my stores around the city were closed during the lockdown, and I was not able to pay my staff. We are still closed because customers are afraid of visiting storefronts. I have some online business, but we are unable to pay rent at this time. We are just waiting to see what the government will do about it for now.

— Chinese clothing retailer in Manhattan

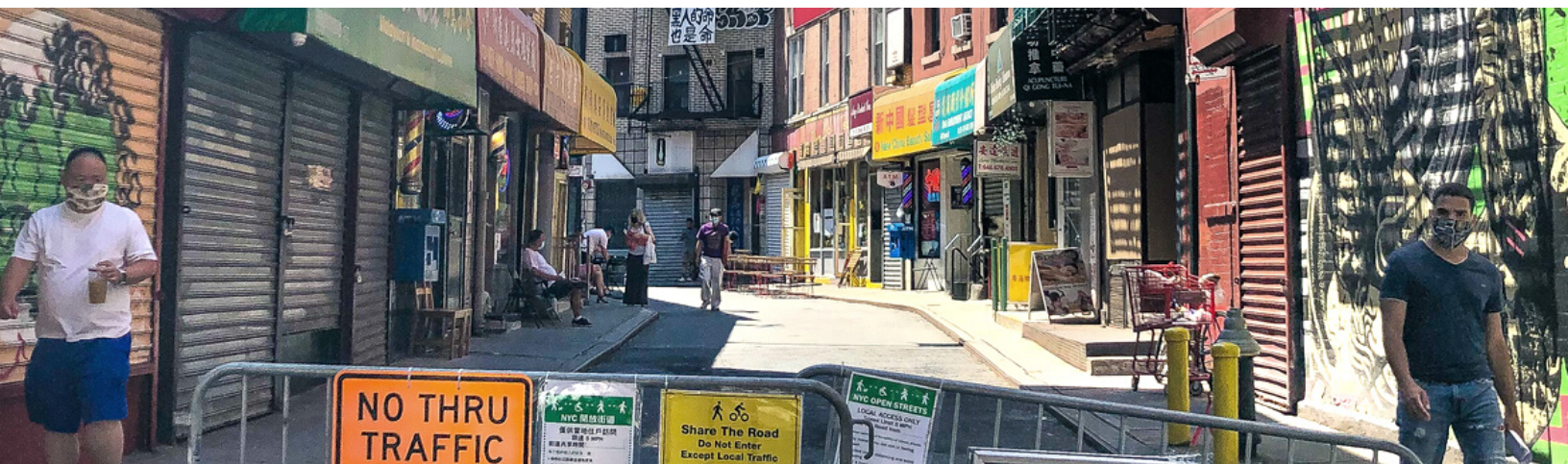
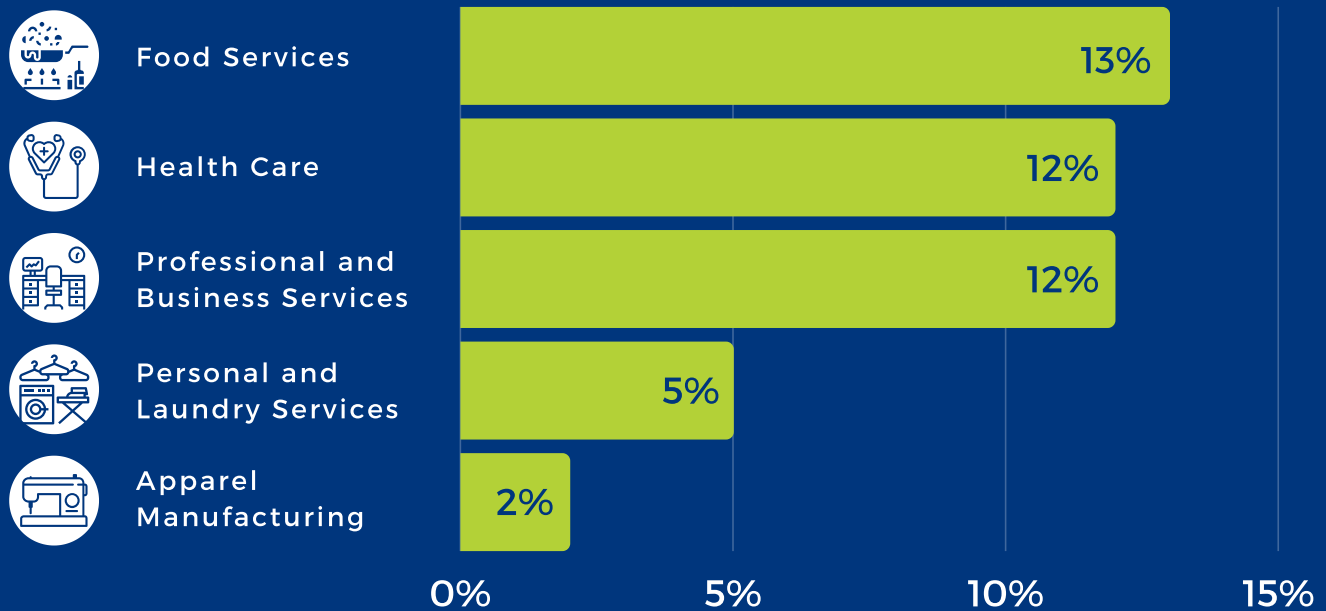


CHART 3

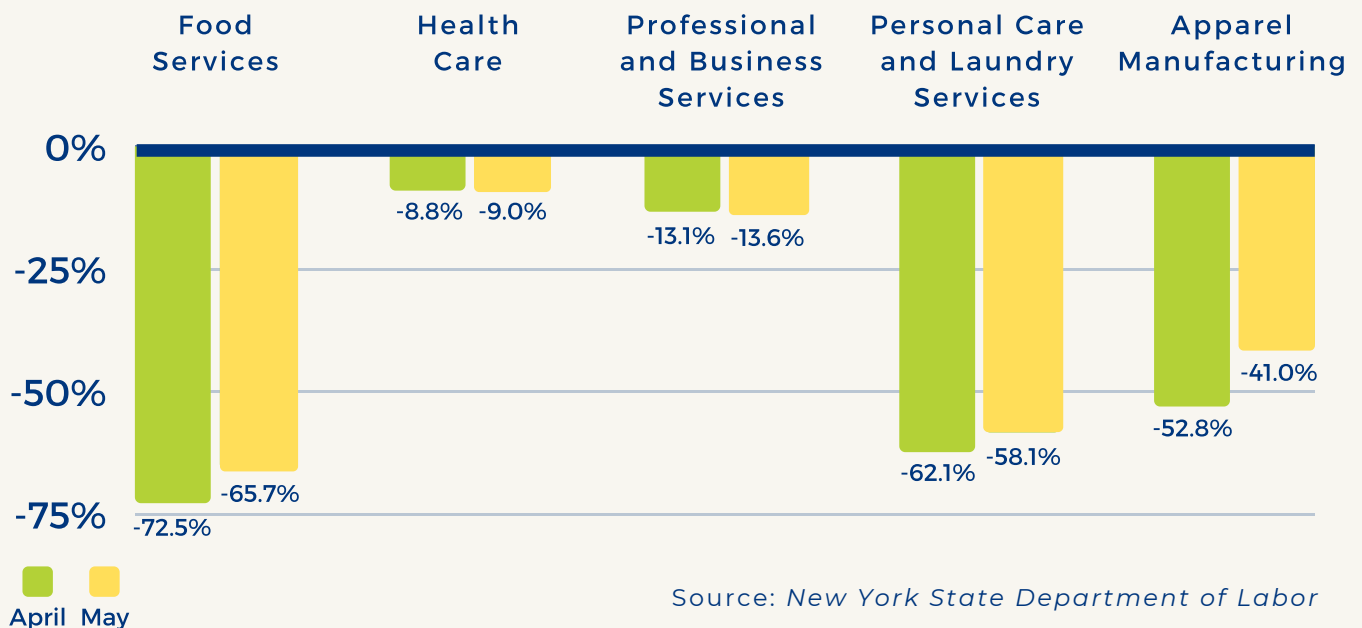
## TOP INDUSTRIES EMPLOYING CHINESE NEW YORKERS...



Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year Public Use Microdata

CHART 4

## ...LOST THE MOST JOBS



Source: New York State Department of Labor



# FILIPINO AMERICANS



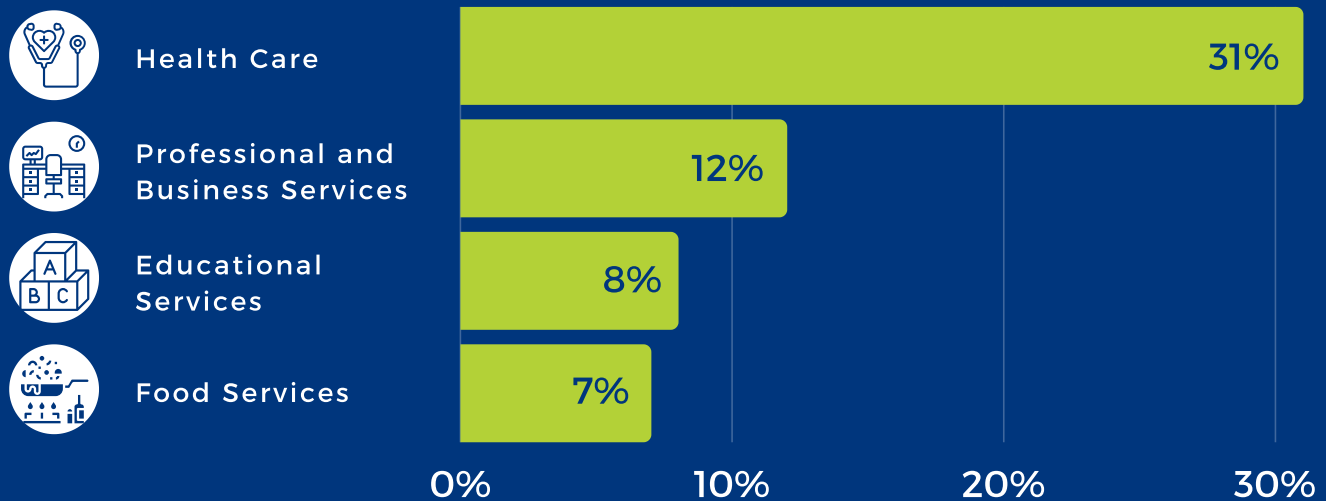
**Almost 1 in 3 Filipino Americans was employed in the healthcare sector, putting this community most at risk for COVID-19 exposure.**

The Filipino community has been able to avoid the worst ravages of the employment storm caused by COVID-19. However, with Filipino American workers being over-represented in the healthcare industry relative to their share of the population, the community experienced a greater risk of exposure to the virus than the general population. Filipino New Yorkers are three to four times more likely to be employed in healthcare compared to all workers. Most Filipinos in healthcare were employed in hospitals and other health subsectors that shed some jobs year-to-year in

April 2020. Subsectors such as nursing care facilities (4.9%), outpatient care centers (8.5%), and home health care services (4%) lost jobs. Outside of healthcare, Filipinos in the professional and business services industry faced 13.1% of jobs lost based on year-to-year employment in April 2020. Filipinos employed in education services mostly worked in the elementary and secondary schools sector, which lost 9.9% of jobs in April 2020. Filipino Americans also depended on food service jobs. As shown in Table 2, food services suffered some of the steepest jobs losses in April and May.

CHART 5

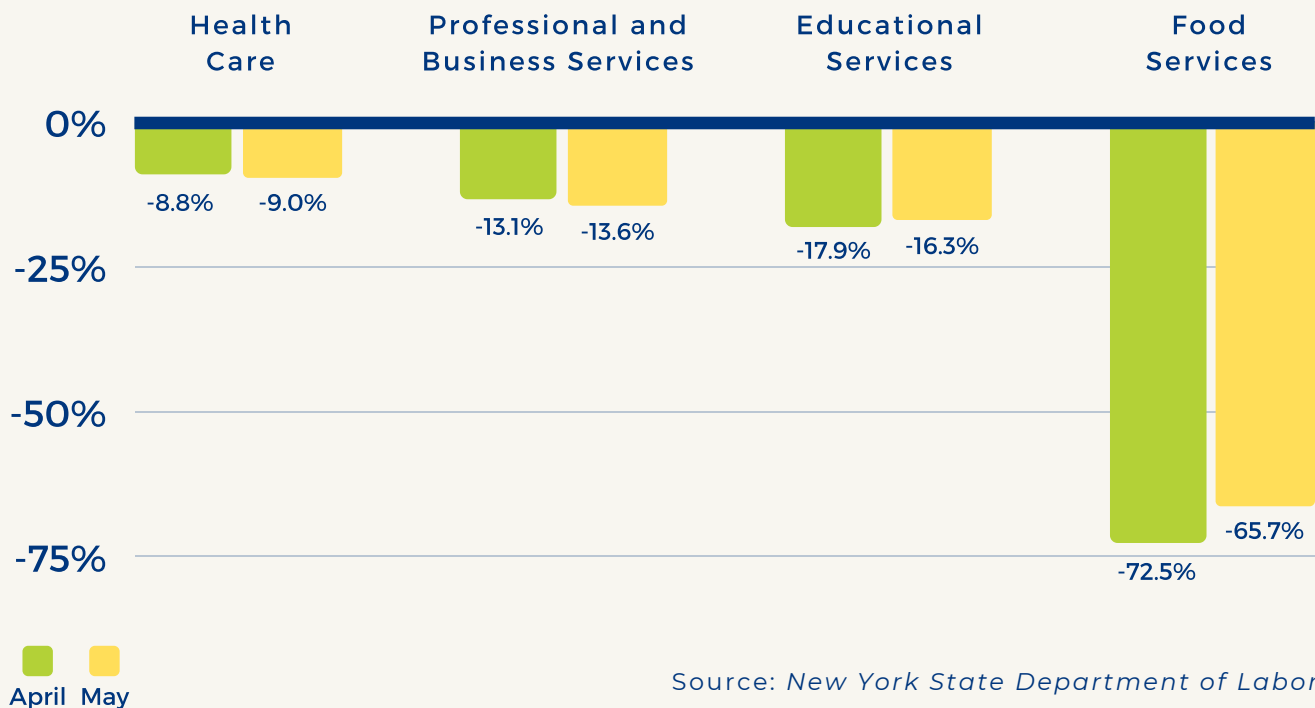
## OF THE TOP INDUSTRIES EMPLOYING **FILIPINO** NEW YORKERS...



Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year Public Use Microdata

CHART 6

## ...**FOOD SERVICES** LOST THE MOST JOBS



Source: New York State Department of Labor



# INDIAN AMERICANS

Significant shares of Indian American workers relied on several industries that shed jobs during the economic downturn from COVID-19. Health care was the leading industry employing Indian Americans, at a rate of 15%. While a large share of Indian medical workers employed by hospitals was unaffected by job loss, those employed in the offices of physicians and home health care services bore

## **Indian workers were hit by large employment losses in retail and transportation sectors.**

the brunt of job loss in the healthcare industry. Offices of physicians lost 26.8% of jobs and home health care services lost 4% of jobs, based on year-to-year employment. As a major industry, professional and business services lost 13% of jobs based on year-

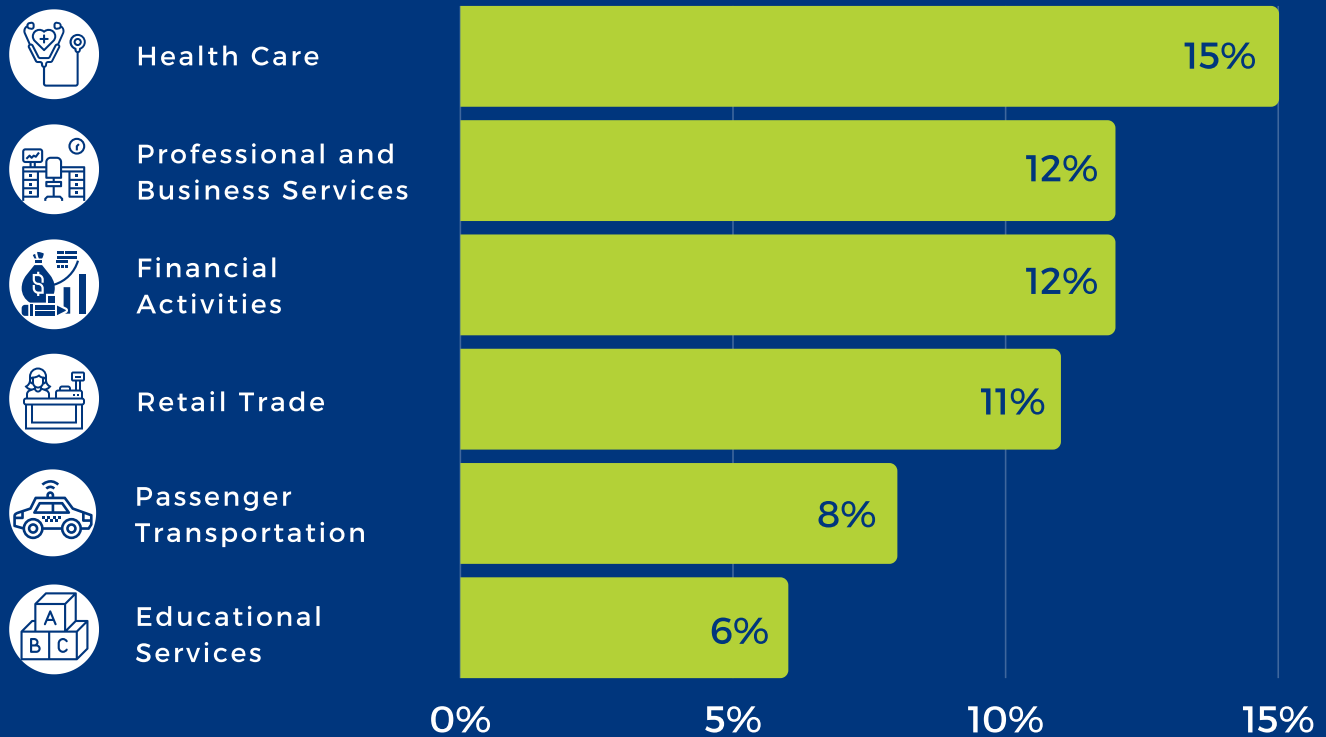
to-year employment across sub-sectors such as legal services, computer systems designs, etc.

Retail trade employed 11% of Indian American workers. Overall retail trade experienced a 29.7% year-to-year decline for April 2020. Within retail trade subcategories, Indian New Yorkers were most likely to be employed in food and beverage; clothing; and department stores. These subindustries had a wide range of job losses, with food and beverage stores having the lowest job loss at 10.4%, clothing stores with the highest (51%), and department stores (33%) right in the middle. Eight percent of Indian Americans were employed in the transit and ground transportation sector mostly, in the taxi and rideshare services. This sector experienced heavy job loss due to COVID-19, as noted in Table 2, with nearly 36% losses in April 2020.



CHART 7

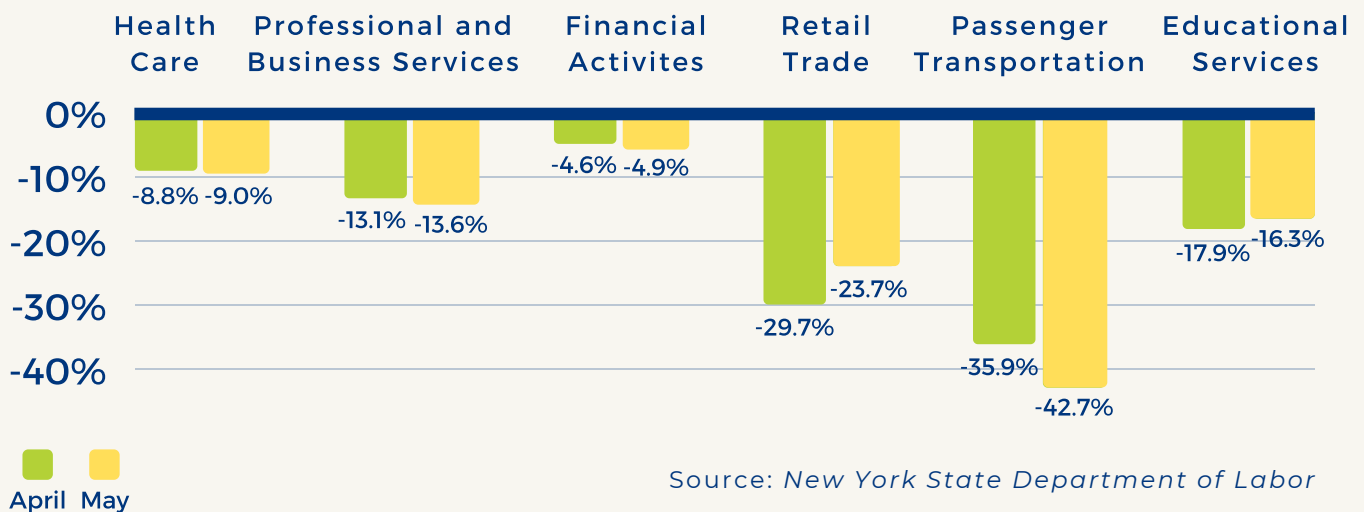
## OF THE TOP INDUSTRIES EMPLOYING INDIAN NEW YORKERS...



Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year Public Use Microdata

CHART 8

## ...RETAIL, TAXI, AND RIDESHARE INDUSTRIES LOST THE MOST JOBS



Source: New York State Department of Labor

# JAPANESE AMERICANS

Japanese American workers in the food services and education industries were impacted the most by the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, those working in food services were impacted by job losses in restaurants and other eating and drinking establishments, which experienced a massive loss in employment of 72.5% in April 2020. Most Japanese workers in the education sector were employed in higher education at colleges, universities, and professional schools, which faced a 4.6% loss in employment. The largest industry employing Japanese workers, professional and business

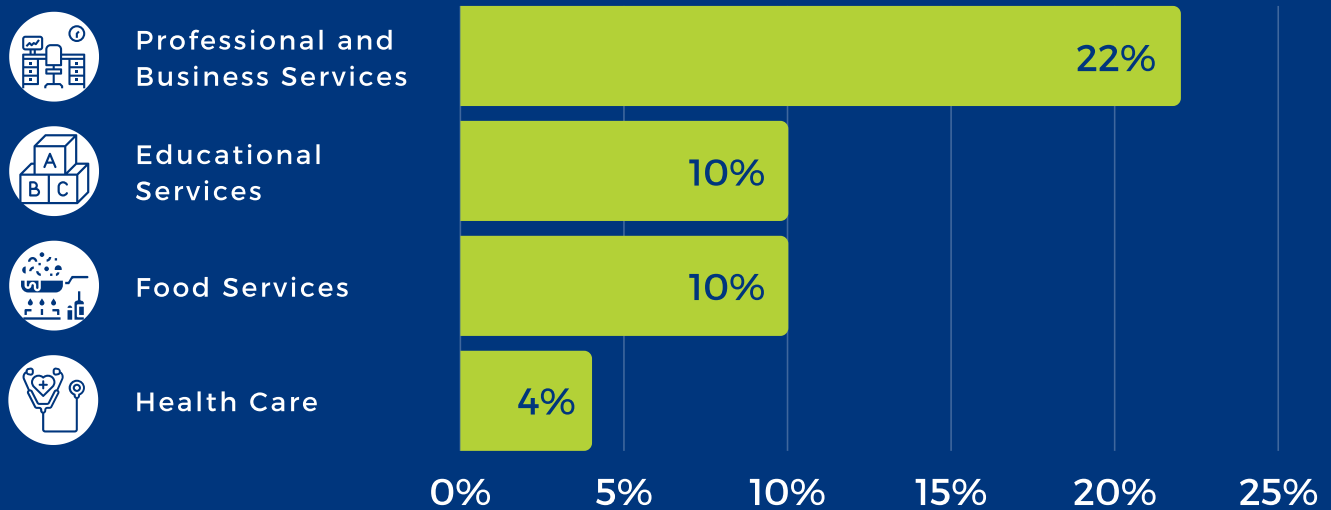
services, experienced employment loss at 13.1% based on year-to-year employment. However, professional subsectors such as computer systems design and related services, as well as architectural, engineering, and related services, which were more likely to employ Japanese workers, remained largely unaffected in April and May of 2020 (see Table 2).

**Japanese workers in the food services industry faced the steepest job losses in their community.**



CHART 9

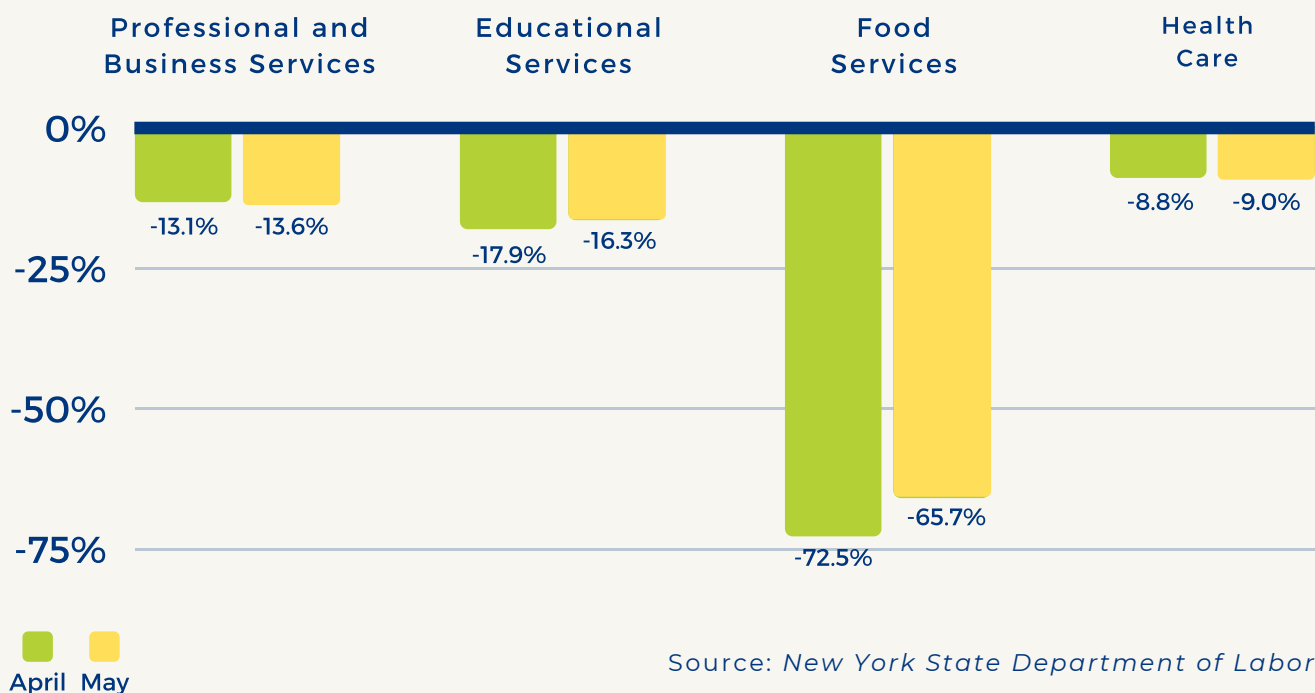
## OF THE TOP INDUSTRIES EMPLOYING JAPANESE NEW YORKERS...



Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year Public Use Microdata

CHART 10

## ...FOOD SERVICES LOST THE MOST JOBS



Source: New York State Department of Labor



# KOREAN AMERICANS

Koreans employed in the retail trade and the personal and laundry care services industries lost the most jobs. Retail trade employed 12% of Korean Americans and lost 29.7% of jobs in April 2020 and 24.4% of jobs in May 2020 based on year-to-year employment. Retail subindustries that employed Korean workers also saw a decline in jobs, such as food and beverage stores (10.4% jobs lost) and clothing and clothing accessories stores (51%). Within the personal and laundry care services category, Korean American workers were overrepresented in beauty salons, nail salons, and other personal care services, as well as in dry cleaning and laundry services. The personal and laundry care services industry lost 62.1% of jobs in April 2020 based on year-to-year change, and continued to lose a massive 58.1% of jobs in May 2020. Job losses across top industries employing Korean Americans have had a significant economic impact on the community.

The top industry employing Korean American workers was professional

and business services. Within this industry category, several subcategories saw job losses based on year-to-year employment for April 2020: advertising and related services lost 2.1% of jobs; legal services lost 8.8% of jobs; and management, scientific, and technical consulting services lost 7.5% of jobs. Most Korean workers in health care were concentrated in jobs in hospitals, which remained fairly stable in employment in April and May 2020. In the financial industry, Koreans were employed in banking and related activities, financial investment activities, and real estate. The industry lost 4.9% of employment in May 2020.

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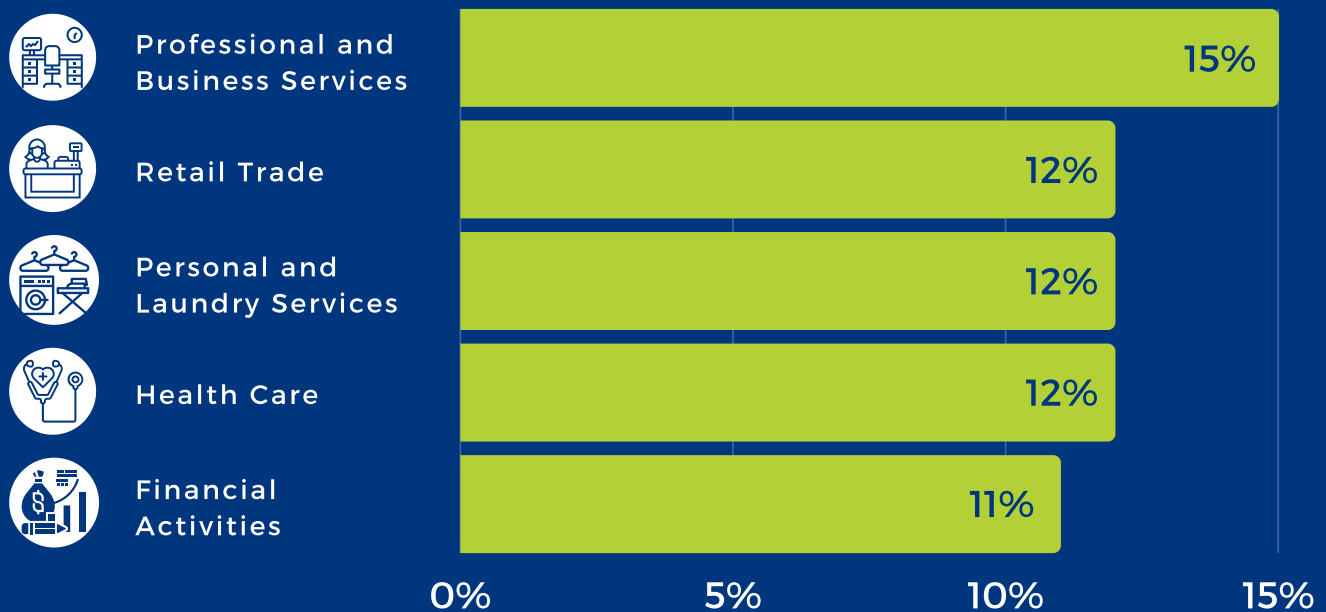
I had no income during the time my business was ordered to close. My landlord keeps calling to ask if I can pay rent, and I don't know how much longer I can hold out.

— Korean hair salon owner  
in Manhattan



CHART 11

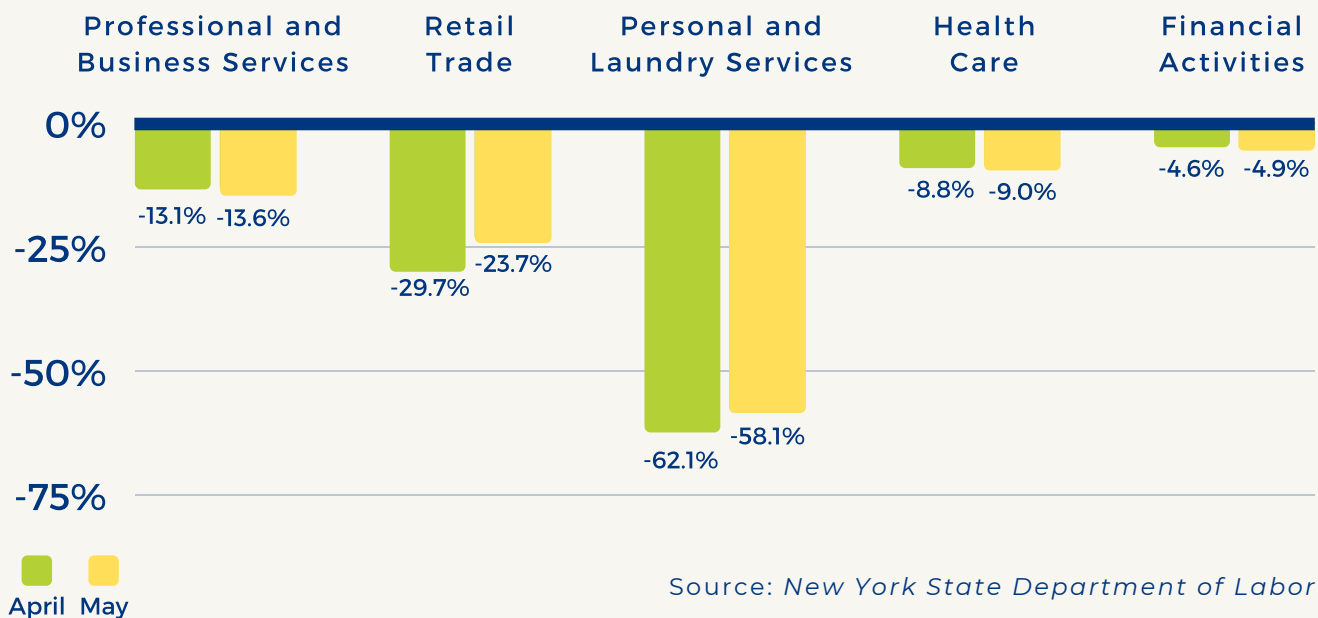
## OF THE INDUSTRIES THAT EMPLOYED THE MOST KOREAN NEW YORKERS...



Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year Public Use Microdata

CHART 12

## ...RETAIL, PERSONAL, AND LAUNDRY SERVICES LOST THE MOST JOBS



Source: New York State Department of Labor



# NEPALI AMERICANS

More than half of Nepali Americans worked in industries that faced significant job losses due to COVID-19, causing the community considerable economic harm. The largest groups of Nepali workers were taxi and limousine drivers,

which are a part of the transit and ground passenger transportation industry. As noted in Table 2, transit and ground passenger transportation faced a job loss of 42.7% from year-to-year in May 2020. Nepalis were also concentrated in the food services industry, similar to other Asian groups, and suffered job losses there as well, with a loss of 72.5% in April 2020 followed by 64.4% loss in May 2020, based on year-to-year comparisons. Within the retail trade industry, Nepalis were employed in places that faced job cutbacks, such as health and personal stores (11.6% jobs lost), and food and beverage stores (10.4%). In the personal and laundry services sector, Nepalis were mainly employed by beauty salons, which were hard-hit by mandated closures in New York.

I used to work as a kitchen helper at a restaurant, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I lost my job. It's even more difficult as I am also suffering from health problems where I occasionally experience body aches. I still have not been called back to work – I am most worried about my health, work, and money because I have to pay rent and buy grocery items. I wish to have access to medicine for my health, and have a job.

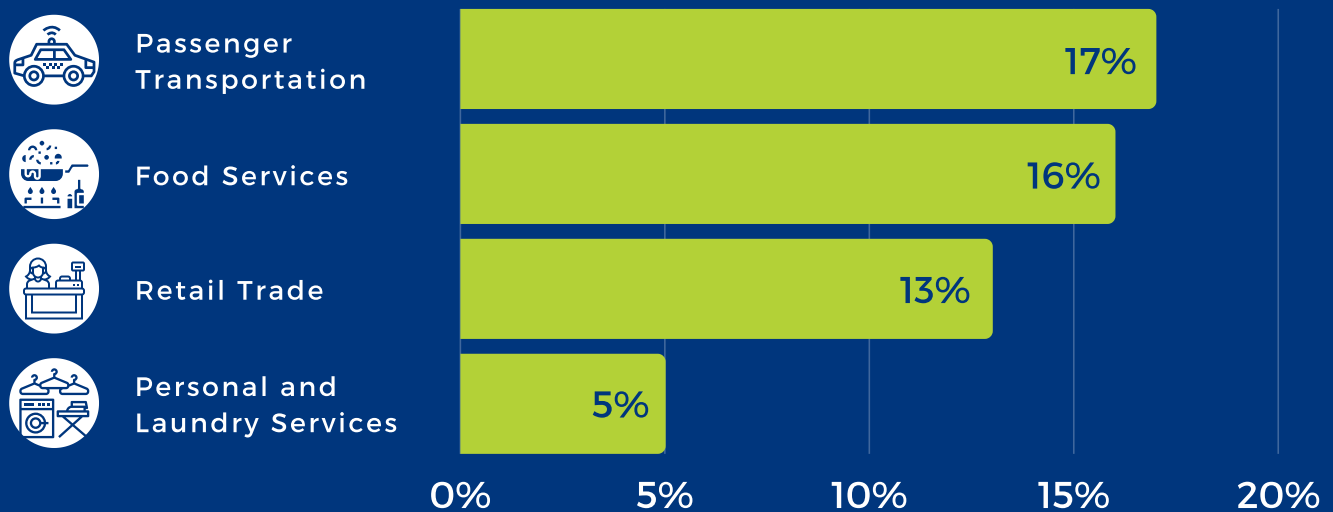
— Nepali restaurant worker in Queens

**More than half** of Nepali Americans mainly worked in industries that faced significant job losses due to COVID-19.



CHART 13

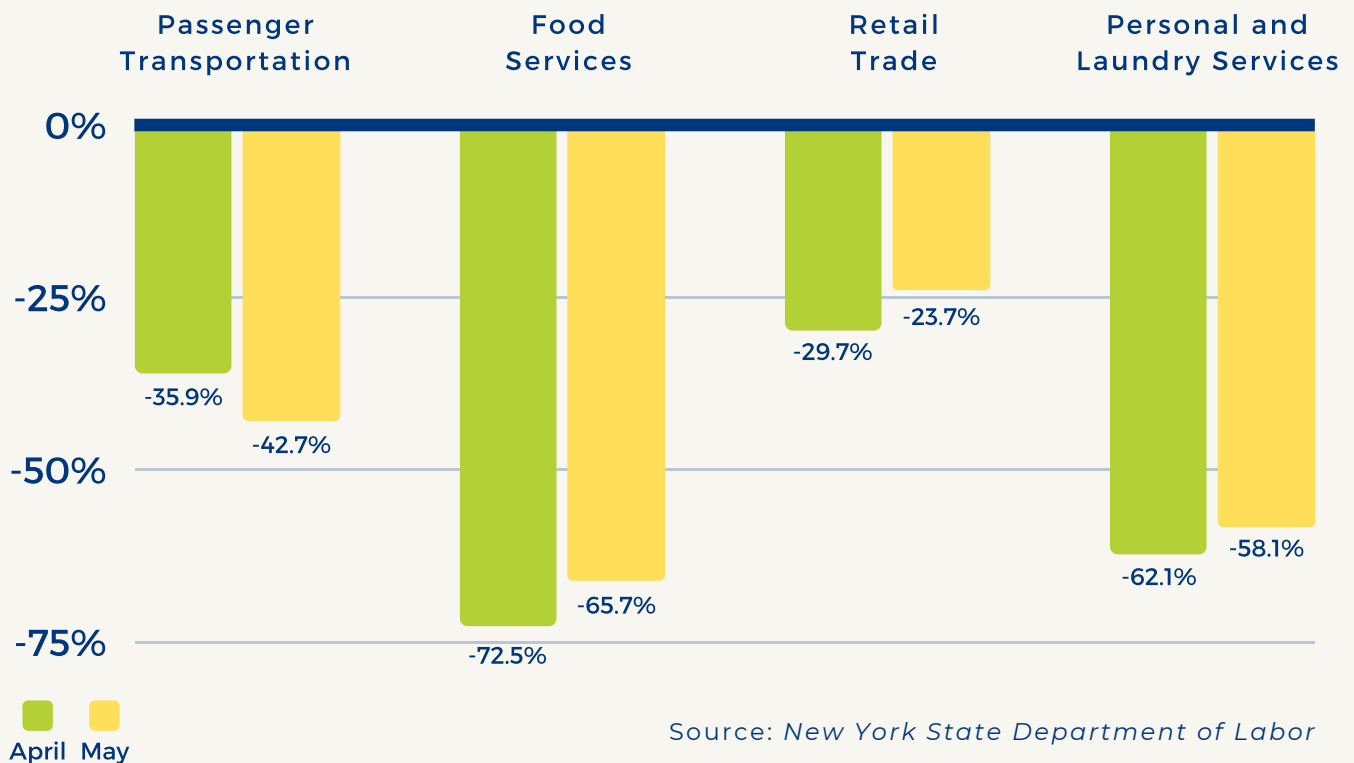
## ALL OF THE TOP INDUSTRIES EMPLOYING NEPALI NEW YORKERS...



Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year Public Use Microdata

CHART 14

## ...FACED MAJOR JOB LOSSES



Source: New York State Department of Labor

# PAKISTANI AMERICANS



Pakistani American workers in the transit and ground passenger transportation industry were mainly reliant on taxi and limousine services for employment. The transit and ground passenger transportation sector suffered a 35.9% decline in April 2020, followed by a 42.7% decrease in May 2020, year-to-year, which led to major job loss in the Pakistani community. Of those in the health-care industry, most were employed in hospitals and home health care services. Pakistani home health care service workers were the ones most affected by a 13.5% decrease in year-to-year employment for May 2020. Meanwhile, employment in hospitals remained comparatively stable. Pakistanis in retail were employed in places that experienced job losses within their subindustry in April 2020, such as grocery stores (10.4% jobs lost year-to-year) and pharmacy and

drug stores (11.6%). Similar to other Asian groups, Pakistani Americans were also affected by the sudden and dramatic fall in employment in the food services industry.

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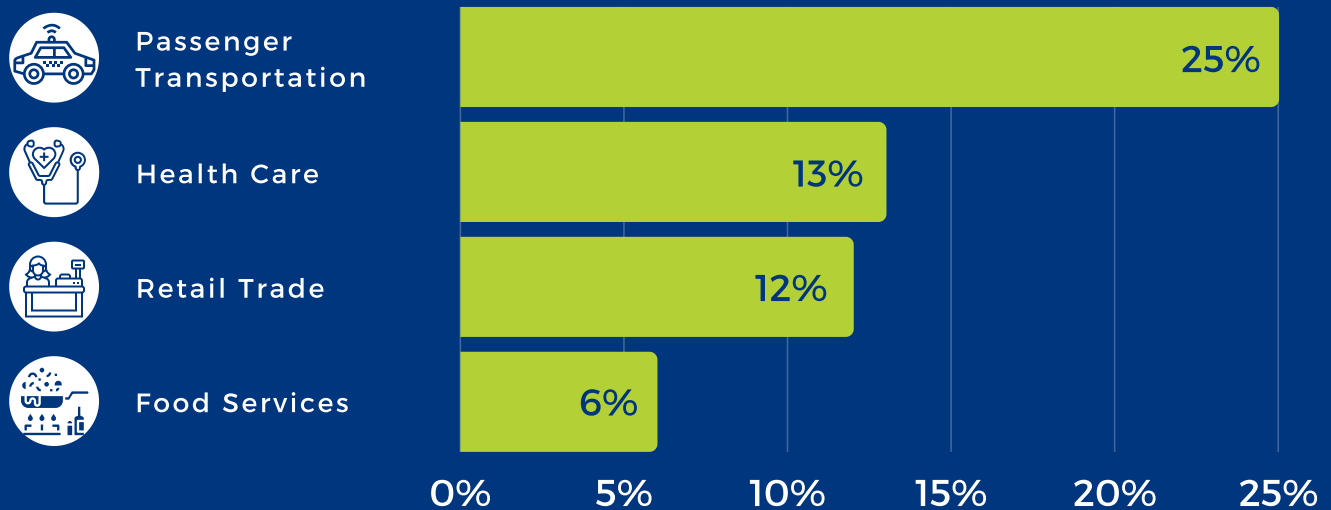
I drive a yellow cab, and I haven't been able to work since the shutdown. I am over 60 years old and have health issues, which would make it really dangerous for me if I caught the virus. Also, there's no business in the city, nothing to work for, really. I would not be able to make the daily lease amount for the car I use. Money became a big issue because expenses like electricity and food costs went up because all of my kids were home every day. When I finally received unemployment assistance after a month, it was not enough to cover rent. I had to borrow money from my brother.

— Pakistani yellow cab driver  
in Queens



CHART 15

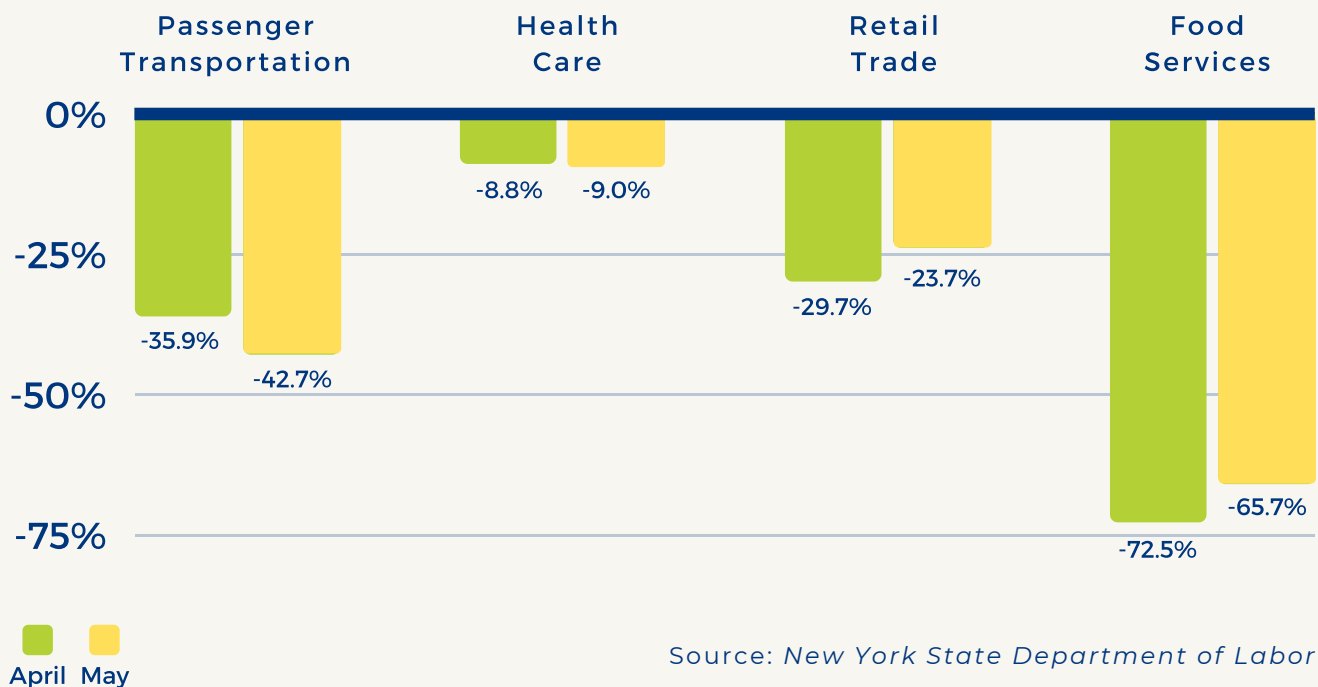
## OF THE MAJOR INDUSTRIES EMPLOYING PAKISTANI NEW YORKERS...



Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year Public Use Microdata

CHART 16

## ...THE HEAVIEST JOB LOSSES WERE IN TRANSPORTATION, RETAIL, AND FOOD SERVICES



Source: New York State Department of Labor

# VIETNAMESE AMERICANS

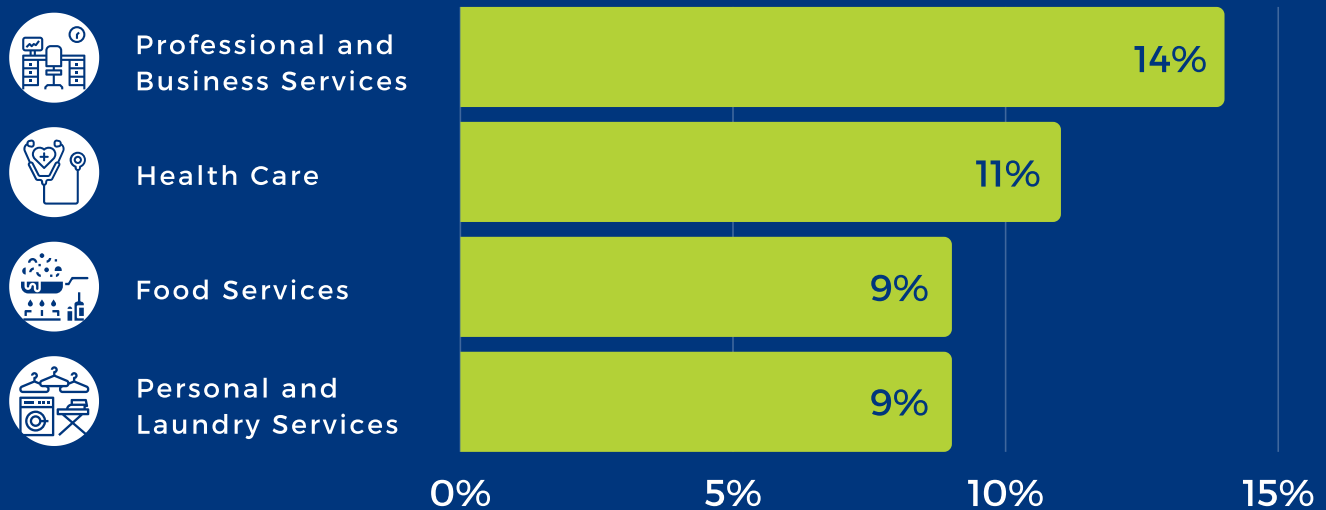
Vietnamese workers were affected by the 13.1% year-to-year job loss in professional and business services, an industry where Vietnamese are overrepresented. Professional sub-sectors that employed Vietnamese workers, such as computer systems design and related services, as well as accounting, tax preparation, bookkeeping, and payroll services,

**Vietnamese New Yorkers were hit hard with job losses in personal care service and food service industries.**

experienced declines in employment in April and May of 2020 (see Table 2). Most Vietnamese health-care workers were employed in hospitals, which were not impacted by job losses. Within personal and laundry services, Vietnamese Americans were mainly employed in beauty salons, nail salons, and other personal appearance services, which lost 62.1% of employment from year-to-year in April 2020. Additionally, Vietnamese Americans were also employed in food services, an industry that faced heavy losses in both April and May 2020.



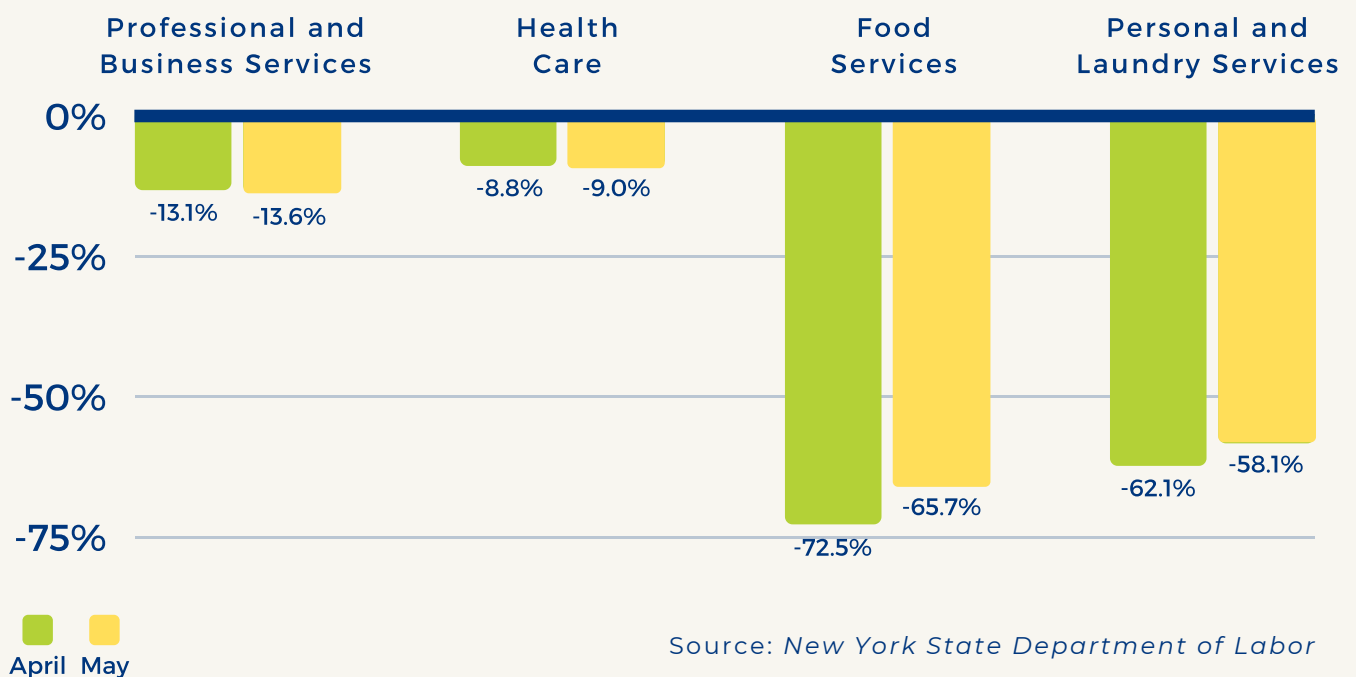
## OF THE TOP INDUSTRIES EMPLOYING VIETNAMESE NEW YORKERS...



Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year Public Use Microdata

CHART 18

## ...FOOD SERVICES AND PERSONAL CARE SERVICES LOST THE MOST JOBS



Source: New York State Department of Labor



# Policy Recommendations

Poverty, language barriers, and immigration status impede many Asian Americans from participating in relief programs. Specifically in New York City, one in four Asians lives in poverty, 50% of Asians have low English proficiency, and over 70% of Asians are immigrants – a status that often leaves them afraid to access relief programs or unable to access adequate information about them. Translation and languages resources for the unemployed in the Asian community are few and far in between. For example, the New York State Department of Labor’s website offers instructions for filing unemployment insurance forms in only three Asian languages despite the fact that Asian New Yorkers speak well over 30 Asian languages.

Increasing the number of Asians employed across New York City’s different industries, especially in the ones where Asians have traditionally been underrepresented, is crucial to reviving the overall economy of the city and the well-being of the fastest-growing community in the city and state. We recommend that policy makers pay attention to the unique needs of these communities and work on improving language access, prioritizing marginalized communities in workforce development efforts, and making sure that all forms of financial assistance are accessible to those who need it, regardless of citizenship status.

# About Us

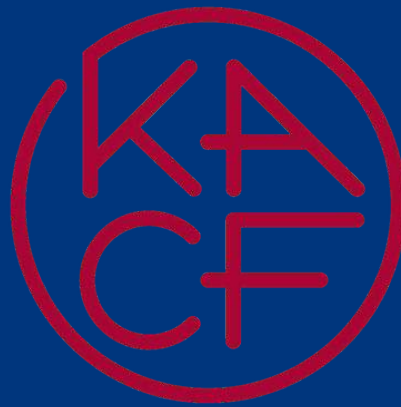
Founded in 1989, the Asian American Federation (AAF) is an umbrella leadership organization that represents the collective voice of 70 community-based organizations serving 1.3 million Asian Americans, the fastest-growing population in New York City. AAF is one of the strongest leadership voices advocating for better policies, services, and funding that lead to more justice and opportunity for Asian immigrants, one of New York City's poorest and underserved communities.

Our mission is to raise the influence and well-being of the pan-Asian American community through research, policy advocacy, public awareness, and organizational development. We support Asians from 20 ethnic groups – diverse in language, culture, and religion – that make up New York's Asian community, by providing expert research and unrelenting advocacy; working with lawmakers to change policies; and training Asian nonprofits to better serve their communities.

## TECHNICAL NOTE

To improve the readability of the charts and tables, we abbreviated some of the industry categories from the official names used in the New York State Department of Labor statistics. Food Services are designated as Food Services and Drinking Places in the NYSDOL data. Passenger Transportation refers to Transit and Ground Passenger Transportation. Health Care is the three industry categories of Ambulatory Health Care Services; Hospitals; and Nursing and Residential Care Facilities.

Support provided by



KOREAN AMERICAN  
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



**Asian American Federation**