

A recipe for disaster: Employment conditions for chefs in the New Zealand hospitality sector

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Introduction

Considerable research has discussed the working conditions of chefs, covering topics such as wage theft [1], bullying and harassment [2, 3, 4], occupational commitment [5], gender and chef identity [6], and mental health and wellbeing [7, 8]. However, contemporary data that clearly shows the working conditions of chefs in the New Zealand hospitality sector is rare. This paper presents recent data from two surveys that highlight the problematic working conditions of chefs in a sector that is of significant economic importance to New Zealand.

Research Design

The data for this extended abstract are drawn from two anonymous online surveys: the first, conducted in 2023, captured 2,203 respondents and represents the largest survey of its kind in New Zealand; the second, conducted in 2024, captured 1,032 respondents. The surveys contain a range of questions on issues including employment relations agreements, working conditions, decent work, psychological contracts, emotional labour, and wages, and were created and hosted on the Qualtrics XM platform. This paper presents data relating to chefs and kitchenhands (defined as kitchen workers who support chefs), comprising participants from 2023 and 58 from 2024.

Findings

Hours worked per week, 2023: Responses were received from fifteen job roles. Chefs reported the longest working hours: 26% indicated that they worked more than 40 hours per week, with senior managers the next highest group at 18%. Furthermore, 30% of chefs reported working more than 50 hours per week, a rate matched only by senior managers. In contrast, just 1% of food and beverage attendants and functions/events attendants reported working more than 40 hours per week.

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Receiving legally required rest breaks, 2023: Chefs were the largest group reporting non-compliance with rest breaks, with 24% stating they *never* received them. Waiters trailed well behind at 16%, and shift managers at 12%.

Working split shifts involving unpaid breaks over one hour, 2023: Analysis of workers who 'always' or 'often' worked split shifts showed that 25% of chefs fell into this category, the highest proportion among the fifteen roles. Waiters were the next most affected, with 14% commonly working split shifts.

Training, 2023: Regarding the receipt of formal and/or informal training in their roles, chefs reported the highest rates of *strongly disagreed* and *disagreed* responses among the fifteen roles titles (27% and 35%). In comparison, only 1% to 5% of junior managers and fast-food managers selected these options.

Bullying and harassment, 2023: Fifty-five percent of chefs indicated they had experienced or witnessed bullying and harassment. Interestingly the lowest response for this question came from kitchen hands at 43%. Shift managers, junior managers, and fast-food managers reported the highest rates of bullying and harassment (66%, 69% and 72%). On average, 56% of all hospitality workers surveyed reported experiencing this behaviour.

Burnout and turnover intention, 2024: Based on a nine-question MBI scale, chefs reported a burnout mean score of 21.5, second only to fast food workers (22.5). The lowest scores were observed among tour guides (12.5) and IT, finance, and marketing workers (14.4). The overall mean for the 478 respondents was 18.6.

Turnover intention. When asked if they intended to leave their current job within the next twelve months, 48% of chefs answered *yes*—the highest rate for this question. The average across all respondents was 37%.

Discussion

The New Zealand media often reports on the shortage of chefs in the hospitality sector. With almost half of the chefs in the 2024 study reporting elevated burnout scores, 55% in the 2023 study experiencing bully and harassment, and just under half in the 2024 survey indicating they intend to leave their jobs within the next 12 months, some significant drivers of that shortage become evident. The above results reveal that chefs in these surveys consistently reported the worst conditions of all hospitality workers. They reported the highest rates of

working split shifts, missing required breaks, and receiving insufficient training. Combined with working the longest hours of any hospitality role, this creates a clear recipe for chef burnout and high turnover.

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