



# SUPPLY-SIDE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT: SURVEY RESULTS

## Edgecombe County, North Carolina



PREPARED FOR:

**Eric Evans**

Edgecombe County Manager

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People • Business • Community

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# Executive Summary

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## Purpose

After reaching a peak unemployment rate of 17 percent following the Great Recession, Edgecombe County, North Carolina, still has a persistently high unemployment rate compared to the statewide figure. Its economy and workforce are lagging behind the state in other ways as well: Edgecombe County residents earn less, are more likely to be poor or struggling, and are more likely to be trapped in low-quality jobs. Workforce development policies at the federal, state, and local levels are largely focused on connecting job-seekers to jobs through education or training, but often fail to address other barriers to employment. Compounding this issue is the fact that most workforce development initiatives — especially for the broader population of job-seekers and not just the “hard to employ” — are designed based on data collected by third parties. Rarely are job-seekers asked what barriers they face.

In an effort to improve employment outcomes in Edgecombe County, the county manager, in partnership with the Turning Point Workforce Development Board, and with a grant from the NC Department of Commerce, contracted with the UNC School of Government and NCGrowth to conduct a study of supply-side labor barriers. Specifically, the UNC research team was tasked with the following research questions:

*What are the barriers that job-seekers in Edgecombe County, North Carolina say they face when trying to obtain a quality job? What barriers should local officials and service providers in Edgecombe County focus their efforts on mitigating? What policies and strategies could be employed to do so?*

To collect data, we employed a survey of 119 job-seekers receiving services at the NCWorks Career Center located in Rocky Mount. Specifically, we asked about job-seekers' perceptions of the barriers they face trying to obtain or keep a job, in addition to information about their past employment and job search experiences. The survey was administered in mid-February to mid-March of 2020, just before the lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and closings of non-essential businesses that occurred due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. We conducted follow-up interviews with a small number of survey respondents to probe more deeply their job search experiences and perceptions about employment barriers.



## Key Findings

**The data reveal three major perceived barriers to employment in Edgecombe County:**

- A challenging market for good quality jobs
- Gaps in education and experience
- Gaps in personal networks

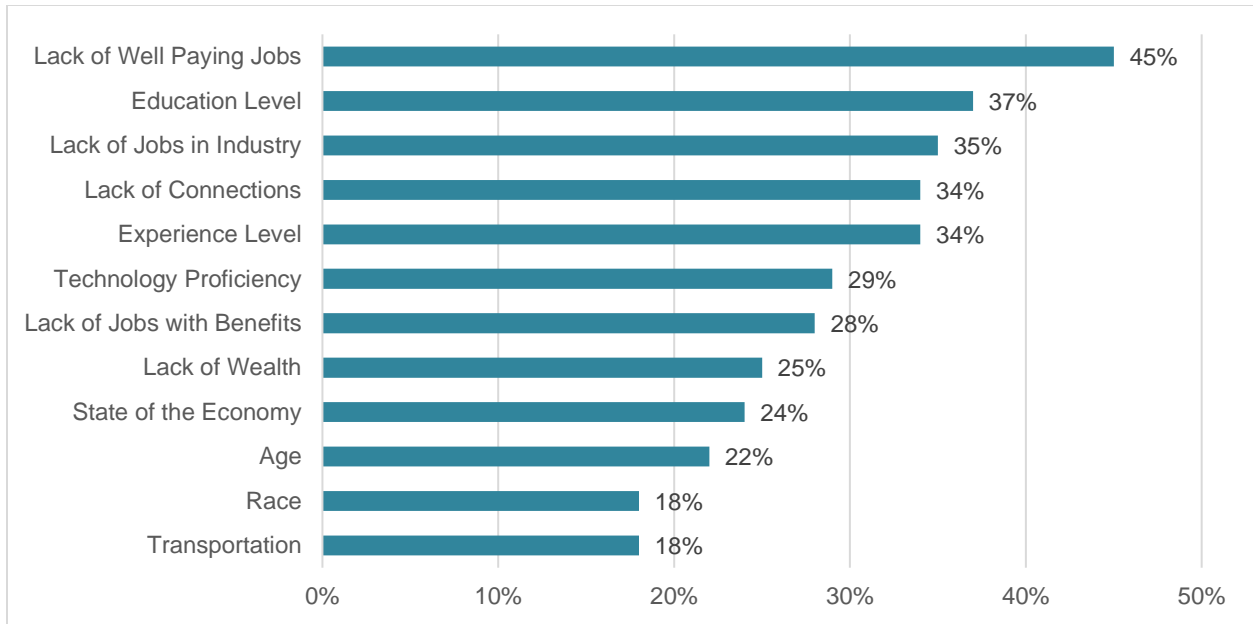
**Additionally, certain barriers to employment may not be widespread issues, but pose significant hardships for those affected:**

- Ongoing medical expenses and physical health issues
- A lack of technology proficiency, especially as it relates to the job application process
- Access to reliable transportation
- A record of criminal convictions

**Finally, the following data insights, although not identified as major barriers by job-seekers themselves, merit further exploration:**

- Some respondents are unsure about whether they experience depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues.
- Many respondents are not accessing community resources, such as community-based nonprofits or religious institutions, instead relying on family, friends, and institutional resources, such as the NCWorks Career Center.
- Job-seekers in Edgecombe County are concentrated in the younger (under 25) and older (45 to 64) ends of the age spectrum.

Survey respondents were likely to face multiple barriers: 71 percent of respondents cited at least two issues negatively affecting their job search. However, despite this, respondents valued financial self-sufficiency, and largely felt that they were personally responsible for the outcome of their job search.



**Figure A: Percentages of respondents who cited different factors as barriers to employment**

## Policy Implications

An analysis of labor supply-side barriers suggests that public officials and service providers consider these focus areas as ways to enhance programs and policies to help job-seekers:

- Better connections for job-seekers to help, including mental health services
- Fostering networking opportunities
- Continuing work to improve wages and job quality
- Carving out a specific focus on older workers
- Replicating the survey and expanding local data collection

Finally, we suggest that this method of directly surveying job seekers be refined and replicated in other jurisdictions in order to better understand job seekers' experiences and employment barriers from their vantage point.

## Project Purpose

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In the summer of 2019, local officials in Edgecombe County, NC requested assistance from the UNC School of Government (SOG) with conducting an analysis of the barriers that may be contributing to persistently high levels of unemployment in the area. With funding from the NC Department of Commerce, the SOG engaged NCGrowth at the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise to form the UNC research team to undertake the project. The UNC research team consulted with the Turning Point Workforce Development Board in designing the survey and established a partnership with the Rocky Mount NCWorks Career Center to serve as the primary data collection site. Specifically, this research project sought to address the following questions:

*What are the barriers that job-seekers in Edgecombe County, North Carolina say they face when trying to obtain a quality job? What barriers should local officials and service providers in Edgecombe County focus their efforts on mitigating? What policies and strategies could be employed to do so?*

In addition to sharing insights with county leaders and service providers, the project has a dual purpose of contributing to generalizable knowledge in the fields of workforce and economic development. The research findings help fill an identified knowledge gap specifically with respect to the employment barriers job seekers encounter. Edgecombe County is a good location for such a survey due to its persistently high rate of unemployment compared to other counties in North Carolina.

# Issue Framing

## A. Why might Edgecombe County consider a new approach to workforce development?

Edgecombe County, North Carolina, is a region that experiences high levels of unemployment compared to other counties in North Carolina (Figure B). Despite a multitude of workforce and economic development initiatives to lower the unemployment rate, it persists. This project is meant to be a novel way in Edgecombe County to diagnose reasons for unemployment in the county; this way, local policymakers may be able to design policy interventions that work.

Edgecombe County was greatly affected by the Great Recession starting in 2008: in February 2010, its unemployment rate ballooned to 17%.<sup>1</sup> Despite some recovery, Edgecombe County had the third highest unemployment rate in the state at 6% in 2017, with 44% of the 16 and over population not in the labor force. Comparatively, the state-wide unemployment rate was 4%, with 37% outside the labor force.<sup>2</sup> Edgecombe County's strained relationship with the labor market is reflected by the fact that 25% of residents live below the poverty line, compared to 16% of all North Carolina residents.<sup>3</sup> Of all Edgecombe County residents, 51 percent are considered to be “poor or struggling.”

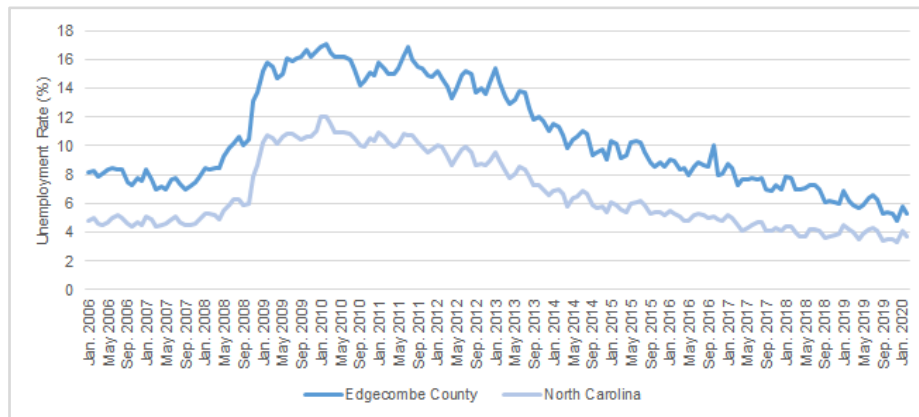


Figure 2A: Unemployment rates in Edgecombe County, 2006 - 2020<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Holder, Sarah, “Decentralize the Government? North Carolina May Try,” *CityLab*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.citylab.com/life/2019/03/government-jobs-state-agencies-list-north-carolina-dmv/580129/>.

<sup>2</sup> Unemployment Rate, 2018. Social Explorer, (based on data from U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-year, accessed March 25, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Poverty Rate, 2018. Social Explorer, (based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-year; accessed March 25, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Social Explorer, Unemployment Rate.

Edgecombe County's high unemployment rate may correlate with its majority black population. Racial gaps in the labor force are well documented and pronounced, and low-wage work and unemployment disproportionately plague black workers.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the COVID-19 economic downturn, black unemployment in North Carolina was nearly 7 percent, while white unemployment was under 3 percent.<sup>6</sup> The racial disparity in Edgecombe County is more acute: in 2018, 10 percent of black labor force participants were unemployed, versus 5 percent of white labor force participants.<sup>7</sup>

The Turning Point Workforce Development Board and regional partners have employed several initiatives to help job-seekers find high-quality jobs, including:

- The Regional Advanced Manufacturing Pipeline – (RAMP) East, which is meant to improve recruitment from the community colleges to the advanced manufacturing sector.
- The development of State Certified Career Pathways in healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and business service support.
- Increased efforts to engage employers in apprenticeships.<sup>8</sup>
- The Area L AHEC, which provides ongoing training and development services to primary care providers.<sup>9</sup>
- The Strategic Twin-Counties Education Partnership (STEP), which concentrates on workforce awareness and readiness for K-12 Nash and Edgecombe County students;<sup>10</sup>

While these efforts are making a difference, the county's high unemployment rate persists. We theorize that the current policies and interventions may not fully address the needs of job-seekers, particularly those who may be harder to employ for various reasons. Edgecombe County's approach to reducing the unemployment rate has primarily focused on improving specific workplace skills and education, especially as it relates to high-growth industries, but may fail to fully address underlying issues that impact a person's ability to work, such as transportation, health or childcare issues.

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<sup>5</sup> Pitts, Steven C., PhD, *Job Quality and Black Workers An Examination of the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York*, UC Berkeley Labor Center, May 2008, [http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2007/blackworkers\\_07.pdf](http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2007/blackworkers_07.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Wilson, Valerie, *Black unemployment is at least twice as high as white unemployment at the national level and in 14 states and the District of Columbia*, Economic Policy Institute, April 4, 2019, <https://www.epi.org/publication/valerie-figures-state-unemployment-by-race/>.

<sup>7</sup> Social Explorer, Unemployment Rate.

<sup>8</sup> *Annual Report for the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy*, Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments, 2019, <https://www.ucpcog.org/UCPCOG%202019%20Annual%20CEDS%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> "Our Mission and Vision," Area L AHEC, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.arealahec.org/about/about-us/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Our Mission and Goals," Strategic Twin-Counties Education Partnership, accessed March 31, 2020, <https://www.step-partnership.org/our-mission-goals>.

We observed that connections between the workforce development and social services system in the county can be fragmented. The NCWorks Career Centers are focused on job-related assistance; the services they offer include career-search and labor market information services, education services, workplace training, and job-seeker services. While counselors can make referrals or provide information on services when prompted, it is not necessarily in their job purview to diagnose a reason why a client is unable to work. It is also difficult to find workforce transition or community assistance program information within the online NCWorks system.<sup>11</sup>

## B. Why consider self-identified barriers to employment?

Many unemployed people face obstacles to obtaining or holding well-paying, high-quality jobs. Commonly cited reasons include a lack of transportation; childcare or elder-care; physical or mental health issues; substance abuse issues;<sup>12</sup> possession of criminal records; or a lack of necessary job skills or soft skills.<sup>13</sup> These types of barriers are considered labor supply-side barriers. Labor supply-side barriers stand in contrast to demand-side barriers, or obstacles posed by greater economic trends such as declining industries or economic downturns that stymie labor force participation.<sup>14</sup> An accumulation of supply-side barriers often plague the “hard-to-employ,” leaving this population trapped in low-wage jobs, chronically unemployed, or alienated from a society that values honest work and self-sufficiency.<sup>15</sup>

State and local governments throughout the United States have employed numerous policy interventions to help job-seekers secure suitable jobs, ranging from establishing local career centers, to developing new education programs, to coordinating social services for job-seekers. These initiatives constitute a large part of the field of workforce development, which focuses on matching job-seekers to jobs, training or educating workers, and ensuring jobs are consistently available.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Workforce Transition and Community Assistance,” NCWorks, accessed March 31, 2020,

<https://www.ncworks.gov/vosnet/gsjpub/documentView.aspx?enc=k8KmPAIGNeNnk3L/lfKA5w==>.

<sup>12</sup> Corinth, K.C., *Barriers to Work and Social Enterprise: Estimating the Target Population*, American Enterprise Institute, July 20, 2017, [https://www.aei.org/\\*/barriers-to-work-and-social-enterprise-estimating-the-target-population/](https://www.aei.org/*/barriers-to-work-and-social-enterprise-estimating-the-target-population/).

<sup>13</sup> Funk, Robert, *Battle of the Barriers: Workers Want Jobs, but Seven Barriers are in Their Way*, ExpressPros, January 24, 2018, <https://www.expresspros.com/Newsroom/America-Employed/New-White-Paper-from-Express-Barriers-Between-People-and-Jobs.aspx>.

<sup>14</sup> Parrot, James, and Lazar Treschan, *Barriers to Entry: The Increasing Challenges Faced by Young Adults in the New York City Labor Market*, The Fiscal Policy Institute, 2013, [http://fiscalspolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/JFNYC\\_Barriers\\_to\\_Entry\\_5-2-13.pdf](http://fiscalspolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/JFNYC_Barriers_to_Entry_5-2-13.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Bloom, Dan, and David Butler, “Overcoming Employment Barriers: Strategies to Help the ‘Hard-to-Employ,’” in *Reshaping the American Workforce in a Changing Economy*, ed. Harry J. Holzer and Demetra Smith Nightingale (Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 2007), 155-180.

<sup>16</sup> Haralson, Lyn E., *What Is Workforce Development?*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, April 1, 2010, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/bridges/spring-2010/what-is-workforce-development>.

For workforce development initiatives to be effective, policymakers must have a thorough understanding of what factors prevent labor market participants from obtaining satisfactory work. From a practice-driven standpoint, workforce development programs are often successful at assessing eligibility for public services or work readiness, but sometimes fail to capture *why* individuals are unable to work.<sup>17</sup> From a data-driven standpoint, research on employment barriers often uses data from employers or career centers, which abstracts identified reasons for being unable to work. Furthermore, studies that source data from job-seekers themselves often focus on specific sub-populations of the unemployed, including the “hard-to-employ.” Despite considerable literature on employment barriers, comparatively few studies directly ask a sample that attempts to be representative of the full population of job-seekers why they are unable to find a good quality job.

Effective workforce development initiatives are more important than ever in an increasingly stratified labor market. As middle-wage jobs disappear — a trend which is often attributed to new technology, changing workforce demographics, climate change, shifting global demand, and shifts in established business models — it is more difficult for the hard-to-employ and individuals facing significant employment barriers to find well-paying, good-quality jobs.<sup>18</sup> This phenomenon is even more acute in rural economies, where population and job growth has been stagnant or falling since the Great Recession, and real wages continue to decline.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, while the short and long-term effects of the COVID-19 public health crisis on labor markets are largely unknown, they are likely to exacerbate these trends and structural challenges.

Additionally, this project is an opportunity to give job seekers direct input into the conversation of crafting policies designed to help them. Although falling short of giving them a formal role in economic decision-making, it is a step towards empowering marginalized populations to voice directly what issues they face in the job search process, rather than relying solely on data reported by employers or collected by third parties. It may also help address underlying bias or racism in the workforce development policy-making process. Recent research in the healthcare field demonstrates negative health outcomes that can plague marginalized populations

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<sup>17</sup> Bloom and Butler, “Overcoming Employment Barriers,” 155-180.

<sup>18</sup> Loprest, Pamela, Demetra Nightingale, Jenny R. Yang, and K. Steven Brown, *What would it take to achieve quality jobs for all workers?*, Urban Institute, May 2019, [https://next50.urban.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/2019%2005%2009\\_Next50%20Job%20Quality\\_finalizedv2.pdf](https://next50.urban.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/2019%2005%2009_Next50%20Job%20Quality_finalizedv2.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Lund, Susan, James Manyika, Liz Hilton Segel, André Dua, Bryan Hancock, Scott Rutherford, and Brent Macon, *The future of work in America: People and places, today and tomorrow*, McKinsey Global Institute, July, 2019, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-in-america-people-and-places-today-and-tomorrow>.

when systemic bias or racism prevents doctors from fully listening to their patient.<sup>20</sup> The same idea may be applicable here, when workforce development practitioners fail to seek input from an important segment of their constituents. Asking job-seekers what barriers they encounter can help shift power dynamics, show respect, and perhaps create greater buy-in for policy interventions.

### C. Why might Edgecombe County's workforce development policies need to focus more on supply-side issues?

The workforce development in Edgecombe County is a node of a broader and more complex system. Although programs and funding span across all sectors and levels of government, the overarching framework for workforce development programs is set by the federal government. Today, federal workforce policy is dictated by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014. Under the WIOA, national workforce policy is mostly demand-driven. The workforce system places a special focus on filling skills in demand by employers, tapping into the opportunity that 40 percent of American employers say they cannot find employees with the skills they need.<sup>21</sup>

Federal workforce policy has also been highly fragmented; workforce development programs focus on connecting workers to jobs, and do not have an explicit motive to address underlying barriers. Thus, connections between workforce programs and welfare provision programs can be weak. The most explicit example of a workforce program integrated with welfare provision is the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which requires parents to work to receive welfare but is limited in scope. The WIOA attempts to address some of these criticisms, by:

- Requiring more flexibility in service delivery, allowing different policy interventions for different populations.
- Aligning workforce development with other systems, including employment services, adult education, economic development, and vocational rehabilitation.
- Increasing some emphasis on services to individuals with barriers to employment.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Anwar, Yasmin, "Why middle-class black women dread the doctor's office," *UC Berkeley News*, January 18, 2019, <https://news.berkeley.edu/2019/01/18/invisiblevisits/>.

<sup>21</sup> Laboissiere, Martha and Mona Mourshed, "Closing the skills gap: Creating workforce-development programs that work for everyone," McKinsey & Company, February 2017, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/closing-the-skills-gap-creating-workforce-development-programs-that-work-for-everyone>.

<sup>22</sup> Nightingale, Demetra Smith. "Statement of Demetra Smith Nightingale, PhD.; hearing on Preparing the Workforce," statement to the Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies, United States House of Representatives, April 4, 2017, [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/89426/nightingale\\_-\\_testimony.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/89426/nightingale_-_testimony.pdf).



However, the extent that the WIOA actually achieves any of these differences adequately is unclear, especially considering the persisting labor demand-driven policies in Edgecombe County and its workforce system's lack of integration with public service providers other than the K-12 and community college systems.

Edgecombe County may have also prioritized labor demand-driven policies based on local conditions. There are visible changes to the local economy as previously strong sectors of the economy continue to shed jobs and low-wage jobs are more common. Manufacturing, Edgecombe County's largest industry by employment, has shrunk by 21 percent since 2016; the top five occupations by number employed all had an average hourly entry wage of \$8 to \$10 an hour. As the local economy continues to shift, it is likely that policymakers are pressured to find ways to close the skills gap, or the mismatch between well-paying jobs available, and workers with skills for languishing occupations or industries.

#### D. In what way is there a knowledge gap of self-identified barriers to employment?

Academic studies that examine self-reported barriers to employment often use narrowly defined samples, such as social services recipients, job-seekers with children, job-seekers with a criminal record, job-seekers seeking health treatments, or participants in community organization programming. There is sizable research on the “hard-to-employ,” a population that often requires special intervention to help them succeed in the labor market. The hard-to-employ population often suffers from chronic, overlapping barriers to working (Table 2B).

CATEGORY	BARRIERS
<b>Human Capital Deficits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of work skills and experience</li> <li>● Lack of knowledge of workplace norms</li> <li>● Lack of education or degrees</li> <li>● Lack of technology proficiency</li> </ul>
<b>Health Problems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mental illness</li> <li>● Learning disabilities</li> <li>● Substance abuse and drug dependence</li> <li>● Physical health, including chronic health issues, disabilities and maternal health</li> </ul>

<b>Lack of Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of information about jobs</li> <li>● Lack of support from social networks</li> <li>● Disengagement from support services</li> </ul>
<b>Work Disruptions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Recent homelessness and lack of stable housing</li> <li>● Child or elder care issues</li> <li>● Transportation issues</li> </ul>
<b>Hiring Issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Involvement with the criminal justice system</li> <li>● Communication issues</li> <li>● Language barriers</li> <li>● Perceived discrimination</li> </ul>
<b>Emotional Issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of confidence and fear of rejection</li> </ul>

**Table 2B: Common barriers to employment**

Examples of survey-based studies about supply-side barriers with narrow sample definitions include:

- A 2018 study from Loyola University Chicago examined perceived employment barriers for low income populations in Chicago and South Korea, with both samples coming from social service agencies. Researchers defined the Perceived Employment Barrier Scale, finding human capital barriers to be the most significant.<sup>23</sup>
- A 2002 study looking at urban women receiving welfare assistance cite transportation, lack of a high school diploma, or a major depressive episode as a major barrier to employment.
- A study surveyed visitors to one of Nevada's One-Stop career centers and students in vocational training programs. The study found there was no evidence to support age as a perceived barrier.<sup>24</sup>
- A 2013 study by the Fiscal Policy Institute that examines barriers to working for young adults in the New York City labor market, including racial disparities in education levels.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Hong, Philip Young P, In Han Song, Sangmi Choi, and Jang Ho Park. "Comparison of Perceived Employment Barriers among Low-Income Jobseekers in the United States and South Korea." *International Social Work* 61, no. 1 (January 2018): 23–39. doi:10.1177/0020872815600509.

<sup>24</sup> Maddy, LM, "Perceived barriers to employment for older displaced workers," *Online Journal for Workforce Education and Development*, 7(1): 2014, <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1170&context=ojwed>.

<sup>25</sup> Parrot, James, and Lazar Treschan, *Barriers to Entry: The Increasing Challenges Faced by Young Adults in the New York City Labor Market*, The Fiscal Policy Institute, 2013, [http://fiscalspolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/JFNYC\\_Barriers\\_to\\_Entry\\_5-2-13.pdf](http://fiscalspolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/JFNYC_Barriers_to_Entry_5-2-13.pdf).

Comparatively little literature is available for a broader population of job-seekers. Policy-makers often focus on the barriers the hard-to-employ face, generally for four reasons:

- From a taxpayer's perspective, it is costly to support individuals who, with assistance, could work.
- There may be benefits for society when hard-to-employ people are able to work steadily — for example, beneficial effects on public safety, family structure, and child well-being.
- The retirement of the baby boom generation may produce tighter labor markets in the future, making it critical to take the best advantage possible of our nation's human resources.
- The belief that most people want to work, and the work-first ethos of American culture.<sup>26</sup>

The intense focus on the hard-to-employ population is perhaps misguided. The conflation of workforce development policy with traditionally low-income or marginalized populations can serve to alienate a broader population of job-seekers facing a tight labor market or other extraneous circumstances, but do not personally identify as somebody needing government assistance.

In comparison, academic studies that consider a broader population often feature data sourced from employers or third-parties, not workers themselves. For example, a study conducted at the Department of Defense to examine barriers underrepresented populations faced when applying to DoD jobs examined “relevant quantitative data, interviews with and a survey of hiring managers and supervisors, and interviews with other experts.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, a 2018 study sourced perceptions of employment barriers in rural versus urban settings from counselors, finding that workers from both settings face the same number of barriers.<sup>28</sup>

From a workforce policy practitioner's approach, surveying a broad sample of job-seekers on the barriers they face to inform policy is not a novel approach. However, it is often underutilized in favor of readily available data sources, including data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 2014, regional partners in

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<sup>26</sup> Bloom, Dan, Cindy Redcross, JoAnn Hsueh, Sarah Rich, and Vanessa Martin, “Four Strategies to Overcome Barriers to Employment,” MDRC, October 2007, [https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full\\_375.pdf](https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_375.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Matthews, Miriam, David Schulker, Kimberly Curry Hall, Abigail Haddad, Nelson Lim, Bruce R. Orvis, Stefan Zavislan, “Unequal Opportunity Barriers to Employment in the Department of Defense Civilian Workforce,” Rand Corporation, 2018, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB10017.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10017.html)

<sup>28</sup> Courtney Evans, Caroline Booth & Simón Sánchez-Moral (Reviewing editor) (2019) Counselor perceived barriers and supports to employment, *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5:1, DOI: [10.1080/23311886.2019.1583049](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2019.1583049)

Baltimore facilitated a study of job-seekers receiving services at their local career center, finding six major barriers to employment opportunity: industry and career barriers; transportation and housing barriers; workforce system limitations; structural racism; social barriers; and education, training, and skills barriers.<sup>29</sup>

Administrators often tend to favor employer-focused surveys. In North Carolina, for example, the Department of Commerce facilitates a biannual Employer Needs survey to help shape workforce development plans from a labor demand approach. The last comprehensive job-seeker survey was conducted in 2013 by the North Carolina Association of Workforce Development Boards; over 5,000 job-seekers across North Carolina participated.<sup>30</sup> Significantly, the survey found that 43 percent of respondents turned down job offers because of low pay, indicating a gap in the market between skills and wages.

It is unclear why broad surveys of job-seekers are not well represented in academic literature or in policy-making settings. One theory is that it is difficult to obtain a representative, statistically significant sample of job-seekers. For example, a study that attempted to survey visitors to one of Nevada's One-Stop career centers; a low response rate prompted augmenting sample with students in vocational training programs.<sup>31</sup> Focusing on more narrowly-defined samples may yield stronger insights. Another theory is that workforce development policy has historically failed to appropriately incorporate residents' voices; because the framework for workforce policies are often set at the state or national level, it can be difficult to weave in citizen input.

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<sup>29</sup> RDA Global, Inc., *Barriers to Employment in the Baltimore Region*, Opportunity Collaborative, June 2014, [https://www.baltometro.org/sites/default/files/bmc\\_documents/general/community/opportunity-collaborative/toc\\_wf\\_barriers-to-employment-opp\\_2014.pdf](https://www.baltometro.org/sites/default/files/bmc_documents/general/community/opportunity-collaborative/toc_wf_barriers-to-employment-opp_2014.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> "Job Seeker Survey Reveals Significant Challenges Ahead," *Region Q Workforce Development Board*, May 2, 2013, <https://www.24-7pressrelease.com/press-release/342184/job-seeker-survey-reveals-significant-challenges-ahead>

<sup>31</sup> Maddy, LM, "Perceived barriers to employment for older displaced workers," *Online Journal for Workforce Education and Development*, 7(1): 2014, <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1170&context=ojwed>.

# Survey Methodology

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The data analyzed come from a survey offered to all clients of the Rocky Mount NCWorks Career Center. The survey was offered both on paper and online via Qualtrics, although an overwhelming majority of survey-takers completed the paper survey. The survey was offered throughout February and early March 2020, and naturally concluded with the onset of the COVID-19 crisis and restriction of visitors to the Rocky Mount NCWorks Career Center.

## A. Survey content

In the survey, we sought to glean insights about what respondents perceive as reasons that impede them from seeking, securing, or retaining employment. Specifically, respondents were specifically asked: “How much do you think the following things have HURT your chances of finding or keeping a job?” Respondents were given five options: “A Lot,” “A Little,” “Neutral,” “Not Really,” and “Not at All.” In this report, something is considered a “barrier” when a respondent indicates “A Lot” or “A Little.” Conversely, something is *not* considered a “barrier” when a respondent indicates “Not Really” or “Not at All.”

Additionally, the survey posed questions about respondents’ demographics, economic situations, previous employment, and job search processes. All answers were self-reported. See Appendix A for the full survey.

## B. Sample population

To distribute the survey, NCGrowth worked with the Rocky Mount NCWorks Career Center. The Rocky Mount NCWorks Career Center provides services to job-seekers to improve their skills and find work, such as assistance searching for jobs, computer access, application reviews, and facilitating job fairs; it is one of 94 in the state.<sup>32</sup> The center is a component of the broader NCWorks system, the state’s workforce development system administered by the North Carolina Department of Commerce with local oversight by the Turning Point Workforce Development Board.

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<sup>32</sup> “Main Page,” NCWorks, North Carolina Department of Commerce, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.ncworks.gov/vosnet/Default.aspx>.

The sample population was selected because it is a mostly representative sample of job-seekers in an attempt to capture data beyond the hard-to-employ. To be eligible for unemployment insurance in North Carolina, dislocated workers are required to participate in state reemployment programs and must register with NCWorks. In North Carolina, unemployment benefits seekers are required to participate in the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) or the Employability Assessment Interview. Both of these assessments generally mandate a visit to the individual's local NCWorks Career Center. Diane Thomas, the Rocky Mount NCWorks Career Center's manager, estimates that an average of fifty people visit the center each day to receive services.<sup>33</sup>

We observe two major flaws with this sample population:

- This sample may exclude job-seekers not seeking unemployment insurance; which could include individuals not expecting to be unemployed for long or individuals ineligible for unemployment insurance, such as undocumented workers or workers in the gig-economy.
- Because the survey was offered to all clients of the Rocky Mount NCWorks Career Center, only 40 percent of survey takers live in Edgecombe County, with 50 percent living in Nash County and 10 percent living in neighboring counties. The following results will consider both the overall sample ("Total Sample") and data collected from Edgecombe County residents ("Edgecombe Sample").

## C. Response

Respondents were offered the chance to take the survey while waiting for their appointment with a career counselor. A total of 119 surveys were returned with varying degrees of completion; it is unclear what the actual response rate is because the NCWorks Career Center does not track the exact number of daily visitors. Where responses do not total 100 percent is indicative of non-response to those questions.

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<sup>33</sup> Diane Thomas, Rocky Mount NCWorks Career Center, Phone correspondence, February 2020.

# Survey Results

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**The data reveal three major perceived barriers to employment in Edgecombe County:**

- A challenging market for good quality jobs
- Gaps in education and experience
- Gaps in personal networks

**Additionally, certain barriers to employment may not be widespread issues, but pose significant hardships for those affected:**

- Ongoing medical expenses and physical health issues
- A lack of technology proficiency, especially as it relates to the job application process
- Access to reliable transportation methods
- Criminal convictions

**Finally, the following data insights, although not identified as major barriers by job-seekers themselves, merit further exploration:**

- Some respondents are unsure about whether they experience depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues.
- Many respondents are not accessing community resources, such as community-based nonprofits or religious institutions, instead relying on family, friends, and institutional resources, such as the NCWorks Career Center.
- Edgecombe County job-seekers are comparatively younger (under 25) and older (45 to 64) than the total sample of job-seekers.

Respondents were likely to face multiple barriers: 71 percent of respondents cited at least two issues negatively affecting their job search. However, despite this, respondents took pride in financial self-sufficiency, and largely felt that they were personally responsible for the outcome of their job search.

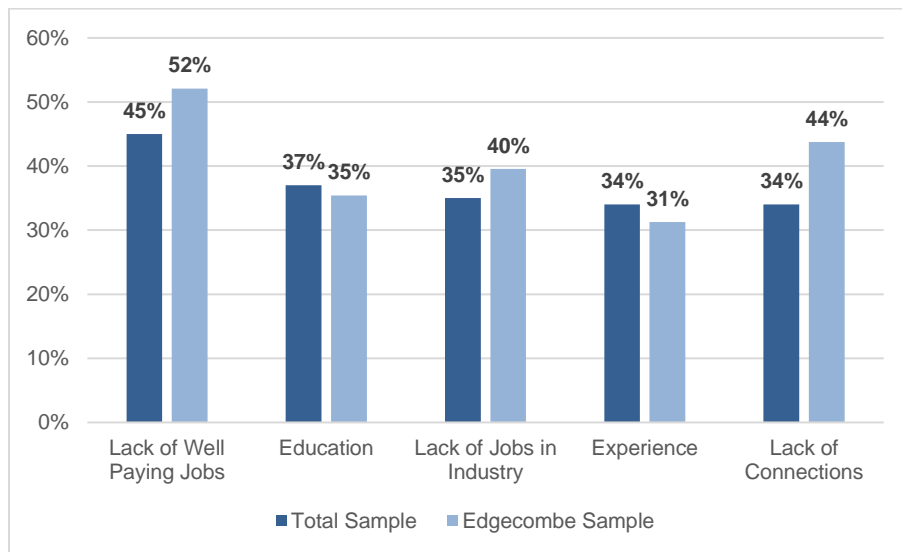
## A. Summary data

**Key Insights:**

- Respondents, especially Edgecombe County respondents, perceived issues with the labor market, including a lack of well-paying jobs and a lack of jobs in their industry, as major barriers to employment.

- Respondents also perceived gaps in education, experience, and personal networks as major barriers to employment.
- Most respondents did not perceive substance abuse issues, veteran status, disabled or elder care, mental health, and medical expenses to be barriers to employment.
- Respondents often face multiple barriers to employment.

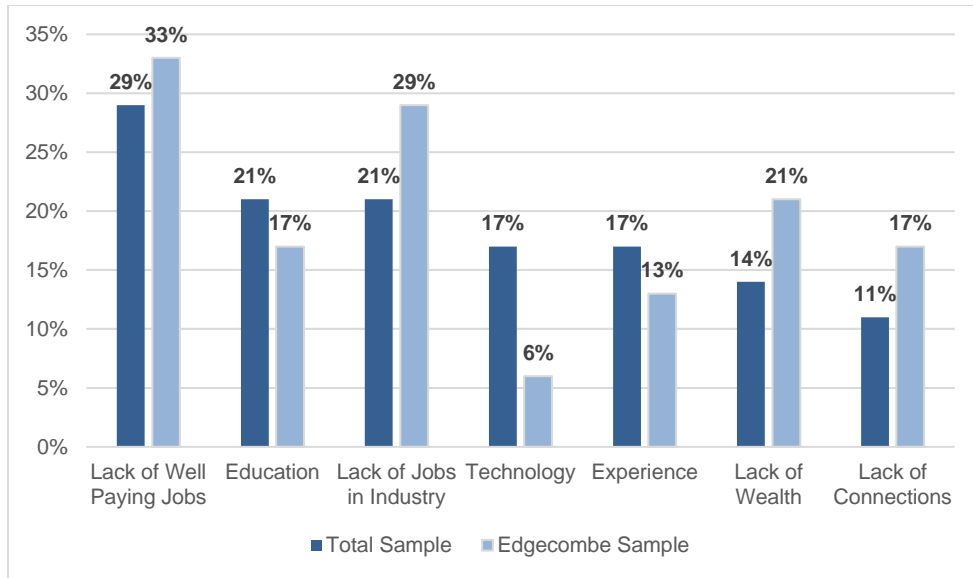
In the total sample, respondents indicated a lack of well-paying jobs as the most common barrier to employment (Figure 4A). This particular concern about the local job market prevailed among survey respondents during the pre-COVID-19 period of economic expansion. In the subset of Edgecombe County survey responses, the most respondents indicated a lack of well-paying jobs (52 percent) and a lack of connections (44 percent) as barriers to employment. Overall, respondents often felt that a challenging job market was a major barrier to employment, followed by somewhat controllable factors like levels of education, experience, and a personal network.



**Figure 4A: Highest percentages of respondents indicating a factor is a barrier to employment**

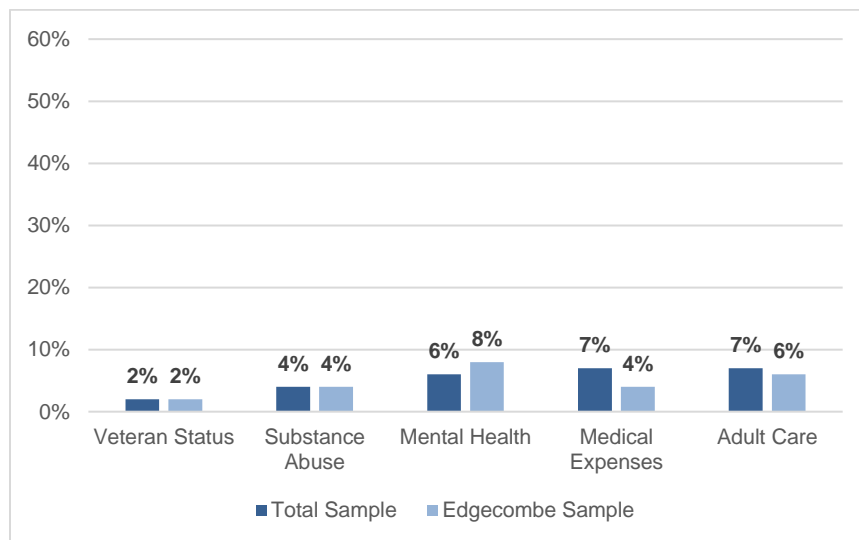
In addition to the most ubiquitous barriers to employment, lack of technology and lack of wealth also had a greater share of respondents indicating these barriers hurt their chances “A Lot” when trying to secure employment (Figure 4B). Fewer respondents, overall, cite these as barriers, but those who do find these barriers to be significantly burdensome.





**Figure 4B: Highest percentages of respondents indicating a factor is VERY burdensome**

Similarly, most respondents in both the total sample and Edgecombe County indicated that substance abuse issues, veteran status, disabled or elder care, mental health, or medical expenses were not barriers to employment. Profile data collected elsewhere on the survey supports the fact that these factors are not common issues for respondents.



**Figure 4C: Lowest percentages of respondents indicating a factor is a barrier to employment**

Additionally, respondents cited having multiple barriers to employment; 71 percent indicated at least two barriers affecting their job search at least a little bit, with 32 percent citing at least 6 barriers and 61 percent having at least one major barrier. Conversely, 29 percent cited having no barriers to employment.

It is difficult to sort out a “hard-to-employ” population from this sample. As a whole, most respondents are early into their job search process: 58 percent have only been looking for work for less than a month, although 8 percent have been looking for over a year. Similarly, only 21 percent of total respondents have had 3 or more interviews, although 31 percent of respondents had already filled out at least 15 applications.

## B. Demographic factors

**Key Insights:**

- Most respondents across the board largely did not see demographic factors as an employment barrier.
- Among those who cited demographic factors, respondents indicated that race and age may play a bigger role in hindering the job search than gender and/or sexuality and veteran status.
- Edgecombe County respondents were more likely than those from the total sample to cite race and/or age as a barrier.

The data in Table 4D provide a snapshot of the sample’s demographic characteristics: gender identity, race, age, and veteran status. The sample reflects a higher concentration of Black/African American job-seekers than represented in county-wide demographics. The sample also reflects different age characteristics between the overall sample and the subset of Edgecombe County respondents; Edgecombe County respondents were both younger and older than respondents in Nash and neighboring counties.

<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>		<b>Total Sample</b>	<b>Edgecombe Sample</b>
<b>Gender Identity</b>	Male	45%	46%
	Female	54%	54%
	Non-binary	1%	0%
<b>Race</b>	Black	86%	88%
	White	10%	8%
	Hispanic	2%	2%
<b>Age</b>	18-24	18%	31%
	25-44	50%	17%
	45-64	28%	50%
	65+	3%	2%
<b>Veteran</b>	Yes	3%	4%
	No	96%	96%

*Table 4D: Sample demographic characteristics*

The data in Table 4E reflect perceptions of these demographic factors as being burdensome in the job search process. Of these factors, Edgecombe County respondents indicate that race and age may play a bigger role in hindering the job search (25 percent and 27 percent, respectively, indicated these factors being a barrier) than gender and/or sexuality and veteran status (15 percent and 2 percent, respectively). Edgecombe County respondents also were more likely to cite race and age as barriers than the sample as a whole (25 percent and 27 percent, respectively versus 18 percent and 22 percent). However, most respondents across the board do not consider demographic factors to be a barrier.

<i>Perceived Barrier</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample
		<i>n = 119</i>	<i>n = 48</i>
<b>Race</b>	Barrier	18%	25%
	Not a Barrier	60%	58%
<b>Age</b>	Barrier	22%	27%
	Not a Barrier	58%	58%
<b>Gender and/or Sexuality</b>	Barrier	12%	14%
	Not a Barrier	68%	67%
<b>Veteran Status</b>	Barrier	2%	2%
	Not a Barrier	76%	79%

**Table 4E: Perceptions of demographic barriers to employment**  
*(Totals do not equal 100 percent; the remaining responses include non-response or neutral opinion)*

## C. Human capital

### Key Insights:

- Roughly a third of respondents indicate that lack of education, experience, or technology proficiency are barriers to securing employment.
- However, respondents are less likely to indicate that a lack of prior job experience is not a barrier to securing employment. Edgecombe County respondents are even less likely than the total sample to assert that lack of experience is not at all a barrier.
- Older respondents are more likely to perceive a lack of technology proficiency to be a barrier.
- Younger respondents cite education levels as not a major employment barrier; older respondents do.

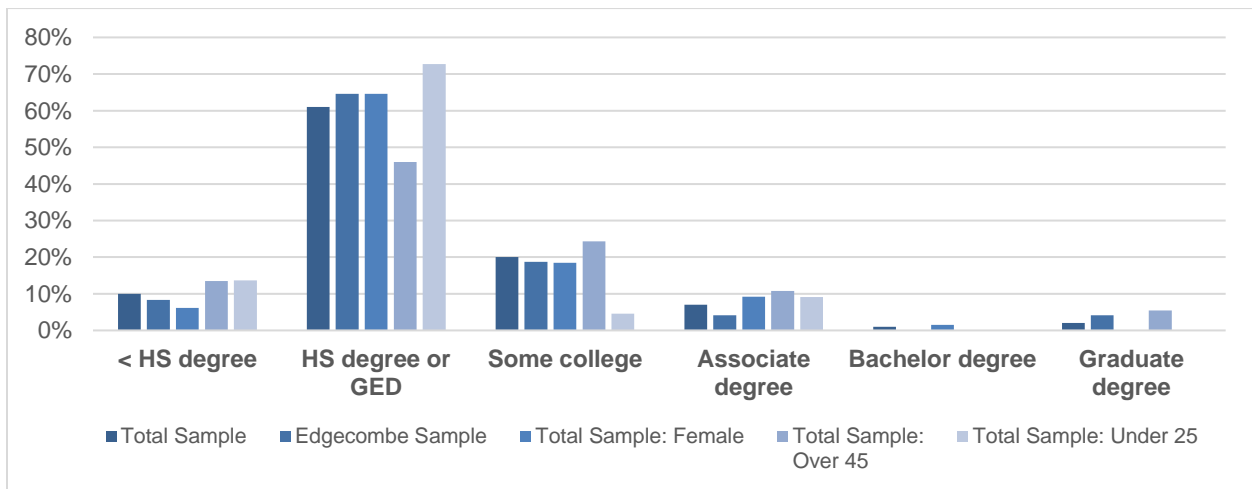
The data in Table 4F show respondents' perceptions of their levels of education, experience, and technology proficiency as barriers to securing a job. The data is shown in total, as well as segmented by residence, gender, and age.

<i>Perceived Barrier</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample	Total Sample: Female	Total Sample: Over 45	Total Sample: Under 25
		<i>n</i> = 119	<i>n</i> = 48	<i>n</i> = 66	<i>n</i> = 37	<i>n</i> = 22
<b>Education Level</b>	Barrier	37%	35%	35%	35%	32%
	Not a Barrier	41%	42%	44%	24%	64%
<b>Lack of Experience</b>	Barrier	34%	31%	33%	25%	36%
	Not a Barrier	38%	33%	35%	35%	45%
<b>Lack of Technology Proficiency</b>	Barrier	29%	19%	29%	38%	23%
	Not a Barrier	48%	52%	47%	35%	68%

**Table 4F: Perceptions of education or experience barriers to employment**  
(Totals do not equal 100 percent; the remaining responses include non-response or neutral opinion)

The sample as a whole reflects that 37 percent of all respondents perceive education level to be a barrier to securing a job, 34 percent perceive a lack of experience to be a barrier, and 29 percent perceive a lack of technology proficiency to be a barrier. Fewer Edgecombe County respondents consider technology proficiency to be a barrier.

Table 4G provides data on reported education levels in respondents, and shows that most respondents only possess a high school degree. Edgecombe County has a higher percentage of respondents that finished high school, although a slightly lower percentage of respondents that obtained a post-secondary degree (10 percent for the total sample versus 8 percent for Edgecombe County).



**Table 4G: Sample education levels**

Female respondents are slightly more likely to report that education levels are not a barrier to securing employment (44 percent versus 41 percent for the total sample). This may be a reflection of slightly higher education levels in female respondents; only 6 percent failed to obtain a high school degree, versus 10 percent in the population.

Perceptions in education levels are also reflective of age; although roughly the same percentage of respondents over 45 and under 25 reported education levels to be at least somewhat a barrier, significantly more respondents under 25 thought education was not a barrier than respondents over 45. This may be reflective of job expectation differences in these age groups, especially considering that 87 percent of respondents under 25 have a high school degree or less. Younger job-seekers are likely more content with jobs that do not require a post-secondary degree. However, younger job-seekers are likely cognizant of their age in the labor market: fewer respondents under 25 report that lack of experience is 'Not at All' a barrier to securing work compared to education level.

Survey respondents are not more likely to view a lack of job experience as a barrier to employment than education or technology proficiency levels. However, survey respondents are also less likely to indicate a lack of experience is not a burden: 38 percent report lack of job experience as not a barrier, versus 41 percent reporting education level and 48 percent reporting technology proficiency as not being a barrier. This observation could be attributed to the changing dynamics of the labor market; in the limited interviews conducted, interviewees shared a history or willingness to switch industries or occupations to obtain a good job, where they may not have extensive experience. Data from the New York Federal Reserve's SCE Labor Market Survey supports this hypothesis: low-wage workers are switching jobs more often. In 2019, 12 percent of low-wage workers changed jobs, up from 8 percent in 2018.<sup>34</sup>

38 percent of respondents over the age of 45 perceive a lack of technology proficiency to be a barrier, versus 29 percent of the total sample. This finding is not surprising: the difficulties of older workers in using technology to obtain a job, as well as their lack of technological proficiency to perform certain jobs, are well documented in the literature.<sup>35</sup> Our interviews reflected this sentiment; one older job-seeker discussed the pressure to exclusively use email and online applications, and the process did not come

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<sup>34</sup> "SCE Labor Market Survey," Center for Microeconomic Data, Federal Reserve Bank of New York, accessed April 8, 2020, <https://www.newyorkfed.org/microeconomics/sce/labor#/experiences-transitions1>.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, Chin Chin, Sara J. Czaja, Joseph Sharit, "Training Older Workers for Technology Based Employment," *Educational Gerontology* 35, no.1 (January 2009): 15-31, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42639649\\_Training\\_Older\\_Workers\\_for\\_Technology-Based\\_Employment](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42639649_Training_Older_Workers_for_Technology-Based_Employment).

naturally to them. A lack of technology proficiency is not entirely limited to older job-seekers; 23 percent of respondents under 45 thought this was a barrier. Again, our interviews supported a wariness of the online application process; one younger interviewee lamented its impersonality, as well as the difficulty to prove their work ethic online versus in-person.

## D. Dependent care

### Key Insights:

- Most respondents did not perceive caring responsibilities as major barriers to employment, although childcare is more of a burden than elder or disabled adult care.
- Female respondents are more likely to cite childcare as a barrier to employment.
- Just over half of total and Edgecombe County respondents cite that they are "able to access childcare," although female respondents are more likely to cite that they are not able to access childcare.

The data in Table 4H show respondents' perceptions of childcare and elder or disabled adult care responsibilities as barriers to securing a job. The data is shown in total, as well as segmented by county and gender.

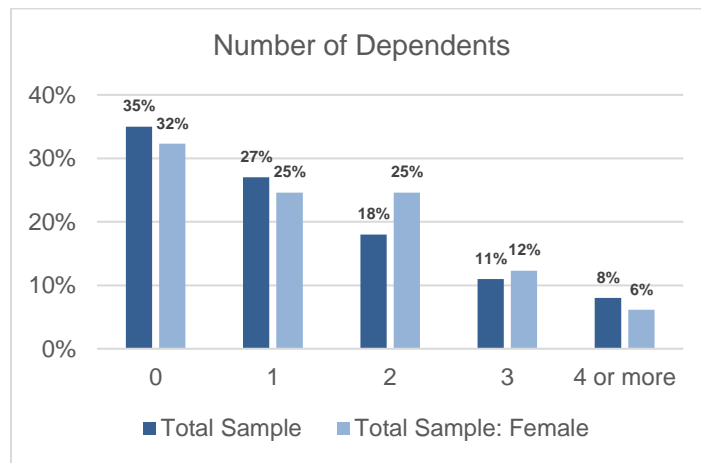
<i>Perceived Barrier</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample	Total Sample: Female
		<i>n = 119</i>	<i>n = 48</i>	<i>n = 65</i>
<i>Child Care Responsibilities</i>	Barrier	14%	17%	20%
	Not a Barrier	64%	60%	60%
<i>Elder/Disabled Adult Care Responsibilities</i>	Barrier	7%	6%	6%
	Not a Barrier	73%	79%	77%

**Table 4H: Perceptions of dependent care responsibilities as barriers to employment**  
(Totals do not equal 100 percent; the remaining responses include non-response or neutral opinion)

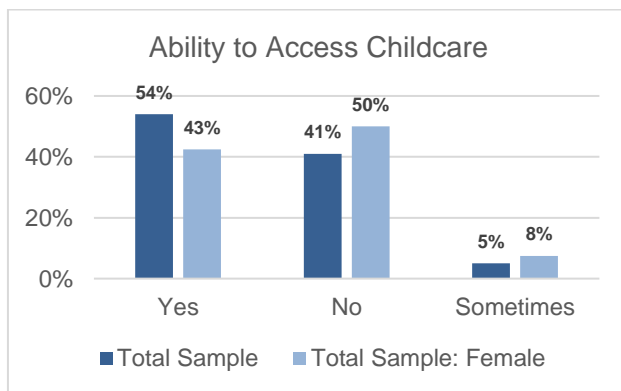
By and large, most respondents did not perceive caring responsibilities as major barriers to employment, although childcare is more of a burden than elder or disabled adult care. However, respondents in Edgecombe County are more likely than respondents in the total sample to cite childcare responsibilities as a barrier (17 percent). Female respondents in the total sample are also more likely to cite childcare responsibilities as a (20 percent). Considering that roughly two-thirds of respondents have dependents, it

would appear that most respondents are able to manage caring responsibilities with their employment requirements.

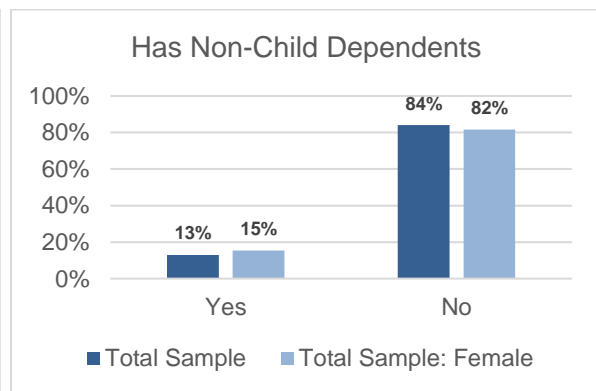
However, only 54 percent of total respondents with children and 43 percent of female respondents with children cite that they are able access childcare. The reason for this incongruity in the data is unclear; we would expect childcare to be more commonly cited as a barrier given that a near-majority of respondents with dependents cannot access childcare. This could suggest that childcare may not be a major barrier, despite inability to access it; respondents could have children that are older, or are able to rely on family or friends to watch their children. This could also be survey error; the phrase "access to childcare" was left to the respondent to interpret. More research is necessary.



**Chart 4I-A: Number of respondents with dependents**



**Chart 4I-B: Ability of those with dependents to access childcare**



**Chart 4I-C: Respondents with non-child dependents, including elderly or disabled adults**

## E. Health issues

### Key Insights:

- Respondents largely do not consider mental health issues to be a barrier to employment, despite nearly a quarter of respondents reporting they have or may have mental health issues.
- Respondents are more likely to cite physical health as a barrier to employment.
- Respondents have a very low prevalence of substance abuse issues, and accordingly do not cite it as a barrier.
- Medical expenses are not a major barrier to employment for most respondents despite less than half the sample having health insurance. However, when medical expenses are cited as a barrier, they are considered to be a significant barrier.

The data in Table 4J show respondents' perceptions of mental and physical health issues, as well as substance abuse issues, as barriers to securing a job. The data reflect the fact that respondents in total and in Edgecombe County largely do not consider mental health or substance abuse issues to be a barrier to employment. Respondents are more likely to consider physical health issues as a barrier to employment.

<i>Perceived Barrier</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample
		<i>n = 119</i>	<i>n = 48</i>
<b><i>Mental Health Issues</i></b>	Barrier	6%	8%
	Not a Barrier	72%	77%
<b><i>Substance Abuse Issues</i></b>	Barrier	4%	4%
	Not a Barrier	79%	82%
<b><i>Physical Health Issues</i></b>	Barrier	9%	10%
	Not a Barrier	69%	73%

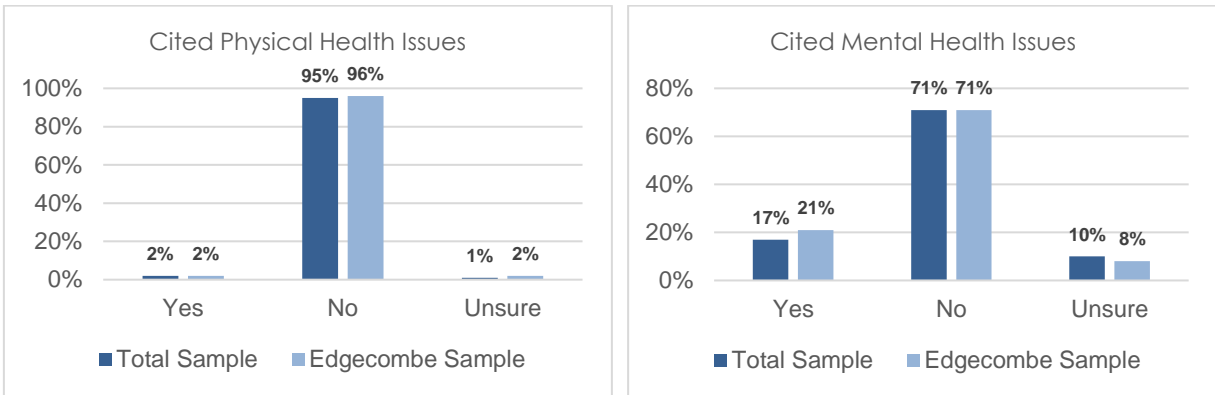
**Table 4J: Perceptions of health issues as barriers to employment**  
(Totals do not equal 100 percent; the remaining responses include non-response or neutral opinion)

The perception of substance abuse issues not being a major barrier to employment is well founded: 95 percent of total respondents report not having substance abuse issues that affect their daily life (Chart 4K). The story is less clear for mental health issues; only 71 percent of total respondents report not having a mental health issue that affects their daily life. The fact that while 27 percent of respondents report having or possibly having mental health issues, yet only 6 percent cite it as a barrier, suggests that respondents are able to manage mental health issues so they do not affect their job



search or employment. It could also suggest that respondents may not -- or are not willing to -- recognize the effect depression, anxiety, or other issues may have on the job search or continued employment.

An important finding is the fact that 10 percent of respondents are unsure of whether they have mental health issues that affect their daily life. This could suggest undiagnosed anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues that respondents may not be receiving care for.



Charts 4K and 4L: Health issues characteristics

Medical expenses are not considered an employment barrier for most respondents (Table 4M), despite the fact that only 44 percent report having health insurance. However, for respondents who do perceive medical expenses to be a barrier to employment, it is a significant barrier: virtually no respondents indicated medical expenses to have hurt their job search just "A Little."

Perceived Barrier		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample
		n = 119	n = 48
Medical Expenses	Barrier	8%	4%
	Not a Barrier	72%	73%
	Very Burdensome	7%	4%

Table 4M: Perceptions of medical expenses as barriers to employment  
(Totals do not equal 100 percent; the remaining responses include non-response or neutral opinion)

## F. Records of criminal conviction

### Key Insights:

- 39 percent of total respondents that have a criminal conviction cited it as a

barrier to employment; 29 percent cited it as “Not at All” a barrier.

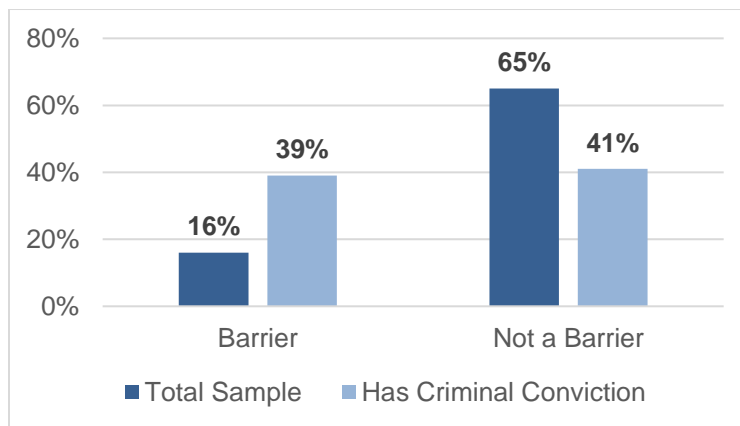
- A substantial percentage of survey respondents in Edgecombe County have criminal convictions that may affect their job search.

Just under half — 46 percent — of Edgecombe County residents have a criminal conviction, higher than the total sample’s 35 percent (Table 4N).

<i>Situational Characteristics</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample
		<i>n = 119</i>	<i>n = 48</i>
<i>Has Criminal Conviction</i>	Yes: Misdemeanor	24%	31%
	Yes: Felony	11%	15%
	No	60%	54%

**Table 4N: Criminal conviction characteristics**

A majority of respondents do not consider having a record of a criminal conviction to be a major barrier (Chart 4O). However, of respondents in both the entire sample and in Edgecombe County with a criminal conviction, 39 and 38 percent respectively cite it as a barrier. This suggests that while having a criminal record may not be a barrier for most job-seekers, having a criminal record is still a substantial hindrance to gaining employment.



**Chart 4O: Perceptions of criminal convictions as barriers to employment**

*(Totals do not equal 100 percent; the remaining responses include non-response or neutral opinion)*

## G. Transportation

### Key Insights:

- Edgecombe County respondents are more likely to view transportation access as a barrier to employment.
- Fewer Edgecombe County residents have regular access to a vehicle, and must rely on alternative methods such as ride from family and friends, public transportation, or biking.
- Only 58 percent of Edgecombe County respondents have a driver's license.
- 73 percent of Edgecombe County respondents live within 30 minutes of their last job, versus 63 of the total sample.

Edgecombe County residents are slightly more likely than all survey respondents to indicate that transportation is a barrier to employment, and definitely more likely to rely on methods of transportation other than personally owned vehicles. Most respondents did not view transportation as a barrier; however, 18 percent of the total sample and 23 percent of the Edgecombe County sub-sample did (Table 4P).

<i>Perceived Barrier</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample
		<i>n = 119</i>	<i>n = 48</i>
<i>Inadequate Transportation</i>	Barrier	18%	23%
	Not a Barrier	61%	58%

**Table 4P: Perceptions of transportation as a barrier to employment**  
(Totals do not equal 100 percent; the remaining responses include non-response or neutral opinion)

More Edgecombe County residents report shorter commutes than in the total sample, suggesting that many job-seekers were previously able to find work close to home and that commute times are not burdensome (Figure 4R).

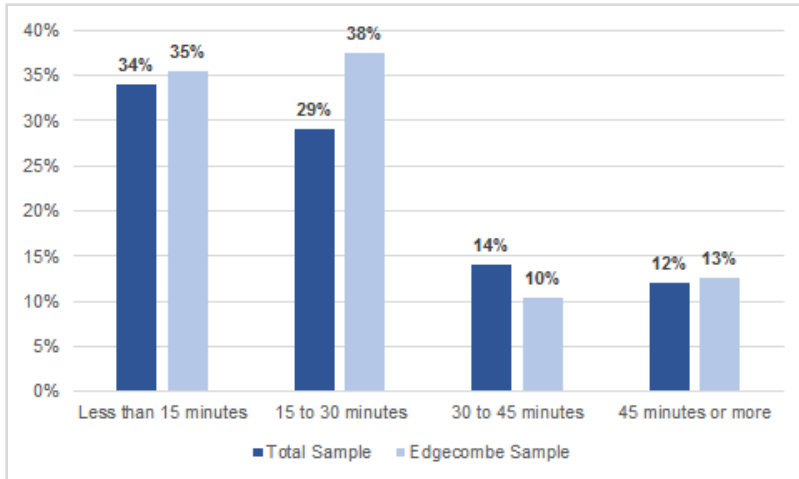


Figure 4R: Commute times of last job held

Edgecombe County residents are less likely to have regular access to a vehicle; only 81 percent of Edgecombe County respondents indicated they have regular access to a vehicle, versus 87 percent of the total sample. Fewer respondents in Edgecombe County rely on a personal vehicle they own, and instead rely on other methods of transportation to commute to work (Figure 4S).

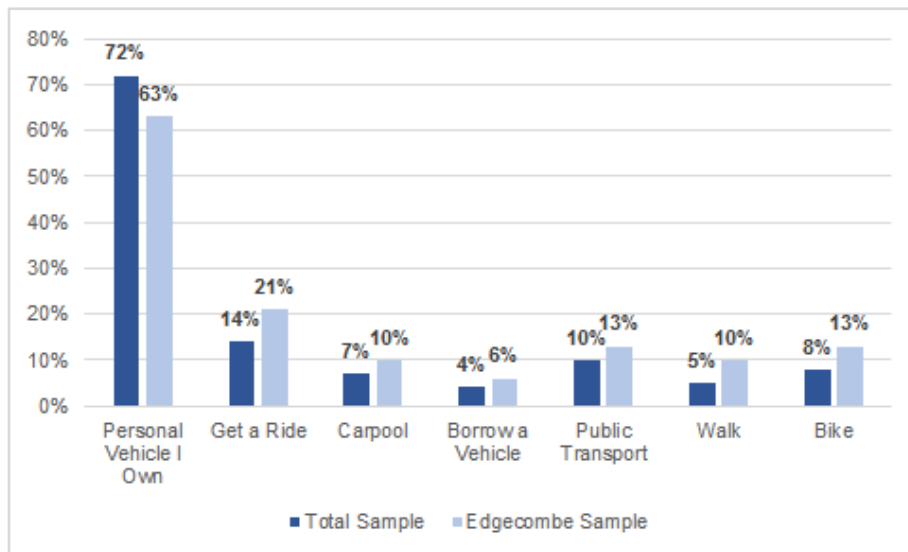


Figure 4S: Share of respondent who often use each method of transportation

Additionally, only 58 percent of Edgecombe County respondents indicated having a driver's license, versus 70 percent of the total sample. The reason for this discrepancy is unclear; perhaps Edgecombe County respondents have more difficulties obtaining licenses, or have a greater proportion of undocumented job-seeker. Targeted research may be needed.

## H. Housing

### Key Insights:

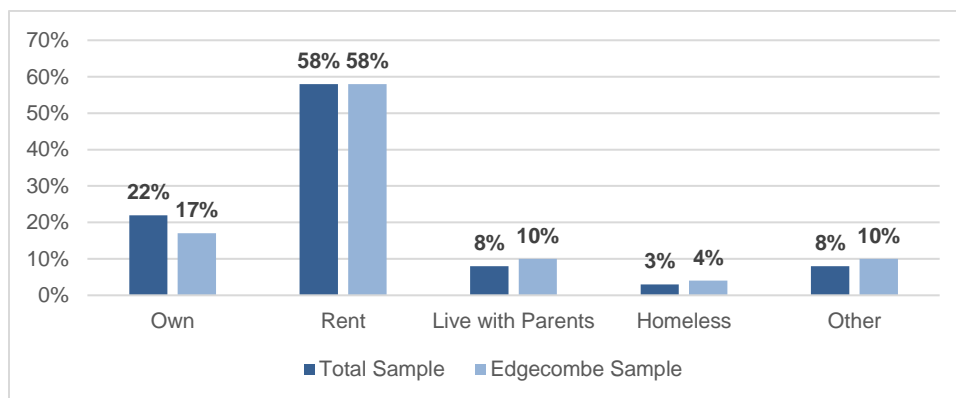
- Inadequate housing is not perceived to be a barrier, but less likely to not at all be considered a barrier.
- Most respondents are renters — 58 percent, versus 22 percent of homeowners in the total sample.
- A greater share of Edgecombe County respondents live elsewhere than a rented or owned home; this includes living with parents, being homeless, or living in government-assisted housing.

Only 10 percent of the sample view housing to be a barrier to employment (Table 4T).

<i>Perceived Barrier</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample
		<i>n = 119</i>	<i>n = 48</i>
<i>Inadequate Housing</i>	Barrier	10%	10%
	Not a Barrier	71%	73%

**Table 4T: Perceptions of housing as a barrier to employment**  
(Totals do not equal 100 percent; the remaining responses include non-response or neutral opinion)

Renting versus owning does not seem to play a role in perception of inadequate housing as a barrier to employment. Edgecombe County respondents are just as likely to be renters as respondents in the total sample, but more likely to rely on alternative methods of housing, including living with parents or being homeless (Table 4U). Edgecombe County residents are more likely to receive government assistance for housing; 17 percent in the Edgecombe County sample versus 10 percent in the total sample.



**Figure 4U: Sample housing characteristics**

## I. Income and wealth

### Key Insights:

- Most respondents are considered lower-income, and have self-reported incomes of under \$30,000 per year.
- Respondents in Edgecombe County are more likely to cite a lack of wealth or money as a barrier to employment: 31 percent versus 25 percent of the total sample.

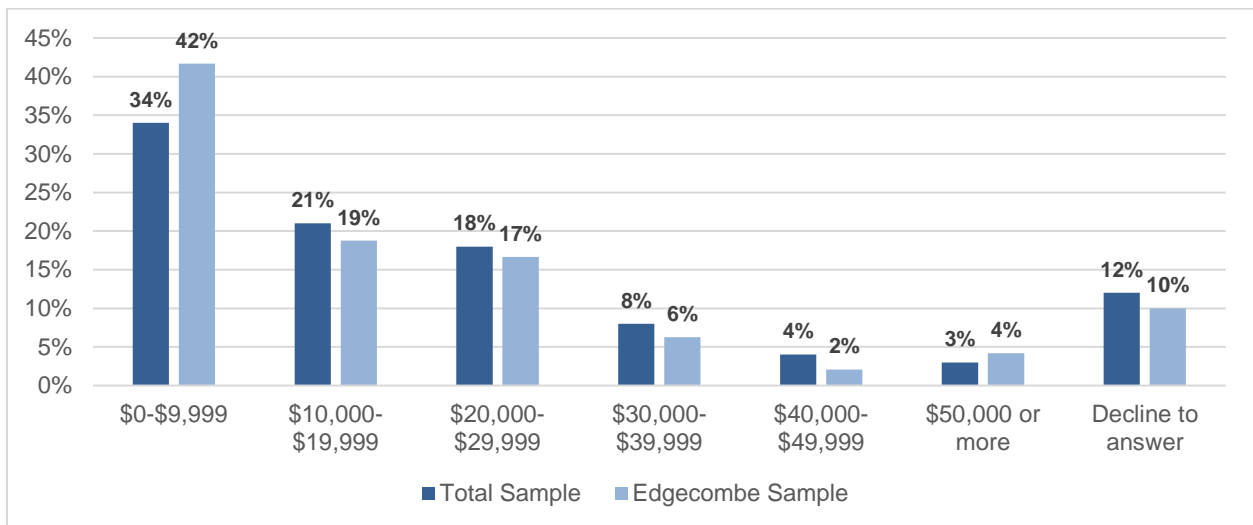


Figure 4V: Household incomes

The data in Figure 4V reflect low household incomes among respondents. Respondents were not given specific details about how to consider yearly household income — income before or after unemployment, for example. This question had a higher proportion of non-response; 12 percent of the overall sample declined to answer. Edgecombe County respondents reported having even lower incomes than the total sample; 78 percent of Edgecombe County respondents reported household income less than \$30,000, compared to 73 percent of total respondents. Overall, the survey sample reflects lower household incomes than of the average for Edgecombe County, which had a median household income of \$35,516 in 2018.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Income, Edgecombe County and North Carolina, 2018. Social Explorer.

<i>Perceived Barrier</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample
		<i>n = 119</i>	<i>n = 48</i>
<i>Lack of Money or Wealth</i>	Barrier	25%	31%
	Not a Barrier	53%	53%

**Table 4W: Perceptions of housing as a barrier to employment**  
*(Totals do not equal 100 percent; the remaining responses include non-response or neutral opinion)*

Respondents in Edgecombe County are more likely to consider a lack of money or wealth as a barrier to employment: 31 percent versus 25 percent in the total sample. Some sort of accumulated wealth is important in the job-search; it allows the job-seeker to have more flexibility in waiting until they land the right position, as well as the ability to reinvest in themselves through education. A lack of wealth may make a job-seeker more likely to take a low-quality job to be able to survive.

## J. Job quality

### Key Insights:

- A lack of jobs that pay well is cited as a major barrier; a lack of jobs with benefits is also a considerable barrier compared to other factors, but not as much as well-paying jobs.
- Edgecombe County job-seekers are more likely than survey respondents from the full sample to be in unstable, low-wage positions.

Survey respondents are most likely to cite issues with the labor market as a major barrier to finding employment. A lack of well-paying jobs is the most common barrier cited among respondents; 45 percent of total respondents, and 52 percent of Edgecombe County respondents cite it as a barrier. Only 17 percent of Edgecombe County respondents believe a lack of well-paying jobs is not an issue at all. However, fewer respondents are concerned by a lack of jobs that offer benefits; only 28 percent of the total sample cite a lack of jobs with benefits as a barrier to employment, and 23 percent of Edgecombe County respondents.

<i>Perceived Barrier</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample
		<i>n = 119</i>	<i>n = 48</i>
<i>Lack of Jobs with Benefits</i>	Barrier	28%	23%
	Not a Barrier	43%	46%
<i>Lack of Jobs that Pay Well</i>	Barrier	45%	52%
	Not a Barrier	33%	32%

*Table 4X: Perceptions of a lack of jobs with benefits and good pay as a barrier to employment (Totals do not equal 100 percent; the remaining responses include non-response or neutral opinion)*

The fact that a high percentage of respondents think job quality is an issue is reflected in the data collected about previous or current positions:

- **Respondents worked multiple jobs;** 65 percent of respondents in Edgecombe County worked in two or more jobs in the last year (compared to 47 percent of total sample).
- **Respondents do not have steady work;** half of respondents in Edgecombe County previously held full time jobs, the other half held part-time, temporary, or seasonal jobs.
- **Respondents are still likely to be working a full schedule.** Despite how jobs are classified, 76 percent of respondents are likely to have worked jobs with hours just short of full time or full time; 44 percent worked 30-40 hours; 27 percent worked over 40 hours.
- **Respondents are likely to have previously held positions that are considered low-skill or low-education;** occupations with more than one respondent in Edgecombe County include cook, maintenance worker, customer service representative, machine operator, returns processor, production worker, and substitute teacher (See Appendix D for a full list of jobs cited).
- **Respondents are in low wage jobs;** 44 percent earned \$10 to 15 an hour at their last or current job, 31 percent earned under \$10 an hour.
- **Respondents are in jobs that do not provide benefits;** roughly three-fourths of respondents did not receive benefits at their last job, and only 19 percent cited receiving health care insurance.
- **Respondents are actively seeking better jobs;** 18 percent of the total sample are looking for a new job because they are under-employed or looking for a new career; 12 percent of job seekers are currently employed.

Considering county level data, job-seekers in Edgecombe County may face a tough occupational landscape when looking for jobs. Occupations with the most number of



employees in Edgecombe County and the greater Rocky Mount-Wilson region<sup>37</sup> are skewed towards low-education, low-paying positions. Edgecombe County residents are particularly affected by stagnant wage growth rate of 1.2 percent annually.<sup>38</sup> The occupations with the most number of annual openings — food preparation and serving workers; retail salespersons; cashiers; waiters and waitresses; and laborers and freight, stock, and material movers — all have median entry wages of \$8 to \$10 per hour (Table 4Y).<sup>39</sup>

Occupation Title	Annual % Growth	Average Annual Openings	Median Hourly Wage	Education
Retail Salespersons	0.10%	631	\$11	No formal educational credential
Combined Food Preparation and Serving Workers, Including Fast Food	1.60%	663	\$9	No formal educational credential
Cashiers	-0.50%	443	\$9	No formal educational credential
Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand	-0.20%	290	\$11	No formal educational credential
Office Clerks, General	-1.10%	197	\$14	High school diploma or equivalent
Registered Nurses	0.10%	98	\$29	Bachelor's degree
Customer Service Representatives	-0.10%	217	\$15	High school diploma or equivalent
Waiters and Waitresses	0.70%	342	\$9	No formal educational credential
Nursing Assistants	0%	174	\$11	Postsecondary nondegree award

Figure 4Y: Jobs employing the most people in the Rocky Mount-Wilson Region, sorted by employed in 2017 <sup>40</sup>

Even prior to the COVID-19, it appears that respondents consider the labor market somewhat broken. This introduces an interesting and unresolved dynamic of systemic barriers versus personal barriers for which respondents may be responsible. To illustrate, both interviewees viewed the job search as their personal responsibility, and felt in control of their own outcomes. This dynamic seems to be played out elsewhere in the data, especially as demographic factors like race and gender are not really considered major barriers, despite being well documented in the literature as such.

<sup>37</sup> The Rocky Mount-Wilson region is chosen as the geographical frame of reference here because many Edgecombe County residents work outside of the county.

<sup>38</sup> US Cluster Mapping, "Cluster Portfolio: Edgecombe County, NC."

<sup>39</sup> "North Carolina Star Jobs," North Carolina Department of Commerce, accessed April 12, 2020, <https://nccareers.org/starjobs/index.html>.

<sup>40</sup> "North Carolina Star Jobs," North Carolina Department of Commerce.

## K. Economic landscape

**Key Insights:**

- 39 percent of Edgecombe County respondents perceive a lack of jobs in their industry to be an employment barrier.
- Respondents are more likely to be neutral about the state of the economy as a barrier to employment
- Most respondents previously worked in industries that are shrinking in Edgecombe County, including manufacturing, construction, and retail trade.

Respondents are more likely to cite issues with their industry, and to a lesser extent the economy overall, as a barrier to employment. 39 percent of Edgecombe County residents consider a lack of jobs in their industry to be a barrier; only 25 percent perceived the overall state of the economy, pre-COVID-19, is an issue in their job search.

<i>Perceived Barrier</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample
		<i>n = 119</i>	<i>n = 48</i>
<i>Lack of Jobs Available in Industry</i>	Barrier	35%	39%
	Not a Barrier	39%	36%
<i>State of the Economy</i>	Barrier	24%	25%
	Not a Barrier	43%	40%

**Table 4Z: Perceptions of a lack of available jobs in the respondent's industry and the overall state of the economy as a barrier to employment**

Concerns about lack of jobs available in certain industries are well-founded. Edgecombe County's largest industries by employment are shrinking, including manufacturing, retail trade, health care, food services, and construction (Table 4AA). This county-wide trend is reflected in our survey data: nearly a third of respondents worked in manufacturing (28 percent), followed by food service (8 percent), health care (7 percent), construction (7 percent), and retail (6 percent). Growing industries — including transportation and warehousing, administrative and support and waste management and remediation services, and wholesale trade — each only employ a fifth of the number of employees in manufacturing.

<b>Largest Industries</b>	<b>2019 Employment</b>	<b>Change from 2016</b>
Retail Trade	2,642	-4%
Manufacturing	2,609	-13%
Health Care and Social Assistance	2,159	-2%
Public Administration	2,101	-3%
Educational Services	1,729	-2%
Accommodation and Food Services	976	-14%
Construction	530	-8%
Wholesale Trade	505	14%
Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	440	55%
Transportation and Warehousing	452	35%

Table 4AA: Largest Industries in Edgecombe County, Q3 2019<sup>41</sup>

Despite numerous barriers respondents say they face in the job market, they are mostly hopeful that the job search process will result in a steady job; Edgecombe County residents even more so than the total sample.

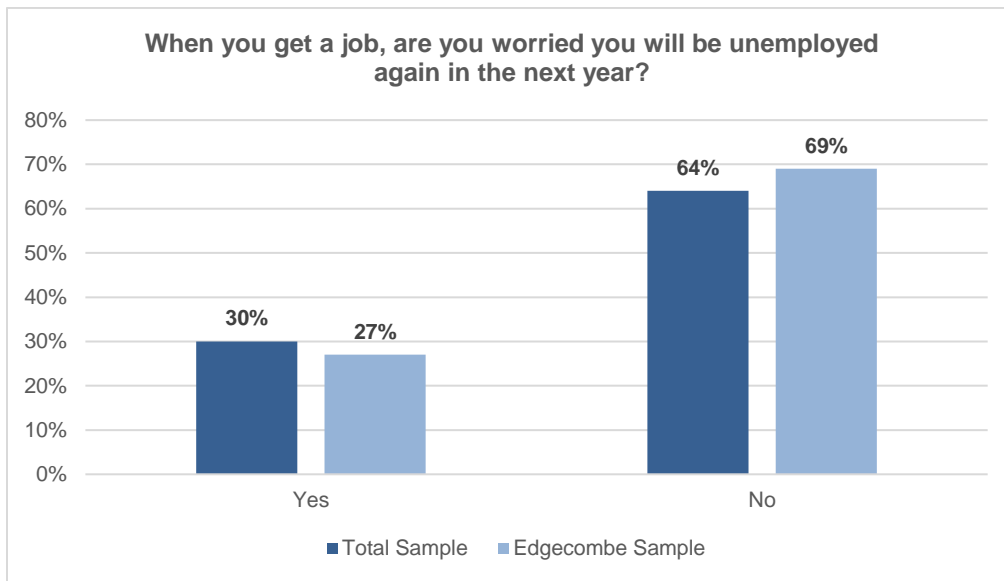


Table 4AB: Percentage of respondents who cite they are not worried about being unemployed again next year

<sup>41</sup> Employment Counts by Industry, Q3 2016 - Q3 2019. Demand Driven Data Delivery System, North Carolina Department of Commerce, (based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census Employment and Wages; accessed March 25, 2020).

From a labor demand perspective, Rocky Mount is poised to experience economic growth, which may be comforting to job-seekers.<sup>42</sup> Ongoing transportation infrastructure construction, increased retail development, and the attraction of a few key companies have created more jobs in the metro area. Edgecombe County recently announced that Triangle Tire, a Chinese tire manufacturing company, will build two factories in Rocky Mount and Tarboro. The largest manufacturing investment ever in rural North Carolina, Triangle Tire is poised to create 800 jobs by 2022.<sup>43</sup> Other future developments include a planned Corning distribution site, which will create over 100 jobs, and the future NC DMV headquarters, which will bring over 300 jobs.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, CSX recently broke ground on a future intermodal rail facility to facilitate freight distribution near the Triangle area, and will affect at least 1,300 jobs.<sup>45</sup> How this sense of hope and optimism about future economic prosperity in the region will be affected by the COVID-19 disruption remains to be seen.

## L. Networks and support systems

### Key Insights:

- Nearly half of Edgecombe County respondents felt that a lack of connections was a barrier to employment.
- Most respondents felt that their expanded networks, including colleagues, friends, and community organizations were less helpful in the job search than the NCWorks Career Center or family members.
- Most respondents rarely rely on financial assistance; when they do need it, they generally turn to friends and family first.

The data in Table 4AC describe the degree to which respondents felt a lack of connections was a barrier to employment: at least 44 percent of Edgecombe County residents felt so, versus just 34 percent in the total sample. This is the second most commonly cited barrier in Edgecombe County, after a lack of well-paying jobs.

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<sup>42</sup>"Area Economy Poised for Growth in Future," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, accessed October 28, 2019, <http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2018/01/14/Area-economy-poised-for-growth-in-future.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> "DMV Relocation Approved," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, accessed October 28, 2019, <http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2019/03/05/DMV-relocation-approved.html>.

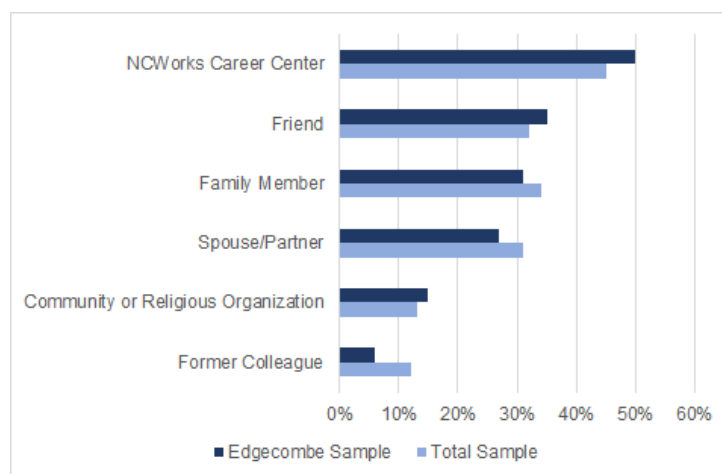
<sup>45</sup> "CSX to Break Ground for Rail Hub in April," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, accessed October 28, 2019, <http://www.rockymounttelegram.com/News/2019/03/16/CSX-to-break-ground-for-rail-hub-in-April.html>.

<i>Perceived Barrier</i>		Total Sample	Edgecombe Sample
		<i>n = 119</i>	<i>n = 48</i>
<i>Lack of Connections</i>	Barrier	34%	44%
	Not a Barrier	41%	35%

*Table 4AC: Perceptions of a lack of connections as a barrier to employment*

This insight may be reflected in data also collected on the most helpful resources in the job search process (Figure 4AD). The top three resources for Edgecombe County respondents are mostly 'built-in' personal networks: the NCWorks Career Center, family, and spouses/partners. The NCWorks Center appears to be a great resource for job-seekers; however, it is unclear if it is helpful for the professional connections it fosters in addition to the direct services offered.

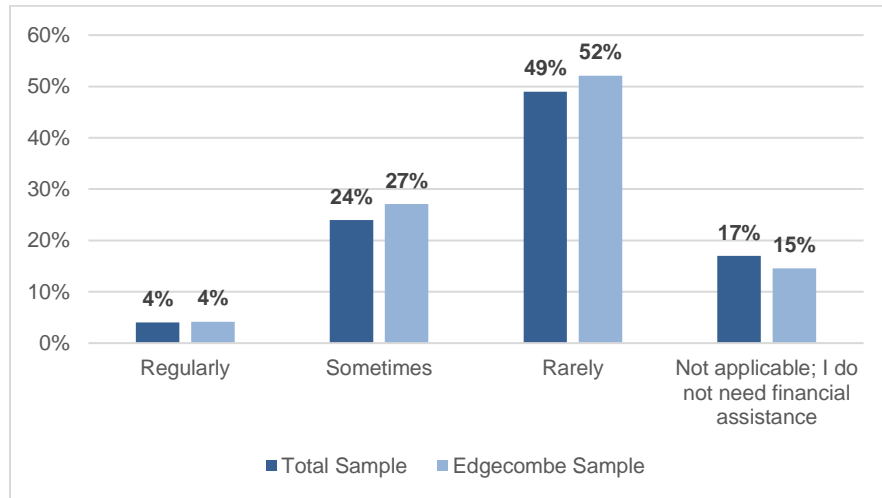
Resources that help make up a more traditional professional network — colleagues and community-based groups — are less helpful. Friends, however, are considered more helpful. This could imply that there are fewer opportunities to hear about jobs, connect with local employers, and less opportunities for applicants to distinguish themselves from the candidate pool. This observation could be especially acute for job-seekers not comfortable with online applications. Research supports the fact that while people are more connected than ever, there may be less opportunities to diversify networks and become socially engaged locally, especially for those who are not technologically proficient. For example, the decline of church attendance in many communities has been cited as a potential loss of a valuable civic space.<sup>46</sup>



*Figure 4AD: Percentage of resources that have been 'very helpful' in the job search process*

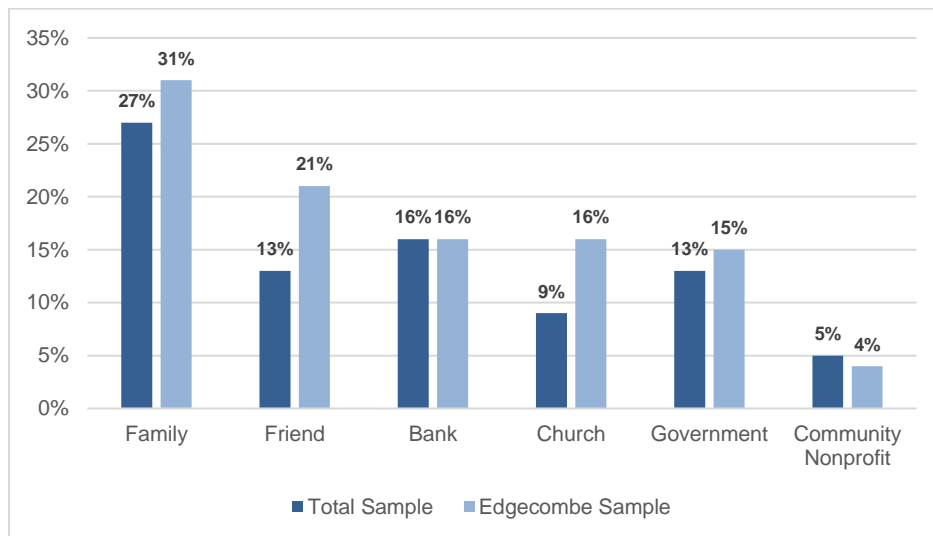
<sup>46</sup> Polimedio, Chyanne, 'Church attendance and the decline of civic spaces,' *Pacific Standard*, November 7, 2017, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/losing-our-religion-and-its-spaces>.

Respondents are also not likely to regularly or sometimes rely on others — family, friends, government, or community organizations — for financial help. That being said, roughly half of respondents cite the rare need for assistance (Figure 4AE).



**Figure 4AE: Frequency respondents cite relying on others for financial assistance**

Respondents are most likely to turn to family or friends for financial assistance, and to a lesser degree the bank, church, or government entities. Respondents rarely rely on community nonprofits (Figure 4AF). This could reflect a general ethos of self-reliance, and may indicate that the sample does not have an overrepresentation of welfare recipients.



**Figure 4AF: Resources respondents have 'often' or 'sometimes' turned to for financial assistance**

This survey did not directly ask respondents if they received welfare benefits – only if they rely on the government for financial assistance, or if they receive government assistance for housing. Therefore, it is unclear if survey respondents are more or less likely to receive welfare benefits than the residents county-wide.

# Policy Implications

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Although survey respondents cite a wide variety of barriers that impede their job search, the findings point to four key focus areas around which Edgecombe County public officials and service providers can enhance supply-side supports:

- Access to mental health services
- Personal networks
- Accessing help for very burdensome barriers
- Job-quality and wages for job-seekers

While Edgecombe County might not be able to fully combat greater labor market forces like the stagnation of wages, or greatly alter the focus of the area's workforce development strategy, policymakers may be able to address gaps in services offered. Additionally, we offer ideas on how this survey can be replicated, scaled, and improved for future use in Edgecombe County and beyond.

## A. Better connecting job-seekers to help, including mental health services

Although lower percentages of job seekers identified barriers that can be addressed by social services elsewhere in the county, those barriers proved to be more burdensome for that smaller sub-set of respondents. Modifying workforce development offerings to be more comprehensive for all job-seekers, not just the “hard-to-employ,” may provide much needed help for job-seekers who are mostly self-sufficient but still struggling.

Edgecombe County has a robust social safety net through its Department of Social Services, which coordinates and administers programs like Medicaid, SNAP, and North Carolina's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Additionally, Edgecombe County offers services to assist with childcare, including finding childcare providers, and providing limited financial assistance.<sup>47</sup> However, these service offerings can be disconnected from workforce development initiatives, especially if the job-seeker does not indicate finding childcare as a problem to their NCWorks Career Center counselor.

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<sup>47</sup> “Economic Services, Social Services,” Edgecombe County, North Carolina, accessed March 31, 2020, [http://cms5.revize.com/revize/edgecombecounty/departments/dss/economic\\_services.php](http://cms5.revize.com/revize/edgecombecounty/departments/dss/economic_services.php).



## Case Study: The Layoff-to-Employment Action Planner

A promising approach is a supplement to the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) or the Employability Assessment Interview to include referrals to community or government services. A tool designed by a third party provider is seemingly proven effective in Nevada: the Layoff-to-Employment Action Planner (LEAP). LEAP assesses individuals in 8 areas: finances; emotional issues; social, family, and health issues; use of time; next career; more education and training; job search; and use of services and resources. RESEA interviewers are able to assess additional barriers to employment, and help connect job-seekers to services throughout the interview.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, our data suggested the sample population may be self-reliant, as a majority of respondents report that they do not rely on government assistance. Presenting information on social resources in the same arena as career-specific resources, like information on community college or training programs, may help clarify what resources are available or destigmatize the idea of asking for assistance. Furthermore, linking job-seekers to affordable resources beyond government assistance may make it easier to access temporary assistance.

## Case Study: Orange County, NC Department of Social Services

In Orange County, North Carolina, government leaders have effectively integrated employment and training services with social services. "Employment Services" is a division of the Orange County Department of Social Services (DSS). In addition to providing traditional career services, this division's purpose includes providing "supportive services that contribute to stable, living wage careers." Orange County has established greater flexibility in responding to constituents' career search and readiness needs by creating the Orange Works Employment and Training Center, which is in addition to the service offerings of the Orange County NCWorks Career Center.

The Orange County NCWorks Career Center is branded as the Orange County Skills Development Center, and under the purview of DSS. In addition to services to obtain employment, education, or training, the Center very clearly offers referrals to community-based agencies for assistance. This service is listed on its website, as well as a list of community-based partners.

Most relevantly, Orange County's career-assistance programs are structurally linked with economic services, such as Work First Family Assistance, Food and Nutrition Services, Medicaid, and other programs by virtue of the fact they are all in the same county department. Information about these services are located in the same place online, and in-person assistance for either employment or economic services is offered at the same DSS office locations.

Finally, Edgecombe County should consider a long term goal of better integrating workforce development with related departments, including economic development, social services, and education. A McKinsey brief suggests creating a holistic strategy with measurable goals is the first step towards breaking down hampering silos.<sup>48</sup> Although workforce development programs and policies are under the purview of the Turning Point Workforce Development Board, Edgecombe County government can take the lead in establishing a strategy for coordination of its own services.

## B. Fostering networking opportunities

Respondents indicated a lack of connections as being a major barrier to employment. The regional workforce development partners could foster greater opportunities for job-seekers to connect with other community members, and not just for the singular purpose of acquiring a job. Broader networks, while not always initially fruitful, can help create connections vital for landing a job. It can also help job-seekers plug into a professional community, especially, as they may be lacking one while unemployed. The NCWorks Career Center already holds regular job fairs, which is a great way to connect employers to job-seekers. County partners can assist these efforts, and augment them with general networking opportunities:

- Compiling and advertising community events and socially-oriented volunteer opportunities
- Facilitating job clubs

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<sup>48</sup> Cheng, Wan-Lae, Thomas Dohrmann, Mike Kerlin, Jonathan Law, and Sree Ramaswamy, "Creating an effective workforce system for the new economy," McKinsey & Company, July 2018, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/creating-an-effective-workforce-system-for-the-new-economy>.

- Helping job-seekers understand online networking tools, like LinkedIn or Facebook




## Case Study: Job Clubs

Job clubs are a great way to help job-seekers connect with peers and broaden their networks. A job club is a small group of people coming together to provide a supportive network for each other throughout the job search process. Although each job club can look different, they are generally structured as regular meetings in which a facilitator leads activities to network, share contacts and job leads, or facilitate peer feedback on application materials. Several career centers throughout the country facilitate job clubs. In North Carolina, the NCWorks Career Centers in Guilford and Wake Counties previously offered job clubs, although they are seemingly no longer active. In Orange County, the Orange Works Employment and Training Center offers a “Job-Seeking Skills Workshop” to assist with networking; although similar to a job club, the workshop is structured as open-entry and open-exit class.

At the workNet DuPage Career Center in DuPage County, Illinois, its Friday Job Club is a central resource offering. The club is open to everybody, and features an expert guest speaker each week. Recent topics have included "Staying Motivated During the Job Search" and "How to Effectively Network in the Time of COVID-19." Additionally, the club offers unstructured time to network and share information, as well as to get advice from Career Center staff. Although normally an in-person meeting, the club pivoted to online webinars in the COVID-19 crisis. For more information, see: [worknetdupage.org/job-seekers/workshops/jobclub](http://worknetdupage.org/job-seekers/workshops/jobclub)

**JOIN OUR JOB CLUB**

THE JOB SEARCH IS SHORTER WHEN SHARED WITH OTHERS

 Job seeker Mary meets job seeker Joe at Job Club.	 They connect on LinkedIn and share a few contacts.	 Mary pursues a connection and lands a new job.
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*Source: workNet DuPage County*

## C. Carving out a specific focus on older workers

Given the high percentage of job-seekers over the age of 45 in the sample, Edgecombe County leaders should remain mindful of the unique concerns of this population. Education, apprenticeships, and other reskilling opportunities may not be feasible workforce development for older populations, depending on the opportunity cost and other financial responsibilities they have. Older workers have unique advantages for employers, including dependability and higher quality work; however, finding well-paying jobs is often a challenge for this population due to technological barriers or negative perceptions.<sup>49</sup>

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services' Division on Aging and Adult Services administers the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) in Edgecombe County, which places unemployed, low income individuals over 55 in community service roles to provide new skills for the marketplace.<sup>50</sup> Although the SCSEP works closely with NCWorks Career Centers, its service offerings are separate and targeted. The SCSEP may not be an option for older workers that do not meet eligibility criteria, or may not be interested in such a time-intensive program.

The Upjohn Institute suggests these policy strategies to improve workforce programs for older workers, which may be applicable here:

- Offering all job assistance resources in-person or on paper in addition to being online
- Dedicating a counselor to focus on older workers
- Facilitating job clubs for job-seekers over the age of 50
- Targeted and on-the-job skills training for in-demand jobs<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Schwartz, Jeff, Kelly Monahan, Steve Hatfield, and Siri Anderson, "No time to retire," *Deloitte*, December 7, 2018, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/technology-and-the-future-of-work/redesigning-work-for-our-aging-workforce.html>.

<sup>50</sup> "Senior Community Service Employment Program Brochure," Area Agency on Aging, Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments, accessed June 11, 2020, <https://www.ucpcog.org/Area%20Agency%20on%20Aging/AAA%20Programs/Title%20V%20Brochure%202016%20update.d%202-26-19.pdf>

<sup>51</sup> O'Leary, Christopher, "Improving workforce programs for older workers," *The Upjohn Institute*, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.upjohn.org/research-highlights/improving-workforce-programs-older-workers>.

## Case Study: The Aging Worker Initiative

The Aging Worker Initiative (AWI) was a federally funded grant program through the Department of Labor to evaluate strategies to improve the workforce system's models of service delivery to older workers. In the summer of 2009, the AWI funded ten awards of roughly \$1 million each to workforce development boards and related organizations throughout the United States.

Award-Winning Organization	Location
Tecumseh Area Partnership, Inc.	Indiana
Quad Area Community Action Agency, Inc.	Louisiana
Coastal Counties Workforce, Inc.	Maine
Baltimore Country Office of Workforce Development	Maryland
Macomb/St. Clair Workforce Development Board, Inc.	Michigan
South Central Workforce Investment Board	Pennsylvania
Goodwill Industries of Houston, Inc.	Texas
Vermont Associates for Training and Development, Inc.	Vermont
Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council	Washington
Fox Valley Workforce Development Board	Wisconsin

*Award grantees*

Grantees were given freedom to tailor their programs for older workers, resulting in a myriad of different service delivery approaches. Evaluation of the program resulted in several relevant recommendations:

- **Hire knowledgeable and dedicated staff.** Several grantees found success in having dedicated case managers for older workers, as well as staff with experience working with older job-seekers. Grantees found that older workers needed and valued ongoing, personalized assistance.
- **Offer career counseling and labor market information.** Grantees found that older workers were often uninformed about their options in the labor market, as well as the training and skills needed to attain certain positions.
- **Screen participants** to ensure that they are receiving services to address other employment barriers, especially for older workers that participate in long-term trainings (such as the SCSEP). For programs or trainings, screen participants to ensure that they want to work, and have appropriate and attainable job goals.
- **Ensure that the targeted occupations are of interest to older workers and appropriate to their skills.** Grantees found that staff with a thorough understanding of the skills gaps between older job-seekers and their targeted occupations were more effective than steering job-seekers towards “high growth” occupations. Grantees also found that involving employers and other industry representatives in designing trainings for older workers helped to eliminate skill mismatches and ascertain job availability.

*Kogan, Deborah, Denna Khemani, Tyler Moazed, Jill Leufgen, Elizabeth Laird, Michelle Derr, and Kathleen Keefe, 2013. Evaluation of the Aging Worker Initiative. Mathematica Policy Research. ETA Occasional Paper No. 2013-19. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, March 29.*

## D. Continuing work to improve wages and job quality

Clearly, there are structural deficiencies in the labor market that are depressing wages and trapping a sizable number of Edgecombe County residents in low-wage, low-quality jobs. Wage stagnation is an issue that is plaguing labor markets nationally and statewide; Edgecombe County and its workforce partners already recognize this issue locally. A number of workforce development initiatives, especially connected to education, training, and the idea of skilling or reskilling workers for better paying jobs, are underway in the county and greater Turning Point Workforce Development Board service area.

Although connecting job-seekers to higher-skill, higher-paying jobs is one promising method to help improve overall worker satisfaction, there may be room for alternative policy strategies to improve wages. The Urban Institute, for example, recommends publicly subsidizing jobs.<sup>52</sup> Most importantly, the Urban Institute recommends collecting data that can inform future initiatives, and monitoring existing standards and compliance to guarantee worker prosperity.

## E. Replicating survey and expanding local data collection

Edgecombe County and the Rocky Mount NCWorks Career Center should consider administering a survey to its constituents on a regular basis. Conversations with the NCWorks Career Center staff revealed that this was the first time in recent memory a survey had been distributed; a regular survey could not only help shape policy, but quantitatively identify areas to improve local service delivery. A periodic survey of job seekers would also allow the county and workforce development partners to set and track progress toward barrier mitigation goals.<sup>53</sup>

Expanding local data collection could prove useful for Edgecombe County. Additional data collection could include a targeted, follow-up survey or additional interviews, and will help augment this initial survey effort. For example, additional data collection could evaluate the awareness or effectiveness of existing workforce development initiatives in relationship to perceived barriers to hone in on specific policy interventions. Reliable and reasonably unbiased data are integral to informing policy interventions, and targeted data would help refine current or future initiatives. Additionally, soliciting

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<sup>52</sup>Loprest, Pamela, Demetra Nightingale, Jenny R. Yang K., and Steven Brown, "What would it take to achieve quality jobs for all workers," *The Urban Institute*, May 2019, [https://next50.urban.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/2019%2005%2009\\_Next50%20Job%20Quality\\_finalizedv2.pdf](https://next50.urban.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/2019%2005%2009_Next50%20Job%20Quality_finalizedv2.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> Cheng, "Creating an effective workforce system for the new economy."

resident input to improve public services is a way to bring 'deliberative democracy' into the workforce system, and can elucidate different perspectives and make constituent voices heard.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Farrell, Diana and Andrew Goodman, "Government by design; Four principles for a better public sector," McKinsey & Company, December 2013, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/government-by-design-four-principles-for-a-better-public-sector>.

## Conclusion

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This survey is a new approach for Edgecombe County to determining approaches to improve workforce development service delivery with the end goal of improving the unemployment rate. Asking job-seekers the barriers *they* face when seeking a job revealed some known insights, such as a difficult job market for well-paying jobs in their current industry, as well as new insights, such as the importance of connections and networks and the potential burden of undiagnosed mental health issues.

Ultimately, we hope this survey will serve as a template for future surveys in Edgecombe County. We also hope this serves as a template for workforce development boards beyond Edgecombe County to collect local data. Although surveying job-seekers on the barriers they face to inform policy is not a novel approach in the field of government administration — for example, a similar study was conducted by Baltimore regional partners in 2014 — it is an underutilized approach in local workforce development settings.<sup>55</sup> Although being based on a convenience sample of local job-seekers in a single service area may limit the generalizability of the findings, the survey data provide meaningful insights that can inform workforce development policy and programming.

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<sup>55</sup> RDA Global, Inc., *Barriers to Employment in the Baltimore Region*, Opportunity Collaborative, June 2014, [https://www.baltometro.org/sites/default/files/bmc\\_documents/general/community/opportunity-collaborative/toc\\_wf\\_barriers-to-employment-opp\\_2014.pdf](https://www.baltometro.org/sites/default/files/bmc_documents/general/community/opportunity-collaborative/toc_wf_barriers-to-employment-opp_2014.pdf).



# Appendix

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## A. Survey questionnaire



### **RESEARCH SURVEY Your Experience Seeking a Job**

We are inviting you to participate in a research study. Researchers at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill want to identify barriers that prevent people from gaining or maintaining employment. Your responses will help Edgecombe County improve its services for future job seekers.

**Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You are not required to complete the survey in order to receive assistance from the NCWorks Career Center, and there are no negative consequences for choosing not to participate.**

This survey will take approximately 10 minutes. Answer each question honestly and to the best of your ability; your responses will remain confidential and anonymous. The survey will ask about illegal activity, including illegal drug use. This information will remain confidential and anonymous, and will not be attributed to you. Survey responses will only be processed and seen by UNC researchers.

If any question makes you uncomfortable, feel free to skip the question and move on. In addition, you can stop at any point. If you have any questions or concerns before the survey begins, please contact lead researcher Dr. Jonathan Morgan at 919-843-0972 or the UNC Institutional Review Board and Office of Human Research Ethics at 919-966-3113.

Thank you for your participation!

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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## Section 1: Personal Questions

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**1. How old are you?**

- 18-24 years old
- 25-44 years old
- 45-64 years old
- 65 years or older

**2. How do you identify racially/ethnically? Select all that apply.**

- White
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Black or African-American
- Native American
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Other (specify in space provided): \_\_\_\_\_

**3. What is your gender identity?**

- Female
- Male
- Other (specify in space provided): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to answer

**4. What is your marital status?**

- Married or living with partner
- Single

**5. Are you a veteran?**

- Yes
- No

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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**6. What is your highest education level?**

- Less than a high school degree
- High school degree or GED
- Some college
- Associate degree
- Bachelor degree
- Graduate degree

**7. Which county do you primarily live in?**

- Edgecombe
- Nash
- Other (specify in space provided): \_\_\_\_\_

**8. What best describes your current housing situation?**

- Own
- Rent
- Neither own nor rent: (specify in space provided): \_\_\_\_\_
- Homeless

**9. Do you receive governmental assistance to help pay for your housing, or do you live in a public housing unit?**

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**10. What is your approximate yearly household income?**

- \$0-\$9,999
- \$10,000-\$19,999
- \$20,000-\$29,999
- \$30,000-\$39,999
- \$40,000-\$49,999
- \$50,000 or more

**11. Do you have a driver's license?**

- Yes
- No

**12. Do you have regular access to a vehicle? (Car, truck, etc.)**

- Yes
- No

**13. How often do you use the following to commute to work?**

	Often	Sometimes	Never
My own personal vehicle	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Get a ride from a partner, family, or friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Carpool with a co-worker, partner, family, or friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Borrow a vehicle from a partner, family, or friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Public transportation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Walk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Bike	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (specify in space provided): _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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**14. How many dependents do you have?**

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

**15. If you have children and need child care, have you been able to access it?**

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- Not applicable, I do not have children

**16. Do you have any other non-child family members you help care for?**

- Yes
- No
- Other (specify in space provided): \_\_\_\_\_

**17. Do you currently have insurance that helps pay for your medical bills?**

- Yes
- No

**18. Does anxiety, depression, or mental illness affect your daily life?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

**19. Does substance abuse affect your daily life? This includes both illegal and legal drugs/substances, including medically-prescribed opiates, alcohol, heroin, etc.**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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**20. How often are you able to get financial assistance (from any source, including friends, family, community, church, or government) when you need it?**

- Regularly
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Not applicable; I don't need financial assistance

**21. In the last year, how often have you used financial assistance to pay your bills or expenses from each of the following?**

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Bank	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family Member	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friend	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Church	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Government	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community-based nonprofit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (specify in space provided):	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**22. Have you been convicted of a crime as an adult?**

- Yes, felony conviction
- Yes, misdemeanor conviction
- No

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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## Section 2: Job Search Questions

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**23. Why are you looking for a job?**

- I am currently unemployed
- I am currently under-employed
- I am looking to switch careers
- Other (specify in space provided): \_\_\_\_\_

**24. How long have you been looking for work?**

- A month or less
- Up to 6 months
- 6 to 12 months
- A year or more

**25. How many job applications have you filled out in the last six months?**

- 0
- 1 to 5
- 5 to 10
- 10 to 15
- 15 or more

**26. How many job interviews have you had in the last six months?**

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

**27. When you get a job, are you worried you will be unemployed again in the next year?**

- Yes
- No

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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**28. If you have reached out to any of the following for help during your job search, how helpful have they been?**

	Very Helpful	Moderately Helpful	Not Helpful at All
Spouse or Partner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family Member	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friend	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Former Colleague	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
NCWorks Career Center	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community or Religious Organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (specify in space provided):	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**29. How much do you think have the following have HURT your chances of finding or keeping a job?**

	A Lot	A Little	Neutral	Not Really	Not at All
Race	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Age	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gender/sexuality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Veteran status	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**30. How much do you think have the following have HURT your chances of finding or keeping a job?**

	A Lot	A Little	Neutral	Not Really	Not at All
Education level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of previous job experience	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of technology proficiency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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**31. How much do you think have the following have HURT your chances of finding or keeping a job?**

	A Lot	A Little	Neutral	Not Really	Not at All
Child care responsibilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Elder or disabled adult care responsibilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Medical expenses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Physical health issues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mental health issues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Substance abuse issues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Criminal conviction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**32. How much do you think have the following things have HURT your chances finding or keeping a job?**

	A Lot	A Little	Neutral	Not Really	Not at All
Lack of money or wealth	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of connections	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inadequate housing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inadequate transportation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**33. How much do you think have the following things have HURT your chances finding or keeping a job?**

	A Lot	A Little	Neutral	Not Really	Not at All
Lack of jobs with benefits	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of jobs that pay well	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of jobs available in your industry	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The state of the economy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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## Section 3: Employment Questions

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**34. How many jobs have you had in the last 12 months (full or part-time)?**

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

**35. How long have you most recently been unemployed?**

- A month or less
- Up to 6 months
- 6 to 12 months
- A year or more
- I am currently employed

**36. What was your employment status at your last regular job?**

- Full-time employee
- Part-time employee
- Temporary employee
- Seasonal employee
- Self-employed

**37. What was your job title at your last regular job?**

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*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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**38. Which best describes the industry of your last regular job?**

- Retail - Food Service
- Retail - Other
- Manufacturing
- Agriculture
- Construction
- Education
- Health Care
- Utilities
- Computer & Electronics
- Government
- Emergency Services
- Entertainment
- Hospitality Services
- Other (specify in space provided): \_\_\_\_\_

**39. About how many hours did you work every week when you were last employed?**

- 0-10 hours
- 10-20 hours
- 20-30 hours
- 30-40 hours
- More than 40 hours

**40. How much money did you earn per hour?**

- Under \$10
- \$10 to \$15
- \$15 to \$20
- \$20 to \$25
- More than \$25
- Other (specify in space provided): \_\_\_\_\_

**41. How long did it take you to get to work on a regular day?**

- I worked at home
- Less than 15 minutes
- 15 to 30 minutes
- 30 to 45 minutes
- 45 minutes or more

**42. Did you receive any of the following employee benefits at your last regular job?**

	Yes	No
Paid sick leave	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Paid vacation days	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Health insurance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Retirement benefits	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (specify in space provided): _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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**43. How often did you do the following at your last regular job?**

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
Talk with customers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supervise others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work in a team	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Write reports	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use arithmetic or math	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use a computer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Operate heavy machinery	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Exert physical labor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**44. How much did you enjoy the following parts of your last regular job?**

	Really Enjoyed	Sort of Enjoyed	Indifferent	Didn't Really Enjoy	Didn't Enjoy at All
Supervisor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Coworkers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pay	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Benefits	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Type of work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Company	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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**45. Why did you stop working at your last job?**

- Laid off
- Fired
- Quit because of low pay or benefits
- It was seasonal or only for a limited period of time
- Left for personal reasons (health, child care, etc.)
- Incarcerated
- Other (specify in space below): \_\_\_\_\_

**46. What is the longest period of time you have ever been out of work?**

- 6 months or less
- 6 to 12 months
- 1 to 2 years
- 2 years or more

**47. Please share any additional thoughts you have on your unemployment or job search.  
(OPTIONAL)**

**END OF SURVEY**

**Please place the completed survey in the envelope and return to the front desk.**

*Your responses are confidential and will not be attributed to you.*

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## B. Survey respondent industries

Below is a list of the industries respondents reported being in. The data feature some light summarization of corresponding traits. Some respondents reported being in more than one industry.

Industry	Total	Edgecombe	Freq. Wage	% Full Time	% With Benefits	% Laid Off or Temporary
Agriculture	1	0	*	*	*	*
Computer & Electronics	4	0	\$25+	50%	50%	75%
Construction	11	5	\$10-\$15	64%	36%	73%
Education	3	2	\$10-\$15	66%	33%	100%
Emergency Services	1	0	*	*	*	*
Entertainment	1	1	*	*	*	*
Government	1	1	*	*	*	*
Health Care	15	6	\$10-\$15	47%	80%	20%
Hospitality Services	4	2	< \$10	25%	25%	0%
Manufacturing	40	20	\$10-\$15	48%	39%	57%
Other	21	4	\$10-\$15	85%	70%	45%
Retail - Food Service	13	5	\$10-\$15	62%	42%	15%
Retail - Other	10	5	< \$10	40%	40%	20%

Self-reported industries represented in the "Other" category include:

- Banking (2)
- Call Center (6)
- Child Care (1)
- Delivery (2)
- Factory (1)
- Private Business (1)
- Sanitation (1)
- Security (2)
- Solar (1)
- Tobacco (2)
- Warehousing (4)

### C. Survey respondent occupations

Below is a list of the industries respondents reported being in. The data feature some light summarization of corresponding traits. Because this question asked respondents to write in their occupation, occupations are lightly edited.

Industry	Position
Agriculture	Tractor Operator
Computer & Electronics	Database Developer/Support
	Lister
	Marketing Sales Associate
	Technical Account Manager
Construction	Contractor
	Door Builder
	Electric Helper and Spotter
	Electrical Apprentice
	Electrician
	Highway Construction Laborer
	Maintenance (3)
	Operator Technician
Education	Teacher Assistant
	Bus Driver
	Substitute Teacher (2)
Government	Armed Private Security
Health Care	Dietary Cook
	Ophthalmic Technician
	Medical Assistant
	Personal Care Assistant (2)
	Patient Service Attendant

Industry	Position
Hospitality Services	Housekeeping
Manufacturing	Assembler (2)
	Battery Specialist Maintenance
	Distribution Machine Operator (3)
	Fabricator
	FC Associate
	Forklift Driver (2)
	Installer helper
	Lister
	Machine Operator (5)
	Maintenance (2)
	Material Handler
	Material Recovery
	Operations Technician
	Packer (2)
	Picker
	Production Operator
	Production Worker (5)
	Quality Control Manager
	Quality Inspector (3)
	Returns Processor (2)
Sanitation (3)	



Industry	Position
Manufacturing	Shipping/Receiving Clerk
	Sweeper
	Warehouse Associate
	Welder
Other	Banker
	Child Care Provider
	Customer Service Representative (5)
	Delivery Driver
	Fraud Detection Specialist
	Line Trimmer
	Marketing Sales Associate
	Security (2)
	Truck Driver
	Valet Parking Attendant
Retail - Food Service	Cake Decorator
	Cashier
	Cook
	Crew Member
	Meat Department Worker
	Packer (2)
	Server
	Shift Lead

Industry	Position
Retail - Other	Cashier (2)
	Delivery Driver
	Early Morning Stacker
	Office Assistant
	Reset Lead
	Service Writer
Warehousing	Stocker
	Telemarketer
	Expeditor
	Quality Inspector
	Warehouse Worker