

The Employment Experiences of Public Housing Residents Findings from the Jobs-Plus Baseline Survey

Public housing residents are commonly thought to be harder to employ than other low-income working-age populations, but detailed evidence on their actual employment experiences and difficulties is scarce. The dearth of information can hinder efforts by policymakers and administrators to reduce the high rates of poverty, joblessness, and related social problems found in many public housing developments across the country.

This report helps to address the information gap by analyzing data from a special survey of residents in eight public housing developments (in seven cities) with customarily high rates of joblessness and reliance on welfare. These developments have been part of the Jobs-Plus Community Revitalization Initiative for Public Housing Families, an ambitious research demonstration project that aims to improve residents' employment and quality-of-life outcomes. The survey, undertaken to collect baseline data about the communities and their residents just prior to the start of the Jobs-Plus program, sheds important light on how closely residents were already connected to the labor market, what kinds of jobs they obtained, and why some residents worked or looked for work less than other residents.

Key Findings

- The survey of residents revealed a more extensive and varied connection to the labor market than had been expected, given the very low rates of employment that characterized the public housing developments in the years prior to their selection for Jobs-Plus in the mid-1990s. Slightly more than 90 percent had worked at some point in their lives, and a majority were either currently employed or searching for work at the time of the survey.
- Many residents who worked did so only part time, and the majority were employed in low-wage jobs paying less than \$7.75 per hour and offering no fringe benefits.
- Health status was the factor most clearly associated with residents' engagement in the labor market. Survey respondents who described themselves as having health problems were less likely than others to have had recent work experience or to engage in job search activities.
- Even with extensive data, it is difficult to create statistical profiles that accurately differentiate survey respondents who can be characterized as easier to employ from those who are harder to employ. Across a wide range of measures — including demographic characteristics, incidence of domestic violence, and residents' social networks — no consistent patterns emerged to distinguish which residents were most actively and least actively involved in the labor market.

Building on these new insights into public housing residents' relationship to the labor market, future studies will explore how financial incentives, employment services, and the reinforcement of community supports for work can increase residents' success in the labor market.