

THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM AND INDIVIDUALS WITH BARRIERS TO
EMPLOYMENT: TOWARD A STRATEGY FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT IN WEST MICHIGAN

By

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ABSTRACT

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On July 22, 2014, President Barack Obama signed into law the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (Pub. L. 113-128). Representing the “first major reform to federal job training programs in more than 15 years,” Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez characterized WIOA as a “fundamental transformation” in workforce development policy (Committee on Education and the Workforce, 2015). Among the themes in WIOA is the Act’s clear focus on “the most vulnerable workers,” including “individuals with barriers to employment” (128 STAT. 1428-29). Under the new law, state and local workforce development agencies have a unique opportunity to ensure workforce development policies and programs are strategically aligned to best serve the needs of jobseekers, including individuals with barriers to employment. However, little research has been done to understand the various perceptions held by stakeholders in the workforce development system regarding the barriers to employment facing today’s jobseekers. This dissertation uses rich qualitative information collected from seven focus groups and in-depth, follow-up interviews with 31 jobseekers in the West Michigan Works! Workforce Development Area (WDA) and ten semi-structured interviews with key informants representing federal, state, and local administrators, staff, and other stakeholders to describe and explain the various perceptions of barriers to employment and the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in the labor market. I find that most jobseekers and

key informants believe that the labor market has improved in recent years, but that the overwhelming majority identify continuing, structural problems that disproportionately affect individuals with barriers to employment. Investigating further, I find that perceptions are similar across and between participant groups, but find strong differences regarding discrimination and education and training as barriers and the types of education and training and support services needed to be successful in the labor market. My findings and recommendations intend to support successful implementation of WIOA in the West Michigan Works! WDA and elsewhere.

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To the jobseekers and those helping them.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In this dissertation, I tell the story of those looking for work in a labor market nearing full employment and a workforce development system responsible for helping jobseekers left behind since the “Great Recession.” The story is told from the perspective of 31 unemployed jobseekers and 10 workforce development officials. The purpose of the dissertation is to support the workforce development system through an assembling of a better, shared understanding of the barriers to employment facing today’s jobseekers and the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in the labor market. This better, shared understanding will help in the development of policies and programs to support economic expansion and develop the talent of our workforce, especially for individuals with barriers to employment.

This chapter begins with an overview of the public workforce development system, including an introduction to the recently reauthorized federal job training law. Next, the chapter highlights some of the challenges facing today’s jobseekers, showing that those who remain unemployed today face many, often serious barriers to employment. Next, the dissertation’s problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are outlined, followed by an introduction to the dissertation’s research approach and methods and my motivation and assumptions. The introductory chapter concludes with a description of the organization of the dissertation, which is presented in 9 chapters.

The Public Workforce Development System

The public workforce development system is “a network of federal, state, and local offices that function to support economic expansion and develop the talent of our nation’s workforce” (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007). While tracing its roots to the Morrill Act of 1862,¹ the *modern* workforce system was established 100 years later with the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962,² the legislation credited with creating the first major federal job training programs (O’Leary et. al., 2004). The public workforce system and job training programs have evolved since then with continued reauthorizations, including the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973, The Job Training Partnership Act of 1982, the Workforce Investment Act of 1988, and, most recently, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014. Discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, each iteration of federal job training programs maintain focus on workforce development while reflecting the economic, social, and political challenges of the times (O’Leary et. al., 2004: 5-6). So is the case with the WIOA. The Act’s legislative history (and the legislative history of an earlier version, the Supporting Knowledge and Investing in Lifelong Skills (SKILLS) Act), shows that Congress was cognizant of the many

¹ Discussed in Chapter 2, the Morrill Act of 1862 is considered one of the earliest federal workforce development programs. The Act gave states that remained in the Union a grant of public land to sell, the proceeds of which were to be used to establish colleges to teach engineering, agriculture, and military science (Library of Congress, 2015). Since the Act helped pay faculty salaries, and provided education to the public, the Morrill Act “may be considered one of the first workforce efforts of the federal government” (Library of Congress, Washington State Employment Commission, 2012).

² Chapter 2 provides an overview of the purpose of the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973, the Job Training and Partnership Act of 1982, and the Workforce Investment Act of 1988.

challenges facing today's jobseekers and intended to help the most vulnerable workers and those with barriers to employment.

Reauthorization

On July 22, 2014, President Barack Obama signed into law the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (Pub. L. 113-128). Representing the "first major reform to federal job training programs in more than 15 years," Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez characterized the Act as a "fundamental transformation" in workforce development policy (Perez, 2015). Among the themes in the Act is its clear focus on "the most vulnerable workers" including "individuals with barriers to employment" (128 STAT. 1428). The Act specifies that the term "individuals with a barrier to employment" shall include, among others: displaced homemakers, low-income individuals, individuals with disabilities, older individuals, ex-offenders, homeless individuals, youth, single parents, and the long-term unemployed." (128 STAT. 1433-34).

The Act's focus on these individuals with barriers to employment reflects challenges that were present leading up to its passage and that linger today, even as the U.S. economy enters its eighth year of recovery from the Great Recession, the serious economic downturn that began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009. As new policies and programs are being developed under WIOA, workforce development agencies are considering the serious challenges facing jobseekers who continue to participate in the Act's core programs. Just as the passage of the WIOA was bipartisan, so were the many concerns for the American workers left behind in an uneven economic recovery (128 Cong. Rec. 1407-15, 2013). With the primary culprits cited as the fallout from the Great Recession, a "skills gap," and a "broken workforce development system," Congress acknowledged the many challenges facing the public

workforce system and the individuals it serves (Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training, 2013).

Today's Jobseekers

Indeed, many of today's jobseekers are facing barriers to employment. The Great Recession has been widely cited for its severity (Stiglitz, 2010; Krugman, 2012) and its impact on labor markets (Appelbaum, 2012), including industry-wide job losses and wide-spread unemployment (Hodson, 2012; Sweet, 2013). While the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), the organization responsible for tracking business cycles, concluded that the trough of the Great Recession occurred in June 2009, any remarkable recovery, especially in labor markets, was delayed several years (Krugman, 2012; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). This was particularly true in Michigan, a state hit especially hard during the Great Recession and one of the last states to muster a meaningful recovery (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

However, as the economy enters its eighth year of recovery, several labor market indicators have turned positive and are showing considerable improvement. Two "headline" numbers demonstrate this improvement: the unemployment rate and the number of workers on private sector payrolls.

- First, the national unemployment rate, 4.7 percent at the time of this dissertation,³ has been almost halved from its peak of 9.6 percent following the Great Recession. And, the rate in Michigan has fallen even more, dropping from 13.4 to 4.6 percent.⁴

³ In January 2017, the 2016 preliminary annual average unemployment rate for the United States was 4.9 percent according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

⁴ In January 2017, the 2016 preliminary annual average unemployment rate for Michigan was 4.6 percent, according the Michigan Bureau of Labor Market Information and Strategic Initiatives.

- Another example of a labor market indicator showing improvement is private sector employment. Michigan's labor market has added 425,400 private sector jobs since 2009 with major gains in manufacturing (+132,500), administrative services (+62,600), professional services (+57,300), and health services (+46,300).⁵

But, these *overall* improvements disguise some hallmarks of an uneven labor market recovery that is taking place in the U.S. and in Michigan. For example:

- While unemployment rates fall to levels associated with full employment, the instance of long-term unemployment, or joblessness lasting 27 or more weeks, has remained stubbornly high. In 2016, the share of all unemployed residents that have been out of work for 27 or more weeks stood at 22 percent compared to the 3 percent recorded in 2000 (Current Population Survey, 2016).
- Despite unemployment rates recovering, labor force participation rates, or the share of the working age population *active* in the labor market, have remained mostly flat, suggesting that many workers remain on the sidelines watching the recovery from a distance. In 2016, the labor force participation rate in Michigan measured 61.4 percent, well below the nearly 69 percent seen in 2000 (Current Population Survey, 2016).
- While private sector employment has expanded, employment in important goods producing industries, namely manufacturing and construction, have yet to recoup the jobs lost over the last decade. While total private employment has recovered 92

⁵ The change in private sector employment, by industry between 2009 and 2015, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

percent of jobs lost since 2000, manufacturing has recovered just 66 percent of its losses with construction at 70 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).⁶

Accordingly, many of today's jobseekers have been left behind in an uneven recovery and are among our most vulnerable workers, including individuals with one or more barriers to employment (Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training, 2013). Successful implementation of the WIOA will depend on whether policies and programs increase access to, and opportunities for the employment, education, training, and support services individuals with barriers to employment need to be successful in the labor market. But, before that can happen, we need a better, shared understanding of the barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers and the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in the labor market.

Workforce Development in Michigan

In Michigan, workforce development activities are carried out by the State of Michigan, Workforce Development Agency (WDA) through a system of 16 Michigan Works! Agencies covering as many Workforce Development Areas. According to the Michigan Works! Association (2016):

“The Michigan Works! System is the first unified workforce development system in the U.S. and is an integral partner in developing Michigan's economic future. The system is demand driven, locally responsive, and ready to meet the needs of each community. Every year, the Michigan Works! System serves nearly four million customers.”

⁶ While long-term unemployment, labor force participation, and unrecovered job losses are all fairly easy to quantify, other evidence of an uneven labor market recovery is found in the elevated number and share of “discouraged workers,” the “underemployed,” and “involuntary part-time workers,” discussed in more detail later in Chapter 1.

The West Michigan Works! Agency is one of 16 Michigan Works! agencies responsible for administering the workforce development programs under the WIOA. With administrative offices in Grand Rapids, Michigan, West Michigan Works! serves residents in a seven-county Workforce Development Area that includes Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Kent, Montcalm, Muskegon, and Ottawa counties.

In many ways, West Michigan Works! is representative of workforce development efforts in Michigan, generally. First, the Agency coordinates all the core programs under the WIOA, including the adult, dislocated worker, and youth programs and Wagner-Peyser employment services programs administered by the U.S. Department of Labor; the vocational rehabilitation and adult education programs administered by the U.S. Department of Education; and parts of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Importantly, the area includes the second largest metro area in the state, the Grand Rapids-Wyoming Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), meaning staff deliver services to residents in a major metro area with a diverse economy and labor market. At the same time, staff work with residents in smaller, but still substantial metro areas like the Muskegon-Norton Shores MSA and the Holland-Grand Haven MSA, as well as with residents in suburban and rural communities like Allegan, Greenville, Fennville, Hastings, Ionia, and Sparta. Therefore, the Agency serves jobseekers in a region with economies and labor markets that range from large and diverse to those relying on a handful of employers or on a few industries like agriculture, leisure, or manufacturing.

Next, the area has displayed similar labor market trends to the U.S. and state labor markets, reporting similar trends in long-term unemployment, labor force participation, and private sector payroll jobs. Further, evidence of discouraged workers, underemployment, and involuntary part-time employment is found in the area.

The West Michigan Works! workforce development area offers a desirable location to examine the workforce development system. This is because Agency staff administer all of the Act's core programs and because they serve residents in a region displaying economic, demographic, and geographic diversity. Accordingly, much of the fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted in the area, with a local administrator, local staff, and jobseekers providing important perspectives through the dissertation's qualitative data.

Statement of Problem

Despite jobless rates and other labor market indicators showing improvement in Michigan and in West Michigan, unemployment and complete absence from the workforce remain very problematic. During an economic recovery in its eighth year, many residents are among our most vulnerable workers, including individuals with one or more barriers to employment. These residents are being left behind in an uneven labor market recovery and are contributing to widening economic inequality.

While a central purpose of the WIOA is to increase, particularly for individuals with barriers to employment, access to and opportunities for employment, education, training, and support services needed to succeed in the labor market, different beliefs about the barriers to

employment and ideas about what is needed to succeed in the labor market make it difficult to design policies and programs and to successfully implement the Act.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the dissertation is to support the workforce development system through the assembly of a better, shared understanding of the barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers and of the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in the labor market. By cataloguing, describing, and explaining the diverse beliefs about barriers and ideas about education, training, and support services held by the numerous stakeholders⁷ in the public workforce development system, this dissertation supports the development of new, and improvement of existing, workforce development policies and programs. This dissertation intends to support the implementation of the WIOA and lead to better employment outcomes for individuals with barriers to employment.

Research Questions

In this dissertation, I ask four research questions that, through qualitative inquiry with the numerous stakeholders in the workforce development system, allow for a better, shared understanding of the barriers to employment and education, training, and support services.

The first research question asks: "How do participants describe the labor market and an

⁷ Discussed below, the "numerous stakeholders" were: (1) key informants, including program administrators, program staff, and system stakeholders; (2) jobseekers or program participants in workforce development programs; and (3) individuals similarly situated to program participants but who are not participating in workforce programs ("other cases").

economy entering its eighth year of recovery?” This information will provide rich contextual and perceptual information about how jobseekers and key informants think the economy and the labor market have been performing in the post-2008 recovery. This allows for comparisons of perceptions to theoretical information about the types of unemployment, providing better insights to policy makers about the circumstances of jobseekers today.

The second research question asks: “What do the participants believe are the causes, content, and consequences of the ‘barriers to employment’ faced by jobseekers today?” This question is asked to allow for deep exploration of the perceptions of jobseekers and key informants regarding the barriers to employment they face. The information collected will be compared to the barriers described in the literature to identify common or different themes between participants and the broader literature.

Table 1: Research Questions and Information Needed

<i>Research Question</i>	<i>Information</i>
How do participants describe the labor market and an economy entering its eighth year of recovery?	Perceptual, contextual, theoretical
What do the participants believe are the causes, content, and consequences of the “barriers to employment” faced by jobseekers today?	Perceptual, contextual, theoretical
What ideas do the participants have about the “education, training, and support services” needed to be successful in the labor market?	Perceptual, contextual, theoretical.
What do jobseekers today want other stakeholders in the public workforce development system to know or to understand when designing workforce development policies and programs?	Perceptual

Similarly, the third research question asks: “What ideas do the participants have about the ‘education, training, and support services’ needed to be successful in the labor market?” This will allow for comparison between the various stakeholder’s ideas for what is necessary to be successful in the labor market. This information will help policy makers better develop programs that may help people with barriers to employment.

The forth research question asks: “What do jobseekers today want other stakeholders in the public workforce development system to know or to understand when designing workforce development policies and programs?” Discussed in Chapter 3, participant action research-inspired methods were used to investigate this research and intend to give voice to jobseekers.

Research Approach

The dissertation uses the case study approach and employs multiple qualitative methods (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Multiple qualitative methods were used, including focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, and participant action research-inspired data collection. The dissertation’s participants included jobseekers; federal, state, and local program administrators and staff; and other stakeholders, including representatives from state and local workforce boards and from national and state associations. The participants were classified as cases based on their affiliation (federal, state, or local) and their role (jobseeker, administrator, staff, or stakeholder), allowing for rich analysis among and between cases.

Rationale and Significance

The dissertation has central sociological relevance. Sociologists have long studied employment and unemployment (Grint, 2005; Volti, 2012); human capital (Becker, 1964; Blau, Ferber, & Winkler, 2002); social capital (Putnam, 2000; Gold, 2010; Sharone, 2014); skills and job training (Hodson, 2012; Sweet, 2013); vulnerable populations (Pelka, 2012; Marx & McLellan, 1977; Ehrenreich, 2001), economic inequality (Wilson, 1996; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003), and job training and workforce development (Hodson, 2012; Appelbaum, 2012; Van Horn, 2015).

The dissertation is timely due to the recently-passed WIOA, the very recent release by the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education of the final rules for the Act, and the rush by state and local workforce development agencies to design innovative policies and programs intended to implement the Act. And, with many jobseekers facing one or more barriers to employment, cataloguing, describing, and explaining the beliefs about these barriers to employment and the ideas about the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in the labor market will support successful implementation of the Act.

Motivation and Assumptions

My motivation for this dissertation reflects the nuances and complexity of the labor market and barriers to employment and the folly of reducing those complex nuances to economic variables. When studying individuals with barriers to employment, richer, more qualitative exploration is needed to understand the individuals, their barriers, and what they need to overcome those barriers. Why now? Beyond just an interest in the subject and the research methods used, my motivation for this dissertation comes from the increased focus on individuals with barriers to

employment seen in the WIOA. To truly tailor policies and programs and successfully implement the Act, the workforce system needs to better understand the populations they are trying to serve.

I bring several assumptions to this study. At the time of conducting this dissertation, I was a State Bureau Administrator and the Director of the Michigan Bureau of Labor Market Information and Strategic Initiatives in Lansing, Michigan. In this role, I served as an advisory member of the Governor's Talent Investment Board, was the Chair of the Labor Market Information (LMI) Institute Board of Directors in Arlington, Virginia, and was a member of the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA) Labor Market Information Committee in Washington, D.C. During the time of this dissertation, I came in regular contact with officials in the U.S. Department of Labor, in the Michigan Talent Investment Agency (TIA), and throughout the workforce development system and infrastructure.

As a result, I was an active participant in the national, state, and local implementation of the Act and therefore bring important perspective and experience to this research. However, I also acknowledge that this experience and perspective may be a liability, particularly in assumptions about the workforce development system. First, I acknowledge my optimistic view of the workforce development system, particularly in Michigan. Next, I recognize my strong belief that more qualitative inquiry is needed in workforce and labor market research. Finally, I acknowledge my professional and personal relationships with individuals in the national, state, and local workforce development system.

Somewhat counterbalancing these potential liabilities is the nature of my career as an administrator of an agency that provides objective, unbiased economic and labor market

information, analysis, and insights for the system. That is, my *profession* requires objectivity. And, I will attempt to carry that professional requirement into this academic research.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation has 9 chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 comprehensively reviews the economic, sociological, and public policy literature related to unemployment, structural unemployment, job training, workforce development, and barriers to employment. Chapter 3 explains and justifies the research design, with a discussion of methods, the case study approach, and the dissertation's participants and settings. Chapter 4 reports demographic and economic information about the dissertation's participants and introduces the analytic categories. Chapters 5 through 8 discuss the dissertation's findings and analysis. In particular, Chapter 5 presents the findings from the first research question, Chapter 6 and 7 describe the second and third research questions, and Chapter presents the findings from the fourth research question. Finally, Chapter 9 provides conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter Summary

I began this chapter by introducing the public workforce development system, which, at least in its modern form, exists to “develop the talent of our nation’s workforce.” I then noted that the most recent reauthorization of public workforce development law, the WIOA, has a clear focus on individuals with barriers to employment. I then explained the importance of this focus, showing that eight years into the economic recovery, many residents are being left behind, including individuals with barriers to employment. In this chapter, I introduced the purpose of

the dissertation: to support successful implementation of the WIOA Act by capturing from numerous stakeholders in the public workforce development system their beliefs about the barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers and their ideas about the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in the labor market. Along with this, I introduced the problem statement and the dissertation's four research questions. This chapter closed with a brief discussion of the dissertation's research approach, its methods, my motivation, and my assumptions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter begins by orienting the dissertation within the discipline of sociology, situating it in the area of economic sociology, particularly the sociology of work and occupations and the sociology of job training. Through a review of the extant literatures, this chapter provides an overview of the multidisciplinary research that underlies this dissertation and its four research questions, including the economic literature on unemployment, the sociological literature on employment, job training, and the public workforce development system, and the wide-ranging literature on barriers to employment. This chapter concludes with a justification for the dissertation's conceptual framework and a restatement of the dissertation's research questions tied to that framework.

Orientation of the Dissertation

As discussed in Chapter 1, sociologists are interested in the subject matter of this dissertation, particularly with employment and unemployment, human capital, social capital, job training and workforce development, and inequality and vulnerable populations. Within the discipline of sociology, this dissertation is situated in what is sometimes referred to as “the new economic sociology” (Bandelj, 2009: 2; Swedberg, 1994). Building on the classic works of Karl Marx,⁸ Max

⁸ Karl Marx analyzed sharpening class inequalities that accompanied capital concentration and accumulation (Hodson, 2002: 3).

Weber,⁹ and Emile Durkheim,¹⁰ each in their time addressing the intersection of economy and society (Grint, 2005; Hodson, 2002), the new economic sociology draws a renewed attention on two themes: “embeddedness” (Krippner & Alvarez, 2007) and the “socially constructed nature of economic phenomena” (Swedberg, 1994). Within economic sociology is the sociology of work (Hodson & Cornfield, 2002; Grint, 2005). According to Vallas (2011: 1) the sociology of work is, “concerned with the social relations, normative codes, and organizational structures that inform the behavior, experience, and identities of people during the course of their working lives.” Contemporary sociology of work “focuses on addressing the theoretical, empirical, and policy challenges posed by economic globalization, democratization, the changing social and demographic composition of the labor force, and neoliberal state deregulation of markets” (Hodson & Cornfield, 2002).

In the U.S., sociologists of work have concentrated on deindustrialization, the growth of labor force diversity, changing employment relations and the increased emphasis on flexibility, networks, and work and family conflicts, and the plight of the middle class. This dissertation builds on the current directions in the sociology of work, and contributes to our understanding of the role of the state, through the federal workforce development system, in providing the education, training, and support services that individuals with barriers to employment need to be successful in the labor market.

⁹ Max Weber characterized the new bureaucratic social order as an “iron cage” (Hodson, 2002: 3).

¹⁰ Emile Durkheim examined the impact of the increasing complexity of the division of labor on anomie and community (Hodson, 2002: 3).

Unemployment and Structural Unemployment

A central purpose of the public workforce development system, as reaffirmed throughout the WIOA, is to increase employment opportunities for unemployed jobseekers, particularly for those with barriers to employment (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015; 128 STAT. 1434). And, despite improvements in labor market indicators, many of those who remain out of work have one or more barriers to employment and are counted as long-term unemployed. The continuing existence of long-term joblessness suggests that there are structural mismatches in the labor market and require a closer look at unemployment and so-called “structural unemployment.”

Unemployment

Few social problems have been studied more than unemployment (O’Connell, 2015).

Unemployment refers to the number of people “who are available for work and are actively seeking work but cannot find jobs” (Abel & Bernanke, 2001: 8). In the U.S., unemployment is measured by the Current Population Survey (CPS).¹¹ The CPS is a monthly survey of households conducted by two federal agencies, the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Responses to the CPS determine if residents are counted as employed, unemployed, or not in the labor force.

¹¹ The Current Population Survey (CPS), sponsored jointly by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), is the primary source of labor force statistics for the population of the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). A monthly survey of approximately 60,000 households in the United States (about 2,000 of them in Michigan), the CPS is used to measure who is employed, who is unemployed, and who is not in the labor force (ibid). In addition, the CPS provides detailed information on characteristics of unemployed, including information about demographics, duration, and reason for unemployment.

Economists define three *types* of unemployment:¹² *frictional* unemployment, *cyclical* unemployment, and *structural* unemployment. Frictional unemployment occurs when workers search for suitable jobs and firms search for suitable workers (Abel & Bernanke, 2001: 95). Importantly, these “frictions” in the labor market represent *qualified* individuals with *transferable* skills (Arnold, 2005) moving from job to job. In a dynamic, changing economy, some level of frictional unemployment will always be observed (Abel & Bernanke, 2001). That is, it is *healthy* unemployment. Cyclical and structural unemployment are more complicated. Building on Friedman and Phelps (1968) pioneering work, Krugman (1994) distinguishes between the two by invoking the “natural rate of unemployment.” In doing so, he notes that, cyclical fluctuations around the natural rate can be attributed to “changes in aggregate demand” while structural movements in the natural rate itself, result from “changes in labor market institutions, demographic shifts, and so on” (Krugman, 1994: 25). In other words, cyclical unemployment coincides with the business cycle and structural unemployment reflects structural changes in the labor market. If cyclical unemployment remains persistently high over an extended period, it converts to structural unemployment (Janoski, Luke, & Oliver, 2014; DeLong, 2002). While pinpointing the actual shifts behind structural unemployment is difficult, it most often results from a “persistent mismatch” between the skills and characteristics of workers and the requirements of jobs (Hubbard & O’Brien, 2006: 239). As a result, structural unemployment has more serious, longer lasting consequences than frictional unemployment, and even more so than cyclical unemployment.

¹² It is important to note a forth type of unemployment, “seasonal unemployment,” is sometimes categorized as a form of structural unemployment.

While *all* unemployed jobseekers are pertinent to this dissertation, the relationship between barriers to employment and the persistent mismatch in skills that is often associated with structural unemployment necessitate a more detailed discussion of the causes and consequences of structural unemployment.

Structural Unemployment

Sociologists of work may understudy the subject of structural unemployment. One analyst notes that, “given the dramatic, persistent spike in long-term unemployment since the onset of the economic crisis, it is surprising how few recent authors have focused on the problem of structural unemployment” (Burke, 2015). In *The Causes of Structural Unemployment: Four Factors that Keep People from the Jobs They Deserve*, Janoski, Luke, & Oliver (2014) describe four factors that have fundamentally changed the labor market and have caused structural unemployment. They are: (1) the shift to services and skill mismatches; (2) downsizing, outsourcing, and offshoring; (3) changing technology; and (4) structural financialization (Janoski, Luke, & Oliver, 2014: 19). Underlying these four factors are several recent trends, including the decline in manufacturing employment, with major job displacement and trade union decline; an increase in service employment, requiring more emphasis on professional training; outsourcing to temporary employment firms and subcontractors and offshoring to foreign firms; and improved transportation and information technology, robotics, and automation. (Janoski, Luke, & Oliver, 2014). The result is a skills-mismatch. They explain:

“Most of the focus is on the shift from manufacturing to services and the subsequent mismatching of the skills of the unemployed with what the service sector now demands in terms of skills. Blue-collar skills from manufacturing fit poorly with a rising service economy. Although skills mismatches exist as an important part of structural unemployment, the role of such mismatches is often exaggerated as the sole cause of

structural unemployment. Some of the expansion of services is really due to outsourced work from manufacturing employers with no real change in skills, and additional aspects of the mismatch are due to employer's reluctance to train workers and pay them a competitive wage when those skills are scarce. Consequently, we attribute the skills mismatch problem not only to workers but also to the lack of willingness to train by employers and the state (Janoski, Luke, and Oliver, 2014: 21).

This highlights the intersection of structural unemployment and job training, discussed later in this chapter.

Because structural unemployment reflects long-lasting shifts in labor demand, it is not quickly or easily fixed (Arnold, 2005). An economy experiencing structural unemployment will have challenges with chronic, long-term unemployment (Appelbaum, 2012). Therefore, one indicator of a persistent mismatch between labor supply and labor demand is elevated long-term unemployment. In the U.S., long-term unemployment is defined as joblessness that last 27 or more weeks (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). In Michigan, approximately 67,000 unemployed residents had been out of work for 27 weeks or longer in 2016 (Current Population Survey, 2016). This covers nearly 22 percent of *all* unemployed residents and is a major shift from 2000 when this figure stood at just 3.5 percent of the unemployed (Current Population Survey, 2015). And, while long-term joblessness today is down from nearly 50 percent of all unemployed in 2009, understanding lasting shifts in unemployment is critical to a sociological depiction of the barriers to employment and government efforts to address newly intransigent forms of joblessness.

Beyond Unemployment: The “Real” Unemployment Rate?

The unemployed, even the long-term unemployed, who continue to seek jobs are counted in official labor statistics. Other groups, like people who have exited the labor market, are not

part of the tally. This sometimes draws criticism and causes some to reference the “real” unemployment rate (Bregger & Haugen, 1995). What often distinguishes the concept of a “real” unemployment rate from an “official” unemployment rate is: (1) individuals who have given-up looking for work; and (2) part-time workers who are seeking full-time work. While technically not counted as unemployed, these groups of people have the same or similar experiences as those counted as unemployed. As such, I now turn to a brief discussion of these groups, known as “discouraged workers” and as “involuntary part-time workers,” respectively. I conclude this section with an overview of an introduction to alternative measures of labor underutilization.

Discouraged Workers and Involuntary Part-Time Workers

The labor force consists of the employed and the unemployed. Many people may not be active in the labor market, including: retirees, students, caretakers, to name a few. But, one group not active in the labor market, specifically because they believe no jobs are available for them or that there are none for which they would qualify, are so-called “discouraged workers.”¹³ The perceptions of these individuals, whose experience places them outside robust participation in a labor market, are nonetheless critical to successfully implement the WIOA. However, a challenge inherent in the research design is gaining access to these individuals, since they are,

¹³ According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) “discouraged workers are a subset of persons marginally attached to the labor force. The marginally attached are those persons not in the labor force who want and are available for work, and who have looked for a job sometime in the prior 12 months, but were not counted as unemployed because they had not searched for work in the 4 weeks preceding the survey. Among the marginally attached, discouraged workers were not currently looking for work specifically because they believed no jobs were available for them or there were none for which they would qualify.”

by definition, not participating in the workforce development system and likely not found in American Job Centers. This is discussed in Chapter 3.

Like discouraged workers, involuntary part-time workers are another group struggling in the labor market. In the U.S., about 21 percent of wage and salary employment is part-time (Current Population Survey, 2016). Of those working in part-time jobs, about 81 percent choose to work part-time; that is, they are working part-time for “noneconomic reasons” (Current Population Survey, 2016). However, about 19 percent of part-time workers indicate they would like to be working full-time. Involuntary part-time employment is divided into two categories: (1) people who are working part-time because of “slack work or business conditions”; and (2) people who are working part-time because they “could only find part-time jobs” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Both reasons suggest that workers are not as productive in the labor market as they would like to be, and these individuals are sometimes dubbed “underemployed.” Like discouraged workers, studying these individuals will be challenging, but their perceptions and their barriers to employment are important in this dissertation. Unlike discouraged workers, involuntary part-time workers may, by definition, engage with the workforce development system as they try to find full-time employment.

An Alternative Measure of Labor Underutilization

Because of the large number of discouraged workers and involuntary part-time workers, some scholars allege that official statistics understate the unemployment problem (Bregger and Haugen, 1995). This view holds that “any measure of joblessness should reflect not only those officially classified as unemployed, but also all persons who want to work, even if they are not actually looking for jobs on a current basis” (Bregger and Haugen, 1995: 19). This can be

accomplished by counting discouraged workers and involuntary part-time workers and recalculating a broader measure of joblessness.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics responds with a handful of “alternative measures of labor underutilization.” Just as the official unemployment rate is collected from the CPS and calculated by the Bureau, so are these alternative measures. The five alternative measures are constructed to allow direct comparison with the official unemployment rate, the U-3. The alternative measures include the U-1 and the U-2, both using a narrower definition for the calculation and the U-4, U-5, and U-6, each casting a wider net for the calculation.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009), the alternative measures are defined as:

- U-1 - Persons unemployed 15 weeks or longer, as a percent of the civilian labor force;
- U-2 - Job losers and persons who completed temporary jobs, as a percent of the civilian labor force;
- U-3 - Total unemployed, as a percent of the civilian labor force (official unemployment rate);
- U-4 - Total unemployed plus discouraged workers, as a percent of the civilian labor force plus discouraged workers;
- U-5 - Total unemployed, plus discouraged workers, plus all other persons marginally attached to the labor force, as a percent of the civilian labor force plus all persons marginally attached to the labor force; and
- U-6 - Total unemployed, plus all persons marginally attached to the labor force, plus total employed part time for economic reasons, as a percent of the civilian labor force plus all persons marginally attached to the labor force.

As one might expect, the measures yield higher *rates* as they move from the official unemployment rate, U-3, to the broader measures of U-5 and the U-6. For example, consider the various measures in the years immediately following the Great Recession, a time when the Michigan labor market was performing poorly. In 2009, the official unemployment rate was

13.3 percent compared to a slightly higher U-5 at 15.0 percent and a U-6 that stood at 21.5 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

These broader definitions are important because this dissertation engages with individuals who are out of work for *any* reason. That is, to gain a better, shared understanding of the barriers to employment and the ideas about the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in the labor market, the voice of the long-term unemployed, discouraged workers, involuntary part-time workers, and others must be considered. These concepts will be important in understanding the social significance of these various groups. In the section below, I provide an overview of the economic and non-economic effects of unemployment, which will be critical to understanding the circumstances of individuals and groups who are experiencing job loss and unemployment.

Economic and Noneconomic Effects of Unemployment

There are well-documented economic and noneconomic effects of being out of work. Labor market specialists and researchers identify two major costs associated with unemployment: (1) the loss of output that occurs because fewer people are productively employed; and (2) the personal or psychological costs faced by unemployed workers and their families. (Abel & Bernanke, 2001).

Economists and sociologists show that the costs are especially high for workers suffering long spells of unemployment and for the chronically unemployed (DeLong, 2002; Abel & Bernanke, 2001), with those individuals experiencing lost income (Johnson & Feng, 2013), increased incidence of poverty (Nichols, 2012), lower reemployment outcomes (Krueger et. al., 2014), and skills depreciation, including reductions in human capital and social capital (Nichols,

2013). Brand (2015) categorized the impacts from job loss into economic effects and noneconomic effects, with the latter including serious social-psychological effects and negative impacts on physical well-being. Brand notes:

“Job loss has been linked to both short- and long-term declines in physical health, including worse self-reported health, and physical disability, cardiovascular disease, greater number of reported medical conditions, increase in hospitalization, higher use of medical services, higher use of disability benefits, increase in self-destructive behaviors and suicide, and mortality (Brand, 2015: 367)

Brand (2015) explains job loss “disrupts more than just income flow; it disrupts individuals’ status, time structure, demonstration of competence and skill, and structure of relations” as well as psychological well-being, including depression and anxiety. (Krueger et. al., 2014; Brand, 2015; Tefft, 2011). These and other costs motivate the government to work to reduce the impacts of unemployment and, as discussed, the workforce development system is charged with doing so through education, training, and support services.

Conclusion

This section has introduced the working concepts of unemployment and structural unemployment used throughout this dissertation. It has also discussed discouraged workers and involuntary part-time workers. Despite lower unemployment rates, the drop in the labor force participation rate, the rise in long-term unemployment, and the incidence of involuntary part-time employment suggest there remains structural unemployment in the labor market. Because structural unemployment reflects a mismatch between skills offered by labor supply and needs of labor demand, investment in education, training, and support services are required to reduce unemployment. The costs of unemployment give government agencies an

incentive to work to reduce unemployment. The public workforce development system attempts to do this by providing education, training, and support services to jobseekers, particularly those with barriers to employment.

The Sociology of Job Training

Understanding the education, training, and support services individuals with barriers to employment need to be successful in the labor market is central to the major themes of this dissertation. This section reviews the literature on the sociology of job training, beginning with a brief overview of human capital theory and how sociologists have departed from the rigid, economic theory. This review then provides an overview of some of the current debates in the sociology of job training literature.

Job Training and Unemployment

Sociologists and economists agree that job training is important, especially as a policy to reduce unemployment. Abel & Bernanke (2001: 455) cite “government support for job training and worker relocation” as a major policy aimed at reducing unemployment. Likewise, Janoski, Luke, & Oliver (2014: 23) list job training as one solution for the structural unemployment problem. However, there are conditions for job training to have the desired effect on joblessness. Bernanke (2001: 456) emphasizes that job training should “address the component of aggregate unemployment resulting from a structural mismatch between job seekers and job vacancies, so that training is targeted to occupations with local job vacancies.” Janoski, Luke, & Oliver (2014: 23) argue that to get the unemployed or those in insecure jobs into new jobs or job training “requires a major restructuring of American education because of its inefficient approach to training workers who do not intent to go to college.”

As such, the workforce development system should ensure job training is targeted to occupations with local vacancies and to residents who do not intent to go to college. The former is accomplished in the WIOA through several provisions that focus on state and local in-demand occupations. According to WIOA, the term in-demand occupation means, “an occupation that currently has or is projected to have a number of positions (including positions that lead to economic self-sufficiency and opportunities for advancement) in an industry sector so as to have a significant impact on the State, regional, or local economy, as appropriate” (128 STAT. 1433). Moreover, the Act states that the determination of whether an industry sector or occupation is in-demand, “shall be made by the State Board or Local Board, as appropriate, using State and regional business and labor market projections, including the use of labor market information” (128 STAT. 1433). The requirement that job training more efficiently train workers who do not intent to go to college is also considered in WIOA. In fact, the Act is full of references to on-the-job training, internships, paid and unpaid work experiences, transitional employment, and apprenticeships.

I now move to a more detailed discussion of job training by reviewing the different economic perspectives (human capital theory) and sociological perspectives (social capital), and explore what factors drive successful job training.

Economic and Sociological Theories Explaining Job Training

How people learn has been of central concern to sociologists (Bills, 2003). Gary Becker (1964: 11) defines human capital as “activities that influence future monetary and psychic income by increasing the resources in people.” Importantly, Becker distinguishes between “general training” and “specific training.” In his view, general training is “useful in many firms besides

those providing it” (Becker, 1964: 33) while specific training can be defined as “training that has no effect on the productivity of trainees that would be useful in other firms” (Becker, 1964: 40). Human capital theory argues employers will not pay for or provide general training because they want to protect their investment. They will, however, invest in workplace-specific skills, which assure them a return on their training investments. The assumptions of human capital theory have major implications on the workforce development system. With many chronically or structurally unemployed jobseekers participating in the system, who pays for “general training” and who pays for “specific training” is an important policy issue.

However, sociologists have questioned the assumptions of human capital theory (Bills, 2003). Bills (2003: 12) notes that sociologists “have never been entirely persuaded by the behavioral assumptions of human capital theory.” In fact, Knoke & Yang (2002) find that employers “quite readily provide their core employees with skills that other employers value” and conclude that “the parsimony and elegance of human capital theory is too great a price to pay given the messy and contradictory nature of worker training.”

The complexity of job training opens the door to considerable sociological work that goes well beyond human capital theory (Bills, 2003; Sorensen & Kalleberg, 1981). In their development of social capital theory, Putnam (2000: 19) and other sociologists show how “our lives are made more productive by social ties.” Social capital refers to connections among individuals and the “social networks” and the “norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness” that arise from them (Putnam, 2000). Indeed, models of social capital or social networks have been used by sociologists to study employment and unemployment, with abundant research on subjects like wages and wage growth (Schonberg, 2007); entrepreneurship (Gold, 2010); and

unemployment and the job search (Trimble & Kmec, 2011). The general conclusion is that social connections and social networks have a significant and positive impact on employment outcomes and work.

The sociology of job training is not limited to human capital and social capital. Some sociologists have drawn attention to inequalities in the access to worker training, showing that not all workers participate in training at the same rate, with differences seen by race (Kim & Creighton, 1999), by gender (Knoke & Ishio, 1998) by occupation and industry (Marquardt, 2000), by education level (Kim & Creighton, 1999), and by organization type (Osterman, 1995). Others have entered the debate calling for a better understanding of the content of training (Luo, 2002) and the institutions and structures providing training (Osterman, 2001).

Some sociologists have questioned job training and the public workforce development system. Boyle & Boguslaw (2002: 104) acknowledge that the U.S. economy “has become global, dynamic, and technology-driven” but note that while training and retraining are common solutions to poverty and unemployment that they “have had only limited success, from the perspectives of both employer and employee.” Other sociologists have argued that theories of human capital and social capital are limited because of the focus on the individual and not on the system (Boyle & Boguslaw, 2002: 107; Lafer, 1994; Ryan, 1976).

Conclusion

This section highlighted the sociology of job training and its reliance on human capital theory to explain worker training and investments in that training. Sociologists have broken with human capital theory, specifically in the provision of “general training” and the role that social capital and networks play in the labor market. The review also introduced a few debates in the

literature including the content of worker training and the structures providing the training.

Finally, one concern was raised about the effectiveness of job training and another was surfaced about the limitations of theory that result from a focus on the individual and not on the system.

The Public Workforce Development System

The public workforce development system is “a network of federal, state, and local offices that function to support economic expansion and develop the talent of our nation’s workforce” (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007). The public workforce development system is among those “political and institutional arrangements” (Bills, 2003; O’Leary, 2004; Van Horn, 2015) that, together with community colleges (Dougherty & Bakia, 2000) and the welfare system (Lundgren & Rankin, 1998), provide education, training, and support services to unemployed jobseekers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016).

There is a large volume of research on the workforce development system and the programs it is responsible for administering. However, the research tends to be programmatic and applied. Yet, the efforts of researchers in the area are highly influential to federal, state, and local workforce developers. In fact, some prestigious organizations are dedicated to the study of the workforce system and its programs, including the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research in Kalamazoo, Michigan and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, in New Brunswick, New Jersey. These two organizations, alone, are responsible for a substantial volume of research on workforce development and related topics. While much of the research concentrates on program participants (Hobbie & Chocolaad, 2015) or

program evaluation (Smith & Fichtner, 2015), others focus on the system (Good & Strong, 2015; O’Leary et. al., 2004).

According to O’Leary, et. al. (2004), government action to promote employment in the U.S. has always been prompted by crisis. In fact, the first workforce development *program* was started during the Civil War and targeted specific skills, while the workforce development *system* traces its roots to the depression-era “New Deal” programs for public works. The history of government action to promote employment tends to show a responsiveness to the needs in changing economic structures. As noted, a core goal federal job training efforts has been to encourage economic expansion and enhance the overall talent of the workforce. These actions are well designed for the human capital theory, in which the specific skills of the workforce keep pace with the growth in the technical sophistication of the productive economy. At the same time, these actions provide opportunities for the development of social connections and social networks.

The History of Public Job Training and Workforce Development

The Morrill Act of 1862 is considered one of the earliest federal workforce development *programs*. The Act gave states that remained in the union a grant of public land to sell, the proceeds of which were to be used to establish colleges to teach engineering, agriculture, and military science (Library of Congress, 2015). Since the Act helped pay faculty salaries, and provided education to the public, the Morrill Act “may be considered one of the first workforce efforts of the federal government” (Library of Congress, Washington State Employment Commission, 2012). Interestingly, the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan, now Michigan State University, “served as the prototype for the nation’s ‘land-grant’ institutions

created under the Morrill Act” (Michigan State University, 2012). More recently, the public workforce development *system* can be traced to The Wagner-Peyser Act of 1933, which established a nationwide system of public employment offices known as the Employment Service (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). Just three months after taking office as president, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Act into law and saw it play “a key role in economic recovery from the Great Depression by referring jobless workers to available private sector jobs as well as to newly created public works and public service jobs” (O’Leary & Eberts, 2008: 1).

Following the Wagner-Peyser Act of 1933, public job training programs evolved through five reforms: The Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA) of 1962; The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) of 1973; the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, and, the focus of this dissertation, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014. The descriptions below are intended to give a brief overview of the stated purpose of each piece of legislation.

- **The Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA)** – The Manpower Development and Training Act was passed March 15, 1962. The purpose of the Act was: “To require the Federal Government to appraise the manpower requirements and resources of the Nation, and to develop and apply the information and methods needed to deal with the problems of unemployment resulting from automation and technological changes and other types of persistent unemployment” (76 STAT. 24).

- **The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) of 1973** – Signed into law by President Richard Nixon December 28, 1973, the CETA¹⁴ was an Act “To assure opportunities for employment and training to unemployed and underemployed persons (87 STAT. 839). The purpose of the Act was: “To provide job training and employment opportunities for economically disadvantaged, unemployed, and underemployed persons, and to assure that training and other services lead to maximum employment opportunities and enhance self-sufficiency by establishing a flexible and decentralized system of federal, state, and local programs” (87 STAT. 839).
- **Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) of 1982** – The JTPA was passed October 13, 1982 during the Reagan administration. The purpose of JTPA was: “To establish programs to prepare youth and unskilled adults for entry into the labor force and to afford job training to those economically disadvantaged individuals and other individuals facing serious barriers to employment, who are in special need of such training to obtain productive employment” (96 Stat. 1322).
- **Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998** – The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 was passed August 7, 1998. The purpose of this Act was: “To provide workforce investment activities, through statewide and local workforce investment systems, that increase the employment, retention, and earnings of participants, and increase occupational skill attainment by participants, and, as a result, improve the quality of the workforce,

¹⁴ The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973 saw the first elements of decentralized decision making, credited with creating local workforce development boards (O’Leary, 2004).

reduce welfare dependency, and enhance the productivity and competitiveness of the Nation (112 Stat. 945).

- **The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)** – The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act was passed on July 22, 2014. The purpose of the Act was: “To increase, for individuals in the United States, particularly those individuals with barriers to employment, access to and opportunities for the employment, education, training, and support services they need to succeed in the labor market (128 Stat. 1429).¹⁵

Beyond the stated purpose of each of the five federal workforce development statutes, this inquiry is interested in the *actual* text of each, particularly as it relates to “individuals with barriers to employment.” An analysis of the term *barriers to employment* (and related terms) for each of the five statutes shows a clear increase in the focus on individuals with barriers to employment from MDTA to WIOA. In fact, the frequency of the term “barrier” or “barriers” in

¹⁵ Other stated purposes of the Act include: “To support the alignment of workforce investment, education, and economic development systems in support of a comprehensive, accessible, and high-quality workforce development system in the United States. To improve the quality and labor market relevance of workforce investment, education, and economic development efforts to provide America’s workers with the skills and credentials necessary to secure and advance in employment with family-sustaining wages and to provide America’s employers with the skilled workers the employers need to succeed in a global economy. To promote improvement in the structure of and delivery of services through the United States workforce development system to better address the employment and skill needs of workers, jobseekers, and employers. To increase the prosperity of workers and employers in the United States, the economic growth of communities, regions, and States, and the global competitiveness of the United States. For purposes of subtitle A and B of title I, to provide workforce investment activities, through statewide and local workforce development systems, that increase the employment, retention, and earnings of participants, and increase attainment of recognized postsecondary credentials by participants, and as a result, improve the quality of the workforce, reduce welfare dependency, increase economic self-sufficiency, meet the skill requirements of employers, and enhance the productivity and competitiveness of the Nation” (128 Stat. 1429).

WIOA is 38, compared to none in the MDTA. However, while the MDTA does not mention “barrier” or “barriers” it does mention “handicapped” two times. And, the frequency of “barriers” or “barrier” in WIOA is nearly double the frequency in WIA, over five times more than in JTPA, and ten times more than in CETA.

The public workforce development system is not without criticism (Good & Strong, 2015). Krepcio & Martin (2012) identify five key trends challenging and influencing the public workforce system. They are: (1) the slow growth economy and “jobless recoveries”; (2) changing labor markets and employment relations; (3) advances in information and communication technology; (4) demographic changes; and (5) reduced funding for the system (Good & Strong, 2015). These trends have resulted in strain on the system. Moreover, it is likely that the Great Recession has been “the greatest challenge to the workforce development system” (Wandner, 2012). Slow economic growth, changing labor markets, and increased technology has led to increases in the number of unemployed jobseekers engaging with the system and skills mismatches have put increased demand on system resources.

Conclusion

This section introduced the public workforce development system and its five major reforms, most recently the WIOA. The workforce system is responsible for administering job training programs to help unemployed job seekers find and keep jobs. This review showed that individuals with barriers to employment are a central focus of WIOA, explicitly mentioned in the stated purpose of the Act and referenced throughout the Act. The review concluded with an observation that the workforce system is under strain from increased, significant demand from unemployed jobseekers, many with one or more barriers to employment.

Barriers to Employment

The Act's clear focus on individuals with barriers to employment requires a review of the current literature on the subject. The literature on employment barriers is widely dispersed with major contributions from scholars in a handful of disciplines, including: vocational rehabilitation, sociology, social work, criminal justice, and the health professions. In fact, the literature is so decentralized, that finding a common definition for "barriers" to employment is difficult. However, the definition offered by the U.S. Department of Labor seems most appropriate. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, a barrier to employment is a "characteristic that may hinder an individual's hiring, promotion, or participation in the labor force. Identification of these barriers will vary by location and labor market" (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012).

A few patterns emerge from a review of the existing literature on the barriers to employment, specifically how the authors conceptualize and identify the barriers. The first, and most common, way of identifying barriers to employment is to study people who, because of their belonging to a *class* of individuals, are likely to experience one or more barriers to employment. Examples of this include barriers for "teens and young adults with disabilities" (Sally, 2011) or barriers for "visually impaired women" (Coffey, et. al., 2014). A second way of identifying barriers to employment is to study people who, because of their participation in a *program*, are likely to experience one or more barriers to employment. An example of this includes "welfare participants" (Blumenberg, 2002; Bloom, et. al., 2011). A third, and much less common way of identifying barriers to employment, is by identifying the *actual barrier*.

Examples of an actual barrier studied in the literature is “reliable transportation” (Baum, 2009) or “child care” (Skouteris, 2007).

Parsing a large body of literature on various groups and programs provides some insights from a workforce development perspective. For example, Goldberg (2000) studied participants in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs and learned that the most common employment barriers are physical and mental health problems, domestic violence, low skill levels, lack of adequate or affordable housing, and limited proficiency in English. Research in this area has shown that recipients with work barriers are less likely to find jobs, have lower earnings on average, and are more likely to lose assistance because of a sanction for program noncompliance than families without barriers (Goldberg, 2000; Kim, 2000).

Another way the literature handles barriers to employment, particularly important in this dissertation, is by reviewing workforce development legislation, like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. That is, how does the Act define barriers? In the case of the most recent workforce development law, the Act casts a large net when defining “individuals with barriers to employment.” According to the Act, the term “individual with a barrier to employment” means:

“A member of one or more of the following populations: displaced homemakers; low-income individuals; Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians; individuals with disabilities; older individuals; ex-offenders; homeless individuals; youth who are in or have aged out of the foster care system; individuals who are English language learners, individuals who have low levels of literacy, and individuals facing substantial cultural barriers; migrant and seasonal farmworkers; individuals within 2 years of exhausting lifetime eligibility under part A of title IV of the Social Security Act; single parents (including single pregnant women); and the long-term unemployed” (128 STAT. 1452).

In addition, the Act provides room for “such other groups as the Governor involved determines to have barriers to employment” (128 STAT 1452). In Michigan, the Governor’s Talent Investment Board (GTIB) would make that determination. At the time of this dissertation, no additional groups of individuals with barriers to employment had been identified by the GTIB.

Individuals with Barriers to Employment and Labor Market Outcomes

A volume of literature addresses the employment outcomes for individuals with barriers to employment, particularly for individuals with disabilities (Sevak, Brucker, & O’Neill, 2015), older workers (Latham & Vickers, 2015), and ex-offenders (Raphael, 2014). While the literature is widespread and targets specific individuals, groups, or barriers, it shows that there is a link between barriers to employment and employment outcomes in the labor market.

Individuals with Disabilities

First, individuals with disabilities see lower labor force participation rates and higher unemployment compared to those with no disability. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “the unemployment rate for persons with a disability was 10.7 percent in 2015, about twice that of those with no disability (5.1 percent)” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). And, although individuals with disabilities tend to be older, “across all age groups, persons with a disability were more likely to be out of the labor force than those with no disability” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). One explanation is barriers to employment. Among individuals with disabilities who were asked to identify the barriers they encountered, most (80.5 percent) reported that their own disability was a barrier to employment. Other barriers cited included lack of education or training (14.1 percent), lack of transportation (11.7 percent), and the need for special features at the job (10.3 percent)” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

Older Workers

Older workers provide a second example of individuals with barriers to employment realizing less favorable employment outcomes in the labor market. While older workers appear to be faring well in the labor market, they have unique challenges. Latham & Vickers (2015) note that the Great Recession hit older workers especially hard, showing that once unemployed, older workers tend to remain jobless for longer periods than younger workers. To quantify, nearly half of older jobseekers had been unemployed for 27 or more weeks, compared to 28.5 percent of workers aged 16 to 24 years and 41.3 percent of workers aged 25 to 54 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

Ex-Offenders / Returning Citizens

Ex-offenders, or individuals with a criminal history or background, typically a felony conviction, provide a third example. Discussing ex-offenders, Raphael 2014: 43 notes that “in addition to very low levels of formal education, many have low levels of cumulative work experience relative to other adults their age, have histories of substance abuse, often lack the soft skills needed in modern workplaces, and suffer disproportionately from severe mental illness.” In addition, he notes that “within the low-wage labor market, there are many adults without official criminal histories who have similar demographic profiles and thus face similar limitations. Former inmates, however, face additional barriers to employment that are created specifically by their officially recorded criminal pasts” (Raphael, 2014: 43). Ex-offenders face less favorable outcomes in the labor market beginning with the job search and lasting to include higher unemployment and lower earnings.

Long-Term Unemployed

Time spent out of work can, itself, be a barrier to employment. Therefore, the long-term unemployed provide a forth example. There is some evidence of a stigma associated with long-term unemployment, and jobseekers may face discrimination when looking for work (Eriksson & Rooth, 2014), According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as the duration of unemployment increases, the likelihood of becoming employed in the following month declines. In 2014, about 35 percent of people who had been out of work less than 5 weeks found work in the next month; about 11 percent of people who had been out of work for 1 year or longer became employed in the following month (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). This is problematic as jobseekers with one or more barriers to employment have less favorable labor market outcomes that, if they persist, can lead to long-term unemployment, compounding their employment barriers and further reducing the likelihood they will find and keep jobs.

Conclusion

This section provided a concise overview of the literature on barriers to employment by identifying the categories used to study barriers, including by group, by program, and by barrier. A fourth option was identified in using legislation to guide the inquiry. Recognizing the WIOA's focus on individuals with barriers to employment, this review highlighted how barriers are defined in the Act and provided examples of less favorable labor market outcomes and the types of barriers identified in the literature for each. The review concluded with an important observation that individuals with more than one barrier to employment face additional hardship in the labor market, putting additional strain on the workforce system. Table 2

provides an overview of individuals or groups of individuals identified as having barriers to employment and the corresponding barriers identified in this literature review.

Table 2: Individual / Groups and Barriers to Employment

<i>Literature</i>	<i>Individuals / Groups</i>	<i>Barriers</i>
Social Work, Sociology	Low Income Individuals	Education, work experience, mental and physical health challenges, child care, special needs child care, transportation, domestic / relationship violence.
Vocational Rehabilitation, Sociology	Individuals with Disabilities	Disability, education, training, transportation, workplace accommodation.
Social Work, Criminal Justice	Ex-Offenders	Discrimination, education, training, mental and physical health challenges.
Sociology	Older Individuals	Discrimination, disability, education, training, mental and physical health.
Social Work, Sociology	Youth	Discrimination, disability, education, training,
Sociology, Public Policy	Long-Term Unemployed	Discrimination, scaring, education, training,

Conceptual Framework

In this dissertation, I use “functionalism” or “functional sociology,” (Colomy, 2001, 5), as a conceptual framework for the study of unemployment and the public workforce development system. The social system, the principle of functional prerequisites, institutional alternatives, and goal attainment systems (Parsons, 1951; Luhmann, 2013) all offer an insightful lens for studying the workforce development *system*.

Colomy (2001: 27) describes functionalism as a “macro perspective that examines the creation, maintenance, and alteration of durable social practices, institutions, and entire

societies.” Most relevant to this dissertation is the functional assumption that societies must address a large number of social problems, or “functional prerequisites” (Colomy, 2001; Parsons, 1951). In this context, examples of social problems may include socializing the youngest, distributing food and other goods and services, controlling deviance, and containing conflict. Certainly, improving the employment outcomes of individuals with barriers to employment would satisfy the definition of a functional prerequisite.

Because societies must address these social problems, “customary practices and institutions” are established to meet these problems (Colomy, 2001: 28). But, these practices and institutions evolve over time. According to the principle of institutional alternatives, societies have developed many different answers to basic needs. The enactment and continued reauthorization of workforce development programs provide an example of an institutional alternative. While improving employment outcomes for individuals with barriers to employment may have once been accomplished through employers (through apprenticeships), families (through socialization), corrections (through job training or reentry programs), or educators (through high school curriculum and vocational training programs), the size and scale of these individuals (the unemployed) has changed, giving rise to a patchwork of federal and state workforce development policy and programs. However, the workforce development system must successfully address the social problems it was established to solve. If not, it too will be replaced by institutional alternatives. With tremendous strain on the system and a lingering structural unemployment problem, the system faces serious challenges. If these and other labor market problems do not abate because of the efforts of the workforce system, a crisis may be on the horizon.

A Note on Conflict Theory

Although this dissertation relies on one sociological prospective, structural functionalism, it is important to acknowledge another in conflict theory (Marx, 2004; Braverman, 1974). Conflict theory is one of the central theories in the sociology of work (Hodson, 2012) and will be referenced throughout this dissertation. Indeed, conflict theory has been used to explain why certain populations have increased incidence of barriers to employment. However, the goal of this dissertation is to undertake a system-wide study of the workforce development system, and this was best suited for the functionalist perspective.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the economic literature on unemployment and structural unemployment, the sociological literature on job training and the public workforce development system, and the wide-ranging literature on barriers to employment. First, through a review of unemployment and structural unemployment, I highlighted some of the hallmarks of structural unemployment, which, when viewed alongside recent labor market indicators discussed in Chapter 1, suggest that Michigan continues to face a structural unemployment problem. Next, I reviewed the literature on the sociology of job training, highlighting human capital theory and theories of social capital. In this discussion, I reviewed the role of general skills training, specific skills training, and social networks. Finally, I reviewed the wide-ranging literature on barriers to employment. While I outlined barriers to employment, generally, I focused more on the barriers defined in the WIOA. Further, I highlighted literature on labor market outcomes for individuals with barriers to employment,

consistently showing worse outcomes for individuals with work barriers. This reality supports the purpose of this dissertation and the problem it is attempting to address.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to support the workforce development system through a better, shared understanding of the barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers and of the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in the labor market. I address four research questions: (1) How do participants describe the labor market and an economy entering its eighth year of post-2008 recovery?; (2) What do the participants believe are the causes, content, and consequences of the "barriers to employment" faced by jobseekers today?; (3) What ideas do the participants have about the "education, training, and support services" needed to be successful in the labor market?; and (4) What do jobseekers today want other stakeholders in the public workforce development system to know or to understand when designing workforce development policies and programs?

This chapter describes the dissertation's methodology, including a discussion and description of the research approach and design, the research participants, the data collection methods, the research settings, the analysis and synthesis of data, and issues of trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations.

Discussion of Research Approach and Design

In this dissertation, I employ multiple qualitative methods. To address the dissertation's four research questions, qualitative methods were most appropriate because they "allow researchers to share in the understanding and perceptions of others" (Berg, 2007: 9). The

major qualitative data collection methods used are focus group interviews, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, and participant action research-inspired data collection. These methods are best suited for collecting the type of contextual and perceptual information about the sociological phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2009). The contextual information collected included participants' (job seekers and other stakeholders) experiences with and feelings about the economy, the labor market, and the public workforce development system. Perceptual information collected concentrated on participant perceptions of the barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers and the education, training, and support services necessary to be successful in the labor market.

A hallmark of this dissertation is its system-wide focus, necessitating the collection of information from many individuals representing various perspectives. This was well suited for qualitative methods. Creswell (2014: 186) notes, "qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges."

Qualitative methods were preferred over quantitative methods because with qualitative methods, "inquiry focuses on and captures complex interdependencies and system dynamics that cannot meaningfully be reduced to a few discrete variables and linear, cause-effect relationships" (Patton, 2015: 47). A major motivation for this dissertation, as discussed in Chapter 1, comes from my observation that traditional labor market information sources, based on quantitative methods, often omit important information about the individuals and groups behind the numbers. At the same time, I recognize the critical contributions that quantitative

studies have made to the topic, and hope to build upon those studies by providing a deeper understanding allowable only by qualitative exploration. The findings from this dissertation will supplement existing quantitative research and, in doing so, support the implementation of the WIOA.

Case Study Design and Multi-Case Approach

Within the framework of qualitative research, this dissertation was suited for a case study design where the researcher “develops an in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (Berg, 2007). Merriam (2009: 50-51) outlines the benefits of the case study design, particularly appealing in applied fields and particularly useful for informing policy:

“The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon. Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers’ experiences. These insights can be constructed as tentative hypotheses that help structure further research; hence, case study plays an important role in advancing a field’s knowledge base. Because of its strengths, case study is a particularly appealing design for applied fields of study such as education, social work, administration, health, and so on. An applied field’s processes, problems, and programs can be examined to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and perhaps even improve practice. Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy.” (Merriam, 2009: 50-51)

These benefits of the case study design are consistent with the purpose of this dissertation: to understand a phenomenon, provide a rich holistic account of it, and, by doing so, inform policy. Indeed, the case study design has been used in workforce development research to analyze

perceptions of program participants (Hopkins, Monaghan & Hansman, 2009) and to inform policy (Van Horn, 2015).

This dissertation uses a multi-case approach (Berg, 2007; Stake, 2006). In multi-case study research, “the single case is of interest because it belongs to a particular collection of cases. The individual cases share a common characteristic or condition. The cases in the collection are somehow categorically bound together. They may be members of a group or examples of a phenomenon” (Stake, 2006: 5-6). Likewise, Patton (2015: 260) notes that “one or more groups are selected as the unit of analysis when there is some important characteristic that separates people into groups and when that characteristic has important implications for the program.” As such, this dissertation finds support in its assignment of jobseekers, program administrators, program staff, and stakeholders as separate cases and its assignment of federal, state, and local as separate cases. These groups, categorically bound but distinguished by important characteristics, will lend themselves to rich intra-case and cross-case analysis. The same methodological framework was used across cases. This was done to enhance representativeness and robustness. Table 3 summarizes this dissertation’s multi-case design and provides an overview of the intra- and cross-case analytical framework that will be used in Chapter 5-8. For example, Chapter 5 compares information from jobseekers, administrators, and staff regarding the labor market and an economy entering its eighth year of recovery. Comparing the perceptual, contextual, and theoretical information across and between these various participant groups (cases) provides a rich holistic account of the economy, barriers, and what is needed to be successful in the labor market.

Table 3: Case Study Design and Analytical Framework

<i>Case 1: Program Administrators</i>	<i>Case 2: Program Staff</i>	<i>Case 3: Jobseekers / MW! Programs</i>	<i>Case 4: Jobseekers / “Other Cases”</i>	<i>Case 5: System Stakeholders</i>
Case 1.1: Federal Administrator	Case 2.1: Federal Staff (Not Sampled)	N/A	N/A	Case 5.1: Federal Stakeholders
Case 1.2: State Administrator	Case 2.2: State Staff	N/A	N/A	Case 5.2: State Stakeholders
Case 1.3: Local Administrator	Case 2.3: Local Staff	Case 3: Jobseeker / MW! Programs	Case 4: Jobseekers / “Other Cases”	Case 5.3: Local Stakeholders

As described above, multiple qualitative data collection techniques were used over five phases:¹⁶

- Phase 1 – Program administrators, program staff, and other stakeholders interviewed between March 30 and November 9, 2016.

¹⁶ Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this exempt study was granted on March 30, 2016.

- Phase 2 – Jobseekers participating in West Michigan Works! workforce development programs join the study as focus group participants or as interviewees between August 28 and November 11, 2016.
- Phase 3 – Selected jobseekers from Phase 2 agree to participate in semi-structured interviews based on typical case selection on “barriers to employment” defined in the WIOA between October 20 and November 18, 2016.
- Phase 4 – Other cases, representing similarly situated jobseekers who are not participating in Michigan Works! programs, identified through chain-referral, snowball, or network sampling, join the study through semi-structured interviews between October 28 and November 18, 2016.
- Phase 5 – Feedback from jobseekers in Phase 2 and Phase 3 reported to program federal, state, and local administrators from Phase 1 between November 28 and December 9, 2016.

Participants

The dissertation’s participants included the numerous stakeholders in the public workforce development system. The “numerous stakeholders” were: (1) key informants, including federal, state, and local program administrators and staff and other stakeholders including federal and state associations; (2) jobseekers who are participating in workforce programs; and (3) individuals similarly situated to program participants but who are not participating in workforce programs (“other cases”). While these different stakeholder groups had in common their connection to the workforce development system, individuals in each group were

identified using different sampling strategies, were studied using different data collection methods, and participated at different research sites. This type of flexibility is required and should be expected when conducting qualitative research studies (Creswell, 2014).

Participants: Jobseekers

In Phase 2, three different sampling strategies were used to recruit jobseekers to participate. First, both a homogeneous sampling strategy and convenience sampling were used to attract jobseekers to focus group interviews. Then, a typical case sampling strategy was used to identify individuals for participation in additional phases of the dissertation.

Jobseekers were initially recruited from “information sessions” (basically, orientation sessions) at American Job Centers (formerly known as One Stops under the Workforce Investment Act) in the West Michigan Works! Workforce Development Area (WDA). This homogeneous sampling strategy attracted six individuals who agreed to participate from those attending the information sessions. Because this strategy was less successful than needed or desired, due to scheduling conflicts for potential participants, jobseekers were next recruited from the “resource rooms” (technology-enhanced locations to promote job searching, testing, and other general employment seeking resources and activities) at American Job Centers in the West Michigan Works! WDA. This convenience sampling strategy resulted in 25 individuals who agreed to participate in focus groups from an unknown, but substantial, number of individuals visiting the American Job Centers. Interested individuals were given a \$25 Visa Gift Card for their participation. All participants voluntarily participated and recorded their informed consent.

Drawing from the 31 focus group participants, a typical case sampling strategy was used to recruit seven individuals to participate in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews in Phase 3. Of the seven program participants selected to participate, all seven accepted. These participants were identified for Phase 3 of the research because they represented “typical cases” for selected categories of “individuals with barriers to employment” as defined in WIOA and discussed in Chapter 2.

Participants: Other Jobseekers

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, many, but not all, individuals experiencing joblessness are participating in workforce development programs through the public workforce system. Accordingly, this dissertation’s primary focus on workforce program participants was supplemented by including in the dissertation “other cases,” or individuals with barriers to employment who were *not* participating in workforce development programs. Indeed, including this group in the dissertation provided valuable comparative insights discussed in Chapter 5.

To recruit these other cases, a snowball or network sampling strategy was used. Dissertation participants from Phase 2 and Phase 3 were asked if they would be willing to identify any other individuals in the same or similar circumstances (as the participant) who were not participating in the workforce development system. As a result of this snowball or network sampling strategy, four additional cases were recruited to the study. These additional cases were invited to participate in semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. These participants were also given a \$25 Visa Gift Card, voluntarily participated, and recorded their informed consent.

Table 4: Overview of Participants: Jobseekers

<p>Phase 2:</p> <p>31 program participants join the study as focus group participants between August 28 and November 11.</p>	<p>Phase 3:</p> <p>7 program participants agree to in-depth interviews based on typical case selection on 6 (selected) “barriers to employment” defined in WIOA between October 20 and November 18.</p>	<p>5 low-income individuals</p> <p>§ 3 (24)(B)</p>
		<p>2 individuals with disabilities</p> <p>§§</p>
		<p>2 older individuals</p> <p>§ 3 (24)(E)</p>
		<p>1 ex-offenders</p> <p>§ 3 (24)(F)</p>
		<p>2 youth</p> <p>§ 3 (24)(H)</p>
		<p>5 long-term unemployed</p> <p>§ 3 (24)(M)</p>
		<p>6 other barriers</p> <p>§ 3 (24)(M)</p>

Participants: Key Informants

Key informants (or key knowledgeable) “are a prized group and inform our inquiry when we tap into their knowledge, experience, and expertise” (Patton, 2015: 284). Accordingly, this

dissertation identified as key informants program administrators, program staff, and other system stakeholders who had specialized knowledge, experience, or expertise regarding the workforce development system, individuals with barriers to employment, or education, training, and support services. Key informants were identified using two sampling strategies: critical case sampling and continuum sampling. Critical cases are “particularly important” to the research and continuum sampling ensures that cases are present from various perspectives (Patton, 2015: 276). A total of 12 key informants were invited to participate in this dissertation and ten agreed. The following is a description of the key informants who were invited to participate.

Program Administrators

Three (3) program administrators were invited to participate, representing the federal, state, and local continuum. One (1) federal administrator representing the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration (ETA) was invited; one (1) state administrator representing the State of Michigan, Workforce Development Agency was invited; and one (1) local administrator representing West Michigan Works! was invited.

Representing top federal, state, and local officials responsible for overseeing all workforce development activities, including the implementation of the WIOA, the perspective of program administrators was a critical input for this dissertation. Program administrators have a high degree of familiarity with workforce development programs and the participants they serve, making their knowledge, experience, and expertise particularly valuable to this dissertation. Including the federal, state, and local continuum provides rich insights.

Program Staff

Three (3) program staff were invited to participate, representing the state and the local continuum. One (1) state program staff representing the Michigan Workforce Development Agency was invited; and two (2) local program staff representing West Michigan Works! were invited.

Local program staff were identified because they are likely most familiar with jobseekers and have detailed “on the ground” insights and information. Importantly, in the West Michigan Works!, participating staff represented “career coaches” and “career navigators.” Career navigators are front-line staff who have the highest frequency of interaction with participants. Career coaches are more intensive service providers and have fewer interactions, but their interactions are typically very in-depth and detailed.

State program staff, while knowledgeable about jobseekers and program participants, generally, may be less familiar with the jobseekers than their local counterparts. However, they are likely more familiar with federal and state workforce development policy, as they are often involved in the development and implementation of the policies. Participating state staff were responsible for policy under WIOA programs.

System Stakeholders

System stakeholders included national, state, and local organizations or institutions involved in the workforce development infrastructure. They included members of state and local workforce boards, senior officials in associations representing workforce boards or workforce agencies. First, members of the State Board and the Local Board, required by Section 101 and Section 107 of the WIOA, were identified because of their knowledge, experience, and

expertise and their role in shaping workforce development policies and programs and the implementation of the WIOA. Officials from both the Governor's Talent Investment Board ("State Board") and the West Michigan Works! Workforce Development Board ("Local Board") were invited to participate. One (1) member of the State Workforce Board, the Governor's Talent Investment Board (GTIB), was invited to participate. The GTIB is the State Board in Michigan, statutorily required by Section 101(b) of WIOA. Per the Michigan Workforce Development Agency:

"The [GTIB] is the principal private-sector policy advisor on building a strong workforce system aligned with state education policies and economic development goals. Created by Executive Order 2015-11, GTIB is a business majority led board of industry executives, legislators, labor officials, education leaders, local elected officials, state agency directors and other representatives consistent with the provisions of the WIOA Section 101(b). The GTIB provides a vital role in bringing citizen involvement, engagement, and oversight to the state's talent enhancement effort, and serves as a catalyst for talent enhancement and economic development entities. The GTIB recommends policies to the Governor and state departments that guide workforce investment and training at both the state and local levels."

One (1) member of the West Michigan Works! Workforce Development Board was invited to participate. Like the State Board, the Local Board is statutorily required by the WIOA and has direct oversight over the operations of the local workforce development agency. The local administrator serves as the chief executive officer of the Board. There are 35 members of the Board.

Next, officials from major associations representing workforce development agencies and workforce development boards were invited to participate in the dissertation. The perspective of these stakeholder organizations was important to this dissertation because they possess specialized and salient, often policy-oriented knowledge, experience, and expertise with workforce development and the WIOA. These organizations, described in further detail

below were: the Michigan Works! Association, the National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB), and the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA). One (1) official from the Michigan Works! Association was invited to participate. A critical partner in workforce development in Michigan, the Michigan Works! Association “is a non-profit membership organization that supports the state's talent development system: Michigan Works!. The Association connects local agencies and partners with resources to help them better serve employers and job seekers.” At the time of this dissertation, Michigan Works! was actively involved in supporting its membership with understanding and implementing the WIOA.

One (1) official from the National Association of Workforce Boards was invited to participate. According to their website:

“The National Association of Workforce Boards represents approximately 550 Workforce Development Boards and their 12,000+ business members that coordinate and leverage workforce strategies with education and economic development stakeholders within their local communities, to ensure that state and local workforce development and job training programs meet the needs of employers.”

Accordingly, the participation of NAWB in this study was important because the number of stakeholders it represents and the specialized knowledge it has regarding the WIOA. For example, the association has several publications on their website interpreting the WIOA and advising its members regarding implementation and has hosted several national convenings on WIOA implementation.

One (1) official from the National Association of State Workforce Agencies was invited to participate. According to their website: “The National Association of State Workforce Agencies is a national organization of state administrators of the publicly-funded state workforce system, including the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA),

employment services, training programs, unemployment insurance, employment statistics and labor market and workforce information.” As the “voice of state workforce agencies,” the participation of NASWA brings a critical perspective to this dissertation.

Table 5: Overview of Participants: Key Informants

<i>Local Administrators, Staff, and System Stakeholders</i>	<i>State Administrators, Staff, and System Stakeholders</i>	<i>Federal Administrators and System Stakeholders</i>
Administrator – West Michigan Works! Agency Staff – West Michigan Works! Agency Member – West Michigan Works! Workforce Development Board	Administrator – Michigan Workforce Development Agency (WDA) Staff – Michigan Workforce Development Agency (WDA) Member – Governor’s Talent Investment Board (GTIB) Official – Michigan Works! Association	Administrator – U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration (ETA) Official – National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA) Official – National Association of State Workforce Boards (NAWB)

Data Collection

In this dissertation, I employ multiple qualitative data collection methods, including focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, and participant action research-inspired data collection.

Focus Group Interviews

The focus group is an interview style designed for small groups of unrelated individuals, formed by an investigator and led by a moderator in a group discussion on some particular topic or topics (Berg, 2007: 144). Morgan (1997) usefully provides an overview of focus group interviews as a method for data collection:

“Focus groups are fundamentally a way of listening to people and learning from them. Focus groups create lines of communication. This is most obvious within the group itself, where there is continual communication between the moderator and the participants, as well as among the participants themselves. Just as important, however, is a larger process of communication that connects the worlds of the research team and the participants.”

Among the number of appropriate uses for focus group interviews, Berg (2007: 145) notes that focus groups are a useful strategy for “generating impressions of products, programs, services, institutions, or other objects of interest” and “learning how respondents talk about the phenomenon of interest.” A focus group consists of a small number of participants, typically 6 to 8, under the guidance of a facilitator, known as a moderator (Berg, 2007; Morgan, 1997). Krueger (1997) recommends that for complex problems focus groups should be kept to no more than 7 participants.

This dissertation used focus group interviews as one primary method of data collection from jobseekers. While one purpose of the focus group interviews with jobseekers was to collect their perceptions and understandings, a second, equally important purpose was to

identify individuals with barriers to employment for further participation in the dissertation. Therefore, the focus group interviews served both as a method for data collection and as a recruitment strategy for additional data collection. Consistent with the recommendation of Krueger (1997), all focus groups were kept to fewer than 7 participants. Focus group interviews were recorded using a Sony ICD-PX333 digital recorder. A professional transcription service transcribed all audio recordings within 30 days of the focus group and all digital files were subsequently erased.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured, one-on-one interview is a primary method used for collecting qualitative information. “We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe and to understand what we have observed” (Patton, 2015: 426). This dissertation used one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, sometimes called semi-standardized interviews, to collect data from key informants, including program administrators, program staff, and system stakeholders. According to Creswell (2014: 191-192) two of the benefits of interviews include allowing participants to share historical information and allowing research control over the line of questioning. Both of these benefits were important for talking to key informants. First, information about the historical context of workforce development is important in understanding how individuals with barriers to employment have been served under the various federal job training statutes. Next, controlling the questioning was important and allowed the conversations with key informants to dig deeper to uncover rich data regarding barriers to employment and system dynamics. Two weaknesses of the interview were considered. First, Creswell (2014) notes that information may be filtered through the view of

interviewees; and, not all people are equally articulate and perceptive. In this dissertation, I wanted the view of the interviewees, based on our continuum sampling strategy. And, while not all interviewees were as articulate and perceptive, having control of the questioning allowed clarifying questions when problems were encountered.

In addition, interviews were used to collect additional data from program participants identified as having one or more barrier to employment. Semi-structured interviews were determined to be the best method of data collection for these participants because they followed a standard interview schedule, but allowed for the type of flexibility necessary when discussing the subject. Historical information and control, as noted above, were also important when interviewing jobseekers.

Participant Action Research-Inspired Data Collection

This dissertation borrows from the literature on participant action research the notion that involving participants in the research process can produce useful information and be empowering to those participating. Participant action research is a process that “gives credence to the development of powers of reflective thought, discussion, decision and action by ordinary people participating in collective research on ‘private troubles’ that they have in common” (Berg, 2007: 222).

Berg (2007: 224) identifies two tasks associated with action research: the first is to “uncover or produce information and knowledge that will be directly useful to a group of people.” The second task of action research is to “enlighten and empower the average person in the group, motivating each one to take up and use the information gathered in the research.” Participant action research inspired one of this dissertation’s data collection

methods. This method, employed to answer my fourth research question, attempts to follow closely both recommendations. First, the findings from this dissertation, if shared with *all* participants, should be useful to the workforce development system as a reflection of barriers, a catalogue of ideas, or as policy recommendations. Second, by asking jobseekers what they would like other stakeholders to know or understand, and then taking that back to the administrators and the staff, should be as informative to other stakeholders as it is empowering to the jobseekers.

Table 6: Summary of Sampling Strategy and Data Collection Methods

	<i>Program Administrators / Program Staff / System Stakeholders</i>	<i>Program Participants</i>	<i>Additional Cases</i>
<i>Sampling Strategy:</i>	Key informants / Continuum	Convenience / Homogeneous / Typical Case	Snowball / Network Sampling
<i>Data Collection Method:</i>	In-depth, semi- structured Interviews	Focus groups / In- depth, semi- structured interviews / critical incidents	In-depth, semi- structured Interviews
<i>Research Phase:</i>	Phase I / Phase V	Phase II / Phase III	Phase IV

Research Settings

The workforce development system is comprised of federal, state, and local structures and organizations. To collect system-wide information, I targeted federal, state, and local participants. Because this dissertation focuses on the numerous stakeholders in the public workforce development system, data collection took place at various times and in many research settings. The greatest variation in time and research setting was seen in interviews conducted with key informants, with data collection lasting 9 months and taking place in various locations. Data collection with jobseekers and other cases was concentrated in the West Michigan Works! Workforce Development Area and spanned 4 months.

Interviews with Key informants

Interview appointments with key informants were scheduled so that interviews would be conducted in the participants' natural setting. (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015; Berg, 2007). All interviews with key informants took place at workforce development conferences, at local, state, or federal buildings, or at American Job Centers. The following were the sites for interviews with key informants:

- Interview with key knowledgeable at the John C. Kluczynski Federal Building in Chicago, Illinois on March 22, 2016.
- Interview with key knowledgeable at the Workforce Information Advisory Council (WIAC) meeting in Washington, D.C. on July 14, 2016.
- Interview with key informant at the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA) Annual Conference in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on September 28, 2016.

- Interview with key informant at the Michigan Works! Annual Conference in Mount Pleasant, Michigan on October 2, 2016.
- Interview with key informant at the West Michigan Works! Administrative Offices in Grand Rapids, Michigan on October 20, 2016.
- Interview with key informant at the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA) Joint Employment and Training and Labor Market Information Committee Meeting in Richmond, VA on November 2, 2016.
- Interview with key informant at the State of Michigan Victor Office Center in Lansing, Michigan on November 9, 2016.

Focus Group Interviews and One-On-One Interviews with Jobseekers

Focus group interviews and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with jobseekers were conducted at American Job Centers in West Michigan. These sites were, again, selected to interact with participants in their natural setting (Berg, 2007). Because these individuals were participating in the workforce development system at the time of this dissertation, conducting focus groups and in-depth, semi-structured interviews at the place where services are received was the preferred setting.

- Focus group interview at the Straight Avenue Service Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan on August 28 and October 20, 2016.
- Focus group interviews at the Allegan Service Center in Allegan, Michigan on November 18, 2016.
- Focus group interviews at the Franklin Street Service Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan on October 28, November 21, 2016.

Semi-structured interviews with “other cases” were conducted at the place of choosing of the interviewee. Unlike program participants, these individuals were not participating in the workforce development system, thus, conducting interviews at American Job Centers would be unnatural and therefore alternative sites were preferred. Alternative sites included the Kent County Department of Human Services building and downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Data Analysis

This dissertation generated a large amount of data. Thus, data collection and data analysis occurred together to reduce repetitious, unfocused, and overwhelming data (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). During data collection and data analysis, I remained focused on the themes that best supported the purpose of the study and that provided insights into the dissertation’s research questions. In this dissertation, I followed the analytical sequence proposed by Creswell (2014) and included steps moving from raw data collection to interpreting the meaning of themes.

First, data was organized and prepared for analysis. A custom database was built to manage the demographic and economic data collected from participants, with the database closely following the dissertation’s analytical framework. A professional service¹⁷ was used to produce transcripts from focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews created from audio recordings. All transcribed interviews were comprehensively and systematically reviewed for completeness and accuracy. To further ensure completeness and accuracy, transcripts of

¹⁷ Audio Transcription Centers, 125 Tremont St., Boston, MA 02108 (AudioTranscriptionCenter.com)

interviews with select key informants (program administrators and system stakeholders) were sent for review. Final transcripts were entered into the qualitative software package NVivo 11 Pro and that same package was used to review and code interview transcripts using the case identifiers assigned to each case and to each participant. Further, economic and demographic information collected from jobseekers was entered into the custom database allowing for reconciliation with the NVivo cases. Coding structures were reviewed and revised.

Issues of Trustworthiness

All research must be evaluated for trustworthiness. Lincoln & Guba (1985) assert that “trustworthiness of a research study is important to evaluating its worth” and explain that trustworthiness involves establishing “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.” I employ various techniques to enhance trustworthiness.

Credibility refers to establishing “confidence in the findings and interpretations of a research study” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This dissertation incorporated three techniques to enhance credibility, including: (1) triangulation of data sources; (2) peer debriefings; and (3) member checks. Inherent in the multi-case design was the use of various sources of data collection available for triangulation. By comparing data within and between cases, and with published economic and demographic information, results could be triangulated for verification of validity and reliability. These results are presented in Chapter 4. Further, member checks and peer debriefing were used throughout the dissertation. Member checks involve “seeking feedback from representatives of the stakeholder groups involved in or affected by an investigation” (Daytner, 2006: 6; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks were conducted with

both jobseekers and key informants throughout the dissertation. Likewise, peer debriefing allows the researcher to share findings and interpretations with peers to increase confidence in findings. Like member checking, peer debriefing provides additional credibility to the research results, but unlike member checking, peer debriefing invites feedback from those uninvolved in or unaffected by the investigation but nonetheless knowledgeable and skilled in the subject matter. In this dissertation, a senior-level workforce development professional participated in peer debriefing.

Dependability “addresses how the findings and interpretations could be determined to be an outcome of a consistent and dependable process,” and confirmability seeks to ensure that the “findings of the study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To evaluate dependability and confirmability, both an inquiry audit and a confirmability audit were performed. Before completion of the dissertation, I recruited a second senior-level workforce development professional to review the process and the product of the research dissertation and to evaluate whether the data supported findings, interpretations, and conclusions.

Finally, transferability ensures that the “findings will be applicable in different contexts or subjects” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While transferability was not a central goal of this dissertation, one purpose was providing they type of “thick description” that can be used by readers to determine whether findings would be applicable in different contexts or subjects (Geertz, 1973). Accordingly, prior to completion of this dissertation, I shared the findings with an uninvolved local workforce development program administrator and an unrelated state vocational rehabilitation program administrator. The local workforce development

administrator was asked to review the results and assess whether the findings would apply in a different area of the state, representing a different “context.” The state vocational rehabilitation program administrator was asked to review the results and determine whether the findings would apply in vocational rehabilitation programs, representing a different “subject.”

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues may arise in any research project. These issues apply to qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research and to all stages of research (Creswell, 2014). As such, researchers need to anticipate the ethical issues that may arise during their studies (Creswell, 2014: 92; Berg, 2007). Throughout this dissertation, I attempted to identify and address ethical issues regarding the dissertation participants, the research sites, and data analysis and reporting.

Several ethical issues regarding participants were identified. Individuals with barriers to employment were considered a vulnerable population. Accordingly, I took care to disclose and discuss with them the purpose of the dissertation; to provide them with informed consent prior to their voluntary participation; to protect their identity using fictitious names; to compensate participants for their time; and to recognize them in the dissertation. The same care was taken with the other participants: program administrators, program staff, and system stakeholders. Additional ethical issues were addressed regarding the research sites. Care was taken to respect American Job Centers in the West Michigan Works! WDA. I gained access to the American Job Centers with the permission of the local administrators and with the

knowledge of the local staff and the local workforce investment board. In an attempt to disrupt the site as little as possible, I remained silent during the information sessions and while on the floor at the American Job Center. Private conference rooms for focus groups and interviews were scheduled as a low priority and I communicated the ability to move, cancel, or postpone scheduled activities to accommodate the jobseekers and staff. I requested that program staff be interviewed while off-duty to ensure other program staff and jobseekers be unaffected by their absence.

Finally, ethical issues were addressed in the data analysis and reporting. I excluded from analysis any information that may be harmful to participants. In addition, I was careful not to side with participants and attempted to report all results not only positive results.

Throughout this dissertation, I consulted and complied with the American Sociological Association Code of Ethics¹⁸ and the Michigan State University Institutional Review Board (IRB)¹⁹ to maintain focus on ethical issues ensuring confidence that a high level of attention was provided to ethical considerations, especially given the subject matter and nature of the dissertation and the participants involved.

Limitations

This dissertation contains several limitations. Some limitations are inherent in the qualitative approach while others are the result of the study design. First, in qualitative research (as in

¹⁸ The American Sociological Association (ASA) Code of Ethics, available at: <http://www.asanet.org/membership/code-ethics>

¹⁹ The Michigan State University Human Research Protection Program, available at: <http://hrpp.msu.edu/>

quantitative research), the bias of the researcher can present a limiting factor. Indeed, my bias is a limitation in this study. As an “insider,” I bring to the study several biases, discussed in Chapter 1. While impossible to eliminate, these biases were controlled through reflexivity in the research design and through peer debriefing, described above.

Another limitation of qualitative research and of the dissertation’s design is the role of the researcher as a “facilitator and interviewer” (Berg, 2007; Morgan, 2009). Especially in the case of program administrators, the participants’ familiarity with me may shape their responses; that is, the participants may say what they think I want to hear. Finally, the research sample may be a limiting factor, especially for the jobseekers and individuals with barriers to employment. While generalizability was not the central goal of the dissertation, concentrating on jobseekers participating in programs in only a handful of American Job Centers in the West Michigan Works! WDA is an additional limitation of the dissertation. These limitations are each revisited in Chapter 9 and support my recommendations for further research.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a detailed description of and justification for the dissertation’s methodology and research design. Falling firmly within conventional qualitative research designs, this dissertation followed a multiphasic, multi-case design and employed multiple methods to collect rich, descriptive information from participants. The dissertation’s analytical framework supports its purpose statement, problem statement, and research questions presented in Chapter 1 and is informed by its theoretical orientation and literature review presented in Chapter 2.

The dissertation's participants were identified and described as the numerous stakeholders including jobseekers and federal, state, and local program administrators, staff, and stakeholders. Various sampling strategies, data collection methods, and research sites were deployed, including purposeful, convenience, and network sampling strategies and focus group interviews and semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. American Job Centers in the West Michigan Works! WDA were the primary sites for focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews with jobseekers and staff, while multiple sites were catalogued for interviews with program administrators and stakeholders. Data collection and analysis were discussed, including the use of a custom database, NVivo 11 Pro, coding structures, and cross-case and intra-case analysis.

Issues of trustworthiness were addressed and assessed through procedures aimed at improving credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These procedures include, but are not limited to, debriefings to address credibility, audits to address dependability and confirmability, and thick description and sharing results to address transferability. Finally, ethical considerations were raised, particularly involving jobseekers and individuals with barriers to employment. Several strategies were discussed for handling ethical concerns. Finally, several limitations were recognized and will be revisited in Chapter 9.

CHAPTER FOUR: DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

Introduction

The participants in this dissertation were the numerous stakeholders in the public workforce development system and included jobseekers; federal, state, and local administrators and staff; and other stakeholders, including representatives from state and local workforce boards and from national and state associations. Information from 31 jobseekers was collected at seven focus groups and seven follow-up interviews and information from ten key informants was collected at semi-structured interviews. This brief chapter intends to provide an overview of the demographic and economic characteristics of the participants as well as some observations of the dissertations participants.

Summary Statistics of Participants

As explained in Chapter 3, three different sampling strategies were used to recruit jobseekers to participate in focus group interviews and follow-up interviews. First, both homogeneous sampling and convenience sampling were used to attract jobseekers to focus group interviews. Next, a typical case sampling strategy was used to identify individuals for participation in additional phases of the study. This section summarizes the demographic and economic characteristics of the 31 jobseeker participants²⁰ to: (1) provide context for much of the

²⁰ Key informants were identified using two sampling strategies: critical case sampling and continuum sampling. Because these participants were selected because of their importance to the research and because they represent various perspectives (Patton 2015: 276), no demographic or economic characteristics were collected from key informants.

description that follows in the rest of this dissertation; and (2) allow for comparisons between the jobseekers participating in focus groups and follow-up interviews and *all* unemployed residents in the West Michigan Works! WDA and in the state of Michigan.

Demographic Characteristics

Table 7 displays the key demographic characteristics of participants' age, sex, race, education, income, and other variables and compares those characteristics with *all* unemployed residents in the WDA and in the state of Michigan. Note in particular:

- The median age for focus group participants was between 25 to 34, in line with the median age for all unemployed residents in the WDA and in the state of Michigan, both at 25 to 44.
- Female jobseekers were overrepresented (+14 percentage points) in focus group interviews, with females comprising 58 percent of all participants, well above the share of total unemployed that are female. This overrepresentation was the result of targeting for participation single parents and displaced homemakers.²¹
- Black / African American jobseekers are heavily overrepresented (+32 percentage points) in focus group interviews. This is the result of the research sites, with the primary data collection taking place in a major metropolitan area.
- However, focus group participants were also selected from rural communities, with unemployed rural jobseekers representing 13 percent of participants, in line with the 12

²¹ Recall, single parents and displaced homemakers are among the individuals with barriers to employment identified in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, thus their targeting for participation.

percent of rural unemployed among all unemployed. Incidentally, all participating rural jobseekers were white.

- Focus group participants out of work for 27 or more weeks measure 29 percent of all unemployed, slightly lower than the share of long-term unemployed residents in the WDA (21 percent) and statewide (22 percent).
- Individuals with disabilities were slightly overrepresented (+3 percentage points) with 13 percent of participants reporting a disability, compared to around 10 percent of all unemployed jobseekers in the WDA and in Michigan. This is the result of targeting individuals with disabilities for participation.
- Individuals holding a bachelor's degree or higher were overrepresented (+25 percentage points) in focus group interviews with 35 percent of participants having a bachelor's degree. This overrepresentation was surprising, but the coincidence of bachelor's degree and a significant barrier to employment, usually disability, was always present. Likewise, jobseekers with a high school diploma were overrepresented (+15 percentage points).
- Low-income individuals are slightly overrepresented (+5 percentage points) in focus group interviews with 35 percent of participants classified as low income, compared to around 30 percent of all unemployed jobseekers in the WDA and in Michigan. This is explained by: (1) the purposeful targeting of low-income individuals for participation; and (2) the use of convenience sampling that attracted a number of TANF program participants, who are necessarily low-income individuals.

Table 7: Demographic Profile of Focus Group Participants

	<i>Focus Group Participants (N=31)</i>	<i>Unemployed, West Michigan Works! Workforce Development Area (WDA)</i>	<i>Unemployed, Michigan</i>
Modal Age	25-34	25-44	25-44
% Female	58 percent	43.7 percent	45.6 percent
% Black or African American	45 percent	13.2 percent	24.9 percent
% Bachelor's Degree	35 percent	10.0 percent	10.1 percent
% High School Diploma	39 percent	24.2 percent	24.1 percent
% Rural	13 percent	12 percent	--
% Disability	13 percent	10.3 percent	10.5 percent
% Low-Income	35 percent	30.4 percent	30.2 percent
% Long-Term Unemployed	29 percent	27 percent	30 percent

Source: Jobseeker demographic information sheet; Current Population Survey (CPS), and American Community Survey (ACS)

While demographic information was not collected from key informants, the following was observed: 80 percent of key informants were white, 70 percent were women, and estimated ages ranged from 25 and 34 for local staff to 55 and older for one state board member. Other key informants were estimated between 35 and 54.

Economic Characteristics

Participants were asked to identify their last occupation of employment. All 31 responded with job titles, which were coded into Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) job titles and aggregated at the major occupational group level. For example, the occupation “welder” was coded as “welders, cutters, solderers, and brazers” and listed as a “production” occupation.

Table 8: Occupational Distribution of Focus Group Participants

<i>Last occupation of employment</i>	<i>Occupational distribution – Focus group participants</i>	<i>Occupational distribution – West Michigan Works! WDA</i>	<i>Occupational distribution - Michigan</i>
Total, all occupations	100%	100%	100%
Management, business, and financial	9.7%	8.6%	9.3%
Computer, engineering, and science	6.5%	4.6%	6.3%
Education, legal, community service, arts, and media	9.7%	9.4%	9.1%
Healthcare practitioners and technical	0.0%	5.4%	6.3%
Service	19.4%	18.3%	19.9%
Sales and related	12.9%	10.1%	10.3%
Office and administrative support	9.7%	14.2%	15.0%
Farming, fishing, and forestry	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
Construction and extraction	3.2%	3.1%	3.0%
Installation, maintenance, and repair	3.2%	4.0%	3.9%

Table 8 (Cont'd)

Production	16.1%	14.1%	10.4%
Transportation and material moving	9.7%	8.3%	6.3%

Source: Jobseeker demographic information sheet, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Occupational Employment Statistics (OES). **Note:** Provided job titles were aligned to Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes using O*NET Online.

Overall, the occupational distribution of focus group participants matches occupational employment in the West Michigan Works! WDA and in the state of Michigan. The following are highlights from Table 8:

- Nearly 60 percent of participants fall within four occupational categories: service, sales, production, and transportation and material moving occupations. These same groups comprise 50 percent of occupational employment in the WDA and 48 percent statewide.
- These occupational categories are noteworthy because of the lower skill requirements. In addition, higher turnover rates in service and sales occupations and higher unemployment rates in production and transportation and material moving occupations are noteworthy.
- Focus group participants represented all occupational categories except for healthcare practitioner and technical occupations and farming, fishing, and forestry occupations.
- Office and administrative and support occupations are underrepresented (-5 percentage points) by focus group participants. Unlike healthcare practitioner and technical occupations, jobless rates are above average in these occupations.

- Production occupations were overrepresented (+2 percentage points) by focus group participants. This is expected due to the long-term, structural unemployment affecting many workers displaced from jobs in manufacturing industries and related production occupations, both factors discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

Status

Among key informants, status is clearly defined: administrators enjoy the most status as the executives of their respective workforce development agency. Within the agency, staff have varying levels of status. State staff operate within highly bureaucratic Civil Service structures, with highly defined “levels” for managers, specialists, and analysts. Status among local staff appeared less formal, but from observation it appeared career coaches had more status than career navigators (for example, career coaches have private cubicles in the back of the American Job Centers compared to career navigators who share a work area, typically near the front or in the middle of the Center.)

Status among federal, state, and local agencies is more complicated. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is important to note that the federal-state relationship is highly bureaucratic with one federal administrator overseeing workforce development activities in ten states.²² Likewise, one state agency oversees the workforce development activities in 16 local areas, known as Michigan Works! Workforce Development Areas. In contrast, status among

²² Michigan is part of U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration Region 5 – Chicago, which includes: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Kansas.

jobseekers is constantly under negotiation, clearly demonstrated during focus groups. There are many examples, with two highlighted below:

- Jobseekers negotiate status based on the time they have been out of work. The long-term unemployed appear to enjoy lower status than recently laid-off or frictionally unemployed. This sometimes plays-out as a jobseeker hears the circumstances of another, and follows by staying, “Well, nothing like that – but . . .” to show their circumstances are not as bad as others.
- Among individuals with barriers to employment, status is often negotiated between the *type* of barrier or the *circumstances* of the barrier. One example is status negotiation between ex-offenders. There are clear lines between the *type* of criminal activity responsible for the jobseeker’s status. For example, one jobseeker described his felony during a follow-up interview by insisting: “I mean, it wasn’t for anything sexual.”

Analytic Categories

After careful review of the data collected for this dissertation, including audio recordings, transcripts, fieldnotes, and coding schema, three analytic categories were developed based on themes in the data and will help to guide the analysis. Table 9 summarizes the dissertation’s research questions, key findings, and analytic categories:

Table 9: Research Questions, Findings, and Analytic Categories

Research Question	Finding	Analytic Category
How do jobseekers and key informants describe the labor market and an economy entering its eighth year of post-2008 recovery?	Most participants believe the economy and labor market have improved in recent years, but all participants express a concern or caution over current labor market conditions.	Exploring perceptions of the post-recovery labor market in West Michigan.
What do the jobseekers and key informants believe are the causes, content, and consequences of the “barriers to employment” faced by jobseekers today?	Most participants believe that there are one or more, often significant, barriers to employment facing today’s jobseekers.	Detailing challenges and exploring opportunities under the WIOA.
What ideas do the jobseekers and key informants have about the “education, training, and support services” needed to be successful in the labor market?	Most participants have ideas about the “education, training, and support services” . . . needed to be successful in the labor market.	
What do jobseekers want other stakeholders in the public workforce development system to know or to understand when designing workforce development policies and programs?	Jobseekers want other stakeholders in the public workforce development system to know that they want to work, that they are often mistreated, even exploited, and that they lose hope and feel like giving up, but they do not.	Giving voice and showing value to system stakeholders.

The first analytic category is entitled “exploring perceptions of the post-recovery labor market in West Michigan.” This category results from several themes from the first finding, that “most participants believe the economy and labor market have improved in recent years, but all participants express a concern or caution over current labor market conditions.” The category guides the analysis in Chapter 5 and answer the first research question.

Themes from two of the dissertation’s key findings are combined to build the second analytic category, “detailing challenges and exploring opportunities under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.” The two findings are that “most participants believe that there are one or more, often significant, barriers to employment facing today’s jobseekers” and that “most participants have ideas about the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in the labor market. The category steers the analysis in Chapters 6 and 7 and answers the second and third research questions.

The third analytic category is named “giving voice and showing value to system stakeholders.” This category results from themes coming from the dissertation’s finding that “jobseekers want other stakeholders in the public workforce development system to know that they want to work, that they are often mistreated, even exploited, and to understand sometimes it they lose hope and feel like giving up, but they do not.” The category guides the analysis in Chapter 8 and intends to answer the forth research question.

Chapter Summary

This chapter showed that the dissertation’s sampling strategy generated a demographically and economically representative sample of jobseekers compared to unemployed residents in the

West Michigan labor market and in the state of Michigan. Demographically, select characteristics were purposefully overrepresented in the sample, reflecting the WIOA's focus on certain populations with barriers to employment. Overrepresented populations included: women, Black / African Americans, long-term unemployed, individuals with disabilities, and low-income individuals. Surprisingly, individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher were overrepresented in the sample. The occupational employment of the participants matched employment in the West Michigan labor market and in the state of Michigan.

This chapter also highlighted the dissertation's four analytic categories, which flowed from the research questions and findings. These categories include: "exploring perceptions of the post-recovery labor market in West Michigan," "detailing challenges and exploring opportunities under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act," and "giving voice and showing value to system stakeholders." The next four chapters are organized under these analytical categories.

CHAPTER FIVE: EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF THE POST-RECOVERY LABOR MARKET IN WEST MICHIGAN

Introduction

As the U.S. economy continues its eighth year of recovery following the Great Recession, contradictory evidence exists as to whether the labor market has mounted any meaningful recovery.²³ To support implementation of the WIOA, it is important to explore the perceptions of jobseekers and key informants in the workforce development system. This perceptual information is important for workforce developers to understand when designing policy and programs. Accordingly, the dissertation's first research question asks how jobseekers and key informants describe the labor market and an economy entering its eighth year of post-2008 recovery.

In investigating this research question, my primary finding is that most participants believe the economy and labor market have improved in recent years, but that all participants express concern or caution over current labor market conditions. Exploring this question deeper, a few themes emerge from participant perceptions of the economy and the labor market:

1. While most participants believed that the labor market had improved in recent years, a few participants did not. Some jobseekers and all local staff were the participants describing the labor market as "worse."

²³ Discussed in Chapter 1, recall lower unemployment rates and higher employment growth number contrasted with increases in long-term unemployment and lower labor force participation rates.

2. Participants who saw an improvement in the labor market relied on official labor statistics and reduced caseloads as evidence of improvement.
3. Most participants have concerns about the labor market, even those who saw improvement. Those concerns centered around three themes: the *types* of jobs available today, the recent increase in temporary work arrangements, and “discouraged” workers.
4. Several themes emerge from focus group participants that confirm the existence of structural unemployment in the labor market, but also suggest something more than structural unemployment is happening.

This chapter will present the findings and analysis from seven focus groups and follow-up interviews with 31 jobseekers and semi-structured interviews with ten key informants, including federal, state, and local administrators, staff, and stakeholders. This chapter is organized around the four themes above, each taken-up in turn below.

While most participants believe that the labor market has improved in recent years, a few participants did not. Some jobseekers and local staff were the only participants describing the labor market as “worse”

Seventy percent of key informants and two-thirds of jobseekers described the labor market as “improved,” “better,” or with similar positive sentiments. While most jobseekers and most key informants thought that the labor market was better, two participant groups covered those not seeing any improvement in the labor market: some jobseekers and all local staff. That is, local staff were the only key informants not seeing any improvement in the labor market since the Great Recession, an understandable finding considering this group, more than any other group

of key informants, spend most of their time working one-on-one with jobseekers. They, after all, are the ones closest to those still struggling in the post-recovery labor market. One local staff describes the labor market from her perspective:

“Working with job seekers every day, I don’t think that it’s going well, only because a lot of job seekers come into us and they’re unemployed. They’re looking for work. They’re recently laid off. Their companies are being outsourced. And so, they’re just kind of in a state of, I would say, like, emergency. They’re not sure where to go from here. They might be working, but they’re working on low-wage jobs, so they’re just looking for better income, something where they can support their families better. So, I don’t necessarily think it’s in a -- it’s in a positive place, although research might say it is. I think, working with job seekers, it’s not.”

Other local staff share this perspective, with their perception of the labor market seemingly influenced by their interactions with and the circumstances of the jobseekers they interact with daily. For example, local staff working with ex-offenders tie their perceptions of the labor market to their client’s experiences. Same for staff working with individuals with disabilities. And so on.

Jobseekers, at least some jobseekers, are the other participant group not seeing any improvement in the labor market. It is not surprising that one-third of jobseekers felt this way, considering they are the ones continuing to struggle to find work. Considering the circumstances of many jobseekers described throughout the dissertation, it is surprising so many felt things had improved. Those hesitant to acknowledge any meaningful improvement are those citing their own job search as evidence of a struggling labor market. One jobseeker explains:

“I’ve been told that not only in Michigan, but all over the country that the job market has improved, and we’re doing really well with creating jobs, but I don’t see that in my own job search; I don’t see that reflected even here in Michigan.”

Within this group of jobseekers, most accepted that the labor market had improved for *some* people, but that *they* had yet to see any improvement. As one jobseeker put it: “They say that the market is growing, but for who?” Statements like this were common during all focus groups and are consistent with the recognition by jobseekers, especially long-term unemployed jobseekers, that they lack the skills, the human capital, or the social capital to participate meaningfully in the improving labor market (Nichols, 2013).

One key knowledgeable, a state stakeholder, remained neutral on the labor market. He explained: “It is neither better nor worse; it’s different.” According to this key informant, things are “different” because the types of jobs and the types of workers. While only one participant was uncomfortable classifying the economy and the labor market as “better” or “worse,” the observation that things are “different” was a reoccurring theme, even among those who believe that things, overall, have improved. In other instances, and with other participants, “different” is typically used to describe the different types of jobs available, usually with jobseekers referring to more *Sales* and *Service* occupations replacing production occupations. Key informants shared this observation. And, these observations match the economic reality of continuing structural changes in the labor market described in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, and identified by Janoski, Luke, & Oliver (2014) and others as one cause of structural unemployment, particularly if the skills of the jobseekers do not align with new opportunities. While key informants mostly agreed with jobseekers, they do add the observation that there are more *Professional* and *technical* opportunities available, but add that some jobseekers lack the education and training for those positions.

In summary, the only participants who did not see an improvement in the labor market were some jobseekers and all local staff. For the former, the perception is driven by their own experiences in the labor market and for the latter the perception follows from close, consistent interaction with the jobseekers. Only one participant stated that the economy was neither better nor worse, instead opting to describe it as “different.”

Participants seeing an improvement in the labor market rely on official labor statistics and reduced caseloads as evidence of improvement

Seventy percent of key informants and two-thirds of jobseekers described the labor market as “improved,” “better,” or with similar positive sentiments. It is understandable that most participants believed the economy and labor market have improved in recent years considering the “improvement” in reported labor statistics (which, in fact, reflected increased hiring and lower unemployment rates) and reduced caseloads in Michigan Works! offices (which have fallen sharply since the Great Recession and its aftermath, as was learned from a local administrator and local staff.)

Explaining why they believed things were better, jobseekers and key informants both cited official labor statistics among the reasons. However, it was interesting that so many jobseekers were knowledgeable about current labor statistics, generally. One possible explanation for this was interest among jobseekers in the 2016 presidential election, a topic sometimes dominating several minutes before focus groups officially started. During the time of our data collection, improvements in labor statistics were consistently reported, perhaps heightening awareness of recent numbers. Moreover, many jobseekers appeared to be familiar with recent trends and were conversational about different interpretations of those trends.

This may be because of an increase in media attention on the job market and because of the presidential candidates' analysis of these labor statistics being reported widely in the popular media.²⁴

Still, a few jobseekers were surprised to learn that labor market indicators reflect improvement. One jobseeker joked: "Who says, 'better?'" One jobseeker took issue with these indicators, suggesting that the unemployment rate did not capture differences in labor market outcomes affecting certain populations, in this case, race:

"My perception, pardon everyone, being African-American, I may recognize that four percent [unemployment rate] as being true, but as to whether or not -- which jobs are available, would bring me to question, as to the accuracy, how accurate those numbers could be."

This comment was met with agreement by other focus group participants, including white jobseekers. Like so often during the focus groups, jobseekers were sympathetic of others' concerns. This was one instance where diverse jobseekers, in this case white jobseekers, agreed with and supported their peer, in this case an African American/ Black jobseeker, while they shared their perspective. It is not just jobseekers, or even African American / Black jobseekers that believe that labor market indicators failed to tell the "whole story." Other jobseekers and key informants share the concern. Most key informants were cautious of the official unemployment rate. Of them, all participants believe the official unemployment rate

²⁴ For example: Irwin, N. (2016, February 10). The Real Jobless Rate Is 42 Percent? Donald Trump Has a Point, Sort Of. The New York Times; Davidson, A. (2016, September 10). Trump and the Truth: The Unemployment-Rate Hoax. The New Yorker; Matthews, C. (2014, November 4). Hillary Clinton Will Love Friday's Jobs Report. Fortune.

conceals some underlying weakness in the labor market. This concept was best summarized by a state stakeholder, who said:

“The unemployment number is *one* indicator. For me, that's it. So, it could be that it's down but everybody is employed in two to three jobs that really aren't self-sustaining, and that would feed into the unemployment number being reduced. The other aspect of it we saw in Michigan was in 2008 and 2009, when we went through that horrific upheaval -- many of the people fell off the unemployment number, but they aren't necessarily employed. So, that's an interesting number, but it's not the only input.”

The federal perspective is similar, with an administrator reacting to an improved unemployment rate by saying: “I think there is still a lot of unknown out there.” Despite some recognition that the unemployment rate may not tell the whole story, one stakeholder conceded:

“Now, if you asked me, do I want to have a low percentage or a high percentage, I definitely want a lower percentage. I think that is an indicator that the economy is doing better, but it is not the full story.”

Acknowledging an improvement in labor market indicators, another local staff member reported: “Well, from a day-to-day perspective, of working with job-seekers, it doesn't look as good to me, or has as bright an outlook at it may -- the numbers may suggest.”

Key informants, especially administrators and staff, may be more knowledgeable about official labor statistics due to the required use of labor market information in the planning requirements for the implementation of the WIOA.²⁵ Even those recognizing that official labor

²⁵ Several provisions of the WIOA require the use of labor market information, described in Section 304. Primary activities requiring the information are the State plan, the Local plan, defining In-demand industries and occupations, career pathways, and program evaluation. Key informants at the administrator and staff level are involved in these activities.

statistics do not tell the “whole story,” acknowledge that the numbers are one important measure of the health of the labor market.

It was interesting to hear both jobseekers and key informants raise concerns about official labor statistics. Indeed, key informants, especially administrators were expected to be knowledgeable about the nuances of the measures, but hearing the same from staff, stakeholders, and jobseekers was surprising. However, all concerns shared by participants fit with the issues identified by Bregger & Haugen (1995), reviewed in Chapter 2, which note the exclusion of discouraged workers and involuntary part-time workers caused some commentators to allege that the official statistics understate the unemployment problem.

Key informants, particularly administrators, reported less demand on system resources as evidence of an improved labor market. This is best summarized by one administrator when describing the number of jobseekers visiting one American Job Center at the peak of the Great Recession: “We had over 200 people on a waiting list per week, and we were scheduled out 10 weeks, so we had 2,000 people that were waiting for training.” The reduced demand could, indeed, reflect an improved labor market. An alternative explanation is that fewer unemployed jobseekers are using the system. And, there is some evidence of this from the small sample of participants who were not participating in the labor market. From their participation, I learn that they do not know about the system or do not believe that the system can help them. Growth in this group of unemployed residents, especially those who previously engaged with the system, could certainly reflect some of the reduced demand on system resources (but, for concerning reasons).

In summary, both jobseekers and key informants relied on labor statistics as evidence of an improved labor market. Jobseekers and some key informants may have been more aware of labor statistics because the coverage of the 2016 presidential election, suggested by their familiarity with the candidates' perspectives of the numbers. As expected, some participants questioned the accuracy of labor statistics, mostly because of their underestimation of the unemployment problem. In addition, key informants were likely aware of labor statistics because their required incorporation into WIOA planning. Other key knowledgeable relied on decreased caseloads as evidence of an improving labor market.

Most participants have concerns about the labor market, even those who saw improvement. Those concerns centered around three themes: the types of jobs available today, the recent increase in temporary work arrangements, and “discouraged” workers

As discussed above, 70 percent of key informants and two-thirds of jobseekers described the labor market as “improved,” “better,” or with similar positive sentiments. However, most participants had concerns about the labor market. And, notwithstanding a few differences, there are many similarities between the concerns raised by jobseekers and key informants. Both jobseekers and key informants were concerned about the *types* of jobs available today, while jobseekers alone were concerned about the increase in temporary work arrangements, and key informants and some jobseekers were concerned about discouraged workers.²⁶

²⁶ Only two key informants used the term “discouraged worker.” However, other participants used terms like “disenfranchised” or “lost workers” to describe individuals who had given-up looking for work and who were not participating in workforce development programs through Michigan Works! agencies.

The first area of concern, shared by jobseekers and key informants, was over the types of jobs available. Most of the discussion in focus groups and interviews was around wages and benefits, with benefits including health insurance, paid time off, and flexible work schedules. In short, jobseekers do not like what they see. Jobseekers believe that many jobs offer too little in terms of pay and benefits, especially to support a family. As one jobseeker summarizes:

“Where are the good, you know, take care of your family jobs, take care, you know, of all your expenses? I see jobs that, you know, you can make \$12 an hour, which is not a bad wage, but does it allow you to take care of your family and pay for everything that you need? I don’t see those types of jobs available.”

When talking about the types of jobs that are available, it is common for jobseekers to express displeasure with their options: “There are jobs there, but it’s just jobs you have to just settle for until you’re able to find something that you really want.”

In terms of benefits, many jobseekers commented on the importance of employer-provided health insurance. One jobseeker summarized her circumstances as an individual with a disability:

“I’ve seen a lot of part-time jobs with no benefits. And I can take less money. I know I’m not going to get a job with the same money I had after that many years, but I can’t do a part-time job with no health insurance. I’ve got to have health insurance, so that’s kind of where I’m coming from.”

Beyond health insurance, jobseekers repeatedly talked about the importance of paid time off and flexible work schedules. These benefits were particularly important to many jobseekers because the need to care for children, their lack of reliable transportation, or their family responsibilities. One jobseeker introduced me to the idea of “points,” when he said:

“They [employers] don’t understand that people have problems. Like my friend, her mom got into a car accident, and broke her hip and everything. She was out of work for

2 days and they marked her “points.” Why are you giving her “points” for her mom getting in a car accident? She could have died! They don’t care.”

When asked what “points” were, jobseekers explained that they were a system of tracking workers showing up late or missing work. When you “hit” your points, you are done working with the employer, it was explained. Most workers were familiar with the term and many readily provided the group with the number of points they most recently had. When one jobseeker asserted she had 15 points at her last employer, the statement was met with other jobseekers in the focus group exclaiming, “wow, that’s good!” and questioning “how, many?” The average number of “points” seemed to be around ten, but one jobseeker reported as few as seven. Interestingly, the number of “points” granted was another way jobseekers negotiated status.

While jobseekers are frustrated with “new” part-time, low paying jobs, they believe that all jobs today pay lower wages and offer fewer benefits. In some instances, jobseekers compare the wages or benefits they received in the past to what they are being offered today, sometimes for the exact same job. One participant, who is a welder, and who expects to be back at work in a matter of days, explained how he has seen his wage fall, even in what is considered an “in-demand job”:

“Well, I was in manufacturing. I worked at this place before, but then they got sold to -- and another company bought us out. Our workforce went to 200 to 60 people and my father-in-law worked there for 20 years and got laid off. But now these jobs are starting to come back -- but when I worked for the first company, I was making \$25 an hour, but when they basically busted the union they called me and said: ‘Hey, our pay rate is now \$17, would you like to come back and work for us?’ Are the jobs there? Yes, but are they paying as much? I don’t think so.”

Key informants agree with these concerns. In fact, most administrators, staff, and stakeholders recognize that many jobseekers, especially those with barriers to employment, are not fully participating in the recovery. A state staff member best summarized this when she said:

“I think overall, obviously, we’re in a lot better spot than we were a few years ago, during the recession. So, I think overall, the picture looks pretty good. But I think, underlying there, I think it’s good we’re seeing more people re-join the labor force, but I think we’re also still seeing a group of folks -- and I suspect it’s more those folks with more barriers to employment, that are still not where they would like to be.”

Several key informants observed that the jobseekers that are having the hardest time in the labor market are those lacking the education and training necessary to find the jobs they want or expect. According to one administrator: “Those who are long-term unemployed with no skills -- they are our biggest focus right now.” In fact, all administrators echoed this, with one of them explaining:

“Some of those individuals we’re working with that are structurally unemployed or underemployed or maybe aren’t even interested in working in the labor force, and so how do we work with them to get them the skills they need, whether it’s basic skills, soft skills or hard skills.”

Only a few jobseekers agreed that the types of jobs available were a function of the education and training: “I just see jobs where you have to have, like, a degree in order to get the job that you really want, you know what I mean?” This gets at a larger theme: there are very different perceptions about the role of education and training in overcoming the barriers to employment. This is discussed in much more detail in Chapter 6.

Much of what jobseekers and key informants report seeing is the well-documented, highly observable shift from a *goods producing* economy to a *service providing* economy, a

trend detailed in Chapter 1 and 2. Indeed, lower pay and fewer benefits is consistent with expectations for part-time work and temporary work, for *service providing* industries and occupations, and for job titles that require less education and training. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Hodson, 2012; Volti, 2012; Sweet, 2013). And, these are the types of jobs most participants report finding in their self-guided job search or report being referred to by local staff, like career coaches and career navigators.

There are some key differences between the concerns and cautions expressed by jobseekers and those expressed by key informants. One difference is the common jobseeker concern over the role of temporary employment agencies in the labor market. Jobseekers express concern, even worry, over temporary employment agencies, beginning with the nature of the jobs they offer. Some believed that these establishments are providing a false sense of recovery. One jobseeker observes: “I think [the labor market] has improved but I think it has improved because of the temp agencies.” Another jobseeker remarks: “It’s easy to get a job through a temp service.” The problem is not with temporary employment agencies, explains one jobseeker, but instead that temporary employment is pretty much all there is in today’s labor market. He explains: “The huge problem for me is -- because I felt like, when I first started working you could get hired into the company directly, now everything is pretty much what he said [acknowledging another participant], temp services.” And these jobs are often unstable, explains one jobseeker: “But then when it’s time for you to get hired in, or when you think you will get hired in, they don’t need you anymore and they go to the next person.” This comment was met with nodding heads and agreement among fellow jobseekers. This

discussion of temporary employment agencies will be described in much more detail in Chapter 6, below.

A second difference has to do with “discouraged workers.” When discussing the labor market, several key informants at the federal, state, and local level were concerned about the unemployed or discouraged workers who are no longer engaging with the workforce development system. One administrator takes the improvement in labor market indicators as evidence that those remaining out-of-work have outdated skills:

“I think while we see 4 or 5 percent’s I think it’s much higher -- and my concern is that those individuals haven’t gone back to any up-skilling or training. So if they left a business and now are long-term unemployed their skills will not meet what’s needed now to get back into some kind of wage that can sustain their families. So, I think there is still a lot of unknown out there.”

This is also problematic to another administrator, who is thinking about how to get many of these jobseekers back in the door to participate in programs:

“My bigger concern is the individuals that are -- the disenfranchised. They’re not looking for [work] anymore. And how do we tap into them? Because, as our unemployment goes down, our pool, our supply, obviously, is going down. And that means what individuals do -- we do have left there, a, have a lot more barriers.”

Those out of the labor market and not engaging with the Michigan Works! system have either given-up looking for work altogether or are relying on the underground economy for employment – what one jobseeker calls his “side-hustle.” Recently appearing in recruitment advertising for ride share company Uber, the term “side-hustle” (and other terms like “hustle,” “side-job,” and “gig”) was used by a few jobseekers and those out of the labor market to describe work they were doing on the side in the informal economy. Surprisingly, only one

jobseeker expressed concern over the illegal nature of some side work. But, this same jobseeker was careful to acknowledge that side work can be totally legitimate:

“I know people who have just said, you know, I’m not going to get any more money, you know, from unemployment or anything like that, or I can’t follow the rules that they want me to follow, so you know, I’m going to do my hustle on the side. I’m going to try to, you know, whether it be some type of self-employment that may lead to some illegal activity, or something like that, but I’m going to find another way. Or, can I be the childcare provider for some family members, and you know, look after the kids while they go to work, you know how can I help? So, it’s not only just illegal, something illegal, but other things that they can do in the family, maybe just to help out, and some people just give up, and don’t do anything, you know? They’re just not employed.”

Another jobseeker made an important observation that, from what she sees, there are a lot of black men who are not participating in the labor market. She contemplated what happens to them:

“I think a lot of men, a lot of black men, you know, I think that’s an issue. They’re just out there, but not employed, you know, and it seems like we’ve kind of overlooked them, and what do we do next now with them? What’s going to happen as a result of having so many men be unemployed, that’s what I wonder.”

In summary, most jobseekers and key informants had concerns with current labor market conditions. Both jobseekers and key informants expressed concern over the types of jobs available, with jobseekers detailing wage and benefits and the part-time nature of those jobs as the primary concern. In addition, jobseekers expressed concern that temporary employment was responsible for much of the improvement in the labor market, an important distinction, in their view, from the economy improving due to full-time, permanent jobs being created. Finally, both jobseekers and key informants had concerns over workers who gave-up looking for work, with key informants hoping to bring them in the workforce development system and jobseekers wondering what happens to them.

Several themes emerge from focus group participants that confirm the existence of structural unemployment in the labor market, but also suggest something more is happening

Observations by jobseekers and key informants suggest that there is structural unemployment in the West Michigan Works! WDA. Structural unemployment most often results from a “persistent mismatch” between the skills and characteristics of workers and the requirements of available jobs (Hubbard & O’Brien, 2006: 239). One way to confirm the existence of structural unemployment is to rule out the existence of frictional unemployment, or the unemployment resulting when jobseekers move from job to job with transferable education, training, and skills. However, just two of the 31 jobseekers participating in focus groups satisfied the definition of *frictional* unemployment. These two jobseekers had been out of work for a short period, planned to return to work soon, and believed they had “transferable skills” allowing them to move from job to job (Arnold, 2005). One of those jobseekers was a welder with “some college” and the other was an IT manager with a bachelor’s degree.

The circumstances of other jobseekers, even those holding a bachelor’s degree, match more with what is expected with structural unemployment. Janoski, Luke, & Oliver (2014: 19) identify four trends with structural unemployment: (1) the shift to services and skill mismatches; (2) downsizing, outsourcing, and offshoring; (3) changing technology; and (4) structural financialization. While no jobseekers or key informants discussed “structural financialization,” the other three trends closely match the themes from focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

First, the shift to services and skills mismatches was a common theme discussed by many jobseekers, particularly those last employed in production occupations (welders, machine operators) or construction occupations (laborer, equipment operators). When discussing the

types of jobs available, jobseekers and key informants both recognize a decrease in pay, especially when moving from production occupations to service occupations, but also when comparing production occupations today to production occupations several years ago. Jobseekers in the West Michigan Works! WDA tied some of the decline in wages (and in jobs) to the decline in manufacturing employment and to the increase in service employment. Next, jobseeker frustration around temporary employment agencies emerged as a central theme in this dissertation and relates back to one of the trends Janoski, Luke, & Oliver (2014) referred to as outsourcing, which is described as “outsourcing to temporary employment firms and subcontractors.” (Outsourcing of this kind can be distinguished from “offshore outsourcing,” which involves outsourcing work to other countries.) The rise in temporary work arrangements is also widely discussed in the sociological literature and is summarized in Chapter 7. Third, changing technology is one trend cited by older workers and other jobseekers interested in gaining general skills or specific job training. Janoski, Luke, & Oliver (2014) note that changing technology requires more emphasis on professional training. It follows that if jobseekers lack either the general skill or the specific skill, they will have a more difficult time finding jobs, satisfying the very definition of structural unemployment.

However, something beyond structural unemployment may be taking place. As noted above, structural unemployment typically refers to a mismatch in the skills of workers and the demand of employers. Yet, some participants seem to suggest a complication: even with education and training and some transferable skills, many jobseekers remain unemployed. For example, just one of the 11 participants with a bachelor’s degree or higher would be considered *frictionally* unemployed (our IT manager, from above). That leaves ten jobseekers with a

bachelor's degree or higher who are struggling to find work, including two who have been out of work for 27 or more weeks. Among the bachelor's degrees represented are: social work, psychology, and computer science (a second jobseeker with IT training and background). Another seven participants report education beyond high school but something less than a bachelor's degree. Among the certifications are: welder, nursing assistant, and machine operator. All seven participants in this category are having a difficult time finding work, with one being out of work for 27 or more weeks.

So, do they have the "right" education or training and the "right" skills? This, of course, depends on employer demand. However, one administrator explains that occupations in health care and manufacturing are especially hard to fill in West Michigan, suggesting that our nursing assistant and our welder may be contenders. In describing the demand in manufacturing, one administrator recalls:

"... then even some of the manufacturers have posted signs on corners and other things too that they typically wouldn't have to do. It's a lot different. I think employers are struggling with finding talent -- but their definition of talent ranges from a real skillset and need, like coders and software developers to entry level talent and somebody who can just push two buttons and have soft skills to be able to keep their manufacturing equipment running."

Further, a system stakeholders confirms that employers see education beyond high school as a hallmark of motivation, perhaps putting the ten unemployed bachelor's degree holders in a better position to find employment. However, in the case of these 17 jobseekers, all but three report a barrier to employment (led by discrimination, transportation, and childcare). Therefore, from this limited sample of jobseekers, it is, at least, interesting to note

that even those with some education and training and some transferable skills *still* face a difficult job search in today's labor market.

Chapter Summary

This chapter showed that jobseekers and key informants believe the economy and labor market have improved in recent years, but that they have concerns over the current state of the labor market. While official labor statistics, anecdotal stories of job gains, and reduced demand on system resources support a finding that things have improved, there remain unemployed jobseekers and those who have given up looking for work all together. This suggests there is a mismatch between the skills of jobseekers and the demands of employers, resulting in structural unemployment. However, there may be something more than structural unemployment, as jobseekers with some education and training and some transferable skills remain out of work. Barriers to employment offer a partial explanation, as most jobseekers in this group report at least one barrier to employment, led by discrimination.

CHAPTER SIX: DETAILING CHALLENGES UNDER THE WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT

Introduction

Participants from across the workforce development system believe that the economy and labor market have improved, but the overwhelming majority identify continuing, structural problems that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including individuals with barriers to employment. To support implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in a manner consistent with its focus on individuals with barriers to employment, it is important to describe and explain the perceptions of the barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers. Accordingly, the dissertation's second research question asks what jobseekers and key informants believe are the causes, content, and consequences of the "barriers to employment" faced by jobseekers today.

In investigating this research question, I learn that most participants believe that there are one or more, often significant, barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers. Investigating this finding further, a few themes emerge from participant perceptions of the barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers:

1. While most participants believed jobseekers face barriers to employment, a small group of jobseekers and key informants do not.
2. Jobseekers reported barriers to employment consistent with nine of the 13 categories of "individuals with barriers to employment" defined in Section 3 of the WIOA.²⁷

²⁷ The only groups not knowingly represented were: (1) Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians" (§ 3 (24)(C); individuals with low levels of literacy and individuals with substantial cultural barriers (§ 3 (24)(I); migrant and

3. This dissertation uncovered barriers to employment that are in-line with those described in the sociological and related literature on barriers to employment.
4. Jobseekers and key informants are mostly consistent in their perceptions of barriers to employment, but with notable differences in the role of education and training and discrimination.

While there are notable differences in the perceptions about the *types* of barriers faced by today's jobseekers, 81 percent of jobseekers and 88 percent of key informants agreed that jobseekers today face one or more, often significant, barriers to employment. This section presents the dissertation's findings regarding both the groups of individuals with barriers to employment, as defined by the WIOA, and the actual barriers to employment that today's jobseekers say they are facing. The intent is to present real-life situations to illustrate and illuminate meanings that expand readers' experiences with the phenomenon and advance knowledge of the barriers faced by jobseekers (Merriam, 2009: 50-51).

Most Participants Identify Barriers to Employment

While most participants believe jobseekers face barriers to employment, a small group of jobseekers and key informants do not. Just 19 percent of all jobseekers felt they (themselves) did not face any barriers to employment. Compared to all participating jobseekers, this group was older, more educated, more white, more male, and included no long-term unemployed jobseekers. It is likely that these demographic characteristics impacted perceptions of barriers

seasonal farmworkers (§ 3 (24)(J); and individuals within two years of exhausting lifetime eligibility under the Social Security Act (§ 3 (24)(K).

to employment. While most of these jobseekers recognize that *other* unemployed jobseekers face barriers to employment, at least three believe it starts with “attitude” or “motivation.” In an exchange between two jobseekers, one a welder (who was “between jobs”) and the other a recently-downsized IT project manager, the role of “attitude” is discussed:

[Welder]: Since I’m only 27, since I turned 18 I haven’t had any issue getting a job. I think it’s more an educational barrier -- more attitude and presentation and overall wanting to get a job.

[IT Project Manager]: I definitely agree. It’s all about your attitude, if you want to put in the time to go find the job or learn a skill, like him and welding [nodding in the direction of Welder], you just don’t apply for a job as a welder, there’s a lot to learn.

Only one key informant hesitated to identify barriers faced by today’s jobseekers. In his view, everyone faces barriers, or “hardships.” He explained: “Well, my view with that is there’s always going to be some hardships, I don’t think there is a system that we can create that will eliminate all hardships, there’s always going to be some.” When pressed, the key informant doubled-down and suggested that “attituded” was a barrier. He also noted later in the interview that lack of education and training could be a barrier to employment.

Given that most participants agree that today’s jobseekers face one or more barriers to employment, it is important to understand the perceptions underlying these barriers. As the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 clearly demonstrated, researchers have studied barriers to employment both by looking at groups of people who, because of their belonging to a class of individuals, are likely to experience one or more barriers to employment (Sally, 2011) and by looking at the actual barriers (Baum, 2009; Skouteris, 2007). I follow this dual class- and type-dichotomy by first discussing barriers experienced by groups, particularly based on the groups

identified in WIOA (immediately below) and then explicating the actual barriers to employment identified by jobseekers and key informants (later in this chapter).

Individuals with Barriers to Employment Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

Studying barriers to employment by looking at groups of people who, because of their belonging to a class of individuals, are likely to experience one or more barriers to employment, I found jobseekers fitting in nine of the 13 categories of “individuals with barriers to employment” defined in the WIOA,²⁸ including: displaced homemakers; low-income individuals; individuals with disabilities; older individuals; ex-offenders; homeless individuals; youth; single parents; and the long-term unemployed (128 STAT. 1433-34).²⁹ The only groups defined in WIOA that I did not find were: Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, individuals with low levels of literacy and individuals with substantial cultural barriers, migrant and seasonal farmworkers, and individuals within two years of exhausting lifetime eligibility under the Social Security Act. Table 10 below lists the nine categories in which jobseekers fit, along with the barriers to employment identified by jobseekers for each corresponding category. The rest of this section will highlight each of the nine categories of individuals with barriers to employment identified in the Act.

²⁸ The only groups not knowingly represented were: (1) Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians” (§ 3 (24)(C); individuals with low levels of literacy and individuals with substantial cultural barriers (§ 3 (24)(I); migrant and seasonal farmworkers (§ 3 (24)(J); and individuals within two years of exhausting lifetime eligibility under the Social Security Act (§ 3 (24)(K).

²⁹ While this dissertation did not uncover any additional groups of individuals with barriers to employment, we did find that many jobseekers identify temporary employment agencies as a barrier to employment, discussed in more detail below.

Table 10: “Individuals with Barriers to Employment” and the Barriers Faced

<i>“Individual with a barrier to employment” and number of jobseekers</i>	<i>Barriers to employment identified by jobseekers in corresponding category</i>
2 Displaced Homemaker § 3 (24)(A)	Child care, education / training, discrimination
11 low-income individuals § 3 (24)(B)	Transportation, child care, discrimination, education / training, disability
4 individuals with disabilities § 3 (24)(D)	Transportation, discrimination
13 older individuals § 3 (24)(E)	Discrimination, education / training
4 ex-offenders § 3 (24)(F)	Discrimination, transportation, education / training
2 Homeless Individuals § 3 (24)(G)	Substance abuse, housing, discrimination, transportation
4 Youth § 3 (24)(H)	Child care, transportation
5 Single Parents § 3 (24)(L)	Child care, transportation, education / training, discrimination
9 long-term unemployed § 3 (24)(M)	Child care, transportation, discrimination

Displaced Homemakers

Two participants were displaced homemakers and both identified child care and education / training as their biggest barriers to employment. One jobseeker summarized the experience of a displaced homemaker as follows:

“I have a degree, but I’ve been home with my kids for 10 years. My oldest son is 10, and my youngest is almost four now. My husband was a traveling consultant, and now I find myself a single mom with three boys, and my degree is in business, computers. I was an IT manager, so my work gap in IT has kind of left me in the dust, and my degree isn’t really worth a whole lot, even though people are looking for degrees, it’s the work gap that I’m having a problem with right now, trying to find good work, and I see a lot of part-time things here and there, but seems like the schedules are scattered, and I can’t work evenings and weekends with my kids, because it’s hard to have daycare on evenings and weekends, you know, with a variable schedule.”

In addition to child care and education, the displaced homemaker described her “work gap.”

When asked more about this, she indicated that she believes that employers look past her because she has been out of the labor market for ten years. This observation, while raised, in this case, by a displaced homemaker, was widely supported by single parents and other focus group participants, many who shared stories about family and friends in the same situation.

Low-Income Individuals

Eleven participants identified as low-income individuals. However, the number of low-income individuals was likely much higher, given the participation by many jobseekers in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. Nevertheless, low-income individuals listed transportation, child care, discrimination, education / training, and disability as their major barriers to employment. These barriers are in-line other studies in the literature on the barrier to employment faced by TANF participants, with the exception of domestic violence, which is

identified in the literature but was not found in our participants (Goldberg, 2000; Danziger, 2002). Discussed throughout this chapter, the *cost* of support services, like transportation and child care, is one of the major reasons so many jobseekers identified them as barriers.

Low-income individuals (and, considering the costs for some of these services, even middle-income individuals) have an especially hard time with these services. As explained by one jobseeker, low-income individuals face a paradox:

“There’s a chasm you fall into that I have found in employment, when you make so much per hour, say minimum wage, for me, I got Medicaid, and I got some food stamps, you know, to help supplement my stuff, but once I started making nine dollars an hour, she said: “You make too much.” And I said: “What are you talking about I make too much?” [laughs] It was easy for me -- I went -- and I said: “You might as well put me back at \$8.50 because I can’t afford to go buy insurance now.”

This is commonly referred to as the “benefits cliff.” Another jobseeker takes it a step further, complaining: “It sucks that you have to quit your job in order to survive.” But, this observation captured the thoughts of many low-income individuals and jobseekers. And, this subject has been studied in the sociological and policy literature, with studies recognizing the perception and some attempting to quantify the income benefits of moving from welfare to work (Danziger et. al., 2002). For example, Danziger et al. (2002) found that income after taxes and work-related child care and transportation expenses for those leaving welfare increased by \$2.63 for every additional hour worked compared to those staying on welfare.

It was interesting to see that many low-income individuals understand the economics, with some even describing in detail the calculations they make to determine what accepting a job will mean for their bottom line.

Individuals with Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities included two jobseekers with physical disabilities, one jobseeker had a learning disability, and one jobseeker had alcoholism. A jobseeker who suffers from a chronic back injury, described how a fruitless job search can lead to frustration, even depression and anxiety for individuals with disabilities. She shared:

“The Michigan Works! staff will tell you -- if you would ask that, I am here a lot applying for jobs. Sometimes the programs get stuck and I have to call them over. I have applied everywhere. So it’s really discouraging to me – because, I want to get back to work. I think secretarial work wouldn’t require me to be on my feet, because when I wasn’t disabled I was really good at teaching. I loved the kids, we upgraded their reading, got some kids at the 5th grade level to 9th grade level, and they were in middle school at the time. But, I can’t do that any -- I am not depressed but I do have anxiety over this situation.”

She was not alone. Each participant with disabilities expressed feelings of hopelessness. In a follow-up interview with one individual with a learning disability, the jobseeker recounted stories of being teased and even reasoned: “Sometimes, I’m like, man, it’d be easier just to give up [the job search].”

Older Individuals

Thirteen older workers were represented in focus group interviews. Older workers identified a handful of barriers, with age discrimination leading all other explanations. One jobseeker described how she thinks employers looked at her application:

“I’m also having a hard time with the job, trying to find -- because of my age. I just turned 51, and I don’t think they -- because they’re probably thinking oh, I’m going to not be there for a long time. They think oh, I’ll leave and, you know, and I just, I’ve been to a few interviews and nothing panned out. And I’m just like, about ready to give up on the job search.”

Other barriers include disability and education and training. Disability was an expected barrier for older workers, as discussed in Chapter 2. This is due to the increased incidence of disability in older age. However, education and training as a leading barrier for this group was an interesting finding. In focus groups and follow-up interviews, older workers were among the first group to indicate that they were open to education and training, believing it was necessary in today's labor market. This is an especially important finding because, as discussed later, not every jobseeker identifies education and training as barriers to employment.

Ex-Offenders (Returning Citizens)

Four ex-offenders, or "returning citizens," participated in focus group interviews. The background check (or criminal record) leads the barriers claimed by ex-offenders. One jobseeker, who was recently released from prison following a seven-year sentence, summarized the feeling of all four ex-offenders who participated in focus groups:

"I've just come out of prison four months ago. So, I see a lot of jobs, but I see a lack of career, careers being offered, especially for somebody coming out of prison. That was my first time in prison. I thought it was the end of my life, but in certain respects it was the beginning, because people began investing in me. But I have to start that process all over again when I come out, because now I'm -- society-at-large looks at people who have been in prison, they dis-- they think there's a stigma there -- I get frustrated, like, man, this is crazy, that barrier, why do they always ask for my criminal history?"

Additional barriers included education and training and transportation. Two ex-offenders recognized that some of the job training they received through the Michigan Department of Corrections while in prison was valuable, but expressed difficulty trying to explain the value to uninterested, or prejudice employers. One jobseeker even recounted the embarrassment of having to tell perspective employers that he did not work for the State of Michigan:

“In fact, they even get it confused. I’ve had employers call me and say, “Hey, I see you worked for the State of Michigan.” You don’t know what you’re reading there, I was a prisoner. They say, “Oh, well I didn’t see that on there.” I said, you think that I’m going to put that on my resume? No. [Laughter] -- But I put my work history there.”

Homeless Individuals

Two homeless jobseekers participated in focus group interviews. Both believed housing and transportation were the largest barriers to employment. One homeless individual added substance abuse (specifically, alcoholism) and discrimination (due to a criminal background) to the list. Below, one jobseeker explained how one drunk and disorderly conduct conviction now limits his career options:

“There’s tons of work out there, it’s like well, are you willing to ‘pull wire,’ you know? Sometimes it’s just that. It’s like, and I crapped all over my own self, you know, this year, and I really, I’m paying for it. You know, that one incident really kind of screws me up. You know, and I’m having a hard time with that. Yeah. Plus, you know, I don’t go and tell everybody I’m homeless, I’m a loser, I really screwed up my life, and I’m a drunk, don’t give me any alcohol, you know, it’s not like that. It’s like I’ve got to present this other person that I am, you know? And it’s not easy.”

This shows the relationship between homelessness and substance abuse. It also describes the coincidence of barriers to employment, with this participant identifying at least five unique, interrelated barriers to employment.

Youth

Four youth between the ages of 18 and 24 participated in focus group interviews. The youth included three females and one male. Among the barriers to employment youth identified were child care and transportation. For some youth, finding a full-time job can be challenging, as one jobseeker explained: “They won’t even give you full-time options. They will hire you part-time so you won’t get the benefits.” Another jobseeker explained how low-paying jobs

limit his transportation: “You can’t survive. I don’t have a car right now so it kind of limits me too.” And, child care further complicates matters for some youth:

“I have two kids and I’m a single mom. I have no support through my family or their dad’s side of the family, so it’s like I’m by myself. So I got to find someone that can pay for childcare, transportation, and then having my own house and all my own bills, doing it all by myself. So it’s a challenge.”

Youth did not identify education and training as a barrier to employment. In fact, youth participating in the focus groups generally seemed confident in their skills and in their work ethic. In their view, the challenge came down to the support services, particularly costly ones like child care and transportation.

Single Parents

Five single parents were among the focus group participants. All five single parents were female and in all cases the fathers were not in the picture for one of two major reasons: separation or incarceration. One jobseeker explained the difficulty being a single parent while her kid’s father is in prison:

“It’s hard being a single parent and trying to afford child care. In jobs, they don’t care about that, they just want you there. What do I do? I let everyone know about my situation -- with my kid’s dad wouldn’t get out of jail until March. I wasn’t planning on that to happen. It’s like I don’t know what to do at this point. I’m trying to do everything that I can do and I am just getting knocked out every time. [Pausing, beginning to cry] I know it was my decision to have kids. It might not be the best decision but they are here now [crying].”

Beyond the hardships of being a single parent, participants who are single parents identify child care, transportation, education and training, and discrimination as barriers to employment.

There was also overlap between single parents and low-income individuals.

Long-Term Unemployed Individuals

Eight participants had been out of work for 27 or more weeks, classifying them as long-term unemployed. Among the long-term unemployed, barriers included child care, transportation, and discrimination. In the case of long-term unemployed, discrimination refers to employers passing on candidates because of an extended period of joblessness. One jobseeker explains:

“Every time I apply for a job, I go on interviews, but I don’t seem to be able to get the job. I don’t know if I’m just not the right fit anymore. You know, and as time goes by, I wonder, do people want me back, because I’ve, you know, been out of that skillset for going on two years now. So, well more than two years, going on three years now. So, it seems like it’s getting harder and harder.”

Interestingly, jobseekers in this category did not identify education and training as a barrier, but during focus groups and follow-up interviews, at least one acknowledge that education and training may help with finding a job.

Summary

This section identified jobseekers in 9 of the 13 categories of “individuals with barriers to employment” defined in Section 3 of the WIOA. I provided a description of each of these nine categories and highlighted the barriers to employment identified by jobseekers in each.

Selecting “typical cases,” I described for each category some of the causes, content, and consequences of the barriers to employment. This analysis supplements our knowledge of the barriers to employment faced by jobseekers in the categories identified by WIOA. The next section takes a different perspective, as I now analyze the barriers to employment that jobseekers and key informants believe today’s job seekers face in the labor market.

Jobseekers and Key Informants Discuss Actual Barriers to Employment

This section presents detailed findings from the 81 percent of jobseekers and the 90 percent of key informants who believed that today's jobseekers face one or more barriers to employment. This section focuses on the actual barriers to employment instead of *groups* of individuals who may face barriers to employment discussed in the previous section. Jobseekers were asked to identify any barriers coming between them and employment. All participants responded, listing 24 unique barriers. Table 11 below, displays the actual barriers identified by two or more participants.³⁰ Likewise, key informants were asked what barriers, if any, they believe faced today's jobseekers. All participants responded, and their responses are also recorded in Table 11. It is important to note that the key informant tally is higher, because they were asked to identify barriers facing today's jobseekers, *generally*. In contrast, jobseekers were asked to identify barriers that they, as individuals, actually faced. For example, when 23 percent of jobseekers reported "transportation" as a barrier, that means that 23 percent of them believed transportation-related issues are one obstacle between them and employment. However, when 80 percent of key informants identified "transportation" as a barrier, that means that 80 percent of them believed that transportation-related issues are a barrier facing *some* jobseekers today.

³⁰ Barriers to employment identified by just one jobseeker were time, poor interview skills, tattoos, hair color, substance abuse, and discrimination because of sex. These barriers, were not discussed in further detail because just one jobseeker identified them and no key informant identified them.

Table 11: Barriers to Employment Facing 31 Jobseekers in West Michigan Works! WDA

<i>Barrier</i>	<i>Jobseekers, percent of participants facing barrier (N=31)</i>	<i>Key informants, percent of participants mentioning barrier (N=10)</i>
Discrimination	42%	30%
Transportation	23%	80%
Child care	23%	70%
Criminal record / background check	13%	40%
Education / training / skills	13%	80%
Long-term unemployment / employment gap	13%	60%
Disability	13%	60%
Housing / homelessness	13%	40%
Temporary employment / staffing firm	6%	0%
Attitude / motivation	6%	20%
Substance abuse	6%	30%

Overall, this dissertation uncovered barriers to employment that are in-line with those described in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The only barrier identified in the literature

that I failed to find among participants was domestic violence (Goldberg, 2000).³¹ While the focus group design may have made some jobseekers uncomfortable with sharing domestic violence as a barrier, no jobseekers raised it at follow-up interviews or recorded it on their demographic information sheet, which asked jobseeker to report any barriers they would like to discuss.

An analysis of the barriers identified by jobseekers and key informants provides interesting insights. First, the top barriers jobseekers identified include: discrimination, transportation, and child care. The top barriers key informants identified are: education and training, transportation, and child care. Interestingly, discrimination topped the list of barriers identified by jobseekers, as 42 percent of jobseekers said discrimination was standing between them and a job while just 30 percent of key informants saw discrimination as a barrier to employment. In contrast, just 13 percent of jobseekers identified education and training as a barrier to employment, compared to the 80 percent of key informants who listed education and training as a barrier affecting today's jobseekers. An analysis of these and other barriers to employment are presented below.

Discrimination

Forty-two percent of jobseeker participants listed discrimination as a barrier to employment, making it the most commonly cited barrier among jobseekers. According to jobseekers, this barrier includes discrimination because of race/color (26 percent), because of age (26 percent),

³¹ Perhaps domestic violence? One jobseeker described her transportation barrier in the following way: "I went through some issues with my ex. I had a car but he wouldn't give it to me. So -- and then he don't want to help me with our kids."

and because of sex (3 percent). Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Pub. L. 88-352) (Title VII) prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin.

Discrimination, Because of Race/Color

According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC): “Race discrimination involves treating someone unfavorably because they are of a certain race or because of personal characteristics associated with race. Color discrimination involves treating someone unfavorably because of skin color complexion.” Twenty-six percent of jobseekers identify race discrimination as a barrier to employment. Some jobseekers talk about personal experiences they have had with race discrimination, with statements including: “I am sure my race is the reason I did not get hired in a few places,” and “Barriers? Racism. Big time. The darker the skin, honestly, it’s not right but I see it all the time.”

Some jobseekers offered explanations connecting race discrimination with higher unemployment and worse labor market outcomes for people of color. One jobseeker stated:

“As being black, I don’t want to say it like that, but it’s harder to get the higher paying jobs, whether you have a degree or not, whether you have the training, whether you have the skills, it doesn’t matter – you’ll end up getting the lower-paying jobs or the jobs they give to everybody.”

Several jobseekers shared their perspective on race discrimination, with one jobseeker sharing with the others in the focus group her strategy for thinking about racism:

“But, I -- that’s just a given that I accept, and, you know, I have to impress the employer with my skills and my experience, and hope, you know, that someone just doesn’t, you know, check me off, you know not employable because of my race. It’s something that’s not, you know -- people don’t talk about it. It’s like the elephant in the room, but you have no -- you know, it’s not blatant, you know, so there’ll be no way to really address it. And most employers say they’re equal-opportunity employers, so.”

Discrimination, Because of Age

Thirteen older workers, those aged 45 and over, participated in focus group interviews. Older workers identified a handful of barriers including disability and education and training. But, according to older workers, age discrimination leads all other barriers. In fact, of the 13 older jobseekers, just over half believed their age is the primary barrier to employment.

As summarized by one older jobseeker, many older workers find themselves unemployed for the first time in a long time and face a number of obstacles and emotions:

"I'm new to being unemployed. I've worked for the same company for over 41 years, so I was kind of shocked to be in a group of people -- I mean, it wasn't just me, like 20-some people, that got let go, and when we asked, while we were told we were laid off, and we said, well -- and they took us individually, so I said, well, does that mean we're going to get called back? And they said: "doubtful." So I didn't think that -- I have a degree, and I have quite a bit of skills, so I didn't think I would be 60 years old, and going out and trying to find a job, you know. You know, I might think that I might not have as good a job, but I didn't think I would be in this position, so it's kind of new to me, so I don't really know yet. I know age is going to be a big factor; I've been talking to other people that have all been in this situation. They told me: "oh yeah, you get past 40, forget it," you know. And when I say I have 40-some years of experience at one company, they're going to know I'm not 20. So I know that's going to be a negative. I've seen a lot of part-time jobs with no benefits. And I can take less money. I know I'm not going to get a job with the same money I had after that many years, but I can't do a part-time job with no health insurance. I've got to have health insurance, so that's kind of where I'm coming from."

Other older workers share similar stories, sometimes with advice for other participants, like one jobseeker who instructed other in the focus group:

"A lot of times they [employers] do look at ages -- it's like, 'ok, you're older, why should we hire you instead of the young ones?' I used to tell people I have old school ethics. When you go to work, you go to work. That's what you're supposed to do, and I will get the job done. That's the attitude because that's what we grew up with."

As is the case with other forms of discrimination, the EEOC is the agency responsible for enforcing the protections in the area of employment. According to the EEOC, The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) “only forbids age discrimination against people who are age 40 or older.”³² Despite these protections, no jobseekers complaining of age discrimination nor other focus group participants mentioned any legal protections. In fact, aside from comments like “that’s not right” and related sentiments, no participants seemed to question the legality of some of the actions taken against jobseekers because of their age. This was a surprising observation based on my own perceptions that knowledge of anti-discrimination legislation was ubiquitous.

While 42 percent of jobseekers see discrimination as one of *their* barriers to employment, just 30 percent of key informants specifically state that discrimination is a barrier to employment for today’s jobseekers. However, all key informants that did list discrimination as a barrier to employment talked about how discrimination extends well beyond discrimination because of race, age, and sex, each drawing attention to other characteristics like disability, criminal background, and TANF participation. Discussing age discrimination, one administrator described an approach to working with older workers who may face discrimination:

“If I walk through the door, and my hair is silver, and there’s preconceived notions, I’m at a disadvantage. So, how do I market myself in today’s job market -- with interviewing with someone who’s half my age, who looks like my grandson? And how do we help them market themselves, and speak their [the employer’s] language?”

³² In fact, workers under the age of 40 are not protected by the Age Discrimination and Employment Act (ADEA). However, in Michigan, the Elliott-Larson Civil Rights Act does protect employees discriminated against because of their youth. See, Zanni v Medaphis Physician Services Corp, 240 Mich App 472 (2000).

The finding that discrimination topped the list of barriers identified by jobseekers but was cited by just three of ten key informants is problematic. If jobseekers are correct, and discrimination is a primary barrier to employment, the workforce development system may be missing an opportunity to advocate for policies and procedures to better police and enforce existing equal employment opportunity programs. Based on the findings in this dissertation, the evidence may support the jobseeker claim that discrimination is a barrier to employment. However, if jobseekers are unaware of these statutes and their protections, or if they lack confidence in the workforce development system to advocate on their behalf, the system is missing an opportunity to reduce a barrier to employment.

Transportation

Twenty-three percent of jobseekers identified transportation as a barrier to employment. Transportation surfaced as a complicated issue, with jobseekers explaining that the challenges for those without their own vehicle include access to reliable transportation, the time it takes to commute on public transportation, and the cost for taking public or for-hire transportation. And, for some, there are other factors, like embarrassment. But, all jobseekers who listed transportation as a barrier acknowledged it is necessary to find, and to keep jobs. One jobseeker noted: “There are a lot of jobs out in the suburban area and there is no way to get to these jobs.”

But, the barrier is not limited to *getting* to work, as one jobseeker noted: “Sometimes you can get *there* but you cannot get *back* home. You would have to pay somebody and that’s just too much money and you start losing again.” Another jobseeker added: “The hard part is

always getting into work. If you need to get the bus you need to leave 1 and a half hours earlier, because you need to take not 1 bus but 2 or 3 sometimes.”

Another common complaint is the cost of taking public transportation:

“At the beginning of a job it’s a problem. Grand Rapids has a great bus system if it’s not in the outskirts of town. If it is, you got to walk. But the buses are almost \$2 every day and you don’t have any money to begin with, so how am I going to come up with \$10 in the first week just to ride the bus?”

Costs are even higher for those taking for-hire transportation like a taxi or an Uber, with jobseekers, especially in rural communities, noting it is too expensive to use regularly.

Another perspective was expressed by a younger jobseeker, who shared his embarrassment over riding the bus. In the exchange below, two older, female jobseekers help him with his concern:

[Youth]: “At my age, me being 21, I have been kind of embarrassed by seeing people I went to school with in nice cars -- to see me at the bus stop. I feel like my time will be here someday.”

[Older Worker 1]: “I don’t want you to be embarrassed. Look how old I am, I’m on the bus.”

[Older Worker 2]: “I am not embarrassed to be on the bus, I am grateful. I went back to school and I took the bus. I had a car then I didn’t have a car, and I made it work. So don’t be embarrassed. A lot of people now are married, have kids, and have only one car.”

As with all barriers, jobseekers shared their solutions for overcoming the common hurdles with transportation. One jobseeker instructed fellow participants that they should never admit to not having reliable transportation:

[Jobseeker 1]: “Yeah, that’s a limitation, it’s like I always take the bus, or whatever. And I always say yes, yes, yes, I can get there, and I get there. But sometimes, I’ve got to walk a little ways, because all my jobs were out by the airport and it’s like, the number

five goes out there, and it's got a skip zone, and then I transferred to second shift, and I can't -- I'm Uber'ing it."

[Jobseeker 2]: "I've also walked on Broadmoor headed in that direction, in the rain, not realizing that that grass holds about that much water [measuring several inches using his hands], only to arrive at my destination with not only my feet being soaking wet, but my pants up to my ankles. However, I didn't let that stop me."

Another jobseeker shared her experience with transportation services provided by

Michigan Works!. She explained:

"I don't have a car, or a vehicle, so it's hard for me to -- I'm using what they call the Go Bus, I think it's through Michigan Works and DHS, and they come and pick me up, take me here, go over to where my volunteer/community services is. But for a job, they'd have to keep coming every day, which they do now, but I'm having a hard time."

Eighty percent of key informants mentioned transportation as a barrier facing today's jobseekers. One administrator cited transportation as "one of the largest [barriers]" and described an instance when a large employment area had limited public transportation:

"We ran into an issue with some of the industrial parks not having public transportation. We even reach out to them -- Walker Street corridor has over 14,000 employees in it, between [a major retailer], [a manufacturer], and some others, and the nearest bus stop was a mile from that location."

The same administrator echoed some of the same concerns shared by jobseekers. For example, acknowledging the concern jobseekers express over added commuting time when taking public transportation, the administrator added:

"And, if you have children, it results in additional barriers because there's a good chance that your daycare might not be walking distance from your house or walking distance from the employer, which means that you may have to take multiple connecting buses, which adds hours onto your day, not just 15 or 20 minutes."

In fact, administrators at all levels each identify transportation as one of the largest barriers to employment facing jobseekers today.

As expected, transportation was one of the area where jobseekers and key informants agreed on the barrier and its consequences. Key informants at the state, federal, and local administrators and staff all recognize the barrier. This was expected and confirms what was described in the literature: that transportation is among the most commonly cited barriers to employment.

Child Care

Twenty-three percent of jobseekers identified child care as a barrier to employment. When discussing the barrier, three major issues are described. They include the cost of child care, the time and transportation required to take children to child care, and the quality of child care.

Discussing the cost of child care, one jobseeker observed:

[Displaced Homemaker]: “For three kids full-time, it’s like 600 and something dollars a week, with no assistance, that’s how much it costs. For three kids -- full-time, like in the summer, you know, when they’re not in school.”

[Moderator]: “The economics just don’t make sense?”

[Displaced Homemaker]: “Right. You can’t make that much money, especially start out jobs.”

Others point out there is little choice: “I can’t afford \$200 a week for child care. But I don’t have an option. I either pay \$200 a week for child care or I don’t have a job. What do I do?”

Other jobseekers share anecdotes about their kids being mistreated at an “affordable” day care:

“I was paying an affordable price -- I found out her boyfriend was messing with my kids. It’s really hard to find an affordable daycare, and once you find it there is weird stuff going on. Sexual abuse? You just don’t know. Because -- Because I don’t think it’s administrated well. And these prices are just outrageous. They are trying to get rich off of it.”

Others describe the transportation challenges related to child care, often adding significant time to morning and afternoon commutes. And, child care can be an especially difficult barrier when children are very young or have special needs. One jobseeker, tending to her baby girl who was with her during the focus group, explained:

“I was a branch manager for about 4 and a half years and I went out on maternity leave, I had my baby. She has special needs and I am unemployed because of her. I need to be with her.”

As confirmed by jobseekers, child care is a complicated problem, and one that is among the leading barriers to employment listed by participants.

Key informants agree, with 70 percent identifying child care as a barrier facing jobseekers. As one key informant explained, child care can also be a barrier for employers: “Child care [is a barrier]. And it is a barrier to families and it's a barrier to employers, because if their workers don't have adequate, safe childcare, and affordable childcare, it's not going to work.”

Child care was a second area where the perceptions of jobseekers and key informant were in line. It was also described in the literature as a leading barrier to employment, and one that affects many jobseekers.

Education / Training / Skills

Just 13 percent of jobseekers listed education / training as a barrier to employment. Most of those identifying education and training believe basic skills training is what holds them back. As noted by one jobseeker: “I don’t know Microsoft Word, Excel, or PowerPoint. I have been [to Michigan Works!] at least 2 or 3 times a week and I could be applying to 20 jobs if I knew these computer programs.”

In contrast, a handful of jobseekers, particularly those who have been out of the labor market for a while, identify specific training as what is needed. This was surprising, considering workers who had been out of the job market for a while may want basic, general skills training to combat skills depreciation (Nichols, 2013). One jobseeker, who was looking to return to a computer occupation, was investing in specific training: “I’ve recently taken a project management course and I’m studying to get that certification, so I’m hoping that will close the gap a little bit.”

Other jobseekers noted that a lack of general skills could start to show during the application process. One jobseeker vented: “It has been 11 years since I interviewed, I never acquired any computer skills, and so sometimes even job searching is difficult when I can’t navigate on a computer.”

Even motivated jobseekers who want to pursue education and training have obstacles: “You can’t get an education because you don’t have the time or the money to do it.” Another jobseeker added: “You can’t make enough with the wage they offer to go back to school. There’s no money. It’s all bills. I can’t go back to school for what I want to do because I don’t make enough money.” And, family responsibilities are a cited obstacle for others: “You got to take care of your family -- so you might not have time to go back to school at night.”

Whether it is general skills training or specific skills training, more than the 13 percent of jobseekers who identified education and training as a barrier to employment are interested in opportunities. One jobseeker best summarized the changing labor market when he compared job requirements in the past with what is needed today:

“When I came out of high school, you could get a job or jump from job to job because there were jobs back then. But now it’s a totally different game. You absolutely have to have some kind of education.”

This statement received support from other focus group participants. This also ties back to the observation in Chapter 5 that jobseekers see a difference in the *types* of jobs available today.

While 13 percent of jobseekers identified education and training as a barrier to employment, 80 percent of key informants believed education and training was a barrier facing today’s jobseekers. While some difference in the perceptions of education and training as a barrier to employment was expected, the sharp contrast between jobseekers and key informants was surprising. Not surprising, however, was how key informants talked about education and training.

Administrators and staff recognized the value in both general skills and specific skills.

One administrator described the challenges of some jobseekers:

“Some of those individuals we’re working with that are structurally unemployed or underemployed, or maybe aren’t even interested in working -- and so, we have to work with them to get them the skills they need, whether basic skills, soft skills, or hard skills to be successful.”

When asked whether employers are willing to provide the training jobseekers need to be successful, a state staff member suggested:

“I think they’re not very likely to do what we would call soft-skills or employability skills. I mean, we hear repeatedly from employers ‘just give me somebody with the basic skills that knows how to show up on time, that is going to be dressed appropriately, act appropriately. I’ll take that any day. I can train them on the specifics of the job, but they have to come with those basic employability skills.’”

However, she noted that: “They *are* willing to do the more occupationally specific training that might be tied to, say, that you can learn on the job, or with some limited supervision.” Generally, administrators and staff agreed with this distinction. With some of the most support coming from apprenticeship models of on-the-job training for workers.

The different perceptions of the role education and training play in the labor market are concerning. Assuming key informants are correct and education and training is among the most important barriers to employment, then many unemployed jobseekers may be overlooking an important opportunity to find work. And, the evidence points in favor of key informants. The correlation between education and labor market success is well-documented in the economic literature (Riddell and Song, 2011; Becker, 1964), in the sociological literature (Hodson, 2012), and in official labor statistics (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

There are more differences when considering the *type* of education and training jobseekers and key informants believe is necessary to be successful in the labor market. For instance, job seekers would like to see more “basic skills training” while key informants favor the apprenticeship model, essentially on-the-job, employer-provided specific skills training. This distinction is important. In the case of basic skills training, human capital theorists, like Becker (1964), suggest that employers are unwilling to invest in these skills. In contrast, they may find more support for specific, employer specific skills training. However, if the basic training was provided by the *workforce development system*, the costs would not be borne directly by employers. This is consistent with what key informants report hearing from employers:

“... we hear repeatedly from employers ‘just give me somebody with the basic skills that knows how to show up on time, that is going to be dressed appropriately, act

appropriately. I'll take that any day. I can train them on the specifics of the job, but they have to come with those basic employability skills.'"

Moreover, providing basic training especially designed for particular groups, like homemakers, single parents, or older workers may target individuals with barriers to employment, supporting a central purpose of the Act. Some jobseekers described this training as "ongoing" training for dislocated workers looking for general skills while others referred to it as "catch-up" training for people who have been out of the workforce for a while. One example is, "a program for moms to keep them in the workforce, or to keep them current, or to keep them relevant," a displaced homemaker shared. Other examples of targeted, basic skills training include basic computer skills training for older workers (some who acknowledge problems with technology and computers); basic interview skills training for all jobseekers, but particularly for ex-offenders and youth (some who express challenges talking to employers about their background or their lack of experience); and job search classes for all jobseekers who would like to learn more about finding and applying for good jobs.

Long-Term Unemployment / Work Gap

Thirteen percent of jobseekers list long-term unemployment or "work gap" as a barrier to employment. Paradoxically, only two of the nine jobseekers categorized³³ as long-term unemployed listed their long-term unemployment as a barrier. However, most jobseekers acknowledged the longer one remains out of work the more difficult it is to get back to work. A

³³ That is, of the nine jobseekers who indicated they were out of work for 27 or more week, just two listed long-term unemployment, work gap, or similar barriers to employment.

few jobseekers shared their stories, like one jobseeker, who reported being out of work for longer than 27 weeks:

“Every time I apply for a job, I go on interviews, but I don’t seem to be able to get the job. I don’t know if I’m just not the right fit anymore. You know, and as time goes by, I wonder, you know, do people want me back, because I’ve, you know, been out of that skillset for going on two years now. So -- well more than two years, going on three years now. So it seems like it’s getting harder and harder.”

Stories like this were expected from the long-term unemployed. In fact, these stories are evidence of the lower reemployment outcomes (Krueger et. al., 2014) and skills depreciation (Nichols, 2013) discussed in Chapter 2.

Some jobseekers were critical of the long-term unemployed, demonstrated by one participant who said: “More than 26 weeks, you’ve definitely got an attitude problem.” Other more sympathetic participants offered advice:

“There’s a study that shows if they look at your resume and you haven’t done anything in the past 6 months, there are more likely to avoid you. “What have you been doing? Sitting around for 6 months?” I don’t want to hire somebody that has no motivation. “Did you take classes? Did you do anything?” So, don’t just put nothing in your resume.”

This jobseeker was acting as a great coach for a fellow jobseeker. While citing a study on the duration of unemployment *may* seem uncharacteristic of a jobseeker, her advice resembled the type of coaching jobseekers get from local staff at their welcome sessions and while working one-on-one with career advisors and career coaches at American Job Centers.

Six in ten key informants believed that long-term unemployment can be a barrier to employment, with most recognizing a “stigma” associated with longer periods of joblessness. When discussing long-term unemployment, one state staff member stated:

“I think a lot of it comes down to their skills. I think they’re going to have skills that are more out-of-date, or again, be people that don’t have a good work history that they can put on their resume. But we definitely see, I mean, in data, the longer someone is unemployed, the less likely the employer is really going to look at them, and look at their resume, and really take seriously their skills, because they think, ‘OK, you haven’t worked in two years, this industry has changed. So, you can’t possibly have the current skills that I need.’”

This ties back to the discussion of education and training and the type of training required to be successful in the labor market. In this case, the state staff seems to be talking about jobseekers lacking specific skills. As noted above, classic human capital theory would suggest employers would be more willing to invest in firm specific skills. However, those citing long-term joblessness as a barrier to employment suggest *both* general and specific skills are needed to be successful in the labor market.

Key informants and jobseekers break from one another regarding their perceptions of long-term unemployment as a barrier. Key informants, especially administrators and staff, recognize the scars of long-term joblessness, while far fewer jobseekers do.

Disability

Thirteen percent of participants listed disability as a barrier to employment. During focus groups and follow-up interviews, the most common disabilities were physical disabilities or injuries. However, mental health, substance abuse (specifically alcoholism), and learning disabilities were all discussed. As one local staff explains, individuals with disabilities are looking for work:

“We do have a lot -- a few customers who have physical disabilities that have come in pretty regularly, and I think that, from what I’ve seen, their physical disability, to them is not a limitation, because they want to keep moving, and keep doing what they need to do, and be a contributing member to society.”

Mental illness is another category of disability. A different local staff explained:

“I’ve worked in this field long enough to know when someone is -- has maybe a false sense of reality, of, you know: “oh, I can work.” You know, and then they get the job, and they lose it right away because of an untreated, you know, illness. And so, we -- we do see a lot of people who -- I mean, I don’t want to make an assumption, but who may have had struggles with mental illness and substance abuse, who are chronically unemployed, and long-term unemployed.”

Some jobseekers argued that discrimination begins even before an employment relationship is formed. In a follow-up interview, one jobseeker, expanding on a story she told during a focus group interview, claimed that an employer, after seeing her arrive for an interview in a back brace, asked her to reapply to the company after her back got better. When she was asked what she did, she responded: “Well, I went home.”

Sixty percent of key informants believe disability is a barrier to employment facing today’s jobseekers. One local staff described an approach to working with individuals with disabilities:

“So, let’s say it might be they have a lower reading or writing level, their comprehension is not all the way there. So we assist with that, just kind of pointing out other resources throughout the community that they have. So I like to say if it’s not something that I can *directly* help you with or Michigan Works! can *directly* help you with, I don’t want to just leave you hanging and say, well: “that sucks.” Let’s look at some other resources outside in the community. Because Michigan Works! can only do so much.”

She went on to discuss how the WIOA calls for closer collaboration between workforce development agencies and Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS). This point was also made by federal, state, and local administrators, with all believing this collaboration is an improvement over the Workforce Investment Act.

Housing and Homelessness

Thirteen percent of jobseekers identified housing and homelessness as a barrier to employment. Only two jobseekers confirmed they are currently homeless. One indicated he was staying at a local men's shelter at Mel Trotter Ministries in Grand Rapids. He shared his story, which demonstrates the coincidence of homelessness and substance abuse:

[Homeless Individual]: "I'm a binge drinker. And I made myself homeless this time. I got an assault and battery, it was more drunken and disorderly. I'm currently taking care of the drinking problem, been sober a few months now –

[Moderator]: [overlapping dialogue] Congratulations!

[Homeless Individual]: I'm living at Mel Trotter. That's a joy in itself, let me tell you [said sincerely]. It's places I've never been before. It's like, you know, I can't blame anybody but me, you know?"

It was surprising to have not one but two homeless individuals participate in focus group interviews. While homelessness is a commonly cited barrier to employment, I was initially concerned that I would be unsuccessful recruiting homeless individuals for focus groups (recall, a category of individual with a barrier to employment under WIOA). It was also remarkable that the homeless individual cited above demonstrated outstanding communication skills and came across as an exceptionally confident jobseeker.

Other jobseeker listed housing as a barrier to employment for a number of reasons, including the cost of housing and child care. One jobseeker represented several others when she said: "I would never be able to survive in a house by myself." Another rural jobseeker shared:

"I'm worried -- I'm worried once I lose my housing, because I'm on a two-year program, that I won't be able to afford rent with my current job with my expenses. And I don't really have a lot of extra expenses. It's all basics."

Another reason some jobseekers identified housing as a barrier to employment is because they are living with their parents. While this was especially true for youth, it was also seen with at least two older jobseekers who had returned to live with elderly parents.

Forty percent of key informants mentioned housing and homelessness as a barrier facing jobseekers today. One administrator described the connection between housing and transportation: “Housing, and the high cost of housing, can be an issue for some of our residents and where they can live, which presents a problem for transportation.” Likewise, another administrator discusses housing in the context of ex-offenders or “returning citizens”:

“Talking about housing, look at our returning citizens. They got one big barrier right there. They don’t even have a driver’s license, how are employers are going to look at them? How do they actually address that? When they go back to the community they lived in, are they going to go back to what they are used to or are we going to help them finding housing? Housing is a huge barrier for returning citizens.”

Housing and homelessness is an area where jobseekers and key informants were in line with one another, particularly with their perceptions of the causes and consequences of the barrier.

Temporary Employment Agencies

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Temporary Help Services industry (which includes temporary employment agencies) is made up of employers “primarily engaged in supplying workers to clients' businesses for limited periods of time to supplement the working force of the client. The individuals provided are employees of the temporary help service establishment. However, these establishments do not provide direct supervision of their employees at the clients' work sites” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

Six percent of jobseekers identified temporary employment agencies as a barrier to employment. Importantly, while only six percent listed the barrier, practically all jobseekers

expressed concern with the agencies and their practices. Surprisingly, this was discussed at four of the seven focus groups, with some jobseekers becoming very agitated with temporary employment agencies. Jobseekers cite being “treated poorly” and “thrown away” by these agencies. Both assertions seem to relate to the temporary nature of assignments, with jobseekers noting that when work assignments are done, or when work slows, they are simply sent home. This is consistent with sociological interpretations of temporary and contingent work arrangements as “marginal,” discussed below. Moreover, some jobseekers believe these agencies may actually have an incentive to keep them in temporary jobs. One jobseeker explained:

“The services sometimes let you go in 80 days and they say: ‘Well, they don’t need anyone anymore.’ So, we have to start all over at a new place. Once they lose you to that employer, they won’t make any money so they don’t want you to get hired.”

No key informants identified temporary employment agencies as a barrier to employment. While administrators and staff recognize the role of part-time and temporary employment in the labor market, some even acknowledging the increased incidents of temporary employment agencies and temporary work arrangements, none saw these agencies as contributing to the hardship faced by jobseekers. Therefore, jobseekers and key informants have different perceptions of the temporary employment agency as a barrier to employment. This was an interesting finding and one that I did not expect would rise to the top of jobseekers’ lists of barriers.

As noted above, temporary and contingent work arrangements are a continuing trend in the workforce, and temporary employment agencies are in the middle of it. Temporary or contingent work is sometimes classified as “marginal work” because its temporary, unstable

nature. As Hodson (2008: 339) explains, temporary workers are considered marginal, “to the extent that their work is involuntarily intermittent and their pay and hours of work are substantially below what they might obtain in a more conventional, permanent job” (Hodson, 2008: 339; Lichtenstein, 2011). This matches jobseekers’ concerns regarding temporary employment agencies, with the most common grievances being low pay, lack of benefits, and poor treatment. Other jobseekers focused on their perceived exploitation, discussed more in Chapter 8.

An important connection to our discussion of discrimination is the argument by George Gonos (2004) that “the traditional employer-employee relationship is severed by the temporary employment firm” (Gonos, 2004; Lichtenstein, 2011). This may be responsible for jobseekers being unaware of their legal protections, particularly if they are never referred to as “employees,” but instead always as “temps.” This is an area requiring more investigation, but, in the scope of this dissertation, is a remarkably interesting finding and one revisited in Chapter 9.

Attitude and Motivation

Two jobseekers believed that one of the largest barriers to employment was a jobseeker’s attitude and motivation. They noted: “I think [the labor market] has improved. I just think some people sometimes don’t want to work and make excuses about it” and “I feel that some people just don’t want to work.” Statements like these are rare among focus group participants (and, incidentally, also among key informants), but mentions of attitude and motivation are present in each of the seven focus group interviews, even if just in passing.

Two key informants believed that attitude and motivation are barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers. When discussing motivation, one key informant talks about trying to motivate employees:

"It really boils down to a motivation issue. To get the knowledge and develop the skills that employers need -- if they aren't motivated, I certainly can try to do things that will help to motivate them to want to do that, but that takes time, takes effort. There's a lot of uncertainties when you try to do those things so that makes it challenging."

Other key informants discussed motivation and attitude when describing jobseekers as customers, but do not necessarily identify it as a barrier to employment.

Summary

This section identified actual barriers to employment faced by jobseekers and discussed by key informants. Jobseekers and key informants listed 24 unique barriers to employment. Mostly consistent with the literature, commonly identified barriers included discrimination, transportation, child care, disability, and education and training. Importantly, this chapter identified a problematic theme: jobseekers identify discrimination as the leading barrier to employment while key informants identify education and training. Discussed in Chapter 9, this difference in jobseeker and key informant perceptions of the barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers was unexpected and represents an important opportunity for the workforce development system as the WIOA is implemented.

Chapter Summary

This chapter showed that participants (81 percent of jobseekers and 90 percent of key informants) agreed that jobseekers today face one or more, often significant, barriers to

employment. Investigating this further, participants identified nine of the 13 categories of “individuals with barriers to employment” defined in the WIOA. This suggests alignment between the Act’s focus on individuals with barriers to employment and the barriers to employment identified by participants. Moreover, 24 actual barriers to employment were identified by participants, mostly drawing agreement between jobseekers and key informants. The notable differences between the two groups were the role of education and training (topping the list for key informants) and that of discrimination (leading the barriers identified by jobseekers) and of temporary employment agencies (cited by several jobseekers but no key informants).

CHAPTER SEVEN: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES UNDER THE WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT

Introduction

Most participants believe there are continuing, structural problems in the labor market that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including individuals with barriers to employment. To support implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in a manner consistent with its focus on individuals with barriers to employment, it is important to describe and explain the various perceptions of the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in today's labor market. Accordingly, the dissertation's third research question asks what jobseekers and key informants believe are the education, training, and support services necessary to be successful in the labor market.

Investigating this research question, I learn that most participants have ideas about the "education, training, and support services" needed to be successful in the labor market, with jobseekers concentrating on support services and key informants focusing education and training, as well as policy. Investigating this finding further, a few themes emerge from participant perceptions of what was needed to help jobseekers be successful:

1. Jobseekers focus on employment law and support services and key informants concentrate on education and training and workforce development policy.
2. Jobseekers perceptions of current employment laws are concerning, with many jobseekers believing discrimination is permissible under the at-will employment doctrine and misunderstanding protections for other individuals, like ex-offenders and individuals with disabilities.

3. Areas of overlap included Michigan Works! sponsored general training, targeting individuals with barriers to employment, and specific, employer sponsored training, like apprenticeships.

Jobseekers and key informants were asked what ideas they had about the “education, training, and support services” today’s jobseekers need to be successful in the labor market. This section provides an overview of the more common ideas presented by jobseekers and key informants. First, jobseekers’ ideas include: challenging the employment-at-will doctrine, advocating for “ban the box” legislation, more targeted, general skills training, financial assistance for support services, increased flexibility from employers, and more information about job openings. Next, key informants’ ideas are presented, including: taking advantage of increased innovation and flexibility allowed under WIOA, focus on poverty reduction and general skills training, increased attention on employer-sponsored apprenticeships, and increased engagement with diverse populations of jobseekers.

Jobseekers Discuss Ideas for “Education, Training, and Support Services”

When asked what education, training, and support services they needed to be successful in the labor market, jobseekers share ideas ranging from easy solutions to the barriers discussed during the focus group interviews to grandiose policy prescriptions. However, most ideas, big or small, were directly related to what jobseekers identified as their barriers to employment. Outlined below are some of the themes that emerged from jobseekers discussing what they needed to be successful during the seven focus group interviews.

Employment-at-Will

One of the most talked about solutions to the common barriers to employment (discrimination, disability, criminal background), was “reversing” the so called employment-at-will doctrine.

The first time this came up at the first focus group, it was surprising. When it came up at *every* focus group thereafter, it was highly suspicious. Why did so many jobseekers think doing away with the “employment-at-will” doctrine or “at-will employment” was a top priority for being successful in the labor market? According to Black’s Law Dictionary, employment-at-will is: “Employment that is usually undertaken without a contract and that may be terminated at any time, by either the employer or the employee, without cause” (Garner, 2014: 566). There are, however, major exceptions to the employment-at-will doctrine: the public policy exception; the statutory exception; the contract exception; and the covenant-of-good-faith exception (Muhl, 2001; Rothstein, 2010). The type of discrimination disused by jobseekers is squarely within the statutory exception.³⁴ While jobseekers cannot be expected to know the legal nuances of the doctrine, it was surprising that so many believed employees could be let go for *any* reason, including discriminatory reasons.

Among the jobseekers wanting to put an end to the doctrine, all believed that employment-at-will allows employers to terminate employees for “any reason whatsoever.” One jobseeker explains: “We need more protection for workers because if your boss doesn’t like you or has a problem with you, and I mean for whatever reason, they can terminate you.” Similar statements were made at all seven focus groups and by a diverse mix of jobseekers.

³⁴ A few examples of statutory exceptions include termination because of race, color, sex, religion (see Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) and for engaging in lawful union activities (see National Labor Relations Act).

Moreover, some jobseekers believe Michigan is the *only* employment-at-will state. One jobseeker explains: “I would change at-will employment, because they say it’s just Michigan as the at-will state, as far as if they can fire you for any reason -- I would, you know, definitely recommend that that be changed.” Beyond the employment-at-will doctrine, some jobseekers believed that claims of employment discrimination were no longer investigated or were fruitless because of at-will employment. One jobseeker describes his experiences with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the Michigan Department of Civil Rights (MDCR):

“The EOC [sic], MDCR, do not, or has not, protected employees with complaints or concerns as to the reason why they’ve lost their positions or jobs. I have, on four occasions, initiated a complaint with MDCR in regards to me losing a position because of discrimination, and they completely overlooked the details that I would file, glaze over the investigation, and say well we didn’t find discrimination.”

The recommendation by jobseekers that employment-at-will is prohibited is symptomatic of a larger problem: jobseekers are unaware of the legal framework intended to protect individuals from wrongful discrimination in, among other places, the workplace. The jobseekers participating in focus groups believed either that employment-at-will allowed discrimination or lacked confidence in the structures and institutions that are responsible for enforcing anti-discrimination laws. This was very concerning. Further This was evident in every focus group and most follow-up interviews. Advocating on behalf of jobseekers who believe discrimination is a barrier to employment may be an opportunity for the public workforce development system.

Ban the Box

In a closely related area, jobseekers would like to see employers, “ban the box.” This means jobseekers would like to see removed from job applications any questions about criminal background. Henry and Jacobs (2007: 756) note that “The ‘ban the box’ initiative is a promising and constructive policy innovation that further the goals of the prisoner reentry movement.”

While the reentry movement covers many aspects of returning citizens reentering the community, workforce developers and these jobseekers, are mainly talking about the return to employment, which is one of many challenges facing this population. Importantly, criminologists note that:

“Although the ban the box campaign represents a major step toward regularizing the status of ex-offenders, it also illuminates the magnitude of ex-offender challenges to reentry. By definition, the ban the box movement only reaches those ex-offenders who are job ready and job capable” (Henry and Jacobs, 2007.)

The idea was presented and advocated by ex-offenders and other jobseekers alike. Most jobseekers agree that ex-offenders should not be automatically disqualified from jobs just because their past: “I really like the idea of the job-specific exemptions that would disqualify you, as far as a criminal history.” Another jobseeker expanded:

“It’d be nice if they could directly correlate the offense to the job -- you know, like if you’re stealing, then maybe the bank doesn’t want to hire you, or you know, if you’re a pedophile, maybe the child daycare center doesn’t want to hire you, but that doesn’t mean that the jobs that have nothing to do with what the offense was should have anything to do with that. Maybe you shouldn’t have to -- you know, unless it was directly related, maybe you shouldn’t have to put that down for a job.”

One jobseeker said: “Everybody makes mistakes and just because you have a felony, I don’t think that should be that way – especially if they are over 15 years ago.” Conversations like this

occurred at all focus groups, and involve ex-offenders and others. The show of support by other jobseekers touched one ex-offender so much, he began to wipe the tears while others were advocating for a change in how ex-offenders are treated in the job market and supporting ban the box legislation.

As the agency responsible for enforcing anti-discrimination statutes in the employment area, the EEOC has weighed in on the matter. The EEOC warns employers:

“Federal law does not prohibit employers from asking about your criminal history. But, federal EEO laws do prohibit employers from discriminating when they use criminal history information. Using criminal history information to make employment decisions may violate Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended (Title VII)” (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2012).

According to EEOC enforcement guidelines, the use of criminal history as a screen should be “narrowly tailored to identify criminal conduct with a demonstrably tight nexus to the position in question (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2012). In other words, an employer can use criminal history to screen applicants with crimes of fraud or dishonesty from a bank manager position. Therefore, like with employment-at-will doctrine, protections do exist, they are just not recognized or trusted by the jobseekers. Moreover, programs through the Department of Labor, like “Work Opportunity Tax Credits,” may provide an incentive to employers that hire and train people who fall into several categories including qualified ex-offenders.³⁵

³⁵ According to the Department of Labor, a Qualified Ex-Felon is, “An individual who has been convicted of a felony and has a hiring date which is not more than one year after the last date on which he was convicted or released from prison.”

Targeted Training

Jobseekers want to see Michigan Works! provide basic training designed for particular groups, like displaced homemakers, single parents, and older workers. In their view, trainings should be designed to meet their specific needs. Some jobseekers described this training as “ongoing” training for dislocated workers looking for general skills while others referred to it as “catch-up” training for people who have been out of the workforce for a while. One jobseeker explains her idea for a targeted training program for displaced homemakers:

“A program for moms to keep them in the workforce, or to keep them current, or to keep them relevant, because it’s not as if we weren’t doing anything. And I don’t think that I should have been making a million dollars because I’m doing all these different jobs [referring to being a stay-at-home mom], I don’t think it’s like that either, but I just feel like, I’ve been left behind, you know, having done that.”

Other examples include: basic computer skills training for older workers (some who themselves acknowledge problems with technology and computers); basic interview skills training for all jobseekers, but particularly for ex-offenders and youth (some who express challenges talking to employers about their background or their lack of experience); and job search classes for all jobseekers who would like to learn more about finding and applying for good jobs.

Both jobseekers and key informants see job training as a way to reduce barriers to employment. In the case of general skills training, jobseekers and key informants agree that targeted training is best if it is “targeted.” Jobseekers identify older workers, single parents, and displaced homemakers as candidates for targeted training, while one administrator takes a broader view, suggesting that targeting low-income individuals for general skills training should be one of several tools that may help address poverty and inequality. As discussed above, this

type of general skills training may find lackluster support from employers, so the public workforce development system is a likely sponsor of targeted training.

Financial Assistance for Support Services

Jobseekers like the idea of financial assistance for costly support services like child care and transportation. Most jobseekers describe financial support as tax credits or subsidies.

Reminding the group that paying for child care can be a major disincentive to work for some, one jobseeker notes:

“I’ve heard about tax credits for just people who are paying for childcare, you know, as a write-off on your -- income tax. So I think that would be one solution, because I remember, being a single parent and having to pay for daycare, and it was just, you know, every week you had to put down a substantial amount of money so that you could work.”

Most jobseekers suggest that financial assistance for support services would be available for a limited time only. For example, when newly hired workers are getting settled into employment. They believe this would make a difference and would reduce some of the disincentive associated with taking a job with a lower, entry level wage.

Increased Flexibility from Employers

Most jobseekers expressed concern over trying to balance demanding work schedules with other responsibilities, like caring for children. But, within that group, some jobseekers noted it gets even more complicated when adding education and training to the mix. Jobseekers agreed it is difficult “finding the time” to go back to school or to class, but one jobseeker believes that employers purposefully add to the difficulty:

“The district manager deliberately scheduled me during my classes -- when you have the understanding that companies will work with you while you’re trying to go to school to pursue your education, and further your education.”

Generally, jobseekers agreed that employers should be more flexible when their workers are trying to balance work and other responsibilities, including education and training. When asked how this flexibility could be achieved, one jobseeker believed Michigan Works! could “help show the benefit of going back to school” to employers.

Information about Job Openings

Jobseekers expressed some confusion about where they should be looking for available jobs. When asked about Pure Michigan Talent Connect, part of the state’s official labor exchange service,³⁶ some jobseekers were totally unaware of it. This is best summarized by a conversation at one focus group:

[JOBSEEKER 1]: “If there was a way to increase the amount of opportunity, job opportunities presented to us, that would shorten the length and amount of time of how long we’ve been unemployed.”

[MODERATOR]: “And when you say presented to you, what do you mean?”

[JOBSEEKER 1]: “You know, a way to find jobs. Like Monster.com, Dice.com, Indeed.com --

[MODERATOR]: So, there are things like Talent Connect, which is the job portal that Michigan Works! uses. Is that --

[JOBSEEKER 5] Anybody here using that?

[JOBSEEKER 2]: No.

[JOBSEEKER 3]: What is it called?

³⁶ The Wagner-Peyser Act of 1933 established the Employment Service and later the One-Stop services delivery system. According to the Department of Labor: “The One Stop delivery system provides universal access to an integrated array of labor exchange services so that workers, job seekers and businesses can find the services they need in one stop and frequently under one roof in easy-to-find locations” The labor exchanges services include: “job search assistance, job referral, and placement assistance for job seekers, re-employment services to unemployment insurance claimants, and recruitment services to employers with job openings.”

[JOBSEEKER 5]: No.

[MODERATOR]: Talent Connect. Yeah, it's what's on that screen right there --

[JOBSEEKER 3]: Oh yeah, I'm on there.

[JOBSEEKER 2]: I don't use it.

[JOBSEEKER 5]: I don't use it.

[JOBSEEKER 3]: I haven't found it helpful at all.

[JOBSEEKER 1]: I don't know anything about it.

[JOBSEEKER 3]: I haven't used it since I've started doing this. I've been using Indeed.com.

While this conversation would frustrate key informants, it reflects a theme that emerges from these focus groups: jobseekers do not always have knowledge of or information about the tools or resources available to them. And, many jobseekers indicate they would like more information about job openings.

Key Informants Share Ideas for “Education, Training, and Support Services”

When asked what education, training, and support services today's jobseekers need to be successful in the labor market, key informants honed-in on workforce development legislation and policy as well as on education and training. As noted below, there are areas where federal, state, and local administrators all have similar ideas. Likewise, administrators and staff appear to agree on most of the ideas presented. Discussed below are some of the themes that emerged from key informants sharing what they thought jobseekers needed to be successful during one-on-one interviews.

Increased Innovation and Flexibility

Most key informants are optimistic about the WIOA and its focus on individuals with barriers to employment. Administrators and staff are interested in taking advantage of the innovation and flexibility in the new legislation to serve jobseekers. One state staff member explains:

“I really think that’s the best way to move things forward, is -- I think we have a good structure with the law. But what we need to do is actually utilize all the different opportunities we’re given in the law, but also make a concerted effort to get more diverse customer groups into the system.

However, “more diverse customer groups” means different populations being served with different federal dollars. As such, one administrator explains more flexibility is required:

“We need stronger partnerships, and it starts at the national level. Because if I could braid in my TANF money -- who, a lot of these individuals are receiving some type of public assistance -- my WIOA dollars, my [vocational] rehab dollars, and not have to report three different ways, three different set of rules -- So we spend a lot of time and a lot of resources doing that. So, if we could have a truly streamlined benefits system, where the federal departments are talking to each other, that’s what we need.”

Most key informants believe Michigan is poised to be a national leader in the implementation of the WIOA, with some citing that parts of the Act are based on the “Michigan model.” That is, this key informant believes that parts of the WIOA were modeled after what is already being done in Michigan, particularly as it relates to partnerships. According to this key informant:

“With WIOA, they’re really focusing much -- quite frankly, the Michigan model of, you know, braiding resources of -- how we have worked for decades, they’re trying to make that, force that to happen at the state [federal] level.”

Federal, state, and local administrators agree that increased innovation and flexibility under the WIOA will better serve individuals with barriers to employment. There is substantial

overlap in the ideas of federal, state, and local administrators, which include braided funding, less duplicative reporting, and methodological changes to performance evaluation measures.

Poverty Reduction

Local administrators and staff are interested in programs targeting “generational poverty” and “poverty reduction.” One administrator connects many of the individuals with barriers to employment and low-income individuals and poverty and asks: “The goal for any of those populations is -- how do we lift them out of poverty, how do we get them the skills they need to be successful long term? And how do we make it so their children aren’t living or growing up in poverty or creating the same cycle?”

Part of the answer, according to some key informants, may be with remedial skills training. As one administrator stated: “I would say we probably need more dollars invested in remedial education, particularly for those individuals who aren’t ready for a high school diploma or GED.” The administrator explains:

“We’re working more closely with the literacy centers from that standpoint and some of them are frankly robust and strong and other ones are very small as far as the counties go and the resources are much more limited. It would be how do we get those individuals on a good, clear path to get at least their high school diploma or GED.”

This aligns well with how another administrator describes their thinking around poverty reduction:

“The goal is to lift them out of poverty, how do we get them the skill they need to be successful long term? And how do we make it so their children aren’t living in -- growing up in poverty or creating the same cycle.”

State and local staff agree, citing poverty reduction as a necessary step in reducing barriers to employment for jobseekers.

Apprenticeships

Federal, state, and local key informants support more apprenticeships. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, an apprenticeship is “a combination of on-the-job training and related instruction in which workers learn the practical and theoretical aspects of a highly skilled occupation. Apprenticeship programs can be sponsored by individual employers, joint employer and labor groups, and/or employer associations” (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). At the federal, state, and local level, administrators and staff discussed apprenticeships as a way to provide specific training to jobseekers, while they are receiving a paycheck. One administrator observes: “We’ve got a lot of employers that are able and willing to pay for the training, for apprenticeships -- we’re certainly seeing a trend to more apprenticeships, how do we get more registered apprenticeships?”

Apprenticeships are growing to include more job titles that those traditionally associated with apprenticeship programs. And, many of those occupations are in high demand. An administrator explains some recent efforts around apprenticeships:

“We recently launched a medical assistant apprenticeship program. We’ve been able to get them [jobseekers] interested in that apprenticeship program so we’ve seen a lot more demand for employers to invest in their current labor force and up-skill their labor force or to invest in training up front to get them the skills that they need to get them to finish the training and to hire them once they finish the training.”

The apprenticeship model as described by key informants would provide jobseekers with employment in in-demand occupations, with job training, and with a paycheck.

However, apprenticeship programs will be most successful if participating jobseekers have general skills. In fact, if jobseekers lacking general, basic skills participate in apprenticeship programs and turn-out to be unsuccessful, sponsoring employers may view that as a failure of

the workforce development system and may rethink their partnership. As such, the question remains: What is done with jobseekers who lack the basic, general skills?

Engagement with Diverse Population of Jobseekers

When asked about unemployed jobseekers who are not participating in the workforce development system, a state staff member says: “They may not be engaged with us, but we have not engaged them – that needs to change.” This was an interesting observation and one that was repeated by an administrator. This is strong evidence that the state workforce development agency is aware that there are population being “missed.” This supports one of the underlying themes in this dissertation: the workforce development system only works if it does what it is supposed to do and get jobseekers back to work. If it does not, or if large populations are being “missed,” those populations will rely on other structures and institutions for education, training, and support services.

One key informant explains:

“Whether it’s your white-collar, or your chronically unemployed offenders, is really our commitment to providing the best service and information possible to all these customers, making a concerted effort -- there are a lot of these customers that don’t even engage with the system. That’s part of our job, as part of the system, to figure out how to reach these folks, to make sure that they know about this system, so that they can engage through the system.”

The idea of engaging jobseekers who are not participating in the workforce development system was shared by federal, local, and staff administrators and staff, as well as other key informants.

Interestingly, all administrators believed it was important to focus on diverse populations who may not be participating in the workforce development system. This was

apparent from all administrators, but was strongest at the federal and state level. Among the populations discussed were migrants, refugees, individuals with disabilities, and discouraged workers.

Social Networks

While no jobseekers or key informants discuss improved social networks during focus groups, each of the seven focus groups contained at least one exchange between two or more participants working through a problem or set of problems. In one of the most illustrative exchanges, a quiet, soft-spoken jobseeker cautiously expressed frustration that a Community Mental Health (CMH) “Clubhouse” would not provide a work reference for her, despite her working there for over 12 months. Another jobseeker, having her own experiences with CMH Clubhouses offered her support:

[JOBSEEKER 1]: Clubhouses can’t give you work references?

[JOBSEEKER 2]: No. They help us gain skills but if someone was to call them for references they will say they can’t.

[JOBSEEKER 1]: That is really interesting because I applied for one and they said you do the job, so they know what you are doing, so I don’t understand why they can’t give you a reference. [Visibly agitated] They know more than anyone that you are doing the job! It really doesn’t make sense. Did the director say that to you?

[JOBSEEKER 2]: Yes. The director over the clubhouse.

[JOBSEEKER 1]: What agency was your clubhouse?

[JOBSEEKER 2]: Well, I worked for a while in a foster care home and then I went to [one] and then I started to go to the [another one]. I mean it’s a nice place. They are experts in what they do. They make everything therapeutic. But that’s just one complaint I have. You are trying to make me ready to work but I can’t get a reference. That doesn’t make sense.

[JOBSEEKER 1]: That’s amazing. I would try to talk to the CEO and say: I don’t understand your policy. I thought one of your roles was to make me independent and self-efficient. If you don’t give me a reference but you are making me work for a year for you, so what’s the point? I might as well be volunteering and making money. It seems to me that they are sabotaging you.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I show that most participants have ideas about the “education, training, and support services” needed to be successful in the labor market. Key informants concentrated on education and training, and on workforce development policy, and jobseekers focused on changes to employment law and on support services. This confirms that, just as jobseekers and key informants have different perceptions of barriers to employment, they also have different ideas about education, training, and support services. Digging deeper, I find that jobseekers want to do away with the “employment-at-will” doctrine and support “ban the box” legislation, both ideas that many jobseekers believe will help remedy the discrimination they see in the labor market. In addition, jobseekers support financial assistance for costly support services, like transportation and child care, and general skills training, like software training and interview skills. Key informants focus on education and training and workforce development policy. Education and training examples include supporting apprenticeship programs and targeting low-income individuals with general skills training. Workforce development policy includes taking advantage of increased flexibility and innovation allowed under the WIOA and increased engagement with jobseekers from diverse populations.

CHAPTER EIGHT: GIVING VOICE AND SHOWING VALUE TO SYSTEM STAKEHOLDERS

Introduction

Discussed throughout this dissertation, jobseekers offer many valuable insights about the labor market, barriers to employment, and education, training, and support services. Behind those insights there are a lot of experiences and ideas that jobseekers rarely get an opportunity to share with other stakeholders in the workforce development system. This dissertation attempted to provide a voice to jobseekers; a voice directly to the key informants to think about when developing policies and programs and implementing the WIOA. Accordingly, the dissertation's final research question asks: "What do jobseekers want other stakeholders in the public workforce development system to know or to understand when designing workforce development policies and programs?"

Investigating this research question through data collected by methods inspired by participant action research, I learn that many jobseekers have strong opinions about their joblessness. And, most jump at the opportunity to share those opinions with others in the workforce development system. Investigating this finding further, a few themes emerge:

1. Jobseekers want others in the workforce development system to know that they want to work, that they are not lazy, and, that sometimes, it's easy to lose hope and give-up.
2. Program participants want others in the workforce development system to know that they are often mistreated, even exploited.

This brief chapter provides an overview of these themes. The chapter intends to "uncover information" that jobseekers may not ordinarily share with key informants, and to "empower"

the average jobseeker by giving them an opportunity to speak to those key informants through this dissertation (Berg, 2007).

Common Themes in the Voice of the Jobseekers

When jobseekers are asked what they would like others in the workforce development system to know or understand, several common themes emerge from the focus groups and follow-up interviews. First, jobseekers want others to know that they want to work, they are not lazy, and, sometimes, it's easy to lose hope and give-up. Next, jobseekers want others, particularly administrators, to know that they are often mistreated, even exploited.

In each focus group, jobseekers follow a progression: first, expressing their desire to work; next citing various barriers, including mistreatment and exploitation; and finally suggesting that it is easy to lose hope. That is, what starts as a hurried statement by frustrated jobseekers ends-up being one of the more emotional segments of the focus group. The emotion is understandable. All the jobseekers I talked to want to work. Among the groups expressing the most frustration are those who have been looking for work for 27 or more weeks and individuals with barriers to employment, particularly individuals with disabilities, ex-offenders, and single parents.

It is clear from nearly all jobseekers that they and their families are experiencing the personal or psychological costs associated with unemployment discussed in Chapter 2. Beyond feeling frustrated, I heard jobseekers talk about feeling anxious, depressed, hopeless, embarrassed, ashamed, disrespected, useless, and angry. These feelings are consistent with

what Brand (2015) calls “noneconomic effects,” which include social-psychological effects and negative impacts on physical well-being.

“We want to work, we are not lazy . . .”

Jobseekers want other stakeholders to know that they are not lazy and that they want to work.

While most jobseekers express a desire to work, many acknowledge that there are lazy jobseekers out there. According to one jobseeker:

“Lazy people -- They want to work but when they get the opportunity they just, I don’t want to go or I don’t feel like waking up or I don’t feel like they pay enough for what I do or it’s too far to drive to go.”

Another jobseeker added:

“There’s a difference between being lazy and gave-up. The gave up ones you can address, those are people who need hope. The lazy people could have hope but they are still lazy. You can focus on them, spend a lot of money on them, and it doesn’t help. Sometimes it’s just best to write them off, what can you do? The lazy one: he gets a job and calls sick in the first week. He’s not going to go anywhere.”

Jobseekers do not want other stakeholders to mistake their frustration with giving-up or laziness. And, jobseekers *do* feel frustrated: “I applied for a position once and there were other 8,000 applicants. It’s a waste of my time, a lottery ticket basically.” And, jobseekers do feel laughed at:

“I went to the interview and I know I was nice looking and everything and every question he asked me I promptly responded. He said: I am going to call you. I have been waiting. I didn’t see any black people employed there. I was probably the first one even interviewing with them. You will leave thinking that you got the job because you aced the interview and all the time he was back laughing at you.”

However, jobseeker said that sometimes they do feel like giving-up: “It’s really hard. It gets to a point where you just lose hope. What am I doing all of this for?”

More than anything, jobseekers want to ask for a chance: “Everybody was new to a job once -- so just give them the opportunity to get the skills so they can be just as good as these people are. Everybody has to start somewhere.” And, they want some time to get there:

“Give me a chance longer than 60 or 90 days to determine what I can offer the company. I am a very visual person and I learn better that way, opposed from reading or hearing a PowerPoint. I have to see it in order to be able to do a lot of things. If I can see it I can do it.”

Some jobseekers believe that they are judged by others who think they are “lazy” or that they do not want to work. Further, jobseekers, especially those with barriers to employment, are having a difficult time finding work, causing even more frustration. Over time, this frustration leads jobseekers to feel like giving up. And, as I learned from two of the four jobseekers who are not participating in the workforce development system, giving-up on the system does happen.

“We are mistreated, exploited . . .”

Jobseekers want other stakeholders to know that they are mistreated by some employers, often exploited. In fact, virtually all jobseekers in every focus group have a story to tell about themselves, or someone they know, being mistreated, even exploited, on the job. The stories range from examples of bad bosses and bad work cultures to unlawful violations of employment law. A common anecdote involves employers not treating their workers right. One jobseeker explained:

“I mean, they don’t treat you right! I make decent money for not having a degree, it’ like \$15 -- but they don’t treat me right. I’d rather be where I make \$8 because the way the talk to me.”

Other more detailed stories involve temporary employment agencies, ex-offenders, and individuals with disabilities. First, jobseekers believe temporary employment agencies make too much profit off their work. One jobseeker, a welder, describes how he watched his wage fall because of these agencies:

“Most employers feel that they pay a temp service a dollar amount per head, so for example -- just say \$5 a head, so he pays an employee starting up to \$10 plus \$5 a head to the temp services. So, that’s \$15 that you’re paying for these employees. Here’s the thing, my salary should be, like, \$17. They are paying me \$10 and the temp service \$5. Most of the time the employers feel like it is cheaper for the company to continue to pay \$5 a head as opposed to hire you and pay benefits, medical, 401k and all extra stuff that they are required to offer.”

Statements like this are directly related to the earlier discussion of temporary employment agencies, their role in the labor market, and jobseeker perceptions of the agencies. As noted above, some jobseekers consider these agencies themselves a barrier to employment.

Among the groups reporting the most exploitation were ex-offenders. Among the stories, jobseekers share: “I know a company who hires ex-offenders but wouldn’t pay them – or, they would not pay them the rate they were paying the others.” Another jobseeker shared: “They would hire ex-felons but would not pay them the rate that they paid the other employees and they would not give them benefits.” One jobseeker told a story after a focus group, when the recording had stopped, about a local employer that would hire ex-offenders, but would not pay them. In exchange for one year of “dedicated service,” the employer would agree to be a “glowing reference” when the individual applied for other employment.

Chapter Summary

Using participant action research-inspired data collection techniques, I learn that jobseekers have valuable insights for other stakeholders in the workforce development system. First, jobseekers want others to know that they want to work. This statement is repeated time and time again in each focus group. Jobseekers strongly contest the perception that they are lazy and do not want to work. Instead, they cite great frustration over the labor market and their job search. But, they want others to know that they want to work. And, they want a shot. Next, jobseekers want others to know that they are often mistreated, even exploited. Again, this theme was repeated at all focus groups. Jobseekers quickly cite staffing firms as among those mistreating them. They want others to know about their practices and want someone to get involved on their behalf.

Finally, jobseekers and their families report feeling anxious, depressed, hopeless, embarrassed, ashamed, disrespected, useless, and angry. And, while jobseekers did not ask me to share these feelings with others in the workforce development system, these feelings probably speak the loudest in showing their frustration navigating a labor market that many feel left them behind.

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation was to capture from numerous stakeholders in the public workforce development system their perceptions of today's labor market, their beliefs about the barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers, and their ideas about the education, training, and support services needed to be successful in the labor market. This dissertation addressed four research questions:

1. How do jobseekers and key informants describe the labor market and an economy entering its eighth year of post-2008 recovery?
2. What do the jobseekers and key informants believe are the causes, content, and consequences of the "barriers to employment" faced by jobseekers today?
3. What ideas do the jobseekers and key informants have about the "education, training, and support services" needed to be successful in the labor market?
4. What do jobseekers want other stakeholders in the public workforce development system to know or to understand when designing workforce development policies and programs?

To answer these research questions, I held seven focus groups and follow-up interviews with 31 jobseekers and one-on-one interviews with ten key informants. The findings and analysis were presented in Chapters 4-8. The conclusions and recommendations presented below follow from these findings and analysis. Table 13, below, summarizes the dissertation's findings, analysis, conclusions and recommendations.

Table 12: Findings, Analysis, and Conclusions, and Recommendations

<i>Finding</i>	<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Conclusions</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>
Most participants believe the economy and labor market have improved in recent years, but all participants express a concern or caution over current labor market conditions.	<p>1. Participants seeing no improvement in economy / labor market limited to jobseekers and local staff.</p> <p>2. Shared concerns include: the types of jobs available today; and the number of people who have given up looking for work.</p> <p>3. Jobseekers are concerned about the rise of temporary work arrangements and staffing firms.</p>	<p>1. Those seeing no improvement in economy / labor market due to their individual experiences (jobseekers) or proximity to the jobseekers (local staff).</p> <p>2. All concerns are related and confirmed with local labor market information showing more temporary help jobs and discouraged workers.</p>	<p>1. More exposure for key informants to jobseekers and their experiences.</p> <p>2. Better understanding of the types of jobs available (key informants) and their career pathways (jobseekers).</p> <p>3. Awareness of temporary employment agencies.</p> <p>4. Strategy to reengage discouraged workers no longer participating in programs.</p>
Most participants believe that there are one or more, often	1. Participants identify barriers that align to those listed in the WIOA.	1. The WIOA and key informants are correctly identifying the barriers to employment facing jobseekers.	1. Strategy to engage / reengage with individuals with specific barriers to employment.

Table 12 (Cont'd)

significant, barriers to employment facing today's jobseekers.	2. Jobseekers and key informants identify similar barriers, but with notable differences in the role of human capital and discrimination.	2. Differences in the type of education / training needed: jobseekers want "general" training and key informants identify "specific" training.	2. Expand "general" training programs and market existing "general" training programs.
Most participants have ideas about the "education, training, and support services" . . . needed to be successful in the labor market.	3. Ideas about what is needed to be successful flows from the barriers, led by human capital and changes in employment law.	3. Jobseekers desired changes in employment law, however, many desired protections already exist.	3. Leverage apprenticeship programs, but carefully review applicants. 4. Provide opportunities for legal / advocacy workshops regarding employment discrimination.

Conclusions and Theoretical Implications

In the dissertation's introductory chapter, as in the literature review, I noted that headline economic statistics and labor market information suggest an improvement in today's labor market. Looking deeper, however, uncovers some continuing weakness. This is reflected in the first finding of the dissertation: that most participants believe the economy and labor market have improved in recent years, but all participants express concern over current labor market conditions. This finding supports some of the confusion that goes along with the mixed-bag of statistics. The concerns center around three themes: (1) jobseekers and key informants are concerned about the types of jobs available today; (2) key informants and some jobseekers worry about discouraged workers, or those who have given-up looking for work; and (3) jobseekers worry about the rise in temporary work arrangements and staffing agencies.

Among those not seeing any improvement in the labor market were some jobseekers and all local staff. I explained in Chapter 5 this was likely due to their individual experiences (in the case of jobseekers) and their proximity to those jobseekers (in the case of local staff). Otherwise, most jobseekers and virtually all key informants believed the labor market had improved in recent years. I noted that reliance on official labor statistics and administrative data seemed to drive these perceptions.

However, even those seeing improvement expressed concerns over labor market conditions. I noted that some of these concerns were shared between jobseekers and key informants. For instance, jobseekers and key informants shared two common concerns: the types of jobs available today; and the number of people who have given-up looking for work. In

addition, I highlighted concerns expressed by only jobseekers. First among them was the rise in temporary work arrangements and staffing agencies.

These shared concerns over the types of job available today and the jobseeker concern over temporary work may be closely related. In fact, of all online advertised job vacancies in the fourth quarter of 2016, close to ten percent were in the temporary employment services industry (The Conference Board, Help Wanted Online, 2016). While this information on vacancies does not give us any detail on the the grievances over pay, benefits, and flexibility, it does confirm that many of today's job vacancies are through temporary help agencies.

The shared concern over the number of residents who have given-up looking for work is confirmed in official labor statistics. As described in Chapter 1, the number of discouraged workers has improved significantly since the end of the Great Recession, but remains elevated today. The challenge, according to key informants, is identifying these residents and getting them to engage with the workforce development system.

The literature review also highlighted barriers to employment, particularly showing that employment barriers are studied both through populations of individuals who are likely to face barriers (for example, individuals with disabilities) and through actual barriers to employment (for example, transportation). Both were identified in the dissertation's second finding: that most participants believe that today's jobseekers face one or more, often significant, barriers to employment. I explained in Chapter 5 that participants (jobseekers and key informants) identified barriers to employment that are (mostly) consistent with those defined in WIOA. This shows that the new federal job training law is correctly targeting vulnerable populations. Moreover, it demonstrates agreement among key informants at the federal, state, and local

level and suggests that state and local administrators and staff are also targeting the right populations.

A related finding, presented in Chapter 6, showed that jobseekers and key informants are mostly aligned in their perceptions of the barriers to employment, but with notable differences in the role of human capital and of discrimination. First, jobseekers and key informants agree on many barriers facing today's jobseekers like transportation, child care, criminal record, long-term joblessness, disability, and housing. However, the role of human capital, described as education and training, was undervalued by jobseekers, with just 13 percent identifying it as a barrier to employment (compared to 80 percent of key informants). Likewise, key informants undervalued the role of discrimination, with just 30 percent identifying it as a barrier (compared to 42 percent of jobseekers).

The third key finding from the dissertation is that most participants have ideas about the "education, training, and support services" needed to be successful in the labor market. Consistent with what I presented in Chapter 7, the higher value placed on education and training by key informants carried into what they believe is needed to be successful in the labor market. That is, most key informants, but only a few jobseekers, like the idea of education and training. However, there is disagreement regarding the *type* of education and training needed, particularly whether job training should be "general" or "specific." As described, jobseekers favor general job training, with an emphasis on remedial skills, with computer skills being the most commonly cited need. In contrast, key informants favor on-the-job, specific training, with apprenticeships leading the list of ideas. The differences in perceptions of what type of job training is needed must be reconciled: key informants may be overestimating the skills,

knowledge, and abilities of jobseekers or jobseekers may be underestimating what they need in the labor market.

Also consistent with what I presented in Chapter 6, jobseeker perceptions of discrimination carried into what they believe is needed to be successful in the labor market. Discussed in Chapter 7, jobseekers would like to do away with the employment-at-will doctrine, likening it to permissible discrimination. Moreover, jobseekers believe policies are needed to prohibit discrimination because of criminal record, disability, and age. As noted in Chapter 7, these perceptions were surprising both for their dominant role during all focus group interviews and for their mischaracterization of what is permissible discrimination under federal and state employment law. The role of employment discrimination as a barrier to employment should receive more attention by program administrators, especially considering it is so widely reported by jobseekers.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

The recommendations below are drawn from the findings, analysis, and conclusions presented in this dissertation. The recommendations are provided for: (1) key informants; and (2) jobseekers. Finally, recommendations for further research are presented.

Implications and Recommendations for Key Informants

A central purpose of the WIOA is “to increase, for individuals in the United States, particularly those individuals with barriers to employment, access to and opportunities for employment, education, training, and support services they need to succeed in the labor market” (124 STAT 1428-29). To support this successful implementation of the Act, the findings and conclusions

from this dissertation are used to advance a handful of recommendations targeted at key informants, including federal, state, and local program administrators and staff. These recommendations include: (1) developing a deeper understanding of the types of jobs available today; (2) reengaging discouraged workers; (3) engaging individuals with specific barriers to employment; (4) expanding general training programs and marketing existing programs; (5) leveraging apprenticeship programs, but carefully reviewing applicants; and (6) providing legal / advocacy programming targeting employment discrimination. These recommendations are taken, in turn, below:

- Types of jobs – The first recommendation is for program administrators and staff to develop a better understanding of the types of job available. There is no doubt that administrators and staff have knowledge of and information about in-demand industries and occupations in their areas. However, this recommendation focuses more on the characteristics of those in-demand jobs, including working conditions and the individual employers hiring program participants. This recommendation is important for several reasons. First, any report of jobseeker mistreatment or exploitation ought to be taken seriously by the workforce development system, even if that means excluding certain employers from participating in programs (even in a so-called demand-driven system). Second, understanding the working conditions associated with available jobs can help local staff better manage the expectations of jobseekers and employers. This may result in some vacancies receiving fewer applications, or even going unfilled. But, this may reduce some of the turnover demonstrated among jobseeker participants.

- Reengage discouraged workers – The second recommendation is for program administrators and other stakeholders to develop strategies to reengage discouraged workers. Most key informants (and some jobseekers) were concerned about the number of residents who have given-up looking for work and are no longer engaging with the workforce development system. (Similarly, discouraged workers are not reported in official labor statistics, perhaps understating some slack in the labor market.) As such, state and local workforce development agencies must target these residents. However, to successfully serve these residents, the system must offer solutions to their unemployment, which will require a strategy intended to rapidly place the residents in jobs or in job training programs.
- Organize solutions around particular barriers – The third recommendation is for the workforce development system to organize programs / solutions around barriers to employment. Strategies would include support services targeted at individuals with barriers to employment like transportation, child care, and education / training. Support services would leverage existing programs and take advantage of powerful social networks that emerge between jobseekers. For example, a program that currently provides bus passes for jobseekers may include bi-weekly support groups where all jobseekers would discuss transportation and other barriers, allowing fellow jobseekers and local staff to learn what is working and what is not. This recommendation follows from the several examples of jobseekers helping one another during focus group interviews.

- Expand / market general training programs – The fourth recommendation is for the workforce development system to expand general training programs and to promote and market existing general training programs. Indeed, workforce development agencies offer a variety of general skills training opportunities. However, this recommendation comes after learning that no jobseekers identifying general skills training as a barrier knew of training opportunities through Michigan Works!. Based on feedback from jobseekers, an opportunity for general skills training is computers / technology. Moreover, some key informants may be overestimating the skills, knowledge, and abilities of jobseekers. This is highly problematic if jobseekers are placed in employment or training opportunities without general skills, causing employers or training providers to lose confidence in the workforce development system.
- Leverage apprenticeship opportunities – The fifth recommendation is for the workforce development system to leverage apprenticeship programs, but to carefully review applicants. Several apprenticeships programs exist at the federal, state, and local levels. One example of a current program aimed at skilled trades and apprenticeships is the Skilled Trades Training Fund (STTF), reimagined as the “Going PRO” program in Michigan. While these programs are popular with jobseekers and staff, jobseekers should be carefully reviewed before participation to reduce the risks associated with matching underqualified jobseekers with apprenticeship opportunities.
- Legal / advocacy workshops for jobseekers – The sixth recommendation is for program administrators to provide opportunities for legal / advocacy workshops regarding

employment discrimination. This recommendation follows from a large number of jobseeker who have personally experienced wrongful discrimination and the widespread belief among jobseekers that certain behaviors are permissible when they are not. Providing jobseekers access to licensed attorneys with experience in labor and employment law could be a valuable resource for all jobseekers, but particularly for those who have faced wrongful discrimination or those belonging to protected classes, like individuals with disabilities, older workers, and some ex-offenders. Moreover, the role of employment discrimination as a barrier to employment should receive more attention by program administrators, especially considering it is so widely reported by jobseekers.

Implications and Recommendations for Jobseekers

The findings and conclusions from this dissertation support a handful of recommendations targeted at jobseekers. These recommendations include developing a deeper understanding of the types of job available today and their career pathways and better information about the types of job available by education and training. These recommendations are discussed below:

- Research career pathways – The first recommendation is for jobseekers to research career pathways to understand the nature of job openings. That is, research and understand that most entry-level *Service* and *Sales* occupations pay very little and offer few or no benefits. However, employment at some occupations may lead to other, higher-paying occupations. This is especially true when jobseekers receive additional education and training from the workforce development system. This recommendation

follows several jobseekers expressing frustration with current openings being for jobs with low wages, low benefits, and low flexibility.

- Job openings and education and training – The second recommendation is for jobseekers to have better information about the types of jobs available for their levels of education and training. This recommendation is also the result of many jobseekers feeling frustrated about the types of jobs available, and the lack of employer response to their applications. All jobseekers, even those with little or no education beyond high school, expressed frustration with the pay associated with current vacancies. However, there are many higher-paying vacancies in the West Michigan labor market, but these vacancies are in occupations requiring advanced training or education (The Conference Board, Help Wanted Online, 2016). For example, vacancies for engineering occupations and computer occupations are associated with higher earnings, but most require a bachelor's degree or higher. In contrast, vacancies in sales occupations and service occupations are associated with lower earnings, with many requiring a high school diploma or less. This underscores the relationship between education and training and labor market success.

Recommendations for Further Research

This dissertation's findings were based on seven focus groups and follow-up interviews with 31 jobseekers and one-on-one interviews with ten key informants. Key informants included federal, state, and local administrators, staff, and other stakeholders. Jobseekers and local key informants were all from the West Michigan Works! Workforce Development Area. Therefore, the first recommendation is to expand the scope of the research conducted for this

dissertation, inviting participation from more jobseekers and local key informants from other Workforce Development Areas. Regarding the dissertation's participants and design, I recommend the following additional research:

- Inclusion of employers and educators – While the dissertation took a system-wide approach, employers and educators were not directly included (although employers were represented through the participation of the State Board member). With several key findings related to human capital and the role of general skills and specific skills, the perspective of employers and educators would have been very insightful. Any further study should include as key informants both local employers and training providers.
- Repeat study in another workforce development area – While the results from this dissertation were shared with an uninvolved local administrator, repeating the study in another Michigan Works! area would provide additional insights. Because this dissertation focused on West Michigan Works! Agency, other areas may provide additional data, like the workforce development agencies in the Detroit area (the largest metropolitan area in Michigan) or in the Upper Peninsula (the most rural area in the state).

Regarding the dissertation's findings and conclusions, I recommend the following additional research:

- Job training – As noted in Chapter 2, sociologists have questioned the rigid economic theories of human capital, but the question remains: how general is “general” in the context of training. This question could be explored through qualitative exploration with employers and training providers. Further study of this research question could

add to the literature by answering the question about what skills the workforce development system should support.

- Temporary employment agencies – Sociologists and economists have studied temporary employment agencies, but the role of these agencies in the public workforce system should be investigated more.
- Discrimination – A more detailed study of jobseeker perceptions of employment law is necessary. Indeed, perceptions are often inaccurate, but the question of why jobseekers have the perceptions they do is important.

Final Thoughts: The Success of the Workforce Development System

Early in the dissertation, I conceptualized the workforce development system as a social system created to address the social problems of unemployment and worker retraining. I cautioned that the workforce development system must successfully address the problems it was established to solve or risk being replaced by institutional alternatives. So, one overall question remains: has the workforce development system been successful? While the findings from this dissertation were not designed to answer this question, the findings can support the assertion that the system has been facing remarkable strain, yet it is poised for success.

First, it is important to note that 16 years passed between the Workforce Investment Act and the WIOA. During those years, the U.S. economy faced not one, but two serious recessions. For the reasons described throughout this dissertation, these recessions fundamentally transformed the labor market, causing massive job losses and high unemployment. This put tremendous strain on the workforce development system (seen in the

form of large numbers of unemployed jobseekers). Yet, the federal job training programs were left largely unchanged. However, the bi-partisan support for the WIOA in 2014 is one signal that the system is adjusting to the needs of workers being left behind in an uneven recovery. The Act's focus on individuals with barriers to employment is further evidence, considering many of today's jobseekers are facing one or more barriers to employment.

Beyond the WIOA, this dissertation found other support for the claim that the workforce development system is poised for success.

- Consistent barriers to employment – The findings from this dissertation show that there is consistency between the barriers to employment affecting jobseekers and those highlighted in the WIOA. This suggests that, more often than not, federal, state, and local agencies understand the challenges facing jobseekers.
- Jobseekers want to work – All 31 jobseekers participating in focus groups and follow-up interviews indicated that they *want* to work. In most cases, jobseekers were seeking support services or education and training while actively looking for work.
- Key informants are passionate and committed – All ten key informants were passionate about their role in workforce development and committed to helping jobseekers find work.

However, this dissertation also identified areas of concern.

- The role of education / training – One area of concern is the difference between jobseekers and key informants regarding the role of education and training as a barrier to employment. Education and training is at the top of the list of barriers cited by key

informants, yet toward the bottom of the list for jobseekers. This is one case where administrators and staff are on a different page than jobseekers.

- Type of job training – Another area of concern is the difference between jobseekers and key informants about the *type* of education and training needed to be successful in the labor market. While jobseekers favor general skills training, key informants cite specific skills training (apprenticeships) as what is needed.
- Role of discrimination – An alarming concern is the perceptions of discrimination as a barrier to employment. Discrimination tops the lists of barriers identified by jobseekers, yet falls somewhere in the middle for key informants. This should be taken very seriously by administrators, especially considering the number of jobseekers reporting having personally experienced discrimination.
- Exploitation – An equally important concern is that many jobseekers feel like they are being exploited. While they are quick to cite temporary employment agencies as one source of the exploitation, no key informant identified temporary employment agencies as exploiting jobseekers or as a barrier to employment.

The WIOA appears to target the jobseekers at the right time. While concerns about discrimination and exploitation must be addressed immediately, differences in the perceptions of barriers to employment are manageable. On balance, the findings from this dissertation support the claim that the system appears to be poised for success.

Chapter Summary

This final chapter reviewed the dissertation's key findings: that most participants believe the economy and labor market have improved in recent years, but that all participants express concern over current labor market conditions; that most participants believe that today's jobseekers face one or more, often significant, barriers to employment; and that most participants have ideas about the "education, training, and support services" needed to be successful in the labor market. Next, several recommendations were provided for the workforce development system and for jobseekers.

Two enhancements for further research were offered, including: (1) adding employers and training providers as key informants; and (2) adding jobseekers and key informants from different Workforce Development Areas. Finally, I offer some suggestions for further research, focusing on how general is "general" in the context of skills training, on the role of these agencies in the public workforce system, and on jobseeker perceptions of employment laws.

The chapter closed with a provocative question: is the workforce development system successful at increasing opportunities for employment, education, training, and support services that individuals with barriers to employment need to be successful in the labor market? After noting that the system has been under remarkable strain following two economic recessions, I cite some areas of concern and opportunity as well as some areas of success. I conclude that, on balance, the findings from this dissertation support the claim that the system appears to be poised for success.

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