



# Barriers to Reemployment During the COVID-19 Recovery

A Survey of Federal Unemployment Recipients in Philadelphia

Summary Results

November 2021

## Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis, some Philadelphia residents have experienced disproportionate burdens. [Earlier research from Philadelphia Works](#) has shown that communities of color, low-wage and low-skill workers, and young women have been much more likely to lose employment or exit the labor force since the pandemic began.

In 2021, as vaccines were rolled out, social distancing restrictions were lifted, and affected employers began to rehire, thousands of Philadelphians remained unemployed or disconnected from the labor force. In August, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the city's employment remained down by more than 63,000 individuals compared to pre-pandemic levels. Nearly 40,000 of these individuals had disconnected from the labor force, indicating that they were no longer looking for work.

Despite the large number of individuals that remain out of work, employers in Philadelphia and across the country have reported difficulty filling open positions. While this labor shortage was originally concentrated in the leisure and hospitality sector, we have since seen major disruptions in transportation and logistics, manufacturing, and construction. Labor demand, measured as total monthly job postings, [continues to increase faster than employment](#), suggesting that the current labor shortage will not be quickly resolved.

Unlike other recessions, the COVID-19 economic crisis was not brought on by market forces. Instead, an exogenous event forced economic activity to pause, resulting in the sharpest loss in employment in recent history. The nature of the pandemic, which forced many of us indoors, allowed only those in professional and technical occupations to continue to work uninterrupted, remotely, and relatively safe from the virus. Frontline and non-technical workers either endured, continuing to work through the pandemic, were laid off, or chose to exit the labor force.

Compelled to act, Congress and the federal government greatly expanded the social safety net, increasing weekly unemployment benefit amounts, extending the benefit period, and allowing workers that would typically not qualify for benefits to receive weekly payments. Unlike during the Great Recession, when the federal government provided support to large employers and financial institutions, their response during the COVID-19 pandemic was aimed squarely at the American worker.

While many have blamed these expanded benefits for our current labor shortage, there has been little evidence that this is true. In states that ended expanded benefits prematurely, [employment did not experience a significant boost](#). If this is the case, what barriers are the long-term unemployed experiencing? What is preventing their reentry into the labor market or into employment opportunities, even as employer demand surges?

To help answer these questions, Philadelphia Works surveyed the approximately 175,000 Philadelphia residents that continued to receive federal unemployment benefits when those programs ended in early September 2021. This document contains an overview of results.

## Executive Summary

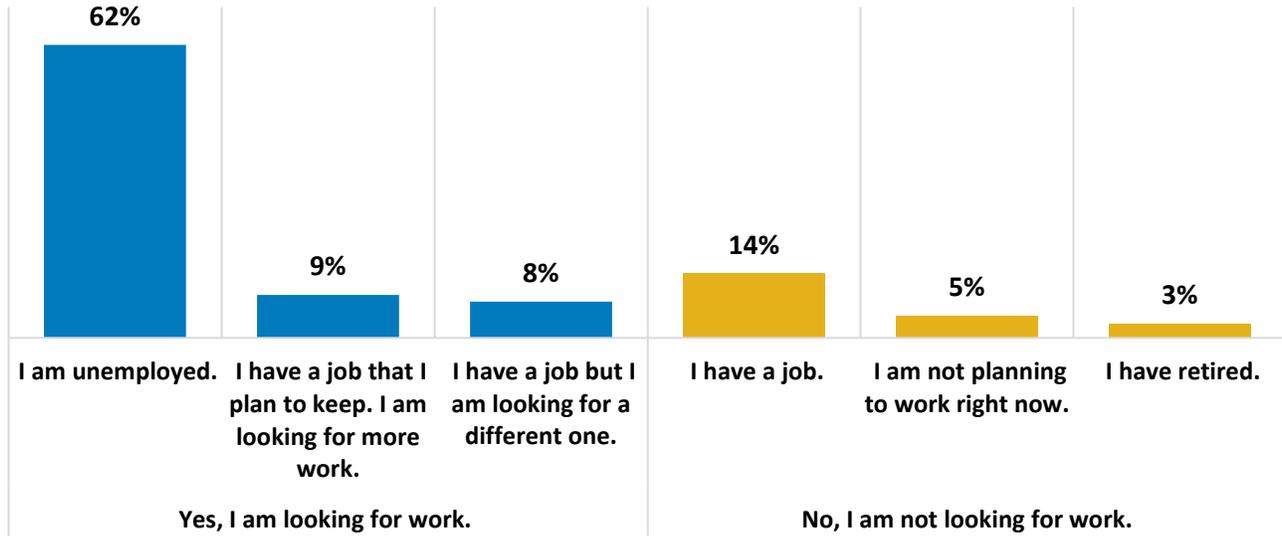
- Two-thirds (67%) of survey respondents indicated that **they remained unemployed** after the expiration of federal unemployment benefits. The vast majority of these individuals reported that they **were looking for employment**.
- **Health and safety concerns, wages, and perceived skill deficiencies** were strong barriers to employment for survey respondents that were looking for work.
- For those no longer looking for work, **health and safety** was the most common theme in preventing their return to the labor force.
- Despite health and safety concerns, **most respondents stated they were looking for on-site or in-person employment**. Nearly one-third stated that they were *only* looking for in-person work.
- For respondents looking for work, the majority (60%) stated they were **willing or very willing to switch to a new industry or field**.
- For respondents that were employed, **about 30% had found a new job** during the pandemic. Half of those with new jobs reported that they had **switched fields or industries**.

## A Brief Note on Methods and Survey Design

- This survey was sent by email to all Philadelphia residents who continued to receive federal pandemic unemployment benefits (Pandemic Unemployment Assistance or Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation) on the last day of these programs on September 4, 2021. Email addresses were collected by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry when individuals first filed claims for unemployment compensation.
- Approximately 3,900 individuals responded between September 30 and October 28, 2021.
- Aggregate demographic and educational attainment information was requested at the end of the survey. Responses to demographic questions were optional. The demographic information presented here was provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry and was collected when individuals first filed claims for unemployment compensation.

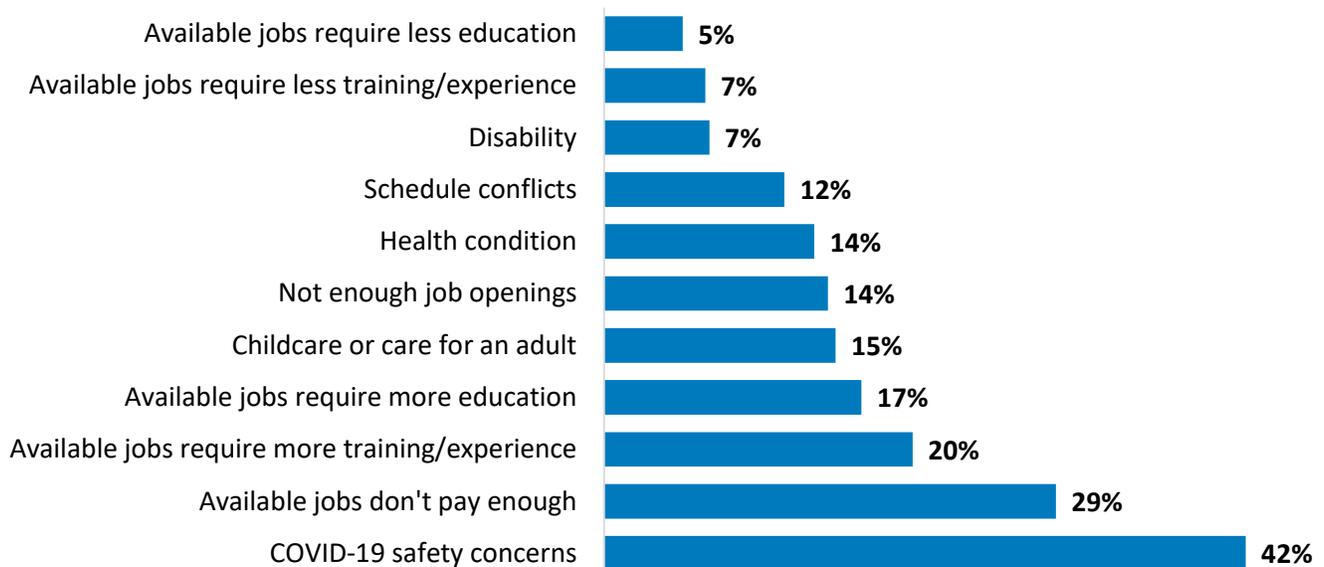
## Are You Looking for a Job?

79% of respondents said they were looking for work, the vast majority of whom were currently unemployed.



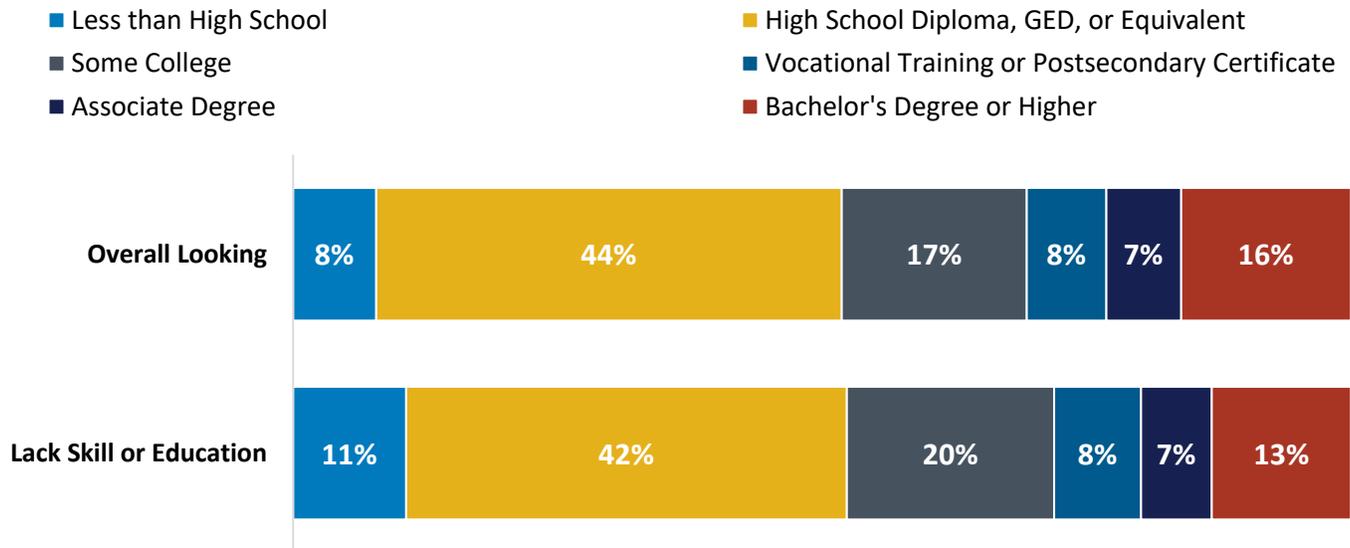
## For those that are looking: Have any roadblocks come up during your job search?

The most commonly cited barriers for those looking for work were health concerns, wages, and a lack of relevant skills.



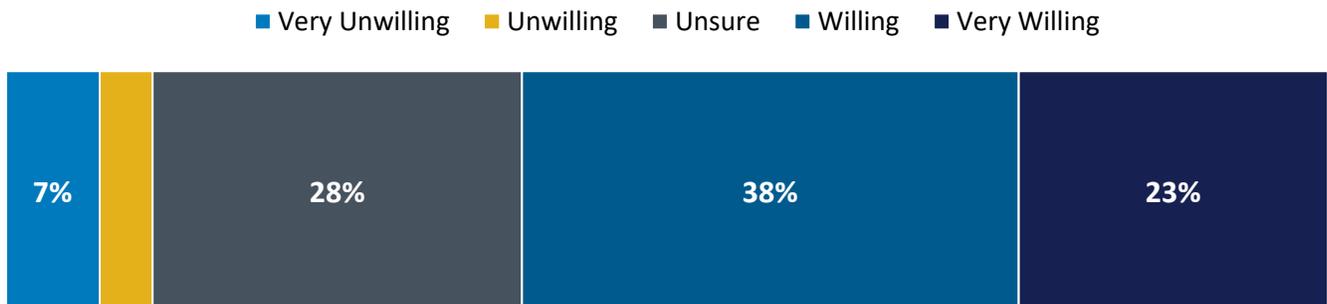
## For those that are looking: Have any roadblocks come up during your job search?

Respondents that stated they lacked the required education or skills were more likely to have less than a high school diploma, some college, or a vocational certificate.



## For those that are looking: Are you willing to switch to a different industry or occupation?

Over 60% of respondents looking for employment stated they were either willing or very willing to switch to a different field or industry.



## For those that are looking: Which work schedule appeals to you most?

The majority (71%) of respondents were looking for full-time work. 28% said they were interested in enrolling in education or job training while working.

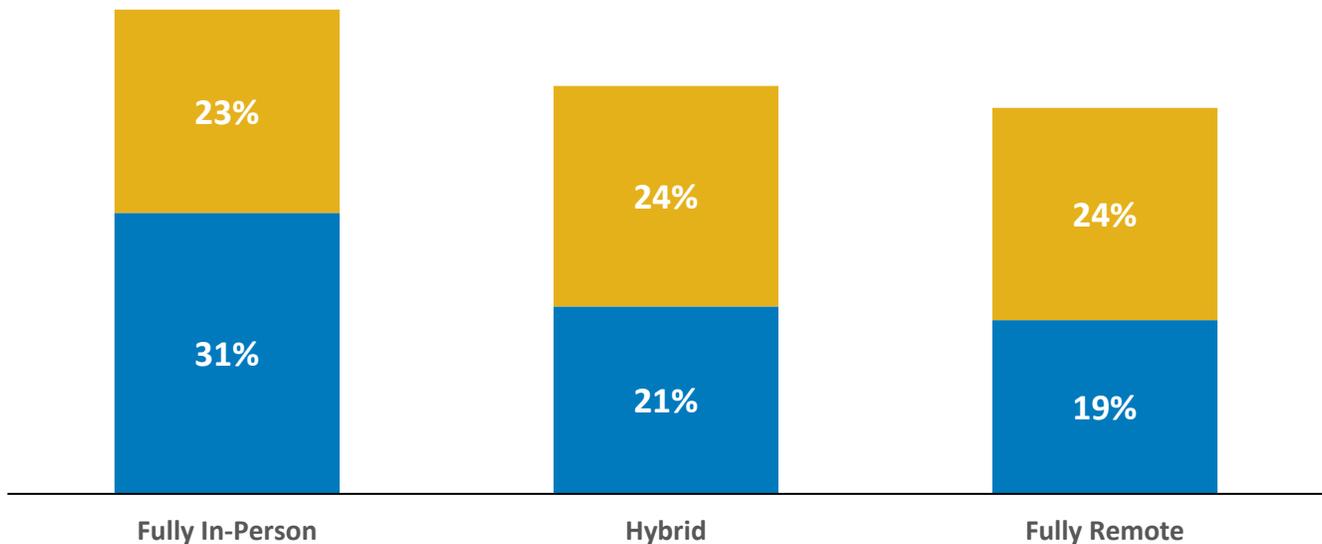
- Working full-time
- Working full-time, while in job training or education
- Working part-time
- Working part-time, while in job training or education



## For those that are looking: Which work setting appeals to you most?

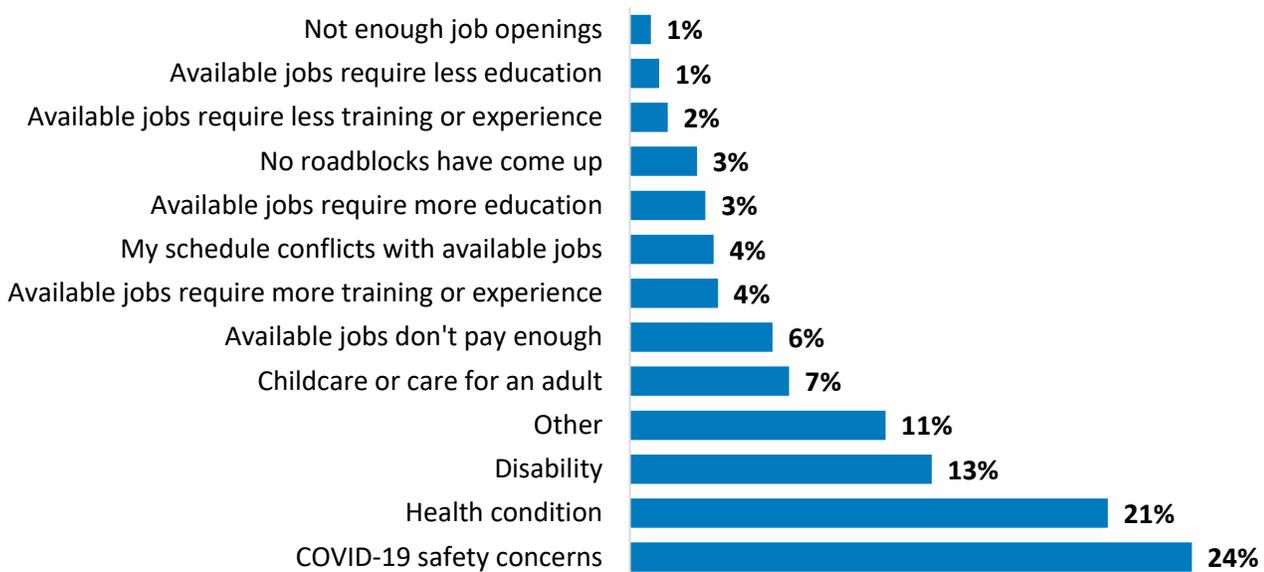
Just over half of all respondents selected a preference for fully in-person work. 31% of all respondents stated they were only interested in fully in-person work. Meanwhile, 13% were open to any option.

- Strong Preference
- Open to Other Options



## For those that are not looking: Have any roadblocks contributed to your decision not to work?

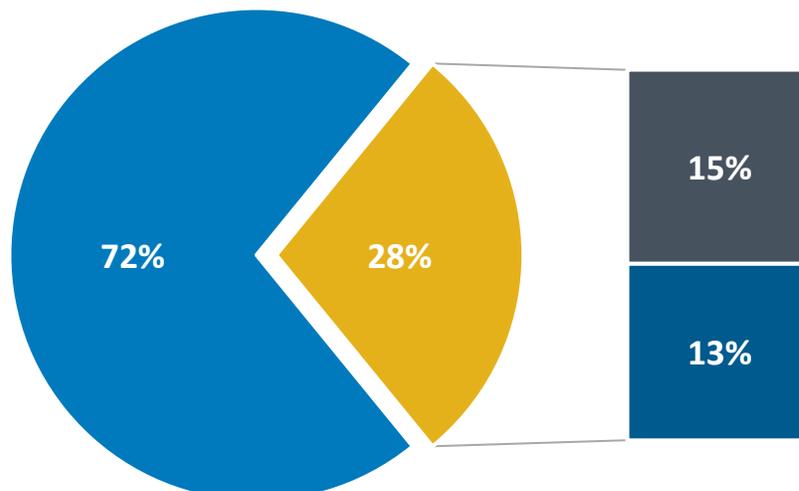
Health, Disability, and Safety Concerns were the top reported reasons that individuals had left the labor force, or stopped looking for work.



## For those that are employed: During the pandemic did you start a new job, and was it in a different field or industry?

Nearly 30% of employed respondents started a new job during the pandemic. More than half of those transferred to a new industry or field.

■ Did not start a new job    
 ■ Started a new job in same industry    
 ■ Started a new job in different industry



## Recipient Demographics: As Reported During Application for Benefits

As Philadelphia Works has reported throughout the pandemic, Black and African American residents have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 employment crisis. Despite making up roughly 40% of Philadelphia's labor force in 2019, Black and African American residents made up 60% of federal pandemic unemployment recipients on the last day of availability.

Race	Recipients	Share
Black or African American	105,067	60%
White	36,235	21%
Other or Not Reported	25,855	15%
Asian	4,851	3%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2,100	1%
Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	935	1%
<b>Total:</b>	<b>175,043</b>	<b>100%</b>

Binary Sex	Recipients	Share
Female	86,287	49%
Male	88,756	51%
<b>Total:</b>	<b>175,043</b>	<b>100%</b>

Age Group	Recipients	Share
16-19	9,368	5%
20-24	23,885	14%
25-34	54,144	31%
35-44	36,165	21%
45-54	24,362	14%
55-64	17,966	10%
65 and older	8,488	5%
Not Reported	665	0%
<b>Total:</b>	<b>175,043</b>	<b>100%</b>

For comments or questions about the contents of  
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