



where are the
workers?

Where are the Workers?
Cuyahoga County Working-Age Adult Focus Group
Summary
May 2022

Six focus groups were completed between May 12, 2022, and May 20, 2022. These focus groups were conducted to solicit input from a geographically balanced population of working-age adults in Cuyahoga County. Three focus groups were held on the East side of Cleveland and three were held on the West side.

PolicyBridge solicited partnerships with nonprofit organizations to recruit, provide host locations for the focus group sessions, and co-facilitate sessions with their constituencies. Each community nonprofit partner organization was asked to recruit and assure participants from their respective constituencies. The partners PolicyBridge engaged were: A Vision of Change; Environmental Health Watch; Esperanza; and Union Miles Development Corporation.

Focus Group Session Participants' Demographic Profile

The number of participants requested for each session was 10 to 15 working-age adults between the ages of 18 and 65. The community partners involved did a phenomenal job of recruiting and mobilizing their respective communities. As a result of their efforts, there were sixty-nine working-age adults between the ages of 18 and 72 that participated and provided insights and perspectives. The ages of the participants ranged from eighteen to above 66. The group tended to skew towards the upper age range. This is represented by there being sixteen participants between the ages of 18 and 30; twenty-five between 39 and 49; and thirty-four between fifty and over sixty-six. There were forty-nine females and twenty males from the City of Cleveland and surrounding Cuyahoga County suburbs who provided responses to questions about three working-age adult research areas: Recruitment and Retention; Wages and Benefits; and Employment Climate.

The participants were composed of a diverse group of Cuyahoga County residents. Of the sixty-nine people who participated in the sessions, 61% (42) were African American; 33% (23) of the participants were LatinX; 3% (2) were Caucasian; 1% (1) Native American and 1% (1) Other. Fifty-seven percent (39) of the participants were employed; 13% (9) were unemployed; 1% (1) was underemployed; 3% (2) were retired; and 26% (18) responded other or did not respond to this question. Wide dispersion existed among the participants responses about educational attainment and annual income. Thirty-two (46%) of the participants graduated high school or completed some college. Those with a two-year, four-year, or a graduate degree totaled 24 (35%) of the participants. The majority 41 (59%) of the participants' annual income ranged between \$0 to \$20,000, while 7 (10%) of the participants had annual incomes between \$30,000 and \$40,000. Another 16 (23%) participants indicated that their annual incomes were more than \$40,000. Five (7%) participants did not respond to the question.

Summary of Participants' Comments

Response Takeaways

There were a few overarching perspectives that were strongly stated by participants in each of the six-focus group session. These were:

- The way workers view employment has changed. They no longer view employment as a financial exchange, they now want and expect much more and will not accept less than they expect.
- Workers agreed that higher wages and benefits when seeking to recruit or retain them is a good starting point, but should also include regularly scheduled, bonuses, incentives, and developmental opportunities.
- There was broad consensus among workers about being treated with respect, valued, and having workplace flexibility to meet the needs of their families. These factors were as important or more important as the pay and benefits they receive.
- Workers also clearly stated that If employers want workers to accept the employment opportunities they are offering, they must adapt to the needs of the workers, or they will continue to have jobs that are not filled.
- Workers expressed that they now feel freedom to exercise “choices” and take risks when seeking or keeping employment. They are beginning to recognize the power they possess to choose employment opportunities that add value to their lives as opposed to making them feel like “beasts of burden.” As a result, they now are very comfortable working fewer hours and having more of their precious time for living a fuller, happier life.
- Employer must adapt their thinking and methods when seeking to recruit and/or retain workers, especially workers of color, and female workers with families. The pandemic has caused workers to be more discriminating when evaluating employment. They are seeking employment opportunities that provide good wages and benefits, work/life balance, growth opportunities, and work environments that are absent implicit bias, racism, discrimination, and disrespect.
- There was also broad consensus among workers that the pandemic and the resulting health and environmental conditions caused them “take a deep breathe,” pause, and confront how they were going to survive. What resulted was an acknowledgement by workers that they learned how to live in different and more constructive ways. What resulted was an acknowledgement by workers that they learned how to live in different and more constructive ways. This included how to survive financially using many formal and informal options of making money.

Section 1. Recruitment and Retention

There were several similarities across all six focus groups regardless of demographics. It became evident that focus group participants were more concerned with not being discriminated against or disrespected by employers. The types of discrimination against or disrespect exhibited by employers based on comments from participants are:

- One participant stated that her prior police record was 16 years old and still being held against her. She went on to express her frustration and feelings of hopelessness associated with this kind of discrimination.
- A female participant stated that she had been a payroll criminal in the past, but it continued to follow her and made it impossible to secure employment.
- Another participant stated age as a barrier because of the lack of technological skills and felt like the differences were generational.
- It was stated by a male that employers expected workers to complete 10 hour shifts with no breaks or lunch. This participant also stated that there are no worker support systems.
- One LatinX participant stated that because her credentials were not acquired in this country, they were considered substandard, and it affected her ability secure employment commensurate with her educational level. She said it was frustrating because she feels she should not be forced to take employment that is beneath her ability just due to a language barrier.
- One female participant was told she was overqualified for the position, and she felt like this was simply an excuse for not hiring her. She remedied this by “scaling back” her resume.
- A LatinX women said that in factory work, you need to learn all the functions, but they limit you when you do not know the language.
- A LatinX male stated my credentials acquired in Puerto Rico do not hold the same weight here in the U.S.
- Another LatinX male shared that he had been put in the position of training new hires during the pandemic who ended up making a higher hourly wage, so he left.

Section 1. Recruitment and Retention

Another challenge articulated by focus group participants was balancing work and family. There was broad consensus that many of the employment opportunities were rigid with an expectation that workers had no life outside of work. This caused participants to re-evaluate the kinds of employment opportunities they would seek or keep. Some of their comments are below:

- One female participant's brother was a mail carrier but had no quality of life because of all the hours. He made a change to have more time for family and living in general and simply accepted the cut in pay.
- Another female stated if you are hiring someone who has children, take that into consideration and allow as much flexibility as possible.
- An African American male suggested that Union lose younger workers when they find out they must be drug tested. This participant stated that he attempts to mentor and counsel new African American employees, but it does not always work.

Participants also discussed the role and effectiveness of organizations charged with assisting people find and keep employment. Their overall assessments were that many of these organizations were not proving the needed supports and outreach required to really help workers find and keep jobs. Below are some comments from the participants.

- One female African American participant stated that turnaround time for returning calls is unacceptable.
- An African American female participant's car died, and she did not have adequate resources for the repair but learned that the company had an "advance on pay" program that she was able to take advantage of and maintain her employment.
- One female said that if employers want to connect better with potential workers, they should have more career fairs that come out into the neighborhoods are needed (i.e., potential employers could hold a job fair at the location of the focus group meeting).

Section 1. Recruitment and Retention

Another area of discussion for participants was how do they and their family members make their money. The responses were both informative and interesting as indicated below:

- One African American female stated that there are systemic disincentives to acquire employment. She said people who are receiving public assistance and subsidized housing in some cases lose benefits and have sharp increases in rent if their income increases beyond eligibility limits and they end up worse off financially because of taking the job opportunity.
- An African American male insisted that some part-time jobs are more lucrative than full time, but benefits are lost
- Another male participant said people in his family makes more money babysitting part time than working a full-time job.
- One younger African American female was quite vocal regarding her disinterest in working a legitimate job. She stated that she makes more money working “under the table” than she ever could working a legitimate job.
- One female said unemployment was paying better than employment.



Section 2. Wages and Benefits

Additionally, they were concerned with the ability to earn a living wage that enabled them to take care of their families. Many of the participants stated that wages were not the most crucial factor when considering taking or keeping employment. Instead, they stated that being respected is much more important. There were other participants who stated that wages and the benefit package were both particularly important. Two other factors offered by participants related to wages and benefits were opportunities for training and development; and future organization growth. Below are participant comments related to wages and benefits.

- A female said that without adequate compensation, you really cannot manage your life.
- She also said, in some cases, raising wages dictates whether you keep a job or leave it.
- An African American male stated If it is a situation where you cannot meet your monthly obligations, even though you are working 40 hours a week, then raising wages would make a difference.
- A younger African American female said speaking for my generation, some younger people would rather be paid less and be happier- if it comes down to that.
- A female described herself as a single parent and said raising wages would motivate me because so many positions are asking a lot of you but are not willing to pay a living wage. Yes, raising wages would help because I am a single parent and with inflation it is exceedingly difficult to make ends meet.
- A Caucasian male stated that raising wages would demonstrate to the employee that he/she is valued.
- An African American female offered that raising wages would be successful with me because low pay is affecting my ability to take care of my family.
- A young African American male said it depends on your situation. If you are having financial difficulties, then wages are the most important consideration.
- Several participants stated that they would stay in a job for a good healthcare plan.



Section 3. Employment Climate

Several reoccurring themes emerged when the focus group participants discussed employment climate, such as the importance of a diverse and non-discriminatory workplace; fair and equitable treatment; respect; mutual trust; upward mobility; and work/life balance – to name a few. Many shared stories about their personal journeys.

For instance, LatinX participants shared their struggles regarding the language barrier and how employers often and erroneously equate that barrier with a lack of capacity and/or intellect. This is an ongoing source of frustration and a barrier to upward mobility. This makes LatinX workers wonder if they are being subjected to implicit bias and racism. Oftentimes employers and potential employers underestimate their capacity and then treat them accordingly. This translates into lower pay; substandard and disrespectful treatment in the workplace; difficulty securing employment; and a myriad of other manifestations of subpar treatment in general.

African American participants also said that they experienced disrespect, discrimination, and racism in the workplace. Their experiences have made them more likely to leave an employment situation or not pursue an employment opportunity. Below are comments from participants that reinforce their perceptions.

- One African American male stated they the work environment was overwhelming and had unfair expectations regarding production without breaks; and being made to feel “less than” if you need or expect a break.
- An African American female said she left a job due to childcare issues and stayed home with my children because I was needed there.
- Several participants said they were not made to feel like they are celebrated and supported as opposed to merely being tolerated.
- A LatinX male offered, not being disregarded simply because you do not know the language. Many people who struggle with the language are more than capable of doing the job.
- Other LatinX participants agreed and stated that it is very disheartening to bring your “whole” self to the job and not see opportunities for upward mobility. This creates disincentives to work. People want an opportunity for growth that is extremely important.



Section 3. Employment Climate

- An older African American male who works in a union job said, work can feel like drudgery if you cannot see any opportunities for upward mobility. If you cannot see a legitimate avenue or path that allows for growth, you can feel stalled/trapped and lose your motivation.
- One LatinX female said if the situation were highly stressful, I would leave whether I had a job lined up or not. Being embraced and made to feel as though you are a part of the collective was important to her.
- One African American female stated that employers need to create an environment that embraces all people because there are many types of discrimination including but not limited to gender and race.
- A female participant stated that she interviewed for a position and her interviewer was extremely rude but offered her the job. She turned it down because she did not want to work there if what she experienced in the interview process was any indication of how the actual work environment would be.
- Another female participant's uncle died, and the boss told her he would fire her if she did not come to work.
- Definitely! Working in general is stressful enough without the added discount of feeling like you are not worthy of opportunities for upward mobility or feeling like your employer does not see the growth potential in you.
- Yes, when an employer/work environment does not provide opportunities for growth and development, it could be construed as basically saying that employees have nothing of significance to offer except what they are currently engaged in/nothing more.
- One LatinX male said employers should get to know their employees, displaying common decency/common courtesy and create a serene, comfortable environment.
- Relationship building activities
- An African American female stated I would not take a job I did not want to do.



Section 4. Impact of the Pandemic

Another theme worthy of noting here is the perspective transformation the pandemic is driving. Perspective transformation is defined as thinking, understanding to act differently. The pandemic entered our lives and the ground shifted underneath our feet. This change is tantamount to a paradigm shift and requires more than a surface level adjustment. Focus group participants shared stories that illuminate this fact. With any major crisis, opportunities rise to the top as well. Although participants experienced the negative aspects of the pandemic, they clearly saw and seized on the opportunity to reinvent themselves. Their notions about work are forever changed. They know their value and they are looking to avail themselves of opportunities that will not only provide the financial support they need to take care of their families but also provide them with the latitude needed to have a standard of living that supports a healthy work/life balance. The comments of focus group participants are as follows:

- An African American female participant's son was employed at a fast-food restaurant and is now a salesperson at a high-end furniture store selling couches valued at \$50,000 and making much more money.
- Another African American female said I left a job without having anything lined up because my boss was making unreasonable demands and I did not feel as though I could tolerate it another day. Circumstances created by the pandemic made this possible. I knew that there were 'stop-gap' measures I could avail myself of, so I did.
- One African American male stated the pandemic opened a whole new world of opportunity for me, my colleagues, and my network of friends.
- An African American female said the pandemic provided additional opportunities and, in some cases, enabled you to be a little more selective. My financial situation was adversely affected initially, but it balanced out.
- One African American male stated the pandemic had both positive and negative consequences. The pause in activity and the ability to have personal time were definite pluses.
- A female participant stated Yes, the pandemic affected me. I was laid off from my job and had issues with trust. I had to jump outside of my comfort zone.
- An African American female said we engage in gig work such as Door Dash because it allows us the freedom to take care of kids while working (i.e., your child can be in the backseat as you deliver) and it pays well. We have a network of mothers who participate in these activities. We work together and look out for one another.

Section 4. Impact of the Pandemic

- Another African American female participant stated that she would take a part-time job and that her perspective was changed by the pandemic because it provided an opportunity to “change lanes” – for once. In the past, she never had the opportunity to “take her foot off the accelerator” and exam the external environment for new and innovative opportunities.
- Another African American female participant shared a great deal of information regarding the affects the pandemic had on employment decisions. She stated that people are now following their passions, discovering hidden talents, and making entrepreneurship their employment/livelihood choice. The examples she provided was of people becoming millionaires by following their own paths as opposed to working for someone or some company.
- A LatinX male participant shared young workers are having difficulty finding themselves; old standard is not a fit for the younger generation.
- A LatinX female stated the pandemic influenced my reasoning providing me with a different view of the concept of time and how fleeting life is. She also said on the one hand, there were financial opportunities, such as the stimulus check, but some employment opportunities slowed down.
- An African American female stated the pandemic has influenced my thinking across the board, but I struggle with knowing where to “step” if you will. While the pandemic presents new opportunities, one is always nervous about change and whether it is sustainable. I think some of this is generational and affects older workers more than younger ones because older workers have been acculturated to “stay” on the job – regardless and simply push through. The younger generation does not seem to be as willing to do that.
- An African American female participant shared that she lost her husband to Covid, and it changed her perspective on life in general. She now understands that life is fleeting, and you must make the best of the time you have and that includes making wise choices about how you spend your time. She engages in volunteer work and activities that give her a sense of fulfillment.
- Another African American female offered I would not take a job that overwhelmed me and made me feel bad about myself. The pandemic changed my view and made me realize that I had a choice. This is new for me and many others. It represents a cultural shift.”

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