



WORK AND OPPORTUNITY IN DETROIT: THE CASE FOR A BOLD SUBSIDIZED EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE

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KEY FINDINGS

- There are nearly 140,000 working-age Detroiters who are not participating in the labor force, meaning they are unemployed and are not looking for work.
- 60% of working-age Detroiters with no college experience face at least one major barrier to work, dramatically reducing their odds of being in the labor force.
- Subsidized transitional employment programs are an effective way of rapidly connecting disadvantaged workers to work and wages.

For the past decade, Detroit has had the highest poverty rate of any big city in the country.¹ While the city's poverty rate had declined from nearly 40% in 2015 to just over 33% in 2018, it remains a full six percentage points higher than that of Memphis, the peer city with the second highest poverty rate (US Bureau of the Census 2018).

A potential driver of the city's high poverty rate is its low rate of labor force participation. Thirty-five percent of Detroiters between the ages of 18 and 64 are not in the labor force, meaning they are neither employed nor actively looking for a job.² As shown in Appendix Table 1, Detroit is exceptional in this regard, with the highest rate of labor force non-participation of any major city in the country, and significantly above peer cities like Philadelphia (29%), Milwaukee (25%), Baltimore (25%), and St. Louis (21%). For Detroit, this high rate of labor force non-participation translates to tens of thousands of working-age Detroiters wholly disconnected from the formal economy.³

Bolstered by the national recovery, the City of Detroit—alongside public, private, and nonprofit partners—has made tremendous progress in putting thousands of Detroiters back to work and pulling thousands of families out of poverty. To continue this progress, however, we need to figure out why so many Detroiters are still not working, and community stakeholders

must craft novel strategies to help this population gain a foothold in the labor market.

Two recent papers from Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan diagnose the problem of labor force non-participation in Detroit and offer a potential remedy. *The Detroit Labor Market: Recent Trends, Current Realities*, written by economist Harry Holzer of Georgetown University and Joshua Rivera of Poverty Solutions, offers the most comprehensive picture to date of the characteristics of Detroiters not participating in the labor market. They estimate that nearly 140,000 working-age Detroit residents are not in the labor force, and many face multiple barriers to employment, including low educational attainment, disability, and lack of transportation. The social consequences associated with this scale of joblessness are staggering and warrant appropriately scaled interventions.

The second paper, *Toward a Comprehensive, Inclusive, and Equitable Subsidized Employment Initiative in Detroit*, written by Chris Warland and Melissa Young from the Heartland Alliance, an anti-poverty organization based in Chicago, proposes a solution appropriate to the scale of the problem. Warland and Young envision a subsidized transitional employment program in Detroit that intentionally seeks to reengage those Detroiters who are disconnected from the labor market due to barriers to employment. Cities across the country operate subsidized employment programs, connecting struggling residents directly to employment and wages. Indeed, research suggests these programs provide the greatest benefit to the most disadvantaged, making subsidized transitional employment an essential tool for ensuring equitable employment outcomes as Detroit sees an economic resurgence.

THE CHALLENGE: LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION AND BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

In their paper, Holzer and Rivera focus on understanding Detroit's labor force participation challenge. Labor force participation measures the share of working-age individuals who are either employed or actively looking for a job. This rate is an important economic indicator that must be used in tandem

with the unemployment rate to accurately measure the health of a labor market. The unemployment rate captures the share of unemployed workers who are *actively seeking* employment, but not those workers who are sitting on the sidelines of the labor market. Therefore, a low unemployment rate can offer an incomplete picture of labor market activity, as it fails to capture all of the working-age adults who are not working.

There are, of course, many reasons why someone might not seek employment. Perhaps an individual is enrolled in school, has chosen to stay at home to care for children, or has entered into retirement. However, there are also a host of less benign reasons an individual may be disconnected from work: a physical or mental disability, lack of adequate transportation, lack of adequate child care, a history of involvement with the criminal justice system, lack of work history, or lack of necessary work skills (Dutta-Gupta et al. 2018, Council of Economic Advisors 2016). Any of these factors, or some combination of them, may keep an individual from pursuing employment even if, under the right circumstances, they would be ready, willing, and able to work.

WHO'S OUT OF DETROIT'S LABOR FORCE?

Holzer and Rivera look at employment and labor force participation rates in Detroit using microdata from the American Community Survey, an annual survey conducted by the Census Bureau. They analyze data from 2006-2007, 2010-2011, and 2016-2017, to get a sense of the labor market at two economic peaks, as well as the trough of the recession. As one would expect, they find a decline in employment and a rise in the unemployment rate during the recession, and the inverse during the recovery. However, they also find that the labor force participation rate for working-age⁴ Detroiters is stable in all three periods, at roughly 65%. This means that even in the best of economic times, on either side of the recession, more than one-third of working-age Detroiters are not participating in the labor force.

Why did the number of Detroiters seeking employment not increase in the economic expansion that followed the recession? One potential explanation is the city's aging population.

TABLE 1: EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES OF DETROIT RESIDENTS FOR DETAILED DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS: 2006-07, 2010-11, 2016-17; AGES 18-64

CHARACTERISTICS	EMPLOYED (ROW%)			UNEMPLOYED (ROW%)			NOT IN LABOR FORCE (ROW%)		
	2006-2007	2010-2011	2016-2017	2006-2007	2010-2011	2016-2017	2006-2007	2010-2011	2016-2017
Age									
18 to 34	49.9	42.6	58.8	18.2	25.6	14.2	31.9	31.8	27
35 to 54	56.3	52.5	60.8	11.9	18.7	9	31.9	28.9	30.2
55 to 64	38.8	34.5	36.7	5.5	8.1	4.1	55.7	57.4	59.2
Education									
Less than HS	31.1	27.4	31.9	16.7	21.4	11.5	52.2	51.2	56.6
HS/GED	48.5	41.4	50.1	14.7	22.3	11.3	36.8	36.3	38.6
Some College & AD	61	50.7	63.2	11.9	18.2	10.6	27.2	31.1	26.2
Bachelor's and Above	73.5	72	77.5	4.8	9.8	4.3	21.6	18.2	18.1
Gender & race									
White Male	56.3	54.3	65.3	10	14.3	8.8	33.7	31.4	25.9
White Female	46.1	44.5	54.8	10.8	13.3	4.2	43.1	42.2	41
Black Male	47.5	38.2	51.9	15.5	23.6	12.8	36.9	38.2	35.3
Black Female	53.6	49.8	56	11.7	17.1	9.6	34.7	33.1	34.4
Other Male	57.1	62.3	72	19.8	18.8	5.3	23	18.9	22.7
Other Female	45.2	33	40.7	9.7	15.9	8.5	45.1	51.1	50.8
TOTAL	51.1	45.3	55.1	13.2	19.2	10.2	35.7	35.5	34.8

*Rows each year sum to 100 percent by year and employment outcome. e.g., Employed + Unemployed + Not in labor force sum to 100 for any particular group and year.

TABLE 2: BARRIERS TO WORK: 2016-17 AGES 18-64, NON-ENROLLED AND NON-COLLEGE POPULATION

	FREQUENCY	EMPLOYED (ROW %)	UNEMPLOYED (ROW %)	NOT IN LABOR FORCE (ROW %)
No barriers	68,097	62.8	11.9	25.3
One barrier	70,034	42.4	11.4	46.3
Two barriers	40,459	26.3	9.1	64.7
Three barriers or more	10,651	6.9	11.1	82
TOTAL	189,240	44.3	11.1	44.7

Indeed, Holzer and Rivera find that a large share of the aging population under 65 has exited the workforce, with 60% of Detroiters between the ages of 55 and 64 sitting on the sidelines. But it's not only this older cohort where we see labor market disengagement. As shown in Table 1, over 55% of high school dropouts are out of the workforce, as are nearly 40% of those with no education beyond high school. Moreover, almost one-third of Detroiters in their prime earning years—ages 35 to 54—are not in the labor force. **All told, an estimated nearly 140,000 working-age Detroit residents are not in the labor force.**

Digging further into the data, Holzer and Rivera isolate the working-age Detroiters who are not enrolled in school and do not have any college education, to explore the specific barriers this population faces. There are almost 190,000 Detroiters who fall into this group, and 45% of them are not in the labor force. Of those who are in the labor force, 11% are unemployed.

This group reports several barriers to employment the literature suggests can keep individuals from gaining employment, or even looking for a job:

- 24% of this population report a disability;
- 35% lack a high school diploma;
- 24% do not own a car;
- And *half* have not worked in the previous year.

Obtaining adequate child care is often cited as a common barrier to employment, but a relatively smaller share of this group (14%) report having custody over a small child.

Of these common barriers, disability appears to be an important driver of labor market non-participation, with 80% of those reporting a disability not in the labor force. In addition, 56% of those without a high school diploma, 61% of those without a car, and 85% of those who did not work in the previous year are not in the labor force. The authors are quick to point out these are only correlates, and the data does not imply that a disability or lack of transportation is causing labor market disengagement.

However, any of these factors, or some combination, likely contributes to some of the disengagement. As shown in Table 2, of the 189,240 non-enrolled, non-college, working-age Detroiters, more than 60% (121,144) report one or more major barriers to work.⁵ For those facing no barriers to employment, 75% of this population is either employed or looking for employment. This number drops to 54% for those facing one major barrier, 35% for those facing two, and 18% for those facing three or more.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT

In recent years, the number of individuals filing for disability has told us much more about the state of the economy than the state of Americans' health. Over the past few decades, the number of Americans on disability has skyrocketed, even among younger and middle-aged workers, and even as the overall health of the American population has improved, medical advancements have proliferated, and the share of Americans working in physically demanding jobs has declined (Autor 2011). Meanwhile, the growth in disability filings has coincided with the decline in wages and employment opportunities for those with less education, suggesting that discouraged workers with a disability may simply be replacing wages with disability payments (Autor 2011).

Seen through this lens, Holzer and Rivera's finding that disability stands as a central barrier to employment provides a clear case for paying close attention to the intersection of disability and employment. The large share of working-age Detroiters reporting a disability and not participating in the labor market could represent a large number of discouraged workers who, given the opportunity and supports, would be ready and willing to work.

SUBSIDIZED EMPLOYMENT: A RESPONSE TO LABOR FORCE DISENGAGEMENT

In light of Detroit’s labor force participation challenges, Chris Warland and Melissa Young, from the Heartland Alliance, propose subsidized employment as a strategy to reengage workers. For a number of years, the Heartland Alliance has both studied subsidized employment initiatives across the country and played a role in operating subsidized employment initiatives in Chicago and across the state of Illinois. In their paper, *Toward a Comprehensive, Inclusive, and Equitable Subsidized Employment Initiative in Detroit*, Warland and Young lay out the case for implementing a large-scale subsidized employment/transitional jobs program in Detroit, and provide a guide to implementation.

Warland and Young note that the scale of labor market disengagement in Detroit makes the city uniquely positioned to implement a subsidized employment program. A broad base of evidence suggests subsidized employment is an effective way to connect disadvantaged workers to employment and income, reduce recidivism, reduce spending on social programs, and boost local economies.⁶ In addition, as Detroit experiences an economic resurgence, a subsidized transitional employment program can help to ensure all Detroiters capture some benefits of this economic growth.

Results from a recent federally-funded subsidized employment program in seven cities underscore the notion that subsidized employment programs are an effective way to rapidly increase employment and earnings amongst labor force non-participants. In an evaluation of the Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration (ETJD) project, disadvantaged workers were randomly assigned to a treatment group, which entered into a subsidized employment program, or a control group, which received general employment services. Three months after assignment, those receiving subsidized employment had employment rates of over 70%, versus 40% for the control group (Barden et al. 2018).

As Warland and Young note, a consistent finding from the literature on subsidized employment programs is that labor market non-participants are “willing and able to work if barriers to employment are removed.” The literature also finds subsidized employment programs provide the largest benefit to the most disadvantaged workers, suggesting that these programs are a necessary component of any comprehensive workforce development system.

WHAT DOES A SUBSIDIZED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?

Subsidized employment programs often place individuals in low-skill, low-barrier jobs with nonprofits and public sector agencies. The programs usually provide significant wraparound supports to help participants navigate barriers to employment, and some programs have a training component to help participants transition to the competitive employment market.

One promising model that Warland and Young feature in their paper is the READI program in Chicago, which seeks to leverage subsidized transitional jobs to reduce gun violence. The program recruits those individuals most at risk of gun violence involvement, offers employment in a low-barrier, public service job, provides a suite of wraparound supports to help navigate barriers to employment, and engages participants in intensive cognitive behavioral therapy to help manage past trauma and reduce future acts of aggression. Participants primarily work to beautify blighted lots identified by nonprofits and city officials, are connected immediately to wages, and are offered opportunities for professional growth in city departments or the private sector.

WHAT ARE THE CORE DESIGN FEATURES OF A SUBSIDIZED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM?

Warland and Young note that program design is critical to achieving positive, equitable outcomes for disadvantaged Detroit workers. If not designed intentionally, the benefits of subsidized employment programs will flow to those individuals who likely could have obtained employment on their own accord in the competitive labor market, rather than to the most disadvantaged workers who are sitting on the sidelines. The central design components Warland and Young point to include:

- **Zero exclusion.** Zero exclusion means not screening potential participants out based on a history of criminal justice involvement, failure to pass a drug screen, or more nebulous factors like “readiness” or “motivation.” This is a particularly critical design feature to achieve racial equity in participation, as excluding people with criminal records, for instance, could perpetuate the discrimination we see in the criminal justice system.
- **Nonprofit and public sector placements.** To adequately serve high-barrier individuals, the majority of subsidized employment placements need to be in public agencies and mission-driven nonprofits that are willing to take on the inherent risk.
- **Connecting individuals to wages immediately.** In order to ensure adequate participation amongst a population who is disconnected from the labor market, it’s important for participants to understand that employment and wages are a first-order condition, not something that occurs after a training program.
- **Extended intervention period.** A 2016 study from Georgetown Law’s Center on Poverty and Inequality found subsidized employment programs with an intervention period (the time when participants are working in a subsidized job) of over 200 days were far more likely than shorter interventions to yield increased employment and earnings for participants in the competitive labor market (Dutta-Gupta et al. 2016).

- **Robust wraparound supports.** A central part of a successful subsidized employment program needs to be intensive counseling with participants to understand the barriers they face, and resources dedicated to mitigating those barriers.
- **Aggressive outreach.** Because the populations best served by subsidized employment are unlikely to seek employment services on their own, a subsidized employment program needs to have an aggressive outreach component that actively recruits those hardest to reach.
- **Workforce development.** By leveraging Detroit’s robust workforce system to help train subsidized workers in growth sectors and provide basic skills education, a Detroit subsidized employment program could yield post-subsidy success for participants.
- **Human-centered design.** While there is existing data on the characteristics of those individuals not participating in the labor force, we need to learn more about what is keeping them from seeking employment, and the supports they need to gain and retain a job. Having those with lived experience help design the program ensures it will adequately serve the end-user.
- **Strong support from city government.** City government can convene collective partners, lend public support, and use public funding streams and procurement dollars to provide subsidized jobs.

LIMITATIONS OF SUBSIDIZED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

Despite the potential benefits, subsidized employment programs are not a panacea. Many studies find the employment and earnings gains participants realize during the intervention do not last beyond the initial subsidy, likely due to structural issues in the labor market (e.g., employment discrimination) and individual barriers that can’t be treated through a relatively brief intervention (e.g., mental illness or chemical dependency). However, the long-term impact of subsidized employment programs seems to be largely dependent on program design, with longer treatment periods correlated with long-term benefits.

Regardless of the long-term impacts on participants’ employment and earnings in the competitive labor market, we should be careful not to ignore the spillover benefits that may accrue to participants’ families as a result of these programs. One program in Milwaukee, New Hope for Families and Children, offered community service jobs and wraparound supports for disadvantaged Milwaukee residents, which resulted in a boost in employment and earnings for program participants, with lasting effects for those facing limited barriers to employment. But in addition, the children of program participants experienced improved academic achievement beyond the intervention period, and increased school engagement over the long term (Dutta-Gupta et al. 2016).

Warland and Young also argue that we should not expect all individuals enrolled in a subsidized employment program to ever transition to unsubsidized employment in a competitive labor market, based on the obstacles they face. Instead, we should view subsidized employment programs not as one-time, brief interventions, but as a fixed and critical part of the workforce development system.

Finally, despite the limitations of subsidized employment programs, no other workforce intervention has been shown to be as effective in rapidly getting large numbers of disadvantaged workers connected to work and wages. Based on the employment challenges we face in Detroit, it may be the only feasible path forward if we hope to increase participation in the labor market and continue our progress in reducing poverty.

WHERE IS THIS ALREADY HAPPENING?

A number of U.S. cities—most notably Chicago, Milwaukee, and San Francisco—already run or support subsidized employment programs as a core component of their workforce development and anti-poverty programming. Warland and Young report that senior staff in these cities feel subsidized employment serves a critical gap in their city’s overall workforce strategy, by engaging those individuals who could not be adequately served by traditional workforce services.

We also have active programs here in Detroit that can serve as models. The Center for Employment Opportunities—which recently expanded to Detroit—partners with cities across the country in leveraging public contracts to create transitional work experiences for returning citizens, helping to reduce recidivism and put participants on a pathway to long-term employment. And homegrown social enterprises like the Empowerment Plan and Rebel Nell provide transitional work experiences, training, and wraparound supports for Detroiters facing significant barriers to employment, to help put them on a path to employment in a competitive market.

HOW DO WE PAY FOR THIS?

A primary concern is how we would pay for such an initiative. Subsidized employment schemes structure pathways to work for those with low skills and high barriers, who are unable to obtain work in the competitive market. This means providing wages, wraparound supports, and often additional training. Needless to say, this proposition is more expensive than traditional workforce offerings.

However, as Warland and Young note, “Although subsidized employment is not an inexpensive response to chronic unemployment and poverty, it has been shown to be cost effective and deliver a positive return on public investment.” In other words, while the investment may seem high, it is likely far lower than the societal cost of more than a third of working-age Detroiters not working and not looking for work.

Indeed, many cities have found these programs to be worth the investment, and fund them through both public and philanthropic sources. Chicago and Milwaukee use Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) dollars to support their subsidized employment programs, pairing those dollars with Employment and Training dollars for food stamp recipients. San Francisco and Milwaukee both pull money out of their general fund to pay for subsidized employment, while for several years Newark paid for subsidized employment programming through a 5% airport rental car tax. In addition, many states use their Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grants to fund subsidized employment programs.

In addition to those public revenue streams, there is also a significant role for philanthropy to play. Because public agencies may be initially cautious about hiring individuals facing significant barriers to employment, philanthropy can fund pilot programs to prove efficacy. Indeed, the READI program is funded exclusively by philanthropy, with a long-term goal of transitioning to public funding sources if the program is shown to be effective.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Defined as any city with population over 500,000.
- 2 Estimates come from pooled data from the 2016 and 2017 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.
- 3 Many of the figures in this brief are pulled from a report by Harry Holzer and Josh Rivera, which this brief in-part summarizes. For methodology and sources, see the full paper, *The Detroit Labor Market: Recent Trends, Current Realities*.
- 4 Holzer and Rivera limit their analysis to 18-64 year olds, rather than all individuals over 16, which is the sample traditionally used to derive the labor force participation rate. Under this measure, the city's labor force participation rate falls to 54%.
- 5 For this analysis, the four barriers the authors used were disability, lack of high school diploma, no car, and presence of a small child.
- 6 The principle source for this section of the brief is *Toward a Comprehensive, Inclusive, and Equitable Subsidized Employment Initiative in Detroit*, by Chris Warland and Melissa Young of the Heartland Alliance. Please see the full paper for citations and source material.

CONCLUSION

Since the end of the Great Recession, the City of Detroit and its partners have made significant progress in putting Detroiters back to work and pulling Detroit families out of poverty. Despite that progress, Detroit faces the lowest rate of workforce participation in the country, with tens of thousands of residents not working, and not looking for work. Widespread labor force disengagement suggests there is a segment of Detroit's population that struggles to access jobs in a competitive market, and is not able to be served by traditional workforce programs.

As such, Detroit's challenges should be addressed through a large-scale subsidized transitional jobs program, designed to give tens of thousands of disadvantaged Detroiters a foothold in the labor market. Such a program would not be easy or cheap to implement, but it is perhaps the only solution capable of getting large numbers of Detroiters facing significant barriers to employment rapidly connected to employment and wages, thereby helping to pull tens of thousands of additional Detroit families out of poverty.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX TABLE 1: EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES IN PEER CITIES: AGES 18-64, 2006-07 AND 2016-17

PLACE	CHARACTERISTICS	EMPLOYED (ROW %)		UNEMPLOYED (ROW %)		NOT IN LABOR FORCE (ROW %)	
		2006-2007	2016-2017	2006-2007	2016-2017	2006-2007	2016-2017
Baltimore, MD	White	71.6	79.2	4.1	3	24.3	17.8
	Black	62.5	62.8	9	8.4	28.5	28.9
	Other	68	72	7.8	2.9	24.2	25
	TOTAL	65.7	68.8	7.3	6.2	26.9	25
Cleveland, OH	White	67.7	67.9	7.8	6	24.5	26.1
	Black	57	56.5	14.1	12.5	28.9	31.1
	Other	66.2	66.3	7.4	4.3	26.4	29.3
	TOTAL	62.2	62.4	11	8.9	26.9	28.8
Detroit, MI	White	51.6	60.2	10.3	6.6	38	33.2
	Black	50.9	54.1	13.4	11.1	35.7	34.8
	Other	51.8	55.2	15.2	7	33	37.8
	TOTAL	51.1	55.1	13.2	10.2	35.7	34.8
Milwaukee, WI	White	78.5	77.5	4.1	2.7	17.4	19.8
	Black	59.8	62.6	12.2	7.5	28	29.9
	Other	68.9	68.6	7.2	6.7	23.9	24.7
	TOTAL	70	70	7.7	5.3	22.4	24.7
Philadelphia, PA	White	70.4	69.3	5.2	4.4	24.4	26.4
	Black	58.5	61.5	10.8	7.2	30.7	31.4
	Other	58.8	61.3	6.6	7	34.7	31.7
	TOTAL	63.8	64.7	7.8	6	28.5	29.3
Pittsburgh, PA	White	72.8	79.9	3.7	3.3	23.4	16.8
	Black	60.8	64.8	7.9	9.3	31.4	25.9
	Other	65.1	64.5	4.2	3.3	30.6	32.1
	TOTAL	69.6	75.3	4.7	4.5	25.7	20.2
Saint Louis, MO	White	76.1	81.6	5	2.8	19	15.6
	Black	58.3	63.3	12.8	9.3	28.9	27.4
	Other	66.9	69.1	6.5	5.1	26.6	25.8
	TOTAL	67.5	72.8	8.6	5.8	23.8	21.4

*Rows each year sum to 100 percent by year and employment outcome.