

Employment Processes as Barriers to Employment in the Low-wage Labor Market

Project Overview

Racial bias can be present in any step of the employment process. That includes how jobs are advertised and applications are screened, tasks and work hours are assigned, mentoring is offered, compensation is set, and retention and promotion decisions happen. To meaningfully improve racial equity in employment, the many groups involved or interested in those employment processes—affected workers, their employers, and organizations, policymakers, and researchers who work to improve employment outcomes—must understand the many ways in which employment processes in hiring, promotion, and wage setting contribute to racial disparities in employment. This project, sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, will systematically review what is known about how employment processes can present barriers for workers of color, as well as explore and identify potentially promising strategies to address biases in the low-wage labor market.

Project Activities

This project comes at a time of both need and opportunity. The post COVID-19 labor market is tight, with labor demand outweighing labor supply in many sectors. Increased attention to instances of racial injustice compels individuals, organizations, and governments to focus on racial equity. Together, these factors provide a window of opportunity to examine and address racial biases in low-wage labor market employment processes.

The project involves two phases. Phase one activities include:

- **Insights from Workers, Employers, and Employment-involved Organizations and Policymakers.** As a foundation, the study will solicit insights from individuals from a variety of groups who as project collaborators can provide diverse perspectives on problems and potential solutions. Potential groups include workers, employers, policymakers, program operators, and researchers. They will provide input on the nature of employment barriers experienced by workers of color, where to intervene, and examples of potentially promising interventions. They will direct the study team to literature that might be difficult to find (e.g., grey literature) or that should be a priority for the team's review. Finally, they will help disseminate project deliverables.
- **Literature Review.** The literature review will provide a comprehensive summary of the current evidence base regarding biased employment processes and opportunities to

“disrupt” them. It will cover all steps in the employment process, including hiring; task, learning, and compensation assignments after hiring occurs; and subsequent retention and promotion decisions. For each step of the employment process, the literature review will document practices that aim to detect and address racial bias. It will also suggest interventions that merit further exploration. The literature review will be a public-facing document and disseminated widely.

Potential future activities include site visits to document promising practices and a report that will propose research questions for future inquiry and potential study designs to answer them.

Abt Associates Inc. is leading the project, in partnership with Dr. Susan Lambert at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Public Policy, and Practice. Dr. Harry Holzer at the Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy is a senior advisor to the team.

This project began in September 2021 and will continue through September 2023.

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