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Persons with Disabilities Seeking Employment and Public Transportation: Findings of a New Jersey Survey

by Andrea Lubin

Over a seven-month period in 2010-2011, the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC) at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey conducted a survey of persons with disabilities in New Jersey who were actively searching for employment. The purpose of the survey was to identify key transportation-related issues — with an emphasis on those related to public transit use — hindering respondent job search and employment opportunities. This brief discusses how transportation is a prominent factor in the job search process and presents an overview of survey findings as they relate to public transit availability, usage, importance, and satisfaction among the approximately 500 survey respondents.

Introduction

Nationwide, many people are coping with one or more disabilities. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) 2011 data, among the nation's almost 240 million working-age adults, 11%, or 27 million, reported one or more disabilities.¹ BLS 2011 data show how underrepresented persons with disabilities are in the labor market, with the civilian labor force participation rate in the United States for persons with disabilities aged 16 to 64 at 32%, compared to 77% for people without disabilities. Unemployment rates for persons with disabilities aged 16 to 64 are 16% nationwide, whereas the rate for persons without disabilities is 9%. A recent report from the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions discussed the seriousness of such findings and emphasized that "while all Americans suffered during the recession, working age Americans with disabilities dropped out of the labor force at a rate five times higher than workers without disabilities."²

A New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development analysis of American Community Survey 2010 data showed that approximately 47% of those with disabilities aged 18 to 64 were in the labor force compared to almost 80% of the state's total 18 to 64 population being in the labor force. Further, the 2010 median income of workers with disabilities in New Jersey was 37% less than earnings of workers without disabilities.³ Under-representation in the labor market and decreased earnings negatively affect overall economic attainment and quality of life, producing poverty rates often two to five times higher among persons with disabilities.⁴

Transportation remains a significant issue for persons with disabilities seeking employment throughout the nation. To determine specific transportation issues encountered by New Jersey persons with disabilities in the job search process, VTC developed and conducted a study that surveyed this population. The survey was unique and valuable because it generated primary data on this topic from the targeted population. Key findings are presented in this brief.

Why Public Transportation Matters

Often discussed in literature is the role transportation plays in facilitating job access and helping to meet other daily living needs among persons with disabilities.⁵ The 2010 Survey of Americans with Disabilities, conducted by the Kessler Foundation and the National Organization on Disability, found that 34% of respondents with disabilities reported inadequate transportation as a problem compared to 16% of persons without disabilities.⁶ *The Hidden Workforce* examined employment obstacles for persons with disabilities in regions of New York and Connecticut and found that lack of transportation was the greatest factor affecting employment.⁷ Another study found that transportation was the strongest predictor in determining employment outcomes of African-American persons with disabilities.⁸ To address this transportation concern, the Minnesota Employment Policy Initiative recommended in 2010 that funding for public transit be increased as a means to better serve persons with disabilities seeking work.⁹

Since transportation overall has a significant role in accessing employment for persons with disabilities, it is logical to question how **public** transportation modes can help to address employment transportation needs among this population. Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, significant emphasis has been placed nationwide on making public transportation accessible for persons with disabilities and many successes in this regard have been achieved. In New Jersey, New Jersey Transit, the statewide transportation agency, has made the entire bus fleet accessible, as well as many of its commuter rail and the majority of its light rail stations. Despite this nationwide commitment to increasing public transit accessibility, ADA complementary paratransit serving those who cannot utilize fixed-route transit due to their disability has also proliferated. Costs for providing these specialized transit services have continued to escalate, thus providing additional incentives to better understand the obstacles to taking public transportation that remain for persons with disabilities seeking work.

A Survey of Persons with Disabilities Seeking Work

With funding from the Federal Transit Administration, VTC undertook a study that identified key transportation-related issues hindering job search and employment for persons with disabilities in New Jersey. The VTC research team designed a survey for persons with disabilities actively seeking employment with the intention of achieving two goals. The first goal was to document the transportation modes used by respondents and to better understand their thoughts on transportation's role in the job search process. The second goal was to identify the specific issues and/or obstacles respondents experienced or were concerned with related to taking public transportation to/from employment.

Survey Development and Dissemination

The confidential survey questionnaire was designed to be completed by New Jersey adults age 18 and older with disabilities who were actively searching for employment. The survey instrument was designed in two modes: a paper version and an online (web) version, with each presenting the same questions. To disseminate the survey to the desired population, the study team collaborated with the New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, as well as with many New Jersey agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other community stakeholders involved in disability employment efforts.

Who are the Survey Respondents?

In all, 489 respondents participated in the survey. Almost half of the respondents reported a household income under \$15,000, which may likely explain their search for employment. Approximately one-third reported living in a zero-vehicle household. The majority of respondents reported they had a physical disability. About half of the respondents reported cognitive and developmental disabilities. Mental health disabilities, blindness/severe vision impairment, vocal/speech impairment, and deafness/hearing impairment were also reported by respondents but to a lesser degree.

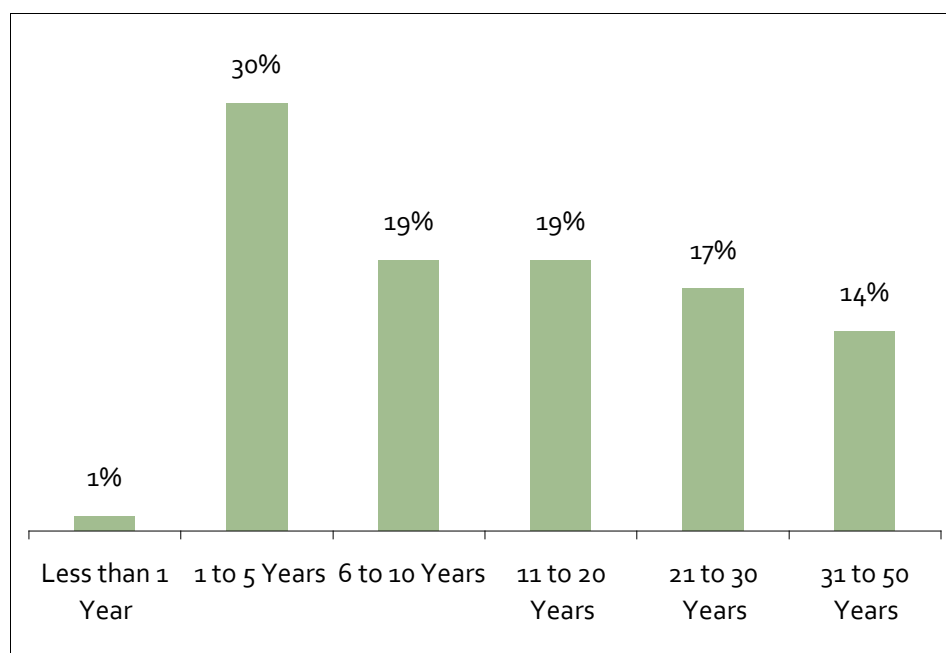
Level of education is a critical factor to consider when conducting employment research. According to human capital theories, employment increases with education level. The overwhelming majority of survey respondents reported possessing less education than a Bachelor's degree (78%), with fewer than a quarter of respondents indicating they had earned a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Employment Status, Experience, and Occupation Search

The overwhelming majority of respondents (71%) indicated they were currently unemployed. Among the other respondents, 21% reported having a part-time job and 8% a full-time job. These employed respondents completed the survey because they were seeking new employment. Among the unemployed, almost half reported having been unemployed for three or more years — a considerable finding. In contrast, 17% reported being unemployed for less than a year, 24% between one and two years, and 16% between two and three years. Most respondents indicated they would accept either full- or part-time work (44%), with 35% looking for part-time work exclusively and 21% looking for full-time work exclusively.

In terms of work experience, the greatest percent (30%) indicated they had one to five years of paid work experience, either full or part time. Few respondents, less than 1%, reported having less than a year of work history. There were also a significant number of respondents who had substantial years of work experience, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. VTC Survey Respondents' Work Experience



The survey also asked respondents for information on the occupation(s) they were seeking. The responses captured were categorized by the research team, with the following top five most cited job categories:

1. Administration — 21%
2. Sales — 21%
3. Care — 11%
4. Food — 11%
5. Service — 10%

The “care” category encompassed responses from fields that include childcare and health-related positions such as nurse, medical assistant, pharmacy technician, and home health aide. The “service” category included responses related to positions that provide customer assistance and support such as hair stylist, janitor, hotel porter, housekeeper, driver, and customer service representative. Job categories that were least cited by respondents were in the fields of government, entrepreneurial employment, management, and legal positions.

Importance, Availability, and Usage of Public Transportation

As previously discussed, literature demonstrates that transportation is considered important to job search for persons with disabilities. The VTC survey results confirmed this premise. According to the survey findings, 76% of all participants felt strongly that transportation is important for their job search. The idea that transportation is important for the survey respondents for their job search is also evident from the responses to two other survey questions. When asked whether they left or refused a job offer because of travel difficulties, a quarter of respondents left a job and almost half refused a job offer because of travel difficulties.

The importance of transportation among survey respondents is supported by the finding that more than one-third reported that public transportation had been useful for their job search. Also, a majority of respondents affirmed that they were considering public transit as a travel means for their next job. This percentage was higher for respondents from zero-vehicle households. Notably, more than half of the respondents from households with one or more vehicles also noted they were considering taking transit to work.

With regard to public transit availability near respondents’ residences, almost three-quarters reported having access to bus service near their home, and between 42% and 51% reported access to other modes, including commuter rail, Access Link ADA paratransit service, and other paratransit services like county paratransit. Direct correlation was found between availability of a transit mode and usage of that mode among respondents.

The survey asked which modes respondents frequently used for commuting purposes (**among those who currently had a job**) and for all trip purposes. Although the highest proportion of job seekers with disabilities traveled as passengers of cars driven by others, significant proportions also used bus and paratransit services provided by New Jersey Transit, counties, municipalities, and nonprofit organizations. In fact, of those respondents currently working, almost one-third used paratransit services to access employment. The public transit mode used most frequently by respondents for both commuting and for other trip purposes was bus.

Obstacles to Using Public Transportation

Knowing that transportation is important to the job search process for survey respondents and that many have public transportation available to them and use it, one must ask why transportation continues to be cited as an issue by persons with disabilities seeking employment. A variety of barriers, both actual and perceived, can discourage persons with disabilities from using public transportation. Specific barriers can include being able to navigate the pedestrian environment near/at a station/stop, the presence of functioning transit equipment meant to aid persons with disabilities, being able to readily access transportation information, being able to read and understand schedules, and perceptions of safety at/near a station/stop. Service cost, hours, availability, and reliability can also act as obstacles to using public transportation for persons with disabilities and others.

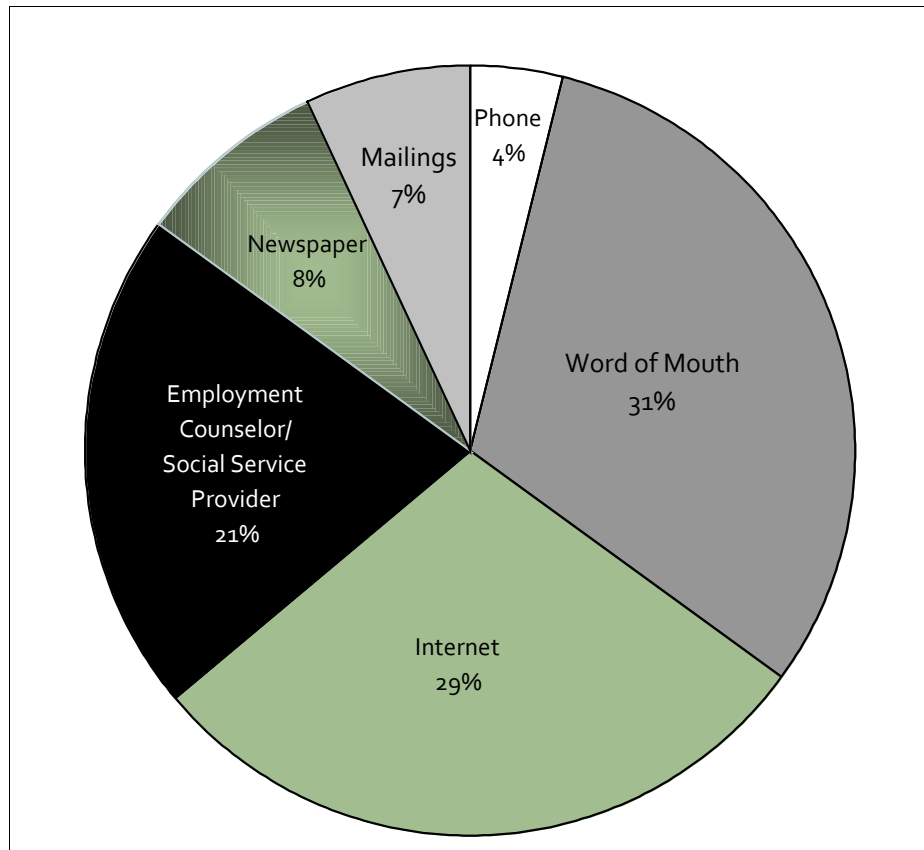
Survey respondents' satisfaction with a variety of elements and features associated with using public transit were sought in order to better understand obstacles to using public transportation. In terms of reliability, half of respondents reported feeling public transportation is at least somewhat reliable. Half of respondents also reported feeling very or somewhat satisfied with the public transportation near their home. A follow-up question to those respondents who indicated they were not very or not at all satisfied with service found there is not one single barrier, but a multitude of barriers that affected the satisfaction level of these respondents. Those barriers included service not being available when needed, service not available near home, service not available to desired destination, and cost too high. Correlation analysis showed direct association between availability of a mode and satisfaction with the mode.

Respondents were also asked about their satisfaction with environmental conditions, transit equipment, and perceptions of safety while using transit. Environmental conditions — which include presence and condition of sidewalks, intersections, street crossings, and street lighting — seemed to be a concern for many participants, as the percent of dissatisfied respondents exceeded the satisfied respondents by 9 to 14 percentage points for each of the environmental conditions presented. In contrast, neither transit equipment nor safety concerns appeared to significantly hinder respondent satisfaction with New Jersey's transit system. Specifically, respondents who reported using transit equipment meant to aid persons with disabilities, such as bus lifts, expressed overall satisfaction. In terms of safety concerns, more respondents reported feeling safe than unsafe waiting at stations/stops, traveling by transit, or walking to a transit station/stop.

Another potential barrier to transit use for work relates to obtaining and understanding public transit information. However, a majority of respondents reported being very or somewhat comfortable in using transit bus/rail schedules and more than half mentioned they found transit signs and announcements helpful.

Lack of information/awareness about public transportation options and features was evident through the survey findings. For example, more than one-third of respondents were unaware that New Jersey Transit offers reduced fare tickets to persons with disabilities. The survey also sought to gauge the interest level of respondents in taking a travel training class to learn how to become more familiar and comfortable with using transit in New Jersey. More than half of respondents indicated they were either very or somewhat interested in taking such a course.

Figure 2. From What Sources are Persons with Disabilities Seeking Employment Transportation Information?



The VTC survey asked respondents what sources they used to determine potential transportation options for a job interview and/or for employment trips. As Figure 2 shows, respondents acquired information on transportation options for travel to work generally by word of mouth, then the Internet, and then employment counselor or social service provider.

The finding that 21% of respondents were seeking transportation information for work trips from the vocational rehabilitation professional community demonstrates the critical role counselors have to being aware of the potential universe of public transportation options so they can inform and guide their clients. Efforts to encourage the vocational rehabilitation community to provide an informed discussion of transportation during the job counseling process would be most valuable to job seekers.

Moving Forward

In all, survey findings demonstrate that transportation indeed has a critical role in enhancing job access for people with disabilities: many respondents use public transport, many were willing to consider using it to get to/from employment, and many reported public transit helped with their job search activities. However, there remains a variety of environmental, informational, and service-related barriers to using public transportation as almost half of respondents reported dissatisfaction with public transit service. Below are some suggestions for moving forward in addressing transportation barriers to work identified from the survey analysis:

- **Environmental Obstacles to Using Transit.** Investigating cost-efficient strategies to address this issue and that foster cooperation among transit agencies and local municipalities is critical, as almost half of respondents expressed dissatisfaction in this regard. It is important to involve municipalities in the discussion because they are often responsible for their communities' street infrastructure — not the local or state transit agency. Environmental barriers to/from transit stations/stops are also important to address because the survey found that many respondents walk as a mode of transportation.
- **Information Barriers to Using Public Transit.** Better marketing of transit services and features that could help persons with disabilities seeking work, such as the reduced fare program, need to be advocated and pursued. Travel training programs present a valuable way to impart the necessary skills and information to persons with disabilities to become safe, independent, and confident public transit users. These programs need to be promoted and made available to larger segments of the population with disabilities seeking employment.
- **Service Barriers to Using Public Transit.** Survey results showed some evidence that different disability types reported using different travel modes and having divergent feelings about their willingness to consider using transit to commute and perceived usefulness of using transit in the job search process. More research is needed to explore these issues further — research that does not focus on persons with disabilities as a homogenous group. This approach will help to identify unique and common obstacles among disability types.

Also in terms of service barriers, many respondents shared their desire for more frequent service and for more service routes serving a greater geographic area. In many cases, these persons may have exhausted their potential travel options, but in other instances, there are likely potential transportation solutions available that respondents were not aware exist. This is why developing and promoting diverse transportation information sources, such as one-stop call centers, are valuable. This finding reflecting the desire for more services also demonstrates the importance of transportation providers continuing to identify unmet needs and partnering with one another to meet those needs, without duplicating services.

Endnotes

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For More Information

Ms. Lubin and her research collaborator, Devajyoti Deka, authored two papers related to the VTC survey findings, which have been accepted for publication in the *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board*:

Lubin, A., & Deka, D. (in press). The role of public transportation as a job access mode: Lessons from a survey of persons with disabilities in New Jersey. *Transportation Research Record*.

Deka, D., & Lubin, A. (in press). An exploration of poverty, employment, earnings, job search, and commuting behavior of persons with disability and African Americans in New Jersey. *Transportation Research Record*.

About the Author

Andrea Lubin is a senior researcher with the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University. She has more than 10 years of experience in transportation policy analysis, research, and outreach. Most of her research initiatives focus on improving access to transportation for disadvantaged populations, including people with disabilities and the elderly. She has been instrumental in developing a travel information training program to improve employment outcomes of people with disabilities in New Jersey and facilitated the creation of an online transportation information resource targeted to the transportation disadvantaged (<http://www.njfindaride.org>).

Disclaimer

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Kessler Foundation's fundamental strategy is to link science and grantsmanship so that people with disabilities can lead more productive, independent, and fulfilling lives. Kessler Foundation Research Center conducts research that improves quality of life for persons with injuries of the spinal cord and brain, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and other chronic neurological and orthopedic conditions. Although individuals living with disabilities represent the largest minority group seeking employment in today's marketplace, they are often not considered an integral component of corporate diversity programs. Through its strategic focus on employment, Kessler Foundation has invested more than \$25 million since 2005 in organizations that work to create job opportunities through development, placement employer education, and social enterprise. This funding has enabled people with disabilities to overcome the obstacles that often face them and meet the workforce needs of American business. Innovative grantmaking has introduced creative solutions to help eliminate some of the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from working.

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