



# Job Quality: Insights from OPRE Projects, Federal Initiatives, and Academic Research

April, 2024

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OPRE Division of Economic Independence  
Internal Learning Convening Summary  
Kristin S. Seefeldt  
Report # 2024-096



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OPRE Report 2024-096  
April, 2024

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Submitted to:  
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# Introduction

## Expert Convenings Related to Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency

OPRE's Division of Economic Independence periodically convenes experts to build understanding in ACF and the field more broadly of timely topics related to welfare, employment, and self-sufficiency. Experts may contribute multiple types of expertise, including technical, content, practical, and lived expertise. These convenings may inform OPRE's current and future research and evaluation work, among other purposes. Expert convenings do not seek consensus advice from the assembled experts; rather, they seek a variety of perspectives to inform OPRE's work. Learn more about recent expert convenings by exploring their summaries on [OPRE's website](#).

On April 19 and 20, 2023, staff from the Division of Economic Independence in the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), hosted an internal learning convening, designed by Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan and supported by the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the convening was to build internal knowledge and engage in discussion about job quality and related issues within the low wage labor market to inform potential future directions for research, not to provide consensus advice. Substantive topics that were covered included federal initiatives and research related to job quality, definitions of job quality, and characteristics of low paying jobs that may affect job quality, including gig work, scheduling practices, and workplace violations.

Staff in the Division of Economic Independence identified job quality as a topic to learn more about following discussion at an August 2022 staff retreat of research evidence and gaps in knowledge identified by the division's [Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Learning Agenda](#). Staff partnered with Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan to plan for the internal convening. It was attended by staff from the Division of Economic Independence, with presentations from Kristin S. Seefeldt, University of Michigan (who also served as the convening's facilitator); Alexandria J. Ravenelle, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill; and Kristen Harknett, University of California San Francisco. Below is a list of attendees, a summary of the convening sessions, and a summary of the points of discussion raised throughout the two days.

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<sup>1</sup> The Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison administers the National Research Center on Poverty and Economic Mobility under a cooperative agreement with the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. OPRE's Division of Economic Independence provides support for the Center's National Poverty Fellows Program and research dissemination events.

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# Attendees

## Expert Attendees

Kristin S. Seefeldt  
Associate Professor  
University of Michigan

Alexandrea J. Ravenelle  
Assistant Professor  
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Kristin Harknett  
Professor  
University of California, San Francisco

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Jennifer Daniels  
National Poverty Fellow, Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison  
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<sup>2</sup> The list reflects staff members in attendance and who were working within OPRE's Division of Economic Independence at the time of the convening.

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Clare DiSalvo  
Senior Social Science Research Analyst  
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# Job Quality and the Low Wage Labor Market

## Session 1: Findings from Select OPRE Evaluations

A key focus of many research projects funded by OPRE's Division of Economic Independence is identifying effective interventions for moving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and other individuals with low incomes into jobs. To help set the stage for the rest of the convening, this session, led by Dr. Kristin Seefeldt in consultation with Division staff, provided an overview of select OPRE-funded research related to job quality so that participants had a shared awareness of lessons learned from these studies.

The first set of projects -

1. [Employment Sector Analysis for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\) Recipients and Other Low-Income Families](#)
2. [The Promising Occupations Achievable through Education or Training for Low-Income Families](#)
3. [The Next Steps for Employment and Training Research: Roundtable and White Papers](#), in particular the report [Understanding the Changing Nature of Work: Implications for Research and Evaluation to Inform Programs Serving Low-Income Populations](#) -

provide recommendations related to labor market trends and the use of Labor Market Information (LMI) to identify in-demand jobs.

The session focused on take-aways from three reports that came out of the Employment Sector Analysis project:

- [Promising Occupations Achievable Through Short-term Education or Training for Low-Income Families](#), which presents labor market projections through 2022 of “promising jobs” in the U.S. and in all states, as well as D.C. and Puerto Rico.
- [Using Data to Connect TANF Clients to Good Jobs: An Opportunity to Foster WIOA Partnerships](#), a guide, designed with TANF administrators in mind, to understanding and using LMI and developing partnerships with Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) funded agencies.
- [Resources for Connecting TANF Recipients and Other Low-Income Families to Good Jobs](#), another resource guide for TANF administrators and others to connect TANF recipients to jobs, focusing on career assessment and exploration, career pathways and sectoral strategies, and LMI.

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Also highlighted was the [white paper](#) on the Changing Nature of Work (noted above). This paper documents key trends in the labor market and how they might change the nature of work, with a focus on populations with low income. The convening focused on key findings from the paper, including: which jobs are at the highest risk of being automated (low paying jobs); the share of jobs with alternative work arrangements and implications for well-being and future employment; and the extent of economic disparities and effects of automation across regions and by urbanicity.

## Session 2: Measuring and Promoting Job Quality

This session, also led by Dr. Kristin Seefeldt, provided an orientation to other federal initiatives related to job quality and reviewed various ways that job quality is measured. Currently, there are no widely accepted methods to measure “job quality” although a number of initiatives are working toward developing criteria. The U.S. Department of Labor’s (DOL) Employment and Training Advisory System issued a Guidance Letter in 2023 on [Increasing Employer and Workforce System Customer Access to Good Jobs](#). The letter lays out a definition of a “good job,” which DOL notes will help “workers achieve economic stability and mobility, while prioritizing diversity and worker voice.” Developed in conjunction with the Department of Commerce, the document identifies **Eight Principles of a Good Job**. These are jobs that:

1. Use intentional hiring practices (e.g., not requiring excessive credentialing);
2. Provide family-sustaining benefits, with encouragement to use those benefits;
3. Are grounded in values of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA);
4. Allow employees the ability to unionize;
5. Provide safe, healthy, secure, and accessible workplaces;
6. Give workers a sense of being valued;
7. Offer a stable and predictable living wage; and
8. Have equitable opportunities for advancement.

Other organizations have also developed metrics of job quality including the Good Jobs Institute, the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, Brookings Institute, The Urban Institute, and the Aspen Institute. In many cases, these organizations attempt to make a business case for “good jobs;” that is, good jobs increase worker dedication and thus performance and reduce turnover, which can be costly. The different definitions of job quality developed by these organizations share some similarities in the characteristics of good jobs they list. For example, all of them encompass pay and benefits, career advancement, and at least some aspect of workplace culture. However, the exact terms they use differ, and some components are more narrow or broad, depending on the organization.

The Biden-Harris Administration rechartered the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Subcommittee \(SBS\)](#) of the Committee on Science of the National Science and Technology Council in April 2022. The SBS, which is charged with coordinating policy action to address social issues using methods



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and evidence from the social and behavioral sciences, established several interagency working groups (IWGs) around priority action areas, including Good Jobs. A Division of Economic Independence staff member who represents OPRE on this IWG provided an update on the group's work, given its relevance to job quality. Broadly, the IWG is assessing the existing evidence on “good jobs” and associated topics (e.g., provision of supportive service, equitable access to jobs) and considering actionable steps for applying the evidence to inform practice and policy across the federal government.

As a way to assist workforce development systems increase the number of “good jobs,” DOL, in partnership with Jobs for the Future ([JFF](#)) and others, launched the [Job Quality Academy](#). The Academy helps teams representing states, tribes, and local workforce development boards and partners take action on DOL's Eight Principles of a Good Job (listed above) through professional development and strategic planning opportunities. Sixteen teams were selected via a competitive application process to participate in the inaugural Academy in Spring 2023.

Additional federal support for promoting good quality jobs has come through the Department of Commerce's grants made with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding as part of the [U.S. Economic Development Administration's Good Jobs Challenge](#). The goal of the challenge, which announced awards in 2022 to 32 industry-led, worker-centered training partnerships and systems, is to invest in local economies by expanding opportunities for people to acquire good jobs while at the same time ensuring that the U.S. has a workforce with skills to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.

## Session 3: Gig Work and Job Quality

This session examined one area of growth within the low wage economy with implications for job quality—gig work. Dr. Alexandria Ravenelle provided conceptual definitions of gig work, described benefits and drawbacks of participating in the gig economy, and presented relevant findings from her research.

The first concept is the “sharing economy,” a catch-all term for peer-to-peer firms that connect people for the purpose of distributing, sharing, and reusing goods and services. AirBnB, for example, is part of the sharing economy. The “on-demand economy” is defined as economic activity created by technology companies to fulfill consumer demand via the immediate provisioning of goods and services; Amazon fulfills customer orders as part of the on-demand economy. Finally, the “gig economy” is the part of the labor market characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs. Most of the work performed in the sharing economy is both on-demand and gig-based, including Uber, Lyft, DoorDash, and TaskRabbit.

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The gig economy attracts people, particularly those with lower income, with the promise of making money and offering flexibility; in reality, it offers little income and no benefits. Unlike traditional jobs, gig workers are designated as 1099 Independent Contractors, which excludes them from basic workplace protections and benefits such as minimum wage coverage, overtime pay, unemployment insurance, sick leave, parental leave, and Social Security and Medicare contributions. Gig jobs also offer no rights to tips. All these aspects of gig work may erode the quality of these jobs.

Researching participation in the gig economy can also be challenging. Dr. Ravenelle offered sample interview and survey questions and approaches to help identify if an individual is part of the gig economy but cautioned that gig workers themselves may not recognize the work they are doing as gig work.

## Session 4: Workplace Violations and Job Quality

Lower paid workers are at risk of experiencing workplace violations that may erode the quality of their jobs. Partially in response to this, there have been efforts to unionize the workplaces of lower paid workers. This session, led by Dr. Kristin Seefeldt, addressed workplace violations and trends in unionization efforts.

Workplace violations can take a number of forms, including:

- Wage theft (i.e., failure to pay minimum wage and/or overtime; requiring workers to clock out early or otherwise not paying full hours; not paying tips)
- Job misclassification (i.e., classifying as an independent contractor or exempt employee)
- Unsafe working conditions (e.g., unsafe equipment)
- Bullying, sexual harassment, and discrimination

Data on the prevalence of these experiences is limited and likely represent significant undercounts of the actual experiences of workers. Much of the data reported comes from official filings and investigations that rely upon someone - usually the worker - to know a) they are experiencing a violation; b) they can file a complaint; and c) how to pursue a filing. With these limitations that likely contribute to undercounting the prevalence of these experiences in mind, this session raised the following issues:

- The U.S. DOL, which is responsible for investigating claims of wage theft, reported recovering more than \$115 million in back wages in 2022, with the health care, construction, and food service industries having the largest amounts recovered (U.S. DOL undated).
- According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), an estimated 17 percent of the low-wage workforce in the 10 most populous states are paid less than minimum wage (in violation of the law) (Cooper and Kroeger 2017).

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- Based on state-level studies, 10-30 percent of employers misclassify some jobs (National Employment Law Project, 2020), with landscapers, truck drivers, home health aides, janitors, and nail salon workers among the occupations most at risk of misclassification.
  - The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA 2021) conducted 13,700 complaint initiated investigations of workplace safety violations in 2021, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2021) received 61,000 bullying, sexual harassment, and discrimination charges in 2021. In both of these instances, workers in lower paid and/or female dominated industries were more likely to experience these violations (Durana et al 2018).

From a research perspective, measuring the extent to which these violations occur may be difficult. In addition to potential undercounts in official data, workers may not know violations are occurring. Additionally, some topics (e.g., sexual harassment) may be very sensitive, and individuals may fear retaliation if they report the violation.

One potential avenue for worker protection is union membership. Higher rates of unionization are associated with higher wages and lower gender and racial wage gaps, receipt of health insurance, and safer workplaces, among other benefits (Banerjee et al 2021). Unions provide processes for workers to file grievances, and depending on the contract, workers may strike if their requests are not being met or provisions of their contracts are being violated. However, rates of unionization vary widely by state and tend to be low in occupations with many low paid workers, such as sales and food service work (U.S. DOL 2024).

## Session 5: Scheduling Practices and Job Quality

With a 24-7 economy and practices such as “just-in-time” scheduling, many workers in the low wage labor market—particularly those in the service sector—face unpredictable schedules, which are associated with a variety of negative outcomes. In this session, Dr. Kristen Harknett presented work from The Shift Project, an initiative that monitors and studies low wage work in the service sector. The Shift Project’s work to date has primarily focused on schedule instability, both its prevalence and consequences, and policy solutions to issues uncovered by the study.

Between 2016-2022, The Shift Project conducted online surveys with approximately 200,000 workers at large retail and food employers. The study found that two thirds of hourly workers experienced last-minute changes to their work schedules, and a quarter were asked to be on-call for work. Seven in ten study participants believed they needed to keep their schedules open in case they were given a shift, meaning that finding time to run errands or tend to other tasks could be difficult. The same proportion said they wanted a more stable and predictable work schedule. Work schedule instability is associated with material hardship, unhappiness, sleep loss, and psychological distress. Single parents experience greater difficulty with work-life balance with

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unpredictable schedules, and child behavior problems can sometimes be traced back to parents' unpredictable work schedules.

Dr. Harknett highlighted work in several municipalities to combat unstable scheduling and short notice shifts. For example, Seattle passed the Secure Scheduling Ordinance, which requires employers to provide workers with their schedule at least two weeks in advance and mandates additional pay to workers for last minute schedule changes. Since then, based on a pre/post survey fielded by The Shift Project, schedules of Seattle workers have stabilized, meaning that, compared to workers in a designated comparison city, fewer Seattle workers received less than two weeks' notice of their schedules, had an on-call schedule, were scheduled for "closing" (closing a store one night and working the opening shift the next day), or had their shift changed or cancelled, including without pay for that change. Seattle workers reported higher levels of happiness and less material hardship than their control group counterparts. Additionally, stable shifts have increased employee loyalty and decreased turnover, a benefit to businesses.

## OPRE Discussion

Throughout the two days, time was set aside for Division of Economic Independence staff participating in the convening to discuss the information presented in the sessions. Five broad themes emerged from those discussions.

***Challenges measuring job quality.*** Participants observed that measuring job quality is challenging, particularly if aiming to do so both in a way that is efficient (to minimize burden) but also captures the multiple dimensions of vulnerability (e.g., scheduling variability, workplace violations, etc.). Participants discussed whether job quality could be conceptualized as being on a continuum, with various attributes of quality ranked by importance according to a specific worker's circumstances, and subject to change based on age, location, and other factors. However, such a construct might limit comparability across studies and make it difficult to identify program or policy implications from research using such a measure. Income or earnings might therefore be the best single indicator of job quality, given measurement constraints.

Participants also discussed the value of collecting qualitative data to better understand individual perspectives on job quality and the types of tradeoffs people are willing to make when thinking about job quality for themselves. Lastly, some participants raised the idea of conducting research to identify the base or minimum set of attributes a job must have in order to meet workers' basic needs and be considered a "good job."

***Including worker voice and understanding impacts on workers.*** Participants discussed the importance of incorporating the lived experience of workers in research on job quality, ranging from calls to include workers' perspectives when developing measures of job quality to developing a better understanding of the precarity faced by low wage workers and examining the effect of

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workplace conditions on the family. Participants also considered how to collect data on the accessibility of unions to those in low wage jobs and assess implications for job quality.

***Better understanding of gig work.*** Participants raised several questions around better understanding gig work including whether gig work helps to bridge gaps in the safety net, whether it serves as a replacement for informal work arrangements, and how it affects calculating eligibility for public benefits. Other comments focused on gig worker identities and examining the extent to which TANF and related populations engage in gig work and may be at risk for negative outcomes, such as low or unstable income. Some participants noted that gig work might be beneficial for certain workers if they need flexibility; participants considered how researchers could disentangle the problematic from the supportive aspects of gig work.

***Research about employers and job quality.*** Participants discussed ideas for research to better understand employers' decision-making about the jobs they offer and the factors that might affect these decisions. For example, research could explore how structural conditions (e.g., local unemployment rates) affect the quality of jobs that employers offer and seek to identify the conditions needed for employers to support good jobs. Research that demonstrates to employers the return on investment (ROI) of offering good jobs could be informative for program and policy decisions.

***Implications for TANF programs and clients.*** Participants discussed ideas for research to unpack how TANF program practices might affect the quality of jobs that TANF clients attain. For example, how do case managers make decisions about which jobs or sectors to connect clients to? Are clients' preferences taken into account? What are barriers and facilitators to case managers using LMI to identify in-demand jobs of good quality? Participants also discussed the role of other supportive services and the larger safety net in thinking about job quality, such as healthcare and childcare benefits offered by an employer.

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