

Barriers to employment: Key findings from recent survey effort

Overview

In July 2021, the Maine Department of Labor circulated a brief survey to better understand the barriers faced in returning to work. This survey was distributed to unemployment insurance claimants as well as active jobseekers on [Maine JobLink](#)—in total over 44,000 individuals. Additionally, the survey was translated into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, and Vietnamese to broaden accessibility. The survey was shared with worker advocate and other community partners to be distributed within their networks as well.

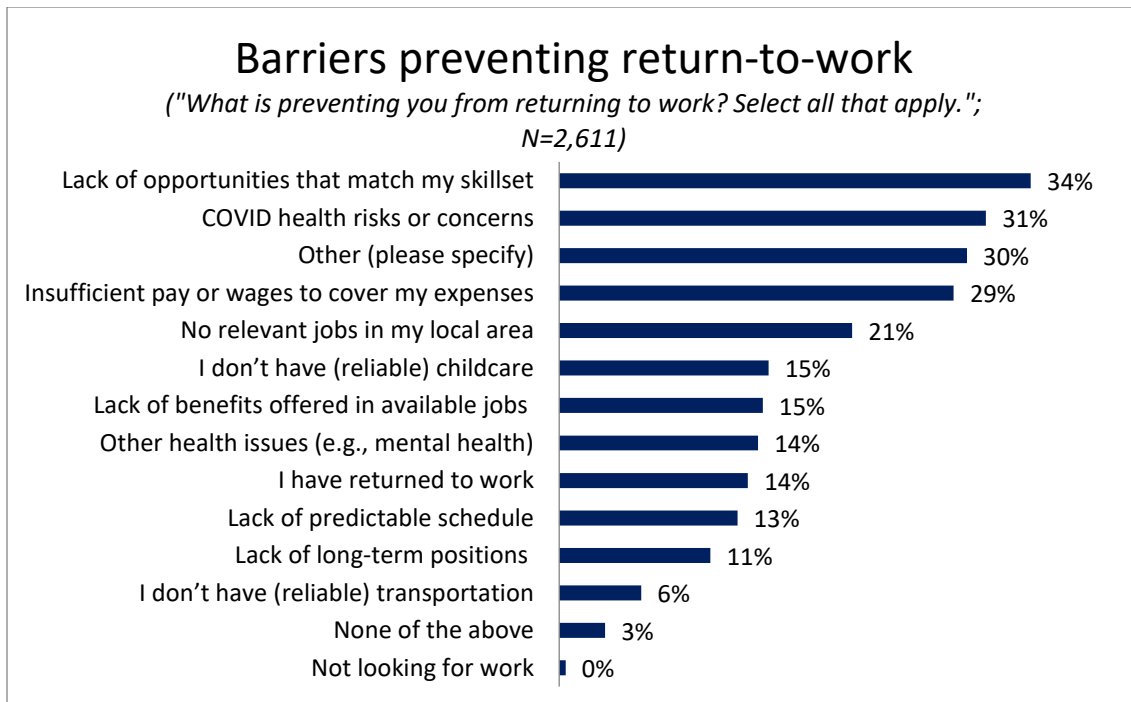
In total, more than 2,600 individuals responded to the anonymous survey (*see demographics in Appendix*). The following outlines key takeaways and themes from this survey.

Top barriers faced in returning to work

Survey respondents noted that there are several barriers preventing them from returning to work. The most cited barriers included a “lack of opportunities that match my skillset” (34%) and “COVID health risks or concerns” (31%).

Additional reasons preventing return to work related to:

- **Job quality concerns** regarding insufficient wages (29%), lack of benefits (15%), unpredictable schedule (13%) or lack of long-term positions (11%)
- **Inaccessibility of relevant opportunities** including lack of relevant jobs in the local area (21%)
- **Lack of necessary social supports** including lack of reliable childcare (15%) and transportation (6%)



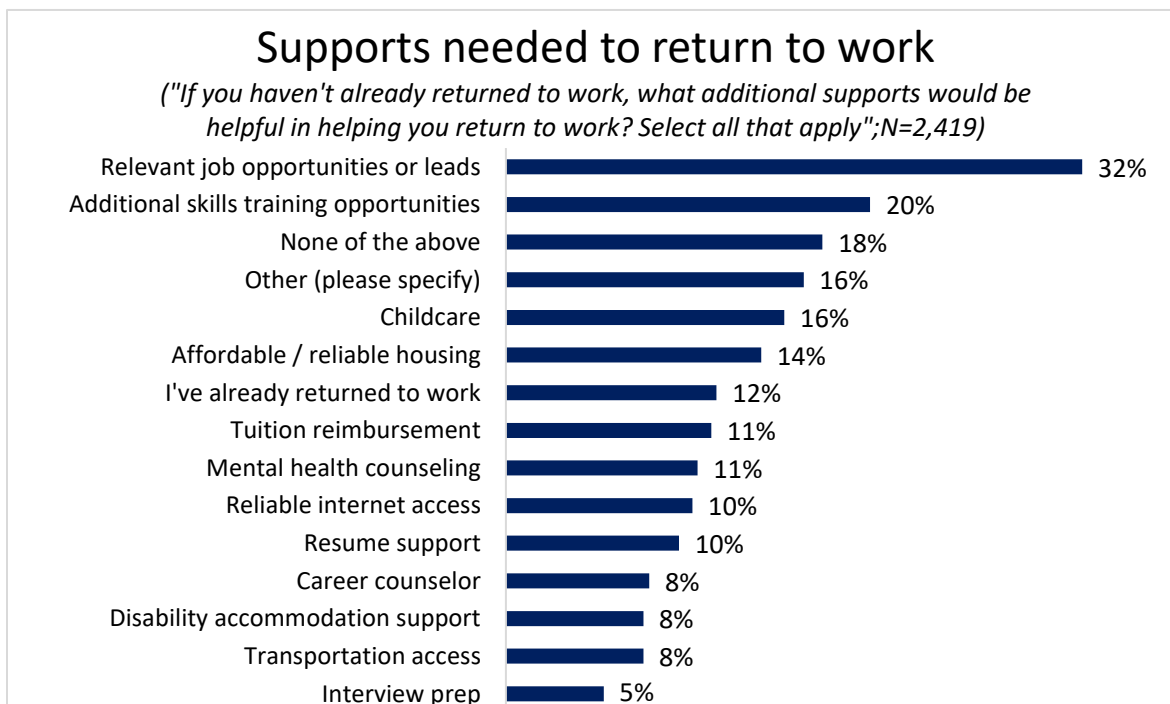
Nearly one-third of respondents (30%) cited other barriers via open-ended response. Based on analysis of a random sample, the primary themes focused on **age-related discrimination, challenges getting interviews in the competitive market and self-employment challenges related to economic recession** (e.g., lack of clients, lower sales, and supply chain challenges).

Top barriers experienced differed by demographic and geographic characteristics of the survey respondent pool:

- **COVID health risks were more commonly cited among older adult respondents as compared with younger counterparts**—44% of respondents 55+ cited this as a key barrier as compared with 15% of respondents under 24. Additionally, survey respondents over the age of 55 **cited ageism and age discrimination as barriers preventing them from returning to work**. The theme of ageism accounted for approximately 25% of “other” barriers cited among older adult respondents.
- **Women were more likely to cite childcare-related barriers:** Among survey respondents, 15% cited lack of reliable childcare as a barrier preventing return to work. This reason was a more significant barrier among female survey respondents (20%) than male respondents (8%).
- Survey respondents **outside of southern coastal counties were more likely to cite “no relevant jobs in my area” as a barrier**. While only 18% of respondents from Cumberland and York counties cited this as a barrier, respondents from Franklin (32%), Washington (31%) and Piscataquis (35%) were twice as likely to lack of relevant local opportunities as a barrier.

Additional supports needed

Survey respondents were asked to identify the additional supports needed to return to work. The most selected support needed was **relevant job opportunities or leads**—cited by 32% of survey respondents. Nearly every demographic and geographic groups of respondents agreed that this was a top need to return to work.

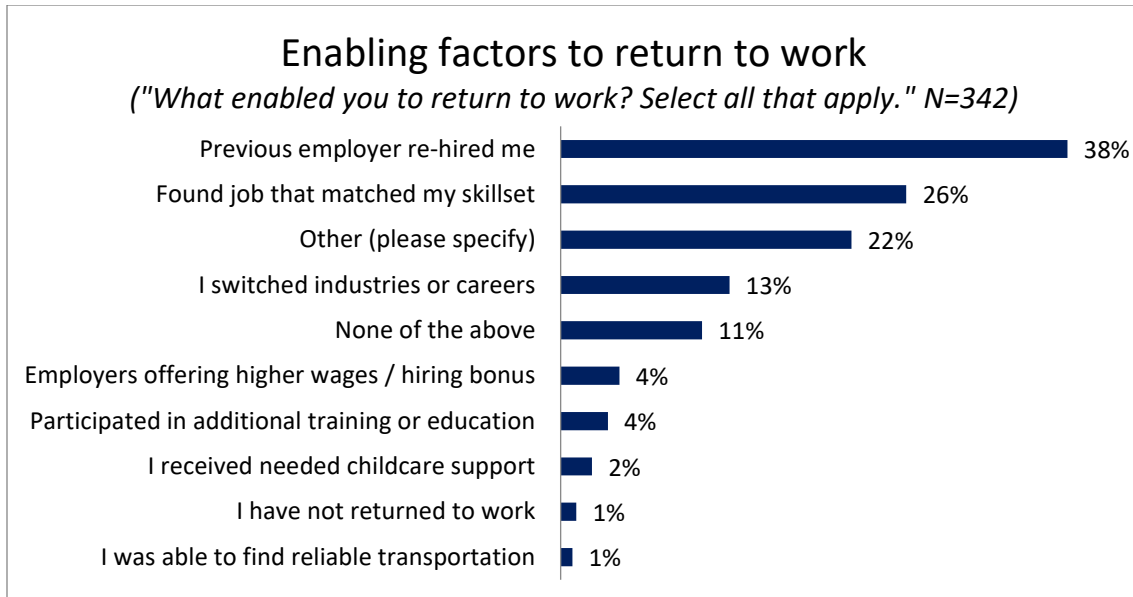


Other commonly cited needs included:

- **Education and training supports**, including additional skills training (20%) as well as tuition reimbursement (11%). Tuition reimbursement was cited as a key support needed but was more commonly cited among younger survey respondents—with 41% of 18-24 years indicating this as a need.
- **Social and infrastructure supports**, including childcare (16%), affordable housing (14%), mental health support (11%), transportation access (8%) and disability accommodation supports (8%). The degree to which social supports were listed as a top need varied significantly by demographic group.
 - o **Childcare was cited as the top needed support among respondents ages 25-44**, 39% of whom cited this as a need vs. 16% overall
 - o **Survey respondents 18-35 were much more likely to cite structural and social supports as key needs**--with more than one-third (34%) citing affordable housing as a key need (vs. 14% overall) and 27% citing mental health support needs (vs. 11% overall).
 - o **BIPOC respondents were more likely to cite social support-related needs compared to White respondents:** While only 14% of White respondents cited “affordable housing,” more than 25% of BIPOC respondents cited this as key need. Similarly, “transportation access” was a need cited by 7.5% of White respondents as compared with 26% of American Indian and 18% of Black respondents.
- **Career preparation and exploration supports**, including resume review (10%), career counseling (8%) and interview prep (5%).

Other supports: Sixteen percent of respondents indicated that other supports were needed. The most cited related to **additional job opportunities in one’s field, region, or remote work opportunities**. Other themes included **support against discriminatory hiring practices**, particularly related to age, as well as **caretaking support**, in the form of more affordable care options or direct compensation for family caretaking responsibilities. Some respondents were looking for higher wages, more flexible hours, or access to benefits, while others requested support with education or training, others sought additional COVID-19 health safety standards before returning to work.

Those who did return to work were asked about the enabling factors that led to their return. The most cited reason was that their **previous employer re-hired them** (38%), followed by 26% of survey respondents who **found a job that matched their skillset**. An additional 13% of respondents **switched careers or industries** to get reconnected to work while others cited receiving hiring bonuses, additional training and social supports (childcare, transportation) as enabling factors.



More than 20% of respondents cited other reasons they were able to return to work. The most common themes among a random set of open-ended responses included **returning to work within a reduced or part-time capacity**. Other enabling factors cited included the **economy reopening** post-pandemic with increased as well as **starting a new business or becoming self-employed**.

Conclusion and next steps

This survey provides insights into the complex employment landscape that Maine workers, residents, and businesses are operating within today. Barriers to employment are uniquely personal and far-ranging, though commonly cited needs center on the following:

- **Relevant, accessible training, education and job opportunities** aligned with skillset, field of interest and lifestyle (including remote flexibility)
- **High-quality jobs** that provide access to benefits, livable wages, sufficient hours, and predictable or flexible schedule
- **Social supports** that promote stability including affordable housing, reliable transportation, caretaking support, and healthcare access

The Maine Department of Labor will leverage this research, along with several other inputs, to continue to inform its workforce development policies and programs to best serve the unique and nuanced needs of Maine's workers. Some immediate offerings that are targeted to help overcome existing barriers include:

- **Helping prepare and connect workers to job opportunities:** Access upcoming [workshops](#) such as [interview prep workshop](#), connect with hiring employers via [local and virtual hiring events](#) and postings on [Maine JobLink](#), or reach out to a [local CareerCenter](#) to receive career advising support.
- **Addressing specific barriers among communities:** Attend upcoming workshop on [overcoming bias and finding work for adults 55+](#), [recovery in the workplace](#), or [finding work among justice-involved community](#), as well as accessing resources such as disability accommodation support via the [Bureau of Rehabilitation Services](#).

- **Navigating social support resources to overcome barriers:** Attend an upcoming workshop on [how to navigate state & local resources](#) as well as this [resource guide](#), or reaching out to [local CareerCenter](#) to help connect you as well.

Additionally, the Department of Labor is investing in future actions to address these barriers through:

- **Expanding career service counselors and navigators to meet people where they are**, identify needs, and provide connections to relevant trainings and job opportunities
- Designing and targeting training and skills-building opportunities (e.g., apprenticeship) to **meet unique needs of communities experiencing highest barriers**—including strengthening partnerships with trusted community partners representing communities of color, women, opportunity youth and older adults
- Continuing to **partner closely with other state agencies and service providers to address social support-related barriers** to employment (childcare, transportation, etc.)
- **Working with employers to provide high-quality job opportunities** in their communities and partnering with employers to create safe and fair workplaces

Survey respondent profile

What is your gender? (N=2,437)	
Female	63%
Male	33%
Prefer not to answer	3%
Other (please specify)	1%
What is your race? Select all that apply (N=2,435)	
White	89%
Prefer not to answer	7%
American Indian or Alaska Native	3%
Black or African American	2%
Other (please specify)	2%
Asian	1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%
What is your ethnicity? (N=2,278)	
Not Hispanic / Latino	77%
Prefer not to answer	16%
Other (please specify)	6%
Hispanic / Latino	2%
What is the highest level of education you have completed? (N=2,432)	
Some college, no degree	28%
High School Diploma or GED	24%
4 years of college or undergraduate degree	22%
Associate's Degree	13%
Masters, Doctorate or other post-graduate study	12%
Less than High school	2%

What is your age? (N=2,433)	
18-24	3%
25-34	13%
35-44	19%
45-54	17%
55-64	26%
65+	22%
What is your primary county of residence? (N=2,426)	
Cumberland	23%
York	16%
Kennebec	9%
Penobscot	9%
Androscoggin	8%
Oxford	4%
Aroostook	4%
Hancock	4%
Somerset	3%
Waldo	3%
Knox	3%
Lincoln	2%
Sagadahoc	2%
Washington	2%
Franklin	2%
None of the above	2%
Piscataquis	1%
Other (please specify)	1%
Are you a military veteran? (N=2,422)	
Yes	7%
No	92%
Prefer not to answer	1%