



Toward the Future of Black Older Workers

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Today there are growing concerns about the future of work for America's aging labor force. Most concerns historically focus on what is happening to those who retire, and what solutions are needed to fill the roles that they leave behind. The same concern exists in the current COVID-19 context, where policymakers and advocates **argue that as older workers exit jobs**, the lack of prepared younger workers is making a supposed labor shortage worse. While the impact of a segment of the workforce aging out is important, the discourse generally dismisses the fact that many older workers need to remain employed to improve financial stability. This is particularly true for older Black workers, **whose share of the labor market is expected to increase over the next decade**. At the same time, these workers will continue to wrestle with compounding discrimination on the basis of age, race and gender, and accelerated automation in the workplace.

For me, the future of work for older Black workers is personal and inextricably linked to our overall well-being. The intersection is profound for me as someone who has watched my own relatives labor in poor quality work, lost jobs in the last year because of the pandemic and struggled to re-enter the labor force due to new skill requirements brought on by automation. Opportunities for older Black workers to compete with younger workers who have adapted to new technologies or have greater access to training resources to upskill make the future of work complicated. This is particularly pronounced in the American South, which is not only where I was born and where my family lives and works, but also **where more than half of the Black population lives**. In recent work at the Joint Center, **we found that over half of all private sector workers** in the Black rural South work in the six industries with the highest potential for automation, compared to only a third of U.S. private sector workers.

Prior to the pandemic, automation already posed a disproportionate risk for Black workers. Black workers **remain concentrated in a small number of occupations** as a result of stubborn racial and age discrimination, and unfortunately, many of the workers in these occupations **are at greater risk of being displaced by automation**. For example, compared to White workers, **Black workers are over one-and-a-half times** more likely to be cashiers, cooks, food preparation and serving workers (including fast food). While automation was predicted to increase in these occupations over the next decade, **the COVID-19 pandemic added fuel**.

The last year of a public health emergency accelerated the risks of automation as Black workers disproportionately suffered job losses. According to AARP, **over one in four** Black workers cite job lay-offs as the main reason for their declining financial security, with Black workers ages 50 and older more likely than those ages 25–49 to cite lay-offs as the main reason for the decline. Moreover, **Black workers age 55 and older have been 26 percent more likely** than white workers to lose their jobs since the COVID-19 pandemic peak in April 2020. Evolving technologies in workplaces have spread rapidly in recent years and **have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic**. As a result, many jobs were eliminated, and others have changed to require more digital skills. There is a clear consensus that in order for us to create an inclusive economy in light of these rapid changes, knocking down barriers to training and education needed to acquire digital skills will likely ensure equity in the future of work. According to the National Skills Coalition, **half of Black workers need digital skills**.

The future of work is not only about automation. In thinking about the future of work, we must also think more decisively about a framework that improves *the future of Black workers*, particularly older workers. In order to guarantee an equitable economic recovery, the country's labor policies and employer practices must prioritize the needs of Black workers who are systematically excluded from better employment opportunities. The acceleration of automation during the pandemic provides a great sense of urgency that calls for bold, creative solutions to ensure older Black workers are included in the nation's economic recovery and that we do not return to the status quo.