

WORKTRENDS

AMERICANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT WORK, EMPLOYERS, AND GOVERNMENT

Trends in American Opinions about Jobs, 2010 to 2021

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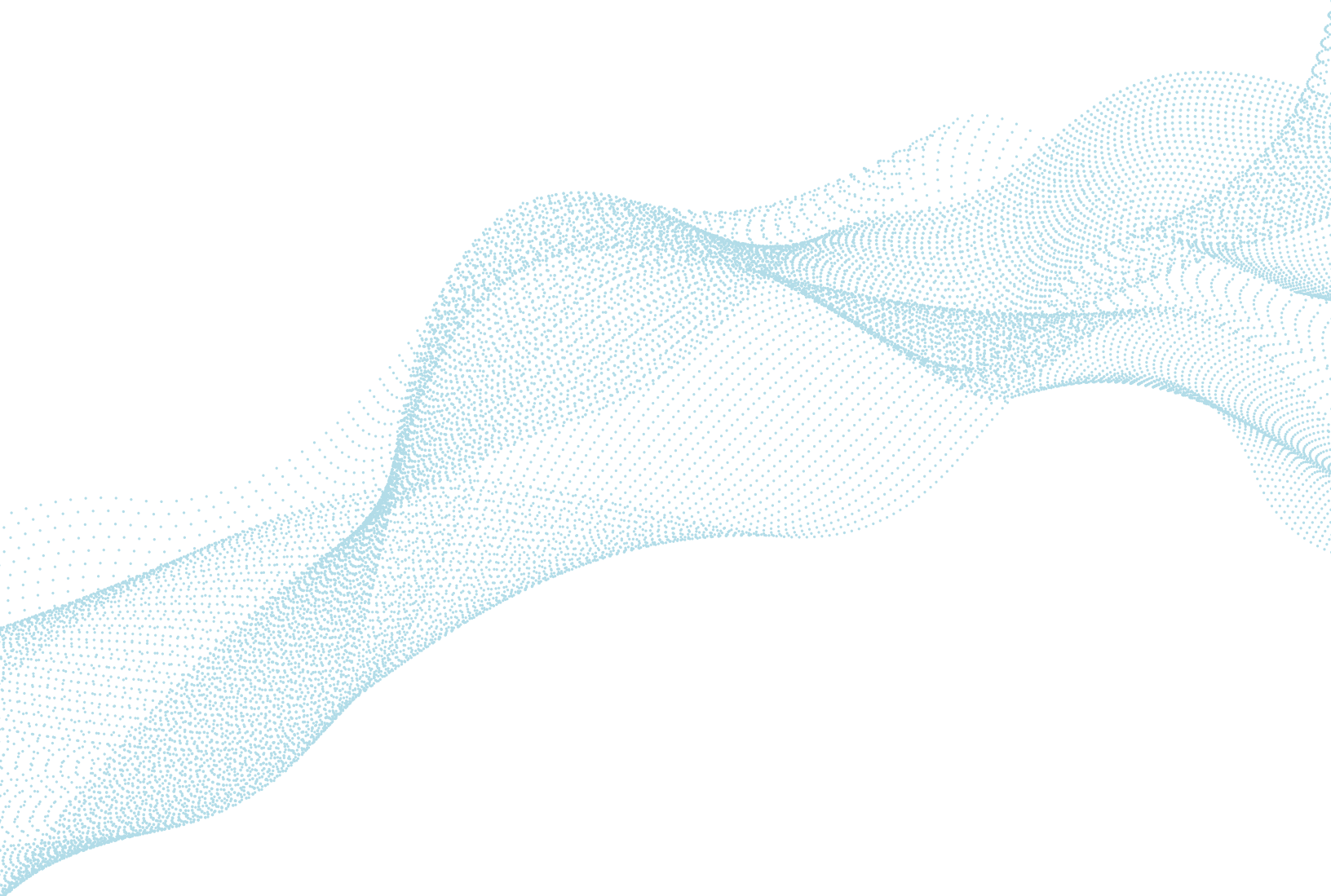
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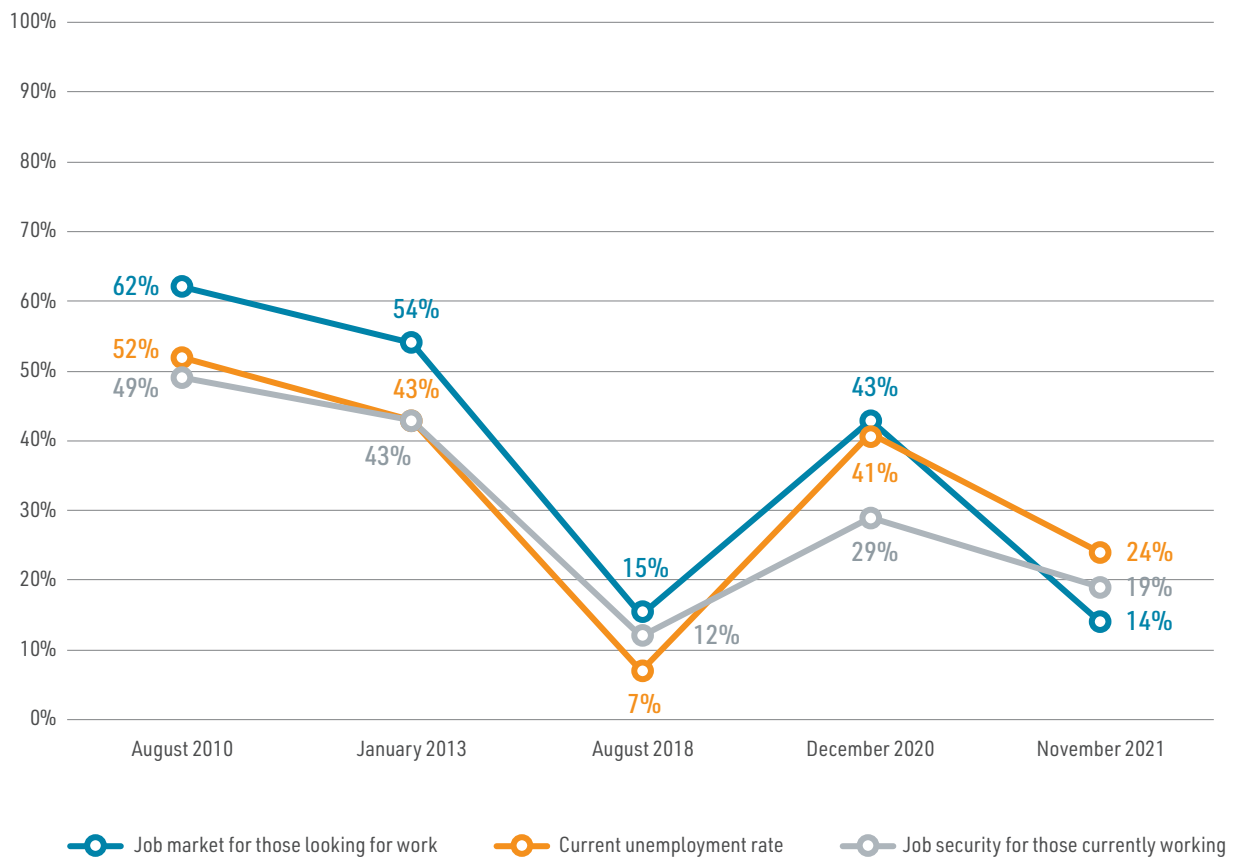


American Optimism about Jobs in 2021

As 2022 begins, American workers are more confident than they have been in more than a decade in their ability to find work if they need to, and generally are not very concerned about the job market or job security, according to the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development’s Work Trends national surveys conducted since 2010.¹ As the nation struggles to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, workers are confident about their job prospects, but worried about the **rising cost of living**. Optimism about job opportunities is similar to workers’ views in the **summer of 2018** when the national unemployment rate was 3.9%.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of Americans who say they were very concerned about the current unemployment rate, the job market for those looking for work, and job security for those working since 2010. Figure 2 shows the sum of the very/somewhat concerned responses. The data in Tables 1 and 2 accompany the data in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Percent Very Concerned about Jobs, Trend Data, 2010 to 2021, National Sample



¹ Percentage totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding. See page 11 for methodological information.

Figure 2: Percent Very/Somewhat Concerned about Jobs, Trend Data, 2010 to 2021, National Sample

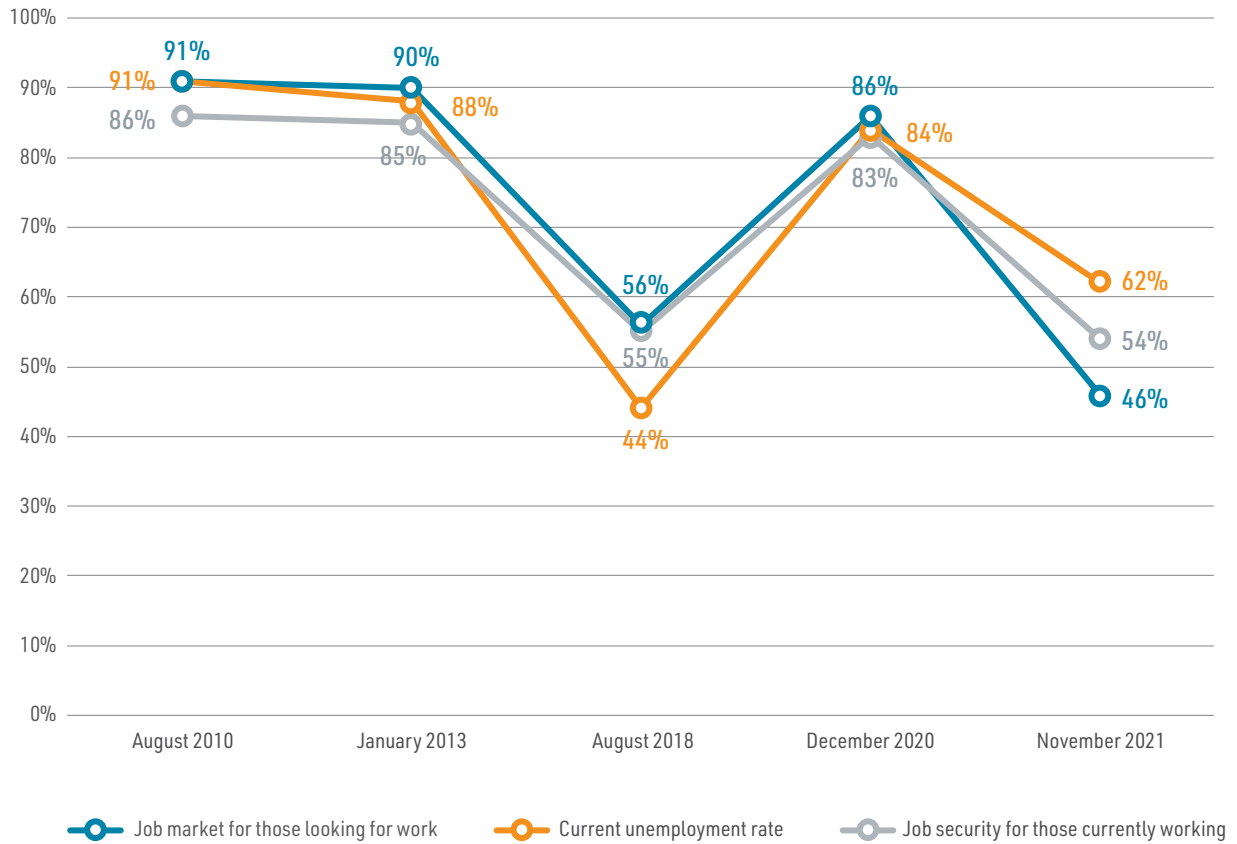


Table 1: Percent Very Concerned about Economic Indicators, Trend Data, 2010 to 2021, National Sample

	November 2021 ²	December 2020	August 2018	January 2013	August 2010
Job market for those looking for work	14%	43%	15%	54%	62%
Current unemployment rate	24%	41%	7%	43%	52%
Job security for those currently working	19%	29%	12%	43%	49%
Sample size*	1,004	809	827	1,077	818

*This table reports the lowest sample size of the three indicators asked in the survey for that time period; sample size may be higher.

Thinking about some economic issues...how concerned are you about [ITEM]? Very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not at all concerned (2020/2013/2010 – not concerned at all)?

² Fielded November 19 to 21, 2021, prior to the identification of the Omicron variant by the World Health Organization.

Table 2: Percent Very/Somewhat Concerned about Economic Indicators, Trend Data, 2010 to 2021, National Sample

	November 2021	December 2020	August 2018	January 2013	August 2010
Job market for those looking for work	46%	86%	56%	90%	91%
Current unemployment rate	62%	84%	44%	88%	91%
Job security for those currently working	54%	83%	55%	85%	86%
Sample size*	1,004	809	827	1,090	818

*This table reports the lowest sample size of the three indicators asked in the survey for that time period; sample size may be higher.

Thinking about some economic issues...how concerned are you about [ITEM]? Very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not at all concerned (2020/2013/2010 – not concerned at all)?

Comparing the 2009–2020 economic expansion since the Great Recession to the ongoing recovery from the pandemic-induced recession of 2020 reveals two important differences between the two crises. First, the “quits rate” in November 2021 was the highest measured on record (tying September 2021). Second, the unemployment rate following the Great Recession declined at a much slower pace during economic expansion/recovery, compared to the decline of the unemployment rate during the pandemic economy.

In December 2020, half of Americans surveyed by the Heldrich Center said economic conditions would likely be worse or the same in the next year, while the other half thought the economy would improve. One year later, Americans say things have indeed improved. Concern about the job market for job seekers and job security for workers is at or near levels measured in August 2018. However, this is not the case when Americans are asked to rate their concern about the current national unemployment rate.³ This is likely because:

- ▶ The national unemployment rate hit a historic high in March 2020 due to the initial pandemic surge. The sudden, massive peak of job loss, job change, and other household economic impacts were widespread, with families still reeling from those impacts almost two years later.
- ▶ Job gains in the fourth quarter of 2021 were not as extensive as expected, or hoped, especially for certain industries, populations of workers, and areas of the United States.
- ▶ Many workers are unsure about the significance of the unemployment rate as an economic indicator, something the Heldrich Center measured in a 2016 survey and has been considered by the Pew Research Center and other researchers.
- ▶ The unemployment rate does not take into account the number of Americans who have left the labor force, such as discouraged workers and early retirees, a widely reported phenomenon that has been part of the conversation of the lasting household impacts of the pandemic-induced recession. Alternative measures of labor utilization are less known by the public.
- ▶ At the time the November 2021 survey was fielded, the pandemic was ongoing, with the winter season approaching, but the Omicron variant not yet identified by the World Health Organization. In 2018, there was considerable optimism about a record-low unemployment rate, increasing wage and job growth, and an expanding economy.

Nearly two years into the pandemic economy, American workers express great confidence in their ability to find new jobs. This explains why so many are asking their employers for higher wages and better benefits and why others just quit their jobs in search of better opportunities.

³ Differences between the two time periods are outside of the margins of error for each survey (see page 11 for margins of error).

When asked specifically about finding work, American workers are much more optimistic about their prospects in 2021 than they were in 2010, and for some measures, than they were in 2018. In late 2021, three in four Americans said it is a good time to find a quality job (76%) and agree that “it’s not hard to find a job in America if you really want to work” (76%) (see Tables 3 and 4). At the end of 2021, 5 in 10 workers were very or extremely confident they can find work, compared to 3 in 10 workers in 2018, and 2 in 10 workers who expressed this confidence in January 2013 (see Table 5).

Table 3: Good Time/Bad Time to Find Quality Job, Trend Data, 2010 to 2021, National Sample

	November 2021	December 2020	August 2018	January 2013	August 2010
Good time	76%	27%	64%	27%	7%
Bad time	24%	73%	36%	73%	78%
Don’t know/other/refused	NA	NA	NA	NA	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Sample size	1,006	811	827	1,082	818

Thinking about the job situation in America today, would you say that now is a good time or (a) bad time to find a quality job?

Table 4: Finding a Job in America, Trend Data, 2010 to 2021, National Sample

	November 2021	December 2020	August 2010*
Agree	76%	65%	44%
Strongly agree	41%	24%	NA
Somewhat agree	34%	41%	NA
Disagree	25%	36%	56%
Somewhat disagree	15%	27%	NA
Strongly disagree	10%	9%	NA
Total	100%	100%	100%
Sample size	1,006	813	818

*asked as agree/disagree only

It’s not hard to find a job in America if you really want to work.

Table 5: Confidence in Finding New Job, Trend Data, 2010 to 2021, Employed Americans

	November 2021 ⁴	December 2020 ⁵	August 2018	January 2013	August 2010
Extremely confident	26%	10%	10%	8%	7%
Very confident	25%	17%	21%	10%	12%
Somewhat confident	29%	35%	42%	34%	30%
Not very confident	16%	26%	21%	30%	30%
Not at all confident	5%	13%	7%	18%	20%
Don't know/refused	NA	NA	NA	NA	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Sample size	575	458	457	673	326

How confident are you that if you lost or wanted to leave your current job, you could find another job as good or better?

⁴ Based on employed full time or part time, or retired but working (65+ currently employed, N=40).

⁵ Based on employed full time or part time, or retired but working (retired but working, N=35).

2021 and 2018: Contextualizing the (Positive) Numbers

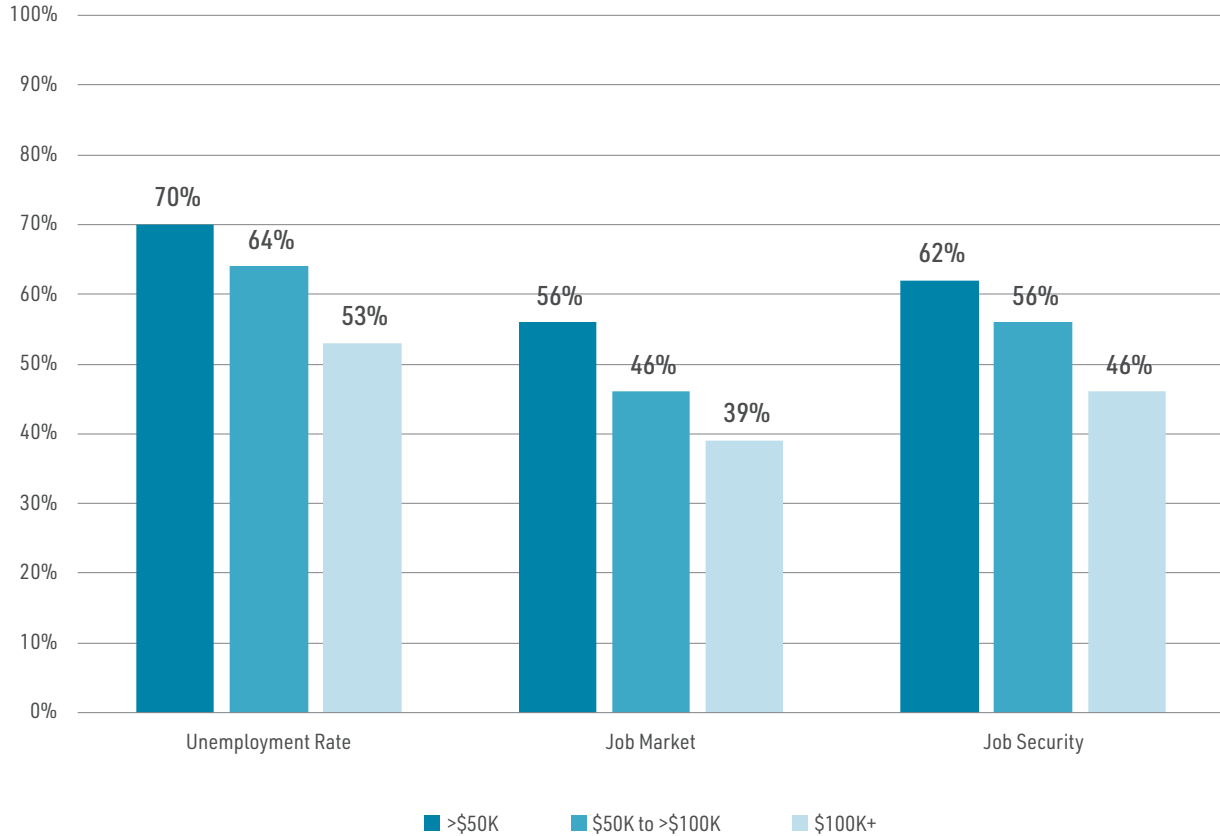
Even as conditions improved in 2021, Americans' attitudes about the unemployment rate, the job market, and job security are split as 2022 begins. There were similar patterns in 2018 when there had been a clear improvement in attitudes in the years following the Great Recession. Roughly half of the population said they were very or somewhat concerned about these indicators, and the other half reported being not too or not at all concerned (see Table 2). In both 2021 and 2018, there were clear differences in reported levels of concern by household income and age (see Figures 3 to 6).

In 2021, lower-income households (those earning less than \$50,000 annually) were more likely to say they are very or somewhat concerned about the current unemployment rate, the job market for those looking for work, and job security for workers, compared to the nation's highest earners (those making at least \$100,000 per year) (see Figure 3). Young adults (ages 18 to 34) also are more likely to say they are very or somewhat concerned about the job market and job security, compared to older adults (see Figure 5). In 2018, concern about the unemployment rate varied by age, but not for job market or job security (see Figure 6). Still, household income was a clear predictor of concern (Figure 4).

While poll numbers in 2021 and 2018 are comparable, the devil is in the details. Asking Americans to describe their attitudes about various aspects of employment and unemployment, and disaggregating those opinions by key socioeconomic demographics, paints a clearer picture of economic attitudes as they pertain to jobs, and why Americans are split, even before the Omicron variant spread, or in times of economic expansion.

Figure 3: Percent Very/Somewhat Concerned about Jobs, November 2021, National Sample by Household Income

7 in 10 Americans earning less than \$50K a year said they were very or somewhat concerned about the unemployment rate in late 2021, compared to 5 in 10 \$100K+ earners

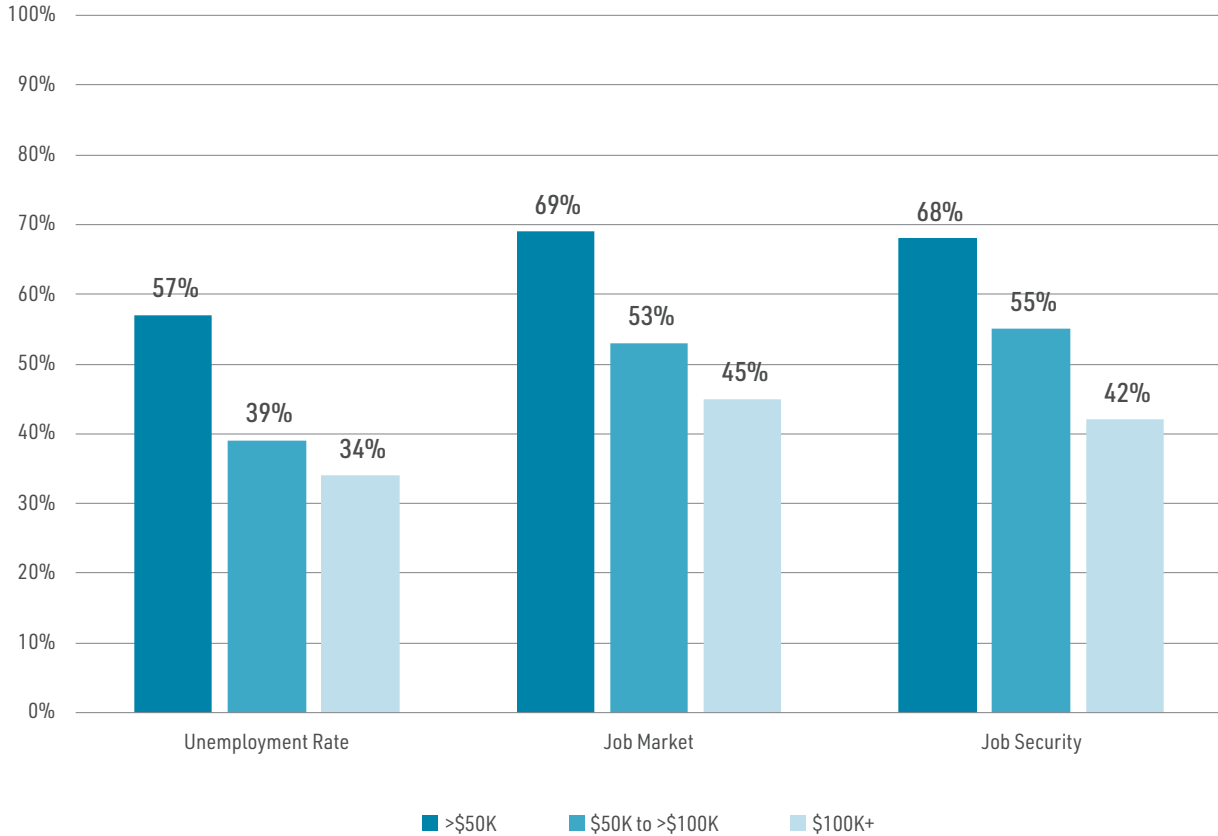


Sample sizes: >\$50K, N=292; \$50K to >\$100K, N=280; \$100K+, N=447

Statistically significant differences (chi-square) at p<.05 level by household income, between the lowest and highest earners, when asking about the unemployment rate, the job market, and job security in 2021

Figure 4: Percent Very/Somewhat Concerned about Jobs, August 2018, National Sample by Household Income

6 in 10 Americans earning less than \$50K a year said they were very or somewhat concerned about the unemployment rate in mid-2018, compared to 3 in 10 \$100K+ earners

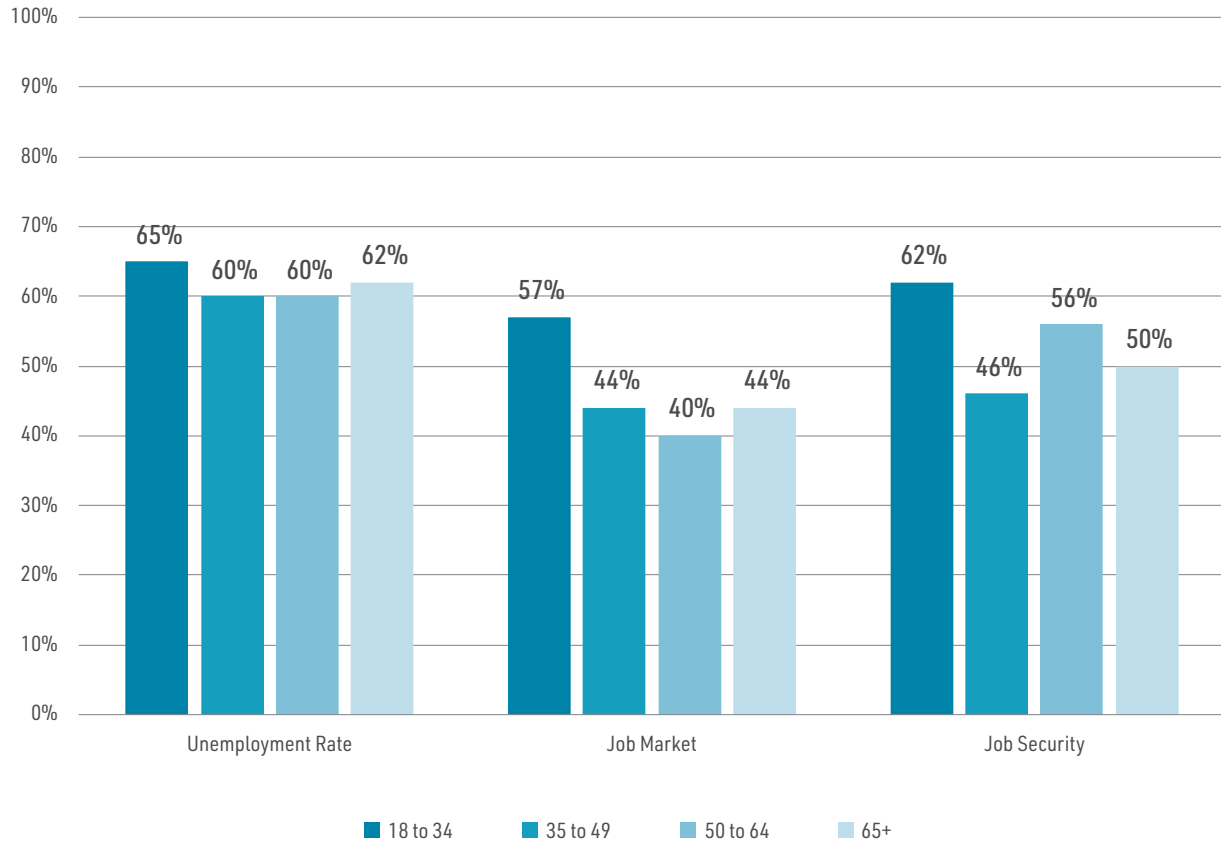


Sample sizes: >\$50K, N=275; \$50K to >\$100K, N=262; \$100K+, N=292

Statistically significant differences (chi-square) at p<.05 level by household income, between the lowest earners and all others, when asking about the unemployment rate, the job market, and job security in 2018

Figure 5: Percent Very/Somewhat Concerned about Jobs, November 2021, National Sample by Age

6 in 10 Americans of all ages were concerned about the unemployment rate in late 2021; differences are apparent when asking about the job market and job security

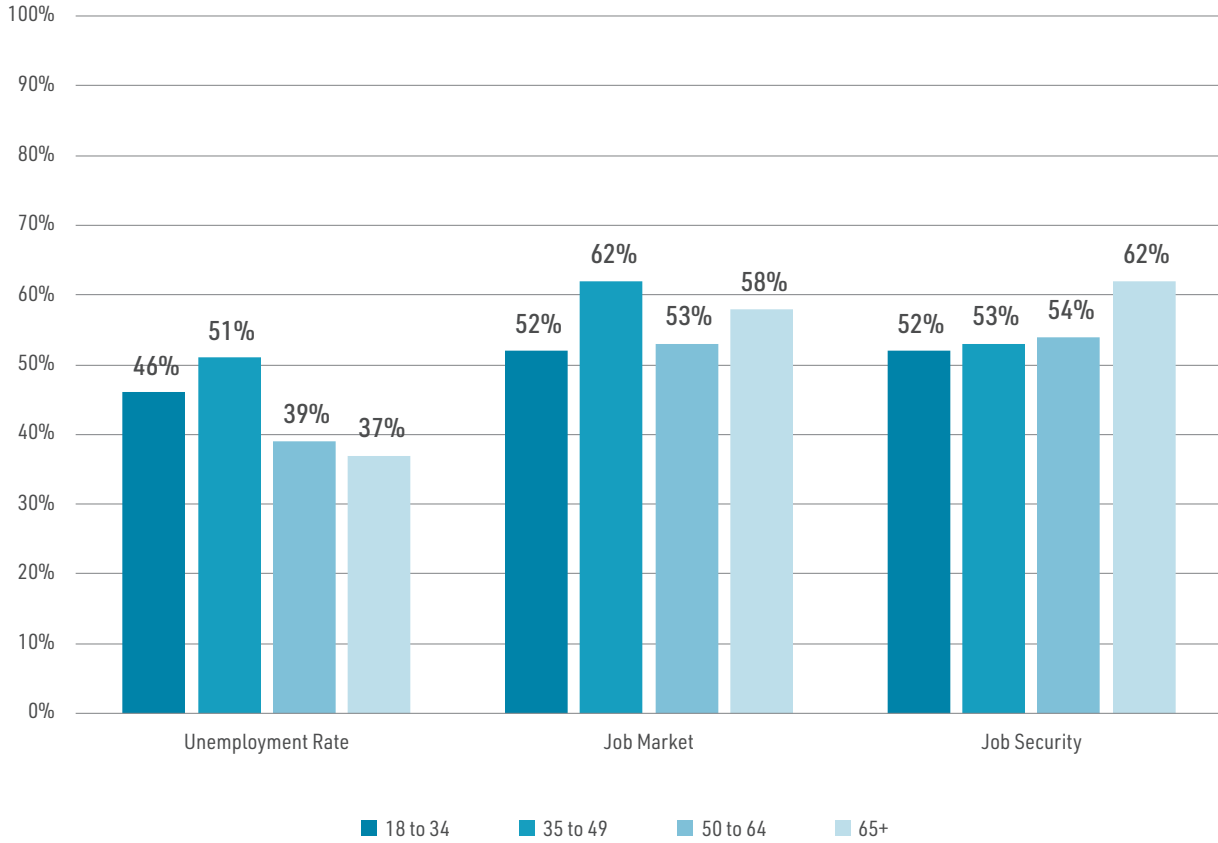


Sample sizes: >\$50K, N=275; \$50K to >\$100K, N=262; \$100K+, N=292

Statistically significant differences (chi-square) at p<.05 level by age when asking about the job market (youngest and all others) in 2021

Figure 6: Percent Very/Somewhat Concerned about Jobs, August 2018, National Sample by Age

In 2018, Americans under 50 were more likely to say they were concerned about the unemployment rate, compared to Americans over 50



Sample sizes: 18 to 34, N=199; 35 to 49, N=169; 50 to 64, N=255; 65+, N=200

Statistically significant differences (chi-square) at p<.05 level by age (18 to 49 and 50+ aggregated) when asking about the unemployment rate in 2018

How we Did this

See the [December 2021 Heldrich Center press release](#) and [topline](#) for methodological information describing the November 2021 survey and sample composition (note that the December 2021 press release describes findings based on the American labor force, rather than the total survey sample). The surveys were fielded online to national probability samples of U.S. residents age 18 or older. The studies have been weighted on various demographic categories such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, census region, education, and household income. Survey dates, margins of error, and links to topline questionnaires for Work Trends surveys referenced in this brief are listed below.⁶ Work Trends reports, briefs, and topline since 1999 can be found [here](#).⁷

December 2020

December 4 to 14, 2020

Margin of error: +/- 3.8%

August 2018

August 8 to 19, 2018

Margin of error: +/-3.4%

January 2013

January 9 to 16, 2013

Margin of error: +/- 3.0%

August 2010

July 19 to August 6, 2010

Margin of error: +/- 4.0%

⁶ Margins of error are higher for subgroups (such as employed Americans).

⁷ When comparing the numbers in this brief with the trend data presented in the links, percentages may be greater or less by one percentage point due to rounding.

Background

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey was founded as a research and policy organization devoted to strengthening New Jersey's and the nation's workforce during a time of global economic change. The Heldrich Center researches and puts to work strategies that increase worker skills and employability, strengthen the ability of companies to compete, create jobs where they are needed, and improve the quality and performance of the workforce development system. Since 1997, the Heldrich Center has experienced rapid growth, working with federal and state government partners, Fortune 100 companies, and major foundations. The center embodies its slogan "Solutions at Work" by teaming with partners and clients to translate cutting-edge research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, unions, schools, community-based organizations, and government officials can leverage to strengthen the nation's workforce.

Since its inception, the Heldrich Center has sought to inform employers, union leaders, policymakers, community members, the media, and academic communities about critical workforce and education issues that relate to the emerging global economy. To better understand the public's attitudes about work, employers, and the government, and improve workplace practices and policy, the Heldrich Center produces the Work Trends surveys on a regular basis. (The complete set of reports is available at www.heldrich.rutgers.edu). The surveys poll the general public on critical workforce issues facing Americans and American businesses. The survey findings are promoted widely to the media and national constituencies. The series is directed by Carl E. Van Horn, Ph.D., Director of the Heldrich Center and Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at Rutgers University.

Trends in American Opinions about Jobs, 2010 to 2021 continues to advance the goals of the Work Trends series to give American workers a voice in the national economic policy debates, and thereby provides policymakers and employers with reliable insights into how workers across the nation are judging and acting upon the realities of work and the workplace.

The authors of this brief were Jessica Starace, MPP and Carl Van Horn, Ph.D. Heldrich Center research staff assisted with the production of this brief. InBum Chung was the graphic designer. Robb C. Sewell was the editor.