

Background

Analyses of the pervasiveness of explicit and perceived racial discrimination in the U.S. workplace and the significant, long-lasting socioeconomic and health impacts on workers and employers have been documented in academic literature in the past several decades (Bobo & Suh, 2000; Lee & Liu, 1999; Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Chan, Brief, & Bradley, 2003; Bastos, Celeste, Faerstein, & Barros, 2010; Williams, 2016; Burkard, Boticki, & Madson, 2002; Auer & Ruedin, 2019; Pager, Western, & Bonikowski, 2009). The implications of racial discrimination in the workplace include negative effects on workers' attitudes about work, their physical and psychological health, and the perceived diversity climate and organizational behaviors that characterize their workplaces. One meta-analysis concluded that an increase in perceived racial discrimination in the workplace leads to a decline in job satisfaction, physical health, psychological health, organizational citizenship behavior and perceived diversity climate, and an increase in coping behavior (Triana, Jayasinghe, & Pieper, 2015; Jagustyn, 2010). Furthermore, the characteristics of the workplace environment are an integral part of operationalizing the quality of a job in an organization, which is related to productivity and performance, absenteeism, turnover, and the physical and psychological health of the worker.

Actual or perceived discrimination experienced in workers' daily interactions with their colleagues and supervisors can affect hiring, pay, task assignment, and promotional opportunities (Hite, 2004; Hammond, Gillen, & Yen, 2010). How workers think about discrimination has some bearing on diversity, equity, and inclusion practices that have emerged in the U.S. workplace in recent years. The implications for these initiatives in U.S. companies are immense (Dixon-Fyle, Dolan, Hunt, & Prince, 2020). These realities have serious implications for workers' career advancement, their earning potential, and ultimately their lifetime economic mobility (Hughes & Dodge, 1997; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2017; Loprest, Katz, & Shakesprere, 2021; Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Chan, Brief, & Bradley, 2003; Brown, 2020).

Non-White individuals experience more stress while on the job related to these realities and suffer from poorer physical and mental health, which in turn affects their productivity and performance (McCluney, Schmitz, Hicken, & Sonnega, 2018; Williams, 2015; Maese & Lloyd 2021). The negative health impacts are often reflected in lower job performance, absenteeism, and higher turnover rates, and often lead to depression and lower self-esteem in employees. Furthermore, not all workers will interpret workplace conditions, job characteristics, and policies in the same way due to culture, experiences, and their racial/ethnic background, which is a key finding of a John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development study conducted in 2002 and in other research (Dixon, Storen, & Van Horn, 2002). For example, the Pew Research Center found clear differences between the attitudes of Black workers and White workers about the prevalence of these issues and the mechanisms that are needed to bring about change (Gonzalez-Berrera & Lopez, 2020). Opinions varied between the groups on ways that promotion and advancement opportunities, hiring decisions, and even daily interactions among workers and their colleagues were implicitly or explicitly biased (Pew Research Center, 2016; Funk & Parker, 2018; Horowitz, Parker, Brown, & Cox, 2020). Barriers to taking action over racial discrimination include having sufficient evidence and proof, knowledge of workplace procedures to file a complaint, fear of job loss, and lack of time and energy and potential stigma among co-workers (Rolfe, Dhudwar, George, & Metcalf, 2009). The inherent burden of combating workplace discrimination is borne by workers, due to information and power imbalances and

therefore requires incentivizing employers and empowering government with the tools needed to combat these issues (Wilson, 2022). These realities create challenges when managing disputes, both formally and informally, and ultimately remedying discrimination in the workplace (Hirsh & Lyons, 2010).

Over the past five years, public opinion studies have explored workplace discrimination in the United States, though **few have painted a thorough, detailed picture of these experiences within the workplace using a robust sample of the labor force.** Leading research organizations conducting this research over the past five years have been limited in either the scope of the project (questions asked of the sample) or the target sample type or size (category and number of respondents who were surveyed). Rigorous opinion research is needed to examine the attitudes and experiences of Asian-American, Black, Latino, and White workers, and inform employers and policymakers to help eliminate the actual and perceived biases and discrimination that pervade hiring decisions, advancement opportunities, and the climate of the workplace.

The goals of the Heldrich Center's research project were to conduct a landscape study of workers' perceptions and opinions about three specific sub-topics:

1. the problem of racial and ethnic discrimination in the workplace;
2. the role that diversity, equity, and inclusion play in the workplace; and
3. the solutions that workers **perceive** as impactful/effective to address discrimination, diversity, equity, and inclusion to improve the economic mobility of workers of color, especially women and low-wage workers (for a summary of the literature, see Appendix A).

Using opinion surveys and qualitative interviews, this project documents the current reality of demographic disparity in the workplace. As it relates to opinions about diversity, equity, inclusion, and discrimination, this project also explores strategies, policies, procedures, and programs that could contribute to improving diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and reducing actual and perceived discrimination, in the United States.⁶

Research Questions

The research team explored the following dimensions of how workers perceive racial inequity and discrimination in the U.S. workplace to guide the project activities:

1. To what extent are current workplace policies and practices perceived to have disparate impacts on workers of different races and genders?
2. What are workers' perceptions of the value of various diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in their workplace? Are there promising diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies, according to the respondents, that government, business, labor, and philanthropies should further evaluate?
3. What worker benefits and policies might improve job quality and reduce the impacts of workplace discrimination?
4. In what ways can equitable workplaces and economic mobility be advanced for people of color (Black, Latino, and Asian American), low-wage earners, and women?
5. What public policies and other levers might incentivize employers to build more equitable workplaces and ensure economic mobility for people of color, low-wage earners, and women?

Survey Goals and Methods

1. What are workers' perceptions of discrimination in the workplace and how do these compare with findings from research conducted by the Heldrich Center [20 years ago](#) (Dixon, Storen, & Van Horn, 2002)?
2. How do individuals perceive and experience workplace discrimination?
3. What are employer responses to workplace discrimination?
4. What is happening in smaller workplaces (fewer than 250 workers) compared to workplaces with 250 or more employees?
5. How do workers perceive diversity vs. equity vs. inclusion?
6. What are the most important topics that require additional investigation?

This study asks workers their **opinions** of the various diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that may or may not be present in the workplace, and how helpful they are or might be, especially of those workers who say that racial and ethnic discrimination in the workplace is a problem. While the survey does not drill down into specifics of inclusivity, for example, it does describe what workers think about inclusivity by describing examples from their work experiences that highlight promising things that have may have affected their perceptions of inclusion in the workplace.

The project team utilized a mixed-methods research approach in four phases of activities to produce rich primary data and deliverables that will be valuable to workers, human resources professionals, business leaders, worker advocates, foundations, and policymakers. The centerpiece of the effort is a nationally representative survey, informed by a pilot test survey (and individual interviews of respondents), which offered the best research method to reliably capture the opinions of U.S. workers. Prior to conducting the survey, the team reviewed literature, including key concepts and previous studies and surveys. Heldrich Center researchers identified and conducted six virtual in-depth interviews with practitioners and researchers from leading organizations and universities who are experts in the fields of economics, business, psychology, sociology, and public policy. These subject-matter experts informed the development of the survey and enriched the project's storytelling. Interview questions focused on economic mobility and discrimination, and what might improve the national survey and/or the project. These preparatory steps were taken as part of a pilot survey to enhance the quality of the main survey (see Appendix B for a complete description of the project approach and methods).

Survey Overview

The Heldrich Center conducted this study using NORC’s AmeriSpeak® panel and Lucid’s panel for the sample source (to obtain an additional qualifying employed sample by distinct racial and ethnic groups). The former is a probability-based panel and the latter is a non-probability panel. The survey was offered in English and Spanish and was administered in two modes for the AmeriSpeak® respondents depending on the preference of the respondent provided during the panel recruitment: self-administered by the respondent online, or administered over the telephone by a live interviewer. For non-probability respondents, all completed interviews were self-administered by the respondent online. Final data were weighted using NORC’s TrueNorth Calibration methodology.

The probability-based, calibrated sample includes 3,277 U.S. workers: 605 Asian Americans, 915 Blacks, 802 Latinos, and 955 Whites, employed full or part time.⁷ Table 3 shows the margins of error for each, as well as a breakdown of the sample composition of the total sample of U.S. workers. Sample characteristics are included in Appendix B. One-half of the sample was given “unfair treatment” as a prompt for various questions, while the other half of the sample was given “what you consider to be discrimination” as a prompt. Key definitions of terms used in the survey, such as “people of color” and “discriminated,” are described in Appendix B. The topline and survey questionnaire are presented in Appendix C.

All Workers	Asian-American Workers	Black Workers	Latino Workers	White Workers
+/- 2.89%	+/- 5.39%	+/- 4.35%	+/- 5.23%	+/- 4.22%

Table 3: Margins of Error for Survey Samples

Margins of error will be higher for questions where there is additional disaggregation (i.e., by income or gender identity, or for a filtered survey question).