

REPORT

# Barriers to Employment Opportunity in the Baltimore Region

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2019 Survey  
of Job Seekers

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# Introduction

In 2014, the Baltimore Metropolitan Council (BMC) released a study of [Barriers to Employment Opportunities in the Baltimore Region](#), as part of a program called the Opportunity Collaborative. The Opportunity Collaborative was a consortium of partners led by BMC that developed regional plans in the areas of housing, transportation and workforce development, with funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The 2014 barriers study was based on a literature review, labor market analysis and interviews with workforce development managers throughout the region. Central to the study was a survey of job seekers in the Baltimore region. The 2014 study found that many job seekers in the Baltimore region face a complex array of barriers from a multitude of sources including financial burdens, industry and employer requirements, social issues, transportation difficulties, structural racism, and educational challenges.

This report aims to build on the work of the Opportunity Collaborative by analyzing how barriers to employment opportunity continue to affect job seekers in the Baltimore region. During the summer of 2019, BMC and local workforce agencies rereleased the survey from the 2014 study. The survey was carried out by workforce development board staff in Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Cecil, Harford, and Howard Counties as well as Baltimore City. Survey takers were clients of the local workforce boards who have or are currently utilizing American Job Center services. In total, the survey yielded over 750 respondents in the region. Throughout the report, survey respondents are referred to as job seekers.

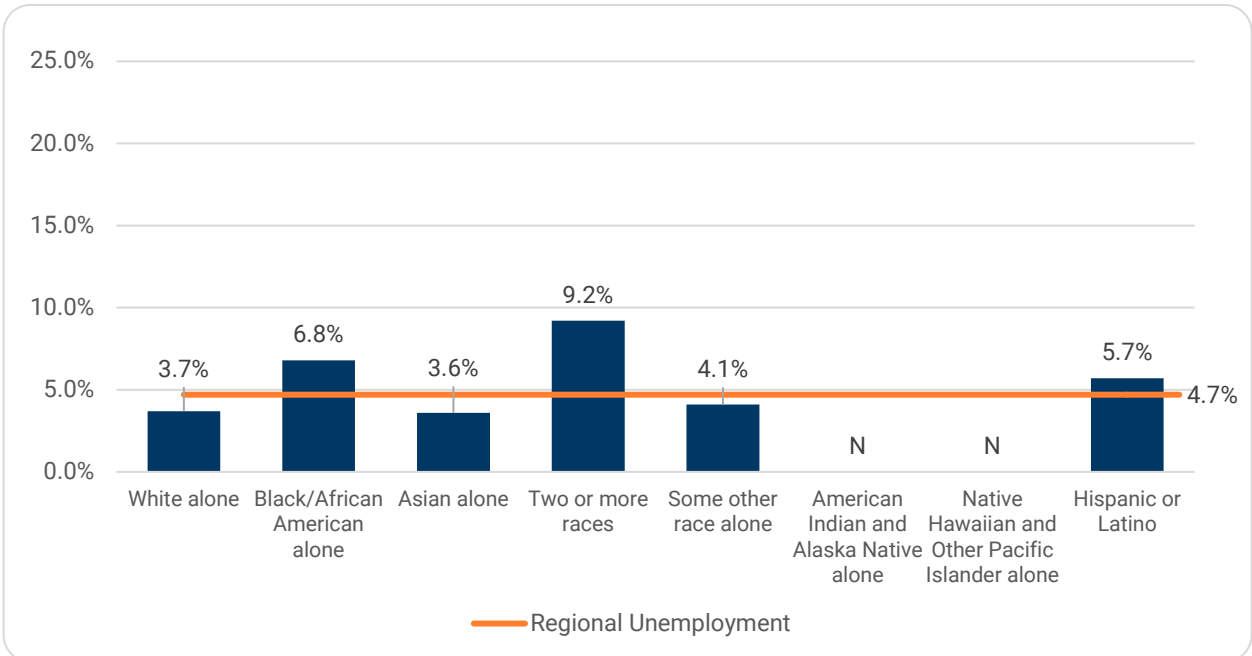
This report summarizes and analyzes the results of this survey, with an eye towards better understanding the challenges our job seekers face in obtaining stable and family-supporting employment. The report, and the survey data it is based on, are intended to inform and support the policies and decisions that shape workforce development and adult education programming in the Baltimore region.

## A Growing Economy: 2014 to 2018

In 2014, when the Opportunity Collaborative study of barriers to employment opportunity was published, the U.S. and the Baltimore region were still recovering from the recession that began in late 2007. According to the American Community Survey (ACS), unemployment in the region peaked at 9.4% in 2011 and had decreased to 6.8% by 2014.

In the intervening years, the Baltimore region economy has improved substantially, experiencing continued economic growth and declines in unemployment. Gross Regional Product reached \$166 billion by 2017, and experienced real growth of 4.5% over the 2014 to 2017 time period<sup>1</sup>. The number of jobs in the region increased by 5.1% (more than 65,000) from 2014 to 2018<sup>2</sup>. Unemployment has continued to decline over the same period, from 6.8% in 2014 to 4.7% in 2018. However, the benefits of the recovery have not been distributed equally, and disparities in employment patterns among those in the labor force (those employed or available for work) remain despite low unemployment rates. These disparities are reflected in unemployment rates that exceed the regional average for specific populations including racial minorities, those in poverty, and those with a high school diploma or less (see Figures 1 and 2). For example, African-Americans comprise 28.6% of the region’s working age population but account for over 40% of all unemployed people.

**Figure 1. Unemployment Rates by Race and Ethnicity in the Baltimore MSA: 2018**

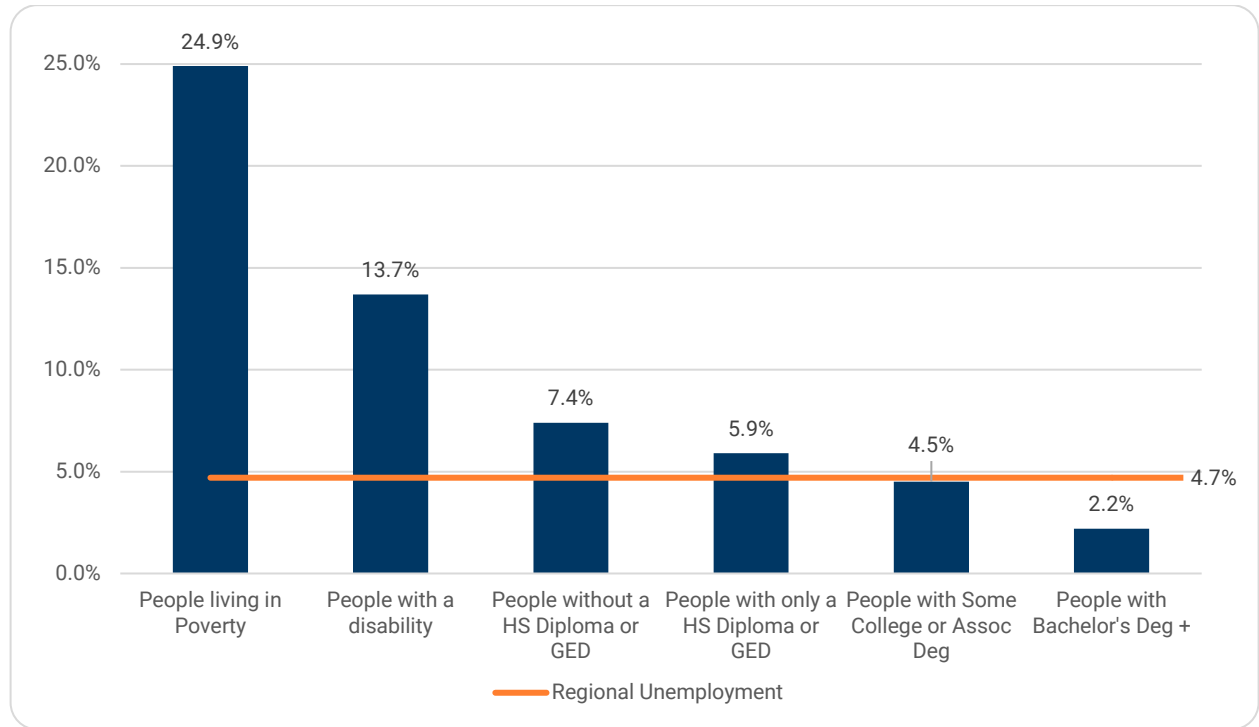


N=Data cannot be displayed because the number of sample cases is too small. Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2018 1-Year Estimates: Table S2301

Unemployment disparities are even more stark for adults living in poverty as they account for approximately 9% of the region’s working age population and over a quarter (27%) of the unemployed.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Gross Domestic Product by Metropolitan Area, 2017 data tables.  
<sup>2</sup> Source: Emsi 2019.3, QCEW employees.

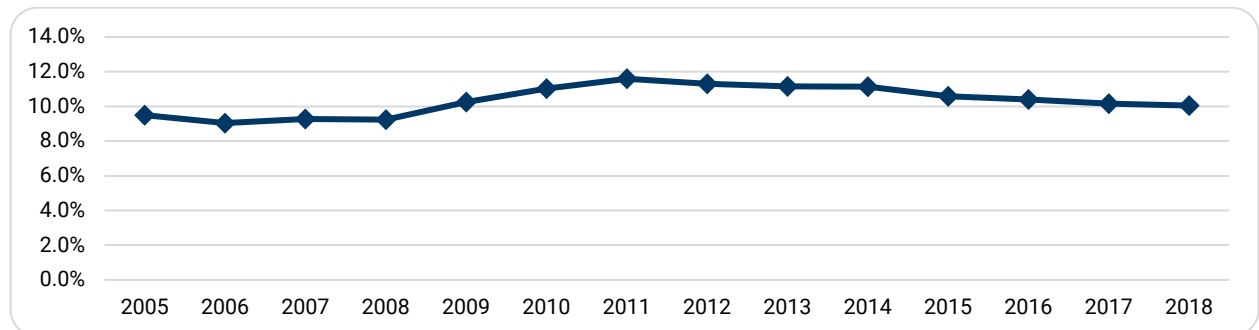
**Figure 2. Unemployment Rates by Selected Characteristics in the Baltimore MSA: 2018**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2018 1-Year Estimates: Table S2301

The poverty rate climbed rapidly with the onset of the recession, and peaked at 11.6% in 2011. While the poverty rate has since decreased, it remains above pre-recession estimates at 10.1% in 2018, over a full point higher than the low of 9.0% recorded in 2006.

**Figure 3. Poverty Rate in the Baltimore MSA: 2005-2018**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates: Table S1701

This updated survey finds that barriers to employment opportunity continue to impact job seekers in the Baltimore region in complex and interconnected ways. Indeed, on average, survey respondents faced over nine different barriers from the following categories: education, training, and skills; financial; housing and transportation; industry and career; and social.

**Figure 4: Barriers to Employment Opportunity by Category**

### Education, Training, and Skills

- Difficulties using technology and computers
- Difficulties with math
- Difficulties with reading and literacy
- Don't know where to get training
- No HS diploma or GED

### Industry and Career

- Laid off and I need new skills
- Limited work experience
- Not sure how to search for a job
- Not sure what job or career I want to have
- Trouble searching/applying for jobs online

### Financial

- Can't afford professional clothes, a bus ticket, etc.
- Cost of training or education is too high
- Difficulties paying child support
- Earn too much to qualify for DSS/assistance programs
- Jobs I find don't pay enough to cover

### Social

- Can't find affordable child care
- Can get a job, but can't keep a job
- Criminal record
- Don't understand the culture of work (what to say, how to act)
- Drug or alcohol abuse or addiction
- Getting to work on time, communicating with boss/co-workers
- Health problems
- Mental health issues
- Personal support system problems

### Housing and Transportation

- Can't find permanent housing
- Can't get to work or get home using public transportation
- Don't have a driver's license
- Don't have reliable/consistent methods of contact
- Have a bad driving record

Taken alone, these barriers may seem surmountable. Taken together, they continue to separate many of our region’s job seekers from economic opportunity. When data is disaggregated by characteristics such as race, gender, or educational attainment, it is apparent that barriers have disparate impacts. For example, persons with a high school diploma or less face both greater numbers of barriers collectively as well as disproportionate shares of most individual barriers.

## Methodology

Study results are based on a survey of over 750 respondents from Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Cecil, Harford, and Howard Counties as well as Baltimore City. Staff at American Job Centers within each jurisdiction collected survey responses from June through September of 2019.

In addition to demographic characteristics, survey respondents were asked to rate their personal experience with 29 barriers to employment opportunity on a scale of 0 to 5. To simplify the presentation of the analysis, survey responses are categorized as not a problem (rating of 0), minor barrier (rating of 1, 2, or 3) and major barrier (rating of 4 or 5). The number of complete survey responses (n=768) was relatively evenly distributed across jurisdictions, as shown in Figure 5. However, the working age population is not. As a result, survey responses were weighted by the working age population in each jurisdiction.

**Figure 5. Survey Responses by Jurisdiction**

Jurisdiction of Residence	Responses	Share
Anne Arundel County	110	14.3%
Baltimore City	99	12.9%
Baltimore County	114	14.8%
Carroll County	115	15.0%
Cecil County	66	8.6%
Harford County	128	16.7%
Howard County	136	17.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>768</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

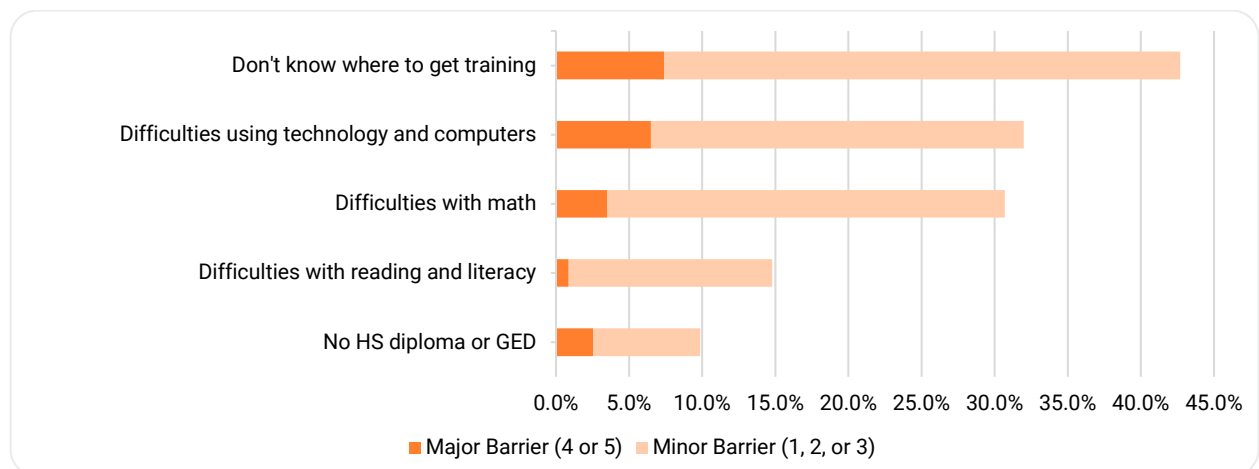
# Education, Training, and Skills Barriers

## Education, Training, and Skills

- Difficulties using technology and computers
- Difficulties with math
- Difficulties with reading and literacy
- Don't know where to get training
- No HS diploma or GED

The top two most frequently cited education, training, and skills barriers are related to accessing training and use of technology. More than 40% of job seekers reported difficulties accessing training opportunities, while over 30% reported difficulties using technology and computers. A high school diploma as well as basic math and reading skills are a baseline necessity for many jobs. However, nearly 10% of survey respondents cited having no high school diploma or GED, 15% cited difficulties with reading and literacy, and over 30% cited difficulties with math as a barrier.

**Figure 6. Education, Training, and Skills Barriers: Percentage of Job Seekers Encountering Barrier**



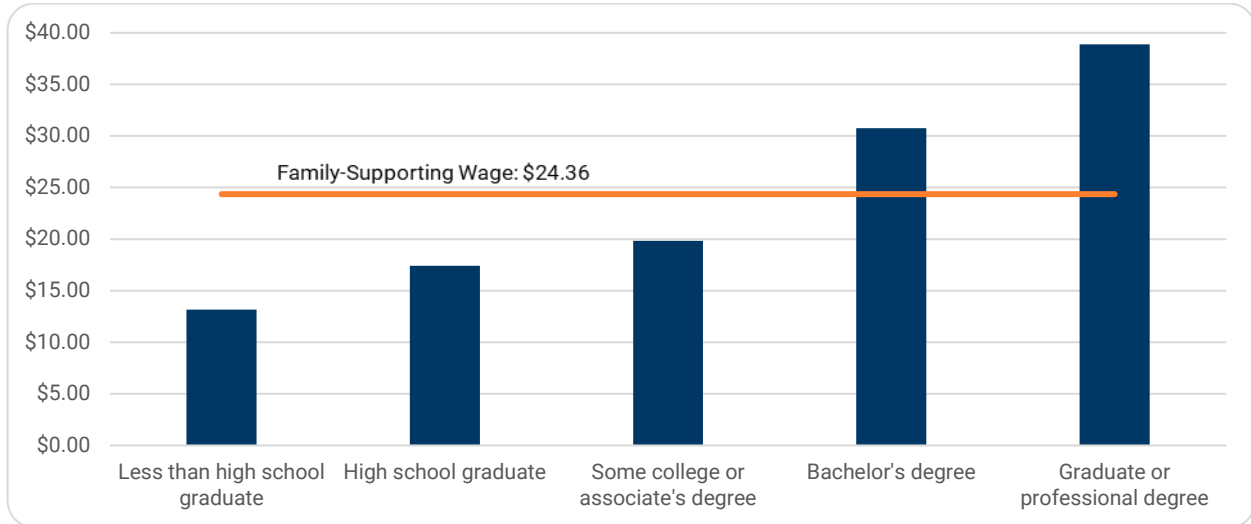
Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768. Responses are weighted by working age population in each jurisdiction

Higher levels of educational attainment, training and skills are linked to higher wages (see figure 7). They are also necessary to access many of the jobs projected over the next



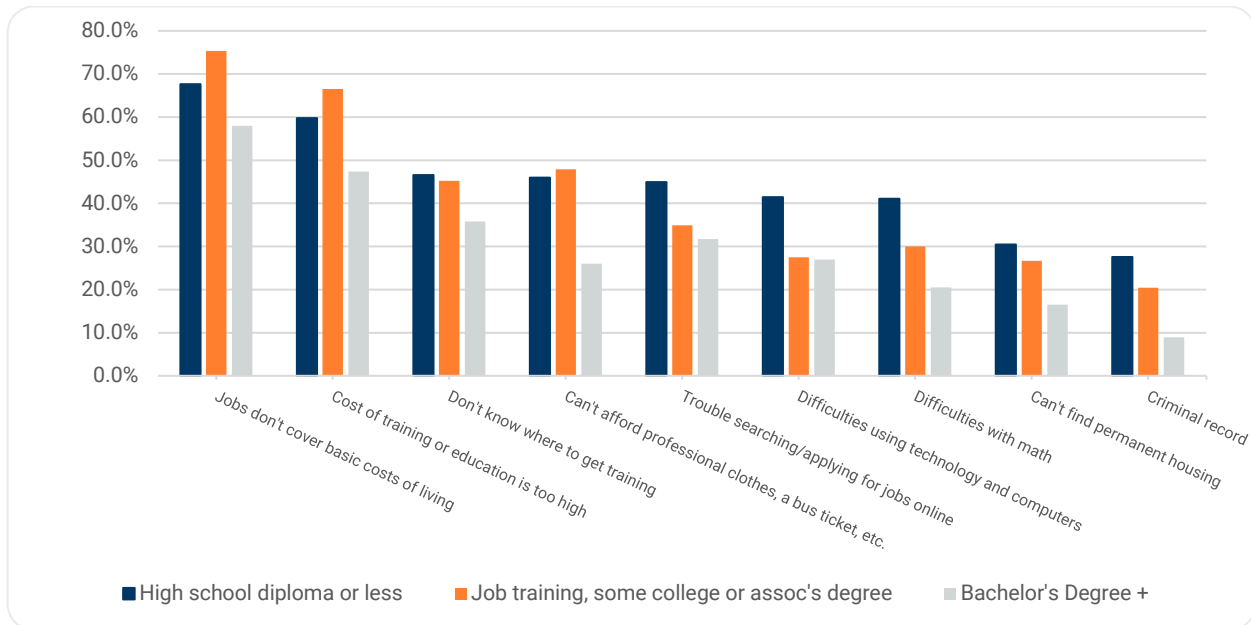
decade. More than 72% of the total demand for jobs paying a family-supporting wage over the next decade have a typical entry-level of education greater than a high school diploma<sup>3</sup>. In addition, survey results indicate that those with less than a Bachelor's degree are more likely to struggle with employment barriers, as evidenced in figure 8.

**Figure 7. Median Hourly Earnings by Educational Attainment: 2018**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates: Table B20004

**Figure 8. Selected Barriers to Employment Opportunity by Level of Educational Attainment**



Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768. Responses are weighted by working age population in each jurisdiction

<sup>3</sup> Total demand is equal to new jobs created plus separations. Separations are comprised of people changing occupations and labor force exits. The family-supporting hourly wage of \$24.36 is derived from MIT's living wage calculator. It is derived by averaging a living wage for three of the most common family types in Baltimore City. For more information on Family-Supporting Jobs, please see [BMC's Family-Supporting Jobs Report](#).

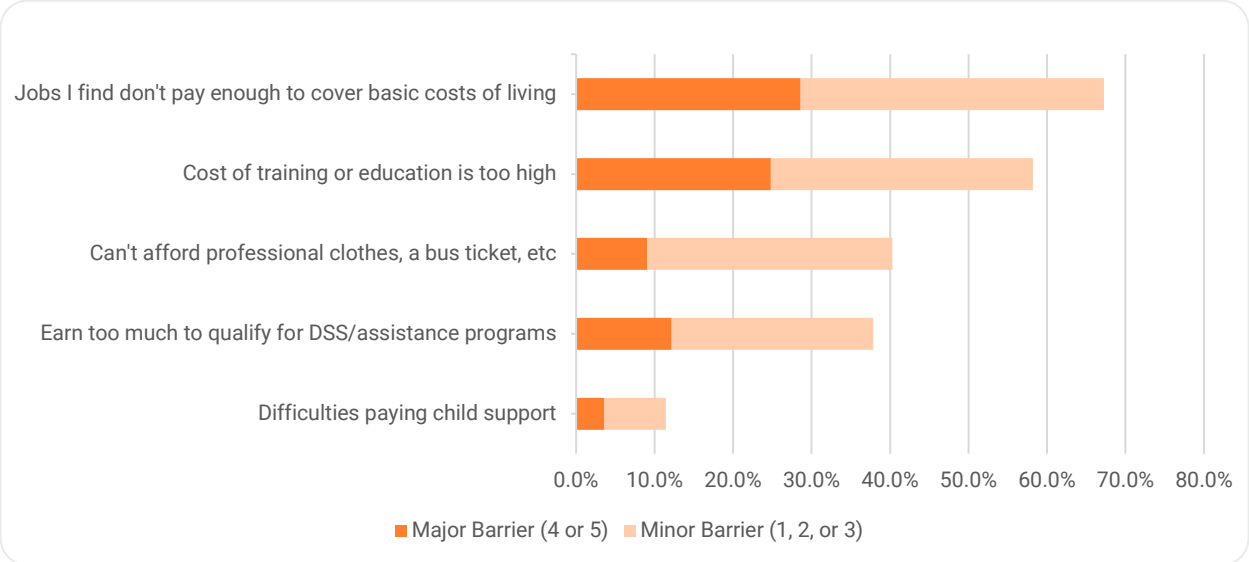
# Financial Barriers

## Financial

- Can't afford professional clothes, a bus ticket, etc.
- Cost of training or education is too high
- Difficulties paying child support
- Earn too much to qualify for DSS/assistance programs
- Jobs I find don't pay enough to cover basic costs of living

Job seekers consistently identified financial issues as a barrier to employment opportunity. Of the 29 barriers surveyed, the top two were financial in nature. More than two-thirds said that the jobs they find don't pay enough to cover their basic costs of living. While increasing levels of educational attainment and training are linked to higher wages, nearly 60% of job seekers reported that education and training opportunities are too expensive. In addition, more than 40% of job seekers reported difficulties affording the items they need for work.

**Figure 9. Financial Barriers: Percentage of Job Seekers Encountering Barrier**

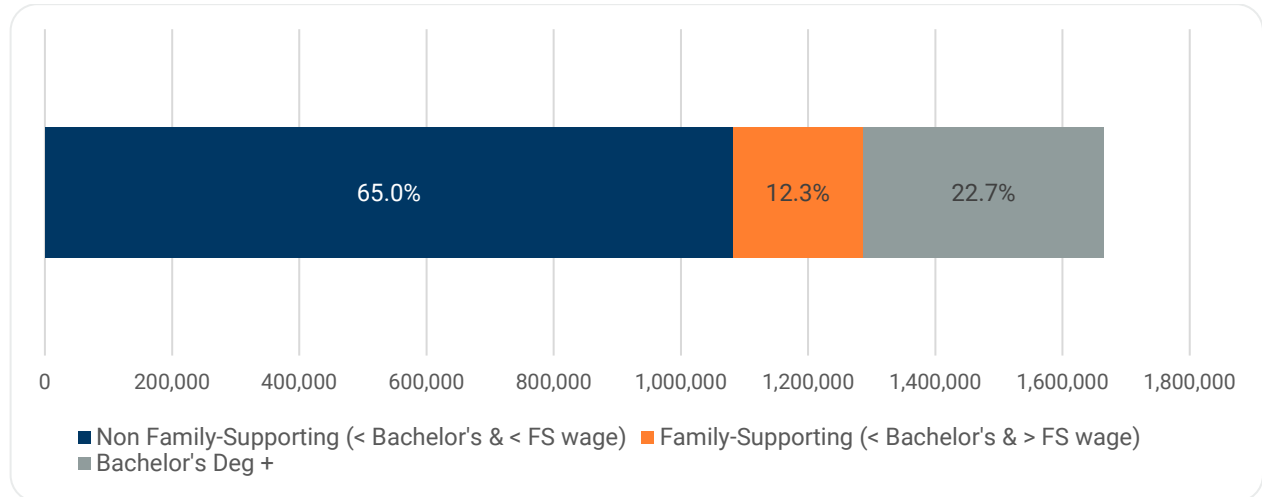


Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768. Responses are weighted by working age population in each jurisdiction

Compounding these financial issues is a lack of jobs that pay a family-supporting wage, particularly for those with less than a Bachelor's degree. Of the total demand for jobs over

the next decade, just 12.3% have a typical entry-level of education less than a Bachelor's degree and pay a family-supporting wage of at least \$24.36 hourly<sup>4</sup>.

**Figure 10. Total Demand for Jobs by Job Category: 2018-2028**



Source: Emsil 2019.3; Baltimore Metropolitan Council

# Housing and Transportation Barriers

## Housing and Transportation

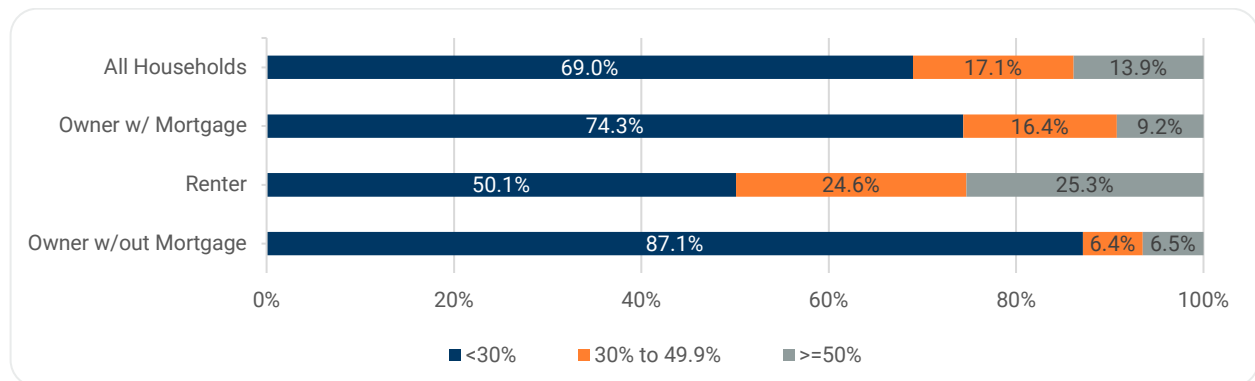
- Can't find permanent housing
- Can't get to work or get home using public transportation
- Don't have a driver's license
- Don't have reliable/consistent methods of contact
- Have a bad driving record

Housing and transportation barriers are often financial in nature, but they present a unique set of challenges for job seekers. On the housing side, nearly a quarter of job seekers cited trouble finding permanent housing as a barrier. In addition, over 15% reported difficulties with reliable methods of contact such as a home address, e-mail address, or phone. In 2018, nearly one-third of Baltimore region households were housing cost burdened, meaning that housing costs comprised 30% or more of household income.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Emsi 2019.3 and Baltimore Metropolitan Council

Approximately 17.1% of households were considered moderately burdened (30% to 49.9% of income spent on housing), while 13.9% were severely burdened (spending greater than 50.0% of income on housing). Housing cost burden was more acute for renter households in the region, with nearly half considered burdened and 25.3% considered severely burdened.

**Figure 11. Housing Costs as a Share of Household Income in the Baltimore MSA: 2018**



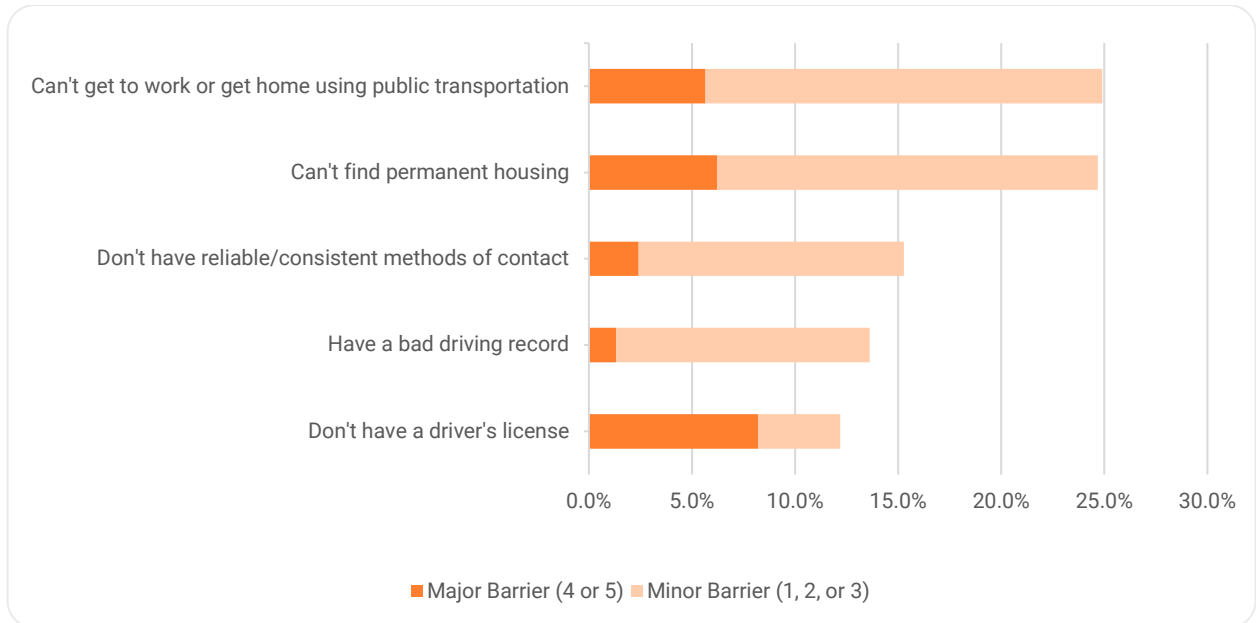
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates: Tables B25070 and B25091.

A quarter of job seekers reported issues with getting to work or home using public transportation. More than 10% cited a bad driving record or didn't have a driver's license at all. Of those without a driver's license, more than two-thirds identified this as a major rather than a minor barrier.

There are a number of requirements for getting a driver's license including proof of residence and proof of identity. Getting a driver's license can be particularly onerous for someone struggling with permanent housing (24.7%) or someone who has issues affording basic items for work such as professional clothes or a bus ticket (40.3%). A driver's license can also be suspended for nonpayment of child support. In Maryland, more than \$1.2 billion in past due child support went uncollected by the Maryland Child Support Administration, while there was \$379 million in total uncollected debt in Baltimore City<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Source: The Abell Report Volume 32 Number 5, June 2019. [Reforming Child Support to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families.](#)

**Figure 12. Housing and Transportation Barriers: Percentage of Job Seekers Encountering Barrier**



Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768. Responses are weighted by working age population in each jurisdiction

In addition to being a burden generally, not having a driver’s license can be a barrier to employment in certain sectors. For example, a driver’s license is often required for jobs in sectors such as construction and transportation and warehousing, thus eliminating many jobs in these sectors for those lacking one. This is unfortunate, as the construction sector provides the second highest demand for family-supporting jobs from 2018 through 2028 (among Baltimore region sectors identified in BMC’s Family-Supporting Jobs Report)<sup>6</sup>.

Compounding transportation difficulties for those reliant on public transportation is the fact that many of the region’s jobs created between 2018 and 2028 are projected to be outside of Baltimore City. Over 85% of new jobs and nearly 77% of total demand (new jobs + separations) from 2018 to 2028 are projected to be outside of Baltimore City<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Source: Emsi 2019.3 and Baltimore Metropolitan Council

<sup>7</sup> Source: Emsi 2019.3 and Baltimore Metropolitan Council

# Industry and Career Barriers

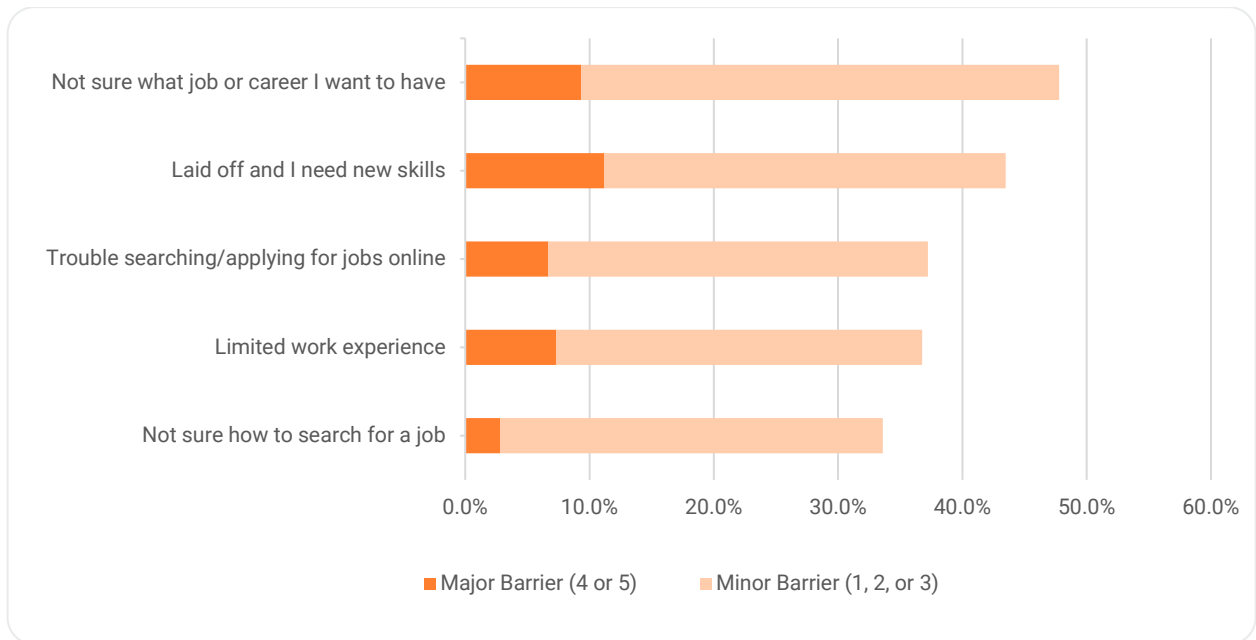
## Industry and Career

- Laid off and I need new skills
- Limited work experience
- Not sure how to search for a job
- Not sure what job or career I want to have
- Trouble searching/applying for jobs online

According to job seekers, some of the top barriers encountered are linked to a changing job market and the high costs of obtaining the additional education and skills necessary to participate in it. Responses from job seekers reflect uncertainty of career choice as well as how to go about searching and applying for jobs. Nearly half of job seekers cited uncertainty surrounding what job or career they want to have, more than one-third reported trouble searching and applying for jobs online, and one-third were not sure how to search for a job at all.

As the economy adapts to rapid technological change, increasing demands are placed on job seekers to keep their training and education aligned with the needs of employers. However, more than 40% of job seekers reported having been laid off and needing new skills. In addition, more than one-third said that their work experience is inadequate. Re-training to meet the demands of a changing job market is made even more difficult for those that have problems affording additional training or education (58.2%), have difficulties with technology (32.0%), lack basic math (30.7%) or reading (14.8%) skills, or don't have a high school diploma or GED (9.9%).

**Figure 13. Industry and Career Barriers: Percentage of Job Seekers Encountering Barrier**



Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768. Responses are weighted by working age population in each jurisdiction

# Social Barriers

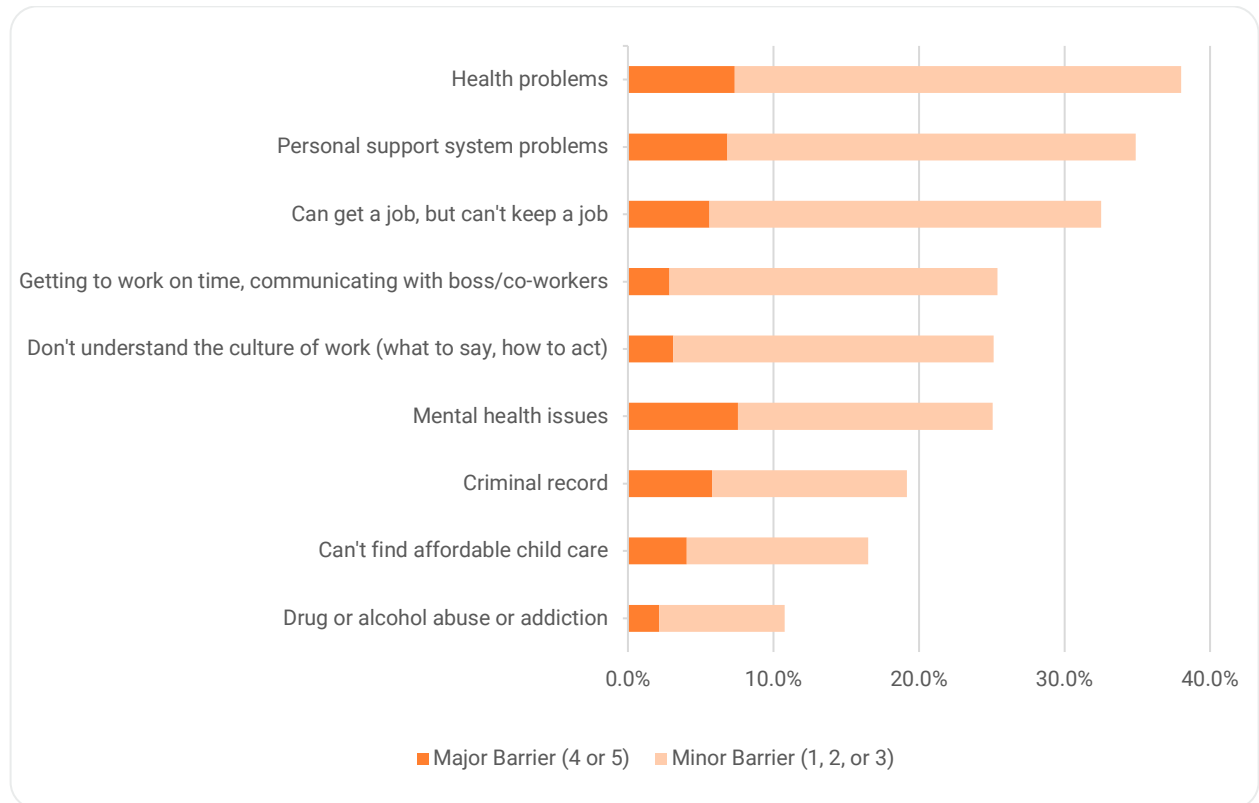
## Social

- Can't find affordable child care
- Can get a job, but can't keep a job
- Criminal record
- Don't understand the culture of work (what to say, how to act)
- Drug or alcohol abuse or addiction
- Getting to work on time, communicating with boss/co-workers
- Health problems
- Mental health issues
- Personal support system problems

Job seekers in the Baltimore region also reported facing a range of interconnected social barriers including health problems (38.0%), problems in their personal support system (34.9%), and mental health issues (25.1%). Others reported issues with soft skills related to the culture of work such as struggling to keep a job (32.5%), problems with getting to

work on time and communicating with co-workers (25.4%), and not understanding how to act in a work environment (25.1%). In addition, nearly one in five job seekers reported having a criminal record.

**Figure 14. Social Barriers: Percentage of Job Seekers Encountering Barrier**



Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768. Responses are weighted by working age population in each jurisdiction

# Barriers to Employment Opportunity by Gender

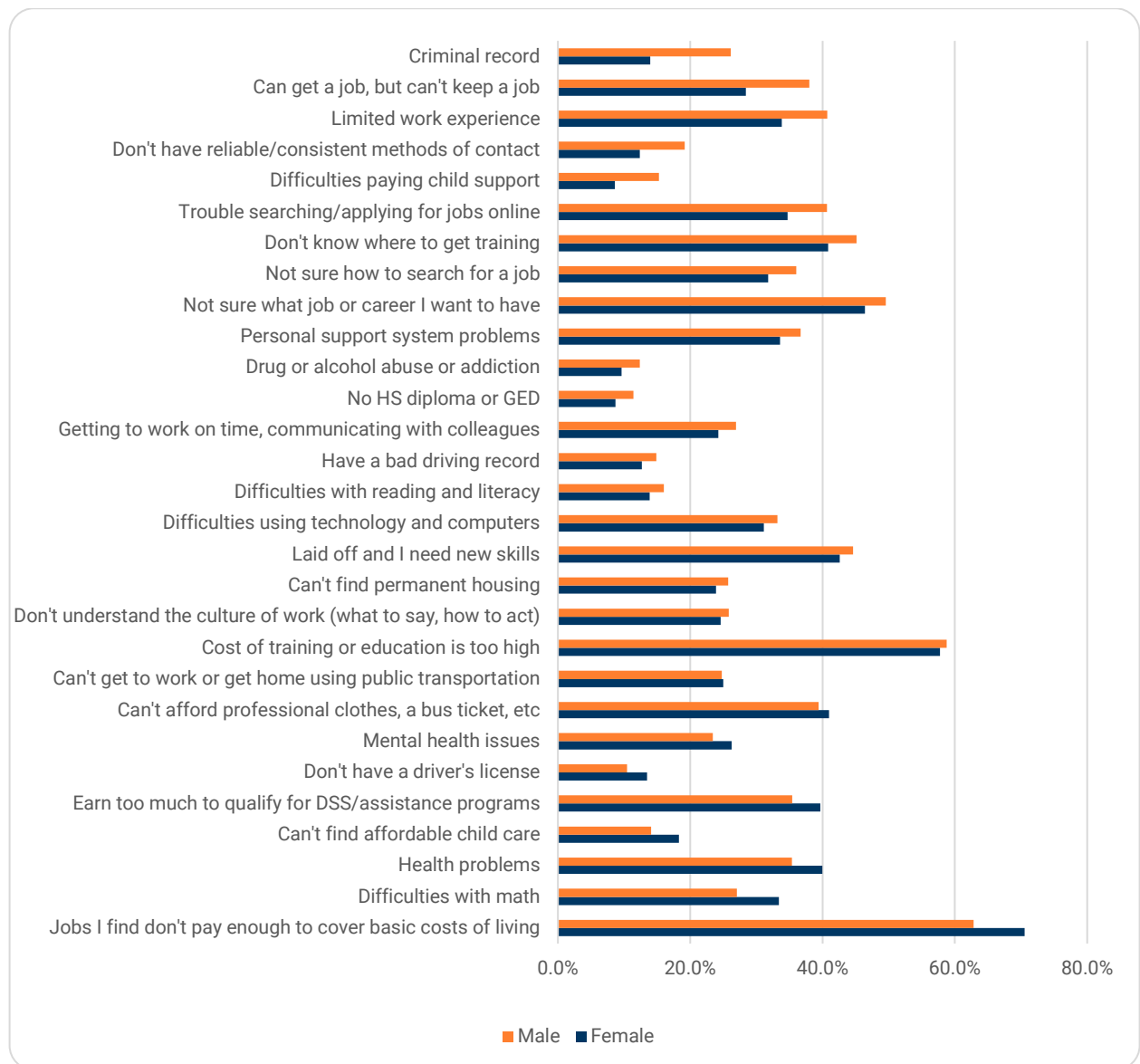
Figure 15 lists the top three barriers with the largest difference between female and male respondents and vice versa. Figure 16 shows the full list of barriers along with the shares of female and male respondents identifying each barrier as a problem. In general, females and males tended to encounter barriers in similar shares. The percent difference between female and male respondents exceeded 10% for only one barrier (criminal record), and was less than 5% for 21 barriers.



**Figure 15. Top Three Barriers with the Largest Difference by Gender**

Female Share exceeds Male Share (Female % - Male %)	Male Share exceeds Female Share (Male % - Female %)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jobs I find don't pay enough to cover basic costs of living (7.7%)</li> <li>• Difficulties with math (6.4%)</li> <li>• Health problems (4.6%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criminal record (12.2%)</li> <li>• Can get a job, but can't keep a job (9.6%)</li> <li>• Limited work experience (6.9%)</li> </ul>

**Figure 16. Barriers to Employment Opportunity by Gender: Percentage of Job Seekers Encountering Barrier**



Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768. Responses are weighted by working age population in each jurisdiction

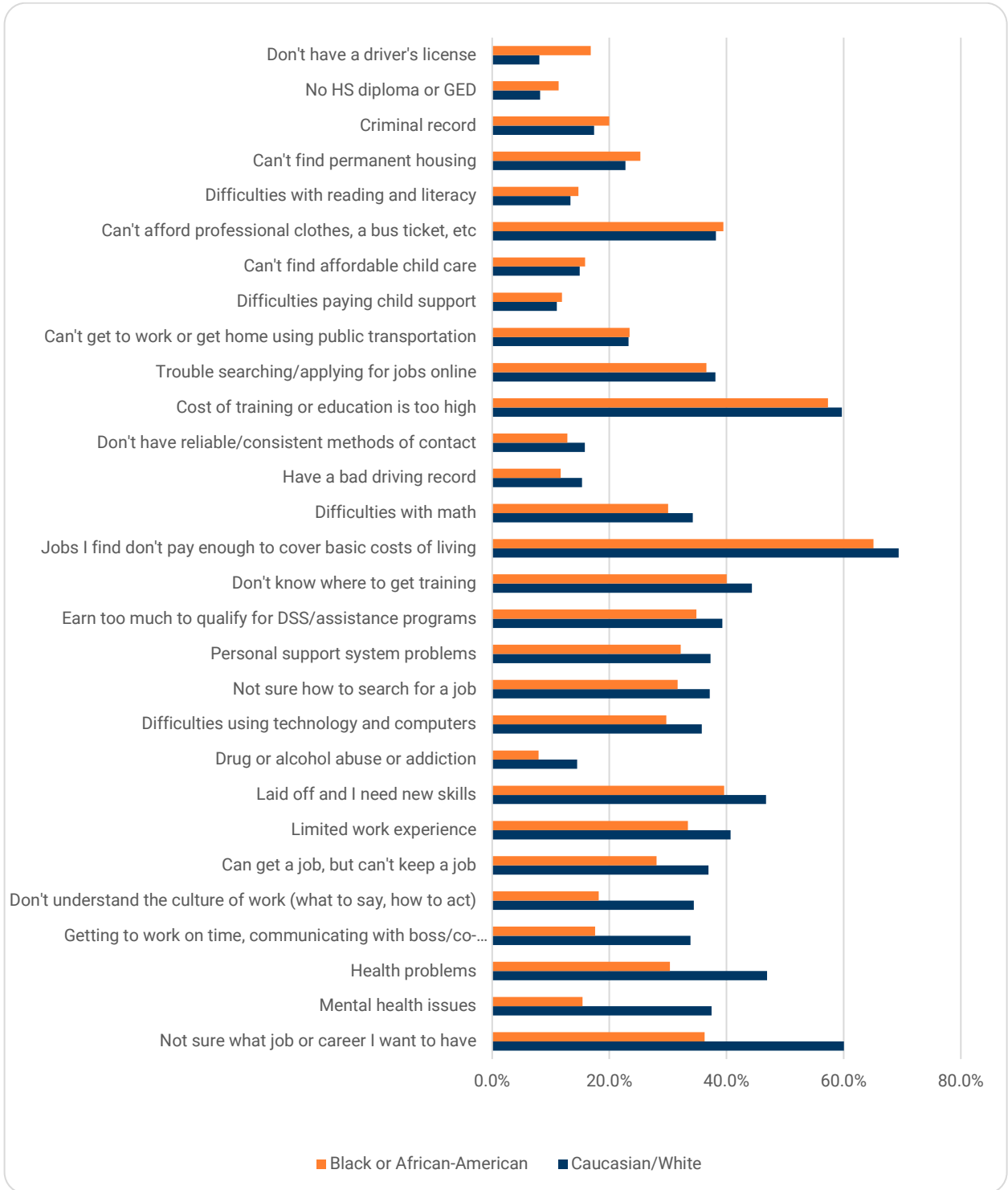
# Barriers to Employment Opportunity by Race

Figure 17 lists the top three barriers with the largest difference between black and white respondents and vice versa. Figure 18 shows the full list of barriers along with the shares of black and white respondents identifying each barrier as a problem. There were differences in the kinds of barriers blacks and whites reported struggling with. Black job seekers responded in greater shares to barriers revolving around finances, education and skills, transportation, and housing. White job seekers tended to respond in greater shares to social, industry, and career related barriers.

**Figure 17. Top Three Barriers with the Largest Difference by Race**

<b>Black Share exceeds White Share</b> <i>(Black % - White %)</i>	<b>White Share exceeds Black Share</b> <i>(White % - Black %)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Don't have a driver's license (8.7%)</li><li>• Don't have a HS diploma or GED (3.1%)</li><li>• Criminal record (2.6%)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Not sure what job or career I want to have (23.8%)</li><li>• Mental health issues (22.0%)</li><li>• Health problems (16.6%)</li></ul>

**Figure 18. Barriers to Employment Opportunity by Race: Percentage of Job Seekers Encountering Barrier**

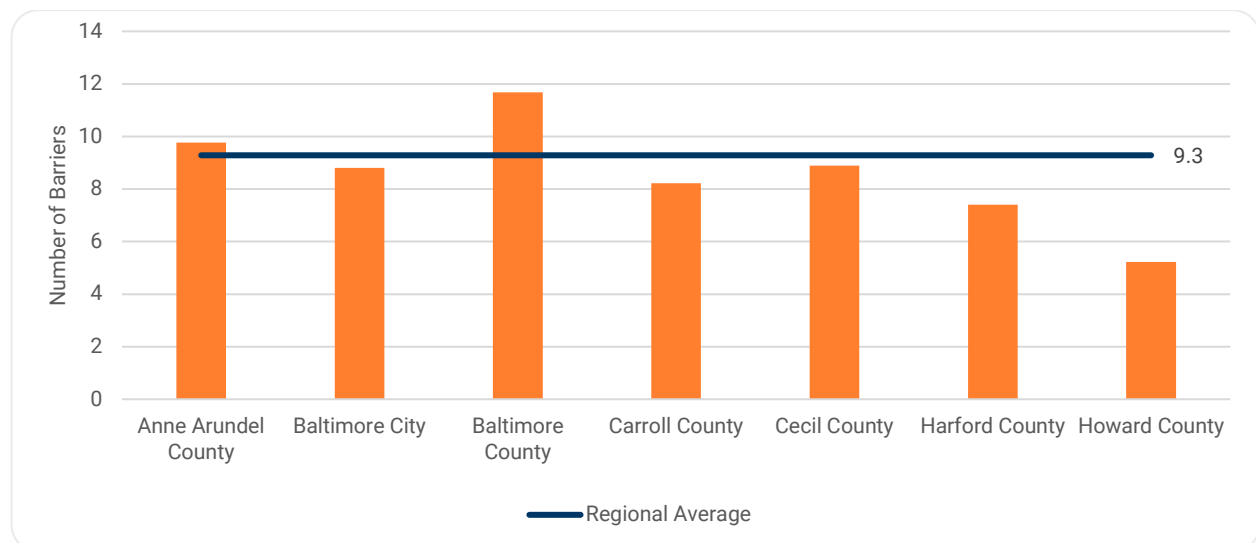


Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768. Responses are weighted by working age population in each jurisdiction

# The Interconnected Nature of Barriers

The following figures begin to illustrate the complex and interconnected nature of barriers to employment opportunity facing job seekers in the Baltimore region. As mentioned previously, these barriers seldom occur in isolation. Indeed, job seekers in the region reported encountering an average of 9.3 barriers. Respondents living in Baltimore County reported the highest average number of barriers at 11.7, while Howard County residents reported less than half that at 5.2.

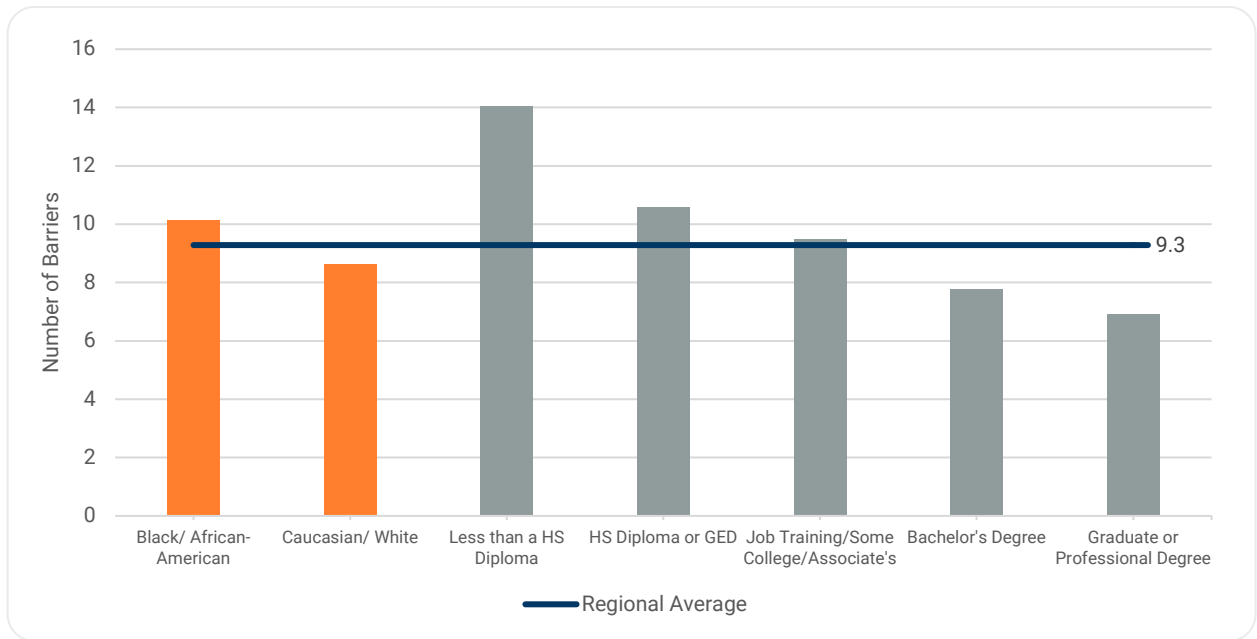
**Figure 19. Average Number of Barriers Encountered by Jurisdiction**



Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768.

The number of barriers encountered also differs across racial lines and by levels of educational attainment. Black respondents reported an average of 10.1 barriers while white respondents reported an average of 8.6 barriers. Results by educational attainment are even more disparate. Those with less than a high school diploma encountered an average of 14.0 barriers. Those with a high school diploma and with some college education also reported more barriers than the regional average at 10.6 and 9.5, respectively. However, those with a Bachelor’s degree (7.8) and higher (6.9) encountered significantly fewer barriers on average.

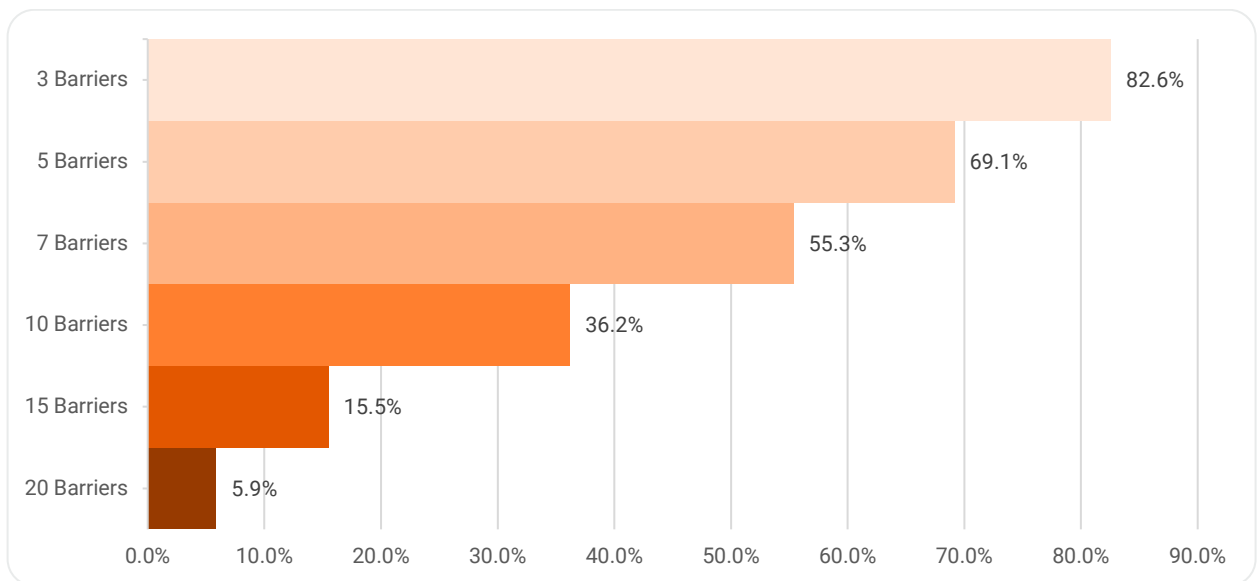
**Figure 20. Average Number of Barriers Encountered by Race and Educational Attainment**



Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768. Responses are weighted by working age population in each jurisdiction

Nearly all respondents reported encountering at least 3 barriers, and many reported far more. While 82.6% of respondents faced 3 or more barriers, 15.5% faced 15 or more barriers and 5.9% faced 20 or more. Figure 21 illustrates the share of job seekers by number of barriers encountered at set intervals.

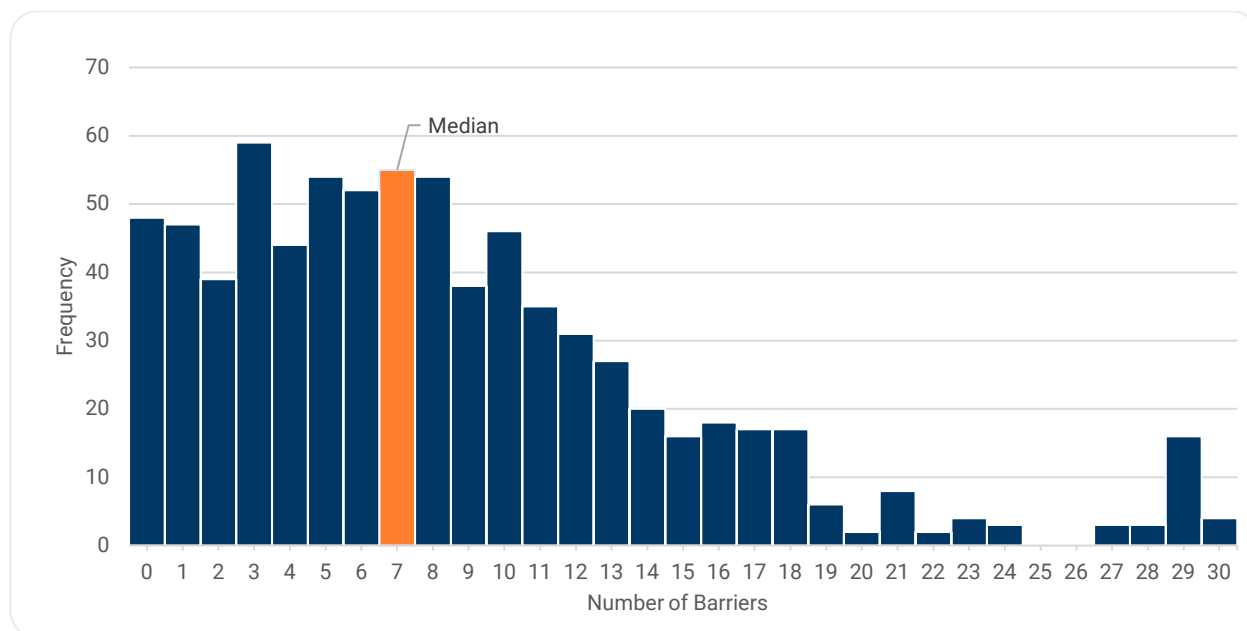
**Figure 21. Share of Job Seekers by Number of Barriers Encountered**



Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768

Figure 22 shows the full frequency distribution of barriers encountered for all respondents, with a median of 7.

**Figure 22. Distribution of Number of Barriers Encountered**



Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2019, n=768

While statistics on the share of persons reporting individual barriers and the average number of barriers encountered can be instructive, they don't fully illustrate the day-to-day challenges for job seekers facing multiple barriers. In order to explore this more fully, we looked at the shares of respondents facing each pair of barriers. For example, 53 respondents reported not having a high school diploma or GED. We then calculated the share of those 53 respondents facing each of the remaining 28 barriers. We did this for every combination of barriers. This creates a complex and interconnected matrix that reveals the relationships between barriers.

There were several barriers that nearly every other barrier paired with. Many of these barriers are financial in nature. For example, regardless of the initial barrier faced, more than 65% of job seekers also cited difficulties finding jobs that cover their basic costs of living. That number is greater than 80% for 21 of the barriers. In addition, the vast majority of job seekers facing a barrier also reported that the cost of education and training is too high. More than 60% of job seekers identified this as a barrier in combination with any other barrier. That number is greater than 70% for 26 of the barriers.

Finally, certain barriers emerged as indicators of facing an even larger number of additional barriers. Those that reported having had issues with drug or alcohol abuse, job seekers lacking a high school diploma or GED, and those citing difficulties with reliable or consistent methods of contact serve as instructive examples:

### Of those having had issues with drug or alcohol abuse...

- 88% have trouble finding jobs that cover their basic costs of living
- 82% have some mental health issues
- 76% have some health problems
- 76% find that the cost of training and education is too high
- 75% aren't sure what job or career they want to have
- 73% have trouble affording the items they need for work
- 72% have limited work experience
- 12 of the remaining barriers are encountered in shares between 60% and 70%
- 5 of the remaining barriers are encountered in shares between 50% and 60%

### Of those lacking a high school diploma or GED...

- 79% have trouble finding jobs that cover their basic costs of living
- 75% have difficulties with math
- 74% aren't sure how to search for a job and have trouble searching for jobs online
- 74% have trouble accessing training and education
- 74% find that the cost of training and education is too high
- 72% have trouble affording the items they need for work
- 72% have some health problems
- 10 of the remaining barriers are encountered in shares between 60% and 70%
- 7 of the remaining barriers are encountered in shares between 50% and 60%

### Of those citing difficulties with reliable or consistent methods of contact...

- 79% have trouble finding jobs that cover their basic costs of living
- 78% have trouble affording the items they need for work
- 74% aren't sure what job or career they want to have
- 74% find that the cost of training and education is too high
- 71% aren't sure where to access additional training and education
- 11 of the remaining barriers are encountered in shares between 60% and 70%
- 3 of the remaining barriers are encountered in shares between 50% and 60%

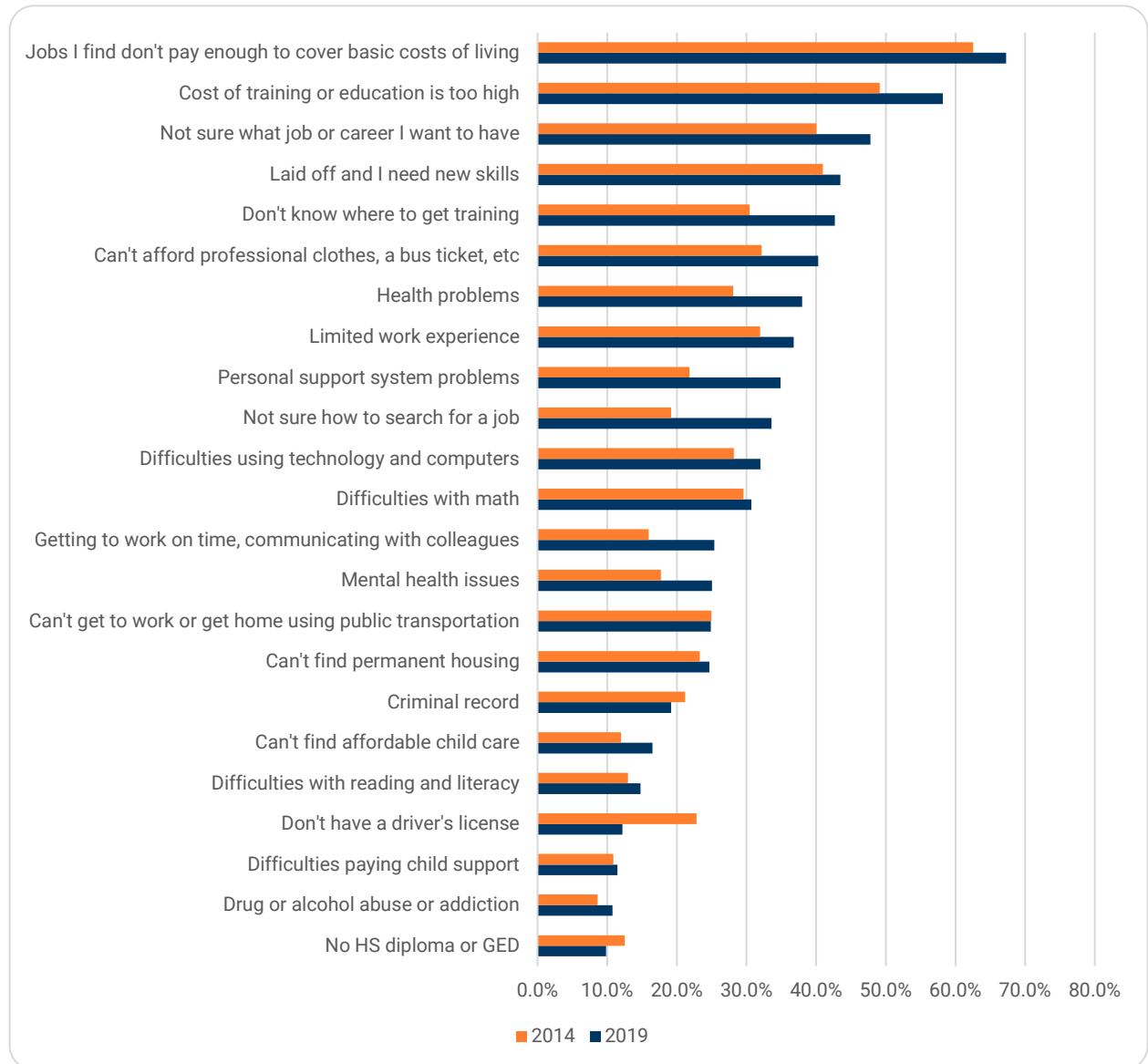
These are just a few examples among many illustrating the interconnected landscape of barriers to employment opportunity faced by job seekers.

# Comparison to 2014 Barriers Survey

This survey reveals that clients of American Job Centers in the Baltimore region continue to struggle with barriers to employment opportunity, often in greater proportions than in 2014. The 2014 and 2019 barriers surveys shared 23 barrier questions in common (6 were added to the 2019 survey). The percentage of respondents identifying each barrier as a problem increased for 19 of these 23 barriers. The largest increases were seen for those unsure of how to search for a job (from 19.2% to 33.6%) and for those reporting problems in their personal support system (from 21.8% to 34.9%). Other large increases from 2014 to 2019 include barriers such as mental health and other health issues, getting to work on time, finding affordable child care, and knowing how to access training and education. The largest decrease was seen for those reporting not having a driver's license, with 22.8% and 12.2% identifying this as a barrier in 2014 and 2019, respectively. Respondents identified the remaining barriers as an issue at relatively comparable levels.



**Figure 23. Barriers to Employment Opportunity in 2014 and 2019 Surveys: Percentage of Job Seekers Encountering Barrier**



Source: Survey of Job Seekers in the Baltimore Region, 2014 (n=1037) and 2019 (n=768). Responses are weighted by working age population in each jurisdiction

The purpose of this report is to identify and highlight the barriers that job seekers are experiencing today, and to serve as a tool for use by workforce professionals, educators, and employers in the development of effective policies and programs to overcome these impediments. The economy has improved significantly since 2014, with increasing gross regional product and low levels of unemployment. However, the results from this survey indicate that we risk leaving many job seekers behind. We need to identify comprehensive solutions to these barriers if we hope to create an inclusive job market with employment opportunity for all workers.