Job Search Responses of Older Workers as the COVID-19 Pandemic Winds Down

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Project Abstract: This project studies how job search responses of older workers changed in the roughly 18-month period beginning with the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in winter of 2021 and the wind-down of the pandemic.

The evidence this research will provide along multiple dimensions of worker responses to the roll-back of the pandemic is of clear importance to SSA. The analysis will provide evidence on many critical questions, including: What are the differential effects of disease incidence declining and vaccine rollouts on older workers searching for new jobs? As the pandemic subsides, how quickly do older workers (relative to younger workers) search and apply for jobs with different degrees of customer contact? Similarly, how quickly do older workers (relative to younger workers) begin to search for jobs with different opportunities to work from home? How do these responses differ for older workers with relatively long spells of non-employment stemming from the onset of the pandemic? How do these responses differ for locations that had longer and more sustained economic shutdowns? Do responses of older job searchers to job-ad language suggesting age stereotypes suggest variation in employer willingness to hire older workers post-COVID? The answers will be informative about the likelihood of older workers returning to work and how quickly this return to work occurs, and the factors that influence these outcomes. These outcomes are critical to older-worker well-being and to predicting the effects of COVID-19 on employment, especially in so called bridge jobs, and retirement of older workers. The research will also provide evidence that may prove useful in the future in choosing policy responses to other pandemics that may emerge.

The core data on job search (and vacancies) are being collected this year as part of a separate research project. The data include responses from job searchers to job ads placed on a large and widely used job board in 15 major cities, as well as the number of job ads by occupation and city on the job board on the day when job ads are posted, to capture variation in job vacancies. The

data from the job search study will be combined with a number of new data sources that researchers have developed over the past year to capture multiple dimensions of the effects and responses to COVID-19.

We capture total job ads and new ad placements in rotating groups of five cities across three large occupations. These data are recorded twice per three-week period as each block of five cities cycles in and out of rotation. From job seekers we record the date of their application, whether they responded to a cue in the job ad designed to catch their attention, first name, earliest listed employment date, the number of previous jobs listed, the number of full years a candidate is not listed as employed since their first listed employment date, whether the candidate is currently employed, the NAICS codes of their most recent job, the NAICS codes of all of their listed jobs, the highest level of education listed, their high school graduation year, their college graduation year, the earliest year listed on their resume, and the de-identified text of their resume. We proxy for age by using high school graduation year, college graduation year, earliest listed employment date, and earliest year listed on a resume to calculate a likely lower bound on their year of birth. These data are aggregated to generate total applications, age ratios and distributions, and demographics on the applicant pool for five random city-occupation combinations each week.

Data on job openings and applicants are matched to several new datasets related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We incorporate CDC county-level data on vaccine administration, cases, and deaths, state-level and city-level data and indexes on policy responses to the pandemic, Bureau of Transportation county-level data on worker mobility, BLS and Current Population Survey data on telework patterns by age, race, and occupation, as well as foot traffic data from Google by type of establishment, state, and time. Combining information from these sources enables us to examine how the job search and application behavior of older workers recovers and responds as disease incidence declines and the economy “re-opens”.