

Meeting the needs and preferences of low-income older adults to obtain employment:

Implications for Federal Policy of the Older Americans Act

By Pat Elmer, Mary Branagan, Thomas Saylor, and Ernest Gonzales

BACKGROUND

Working longer has been proposed as the key to improve retirement security.¹ This is especially true and important for low-income older adults. While Title V of Older Americans Act (Senior Community Service Employment Program, “SCSEP”²) aims to help low-income adults aged 55 and older obtain employment, it does not adequately fulfill the preferences of this diverse population.

Federal policy and programmatic outcome measures heavily emphasize participants to obtain full time work. However, this requirement is often misaligned with participants’ capacity, needs, and preferences.

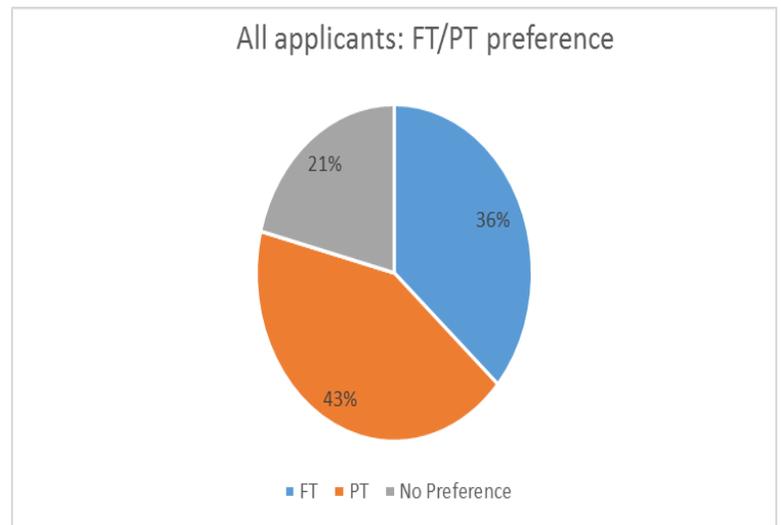
In this brief, we highlight the diversity of SCSEP participants, their preferences for full or part-time work, and actual job placements. Results can help shape and inform policy objectives of Title V of the Older Americans Act.

METHODOLOGY

Information was collected from Associates for Training and Development (A4TD), a SCSEP national grantee. A new applicant applies for A4TD’s SCSEP services by completing an initial screening questionnaire, either online or over the phone. This questionnaire solicits information about eligibility and preferences, including whether the applicant seeks full time or part time work. As part of the applicant/assessment process, applicants are asked about what motivates their employment preferences. Their responses are recorded in case notes. This data is derived from the applicant questionnaire and the case notes.

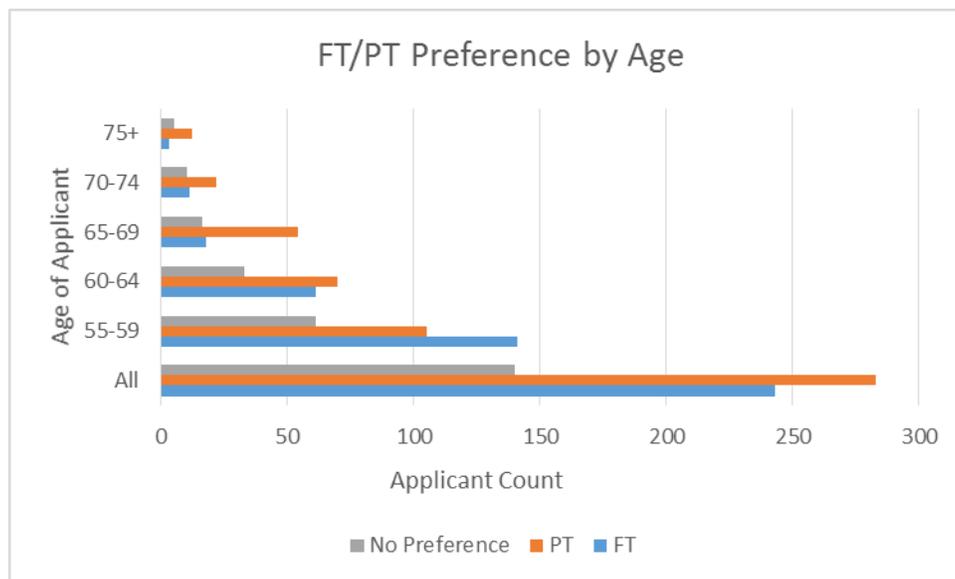
RESULTS

From June 1, 2014 to June 1, 2015, 666 individuals applied to A4TD SCSEP. Of those applications, 43% preferred part-time work; 36% preferred full-time work, 21% had no preference (see figure to the right).



Variability of preferences by age

As seen in the figure below, the age of the participant influences the preference for full or part-time work. As expected, the overall trend clearly demonstrates that younger participants (55-59 age group) prefer full-time work. However, this preference shifts towards part-time work among older groups (60-75+). It is also clear that a third group has no preference for either full- or part-time work across all age groups.



Percentage of exits for full-time and part-time work:

At the time of exit, each participant reports the circumstances of their exit to SCSEP staff, including information about their employment outcomes. From these reports, data is entered into the SCSEP Performance and Results QPR System (SPARQ), a United States Department of Labor database. From there, reports are easily obtained on employment outcomes. Over the last 12 months, there were 75 exits for employment in all A4TD SCSEP projects, of which 77% were part-time and 23% were full-time.

Based on case notes that record participants' comments upon entering and exiting SCSEP, we see trends that show common reasons why people accept part-time work. Emerging themes included family care, physical limitations, and earnings caps on other benefits. Many respond that a work-life balance has become more important as they have aged. Informal caregiving was ranked as one common reason for preferring part-time work and is in line with other research.³

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Policymakers should be aware of the capacity, needs and preferences of low-income older adults to work longer.
- Modifying SCSEP performance measures to reflect the diversity of participants' capacity, needs, and preferences is warranted.

LIMITATIONS

These findings should be viewed within their limitations. First, this sample consisted of participants in A4TD's programs in Vermont and Connecticut. Research is warranted to identify if these patterns are consistent throughout the nation. Second, more rigorous and robust research is warranted to identify key social, economic, and health determinants to employment needs and preferences (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, objective and subjective measures of health, income needs, educational levels, availability of transportation).

CONCLUSION

Working longer is clearly important to individuals, communities, and society at large. However, federal policy is misaligned with the capacity, needs and preferences of the great diversity found within low-income older adults participating in SCSEP. Moreover, local labor market needs may be highly influential on whether participants obtain full- or part-time work, irrespective of individual capacity, needs or preferences. Overall, these findings highlight the mismatch between programmatic outcomes measures of SCSEP and participants' needs.

While rigorous research is warranted, adjusting SCSEP performance measures to reflect the diversity of participants is highly encouraged.

END NOTES

- ¹ Munnell, A., & Sass, S. A. (2008). *Working longer. The solution to the retirement income challenge*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press.
- ² The Senior Community Service Employment Program is a community service and work-based job training program for older Americans authorized by the Older Americans Act. More information can be found here: <http://www.doleta.gov/seniors/>
- ³ Gonzales, Lee, Brown & Goettge (2015). Challenges to working longer: Caregiving in later life. Retrieved from http://www.bu.edu/ssw/files/2015/06/Research-Brief_Challenges-to-working-longer_Caregiving-in-later-life_0514151.pdf

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