

1

Hard Work Hasn't Been Paying Off

Creating Real Opportunity for Millions of Workers

What's the real story about today's jobs? What have jobs really been like for the past 40 years and what do the workers themselves say about them? What do most of us know about the work that millions of people do—the manufacturing, construction, printing, clerical, healthcare, retail, food service, grocery, real estate, and automotive service jobs that have employed nearly two-thirds of the U.S. workforce since 1980 (BLS 2019f; Rose 2018; Plunkert 1990)? These are the day and night jobs that are important to society as a whole and that keep most people's families and communities strong, healthy, and surviving. But they're also the jobs that seldom enable families and communities to thrive and are often first to go in a recession. None of us can do without these jobs, but the reality is that these jobs don't pay off, they are often discriminatory by gender and race/ethnicity, they don't provide advancement opportunity, they are sometimes dangerous and exploitative, and they too seldom utilize people's full range of capabilities. It is the latter—utilizing capabilities—that ultimately benefits the worker, the community, and the nation, as all benefit when people are able to utilize their capabilities and strengths in their work.¹

Accordingly, the aim of this book is twofold: first, to present workers' stories about their labor market jobs during the past 40 years of major changes in the labor market so that we learn what their jobs were and are

1. I explicitly do not use the terms *skills* and *skill levels*, thanks to a reviewer's comments. Even though those terms are widely used, they may be subjective and contested and are here better indicated by terms such as capabilities, interests, and capacities.

really like and, second, to suggest ways that ideas about work could be usefully expanded in order to benefit workers, communities, and the nation. In fact, the ranks of these workers have swelled over the past 40 years to include individuals with occupations formerly associated with four-year college degrees and professional or semiprofessional status. The impact of recessions over the 40 years that culminated in the Great Recession in 2007–2009 and its decadelong aftermath of labor market constriction were then magnified by the economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and its high level of unemployment and financial stress. In a word, sole reliance on the labor market for workers' economic security and meaningful activity needs serious consideration, which this book aims to provide.

Foundational Beliefs about Work

Underneath the economic and labor market changes and challenges reviewed in the next sections, foundational beliefs held by most in the United States, such as America is the land of opportunity and that hard work pays off, are called into question. Workers whose stories appear in this book, whose hard work has not paid off since the 1980s, and others who are still out of work raise their voices against the view that today's United States is a land of opportunity and unlimited possibility. The high value placed on labor market work in the United States, above all other kinds of work, as Kathi Weeks (2011) has richly documented, underlies these workers' hopes and struggles alike.

Historically, the land of opportunity characterization began in the frontier days, even though much of the opportunity was achieved at the expense of indigenous peoples. Early on, colonial governments took Native Americans' lands and sent Native children away to boarding schools to eliminate their indigenous culture and assimilate them to white Christian culture. In the 1700s and 1800s, famine in Europe and Scandinavia inspired large-scale migration to the United States because of the new country's ample arable land, much of which was originally the indigenous peoples' land, and agricultural success was achieved in large part at the expense of enslaved persons primarily from Africa. After industrial work supplanted agricultural work in the economy of the late 1800s, labor market work in goods-producing manufacturing industries, often enhanced by unions, became the locus of wage and advancement opportunity for millions of workers and their families in the United States. From the 1960s, however, and expanding in the 1970s, manufacturing industries receded as the dominant source of unionized, family-sustaining, higher-waged jobs. Today, although productivity in some parts of the manufacturing industry is still substantial, it mostly occurs in the computer and electronics sectors (Baily and Bosworth 2014) or

results from management practices that require overtime instead of engaging in additional hiring. As a result, by the late 1900s, the number of job possibilities in manufacturing were massively reduced and superseded by an increasing number of jobs in service industries, which generally did not match manufacturing in productivity or wages. And while productivity and wages had grown in parallel before the 1970s, the great decoupling of wages from productivity in virtually all U.S. industries since the 1970s remains the case today, to some extent a result of declining unionization and greater managerial focus on short-term gains and the accompanying cuts in the cost of wages (Kenworthy and Marx 2017, 18).

The historic view of opportunity in the United States has also been based on economic criteria in contrast to class or caste differences. Nevertheless, as in today's more "developed" society—in quotes because philosophically and theoretically, development implies far more than economic development—the notion of opportunity in this book draws less on economic metrics and more on Nobelist Amartya Sen's (1999) ideas about human freedoms and human flourishing. Freedom and flourishing occur in a social, economic, political, and moral environment that values and aims for "good and flourishing lives" for all community members through the freedom to develop and enact one's capabilities and interests in ways that are meaningful for both persons and society. From the standpoint of Sen and this book, community signifies "the relations of mutual engagement" (Wenger 1999, 73). This does not mean unanimity, but implies "people who are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another" (73).

Regarding the foundational belief that hard work pays off, the fastest-growing service jobs in the United States today are healthcare support positions such as home health aide, medical assistant, personal care aide, physical or occupational therapy aide, pharmacy aide, and phlebotomist, with median² annual wages in 2019³ of \$28,470 (BLS 2020i). This annual wage barely exceeds the poverty line for a family of four (110%), and doesn't come close to 200% of the poverty line, which is considered barebones self-sufficiency by many scholars and policymakers (e.g., Jiang, Ekono, and Skinner 2016, 1). The number of these positions was projected to increase by almost 30% between 2018 and 2028 in the United States (BLS 2019f) as a result of the

2. For labor market and employment metrics, the Bureau of Labor Statistics regularly uses the *median*, defined as the middle number in a range of numbers; in other words, the "typical" or "average" number. In this book, the terms *median* and *average* are used as equivalent. If another metric, such as *mean* is used in BLS or other research cited, we will identify that accordingly.

3. In many places I use 2019 as a baseline metric for wage-related information (e.g. BLS 2020b) because it was the most recent normal or typical period before the COVID-19 pandemic and its resultant economic and labor market tumult.

growing size of the aging population. Wages are not projected to rise significantly, however, which means that these hard-work positions will continue to not pay off.

Other fast-growing service jobs with a similar range of annual wages in 2019 include waiters; retail salespersons; bicycle repairers; derrick operators in oil and gas; roustabouts in oil and gas; service unit operators in oil, gas, and mining; and operations managers. Service jobs in the oil, gas, and mining areas, in contrast, yield median annual wages from the high \$30,000s to the low \$40,000s. By comparison, the median household income in the United States in 2019 was \$63,000, barely surpassing the pre-Great Recession figure of \$60,664 in 2001 (BLS 2019i). Worse, according to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) Inflation Calculator, an income of \$60,664 in 2001 is the equivalent of just over \$89,000 in buying power today, which is roughly \$26,000 more than the actual median household income in 2019. Thus, hard work does not seem to be paying off for most service workers, even though the country vitally needs what they contribute.

Nevertheless, beliefs that hard work pays off and that the United States is the land of opportunity remain recognizable symbols of the perceived economic potential of labor market work for persons in the United States. Historically, the idea of opportunity in the labor market was founded on these premises: wage work is available to all who seek it, a person's hard work will be rewarded by regular wage increases, education and employer-provided skill training will lead to promotion, and parents' efforts will be rewarded by their children's future mobility, which will surpass theirs. These ideas and beliefs about opportunity through work and wages are still held by many in the general public and by many workers, even though they are not fully applicable or achievable for countless millions today.

In fact, as noted earlier, throughout U.S. history, opportunity has never been available to all, or even to most people (Ingraham 2016), and today it is increasingly less available to lower- and even middle-income workers (Kalleberg 2018; Willis 2015). By 1980, labor market work had changed for the worse for virtually all workers to some extent (Kalleberg 2009; Kochan and Barley 1999; Vallas 2012), particularly for those without postsecondary education and those with below-sufficiency earnings (Dodson 2009; Iversen and Armstrong 2006; Shipler 2004), despite the short period in the late 1990s (Kenworthy and Marx 2017). Not surprisingly, the workers whose stories appear in this book, most of whom are also parents and many of whom are female, people of color, or both, expressed both belief and disbelief about opportunity in labor market work. One critical reason for workers' disbelief in both opportunity and the payoff of hard work is that there are not enough jobs in the United States today for all who need and want one.

Hard Work: What It's Like Today for Millions

More than 10 years after the Great Recession officially ended, and until the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, news media reported daily that the U.S. economy was on the upswing and unemployment was down. In fact, for most of 2019, the unemployment rate fell below 4% (BLS 2020b), the usual signifier of full employment in the United States. That perspective was completely upended in April 2020 when more than 16 million workers, more than one in ten, filed unemployment claims during the coronavirus pandemic (Soergel 2020, 2). Even before the pandemic, however, glowing numbers about the country's general economic health and unemployment rates under 4% told only part of the story about today's workers, and to a great extent it was a misleading story.

The real story about the hard work that hasn't been paying off for millions of lower-wage earners involves both economic and employment conditions and numbers. In this book, numbers clarify what's happening now, and narratives present workers' experiences in manufacturing, construction, printing, clerical, retail, healthcare, and semiprofessional service jobs since the 1980s. Both the numbers and four decades of people's everyday work experiences suggest that work available in the U.S. labor market alone is not sufficient now, nor will it be in the coming decades, to support the millions of people in the United States who want to work hard, want their work to pay off, and want real opportunity for their futures.

Let's look at the numbers first. Five recessions since January 1980, including the Great Recession (officially lasting from 2007 to 2009) and longer postrecession unemployment periods than in earlier decades, have resulted in punishing, higher-than-average-unemployment rates for some workers. Specifically, the downturn in employment accompanying the Great Recession was notable for its "prolonged length, for affecting an especially wide range of industries, and for being deeper than any other downturn since World War II" (Goodman and Mance 2011, 3). The recession and its aftermath have also disproportionately disadvantaged workers of color and younger workers. For example, unemployment rates in December 2019 were higher for African Americans (5.9%) and Hispanics (4.2%) than for whites (3.2%) or Asians (2.5%) (BLS 2020d). Pandemic-related poverty rates for the same groups were predicted to be 15.2%, 13.7%, and 6.6%, respectively (Giannarelli, Wheaton, and Acs, 2020), despite the help from the stimulus checks and increased SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) allotment.

In addition, the jobless rate for over a half-million youth aged 16 to 24 years, which is a prime period for labor market entry, was 11.2% for whites and nearly double that (20.6%) for African Americans (BLS 2020d). Worse,

in December 2019, almost one in five unemployed persons overall (1.2 million) had been unemployed for more than 27 weeks (BLS 2020d), which made them ineligible for unemployment compensation in all but two states—if they had been eligible for the unemployment insurance program to begin with. Extended unemployment compensation under the federal CARES Act in March 2020 helped roughly 13.3 million people, but the act was set to expire in December 2020. At that point, the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) Act extended benefits for new applicants to March 14, 2021, and the Pandemic Relief Act extended the CARES act compensation up to 50 weeks (Staller 2022). Under the new administration in January 2021, the American Rescue Plan authorized another round of stimulus payments, extended the time frame for unemployment benefits, and vastly expanded aid to children in lower-income families. Even earlier, however, a historically low one in four jobless workers actually received unemployment insurance benefits in 2015 (Buffie and Rawlins 2017; West et al. 2021), a situation that disadvantaged a number of workers reporting in this book.

Importantly, the unemployment numbers do not include the epic and lasting withdrawal of millions of workers from the labor force, those who are not counted as officially unemployed. Since 1994, the U.S. Census Bureau has designated and counted workers that are “not in the labor force” in total and in three subgroups: “marginally attached to the labor force,” “discouraged,” or “other” (BLS 2020b). The subgroups are further described as persons who have looked but cannot find work (“marginally attached”); persons who believe that no work is available for them (“discouraged”); and persons who lack schooling or training, are viewed as too young or too old by employers, or are the target of some type of discrimination (“other”). In 2009, the official end of the Great Recession, 5.9 million persons were not in the labor force but wanted a job, yet that number had fallen by only about 1.3 million, to 4.6 million, 10 years later, by December 2019. It is clear, then, that if those 4.6 million persons were considered officially unemployed and added to the 5.5 million actually counted as officially unemployed, which constituted a 3.5% unemployment rate (AARP Public Policy Institute 2019), the *actual* unemployment rate would be at least 7%. Moreover, these figures preceded the major economic downturn in spring 2020, when the economy essentially ground to a halt during the coronavirus pandemic. It will be years before we know the full effects of that downturn on workers and businesses.

The numbers above, of course, reflect only the workers’ side of the equation. Unfortunately, the employer-side numbers—the number of jobs available—are equally concerning. Rates of employment in the total non-farm and total private categories, which encompass the initially mentioned occupations in this book, fell 21% and 23%, respectively, between December

2018 and December 2019 (BLS 2020c). Average weekly hours of work remained the same over the year at 34.5 hours, but average hourly and weekly wages across all employers also stayed the same. As Gould (2019) has found, although a low unemployment rate in the past has generally benefited lower-wage workers, workers at the lower end of the income distribution today have experienced a slowdown in the rate of wage growth since the Great Recession. In contrast, wages at the top end have skyrocketed, a sign of growing income inequality. Treuhart and Hamilton (2020, 2) report similar findings: “Forty-four percent of American workers earn less than \$18,000 a year, while the executives of the largest 350 companies earn \$18.9 million on average.”

Overall, then, given the pattern of frequent economic recessions in the United States, persistent wage stagnation in lower-paying jobs since the 1970s (Benmelech, Bergman, and Kim 2019), and greater income inequality, the long-term prognosis for employment stability and racial/ethnic equity in the labor market for those below the top echelon of earners seems poor. In addition, glacial increases in U.S. productivity between 2009 and 2021, as evidenced by gross domestic product (GDP) growth of -1% to $+2\%$ or slightly more, are paralleled by similarly slow hiring practices and minimal job creation by most U.S. employers.

Expanding the hard-work-doesn't-pay-off lens to expose the everyday conditions and experiences of those who hold labor market jobs forces us to train our attention on changes imposed by upper management, such as just-in-time scheduling, where employees are told to come and go at the last minute; the elimination of on-the-job training; the reduction or making of nonwage benefits unaffordable; and the deemphasis of employer-employee loyalty, as rigorously documented elsewhere (e.g., Autor 2019; Kalleberg 2018; Eberstadt 2016; Kochan and Dyer 2017; Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly 2014; Weeks 2011; Beck 2000). Such neoliberal managerial actions have greatly compounded the struggles resulting from broader economic patterns for millions of workers like those in this book, as the next section elaborates.

On-the-Ground Challenges in Today's Labor Market

Autor (2019) describes one labor market change as job polarization, meaning that current jobs and those projected to be created over the next decade or so are either at the top of the occupational ladder, for workers with professional or semiprofessional credentials and those with four years of education, or at the lower end of the ladder, for workers without postsecondary education and credentials. In Autor's view, polarization largely results from two demand-side forces: (1) the decline of manufacturing production work

as a result of automation and rising trade pressure and (2) the proliferation of office computing that has diminished the ranks of clerical and administrative workers, in favor of those with four-year college degrees (2019, 21). In contrast, Holzer (2011) and Holzer and Lerman (2009) contend that employment in jobs that require education or training beyond high school but less than a four-year bachelor's degree has remained quite strong.

Autor and Holzer agree, however, that wages for millions of men have either decreased or stagnated since 1980, particularly in manufacturing but also in other occupational areas. In contrast to earlier decades when workers could provide financially for their families, often regardless of their education level, wages today are tightly tied to schooling. The most common message employers give lower-earning job seekers now is "not enough skills" (Rushing 2019). In other words, the presumption is that there are plenty of jobs, but today's job seekers lack sufficient training to do them. Others (Weyrich 2006; Holzer 1998) suggest that employers use lack of schooling as a way to discriminate against job seekers because of their race, geographic location, gender, age, or sexual orientation.

Automation and globalization (Stern and Kravitz 2016) are often cited as other labor market changes that have cut down on work opportunities in recent decades, particularly evident in the severe downturn in manufacturing and related industry jobs such as construction and printing. Union membership among workers has declined from 20.1% (17.7 million workers), in the initial census measurement taken in 1983, to 10.3% (14.6 million workers, most of whom are in public-sector workplaces) in 2021 (BLS 2022). New forms of strategic collective influence at both management and employee levels are part of today's labor discourse (Stern and Kravitz 2016). Some of the new forms of management, however, such as employee groups, are attempts to use the new form of employer-employee relations to *discourage* unionization efforts (e.g., the Sam Gates Family Story, in Iversen and Armstrong 2006, 137–39).

Another labor market challenge that particularly affects workers like those in this book is the frequency of nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses in private industry every year (BLS 2019h). The frequency of injury in manufacturing and related industries is well known, but data from the increase in service industry jobs in healthcare, retail, and other service venues such as business call centers reveal that they are also sites of physical strain, falls, carpal tunnel syndrome, back injuries, eye injuries, and emotional stress for many everyday workers (BLS 2018; Iversen and Armstrong 2006, 2007; Guendelsberger 2019). In 2017, nearly one-third of nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses resulted in days away from work (BLS 2018, 1). Considering the projected increase in the country's aging population, the number of nonfatal injuries in 2018 to workers in the healthcare and

social assistance sectors is particularly worrisome. Workers in these sectors experienced about 550,000 nonfatal occupational injuries, the highest number of all labor market industries. Nonfatal healthcare and social assistance injuries in 2018 outnumbered those in manufacturing, at about 400,000; retail trade, at almost 200,000; accommodation and food service, at 270,000; and construction, at almost 200,000 (BLS 2019h, 1). The jobs held by most of the workers in this book, and millions like them across the United States, are not only the lowest paid, often earning below poverty-level wages, and the most vulnerable to economic downturn, but are also associated with the highest risk of nonfatal occupational injury (BLS 2019h, 4).

More Job Seekers but Not Enough Jobs

Here are some recent numbers about how many jobs are actually available. The total U.S. population reached 329.4 million persons in March 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). Earlier estimates indicated that in 2020, approximately 74 million would be children under the age of 18, about 56 million would be adults 65 years or older, and a little over 200 million would be adults in the prime working ages of 18 to 64 years (Vespa, Armstrong, and Medina 2018, 5). At the same time, the notion of “prime working years” for some women now extends into the late 60s and 70s (Goldin and Katz 2018).

Official employment numbers in March 2020, revised in September 2020, showed that 155.8 million persons were employed full-time (34.5 hours or more a week) and 5.8 million were employed part-time for economic reasons, meaning they were working 1 to 34 hours a week but wanted full-time employment. A total of 20.6 million were employed part-time for noneconomic reasons, including childcare problems, family or personal obligations, school or training, and social security limits on earnings (BLS 2020d). Almost 8 million held multiple jobs (5% of the total number of individuals employed) and 9.5 million persons were listed by the BLS as self-employed, unincorporated (BLS 2020d). Overall, 162.9 million persons held paying jobs (BLS 2020d).

At the same time, approximately 152.3 million jobs were available in the U.S. labor market (Department of Numbers 2019) for the 200 million potential prime-age workers in 2020 noted earlier. The discrepancy in the number of people who want to work versus the number of jobs available became even greater in 2021 than it was at the end of 2019, as pandemic-related unemployment raged on. In April 2020, for example, out of 22 million jobs lost during the pandemic, only 9 million had been regained (Bartash 2020). Opportunity rhetoric such as “anyone can work if they want it enough” or “people who are unemployed are just too lazy to work” did not jibe with the number of jobs available, either as the economy inched forward after the Great Recession and during the pandemic or today, in 2021–2022.

And, of course, numbers alone don't account for the low wages that far too many jobs pay, as noted earlier about occupations in the service sector, the glacial pace of post–Great Recession wage increases more than 10 years after the recession technically ended, and the pandemic's effects on job loss. Ultimately, millions of counted and uncounted people who describe their life activities as work but are not paid or not paid enough figure centrally in the need to create *real* opportunity for the workers in the United States.

Creating *Real* Opportunity through Expanding Ideas about Work

Since the dominant narratives about hard work paying off and opportunity being available for all do not square with the numbers, another question emerges: What can be done so that 12 million full-time workers at ages 25 to 64 do not live in poverty or have incomes below 200% of the federal poverty threshold (PolicyLink 2019)? Forty years ago, in 1980, fewer than 7 million people were working but still poor; today, 12.4 million workers struggle in that category. Many noted scholars have rigorously explored the causes and consequences of the past 40 years of labor market changes using statistical analyses (e.g., Kochan and Barley 1999; Beck 2000; Ciulla 2000; Clogg, Eliason, and Leicht 2001; Levy and Murnane 2006; Blank, Danziger, and Schoeni 2006; Bartik and Houseman 2008; Kalleberg 2009, 2018), and the experiences recounted by the workers in this book add another dimension to the numbers. They help us understand in greater detail how workers' lives have been affected by changes in labor market jobs and clarify the kinds of opportunity that could create meaningful change in their lives.

In brief, the workers here speak of having to substitute lower-wage service jobs for the higher-wage manufacturing, construction, printing, and automotive positions they held before their companies moved from urban centers to the suburbs or out of the country or closed down completely. They speak of increasingly stressful physical and emotional working conditions in offices, foundries, healthcare facilities, and customer service and other call centers where workforce flexibility for employers is experienced as insecurity for the workers (McCall 2000) and workplace efficiency strategies take the form of intrusive surveillance. They speak of the declining value of their wages, limited union possibilities, and wage-reduction practices at work that are surreptitiously presented as an increase in paid hours. Such practices are often accompanied by reduction or elimination of nonwage benefits.

In addition, higher percentages of these workers are underemployed, defined officially as working part-time but wanting full-time work (Stevens, Huff, and Pihl 2017), or have stopped looking for work. Worse, these workers' narratives show that even when their incomes reach 200% of the federal poverty level, which is barebones family economic sufficiency as noted ear-

lier, making ends meet is a daily struggle wherein the fragile balance is easily upended by a medical bill, a car repair, a child's need for special services, or a layoff. The workers here illustrate what it's like to be among the 12.4 million full-time workers between the ages of 25 and 64 in the United States who are considered *economically insecure*, a term parallel to *low-income*, because these workers earn less than 200% of the poverty line (PolicyLink 2019). More than half of such workers, like many whose stories are featured in this book, are persons of color, and a high percentage are women. The narratives in this book also demonstrate how repeated recessions over the decades since the 1980s have resulted in neoliberal employer practices that disadvantage many workers. For example, cost-saving practices such as *outsourcing* (contracting some roles or whole departments, such as human resources, to organizations outside the business); using *contingent workers* (hiring short-term workers on an as-needed basis rather than hiring more full-time employees) (Sweet and Meiksins 2017); and *offshoring* (sending some tasks out of the country, where labor is cheaper) have cumulatively lowered or eliminated work opportunity for millions of workers in the United States.

Why Are Workers' Accounts Important?

Workers' narrative accounts that touch on these issues are particularly important because their actual experiences on the job are often not reflected in employment policies or workplace practices, which may then result in continual exclusion from an opportunity path. As noted, workplace conditions in many jobs have become increasingly inhospitable or downright dangerous, which can easily truncate opportunity. Second, worker accounts are important because policymakers and the public often characterize lower-income workers as lacking motivation, being lazy, or not working hard enough, and solutions to the perceived problem are then directed at changing individual behaviors rather than toward creating innovative and supportive policies, programs, and organizational structures. Specifically, the individualistic default path to mobility and higher earnings is understood to be more education, even though only about 35% of jobs in the United States actually require a four-year college education (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2019) and 34% of working-age people in the United States have a four-year college degree (Voice of America 2018). Third, in contrast to pejorative characterizations of many workers, their own accounts provide vivid evidence that work is still deeply meaningful to them, even when their daily dedication and future hopes are being sorely challenged by employers' policies and practices or by inadequately funded public workforce retraining and supports. Their vivid accounts may then reach policymakers' hearts and minds to suggest more equitable policy improvements. Fourth, worker accounts

are important because some government officials in the prior administration had raised the hopes of workers in industries such as steel and coal, where work opportunities are actually decreasing, attempting to revive a bygone period in U.S. labor market history rather than envisioning new ways to foster opportunity for workers in the future. Fifth, without public and policymaker understanding of what *real* opportunity means to workers and would-be workers, now and in the foreseeable future, workers' visions of their own futures are less likely to be realized. As Sennett (1998, 30) reminds us, "Narratives are more than simple chronicles of events; they give shape to the forward movement of time, suggesting reasons why things happen, showing their consequences." Finally, the workers in this book, as elsewhere, express strong desires to work at least some of the time at what they love, do what is meaningful to them and others, and have the opportunity to utilize their capabilities (Sen 1992; Nussbaum and Sen 1993; Fleurbaey 2018; Ferguson and Li 2018). These six reasons for paying attention to narrative accounts suggest they are critical for informing policy change and to the book's aim of expanding what is considered work and compensating it.

In particular, despite many television and internet reality shows, the U.S. public does not seem to know much more today about what many workers' jobs are like than they did in Studs Terkel's (1974) book, *Working*, which was situated in the old job market of the 1960s and early 1970s under the "old employment contract" (Kochan and Dyer 2017), before the major changes in the 1980s that continue today. That such changes in the labor market have taken place in basically a single generation makes it even more imperative to challenge the exclusive valuation of labor market work as "work," as Kathi Weeks (2011), Ulrich Beck (2000), and Karl Marx (1933) have done. Although some of the new work forms, such as gig work, are considered to be outside the formal labor market, most are affiliated with larger businesses, though usually without nonwage benefits. More broadly, the experiences that workers in this book relate raise questions about labor market inequality, stratification, and limited opportunity or life chances (Weber 1978 [1922]). Pragmatically, workers' accounts have broad implications for themselves and their families, especially their children; for workforce and employment-related education and policy; for the health of communities; and for the very way the U.S. populace thinks about what work is today and will be in the future.

Considering the needs of people and the social and physical environment in the 2020s and that "60% of jobs we have today will see more than 30% of tasks fundamentally transformed" (Sneider 2019, 2), the following chapters showcase workers' experiences in their jobs and occupations and their struggles and occasional small successes, which cumulatively herald the need for changes in thinking. Even current policy efforts, such as raising

the minimum wage and other wage movements, such as the Fight for \$15, valuably address wages but remain embedded in labor market jobs. The Earned Income Tax Credit similarly enhances income for labor market workers through the tax system. Only the Universal Basic Income (UBI) pilot programs (e.g., West, Baker, et al. 2021) are separate from need assessment, means testing, or job participation but, to date, UBI programs are limited in scope and length as well. Acknowledging the plusses of these policy efforts and expanding upon them, the final chapter in this book presents new ways to think about defining and compensating work beyond the labor market in order to benefit workers and families, foster community and civic engagement, and improve the country's failing infrastructure (American Society of Civil Engineers 2021).

The Book in Brief

This book puts a human face on the work experiences of a broad range of workers from the early 1980s to today, the 2020s, and aims to let their voices illustrate the challenges of the changes to work in the labor market and make them more visible and known. Importantly, the workers describe not only what they did or do as work, but also what they would like to do: in one worker's terms, their "heart-string." Chapter 2 shows what manufacturing, construction, and printing industry jobs have been like over the decades as they shifted by geography, workplace practices, and size of workforce. Subsequent chapters then explore the industry shift from manufacturing to services, detailing what service jobs entailed yesterday and entail today through workers' experience of them over the decades. Because the content of today's most common service jobs has not been broadly discussed beyond the low wages and the little mobility opportunity they afford, the chapters here examine the details of workers' experiences in the most common and highly populated service sector jobs: clerical (Chapter 3), healthcare (Chapter 4), food service and retail (Chapter 5), and in less common but still widespread service areas such as real estate, architecture, and automotive service (Chapter 6). In each sector, workers' descriptions and analytic commentary illuminate job content, working conditions, wage adequacy, and workers' feelings about their work and future work opportunity. Hearing directly from these workers and would-be workers enables us to more fully understand "the relations between the transformations within working life and workers' subjectivities [which] have been relatively under-explored" (Gill and Pratt 2008, 2).

The in-person knowledge and understanding we gained talking with our interlocutors, observing them at work, and talking with their coworkers and supervisors enable us to assess the relevance of existing policy and pro-

gram solutions to the work-related struggles that so many workers and communities experience. For example, President Donald Trump's 2018 executive order (White House 2018, 1) aimed to remedy the so-called skills crisis through "fostering an environment of lifelong learning and skills-based training, and to cultivate a demand-driven approach to workforce development." The executive order asked companies to create training opportunities, which most had already begun, but no reliable information exists about how many jobs were created or filled (Kessler 2019), largely because the companies were not required to hire those they trained. Demonstrating the president's preference for business solutions over policy ones, in 2018 he also proposed a 39% budget cut to the main federal workforce policy, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014. Although the cut was ultimately not approved by Congress, the president's views were in line with the ongoing decline in federal funding for workforce training and education that has taken place over the past 20 years: from \$4.68 billion in 2001 to \$2.79 billion in 2019 and \$2.79 billion proposed for 2020 (Campaign to Invest in America's Workforce 2019). Similarly, the administration's proposal to add work requirements for persons needing temporary food assistance (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as SNAP), housing assistance (Housing Choice Voucher Program), or childcare assistance, often coming from redirected Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds, particularly disadvantages those who are unemployed because of mental or physical disabilities but need such supports *before* they are able to look for work. Although these assistance programs are officially oriented to supporting parents' work and, occasionally, workforce training, they are less accessible than expected. Relatedly, the relevance of wage policies and income movements noted earlier is also part of the conversation.

The final chapter (Chapter 7) proposes new ways to create *real* opportunity for workers, including the importance of revising ideas about what work is and how some work can be transformed into civil labor and compensated in various ways, such as by money, time, or exchange. Examples of success with civil labor programs in European countries and others outside the United States add our imperative of compensation to Ulrich Beck's (2000) idea of civil labor. This work expansion effort we propose is oriented both to combining civil labor with labor market work and also to enabling workers to pursue the kind of work or activity that is meaningful to them and similarly benefits others. Teresa⁴ is an example. Teresa's automotive service position in Seattle, which she achieved after a period of workforce

4. Most organization and all person names are pseudonyms, with the exception of two community respondents in Chapter 7 (see footnote 2 in Chapter 7). Pseudonyms were selected by the participants in the Ethnographic and Family Studies, and by the author in the other two studies.

development training, paid the bills. But her passion and talent, what she so aptly called “my heart-string,” lay in catering, which she had time to do only occasionally, uncompensated, for her church and community organizations. If she could job-share her automotive position and be compensated for it and for part-time catering, perhaps by federal funds to communities for compensated civil labor initiatives, Teresa, her family, the job-sharing worker, and her community could all benefit. We return to Teresa’s story in Chapter 7.

The final chapter also suggests ways that creating new, compensated ways of working could dramatically benefit towns and neighborhoods. One way we propose is through enhanced civic engagement activities that the community values. Some might be compensated by philanthropists or foundations, as can be seen in the examples of artists in North Philadelphia and horticulture in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. A second way could enable more people to spend some of their time outdoors working on widespread improvements in roads, bridges, and other local structural needs, now that decades of labor market changes have resulted in an insufficient workforce to solve the severe infrastructure problems throughout the United States. Groups of supervisors and managers could oversee less-trained workers, who could then advance their capabilities while improving community safety. Finally, Chapter 7 suggests how new ways of working can provide greater intergenerational opportunity for the workers’ children. Creating real opportunity through compensated civil labor, then, is what Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller (2008, 36) might view as “a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than to private individuals.” In sum, the focus in the last chapter of this book is the generation and expansion of compensated civil labor.

A Word about the People and Research in This Book

The workers’ stories in this book are drawn from several research studies I conducted alone or with colleagues [see Appendix] between the late 1980s and 2019. I have talked with the study participants about their work experiences in seven locations across the United States: Milwaukee, Wisconsin; New Orleans, Louisiana; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; a Philadelphia suburb in Pennsylvania; St. Louis, Missouri; Seattle, Washington; and Tacoma, Washington. The workers were racially and ethnically diverse and represented earners in both lower- and middle-income categories.⁵ Table A.1 in

5. We follow the many scholars and policymakers today who define “lower income” as income below 200% of the federal poverty line. For “middle income,” we use the range other scholars employ, which is family income that falls within 75% to 125% of the national median family income (Gauthier 2015).

the Appendix summarizes the studies and the workers whose interviews I revisited and reanalyzed for this book.⁶

In all, I have interviewed more than 1,200 workers and would-be workers since the 1980s, including hundreds more family members, community members, workforce and welfare-to-work trainers, K–12 school personnel, employers, religious figures, and others relevant to the workers themselves. In most of these studies, the conversations took place multiple times over many years. For this book, I rereviewed the transcripts and data collected during these studies—at least fifteen thousand pages in all—and plumbed aspects of the workers’ experiences and perceptions in addition to those examined in and reported following the original studies. Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf (2000) call this analytic method the biographical-interpretive method, which extends qualitative methods such as oral history, biography, and ethnography with analytic interpretation and reflexive positioning. As they note, “Biographies, which are rooted in analysis of both social history and the wellsprings of individual personality, reach forwards and backwards in time, documenting processes and experiences of social change” (2). Relatedly, use of multiple studies connected by researcher positionality, but not necessarily related by time or original intent, has become more common (for example, Burawoy 2009; Dodson 1998; Kanter 1989), even though it is still quite novel. Technically, this method can also be called an ethnographic reanalysis, which Burawoy (2009, 76) has identified as very rare among sociologically inclined ethnographers.

Overall, the labor market context over the past 40 years has been increasingly challenging for nearly two-thirds of the workers in the United States. While some workers could indeed benefit from more education and training, many of those with such advantages have not been thriving in the changed labor market environment. Worse yet, wage and salary projections for the labor market occupations explored in this book do not look as if they will pay off or offer real opportunity for at least the rest of the 2020s. We see this first in Chapter 2, in the experiences of workers whose hard work in manufacturing, construction, and printing jobs has met wage and opportunity challenges from both employers and the larger economy.

6. Research partners and the relevant studies are identified in full in the Appendix.