

Unemployment in Wilson County

May 11, 2017

The Inaugural Class of the Wilson Impact Initiative

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Introduction

The Wilson Impact Initiative was formed out of collaboration among three organizations: Wilson Chamber of Commerce, Wilson Economic Development Council, and Wilson 20/20 Community Vision. In 2015, the three aforementioned organizations interviewed applicants and selected 16 inaugural participants to complete an 18-month series of leadership and professional development seminars. A core requirement of the program is completion of a white paper that focuses on an issue within Wilson County. The project adopted by the Wilson Impact Initiative participants and the subject of this white paper is the status of unemployment in Wilson County.

This white paper was written about a series of interview-based surveys, which were conducted with individuals seeking services at several employment opportunity centers and organizations in Wilson County. These discussions were completed in order to provide a grassroots perspective on the barriers for unemployed or underemployed individuals in Wilson County. The goal of this effort was to characterize an otherwise undefined population of “employment-at-risk” working-age adults in the Wilson area, in an effort to target and better define programs and forms of aid which were optimized to the population. This research is a fact-based illustration of what the study’s interviewees deemed as barriers. The results of the Wilson Impact Initiative efforts will provide useful information to frame the dialogue further among agencies and the community on how to move Wilson County forward with regard to unemployment.

Statement of Problem

The unemployment rate of Wilson County is currently 7.8%.¹ Although this rate has decreased from the rate of 8.8%² one year ago, Wilson County has one of the highest unemployment rates in North Carolina. As of February 2017, only seven other counties have employment rates higher than Wilson County. Likewise, the state average is 4.7%.³ Despite the fact that the rate has improved, unemployment remains one of Wilson County’s greatest ongoing challenges.

¹ North Carolina Civilian Labor Force Estimates, North Carolina Department of Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis Division, Preliminary Statewide and County Data for February 2017 (unadjusted).

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

For the purposes of this study, unemployment is defined as “People who are jobless, are looking for a job, and available for work are *unemployed*.”⁴ More specifically,

Persons are classified as unemployed if they do not have a job, have actively looked for work in the prior 4 weeks, and are currently available for work. Persons who were not working and were waiting to be recalled to a job from which they had been temporarily laid off are also included as unemployed. Receiving benefits from the Unemployment Insurance (UI) program has no bearing on whether a person is classified as unemployed.

The unemployment rate represents the number unemployed as a percent of the labor force.

Actively looking for work may consist of any of the following activities:

- *Contacting:*
 - *An employer directly or having a job interview*
 - *A public or private employment agency*
 - *Friends or relatives*
 - *A school or university employment center*
- *Submitting resumes or filling out applications*
- *Placing or answering job advertisements*
- *Checking union or professional registers*
- *Some other means of active job search*

Passive methods of job search do not have the potential to connect job seekers with potential employers and therefore do not qualify as active job search methods. Examples of passive methods include attending a job training program or course, or merely reading about job openings that are posted in newspapers or on the Internet.

Workers expecting to be recalled from temporary layoff are counted as unemployed whether or not they have engaged in a specific job seeking activity. In all other cases, the individual must have been engaged in at least one active job search activity in the 4 weeks preceding the interview and be available for work (except for temporary illness).⁵

Although there is no official measure of underemployment,⁶ the population of interviewees covered by this study includes both those who are without any form of employment as well as those who are employed part-time and who are seeking full-time employment.

⁴ United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, December 2, 2016.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ “Because of the difficulty of developing an objective set of criteria which could be readily used in a monthly household survey, no official government statistics are available on the total number of persons who might be viewed as underemployed. Even if many or most could be identified, it would still be difficult to quantify the loss to the economy of such underemployment.” *ibid.*, Frequently Asked Questions, October 5, 2015.

Agencies and organizations that currently provide services and resources for the unemployed in Wilson County include but are not limited to the following:

- Department of Social Services
- Diversified Opportunities
- Hope Station
- Jobs for Life
- NC Works
- Opportunities Industrialization Center of Wilson (Wilson OIC)
- St. John Community Development Corporation (CDC)
- Turning Point
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Wilson Community College
- Wilson County Library
- Wilson Housing Authority

Methodology

The Wilson Impact Initiative participants interviewed 116 individuals from Wilson County beginning October 27, 2016 and concluding January 6, 2017. Based primarily on the difficulty of obtaining valid results from a small, hard-to-reach population via a completely randomized survey, these individuals were chosen at random through a controlled approach of interviewing community members receiving services from the following local organizations: Hope Station, NC Works, Wilson OIC, and the Wilson Housing Authority. This method was used due in large part to the unique challenges posed by surveying an at-risk, sometimes transient population beyond typical census and other demographic data-gathering activities.

In addition to providing a larger initial sample of participants who were of interest to the study, this approach allowed the collection and aggregation of results based on demographic sub-populations which could be defined by agency survey location. All individuals were interviewed in person by a two-member team using a questionnaire developed by the Wilson Impact Initiative regarding employment status.⁷ The questionnaire was designed for use in an interview setting and consisted of ten primary questions, which were read aloud to all individuals with responses recorded by the Wilson Impact Initiative team conducting each interview. This method was chosen by the Wilson Impact Initiative in the event there were any literacy or language barriers⁸ with the individuals chosen at random. Questions were not only selected to allow basic

⁷ See Appendix A for questionnaire.

⁸ Spanish speaking members of the Wilson Impact Initiative assisted in verbal translation of the questionnaire.

demographic decomposition of the surveyed population,⁹ but also to allow a wide multivariate variety of survey responses on challenges faced in gaining and/or maintaining employment, as well as information on organizations that the respondents had interfaced with in working to obtain employment.

The aforementioned organizations were suggested by the advisors to the Wilson Impact Initiative in order for the group to survey a representative cross-section of the unemployed and underemployed population. All individuals surveyed were utilizing services and/or resources of the organizations where they were surveyed.

A total of 116 individuals were surveyed across a total of four locations. The following is a breakdown of the number of responses by agency location by date:

- Hope Station -- 36 respondents
- NC Works -- 15 respondents
- Wilson Housing Authority -- 5 respondents
- Wilson OIC -- 60 respondents

Findings

Initial Analysis of Raw Results

Based on the substantial amount and depth of data gathered, initial analysis revealed the following:

A high percentage (37.9% of total) of survey respondents across the totality of survey locations indicated that they were disabled, which represented an unanticipated result for the working group. While results from this cohort were characterized independently,¹⁰ it was determined -- as disabled respondents would generally be assumed not to be actively looking for work -- that these results would be excluded from the recommendations portion of the study due to the limited resources imposed by the size and resources of the working group. However, it is recommended that a more thorough targeted analysis be conducted on this sub-population of respondents, possibly as a follow-up project to this one.

Similarly, 25% of respondents indicated that they were employed either part-time (15.5%) or full-time (9.5%) at the time the interviews were conducted. Results from these respondents were excluded from further analysis of unemployed (as were results from respondents where the unemployment section was left blank), given that

⁹ Gender, age range, and level of education were obtained.

¹⁰ Refer to Appendix C.

respondent data did not meet the primary working criteria of unemployment.¹¹ The following analysis focuses on those who self-identified as unemployed.

Demographic Analysis of Targeted Results

With a few exceptions, results were broadly consistent across respondents from each of the agency locations surveyed. Excluding results from disabled and/or otherwise employed individuals, per the initial analytical scope defined earlier in the Methodology section, the data displayed the following demographic markers as seen in Figure 1.

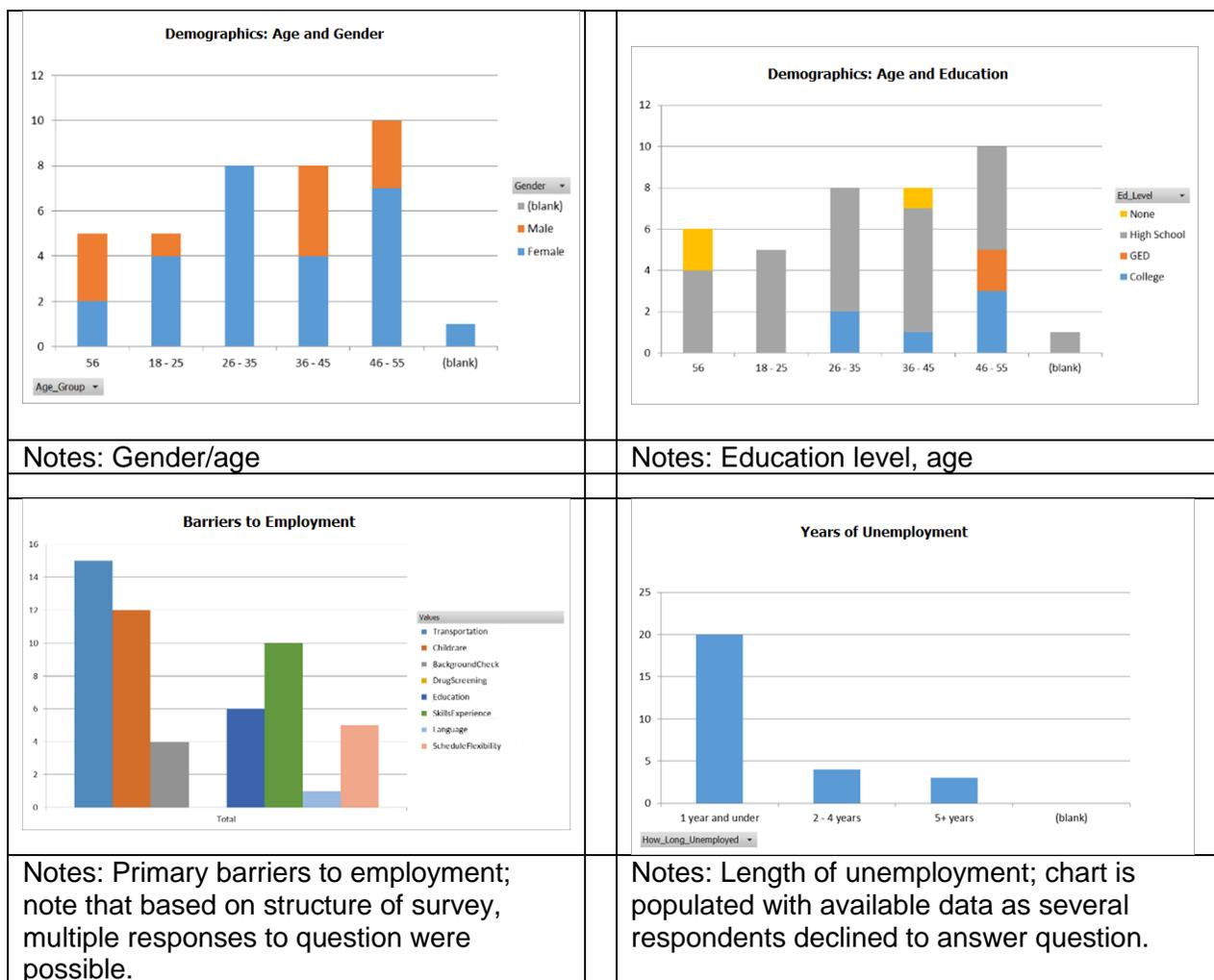


Figure 1: General demographics of all non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed.”

¹¹ Those who are employed part-time but seek full-time employment are considered to be underemployed, rather than unemployed.

Based on the foregoing, the “most typical” respondent in the survey had the following characteristics within an overall revised population of 38 respondents:

- Gender: female (70.2 % of respondents)
- Age range: 26-55 (70.2 % of respondents)
- Highest education attained: GED or high school (76.3 %)
- Barriers to obtaining employment:
 - transportation (39.5%)
 - child care (31.6%)
 - skills/experience (26.3%)
- Length of unemployment: less than one year (52.6% of respondents who specifically self-reported as being unemployed)

While attention to other demographics should not be reduced or excluded based on these results, individuals fitting any two or more of these demographic markers would represent primary areas of focus.

Analysis of Primary Agency Use by Target Demographic

This section provides an analysis of reported assistance agency use by respondents in the target demographic.

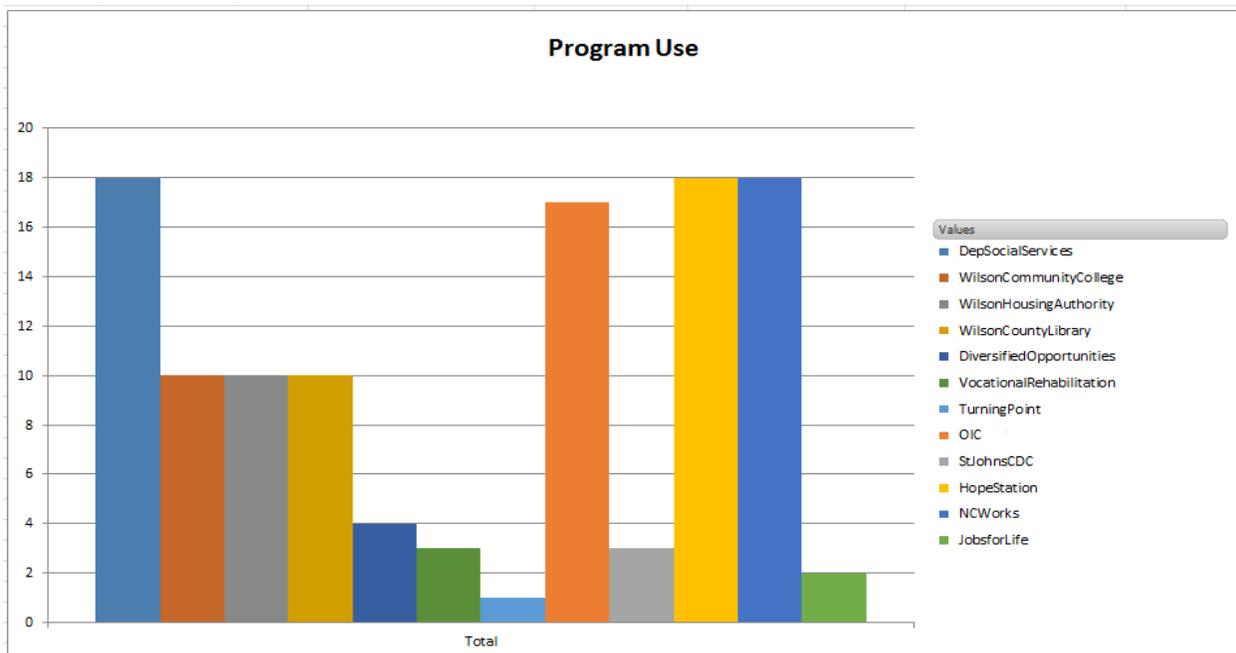


Figure 2: Previous and current agency use within target demographic of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” surveyed across all agencies.¹²

¹² Note that based on structure of survey, multiple responses to questions were possible.

Agencies with highest use reported by surveyed population were Department of Social Services, Hope Station, NC Works, and Wilson OIC; these four agencies accounted for 62.3% of the total reported agency interactions within the target demographic. Agencies returning the lowest reported use among the target demographic included Turning Point and Jobs for Life.¹³

Demographics (Age/Gender) for Agencies with Highest Reported Utilization

This section contains information about age and gender within the target demographic (non-disabled, unemployed).

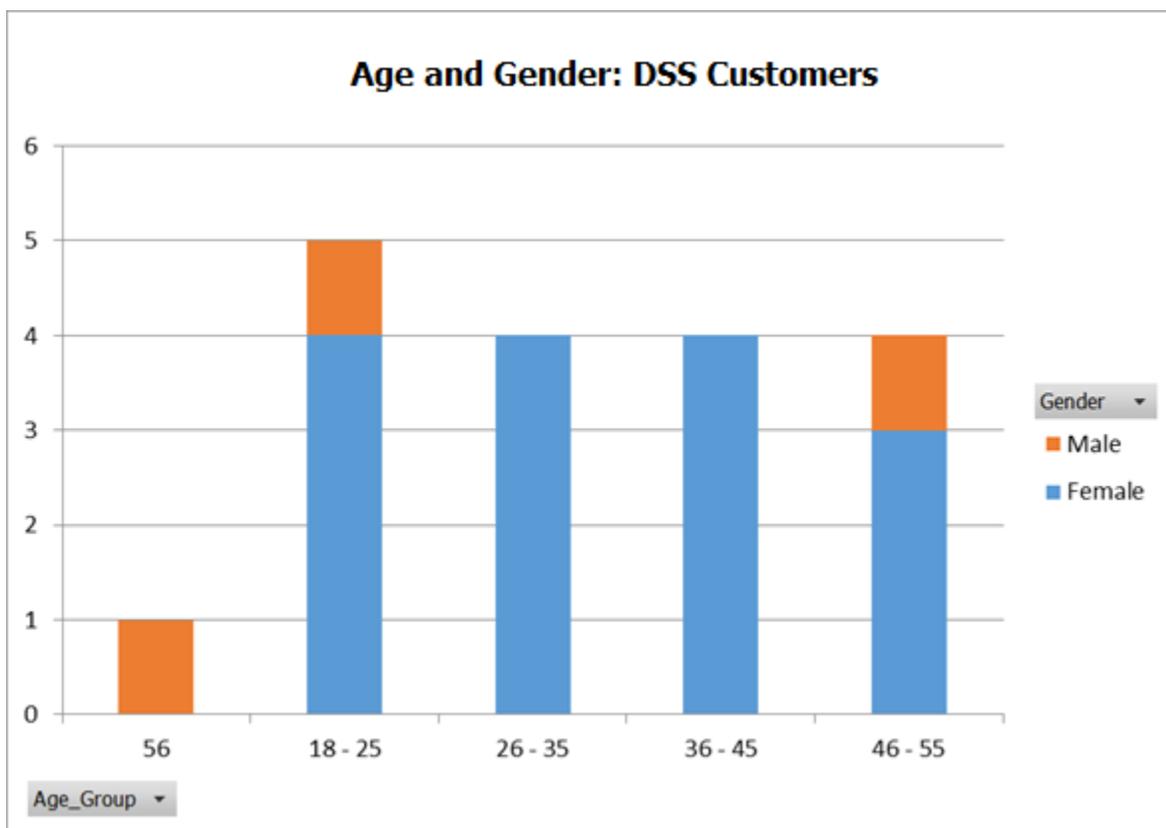


Figure 3: Previous and current agency use within target demographic of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” by age and gender, for **Department of Social Services**.

¹³ There were no participants filtered-out, due to disability or other employment conditions, when reporting agency interaction. The low rate of interaction extends across the surveyed population.

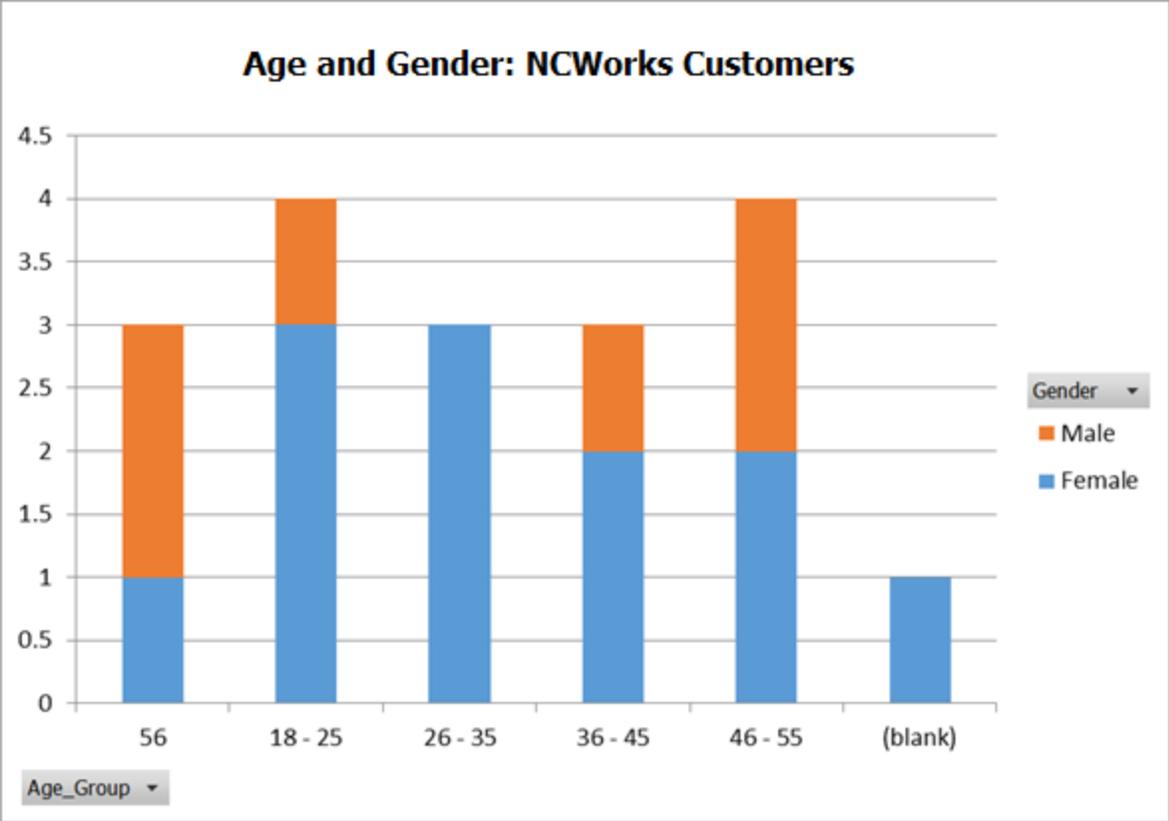


Figure 4: Previous and current agency use within target demographic of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” by age and gender, for **NCWorks**.

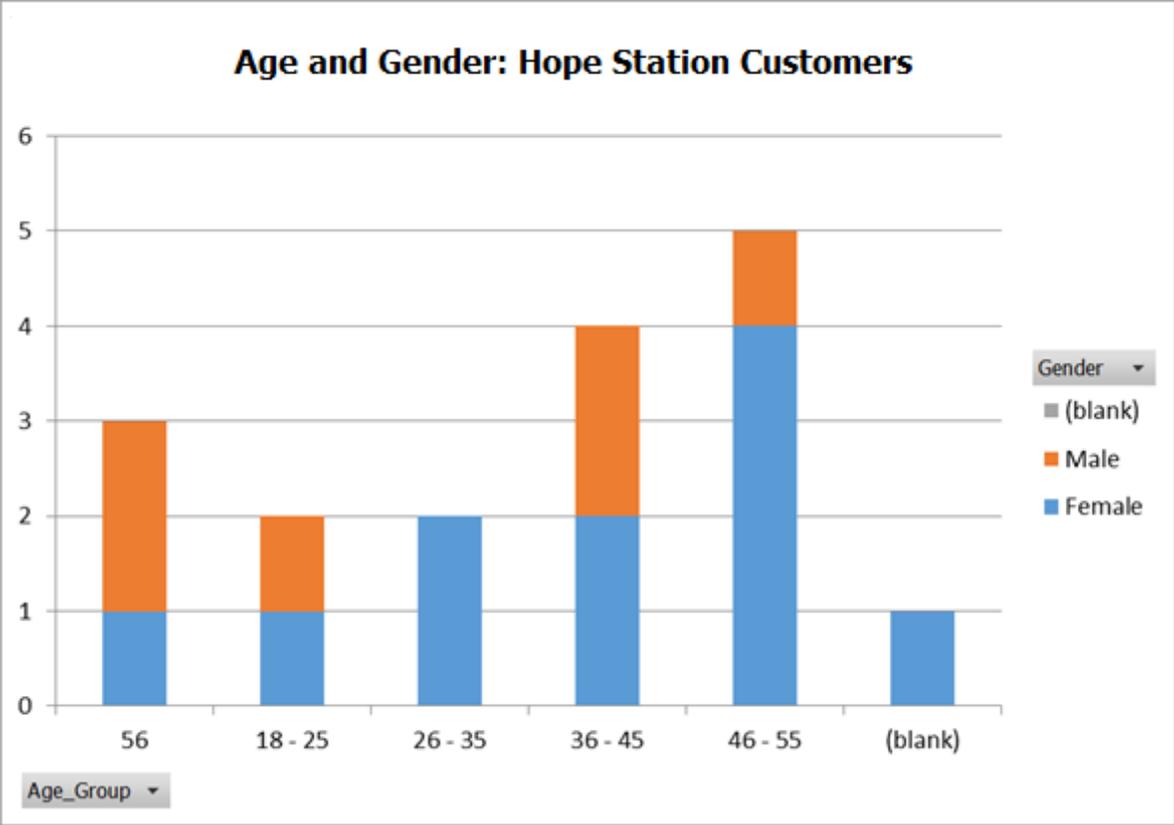


Figure 5: Previous and current agency use within target demographic of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” by age and gender, for **Hope Station**.

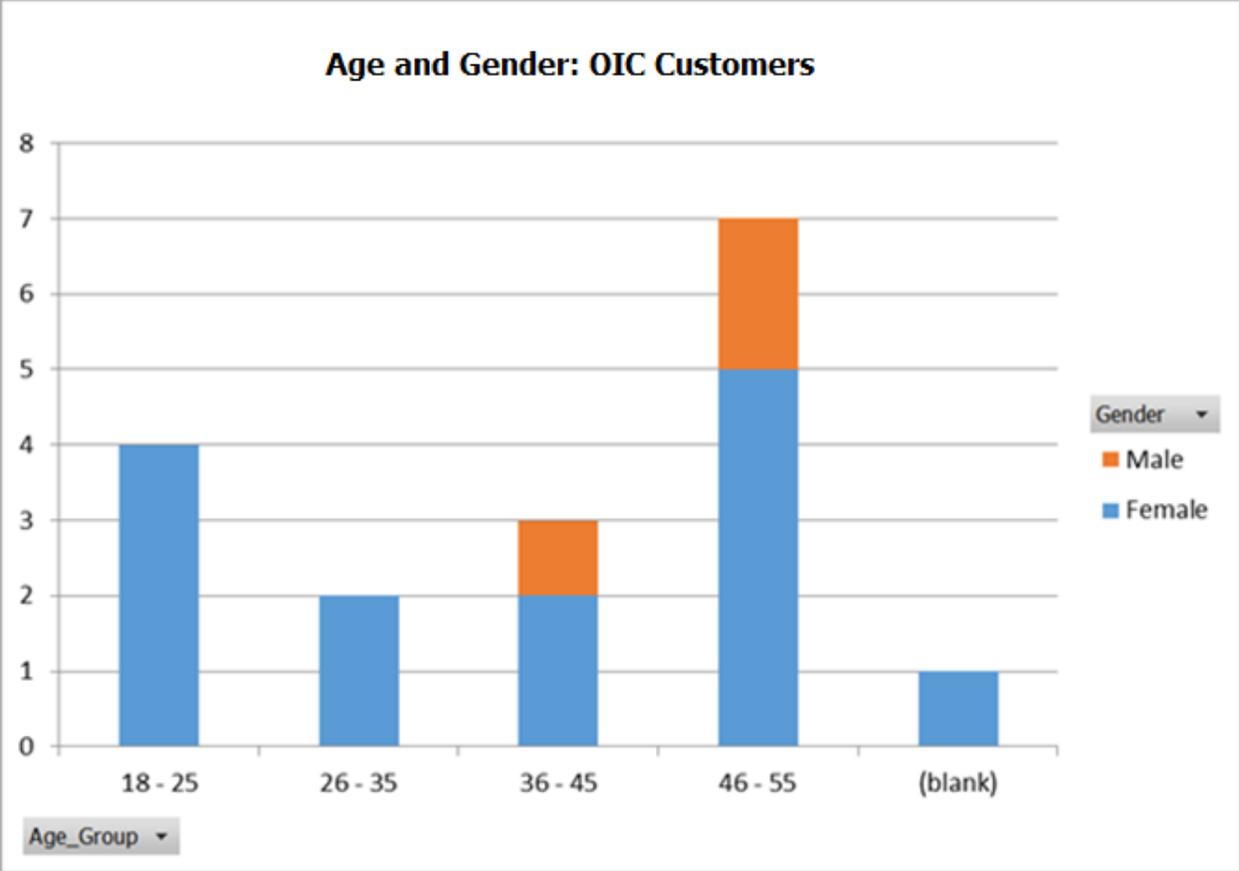


Figure 6: Previous and current agency use within target demographic of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” by age and gender, for **Wilson OIC**.

Program Co-use for Agencies with Highest Reported Utilization

This section contains information about frequency of other-program co-use for agencies with the highest reported utilization among the target demographic (non-disabled, unemployed).

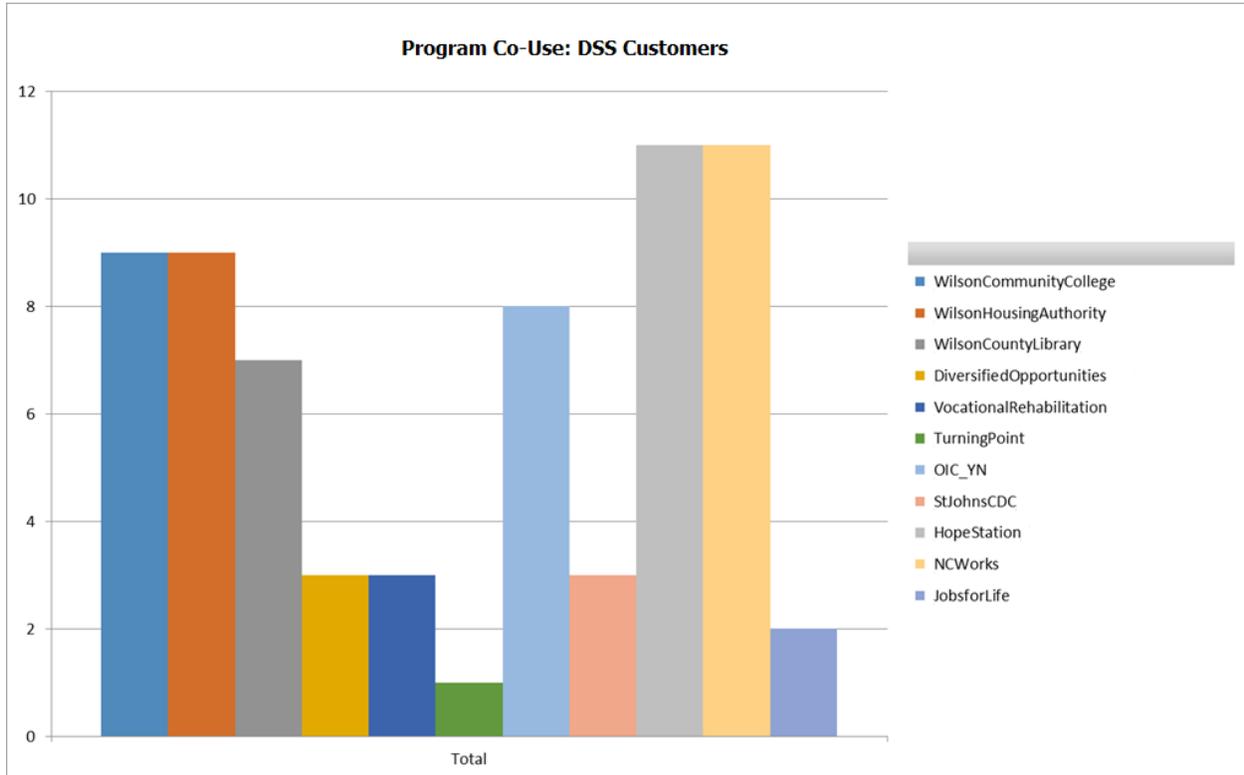


Figure 7: Agency co-use within target demographic of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” for **Department of Social Services** (Department of Social Services count date omitted for clarity). Programs with highest co-use among Department of Social Services users were Hope Station and NC Works (tied).

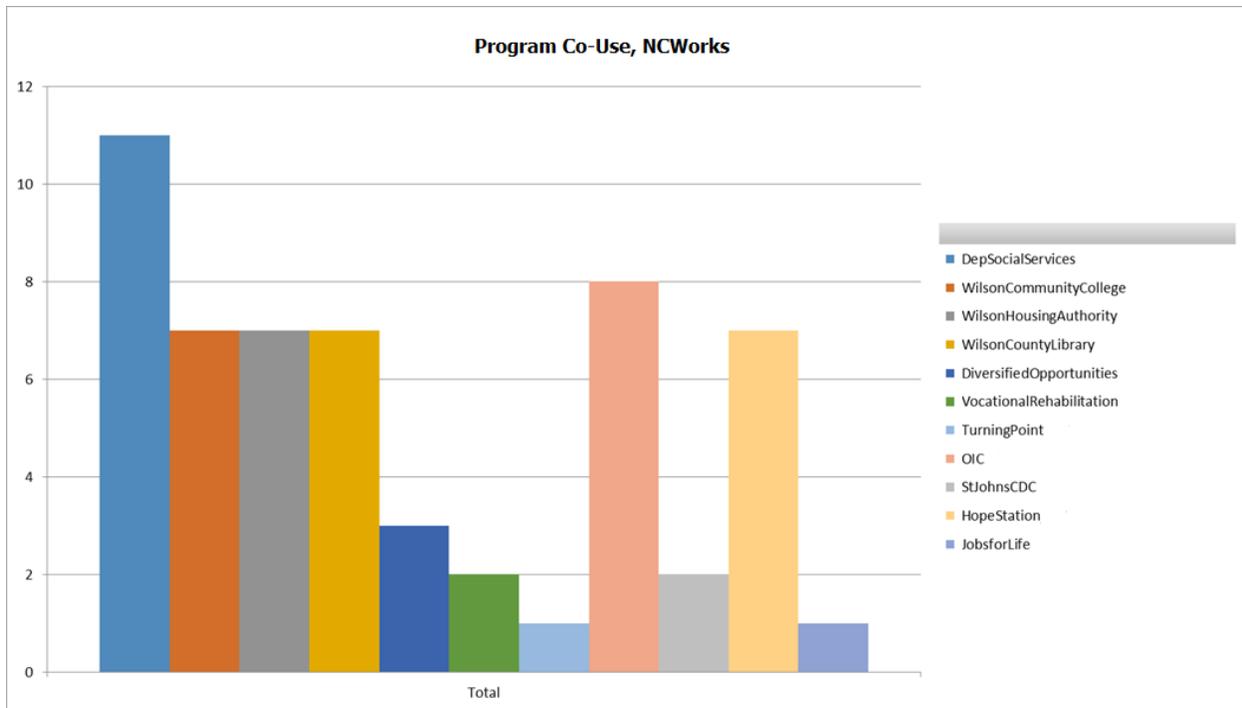


Figure 8: Agency co-use within target demographic of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” for **NCWorks** (NCWorks count date omitted for clarity). Program with highest co-use among NC Works users was Department of Social Services.

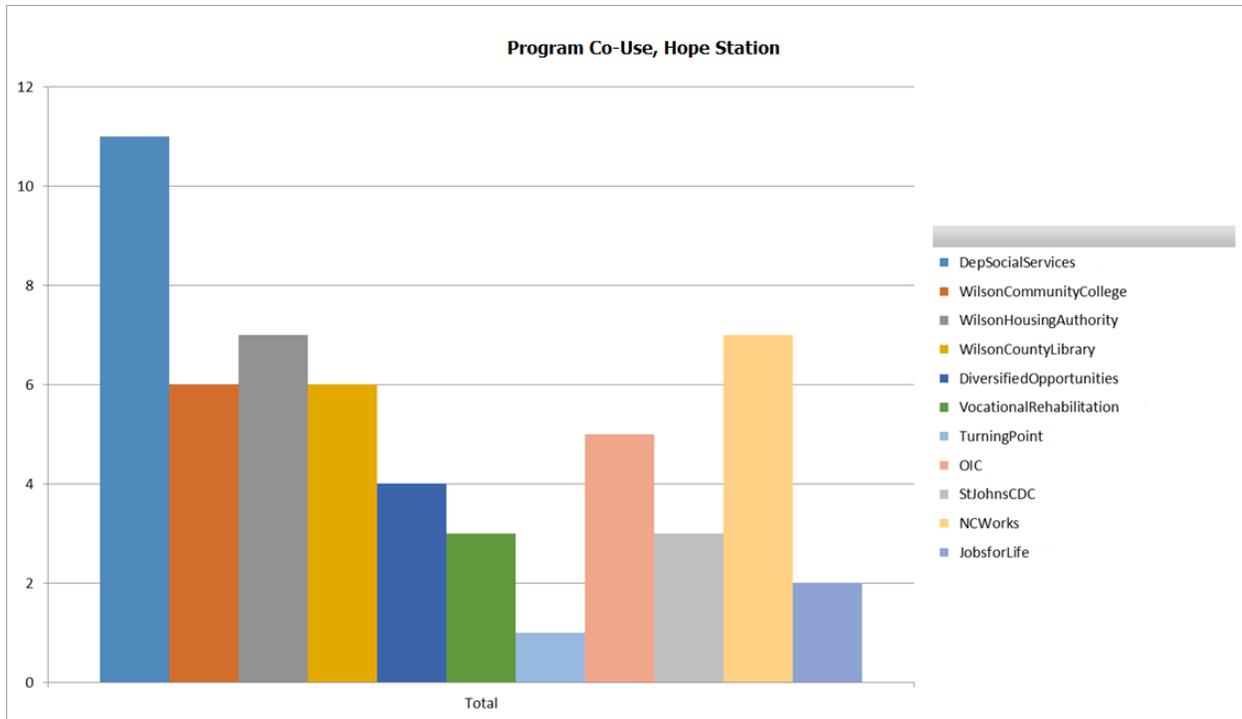


Figure 9: Agency co-use within target demographic of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” for **Hope Station** (Hope Station count date omitted for clarity). Program with highest co-use among Hope Station users was Department of Social Services.

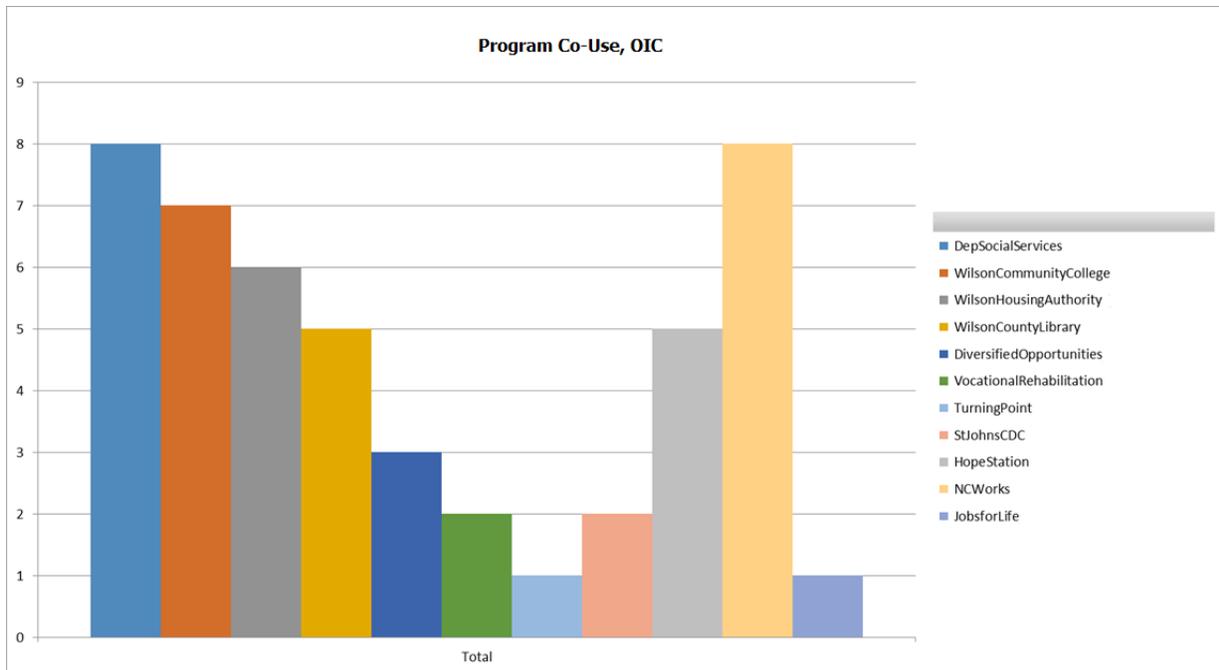


Figure 10: Agency co-use within target demographic of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” for **Wilson OIC** (Wilson OIC count date omitted for clarity). Programs with highest co-use among Wilson OIC users were Department of Social Services and NC Works.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study enabled the members of the Wilson Impact Initiative to identify several demographic areas for further review and action for the agencies of Wilson County. The focus for these are primarily transportation and childcare. Although survey responses consistently reported these as issues among the target population, additional study is needed to determine the extent of barrier and determine the most effective solution.

This study also identified that, based on utilization, there are two major groupings of organizations serving the target population -- one of which is seeing heavier use and one of which is not. Within the heavier-use set of organizations, there is a higher correlation to co-use (e.g., users of one of these organizations tend to report using other organizations in the same *heavier-use* organizational grouping as well.)

The research revealed that the needs of Wilson’s unemployed are being addressed by a well-meaning, yet seemingly-disconnected, network of publicly and privately funded entities. It is the belief of this committee that there should be one

centralized supervising entity to coordinate the efforts of all organizations and agencies tasked with aiding the unemployed in Wilson County. This coordination of resources will not only create a more streamlined and timely mechanism for employing the unemployed for the county, it could ultimately prove to be more cost-effective by providing a holistic, coordinated set of solutions to the Wilson unemployed community while reducing duplication of effort.

This study also uncovered other barriers to employment in Wilson County. The most significant barrier to the stimulation of job growth among the unemployed is the lack of transportation opportunities offered by the community. Given efficient and sufficient public transportation, many of the unemployed would be able to sustain reliable work habits enabling them to retain employment. The lack of affordable child care is another barrier for many of Wilson's unemployed parents. Compensation offered by many of the community's businesses is not enough to offset the ever-increasing cost of child care. The research found that the lack of transportation and affordable child care outweigh even the negative effects of a criminal background in terms of obtaining and holding a job.

A large segment of Wilson County's unemployed citizens are disabled; many of the disabled are receiving some of the same services as those seeking jobs. While the disabled are not included in the unemployed statistics, the community could benefit from a future Wilson Impact Initiative project exploring the many reasons for disability and the possibility of returning a portion of this population back into the workforce. This project could also explore the reasons for Wilson County's high percentage of disabled citizens.

The study also revealed anecdotally that our older citizens feel as if they are not receiving an equal opportunity to interview for employment, even though they feel they still have quite a bit to offer. Seasoned unemployed individuals are an overlooked, yet valuable, resource.

Members of the inaugural Wilson Impact Initiative respectfully put this study forward as a means to understand Wilson County's unemployed population better. Since Wilson County currently has one of the highest unemployment rates in North Carolina, there is need to know what the causes and barriers of employment are, as well as understand who is affected. This understanding can lead to further studies with better provisioning of services to the unemployed, and ultimately, a lowering of the unemployment rate.

Acknowledgements

The members of the Impact Initiative wish to thank **Ryan Simons** of the Wilson Chamber of Commerce, **Paula Benson** of Wilson 20/20 Community Vision, and **Jennifer Lantz** of the Wilson Economic Development Council for guidance and encouragement provided throughout this project.

Appendix A: Questionnaire Sample

Wilson Impact Initiative Workforce Questionnaire

Please complete all questions and mail to Impact Initiative, in care of Wilson Chamber of Commerce, 200 Nash Street NE, Wilson, NC 27893

1. **Which age group do you belong?** *Circle one:*

- a) 18 - 25
- b) 26 - 35
- c) 36 - 45
- d) 46 - 55
- e) 56+

2. **Gender** *Circle one:*

- a) Male
- b) Female

3. **Employment Status** *Circle one:*

- a) Full-Time Employment
- b) Part-Time Employment
- c) If you are unemployed, how long? *Circle one:*
 - i) 1 year and under
 - ii) 2 - 4 years
 - iii) 5+ year

4. **If you are unemployed, how often are you looking for employment?** *Circle one:*

- a) Once a week
- b) Once a month
- c) Never

5. **Where do you live?**

6. **What is your highest level of education?**

Circle one:

- a) College
- b) High School
- c) GED
- d) None

7. **Do you provide for anyone else in your home?** *Circle one:*

- a) Yes
- b) No

8. **Have you ever participated in a program that helped get you ready for a job?**

Circle one:

a) Yes

Where? (check one)

- ____ Department of Social Services
- ____ Diversified Opportunities
- ____ Hope Station
- ____ Jobs for Life
- ____ NC Works
- ____ Wilson OIC
- ____ St. John's/CDC
- ____ Turning Point
- ____ Vocational Rehabilitation
- ____ Wilson Community College
- ____ Wilson County Library
- ____ Wilson Housing Authority
- ____ Other: _____

b) No

9. **Are you willing to participate in a program?** *Circle one:*

- i) Yes
- ii) No

10. **What are your greatest struggles when trying to get a job?** *Check all that apply:*

- a) ____ Transportation
- b) ____ Childcare
- c) ____ Disability
- d) ____ Language
- e) ____ Schedule Flexibility
- f) ____ Skills/Experience
- g) ____ Education
- h) ____ Drug Screening
- i) ____ Background Check
- j) Other: _____

Write additional comments on the back of this form.

We are gathering information about the unemployment crisis in Wilson, NC. If we may we contact you for more information, please complete the below:

Name: _____

Phone Number: _____

Address: _____

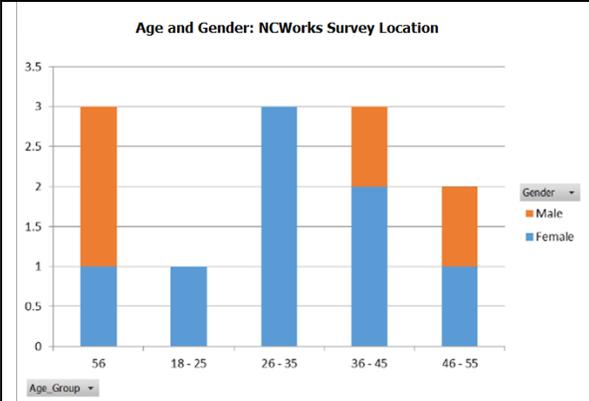
E-mail: _____

Appendix B: Analysis of Segmented Results by Agency Where Surveyed

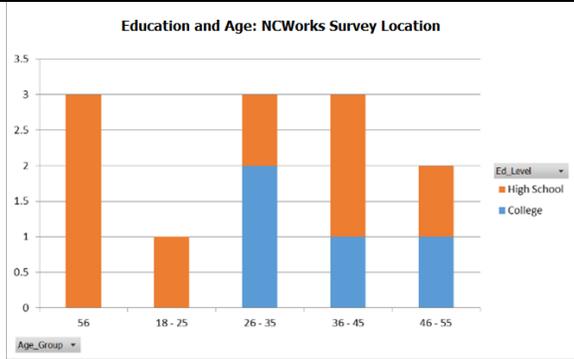
This appendix contains results which are broken down by agency where respondents were actually surveyed. Key demographic elements and distinguishing features are identified after each table.



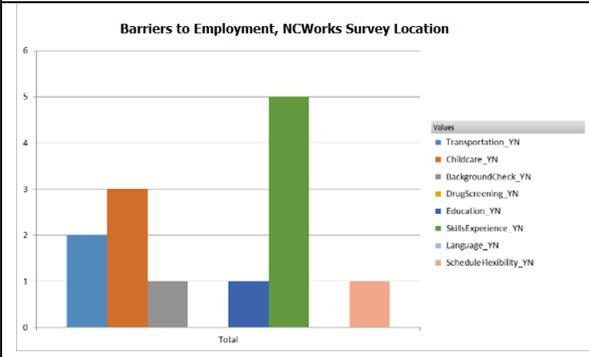
Figure 11: General demographics of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed;” surveyed at **Hope Station**. Results are similar to overall demographics from all-agency results; the majority of respondents are 36-45 years of age, with transportation being, by far, the major barrier to full employment for respondents surveyed at this location.



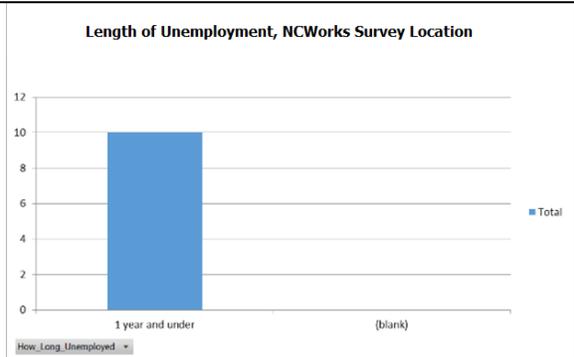
Notes: Gender/age



Notes: education level, age



Notes: Primary barriers to employment; note that based on structure of survey, multiple responses to question were possible.



Notes: length of unemployment; chart is populated with available data as several respondents declined to answer question.

Figure 12: General demographics of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed;” surveyed at **NCWorks**. Results here are also similar to overall demographics from all-agency results. A notable difference from the overall results occurs with skills/experience being the primary barrier to employment for respondent surveyed at this location.

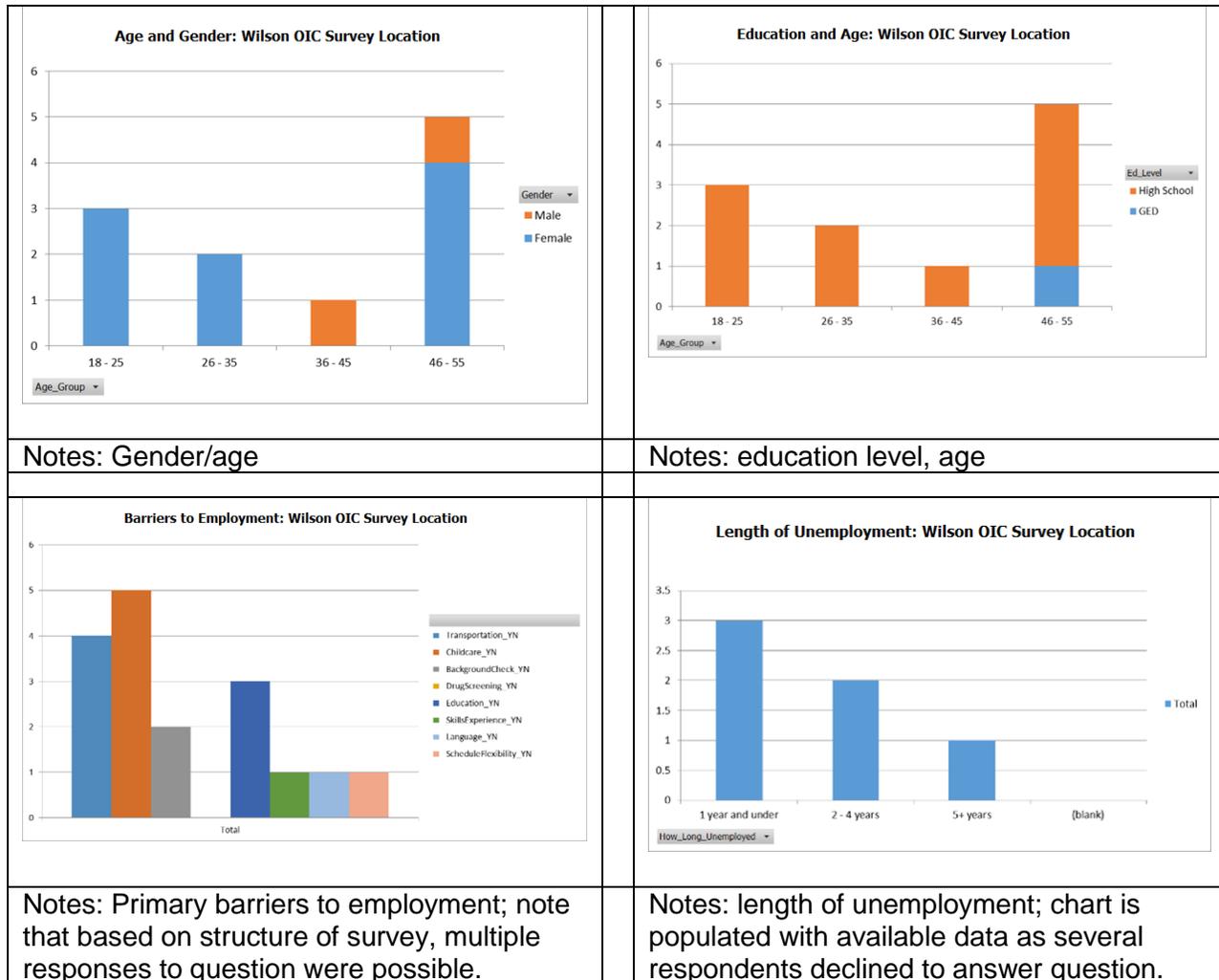


Figure 13: General demographics of non-disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed;” surveyed at **Wilson OIC**. Results here are generally similar to overall demographics from all-agency results with two key differences – respondent ages are disproportionately weighed to the 46-55 age range, and with a slightly larger grouping of individuals reported being unemployed for longer than one year.¹⁴

¹⁴ Views were omitted for Wilson Housing Authority as only one non-disabled individual self-identifying as unemployed is present in this population making further demographic analysis infeasible within the context of data gathered for the study.

Appendix C: Demographics of Individuals Self-Identifying as Disabled

This appendix contains demographics for the surveyed sub-population, which self-identified as “disabled.” Key demographic elements and distinguishing features are identified after each table.

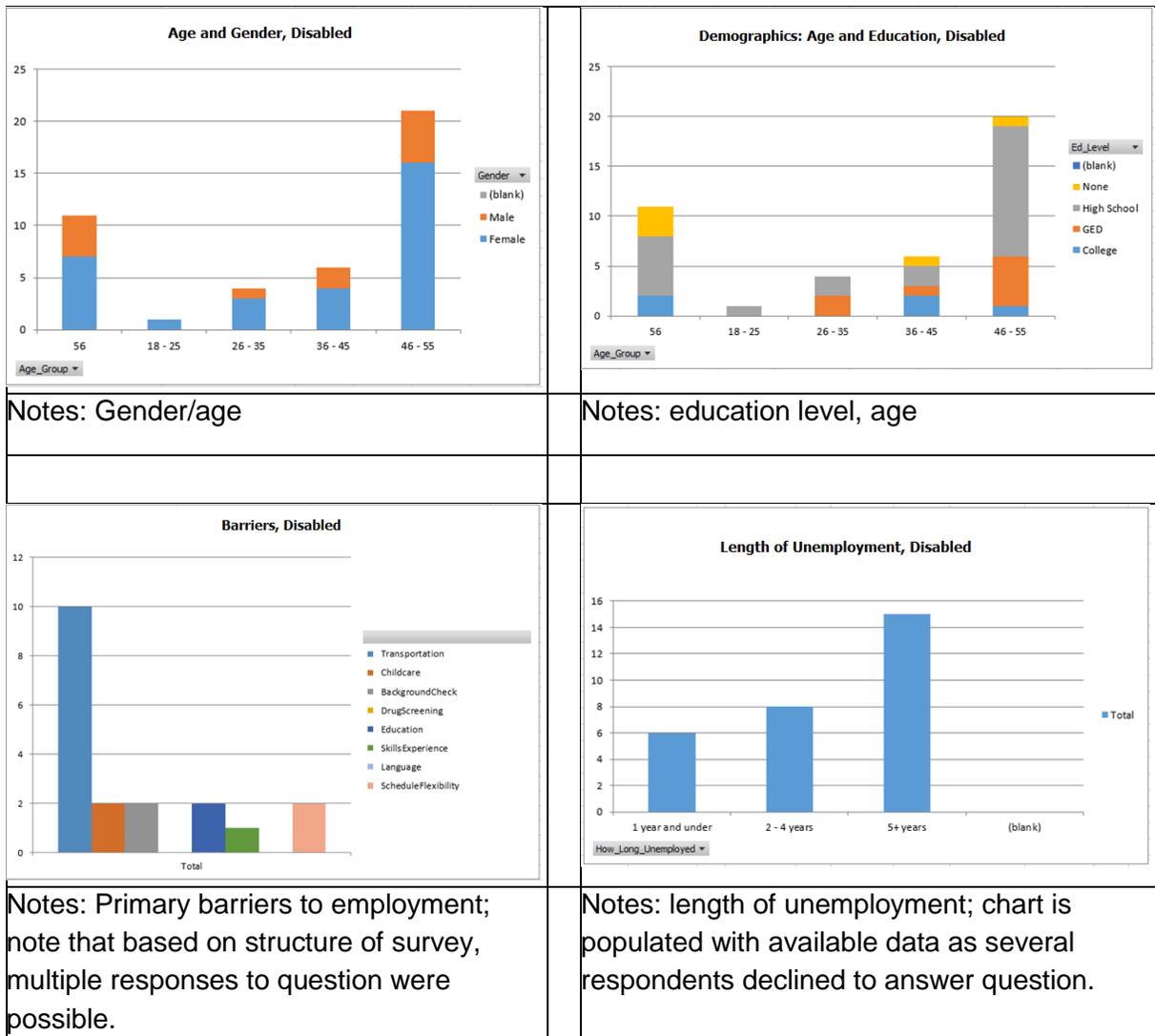


Figure 14: General demographics of all disabled respondents who also self-identified as “unemployed.”

General demographic statistics for respondents self-identifying as disabled include the following:

- Female (72.1% of respondents identifying as disabled)
- 46 and above (74.4% of respondents identifying as disabled)
- Unemployment for 5+ years (51.7% of respondents identifying as disabled; this sub-segment of the disabled population is greater than the under 1 year and 2-4 year unemployed segments of the population combined).
- High school/GED (75.6% of respondents identifying as disabled)
- Beyond disablement, transportation is by far the highest barrier to employment (reported as a barrier by 27% of respondents identifying as disabled)

Analysis of Segmented Results by Agency Where Surveyed (Sub-population Self-reporting as Disabled)

This subsection contains results which are broken down by agency where surveyed. Key demographic elements and distinguishing features are identified after each table.

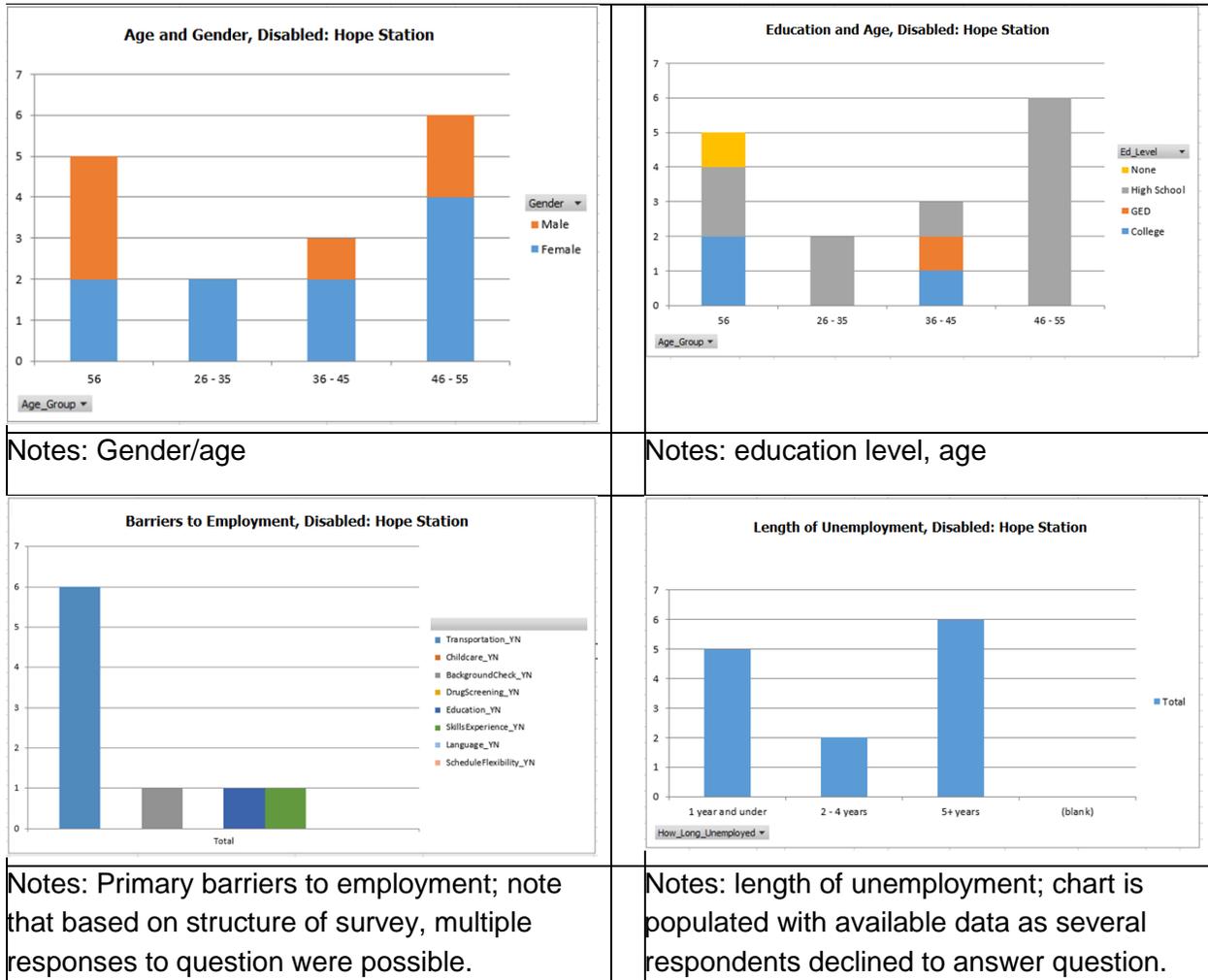


Figure 15: General demographics of disabled respondents who also self-identified as “unemployed”; surveyed at Hope Station. Transportation is considered to be by far the major barrier for surveyed individuals in this population.

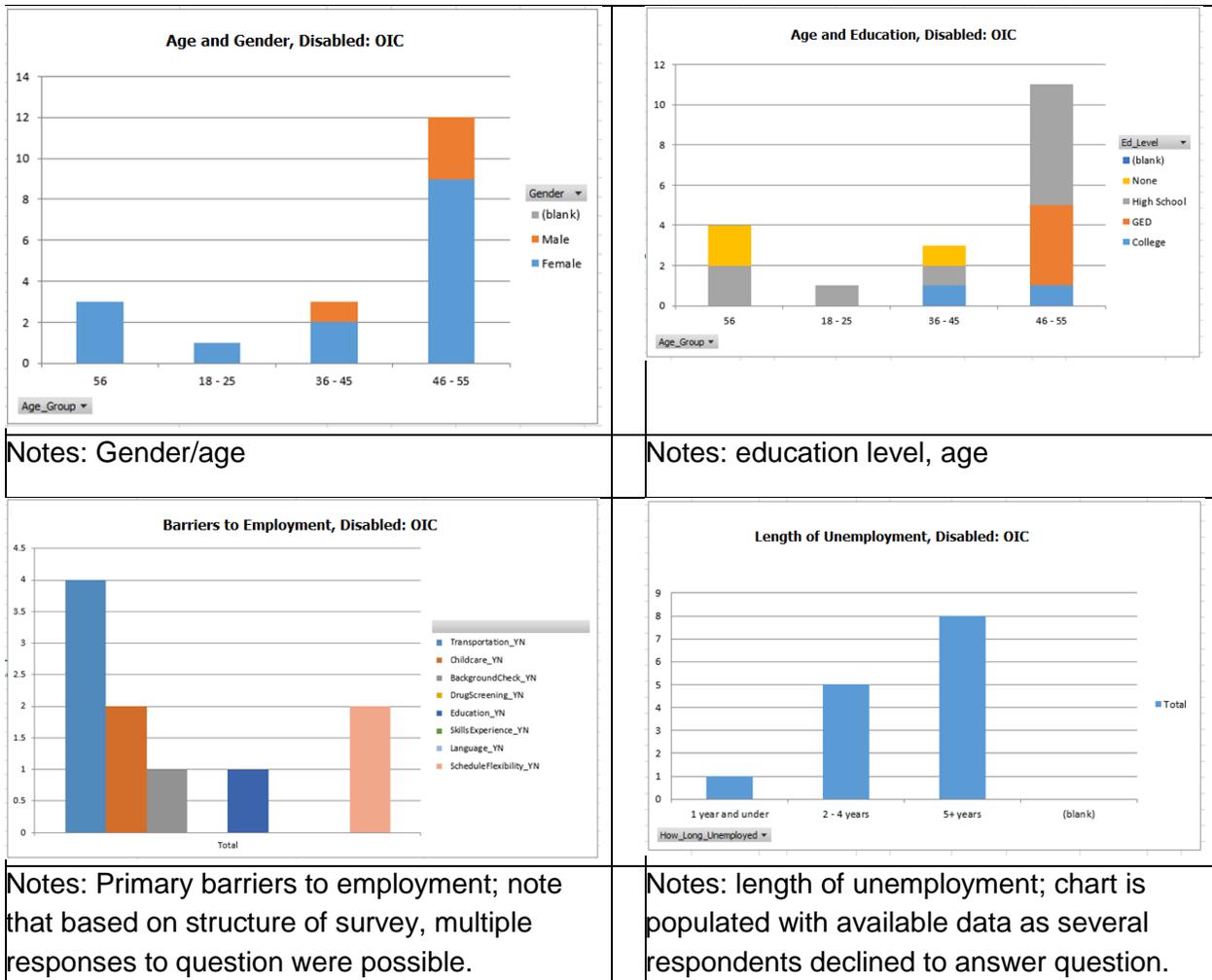


Figure 16: General demographics of disabled respondents who also self-identified as “unemployed”; surveyed at Wilson OIC. Transportation is considered to be the primary barrier for survey respondents but with a mix of childcare and schedule flexibility as other reported barriers.¹⁵

¹⁵ Views were omitted for NCWorks and Wilson Housing Authority as there were no individuals at NCWorks and a total of two respondents at Wilson Housing Authority, making demographic analysis of disabled individuals infeasible.

Analysis of Primary Program Use by Target Demographic (Sub-population Self-reporting as Disabled)

This section provides an analysis of reported assistance agency use by respondents in the target demographic.

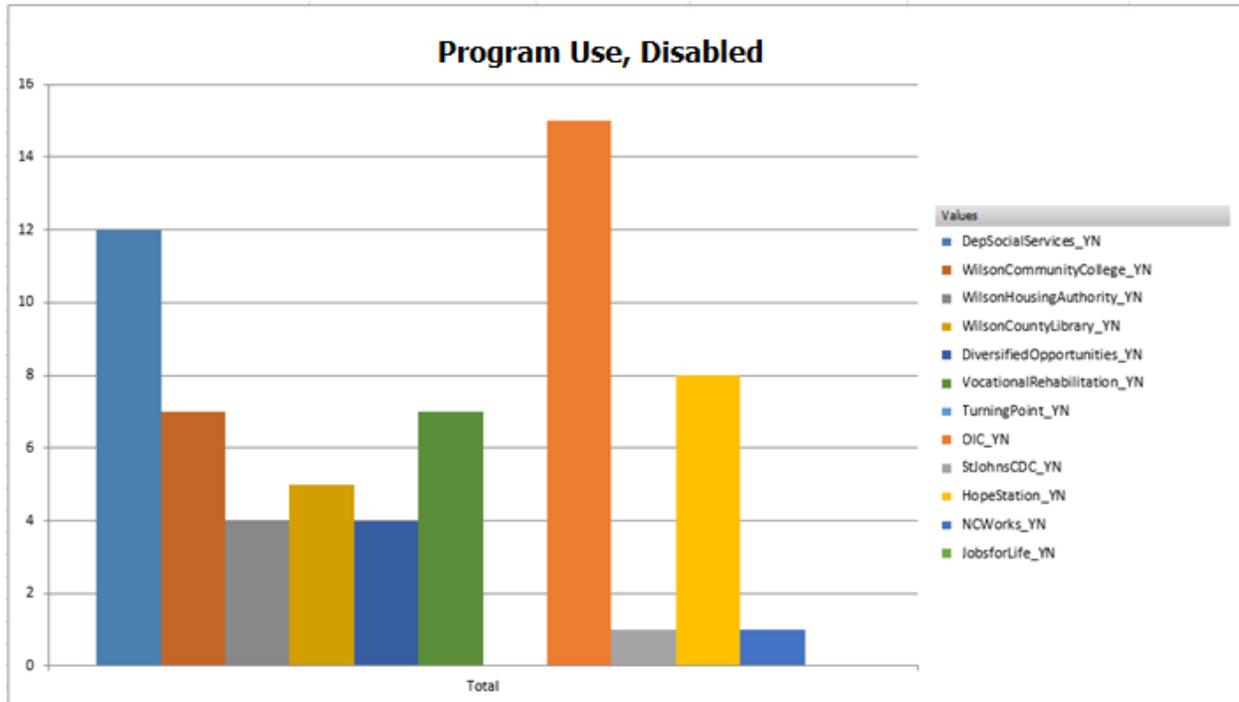


Figure 17: Previous and current agency use within target demographic of disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” surveyed across all agencies. Note that based on structure of survey, multiple responses to question were possible.

Program Co-use for Agencies with Highest Reported Utilization

This section contains information about frequency of other-program co-use for agencies with the highest reported utilization among the target demographic (disabled, unemployed).

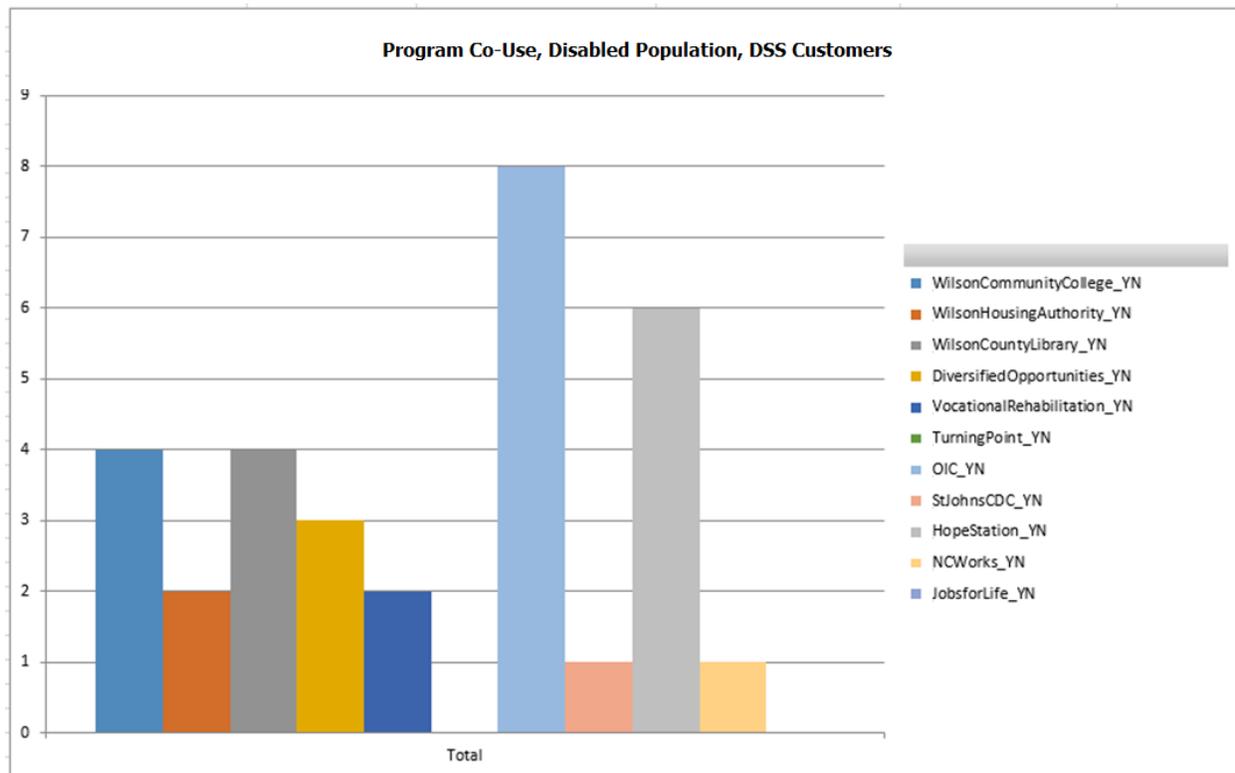


Figure 18: Agency co-use within target demographic of disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” by age and gender, for Department of Social Services (Department of Social Services count date omitted for clarity). Programs with highest co-use among Department of Social Services users are Wilson OIC and Hope Station.

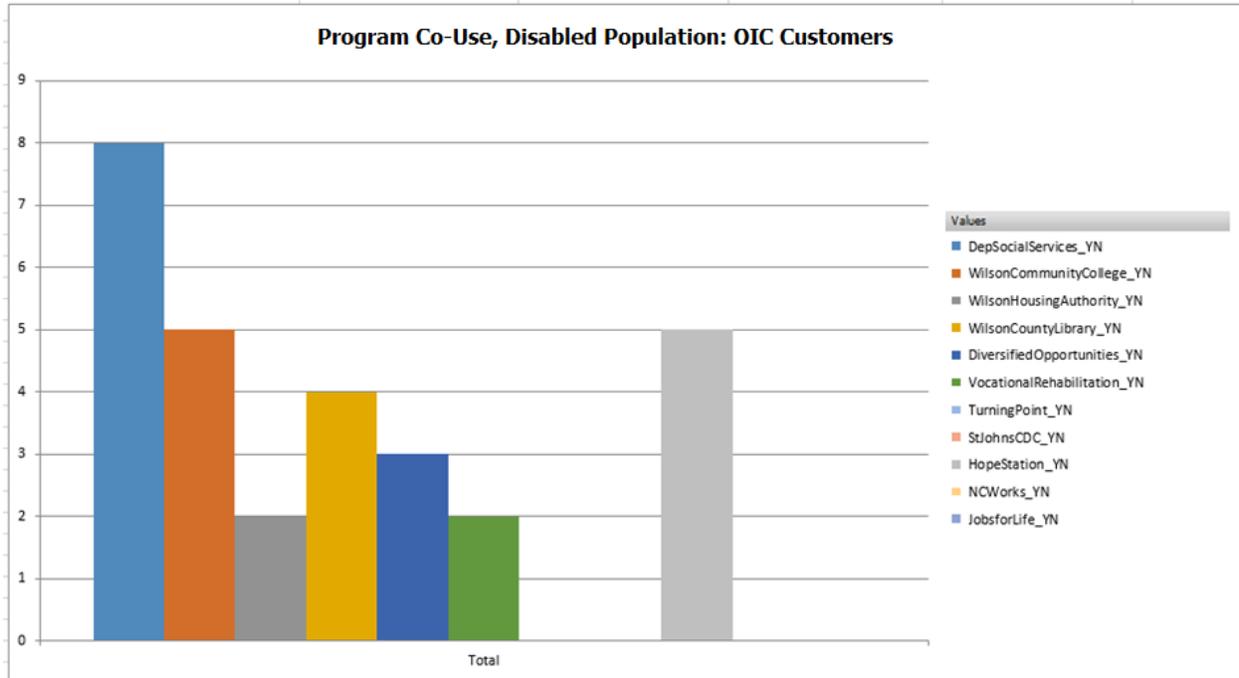


Figure 19: agency co-use within target demographic of disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” by age and gender, for Wilson OIC. (Wilson OIC count date omitted for clarity). Programs with highest co-use among Wilson OIC customers are Department of Social Services and Wilson Community College/Hope Station (tied).

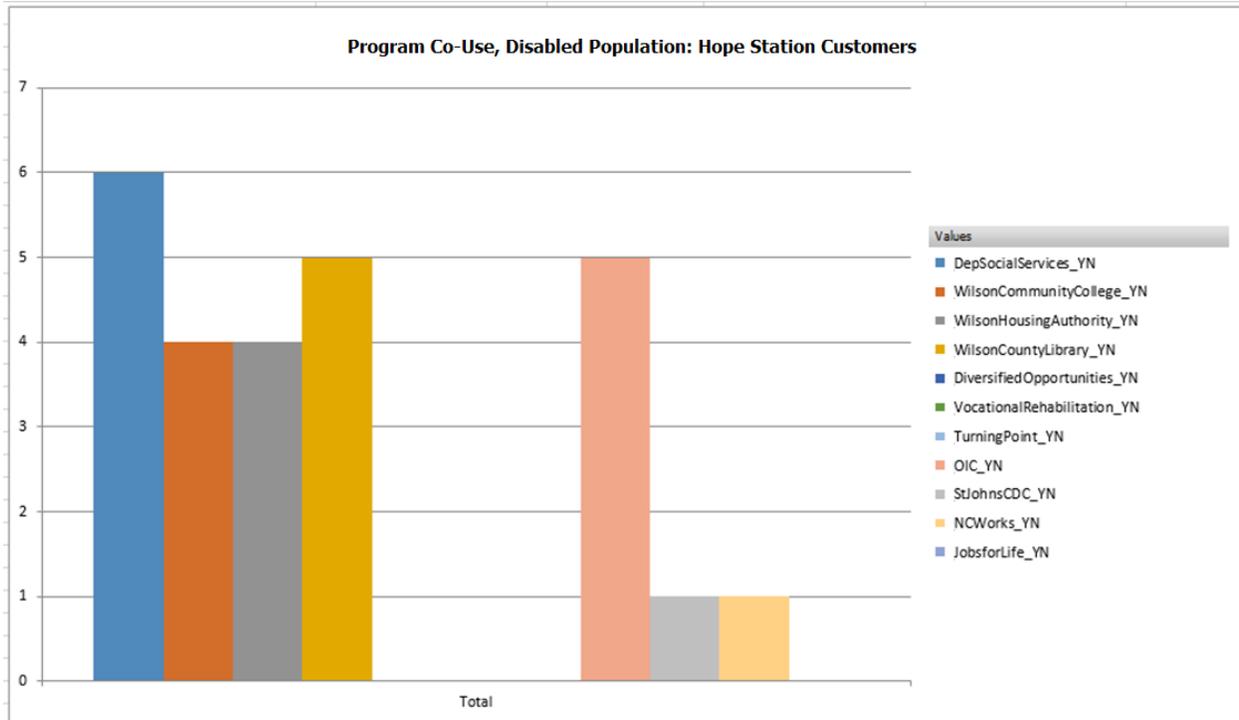


Figure 20: agency co-use within target demographic of disabled respondents who self-identified as “unemployed,” by age and gender, for Hope Station. (Hope Station count date omitted for clarity). Programs with highest co-use among Hope Station customers are Department of Social Services and Wilson OIC/Wilson County Library (tied).

Appendix D: Demographics of Individuals Self-Identifying as Partially Employed

This appendix contains results for non-disabled respondents reporting partial employment. Key demographic elements and distinguishing features are identified after each table.

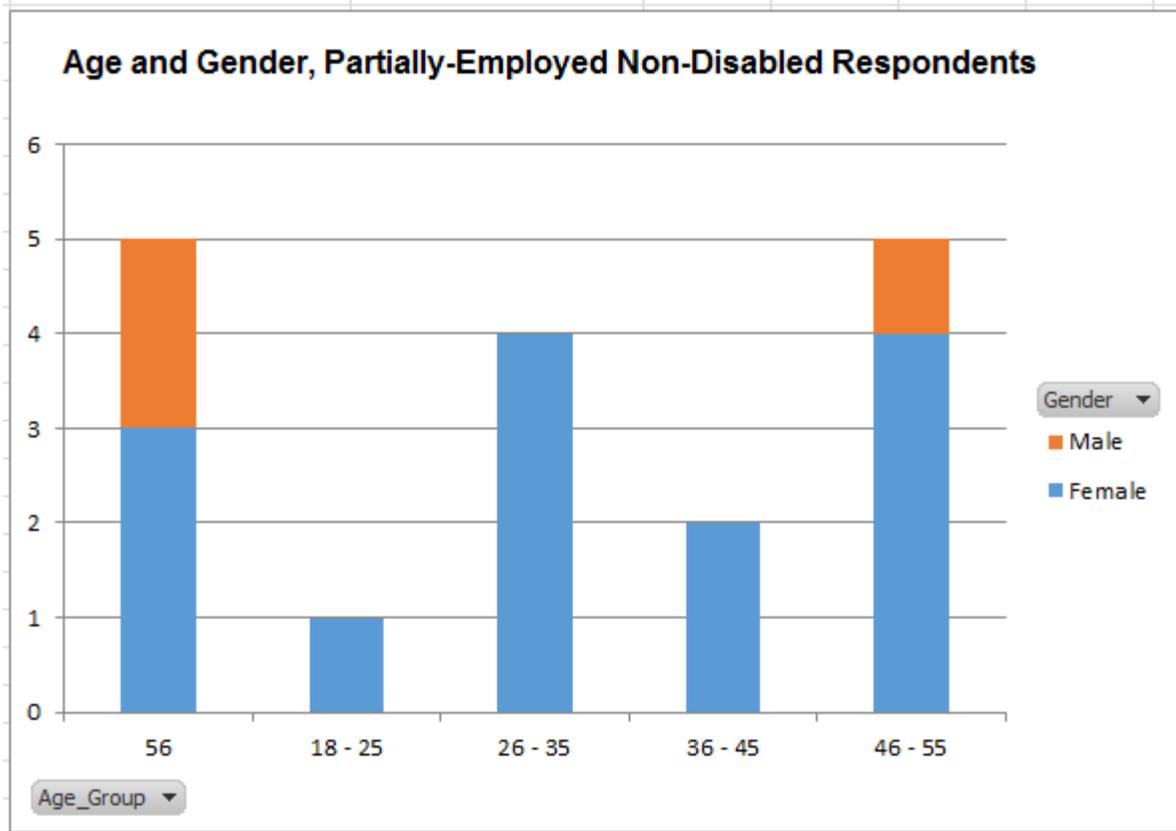


Figure 21: General age and gender demographic information; the majority of respondents reporting partial employment were 46+ and female.

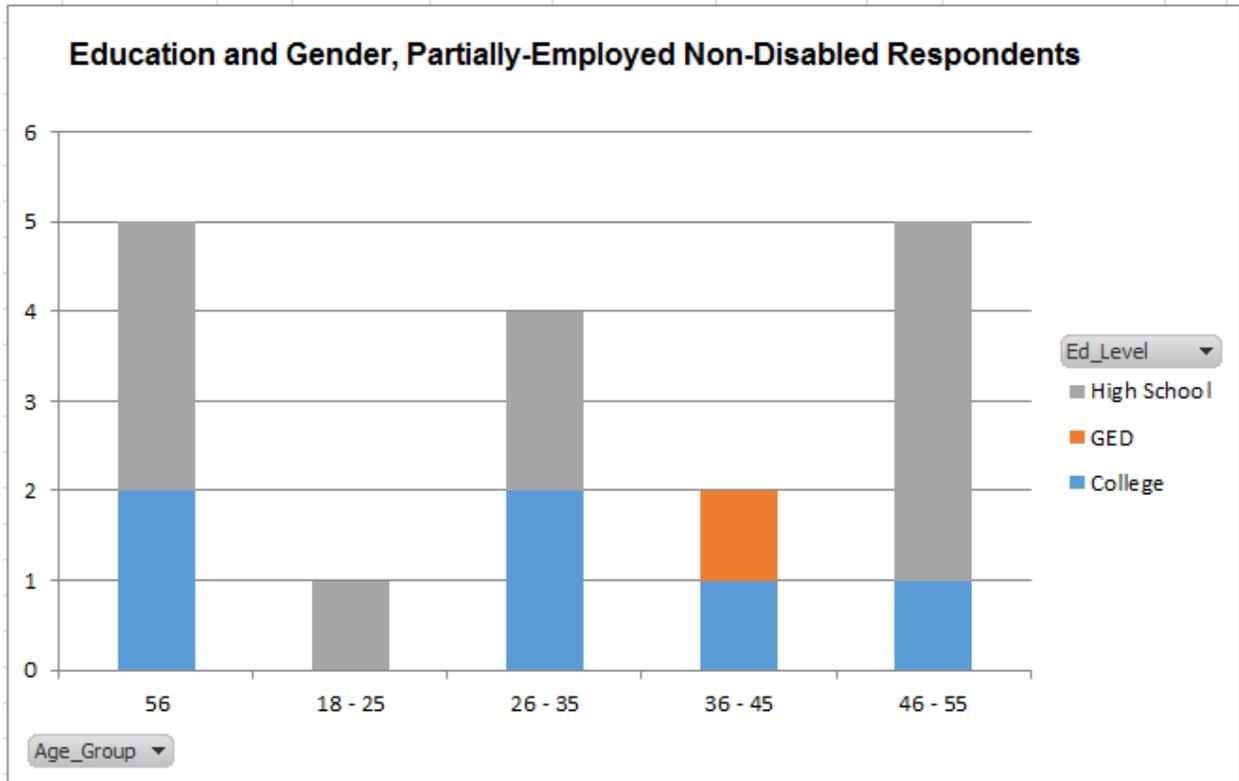


Figure 22: education and gender demographics. The majority of respondents reporting partial employment attended high school.

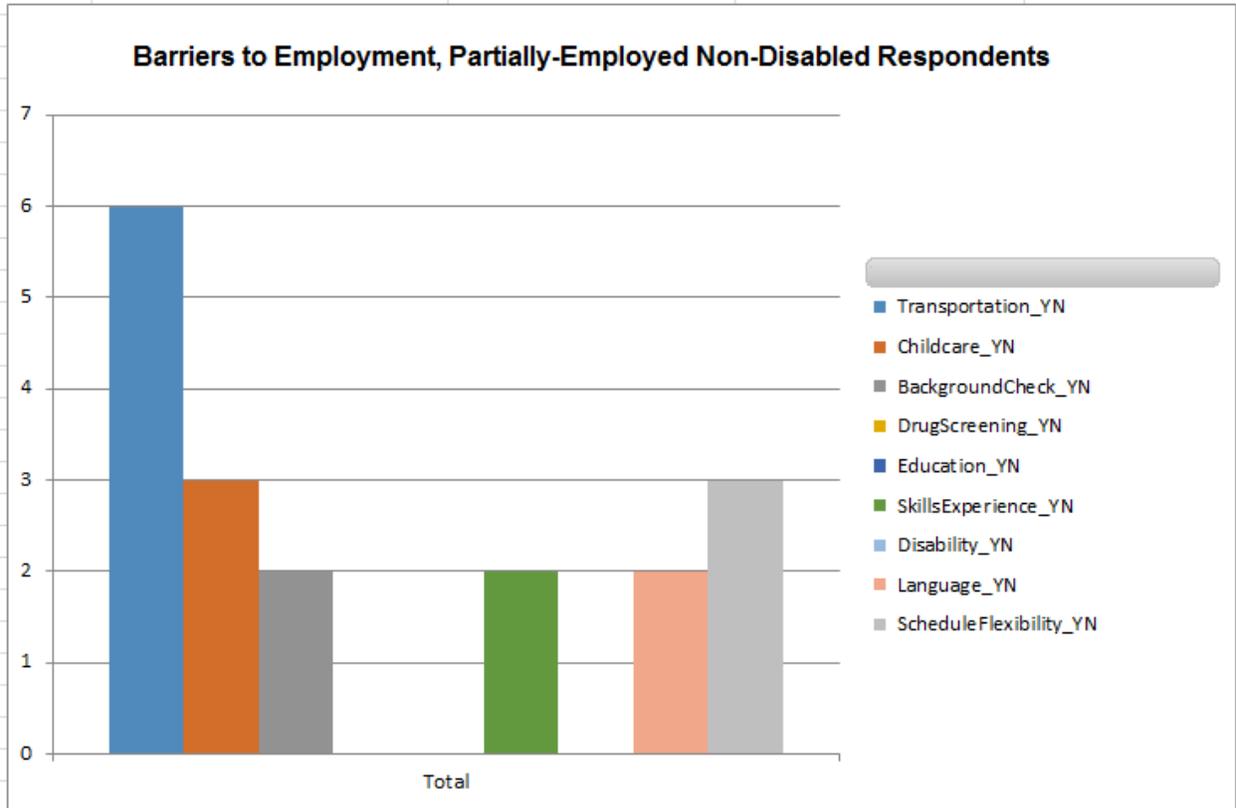


Figure 23: Barriers to employment. A strong majority of respondents reporting partial employment identified transportation as a barrier to employment; additional barriers reported were childcare and schedule flexibility.

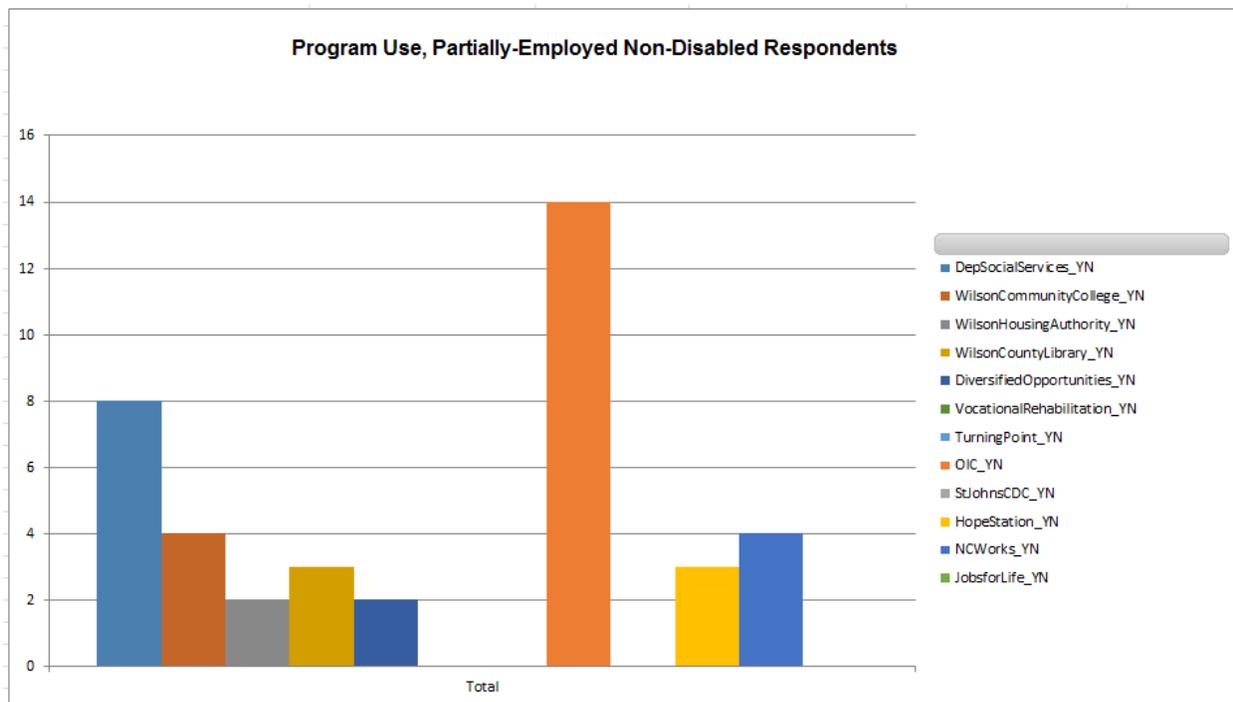


Figure 24: Program use; a strong majority of respondents reporting partial employment identified Wilson OIC as a program which they had used; Department of Social Services was also reported as an agency which a number of respondents had used. Noting that based on structure of survey, multiple responses to question were possible.

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