

No Foot in the Door:
An Experimental Study
of Employment Discrimination
Against Older Workers

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ABSTRACT. Pairs of testers, one aged 57 and one aged 32, applied for 102 entry-level sales or management jobs in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Although their credentials described them as equally qualified, the older applicants received less favorable responses from employers 41.2% of the time. Three quarters of these differences occurred before older applicants could fully present their qualifications. The negative employer assumptions about older workers implied by these differences in outcome were seldom explicitly stated. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: http://www.haworthpressinc.com>]*

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We are hiring people like you who are not set in their ways.

—Comment by an interviewer to a 32-year-old tester

Economic research provides a variety of *indirect* evidence that discrimination against older workers continues to operate in the contemporary American labor market. For example, while younger workers' earnings tend to increase with experience, those of older workers tend to decline (Wanner & McDonald, 1983). Periods of unemployment for involuntarily unemployed older workers average about twice as long as for their younger counterparts (Bendick, 1983). When unemployed older workers find jobs, they do so in a narrower range of occupations and industries than their younger counterparts (Hutchens, 1988). Older workers who perceive themselves to be victims of age discrimination are separated from their jobs at a higher rate than those who do not (Johnson & Neumark, 1997).

Research that investigates such discrimination *directly* is much less common. In one of the few studies of this kind (Bendick, Jackson, & Romero, 1996), pairs of resumes, one for a 57-year-old and one for a 32-year-old, were mailed to 775 large firms and employment agencies across the United States. Although the resumes presented equal qualifications for both job seekers, the older applicant received a less favorable employer response 26.5% of the time when a position was vacant (Bendick, Jackson, & Romero, 1996). For years, older job seekers had received rejection letters in which an employer regretted that no posi-

tion was available that matched their qualifications, and the applicants had wondered if their age had counted against them. Now they could know that, a substantial proportion of the time, it had.

That study left many questions unanswered, however. It only examined differences in treatment between older and younger applicants in the initial contact stage of the job-seeking process. What would have occurred during subsequent stages, including interviews and job offers, remained unexplored. Additionally, employers' responses were measured only through telephone messages and letters; such responses encompassed only a fraction of the ways in which older and younger applicants could be treated differently.

This study extends that earlier research by examining these additional dimensions of the job-seeking process. Like the previous paper, it utilizes pairs of "testers"—research assistants posing as job applicants with equal employment qualifications but different ages. However, the previous study's presentation of applicants was through mailed resumes; the testers in this study were individuals who personally participated in all stages of the job-seeking process.

METHODS

The present study applies to the issue of age discrimination procedures originally developed to examine race discrimination in employment (Bendick, in press; Bendick, Jackson, & Reinoso, 1994; Fix & Struyk, 1993). Employment testing is a systematic social-science technique for observing employers' candid responses to the demographic characteristics of job applicants. Testing operates in the manner of a controlled experiment. Two research assistants pose as job applicants who have identical job-relevant qualifications but who differ in one personal characteristic—in this case, age. Qualifications relevant to the hiring decision, such as the applicants' education and work experience, are controlled by pairing individuals with similar personalities and equipping them with equally strong resumes. The influence of random factors is controlled by repeating the experiment dozens or hundreds of times. Together, equalized qualifications and repeated experiments eliminate the principal explanations other than age for observed differences in treatment between older and younger applicants.

Tester Preparation

This study employed four pairs of testers, in each case matching an older applicant with a younger one. Three teams consisted of white males, and one team, white females. All eight testers were college graduates with substantial professional work experience.

In applying for jobs, however, the testers did not present their own qualifications but instead carried resumes that closely matched the credentials of each team. Both testers within each pair were described as possessing bachelor's degrees in fields related to the position they were seeking, from schools of comparable reputation. Both were portrayed as currently employed, with several years' experience in an occupation related to the position for which they were applying, and seeking opportunity for advancement. The additional years of employment that the older applicant had accumulated, compared to his/her testing partner, were ascribed to a field not directly relevant to the position being sought (for example, military service or public school teaching). While resumes did not state the applicants' ages or dates of birth, information such as dates of college graduation allowed a potential employer readily to infer that one applicant was about 32 years of age and the other, about 57.

Prior to commencing testing, testers received a week and a half of training. This preparation included creation of their resumes, practice interviews, and observation of their partner being interviewed. Testers within each pair were selected to be comparable in appearance and demeanor and were coached to increase their similarity in answering questions.

Sample of Job Vacancies

Between March 1995 and March 1996, 140 job vacancies were selected from the employment section of Sunday editions of the *Washington Post*, the largest circulating daily newspaper in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. These vacancies were for entry-level positions in management or sales which were permanent, full-time and well compensated; in the private sector; required no previous experience in the occupation; and were likely to be sought by older workers.

Testers completed 102 tests from this set of 140 vacancies, a completion rate of 72.9%. A test was considered complete if both testers progressed far enough in the application process to be considered by the employer (that is, if either a resume was delivered or a substantive con-

versation was held) or if one tester was considered by the employer while the other tester made at least four attempts to become considered.

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the 102 completed tests. The table indicates that almost 80% of the job vacancies were located in the Maryland or Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC; nearly half were in the services sector; more than 70% were for sales occupations; 37% involved firms whose names were immediately recognizable as nationally prominent companies or chains; and 44% of the firms advertised themselves as equal opportunity employers.

Testing Procedures

Once a vacancy had been selected, testers followed the application procedure specified in the advertisement: placing an initial call of inquiry, mailing or faxing a resume, or applying in person. In each test,

TABLE 1. Characteristics of the 102 Tests in the Study Sample

Characteristics	Tests (number)	Tests (percent)
All Tests	102	100.0
Location of Firm		
Maryland suburbs	40	39.2
Virginia suburbs	39	38.2
District of Columbia	17	16.7
Other	6	5.9
Industry of Firm		
Personal or business services	48	47.0
Wholesale/retail	26	25.5
Finance, insurance & real estate	21	20.6
Other	7	6.9
Occupation of Vacancy		
Sales	72	70.6
Management	30	29.4
Nationally Recognized Firm	38	37.3
Firm Advertised as an Equal Opportunity Employer	45	44.1
Gender of Applicant		
Male	96	94.1
Female	6	5.9

the older applicant initiated contact shortly before his or her younger partner. Typically, a test proceeded from an initial telephone call to one or more interviews, follow-up calls, and an eventual job offer or rejection. The time required to complete a test ranged between one and five weeks. Testers were trained and instructed to pursue every stage of the hiring process vigorously and enthusiastically.

Immediately after each contact with an employer—telephone call, letter, fax, or interview—the tester involved wrote a detailed narrative account of the event and completed a structured questionnaire. These documents recorded what the tester had observed and heard, including the starting and ending times of events, the appearance and manner of individuals, and statements made by the employer or the applicant. Testing partners were instructed not to discuss their experiences with each other until all tests had been completed.

RESULTS

Overall Rate of Discrimination

Table 2 reports overall differences in employers' responses to the pairs of applicants. The first line of the table reports that older applicants received a more favorable response¹ than younger applicants in 1.0% of the tests, while younger applicants received a more favorable response than their older partners 42.2% of the time. The difference between these two figures, which is 41.2%, represents the *net rate at which older job applicants with qualifications equal to their younger counterparts were disadvantaged by their age*.

The next two lines of the table separately examine two stages within the job-seeking process: the pre-interview stage, during which applicants seek the opportunity to be interviewed, and the subsequent period, during which applicants are interviewed and receive job offers. These lines indicate that approximately *three quarters* of the net disadvantage to older applicants—31.4% out of 41.2%—occurred at the pre-interview stage. Thus, while older testers fared less well than their younger counterparts in all phases of the application process, the majority of their disadvantage arose immediately upon contacting employers, before they could present their qualifications fully. As the title of this paper states, they could not get their foot in the door.

TABLE 2. Overall Differences in Employers' Responses to Applicants

Measures	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Applicant Age 32	Applicant Age 57	Difference (1)-(2)
Received a More Favorable Response than Paired Tester	42.2%	1.0%	= 41.2%**
More Favorable Response During [#]			
Pre-Interview Stage	31.4%	0.0%	= 31.4%**
Interview and Offer Stages	10.8%	1.0%	= 9.8%
Mailed Résumé Study (Bendick, Jackson & Romero, 1996)			
Pre-Interview Stage	43.0%	16.5%	= 26.5%**

Based on 102 older and 102 younger testers during the pre-interview stage, 37 older and 42 younger testers during the interview stage, and 9 older and 30 younger testers during the job offer stage.

** Statistically significant $p < .01$

The final section of Table 2 reports results from the previous testing study of age discrimination in hiring discussed in the introduction of this article (Bendick et al., 1996). These results cover only the pre-interview stage of the application process, for which the present study reported a 31.4% net rate of discrimination. The comparable figure in this previous study was 26.5%, a rate not statistically significantly different from 31.4%. Thus, two testing studies that utilized different methods and examined different samples of employers and occupations broadly concur in their findings.

The following examples illustrate the differences in treatment that the figures in Table 2 represent:

Filed in the Waste Basket—A *Washington Post* advertisement announced “[sales] opportunities for entry-level as well as seasoned professionals” with excellent salaries, benefits, and training. It provided a fax number and a telephone number. Over a several-week period, the older tester made four attempts to contact the employer, three times by leaving a telephone message and once by faxing a resumé, but never spoke directly with anyone.

One day after the older tester made his first attempt at contact, the younger tester called and was given the name of the manager responsible for hiring. The same day, that manager called him back to arrange

an interview. During the interview, the manager revealed that he was filling 15 vacancies in a fast-growing distributor of office copying machines. He stated that having no prior sales experience could be an advantage and that "with young graduates . . . we don't have to de-program trainees." At the conclusion of an interview lasting 40 minutes, he offered the younger tester a job.

Don't Call Me—An employment agency advertised in the *Washington Post* for "recent college graduates" with "0-3 years sales experience" for positions with "*Fortune 500*" companies in computer software, office products, and telecommunications. When the older tester telephoned the agency, a staff member spoke to him for five minutes without discussing his qualifications and concluded by asking him to fax his resumé. After several unsuccessful attempts to telephone that person again, the older tester finally reached her. She told him that the agency was looking only for experienced sales representatives, that sales was a very competitive field in which it was difficult to do well, and that she had made some calls but that it was a very slow time of the year. She explained that if she found anything, she would let him know and concluded by saying, "I'll call you, don't call me, O.K.?"

The younger tester first telephoned the agency later during the same day in which his older partner had first telephoned. The agency staff member who spoke to him asked about his qualifications and scheduled an interview at the agency. When the younger tester called the agency the day after that interview, he was told that his resumé had been sent to 10 companies and that one had already requested an interview. The employment agency staffer then coached the tester on interviewing techniques and suggested that he emphasize his ability to learn new skills, his motivation to earn money, and his enthusiasm.

Not All Interviews Are Alike—Under the "sales" heading in the *Washington Post*, an employment agency advertised for an "account executive" to do executive recruiting in computing, engineering, and finance. Both testers responded by telephone and were granted interviews.

The older tester's interview lasted 48 minutes. After briefly reviewing the tester's resumé, the interviewer commented that 28 years was a long time to teach school. He asked if the tester had read any books on selling and cautioned against making a career change without doing extensive research on sales. The tester continued to state his interest in the position. At the conclusion of the interview, the interviewer sug-

gested that the tester think hard about the career change that the position would involve and, if he were still interested, call him again. The younger tester's interview lasted 85 minutes, during which the interviewer discussed a variety of work and non-work topics in a friendly manner and commented enthusiastically on several of the tester's questions and responses. At the conclusion of the interview, the tester was invited back for a second interview with the interviewer's co-worker; after the second interview, the tester was offered a job.

Same Job, Different Opportunity—In two tests, both applicants were offered apparently identical positions in sales, but with important differences in the offer. In a firm selling life insurance, the older tester was offered a 40% commission on the premiums of policies written, while the younger tester was offered 50%. In a firm selling vacuum cleaners, the older applicant was offered a part-time position "until you feel comfortable with sales," while his younger partner was offered a full-time position.

Table 3 compares five aspects of offers in the nine tests in which both applicants were offered jobs, a total of 45 observed outcomes. In six of these 45, younger testers were favored over their older partners, while older testers were favored in 0 out of 45, a difference that is statistically significant.

TABLE 3. Differences in Offers in Nine Tests in Which Both Older and Younger Testers Received Job Offers

Aspect of Offer	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Same Offer	Older Received Better Offer	Older Received Worse Offer	Difference (3)-(2)
Job Title	7	1	1	0
Salary	7	0	2	2
Health Insurance	6	0	3	3
Full Time	8	0	1	1
Advancement Opportunities	3	3	3	0
Total				6*

Based on 45 observations (5 aspects of 9 offers).

*Statistically significant $p < .05$

Variations in the Probability of Discrimination

Such incidents of differential treatment were observed in virtually all types of positions tested. However, analysis of the 102 tests using the statistical technique of logistic regression revealed two statistically significant variations in the probability that older applicants encountered discrimination (see Table 4).

The first of these variations concerned positions in sales. Using the regression analysis to hold other factors constant, older testers encountered discrimination 34% of the time when applying for sales positions, compared to 100% of the time—30 out of 30 tests—when applying for management positions. This difference may be explained by the fact that compensation in many sales positions is based partially or solely on commissions. In that circumstance, employers may be more willing to hire “high-risk” employees because hires who do not work out well will cost the employer less than poorly performing employees on fixed salaries.²

The second variation concerned vacancies for which employers used an employment agency to identify and screen applicants. In tests involving these intermediaries, older applicants were treated less favorably than their younger counterparts 84% of the time, compared to

TABLE 4. Factors Affecting the Probability of Encountering Discrimination

Independent Variable	Parameter Estimate#	Z Score	Average Probability ⁺ If = 1	If = 0
Intercept	20.1	—		
1 = EEO in Job Ad	-.9	1.5		
1 = Nationally Recognized Firm	-.1	.2		
1 = Sales Position	-20.6	6.4**	.34	1.00
1 = Female Tester	-9.0	.9		
1 = Employment Agency	2.6	2.5**	.84	.29
1 = Maryland Suburbs	.5	.5		
1 = Virginia Suburbs	.8	.9		

Based on a logistic regression equation estimated with a sample of 102 tests and a dependent variable of 1 = younger favored, 0 = otherwise (chi-square = 48.2 with 7 degrees of freedom).

** Statistically significant $p < .01$

+ Holding other variables at their average values; calculated only for statistically significant variables.

29% when no such intermediaries were involved. This finding is consistent with those in earlier testing studies, which found employment agencies substantially more likely than employers themselves to discriminate against older applicants in the initial stages of the applications process (Bendick et al., 1996, p. 38) and against racial and ethnic minorities throughout the process (Bendick et al., 1994, p. 37). All this evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that, with or without explicit instructions from their clients, many employment agencies assume that older applicants and other traditionally discriminated against groups should automatically be screened out.

Aside from the two variations just discussed, logistic regression analysis did not suggest that other factors are predictably associated with major increases or decreases in the likelihood that an employer would treat older applicants less favorably than equally qualified younger ones. Firms that advertised themselves as equal opportunity employers or that carried nationally recognized names were no less likely to discriminate than other employers. Female testers encountered age discrimination at a somewhat lower rate than male testers, but the difference was not statistically significant.

Employer-Applicant Interactions

Table 2 focuses on decisions made by employers during the job-seeking process—whether an applicant was offered an interview or a job and what he or she was offered. Ultimately, the ways in which applicants were treated during the application process are less important than these outcomes. However, it is useful to examine employer-applicant interaction during the process for clues concerning how and why employers reached their decisions.

Table 5 examines initial telephone contacts between applicants and employers, comparing 30 calls by older testers with 57 calls by their younger counterparts. It is reasonable to assume that, in many of these conversations, employers inferred applicants' ages from the sound of their voices or from responses to questions.

The table describes four aspects of these calls: whether the applicant spoke to an employer representative who appeared to have hiring authority (for example, a manager, rather than a secretary); the length of the call; whether the call included any substantive discussion of the job or the applicant's qualifications; and the degree to which the employer's representative actively sought information about the appli-

TABLE 5. Differences in Treatment During Initial Telephone Contact

Measures	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Applicant Age 32	Applicant Age 57	Difference (1)-(2)
Applicant Spoke to a Person Who Appeared to Have Hiring Authority (%)	50.0	44.4	= 5.6
Length of Call (minutes)	4.8	4.5	= 0.3
Contact Actively Attempted to Get Information About Applicant (scale of 1 to 5, 1 = highest)	4.4	3.5	= 0.9
Calls Included Substantive Questions (%)	44.6	69.0	= 24.4**

Based on 30 calls by older testers and 57 by younger testers.

** Statistically significant $p < .01$

cant during the call. On three of these four indicators, the younger applicant fared slightly better than his or her older counterpart. For example, while the average call for older testers lasted 4.5 minutes, that for their younger counterparts lasted 4.8 minutes, about 7% longer. However, none of these differences is statistically significant or dramatic.

The fourth indicator in Table 5 is more complex and more difficult to interpret. According to the table, while employers' representatives actively elicited information about the applicant in 44.6% of calls with younger job seekers, they did so in 69.0% of calls with their older counterparts. This difference might be interpreted as favoring older applicants, in the sense of giving them greater opportunity to present their qualifications. However, it might also reflect employers' attempts to rapidly identify and eliminate applicants they consider not worth interviewing.

Table 6 examines employers' treatment of applicants during job interviews, based on 37 interviews of older testers and 42 interviews of younger ones.

The section of the table above the dotted line documents 14 characteristics of the interview, ranging from the promptness with which the interview began to the length of the interview, the formality of the interviewer (indicated by use of the applicant's first name), the propor-

TABLE 6. Differences in Treatment During Interviews

Measures	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Applicant Age 32	Applicant Age 57	Difference (1)-(2)
Wait Before Interview (minutes)	12.1	8.7	3.4
Length of Interview (minutes)	47.8	43.9	3.9
Interviewer Called Applicant by First Name (%)	90.0	69.2	20.8**
Interview Time Spent on (%)			
Applicant's qualifications/ job requirements	61.0	45.8	15.2
Advantages of the job	17.8	16.4	1.4
Applicant's personality/character	14.9	17.4	-2.5
Other	6.4	19.2	-12.8
Comments by Interviewer About Applicant's (5-point scale; 5 = very favorable)			
Health	4.6	4.2	0.4
Work experience	3.5	3.5	0.0
Job stability	2.8	2.9	-0.1
Enthusiasm/energy	2.5	2.8	-0.3
Skills/expertise	2.3	2.6	-0.3
Ability to learn	2.4	2.9	-0.5
Interviewer Called Applicant Overqualified (%)	2.4	8.3	-5.9
Interviewer Discussed Retirement (%)	2.4	2.7	0.3
Interviewer Asked About Applicant's Willingness to Accept Supervision (%)	0.0	2.7	-2.7
Interviewer Calculated Applicant's Age (%)	35.7	16.7	19.0*

Based on 37 interviews of older testers and 42 interviews of younger testers

* Statistically significant $p < .05$

** Statistically significant $p < .01$

tion of interview time spent on different topics, and the extent to which the interviewer made favorable comments about the applicant. Consistent with the findings with regard to initial telephone contacts, nearly all the differences were so modest in size that they were not statistically significant. Where they did differ, however, they tended to favor younger

applicants. For example, the older testers' interviews were shorter than those of their younger counterparts by about four minutes, or 8%; and for older applicants, 15.2% less interview time was spent on the key topic of the applicant's qualifications and his or her match to job requirements.

The section of the table below the dotted line measures the proportion of interviews in which subjects directly related to the applicant's age were explicitly discussed. These data report little difference in the probability that these topics were raised with older applicants than with their younger counterparts. Only a smattering of interviewers meeting with either applicant used the word "overqualified," discussed retirement, or questioned the applicant's willingness to accept supervision. In fact, interviewers were about twice as likely to be obviously calculating the applicant's age while interviewing younger testers than while interviewing older ones.

Explicit and Implicit Stereotypes

How do job seekers who are equally qualified become judged as differently as Table 2 documents? One explanation is *stereotypes* held by employers—negative generalizations about the likely job performance of older workers that outweighed the qualifications that individual older applicants actually presented. Table 7 provides data on the extent to which employers *explicitly* expressed such stereotypes.

The section of Table 7 above the dotted line tabulates those instances, in the full sample of 102 tests, in which employers made explicit comments, to either older or younger testers, about older workers. The table reports explicit *negative* comments in only 2.9% of tests and explicit *positive* comments in 4.9%.³ For example, during an interview for representatives to sell home security systems, an interviewer told an older applicant that "sometimes age is a good thing" and that he would be "happy to hire a mature person because they would gain credibility in selling the product." In contrast, during an interview for an employment recruiter at a company providing home health care services, the interviewer stated to a younger applicant that his firm was a "young office that had enthusiasm and drive," in contrast to competitors that were staffed by "old nurses who have no motivation."

The section of Table 7 below the dotted line examines 11 negative stereotypes about older workers believed to be commonly held by employers (Bendick et al., 1996, p. 40; Rosen & Jerdee, 1976; Rosen &

TABLE 7. Employers' Expressed or Implied Age-Related Stereotypes

Stereotype	Tests (number)	Tests (percent)
Explicit Age-Related Comments⁺		
Adverse to older workers	3	2.9
Favorable to older workers	5	4.9
Implied Assumptions that Older Workers⁺⁺		
Have high salary expectations	4	13.8
Are less energetic	2	6.9
Are rigid, uncreative, unwilling to change	1	3.4
Have obsolete skills, are unwilling to utilize new technology	1	3.4
Are less motivated by financial returns	1	3.4
Are physically unable to handle job, prone to illness, accidents or absence	1	3.4
Are difficult to supervise	0	0.0
Are likely to retire soon	0	0.0
Are not socially compatible with work peers	0	0.0
Engender high costs for fringe benefits	0	0.0

+ in 102 tests

++ in 29 tests where both testers were interviewed and the younger tester was favored

Jerdee, 1998). In this analysis, the presence of a stereotype is *inferred* in tests where a younger applicant is favored over his or her older counterpart *and* an employer representative comments favorably to the younger applicant on a characteristic about which there is a negative age stereotype.⁴ An example of this circumstance is provided by the quotation at the beginning of this article. There, an interviewer made a job offer to the younger tester and not to his older partner, and commented to the younger tester, "We are hiring people like you who are not set in their ways."

Even using this expansive measure of stereotypes, however, employers' expressions of age-related attitudes remained rare. Among the 11 stereotypes examined, the most frequently expressed one—that older workers' salary demands make them expensive—was expressed in only 13.8% of the tests examined in the table. Five other stereotypes—concerning older workers' supposed lack of energy, rigidity, technological obsolescence, lack of motivation, or physical limita-

tions—were expressed in only 6.9% or 3.4% of the tests analyzed, and the remaining five stereotypes shown on the table were not expressed even once.

DISCUSSION

This study directly examined a relatively narrow range of employment opportunities—entry-level sales and management positions applied for by college graduates—in one metropolitan area. However, it is reasonable to generalize its findings to a broader range of positions sought by older workers. Nothing about the discrimination portrayed in this study appears to reflect circumstances unique to the positions or the locality examined. And the findings were consistent with those in the earlier age-based testing study (Bendick et al., 1996) that covered employers across the United States and three occupations—executive secretary, management information specialist, and writer/editor—different from the ones studied here. The findings are also consistent with studies suggesting age discrimination in employment using research methods other than testing, discussed in the introduction to this article.

During the six-year period from 1990 through 1995, more than 87,000 charges of age discrimination under the federal Age Discrimination in Employment Act were filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. About 15% of these charges were eventually resolved in favor of the complainant and, in cases in which monetary damages were awarded, awards averaged about \$15,000 per claimant (Fair Employment Council of Greater Washington, 1997; Women's Legal Defense Fund, 1996). Thus, existing legal mechanisms provide some recourse for older workers experiencing discrimination.

The implication of the present study, however, is that this volume of legal activity is orders of magnitude smaller than the volume of age discrimination that prevails in the American labor market today. As of 1995, approximately 41 million members of the nation's civilian workforce were age 45 or older (Jacobs, 1997, p. 31). Suppose that these persons experienced employment discrimination at the rates self-reported by older workers in two recent surveys—between 3% (Johnson & Neumark, 1997) and 6% (AARP, 1989). These figures imply that between 1.2 and 2.5 million older workers had suffered discrimination—14 to 28 times the number who had filed complaints

during that six-year period and 92 to 188 times the number whose complaints were resolved in their favor.

In these circumstances, vigorous, expanded enforcement of federal and state laws against age discrimination in employment is obviously appropriate. These activities should include efforts to make older workers aware of the likelihood of encountering unjustified treatment and their rights in that circumstance.

These numbers also suggest, however, that approaches that rely on legal enforcement are unlikely ever to address the majority of discriminatory actions by employers. Additional effort must focus on *prevention* of discrimination, rather than on punishment and restitution once it has occurred. Creative ways must be found to address the underlying cause of the patterns documented in the present study—unspoken but influential employer assumptions that age *per se* can effectively predict whether an individual job applicant will be a productive employee (Graves & Karren, 1996; Faley, Kleiman, & Lengnick-Hall, 1984; Aigner & Cain, 1977).

CONCLUSIONS

The study reported on here provides empirical, quantitative confirmation of an uncomfortable truth—that the contemporary American workplace is far from “age blind.” The consequences of discrimination such as are documented here include not only injustice and economic hardship for individuals but also wastage of human resources and reductions in the nation's productivity (Best & Kale, 1996). Both older workers and the nation as a whole suffer when older job applicants cannot get their foot in the door.

NOTES

1. More favorable responses consisted of: (1) a tester being offered an interview when her/his partner was not; (2) a tester being offered an opportunity to demonstrate proficiency through a skills test when her/his partner was not; (3) a tester being offered a job when her/his partner was not; or (4) a tester being offered a job with substantially more favorable compensation or conditions than his/her partner was offered.

2. Here, the experiences of older workers as a group diverged from those of African Americans in previous testing studies, who encountered a *higher* rate of

discrimination in sales than other fields (Bendick et al., 1991, p. 36). However, many of the sales positions applied for by the African American testers did not involve commissions.

3. The parity of comments favorable to older workers is, of course, consistent with the very low proportion of tests—1.0%—in which Table 2 reports that older applicants were favored over their younger partners. It is also consistent with a result from the previous testing-based study of age discrimination in hiring. There, a subset of the resumes mailed for older job seekers included language in their cover letters pointing out that the applicant possessed qualities about which *positive* stereotypes were associated with older workers, such as experience and maturity. The effect of this language was substantially to *increase* the probability that older applicants were treated less favorably than their younger counterparts (Bendick et al., 1996, pp. 39-41).

4. This analysis is based on 29 tests in which both applicants in a tester pair were interviewed and the younger worker was favored, circumstances in which comments could be interpreted most clearly.

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