

# The Value of Experience: Age Discrimination Against Older Workers Persists



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## About the Survey

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With 2017 marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA), AARP sought to gather insights from workers age 45-plus related to their experience in the workplace and their experiences with age discrimination, specifically.<sup>1</sup> The workforce is aging – with 35 percent of the workforce projected to be age 50-plus by 2022,<sup>2</sup> yet age discrimination in the workforce remains a persistent and common problem. Older workers are experiencing age discrimination not only when looking for a new job but also in other aspects of employment.

With rich work histories, varied experiences and expertise, and work tenures that speak to commitment and resilience, older workers should have the opportunity to be judged on their merits rather than their age. This research shows that older workers consider the protections of the ADEA to be just as critical now as they were 50 years ago. In fact, older workers believe that age discrimination should be taken just as seriously as other forms of discrimination, and support strengthening the laws to ensure that it is.

### Age discrimination in the workplace is common.

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**About three in five older workers (61%) have either seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace.** (Chart 1 and Chart 2)

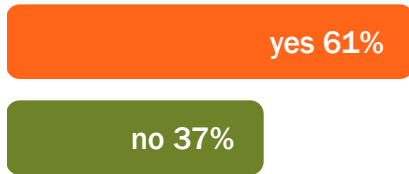
- Unemployed respondents are more likely than employed respondents (74% vs. 61%) to say they have seen or experienced age discrimination.
- Women are more likely than men (64% vs. 59%) to say they have seen or experienced age discrimination.
- African Americans/Blacks are more likely than Hispanics/Latinos and Whites to say they have seen or experienced age discrimination (77% vs. 61% and 59%, respectively).

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<sup>1</sup> The Value of Experience Study was fielded in September 2017 to 3,900 respondents age 45-plus who are in the workforce, either working or looking for work. The full chartbook, annotated survey, detailed methodology and additional factsheets can be found at [www.aarp.org/ValueofExperience](http://www.aarp.org/ValueofExperience).

<sup>2</sup> Aon Hewitt. 2015. *A Business Case for Workers Age 50+: A Look at the Value of Experience*. Washington, DC: AARP.

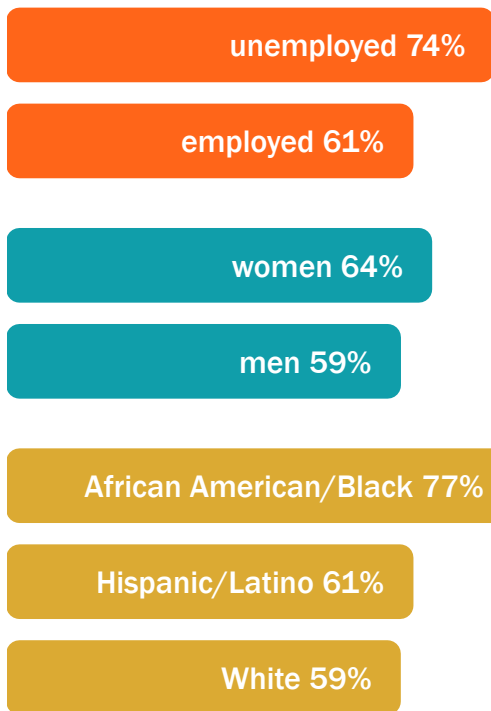
**Chart 1: About 3 in 5 older workers have seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace.**



Q39. Based on what you have seen or experienced, do you think older workers face discrimination in the workplace today based on age?

Base: Total respondents: n=3,900.

**Chart 2: Percentage of subpopulations who have seen or experienced age discrimination by employment status, gender and race.**

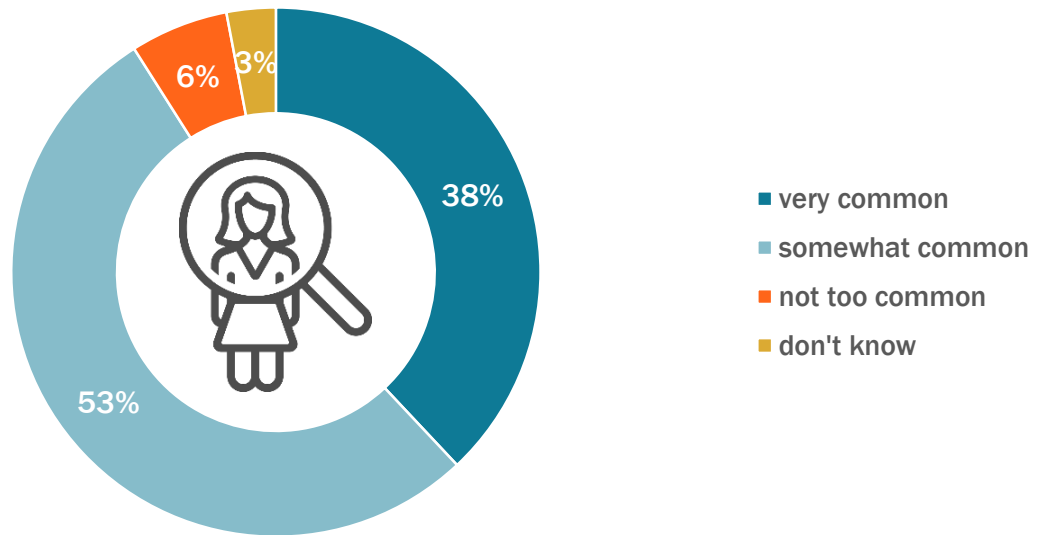


Q39. Based on what you have seen or experienced, do you think older workers face discrimination in the workplace today based on age?

Base: Total respondents; n=3,900; Unemployed: n=291; Employed: n=3,609; Women: n=2,113; Men: n=1,787; African American/Black: n=903; Hispanic/Latino: n=1,036; White: n=1,841.

**Of those older workers who have observed or experienced discrimination firsthand, 91 percent believe it is common. Of those, 38 percent believe it is very common.** Roughly another half say it is somewhat common. Both the unemployed (51% vs. 37% for the employed) and African Americans/Blacks (44% vs. 37% for Whites) are more likely to say that age discrimination is very common. (Chart 3)

**Chart 3: More than 9 in 10 older workers see age discrimination as somewhat or very common.**



Q39b. And, how common do you think age discrimination against older workers is in the workplace today?  
Base: Have seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace: n=2,627.

### **Few workers file a formal complaint.**

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**Although the majority of older workers say that they have seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace, only 3 percent report that they have made a formal complaint to a supervisor, human resources representative, another organization or a government agency.** This seems to indicate that reported instances of age discrimination in the workplace may be just the tip of the iceberg and should not be used to measure how commonplace it is. While the frequency of reporting is low across all subpopulations, African American/Black workers are more likely to have made a report of age discrimination than Whites (6% vs. 2%).

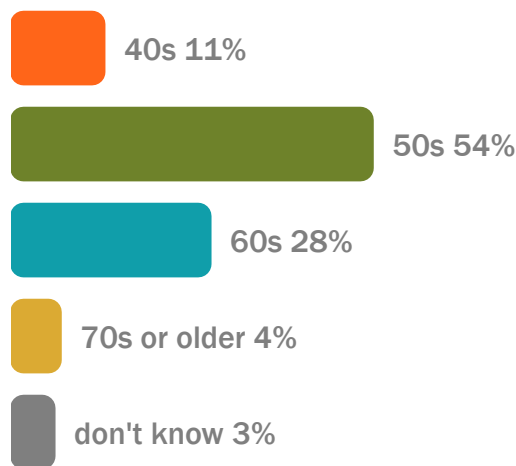
## Most believe age discrimination starts when workers are in their 50s.

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### More than half of older workers who have seen or experienced age discrimination indicate that they believe it starts when workers are in their 50s.

Nearly three in ten believe it starts for workers in their 60s. Unemployed workers (19% vs. 10% for employed workers) and African Americans/Blacks (16% vs. 10% for Whites) are more likely to say age discrimination begins when workers are in their 40s; the ADEA covers workers age 40 and older. (Chart 4)

**Chart 4: Most older workers believe age discrimination begins when workers are in their 50s.**



Q39a. At what age do you think older workers begin to face age discrimination?

Base: Seen/experienced age discrimination: n=2,627.

## Ageist comments are the most frequent type of discrimination.

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**About one-quarter (24%) of older workers report having been subjected to negative comments about their age from either a boss or a coworker (heard negative remarks from a colleague: 15%; heard negative remarks from a supervisor: 9%).** All respondents were asked about age discrimination as it related to six specific workplace actions (Chart 5):

### Chart 5: Not getting hired and hearing negative remarks about older age are the most commonly reported or experienced types of age discrimination.



Q40. Please tell me whether any of the following has happened to you at work since turning 40.  
Base: Total respondents: n=3,900.

Overall, 30 percent of respondents experienced at least one of these six actions and 17 percent experienced two or more. The unemployed are more likely than employed respondents to say that all of the six actions enumerated in the question had happened to them. Both African Americans/Blacks and Hispanics/Latinos are more likely than whites to say the majority of these actions had happened to them.

### Job applicants are commonly asked for age-related information.

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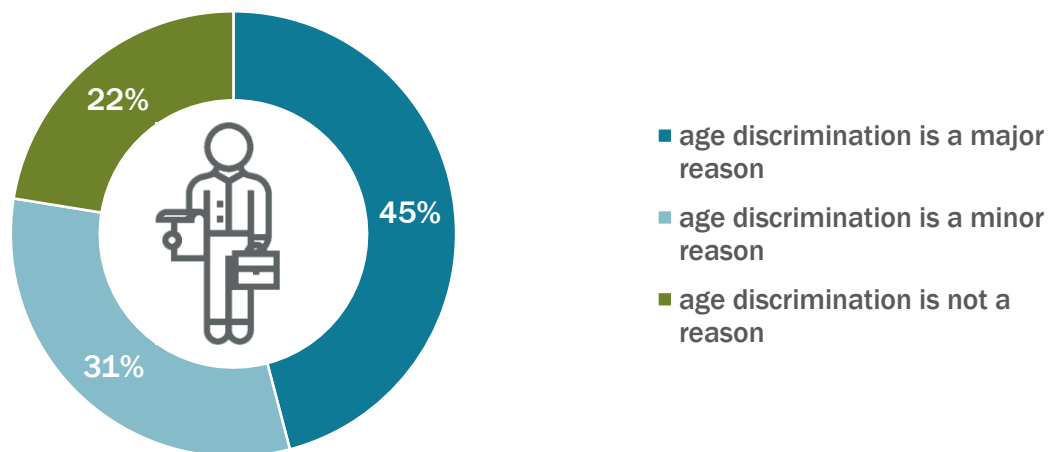
**Among the 29 percent of older workers who had applied for a job or gone on a job interview in the past two years, 44 percent had been asked to provide a birth date, graduation date or some other age-related information.** While asking for birth dates or graduation dates is not automatically illegal, the information can easily be used to discriminate and these questions often deter older workers from applying. The survey finds that this disturbing practice is very prevalent.

## Age discrimination is perceived as the primary limitation to finding a *new* job.

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**For both current workers and those who are unemployed, age discrimination is the top reason for pessimism among those who did not think they could find a new job within three months.** More than three-quarters (76%) say it is a major or minor reason; nearly half consider it a major reason (45%). (Chart 6)

**Chart 6: Three-quarters of older workers blame age discrimination for their lack of confidence in finding a *new* job.**



Q27. Why are you not confident that you would be able to get another job within three months? Please indicate whether each of the following is a major reason, a minor reason or not a reason.  
Base: Believe they could not get another job within 3 months if their job was eliminated: n=1,425.

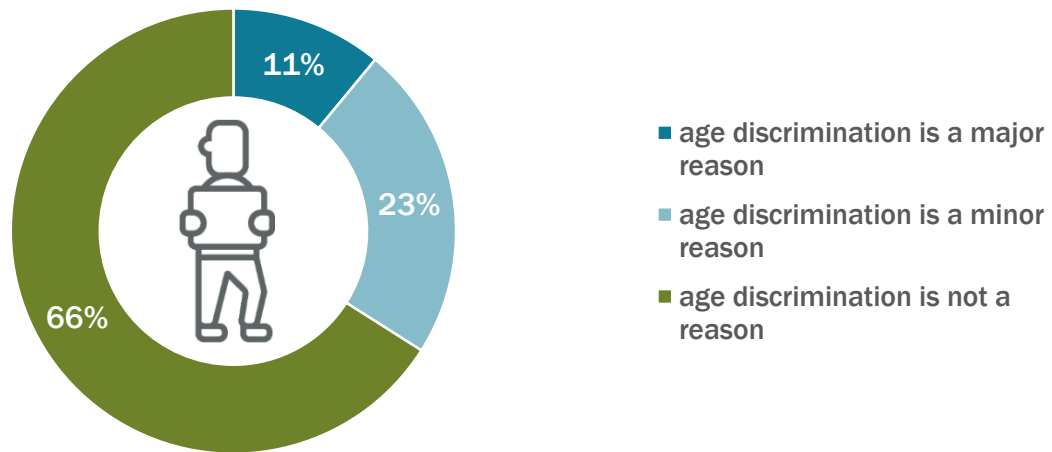
## Age discrimination is a reason that older workers fear *losing* their jobs.

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**Nearly two in ten older workers (18%) believe it is very or somewhat likely that they could lose their job in the coming year.** When exploring reasons why they fear that they will lose their job, one-third (34%) of older workers list discrimination based on age as either a major (11%) or minor (23%) reason. (Chart 7)



**Chart 7: One-third of older workers who believe they could lose their jobs fault age discrimination.**



Q25. For each of the following reasons, please indicate if it is a major reason, minor reason or not a reason why you believe you could lose your job or that your job is likely to be eliminated in the next year.  
Base: Believe they could lose their job or their job could be eliminated within the next year: n=696.

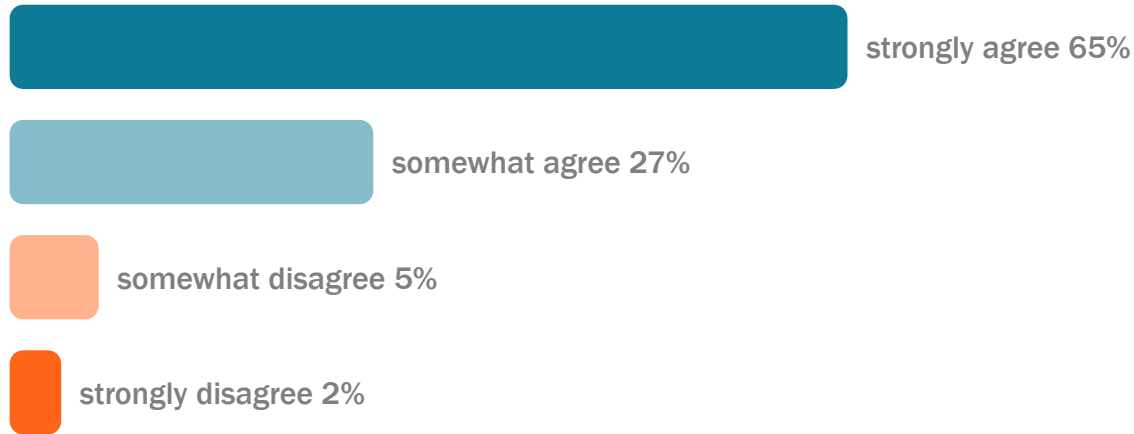
## **Age discrimination protections should be just as strong as other discrimination protections.**

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**Older workers support achieving parity for age discrimination relative to laws protecting other groups, particularly in light of the fact that the Supreme Court made it harder to prove age discrimination in the workplace relative to other types of discrimination.** Over 90 percent agree that older Americans should be protected from age discrimination *just as strongly* as they are protected from discrimination on the basis of race, sex, national origin or religion. About two-thirds (65%) strongly agree and an additional 27 percent somewhat agree. (Chart 8)

- African Americans/Blacks and Hispanics/Latinos are more likely than Whites to say they strongly agree that older workers should be equally protected (African Americans/Blacks: 73%, Hispanics/Latinos: 78% vs. Whites: 62%).
- Women are more likely than men to both agree (93% vs. 89%) and strongly agree (70% vs. 60%) that older workers should be equally protected.

**Chart 8: More than 9 in 10 agree that older workers should be protected against age discrimination as strongly as people are protected against other types of discrimination.**



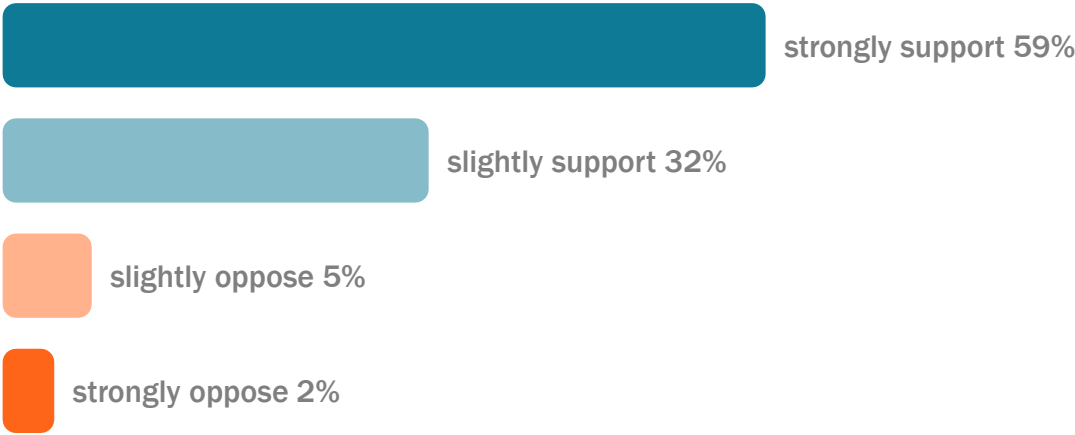
Q44. The Supreme Court recently changed our nation's age discrimination law and made it harder to prove age discrimination than to prove other types of discrimination, for instance based on race or gender. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Older Americans should be protected from age discrimination just like they are protected from discrimination on the basis of race, sex, national origin, or religion.

Base: Total respondents: n=3,900.

**Similarly, older workers express strong support for strengthening our nation's age discrimination laws.** More than 90 percent say that they would support efforts to make laws stronger, with nearly six in ten *strongly* supporting such efforts. (Chart 9)

- African Americans/Blacks and Hispanics/Latinos are more likely than Whites to strongly support strengthening age discrimination laws (African Americans/Blacks: 74%, Hispanics/Latinos: 75% vs. Whites: 56%).
- The unemployed are more likely than the employed to strongly support these efforts to strengthen the laws (69% vs. 59%), as are women relative to men (63% vs. 56%).

**Chart 9: More than 9 in 10 older workers support strengthening the nation’s age discrimination laws.**



*Q45. How strongly would you support or oppose efforts to strengthen the nation’s age discrimination laws?  
Base: Total respondents: n=3,900.*

**Conclusion: Stronger laws are needed to protect workers from age discrimination.**

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**Older workers, with decades of experience, high levels of engagement, low turnover and high motivation, remain a valuable resource for employers. Yet, based on these survey results, they continue to feel the insidious effects of age discrimination in the workplace.** A significant majority have seen or experienced age discrimination, nearly half of older job seekers have been asked for age-related information and nearly one-third report being subjected to ageist comments on the job. As a result, it is not surprising that older workers do not think it is fair for the courts to treat age discrimination as more acceptable than other forms of discrimination, and they strongly support strengthening the age discrimination laws to ensure equal opportunity and a respectful work environment for employees of all ages.

## Methodology

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This survey was fielded via an online probability-based panel in September 2017 to a national sample of 3,900 adults ages 45-plus who were working full time, working part time, or looking for work. Oversamples were also collected to yield 520 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) respondents, 903 African American/Black respondents and 1,036 Hispanic/Latino respondents. This fact sheet focuses on the age discrimination questions for the entire sample, as well as differences by employment status, race/ethnicity and gender. The margin of error is +/-2.12%. This is one in a series of briefs that will be released in 2018 using the data from this survey. The full "Value of Experience Study" includes questions related to motivations for work, plans for working in retirement, age discrimination, job actions and work and caregiving. A full chartbook of general sample results, all briefs/fact sheets, infographics, full survey annotation and a methodology report will be available at [www.aarp.org/ValueofExperience](http://www.aarp.org/ValueofExperience).

