

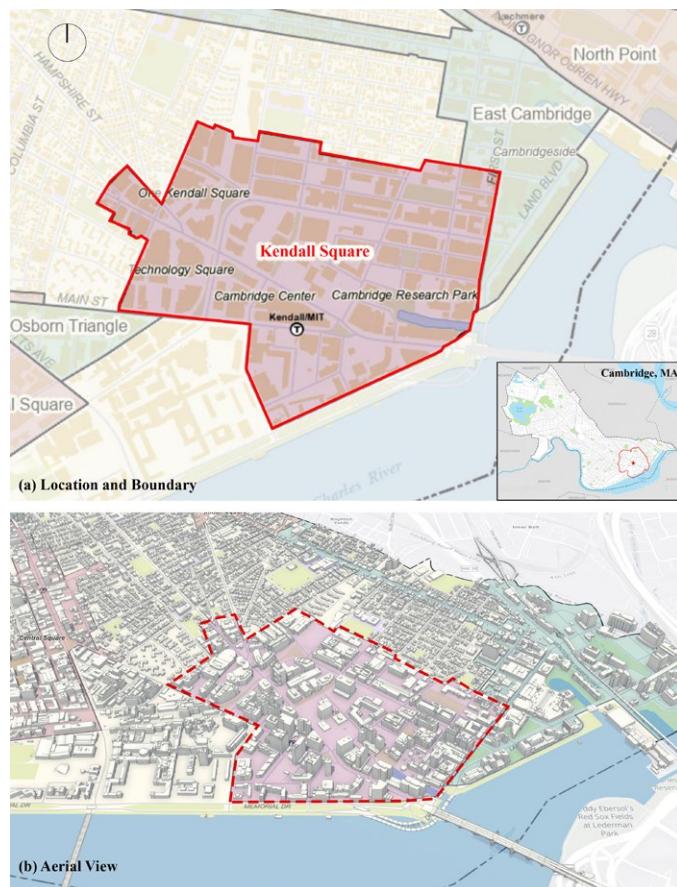


Innovation Districts and Urban Economic Resilience: Lessons from Kendall Square

by Yihao Wu

Innovation districts have remarkably emerged as critical drivers of urban economic growth in dozens of US cities under the era of the knowledge economy. These districts catalyze technological advancements, job creation, and economic competitiveness through intense clustering of knowledge in which researchers and firms operate in spatial proximity. Yet, the allure of specialization may conceal their critical vulnerabilities, potentially undermining the long-term resilience of these innovation ecosystems.

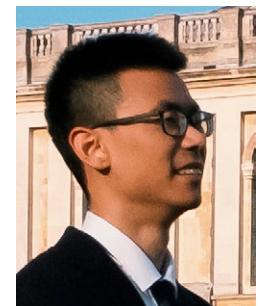
Figure 1. Location and Context of Kendall Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts



This balance between innovation-driven specialization and economic diversity presents an ongoing challenge for planners and policymakers. Using Kendall Square, a globally recognized innovation hub in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as a case study (Figure 1), we explore how excessive sectoral concentration can compromise urban economic resilience and discuss proactive policy interventions to sustain balanced growth.

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The Promise and Pitfalls of Innovation Districts

Innovation districts is generally a place-based urban development strategy, leveraging high-level agglomeration based on anchor institutions or sectors to generate substantial economic and technological benefits. These districts typically emerge around major research institutions and industry clusters, creating vibrant ecosystems rich in knowledge spillovers, skilled labor, and an entrepreneurial network. Kendall Square, home to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and numerous leading-edge biotechnology and technology giants, exemplifies this phenomenon. Between 2020 and 2023, Kendall Square experienced explosive employment growth in technology services, marking a remarkable 238% increase in the sector's workforce.¹

Many scholars believe that innovation districts provide a complementary model to tackle persistent challenges

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Figure 1 Sources: (A) Cambridge Community Development Department, Cambridge Geographic Information Systems (GIS), 2023. (B) Aerial imagery from Cambridge GIS Database, 2023.

Notes From The Chair



Reflecting on 2025

As 2025 draws to a close, I want to take a moment to reflect on all that we've accomplished this year, and offer sincere thanks to the incredible members, volunteers, and partners who make our division so impactful.

This past year has been marked by exceptional dedication across our network, and I want to extend a special thank you to our webinar presenters, who brought forward timely topics and innovative practices that advanced our understanding of the complex intersection between planning and economic development. Your expertise and willingness to share with your peers is what keeps our programming relevant and valuable.

To our volunteers, from the Executive Committee to the awards reviewers, article contributors, and committee members, thank you for generously giving your time and energy. Your work fuels the mission of the Economic Development Division, and I'm deeply grateful for your commitment.

And once again, congratulations to our 2025 APA EDD award recipients, whose work is helping set the standard for excellence in economic development planning. From small towns to major cities, your efforts continue to inspire practitioners across the country.

Looking Ahead to 2026

As we enter the new year, I'm excited to share that the Division will be launching a new Strategic Plan to guide our work through 2028. This plan will focus on expanding professional development, deepening member engagement, and increasing collaboration with partners across the planning and economic development landscape. We're

From small towns to major cities, your efforts continue to inspire practitioners across the country.

excited to share more in the coming months, and we invite all members to be part of this next phase.

We're also gearing up for our 2026 EDD Awards cycle, with nominations opening soon. Whether you've led a groundbreaking plan, or innovative public-private partnership, we encourage you to submit or nominate a colleague. These awards continue to showcase the transformative role planners play in leading economic growth in communities across the country.

Stay connected with us through the spring for webinars, engagement opportunities, and updates on the strategic plan and new initiatives. As always, we welcome your involvement and ideas.

Thank you again for a wonderful 2025. I wish you a joyful and restorative close to the year, and I look forward to all we'll accomplish together in 2026. ■

— Morgan Wortham

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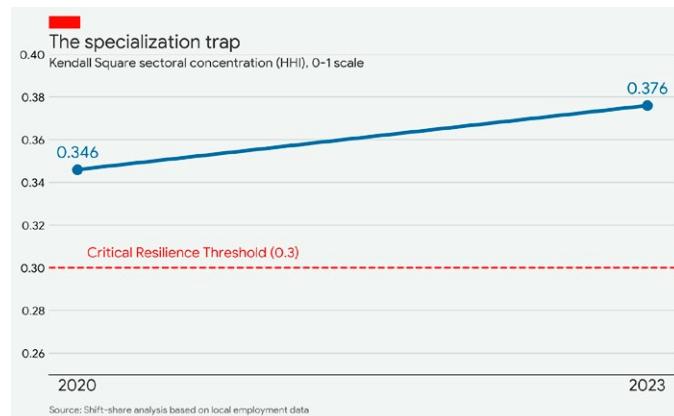
INNOVATION DISTRICTS, CONT.

presented in urban areas by fostering physically compact, mixed-used, and transit-oriented environments. In theory this might have worked well if the main industry which supports the innovation district is booming, however, this hyper-specialization form may pose significant risks when the system meets external shock. While concentrated growth drives immediate economic success, it can simultaneously weaken resilience by reducing sectoral diversity, driving up housing costs, and triggering displacement of service-oriented businesses essential for community vitality. The core question facing planners and policymakers is how to strike a balance between fostering continued innovation while mitigating the structural vulnerabilities created by extreme specialization.

Sectoral Concentration and the Erosion of Economic Resilience

Kendall Square's rapid technological expansion has brought clear economic benefits but at the cost of increasing vulnerability. Using a shift-share analysis, we find that Kendall Square's Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI)² — a measure of sectoral concentration — rose persistently from 0.346 in 2020 to 0.376 in 2023. This level is about triple of Massachusetts' average, and surpasses the critical threshold (0.3), beyond which further specialization reduces systemic resilience by displacing diverse supporting sectors essential for economic adaptability (Figure 2).

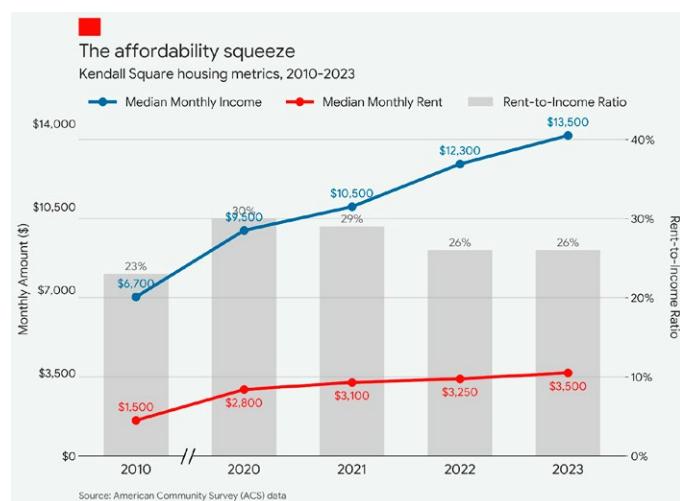
Figure 2. Specialization Trap



To understand the outcomes of hyper-specialization, we analyze the median rent and service-sector employment, which reflect systemic vulnerabilities in Kendall Square's economic ecosystem. The district's sectoral concentration, driven by technology and biotechnology dominance, correlates with a 25% surge in median rents between 2020 and 2023, exacerbating affordability

challenges and displacing lower-margin businesses (Figure 3). Simultaneously, service-sector employment experienced a sharp decline, particularly in areas adjacent to tech clusters: within a 0.25-mile radius of major campuses, service jobs fell by 42%, compared to a 23% decline in areas farther than 0.5 miles. While COVID-19 crisis caused statewide sectoral contractions in several venerable industries (e.g., hospitality, arts) and short-term inflation, the influence on imbalanced sectoral performance persisted despite pandemic headwinds, evidenced by the sharp contrast of local share effect between tech and service sectors.

Figure 3. The Affordability Squeeze



The pandemic triggered an external shock intensifying specialization pressures as tech-oriented sectors adapted quickly to remote work, further marginalizing traditional service businesses reliant on physical presence. The shift toward remote and hybrid working models disproportionately disadvantaged smaller businesses reliant on foot traffic, exacerbating displacement and structural vulnerabilities, and deepening socio-economic disparities within the district. Consequently, the extreme specialization strength that initially boosted local economic prosperity began eroding adaptability and resilience.

Policy Strategies for Proactive Urban Resilience

Given the evidence that resilience decreases sharply beyond a critical threshold of sectoral concentration (HHI = 0.3), **early intervention is crucial to preserving adaptive capacity**. Reactive policies aimed at restoring diversity after excessive concentration occurs are typically less effective and more costly. Several targeted policy

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INNOVATION DISTRICTS, CONT.

interventions can strengthen resilience without undermining innovation-driven growth:

Commercial Rent Stabilization. Proactively implementing commercial rent stabilization measures for essential service-oriented businesses can mitigate displacement pressures. For example, the City of Boston's *Affordable Commercial Assistance Fund* (ACAF) recently demonstrated the efficacy of direct rent subsidies in retaining community-serving businesses in rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods. Such measures become significantly more effective when introduced before reaching critical concentration thresholds.

Mixed-use Zoning and Flexible Land Use. Revising zoning regulations to require mixed-use developments, particularly within proximity to dominant technology clusters, can preserve essential local businesses and maintain economic diversity. New York City recently overhauled its zoning to allow for more flexible, mixed-use spaces specifically to enhance economic resilience and allow businesses to adapt to shocks (like COVID-19).³ These “resilience reserves” act as buffers, maintaining necessary sectoral diversity and reducing vulnerability.

Resilience-weighted Development Reviews. Project reviews that incorporate resilience criteria alongside traditional economic impact assessments. Drawing on frameworks like the *Cape Cod Commission's economic resilience planning*, projects would be assessed not only by direct economic contributions but by their ability to enhance system-wide adaptive capacities and mitigate sectoral displacement risks.

Finally, effective policy intervention demands consideration of both timing and scale. Neighborhood-level analyses reveal significant differences between early and late-stage transformed neighborhoods. Policies must therefore be adaptive, implemented at multiple scales, and adjusted according to the specific timing and pace of sectoral transformations. ■

Endnotes

¹ Source: Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), U.S. Census Bureau.

² The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) is a commonly accepted measure of market concentration. It is calculated by summing the squares of the market shares of each sector within the district. In this analysis, the index ranges from 0 to 1; values closer to 0 indicate a diverse mix of industries, while higher values indicate that the local economy is heavily dominated by a single sector.

³ NYC Department of City Planning. (2021). Zoning for a Resilient Economy.

— *Yihao Wu is a PhD student in Urban Planning and Economics at Harvard University, specializing in place-based urban development and economic resilience. He served as a senior city planner in Shanghai for two years and has abundant practical experience in urban redevelopment. His research integrates spatial analytics and applied econometrics to examine how planning policies influence economic performance at local scale. Yihao's academic work has been published in leading journals like Cities and Urban Studies.*

2026 Economic Development Division Awards Nominations Open!

Nominations for the 2026 [Economic Development Division awards](#) will be open on Thursday, January 8th, 2026 and will close at 5:00 p.m. EST on Friday, January 30th, 2026.

Award categories include:

1. Best Practice – Planning
2. Best Practice – Implementation
3. Innovation – Planning
4. Innovation – Implementation
5. Holzheimer Student Scholarship Award – Recognizing an original student paper or work. The awardee will receive \$500.

6. Donald E. Hunter Excellence in Economic Development – Recognizing an individual with exceptional contributions in the field of economic development

Nominations are reviewed for impact, originality, equity and inclusion, implementation and contribution to community.

All nominations shall be submitted using the form provided [on the website](#). The winners of the awards will be announced at the 2026 Annual National APA Planning conference in Detroit from April 25-28. Only APA members may submit nominations.

For more information, contact Awards Committee member, Sharmili Reddy at apaecondev@gmail.com.

Job Quality and Access Tool

by Kathleen Reigstad, AICP

The Job Quality and Access tool (the tool) is an innovative data analysis resource developed by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) to support economic development and shared prosperity across northeastern Illinois. The tool provides analysis on employment trends, industry clusters, the quality of jobs, and the accessibility of jobs (such as the level of education required). The tool provides data through plots, detailed occupation profiles, maps, and by industry clusters allowing users to explore multiple aspects of how various industries and their related occupations will impact communities.

The tool is hosted on CMAP's website and powered by Tableau. With a recent update completed in December 2023, the tool not only provides job information, but also information on transit and living wages. It also provides customizable weight factors so that users can analyze job opportunities within a local context. Communities throughout the region can use this tool to understand the advantages of their local labor market such as which high-quality jobs are prominent and have openings, and identify areas that need assistance (e.g., high-quality jobs that are difficult to access). The information provided by the tool empowers

leaders to develop action plans that fit both a local and regional context. It provides a window into what the economic and job opportunities really mean for our residents, to support better economic development planning and decision in northeastern Illinois. The tool's design means that when it is used to inform planning and decision-making at the regional, county and local levels, it shifts the status quo from competition to collaboration.



Kathy Reigstad

(continued on page 6)

CHICAGO METROPOLITAN AGENCY FOR PLANNING JOB QUALITY AND ACCESS



TIP STRATEGIES

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

SOURCES: US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS): Lightcast 2023.3 - QCEW Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed, Current Population Survey (CPS), Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) and Basic Monthly Surveys in 2022, National Compensation Survey 2022, US Census Bureau: American Community Survey 2021 5-year aggregate sample, Population Estimates Program 2022 Vintage; US Department of Labor: Employment and Training Administration, Occupational Information Network (O*NET) version 28.0; Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Glasmeier, Amy K., Living Wage Calculator; US Economic Development Administration (EDA); Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness, Harvard Business School; Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT); City of Chicago: Chicago Transit Authority, Commuter Rail (Metra) and Suburban Bus (Pace) Divisions of the Regional Transportation Authority; TIP Strategies, Inc.

Landing page of the Job Quality and Access Tool on CMAP's website.

MENU

- Overview
- Job Quality & Access: Plot
- Job Quality & Access: Details
- Job Quality & Access: Map
- Job Quality & Access: Industry Clusters
- Industry Cluster Appendix

USER QUICKSTART GUIDE

Navigate this workbook by using the menu or tabs to move between visualizations. The left side panel on each page includes icons to click for navigation, informational overlays, sources, and downloading. Each chart has tooltips that are shown by hovering the mouse over a chart element. Series in a chart may be highlighted or emphasized by clicking on an element in the chart or in the corresponding legend. Many charts also have interactive filters in the form of drop-down menus or sliding bars to change which geographies, occupations, or other metrics are displayed. Use the side menu on the left of each page for more information. For best results, view fullscreen on a desktop or laptop computer using a 100% scale resolt.

JOB QUALITY AND ACCESS TOOL, CONT.

Additionally, the tool creates a shared definition of job quality and job access in northeastern Illinois. Conventional approaches to define a high quality, accessible job have struggled to bridge the gap between how residents experience jobs and economic development, and how planners and government officials understand it. The definitions of job quality and job access were created by stakeholders and based upon a review of the many historically used definitions. The tool also creates a shared definition of quality and access supported through metrics. The metrics and data are available at multiple scales to foster collaboration and shared decision-making.

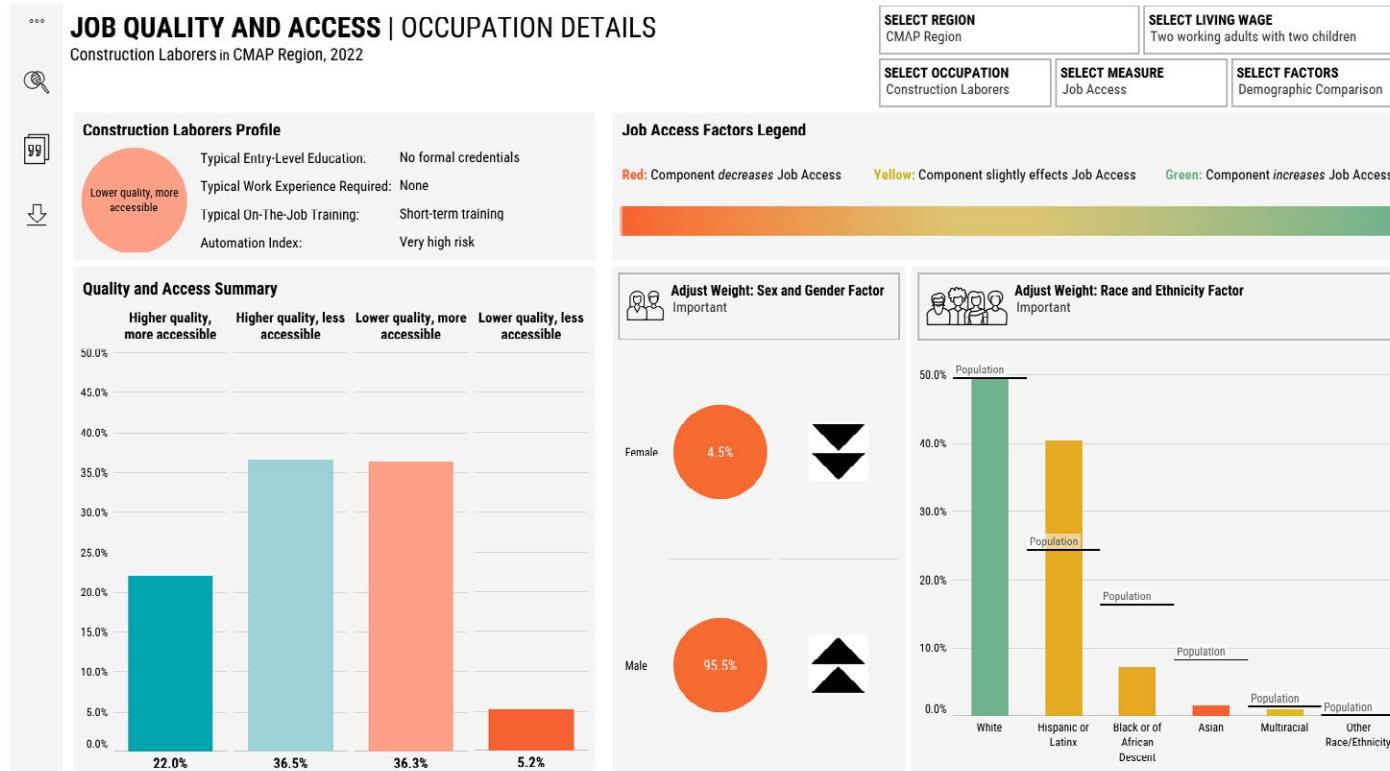
The Job Quality and Access tool gives each occupation a job quality

and a job access score. The job access score measures if a job is equitably accessible for everyone. The score uses data to identify potential barriers, like required on-the-job training or biases perpetuated within job industries. In addition to considering educational and experience requirements, the tool provides the demographic makeup of workers in each job compared to the makeup of the region. This data helps users understand where bias, either in race or gender, is pervasive and shaping the workforce in that profession. Understanding where certain groups are over- or under-represented empowers local leaders to develop solutions. An example of this may occur is to address underrepresentation of Hispanic workers in construction management by partnering to offer multilingual management

courses. The job access analysis is done for every job in the region, creating countless opportunities to investigate and address employment equity.

The tool similarly gives each job a quality score. The job quality score measures if a job supports a high quality of life using data including earnings, paid leave, unemployment rate, related occupations, and other aspects of a job that indicate workers are able to support their families comfortably. As part of measuring a job's quality, the tool compares hourly earnings to what a living wage in the region would be. The tool also allows users to further explore wages by family makeup. By elevating these factors in job scoring, the Job Quality and Access tool elevates decisions that benefit populations who have

(continued on page 7)



Evaluation of workers' race and gender in the **Construction Laborer** occupation using the Job Quality and Access Tool's occupation details tab.

JOB QUALITY AND ACCESS TOOL, CONT.

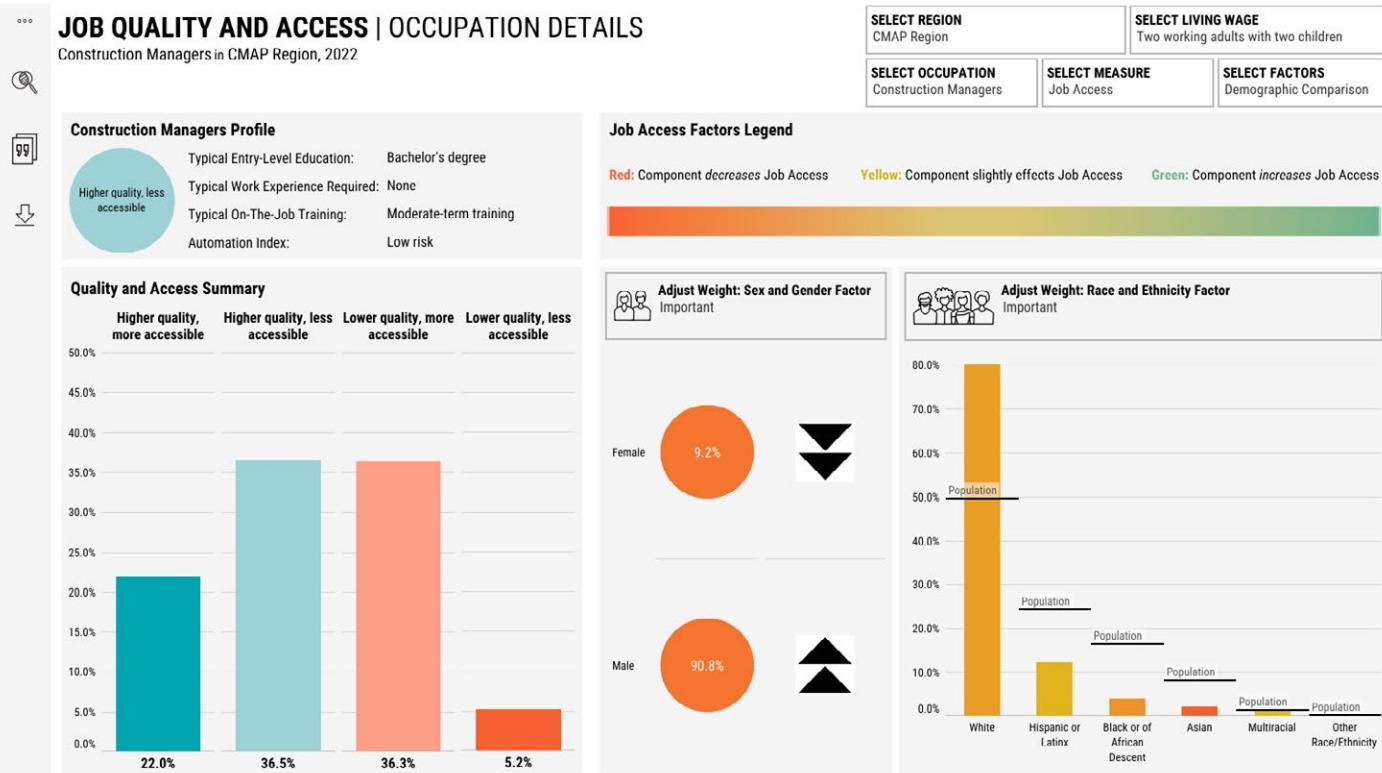
been underrepresented and historically excluded from the workforce.

The Job Quality and Access tool is a result of the work of the Regional Economic Recovery Task Force, which recommended a focus on traded industry clusters. CMAP worked with [TIP Strategies](#) to develop the tool, as well as make recent improvements in 2024. The

updates to design, definitions, and data analysis were guided by a user group that consisted of community partners working in workforce and economic development. ■■■

— Kathleen (Katie) Reigstad, AICP, is a Senior Planner for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). Katie served as project manager for the recent update to the Job Quality and Access tool. With more than

nine years of community and economic development experience, her work includes corridor and neighborhood planning, tax increment and business improvement district planning in Illinois and Michigan, as well as supporting small business and entrepreneur growth in Metro Detroit. Katie holds a Master of Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Michigan.



Evaluation of workers' race and gender in the **Construction Managers** occupation using the Job Quality and Access Tool's occupation details tab.

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Member Spotlight**MEET: Rachel Selsky,
EDD MEMBERSHIP CHAIR**

EDUCATION: Masters in Regional Planning from the University at Albany (Go Great Danes!)

TITLE & ORGANIZATION: CEO at Camoin Associates, North Kingstown, RI

Lightning Round: Get to Know Rachel**Current project you're most excited about?**

Economic and Community Contribution of the Portland Trail System (trails, small business, health benefits — all my favorite things).

What's a challenge in your work that others might relate to?

Trying to anticipate the next big disruption (good or bad) and how best to prepare our team and clients.

What's one policy, tool, or idea more people should be talking about?

Using economic impact analysis for storytelling — translating numbers into real-life examples that communicate value.

What's your "why" for volunteering time on the EDD Executive Committee?

The opportunity to collaborate with other industry leaders from around the country to improve the planning and economic development profession for others.

**Q&A****One small (or big) win from the past year?**

Being brave enough to step into my first dance class in many years.

Just for Fun**Favorite city to visit and why?**

St. Petersburg, FL — it's a fun growing city with interesting history, architecture, neighborhoods, and views. Plus, it means I'm on vacation.

Favorite quote related to economic development, planning, or cities?

The meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you don't expect to sit. I'm not sure if I got that right, but basically, I try to live my life (including at work) by doing what I can to make things better for the next person.

If you weren't working in economic development, what would you be doing instead?

Designing and playing on trails.

If someone wants to collaborate or learn more, how should they reach out?

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PRACTITIONERS: this is a great opportunity to give your community contributions, and colleagues exposure for your economic development efforts.

STUDENTS: have an interesting economic development theory or have you researched economic development locally or abroad? This is a great opportunity to publish your findings.

Example of potential topics include: Adaptive Reuse • Base Realignment & Closure (BRAC) Redevelopment • Climate Resiliency Districts • Environmental Compliance • Joint Development • Rural Economic Development • Service Volunteer Projects and their Impact on Economic Development

Send inquiries and submissions to Jennifer.Trotter@plenaryamericas.com.

- Deadline for the Spring 2026 *News & Views*: March 15, 2026.

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