

## Trends in Employee Tenure, 1983–2018

*By Craig Copeland, Ph.D., Employee Benefit Research Institute*

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### AT A GLANCE

This study examines data on employee tenure — the amount of time an individual has been with his or her current employer — of American workers. It uses U.S. Census Bureau data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), including the most recent January CPS data, to examine the tenure with current employers of wage and salary workers from 1983–2018.

While some believe current American workers change jobs more frequently than was the case for past generations, the data on employee tenure show that individuals holding only one job for their entire career (career jobs) never actually existed for most workers and continue not to exist for most workers. Furthermore, when the labor market has been the strongest, the tenure of workers has tended to be shorter, as more individuals start new jobs by being newly employed or by changing jobs due to more opportunities from a strong economy.

Here are the key findings:

- Over the past 35 years, the median tenure of all wage and salary workers ages 25 or older has stayed at approximately five years.
- This overall trend masks a small but significant decrease in median tenure among men (which had been increasing until declines in 2016 and 2018) and an offsetting increase in median tenure among women.
- The fact that the gender-distinct trends have generally moved in opposite directions has led to overall constancy in the tenure statistics. However, the median tenures by gender have been moving together in recent years.
- The distribution of tenure levels among workers ages 20 or older had been moving toward longer tenures until the most recent years, where shorter tenures have gained share.
- Compared to 2012, median tenure decreased in all groups. In addition, the distribution of worker tenure showed a sizable increase in the lowest levels (two years or less) of tenure. These results indicate that both more individuals have jobs and individuals who had been working changed jobs — potentially to better jobs — as the economy has improved, so that the overall tenure distribution has moved to shorter tenures.
- The difference between private-sector and public-sector workers' tenure distributions is quite striking. While private-sector employers in general have been able to maintain a fairly constant and modest percentage of long-term employees (25 or more years of tenure), public-sector employers have seen this group grow significantly through 2004 before trending down through 2018. Consequently, public-sector employers are facing the retirement of a significant number of their most experienced workers, although this issue is somewhat abating in the most recent years.

- As for career jobs, the highest median tenure level for any age group (15.3 years in 1983 for males ages 55–64) certainly does not cover an entire lifetime career, since the median worker would not have started his or her current job until after age 40. Furthermore, the percentage of workers in both the 55–59 age group and the 60–64 age group with 25 or more years of tenure has been either just above or just below 20 percent at a time that these workers would be ending their working careers. Consequently, approximately 80 percent of workers at these ages have tenures less than 25 years, which would be less than a full working career.
- These tenure results indicate that, historically, most workers have changed jobs during their working careers, and all evidence suggests that they will continue to do so in the future. This persistence of job changing over working careers has several important implications — potentially reduced or no defined benefit plan payments due to vesting schedules, reduced defined contribution plan savings, lump-sum distributions that can occur at job change, and public policy issues both through lower retirement incomes of the elderly population and the loss of experienced, public-sector workers likely to be retiring soon.
- Although tenure is not a good measure of job security, it does provide insight into how long workers choose to or are allowed to remain with their current employers. This idea is particularly relevant over the last 10 years, as unemployment remained high in 2009–2012, when tenure was generally increasing. However, with the unemployment rate falling in 2012 and continuing through 2018, the percentage of workers with shorter tenures increased. Therefore, now with the decrease in the unemployment rate, more individuals appeared to have entered the labor force or changed jobs.

Craig Copeland is senior research associate at the Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI). Any views expressed in this report are those of the authors and should not be ascribed to the officers, trustees, or other sponsors of EBRI, Employee Benefit Research Institute-Education and Research Fund (EBRI-ERF), or their staffs. Neither EBRI nor EBRI-ERF lobbies or takes positions on specific policy proposals. EBRI invites comment on this research.

**Suggested Citation:** Craig Copeland. "Trends in Employee Tenure, 1983–2018." *EBRI Issue Brief*, no. 474 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, February 28, 2019).

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# Trends in Employee Tenure, 1983–2018

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## Introduction

A common perception of past generations of American workers was that they held a career job — staying with the same employer for most of their working years and then retiring. In contrast, current American workers are viewed to change jobs more frequently. However, the data on employee tenure — the amount of time an individual has been with his or her current employer — show that workers of past generations are similar to current workers in terms of tenure.

The tenure data addressed in this *Issue Brief* show this historical fact while also demonstrating that the median tenure and the distribution of the amount of tenure workers have at a particular point in time are greatly affected by the labor market. In times of a strong labor market, the median tenure tends to decrease as more new hires occur, while in a weaker market, median tenure moves upward as fewer new hires occur and workers remain at their jobs as other opportunities are less available.

This article builds on previous Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI) publications that have examined employee tenure data of American workers.<sup>1</sup> The latest data on employee tenure from the January 2018 Supplement to the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) are examined and compared with trends from previous CPS data on employee tenure.<sup>2</sup>

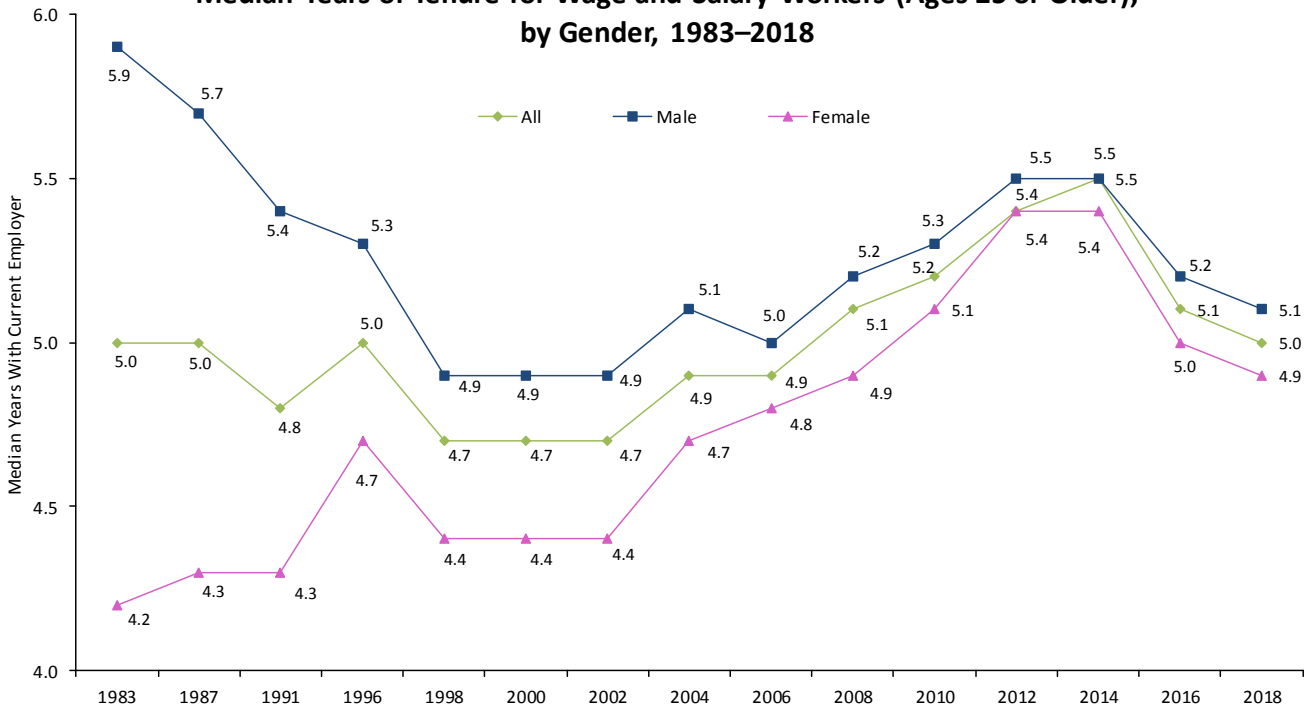
## Overall Tenure

The median tenure for all wage and salary workers *ages 25 or older* in 2018 was equal to its 1983 level at 5.0 years. Over this 35-year period, tenure has ranged as high as 5.5 years in 2014 and as low as 4.7 years in the period around 2000 (Figure 1). The median tenure for *male* wage and salary workers was lower in 2018 at 5.1 years, compared with its high of 5.9 years in 1983. Tenure for males was as low as 4.9 years in the period around 2000. In contrast, the median tenure for *female* wage and salary workers increased from 4.2 years in 1983 to 5.4 years in 2014. The 2018 figure (4.9) is off from a high of 5.4 years in 2012 and 2014. The overall increase in the median tenure of female workers offsets the decline in the median tenure of male workers, leaving the overall median tenure in 2018 equal to its 1983 level but lower than in 2014.

**Age and Gender**—A closer examination of the median tenure of wage and salary workers ages 25–64 by age and gender shows that the median tenure for the oldest working males of this group (ages 55–64) declined steadily from a peak of 15.3 years in 1983 to as low as 9.5 years in 2006. In 2016 and 2018, median tenure for this group stood at 10.2 years (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> However, because a male worker of this age with the median level of tenure would not have started this job until he was in his 40s, it would be difficult to consider it a career job. The median-tenure trend became flatter for younger age categories, showing a smaller change in the tenure level across time. The 25–34-year-old-male tenure trend was virtually flat at around three years. The median tenure in each age group decreased or remained unchanged in 2018.

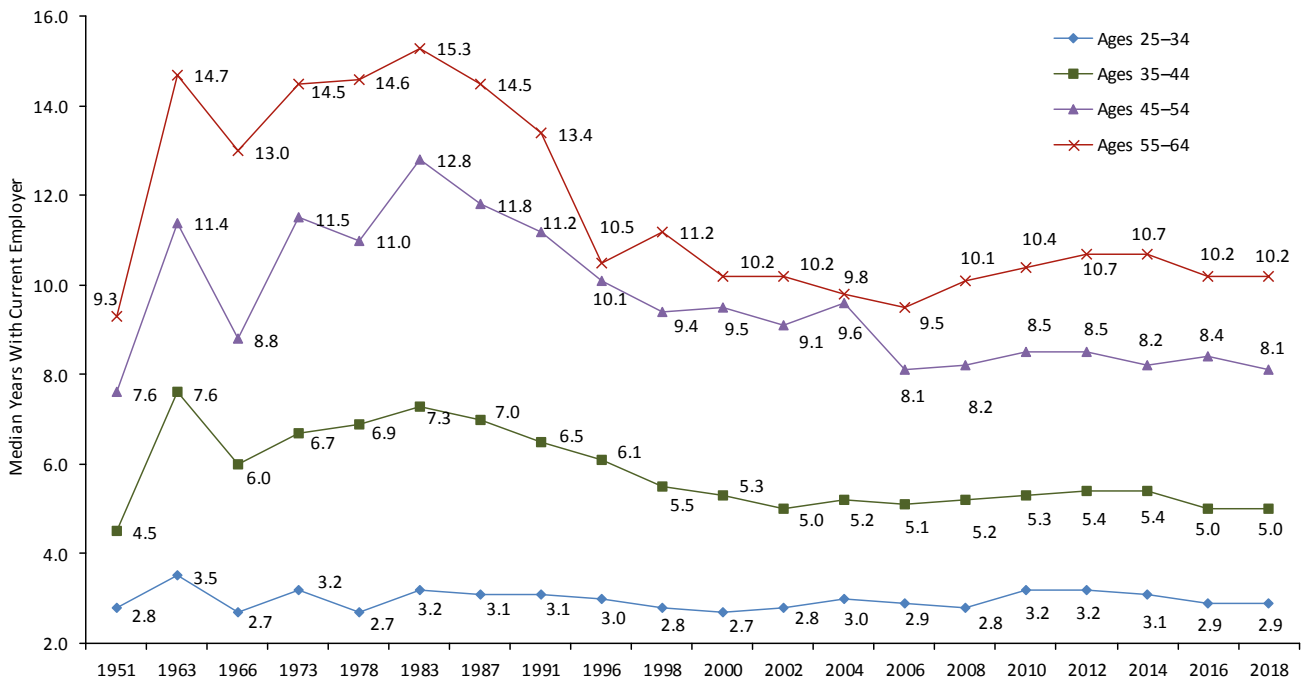
For female wage and salary workers ages 25–64, the median tenure was relatively constant to increasing across all age groups since 1983 (Figure 3). The largest increase from 1983 was among females ages 45–54, whose median tenure increased from 6.3 years in 1983 to 7.1 years in 2018. However, the median tenure of this group had the largest 2018 decline. Despite the increase in the median tenure among those ages 25–34 in 2018, the group's 2018 level was still below its 1983 level (2.8 years compared with 2.7 years in 2018).

**Figure 1**  
**Median Years of Tenure for Wage and Salary Workers (Ages 25 or Older),**  
**by Gender, 1983–2018**



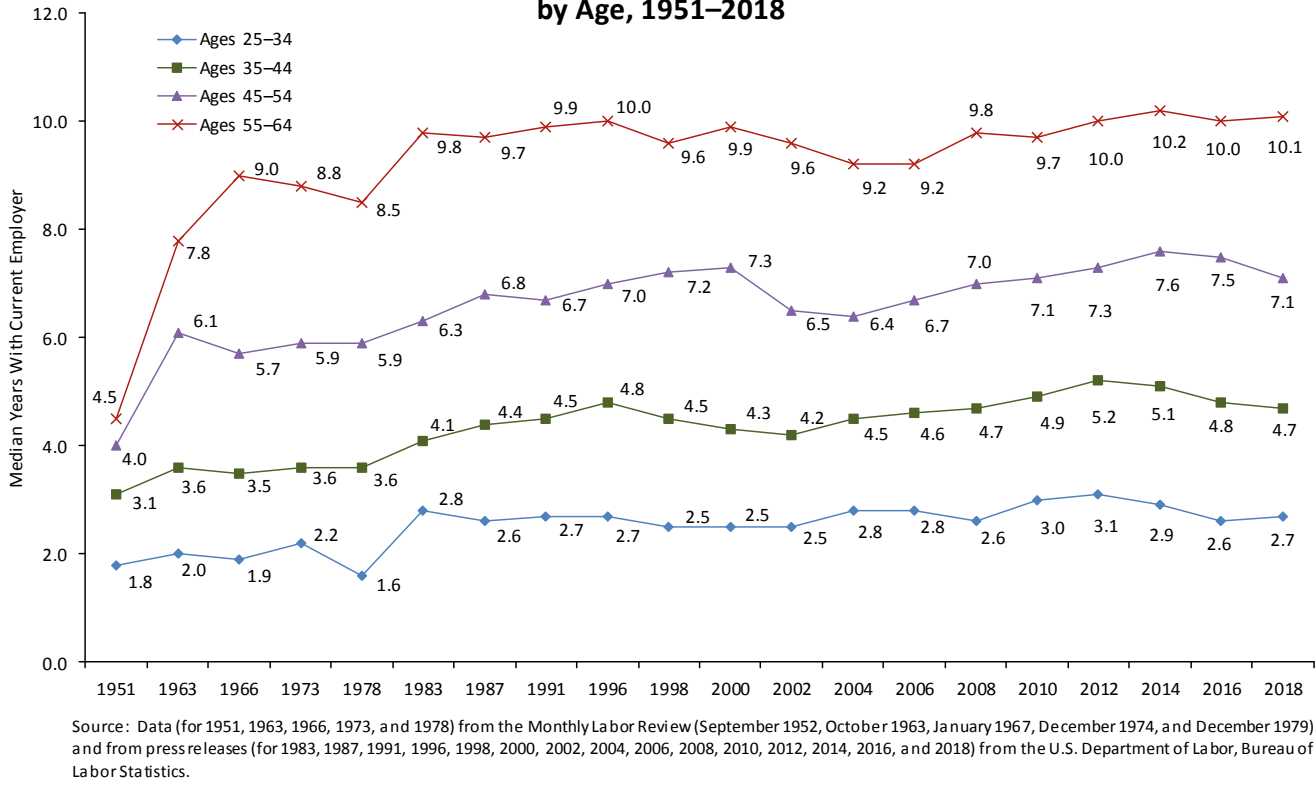
Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Tenure," at [www.bls.gov/news.release/history/tenure\\_09192002.txt](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/history/tenure_09192002.txt), [www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure\\_09182012.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure_09182012.pdf), and [www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm) (all last viewed February 19, 2019).

**Figure 2**  
**Median Tenure Levels for Male Prime-Age (25–64) Workers, by Age, 1951–2018**



Source: Data (for 1951, 1963, 1966, 1973, and 1978) from the Monthly Labor Review (September 1952, October 1963, January 1967, December 1974, and December 1979) and from press releases (for 1983, 1987, 1991, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018) from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Figure 3  
**Median Tenure Levels for Female Prime-Age (25–64) Workers,  
 by Age, 1951–2018**



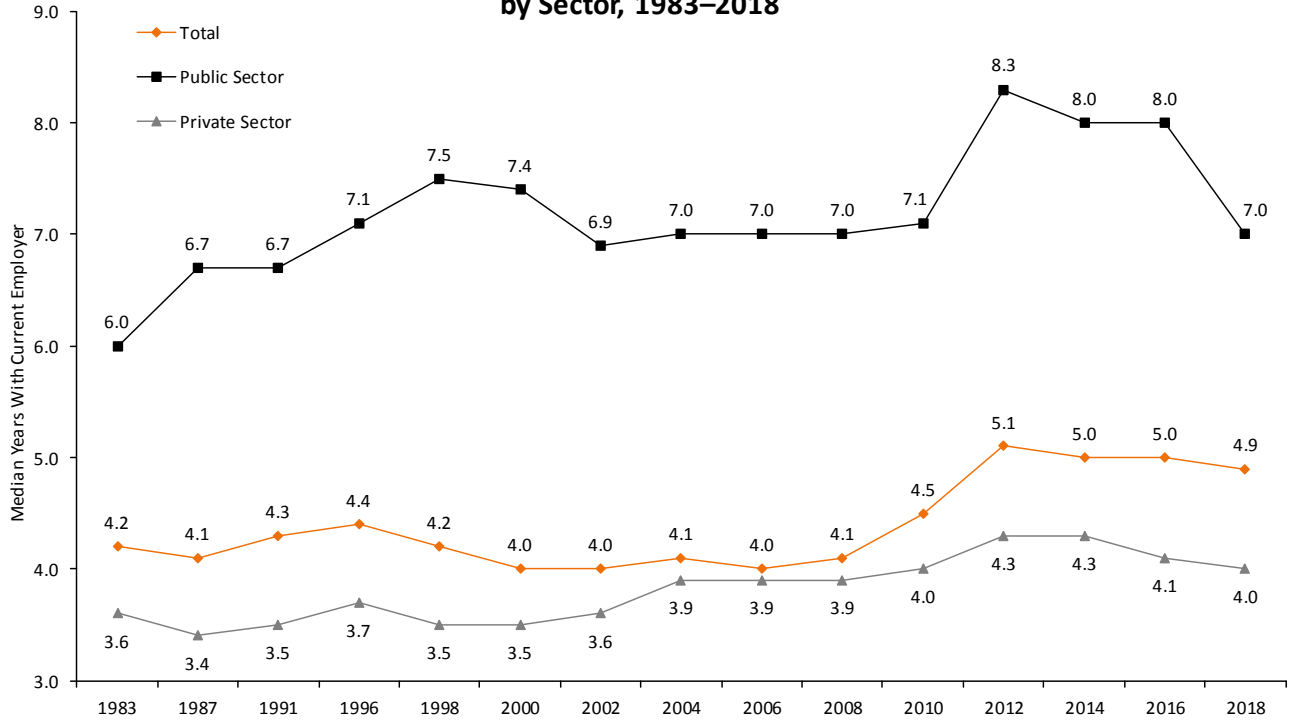
**Public vs. Private Sector**—Among *all* wage and salary workers *ages 20 or older*, the median tenure level was relatively steady at 4.0 years to 4.5 years from 1983 to 2010. The median tenure increased since then to between 5.0 and 5.1 years (Figure 4).<sup>4</sup> The median tenure then fell back to 4.9 years in 2018. *Private-sector* workers’ median tenure also held relatively steady from 1983 to 2002 at around 3.5 years. Subsequently, the median tenure trended upward, reaching 4.3 years in 2012 and 2014. The median tenure then fell to 4.1 years in 2016 and to 4.0 years in 2018. In contrast, the median tenure for *public-sector* workers shows significantly more increases, going from 6.0 years in 1983 to 7.5 years in 1998 and reaching 8.3 years in 2012. Subsequently, the median tenure fell to 8.0 years in 2014 and 2016 and to 7.0 years in 2018.

As a result of the increase in the median job tenure in the public sector, the *relative* median tenure to that of the private sector grew from 1.7 times larger in 1983 to 2.1 times in 1998 (calculations from Figure 4). However, this ratio has fallen back to 1.75 times in 2018 with the larger relative decrease in median tenure in the public sector.

For *male, private-sector* wage and salary workers ages 20 or older, the median tenure peaked in 2012 at 5.3 years. The median tenure level subsequently declined to 5.0 years in 2014, to 4.1 years in 2016, and to 4.0 years in 2018 (Figure 5). In contrast, the median tenure of *female, private-sector* workers had a relatively consistent upward trend (except for slight dips in 1987 and 1998), from 3.1 years in 1983 to 4.6 years in 2014. Since then, it has declined to 4.0 years in 2016, where it remained in 2018.

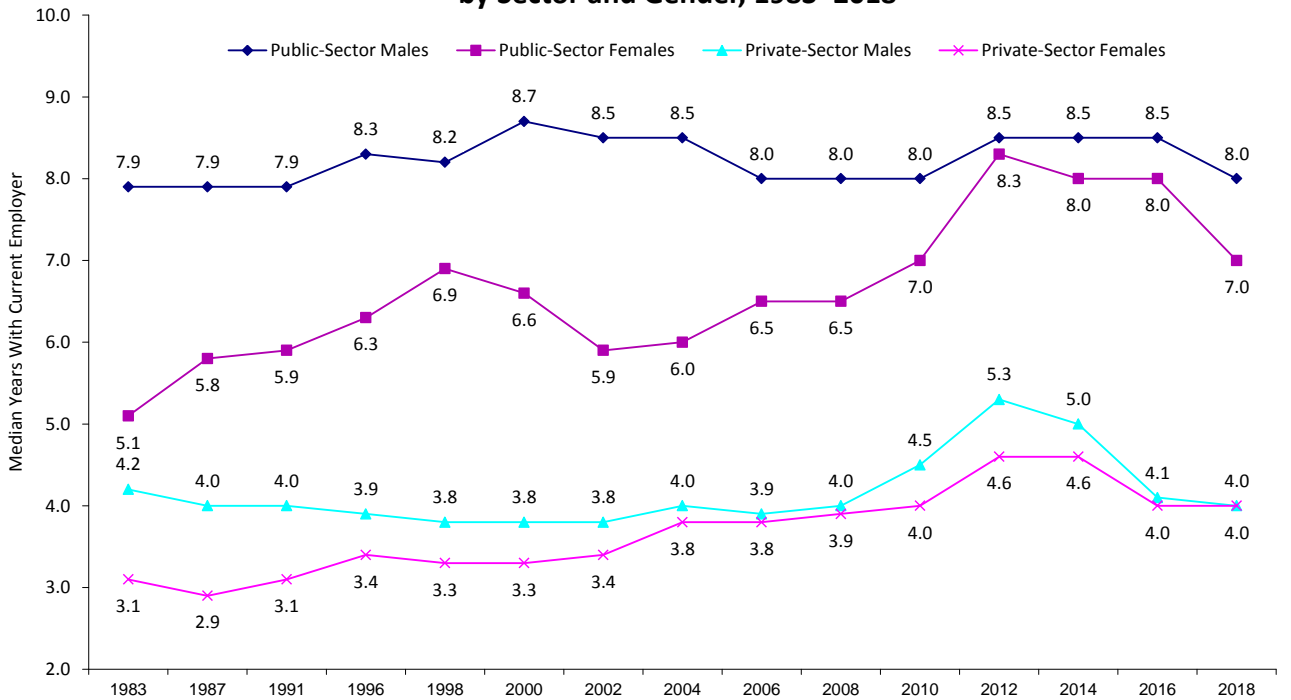
For *male, public-sector* workers, the median tenure had a flat-to-upward trend from 7.9 years in 1983 to 8.7 years in 2000 before falling back to 8.0 years by 2006, where it remained through 2010. The median tenure then increased to 8.5 years in 2012 and held there through 2016. In 2018, it fell back to its 2010 level of 8.0 years. *Female, public-sector* workers’ median tenure level had the most significant upward trend, reaching a peak of 6.9 years in 1998. Median tenure for this cohort dipped to 5.9 years but increased again, reaching 8.3 years in 2012. It stood at 7.0 in 2018, in line with its 2010 level.

**Figure 4**  
**Median Tenure Levels for Wage and Salary Workers (Ages 20 or Older),**  
**by Sector, 1983–2018**



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Tenure," at [www.bls.gov/news.release/history/tenure\\_09192002.txt](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/history/tenure_09192002.txt), [www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure\\_09182012.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure_09182012.pdf), and [www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm) (all last viewed February 19, 2019); and Employee Benefit Research Institute estimates from the January 2014, 2016, and 2018 Current Population Surveys.

**Figure 5**  
**Median Tenure Levels for Wage and Salary Workers (Ages 20 or Older),**  
**by Sector and Gender, 1983–2018**



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Tenure," and Employee Benefit Research Institute estimates from the January 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 Current Population Surveys.

## Tenure Distribution

The distribution of all wage and salary workers *ages 20 or older* across various levels of tenure was relatively stable, with the biggest change occurring in workers ages 20 or older with one year or less of tenure. In 1983, more than a quarter of that cohort — 25.7 percent — had a year or less of tenure. This trended as low as 17.4 percent in 2010's weak labor market and has since risen to 20.5 percent in 2018 (Figure 6). Workers with 20 or more years of tenure was the cohort with the second largest change during the full period. In 1983, 8.9 percent of workers ages 20 or older had two decades or more of tenure. This peaked at 11 percent in 2012 and stood at 10.6 percent in 2016 and 2018.<sup>5</sup>

The tenure distributions over time between males and females had the same movement away from the shortest tenures, but the shifts for each gender were to different tenure amounts. The percentage of male workers with the shortest tenures (one year or less) fell from 24.0 percent in 1983 to 20.2 percent in 2018 with a low of 17.1 percent in 2010's weak labor market (Figure 7). The tenure levels that showed larger shares for males were tenures of more than one year through nine years, increasing from 43.9 percent in 1983 to 49.4 percent in 2018. In contrast, the share of the longest tenures (10 or more years of tenure) for females showed the most growth since 1983, from 20.8 percent to 29.1 percent in 2018 (Figure 8). Tenures of one year or less for females have also been on the rise since 2010's weak labor market.

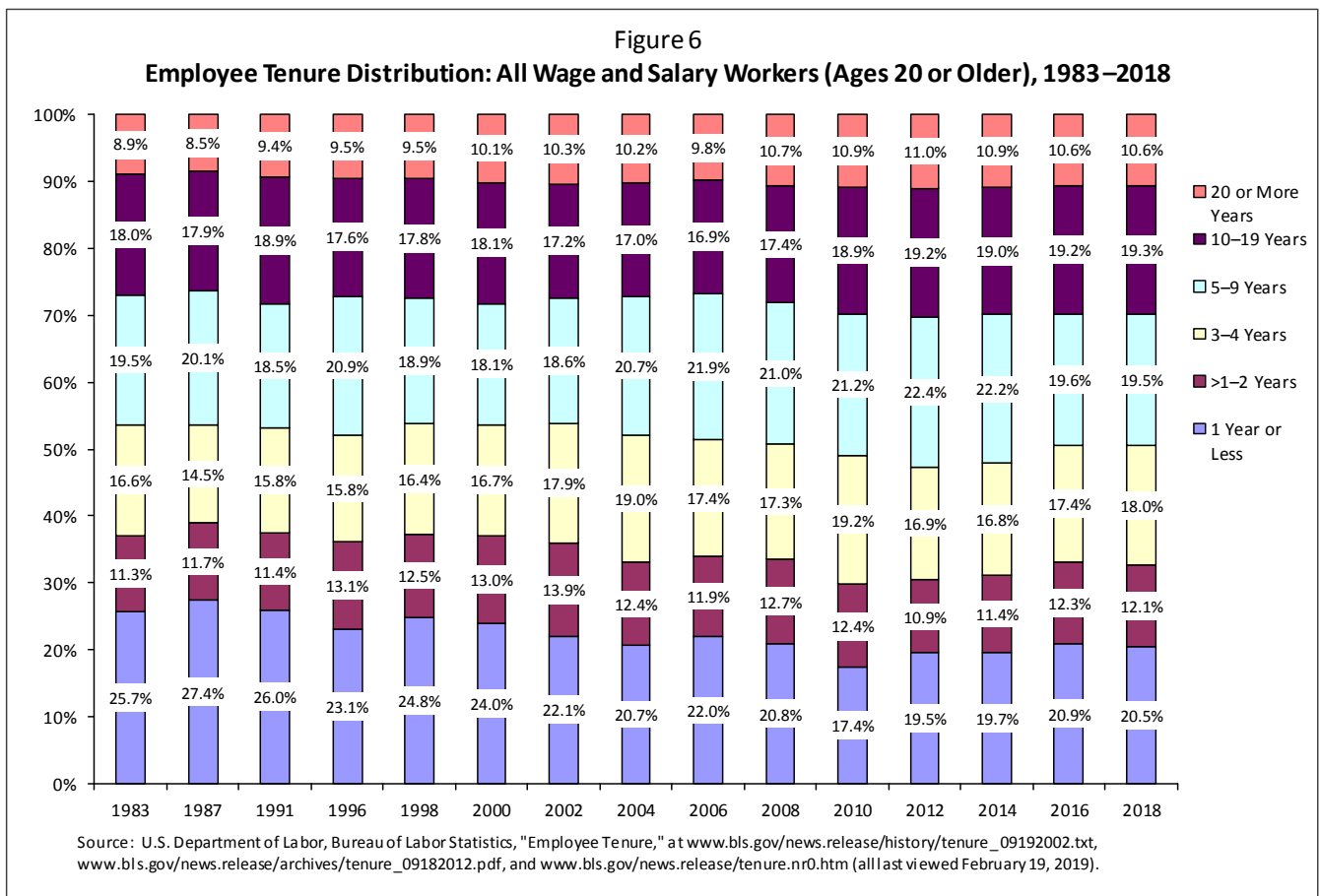
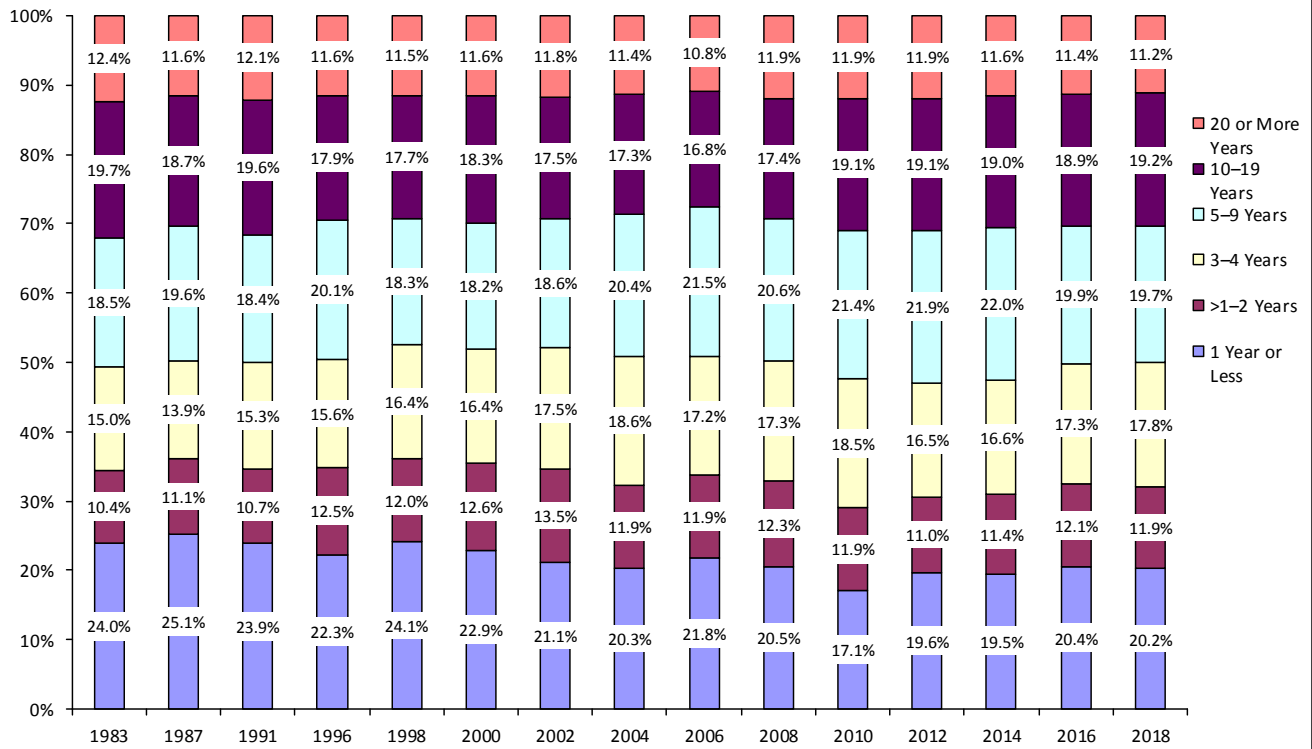




Figure 7

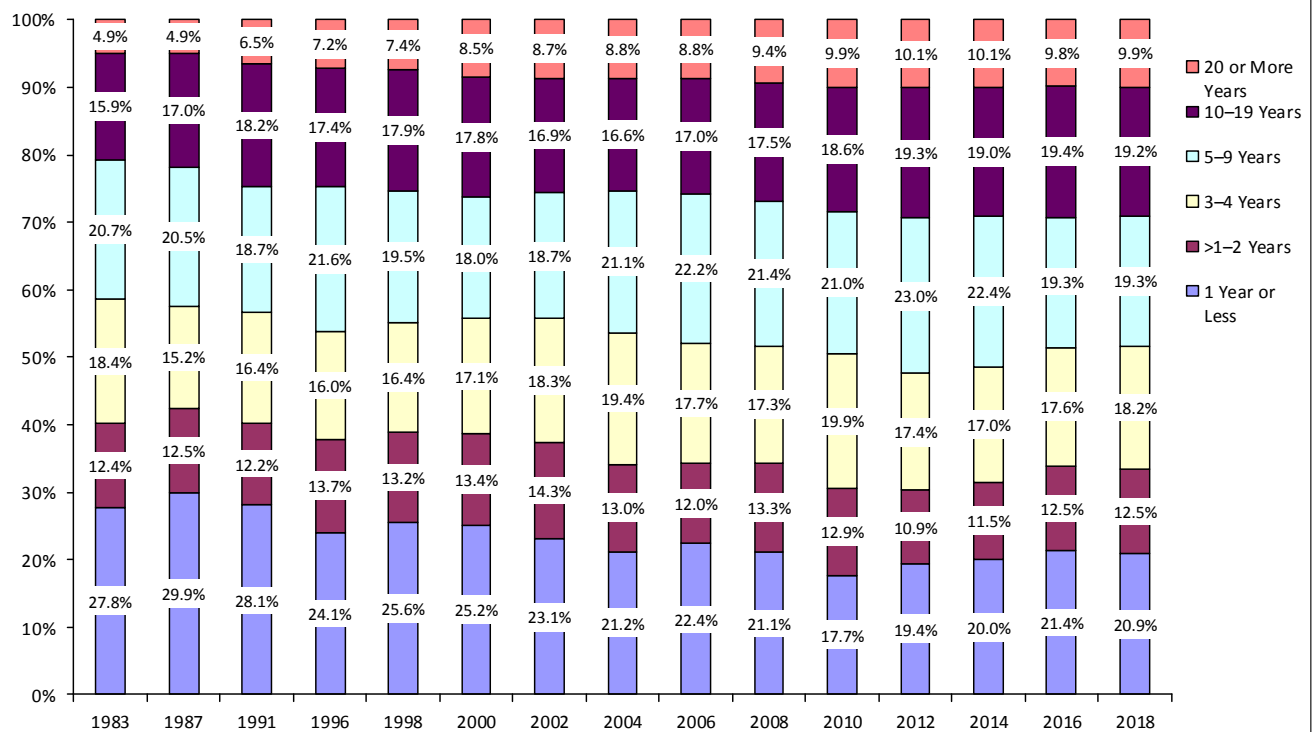
**Employee Tenure Distribution: Male Wage and Salary Workers (Ages 20 or Older), 1983–2018**



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Tenure," at [www.bls.gov/news.release/history/tenure\\_09192002.txt](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/history/tenure_09192002.txt), [www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure\\_09182012.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure_09182012.pdf), and [www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm) (all last viewed February 19, 2019).

Figure 8

**Employee Tenure Distribution: Female Wage and Salary Workers (Ages 20 or Older), 1983–2018**



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Tenure," at [www.bls.gov/news.release/history/tenure\\_09192002.txt](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/history/tenure_09192002.txt), [www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure\\_09182012.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure_09182012.pdf), and [www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm) (all last viewed February 19, 2019).

## Share of Older Workers With Specific Levels of Tenure

Older male and female wage and salary workers (ages 45–64) with 10 or more years of tenure over the 1983–2018 period are examined in order to gain a better perspective on trends in career jobs by gender. Among the *male* age groups examined, a decrease of 10.9 percentage points (ages 60–64) was the minimum change between 1983 and 2018 in the share of workers with 10 or more years of tenure (Figure 9). Males ages 50–54 experienced the largest decline: from 62.3 percent in 1983 to 48.7 percent in 2018 (13.6 percentage points). While there was an overall decline to 2018, the lowest levels for each of the age groups were reached in 2006 — when labor markets began to weaken. The share of longer tenures began increasing in 2008, especially for the ages 60–64 cohort. Then, in more recent years — 2014, 2016, and 2018 — all ages of male cohorts experienced decreases in the percentage with longer tenure.

In contrast, the percentage of *female* wage and salary workers of these ages who had 10 or more years of tenure increased for each age group during the 1983–2018 period but overall experienced less variation (Figure 10). The share of female workers ages 45–49 with 10 or more years of tenure went up from 33.0 percent in 1983 to 40.4 percent in 2018, a 7.4 percentage-point increase and the largest change. However, this trend peaked at 41.4 percent in 2000 before declining to 36.2 percent in 2004 and trending back upward to 40.4 percent in 2018. The 50–54 and 55–59 age groups were relatively flat throughout the 1983–2018 time period, including declines in the percentage with 10 or more years of tenure in 2016 and 2018. The 60–64 age group had the greatest variation (peak to trough) in proportion with tenure of a decade or more: its nadir was 48.7 percent in 2006 and its peak was 58.2 percent in 2018. However, overall variation in the proportion with longer tenure was lower for the female cohorts than for the male cohorts: average variation over the period was 6.6 percentage points for females but 15.3 percentage points for males.

Among older wage and salary workers (ages 45–64), the percentage having the very longest tenure — 25 or more years — was lower in 2018 compared with 1983 (Figure 11). However, among those ages 60–64, the percentage with 25 or more years of tenure increased by nearly 3 percentage points from 2006 to 2018 — with a peak of 21.6 percent in 2014. This comes after a fairly steep decline from 1983 to 2006 (23.3 percent to 16.6 percent). For those ages 55–59, a persistent decline occurred: from 22.7 percent in 1983 to 17.1 percent in 2012 before an uptick reaching 18.9 percent in 2016 and a sharp decline in 2018 to 16.9 percent — the lowest over the time period. The decline in the percentage of workers ages 45–54 with 25 or more years of tenure was less dramatic but more consistent: from 12.9 percent in 1983 to 8.0 percent in 2018.

In addition to differences by age and gender, tenure distribution was also significantly different across employment sectors. Among the *longest-tenured, private-sector workers* (25 or more years), after a significant drop in 1987 from 1983, the percentage of all private-sector workers (male and female combined) with 25 or more years of tenure had a steady-to-upward trend from 1987–2014 before declining in 2016 and 2018 (Figure 12). However, the overall decrease in the proportion of private-sector workers with 25 or more years of tenure was driven by males, as females experienced an overall increase in the proportion with the longest tenure:

- The trend for male, private-sector workers with 25 or more years of tenure was downward from 7.7 percent in 1983 to a nadir of 5.4 percent in 2006. It then increased from 2006 to 2012 before decreasing in 2014–2018.
- The trend for female, private-sector workers has been fairly consistently upward until recently: from 2.6 percent in 1983 to 4.9 percent in 2014 before declines in 2016 and 2018 to 4.6 percent.

In contrast, the percentage of *public-sector workers* (again male and female combined) with 25 or more years of tenure increased sharply through 2004 before declining (males) or flattening out (females and overall) through 2018, showing greater overall variation throughout the period:

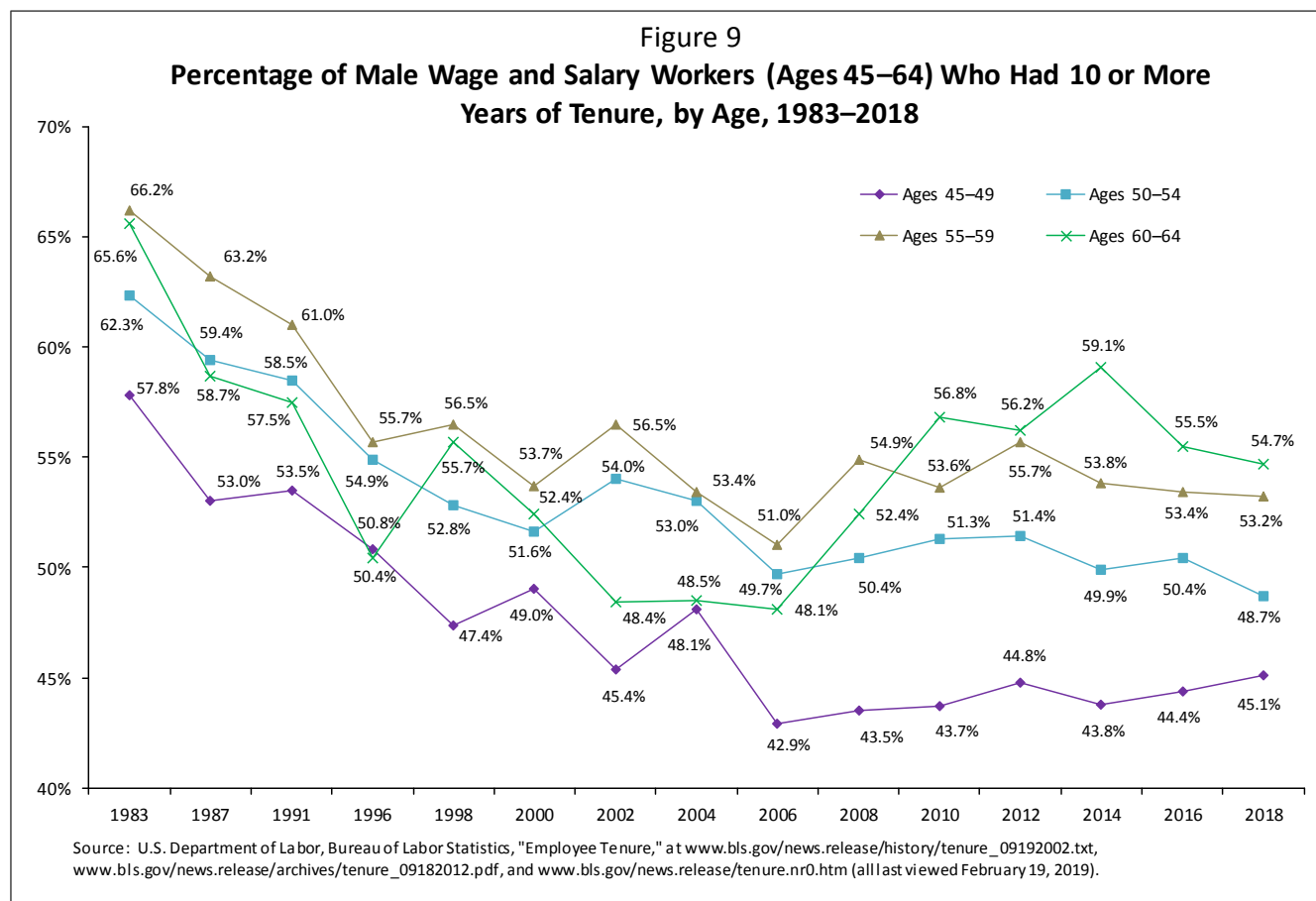
- Among male, public-sector workers, those with the longest tenure went from 8.1 percent in 1983 to a peak of 12.7 percent in 2004. The proportion declined through 2010 but then increased again, reaching 10.8 percent in 2014. In 2016 and 2018, the percentage with 25 or more years of tenure dropped to 9.6 percent with virtually all of the decline occurring in 2018.

- The increase over the full period was even greater among female, public-sector workers. Those with 25 or more years of tenure rose from 2.6 percent in 1983 to a peak of 9.1 percent in 2012 before declining to 8.6 percent in 2018.

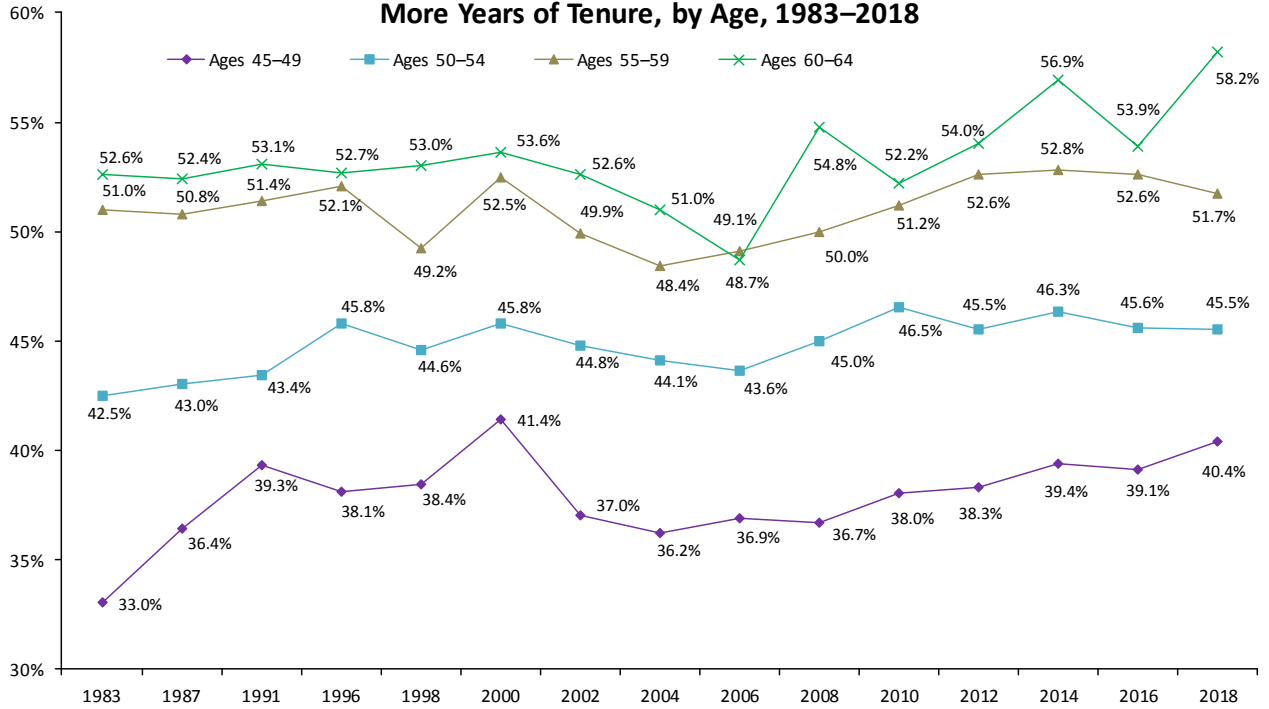
The substantial decline in the percentage of male, public-sector workers with 25 or more years of tenure from 2006–2018 resulted in an overall decline in this percentage for all public-sector workers in this time period. Consequently, the significant difference between the public and private sectors in the percentage of the longest-tenured workers narrowed — the gap was 117 percent higher in 2004, but 83 percent higher in 2010. This gap continued to decline but at a much slower rate, reaching 73 percent in 2018.

This result of a relatively higher percentage of long-tenure workers has implications for public-sector employers, as higher shares of their work forces are reaching ages where many will retire. Thus, at a time of growth in the nation's elderly population (which is more likely to need social services than the nonelderly population), the most experienced workers within government agencies providing these social services will likely be retiring. This issue does seem to have been mitigated in the most recent years, but the relatively higher levels of tenure among public-sector workers could still be a concern.

In contrast, despite increases in the proportion of females with the longest tenure, private-sector employers, in general, do not appear to be facing this same issue. Overall, they have employed a relatively consistent percentage of long-term workers from 1987–2006. Yet, despite being faced with an upward trend from 2008–2014 in this percentage, the share of workers with 25 or more years of tenure fell back in 2016 and 2018, close to pre-2008 levels. Thus, private-sector employers are in a similar position to the one that they were in from 1987–2006 in terms of the portion of longest-tenure workers.

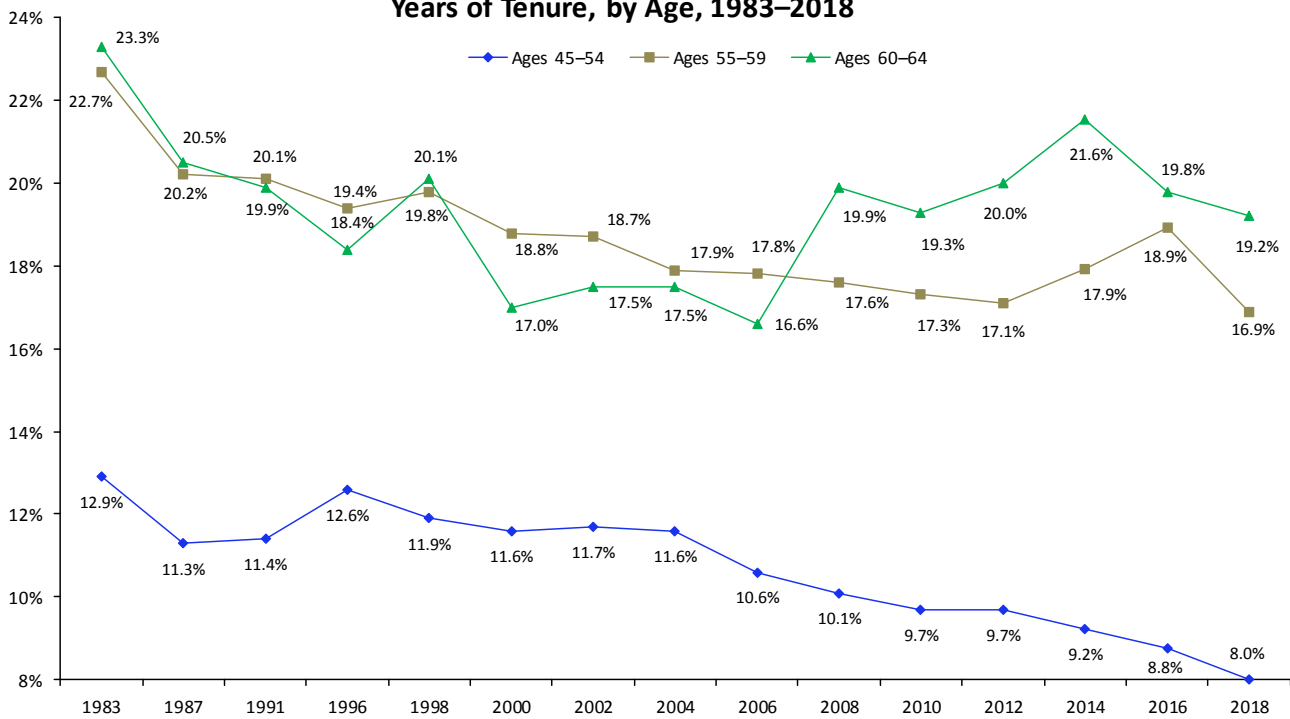


**Figure 10**  
**Percentage of Female Wage and Salary Workers (Ages 45–64) Who Had 10 or More Years of Tenure, by Age, 1983–2018**



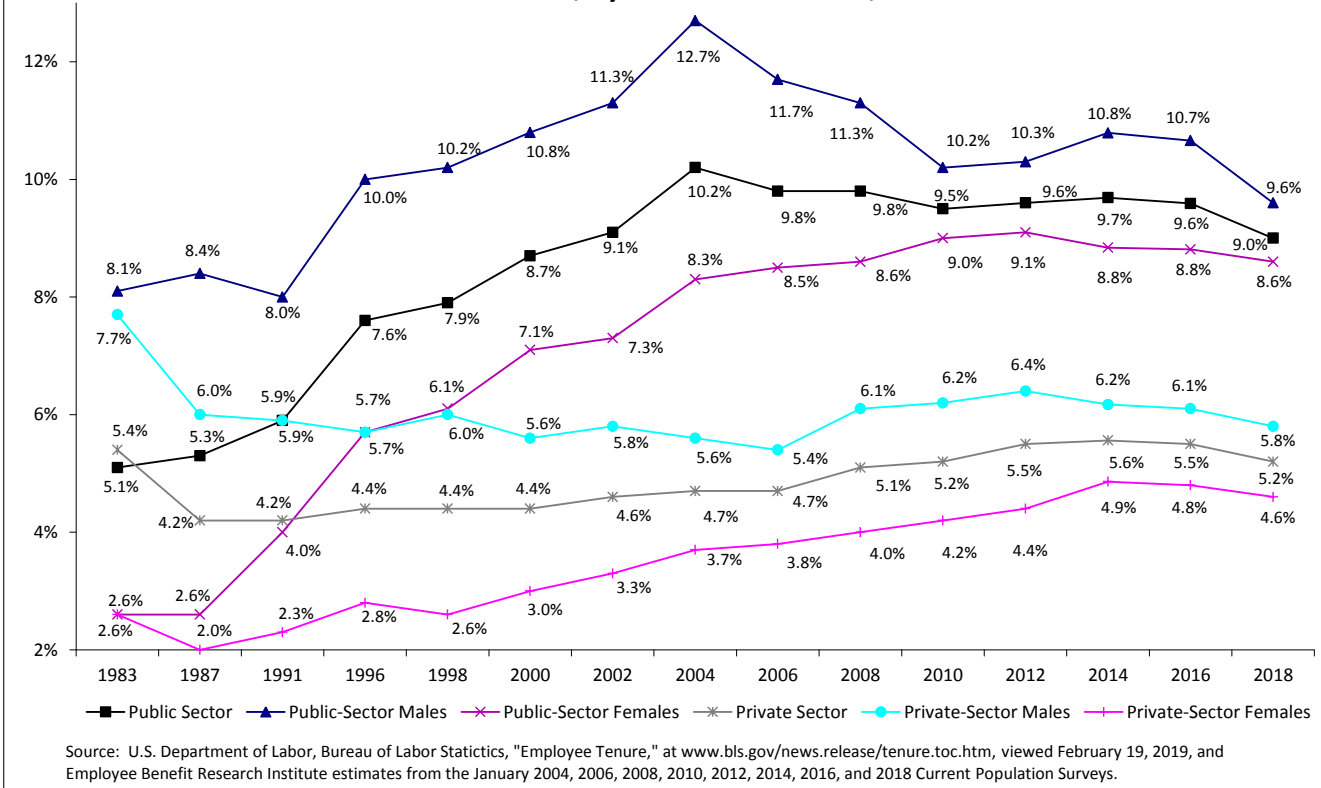
Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Tenure," at [www.bls.gov/news.release/history/tenure\\_09192002.txt](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/history/tenure_09192002.txt), [www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure\\_09182012.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure_09182012.pdf), and [www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm) (all last viewed February 19, 2019).

**Figure 11**  
**Percentage of Wage and Salary Workers (Ages 45–64) Who Had 25 or More Years of Tenure, by Age, 1983–2018**



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Tenure," and Employee Benefit Research Institute estimates from the January 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 Current Population Surveys.

Figure 12  
**Percentage of Wage and Salary Workers (Ages 20 or Older) Who Had 25 or More Years of Tenure, by Sector and Gender, 1983–2018**



## Implications of Job Changes

These tenure results indicate that, historically, most workers have changed jobs during their working careers, and all evidence suggests that they will continue to do so in the future. In 2018, tenure had moved to shorter levels with the improving job market. While the economy may have improved, there are several important implications for workers' potential incomes in retirement from changing jobs:

**Defined Benefit Plans**— Since defined benefit (DB) pensions that are final-average plans have formulas based on tenure and final average salary, workers who change jobs may not receive the maximum potential benefit from this type of plan because they do not remain with the same employer for extended periods. In fact, short-tenure workers (with less than five years in their jobs) may not qualify for any pension benefit at all due to five-year vesting schedules. Since the median length of employment for all wage and salary workers ages 25 or older is 5.0 years, even the decreasing number of American workers who are currently participating in a final-average DB plan are unlikely to receive a significant benefit from the plan.

**Defined Contribution Plans**— When changing jobs and moving to a new defined contribution (DC) plan, the worker must decide whether to participate or, with an automatic enrollment plan, whether to opt out. If participating, the contribution amount and asset allocation must be determined. For workers changing jobs, they could continue on the same pattern that they had in a previous job (particularly if they were in an auto-escalation plan), or they might restart at the defaults of the new plan (or at a lower contribution rate and different asset allocation), which could stunt the savings progress of that from the prior job. Consequently, workers' savings could be curbed while beginning the process again.

**Lump-Sum Distributions**— A worker who changes employers must decide what to do with any retirement plan assets he or she has accumulated, a situation that has become more the norm due to the growth in employment-based retirement plans that have a lump-sum distribution (LSD) option (both DC and DB).<sup>6</sup> Thus, benefit preservation becomes an important concern for these employees as well as for their plan sponsors. If employees do not retain these

assets in some type of savings vehicle for retirement, they may forgo an important source of retirement income. Without this source of income, many workers may face financial difficulties in retirement.

**Public Policy**— These decisions on savings and benefit preservation also have important implications for public policy, as enrollments in means-tested welfare programs could increase significantly if large numbers of retirees prematurely exhaust their own savings reserves.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the share of long-tenured, public-sector employees is dropping during the period when social programs are beginning to face tremendous increases in enrollment. This suggests that the public sector will have fewer experienced workers to address the challenges of the growing retiree population.

## Conclusion

Over the past 35 years, the median tenure of all wage and salary workers ages 25 or older has stayed at approximately five years. However, the overall trend masks a small but significant decrease in median tenure among men (which had been increasing until declines in 2016 and 2018) and an offsetting increase in median tenure among women. Furthermore, the distribution of tenure levels among workers ages 20 or older had been moving toward longer tenures until the most recent years, where shorter tenures have gained share. Therefore, the gender-distinct trends had generally moved in opposite directions, leading to overall constancy in the tenure statistics. However, the median tenures by gender have been moving together in recent years.

Compared to 2012, median tenure decreased in all groups. In addition, the distribution of worker tenure showed a sizable increase in the lowest levels (two years or less) of tenure. These results indicate that both more individuals have jobs and individuals who had been working changed jobs — potentially to better jobs — as the economy has improved, so that the overall tenure distribution has moved to shorter tenures.

The difference between private-sector and public-sector workers' tenure distributions is quite striking. While private-sector employers in general have been able to maintain a fairly constant and modest percentage of very long-term employees (25 or more years of tenure), public-sector employers have seen this group grow significantly through 2004 before trending down through 2018. Consequently, public-sector employers are facing the retirement of a significant number of their most experienced workers, although this issue is somewhat abating in the most recent years.

As for career jobs, the highest median tenure level for any age group (15.3 years in 1983 for males ages 55–64) certainly does not cover an entire lifetime career, since the median worker would not have started his or her current job until after age 40. Furthermore, the percentage of workers in both the 55–59 age group and the 60–64 age group with 25 or more years of tenure has been either just above or just below 20 percent at a time that these workers would be ending their working careers. Consequently, approximately 80 percent of workers at these ages have tenures less than 25 years, which would be less than a full working career.

An important qualifier on tenure data is that it does not measure job security. For instance, an increase in workers' median tenure may mean that job security has declined, because those with shorter tenures have been let go and no longer have jobs. However, the decline in median tenure could also mean workers feel more secure, have an increased ability to find other employment, and switch to better jobs.

Consequently, although tenure is not a good measure of job security, it does provide insight into how long workers choose to or are allowed to remain with their current employers. These ideas are particularly relevant over the last 10 years, as unemployment remained high in 2009–2012, when tenure was generally increasing. However, with the unemployment rate decreasing in 2012 and continuing through 2018, the percentage of workers with shorter tenures increased. Therefore, now with the decrease in the unemployment rate, more individuals appeared to have entered the labor force or changed jobs.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul Yakoboski, "Debunking the Retirement Policy Myth: Lifetime Jobs Never Existed for Most Workers," *EBRI Issue Brief*, no. 197 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, May 1998); Paul Yakoboski, "Male and Female Tenure Continues to Move in Opposite Directions," *EBRI Notes*, Vol. 20, no. 2 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, February 1999): 1–4; David Rajnes, "Update on Employee Tenure," *EBRI Notes*, Vol. 22, no. 3 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, March 2001): 1–8; Craig Copeland, "Employee Tenure," *EBRI Notes*, Vol. 24, no. 3 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, March 2003): 1–10; Craig Copeland, "Employee Tenure: Stable Overall, but Male and Female Trends Differ," *EBRI Notes*, Vol. 26, no. 3 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, March 2005): 1–10; Craig Copeland, "Employee Tenure, 2006," *EBRI Notes*, Vol. 28, no. 4 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, April 2007): 1–11; Craig Copeland, "Employee Tenure, 2008," *EBRI Notes*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, January 2010): 1–12; Craig Copeland, "Employee Tenure Trend Lines, 1983-2010," *EBRI Notes*, Vol. 31, no. 12 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, December 2010): 2–12; Craig Copeland, "Employee Tenure Trends, 1983-2012," *EBRI Notes*, Vol. 33, no. 12 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, December 2012): 12–23; Craig Copeland, "Employee Tenure Trends, 1983-2014," *EBRI Notes*, Vol. 36, no. 2 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, February 2015): 2–13; and Craig Copeland, "Employee Tenure Trends, 1983-2016," *EBRI Notes*, Vol. 38, no. 9 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, September 20, 2017): 2–14.

<sup>2</sup> The latest data come from the January 2018 Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly survey of approximately 60,000 households on demographics, labor force status, and other characteristics of the civilian, noninstitutionalized American population. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts this CPS supplement for the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Tenure levels for previous years come from various other supplements to the CPS. For a further discussion of the data sources, see the Bureau of Labor Statistics' "Employee Tenure Technical Note" at [www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm) (last viewed February 20, 2019). Results of research from BLS and EBRI are compiled in this article to present various trends in employee tenure. See the EBRI publications, op. cit., and the Bureau of Labor Statistics' "Employee Tenure" at [www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm) (last viewed February 20, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> BLS reports that the results prior to 1983 are not directly comparable to those in 1983 and after. The results from those prior years are presented here to give an idea of the best estimate for tenure during that time. The tenure questions were again changed in 1996, so while the 1983 questions are close, the most consistent numbers across years start in 1996. The 2006 tenure release from BLS updated numbers going back to 1996 and made some very minor changes to some of the previously published data. See note in tables of the 2006 BLS press release on tenure at [www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure\\_09082006.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/tenure_09082006.pdf) (last viewed February 20, 2019). BLS is now only reporting tenure levels back to 2008. See the Bureau of Labor Statistics' "Employee Tenure" at [www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm) (last viewed February 20, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> This section focuses on workers ages 20 or older, whereas the prior section focuses on workers ages 25 or older or ages 25–64. Consequently, these numbers are not directly comparable. The different ages are a consequence of matching trends from prior years of Bureau of Labor Statistics analyses.

<sup>5</sup> The number of wage and salary workers ages 20 or older increased from 121.6 million in 2012, to 125.2 million in 2014, to 129.7 million in 2016, and to 132.8 million in 2018. There were 78.9 million of these workers in 1983.

<sup>6</sup> See Jack VanDerhei and Craig Copeland, "The Changing Face of Private Retirement Plans," *EBRI Issue Brief* no. 232 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, April 2001) for a presentation of the increased reliance of retirees on assets from defined contribution plans. The *Issue Brief* also discusses the growth of cash balance plans, which typically allow retirees to take lump-sum distributions. Also, see Jack VanDerhei and Craig Copeland, "ERISA At 30: The Decline of Private-Sector Defined Benefit Promises and Annuity Payments? What Will It Mean?" *EBRI Issue Brief*, no. 269 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, May 2004) for an analysis of the effect of changes in defined benefit plans on retirees' ability to maintain a similar lifestyle throughout retirement. See also Sudipto Banerjee, "Annuity and Lump Sum Decisions in Defined Benefit Plans: The Role of Plan Rules," *EBRI Issue Brief*, no. 381 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, January 2013) for choices between annuities and LSDs from defined benefit plans.

<sup>7</sup> See Craig Copeland, "How Are New Retirees Doing Financially in Retirement?" *EBRI Issue Brief*, no. 302 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, February 2007) for examination of how the retirees born in 1931–1941 were managing their wealth as they started their retirement years; Sudipto Banerjee, "Asset Decumulation or Asset Preservation? What Guides Retirement

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Spending," *EBRI Issue Brief*, no. 447 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, April 3, 2018) for an examination over a longer time period of wealth changes among those in retirement; and Craig Copeland, "Individual Retirement Account Balances, Contributions, Withdrawals, and Asset Allocation Longitudinal Results 2010–2016," *EBRI Issue Brief*, no. 462 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, October 22, 2018) for a look at the pace at which retirees are withdrawing assets from their IRAs.

*EBRI Issue Brief* is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. ISSN: 0887–137X/90 0887–137X/90 \$ .50+.50  
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