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## Project facts

### Key words

Casual workers, Job search, Urban familiarity

### Behavioral themes

Beliefs, Salience, and Spatial familiarity during job search

### Research design

Field experiment

### Scope

Start date: 2023

End date: 2024

n=799

### Location

Nairobi, Kenya (Kibera, Kawangware, and Viwandani)

### Partner

Busara in collaboration with academic researchers from Harvard University

### Ethics approval

AMREF

# How does urban familiarity shape job search and work choices?

**Limited spatial familiarity restricts casual workers' job access in Nairobi.** Workers avoid unfamiliar neighborhoods, overestimating travel, safety risks, and job difficulty. Brief guided visits improve familiarity, restructure beliefs, and expand employment opportunities efficiently.

## Background: Effect of spatial familiarity on job searches

Cities concentrate jobs and amenities, but accessing them requires mobility and knowledge of space. Standard economic models assume workers know where opportunities are and are willing to explore. In low- and middle-income cities like Nairobi, exploration is costly due to distance, transport costs, safety concerns, and limited familiarity.

This research examines whether lack of spatial familiarity constrains job search and work choices among casual workers, and whether brief exposure can meaningfully reduce these barriers.

## Conducting the research

We surveyed 799 casual workers from three low-income Nairobi neighborhoods, measuring their familiarity with nearby urban areas.

The study created real, paid job opportunities across multiple neighborhoods and randomly induced familiarity by accompanying some participants on a one-time job training visit. We then measured job acceptance, wage-distance tradeoffs, beliefs about unfamiliar areas, and persistence of effects using follow-up surveys, SMS tracking, and repeated job invitations.

» **Large familiarity gaps constrain job search:** Casual workers in Nairobi are unfamiliar with many neighborhoods within feasible commuting distance and are significantly less willing to accept jobs in such areas due to pessimistic beliefs about travel time, safety, and job prospects.

» **Workers pay a high 'familiarity premium':** On average, workers require substantially higher wages to accept jobs in unfamiliar neighborhoods. These gaps meaningfully reduce effective access to the urban labor market.

**A single visit changes behavior and beliefs.** One accompanied visit to an unfamiliar neighborhood fully eliminates the familiarity premium. After exposure, workers' job choices and beliefs resemble the same ones as reserved for familiar areas.

## Implications

### For policy makers:

Low-cost interventions that encourage safe, guided exploration—such as job trials, training visits, or transport support—can significantly expand workers' access to jobs without changing wages or infrastructure.

### For practitioners:

Organizations supporting employment can improve placement outcomes by reducing unfamiliarity through orientation visits, clearer information, and making cities more legible.

### For workers:

Brief exposure can unlock new job opportunities and reduce unnecessary self-imposed limits on where to search for work.

## Recommendations for future research

**Exploration interventions and long-term impacts:** Future research should test scalable interventions that facilitate exploration, such as guided exposure programs or digital tools to improve spatial knowledge, and track participants over time to measure effects on earnings, employment stability, and career progression.

**Broader implications of spatial familiarity:** Studies should examine whether similar constraints on spatial knowledge affect other urban decisions, including access to housing, education, healthcare, and public services, to better understand how limited familiarity shapes socioeconomic opportunities.

## Further reading

Dean, J., Kreindler, G., Mbonu, O., Wanjeri, P., Adhiambo, J., Atieno, J., Omare, J., Muniu, G., We, A., Breza, E., Cushman, F., Glaeser, E., Hanna, R., Macchi, E., Turner, M., Morten, M., Rao, G., Pope, D., Imas, A., & Strulov-Shlain, A. (2025). *Demand for Urban Exploration: Evidence from Nairobi\**. [https://ombonu.github.io/demand\\_for\\_urban\\_exploration.pdf](https://ombonu.github.io/demand_for_urban_exploration.pdf)

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## Study team

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