



November 1980

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### Recommended Citation

Hooper Briar, Katharine; Fiedler, Decky; Sheean, Carol; and Kamps, Patricia (1980) "The Impact of Unemployment on Young, Middle-Aged and Aged Workers," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 6 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol7/iss6/11>

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THE IMPACT OF UNEMPLOYMENT  
ON YOUNG, MIDDLE-AGED AND AGED WORKERS

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from research on the effects of unemployment on young, middle-aged and aged workers. The therapeutic benefits of work indicated by the elimination and reduction of problems attributed to joblessness by young and aged workers is examined as well. The implications of such findings for human service professions are explored.

Introduction

Unemployment rates are incomplete indicators of the social, emotional and economic toll that envelopes not just victims but their families and entire communities.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, such statistics inadequately portray the full dimensions of the differential impact of unemployment on its victims. For example, the experience of joblessness for the seventeen-year old ethnic minority youth will be quite different from that of the middle-aged engineer with two children in college, or the fifty-nine-year-old dislocated welder. However, the loss of income may result in strikingly similar social, emotional and economic responses since the resources available to endure unemployment are limited. This paper, drawing on several different studies, will describe the impact of unemployment on young, middle-aged and aged workers in the Pacific Northwest.

Unemployment among youth

The first set of these studies probed the experiences of 150 youth, ages 15-21. The sample, of 140 youth, was drawn from a summer CETA program where 140 youth were interviewed by CETA counselors during their summer work experience. These youth were asked to

recall their jobless experiences as well as to provide information about the impact of their current CETA placement. This research evolved from a pilot study of ten CETA eligible youth who were interviewed prior to being placed in a year-long CETA work. Three months after their placement began, they were interviewed again. Because of the similarities in experiences among both samples of youth, the findings are combined to generate a more composite portrait of the effect of unemployment among these youth.

Work had special meaning for these young people as it meant the opportunity to begin a career, to generate money for college, to help out family finances, or to acquire funds to pay for a car, rent, food and for many to begin a life of independence from their parents and their families.<sup>2</sup> These two groups of youth wanted jobs in order to prepare for future employment: 89 percent wanted a job to learn skills, 77 percent to get more job experience and 72 percent to feel more responsible. Twenty percent of these youth also saw a job as a way to meet people and avoid the isolation of joblessness. Among 88 percent, possessions such as clothes were desired and 61 percent needed money for transportation.

Unemployment for such youthful workers was already longstanding. By the age of 17 or 19, 61 percent of these young people had a history of joblessness as they failed at finding summer jobs, work after school or full-time employment. When they were interviewed, they had been trying to find work for a period of one month to two years. During this time, half of them had felt like giving up looking for a job altogether and one-quarter of them actually did give up looking completely in previous unsuccessful job hunts. All of them had worked at two jobs or more; these ranged from berry picking to mill work. They, indeed, did have work experience, the credential which employers so persistently demand from them. Their limitation was that they lacked experience or education in a particular specific job for which they were seeking employment and wanting to advance themselves.

Unemployment made them feel like they were "going crazy," and "suffocating." Some felt "mad at the whole world," "useless," "fed up," "stranded," saying

"nobody wants to give me a chance," "I am incompetent" and a "failure." One 17-year old who had looked unsuccessfully for work for seven months admitted that he was on the verge of committing a crime. Having a lot of time on their hands with nothing to do made them feel restless and bored, frightened and insecure, depressed and confused. A number of them reported conflict at home and frequently getting in trouble--events they attributed to their joblessness. One respondent, an 18-year-old recovering alcoholic found the tedium of joblessness to contribute to her alcoholism problem and sought work, in part, to ensure herself of a productive way of using her time and a therapeutic way to avoid alcohol. A number of youths claimed that joblessness caused problems with eating and sleeping with some overindulging and others not eating enough.

The consequences of joblessness are further compounded by the self-recrimination and self-blame experienced by these youth. Ironically all but three of these 150 youths blamed themselves for their inability to acquire a job citing their age, or lack of experience, lack of transportation, and other personal attributes rather than the economic system. Most did not see themselves as victims; 77 percent felt that employers treated them fairly when they applied for jobs. When potential employers discredited their previous work and found it to be irrelevant to the qualifications they were seeking, these youths concurred. Despite their long months of aversive job hunting and problems caused by joblessness, 89 percent believed that they would find a good job if they looked long and hard. Only one-fourth thought that landing a good job was due to luck.

Many of the friends of these youth were also unemployed. Despite their awareness of the prevalence of joblessness among their friends and other young people, only 40 percent felt that youth should be guaranteed jobs when they are unable to find them on their own.

Work was therapeutic for these youth as, once placed in CETA work experiences, some of the problems they associated with their joblessness disappeared. Many reported that their functioning improved due to their working. Sixty percent reported feeling less angry and frustrated, 66 percent were less depres-

Eighty percent felt less dependent, 55 percent reported feeling less restless and bored. Eighty-six percent reported more frequent feelings of happiness and freedom which they attributed to having a job and 75 percent reported greater feelings of accomplishment.

They also attributed to their job position changes in social relationships. Three-fourths of the youth reported themselves to be more accepting of others, more responsible, and more confident and sure of themselves as a result of their new jobs.

Patterns of time use changed as well since work provided some structure to their days. They spent less time watching TV and "hanging around with friends." For most of these youths, work brought improved psychological, social and economic changes into their lives. The problems caused by their joblessness were at least temporarily in remission or eliminated.

#### Unemployment among the middle-aged

There are many similarities in the patterns of blame, rejection and disruption in households among young jobless workers and their middle-aged counterparts. Another research effort, conducted in 1971 during the peak of the recession in the Puget Sound area, probed the consequences of joblessness among 52 workers who sought help with their jobless condition through a social service agency designated to provide help to the unemployed.<sup>3</sup> In this sample, 28 respondents were blue collar workers whose mean age was 36 and 24 were white collar workers whose mean age was 47.

At the outset, these workers did not blame themselves for their job loss; they blamed the system or their employers and were able to avoid personalizing the catastrophic event. Had the economy been expanding, these workers might have been reabsorbed, but unemployment rates hovered around 10 percent and they faced long-term unemployment. After 15 weeks of joblessness, a second stage of unemployment set in. This stage was accompanied by an erosion in finances, aversive job-seeking attempts, marital discord at home, and self-incrimination. With the second phase, unemployment became a way of life and workers now blamed themselves

for their jobless condition. This self-blame enabled them to persevere with their job-seeking for they could tell themselves . . . "If I just changed my interviewing style or my resume or some personal attribute, I will be successful." Such a self-blame was very quickly reinforced by those around them, especially worried families and friends. Relationships were splintered by the worker's unemployment. The more a frightened spouse or children might pressure the worker into getting out of the house to look for work, the worker's depression caused him or her to withdraw and become immobilized. Some would sit in the corner all day staring at the ceiling and walls about them.

Income problems devastated many of these workers and their families resulting in different modes of adaptation. Some became "crashers" and were forced to move in with friends; others became "relievers," skidding economically downward onto welfare; some were rescued by a spouse or teenager who were forced to go to work themselves. Others "coasted," depleting their savings and their resources. Some had no survival means left. They were "discredited." They were the ones who, when interviewed, had only a few dollars left and were ineligible for welfare or other concrete sources of help. Financial problems among these workers were compounded by the very way in which they were forced to economize. Loss of their health insurance and pension benefits, accrued through their jobs, increased their financial vulnerability in the event of health problems and hospitalization during their joblessness. Some eliminated or decreased spending on other protections such as fire, life, and car insurance. Other cutbacks necessitated by dwindling finances included recreation, travel, clothes, telephone, gifts, and food. Like the younger jobless workers, these middle-aged persons began to spend more time sleeping and more time alone.

#### Unemployment among the aged

The middle-aged workers in many respects were no different from their aging counterparts whose jobless condition was studied in another research endeavor. In this longitudinal study, 32 workers, ages 55 and older with a mean age of 63, were interviewed as they sought CETA work experience and then again after three

months, once they were placed in their CETA jobs.

Older workers often are viewed as "a dispensable labor pool" who should give up their jobs to make room for younger workers. While it is true that they typically had the cushion of social security, they experienced the same profound impact of unemployment as the young and middle-aged workers with its economic, psychological, social and health problems. Additionally, economic cutbacks forced the elderly to reduce spending for health care, home, fire and auto insurance which, like the middle-aged workers, increased their vulnerability to catastrophic events.

These workers had been employed in a variety of jobs including professional, clerical and service occupations, as well as farming and manual labor. Some had retired either voluntarily or involuntarily and now sought work; others in the sample were struggling with joblessness due to a lay-off or being fired and the remainder were seeking work because they were displaced homemakers.

Regardless of the cause of their jobless situation, they were seeking work because of their inability to live on fixed incomes and the need to structure daily life and to escape feelings of loneliness and of being unproductive. All but five felt depressed at least some of the time and many experienced feelings of nervousness and worry, insecurity, and low self-worth. Seventy-nine percent claimed that their jobless condition created physical problems and 80 percent cited some form of mental health problems such as depression and nervousness. Some attributed their arthritis, high blood pressure, ulcers, frequent colds and flue, headaches, sleeping and eating problems directly to their unemployment. They spent their days sleeping late, watching television, and "sitting around." Several were preoccupied with suicidal thoughts.

The provision of a job through CETA resulted in marked changes for this group of elderly. It enabled them to increase spending for food, insurance, health care, clothing and recreation. Also affected were their loss of self-worth, suicidal thoughts and eating and sleeping difficulties as they all reported that after several months of working, they ceased being

depressed, insecure, lonely and nervous. Several mentioned the new freedom they enjoyed because of their work, of being able to purchase gifts or to travel to see family.

In the eyes of these workers, at least, the provision of jobs was therapeutic; the negative psychological impact of joblessness was sharply reversed when they went to work. For example, a 65-year-old man who had worked for 22 years as supervisor of a maintenance staff quit his job because he thought it would improve his health. A year and a half later, he felt despondent, he had lost interest in hobbies and reading and felt he was wasting his days. Searching for a job was discouraging. He reported that he felt he had lost the ability to sell himself as he was turned down because he was too old to change jobs. In his new job, he felt more alert, more useful and claimed that working "felt like recreation."

A 71-year-old woman had never worked outside of her home. When her husband died, his pension was reduced, causing her financial chaos. As she reduced expenses for food, her diabetes worsened. She began to feel desperate and suicidal. After several months in her job, she reported she was in the "best health ever" as well as feeling "100 percent happier."

#### Shared experiences

The data from the experiences of the young, middle-aged and older workers portray the ways in which unemployment affects all aspects of human functioning even though its symptoms may vary from group to group. For example, all workers were forced to cut expenditures for necessities as well as recreation. Unemployment caused workers in these samples to feel anxious, depressed and bored. They withdrew from social activities and experienced new interpersonal problems. Worst of all, they began to perceive themselves and were perceived by others as dispensable. Yet each group experienced the effects of unemployment somewhat differently. The youth in the samples were preoccupied with the impact of joblessness on their career goals and struggle for independence. Middle-aged respondents were forced to endure the loss of status, possessions, their

marriages and families while the elderly faced mental and physical health problems and were made to feel that they had outlived their usefulness.

Unemployment had a significant impact on the families of some of these respondents. Families of young people face problems when their young persons become involved in crime or turn to drugs to provide ways to structure time or gain income. Such life style alterations, while adaptations to unemployment, may prove irreversible since the youth become involved in activities that further limit employability or that remove from their reach critical opportunities for education and job training. For the middle-aged worker, the stress of unemployment may result in family disruption and erosion of aspirations of all members. Not only may education for children and plans for retirement be dismantled as resources are depleted, but divorce may become an immediate resolution of family and marital difficulties and tension. For the elderly, cutbacks necessitated by lack of income may jeopardize health and housing for both the unemployed and their spouses.

Ironically, each group blamed themselves for their unemployment. In fact, only in the aged group did the majority feel that jobs should be a guaranteed right. Perhaps it was they who could feel the artificiality of mandatory retirement policies and were able to directly attribute their joblessness to this visible obstacle to work. By personalizing the job rejections, many workers hold themselves blameworthy for their joblessness and do not see the direct link between their jobless condition and deliberate policy decisions that limit job availability to millions of Americans.

#### Need for research

Such data suggest not just how debilitating unemployment can be, but the social service and therapeutic attributes of work itself. More research is needed to generate information about the impact of a job on an unemployed worker. Not only will such research help to provide a new perspective on the meaning of work, but it will suggest the extent to which

the crippling effects of unemployment can be reversed by work or at what points the damage is so irreversible that a permanent devastating toll is exacted from the worker as well as the family and community. Such policy relevant questions might help policymakers understand the consequences of their delays in funding job programs and the "critical threshold" in surviving unemployment beyond which endurance abilities are obliterated.

### Unemployment and human service professions

The human costs of unemployment portrayed by the data from these samples suggest that human service professions must begin to systematically address the devastation of unemployment and the importance of work. Dealing directly with unemployment as the "presenting problem" that is shaped by policies that deny economic and employment justice to millions of Americans of all ages, represent one of the most critical and challenging issues facing our human service professions today.

### References

<sup>1</sup>Unemployment rates were initially generated for employers as indicators of the available labor pool. See Janet Norwood, "Social Aspects of Unemployment," paper presented at the National Conference on Social Welfare, Washington, D.C., June, 1976. Also see Readings In Unemployment, special Committee on Unemployment Problems, U.S. Senate, 86th Congress, 2nd Session, Washington, D.C., 1960.

<sup>2</sup>See Carol Sheean's "The Impact of Unemployment on Youth and Their Families," paper presented at the Washington Association of Social Welfare, Olympia, Washington; 1978.

<sup>3</sup>For the full study, see Katharine Hooper Briar, The Effect of Long-term Unemployment on Workers and Their Families (R and E Research Press, San Francisco, 1978).