

Negroes  
(1972 folder)



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR  
Bureau of Labor Statistics  
Report 416  
October 1972

(BLS report 416)

EMPLOYMENT IN PERSPECTIVE :

**Unemployment of Black Workers //**

Considerable discussion has been taking place in recent months concerning the definition of unemployment as it pertains to blacks, or other minority groups, or to disadvantaged groups in the community. Some have suggested that the definition now in use is too narrow and does not reflect the situation of those who have dropped out of the labor force or are underemployed in their present job. For example, a recent newspaper editorial<sup>1</sup> stated that the real issue "is not statistical method, but whether the government is trying to define black unemployment in a realistic way and with the kind of accuracy that will enable it to mount an effective attack on the problem." Since the Bureau of Labor Statistics has a major responsibility for such statistics, this article takes a look at the definition and some of the facts the Bureau provides. An earlier version of this article, by Commissioner of Labor Statistics Geoffrey H. Moore, appeared in the *Washington Post* September 11, 1972.

Black unemployment is defined in precisely the same way as white unemployment—the number of persons without a job who have been seeking work within the past 4 weeks and are available for work. This work-seeking, availability definition has been followed in essentially this form for more than 3 decades. The last official commission to consider the matter, appointed by the late President Kennedy in 1961, specifically recommended that this type of definition be retained in the interest of objectivity and of insuring that those counted as unemployed have had some recent contact with the job market.<sup>2</sup>

Need for work, therefore, because of the difficulty of measuring it objectively, does not enter into the definition of unemployment at all. The definition does not take into account what a person is doing to find work, whether he has turned down a job offer, whether he is rich or poor, whether he is getting unemployment insurance, whether his major activity is going to school, whether he wants a full-time or part-time job, or a temporary job, whether his spouse is working, or

whether he quit his job, was laid off, or never had a job before. The definition rules out those who have given up seeking a job because they believe none is to be found, or for any other reason.

However, information is collected on this last point as well as most of the others and is published by BLS. From it, one can obtain a better indication of the character and dimensions of the unemployment problem than one can get from any single number such as the unemployment rate.

A useful way to put these numbers in perspective and get a comprehensive picture is to take them as a percentage of the population of working age, persons 16 and over. (See table on page 3.) In 1971, about 56 percent of the white population aged 16 and over was employed, compared with 54 percent for Negroes and other races. This may seem like a surprisingly small difference, in view of the more commonly cited figures about the black employment situation. Yet it is a fact that, year in and year out, somewhat more than half of the population over 16, both of blacks and whites, have jobs. The percentage, which is in effect employment per capita, has as a rule been higher for blacks than for whites, but not by more than a percentage point or two, but this ratio doesn't tell the whole story.

The percentage employed part-time because of slack work or other economic reasons in 1971 was twice as great for blacks (3.4 percent) as for whites (1.7 percent), even though the percentage working part-time voluntarily was smaller for blacks (5.7) than whites (6.4). Fewer blacks whose major activity was going to school were employed (0.9 compared with 1.6 percent), and relatively more were unemployed (0.5 compared with 0.3 percent). The proportion of blacks unemployed (5.9 percent) was nearly twice as large as that of whites

<sup>1</sup> *Washington Post*, August 10, 1972.  
<sup>2</sup> President's Committee to Appraise Employment and Unemployment Statistics, *Measuring Employment and Unemployment* (Government Printing Office, 1962)—sometimes cited as the Gordon Committee report.

Washington, U.S. Govt. Print. Off. October 1972.

(3.2 percent). The latter figures differ from the official unemployment rate, which is calculated by dividing the number unemployed by the civilian labor force (employed plus unemployed) rather than by the population. In 1971 the rate was 9.9 percent for blacks, 5.4 percent for whites.

In addition, more than twice as many blacks as whites, relatively, want a job now even though they are not actively seeking one. Lack of job availability is given as a reason for not seeking work by nearly 1 percent of black workers, but by only one-third of 1 percent of white workers. Much larger percentages, about 5 percent of blacks and 2½ percent of whites, are prevented from actively seeking work because they are in school, are ill, or have family responsibilities—even though they report that they do want work.

The figures also show that a larger proportion of blacks than of whites are job-oriented: Those employed plus those seeking work (unemployed) plus those wanting a job but not actually seeking one constituted 66 percent of the black population and 62 percent of the white population. This difference may reflect the greater affluence of the white population and, also, the greater prevalence among blacks of households headed by women, who therefore, work, seek work, or want work; but the figures help dispose of the myth that blacks are less interested in jobs than whites.

Clearly, besides the unemployed, there are groups which are likely to be aided by an increase in the demand for labor, notably those who are employed part-time for economic reasons and those who want work but are not actively seeking a job because they could not find one or think none is available. On the other hand, some groups who want work now may *not* be

particularly helped by an increase in demand for labor, that is, those who want work but are prevented from seeking or accepting a job because of ill health or family responsibilities. Better health care facilities, or day care facilities, may be the essential solution in these cases.

Hence to combine into one statistic those who are seeking work and are available for work—that is, the unemployed—with those who want work but are not available does not help to clarify the issue. The numbers would be larger, but they would be less meaningful.

A further point is that if the unemployment concept is enlarged, the relative position of blacks and whites may not be greatly changed. For example, giving smaller weight among the unemployed to those who are seeking only part-time work, and at the same time including, also at a reduced weight, those who are employed part-time for economic reasons, as the BLS does in its published measure of percent of labor force time lost, will produce a larger percentage for both blacks and whites, and in about the same proportions. The same thing is true over time: Enlarging the concept now will produce larger numbers both now and in the past as well. The percentage of labor force time lost, for example, typically has run about half a percentage point higher than the official unemployment rate month after month for the past 8 years.

A government statistical agency should take great care in making changes in concepts, so that confidence in the integrity of the data is maintained and comparisons with earlier records are facilitated. At the same time, it must be alert to the need for new series. It also has an obligation to make data available in as much detail as is consistent with accuracy—and with a full explanation of the data's uses and limitations—so that those who wish to use them in various ways can do so.

**Characteristics of the working and nonworking population, 1971**

Employment status	Number (in thousands)		Percent of population	
	White	Negro and other races	White	Negro and other races
1. Employed: Total 16 years of age and over . . .	70,716	8,403	55.7	53.7
Major activity-going to school <sup>1</sup> . . . . .	1,993	141	1.6	.9
Major activity-other . . . . .	68,723	8,262	54.1	52.8
Employed full-time . . . . .	58,489	6,844	46.1	43.8
Employed part-time, voluntary . . . . .	8,116	889	6.4	5.7
Employed part-time, economic reasons . . . . .	2,119	529	1.7	3.4
2. Unemployed: Total 16 years of age and over . .	4,074	919	3.2	5.9
Major activity-going to school <sup>2</sup> . . . . .	444	85	.3	.5
Major activity-other . . . . .	3,630	834	2.9	5.3
Seeking full-time job . . . . .	3,127	742	2.5	4.7
Seeking part-time job . . . . .	503	92	.4	.6
3. Civilian labor force (lines 1 and 2) . . . . .	74,790	9,322	58.9	59.6
4. Armed forces . . . . .	2,499	318	2.0	2.0
5. Total labor force (lines 3 and 4) . . . . .	77,289	9,640	60.9	61.6
6. Not in labor force: Total . . . . .	49,670	5,997	39.1	38.4
Want job now, but not seeking one because . . . . .	3,438	965	2.7	6.2
Could not find job or think none available . . . . .	394	145	.3	.9
Think cannot find job, personal reasons . . . . .	197	39	.2	.2
In school . . . . .	973	268	.8	1.7
Ill health, family responsibilities, other . . . . .	1,876	512	1.5	3.3
Do not want job now: Total . . . . .	46,231	5,028	36.4	32.2
In school . . . . .	5,431	942	4.3	6.0
Not in school . . . . .	40,800	4,086	32.1	26.1
7. Total noninstitutional population, 16 years of age and over . . . . .	126,959	15,637	100.0	100.0

<sup>1</sup> Category limited to persons 16-21 years of age; 93 percent of whites and 90 percent of Negro and other races in this group were employed part-time, voluntarily.

<sup>2</sup> Category limited to persons 16-21 years of age; 86 percent of whites and 81 percent of Negro and other races in this group were seeking part-time jobs.

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR  
BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20212**

**OFFICIAL BUSINESS  
PENALTY FOR PRIVATE USE, \$300**

**THIRD CLASS MAIL**

**POSTAGE AND FEES PAID  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR**



**I AR-441**