
Unemployment: Toward a Social Work Agenda

AS HIGH unemployment rates once again sweep the nation, it seems appropriate to address the role of the social work profession in promoting more responsive social policies, services, and practice innovations for jobless workers and their families. Social workers have long witnessed the devastations of unemployment, yet their leadership in activism and problem solving has not been sustained.

The roots of the profession were nurtured in part by collective struggles to aid the unemployed and to question policies that perpetuate the hardship of unemployment.¹ Such concerns were reactivated during the Great Depression by social workers who sensitized society to the problems of joblessness.² More recently, some social workers have been involved in efforts to promote employment-related legislation, such as H.R. 50—the Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act of 1978 (originally known as the Humphrey-Hawkins bill)—and of plant-closure laws. Still others have participated in the design and implementation of employment and training services such as those under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). These activities of individuals need to be paralleled by commitments by the organized profession.

It is ironic that, with a few exceptions, the social work profession has remained reticent about as insidious a condition as unemployment because few professions are as well informed about its human costs. As thousands of workers fill the ranks of the unemployed each month, their personal and family stress is manifested in an array of symptoms, many of which are brought to social service agencies. The often less-than-adequate response of these agencies to these clients indicates not only the need for new practice approaches, but

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Unemployment devastates millions of workers and their families by rupturing their financial, emotional, and social functioning. This article describes the dimensions of the problem and the toll it takes on the unemployed. It discusses the various assumptions about unemployment and the need to develop more social policies related to unemployment and to improve social work services to the unemployed.

a more visible role for social workers in the design and implementation of a continuum of employment and training programs. Few societally induced conditions can cripple human functioning as can joblessness. Moreover, as policy analysts observe, unemployment is one of the few personal calamities that can be prevented through social policy interventions.³

This article addresses such policy issues and their implications for the profession. In addition, it assesses the role of social work in the design and planning of employment, training, and retraining programs and examines the need for innovations in practice to promote more appropriate services and therapeutic responses to jobless clients.

IS UNEMPLOYMENT INEVITABLE?

Over the years, many people (the general public as well as policymakers)

have considered unemployment to be an unfortunate but acceptable (and even inevitable) correlate of attempts to curb inflation. Deliberate tightening of the money supply to bring inflationary pressures under control sharply increases the number of unemployed persons as the demand for goods and services declines. When unemployment rates become a political problem, the scales tip and monetary policies promote the increased availability of money in the hope that a refueled economy will bring down unemployment rates. What has troubled analysts in the United States and abroad is the simultaneous presence of high rates of inflation and unemployment. This condition, called "stagflation," has become the focal point of political debates and promises. Since the late 1960s, when unemployment rates declined to an average 3.5 percent, each cycle of attempts to curb inflation and to ease unemployment has resulted in higher base rates of unemployment. At one time, it was assumed that optimal conditions of unemployment and inflation occurred when unemployment was reduced to 4.5 percent or 4 percent. Such percentages were designated as measures of a "full-employment" economy. In recent years, the inverse relationship between unemployment and inflation has been reexamined, and the optimal unemployment rate has been raised to 6 percent, which is considered a more realistic measure of a "full-employment" economy.⁴

Despite H.R. 50, which calls for reducing the rates of unemployment to 3 percent for adults and 4 percent overall and the rate of inflation to 3 percent by 1983, the public and policymakers seem unmoved by the injustice of the current higher rates of unemployment. Politicians become concerned about joblessness when the national unemployment rate hits

8 percent or 9 percent. However, they usually ignore the issue of job entitlement and the morality of victimizing workers and their families because of economic trends and fluctuations over which such victims have no control. That inflationary pressures stem from a myriad of sources, such as escalating oil prices and arbitrary price hikes in high-demand commodities, does not constrain most policymakers from supporting policies that cast workers from their jobs so companies can minimize their loss of profits and rising costs.

Those who attribute inflationary prices to wage hikes hold workers partially responsible for inflation and thus may be unsympathetic to the injustice of the consequent joblessness of workers. Findings of the Exploratory Project for Economic Alterations should help counter such castigations of unions and workers. According to Nulty, the majority of price hikes in goods and services that matter most to American consumers (in such areas as food, housing, medical care, and energy) stem from nonlabor sources.⁵

National policies concerned with the reduction of aggregate unemployment focus indirectly on getting the jobless back to work. They involve such actions as easing access to money (through changes in monetary and fiscal policies) to stimulate an increased demand for goods and services and to compel increased output and expansion. Such aggregate approaches to the creation of jobs presume a trickle-down effect from the increased flow of money and ignore the fact that major pockets of inflationary pressures may occur in sectors of the economy long before thousands of dislocated workers have returned to work; such pockets of inflation often reinstate anti-inflationary money-tightening policies. In dealing with inflation, as well as with unemployment, policymakers focus on the economy, rather than on the unemployed victim. For this reason, the problems of the unemployed, which are endemic to the economy, are rarely addressed explicitly.

Killingsworth's analysis of studies conducted for the Congressional Budget Office suggested that approaches to the creation of jobs that are targeted to the unemployed (hereafter called "targeted approaches") are more cost-effective than are ag-

gregated approaches, such as tax cuts.⁶ Thus, when the costs per job created by tax cuts over two years and of jobs created by public service employment were compared, the studies indicated that public service employment (a targeted approach) is far less costly and less inflationary than tax cutting (an aggregate approach). For example, the cost for each job created by tax cuts after two years is about \$17,000-\$21,000, and the cost of each public service job is about \$2,600-\$3,500. Although public service employment is controversial, other targeted approaches, such as portable wage vouchers, are potential strategies for ensuring that the unemployed, rather than businesses or the economy, become direct, immediate beneficiaries of policies aimed at getting people back to work.⁷

“ *The idea of guaranteed jobs potentially has advocates in many camps.* ”

The paradox of a society that is committed to the work ethic yet tolerates persistent joblessness can be explained in part by attitudes toward the unemployed. Dislocated workers often are viewed as culpable for their condition by persons who claim "there are plenty of good jobs, just look at the want ads." Despite research that has shown that job listings are themselves invalid representations of the actual jobs available, such attitudes persist; these attitudes mask the real issue, namely, the insufficient number of jobs for all who wish to work.⁸

The unemployed should be the focus of innovative policies and services that address the conditions and side effects of joblessness. Guaranteed jobs should constitute the cornerstone of all other services and policies related to the unemployed. Without being entitled to jobs, workers will remain pawns of a fluctuating economy and will be sacrificed to treat its ills.

The idea of guaranteed jobs potentially has advocates in many camps.

Civil rights, labor union, social work, human service, and environmental groups, along with the young and persons who are forced into involuntary underemployment and retirement, are a few of the possible constituents who could advance such a mandate. Although the original version of H.R. 50, introduced by Rep. Augustus F. Hawkins, tried to promote job guarantees even to the point of renaming local employment offices as job-guarantee offices, it (like the Employment Act of 1946) became mired in the recurring tradeoff between stabilizing prices and reducing unemployment.⁹ Reflected in the tradeoff is the Phillips curve doctrine, which holds that the lower the rate of unemployment, the higher the rate of inflation.¹⁰ The corrosive persistence of stagflation renders the Phillips curve a vulnerable, if not inoperable, premise for addressing full employment. Despite some pioneering efforts in Congress to ensure passage of H.R. 50, the likelihood of its effective enforcement seems remote. Yet, given the work required to promote its passage, even in its weakened position, it can be assumed that some momentum remains to advance additional pieces of "full-employment" legislation. As was found with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, few single pieces of legislation fully embody the goals of reform. Thus, it may require several successive policy-development efforts to achieve such a basic human right as employment.¹¹ Furthermore, the recession and its aftermath may heighten policymakers' and the public's need for such guarantees.

Unemployment insurance is another area that requires reform. Benefit levels for most jobless people infrequently stave off a downward financial skid. However, during difficult economic times (such as those plaguing countries such as England that support job-entitlement policies) the provision of jobs as a right may become economically infeasible. Then income guarantees that are commensurate with wages are warranted.

Guaranteed jobs and income may seem extravagant in the face of the current chaos in the political economy. Yet the cost-effectiveness of such guarantees may be seen in increased productivity, a stronger tax base, and increased revenues. In addition, decreased unemployment will generate

cost savings in long-term institutionalization, imprisonment, and the range of human service programs supported by transfer payments, including welfare, Medicaid, and food stamps. According to Brenner, the recessions of the mid-1970s cost an estimated \$21 billion in lost income, institutionalization, and services to the unemployed.¹² Projections by the Office of Income Security Policy during the 1975 recession, when the unemployment rate was 7 percent, showed that unemployment-insurance costs would be four to six times greater than when the economy was operating at 5 percent. In addition, outlays for Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, and Medicaid were projected to be \$6.8 billion greater (with nine million more recipients) than if the unemployment rate was 5 percent.¹³ Analyses such as that by the Office of Income Security Policy examine obvious income transfer programs, rather than the hidden costs to people that some social workers witness daily. For example, data on jail inmates have shown that 42 percent of the men and 66 percent of the women were unemployed at the time of their arrest.¹⁴ Although incarceration and imprisonment add to the major financial costs of unemployment, the human and social toll is immeasurable and often irreversible. Such profound effects on people should stimulate social work to advocate for full employment, while encouraging careful scrutiny of the financial side as the basis by which such reforms may become politically acceptable.

IMPLICATIONS OF UNEMPLOYMENT

The unemployed constitute an ever-changing population of high-risk individuals for whom joblessness may be the precipitant of catastrophic psychological, health, financial, and family problems. Thus, their welfare is central to the field of social welfare and to the profession of social work. As Table 1 illustrates, the number of individuals who are directly affected by unemployment each year is two to three times the official unemployment rate.¹⁵ Owing to the dynamic nature of unemployment, some people may return to work at the same time that others become unemployed. There-

Table 1.
Rate and Prevalence of Unemployment, 1957-78

Year	Annual Unemployment Rate		Prevalence of Unemployment Per Year	
	Number (in thousands)	Percentage	Number (in thousands)	Percentage
1957	2,859	4.3	11,568	14.7
1958	4,602	6.8	14,120	17.9
1959	3,740	5.5	12,195	15.3
1960	3,852	5.5	14,151	17.2
1961	4,714	6.7	15,096	18.4
1962	3,911	5.5	15,256	18.2
1963	4,070	5.7	14,211	16.7
1964	3,786	5.2	14,052	16.2
1965	3,366	4.5	12,334	14.1
1967	2,975	3.8	11,564	12.9
1968	2,817	3.6	11,332	12.4
1969	2,831	3.5	11,744	12.5
1970	4,088	4.9	14,565	15.3
1971	4,993	5.9	15,851	16.3
1972	4,840	5.6	15,287	15.4
1973	4,304	4.9	14,498	14.2
1974	5,076	5.6	18,536	17.9
1975	7,830	8.5	21,104	20.2
1976	7,288	7.7	20,447	19.1
1977	6,855	7.0	19,512	17.8
1978	6,047	6.0	17,738	15.8

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, *Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), pp. 61, 98, 99.

fore, when the annual unemployment rate hits 9 percent, for example, the incidence of joblessness in the population during that year may be as high as a quarter of the working population. Because ethnic minorities, youths, women, and the elderly are disproportionately victimized by joblessness, unemployment among such groups may be twice that of the general population and—in the case of minority youths—four to six times that of the general population.¹⁶

It has become politically expedient to doubt the accuracy of unemployment rates. Therefore, some elected officials, as well as conservative commentators, argue that the statistics are inflated to reflect persons who are not serious about finding work but must claim to be serious as a condition for receiving aid from such programs as food stamps. Such arguments ignore the major problems with undercounting the unemployed, generated, for example, by excluding from the count those discouraged job seekers who have stopped looking for work. Clinical wisdom alone underscores the likelihood that after multiple rejections by prospective employers, people will reduce or terminate their job-seeking efforts because

the psychological toll of looking for but not finding work may cause them to feel that the effort is futile.

Unemployment statistics were originally developed to provide the business community with information about the available labor pool.¹⁷ New measures are needed to generate routinely data that serve the goals of social welfare, as well as those of business and the labor market. For example, Brenner found that dramatic increases in deaths, suicides, homicides, and stress-related health disorders are related to unemployment, both in the United States and in England, where unemployment has increased sharply in recent years.¹⁸ For example, in studies of Liverpool and Nottingham, he found that for every 1 percent increase in unemployment, 17,000 people die. Other research has shown that joblessness leads to increased blood pressure, depression, self-blame, domestic violence, child abuse, mental health problems, and reduced longevity.¹⁹ Such findings, even though they have been disputed by a few researchers, have major implications for social work practice and the preparation of social service agencies for recession-related caseloads.

Paradoxically, cutbacks in social services occur during recessions just when the demand for services may be the greatest. Predicting the impact of unemployment on a community so the community can activate an adequate social service response should be a major task of the profession. However, social services alone will not address the various causes of unemployment. Thus, the author argues that social welfare policy initiatives are needed to ensure human recovery, as well as economic recovery, during recessions. Moreover, social work as a profession has long advocated the prevention of problems that afflict people and that limit their effective functioning. It can be argued that full employment through the guarantee of jobs for all who wish to work should be the focus of major preventive strategies. Frictional employment, which refers to the hiatus in employment caused by being in between jobs—a situation that occurs even in full-employment economies—should be the only source of joblessness tolerated by social work. The profession must challenge any other kind of unemployment as crippling to the social welfare of its victims.

INNOVATIVE SERVICES

Changes in national employment policies such as those just outlined cannot occur without parallel mandates for new levels of accountability required of employers. For example, plant closures and "runaway" companies do not cause only the social, psychological, and financial problems of joblessness; they also permanently dislocate workers, who may need retraining for reemployment. Thus, employment policies ought to include a set of services (perhaps financed or sponsored in part by employers) that create a system of health, employment, income, training, and retraining security. Many European countries have, to various degrees, labor-market policies that address the jarring dislocations that occur when jobs are terminated.²⁰ In these countries, planned services in response to layoffs, aided by a warning system in which employers are required to notify the government about impending layoffs, allowed, especially before the current depression, a smoother transition of workers from their former jobs to public service jobs

or retraining programs until reemployment was feasible.

In the United States, job placement, training, and retraining programs serve only a small percentage of the jobless. Moreover, CETA training programs, targeted solely to the structurally unemployed who meet income-eligibility criteria, have fallen victim to the same public recriminations as have other programs to aid the poor. Blaming victims and the consequent blaming of programs are engendered by approaches that serve a select few rather than the universe of those in need. Despite the Reagan Administration's dismantling of CETA, the need to create public-sector jobs and job training programs will not abate.

Perhaps, at this juncture, the social work community will start planning future employment and training programs and emerge with a broadened agenda that assumes more responsibility for the development of a continuum of employment and training programs. Although few social workers have sought long-term careers in employment services, their expertise is needed to promote a holistic approach to the needs of the jobless. Currently, employment programs and the counseling that accompanies them respond to unemployed persons in a narrow way. Assessment and problem-solving processes rarely veer from the employment potential of these workers. Consequently, the emotional, financial, or family crises of unemployed workers may not be addressed. Obviously, without the assessment of such key correlates of success in becoming reemployed, the chances that jobless people will fully utilize the services being offered are diminished. Moreover, there may be a critical threshold for reemployment beyond which the toll of joblessness may be irreversible.²¹ Counseling approaches that overlook the personal impact of unemployment may inadvertently increase this impact and the impediments to reemployment.

Research has shown that the acquisition of a job becomes secondary to sheer survival for many victims of unemployment.²² For some victims, the effects of unemployment may lessen their reemployability. For example, a despondent 30-year-old male welder whose rent is unpaid, who has no money for food stamps, and has only \$2.00 in his pocket may

express his desperation in deviant ways. Moreover, his plight may be muffled by the commission of some deviant act so that unemployment—the precipitant of the deviance—is overshadowed by its consequences. Thus, it can be argued that the infusion of social work approaches to troubled clients in employment service programs may promote more effective counseling and improved timing in the provision of critical services.

Similar appeals for a holistic approach to the unemployed may be suggested for social work practitioners. In the main, social workers do not address joblessness as the presenting problem of unemployed persons. Rather, social workers redefine the needs of jobless people to fit the psychological resources that are more central to the social workers' repertoire.²³ Not only does this approach limit the effectiveness of the social worker, who may shy away from establishing the acquisition of a job as a treatment goal, but it reinforces self-blame by the client. Thus, some unemployed persons become convinced that if they can be more assertive or more interpersonally effective, a good job will be forthcoming. For some people, this may be true. However, studies have found that a job may be the most effective treatment solution for many of the problems presented by jobless clients. For instance, data on youthful and elderly jobless workers generated at the time they requested CETA job placements and several months after placement, illustrated this phenomenon.²⁴ Such symptoms of unemployment as the preoccupation with suicide, conflict, and stress were reduced or eliminated when these two cohorts went to work. Moreover, respondents attributed such changes to the acquisition of a job.

For many people, the experience of joblessness nullifies the tendency to engage in political activism because the dynamics of unemployment, including aversive job seeking and continual rejection, lead them to believe that they are to blame for their inability to become reemployed. Once they are preoccupied with self-blame, unemployed workers are loathe to appear any more deviant than they already feel and thus find it difficult to be politically active. One must wonder if social work practice inadvertently

reinforces such personalized responses to the condition because the predominant focus is on changing the client rather than the system. Moreover, social workers' responses are constrained by a limited knowledge of local labor markets and vocational assessment techniques. During a major recession in the Northwest, some jobless workers believed that even after fifteen months of unemployment, they would acquire a good job within a month.²⁵ Such self-deception was motivating but unrealistic, given the high rate of unemployment in that area. Social service interventions, paralleling those that aided some of the long-term unemployed in the Northwest, should include helping clients realistically to examine the probability of finding employment.

Social workers should be equipped to offer a more balanced approach to jobless clients. They need an enriched repertoire of skills to promote more appropriate assessment and intervention strategies with unemployed clients. Evidence from special projects in aid of the unemployed, which social workers have helped to organize, have shown that such skills can be acquired and effectively utilized in a

short time.²⁶ Social workers who have been associated with CETA programs may serve as beginning knowledge pools for local communities. In the meantime, schools of social work must accept responsibility for addressing the implications of unemployment, if not for clients, then for the growing number of unemployed social workers.

With the resurgence of interest in industrial social work, it is time to reexamine the implications of unemployment for more focused social work interventions and appropriate services. Moreover, the current hiatus in liberal social welfare agendas, created by the Reagan Administration, places a greater responsibility on the profession to join with other groups to fill the vacuum with progressive initiatives. Promoting immediate short-range goals for improved services to the unemployed, along with longer-range visions of full employment, will help lay one missing cornerstone of social welfare policy in the United States.

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