

DISCUSSION

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It is a pleasure to comment on these two excellent pieces of research. Both of them are well-designed, limited to a few important objectives, and seem to have been well carried out. Given a mandate from the Gordon Committee, they have shown that there is a little, but not much, overstatement of unemployment as defined. There are a few job-lookers who aren't quite available yet (students), or some who have a job but are looking for a better one. More important, they have shown that the field techniques and probably the quality of interviewer training are sufficiently good so that changes in procedures or adding a few questions do not make much difference. I'm not at all convinced, however, that adding questions on whether the individual was "available" last week and whether he "has a job" are desirable, since they are subjective in a way that not working and looking for work are not.

These two refinements in measurement, reducing the measured "unemployment" still further, raise the question whether we shouldn't be doing research on the extent to which the official measure understates the problem of underemployment. Once a year the Census finds out whether people were unemployed during the previous year, which helps. But what about people who couldn't find full time work? What about those who wanted to work more than 40 hours a week?

The Survey Research Center has experimented with asking questions of this type. The 1963 Survey of Consumer Finances asked:

"Sometimes people don't work as much as they want to because of illness or unemployment or short work weeks or lack of extra jobs. How about you (head) would you say that you worked less than you would have liked last year?"

The percentages saying they wanted more work than they had varies from 44% for people under 35 without a high school diploma, down to 2% for those with some college education.⁽¹⁾ But they are considerably higher than the official estimates of unemployment, and higher than the proportion unemployed at some time during the year.

In the fall of 1963 and again early in 1965 The Survey Research Center asked a national sample the following:

"Some people would like to work more hours a week if they could be paid for it. Others would prefer to work fewer hours a week even if they earned less. How do you feel about this?"

Fifteen per cent had no opinion. Among those with an opinion, some 41% wanted more work, and 16% wanted less.

Quantifying such questions requires coding verbatim replies to open-ended questions, under strict control in a central office. But the results are reproducible. What we need is periodic collection of such measures to provide checks on the whole iceberg of demand for work, of which the official unemployment measure is only the visible and potentially variable fraction.

I do have one suggestion for dealing with the not-at-home problem. It is really a suggestion by Leslie Kish of a variant of a procedure reported by him several years ago at these meetings. If we assume that not-at-homeness is associated with something unusual, but only during the period when the man is not at home, then we should revisit on a later wave some addresses where people were not at home previously, and ask the unemployment questions about the week before the time of the previous visit. These answers would then be substituted for the missing answers of some of the current not-at-homes, about the previous week. This would eliminate the bias that would arise if people were not at home because they were out of town looking for a job. The model assumes that not being home indicates a temporary situation, so that one could not substitute the current situation of previous not-at-homes for current not-at-homes.

My major concern, however, is that we move to a different research question, namely, what is the potential labor force. We may even want to start assessing the extent to which people want to work less!

(1) George Katona, Charles Lininger and Eva Mueller, 1963 Survey of Consumer Finances, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Survey Research Center, 1964), p.33.