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THE 1937 CENSUS OF PARTIAL EMPLOYMENT,  
UNEMPLOYMENT, AND OCCUPATIONS

Introduction

By the middle of 1937 Congress had become acutely aware of the need for more adequate data to serve as a basis for formulating national policy and to administer programs concerning the relief of unemployment. Efforts to alleviate the economic hardships resulting from joblessness had assumed substantial proportions, but there existed no reliable yardstick to indicate the areas where further assistance was needed or the extent to which the various emergency programs were adequate in meeting the problems attacked.

Various estimates of the number of unemployed ranged from about 4 to 14 million. The last canvass on a national scale had been made in connection with the 15th Decennial Census and available data were inadequate to make satisfactory current estimates of the employment situation. Moreover, it was known that substantial shifts in population, especially among the economically underprivileged, had taken place since 1930.

As early as 1934 Congress had discussed a national census of unemployment, employment, and occupations. This project met the approval of the House of Representatives, but the bill which would have authorized such a census did not come to a vote in the Senate at that time.

Each new session of Congress witnessed an increase in the number of bills introduced which would provide for an unemployment census until, on August 30, 1937, the President signed the act introduced by Senator Black "To provide for the taking of a census of partial employment, unemployment, and occupations, and for other purposes." This Act set up a committee consisting of the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Labor, the Works Progress Administrator, the Chairman of the Social Security Board, the Chairman of the Central Statistical Board, and the Director of the Census, or their authorized representatives, to determine the questions to be included in the census. The census was to be taken on or before April 1, 1938 and was to cover the 48 States, the District of Columbia, and the Territories of Hawaii and Alaska. The response to the questions was to be voluntary, and provision was made for calling upon various Federal agencies for information and assistance. Funds were made available from the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1937.

A Brief History of the Census of Unemployment: 1937

On September 16, 1937 an administrator was appointed to set up a temporary agency to take the census. It was decided that there should be a voluntary registration of the unemployed, using the facilities of the Post Office Department for the field work and local checking, and the facilities of the Bureau of the Census for compilation of the results.

Since timely information was urgently needed, the technique of a voluntary registration was adopted. This technique offered the possibility of getting the essential information more promptly and at less cost than by a nation-wide enumeration. It was recognized at the outset, however, that sole reliance could not be placed on information gathered in this manner. An enumerative test census of a representative cross-section of the population of the United States was therefore conducted as part of this survey. The enumerative census was intended to check the relative completeness of the voluntary registration, to give an independent measure of unemployment and partial unemployment, and to present an employment picture of the entire population included in the sample areas.

Planning of the unemployment census was started as soon as the legislation was signed. Administrative and technical leaders in the Federal government participated, and counsel was received from representatives of labor, business, and other groups and individuals met in the Federal service. The committee set up by the Act to formulate the census questions reported the final form of the Unemployment Report Card on September 30, and the following day the Government Printing Office began the printing of 85,000,000 copies of this form.

On November 16, 62 days after the Administrator was sworn in, the Unemployment Report Cards were distributed by the Post Office Department to every household in the United States. Every worker who was unemployed or partly unemployed and able to work and seeking work, was requested by the President to fill out and return a card before Saturday, November 20. A house-to-house canvass was conducted between November 29 and December 4 by postal carriers in those areas which had been designated for inclusion in the check census. After preliminary checking in the local post offices, the forms were sent to Washington for editing, coding, and tabulation.

Despite the magnitude of the undertaking, a preliminary report on the number of persons who registered as totally unemployed or as emergency workers during the period November 16-20, 1937 was sent to the President on January 1, 1938, together with preliminary

data on the findings of the enumerative check census. The following week the President received a similar report on persons who registered as partly unemployed. By the end of February, 1938 the people of the United States had a reasonably complete statistical picture of the unemployment situation, and by June, 1938, ten months after the inception of this tremendous undertaking, the final tabulations were available. The information was in such form that it could be used immediately by administrators and technicians who needed these data. Moreover, limits of the accuracy of the figures were indicated so that users of the data would know with what confidence decisions could be made.

### Public Cooperation

It had always been found difficult to get a good response to a voluntary registration. A response, sufficiently adequate that the data collected could be used with confidence, depended upon the full cooperation of the public. Every effort was made, therefore, to give wide publicity to the registration and to prepare the respondents for their part in this undertaking.

Cooperation was sought by utilizing all possible media of public education. Through the radio, newspapers, magazines, movies, the schools, and the pulpits, the people of the United States were informed of the benefits to be derived from registration and of the part they were expected to play in this census. Voluntary citizens' committees were appointed by the mayors of more than 4800 cities and towns throughout the United States to collaborate with the postmasters and to give whatever assistance was possible to assure a complete registration. Posters were prepared for display in post offices and in store windows. Newsreel trailers were supplied to the movie theatres throughout the country. The questionnaire, instructions, and announcements were translated into 80 foreign languages for the foreign language press and churches. The entire campaign was brought to a climax by an evening broadcast by the President on November 14, urging the cooperation of all. A much more complete registration than was anticipated by many was realized because of the excellent cooperation on the part of the public.

An important factor in obtaining an adequate response was the simplicity of the participation required on the part of the respondent. The registration form was phrased in common sense language, requiring practically no explanatory material. Unemployment report cards were delivered to nearly every home, even in villages where there was no postal delivery service normally. The only work required of the registrant was that he fill out the form and place it in a postal box, rural or urban.

In the enumerative check census an entirely different procedure was followed. There was no specific national publicity, and relatively little local publicity, concerning this phase of the survey, other than an announcement that such an enumeration would be conducted. Here a complete response was assured through the taking of a complete census of the selected areas by postal employees.

#### Scope of the Census

The results of the voluntary registration were shown separately for the totally unemployed, emergency workers, and partly unemployed. This distinction was made in order that different degrees or kinds of unemployment might be recognized as the occasion demanded. A distinction was made between the partly unemployed and the partly employed, the partly unemployed being those partly employed workers who wanted more work.

The information asked on the Unemployment Report Card included age, color or race, sex, occupation and business or industry of the person reporting, the employment condition of other members of the family, the number of dependents, and the individual's total income for the week prior to the census date. Data from the registration were published for the United States, for geographic divisions, States and counties and for cities of 10,000 population or greater.

For all persons 14 years of age or over in the enumerative check areas, the sex, color, or race, age at last birthday, and work status were obtained on the questionnaire. Data were tabulated only for the United States and for geographic divisions. The enumerative check was designed to secure accurate data for only these larger areas, as the results of the check were not sufficiently representative of particular local or State conditions to provide statistics for these areas.

The persons between the ages of 15 and 74 who were enumerated in the enumerative check census were subdivided into the three unemployment classes listed for the registrants, and in addition as part time workers, fully employed workers, workers ill or voluntarily idle, or persons not available for employment. The total of all except the last group was a measure of the size of the total available labor force.

## The Cost of the 1937 Census of Unemployment

The 1937 Census of Partial Employment, Unemployment, and Occupations, including the enumerative check census, was taken at a cost of slightly less than \$2,000,000. Three million of the 5 million dollars made available for the census was returned to the Federal treasury.

### Some Findings of the Census

A total of 7,945,016 persons registered as either totally unemployed or as employed at emergency work, of whom 5,816,975 were men and 2,028,041 were women. The registration results were classified by age, sex, race, and occupation, and by other characteristics of the registrants. An additional 3,219,502 persons registered as partly unemployed, 2,657,917 men and 561,585 women.

Estimates of the completeness of the voluntary registration, based on the enumerative check census, were made by unemployment class, age, race, and sex for the United States, and by age and race for urban-rural classes and for geographic divisions. Statistics indicating the sampling reliability of the data were also presented. These measures of the accuracy of the estimates made the results more useful.

The enumerative check census indicated that in November, 1937, 10,963,000 people in the United States were totally unemployed or emergency workers. Of these, 7,418,000 were male, and 3,545,000, female. In this group of unemployed 17.6 percent were 15-19 years old, 18.1 percent were 20-24 years old, and 12.5 percent were over 54. The completeness of the voluntary registration of the unemployed, including emergency workers, was estimated to be 78.4 percent for males and 56.9 percent for females.

Several important facts were discovered concerning the composition of the unemployed population. It was estimated that 11.7 percent of the population 15-74 years of age were totally unemployed or working on emergency jobs. Of the population between the ages of 15 and 19, 17.9 percent of the males and 13.8 percent of the females were found in the above group of unemployed. When the group between 65 and 74 were studied, 10.8 percent of the men and only 1.6 percent of the women were found among these unemployed.

If the number of jobless is considered in relation to the number of workers instead of in relation to the population in the age group, it is found that the unemployment rate is higher in

youthful ages, but that the rates in the ages between 55 and 74 are also relatively high. The proportion of workers unemployed was lowest between the ages of 25 and 44.

Of the 5,500,000 partly unemployed, 4,056,000 were males and 1,442,000 females. This group comprised 5.8 percent of the population 15 to 74 years of age. The age distribution of the partly unemployed group was found to be distinctly different from that of the totally unemployed and emergency worker group. Of the partly unemployed 86.7 percent were in the more productive ages from 20 to 64 years, but only 79.3 percent of the totally unemployed and emergency workers were in this group.

No dependents were reported by 20.2 percent of those who registered as totally unemployed or as emergency workers, 21.2 percent reported 1 dependent, and 18.1 percent had 2 dependents. It was also found that 7.7 percent had 3 or more dependents. Among the totally unemployed and emergency workers 29.8 percent of the females had no dependents, but only 16.9 percent of the males were in this group.

To summarize briefly, in November, 1937, one person in every eight between the ages of 15 and 74 was totally unemployed or doing emergency work. There were approximately twice as many jobless males as females. The percent of unemployed persons in the older age groups was small when compared with the total number of such persons, but large in relation to the number of older persons working or seeking work. On the other hand, the proportion of the youth unemployed was greater than for any other age class.

#### Uses and Values of the 1937 Census of Unemployment

The results of the census found immediate use as an important basis for Government action on matters involving unemployment, social security, and relief. The increased allocations of funds to youth projects, and changes in the geographical distribution of relief expenditures resulted from the information gathered. The extent to which the data were awaited may be indicated by the fact that, prior to the publication of the final report, more than 80,000 copies of State reports had been requested, and more than 435 separate press releases, giving data for States and cities, had been circulated.

In addition to providing a basis for immediate Government action, the 1937 results also provided the administration with a yardstick which could be used in evaluating the various measures which had been undertaken to alleviate unemployment, and to assist in the general economic improvement of the people of the United States.

However, it must be remembered that the total number of unemployed at a specific period of time, as determined by a census, cannot represent the current level of unemployment at subsequent dates. Such a count can, however, provide a base from which, together with other information, current estimates can be derived.

Not the least important of the contributions of the 1937 census is its effect upon future developments in the study of unemployment data. By introducing new concepts and definitions, and by employing new methods, the way was prepared for more effective study of this group of problems in the future. A modification of the concepts of unemployment as introduced in 1937 has been incorporated into the schedule of the 1940 Census of Population. Furthermore, the use of sampling methods in the enumerative check census served as a demonstration of the feasibility and reliability of large-scale sampling surveys.

In summary, the joint use of the registration method followed by a check census provided a means whereby extensive unemployment information was obtained in a relatively short period of time, both for local areas and on a national basis, at a relatively low cost.