

Symposium on Unemployment, Job Insecurity and Health: Introduction

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The December 2000 issue of the *Economic and Labour Relations Review* (Volume 11 Number 2) contained the first Symposium arising from the Centre for Applied Economic Research's conference on the "Costs of Unemployment". In that symposium, it was shown that unemployment imposed significant costs to society as a whole, as well as to specific groups within it. General social costs, as well as the impact on families, those of mature age and indigenous Australians, as well as the costs arising from precarious employment were considered. However, one important omission that was noted in the Introduction to the Symposium, although it was touched on in some of the papers, was the relation between unemployment and health (Kriesler and Nevile 2000). The three papers in this Symposium redress that omission.

The paper by Harris and Morrow surveys the evidence on the impact of unemployment on the health of "the unemployed, their families and the society generally", and provides an overwhelming argument for a strong causal link running from unemployment to ill-health. This is exacerbated by the intergenerational effects on health resulting from the impact of unemployment on the breakdown of family and the loss of parenting skills, as was also documented in McClelland (2000). Given the unfortunate reality that unemployment is likely to be with us for the foreseeable future, the paper presents a health promotion framework to help address some of the health effects.

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Morrell, Page and Taylor examine the link between unemployment and youth suicide. They note the increase in youth suicides in Australia, and in other similar Western countries, since the 1960s. Looking carefully at the evidence for Australia, they conclude that there is a highly significant and strong correlation between unemployment and youth suicide rates, particularly for young men. This relationship is much stronger than the relation between unemployment and suicide for the rest of the population, and has become much more significant since the 1960s. Given that the future of any country lies with its youth, the conclusions of this paper provide harrowing reading, and highlights the urgency and the immediacy of the problem.

After noting the evidence for the causal link between unemployment and ill health, Bohle, Quinlan and Mayhew extend the analysis to the effects of job insecurity. The importance of this is apparent when it is realised that the number of “workers holding insecure or contingent jobs far outnumber the unemployed” and that the proportion of the labour force in these jobs is growing substantially. They engage in a narrative review, analysing the results of 68 studies published between 1966 and 2001, and conclude that the relation between job insecurity and ill health, is similar to the one between unemployment and ill health though the effects are smaller.

Taken together, the evidence of these three papers overwhelming indicates the strong relation between unemployment, or insecure employment and ill health. The implications of these papers on the costs associated with unemployment are important. By identifying the fundamental social, health and other costs associated with unemployment, they change the burden of the argument away from those who contend that unemployment is the price we need to pay for economic stability. Even if this were true,¹ its implication is that economic stability comes at the cost of instability for society, families and individuals. Rather than seeing the problem as only affecting those who are unemployed or in insecure employment, the evidence of this Symposium and of the Symposium on the Costs of Unemployment in the last issue, suggest that the burden is born by the whole society. This has important implications on the priority given to unemployment alleviation by policy makers. Once it is realised that the cost to the society are extremely large, for all the reasons documented, then there can be no justification for not devoting substantial resources and research into efforts to significantly reduce both unemployment and its consequences.

Note

- 1 The papers in Carlson and Mitchell (2000) strongly refute the argument that unemployment is necessary for economic stability.

References

- Carlson, E. and Mitchell, W. (eds) (2000) "The Path to Full Employment and Equity" *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, Supplement to Volume 11.
- Kriesler, P. and Nevile J. (2000) "Symposium on the Costs of Unemployment: Introduction" *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 178-179.
- McClelland, A. (2000) "Effects of unemployment on the family" *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 198-212.