

Reasons for Nonparticipation in the Labor Force

A Special Labor Force
Report on a Test
of Concepts and Methods

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NONPARTICIPATION in the labor force has become a major concern for manpower research and analysis. Among the important questions that need to be answered are the size and composition of the labor reserve—the groups of persons not seeking work at present, but who do move into and out of the labor force, either in response to seasonal changes or on a more irregular basis; the dimensions of the discouragement problem—its causes and the remedial steps that might help discouraged workers find their place in the job market; the number and characteristics of people who need or want work and would be able to take jobs if something were done to help them (health programs, child care, training, etc.). It is also essential to develop a method for measuring changes in these various groups over time.

The challenge to the researcher in this area is to develop objective methods for measuring what are mainly subjective phenomena. While most of our labor force concepts are based on objective, overt actions (e.g., working, having a job, seeking work in a specific way and within a specified time span) the data on reasons for nonparticipation are subjective, based on—desire for work, attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. These more elusive data require careful probing and cross-checking, to explore the depth of a reported attitude or the reality of a reported reason.

Research on nonparticipation is moving forward on several fronts: Analysis of data already collected has been published,¹ in February 1967, a very intensive questionnaire was directed to men 20 to 64 years of age, and a number of methodological studies have been designed to improve measurement techniques. This article summarizes

the results of one particular attempt to measure the reasons for nonparticipation, a test survey conducted in September 1966 with a representative nationwide sample of 13,000 households. The results should be regarded as first approximations in a continuing program of experimentation and testing; however, it is believed that the test survey also provided some important substantive findings.

Approach of the Survey

The specific purpose of the September 1966 test survey, conducted with 13,000 households in the Monthly Labor Survey sample, was to try out a series of relatively simple questions which could be used on a regular basis in the household survey to measure some aspects of nonparticipation. The definitions of *employed*, *unemployed*, and *not in the labor force* were those adopted for official use in January 1967. The sampling errors were about twice the magnitude of those for the regular Current Population Survey using the 52,500-household sample of 1967.² The very small numbers appearing in the tables depict the results of the September 1966 test survey. Considerably more data must be compiled to assess the significance and reliability of these findings.

The first question—"Does . . . want a regular full-time or part-time job now?"—was designed to sort out those who had some "propensity" to enter or reenter the labor force. The question was not

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¹ "Adult Men Not in the Labor Force," *Monthly Labor Review*, March 1967, pp. 5-15.

² See the Technical Note in *Employment and Earnings and Monthly Report on the Labor Force*, February 1967, for a discussion of the labor force definitions and the sampling errors applicable to the CPS estimates.