



“Long-term unemployment does not discriminate: it affects younger and older workers, people with little and lots of education, people from a variety of ethnic groups, and people who are trying to reintegrate into society after a period of incarceration. With so many groups potentially or actually affected by long-term unemployment, it is important to keep understanding this phenomenon so more successful and holistic solutions to the problem can be generated.”

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Q: What sparked the idea for your research?

My primary line of research has always been concerned with the experiences of people who are socially marginalized because they are not currently engaged in full-time paid employment. Once the U.S. economy started to look like it was recovering following the Great Recession of 2008, it became apparent that not everyone was experiencing a recovery. Although national and regional unemployment rates have mostly returned to pre-recession levels, long-term unemployment remains high, and existing research shows that people who became unemployed during or following the recession have been out of work for longer durations than other periods in history.

What is the scope of your research?

Dr. Debbie Laliberte Rudman of Western University and I are attempting to generate holistic understandings and information at three levels: the policy level, the service provision level, and the individual level. In essence, we're trying to understand how the norms and values that shape sociopolitical policies trickle down to impact everyday life.

Q: Why is research on unemployment important?

Existing evidence suggests that prolonged periods of unemployment can have negative consequences for physical and psychological health at individual, family and community levels. There remains a lot to be learned about how people who are out of work engage in everyday activities (or what occupational scientists call 'occupations') that enable them to support themselves, their families, and make contributions to their communities.

Q: What patterns have you observed in long term unemployment?

Across research sites in the U.S. and Canada, we've seen that a lot of people need to spend time figuring out how to make ends meet, whether through the acquisition of various social support resources (think unemployment insurance, bus vouchers, or free meals at churches) or through drawing from their savings and retirement accounts. This 'figuring out' is complex and requires people to have a range of skills and knowledge. In relation to resources, we've also seen that transportation is a big issue for people: maintaining access to a working, insured personal vehicle is seen as a "must".

Q: What is the difference between unemployed and underemployed?

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, people "count" as being unemployed when they want to work, are available to work, and have actually looked for work in the past 4 weeks. In September 2016, the official unemployment rate was 5%. People fall into the category of long-term unemployment when the previous conditions are true and they've been out of work for 27 weeks or more. As of September 2016, the average number of weeks of unemployment was 27.5 and just under 25% of people who were unemployed fell into the category of long-term unemployed. People who are underemployed are defined as people who want to work full-time and are available to do so but are not able to find work for more than 35 hours per week. As of September 2016, an alternative measure of unemployment that included people who were unemployed, underemployed, and 'marginally attached' to the workforce produced a statistic of 9.7%, almost double the official unemployment rate.

Q: Why is it so important to look at both underemployment and unemployment?

Most media reports contain the official unemployment rate, but that statistics doesn't provide a full picture of the labor market. People who fall into both categories identify being "stuck" in a precarious situation that feels like an obstacle to personal growth and development. It is also important to consider those who are precariously employed, that is, who

are in forms of employment that offer little certainty regarding duration.

Q: What is the rationale behind some of the reforms on unemployment and how do they affect the population?

Many recent policy reforms in the US and Canada have followed a rationale of neoliberalism, where the government prioritizes strategies that reduce individual dependence on community resources as a way of reducing government expenditures. Some of these policy reforms have created situations where people do not qualify for needed support services or have little grace period between receiving and being cut off from support services upon their return to work.

Q: How do you feel this research will be beneficial in shaping the future of unemployment?

There has been a lot of great research done on different pieces of the unemployment puzzle, including the health effects of unemployment and the impact of policy solutions on reducing unemployment. As occupational scientists, we're concerned with trying to connect some of those pieces and understand their implications for everyday life at both individual and community levels.

Q: What are your findings so far?

Some of our findings suggest that people who are unemployed long-term feel 'activated, but stuck'. Many participants have expressed that they are "doing all the right things" to find work – including searching for work, attending skill or educational trainings, and networking – and yet they remain "stuck" in long-term unemployment and other realms of life, such as personal relationships, housing, or leisure pursuits. We're also finding that the ways in which long-term unemployment is managed through sociopolitical policies creates feelings of precarity for both jobless workers and the service providers who help those workers access support services.

Q: Where does your research go from here?

We're just wrapping up the third phase of our study and are bringing all of our data together to try to generate some "big picture" understandings. We will spend most of next year engaging in knowledge dissemination and mobilization sessions where we present our findings to the people who can use it the most: local service providers, policy makers, and job seekers. From there, we know there will be more questions to answer and more collaborators to work with to answer those questions, but we hope that this work can have some immediate, practical implications in addition to laying groundwork for future research.