

Unemployment Rates and Reasons

Dissing the Blind

by James S. Nyman

From the Editor: The following remarks were delivered by Dr. James Nyman at the annual White Cane Banquet of the Omaha Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska, Saturday, November 8, 2008. After teaching for a number of years at the university level, Jim Nyman became director of Nebraska Services for the Blind in 1974, a post in which he continued until his retirement in 1998. He reports the first Federationist he met was Jacobus tenBroek. Here are Dr. Nyman's remarks:



In 1994, on our way to visit a friend in South Africa, my wife and I stopped over for a day in Athens. I had looked forward for a long time to visiting this birthplace of western philosophy. Shortly before we arrived there, some Greek archeologists announced they believed they had excavated the prison cell where Socrates had died after drinking a cup of hemlock, a poisonous concoction derived from the hemlock plant. He had been condemned to death for corrupting the youth of Athens by seeking the truth. With some difficulty we found the excavation site on Mount Phillipapou, and I had my wife photograph me standing where Socrates died for the truth. Socrates had discovered that the search for truth sometimes leads into the dens of politics with, in his case, deadly consequences. It has been said that, in politics, truth is often the first casualty. Well, tonight I hope to rescue truth from the hazards of politics but still find it in a topic that is vitally important to blind persons. Unless I am singularly lucky, I may find myself following in the footsteps of Socrates, treading on the same dangerous ground. When I conclude my remarks, don't be offended if I decline any beverage you may offer me.

What is this truth I am seeking? You will probably have guessed that it has something to do with the unemployment rate for blind people. You would be right in part, but I will also be looking for the reasons that explain that rate--whatever it turns out to be. I have to confess up-front that I don't have a definite answer to either question. We have all heard that the unemployment rate for blind people is 70 percent or more. We have heard that percentage repeated many times, and it has achieved the status of a great truth. This is a shocking number, and it may be that the shock itself puts it beyond questioning. If repetition is the measure of truth, we may already have found what I said I was seeking. On the other hand, we might be well advised to heed the ironic caution of a very wise philosopher named Ludwig Wittgenstein, who suggested that this procedure is, "As if someone were to buy several copies of the morning paper to assure himself that what it said was true."

If we can't rely on repetition as the measure of truth, we will have to adopt some other method in the search. The nineteenth-century British statesman Benjamin Disraeli observed that there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics. If I were to suggest that the repeated claim of a 70 percent unemployment rate is either a lie or a damned lie, I suspect I would have very quickly passed

from the search for truth into the realm of politics and the cup of hemlock would have been handed to me forthwith. So I suppose I will have to fall back on statistics to pursue the truth.

We can start with some official statistics. Each month the U. S. Department of Labor issues a report on the unemployment rate for the previous month. Over the past few years that rate has ranged from 4.2 percent to 6.1 percent. If we accept 70 percent as an accurate figure for the unemployment rate of blind people, the ratio between the Labor Department rate for the general population and the claimed rate for the blind would be anywhere from 11.5 to 16.7 times higher for the blind. In Nebraska the unemployment rate has hovered around 3.5 percent for the past few years, so the ratio would be about twenty times higher in our state. Typically, when individuals and organizations invoke the much higher rate for the blind, it is either implicitly or explicitly equated with the official unemployment rate. Before we can accept this identification, we need to know what the official rate involves.

The concept appears to be simple enough: "Unemployment rate means the ratio of unemployed to the total civilian labor force expressed as a percent." It gets a bit more complicated when we explore the meaning of some of the terms that go into this computation. The Department provides definitions for five terms that are involved:

1. civilian noninstitutional population includes everyone over sixteen except those in institutions and the military;
2. the civilian labor force includes everyone in the civilian population who is either employed or unemployed;
3. employed means working as an employee or in a business, farm, or profession;
4. unemployed is anyone who is available for work and has made specific efforts to obtain a job; and
5. unemployment rate is the percentage of unemployed persons in the labor force.

To simplify and clarify: the civilian labor force is the fraction of the civilian noninstitutionalized population who are either employed or unemployed. At the end of 2007 this was 62.8 percent. In order to be included in the calculation of the unemployment rate, an individual must meet four requirements: he or she must first be sixteen years or older; second, have no employment; third, be available for work; and fourth, have made specific efforts to find employment during the period of reporting. When it is claimed that 70 percent of blind people of working age are unemployed, are we asserting that seven out of every ten blind people satisfy these four requirements of the Labor Department's strict meaning of unemployed, within the civilian labor force? If not, we need to find a more illuminating way to express the shocking truth about the low level of participation of the blind in remunerative employment.

An initial formulation that does not rely on the guidelines for statistical reporting might read: "Seventy percent of people over sixteen who are blind in the civilian noninstitutionalized population are not currently employed. This formulation suggests that 30 percent of blind people of working age are, in fact, employed and are therefore counted in the civilian labor force. This contrasts with the 62.8 percent of the overall civilian population who were in the labor force at the end of 2007. This rate of participation is approximately double that of the blind. What of the 70 percent who are claimed as unemployed?

A glance at statistics for the civilian population helps to illuminate the question. By simply subtracting the 62.8 percent from the total civilian population, we are left with 37.2 percent who are not presently in the labor force. We can reasonably assume that, due to medical and age-related complications associated with blindness in addition to the usual reasons, blind people are absent from the civilian labor force at a somewhat higher rate than that of the general population. Those reasons include such factors as continued education, especially in the younger age range; family

responsibilities; early retirement; disinclination to work; discouragement during job-seeking; and, for a fortunate few, sufficient wealth to eliminate the need for remunerative employment.

Given that 30 percent of blind people are employed and more than 37.2 percent are simply absent from the labor force, we can now ask what percentage can be counted as unemployed. We can only speculate, but 32.8 percent is the absolute maximum and not the 70 percent that is claimed. If we employed the same formula to compute the Department of Labor official unemployment rate as advocates use to calculate the 70 percent figure, we would arrive at the startling conclusion that the monthly unemployment rate had fluctuated between 41.4 percent and 43.3 percent rather than the 4.2 percent and 6.1 percent that has been reported. This, of course, includes the 37.2 percent of the civilian population who simply did not work. One can just imagine the shock waves that would run through Wall Street and the political world if this were reported. Nevertheless, the method used to arrive at this figure would be precisely parallel with that used by advocates to calculate the 70 percent unemployment rate for the blind; that is, it includes all those who are absent from the labor force by choices unrelated to work.

Combining the 30 percent of employed blind persons and the 37.2 percent or more of those absent from the labor force, we arrive at a figure of more than 67.2 percent of those who cannot be counted as unemployed. Less than 32.8 percent appears to be the remainder. Is this, then, the true unemployment rate of the blind? If we now return to the Labor Department statistical reporting standard, the answer will have to be no.

What is the status of this lower percentage? You will recall that, in order to meet the strict standards of the Department of Labor, individuals are counted as "unemployed" only if they are not employed, as defined but "had made specific efforts to find employment." They must also be available for employment, but I will address the question of availability a bit later in my remarks. Meanwhile, for present purposes, "specific efforts to find employment" can include a set of activities as minimal as checking job listings in the local newspaper or on some Internet site, following up on an employment lead, arranging an interview, sending out a résumé, making a cold call, conferring with a rehabilitation counselor, checking with friends and acquaintances in a network of associates, participating in a job training program at a community college, or attending a job fair. While some of this activity will be recorded in documents of one sort or another, it is otherwise a matter of conjecture what portion of these individuals has engaged in one or more of the "specific efforts" enumerated. A full 100 percent would be a generous estimate. Anything less than that would further reduce the percentage who could be counted as unemployed, even under the looser guidelines.

Since being available for employment is one of the Labor Department's criteria for being counted as unemployed, when medical complications and age are considered, the number of blind people who are available for employment is further diminished. While age and medical conditions are not an absolute bar to employment, we know that a higher proportion of the blind experience these additional complications. I cannot quantify the impact of these factors on employment statistics, but the effect is to reduce the unemployment rate significantly below the 32.8 percent that I said was the absolute maximum. If I were not a very modest man, I think I might claim at this point that I had, in the span of a few minutes, cut the unemployment rate for the blind by more than one half. But, it will take more than statistical wizardry to make a substantive difference in the lives of those who fall into the ranks of the unemployed. While it may be politically less dramatic than 70 percent, even the lower percentage is unacceptably high. The lower number, however, should allow us to focus on the fact that it is not a global percentage that we need to reduce, but rather the lives of many individuals that we need to improve.

To recapitulate the analysis: 30 percent of the blind of working age are employed, and around 40 percent are neither seeking employment nor available for work, so that 30 percent or fewer are technically unemployed. This change of perspective should permit us to focus our attention on the particular factors that explain the unacceptably low rate of participation in the labor force. It puts us in a better position to formulate individual plans and general policies to attack the problem.

Dissing the Blind

For simplification I have identified a half dozen factors that, singly or in some combination, are involved in most cases of unemployment. Since each of these factors begins with the three letters D-I-S, I call this "Dissing the blind." Thus we have 1. discrimination, 2. disincentives, 3. distance, 4. discouragement, 5. disinclination, and 6. disability. We can only hope that the complexity of particular situations will not leave us in the position of the unfortunate centipede in the poem:

The centipede was happy quite,
Until the toad, in fun, said, "Pray:
Which leg comes after which?"
Which brought its mind to such a pitch,
It lay distracted in a ditch.

1. Discrimination: As blind people we are fortunate if we get from one end of a day to the other without experiencing some form of discrimination. It is a pervasive phenomenon with many manifestations. Any time we confront some form of differential treatment, even if it is intended to benefit us, it reflects an underlying attitude that places us in a class outside ordinary membership in the human community. No single approach can effectively cope with the many forms that discrimination takes. The National Federation of the Blind has evolved many strategies to reduce or eliminate the impact of this differential treatment by legislation, litigation, and public education.

Obtaining legislative action has proved relatively easy over the past forty years with the adoption of White Cane Laws in most states and passing of civil rights legislation at the federal level with Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and laws pertaining to the education of disabled children enacted in the past thirty years. Unfortunately, the mechanisms enforcing these laws are so cumbersome and lawyer-driven that blind and otherwise disabled people are fortunate if the resolution of particular cases isn't posthumous or doesn't extend into old age. Court rulings have so diminished the value of antidiscrimination laws that Congress found it necessary to adopt and the president to sign the Americans with Disabilities Amendment Act to return to the original intent of the law. Ironically, a constitutional amendment in Nebraska, the Civil Rights Initiative, intended to end both preferential treatment and discrimination, in its very language discriminates against the disabled. The operative section of the proposition reads: "The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting." It is far from clear what this language means, but one thing is evident: disabilities do not even merit a mention in the enumeration of classes of affected people.

Clearly it is not easy to change a whole culture and the attitudes that govern behavior toward disabled people. Optimists may claim that over the past half century great strides have been made, but evidence for this claim is fragmentary at best. Persuasion and occasional favorable rulings can resolve individual cases in employment, education, and access to public benefits, but discrimination is a continuing reality that blind individuals and the blind as a group must confront.

Forty years ago, when I was seeking employment as a college teacher, I recall at least two rejection letters that flatly stated that a blind person could not manage the responsibilities of a faculty member.

We are not likely to encounter such open declarations in today's atmosphere of social consciousness, but the more subtle forms are probably more difficult to combat. Because those who discriminate rarely leave a trail of evidence to document the discrimination, it is difficult to quantify the scale of actual discrimination. One thing is certain: the accumulation of anecdotal evidence cannot all be dismissed as the product of a paranoid imagination. The National Federation of the Blind, by public education, legislation, litigation, negotiation, and innovation, has succeeded in having some of the barriers to employment identified and lowered. Unfortunately, barriers have proved more amenable to modification than the underlying attitudes that lead to their erection in the first place.

2. Disincentives: In 1968, when we organized a new affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind in Illinois, I served as the legislative representative, becoming an official registered lobbyist in the state. One of the first undertakings I carried out was to write a letter to all the members of the Illinois Congressional delegation, urging them to support an increase in the earnings allowance for blind recipients of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). The NFB has long argued that restrictions in the earnings limitations discouraged blind people from seeking employment since, when the limit was reached, recipients would experience a sudden drop in income and loss of medical benefits.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. When Supplemental Security Income (SSI) was implemented in 1974, an even more restrictive earnings limitation was applied. Until 1996 the earnings limitation for blind SSDI recipients was linked to those for Social Security recipients between the ages of sixty-five and seventy. In that year that coupling was eliminated, and, while the earnings limits increased at an accelerated rate for older people, it lagged significantly for the blind. In 2008 this disparity is between \$18,840 for the blind and \$36,120 for older people: a total of \$17,280, or \$1,440 a month. On May 15 the House of Representatives passed the Blind Persons Earnings Fairness Act, which would gradually re-couple earnings limitations for blind and senior recipients. If this is finally adopted by both House and Senate, one of the significant disincentives to seeking employment will have been greatly reduced.

When Medicare became a part of SSDI benefits in 1965, the argument became more compelling. Many blind beneficiaries needed medical services for other conditions covered by Medicare. Under these circumstances it is understandable that fear of losing medical benefits associated with the SSDI program has been one of the greatest disincentives to seeking employment. To counteract these obvious disincentives, the period of eligibility for medical benefits has been extended for ninety-three months so that the threat of losing these benefits immediately after cash benefits are terminated no longer exists. Nevertheless, fears have a tendency to outlive the facts, so it is incumbent on the Social Security Administration, rehabilitation personnel, and advocates to impress the facts on potential job seekers. Some positive incentives besides extended medical coverage have been incorporated into SSDI to reduce or eliminate disincentives, including discounting work-related expenses and imposing no limitations on earnings during a trial work period of nine months to a year. If parity is reached with the earnings limits for older recipients, a moderate income and living standard with some security against the devastation of medical costs will have been achieved. These measures and others have significantly reduced the disincentives to seeking and obtaining employment.

3. Distance: Let's take a fanciful journey into the next generation. Everyone will be driving smart cars. To be more precise, smart cars will be driving everyone. Earlier this year, at the annual showcase of the electronics industry in Las Vegas, an experimental vehicle was demonstrated. With global positioning technology and other systems for controlling the movements of the vehicle, all the passenger needed to do was enter a destination into the GPS and sit back and wait until the car arrived.

Many aspects of ordinary life are impaired by the limited options that confront a blind person. Social, economic, recreational, entertainment, religious, educational, and family participation can involve the necessity of devising alternatives for simply getting there. At best public transportation is a poor option, except in the largest metropolitan areas. The private automobile has come to dominate social existence, including work, to the point that in some settings blindness can virtually immobilize an individual. The lack of imagination and resources among those who operate public transportation systems makes it clear that no solution to the problem of simply getting there, wherever there might be, is likely to come from that quarter. If a quarter century turns out to be an accurate projection for the introduction of smart cars, I will be just a little over a hundred years old and probably not seeking employment, but it would represent the elimination of one of the serious obstacles to the employment of blind people. But employment is only part of life, and the other dimensions would also be greatly enhanced. I said it would be a fanciful journey, but some of the younger members of the audience may live to see it realized.

4. Discouragement: Anyone who has experienced repeated failures to obtain employment may feel discouraged and drop out of the labor force. The likelihood of experiencing repeated failure if one is blind is many times greater than it is for members of the general public. I know of no way to quantify the fraction of unemployed blind people who are simply discouraged and have withdrawn from the job search. Workshops by consultants, books and articles by experts, job fairs, and individual counseling can lay out many brilliant strategies for job seeking, but the realities of discrimination and indifference more often than not reduce these to exercises in futility. Meanwhile, discouragement and withdrawal from the job search continue to swell the ranks of unemployed blind people and account for a significant fraction of the unemployment rate. Repeated assertions of the 70 percent unemployment rate can hardly be encouraging to these individuals.

5. Disinclination: Some people in this world would prefer not to work. Some of them are blind. If people are blind in this society, there is a pretty good chance they can qualify for a variety of public supports: SSDI, Medicare, SSI, public housing, food stamps, and other benefits. If an individual settles into a comfort zone in this framework, a disinclination to work can be sustained. I recall suggesting to Robert Newman that he create a scenario of a blind character for his Thought Provoker in which an individual found a comfort zone of adequate resources and a lifestyle that nurtured a disinclination to work. The vehemence of reaction to this scenario suggests that our well-known commitment to the work ethic will minimize this factor. No matter how much we may deplore this rejection of the work ethic, most of us know someone who prefers this lifestyle. Technically, anyone who is so inclined is not counted under the Labor Department strict standard for being unemployed, but he or she would satisfy the more general notion of unemployment. Fear of rejection or discouragement after repeated failures may explain the attitude, but the reality must be acknowledged. I know no way to quantify the contribution of this phenomenon to the unemployment of blind people.

6. Disability: In 1917 Nebraska adopted a definition of blindness that still provides the statutory meaning of this visual condition. The definition reads: "The term blind includes all persons whose sight is so defective as to seriously limit their ability to engage in the ordinary vocations and activities of life." The misleading aspect of this definition is that it directly links the degree of defectiveness with the limitations on ability to engage in vocational and other activities. Unfortunately, this perception is deeply ingrained in popular beliefs about the relationship between visual acuity and ability to function in the world, including the world of work. This statutory definition, however, is open to a different interpretation, one that suggests that limitations can be overcome. In the familiar formulation of Kenneth Jernigan: "If a blind person has proper training and opportunity, blindness can be reduced to a physical nuisance." The critical qualification, of course, is, "with proper training in the alternative techniques of blindness." When positive attitudes drive and sustain the motivation to employ the alternative techniques, then blindness is significantly reduced as a factor. It is not an

accident that individuals who complete a training program in the orientation center in Lincoln have an employment rate of around 90 percent. Further evidence for the value of training in the alternative techniques is provided by Dr. Ruby Ryles of Louisiana Tech and Dr. Fred Schroeder, who have documented that 90 percent of employed blind people are proficient Braille readers. In the modern economy Braille literacy and computer literacy combined are indispensable skills. Without such training it is difficult to see how individuals could, in the strict requirements of Labor Department statistics, be said to be available for employment.

While it is only a guess, I am willing to wager that the unemployment rate could be cut in half again if proper training in alternative techniques and the adoption of positive attitudes were available to all blind people nationally.

Conclusion

I began by saying that I was seeking the truth about the rate of unemployment of blind people. The conventional wisdom and political rhetoric suggest that this rate is 70 percent. When viewed in light of Labor Department guidelines, this asserted rate is more a matter of politics than an accurate description of reality. But official statistics only hint at a serious problem. It is more illuminating to examine the reasons for the low rate of participation in the labor force. In other words, the problem is not how we can reduce a statistical unemployment rate, but how we can increase participation in the remunerative labor force.

I have suggested that discrimination, disincentives, distance, discouragement, disinclination, and disability account for most of the absence from the work place. Administrative and judicial remedies may affect discrimination in limited ways, but public education activities by the National Federation of the Blind and the examples of blind individuals will do more to effect changes in the social attitudes underlying discrimination. However, as the saying goes, "Don't hold your breath!" Much has been done to reduce the disincentives associated with SSDI, SSI, and Medicare, but the impact of these benefits must be communicated by the Social Security Administration, advocacy organizations, and rehabilitation agencies. We need to do a better job of education and counseling. Transportation will continue to be a significant problem for blind people to resolve, requiring a combination of individual ingenuity and initiative and some public action. Perhaps in the next generation technology may make the convenience of the private automobile as available to the blind as it is to everyone else. Discouragement stemming from repeated failures and disinclination to work may be overcome when success replaces failure. Encouragement by advocates and professionals can sustain efforts toward employment, but, as they say, "Nothing succeeds like success." Finally, disability is the most pervasive and the most remediable factor that explains the low rate of participation of the blind in the labor force. It is a sad truth that the vast majority of blind people have not had the opportunity for proper training in the alternative skills of blindness and the sustaining attitudes that would render them successful job seekers and workers.

If we are guided by the Biblical injunction, "Seek the truth, and the truth shall set you free," rather than contributing to the creation and perpetuation of myths and misconceptions about a 70 percent unemployment rate, we may indeed find the truth we have been seeking. Well, what is this truth that can set us free? It turns out not to be all that mysterious and, I hope, not at all hazardous to the seeker. I would say that this is the truth that the National Federation of the Blind has pursued since its founding in 1940. It is the truth that blindness can be managed in the social and physical environment by proper training, adopting a positive philosophical attitude, and persuading others to understand this truth. Little by little, but a little too slowly, this truth is beginning to prevail.

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