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978-0-521-09818-2 - Men Out of Work: A Study of Unemployment in Three
English Towns

M. J. Hill, R. M. Harrison, A. V. Sargeant and V. Talbot

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Foreword

In 1968, when I was appointed as temporary Social Work Adviser to the Supplementary Benefits Commission, I was asked to examine a number of aspects of the Commission's functions which affected the welfare of individuals. Amongst those which interested me particularly was the problem of so-called 'voluntary unemployment'. The policies of the Supplementary Benefits Commission and the problems which arise from them have been discussed at some length elsewhere.¹ But the discussion was in many aspects speculative, in the absence of research into the nature of the problem and the factors, economic, social and psychological, associated with it. On my return to the University of Oxford in 1970, the Department of Health and Social Security sponsored research under my direction of which the material in this report is the first outcome.

The research falls into two parts; the first, a survey of the factors associated with chronic or frequent unemployment, was completed in 1972 and this book presents the preliminary analysis and discussion of the evidence. The authorship is a joint one and it is the work of the Research Officer, Michael Hill, who was appointed to take charge of the Survey and of our three research assistants, Robert Harrison, Anthony Sargeant and Valerie Talbot. My own role has been purely advisory and, of course, in liaison with the Department of Health and Social Security. The decision to publish a preliminary report was taken during the course of the research; mainly because it became evident that the topic was one of considerable interest to people with different interests and disciplines and one about which there was some urgency. It was also clearly desirable that those who had worked so hard in planning and executing the survey should have the opportunity of contributing to some written conclusions.

However, time has not yet permitted us to analyse and discuss all of the implications of the report: Michael Hill and I will collaborate on a further book which attempts this. In particular, we hope to examine the relations which do or should exist between three aspects of our Social Services which are relevant to the unemployed: namely, the income maintenance services based on contributions (that is, in this country, unemployment and sickness benefit); means-

1 Client or Claimant? A Social Worker's View of the Supplementary Benefits Commission. O. Stevenson National Institute Social Services Library, No. 25., Allen & Unwin 1973.

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tested benefits which are provided to supplement or replace those benefits (in this country, supplementary benefits); and the personal social work services. As is pointed out in this report, the present structural relations between the Department of Employment and the Supplementary Benefits Commission are somewhat ambiguous. Both have responsibilities which go beyond the payment of benefit. Indeed, so far as the Department of Employment is concerned, there are well advanced plans for a separation of the payment from the 'job finding' function. The Supplementary Benefits Commission also enters the 'job finding' field with and for certain men. The social work services have, by and large, only been involved in these problems as a secondary focus, arising from the primary task (for example, of preventing delinquency or combating poverty). Work, per se, has not been a central issue, except for the handful of social workers employed in Industrial Rehabilitation Units. There are major issues and problems here, upon which this report can only comment superficially and which we shall examine fully later. We shall also provide further information on the attitudes and characteristics of unemployed men, derived from a small sample interviewed in much greater depth and detail than was possible in the main survey.

More light may, in fact, be thrown upon these matters by the second part of the research, now in progress. In this, the work of social workers with unemployed men receiving supplementary benefit is to be compared with that of officials, designated as 'Unemployment Review Officers'. It is not appropriate to describe this here.¹ Suffice it to say that the Research Officer, 'Tom' Thompson and I will collaborate in analysis of these findings which will in some ways complement those of the earlier survey and that the results of the research will be available in 1974.

There is a sense in which the findings of this report may be described as a ground clearing operation: much of it will not surprise those who are knowledgeable through day to day contacts with the unemployed. It does not come as a shock to find that age, lack of skill, and disability are the major factors associated with unemployment in areas of high unemployment. As with much research in the social sciences, the first stage may be to confirm the obvious, with the occasional bonus for the researcher of refuting the apparently obvious. However, it has to be done, for one man's common sense is another man's nonsense. It is particularly important in this field because the topic is a highly emotional one, round which mythologies develop. Politicians of all shades are subject to considerable pressure from public opinion to urge their civil servants

1 For an outline of the research plans, see Appendix II to *Client or Claimant*.

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ways. Most of the secretarial work for the project was done by Mary McMahon and Ann Lincoln-Brown. Their contributions were obviously important ones. We would like to thank the various other people who gave us secretarial help, and the following for the clerical help they gave: Anne Barefoot, John Grainger, Gareth Jones, Harold Lumsden, Barbara Miller, Doreen O'Brien, Dan Parsons and Tom Rivers. We are very grateful for the efforts of our interviewers, who were too numerous to name individually. We would also like to thank Clive Payne, Jean Nicholls and the Research Services Unit of Nuffield College; the Atlas Computer staff; the research services unit of the National Foundation for Educational Research; and Christopher Hill, for their assistance with the computing and statistical work for the project.

We would like to thank those of our colleagues who took a particular interest in the project and in particular Joan Payne, George Smith and 'Tom' Thompson. Olive Stevenson's involvement in the project will, of course, be evident from the foreword, but we would like to express our appreciation of the way in which she has seen her role as involving a combination of a readiness to leave us alone to get on with the day to day work on the project and a willingness to be available for consultation when problems arose.

We have left our most important acknowledgement until last. This is to the men who allowed us to put them 'under the microscope', who freely, and with no hope of personal gain, allowed our interviewers to subject them to a lengthy and sometimes stressful interrogation about their lives and circumstances. The only thing we can offer in return for their crucial co-operation is the hope that this book will make a contribution to a wider understanding of their predicament.

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In her forward Olive Stevenson has made clear the role of the Department of Health and Social Security as the sponsors of this research. The relationship between the research team and the DHSS has been a most satisfactory one. Our difficulty, therefore, in acknowledging the help given to us by individual civil servants is that we are indebted to a large number of people, many of whom we have never met and do not know by name. Within the DHSS three groups of people have assisted us with the research. First, there were those from the division (SR5) specifically responsible for liaising with research projects such as ours. Everyone there was most helpful and encouraging. We would however like to single out for special mention Douglas Whiting and Ivor Hughes, who bore much of the responsibility for day to day liaison with us. Second, there were policy makers from a number of divisions who assisted us with their comments on our plans, questionnaire and manuscript. Within that group of people we would like to express our particular thanks to Mary Jones and Peter Harmston. Third, we would like to thank the managers and staff of the DHSS local offices in Swindon, Coventry, Hammersmith and Newcastle, who helped us when we were actually in the field.

From our point of view the Department of Employment had as important a role as the DHSS in assisting us with the many practical aspects of the survey. Their local employment exchange staffs shouldered the overwhelming burden of practical support for the project when we were in the field. We are very grateful for all the help received from the Department of Employment in the three main research areas and the pilot survey area. Despite the fact that they were often excessively busy the local staff always received us in a most friendly and helpful way. We are also grateful to headquarters staff of the Department of Employment, who helped the project to run smoothly and contributed their comments on our efforts.

One other government department should not remain unacknowledged: the Criminal Records Office of the Home Office, who kindly supplied us with data.

In each area the local authorities also provided help on the various occasions when we approached them for information. We would like to thank them for the interest they took in the project.

In running a large scale research project one is inevitably dependent upon the contributions of a large number of people, who are involved in a variety of

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to take a harder line with 'the work shy', a pejorative term whose moralistic overtones block further analysis of the problem. This research has been concerned to get behind that phrase and the official equivalent 'the voluntarily unemployed' and to ask the question, 'does such a group exist; if so, what are they like and how do they relate to the labour market?' It is our hope that some of the facts in this report will help those who shape policy, not least by providing concrete evidence to complement experience.

The authors will be specific in their acknowledgements to those who have cooperated in the execution of the research. For my part, I would like to mention in particular Geoffrey Beltram who was, at the time the research was planned, in charge of research development in the Social Security field and whose deep concern about this particular topic was a source of encouragement to me in formulating the research plans.

Olive Stevenson