

# Work to Welfare

*How Men Become Detached from the Labour  
Market*

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Pete Alcock, Christina Beatty, Stephen Fothergill,  
Rob Macmillan and Sue Yeandle



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# Contents

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<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of tables</i>	ix
<i>Notes on the authors</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xvii

## **Part I The context for labour market detachment**

1 The UK labour market	3
SUE YEANDLE	
2 The international context	25
SUE YEANDLE	
3 The benefits system	56
PETE ALCOCK	

## **Part II New evidence from the UK**

4 The detached male workforce	79
CHRISTINA BEATTY AND STEPHEN FOTHERGILL	
5 Incapacity Benefit and unemployment	111
CHRISTINA BEATTY AND STEPHEN FOTHERGILL	
6 The over 50s	140
CHRISTINA BEATTY AND STEPHEN FOTHERGILL	
7 Family, life course and labour market detachment	162
SUE YEANDLE	
8 The role of health in labour market detachment	187
SUE YEANDLE AND ROB MACMILLAN	

vi	Contents	
9	Getting by ROB MACMILLAN	206
10	Back to work? STEPHEN FOTHERGILL AND ROB MACMILLAN	228
<b>Part III The policy implications</b>		
11	New roles, New Deal PETE ALCOCK, CHRISTINA BEATTY, STEPHEN FOTHERGILL, ROB MACMILLAN AND SUE YEANDLE	251
	<i>Appendix: Research methodology</i>	269
	<i>References</i>	275
	<i>Index</i>	284

## Figures

---

2.1 Finland: broad unemployment as a percentage of the population aged 15–64, 1985–97	<i>page</i> 42
4.1 Unemployment and economic activity among men of working age, Great Britain, 1977–2000	80
4.2 Non-employed men, Great Britain, April 1991	82
4.3 Long-term unemployment and economic inactivity among men as a proportion of males aged 25–64, by district, England and Wales, 1996–7	83
4.4 Long-term unemployment and economic inactivity among men as a proportion of males aged 25–64, Scotland, 1996–7	84
5.1 Long-term Incapacity Benefit claimants, men, Great Britain	112
5.2 Men claiming sickness-related benefits as a proportion of working-age male population, England and Wales, August 1999	114
5.3 Men claiming sickness-related benefits as a proportion of working-age male population, Scotland, August 1999	115
5.4 The impact of job loss on recorded unemployment and recorded sickness	127
6.1 Early retirement among older detached men	143
6.2 Share of older detached men who would like a full-time job	150
6.3 Share of older detached men looking for full-time work	151
6.4 Share of older detached men reporting health limitations on ability to work	152
6.5 Share of older detached men who do part-time, temporary, casual or seasonal paid work	155
6.6 Share of older detached men with pension income	156
6.7 Share of older detached men with partner in employment	156
7.1 Self-described status, by household composition	164

viii List of figures

7.2 Social class based on occupation, by household composition	165
7.3 Principal reason for last job ending, by household composition	166
A.1 Location of survey areas	270
A.2 Male labour market detachment in survey areas, 1996–7	271

## Tables

---

1.1	Reasons for economic inactivity: by gender, 1993 and 1998	<i>page</i> 9
1.2	Employee jobs in selected industries in the UK: 1948–98	18
1.3	Older workers in employment by age group and whether working full time: UK, winter 1999–2000, not seasonally adjusted (thousands (%))	19
1.4	Movement between employment statuses over twelve months: men in UK, spring 2000	24
2.1	Male unemployment in the EU: European Labour Force Survey 1999	26
2.2	Male full-time employment rates for selected countries, by age, spring 2000 (% of age group)	28
2.3	Working-age population non-employment rates for selected countries, by age and sex, 1997	29
2.4	Male inactive population aged 15 plus by reasons for not looking for work, 1999	30
2.5	Male employment, showing part-time employment, contracts of limited duration and usual hours worked	34
2.6	Number of people affected by employment difficulties in France, 1996 (thousands)	40
4.1	Economic inactivity among men by age, Great Britain	81
4.2	Male employment rates by region, summer 2000	85
4.3	Self-declared status of detached male workforce	87
4.4	Age of detached male workforce	88
4.5	Social class of detached male workforce	90
4.6	Selected qualifications of detached men	91
4.7	Length of time since last regular full-time job	92
4.8	Length of time in last regular full-time job	94
4.9	Principal reason for last job ending	96
4.10	Labour market attachment	97
4.11	Reasons for not looking for full-time work	99
4.12	Self-assessment of influence of health	100

4.13	Sources of financial support	102
4.14	Benefits claimed	104
5.1	Key characteristics of 25–64-year-old men on benefit	119
5.2	Male Incapacity Benefit claimants: principal reason for last job ending	121
5.3	Financial circumstances of 25–64-year-old men on benefit	122
5.4	Selected financial circumstances of male Incapacity Benefit claimants	124
5.5	Indicators of hidden unemployment among male Incapacity Benefit claimants, Great Britain, April 1999	132
5.6	Estimated hidden unemployment among male sickness claimants, August 1996	135
5.7	Estimated hidden unemployment among male sickness claimants, top twenty districts, August 1996	136
6.1	Self-declared status of older detached men	142
6.2	Age breakdown of older detached men	142
6.3	Social class (based on occupation) of older detached men	144
6.4	50–64-year-old detached men: length of time since last regular full-time job	146
6.5	50–64-year-old detached men: principal reason for last full-time job coming to an end	148
6.6	Financial circumstances of 50–64-year-old detached men	154
6.7	Pension and benefits status by social class (based on occupation) of 50–64-year-old detached men	158
7.1	Household composition of detached men	163
7.2	Job search, by household composition (%)	167
7.3	Benefits and financial situation by household composition (%)	167
7.4	Do you think there is a realistic chance you will ever get a job?	167
7.5	Men’s circumstances by partnership status	173
8.1	The role of illness, ill-health and accidents in departure from the labour market	193
8.2	The variety of health difficulties reported (men in follow-up sample only)	195



# 1 The UK labour market

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*Sue Yeandle*

## **Introduction**

This book is about processes of labour market detachment among adult men. As later chapters show, in recent years detachment from the labour market has become an increasingly important phenomenon, with significant economic and social consequences. Yet it cannot be explained in terms of any single factor – men’s attitudes or personal characteristics, for example, or employers’ decisions to close or restructure workplaces. As a research team, our interest in the processes of labour market detachment arose partly from the observation that, in the early and mid-1990s, inadequate opportunities in the British labour market were being reflected not only in continuing high levels of unemployment, but also in rising levels of economic inactivity. This was particularly the case in certain local labour markets where major industrial restructuring had occurred. We were also stimulated by a developing literature on how employment behaviour and labour market participation were influenced by welfare systems and social security regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990). Finally, we were interested in how far changes in men’s social and family roles, affected both by women’s rising rates of labour force participation and by the proliferation of different types of household structure, were shaping changes to traditional expectations about men’s working lives.

What do we mean by detachment from the labour force? Labour market analysis uses a range of measures to assess levels of participation in the labour force: employment, unemployment and a variety of types of ‘economic inactivity’. Our study started from an assumption that the boundaries between these categories were not clear cut. How to count the unemployed (those who want a job but cannot obtain one) had already become an increasingly vexed question for academics and policy-makers alike. As discussed below, the available measures all have limitations. This had been widely recognised in relation to female unemployment for years (Sinfield 1981, Walker 1981, Martin and Wallace 1984), but until the 1990s the prevalence of standardised patterns of male employment

had disguised the problem for the male labour force. At the start of the twenty-first century, a range of alternatives to full-time 'lifelong' male employment have emerged, with part-time working, early retirement, re-training and adult learning, all unknown for men early in the twentieth century, becoming familiar concepts. Further, during the later twentieth century, it became possible in certain circumstances for men to withdraw from employment and to access a range of social security, insurance and employment benefits associated with chronic ill-health, a limiting disability or family responsibilities of various kinds. Important changes in the rules governing such withdrawals from the labour force, whether permanent or temporary, occurred during the last quarter of the twentieth century. For example, new rights to time off to carry out parental and family duties were included in the Employment Relations Act 1999. These developments are discussed in more detail in ch. 3.

Our study is the more timely because the relationship between work and welfare was given very high profile by the Labour government immediately it came to power in 1997. It has continued to be an important and controversial theme since that time. This book explores new evidence from men who have become more or less detached from the labour force. It is based on a study of men who, when interviewed, were of an age at which full-time employment would once have been taken for granted. All the men were aged between 25 and 64, and almost all had been without regular full-time work for six months or more (see the appendix). The study was thus designed to explore the blurred and eroding boundaries between unemployment, economic inactivity and part-time employment for men. As later chapters show, the decisions the men had made were often complex, frequently a mixture of both enforced and voluntary processes, and sometimes 'drawn out'; one step had led to another for some, resulting in their labour force detachment, even though this may not have been an intended or expected outcome of the actions they took or the choices they made.

High levels of unemployment, as experienced during the later 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, were not, of course, new; indeed, in the 1940s, many aspects of the modern British welfare state had emerged from experiences of widespread poverty and hardship associated with mass unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s. But in the mid-1990s, interesting new evidence was rapidly accumulating: among older men, rates of 'economic inactivity' had accelerated fast, with inactivity associated with sickness and disability growing at a rate hard to comprehend in the context of rising general living standards (e.g. in housing and nutrition) and after fifty years of the National Health Service. Our study took shape as a way of answering the following questions about adult men and the labour market:

- How much unemployment is concealed by economic inactivity among men?
- What do the recent work histories of men who have become ‘detached’ from the labour market tell us?
- How far are ‘detached’ men cushioned from the effects of losing their wage by their family and personal circumstances, and more generally, how do they ‘get by’?
- Among detached men, how large are the groups still seeking work, prevented from working by health or disability, choosing early exit (perhaps linked with part-time work) or occupied by family responsibilities?

Later chapters show how the study has been used to provide some of the answers to these questions. In this opening chapter, we discuss approaches to measuring employment and unemployment, and the problems and issues associated with them; the dynamic nature of labour market analysis, both in relating to the changing composition of the labour force and to changes in demand for labour of different types; and men’s changing experience of work as a component of their lives.

### **Employment and unemployment in the UK**

As other commentators have pointed out, ‘there is no perfect way to measure unemployment’ (MacKay 1999: 1919). What is more, economies which permit free movement of labour will inevitably and always have some unemployment; this is known as ‘adjustment’ unemployment, which may be both frictional (people moving between jobs for which they have appropriate skills, within the same local labour market) and structural (movement between jobs which involve, for the worker, a change of occupation or industry or local labour market) (MacKay 1999: 1920). This much has long been recognised; indeed, Beveridge himself argued that ‘full employment does not mean the end of change, competition, initiative and risks. It means only fresh opportunity always’ (Beveridge 1944: 131).

In Britain, statistics on unemployment have been collected, in a variety of ways, since the 1880s. Statistics were derived initially from trade union records, and later from data based on unemployment insurance records after 1911 (Denman and McDonald 1996). During the first half of the twentieth century, changes to the law on unemployment insurance brought increasing numbers of unemployed workers within the scope of these records; but it was only with the 1948 implementation of the National Insurance Act that coverage extended to all male and female employees. The resultant data, on those ‘registered as unemployed’, most

of whom were also eligible for social security benefits because of their unemployment, can be distinguished from the ‘claimant count’ figures on which administrative data since 1982 have been based.<sup>1</sup> While the earlier assessments had been based on a clerical count, the new data collection system was computerised in 1982. From October of that year, registration for employment became voluntary for all adults, and from November 1982 the official unemployment figures were based instead on a claimant count of those receiving unemployment-related benefits. Denman and McDonald report that this led to changes in coverage which ‘had the effect of reducing the level of unemployment, on average, by 112,000 (or 3.7 per cent)’ (1996: 13). The 1982 changes followed an inquiry into unemployment statistics instigated in 1980 by the then new Conservative government. At that time the government identified ‘those aged 60 to 65 who had taken “early retirement”, the unfit and the “unemployable” as groups that should be excluded’ (Walker 1981: 9). As Walker notes, the Job Release Scheme, introduced in 1977, had already denied those within a year of statutory retirement who chose to join it (leaving work in return for a tax-free allowance) the entitlement to register as unemployed.

The ‘claimant count’ is based on official records of the number of individuals who are (successfully) claiming ‘unemployment benefits’. Of course, the titles given to such benefits change over time, as governments decide (see ch. 3). The basis upon which a claim for unemployment benefits is approved is subject to change, usually caused by governments deciding to adjust the eligibility criteria entitling individuals to such benefits. These criteria include evidence about whether or not the individual has, as a member of the workforce, been making National Insurance (NI) payments over relevant periods. Some people who are not in work but who would like to have a job may be deterred from applying for such benefits, thinking they are ineligible, or fearing stigma or that they may be judged to be ineligible. Here confusion about benefit entitlement, discussed more fully in ch. 3, plays an important role. Some of the sources of stigma or embarrassment about claiming benefits are also outlined in that chapter. Other people may be excluded from the claimant count (and indeed from receiving benefit) because they are judged not to be behaving appropriately. In recent years this has been connected with various assessments of whether an individual is ‘actively seeking work’ or ‘available for work’ (again, see ch. 3 for details). Some who wish to work may have

<sup>1</sup> For a full analysis of changes affecting the collection of unemployment statistics from 1881 onwards, see Denman and McDonald (1996) (including annex A which details ‘legislative and administrative changes likely to have affected the monthly series of unemployment statistics between 1912 and 1982’) and Fenwick and Denman (1995) for a list of all such changes affecting the unemployment figures between 1979 and 1995.

characteristics that enable assessors to allocate them to another category of benefit because they meet its eligibility criteria (the prime examples being sickness and disability benefits). Examples of men who were advised to apply for, or were redirected to, other benefits are discussed in chs. 7 and 8.

The political sensitivity of unemployment, particularly as 'magic' figures such as the 1 or 2 million mark are reached, has meant that governments have sometimes stood accused of 'massaging' the unemployment figures. Some argue that, for the purpose of analysis of conditions in the labour market, the 'claimant count' figures are best discarded and replaced by survey data, especially data based on figures collected using the International Labour Organisation (ILO) definition of unemployment. This covers people who are out of work, want a job, have actively sought work in the previous four weeks and are available to start work within the next fortnight; or are out of work and have accepted a job that they are waiting to start in the next fortnight. The ILO definition has the advantage of enabling cross-national comparison of data, as well as eliminating the impact of administrative and legislative changes, but it remains an imperfect measure. Labour Force Survey data, in the UK as elsewhere in Europe, rely on asking a randomly selected, statistically generalisable, sample of individuals to assess their own situation. Such data produce statistically reliable estimates, and tend to be favoured over counts of claimants since the latter fail to pick up many persons who wish to have paid work. Examples include eligible persons who are not claiming relevant benefits, and others who may want work but are officially deemed not to be fully active in seeking it. Given that unemployed people in areas of high unemployment and low demand for labour are more likely than others to become discouraged in their search for work, this can be an important source of regional variation in the reliability of claimant unemployment data. Being counted within the ILO definition of unemployment for respondents to these surveys nevertheless implies that, in their own judgement, they are 'actively seeking work'.

As MacKay (1999) and others note, it has traditionally been the relationship between the number of unfilled jobs in the economy (job vacancies) and the number of people judged to be unemployed which has determined whether or not unemployment is seen as a political problem requiring government action, or an inevitable labour market characteristic (as in 'adjustment unemployment', discussed above). If estimates of vacancies (there is no sure way, in a free market economy, of counting all vacancies, so labour market analysts rely always on estimates, guided by research evidence on how best to make these) are smaller than counts of 'the unemployed', by other than a very small margin, then there is judged

to be an 'unemployment problem'. Such a problem has existed for British governments now for over thirty years. During that time commentators have repeatedly drawn attention to a variety of facets of this problem. It varies in severity by region; it affects men and women differently; it is experienced more frequently by young workers and by older workers; and it arises both because people wishing to enter the labour market cannot find a job, and because people who hold jobs lose their position when employers decide to shed labour or to close a worksite. Throughout the past fifty years, as shown below, workers in certain occupations and industries have been especially vulnerable to redundancy. The regional location of these industries gave rise to the expectation that job losses of this type and scale would lead to (at least initial) rises in unemployment in the regions affected. That this did not occur, to the extent expected, following mass pit closures in the British coalfields in the 1980s and 1990s, was part of the labour market puzzle which Beatty and Fothergill first investigated in their study of labour market adjustment in the coalfields (Beatty and Fothergill 1996).

The period between the early 1970s and 1997 (when our study was begun) saw important fluctuations in male and female economic activity rates, employment rates and unemployment rates. While economic activity for women increased, men's economic activity fell. More detail about the situation of men is given in ch. 4.

The scale of the changes is evident. Male employment in Great Britain fell by an extraordinary 1.7 million between spring 1979 and spring 1983 (Office for National Statistics 1997). In the following decades the number of jobs held by men continued to fall – by almost 1 million between 1981 and 1998, with very large falls in manufacturing jobs and the extractive industries only partly offset by increases in male employment in parts of the service sector, notably in financial and business services and in distribution, hotels, catering and repairs. By contrast, the overall number of jobs held by women increased by 2.2 million between 1981 and 1998, although many of these jobs were part time, and the increase disguised major job losses affecting women employed in manufacturing (Office for National Statistics 1999: table 4.15).

For the whole of the last quarter of the twentieth century, unemployment was a significant economic and political issue, with profound social consequences. Officially recorded male unemployment peaked in the mid-1980s and again in 1993. More detailed figures for the 1990s show that while for both men and women claimants unemployment was a particularly acute problem for the young (those under 25), among workers aged 25 and above, rates were consistently higher for men than for women, with rates for men aged 45–54 fluctuating between 4.8 and

Table 1.1. *Reasons for economic inactivity:<sup>a</sup> by gender, 1993 and 1998*

	Males		Females		All of working age	
	1993	1998	1993	1998	1993	1998
Does not want a job	70	67	72	71	72	69
Wants a job but not seeking in last four weeks						
Long-term sick or disabled	10	16	3	6	5	9
Looking after a family or home	2	2	14	14	10	9
Student	4	5	2	3	3	3
Discouraged worker <sup>b</sup>	3	1	1	1	2	1
Other	5	5	4	4	4	4
All	24	29	24	26	24	27
Wants a job and seeking work but not available to start <sup>c</sup>	6	4	4	3	4	3
All reasons (= 100%) (millions)	2.7	3.0	4.9	4.9	7.6	7.9

*Notes:*

<sup>a</sup>At spring each year; males aged 16 to 64, females aged 16 to 59.

<sup>b</sup>People who believed no jobs were available.

<sup>c</sup>Not available for work in the next two weeks. Includes those who did not state whether or not they were available.

*Source:* Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics (*Social Trends* 29, 1999).

9.3 per cent, compared with 3.1 and 5.0 per cent for women of the same age.

The economically inactive, as discussed in more detail below, comprise a number of sub-categories which are conceptually and empirically distinct. 'Inactive' persons may be full-time students, persons caring full time for another person or for a home and family, persons who are not required to register for work because they are sick or disabled and in receipt of sickness or disability benefits, as well as those who have chosen, or been required to take, an early exit or temporary withdrawal from the labour force. Some of these, the 'early retired', may have taken severance or reached the retirement age specific to their occupation, and will often (although not always) be in receipt of an occupational pension. Between 1993 (the most recent peak in male unemployment) and 1998 the Labour Force Survey estimated that the number of men of working age who were economically inactive rose from 2.7 million to 3 million. Of these, the proportion saying they wanted a job, but who had not sought work in the previous four weeks, rose from 24 to 29 per cent (table 1.1). While this table shows that the figures for most sub-categories of male economic inactivity remained relatively stable, those indicating that they were not

seeking work because of long-term sickness or disability rose particularly sharply. A similar, but less marked, picture emerges when the figures for women of working age are examined.

Previous research had in the 1980s already focused on a particular sub-category of the unemployed, those who had been unemployed for longer periods (the long-term unemployed, usually defined as those out of work for a year or longer) (Burghes and Lister 1981, White 1983, Dawes 1993). Much earlier, Beveridge had discussed the 'long-period unemployed', citing Wales and Northern England as areas where 'nearly two out of every five persons unemployed had been out of work for more than a year' (Beveridge 1944: 66–7). In these mid- and late-twentieth-century studies it had already been noted that there were important regional, age and sex differences among the long-term unemployed.

In the early 1980s, Walker reported that, in 1979,

two-thirds of those unemployed for more than one year were aged 35 or over, and one-third were aged 55 or over. Nearly three-quarters had formerly held manual jobs . . . The long-term unemployed came disproportionately from construction, manufacturing or basic industries. The main reasons given for leaving their last job were redundancy and ill-health. In fact, more than one in three had some handicap or illness which affected their activities. (1981: 19)

Walker also drew attention to 'a significant group of older people who are part of the "hidden" unemployed because, under different labour market conditions, they would be employed', stressing the role of 'age discrimination' in this process, which meant that 'long-term unemployment [was] borne disproportionately by older workers' (23). Regional disparities in the unemployment rate contributed further complexity, although regional analyses still underestimated the impact on some vulnerable small areas. Sinfield, writing about the geography of unemployment in 1981, commented that

the picture that emerges is a depressing one of downward spiral. It illustrates well what may happen in a community with above-average unemployment for many years, and how further increases in unemployment will generally hit these groups yet again. (Sinfield 1981: 28)

Another study found that 'personal disadvantages', including low levels of education, poor health and disability, played only a minor role in explaining long-term unemployment. Rather more important in individual work histories were displacement from the 'shrinking manufacturing sector' (and from other industries of declining employment, such as mining, iron and steel) and mobility between industries (White 1983: 151). Large-scale redundancies, and to a lesser extent employers' programmes of early retirement, had also been important in bringing older men into



long-term unemployment. Only a minority of the long-term unemployed in White's study had a personal history of 'recurrent unemployment', and this was concentrated among the younger long-term unemployed. Notably, most of the formerly stable workers who were now long-term unemployed were older men, a disproportionate number of whom had experienced redundancy or early retirement. White observed that 'there were however many who had left stable employment of their own choice, most commonly for reasons of ill-health' (154). Furthermore, 'the great majority of the long-term unemployed came (in their last employment) from large or medium-sized firms or from the public sector' (155). White emphasised that while older men at this time were 'not particularly prominent in the flow into long-term unemployment', their chances of getting a job were 'extremely slender'. Summarising his conclusions about workers who had fallen into long-term unemployment directly from long-lasting stable jobs, he explained:

The main routes into unemployment for these formerly stable workers are early retirement, redundancy, and leaving for reasons of ill-health. The occupational pensioners naturally come from the over-55 age group, and from the skilled manual and higher non-manual occupations. Those leaving work for reasons of ill-health are more often in the age group between 45 and 55 and from a wide mix of manual occupations. Redundancies and closures, especially large-scale ones, bring stable employment to an end for many in both age groups. (White 1983: 164)

In 1986 a large research programme involving ten universities, the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI), was sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council. This studied developments in six labour markets (Aberdeen, Kirkcaldy, Northampton, Coventry, Rochdale and Swindon) and examined changes in labour supply and demand, the impact of economic restructuring and continuing high unemployment. The SCELI studies adopted a broader than conventional definition of unemployment, recognising that 'the unemployed are not just people without work but people who would participate in the formal economy if there were jobs available for them' (Gallie, Marsh and Vogler 1994: 7).

The SCELI studies also noted that it was difficult to make 'clean distinctions' between the unemployed and the economically inactive. In practice, SCELI treated as unemployed all those who were receiving benefits on the grounds of unemployment and any others who had looked for work in the previous four weeks.

By comparison with the present study, SCELI paid rather little attention to the group within the economically inactive category that

has increased most rapidly and has become the focus of growing policy attention: recipients of long-term sickness and disability benefits. SCALI nevertheless took research into employment and unemployment into important new territory and reached some significant conclusions. The study emphasised that there were 'no grounds for considering the non-registered (unemployed) as in any sense a less real category of the unemployed'. Furthermore, unemployed people did not display 'distinctive' attitudes to work, and '[t]he unemployed were clearly not... inherently unstable members of the workforce' (Gallie and Vogler 1994: 152).

Factors important for 'job chances' were

The availability of particular types of work... the resources that can be provided by the household to facilitate job search, and... the structural misfit between the low qualifications possessed by the unemployed and the sharp rise in qualifications required by the changing nature of work in industry. (Gallie and Vogler 1994: 153)

The SCALI data also provided an opportunity to study work history data collected from respondents for the period 1945–85. Analysis revealed a substantial strengthening of the relationship between 'men's occupational status and their susceptibility to unemployment' over the period, as well as a 'cohort difference in the impact of the adverse economic circumstances of the 1970s and 1980s', which had affected younger cohorts most seriously (Gershuny and Marsh 1994: 113). As we reveal in ch. 7, our new study found further evidence of this effect. Gershuny and Marsh also stressed their finding that 'unemployment is concentrated among a small group of people (in distinctive geographical and occupational locations)' (1994: 113).

The relationship between labour market behaviour and aspects of family life had been studied before SCALI (Yeandle 1991, 1993, Allatt and Yeandle 1992), but came into wider view through the new six-labour-market study. Specific scrutiny of unemployment and relationship breakdown revealed that

Postmarital unemployment caused a significant number of marital dissolutions which would otherwise not have occurred at all, or would have occurred at a later date... [and that] a number of individuals experienced unemployment episodes as a direct consequence of the dissolution of their marriages. (Lampard 1994: 296)

This issue has also been explored in the present study, and is discussed in relation to specific cases in ch. 7.

Dawes's investigation of *Long-term Unemployment and Labour Market Flexibility* (1993) drew on samples of men and women who had been out of work for six months or more in four of the localities included in

the SCCLI studies (Rochdale, Northampton, Swindon and Kirkcaldy), the interviews taking place in 1990 and 1991. Dawes found that where they could, the long-term unemployed acted flexibly, but that they were constrained by 'social factors which [were] not within their control' (8). The 'extent of household responsibilities' was a major influence on the labour market behaviour of the unemployed, a point explored in the present study, while social (and household) networks were of great importance in gaining a job and in alleviating poverty and social exclusion during unemployment. Dawes concluded that 'the level of unemployment benefits has no explanatory value in considering the labour market behaviour of the long-term unemployed'; indeed, decreasing levels of benefit would be likely only to 'exacerbate the process of social exclusion'. The research found that over time the 'reservation wage' increased rather than decreased, since for this group 'their household commitments remain[ed] the dominant influence on their assessment of the earnings they require[d]' (9).

These and other studies, then, had shown well before our study began that unemployment was unevenly distributed across the country, and affected some groups of men much more severely than others. It also indicated that the term 'unemployed' could, at times, be a label attached to men whose ability, inclination or need to work had become reduced, as well as one used to describe those whose sole reason for being out of work was that they had no opportunity of employment. Poor health, early retirement, other sources of income, including redundancy payments, wage replacement schemes, opportunities to access pensions before statutory retirement age and changes in social security benefits were all adding to an already complex picture. The way the boundaries between unemployment and other economic statuses were shifting was a key interest for our study, as it was clear that processes of labour market attachment and detachment were neither simple nor static.

### **Men's changing experience of work**

Throughout the 1990s evidence accumulated that, for men, the 'standard employment relationship' was becoming eroded (Beck 1992, Beatson 1995, Cousins 1999, Goodin 2000). Under multiple pressures – from labour market restructuring and an increasingly important service sector, from increased opportunities for extended education, from new patterns of family life and from the quest within organisations for downsized, flexible workforces responsive to technological change – men's employment patterns became more diverse. It became the received view that never again would men's working lives involve lifelong full-time employment in

a single industry, for the half century of their lifespan between the ages of 15 and 65. Work for men would start later, finish earlier and be more varied in between. Skills would become obsolete, or require updating, ever more rapidly, whole industries in which men had predominated for 150 years would disappear and in the future more work would involve interpersonal, clerical and technical skills, with much reduced call for manual labour, fewer unskilled jobs and a greater need to reskill and re-train, not just once, but perhaps numerous times during the working life. These developments, viewed as tragic and alarming by some (Seabrook 1978, 1982, Showler and Sinfield 1981, Merritt 1982), were seen by others as potentially heralding a world in which men would have more leisure, more choice and more variety in their lives (Gershuny, 1978). Data from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) confirm many of these observations. For example, whereas less than 5 per cent of men exited full-time education to unemployment before 1970, by the 1990s 'this had grown to almost one in three' (Taylor 2000: 76).

These changes reflected increased workplace and skill flexibility and greater use by employers of options for early retirement and voluntary redundancy. These trends were expected to continue (although as ch. 2 shows, most European governments no longer believe this to be the case). These developments, it was concluded, would not only exert their impact through changing practices in the workplace, but would also affect men's later lives: changes in the proportion of male workers covered by occupational pension provision were of particular concern. In the UK the proportion of male workers who were members of occupational pension schemes peaked as long ago as 1967, steadily reducing from the 1970s onwards (Department of Social Security (DSS) 2000a: para. 2.1).

The financial circumstances of detached men are an important element of the present study, and are discussed in chs. 6 and 9. A recent review of studies in this field has shown that the average real incomes of people in the 50–74 age group increased substantially in the last quarter of the twentieth century, with earnings playing a declining role, and private pensions and investment income an increasing role, while 'unearned private income was more important than transfers from the state' (Barker and Hancock 2000: 49). This review also used evidence from the Family Resources Survey (FRS) to show that 'nearly a quarter of men aged 50–54 who are seeking work or would like a job, and a fifth of those who are long-term sick in this age group, are drawing an occupational pension' (Barker and Hancock 2000: 50).

The FRS data also demonstrate that among the 50-plus group, men who were early retired were substantially more likely than those who were

long-term sick to be owner-occupiers, and that about a quarter had no financial wealth. Those in employment had the highest incomes in this group, followed, in declining order of income level, by the retired, the long-term sick and those looking for work (Barker and Hancock 2000: 51). Furthermore, the authors, using data from the BHPS, confirmed that

controlling for other factors, retirement before state pension age increases the probability of movement into the low-income group, possession of an occupational pension reduces the probability and home-owners are less likely than renters to move into low income. (Barker and Hancock 2000: 59)

Barker and Hancock's review (which also considered evidence from the Survey of Retirement and Retirement Plans conducted in 1988 and 1994) emphasised the importance of recognising the variety of financial circumstances in which early retired people, and indeed others in this age group, are found. Our study, as chs. 6 and 9 confirm, firmly underlines this point.

Since 1997, the pensions and employment situation of older workers have been a particular focus of the Labour government's attention, and a range of measures designed to halt or reverse the trend towards lower employment rates among this group has been introduced (Ashdown 2000), including the New Deal 50 Plus, which aims specifically to encourage those in the 50–64 age group to return to employment. Pensions policy has also been under review, and the Performance and Innovation Unit (2000) has reported on the trends and issues which lie behind the government's emphasis on 'active ageing'.

The study reported in this book is concerned with men who have become detached from the labour force on both voluntary (as in early retirement) and involuntary bases. Involuntary labour market exit may arise because of redundancy, poor health, workplace accidents and injuries, family obligations or dismissal. During the twentieth century men (and women) have acquired a range of legal rights and protections in employment which now govern their conditions of employment and the ways and circumstances in which their employment can be terminated. Full discussion of these is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is worthwhile briefly to note the main developments. (In some industries, collective bargaining agreements negotiated between employers and trade unions may offer a higher degree of protection to workers than is offered by the law.) The key provisions in British law have included those relating to redundancy, unfair dismissal, sickness, disability, entitlements to periods of leave (paid and unpaid) and regulations concerning working

hours. These policy developments are all relevant to the present study since they affect the circumstances in which men leave employment, or may have their employment legally terminated. For anyone who has ever secured employment, it is departure from paid work which, ultimately, leads to labour market detachment. Some of the legal measures concern how employers must behave if they intend to shed labour; others give legal protection to workers whose behaviour, for example absences from work, might otherwise cause their employers to dismiss them.

The Redundancy Payments Act 1965 was a policy originally introduced in a period of low unemployment, designed to facilitate the redeployment and mobility of workers, especially those over 41 years of age. In the 1970s, however, this had in effect 'become (hidden) *unemployment* redundancy for those within less than ten years of retirement' (Harris 1991: 110, emphasis in original).

A government-sponsored study of the effects of this legislation also showed that

One of the most important demonstrated consequences of the Act has been to increase the significance of age as a criterion for redundancy because the larger payments to older workers with long service acts as a mechanism to induce them to leave employment. (Department of Employment, 1978, cited Hepple and Fredman 1986: 141)

The 1965 Act and the subsequent Employment Protection (Consolidation) Act 1978 (which incorporated the 1965 Act) laid down how redundancy payments should be calculated. This included a scaling down of the amounts payable to workers in their final year before statutory retirement age (Hepple and Fredman 1986), and the exclusion of workers over this age from the provisions of the Act, providing a further incentive to male workers to avoid delaying departure from employment until after reaching age 64. We will see in ch. 2 how governments, which once encouraged such early retirement, have more recently tried to reverse the trend towards 'early exit' in an attempt to raise the employment rate among the working-age population (WAP).

The main ways in which the state has sought to support workers prevented from working through sickness or disability are described in ch. 3. Policy on industrial and occupational diseases and injuries developed gradually (and somewhat piecemeal) from the late nineteenth century onwards. The Workmen's Compensation Act of 1887 first introduced the concept of 'occupational risk' and provided for workers to be compensated for injuries suffered at work. This was extended to cover certain industrial diseases in 1906 (Marshall 1975). As late as 1972, however, some 5 million workers still 'worked in premises not covered by any

occupational health or safety legislation' (Hepple and Fredman 1986: 44), a fact which the comprehensive Health and Safety at Work Act of 1974 was designed to rectify. These and other subsequent developments have cushioned the worst effects of sickness and injury, although there remains a strong link between poverty and other forms of deprivation and poor health.

Legislation introduced by the last Conservative administration sought for the first time to protect workers and potential employees from discrimination on the grounds of disability (the Disability Discrimination Act 1995). Social and ideological perceptions of disability have changed significantly over recent decades (Walker and Howard 2000). This has contributed to shifts in policy concerning the state's responsibility to enable people with disabilities to secure adequate income to meet their living costs, as well as to enable them to participate in employment. The social security aspects of these shifts are considered in ch. 3. In line with such policy developments, the incoming 1997 Labour administration placed further emphasis on its desire to see 'an increase in the number of disabled people able to work', although how far the measures introduced have actually helped disabled people remains controversial (Drake 2000).

Through the Employment Relations Act 1999, introduced in part to comply with the UK's commitments to the European *Social Policy Agenda* (Commission of the European Communities 2000), male employees for the first time gained the right to some types of leave from work with legal protection against being penalised by their employer (Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) 1998). This was an important development, as it treated men who were fathers as having responsibilities other than for breadwinning, and meant that a role for men which involved the care of their families was now recognised in law. The Act gave all workers, including men, the right to thirteen weeks' unpaid leave during the first five years after having a child, and the right to take 'reasonable time off' to deal with family crises involving their children or other dependants. The government went on to review all aspects of parental leave in 2001, following publication of the *Work and Parents* Green Paper. It is planned that statutory rights to paid paternity leave for men at the time of their child's birth will be introduced in 2004 (DTI 2000).

While this brief discussion indicates the range of legal measures which should help to prevent men's detachment from the labour force, or compensate them if they are unable to work, our research showed that many men were unsure about their entitlements. Some men had quit their jobs in circumstances where the more recent developments described above

Table 1.2. *Employee jobs in selected industries in the UK: 1948–98*

Index (1948 = 100)	1948	1958	1968	1978	1988 <sup>a</sup>	1998
Coalmining	100	98	61	37	15	2
Ports and docks	100	100	87	42	23	16
Railways	100	87	51	44	27	16
Steel production	100	114	123	101	37	18
Shipbuilding	100	88	64	60	24	8
Agriculture	100	74	49	47	40	40
Motor vehicle manufacture	100	113	169	169	39	36
Textile manufacture	100	94	74	49	23	18
Column totals	100	92	73	58	27	19
Column totals (000 jobs)	4,092	3,778	2,993	2,363	1,118	791

*Note:* <sup>a</sup>The 1998 figures are interpolations based on the 1987 and 1989 Censuses of Employment. There was no Census of Employment in 1988.

*Source:* Parliamentary question in the House of Lords, 19 April 2000, published in Office for National Statistics 2000, 108.7: 311.

might have enabled them to remain in employment. We return to these issues in later chapters of the book.

### **Changes in the structure, organisation and composition of the labour market**

The key features of change in the UK labour force since the 1960s are well known. Back in 1966, well over half of the workforce (58 per cent) were manual workers, while fewer than one-tenth were in managerial or professional jobs (Weir 1973: 21). Thirty years later (using revised and therefore not directly comparable occupational definitions), it was estimated that fewer than half of employed men (about 48 per cent) were in manual occupations, while almost one-third (31 per cent) were in managerial or professional jobs. The occupational distribution of the workforce had also changed, with jobs in traditional male industries – coal, steel, shipbuilding, heavy engineering, vehicle manufacturing and agriculture – sharply reduced. Table 1.2 shows the dramatic reduction in the number of jobs in such industries between 1948 and 1998.

As the service sector has grown in importance in the UK economy, so the nature of the jobs within it has altered. The proportions of workers in full-time employment vary by both sex and age, and for men, the proportions in full-time employment fall quite sharply in older age groups (table 1.3). Service sector employment contains many part-time jobs, a high proportion of jobs based in offices, shops and leisure outlets, and



Table 1.3. *Older workers in employment by age group and whether working full time: UK, winter 1999–2000, not seasonally adjusted (thousands (%))*

Age	50–59	60–64	65+
Men	2,731	644	283
of which			
Total in full-time employment	2,512	526	88
Percentage in full-time employment	(92)	(82)	(31)
Women	2,297	370	179
of which			
Total in full-time employment	1,201	116	22
Percentage in full-time employment	(52)	(31)	(12)
All persons	5,028	1,014	461
of which			
Total in full-time employment	3,712	642	110
Percentage in full-time employment	(74)	(63)	(24)

Source: Labour Force Survey (published in Office for National Statistics 2000, 108.7: 311).

many in which the tasks involved have traditionally been unpaid work performed by women.

Part-time and temporary employment and (for some people) having a second job have become important features of the UK labour market, which has shown continuing growth in the proportion of part-time jobs, especially those held by workers in certain age groups and women. Part-time employment increased rather steeply for men in the UK between 1985 and 1995, with part-time employment among men aged 25–49 rising by 145 per cent to approximately 250,000 jobs. This was also an important type of employment for younger and older men, with almost 450,000 part-time jobs held by men under 25, and around 250,000 by men aged 50–64, in 1995 (Yeandle 1999). Men are slightly less numerous than women among those in the UK labour force who hold a second job. Labour Force Survey estimates suggest that in 1998 around 550,000 men and some 680,000 women were in this situation (Office for National Statistics 1999: 77). Temporary employment, although not a particularly strong feature of the UK labour market when it is compared to that of other European countries, affected around 6.5 per cent of male employees in the UK in 1997 (and was higher, at 8.4 per cent, for women).

Changes in the occupational and industrial structure of the labour market have, of course, brought some benefits for those in the workforce. The declining industrial sectors included many characterised by dangerous, unhealthy or unpleasant working conditions. Despite health and safety

legislation, including the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act, workplace injury rates remain much higher in many traditionally male occupations – construction, extraction and utility supply, transport, storage and communication, agriculture and manufacturing (all with workplace injury rates at or near 20 per 1000 in the late 1990s) (Office for National Statistics 1999: 84) – than in education, finance and business. Predominantly male industries such as agriculture and fishing, transport and communication, energy and water supply and construction also have longer average weekly hours of work than is the case in banking and finance, public administration, education and health or other services (Office for National Statistics 1999: 78), although male weekly hours of employment continue to exceed female weekly hours in all of these sectors.

### **Regional and local labour markets**

As indicated above, a regional and local focus has long been recognised as important in explaining labour market behaviour and change. The main structural developments in the UK labour market referred to above have had a differential impact in different regions of the country. This has meant that employment growth of certain types has been concentrated in some localities, with a converse concentration of job loss in others. Investigation of the relationship between local unemployment rates and individual ill-health during the 1980s has shown, by correlating rates of unemployment in local labour markets with data on the health of individuals, that '*high levels of unemployment exert an adverse effect on the relative chances of poor health, whether subjective or objective, across a national population of working age*' (Bellaby and Bellaby 1999: 479, emphasis in original). This research, which controlled for a range of confounding factors including the 'healthy worker effect', suggested that 'it is . . . likely that high levels of unemployment generate ill health that leads to more irregular employment and more frequent early exit from the labour market' (*ibid.*). This is important in relation to the present study, which was designed to explore processes of labour market detachment in areas with different levels of joblessness (see the appendix). As we show later in the book, our study found greater reliance on sickness and disability benefits in the areas of higher, longer-standing unemployment. A variety of ways in which this finding might be explained are explored in chs. 5 and 8.

Another important feature of the dynamic labour market which this book explores concerns changes in the skills and skill levels of the male labour force over time. Much of the labour market restructuring outlined above has occurred in sectors in which skilled male manual workers were employed. For middle-aged and older men leaving these industries,

closures and redundancies meant that the occupation for which they had trained (often through formal apprenticeships) and in which they had expected to have lifelong employment was now closed to them. For younger men these same shifts have brought important changes in youthful expectations about when in the life course vocational training occurs, and have introduced the idea that there may be a number of points in the male working life when skills need to be acquired. Men in their 40s and older, shaken out of traditional male industries, now require both new job opportunities and the chance to retrain and reskill for these, if they are to regain access to employment.

The adequacy of the state's efforts to support these developments has been widely debated. From 1974 onwards, following the establishment of the Manpower Services Commission, vocational training structures in the UK were recast (Ainley 1988). The old apprenticeship model, which had given many working-class males their access to skilled, unionised and relatively secure and well-paid employment, was replaced by a variety of youth training schemes, mainly designed to alleviate the problems associated with rising youth unemployment (Allatt and Yeandle 1992). Later, in the 1990s, modern apprenticeships, and sustained efforts to increase the age participation rate in further and higher education, were also introduced, as governments gave increasing attention to the need for higher levels of skill and qualification in the workforce. Inevitably, some of the detached men interviewed for the present study had experience of these measures. Since 1997, a range of New Deal programmes have been introduced, as part of Welfare to Work policy. The initial emphasis was on the New Deals for young people and for lone parents, although subsequent initiatives have also been developed: New Deal 50 Plus, mentioned above, and New Deal 25 Plus. The Labour government has claimed success for these interventions (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) 2001a), although critics argue that falls in official unemployment have been mainly attributable to the buoyant labour market context which coincided with Labour's 1997–2001 term of office.

### **Earnings and family responsibilities**

The changes in men's relationship to the labour market described above have gradually eroded the male breadwinner role, while women's much increased participation in employment has underscored this change. Indeed, the trend towards dual earning in family households has been particularly important in raising the standard of living of those households able to retain an active connection with the labour market. A variety of demographic changes is also linked to the changes in men's family

responsibilities and in the role of male earnings in household economies. These changes include a lower marriage rate, smaller family size coupled with increased longevity (so that raising a family occupies a relatively shorter part of the average life), higher levels of divorce and relationship breakdown and an increasing likelihood that men will have second families. The situation of some men, including lone fathers, single men and divorced or widowed men living alone, raises particular issues relating to labour market attachment. Although it continues to be the case that most men are the main earners for their households, for a significant group supplementary income is available, especially at certain life stages, and men who are lifelong sole breadwinners have become something of a rarity. The significance of these developments for male attachment to the labour force has been little discussed and studied. The design of the present study has enabled some light to be shed on the circumstances of men in different family and household situations, which are examined in ch. 7.

In the past decade analysts have drawn attention to the emergence of a social divide between 'work-rich' and 'work-poor' households (Gregg and Wadsworth 1996). Official analysis of 'workless households' – homes in which no one has a paid job – showed that in 1998 they could be categorised as follows: 31 per cent single person households; 25 per cent lone parent households containing dependent children; 21 per cent married/cohabiting couples without children; 12 per cent married/cohabiting couples with dependent children; 5 per cent lone parents with non-dependent children; 4 per cent households of two or more unrelated adults; and 3 per cent married/cohabiting couples with non-dependent children. Further analysis showed that economic inactivity was more important among these households than unemployment. Of the 3.1 million workless households containing at least one person of working age, 75 per cent were households where all adult members were economically inactive and 14 per cent were households where all were unemployed, while 11 per cent contained both unemployed and inactive adults (Office for National Statistics 1999: 74). The implications of this are that policy directed at reducing unemployment will not, unless it is accompanied by significant policy measures to tackle economic inactivity, make much of an inroad into poverty.

Furthermore, generic policy based on a notional household containing a couple and their children is now more inappropriate than ever. Recent comparison of data from the General Household Panel Survey for 1973 and 1996 (Berthoud 2000) shows that households containing 'single adults' were less likely to have a job at the later date (68 per cent compared with 80 per cent in 1973). Among 'couples with children',

there was an increase in both joblessness (up from 5 to 9 per cent having no job) and dual earning (up from 43 per cent to 60 per cent). The increasing prevalence of living alone, which features among the population of working age as well as among the post-retirement population, like the continuing rise in the number of lone parent families, which has already reached official policy agendas, must be recognised in the development of employment and social policy.

### **Labour market dynamics**

As is made clear in ch. 3, which discusses social security benefits, there is continuous and substantial movement between different labour market (and thus benefit) circumstances. This dynamic aspect of the labour market is very important. It is movement into unemployment (or another specific labour market status, such as economic inactivity) at a higher on-flow rate than the off-flow from that status which raises the size of the unemployed (or inactive) population. What matters, in terms of whether unemployment or economic inactivity is increasing or decreasing, are the answers to three questions? How many people are entering unemployment (etc.)? How many people are leaving unemployment (etc.)? And once on, how long are people remaining in unemployment (etc.)?

Movement between economic activity statuses over time can be estimated from the UK Labour Force Survey. Table 1.4 shows the estimates based on data for men whose status was known for spring in both 1999 and 2000. From this table it can be seen that some statuses are much more static than others: for example, most men (95 per cent) who were in employment in spring 1999 were also in employment in spring 2000. Those who were economically inactive in 1999, however, were also very likely to remain so a year later; of those looking after a family or home, 88 per cent were still inactive, and of those who were long-term sick or disabled, 96 per cent were still inactive. By contrast, of those who were unemployed and actively seeking work in spring 1999, 40 per cent were in work a year later, 46 per cent remained unemployed and 14 per cent had become economically inactive. Of those who had been temporarily sick or injured in 1999 39 per cent had regained employment, while 14 per cent had become unemployed and 48 per cent were economically inactive.

The BHPS also provides important evidence of dynamic labour market processes, showing that whereas only 3 per cent of employed men had become unemployed at the next wave of the interviews (one year later), 54 per cent of men who were unemployed at first contact were still in this situation at the following wave of interviews (Taylor 2000: 90). On the

Table 1.4. *Movement between employment statuses over twelve months: men in UK, spring 2000*

Status one year previously (main activity self-assessed)	Current labour market status			
	Total (000)	Employed (%)	Unemployed (%)	Economically inactive (%)
In employment <sup>a</sup>	15,000	95	2	2
Unemployed, actively seeking work				
Full-time student	1,361	38	9	52
Looking after family or home	251	7	6	88
Temporarily sick or disabled	98	39	14	48
Long-term sick or disabled	1,287	2	2	96
Retired	3,706	1	— <sup>b</sup>	99
None of these	178	45	14	41
All	22,754	68	4	28

*Notes:*

<sup>a</sup>Includes those who responded that they were working in a paid job or business, laid off, on short time in a firm, on a government-supported training scheme or doing unpaid work for themselves or a relative.

<sup>b</sup>Sample size too small for a reliable estimate.

*Source:* Labour Force Survey (in Office for National Statistics 2000, 108.9: 394).

basis of extensive analysis of the BHPS, Taylor conjectures that ‘Unstable early years in the labour market, and an exposure to unemployment at a young age (which is becoming more common) could have repercussions for an individual’s career’ (Taylor 2000: 92).

These analyses form an important backdrop to our study. As ours is a study of men who have had no full-time regular job for almost all the six months prior to the survey, it has, by definition, excluded those men who, during the previous six months, have returned to employment following redundancy, unemployment, ill-health or a short spell, for whatever reason, between jobs. The study was designed to explore processes of male labour force detachment. As such it is men without work whose personal, family or economic situations have led them to make no attempt, or only unsuccessful attempts, to re-enter the labour market with whom this book is concerned.