

Essay

How Can We Help the Long-Term Unemployed?

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We are in the midst of an invisible crisis of long-term unemployment. Six years after the official end of the Great Recession, the percentage of long-term unemployed (LTU) people remains at levels unseen in over 6 decades. A recently released AARP Public Policy Institute [report](#) reveals that a stunning 45 percent of unemployed workers over the age of 55 are LTU, and that these workers are far more likely than other workers to drop out of the workforce altogether. Long-term unemployment puts workers and their families at great risk for losing their homes and life savings, and as [my recent book shows](#), for many job seekers the most devastating consequence of long-term unemployment is the emotional toll of enduring months or years of rejections. Family breakdown and deterioration of physical health often follow.

Who becomes trapped in long-term unemployment? Many assume that education is at the root of it. Yet, once laid off, the likelihood of becoming LTU is just as great for those with a college education as it is for those without. The most reliable predictor of long-term unemployment is age. There are multiple reasons why older workers are more likely to get trapped in long-term unemployment, but one key factor is unfounded employer stereotypes. While some employers fear that older workers will not

stick around, my research—involving in-depth conversations with hundreds of unemployed job seekers—and other larger studies suggest that older workers are more committed to contributing to a company that gives them a chance to prove their value than any other group of workers.

Also underlying the crisis of long-term unemployment is the ugly truth that older LTU workers face a double bias. In addition to age discrimination they confront another distinct barrier in the form of discrimination based on duration of unemployment. Flying in the face of any semblance of meritocracy, research shows that the likelihood of an employer inviting a job seeker for an interview is shockingly *higher* for an applicant with no relevant industry experience but who is only short-term unemployed compared with a job seeker who has relevant industry experience but is unemployed longer than 6 months. The

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systematic screening out of job seekers based on their unemployment duration is not only a vicious trap for unemployed workers but also means that companies are passing on more qualified candidates.

What can be done? The long-term unemployment crisis needs to be addressed at multiple levels. First, employers should be encouraged to re-examine screening processes that shut out older LTU applicants. Given the large pool of talented workers that is currently being missed by most employers, companies who take steps to end discrimination against older LTU workers are likely to see a boost in their performance. But appealing only to companies' self-interest is insufficient. In the United States, we have come to recognize the damage of institutionalized forms of discrimination against entire categories of job seekers such as women and minorities, and the same should be recognized as true for discrimination against the LTU. The difficulty of enforcing antidiscrimination laws means that making discrimination against LTU workers illegal would not make the problem disappear. Nonetheless, making such discrimination illegal would send a clear moral message to employers that these hiring practices are contrary to American values of meritocracy and equal opportunity. One cannot claim to be a good corporate citizen while engaging in hiring practices that systematically exclude millions of workers without regard to their actual skills and abilities.

As we work to change employers' hiring practices, we should also do much more to support LTU workers. Research dating back to the 1970s shows that certain support interventions make an important difference in raising the re-employment rates. Moreover, my current research with the Institute for Career Transitions reveals how interventions can yield dramatic benefits to job seekers' well-being by using strategies that counter the institutional forces that often lead LTU job seekers to blame themselves for their unemployment. While job search support is only a partial solution, funding the expansion of effective support interventions can make a dramatic and immediate difference to the prospects and well-being of millions of American workers.

We are experiencing an immense but silent crisis. I fear the stoic silence of LTU workers has led our policy makers and the general public to underestimate the intensity of the financial

and emotional pain wrought by long-term unemployment. In fact, with record levels of long-term unemployment persisting 6 years after the Great Recession has ended, the crisis of long-term unemployment is one of the defining social problems of our time. We can no longer wait for the long-term unemployment problem to resolve itself, but must take concerted action to end it.

The views expressed by the author are meant to encourage debate and discussion; they do not necessarily represent official policies of AARP.

Essay 15, June 2015

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