



Native Americans in the labor force: hunting for an accurate measure

JUDITH KLEINFELD AND JOHN A. KRUSE

The concepts used nationally to assess labor force participation are considered to be inappropriate for Native American population groups. The fundamental issue concerns the measurement of unemployment. The Current Population Survey (CPS) defines an unemployed person as someone who has no employment, is available for work, and has engaged in some specific jobseeking activity within the past 4 weeks. As the American Indian Policy Review Commission points out, in many Indian reservations and isolated Native villages, few jobs are available.¹ In these small communities the informal communications network provides excellent information on new employment opportunities. Many Indian and Eskimo adults do not actively seek work in the conventional sense because they are well aware that no work is available. To exclude these individuals from the labor force results in a serious underestimation of Native American unemployment and the available labor pool. Moreover, this problem is not merely a technical issue of measurement. Federal and State funds are allocated to regions on the basis of such employment statistics.

While the knowledge that no jobs exist may cause significant members of Native Americans not to be counted as members of the labor force, there is also evidence to suggest that many Native Americans in fact drop out of the labor force intermittently in order to meet community and family obligations, or to pursue other activities such as hunting and fishing. For example, Harland Padfield and John van Willigen carefully studied the activity patterns of a sample of 300 Papago men.² They found that 15 percent were "voluntarily idle" in midsummer.

Attitude surveys also suggest substantial variability in Native Americans' work schedule preferences. Accord-

ing to some surveys, the majority of Indians and Eskimos prefer long-term jobs, suggesting that it is teachers and employers who incorrectly overestimate preferences for seasonal work.³ However, these studies, as well as other research, suggest considerable variability in preferences for year-round and part-year wage work, not only among different Native American population groups but also among individuals in the same group.⁴ Therefore, the measurement problems associated with unemployment among Native Americans are not limited to the discouraged worker effect; they also stem from real desires not to work for wages during part of the year.

To overcome these problems, agencies and researchers concerned with Native American populations have used a variety of alternative concepts and measurement approaches to assess unemployment. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, for example, considers any Native adult who does not hold a wage job to be "unemployed." Agency personnel roughly estimate unemployment in some rural Native communities and reservations to be as high as 50 to 80 percent. The American Indian Policy Review Commission, suspecting that census figures underestimate and Bureau of Indian Affairs figures overestimate Native American unemployment, suggested that the 1980 census questions on unemployment should be adapted to the situation of American Indians.⁵ The Commission recommended that Indians be asked, "When job opportunities occur, do you seek them?"

The 1980 Census Supplementary Questionnaire for Indians, however, did not follow this recommendation. The question on unemployment asks, "Of the weeks not worked in 1979, how many weeks was this person actively looking for work or on layoff from a job?" Previous questions ask how many weeks the person worked in 1979 and the main reason the person worked fewer than 50 weeks. However, respondents have no socially acceptable way of indicating that they prefer a lifestyle combining intermittent participation in the wage economy with non-wage activities, such as subsistence hunting and fishing. Such a response would be placed in the category "did not want work," which has negative connotations, particularly for men without obvious home responsibilities.

Without information on the size of the intermittent worker effect, statistics on Indian and Eskimo employ-

Judith Kleinfeld is a professor of psychology and John A. Kruse is an associate professor of survey research at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

ment patterns are difficult to interpret. For example, Benjamin Taylor and Dennis O'Connor, in a study of five Indian reservations in the Southwest, point out that "seasonal or irregular work characterizes a significant part of reservation labor, ranging from 27 percent of the working-age Zaguna tribe to 55 percent of the Fort Apaches over 16 years of age."⁶ However, it is not clear to what extent these patterns are the result of personal preference and to what extent they are caused by lack of jobs and requisite skills.

Alaskan research

This paper discusses three Alaskan studies concerned with measuring unemployment in Native American groups. These studies suggest the importance of both a "discouraged worker" and an "intermittent worker" effect in understanding Native American employment patterns. Standard national definitions of unemployment substantially underestimate the proportion of Natives who want work and are available for work. However, our research also suggests that average labor force participation rates, at least among men, may remain substantially below national norms even when high-paying jobs at a variety of skill levels are available.

The first study was conducted in January 1977.⁷ The Alaska Legislature, believing that official employment statistics seriously understate unemployment in rural Native communities, directed the State Department of Labor to survey "real" unemployment in the Lower Yukon-Kuskokwim Region. Income levels in the Eskimo communities in this isolated area are among the lowest in Alaska, and job opportunities are extremely limited. Of available jobs, 44 percent are in government. However, the region also has a strong noncash economy based on subsistence fishing and hunting. In addition, commercial fishing, trapping, and crafts are important sources of cash income, although no statistics are available on employment in these occupations.

Bilingual Eskimos interviewed 86 percent of the working-age adult population (1,412 respondents) in nine villages. They used a one-page form patterned on the CPS. As in the CPS, one set of questions classified individuals as "unemployed" if they were not working and had "been looking for work during the past four weeks." However, the villagers were also asked about desire for work. "Does the person want a regular job now, either full or part-time?" Under the conventional CPS definition, the unemployment rate in January 1977 was 24 percent. Under the broader definition, it was 48.8 percent.

While national surveys also yield higher jobless rates when "discouraged workers" are included, these results support the view that unemployment among Natives is seriously underestimated. However, the specific survey question used has some limitations.

First, there is the problem of respondents presenting themselves to an interviewer in a favorable light. Village Eskimos in remote communities are well aware of the majority culture's work ethic, whether or not they personally subscribe to it. Without an obviously acceptable reason, such as child care responsibilities or poor health, they might have been reluctant to tell the interviewer that they did not want to work at the time of the survey.

Second, the question does not cover desired duration of employment. In another household survey, which included some of the same communities, most of the 344 respondents indicated that they preferred to work only certain months of the year. Those who wanted part-year work generally did not want to be employed in the spring or fall, seasons of intense subsistence activity.⁸ Indeed, some Eskimos may view wage work as a secondary activity, a means to supplement hunting and fishing. Thus, asking whether the individual wants a "regular" job may miss a critical cultural difference in labor force behavior.

North Slope boom

In the second study, funded by the National Science Foundation, we examined the response of the Inupiat to the new high paying job opportunities on the North Slope in 1977.⁹ A previous study of Native employment directly associated with the trans-Alaska pipeline project found that many Natives had worked for only 8 weeks or less despite the high pay.¹⁰ During informal interviews, Native respondents cited work camps located away from home, the heavy 10-hour, 7-day workweek, bigotry against Natives by white coworkers, and alleged poor use of Native workers by the companies, as disincentives to longer employment tenure.¹¹

On the North Slope, however, oil and gas development created a situation which eliminated or modified many of these perceived barriers to long-term employment. The jobs resulted not so much from direct oilfield activities at Prudhoe Bay as from the formation of an Inupiat government, the North Slope Borough, in 1972. The borough, encompassing eight Inupiat villages and a population of about 4,000, levied property taxes on the Prudhoe Bay oil complex. Revenues grew from less than \$1 million in 1973 to about \$57 million in 1977. The borough transformed these tax revenues into jobs adapted to contemporary Inupiat lifestyles. It launched a \$511 million capital improvements program, which resulted in large numbers of skilled and unskilled construction jobs. Borough government and school district operations also employed large numbers of white-collar workers. By 1977, the borough alone employed about 800 workers in administration, education, and construction.

The government established a strong local hire pro-

gram and was willing to absorb substantial cost overruns to employ local Inupiat. To minimize conflicts between wage work and subsistence, the borough granted leaves of absence for subsistence activities and was tolerant of absenteeism. It paid high wages, with construction pay matching the wage scales established during the building of the trans-Alaska pipeline. The average wage of Inupiat adults in 1977 was almost \$500 per week, and about 25 percent received paychecks of \$800 or more. Yet, borough jobs did not require workers to leave home, give up subsistence activities, cope with bigotry, or deal with an uncomfortable, non-Native environment.

The borough did not succeed in making jobs available to all Inupiat adults in each of the eight villages during the entire year. However, in certain situations, such as in Barrow (the large regional center), jobs were readily available to anyone who wanted wage work during the summer construction season.

The North Slope study examined the question—under these unusually favorable labor market conditions did the labor force participation rate of Inupiat men and women approach national norms? Or did special cultural factors result in lower labor force participation despite the availability of good jobs and the presence of loosely structured work rules?

Inupiat interviewers conducted a household survey in Barrow and five smaller communities in late 1977. We had randomly selected one adult from each village household and one adult from a 50-percent sample of Barrow households. The final sample consisted of 290 persons, 75 percent of the adults contacted, and represented 21 percent of the adult population. In our labor force analysis, we excluded persons age 16 to 18 and 55 and older so that cultural differences in school attendance and retirement ages would not affect comparisons with national labor force patterns.

Those interviewed were asked for a work history from October 1976 to September 1977. Persons who did not hold any paying job during the year were asked whether there were special reasons that prevented them from working. To measure monthly unemployment the survey asked, "Were there months between October 1976 and September 1977 when you wanted a job and didn't have one? (If yes) What months were they?" This measure of unemployment was, of course, a broad definition, which counted a person as "unemployed" if he or she stated a desire for wage work regardless of specific jobseeking activity.

In analyzing the data, it quickly became apparent that many Inupiat did not say they wanted wage work during all the months they did not work. Some were nonwage earners, whose family responsibilities or health problems prevented them from taking employment. However, many were intermittent workers who worked

at wage jobs part of the year. In addition, when asked about work schedule preferences, slightly more than half of both men and women said they wanted some form of part-year work.

This preference for part-year work was even stronger among North Slope Inupiat high school students, particularly male students.¹² In this small survey, our question on work preferences contained a socially acceptable alternative to year-round wage work ("After you have finished your schooling, do you want a year-round job or to work only part of the year so you can hunt and fish a lot, or don't you want a job?"). None of the students stated they didn't want a wage job at all. However, of the 75 male students, 69 percent preferred a part-year job compared to 41 percent of the 99 female students.

When we measured annual average labor force participation,¹³ Inupiat adult women approached national norms, particularly the young women. However, Inupiat male labor force participation at all ages was far below national norms.

The major reason for the lower male labor force participation was that most men were blue-collar workers. When particular construction projects ended in their villages, they were laid off. Substantial layoffs occurred in the winter of 1976–77, when the borough cut back on its construction program because of financing difficulties. However, intensive construction work resumed in the summer of 1977. This increase in job opportunities led to a dramatic increase in male labor force participation, which rose from a low of 47 percent in November 1976 to a high of 74 percent in September 1977.

Yet, even when good job opportunities were abundant, Inupiat male labor force participation remained well below national norms. In Barrow, for example, labor force participation of Inupiat men age 18–55 peaked at only 76 percent in the summer of 1977. Of the 24 percent who were not in the labor force, just 10 percent were nonwage earners and most of these had health problems. The remainder were intermittent workers who chose not to work during the month.

In short, the North Slope study suggests that the major factor influencing Native American labor force participation is indeed the availability of good jobs. Yet, even under highly favorable circumstances, cultural preferences result in labor force participation rates below national norms, at least among men.

Although our North Slope research results suggested that the number of intermittent workers is significant, we could not precisely measure the number of such workers. We had asked retrospectively what months individuals were without work but wanted it. However, people may have forgotten specific months. We attempted to remedy this problem in a subsequent study by including a question which asked explicitly

whether individuals did not want work in particular months.

Regional surveys

In 1979, we cooperated with several Federal and State agencies to conduct a broad survey of recreation, employment, and other community issues in randomly sampled households in the Interior, Southcentral, and Southeast regions of Alaska. Each regional survey included the urban center, surrounding small Native and other communities, and rural Native villages. The Native sample consisted of 335 respondents representing Eskimo, Aleut, Athabascan, and Tlingit cultural groups.¹⁴

The survey questions concerning employment were essentially the same as in the North Slope study. However, in addition to asking each respondent which months during the previous year "did you want a job but did not have one," respondents were also asked, "Which, if any, months between April 1978 and March 1979 did you decide not to work?" Thus, the decision to withdraw temporarily from the labor force was measured directly rather than being inferred as a residual category.

The results show that rural Natives specifically did not want to work during an average of 1.4 months of the year. The particular months specified varied by region. In the Interior, peak withdrawal occurred in August (17 percent); in Southcentral, the peak was in October (9 percent); and in Southeast, it was January through March (8 percent). However, even with these explicit answers, there remained a large residual of Natives who were not working at wage jobs and who stated neither that they wanted work nor that they did not want work in a particular month. This residual ranged from 12 percent in the Interior to 8 percent in Southcentral Alaska. If we assume this group would take work if jobs were available, 29 percent in Interior, 18 percent in Southcentral, and 24 percent in Southeast were unemployed. If we assume this group was not interested in wage work, although reluctant to say so, unemployment rates would drop to 17 percent in the Interior, 10 percent in Southcentral, and 13 percent in Southeast. The use of these series of questions to estimate annual average unemployment results in a bracket around the "true" proportion of Native American unemployment. Whichever estimate is used, it is obvious that serious levels of unemployment exist in these regions.

Thus, even by providing a means for respondents to differentiate between unemployment and temporary withdrawal from the work force, our estimate of unemployment remains imprecise. However, in these Native American population groups the nature of unemployment itself is imprecise. Some adults shift in and out of

wage work depending on job availability, immediate need for cash, and what other options exist at the time. It is, of course, possible to develop a series of questions which unambiguously assigns adults to a labor force category each month. Indeed, in an exploratory study, we attempted to ask Native respondents about their activities in the wage and nonwage sectors and whether they wanted employment on a month-by-month basis. This measurement approach, however, worked badly. Native adults resented and resisted having their activities categorized in these ways. Such a survey approach was perceived as too intrusive. It made too obvious the number of months adults were not engaged in some "productive" activity by majority culture definitions.

Conclusions

Taken together, these studies confirm that the standard definition of unemployment results in a serious underestimation of the number of Native Americans who want wage work. The availability of local employment opportunities, or the lack of them, are well known and largely determine whether individuals actively look for work. At the same time, these studies suggest that significant numbers of Native Americans chose to work intermittently in the wage economy, although the proportion of such worker is likely to vary among cultural groups. Both the "discouraged worker" effect and the "intermittent worker" effect makes it quite difficult to measure Native American labor force participation.

We can offer no simple solution to the problem of how to measure unemployment in Native American population groups heavily involved in a nonwage as well as a cash economy. Two general points emerge from our analyses:

- Questions designed to measure unemployment among transitional Native groups should present a choice between wage work and socially prestigious alternatives in the local cultural situation. Native Americans are aware of the majority culture work ethic and can be reluctant to indicate that they are not employed and do not want wage work.
- Studies of Native American labor force patterns should recognize the possibility of preferences for part-year versus year-round work (in addition to part-time versus full-time jobs) and should include questions to assess during how much of the year and at which times individuals want wage work.

The specific measurement approach we have developed (asking adults which months they were employed, which months they wanted work, and which months they did not want work) results in a range, rather than a single estimate, of unemployment. About 10 percent of Native adults who are not working in particular months do not place themselves in the alternative work-

do not want work categories. This ambiguity, however, may reflect the actual vagueness of unemployment among individuals who maintain a lifestyle combining economic activity in both the modern and traditional

sectors in the context of extended families who provide mutual economic support. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect that precise answers to questions on unemployment can be found in this cultural context. □

— FOOTNOTES —

¹ Mary Ellen Ayres, "Federal Indian policy and labor statistics—a review essay," *Monthly Labor Review*, April 1978, pp. 22–27.

² Harland Padfield and John van Willigen, "Work and income patterns in a transitional population: the Papago of Arizona," *Human Organization*, March 1969.

³ Derek G. Smith, *Occupational Preferences of Northern Students* (Ottawa, Canada: Northern Economic Development Branch, 1974); and *Native People's Perceptions of Factors Associated with Job Acceptance and Retention* (Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Northern Affairs Branch, 1974).

⁴ Note the differences in preferences for year-round work expressed in a survey of diverse Alaska Native population groups in Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, *Western and Arctic Alaska Transportation Study*, August 1980.

⁵ "Federal Indian policy . . .," p. 25.

⁶ Benjamin J. Taylor and Dennis J. O'Connor, *Indian Manpower Resources in the Southwest: A Pilot Study* (Arizona State University, 1969), p. 354.

⁷ Rod Brown, Jeff Hadland, Scott Hannigan, and Stanley D. Burrows, *Lower Yukon-Kuskokwim Region Labor Market Analysis* (Alaska

Department of Labor, 1981).

⁸ *Western and Arctic Alaska Transportation Study*.

⁹ Judith Kleinfeld, Jack Kruse, and Robert Travis, *Different Paths of Inupiat Men and Women in the Wage Economy* (University of Alaska: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1981).

¹⁰ Larry L. Naylor and Lawrence A. Gooding, *Alaska Native Hire on the Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline Project* (University of Alaska: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1978).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Judith Kleinfeld and Jack Kruse, *High School: Views of North Slope Borough Students* (University of Alaska: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1977).

¹³ We treated a respondent as being in the labor force in a given month if he or she held a job for 2 weeks or more during the month or wanted wage work during the month. Those who did not work at all during the year or did not mention that they wanted work during a month they were not working were treated as out of the labor force for that month.

¹⁴ Alaska Public Survey, unpublished results (University of Alaska, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1981).