

# A year's work: labor force activity from a different perspective

*The annual March work experience supplement to the Current Population Survey provides a unique view of labor force activity which complements the monthly CPS data*

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"How many Americans work all year?" "How many persons experience unemployment sometime during a given year?" These are some of the questions that cannot be answered with the typical data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), which refer to a single week each month. Even the annual average data are nothing more than an average of the situation in those 12 "typical" weeks. The annual work experience survey, conducted each March as a supplement to the CPS, provide data which reveal how many persons worked or looked for work, or did both, during the previous year.

The March supplement provides a comprehensive year-long view of labor force activity, that is, the number of weeks each person spent working, looking for work, or not in the labor force. These data provide a different perspective on the work force than the monthly data. For example, while the monthly survey indicated that about 8.2 million people were unemployed in a typical week in 1986, the March supplement showed that almost 21 million persons had been unemployed for at least 1 week during that year.

Thus, the work experience data enhance the monthly CPS numbers. Some trends, for example, the overall economic strength from year to year or the long-term increases in labor force participation of women, are

evident from both perspectives. Often, however, one view provides information not obtained from the other, such as the inability of the monthly CPS to show the number and weeks women work during the year.

This report examines the results of the March 1987 work experience questions. It addresses five specific issues or trends for which these data provide a unique view of the labor market.

1. *Despite a widespread perception of a recent proliferation of part-time or temporary jobs in the economy, the proportion of workers who were employed year round, usually full time in 1986 was at its highest level in the past 20 years and was up sharply from 1982.*

In 1986, 59.2 percent of all persons with some employment during the year worked at least 50 weeks, usually in a full-time job. Such schedules are called "year-round, full-time," or "full-schedule" work. That proportion was slightly higher than in the mid-1960's, and well above the recessionary low of 55.0 percent in 1982 and the 1976 low for the two decades for which a consistent series of data are available. (See table 1.) This lengthening of work schedules is even more impressive when one considers that women, who are generally less likely than men to work full schedules, have made up a steadily expanding share of the work force.

Between 1982 and 1986, the total number of persons with some employment during the year rose by 9.5

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**Table 1. Work experience of the population during the year, by sex, 1966-86**

Year	Number of workers (thousands)	Percent distribution				Workers as a percent of population	Year-round, full-time workers as a percent of population	
		Total	Full time		Part time			
			50 to 52 weeks	1 to 49 weeks	50 to 52 weeks			1 to 49 weeks
<b>Both sexes</b>								
1966 ...	86,266	100.0	58.0	23.3	6.3	12.4	66.9	38.8
1967 ...	88,779	100.0	58.6	22.9	6.4	12.1	67.2	39.4
1968 ...	90,230	100.0	57.9	23.3	6.4	12.4	67.6	39.1
1969 ...	92,477	100.0	57.1	23.4	6.8	13.0	67.9	38.8
1970 ...	93,850	100.0	55.6	23.8	6.7	13.9	67.4	37.5
1971 ...	95,481	100.0	56.1	23.3	7.2	13.5	66.7	37.4
1972 ...	97,654	100.0	57.0	23.0	6.7	13.2	66.8	38.1
1973 ...	101,112	100.0	57.0	22.3	7.0	13.7	67.8	38.6
1974 ...	102,608	100.0	54.3	24.3	7.0	14.4	67.3	36.5
1975 ...	102,603	100.0	54.3	24.6	7.5	13.7	66.0	35.8
1976 ...	105,909	100.0	54.2	24.3	7.2	14.3	66.9	36.3
1977 ...	108,914	100.0	54.8	23.8	7.1	14.3	67.6	37.0
1978 ...	112,335	100.0	56.2	22.9	7.0	13.9	68.5	38.5
1979 ...	114,993	100.0	56.3	22.7	7.1	13.9	68.9	38.8
1980 ...	115,752	100.0	56.1	22.4	7.7	13.7	68.3	38.3
1981 ...	116,794	100.0	55.9	21.7	7.8	14.5	68.0	38.0
1982 ...	116,277	100.0	55.0	22.0	8.4	14.5	67.0	36.8
1983 ...	117,575	100.0	56.8	20.3	8.8	14.2	66.8	37.9
1984 ...	121,148	100.0	58.1	19.7	8.1	14.0	68.2	39.6
1985 ...	123,466	100.0	58.7	19.5	8.3	13.6	68.6	40.2
1986 ...	125,763	100.0	59.2	19.1	8.4	13.4	69.0	40.8
<b>Men</b>								
1966 ...	51,708	100.0	70.0	18.8	4.0	7.2	85.4	59.8
1967 ...	52,396	100.0	69.9	19.2	4.0	6.9	85.1	59.5
1968 ...	53,312	100.0	69.4	19.3	4.2	7.1	85.3	59.2
1969 ...	54,390	100.0	58.3	19.5	4.4	7.9	85.2	58.2
1970 ...	55,041	100.0	66.1	21.5	4.4	8.0	84.1	55.6
1971 ...	56,257	100.0	66.0	21.2	4.5	8.3	83.5	55.1
1972 ...	57,420	100.0	67.2	20.4	4.2	8.2	83.5	56.1
1973 ...	58,858	100.0	67.9	19.5	4.3	8.3	83.7	56.8
1974 ...	59,389	100.0	64.5	22.8	4.3	8.5	82.7	53.3
1975 ...	59,091	100.0	63.8	23.7	4.4	8.1	80.6	51.4
1976 ...	60,361	100.0	64.1	23.4	4.2	8.3	80.8	51.8
1977 ...	61,693	100.0	64.6	22.8	4.1	8.5	81.1	52.4
1978 ...	63,015	100.0	66.1	21.7	4.0	8.1	81.3	53.7
1979 ...	64,063	100.0	66.3	21.3	4.2	8.3	81.1	53.8
1980 ...	64,260	100.0	65.2	22.0	4.4	8.4	80.1	52.2
1981 ...	64,769	100.0	64.5	21.6	4.5	9.3	79.7	51.4
1982 ...	64,365	100.0	62.3	23.0	4.8	9.8	78.2	48.8
1983 ...	64,512	100.0	64.3	21.2	5.0	9.6	77.5	49.8
1984 ...	65,980	100.0	66.5	19.9	4.7	9.0	78.3	52.1
1985 ...	67,301	100.0	66.8	19.7	4.8	8.7	78.8	52.6
1986 ...	68,233	100.0	67.3	19.4	4.7	8.7	78.8	53.0
<b>Women</b>								
1966 ...	34,538	100.0	40.1	30.0	9.6	20.3	50.4	20.3
1967 ...	35,737	100.0	42.1	28.4	9.9	19.5	51.3	21.6
1968 ...	36,918	100.0	41.4	28.9	9.6	20.1	52.0	21.5
1969 ...	38,037	100.0	41.1	28.3	10.3	20.4	52.6	21.6
1970 ...	38,809	100.0	40.7	27.2	10.0	22.1	52.5	21.4
1971 ...	39,224	100.0	41.8	26.3	10.9	21.0	51.7	21.6
1972 ...	40,233	100.0	42.5	26.6	10.3	20.5	52.0	22.1
1973 ...	42,253	100.0	41.9	26.2	10.6	21.3	53.6	22.5
1974 ...	43,218	100.0	40.4	26.5	10.6	22.5	53.6	21.7
1975 ...	43,511	100.0	41.4	25.7	11.7	21.1	52.9	21.9
1976 ...	45,447	100.0	41.1	25.4	11.2	22.3	54.4	22.4
1977 ...	47,219	100.0	42.1	25.0	11.1	21.8	55.5	23.4
1978 ...	49,318	100.0	43.6	24.3	10.8	21.3	57.0	24.9
1979 ...	50,929	100.0	43.7	24.5	10.8	21.1	57.9	25.3
1980 ...	51,492	100.0	44.7	23.0	11.9	20.4	57.7	25.8
1981 ...	52,025	100.0	45.1	21.9	11.9	21.1	57.5	25.9
1982 ...	51,972	100.0	45.9	20.8	12.9	20.3	56.8	26.1
1983 ...	53,063	100.0	47.6	19.2	13.4	19.8	57.3	27.3
1984 ...	55,188	100.0	48.2	19.6	12.2	20.1	59.1	28.5
1985 ...	56,165	100.0	48.9	19.2	12.3	19.5	59.4	29.1
1986 ...	57,530	100.0	49.5	18.8	12.7	19.0	60.2	29.8

million, but the number who reported full-schedule work rose by 10.5 million. The number of part-timers working all year also grew, although by only 700,000, while part-year employment, particularly among full-time workers, fell. Over the same 4-year period, a growing proportion of workers held full-schedule jobs, while the proportion of the total working population was also expanding. Combining the two trends, the proportion of the working age population who worked year round, full time increased to 41 percent in 1986—significantly higher than earlier peaks of 39 percent in the late 1960's, 1973, and 1979, and well above the recent low of 37 percent in 1982.

Men's work schedules have gradually declined, with proportionately fewer working and, of those, fewer working full schedules. However, between 1982 and 1986, their work schedules were expanded. The proportion working year round, full time rose from 49 percent in 1982 to 53 percent in 1986. Despite this rebound, the proportion of men with full-time, full-year employment was still well below the 60-percent high recorded in 1966.

Women, however, have had an impressive growth in year-round, full-time work over the 20-year period. The proportion with at least some employment during the year rose from almost 50 percent in 1966 to 60 percent in 1986, while the percentage on full schedules among those working rose from 40 to 50 percent. Nearly 30 percent of the female population worked at year-round, full-time jobs in the mid-1980's—almost half again more than the 20- to 22-percent proportions of the late 1960's. Proportionately fewer women now are working part time, and, most importantly, fewer are taking extended time off during the year. The upward trend has been so strong that the proportion of women on full schedules did not fall even during the last two recessions.

## 2. Women are becoming less and less likely to leave the work force for part of the year (or on a seasonal basis).

Of all women with jobs, more than three-fifths worked year round in 1986, up from about half in 1966. As the following tabulation shows, the long-term trend toward full-year work has been evident both among women who work full time (35 hours or more per week) as well as those who usually work part time. The growing tendency toward year-round work has also cut across all age groups, although it was greater for younger than for older workers.

	Total	Percent of women working:			
		Year round		Part year	
		Full time	Part time	Full time	Part time
1966 .....	100.0	40.1	9.6	30.0	20.3
1986 .....	100.0	49.5	12.7	18.8	19.0

**Table 2. Percent of population who worked and percent who did not work, by sex, age, and race, 1986 and 1966**

Age	Percent of population who worked				Percent of population who did not work			
	1986		1966		1986		1966	
	White	Black	White	Black <sup>1</sup>	White	Black	White	Black <sup>1</sup>
<b>Men</b>								
16 to 19 .....	67.1	37.5	75.9	67.3	32.9	62.5	24.1	32.7
20 to 24 .....	92.4	76.8	93.8	90.1	7.6	23.2	6.2	9.9
25 to 44 .....	94.5	86.5	98.4	97.1	5.5	13.5	1.6	2.9
45 to 64 .....	84.5	77.1	93.2	88.4	15.5	22.9	8.8	11.6
65 and older .....	22.0	16.4	35.3	34.1	78.0	83.6	64.7	65.9
<b>Women</b>								
16 to 19 .....	64.6	36.6	59.8	48.9	35.4	63.4	40.2	51.1
20 to 24 .....	83.1	64.5	69.8	67.2	16.9	35.5	30.2	32.8
25 to 44 .....	77.4	75.3	52.4	66.3	22.6	24.7	47.6	33.7
45 to 64 .....	59.2	60.0	53.8	65.2	40.8	40.0	48.2	34.8
65 and older .....	10.0	10.0	13.4	20.8	90.0	90.0	86.6	79.2

<sup>1</sup>Data are for black and other racial minorities.

Women have traditionally limited themselves to part-year work, often to care for their school-age children during the summer vacation months. But the proportion of women leaving the labor force to care for their children has been declining steadily. Since 1966, the proportion working full time, year round even though they had children of school age (6 to 17 years) has increased by 11 percentage points—to 49.6 percent. And there has been a growing tendency toward full-year work even among women with younger children, including those with toddlers under age 3.

The increased stability of women's labor force activity is also supported by the "gross-flow" data available from the monthly CPS. Annual averages of these estimates, which compare the labor force status of people in 2 consecutive months, have been available since 1968. In that year, about 8 percent of women in the labor force in one month, and 3 percent of those who worked a full-time schedule, had withdrawn from the labor force as of the next month (departures). By 1986, these figures had fallen to 6 and 2 percent, respectively. Declines of almost the same magnitude are also evident in terms of "arrivals"—those not in the labor force in the previous month but who were in the labor force in the current month. The following tabulation shows the average monthly percentage of women both entering and leaving the labor force:

	<i>Leaving labor force</i>		<i>Entering labor force</i>	
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Worked full-time schedule</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Worked full-time schedule</i>
1968.....	7.9	2.8	7.0	2.3
1986.....	5.7	1.7	5.4	1.5

The decline in the rate of mobility into and out of the labor force has been dominated by young women, particularly those ages 25 to 34, who are most likely to

have young children. The gross-flow data show that women are tending to stay in their jobs year round.

3. *Adult black men, and young blacks of both sexes, are far more likely than their white counterparts either to spend the entire year without a job, or when they worked, to work fewer weeks.*

Racial disparities in nonwork rates in 1986 were sharpest among the young. For example, almost one-fourth of all black men ages 20 to 24 reported that they did not work at all in 1986, compared to fewer than one-tenth of white men. (See table 2.) This gap has widened considerably since 1966, when the proportion not working in this age group was 10 percent for black and other minority races and 6 percent for whites.<sup>1</sup> The widening gap was primarily the result of an increase in the nonwork rates for blacks, a pattern that was typical of almost all age groups of men.

For women ages 20 to 24, the story was somewhat different. Although there was a wide racial discrepancy in the incidence of work for young women in 1986, it resulted more from a much-improved employment record for whites over the 20-year period than a worsening one for blacks. One might say, then, that young black women were not part of the surge in employment that affected most other groups of women.

Teenage blacks experienced a dramatic decline in work activity over the two decades. In 1966, the nonwork rates of black teens of each sex exceeded those of white teens by 10 percentage points; by 1986, the gap had grown to 30 points. This large spread stems principally from an increased rate of employment for white teenage women and a drop in the black employment rate.

The percentage of teenage men of both races with some employment fell over the two decades, but much more so for blacks. In 1986, a black male teenager was twice as

**Table 3. Percent distribution of workers with employment, by work schedule, 1986**

Characteristic	Total	Usually full time		Usually part time
		50-52 weeks	1-49 weeks	
<b>Men</b>				
White:				
16 to 19 years .....	100.0	9.3	26.7	64.0
20 to 24 years .....	100.0	46.7	32.1	21.2
25 to 54 years .....	100.0	78.9	16.1	5.0
55 years and older...	100.0	64.3	16.7	19.1
Black:				
16 to 19 years .....	100.0	10.8	32.7	56.0
20 to 24 years .....	100.0	35.6	35.9	28.5
25 to 54 years .....	100.0	70.4	22.1	7.5
55 years and older...	100.0	63.4	13.5	23.4
<b>Women</b>				
White:				
16 to 19 years .....	100.0	7.1	18.3	74.6
20 to 24 years .....	100.0	39.6	27.4	33.0
25 to 54 years .....	100.0	56.0	17.1	26.9
55 years and older...	100.0	47.2	14.1	38.8
Black:				
16 to 19 years .....	100.0	5.5	22.9	72.3
20 to 24 years .....	100.0	29.2	32.7	38.2
25 to 54 years .....	100.0	62.9	20.7	16.4
55 years and older...	100.0	47.3	16.6	35.9

likely to have spent the entire year without a job as he would have in 1966.

In the mid-1960's, it was rare for a man to spend the entire year without working except for those in the youngest and oldest age groups. By 1986, however, it had become more common even among men ages 25 to 44. Proportionately far more black men than white men spent all of 1986 without work. For example, among the 25- to 44-year-olds<sup>2</sup>—an age group in which most persons have completed their education and very few have a disability that would prevent them from working—14 percent of black men were reported as not working at all during the year, compared with 6 percent of white men. (See table 2.)

Among the men not working in 1986, a greater proportion of blacks than whites cited the inability to find a job. This was particularly true for the 25- to 44-year-olds, where 1 of every 3 black nonworkers, as compared to 1 of every 4 whites, gave that as a reason. The overall effect of these job market problems on blacks is more than the differences these rates suggest, because, as stated earlier, a far larger proportion of blacks than whites reported not working at all.

Differences in nonwork rates tend to disappear by age 55, although reasons for nonparticipation differ by race. Older black men were far more likely than white men to cite ill health or disability as their main reason for not working, while whites were more likely to cite retirement.

While nonwork rates fall sharply as education increases, the racial difference in the proportions of nonworking men cannot be explained solely by the generally lower levels of

education of blacks as compared to whites. In fact, at each level of education, from high school dropouts to college graduates, black men were more likely than whites to have been jobless the entire year.

Only among adult women was there little racial difference in annual nonwork rates. White and black women ages 25 to 44 had virtually identical nonwork rates in 1986, at about 25 percent. The converse, of course, is that 75 percent of each group worked in 1986; in 1966, the work rates in this age group were 66 percent for black women and only 52 percent for whites.

Racial discrepancies were also evident in the work schedules of persons who held jobs in 1986. In almost every age group, a much higher proportion of white than black men reported working full time year round. (See table 3.) The large majority of men ages 25 to 44 who worked part of the year (fewer than 50 weeks) listed job market difficulties or layoff as the reasons for not working a full year. Only among older men did whites record more part-year work than did blacks. As with the nonwork data, older white men were more likely than blacks to cite retirement as their reason for part-year work. Blacks were more likely than whites to cite health and job market factors.

The patterns of work among women of both races were generally very similar in 1986. While the proportion of women in both races employed in year-round, full-time jobs was up sharply from 1966, the gain was greater for black women.

4. *The numbers of people employed and of those unemployed anytime during the year are much larger than those found in the monthly surveys. Unemployment was experienced by 16 percent of the labor force in 1986 versus an annual average unemployment rate of 7.0 percent.*

As mentioned earlier, estimates from the March work experience survey differ from the annual averages of the 12 monthly surveys. The reference periods are totally different and the manner in which persons are placed in the three labor force status categories also differs. The reference period for the work experience survey is the entire year, while that for each monthly survey is 1 week. Moreover, persons are not placed into mutually exclusive categories in the work experience survey as occurs in the monthly CPS. For example, in the work experience data, an individual who was employed part of the year, unemployed part of the year, and not in the labor force part of the year shows up in all three categories. In the monthly data, by contrast, all individuals are classified in a priority order, as *either* employed, unemployed, or not in the labor force each month; they can never be in more than one category.

In 1986, almost 126 million persons worked all or part of the year, while the annual average employment level

**Table 4. Comparison of employment and unemployment data obtained from the March 1987 work experience supplement with those from the averages of the 12 monthly surveys**

Characteristic	Worked in 1986 as a percent of March 1987 population (Work Experience Survey)	Employed as a percent of population, 1986 annual averages	Ratio of March survey to annual averages	Percent of labor force with 1 week or more unemployment (Work Experience Survey)	Unemployment rate, 1986 annual averages	Ratio of March survey to annual averages
<b>Sex and age</b>						
Total, 16 years and older .....	69.0	60.7	1.1	16.2	7.0	2.3
Men, 16 years and older .....	78.8	71.0	1.1	16.9	6.9	2.4
16 to 19 years .....	61.9	45.7	1.4	25.8	19.0	1.4
20 to 24 years .....	89.9	76.3	1.2	27.6	11.0	2.5
25 to 44 years .....	94.3	89.0	1.1	16.8	6.0	2.8
45 to 64 years .....	83.8	76.0	1.1	11.3	4.4	2.6
65 years and older .....	21.5	15.4	1.4	4.9	3.2	1.5
Women, 16 years and older .....	60.2	51.4	1.2	15.3	7.1	2.2
16 to 19 years .....	59.6	43.6	1.4	24.3	17.6	1.4
20 to 24 years .....	80.1	64.9	1.2	23.5	10.3	2.3
25 to 44 years .....	77.0	67.8	1.1	15.0	6.2	2.4
45 to 64 years .....	59.4	51.9	1.1	9.7	4.2	2.3
65 years and older .....	10.0	7.2	1.4	4.4	2.8	1.6
<b>Sex, race, and Hispanic origin</b>						
Both sexes:						
White .....	69.7	61.5	1.1	15.0	6.0	2.5
Black .....	63.6	54.1	1.2	25.1	14.5	1.7
Hispanic origin .....	67.4	58.5	1.2	22.3	10.6	2.1
Men:						
White .....	79.9	72.3	1.1	15.9	6.0	2.7
Black .....	70.0	60.6	1.2	25.3	14.8	1.7
Hispanic origin .....	81.2	72.5	1.1	23.6	10.5	2.2
Women:						
White .....	60.3	51.7	1.2	13.9	6.1	2.3
Black .....	58.5	48.8	1.2	24.8	14.2	1.7
Hispanic origin .....	53.9	44.7	1.2	20.5	10.8	1.9

from the monthly surveys was just under 110 million. Similarly, the work experience data show that 20.7 million persons were unemployed sometime during the year; the average of the 12 monthly figures was 8.2 million.

The proportion of the population age 16 and older who worked sometime in 1986, at 69.0 percent, was considerably higher than the 60.7 percent annual average employment-population ratio. As shown in table 4, the higher the likelihood of year-round work, the closer the estimates from the two surveys will be. If all those with some employment in 1986 had worked every week of the year, the two series would be identical. On the other hand, if everyone had worked only 1 month, the ratio of the work experience survey employment numbers to those of the monthly data would be 12 to 1. Because the proportion working year round, full time has risen over the years, the work experience-monthly average differences have narrowed slightly.

In terms of unemployment, there is even greater turnover from month to month. In times of economic expansion, when unemployment duration is relatively short, there will be larger differences between total annual unemployment and average monthly unemployment, for example, a ratio of 2.2 in 1983, compared to 2.5 in 1986. Similarly, the ratio of the incidence of unemployment in

the March work experience survey to the annual average unemployment rate was 2.5 for whites and 1.7 for blacks. This indicates that blacks were unemployed more weeks during the year and were more likely to be picked up among the unemployed in the monthly surveys.

In summary, both with regard to the measurement of employment and unemployment, the two surveys are complementary, providing very different but useful perspectives on the work force.

*5. Virtually all persons who experienced some unemployment also worked sometime during the year. In 1986, the proportion was nearly 90 percent. Much of the joblessness was of short duration, but 44 percent of the unemployed were without work for 15 weeks or more.*

Of the 20.7 million persons with some unemployment, about one-fourth were jobless only 4 weeks or less (including just under 1 million year-round workers with 1 or 2 weeks of unemployment). The probability of having only a short spell of unemployment was greater for whites, particularly white women, than for blacks, as shown in the following tabulation:

	Percent of unemployed			
	Who also worked in 1986	Un-employed 1 to 4 weeks	Un-employed 15 weeks or more	Un-employed 40 weeks or more
Total .....	88.5	24.2	44.0	10.2
White men .....	93.1	22.0	45.8	10.0
White women ...	87.5	30.6	37.2	7.3
Black men .....	83.5	16.9	53.5	16.0
Black women ...	73.1	18.3	51.4	16.2
Hispanic men ...	93.2	17.4	54.3	12.6
Hispanic women .....	83.4	27.1	40.5	8.3

At the other end of the joblessness spectrum, 44 percent of those with unemployment were out of work for 15

weeks or more. As shown in the tabulation, there was more of such long-term unemployment among blacks than whites. Unemployment of 40 weeks or longer was reported for 16 percent of blacks and 9 percent of whites.

As indicated earlier, the work experience and the basic CPS data complement each other in the analysis of employment and unemployment. Most importantly, the work experience data add another dimension to labor force behavior—that individuals can experience a range of work and nonwork situations over the course of a year. While the monthly data are more timely, and therefore provide the only measures for current analysis, the year-long perspective provides an insight into long-term changes in work patterns not available elsewhere. □

—FOOTNOTES—

<sup>1</sup> Data were not tabulated separately for blacks until 1972. In that year, blacks made up 90 percent of the black and other noninstitutional population. Data for 1966 to 1971 on blacks include both blacks and

other minority races.

<sup>2</sup> Available data for 1966 place 25- to 44-year-olds into a single "central-age" category.

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**A note on communications**

The *Monthly Labor Review* welcomes communications that supplement, challenge, or expand on research published in its pages. To be considered for publication, communications should be factual and analytical, not polemical in tone. Communications should be addressed to the Editor-in-Chief, *Monthly Labor Review*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC 20212.

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