

The April Review

With energy costs the subject of much scrutiny and concern in the United States and around the world, our first article this month is particularly timely. In her analysis of energy expenditures and prices over the last couple of decades for the Southern tier of States ranging from Maryland to Texas, Cheryl Abbot finds that consumers spend a larger share of their budgets on energy-related goods and services than in other regions of the country. However, even in the face of sharp increases in energy prices in recent years, energy expenses now make up a smaller share of Southern consumers' budgets than they did at the beginning of the period under study.

In a period of inflationary concerns, the living standards and purchasing power for various demographic groups, particularly people on fixed incomes, are of significant interest. Kenneth J. Stewart this month provides a history of movements in an experimental consumer price index for Americans 62 years of age and older. Twenty-five years of data are now in hand for this inflation measure produced by BLS at the behest of Congress. While the experimental index has grown at a somewhat faster rate than the Bureau's main inflation gauge (the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers, which accounts for nearly 90 percent of the U.S. population), Stewart notes the methodological limitations inherent in the construction of this in-

dex and states that conclusions drawn from this time series must be treated with caution.

In recent years, BLS programs have gradually been implementing updates of centralized classification systems for industry and occupation, as mandated by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). While it may not always be readily apparent, a tremendous amount of work goes into managing these transitions, including making changes to estimating systems, publication tables, technical documentation, and so on. The article by E. Raphael Branch, James A. Buszowski, Albert E. Schwenk, and Mark Gough discusses one important aspect of these conversions for a prominent BLS program. They describe the special computations necessary to prepare transitional historical indexes for the Employment Cost Index (ECI) in order to develop new factors to account for seasonal variations in ECI data.

Finally this month, in our Regional Trends feature, George Helmer reviews various measures thus far this decade for Micropolitan Statistical Areas, a new geographic designation introduced by OMB in 2003.

Data on minimum wage workers

Last July, the first increase in a decade in the Federal minimum wage took effect. A Federal minimum wage level was first introduced for hourly paid workers in 1938 as part of the Fair

Labor Standards Act and periodically has been raised since. BLS each year produces annual average estimates derived from the Current Population Survey of workers paid at hourly rates, including those at the current minimum wage. A compendium of these data, available at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/minwage2007.htm>, has been updated for 2007. Data are presented for a wide range of characteristics, including age, sex, race, educational attainment, and full- and part-time status.

Another Spotlight

As noted in this space in the November 2007 issue, BLS now periodically posts a new feature on its Web site called *Spotlight on Statistics*. These colorful and succinct synopses of BLS data are intended to bring together information from the Bureau's various programs tied to common themes. The latest subject is "Around the World in 8 Charts," which aptly utilizes various measures from our comparative foreign labor statistics program. Teenage unemployment in countries as diverse as Germany, Australia, and Japan; comparisons of pay and benefits for manufacturing workers in Norway, the Philippines, Brazil and other countries; and a comparison of international unemployment rates for a 15-year span beginning in 1991 all are part of the itinerary. Look for the *Spotlight* to illuminate new subjects as the year goes on. □