Want Ads and Jobs for the Poor: A Glaring Mismatch

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This study tested the claim that newspaper help-wanted sections list enough jobs for all who want work. We counted jobs listed in The Washington Post's help-wanted section, sorting them by skill, education, and experience to identify those available to the unemployed poor. Then we asked employers how many people had applied. Only 13% of all vacancies and only 8% of all full-time vacancies offered work for the unemployed poor. Although these menial jobs paid low wages and rarely offered fringe benefits, they received an average of 21 applications and were quickly filled. The tight labor market for menial jobs portends great difficulty in securing paid employment for people now being evicted from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program.

KEY WORDS: want ads; jobs; poor; unemployed; welfare.

INTRODUCTION

Do unemployed poor people want to work? How can so many people be unemployed and receiving welfare when the help-wanted ads of the classified section of every major newspaper list hundreds of available jobs? Two of the best known people who repeatedly have asked these questions are former president Ronald Reagan and radio personality Paul Harvey. In 1982 President Reagan reported that a Sunday issue of The New York Times listed 44.5 pages of help-wanted ads; The Washington Post listed 33.5 pages, and the Los Angeles Times, 65.5 pages. Reagan asked, "How does
a person... justify calling themselves unemployed when there's a fellow spending money advertising and saying, 'I've got a job; come fill my job?''' (Unsigned, 1982:253).

A year later when a reporter asked President Reagan about the unemployment rate of African-Americans, then at 17%, Reagan referred job seekers to the previous Sunday's *Washington Post* in which he claimed that there were 24 full pages of classified ads (Reagan, 1982:13). Again in 1988, President Reagan reminded those attending a Republican campaign rally in Voorhees, New Jersey, of his hobby of counting the number of pages of help-wanted ads in the paper and reported that "... in the Washington daily paper on Sunday, you pick it up and see 70 full pages of those tiny help-wanted ads, employers looking for people to come to work..." (Reagan, 1991:1451).

Paul Harvey has broadcast the same homily for at least a quarter century. In 1971 he declared "... [T]he very idea that we have... Americans on welfare, with newspapers bulging with jobs waiting for people, just makes no sense, no sense at all" (Harvey, 1971:22), and recently he reiterated this point in one of his radio broadcasts asking "Why are so many people out of work when help-wanted ads are in all metropolitan papers?" (Harvey, 1994).

Reagan and Harvey are not alone in wondering why poor people are unemployed in light of pages of help-wanted ads. Many undergraduates tether their declarations of the availability of jobs to the lack of work motivation among poor people just as Fortune magazine commentator Daniel Seligman (1981) did when he was provoked by a Herblock (Block, 1981) cartoon that took exception to President Reagan's reference to the help-wanted ads as a source of employment for unemployed poor people. Seligman (1981:33) counted 1491 help wanted-ads in The Washington Post of April 22, 1981, and reported "... that quite a few of the jobs being offered... were fillable by people with little or no training." Also, in Minnesota a few years ago, people supporting the governor's veto of a work-readiness program waved newspapers full of help-wanted ads in the faces of people protesting the veto (Unsigned, 1992). Some years earlier, the National Review had reported that Charles Murray advocated a policy of "... cold turkey. AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] could just be wiped off the books, and erstwhile recipients could read the want-ads" (Unsigned, 1986:14; see also Murray, 1984: 219-232).

The question of whether newspaper help-wanted advertisements provide an adequate source of job opportunities for unemployed poor people is part of the much larger and more significant question at the center of the national debate about welfare and poverty: are there enough jobs for unemployed poor people? Murray (1984) and Mead (1992) assert the jobs