

# The First National Unemployment Survey: Unemployment and the Canadian Census of 1891

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Article abstract

The 1891 census asked Canadians if they had been unemployed in the week preceding the taking of the census. On the basis of a preliminary analysis of responses from working class areas in British Columbia, we comment on the nature of this source, and on the possibility of using it to determine both the extent of unemployment and the characteristics of the unemployed. We demonstrate our conclusion that this source has significant utility by testing the hypothesis that unemployment was a structural problem in the industrial capitalist labour market and not simply a result of specific deficiencies in part of the labour force.

# RESEARCH REPORTS/ NOTES DE RECHERCHE

## The First National Unemployment Survey: Unemployment and the Canadian Census of 1891

Peter Baskerville and Eric Sager

CANADIAN GOVERNMENTS ONLY GRUDGINGLY concerned themselves with unemployment. Not until the introduction of unemployment insurance in 1940, requiring the registration of all unemployed, were reasonably systematic statistics gathered on the Canadian jobless. Other countries exhibited similar foot dragging. While questions focusing on the unemployed appeared on all federal U.S. censuses between 1880 and 1910 and on some state censuses as well, only a few of these were ever tabulated and fewer still were used as instruments for policy reform. Indeed the term unemployment itself only gained general usage in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The word is not found in the 5000 pages of testimony compiled by the *Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital* in Canada in 1889. Yet even a quick reading of that testimony reveals a

<sup>1</sup>For work on early Canadian unemployment see, Udo Sautter, "Measuring Unemployment in Canada: Federal Efforts Before World War II." *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 15 (1982), 475-89; Sautter, "The Origins of the Employment Service of Canada, 1900-1920," *Labour/Le Travail*, 6 (1980), 89-112; and James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941* (Toronto 1983). For the American experience see, Alexander Keyssar, *Out of Work: The First Century of Unemployment in Massachusetts*, (Cambridge 1986) and Paul T. Ringenbach, *Tramps and Reformers, 1873-1916: The Discovery of Unemployment in New York* (London 1973). For comments on the British experience see, Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford 1971) and G. Phillips and N. Whiteside, *Casual Labour: The Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry, 1880-1970* (Oxford 1985). For a general historical treatment see J.A. Garraty, *Unemployment in History: Economic Thought and Public Policy* (New York 1978).

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strong concern about “steady” or “constant” employment and about “idle” or “broken” time. The Dominion Trades and Labor Congress underlined that concern when, in 1890, it forwarded to the federal government a long list of possible questions for the upcoming census. A question dealing with the unemployed headed that list.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this pressure, the government instructed all enumerators to ask Canadians whether they had been unemployed during the week preceding the taking of the census. The results were never tabulated, and 30 years were to pass before the government repeated this experiment.

Clearly this first national unemployment survey had absolutely no impact on subsequent policy. Our focus, however, lies elsewhere. To what degree are the responses to this question of use to the historian? Can any meaningful comments be made as to the extent or rate of unemployment during the era of early industrialization? Does this census data permit the portrayal of the typical unemployed at this time? Should historians invest time, energy, and money in compiling and analyzing the responses to the unemployment question? This research note offers a preliminary perspective on these issues.

Because this is a pilot project we decided to analyze the entire adult population (15 years and older) for those urban sub-districts where an initial survey revealed a high concentration of skilled and unskilled workers. To date our data file includes 3,866 individuals living in three sub-districts in Victoria, Vancouver, and New Westminster, British Columbia. The file includes a large number of working people and the incidence of single men is much higher than in the general population. Obviously a more definitive statement about unemployment must await a much broader sample, taken from other urban districts both in British Columbia and elsewhere in Canada. Our preliminary research, however, allows us to comment on the nature of the source, the possibility of using this source to measure the extent of Canadian unemployment and the characteristics of the unemployed.

## I

CENSUS ENUMERATORS RECEIVED *no definition of unemployed*. The instructions concerning the unemployment question stated that “Column 19 indicates the condition of the labour market during the first week of April, 1891.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than assist the census taker in defining unemployed this statement added a second term, labour market, with which the “painstaking-enumerator” had to grapple.<sup>4</sup> Presumably only those who belonged in the labour market could be classified as unemployed. In the case of women and children, enumerators were told that “unless

<sup>2</sup>Proceedings of the Sixth Session of the Trades and Labor Congress of the Dominion of Canada, 2-5 Sept. 1890, 20: National Archives of Canada [hereafter NAC], RG2, v. 5190, file 2569, G.W. Dower to J.A. Chapleau, 10 November 1890.

<sup>3</sup>*Manual Containing the Census Act and The Instructions to Officers Employed in the Taking of the Third Census of Canada*, Ottawa, Department of Agriculture, 1891, [hereafter *Census Manual*], 18.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

they have a definite occupation besides their share in the work of the family or household, the [occupation] column is to be filled with the sign — — .<sup>5</sup> A dash ( — — ) had four possible meanings.<sup>6</sup> Most often it meant “no,” but in certain unspecified cases it could mean “nothing,” “not concerned” or “unknown.” Thus when a — — is entered in response to the question “Were you unemployed during the week preceding the census” it might mean “no, I was not unemployed;” “not concerned” in the sense that the question is not relevant to me since I do not belong in the labour market: or, “unknown,” in that enumerator could not determine just what the situation was. Those dependents living at home — sons, daughters, mothers-in-law, etc. — and all individuals 60 years and older who had no listed occupation almost invariably had a dash recorded as their answer to the unemployment question. For these people it seems reasonable to assume that the answer meant not concerned, in that they did not perceive themselves (and neither did the enumerator) to be members of the labour market.

One subset of our data, however, seemed to defy this logic. Four hundred and fifty-six individuals, or one in eight of non-housewives or other obviously dependent household members had a dash recorded in the occupation column. We have included the 19 per cent (87) who claimed to be unemployed, although they had no listed occupation, in the ranks of the labour market on the assumption that the enumerator by recording yes to the unemployment question found no reason to exclude them. Since most of the remaining 81 per cent (369) were male and between the ages of 20 and 50, it seems difficult to exclude them from the labour market. The fact that 80 per cent of the group were also Chinese (approximately double their percentage of our total population) is interesting. The Chinese were overwhelmingly male, single boarders between the ages of 20 and 50. Most Chinese boarders lived in cramped, crowded lodgings fronting on a myriad of back alleys in a small ghettoized area of Victoria. It seems reasonable to assume then that for many of this group the dash the enumerator recorded meant unknown. The fact that for many of these lodgers the term Chinaman was written in lieu of a name and the occupation question was also, of course, recorded as a dash strongly suggests that the particular individual counted was absent and those who were present had only the vaguest knowledge about the man's present occupation and employment situation. The meaning of the dash response for the remaining 20 per cent (78) of the group is less clear. Since most of them were single male and female boarders, it is, however possible that the enumerator once again lacked necessary information. In summary, then, age, sex, and household status suggest that this group of 369 individuals belongs in the labour force. Because, however, both occupation and employment status are recorded as a dash, they have been placed in the unknown column in Table 1. The final point to note here is that despite the problems associated with both the definition of terms and the interpretation of the dash entry, it is possible to come to a reasonable understanding of the enumerator's meaning

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

for most cases in this subset, a subset, it should be emphasized, without equal in our survey in terms of its apparent ambivalence.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Labour Market Composition: 1891**

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	Employed	Unemployed	Unknown
Male	2520	401	321
Female	99	13	48
	2619	414	369

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**TABLE 2**  
**Non-Labour Market Composition: 1891**

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Housewives:	264
Dependents*	110
+ age 60:	90
	464
TOTAL	

\* sons, daughters, mothers-in-law, etc.

## II

GIVEN THAT IT IS POSSIBLE to understand, within a tolerable level of uncertainty, the usage of terms and meaning of most responses as regards to the unemployment question in the 1891 census, should we then conclude that the answers to this question will provide us with a reasonable estimate of the rate of unemployment in Canada during that week? An unemployment rate can certainly be calculated, but it will be a rate which underestimates the true number of jobless. As numerous other analyses of census enumeration in the nineteenth century have indicated, the poor, transient and ethnic minorities are generally underrepresented.<sup>7</sup> Within these cohorts (especially the first two) one would expect to find a large number of unemployed. To the extent that they are underrepresented so, too, is the unemploy-

<sup>7</sup>These systemic biases may have been accentuated in the taking of the Victoria census in 1891. Victorians argued long and hard that the census underenumerated the city's residents.

ment rate offered by the 1891 census. Nor is the unemployment rate as calculated from the census comparable to the rates of a century later, because both the numerator and the denominator are different from those used in later times. Given these general caveats the census nonetheless remains the best available proxy for the rate of Canadian unemployment during the early phase of industrialization. As Table 1 indicates, we found 3,033 individuals in the labour market for whom we had information on employment. Almost 14 per cent of these people were unemployed. It is true that the percentage of unemployed is likely to be relatively high in these pre-selected working class urban areas. Yet even so the numbers lacking some sort of paid employment are significant. If 14 per cent of the adults in these districts lacked paid employment in the spring of 1891, a much larger proportion experienced unemployment throughout the course of the year. One recently published study of unemployment at this time in Massachusetts (a more heavily industrialized area than British Columbia) suggests that the frequency of unemployment was three times greater than the rate of unemployment during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>8</sup> This means that over 40 per cent of the work force in the districts surveyed would experience some unemployment during 1891. Clearly the census reveals a high rate and incidence of unemployment in working class areas of British Columbia.<sup>9</sup> This fact alone points to the need for further comparative work with other areas across Canada.

### III

WHO WERE THE UNEMPLOYED? Contemporary commentary and much subsequent public policy on the unemployed often rested on the assumption that the unemployed were drawn from peculiarly disadvantaged groups or an unskilled lumpenproletariat.<sup>10</sup> The source of the problem, in other words, lay with the unemployed themselves. It is worth testing this assumption, because it may be that the premise underlying much of our past policy, and much of our present day discussion, has, from the beginning of industrialization in Canada, been untenable. Our hypothesis is that this assumption is, indeed, incorrect. Unemployment was from the beginning a structural problem in the industrial capitalist labour market rather than simply a problem of specific deficiencies in part of the labour force. The unemployed were drawn from all levels and occupations within the industrial working class; they were not a distinct subset characterized by specific ethnic, age, sex, religious, or other attributes. The remainder of this note reports on the result of an initial test of this hypothesis.

<sup>8</sup>Keyssar, *Out of Work*, 50, 356-8, 375.

<sup>9</sup>A survey of local newspapers and of the papers of a major local mortgage company, the British Columbia Land and Investment Company, suggests that the census was taken well before the beginning of the economic depression of the 1890s. The extent of unemployment in working-class areas did not, therefore, result from a cyclical economic downswing.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own*, 6-11. Or, better still, examine the public statements and public policy of British Columbia's current provincial government.

One common stereotype of the unemployed was that they were disproportionately young, single, male, immigrants. There is in fact, however, no strong relationship between age and the response to the unemployment question. Men in their late teens and twenties were slightly more likely to be unemployed (15.3 per cent) than others, but men in their thirties (12.8 per cent) and forties (12.9 per cent) were only a little less likely to be without work. While boarders and lodgers were more likely to be unemployed (16.2 per cent) than heads of households (8.4 per cent), one cannot predict unemployment on the basis of being married (11 per cent) or single (14 per cent). If most of the unemployed were males, so were most members of the labour market. What is interesting is that for those women in the work force, their chances of being unemployed (11.6 per cent) differed very little from that for men.<sup>11</sup>

Only a small number of the residents of our sub-districts (3.4 per cent) had been born in British Columbia. For this reason alone the unemployed were predominantly immigrants to the province. Close to 10 per cent of those born in British Columbia were unemployed and, with one exception, this represented a lower rate of unemployment than experienced by those born elsewhere. Yet the problem of lack of work did not begin and end with recent arrival. There was considerable variation in responses between peoples from different regions and nations. Thus the proportion of unemployed was particularly high among the Ontario-born (24.7 per cent of adult males), and particularly low among the Chinese (8.1 per cent). Although at first sight there appears to be a relationship between birthplace and employment, a hasty conclusion about national or ethnic differences must be resisted. To know a person's birthplace does not help at all to predict their chances of being unemployed.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the distribution of the unemployed may tell us more about cultural variation in understanding or acceptance of the concept unemployed, rather than success in finding work. Declaring oneself to be unemployed may have been easier for the Ontarians. They may have had previous acquaintance with the reality and concept of unemployment. Their previous experience in an emerging industrial capitalist economy may have encouraged them to equate possession of a single wage-earning occupation with economic security, and to understand unemployed to mean a failure to find work in that occupation. The Chinese, on the other hand, may have believed that stating that one was unemployed might jeopardize their chances of staying in Canada. Whatever the reason for the variation in responses, it is clear that no national or ethnic group was immune from the condition of lacking employment.<sup>13</sup>

Knowing a worker's religion also provides little help in predicting the labourer's work status. All religious groups other than the Confucians (who were

<sup>11</sup>Keyssar, *Out of Work*, 90-91, 101, comes to similar conclusions concerning sex and age.

<sup>12</sup>Aggregating birthplaces into nine groups (British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, the United States, England/Wales/Scotland, Ireland, Continental Europe, and China) yields a significant chi-square and a contingency coefficient of 0.16, but lambda with employment dependent is zero.

<sup>13</sup>See also Keyssar, *Out of Work*, 82.

all Chinese) experienced unemployment rates in excess of 11.5 per cent. While the extent of unemployment did vary for some religions (Reformed Dutch Lutherans and Presbyterians each exceeded a 20 per cent unemployment rate) the point to note is the consistently high rate for all groups other than the Confucians. As with sex, age, nationality, and ethnicity, no religion provided protection against unemployment.

We come closer to an understanding of unemployment by focusing on occupations.<sup>14</sup> Those in white collar sectors such as professionals and sales or service occupations were least likely to be unemployed. Among adult males, those in manufacturing (15.4 per cent), those in the primary sector (fishing, forestry and mining) (19.4 per cent) and those who were general labourers (24.9 per cent) were much more likely to be unemployed. It is difficult to separate wage-earners from employers, or manual labour from other workers, but we have used the International Standard Classification of Occupations to separate occupations into broad categories. Two-thirds of the men in the sample were in primary occupations, in manufacturing trades, in general labouring, or they had no stated occupation. No less than 86.3 per cent of the unemployed were in these categories. It is interesting to note that those occupations experiencing the highest rate of unemployment were those most closely associated with the emerging industrial capitalist economy.

Within the industrial sector, unemployment was not unique to specific occupations. We cannot explain unemployment, for example, by referring to seasonal or cyclical fluctuations in demand for labour in certain resource industries. Nor, on the basis of our initial investigation, is it sufficient to state that unemployment was primarily the preserve of the unskilled.<sup>15</sup> Certainly a high percentage of general labourers were unemployed, but even for those in more skilled manufacturing jobs, the unemployment rate exceeded 15 per cent. Only people outside the industrial working class could regard unemployment as being the condition of others. Within the industrial working class, unemployment extended beyond any particular group whether defined by ethnicity, nationality, age cohort, sex, religion, or economic sector. Unemployment had acquired its twentieth-century meaning. It was not simply the by-product of season, mobility, or migration. It was one type of systemic deprivation in an emerging industrial economy, a deprivation associated particularly with the industrial capitalist labour market. To be unemployed was to be deprived of the means to sell one's labour in return for wages, and it was a recurring condition of membership in British Columbia's working class. We suspect that research in other, more and less industrialized areas in Canada, will provide further support for this preliminary conclusion.

<sup>14</sup>Aggregating occupations into seven categories (professional, clerical, sales, service, mines/forestry/fisheries, manufacturing and general labourers) and cross tabulating with employment yields a significant chi-square of 114.8 and a contingency coefficient of .19.

<sup>15</sup>With a larger sample, both from British Columbia and from selected areas across Canada, unemployment rates in various occupations of a skilled and unskilled sort can be more closely explored.



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