

Youth joblessness and patterns of job searching

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Many of the current labour market debates ascribe unemployment in South Africa to either a deficient supply of skills, or to subdued demand resulting from inadequate macroeconomic performance and the impact of globalisation. Other less-explored dimensions of unemployment include job-seeking patterns among the unemployed. Although there is a lack of data that can be used to assess the extent to which these patterns might contribute to unemployment, this brief article attempts to contribute by shedding some light on job-seeking dynamics in South Africa.

This analysis briefly explores off-the-job search dynamics among the youth (formally classified as members of the population aged 15 – 34 years)¹ that are actively searching for work. It starts with a broad overview of youth unemployment and thereafter describes search patterns among the youth and how job-seeking behaviour differs according to education, field of study, gender and race. The article then concludes by highlighting issues for further research and policy development.

Overview of youth joblessness

According to the *Labour Force Survey* (LFS), there were approximately 3,3 million unemployed South African youth in September 2003. This represents 20 per cent of the total economically active population, or 70 per cent of the officially unemployed population. The September 2003 LFS reveals that South Africa's youth unemployment has important racial and gender dimensions (see Table 3.1). Females were in the majority (53 per cent) and nearly nine in ten unemployed youth were Black. Approximately 35 per cent of the unemployed youth had matric or had completed secondary schooling. Unemployment rose with education up to secondary levels, peaked among those who had not fully completed their secondary-level education, and thereafter dropped drastically to about one per cent at vocational level. Notably, the likelihood of unemployment climbed to 5 per cent among those with tertiary education.

The single most prevalent field of specialisation among the jobless youth with certificates/diplomas or degrees in 2003 was business and commercial studies, at 32 per cent. The second largest group (31 per cent) was trained in a variety of fields such as education and training, human and social studies and communication studies².

Table 3.1 Youth unemployment and search methods, 2003*

Variables/ categories	Percentage of total unemployed youth	Job search methods (per cent)			
		Registered at agencies	Enquired at workplaces	Placed or answered advertise- ments	Sought assistance from relatives or friends
Gender					
Male	47,1	15,7	60,4	13,8	10,1
Female	52,9	13,2	57,7	17,6	11,5
Population group					
Black/African	87,3	14,9	58,5	15,3	11,4
Coloured	8,7	7,9	73,9	12,2	6,1
Indian/Asian	2,1	19,4	34,7	37,4	8,6
White	1,9	13,1	37,8	35,8	13,4
Highest education level					
No schooling	1,3	17	69,8	1,5	11,7
Some primary	15,7	18,6	63,7	3,1	14,6
Some secondary	42,1	14,1	65,5	9,1	11,3
Completed secondary/ matric	34,5	13,2	52,9	24,1	9,8
Vocational	1,4	9,4	43,4	39,2	8
Some tertiary	5,1	12,4	31,6	51,9	4
Area of study**					
Manufacturing, engineering and technology	16,4	13,6	39,6	44,3	2,5
Health sciences and social services	6,1	17,4	31	51,7	0
Business, commerce and management	31,9	5,9	36,1	53,1	4,8
Physical, mathematical, computer and life sciences	14,2	7	31,6	58,7	2,7
Other	31,3	19,9	25,1	49,2	5,8

* Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding errors

** Percentage of unemployed youth with certificate, diploma or degree qualifications

Source: Own calculations, *Labour Force Survey*, September 2003

¹ Although the International Labour Organisation defines the youth as those aged 15 – 24 years, this article follows South Africa's official classification of 15 – 34 years. See online: www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/kilm09.htm

² Classified together as "Other" in Table 3.1.

Youth qualified in manufacturing, engineering and technology constituted the third largest share (16 per cent). The table further shows that about one in five of these youths were trained in physical, mathematical, computer and life sciences.

Another feature of South Africa's labour market is long periods spent in out-of-the job seeking among the youth. The duration of unemployment among the youth was found to be markedly skewed towards long-term unemployment. On the basis of the International Labour Organisation's one-year or longer³ criterion for long-term unemployment, the data reveal an estimated prevalence rate of 61 per cent among the youth.

The *Labour Force Survey* also enquired whether the job seekers had received offers in the preceding six months and if they were aware of available jobs (for which they qualify) but which they were not prepared to take. Data suggest that the jobless youth hardly received any job offers. Only about three per cent of the three million plus unemployed youth had received job offers. Less than half a per cent of the youth⁴ indicated they were aware of available jobs for which they qualified but were not willing to take.

Dimensions of job searching among unemployed youth

This section describes linkages between youth job-seeking patterns and gender, population group/race, educational background and field of study. The September 2003 LFS results confirm findings elsewhere⁵ in which the method of direct enquiries at work places was the most utilised off-the-job search method (59 per cent) among the youth. This is followed by responses to advertisements (16 per cent) and registration at employment agencies or trade unions (14 per cent). Only one in ten unemployed youth were likely to rely on social networks including relatives and friends.

Table 3.1 demonstrates the incidence of each search method within each category per variable. The incidence of direct enquiries was generally as high among males (60 per cent) as it was among females (58 per cent). The rate of dependency on friends and relatives was marginally higher among females (12 per cent) than among males.

The data reveal notable search method propensities by educational background. Table 3.1 shows that below tertiary level, most youths in each of the categories tended to search by making direct enquiries. It further shows an

inverse relationship between educational attainment and the incidence of this method – from nearly 70 per cent among those without any schooling down to 32 per cent at tertiary level. In other words, the higher the level of education, the less the youth were likely to enquire directly at work places.

The method of placing or responding to advertisements was more common among those with completed secondary education and higher compared to lower levels of education. The percentage responding to advertisements increased with the level of education from about 2 per cent among those with no education to 24 per cent for those with completed secondary education and 52 per cent at tertiary level.

The data further show that, contrary to the general pattern where direct enquiries at work places were most popular among the youth, the majority (51 per cent) of those that possessed some form of specialisation in a field of study, rather relied on vacancy advertisements.

Racial differences in job search patterns are also evident. Direct enquiries at places of employment were most utilised by Coloureds (74 per cent), Blacks (59 per cent) and, to a much lesser extent, by Whites (38 per cent). Whites were much more likely to also depend on relatives and friends (13 per cent) compared to other races.

Some reflections

The findings indicate that direct enquiries at work places are the main means of job seeking among the youth. The groups that are most likely to use this method – females, Blacks and the youth with incomplete secondary education – tend to experience lower labour market success rates. Table 3.1 shows that these groups have a relatively higher incidence of unemployment. Those with secondary education have a higher risk of joblessness; females display a higher incidence of unemployment than males; and Africans tend to experience higher rates of joblessness than other races and they tend to be more reliant on the direct enquiry method.

The role of search patterns in joblessness is pertinent. In broad terms, research is required to shed more light on the role of job-search methods in youth labour market success *vis-à-vis* other demand and supply factors. Furthermore, job search methods such as networks may be an important challenge for historically disadvantaged groups and merits attention from key players in the labour market.

³ See online: www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/kilm10.htm

⁴ These findings should only be viewed as indicative, as the number of applicable cases to these particular questions is not large enough.

⁵ Duff, P. and D. Fryer. 2004. "The Dynamics of Job Search and the Microfoundations of Unemployment: Evidence from Duncan Village". Paper presented at the Labour Market Forum Conference, Somerset West, South Africa.