

JOBHUNTERS AND THE WORK-SHY: PERMANENT UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE WILLINGNESS TO TAKE UP WORK

Purpose of the study

The mass media daily enable us to learn more and more about Hungary's economic difficulties and about the effect these generate in employment. The number of statistics that highlight an increase in the number and rate of unemployed people is growing. Significant as these figures are, they reveal very little about the plight of the people behind them.

In addition to published statistical figures, a growing number of articles and analytical studies have recently appeared (cf. Bánfalvy 1991, Nagy 1991, Fekete-Szabó-Sándor, 1991).

In spite of all this, we have hardly any information of the difficulties and ways in which unemployed people are trying to find jobs to support their families. We do not know what happens to them in the course of ever-increasing unemployment; nor do we know what sort of financial crisis and mental anguish they go through as they proceed along the path which seems less and less hopeful. Little do we know what happens to them after their benefit is withdrawn.

It is especially timely to study the problems of everyday life, bread-and butter worries and people's attempts to cope at a time when the unemployment rate is continuously rising. Experts say that the unemployment rate in the two counties which we have studied (13% in Hajdú-Bihar County and 21% in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County at the end of 1992) has not peaked yet. In addition to those who are registered as unemployed and receive benefits, the number of those who, after their unemployment benefit is withdrawn, are left behind by the system unable to find new employment is considerable.

In the middle of 1992, within the framework of an OTKA research programme and aided by the Hungarian Credit Bank's Foundation for Hungarian Science, we had an opportunity to have a closer look at the unemployed and to gain experience as to how subtle and versatile this stratum is, which is often characterised by a mere rate.¹

1 In conducting the interviews and compiling the preliminary materials I was greatly helped by my friends Éva Szabóné Orosz, Margit Boda, Ibolya Szalay and Sándor Márton. I would hereby like to thank them for their support.

Method of study, composition of the sample

Our study was conducted in two towns: Nyíregyháza and Debrecen.

In order to familiarize ourselves with the unemployed, besides processing available statistical information and analysing documents, we chose a sample of one hundred with a view to making interviews with them.² Half of the respondents randomly selected from people registered as unemployed in January 1991 were from Debrecen, the other half from Nyíregyháza. The age bracket of the people interviewed, male and female, was between 25 and 45. We chose this particular age group because, in our view, this generation carries multiple burdens on its shoulders. In addition to the problems involved in raising children in their own families, they also have to deal with the problems of helping — not infrequently financially — their aging parents, hence their unemployed status concerns far broader social strata, and affects the lives of far more individuals than in the case of other generations.

We selected people as our respondents who became unemployed in January 1991 so as to enable ourselves to find out about long-term unemployment, although we were not able to conduct a follow-up study. We conducted our interviews between March and May 1992 thus we were able to gather information about a minimum of one year. We discovered what happened during that year and we learnt about the typical reactions and responses among the unemployed studied.

We also chose our sample with a view to including only people who were receiving unemployment benefits in January 1991 because in 1990 there was also a significant number of people registered as unemployed who, in fact, were employed but registered themselves with the authorities as unemployed in the hope of finding better jobs.

Finally, we excluded from the sample those with qualifications higher than secondary school because, due to their small number, it would have been impossible to provide valid information about them.

In the course of our half-structured interviews we focussed on the following groups of problems:

- the composition of the households of unemployed people; the persons living together
- schools, courses, qualifications
- professional life
- last place of employment and the circumstances of becoming unemployed
- the everyday life of unemployed people (structure of activities, time structure)
- relationship with the County Jobs Centre
- relationships (family, relatives, friends, neighbours, etc.)
- the psychological effects of being unemployed
- health status
- re-employment; outlook on the future

2 From the finished interviews only 95 could be used in the course of setting up the tables representing the samples (due to lack of data, e. g., ambiguous answers, classification problems).

In what follows we intend to present our experience gained in the course of our research primarily with respect to voluntary unemployment as well as people's attempts to find a way forward which can be characterised as typical among the long-term unemployed. There were significant differences among the unemployed from whom our random sample was chosen in the two towns of the study.

In January 1991 the number of people receiving benefits between 25 and 45 years of age, with a maximum of secondary school education was 181 in Debrecen, while the corresponding figure in Nyíregyháza was 662.

The ratio of men to women among those interviewed, 62 to 38%, coincided with their distribution among the unemployed in general.

The average age of the respondents was 36.5. This does not correspond to the average age of unemployed people, which is explained by our choice; we had wanted to study a narrower cohort, people between 25 and 45. We had originally thought that this age was equally far from the start of people's careers and from retirement thus having a lesser effect on people's chances of finding work. In the course of the interviews, however, it became increasingly clear that from the aspect of the chances of finding employment, it was wrong to have ranked people's ages among the secondary, less important factors.

This was borne out by the respondents' experience: when you reach the age of 40 you are considered to be old and your chances in job-hunting are small. Of course age alone is not decisive; people's chances of finding jobs are also influenced by other factors accompanying age, e. g., one's physical state — to what extent has a person been worn out by strenuous physical work by the time he or she is 35 or 40. Another factor is appearance; what signs has a deviant way of life not infrequently accompanying unemployment left on people applying for jobs? And it is a well-known fact how important looks are in the case of women applying for vacancies in office management or perhaps as secretaries. We will return to these aspects in subsequent parts of the paper.

The time when our respondents became unemployed (January 1991) still belonged to an early stage of unemployment. In the public opinion this period was associated with cutbacks in the number of unskilled workers. For the Nyíregyháza sample this hypothesis was not confirmed. Judging by the distribution of staff groups, the number of skilled and unskilled workers were similar as early as 1991, with the skilled workers slightly outnumbering their unskilled counterparts. And in Hajdú-Bihar County, especially in Debrecen, to our surprise, we found that the early stages of lay-offs had affected skilled workers on the largest scale, closely followed by employees working in administration and office management.

Table 1. Division of sample by staff groups (percentage)
(N = 95 people)

	skilled workers	semi-skilled workers	unskilled workers	administrative	low-level management	Total
Debrecen	47. 1	13. 2	3. 8	20. 8	15. 1	100
Nyíregyháza	35. 7	16. 7	28. 6	11. 9	7. 1	100

In addition to the above, the distribution of the respondents by their educational level also shows that even the early stages of unemployment weren't characterised by a preponderance of unskilled workers.

Table 2. Distribution of people interviewed by educational level (percentage)
(N = 95 people)

	less than 8 years of elementary school	8 years	vocational school	secondary school	Total
Debrecen	0	15. 1	39. 6	45. 3	100
Nyíregyháza	2. 4	40. 5	33. 3	23. 8	100

When analysing our data it is necessary to make a distinction between the duties of the respondents at their last place of employment and in the greater part of their lives, for in most cases these do not coincide. As a result of mounting financial, but not infrequently psychological pressures, employees accept vacancies that could be filled by employees with lower educational levels and skills. At the same time, as the number of the unemployed grows, employers, too, are beginning to employ better qualified people to fill vacancies. Often it is not the higher qualification but its versatility that matters. These days shorthand and typing skills do not suffice for employees in office management. They are expected to be computer literate, speak languages, to have done secretarial courses, etc.

Table 3. Position in the present labour market of the respondents (percentage)
(N = 95 people)

	receiving benefit	not receiving	in work	inactive	Total
Debrecen	52. 7	7. 6	32. 1	7. 6	100
Nyíregyháza	71. 4	11. 9	9. 5	7. 2	100

Those who do not receive benefits have used up the time allocated to them by their unemployment benefit. (There was one exception, though, who had his benefit withdrawn for not co-operating with the Jobs Centre. He did not accept the job that they had offered to him.)

Within the stratum of 'inactive' people there are equal numbers of women receiving maternity allowances and people receiving disability benefits. We classified as recipients

of disability benefits only those individuals who were already receiving their benefits at the time of the interviews.

Due to the small number of participants, the sample cannot be regarded as representative in any way. However, it is my conviction that these interviews have brought us closer to finding out more about the characteristics of this stratum and have enabled us to have a better understanding of its background motivation.

'Voluntary' unemployment

„... in olden times those who wanted or liked to work did work whereas those who didn't, were hobos — just like now.”

One of the harshest opinions of the unemployed among the general public is, especially in earlier periods, that only those become members of this stratum who themselves are to blame for their misfortunes and that the majority of them volunteer for the status of unemployed.

It is a commonly held view today, too, even among the unemployed themselves, that if someone tries hard they can find employment.

It is extremely difficult to give a notional definition of who a voluntary unemployed person really is. In what follows we shall look at a few opinions.

„In the world unemployed people are grouped into two classes: those becoming unemployed voluntarily and those who become unemployed inevitably. The voluntary unemployed are those who do not consider work profitable for pay below their unemployment benefit.”³

We found several individuals among our respondents who were reluctant to work even for pay somewhat higher than their benefit. They are only willing to take up employment again if their pay is considerably higher than the sum of their present unemployment benefit.

It is equally difficult to define the concept of voluntariness if we are to classify into the categories of voluntary versus non-voluntary women with young children, people with impaired physical condition or sick people. The above definition cannot be extended to include them. Marie Jahoda's idea of voluntariness reflects the diversity of everyday life much better: „Conclusions regarding the 'voluntary' nature of unemployment should be rejected. One reason is that the notion of 'voluntariness', as it is commonly known, implies that the individuals take a deliberate and careful decision to choose unemployment as something more favourable than employment. Even if we add to the number of those who are better off being unemployed than the employed (who are usually low-paid heads of families and people with large families) the drop-outs and scroungers, who would live on lower living standards rather than go out to work, it would still be absurd to assume that there are greater numbers amongst the unemployed who choose unemployment on

3 Quoted from a lecture delivered by Bálint Zöld, Chairman of the Hungarian Psychiatric Association at the conference „Unemployment and Mental Hygiene in Hungary '92”, 16 January, 1992.

a voluntary basis. Either way, the boundaries of 'voluntary' decisions are strictly determined by pressing social norms and past experience. What is left beyond all this is very important but not great enough for us to be able to explain the current rise of unemployment by voluntary decisions." (Jahoda 1991: 8).

We have to disagree with Jahoda's point that there are no individuals among the unemployed who take a careful and deliberate decision in choosing this condition because in the short run it seems and, in fact, is more profitable for them. While analysing the interviews we found that 'volunteers' fell into several groups. At the same time the findings of our research support the second part of Jahoda's statement that it is not the voluntary unemployed who are primarily responsible for the rapid increase in the unemployment rate and that the pressures of the environment play a great role even in the cases of the unemployed that seemed 'voluntary'.

Let us return now to our own study and to those who do not want to work for a shorter or longer period, or to those who may never want to work again. Let us examine the extent to which these decisions were free or forced by circumstance, and let us see what these pressures are.

First of all we wanted to find out whether those interviewed were considering re-employment or they had recently quit looking for work altogether (maybe did not even take up employment). Naturally, here we considered only individuals who were still out of work, assuming that those who had re-employed had automatically considered finding work.

Table 4. Are you considering seeking a job? (percentage)
(N = 95 people)

	Yes	No	Total
Debrecen	77. 8	22. 2	100
Nyíregyháza	86. 8	13. 2	100

One cause of the discrepancy between the figures of Debrecen and Nyíregyháza may be that in 1991 in Debrecen it was still somewhat easier to find work. Thus, those who really wanted to work and did not belong to the group of the multiply disadvantaged, were more likely to find jobs than their Nyíregyháza counterparts. From this aspect, the 77. 8% is an already filtered population.

In Nyíregyháza the chances of employment lagged behind both the national and the Hajdú-Bihar County average already in 1991. Within the total number of unemployed people the number of those who wanted to find work but remained unemployed was somewhat greater in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County.

Within the group of those who wanted to work further groups could be isolated depending on the conditions jobless people were willing to accept or on their explanations as to why they no longer wanted to work.

In what follows we examine how soon job-seekers would like to return to work:

Table 5. How important is it to you to return to work? (percentage)
(N= 95 people)

	very urgent	not very urgent	not at all urgent	total
Debrecen	48. 7	28. 6	25. 7	100
Nyíregyháza	42. 1	31. 6	26. 3	100

As can be seen, only half of the job-seekers find it essential that they should find a job as soon as possible. For some reason or other, the others adopt a wait-and-see attitude (as we shall see from our examples, the majority of these wish to stay at home until their benefits are withdrawn), and over a quarter of the sample find re-employment not urgent at all; maybe they will drop out of the cycle of potential job-hunters for good.

Let us examine the people who have quit looking for jobs temporarily and those who have given up for good.

Of course there are no clear types here, either, as the motivations for one's decision may be extremely diverse in particular cases, but we intend to present the most characteristic examples.

1. Those who adopt a wait-and-see policy

„I won't have physical work recommended to me. It's degrading."

„No work is degrading if I do it with dignity!"

Close to a quarter of the respondents belong here, they are the ones who will look for jobs with lesser intensity or not at all in the near future, or at least while they receive their benefits.

It should be noted here that the people interviewed had been out of work for over a year. In the early stage, especially in the first three months, greater numbers were intensively looking for jobs. The present opinions thus reflect the apathy following their first disillusionment and despair.

1. 1. The largest group of those who have adopted a wait-and-see attitude is made up of people who are satisfied with the amount of their unemployment benefit and, after previous enquiries, they have concluded that in the vacancies offered to them they would receive a considerably lower income than their present unemployment benefit. Hence they are deterred from taking employment as long as they receive their benefit. (This, of course, does not mean that they do not make money in the 'shadow economy'.)

Man of 40, driver. His unemployment benefit at present is 14,000 forints.

„I could find a job for 10,000, but I'd have to load bricks and gravel, alone, with flexible working hours, and I'd also have to be a mechanic! I'd rather not... I'm almost 40, and they expect me to go to work for 10,000 forints? And from that the pension contribution and lots of other things would be deducted! I'd rather be unemployed and get seven thousand forints and do something on the side. I may even be better off this way as I don't need to buy a bus pass, money for clothing to dress neat and I don't have to pay for my children's school lunch. That's about 2000 forints for two kids.”

Man of 32, skilled worker

„If I had tried hard enough I would have found some sort of employment but I won't do it just so that I can have a job... In other words, I wanted to work for the money and not to work as a replacement for sitting at home.”

Man of 33, skilled worker

„I would go out to work if I got a different sum of money. At first I received maximum benefit.”

Man of 32, high-school graduate. His benefit is 14,500 forints.

„I don't want to find a job... To tell you the truth, I feel I have entirely different objectives for myself than simply find any job at 32.”

Man of 37, high-school graduate. Wants to set up his own business after his benefit stops.

„When my attempts failed, I received a relatively good benefit, I decided to wait for the time being.”

1. 2. The second group of wait-and-seers is made up of those with not too high benefits who decide to wait until their benefits are withdrawn because the consequential increase in their income would be negligible. They use the duration of the benefit to wait for or find the appropriate job. Their benefit is a safe source of income, thus they are not financially forced to take the very first opportunity under unfavourable conditions.

Woman of 40, high-school graduate.

„If I am paid 10,000 forints, that's hardly more than my benefit. Then I say I'd rather stay at home with my family, for 10,000 forints will not get me out of this fix. After all these years a good trader won't take up employment for less than 15,000 forints net.”

Man of 35, skilled worker.

„I'll be receiving my benefit until November — after that, we'll see.”

1. 3. A small but peculiar group of wait-and-seers is made up of individuals who have not switched to a 'waiting' position at the expense of the unemployment benefit, but whose aim, too, is to gain time, to wait until more favourable opportunities for employment occur. This group was represented by expectant mothers who had spent half a year to a year hunting for jobs in vain and, before their benefits were stopped, decided to have a child and choose the three relatively calm years of childcare leave over the uncertain labour market.

Other researchers have also found that there is a close relationship between childbirth and unemployment, or rather, between childbirth and the desire to flee from unemployment, but, as far as I know, hardly any empirical studies have been made so far. On the basis of her experience gained in a Baranya County research study of a sample of 1000, Emőke Simonyi says, „A lot of women decided to become pregnant at this age (30 and 39) rather than becoming unemployed.”⁴

During the course of a study carried out in Debrecen in May 1992 among parents of children between 0 and 3 years (the number of those interviewed was 1916), the relationship between the fear of unemployment and a decision to have a child was given a somewhat more definitive character. When asked whether their fear of becoming unemployed played a part in giving birth to a child 12% of respondents said yes (Csoba 1992).

During our present study we met three cases like this. These families decided to have a second, a third and a fourth baby, respectively.

In addition to the childcare allowance and the childcare benefit, further regular support is provided for the families by the family allowance or perhaps the regular educational allowance, which families may claim from the local government.

From our sample of 100, a further 8 to 10 families live exclusively on the income they receive for their children, not counting occasional work.

2. The sick

„If your health has deteriorated you are not wanted anywhere!”

Twenty-seven of the respondents mentioned some sort of illness which could not be disregarded when seeking work. The range of illnesses is very large: diabetes, tumours, rheumatism, slipped disc, hernia, other locomotor disorders, problems with people's vision, blindness in one eye, heart and circulation problems, heart attack, epilepsy and other problems of the nervous system.

Several people we asked mentioned that they had had to claim sickness benefit several times owing to their illness and when they were dismissed their employers used this as an excuse most of the time. In seven cases out of the 27 it was officially acknowledged that these people's working capacity had deteriorated over a period of one to one-and-a-half years. In the case of four individuals the rate of injury to health was 67% or more, and it was lower in four cases. The only escape from unemployment for another 12 individuals involved applying for disabled status. In recent times the incidence of this as the last resort for unemployed people has been rising.

Considering all circumstances, the situation of legally recognised disabled people still seems relatively secure compared to the situation of those who live aware of their illness but have had their applications for disabled status rejected. Their impaired physical condition restricts them in applying for jobs (light physical work with special shifts would

4 Based on research she conducted in Pécs.

be appropriate for them, but their condition is not serious enough for these people to have their reduced working capacity recognized. This condition of „not yet, but also not any more” has a very depressing effect on the people involved.⁵

The ratio of sick people within the stratum of the unemployed is not restricted to Hungary — the Hungarian morbidity and disability rates are close to the British rates. „In Great Britain there is a disproportionately large number of disabled and not very healthy people, at least among the unemployed. A recent unemployment study carried out in cities found that 29% of white unemployed people were partially disabled (only 9%, however, were officially disabled).” (Jahoda 1991:19. The corresponding ratios in our own sample were 27% and 8%).

The majority of diseases did not come about during the time of unemployment; rather, heavy physical work, an unhealthy way of life and other factors had all greatly contributed to these people becoming jobless.

Woman of 41, primary school educated. Complains of strong pains in her legs and varicose veins.

„I could no longer do a caretaker’s job so I was forced to hand in my notice. The doctor didn’t keep me on sick leave, but sent me back to work saying I was not ill. This is how I claimed unemployment benefit. I had no alternative, really. I figured it out that if I didn’t have ‘resigned’ in my labour-book, I’ll be eligible for unemployment benefit.”

Man of 43, divorced. Blind in one eye.

„As a matter of fact, nobody knew I was blind in one eye. I had two enemies, who told Feri about it — he was my employer. I was working as a semi-skilled worker. From then on I was not allowed to climb the scaffolding because, as he said honestly, he could be held responsible for me. He paid me 20,000 forints as compensation for dismissal. Since then I have been unemployed and have been living here with my mother.”

3. Women looking after the long-term sick within families

„Don’t send any gypsies or mothers with small children!”

On the basis of their number and the significance of this type, unemployed people who are forced to stay out of work to look after their long-term sick dependants take up the third place. Long-term sick people can be minors, sick relatives, elderly parents requiring more than average care and, not infrequently, the permanent presence of the carer, thus making it difficult for such carers to find employment.

Special attention must be paid within the group to the case of single mothers who cannot rely on external help (from relatives, or grandparents). Thus going out to work in today’s 8-hour shifts, or even working in two or three shifts is out of the question for them. In our sample, ten women belong to this group. Of course, this type is not clear

5 Bálint György, Deputy Chief Medical Officer of the National Health Service said in an interview in 1991 that „many jobless people apply for disability benefit who, had they not lost their jobs, would not apply for disability pension” („Rokkantnyugdíjaztatás”).

either, there possibly being additional disadvantages to a long-term sick child (e. g., not only is the child seriously asthmatic, but the mother is ill, too). Far from volunteering to become unemployed, these women, in fact, are forced to accept their plight, and not only during the period of unemployment benefit, but also in the years following. Or even if they can find jobs, they will not go out of their way to look for work.

They can take up employment only under very specific conditions — something the present-day labour market does not encourage mothers with small children to do. Part-time employment is far from common in Hungary. Besides, if a single mother cannot support her family with the money she earns in a full-time job, what could she do with what she would earn from a part-time job?

Woman of 36, divorced, mother of four

„They told me to go and work in the Canning Factory. Later the woman asked why I hadn't accepted it. I told her she was insane. You can't leave four small children on their own at night. They are not used to being left alone at home ... I won't go and try to find a job until the girl is able to look after herself, she should be a minimum of, say, ten years old — she's five now. Later, if I see that the girl is independent, I'll be able to go to work.”

Woman of 35, divorced, mother of two

„What I'd need is a job I could do with two small children, one goes to kindergarten, the other goes to school. So that I wouldn't have to go to work by 6am, that is, I wouldn't have to do shiftwork because I simply cannot do that. I'd have to pay a baby-sitter 200 forints per hour, so no matter how much I'd be earning, I'd have to give out several hundred forints every day.”

Woman of 31, with three children. One child is disabled.

„It's becoming more and more difficult. And here is this big girl; because there would be no problem if she was able to look after herself. But we have to take her everywhere. She doesn't even know the numbers. And when my unemployment benefit expires, in October, I'll claim custody allowance for her because she will never be able to work.

Woman of 40

„Time passes by at home when I do the housework. My sick mother, who is 80, cannot move. I have to look after her, too. Now I have to look after two families. Shopping, cooking, cleaning ... I have to go and see her every day. I'm not bored ... as long as I have to look after my mother, I'm bound to be unemployed. Then, we shall see. I'd like something I could do at home.”

4. People who are stuck, and the lucky few who have found a solution

In addition to the three basic types, obviously, there can be numerous reasons for somebody not being able to or not wanting to find a job in the short or even long run. If we had a sufficient number of respondents, we could probably form further types. For the time being we can only present the most characteristic ones (from among the particular cases).

Four alcoholics

Man of 41, divorced, skilled worker

Man of 39, divorced for 10 years, skilled worker; unemployed for the second time.

Man of 40, semi-skilled worker, unemployed for the second time.

Man of 42, unskilled worker. In his family, the wife and the two sons are also unemployed.

The men belonging to this group specify occasional work as their basic source of income. (It is probable that there is a higher incidence of this type among the people interviewed but — and this is one of the most sensitive points of our research — we have grouped under this heading only those who, during the interview, mentioned alcohol as a contributing factor in their cases.)

Two men have become Jehova's Witnesses

Man of 31, high-school graduate

Man of 38, skilled worker. His wife is unemployed. They have three children.

„We are able to help people who are going through a bad patch, just like us. We would like to realize the guiding values of the Bible in our life... We are at home during the day. We have the opportunity of meeting and maintaining relations with lots of people who are unemployed themselves and are trying to find a solution, and consolation. There is no way out, but we can at least inform them about hope, ... and we do not focus on human authority.”

Together with their spouses, these men have decided that for them converting people (to Jehova's Witnesses) will remain their main work, the meaning of their lives.

Two gypsy musicians

Man of 31, with three children. Unemployed for the third time. His wife is claiming disability benefit.

Man of 28, with two children. His wife is a cleaner.

„I had a Yamaha piano worth 200,000 forints and I had to part with it for half the money. („Then how could you go back to work?") I can't because I have no money to buy it back. („Are you trying to find a job?") No, I'm afraid to look for one because I'm afraid they'll say yes. If only I could buy back my instrument somehow within a year! It would be OK then, but if I can't and my benefit is withdrawn, I don't know what'll happen then ... the clerk at the Centre told me they would send me to work as an unskilled worker. I told him he couldn't send me to work in a place like that, but I also said that I was willing to take on anything that would agree with my skills and my knowledge!”

One farmer

Woman of 37, with one child. Finished the eight classes of elementary school and a course in cutting and sewing.

(„Have you quit looking for a job altogether?") „For now, yes. To tell the truth, I have. Now, because of this land business... My father had 15 acres of land ... now this land has been allotted to us, two acres have been planted with sunflowers, and we're trying to figure out what would be worth planting where, ... in this one here we'll have peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, melons and tobacco in the autumn. I wouldn't dare to take on employment because of this land business. I want to stay at home now.”

Together with her husband she decided not to go out to work but claim their parents' land and start farming instead. It is highly likely that, had we not chosen our sample in large towns, the number of cases belonging to this type would have been remarkably higher.

One person studying to be a college student

Woman of 26, high-school education, mother of a five-year-old child

„I wasn't able to find a job. The truth is I'm not trying really hard. Now I'm attending a school of finance and economics. I want to use this time and study instead... I had a vacancy that I could have taken. I could have become an administrator ... but it would drain my strength and I have a child. How am I supposed to work and study? You're bound to neglect one of the three. If I want to continue my studies, shall I neglect my child? No, I'd rather neglect my work... Once I was sent to a place where the entrails of animals were cleaned. I received the notification and I despaired — what if they accept me! When I went there it was stinking with entrails already from 20 metres away! I told myself I wouldn't survive this. I went in and told them very firmly that I didn't want that vacancy. They signed my paper. I went back to the Jobs Centre and they signed my paper... I didn't quote my unemployment status. If anybody anywhere asks me I tell them I'm a housewife. I quote having a child. I don't mention I'm unemployed because I'm ashamed of myself for not working, for being deliberately at home, studying, while others work and have 1% of their wages (unemployment contribution) taken off them. And since I need that money I take it, but afterwards I console myself by thinking: so far I have worked and others have studied, now I'm studying and others are working.”

Those who have already found work

Finding a job is not an easy task in spite of the fact that the unemployment rate in 1991, but especially in its first half, did not even come close to the situation characteristic of one year later. Out of the 100 people interviewed, 21 have been able to find and remain in employment. Four of these are from Nyíregyháza, and 13 are from Debrecen. They usually have their contacts, their friends and family members to thank for their jobs. Only in one case did the Jobs Centre find work for somebody, but even then, the desperate woman, who was a single parent with three children, was helped by the personal sympathy of the clerk rather than the official bureaucracy.

But let us examine the facts.

Three people have become independent entrepreneurs

Man of 32, skilled worker. He bought a van with his family's assistance and became a haulier.

Man of 32, high-school education. He took out a permit as an entrepreneur and became an official newsagent and distributor. In reality he lived off various clerical and physical odd jobs.

Woman of 40, high-school education, worked in middle management for a long time. After being unemployed for half a year she took out an entrepreneur's licence and became an adviser for entrepreneurs.

Three people have found work again in their families' enterprises

Man of 42. Together with his son he does business with Turkish and Italian goods on the second hand market.

Man of 41, high-school education. He was unemployed for nine months. Then his brother formed a limited company and he has since been employed by him.

Woman of 30. Her husband formed a limited company, she works there, too.

One person has found a job at a family member's workplace

Woman of 36. Being unemployed led to complete mental exhaustion. (She was unemployed between November 1990 and February 1991.) Her husband couldn't cope any more, tried all his connections and had his wife employed at his workplace.

Two people were found jobs through family connections

Man of 40. He had diminished working capacity (40%). A company advertised a vacancy for a caretaker. 600 people applied for the job. The husband of the wife's boss is a manager at the company. He was asked to take on this man.

Man of 39, high-school education

„I went to the Jobs Centre; they sent me to two openings but both offered such low wages that in the end I didn't take either of them. But, if I don't accept jobs, I am not eligible for unemployment benefit ... Eventually my father-in-law told me that the State Insurance Company would employ me as an agent. Although financially it was a set-back, my circumstances became a lot better than in the job the Jobs Centre offered to me. I earn 4,000 forints and no longer claim unemployment benefit.”

One person was recommended an opening by the Jobs Centre

Woman of 32. Mother of three little children. Divorced, at present living with a partner. She found a job with the help of a clerk working for the Jobs Centre.

(„*What experience did you gain in the course of your search for work?*”) „I found that it was very difficult to find a job and it matters where you go. I, for example, when I got to this school, all I was asked for by the head teacher was my labour-book. I sat down and he said I was admitted. I was surprised, I found it difficult to believe. The head looked at me and asked what was wrong with me ... I asked him if this had been pre-arranged. He said he had received a phone call and had been told they would send a woman. They spoke highly of you and I decided that we needed this person.

But this is not the case everywhere. Many employers just skim through the book and usually find fault with why I left my previous workplace, why I became unemployed. And then I had to explain to them, please understand there was nothing I could do about it... my son had become asthmatic. I had to tell this everywhere. In one place I asked them why don't you want to know my whole life story? Don't start with why I became unemployed...”

Four people found work for themselves

Man of 35. A bricklayer employed him as an unskilled labourer. He is trained as a locksmith and a bricklayer. He had spent months job-hunting before he was finally able to find work. He could have found work earlier but only on the black market.

Woman of 39, high-school graduate

„I am working for DEASZ now... I was out of work for seven or eight months. I went to work for considerably less than what I had in my previous workplace. I simply had to find employment in spite of the fact that I knew, I know even now, that this work won't last long. (She was employed temporarily only.) A month or two, and I'll be unemployed again. They were to have employed me until the 1st of January... but I'm still here. But I can't stay any longer after the books are balanced... We've had a lot of rows in the family about me not earning any money. That's why I accepted this job. And that's why I accepted a lower pay than my unemployment benefit. My benefit then was 14,000 forints and I went to work for 11,000.”

Man of 35, skilled worker. He was unemployed for two months. He found casual work with an entrepreneur.

„After two days he said, OK mate, we're settled, you'll be given 80 forints per hour. He said, no booze, though. No problem, I said, that's not difficult. The other thing is — you'll have to work. It is possible that I was lucky.”

Woman of 45. Found employment with a joint stock company. She is a clerk and a cashier. She is a high-school graduate, trained as a steno-typist, as a draughtswoman, a maker of shoe uppers, and in confidential file management.

„I, too, tried in lots of places and what mattered wasn't what you knew but the first impressions. The limited and joint stock companies were looking for people and gave good wages, too, but, unfortunately, they expected me to have a further 25 skills to the five or six I had. When I came to this company, I was asked — all 50 applicants were — if I knew how to work telexes, faxes, the new type of typewriter, computers... Five were picked from the fifty and they were notified... Being unemployed made me feel ill. I love working.”

Seven people found employment through acquaintances (they were recommended)

Man of 45. His present job was recommended to him by people he knew. Now he is working for the same amount of money as his unemployment benefit was. He was earning the same amount as he was in 1966 as he is now. His wife is out of work, too. They dreaded not being able to make ends meet. This is why he took this job. The company is loss-making; they haven't been paid even this small pay for months now. Instead of the safe benefit, this man made do with income coming from uncertain work.

Man of 33, high-school education. An acquaintance recommended him to the Railways as an unskilled worker.

Man of 36. He, too, was recommended to his present workplace by an acquaintance.

„For three to four months we were both unemployed, over Christmas as well. It wasn't an easy period... I got this job through an acquaintance. They told me they had this vacancy. I used to work as a driver but now I work as a caretaker. I consider this pay higher than my benefit. I'm paid almost 9,000 forints... It wasn't difficult for me to find a job, but only because I knew someone. Otherwise I could still be out of work.”

Man of 35, skilled worker. He was unemployed for three months. His friend recommended him to the brewery as a crater.

Woman of 45. Her mother-in-law's neighbours got a job for her. The neighbour retired but before doing so she recommended 'the young woman' to replace her. At present she is working as a school secretary. She waited nine months before getting this job.

Man of 30

„I was unemployed for almost a year. Then I found work at TITASZ through friends. We can say that I managed to find a job with the help of relatives and friends.”

Man of 34. He was unemployed between November 1990 and January 1991.

„I had staff that I had to send on unpaid leave. One was a man with three children, and even though he had a job he didn't get a penny... I knew how disadvantageous that was... I, too, have two kids and my wife doesn't work. I found having to send these people away troublesome... I handed in my notice and quit... I was unemployed for two months, but luckily, I succeeded in finding a job with the same firm... My unemployment benefit was 14,027 forints per month. I'm sure there would have been some who would have thought I'd wait a year and then I'd look for another job. But I thought it was all uncertain. What if the situation changes so radically that I won't be able to find a job. Or I'll forget so much during a year that I won't be able to do a job. I was lucky, they knew me. They knew what I was capable of. They employed me.”

Survival techniques

„I often dream that I work...”

1. „Relapsers” or the main reasons of recurring unemployment

Over a quarter (26.3%) of those interviewed had also previously been unemployed. The „record holders” (3 men) had become ‘members’ of the unemployed group for the third time in two years. The most general explanations have been known for some time now. It would be difficult to separate cause and effect in the individual factors. Unemployment is traditionally caused by the following:

- the first to be dismissed are those who came last,
- the first to be dismissed are those who do not have contacts in the new workplace who could put in a good word for them;
- the first to be dismissed are those who do not have a family.

It is a generally known fact that the unemployed are in a disadvantageous situation from this aspect, too. A study carried out in 1990 shows that in the age bracket of unemployed people between 35 and over, the percentage of married people is only 50% (Fóti – Illés 1992: 30).

In the respondents' view, an extremely important new aspect should be included among the generally known and long-used discriminative aspects: the first to be dismissed are those, they say, for whom the position has been obtained by the Jobs Centre. Naturally, here the people interviewed were reflecting on not only the chances of keeping a job but also the chances of finding one. It is extremely difficult to measure the true

value of this statement, but it is conspicuous that several respondents referred to it independently of each other.

„No matter how many vacancies I applied for, people didn't think I wanted to work. No matter which company I went to, the manager looked at me and I was literally burning with shame. In an office there were four people sitting and they were all looking at me... I even told one of them, I haven't come from prison, I've come from the Jobs Centre...”

„I knew there was such a thing as unemployment benefit, because I had been given my labour-book on 13th and I registered with the centre on the 26th. In the meantime I tried to find a job for myself. Because it isn't the same, taking the paper from the Jobs Centre and then they look at me... and I can feel that they don't like me having been sent from the Jobs Centre... Those who come without a paper are certain to want to work but those who come with one, may simply want to have it stamped...”

Of course these reservations in connection with those for whom the jobs have been obtained by the Jobs Centre are valid not only at the moment of employment, rather, they dog them for long months until they acquire the necessary contacts in their new workplace and can prove that they did come for work and not for a stamp.

The opinions and views of employees are also greatly influenced by the stereotypes of public opinion. Being unemployed carries a stigma, even if in recent times the gravely negative public opinion about the unemployed has somewhat softened. In the case of people for whom their jobs have been obtained by the Jobs Centre, this stigma is obvious, while with those who are 'simply looking for work' their intention to change their job can also be viewed as a positive effort — they are trying to move to a better job.

„I don't believe that if a man has been dismissed he will rush directly to the Jobs Centre and say, I want my benefit. First he will try and change his own situation. If he doesn't succeed, maybe he will go to the Jobs Centre as a last resort!”

Employees, albeit often not consciously, are biased against people who are sent by the Jobs Centre, and this tendency is usually maintained in the first four months of employment, increasing the chances of a further dismissal. The background to the prejudice is basically summed up by the interviewee we quoted last. If a person is unemployed and really wants to work, he will try and find a job unaided. Those who are sent by the Jobs Centre have already got past a first selection. This can be 'self-selection', which means that their intention to find work is not serious, but it can be real selection, the employee doesn't have marketable skills for the employer, couldn't sell himself on the 'free market', other employers didn't employ him — why should I?

The people interviewed thought it was not only employers who were prejudiced against the unemployed at the time of employment and for several months afterwards, but also their colleagues.

„It would be nice to go to work somewhere where there are other people who have been unemployed. If there aren't any more of us, then a displacement game will start. It's like prejudice

against immigrants or racial hatred... Those who have been out of work are not welcome. This will inevitably lead to remarks."

Due to the small number of respondents these inferences should naturally be regarded as a hypothesis rather than the conclusive results of our study, but the information coming from various sources reflects very serious indications, which may serve as a starting point for further research.

The following specific reasons led to repeated unemployment:

- Having been offered higher wages, the unemployed person quit his original workplace soon after he was given a job and went to work for a limited company. In the beginning it paid well but after a few months it went bankrupt and the employee was sacked for the second time.

- The unemployed person went to work for an entrepreneur or to a limited company but, referring to their financial hardships, the employer paid him only a fraction of what he had promised. He decided that he would not work for that much. Back to unemployment.

- When his first sick pay was due, the employee found that his employer had not registered him with social security, and, despite his high salary, he had been deprived of social security benefits. His choice is unemployment again, in the hope of a „decent job”.

- Unemployed people are only employed on a temporary basis, and when their contract expires, they can go and look for a new job. Especially younger people are threatened by this extremely adverse form of unemployment. The reason is that if people become unemployed for the second time in a year, employers look at them distrustfully from the outset. The more often a person becomes unemployed, the smaller the chances are of finding work.

„I was employed there on a temporary basis... but when the season was over I left ... then I went back for the next season but not once was I employed on a permanent basis. („How long did this go on like this?") Four years. („Were there others whose contracts had expired?") Yes, there were two before me. Both of them young people. They, too, were employed temporarily, but then the older people came back."

„In the meantime I was looking for work; I held a probationary appointment at Sóstó Timber Industry Limited... where I worked for one month when I was told I wasn't needed after all. That is when I first saw an unemployed person undertake the same kind of work at much lower wages than a full-time worker."

2. Forms of finding employment

„You look through the papers, go places, ask your friends, but you can't find anything anywhere!"

The four most frequent types of finding a job are the following:

A) The unemployed person goes from company to company himself.

B) He regards the job advertisements in newspapers as his major source of information in finding a job.

C) He sets out to find work relying on his contacts, on information he receives from family, friends and acquaintances.

D) The job is obtained for him by the Jobs Centre.

Of course, in individual cases, these forms are also applied side by side, together. With respect to their popularity or frequency, the following picture emerges:

Table 6. Ratio of the individual types of finding employment applied by respondents (percentage)

	A	B	C	D
Debrecen	85	34	41	71
Nyíregyháza	85	26	33	54

However, the frequency indexes of the individual types differ greatly from their efficiency indexes. If we examine which channel by way of which most applicants were able to find work, we shall find that, from the point of view of efficiency, type C is in first place, type A takes second place, and type D, relatively high on the frequency scale, shares third place with B when it comes to efficiency.

A) Running around town

Personal inquiries are very popular among job-seekers. Of course there are several variants here, too, because „I've tried once” and „I run around town, inquiring regularly” are only two end points of a broad scale! And of course there are some who, afraid of being rejected, send their acquaintances and friends to ‘explore’ and appear in the flesh only in the vacancies thus ‘prepared’, but when interviewed, assess this as personal effort in seeking employment.

Our experience shows that personal enquiries tend to be characteristic of the first three months of unemployment, when the job-hunter still believes that his personal efforts will be fruitful. Many do not even register with the Jobs Centre, hoping that they will be able to find employment within a few days.

After the disillusionment of the first three months the intensity of job-hunting, especially personal involvement decreases, and the intention of the unemployed to find employment manifests itself in skimming through the newspapers every day and waiting for their friends and acquaintances’ possible help.

Personal effort in finding a job intensifies again towards the end of the unemployment benefit period, but this time without the enthusiasm and optimism experienced in the first three months. It is more of a desperate fight for survival. Their negotiating positions deteriorate, too, and the job-hunters are willing to accept wages identical to or even lower than their unemployment benefit.

B) „You shouldn't believe the newspaper ads!”

There are several cycles of finding employment through newspaper advertisements. In the first stage, the vacancies advertised in newspapers are mostly of secondary significance. The majority of job-hunters trust their personal connections and the efficiency of their acquaintances' offers, find the vacancies advertised in newspapers less promising, nor do they expect much of the ability of the Jobs Centre to find work for them. If they are unable to find employment at the end of the first three months, newspapers formally acquire a bigger role, whereas in reality they are of low efficiency when it comes to finding employment, hence their popularity remains unchanged.

The daily skimming of papers seems to be characteristic of the middle cycle of the time spent out of work. Interestingly, we have found a double motivation among those 'skimming the papers' regularly. The members of one group look at the papers conscientiously early in the morning, wanting to be the first to apply, hoping to find something but have to face disappointment daily, as is shown by the following excerpts from our interviews.

„I applied to practically every single job advertised in the Hajdú-Bihar daily *Napló* or any other newspaper. There were several jobs where I had to write a CV and all sorts of things, but they always replied that, unfortunately, the vacancy had been filled, or I got no reply at all. I went to every advertised lecture or work organisation opportunity but I suspect that these focus on two jobs: they either want insurance agents or sellers of washing powder.”

„On one occasion, having read the advertisement for a storekeeper's job I was at MAGÉV at 7 a. m. As the workers were going in I went straight in to see the manager, who said, 'I'm sorry, sir, but somebody was here before you, he is just being seen up here.' I said, 'Where could he come in as I was the first to arrive and I haven't seen anybody here.' He was just bluffing. They had filled the vacancy earlier but they advertised it in the newspaper. In fact, there were several cases like this, not only me.”

The second group of daily paper-readers do not pick up the paper early in the morning, rather, they pick it up somewhat later, skimming it with the intention of finding, practically by way of self-justification, that there was nothing in it today either and thus it is simply impossible to find employment.

Man of 40. Has just had his unemployment benefit withdrawn.

„Only firms that cannot otherwise find workers advertise in newspapers. Even if they do employ someone, they sack them before they'd have to pay him and employ somebody else.”

Man of 36.

„I couldn't find employment in any of the places because, by the time I went there, the vacancy had been filled. Later they registered the posts with the Jobs Centre but also advertised them in the papers. By the time the Jobs Centre was notified of the jobs they had been filled through the newspaper ads.”

C) Finding employment with the help of connections

If we examine the indexes of successful job-hunting, we see that the most productive ways of finding a new job involved connections through friends, relatives and acquaintances. Of course these only lead to a solution for the unemployed person if the person involved has a rather extensive network of relationships. This is exactly why the tendency of the unemployed losing their contacts as the time span of their unemployment expands is so dangerous. (This tendency has been pointed out in the literature and was borne out by our study, too.) Together with the diminishing number of friends and acquaintances, who represent a link between the unemployed person and the outside world, the chances of finding information about new job openings decreases, too.

Perhaps no less important is the fact that the mediating activities of friends and acquaintances also involve the possibilities of guarantees. If someone is recommended to a workplace, there is the implication that a guarantee is undertaken for him. This could greatly increase the chances of being employed as against the chances of the unknown person who 'comes in from the street'. Naturally, in cases like this the recommender's word weighs heavily, since his values represent a point of reference for the employer in connection with the applicant. It is a strange game: nobody recommends a person who would later be a disgrace to them because that would also weaken the recommender's position at work. If the employer trusts the recommender, he also trusts the person recommended. However, these contacts are not as important later as they are at the moment of employment. If a mediation fails, the mediator's disadvantage is not as great as the advantage an unemployed person gains in case of a successful mediation by being employed.

Man of 25, high-school education

„I tried my best to remain in contact with lots of people. I have lots of acquaintances, many people knew that I was out of work. I had a wide circle of acquaintances... one told me that there was an opening for a rubbish collector. A very good friend of mine, and I took it.”

„I tried everything starting from newspapers... through old class mates and pals... I had the time to try every possibility but there was simply nothing. Eventually I was able to find a job through relatives.”

D) Those for whom the Jobs Centre has obtained jobs

During the one year of unemployment the applicants received quite a high percentage of job offerings. These offerings, however, were attractive to the unemployed in rare instances only.

The most important problem with the jobs offered was low pay, which did not meet the jobseekers' expectations, with the net wages often not even reaching their then unemployment benefit.

The majority of the unemployed believe that employers will register only those vacancies with the Jobs Centre which cannot be filled in any other way. This practice

simplifies the work of the Jobs Centre but also feeds the prejudice of the employers themselves against the people sent to them by the Centre.

Woman of 34, unskilled

„I could have worked in a kitchen for 4500 forints a month but that would have covered only the food for my child. There would have been a job as a cleaner too, paying about 4800 forints. That was in June 1991.”

Man of 31, skilled

„I went there saying that I don't want to go on the dole if they can offer me something and they offered a job with a 55 forint per hour gross wage. That is ridiculous...”

Man of 25, unskilled

„They sent me to many places which either had closed down or which had filled the vacancies... Once I was sent to a factory. There was a man who managed these things. I show him the paper where the offered money was written down but he told me that he could give me no work for so much money.”

We are aware of the much more dynamic increase in unemployment in the period following the time of our investigation. Although several important factors affecting the labour market have changed (the chances of finding work have diminished because of the growing number of the unemployed and the absolute decrease in labour demand), we still find it useful to enumerate the factors which assist or hinder people in finding work and escaping unemployment. The impact of these factors has probably remained the same. As to the findings of our reported research we regard them as hypotheses for a more extended and systematic investigation.

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