

Lacking skills and jobs

Adapted from Champion, Wong, Rooke. Dorling, Coombes, Brunson (1996) *The Population of Britain in the 1990s*

The early 1990s were a period when regional variations in unemployment had temporarily narrowed, due to the recession centred around 1990 in the usually prosperous south of England. After this, the gap between North and South widened again: even so, dividing Britain into the ten 'standard' regions rarely finds a scale of variation in which the highest rate is as much as double the level of that in the least-affected region. In fact, the single most important factor influencing a person's chances of gaining a job is having skills and education.

Dividing the labour-force according to their level of education reveals that the unemployment rate of those with no qualifications is over three times that of those with degrees or diplomas. The distinctions become greater once people have gained work experience in the sorts of jobs which are associated with each level of qualification. Data from the Spring 1992 Labour Force Survey shows that the unemployment rate among people who have worked in a professional occupation is under 3%—which is the level often seen as 'full employment' (because there will always be some people who are between jobs). On the other hand, all the mainly industrial manual occupation groups had unemployment rates at least six times higher.

The geographical pattern is a familiar one, with most of the areas with high rates of unemployment clustered in northern conurbations where there has been long-run industrial decline. The other concentration is in the eastern inner London Boroughs. Here, the problem is more likely to be a reduction in demand for low-skilled labour among the service industries which are dominant in London—and also in the Isle of Wight and a few other southern areas with higher rates of joblessness.

Migration might ease unemployment problems; not one place in southern England has a very high low-skill unemployment rate, while none of the northern metropolitan areas has a very low rate. Yet no southern area has a low-skill rate below the 3% 'full employment' level, so there cannot be many low-skill jobs being left unfilled. A fair summary seems to be that migration might level out the unemployment rates and so alter *who* is unemployed, but the current shortage of jobs for those with few skills would remain at much the same level. The need to have skills to compete in the labour-market follows from British firms having to compete with firms in the many countries where skill levels are higher. The summer 1993 LFS shows that even having a degree is no longer a secure and direct route into a job: among the under-25s there was little difference in unemployment rates according to their level of qualifications. However, it seems certain that, as they get older, their experiences will be similar to their parents'—so that those who remain without skills will remain the most vulnerable to unemployment.

1. What is the single most important factor which influences a person's chance of obtaining a job?
2. What evidence from the passage suggests that there are regional variations in unemployment?
3. Which occupational groups are most likely to be unemployed?
4. Which areas experience high unemployment?
5. Would migration to the South of England ease unemployment rates among the unskilled?
6. Which age groups tend to be vulnerable to unemployment?
7. What implications does the distribution of unemployment have for the health, the education and the welfare services in this country?