

National Employment Law Project

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NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT LAW PROJECT RELEASES NEW NATIONAL SURVEY OF THE UNEMPLOYED

Survey Documents the Severe Financial and Family Hardships of Unemployment as Federal Aid to the Jobless is Scheduled to Expire May 31

WASHINGTON, DC—As the debate over the future of jobless benefits heats up in Washington, the National Employment Law Project (NELP) today unveiled the findings of a new national survey of unemployed workers documenting the everyday hardships caused by the struggling labor market.

“Unemployed in America,” a survey conducted for NELP by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, paints a detailed picture of the unemployed, one far more complete than the Labor Department’s monthly unemployment reports. Officially, two million workers—the highest figure in nearly 10 years—are unemployed and have been searching for work for six months or more. NELP’s survey is the first to capture the pulse of what it means for workers to be unemployed during this recession and detail how federal jobless benefits have been a significant help for unemployed workers and their families.

“Today’s unemployment story is now about the persistent problem of long-term joblessness, as well as the serious limitations of the unemployment insurance safety net,” said Maurice Emsellem, Director of Public Policy for NELP. “As the clock winds down on federal jobless benefits, this survey should serve as a wake up call for Congress and the President to immediately extend and expand the federal jobless benefits program.”

The results show that unemployed workers are struggling against the odds to find new work. Although they continue to search intensively for work, many of the jobless expressed increased frustration and lack of confidence about today’s job market. Among the findings:

- *More than 86 percent say that it is hard to find an acceptable job in today’s market.*
- *83 percent find it harder to find a job now than in the past.*
- *61 percent are concerned that they will have to accept work that pays less than their previous job; 60 percent are concerned that they will have to take a job without health care.*

The survey also documented the severe financial hardships of unemployment. It found that a majority of the unemployed have taken drastic measures to meet their basic needs:

- *Almost six in ten unemployed American reveal that they have spent a significant amount of their savings, almost half have borrowed money to pay current expenses, and nearly a third report increased credit card debt.*
- *One in four unemployed workers report having moved to other housing or moved in with friends or relatives since becoming unemployed.*
- *More than half of the unemployed state that they have postponed medical or dental treatment for financial reasons.*
- *56 percent say that they had to cut back on spending for food since becoming unemployed.*
- *One-third of the unemployed who were once covered by health insurance no longer have health care since becoming unemployed.*

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The survey also revealed that today's unemployment crisis is having an impact on the families of unemployed workers that has previously been untold. Consider:

- *More than three in four unemployed Americans say that stress within their family has increased since they became unemployed.*
- *Among the unemployed with children, two-thirds have cut back on spending on their children, such as clothing and extracurricular activities.*
- *One-third have interrupted their own or a family member's education.*
- *More than a quarter of the unemployed say that another family member has had to find a job or increase the number of hours he or she works.*

Finally, the survey provides hard evidence that unemployment benefits and the federal extension in particular play a critical role in helping unemployed workers now struggling to make ends meet. The survey found:

- *78 percent of the unemployed who have received unemployment benefits agree that benefits have been very important in helping them and their families meet their basic needs.*
- *Of those who have run out of unemployment benefits, more than two-thirds acknowledge that the ending of their benefits has had a major impact on their financial situation.*
- *Eight in ten unemployed workers believe that Congress should continue the federal extension past May 31, and more than three in four (including 73% of Republicans) believe that it would very helpful if Congress increased the number of weeks of federal benefits from 13 to 26.*

Unless Congress and the President reauthorize the program, literally millions of unemployed workers will no longer qualify for any federal jobless benefits, joining the nearly three million workers who have already run out of their limited 13 weeks of assistance. "What's clearer now than ever, is that America's jobless deserve better. They deserve jobs as soon as they can get them, but they deserve more unemployment benefits now," said Mr. Emsellem.

For complete survey findings or to speak with an unemployed worker, please contact Jason Dring at 202-518-8047 or Jason@publicinterestpr.com. For more information on the impact of the economy on unemployed workers and the federal extension of unemployment benefits, visit NELP's new on-line resource for unemployed workers, "Laid Off & Left Out" (www.unemployedworkers.org).

From April 17 to 28, 2003, Peter D. Hart Research Associates conducted a representative, nationwide, random-digit-dial telephone survey among 413 unemployed adults, defined as currently unemployed and looking for work, not on layoff, generally available to start work, and having looked for work within the past 12 months. The criteria used for selecting respondents means that the survey includes more long-term unemployed adults than those included in definitions used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The margin of error for the survey is plus or minus 4.9 percent.

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The National Employment Law Project is a non-profit policy and legal organization based in New York City. NELP has advocated on behalf of low-wage and unemployed workers for over 30 years, and is particularly concerned with assisting these workers in overcoming barriers to employment and government systems of support.