What is unemployment?

Every month the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) asks roughly 60,000 households to complete a survey on what they did the past week for work. To be unemployed, a person must be age 16 or older. They must be noninstitutionalized and not have a job. They also must currently be available to work and have actively looked for work in the prior 4 weeks to be classified as unemployed.

**Glossary**

Survey — asking questions and collecting data using a sample.

Noninstitutionalized — not an inmate of an institution such as a prison or mental facility, and anyone who is not an Active Duty member of the Armed Forces.

**Actively looking for work**

These are examples of specific activities that count as actively looking for work.

- Contacting an employer or employment agency.
- Submitting resumes or applications.
- Asking for recommendations from friends and family.

Some activities, such as reading about a job opening in the newspaper or on the internet but not actually applying for open jobs, are not counted as actively looking for work.

**Did you know?**

The sample survey system of counting the unemployed in the United States is also used by many foreign countries, including Canada, Mexico, Australia, and Japan.

**DIY data**

With BLS data, you can explore unemployment by state and county at bls.gov/lau/.