Economics Made Easy

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/.