

## Older and unemployed

*Forced Out: Older Workers Confront Job Loss.* By Kenneth A. Root and Rosemarie J. Park, Boulder, CO, FirstForumPress (a division of Lynne Rienner Publishing, Inc.), 2009, 266 pp., \$65.00/hardback.

Although job loss can be difficult at any age, older workers often find the experience particularly challenging. Statistics consistently show that older displaced workers remain unemployed longer and exhibit lower rates of reemployment than their younger counterparts. In their book *Forced Out: Older Workers Confront Job Loss*, authors Kenneth Root and Rosemarie Park take a look at one such group of older displaced workers and examine their experiences, attitudes, and outcomes when confronted with job loss.

The book is the result of a study of 173 workers laid off from United Defense Industries between October 1998 and December 1999. United Defense, as the name suggests, is a defense contractor, supplying weapons delivery systems to the U.S. military. The workers in question, all men, were formerly employed at the company's Fridley, Minnesota, facility. The laid-off men were surveyed at three points: first, shortly after being dismissed in February 2000, then again in March 2001, and finally in April 2002. Respondents were asked about their employment status, their feelings toward the company, their experiences with local government employment services (specifically, the Anoka County Job Training Center), and various other questions designed to ascertain how they were coping.

The book begins with a review of the literature concerning older displaced workers, followed by a history of the company and the events leading up to the 1998–1999 downsizing. Next, we are introduced to the survey participants. The laid-off men range in age from 42 to 68, with an average age of 55. They are what might be called “supertennured,” with an average seniority of 29 years. With regards to education, 13 percent had not completed high school, 50 percent had a high school diploma (but no college), and 34 percent had some college or a technical degree. Only four men (2 percent) reported having a bachelor's degree. The vast majority of the men (76 percent) were married at the time of the first survey.

In chapter 4, the men first share their thoughts on being displaced. Perhaps not surprisingly, many reported feeling bitter and/or anxious after learning that they would be laid off; some, however, who were near retirement, were quite happy to depart with the added bonus of a separation allowance. In subsequent chapters, the authors examine the financial strains caused by job loss: how former long-term employees, now unemployed older workers, fared in the job market; the feasibility of self-employment and early retirement; and the potential upside of job loss, including more job security and greater fulfillment in one's new employment. In chapter 11, the men reflect back on the experience of job loss years afterwards. In addition to presenting an analysis of the statistics and their underlying causes, the authors include profiles of individual workers in each chapter to illustrate the topic discussed. These personal narratives provide valuable insight

into the mindset of the displaced men and add color to what might otherwise be a drab discussion of data.

The authors define as employed all men currently working full- or part-time and as unemployed all others who are neither retired, nor in a training program, nor physically unable to work. Respondents were allowed to self-select their employment status without regard to job search activity. Per those definitions, at the time of the first survey in February 2000, 48 percent of the laid-off men were employed either full or part time, 18 percent were unemployed, and the remaining 34 percent were not in the labor force (i.e., retired, in a training program, or physically unable to work). Though not strictly comparable, data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) that same month show that, across all industries, displaced men ages 45 to 64 exhibited a reemployment rate of 76 percent. The lower reemployment rate among United Defense workers may reflect, in part, the fact that these men had been recently laid off; by contrast, the BLS survey includes all men laid off within the previous 3 years, in this case 1997–1999.

By the time of the final survey in April 2002, the employment status of the United Defense men had improved somewhat compared with the national picture. That month, 63 percent of the displaced United Defense workers reported being employed full or part time, while 9 percent were unemployed and 28 percent were not in the labor force. National statistics published by the BLS from January 2002 show that the reemployment rate for displaced men ages 45 to 64 was 64 percent, significantly lower than it was 2

years earlier. Clearly, the recession of 2001 was taking a toll on older workers nationwide. The still-large share of former United Defense male employees not in the labor force suggests that some of them decided to take their pensions and head for the exits rather than compete in such an economy.

In the final chapter of the book, the authors review the various national, state, and local workforce programs in existence at the time and offer their own prescriptions for easing the pain of job loss for older workers. The authors' recommendations include expanding job opportunities through temporary public

service jobs and training opportunities, and extending unemployment benefits for those in a training program. The appendix provides a detailed description of the methodology used, including copies of the surveys mailed to participants.

My chief complaint with the book is that there are no summary tables included in the appendix; instead, the tables are scattered throughout the volume, making it difficult for the reader (or reviewer) to compare statistics from different survey periods. Nevertheless, the authors have produced a book that sheds light on the unique problems faced by older displaced wage earners. Their study

of the laid-off workers of United Defense puts a human face on unemployment, and the authors' respect for the men is clear throughout. While this book will be interesting to social scientists in a variety of disciplines, it is particularly recommended for human relations professionals, employment counselors, and others who might one day find themselves in the position of managing the aftermath of a downsizing. □

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