

MEASUREMENT OF EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT IN INDIA: SOME ISSUES

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The survey design, the concepts and definitions used and the measurement procedures adopted in the NSS 27th Round (1972-73) Employment-Unemployment Survey were based on the analysis and recommendations in the Report of The Expert Group on Unemployment Estimates – better known as The Dantwalla Committee Report (GOI, 1970). Ever since, in terms of concepts and definitions etc., these have remained virtually unchanged in all subsequent NSS Employment-Unemployment Surveys (EUS, for short).

The changes in the structure of the Indian economy since the early 1970s, the adoption of UNSNA 1993, the adoption by the National Accounts Division, Central Statistical Organization (NAD, for short) of EUS-based estimates for the estimation of GVA in the unorganized segment of almost all of the non-agricultural sector since 1993-94, and, the shift by the Planning Commission since the Tenth Plan from the estimates based on the Usual (principal plus subsidiary) Status to Current Daily Status-based estimates in their labour and employment exercises, singly and together, suggest the need for a review of the concepts and definitions used, of the estimates derivable from the NSS Employment-Unemployment Surveys, and, of the use of such estimates for planning and policy.

In the NSS Employment-Unemployment Surveys, work is defined as engagement in economic activity with any activity resulting in production of goods and services that add value to national product being considered as an economic activity. However, while being consistent with the Indian SNA, the fact that the ambit of economic activity in the NSS Employment-Unemployment Surveys does not cover (i) production of goods – other than that in the primary sector – that is entirely for own consumption; and (ii) processing of primary products for own consumption, implies that the definition of work in our Employment-Unemployment Surveys is not yet fully synchronised with the 1993 UN system of National Accounts. Also, by convention, activities such as prostitution are not considered as economic activities, even though, there is a clear link between “service” and earnings.

The derivation of GDP-contribution of the unorganized segment of almost all of the non-agriculture sector as the product of (i) an estimate of GVA per worker in the unorganized segment of each of the specified activities drawn from the NSS Enterprise Surveys; and, (ii) an EUS-based estimate of labour input or ‘jobs’ in the activity¹, raises a number of issues.

In the NSS (unorganized sector) Enterprise Surveys, a worker is defined as one who participates, either full time or part-time (working less than or equal to half of the normal working hours of the enterprise) on a fairly regular basis. Further, a worker need not

¹ Briefly stated, the total number of ‘jobs’ in a given activity – covering both the organized and the unorganized segments of that activity – is estimated as the sum of (i) workers in that activity on the usual principal status (or, UPS workers, for short); (ii) Other UPS workers reporting subsidiary status work in that activity; and (iii) workers in that activity who are workers only on the Usual Subsidiary Status (or, SS workers, for short). From this total, the DGE&T estimates of employment in the public sector and private sector enterprises (covered under the Employment Market Information System) in that activity, is deducted. The residual is used as the estimate of labour input in the unorganized segment of the given activity.

mean that the same person is working continuously. It only refers to a position and, therefore, the notion of ‘jobs’ – rather than of workers. From this perspective, the inclusion of subsidiary work of Usual Principal Status Workers in the count of ‘jobs’ may not pose a “conceptual” problem.

In practice, however, there is or could potentially be a problem arising from the fact that while **in the EUS the count of ‘jobs’ in a specified NIC-category is based on self-reporting by the worker, in the enterprise survey it is based on the reporting of employment by the enterprise/establishment.** Apart from the issue of “acknowledgement” as a worker by the enterprise - which may be an issue for the larger enterprises in the unorganized sector - there is the issue of workforce supplied by other contractor enterprises. In the case of such workers, their emoluments are treated as intermediate inputs in the NSS enterprise surveys, and, it is possible that the NIC-Codes assigned to such workers relate to that of the “Contractor Enterprise”. Potentially, this could result in a mismatch of ‘jobs’ in a given NIC-category based on EUS and the estimate of GVA – per worker in that NIC-category drawn from the NSS enterprise surveys.

This problem of mismatch between the employment estimates drawn from a household employment survey and those based on reporting by establishments is possibly even more serious when the DGE&T estimates are used to subtract organized sector jobs from the total count of jobs to derive the estimate of Labour Input in the unorganized sector. [See, Sundaram (2008), for a set of alternative estimates of organized and unorganized sector employment based on NSS Employment-Unemployment Surveys].

At first sight, the sharp decline in the share of agriculture (and allied activities) in GDP – to less than 17.5 percent in 2007-08 – may suggest that one could possibly dispense with EUS estimates on the Usual Status based on a 365-day reference period that carries with them the possibility of recall errors.

Before we examine this further, it needs to be stressed that, unlike the estimates on the Current Daily Status – currently preferred by the Planning Commission – the Usual Status estimates are properly defined over **persons** and there are no problems in interpreting the resultant estimates in terms of the **number of individuals** who are at work or are seeking/available for work. We will elaborate this further when we comment on the problems in the interpretation and use of estimates based on the Current Daily Status.

Two features of the structure of workforce – a dominant share of agricultural activities marked by seasonal variation, and, a very small share of regular wage/salary workers who may be presumed to have stability in employment characteristics – prompted the Dantwala Committee to recommend the canvassing of employment characteristics (of the population) over the year as a whole in addition to the current week as was the practice till then.

Now, despite a significant reduction over time in its share in the workforce, agriculture remains the principal absorber of labour force in the country. In 2004-05 agriculture had

a 57 percent share in the total work force, and over the 2000-2005 period, the absolute number of workers in this sector increased by nearly 18 million i.e. over 30 percent of the total incremental workforce. [See Sundaram, 2007].

Secondly, the share of regular wage/salary workers (or RWS workers, for short) in the workforce continues to be relatively small – just over 15 percent in 2004-05. Also, the emergence in recent years of the phenomenon of “Temporary Workers” among the RWS-workers – especially in Urban India – also casts some doubts about the presumed stability of their employment-characteristics.²

It is clear from the foregoing that, despite the changes in the structure of the economy since the early 1970s, canvassing the activity status of the population on a long reference period of 365 days continues to be necessary. That the resultant work force/labour force participation rates are meaningfully defined over persons, bears repetition. These participation rates, when multiplied by appropriate population totals, yield estimates, differentiated by gender, rural/urban location, states and regions within states, of the number of persons who are in the workforce or are unemployed or, are outside the labour force. And, these estimates are agreeable on any dimension of choice.

In conformity with the accepted standards of labour force surveys, in all the quinquennial employment-unemployment surveys the activity status of the population surveyed is also canvassed with the 7-days preceding the survey as the reference period. In fact, detailed activity status of the sample population is canvassed in respect of each day of the 7-day reference period. Further, the provision for recording pursuit of an activity with full-intensity (4 hours or more) or, half-intensity (one hour or more but less than 4 hours), implies that an individual could be reporting two activities for the same calendar day – each with half-intensity.

The estimates of workforce and labour force participation rates on both Current Weekly and the Current Daily Statuses are computed on the information on the activity status in the 7-days preceding the date of survey collected as stated above.

The estimates on the Current Weekly Status are derived on a ‘priority-cum-majority time’ criteria. In terms of the three broad activity categories of workers, unemployed, and, outside the labour force, the status of being at work (even if only for one half-day in the week) has priority over being unemployed (seeking/available for work at least for one half day) which, in turn, has priority over being outside the labour force. So that, only a person who had neither worked nor was seeking/available for work even for one-hour anytime during the reference week is considered as being outside the labour force on the

² This feature of the current employment scene would also suggest the need for obtaining more details about the nature of such “Temporary” contracts of workers who are classified as RWS-workers. Relevant issues here would be their spells of unemployment, if any, and the extent of “roll over” from one contract to another. Indicative of the presence of possible roll-over of contracts is the fact that the proportion of workers who perceived their current employment to be ‘temporary’ is significantly smaller than those who reported themselves to be working without any written contract. (See, Sundaram, 2008).

current weekly status. The majority time criteria comes into play in the event of multiple activities during the reference week. Later in this paper we will offer a brief comment on Modified Current Weekly Status (MCWS) which is based on the activity status for the major part of the week i.e. 3.5 days or more and revived recently by Krishnamurty and Raveendran [See Krishnamurty & Raveendran (2008)].

Estimates of workforce/labour force participation rates on the Current Daily Status are derived as a **ratio** with the aggregate of days in employment (labour force) in the numerator and the total number of ‘available’ days – equal to seven times the population – in the denominator.

To derive the days in employment/labour force/outside the labour force that defines the numerator, we start with the observations on the activity status provided by a moving sample of persons belonging to households surveyed on different days for each of the seven days of a moving reference week. Each type of days – employed, unemployed or outside the labour force – are summed over individuals (each having a design-based weight) and across calendar days. In this aggregation, each day of activity with ‘full intensity’ is counted as one full day and that with ‘half intensity’ as one half-day, with two such ‘half-days’ counted as one. So that, what we have in the numerator is the aggregation of, say, employed days of individuals whose days in employment could (and does) range from ‘zero days’ to all 7-days and values in between in units of half-days.

Let us illustrate this by reference to the 61st Round (2004-05) estimate of Unemployment on the Current Daily Status for rural India. The numerator of the ratio, namely, **the total number of person days in unemployment for rural males is estimated at a little under 110 million**. And, with the total person days available – equal to seven times the estimated population of rural males – as the denominator, the proportion unemployed on the Current Daily Status is placed at 42 per 1000. (See GOI, 2006, p - 319).

An analysis of the Unit Record Data of the NSS 61st Round Employment-Unemployment Survey shows that, a little under 48 percent of the total unemployed person days of rural males was contributed by just 2 percent of them who reported that they were seeking/available for work on all 7-days of the reference week. At the other end of the spectrum, 92.5 percent of rural males reported that, in the reference week, they were **not** seeking/available for work even for one half-day. That is, they were unemployed for Zero-days, during the reference week. Of the balance, a little under 30 percent of the total unemployed person-days was contributed by 4 percent of rural male population who reported seeking/available for work between 0.5 day and 3.0 days in the reference week, and, a little over 22 percent by 1.5 percent of rural males who reported seeking/available for work for between 3.5 and 6.5 days during the reference week. [See Table 1 for these and parallel estimates for other population segments at the all-India level].

A further analysis shows that, among rural males, little under 51 percent of those seeking/available for work on all 7-days in the reference week are those classified as **workers on the Usual Principal Status** i.e. those who had reported themselves to be in

the labour force for the major part of the year with a majority of the days in labour force being economically active.

We have here a clear problem of inconsistency between the characterization of the population on the Usual Status and that on the Current Daily Status. To a lesser extent, this problem is also present in respect of those classified as workers on the Usual Subsidiary Status. Among rural males, such subsidiary status workers accounted for a further 6 percent of those reporting unemployment on all 7-days of the reference week. Among rural females reporting unemployment on all 7-days of the reference week, a little over to 45 percent of them were workers on the Usual Principal Status, with a further 9 percent of them being workers on the Usual Subsidiary Status. [See Table 2]

The above noted problem is less acute in urban areas, with the proportion of those reporting unemployment on all 7-days of the reference week who are classified as workers on the Usual Status being 26 percent for urban males and just 17 percent for urban females. Taking both rural and urban populations together, close to 46 percent of those who reported being unemployed on all 7-days are classified as workers on the Usual Status – 39 percent on the Usual Principal Status and 6 percent on the Usual Subsidiary Status. In this context, it may be noted that close to 56 percent of the total person-days in unemployment came from those who reported being unemployed on all 7-days in the reference week.

This problem of a substantial proportion of those counted as unemployed on the current status being workers on the Usual Principal Status, illustrated above in respect of those reporting seeking/available for work on all 7-days of the reference week, becomes even more acute if we expand this analysis to all those who reported themselves to be seeking or available for work for a major portion of the week i.e. for 3.5 days or more. This would be the set of Unemployed on what Krishnamurty and Raveendran (Krishnamurty and Raveendran, 2008) call the modified current weekly status (MCWS, for short). As can be readily seen from Table2, in the case of rural males, for example, the proportion people who are unemployed on MCWS who are workers on the Usual Principal Status increases from 51 percent (in the case of those unemployed on all 7-days of the reference week) to a shade under 68 percent. This is observed across all the four population segments. So that, taking all the four population segments together, close to 57 percent of the unemployed on MCWS are workers on the Usual Principal Status. If we add those classified as workers only on the Usual Subsidiary Status, the proportion of the unemployed on MCWS who are classified as workers on the Usual Status goes up to 64 percent.

Before reverting to our discussion of employment-unemployment estimates on the Current Daily Status, a brief comment on the concept of 'Modified Current Weekly Status'. This is in fact a resurrection of an early suggestion of Late Professor Pravin Visaria. Now, the use of '3.5 days' as a cut-off value to define majority time raises a more general question: do we want/expect that people are or should be in the labour force on all 7-days of the reference week? This is not just an academic question. Our analysis shows that, in rural areas, about 1.4 percent of rural males and about 1.2 percent of rural

females are reported to have worked for 3.0 days in the reference week. Further, 1.6 percent of rural male population and 0.7 percent of rural female population reported themselves to be seeking/available for work for 3 days during the reference week. So that, the adoption of a 6-day week –for purposes of measuring work & unemployment—would significantly raise the size of the workforce/labourforce on MCWS.

A different kind of a problem of interpretation of the measures of unemployment on the Usual and Current Daily Statuses is seen in respect of those who reported that they neither sought nor were they available for work for even one half-day during the reference week.

In the NSS Employment-Unemployment Surveys, an activity classification of the population on the Usual Principal Status is followed-up with a set of probing questions to find out whether and how many of the surveyed population at all sought work or were available for work in the preceding 365-days and, if yes, the period for which they sought or were available for work. And, tabulations based on the set of probing questions are available in the published reports.

At the all-India level, among rural males classified as self-employed on the Usual principal status a little under 82 percent (817 per 1000 to be exact) neither sought nor were available for work in the preceding 365 days. To put it differentially as per their responses to the follow-up questions, 18.3 percent of rural male who are classified as self-employed on the Usual Principal Status (UPS) sought/were available for work for at least some days on some months of the year. Now, a Usual Status x Daily Status cross-tabulation by broad activity status categories shows that among the same set of rural males classified as self-employed on the Usual Principal Status, 96.7 percent of them reported zero days of Unemployment during the reference week. So that, as per their reported activity-status during the reference week only 3.3 percent of them at all reported seeking/available for work i.e. a 15 percentage point divergence in the proportion at all seeking/available for work as between the Usual and the Current Daily Status. In the case of rural males and rural females classified as Casual Labourers on the Usual Principal Status, the proportion of such workers who reported seeking or available for work for at least 0.5 days during the reference week (30.0 percent for rural males and 25.5 percent for rural females) is significantly smaller than the proportion of the same set of workers who reported seeking or available at least for some days for some months in the preceding 365 days: by 21 percentage points for rural male casual labourers and by as much as 29 percentage points for rural female casual labourers. Table 3 presents parallel set of numbers for other activity-status categories and other population segments.

As can be readily seen, this divergence is also quite significant among self-employed urban males and, for the self-employed and casual labourers among urban females.³

It follows from the above that a fair proportion of those who reported “zero days of unemployment” during the reference work are those who did report themselves to be seeking/available for work at least on some days on some months in the preceding 365 days. And, this proportion is sizeable for the rural casual labourers on the Usual Principal Status. At the very least, this would suggest that **the claim that the estimates of unemployment on the Current Daily Status fully captures the non-utilisation of available labour time is open to some doubt**

.It needs to be stressed that, in terms of **individuals**, the two types of problems discussed above – a proportion of those reporting unemployment on all 7-days of the reference week being workers on the Usual Principal Status and of those reporting zero days of unemployment during the reference week but reporting seeking/available for work in the preceding 365-days cannot be treated as off-setting one another.

The above leads us to examine the casting by the Planning Commission of its employment-unemployment exercises in the Tenth and the Eleventh Five Year Plan in terms of person-days of work and of person-days of unemployment. In matching the demand for and the supply of labour, on the supply side, the estimates of labour force person-days are derived as the product of the labour force participation rates on the Current Daily Status in a given population segment and an estimated/projected total population in that segment and summed across the population segments.

The draft Eleventh Plan chapter on Employment thus gives a figure of 36.564 million as unemployed on the Current Daily Status. As shown above, the CDS unemployment rate reflects an aggregation across individuals and calendar days of full-days and half-days of unemployment over a moving sample of seven days. As such, it may be treated as an estimate of the proportion of persons seeking/available for work on a typical day in the year.

The central question here is: can the product of the estimated population in the given population segment and the estimated proportion unemployed on Current Daily Status be treated **as the number of persons unemployed** or even as person-years of unemployment? Such an inference carries with it the implicit assumption that each individual in the labour force on the Current Daily Status is or should be in the labour force on all 365-days in the year!

From an operational perspective also, the figure of 36.564 million as the number unemployed on the Current Daily Status reported in the Plan document does not mean that so many **individuals** are unemployed on all 365-days in the year. This does not hold

³ Except in respect of Urban males classified as Casual Labourers, directionally, all the above stated results hold even if we treat all the not recorded cases as those who neither sought nor were available for work any time during the preceding 365 days.

good even in respect of those who reported seeking/available for work on all 7-days of the reference week – about 1.75 percent of the total population as estimated by the Survey.

In striking a demand-supply balance, **this distinction between persons** in the labour force/ work force **and person-years** of work/unemployment is important because, **on the employment generation side**, person-days of employment is an appropriate unit of account only in a limited number of activities such as NREGP or other public works. In respect of all regular wage/salaried employment and in respect of all employment in the organized sector, the appropriate unit of account is number of persons employed.

Even in the case of activities where person-days of employment generated is a meaningful number, we will be faced with the problem of converting them back into person-years of employment generated to be matched against the supply of labour specified in terms of persons. The question is: how many person-days constitute a person year? Is it 273-days – as in the Revised Draft Sixth Five Year Plan – or 300 days or 365-days? Since on the supply side one person-year is, implicitly, specified as 365-days, even the use of a 300-days norm to convert person-days of employment generation say, under NREGP, into person years of labour demand, would overstate the generation of employment relative to the supply of labour on CDS-basis.

As far as the labour and employment exercises in the Eleventh (and, subsequent) Five Year Plan(s) are concerned, in our judgment these are best carried out in terms of labour force (workforce) participation rates on the Usual (Principal plus Subsidiary) Status (UPSS, for short). It may be noted that this was also the approach adopted by the Task Force on Employment Opportunities (GOI, 2001), as well as in all the Five Year Plans since the early 1970s up to and including the Ninth Five Year Plan..

In arguing for the use of UPSS-based estimates in our employment planning exercises, there is no presumption either that those in the workforce on UPSS are at work throughout the year or that the unemployed on UPSS are unemployed throughout the year.

Relying on published tables based on the follow-up questions to workers on the Usual Status, it is seen that roughly 25 percent of UPSS workforce in rural India and between 11 to 14 percent of UPSS workforce in Urban India were without work for at least one month in the 365 days preceding the Survey **and** were seeking or were available for work at least for some days for one or more months during the year. As one would expect, this problem is particularly acute for those classified as Casual Labourers on UPSS. Thus, close to or above 50 percent of such workers in rural India and between 40 (males) and 44 (females) percent of Casual Labourers in Urban India reported themselves to be without work for at least one month and to be seeking/available for work for at least some days in the month(s) they were without work. This problem is the least for the RWS-Workers – between 4 to 5 percent for male workers and between 6 to 7.5 percent for female workers. Among the self-employed workers this problem is more widespread in rural India (between 7.50 and 11.00 percent).

From the perspective of employment planning, the above-noted information, while relevant, needs to be sharper and more focused. What the planner needs to know is how many persons are seeking or available for work for how many days during the different quarters of the year. This, we believe, can be obtained by appropriate changes in the reference period of the set of follow-up questions currently canvassed.

The broad conclusions derivable from our review of the concepts and definitions used in the NSS Employment-Unemployment Surveys and of the estimates derivable there from and the use thereof in our planning exercises may be summarized below:

- (i) Further steps are needed to synchronize fully the definition of work adopted in the NSS Employment Surveys with the 1993 UNSNA;
- (ii) The use of the EUS-based count of “jobs” in the estimation of GDP in the unorganized segment of almost the entire non-agricultural sector poses no conceptual problems. However, the problems of matching the count of “jobs” from the household survey with employment in the organized sector based on reporting by establishments and the possible mismatch of NIC-Categories arising from workers supplied by ‘contractor’ enterprises, remain;
- (iii) The changes in the structure of GDP and of employment, while being quite substantial, are yet inadequate to give up the canvassing of the activity status of the population on the Usual Status. In fact, given the problems with the interpretation and use of the employment estimates on the Current Daily Status for employment planning and policy exercises discussed above, which are also carried over in the recently revived concept of Modified Current Weekly Status, the estimates based on the Usual Principal plus Subsidiary Status, with some additional characterization remain the best option for employment planning and policy analysis.

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Table 1: Per 1000 Distribution of Persons and Person-days of Unemployment by Number of Days in the Reference Week for which Seeking/Available for work by Gender and Rural Urban Location: All-India, 2004-05

Per 1000 Distribution of Persons and of Unemployed Person-Days by Number of Days Seeking/Available for work in the Reference Week

Population Segment		Number of Days Seeking/Available for Work				Total
		Zero Days	0.5 – 3.00	3.5 – 6.5	All 7-days	
Rural Male	Persons	925	40	15	20	1000 (369.2)
	U.E. Person-days	NIL	298	223	479	1000 (109.5)
Rural Female	Persons	966	16	7	11	1000 (355.2)
	U.E. Person-days	NIL	247	219	534	1000 (51.4)
Urban Male	Persons	938	24	9	29	1000 (129.0)
	U.E. Person-days	NIL	168	129	703	1000 (37.8)
Urban Female	Persons	978	5	2	15	1000 (118.6)
	U.E. Person-days	NIL	95	82	823	1000 (14.5)

Notes: 1 Author’s estimate from Analysis of in a Unit Record Data.

2 Figures within brackets relate to the estimated number (in millions) of persons/ Unemployed (U.E.) Person-days.

Table 2: Per 1000 Distribution of Persons Seeking/Available for work on all 7-days Of the Week by Broad Usual Activity Status by Gender & Roural-Urban Location: All-India, 2004-05

Per 1000 Distribution of Persons Seeking/Available for work by Usual Activity Status

Activity Status	Rural Males	Rural Females	Urban Males	Urban Females	Total
Self-employed on Usual Principal Status	149 (137)	76 (62)	55 (91)	16 (23)	97 (101)
RWS-worker on Usual Principal Status	15 (10)	7 (5)	64 (51)	43 (37)	27 (18)
Casual Labourers on Usual Principal Status	346 (531)	369 (544)	95 (229)	75 (141)	268 (449)
Work Force on Usual Principal Status	510 (678)	452 (611)	214 (371)	133 (201)	392 (568)
Work Force on Usual Subsidiary Status	58 (68)	94 (94)	53 (53)	35 (54)	63 (70)
Unemployed on UPSS	417 (243)	426 (266)	713 (556)	761 (668)	520 (339)
Outside Labour Force on UPSS	15 (11)	28 (29)	21 (20)	71 (78)	25 (22)
All Number of Persons (in million)	1000 7.5 (13.0)	1000 3.9 (6.5)	1000 3.8 (4.9)	1000 1.7 (2.0)	1000 16.9 (26.4)

- Notes: 1. Estimates are based on an analysis of Unit Record Data
2. Figures within brackets relate to those who are seeking/available for work for the major part of the reference week i.e. for 3.5 days or more.
3. UPSS: Usual (principal plus subsidiary) status.

Table 3: Proportion (per 1000) of Self-Employed, Regular Wage Employee and Casual Labourers on Usual Principal Status who had Reported Zero Days of Unemployment I the Reference Week and of those who had NOT sought/available for work in the Preceding 365-days by Gender and Rural-Urban Location: All-India, 2004-05

Activity Status/	Self-Employed		RWS-Workers		Casual Labourers	
	Zero Days UE on CDS	NOT Sought/Available for work	Zero days of UE on CDS	NOT Sought/Available for work	Zero-days UE on CDS	NOT Sought/Available for work
Rural Males	967	817 (860)	991	917 (951)	700	488 (541)
Rural Females	985	825 (856)	992	901 (931)	745	453 (495)
Urban Males	971	899 (942)	991	929 (963)	634	587 (641)
Urban Females	983	891 (924)	988	910 (951)	710	574 (612)

- Notes: (i) Columns (2), (4) and (6) are based on computations by the author from Unit Record Data.
(ii) Columns (3), (5) and (7) are drawn from Table 65, NSS Report No. 515: Employment-Unemployment Situation in India, 2004-05, pp. 548-550 (GOI, 2006).
(iii) Figures within brackets in columns (3), (5) & (7) reclassifies the 'not-recorded' category as those who had **not** sought/were available for work in the preceding 365-days.