

## **School Enrollment Trends among Displaced Workers: 1994 to 2010\***

Stefanie Lightner

Department of Sociology &  
Minnesota Population Center  
*University of Minnesota*

Working Paper: September 19, 2012

\*Prepared for presentation at the 2013 annual meeting of the Population Association of America. Do not cite or quote without permission. Please direct correspondence to Stefanie Lightner, Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, 909 Social Sciences, 267 19<sup>th</sup> Ave S, Minneapolis, MN 55455. Email: [dixo0050@umn.edu](mailto:dixo0050@umn.edu)

## **Extended Abstract**

This paper analyzes the school enrollment patterns of displaced workers in the U.S. from 1994 to 2010. Using newly linked October supplements of the Current Population Survey (CPS) I document trends in school enrollment following an involuntary job loss or reduction to part time employment. I also consider changes over time in how displaced workers prioritize school and work. Has the search for new employment changed for displaced workers who have enrolled in school over time? What is the influence of public policy on short term trends in returning to school the unemployed? Which industries are more likely to have its displaced workers return to school and how has this changed since 1994? By linking work status one year to school enrollment status the next over a period of 16 years we are able to identify long term trends in the prevalence of adults returning to school after job loss.

### *Theoretical focus*

The increasing demand for a more highly educated workforce (Goldin and Katz, 2008) coupled with an increase in the individualization of the life course (see Shanahan, 2000, for a review) leads to the expectation that more adults will pursue additional education and training in the face of unemployment. As nontraditionally-aged college attendance has become more common, displaced workers may be less and less hesitant to enroll in school later in life, especially within the context of an increasing return to human capital.

In addition to these changes in demand for human capital and variability in life course trajectories, Turner (1976) argues that modern times in the U.S. have led to a shift in self-conceptualization that is less institutionally defined and increasingly defined by impulse and self-gratification. If this is the case, I expect displaced adult workers to feel more inclined to take advantage of their circumstances and enroll in school to pursue intrinsic returns to education. An aggregate shift from institutionally centered locus of self to an individually centered locus of self

also suggests that displaced workers may be less actively pursuing fulltime employment once they enroll in schooling and/or less inclined to take a fulltime job as soon as one should become available.

These changes in acceptance of non-normative sequences of life course transitions, returns to education, and how we prioritize institutional roles and self-discovery can all motivate trends in adults returning to school following involuntary job loss.

### *Data and methods*

Most existing research utilizing CPS data does so using cross sectional methods. Each month of survey data is considered a representative snap shot of current labor market conditions. The unique sampling design of the survey means households participate in two periods of monthly interviewing lasting four months and spaced 12 months apart. So a household that is selected into the sample in October of 1995, for example, will be interviewed 8 times, September through December of 1995 and then September through December of 1996. Studies that do link respondents from one year to the next or month-to-month tend to do so for a relatively short number of years (for example, Elman and O'Rand, 1998). The current paper looks beyond this narrow window and extends the analysis of trends in adult school enrollment over 16 years of linked CPS data.

### *Expected findings*

I expect that since 1994 U.S. workers are more likely to enroll in school following job loss. I also expect that older displaced workers are enrolling in vocational/technical programs more so than their younger (26-45) counterparts. I expect that because education has become increasingly important (both within popular discourse and in actual market outcomes) displaced workers are more likely to persist in their schooling once enrolled even if a job were to become immediately available.

## References

- Elman, Cheryl, and Angela M. O'Rand. (1998). Midlife Entry into Vocational Training: A Mobility Model. *Social Science Research*, 27, pp. 128-58.
- Goldin, Claudia, & Katz, Lawrence. (2008). *The Race between Education and Technology*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Shanahan, M. J. (2000). Pathways to adulthood in changing societies: Variability and mechanisms in life course perspective. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, pp. 667-692.
- Turner, R. H. (1976). The real self: From institution to impulse. *American Journal of Sociology*, 81(5), pp. 989-1016.