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Introduction

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sponsored by The National Council on Employment Policy

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Introduction

What has been happening to the United States' labor force and productivity data systems? That was the major question examined at a conference sponsored by the National Council on Employment Policy held in Washington on June 17, 1982. The Council, a private nonprofit organization with special interest and expertise in the areas of labor market and employment and training programs, set out to examine whether the basic concepts and definitions used in collecting and reporting labor force and productivity data portray current conditions and whether the available data are adequate for policy formulation and evaluation processes.

Joining Council members at this conference were leading public and private economic and statistical analysts. The debate during the conference over these issues and the material presented in the four main Council-sponsored papers was enlightening and informative, but often also heated.

American social and economic policies in the early 1980s have experienced significant changes. The conference explored how existing statistics have been, and can be, used by policymakers in reaching key decisions. But beyond the quality and quantity of existing data, the conferees examined critically the strengths and weaknesses in the American labor force data system.

This volume contains the papers presented at the conference. As published, the papers reflect the comments and critiques presented during the course of the deliberations. Based on the proceedings, the Council prepared a brief policy statement, "Labor Force and Productivity Measurements: Danger Ahead." The Council concluded that the United States' labor force and productivity data systems face deterioration because of a "starvation budget" which has forced a decline in the quality and quantity of the published information and a curtailment of needed research.

While each paper examined one part of the system, the Council's statement tries to view the system as a whole. It places American labor force and productivity data measurements in the context of recent federal budgeting developments. It took many years to create the system, the Council cautioned, and it could lose the trust of policymakers and the general public if it is allowed to deteriorate.

No econometric model or policy evaluation can be better than the data on which it is founded. Ideology and basic values will always play a significant part in this process. However, sound data can provide a tether that links policymakers, the media, and the general public with reality. It is the Council's hope to strengthen this tether and to point out where it has become weak and may fray unless action is taken.

What's Happening to American Labor Force and Productivity Measurements?

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