

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

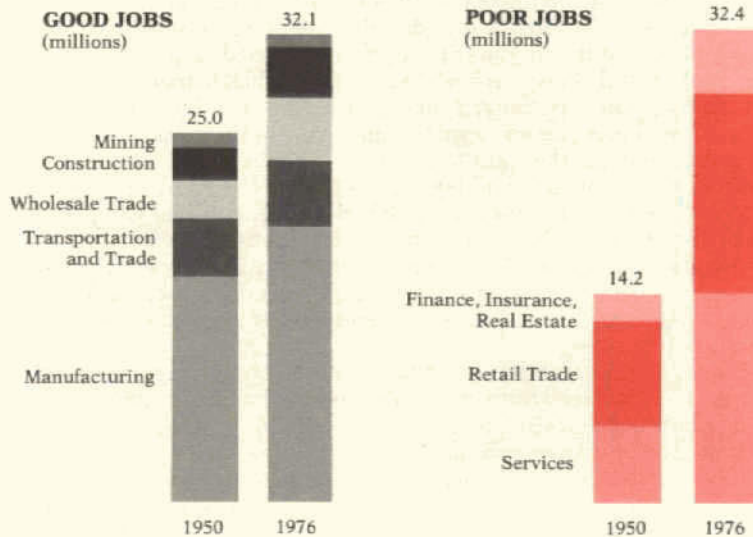
The Job Problem

"The Job Problem" by Eli Ginzberg, in *Scientific American* (Nov. 1977), 415 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

Despite the creation of 28 million new civilian jobs in the U.S. between 1950 and 1976—a healthy 48 percent increase—the nation's unemployment rate has doubled during the same period to about 7 percent. One big reason, writes Columbia economist Ginzberg, is the rapid rise in the number of job-seekers, especially women and young people. Of the overall growth in the U.S. labor force, from 62 million persons in 1950 to 95 million today, women account for no less than 60 percent.

The employment impact of the job shortage is aggravated by the low quality of most new jobs: Three out of four are classified as "poor" when measured by wages, fringe benefits, and working conditions. In this respect, the public sector has outperformed the private; two-thirds of the 9 million federal, state, and local government jobs created since 1950 were "good" compared to fewer than a third of the new jobs in the private sector.

Who took these "poor" jobs? By far the largest number—12 million—were married women with working husbands; 5.9 million more were single young men and women, many of them still in school. Overall, Ginzberg writes, the statistics support the view that white men have easier access to good jobs, with women and minorities trapped in bad ones, mostly in the retail trade and service industries.



Adapted, with permission, from Scientific American.

Between 1950 and 1976, the number of "poor" jobs increased much more rapidly than the number of "good" jobs. Higher-paying jobs during the period grew by 28 percent (7.1 million); low-paying jobs nearly doubled.

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Federal efforts to reduce unemployment, including President Carter's \$10 billion federal job creation effort (a new departure in U.S. domestic policy), tend to ignore an estimated 17 million potential job-seekers not now counted among the 7 million officially unemployed: those in school or in poor health, those with responsibilities at home, or those discouraged by unsuccessful job-hunting. Providing a job for everyone, says Ginzberg, is too ambitious; neither the public nor private sector can absorb these 17 million "overhangers" of the labor market. His conclusion: Manpower and training measures "should be focused on the groups that are currently least equipped to find and hold jobs."

A Plague of Ills

"Before the Black Death" by A. R. Bridbury, in *The Economic History Review* (Aug. 1977), 1 Mundells St., Welwyn Garden City, Herts AL7 1EU England.

Economic historians have studied the economy of the late 13th and early 14th centuries for clues to the "momentous subversion of the accepted order" in England after the Black Death of 1348. During the 14th century, the expansion of late medieval society came abruptly to an end; in England, this was reflected in the decline of the large-estate system, a net loss of land under cultivation, and political turmoil following the death of King Edward III (1327-77).

Most scholarly explanations of the breakup of English society tend to link political turbulence with economic decline and the Black Death. Some historians maintain that the plague simply delivered a death-blow to an economy already under strain; others hold that the medieval economy could have withstood the Black Death had it not been weakened by the Hundred Years War—and, in particular, by the foreign adventures of Edward III.

But Bridbury, a scholar at the London School of Economics, believes that political collapse did not necessarily mirror basic economic woes. Taxation ledgers reveal a "varied and opulent" farming economy in England. In Lincolnshire alone nearly 4,000 men were required to assist the chief commissioners in collecting taxes when Parliament authorized a new levy in 1298. Farm records indicate a sizable sheep-raising industry. Moreover, says Bridbury, medieval wars were relatively inexpensive affairs, "portentiously splendid melodramas" with rarely more than 10,000 men under arms.

In addition, he writes, price levels for labor, rent, and produce remained high in the period before the Black Death; the peasant population continued to grow. When prices fell, as they did in 1333, Edward III's wars had not yet commenced. Even after the Black Death, the population of wage earners was not seriously depleted. There was no difficulty filling job vacancies.

Rather than disrupting the fabric of peasant society, Bridbury concludes, the economic troubles of the early 14th century disrupted the lives of the nobles and the commercial classes, on whom fell the main burden, finally, of financing Edward's wars.