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Out of Work, Too Down to Search On, and Uncounted

By [MICHAEL LUO](#)

They were left out of the latest unemployment rate, as they are every month: millions of hidden casualties of the Great Recession who are not counted in the rate because they have stopped looking for work.

But that does not mean these discouraged Americans do not want to be employed. As interviews with several of them demonstrate, many desperately long for a job, but their inability to find one has made them perhaps the ultimate embodiment of pessimism as this [recession](#) wears on.

Some have halted their job searches out of sheer frustration. Others have decided it makes more sense to become stay-at-home fathers or mothers, or to go back to school, until the job market improves. Still others have chosen to retire for now and have begun collecting [Social Security](#) or disability benefits, for which claims have surged.

Rick Alexander, a master carpenter in Florida who has given up searching after months of effort, said the disappointment eventually became unbearable.

“When you were in high school and kept asking the head cheerleader out for a date and she kept saying no, at some point you stopped asking her,” he said. “It becomes a ‘why bother?’ scenario.”

The official jobless rate, which garners the bulk of attention from politicians and the public, was reported on Friday to have risen to [9.7 percent in August](#). But to be included in that measure, which is calculated by the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) from a monthly nationwide survey, a worker must have actively looked for a job at some point in the preceding four weeks.

For an increasing number of people in this country who would prefer to be working, that is not the case.

It is difficult to assign an exact figure, because of limitations in the data collected by the bureau, but various measures that capture discouragement have swelled in this recession.

In the most direct measure of job market hopelessness, the bureau has a narrow definition of a group it classifies as [“discouraged workers.”](#) These are people who have looked for work at some point in the past year but have not looked in the last four weeks because they believe that no jobs are available or that they would not qualify, among other reasons. In August, there were roughly 758,000 discouraged workers nationally, compared with 349,000 in November 2007, the month before the recession officially began.

The bureau also has a broader category of jobless it calls “marginally attached to the labor force,” which includes discouraged workers as well as those who have stopped looking because of other reasons, like school, family responsibilities or health issues. But economists agree that many of these workers probably would have found a

way to work in a good economy.

There were roughly 2.3 million people in this group in August, up from 1.4 million in November 2007. If the unemployment rate were expanded to include all marginally attached workers, it would have been 11 percent in August.

But even this figure is probably an undercount of the extent of the jobless problem in this country. There are about 1.4 million more people who are [not in the labor force](#) than when the recession began. Some of these are retirees, stay-at-home parents, people on disability and students. But it is also rather likely that many of these people have given up looking for work at least partly because of economic reasons as well.

Here are four people's stories:

Rick Alexander: A Builder by Trade, With Too Much Time

In the worst case, Rick Alexander figured, he could scrounge up a job at Home Depot.

He was a master carpenter, after all. He had skills. He had run his own successful home-restoration business for 28 years.

In early 2008, however, he moved to Florida to take care of his ailing parents, leaving his business in Connecticut to his daughter.

After helping his parents into an assisted-living facility, he began applying for jobs. He devoted eight hours a day to the task, sometimes sending out three or four applications a day.

"It was a full-time job," he said.

At first, he focused on jobs in construction, applying to be a site supervisor. He looked for anything within an hour's commute of where he was living in Jensen Beach.

But the real estate industry had fallen off precipitously, bringing building to a near standstill. Mr. Alexander, 58, began branching out to suppliers, applying at lumberyards and other wholesalers. Eventually, he expanded his search to Home Depot, Lowe's and mom-and-pop hardware stores. Finally, he began applying for "everything under the sun," even the overnight shift at convenience stores.

By that summer, he had still received no callbacks for interviews. He went back to Connecticut for several weeks to do a renovation for an old client to earn some cash. When he returned to Florida in August 2008, he tried to start his own business, selling advertising on video displays mounted in coffee shops and other places.

He networked furiously with local businesses, but by then the economy had nose-dived. Mr. Alexander said he grossed a total of \$150. He sank into a funk and stopped looking.

"There are thousands of people applying for every job I'm looking at, and potential employers won't even give me the courtesy of acknowledging I applied," he said. "The entirety of that causes me not to bother. It's a waste of my time and theirs."

He has applied to just two jobs this year, both several months ago. The unemployment rate in his area, Martin County, now exceeds 11 percent. After prodding from his companion, Dona Olinger, he went down to Home Depot a little over a month ago to re-activate his application there.

His savings are gone. He lives with Ms. Olinger, who makes \$10 an hour as a volunteer coordinator at a food pantry, Harvest Food and Outreach Center, where they also get groceries every week. It is her salary that pays their rent.

Mr. Alexander's parents have since moved out of the assisted-living facility and back into their home, so he tends to them most days. He reads [Robert Ludlum](#) novels. He sleeps. To fill his time, he is looking into volunteer work. The other day, he cut the grass on his small lawn using just a pair of clippers.

Ray Rucker: Feeling Counted Out With Years Still Left

Ray Rucker came home from a job interview several months ago, sat down in his living room with his suit still on and wept.

The meeting with the interviewer had lasted 10 minutes. The man did not even open a folder in front of him to study Mr. Rucker's résumé. It was just "jibber jabber," Mr. Rucker said later.

Mr. Rucker, who lives in Overland Park, Kan., had little doubt about what had happened. He is 62 years old and, as he puts it, "I look 62."

He lost his job as a facilities manager for Starbucks in Kansas City and Wichita, Kan., last November, when the company closed hundreds of stores across the country. He had done similar work for years for other national restaurant chains and retail outlets.

He landed his first interview within a month, with a retail chain. He was invited back to talk to the vice president of operations and to the director of operations. He was also invited to meet with the company's chief executive.

But as Mr. Rucker was finishing with the director of operations, she asked him straight out whether he was retiring soon. Shocked, Mr. Rucker answered, truthfully, that he planned to work at least 10 more years.

The meeting with the chief executive never came. Mr. Rucker said he thinks his interviewer simply did not believe he planned to continue working.

A month ago, he found a job posting that seemed tailored for him, a facilities manager for a national restaurant chain. He sent in his résumé and three days later got called for an interview. The company official said he was in a hurry to fill the position. But Mr. Rucker soon learned that this one, too, had slipped from his grasp.

"That's the one when I kind of threw in the towel," he said.

Mr. Rucker said he was done looking. His wife, who works at a small nonprofit organization, protested, saying there was more he could do to look.

"You don't know what I'm going through," Mr. Rucker said he told her.

“You send out so much, and you don’t get responses,” he said. “Then when you get called in, you’re treated like you’re too old. Why am I doing this?”

So he made an appointment with the local [Social Security](#) office to begin claiming benefits. He might try to get some kind of hourly job to help make ends meet. He has mapped out some home renovation projects he wants to do.

The Social Security checks will not equal even a third of what he used to make. But he is now preparing for semiretirement.

Jenny Salinas: From a Nonstop Career to a Focus on the Home

Jenny Salinas never envisioned being a stay-at-home mother, taking care of the children and keeping house. She was the one with the high-powered career, the six-figure salary, always jetting off to Russia or China.

She put her 5-year-old daughter, Mia, in day care when she was three months old. Mia got so used to her mother going away she would simply say, “Mommy’s on a trip,” and blow her kisses when she left.

But after searching unsuccessfully since January for a job, Mrs. Salinas, 37, said her priorities had shifted. She is now content to stay home and focus on her family. She and her husband are even talking about having more children.

“It’s just amazing how it changes your perspective on what’s important,” she said.

Mrs. Salinas had been a manager of corporate marketing and media relations at an oil and gas company in Houston, where she lives. She was so focused on her career, she said, that she never noticed her daughter had a lazy eye. Mrs. Salinas’s mother mentioned something to her, but only after Mrs. Salinas was laid off did she realize that her daughter needed to see an ophthalmologist.

“That’s how much I was on my BlackBerry,” Mrs. Salinas said.

Mrs. Salinas was initially confident that she would land somewhere quickly. She seemed to be doing well, too, scoring interview after interview for senior-level corporate marketing positions. But each of those prospects dried up, usually because of a hiring freeze or some other obstacle.

So, for the last two months, she has not looked at all. Partly, she has been busy, selling their old house, moving into a new one they are renting at half the monthly expense, seeing her daughter off to kindergarten.

She is helped by the fact that her husband, a vice president at an advertising agency, still has his job. After the couple realized that her job search might take time, they decided to cut back on their spending.

She has in mind a specific set of companies, but they are all still not hiring. Unwilling to settle for just any job, she said, she would rather bide her time.

But the process of searching for work and coming up empty has also left her feeling spent.

“I was just discouraged, fed up and angry, feeling like my career had betrayed me,” she said.

Her daughter used to be in day care or preschool from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., but Mrs. Salinas began dropping her off later and picking her up earlier. Some days, they skip day care completely and while away the day together.

Tatjana Jovanovic-Grove: Moving From Serbia, Scraping By Online

Tatjana Jovanovic-Grove now occupies her days with arts and crafts projects. She makes a little money selling them online — \$10 here, \$50 there — but mostly it beats the sense of futility that used to envelop her each day during her quest to find a job.

“I stopped looking because that feeling of being rejected again and again is hard,” she said. “It’s just like somebody punching you in the face.”

Ms. Jovanovic-Grove, 41, has struggled to find work since she immigrated in late 2005 to the United States from her native Serbia, where she was a biology researcher at a prestigious research institute in Belgrade.

She had married an American, Doug Grove, 42, a Wal-Mart mechanic she met over the Internet. The couple initially lived in Glendale, Ariz., with their three children from previous marriages, but they moved to Winston-Salem, N.C., in late 2007.

They were attracted by the weather and the low crime rate. They also thought Ms. Jovanovic-Grove, who earned a master’s degree in Serbia in environmental protection and zoology, would have an easier time finding a job in an area rich with universities.

“I was really thinking I would have no problem,” she said.

The need for her to find work became more urgent after the couple took on thousands of dollars in additional debt after they turned their Arizona home over to a bank in lieu of a foreclosure settlement. They had been unable to sell it amid the state’s collapsing real estate market.

But aside from a few temporary jobs, Ms. Jovanovic-Grove has come up empty on everything from research assistant positions to retail jobs. Meanwhile, her husband’s hours at Wal-Mart, where he is paid a little more than \$14 an hour, have been cut back.

In May, she stopped looking completely, concluding that the job market was saturated. Winston-Salem’s unemployment rate exceeded 10 percent.

“You figure out it’s just like when you toss a piece of meat at a pack of hungry cats,” she said. “I just gave up because I could not compete.”

Instead, she has turned to making [wood handicrafts](#) and selling them on Etsy.com, an online marketplace. The small payments she gets often mean she earns less than fifty cents an hour for her effort. But she reasoned it is better than wasting gas driving around applying for jobs she believes she cannot get.

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