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UNEMPLOYMENT AND PRISON COMMITMENTS¹

RAY MARS SIMPSON²

The Stock Market crash in October, 1929, disrupted American business and plunged the country into a period of economic unrest. Unemployment reached tragic proportions. About the same time it was discovered by the populace that the majority of jails and penitentiaries were badly overcrowded. The unusual coexistence of excessive unemployment with overcrowded prisons led many to assume that unemployment was an outstanding causative factor in crime. This article shows that such an assumption is not completely justified by available facts.

- - There seems to be no consistent relationship between the increase in number of prisoners admitted to the penitentiary and the employment index for the population at large.

The number of men admitted to the Illinois State Penitentiary from 1925 to 1931 was as follows: 780, 680, 669, 768, 1054, 1204, and 964. The monthly average of employment in Illinois covering the period 1925-1927 is taken as a basic index of 100. In 1925 the index of business was practically normal (100.5). Chart I shows that the increase in prison population does not follow business conditions as reflected in the employment index. It is interesting to note that there was a sharp drop in the number of prisoners admitted in 1931, when the index of employment was far below that of the previous six years.

It should be borne in mind that the number of prisoners admitted to the Illinois State Penitentiary each year is only one of several indexes of the amount of crime committed in the Northern Illinois area. Hence a word of caution is necessary lest some draw too sweeping conclusions from the above data.

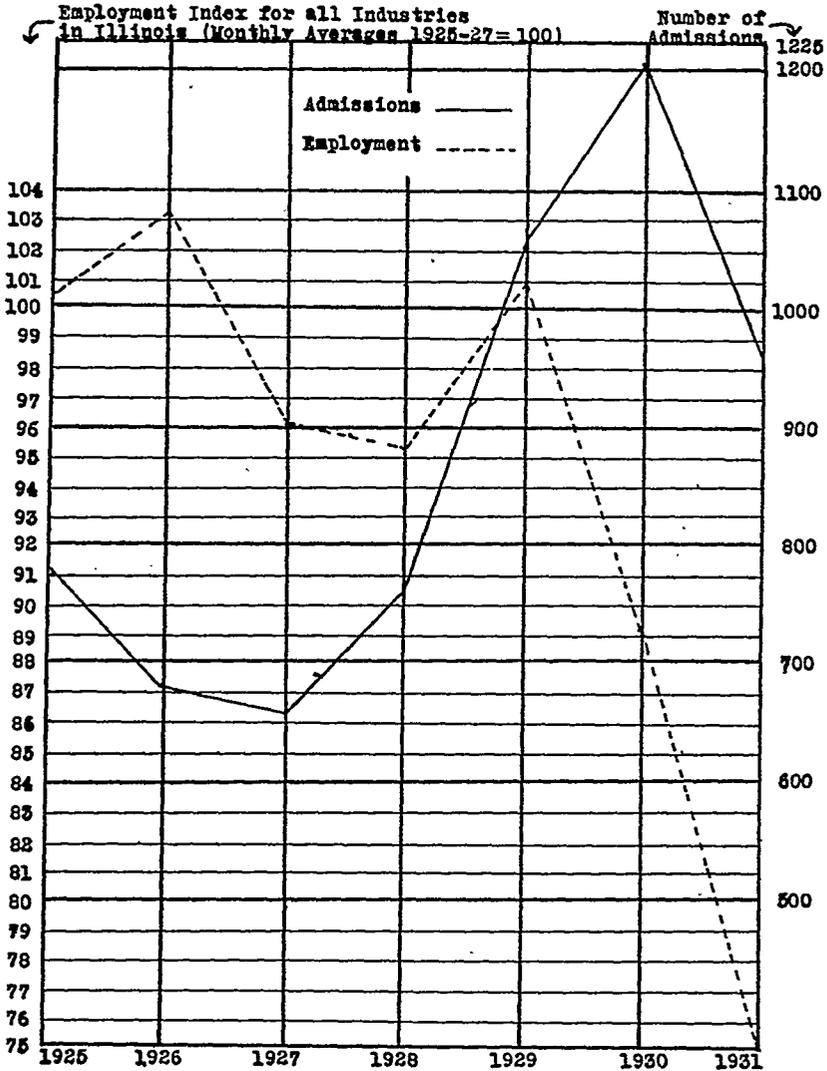
A comparison of the figures on unemployment among prisoners who were unemployed when the crime was committed with the averages for the wage earners in the country at large reveals an excess of unemployment for the criminal group. Fifty per cent of the men admitted to the Illinois State Penitentiary at Joliet in 1927 were unemployed at the time the crime was committed. In 1929 the

¹Studies from the Institute for Juvenile Research, Chicago. Paul L. Schroeder, M. D., Director. Series C. Number.

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Chart I

Male Admissions at the Illinois State Penitentiary covering a period of 7 years compared with the Employment Index for the State of Illinois over the same period of time



percentage of those who were unemployed when the crime was committed had dropped to 37.0 per cent. In 1930, the number of those who were unemployed when the crime was committed had increased to 44.2 per cent. Figures for 1931 show that 53.5 per cent of those admitted were unemployed when the crime was committed. In order to analyze these findings it is necessary to compare them with figures dealing with conditions of unemployment in the country at large as well as with figures covering the area from which the prison population was drawn.

Paul H. Douglas and Aaron Director in their excellent book dealing with "The Problem of Unemployment" (1931) state that "the average percentage of unemployment, including illness and disability, for manufacturing, transportation, mining and construction during the 30 years from 1897 to 1926 was approximately 10 per cent. We believe that the average for all industry would be approximately 8 per cent" (page 32). They state (page 22) that the number of unemployed in the building trades, manufacturing, and transportation on January 1, 1931, was approximately 14.5 per cent. These figures are sufficient to show that the percentage of unemployment in the population at large, based upon the three occupational groupings above, is somewhat lower than the percentage of unemployment in the prison group considered in the above paragraph.

Since 65.3 per cent of the prisoners admitted to the Illinois State Penitentiary in 1931 came from Cook County (in which Chicago is located) the following report affords a basis for further comparison. The Illinois Department of Labor^a reported that on October 15, 1931, "40 per cent of the total number of gainful workers reported for Chicago in the census for April, 1930" were unemployed. Since 53.5 per cent of prisoners admitted in 1931 were unemployed when the crime was committed it seems evident that business depression might possibly be held responsible for the 13.3 per cent of excess in unemployment found in the criminal group. However, it should be recalled that 50 per cent of the prisoners were unemployed (when the crime was committed) in 1927 when business conditions were only 4 points below the normal index of 100 (see chart). If unemployment is an outstanding causative factor in crime one would expect to find a far higher rate of unemployment among the prison group admitted in 1931.

Since the increase in the number of prisoners admitted each

^aThe Labor Bulletin (Official publication of the Illinois Department of Labor), November, 1931, Vol. XI. No. 5, page 82.

year is not accompanied by a corresponding consistent increase or decrease in the amount of unemployment in this group of men it seems evident that too much blame should not be placed upon unemployment as causal factor in crime. If unemployment causes crime one would expect to find consistent increases in the number of yearly admissions to prison during, or immediately following, periods of marked business depression. Furthermore, if excessive unemployment and crime were found together it does not necessarily follow that one is the cause of the other. In fact, is it not possible that crime might possibly be the cause of the excessive amount of unemployment found among criminals? Final decision in this matter must await the presentation of further evidence.

In December, 1930, the gun investigating bureau established as a branch of the Chicago Police Department, included the following statement in their report following the questioning of 539 pistol-toters: "The present unemployment situation is having no appreciable effect on the crime rates. Approximately 50 per cent of the arrested gunmen were jobless, about the same percentage as in boom times."

If there is a relationship between crime, measured by yearly admissions to the penitentiary, and unemployment it is to be expected that there will be considerable agreement between the monthly (seasonal) variations in unemployment among men who commit crimes and monthly fluctuations in general business conditions. Table I shows that the months in which excessive amounts of crimes are committed do not correspond to the months of deepest business depression. The Illinois Index of Employment is used here because it represents a reliable index of business conditions in the region from which the 1135 prisoners were taken. In the month of November, when business conditions are generally good (normally), there was an excessive amount of unemployment (66.66 per cent) noted among prisoners who committed crimes in that month. The average number of unemployed in this particular group of 1135 prisoners selected at random was 52.51 per cent. The gradual decrease in the employment index for 1930 is not accompanied by a consistent decrease in the amount of unemployment found among prisoners. It will be seen (Table I) that 56.17 per cent of the men who committed crimes in the month of January, 1930, were unemployed in spite of the high index of employment. Business conditions were better in January, 1930, than for any other month in that year. A comparison between the fluctuations in unemployment in construction and the

TABLE I

Percentage of 1135 Prisoners who were UNEMPLOYED when crime was committed, compared with Index of Seasonal Employment for all Industries in Illinois in normal times (1925-1927) and in 1930.

<i>Month in which crime was committed</i>	<i>Number of cases</i>	<i>Number un-employed</i>	<i>Per cent un-employed</i>	<i>Illinois normal Index*</i>	<i>Illinois 1930 Index*</i>
Jan., 1930	94	53	56.17	101.4	97.0
February	90	40	44.44	101.6	96.2
March	88	42	48.46	101.1	95.0
April	78	49	62.56	99.5	93.9
May	76	38	50.00	98.9	92.5
June	80	33	41.25	98.9	90.7
July	96	43	44.79	98.0	87.3
August	109	53	48.63	98.5	86.4
September	80	42	52.50	99.7	85.4
October	95	49	51.58	101.8	83.4
November	87	58	66.66	100.8	81.8
December	99	58	58.58	100.5	81.8
Jan., 1931	63	38	60.31	101.4	79.9
Total	1,135	596	52.51		

*These figures are taken from "The Labor Bulletin" published by the Illinois Department of Labor, Vol. XI, No. 2, August, 1931.

per cent of the men who were unemployed when they committed a crime shows even wider variations. For example, the number of men employed in construction work is exceptionally low during December, January, February, and March, while the percentage of unemployed men who committed crimes in those four months was above the average (for the 13 months considered in Table I) in December and January and below the average in February and March. The volume of retail trade rises appreciably during November and December while the percentage of unemployed men who committed crimes during those two months (66.66 per cent and 58.58 per cent) is exceptionally high. February and March are dull months in the automobile industry while the rate of unemployment for men who committed crimes during these two months is below the average shown in Table I. These comparisons suggest that the employment found among men who commit crimes cannot be accounted for by seasonal fluctuations in business.

The past criminal record of prisoners seems to be related to unemployment. Table II shows that 60 per cent of the men with a penitentiary record were unemployed when they committed the crime for which they were committed under the present sentence while only 31.94 per cent of the men with no past record were unemployed when they committed the crime. Men who had been in jails, work-houses, and reformatories also showed a higher rate of unem-

ployment than those with no previous criminal record. Five hundred prisoners were selected at random from those admitted in 1930 to provide a representative sample.

TABLE II.

Unemployment and Previous Criminal Record. (500 Prisoners selected at random from those admitted in 1930.)

<i>Previous Criminal Record</i>	<i>Number of Cases</i>	<i>Number Unemployed</i>	<i>Per Cent of each group- ing Unemployed</i>
No previous Record	216	69	31.94
Jail and Work House Record	150	87	58.00
Reformatory Record	44	29	65.91
Penitentiary Record	90	54	60.00
Total	500	239	47.80

In Table III it is shown that 13.8 per cent of a total of 500 men were unemployed men with no previous record when they committed the crime for which they were sentenced to the penitentiary. Thirty-four per cent of the total 500 men had previous criminal records (i. e., had been in jails, work-houses, reformatories and penitentiaries) and were unemployed when they committed the last crime. Table III also shows that 52.2 per cent of the random selection of 500 men admitted in 1930 were employed when they committed the crime for which they were sentenced to prison. (It should be recalled that the total number of those unemployed in 1930 admissions was 44.28 per cent.) Tables II and III both suggest that recidivism plays a large part in figures dealing with the relationship between crime and unemployment. Practically two-thirds of the admissions for 1929 had been in conflict with the law on some previous occasions. Only 33.4 per cent had never been arrested; 12.4 per cent had been in penitentiaries before; 25.9 per cent had served time in jails and houses of correction; and 18.7 per cent had been arrested but not convicted on previous occasions. Past criminal record may

TABLE III.

Unemployment and Previous Criminal Record. (500 prisoners selected at random from those admitted in 1930.)

	<i>Number of Cases</i>	<i>Per cent of Total Cases</i>
UNEMPLOYED men with no previous criminal record..	69	13.8
UNEMPLOYED men with Jail and Work House record.	87	17.4
UNEMPLOYED men with Reformatory record.....	29	5.8
UNEMPLOYED men with Penitentiary record.....	54	10.8
Total number of men who were EMPLOYED.....	261	52.2
Total	500	100.0

be responsible for a "mental set" which may be responsible in part for the excessive amount of unemployment found among criminals.

The greatest number of unemployed men who commit crimes are found among robbers, burglars and thieves. This fact is brought out nicely in Table IV. The robbery, burglary and larceny groups are characterized by far more recidivism than the murder and sex groups. The amount of recidivism involved must be considered before placing too much blame upon hard times or business depressions as causes for thievery.

TABLE IV
Unemployment by Crime Groups
(1,054 Prisoners admitted in 1929)

<i>Crime Groups</i>	<i>Total Cases</i>	<i>Unemployed</i>	<i>Per Cent Unemployed</i>
Robbery	359	164	45.68
Burglary	157	71	45.22
Larceny	144	60	41.66
Fraud	89	27	30.34
Larceny Auto	47	13	29.78
Murder	132	37	28.03
Sex	100	15	15.00
Miscellaneous	26	11	42.30
Total	1,054	398	37.58

It has been shown that unemployment among those admitted to the Illinois State Penitentiary is somewhat independent of industrial depressions or seasonal fluctuations in business. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that recidivists are more likely to be unemployed when they commit crimes than those who have no past criminal record.

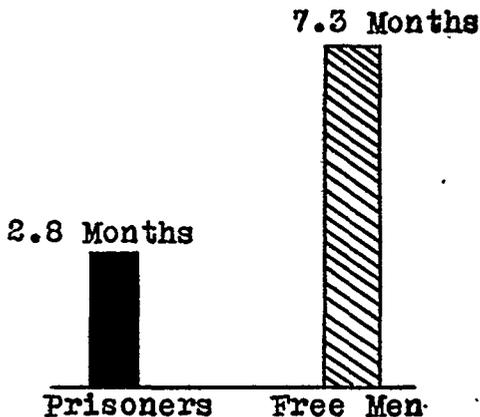
It will now be shown that it is possible for law-abiding individuals to remain unemployed without breaking the law for much longer intervals of time than those who have been committed to prison.

In Chart II, 269 unemployed free men seeking jobs at the Illinois Free Employment Agency in Chicago in January, 1931, are compared with 172 prisoners who were unemployed when they committed the crime for which they were sentenced to the penitentiary. The average length of time unemployed since the last job was calculated for the free men. The average length of time unemployed at the time the crime was committed was calculated for the prison group. Chart II shows that the free men had been unemployed an average of 7.3 months when questioned, while the prisoners had been unemployed an average of only 2.8 months when they committed the crime for

which they were sentenced to prison. Although the group of free men had been unemployed an average of two and one-half times longer than the average period of unemployment shown for the prisoners, they were nevertheless managing to stay out of trouble!

CHART II.

AVERAGE LENGTH OF TIME UNEMPLOYED IN MONTHS SINCE LAST JOB
(269 Unemployed free men compared with 172 prisoners who were unemployed when the crime was committed.)



There were no outstanding discrepancies in inter-quartile ranges between the two groups to account for this difference. Furthermore, the median length of period of unemployment for the free man was 7.1 months while the median for the prisoners was 2.9 months. Evidently certain individual differences outside the realm of unemployment must be responsible for the wide divergence between the free men and prisoners shown in Chart II.

In 1929 the men admitted to the penitentiary who were unemployed when they committed crime were out of work an average of 3.2 months before committing the crime for which they were imprisoned. The period of unemployment varied from one day to four years. Six per cent reported that they had been out of work for one year or longer. Actually 41 per cent of those unemployed had been out of work less than one month. The 3.2 months average period of unemployment for the 37 per cent of the 1054 prisoners (who were unemployed when the crime was committed) admitted to the Illinois State Penitentiary in 1929 is not far above the average of 2.8 months established for the group of 172 prisoners considered

in Chart II. This comparison offers a pertinent commentary upon the reliability of the averages presented.

Intelligence may exert a slight influence upon the average length of the time the group of prisoners were idle before committing crimes. In Table V it will be seen that the prisoners possessing average intelligence (C+, C, C-) (Army Alpha Examination) manage to keep out of trouble for a slightly longer period of time than those possessing superior or inferior intellectual capacity. It is possible that too much intelligence or too little intelligence may contribute to occupational instability. However, since there are relatively few cases at the higher and lower levels it is impossible to draw any reliable conclusions from Table V.

TABLE V.

Average Number of Months idle compared with Intelligence of Prisoners who were unemployed when the crime was committed.

<i>Intelligence (Army Alpha)</i>	<i>Number of Months</i>	<i>Number of Cases</i>
A	2.09	12
B	2.27	22
C+	3.72	40
C	2.59	47
C-	3.03	32
D-E	2.27	20
Total	2.81	173

Of all robbers, burglars, and those convicted of larceny who were admitted to the Illinois State Penitentiary in 1929 almost 60 per cent were above average in intelligence. In Table IV it was shown that around 45 per cent of robbers and burglars were unemployed when they committed the last crime. Although men who committed these types of crime generally have superior intelligence yet 45 per cent of them are unemployed when they violate the criminal code. They possess the ability to earn an honest living yet they turn to illegitimate methods of solving the problem of sustenance.

In contrast to the group blessed with superior intellectual capacity it is illuminating to turn to the murderers and sex offenders who are less endowed. Sixty-eight per cent of the murderers admitted to the Illinois State Penitentiary in 1929 were below average in intelligence yet only 27 per cent of this entire group were unemployed when the crime was committed. While practically 50 per cent of the sex delinquents were below average in intelligence only 17 per cent were unemployed. In this comparison between crime groups the figures tell a different story. The ignorant have jobs while the

more intelligent group are unemployed. This type of comparison is clouded by the nature of the crime committed.

In the main, advancing age seems to exert a stabilizing effect in so far as unemployment is concerned. It should be noted that there is one inversion (i. e., an increase) shown in Table VI at the 35-39 year age level. In Table VI it is shown that the highest per cent of unemployment is found between the ages of 20 and 24 (inclusive). Young men at this age are normally in great demand in trade and industry. In spite of the favorable opportunities surrounding men of this age it seems very significant that such a large percentage of them were unemployed when they violated the law.

TABLE VI.

Age of Prisoners who were Unemployed when the Crime was Committed.

<i>Age</i>	<i>Total Cases</i>	<i>Number Unemployed</i>	<i>Per Cent Unemployed</i>
15-19	29	16	55.2
20-24	96	57	59.4
25-29	91	43	47.2
30-34	53	23	41.9
35-39	36	19	52.8
40-44	19	7	36.8
45-over	23	8	34.8
Total	347	173	49.8

Before drawing any final conclusions it is necessary to let these unemployed men speak for themselves. The various reasons given for being unemployed are presented in Table VII. The chief reason given by both prisoners and free men was that "no work (was) to be had." This same explanation ranks first in 1929 and 1930. If the first four reasons given for being unemployed ("no work to be had," "laid off," "business depression," and "slack season") are added together it is evident that industrial depression receives the blame of 55.3 per cent of the prisoners admitted in 1929, of 82.5 per cent of the prisoners admitted in 1930 (covering a random sample of 500) and 92.8 per cent of a random sample of free men seeking employment in January, 1931. The "laid off" item in Table VII affords a sharp contrast between the prisoners and free men. While 40.1 per cent of the free men stated that they had been "laid off" only 19.6 per cent of the 1930 group of prisoners gave this reason for being unemployed when the crime was committed. It is surprising to find such a high percentage (around 55 per cent) of the 1929 group of prisoners blaming business conditions for being unemployed

TABLE VII.
REASONS GIVEN FOR BEING UNEMPLOYED
(Percentages)

<i>Reasons given for being unemployed</i>	<i>351 Prisoners Admitted in 1929</i>	<i>173 Prisoners Admitted in 1930</i>	<i>272 Free Men 1931</i>
No Work to be had.....	44.0	58.3	42.3
Laid Off.....	10.0	19.6	40.1
Business Depression.....			10.4
Slack Season.....	1.3	4.6	
Sickness.....	11.0	6.9	2.7
Quit Working.....	2.0	3.5	
Travelling.....	2.0	2.9	
Fired.....	2.0	1.1	
Mother or Father Died.....		1.1	
Taking a Vacation.....	2.0	.7	.1
Arrested.....		.6	
Drunkenness.....	1.0	.7	
Bankruptcy.....			2.9
Change in Business.....			1.5
On Odd Jobs.....	6.0		
Looking for Work.....	5.0		
Did not look for work.....	4.0		
Accidental Injury.....	1.5		
Helping at home.....	1.3		
Had plenty of money.....	1.3		
Other excuses.....	5.6		

since 1929 was a year of unusual business opportunity (see employment index in Chart V).

The following tentative conclusions are supported by the data presented in the foregoing pages:

1. Yearly increases and decreases in the number of prisoners admitted to the Illinois State Penitentiary do not consistently conform to yearly increases and decreases in employment.
2. Recidivists are more likely to be unemployed when they commit crimes than those who have no past criminal record.
3. With increasing age, fewer men admitted to prison are unemployed when they commit crimes which result in prison sentences.
4. Prisoners tend to blame business conditions for being unemployed at the time the crime is committed regardless of whether business conditions are good or bad.

In general, it seems evident that too much emphasis should not be placed upon unemployment as a causal factor in crime.