

Youth On Relief

Preliminary Results of a Survey in Halifax

By L. RITCHER*

IN November 1936 a conference on unemployment relief was held in Halifax under the auspices of the Institute of Public Affairs. It was attended by representatives of nearly all municipalities of the province where relief was paid at that time, by all of the relief officers of the provincial government and by leaders of social work in the province. At the end of the conference a resolution was passed asking the Institute of Public Affairs to investigate the unemployment situation in the province and to publish the results of its research. The resolution was put forward by Mayor Muggah of Sydney and seconded by Mayor Kaufman of Amherst.

It was on account of this resolution that the Institute of Public Affairs decided to make an investigation of unemployed youth in Halifax. This problem was chosen for various reasons. In a previous survey covering the whole province¹ it had been found that boys and girls under twenty-five years of age represented one of the largest groups among relief recipients in Nova Scotia and that they were chiefly concentrated in Halifax. There seemed to be further, at the time when the investigation was first contemplated, good prospect that some constructive measures might be taken to improve the situation of these boys and girls. The National Youth Employment Commission, Ottawa, formed by the National Employment Commission (Purvis Commission) to study the problem of unemployed youth had expressed its interest in the establishment of training facilities for these unemployed and it seemed probable that the Dominion government would make funds available for this purpose (which have indeed been voted since by Parliament). Educationists and social workers familiar with the unemployment situation in Halifax expressed the opinion that among the boys and girls on relief in the city there were a good many who, being provided with a proper training, would have a fair chance to find work. Plans were discussed to set up training courses in Halifax. But it was soon found that it would not be advisable to draw up a scheme as long as one did not possess adequate information about the extent and nature of unemployment among the juveniles, their character and abilities, their vocational and educational background. It seemed worthwhile to conduct a survey in order

to find out all these facts even if the training facilities, which were hoped for, should not come off. For the results to be anticipated would be most valuable for formulating any future programme of youth policy, be it in education, in vocational guidance or in public welfare.

The committee formed to prepare the investigation decided that an attempt should be made to interview all the boys and girls who receive relief either for their own person or as members of a family whose head was on relief. The task was entrusted to four persons who had previous experience in vocational guidance—the principal of a large school; a high school teacher who had done similar work in London, England; a girl, a former teacher, who had studied vocational guidance at Harvard; and the writer of this article. They used for their interviews a questionnaire covering all important phases of the personal and vocational life. Thanks to the great interest that the then mayor of Halifax, Mr. E. J. Cragg, took in the project, the invitations to the unemployed boys and girls were sent out by Mr. G. E. Ferguson, Administrator of Relief, and the interviews were held in the Relief Office, though attendance was not compulsory.

The investigation took place during April and May 1937. Out of 310 boys and 142 girls who had been asked to register, 202 boys and 71 girls appeared. They were all between 16 and 25 years of age. Married women under 25 whose husbands were on relief had not been asked to come since they would not be in need of vocational guidance.

In this article some preliminary results of the investigation will be discussed as far as the boys are concerned. A more detailed study including the girls may be published later.

The unemployed boys were rather evenly distributed over the various age groups. No evidence was found that there is a greater demand for young boys leaving school because they get lower wages than older boys.

TABLE I

Age Group	Number of Boys	Married
16-18	47	·
18-20	45	7
21-25	109	82

Surprising is the high percentage of married in spite of the fact that most of the young men have been on relief for quite a long time. In the age group 21-25, there are among 10 unemployed 8 married, and among 10 married, 9 are fathers of children. Of the 82 married 37 had one child;

1. "Unemployment and Relief in Nova Scotia" by L. Richter, *Dalhousie Bulletin on Public Affairs* II.

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25, two children; and 10, three children. Quite a few of these marriages have been concluded and a great number of children have been born while the husband and father was on relief. Even among the 46 in the age group 18-20, there were 7 married; they all had children, 2 of them 2. One of these young fathers was just 18 years old.

Of the young men in the age group, 21-25, the great majority (about 90 per cent) had a relief order in their own name, that is they had a household independent of their parents. On the other hand all the boys of the age group, 16-18, and all but 5 of the age group, 18-20, lived with their parents.

Since it was one of the purposes of the investigation to find out whether it would be helpful to establish training facilities in Halifax, great pains were taken to get reliable information about the educational and vocational background of the unemployed. Questions had therefore been inserted in the questionnaire about the grade reached in school, the age when school was left, and the best school subjects.

If one assumes that the average student should attend school at least until Grade Seven, one is compelled to state that not even half of all these unemployed boys, that is 95 out of 202, have reached that goal. A little more than 10 per cent, that is 26 out of 202, have not gone farther than Grade Four. (See Table 2).

There were no complete illiterates among the boys though some of them found reading and writing difficult. One of the boys had never attended school.

TABLE II

Grade when left school	Number of boys	Age When left school	Number of boys
XII	1	19	1
XI	1	18	3
X	6	17	10
IX	14	16	67
VIII	26	15	53
VII	49	14	39
VI	45	13	9
V	24	12	2
IV	14	11	4
III	5	10	1
II	6	9	1

9 boys were still attending school.

These results are very unsatisfactory and they appear all the more so if one considers the length of school attendance. For it would be a mistake to believe that the boys had not reached a higher grade because they had to leave school too early. As Table 2 shows, 173 boys were 14 years and older when they left school. They would have been able to reach Grade Seven in that time. If they did not it must have been that they could not comply with the requirements of the school.

Table 3 shows what the boys regarded as their best school subjects. Some of them gave more than one subject so that the number does not correspond with the total number of boys.

TABLE III

Best school subject	Number of boys
Arithmetic	88
History	14
English	14
Spelling	10
Geography	6
Reading	5
Drawing	5
Handwork	3
Science	2
Latin	1
No particular subject	51

Arithmetic takes by far the first place. This finding corresponds with the experience of the University that Nova Scotia boys are more gifted for Mathematics and Science than for languages and literature. Considerable interest seems to exist in History and English. That only three boys gave handwork as their best subject is probably due to the fact that it is only taught in three of the Halifax schools.

While the information given about the educational background was rather definite and seemed quite reliable it was extremely difficult in many cases to get proper answers about the usual occupation and the employment record. The reason is that the great majority of the boys has never been regularly employed in the proper sense of the word. In addition to the 42 boys who frankly admitted it, there were a good many giving their usual occupation such as labourer, or seaman or clerk, who had only been engaged in that type of work for a few days or weeks. The following table listing the usual occupation of the boys is therefore only very limited in value. The one thing, however, that it shows clearly is that nearly all the unemployed boys are unskilled.

TABLE IV

Usual occupation	Number of boys
Labourer	83
Errand boy and shipper	13 each
Chauffeur	12
Clerk, painter	6 each
Mechanic, seaman	4 each
Carpenter	3
Broom maker, cook, theatre usher, printer	2 each
Baker, electrician freight handler, hotel houseman, male nurse, pipe fitter, stone mason	1 each
No particular occupation	42

The efforts to get exact answers about duration of employment and unemployment met with the same difficulty. The work performed during the last two years was in most cases so casual and negligible that the boys could not remember it very well though they made great efforts to do so. Never regularly employed except for seasonal and temporary work there were 32 of the 46 boys in the age group 18-20, and 89 of the 109 boys in the age group 21-25. In the age group 16-17, the situation was by no means better though no figures could be obtained.

To be unemployed does not necessarily mean

to be on relief, especially not in the case of boys living with their parents. They are a concern for the Relief Office only while their parents are on relief. It was not possible to learn from these juveniles how long the family had been on relief though the information could be collected without great difficulty from the files of the Relief Office. But such an inquiry would only confirm the clear impression gained from the interviews that the majority of the unemployed boys of the age groups 16-20, came from families who had been on relief for a considerable time. A little more favourable is the situation in the age group 21-25. Nearly all the young men in that group having relief orders in their own names could give information about the length of time they had been on relief. Of the 109 persons in that group there had been on relief without a break of at least a month:

1 - 26 weeks	51
27 - 52 "	27
1 - 1½ years	9
1½ - 2 "	4
2 - 3 "	7
3 - 4 "	4

From the interviews it can be assumed, however, that the spells of unemployment experienced by these young men were as a rule much longer than the time on relief.

The last question asked in the various interviews was about the sort of work the boys would like to take up in case an opportunity offered. They were allowed to make alternative proposals so that the number of vocations listed below is in excess of the number of boys.

TABLE VI

Work desired	Number of boys
Mechanic	76
Electrician	27
Painter	26
Carpenter	22
Chauffeur	16
Engineer	15
Seaman	14
Commercial clerk	12
Mason	10
Plumber	9
Radio repair man	8
Airplane mechanic	7
Wireless operator, farmer, cook	6 each
Aviator	5
Fisherman	3
Bookkeeper, shoemaker, s.s. steward, surveyor, window decorator	2 each
R.C.M.P., male nurse, lithographer, steam shovel operator, porter, broom maker, bellhop, photographer	1 each

The boys who wanted to go in for mechanics were more or less vague about training plans. They wished a job that would require work on machines, motors, etc. It is unfortunately a very large group which has no definite conception as to what should be their place in life. They will need very careful vocational guidance. On the other hand it is rather encouraging that many others are inclined to go in for jobs which require a thorough training. Carpenters, painters, electri-

cians, plumbers and masons come under that category.

Surprisingly low for a province with so important an agricultural background is the number of those who want to go in for farming. They have mostly spent their childhood on farms, and they confirm the experience gained elsewhere that training courses in agriculture should be restricted to boys from rural environments. The fact that only 3 boys have declared for fishing reflects the unfavourable situation of the fisheries, while the sailor's job attracts 14 boys. Those who want to become aviators or aeroplane mechanics are all of the age groups 16-20. The older boys are less adventurous and seem to prefer the good old crafts. All the boys were asked whether in order to get the desired job they would be prepared to undergo a special training and these questions were always answered in the positive.

What is the final result of the investigation? It has given a clear insight into the situation of unemployed boys in an industrial city of eastern Canada. It has shown things as they are and it has destroyed some myths. There are hardly any malingers among those who were interviewed. They were willing to work and looking eagerly for jobs. But a good many of them were not sufficiently equipped to meet the competition in the labour market. There were gaps in their school and vocational education which mean a serious handicap for them. In many cases these gaps could be filled by providing for training facilities which have proved so helpful elsewhere. Conditions in Halifax for establishing such training courses are favourable. The average state of health among the juveniles is better than might be anticipated after the long periods of unemployment which most of them have experienced. Only 12 boys were in apparently bad physical condition. There are many bright boys of still unbroken energy who are anxious to learn and who seem to promise good results. Classifications made at the end of the interviews show that out of 202 boys, 56 are very suitable, 110 suitable, and 36 unsuitable for training. It must further be remembered that the survey was only concerned with young people on relief who represent only a small part of the total number of unemployed juveniles, and that there probably will be among those who are not on relief a still larger number of good candidates for training courses.

The part of the investigation concerned with the educational and vocational background and with the sort of work desired by the unemployed gives valuable indications as to what should be taught in such a training course. The establishment of training facilities would not only be of benefit for those participating but would be of great value for the whole community and would in the long run tend to reduce the total expenditure for relief.