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RESEARCH BULLETIN

REASONS FOR FAILURE TO ACCEPT ASSIGNMENTS
TO WORKS PROGRAM EMPLOYMENT IN THIRTEEN CITIES

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Preface

A series of studies was undertaken by the Division of Social Research in December 1935 to ascertain the validity of reports that large numbers of relief clients certified as eligible for Works Program Employment were refusing to accept jobs to which they had been assigned. The series of studies was divided into two parts; the first, Bulletin Series II No. 15, included inquiries in Cincinnati, Toledo, and the rural and town portions of Stark and Athens Counties, Ohio. The second part, which is here presented, consists of studies in thirteen cities^{1/} distributed throughout the country.

The reassignment forms used by the W.P.A. labor offices and the original assignment forms used by the United States Employment Service, the National Reemployment Service, or the state employment services provided a means of ascertaining the names of clients who had failed to accept referral to a W.P.A. job or failed to report for a job to which they had been referred. From these forms random samples of approximately 250 cases in each of the thirteen cities were drawn for the purpose of intensive study. After necessary information regarding family composition, usual occupation, and recent income for each referred worker had been transcribed from the W.P.A. records and from relief agency files, the specific reason for the client's failure to take a W.P.A. job was obtained by means of a home interview. Whenever the validity of the reason given by a client was open to doubt, it was followed up by interviews with family case workers, employers, and doctors.

These studies of failures to accept W.P.A. assignments are somewhat similar to the series of surveys conducted in the summer of 1935 for the purpose of ascertaining whether relief clients were refusing to take private jobs. Analysis of failures to take Works Program jobs is considerably simplified by the fact that all assignments are made through official agencies and that the hours of work, conditions of employment, and rates of pay are matters of record.

The studies were conducted in the thirteen cities by the supervisors of the Urban Current Change Survey staffs, and the data, together with a background report upon the work in each city, were sent to the Special Inquiries Section of the Division of Social Research for analysis. The uniformity of method employed in making the studies and the similarity of the findings in the thirteen cities have made it possible to present a combined report of the results.

^{1/} The cities are: Atlanta, Georgia; Baltimore, Maryland; Bridgeport, Connecticut; Butte, Montana; Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Houston, Texas; Manchester, New Hampshire; Omaha, Nebraska; Paterson, New Jersey; St. Louis, Missouri; San Francisco, California; Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

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SUMMARY

An average of 28 percent of the total assignments made in the thirteen cities where surveys were conducted did not result in placements of workers on W.P.A. projects. The unsuccessful assignments varied from 15 percent of the total in Houston, Manchester, and Omaha, to 48 percent in Paterson.

In none of the cities, however, did the number refusing to work without justifiable reason exceed one percent of the sample, and in the surveys in eight of the cities there was no instance of a refusal which could be classed as unjustifiable. The cases of unjustified refusal in all the cities averaged less than one-half of one percent of the unsuccessful referrals, while, in relation to the total number of assignments, those which were unjustifiably refused constituted only one in a thousand.

Willingness to work is further attested by the fact that many clients who were unable to accept a first assignment for temporary reasons were found to have taken a later assignment.

Most of the failures to accept referral resulted not from any unwillingness to work on the part of the client, but from the fact that the tremendous task of placing thousands of needy persons on Works Program jobs made it impossible to keep completely accurate current records as to the employment status, employability, and home addresses of certified workers.

Among those who failed to accept assignments, an average of 30 percent was already employed in private industry and 9 percent on W.P.A. and

relief projects. Workers' preference for private employment is very strongly evidenced by the substantial proportion (46 percent) of the cases in the private employment category who refused W.P.A. assignments even though their incomes during the month preceding referral were lower than the incomes they would have received had they accepted the W.P.A. assignments.

An average of 27 percent of those failing to accept referral in the thirteen cities did so because of physical disability; 16 percent did not receive notification of their assignment; 3 percent reported and were rejected by foremen because of physical unfitness for the job; 3 percent refused jobs which were markedly inferior to their usual occupations; and for 12 percent the failures were due to miscellaneous other reasons.

The inquiries in the thirteen cities indicate the same types of circumstances and problems as were found in the three Ohio communities studied. There were, of course, variations among the cities, depending upon employment conditions in private industry, and upon the success with which inter-office clearances were made among the local relief agencies, the W.P.A. district offices and the employment service offices.

The studies have clearly demonstrated that relief clients are anxious to take Works Program jobs, and that those who are not willing to work are so few as to be of little or no importance compared to the 99.9 percent who want jobs and who take them whenever they are reasonably able to do so.

REASONS FOR FAILURE TO ACCEPT ASSIGNMENTS
TO WORKS PROGRAM EMPLOYMENT IN THIRTEEN CITIES

Twenty-eight percent of the total number of assignments to W.P.A. jobs had not resulted in placements as of the dates when the studies were made in the thirteen cities. The percentage of unsuccessful assignments was considerably higher than the average in Detroit, San Francisco, and Paterson, and considerably lower in Omaha, Houston, and Manchester. Table I gives the total number of assignments and the number which had not resulted in placement in each city.

Table I. Total Assignments and Unsuccessful Assignments in Thirteen Cities^{a/}

Cities	Total Assignments	Unsuccessful Assignments	Percentage Unsuccessful
Total	252,604	69,998	28
Atlanta	12,102 ^{b/}	2,422	20
Baltimore	5,985	1,268	21
Bridgeport	4,200 ^{b/}	1,000	24
Butte ^{c/}	--	169	-
Chicago	95,923	22,937	24
Detroit	42,847	17,437	41
Houston ^{d/}	10,046	1,500	15
Manchester	1,758	258	15
Omaha	6,843	994	15
Paterson	4,065	1,950	48
San Francisco	21,836	10,083	46
St. Louis	32,200	7,420	23
Wilkes-Barre ^{d/}	14,794	2,560	17

^{a/} All studies could not be made simultaneously in the thirteen cities, but the date on which the sample was drawn lies in each case within the period from December 18, 1935 through January 31, 1936.

^{b/} An approximation based on placements plus unsuccessful assignments.

^{c/} Total assignments not available for Butte.

^{d/} Figures apply to whole W.P.A. district.

Variations in the proportion of unsuccessful referrals reflect differences in assignment procedure and practices in the several cities rather than differences in the readiness of workers to take W.P.A. jobs. In Detroit the unsuccessful referrals were as high as 41 percent of all assignments largely because of the adoption of an emergency measure to speed placements. In placing 11,000 persons on W.P.A. jobs within 48 hours it was impossible to eliminate mechanical errors and unsuitable assignments. Difficulties in assignment procedure account for the high percentages in San Francisco and Paterson.

A sample of approximately 250 unsuccessful assignment cases was studied in each city. Since the total number of such cases varied from city to city, this sample covered the situation more fully in some cities than in others. The ratio of the number in the sample to the total number of unsuccessful referrals for each city is shown in Table II.

Table II. Sampling Ratios Used For Study of Unsuccessful Referrals in Thirteen Cities.

City	Sampling Ratio
Atlanta	1 in 9
Baltimore	1 in 5
Bridgeport	1 in 4
Butte	All cases
Chicago	1 in 83
Detroit	1 in 70
Houston	1 in 6
Manchester	All cases ^{a/}
Omaha	1 in 4
Paterson	1 in 8
San Francisco	1 in 40
St. Louis	1 in 30
Wilkes-Barre	1 in 10

^{a/} Except 10 cases outside the city.

Most of the reasons for failure to accept assignment fell into three main categories: (1) already engaged in private employment, on W.P.A. projects, or on relief jobs; (2) failure of, or errors in, notification procedure; and (3) permanent, tempo-

rary, or partial, unemployability. Of these the group "already employed" was the largest. The following table gives the percentages of the sample for each city according to reason for failure to accept assignment.

Table III. Percent Distribution of Unsuccessful Referrals in Thirteen Cities, Classified by Reason for Failure

Reasons	Atlanta	Baltimore	Bridgeport	Butte	Chicago	Detroit	Houston	Manchester	Omaha	Paterson	San Francisco	St. Louis	Wilkes-Barre	Average
Total unsuccessful referrals	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Private employment	16	16	68	20	16	36	45	29	15	35	24	25	40	30
Already on W.P.A.	21	2	2	-	2	4	6	3	2	19	9	3	6	6
On relief work	3	-	*	15	2	1	4	4	*	1	-	1	5	3
Notification difficulties	22	2	18	18	18	11	6	31	7	17	13	35	6	16
Temporarily unemployable	18	24	4	24	14	20	11	8	27	6	15	5	12	14
Permanently unemployable	5	21	3	6	13	6	10	10	11	9	8	6	3	8
Partially unemployable	4	14	-	-	8	5	-	9	2	2	7	6	3	5
Assigned occupation markedly inferior to usual	5	2	1	3	4	4	2	1	6	2	4	-	1	3
Rejected by foreman	-	2	-	1	10	2	2	-	7	-	6	3	5	3
Relief greatly exceeded W.P.A. wage	-	4	-	-	1	3	-	-	1	-	-	1	4	1
Lack of skills or tools	*	*	-	1	2	*	-	1	4	-	1	1	1	1
Distance from project	-	*	-	2	-	*	1	*	2	*	1	-	-	1
Unable to leave home	*	4	-	2	1	1	2	*	1	*	1	*	*	1
Assignment error	1	2	-	1	1	1	*	-	1	1	2	4	1	1
In jail or institution	1	2	1	-	1	1	*	*	*	*	1	2	-	1
Deceased	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	*	-	-	1	*	-	*
Prospect of private job	-	*	-	1	*	1	4	*	1	1	1	1	1	1
Unwilling to work	-	*	-	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	*
Miscellaneous	3	4	1	6	6	3	5	2	11	7	6	6	11	5

* Less than one-half of one percent.

Private Employment

An average of 30 percent of those interviewed could not accept W.P.A. assignments because they were privately employed^{1/}. This percentage varied from city to city according to the trends of employment in local industries, the local assignment practices, and the current condition of the records from which assignments were made. Only 15 percent of the sample in Omaha had private employment at the time of referral, while in Bridgeport this group constituted 68 percent of the sample. The high percentage in Bridgeport represents not only increased employment in local industries but also an accumulation of private employment cases remaining on the records from which assignments were made, despite previous removals from the relief rolls. In Baltimore, where the percentage of those failing to report because of private employment was only 16 percent, it had been possible to make a preliminary contact with the client or his family to learn whether or not he was already employed. In this way many of those privately employed were taken from the lists before assignments were made.

The privately employed persons who could not accept Works Program employment were for the most part not on relief at the time of referral. In order to encourage relief clients to accept private employment, the following instructions had been issued in letter W.P.A.--29, dated September 4, 1935 from Harry L. Hopkins, Administrator to all State Works Progress Administrations: "The

certification of a case which received relief in May 1935, or thereafter, is not to be cancelled if the case is closed because a person included within the relief group has secured private employment." This type of case constituted the bulk of the privately employed group in those cities where the percentage refusing W.P.A. jobs because of private employment was high.

In Bridgeport and Houston 84 and 54 percent, respectively, of the workers not accepting referrals because of private employment were not on relief during the month prior to referral. Not all cases reporting private employment can be looked upon as non-relief cases, however. In Manchester 21 out of the 71 refusing referral because of private employment were engaged in seasonal work, while the other 50 had temporary jobs, the insecurity of which is attested by the fact that almost every month these people find it necessary to ask for some type of relief.

W.P.A. Employment

Assignments were sometimes sent to persons who were already working on the program, and who therefore could not accept another assignment. The number of such cases is not significant except in two cities where special circumstances account for the situation. In Atlanta, the closing of the local relief office, and the attempt to place thousands of people in a few days resulted in a congestion in the W.P.A. office which prevented accurate checking of assigned lists. Consequently, many

^{1/} It is noteworthy that 12,538, or 35 percent, of the relief case closings in the thirteen cities during October were made possible by private employment. The number of closings due to private employment in November increased to 13,623, thus suggesting that the flow of relief persons into private employment continued in substantial proportion. This indicates that private employment as a cause of unsuccessful referrals is not over-emphasized in the samples drawn in this study.

persons received two assignments, and because they could accept only one, were recorded as having failed to report on the other. Thus, when interviewed, they were found to be already working on projects. In Paterson, duplication of assignment slips resulted from the fact that duplicate certification slips had been issued to speed the handling of placements.

Relief Work

An average of 3 percent of the persons interviewed had failed to report because they were working on relief projects. Over one half of them were in the Civilian Conservation Corps, while most of the others were on F.E.R.A. projects. Some exceptions had been made to allow for the completion of F.E.R.A. projects before workers were transferred to W.P.A. work, and, therefore, a few cases occurred in which workers did not respond to W.P.A. assignments because they had other relief employment. The proportion of such cases was small in every city except Butte, where it accounted for 15 percent of the unsuccessful referrals investigated.

Notification Problems

The relief population is a mobile group. Frequent changes of residence are among its characteristics. Hence, many of the assignments sent to relief clients through the mails did not reach them--either because they had moved or could not be located. In a small proportion of the cases the notice of referral had not reached the client even though the address was correct.

The cases in which notification failed to reach the worker consti-

tuted an average of 16 percent of the samples in the thirteen cities. The Baltimore, Houston, and Wilkes-Barre data show that notification difficulties occurred in less than 6 percent of the cases while the problem assumed much greater proportions in Atlanta, Manchester, and St. Louis where 22 percent, 31 percent, and 35 percent respectively of the unsuccessful referrals were attributed to this cause. The closing of the relief office in Atlanta complicated the notification procedure in that city. Only by careful tracing of the 100 cases in which address discrepancies occurred, were interviewers able to reduce to 44 the number of cases that could not be located for interview.

Unemployability

An average of 27 percent of the persons interviewed in the thirteen cities had been unable to accept assignments because of some degree of unemployability. In two cities the proportions which were unemployable were unusually large; in Baltimore 59 percent, and in Omaha 40 percent, failed to accept W.P.A. jobs because of physical disability.

The 27 percent included persons who were temporarily ill or disabled, some who were permanently unfit for work, and others who were employable with handicaps. In general, the number of cases with temporary disabilities exceeded those permanently unemployable. Data from Bridgeport Butte, and Houston did not indicate what proportion of the unemployable group was actually employable with handicaps. Manchester data showed that the 9 percent who were only partially employable had been mill workers and were unfitted for heavy outdoor labor.

The cases listed as "rejected by foremen" are, of course, neither failures to report or refusals to work. Such cases, erroneously reported as refusals, averaged 3 percent of the sample in the thirteen cities; in four cities such cases did not occur in the samples drawn for study. The desire of many relief clients to work in spite of physical handicaps is evidenced by the fact that most of the cases rejected by foremen at the project were physically unfit for work.

Assigned Occupation Markedly
Inferior to Usual

An average of 3 percent of the unsuccessful referrals involved refusals of Works Program jobs at occupations markedly inferior to the usual occupations of the workers. No such instance occurred in the St. Louis sample, while 6 percent of the unsuccessful referrals in Omaha were for this cause. In many of the cities relief clients had at first been encouraged to refuse jobs below their occupational skill until projects could be provided on which they could be assigned at their usual occupation.

With the development of the Works Program, opportunities for use of skills are being increased, but in the meantime workers have been urged to accept any assignment until they can be transferred to work for which they are better fitted. In accordance with this policy, seven of the 13 workers in Chicago who refused jobs below their occupational rating had, at the time of the interview, accepted second assignments. A different situation had developed in San Francisco. There the number of relief clients refusing jobs inferior to their usual occupations had increased with the rise in the number of projects offering skilled

jobs because the skilled workers feared that they would not be transferred if they accepted an assignment to unskilled work. In either case, however, the number of such refusals was too small to be of great significance.

Distance From Project

In Butte and Omaha slightly more than 2 percent of the workers interviewed had failed to report for assignments because the project was excessively far from their homes, and transportation costs would have seriously reduced their incomes.

All Other Reasons

In six cities a few workers interviewed had refused W.P.A. jobs because the wages would have been less than their relief income. As a percentage of the total sample, these cases in each of the six cities were unimportant, amounting to 4 percent in Baltimore and Wilkes-Barre, 3 percent in Detroit and one percent in Chicago, Omaha, and St. Louis. In such instances the average family to be supported consisted of eight members, and the reduction in income resulting from acceptance of a W.P.A. job would have been substantial, ranging from 10 to 65 percent.

In Baltimore, workers who refused W.P.A. jobs for this reason were undoubtedly influenced by the policy of the Baltimore Emergency Relief Commission which, up to November 21, 1935 permitted relief clients to refuse W.P.A. jobs if the wage offered was 10 percent below their relief budget. Although the policy had been changed at the time the study was made, there was undoubtedly a tendency on the part of clients to refuse for this reason because such refusals had previously been allowed.

Refusals of jobs because acceptance would have meant the sacrifice of part-time employment which, with supplementary relief, provided an income higher than the W.P.A. wage, were few except in Omaha and Wilkes-Barre, where they constituted 4 and 8 percent respectively of the cases studied.

It was found that some persons assigned and not reporting were no longer members of relief households. This was the situation in 4 percent of the cases in the Paterson and St. Louis samples, while it did not occur at all in the samples drawn in five cities, and accounted for 2 percent or less in the other cities.

Lack of tools or of skill needed for the assigned job was the reason for a few failures to accept referrals. Other reasons given by workers interviewed in the various cities include: unable to leave dependents, assigned incorrectly, in school, in jail or institution, deceased, and prospect of private employment.

Unjustifiable Refusals to Work

In eight cities no reason given could be called clearly unjustifiable or indicative of unwillingness to work. In no city did more than one percent of the persons interviewed refuse assignments without justification.

Interviewers in each city were instructed to seek independent veri-

fication of the reasons given by the workers, but on the average the validity of the reason was doubted in only 5 percent of the cases. However, specific facts to substantiate these doubts could rarely be secured. In Baltimore and Chicago, where the group failing to accept assignment because of unemployability was large, 16 and 13 percent respectively of the cases were doubted. However, in most cases the claims of unemployability were supported by medical certificates.

In any event, doubts as to the justification of failures to take W. P. A. jobs apply to a relatively small proportion of the sample. Workers who were already working on W.P.A. or who did not receive the assignment slips, or who reported and were rejected by the foreman can not be said to have refused W.P.A. jobs at all. Workers engaged in private employment or physically disabled could not accept referral; their failure to do so is entirely justifiable.

The fact that in 68 percent of the cases interviewed the income from W.P.A. employment would have been greater than the income which the workers had been receiving during the month prior to referral indicates that for the majority of cases it was a sacrifice to be unable to accept the W.P.A. job. Under such conditions it is not likely that workers would invent excuses to avoid placement on the Works Program.

