

Unemployment and Religion in Northern Ireland

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Abstract: This paper examines recent data on the employment status of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. In particular, the 1981 Population Census and the new Continuous Household Survey are used to compare rates of unemployment for the two religious groups in the early 1980s with those found in 1971. Explanations for differences in unemployment rates are considered briefly.

I INTRODUCTION

During the past 10 years there has been a considerable growth in research seeking to establish and account for the labour market experiences of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. This research has, for the first time, allowed the debate over discrimination and disadvantage in employment to be put on a sound empirical footing. Disagreements and debate, of course remain, especially in the interpretation of data. Much of the research to date has drawn upon data collected during the 1970s and, while they have revealed patterns unlikely to be changed in a short time, they do suffer from the perception of being "out of date". An important task, therefore, is to establish the nature of current labour market patterns and identify any evidence of change.

A major finding of the research undertaken on data collected during the 1970s was the differential experience of unemployment of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.

Table 1: *Religion and unemployment (%)*

| | <i>Male</i> | | <i>Female</i> | | <i>Total</i> | |
|------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| | <i>1971</i> | <i>1981</i> | <i>1971</i> | <i>1981</i> | <i>1971</i> | <i>1981</i> |
| Protestant | 6.6 | 12.4 | 3.6 | 9.6 | 5.6 | 11.4 |
| Catholic | 17.3 | 30.2 | 7.0 | 17.1 | 13.9 | 25.5 |

Source: Northern Ireland Population Censuses, 1971 and 1981

At that time, the rate for Catholics was $2\frac{1}{2}$ times the Protestant rate, and the male Catholic rate was three times greater than the male Protestant rate (Table 1). Further analysis of the census data by geographical area revealed that for males the rates for Catholics were substantially higher than those of Protestants in each of the 26 district council areas.

From the mid-1970s unemployment rates in Northern Ireland began to rise and, with the onset of the unemployment "crisis" in the late 1970s, many commentators began to suggest that the differentials in unemployment experience were being eroded, if not eradicated, by the general and large scale increase in unemployment (e.g., Byrne, 1980; Morrissey, 1984). Government statements sought to emphasise the Province-wide problem of high and increasing unemployment rather than the differential experience of the problem by the two communities (Department of Finance, 1979). Increasingly it was argued that, as far as unemployment was concerned, both communities now experienced an "equality of misery".

One study, however, seemed to suggest that substantial differences remained in the rates of unemployment experienced by Protestants and Catholics. Drawing upon a major government survey which monitored the experiences of 3,500 unemployed males during 1976-1977, Miller and Osborne (1983, p. 98) found major differences between the experiences of Protestants and Catholics:

. . . Catholics were over-represented in the survey (compared with their representation in the economically active population), were more likely to have been unemployed in the previous three years, for that unemployment to have lasted longer, to experience a longer period before securing a job (for those obtaining a job), to receive from Employment Offices fewer job submissions, and to be disproportionately represented in those remaining unemployed throughout the year. Moreover, the analysis demonstrated that these differences could not be accounted for by variations in education, skill level (as measured by social class), geographical mobility or general motivation.

Despite the evidence of this survey, the prevailing belief in discussions about unemployment was that it was now a common problem, experienced by Protestants and Catholics at broadly similar rates.

In recent times, two new sources of data allow an assessment of unemployment in terms of religious affiliation: the 1981 Population Census; and a new major government survey, the Continuous Household Survey. The key characteristics of these sources of data can be described as follows.

The 1981 Population Census

The 1981 Census experienced major difficulties in the enumeration of the population of Northern Ireland. This resulted in an acknowledged under-

enumeration of the population, although the scale of the under-enumeration has been disputed (Morris and Compton, 1985). A second problem with the census is the increase in the proportion of the population not prepared to answer the voluntary question on religious affiliation. The Religion Report of the Census (DHSS, 1984) revealed that 274,584 or 18.5 per cent of the enumerated usually resident population had not stated a denomination, a virtual doubling of the proportion recorded at the time of the 1971 Population Census. These two factors together mean that analysis of the 1981 Population Census on the basis of religion must be undertaken with caution. Recent detailed assessments of the non-enumerated population suggest that more Catholics than Protestants fall into this category while the estimated religious balance seems to be more even amongst those not stating a religious affiliation (Compton, 1985). Although overall population estimates can be attempted, it is not possible to assign the non-enumerated population an estimated religious affiliation and an economic position. But given the events occurring at the time of the 1981 Census (e.g. the Hunger Strikes, murder of a census enumerator in a Catholic area, etc.) it is not unreasonable to suggest that much of the under-enumeration occurred in Catholic working class areas. If this is the case, then the census figures underestimate the level of Catholic unemployment. While this is unfortunate, it does not substantially affect the argument of this article, since had these unemployed Catholics been included in our figures, they would amplify the differentials we have found. Fortunately, however, the Continuous Household Survey provides a valuable means of checking the patterns suggested by the census (and vice versa).

Continuous Household Survey (CHS)

The CHS began in 1983 and samples approximately 1 per cent of the private households in Northern Ireland in each year. The CHS is similar in form and content to the General Household Survey carried out in Britain. The CHS includes a question to elicit religious denomination of respondents. The publication of a report combining the 1983 and 1984 surveys examining socio-economic differences in terms of denomination (Department of Finance and Personnel, 1985) enables an assessment of unemployment to be made.¹

II UNEMPLOYMENT - THE CENSUS

The unemployment rates for Protestants and Catholics disaggregated by sex (Table 1) suggest that the Catholic rate of 25.5 per cent is approximately 2.5

1. With 36 per cent of those in the combined surveys indicating themselves to be Catholics, the religious proportions closely match the latest census based estimates of the Catholic proportion of the population. The CHS, as a large sample survey, is subject to sample error. The combining of the 1983 and 1984 Surveys effectively halves the sample error which would have resulted from using one survey. Nevertheless, the statistics from CHS are subject to this factor (Department of Finance and Personnel, 1985, p. 32).

times the Protestant rate at 10.2 per cent and that this is the case for both males and females.

The unemployment data can be further examined by looking at different age groups where further important elements of the experience of unemployment are revealed (Table 2). The first is that unemployment is greater for the younger age categories for both Protestants and Catholics and for males and females. Indeed the lowest rate of unemployment is to be found in the oldest age category, those over 50, for both Protestants and Catholics. This represents a major reversal of the pattern which prevailed in times of lower unemployment when it was the older age groups who experienced the higher rates.

Table 2: *Unemployment by Religion, Sex and Age: Northern Ireland (%)*

| <i>Age Groups</i> | <i>Catholics</i> | | | <i>Protestants</i> | | |
|-------------------|------------------|----------------|--------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------|
| | <i>Males</i> | <i>Females</i> | <i>Total</i> | <i>Males</i> | <i>Females</i> | <i>Total</i> |
| 16-25 | 39.0 | 24.6 | 32.7 | 19.6 | 16.5 | 18.3 |
| 26-35 | 29.1 | 15.4 | 24.6 | 11.7 | 9.6 | 11.0 |
| 36-50 | 26.5 | 11.4 | 21.4 | 9.7 | 6.2 | 7.0 |
| 51+ | 23.8 | 10.8 | 19.6 | 9.6 | 5.9 | 8.5 |

Source: 1981 Population Census, unpublished data.

The second point is that when comparing Protestant and Catholic rates for each age category, Catholic rates are substantially higher. For males, Catholic rates for each age category are twice as high as Protestant rates. Thus while the rates are highest for both Protestant and Catholics in the 16-25 age group, the Catholic rate at 39 per cent is twice the Protestant rate at 19.6 per cent. The differences for females are less substantial, but unemployment rates are approximately 50 per cent higher for Catholics than Protestants.

Unemployment rates for geographical areas can also be examined. In Table 3 are shown unemployment rates for Protestant and Catholics, disaggregated for males and females, by District Council Areas. Taking the rates for all persons first, the Catholic rates is substantially higher in all areas except Castlereagh, where the Protestant rate is marginally higher. (The Catholic proportion of the population in this area is very small). The male figures reveal that Catholic rates are significantly higher, generally twice as high, in most areas. Areas where the differential is particularly marked are Armagh, Cookstown, Craigavon, Dungannon, Derry, and Newry and Mourne. On the other hand, the rates are marginally higher for Protestants in Castlereagh, and the differential in rates is lower in Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey and North Down. In the latter case the overall rate for both communities is notably low. The rates for females are higher for Catholics in 24 of the districts although the differential is not as great as for males. Carrickfergus and Castlereagh have higher Protestant rates.

The final analysis from the census reported here² relates to unemployment rates calculated by religion, sex and by age groups for the 26 District Council Areas. Once again the overwhelming characteristic is the higher rate for Catholics in most age groups in the 26 areas. For females, the picture is slightly less clear-cut. There are 3 areas where the Protestant rate is the same or higher for 16-25 year olds and, in general, the difference in rates is smaller than among males.

The problems inherent in the 1981 Census reduce the weight that can be given to these statistics. Nevertheless, as Compton (1985) points out, with an 80 per cent response rate to the religious question, the 1981 Census constitutes a large

Table 3: *Unemployment by District Council Areas, Sex and Religion (%)*

| <i>District</i> | <i>Males</i> | | <i>Females</i> | | <i>Total</i> | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| | <i>Catholic</i> | <i>Protestant</i> | <i>Catholic</i> | <i>Protestant</i> | <i>Catholic</i> | <i>Protestant</i> |
| Antrim | 24.5 | 10.5 | 20.4 | 9.6 | 19.8 | 10.2 |
| Ards | 21.2 | 9.8 | 12.0 | 9.8 | 17.8 | 9.8 |
| Armagh | 28.8 | 10.2 | 15.9 | 9.5 | 24.2 | 10.0 |
| Ballymena | 22.1 | 11.1 | 14.0 | 9.0 | 19.1 | 10.3 |
| Ballymoney | 30.0 | 16.4 | 13.7 | 9.1 | 24.6 | 13.9 |
| Banbridge | 23.1 | 11.0 | 18.9 | 9.8 | 21.6 | 10.6 |
| Belfast | 31.4 | 15.6 | 18.3 | 14.1 | 26.0 | 15.1 |
| Carrickfergus | 20.5 | 16.5 | 8.9 | 10.6 | 15.7 | 14.7 |
| Castlereagh | 8.6 | 9.2 | 6.9 | 16.4 | 7.8 | 10.8 |
| Coleraine | 27.5 | 16.4 | 13.9 | 10.1 | 22.6 | 14.1 |
| Cookstown | 43.3 | 14.4 | 26.6 | 12.6 | 38.0 | 13.8 |
| Craigavon | 30.4 | 11.0 | 19.5 | 9.6 | 26.2 | 10.4 |
| Down | 19.7 | 8.9 | 11.6 | 9.0 | 16.8 | 8.9 |
| Dungannon | 36.7 | 21.7 | 24.0 | 11.6 | 32.6 | 12.4 |
| Fermanagh | 30.1 | 11.1 | 17.1 | 9.6 | 26.2 | 10.6 |
| Larne | 34.0 | 13.1 | 13.7 | 10.9 | 25.2 | 12.4 |
| Limavady | 36.7 | 14.3 | 16.2 | 11.4 | 27.5 | 13.5 |
| Lisburn | 22.1 | 8.8 | 15.8 | 9.6 | 19.8 | 9.1 |
| Londonderry | 35.8 | 14.4 | 17.6 | 10.1 | 29.1 | 12.9 |
| Magherafelt | 31.9 | 16.5 | 17.5 | 11.0 | 27.1 | 14.7 |
| Moyle | 31.1 | 21.0 | 16.2 | 15.1 | 26.4 | 19.1 |
| Newry & Mourne | 35.5 | 14.8 | 20.0 | 12.0 | 30.3 | 13.8 |
| Newtownabbey | 18.1 | 11.8 | 11.5 | 8.9 | 15.4 | 10.7 |
| North Down | 11.1 | 7.1 | 9.2 | 7.0 | 10.3 | 7.0 |
| Omagh | 27.2 | 10.9 | 15.6 | 9.4 | 23.4 | 10.8 |
| Strabane | 39.0 | 21.9 | 20.4 | 13.6 | 32.8 | 19.4 |

Source: 1981 Population Census, unpublished data.

2. Details of these data are available from the authors.

“sample” (although of course there is the problem of bias due to non-enumeration). The basic trends revealed in the data are, however, reliable and, as we shall see, supported by the CHS data.

III UNEMPLOYMENT — CHS

The CHS religion report (Department of Finance and Personnel, 1985) includes a number of tables examining economic activity including unemployment.

Table 4: *Economic Activity of Protestants and Catholics (%)**

| | <i>Protestants</i> | | | <i>Catholics</i> | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------|------------------|----------------|--------------|
| | <i>Males</i> | <i>Females</i> | <i>Total</i> | <i>Males</i> | <i>Females</i> | <i>Total</i> |
| Unemployed | 15 | 11 | 13 | 35 | 17 | 28 |
| Working full-time | 82 | 55 | 71 | 62 | 55 | 59 |
| Working part-time | 3 | 35 | 16 | 3 | 28 | 13 |

*Based on economically active person 16+

Source: Extracted from Department of Finance and Personnel (1985)

The CHS data, collected up to two years after the census, records unemployment rates a little higher than those of the census, reflecting the continuing rise in unemployment during the early 1980s (Table 4). The data reveal, however, similar differentials to those of the census. Thus the Catholic male rate is 35 per cent while the Protestant rate is 15 per cent, and the Catholic female rate is 17 per cent compared with the Protestant female rate of 11 per cent. For both sexes, the Catholic rate is 28 per cent and the Protestant rate is 13 per cent. Generally, therefore, Catholic rates are twice as high as Protestant rates. Data on the length and frequency of unemployment in the previous two years reveal that 44 per cent of unemployed Catholics have been unemployed for over 2 years, compared with 33 per cent of unemployed Protestants. Thirty per cent of Catholics have been unemployed up to 1 year compared with 40 per cent of Protestants, thus demonstrating the comparatively recent experience and/or shorter duration of Protestant unemployment.

The CHS report reveals the extent of disadvantage of young Catholics in the labour market (Table 5).

For the 16–18 age group, unemployment is broadly similar for Catholics (18 per cent) and Protestant (17 per cent) but a significantly higher proportion of Protestants are working than Catholics. A large proportion of Catholics remain in school, while similar proportions of Protestants and Catholics enter government training schemes (GTS). For the 19–24 age group, however, where these

other options are no longer available, a large differential in employment status is revealed. Just under half of Catholics are working (46 per cent), compared with two-thirds of Protestants (64 per cent), while 32 per cent of Catholics are unemployed compared with 19 per cent of Protestants.

Table 5: *Employment Status of 16-24 year olds (%)*

| | Catholic | | | "Non-Catholic"* | | |
|-------------------------------|----------|-------|-------|-----------------|-------|-------|
| | 16-18 | 19-24 | Total | 16-18 | 19-24 | Total |
| Working | 22 | 46 | 37 | 33 | 64 | 52 |
| Unemployed | 18 | 32 | 27 | 17 | 19 | 18 |
| YTP/GTS | 7 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 0 | 3 |
| At school/college | 50 | 8 | 24 | 41 | 6 | 19 |
| Keeping house | 2 | 12 | 8 | 1 | 9 | 6 |
| Permanently unable to work | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Single parent | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |

*"Non-Catholic" includes all persons who stated a specific denomination other than Catholic and those who stated "no denomination"

Source: Extracted from Department of Finance and Personnel (1985).

Although the 1981 Population Census and to a limited degree the CHS pose problems for the calculation of definitive unemployment rates by religion, it may be concluded that the differential between unemployment rates among Protestants and Catholic is, within the context of higher overall levels of unemployment, both substantial and as wide as in 1971.

IV DISCUSSION

The publication of research documenting the unemployment experience of Protestants and Catholics has produced two very different sets of explanations. The first, advanced from a traditional nationalist perspective, views these patterns as a product of a discrimination inherent in the socio-political structure of Northern Ireland (e.g. Farrell, 1976; Graham, 1984). The second, in response, refers to a number of characteristics said to be intrinsic in the Catholic community as an alternative to the "discrimination" explanation. According to this view, factors such as the contrasting geographical location of Protestants and Catholics, the higher fertility rates and lower educational attainment of Catholics are the main explanations for higher Catholic unemployment rates, while "discrimination" is a minor and residual problem (Compton 1976; 1981). The ideological underpinnings of these positions result in exclusivist assignments of blame for disadvantage: either "the system" or "Catholics" themselves. We

now review these alternative explanations of the higher Catholic rate of unemployment.

(a) *Geographical Location*

A larger proportion of Catholics than Protestants live in areas of lower employment opportunities, particularly the west of the Province. It has been argued, therefore, that higher Catholic unemployment is predominantly a function of this distribution (Compton, 1981). However, such a view implies that Protestant and Catholic unemployment rates are similar in different areas. The data from both the 1971 and the 1981 Censuses, however, reveal Catholic rates to be higher than Protestant rates in all District Council Areas. Advocates of the importance of geographical location tend to neglect the role of the state in shaping the geography of job opportunities, while advocates of the "discrimination" explanation view industrial location policy, especially in the 1960s, as designed to benefit Protestant areas to the exclusion of Catholic areas. Most recent judgements tend not to go this far. Whyte (1983) suggests that policies for regional development in the period to 1968 seem to have been one of the less serious areas for complaint by Catholics while a recent review of industrial location policy (Bradley *et al.* (forthcoming)) points out that, while in the period up to 1975 a large proportion of new projects went to the more economically advanced areas, since then high unemployment areas have tended to benefit from location policies. However, it is not possible to rule out the role of industrial location policies in the past in maintaining high unemployment in peripheral and predominantly Catholic areas.

(b) *Demography*

The higher Catholic fertility rates and rates of population growth have prompted Compton (1981, p. 141) to suggest that:

the only effective way to guarantee improvement in the relative position of Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland is through the encouragement of fundamental change in certain of the innate features of that community. Acceptance of the desirability to (*sic*) bring Roman Catholic family size and rate of growth closer to the national and European average would be an important step to greater equality.

The importance of fertility differences in accounting for higher Catholic unemployment can be queried on several grounds. First, analysis of the 1911 Census data suggests that Catholic socio-economic disadvantage was already evident at a time when Catholic and Protestant fertility rates were similar (Cormack and Rooney, 1984). Secondly, and most importantly, this interpretation ignores labour market processes. Since it is asserted that there is little or no discrimination, the processes of entering the labour market and securing

advancement within it are assumed to be fair. The roles of exclusion, segregation and unfair hiring practices are ignored.³ Thirdly, one of the asserted effects of larger families of Catholics is through the operation of the "poverty trap", which provides a greater incentive for those with large families (Catholics) to stay unemployed rather than to take a low-paid job. However, a study of 3,500 males, joining the unemployment register, followed over the succeeding year found little evidence of this disincentive effect, either in general or among those with large families, Protestants or Catholics (Miller and Osborne, 1983). Fourthly, although it is argued that the higher growth rate of the Catholic population results in a larger proportion of Catholic entrants to the economically active Catholic population than is the case for Protestants, this fails to take account of the demographic structure of the labour market as whole, including the respective sizes of the retiring cohorts (see Eversley, forthcoming, for a full assessment of these issues). Nor is it apparent why, if full equality of opportunity prevailed in the labour market and all other things were equal, the proportion of entrants gaining employment should not be proportional to the religious composition of those entrants. Finally, the most recent evidence suggests that the fertility differentials between Protestants and Catholics are declining quite markedly (Compton *et al.*, 1985). Thus, the significance of demographic factors in accounting for higher Catholic unemployment has clearly been over-emphasised.

(c) *Educational Attainment*

There are differences in the educational attainment of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. The most recent evidence suggests that a smaller proportion of adult Catholics possess any educational qualification: 39 per cent of Catholics compared to 46 per cent of Protestants (Department of Finance and Personnel, 1985). Amongst school leavers, fewer Catholics gain GCE "O" or "A" levels than Protestants, and the subjects of their passes are skewed towards the Arts and Humanities (Osborne, 1985). However, current differences between religious groups in educational attainment in the adult population reflect the range of opportunities available to them in Northern Ireland and the level of migration over the past fifty years. Moreover, quite possibly a generation ago jobs and promotions were less closely related to qualifications than they are now. The crucial question is the extent to which contemporary school leavers are able to translate examination attainment into job access. In the Northern Ireland context there has been no research fully evaluating the "tightening bond" between examinations and job access, similar to that reported for

3. See Miller and Osborne, (1983) for a consideration of some labour market practices in relation to unemployment in Northern Ireland and Carline *et al.* (1985) for a general review of labour market practices and discrimination in employment.

example, in Scotland (Gray *et al.*, 1983). Until that research is undertaken this question cannot be answered.

(d) *Discrimination*

The extent and significance of job discrimination in the Northern Ireland labour market remains the area of major disputation. Part of the disagreement stems from problems of definition. Discrimination in terms of direct individual mistreatment needs to be differentiated from indirect discrimination where disadvantage results from actions or practices which are not of themselves necessarily designed to be biased. Undoubtedly, discrimination, both direct and indirect, exists in contemporary Northern Ireland. However, most assessments suggest that the volume of direct discrimination is falling and is considerably lower than that which existed in Northern Ireland during most of its history (Whyte, 1983). Indirect discrimination, however, remains a substantial issue. The widespread use of informal recruitment practices even in the case of large firms with apparently well developed personnel functions (e.g., Shorts) help perpetuate longstanding employment patterns. A commitment to providing equality of opportunity by employers, needs to be followed by firm action to ensure change. The adoption of major new procedures and the monitoring of results by the Northern Ireland Civil Service is a good example of what is required. Many employers, in the private sector in particular but also including some in the public sector, have yet to take such vigorous action. Discrimination, particularly indirect discrimination, would appear to continue to contribute to unemployment differentials.

Since 1976, the Fair Employment Agency has been the main instrument of public policy in Northern Ireland to eliminate religious discrimination and secure equality of opportunity in employment. Almost ten years after its establishment, the Northern Ireland Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights has announced its intention to review the effectiveness of policy in this area. Undoubtedly the persistence and scale of the differential experience of unemployment between Protestants and Catholics, as outlined in this paper, provides evidence of the substantial task remaining to secure greater equality.

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