

# *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*

---

*Volume 62, Issue 3*

2009

*Article 17*

---

## Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition. Volume Two: Work and Welfare.

Susan Carter*	Scott Gartner†	Michael Haines‡
Alan Olmstead**	Richard Sutch††	Gavin Wright‡‡

\*,  
†,  
‡,  
\*\*,  
††,  
‡‡,

and therefore not in a position to join conventional workplace-based unions. As the author argues, however, “while one sector of the working class was indeed defeated” by the neoliberal onslaught of the 1980s,

the destruction was not as complete as feared by the most pessimistic. What has happened is that new kinds of trade union structures have emerged ... especially those of the peasants and informal sector workers in the cities. (p. 252)

Workers are no longer concentrated in large workplaces such as mines and factories, but are geographically dispersed in different work sites. Men and women of all ages work as vendors in market stalls, laborers in small workshops (which are often subcontracted by formal enterprises), casual laborers in the construction and building trades (mostly men), and domestic servants in upper- and middle-class people’s homes (mostly women).

The first part of the book introduces the residents of Rosas Pampa, a neighborhood in El Alto in which Lazar conducted extensive fieldwork between 1997 and 2004. The author describes not only their economic lives and physical living conditions but also the citizenship norms they have developed, their sense of identity, and their collective consciousness. The second part examines the relationship between the local state and citizens, focusing on a case study of fish vendors affiliated with the Federation of Street Traders of El Alto. As Lazar explains, the privatization agenda of the municipal government creates conflict with trade unions, but the relationship between them is mutually dependent since “the state needs the unions to regulate economic activity, and the unions need the state to confer legitimacy” (p. 207).

Lazar offers a useful corrective to the false dichotomy between the “trade union form” and the “communitarian form.” Some Bolivian intellectuals view these as distinct cultural traditions, with the trade union model being a western imposition and the communitarian model an “authentic” political expression (p. 174). While such a distinction may accurately describe the history of trade unionism in some indigenous communities in northern Potosí, Lazar argues that it is not true in the northern *altiplano* region (where El Alto is located), where “[indigenous] communities tended to appropriate the trade union form in a kind of political syncretism.” Indeed, as has been noted by other scholars, such as Sinclair Thomson and Forrest Hylton in *Revolutionary Horizons* (Verso, 2007), the left-indigenous party that is currently in power is another example of the powerful political

organizations that are based on a mixture of such traditions.

The book provides very thick descriptions of the day-to-day life of the leaders of informal trade unions in contemporary El Alto, but it suffers from a historical myopia that leads the author to make some exaggerated claims. Lazar suggests, for example, that organizations of street traders are “new” (p. 252). The ample literature on the rich history of trade unionism in Bolivia suggests otherwise. If anything, informal workers’ organizations are less powerful today than they were in the early part of the twentieth century, when anarchist organizations such as the Federation of Women Workers, which grouped together domestic workers, market vendors, and cooks, held sway. (See, for example, Ineke Dibbits’s 1986 work, *Polleras libertarias: Federación obrera femenina, 1927–1964*.) Nonetheless, *El Alto, Rebel City* will be of interest to readers seeking to learn more about the internal dynamics of workers’ organizations in the informal economy.

Susan Spronk

Assistant Professor  
School of International Development  
and Global Studies  
University of Ottawa

## Research Methods and Information Sources

*Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition. Volume Two: Work and Welfare.* Edited by Susan Carter, Scott Gartner, Michael Haines, Alan Olmstead, Richard Sutch, and Gavin Wright. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 934, xiv pp. ISBN 0-521-58540-6, \$825 (for the entire five-volume set, hardbound).

The Millennial Edition of *Historical Statistics of the United States* has been long in the making, but it is well worth the wait. This is the fourth edition of *Historical Statistics*, the previous three having been published by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The latest “Bicentennial” edition, published in 1975, included 1,200 pages in two volumes, with about 200 pages devoted to work and welfare. The Millennial edition includes five volumes, with volume 2 (934 pages) devoted entirely to work and welfare. This review will discuss only volume 2, although many readers of the *ILR Review* also will be interested in the other volumes, covering Population (volume 1), Economic Structure and Performance (volume 3), Economic Sectors

(volume 4), and Governance and International Relations (volume 5).

The volume is divided into seven sections: Labor; Slavery; Education; Health; Economic Inequality and Poverty; Social Insurance and Public Assistance; and Nonprofit, Voluntary, and Religious Entities. Each section contains one or more introductory essays providing background information for the tables that follow. These essays, which vary in length from 5 to 27 pages, are written by the section's editors or associate editors. Each provides a useful introduction to the topic covered, as well as a list of references for those who wish to delve more deeply into the subject. Some of the volume's 432 tables have been reproduced from earlier editions of *Historical Statistics*, although "users should be aware that some data from these editions have subsequently been revised" (p. xi). However, a large share of the data series reported are new, in the sense that they are from research done after 1975.

The first section, on Labor (classified as Ba), is by far the largest in the volume. It contains seven essays and 178 tables, covering the work force, employment and unemployment, occupations, wages, hours and working conditions, trade unions, and household production. The seven essays present an excellent introduction to the economic history of American labor. I found three essays particularly useful: Susan Carter's "Labor Force" (a lengthy piece), Robert Margo's "Wages and Wage Inequality," and William Sundstrom's "Hours and Working Conditions." It is impossible to summarize the contents of the tables, which present an immense amount of information. For example, there are 32 tables of occupational data, filling 121 pages. These present detailed occupations data tabulated from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS). Table Ba1159-1395 (p. 144) shows that in 1950 there were more than twice as many economists as psychologists, while by 1990 there were 29% more psychologists than economists. This reviewer, for one, finds this trend troubling. There is much fascinating information contained in these tables, but space constraints limit me to one more example. The labor force participation rate for white men declined from 91.7% in 1880 to 76.0% in 1990, while the corresponding rate for white women rose from 13.4% to 57.1% over the same period (Table Ba417-424, p. 80). Married women of all races with children under age 6 had a labor force participation rate of 4.7% in 1880, compared to 59.7% in 1990 (Table Ba425-469, p. 81).

The brief second section (classified as Bb), on Slavery, contains tables on slave populations and number of slaveholding families by state, as well

as slave prices. Section three (Bc), on Education, includes an excellent introduction by Claudia Goldin and tables on trends in educational attainment, school enrollments and expenditures, and earnings by years of school completed. Section four (Bd), on Health, contains tables on health expenditures and extent of health insurance coverage, as well as incidence of disease, per capita consumption of nutrients, and physical well-being.

The following section (Be), on Economic Inequality and Poverty, includes an essay on the distribution of income and wealth by Peter Lindert, and a quite detailed essay on the measurement and extent of poverty by Linda Barrington and Gordon Fisher. The latter essay contains two useful tables presenting measures of poverty lines from 1870 to 1962 (Table Be-G) and estimates of poverty rates from 1900 to 1962 (Table Be-H). These show how the measurement of poverty influences the estimated number of persons living in poverty. For example, economist Robert Lampman estimated the number of persons living in poverty at 32.2 million in 1957 and 33.0 million in 1961, while Michael Harrington in *The Other American* estimated that around 50 million persons were living in poverty in 1959 (Table Be-H, pp. 642-43).

Section Bf, on Social Insurance and Public Assistance, contains essays on public assistance up to the 1920s by Stephen Ziliak and Joan Hannon, and on social welfare from 1929 to the present by Price Fishback and Melissa Thomasson. The accompanying tables provide information on public social welfare programs and expenditures, as well as on private employee benefit plans and expenditures. Fishback and Thomasson show in their essay that public social welfare spending increased from about 4% of GDP in 1929 to nearly 21% in 1993 (p. 702). Finally, Section Bg examines non-profit, voluntary, and religious organizations, and philanthropic and charitable giving.

The volume's 432 tables provide a wealth of information on work and welfare. However, some data series that one would expect to find here are instead found in other volumes, so users will need to have access to the entire five-volume set. Immigrants were and are an important part of the work force, but data on the occupations of immigrants at time of arrival in the United States are contained in volume 1 (section Ad) rather than in this volume. The wage series presented in section Ba are all in nominal terms. To examine trends in workers' purchasing power, it is necessary to deflate the nominal wage data in this volume using cost of living data presented in volume 3 (section Cc).

One omission warrants mention. Table Ba470-477 contains the unemployment series for 1890-

1990 constructed in 1992 by David Weir. It does not contain the important series for 1890–1939 constructed earlier by Stanley Lebergott and by Christina Romer. Susan Carter, in her essay on the labor force, discusses the Lebergott and Romer series (pp. 30–31), but only the Weir series is presented. I would have preferred having all three series included. Lebergott's unemployment estimates for the 1930s differ significantly from Weir's because Lebergott considers "emergency workers" on federal relief programs such as the WPA to be unemployed, while Weir considers such workers to be employed. As a result, Weir's estimated unemployment rates for 1933 to 1941 are much lower than Lebergott's.

The editors and contributors, along with Cambridge University Press, are to be applauded for putting together an outstanding resource that far surpasses earlier editions. All readers of the *ILR Review* will find this volume of interest, and many will find it to be indispensable for their research. The five-volume set is quite expensive, and I suspect that few readers will choose to purchase it, but they should immediately request that their university and public libraries obtain a set as well as the online edition.

*George R. Boyer*

Professor of Labor Economics  
ILR School  
Cornell University