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Moving target: N.C.’s unemployment rate

North Carolina Commerce Secretary Sharon Decker said recently that one of the reasons unemployment is high in the state remains stubbornly high is that unemployed people are moving here. A headline characterized that as a claim that North Carolina is attracting unemployed people. That’s not quite what Decker said, but it’s close.

Is that a controversial thing to say? Often statements like this devolve into arguments over whether people from other states are moving here for the unemployment benefits. But this past year, the General Assembly reduced those benefits, both in terms of dollars and duration. Since July, North Carolina is no longer especially generous with its unemployment benefits.

Beyond that, empirical economic research reveals little evidence that people actually move to obtain better unemployment benefits. There is some indication that improving benefits can discourage unemployed people from moving away, but that’s a different issue.

Overall, Americans move significantly less than they used to. According to Census Bureau data, the rate of moving has fallen by nearly half since the mid-1980s, to just 12 percent in 2012. The rate hit an all-time low of 11.6 percent in 2011. So much for hard times forcing people to hit the road. When the recession got bad in North Carolina a few years ago, we didn’t suddenly see people moving to low-unemployment states like North Dakota or Nebraska.

Two-thirds of all moves are within the same county, and about a fifth are within the same state. Only about 14 percent of all moves are from state to state, and that has trended little in either direction over time. Thirty years ago, interstate moves accounted for 17 percent of all moves.

Since the late 1990s, the Census Bureau has asked movers why they moved. Outliers, that be careful with the data, because job-related moves include such motivations as wanting a shorter commute. “New job or job transfer” has consistently accounted for about one-tenth of all moves. Just about 2 percent of movers say they moved to look for work or because they lost a job, though that figure rose as high as 2.7 percent early in the last recession. These data apply to all categories of moves, though moving to look for work is most likely to be an interstate move.

The biggest reason for moving appears to be housing. Not surprisingly, the number of movers looking for cheaper housing or dealing with evictions and foreclosures rose during the last recession.

Is it possible that some of the people coming to North Carolina are here to look for work? Sure, but that’s not a bad thing. After all, new residents are not just suppliers of labor, i.e. workers. They’re also demanders of labor, through their purchases. If more people buy groceries, then more people are needed to stock the shelves, and so on.

The main question is why North Carolina’s unemployment rate is still so high. It’s true that we face structural challenges related to worker skills and the ongoing changes in the state’s manufacturing sector. But those factors were with us before the recession and they’ll be with us when this depression finally ends. They’re not why the rate has fallen slowly.

Unemployment here has fallen in approximate lock step with the rest of the country. In fact, the recovery has exhibited very little variation across states. What’s happening here is a microcosm of what’s happening everywhere in the U.S. economy. People moving in are not slowing down North Carolina’s recovery.

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