

B) Unemployment Trends

According to the evidence, both statistical and personal, which witnesses supplied to the Committee, labour market difficulties of older workers raise serious concerns about Canada's success in living up to the anti-discrimination commitments and other human rights standards which it has already affirmed repeatedly in principle.

The problem of older worker unemployment has emerged with particular clarity in the years following the 1982 recession, during which the special vulnerability of older workers to the effects of economic restructuring, technological change, corporate rationalization and plant closure was apparent in unemployment data.

Unemployment among workers aged 45-64 rose, between 1981 and 1984, from 4.5% to 7.9% before declining to 6.8% in 1986, and to 6.6% in March 1988.⁸ While the worsening of unemployment during the recession indicated by this data is no worse than that for other groups, the data conceal some substantial variations among the differing groups of older workers. In 1986, for example, unemployment for workers aged 55-64 stood at 7.3%, an increase from the 6.9% who were unemployed in the depths of the recession in 1982.⁹ This situation contrasts with the employment pattern of those in the labour force aged 25-54, for whom unemployment rates fell from 8.8% to 8.2% between 1982 and 1986. Officials from Labour Canada, commenting on the Statistics Canada study from which these data are drawn, noted that while unemployment rates remain relatively low for older workers, their relative advantage vis-à-vis the rest of the labour force had diminished, by 1986, to about half the size of the 50% differential applying in 1982.

Unemployment figures, although they suggest that many older workers may not be participating in the benefits which economic recovery has conferred upon other Canadians, tell only one part of the story. A dynamic labour market, for example, may yield relatively high unemployment rates during any given period, as workers leave positions and search for more desirable positions. Long-term unemployment, in contrast, is much less likely to be voluntary and is much more likely to reflect serious privation on the part of the unemployed.