

NATIONAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: ECONOMY



Jerome H. Powell, chair of the Federal Reserve and one of the world's top economic leaders, has spent much of 2018 telling people that the U.S. economy is strong and almost "too good to be true." But last week, he stressed a different message — not everyone has been lifted by faster growth.

"The benefits of this strong economy and sound financial system have not reached all Americans," Powell said in Dec. 3 speech. "The aggregate statistics tend to mask important disparities by income, race and geography.

He repeated that message in a Dec. 6 speech. "While the economy is strong overall, we recognize that some communities have yet to feel the full benefits of the ongoing expansion," he said.

The reality is that in a year when unemployment hit the [lowest level in almost 50 years](#), with inflation staying low and [growth popping](#) after the tax cuts, a surprising number of red flags remain in the economy, especially compared with the last period of strong economic growth, in 1999-2000.

It's a reminder, many experts say, that the U.S. economy has deep structural problems that are far from being cured.

Four in 10 adults still say they don't have enough savings to cover a \$400 emergency expense, according to the latest Federal Reserve [report](#) on the economic well-being of Americans. While that is an improvement over 2013, when half of Americans said they could not cover a \$400 expense, it remains elevated at a time when unemployment is so low and [wages are rising](#).

A substantial number of Americans — 45 percent — still rate the current economy as “only fair” or “poor,” according to a Gallup poll in November. Though that is better than in recent years, it is still far higher than November 2000, when only 29 percent of Americans gave the economy a poor grade.

Despite the abundance of “We’re hiring!” signs across the country, an alarming number of men in their prime working years are not employed or looking for work. **The labor force participation rate for men ages 25 to 54 is 89 percent,** which is below the pre-recession level (90.6 percent in November 2007) and well below what the rate was in 2000, when nearly 92 percent of men of prime age had jobs or were actively searching for work.

In another telling sign, the number of **dollar stores has surged from 20,000 to 30,000 locations since 2011,** according to a [report](#) by Marie Donahue and Stacy Mitchell of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. These stores are growing rapidly in urban black neighborhoods and rural America, Donahue and Mitchell found, two parts of the country whose residents are starting to look like a “permanent underclass.”

Arguably the brightest spot in the U.S. economy [is hiring](#). Companies continue to add workers at a rapid rate, yet even in the labor statistics, there is troubling data.

About 4.8 million Americans who want full-time employment are stuck in part-time jobs, according to the Labor Department. That is still above the pre-recession level and, even more alarming, has jumped by 423,000 since August.

Wages in several key sectors of the economy are also lagging behind, even at a time when employers say they can’t find enough people to hire and are offering more money. Average weekly pay, adjusted for inflation, fell slightly in the past year for transportation jobs and administrative and support jobs, according to Labor Department data. Average weekly wages in the hotel and food industries barely grew once inflation is factored in. These are some of the most common jobs for working-class Americans, who do not have college degrees and make about \$30,000 to \$69,000 for a household of three.

Suicide rates are so high that life expectancy is [declining](#) in the United States. On average, 129 suicides occur a day, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the suicide rate continues to climb, especially among middle-aged men. In every state but Nevada, suicide rates have increased since 1999.

Most of these problems are structural, not cyclical, and will not be reversed easily. Many of these issues emerged shortly after 2000, although they accelerated downward during the Great Recession. They are unlikely to be cured by faster growth alone, especially if that stronger growth lasts only for a year or two, as many economists now expect, and then retreats to around 2 percent annual growth in 2020 — or even into a recession.

Powell isn’t the only one reminding the country that deep problems remain, even as the rosy statistics pour in. Conservative scholar Oren Cass, a former adviser to Mitt Romney, is out with a book, “The Once and Future Worker: A Vision for the Renewal of Work in America,” that is getting a lot of attention. He argues even more forcefully that [fixing many of these problems is the key to a stronger long-term economy and a better society](#), but it will take more than better GDP growth to get there.

“While growth is necessary to a prosperous society, it is not sufficient,” Cass wrote. “Not all growth is equally beneficial, and the policy choices that yield the most immediate short-term growth don’t necessarily prepare the ground for sustained economic and social progress.”

A year ago, some Republican lawmakers made the assertion during the tax debate that we just need to get growth going and everything else will fall into place. A year later, it is apparent that this is not fully the case.

Ideas are starting to come to the fore to address the deeper structural issues. The Trump administration has aggressively [pushed apprenticeships](#), although it has also sought [deep cuts](#) in government-funded retraining programs. On the left, progressives have crafted legislation to raise the minimum wage and [enact a “job guarantee,”](#) although questions remain about how to fund it.

This week Trump signed an executive order creating the White House Opportunity and Revitalization Council, which is supposed to focus on aiding “impoverished neighborhoods that have been ignored by Washington in years past.” Cass has joined a bipartisan group of policy wonks calling for some sort of wage subsidy, and there has been [bipartisan work in Congress to combat the opioid crisis](#). Efforts are building to try to help, but they remain modest, given the gravity of the problems the nation faces.

As the country heads into 2019 and 2020, the debate remains: What else can be done to help those left behind?

HOUSEHOLD		DATA				
Table A-5. Employment status of the civilian population 18 years and over by veteran status, period of service, and sex, not seasonally adjusted						
[Numbers in thousands]						
Employment status, veteran status, and period of service	Total		Men		Women	
	Nov 2017	Nov 2018	Nov 2017	Nov 2018	Nov 2017	Nov 2018
Gulf War-era II veterans						
Unemployed	155	120	123	98	33	22
Unemployment rate	4.6	3.4	4.3	3.3	6.6	4.1

National unemployment rate is 3.4 percent (November 2018). Gulf War II veterans unemployment rate is 3.4 percent.ⁱ Currently, the unemployment rate for Gulf War II women veterans is 4.1 percent (up from 2.7 percent in October).

TOPIC 2: MEETINGS

On Wednesday, December 12, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division spoke with Barrett Bogue, former Vice President of Communications for Student Veterans of America who has now gone on to find his own PR Firm Evocati. Barrett shared a proposal he has developed for commemorating the 75th anniversary of the World War 2 GI Bill in June 2019.

On Wednesday, December 12, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with William Attig, Executive Director of the AFL-CIO's Union Veterans Council. William shared his plans for rallying organized labor leaders towards identifying credentialing barriers facing entry, and expressed interest in supporting The American Legion's credentialing initiatives.

On Thursday, December 13, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division met with the Enlisted Association of the National Guard to discuss their latest initiative on promoting military transfer credit reciprocity. They have recently started a the Veteran Education Project, and asked for VE&E input on their vision and objectives.

On Thursday, December 13, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division spoke with the Grants Manager & Legal Counsel for the Laura and John Arnold Foundation (LJAF) about a proposed grant they would like to give to The American Legion in the amount of \$500,000. LJAF would like to support American Legion's education advocacy efforts with unrestricted operating funds.

On Friday December 14, the Veterans Employment & Education Division will attend the Transition Trucking: Driving for Excellence Awards at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. This event is hosted by FASTPORT a veteran employment software company.

On Friday, December 14, the National Veterans Employment & Education Division attended the VSO/DOL monthly breakfast meeting. DOL provided an update on their employment programs that support transitioning service members, veterans and military spouses and VE&E staff shared their plans for a March military spouse credentialing roundtable.

On Saturday December 15, the Veterans Employment & Education Division will attend the Fairfax NAACP Veteran and Minority Business Expo.

TOPIC 3: EMPLOYMENT

This factsheet provides data on employment rates for veterans with disabilities, which can be used to advocate for increased employment opportunities for veterans with disabilities.

Disability measurements and veterans: There are two different measurements of disability for veterans in the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS):

ACS disability: A difficulty with one or more of the following: hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care and independent living.ⁱ Please note that an ACS disability may or may not be acquired during military service.

Service-connected (SC) disability: A disease or injury determined to have occurred during military service. The Veterans' Administration assigns a disability rating as a percentage from 0% -100% disabled.

Note: These two measures might not fully capture all veterans' disabilities. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) and/or depression are called the "signature" disabilities because these impairments are so common among returning veterans. Because of the questions asked on the survey, some veterans with the signature disabilities might not have indicated they had disabilities. Also, many veterans with these impairments might not have been diagnosed. They may have acquired their disabilities at a time when the symptoms displayed were not thought to be related to a disability or they may not yet recognize that they have a disability. It is estimated that the number of OEF/OIF veterans with one or more of the signature disabilities is about 30%.

Key statistics on employment rate for veterans with disabilities: Nearly a third (29.6%, 3.5 million) of the 12 million veterans ages 21-64 report having a disability:

12.4% (1,495,000) report only a SC disability

10.5% report an ACS disability only

6.7% report both an ACS and a SC disability

The employment rate of veterans with disabilities is significantly lower than that of veterans without disabilities. Only about a third of veterans who report both an ACS and SC disability (32%) and only 37% of those reporting only an ACS disability are employed, compared with over three-quarters of veterans without disabilities. As a comparison, the overall employment rate of the civilian population is 71%.

69% of veterans with only a SC disability are employed, a number only eight percent lower than for those with no disability. This number includes veterans across a wide age span. Other data sets indicate the unemployment rate among younger, recently-returned veterans is much higher than the civilian population.^{vi} This might indicate that veterans do over time tend to heal or cope with their SC disabilities in ways that enable them to return to work.

Key statistics on employment rate for veterans with a service-connected (SC) disability rating:

The SC disability rating is issued by the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs based on the percent an injury or illness acquired as a result of service impacts the veteran's lifetime earning capacity. This rating is given in ten percent increments, with 0% indicating a disability that does not impact earning capacity and 100% indicating a severe disability that renders the veteran totally unable to work.

35.1% of veterans with a SC disability have a disability rating of 50% or higher (410,700). Veterans with a SC disability rating of 50% or higher have significantly lower rates of employment than those with ratings of 0 to 40%. Only 25% of the 131,900 veterans with a SC rating of 70% or higher are employed.

Several laws protect the employment rights of veterans with disabilities. Like all Americans with disabilities, they are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In addition, the United Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) requires the reinstatement of returning veterans to the same civilian job they left when deployed. Veterans with disabilities (called “Special Disabled Veterans”) are covered under the new rules of the Vietnam Era Veterans’ Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRAA). Veterans with and without disabilities may also be eligible for hiring preferences. Veterans included in these estimates could have served as long ago as the Vietnam era or as recently as the Gulf War era II.

Gulf War Era II veterans have a higher prevalence of the “signature disabilities” of the Gulf War (PTSD, TBI and/or depression). An estimated 30% of recently returned veterans screen positive for one or more of these impairments. For these recently returned veterans, delays and barriers in accessing treatment could significantly impact employment outcomes.

A survey of veterans with both ACS and SC disabilities found that:
57% feared they would be discriminated against in hiring because of their disabilities.
36% intended to disclose their disabilities to an employer.
27% intended to request an accommodation when employed.

A survey of employers found that many employers:

- Struggle with accommodating veterans with the signature disabilities of PTSD, TBI and depression.
- Are confused about resources related to recruiting or accommodating veterans with disabilities and therefore are not using these effectively.

TOPIC 4: VETERAN HOMELESSNESS



A homeless veteran in Blue Springs recently received the help of his community after a post about him circulated around the Blue Springs Community Facebook page.

Steve Arnold isn't a stranger to many in Blue Springs. He is seen almost every day walking along Woods Chapel Road helping pick up trash and cigarette butts at several convenience stores.

"The main reason why I pick up butts or trash around here is it was God who told me since I was hanging around here so much he told me to make myself useful," Arnold said. "I'm here about every day and I just come down around 9 or 930 and then I hang around and at 12 noon I go up to Little General so I can call my daughter every day."

Steve said he's been homeless for over 10 years and he lives in a tent a few hundred yards from the highway. Steve didn't know it but he slowly caught the attention of Sella Minker, a QuikTrip manager, who began to notice Steve was unlike most homeless people that come into her store.

"I always caught Steve outside picking up trash and I told him to stop but he said he had nothing else to do," Minker said. "He's very quiet so it took a while for us to get to know him before we really started to talk. He's so humble, doesn't make a scene, he is quiet, he will come in and say hi, tell us he's leaving and that he'll be back in a little bit."

Despite her efforts, Steve insisted on helping around the store.

"One thing picking up these butts is I will pick up trash on the road a lot of times because I figure if I'm going to be going by a trash can I might as well pick it up rather than complain about it. Trying to get it in the trash can," Arnold said.

Their friendship grew over time and as the holidays approached knowledge of Steve and his story began to expand across the town thanks to a post Minker made on the community's Facebook page.

"I got on the Blue Springs Community Page and people started commenting about how Steve doing, asking for updates, and I commented on there and people started asking me what he needed. I asked him some question, gave out some info." Minker said. "People started bringing up bags of clothes, would help him out with food, money for food, and say if he needs anything to let them know, message them. It's been really great to see this community come together."

It was a gesture Steve said helped remind him of the kindness that's in the hearts of his neighbors and now friends.

"I'm very appreciative. I thank them always. I do see the love of Christ in many of them." Steve said, "It was just very gracious. Very grateful to all of them. I just was realizing this area has a lot of decent people in it, a very good neighborhood around here."

TOPIC 5: CAREER FAIRS

This week, work continued on The American Legion's upcoming hiring events to be staged in Oklahoma (OK), Fredericksburg (VA), Shaw AFB (SC), Wright Patterson AFB (OH), Washington Wizards (DC), Joint Base Andrews (MD), Lexington Park (MD), and Fort Bliss (TX).

The mission of The American Legion's National Veterans Employment & Education Commission is to take actions that affect the economic well-being of veterans, including issues relating to veterans' education, employment, home loans, vocational rehabilitation, homelessness, and small business.

TOPIC 6: SMALL BUSINESS

Finding veteran-owned local businesses will soon be easier. The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs is offering a sticker to qualifying veteran-owned businesses. Veteran-owned businesses that are registered with the state, and in good standing, can display the logo in their place of business.

The stickers will be released as part of their annual program that sets aside \$300 million in state contracts that only veteran-owned businesses can bid on, Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs spokesman Dave MacDonna said "We want to raise public awareness about small businesses that are veteran-owned or large businesses that are veteran-owned."

There are many small business owners across the state and this is a way for consumers to have confidence that they're spending their money with one. MacDonna said "We want the consumer to realize that they are a trusted and valuable part of the community."

The program will run in concurrence to the state's annual Veterans' Business program, which gives qualified veteran-owned businesses in the state access to more than \$300 million in contracts.

For information about the program, visit www2.illinois.gov/cms/business. See the new proposed logos below.



TOPIC 7: EDUCATION

One of the nation's largest for-profit college chains announced Wednesday that it was abruptly closing in dozens of [locations nationwide](#), after its accrediting agency suspended approval. Birmingham, Alabama-based Education Corp. of America said it was closing schools operating as Virginia College, Brightwood College, Brightwood Career Institute, Ecotech Institute and Golf Academy of America in more than 70 locations in 21 states. The company said in October that it had more than 20,000 students, although more recent documents indicate the number may be closer to 15,000.

ECA schools enrolled about 4,000 students using the Post-9/11 GI Bill in fiscal 2017, the latest year for which federal data is available. A [Military Times analysis](#) of Department of Veterans Affairs data shows more than \$41 million went to pay for the education of veterans at these schools. The company, backed by investors including private equity firm Willis Stein & Partners of Chicago, is the latest in a series of for-profit colleges to close after allegations that they were loading students up with debt while not providing them with marketable skills. In some cases, students told local news outlets Wednesday that operations ceased immediately, while in other cases students said they were told to return for meetings later.

ECA spokeswoman Diane Worthington said that at most locations, Friday would be the last day of classes, and students would get academic credit for this term. One ECA institution, New England College of Business, is not closing. The company mostly offers professional certificates in subjects like cosmetology, culinary arts and medical and dental assisting. In a letter to students, ECA CEO Stuart Reed said the company's impending loss of accreditation, along with added requirements from the U.S. Department of Education, made the company unable to raise more money to operate the schools while it sought to reorganize. "It is with extreme regret that this series of recent circumstances has forced us to discontinue the operation of our schools," Reed wrote.

In October, the company sued the U.S. Education Department seeking to maintain its federal funding, which was in jeopardy over its dire financial situation. A judge later [dismissed](#) the suit.

Court documents filed by the company said its lagging revenue left it unable to make payments on its debt or rental fees, and that it faced eviction at several campuses. ECA estimated it owed \$66 million at the time. Even before then, ECA was planning to shutter 26 campuses to cut costs. Another federal judge in Georgia later granted a bankruptcy-like receivership meant to protect the company from creditors. ECA largely blamed falling enrollment on an upswing in the economy, which left fewer adults heading to school for job skills, and on increased federal regulation of the for-profit college industry. The sudden closure drew criticism from the U.S. Education Department, which said it had been working with the company to arrange a shut-down that gave students time to transfer. "Instead of taking the next few months to close in an orderly fashion, ECA took the easy way out and left 19,000 students scrambling to find a way to finish the education program they started," Liz Hill, an Education Department spokeswoman, said in a statement.

Like the recently shuttered Corinthian Colleges and ITT Technical Institute chains, Education Corporation of America was overseen by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, one of the watchdog groups the federal government appoints to ensure colleges offer a quality education. The council, known as ACICS, wrote a Tuesday letter to Reed saying it was suspending accreditation immediately at all the institutions, citing “rapidly deteriorating financial conditions,” a failure to make required payments to the council and a wide variety of academic concerns. ACICS was shut down by the Obama administration over allegations of lax oversight, but was later reinstated on Nov. 21 by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, who found it was “substantially in compliance” with federal standards.

Virginia Rep. Bobby Scott, the top Democrat on the House Education and the Workforce Committee, urged DeVos to rethink her decision on ACICS after the Wednesday closure. “We have repeatedly warned about the risks low-quality, for-profit education companies and irresponsible accreditors pose to students and taxpayers across the country,” Scott said in a statement. “Today’s announcement is another painful reminder of those risks.” Corinthian and ITT Tech educated thousands of student veterans when they closed in 2015 and 2016, respectively, and became the impetus for a provision in the Forever GI Bill law passed last year that [restores GI Bill benefits](#) to victims of abrupt school closures.

In many cases, students and teachers were in class when they got the news about the ECA closures Wednesday. Melissa Zavala, who was studying to be a medical assistant at a San Antonio, Texas, campus of Brightwood, told [KSAT-TV](#) students were taken to an auditorium. “The director was there and she was like, ‘I have bad news. The school is closing down,’” Zavala said. “Everyone was like, ‘What about our student loans? We’re almost done.’” Zavala said campus officials couldn’t provide additional information and told them to look online for other colleges they could attend. “They took our money, they shut the school down and that’s it for us,” Zavala said. Toby Merrill, who directs the [Project on Predatory Student Lending at Harvard Law School](#), said students can ask the U.S. Department of Education to cancel loans if a school closes. However, that opportunity doesn’t apply if a student transfers credits or if a school hires a successor to offer students classes to complete their programs.

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ⁱ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t05.htm>