

Viet Vet Job Gains Reversed

'73 Year-End Rise Wiped Out By Drop in '74

By Tim O'Brien
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Unemployment among veterans of the Vietnam era shot up dramatically during the first three months of 1974, virtually wiping out what President Nixon recently called the "remarkable success story" of 1973.

A report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, covering the first quarter of 1974, finds that joblessness among Vietnam-era veterans is "back up to year-ago levels, losing the decided over-the-year improvement registered in the fourth quarter of 1973."

In the overall 20-to-34 age bracket, the first-quarter unemployment rates jumped 125 per cent for non-white vets and 52 per cent for white veterans.

Only last January, the President told Congress that his administration's job placement efforts were instrumental in reducing Vietnam-era unemployment from a high of 11 per cent in 1971 to 4.4 per cent by the end of 1973.

While veteran unemployment increased in all categories during the first three months of 1974, it hit hardest among non-whites. Nearly 12 per cent of the black and minority veterans of the Vietnam era were looking for jobs, more than doubling their unemployment rate during the last months of 1973.

In the 20-to-24 age bracket, which includes a high proportion of draftees inducted during the waning years of the war, the unemployment rate for non-whites was a startling 18.9 per cent. In the fourth quarter of 1973 the figure was 8.5 per cent.

In the same 20-to-24 age bracket, more than 11 per cent of the white Vietnam-era veterans were without jobs, again nearly doubling the fourth quarter 1973 rate.

Despite campaigns calling on employers to "Hire the

Vet." in the key 20-to-24 age bracket, the veterans' unemployment rate was 9.9 per cent, compared to 7.6 per cent among non-veterans. Black veterans in the same age group experienced an unemployment rate 25 per cent higher than their non-veteran counterparts.

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee staffers said the new statistics are "shocking," and Chairman Vance Hartke (D-Ind.) has scheduled hearings Tuesday to look into the problem. The committee will also probe what Hartke said was the failure by the Department of Labor to fulfill a 1972 congressional order to hire 68 extra officials to insure that veterans get first referral treatment on job openings.

The overall picture would be even worse, some critics say, if the Bureau of Labor Statistics had not acted last fall to broaden its veteran category to include 30-to-34-year-olds. For both whites and non-whites, 30-to-34-year-old veterans experienced far less joblessness than their younger counterparts.

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Many of the 30-to-34-year-old veterans were discharged during the Vietnam era but never actually served in the war theater, and critics say that not as many of the older veterans were compelled into the service by the draft, nor as frequently uprooted after college or high school. "Including these (older) guys in the statistics waters down the real impact of joblessness on the Vietnam-era GIs," said a Senate staff member.

James R. Wetzel, assistant commissioner in the BLS Office of Current Employment Analysis, said that, "after a certain age passes, the employment situation actually tends to be better for veterans than non-veterans."

Back in 1970 and 1971, he said, the problems of the vet-

erans returning from Vietnam were exacerbated by a generally bad labor market, and the influx of young vets could not be entirely absorbed. The result was an early 1971 veterans' unemployment rate of 11 per cent.

In the next two years, Wetzel said, job opportunities expanded, the swell of returning soldiers gradually ebbed, and by late 1973 the picture improved for veterans.

Then, in a third stage, the energy crisis and other factors tightened the job market, and veterans, with low seniority and civilian job experience, were often the first fired and last hired.

Wetzel noted that the short-term gap between veteran and non-veteran employment rates may be partly a function of the differences in their educational and social backgrounds.

"One line of research ought to be to study the implications of a draft that apparently drew heavily on the disadvantaged, while those who were more advantaged were able to avoid conscription," Wetzel said.

Some critics argue that this

process created a cycle in which the disadvantaged carried the brunt of a war, while the advantaged, who already had brighter job prospects, were able to improve their position through education and training.