

## Measuring Broad Economic Goals

### Overview

The 1930s were marked by periods of chronically high unemployment in the United States. After World War II, Congress passed the Employment Act of 1946, which stated that it was the policy and responsibility of the federal government to use all practical means to promote maximum employment, production and purchasing power. The Employment Act of 1946 established three important goals for the economy:

1. *Full employment* (also called the natural level of employment) exists when most individuals who are willing to work at the prevailing wages in the economy are employed and the average price level is stable. Even under conditions of full employment, there will be some temporary unemployment as workers change jobs and as new workers seek their first jobs (*frictional* unemployment). In addition, there will be some *structural* unemployment. Structural unemployment exists because there is a mismatch between the skills of the people seeking jobs and the skills required for available jobs.

2. *Price stability* exists when the average level of prices in the economy is neither increasing nor decreasing. The goal of price stability does not imply that prices of individual items should not change — only that the average level of prices should not. A sustained rise in the average level of prices is called *inflation*; a sustained decline is called *deflation*.

3. *Economic growth* exists when the economy produces increasing amounts of goods and services over the long term. If the increase is greater than the increase in population, the amount of goods and services available per person will rise, and thus the nation's standard of living will improve.

In 1978, Congress passed the Full Employment and Balanced Growth (Humphrey-Hawkins) Act establishing two additional goals: an unemployment rate of 4 percent with a zero-percent inflation rate.

### Measuring the Achievement of Economic Goals

To determine how well we are achieving the economic goals, we must measure the levels of employment, prices and economic growth. We look at how such measurements are commonly made.

#### Part A

##### Measuring Employment

The civilian unemployment rate measures how well we are achieving the goal of full employment. The unemployment rate is derived from a national survey of about 60,000 households. Each month the federal government asks these households about the employment status of household members aged 16 and older (adult population). The survey puts each person in one of three categories: employed, unemployed or not in the labor force. People who are at work (the employed) plus those who are actively looking for work (the unemployed) make up the *labor force*. The labor force is much smaller than the total adult population because many individuals are too old to work, some people are unable to work and some choose not to work.

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Adapted from *Master Curriculum Guide in Economics: Teaching Strategies for High School Economics Courses* (New York: National Council on Economic Education, 1985), p. 126.

The *unemployment rate* (UR) is defined as

$$UR = \frac{\text{number of unemployed}}{\text{labor force}} \times 100$$

The *labor force participation rate* (LFPR) is defined as:

$$LFPR = \frac{\text{number in labor force}}{\text{adult population}} \times 100$$

How well has the U.S. economy met the goal of full employment? Use the formulas just given to fill in the last three columns of Figure 11.1. All of the population and labor-force data are in millions.



Figure 11.1  
**Civilian Employment 1960 to 2000**

Year	Civilian Noninstitutional Population Aged 16 and Over	Civilian Labor Force			Unemployment Rate	Labor Force Participation Rate
		Employed	Unemployed	Total		
1960	117	66	4			
1970	137	79	4			
1980	168	99	8			
1990	188	117	7			
2000	209	135	6			

1. In which year was the economy very close to full employment as indicated in the Humphrey-Hawkins Act?
2. Why has the labor force participation rate increased since the 1960s?
3. Do the data on the national unemployment rate in Figure 11.1 reflect the extent of unemployment among a particular group in our society, such as teenagers aged 16 to 19? Explain.

**Part B**

**Measuring Price Changes**

Price indexes measure price changes in the economy. By using a price index, you can combine the prices of a number of goods and/or services and express in one number the average change for all the prices. The consumer price index, or CPI, is the measure of price changes that is probably most familiar to people. It measures changes in the prices of goods and services commonly bought by consumers. Items on which the average consumer spends a great deal of money — such as food — are given more weight (importance) in computing the index than items such as newspapers, magazines and books, on which the average consumer spends comparatively less.

The index itself is based on a market basket of approximately 400 goods and services weighted according to how much the average consumer spent in the base year. Other price indexes used in the United States include

- the producer price index, which measures changes in the prices of consumer goods before they reach the retail level, as well as the prices of supplies and equipment businesses buy, and
- the gross domestic product price deflator, or GDP price deflator, which is the most inclusive index available because it takes into account all goods and services produced.

To construct any price index, economists select a previous period, usually one year, to serve as the base period. The prices of any subsequent period are expressed as a percentage of the base period. For convenience, the base period of almost all indexes is set at 100.

For the consumer price index, the formula used to measure price change from the base period is

$$\text{Consumer price index} = \frac{\text{weighted cost of base-period items in current-year prices}}{\text{weighted cost of base-period items in base-year prices}} \times 100$$

We multiply by 100 to express the index relative to the figure of 100 for the base period.

To keep things simple, let's say an average consumer in our economy buys only three items, as described in Figure 11.2. First compute the cost of buying all the items in the base year:

30 x \$5.00	=	\$150
40 x \$6.00	=	240
60 x \$1.50	=	<u>90</u>
TOTAL	=	\$480

To compute the consumer price index for Year 1 in Figure 11.2, find the cost of buying these same items in Year 1. Try this yourself. Your answer should be \$530: the sum of (30 x \$7) + (40 x \$5) + (60 x \$2). The consumer price index for Year 1 is then equal to (\$530 / \$480) x 100, which equals 110.4. This means that what we could have bought for \$100 in the base year costs \$110.40 in Year 1.

If we subtract the base year index of 100.0 from 110.4, we get the percentage change in prices from the base year. In this example, prices rose 10.4% from the base year to Year 1.

Remember that the weights used for the consumer price index are determined by what consumers bought in the base year; in the example we used base-year quantities to figure the expenditures in

Year 1 as well as in the base year. The rate of change in this index is determined by looking at the percentage change from one year to the next. If, for example, the consumer price index were 150 in one year and 165 the next, then the year-to-year percentage change is 10 percent. You can compute the change using this formula:

$$\text{Price change} = \frac{\text{change in CPI}}{\text{beginning CPI}} \times 100$$

Here's the calculation for the example above:

$$\text{Price change} = \frac{165 - 150}{150} \times 100 = 10\%$$

Fill in the blanks in Figure 11.2, and then use the data to answer the questions.



Figure 11.2

**Prices of Three Goods Compared with Base-Year Price**

	Quantity Bought in Base Year	Unit Price in Base Year	Spending in Base Year	Unit Price in Year 1	Spending in Year 1	Unit Price in Year 2	Spending in Year 2
Whole pizza	30	\$5.00		\$7.00		\$9.00	
Prerecorded audio cassette	40	6.00		5.00		4.00	
Six-pack of soda	60	1.50		2.00		2.50	
Total	—	—		—		—	

4. What is the total cost of buying all the items in Year 2? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is the CPI for Year 2? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What is the percentage increase in prices from the base year to Year 2? \_\_\_\_\_
7. In August 2000 the CPI was 172.8, and in August 2001 the CPI was 177.50. What was the percentage change in prices for this 12-month period? \_\_\_\_\_

**Part C**

**Measuring Short-Run Economic Growth**

To measure fluctuations in output (short-run economic growth), we measure increases in the quantity of goods and services produced in the economy from quarter to quarter or year to year. The *gross domestic product*, or GDP, is commonly used to measure economic growth. The GDP is the dollar value at market prices of all final goods and services produced in the economy during a stated period.

*Final goods* are goods intended for the final user. For example, gasoline is a final good; but crude oil, from which gasoline and other products are derived, is not.

Before using GDP to measure output growth, we must first adjust GDP for price changes. Let's say GDP in Year 1 is \$1,000 and in Year 2 it is \$1,100. Does this mean the economy has grown 10 percent between Year 1 and Year 2? Not necessarily. If prices have risen, part of the increase in GDP in Year 2 will merely represent the increase in prices. We call GDP that has been adjusted for price changes *real* GDP. If it isn't adjusted for price changes, we call it *nominal* GDP.

To compute real GDP in a given year, use the following formula:

$$\text{Real GDP in Year 1} = (\text{nominal GDP} \times 100) / \text{price index}$$

To compute real output growth in GDP from one year to another, subtract real GDP for Year 2 from real GDP in Year 1. Divide the answer (the change in real GDP from the previous year) by real GDP in Year 1. The result, multiplied by 100, is the percentage growth in real GDP from Year 1 to Year 2. (If real GDP declines from Year 1 to Year 2, the answer will be a negative percentage.) Here's the formula:

$$\text{Output growth} = \frac{(\text{real GDP in Year 2} - \text{real GDP in Year 1})}{\text{real GDP in Year 1}} \times 100$$

For example, if real GDP in Year 1 = \$1,000 and in Year 2 = \$1,028, then the output growth rate from Year 1 to Year 2 is 2.8%:  $(1,028 - 1,000) / 1,000 = .028$ , which we multiply by 100 in order to express the result as a percentage.

To understand the impact of output changes, we usually look at real GDP per capita. To do so, we divide the real GDP of any period by a country's average population during the same period. This procedure enables us to determine how much of the output growth of a country simply went to supply the increase in population and how much of the growth represented improvements in the standard of living of the entire population. In our example, let's say the population in Year 1 was 100 and in Year 2 it was 110. What was real GDP per capita in Years 1 and 2?

Year 1

$$\text{Real GDP per capita} = \frac{\text{Year 1 real GDP}}{\text{population in Year 1}} = \frac{\$1,000}{100} = \$10$$

Year 2

$$\text{Real GDP per capita} = \frac{\$1,028}{110} = \$9.30$$

In this example, the average standard of living fell even though output growth was positive. Developing countries with positive output growth but high rates of population growth often experience this condition.

Now try these problems using the information in Figure 11.3.



Figure 11.3

### Nominal and Real GDP

	Nominal GDP	Price Index	Population
Year 3	\$5,000	125	11
Year 4	\$6,600	150	12

8. What is the real GDP in Year 3? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What is the real GDP in Year 4? \_\_\_\_\_
10. What is the real GDP per capita in Year 3? \_\_\_\_\_
11. What is the real GDP per capita in Year 4? \_\_\_\_\_
12. What is the rate of real output growth between Years 3 and 4? \_\_\_\_\_
13. What is the rate of real output growth per capita between Years 3 and 4? \_\_\_\_\_  
(Hint: Use per-capita data in the output growth rate formula.)