

A Conversation with Janet L. Norwood

Stephen E. Fienberg

Abstract. Janet L. Norwood was born in Newark, New Jersey, on December 11, 1923. She was an undergraduate at Douglass College of Rutgers University from 1941 to 1945 and went on to do graduate studies in economics at Tufts University, from which she received the M.A. (1946) and Ph.D. (1949) degrees. She taught briefly at Wellesley College in 1948 and 1949. Several years later, in 1963, she joined the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and remained a member of its staff for 28 years. From 1979 to 1991 she headed the agency as Commissioner of Labor Statistics, serving under both Democratic and Republican presidents. On her retirement from BLS in 1991, a U.S. senator characterized her as a "national treasure." She is now a Senior Fellow at the Urban Institute in Washington.

Her contributions to BLS and to the federal government more broadly have been widely recognized by the government, by professional societies and by universities. For example, in 1979 she received the Philip Arnow award, the highest award given by the Department of Labor, the Julius Shishkin Award from the Washington Statistical Society in 1986 and was chosen as the 1990 Statistician of the Year by the Chicago Chapter of the American Statistical Association. Norwood has also received honorary degrees from Carnegie Mellon University and Florida International University.

Norwood was President of the American Statistical Association in 1989 and has served as a member of the board of directors of several professional associations. She was chair of the Board of Trustees of the National Institute of Statistical Sciences in 1992 and 1993, and she is a member of the Committee on National Statistics at the National Research Council and of the Editorial Advisory Board of *Chance*.

The following conversation took place on the deck of her summer home in Liberty, Maine, in 1993.

Fienberg: Let's begin with some recent events, and then we can move back to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). It has been a year and a half since you stepped down from the position of commissioner of labor statistics. I assume that that hasn't been idle time and that you've taken up new activities.

Norwood: Yes, I certainly have. In fact, I'm busier than ever before, and the scope of my activities is broader. Of course, I continue my interest in the employment situation and keep up with the problems of the labor market, but I do a number of other things as well. The president asked me to chair the new Advisory Compensation, which is made up of 11

members appointed by the House of Representatives, the Senate and the president. The Council has three years to review the entire unemployment insurance system and make recommendations for its improvement. The program has not changed very much since its inception 50 years ago, even though the labor market has changed enormously during that period. Unemployment insurance involves a number of important issues of public policy, but it is important also to the federal statistical system. Unemployment insurance tax records provide the BLS with the universe of business establishments for its business survey sample, and the system also produces information on wage income for the national accounts.

Fienberg: You said you were appointed by the president; which president?

Norwood: That's an interesting issue. I was appointed by President Bush just before he left office; the Clinton administration asked me to stay on, and I have agreed to do so. The Council has given me

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