After six months out of work, it's extremely hard to find a job

By Steve Thorngate
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This week, the Senate very nearly advanced an extension of unemployment benefits, but it couldn't quite get it done. While some congressional Republican favored an extension if it were offset by spending cuts elsewhere, a popular conservative argument holds that people who have longer access to unemployment benefits will take longer to find a job. The well-worn implication: why work for a living when you can get literally *hundreds* of dollars a month for free?

When the 2008 unemployment extension expired last month, residents of all but two states were left with six months or less of benefits. Intuitively, that may sound pretty reasonable. But as Matthew O'Brien reported last year, the longer you've been out of work, the less employers want to hire you. And a recent study found that it's not just one factor among many; it's the most significant one (emphasis is O'Brien's):

> Employers prefer applicants who haven't been out of work for very long, applicants who have industry experience, and applicants who haven't moved between jobs that much. *But how long you've been out of work trumps those other factors*.... As long as you've been out of work for less than six months, you can get called back even if you don't have experience. But after you've been out of work for six months, it doesn't matter what experience you have....*This is what screening out the long-term unemployed looks like*. In other words, the first thing employers look at is how long you've been out of work, and that's the only thing they look at if it's been six months or longer.

When voters with jobs hear that the unemployed already get six months of benefits without the extension, they may conclude that this is more than generous. How hard can it be to find a job? Well, pretty hard—and the longer it takes, the harder it gets.

(I got the O'Brien link via Brad Plumer, whose primer on this subject is worth a read.)