COVID’s Next Problem

Summary:

Persons receiving supplemental unemployment insurance who are at the lower end of the earning spectrum have financial incentives to remain unemployed until the expiration of the weekly $600 federally-funded supplement. This distorted incentive will complicate the speedy recovery of the economy as governors begin to loosen restrictions on the opening of businesses. The authors recommend that the CARES Act be amended to: a) temporarily eliminate the FICA tax on the first $10,000 of income earned between after June 1st and July 31st; b) expand the earned income tax credit for low wage earners who return to work before July 31st.

Article

COVID’s next problem will be shortages in the availability of low-skilled laborers, and this could severely hinder the economic recovery. How can there be a shortage in the supply of labor with the unemployment rate hovering around 15%? The cause is easy to understand: in order to mitigate the economic impact of the COVID pandemic on the newly unemployed, the CARES Act temporarily enhances and expands unemployment insurance. Specifically, the law provides an additional flat payment of $600 per week to the amount regularly available for unemployment insurance under individual state laws; this provision is in effect through July 31, 2020. For a typical worker, the weekly unemployment benefit is now $900 per week [Jake to check] which means that anyone who makes less than $45,000 per year has a short-term financial disincentive to return to work.

We have all heard the stories over the past few weeks. Here are a few:

* The swimming pool service company which has a long backlog of jobs because workers are making more on employment than the company can afford to pay them
* The restaurant owner who is planning to pay her workers under the table until July 31st
* The college student who has no financial motivation to seek summer employment
* The landscaper who is unable to find laborers to service customers
* Etc.

During the CARES ACT Senate debate, Senator Benjamin Sasse (R- Nebraska) proposed an amendment stipulating that supplemental federal unemployment payments not result in individuals receiving unemployment compensation in excess of the amount of wages that they earned prior to becoming unemployed. The amendment failed to pass largely on a party line vote (48 Yeas, 48 Nays, 4 not voting). As a consequence, many low wage earners are now receiving unemployment compensation in excess of their prior employment income. How many unemployed workers fall into this category?

It is surprisingly difficult to provide an exact answer to this question because unemployment insurance is administered at the state level and the base level of unemployment insurance varies by state. Moreover, data capture and reporting on the prior earnings of the newly unemployed is sparse and incomplete in most states. However, we estimate the number of workers who presently receive UI in excess of their prior wages at approximately 12 million persons. This figure was calculated by multiplying the total number (20 million) of newly unemployed persons since CARES went into effect by an estimate of the percentage of these workers (60%) who make less than $45,000 annually.

The authors recognize than many of these 12 million persons are unable to return to work even without the financial disincentive. For example, many unemployed need to care for family members impacted by COVID or work for employers that are still closed. Additionally, there are surely millions of unemployed who make less than $45,000 per year who would prefer to return to work for a variety of reasons including:

* Feeling the sense of self-worth that employment provides
* Achieving long-term occupational goals
* Retaining their job/income for the longer term beyond July 31st
* Making a larger contribution to the world
* Experiencing companionship and affiliation with their work team
* Etc.

Although these non-monetary incentives are powerful, we argue that there are several categories of workers where some of these motivations are less important. Among these categories include: seasonal workers; temporary employees; gig workers; students; and certain groups of unskilled laborers. So what can the federal government do to mitigate an individual’s financial disincentive to return to work?

The federal supplement to unemployment insurance is in place until July 31st and it is both unwise and politically infeasible to repeal this provision. In fact, one can make a solid argument that the July 31 deadline should be extended if large swaths of occupations remain unable to return to work. Clearly, a repeal of the supplemental UI provision of CARES is a non-starter.

Instead, we believe that the federal government needs to provide an income boost to low income wage earners who return to work before July 31st. We have 2 ideas as to how this can work as follows:

* Temporarily change the 7.65% FICA tax such that the first $10,000 in income earned after June 1st and before July 31st is taxed at zero; this change could be coupled with a temporary increase in the social security wage base of $137,700 to mitigate the impact on the solvency of the Social Security trust fund. The effect would be felt immediately in weekly pay checks and would be especially important for low wage earners
* Expand the existing Earned Income Tax Credit [Jake – please research and determine how it can be tweaked to provide better short term incentives.]
* Open to a third idea if you have it. Whatever it is, it needs to provide visible cash to low wage earners immediately. Low wage earners have very high marginal rates of time preference because of short term essential cash needs (rent, food, utilities, etc.) and a program needs to recognize this reality.