Jobs problem heads list

By MARSHA SHULER
Capitol news bureau

Louisiana's unemployment, which has topped the national average for almost four years, continues to head the list of problems facing the state, according to a statewide survey of voter opinion.

Not since March 1982, when the national jobless rate was 9.5 percent and the state rate was 9.1 percent, has the national unemployment rate been higher than Louisiana's.

But despite the state's problems, 80 percent of the respondents say they want to stay in the area in which they now reside.

A third of the 907 registered voters questioned in the Morning Advocate and State-Times annual poll cited unemployment as the single most important problem facing the state. Another 13 percent named the related problem of the economy.

The state's unemployment rate has consistently exceeded the national average. The most recent figures show Louisiana at 11.5 percent, with the nation as a whole at 6.7 percent.

Unemployment was mentioned as the top problem by 52 percent of the respondents in the southwestern portion of the state, which includes hard hit Allen Parish and the Lake Charles area. In Allen Parish unemployment has hovered around 20 percent throughout the year.

Not surprisingly, 62 percent of the unemployed respondents ranked the jobless situation as the biggest problem facing the state.

Pollster Ed Renwick asked: "In your opinion, what is the single most important problem facing Louisiana today?"

In addition to unemployment and the economy, other problems that received top billing from respondents included: corruption/politicians, cited by 8 percent; Gov. Edwin Edwards and his trial (7 percent); the state's educational system (7 percent); the state's educational system (7 percent); crime (5 percent); taxes (3 percent); and state government's financial crisis (2 percent).

The poll was conducted Jan. 3-13 by telephone. In the prior poll, conducted in December 1984, unemployment led the list of problems, cited by 28 percent of the respondents.

It was followed by the state's financial situation with 15 percent and tied for third place were crime and taxes with 9 percent each.

In addition to the state's major problem, the pollster asked about the state's image.

The question posed was: "Which one of the following has hurt Louisiana's image the most or don't you think the state's image has been hurt?" The choices given were the World's Fair, Edwards' problems with the law, the Saints losing record, Tulane/LSU sports scandals.

A majority (55 percent) listed Edwards problems with the law as the one thing that has hurt Louisiana's image most.

The poll was conducted two to four weeks after the governor's trial on federal racketeering-conspiracy and fraud charges ended in a mistrial.

Sixteen percent of the respondents said the state's image was hurt most by the World's Fair, which ended in bankruptcy even after substantial infusion of state funds.

Two percent cited the losing record of the New Orleans Saints professional football team, and another 2 percent said the Tulane and LSU sports scandals were the most damaging.

Only 5 percent said they think state's image has not been hurt, while 13 percent said all of those events harmed Louisiana's image.

Despite the state's problems and its image, 80 percent of the respondents said they prefer to continue living where they now live.

But this poll's respondents are more pessimistic than the prior group about the quality of life in their area.

"Is the quality of life in your area of Louisiana getting better, getting worse or staying about the same?" the pollster asked.

In both the recent poll and the December 1984 survey, 52 percent said it was staying about the same. However, this time 33 percent said it is getting worse compared to 22 percent in December 1984.

Thirteen percent said it is getting better compared to 23 percent in the prior poll.

"If you could, would you stay in the area where you now live, move to another part of the state or move out of Louisiana?" the pollster asked.

Only 12 percent said they would move out of Louisiana, with the reply found most often among Republicans (27 percent), voters under 30 years of age (26 percent), college graduates (21 percent), the unemployed (18 percent) and those living in the New Orleans Metropolitan area (17 percent).

Six percent said they would move to another part of the state. The response was more likely to come from the unemployed (13 percent) and voters under 30 (12 percent).

As for the problems facing the state, poor economy was listed more frequently as a problem by those living in south central Louisiana and the Orleans Metro area and by those making $30,000 to $45,000 a year.

Corruption tended to be listed more by those living in southeast and southwest Louisiana, Republicans, Protestants and those making more than $45,000 a year.

Those most frequently mentioning Gov. Edwards' trial as the single most significant problem facing the state include respondents in north Louisiana, Republicans, retirees and those making more than $45,000 a year. Eight percent of the whites mentioned it compared with 2 percent of the blacks.

Those who consider the state's educational system the top problem are more likely to be Republicans, college graduates, those making more than $45,000 a year and residents of the New Orleans Metropolitan area.

Eight percent of the whites compared with 5 percent of the blacks cited the educational system as the biggest problem.

Other problems mentioned in the poll but that were listed by fewer than 1 percent of the respondents include roads and bridges, drainage and flooding, assistance for the poor, the state's image and pollution.

Seven percent of those polled mentioned miscellaneous problems and 9 percent did not reply.