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Abstract

We develop a time series of quits and layoffs using the Current Population Survey, and analyze their relationship with labor supply decisions over the business cycle. Our findings challenge the assumption that most labor force exits from employment are voluntary quits. Instead, we show that 40% of these exits are precipitated by layoffs. With this distinction, we find both quits to non-participation and the share of workers exiting after a layoff falls during recessions. A workhorse search model is used to frame how these facts add nuance to our understanding of business cycles. Additional results explore regularities of these patterns in the cross section of workers, in the COVID-19 recovery, and in comparison to the JOLTS series on quits and layoffs.

1 Introduction

We construct and analyze a comprehensive time series of quits and layoffs leading to non-employment, as reported by households in the Current Population Survey (CPS). Our main contribution lies in harmonizing data to classify flows from employment to non-participation as either quits or layoffs.¹ This distinction is crucial. Whereas prior literature normally treats all labor force exits from employment as voluntary quits (or omits these flows altogether), we find that over 40% of all flows into non-participation (EN) are actually precipitated by layoffs. Correctly classifying these flows is vital for understanding the true magnitudes of volatilities of quits and layoffs. Moreover, we argue that movements in quits and exits following layoffs provide valuable information for theories of labor supply and labor markets over the business cycle.

Our data reveal that the reason for separation (quit or layoff) exhibits patterns that are distinct from the destination after a separation (unemployment or non-participation). For instance, in the post 1980's U.S., 1.5-2% of workers quit to non-employment each month, whereas 2.5-3% of workers exit the labor force. While the employment to non-participation (EN) transition rate is countercyclical, we find that quits are procyclical, decreasing during recessions. Layoffs and

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¹Unless otherwise stated, a quit will refer to a quit from employment to non-participation. Similarly, separations and other terms will always deal with separations to non-employment not to another employer.

the employment to unemployment (EU) transition rate move in the same direction, they are both countercyclical, with layoffs being slightly more volatile than the EU transition rate.

The procyclicality of quits and countercyclicality of layoffs paint a unique picture of how business cycles unfold. During recessions, quits decline as layoffs increase. This is not news. What is new and striking is the magnitudes. The fall in quits almost completely offsets the rise in layoffs leading total separations to be almost acyclical. This indicates that while the total separation rate from employment may appear irrelevant for rises in unemployment during recessions, we now see the composition of separations critically changes. Layoffs are a leading indicator of a recession even if total separations are not.

In addition to the labor supply decision of an employed person (whether to quit or remain employed), we show that labor supply decisions following a layoff also contribute to unemployment dynamics over the business cycle. The share of workers who leave the labor force after a layoff decreases during recessions. This finding is consistent across all recessions since the 1980s. This indicates a higher attachment of non-employed individuals to the labor force in recessions just as lower quits indicated a higher attachment of employed individuals.

A Shapley decomposition reveals that quits and labor supply decisions are quantitatively significant for the business cycle dynamics of the US labor market. The reduction in quits during recessions offsets more than 90% of the increase in layoffs. Without the reduction in quits, increased layoffs would be as important as decreased job finding from unemployment in accounting for employment declines during a recession. Changes in labor force exit and entry account for about 40% of the increase in unemployment during recession. The fact that laid off workers are more likely to remain in the labor force amplifies the impact of higher job loss rates on unemployment. These two facts underscore the quantitative importance of countercyclical increases in marginal labor supply.

Taking stock, our data highlight three salient facts characterizing recessions: (i) market tightness falls (aka vacancies per unemployed worker fall); (ii) quits to non-employment fall; and (iii) the share of laid-off workers who exit the labor force falls. These latter two facts show that labor supply increases on the margin for both employed and job losers in a recession. We employ a workhorse search model, augmented to generate gross participation flows, to assess what a theory must encompass to replicate these facts. It is challenging to identify a single shock which can decrease market tightness, increase labor supply, and simultaneously increase layoffs, as we have observed in the data.

Our theoretical model suggests that complete theories of labor markets over the business cycle likely require additional features beyond the shocks driving job losses. We dig deeper into our data to identify potential additional features. First, we focus on a couple of demographics with many marginal participants who drive overall quits and labor force exits and their declines during recessions. Marginal participants, compared to highly attached participants, experience a 2 to 3 times larger decline in quits during recessions. Additionally, the share of marginal participants exiting the labor force after a layoff falls more during recessions than for the average

US worker. These facts indicate that studying marginal participants is useful for understanding the increased labor supply in recessions and identifying necessary features for a complete theory of labor markets over the business cycle.

Second, we examine recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic recession and show that our time series offer an informative alternative for researchers and policymakers interested in quits and layoffs. Despite the pandemic recession differing in many aspects from other recessions, it is no different in the business cycle patterns of quits and layoffs. Both quits and layoffs into non-participation decrease, but the decline in quits is dominated by the unprecedented rise in layoffs. Interestingly, we find no evidence of a “great resignation” and instead a recovery pattern that is very similar to earlier recessions.

Our data present new opportunities to research quits and layoffs and connect them to worker characteristics and their subsequent labor supply decisions. Prudent researchers will view these data alongside other data on layoffs and quits to form the most accurate view of labor markets. The main complementary data, updated monthly, come from the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS), a survey of employers. We conclude by comparing and contrasting our data with JOLTS. Notably, the quits series track each other well across the two surveys until the late 2010s. Even when combined with direct employer to employer flows computed by [Fujita et al. \(Forthcoming\)](#), the CPS data and JOLTS data diverge after the pandemic. Regarding layoffs, our series shows a more pronounced increase during the 2007 recession compared to JOLTS data, but both series display similar business cycle patterns.

Literature Our paper contributes to the empirical and theoretical literatures that examine labor market flows between employment, unemployment, and non-participation.

A rich literature following work by [Abowd and Zellner \(1985\)](#) and [Blanchard and Diamond \(1990\)](#) has analyzed gross flows and transition rates between the labor market states. This body of research aims to understand the evolution of labor market flows across time, cross-sections, and business cycles. [Shimer \(2012\)](#) utilizes flow data on employment-unemployment transitions to construct job-finding and job-loss probabilities, assessing their relative importance to unemployment rate fluctuations. Similarly, [Elsby et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Elsby et al. \(2019\)](#) employ data on flows between employment, unemployment, and non-participation to analyze the contribution of each flow to labor force participation rate fluctuations. Others, such as [Garibaldi and Wasmer \(2005\)](#) and [Krusell et al. \(2017\)](#), have used gross flows data to inform macroeconomic models of labor markets. While our paper focuses on employment to non-employment separations, as only these can be decomposed into quits and layoffs using the Current Population Survey (CPS), [Fujita et al. \(Forthcoming\)](#) have used the CPS to study job-to-job transitions. However, the CPS does not have information to be able to distinguish whether a direct job-to-job transition is due to a quit, layoff, or other reason.

The majority of these studies, including ours, rely on CPS data. However, some researchers, such as [Davis et al. \(2011\)](#) have employed alternative data sources like the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) to study labor market fluctuations. We provide a comparison

of our CPS-derived series with JOLTS separations data in Section 8 of this paper.

[Simmons \(2023\)](#) uses data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and UK survey data to classify all separations as layoffs, quits, or other. While this SIPP-based approach allows for the classification of all separations, including direct job-to-job, it lacks some advantages of CPS data which is more frequent (monthly) and longer (uninterrupted since 1978). Nevertheless, it is the only other paper, to our knowledge, that constructs a comprehensive and distinct series of quits and layoffs.

Recent studies have also employed dis-aggregated CPS data on flows and transition rates to examine how demographic factors influence business cycles and trends in various labor market stocks (e.g. [Ellieroth \(2023\)](#), [Hegarty \(2023\)](#), [Ellieroth and Michaud \(2024\)](#))

The unique dynamics of quits and layoffs following the COVID-19 pandemic have sparked renewed interest in the distinct implications of the reason for a separation. [Qiu \(2022\)](#), [Graves et al. \(2023\)](#), [Moscarini and Postel-Vinay \(2023\)](#), and [Bagga et al. \(2023\)](#) investigate cyclical dynamics, including the "Great Resignation" phenomenon. [Cai and Heathcote \(2023\)](#) and [Blanco et al. \(2023\)](#) explore the quit versus layoff distinction in other contexts.

Our work also relates to the literature on the unemployment volatility puzzle, as discussed by [Shimer \(2005\)](#) and further explored by [Chodorow-Reich and Karabarbounis \(2016\)](#), [Hagedorn and Manovskii \(2008\)](#), [Ljungqvist and Sargent \(2017\)](#), and [Mitman and Rabinovich \(2019\)](#). We contribute to this discourse by demonstrating that layoffs are more frequent and less cyclically volatile than flows from employment to unemployment; and also that labor supply appears to be countercyclical, on the margin.

2 Data and Methodology

2.1 Data source

We use monthly data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) from January 1978 to July 2024. The CPS is a rotating panel survey of approximately 60,000 households, conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. While primarily designed for cross-sectional analysis, the CPS's rotating panel structure allows us to match individuals across consecutive months, enabling the computation of month-to-month labor market transitions. Our primary sample includes all individuals aged 15 and above, with a supplementary analysis focusing on the prime-age population (25-55 years old).

2.2 Methodology

Our key methodological contribution is to classify flows from employment to both unemployment and non-participation by reason of separation. The goal is to newly classify four distinct flows:

- Employment to unemployment due to a quit (EUQ)
- Employment to unemployment due to a layoff (EUL)

From	To		
	E	U	N
E	f_{EE}	f_{EU}	f_{EN}
U	f_{UE}	f_{UU}	f_{UN}
N	f_{NE}	f_{NU}	f_{NN}

Table 1: Standard approach of flow rates in the CPS

- Employment to non-participation due to a quit (ENQ)
- Employment to non-participation due to a layoff (ENL)

The CPS short panel follows a 4-8-4 structure which allows us to observe individuals for 4 continuous months, followed by an 8 month break, and then another 4 month period. Due to the option of observing individuals for two consecutive months, researchers have frequently used the CPS to compute gross flows and transition rates (Abowd and Zellner (1985), Shimer (2012), Elsbey et al. (2015), and many others). Most commonly, researchers have computed flow rates between the three labor market states employment (E), unemployment (U), and non-participation (N) to create a matrix of nine flow rates as shown in Table 1. The flows have been used to understand fluctuations in job finding and job loss rates, or to study the evolution of stocks such as the unemployment rate or employment-population ratio using a stock-flow analysis.

The standard approach often interprets flows between employment and unemployment as layoffs and flows between employment and non-participation as quits. We show this convention is not accurate. Flows into both unemployment and non-participation consist of both layoffs and quits.

We follow the standard methodology of computing gross flows with an important difference: we compute flow rates from employment to both unemployment and non-participation *by reason of separation*. Thus, we not only get employment to unemployment (EU) and employment to non-participation (EN) rates, but also employment to unemployment due to a quit (EUQ), employment to unemployment due to a layoff (EUL), employment to non-participation due to a quit (ENQ), and employment to non-participation due to a layoff (ENL), such that

$$f_{EU} = f_{EUQ} + f_{EUL} \tag{1}$$

$$f_{EN} = f_{ENQ} + f_{ENL} \tag{2}$$

While there are a few papers which have distinguished separations into unemployment by quits and layoffs, we are the first (to our knowledge) who also distinguish separations into non-participation by quits and layoffs. Table 2 shows our contribution to the standard approach of using the CPS to calculate flows. While this seems like a minor change, it allows researchers to use this data in important ways, such as (i) analyzing what fraction into unemployment and non-participation is due to a layoff vs. a quit; and importantly (ii) accurately observing total

quits and total layoffs into non-employment, i.e

$$\text{Quits} = f_{EUQ} + f_{ENQ} \quad (3)$$

$$\text{Layoffs} = f_{EUL} + f_{ENL} \quad (4)$$

From	To		
E	U	N	
E	f_{EE}	$f_{EUQ} + f_{EUL}$	$f_{ENQ} + f_{ENL}$
U	f_{UE}	f_{UU}	f_{UN}
N	f_{NE}	f_{NU}	f_{NN}

Table 2: Our contribution to the standard approach

2.3 Decomposition into Layoffs and Quits

2.3.1 Unemployment

We are going to keep this section brief, since the distinction of a layoff or quit into unemployment in the CPS has been used in previous literature. In CPS IPUMS (Flood et al. (2023)), the variable to classify a separation into unemployment as a quit, layoff, or other is readily available and harmonized for all sample months. The survey asks all unemployed individuals why they became unemployed and distinguishes between workers who had lost jobs (due to temporary layoff, involuntary job loss, or ending of a temporary job), those who had quit jobs, those who were re-entering the labor force after an extended absence from the work force, and those who were seeking their first jobs (new entrants). We use these answers and classify a separation into unemployment as a layoff or quit as follows:

- Layoff: Job loser/on layoff, other job loser, temporary job ended
- Quit: Job leaver

2.3.2 Non-participation

The variable coding reason for leaving the last job is not easily available on CPS IPUMS for non-participants, those not actively searching for a job. This instead requires work with the raw CPS data. The next paragraphs will outline the process to distinguish separations into non-participation by reason of separations.

The question asked to individuals to inquire their reason of non-participation has slightly changed over the years, but is a close variant of:

Why did ... leave that job?

Before 1994, the question is asked to all non-participants who fulfill the following criteria: (1) currently not in the labor force, but worked for pay within the last five years, and (2) in the outgoing rotation group (ORG), which means the individuals are in month of sample 4 or 8. After 1994, the question is asked to individuals who (1) are currently not in the labor force, but worked for pay within the last 1 year, and (2) are in the outgoing rotation group (ORG). We restrict our sample to anyone who has worked in the past 12 months for the entire time period.² The possible answer choices to the question have changed over time and we harmonize the answers across all months and years and define a layoff or quit as follows:

- Layoff: Temporary, seasonal or intermittent job completed, Slack work/business conditions
- Quit: Personal or family (including pregnancy), Return to school, Health, Retirement or old age, Unsatisfactory work arrangements

All remaining reasons are labelled as other.

2.4 Linking over Time

We follow [Madrian and Lefgren \(1999\)](#) when linking individuals across two consecutive months and verify match quality based on sex and age.³ In the CPS, the unique household and person identifier corresponds to the physical address of the individuals and therefore being able to match an individual does not necessarily imply matching the same individual but rather two individuals living at the same physical address in subsequent months. Personal characteristics, such as age and sex, which do not change over two subsequent months (or by not more than one in the case of age) and help to reduce false matches. Once we matched individuals across two subsequent months based on the above criteria, we use the matched data to compute the numbers of individuals in each labor market state in a given month.

For all labor market states with the exception of layoffs and quits into N, we simply count how many individuals are in each labor market state. Since only individuals in the outgoing-rotation groups are asked about their reason for non-participation, we only have a subset of individuals responding to the question. We assume that the distribution of individuals by reason for non-participation is the same across all individuals in that month and use the share of quits and layoffs from the outgoing rotation groups multiplied by the total E-to-N transition rate to compute the number of layoffs for all other individuals making an employment to non-participation transition. Thus, we obtain flows numbers for individuals transitioning due to a layoff from E to N, and individuals transitioning due to a quit from E to N.

Once we have the numbers of individuals in each labor market state we compute flow rates between the different states. We compute the transition rates as the number of individuals with

²In theory, since we are looking at individuals who make a transition from employment in the previous month to non-employment in the current month, all individuals should fulfill this requirement, but a very small number reports not having worked in the past 1 year and we do not include them.

³We are not matching based on race since the answers have to this question has changed drastically over time.

labor market state I in the previous month and labor market state J in the current month relative to all individuals with labor market state I in the previous month, such that

$$f_{IJ} = IJ_t/I_{t-1} \quad (5)$$

where $I = \{E, U, N\}$ and $J = \{E, U, N, UL, UQ, NL, NQ\}$ to obtain flow rates as shown in table 2.

Lastly, we seasonally adjust the data using the X-13ARIMA-SEATS seasonal adjustment program provided by the U.S. Census Bureau.

3 An Overview of Quits and Layoffs

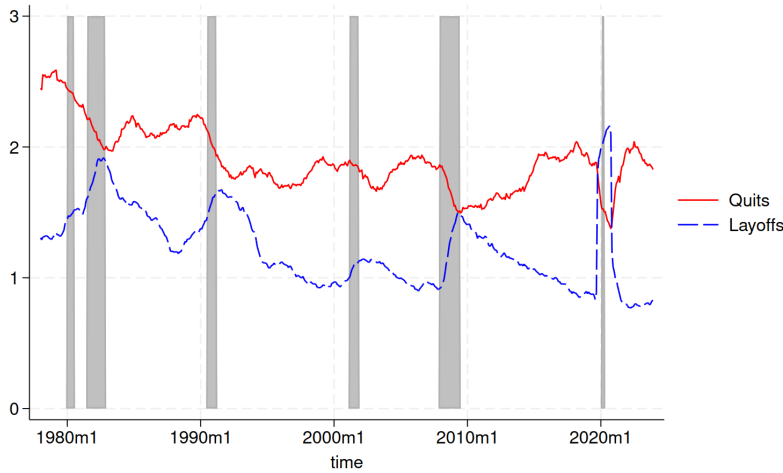


Figure 1: Monthly Quits and Layoff rates (as a percent of employment) (Monthly seasonally-adjusted data and 6-month centered moving average)

Figure 1 plots the full time series of the monthly quit and layoff rates to non-employment from 1978-2023 as a percent of total employment for the entire working-age population in the United States. We see that the quit rate generally exceeds the layoff rate but the two converge during recessionary periods. On average, 60% of all separations to non-employment are quits and 40% are layoffs.⁴ In the average month, about 1.9% of all workers quit their job. Both series display clear business cycle patterns which we will discuss in more detail in the following section.

Figure 2 shows the two series together, i.e. total separations into non-employment. In the average month, 3.1% of workers leave their job to non-employment either as a result of a quit or a layoff. While we saw in the previous figure that both quits and layoffs vary with the business cycle, total separations do not move much over the business cycle. The reason for that is that the decline in quits during recessions mostly off-sets the rise in layoffs.

⁴Among the prime-age population (25-55 years), half of all separations into non-employment are quits and the other half are layoffs.



Figure 2: Total Separations into Non-employment (as a percent of employment) (Monthly seasonally-adjusted 6-month centered moving average data)

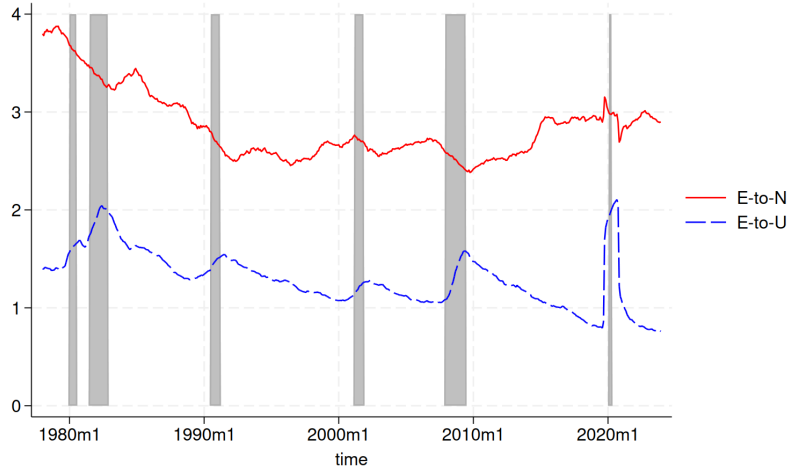


Figure 3: Flow Rates from Employment to Non-Participation (EN) and to Unemployment (EU)

Figure 3 plots flows from employment to non-employment by destination: unemployment or non-participation. These were the standard flows considered in prior research on the cyclical properties of the labor market. Comparing the EU and EN rates to our quits and layoffs series, we see that flows to non-participation exceed those to unemployment by more than quits exceed layoffs. Of all workers separating to non-employment each month, 70% move to non-participation and 30% move to unemployment.⁵ Comparing Figure 4 and Figure 1, it is obvious that these flows are related but not the same. Notably, the rate of EN flows is around 50% higher at a monthly frequency than the quit rate. There are also clear cyclical differences with the quits and layoffs each more volatile than EN and EU, respectively. Figures 4 and 5 allude to the reason for these discrepancies. A significant share of workers choose non-participation after a layoff, which

⁵Among the prime age, 59% move to non-participation and 41% move to unemployment.

contributes to EN flows being significantly larger than quits in the data. This share decreases during recessions leading EN flows to be less volatile than the rest.

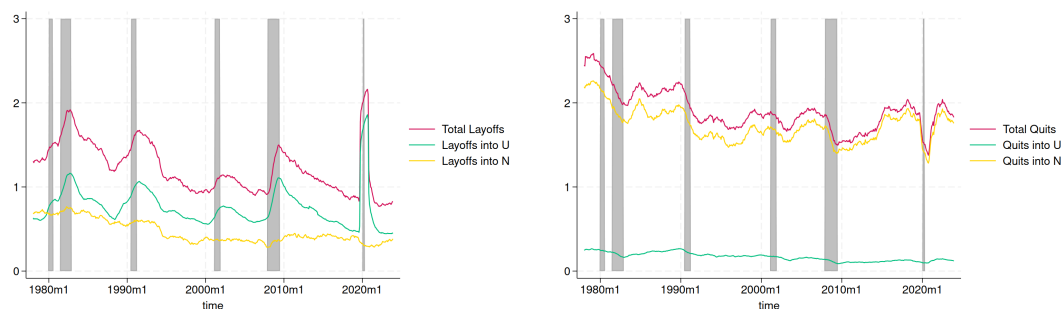


Figure 4: Layoffs and quits by destination

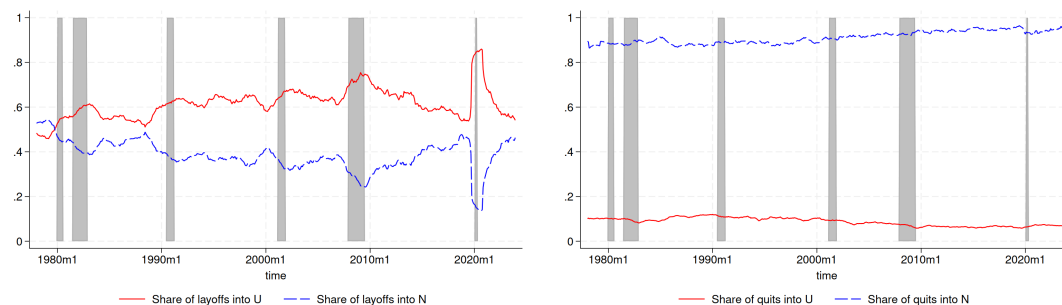


Figure 5: Share of quits and layoffs by destination

Specifically, 40% of laid off workers move to non-participation. For workers who quit, the share who move to non-participation is much higher at over 90%.⁶ Clearly, not all movements to non-participation are due to a quit decision as was previously assumed. This means that classifying flows from employment to non-participation as quits understates the level of lay-offs by 40%, which will be especially important considering business cycle fluctuations.

4 Business Cycle: How Quits and Layoffs Shape Labor Market Fluctuations

The flow rates shape business cycle properties of stocks, such as the unemployment rate or employment-population ratio, and also help us understand how labor supply choices and frictions interact and vary over the business cycle.

We start by illustrating how quits and layoffs evolve over the business cycle in Table 3. The first row of Table 3 shows the correlation of each flow rate with the unemployment rate. The table confirms that quits and layoffs move in opposite directions over the business cycle as shown graphically in Figure 1. Table 4 shows that the correlation between quits and layoffs

⁶For prime age, 30% move to non-participation after lay-off and 86% move to non-participation following a quit.

over the entire observation period is -0.0255. (For comparison, the correlation between E-to-U and E-to-N flows is strongly positive, 0.43). Quits decrease in times when unemployment increases, and thus, are procyclical. Layoffs, on the other hand, are countercyclical and increase when the unemployment rate is high. Quits into both unemployment (U) and non-participation (N) decrease in recessions but quits into N are the main contributor for the overall decline in quits. Layoffs, on the other hand, display a similar cyclicality regardless of the destination of the layoff. Layoffs into unemployment increase more than layoffs into non-participation in a recession which is important to understand the finding that the share of laid off workers exiting the labor force declines in recessions.

Statistic	Quits			Layoffs			Total sep.
	to U	to N	Total	to U	to N	Total	to (U+N)
Corr(x, y)	-0.0626	-0.2469	-0.1906	0.5083	0.3982	0.5775	0.4499
SD(x)/SD(y)	0.0300	0.1451	0.1648	0.2909	0.0894	0.3200	

Table 3: Business cycle correlations of each flow (x) with the unemployment rate (y)

Statistic	
Corr(EQ, EL)	-0.0255
SD(EQ)/SD(EL)	0.5149

Table 4: Business cycle correlations of quits and layoffs

Table 5 shows how the destination of quits and layoffs vary over the business cycle. In times when the unemployment rate is high, the share of each layoffs and quits into non-participation decline. The share of layoffs into non-participation is negatively correlated with the unemployment rate. This indicates that while both layoffs into U and N increase in recessions, the increase is larger for layoffs into U. The share of quits that flow into N decreases when the unemployment rate increases. We have seen the reason for that in Table 3: quits into non-participation strongly decline and by more than quits into unemployment during recessions, thus shifting the share of quits towards quits into unemployment. These findings from Table 5 suggest that laid off workers become more attached to the labor force in recessions as more workers choose to remain unemployed after losing their job. Employed workers too become more attached as fewer workers quit their job to non-employment.

Statistic	Share of Layoffs into N	Share of Quits into N
Corr(x, y)	-0.2569	-0.1574
SD(x)/SD(y)	0.0383	0.0153

Table 5: Business Cycle correlation of the share of layoffs and quits into N with the unemployment rate

Table 6 shows the business cycle properties of EU and EN flow rates and compares them with the statistics for layoffs and quits which are taken from Table 3. The first two columns compare EU flow rates (those the standard method often assumed to be layoffs) with our layoff series and we see that the cyclical property of these two series is similar in magnitude and countercyclical. This is a lucky coincidence. The ambitious researcher who looks only at EU transitions which are layoffs but continues to classify all EN as quits would fare worse and find a cyclical property which is too low compared to the true cyclical property of the layoffs.⁷

The second two columns show more stark differences for quits and EN rates (those the standard methods could not distinguish and assumed to be quits). While quits are procyclical, they decrease in recessions, the EN transition rate is actually countercyclical, increasing during recessions. An explanation for this difference is that around 40% of all EN transitions are actually precipitated by layoffs. We have seen in Table 3 that layoffs are strongly countercyclical and work to offset the procyclical property of quits into non-participation. We therefore strongly recommend using the quits series rather than the EN transition rate in order to analyze how labor supply choices, e.g. whether to quit from employment, shape job destruction over the business cycle.

Statistic	Layoffs	EU	Quits	EN
$\text{Corr}(x, y)$	0.5775	0.5949	-0.1906	0.1019
$\text{SD}(x)/\text{SD}(y)$	0.3200	0.3019	0.1648	0.2247

Table 6: Business Cycle correlation of E-to-U and E-to-N flow rate with Unemployment Rate

Our time series covers six recessions starting with the one in 1980 up until the pandemic recession of 2020. Obviously, recessions differ in their cause, length, and severity, as well as their impact on the labor market. However, the following two figures show that recessions are remarkably similar with regards to quits, layoffs, and total separations into non-employment. Rather than looking at a measure of the business cycle that depends on time, we consider labor market tightness as a measure of the state of the economy.⁸ Figure 6 shows the relationship between labor market tightness and our quit series for each recession plus six months of recovery. Each set of colored dots represents one of the six recessions. We see that quits are low if labor market tightness is low and increase when the labor market becomes tighter. This observation is true for all recessions. While we see a long-run trend decline in quits, there does not seem to be large differences across business cycles as the positive correlation between quits and labor market tightness is similar in magnitude across all recessions.

Figure 7 shows the relationship between total separations into non-employment and labor market tightness for the same time frame as the previous figure. We see that total separations are completely unrelated to labor market tightness for all recessions. As mentioned previously, the reason is that the decline in quits during loose labor markets almost perfectly offsets the increase in layoffs during these periods. Again, we can observe level differences across the different

⁷Compare 0.5083 in Table 3 with 0.5775 in Table 6

⁸Labor market tightness is defined as the the unemployed relative to vacancies.

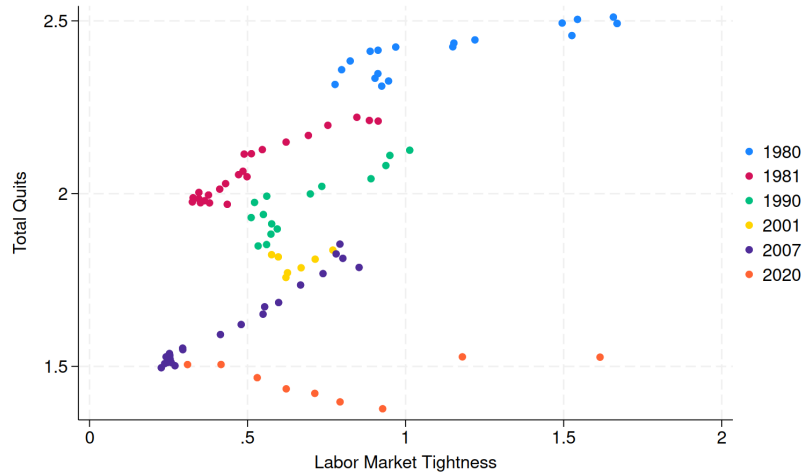


Figure 6: Total quits into non-employment is positively correlated with labor market tightness

recessions, primarily due to the severity of job loss and the level of layoffs, but business cycle patterns are the same across all recessions.

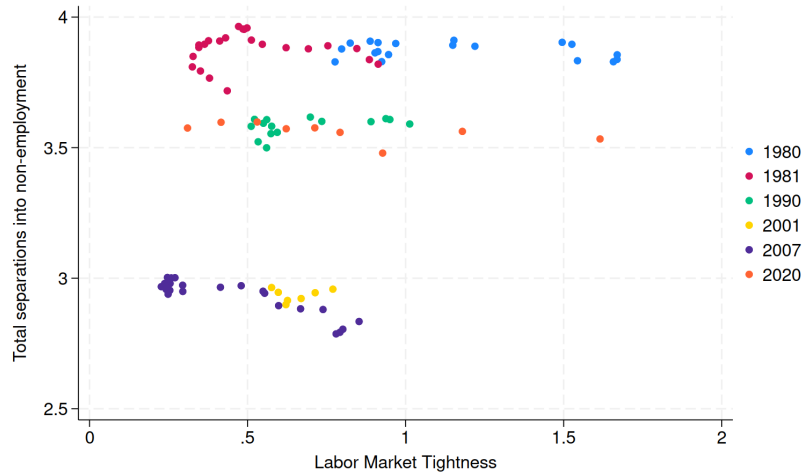


Figure 7: Total separations into non-employment is not correlated with labor market tightness

4.1 Alternative Business Cycle Indicators

Tight Labor Markets. To focus on expansions we construct a measure of a tight labor markets. We follow [Aaronson et al. \(2019\)](#) and use an indicator of whether the unemployment rate in a given quarter is below the noncyclical rate of unemployment..⁹ Table 7 shows correlations of the different flow rates with this measure of tight labor markets. They capture the movement of flows in exceptionally good times for comparison with Table 3 which uses the unemployment rate as an indicator.

⁹Since data for the noncyclical rate of unemployment is only available at the quarterly frequency, we transform our monthly data into quarterly by averaging over each quarter.

Statistic	Quits			Layoffs			Total sep.
	to U	to N	Total	to U	to N	Total	to (U+N)
$\text{Corr}(x, y)$	0.1828	0.2967	0.2664	-0.3491	-0.2291	-0.3880	-0.1945

Table 7: Correlations of each flow (x) with the measure for a tight labor market (y)

We see that tight labor markets (expansions) are characterized by higher quits, both into unemployment and non-participation. In other words, workers become more likely to quit when vacancies are high, the unemployment rate is low, and jobs are easy to find. Layoffs show the opposite pattern. Layoffs decline in tight labor markets, which is not surprising.

Total separations, quits plus layoffs, decline during tight labor markets. Although quits increase, the fall in layoffs during these periods dominates the rise in quits and leads to an overall fall in separations into non-employment.

4.2 Alternative Beveridge Curve

Figure 8 uses our quits series to produce an alternative Beveridge curve. Instead of graphing the unemployment rate against a measure of vacancies, we graph the unemployment rate against our quits series. We do this for each recession, starting at the peak and ending 12 months after the trough. The resulting figures show a downward sloping curve similar to the standard Beveridge curve. The downward shape shows that the number of quits decreases as unemployment in the economy increases. One interpretation is that quits are higher in tighter labor markets. This is not surprising based on the theory of “job hoarding”. Workers are less likely to quit a job during times when it is difficult to find a new job, which would explain the shape of the alternative Beveridge curve.

Notably, the relationship between quits and unemployment does not vary much from recession to recession, whereas the relationship between vacancies and unemployment does.¹⁰ Thus, we do not observe any shifts of the alternative Beveridge curve as one commonly does with the standard Beveridge curve. The most likely explanation is that quits to non-employment are not (as) informative about matching efficiency as the rate of vacancies.

4.3 Which flows drive the cycle? A Shapley value decomposition.

In this section we compute the contribution of each type of labor market flow to employment and unemployment changes through recessions peak-to-trough and expansions trough-to-peak. We do this both decomposing flows by destination (employment to/from unemployment to/from non-participation) and by reason (quit versus layoff). The idea is to understand the decline in employment during a recession as the culmination of increased outflows to non-employment a decreased inflows from non-employment. The same can be said for employment increases during

¹⁰If we were to plot all recessions in the same figure, they would be not all laying on top of each other, see figure 30 in the appendix.

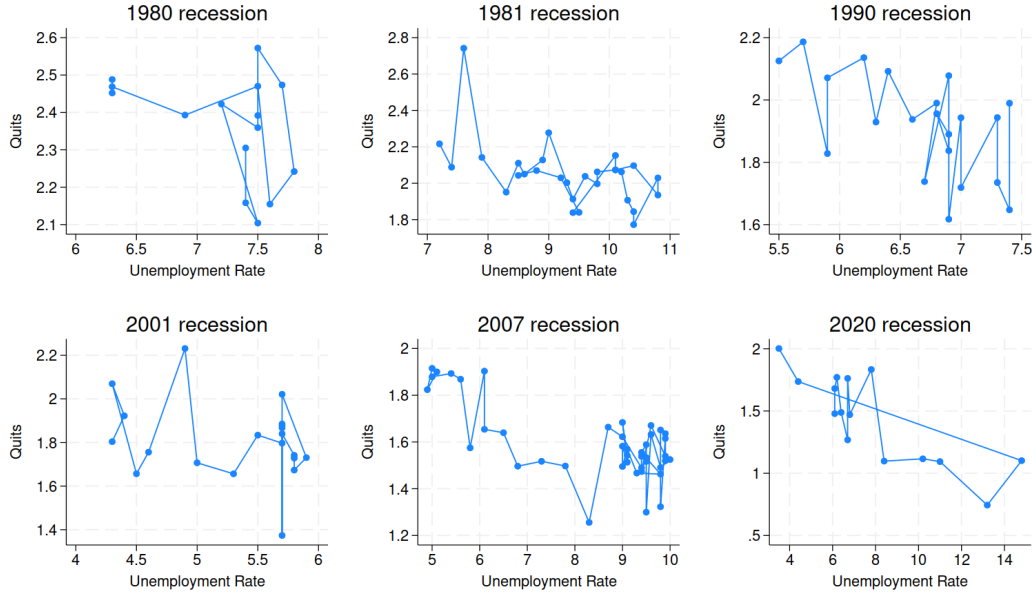


Figure 8: Alternative Beveridge Curves for each recession

expansions and for the dynamics of unemployment: how much do each of inflows and outflows matter?

The marginal contribution of a flow is defined by its Shapley value: the appropriately weighted sum of its marginal contribution to every permutation of the set of other flows. The concept of marginal contribution takes into consideration that all other flows change as well. Take for example the contribution of changes in labor force exits after unemployment to changes in unemployment during a recession. The marginal contribution considers that layoffs also increase during a recession and job finding rates from unemployment fall, both of which magnify the contribution of the fall in exits after layoff. This is particularly important because we have emphasized that labor supply of employed and laid off workers increases, on the margin, during a recession. This does not mean the labor force participation rate is counter-cyclical since many other forces, such as higher layoff rates, affect aggregate participation more strongly.

We have eight flows: quits resulting in non-participation (QN); quits resulting in unemployment (QU); lay-offs resulting in non-participation (LN); lay-offs resulting in unemployment (LU); flows to employment from unemployment (UE); flows to employment from non-participation (NE); flows to non-participation from unemployment (UN); and flows to unemployment from non-participation (NU). Each decomposition begins with the shares of employed, unemployed, and non-participants equal to their values in the month prior to the start of the expansion/recession and then calculates the cumulative change in each to the end date. Expansions begin when unemployment peaks and end when recessions begin. Recessions begin according to the Sahm rule.¹¹ The average contribution of each flow across business cycles weights each

¹¹We begin with the first full cycle we have: the 1980s recessions which we group into one. The recession start dates (expansion end dates) are: Jan 1980, Sep 1990, May 2001, Dec 2006, May 2020, and we compute the final

business cycle by its relative change in employment to population or unemployment rate.¹²

Table 8 sums the Shapley values in terms of a few themes. The complete values are in Appendix Table 13. “Quits” and “Layoffs” are all quit or layoff separations from employment to non-employment regardless of destination. “Exits” and “Entry” are flows in/out of the labor force regardless of origin or reason (e.g., exits include quits and layoffs to non-participation plus flows from unemployment to non-participation). “Job loss/finding” is the sum of the contribution of layoffs and job finding from unemployment.

	Quits	Layoffs	Exit	Entry	Job Loss/Finding
Recession					
Employment	-103.7	116.8	-122.9	-6.5	224.1
Unemployment	-1.2	32.9	16.6	23.9	60.9
Expansion					
Employment	30.9	65.6	73.7	-1.6	27.9
Unemployment	-7.2	55.7	3.1	24.9	72.1

Table 8: Shapley values of flows measured as percent contribution to change in employment/population and the unemployment rate.

Job loss and job finding rates are the dominant forces driving employment and unemployment in recessions, but in the case of employment this is only because changes in quits and labor force participation offset changes the layoff rate. The fall in quits boosts employment during a recession by almost completely offsetting the contribution of layoffs to reducing it. The same is not true for unemployment. The contribution of the reduction to quits to unemployment is swamped by the increase in layoffs because most quits are to non-participation. Reductions in labor force exit work in a similar way to boost employment during a recession but both higher entry and lower exits after layoff work to increase unemployment.

Most flows work together to shape expansions. Falling layoffs and labor force exits drive employment growth. Falling layoffs and rising job finding rates drive unemployment declines. Results for employment must be taken with the caveat that there is trend growth pre-2000.

These patterns can also be shown graphically. Figures 9 and 10 show the Shapley value contribution of each flow to the cumulative change in the respective employment or unemployment series. The decomposition treats the employment-to-population growth period (1978-1999) and period of stabilization/decline (2000-2019) separately. The graphs better capture long run trends but offer glimpses at higher order moments and variation (or lack thereof) across specific episodes.

Taking stock, the Shapley value decomposition emphasizes that quits and layoffs have different behavior, often moving in opposite directions, which emphasizes the importance of treating expansion until May 2024. The Expansion start dates (recession end dates) are Dec 1982, July 1992, July 2003, March 2010, and March 2020.

¹²The contributions do not add up to 100% within recession but not when we take the average across recessions because of this weighting scheme.

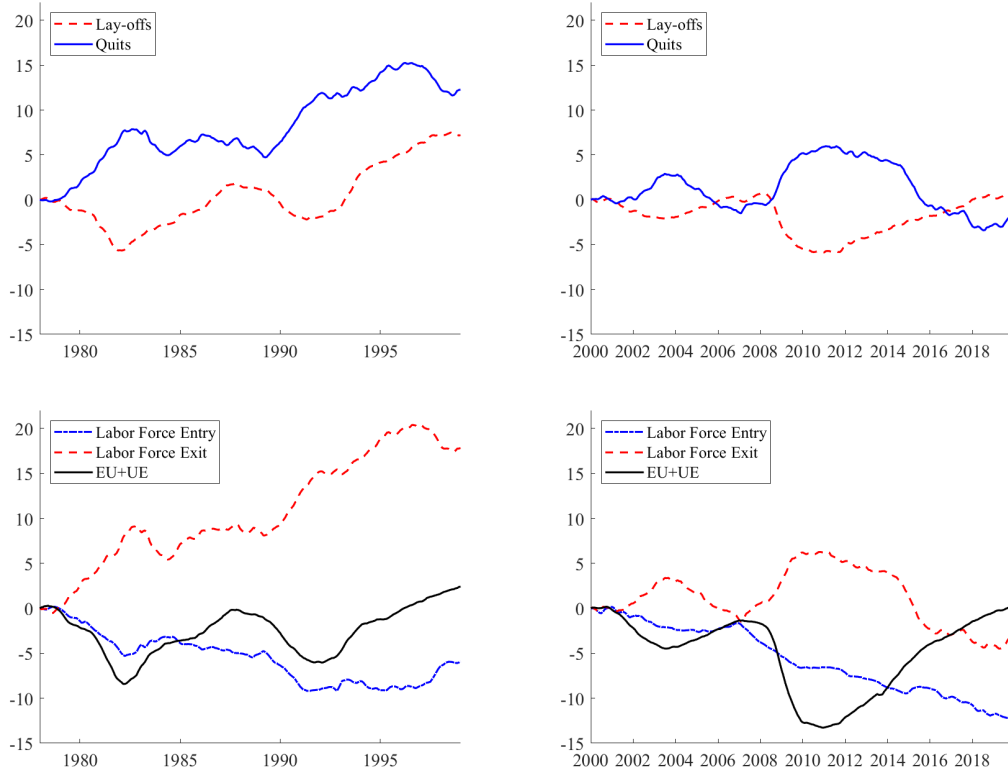


Figure 9: Shapley-Owen decomposition of flow contribution to employment-population trends.

them as distinct. Labor force participation decisions are quantitatively important as well.

5 Theory: Implications for Models of the Labor Market.

Most theories of the labor market view recessions as a time where the net value of employment declines relative to non-employment. Existing jobs are destroyed as firms and workers cannot find terms under which they benefit from continuing their relationship. Vacancies fall as new hires become less profitable.

In this section, we analyze a workhorse model of labor markets to argue that our empirical findings present a refinement, or even a challenge, to this conventional wisdom. In the data, recessions are a time when quits and the share of laid off workers who exit the labor force both fall. In the general theory we present, this is indicative of labor supply increasing, at least on the margin. We will show this is at odds with some theories of recessions: the shocks that generate recessions also generate a decline in labor supply. Extending models to replicate this behavior is important for understanding drivers of business cycles and how labor supply decisions serve to dampen business cycle fluctuations.

The model follows [Garibaldi and Wasmer \(2005\)](#) who augment the Mortensen Pissarides model with shocks to the value of non-participation to generate quits distinct from layoffs and significant gross flows across labor force participation.

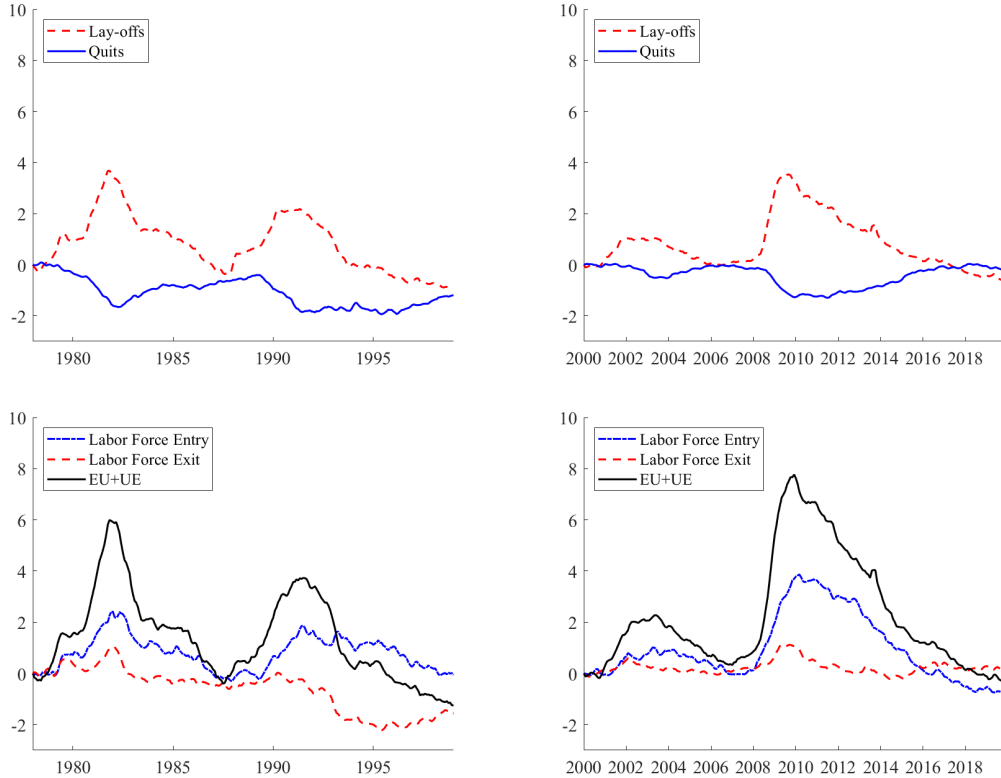


Figure 10: Shapley-Owen decomposition of flow contribution to the unemployment rate.

5.1 Model Set Up

Time is continuous. The model has two types of agents: firms and unit measure individuals. Both types are risk neutral and discount the future at rate $r > 0$.

Individuals may either be employed (e), unemployed (u), or are a non-participant (n). Individuals differ in their value of home production, b .¹³ A non-participant collects the full value of their home production b . An unemployed worker collects a share of their home production that is net of search costs and unemployment benefits $(1 - \alpha)b$. It is assumed that $0 \leq \alpha \leq 1$. An employed individual collects labor income $w(b)$, a Nash-bargained wage that will depend on the worker's individual outside option b .

An individual's value of home production (b), realized or latent, follows a stochastic process. The initial value is drawn from a continuous distribution with c.d.f $F(b)$. New draws occur at Poisson rate ρ .

Individuals make labor supply choices. Non-employed individuals choose whether to search for a job in unemployment or do not search and are a non-participant. Unemployed individuals receive job offers at rate $\lambda(\theta)$ and non-participants receive no offers. Employed workers choose whether to quit to non-employment. Jobs can also end exogenously at rate δ .

¹³We call b home production for convince but the quantitative interpretation of b is any idiosyncratic time-varying wedge in the flow net benefit of a job. Real reasons for this could be related to child care needs, health, return to school, etc.

Let $W(b)$, $U(b)$, and $N(b)$ be the values of employment, unemployment, and non-participation (respectively) to an individual with home productivity b . These can be defined recursively as:

$$\begin{aligned}
(r + \rho)W(b) &= w(b) + \rho \int_{b'} \max\{W(b'), U(b'), N(b')\} dF(b') \\
&\quad + \delta[\max\{U(b), N(b)\} - W(b)] \\
(r + \rho)U(b) &= (1 - \alpha)b + \rho \int_{b'} \max\{U(b'), N(b')\} dF(b') \\
&\quad + \lambda(\theta)[\max\{W(b), U(b)\} - U(b)] \\
(r + \rho)N(b) &= b + \rho \int_{b'} \max\{U(b'), N(b')\} dF(b')
\end{aligned}$$

Firms choose whether to pay a cost κ to maintain an open vacancy. A vacancy yields a match with an unemployed individual at rate $\lambda^f(\theta)$. All employed matches produce output y and so the flow profit to a firm with worker with home production b is $y - w(b)$. Firms enter freely until their matching probability reaches the value where the expected profit from posting an additional vacancy net of the posting cost equals zero. Let $J(b)$ denote the value of a match given the worker's current draw b .

$$(r + \rho)J(b) = y - w(b) + \rho \int_{b'} \max\{J(b'), 0\} dF(b') - \delta J(b)$$

Wages are determined by Nash bargaining in the standard way. Let $J(b)$ be the value of the match to the firm and β be the worker's bargaining power. Then,

$$w(b) = \operatorname{argmax}_w [W(b) - \max\{U(b), N(b)\}]^\beta J(b)^{1-\beta}$$

The meeting probabilities $\lambda(\theta)$ and $\lambda^f(\theta)$ are determined by market tightness $\theta = \frac{v}{u}$ where v is the measure of vacancies and u is the measure of unemployed individuals. The flow of total matches is given by a matching function $m(u, v)$. The function $m(\cdot)$ is assumed to have constant returns to scale so then an unemployed individual meets a firm at rate $\lambda(\theta) = \frac{m(u, v)}{u} = m(1, \theta)$ and a vacancy meets an unemployed worker at rate $\lambda^f(\theta) = m(\theta^{-1}, 1)$.

An equilibrium is a pair of policy functions: quits $g^q(b)$ and entry to unemployment from non-employment $g^e(b)$; a measure of vacancies v ; the distribution of unemployed workers across states denoted with cdf $F^u(b)$.¹⁴ These objects determine an equilibrium market tightness θ which all agents take as given. We will focus on comparative statics of stationary equilibria, those where the joint distribution of workers across states and types is constant but there are still gross flows of individuals.

As shown in [Garibaldi and Wasmer \(2005\)](#), the policy functions each satisfy a cut-off rule. The quit cut-off is b^q such that $W(b^q) = N(b^q)$. For any $b > b^q$, a worker will quit and quit specifically to non-participation since $\alpha > 0$. The entry/exit cut-off is b^e such that $U(b^e) =$

¹⁴The distribution is necessary so that firms can calculate the expected profits from whom they then meet when posting a vacancy.

$N(b^e)$. For any b larger than/smaller than or equal to b^e a non-employed worker will exit/enter the labor force.¹⁵

We will call a labor force exit from employment due to $b > b^q$ a “quit” and a labor force exit following the arrival of destruction shock δ due to $b > b^e$ a “layoff”. Costly search ($\alpha > 0$) implies $U(b) < W(b)$ for all $b \leq b^q$ and so the quit threshold must be higher than the exit threshold: $b^q > b^e$. Workers who exit after layoff span $(b^e, b^q]$. These workers would be happy to keep working while employed but decide to exit and not look for work if they are laid off. It makes sense to call these workers “marginal”. They appear in center (blue) in Figure 11.

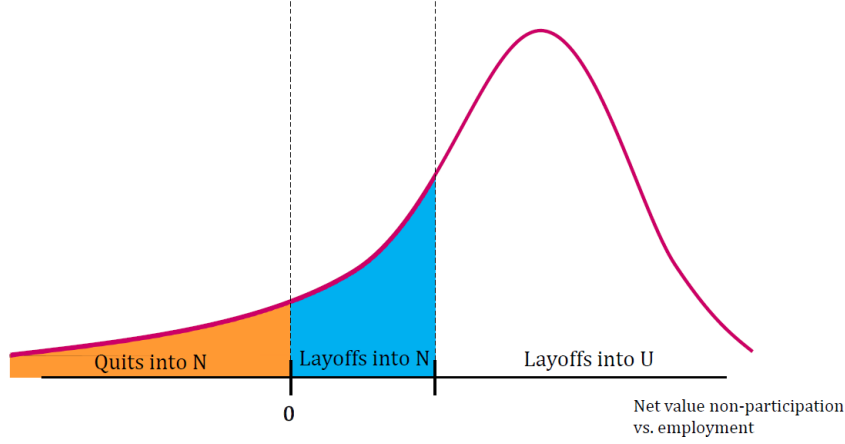


Figure 11: Cut-off rules and the distribution of workers.

Figure 11 provides a qualitative depiction of workers’ quit and exit cut-offs ranked on a hypothetical distribution over net values of employment provided by variation in home production b . The x-axis depicts $W(b) - N(b)$. The quit threshold b^q is where $W(b^q) = N(b^q)$. The participation threshold is to the right, indicating that a greater net value of employment is necessary to enter to compensate for paying search costs in unemployment. The blue shaded area between the two is the mass of marginally attached workers.

Characterizing a recession in the model that looks like the data. Empirically, recessions are characterized by declines in market tightness and subsequent job finding rates. We will define recessions in the model similarly. In the model, vacancies are determined by the zero profit condition. It is,

$$0 = -\kappa + \lambda^f(\theta) \int_{\underline{b}}^{b^q} J(b') dF(b')$$

Substituting the expected value of a match, in equilibrium, we have:

$$\kappa = \lambda^f(\theta)(1 - \beta) \frac{b^q - b^e}{r + \rho + \delta}$$

¹⁵If there is no b^q such that $W(b^q) = N(b^q)$, then the worker always quits or always not quit depending on $W(b) > N(b)$ or $W(b) < N(b)$ for all b . Similar logic holds for b^e . These are not empirically relevant cases and so we consider only the parameter space where b^q and b^e are determinate.

A recession that is consistent with the data is depicted in Figure 12. To simultaneously have market tightness fall, quits fall, and exit rates after a layoff fall it must be that both b^q and b^e rise, but b^e rises more than b^q . The quit threshold b^q is where the worker is paid the total surplus of the current match. The entry threshold b^e is where the value of searching for a new match, net of the search cost, offsets the outside option of home production. The difference between b^q and b^e therefore reflects that having a job is more valuable than searching for one. This gap is entirely due to search costs and frictions and gives rise to a “job hoarding” motive. It takes a higher draw of outside option b to induce a worker to quit than it does to induce a worker to exit the labor force because re-entry into unemployment is costless but re-entry into employment is not. A recession must then be a time when job hoarding motives decrease, curiously alongside a decrease in quits and a decline in workers’ job finding rates. This is the dynamic that is hard to capture: job hoarding decreases when non-employment becomes less nasty relative to employment but (1) lower job finding rates make non-employment more nasty, and (2) if non-employment is less nasty then exits after layoff should increase, counter to the data.

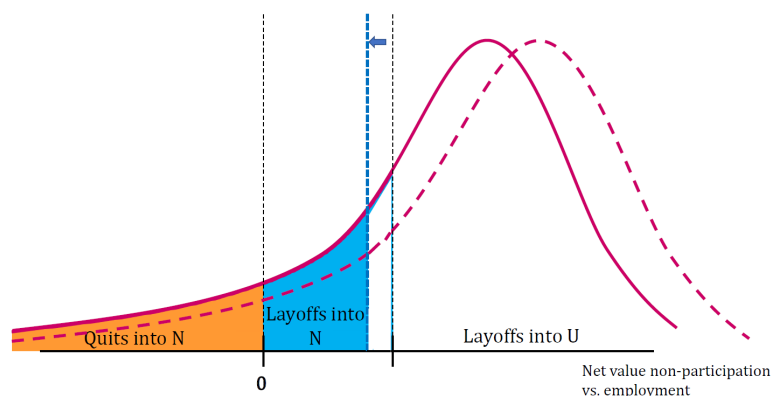


Figure 12: A recession that features procyclical quits, exit rates after layoff, and market tightness.

Why could exits after layoff fall in a recession? The threshold to exit after layoff is where the loss of home production due to search costs is equal to the gain from searching for a job: $\alpha b^e = \lambda(\theta)(W(b^e) - U(b^e))$. All else equal, exits after layoff decrease (b^e becomes larger) when α decreases, $\lambda(\theta)$ increases, or when the net benefit of search increases.

It is well established that the job finding rate $\lambda(\theta)$ is procyclical. This must be a feature of any theory of labor markets over the cycle and must be undone by other features to deliver procyclical exits after lay-off.

What about the net benefit of search? Using the definitions of W and U we have:

$$\beta \frac{b^q - b^e}{r + \rho + \delta} = \frac{\alpha b^e}{\lambda}$$

We showed that $b^q - b^e$ must fall to generate a decline in vacancies, as in the data. It is also the case that job finding rates λ fall during recessions in the data. To get quits after layoffs to decrease, a decline in b^e , we must offset these two forces. There are two remaining margins: either the search cost α or lay-off rate δ must fall. Lay-off rates move in the opposite direction, rising or at least not falling during recessions. That leave search costs. Search cost α has a broad interpretation. A rise in unemployment benefits during recessions would be captured as a fall in α : the net benefit of unemployment and claiming benefits rises relative to non-participation and not claiming benefits. This is one plausible mechanism for quits after layoffs to fall in a recession.

Why could quits fall in a recession? The threshold to quit from employment is where the value of home production is equal to the total expected joint-surplus of the match. This is:

$$b^q = y - \rho \int_{\underline{b}}^{b^q} [J(b') + W(b') - N(b')] dF(b')$$

The expression includes the result that Nash bargaining dictates provision of the entire flow value of production to the worker on the margin of quitting. Workers quit less often (b^q increases) when current productivity y increases or the net surplus of employment relative to non-employment increases. Productivity is generally acyclical or procyclical and so the recessionary decline in quits ought to come from the increase in the net surplus of employment. Yet because productivity does not move much, the change in the net value likely comes from a fall in the value of non-employment. There is one force in the model working in this direction: a decline in the job finding rate. Whether this is a quantitatively important force is a delicate balance. Declines in the job finding rate would push towards more quits after layoff, a movement opposite to our empirical findings that would have to be undone by another force. Further, it would have to be “undone” by another force significantly enough to have the gap between b^q and b^e increase substantially enough to maintain the decline in vacancies found in the data.

Taking Stock. In this section we analyzed what is required from a conventional search model to deliver three key empirical characteristics of labor markets: (i) there are large gross participation flows; (ii) quits and exits after layoff fall in recessions; (iii) market tightness falls in recessions. The model required a decrease in the job hoarding motive, decrease in the value of non-participation relative to employment, and a decrease in the value of unemployment relative to non-participation. Neither a productivity shock nor a shock to the job destruction rate, alone, could provide all three. It may be possible to manufacture an empirically consistent recession by decreasing search costs α , perhaps interpreted as a rise in unemployment benefits. The decline in job finding rates may be enough to decrease the quit rate through a decline in the value of non-participation with the modification that quitting workers are not eligible for unemployment benefits. Altogether, it is a quantitative question because a decline in vacancies is also necessary. One thing is clear: productivity shocks work in the wrong way on labor supply in all dimensions.

Perhaps it is better then to focus on ingredients that the model does not have that could put it into better shape. The first is risk aversion and non-labor income. If there are wealth effects on labor supply then countercyclical declines in non-labor income, such as asset income, would raise labor supply during recession and reduce quits. Countercyclically elevated risk would do the same. The second is heterogeneity. It could be that the workers laid off in a recession are selected to be those most likely to remain in the labor force or the workers surviving in employment are the most attached. We will explore these ideas in the following sections but it is a non-exhaustive list. Our point is to assess other theories and models of the labor markets over the business cycle by considering whether they also replicate the counter-cyclicality of labor supply, on the margin, that is salient in our empirical analysis.

6 Focus on Marginal Participants

This section uses the unique ability to break down the data by different demographics in the CPS to better inform margins on which benchmark theories could be enriched to better capture labor supply dynamics. While there are many interesting ways to slice the data, this section focuses on married women and Blacks. In sum, married women and Blacks make up about 35% of both the labor force and employed workers in the U.S. over the last 30 years. While married women and Blacks are different in many aspects of their labor market patterns, both are characterized by frequently crossing the participation margin, a defining characteristic of “marginal participants” critical to the theory of Section 5. The monthly flow rates from the labor force to non-participation for married women and Blacks are 28% and 26%, respectively. These flows are about twice as high as the flow rates for prime-age white men, a group that is commonly studied when analyzing the U.S. labor market and considered highly attached.

Overview. Figure 13 shows that quits account for a significantly higher share of total separations for married women and Blacks than for prime-age white men and the average US worker. About 40% of total separations are quits but 50-60+% of separations of marginal participants are quits. This implies that marginal participants are an important contributor to the aggregate quit rate. It also reinforces the meaning of the term “marginal participant” since these two groups have high labor force participation rates but also high quit rates implying frequent moves between employment and non-participation.

A higher share of each Black and married women workers choose to exit the labor force if they are laid-off than compared to other workers. Figure 14 shows 28% of laid off Black workers exit the labor force. For married women this number is 53%. For comparison, only 14% of all prime-age white men leave into non-participation after experiencing a layoff. Thus, married women and Blacks are about 2 to 3 times more likely to exit the labor force after layoff than the group of highly attached prime-aged men. As discussed in Section 5, the participation decision after a layoff is an important part of labor supply. Such workers are assumed to have wanted to continue working while employed but decide to exit and not look for work if they are laid off.

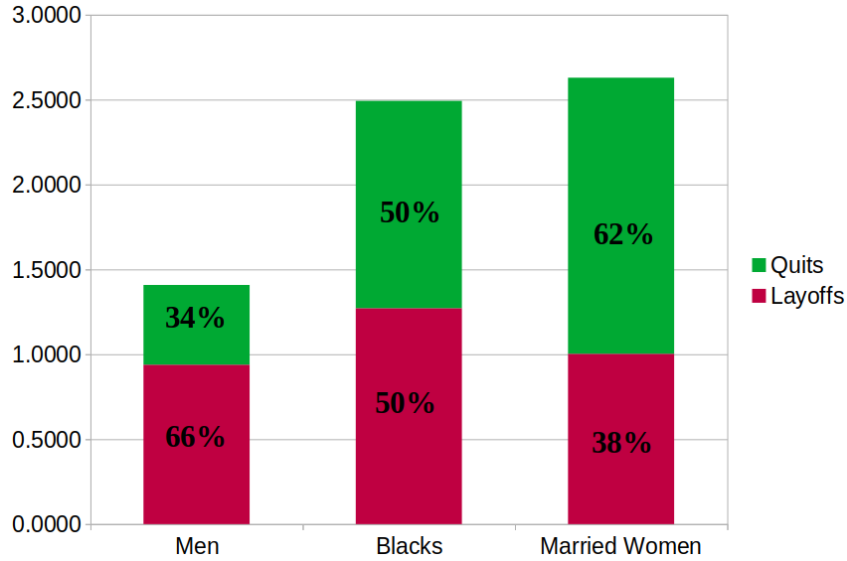


Figure 13: Share of quits and layoffs

This means that, all else equal, changes in layoff rates would have a greater impact on the labor supply of these groups. The next section uses the business cycle to evaluate the “all else equal” caveat and see whether the labor supply of laid off marginal workers changes in recession.

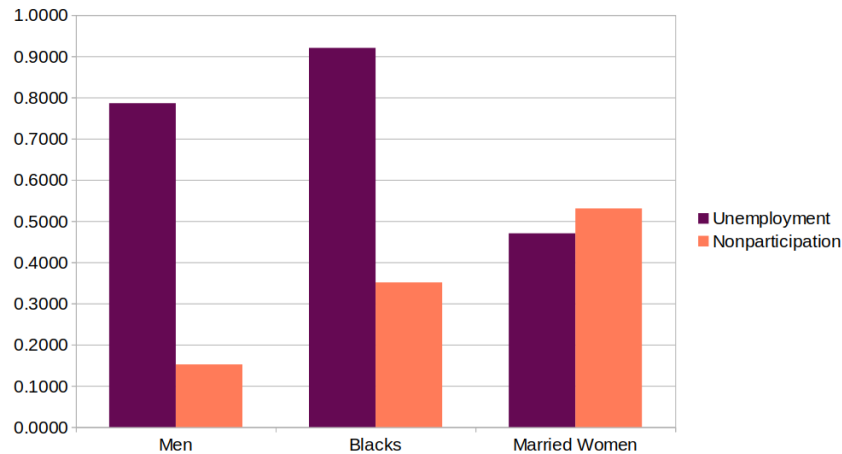


Figure 14: Destination after layoff

Business Cycle Married women and Blacks experience a significantly larger decline in quits during a recession, defined by NBER dates, than the average worker. Figure 15 compares them to men. Notably, the decline in quits for Blacks and married women is almost entirely a result of a decline in quits into non-participation. By contrast, the highly attached group (men) show almost no change in quits into N.

Another way to show Blacks and married women have more pro-cyclical quits is by assessing their correlation with the unemployment rate. Table 9 shows that the correlation of quits with the unemployment rate is 2 to 4 times higher for Blacks and married women, respectively, than for the average US worker studied in Section 3. The correlation of layoffs with the unemployment

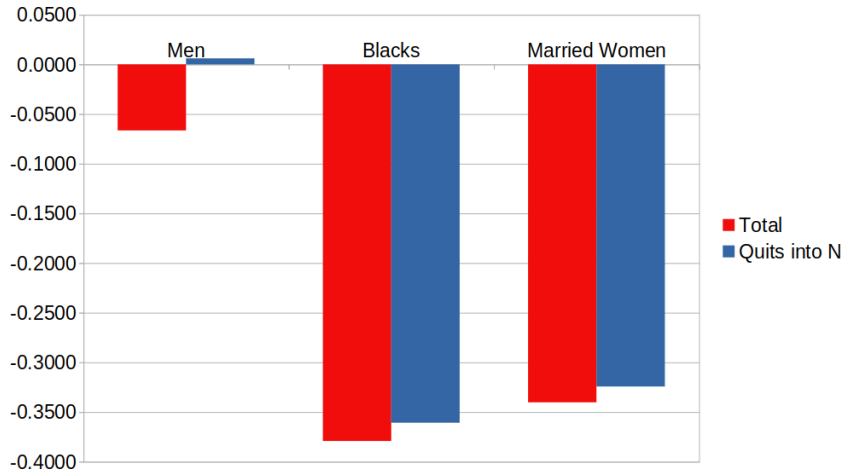


Figure 15: Recession change in quits

rate for both groups, however, is more comparable to the average in the US economy (0.5775). Blacks display a slightly higher volatility, indicating a larger increase in layoffs during recessions, and married women experience a lower volatility.

Married women become much less likely to exit the labor force after a layoff if that layoff occurs during a recession. Column 3 of Table 9 shows the correlation of the share of laid off workers that exit the labor force for each group with the unemployment rate. The comparable statistic for the whole population is -0.2569 suggesting the elasticity of quit behavior to the unemployment rate is almost twice as high for married women than for the average worker.

For Blacks, on the other hand, the state of the economy does not seem to be correlated with the likelihood of exiting the labor force after a layoff. While employed Black workers quit less during recessions signaling higher attachment to the labor force, this increased attachment is not present after they experience a layoff. While providing an explanation of this differing behavior is beyond the scope of this paper, it highlights the importance of studying labor supply decisions of different demographic groups on the extensive margin to understand overall business cycle patterns.

Demographic group	Quits	Layoffs	Share of layoffs into N
Blacks	-0.3852	0.5952	0.0041
Married Women	-0.7623	0.5133	-0.4920

Table 9: Correlations with the unemployment rate

Taking stock, marginal participants refine our theories in two ways. First, since they are the ones moving across the participation margin, the magnitudes of their experiences may be more in-line with magnitudes in the model. For example, when thinking about how much labor hoarding reduces quits in the aggregate, it may still be more accurate to look at the recessionary fall in job finding rates for these groups since they drive both the level and cyclicity of overall quits in the economy. Second, they may hold clues to specific mechanisms outside the

basic model. For example, [Ellieroth and Michaud \(2024\)](#) develop a theory of a counter-cyclical “non-subtracted worker” effect that can account for married women’s procyclical quits. The mechanism is that higher risk to spousal job loss during recessions serves as an increased risk of a wealth effect that raises labor supply out of a precautionary motive. Such wealth effects may be present for other workers through countercyclical risk to financial assets.

7 Focus on an Episode: The Pandemic Recession and Recovery

The empirical patterns we’ve established are strikingly similar across recessions. No single episode better proves this point than the recession and recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic recession stood out compared to other recessions in many aspects, our new time series of quits and layoffs show that the business cycle patterns of quits, layoffs, and labor supply decisions are mostly unremarkable. They are consistent with historic patterns given economic fundamentals.

The pandemic recession was characterized by an unprecedented increase in layoffs. Our data show that the increase in layoffs is accompanied by a decrease in quits. Thus, like all other recessions, quits fall as layoffs increase. However, compared to the prior recessions, we see an increase in total separations into non-employment during the pandemic recession (see [Figure 2](#)). Unlike prior recessions, quits did not, and arithmetically could not, fall enough to offset the huge rise in layoffs. While looking at total separations might lead someone to conclude that the pandemic recession was different, observing layoffs and quits separately shows that the business cycle pattern is consistent with our findings about procyclical quits and countercyclical layoffs.

We emphasized that the share of laid off workers who exit the labor force falls during a recession and the pandemic recession is no different. However, the magnitude of that fall is striking as layoffs into non-participation made up almost 50% of all layoffs prior in late 2019, but then dropped to under 20% in early and mid-2020. Being able to decompose transitions into non-participation into quits and layoffs, allows to us to make this observation which potentially has important implications for policy makers, e.g. were the unemployment insurance benefits extensions during that time period an important contributor for this finding?

Lastly, let us focus on the recovery after the pandemic recession, a period which has been frequently called the “great resignation”. The pandemic recession has been referred to as such because of the “high level of worker separations in the form of quits” ([Şahin and Tasci \(2022\)](#)) Most studies researching this phenomenon have been using quits data from JOLTS.¹⁶ However, contrary to JOLTS data, our time series of quits does not display an increase in the Covid recovery higher than in previous recessions.¹⁷ [Figure 16](#) shows the peak-to-peak change for the 2001, 2007, and 2020 recessions, and it is clear from the figure that the recovery after the

¹⁶The final section of this paper speaks more of the difference between the CPS and JOLTS.

¹⁷Our data can be combined with the CPS series of employer-to-employer flows assembled by [Fujita et al. \(Forthcoming\)](#) but their series does not identify an employer to employer move as a quit or layoff. These figures are in the final section of the paper.

pandemic recession follows a very similar pattern as the recovery after the 2007 recession, albeit on a seemingly faster timeline.

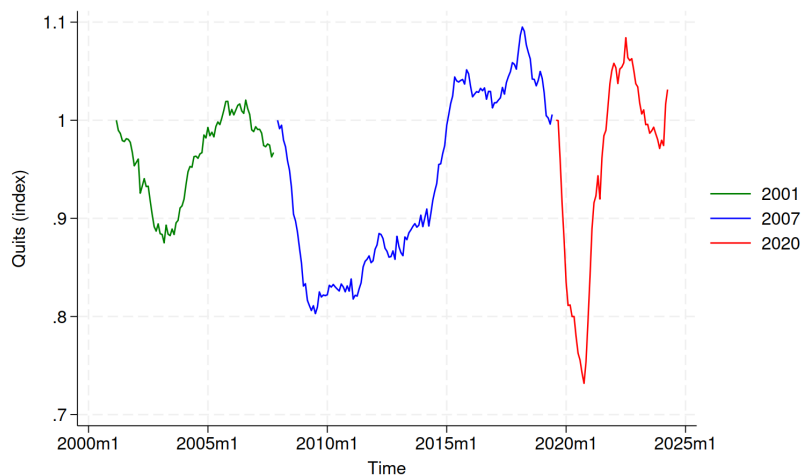


Figure 16: Peak-to-peak change in quits for the 3 most recent recessions (Note: Each peak is normalized to 1)

The similarity to other episodes of quits, layoffs, and labor force participation in the pandemic recession is best seen by comparing flows to economic fundamentals. For an “apples to apples” comparison, we consider correlations with market tightness. Market tightness is defined as the number of unemployed over the number of vacancies.

Figure 17 displays the correlation of quits with labor market tightness using peak-to-peak data for the same three recessions, and similarly, we do not find evidence of a great resignation. All three recessions show a positive correlation of quits and labor market tightness with a very similar magnitude of correlation. The only apparent deviation is the negative correlation between quits and labor market tightness in the first few months of the pandemic. The subsequent recovery has displayed similar correlations as past cycles.

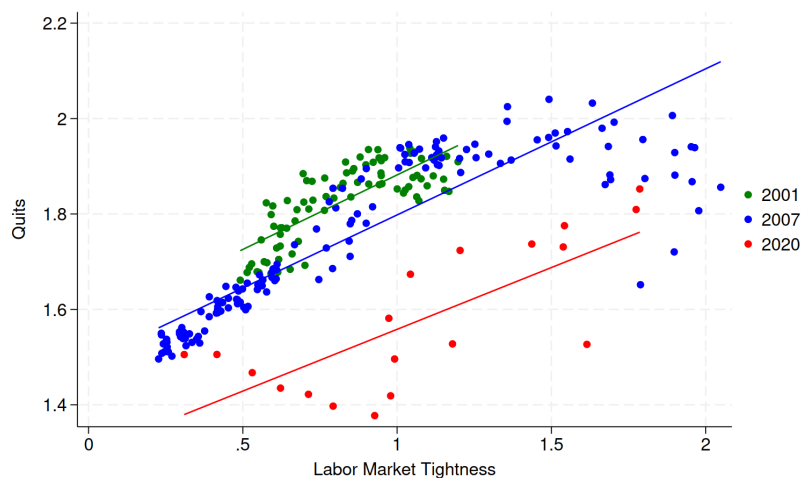


Figure 17: Correlation of quits with labor market tightness for the 3 most recent recessions

8 Comparison to Jolts and Other Data

The Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) has been the primary source used to analyze quits and layoffs in the United States.¹⁸ It is a monthly employer survey run by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). In this section, we compare our CPS quits and layoffs series with the corresponding JOLTS series.

JOLTS defines layoffs as “Involuntary separations initiated by the employer” and quits “Employees who left voluntarily. Exception: retirements or transfers to other locations are reported with Other Separations”. Lastly, the JOLTS category “Other Separations” includes “retirements; transfers to other locations; deaths; or separations due to employee disability”. Therefore, a quit in JOLTS is any voluntary separation with the exception of retirement, disability, death, or transfers to other locations; and a layoff is any involuntary separation. It is important to note that JOLTS includes job-to-job quits and layoffs, whereas we can only observe the quits and layoff distinction for separations to non-employment¹⁹ The JOLTS are also known to under count separations even when sampling weights are applied because they do not measure separations due to firm exit (Faberman (2005)). To remedy this, the disseminated JOLTS data are adjusted via a Monthly Alignment Method to produce stocks that are consistent with employment measured in the Current Employment Statistics (CES) (Cheng et al. (????)).

In order to compare our data to JOLTS, we will restrict it accordingly. Layoffs are straightforward since we, similar to JOLTS, only consider individuals as laid off if they lost their job involuntarily. With regards to quits, we exclude all individuals who are retired²⁰ and disabled individuals are automatically excluded because they are not in the universe of individuals being asked the question of reason for non-participation. Death is also automatically excluded due to our linking strategy, because a dead person would not show up in the current month. Lastly, since we only consider separations into non-employment we do not have to worry about transfers to other locations. The earliest available from JOLTS is for January 2001, so restrict our series to start at the same date. Both series are seasonally-adjusted.

Figure 18 compares the JOLTS layoffs series with our layoffs series constructed using the CPS, including and excluding the pandemic recession. For every month in the sample, with the exception of the pandemic recession, the layoff rate computed using JOLTS data exceeds our layoff rate based on the CPS data. The correlation between the two series for the entire time period is 0.63. Notably, our layoffs series is significantly more responsive to fluctuations in the unemployment rate. The correlation of the CPS layoffs series with the unemployment rate is 0.50, whereas it is only 0.27 for the JOLTS layoffs series.

The comparison of these data sources poses an important challenge for researchers going

¹⁸Other complementary and timely data sources include the Survey of Consumer Finance (SCF) as for example in Koşar and Van der Klaauw (2023).

¹⁹Fujita et al. (Forthcoming) provide a series of employer to employer flows that does not distinguish quits and layoffs.

²⁰By definition, they should not be asked the question in the CPS, but yet, there is a very small number in some months, which respond with retirement, and we exclude those

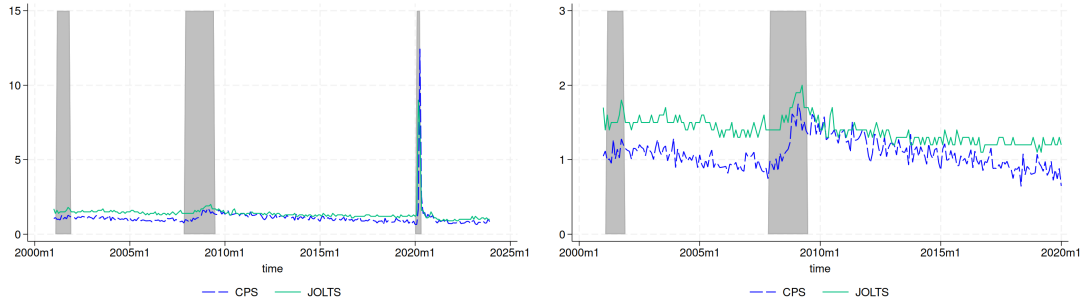


Figure 18: Layoffs, full series (left) and with the removal of 2020 + (right).



Figure 19: JOLTS total Quits and our adjusted CPS quit to nonemployment series

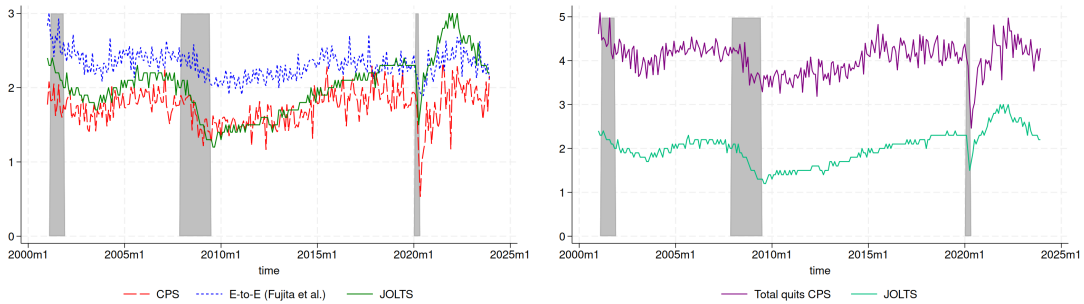


Figure 20: Quits: adjusted CPS quits to nonemployment, E-to-E flows [Fujita et al. \(Forthcoming\)](#), and JOLTS (Left); combined CPS quits plus E-to-E and JOLTS (right)

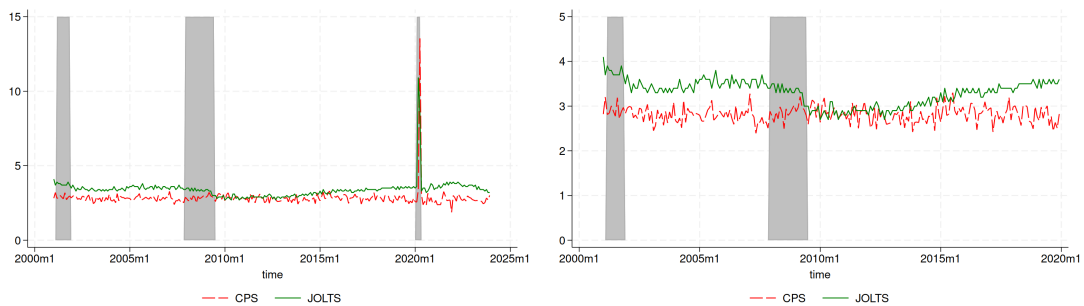


Figure 21: Total separations, full series (left) and with the removal of 2020 + (right).

forward: what is the true layoff rate? How does it vary over the cycle? Answering these questions

is important for understanding the true nature of job destruction. Further research is also needed to assess the divergence of the quit series starting in the late 2010's. Maybe it has to do with multiple job holders because JOLTS measures "jobs" and CPS measures "employed people". Or it could be due to the accuracy of employer's classification of retirements, supposedly removed from JOLTS, becoming increasingly important due to demographics. We cannot be sure without future research into this issue.

9 Conclusion

We developed and analyzed a new data product for macroeconomists: quits, layoffs, and their subsequent labor participation status. These data were developed by harmonizing raw data in the CPS household survey. The standout results of our analysis are as follows. First, over 40% of layoffs lead to a labor force exit. This means that assuming all moves out of the labor force are quits, as has been frequent in the literature, has vastly overstated quits and understated layoffs. Quantitative macroeconomists should take note and reconsider their model targets. Second, both quits and the share of laid off workers exiting the labor force are procyclical. This means that labor supply, on the margin, increases in recessions which serves as a mitigating force against employment declines. Models of the labor market, particularly quantitative ones, should capture this feature. We walked through some ideas of what is necessary for this to occur in a simple search model.

The new data opens the door for many areas of future research and motivates many research questions. The most obvious question of interest is: why do so many laid off workers exit after being laid off and why is this number decreasing in recessions? The CPS data provide opportunities to examine household and worker correlates with these patterns that could bring us closer to answering this and other questions. Another important question is what drives the procyclicality of quits? Understanding this behavior is important since they play a critical role in smoothing employment separations over the business cycle by almost completely offsetting movements in layoffs.

A main motivation for this project was to provide additional information about the functioning of labor markets to help guide policy.²¹ Two things need to happen to increase the impact of these data. First, the gaps between our CPS series and JOLTS need to be better understood. The two series are some of the only high frequency data on quits and lay offs but, as we stand today, it is difficult to know how much to weight each series in our understanding. Second, macroeconometricians need to formally evaluate the predictive power and correlates of each series. Nonetheless, the research as it stands has an important take away for policy makers. Labor supply decisions matter and they matter more than we previously thought. Flows from employment to unemployment understate the true extent of job loss in the economy because job loss can lead workers to exit the labor force entirely. We hope future research will guide our

²¹Our series of quits and layoffs will be available at <https://sites.google.com/qlmonthly.com/home> and will be updated monthly.

understanding of whether there is a role for public policy to intervene in these exits or if they are simply a feature of individuals choosing what's best for themselves in a well functioning labor market.

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A Prime-age individuals

This section provides the same figures and statistics as in the main text but for the prime-age population, those between 25 and 55 years.

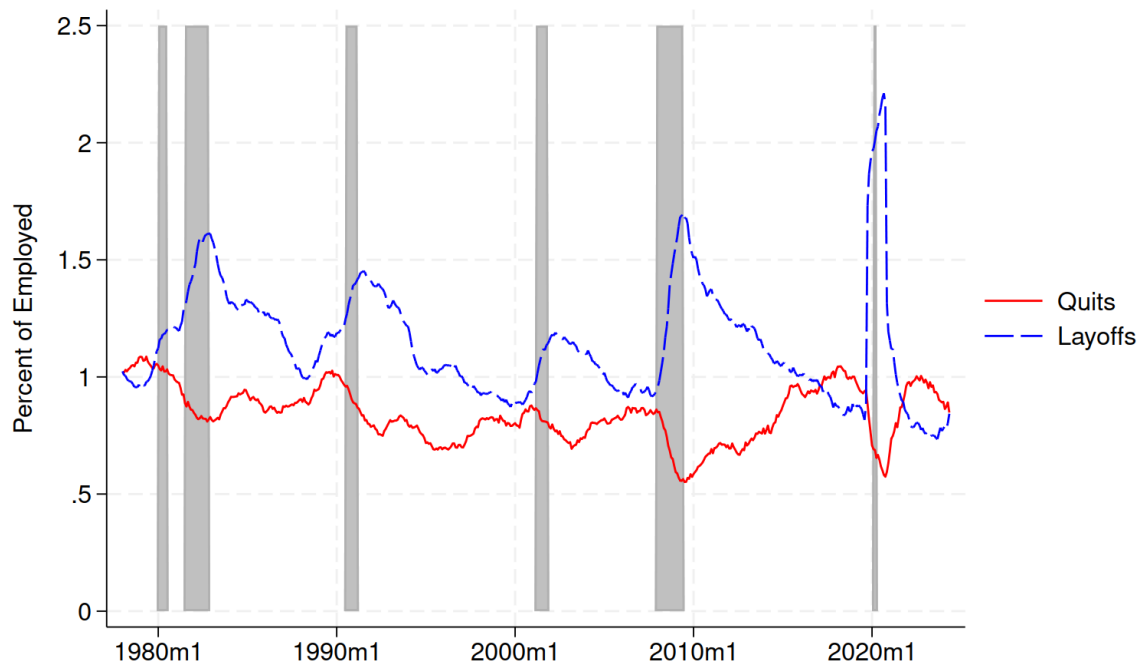


Figure 22: Quits and layoff for prime-age population (25-55 years)



Figure 23: Total separations

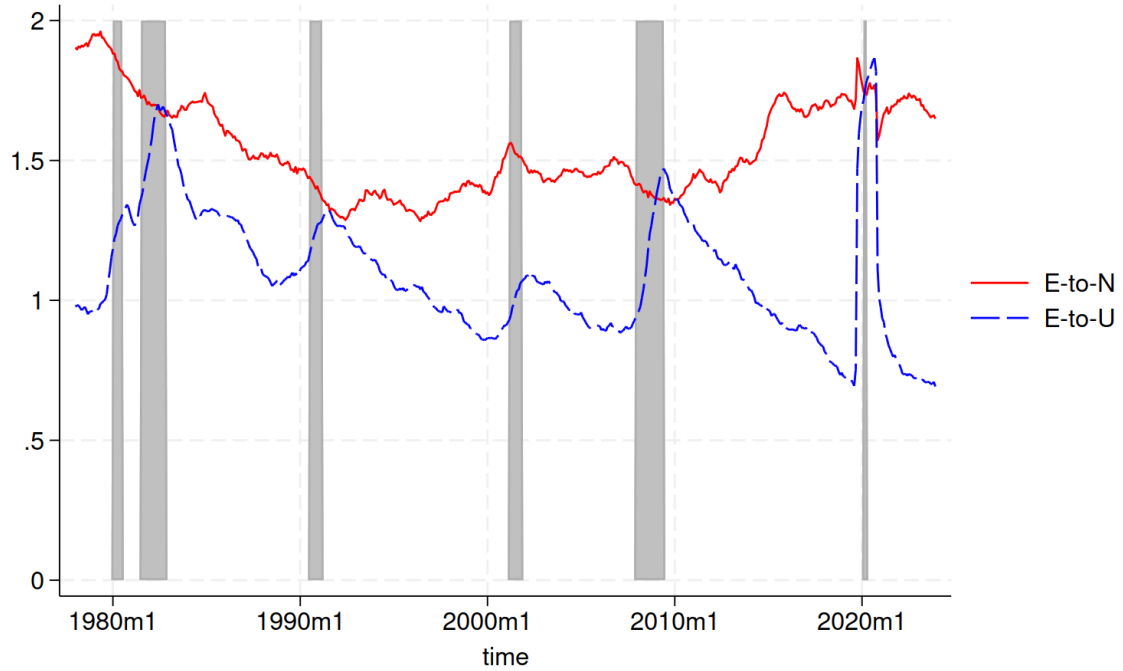


Figure 24: EN and EU flow rates for prime-age population (25-55 years)

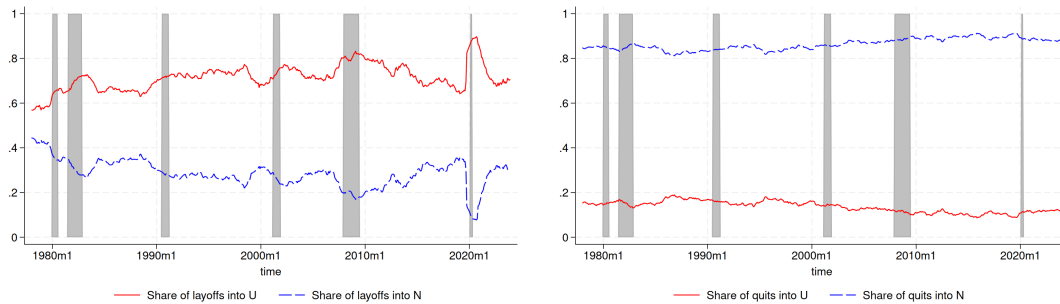


Figure 25: Share of quits and layoffs by destination for prime-age population (25-55 years)

Statistic	Quits			Layoffs			Total sep.
	to U	to N	Total	to U	to N	Total	to (U+N)
$\text{Corr}(x, y)$	-0.1671	-0.3674	-0.3871	0.5369	0.3225	0.5663	0.6142
$\text{SD}(x)/\text{SD}(y)$	0.0190	0.0874	0.0911	0.2502	0.0595	0.2778	

Table 10: Business cycle correlations of each flow (x) with the unemployment rate (y) for the prime-age population (25-55 years)

B Additional Statistics

B.1 Quits and Layoffs for Different Demographic Groups

We observe substantial heterogeneity and highlight here the most commonly used distinctions: gender, race, education, and family structure. However, the data allows for studying many more

Statistic	Share of Layoffs into N	Share of Quits into N
$\text{Corr}(x, y)$	-0.2647	-0.0289
$\text{SD}(x)/\text{SD}(y)$	0.0344	0.0141

Table 11: Business Cycle correlation of the share of layoffs and quits into N with the unemployment rate for the prime-age population

Statistics	E-to-U	E-to-N
$\text{Corr}(x, y)$	0.6164	0.0087
$\text{SD}(x)/\text{SD}(y)$	0.2555	0.1186

Table 12: Business Cycle correlation of the E-to-U and E-to-N transition rates with the unemployment rate for the prime-age population

dimensions of heterogeneity.

Gender We observe very clear level differences between men and women in their quit series. For women, quits are twice as large in the 1980s than for men, and this difference slowly decreases as the monthly quits for women decline. Actually, it appears that both quits and layoffs are trending downwards over time for women, whereas there is no apparent trend for men in either of the two series. For men, quits and layoffs are on average about the same magnitude, but for women monthly quits are always larger than monthly layoffs, with the exception of the three pandemic months. For both men and women, quits are procyclical and layoffs are countercyclical.

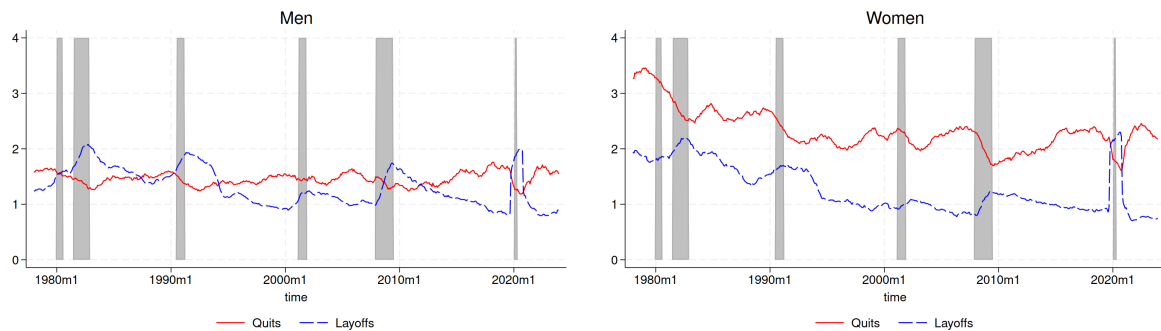


Figure 26: Quits and Layoffs by Gender

Race We also observe substantial level differences when distinguishing between Blacks and white individuals. Both quits and layoffs are larger for Blacks than Whites. Interestingly though, the co-movement of quits and layoffs are similar for both groups, it just looks as if the two series are shifted upwards for Blacks. For both groups, quits are larger than layoffs, with the notable exception of the 1980s for the Blacks, where layoffs were significantly larger than quits. It appears that Blacks and whites experienced a decline in their layoffs between the late 1970s and mid-2000s. Quits, however, are procyclical but without a clear trend.

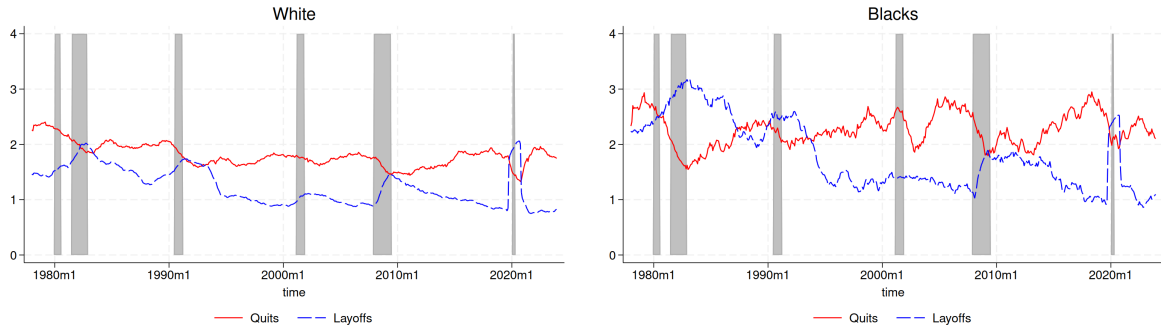


Figure 27: Quits and Layoffs by Race

Education Again, when we split the sample by education, we observe level differences. High school (at most) educated workers' quits and layoffs are higher than for College (at least) educated workers for the entire observation period. For both groups, quits are procyclical and layoffs are countercyclical. Although quits appear to fall more and layoffs increase more for high school educated workers, the relative changes (relative to their level) in recessions for the two groups are similar. Layoffs have been falling for the high school group from the 1980s until right before the pandemic, but we do not see a similar trend in the college group.

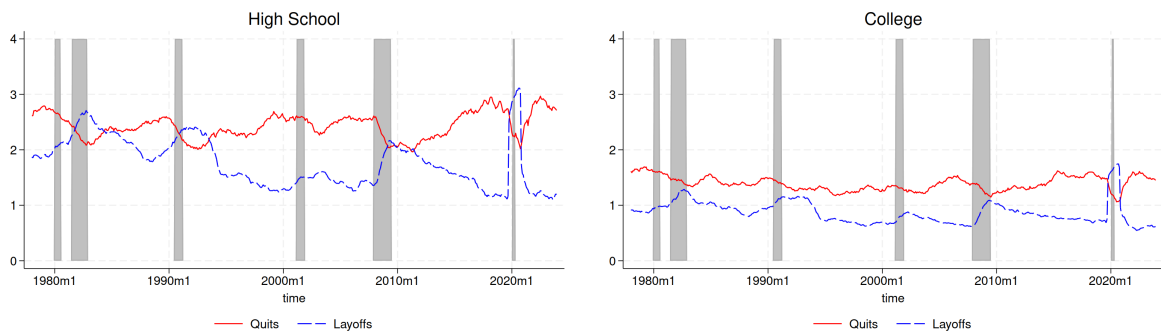


Figure 28: Quits and Layoffs by Education

Family Structure Lastly, we split the data into three groups: Married without kids, single without kids, and households with kids, such that there are no overlaps between the three groups. Maybe not too surprising, but households with kids have the highest quit rates, which are higher than for any of the other types we analyzed in this section. Furthermore, this group also has the highest layoff rates compared to married households and single households; however, this rate displays a clear downward trend from the early 1980s until the beginning of 2020.

Married and single households are more similar in their level of quits and layoffs. The quit rates for married households are slightly higher as married women have the highest quit rates (see [Ellieroth and Michaud \(2024\)](#)) and married men have the lowest and singles fall between the two. The quits and layoffs series for all three types of family structure display the procyclical quit pattern and countercyclical layoff pattern.

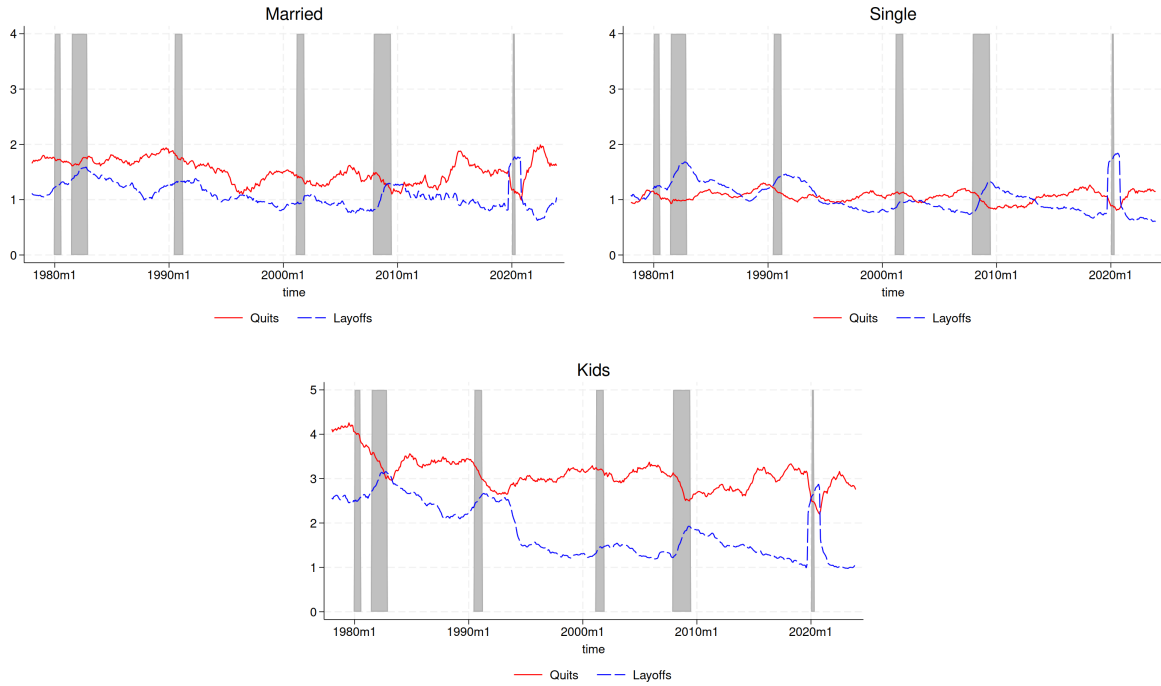


Figure 29: Quits and Layoffs by Family Structure

B.2 Complete Shapley Decomposition

	QN	QU	LN	LU	UE	NE	UN	NU
Expansion								
Employment	17.5	3.3	52.8	12.8	11.7	9.4	-6.6	-11.0
Unemployment	-8.5	1.3	-8.1	63.7	7.1	9.0	19.7	15.8
Recession								
Employment	-102.5	-1.2	+25.2	+91.6	+133.7	79.4	-45.6	-86.0
Unemployment	-1.3	11.6	5.2	27.7	33.0	7.4	12.7	16.4

Table 13: Shapley values of flows measured as percent contribution to change in employment/population and the unemployment rate.

B.3 Alternative Beveridge Curve

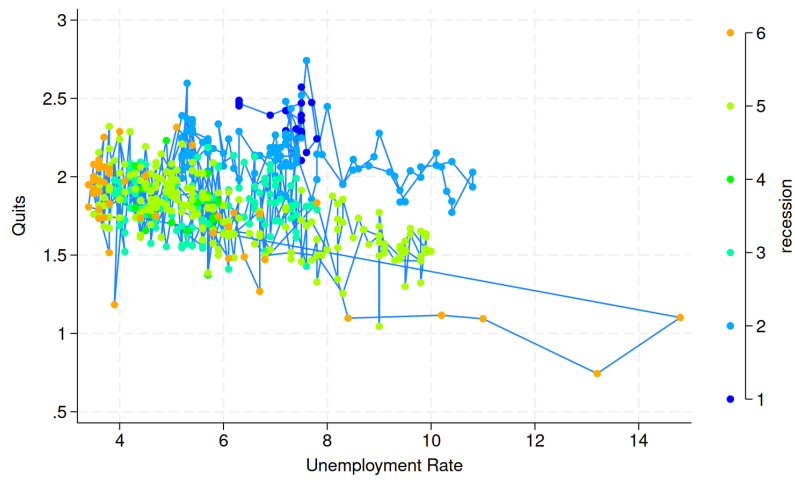


Figure 30: Beveridge Curves for the entire time period