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With the Bureau of Labor Statistics's (BLS's) release of preliminary December employment data for Rhode Island and the country, a sense of the year (and the likely revisions forthcoming) comes into focus. In December, Rhode Island's unemployment rate dropped once again, to 5.1%, from 5.2% in November, bringing the string of decreases to 29 straight months.

Once again, though, the apparent improvement came only because the employment drop (of 371 people) was overshadowed by the decrease in Rhode Islanders working or looking for work (down by 801). Looking at the year, Rhode Island lost nearly half of the gains it had made in labor force through August and 1,849 of the 16,747 employed residents it had gained through the same month. In keeping with prior years, the employment number is likely to be trimmed by thousands with the revision. The first chart at right illustrates how December's results were part of a continuing downslide.

All six New England states continued to join in the decline, although in December nine other states slid, as well. The columns in the second chart are consequently smaller for both Massachusetts and Connecticut, this month, but Rhode Island remains the only Southern New England state below its January 2007 level of employment and labor force.

As the third chart shows, an unemployment rate that didn't make a positive out of lost labor force would have actually gone up, in December, rather than down. The red line shows what Rhode Island's unemployment rate would have been if the labor force had not shrunk since January 2007. As of December, the unemployment rate would have increased to 8.4%.

