

US Economic Crisis: Soaring Rate of Unemployment for African Americans

Flat Unemployment Rate Masks the Race Gap

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The U.S. economy added 162,000 jobs in March, but the unemployment rate held steady at 9.7 percent, according to new figures released by the Labor Department Friday.

On the whole, the economic news was mixed, but for African Americans, it was particularly troubling. The unemployment rate for whites held steady at 8.8 percent compared to February and went down for Asians from 8.4 percent to 7.5 percent. But it rose to 16.5 percent for blacks from 15.8 percent. Hispanics showed a slight increase as well from 12.4 percent to 12.6 percent.

"It's very disappointing," said Peter Edelman, a former Clinton administration official who directs the Center on Poverty, Inequality, and Public Policy at the Georgetown University.

While there have long been disparities in white and minority employment, Edelman said, the latest unemployment numbers from the Labor Department show that while "some white people got jobs, some black people and Latinos actually fell behind more."

"We're seeing a whole set of things happening in the recession that are making the inequity worse," said Seth Wessler, a researcher at the Applied Research Center, a racial justice think tank in Oakland.

Chief among those factors are the massive cuts meted out to public services on the state and local level, particularly to public transportation.

"If the bus line you depend on is cut, it's impossible to look for a job or even hold onto the one you have," Wessler said, "and we know that across the country - from New York to Los Angeles - bus service is being cut and fares are increasing."

"We know that people of color are much more likely to depend on public transportation," he added. "White people are not being impacted in quite the same way."

Edelman of Georgetown University believes the primary source of the job gap is the type of work that is emerging as the economy recovers: "mid-skilled" jobs in the health care and alternative energy sectors.

"There will be job growth. The question is who gets the job," Edelman said.

"The jobs that we project over the next decade that are reasonably well paying involve a

degree of skills and a degree of preparation,” he added, “and people of color have disparate educational attainment,” and will be less able to land that work without an associates degree or certificate from a local community college.

President Obama recognizes this, Edelman said, and included a \$10 billion investment in community colleges as part of his health care package, but the amount was slashed down to just \$2 billion as part of the “reconciliation” process between the House and Senate versions of the bill.

Other efforts at major federal job training and employment programs have floundered in Congress because of Republican opposition, Edelman said, and Obama has not done enough to overcome it.

Minority communities will likely see an increase in the coming months as the Census Bureau hires 700,000 enumerators who help count the U.S. population, said Heidi Shierholtz, a labor economist at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington.

But those jobs will be gone by the fall and Shierholtz believes unemployment will be on the rise again in the fourth quarter of 2010. The latest unemployment figures from the Labor Department show that more than 400,000 Americans have been out of work for more than six months and have joined the ranks of the “long-term unemployed.”

“I don’t think we’ve turned the corner,” she said, “and we will not turn the corner until early next year.”

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