

Black Youth Joblessness in Urban America: New Findings on a National Disgrace

by Robert Cherry

With the recent protests in Milwaukee and several other cities over police killings of young African American men, new attention has been focused on urban racial differentials in residential concentrations, poverty and underemployment. This article draws upon a large national census data set to document intercity racial and ethnic differences in the fractions of young men without jobs in the years since the 2008-09 Great Recession. The findings show pervasive high national joblessness of young black men that goes well beyond just deindustrialized cities.

Annual 2010 to 2014 employment data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey was gathered for non-institutionalized men, 20 to 34 years old, in 34 major US cities. Five-year pooled samples provide adequate sample sizes for each city to make reliable statistical estimates. The calculations in the table below show that, over this five-year span, the average rate of black joblessness or nonemployment (1 minus the employment/population rate) across these cities was, at 39.3 percent, nearly twice the rates of whites (22.3 percent) and Latinos (22 percent). In New York City over this period – a time of rapid citywide job growth – 41.6 percent of young black men were without jobs, compared to 22.7 percent of young whites and 29.1 percent of Hispanics.

The findings paint a particularly grim picture for black men in Midwestern industrial and Mid-Atlantic cities. The highest black joblessness rate (58.2 percent) was in Detroit, whose bankrupt economy also left the highest fraction of young whites (42.8%) without employment. In Milwaukee, 54 percent of young African Americans had no job, compared to the far lower rates of 17 and 26 percent, respectively, of the city's white and Latino young men. Like Detroit and Milwaukee, Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and DC, all had black jobless rates above 45 percent.

Black joblessness in southern and western cities was modestly lower: down as low as 31.7 and 23.3 percent in Dallas and Seattle,

respectively. Thus, weak labor markets cannot be the most important reason for such high black jobless rates so that simply expanding employment opportunities would likely have only a modest effect on the jobless rates of young black men.

Of course, these youth nonemployment rates may reflect in part differences in labor force participation and in college enrollment. But with higher enrollment rates among whites than African Americans, the role of school enrollment seems limited to the very youngest age 23 and under. One-sixth of non-institutionalized young black men have either no high school degree or no more than a high school equivalency degree (GED). Almost two-thirds of less-educated young black men, 25 to 29 years old, were jobless in 2010. There were more black men in this age group who were incarcerated than gainfully employed. However, the city data presented here indicate that the scourge of joblessness goes well beyond less-educated young black men and should be a national public policy priority.

The black joblessness data has direct ramifications for the black family. Kathryn Edin has linked this joblessness to the break-up of relationships leading to the “father-go-round” where black mothers enter sequential relationships with black men. While in her previous work, Edin pointed to the irresponsibility and infidelity of the male partners as the major causes for these break ups, the outcome is multi-partner fertility: a growing share of black mothers having children with more than one partner. Once biological fathers move out, a large percentage abandons their children left behind. Research documents the particularly harmful effects abandonment has on boys.

As these men enter into new relationships they tend to father additional children. Often these men are caring to their new children but are harsh with the children that their new partners had with other men. Statistics indicate that the rate of child maltreatment is three times higher for mothers living with a partner who is not the father of all her children than if she is without a partner. This contrast is particularly strong among black families. Without

Male Joblessness, 20 to 34 Years Old, by Race and Ethnicity (2010-14)

	Jobless Rates				Jobless Rate Ratios			Black Share	
	Total	White	Black	Hisp	B/T	B/W	B/H	All Men	Jobless
Atlantic									
Boston	25.3	19.9	33.5	28.7	1.32	1.69	1.17	15.2	20.0
New York	29.7	22.7	41.6	29.1	1.40	1.83	1.43	19.3	27.1
Philadelphia	39.4	31.6	49.5	39.5	1.25	1.57	1.25	33.2	41.7
Baltimore	33.6	21.6	45.3	14.8	1.35	2.09	3.06	51.0	68.6
District of Col	26.7	15.2	47.1	19.2	1.76	3.10	2.45	32.5	57.4
Industrial MW									
Pittsburgh	29.4	24.4	46.0	21.3	1.56	1.89	2.16	15.1	23.7
Cleveland	37.9	23.9	51.7	31.8	1.36	2.17	1.63	45.6	62.3
Detroit	53.3	42.8	58.2	26.4	1.09	1.36	2.21	77.2	84.3
Chicago	26.7	16.3	50.1	22.1	1.88	3.07	2.27	22.6	42.5
Milwaukee	32.5	17.5	54.4	26.1	1.67	3.12	2.08	32.5	54.4
Other MW									
Columbus	21.4	18.7	36.1	14.1	1.69	1.93	2.56	15.2	25.7
Cincinnati	25.5	20.0	39.3	20.8	1.54	1.96	1.88	25.1	38.6
Indianapolis	24.9	21.6	40.0	15.0	1.61	1.85	2.68	23.0	37.0
St. Louis	30.8	20.7	43.6	24.2	1.42	2.11	1.80	34.7	49.2
Kansas City	20.2	17.2	31.3	18.4	1.55	1.82	1.70	16.4	25.4
Minn-St. Paul	21.4	16.0	36.7	15.9	1.71	2.30	2.31	12.8	22.0
Oklahoma City	19.7	18.5	30.0	10.0	1.52	1.62	2.99	10.0	15.2
South									
Atlanta	28.5	20.9	36.5	19.3	1.28	1.74	1.89	41.4	52.9
Charlotte	20.0	15.5	35.2	9.7	1.76	2.27	3.63	26.9	47.3
Jacksonville	24.0	20.2	35.2	15.6	1.47	1.74	2.26	26.8	39.4
Miami	28.4	23.5	50.8	25.1	1.79	2.16	2.02	13.4	24.0
Memphis	30.4	23.7	37.6	13.3	1.24	1.59	2.82	51.8	64.2
New Orleans	31.7	20.5	42.1	14.9	1.33	2.06	2.83	48.7	64.7
Dallas	18.2	16.6	31.7	12.9	1.74	1.91	2.45	17.2	30.0
Houston	20.1	18.7	33.2	14.9	1.65	1.77	2.22	17.4	28.7
San Antonio	25.6	18.8	32.3	21.5	1.26	1.72	1.50	7.1	10.6
West									
Denver	18.6	14.5	30.0	21.0	1.61	2.07	1.43	8.1	13.0
Phoenix	27.0	23.4	38.2	29.1	1.41	1.64	1.32	7.4	10.5
Las Vegas	24.6	25.3	41.9	18.5	1.70	1.65	2.26	11.0	18.7
Los Angeles	26.1	26.0	40.5	22.2	1.55	1.56	1.82	7.4	11.5
San Francisco	19.5	13.0	38.0	21.3	1.95	2.91	1.78	3.7	7.2
Portland	25.6	24.5	37.5	21.5	1.46	1.53	1.74	5.2	7.6
San Diego	23.2	20.5	26.5	24.8	1.14	1.29	1.07	5.9	6.8
Seattle	18.1	15.2	23.5	15.9	1.30	1.55	1.48	5.8	7.6
National	24.8	22.3	39.3	22.0	1.58	1.76	1.79	12.2	19.2

Source: American Community Survey, microdata from IPUMS, 5-year pooled sample 2010-14, provided by Economic Policy Institute.

partners, there are higher child maltreatment rates among white than black mothers. By contrast, when partners are present, the black rate is more than double the white rate on all three categories of maltreatment.

My recently published study with Chun Wang verified that male joblessness is strongly linked to child maltreatment. We analyzed state-level data, 2000-12, and found that for each one percent the male jobless rate increased, the overall child maltreatment rate increased by almost one percent. Given the racial differential jobless rates, this goes a long way to explain the racial disparities in child maltreatment rates.

Due to employment disparities, the black share of jobless young men is much higher than their share of all young men. For example, in Chicago the black share of all young men equaled 22.6 percent while their share of jobless young men equaled 42.5 percent. In many cities, the black share of jobless men exceeded 40 percent. When black young men make up such a high proportion of the jobless, negative racial stereotyping may be reinforced such that African Americans' problems with employers and police are intensified.

Disproportionately high black jobless rates seem to clearly follow from these unfavorable stereotypic attitudes of employers and racially biased policies. This is certainly the case in Milwaukee, where employer biases and biased transportation policies explain a significant portion of the racial jobless disparities. However, these large disparities are also an index of the social isolation of young black men. Often living in high-poverty-concentration neighborhoods, young black men have very deficient networks of contacts that can recommend them for decent jobs. Unfortunately, the labor market for less-educated workers is strongly influenced by these networks. In addition to direct discrimination, this lack of social networks may also help to explain why young black men have substantially higher rates of joblessness than even Latinos.

The importance of these networks was vividly illustrated in the movie *Gran Torino* when the Clint Eastwood character befriended his Hmong teenage neighbor. Wanting to help the boy gain employment, Eastwood contacts a friend who has a salvage company. Grooming and prepping him on how to look and what to say, the boy is hired. This suggests that even when employers have no racial animus, if they rely on personal networks, few black young men will be hired.

What can be done about this state of affairs? Twenty years ago the answer would have been to increase teen employment where disadvantaged youth would get the spending money that they need and the interpersonal skills that would aid them in gaining long-term employment. Over the last two decades, however, teen employment rates have plummeted, particularly for black youth, so that this is no longer a viable strategy.

As a result, many advocates favor improving college access with the hopes that many of these young men will attain college

degrees. Despite substantial expenditures, the majority of these young men do not gain community college degrees, let alone four-year degrees. My own belief is that more attention should be paid to certificate programs that range from eight weeks to fifteen months, particularly those offered by the public sector or the best-practices for-profit colleges. These programs enable students to avoid the remediation hurdles they experience in the community colleges and provide success markers in a shorter period of time; successes that can be built upon. The most important point is that we must take more seriously the employment problems faced by young black men and look beyond traditional academic attainment as a solution.

Robert Cherry is Stern Professor in Economics at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. His most recent book is: Moving Working Families Forward: Third Way Policies That Can Work (NYU Press).

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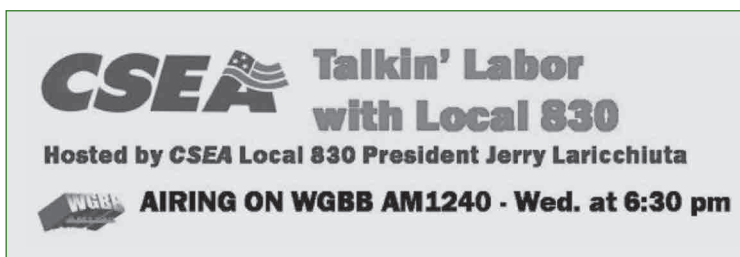
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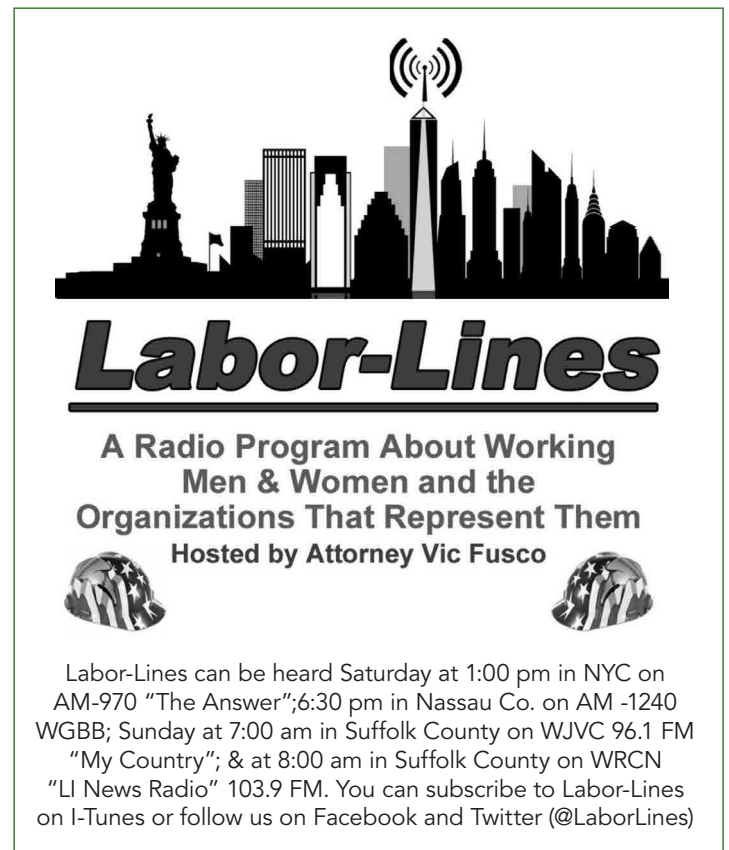
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