



Milwaukee's black/white jobless gap is highest in U.S.

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Gripped between repeated rejection and the need to find work, Lawrence Griffin saw his blood pressure rise to the point where he needed to be hospitalized. Just before Vonnie Thomas finally landed a job, he began feeling depressed.

Griffin and Thomas are African-American Milwaukeeans who have struggled to get a job. And that struggle has taken its toll.

More than half of the working-age African-American males in greater Milwaukee are not employed, according to a university report released Sunday.

Milwaukee's black male joblessness is second only to Buffalo's among 35 large metro areas, according to the report from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Economic Development. But Milwaukee is second to none in the gap between black and white joblessness.

The rate of African-American males, ages 16 to 64, without a job in metro Milwaukee jumped to 51.1% last year from 46.8% in 2006 - probably its highest ever, according to the report's author.

"What we've been trying to do in this community to address this issue clearly isn't working. The numbers continue to get worse, not better," said Marc Levine, founding director of the UWM center.

"And given perilous economic conditions on the horizon, we have every reason to fear that conditions may get even worse."

In the study, anybody not identified as employed was considered jobless; an official unemployment rate considers only those actively seeking work.

For every age category, black males in the four-county Milwaukee area had high jobless rates and big disparities compared with rates for white males and Hispanic males, Levine found. Within racial groups, Milwaukee residents had higher jobless rates than their suburban counterparts.

Compared to Milwaukee, the jobless rate for African-Americans in the Buffalo area was 51.4%. Metro Detroit ran third, at 50.6%. But the unemployment rate for white males in Milwaukee was third-lowest in the country, at 18.6%, creating the biggest gap by far between blacks and whites.

"One of the tough things to figure out is why Milwaukee is so much worse. None of us has the answer, and we've got to come together and figure that out," said Ralph Hollmon, president and chief executive officer of the Milwaukee Urban League. "If we could mitigate it, I believe the quality of life for everybody in our city and region and state would be a whole lot better."

Rejection takes a toll

Lenard Wells has ardent interest in Milwaukee's joblessness.

As director of two satellite campuses of Concordia University Wisconsin, he's involved in the area's work force development. As a retired Milwaukee police lieutenant and former chairman of the state Parole Commission, he has deep concerns about wasted human potential.

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"The numbers are so staggering that we feel overwhelmed and embarrassed at the same time," Wells said, when told of Levine's report.

In his doctoral dissertation this year for Cardinal Stritch University, Wells found that Milwaukee-area employers are less inclined to hire an African-American man with a clean criminal record than a comparably qualified white man with a criminal past.

Through research modeled after the work of Princeton University sociologist Devah Pager, who has come up with similar findings in Milwaukee and elsewhere, Wells gained insight into the frustrations encountered by African-American men hunting jobs.

Applying for entry-level jobs with minimal requirements at 30 employers with verified openings, the African-American man in Wells' study received just four callbacks, compared with 13 for the white applicant. At some places, the African-American man couldn't even get a job application and was told there was no opening, even though the white man was allowed to apply - in one case, minutes after the black man had been turned away.

The African-American college student who applied for jobs for Wells' study became so dejected that he needed counseling, Wells said.

Richard S. Jones, a sociologist at Marquette University who was one of Wells' dissertation advisers, said repeated rejection takes a toll on job seekers.

"It certainly does provide a reason why people will stop looking - because they know it's hopeless. They know they're not getting a fair shake. They figure that out right away," Jones said.

'Salvation' in a job

"I don't think the average person knows all the struggles these guys have," said Terron Edwards, an employment counselor and coordinator of the fatherhood group at New Hope Project Inc., a work-based anti-poverty agency in Milwaukee.

Griffin, who's 39 and has been out of work since a temporary assignment ended in mid-August, figures he has delivered about 40 résumés in the past few weeks with hardly a courtesy call to show for it.

Thomas, 35, said he applied for more than 60 jobs through New Hope after he became unemployed in March. He speaks of his month-old floor position at a food-processing factory as his salvation.

"You feel down. You feel depressed," Thomas said. "But I asked God, and I know God had a better day for me."

Griffin, a single dad with two teenagers at home, worries how his joblessness affects his children's outlook.

"It gets depressing. It gets to a person. It takes away from my kids, and my sole purpose for living and working is for them," Griffin said. "It puts you in that frame of mind where you see why people turn to the negative."

That's Wells' concern. As some 4,000 prison inmates a year are released to Milwaukee, needing work, Wells wonders how they'll combat discouragement.

"We don't have a measure of how many people went through this and said, 'I'm just not going to do this anymore, and I'm going back to a life of crime,'" Wells said. "We do know it is occurring."

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