

Unemployment rate nearly double for Black workers

Written by Dorothy Rowley, Special to the NNPA from the Afro-American Newspapers
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – “Astounding” is how President Obama, speaking March 6 in Columbus, OH, characterized the nation’s new Unemployment figures - a staggering 8.1 percent, the highest since 1983 as employers pick up the pace of layoffs.

Just as disconcerting is the sharp rise in unemployment among African Americans - a whopping 13.4 percent in February. The last time the Black monthly unemployment rate was so high was in February 1994, as the nation was digging out of a recession, according to the Labor Department.

The latest figures continue to show job losses are large and widespread across nearly all major industry sectors. In January, the overall national unemployment rate was 7.6 percent. For Blacks, it was 12.6 percent.

Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate the Black unemployment rate has traditionally far exceeded that of other ethnic groups, especially Whites whose joblessness is normally half that of African Americans.

Reasons for the disparity cited by experts include a gap in education between Blacks and Whites, marginal ties by African American households to the labor market and a failure by policy-makers to equate Black unemployment to a crisis needing urgent attention.

The BLS Web site, which maintains Black unemployment data dating back to 1972, also states that the Black jobless rate reached its lowest level on record in April 2000, when it dropped to 7.0 percent.

While the agency’s latest figures highlight a growing gender gap between Black men and women in the workforce, it also shows that the unemployment rate for Black men in February was 16.3 percent compared to 10.8 percent for Black women.

The Washington, D.C.-based Economic Policy Institute's Race, Ethnicity and Economy Program reported recently that Blacks are typically impacted by recessions and that it comes as no surprise that there is a significant increase in Black unemployment during such times.

Program Director Algernon Austin offered in a recent Chicago Sun article that lack of job opportunities for Blacks ultimately trickles down to teens, making it doubly hard for them to find work, particularly with summer on the horizon.

"We really want teens to work," Austin said. "Getting job experience now helps people in their employment."

The jobless rate for teens in general is just over 21 percent.

However, Austin noted that the rate among Black teens has already surpassed 38 percent and the figure could be as high as 44 percent for teens still looking for work.

"The sad and troubling part of this is most likely these aren't the peak numbers," Austin says in the article, suggesting that the peak will come in a year’s time, "unless the stimulus comes in and works."

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The latest figures continue to show job losses are widespread across nearly all major industry sectors. Construction and manufacturing jobs have been among the hardest hit, a continuing concern for such groups as the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.

The organization periodically blasted the Bush era, saying unemployment among African Americans had become so dismal during his administration that it was well on its way to becoming a socially explosive issue, mainly because a growing segment of the Black community, including its youth, had begun to feel permanently disconnected from the economy.

Now, with President Obama at the helm, his administration maintains he has made a considerable thrust at providing job training programs in inner cities where the largest populations of African Americans tend to reside, as well an increase in government jobs through the recently enacted \$787 billion economic recovery plan.

"The president is going to do his job, but needs to get the word out [to city and state agency heads about] how high the stakes are," Obama senior adviser Valerie Jarrett said last week during a teleconference with Black journalists.

Meanwhile, even as Obama's recovery strategy was created to save more than 3 million jobs, the country continues to lose jobs quickly, with 651,000 lost in February, and keeping the administration racing to keep up.