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When Work Disappears: The Silent Reality of Chronic Black Unemployment Between The Lines

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As the economy slowly recovers, there is a staggering reality facing the national black community - the absence of work. All segments of the nation's population seem to be pulling out of the hole dug by the recession, except for African Americans. For them, the hole is as deep as it's ever been (with exception of when the "Great Recession" hit rock bottom in June 2009).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics released its monthly "Jobs report" last week, and in the middle of an election year, the focus, of course, was on job creation. 80,000 (non-farm payroll) jobs were created in June, 2012. The nation's unemployment rate remained at 8.2%, the same as it was in May. However, black unemployment *rose* from 13.6% in May to 14.4% in June. What exactly does that mean? Has the nation returned to last hired, first fired practices of the past? That's not clear, but whatever it does mean, black unemployment is now "officially" double that of whites in this nation.

White unemployment is 7.4% (the same as it was the month before). Latino unemployment remained at 11.0% (the same as it was in May). The deeper (darker) question here is, why are others holding work while black people are losing work? Nobody has answers.

Unemployment rate reports don't really tell the whole story. They only reports people "out of work" and looking for work in the preceding month. That excludes a whole lot of people, including those who may have been out of work for six months or more, and those who may

have stopped looking for work. The University of California at Berkeley released a data brief that painted a much darker reality of what is actually happening to the black community. Called, "Work in the Black Community," the brief summarizes for the past three years the realities of the job market in the nation's "recovery period," and disaggregates various segments of the population in order to see where the change is actually taking place.

Well, we know where its *not* taking place...in the black community. But who's to blame for that. We know the Federal Recovery Act has created construction and service jobs all over the nation. Let's take that off the "Blame Obama" plate right now...because most have local hiring requirements attached to their compliance regulations. But the contractors that are hiring seem to have an absence of black people on their hiring crews. They hire from the local community, they just don't hire us. There seems to be a pattern to this, almost as if there is a loophole somewhere that everybody knows about - except us. Why do I say that? Because nobody else's employment numbers are slipping. Just ours - now, you can call it my conspiracy paranoia - but the brief also reports the nation's "employment-population ratios" that time the rest of the story (that unemployment rates don't tell).

The employment-population ratio is the best jobs indicator that captures the percentage of the population that is employed and can interpret the probability that a member of a population is employed - something unemployment rates don't capture. Discouraged workers (people not looking for work) are likely to be captured in this report, whereas retired persons, full time students, disabled persons and homemakers are not. In short, it provides a fuller context of the nation's employment picture.

For the whole labor force, the employment population ration is 58.6%. For whites, it's 59.4%. For blacks, it's 53.1%. Here, you see that unemployment affects black women as adversely as it affects black men. The ratio of black men working is 54.5%. For black women, it's 52.0. Black teens are most adversely impacted. Teen employment population ratio (ages 16-19) for the nation is 26.6%. For white teens, it's 29.7%. For black teens, it's 16.8% for black male teens, it's 15.7%. Work has disappeared almost altogether for them. Deplorable. Even more deplorable is that hardly anybody is talking about it. Silence doesn't help the situation.

I'm sure this isn't just happening in Los Angeles. I can't speak for the whole nation, just where I live, work and socialize. It stands to reason

that it is the case for most of the country, since the unemployment rates and population employment ratios are across the board. But they are *much higher* in urban America. Out of work black men often take a bad rap, like they somehow don't want to work. How about they can't find work? - Even the work in plain sight.

Damn near every street in the southland is torn up from construction, as is damn near every freeway. I purposely look for BMWs (Black Men Working). I rarely see any and I'm not the only one who notices this. It's often a point of conversation in the circles I run in.

In fact, I can say with relative certainty, I see *none* much more than I see *one*. If I see two, I damn near pull over and clap. We need to applaud any black man who holds down a job in this economy - however long he holds it. We also need to dispel the notion that black men don't *want* to work. Maybe it's just me, but one can easily conclude that someone out there doesn't want them to work. Or maybe the scarcity of work just seems to "coincidentally" impact black men more than anybody else. There's another factor here, and we need to find out what that is.

However you want to frame, the disappearance of work in the black community needs to become more than a silent reality. It needs to become a public conversation - and a focus of direct action.

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