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The Danger Zone

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The national unemployment rate came in at 4.5 percent last week and was generally characterized as pretty good. But whatever universe those numbers came from, it was not the universe that black men live in.

Black American males inhabit a universe in which joblessness is frequently the norm, where the idea of getting up each morning and going off to work can seem stranger to a lot of men than the dream of hitting the lottery, where the dignity that comes from supporting oneself and one's family has too often been replaced by a numbing sense of hopelessness.

What I'm talking about is extreme joblessness — joblessness that is coursing through communities and being passed from one generation to another, like a deadly virus.

Forget, for a moment, the official unemployment numbers. They understate the problem of joblessness for all groups. Far more telling is the actual percentage of people in a given segment of the working-age population that is jobless.

Black men who graduate from a four-year college do reasonably well in terms of employment, compared with other ethnic groups. But most black men do not go to college. In big cities, more than half do not even finish high school.

Their employment histories are gruesome. Over the past few years, the percentage of black male high school graduates in their 20s who were jobless (including those who abandoned all efforts to find a job) has ranged from well over a third to roughly 50 percent. Those are the kinds of statistics you get during a depression.

For dropouts, the rates of joblessness are staggering. For black males who left high school without a diploma, the real jobless rate at various times over the past few years has ranged from 59 percent to a breathtaking 72 percent.

“Seventy-two percent jobless!” said Senator Charles Schumer, chairman of Congress's Joint Economic Committee, which held a hearing last week on joblessness among black men. “This compares to 29 percent of white and 19 percent of Hispanic dropouts.”

Senator Schumer described the problem of black male unemployment as “profound, persistent and perplexing.”

Jobless rates at such sky-high levels don't just destroy lives, they destroy entire communities. They breed all manner of antisocial behavior, including violent crime. One of the main reasons there are so few black marriages is that there are so many black men who are financially incapable of supporting a family.

“These numbers should generate a sense of national alarm,” said Senator Schumer.

They haven't. However much this epidemic of joblessness may hurt, very little is being done about it. According to the Labor Department, only 97,000 new jobs were created in February. That's not even enough to accommodate new entrants to the work force.

And then there's the question of who's getting the new jobs. According to statistics compiled by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston, the only groups that have experienced a growth in jobs since the last recession are older workers and immigrants.

People can howl all they want about how well the economy is doing. The simple truth is that millions of ordinary American workers are in an employment bind. Steady jobs with good benefits are going the way of Ozzie and Harriet. Young workers, especially, are hurting, which diminishes the prospects for the American family. And blacks, particularly black males, are in a deep danger zone.

Instead of addressing this issue constructively, government officials have responded by eviscerating programs that were designed to move young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into the labor market.

Robert Carmona, president of Strive, an organization that helps build job skills, told Senator Schumer's committee, “What we've seen over the last several years is a deliberate disinvestment in programs that do work.”

What's needed are massive programs of job training and job creation, and a sustained national effort to bolster the education backgrounds of disadvantaged youngsters. So far there has been no political will to do any of that.

You get lip service. But when you walk into the neighborhoods and talk to the young people, you find that very little, if anything, is being done. Which is why the real-world employment environment has become so horrendous for so many.

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