

NYT. Nearly Half of Black Men Found Jobless
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It is well known that the unemployment rate in New York City rose sharply during the recent recession. It is also understood that the increase was worse for men than for women, and especially bad for black men. But a new study examining trends in joblessness in the city since 2000 suggests that by 2003, nearly one of every two black men between 16 and 64 was not working. The study, by the Community Service Society, a nonprofit group that serves the poor, is based on data from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics and focuses on the so-called employment-population ratio - the fraction of the working-age population with a paid job - in addition to the more familiar unemployment rate, the percentage of the labor force actively looking for work. Mark Levitan, the report's author, found that just 51.8 percent of black men ages 16 to 64 held jobs in New York City in 2003. The rate for white men was 75.7 percent; for Hispanic men, 65.7; and for black women, 57.1. The employment-population ratio for black men was the lowest for the period Mr. Levitan has studied, which goes back to 1979. "We're left with a very big question," Mr. Levitan, a senior policy analyst with the society, said in an interview. "As the economy recovers, will we see a rise in employment among black men in tandem with the rise in employment of city residents generally? In other words, is this fundamentally a cyclical problem or is it more deeply structural? I fear that it is more deeply structural."

Researchers who have studied joblessness said Mr. Levitan's findings were consistent with trends among disadvantaged men, both black and white, in other Northern and Midwestern cities where manufacturing jobs have disappeared in recent decades. Some said factors that might have made the problem worse since 2000 could include welfare reform, high rates of incarceration producing gaps in job histories, and competition with immigrants for low-skill jobs. Lawrence M. Mead, a professor of political science at New York University who specializes in social policy and welfare reform, said that labor force participation - job-holding and job-seeking - among disadvantaged men had been declining nationwide and that New York City had long had "a lower work level" than elsewhere. Others said a similar racial gap in male employment had been seen in Midwestern and Central states. "You're really talking about a long-term problem among low-skilled, disadvantaged men," Professor Mead said. "Blacks are disproportionately disadvantaged. You're seeing this tendency to drop out. It's very serious and nobody has an answer." Mindy Tarlow, executive director of the Center for Employment Opportunities, an employment program for men and women with criminal records that is based in Lower Manhattan, said her agency's success rate in placing clients in unsubsidized jobs had dropped to 55 percent from 65 percent between 2000 and 2003. She attributed the change not only to the recession but also to women coming off welfare and looking for work. "I do know there are more people in the low-skill job market competing for the same low-skill jobs," she said. "In some ways, the low-skill job market has become more competitive. Welfare reform came into law in 1996, but I think the impact was starting to be felt around 2000, maybe earlier." David R. Howell, a labor economist and professor at New School University, said service jobs were particularly hard for black men to get. He said studies had shown that employers "are particularly uninterested in hiring black men for jobs that require customer or client contact, for whatever reason." They tend to give preference to women, he said.

Mr. Levitan used data from the Current Population Survey, a monthly survey done by the Bureau of Labor Statistics on a nationwide basis. He averaged the 12 monthly figures for New York City for each year. He said he used the employment-population ratio because the unemployment rate, which counts only people who are actively looking for a job, did not capture those too discouraged to keep trying. In a recession, the number of discouraged workers goes up, Mr. Levitan said. If job losses land disproportionately on one group of people, a disproportionate share of that group may give up looking for work. In that case, changes in the unemployment rate for that group will tend to understate the relative impact of the recession on that group, he said. Mr. Levitan found that the unemployment rate for black men in New York City rose by 5.3 percentage points, to 12.9 percent, in 2003. The employment-

population ratio dropped by 12.2 percentage points, to 51.8, from a cycle peak of 64 in 2000. The employment-population ratio for Hispanic men dropped by 7.1 percentage points; the ratio for white men dropped by 2.1. The margin of error was 4 percent.

The declines among black and Hispanic women were smaller than among black and Hispanic men. Mr. Levitan said the industries that had the biggest drop in employment - manufacturing, finance and professional services - were dominated by men. And the one sector that grew significantly during the recession - education and health services, which now accounts for 18.7 percent of all jobs - is overwhelmingly female. "It definitely reflects that black men disproportionately have had to carry the burden of the unemployment situation in New York City," Lizzette Hill Barcelona, executive director of Strive New York, a work force development agency, said of Mr. Levitan's findings. "Black men are usually the least skilled. In a tough economy, those are the jobs that you can do away with."

Andrew A. Beveridge, a sociologist at Queens College, questioned whether the data from the Current Population Survey, which is done nationally, could reliably be used to track changes in joblessness among specific groups in New York City from one year to the next. He said it was conceivable a year-to-year change might be the result of changes in the sample of people surveyed. Mr. Levitan said the Bureau of Labor Statistics had used a methodology similar to his, using its 12 monthly surveys to create annual averages for states, metropolitan areas and cities. He said the sample size in New York City was big enough to be reliable. And he said the data from 1979 to 2003 followed a pattern consistent with the business cycle, suggesting that they accurately reflected reality. Professor Howell, who had seen the study, said: "The magnitude of the employment-rate collapse is so large for black males that it looks like a data problem. But I don't think it is. Because you see not as startling a drop, but still a very large drop, for Hispanic males as well. It's well known that black men are at the end of the hiring queue. So it's perfectly plausible that they took the biggest hit."