
Job seekers face a racial divide; Jobless rate is much higher for African-Americans in Charlotte

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Ten years ago, Shirley Quarterman had just earned her associate's degree in health care and moved from Atlanta to Charlotte - encouraged by all she'd heard and read about Charlotte as a hotspot for young African-American professionals.

Ten years later, Quarterman is unemployed. She learned in May that her job as a coordinating supervisor for a home care agency was being eliminated.

Quarterman, 35, is applying for retail and restaurant jobs - and being told she's overqualified. "At this point," she said, "I'll take what I can get."

The number of unemployed blacks in the Charlotte-Gastonia-Concord region has nearly quadrupled in the past decade, from 4.9 percent in 2000 to 19.2 percent in 2010, according to the nonpartisan Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. In the same period, unemployment among whites grew from 2.8 percent to 8.2 percent.

Ron Leeper, president and owner of R.J. Leeper Construction, LLC, said Charlotte residents ought to be "extremely concerned" about the growing disparity.

"We're all at risk when you're talking about the terrible effect these kinds of numbers will have on our community," he said, citing increased crime, economic instability and damage to Charlotte's reputation as potential consequences. "I hope we never see this as the way it has to be."

As a black business owner, Leeper acknowledged that his company is not immune to the trend. R.J. Leeper Construction, which actively recruits minority applicants, has cut one-third of its workforce since 2008, Leeper said. He noted that intentional recruitment and job training are vital to reducing the black-white disparity.

"It's not a good thing when we see a lot of people get seemingly left behind," Leeper said. "We can start to see the pain occur in other places, too. From a policy standpoint, from an economic standpoint, we need to work harder."

The growing rate of black unemployment reveals a much larger problem in Charlotte, said Patrick Graham, president and CEO of the Urban League.

"It is not just about black unemployment. That is just the harshest symptom of our failure to invest in education and workforce development," Graham said. "It's very dangerous not just for the African-American community, but for Charlotte in general and our ability to be competitive in the global economy."

Charlotte's 19.2 percent unemployment rate among blacks is higher than the 15.9 percent the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics calculates for blacks nationwide. The disparity among whites is lower - 8.2 percent in Charlotte, just above 8.1 percent nationally.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics doesn't break down employment by race at the local level. But the Economic Policy Institute calculated the local rates at the Observer's request, using the latest data from the American Community Survey, an ongoing study by the U.S. Census Bureau. Their figures show the black-white disparity is greatest with those of lower education levels.

Education and jobs

"Particularly in Charlotte, blacks with some college have an unemployment rate that's basically the same as whites with a high school diploma," said Algernon Austin of EPI. The numbers indicate that blacks with less than a bachelor's degree end up having to work harder than whites of comparable education to find jobs, Austin said.

"Generally, for blacks to have the equal odds of finding work, they must have higher educational credentials than a white person," Austin said.

While blacks such as Quarterman who have some education might have been able to find jobs more easily in the past, the job search now proves particularly grueling.

As a single mother of three children, Quarterman had to cut corners to pay for the basics. In the past few months, she started using food stamps, downgraded to an apartment, cut off her Internet service and gave up her car. She travels by bus to career centers to use their computers and fill out applications.

"It's very hard," she said. "It makes me want to move back home to Atlanta."

Education levels, more so than race, drive unemployment rates, said John Silvia, chief economist at Wells Fargo.

"Education is really the defining factor of success in Charlotte," Silvia said. "If you want to be successful in this city and prosper, you need to be educated."

Black-white disparities in unemployment aren't new, and they're not unique to Charlotte. Nationally, whites tend to reach higher levels of education than minorities.

"It's not just discrimination based on race," Graham said. "The biggest factor is that the educational attainment of blacks is much less than whites."

Other factors also drive the high unemployment rate, such as the higher incarceration rate for blacks than

whites, said Michael Elder, president and CEO of Goodwill Industries.

"When you put all this together - a disproportionate number of blacks have lower education levels and higher criminal records - you have a disproportionate number of barriers to employment," Elder said.

The widening of the gap worries some local leaders.

"We have done a great job at masking the problem. We don't talk about it," Graham said. "But everyone is not hurting. There are some who are hurting a lot more and have always carried the load of our economic woes - and that's the African-American community.

"We can't be the beacon of the New South and then have unemployment rates and wealth gaps that take us backwards to the statistics of a Jim Crow era."

A rapid migration

In 2007, Black Enterprise magazine ranked Charlotte one of the top 10 cities for African-Americans, citing factors such as job opportunities and a low cost of living.

In 2008, Forbes magazine named Charlotte one of America's most miserable cities. The magazine gave Charlotte a low rating primarily because "employment growth did not keep up with population growth, meaning unemployment rates are up more than 50 percent compared with 10 years ago."

Less dependent on textiles than other Southern cities, Charlotte experienced a boom in financial services and white-collar positions. Nearly 20,000 jobs in the finance and insurance sector were added from 2000 to 2006, according to the N.C. Employment Security Commission. The boom also ushered in a wave of middle-class blacks who came to Charlotte looking for jobs in a wide range of fields.

Nisha Williams, 26, moved to Charlotte from Connecticut in 2003 to study at Johnson C. Smith University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in criminology and sports management. Since graduating in 2007, she has worked in various retail positions and has been unemployed since April 2010.

Williams said despite sending out up to 20 applications per day, she still hasn't found a job where she can use her degree. Employers looking to fill lower-skilled jobs have deemed her overqualified. Now, she just wants to move out of Charlotte.

Since August 2007, BLS figures show that more than 47,000 jobs in Charlotte were lost, including more than 5,500 finance jobs.

Along with the higher-paying financial positions, fields requiring less education also took a serious hit during the downturn. Those included construction, hospitality and retail, where more than 28,000 jobs were lost since 2007.

Although jobs have slowed, population growth has not. The population increased by nearly 80,000 people in the past decade and hasn't substantially slowed since the downturn, said Erin Watkins, research director at the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce.

The increasing population may contribute to the competition for jobs in Charlotte.

Agency support

Even educated African-Americans are having a harder time finding jobs - and Charlotte's social safety nets are feeling the strain.

Erika Vann, 36, moved to Charlotte from Washington, D.C., in 2007 to work as an information technologist for Duke Energy. With certification in information technology and 13 years of experience in the computer field, she assumed her skills would be in demand.

"At that time, the job market was stable," Vann said.

After she was laid off, Vann moved to a less expensive house, and her car was repossessed. At various periods over the past three years, she had to go to churches for food, borrow from friends and use food stamps.

She once sent out up to eight job applications a day. Discouraged, she's now down to two or three.

Vann eventually turned to Goodwill Industries, which provides training programs for the unemployed.

Similar agencies, such as the Charlotte Area Fund, which primarily serves impoverished minorities, have seen an increase in the number of educated blacks who are jobless.

"We have served more people with master's degrees over the past year and a half than I've seen in the past 15 years," said Karen Browning, executive director of the Charlotte Area Fund.

Jacob's Ladder, a Charlotte nonprofit that offers job readiness programs for its mostly black clientele, has also seen an increase in the number of people with higher degrees who are asking for help, said former executive director Steffi Travis.

The Urban League, a nonprofit organization that helps African-Americans through education and job training, has seen a 30 percent increase in the number of people who come in with at least some college, Graham said.

For now, Williams thinks her best chance at finding a job might be outside of Charlotte.

She said many of her JCSU classmates have already left Charlotte for out-of-state job opportunities - and have had some success.

"I would stay here and work if I had a salaried position. I mean, I bought a house here," Williams said. "But when I apply for jobs outside of North Carolina, I get better feedback."

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