

Transportation Infrastructure and Good Jobs for Black Men

Slide 2: Top ten metropolitan areas with the highest black male unemployment rates, July 2009 to May 2012

For the three years since the technical end of the Great Recession, black men in many of America's major metropolitan areas have experienced unemployment rates close to or above 20 percent. The peak unemployment rate nationally during the Great Depression was around 20 percent. We need to think creatively about what can be done to end the "economic depression" confronting black men.

Slide 3: Share of male 16-to-64 year-old population in construction, manufacturing, and transportation industries, 2005-2007

One of the reasons that black men have such high unemployment rates is that they do not get the jobs that other men get. Black men are severely underrepresented in construction and significantly underrepresented in manufacturing. In transportation, however, black men do better than average, but this transportation advantage is not enough to compensate for their underrepresentation in manufacturing and construction.

One way to increase black male employment rates would be to increase their numbers in construction and in manufacturing. Since black men apparently have good access to transportation jobs, another approach would be to expand the transportation sector.

Slide 4: Estimated number of black male job losses from 2007 to 2011

These are very rough estimates. While black men are underrepresented in construction, they are not completely absent. The dramatic decline of the construction industry did also affect black men. About a quarter of the decline in jobs for black men from 2007 to 2011 is due to job losses in construction.

We should keep in mind that in a healthy economy there would be significant job growth in these sectors from 2007 to 2011, so these numbers undercount the jobs deficits for black men in construction, manufacturing, and transportation.

One way to help rejuvenate the construction industry is for the government to invest in transportation infrastructure. Big construction projects require the transporting of large amounts of materials and equipment to and from construction sites. This need leads to the creation of transportation jobs. A lot of construction work involves assembling items that have been manufactured elsewhere. Thus, big construction projects can also provide a boost to manufacturing jobs.

Investing in transportation infrastructure therefore can potentially assist in not only putting black construction workers back to work, but also blacks in manufacturing and in transportation.

Slide 5: ASCE Transportation Infrastructure Grades, 2009

Anyone who lives in the D.C. metro area is keenly aware of our transportation infrastructure problems. On the positive side, our public transit system moves more than a million people each weekday. On the other hand, it seems that the system is falling apart faster than Metro can repair it.

These problems are not unique to D.C.

Slide 6: Estimated share of African-American jobs in different transportation infrastructure investment plans

In recent years, EPI has done estimates of the demographic composition of the jobs created by different specific transportation infrastructure proposals. Here is our assessment the share of jobs that would go to African Americans from four different plans. The first point to note is that they are all predicted to yield significant numbers of jobs for blacks, ranging from 9 percent of all of the jobs to 14 percent. The bigger the infrastructure investment, all else equal, the greater the absolute number of jobs that blacks can obtain. In other words, there is a direct benefit that blacks obtain from transportation infrastructure investments.

The red line represents the share of blacks in the labor market—11 percent. Any project that exceeds an 11 percent share for blacks has the additional benefit of working slightly to reduce the black-white unemployment disparity. So, for blacks, the ideal infrastructure project is (1) big and (2) going to yield more than 11 percent of the jobs for blacks.

We have not done any systematic analysis, but so far it seems that projects that have a greater share of investments in public transit produce a greater share of jobs for blacks.

I'm now going to focus a bit on the "FTA Transit Backlog" plan. I've selected this one because the plan is large, and it yields a 13 percent share of jobs for blacks. The "FTA" refers to the Federal Transit Administration. The FTA provided an assessment of the amount needed to meet the backlog of repair needs for the nation's public transportation systems. EPI then did a demographic analysis of the share of the jobs that would go to different groups.

Slide 7: FTA Transit Backlog Jobs

The jobs created by the FTA Transit Backlog plan would be 74 percent male. A majority would require a high school diploma or less. Other transportation infrastructure plans have a similar gender and educational profile.

Slide 8: Wage distribution by quintiles of FTA Transit Backlog jobs

The majority of the jobs would pay wages in the middle or higher quintiles of the wage distribution. Other transportation infrastructure plans have a similar wage distribution profile.

The FTA Transit Backlog plan and other infrastructure plans present a good opportunity for good jobs for black men because, not only are blacks likely to obtain a significant share of the jobs, most of the jobs go to men and most pay a good-job wage.