



Joint Economic Committee
Senator Charles E. Schumer
Chairman



Joint Economic Committee Hearing on Addressing the Problem of African-American Male Unemployment

Opening Statement Sen. Charles Schumer

I would like to welcome my fellow Members, our witnesses and guests here today for our first Joint Economic Committee hearing on employment in the 110th Congress. The Joint Economic Committee, which was created by the Employment Act of 1946, has a tradition of holding hearings on the employment situation. Going forward, we hope to use the timing of the monthly releases of employment data as an opportunity to investigate problematic trends lurking behind the headline numbers that warrant national action. Today, our focus will be on the growing crisis of joblessness for young African American men.

The crisis is profound, persistent and perplexing. Both across the country and particularly in my home state of New York, far too many black men are facing difficulty finding and keeping work. The numbers are staggering and getting worse, particularly for young black men.

Consider these statistics:

In 1999, 65% of black male high school dropouts in their 20's were jobless - in other words not looking or unable to find work - and by 2004, the share had grown to 72% jobless. **72% jobless!** This compares to 29% of white and 19% of Hispanic dropouts.

In the inner cities, more than half of all black men do not finish high school. Even when you consider high school graduates, half of black men in their 20's were jobless in 2004.

To make matters worse, incarceration of young black men is at historic highs. A black man with only a high school diploma has a 30 percent chance of having served time in prison by the time he turns thirty. Without a high school diploma, his likelihood of having been incarcerated jumps to 60 percent. In fact, a black male in his late twenties without a high school diploma is more likely to be in jail than to be working.

These numbers take your breath away. These numbers should cause national alarm and demand a national solution.

One reason this crisis is perplexing is because it is playing out against a backdrop of relative economic success and unprecedented historical advances for many sectors of our nation's African American population.

Obviously we know the stories of highly successful black men and women -- Richard Parsons, the head of Time Warner, Stan O'Neal, the head of Merrill Lynch, Oprah Winfrey, Senator Barack Obama, Condi Rice and countless others. And more importantly there are burgeoning black middle class communities throughout the country and lower income black women who have made impressive gains in terms of work force participation in just the last few years.

So, we can lull ourselves into thinking things are all right. But we have to dig down into the numbers a little more to see how mistaken that belief is when it comes to black males with less than a college education. And that is what we hope this hearing will accomplish today – to give us a better handle on this problem, and help us craft the right policy solutions to address it.

There are many circumstances that led us to this point, and many of them are familiar culprits. Failing schools, dysfunctional families, high incarceration rates, overt and subtle racism, and the decimation of manufacturing jobs that typically afforded opportunities to black men in the labor market.

These political, cultural, economic and personal elements are high hurdles that are tripping up far too many young black men. And while this is a sensitive subject, there is also a subculture of the street that provides easy money and allows some to eschew personal responsibility. But we can't sit passively by and let that subculture claim another generation of young men.

A long-time friend and community leader in Brooklyn, the Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood said it best: "Government has a moral responsibility to compete against, and win against, subcultures that are immoral, illegal and really inhuman."

Reverend Youngblood is 100% right. But this much is certain: on the Federal level, there has been no comprehensive public policy response to this situation. We have left the problems of black men largely to the market, which is ignoring if not exacerbating the problem.

My goal today is twofold: first, we must shine a bright spotlight on a problem that - to my thinking - has received scant attention, inadequate resources, intermittent focus and poor coordination at the federal level.

Second, I want to explore legislation, policy and programs that will have a real impact in addressing this crisis. This committee's challenge today, and in the weeks and months ahead, will be to put forward a series of policy recommendations aimed at addressing the crisis of young black male unemployment. We will start by looking today at promising reform experiments at the state level – such as in my home state of New York – and see what we can and should emulate on the federal level.

At the state level, there has been some good news. After much trial and error, we now have several successful job training and placement models **THAT DO WORK**. In a few moments, we'll hear from Robert Carmona of STRIVE whose job-training program has been replicated with great success throughout the United States and around the world.

We'll also hear from Dr. Ronald Mincy who has helped design an Earned Income Tax Credit initiative for non-custodial parents in New York State that will help draw thousands of new workers into the labor force in the coming years.

Our task will be turning these local-grown programs, models and ideas, into national policies that can help us meet this challenge head-on.

With that, I will turn to the Vice Chair, Ms. Maloney, to give her opening statement, and give the other members a chance to provide statements before we proceed to the introduction of our panelists.