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Twin Cities jobless gap worst in nation

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Audra Robinson has worked only intermittently since 2009 and hasn't worked at all since September.

Robinson, 39, is no slouch. The Brooklyn Park woman has a bachelor's degree in marketing from Concordia University, where she graduated magna cum laude.

But Robinson is black, and statistically that makes it harder for her to find work than for Twin Citians who are white.

Even as the economy shows signs it could be climbing out of its recession, black Americans face far bleaker prospects of getting back into the workforce than their white counterparts. Unfortunately for Robinson, nowhere in America is the disparity between black and white unemployment greater than in Minnesota and the Twin Cities.

Newly released figures from the U.S. Bureau

of Labor Statistics place Minnesota's 2010 black jobless rate at 22 percent. That's 3.4 times the white rate of 6.4 percent, giving the state the largest gap in the country.

A 2009 analysis by the Economic Policy Institute found that among 18 of the largest metro areas, the Twin Cities had the biggest gap between white and black unemployment. The state's black population is concentrated in the Twin Cities.

Robinson remains undaunted in her job-hunting efforts. "I personally believe in the American dream no matter how many times I have been disappointed." Still, she would like to see "greater effort to figure out how to make diversity not just a statement but a true commitment."

The employment gap between blacks and whites is a distinction demographers and other experts in the state have watched for years. But identifying all the reasons and finding solutions has been elusive.

While other minority groups also have higher unemployment, studies that identified the Twin Cities as the place with the greatest disparity focused on black unemployment. Experts cite a combination of factors making it harder for black Minnesotans to compete

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for jobs.

The state's black population is five years younger on average than the black population nationally, and unemployment is higher among younger people. White Twin Citians are more educated than counterparts in most other metro areas, while black Twin Citians are somewhat less educated than blacks elsewhere.

Some experts say the employment gap may be fueled in part by another disparity: Fewer white Minnesotans have criminal records than whites nationally, while the opposite is true for black Minnesotans. The disparity between blacks and whites on that score is four times higher in the state than for the country as a whole. The American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota and others say racial profiling accounts for much of that.

In the black community, some express doubts about whether the concept of equal opportunity remains on the radar of some Minnesota employers.

"I think Minnesotans like to believe they are good people," said Shawn Lewis, board member of the St. Paul Foundation's Pan African Community Endowment. "They like to believe they are progressive people, that

they don't have any biases, that they treat people fairly. In reality, that is not the situation."

Some blacks say they lack connections that might land them a job in a slowly recovering economy.

"It's not what you know, but who you know," said Jacqueline Brown, 51, laid off in 2008 as a supervisor for a medical facility. "There aren't enough blacks in hiring positions, in human resources, so blacks don't have an equal chance of getting a job," she said.

A lopsided competition

Desirea Arnett, 20, of Minneapolis, dropped out of Cooper High School in Robbinsdale when she was 17.

After working four years as a day care assistant, she was laid off last year and hasn't found work since. The Resource Workforce Action Center in north Minneapolis helped her apply for at least 100 jobs.

"It's really hard finding a job when you are not a high school graduate," Arnett said. "I tried to stay in school. I messed up, I wish I went to school every day like my mama

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wanted me to."

Dropouts have a harder time getting jobs or are among the first laid off. The four-year, on-time high school graduation rate was 43 percent for blacks and 81 percent for whites in 2008-2009 in the Twin Cities metro area, said Craig Helmstetter, a researcher with the nonprofit Wilder Foundation.

Blacks and other minorities who drop out in the Twin Cities compete for jobs against a white population with more education than the national average, according to Algernon Austin, author of the Economic Policy Institute's 2010 report. But he found that Twin Cities blacks with education equal to that of whites were still more likely to be unemployed.

It adds up to a much starker difference in Minnesota than elsewhere. Minnesota's white unemployment rate is 10th-lowest in the country, while the state's black unemployment rate is third-highest.

Nationally, the black jobless rate was 15.9 percent, not quite double that of whites at 8.7 percent. The Minnesota black jobless rate has been triple that of whites or larger since 2004.

The disparity "is noticeably large, and it is not acceptable," said Minnesota state economist Tom Stinson. "It is frustrating trying to figure it out and what to do about it."

Linking disparities

More and more experts link the job disparity between blacks and whites to disparities in education and in criminal records.

Myron Orfield, professor and executive director of the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School, said Twin Cities schools that are in effect segregated by poverty "are not only dropout factories, but they are a very strong path to prison. ...

"A disproportionate number of kids [who end up] in prison [went to] these very poor, segregated schools," Orfield said. "Once they have been involved in the criminal justice system, that is a big barrier to employment."

Howard Simmons, 41, of Minneapolis, with a record of assault convictions, has been unemployed for two years, except for odd jobs such as snow removal. "No company will hire me because of my felony

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background," he said.

As a young black man, Walter Powell, 22, of Minneapolis, said he also hasn't been able to find a job in two years -- in part because of a 2008 conviction for carrying a pistol without a permit. He said he got hired as a janitor by the State Fair last summer, then the offer was withdrawn because of the conviction. "I was heartbroken," he said.

Other black Minnesotans say they can sense discomfort among potential employers who are white.

Tanesha Collaso, 23, of Brooklyn Center, just landed a job Tuesday after being unemployed since November. She said she felt that discomfort when she applied for work at Mall of America clothing stores.

"When I walk into the store," she said, "They almost say with their eyes, 'You can't even buy the clothes that are in here; How could you work for us?'"

Benjamin Walker, 50, of Minneapolis, said that when he recently applied for a job at a muffler shop, the manager asked, "How would you feel to be the only black working with a bunch of whites? Would it affect the quality of your work?"

He insisted it would not. He still didn't get the job.

Staff librarian John Wareham did research for this report. Randy Furst • 612-673-7382

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