

Economic burden on shoulders of blacks, women

Unemployment figures are frightening enough, but over time they get scarier. Anyone who thinks the economy treats people much more fairly now than when Eisenhower was in office should learn that



Eric Peterson

the same groups have been hunting for jobs for years and years. The numbers are there for anyone to look at.

To be young, black and female is to have three strikes against you in the American job market. Black women aged 16 to 19 have always suffered the highest unemployment rate of any social group since the statistics were first collected in 1954.

In that year, 20.6 percent of black

teenage females looking for work had no jobs; in 1981 the figure was 38.3 percent. (The average unemployment rate during the worst part of the Great Depression in 1933 was 24.9 percent.)

Every year, for more than 25 years, black teenage women have had the highest unemployment rate of any group measured, but they are not alone. There are consistent patterns in employment and unemployment in this country, patterns that haven't really changed in good times or bad. The simplest way to show it is to divide employable groups into two categories — the lucky and the unlucky:

LUCKY	UNLUCKY
Male	Female
White	Black or other non-white
Salaried	Blue collar
Full time	Part time
Over 20 years old	Teenage

For white males, the economy can be grim enough, but for blacks or women, for people in blue collar jobs or people new to the job market, unemployment figures have nearly always been worse than for the whole population.

There are only two exceptions: white women over 20 have been about equal or better in unemployment rates to white men in the same age group for the last several years, and the unemployment rate for white male teenagers is worse than the rate for white female teenagers.

But the pattern is terribly simple. While the general unemployment rate in 1981 was 7.6 percent, and 6.9 percent for white women, it was 14.1 percent for blacks, 14.3 percent for black women, and 10.3 percent for blue collar workers. These proportions have held true for roughly 30 years.

However, unemployment isn't the only economic difficulty the "unlucky" people have faced. They are the "last hired, first

fired." When economic conditions are good, blacks and teenagers and unskilled workers may get modest pay increases, but their jobs are pretty insecure when company profits are low.

As well as being unemployed longer and more often, people in these groups also get lower pay for the same work done by other, apparently more favored groups, and usually have lower prestige jobs to begin with. Blacks and women sometimes find access into certain labor unions hard. Education is also harder for these groups to come by.

The inescapable conclusion is that a permanent underclass has been formed, despite publicly expressed ideals to the contrary. The desperation of having no certain income tends to fall on the same people year after year and unemployment benefits run out — if you can get a job to earn them in the first place. The burden of hard times is much heavier on some shoulders than others.

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