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Editorial: A lower black jobless rate. Somebody tell Illinois.

By Editorial Board

First, the national news: According to the latest federal jobs report, the U.S. unemployment rate for black Americans is 6.8 percent. That's the lowest level since 1972, when the government began tracking that data. More people are finding work, more households are seeing their prospects improve.

Now the news in Illinois, where over the decades politicians have sent employers an inescapable message: We like your private sector tax dollars, but have you thought about moving your business to Indiana, to Wisconsin, to Texas?

So we aren't shocked that the unemployment rate for African-Americans in Illinois is 10 percent. That's the highest of any state, according to the Economic Policy Institute. Yes, the lagging economy in Illinois hurts millions of people — African-Americans disproportionately so.

That's a big reason why we write so often about the slow economic growth in Illinois, with job creation poky and, each year, residents leaving by the tens of thousands for other states. The response of Illinois legislators has been to raise the personal income tax rate by 32 percent and to avoid upsetting a status quo that pours enormous resources into the public sector.

Here's the bigger picture: The U.S. economy is in the ninth year of expansion. It will become the longest on record, surpassing the 1990s boom, if it reaches the second half of 2019. Growth, which had been unspectacular, perked up during President Donald Trump's first year in office because businesses are investing more. Attribute their optimism to the tax reform deal and the administration's focus on removing regulatory red tape.

With growth and investment come hiring: Employers added nearly 2.1 million jobs in 2017, the seventh year above 2 million. The benefits, though, aren't equally



The national unemployment rate for African-Americans is 6.8 percent, the lowest level since 1972 when the government began tracking that data. That is a very positive economic trend for a population whose joblessness rate is far too high. (Lynne Sladky / AP)

shared. At 6.8 percent, the black unemployment rate nationwide is nearly twice as high as the 3.7 percent rate of white unemployment. Cue that 10-percent rate of black joblessness here: As more African-Americans in other states come off the unemployment rolls, many of those who live in Illinois are left behind.

In Chicago, the job situation in hollowed-out West and South side neighborhoods is dire. Manufacturers left long ago. There are few retail and restaurant jobs. All the economic activity is located miles away in the Loop and elsewhere in metropolitan Chicago. Too many young people have inadequate job training and ... nothing to do. According to the Great Cities Institute at the University of Illinois at Chicago, more than 40 percent of 20-to-24-year-old black males in Chicago are out of work and out of school. Does a booming national economy ever touch Chicago's most impoverished neighborhoods? Can young people be drawn out of urban isolation?

Teresa Cordova and Matt Wilson of the Great Cities Institute tell us that from 2014 to 2015 there was a noticeable decline in the percentage of 20-to-24-year-old black males in Chicago who are out of work

and out of school: from 45.7 percent to 42.8 percent. There may be other factors at play, including support from social programs, but it's logical to presume more young African-Americans are finding work. Cordova says she sees "little rays of hope" that should be built on, meaning: more job training and economic development activity as the economy expands. "If you live in the Loop, this feels really exciting. If you are still living on the corner of Loomis and 63rd, what's it like over there?"

No, America's racial divides — in educational opportunities, in community employment income, and more — won't be rectified by a few quarters of above average growth. But the lowest black unemployment rate on record is something to build upon.

So we'll keep urging Illinois politicians to restore this state's heritage of opportunity for all comers. Because everyone has a better chance at a better life when jobs are more plentiful.

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