

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

February 4, 2018

Chicago's young African-Americans don't count in Trump's job number

By Laura Washington

"African-American unemployment stands at the lowest rate ever recorded," President Donald J. Trump declared Tuesday in his first State of the Union speech. Coming from America's No. 1 serial liar, that was hard to believe. But true.

The December 2017 unemployment rate for African-Americans stood at 6.8 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. It's the lowest it's been since 1972, when the bureau first began reporting data.

Trump's pronouncement inspired glad shouts and applause from Republican members of Congress. However, Democrats, particularly members of the Congressional Black Caucus, did not jump out of their seats for joy.

They, and employment experts like Jack Wuest, know that, back home await black youths and men who represent another, dire set of numbers.

"Those who are not looking for jobs. They've given up," Wuest, executive director of Chicago's Alternative Schools Network told me last week.

The official unemployment rate doesn't include them, he explained. "Statistically, they don't exist."

A January 2017 study commissioned by the network found that black males are overrepresented among the chronically unemployed.

Black males in Chicago had extremely high out-of-work rates for 16 to 19-year olds in 2014 and 2015, shows research by the Great Cities Institute at the University



President Donald Trump gestures as delivers his first State of the Union address in the House chamber of the U.S. Capitol to a joint session of Congress Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2018 in Washington, as Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Paul Ryan applaud. (Win McNamee/Pool via AP)

of Illinois at Chicago.

In Chicago, 88.8 percent of black males ages 16 to 19 were jobless in 2015; 60 percent ages 20 to 24 were unemployed.

They may be invisible in Trump Land, but not on the streets of Chicago. They stand idle on corners, listlessly ride the "L." Too many of them are looking for trouble.

As Trump incessantly reminds us, the stock market is skyrocketing and the unemployment rate plummeting. The Republicans' tax reform has put real money in our pockets.

For these young people, it's all excruciatingly meaningless.

No skills, no jobs. Thanks to their socio-economic status, they represent another kind of "dreamers:" Black youths who — through no fault of their own — are set up

to fail.

They are the products of deficient schools. Mom and dad are encumbered by poverty, lack parenting skills, are in prison, or worse, disabled or dead, at the hands of violence and addiction.

Their young men can't read a book, nor fill out a job application. They can't count. They lack the coping skills and confidence to succeed.

It's been a long, hard slide into this employment no man's land, said Wuest, who has been advocating for youth employment and education since he founded the Alternative Schools Network in 1973.

Federal funding for youth employment programs first emerged in 1964, in response to the Newark, New Jersey riots. But they were eliminated by Democratic president, Bill Clinton in 2000. That

federal effort once employed 700,000 to 800,000 low-income kids every summer, Wuest said.

It was simple strategy: Match kids with community groups who know the neighborhood. Connect them to jobs that help them build their confidence and resumes. Other preparation programs can build work and job-readiness skills, like being on time and coping with anger issues.

“Getting a job as a teenager is great because you can test yourself against the world,” Wuest said.

If Trump truly wanted to celebrate black history, his administration could “create a comprehensive youth summer and year-round employment program for low-income and moderate-income youth and young adults,” Wuest said in an email.

That would be worth boasting about. No lie.

Email: lauraswashington@aol.com