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Blacks in South Florida suffered most during Great Recession

By Donna Gehrke-White, Georgia East and Dana Williams, Sun Sentinel

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In 2010, after the recession ended, 16.3 percent of blacks were looking for work compared with a 10.1 percent overall unemployment rate in Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

As for household income, blacks also saw steeper drops in Broward and Miami-Dade counties than the overall population.

Palm Beach County black households fared better. Their median incomes fell slightly less than the county as a whole.

Blacks "are bearing the brunt of the recession," said William B. Stronge, an economics consultant and professor emeritus at Florida Atlantic University.

"They have been moving up economically, but the gains they have made are relatively small and the recession has hit them disproportionately."

Since those economic gains were recent, many lacked the savings to weather the recession — including having the money to go back to school after being laid off, said Roslyn Osgood, an adjunct professor who teaches public policy at Nova Southeastern University.

"As a race, because of slavery, we're always playing catch up economically," Osgood said. "When a recession hits, it knocks us three steps back."

Almost one out of four blacks are underemployed, meaning they had no job, weren't working as many hours as they wanted or had been discouraged enough to drop out of the labor force, said Bernardo Oseguera, at the Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy at Florida International University.
Thousands of South Florida blacks have "have given up looking for work," said Patrick Franklin, chief executive officer for the Urban League of Palm Beach County.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' breakdowns of 2011 unemployment data for South Florida will be available in the fall, but statewide, unemployment for all races hit 10.7 percent.

FIU's Oseguera said the latest data continues to show a wide disparity.

"It was 15.7 percent for African-Americans, almost twice as for white non-Hispanics' 7.9 percent," he said.

So why were blacks being hurt worse? Many long-time unemployed people lack sought-after computer skills and aren't aware of government education programs that might help them land new jobs, Franklin said.

Duane Webb, 30, an Army veteran, found it difficult to find a job when he first moved back home to Lauderhill from Fort Hood, Texas. As part of the infantry, Webb said part of his responsibility was to hunt for explosives. Webb said when he returned he needed help with revamping his resume and needed to beef up his job interviewing skills.

"I was without a job for about three months," said Webb, whose family helped support him during the transition.

He finally landed a job at a hotel after going to the Center for Working Families at the Urban League of Broward County. He's now working for an airline.

Webb is one of the lucky ones. Some 56 percent of unemployed blacks in Florida were out of work for at least six months in 2011, said FIU researcher Oseguera.

Other South Florida blacks talk about struggling to keep their companies afloat.

"I try to do the best I can," said Luxner Jean, of Pembroke Pines, as he props up his South Florida used car lot and rental company from the proceeds from his car rental business and ice making plant in Haiti. "I struggle — the economy is very bad."

His customers just don't have the money to buy cars right now in South Florida, Jean said. "Once I used to sell 50 to 60 cars in a month," he added. "Now maybe it's 15."

More formerly middle-class blacks are coming to the Urban League for help after they've lost their jobs and their homes, said Courtnee Biscardee, vice president of programming at the Urban League of Broward County.

"We still primarily serve a low-income population, but some of our clients were not low income two years ago," said Biscardee. "We have low to moderate middle class clients who are now in a new space."
Many don't have families with savings to help them through a temporary crisis, said FAU's Stronge.

"We took a double hit: Florida had the housing bust and the economic downturn at the same time," added Urban League's Franklin. "We had the perfect storm — that is still down here."