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## **Back to Work in New Orleans**

By Harry J. Holzer

Getting people back to work in New Orleans poses a familiar set of problems for the U.S. Department of Labor and other agencies, albeit at a vastly larger scale. Particularly challenging is how to employ young black men, already underrepresented in the workforce, in the rebuilding effort given their low rates of employment, and high rates of crime and incarceration.

Some statistics:

- In August 2004, the unemployment rate for black teenagers nationally was just over 35%. The percentage of the population employed was only about 20%, which is only about half the rate observed for whites.
- Among young black men in New Orleans aged 16-24 who were not enrolled in school, fully 40% were not even in the labor force in the year 2000 – one of the worst rates of nonparticipation in the nation (see the accompanying Excel file).

Among the contributing factors to high joblessness among young black men are weak schooling in an economy that increasingly values math and language skills, disappearing blue collar jobs, and “job sprawl” that creates employment opportunities in suburbs that are hard for many young blacks to access.

Illegal activity, especially the drug trade, led to increased incarceration rates among young black males in the 1980s and early 1990s. On top of their poor skills, low work experience and substance abuse histories, most employers are reluctant to hire former offenders—especially black offenders. State laws prohibit them from holding many kinds of jobs or even drivers' licenses. And the young men themselves have very little interest in jobs that offer them nothing but low wages, few benefits, or few chances for promotion. Also, many are non-custodial fathers who are in arrears on their child support, so most of their low wages will be withheld for child support payments—further reducing their incentives to work.

What can be done?

- Efforts to increase employment and prevent crime among young men must begin with efforts to improve their basic and job-related skills. In the high school years, we should link them to the job market through apprenticeships, internships, and the like. Access to training in community colleges needs to be improved, and job training programs with proven records for out-of-school youth—such as the Job Corps and the Youth Service Corps—should be expanded. And their access to employers—especially those providing higher-paying jobs—needs to be improved through job-placement strategies that link training to available jobs and help overcome information and transportation problems.

- The New Orleans rebuilding effort actually provides an opportunity to do something positive for low-income young black men who previously lived there. Large numbers of jobs will be available in the cleanup and reconstruction effort for those with modest skills. It is critically important that young men who were earlier New Orleans residents have access to these jobs. To the extent that so many of these men have relocated, local One-Stop offices and Workforce Boards in their new locations need proactive strategies of placing them into available jobs, while companies awarded contracts should be required to employ them in significant numbers.
- Finally, apprenticeships and other on-the-job training opportunities can be established providing these young men with some certification once the effort is completed. Criminal records should not be considered barriers to participation; and “fatherhood” services plus some arrearage forgiveness should be provided for non-custodial fathers who now intend to comply with their child support orders. Additionally, there should be assistance with gaining housing and transportation for those returning permanently to New Orleans in ways that enhance employment prospects for these workers.

A real opportunity to make progress on a seemingly intractable economic and social problem exists. If such an effort were successfully undertaken, the terrible cloud of Katrina might ultimately have a true silver lining.

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