

Summertime's here and the living isn't easy

by Marc_H._Morial

On May 2, the Bureau of Labor Statistics confirmed what we have known for a long time - the American economy is weak and growing weaker. As summer approaches, we are faced with the fact that during the past two months, more than 100,000 Americans have lost their jobs - 80,000 in March and another 20,000 in April. In fact, this year has seen a steady erosion of employment with a total loss of a quarter of a million jobs since January. By any measure, this is bad news for our economy, but it's even worse news for blacks.

Black unemployment, now at 9 percent, continues to nearly double the current 5.1 percent rate for whites. Clearly, blacks are being hit hardest during this current economic downturn.

Some would have us believe that a loss of "only" 20,000 jobs in April and an overall unemployment rate of 5 percent is a sign of "resilience," as the New York Times declared in a May 3 headline. Although the country experienced a lower job loss than expected in April, there was a significant increase in the part-time vs. full-time employment rate. Unfortunately, most part-time jobs, especially in the retail and health services sectors, pay low wages and rarely offer comprehensive health insurance benefits. So, the overall impact is that many people, particularly blacks, are not able to secure the income needed to support their families and keep them healthy.

The continued rise in the cost of staples like gas and food are also huge obstacles to economic stability and will force most low- and moderate-income families to use their government rebate checks to simply keep their heads above water. Be certain that it is clear to both me and an overwhelming number of leading economists, that a summertime halt in federal gas taxes amounts to nothing more than "hocus pocus" economic policy. A temporary halt of this revenue stream would probably result in the loss of tens of thousands of blue-collar jobs and put the maintenance of our highways and bridges at risk while not even guaranteeing that Americans pay less at the pumps.

Robbing long-term progress for short-term gain is not smart economic policy.

As president and CEO of the National Urban League, I continue to call for an infrastructure stimulus package focused on job creation to improve the lives of struggling Americans across the country. With so many citizens facing long-term unemployment, I call on the federal government to extend unemployment insurance benefits beyond the current 26 weeks. And with black teens experiencing a devastating unemployment rate of nearly 30 percent, we are in dire need of the immediate restoration of the Summer Youth Jobs Program.

As the statistics clearly show, employment for a growing number of Americans is still a "dream deferred." As such, we must continue to push for federal policies designed to strengthen our economy and put more Americans back to work.

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