

Obama Reaches Out to Young Blacks as Recovery Bypasses Them

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As President Barack Obama spoke to black students in South Carolina Friday about opportunity and how to get ahead, the most recent jobs report highlights an economy in which they're faring worse than just about every other demographic group.

The unemployment rate for blacks between the ages of 18 and 29 was 16.2 percent in February, about twice that of whites and almost triple the jobless rate for all U.S. adults, according to an analysis of federal data by Generation Opportunity, an Arlington, Virginia-based group for young adults that advocates less government.

The disparity underscores how the nation's first black president has overseen an economic recovery that bypassed many poor blacks, deepening racial inequality. Somewhat lost in the wake of a damning report on racial discrimination by Ferguson, Missouri, police and on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, the Obama administration has proposed a flurry of economic and policy initiatives to try to help blacks.

"You should be wildly optimistic about your possibilities for the future," Obama told a mostly black crowd at Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina. "The truth is today, right now, you are more likely to be healthier, wealthier, less discriminated against, have more opportunity, less likely to be caught up in violence than probably anytime in human history."

Legacy Project

Obama's trip to the historically black school follows Thursday's release of a White House report outlining his efforts to help young black and Hispanic men and make that part of his legacy after largely steering clear of discussing race earlier in his presidency.

Obama has of late publicly embraced tackling racial inequality as one of his chief missions.

He sought to draw attention to his "My Brother's Keeper" mentoring program on its one-year anniversary by hosting teenage mentees at the White House and conducting an interview with one of them for the oral history project StoryCorps. Separately, Obama recently pushed to steer federal grants toward historically black colleges, fund minority apprenticeships and address tensions between minorities and police after a series of deadly confrontations involving unarmed black men.

"This is going to be something that I'm going to be devoting a lot of energy to," Obama said in Columbia. "Because it's not just a black or a Hispanic problem -- this is an American problem."

Uneven Recovery

The task has grown more difficult during his tenure, as an uneven recovery has left young blacks falling further behind other groups.

The median net worth of black households fell 33.7 percent to \$11,000 from 2010 to 2013, according to an analysis of Federal Reserve data by the Pew Research Center. By contrast, the median net worth of white households increased 2.4 percent to \$141,900 during the same period.

For recent college graduates between the ages of 22 and 27, the 2013 unemployment rate was 12.4 percent for blacks compared with 5.6 percent for others, according to a May report by the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington. While black graduates have historically experienced higher unemployment rates than their peers, the gap has widened since 2007, the report found.

Similar post-recession trends have widened the racial divide on measures such as income, poverty, labor-force participation and incarceration.

‘State of Emergency’

“There is an economic recovery in the country, but unfortunately it’s not reaching many African-American families,” U.S. Representative G.K. Butterfield, a North Carolina Democrat and chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, said after a Feb. 10 meeting with Obama. “We wanted to inform the president that black America continues to be in a state of emergency.”

Obama discussed the U.S. economic recovery and his efforts to address racial inequality and responded to questions from the audience at Benedict College.

Even as the U.S. Labor Department reported Friday that 295,000 jobs were added in February, Obama’s trip to South Carolina comes at a time when “everything is tougher” for blacks, said David Swinton, president of Benedict College, where more than 80 percent of students qualify for federal Pell grants for low-income students.

Income Gap

“Nothing has changed for a long time in terms of the economic status of African Americans,” said Swinton, who wrote his 1974 Harvard dissertation on racial differences in employment. “The income gaps are the largest they’ve been since the ‘70s. The wealth gaps are even larger.”

Many of the structural forces that have contributed to racial disparities existed long before Obama’s presidency. In addition to discrimination, the challenges of growing up in poor neighborhoods -- with lower levels of educational attainment, higher poverty rates and more crime -- have contributed to economic inequality for decades, Swinton said.

Compared with other children, black children were more than twice as likely to live in high poverty neighborhoods and almost twice as likely to grow up in a single-parent household, according to an April report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a Baltimore group advocating for at-risk children.

Obama Reflects

“My father left when I was two, so I didn’t know him either,” Obama told 18-year-old Noah McQueen, a White House mentee, during an interview with National Public Radio’s StoryCorps program last week. “As I get older, I start reflecting on how that affected me.”

Obama is backing several initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for young minorities, from helping finance college educations to easing criminal sentencing guidelines. In the wake of a Department of Justice probe unveiling widespread harassment of young black residents by police in Ferguson, Obama this week released a report with recommendations for rebuilding trust between law enforcement and minority communities.

Yet his proposals have often stalled in the Republican-led Congress, and he has faced criticism for not doing enough to help the black voters who turned out in record numbers to elect him.

Some Headway

“The president and his administration have made some headway,” said Patrice Lee, outreach director for Generation Opportunity, which gets funding from the billionaire Koch brothers’ network of conservative donors and releases monthly reports on youth unemployment. “Unfortunately, it hasn’t been enough, considering the severity of the situation.”

Duresny Nemorin, who graduated from Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University in December, said that while she supports Obama, she been left out of the economic recovery he’s been touting. She’s been looking for work for more than six months, and recently moved back to live with her parents.

“I graduated with honors, studied abroad, speak more than one language and I’ve had a lot of internships,” said the 23-year-old Orlando resident. “I’ve heard a lot of good things about my resume, but I still find it hard to find a job.”

Nemorin said she has applied for hundreds of public relations jobs and frets over the \$25,000 in student loans she amassed at the historically black university in Tallahassee. She often conceals her race on job applications, hoping it will improve her chances.

“I haven’t experienced any direct discrimination,” she said. “But in the back of my head, I think it might play a role.”