

The grass may not be greener.....

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During the past two years a prominent media sound bite was that Buffalo had the second highest poverty rate in the country. A closer look at the data produced by the Census Bureau revealed that Buffalo and forty six (46) other cities have the same very high poverty rate, i.e. rates are not statistically significantly different. The stories about poverty also claimed that Buffalo had the third lowest median income among large U.S. cities. In fact, there were 31 cities in the U.S. and Puerto Rico with the same median income as Buffalo.

This past week, both print and television media have reported that the joblessness rate for Black males in Buffalo is the worst in the nation. The story posted by WGRZ TV states "A new study shows Buffalo has the highest joblessness rate in the country for Black males..." These stories are based on a report written by Marc Levine at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Center for Economic Development titled "Research Update: *The Crisis Continues: Black Male Joblessness in Milwaukee 2007*". One table (Table 6, pg. 11) in this report compares Black male workers' unemployment rate in Milwaukee to that of 35 other large metropolitan areas. The Buffalo media has focused on the statistic that 51.4% of Black male workers in Buffalo are unemployed to paint another dreary picture of the Buffalo economy.

Data used in Dr. Levine's report are from the 2007 American Community Survey, conducted by the Census Bureau. The survey is a continuous measurement survey, meaning questionnaires are sent to a sample of households each month during the year. Unlike the Decennial Census, where all answers relate to the same reference week, responses in the ACS are summarized for numerous reference weeks. As stated in the Bureau's 2007 Subject Definitions report, under Limitations of the Data:

*The reference week for the employment data is not the same for all people. Since people can change their employment status from one week to another, the lack of a uniform reference week may mean that the employment data do not reflect the reality of the employment situation of any given week.*

[http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/2007/usedata/Subject\\_Definitions.pdf](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/2007/usedata/Subject_Definitions.pdf) pg.40.

Dr. Levine's study was focused on joblessness in Milwaukee; it was not designed as a comparison of cities throughout the United States. Problems abound with using this study to compare Buffalo's Black male joblessness rate. For example, Dr. Levine used data associated with metropolitan areas, not cities. The Buffalo-Niagara Metropolitan area consists of Erie and Niagara Counties. The Black male joblessness rate for the City of Buffalo is 49% (+/- 5.7%), 17<sup>th</sup> on the list of all cities (places) and for the City of Milwaukee is 52% (+/- 4.1%), 9<sup>th</sup> on the list of all cities, although these rates are not significantly different. In addition, Dr. Levine did not use data from all metropolitan areas or even the 36 largest metropolitan areas in the US. In a list of metropolitan areas sorted by 2007 population estimates, Milwaukee is the 39<sup>th</sup> largest and Buffalo-Niagara is the 47<sup>th</sup> largest. According to the report, Dr. Levine chose the "35 benchmark metropolises from across the country" because "these metropolises represent

a broad variety of regions and overall economic conditions, and each has a significant African American population." pg 9.

ACS annual estimates are provided for a wide variety of personal and household characteristics, but only for locations with a large enough sample/response to provide meaningful statistics. All estimates produced by the Census Bureau include the margin of error associated with a statistic. As documented by the Census Bureau:

*Sampling error is the difference between an estimate based on a sample and the corresponding value that would be obtained if the estimate were based on the entire population (as from a census). Note that sample-based estimates will vary depending on the particular sample selected from the population. Measures of the magnitude of sampling error reflect the variation in the estimates over all possible samples that could have been selected from the population using the same sampling methodology.*

*Estimates of the magnitude of sampling errors – in the form of margins of error – are provided with all published ACS data. The Census Bureau recommends that data users incorporate this information into their analyses, as sampling error in survey estimates could impact the conclusions drawn from the results.*

<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/ACS/accuracy2007.pdf> pg.15

A second problem with Dr. Levine's analysis is that it ignored the margin of error in comparing joblessness rates. The percent Black males age 16-64 who are unemployed (by Dr. Levine's definition) in the Buffalo metropolitan area is not statistically significantly different from the rates associated with thirty two (**32**) other metropolitan areas including Milwaukee, WI, Rochester, NY, Syracuse, NY, Albany, NY, and Detroit, MI. The percent Black males age 16-64 who are unemployed in the City of Buffalo is not statistically significantly different from the rates associated with forty seven (**47**) other cities including Milwaukee, WI, Rochester, NY, Syracuse, NY, Cleveland, OH, Minneapolis, MN, Baltimore, MD, Washington, DC, and Detroit, MI.

Dr. Levine defined unemployment (joblessness) for black males age 16 to 64 years old as those who are in the civilian labor force and unemployed and those who are not in the labor force. The Census Bureau defines these subjects as follows:

**Unemployed** – All civilians 16 years old and over are classified as unemployed if they (1) were neither "at work" nor "with a job but not at work" during the reference week, and (2) were looking for work during the last 4 weeks, and (3) were available to start a job. Also included as unemployed are civilians who did not work at all during the reference week, were waiting to be called back to a job from which they had been laid off, and were available for work except for temporary illness. Examples of job seeking activities are:

- Registering at a public or private employment office
- Meeting with prospective employers
- Investigating possibilities for starting a professional practice or opening a business
- Placing or answering advertisements

- *Writing letters of application*
- *Being on a union or professional register*

**Unemployment Rate** – *The unemployment rate represents the number of unemployed people as a percentage of the civilian labor force. For example, if the civilian labor force equals 100 people and 7 people are unemployed, then the unemployment rate would be 7 percent.*

**Not in Labor Force** – *All people 16 years old and over who are not classified as members of the labor force. This category consists mainly of students, housewives, retired workers, seasonal workers interviewed in an off season who were not looking for work, institutionalized people, and people doing only incidental unpaid family work (less than 15 hours during the reference week).*

[http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/2007/usedata/Subject\\_Definitions.pdf](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/2007/usedata/Subject_Definitions.pdf) pg. 40-41

If we use the unemployment rate as defined by the Census Bureau, ignoring those who are not in the labor force, Buffalo's metropolitan area has a Black male (age 16-64) unemployment rate of 18% (+/- 4.3%) and a White male (age 16-64) unemployment rate of 6% (+/-0.8%). The Milwaukee metropolitan area has a Black male (age 16-64) unemployment rate of 22% (+/-1.7%) and a White male (age 16-64) unemployment rate of 4% (+/-0.5%). Out of the 132 metro areas in the U.S. for which data are available on Black male unemployment, **73** have the same rate as Buffalo, i.e. not statistically significantly different. Out of the 368 metro areas in the U.S. for which data are available on White male unemployment, **226** have the same rate as Buffalo, i.e. not statistically significantly different. With respect to places (cities), the City of Buffalo has a Black male (age 16-64) unemployment rate of 19% (+/- 5.2%) and the City of Milwaukee has a Black male (age 16-64) unemployment rate of 23% (+/-4.1%). Out of the 105 cities in the U.S. for which data are available on Black male unemployment, **67** ( more than half) have the same rate as Buffalo, i.e. not statistically significantly different.

An additional, and perhaps more meaningful statistic in Dr. Levine's report, is the ratio of Black to White unemployed (Levine's definition) male workers (age 16-64). What Dr. Levine did not consider is the ratio of Black to White workers within a city. Considering both of these ratios (workers and unemployed workers -Levine's definition) for places that the Census Bureau provides estimates for both races reveals, for instance, that in the City of Detroit, MI there are nearly 7 Black workers for every 1 White worker, whereas in the City of Buffalo, NY there are nearly two White workers for every Black worker. Both ratios (workers and unemployed workers) for the City of Buffalo are less than 1 indicating that there are more White workers than Black workers and more White unemployed workers than Black unemployed workers. However, the ratio for unemployed workers is significantly larger than the ratio for workers, indicating a bias against Black male workers. In other words, for every Black unemployed worker there is one White unemployed worker. In Detroit, however, the ratio of Black unemployed workers to White unemployed workers is no different from the ratio of Black workers to White workers, so there is no bias against Black male workers. Eleven (11) of the ninety (90) cities (places) for which the

data are available indicate no bias toward Black male workers. The remaining seventy-nine (79) places are biased against Black male workers. Buffalo is not alone, nor is it the most biased. Consider the city of Austin, TX where there are over eight (8) White workers for every Black worker but fewer than four (4) unemployed White workers for every unemployed Black worker.

The same analysis using the census definition of unemployment yields more than ten White male workers (age 16-64) for every Black male worker (age 16-64) in the Buffalo metropolitan area but fewer than four unemployed White male workers for every Black male unemployed worker. In the Milwaukee metropolitan area there are more than seven White male workers for every Black male worker but fewer than two unemployed White male workers for every unemployed Black male worker. Thirty seven (37) of the metro areas are unbiased whereas ninety five (95) of the metropolitan area indicate a bias against Black male (age 16-64) workers.

Black male joblessness issues, like poverty, seem to be spread throughout urban America and certainly are not unique to Buffalo, NY. Those looking to leave Buffalo for greener pastures may be surprised to find the grass is as brown as ours.