

## *Research*

### **Addressing African American Male Unemployment in Two Inner-City Neighborhoods: A “Credentialed Skills Quandary”**

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#### **Abstract**

This study investigated African American male unemployment in two inner-city neighborhoods for the purpose of identifying viable programmatic interventions to address the problem. Input was gathered from unemployed African American males regarding their background, unemployment experiences, knowledge of the local WIN Job Training Center, and suggestions for services to help them gain employment. This study utilized an exploratory, non-experimental mixed-methods design, which incorporated the use of a survey instrument and participant focus groups (n=12). Survey findings indicated the majority of respondents tended to be unemployed without a full-time job for over one year; listed lack of transportation as the primary reason for their unemployment; possessed knowledge of where available jobs were located; and had not received any special vocational training. A significant theme emerging from the focus groups indicated participants possessed undocumented vocational skills acquired through “on-the-job” experiences. Programmatically, this lack-of-documentation regarding skills possessed leads to a “Credentialed Skills Quandary”--- that is, how to document that participants are proficient in certain vocational areas without going through an extended credentialing process that delays obtaining employment. This study’s findings suggest a flexible program which provides job search and transportation assistance, coupled with on-the-job credential-producing training may be a more effective employment strategy.

#### **Introduction**

This study investigated chronic African American male unemployment in two Jackson, Mississippi inner-city neighborhoods. Using an exploratory research design, it sought to identify those contemporary issues, attitudes, perceptions, and possible remedies that could prove effective in reducing African American male unemployment. The specific objectives of this study were to gain insight from participants regarding their unemployment experiences; assess participants’ knowledge of the local WIN Job Training Center and services provided at that facility; and gather input regarding suggested services, programs, and/or activities that can help participants gain employment. This study is part of a two-phase research project that consists of (1) collecting and analyzing information from unemployed African American men living in two inner-city neighborhoods; and (2) based upon information collected and analyzed, designing and implementing community-based interventions that have local and national programmatic relevancy.

While there have been studies examining African American male unemployment in other urban areas (e.g., Liebow, 2003; Wilson, 1997); there is a scarcity of research specific to the Jackson, Mississippi area. A “key word” search of several academic databases (e.g., Academic Search Premier, SocIndex, ERIC, Vocational

and Career) of the terms “unemployment”, “African American male”, and “Jackson, Mississippi” did not return any scholarly research articles or manuscripts on this issue. This study thereby addresses a void in the research and programmatic literature regarding African American male unemployment in the Jackson, Mississippi area. The study’s intent is to provide a contemporary research and programmatic framework for addressing the issue of chronic African American male unemployment in inner-city neighborhoods locally and across the United States. Since African American male unemployment has been closely linked with several urban maladies (Wilson, 1999), identifying effective unemployment interventions may also be a path to improving other socio-economic conditions impacting the quality of life in urban areas.

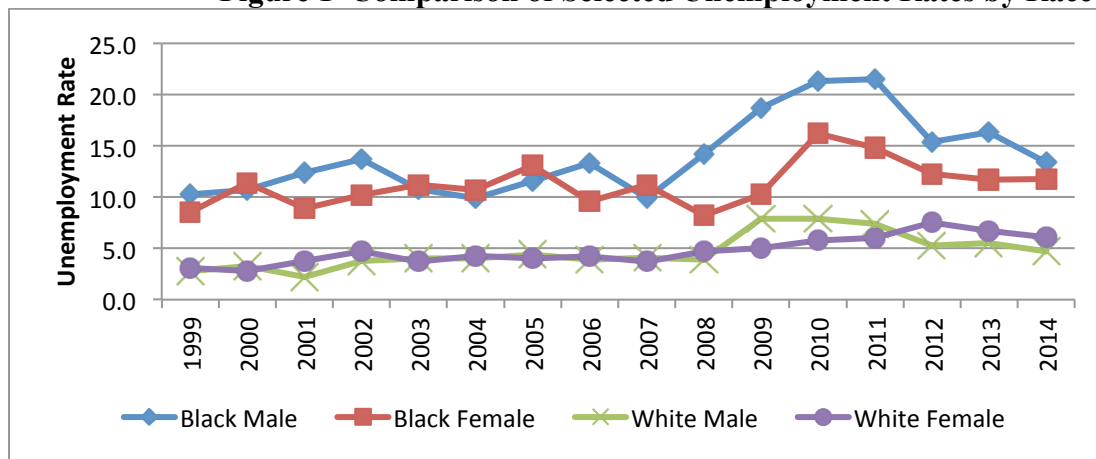
### **National Perspective**

The recent “Great Recession” re-focused the national spotlight on unemployment in America. The economic downturn beginning in 2007 contributed to over 3 million jobs being lost in the U.S. economy; with over 16 million Americans being unemployed as of January, 2010 (Soyars, 2010). At the beginning of the year 2007, the U.S. unemployment rate was 4.6%; however, by January, 2010, that rate had increased to 10.6% (BLS 2012). When the unemployment rate is examined by race over this same time period, the rate for African Americans was 17.3%, Whites was 9.6%, and Asians was 8.4% (BLS 2012). Nationally for African American men above the age of 16, the number of unemployed peaked at 1.8 million men in March, 2010, with a corresponding unemployment rate peaking at 21.3% (BLS, 2012). Since that time, the national African American male unemployment rate has trended downward to 10.3% as of June, 2015 (BLS, 2015). This downward trend follows a similar pattern of declining unemployment rates experienced by other race/gender groups since the year 2010 (BLS, 2015). However, the African American male unemployment rate (10.3%) is still higher than the unemployment rates for White men (4.7%), Asian men (4.0%), and Hispanic/Latino men (BLS, 2015)

### **African American Male Unemployment in Mississippi**

In Mississippi for the years 1999-2014, the average state unemployment rate was 7.3% (BLS, 2014). By way of comparison during this same time period, the average unemployment rate for African American men was 14.0% (BLS, 2014). Figure 1 provides a comparison of unemployment rates for African American males and females, and White males and females in Mississippi. African American males comprise approximately 15% of the Mississippi civilian labor force compared with approximately 33.7% for White males (MDES, 2012, p. 1) In terms of statewide labor force participation rates (LFPRs), the African American male rate was approximately 84.8%; whereas the White male rate was approximately 93.4% (MDES, 2012, p. 1). Just as with the White male LFPR, the African American male LFPR suggests the overwhelming majority of this group is attached to the workforce on a relatively consistent basis. Therefore in the context of this study, the issue becomes who are those African American males not attached to the workforce; what are some of the major reasons for this non-attachment; and what can be done to attach these individuals to the workforce.

**Figure 1 Comparison of Selected Unemployment Rates by Race & Gender**



### African American Male Unemployment in the City of Jackson

To assess the overall status of unemployment among African American males in the City of Jackson, data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2009-2013) were used. Survey estimates indicated that for the time period examined (2009-2013), there were 27,807 civilian African American males comprising the labor force, of which 23,207 were employed (ACS, 2013). This represented a labor force participation rate (LFPR) of approximately 83.4%. Over this same time period, the African American male unemployment rate was approximately 16.5%. By way of comparison, there were 8,136 civilian White males in the labor force, with 7,510 of this group employed (ACS, 2013). This represented a labor force participation rate (LFPR) of approximately 92.3%. Over the 2009-2013 time period, the White male unemployment rate was approximately 7.6%.

### Description of Targeted Neighborhoods

Table 1 provides a statistical profile comparison of the neighborhoods selected for this study. These neighborhoods were selected on a convenience basis due to the authors’ familiarity with those areas and local neighborhood community centers. The U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey’s 5-Year Estimates (2009-2013) were the data source used to compile this comparison profile (ACS, 2013). In examining Table 1, the Washington Addition/Census Tract 32 area displays the highest levels of economic stress based upon the indicators selected. The 57.8% labor force participation rate reflects substantial non-attachment by African American males to the workforce. As discussed in this study’s background section and depicted in Table 1, poverty and low educational levels are often linked with areas exhibiting high unemployment.

**Table 1 Comparison of Selected Neighborhoods**

Indicator	Washington Addition / Census Tract 32	Midtown / Census Tract 114	City of Jackson (All Census Tracts)
<b>Total Population</b>	1,177	1,209	173,997
<b>African American Population (%)</b>	98.8%	98.2%	80.4%
<b>White Population</b>	1.1%	1.5%	18.2%
<b>AA male Population (% of total population)</b>	52.0%	42.6 %	36.5%
<b>High School Graduate or Higher (%)</b>	77.3%	70.5%	83.6%
<b>Poverty - All People (%)</b>	53.3%	35.9 %	30.2%
<b>Female Headed Households (%)</b>	18.8%	26.8%	27.7%
<b>AA male Labor Force Participation Rate</b>	92.5%	79.2 %	83.4%
<b>AA male Unemployment Rate</b>	7.4%	20.7%	16.5%

Data presented in Table 1 indicate both census tracts display high levels of poverty, especially Census Tract 32 with over one-half of all people living in poverty.

## Methods

*Design.* This study utilized an exploratory, non-experimental mixed-methods design which incorporated the use of quantitative and qualitative research methods (e.g., collecting data via a survey instrument and participant focus groups). The goal of this mixed-methods design was to obtain numerical and non-numerical observations that would provide deeper, more meaningful insight into understanding the phenomenon under study (Babbie, 2010, p. G9). The purpose in using qualitative, exploratory research methods is to uncover observations that provide deeper, more meaningful insight into understanding the phenomenon under study. Exploratory qualitative research is not dependent upon having a large n (sample size) to discover significant theoretical and/or programmatic findings. It is anticipated any potential findings will be subjected to additional research using more stringent research criteria. The goal of this study is to gather more information and insight that can



be used to develop and implement viable programmatic interventions.

*Data Collected.* This study collected both primary and secondary data for its analysis activities. Quantitative data describing national, state, and local level unemployment measurements were collected from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Mississippi Department of Employment Security's Labor Market Information Division. Quantitative data describing selected participant characteristics (e.g., educational level; length of unemployment) were collected via a survey instrument. Quantitative data describing selected neighborhood socio-economic characteristics were collected from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey's 5-Year Estimates (2009-2013).

Qualitative data were collected through the use of two focus groups sessions conducted in each of the targeted neighborhoods. These focus group sessions utilized a semi-structured interview questionnaire that incorporated both closed- and open-ended questions. Qualitative data were also collected through limited one-on-one conversations with African American men in the targeted neighborhoods. The primary variables of interest for this study included the participant's length of unemployment, educational level, age group, reasons/causes for unemployment, knowledge of WIN Job Training Center, and stated job skills.

*Procedures.* Focus group participants were recruited via the use of informational flyers distributed at community centers, and through the use of word-of-mouth messaging in the targeted neighborhoods. A twenty dollar (\$20) cash incentive was paid to African American men who participated in the focus group sessions. Eligibility to participate in the focus group sessions, and in completing the survey instruments, was limited to unemployed African American men who lived in the targeted neighborhoods and/or spent the majority of their time in the targeted neighborhoods due to familial, relational, and/or historical reasons. Data were analyzed utilizing the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS v.18) to produce descriptive and cross-tabulation outputs from the survey questionnaire.

*Limitations.* The limitations of this study included a small sample size (i.e.,  $n = 12$  overall,  $n = 5$  for Washington Addition/Census Tract 32,  $n = 7$  for Midtown/Census Tract 114) for both survey respondents and focus group participants. Another limitation particular to the Washington Addition/Census Tract 32 focus group session was not being able to conduct a continuous, un-interrupted interview session. The focus group participants were not randomly recruited and were self-selected. Additionally, this study relied upon participants' "self-reported" data which may be bias, incorrect, and/or un-verifiable. Because of these limitations, this study's findings may not be generalizable to other and/or larger population groups, or to other similar geographic communities.

## Findings

This section presents several noteworthy findings obtained from the survey instrument and two focus group sessions.

**Table 2 Time Since Last Full-Time Job / Age Group**

Time since last full-time job	Age group						Total
	18 to 25	26 to 30	31 to 35	36 to 40	41 to 45	Over 45	
<b>1 month to 3 months</b>	0	0	1	0	0	0	1 (8.3%)
<b>6 months to 12 months</b>	0	1	0	0	1	1	3 (25.0%)
<b>1 year to 2 years</b>	3	1	0	0	0	1	5 (41.7%)
<b>2 years to 4 years</b>	0	0	0	1	0	1	2 (16.7%)
<b>Over 4 years</b>	0	1	0	0	0	0	1 (8.3%)
<b>Total</b>	3 (25.0%)	3 (25.0%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (8.3%)	3 (25.0%)	12 (100.0%)

Results from this cross-tabulation indicated 50% of the participants were under the age 30; and over 66% of the participants had been without a full-time job for at least 1 year. Results from this tabulation also reveal that only one participant indicated he had been unemployed over 4 years. Surprisingly, this participant was in the 26-30 age group and thus was relatively young as opposed to one of the older age groups such as 41-to-45 or Over 45.

*Table 3* is a cross-tabulation of survey questions 1 and 2. Results from this cross-tabulation indicated 44% of the participants had an Eleventh grade education or lower; and over 33% of this same educational grouping had been without a full-time job between 1 to 2 years. *Table 3* does not contain a “2 years to 4 years” unemployment category as a result of three participants not providing answers for use in this cross-tabulation; whereas those participants did provide answers for use in the *Table 2* cross-tabulation.

*Table 4* is a cross-tabulation of survey questions 6 and 7. Results from this cross-tabulation indicated 50% of the participants selected “Lack of transportation” as the primary reason for their unemployment. “Lack of transportation” was selected in 4 of the 6 age categories, thereby suggesting that reason may hold validity across different age groups. The second most selected category was a tie between “Not enough education” (16.7%) and “Past criminal record” (16.7%). Another noteworthy observation emerging from this cross-tabulation involved the selection “Don’t know where jobs are located”. Only one participant (in the age 45 or older category) indicated they did not know where to find employment. This observation suggests participants do know where jobs are located, and participants do not view a lack of information as being a major reason for their unemployment status.

**Table 3 Time Since Last Full-Time Job/ Highest Educational Level \***

Time since last full-time job	Highest Educational Level						Total
	Ninth grade	Tenth grade	Eleventh grade	Twelfth grade	One year College	Two years College	
<b>1 month to 3 months</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	1 (11.1%)
<b>6 months to 12 months</b>	0	1	0	1	1	0	3 (33.3%)
<b>1 year to 2 years</b>	1	1	1	1	0	0	4 (44.4%)
<b>Over 4 years</b>	0	0	0	0	1	0	1 (11.1%)
<b>Total</b>	1 (11.1%)	2 (22.2%)	1 (11.1%)	2 (22.2%)	2 (22.2%)	1 (11.1%)	9 (100.0%)

\* NOTE: Three participants did not answer survey question 2 and thereby reduced the number of responses for this cross-tabulation to N = 9.

Table 5 combined responses for survey questions 3 and 4. Results indicated 66% of participants had not received any special training to help them get and/or keep a job. Results also indicated 58% of participants had visited the local WIN Job Training Center. This finding, when considered with the finding of only one participant “not knowing where jobs are located”, suggests participants have knowledge regarding where jobs are located. This raises the question of what role does the local WIN Job Training Center play in helping this population group find employment?

The following listing summarizes information presented in Tables 2-5 that have significant local and national programmatic implications:

- the majority of survey respondents were under the age 30;
- tended to be unemployed without a full-time job for over one year;
- tended to have a twelfth grade or less educational background;
- had visited the local WIN Job Training Center;
- listed a lack of transportation as their primary reason for being unemployed;
- had knowledge regarding where some jobs were located;
- had not received any special training to help them get and/or keep a job; and
- indicated “a lack of skills” is a major reason for them being unemployed.

*Table 4* #1 Reason Unemployed / Age Group Member \*

#1 Reason Unemployed	Age group						Total
	18-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	45 +	
Not enough education	1	0	0	1	0	0	2 (16.7%)
Past criminal record	0	2	0	0	0	0	2 (16.7%)
Don't know where jobs are	0	0	0	0	0	1	1 (8.3%)
Lack of transportation	2	1	0	0	1	2	6 (50.0%)
Other	0	0	1	0	0	0	1 (8.3%)
Totals / %	3 25.0%	3 25.0%	1 8.3%	1 8.3%	1 8.3%	3 25.0%	12 100.0%

\* NOTE: For question #7, two additional categories were available (“Do not have a specific skill” and “Do not want to work right now”) but were not selected by participants

*Table 5* Received any special training / Ever visited WIN Job Ctr.

	Received any special training		Ever visited WIN Job Ctr.	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	4	33.3	7	58.3
No	8	66.7	5	41.7
Total	12	100.0	12	100.0

## Focus Group Sessions

Focus group sessions were conducted in the two targeted neighborhoods using a semi-structured interview questionnaire to obtain participant responses. Overall, participants’ responses provided during the focus group sessions can be summarized into the following major points:

- a lack of transportation and formal education were viewed as major factors contributing to participants’ unemployment;
- “getting referrals/having the right connections/having references” were viewed by participants as being necessary for helping them get jobs;
- participants’ indicated they acquired valuable job skills via “on-the-job training” verses formal, school-type training;



- participants nearly unanimously stated they have knowledge of, and have visited, the local WIN Job Training Center;
- participants stated they generally did not feel positive about their experience visiting the WIN Job Training Center;
- participants stated jobs repairing and/or cleaning-up the neighborhood are needed and can be performed by them in the targeted communities; and
- participants recommended that organizations provide some type of motivational and “trade training” in helping them find jobs.

### Discussion

Findings from the survey instrument and focus group sessions were generally consistent with each other regarding barriers identified by participants (e.g., lack of transportation; lack of education; criminal background; lack of referrals/connections). This study’s findings are consistent with findings in the research literature regarding barriers and issues contributing to African American male unemployment in general (Forstater, 2001; Soyars, 2010; Maloney, 2010). However, several noteworthy finding emerged from the survey responses and focus group discussions.

One of these findings involved the issue of “motivation/accountability”. During the focus group discussions, motivation and accountability were discussed from often opposing viewpoints. For example, some participants acknowledged they needed to have greater motivation and take greater responsibility for their employment situation. Other participants, while agreeing in general with this line-of-reasoning, stated it is hard to maintain motivation when you perceive “the system is working against you” via discrimination and people not giving you a chance. Participants often expressed a feeling of being isolated in their job search activities. Within that context, it becomes easier to understand participants’ comments regarding the need to “get referrals/ have the right connections/ get references” to help them obtain jobs. From a programmatic perspective, this finding presents the dilemma of how to assist participants in maintaining/increasing their motivation, while also getting them to accept greater responsibility for their employment situation and overcome real (and perceived) employment barriers.

Another noteworthy finding involved the participants’ experiences with the local WIN Job Training Center. While nearly all of the participants visited the local job center, they tended to view the center as not being that helpful in terms of gaining unemployment. It must be noted there were several reasons stated for this outcome including the participants not being computer-literate; perceived in-sensitivity and lack of assistance from WIN center staff; and participants simply giving-up due to a lack of success in obtaining a job. The group acknowledged the need to become more motivated individually, while also acknowledging a need for outside assistance in helping them gain employment. The recommendations made by participants regarding the “types” of jobs they can perform (e.g., boarding-up and/or repairing old/abandon houses in the neighborhood) tended to fit the “low job skills” theoretical framework discussed earlier (Schwartzman, 1997; Wilson, 1997; Forstater, 2001). These “low skills jobs” tended to reflect the current skill levels of participants to perform more manual labor-oriented tasks, and reflected the participants’ desire to “upgrade” their vocational skills via “a trade training program” in order to broaden their appeal in the job market.

## Credentialed Skills Quandary

One area where survey findings seemed at odds with focus group findings was in the area of acquired “on-the-job” skills versus classroom-type acquired skills. Survey responses indicated participants did not receive any formal classroom-type skills’ training. On the surface, this finding seems to imply participants do not possess vocational skills that can help them obtain and/or keep a job. Focus group responses seemed to contradict to this implication with participants stating they do possess vocational skills (e.g., painting, carpentry, general maintenance, lawn care); however they acquired these skills via “on-the-job” and not through a traditional credential-granting process. This finding seems to both support and undermine the “low education/low skills” theory discussed earlier. It supports the theory in that most of the focus group participants had low education/low skills and were subsequently unemployed. It undermines the theory in that focus group participants did possess, according to their feedback, a range of marketable skills in vocational employment areas (e.g., painting, carpentry, general maintenance). Thus the emergence of a credentialed skills quandary --- that is, how to document that participants are proficient in certain vocational areas without going through an extended credentialing process that delays obtaining employment quickly.

A theoretical framework that adds insight into this quandary is the social theory of “Credentialism”. This theory examines the role of formal credentials (e.g., diplomas, certificates, licenses) in helping individuals gain employment (and other benefits) in certain occupations or work areas (IESS, 2008) (Brown D. K., 2001) (Collins, 1979). One criticism of Credentialism is that many occupational skills can be successfully acquired on-the-job and/or through practical workplace experience rather than through the use of credentials (IESS, 2008). Another criticism of Credentialism is that the use of credentials can also be an intentionally-designed barrier restricting access to certain occupational areas, resources, and workplace settings (IESS, 2008) (Brown D. K., 2001) (Collins, 1979). Issues such as race, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, social and economic status can all be used to restrict access to certain credentials needed for employment, or to enhance the employment potential of the previously mentioned groups and factors (IESS, 2008) (Brown D. K., 2001) (Collins, 1979). Credential advocates state credentials provide evidence that the possessor has acquired the necessary skills and abilities to perform certain functions at an acceptable level (IESS, 2008). Additionally, these advocates say the obtainment of such credentials provide evidence of other social and educational competencies such as the ability to master certain fields of study; demonstrate persistence and perseverance; and successfully get along with other individual and/or groups (IESS, 2008) (Brown D. K., 2001) (Collins, 1979). Thus, the obtainment of a “credential” serves as a signal or screening device to the labor market that the individual should be employable and ready to successfully function in a given occupation/work environment (Kwon, 2009) (Collins, 1979).

## **Recommended Programmatic Interventions**

One objective of this study was to recommend programmatic interventions addressing African American male unemployment in the targeted neighborhoods. Based upon this study’s findings and findings in the academic literature, specific programmatic interventions needed include more hands-on assistance with job search, readiness, screening, placement, and follow-up services; transportation assistance; job counseling services; motivational training activities; organized liaison/brokering activities with local jobs providers and human development organizations; organized liaison/brokering activities with private, public, and non-profit sector employers (especially those located in or near the target areas); and more on-the-job training experiences

via pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs. Many of these recommendations (e.g., more on-the-job and pre- / apprenticeship programs, dubbed “Earn and Learn”) have been proposed nationally by the Obama administration to better match existing jobs with potential employees (Biden, 2014).

## Conclusions

Findings from this study pointed to transportation issues (identified by 50% of participants as the number one reason for their unemployment), low educational levels, and low job skills’ levels as major contributors to African American male unemployment in the two Jackson, Mississippi neighborhoods. Visiting and knowledge of the local WIN Job Training Center by study participants was found not to be a major problem (nearly all participants had visited the center at least once). The issue of whether participants received any special kind of vocational training proved to be somewhat of a paradox; that is, participants generally did not receive any special kind of training, however they reported having acquired marketable job skills via previous “on-the-job” experiences. This finding relates to the concept of Credentialism --- that is, being able to document the competency of an individual regarding the obtainment of certain vocational (and other) workplace skill areas. With the current and projected trend of more and higher credentialing requirements being needed for employment (Brown D. K., 2001), this trend raises the possibility of potentially millions of unemployed, non-credentialed African American men being excluded from future employment opportunities. This lack of credentials results in a “Credential Skills Quandary” --- that is, how to document that participants are proficient in certain vocational areas without going through an extended credentialing process that delays obtaining employment quickly. One potential answer, pending additional research and testing, is the use of more on-the-job training and apprenticeship-type programs that provide both employment and credentials documentation.

The issues surrounding African American male unemployment are complex. It is hoped this study will provide additional insight and understanding of the issues facing unemployed African American males not only in Jackson, Mississippi, but also in other inner-city areas across the United States.

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