

Blacks hit hardest by public-sector job losses during recession, study finds

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The public sector has long served as an equalizer in American society, a place where minority workers could find stable employment that offered advancement and a reliable path to a middle-class life.

But the Great Recession wiped out many of those jobs, as tax revenues declined and anti-government sentiment added to a contraction that continued long after the Great Recession ended in 2008. Those job cuts disproportionately hurt African-American workers and increased racial disparity in the public sector, a new study by University of Washington sociologist Jennifer Laird concludes.

"There's a double disadvantage that black public-sector workers face, particularly black women," said Laird, a doctoral student in sociology. "They're concentrated in a shrinking sector of the economy, and they're substantially more likely than other public sector employees to be without work."

Nearly one in five black adults works for the government, in positions ranging from teaching to delivering mail, managing departments to investigating crimes. By comparison, 14 percent of whites and 10 percent of Hispanics hold public-sector jobs.

Since blacks are overrepresented in government work, the public-sector cuts naturally affected them more. But Laird's research, presented this week at the American Sociological Association's annual meeting in Chicago, found that black civil servants, especially women, lost their

jobs at rates higher than whites.

Laird analyzed federal unemployment data from 2003 to 2013 by gender, racial groups and public- and private-sector employment, and found that:

- The black/white employment gap for women increased almost sixfold during the post-recession years, from less than a percentage point in 2008 to a high of 5.5 percent points in 2011.
- Black public-sector workers are more likely to become unemployed than their white or Hispanic counterparts.
- Public-sector employment rates for black men rebounded to pre-recession levels by 2013, but employment levels among black women that year remained even lower than in 2008.
- Among various groups of workers, black men had the highest rates of unemployment—5 percent in the public sector and 13 percent in the private sector—between 2003 and 2013.

Job cuts among black government workers declined at steeper rates than other groups even after controlling for education, job type, skill differences and other factors. And while whites are more likely to leave government jobs for private sector work, Laird said, that migration cannot account for widening racial disparities in the public sector.

"The black/white employment disparity is very hard to explain away. Even after controlling for all those factors, it's really a persistent gap," Laird said.

Laird began working on her study after doing research on unemployment among Mexican immigrants and noticing a pattern of race-related job cuts in the public sector. Digging deeper into the data, she discovered an unexpected chasm in public-sector job losses between black and other workers.

The numbers suggested that the protective effect public-sector employment has long offered black workers dropped dramatically after the Great Recession, while white workers remained fairly insulated.

"I was surprised that the disparity was so great," Laird said. "We always think that the public sector protects minority workers."

A series of presidential executive orders and legal decisions starting in the 1940s opened the door to public sector jobs for blacks and women, who had been excluded from other areas of the labor market, Laird notes in her study. Demand for government labor grew substantially during World War II and the Vietnam War, and in the 1960s, blacks gained 28 percent of new positions in the federal government, though they comprised just 10 percent of the U.S. population. The boom was especially pronounced among [black women](#), whose share of government positions more than doubled between the mid-1960s and the early '80s.

Why black workers lost public sector jobs at higher rates than other groups during the Great Recession is unclear. It may be that black workers are more likely to be laid off when [job cuts](#) are triggered by a sudden and significant reduction in funding, Laird said—when the number of layoff decisions increases, she said, managers have more opportunities to discriminate.

But the public sector is no longer shrinking at the rate it was right after the recession. As long as black workers continue to enter the public sector workforce, Laird said, it will continue to offer them type of upward mobility it long has.

"It's encouraging that the black/white gap in public sector employment rates is not as bad now as it was during the recession," she said.

"Compared with the private sector, the [public sector](#) still offers [black workers](#) better pay, more professional opportunities and more job

security."

Provided by University of Washington

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