

# Shocked by jobless numbers? Wait 'til you look inside it.

BY BOB HERBERT

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Last week was a pretty good one for President Barack Obama. Bill Clinton helped out big-time when he returned from North Korea with American journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee. Sonia Sotomayor was elevated to the Supreme Court. And Friday's unemployment report registered a tiny downward tick in the jobless rate.

But for American workers peering anxiously through their family portholes the economic ship is still sinking. You can put whatever gloss you want on last week's jobs numbers, but the truth is that although they may have been a bit better than most economists were expecting, they were still bad, bad, bad.

Some 247,000 jobs were lost in July, a number that under ordinary circumstances would send a shudder through the country. It was the smallest monthly loss of jobs since last summer. And for that reason, it was seen as a hopeful sign. The official monthly unemployment rate ticked down from 9.5 percent to 9.4 percent.

But behind the official numbers is a scary story that illustrates the single biggest challenge facing America today. The U.S. economy does not seem able to provide enough jobs -and nowhere near enough good jobs-to maintain the standard of living that most Americans have come to expect.

The country has lost a crippling 6.7 million jobs since the Great Recession began in December, 2007. No one is predicting a recovery in the foreseeable future strong enough to replace the millions of jobs that vanished in this historic downturn.

**Analysts at the Economic Policy Institute noted that the economy has fewer jobs now than it had in 2000, "even though the labor force has grown by around 12 million workers since then."**

Two issues that absolutely undermine any rosy assessment of last week's employment report are the swelling ranks of the long-term unemployed and the crushing levels of joblessness among young Americans.

**More than 5 million workers--about a third of the unemployed--have been jobless for more than six months. That's the highest number recorded since accurate records have been kept.**

For those concerned with the economic viability of the American family going forward, the plight of young workers, especially young men, is particularly frightening. The percentage of young American men who are actually working is the lowest it has been in the 61 years of record-keeping, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston.

Only 65 percent of men 20 to 24 years old were working on any given day, in the first six months of this year. In the age group 25 through 34 years old, traditionally a prime age range for getting married and starting a family, just 81 of 100 men were employed.

For male teenagers, the numbers were disastrous. Only 28 of every 100 males were employed in the 16 through 19-year-old age group. For minority teenagers, forget about it. The numbers are beyond scary; they're catastrophic.

**This should be the biggest story in the United States. When joblessness reaches these kinds of extremes, it doesn't just damage individual families; it corrodes entire communities, fosters a sense of hopelessness, and leads to disorder.**

The unemployment that has wrought such devastation in black communities for decades is now being experienced by a much wider segment of the population. We've been in deep denial about this. Way back in March, 2007, when the official unemployment rate was a wildly deceptive 4.5 percent and the Bush crowd was crowing about the alleged strength of the economy, I wrote: **"People can howl all they want about how well the economy is doing. The simple truth is that millions of ordinary American workers are in an employment bind. Steady jobs with good benefits are going the way of Ozzie and Harriet. Young workers, especially, are hurting, which diminish the prospects for the American family and blacks, particularly black males are in a deep danger zone."**

The official jobless rate now is more than twice as high--9.4 percent--and even more deceptive. It ticked down a tenth of a percentage point in July not because more people found jobs but because 450,000 people withdrew from the labor market. They stopped looking, they weren't counted as unemployed.

A truer picture of the employment Crisis emerges when you combine the number of people who are officially counted as jobless with those who are working part-time because they can't find full-time work and those in the so-called labor market reserve--people who are not actively looking for work (because they have become discouraged, for example) but would take a job if one became available. The tally from the three categories is

a mind-boggling 30 million Americans--19 percent of the overall work force.

**This is, by far, the nation's biggest problem and should be its No.1 priority.**

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