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Was recession harder on people of color?

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JACKSON -- Aren't economic recessions color-blind affairs? In a report entitled "Tough Times in Mississippi," it seems one credible national group has crunched the recession's numbers to suggest that such an economic assumption is badly in error.

The Center for Social Inclusion, a New York-based advocacy group that focuses on dismantling what it calls "structural" racism, makes just such an argument.

The group offered statistics showing that joblessness was worse for blacks than whites during the recession.

CSI estimated the overall unemployment rate in Mississippi (9.4 percent) as slightly higher than the national average (9.1 percent). However, CSI said the gap between white and black unemployment rates (measured as average annual rates) is much higher in Mississippi.

Nationally, CSI said white unemployment stands at 8.3 percent and black unemployment at 14.5 percent -- up from 4.1 percent and 8.3 percent before the recession, respectively.

In Mississippi, CSI estimates white unemployment rose from 3.9 percent to 7.2 percent while black unemployment rose from 10.5 percent to 16.2 percent between 2007 and 2009. People of color were far worse off before the start of the recession and have been losing jobs at a faster rate since, the group claims.

CSI claims their "research shows that the housing crisis is also having a disproportionate impact on people of color in Mississippi" and cited the following verbatim data shown below as evidence:

During the height of the subprime (2004-2006) boom, banks and other lenders made 72,866 subprime mortgages in Mississippi.

By August 2008, lenders began foreclosure on an estimated 26,856 homes (or 5.2 percent of all mortgages) in Mississippi.

Communities of color have the highest subprime lending and foreclosure rates.

Between 2007 and 2008, homeownership rates dropped further for black Mississippians (down 2.8 percent) than for whites (down 0.5 percent).

But after examining housing and joblessness, CSI took on general poverty in Mississippi as a facet of the recession and offered the following conclusion:

“Over 600,000 Mississippians live below the poverty line, including almost 400,000 children. People who are black are much more likely to live in poverty -- a serious indicator of the recession’s disproportionate impact on communities of color.

“Black poverty (35.2 percent) is almost three times higher than white poverty (12.2 percent). Sadly, children bear the brunt of racialized poverty: almost half (47.6 percent) of black children in Mississippi live below the poverty line.

“Furthermore, what we know about poverty today is a year old. This means it is very likely that the situation is worse than it appears since over 60,000 Mississippians have lost their jobs in the past 12 months.”

What does it all mean?

Clearly, endemic poverty takes less notice of the rise and fall of recession. Chronic unemployment takes less notice of the rise and fall of unemployment rates. Tenuous housing before a recession usually means tenuous housing after a recession as well.

The bottom line is that lawmakers would be wise to remember that Mississippi lags the country entering recessions and in recovery as well.

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