

## On unemployment, black leaders press Obama

By: [Tim Mak](#)

September 2, 2011 02:18 PM EDT

Black leaders said on Friday that the sharp spike in unemployment among African-Americans revealed in the latest jobs report is nothing short of a “state of emergency” as they ratcheted up pressure on President Barack Obama to tackle the issue.

The Labor Department found that black unemployment - already way above the 9.1 percent national average - had a large one-month jump of 0.8 percent, to 16.7 percent in August from 15.9 percent in July. It's the highest level of African-American joblessness in 27 years.

“This is not necessarily President Obama’s fault – but right now, this is his watch. He has to address this issue,” Robert Johnson, founder of BET and the first African-American billionaire, told POLITICO.

With Obama’s major jobs speech set for Thursday, Johnson called on the president to specifically mention African-American unemployment in his remarks to the joint session of Congress.

“I think that the African-American community would welcome a phrase in his speech that says, ‘I am particularly concerned about the consequences of this economic situation...for minority Americans,’” said Johnson. “I think the white community would understand that phrase, coming from the first African-American president. I don’t think he should be shy at all.”

Johnson, along with The Rev. Jesse Jackson, also advocated a conference to discuss black unemployment, something they pointed out hasn’t happened during the Obama administration.

“This crisis is going to require some sort of summit meeting to focus on the several dimensions of it,” Jackson, who called the African-American unemployment situation a “state of emergency,” told POLITICO.

“No one is using the bully pulpit to urge corporations to create diversity of opportunity in this economy,” Johnson said. “We can’t exist in two societies, wherein one population is able to be successful and the other one is unsuccessful – that’s the prescription for social unrest.”

He added, “There’s a growing fear in the black community that we’re being left behind...and no one is standing up to say that we have taken into account the consequences of this economy on those who are most vulnerable, and that is a lot of African-Americans.”

By comparison, white unemployment was 8 percent and the Hispanic jobless rate was 11.3 percent.

Jackson said the problem was structural, arguing that the country needed a plan to end “a pattern of black discrimination and re-segregation. We need jobs, direct access to jobs.”

Others viewed the unemployment figures as a partisan problem - the Congressional Black Caucus released a statement Friday afternoon blaming Republicans for the poor jobs figure in the African-American community.

“Republican leadership has neglected to address unemployment in any meaningful way,” said Rep. Emanuel Cleaver (D – Mo.), the chairman of the CBC. “Time and again they have continued to pass cuts on the house floor which will deny our children with vital education opportunities, eliminating

programs that help families most in need, job training programs, and threaten the livelihood of American families.”

The latest joblessness numbers come as the chorus of voices from within the black community criticizing Obama on unemployment has grown louder over the last few weeks.

“The Congressional Black Caucus loves the president. We’re supportive of the president, but we’re getting tired. We’re getting tired. The unemployment is unconscionable. We don’t know what the strategy is,” Rep. Maxine Waters said at a job fair in August.

The figures for black unemployment among the young are even more disturbing - as high as 50 percent in some urban areas - the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People stressed on Friday.

“It is deeply concerning that the black unemployment rate went up from 15.9 percent to 16.7 percent, and black males and youth have even higher rates of unemployment,” said Hillary Shelton, Sr. Vice President for Policy with the NAACP. “[We need] an additional level of focus on job creation in communities that demonstrate stubbornly high levels of unemployment.”



© 2011 POLITICO LLC

<http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=82C2FB8C-98D7-4AC0-8F26-384AB7606FFE>