

# U.S. public-sector job cuts take a severe toll on blacks

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BY TIMOTHY WILLIAMS

Don Buckley lost his job driving a Chicago Transit Authority bus almost two years ago and has been looking for work ever since, even as other municipal bus drivers around the United States are being laid off.

At 34, Mr. Buckley, his two daughters and his fiancée have moved into the basement of his mother's house. He has had to delay his marriage, and his entire savings, \$27,000, are gone. “I was the kind of person who put away for a rainy day,” he said recently. “It's flooding now.”

Mr. Buckley is one of tens of thousands of once solidly middle-class black government workers — bus drivers in Chicago, police officers and firefighters in Cleveland, nurses and doctors in Florida — who have been laid off since the recession ended in June 2009. Such job losses have blunted gains made in employment and wealth during the previous decade and undermined the stability of neighborhoods where there are now fewer black professionals who own homes or who get up every morning to go to work.

Though the recession and continuing economic downturn has been devastating to the U.S. middle class as a whole, the two and a half years since the declared end of the recession have been singularly harmful to middle-class blacks in terms of layoffs and unemployment, according to economists and recent government data. About one in five black workers have public-sector jobs, and black workers are one-third more likely than white ones to be employed in the public sector.

“The reliance on these jobs has provided African-Americans a path upward,” said Robert H. Zieger, emeritus

professor of history at the University of Florida and the author of a book on race and labor. “But it is also a vulnerability.”

A study by the Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California this spring concluded, “Any analysis of the impact to society of additional layoffs in the public sector as a strategy to address the fiscal crisis should take into account the disproportionate impact the reductions in government employment have on the black community.”

Jobless rates among black Americans have consistently been about double those of whites. In October, the black rate was 15.1 percent, compared with 8 percent for whites. Last summer, the black unemployment rate hit 16.7 percent, its highest level since 1984.

Economists say there are probably varied reasons for the racial gap, including generally lower educational levels for black Americans, discrimination and the fact that many live in areas that have been slow to recover economically.

Though the precise number of African-Americans who have lost public-sector jobs nationally since 2009 is unclear, analysts observers say the current situation in Chicago is typical. There, nearly two-thirds of 212 city employees facing layoffs are black, according to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Union.

The central role played by government employment in black American communities is hard to overstate. African-Americans in the public sector earn 25 percent more than other black workers, and the jobs have long been regarded as respectable, stable work for college graduates, allowing many to buy homes, send children to private colleges and achieve other markers of middle-class life that were otherwise closed to them.

Blacks have relied on government jobs in large numbers since at least Re-

construction, the period after the Civil War, when the U.S. Postal Service hired freed slaves. The relationship continued through a century during which racial discrimination barred blacks from many private-sector jobs and carried over into the 1960s, when government was vastly expanded to provide more services, like bus lines to new suburbs, additional public hospitals and schools, and more.

But during the past year, while the private sector has added 1.6 million jobs, state and local governments have shed at least 142,000 positions, according to the U.S. Labor Department. Those losses are in addition to 200,000 public-sector jobs lost in 2010 and more than 500,000 since the start of the recession.

The layoffs are not expected to end any time soon. The U.S. Postal Service, where about 25 percent of employees are black, is considering eliminating 220,000 positions in an effort to stay solvent, and areas with large black populations — from Detroit to Jefferson County, Mississippi — are struggling with budget problems that could also lead to mass layoffs.

The postal cuts alone — which would amount to more than one-third of the work force — would be a blow economically and psychologically, employees say.

Pamela Sparks, 49, a 25-year Postal Service veteran in Baltimore, has a brother who is a letter carrier and a sister who is a sales associate at the Postal Service. “With our whole family working for the Post Office, it would be hard to help each other out because we'd all be out of work,” Ms. Sparks said. “It has afforded us a lot of things we needed to survive really, but this is one of the drawbacks.”

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