

Struggles continue for African Americans in South Jersey, census data show

By STEVEN LEMONGELLO Staff Writer *pressofAtlanticCity.com* /
Wednesday, February 1, 2012 12:45 am

PressOfAtlanticCity.com

As Black History Month begins today, African Americans in South Jersey continue to face higher poverty rates and lower income and education levels than blacks statewide.

“There’s a positive correlation between education level and income,” said Michael Busler, a fellow at the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College.

Experts also attribute the causes to lack of job opportunities and job training, the need to provide income before school is completed, and too little of both Atlantic City casino income and wages being spent in the city — but what can be done to reverse those trends is another question.

According to data from the American Community Survey’s latest five-year estimates, as well as the 2010 Census, about 20 percent of African Americans in Atlantic County are at or below the poverty line, compared with about 17 percent of African Americans across the state and just 12 percent of all Atlantic County residents.

The median income of African-American households in Atlantic County, \$39,765, is both lower than for blacks statewide, at \$47,191, and for Atlantic County overall, at \$54,766. Median household income for blacks in Cape May and Cumberland counties was even lower, at \$36,625 and \$36,270, respectively.

In addition, more than 1,000 black households in Atlantic County have family incomes of less than \$10,000, as well as almost 700 in Cumberland. Twenty percent of African-American men age 25 and older in Atlantic County have not completed high school, compared with 18 percent of all blacks in New Jersey and 16 percent in the county overall.

“Because there’s such a large percentage of African-American males dropping out of high school, their earning potential is significantly lower than those who finish,” Busler said.

Busler said that each of his three children, who attended Atlantic City High School and graduated in 2005, 2006 and 2008, entered high school with a class of about 900 to 950 students and graduated with a class of about 500.

Many times, he said, “it’s difficult for an African-American teen to stay in school because they have such a low income in the household. If he does drop out (to work), it ends up putting him at a disadvantage. And once they drop out, it’s very difficult to finish. In today’s world, at minimum you need a high school diploma.”

Linda Steele, president of the Atlantic City Branch of the NAACP, said that schools need to do a better job of training students for the working world.

“They need to get back to the basics,” Steele said. “And if they’re not going to college, they need to be focused on a skill. I’m talking about really evaluating a student, finding an interest, and zeroing in on that.”

The proposal put forward by President Barack Obama in his State of the Union address — keeping children in school until they turn 18 or graduate, rather than 16 — is “an effort worth trying,” Steele said, “but honestly I don’t know how doable it is.”

Busler also questioned how enforceable any post-16 educational mandate would be.

“In theory, it’s a great idea,” Busler said. “The more education people have, the better. The problem is, because of poor economic conditions, many people are forced to go to work to survive at 16.”

Steele also said that more job training should be offered for working adults in the area.

Another issue, Busler said, is the large numbers of single mothers in the black community.

Of the 16,017 black households in Atlantic County, an estimated 4,060 are considered a “married couple family” and 5,623 “other family.” The rest are considered single households.

The disparity between one-parent family households headed by men and women in that second category, however, is vast — 4,695 households are led by a woman without a husband present, compared with 928 led by a man without a wife present.

That comes to almost half of all black family households in the county being led by a woman with no husband — compared with just under 15 percent for all households in the county.

“Single mothers also typically have lower earning potential,” Busler said. “Households earn less than when they have a father and mother in the household.”

Then there is the issue of the elderly. More African Americans 65 and older in Atlantic County have incomes of less than \$15,000, about 1,100, than any other age group.

“The reason the poverty level is where it is, in my opinion, is that it’s very difficult for seniors to get part-time jobs or to get opportunities to work in the casino industry, because of their age,” said Ralph Hunter Sr., president and founder of the African American Historical Museum of South Jersey in Newtonville, Buena Vista Township.

Most of the wages earned by casino employees don’t stay in Atlantic City, or many times even Atlantic County, Hunter said — an issue that contributed to the closing of many of the African American-owned businesses from the Northside, including those highlighted in a new exhibit at the All Wars Memorial Building opening today.

“When an employee leaves his shift, he gets on the train and takes that to Burlington, Camden counties,” Hunter said. “The city of Atlantic City is burdened with maintaining a lot of Section 8 and senior housing — but those dollars don’t stay here.”

He added, though, that “a lot of people need Section 8 housing — they’re on Social Security or subsidized income that doesn’t permit them to do other things with their dollars. ... There’s a true need for housing. And that’s one of the reasons I think we could do better.”

Contact Steven Lemongello:

609-272-7275