

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

The Hardest-Working Paper in America

05/03/2019, 06:40pm

45% of Chicago's young black men are out of school and jobless, new report says



Jayy Matias, 18, spoke at a student rally about gun violence and joblessness among youth in low-income Chicago communities Friday. | Nirmal Mulaikal/Sun-Times

By [Nirmal Mulaikal](#) and [Nader Issa](#)

Over the past six months, Jayy Matias applied for more than 22 jobs at grocery stores, restaurants and home improvement retailers but hasn't landed anything.

"It's tough. I want to help my mom and dad out, but I've been struggling to find a job," said Matias, a senior at Pedro Albizu Campos High School in Humboldt Park. "I'm used to not getting a call back, not getting a job, not being accepted."

Matias, 18, was one of nearly 100 students from inner-city charter schools that protested joblessness and gun violence in low-income communities in Chicago outside of the James Thompson Center Friday.

"People of color struggle to find work and turn to the streets in the inner-city selling drugs and killing people because they can't find a job and need an outlet to survive," said Matias. "One less person could be in jail if that person who sells drugs or uses guns just got a paycheck."



Jayy Matias | Sun-Times/Nirmal Mulaikal

If Matias doesn't have success finding a job before he graduates in June, he could join the ranks of low-income young people of color who are both unemployed and out of school.

The Alternative Schools Network, which organized the student rally and runs 43 alternative CPS schools with 3,500 students, released a new report this week that found nearly half of Chicago’s young black men are both out of school and out of work, double the national rate.

“Just on the level of racism, there’s a huge disadvantage,” said Jack Wuest, executive director of the network, which serves many students who dropped out of traditional CPS schools or face other hardships. ASN worked with the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Great Cities Institute to analyze data from the 2017 American Community Survey, the most recent of yearly surveys administered by the U.S. Census Bureau.

About 45% of black men in Chicago age 20-24 were neither working nor in school in 2017, the analysis found. Nearly 20% of Latino men in that age group were out of work and not in school.

Taking into account women, 37% of Chicago’s young black adults don’t have a job and aren’t attending school, according to the analysis.

Their white counterparts, meanwhile, have fared much better due to steep advantages such as longstanding family wealth, investment in their communities and not fighting racism, the report said. In Chicago, only 5.7% of white young adults age 20-24 are out of school and out of work.

Those young men are far worse off than all men their age around the country, where about 24% aren’t working or studying.

While Friday’s announcement that the national unemployment rate was the lowest in nearly a half-century, Wuest said the trend for blacks in Chicago had seen rising rates of out-of-school and jobless young black adults.

One of the biggest barriers for teenagers of color trying to enter the workforce — other than divestment in low-income communities — is often a lack of connections, Wuest said.

“If you’re lower-income, your family probably doesn’t know someone to help you get a job,” Wuest said. “The first job I had in high school, my dad had a connection.”

Wuest believes the lack of opportunities for young men and women of color is connected to violence in Chicago. If teenagers and young adults don’t have viable ways to earn money, their focus will turn to other ways to survive that can lead to violence, poor mental health and a path to prison, he said.



Ashley Rush (right) grieved with fellow students after three murders of students who attended Alternative Network Schools in the last four weeks | Nirmal Mulaikal/Sun-Times

At the rally Friday, Ashley Rush, who attends Sullivan House Alternative High School in South Shore, said she’s been shot three times and has lost two brothers and three friends to gun violence — including one of three recent victims of gun violence who were students at ASN.

“Gun violence has personally hurt my life in so many ways. Moving on hasn’t been easy,” said Rush, 18. “I’m sick of it and what it has done to my family, my school, my community. We are minorities. We are young and we don’t have jobs. But it doesn’t need to be this way.”

Rush said the students and other African American and Latino youth need to be the first to stand together in their communities to fight gun violence.

“We can point to white people, society, the police but it’s also on us,” she said.

The impact on local government is that public dollars are being wasted on jails and prisons that are overflowing with young adults who could have been taxpayers, Wuest said. The government’s loss in taxes for each young adult who goes without a job is more than \$200,000 over their lifetime, he said.

“If we wanted to really stop violence, we would employ everyone who wanted a job,” he said.

Nirmal Mulaikal

Email: nmulaikal@suntimes.com

Nader Issa

Follow me on Twitter [@NaderDlssa](https://twitter.com/NaderDlssa)

Email: nissa@suntimes.com