

Study: 45% Of Young Black Men In Chicago Out Of School, Out Of Work

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Bill Healy/WBEZ

To help teens stay safe and engaged over the summer, Chicago Public Schools hired high school students to renovate aging CPS auditoriums. The teens pictured here renovated the auditorium at Harold Washington Elementary School in summer 2017.

An increasing number of black young men in Chicago are out of work and out of school, according to a report being released on Friday.

The analysis of 2017 census data shows a whopping 45% of black men between the ages of 20 and 24 didn't have a job and weren't in school — about 9 percentage points higher than in 2016. For younger black males ages 16 to 19, the out-of-work, out-of-school rate remained unchanged at 9%.

As it has for more than a decade, the Alternative Schools Network, an advocacy group for schools that re-enroll dropouts, commissioned the analysis, which was done by the University of Illinois at Chicago's Great Cities Institute. In past years, the organization has held panel discussions to try to bring awareness to the issue. But this year, it plans to hold a noon rally on Friday at the Thompson Center featuring students from alternative schools. The students will talk about how many classmates they know who have been killed just in the past few months.

And they will link this violence with the lack of jobs for young people, especially over the summer.

"It is about getting many more kids off the street," said Jack Wuest, the executive director of the network. "It is just that simple."

Thirty years ago, the federal government funded a robust youth jobs program that put hundreds of thousands of teenagers to work across the country, Wuest points out. But he said the Clinton administration took money from that program.

In recent years, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel has "pieced together" money for summer jobs programs, Wuest said. The main one, One Summer Chicago, got more than double the applicants for the available jobs, according to its website. Not having a job as a teenager makes it harder to land one as a young adult, he said.

"So that means that 20 to 24-year-olds haven't had a job when they are 16, 17, 18, 19, 20," Wuest said. "So they don't have that experience. That is why I think we see these numbers that are dangerously high."

Matt Wilson, who did the analysis for the Great Cities Institute, said the difference in the out-of-school, out-of-work rate between black and white young adults in Chicago is especially stark. Only about 5% of white 16 to 24-year-olds are out of work and out of school, compared to 13% of Latinos and a quarter of black young adults.

He said this data helps him better understand why there's more violence in some communities.

"You ask the question: What do they do in the morning? What do they do when they wake up?" he said. "I think when people don't have a way to productively use time, the violence becomes a natural response to that."

Wuest points out many communities across Illinois are grappling with too many idle young adults. Outside of Chicago, more than 127,000 16 to 24-year-olds are out of work and out of school, nearly half of them white.

"It is not just inner city. It is not just Cook County," he said. "It is the rural areas that are white ... those kids are in dire straits too."

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