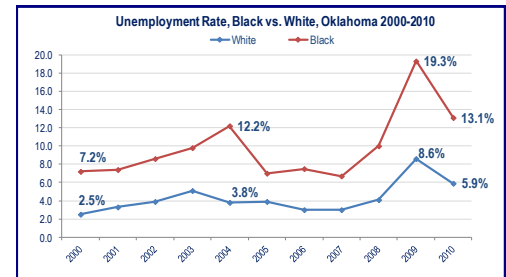


### OKLAHOMA'S BLACK-WHITE UNEMPLOYMENT GAP

Black unemployment in the United States reached depression-era levels in the wake of the Great Recession. Even though Oklahoma experienced a comparatively less severe recession and maintains one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country, black unemployment at the state-level mirrors the national trend.

**Black workers in Oklahoma were unemployed at more than twice the rate (13.1 percent) of white workers (5.9 percent) in 2010;** this is comparable to the national gap – where the unemployment rate for black workers is about twice (16.2 percent) that of whites (8.0 percent). The unemployment rate for black men (15.8 percent) in Oklahoma is about two and half times that of white men (6.1 percent) in 2010.



This entrenched unemployment gap has a long-standing persistence: black workers were unemployed at roughly twice the rate of white workers in Oklahoma throughout the last decade, as shown in the chart above.

#### WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THESE DISPARITIES?

The racial unemployment gap is not convincingly explained by arguments that black workers are less educated or less likely to participate in the labor market:

- Black unemployment is significantly higher than that of whites at all levels of educational attainment.
- The state's black labor force participation rate (63.6 percent) surpassed white labor force participation (62.5 percent) in 2010.

The most compelling evidence for the gap's persistence are incarceration rates and hiring discrimination:

- Exceptionally high rates of incarceration among black Oklahomans exacerbate joblessness. Oklahoma's black population comprised 7.4 percent of the state's general population, but 30.5 percent of the state's prison population in 2010.
- Nearly 39 percent of all black men in Oklahoma have been either incarcerated or on probation for a felony conviction at some point in their lives (2006).
- Academic research finds that hiring discrimination against black applicants is widespread and ongoing.

#### ADDRESSING THE GAP

To help address the black-white unemployment gap, policymakers should:

1. Amend statutes that erect barriers to employment for ex-offenders and perpetuate racialized disparities in sentencing for criminal offenses;
2. Invest in diversity-in-hiring outreach initiatives and employment programs that target jobless black workers, i.e. reimbursing eligible employers for hiring and retaining minority employees.

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Please see our series of blog posts on the racial unemployment gap at <http://okpolicy.org/oklahomas-black-white-unemployment-gap>  
Data is from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS) at [www.bls.gov/lau/](http://www.bls.gov/lau/) and ODOC <http://www.doc.state.ok.us/>