

WHY AMERICA'S WOMEN OF COLOR HAVE LOST GROUND SINCE THE GREAT RECESSION

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Picture a small office with three employees: Jake, a white man; Anita, a Latina woman whose husband lost his job a year ago; and Crystal, a black single mother. Even though all three have similar duties, Jake takes home \$1000 per paycheck, while Crystal gets \$700 and Anita earns \$600. The office also used to employ Anne, another black woman, but she was laid off during hard times in 2009. Crystal and Anita are fortunate to still have their jobs, but their wages put their yearly earnings below the federally measured “poverty line.” Unable to get by on their wages alone, their families also need help from public benefits.

This scenario is imaginary, but it gets at general trends and truths. The recent Great Recession brought hard times to most Americans, but it was especially devastating for women of color. Today, black women and Latinas face worse job and wage prospects, and experience higher poverty rates and greater difficulties in gaining access to health care. Many female-headed households have depleted their “rainy day” savings and depend on a patchwork of low wages and bare-bones supplements like Food Stamps and unemployment insurance to make ends meet. The 2009 recession and slow economic growth since then have derailed many women’s previously modest economic progress. Today, America’s women of color are, overall, significantly worse off than they were before the economic crisis hit.

Eroding Financial Security

Black and Hispanic women suffered big income losses during and after the Great Recession.

- In 2009 alone, black females holding jobs dropped from 58.8 to 54.6 percent, while Latinas holding employment fell from 51.9 to 50.1 percent. Today, 13.8 percent of black women and 12.3 percent of Latinas are looking for jobs they cannot find (and their rates of unemployment exceed the national average by 6.2 and 4.7 percentage points respectively).
- Already struggling households headed by black women and Latinas have plunged into poverty. From 2007 to 2011, the percentage of black female-headed households in poverty jumped from 43.9 to 47.3 percent. The numbers are worse for Latina-headed households, for whom the percentage in poverty grew from 46.6 to 49.1 percent.

Household wealth – the value of assets, minus debts owed – also matters. The Great Recession depleted the accumulated wealth of U.S. households across the board, but hit black and Latino households the hardest. Today, the typical white man – the one in the middle of the overall national distribution of all white men – has a net worth of \$43,800. But the net worth of the typical single Latina women is a mere \$120 and it is only \$100 dollars for the typical single black woman. Another way to think of this situation is to realize that nearly half of single women of color have zero or negative net worth, meaning their debts equal or exceed their total assets.

Such women had little accumulated wealth before the recession and now have less, a situation sure to have lasting adverse effects on the financial security of these women and their families.

Limited Access to Health Insurance

As black and Hispanic women's economic fortunes have declined, it has become harder for many to get access to good quality health care. Private health insurance coverage for black women has decreased from 54.1 to 50 percent since 2007, largely because women who lost jobs also lost employer-backed health insurance. For Latina women, the story has been similar, as private health coverage has fallen from 45.2 to 41.6 percent since 2007.

Some emergency provisions of the Affordable Care Act went into effect in early 2010, offering health coverage to some Americans who lost jobs. Government-provided health insurance increased coverage in 2010 from 36.7 to 40.9 percent for black women and from 31.1 to 36.3 percent for Latinas. But federal help is temporary and many states do not offer Medicaid to people close to the poverty line. Today, close to one in five Latinas and more than one in four black women remain without any health insurance coverage. Research shows that people without insurance often put off needed health checkups and may delay life-saving care until too late.

A Hostile Political Landscape

Why have black and Latina women fallen so far behind, even as the country has begun to recover from the effects of the recession? Part of the explanation lays in state-level political dynamics hurtful to low-income people. Ten million uninsured women earn incomes below 138 percent of the federal poverty line, which would qualify them for Medicaid under the 2014 expansion. Yet four million of these women will continue to live without any form of health insurance or access to Medicaid, because they are unfortunate enough to reside in one of the up to two dozen states whose governments are refusing to participate in the planned expansion of Medicaid. These states include Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, states where women of color have some of the lowest average incomes, even when they work full-time at difficult jobs like home health aide.

Despite the historic presidency of Barack Obama, America's women of color are also losing political leverage. Since 2009, 11 states have adopted photo ID laws that disproportionately burden otherwise eligible low-income, black, and Latino voters. Many of them cannot afford cars and do not have drivers' licenses, and states make it difficult to obtain alternative forms of photo identification. Twenty-five percent of blacks eligible to vote and 16 percent of Latinos eligible to vote lack a valid photo ID, compared with only 8 percent of whites.

In addition to facing barriers to voting, black and Latina women rarely appear on the ballot for public offices whose incumbents make crucial decisions about the economy and social benefits. Black and Latina women only fill 23 of the 535 seats in the U.S. Congress, and they fill only 322 of the 7,382 state legislative seats. Until more women of color vote and serve in office, policymakers will likely remain uninterested in addressing their extraordinary economic difficulties. Latinas and black women and the families that depend upon them will continue to fall behind, even as the rest of America recovers from the Great Recession.

Read more in Marion Johnson, "How Did Black and Latine Women Fare During the Great Recession?," Duke University, April 2013.