

U.S. income gap widening

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for African-Americans, but that has since changed.

"Even in the best of times, I think the racial gaps whether we're looking at income, wages, or wealth are unacceptably high, so I would think that an economic agenda to improve the living standards of black Americans ought to be at the top of anyone's list be they policy maker or voter. The black-white Ratio got up to 64 percent in 2000 and that was the highest on record (since 1947) and that's still a huge gap," he said.

The fact that the minimum wage hasn't been increased since 1997 hasn't helped the plight of blacks.

"Since African-American workers especially women are disproportionately paid wages at or near the minimum, it (a minimum wage increase) is definitely going to help them both in absolute and relative terms. Meaning in absolute terms, they're going to make more, and they're going to make more relative to folks who earn higher than the minimum wage who don't necessarily get a boost when the minimum goes up," he said.

Although a proposal led by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) to increase the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour by January 2009 failed last month, the debate to increase the national minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour is far from over as campaigning lawmakers on Capitol Hill fight to keep their congressional seats in the fall.

Shortly after the defeat of

the bill that included the minimum wage increase, Congressional Black Caucus member Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), expressed her disappointment.

"It is unacceptable that the Republican Majority in the House will vote today to give a tax cut to the heirs of millionaires while blocking an increase in the minimum wage for millions of hard-working Americans," said Lee. "This Republican-controlled Congress already approved an average tax cut of \$42,000 this year to those making more than a million dollars annually. Instead of rewarding the hard work of Americans struggling to make ends meet, Republicans are hard at work making sure the heirs of the wealthy few get an enormous tax break."

House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said in a statement last week, "At the same time as energy prices are going up, the minimum wage has not been increased in nine years; it is still \$5.15 an hour. People can hardly afford to fill up their car to get to work at \$5.15 an hour. In our discussion on this issue in the last couple of days, Democrats are saying to the speaker, 'Mr. Speaker, until there is an increase in the minimum wage, we will not support any raise in congressional salaries.'"

Individual states do have the right to increase the minimum wage above the national rate and so far 21 states and the District of Columbia have done so.

Of those states, Arkansas, Hawaii, Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, New York and Rhode Island are set to enact the new rates between this fall and the start of 2008.

Another report also co-authored by Bernstein, "Buying Power of Minimum Wage at 51-year Low," said since the minimum wage was established in 1938, the longest period of time Congress went without adjusting the level was nine years and three months from January 1981 to April 1990.

If Congress doesn't act by December 1, they could beat that record.

The report added, "Since September 1997, the purchasing power of the minimum wage has deteriorated by 20 percent. After adjusting for inflation, the value of the minimum wage is at its lowest level since 1955."

Couple a steadily increasing cost of living with a minimum wage that's been frozen for nine years and it just doesn't add up—especially for the poor, the report said.

"The fact that the minimum wage has remained the same for nearly nine years means that its real value has declined considerably over this period. As inflation has accelerated recently due to higher energy costs, the real value of the minimum wage has fallen faster," said the report.

Although the economy is constantly shifting—stable for a few years and unstable the next—Bernstein says black Americans can't wait five or 10 years for the economy to shift more positively to

narrow the gap for them. He said acquiring more education and demanding that even local government create jobs are some ways to help.

Bernstein said, "African-Americans should never stop being vigilant about these racial income and wealth gaps as long as they exist."

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Parents, young adults say no easy fix for hooliganism

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said that to combat pressure on children to go astray, they have to make sure that their children aren't out running the streets.

"I don't let my son go places where there is going to be a big crowd," he said.

But Royster acknowledges that he can't be with his 15-year-old son 24 hours a day. "When he goes to someone else's house, they may go to an event like the fireworks downtown," he said. "That's why I have to know who the people are that he hangs out with."

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, "to prevent violent injury and death, we need to weaken or break the chain of events that leads to violence."

In a report published by the CDC in 1992 titled "The Prevention of Youth Violence" A Framework for Community Action," the organization stated that communities that want to combat youth violence need to identify the target group, host activities that complement each other and tailor activities to fit the community's unique personality.

Unity needed

Youth violence isn't new, nor is it specific to Charlotte. In 1969, Philadelphia native Falaka Fattah found learned one of her sons was in a gang.

"I was looking at this every day and didn't know it," she said.

At the time Fattah was publisher of a magazine called Umoja, the Swahili word for unity. Philadelphia was having a serious problem with gang violence and young black men were dying or becoming invalids, she said.

Fattah said when she discovered that her son was in a gang, parental instinct took over and she looked for solutions at home.

"I asked my husband if I could invite my son's

gang to live with us," she said. "I found greedy people who were exploiting the problem for grant money, politicians who said they were going to do something to get elected and well-meaning people who were ineffective. I turned inward because this was my child and I'm the one truly responsible. And the only information I could trust came from the kids."

Nearly 30 years later, Fattah is still reaching out to young men, but she's seen a change in the people she helps.

"The youth are not listening to anybody these days," she said. "There is a broken connection." Parental support, she added, isn't what it used to be when she started Umoja. "There is a culture of violence that is promoted. There is a bigger battle today than ever was."

But it's not unwinnable. "It takes more work, but it's not impossible," she said.

Charlotte's response to youth violence

Following the July 4 eruption, Charlotte mayor Pat McCrory publicly called the participants "thugs" and called for a task force to look into the issue. Councilman Warren Turner announced plans for some form of community outreach.

Neither returned a call to the Charlotte Post for further comment.

Bingo Baker, a mentor from the 704 No Limit Motorcycle Racing Club, said arbitrary rules from government agencies like social services has a lot to do with why children step out of line and feel that they can get away with it.

"You can't spank your kids without worrying about child abuse and then DSS comes down on you and some people don't want to deal with that," he said. "I blame a lot of this on the people who are in charge, telling me what I can and cannot do to my child."

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Rally for respect

Sabrina Taggart leads a protest Friday at a Charlotte Police substation at West Boulevard and Remount Road. Residents from Boulevard Homes, Little rock and Ponderosa Pines gathered to demand more patrols and community involvement to reduce criminal activity in the area.