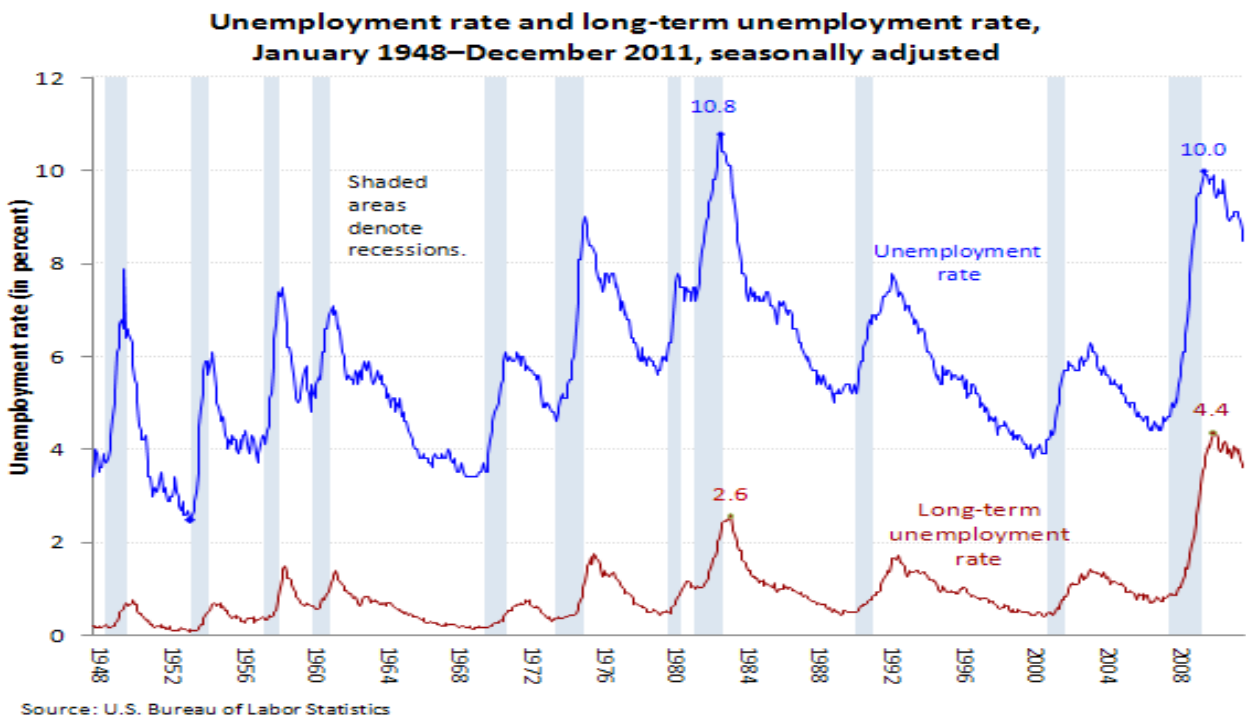


From Jobless to Homeless

Chicagoans are living in the aftermath of the worst recession since the 1930s. Many economists say the excruciating recovery from the Great Recession, which began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009, is the predictable consequence of a housing bust and a grave financial crisis. Chicagoans mounted the Nations unemployment charts with a staggering 11.7 percent in December 2009. ⁱ The greatest jump comes from 5.8 percent in April 2008 to 11.7 percent in June 2009ⁱⁱ: in short, unemployment doubled in just over a year. As a result, Chicagoans are still feeling the effects of the economic recession and a new face has emerged in the homeless population.



The Rise of Family Homelessness in a Meager Economy

For families who rely on wages as their primary financial support and have little or no savings, job loss can rapidly result in dependence on public assistance and an increased risk of homelessness. Not surprisingly, housing experts and advocates suggest that the number of families living in doubled-up and overcrowded situations, as well as the tally of homeless families, has increased with the recessionⁱⁱⁱ. Homelessness in Chicago affects all facets of the community; it is all inclusive of race, ethnicity, and age and education level. Conversely, low-income vulnerable populations who experience first-hand a lack of safe and affordable housing, low wages, and limited access to health care are most likely to be affected by homelessness. Furthermore, job loss, family violence, mental illness, addictions and release from institutional facilities can result in housing loss when people are unaware of or unable to access community support systems.^{iv}

Chicago Coalition for the Homeless conducted a study in July 2012 that reported 105,338 Chicagoans homeless during the 2011-12 school year. This is 12% more than the 93,780 who were homeless a year earlier.^v A new face has emerged in the homeless community: low-income working families whose household heads have been laid off from their jobs, in some cases apply for public assistance, lost their homes and now they are in the homeless population numbers. In fact today, unemployment is among the top reason for homelessness. In light of this condition and at a time when existing homeless and unemployment policy has proven ineffective in addressing family homelessness and joblessness, the growing demand for shelter by unemployed low-income families will present an even greater obstacle.

The need for services to those that are jobless and homeless continues to grow, throughout the country and right here in the Chicago area. While at 19 percent, African-American unemployment in Chicago ranks the third highest in the country according to a July 2012 report published by the Washington-based Economic Policy Institute. Additional data consistently demonstrates that African Americans, who account for only 12.3 percent of the total U.S. population^{vi}, are overrepresented in the homeless population; accounting for more than 38.8 percent of the population in homeless shelters. However, there are some reports listing African-Americans as roughly half of the homeless population. While studies documenting the homeless are difficult to conduct and historically inaccurate, the disproportionate number of black homeless people is impossible to ignore. However, programs for the homeless are rarely targeted for specific racial groups, despite the heavy difference in ratios.

Housing needs and policy priorities differ from region to region, due to historical differences, housing market conditions, job market, and political realities. The authors of this report are large proponents of a race-based approach to policy in addressing homelessness and joblessness, believing that the organizations and executive management groups designed to service the predominantly black homeless population ignores the position of that group. While services are provided regardless of race the large percentage of African-American presence call for a culturally sensitive program to help prevent further disparities in homeless race ratios.

Positions are needed within key policy-making organizations to prevent individual African Americans from having to fight alone for economic stability.

Orchestrated Chaos

Both anecdotal and statistical data suggest that joblessness and homelessness has increased and broadened including more families with children, non-traditional family types and a greater number of working poor households. Chicagoans experience of growth in the size and diversity of the jobless and homeless population is the result of a complex interplay of systematic structural demolition such as:

- 2007-2009: The Worst Recessions in over 30 years.
- 2011: The last of Fifty-three Chicago's public high-rises-Cabrini-Green housing projects in Chicago were torn down. It was the largest demolition of public housing in the nation's history, and it uprooted some 40,000 people, many of whom have never lived anywhere else but in public housing.
- 2013: Forty-nine elementary schools are scheduled to close and transfer thousands of children to new school neighborhoods.

Unemployed, Displaced, and Uprooted

Imminent policy and program decisions in welfare and subsidized housing programs are likely to further exacerbate the present situation. Moreover, the cumulative impact of the strains that leads to homelessness makes it very difficult for people who are homeless to become "re-housed".^{vii}

The current situation and projected trends demand new approaches. Chicagoans must focus on prevention and on permanently re-housing and employing those who become homeless and jobless.

The Recovery Process

The overall picture of labor and housing market recovery since the start of the recession is quite gloomy. The recovery process demands a comprehensive, community and strength-based system to serving those who are under attack with unemployment and/or homelessness. Such approaches necessitate an unyielding commitment to collaborations and partnerships to ensure that program petitioners have access to all the resources needed for long-term stability and self-sufficiency. More explicitly, community joint ventures are the key strategy for addressing the homeless issues that serve as a barrier to employment for many individuals in crisis. By utilizing accessible resources in the community instead of replicating them, programs are able to provide a synchronized and holistic package of support to those afflicted by homelessness and/or unemployment that ensures long-term stability and success. When all the obstacles that caused unemployment and/or homelessness are addressed, people gain the confidence and the tools to achieve immediate self-sufficiency and prevent future episodes of homelessness.

Conclusion

This is NOT Business as Usual.

ⁱ “The Economic Recession of 2007-2009: A Comparative Perspective on Its Duration and the Severity of Its Labor Market Impacts”, Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, and Joseph McLaughlin (Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern U), April 2009

ⁱⁱ Bureau of Labor Statistics Economic News Release, "Unemployed Persons by Duration of Unemployment," April 2, 2010. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t12.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Frequently Asked Questions about Homelessness,” Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, accessed Jan. 10, 2010, <http://www.chicagohomeless.org/learn/what>. The coalition estimate is based on the U.S. Department of Education definition of homelessness, which includes those who are “doubled up” with relatives or friends.

^{iv} Toro, Paul, and Dennis McDonell, “Beliefs, Attitudes, and Knowledge About Homelessness: A Survey of the General Public,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* (1991); Lee, Barrett A., Link, Bruce G. and Paul A. Toro, “Images of the Homeless: Views and Messages,” *Housing Policy Debate* (1991). In past public opinion polls conducted in other cities and nationwide, the percentage of Americans indicating a willingness to pay increased taxes to alleviate homelessness averages in the low- to mid-50 range.

^v Mueller, Daria, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. Nov 1, 2012. Copyright 2012 Chicago Coalition for the Homeless.

^{vi} Population Reference Bureau, Human Population: Fundamentals of Growth: Three Patterns of Population Change, at <http://www.prb.org>.

^{vii} University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. 1998. *Resident Assessment of Housing Quality: Lessons from Pilot Surveys*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.