

# For black men, a permanent recession

by **Reniqua Allen** (</profiles/a/reniqua-allen.html>)

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The jobless rate for African-American males is more than double that for white men. Follow five job seekers as they look for employment in a market that is stacked against them

Topics: [Economy](/topics/topic/categories/economy.html) (</topics/topic/categories/economy.html>), [Race & Ethnicity](/topics/topic/issue/race-ethnicity.html) (</topics/topic/issue/race-ethnicity.html>), [Jobs & Unemployment](/topics/topic/issue/jobs-unemployment.html) (</topics/topic/issue/jobs-unemployment.html>)

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## 1. Introduction

## CHAPTERS

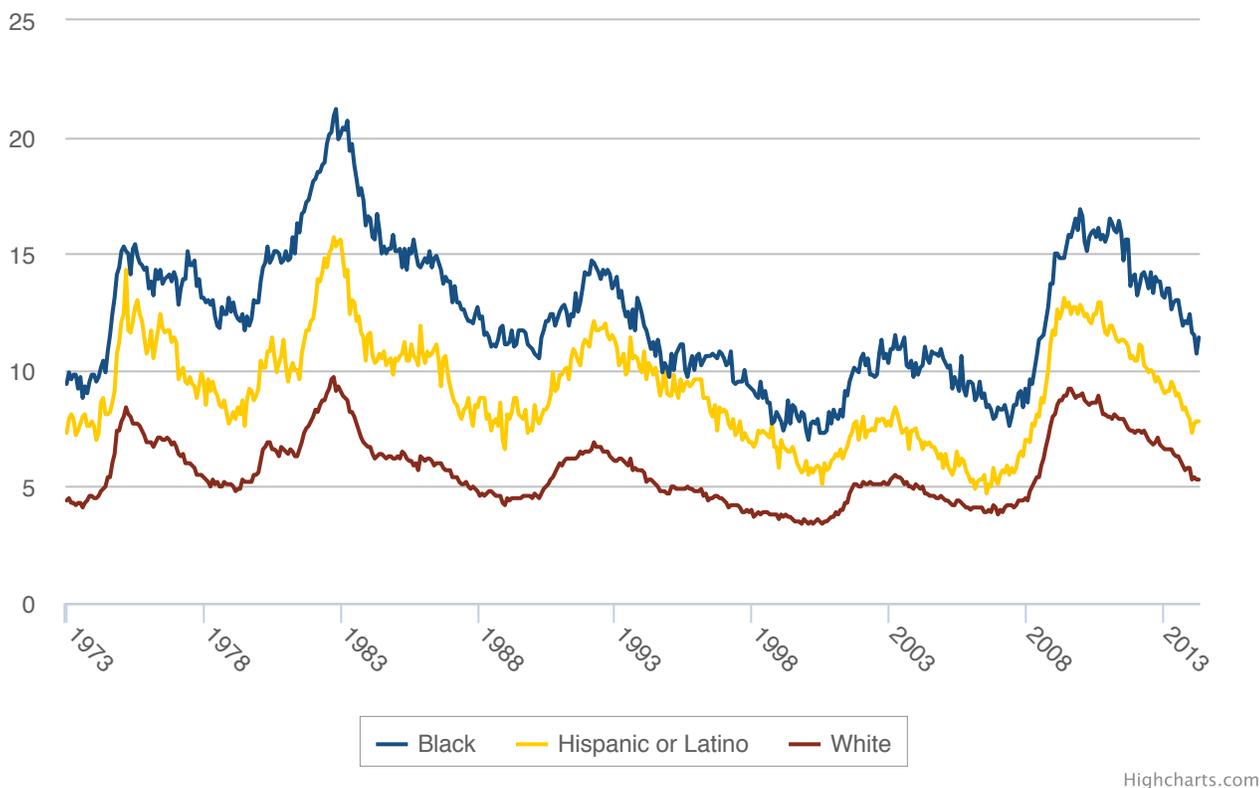
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NEW YORK — Six years after America sank into the deepest economic downturn since the 1930s, the jobless rate has fallen to 5.9 percent, the lowest since July 2008. But one demographic group — African-American men — seems to be stuck in a permanent recession.

Eleven percent of black men over 20 are unemployed today. That's down from 19 percent in 2010, but it's still the highest of any (<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm>) ethnic or racial group. By comparison, 9.6 percent of black women are unemployed, while white men have an unemployment rate of 4.4 percent. That racial disparity, alas, is nothing new. Since the government began tracking unemployment in 1940, the jobless rate for black men has consistently been at least twice that of white males.

Social scientists, economists and other experts cite a variety of reasons for the high unemployment rate among black males: lack of training, loss of public-sector jobs, high incarceration rates (at least five times (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/06/incarceration-gap-between-whites-and-blacks-widens/>) that of white men), unequal access to social networks and outright discrimination. When coupled with the fact that the recession hit all men particularly hard (men lost 2.6 jobs to every 1 by a woman (<http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2014/04/07/women-have-recovered-jobs-lost-in-recession-men-havent/>), in large part because of a decline in manufacturing and construction), a clearer picture of the tenuous relationship black men have with today's labor market starts to emerge.

# UNEMPLOYMENT RATE, BY RACE



Source: U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (<http://www.bls.gov/cps/>). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan brought the issue of unemployment among African-Americans ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/12/paul-ryan-inner-cities\\_n\\_4949165.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/12/paul-ryan-inner-cities_n_4949165.html)) in general to the forefront of national attention earlier this year, intentionally or not, when he said, there's been a "tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work." Many saw his comments as racial code aimed at black men. (Ryan strongly denied this.) But research suggests that his perceptions of race and employment may not have been so out of step with the views of other white Americans. The New York Times Upshot blog found that in 2012 (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/06/incarceration-gap-between-whites-and-blacks-widens/>), 40 percent of white Americans thought blacks didn't work as hard as whites. Another 45 percent said that blacks lacked willpower and motivation to get out of poverty.

While federal law bans racial discrimination in employment and some companies have affirmative action policies designed to promote workforce diversity, Steven Pitts, a labor-policy specialist at the Labor Center at the University of California, Berkley, said racism continues to play a role in hiring practices. But Pitts added that structural racism in "feeder" institutions like higher education, the criminal justice system and the housing market

(<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>) plays a much larger role than individual bias: “The issue isn’t really one of individual behavior, but to actually change institutions and organize accordingly.”

Lee Bowes, the CEO of America Works, a nationwide for-profit employment program, said that, though the loss of manufacturing jobs has disproportionately hurt African-Americans, that doesn’t mean that there aren’t jobs. To find employment, people need to have personal relationships with employers, he explained. “Everyone thinks getting a job is having a good resume. We know it’s networking.”

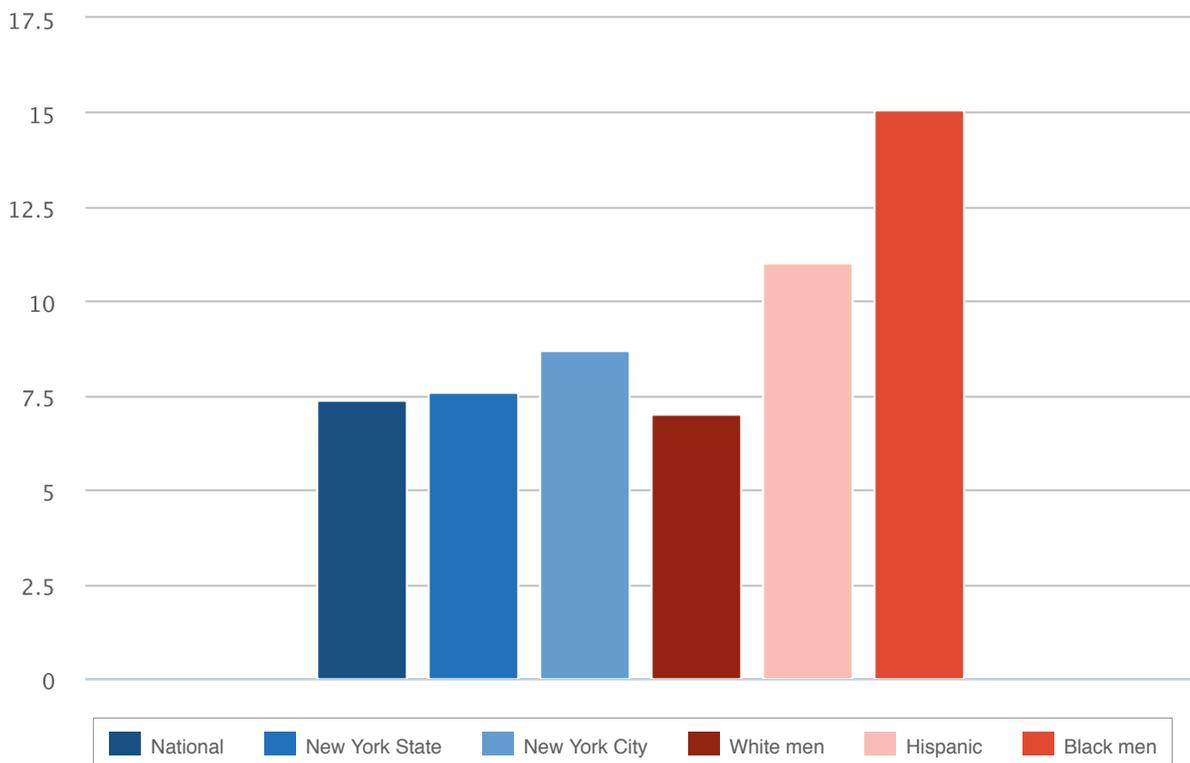
The Congressional Black Caucus has pushed jobs (<http://cbc.fudge.house.gov/economic-development/>) to the top of its agenda, and last winter President Barack Obama announced the formation of a task force (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/us/politics/obama-will-announce-initiative-to-empower-young-black-men.html>) to strengthen opportunities for young boys of color, noting that there are some “groups that have had the odds stacked against them in unique ways that require unique solutions.” The Senate’s only two black members introduced a bill (<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2014/04/09/223926/black-senators-target-minority.html>) that would target minority youth unemployment.

But these efforts have yet to produce much of an impact. In New York state, home to the largest (<http://www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/populations/rempe/black.html>) number of blacks in the country and consistently one of the most expensive places to live, the struggle to find a good job can be particularly difficult. According to the most recent data available, 17.4 of black men are unemployed in the state. Meanwhile, according to new research from the Community Service Society of New York, only 51 percent of black men are working (this includes students, the disabled and those not looking for work) in New York City.

In this series of articles, five African-American men in the New York area talk about their experience finding work. They say that their experience with the job market is different than that of white men and women of color. They say they are judged on their appearance and often are viewed as “thugs” or just plain lazy. Unemployment does not look the same in any one household, and that applies to the men profiled here. These stories aren’t meant to be comprehensive, but rather give a snapshot of the experience of looking for work as a black man.

## **UNEMPLOYMENT RATES HIGHEST FOR BLACK MEN**

While unemployment rates for New York State and New York City are close to the national average, the unemployment rate for black men in New York is nearly double those averages.



Source: Current Population Survey Data, New York State: 1970-2013 ([http://labor.ny.gov/stats/PDFs/current\\_pop\\_survey\\_data.pdf](http://labor.ny.gov/stats/PDFs/current_pop_survey_data.pdf)), 2013 unemployment rates for 50 largest cities (<http://www.bls.gov/lau/lacilg13.htm>).

## 2. Rashad Shane

CHAPTERS

When he left for college almost seven years ago, Rashad Shane never planned to return to his childhood home with the “nice clear view” of the Hudson River. Back then, he wanted to get his degree, buy a house in California and work for a big technology firm developing video games. But things haven’t exactly worked out that way.

After graduating from high school, Shane, who is from the New York City suburb of Ossining, moved to Phoenix to attend the for-profit Collins College, where he majored in video and game design. He loved Arizona and was excited about his future until he realized his financial aid package didn’t cover all of his housing needs.

Panicked, he scrambled to find a job. He was relieved when a clothing store in a nearby mall offered him employment as a seasonal sales associate. It was the



Rashad Shane says that in the New York City suburb where he lives, "If you don't have any education you're stuck in retail, supermarkets. Maybe if you luck out you can get work in a nursing home." Courtesy Rashad Shane

only job that worked with his schedule and transportation needs.

But Shane struggled to pay his \$400 rent and his school expenses; eventually, he was forced to leave his apartment. Not wanting to abandon his education, he bounced from couch to couch for months, hoping he could figure something out.

Nine months after he first set foot in the Copper State, Shane — broke stressed and tired of being without a permanent place to stay — decided to move back home. "I did not want to come back. There's nothing really up here for me. I wanted to finish school really bad. I wanted to make something of myself when I

was out there."

When Shane returned home in 2009, he quickly found a job at a bath store, making \$9 an hour. Nine months flew by, and he was happy. Then staff reductions began. Tensions between the employees increased, and his hours were cut back so much that he was only bringing home \$200 to \$300 a week.

Frustrated, he quit.

He picked up some seasonal work at a video-game store, but when that ended, it took him another nine months to find a new job. After a brief stint at a sandwich shop, Shane returned to the game store. There was a dispute with the manager over a discount card and once again Shane found himself unemployed.

"The feeling of being unemployed for a long term, versus the feeling of someone just having a two- or three-month off period, it kind of feels unreal at first," he said. "It brings me down all the way. I just feel miserable at times. I eventually get over it, but it feels really bad."

Quantel Bazemore, a community advocate with the nonprofit group Community Voices Heard, is trying to make sure that people like Shane have more access to jobs, higher wages, education and decent housing — a challenge in suburban Westchester County, where jobs are limited (<http://www.newyorkfed.org/data-and-statistics/regional-data-center/profiles/lowerhudsonvalley.html>).

He said that when the nearby General Motors plant — a company that helped create the region's black middle class — closed in the 1990s, the old river town "never recovered." "This is the suburbs. If you don't have any education you're stuck in retail, supermarkets. Maybe if you luck out you can get work in

a nursing home.”

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“ ‘Right now I’m thinking of jobs and survival rather than career.’ ”

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— Rashad Shane

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In 2012, Shane was hired as a part-time sales associate at an office supply store by a manager he’d previously worked with. The job was close to a bus stop, the staff was nice and he was content with the \$9 an hour wage. He was doing well until his grandmother fell ill and was diagnosed with breast cancer. As her primary caregiver, he wanted to be home to take care of her. He told his managers he would need a week or two off, but promised to stay in touch.

Ten days later, when his grandmother felt better, he went back to work. As soon as he stepped through the door, Shane said, his bosses told him he had been fired. He had already taken some sick days off and, coupled with his recent absence, he was over the limit and been classified as abandoning his job, they said. Shane was shocked.

Fourteen months later, he was still looking for a new job.

Shane doesn’t think his race has played a part in employers not hiring him, but thinks in this tight market, the standards are higher and employers have their pick. His ideal job would be in law enforcement, but, he says, “Right now I’m thinking of jobs and survival rather than career.”

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## In New York, a long wait for employment

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Black men in New York experience the longest (<http://fiscalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/SWNY-2013.pdf>) periods of unemployment out of any other group, often averaging more than 42 weeks.

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If he could do it again, he says, he would have stayed at some of the other jobs he walked off of — like the one at the bath store — even if the pay was low, and has now broadened his job search.

“I was telling myself that I would never do anything like McDonald’s or a Stop & Shop and stuff like that. But present day, in 2014, all those jobs I said I wouldn’t work at, I’ve applied to and still haven’t heard back.”

In June, he finally had some good luck: He went to a job fair and did a trial run for a job as a resident adviser at a college in Tarrytown. Shane got the job, and by the end of July he was working.

The job means he can afford a smart phone of his own; before, he borrowed friends’ or bought inexpensive pre-paid phones. Says Shane, “I’ve been well off these last four months or so.”

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Each day at 6 a.m., Keith Wyche gets up, meditates and works out. He then makes breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast and coffee and eats while sitting at his table looking out the window and into the serene woods of his one-acre property. If it's nice enough outside, he'll sit on the deck, but he's always at his desk by 8 a.m. It's the same routine he followed when he was president of one of the largest grocery stores in the Philadelphia region, except now he sits in his home office. It's been this way for more than a year.

Last March, after a management (<http://6abc.com/archive/8950190/>) shakeup at ACME Markets, the regional grocery chain where he served as president, Wyche found himself unemployed for the first time since 1981. Since then he's struggled to find a full-time job in which, he says, he can "make a difference."

Wyche is looking for CEO or COO positions at corporate or nonprofit organizations, and the competition has been fierce. In the past year, he has gone on more than 60 interviews in person and on Skype, participated in as many phone interviews and sent out hundreds of resumes. He says he has been a top candidate for major positions in the federal, nonprofit and corporate realms, but hasn't found a suitable job yet.

With a resume filled with multiple high-level jobs at Fortune 500 companies, corporate board positions and a nomination for an NAACP Image Award, he's baffled by his situation. "If someone had told me a year ago that I'd still be unemployed a year later, I wouldn't have believed them. I get paid a \$15,000-an-hour speaking fee, but nobody else sees value in me?"

Wyche, 54, was born in Cleveland, where he earned a bachelor's degree from Cleveland State University and an MBA from Baldwin-Wallace College a few years later. Until last year, he had steady sales and management positions at companies like Pitney Bowes, Ameritech and IBM while writing books and serving as a cable-TV pundit.

Wyche, who commutes between New York City and his home in West Chester, Pennsylvania, for job interviews and speaking gigs, says he's used all of his resources to find work: He has reached out to his high-powered network and checks in with all the major search firms every six weeks, "to the point where they're sick of me."

In some of his interviews, he says, he has been told he's "overqualified" or not the right "fit." He hopes the word "fit" isn't code for something else and wonders if it's age or race that is a factor, noting that his references are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies.



Keith Wyche has been looking for work since he lost his job as president of ACME Markets. Church Street Studios

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**“ ‘So much of who we are is tied to our jobs. You work on your career to be the president and CEO of this and that, and all of a sudden, that’s not who you are.’ ”**

**— Keith Wyche**

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Wyche is not sure why he can't find a job. The four other executives who were let go along with him all found work within four months, he says. They had almost the exact same positions and were around the same age as Wyche, but there was one difference. They were all white men.

A report by The New York Times (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/28/us/texas-firm-highlights-struggle-for-black-professionals.html?pagewanted=1>) last year found that during the recession, racial diversity dropped as a priority for many businesses.

Wyche, who is used to having salary packages (base plus incentives) that are around \$700,000 a year, says that despite the fact that he is financially stable at the moment, he misses feeling like he is adding value to society. “So much of who we are is tied into our jobs. You work on your career to be the president and CEO of this and that, and all of a sudden that’s not who you are.”

He’s found new networks of support such as the Executive Leadership Council, a group of current and former African-American CEOs and senior executives that promotes workplace inclusion and diversity; his pastor; and his family, including a wife he’s been “in love with since seventh grade.”

Wyche has given himself about two years to find a full-time job anywhere in the country. If he is still out of work then he plans on starting a consulting business, a less attractive option to him because he likes executing projects, but one that, he says, might be a blessing in disguise.

“Wherever I land will be where I need to be and where God wants me to be.”

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## 4. Clark Jackson

### CHAPTERS



Clark Jackson has found some success on Broadway and on television but still hasn't made what he would call a middle-class income, save for a period between 2007 and 2008. Andrew Hinderaker for Al Jazeera America

On a gray Wednesday afternoon in late spring, Clark Jackson leaves a yoga studio in the Chelsea section of Manhattan and heads to an audition down the street. It's not his usual routine, but he hopes the extra zen moments will help him prepare for an interview that could lead to his big break.

It's his third audition of the week, and after spending the day before reading for a gig on the HBO series *Girls*, Jackson is in a

zone. He's auditioning for a part in *Half Magic*, an independent film directed and produced by actress Heather Graham and starring Josh Lucas. It's not a big role, but because of the names associated with it, Jackson wants to do his best.

Dressed in a white shirt, black tie and gray hoodie, the actor walks confidently into the Barden/Schnee Casting agency and sits down to study the lines his agent sent the week before.

His audition, which he has spent an hour preparing for, consists of reading two lines: "Peter, thank you so much for coming tonight. Let's finish with some clips from your most successful franchise."

At 2:47 he enters the room.

"Peter, thank you so much for coming tonight. Let's finish with some clips from your most successful franchise."

By 2:49 he is headed out the door.

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**“ ‘They physicalize me – security guard, bouncer, policeman. I have a degree from Stanford and Yale, and that’s what you see?’ ”**

**— Clark Jackson**

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After 15 years working as an actor in New York City, Jackson is used to the nerve-racking audition process, the constant bouts of unemployment and inconsistent pay. Like other creative types in the city, he's created a patchwork of ways to generate income — teaching jobs, acting projects and unemployment insurance when he needs it.

Jackson, who is in his late 30s, has found some success on Broadway and on television but still hasn't made what he would call a middle-class income, save for a period between 2007 and 2008. During that time, his work on two Broadway plays earned him \$83,759. It was a stark contrast to the \$28,212 he made last year.

In some ways, the Atlanta native is used to the instability of an artistic life: His father was a portrait artist who, he says, lived "outside of the system," refusing to open a bank account or pay taxes. His mom, who came from an upper-middle-class background, worked as a teacher, leaving them somewhere between poor and middle class. His parents split up when he was seven, and though he still didn't have a lot, his mom managed her finances well.

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## High unemployment among actors

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A Wall Street Journal

(<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB1000142412mg=reno64->

wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle study found that actors had one of the highest unemployment rates of any occupation at 28.5 percent in 2012. The figures, at least anecdotally, appear even higher for African-American actors.

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After getting a bachelor's degree from Stanford University and an MFA from the Yale School of Drama, Jackson moved to New York City in the late 1990s. He worked gigs off-Broadway, in regional theater and as a waiter while waiting for his acting career to take off.

In 2007 he booked his first two Broadway jobs, in an all-black production of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" starring James Earl Jones and in "All My Sons" starring Katie Holmes and John Lithgow. He more than doubled his salary. "This is the life," he thought.

The second play ended just as the financial crisis hit, and opportunities dried up. Clark began to lean on unemployment as his main source of income. Having a guaranteed check allowed him to stay active auditioning and working on his own creative projects, but "the downside of that," he said, "was I'd gotten hooked on unemployment, which of course was going to end sooner or later."

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**“ ‘It’s a very unique kind of endeavor, being an actor, putting it all out there like that, the ability to let go in the moment.’ ”**

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**— Clark Jackson**

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Jackson says the nonprofit Actor's Fund Work Program has helped him cope through some of the rough times. The group was founded 30 years ago as a "comprehensive workforce development program" to help performers figure out how to survive in the industry, often by utilizing their skills in flexible noncreative gigs.

Jackson said the group has provided emergency funds when he was behind on rent, run workshops that helped him figure out to manage his cash flow and referred him to some nonacting jobs, like teaching gigs, when he needed it most.

Despite the financial insecurity, Jackson said he isn't ready to abandon acting as a career. "It draws on things that no other fields offers me, mind, body and soul. It's a very unique kind of endeavor, being an actor, putting it all out there like that, the ability to let go in the moment."

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## Fewer roles for black actors

But at almost 6 feet, 200 pounds, he said plum roles aren't always so easy to obtain. "They physicalize me — security guard, bouncer, policeman. I have a

A report by the Screen Actors Guild ([http://www.sagaftra.org/files/sag/documents/2007\\_2008\\_CastingDataReports.pdf](http://www.sagaftra.org/files/sag/documents/2007_2008_CastingDataReports.pdf)) found that 13.3 percent of the television and film roles went to black actors from 2002 to 2008. Whites held 72.5 percent of the roles. The Actors Equity Association, which keeps data for theater, doesn't break down numbers by race or ethnicity.

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degree from Stanford and Yale and that's what you see? It's a funhouse mirror. It really is focused on white people and reflecting them as the spinner of all things. There's a real resistance there to change and to being inclusive."

Jackson is trying to find more creative and profitable ways to deal with his shaky employment situation, so he has picked up an adjunct gig at a local college teaching public speaking and has started to consult for a group called Improv Edge, which teaches

companies how to apply improvisation skills to business. He's also filling in for an actor in a local production of "When January Feels Like Summer" for the next few weeks. But he is still looking for a tenure-track job in which he can mix acting and teaching at the college level. And he is waiting for that one gig that will support the middle-class lifestyle he experienced in 2008.

"I've got my feelers out," he said.

Jackson didn't get any of those television and film gigs he auditioned for earlier this year, including the Heather Graham project, but he was OK with it.

It only paid \$268, plus a 10 percent agent fee.

His monthly rent is \$1,200.

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## 5. Robert Coleman

### CHAPTERS

After spending nearly a decade working in sales at an upscale furniture store in the posh suburban New York community of Hartsdale, Robert Coleman was unprepared for life as a security officer in a gritty Harlem neighborhood. On a recent day in his



Robert Coleman was a salesman at an upscale furniture store until the business closed in 2009. His income is now a fraction of what it once was. Andrew Hinderaker for Al Jazeera America

hometown of Yonkers, the 40-year-old sighed at the thought of his recently acquired gig.

It's not that his job is all that difficult, but the hours are long and the work is draining. On top of that, Coleman laments the lack of growth opportunities and says the potential for violence is not worth the \$9 an hour he's receiving.

“You get a lot of vagrants, drug addicts that walk by. They want to come in the building. You're in harm's way, and it's

either one of two things: You're going to get hurt or you're going to hurt someone. I'm not a violent person. I don't want to hurt anyone.”

This new work environment is quite a contrast to just five years ago, when he was a salesman at Domain Home Furnishings, selling furniture to an elite clientele and an occasional celebrity or two. He had been with the company since 1999, and within a few years, Coleman was making \$75,000, had full benefits and was part of a team he loved. “I was happy and content and making my money,” he recalls.

When the company went under in 2009 and he was laid off, he became “sick to his stomach.”

It didn't take long for Coleman to find employment with another furniture company. The store was in a more working-class neighborhood and the furniture was targeted more toward the lower-end market, but he thought he could still find success.

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## High rates of underemployment among blacks

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Blacks are more likely to be underemployed ([http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/03/us/report-finds-hispanics-faring-better-than-blacks.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/03/us/report-finds-hispanics-faring-better-than-blacks.html?_r=0)). Approximately 20.5 percent of blacks are underemployed in America, meaning they are unemployed, not looking for work or are

He was wrong.

Coleman's pay dropped to just \$32,000 a year despite the longer hours he had to put in. Additionally, he said, a cutthroat work environment and cliquey company culture led to even more frustration. Within two years, he said, he along with seven other employees were let go for failing to meet sales goals.

It took him two years to find his next job.

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involuntarily in part-time positions. Among Hispanics, the share is 18.4 percent, and among whites, 11.8 percent.

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“ ‘Appearance is key. They judge you on appearance without knowing what’s going on with you.’ ”

— Robert Lee Coleman

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Coleman, who spent two years at the University of Connecticut before dropping out, believes that while his name “Robert Lee” sometimes gets him in the door more readily than others, hiring managers often look at black men with greater scrutiny when considering them for a job.

He thinks being bilingual or white might have helped him find a new position quicker. “Appearance is key. They judge you on appearance without knowing what’s going on with you.”

Dressed in a beige, collared shirt, khaki pants and a straw hat on his day off, Coleman says he works hard to counter expectations. “I try to get away from that stereotype [by not] wearing baggy pants and jeans and sneakers and not speaking too much slang when I’m around certain people. I try to articulate and speak properly.”

When his unemployment ran out late last year, Coleman had to find a job quickly, so he decided to take a course to become a licensed security guard, a field in which jobs seemed plentiful. He passed the course and found a job in January working the night shift at the building in Harlem.

Even though he technically has a job, however, his employment woes aren’t over.

Coleman’s \$9 an hour wage barely covers his expenses. His hours fluctuate between almost full-time, at 32 hours a week, to much less, at 16 hours, so his paychecks can vary greatly week to week and he doesn’t have health care or other benefits. At his current pay rate, even if Coleman consistently worked 40 hours a week this year, he would only make around \$18,000 annually.

The pay cut has taken its toll. He’s had to move out of his beloved Bronx apartment of 12 years and back in with family. Recreational activities he enjoyed — from seemingly small things, like going to movies, to bigger-budget items, like vacationing in Cancun — had to be put on hold. More than recreation, he’s increasingly worried about money, because he has a new toddler that he needs to help support.

He’s thought about getting a second job, but between his late hours, time practicing in his new band (music is a passion of his), working as a volunteer chef at a senior center and looking for a new full-time job, he thinks he would be overwhelmed.

Coleman hopes to return to sales soon. There's a new mall opening up and he thinks it may be the perfect place to find a better job. "I don't want to get too comfortable with security," he says. "I'm trying to get out of there as soon as possible."

One of the hardest parts of this experience is not being able to support his younger relatives like he used to. "In life you want to provide and be a provider. I'm the oldest grandson. You have the younger generation looking up to you," he says. "At one point — I wouldn't say I was taking care of them, but if they came to me for anything I had it. Now they come to me and it's like 'Look, I don't have it right now.'"

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## 6. Anthony Olverson

### CHAPTERS

"Have your résumés open!"

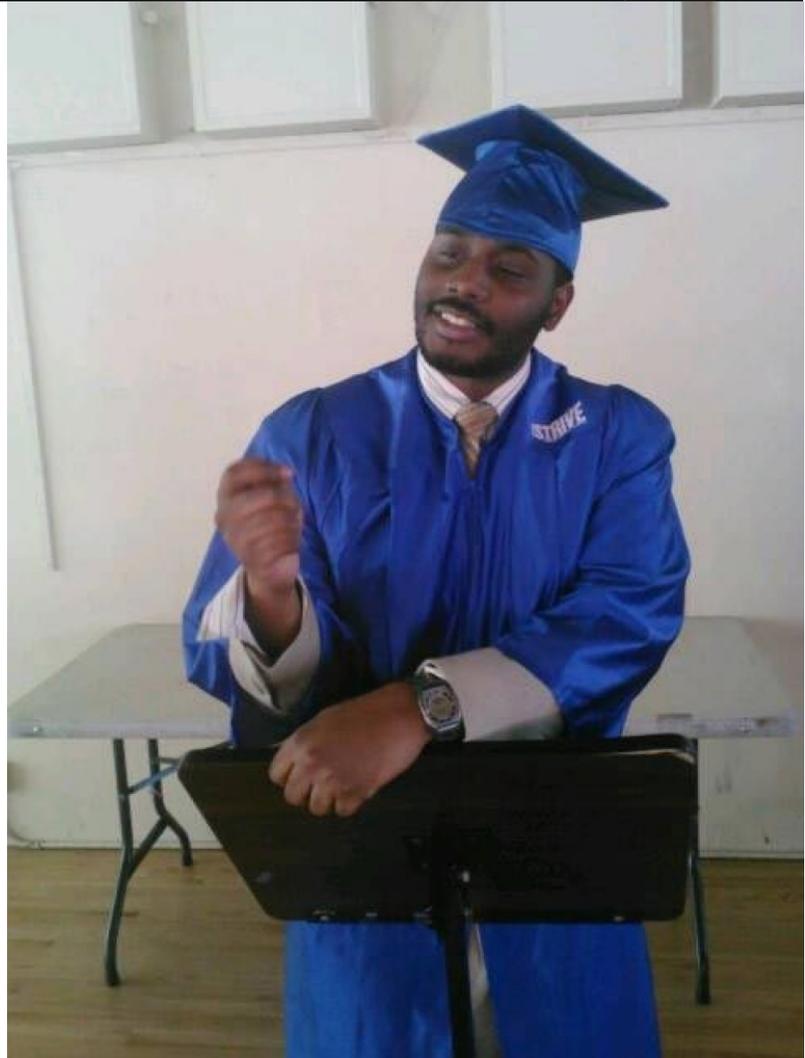
There were just a couple days left until the end of the two-month job-training program, and a sense of anxiety hung in the air as students tapped away at their computers, writing résumés and cover letters. Instructor Nicole Kelley fielded questions from the class of roughly 30 students.

"Ms. Nicole, how can I send my résumé from my cell phone?"

"Does this go under skills or education?"

"What is a cover letter again?"

As Kelley circled the classroom, 27-year-old Anthony Olverson leaned back in his chair and fidgeted with his hands. Occasionally he would glare at the blank computer screen or stare out the window into the gray sky, but mostly he cracked jokes with his friends. Olverson wasn't



Anthony Olverson grew up in Queensbridge, the largest public housing project in the nation and one that is notorious for crime, drugs and violence. Courtesy Anthony Olverson

worried like so many of his peers. He'd already completed his résumé and cover letter. He'd passed all of his certifications with high scores and was confident that he would be able to find a job.

Up until a few months ago, having a full-time job with a steady income had never been a priority for the Queens native. He was too busy trying to make it as a rap artist. He had been spitting rhymes since he was nine, won a few hip-hop contests as part of the group Fresh Bread and even had his song "Boom" played on the local hip-hop station Power 105.

After high school, Olverson enrolled in LaGuardia Community College to study music-recording technology. When NBA star Ron Artest (now known as Metta World Peace) was looking to get into the music business and took an interest in his work, Olverson said, he thought he had hit the jackpot. He increased his time writing and producing music, but eventually became so overwhelmed that he quit school.

At some point, Olverson said, a deal between the two fell through.

Olverson, while disappointed, kept working on his beats. He spent some time in and out of jail for misdemeanors and continued to casually pick up jobs. But when he had his first child last year, Olverson, known on stage as Ant Live, decided he needed to "get my life together."

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**“ ‘I think it’s going to be easy getting a job.’ ”**

**— Anthony Olverson**  
during one of his last days at Strive

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Olverson is from Queensbridge, the largest public housing project in the nation and one that is notorious for crime, drugs and violence. Hustling is the career path for many of his peers, but he wanted to be different. "I don't have a father. I don't want to sell drugs. I don't want to jeopardize the future."

When his neighbor Corey Kelley told him about a program through which he could train him in construction work, he jumped at the chance. Along with Kelley and two other friends, Olverson enrolled in Strive.

Strive International is a national nonprofit employment center that was started in East Harlem more than 25 years ago to help hard-to-employ, at-risk men and women develop skills that will enable them to compete in New York's job market. Strive uses a tough-love approach to help its clients develop "soft skills" like "workplace readiness" and "attitudinal modification."

On each orientation day, Strive co-founder Rob Carmona walks into a packed classroom where he finds a bunch of men and women eager to start anew. He starts by telling the group they must learn how to own up to their past and then move on. He describes the story of his struggles as a drug addict and,

more recently, a very public dispute (<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/jury-n-word-workplace-article-1.1444600>) with a former employee. It was a painful and embarrassing experience, he says, but it was simply life. “Life can be patently unfair.”

Carmona says that black and Latino men in particular (95 percent of Strive’s students identify (<http://striveinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/STRIVE-Annual-Report-2013.pdf>) as a black or nonwhite Hispanic and 55 percent are male) have a “right” to be angry, but they don’t have the right not to do something about it. “America is a land of contradiction and we have to learn to live with that contradiction in a constructive way.” He closes his lecture by telling students to look around the room because most of them won’t make it through the rigorous training program. Others, he notes, won’t even be alive a few years from now.

According to Strive’s research from 2012, 60 percent of those who begin their basic program finish it, and out of that group, two out of three are placed in jobs. Three months later, 90 percent are still at those jobs.

Olverson and his three friends all stayed with the program and received a number of state accreditations in “green” construction.

Nelson Lee, one of the friends, thinks it was because they had each other. “It was cool being with my friends because I always had real support, no fake love.”

“I think it’s going to be easy getting a job,” Olverson said during one of his last days in the Strive program.

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**“ ‘I feel like a grown man now.’ ”**

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**— Anthony Olverson**  
on applying for jobs

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More than three months after finishing the nine-week training program, all of the young men had been on at least one job interview — Lee for an elevator-operator position with a moving company and Kelley for an apprenticeship with a construction labor union. Olverson interviewed for a few construction jobs, including an apprenticeship and another at a construction company that he says will pay \$35 an hour.

Olverson isn’t waiting around. He said Strive motivated him to find work on his own and he has been spending time making connections on his own. There was one particularly promising call that he believes may lead to permanent work, and he is just waiting for the final call.

“I feel like a grown man now,” he said in late spring.

By early fall, the group from Queens had found mixed success.

Lee got the job as an elevator operator and is now making around \$12.50 an hour, said Brian Colon, an account manager at Strive who is responsible for placing graduates of the program. “He hasn’t looked back since.” Kelly and the fourth member of the group, he notes, are still looking for work and struggling to find a place to live, moving from couch to couch.

As for Olverson, no one’s heard from him in over two months. “I think he might have been successful,” said Colon. “He seemed confident. The energy I got from him was good.” After a pause he confidently repeats his words.

“Yeah, I think Anthony’s fine.”

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