



BlackEconomics.org

“Dependent and Unable to Do for Self”

Black leaders have consistently advocated that black Americans must “do for self.”

Frederick Douglass promoted education in order to do for self. Booker T. Washington thought the best way to do for self was to train and acquire practical, technical skills. W.E.B. DuBois predicted that a “talented tenth” of the black community would guide the remaining 90 percent toward a means of doing for self. Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad charted a way of doing for self by developing businesses and religious organizations.

Sadly, over the years, black Americans seem to have lost the connection to this powerful lesson. We have consigned ourselves to jobs and industries that don’t live up to the “do for self” standard.

The statistics are alarming.

Consider America’s key industries as one factor, and black employment in those industries. Second, consider business ownership in the black community by industry.

On employment, 2009 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows a small representation of America’s over 15 million employed blacks (employment and percentage of work force):

- * Agriculture, forestry and fishing — 66,000, or 0.43 percent
- * Mining — 31,000, or 0.20 percent
- * Construction — 509,000, or 3.38 percent
- * Information — 358,000, or 2.38 percent
- * Management (corporate) — 5,000, or 0.03 percent

In order to survive, everyone must eat. That’s agriculture. We must draw raw materials from the earth — mining — to manufacture what we need. Construction turns those materials into homes and workplaces. In this day and age, the flow of information — eased along by those in information technology — increases in importance by the day. Finally, and above all, there must be those able to manage resources and operations.

The statistics show blacks falling short on all counts.

Now, consider the same industries from the perspective of black ownership — a total of 1.9 million in 2007 (number of businesses and percentage of total):

- * Agriculture, forestry and fishing — 4,348, or 0.23 percent
- * Mining — too small to mention, or 0.00 percent
- * Construction — 125,901, or 6.55 percent

- * Information — 23,453, or 1.22 percent
- * Management — 201, or 0.01 percent

These Census Bureau data on black business ownership for 2007 do not differentiate between black firms with or without more than one employee. However, knowing that less than six percent of black firms are large enough to have employees, it stands to reason that the statistics on Black ownership by industry — as bleak as they are — still paint too rosy a picture of blacks' preparedness to do for self.

Where is black employment and business ownership concentrated?

Black workers are mainly in retail trades (1.6 million, or 10.8 percent), health care and social assistance (3.1 million, or 20.5 percent), educational services (1.4 million, or 8.9 percent), public administration (1.1 million, or 7.1 percent) and accommodation and food service (1.1 million, or 7.1 percent).

Black business ownership is similarly concentrated in health care and social assistance (365,140, or 19.00 percent), services other than public administration (358,332, or 18.64 percent), personal and laundry services (302,249, or 15.73 percent), administrative and support services and waste management (216,742, or 11.28 percent), transportation and warehousing (168,339, or 8.76 percent), and professional, scientific, and technical services (163,791, or 8.52 percent).

There is no question that black workers and black firms could be better aligned to enable us to do for self.

Why have we allowed ourselves to settle into such inconsequential roles in the U.S. economy?

Why have we eschewed employment and business ownership opportunities in industries that would permit us to, at least theoretically, maintain some sense of independence and an ability to do for self?

In a slow-growth (or worse) economy, consider the implications for a people who are concentrated in industries that are essentially disassociated from critical production.

It goes without saying that black Americans should be concerned about more than just finding jobs for the 2.4 million of us who were unemployed in 2009. We should be very much concerned about the types of jobs that we prepare ourselves to accept.

Why? Because only the unwise make themselves dependent and unable to do for self.

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