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SF Bay Area's black workers
face crisis of low-wage jobs,
says new UC Berkeley study

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Berkeley -- A University of California, Berkeley, study of San Francisco Bay Area black workers between 1970 and 2000 shows a significant percentage of black workers holding low-wage jobs, a situation that is increasingly acute for young black men.

"In the popular media, the unemployment crisis is captured by scenes of approximately 11,000 applicants -- largely black and Latino -- lining up for 400 vacancies at an Oakland Wal-Mart," said labor policy specialist Steven Pitts, who conducted the study with city planner Steve Wertheim for UC Berkeley's Center for Labor Research and Education.

But his research shows a crisis of not just of unemployment but also a crisis of low-wage jobs for black workers ages 18 to 65 in the nine-county Bay Area. "Too many African-Americans work at jobs that do not provide wages and benefits to properly raise a family," Pitts said.

He said the results could have significant policy impacts in terms of job training efforts by community-based organizations, labor unions, policy advocates and public officials.

Among his findings:

* In 1970, 25.7 percent of all the region's black workers held low-wage jobs, and in 2000 the percentage grew to 27.8 percent of all blacks with jobs.

*In 1970, 37.4 percent of all low-wage black workers held full-time jobs and in 2000, some 49.2 percent of all low-wage black workers worked full time.

* It is increasingly difficult for young black workers, men and women, to get a good start in terms of wages, as the percentage of them holding low-wage jobs grew from 40.2 in 1970 to 63.6 percent in 2000.

* Between 1970 and 2000 the percentage of black men in low-wage jobs increased from 14.9 percent to 27 percent.

Low-wage jobs are defined in 2000 as those paying \$11.50 an hour, enough for a full-time worker to make about \$23,000 a year, or approximately two-thirds of the Bay Area's median income that year. This same threshold was applied to determine the number of blacks working low-wage jobs in 1970.

Asked if the Bay Area employment scene for black workers is likely to differ dramatically from other American urban areas, Pitts said that isn't clear, but the center hopes to investigate further.

The report is part of an ongoing project examining how blacks have fared in the Bay Area labor market. Future research will look at changes in the industrial and occupational distribution of black workers for explanations of the black labor situation.

The report can be found online at <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/publications/index.shtml>.

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