

[<< Return to Main Page](#) | [Print](#)



Blacks and women lag behind in construction jobs; Hispanic workers gain ground in building industry, study finds

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Blacks and women continue to lag in construction jobs despite the increase in transportation funds spent on roads, bridges and mass transit and the national building boom, according to a Saint Louis University study out today.

Hispanics, however, are capturing a greater share of construction employment in most of the 18 metropolitan areas studied, reflecting increased immigration since the 1990s. In Los Angeles, for example, about 41% of the area's workforce is Hispanic, but 67% of construction workers are Hispanic.

"It's a good sign that Hispanics have gotten a position in the construction industry," said Todd Swanstrom, lead author and a public policy professor. "That's progress."

Swanstrom warns, however, that Hispanics in construction tend to earn less, experience higher accident rates on the job and are not likely to enjoy union protection because many are undocumented.

Florence Cox, executive director of Black Contractors United, a Chicago-based professional association, says the demise of vocational schools hurt minorities' prospects in construction, but so has the growing reliance on day workers, many of them undocumented immigrants.

"Everybody loses," she says. "The municipality is not picking up the tax dollars that it should. It deprives the people who are being used, and it keeps people ready and willing and able to work from having access to the kind of work they should have access to."

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, almost 2.5 million construction jobs need to be filled by 2014 and the industry will have to recruit and train almost 250,000 new workers every year.

"This data should not be interpreted as Latinos taking jobs away from blacks," Swanstrom says. "The exclusion of African-Americans in construction occurred well before large Hispanic immigration. Now, there are plenty of jobs to go around and when addressing the looming shortage in skilled construction labor, governments should work to recruit historically excluded groups into construction."

In every metropolitan area studied, construction jobs were predominantly filled by white men, regardless of the racial and gender makeup of the local workforce. The need for workers is increasing as more white construction workers retire, Swanstrom said.

Although women make up half of the population, they are in 6% or fewer of construction jobs. Latinos lagged in only four metropolitan areas studied.

Hispanics make up most of the employment growth in U.S. construction, says Rakesh Kochhar, associate director for research at the Pew Hispanic Center. It comes primarily from newly arrived Mexicans, most of whom are undocumented and who flock to regions such as Atlanta or Charlotte, he said.

Sponsored by the Transportation Equity Network, a coalition of 300 grass-roots

organizations focused on providing opportunities for low-income groups and minorities, the new study advocates vocational training and apprenticeships in cities where transportation projects are underway.

Large government-funded transportation projects are creating employment opportunities in regions that lost manufacturing jobs. In the 18 metropolitan areas studied, spending on transportation alone will generate more than 68,000 on-site construction jobs a year.

Rich Stolz, a founder of the Transportation Equity Network, says few communities have taken advantage of a provision in the 2005 transportation bill. It allows states to use up to one-half of 1% of federal highway funds for workforce development.

The Gamaliel Foundation, a network of 1,600 faith-based organizations in 21 states, is actively working with state and local officials to establish workforce development. Efforts underway:

*In Minnesota, Gamaliel affiliates are meeting with state representatives and state transportation officials to train minority workers for jobs on the rebuilding of the bridge that collapsed a month ago in Minneapolis. A bill introduced in the state Legislature would require the Minnesota Department of Transportation to allocate a portion of its highway dollars to job training -- an amount that could total about \$4 million a year.

*In Kansas City, Mo., an ordinance in effect since July 1 requires companies that win public works contracts to hire at least 10% minorities and 2% women on all projects -- public and private -- that they're working on in the city while their contract is in effect.

*In Missouri, a grant program from the state Department of Transportation will place more than 150 minority, low-income and female workers on the renovation of Interstate 64 in St. Louis County.

"Any gains made by minority groups we think are positive," says Laura Barnett, Gamaliel's national policy director. "At this point we have this enormous opportunity to add more minorities and women."

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