

Written by

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(NEW YORK) – As the entire country observed the historic election of President Barack Obama amid one of the worst economic crises this nation has ever seen, these are the ‘best of times and the worst of times’ for black America. The National Urban League, today, released the State of Black America (SOBA) 2009 report which shows that while the entire country is hurting during these tough economic times, African-Americans are disproportionately hurting worse.

The annual State of Black America report is a barometer of conditions for African-Americans in the United States. It includes the National Urban League's Equality Index, a statistical measurement of the disparities between blacks and whites across five categories: economics, education, health, civic engagement and social justice.

This year's report shows an overall slight decline in the status of blacks as compared to whites, moving from 71.5 percent in 2008 to 71.1 percent in 2009. The only sub index that increased over the past year was in health at about 1.1 percentage points. This was largely because the gap narrowed for those without health insurance.

The report this year takes a look back at the past five years of the Equality Index to view trends of progress and decline. Between 2003 and 2007 the poverty rate and home ownership rate declined for blacks but increased for whites. Even as both groups made progress in educational attainment, the progress was slower for blacks. During the same period while white children saw increases in “preprimary” enrollment of about 3 percent, black children saw a decline of about 1 percent, causing the education gap to grow, not shrink. The report this year shows the trend continues. This year's National Urban League report reminds the country that the election of President Obama does not mean the work of civil rights is done.

“The election of the first black president does not mean we can all now close up shop and go home,” said the National Urban League President and CEO Marc H. Morial. “Instead, it's more important than ever that the National Urban League and other organizations and individuals committed to positive change work even harder to lift up our communities and move this country forward.”

Martin Luther King, III, in the foreword to the report, says President Obama's election does not mean his father's dream has been realized.

“His election is not the fulfillment of the Dream,” King wrote. “This is because President Obama is not the only character in this narrative, nor is he the story's only writer. The American narrative cannot realize its greatest promise unless the narratives of all its peoples are part of that promise. In other words, realizing the American Dream must be a complete possibility for every American.”

The theme for this year's report is “Message to the President.” There are essays from experts, and letters to the president from ordinary citizens about the condition of African-Americans with recommendations on how President Obama and his administration might address them focusing on key areas such as green jobs, housing and schools and education.

“For the first time we have a president whose political base is in a city so we feel that he can better understand the issues and concerns of urban America,” Morial said. “We want to make sure that we work with the administration to ensure that urban America is included in the

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policies coming forth to help this country recover economically. Only then can we begin to close the equality gap.”

For the fifth consecutive year, Pfizer has sponsored The State of Black America report. “We applaud the National Urban League on its continued effort to spark important national dialogue around crucial issues, such as the health status gap endured by black America,” said Forest Harper, vice president of Capability Development at Pfizer. “We have a lot to do before we can achieve the goals of eliminating health disparities, and ensuring that all Americans have affordable access to quality health care regardless of health status or income. Pfizer is pleased to partner with the National Urban League and, together, continue to promote wellness and disease prevention programs, as well as patient assistance programs, like Pfizer Helpful Answers that has helped millions of patients get access to Pfizer medicines for free or at a savings.”

This year's report also looks at trends from another perspective – economic expansion periods. What the numbers show is that trends between blacks and whites were more similar than different in key areas like median household income, poverty, unemployment and home ownership.

During the economic expansion period from 2001 – 2007 (known as the jobless recovery period) there was a decline in real median household income for blacks and whites and an increase in the rate of poverty. Real median household income from 2001 – 2007 declined 1.7 percent for blacks and 3.9 percent for whites and poverty rates increased 7.9 percent for blacks and 5.1 percent for whites.

By contrast, during the 1990s while trends were still similar, African-Americans saw tremendous progress. For the duration of the '90s expansion, real median household income grew by 23.6 percent for African- Americans and 13 percent for whites while poverty rates declined by 30.6 percent and 17 percent, respectively.

The State of Black America 2009 report notes that it will take more than just relying on the Obama administration to make a difference in urban America. While they should hold government officials accountable at all levels, individuals must participate in order for change to happen.

“President Obama has stressed that change comes from the bottom up, not the other way around,” Morial said. “It is up to all of us – as citizens and advocates – to take a more active role in governance at all levels to make sure our voices are heard from City Hall to the State House to the halls of Congress to the White House.”