

The Great Recession of 2008-2009 and the  
Accompanying Blue Collar Depression: They  
Can't Make It Here Anymore

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CLMS Project: The Labor Market Impacts of the Great Recession of 2008-2009

“That big ol’ building was the textile mill.  
It fed our kids and it paid our bills.  
But they turned us out and they closed the doors.  
We can’t make it here anymore.”

James McMurty, We Can’t Make It Here

## **The Great Recession of 2008-2009 and The Emergence of the Blue Collar Depression: The Extraordinary Disparities in Job Losses Across Occupational Groups**

The Great Recession of 2008-2009 has had a number of adverse effects on American workers, their families, and their communities. It has substantially reduced the number of employed working-age adults in the U.S., sharply increased unemployment, underemployment, hidden unemployment, and other forms of labor underutilization, and increased employment, wage, and annual earnings inequality. These job losses and rising unemployment/underemployment problems have not been evenly shared among the nation’s workers by gender, age, race-ethnic, educational attainment, occupational, or family income groups. The job losses have been considerably greater among the nation’s younger workers (<30), males, Black males, those workers without BA degrees, and among blue collar, office support, and lower level service workers. Overall, blue collar workers (construction crafts, manufacturing operatives and other production workers, laborers and helpers, and transportation operatives /material movers) have been more severely affected than any other group. This set of employment developments has been referred to by the Center for Labor Market Studies in earlier papers as the “Blue Collar Depression”. This research paper updates the findings on this key set of employment, unemployment and underemployment issues facing the nation.

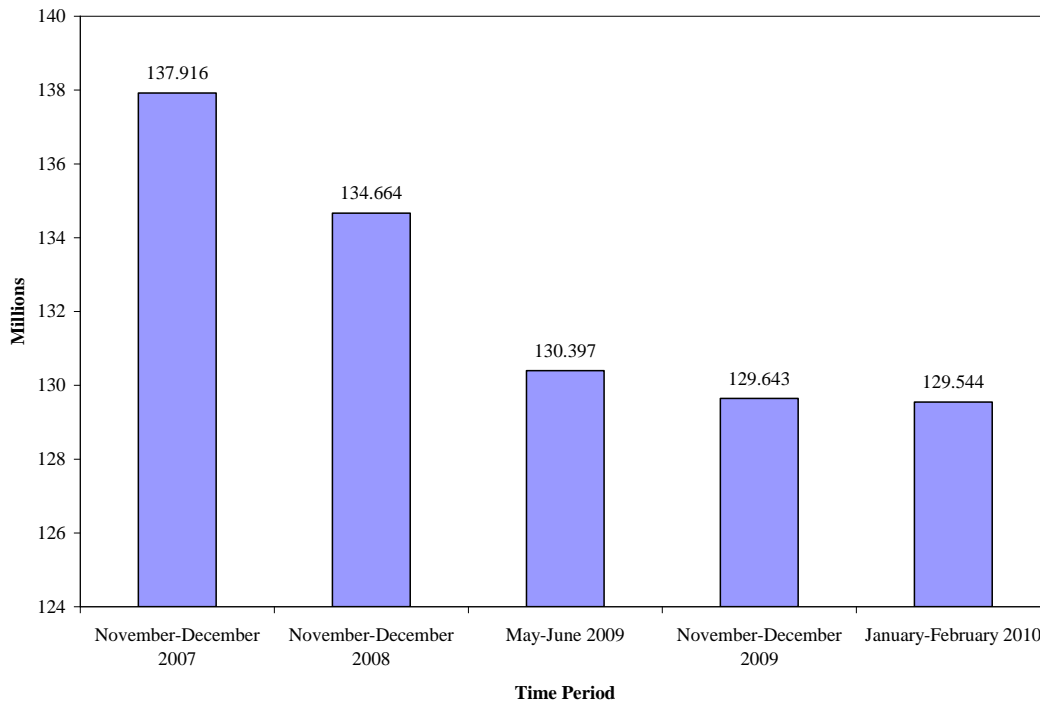
Aggregate losses of payroll jobs in the recent recession have been quite substantial and still had not come to a complete halt by February 2010. From November-December 2007 (the two months immediately before the official onset of the recession) through February 2010 payroll jobs fell steadily and steeply (Chart 1).<sup>1</sup> They had declined to 134.6 million (a 3.3 million loss) by the end of calendar year 2008, to 129.6 million by November / December 2009, and to

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<sup>1</sup> The National Bureau of Economic Research has identified December 2007 as the peak month of the business cycle. The recession officially began in January 2008. NBER has not yet unidentified the official ending month of the recession.

129.5 million in January / February 2010. From November/ December 2007 to January / February 2010, payroll employment had fallen by just under 8.4 million or 6.1% (Table 1).

**Chart 1:**  
**Trends in Nonfarm Payroll Employment in the U.S., Selected Time Periods from**  
**November-December 2007 to January-February 2010**  
**(in Millions, Seasonally Adjusted)**



Employment declines during the recession varied considerably across key industrial sectors. The nation's main goods producing industries (construction and manufacturing) and transportation / warehousing industries (a major employer of blue collar workers) experienced employment declines substantially greater than those of other industries, with employment in construction alone falling by more than one-fourth, (Table 1). In these three industries combined, total employment fell by 4.523 million or nearly 18%. They accounted for 54% of all payroll job losses across the entire economy through January-February 2010.

Table 1:  
Trends in Total Nonfarm Payroll Employment and in Key Blue Collar Employing  
Industries of the U.S. from November/December 2007 to January/February 2010  
(in Millions, Seasonally Adjusted)

Industry	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
	Nov. – Dec. 2007	Jan. – Feb. 2010	Absolute Change	Percent Change
Total Nonfarm	137.916	129.544	-8.372	-6.1%
Construction	7.513	5.587	-1.926	-25.6%
Manufacturing	13.736	11.555	-2.181	-15.9%
Transportation and Warehousing	4.551	4.135	-.416	-9.1%
Above Three Blue Collar Intensive Industries	25.800	21.277	-4.523	-17.5%

Sources: (a) U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “National Current Employment Statistics Survey,” web site.  
(b) U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, The Employment Situation:  
February 2010.

The nation’s blue collar workers primarily consist of four groups of occupations: construction and extraction occupations, installation / maintenance and repair crafts (electrical and electronic technicians, heating and air conditioning mechanics, auto repairs), production workers (machine operators, fabricators, assemblers), transportation operatives, including truck and bus drivers, and material movers. In the fourth quarter of 2009, there were 27.833 million blue collar workers in the U.S., accounting for 20% of all employed civilians. The “blue collar” share of employment varied widely across industries. Blue collar workers were overwhelmingly concentrated in construction (73% of all workers), mining (65%), transportation / warehousing / utilities (57%) and manufacturing (53%) (Table 2). Two-thirds of all blue collar workers were employed in one of these four industries with another 12% in retail and wholesale trade. While some blue collar workers can be found in most service, finance, and public administration industries of the nation, they constitute a small share of the employed. Their share of overall employment in such industries runs from as low as 2.2% (educational and health services) to no more than 8.6% in professional / business services. The industrial sectors that were least adversely affected by the downturn in terms of job loss or actually increased employment were the least likely to employ blue collar workers.

Table 2:  
Blue Collar Workers as a Share of Total Civilian Employment (16+) in  
the U.S. and Key Industrial Sectors, 2009 IV  
 (Not Seasonally Adjusted)

	(A)	(B)	(C)
Industrial Sector	Total Employment (in Millions)	Blue Collar Employment (in Millions)	Blue Collar As % of All
All industries	138.729	27.833	20.0
Mining	.705	.458	65.0
Construction	9.422	6.901	73.2
Manufacturing	13.664	7.227	52.9
Transportation, Warehousing and Utilities	7.023	4.000	57.0
Wholesale and Retail Trade	19.580	3.386	17.3
Leisure and Hospitality	12.332	.543	4.4
Financial Activities	9.464	.327	3.4
Educational and Health Services	32.345	.704	2.2
Professional and Business Services	15.275	1.318	8.6
Public Administration	6.834	.378	5.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “CPS Surveys October – December 2009, public use files,” tabulations by authors.

### **Trends in Employment in Blue Collar and Other Occupations from 2007 IV to 2009 IV**

To identify changes in employment by major occupational group over the course of the recession, we analyzed the findings of the national CPS household surveys for the fourth quarters (October-December) of calendar years 2007 and 2009. Over this two year period, civilian employment of all persons 16 and older fell by 8.4 million or approximately 5.7%. Across nine major occupational groups, accounting for 99% of all workers, employment growth rates varied quite widely, ranging from positive growth rates of 2.4% for professional / technical workers and 1.8% for service workers to declines to 21% for production workers and 23% for construction and extraction workers (See Table 3 and Chart 2). Combining all four blue collar occupational groups into one “blue collar” category yields an employment loss of 5.6 million blue collar jobs or just under 17% (Table 3). During the Great Depression of 1929-33, total employment in the

U.S. had been estimated to have fallen by slightly more than 18%.<sup>2</sup> It is, thus, not an exaggeration to refer to the blue collar downturn as a Depression among the nation's blue collar workers.

Table 3:  
Changes in Civilian Employment (16+) Between 2007 IV and 2009 IV in the  
U.S., All and by Selected Major Occupational Groups  
(in Millions, Not Seasonally Adjusted)

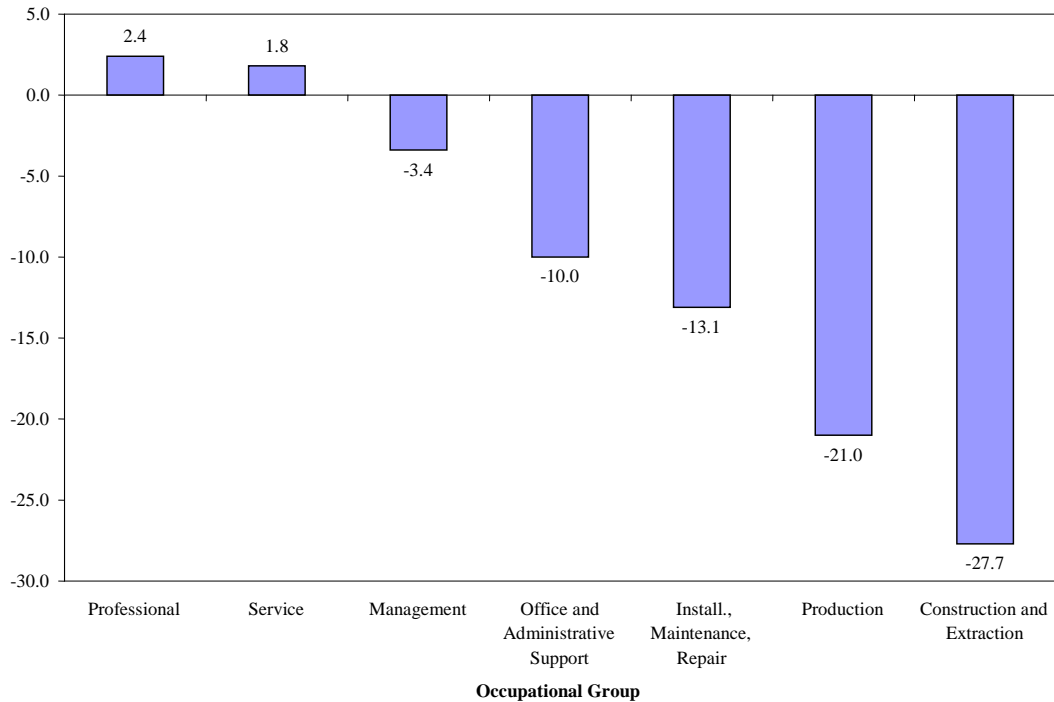
Occupational Group	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
	2007 IV	2009 IV	Absolute Change, 2007 – 2009	Percent Change, 2007 – 2009
All	147.132	138.729	-8.403	-5.7%
Construction and Extraction	9.561	7.394	-2.167	-22.7%
Installation, Maintenance and Repair	5.362	4.658	-.704	-13.1%
Production	9.526	7.519	-2.006	-21.0%
Transportation and Material Moving	9.023	8.262	-.761	-8.4%
All Four Blue Collar Groups	33.472	27.833	-5.639	-16.8%
Administrative Support and Office	19.815	17.819	-1.996	-10.0%
Sales and Related	16.576	15,426	-1.170	-7.0%
Professional	30.648	31.392	+.744	+2.4%
Managerial and Management Support	21.741	20.997	-.744	-3.4%
Professional and Management	52.389	52.389	0	0.0%
Service	23.419	24.346	+.426	+1.8%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPS public use files for October-December 2007 and 2009, tabulations by authors.

<sup>2</sup> During the Great Depression of 1929-33, total employment of persons 14 and older was estimated to have declined by 8.870 million or slightly more than 18%.

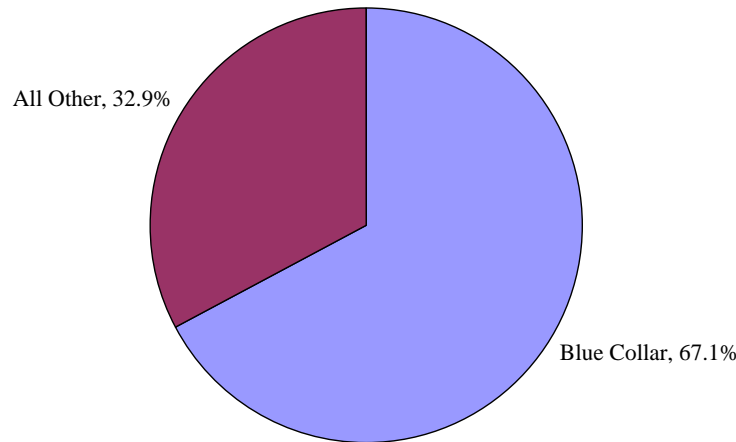
See: U.S. Council of Economic Advisers, Economic Report of the President: 1964, U.S. Government Printing Office, "Table C -19," Washington, D.C., 1964.

Chart 2:  
Percent Change in Employment Between 2007 IV and 2009 IV in the  
U.S. in Selected Major Occupational Groups



In the three month period immediately preceding the recession, blue collar workers accounted for slightly more than 22% of all employed persons in the country. Yet, over the following two years as the recession’s job losses continued to accumulate, blue collar workers accounted for 67% or two-thirds of all job losses in the nation (Chart 3). In contrast, total employment in professional, para-professional and management-related occupations combined was completely unchanged over the same time period (Table 3). Increases in employment in professional jobs exactly offset the drop in management-related employment.

Chart 3:  
Percent of Total Job Losses Between 2007 IV and 2009 IV in  
Blue Collar and All Other Occupations



Given substantial differences in the average educational attainment of workers across occupations, with bachelor and advanced degree holders (MA, PhD, and professional degrees) dominating employment in professional and management-related occupations, it should come as no surprise to discover that job losses, especially among males, varied widely across educational groups. Between November 2007 and January 2010, employment among males with no high school diploma or GED certificate fell by just under 17% versus declines of 10 to 11 percent among males with a high school diploma or 1 to 3 years of college and only 1% among males with a bachelor's or higher degree.<sup>3</sup> For these first three groups of males, the Great Recession felt more like an economic depression.

### **The Steep Rise in Unemployment and Underemployment Among Blue Collar Workers During the Great Recession**

Given the steep declines in employment among the nation's blue collar workers during 2008 and 2009, one would expect above average increases in both their unemployment and underemployment problems. To track changes in the incidence of labor market problems among

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<sup>3</sup> Among employed women, jobs declined by 7% among those with a high school diploma but increased by slightly over 1% among those with a bachelor's or higher degree.

workers in major occupational groups over the course of the Great Recession, we estimated their unemployment and underemployment rates in both the fourth quarter of 2007 and the fourth quarter of 2009 (Tables 4 and 5)

Table 4:  
Trends in Unemployment Rates in Major Occupational Groups in the U.S., 2007 IV to 2009 IV  
(in %)

Occupational Group	(A) 2007 IV	(B) 2009 IV	(C) Percentage Point Change
Construction and Extraction	7.8	20.8	+13.0
Production	5.8	14.5	+8.7
Transportation and Material Moving Service	5.8	11.9	+6.1
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	3.0	9.2	+6.2
Sales	4.8	9.2	+4.4
Office and Administrative Support	4.0	8.8	+4.8
Management and Support	2.0	5.4	+3.4
Professional	2.1	4.2	+2.1

Source: October-December 2007 and 2009 CPS public use files, tabulations by authors.

Workers in each major occupational group experienced some increase in their unemployment rate over this two year period, but the magnitude of these percentage point increases in unemployment rates varied quite widely across these occupational groups. Workers in each blue collar group experienced unemployment rates that increased at above average rates, ranging from 6 percentage points for transportation and material moving occupations to nearly 9 percentage points for production workers, and 13 percentage points for construction and extraction occupations (Table 4). By the fourth quarter of 2009, unemployment rates of blue collar workers ranged from 9.2% for maintenance and installation workers to nearly 15% for production workers and just under 21% for construction and extraction workers. In contrast to these double-digit unemployment rates for 3 of the 4 blue collar groups, the nation's professional and managerial workers only faced unemployment rates in the 4 to 5 percentage point range, which would be considered the equivalent of near full employment for the entire labor force (Table 4).

In addition to their rapidly rising official unemployment rates, most blue collar workers also encountered substantial increases in their underemployment problems. These underemployed workers are individuals who are working part-time (under 35 hours per week) but desire full-time jobs and are available to work full-time. The underemployment rates of blue collar workers in the fourth quarter of 2009 ranged from a low of 4.6 percent among installation / maintenance / repair workers, to 8.4 percent for transportation operators / material movers to a high of over 15% for construction and extraction occupations (Table 5). In sharp contrast, workers in management and professional occupations were experiencing underemployment rates in the two to three percentage point range.

Table 5:  
Underemployment and Combined Unemployment/Underemployment Rates of  
U.S. Workers (16+) in Selected Major Occupational Groups, 2009 IV

Occupational Group	(A) Underemployment Rate <sup>(1)</sup>	(B) Combined Underemployment and Unemployment Rate <sup>(2)</sup>
All	6.4	14.8
Construction and Extraction	15.3	32.7
Service	11.4	20.3
Transportation and Material Moving	8.4	19.3
Sales	7.6	16.1
Production	6.7	20.2
Installation, Maintenance, Repair	4.6	13.4
Office and Administrative Support	4.7	13.1
Professional	3.2	7.3
Management and Support	2.4	7.7

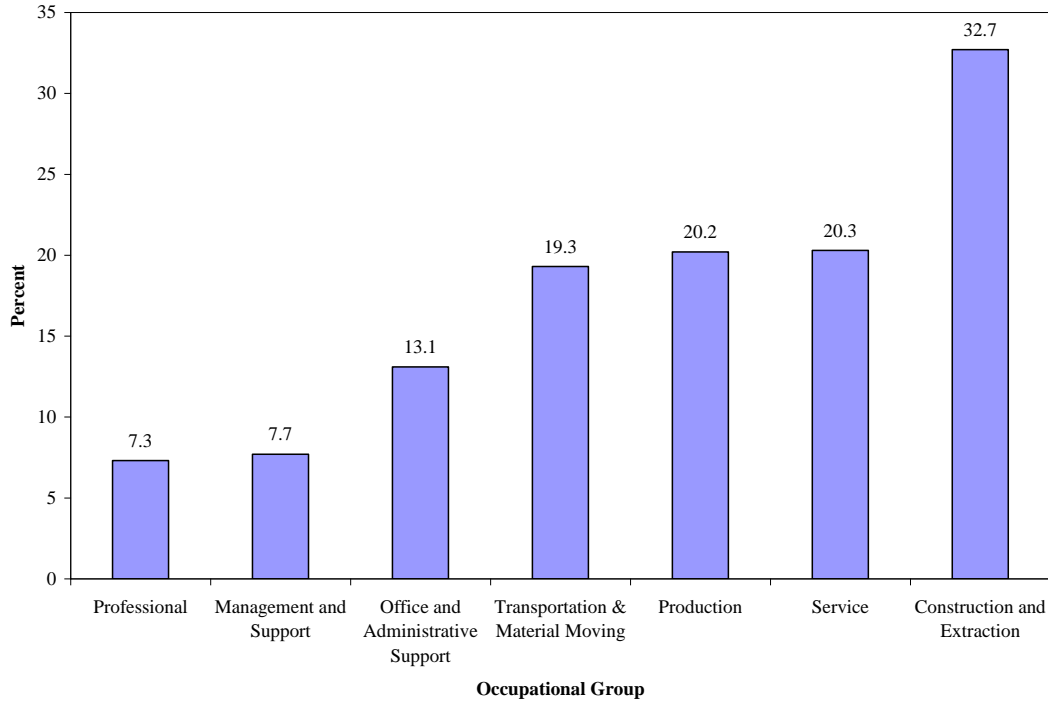
Notes: (1) Underemployment rate is the ratio of the underemployed in a given occupation to the number of employed.

(2) The value of the combined rate of unemployment and underemployment.

The estimates of unemployment and underemployment problems for each occupational group in the fourth quarter of 2009 were added together to estimate a combined unemployment / underemployment rate. Three of the four blue collar groups experienced combined unemployment / underemployment problems in the 19 to 33 percent range while both professional and managerial workers faced combined rates in the 7 percent range (Table 5 and Chart 4). Three of the four blue collar groups were 3 to 4 times as likely to be either unemployed

or underemployed as their professional and managerial peers. The absolute percentage point size of the disparities in these combined unemployment / underemployment rates across occupational groups had widened considerably over the course of the recession.

**Chart 4:**  
**Unemployed and Underemployed as a Percent of the Civilian Labor Force in**  
**Selected Major Occupational Groups, 2009 IV**  
(in %)



### **The Severity of the Labor Market Problems Facing the Nation’s Blue Collar Workers at the End of 2009**

The recession of 2008-2009 has taken a very severe toll on the labor market fortunes of the nation’s blue collar workers. Rising displacement from their jobs and an increasing incidence of both unemployment and underemployment problems have taken place, putting them in severe long-term jeopardy. First, the mean durations of the unemployment spells faced by blue collar workers have risen substantially over the course of the recession, with the mean duration at the end of 2009 (IV quarter) frequently at or above 30 weeks. Being out of work for long periods of time has serious negative consequences for the re-employment prospects of laid off workers and their ability to recapture their former earnings in new jobs. The occupational and general employability skills of the long-term unemployed can atrophy, and the absence of work for many months can lead to premature withdrawal from the labor market, imposing long-term costs on the

workers, their families, and the nation as a whole. A growing body of research over the past two decades also has revealed that long-term job displacement often leads to a host of physical and mental health problems and a loss of perceived sense of general well being and self-esteem, including anxiety, mental depression, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and a reduced level of satisfaction with life in general.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the unemployment problems of many blue collar workers are associated with permanent displacement from their former jobs. Over 70% of the unemployed blue collar workers in recent months report that they were either permanently laid off from their jobs or had held a temporary job that ended with no prospects of recall. Many of these displaced blue collar workers will need to transfer into new occupations or industries to become re-employed or may have to migrate to new communities.<sup>5</sup> Substantially expanded and revamped training and re-training efforts for dislocated workers will be needed to improve the re-employment prospects of many of these workers. Unfortunately, the nation's track record on past re-training efforts for dislocated workers over the past two decades is not very promising. New innovative training efforts with strong ties to employers, including combined classroom training / on-the-job training efforts, will be needed to increase long-term employment and earnings outcomes for the nation's blue collar, dislocated workers.

Third, the re-employment prospects of many blue collar workers are considerably dimmed by the existence of large labor surpluses (unemployed well in excess of available job openings) in key industries employing blue collar workers, especially construction and durable manufacturing over the course of the recession, the overall labor surplus in the U.S. has grown steadily and strongly. In the final quarter of 2007, nationally there were about 186 unemployed workers for every job vacancy in nonfarm industries. By the fourth quarter of 2009, the ratio of the unemployed to job vacancies had risen to 640 to 100, the highest such ratio in the 10 year

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<sup>4</sup> For a review of the evidence on these issues regarding the physical and mental health, life satisfaction, and social impacts of job dislocation,

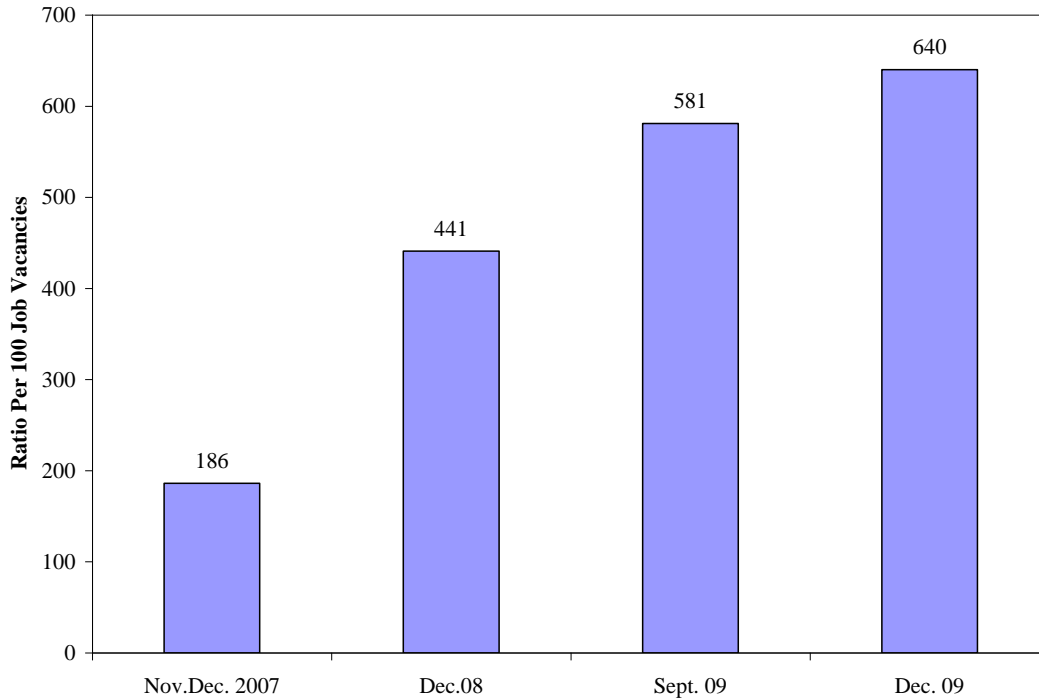
See: (i) Derek Bok, The Politics of Happiness, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2010; (ii) Gregory Murphy and James A. Athanasou, "The Effect of Unemployment on Mental Health," Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 1999, Vol. 72, p. 82; (iii) Louis Uchitelle, The Disposable Americans: Layoffs and Their Consequences, Vintage Books, New York, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> A recent USA Today article discusses the impacts of manufacturing plant closings in small towns on the creation of "ghost towns."

See: Rick Hampson, "New Ghost Towns: Industrial Communities Teeter on the Edge," USA Today, March 1, 2010.

period for which national job vacancy data have been available from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>6</sup>

Chart 5:  
Trends in the Ratio of the Number of Unemployed Persons in the U.S. Per 100 Job Vacancies,  
Selected Time Periods, November-December 2007 to December 2009



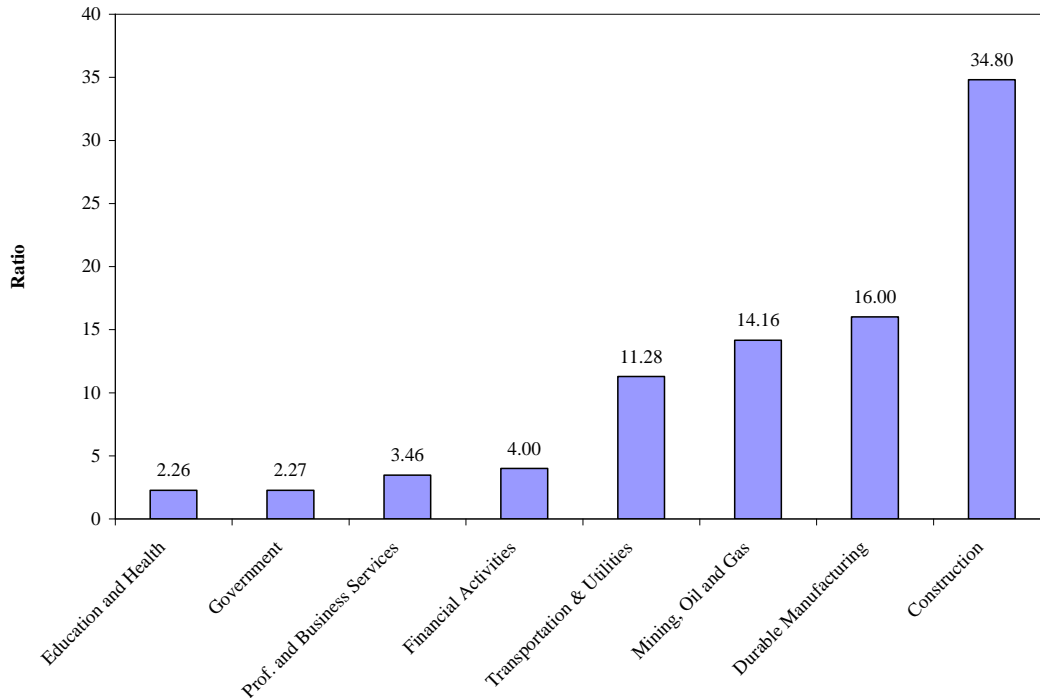
Sources: (i) U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, web site, “Unemployed Persons From the Current Population Survey;”  
(ii) U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, web site, “Nonfarm Job Openings From the Monthly Job Vacancy Survey.”

The degree of labor surplus varied quite considerably across major industrial sectors of the economy in the fourth quarter of 2009. The ratios of the unemployed to job vacancies ranged from lows of 2.26 in education and health industries and government to highs of 16.0 in durable manufacturing and 34.8 in construction.

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<sup>6</sup> The national job vacancy data series began in December 2000. At the end of 2000, there were nearly as many job vacancies as unemployed people in the U.S., the equivalent of full employment according to William Beveridge, the late British Economist.

Chart 6:  
Ratios of Unemployed Persons by Job Vacancies in the U.S. by  
Selected Major Industrial Sectors, 2009 IV



The existence of a high degree of labor surplus in key blue collar industries and occupations also prevails in many individual states as well. Those states, such as Massachusetts which have administered their own job vacancy surveys, are also characterized by substantial labor surpluses. In the spring of 2009, the overall ratio of unemployed persons to job vacancies in Massachusetts was 5.62 to 1.00. In manufacturing industries, however, there were 23.5 unemployed persons per job vacancy and in construction the ratio was 65 to 1.<sup>7</sup> Data on vacancies and unemployment for key blue collar occupations also show high degrees of surplus, with a ratio of 23 unemployed per job vacancy in production occupations and 107 unemployed per job vacancy in construction and extraction occupations.<sup>8</sup> ARRA-funded infrastructure and green technology projects at sufficient scale could contribute to an increase in employment of

<sup>7</sup> For evidence on the existence of a blue collar depression in Massachusetts, See: Andrew Sum with Joseph McLaughlin, Misha Trubbskyy, The Depression in Blue Collar Labor Markets in Massachusetts and U.S.: Their Implications for Future Economic Stimulus and Workforce Development Policies, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, Boston, December 2009.

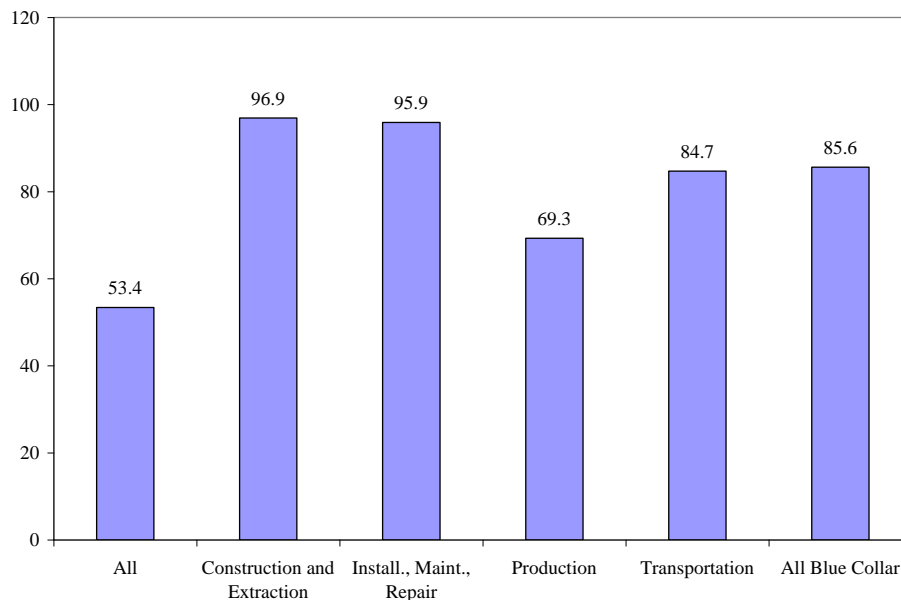
<sup>8</sup> The national job vacancy survey administered by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics unfortunately does not collect data on job vacancies by occupation. A number of states in addition to Massachusetts do so.

workers in key blue collar occupations and help reduce the substantial degrees of labor surplus that exist in most labor markets across the country.

Fourth, the depression in many blue collar labor markets will not be solved by a modest recovery of the U.S. economy over the next few years. As noted earlier, many of the jobs lost by current unemployed blue collar workers will not come back, new jobs will have to be created to absorb these workers, and an array of retraining, re-employment, and relocation strategies will have to be implemented to solve these structural, labor surplus problems. Neither policymakers nor the media have paid proper attention to the deep depression in the nation's blue collar labor markets.

Fifth, the extraordinary decline in the nation's blue collar employment levels in the recession also helps explain other key labor market developments, including the high share of job loss attributable to men, the widening gender gap in unemployment rates to new record highs, and the steeper job losses by Black males. In the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2007, males accounted for a disproportionate share of national blue collar employment (Chart 7). Slightly over 85% of all blue collar workers were men versus only 53% of all workers (16+) in the economy. In the two construction and installation/ craft areas, males represented 96 to 97 percent of the employed.

Chart 7:  
Male Share of Employment in All Occupations and in Blue Collar Occupations, 2007 IV



Given the high share of men in blue collar occupations and the severe job losses among such workers, males as a whole experienced much greater job losses than women over the November-December 2007 to January-February 2010 period. Total male employment declined by 5.67 million or 7.2% versus a drop of 2.17 million or 3.2% among women. Males accounted for 72% of the total loss in civilian jobs during the so-called “he-cession.” The loss of blue collar employment explained 81% of the decline in jobs among men from 2007 IV to 2009 IV.

Table 7:  
Trends in the Employment Levels of Men and Women 16 and Older from  
November-December 2007 to January-February 2010 in the U.S.  
(Monthly Averages in Millions, Seasonally Adjusted)

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
Gender Group	Nov. – Dec. 2007	Jan. – Feb. 2010	Absolute Change	Percent Change
Men	78.336	72.664	-5.672	-7.2%
Women	67.992	65.823	-2.169	-3.2%
All (16+)	146.328	138.487	-7.841	-5.3%

The far sharper decline in male employment helped push up the male unemployment rate much faster than the female unemployment rate (Table 8). In the final two months of 2007, the male unemployment rate was only .2 percentage points higher than that of women (4.9% vs. 4.7%). By November-December 2009, the gap between the male/ female unemployment rates had risen to 2.4 percentage points, the largest gender gap in our nation’s history. The dramatic loss in male blue collar employment was the main driving force behind this rising gender disparity.

Table 8:  
Time Trends in Male (16+) and Female (16+) Unemployment Rates in the U.S. for Selected  
Time Periods Between November-December 2007 and January-February 2010  
 (Seasonally Adjusted, in %)

	(A)	(B)	(C)
Time Period	Male	Female	Male – Female
November-December 2007	4.9	4.7	+2
November-December 2008	7.8	6.4	+1.4
May-June 2009	10.5	8.2	+2.3
November-December 2009	11.1	8.7	+2.4
January-February 2010	10.8	9/5	+2.2

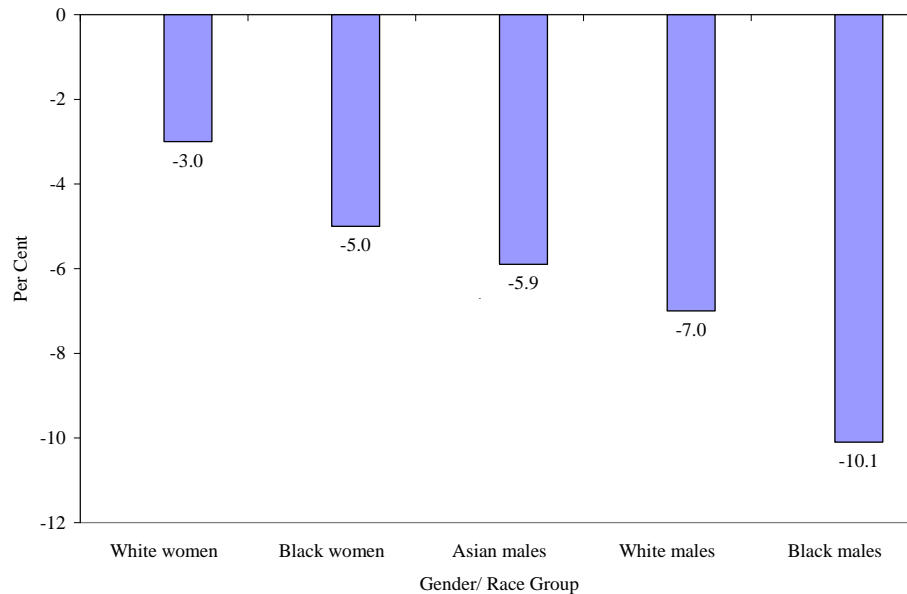
Sixth, Black males have been the most adversely affected by the economic recession in terms of aggregate employment losses. Total employment of Black males dropped by slightly more than ten percent between November 2007 and January 2010. The job loss among Black males was twice as high as that of Black women (5%), more than three times as high as that of White women (3%), and three to four percentage points higher than that of white males and Asian males, respectively (Chart 8).

The steep job losses of Black males in the past two years were primarily due to their above average concentration in blue collar occupations prior to the onset of the recession and their high rate of job loss in these same occupations during the recession. Just under 40% of Black males were working in blue collar occupations immediately prior to the recession.<sup>9</sup> Over the following two years, 19% of all blue collar jobs held by Black men were lost. These blue collar job losses accounted for nearly 85% of all of the net job losses experienced by Black males through the fourth quarter of 2009. These heavy job losses among Black men pushed up their unemployment rate to 19% in the first two months of this year. This represents the highest unemployment rate they have faced since 1983 during the early stages of recovery from the deep recession of 1981-82.

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<sup>9</sup> Only Hispanic males were more likely to be dependent on blue collar jobs than Black males. One-half of all Hispanic males worked in blue collar jobs in the fourth quarter of 2007.

Chart 8:  
Percent Changes in Employment among Selected Gender/ Race-Ethnic Groups, November 2007  
to January 2010 (Seasonally adjusted)



Finally, the high rates of blue collar job losses also have had disastrous effects on the employment rates of the nation's young males (under 30) with no post secondary degrees. The decline in blue collar employment, especially in manufacturing since 2000, has increasingly shut them out of this key segment of the labor market, pushing their employment rates down to post-World War II lows. This set of events has had devastating effects on marriage, family formation, and out-of-wedlock childbearing among young women, especially those without college degrees.<sup>10</sup> Growing numbers of young men are left without the jobs and earnings levels necessary to take on the responsibilities of marriage. Many former industrial communities including small towns and large central cities have suffered severe losses as a consequence.

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<sup>10</sup> See: Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, and Joseph McLaughlin, No Country for Young Men: The Deteriorating Labor Market Fate of Less Skilled Men in America, Report prepared for the University of Wisconsin's Institute on Poverty Research, Madison, WI, 2009.