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## Study: Blacks in Pine Belt earn less

By *TERRY L. JONES*

Blacks in Forrest and Lamar counties earned almost \$8,000 less than whites in 2007, according to a recent study released by the American Human Development Project.

In its "A Portrait of Mississippi 2009" report, the social science research council claims blacks in the two counties only earned \$14,442 in median income, compared to whites who grossed \$22,276.

Across the state blacks earned \$16,720 and whites took home \$27,182, the report says.

"Our median income should be higher," said Clarence Magee, president of the Forrest County Branch of the NAACP. "(But) when it comes to income there are a lack of high paying jobs in the area. We (blacks) tend to flood the fast food (jobs) that don't pay any money."

The AHDP report was commissioned by the Mississippi NAACP State Conference - which wanted to pinpoint distinct human development challenges facing different groups in the state.

The comprehensive study also tracked life expectancy rates, health issues and educational challenges facing the state.

The report says blacks in Mississippi, on average, are more worse off than blacks throughout the nation. The study's data is taken from information collected in 39 states where the population of blacks was large enough to be included in the analysis.

According to the report, blacks encompass 37 percent of Mississippi's total population.

Forrest and Lamar ranked 4th for their percentage of college-educated blacks - 17.3 percent compared to the state's average of 11.6 percent, according to the report.

But they still trail whites in the area. The reports says 31 percent of whites have at least a bachelor's degree in Forrest and Lamar counties.

Approximately 21 percent of blacks have less than a high-school education, the report also states. The state average for blacks is nearly 30 percent.

"It's shocking to me, but it's not surprising," said Hattiesburg resident David Rankin. "We have a big economic disparity in our state and I don't think it's by accident. But instead of blaming people a lot of time for our shortcomings, we have to take a look and see what we're doing."

Rankin said the root of the quality of life issues for blacks in this area lies in education.

"If people aren't being educated properly, how can they move up economically?" Rankin said. "Every year there seems to be a struggle in Jackson about how to fund education."

Rankin added that for a state with the highest number of black elected officials, it's time some of them

step up to the plate and address these issues.

But elected officials say their eyes aren't closed to what's going on.

Charles Marshall, president of the Forrest County Board of Supervisors, agrees with Rankin on the importance of higher education.

But Marshall also said the county's lack of higher paying jobs has also made it difficult to hold on to its population of college-educated blacks.

"If we can attract outside industry to come in and pay higher wages, then people are going to stay here and work and go on to live in a better neighborhoods," Marshall said. "But people are going to have to do some things for themselves and not wait for government to do it."

Magee said the report only emphasizes their message of the importance of education and its link to better salaries and an enhanced quality of life.

"It's going to take a village coming back together to focus on education," Magee said. "If you got a better education its going to equal better jobs, better resources, and improved health and life expectancy."

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