

Mississippi Delta employment continues decline

LEXINGTON, Miss. (AP) — In his 57 years of repairing shoes at his small shop on a corner of the town square, J.C. Travis has seen both extremes of the economy.

There was a time, he recalled, when the work was so plentiful it took "three or four" cobblers to meet the demand. Now, the 72-year-old man works alone.

Unemployment in this mid-Delta town of nearly 2,300 residents has climbed to 22.3 percent and shows no signs of slowing.

Residents say Lexington's future — as with much of the Mississippi Delta, where cotton once was king — is bleak.

"A town without jobs is just about doomed," said Thomas Johnson Jr., 52, as he sat in front of Sam's Grocery store on Lexington's square.

"People here can't progress because they don't have the work and they don't have the money."

Poverty and scarce jobs have long been a fact of life in the 15 counties that comprise the Mississippi Delta and mid-Delta.

The region has nearly 387,000 residents — 14 percent of Mississippi's 2.7 million. During March, the number of unemployed in the Delta represented 21.2 percent of the state's total jobless.

Unemployment nationally was at 4.3 percent in March. In Mississippi, it was 5.7 percent. Outside the Delta, unemployment was as low as 1.5 percent in Lafayette, home to the University of Mississippi, and 4.3 percent in the Jackson area.

Like many small villages in the flat, soil-rich Delta to the west, Lexington has changed little in the last decade.

Downtown clothing and variety shops have dwindled with the economy, leaving empty storefronts.

Most of the Delta's new construction is

limited to a handful of counties along the Mississippi River where gambling is allowed.

"That's where the kids are going," said Laplause Polk, a former economics teacher. "There's nothing here to keep them."

On average, roughly 10 percent of the working age population is unemployed each month, more than double the state average of 5 percent.

The population's main source of income is federal assistance payments, according to the state Department of Human Services.

Charles Wagoner, associate professor of economics at Delta State University in Cleveland, said a resistance to technology and manufacturing jobs some 50 years ago has helped fuel the region's high jobless rates.

"They didn't want it basically because they thought it would compete with their need for agriculture labor," Wagoner said. "The industry never came."

The Delta's lack of adequate roads, bridges and a power grid make it inhospitable to industry, Wagoner said.

"I wouldn't want to build a plant here," he said. "I couldn't get my raw materials. People say we have the (Mississippi) River, but so does St. Louis."

Elected leaders and state agency officials all point to the Delta as the flashpoint for economic crisis. President Clinton this month announced a \$30 million initiative to promote economic development in the area.

Richard Spencer, a tire store owner who has been Lexington's mayor for seven years, fears that "unless we get some industry or something back into the economy here, nothing's going to help."

"We've got an available workforce — I think most of them want to work — but there's nothing to do without leaving the town or the county," he said.

Homeless

(Continued from Page 1) spond to urgent calls for help, advocacy groups said greater public support is needed to provide clothing, food, hygiene products, bus tokens and pre-paid phone cards to needy youth.

"Currently, services aren't being provided for these kids because of liability issues," said Lynn Richmond-Morris, executive director of the center.

She expects some relief because of the work being done by the Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth, a coalition of approximately 106 members concerned with the problem.

"The coalition plans to present a law next January," she said. "If it passes, it will allow services to be provided for that population."

The proposed legislation is referred to as the Right to Shelter law.

"What you find is that kids who survive on the streets become tough very, very

quickly. They're usually very intelligent, quick to learn survival skills and they do what it takes. If they don't, they don't survive," Stand Up for Kids executive director David Mereaux said. "In the state of Nevada right now, everything I do to help (them) is against the law. If I give them a sandwich, a bus token (or) something to drink, I am breaking the law, contributing to the delinquency of a minor. So everything I do is illegal."

Life Line, 1330 E. Karen Ave., has become the home for a new drop-in center serving homeless clients. It is sponsored by the homeless youth partnership.

"We provide clothes, diapers, formula, food, on-site counseling, even day-care for homeless teen moms. We have about 3,000 homeless youth, with a high concentration in this geographical area," Richmond-Morris said of the vicinity where Life Line is located.

She estimated that locally

there are some "300 street kids. The majority are caucasian, very few hispanic, very few blacks," she said, adding that, "the partnership wants the community to know that these services are open to the entire homeless youth population."

She said, "A lot of this has to do with the breakdown of families" and with the abuse that occurs in so many of them.

"The vast majority have been abused, often verbally, but in most cases it's physical and sexual abuse," Mereaux said. "When they hit the streets, they have to survive. They have to do whatever it takes. And there're only four ways to survive on the streets if you're 12, 13, 14 years old, and that's either prostitution, begging ("panhandling"), stealing or selling drugs. The majority of kids get involved in prostitution. Within 48 hours, 42 percent of these kids end up in prostitution ... and the

numbers climb from there.

"They get raped, they get abused, and they get murdered," he continued. "There are 13 kids that, every day, are dying in the streets, 13 a day. That's an astounding number. You hear about Columbine where 12 innocent kids were killed, (but) 13 every single day ... homeless kids are dying in the streets."

These nomadic children can be found throughout the valley.

T.K., for example, is a bright 17-year old who first ran away from home at age 12. The eleventh grade dropout doesn't regret leaving school, nor does he plan to return. He came to Las Vegas three weeks ago after leaving his hometown, Tacoma, Wash., and encountered Life Line a week after arriving.

"I hopped on a bus with no money in my pocket and here I am," he said. "My father was an abusive

drunkaholic and my family rejected me. The most negative influence, I would have to say, I had in my life was my father."

Neither, he said, did he have any supportive extended family.

"The streets are soft and people are giving, that's all I can say," about Las Vegas, he said.

He calls this "the best experience I have had in my (See Homeless, Page 7)

NAACP

(Continued from Page 1)

anyone I wanted," Gillis said. The civil rights group could lose its tax-exempt status if it engages in party politics, said Salim Khalfani, executive director of the Virginia NAACP conference.

In 1997, while he was president of the state NAACP, Gillis endorsed Republican Mark Earley in the campaign for Virginia attorney general.

He said the NAACP general counsel declared in that case that he was within his rights.

The civil rights organization will hold a hearing to determine whether to reinstate Gillis or suspend him permanently.

ABC
Insurance Agency


BRANCH & ASSOCIATES
Insurance & Financial Services

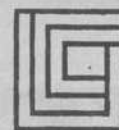
With 2 locations to serve the Las Vegas Valley

2041 N. Jones Blvd. #105
944-5360

1700 Civic Center Drive
649-1029

Auto • Home • Business • Life • Health



URBAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
"URBAN EMPOWERMENT OF BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY"

ANNOUNCES NOMINEES FOR ITS AWARD OF OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT

IN CONJUNCTION WITH ITS GAMING VENUES IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM CONFERENCE, THE URBAN CHAMBER WILL BE HOSTING A COMMUNITY AWARDS RECEPTION ON JULY 8th AT THE MGM HOTEL.

THE RECEPTION WILL HONOR PERSONS THAT HAVE MADE CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE CATEGORIES OF BUSINESS, CIVIL RIGHTS, MEDIA, POLITICS AND SPORTS.

NOMINEES:

BUSINESS:
Bankwest
Henderson Architects
Terry Lanni
Wesley Corporation

CIVIL RIGHTS:
David Hoggard, Sr.
Hank Greenspun
(posthumously)
James McMillian
(posthumously)
Woodrow Wilson
(posthumously)

MEDIA:
Louie Overstreet
Barbara Robinson
Ramon Savoy
Ken Ward
Terry Webster

POLITICS:
Trustee Shirley Barber
Cong. Shelley Berkley
Sen. Richard Bryan
Sen. Harry Reid
Assem. Wendell Williams

SPORTS:
Andre Agassi
Frank Hawkins
Mills Lane
Richard Steele

THE RECEPTION IS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. ADMISSION IS \$35. REFRESHMENTS WILL BE SERVED AND ENTERTAINMENT PROVIDED. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE AWARDS RECEPTION OR GAMING CONFERENCE, CALL THE CHAMBER AT 648-6222.