

Older cities still losing out on jobs

Unskilled labor being phased out

By [Steven A. Rosenberg](#)

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Despite a drop in unemployment across the state overall in the past year, people in older urban areas across northeastern Massachusetts continue to struggle to find work as traditional unskilled labor positions are phased out and demands for skilled computer and technical workers increase.

Over the last year, the state unemployment rate has dropped from 9.3 percent to 8.7 percent, but cities such as Lawrence, Chelsea, Gloucester, and Lowell — which have been heavily dependent on construction and manufacturing over the decades — are still well above the state unemployment level, reported in February.

“It can be very depressing and cause you not to see your value in a number of areas,” said Cazalma Groomes, who lives in Lawrence — the city with the highest unemployment in the state, at 18 percent.

Groomes, 56, worked for 12 years as an executive assistant and corporate project manager, but lost her job 17 months ago when her company moved to Canada.

The closure of large companies is a consistent theme among job seekers at state-funded career centers that provide job counseling, retraining, and workshops.

Lawrence has been the poster city for high unemployment for the last two years, with the rate hovering around 18 percent much of that time. “What I’m seeing in this recession is that companies are closing and people can’t go back to those jobs because they’ve been outsourced overseas,” said Arthur Chilingirian, director of the ValleyWorks Career Center in Lawrence and Haverhill.

Four years ago, the area was hard-hit by the closing of Lucent Technologies in Andover, which employed as many as 12,000 people a decade ago. In 2008, Haverhill Paperboard laid off 200 workers, and last year Sonoco Packaging Products and Debbie’s Staffing cut a total of 800 local workers. And, at the end of this year, Chilingirian says, another 300 jobs will be lost when North Andover’s Solo Cup closes.

Once a vibrant textile city, Lawrence has always been a large source of unskilled labor for area factories, said Lawrence state Senator Barry Finegold. But as factories have closed and the need for skilled laborers has increased, many locals have been unable to fill the newer criteria for jobs in the health and customer service fields, which require advanced computer and math skills.

“During an economic downturn, when the suburbs get the sniffles, urban areas like Lawrence get the flu,” said Finegold.

In the city of roughly 70,000, where 71 percent of its residents identify as Hispanic or Latino in the latest US Census, language can also be a big obstacle to getting a job, said Finegold. “There’s definitely not a lack of desire to work; it’s a question of giving people opportunities and low-level jobs, and that is a difficult challenge,” said Finegold, who added that the average waiting period to enroll in an English as a Second Language program is a year.

In older industrial cities like Chelsea and Revere, workers face a similar plight of waiting a long time to enroll in ESL classes. Linda Rohrer, director of Career Source — a state-funded job-counseling and training center based in Everett — also believes that unemployment in urban immigrant centers like Chelsea (11.3 percent) and Revere (9.9 percent) will drop after people enroll in ESL, computer, and math classes.

Rohrer said there has been a recent increase in hiring in customer support, food services, retail, and health care. Still, Rohrer says, non-English speakers — who are 43 percent of the unemployed her office serves — face a combination of challenges to obtain higher-paying jobs. She said 67 percent of the unemployed who use the career center have a high school diploma or less, and that 46 percent of the unemployed are “mature workers” — 45 and older. “If you’re somebody in that age category and don’t have very good English skills, it’s rough,” she said. “We’re moving in a direction where people need to be comfortable and conversant with technology, and that’s pretty much right across the board.”

At the North Shore Career Center — which has offices in Salem, Lynn, and Gloucester — executive director Mark Whitmore also tells job seekers that more education will lead to better-paying jobs. He said construction and manufacturing have been the hardest-hit sectors in the region during the recession, and one of the biggest challenges workers face is transferring their skills to more technical jobs. His office offers up to 30 workshops a month, and held a job fair last week in Lynnfield. It drew 300 people and about 15 prospective employers — including Varian Semiconductor of Gloucester, Eastern Bank of Lynn, and Shaughnessy-Kaplan Rehabilitation Hospital in Salem.

Whitmore believes health care is now the strongest job sector along the North Shore, and he said recent expansion by hospitals in Beverly and Danvers has added positions for nurses, physical therapists, and customer service representatives.

However, Whitmore said construction jobs continue to decline, with 600 positions in that sector cut in area communities last month alone.

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