

Overburdened and overlooked

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This week's National Urban League conference in St. Louis should help bring much-

needed attention to the myriad problems facing cities across the country. The national media attention concentrated on America's Center Friday for the convention addresses of four presidential candidates surely can't hurt.

League president Marc H. Morial recently told the Post-Dispatch editorial board that he wants the presidential candidates to "lay out their vision for urban America." Good ideas — and the political will to implement them — are sorely needed. By any economic or social measure, our big cities are under enormous stress.

The conference, drawing more than 10,000 people from across the country, comes at a time of unsettling anxiety for many African-Americans, Mr. Morial said. "There is a growing sense that the civil rights successes of the last 40 years have left many people behind."

Earlier this year, for example, the organization's annual State of Black America report examined the status of African-American men. It said that their situation constituted the nation's worst social crisis. The troubling report quantified glaring disparities between African-Americans and whites across five categories — economics, education, health, civic engagement and social justice — and the comparative statistics on AIDS, unemployment and incarceration rates for black men were particularly grim.

African-American men are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as white men and to earn 75 percent of what white males make, the report said. Black men are nearly seven times more likely to be incarcerated, with average jail sentences about 10 months longer than those of white men.

Black men between the ages of 15 and 34 are nine times more likely to be murdered and almost eight times more likely to have AIDS. On such key measurements as unemployment, annual income and high school dropout rates, greater disparities existed between black men and white men than between black women and white women.

These grave racial gaps represent an appalling waste of human potential in countless American cities and regions, including ours.

The report called for concrete strategies to address the problems: universal early-childhood education, more all-male schools that emphasize mentoring; longer school days; more "second-chance" programs for school dropouts and ex-offenders.

A so-called opportunity compact being released at the conference focuses on the development of jobs, housing and entrepreneurship. It underscores the theme of the four-day conference: bridging the economic gap between the races. Workshops have focused on such topics as leadership and career development, wealth accumulation, financial education and health and wellness. More than 100 job recruiters were expected to participate in a career fair that is open to the public and continues through the end of the conference on Saturday.

There is no question that African-Americans disproportionately confront persistent social and economic issues that include poverty, poor education, joblessness and crime. These problems won't be solved by pithy sound bites at any organization's annual conference, but we hope that the league's focus on urban America this week sparks a national discussion that moves urban issues to the front burner — where they belong.