

## **The State of a Wounded City**

Mayor Bloomberg delivered the State of the City message last month, detailing his plans for maneuvering New York through the toughest economic times in 80 years.

Official unemployment hit 10.6 percent in December, the highest rate in nearly 17 years. Even before the recession, research by the Community Service Society (CSS) found that the real jobless figures for African American and Latino New Yorkers – many of whom have given up looking for a job – are three or four times the official rates. CSS research also revealed that more than 200,000 young people in the city ages 16 to 24 were “disconnected,” neither in school nor in the labor force. The great majority are black and Latino youth, a looming crisis for our communities of color.

A mayor of New York can only do so much to combat the effects of an economic recession that has been global in scope. But there are some policies that could help alleviate the worst consequences of a plunging economy.

### **Disconnected Youth**

In his address, Mayor Bloomberg spoke about taking action on problems that CSS has championed – in some cases – for years. For example, the mayor acknowledged the problem of disconnected youth by addressing ways to connect black and Latino young people – especially young men – to the opportunities and support that can lead them to successful employment and allow them to participate in the civic life of the city.

CSS’s research found too few resources and a lack of coordination in the city’s response to disconnected youth. The mayor proposed conducting a detailed assessment of all city, state, and federal funding for youth services and work to connect the people and organizations that are tackling these issues so as to better coordinate the city’s efforts. This undertaking will be led by David Banks, the president and founding principal of the Eagle Academy, an all-boys high school, and Ana Oliveira, the president of the New York Women’s Foundation, who also is a member of CSS’s Board of Trustees.

### **Juvenile Justice**

CSS has advocated for a change in the operations of the juvenile justice system in New York. Too often, young people are simply warehoused in upstate facilities that do nothing to help turn their lives around. The overwhelming numbers of those caught up in the system are black and Latino youth from New York City. Three of every four who get sent to these out-of-city facilities are rearrested within three years, often for even more serious crimes.

It has been found that many juveniles who are sentenced to in-home counseling or other alternative programs – instead of to far more costly upstate facilities – have fewer problems with the law. Incarceration should be only for violent offenders. In response, the city is planning to conduct a major overhaul of the system with new strategies, new goals, and new measurements for success. The city should coordinate its efforts with the State Office of Children and Family Services, where Commissioner Gladys Carrion is attempting to close many of the upstate juvenile facilities and redirect efforts to more therapeutic programs closer to home.

## Financial Education

The city is planning to help New Yorkers get out of debt with a new public-private loan pool that will offer them a fresh start if they commit to sound financial practices. I look forward to more information about this initiative.

The mayor might contemplate the findings in the latest report by the Community Service Society and the Center for an Urban Future entitled “Closing the Skills Gap.” It revealed that “large segments of the city’s workforce currently lack the skills to fully participate in the labor market,” with an underclass of New Yorkers “all but permanently unemployed, underemployed, or stuck in low-wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement.”

New York has been wounded by the recession, but large numbers of New Yorkers were hurting even before the economy tanked. The economy will rebound, but many New Yorkers may not share in the recovery. It will pass them by as it has before unless actions are taken to build the city’s human capital.

The city should revamp its woeful GED system. About 1.1 million New York City workers are without a high school diploma. Yet, in 2007, only 2.5 percent of those eligible took the GED exam; less than half of those passed. Insufficient resources, lack of oversight, and a complete absence of coordination contribute to the system’s poor performance. The skills acquired through a GED are essential to produce an educated workforce that will continue to attract businesses to locate in New York City.

The city needs to upgrade its community colleges, which have awful graduation rates. A successful group of community colleges can provide higher education degrees and serve as a stepping stone to four-year colleges and beyond. Less than 400 of the more than 17,000 students who enrolled as first-time, full-time freshman at the six CUNY community colleges in the fall of 2006 had graduated by 2008.

This is especially important since in the city’s evolving economy, a high school diploma is often not sufficient for many jobs.

Of course, in an economy where the key to employment is education, the job should start in the early grades of our public schools. Strengthening early education will ultimately go a long way to producing a skilled workforce for New York City. This, more than anything else, will ensure that New York’s future economic growth remains strong.

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David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS’s website: [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).

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