

## **Life in New York, Told by New Yorkers**

New York City and the nation have been going through some tough times in the past year and a half. As the economy has plummeted, more than seven million Americans lost their jobs. The number of people without health insurance rose to nearly 50 million. Thirty-five million people are using food stamps to get by. Foreclosures are still threatening millions. Cities and states are cutting public services in an effort to balance their budgets.

In the midst of this recession, the Community Service Society (CSS) has gone to its principal constituency, low-income New Yorkers, to get their opinions about what sorts of public policies could help alleviate the worst of their concerns. When times are tough, it's the poor who suffer the most. They have the least resources and are the most likely to need government aid.

### **The Unheard Third**

In the next few months, CSS will be issuing results from "The Unheard Third," our annual survey of low-income New Yorkers, the only regular polling of low-income opinion in the nation. In the survey, New Yorkers tell us their thoughts on health care, employment, housing, and the hardships they are facing. The survey also lends credibility to our advocacy with elected officials and the news media as we work for changes in public policies that affect low-income families and individuals.

### **Health Care Survey**

In addition to the Unheard Third survey of low-income New Yorkers, we will soon be issuing the findings of our "New York Statewide Poll on Health Reform, 2009," conducted with 1,000 residents. The survey covers many aspects of health care, including opinions about its costs and about the various federal and state health care options currently being proposed.

In our "Unheard Third" surveys, we have found that many low-income people postponed necessary medical care or could not fill a prescription because of a lack of insurance to cover the costs. This is particularly important because many low-income New Yorkers work in small businesses that no longer offer health insurance as a job benefit. In many jobs where health care is offered, low-income workers cannot afford to pay the employee premiums.

One of the keys to the health of New York City's economy is the productivity of our workforce. In today's economy, that means a high level of basic skills. Private sector employers have complained that large numbers of working age New Yorkers have not acquired those skills. This is especially true of those who have dropped out of school. We need to increase opportunities for skills development and educational attainment, and the place to start is the GED.

### **Importance of the GED**

CSS will be issuing a report on the importance of the GED, the General Education Development degree. The report will analyze why a workforce with strong basic skills is important for the economic future of New York City. It will also examine how the system for basic skills development is currently performing and what can be done to improve the efforts to build basic skills that put people on track for good jobs and successful careers in our labor market.

The GED is especially important for those too old or too far behind to earn a conventional high school degree. More than one million working-age New Yorkers without a high school degree or equivalency — nearly a quarter of the working-age population - find themselves on the fringes of the labor market, stuck in low-wage jobs with little chance of advancement at best, and out of work at worst. The single biggest reason is their lack of basic skills.

To have any hope of success in today's labor market, individuals must demonstrate an ability to read and perform math operations at a reasonably high level. Those who cannot are unlikely ever to enjoy job security.

CSS views progress in fighting poverty – building strong, economically secure communities – through a concept of social inclusion. This includes the ability to earn family sustaining wages, to take advantage of opportunities for job advancement, and to participate in the civic life of the community and the city.

Our work is far from over, but through these reports, surveys, and policy briefs, we will stay committed to telling the stories and revealing the struggles of low-income New Yorkers. These surveys and other reports, cases, and briefs regarding workforce development, housing, and legal issues are available online at [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).

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Join the discussion on how we can improve the lives of low-wage workers by making your voice heard on our Turnstile blog at <http://turnstile.cssny.org/turnstile/>.

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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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