

## **VOTE – To Confront Our Jobs Disaster**

Tuesday is Election Day - five days to go before you can have a voice in the future of our city. Thousands of people will head to the polls before they go to work, while others will vote later in the day and unfortunately, there are still others who will not exercise their right to vote at all. The reasons to vote are innumerable; some say it's your God given right, others remind us that people in Third World countries stand in the heat and sun, in line for days to vote while others - particularly from the Civil Rights era died fighting for the right to vote, for all of us.

Now even the most unaware recognize that we're in the midst of a jobs disaster for the African-American community. But for our young people without a high school diploma - a life time of unemployment and under employment is almost a certainty, unless we have elected and appointed officials willing to take aggressive actions. Unemployment and job loss have reached a crisis of unprecedented dimensions. While no one candidate or any person for that matter has the magic pill, we do know that exercising the power of the vote is one way to contribute to the national dialogue on state policy and civic, political and social programs for New York.

Earlier today, Michelle Holder, Labor Market Analyst at CSS, testified before the NYC Council Committee on Community Development. The hearing, entitled, "New York City Poverty 2010: A Look at the Impact of the Recession on Communities, People, and the Administration's Poverty Reduction Plan," unveiled a startling portrait of life for the unemployed and jobless in New York City. Ms. Holder's testimony is contained herein, and is part of a larger report to be issued by the Community Service Society over the coming weeks that identifies the source of hardship for many New Yorker's, particularly African Americans and Latinos. The main reason for hardship is low labor participation, people who are no longer looking for work.

### **Who Bears the Brunt of the Recession?**

While no demographic group was able to completely escape the impact of the "Great Recession," data from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that in New York City African Americans, Latinos, youth, and those with less than a high school or equivalent diploma bear the brunt of the recession. There is also strong evidence that the older you are the longer it took for you to find a job if you lost one. An estimated 30+ percent of the unemployed in the city last year who previously held a job were unemployed for more than a year, and for those 55-64 years old it took on average nearly a year to find a job.

### **African American Men Hit the Hardest**

Once you begin to cross-hatch the categories of race, gender, and age, the most troubling finding of our labor report is what happens to African American men ages 16-24 in New York City due to the recession, especially those who lack a high school or equivalent diploma. While prior to the recession data indicates that the position of young black men in the city's labor market wasn't strong, data suggests that the impact of the recession was catastrophic for this demographic; last year black men 16-24 without a high school diploma were almost wholly pushed out of the city's labor force, and had an unemployment rate in the neighborhood of 75 percent.

## **Unemployment and Incarceration**

From a public policy perspective these findings are troubling because both high unemployment and the lack of a high school or equivalent diploma are factors associated with an increased risk for incarceration. In addition, African Americans are overrepresented in the U.S. prison population; while they represent approximately 13 percent of the U.S. population they constitute 43 percent of all persons incarcerated in federal or state prison or local jails, and the U.S. Department of Justice has projected that 30 percent of all African American men born in this century will be incarcerated at some point during their lives if current imprisonment rates remain unchanged. Finally, there is strong evidence that shows having a prison record is associated with subsequent poorer employment and wage outcomes. These issues are not solely relevant to young African American men without a high school diploma but critical for young Latinos without a high school diploma in New York City as well. After African Americans, Latinos have the next highest level of unemployment in the city as well as the next highest rate of incarceration nationally.

## **A Roadmap for a Better Future**

In order to mitigate the risks associated with incarceration the Community Service Society has in the past strongly advocated for both the importance of available, quality "General Educational Development" (G.E.D.) programs as well as transitional workforce programs that help prepare young people to make successful transitions into either college or permanent, full-time employment. However, in the current economic climate while it's clear the number one issue is jobs, getting politicians to commit resources for job creation, including transitional work programs, is a Herculean task. But the long run costs of neglecting what is happening to young men of color dwarfs what would be needed to provide a pathway to long term engagement in the city's workforce, a necessary element to avoid poverty and imprisonment.

So, on Tuesday, don't underestimate, the power of your vote and the politician's ability to connect the dots from the people who vote to resources for skills training, transitional work, and job creation and whatever you do, don't underestimate your ability to contribute to the national dialogue on the future of black and Latino youth, your future and the future of New York. VOTE.

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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 165 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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