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Depression inspired new idea for dropouts

This is the last of three editorials on new ways to deal with an old problem - dropouts.

Once teens drop out of school, what do they do? What do we - their communities - do?

What we've been doing, and what they've been doing, clearly doesn't work.

Despite decades of talking and studying, of get-tough and get-tougher, there is still a growing generation of "disconnected youths" inhabiting America's cities and towns, committing a disproportionate number of crimes, dying a disproportionate number of deaths.

New York's Community Service Society, one of the nation's oldest urban advocacy groups, describes them as between 16 and 24, out of school and unemployed. There are 200,000 in New York; the National League of Cities estimates the number between 5 million and 6 million nationwide - 2 percent of the population.

There are thousands of disconnected youths in Hampton Roads, millions more around the globe.

To grossly generalize, here's how it has worked for more than a generation: Kids drop out of school and can't find a job because they don't have a degree. They lose a place in their communities. They do something stupid or cruel or criminal and end up in trouble.

Society's current stance toward wayward teens, born of disgust and frustration, understandably focuses on punishment and segregation, an approach with tremendous costs. Worst of all, it abandons teenagers to their own failings and mistakes at a time when they're too young to discard.

While it is expensive to incarcerate somebody, it is also a payment for which society reaps no reward other than a criminal's absence. Once convicted, an already disconnected person has almost no chance of re-entering society in any meaningful fashion, ensuring that the high price must be paid again and again and again.

Beyond the practical cost of prisons and cops and courts, society also loses the talents and ambitions a young person once had, and from which we all might have benefited.

That's the problem and its costs. The solutions require effort of similar complexity and expense. Thankfully, there seems to be a growing weight behind such ideas.

The Business Roundtable - a group of the nation's top executives - and the Community Service Society got together last month to start agitating. The first proposals, according to Society President David Jones, included tax credits for businesses that hire disconnected youths and felons looking to turn their lives around.

More audacious by far, the CSS has begun lobbying for a federal program modeled on the old Civilian Conservation Corps, the quasi-military public-works program. It is a measure of the scope of the problem facing adrift adolescents that the Society has cast back to the New Deal for a model.

The skepticism will be loud. Especially in the past 30 years, suggestions for large-scale and expensive solutions run against a tide of self-sufficiency in a society resentful of transgression, even among its youth.

America and its cities, suburbs and towns no longer have that kind of luxury. The nation faces so many intractable and expensive problems awaiting simple sweat that a new civilian army of workers would have no shortage of projects.

A new Civilian Conservation Corps could go immediately to work rebuilding roads and bridges, constructing mass transit and rail. They could return to their original mission, cleaning up the environment, planting trees. For its money, the government builds a work force of young people with new skills.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in the 1933 Fireside Chat announcing his Civilian Conservation Corps, put it this way: "We are clearly enhancing the value of our natural resources and second, we are relieving an appreciable amount of actual distress."

Does anyone - even opponents of government solutions - think that the distress among today's urban dropouts, among today's disconnected youths, is any less than it was when FDR spoke those words?