

Connecting the Dots: Rising Homelessness and Chronic Joblessness

Posted: July 9, 2010

By David R. Jones

President and CEO, Community Service Society of New York

The Congress was unable to pass a new extension for unemployment insurance benefits before the July 4th holiday recess. The impact on New York and other large cities is immediate and devastating. Nearly two million Americans and tens of thousands of New Yorkers who have been out of work for over a half year or more (the average is 35 weeks) are now without any financial safety net.

The arguments used to stop the reauthorization were basically that unemployment insurance would be a disincentive for people going back to work! Perhaps this is reasonable in a full employment economy, where line after line of job listings piles up in the newspapers (or Monster.com), but not in the current situation, which has five applicants for every job, and 6.5 million people out of work for more than 26 weeks!

Blogging about how dysfunctional Congress has become in this age of partisanship has become its own art form, to which I have little to add. What I'm concerned about is the deathly silence from local elected officials and news media about what this means to the viability of cities like New York. Most of us have watched with growing concern at the explosive growth of homelessness in New York and are seriously baffled by the fact that New York policy makers are focused more on attempting to alter homeless shelter residents' behavior than to deal with the real driver of homelessness, which is job loss and loss of unemployment insurance.

Before this recent cutoff, the numbers were already staggering. In a snapshot issued by the Coalition for the Homeless at the end of May ([Basic Facts About New York City Homelessness](#)), homelessness in New York City had reached the highest levels since the Great Depression and for exactly the same reasons - too many people out of work with no way to pay the rent. Currently, nearly 40,000 people are homeless on any given night and over a 120,000 other adults and children slept in a shelter in fiscal year 2009.

The causal connection between losing a job and not being able to pay the rent, which on average exceeds \$500 per month in this city, should not seem to strain the intelligence of anybody. But the last big push in New York City to bring down the numbers of homeless

was a suggestion to charge them rent. Luckily that was met with such a chorus of raspberries that the administration withdrew the concept. But the mindset it reveals makes the possibility of even higher numbers of homeless almost a certainty, especially if not one city leader raises the danger down in D.C. and demands that Congress acts to save its urban centers.

Let me explain why I'm so agitated. Perhaps it's the heat wave, but what I'm really worried about is some of the findings of our last year's survey of low-income New Yorkers, [The Unheard Third 2009](#). One-third of New Yorkers live at or near the poverty line. More than half of these New Yorkers have less than \$500 in savings; 32 percent have zero. If you lose your income, you're out on the street in a month.

If the number of homeless in the shelter system balloons to 50,000 because of chronic joblessness and systematic cutbacks in jobless supports, it has implications for all New Yorkers, not just for those suffering without shelter or bleeding hearts like me. It would mean that instead of bringing our already sky high tax rates and parking tickets and you name it other little assessments down, we're going to have to plow more and more resources into what we all agree is an intolerable homeless shelter system.

Before the City of New York can begin doing something about this problem, we have to stop blaming individual behavior and start grappling with chronic joblessness. I'm not calling for coddling the poor; I'm calling for city leadership on the issue of chronic joblessness and lack of benefits to bridge the time that people are looking for jobs or acquiring skills that make them employable. Connecting the dots is something the city leadership is going to have to do, or else the problem that is enormous now will only get bigger and bigger each year.