

The New York Times

CITY ROOM

May 29, 2008, 5:55 pm

Answers About Fighting Poverty in New York, Part 2

By [THE NEW YORK TIMES](#)



David R. Jones

Following is the second set of answers from David R. Jones, the president of the [Community Service Society of New York](#). This week, he is answering questions about how New York City and its residents can fight poverty, and how to help low-wage, working Americans who are increasingly marginalized by the global economy.

Readers are invited to submit their questions about poverty in New York [in the comments box below](#). Please limit your comments to questions for Mr. Jones.

- Read [Mr. Jones's biography](#).
- Read [the first set of answers, May 28](#).

Q

What kind of a safety net is there for middle income people who are now affected by the higher costs of living? The working poor are still the ones who don't have enough money to pay for all the necessities (rent, food, medical, public transportation, electricity, daycare & laundry).

It seems that those who stay on public programs (forever & generational) get the benefits but that there is nothing for someone like me who is momentarily squeezed or in fear of being temporarily downsized/laid off, which could cause everything I paid for to crumble. In particular, I make 45 grand, am a single parent and every penny goes to the above mentioned articles with barely anything to save (\$200 a month takes a long time to save up 6 months

emergency funds) and also puts me over the edge for any tax break. My question: What about me?

— Posted by NYCBabe

A

We are fully aware of the many hardships that have fallen upon low to moderate income New Yorkers, individuals that you and my agency have come to define as the “working poor.” For six consecutive years Community Service Society has fielded its annual survey of low-income New Yorkers, [‘The Unheard Third.’](#) [pdf] To our knowledge it is the only survey of its kind in the country. Through our survey we have tracked the challenges New Yorkers like you face.

We have learned about the multiple hardships people are enduring as wages remain stagnant and there are meager savings in the household on which to draw. Families are being forced to choose between necessities such as rent, food, and utilities, for which a missed payment can cause great distress. Our Unheard Third survey revealed that a majority of respondents had less than \$200 in savings to fall back on.

There are several ways that these pressures could be alleviated upon the working poor. In New York City affordable, rental housing would go a long way toward reducing the financial strain upon low and moderate income residents. We also believe that renters deserve a property tax rebate similar to that enjoyed by homeowners. CSS also supports universal health care and is [advancing a plan](#) [pdf] for New York State that we believe will go a long way toward addressing escalating health care costs. We have also been very supportive of paid leave legislation and see it as an important benefit for workers who are often overwhelmed by the illness of a child or spouse. In addition, we are launching a financial literacy project to educate low and moderate income New Yorkers on how to better manage their finances. These measures, and others, are necessary to strengthen the economic standing of the working poor in our city.

Q

I keep reading statistics about the monetary value of education - most recently, that a college graduate makes approximately \$1 million more over his/her lifetime than a high school dropout.

What can be done to address the college readiness problem, as well as the multiple barriers many poor students face to successful college completion (lack of knowledge of the college process, difficulty filling out forms, few

college graduate role models, the need to contribute to the family income, etc.)?

— Posted by Morgan

A

I'm in complete agreement that a college education is perhaps the most effective way to improve life chances for those growing up in poverty; the difficulty is that we still have such massive deficits in our public schools that a focus on college without looking at what happens in K-12 preparation won't work. With a graduation rate of barely 50 percent in N.Y.C. and less than 10 percent of African-American and Latino young people graduating with a regents diploma – (the real minimum for having likely success in college level work) college has become a cruel joke for too many young people in N.Y.

But to wait for our public schools to be fixed before we can really make headway on improved outcomes isn't fair to the young people already in the pipeline who have not seen significant improvement in competent teaching, class size, or curriculum. So the city needs a 2 tiered strategy – continue to press for significant improvement in public education starting as early as possible and mounting a significant effort aimed at young people who are already at risk of dropping out or who are already out of the system.

Three years ago we released [a report](#) [pdf] that revealed that there are as many as 200,000 young adults, age 16-24 who are out of school and out of work in our city, so-called “disconnected youth.” Some of these young people have dropped out of school but some are high school graduates who have been unable to penetrate the labor market or are mired in low-wage, dead-end jobs. Nationally there are estimates of as many as 5 million disconnected youth.

One of the drivers of this population is the lack of substantive alternatives to an academic diploma for our high school students. We know that not every student is college bound nor should college be the only way in which an individual can have a successful life. To his credit Mayor Bloomberg has convened a task force on career and technical education (CTE), on which I serve. I am hopeful that a reinvigorated career and technical education curriculum aligned with the realities of our new global economy will give many young adults a real career pathway. Many of the jobs for which CTE graduates qualify are in high wage occupations with real economic mobility. After all, there is evidence that students in career and technical education programs are more inclined to enroll in college after benefiting from the discipline required to master their chosen field of technical expertise.

Q

Do you think that the poor have a “right” to live in New York City? In other words, why does the government spend so much money trying to keep poor people in New York City, as opposed to letting market forces decide who lives in NYC?

— Posted by Camilo Ortiz

A

The City needs the entire range of residents from wealthy to the working poor in order to maintain its unique position as the leading world city. The reason middle class and upper income people and businesses are attracted to New York is its restaurants, services, hotels, health care, the list goes on, all built on the hard labor of millions of the working poor from dishwashers, child care workers, to those who act as nurses’ aides in our hospitals, all are vital to making the city what it is for all of us. One of the main mistakes people make is assuming that the poor aren’t working. Our statistics show that the overwhelming number of the poor are working, either full time or part time. Of the remainder the largest cohort are the elderly poor or persons who are not working because of serious physical disability.

Q

Is it possible to eliminate poverty in the United States? There are many recent examples of how individuals can help to fight poverty, both in the United States and abroad, do individual efforts really impact poverty or is time and money more effectively used if given to agencies?

— Posted by Janice

A

In my personal view, no, but with enough political will we could reduce the numbers and suffering dramatically and insure that we have a safety net, which will provide some significant supports to protect particularly the young and elderly from being driven to conditions that are not acceptable in the developed world. This is not wishful thinking, a number of countries in Western Europe and Canada haven’t eliminated poverty, but have set up systems of health care, economic supports and housing that provides significantly better conditions than we have in the United States today.