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Answers About Fighting Poverty in New York, Part 3

By [THE NEW YORK TIMES](#)



David R. Jones

Following is the **third and final** set of answers from David R. Jones, the president of the [Community Service Society of New York](#). He has been 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. We are no longer accepting questions for this feature.

- Read [Mr. Jones's biography](#).
- Read [the first set of answers, May 28](#).
- Read [the second set of answers, May 29](#).

Q

I think it would be good to have a public discussion about the fact that quite a huge percentage of the homeless of New York are black people — many being black men — and also black families with children. Let's look at how the city is/has been failing its black people and what can we do about it already?

— Posted by Leslie Song

A

We know there is a racial dimension to poverty, and that certain problems disproportionately affect blacks and Latinos. Several years ago we issued a report that showed the extent of joblessness among black men in New York City. We were startled when we learned that almost half of all black men in the

city were jobless, totally severed from the labor market. Likewise, our research into disconnected youth — young adults 16-24 who are out of school and out of work — revealed that black and Latino youth were mostly removed from educational and economic opportunity. In a city where people of color are an emerging majority, such disparities do not bode well for the health of our city.

The first step toward resolving these disparities is acknowledging they exist. Then we must work toward preventive remedies that address structural inequities that give root to racial outcomes. It requires a willingness to move beyond our comfort zone and confront some of the institutional barriers that frustrate the efforts of blacks and Latinos to succeed. Today the manner in which race impacts opportunity is much more nuanced than some of the overt bias that existed in decades past and was obvious in its discriminatory effects. It requires a fuller understanding of how public policy falls upon different groups, as well as working or helping young black men especially to make a successful transition into adulthood. Despite these challenges we also have to acknowledge where progress has been made and, as generations did before us, not allow present circumstances to define our future.

Q

I am an 18-year-old, lifelong New Yorker who is moving to New Orleans to attend Tulane University, and I've always wanted to return to New York after college. But now I'm wondering if I'll even be able to return home, because the cost of living is completely ridiculous. When I was 14 we had to move from a large Greenwich Village apartment, where I had lived all of my life, to a much smaller apartment that my parents bought in Morningside Heights, because our rent in the Village was escalating at an astronomical rate and my parents didn't want to deal with the instability any longer. With the other boroughs' rents and housing costs catching up to Manhattan's, what will the citizens do? It seems New York is outpricing all of its citizens, and all of the little shops and restaurants that make this city what it is. Really, when will this stop? How much longer can the landlords and people who set the housing prices expect us to pay \$2,500 every month for a studio apartment?

— Posted by Caroline

A

Housing affordability remains one of the most significant challenges facing the working poor and young people like you who are just embarking upon their careers. We have a bona fide housing crisis in our city. Much of the problems stem from the loss of rental units in our city and escalating rents. The Community Service Society has released a report on rent burdens in New York City and its findings confirm our worst fears: the young and the poor, in

particular, are being priced out of the city. The conversion of affordable rental units to market rate rentals is also squeezing many low-income New Yorkers out of the city's housing market. You are correct in pointing out that what was once a Manhattan phenomenon has crept into the other boroughs. As a result, there are increasingly fewer options for the poor, middle-class residents and young people just starting out to find suitable housing.

The midterm to longterm solution is the creation of more affordable housing in our city, which is going to require city, state and federal subsidies, like an expanded [Section 8 program](#) and a reinvestment in public housing. Also, we need to challenge building owners who decide to take affordable units off the market by converting them to market rates, both to insure they live up to their obligations and also provide serious incentives for them to keep their units affordable. In the interim we do believe that renters deserve a property tax rebate similar in scope to that of homeowners. The latter would at least provide some relief to renters and hopefully channel some of the rebate back into the local economy.

Q

I am shocked by the venom [in so many of these comments](#). It is strange that so many of you blame the poor for the city's troubles, and feel that your taxes should not go to help them. The fact is, most of your tax bill goes to corporate welfare and to the upper classes who accrue many more tax breaks and benefits from the government than your average Joe or your poor neighbor (i.e., tax breaks for big mortgages, tax breaks on capital gains, more police protection, better schools and libraries than poor neighborhoods.) You can say they get more because they pay more, but that is wrong, too. The percentage of the average Joe's wage going to taxes is higher and more painful than that of the corporation or millionaire. And, the working poor person's incredibly low wage makes it possible for you and the rich man to get everything cheap. So the working poor are subsidizing *you*, while often being too poor to pay rent. The poor are visible because they have to be. But you are throwing your rage at the wrong people. Divide and conquer — this is how the ruling classes have always done it. Keep hating on your poorer brother, but you are a fool. And only by the grace of luck — that could be you so very easily. A good society is one that takes care of *all* of its people, not only its lucky ones. And then reaps the rewards of the diversity of experiences and backgrounds.

My question is, how can we have a more equitable system in NYC? How can we make sure that all the children are served equally, no matter their tax bracket? And how can we educate the average person about the living conditions of the poor - who have as much trite to be here as anywhere, so they are not blamed all the time?

A

There is, no doubt, a significant lack of understanding of the plight of the poor. We can take some solace in the fact that this seems to be a perennial problem in New York. My organization is more than 160 years old — in a review of our archives, the virulence of the attack on the poor of each city era, seems a constant whether Jewish, Italian or Irish. Despite that, all generations of New Yorkers of all classes have led to significant efforts to improve conditions for the poor. Too many people still subscribe to stereotypes that are the byproduct of misinformation and fall prey to the worst imagery of our fellow New Yorkers who live below the poverty line. Yet, when called upon to help, people in this city show an amazing capacity to empathize with those less fortunate than they and are generous in their outpouring of support, as is evidenced in the annual [Neediest Cases campaign](#) in The New York Times. When given the full complexities of poverty most people show a willingness to move beyond their preconceived ideas about the poor to search for a deeper understanding of the challenges facing low-income New Yorkers. One issue does seem to get through — based on our research, virtually all of the poor are working, disabled or the elderly — few if any are living on government handouts by choice!

There are several things that we know make a difference, particularly in the lives of children and adolescents. The first is education and the role it plays in affording economic mobility. It is why the condition of public education in our city is critical to the long-term prospects for poor children. We also know that housing provides stability and a sense of security, while health care minimizes the risk of chronic illness and promotes wellness. For adults, employment with wages and benefits that allow for a reasonable quality of life is an important step in creating a more equitable environment in our city. Lastly, there is perhaps no better way to educate our families, friends and neighbors than through personal outreach in a manner that encourages open and honest dialogue. We don't have to glamorize poverty, but we surely shouldn't demonize the poor.

Q

There seems to be a conflict of poverty-alleviation interests here. Many commenters deplore the development of the city and the destruction of the old, economically diverse New York as being causes of the plight of the poor.

This development is precisely what pays for the very expensive social programs that many of you demand, though. A bankrupt city can't redistribute wealth, subsidize housing or provide other services to the poor (whether

working poor or professionally unemployed). Without those profitable corporations against which many of you rail, the city would have no money with which to do anything for the poor.

Stopping development and/or making the city an even more expensive place to do business won't help the poor.

— Posted by JB

A

I agree that development is critical to the lifeblood of our city and recognize the important role that commerce plays in expanding opportunity across income groups. The old economically diverse New York of which you speak continues to exist today. The difference is that the global economy has stripped away a layer of jobs in our city that at one time provided workers with decent wages, benefits and a pathway to the middle class. The loss of those jobs, combined with escalating costs, has significantly increased the poor and near poor in New York City. It has also meant that as consumers many New Yorkers do not have the means to purchase the goods and services that contribute to the growth of the local economy. So, it's a double hit — the need to increase services to support the poor and the loss of consumer and tax dollars.

I don't view the private sector as our enemy. In fact, the business community has a critically important role to play in leveling the playing field. By providing good wage jobs, with benefits, businesses help stabilize communities and families. They also play an important role in expanding access to health care since most people are insured through their employer. New York's business community also contributes to the well being of our city through its philanthropic efforts targeting low-income populations; particularly in education and increasingly in efforts targeting skill development. Our aim is to engage the private sector in a manner suited to its strengths while acknowledging that poverty is a condition that demands our collective attention. We have no interest in making the cost of doing business in New York City prohibitive, but aspire to work with the private sector to improve the working poor's access to good wage jobs, including the expansion of unionized job opportunities.

Q

You advocate a renter's credit, similar to the homeowner's credit. But wouldn't such a credit benefit the people who pay the biggest rents (typically, people with a lot of money) more than ordinary New Yorkers? If there's going to be some sort of credit, maybe it should be fixed by family size or proportion of

income paid in rent, not total rent. Also, shouldn't it be refundable—so you can get it even if you don't pay much in taxes?

— Posted by PR

A

You raise an important issue. Scarce public resources should not be wasted by providing property tax relief or rebates to those who can reasonably afford rising housing and living costs. For low- to moderate-income renters and homeowners alike, we would recommend a “circuit breaker” model that targets benefits by household income on a sliding scale. New York State is currently considering reforms to the \$5 billion [STAR homeowner tax rebate program](#) that move in this direction. Low and moderate income renters should also be included because they pay property taxes through their rents. And, yes, the benefit should be in the form of a refundable tax credit.