

How We Avoid Dealing With Poverty

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When I was a second year law student, my advisor and fellow classmates convinced me I had to take "hard" law courses if I wanted to be a successful practitioner when I got out. Accounting for lawyers was the most practical course at Yale Law School I could imagine, so I signed up. I sat in the front row and lasted exactly one session. The course began with the professor stating that the basic introductory materials could be completely skipped over since everyone in the room knew them already. The class all concurred (with me seemingly the only one who silently disagreed) that we didn't have to focus on the elementary stuff. In the entire hour of torture I didn't understand one concept. At the end, I did what I had never done, asked to drop the course. It was going to be simply too hard for me. Give me constitutional law or even corporations, but not accounting.

What does this have to do with anything today? I have had a week where I've heard government officials and heads of foundations tell me that dealing with young African Americans and Latinos without a high school diploma and low reading and math skills was simply too difficult a problem to wrestle with. Young people going to community college, the very young just starting out, and retooling older workers was the only things they thought they could handle. These are all very progressive, decent, and committed people; committed to ending poverty. The trouble is that the ranks of those black and Latino young men and women without a credential have become such a large proportion of inner city urban America. And so many of the most basic low-paying jobs are increasingly requiring a high school credential that we not only can forget about diminishing urban poverty over the next decade, we may see it become more entrenched than ever if we don't confront this population.

As I mentioned, I recognize when things are just too hard, but the steady disinvestment in basic education and skills development in virtually all of the public schools serving poor black and Latino young people is now coming home to roost. The federal stimulus bills and the jobs bills currently being considered by Congress do virtually nothing to address the problem. Whether it's tax credits for employers to hire back workers or efforts to retrain displaced workers or infrastructure projects that only assist highly skilled construction workers, nothing does much for the legions of young people in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Detroit who have no work history and are a long way from getting their high school diploma.

The large foundations have been particularly resistant in their approach to breaking cycles of poverty. They focus on the very young or on community colleges as the way out. In both cases, success is much easier. The very young flower, as Geoff Canada has shown in the Harlem Children's Zone, when given enriched educational opportunity and family support. When young people with or near a high school diploma are supported in the community college system, they make it. My problem is that for every individual we help with these approaches, just as many, if not more, join the ranks of those without a credential and without work.

Now is the time that American cities desperately need transitional jobs programs which focus on public works employment married with serious skills development - for years, not months. Summer youth employment programs, which primarily serve in-school youth, won't cut it when urban high schools routinely have a dropout rate hovering around 50 percent. It may all be too hard, but the shape of a bleak urban landscape is fast emerging, and the longer we wait to deal with it the greater the burden for young people involved and for the rest of America confronting a world that is fast moving past us in providing basic skills to all their people and gaining significant competitive advantage.