

## Mayor's Initiative to Aid Black and Latino Youth

*"There is nothing more dangerous than to build a society with a large segment of people in that society who feel that they have no stake in it; who feel that they have nothing to lose. People who have a stake in their society protect that society, but when they don't have it, they unconsciously want to destroy it."*

*Martin Luther King Jr.*

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Thousands of young black and Latino men are disconnected from the economic, educational, and civic life of New York City. More than 173,000 youth in the city – 16 to 24 years olds - are neither in school nor in the labor force; the overwhelming number are black and Latino. Unemployment for the city's young black men (16–24 year-olds) without a high school diploma was more than 50 percent in 2009-2010. And the New York City public high school graduation rate for black and Latino males is about 50 percent compared to 70 percent for white and Asian males.

Through our own research and policy recommendations, the Community Service Society (CSS) has continually attempted to call attention to these issues and what they mean for all New Yorkers. Our research is a critical tool that CSS uses to increase our understanding of conditions that drive poverty as we advocate for public policy and programs that will improve the economic standing of low-income New Yorkers. "Unemployment in New York City during the Recession and Early Recovery: Young Black Men Hit the Hardest" (December 2010), "The Unheard Third: A Profile of Low-Income Latino New Yorkers" (October 2009), and "The Unheard Third 2009: Job Loss, Economic Insecurity, and a Decline in Job Quality" (May 2010) are a sample of CSS research that called attention to this crisis.

### **A Bold Initiative**

Earlier this month, Mayor Bloomberg took a bold and unique step forward in underscoring the need to help over 300,000 black and Latino young men in our city in the areas of education, employment, health, and the criminal justice system. The focus on the economic recovery and other policy matters has meant that these issues have not received the attention they deserve from our policy makers, business leaders, and government officials. As a result, a large segment of our population – hundreds of thousands of black and Latino youth – are at risk of becoming a "lost generation" with all the economic and social problems that come with it.

With his announcement of this campaign, the mayor acknowledged that the city has a responsibility to help black and Latino young men obtain job skills, complete their education, and choose paths other than those that lead to incarceration. To do so, in these harsh economic times, the mayor is relying on spending nearly \$130 million - \$30 million from the mayor's own foundation, \$30 million from billionaire George Soros, and the remainder paid for by the city.

We applaud the mayor's leadership in making this issue an administration policy priority going forward, committing his own personal resources in the effort, and elevating the public discourse on disconnected youth. For the mayor to try to come up with remedies and put his own resources and his personal stature

on the line is a major move forward. Specifically, he has singled out rethinking the city's approach to probation, expansion of youth programs at public housing sites, and GED preparation.

Some criticism of the mayor's initiative in the New York media has referred to earlier efforts that have failed to provide solutions to these problems. But the crisis is too great to wring our hands and say there is little we can do. Undoubtedly, any effort must take into account the breakdown of families of color and the great many female-headed families. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we be invested in efforts that move disconnected youth onto a path toward responsible social behavior and economic independence.

The problem of disconnected youth does not exist in a vacuum. It is but one reflection of our choices as a society. The growth in the size of the working poor and those now who are jobless – in the city and the nation – is an indictment of our tax, educational, and business policies. They are choices made by government and the private sector and, as such, they can be changed to reflect a more democratic and supportive society.

It is hoped that this initiative will approach the problem with a variety of ways to help black and Latino youth. Some have little education and need help in literacy and numeracy in order to acquire job skills. Others are being held back only because of a felony record. They can get all the job training they need, but many employers simply won't hire the formerly incarcerated. Also, job losses in construction and manufacturing because of the recession hurt young people looking for that first job.

### **Areas of Reform**

We hope that the city's efforts will lead to a robust discussion of other areas that deserve policy reform. These include using public assistance through the Human Resources Administration as a way to reconnect youth to education; using federal housing funds under a requirement known as Section 3 to further expand job/training opportunities for youths in public housing and Section 8 voucher-assisted housing, where unemployment has tripled since the onset of the recession; and taking these much-needed initiatives to the scale required to have a truly significant impact on the scope of the problem.

We look forward to supporting Mayor Bloomberg's campaign as well as providing ongoing research and direct service models on these critically important issues that will define the future of hundreds of thousands of young black and Latino men in our city. The success or failure of this initiative will have a significant impact on the lives of all New Yorkers.

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**David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).**

**From the New York Amsterdam News**  
August 18 – August 24, 2011