

## 40 Years Later: New York City on the Edge

Posted: July 20, 2011

By David R. Jones

President and CEO, Community Service Society of New York

When I was teenager in the late 60s, I was sent by my parents to escort my sister Peggy to the subway station at Fulton and Nostrand in BedStuy, Brooklyn. It was just after two nights of rioting following the assassination of Martin Luther King. The streets were empty, sirens everywhere, stores vandalized, and groups of police on every corner. As one of the least athletic teenagers on my block, my ability to protect my sister was at best marginal -- but I was committed to trying.

Those riots were over 40 years ago and are long since forgotten. The national Kerner Commission inquiry into why riots broke out in cities across America is hard to find even using Google (at least for an inept searcher like me). The Commission [report](#) emphasized widespread racism, lack of jobs and educational opportunity, and residential segregation as key factors in the disturbances nationwide.

Why raise the specter of civil disorder now? Barack Obama is president and, plainly, virulent racism that was routine in the north and south of the 1960s is an exception rather than the rule in today's America. Economic opportunity for those with an education and skills, even in the wake of the Great Recession, continues to grow.

But after the release of more than a half dozen reports by my organization, the Community Service Society of New York, over the past few years, I am now convinced that given the present trajectory of the city's economy, civil order is going to break down, possibly in riot, but almost certainly in increased gang activity and crime.

While the continuing effects of racism play a part in the problem, it's now not the main issue we're facing. This is a problem that has spread to every city and locality in the country: a major transformation in the availability of work for those who lack critical skills and an oversupply of workers seeking low-wage work. In places like New York, Newark, LA, and Chicago, it's a potential disaster.

The 60s riots were driven by young black men without hope or income; the urban problems of this decade are about black and Latino young men lacking skills and education and not connected to work. The numbers in this category in New York City are staggering. Even before the Great Recession, the city had more than 175,000 young people ages 16 to 24 neither working

nor in school ("[Out of School, Out of Work, Out of Luck: New York City's Disconnected Youth](#)," CSS report, January 2005).

New York, like other major cities, has been burdened with exceptionally high school dropout rates for black and Latino males. Nearly 1.3 million persons of working age in the city [lack a high school diploma or GED](#). A generation ago that was not such a big deal, but with structural changes in the economy which are demanding ever increasing levels of literacy and math skills and the exceptionally high levels of unemployment in New York and other major cities, black and Latino men without a high school diploma have been effectively kicked out of the city's economy.

In a recent report by our labor economist ("[Unemployment in New York City during the Recession and Early Recovery -- Young Black Men Hit the Hardest](#)," CSS report, December 2010), we found that only one in four black men in the city, ages 16 to 24, had a job (although two in four of the group were enrolled in school). Similar numbers are true for Latino young men, particularly Puerto Ricans. This has long-term implications for the city, since research seems to indicate that if you don't have a strong attachment to the labor market by age 25, your chances of escaping poverty over your lifetime are diminished.

The stakes for every New Yorker are very high. It's been argued that the riots of the 60s had a negative impact on many communities right through to the present -- white flight, but, perhaps more seriously, the flight of the black middle class along with their political and economic clout, and further concentrations of poverty in some neighborhoods. A serious breakdown in civil order in many city communities could be devastating. While the Manhattan real estate market is in recovery, property values in many outer borough communities are still in trouble. With large numbers of homes threatened by foreclosure and significant instability in the city, this could make a housing recovery problematic.

But immediately the question emerges as to what the city and its leadership can do about a problem that has much to do with changes in the national economy, particularly given the impasse on taxation and expenses which make national initiatives to deal with chronic unemployment in urban areas a virtual nonstarter.

Here are some of my suggestions.

(1) Don't make it worse: The city's police department has stepped up a stop and frisk policy that has led to virtually every black and Latino male being stopped at random in certain communities. About 88 percent of the [183,326 stop and frisk encounters](#) recorded from January through March 2011 resulted in neither an arrest nor a summons, according to figures the NYPD released. About 84 percent of those stopped by police were black or Latino.

This is like watching a three year-old toss matches at a gasoline can. Policing can and should be tough, but it should go back to focusing on gang activity with cops who actually get to know the young people on their beat.

(2) Educate the unemployed: Every young person who comes into contact with government and who lacks a high school diploma or job skills should be connected to a GED course or job training, whether that's a young person applying for public assistance or one who is incarcerated. Making sure they have the requisite skills to get jobs when the economy improves should be the city's mission.

(3) Create job opportunities whenever we can: We've just seen the [reduction of summer youth employment slots](#) from 52,000 to 28,000, with well over a 100,000 applications. Summer youth employment is a good way for young people to build job skills. And we are missing out on opportunities to prepare young people to support our economy in the future.

The government and the private sector can obviously do better. The city reactivating the fire department's cadet program -- discontinued in 2002 -- designed to increase the number of black and Latino firefighters would be a start. Better enforcement by the government of Section 3 of the 1968 Housing Act, which requires that HUD funds be used to maximize job and training opportunities for low-income residents, is another place where much needed employment can be provided.

The political leadership gave lip service to efforts to restore some jobs, but more attention has been given to bike lanes than to jobs for the unemployed young people of the city. I hope we don't have to be reading Kerner Commission II in the near future.