

Summertime, and the Living (Won't) be Easy

Posted: May 28, 2010

By David R. Jones

President and CEO, Community Service Society of New York

We Americans have a very rosy picture of summer, particularly how wonderful it is for children, adolescents and teenagers; a time when they can cut loose, laze around, lay on the grass and frolic at the beach. But that picture has nothing to do with the reality for young people in urban areas during this great recession. I testified earlier this week at the Congressional Joint Economic Committee of the Congress along with other experts on employment and youth. ([Video here.](#)) We represented a broad cross section of ideology and debated appropriate solutions, but there was near universal agreement that we were in the midst of a major crisis among young people trying to get a foothold in the labor economy. National unemployment rates for young adults 16-24 are at an all time high of 19.6%. The situation for young men is worse nearly 23% unemployment, African-American's 33% and Latinos 24%.

For New York City these national statistics paint a grim picture - nothing like a summer of sun and fun. Because the Recession has not only brought a catastrophic level of youth unemployment, it has also led to targeted cutbacks in services for this same demographic. Politicians of all parties have promised no new taxes even on the super wealthy, but have made no such commitment to avoid cutting programs for the urban poor. So cuts for parks and recreation, youth services, GED preparation and testing, all are slated for massive reductions. These programs are vital to the vast majority of New York City's young adults, who can't waltz off to the Hamptons or Cape Cod. They're in a City, where households at or below the poverty line (a third of New Yorkers) have little or no cash reserves. In last year's CSS "Unheard Third " survey nearly two-thirds of low income New Yorkers reported having less than \$1,000 in total cash reserves and 7 out of 10 low-income Latinos reported having less than \$500 in reserves. That means young people between 16-24 are facing the prospects of a summer with virtually no money in their households, diminished job opportunities and a sharp decline in park and recreational options.

It's an article of faith in many political quarters that because of over-policing New York's crime rate will always go down. I'm not convinced; there are nearly 150,000 young people not in work and in school, augmented by thousands more who are off for a "carefree" summer vacation, with no summer jobs and sharply curtailed recreational services. This City has to be very careful that we don't create a tinder box for social disorder after years of relative calm. I don't like the notion of making statements merely to scare people, but for the first time in decades I am concerned that things are seemingly coming together badly in

a way I haven't seen in a long time. Even worse, we are missing out on opportunities to prepare young people to support our economy in the future.

So what could the City do about it? I have some modest suggestions: If we can't fund all parks and recreation efforts, we should immediately prioritize those serving the poorest communities, with the highest rates of youth unemployment. The City should immediately begin to curb the police department's incendiary stop and frisk practices aimed at black and Latino young people to avoid confrontations that could spread. The City should begin immediate discussions with all the cultural institutions that it supports to allow free admission to NYC residents, particularly young people, at least during the summer. This should particularly focus on zoos and botanical gardens, and should also include all our major museums. The cost of access has risen so dramatically that it's virtually impossible for a young adult without a job to even consider going to most of the City's cultural institutions, and the free day and hurdles to free admission basically provide a 100% bar to this group. And finally each city agency should be asked to come up with lists of suggested policies to support young people through what's going to be a very difficult summer.

The divide in income in New York City is at its highest level of all time. I regret that many in the City's leadership have virtually no clue as to what challenges youth in poor neighborhoods are facing (which might have been tolerable when the economy was booming) and at least giving some possibility of jobs and recreation for young people in the South Bronx and Brownsville. Now, in this recession, everyone has to reevaluate how this "Summertime" is going to play out, or else we all may be shocked when things don't work out.