



Latino Youth and the Specter of Joblessness

By David R. Jones
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According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the national unemployment rate last month for Latino youth – ages 16 to 19 – was 27.5 percent. The recession and jobless recovery have been devastating for young people trying to break into the labor market.

One reason for this statistic is that as those in higher paying jobs are laid off, many move to low-wage employment to bridge the gap to a better payday. In doing so, these experienced workers are pushing young people out of employment, out of a first time job, and out of the labor market.

The result could be long-term unemployment for young Latinos. And even when they find work, their joblessness at a young age is likely to haunt them across a lifetime of underpaid employment. Studies show that having a successful labor market experience by age 25 is an important predictor of one's chances of future economic success.

Among the job sectors hardest hit by the recession were construction, manufacturing, and the retail trade, where many Latinos have historically found work.

What we are seeing in New York City and across the country is a generation of young people who are disconnected to either school or work. The problems of these disconnected youth could easily get overlooked. There were about 4 to 5 million disconnected young Americans – age 16 to 24 who were neither in school nor in the work force – before the recession. The numbers are likely to be higher today. A series of reports by the Community Service Society revealed that nearly 200,000 young New Yorkers are disconnected; over 40 percent are Latino youth, mainly young men.

Latinos now comprise the largest share of the city's population under age 25. So it is of utmost importance for the future of New York City that they receive policy attention. Latinos are a diverse group. There are important cultural, economic, and even linguistic distinctions among people broadly described as "Latino." Any application of public policies focusing on Latino youth must take this factor into account.

There are policies that can help to confront and alleviate the crisis of unemployment of Latino youth. We need to focus on school to work transitions for young people not on a college track and subsidized jobs in the public and private sectors to give young people a second chance to connect with work.

There is also a need to strengthen career and technical education programs with better funding and certified teachers working in classes that are serious about moving young people from school to a job or an apprenticeship. We should also consider expanding alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent youthful offenders. A prison sentence for a young person is a lifetime stigma that often leads to a form of

“civil death” after incarceration – no job, no money, no place to live, no health care. All too often, it’s a ticket back to prison.

HUD officials in Washington and New York should be working to maximize employment opportunities at public housing facilities through the Section 3 provisions of the 1968 Housing Act. The unemployment rate for public housing residents has nearly tripled since 2008 when the recession struck the city, rising from 10 percent to 27 percent by 2010.

These sorts of policies should be considered across the country. If nothing is done to reverse this problem, we could see the numbers of disconnected youth double or triple in the near future. If this happens, Latino communities all over the country will be devastated, undermining gains made by Latino families in better economic times in the 1990s. We will witness the growth of a huge underclass of young people without jobs, without hope, and with all the problems accompanying the long-term unemployed and unemployable.

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