

New York's Youth Need Jobs, Not Stop-and-Frisk

Government has a tendency to address problems belatedly and with funding and foresight that are far short of what it would take to do the job properly. A recent example is the state's NY Youth Works program, a new initiative that focuses on the crisis of the lack of jobs for urban young people.

Many young people in urban areas lack a decent education that could provide them with the skills to get and hold jobs in our labor market. Possessing a high school diploma or its equivalent is important; last year in the nation those without a high school diploma had an unemployment rate of 14.1 percent compared to 8.9 percent for workers overall in the U.S. Young people of color are especially affected. Only about half of black and Latino students graduate from high school. The official unemployment rate for blacks 16 to 19 years olds nationally is over 40 percent.

While unemployment fell marginally across the country, it is up in New York City. Young people, in particular, have been hard hit by joblessness. The unemployment rate in New York City for 16 to 24 year olds stood at 23 percent in 2010.

The NY Youth Works program, a proposal of Governor Cuomo's, is funded with \$62 million for job training and \$25 million in tax credits for businesses that hire unemployed youth. It is to the governor's credit that he has taken this step targeting the chronic issue of youth unemployment, made even worse by the recent recession. But these funds are for one year and are to be used statewide. A press release put out by the governor's office last month announced that businesses would be creating jobs for 2,900 youths, with perhaps another 1,000 to participate in job training.

Small Scale Program

New York City alone has about 170,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. These "disconnected youths," as we term them, are unprepared for the future in the midst of the worst economy in our lifetimes. Here in New York City, the overwhelming percentages of disconnected youths are black and Latino men.

And for too many of our black and Latino youth, their main contact with government is not through meaningful job-readiness or training programs, but as the all-too-familiar targets of dubious stop-and-frisk policies. In 2011, 684,330 New Yorkers -- the vast majority black and Latino men -- were stopped by police. Of that number, nine out of ten were not arrested, nor did they receive summonses.

Until we get serious about scaling up programs like the governor's to the true need, while also scaling back ineffective and discriminatory stop-and-frisk policies that scar entire communities, we will come nowhere near what is needed to make a dent in this problem.

Initiatives to connect youth to jobs and educational opportunities do not always require large outlays of funds. By increasing GED programs and other efforts to connect individuals who did not complete high school to education, training, and jobs we are putting young people on a path to economic stability. This is an area where the city and state can help each other.

Also, summer youth employment, which has been drastically cut back in recent years, must be increased. If the city cannot find funds for summer youth employment, then the state must step in. Studies have shown that if people are not employed by age 25, their chances of finding sustaining employment for the rest of their lives are greatly diminished.

There is a need to strengthen career and technical education (CTE) 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 – and a likely trip back to prison.

Just as the governor took credit for closing 3,800 prison beds and 370 juvenile facility beds, he can show further leadership by ensuring that time spent in prison is meaningful. If prisoners have increased access to higher education and enhanced vocational programming, there is a greater chance that after serving their time they will be in a better position to find decent employment.

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

Superfluous Lives

A few months ago, an op-ed column in *The New York Times* by a Columbia University professor set out the possibility that millions of Americans, unable to find work during and after the recession, will be jobless throughout their lives – people who do not have a job and never will have a job, who are superfluous to our economy and the nation. This is not a fantasy; it has happened in Britain, where whole families – many in the north of England - live their entire lives on the dole.

What we need is a campaign for jobs for youth that matches the anti-smoking campaigns we see on the national and local scenes. Unless we have the political will to confront this growing problem, we will be creating a permanent underclass of millions of Americans – along with the accompanying damage of long-term joblessness, higher welfare and prison costs, a spike in homelessness, and a lower quality of life for all of us.

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