



No Relief for Low-Income Latino Families

By David R. Jones

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The recession officially ended in June 2009; just ask any economist. But for many low-income groups across America, the recovery ostensibly going on has brought little or no relief. Last month, the national unemployment rate for Latinos was 13.0 percent, showing little change from the preceding months. But this number does not account for the many Latino workers who have given up looking for work and are no longer considered by the government to be a part of the labor force.

Here in New York City, almost half of low-income Latinos have experienced multiple hardships in the past year. For example, 29 percent report falling behind in rent or mortgage payments in the last year, 28 percent say they were unable to fill a prescription because of lack of money or insurance, and 27 percent lost a job. One in four Latinos report an increase in their health care costs; nearly one in five (18%) say they often skipped meals because they did not have enough money to buy food.

These findings are from the latest Community Service Society (CSS) survey conducted in the summer of 2010. CSS's annual survey of low-income New Yorkers is called "The Unheard Third" because the needs and concerns of the one-third of the city's population who live in low-income households are often ignored or overlooked by public officials, policy makers, and the media.

More than three in four low-income Latinos rate the economic situation in their communities as just fair or poor, including over one-third who say it is poor. So it is not surprising that 55 percent of low-income Latino respondents cited unemployment or the economy when asked to name the biggest problem facing New York City. When asked what government benefit would be most important in helping them and their families get ahead, low-income Latinos most commonly cite job training and health insurance for themselves and their family.

While 22 percent of low-income Latinos report that they are unemployed, nearly two-thirds of them say they are actively looking for work. Their prospects are grim. Labor reports continually show that there are five to six unemployed workers for every job opening. This is especially damaging for young Latinos who are seeking to enter the labor market for the first time. Nationally, nearly one-third of Latinos ages 16 to 19 are unemployed, forecasting a harsh future for Latino communities.

For those still working, the fear of losing a job is pervasive. Sixty-three percent of low-income Latino respondents are worried that they or someone in their household will lose a job in the next year.

Public officials in New York City, citing job increases, assert that the recession was not as long or devastating for the city as it was in other parts of the country. But most recent job hiring in the city have come in health care and restaurant and hotel industries, where jobs are likely to be low wage with little or no job benefits. As a result, many New Yorkers are working for poverty wages.

Unless there is a concerted effort to produce decent-paying jobs both in the public sector – infrastructure and environmental areas - and in emerging industries such as energy and technology – the effects of this recession will cast a shadow over the lives of an entire generation of Americans, much as the Great Depression of the 1930's. But this would come at a time when America is being challenged by a new, global economy. If our industrial base and educational system do not produce a working class that can meet this challenge, then the quality of life of all Americans will suffer.

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 165 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.