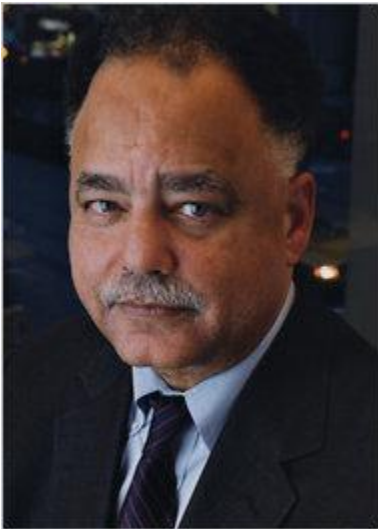


December 05, 2011

Poverty in America: A Conversation With David R. Jones, President, Community Service Society of New York



(On Thanksgiving Day, the New York Times noted in a lead editorial that "one in three Americans -- 100 million -- is either poor or perilously close to it." The editors at the Times based that assertion on an analysis of recent U.S. Census Bureau data. Two days earlier, D.C.-based [Wider Opportunities for Women](#) published an even higher figure -- 45 percent -- as the percentage of the nation's residents lacking economic security. Whatever the exact number, it's clear that millions of Americans are stranded on islands of economic desolation marked by failing schools, sub-standard housing, inadequate healthcare services, and rampant crime.)

Struggling to make ends meet has been a characteristic of life in the United States since its founding. Recent Census figures suggest, however, that the number of Americans living in poverty has reached "an historic high of 46.2 million." According to [another study from the Brookings Institution](#), the number of Americans living in communities where poverty is "extreme" -- neighborhoods in which at least 40 percent of the population is poor -- soared by one-third between 2000 to 2009. Brookings, which based its study on 2000-2009 income data from the census, notes that the increase over the last decade erases all the economic gains of the 1990s.

Regular contributor Michael Seltzer recently spoke with David R. Jones, president of the [Community Service Society of New York](#) and one of the nation's leading advocates on behalf of the poor, about his thoughts on poverty in America and what the growing ranks of low-income New Yorkers can do to escape their predicament.

Michael Seltzer: According to a Brookings Institution study released on November 3, the number of Americans living in poverty has grown by more than a third over the past decade. In New York City alone, 1.6 million people -- approximately one in five New Yorkers -- are living below the poverty line. What are the consequences of that for New York?

David Jones: Those statistics are terrifying on a number of levels. The poverty level is the same in Manhattan as in rural Mississippi. However, the housing costs in rural Mississippi, obviously, are dramatically lower than in New York. A family of three can buy a lot more goods and services in Mississippi on \$17,500 dollars a year than can a family living in Manhattan.

MS: What is the role of the Community Service Society in addressing the economic problems faced by low-income New Yorkers?

DJ: Throughout our hundred-and-seventy-year history, poverty has been our exclusive focus. Our founders perceived poverty in urban areas as a potential danger to civic order. They understood that as more and more people drift into poverty, key elements of the economy and our democracy are undermined. They believed strongly that if you didn't provide low-income people with economic opportunity, you were endangering the civic fabric. And in a multi-ethnic city like New York, keeping the civic fabric in good repair is vital. For those reasons and others, we have always taken a three-pronged approach to our work: research, service, and public education.

MS: What accomplishments can you point to to illustrate the importance of that work?

DJ: Our approach is to put forward unassailable arguments based on serious research, statistical evidence, and cost effectiveness. Through our research, we give ammunition to policy makers and elected officials who are confronted with what would otherwise be an avalanche of anecdotal information. At other times, our moral voice is a much-needed contribution to the conversation. Our intent is to shape public policies and encourage affordable interventions that promote better lives for all New Yorkers.

MS: Do we have the necessary knowledge to effectively address the problems of people living in poverty today?

DJ: Absolutely. For example, CSS focuses on employment strategies that are grounded in today's fiscal realities. Beginning in 2004, we issued a groundbreaking series of reports on black male unemployment and disconnected youth. Seven years later, we find that the problems facing both poor and working people in America are universal and affect people of all colors.

For many people, making the transition into the world of work is neither simple nor easy. This is especially true for young people or people who have been incarcerated. Many need a GED and job-preparedness training. They need help in securing an actual job that pays a living wage. Once they are working, they typically require additional support such as day care and benefits like paid sick leave. And as they establish themselves in the workforce, they need opportunities to climb a career ladder within a trade. We also believe that low-wage workers need the collective bargaining power of a union to ensure that they receive adequate health care, access to reliable credit, and other benefits that the rest of us take for granted.

MS: How important is a solid education?

DJ: It's vital. Each year, after having failed them in elementary and junior high school, we fail to graduate hundreds of thousands of young people from high school. As a result, there's an enormous cohort of young people who lack a high school credential. In New York City alone, over eight hundred thousand working-age adults lack a high school diploma. That's why we are now focusing on helping young people secure their GED.

MS: What argument do you think is most effective in galvanizing public support for pro-poor policies?

DJ: Simply this: In New York, and across the country, we are falling way behind in terms of our economic competitiveness. We are at risk of turning into a second-rate power within a generation. It is a huge cost to our economy when we fail to provide a top-notch education to all Americans. That's the case that advocates for the poor across the country should be making to their elected officials.

MS: What is your greatest hope at the moment?

DJ: My greatest hope is that our business and political leaders recognize that we cannot afford to fall any further behind other global economic powers. We need to put America back on track. Things that might provide a path out of poverty for the working poor and their children are not being addressed with the intensity that is needed to really have a measurable impact on the problem. We need to work together to create a groundswell in support of lifting the most disadvantaged among us out of poverty.

MS: Many nonprofits are fighting the good fight on behalf of the nation's poor. What message can you share with those organizations?

DJ: It's not enough anymore for human service agencies to simply provide services. They must educate the public and advocate for better policies for their constituents. Providing services alone cannot and will not make a lasting impact on the problem. We all need to draw on our own firsthand experiences to advocate forcefully for the critical interventions that we know work.

MS: Where is the funding for this kind of advocacy work going to come from when organizations already are suffering the loss of state and city contracts? One organization I visited a few weeks ago said it had to disband its advocacy efforts due to funding cutbacks. Can foundations play a role here?

DJ: Absolutely. We must make a stronger case to foundation officers that their grant dollars can drive change, real change, when earmarked for advocacy efforts.

MS: Do you see this moment as ripe for a new social movement that puts the concerns of the poor front and center in the public discourse?

DJ: Yes, I do. Its outlines aren't yet clear, but I believe it will emerge sooner rather than later. But to be successful, it will have to provide a meeting ground for people with diverse life experiences.

MS: I hear a sense of hope in your voice.

DJ: America's youth inspire in me a sense of confidence in the future of our country. When I talk to them, certainly in urban areas like New York City, I hear a yearning. They're excited by new ideas, new investments, new technology, and they want everyone to share in the bounty of this great country.

-- *Michael Seltzer*