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Answers About Fighting Poverty in New York

By [THE NEW YORK TIMES](#)



David R. Jones

Following is the first set of answers from David R. Jones, the president of the [Community Service Society of New York](#). This week, he is answering questions about how New York City and its residents can fight poverty, and how to help low-wage, working Americans who are increasingly marginalized by the global economy.

Readers are invited to submit their questions about poverty in New York [in the comments box below](#). Please limit your comments to questions for Mr. Jones.

- Read [Mr. Jones's biography](#).

Q

Everyone knows that the cost of living in New York is exceedingly high. Some who might be relatively well-off in other parts of the country struggle to get by here. When we look at addressing poverty in New York, should the emphasis be on mitigating the high cost-of-living — especially housing costs — or on measures to increase wages, like living wage laws?

— Posted by JP

A

In my opinion, there is very little that can be done to stem the high cost of living in New York; however increased wages is one of the most significant

ways to address this issue. You are right in pointing out the challenges of living in a city where costs are so high.

It is tough enough in periods of relative economic stability but when there is a downturn, such as we are presently experiencing, we begin to see the fallout. Clearly more must be done to preserve affordable housing and create new affordable rental units. More and more we are seeing the displacement of renters from units that are being converted to market rate units. The distance between job and home is important so we should not be surprised when our local economy suffers as workers are pushed to the outer edges of the region in search of affordable housing.

Improved wages and workplace benefits, such as paid sick leave and health care, are also necessary if we are serious about creating more humane conditions for poor New Yorkers. A perfect example is the plight of private security guards, a group we studied at the behest of Local 32BJ of the [Service Employees International Union](#). We were shocked when we learned of the meager wages being paid to individuals who protect some of valuable real estate in the world and who, in this post 9/11 environment, are the first line of defense against possible terrorist attacks on commercial and residential buildings. Most of these individuals are without health care and cannot take a day off with pay; meaning they often work while sick though expected to protect property and human life. Our efforts on behalf of private security guards have reinforced my belief that for many occupations unions are a conduit to a more equitable labor market. Read the report, [“Shortchanging Security: How Poor Training, Low Pay and Lack of Job Protection for Security Guards Undermine Public Safety in New York City”](#) [pdf].

Q

There are so many nonprofits dedicated to fighting poverty that waste both private and taxpayer dollars and never lead to any real results. How can nonprofits be held accountable for their lack of results?

— Posted by Risa

A

As a long-term executive in the nonprofit sector, I should immediately come to its defense, but I share your concern about the nonprofit record in dealing with urban poverty. Part of the problem is that over the past two decades there has been a massive transfer of programming for the poor from the government to non-profits. The assumption was that nonprofits could do the job better and cheaper. The record is decidedly mixed. Nonprofits have been starved of adequate resources, denied cost of living increases and lack infrastructure.

Moreover, the assumption that tax deductible dollars from foundations and individuals would provide significant support of charities serving the poor, hasn't materialized. The trend in major giving tends to go to universities, and large cultural institutions rather than the small or midsize nonprofits, serving the poor, based in poor communities. It has left many non-profits severely underfunded dealing with growing problems for the poor, particularly after "welfare reform." To your final assertion, I believe that the "solution" would be more resources to allow nonprofits to provide adequate pay and training to its workers — along with heightened accountability and metrics to insure that quality services are being provided. My own experience in this sector has driven me to impose controls on our work. It is one of the reasons the Community Service Society engages in rigorous evaluations of our programs to make certain that outcomes meet our expectations for performance.

Q

What effect is the growing income gap and division between the super-rich and the impoverished having on the daily lives of those in poverty? Mayor Bloomberg has said that he does not support a "millionaire tax" because these residents will simply move. I disagree. New York is a unique place and a place that has enabled many of these people to build their wealth because of the superior public sphere that the city creates. How can we convince elected officials and the very rich that a city with less poverty is in their best interests?

— Posted by Ptro

A

Growing income disparities are a critical concern. Contrary to popular belief, the poor of our city are not refusing to work and living off government subsidies. The new poor are full time workers who are falling behind as wages and benefits do not keep pace with rising costs in our economy. Our annual survey of low-income New Yorkers, the Unheard Third, reveals that many of the working poor are confronted with choosing between paying rent and eating, or paying a utility bill and visiting a doctor. It wouldn't require major redistributions of wealth to address this issue. The bare minimum would be a commitment to access to health care for the poor and near-poor, in addition to expanded tax credits. Housing subsidies for renters would also provide some relief for the city's working poor. None of these would be a major budget breaker as we go into the next mayoral election in 2009. Income inequality should be a central question for the next mayor and city council of New York. Read the "[Unheard Third Reports.](#)"

Q

How do you suggest the city provide middle class housing when it has been proven that racial segregation within cities has disastrous effects? How can we overcome income disparity when it comes to being able to buy a home, especially in New York which is quickly become the world's largest luxury resort?

— Posted by John Taranto

A

For moderate income New Yorkers buying a home is less and less an option, particularly after the subprime mortgage crisis, which impacted largely minority communities. New York is a rental city — two out of three New Yorkers are renters. But for low-income New Yorkers rents are increasingly rising to unaffordable levels. In 2005, 43 percent of low-income renters in the private market were paying at least half their income for rent. Yes, the city is losing its capacity to provide housing for middle and lower income working families. It is going to require a combination of strengthening and expanding supports of low and moderate income housing in addition to providing a renters' tax credit, similar to the credit now available to homeowners. See the 2008 CSS Report, "[Making the Rent: Who's At Risk?](#)" [pdf]

Q

As one of the most modernized countries in the world with arguably the most advanced medical technology, the United States still boasts the highest infant mortality rate and lowest life expectancy rate for residents older the age of 60 when compared with almost two dozen industrialized nations worldwide. New York City is the fifth most expensive city in the world and the 11th richest by personal earnings, but our infant death and mortality rates are only slightly better than the national average. Do you see any way of linking universal health care for New Yorkers with the fight against poverty in this city?

— Posted by Kevin

A

Yes. The federal government has stalled in creating a universal health care policy and some states, including New York, are attempting to make changes. Our approach at Community Service Society is set forth in a document titled, "[Cornerstone for Coverage](#)" [pdf]. We would leverage New York's successful Child Health Plus program, by offering access to this insurance through an affordable, and progressive, sliding fee scale — an approach that polls best with New Yorkers. The program severely limits "hidden" costs and offers comprehensive affordable health coverage to all New Yorkers — including immigrants, who make up fully 30 percent of our state's uninsured population.

While our plan won't address all issues associated with being an uninsured New Yorker, if passed, the Cornerstone proposal would harness the state's enormous purchasing power to drive down the costs paid by individual New Yorkers. In this recession, it wouldn't require huge state investment. With "Cornerstone for Coverage" individuals, small businesses and unions could all participate.