

Disconnected Youth

David Jason Fischer



In recent years, public and government attention has begun to focus on New York City's "disconnected youth"—young residents between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. A January 2005 [report](#) by the Community Service Society of New York estimated that nearly 170,000 city residents met this description; other measures that include unemployed young people who are actively looking for work peg the number above 200,000.

As is true in general for those in poverty, disconnected youth are not a uniform group. Some became disconnected when they dropped out of high school; others might be struggling to raise their own children; still others contend with physical or mental health problems or other barriers to education or employment. Roughly half have at least completed high school or a GED.

Given the differences in life circumstances, educational attainment and work readiness among the disconnected, there is no single-bullet strategy for reconnecting them to school or work. For many, high school or GED completion is the goal; others, particularly those with high school degrees and family responsibilities, are more likely to be tracked toward job readiness and employment. Unfortunately, the combination of severely limited public resources and bureaucratic confusion among numerous city agencies and programs has led to very small numbers receiving services: a [2005 report](#) from the Young Adult Task Force estimated that fewer than 10,000 disconnected young New Yorkers were reached by city programs.

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The Mayor's Commission for Economic Opportunity identified "young adults," including disconnected youth, as one of three groups to target for poverty alleviation. Its recommendations include expanding the alternative-education programs and settings now offered by the Department of Education, such as the Learning to Work program and Young Adult Borough Centers; increasing and strengthening "school-community collaborations" that combine education and community service to help keep youth connected; making available more programs that help young adults transition from GED attainment to college; and focusing on the most vulnerable groups -- ex-offenders and young people aging out of foster care -- with a range of services.

My organization, the Center for an Urban Future, noted in a May 2006 [report](#) that the problem of disconnected youth also creates a tremendous opportunity for New York City. As pending [Baby Boomer](#) retirements create a new and urgent need for workers in key New York City industries like health care and construction, we can work with stakeholders in these and other industries to create training curricula and career tracks that can reconnect young New Yorkers to jobs that will benefit all city residents.

David Jason Fischer is the project director at [the Center for an Urban Future](#), a think tank focused on issue of economic development in New York City.

Lifting Children Out of Poverty

Donna Lawrence

Fifty percent of the children who are born in New York City today are born into poverty. That is a really frightening statistic. Once children are born into poverty it's very hard to lift them out.

So, we need to ring the alarm on that alarming number. This report, this commission, is a good first step.

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As a blueprint, it's great. It sets out a framework and covers the critical areas for children and families. The fact that the mayor has done this and is taking leadership is a good signal. But the specific recommendations are going to be key.

For example, the report talks about providing health insurance to children who are uninsured. In New York City, there are about 300,000 children who do not have health insurance, and about 75 percent of those 300,000 are currently eligible for it. So it is good that the mayor recognizes that that children should get health insurance, but the plan does not go into any detail about how he will do that.



We need to know how he is going to reach those kids, what kinds of mechanisms will be put in place to insure that those kids don't lose coverage and how to simplify the system so that families can get coverage and maintain that coverage.

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The Children's Defense Fund is trying to bring together the food stamp application with the health insurance application. Any child receiving food stamps should be eligible for health insurance, but there are a huge number of kids who get food stamps who don't get health insurance and vice versa. This is very technical. A lot of federal regulations would need to be waived to bring those application processes together. The mayor talked in broad strokes about trying to bring the systems together. What we would want to see in six months is how far he has gone.

We need to look at things like enrolling children in health insurance at the time they're born and enrolling parents. Now, when a mother who is uninsured comes to the hospital to give birth, there is no mechanism to enroll her or her children into health insurance.

The childcare issue is critical as well, and it's good that the mayor is addressing it. To get mothers to go out in the workforce, we need to insure they have quality childcare. The challenge is going to be finding physical facilities. Where do we build these childcare centers, how do we get more programs up and running?

This report is a good first step. There is nothing like a mayor taking leadership on an issue like this, but he has got to keep the momentum going and make sure that the details that are filled in meet the overall recommendations.

Donna Lawrence is executive Director of the [Children's Defense Fund-New York](#) .

What Government Should “ And Should Not “ Do

Heather Macdonald

The government should focus on doing the things it can do and recognize what it cannot do. The dismal legacy of the War on Poverty, which destroyed the black family to the misery of generations of children, suggests that government has very little capacity to engage in what sociologist Nathan Glazer has called “social uplift.”

Government can, however, create the backdrop for individual success. New York should

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become the opportunity city by creating the most efficient public services in the country — the best roads, rails, communications services and parks — that allow all individuals to seize opportunity and to better themselves.

New York can become much more economically vibrant by cutting taxes and ineffective social programs that only enrich social workers. The tax burden in New York prevents many entrepreneurs from opening businesses here and creating more and better paying jobs. As Mayor Bloomberg himself says, the best antipoverty program is a job. But as long as the middle class is priced out of the city, our job growth will continue to lag far behind the rest of the country.

New York schools should be unfailingly rigorous and demanding; students should be drilled in spelling, writing, and their multiplication tables. Children should graduate not just with academic skills but also having learned to control their impulses and to show respect for legitimate authority. So far, our schools are far from achieving those goals, in large part because the educational bureaucracy remains in thrall to the knowledge-crushing nostrums of progressive education.

Government is responsible for public safety, and here, New York leads the entire country. Mayor Bloomberg and the New York Police Department come closer everyday to ensuring that residents of every neighborhood enjoy the right to safe streets.

What government cannot do is create personal responsibility and drive in individuals. Yet that is what Mayor Bloomberg is attempting to do by paying people to send their children to school or to keep medical appointments. This payment system creates a very odd situation for the long term, as well as the short term. Will the recipients ever be weaned off their payments? The entitlement mentality will inevitably suck in a larger and larger range of paid-for activities. Not just attending classes, but refraining from hitting your teacher, not bringing a gun to school, showing up for an exam, bathing your kids and feeding them -- all will be candidates for a bribe. How will the city choose which individuals to pay and explain to those it is not paying why they should act in their self-interest for free?

Finally, the single most effective way to reduce child poverty would be to restore the norm of marriage to the inner city. Children growing up in single parent homes are five times as likely to be poor as those raised by married parents. They are also many times more likely to fail in school, become juvenile delinquents, suffer mental problems, and, for girls, become teen

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mothers. Restoring marriage as the norm for raising children does not lie within the power of government. But the mayor can call on private groups to campaign for such a change, and put his own considerable rhetorical stamp on marriage. If successful, such an initiative would be the most important social change in a century.

Heather Mac Donald is a contributing editor at the Manhattan Institute's [City Journal](#).

Don't Forget Those Who Aren't Working

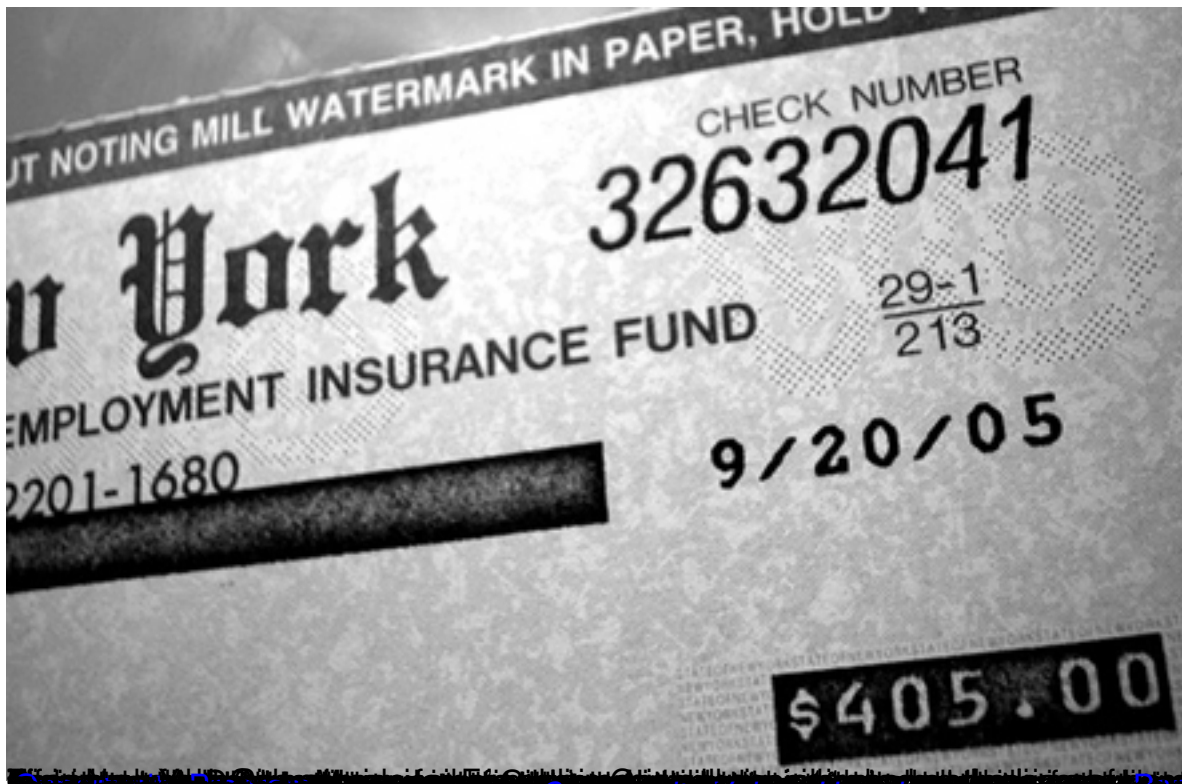
Ketny Jean-Francois

I am one of the 400,000 New Yorkers on public assistance. I am also one of the 13,000 people in the city's Work Experience Program (WEP), administered by the Human Resource Administration. For over a year, I have been stuck doing dead-end and unpaid work. Each day I have to pull weeds from the streets and clean toilets. I do not receive a wage, benefits or a title in exchange for my labor. Instead I receive a public assistance grant. I am forced to do work that does not give me any experience to further my employment prospects. I am interested in entering the health care sector but am currently assigned to the Sanitation Department. Even if I wanted a full time job in the Sanitation Department, there is no pathway from WEP into a paid job at the Sanitation Department. This is the same for most city agencies with WEP workers.

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[Community Voices Heard](#) Strategies to Create Jobs

Bich Ha Pham

The establishment of the New York City Commission for Economic Opportunity and the issuance of its recent report are promising developments. The recommendations of the economic opportunity report that were particularly encouraging in regards to the adult working poor include improving and expanding benefits that support work along with ACCESS NYC (a web-based pre-screening tool for over 20 city, state and federal benefit programs), and increasing access to training for those who are working.

As the city looks to implement the strategies in the report, officials can look to a number of promising and model programs from around the country that have raised earnings and family income. These include wage supplement programs that provide cash payments on top of earnings from wages in order to raise an individual's income to a certain level. That level can be a targeted percentage above the poverty level or a living wage level.

The transitional jobs program for one-time offenders contained in the report can be expanded to include all job seekers, including welfare participants, who along with people who have recently

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left welfare comprise a segment of the city's working poor. As it implements the report's strategies, the Human Resources Administration should try to provide opportunities to increase access to education and job training, including vocational job training and vocational and educational programs at community colleges.

Lastly, though it may seem like a minor part of the report, the city should not promote policies that imply that working poor people and the poor have behavioral problems. Low-wage, part-time jobs with little or no benefits are proliferating in our city and country. Consequently, so are the working poor. People are poor, not because of poor behavior, but because of a lack of jobs adequate to sustain families and of the vocational training and college education needed to get those jobs.

Bich Ha Pham is executive director of the Hunger Action Network of New York State

Barriers to College

Lynne Weikart

Though the Bloomberg report recognizes that college is an important way out of poverty, it does not address many of the obstacles that keep New Yorkers from getting a college education.

Because of structural, cultural, financial, and political barriers, millions of young people do not even contemplate college, are unprepared to attend the college of their choice or struggle to complete their studies. And those who do finish college often find themselves overburdened with debt. A new "[report card on higher education](#)," by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education found that, for many American families, college is becoming less affordable. Whereas Pell grants for low-income students covered 70 percent of a year's cost in higher education in the 1990s, they now cover less than half.

The report gave New York a failing grade for affordability. In 2003, City University Chancellor Matthew Goldstein stated that almost half of CUNY students came from families in which neither parent had attended college and that 40 percent had adjusted gross incomes of less than \$15,000. The cost of attending public universities and community colleges in New York represents nearly half of a low or middle-income students' annual family income. New York

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does have tuition assistance but that alone does not solve the problem since New York State is investing less and less in higher education and depending more and more on tuition for revenue.

Other New Yorkers are legally precluded from attending college, since most people receiving public assistance are required to work and have no time to attend a four-year college program and do what they need to do to continue to receive their benefits. Race, ethnicity and citizenship status often affects a student's ability to even contemplate higher education.

Moreover, recent [studies](#) suggest that policies adopted by federal and state agencies as well as institutions of higher education have discouraged low-income and minority students from attending or completing college. These practices include admitting low-income students but denying them meaningful financial assistance or conversely, encouraging wealthier, higher achieving students to attend a particular college by offering tuition discounts.

In New York and throughout the nation, the transition between high school and college is totally inadequate. Many high school students have an alarming ignorance of what academic and career avenues will be open to them after graduation. A few schools have adopted strategies to address this issue. We need to study these college readiness strategies and pay more attention to the issues of access to and funding for higher education.

Lynne A. Weikart is a professor at [Baruch College School of Public Affairs](#)

Tough Times for Seniors

Bobbie Sackman

Twenty percent of New Yorkers over 65 live in poverty, more than twice the national average. The typical elderly New Yorker living in poverty is a woman, minority, over the age of 75, living alone. Social security provides 80 to 90 percent of her income.

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[New York City](#), [Financial Security](#), [Council of Senior Centers](#), [Sadda Sattar](#)
Getting Foster Teens Beyond the System

Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff

Most young people who “age out” of the foster care system at 18 can expect to live in poverty. Too many are not prepared for college and too many end up homeless, jobless, and incarcerated. They lack the financial and educational resources they need to become successful adults.

Young people from foster care have the aspirations and potential to become fully participating citizens -- to work in accounting, design, health care, web design, the entertainment industry. The main challenge is convincing adults around them that these youth can “and must-- take on more responsibility while they are still in foster care to prepare for a future of economic opportunity. The culture of low expectations for teens in foster care and the lack of accountability for their success or failure must change.

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The foster care system has been given the responsibility of raising thousands of teens to adulthood, but its primary purpose is to protect children from imminent harm, not bring teens to adulthood. As a result, the services provided by the foster care system for teens are typically inadequate, and do not focus enough on future planning as a way for the young people to rise above poverty.

The city has to set high expectations for foster care teens and give them the tools, skills, and education to make the contributions that they can for our society.

The teens themselves can speak most passionately and articulately about what they want for their lives--not just today but for the future. If given responsibility, education and opportunities, they are the best advocates for themselves. And thousands of dedicated and experienced professionals in the foster care system can help lift teens out of poverty if they are given the support and tools to treat each teen as an individual with potential.

But, if we are to be successful in helping foster teens avoid poverty, the broader community must be involved. Leaders from the private sector, experts on higher education, national service, the arts, etc. must get involved -- whether it means giving advice to individual teens, providing scholarships and internships, or participating in policy discussions about preparing teens for adulthood. We all should share in the challenge and responsibility for helping young people in our custody escape poverty and achieve economic opportunity.

*Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff, co-founders and directors of [Youth Advocacy Center](#), are authors of *Beyond the Foster Care System: The Future for Teens*, a book about the development of a program that brings teens, the system, and the outside community into active collaboration to increase opportunities for teens in foster care.*

To End Poverty Among Immigrants, Address Language Barriers

Chung-Wha Hong

It is almost unimaginable to talk about any aspect of city life without talking about immigrants. Immigrants and their children make up two-thirds of the city's population, and over half of births in the city now occur in immigrant families.

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Immigrants have contributed enormously to our great city by stopping significant population declines, revitalizing our neighborhoods, and fueling our economy with their hard work and entrepreneurial initiative. Yet over half of all New York City immigrants live at less than twice the poverty level.



We think a comprehensive approach to poverty should include several key policies and programs specifically addressing immigrants.

1) Greatly Increase Adult English Classes and Workforce Training Opportunities

While English may not be required for many low-skilled jobs, there is clearly a link between English proficiency and earning power. Over a third of limited-English-proficient immigrant

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adults live in poverty, far more than the 14 percent of the English-proficient immigrant adult population. Helping immigrants learn English, and providing English instruction through contextualized workforce training programs is perhaps the most important investment the city can make to reduce poverty in New York's immigrant communities.

2) Eliminate Language Barriers at City Agencies

Language barriers can prevent the immigrant working poor and their families from navigating vital government programs and gaining access to needed income supports to which they are entitled. For example, many immigrants and limited English proficiency tenants are living in unhealthy and unsafe living conditions, and yet over 60 percent do not know that there is a city agency, the Housing and Preservation Department, designed to help them address their housing needs. There is a need for a comprehensive city translation and interpretation system across all city agencies " similar to recent improvements in city schools, hospitals and welfare offices.

3) End the English Language Learner Dropout Crisis

Over half of the city's school children come from homes where English is not the primary language. Almost one-in-seven of all city students are classified as English language learners, and therefore in need of quality bilingual education, English-as-a-second language, or dual language instruction. These students face the same tough conditions that all students encounter " a lack of quality teachers, overcrowded classes, and insufficient instruction time " but with the added burden of learning English on top of meeting all other State Regents standards.

Over half of public school students classified as English Language Learners drop out, the highest dropout rate of any subgroup of city students. Additional investments must be made in recruiting and retaining qualified ESL and bilingual teachers, increasing extended day and weekend instructional programs, and fully aligning the English language learners language arts curriculum with the mainstream curriculum.

Chung-Wha Hong is the executive director of [the New York Immigration Coalition](#) . This piece was adapted from a letter sent in response to the report published by the Commission for Economic Opportunity.

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Banking and Poverty

Sarah Ludwig

If you live in a poor neighborhood in New York City, it's not the pick-pocket or loan shark you need to watch out for. It's financial services companies — check-cashers, payday lenders, rent-to-own stores, money transmitters, and unscrupulous tax preparers — looking to strip all the assets they can from you and your community.



Graffiti in Harlem

Some estimate that low income New Yorkers pay as much as 10 percent of their income for financial services. Perhaps that's no surprise, given that many low income neighborhoods of color still have no bank branches, immigrants wiring money to other countries pay as much as 15 percent of the amount sent, and conventional bank mortgage or small business loans are few and far between.

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Unequal access to credit and financial services in NYC corresponds crudely to neighborhood demographics. Lacking access to fair and affordable financial services, low income neighborhoods are flooded with solicitations for fast cash, predatory mortgage loans, foreclosure rescue scams, and a growing array high cost credit offerings (“Bad credit? No problem!”). This unequal provision of capital access:

- â€~ Reinforces residential segregation, limiting people’s mobility and fair housing choice;
- â€~ Thwarts local economic development, affecting the viability of small businesses;
- â€~ Diminishes homeowners’ equity and appraisal values, and impedes one’s ability to borrow against assets to pay for higher education or needed repairs, or pass along wealth to one’s family;
- â€~ Hampers community revitalization, including schools, crime prevention, and health care improvements;
- â€~ Impedes immigrants’ ability to gain an economic toehold in this country; and
- â€~ Adversely affects one’s ability to build savings and gain economic security.

The pervasiveness of destabilizing, high-cost credit in New York’s low income neighborhoods is reflected back in people’s credit reports, further perpetuating poverty for millions of New Yorkers.

If you’re among the millions of low-income immigrants in New York City, the situation is grossly magnified, since most of the banking world appears at a loss for how to serve you given the morass of anti-terrorist and money-laundering regulations, which have chilled many banks from even opening accounts for many new immigrants.

What can we as New Yorkers do about all this? The reality is that most banking policy matters fall within state and federal level jurisdiction, not the city’s. That said, the city can, and should, be part of the solution. For starters, the city can:

- â€~ Ensure a living wage;
- â€~ Refuse to do business, invest pension funds, or otherwise enter into contracts with companies that are known to engage in predatory financial practices, or that fail to serve communities equitably;
- â€~ Stop partnering with companies like H&R Block to do Earned Income Tax Credit outreach to low income New Yorkers, when H&R Block is a major purveyor of usurious tax refund anticipation loans that target low income neighborhoods of color in our city; and

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~ Press mainstream financial institutions to accept a broader array of identification for people to open accounts and adopt a policy of not asking people about their immigration status when they seek to open an account.

Sarah Ludwig is the co-director of [the Neighborhood Economic Development Advocacy Project](#)

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Implementing the Commission's Recommendations

Betsy Gotbaum

Government has a responsibility to help lift working families out of poverty so they have the opportunity to join the middle class, and I commend the mayor for convening the Commission for Economic Opportunity. But I would also like to raise a few issues and questions.

Will Private Funding Be Enough?

It is to this administration's credit that it is willing to set ambitious goals for the reduction of poverty, but we cannot expect city agencies to do more without additional resources. I applaud the mayor's pledge to raise at least \$24 million in private funds to underwrite the commission's recommendations. An influx of private donations will certainly give this new anti-poverty initiative a shot in the arm. But private donations are not necessarily reliable or sustainable over the long term, and it is crucial that the funding to carry out the commission's recommendations be institutionalized so that it outlives the present administration.

Expanding Benefits

The commission's report calls for "improving and expanding benefits that support work." I urge the administration to interpret this as a mandate to adopt tools like the [Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents](#) waiver and remove obstacles such as the finger-imaging requirement for food stamp applicants,

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steps that would help more New Yorkers put food on their tables and bring more federal dollars into the city economy.

Don't Forget Single Mothers

The report also recommends that the city "expand programs that help prepare fathers for job opportunities, skills-building and legal, financial, and emotional responsibilities of parenthood." I, of course, strongly support this recommendation. But in a city where the poverty rate among single mothers is 41 percent and the labor force participation rate for single mothers with no more than a high school education has risen to nearly 58 percent, I would hope that the commission's recommendation could be broadened to include single mothers as well.

Betsy Gotbaum is the [public advocate](#) of the City of New York. This piece was adapted from comments she made at a City Council hearing on September 21, 2006.

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