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# THE URBAN AGENDA

By David R. Jones



## A Portrait of Life in Black New York City

One of the most stubborn and enduring historic facts in America is the inequities in the quality of life between White and Black Americans. The New York Urban League has a long history of addressing economic conditions impacting Blacks in our city. The aim of its latest report, "The State of Black New York City 2007," published in conjunction with the Black Equity Alliance, is "to present these inequities, provide recommendations for their solution and to begin a long-term process to get New York to those solutions."

I commend Darwin Davis, president and CEO of the New York Urban League, and Billy Jones, chairman of the Black Equity Alliance, for their vision and leadership in publishing this report. It holds up a mirror to the institutional racism that still persists in some quarters of our city. It should become an annual on the status of economic opportunity and Black New Yorkers.

### Black Unemployment

Queens Congressman Gregory Meeks, in the report's preface, writes: "The concentration of poor educational attainment and labor force marginalization in the majority minority segments of the city's population, particularly in regard to its youth, is a recipe for disaster." He cites a study published by my organization, the Community Service Society (CSS), "Unemployment and Joblessness in New York City 2006: Recovery Bypasses Youth," which emphasizes that despite the decline in unemployment between 2003 and 2006, many groups of New Yorkers continued to suffer recession level unemployment rates. These included Black and Latino youth, and Black men.

While much attention is given to the unemployment rate, this measure fails to paint a full picture of disparities in the city's labor market. There is a fundamental difference between unemployment and joblessness. Unemployment figures capture individuals available for and actively seeking work during the survey period. Joblessness, on the other hand, reflects individuals who are completely detached from the labor market, no longer seeking employment upon the belief that opportunities do not exist.

And it is joblessness that still haunts Black and Latino youth and Black men in New York City. Even in 2006, with the effects of the recession gone and employment on the rise, nearly 40 percent of Black males ages 16 to 64 were jobless. Only 36.3 percent of young people age 16 to 24 were working in 2006, down more than ten percentage points from the pre-recession year 2000.

### A road map for public policy

The Urban League report points out that, despite the present predicament, policy makers have an opportunity to intervene with corrective action. For example: creating an Earned Income Tax Credit for workers who are younger than 25 with no qualifying child.

One of the places where jobs are plentiful, and likely to increase, is the city's construction industry. With the rebuilding of downtown Manhattan, the development of the West Side railroad yards, and two new baseball stadiums, to name

just a few projects, construction in New York is booming. Yet, historically, people of color have been systematically excluded from trade unions construction jobs in New York.

The State of Black New York includes an excellent article, "Black New Yorkers in the Construction Industry" by professors Darrick Hamilton and Dennis Derryck of the New School University and Sabine Salandy - a labor market analyst at the Community Service Society - that highlights the underrepresentation of Black men in construction. It provides ideas to increase participation of Black New Yorkers in construction, including apprenticeship programs that the industry's unions agreed to form in response to the recommendations of Mayor Bloomberg's Construction Opportunities Commission.

The subsequent articles cover practically the entire spectrum of issues confronting Black New Yorkers. The articles on housing and health care reinforce the importance of these issues that we found reflected in CSS's latest survey of New Yorkers. CSS has developed a proposal for universal health care called "Cornerstone for Coverage" which calls for affordable, high quality and comprehensive health care for all New Yorkers.

### Criminal Justice

In the article, "Criminal Justice in New York: Just Us," Eddie Ellis writes, "Over the past twenty-five years, the unique social phenomena of mass incarceration coupled with mass unemployment has disrupted and severely damaged the very heart of the Black community in New York State, indeed throughout the United States." He cites the CSS report, "A Crisis of Black Male Employment: Unemployment and Joblessness in New York City, 2003," in detailing some of the consequences for the Black community of criminal justice policies in New York.

Ellis indicts the inherent racism of a system where more than 70 percent of state prison inmates are Black and Latino while comprising only about one-third of the state's total population. He discusses the need for expanding opportunities, especially in employment, for the formerly incarcerated, a project that CSS has taken on with its New York City Reentry Roundtable.

The Reentry Roundtable, begun by CSS in December 2005, provides a forum to discuss issues and identify public policy solutions to assist the formerly incarcerated in New York State. The Roundtable has developed a number of proposals that address unfair obstacles faced by the formerly incarcerated in health care, employment, family reunification, housing, education, and civic participation.

The New York Urban League and the Black Equity Alliance deserve credit for compiling and publishing "The State of Black New York City 2007." The report, coupling statistics with analysis, commentary, and recommendations, can serve as a road map for future public policy initiatives that would produce positive change in the lives of Black New Yorkers.

To find out more, I encourage you to visit the publishers of the report online at [www.nyul.org](http://www.nyul.org) and [info@blackequityalliance.org](mailto:info@blackequityalliance.org).

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