

**The Status of Black Men
in New York City**

Remarks of David R. Jones

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**Hearing of the Congressional Black Caucus:
African Male Initiative Conference**

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Good morning. Let me first congratulate the members of the Congressional Black Caucus from New York and New Jersey - Rep. Charles Rangel, Rep. Greg Meeks, Rep. Ed Townes, Rep. Major Owens, and Rep. Donald Payne - for spearheading this regional conference as part of the CBC Foundation's national State of the African-American Male initiative.

I have particularly enjoyed working in collaboration with Rep. Meeks in the planning of today's event. CSS is proud to be a co-sponsor of this activity and we look forward to working with members of the Caucus in addressing the plethora of issues that have kept black men out of the economic mainstream.

Racial discrimination is a major factor in the economic lives of African Americans, especially young men. I'm sure you've read or heard about the experiment conducted in New York City where black men and white men - with equivalent resumes of education and experience - posed as applicants for entry-level jobs. The story was in yesterday's *New York Times*.

The white men admitted to having a criminal record; the blacks no record. The result: white men with criminal records had a better chance of getting a

job offer or a callback after an initial interview than black men without records. Consider the implications of this when one in three black men with only a high school diploma will go to prison before the age of 40.

Many of the problems faced by the African American community are domestic or local in nature. But more and more are linked to globalization, especially opportunities for employment. Outsourcing - even of low-wage jobs - is becoming commonplace.

The days are gone when high school dropouts could reach the middle class by working their way up the economic ladder. When globalization really takes hold, people without education will be unemployable - they will live a lifetime without ever finding a job that could lift them out of poverty. This is the reality that people without education - without skills - are facing today.

My organization, the Community Service Society, is a nonprofit that focuses on the city's poor. Poverty in New York City is primarily a problem for people of color - the overwhelming number of the 1.7 million New Yorkers living below the poverty line are black and Latino.

CSS conducts research on a number of pressing issues that are of concern to the Congressional Black Caucus.

Just to summarize:

Our latest labor market report reveals that 40 percent of the city's African American men were jobless last year - that's about 235,000 people, equivalent to the population of Newark, New Jersey.

Our report on disconnected youth - young people neither in school nor in the labor market - shows that black males - ages 16 to 24 - were more than twice as likely as white males to be disengaged from any framework that would provide them with a future. We're talking about 170,000 of our city's young people - more than the entire populations of Rochester or Syracuse.

Our latest survey of low-income New Yorkers revealed that - even among full time workers - 33 percent fell behind in the rent, 23 percent postponed or were unable to afford medical care, and 36 percent had to rely on food banks to feed themselves and their families. These are people working full time.

Our latest housing report estimates that 65 percent of New York City families with incomes under

the federal poverty line - 200,000 households - paid at least half of their income toward rent.

Almost half of all students entering high school drop out before graduation, and, of those who do graduate, only 20 percent receive a Regents diploma - indicative of the highest educational attainment.

New York State incarcerates over 70,000 prisoners, the fifth largest prison population in the nation. Eighty percent are black and Latino men from 10 New York City neighborhoods - that's about 57,000 men who face a bleak future when released without jobs or a place to live. Barriers to employment contribute to a 40 percent recidivism rate with three years after release.

It is estimated that about 30,000 prisoners are released each year; most return to their home communities - a large number to Harlem, the South Bronx, Jamaica, and the Rockaways. The top three zip codes where state prison parolees return to: 10035, 10029, and 10039 - all in Harlem.

The Community Service Society has been working vigorously to get job training on the public agenda. The City Council - largely in response to CSS reports - recently added \$10 million to the city's budget for

job training for the chronically unemployed. The Council promised another \$20 million next year. This needs to be an expanded and long-term commitment to be effective.

Thanks to pressure brought to bear by Congressman Rangel, the city recently proposed a Construction Industry Opportunity Commission. The Commission - of which I'm a member - will explore strategies for ensuring that all New Yorkers - particularly people of color - gain access to jobs in the construction industry.

Still, we are faced with stonewalling even in public agencies. The Fire Department has historically excluded blacks and Latinos - as well as women of all races - from their uniformed ranks. New York City has essentially a white fire department - a little bastion of apartheid in our multicolored city. In response to this embarrassment, the Bloomberg administration has refused to reactivate the cadet program, which was set up to recruit more people of color into the department. The latest department graduating class - a total of 231 graduates - included just 11 black men and one woman.

And the city recently settled a lawsuit brought because of the blatant discriminatory practices of former Parks Commissioner Henry Stern against blacks, Latinos, and women. Stern created a separate promotion track that promoted white employees to better paying jobs while bypassing minority employees who were not made aware of the vacancies.

The problem of joblessness is directly linked to the failure of our schools. Schools Chancellor Joel Klein says that only about half of all students entering New York City's high schools graduate. When you consider that top schools such as Stuyvesant and Bronx Science graduate close to 100 percent, what does that tell us about other schools with mostly black and Latino students? Klein admits only about 20 percent of graduates earn a Regents diploma. In 2003 - at 22 high schools - not a single student received a Regents diploma.

And where do the dropouts go? Most of them will face monumental hurdles in this society - barriers to a decent job, to being able to support a family, to being a part of the community.

What about those who do graduate? Employers in the private sector have long complained that the

city's high school graduates are not adequately educated to take their place in the labor market.

In our recent survey of low-income New Yorkers, I was most surprised to see that more than nine out of 10 respondents support vocational programs in high schools. I was brought up on the notion that vocational education was something to be rejected. During my youth, it was where poor, mostly black students were pointed as their only hope of earning a living.

Times have changed. The labor market has been transformed from industrial trades to new and emerging technologies. There are jobs in this economy for young people if they can get the training required for them.

The city recently announced a new technical/vocational education initiative in order to reach those high school students who desire to enter the labor market rather than go on to college. If a high school degree would lead to decent jobs, more students not bound for college would have a reason to stay in school. Given the magnitude of the problem, it will be important that the scale and scope of this initiative are large enough to make a real difference.

The city should also address the lack of a real "second chance" for those young people who have been failed by the schools, are jobless, and need new skills to find employment.

There is the promise of new funding for our public schools. For decades, New York City students have been denied their right to a sound basic education. This was the conclusion of the courts of New York State, after more than 10 years of landmark litigation led by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, known as CFE. To remedy this wrong, the courts ordered the state to provide the city school system with billions of additional funds.

In order to ensure the best use of these funds, the City Council appointed an independent Commission on CFE to develop a plan and specific recommendations related to the goals of the CFE decision. I am co-chair of the Commission. In April, the Commission issued the first of two reports.

Funding from the CFE decision has the capacity to profoundly improve the quality of our schools and the performance of our children. But only if we invest it well, in educational reform that really works.

First, we should demand that the state stop dragging its feet and allocate the funds mandated by the courts. Then we should guard against diluting the impact these funds should have. That means targeting funds to low-performing schools where they are most needed, not spreading the wealth across the board. And we should upgrade the teacher core with an assessment system that evaluates teachers' skills, knowledge, and performance, with periodic assessments as a prerequisite for salary increases.

We have many assets in this city that could be brought to bear on these issues - enormous financial and intellectual resources. But they are not being mobilized.

The city is home to hundreds of nonprofit and corporate foundations that benefit from tax relief expressly designed for them. Yet they hang back when it comes to a commitment that would benefit the city where they do business - investing in the black community. Most foundations and nonprofit research groups manifest a lack of investment - even a lack of interest - in the black community.

The philanthropic sector, in particular, should be providing resources as a bulwark against the right

wing that has made ignoring the black community a cornerstone of its policies. If foundations want you to defend them from legislation calling for greater oversight of their activities, then let them invest in our communities. But they haven't anted up. The Foundation Center estimates that no more than 3 to 4 percent of foundation grant funds in this country are targeted to racial or ethnic minorities.

Our elected officials must take a leadership role. They should be bringing the problems faced by millions of black men to the forefront of public awareness. They must also fight for the kinds of long-term resources that will affect permanent changes in our communities.

Here are a couple of things they can do that would be of great benefit to black communities.

They should be protecting Social Security - seeing to it that it is on a firm financial footing and defeating attempts at privatization - which, if successful, would drain the system of much of its funding. The strength of Social Security is its universality. Once it becomes a program for the poor, it would be open to the typical budget cutting that

accompanies every welfare program. The ultimate effect would be to destroy the system.

Social Security is especially crucial for people of color. Half of New York State's older black and Latino residents depend on Social Security for about 80 percent of their income.

Here in New York City, in Congressman Rangel's district, more than 85,000 New Yorkers get Social Security benefits; in Congressman Towns's district, over 71,000; in Congressman Owens's district, over 63,000. Social Security benefits prevent more than 800,000 older New Yorkers from sinking into poverty.

We also must raise the minimum wage. The federal minimum of \$5.15 has lost 10.8 percent of its value since the most recent increase in 1997 - an hourly wage of \$5.15 in 1997 is now worth only \$4.59. A full-time worker - working 40 hours a week and earning minimum wage - grosses \$10,712 a year, well below the federal poverty guideline of \$15,260 for a family of three.

These are fundamental issues that are going to require years of investment and advocacy. There has to be a willingness on the part of government, nonprofits, and foundations to put these kinds of

issues on their agenda on a long-term basis. That's the only way we are going to create a stronger city and a more equitable society.