

## **Investing in What Works**

*"What people want is something that works. They want to celebrate American successes and American efforts."*

- Haynes Johnson

After the 1992 Los Angeles riots, The New York Times and CBS asked in a nationwide poll, "Are we spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount of money on problems of the big cities, on improving the conditions of blacks, and on the poor?" Majorities approaching two-thirds said too little was being done. "To reduce racial tension and prevent riots, would more jobs and job training help a lot, help a little or not make much difference?" Seventy-eight percent said that more jobs and job training would help a lot. "What is the major obstacle to doing more?" A majority said "lack of knowledge."

That is not so. "Enough is known about the lives of disadvantaged high-risk youth to mount an intensive campaign to alter the trajectories of these children," says Joy Dryfoos in *Adolescents at Risk*. According to Lisbeth Schorr in *Within our Reach*, "We know how to intervene to reduce the rotten outcomes of adolescence and to help break the cycle that reaches into succeeding generations." The national policy implication must be to stop doing what doesn't work and use the money to help finance what does - but on a scale that is equal to the dimensions of the problem.

There are existing, carefully evaluated programs that produce some combination of less crime, less gang-related behavior, less drug abuse, less welfare dependency, fewer adolescent pregnancies, fewer school dropouts, more school grades completed, more successful school-to-work transitions, more employability, better parenting among targeted high-risk youth and more stable families. Young people can grow up with less fear, fewer drug dealers and more business, job and economic development in their communities. Not all model programs achieve all of these good outcomes. But good results are the rule, not the exception.

The common elements that appear to underlie the successes, particularly initiatives organized at the grass roots, include safe-haven sanctuaries after school where kids get mentoring, social support and discipline from big brothers and big sisters; educational innovations that motivate youth to

obtain a high school degree; job training carefully linked to job creation; incentives and feasible options for continuing on to college; employment linked to economic development (like housing rehabilitation); and problem-oriented, community-based policing, which helps secure a neighborhood for the grass-roots economic development that creates jobs for high-risk youth.

Examples of these success are as familiar as the Head Start preschool program for poor kids and as unsung as the New Community Corporation of Newark. The School Development Plan of Professor James Comer at the Yale Child Study Center shows that school dropout rates can be reduced and academic achievement improved by letting parents and teachers take over management of inner-city schools. Housing projects with community-based safe havens like the Dorchester Youth Collaborative in Boston (see Margaret Spillane, page 16) and the Challengers Boys and Girls Club in South Central Los Angeles have significantly less juvenile crime, drug activity and vandalism. For high schoolers in poor neighborhoods, the Ford Foundation's Quantum Opportunities Program demonstrates that a combination of adult mentors and tutors, computer and personal skills training, stipends and financial incentives to go to college can substantially increase the number of students graduating and going on to post-secondary education.

For those who drop out, initiatives like the Argus Community in the South Bronx and City Lights School in Washington, D.C., and Job Corps and YouthBuild USA nationwide, illustrate how remedial education, job and life-skill training, and job placement can work in concert at the community level. YouthBuild USA is especially effective because it trains dropouts in the rehabilitation of housing for the poor. Today, private, nonprofit community development corporations rehabilitate more housing for the poor than the federal government.

A shining example is the New Community Corporation, founded by Msgr. William Linder in the central ward of Newark after the 1967 riots. Twenty-eight years later, N.C.C. is a \$100-million-a-year enterprise, housing more than 6,000 people in eighteen well-maintained properties, caring for 700 children in six daycare centers, providing 2,800 meals daily and employing 1,400 people from the neighborhood. N.C.C. has become New Jersey's largest nonprofit housing operation and one of the largest in the country. Many N.C.C. staffers began there as high school dropouts but now have master's degrees.

The generation of jobs stabilizes inner-city individuals, families and neighborhoods. There is no surer path to welfare reform than jobs. Yet the Congressional debate on welfare, in an astounding display of ignorance that justifies public contempt, has failed to link Argus, Job Corps and

YouthBuild-type job training to grass-roots, "bubble-up" job creation through proven organizations like Monsignor Linder's and financed by community-based banking, as illustrated by the model South Shore Bank of Chicago, which has been replicated elsewhere around the nation.

These are just examples of what works. There are many more. What has the 104th Congress proposed? To do more of what doesn't work and less of what does. There are more proposals for capital gains cuts and other tax advantages for the rich. There is more prison building and more advocacy of enterprise zones. Slashes are proposed for programs that work for children and youth - like Yale's School Development Program, safe havens after school, Job Corps, YouthBuild USA and community development corporations.

The antigovernment mood Congress says it is responding to is real. But much of it is fed by the illusory notion that positive action by government and community agencies is impossible. We know that is not true. If the current tide is to be turned, we must nurture a more informed, hopeful, active and humane public-policy vision - one that invests in what works for the future of America's children.

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