WORLD AFFAIRS DISCUSSION GROUP…St. Paul's and the Christian Science Group

July 19, 2020

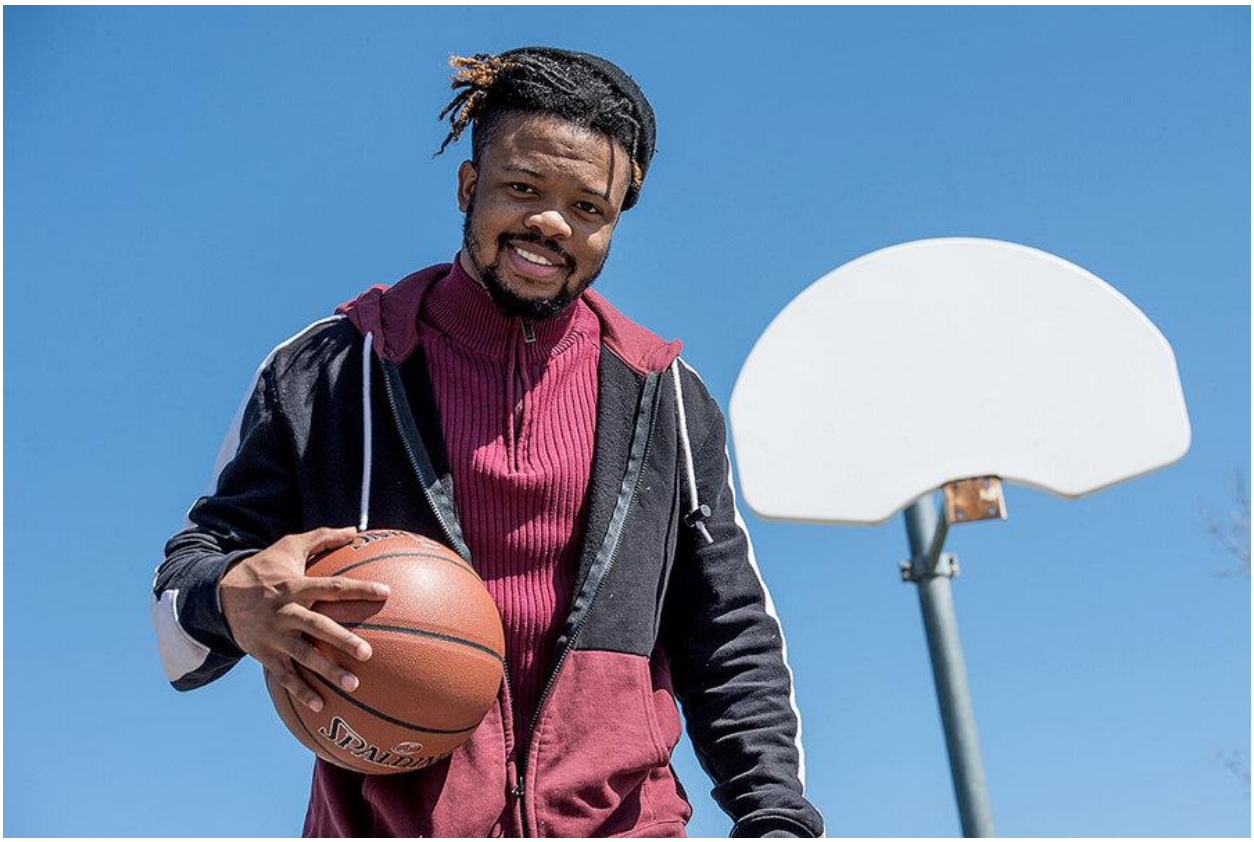
Topic of consideration: Universal Public Service…is it possible or even a good idea?

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

Love of country: US ready for mandatory national service?

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Mandatory national service has been raised – and rejected – throughout American history. Now a commission wants to expand such non-military service in the U.S. as a civic-inspired way to improve lives.



Barbara Colombo/Special to The Christian Science Monitor

"My story isn't unique – a lot of folks face adversity at a young age. Opportunity is the fork in the road." – Xavier Jennings, program coordinator and mentor with Mile High Youth Corps in Denver

June 3, 2020

TWO WAYS TO READ THE STORY

- **QUICK READ**
- **DEEP READ** (11 MIN.)

- **By Anna Mulrine Grobe**

@annamulrine

When Xavier Jennings was a teenager, money was tight for his single mother, who had five children, and he felt a duty to help out. He applied for jobs at Walmart and McDonald's, but struggled to be what he calls in hindsight "interview ready." He started stealing food from a supermarket, and escalated to selling marijuana on the street.

Still, he liked his high school classes and wanted to graduate, even as evictions and spates of homelessness for his family meant switching schools six times in four years. He was devastated when he fell short of credits. "My idea of success was attached to finishing my education." He felt, he says, like a failure.

Mr. Jennings drifted further toward drug sales, but his older brother pulled him back when he saw him hanging out with the wrong crowd. "He told people he knew [in gangs] to stay away from me," Mr. Jennings says. "I owe a lot to him – he really saw goodness in me."

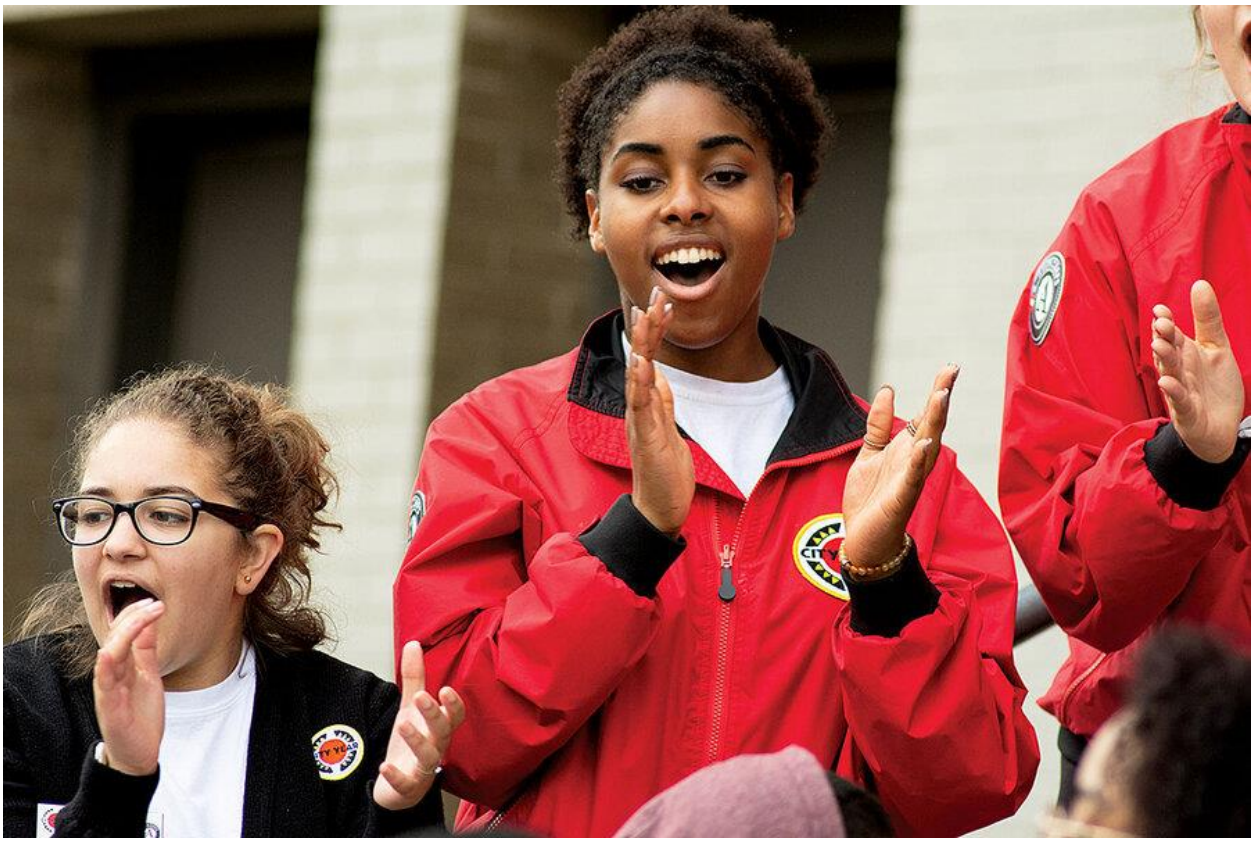
To redirect him, his brother eventually took him to Mile High Youth Corps in Denver, a branch of YouthBuild, a national nonprofit that helps volunteers earn their GED diplomas and pays them minimum wage to work in construction and conservation. As early as the first day on the job, he started to feel differently about himself, he says. "It was planting the seeds of 'I can make a difference.'"

Today Mr. Jennings has a full-time job as a YouthBuild program coordinator, mentoring young adults while coaching Little League and finishing up his college degree in nonprofit management.

Getting more Americans like Mr. Jennings to serve their country lies at the center of a highly anticipated "grand strategy" put forward in March by the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. Created by Congress, the commission argues that national service – funded by the federal government – is central to improving Americans' quality of life, bolstering national security, and strengthening democracy.

While the commission made headlines this spring for recommending that women be required to register for the draft alongside men, it also stressed the need to elevate the status of national service – giving it the same prestige that military recruits enjoy.

To figure out how to do that, the commissioners took a yearlong Alexis de Tocqueville-like journey across the United States, gathering stories such as Mr. Jennings' in hundreds of hours of testimony. Their conclusions came with a warning: Despite high demand, service opportunities for young people through AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, and other programs such as YouthBuild have long remained static and require a new level of investment. The report recommends that lawmakers increase federal funding to boost the number of young people working in national service jobs from 80,000 today to 1 million by 2031.



Alfredo Sosa/Staff/File

Members of City Year AmeriCorps greet students as they enter Gilbert Stuart Middle School in Providence, Rhode Island. Mentors embedded in the school work to boost class attendance.

It comes with hurdles, but advocates believe the coronavirus pandemic has only underscored the importance of such mission-oriented work.

"We've been prepared as a country for a terrorist attack or an overseas war, but clearly we haven't been prepared – culturally or institutionally – for something like this," says Emma Moore, analyst for the military, veterans, and society program at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington think tank. "It highlights in my mind the greater need for national service."

Adds retired Navy Capt. Steven Barney, a commissioner and a former general counsel for the Senate Armed Services Committee: “This is the answer to how we mobilize for something like a pandemic.”

“Healthier sympathies”

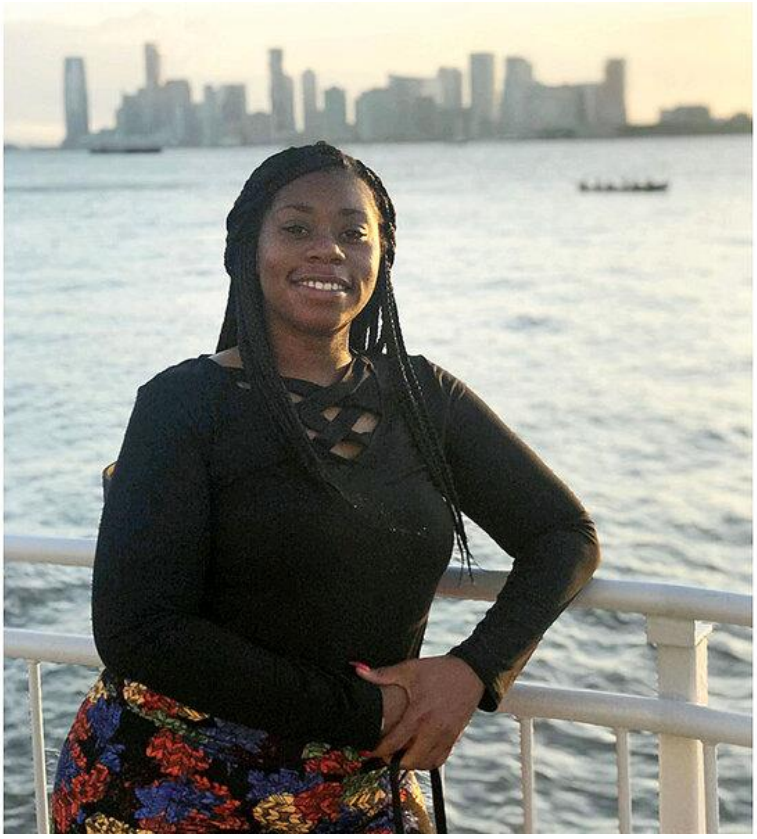
Back in 1906, the philosopher William James, brother of Henry, called for America to create a “moral equivalent of war” through programs of national service that would rally the country to greatness and a shared sense of purpose.

He admitted that it’s hard to beat battlefields for this. “Militarism is the great preserver of our ideals of hardihood,” he wrote in a widely celebrated essay. Those less martially inclined need to acknowledge the appeal of self-sacrifice and camaraderie forged in combat, he advised, and come up with something able to compete with the “dread hammer” of militarism as the “welder of men into cohesive states.”

The solution, he said, is mandatory national service. “To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, clothes-washing, and window-washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes, and to the frames of skyscrapers, would our gilded youths be drafted off, according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas,” he wrote. He also observed, “The martial type of character can be bred without war.”

The idea of mandatory national service has been raised – and ultimately rejected – as a possibility throughout American history. Just a couple of decades before James’ treatise, in 1888, Edward Bellamy published the wildly popular “Looking Backward,” a Utopian novel that was only outsold in its day by “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and “Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ.” Written in the wake of the depression of 1873-79 and a series of recessions in the 1880s, the book called for mandatory service for men and women ages 21 to 45. Some 165 subsequent “Bellamy clubs” sprang up nationwide. The Russian translation of the book was banned by czarist censors for its socialist leanings.

In later decades, philosophers, policy analysts, and politicians offered their own proposals for a “moral equivalent of war.” The New Deal yielded the Civilian Conservation Corps, which mobilized, with the leadership of a young George Marshall, 3 million unemployed Americans who planted some 3 billion trees and constructed 97,000 miles of fire roads, among other projects, between 1933 and 1942, notes a November report by the Brookings Institution.



Courtesy of Sharell Harmon

“They’re in my everyday. We check in. They’re having kids now – we’re family. I didn’t qualify for the military, but it’s important to keep that structure, that support for folks, that possibility of service.” – Sharell Harmon, who made close friends while participating in a YouthBuild program in West Virginia

Following the success of the Peace Corps, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara pushed to tie civilian service to the draft in the early 1960s. Anthropologist Margaret Mead advocated a service program that “would replace for girls, even more than for boys, marriage as the route away from the parental home,” according to a 2019 report from the libertarian Cato Institute. When he was governor of Arkansas and a member of the Democratic Leadership Council, Bill Clinton called for a national Citizen Corps of 800,000 young people. During his presidency, his administration ultimately created the more modestly sized Corporation for National and Community Service and AmeriCorps.

Most recently, retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal, former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, extolled the virtues of universal – though not mandatory – national service. He imagined an America in which “one full quarter of an age cohort, serving together to solve problems, will build attachment to community and country, understanding among people who might otherwise be skeptical of one another and a new generation of leaders who can get things done. I saw these effects for 34 years in the U.S. Army,” he wrote. “We need them in civilian life.”

Social cohesion

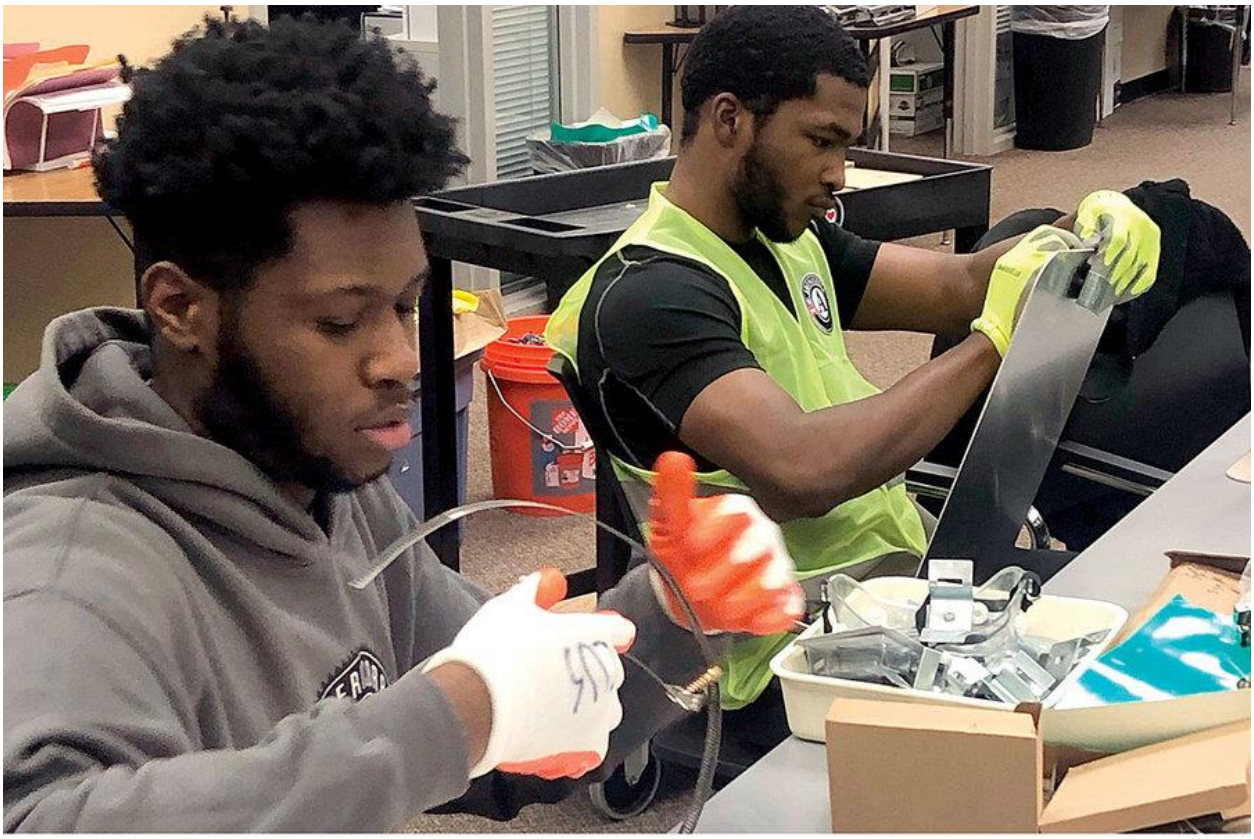
The national commission on military and public service, too, set out to answer the question of whether national service should be mandatory for young adults, and ultimately declined to recommend taking this step. Few leaders are fond of working with conscripts who might turn out to be surly, particularly when kicking them out is tough to do.

“Policymakers should make every effort to promote voluntary approaches to service, reserving mandatory service as a last resort only in response to national emergencies and to ensure common defense,” the commission concluded.

Yet a growing number of countries have been adopting mandatory national service for young people. France last year launched a program championed by President Emmanuel Macron that will ultimately train some 800,000 teenagers a year. The aim is to strengthen social cohesion in a country that abolished mandatory military service more than 20 years ago, in 1997, and give young people “causes to defend and battles to fight in the social, environmental, and cultural domains,” Mr. Macron said.

For one month, 16-year-olds will live communally and give up their cellphones to learn first aid, map reading, and emergency response. After dinner each evening, they’ll be encouraged to debate social issues, such as gender discrimination and the roots of radicalization. Then they’ll have the chance to use their skills in volunteer jobs. The program will soon be written into the constitution and become mandatory over the next seven years. It is expected to cost $1.8 billion a year to run.

After abolishing a year of compulsory military service for men in 2011, Germany is now mulling the idea of bringing back a year of mandatory national service as well, in part to address chronic staff shortages in nursing homes and hospices. It would also be required for all adult asylum-seekers, as a way to better integrate migrants, say officials who point to an increasingly polarized society.



Corey Williams/AP/File

Nicholas Thomas (left) and Joe Wright make school safety signs as part of an AmeriCorps project at Wayne State University in Detroit.

In the U.S., demand for government-sponsored volunteer jobs consistently outpaces the number of open slots. After 9/11, there were more than 150,000 requests for applications to the Peace Corps, for example, but only 7,000 positions available, notes the Brookings Institution report. That trend has continued, with the Peace Corps estimating that, on average, there are three to five times as many applications as slots available. These trends have been mirrored in AmeriCorps applications over the past decade, with three to five applicants for every one open position.

The programs seem to have a good effect on those who do get in. AmeriCorps surveys indicate that more than 80% of the program's national service alumni credit their experience with making them more likely to attain a college degree, vote, volunteer, care about community issues, and fashion practical solutions to problems, the Brookings report says.

Yet expanding such programs is expensive. Convincing Congress to fund them, particularly given the cost of stimulus programs in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic, will likely prove difficult.

While the call to "serve your country" still means joining the military in the minds of many Americans, some 70% of 18- to 24-year-olds don't meet eligibility standards. Sharell Harmon,

for her part, longed to enlist in the Air Force. But when she didn't qualify, she applied to YouthBuild in Elkins, West Virginia, instead.

The orientation was heavy on trust-building exercises. A black woman in a predominantly white rural area, she wasn't surprised that her teammates were mostly "guys who wear hunting gear on the back roads, living their best life." What she didn't foresee was that they'd become her "brothers" – the sort of battle buddies she'd once hoped to find in the armed forces. "They're in my everyday," she says. "We check in. They're having kids now – we're family. I didn't qualify for the military, but it's important to keep that structure, that support for folks, that possibility of service."

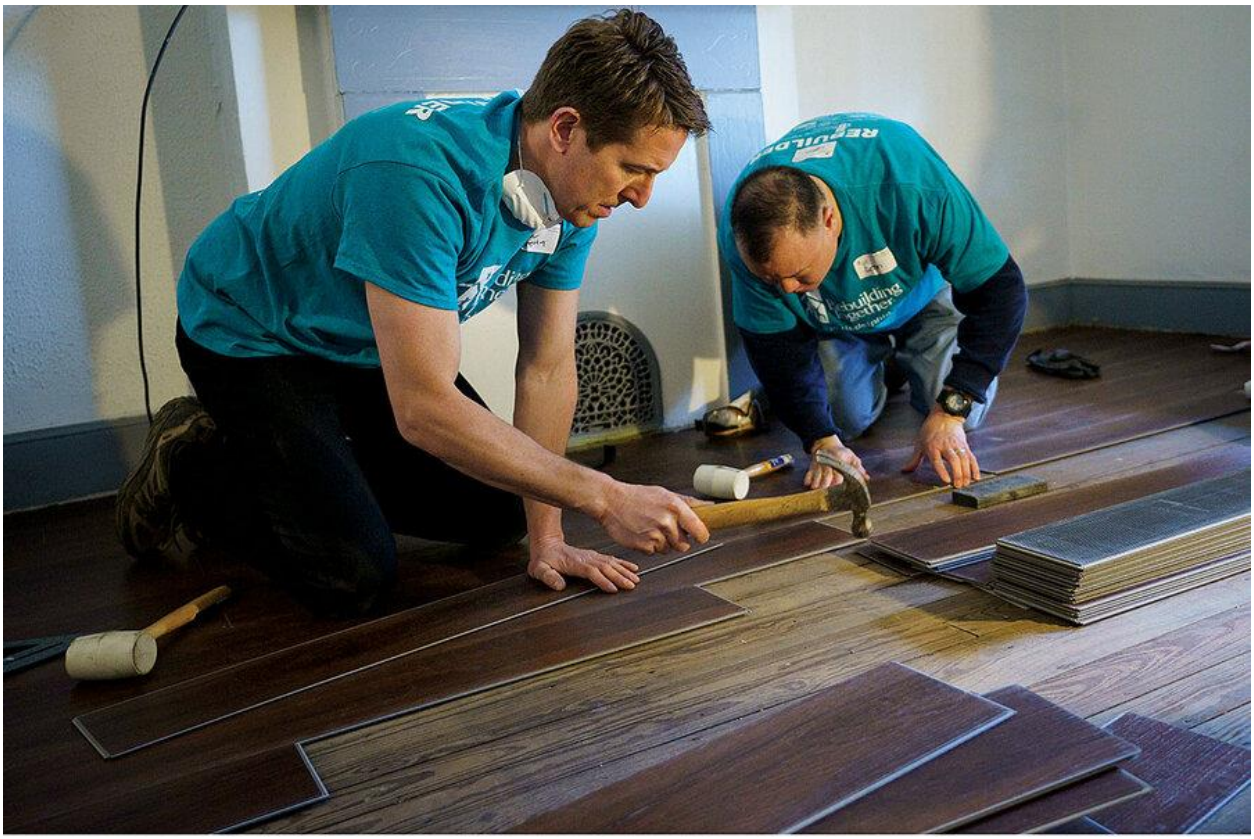
The commissioners agreed, concluding that the concept of service must not only be "demilitarized," but also better linked to government. Their recommendations include, among other things, creating a position on the National Security Council to coordinate military and civilian service, and adding slots in U.S. military academies for those interested in civilian government work. Studying and training together, the commission notes, could improve "whole of government" approaches to crises like the current coronavirus.

These steps could also spur the creation of a national database of volunteers that can be cross-referenced with the skills they bring to any crisis, "rather than just calling for them on Twitter," Ms. Moore adds.

Revamping civics education

Prior to his time on Capitol Hill, serving on the Senate Armed Services Committee and as a staffer for the late Sen. John McCain, Mr. Barney was a Navy lawyer for 22 years. Though he was aware of national service, he still didn't fully understand what it was, he says. To help remedy this, he and his fellow commissioners traveled to 22 states to ask: Why do or don't you serve, and what are the obstacles to serving?

In many cases, the answer to that last query, they discovered, was financial. While military service comes with a salary as well as free health care and college tuition, government-backed volunteer programs such as AmeriCorps are less financially liberal. Designed to be intentionally modest, living allowances are often so low that "members cannot sustain themselves without outside assistance," the commission's report notes.



Jessica Griffin/The Philadelphia Inquirer/AP/File

Doug Getty (left) and Leon Hsi install flooring with Rebuilding Together Philadelphia, a nonprofit that uses volunteers to revitalize homes, in a house on the city's west side.

When Mr. Barney spoke at a kickoff event last spring for AmeriCorps in Boston, he was surprised to learn that the group's initial training included a tutorial on how to register for food stamps. Many volunteers who skipped this step acknowledged that the only reason they could participate in the program is that they had family willing to support them. In 2018, the average budgeted living allowance for full-time AmeriCorps volunteers was $15,370.

If volunteers can manage to make ends meet, however, they often come away with valuable skills. Before Maya Gonzalez discovered Mile High Youth Corps in Denver, she wasn't earning enough working in construction to support her wife and stepchildren. But there were opportunities in energy conservation, program coordinators told her.

"I didn't know or care much about energy efficiency," she says. "But they said, 'You should look into it.'" She did, and through the program became an expert in LED lightbulbs and water-efficient toilets. "I didn't know toilets mattered," but by replacing an old model using upward of 1.6 gallons per flush with a new one using half that amount, "You can only imagine how much that saved on water bills," she says.

What Ms. Gonzalez particularly loved was working with low-income residents. “I’m this Hispanic girl with tattoos – I grew up in the projects – and right away they get the sense I come from a certain background,” she says. “One client told me, ‘I love that it’s you walking in. You feel my pain.’ And, OK, that’s kind of stereotypical, but I’m glad they know they’re not getting judged. All of a sudden they’re making you breakfast while you change a lightbulb.”

Keeping volunteers in their own communities is ideal, says Mr. Barney, who, along with fellow commissioners, recommends creating federally funded fellowships. Under these, people interested in national service would be given a card they could take to any organization and say, “I’m here to help you, and this gives you everything you need to bring me on board.” This might help locals pinpoint sources of need in their neighborhoods.

Better civics education is key, too, the report stresses, since it teaches students how Americans have worked in the past for positive, fundamental change – and overcome efforts to thwart it. As the commissioners traveled the country, “nearly every conversation included a passionate call to improve civic education,” the report points out, noting that the federal government spends more than $3.2 billion for science, technology, engineering, and math programs, versus about $5 million annually on civics.

A handful of states has revamped these courses in ways that could serve as a model for the country. Illinois now requires classroom discussions of “current and controversial events,” and also encourages some volunteering. Florida law mandates that all middle schoolers get one semester of civics, and Massachusetts calls for its high schoolers to take part in at least one “nonpartisan” civics project.

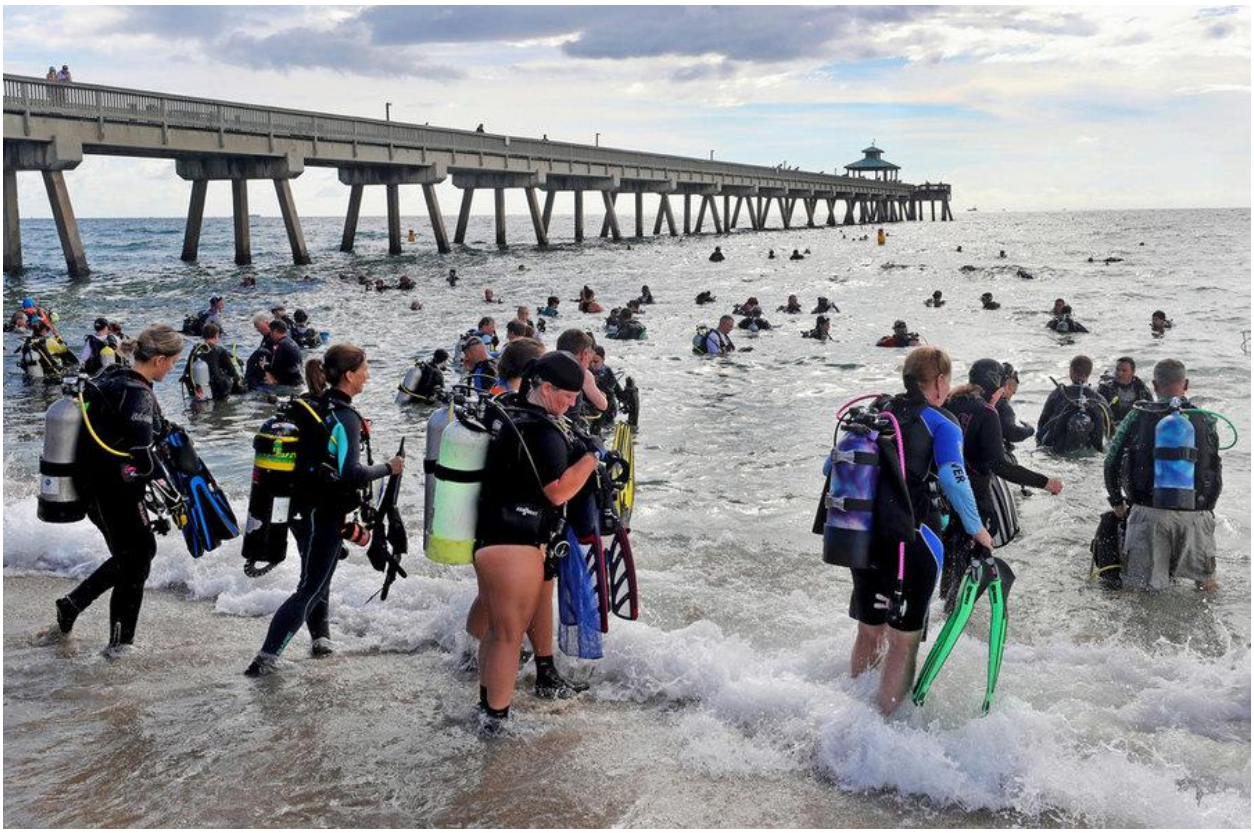
“You need to have service learning opportunities, starting in kindergarten,” Mr. Barney says. “Our vision is that by the time a person graduates, someone will ask, ‘What is your plan to serve?’ and they’ll have a ready answer.”

As a mentor, Mr. Jennings helps his students think through such questions. Hearing their stories helps him point them toward a path that’s right for them. He still aches, though, for the friends and family who didn’t qualify, or weren’t chosen, for programs that have altered the course of his life.

“My story isn’t unique – a lot of folks face adversity at a young age. Opportunity,” he adds, “is the fork in the road.”

Democracies try to boost public service

Various leaders propose incentives for volunteering as a way to rebuild trust and instill a culture of giving. In the U.S., two presidential candidates have made it a campaign issue.



AP

Volunteer divers enter the waters off Deerfield, Fla., on June 15 for an annual clean-up of ocean debris.

July 1, 2019

- **By the Monitor's Editorial Board**

What a dive! On June 15 a group of 633 scuba divers in Florida cleaned up more than 1,500 pounds of waste off Deerfield Beach. It was the largest underwater cleanup on record. It was also perhaps the largest single act of volunteering under the seas.

That last point is worth noting as the idea of promoting public service has lately been revived in at least four Western democracies facing political divisions and a rise in social distrust.

Last month, for example, the French government launched a program of national service with the first group of 2,000 teenagers being trained for community work. This year, Canada ramped up its new "service corps" for young people. In Britain's contest to choose a new prime minister, one candidate introduced the idea of compulsory service for every 16-year-old.

In the United States, meanwhile, two Democratic presidential hopefuls have proposed a service program for all young adults – beyond existing ones like Peace Corps and AmeriCorps.

Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, mentioned the idea in April while former Rep. John Delaney of Maryland was more concrete in laying out a program for a "National Service

and Climate Corps.” In addition, a group of Democrats in Congress proposed a bill last month that would offer student loan relief in exchange for public service.

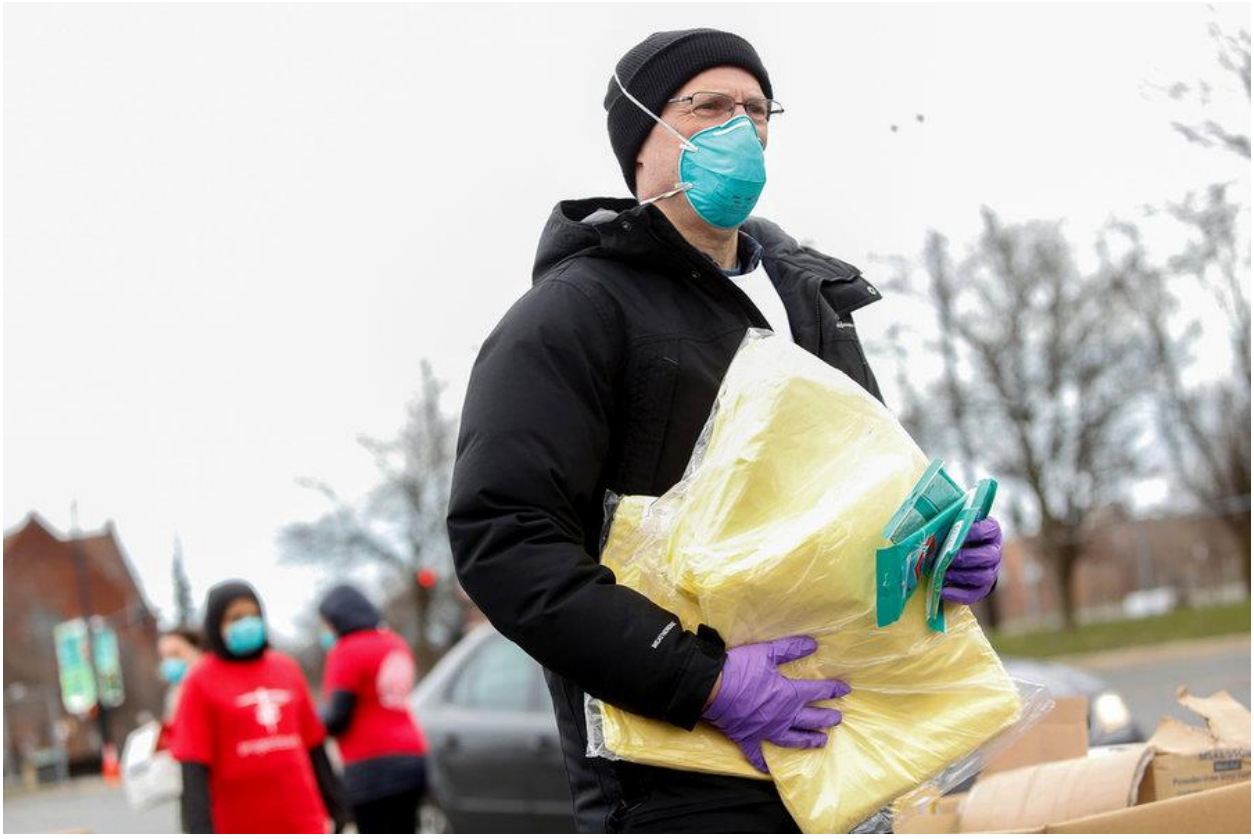
For 15 years, volunteering has declined in the U.S., one reason Congress set up an 11-member panel in 2017 called the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. While the panel will make its recommendations next year, it has already found “an overwhelming desire” among Americans to serve others.

One of the commission’s possible goals is to create a universal expectation of service among a majority of Americans. Or as another presidential candidate, Democratic Rep. Seth Moulton of Massachusetts, put it in a speech, national service should become so common that employers will ask young people applying for a job, “Where did you do your year of service?”

Giving to others through volunteering serves many purposes, especially if it is truly voluntary rather than compulsory. It can build trust across the diverse people of a nation or increase unity around shared values. Most of all, it reflects a commitment to unconditional affection toward others. That’s true even when picking up trash on the bottom of the ocean.

Self-isolation opens a door to national service

Staying home, or venturing out to volunteer, sets a high mark for mass sacrifice. A federal panel suggests new ways to expand such civic engagement.



Reuters

A volunteer in Chicago with Project C.U.R.E. accepts personal protective equipment (PPE) to be donated to healthcare workers,

March 30, 2020

- **By the Monitor's Editorial Board**

Just in time for National Volunteer Month in April, Americans are discovering the meaning of sacrifice in service to others. They are self-isolating during a pandemic, both to protect themselves and their communities. This same awareness of service could be said of paying taxes, joining the military, or doing jury duty. Yet this latest type of mass goodwill, already seared into the collective memory, could have its own impact long after the final defeat of COVID-19.

Staying at home is not the only good turn in a bad time. Some are tapping the internet to tutor low-income students, reduce loneliness in seniors, or ensure people get accurate information. Others who know how to travel safely have responded to calls for volunteers to deliver meals, help hospitals, or just mow a neighbor’s lawn.

The exact measure of volunteering may never be known. But for those who are participating in this unique civic engagement, there is a new blueprint on how to continue the experience.

On March 25, a federal commission set up three years ago to bolster America's culture of service issued its final report. Its key recommendation: create a national roster of Americans with critical skills ready to serve in a public emergency. The panel set a goal of expanding national service opportunities so that 1 million Americans participate annually by 2031..

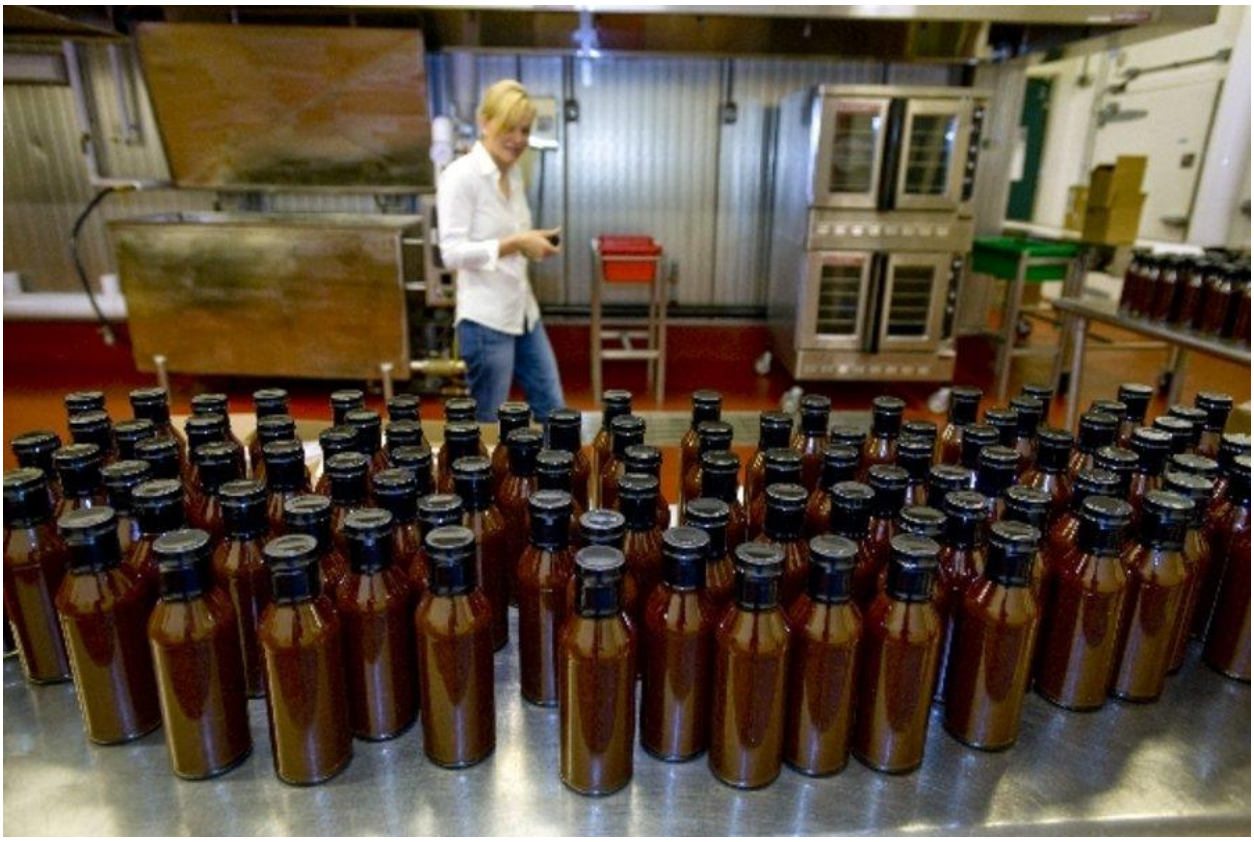
Congress established the 11-member National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service mainly over a question on how to improve expand the selective service system. Indeed, the panel recommended that women be required to register for the military draft. But its mandate included all aspects of service that might improve security in any type of emergency. Or as one commissioner, Debra Wada, put it, "Including women in the registration process reaffirms the nation's fundamental belief in a common defense, and signals that all Americans may be expected to serve."

Since its founding, the United States has frequently sought to enhance a spirit of service through programs such as the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps. That spirit picks up after a major crisis, such as the 9/11 attacks. Now the coronavirus crisis again puts a spotlight on volunteering for the greater good. When faced with a common threat, more people view service to others as a reflection of a higher good, one able to dispel the threat. When seen in that light, enduring a sacrifice like self-isolation is made easier.

•

A better way to create jobs

Nurturing start-ups works even better than infrastructure projects.



Ann Hermes / The Christian Science Monitor

The Food Innovation Center, a business incubator run by Rutgers University, helped Jamie and Jennifer Faitelson (pictured) make and bottle a new barbecue sauce.

Ann Hermes / The Christian Science Monitor

Jamie Faitelson with his specialty barbecue sauce, which contains no high fructose corn syrup.

July 2, 2009

- **By Jeremy Kutner** Correspondent

Bridgeton, N.J. — Chef Hymie Grande stares intently as his bottles of barbecue sauce – the product of years of cooking, tasting, and tinkering – slide along a conveyor belt toward a roll of custom-made holographic labels. This is it, he says, the birth of his small-business dream.

“Nobody else can say they have a sauce that is just like mine,” says Chef Grande (aka Jamie Faitelson), his face beaming. “This is the first time it’s real.”

The road to a business launch hasn’t been easy for the former luxury-watch salesman. With his business too small for commercial bottlers, who demand huge minimum orders, and too ambitious to work out of his home, Mr. Faitelson was stuck. One company he approached wouldn’t consider producing anything less than 35,000 bottles – a massive investment for a bootstrap entrepreneur.

Salvation came in the form of the Rutgers Food Innovation Center, a business incubator that nurtures young food entrepreneurs by giving them advice, a place to work, and, critically, access to a giant professional food production facility – complete with a labeling machine – to get their ideas off the ground.

“A small business like mine could never go to the big producers,” Faitelson says. Without professional guidance, he adds, he’s not sure he would be able to move forward. He now plans to enter his specialty sauce – which contains no high- fructose corn syrup, his chief selling point – at food shows and try to get noticed.

Interest in business incubators has exploded in the United States as recession-hit communities from New York City to Youngstown, Ohio, search for ways to revive their moribund economies. Already, well over 1,000 of these typically nonprofit organizations (more than 7,000 globally) shepherd local entrepreneurs through the beginning stages of business development with resources and services in the hope they’ll one day create local jobs.

They may be onto something. A 2008 study by the Economic Development Administration (EDA) found that, per dollar invested, incubators created more jobs than any other economic-development efforts – more than industrial parks and 10 times more than highway and other transportation projects (see chart). But not all incubators are created equal. As cities rush to embrace this hot economic-development strategy, they run the risk, economic-development experts say, of wasting lots of money.

“An incubator is only as successful as the labor market around it,” says Amy Glasmeier of the urban studies and planning department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. “If it doesn’t have a connection to the local economy, it’s just cheap real estate.”

So what makes a successful incubator? It starts with the ability to meet the many varied needs of entrepreneurs.

Debby Mitchell, a professor at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, came to the entrepreneurial world a complete novice. Her company, GeoMotion, combines education and fitness with such products as fitness mats and an integrated curriculum called Learnercise. Her company set up shop in the University of Central Florida Business Incubation Program three years ago.

“I moved my office into the incubator, and through them was able to find an investor a few years ago, and now I’m living the dream,” Dr. Mitchell says. Recession has trimmed her sales 20 percent, she says, but through a support group of fellow CEOs set up by the incubator, she has figured out how to ride out tough times.

“You’re getting basically free information,” Mitchell says of the contact she’s had with other entrepreneurs and a series of public relations, accounting, and legal professionals who work with incubated companies in the hopes that they’ll be clients one day. “I don’t have a business degree or a business background. For me to make that big a jump would have been tough without other support.”

Unlike Faitelson, who needed to find production capacity, Mitchell needed full-scale business support, from setting up a business plan to finding an investor.

Just as entrepreneurs have varied needs, incubators go about supporting them in different ways. They have flourished in unlikely places like Youngstown and Toledo, Ohio, by focusing very narrowly. (Youngstown, for example, only incubates business-to-business technology firms.) Other cities, like Boulder, Colo., have nurtured successful companies, only to see them leave town because of a lack of long-term strategy, says Dinah Adkins, president of the National Business Incubation Association (NBIA).

The Food Innovation Center, winner of the 2007 Incubator of the Year award from the NBIA, takes a novel approach. Concentrated exclusively on the food industry, it started life solely as a center for advice – reviewing business plans, connecting producers with suppliers, and contacting investors. Physical space, the usual hallmark of incubators, didn’t arrive until much later, well after networks had been established to support new companies.

“We are an economic development center, not a research center,” says Lou Cooperhouse, who runs the incubator. “We want to be so service-oriented that we forget about our four walls.”

Incubators have come a long way since 1980, when a dozen or so facilities dotted the landscape. “Thirty years ago, nobody paid attention to start-ups,” says Ms. Adkins. “It’s huge now.”

During his campaign, President Obama pledged $250 million a year to establish a nationwide network of incubators. That promise shrank to $50 million in his proposed budget. But Adkins says it’s still a big step up from the average $30 million a year that the EDA doled out.

Whether companies like Chef Hymie Grande and GeoMotion can actually thrive on their own remains an open question. The Small Business Administration estimates that 44 percent of all new businesses last at least four years, which means, of course, that 56 percent do not. Companies that graduated from incubation programs seemed to do better in 1997, when the NBIA found that about 87 percent of them made it past that four-year point. But no current study exists and even the decade-old data are unclear, mostly because individual incubators rarely track the long-term success of the companies they hatch.

This lack of clarity, along with the extreme difficulty of launching new businesses, as well as the high failure rates associated with entrepreneurship, even in good times, should give communities and universities pause before they latch onto an incubation program as a foolproof economic engine, incubator experts say.

“We’re seeing every community, no matter what their population, wanting their own incubator,” says Karl LaPan, president of the Northeast Indiana Innovation Center in Fort Wayne. The danger is that communities rush to set up incubators and end up losing money, he adds.

One solution is to focus on incubator networks to ensure that the biotech dreams of one community don’t destroy those of another, Mr. LaPan says. “In an environment like this, competing county by county is not a way to success.”

States are moving slowly toward incubator networks. Maryland, in particular, has worked to link its 20 main business incubators. But the landscape remains competitive, especially in a recession that has left many programs scrambling for funding. This new spirit of cooperation means that the Food Innovation Center regularly trades firms with other incubators that can better serve the needs of clients, including Faitelson, who hopes to begin his conquest of New Jersey’s food world.

Meanwhile, he can dream. “Now it’s trial and error – and fate,” he says.

Related stories

•

•

Income inequality & Racial employment

Rising inequality in a crisis: The view from Baltimore

WHY WE WROTE THIS

The economic downturn caused by the pandemic has fallen disproportionately hard on Black communities. While many people would like to see more government help, some people in cities like Baltimore are taking their own steps to ease economic burdens.

Kriston Jae Bethel/Special to the Christian Science Monitor

"I have dynamic, excellent children" coming to learn in programs at the farm. "We want to prepare children to lead organizations," to promote "Black excellence," says Richard Francis, who goes by the name Farmer Chippy and promotes urban farming on vacant lots in Baltimore.

June 24, 2020

TWO WAYS TO READ THE STORY

- **QUICK READ**
- **DEEP READ** (13 MIN.)

- **By Mark Trumbull** Staff writer
  @MarkTCSM
  BALTIMORE

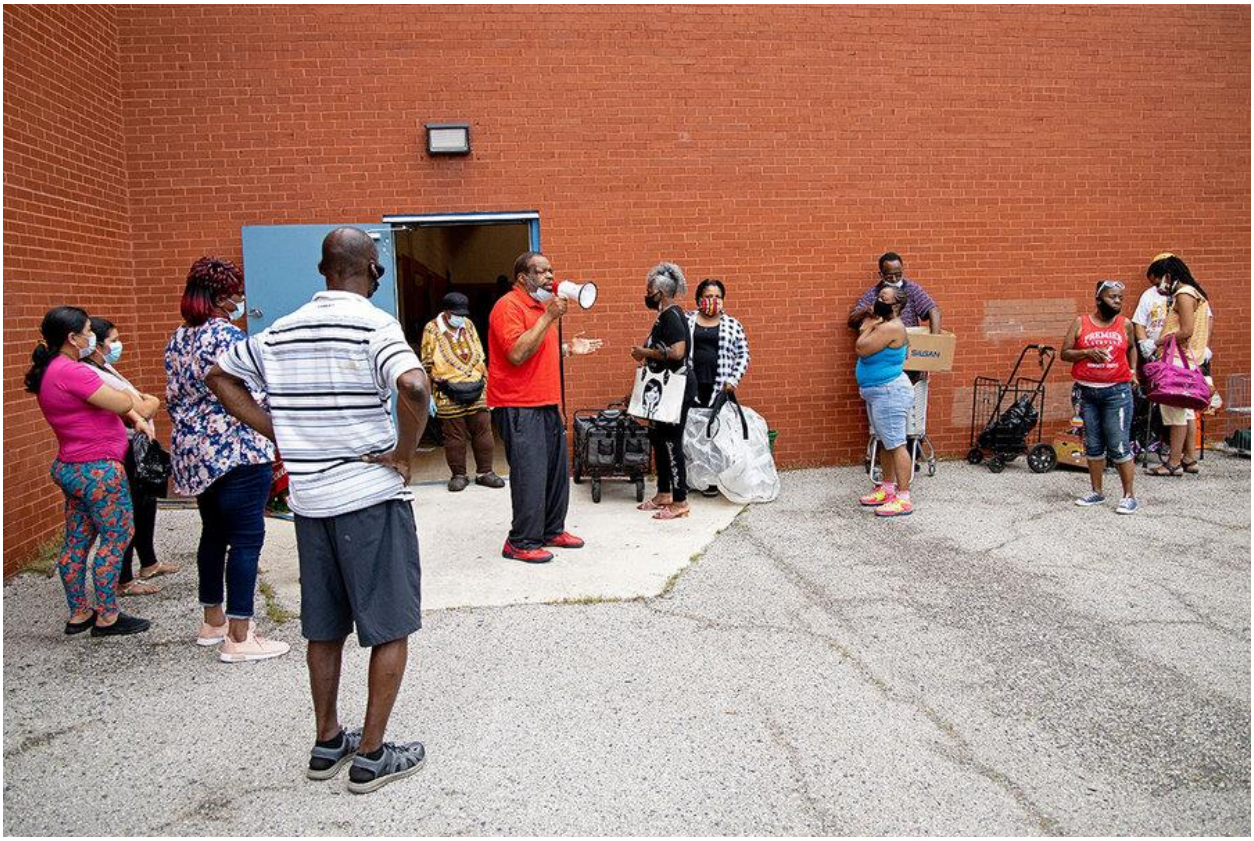
George Mitchell holds up a megaphone to amplify his words to the crowd waiting for boxes of free food. “If you can’t use it, don’t take it,” Mr. Mitchell says. Donations are gratefully accepted, but “if you don’t want to pay, that’s OK.”

The lines for this twice-weekly event in Baltimore have grown significantly longer since the coronavirus shuttered major segments of the economy and sidelined millions of workers.

On this recent Friday, one of the people lined up outside the red-brick former school is Cassandra Branch, who lost her job as a security worker at M&T Bank Stadium. Another is Elizabeth Rice, an aspiring young educator whose school employment dried up. A retail opportunity also fell through, and she hasn't been able to access unemployment benefits.

And there's Daniel, who asked that his last name not be used. He says he's struggling to support his wife and two children with now-rarer home-improvement gigs.

"It's just been too hard," he says of the past several months.



Michael Bonfigli/Special to the Christian Science Monitor

George Mitchell, head of the Langston Hughes Community, Business and Resource Center, gives instructions to people standing in line to receive free food in Baltimore. The center offers job skills classes and other services to local residents, but many of the activities were shut down during the coronavirus.

Economic recessions tend to be especially rough on some of the very Americans who have few resources to begin with: people who are young, work in low-wage jobs, or have less education. And in a nation where African Americans have experienced deep and persistent inequalities from the era of slavery forward, times of economic hardship have historically expanded existing gaps.

The coronavirus downturn looks to be following that same pattern, and perhaps even amplifying it – in the process expanding already deep fault lines in a country that is now in the news more for social unrest than for being a model of shared prosperity.

During the pandemic, while many office-style jobs have been able to be done from home, many lower-paid jobs, such as those at restaurants and football stadiums, have not. The road to recovering those jobs may be slow as the economy gradually reopens. Meanwhile, as of early June, death rates attributed to COVID-19 have been more than twice as high for African Americans as for white Americans.

And now all this is being processed by many citizens through a different lens – one of deep indignation over a fatal instance of police brutality against George Floyd in Minneapolis. While policing and criminal justice issues are the main fuel behind the nationwide protests, vast racial gaps in incomes and opportunities are an inextricable part of the context.

“Now is the time to ask the tough questions. ... There are real windows for a radical significant policy change that open infrequently in the course of history, at least in this country,” says Kenan Fikri, research director at the Economic Innovation Group, a Washington think tank that tracks inequality and focuses on boosting economic growth.

“And I believe that we’re facing one right now.”

Mr. Mitchell, megaphone in hand, is doing his part to lift long-standing burdens. In this largely African American part of Baltimore, he’s working to shift the dynamics that have left so many in his community with little sense of hope or progress.

“Everybody ain’t doing it. But he’s doing it,” says Jeanette Snowden, who is also waiting for her number to be called to fill up a box of food. “This is definitely a five-star light, not only for this community but for people who come from other communities.”

Amid a deep economic downturn and a national election year, the United States is searching for economic hope. President Donald Trump has cut taxes, sought to use trade policy to revive U.S. manufacturing jobs, and this year supported pandemic relief for affected workers and businesses. Democrats are proposing even bigger emergency aid and are abuzz with long-term ideas to narrow the income divide, ranging from a wealth tax to a universal basic income and other bulwarks against poverty.

But on the ground here in a city that is home to some of this nation’s most distressed African American neighborhoods, many residents don’t see much point in waiting for a rescue from on high. That doesn’t mean help would be unwelcome. It’s just that hopes have been raised and dashed many times before.

“This virus has magnified the extreme disparities that exist, especially in our most impoverished neighborhoods,” Sharon Green Middleton, the City Council member for this part of Baltimore, said at a recent council meeting.

The virus is, in fact, giving fresh salience to an appeal made by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, just before his assassination prompted demonstrations of outrage and protest in Black communities nationwide.

“One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive,” Dr. King said. Today’s equivalent might be the grocery and delivery workers who are deemed essential and keeping the nation fed and supplied, generally at low wages and sometimes with few benefits or protections against the virus.

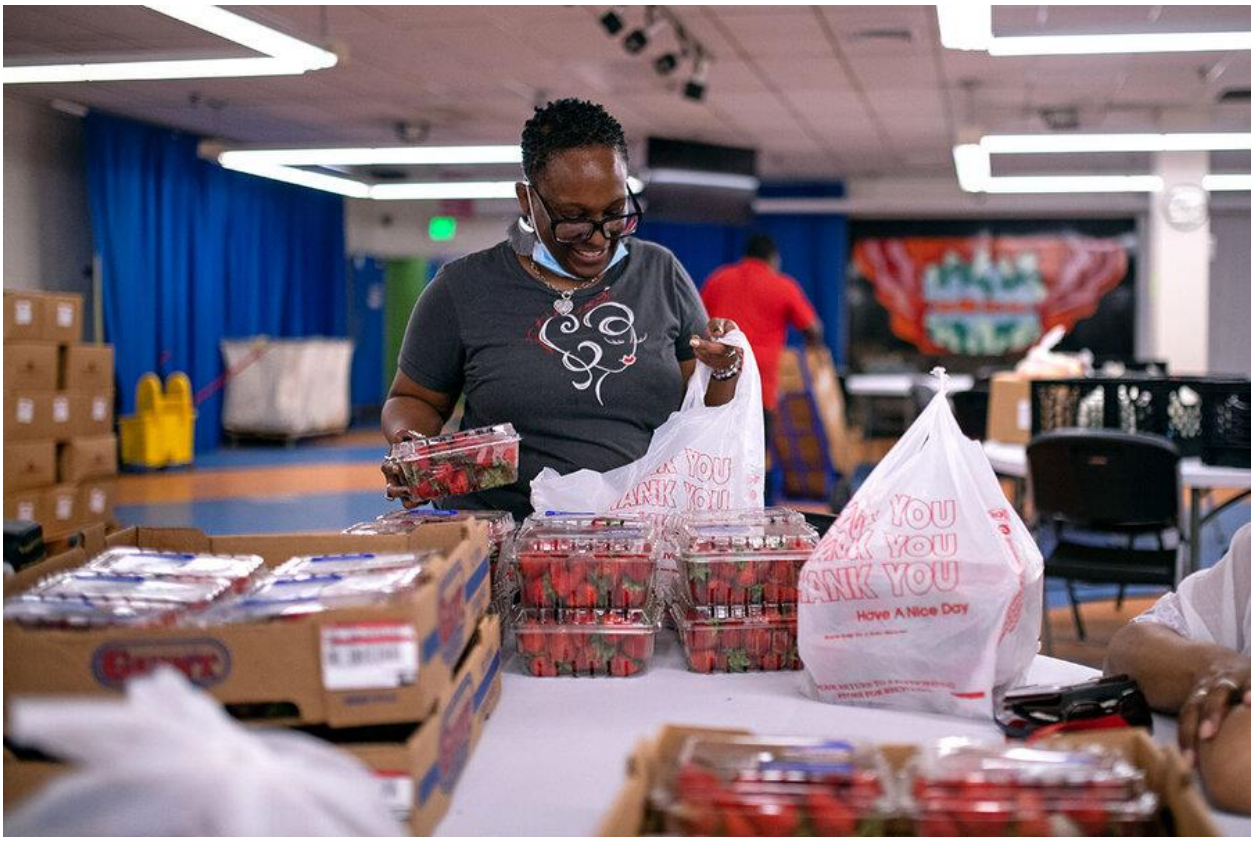
“The person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician, for if he doesn’t do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity,” Dr. King said as he lent his voice to the cause of striking Black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, at the time.

Now, as then, for many people in hard economic circumstances the most visible path upward is local action. It’s efforts like those of Mr. Mitchell and his band of more than 70 fellow volunteers.

Four years ago, after an unsuccessful fight to keep Langston Hughes Elementary School from closing, Mr. Mitchell led a campaign to repurpose the building. Once a coordinator for after-school activities, he now heads the renamed facility – the Langston Hughes Community, Business and Resource Center.

It, too, has been adversely affected by COVID-19. Demand at the center’s food pantry is up, but various job skills classes are on hold (except for ones on nursing). In normal times, the center hosts everything from free hot meals to financial literacy training, Spanish classes, and “Black business Fridays.”

For Mr. Mitchell, it all fits together. When people learn life skills from balancing a checkbook to cooking a meal, it’s a step toward freedom from financial anxiety or debt. And by contrast, when worries about money or a contagious disease combine with not having enough to eat, “it provides a situation where it *is* hopeless.”



Kriston Jae Bethel/Special to The Christian Science Monitor

April Whitehead bags strawberries for distribution at the Langston Hughes Community, Business and Resource Center in Baltimore.

So every box of food counts.

“All we got to do is change one block at a time. It’s working, man,” Mr. Mitchell says.

But he’s far from naive about the magnitude of the challenge. “We’re running out of time.”

Whether complacency is close to his home or in affluent communities far away, “the culture has to change,” he says. “Somebody is making money off of our misery. ... How much money should you make off of people who are poor?”

“Things could be so different”

A couple of miles from the Langston Hughes center, Dion Thompson is wielding a video camera, documenting another local effort to give food to those in need.

He’s now jobless himself. The payment-processing firm he worked for suddenly found itself with fewer businesses that he could pitch as a telemarketing specialist. Mr. Thompson, who had been making $17 an hour, hopes it won’t be long before he can be rehired.

But what he really wants is something longer term, a career – and to put a criminal record behind him. The downturn is making that harder.

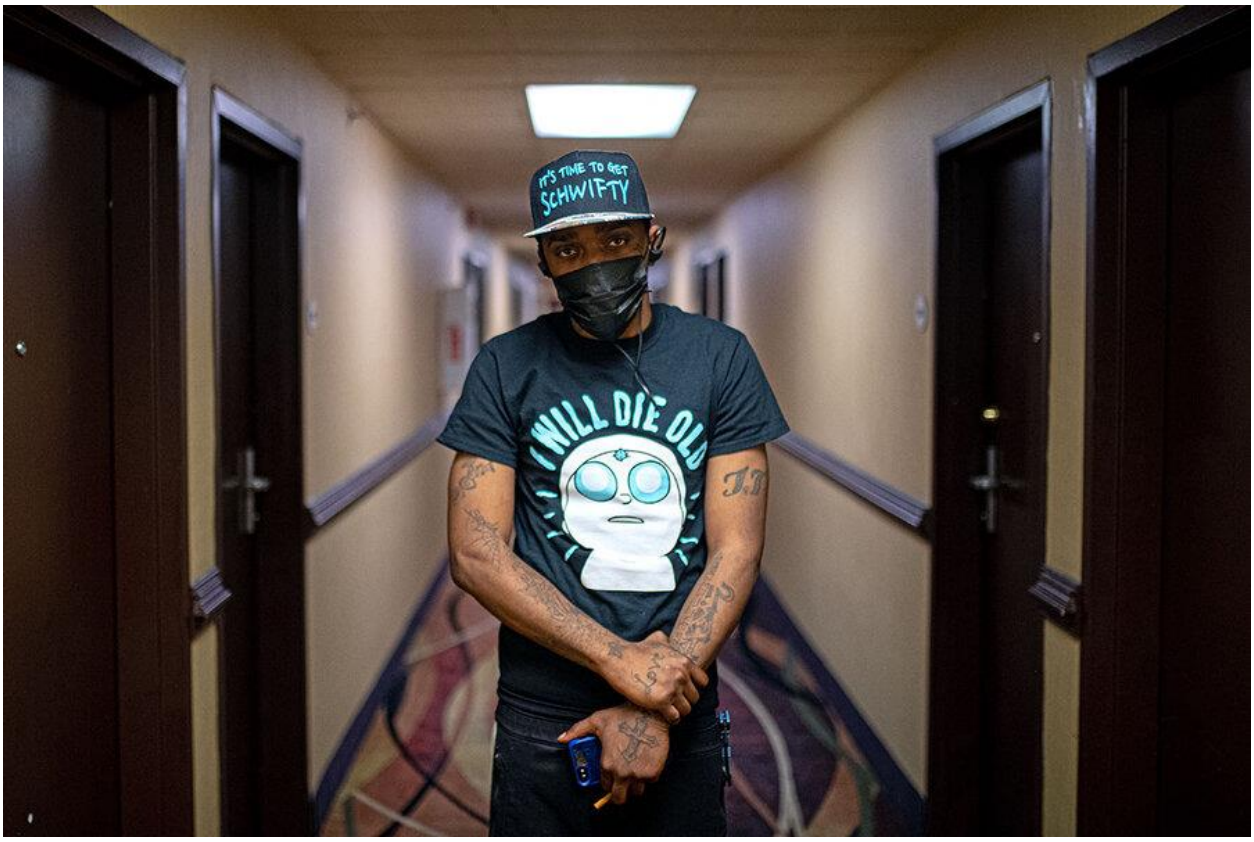
But like Mr. Mitchell, he’s also thinking about how to build up his community. This is the neighborhood that was devastated five years ago by protests after local resident Freddie Gray died of a spinal injury incurred during a police arrest. Promises of investment and jobs have largely bypassed the neighborhood for years.

Mr. Thompson would like to create a studio where people can perform rap or spoken-word poetry.

“I’m trying to change,” he says, and trying to help other young people avoid trouble in a city known for a high murder rate, and also for its packs of “squeegee boys” who seek cash from passing drivers in exchange for a window wash.

“Things could be so different,” Mr. Thompson says. “We should not be looking at skin. We should be looking at morals.”

He’s not seeking cash handouts. But he wonders why more money isn’t spent improving schools. He questions why a billionaire can send an automobile into outer space and yet there’s “not enough money to give to the community.”



Kriston Jae Bethel/Special to the Christian Science Monitor

"Things could be so different. We should not be looking at skin. We should be looking at morals," says Dion Thompson, who was laid off as a telemarketing specialist when the pandemic hit and would like to open a studio where people in Baltimore can perform rap music.

The pandemic's effects are also being felt, of course, in places that aren't known as impoverished. But if the effects are widespread, the disparities are also very real. Even in good times, African Americans face delays in catching an updraft. Yet the long economic expansion that began in 2009 had brought some gains, with Black unemployment hitting a record low 5.4% last August.

Now the officially reported unemployment rate for white Americans has surged from 3.1% in February to 12.4% in May, according to Labor Department estimates. But unemployment for Black Americans has jumped from 5.8% to 16.8% in that same time. For Latino and Hispanic Americans, the rate went from 4.4% to 17.6%.

Pandemic-related gaps are also significant based on age, gender, and education, with higher joblessness among women, young workers, and those without a college degree.

All this comes after several decades of generally widening inequality between those at the top of the earnings scale and the rest of Americans. From 1979 to 2015, household income for the top 1% of earners grew five times faster (a total gain of 229%) than for the bottom 90% (with gains

of 46%). And with costs for education and health care rising faster than wages, legions in middle or lower tiers have seen stagnation rather than meaningful gains in living standards.

As revealed in Baltimore or virtually any other U.S. city, the gaps are starkly geographic. In the new millennium, the gains of economic growth have increasingly been concentrated in "superstar cities" and college towns, while the overall number of counties or ZIP code areas in economic distress has actually been rising, according to Economic Innovation Group data.

With the coronavirus, "we see that distressed people and places are staring down a triple whammy," says Mr. Fikri, the researcher. He refers to higher rates of poor health, weaker health care infrastructure, and now the risk that a depressed job market could persist "for a very long time."

While places like West Baltimore are vastly different from struggling rural areas in Kentucky or New Mexico, their challenges can have some similar roots: a dearth of jobs or investment, education gaps, health burdens including drug addiction, and challenges maintaining strong community bonds.

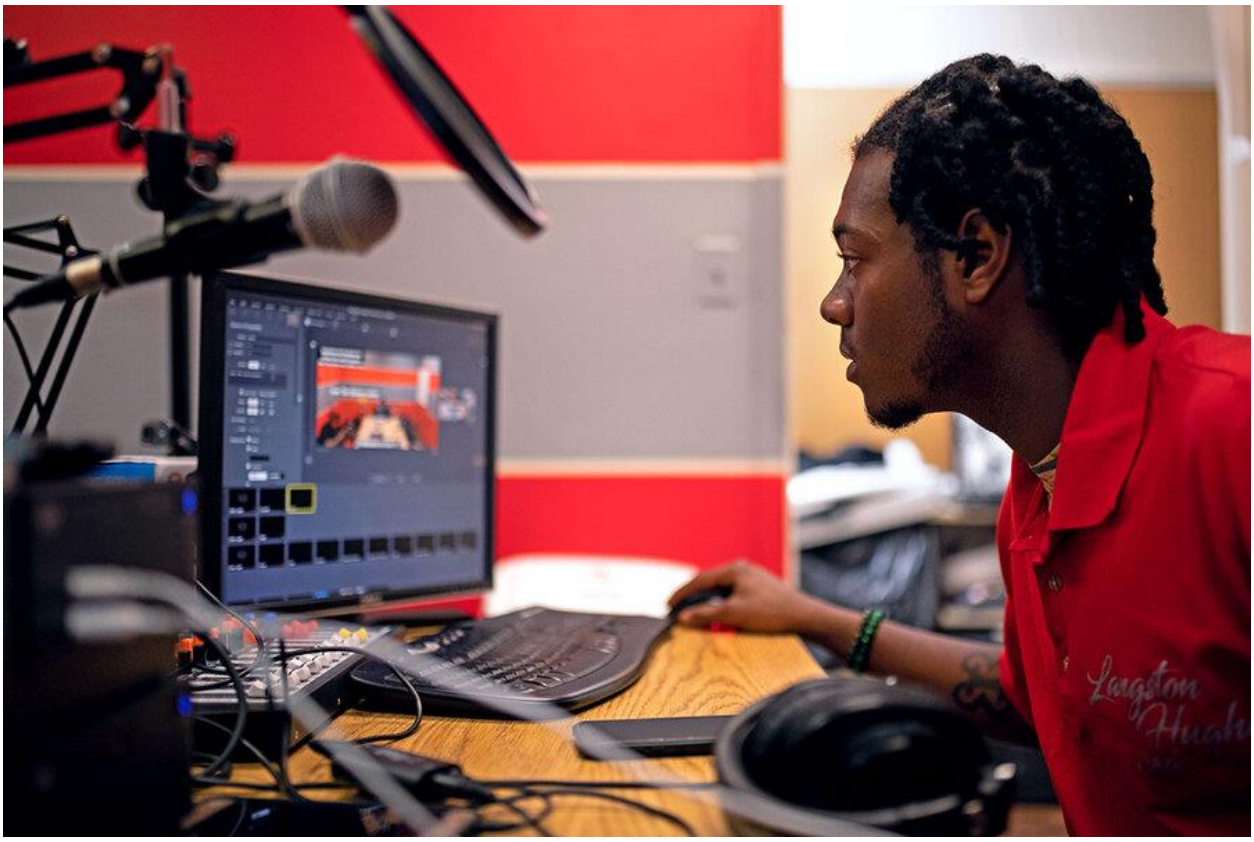
From the urban Northeast to the rural South and beyond, the long-standing reach of racial discrimination adds its own weight.

"The legacy of slavery has not been resolved," says economist Lisa Cook at Michigan State University in East Lansing. She sees this as the greatest among "a whole lot of other challenges" tied to economic inequality.

She calls for blue-sky thinking reminiscent of the New Deal. Fellow Black scholars, she notes, are proposing measures such as a federal jobs guarantee or "baby bonds" that create a nest egg for young people to use for college or other goals as they enter adulthood.

Many conservatives argue that policies aimed at redistribution could lead the nation into a future of higher taxes or reduced overall prosperity. The counterargument is that greater equity can enhance economic growth by broadening markets and talent pools. After all, recent years of high inequality – with chief executive salaries up 940% since 1978 – have coincided with a decrease in, rather than a blossoming of, new-business formation.

"We're missing out on higher living standards if we're not incorporating more women and African Americans into the process," says Dr. Cook. And it has wider political implications, she adds. "If people don't believe that they are participating in the shared prosperity of the country, they won't believe in the system and they won't believe in the social contract."



Kriston Jae Bethel/Special to the Christian Science Monitor

Salim Williams prepares to livestream a radio show, “The Artist Lounge,” at the Langston Hughes center.

Nourishing Black excellence

Here on the streets of West Baltimore, there’s no doubt about whether the community needs a boost. Richard Francis, an immigrant from Trinidad who goes by the name Farmer Chippy, is trying to do it from the ground up.

Quite literally.

Fresh-grown food, after all, isn’t just a welcome form of emergency assistance during the pandemic. It’s also something residents worried about long before. Many residents live in “food deserts” – places without supermarkets let alone farm stands.

“Grow more food!” Farmer Chippy says, as he walks among rows of young corn plants, kale, and other vegetables in formerly vacant lots along Park Heights Avenue. “We must be respected for the talents that exist in our community. We must manage our own resources.”

The vision is one of empowerment for the community; partnering with local groups, he tries to ignite interest in urban farming in young and old alike. Start these steps toward better health and food security, and he says a stronger neighborhood (he calls it an “agrihood”) will follow.

It’s not just that he’s stopped waiting for policymakers to help what he says is “the greatest city in America.” He is actively rejecting an economic system that he says has too long exploited Black workers.

“I have dynamic, excellent children” coming to learn in programs at the farm, he says. “We want to prepare children to lead organizations,” to promote “Black excellence.”

On a recent Saturday afternoon, some of the young people attracted by that vision are helping out at the farm.

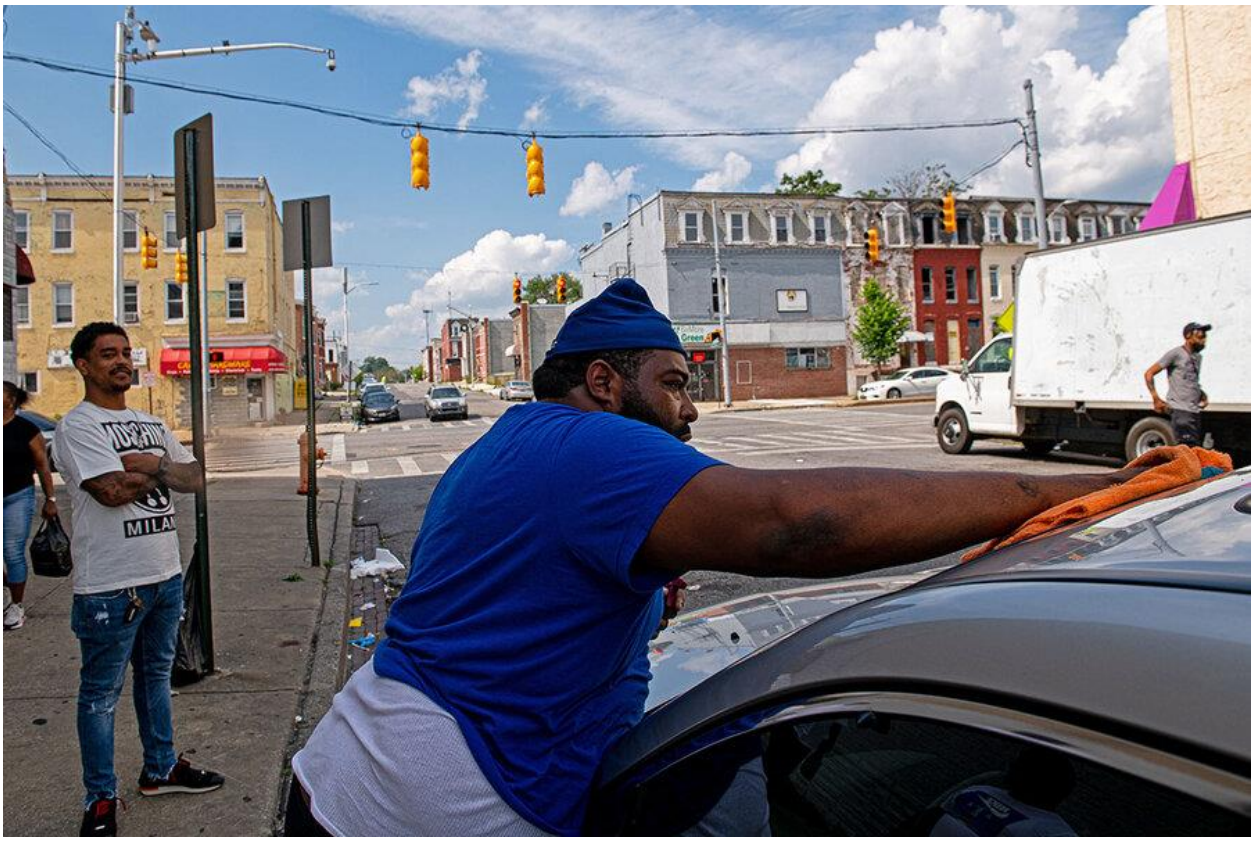
“The whole system needs to be remodeled,” says Kamryn Washington, a political science major at Morgan State University, not far up the road. “This is America,” she explains. “You should be helping out everybody.”

Bria Morton-Lane, a biology major at Howard University in Washington, D.C., similarly wants to see new generations of young people growing up nourished, not just with food but with education.

“It’s not about moving away and making a better life for yourself. I want to make a better life for this community,” the lifelong Baltimore resident says, as she adds handfuls of topsoil to help kale plants thrive.

This is just one upstart project, but it’s not alone in seeing food as a building block toward wider progress. At the storefront of BeMore Green, where Mr. Thompson was doing his videography, the boxes of fresh produce bring smiles to grateful recipients – some of whom bite into crunchy apples.

One of the people growing and delivering the food, Dominic Nell, sees his work as blending physical and mental health in an area that needs more of both. “[We’ve been] left out of the wealth conversation,” he says. So instead of “40 acres and a mule” – the promise that formerly enslaved people hoped would come to fruition after the Civil War – he asks for “40 vacants and some tools,” referring to vacant lots.



Kriston Jae Bethel/Special to the Christian Science Monitor

JR finishes detailing a car on a street in Baltimore. He had planned to open a store, JR's Penny Mart, on the same corner in March, but has been unable to because of the pandemic.

"We've got to love each other a little more."

Marvin "Doc" Cheatham is a community leader just a few blocks away – a longtime advocate of voting, of civil rights, and of taking kids to Orioles baseball games.

As he looks back to the tumultuous year of 1968, when he graduated from high school as unrest flared over the assassination of Dr. King, he says he sees some progress for Black Americans. His view is born out by evidence like rising incomes and education levels since then, and the election of a Black president in 2008.

But Mr. Cheatham also sees big gaps left to bridge, at a time when wealth of the average Black household is one-tenth that of white counterparts. In his neighborhood, the disparity is even greater than that.

"We don't have a health clinic," Mr. Cheatham says. "No laundromat. No bank." Yes, no supermarket either. And with all this, he says, hope in some corners of his neighborhood has "almost disappeared."

It's possible that the exigencies of the current moment – an election-year economic crisis coupled with national outrage over racial injustice – will spur a push for new policies to address economic inequalities as well as police misconduct.

It's notable that many white Americans are marching along with African Americans against racial injustice. And, separate from the question of enduring racism, political pressure in recent years has resulted in some state-level policies to support working-class Americans, such as a higher minimum wage, paid family leave, and higher taxes on rich people to help pay for such efforts.

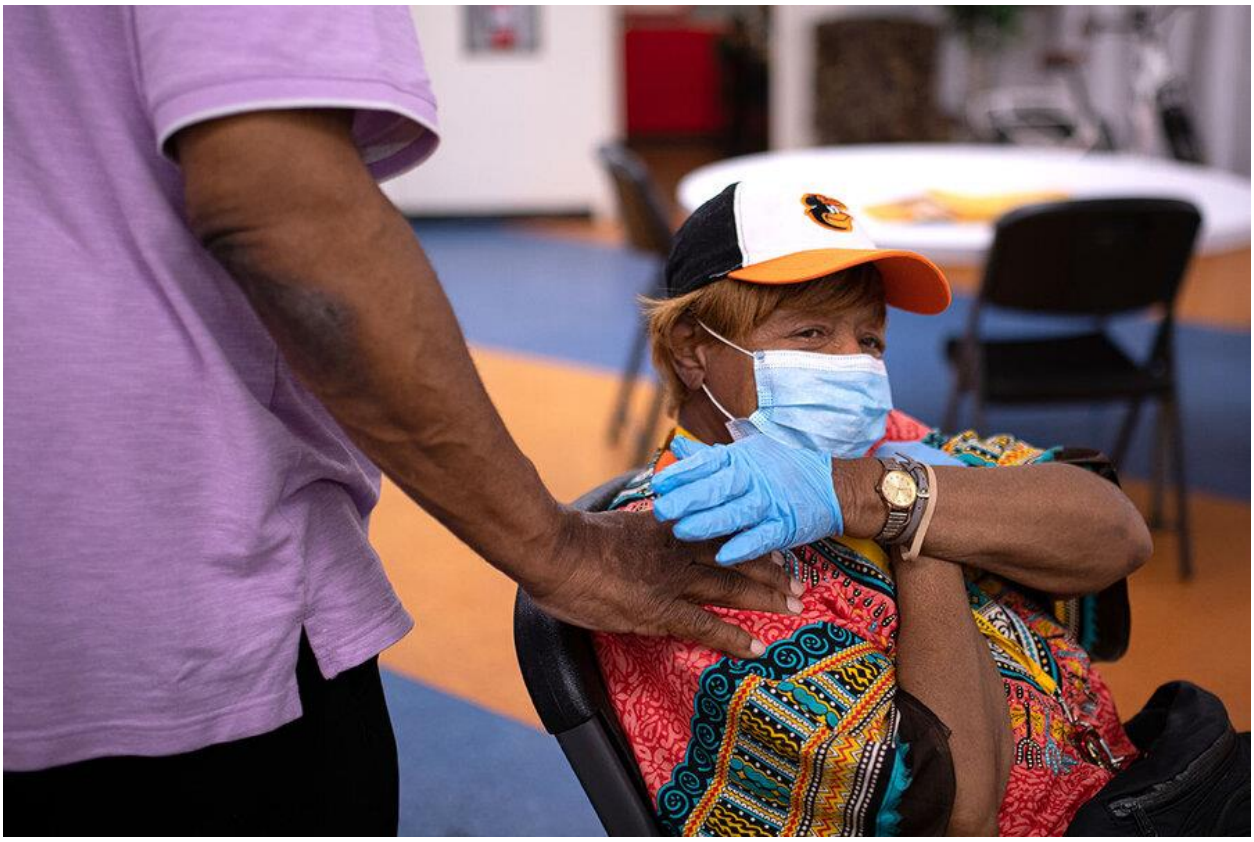
People like Mr. Cheatham say local actions must also play a key role in moving distressed communities forward. When he sees vacant lots, his first thought is not of farms but of parks. He has already carved out one in his Easterwood neighborhood, where people can enjoy picnics and rosebushes. And now a more ambitious project – a skateboard park – is on the way.

"Baltimore is a city that's not going to let itself be defined by its past," says Stephanie Murdock, another community leader who's helping to make it happen. She is white. Mr. Cheatham is Black. But they speak of each other as "brother" and "sister" in this effort to bring positivity, health, and excitement to young people.

America more broadly may need some of the same determination. Economic inequality rarely shows up in polls as a top voter priority. But that's a bit misleading. The American penchant for economic freedom is matched by deep concerns over economic security. And 79% of U.S. adults called inequality a "top" or "important" priority in a 2019 Pew Research Center survey.

Even the long-stodgy U.S. Federal Reserve system, charged mainly with maintaining a stable banking network, now has a regional institute focused on inequality.

Some wonder if America can afford to address the rising income gap. Others wonder if this rich but highly stratified nation can afford not to. The debate will surely be part of this fall's presidential race.



Kriston Jae Bethel/Special to the Christian Science Monitor

Ella Scovens, chaplain for a child care program at the center, greets George Mitchell as he places a hand on her shoulder.

Back at the Langston Hughes center, George Mitchell flips some switches in a modest studio to go on air with his daily call-in show on local radio. On this day he's partly soul-searching about how another African American man with his same first name (George Floyd) died after a police officer pressed a knee into his neck.

"Is that what my life is worth? A counterfeit $20 bill?" he asks, referring to the suspected crime for which Mr. Floyd was being arrested. "They want to label us: stupid, drug addicts ... lazy," Mr. Mitchell says.

Even as he appeals for greater justice, he goads his listeners to lift their own lives higher through compassion and grit. "Take care of your kids. Respect Black women."

Above all, he says, it's time for a society with more love. Love among Black Americans themselves. Love that can span across racial boundaries. "Because I'm pro-Black, I'm not anti anything," he says. "We've got to love each other a little more."