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COMMENTARY

Rod Watson: System fails those who need it most

By Rod Watson

Updated: 11/01/07 7:51 AM

There were lots of dismal statistics in the new Census Bureau report on poverty and this week's Buffalo News series that put faces to the numbers.

But the most discouraging figures of all come from elsewhere in the census files.

That's particularly true if you believe Henry L. Taylor Jr.'s oft-expressed contention that "the problem is not poverty, it's policy."

The census data depicts Buffalo as the second-poorest big city in the nation. Yet Taylor, the University at Buffalo urban planner, reminds anyone who will listen of all the wealth created in Western New York — and of how little of it benefits people in certain neighborhoods.

That's a direct result of policy.

Yet there's a Catch-22 that makes it difficult to see how anything will change: The people most affected by poverty are the very ones who have the least impact on "the system."

A look at Census Bureau surveys after the last presidential election makes the point. Whites reported voting at a nearly 66 percent rate, a full 10 percentage points higher than African-Americans and more than double the anemic 28 percent rate for Hispanics.

The disparity by education level is even greater. Those with a bachelor's degree voted at a nearly 73 percent rate, compared with just a 52 percent turnout for those with only a high school diploma and a measly 35 percent for dropouts.

Income figures paint a similar portrait. Nearly 78 percent of those with family incomes above \$100,000 went to the polls. Among those making \$20,000 to \$30,000, only 49 percent voted. And among families making \$10,000

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to \$15,000, the turnout was 39 percent.

In other words, those with the least — minorities, the less-educated and the poor — do the least to make the system work for them. And if they aren't voting, you can bet they aren't making campaign contributions, hosting candidate dinner parties or manning phone banks.

So what politician is going to take the poor seriously?

“That’s a very hard nut to crack. We’ve been talking about that for 40 years,” L. Nathan Hare, executive director of the Community Action Organization of Erie County, says of the effort to mobilize those who most need mobilizing.

“They’re so disaffected with the political process because they don’t see the process working for them,” Hare said.

Yet the process never will work for them as long as they’re on the sidelines. That’s the dilemma.

A prime example may come next week. The poor — in both Buffalo and shrinking first-ring suburbs — should be incensed by Chris Collins’ talk of rewriting the county sales tax agreement to benefit growing, affluent areas.

But the GOP candidate for county executive knows where the votes are. There’s no reason to fear those who will stay home Tuesday.

And politicians who do court the poor tend to show up only at election time, before forgetting about poor people the rest of the year.

Nothing will change unless “we have some way to engage these people all through the course of the year,” Hare said.

“We may have to bring the meetings into their neighborhoods” rather than holding conclaves in fancy hotels, and it may mean going “literally door-to-door, talking to them on the corners and in the barbershops.”


“If you could produce 25,000 people in Buffalo who’d all vote the same way, you’d produce an awful lot of change here,” Hare said.

Maybe that’s why so few seem to mind if the poor remain silent.

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