

Other parts of the poverty program faced a similar crisis as they got under way. And in retrospect, it is evident that even the experts, in 1964, underestimated the deep-rootedness of poverty, and consequently overestimated the country's ability to devise effective solutions for those caught in its clutches. So rapidly had the social consensus of the country changed in the early 1960's, and so quickly had this change been translated into political action, that neither our understanding of the complexities of the problem nor our technologies for solving it could catch up. As a result, the Job Corps was caught in a hopeless position—reliable technologies simply didn't exist for achieving the extremely ambitious goals which had been set for it.

In short, overoptimistic expectations are largely responsible for much of the disappointment and disillusionment over the Job Corps today. But this is hardly a reason for crossing it off as a failure. And there is a far more important problem which needs to be considered in determining its future.

The Job Corps was enacted by Congress as a program to help eliminate poverty. But there are real questions as to whether on balance it has reduced or aggravated the problem. Job Corps press releases stress the number of graduates now leaving centers and taking jobs, or joining the Armed Forces, or returning to school. And there is little doubt that *some* of these graduates are clearly better off than they would have been without the Job Corps experience. Unfortunately, follow-up data on Job Corps graduates is so sketchy that it is impossible to tell just how many graduates have gained a lasting benefit from their Job Corps experience, and what the degree of that benefit is.

But there is a negative side to the Job Corps balance sheet. For tens of thousands of trainees, the program which seemed to offer one last chance has turned out to mean only disillusionment, frustration, and finally defeat once again. No one knows what the social cost of a Job Corps dropout is—what price must eventually be paid to overcome the effects of reinforced failure on the teen-agers who have found they couldn't make it even in this "last resort" salvage effort. But it is certain these social costs are sizable, a fact which was documented by a Job Corps-financed poll of Job Corps dropouts carried out by the reputable and experienced survey firm of Louis Harris and Associates. The Job Corps attempted unsuccessfully to suppress the results of the survey, which showed among other findings that unemployment was higher among Job Corps dropouts than before they enrolled, and that more than half of the unemployed dropouts were either working or in school before they entered the Job Corps. After twenty months of operation, there were six dropouts or kickouts for every Job Corps graduate—six defeats for every victory. As time passes, this ratio may improve. But until the Job Corps can demonstrate that its successes outnumber its failures, it cannot claim that it is making a positive contribution to the elimination of poverty. And so long as its contribution to the elimination of poverty remains debatable, then its essential justification is subject to serious question.

If it is questionable whether the Job Corps is helping to eliminate poverty, then it is reasonable to ask why it should be continued any longer. Why not shut it down now and stop throwing good money after bad?

The answer is that the problem the Job Corps was designed to solve still exists in massive proportions. There are still hundreds of thousands of teenagers at the bottom of the economic ladder with little hope for moving up. Every year more than one hundred thousand new candidates for unemployment and frustration turn sixteen. Out of this group, some can be helped by simpler, less costly, and more reliable programs of job training, remedial education, work experience, counseling, and other uplift aids in their own hometowns. But there still remain a large number—no one knows how many—who will get little or no help unless they get out of where they now live and into another setting. For this group, there is no alternative but the Job Corps.

No War on Poverty worthy of the name could leave this portion of the battlefield untouched. Therefore, some program like the Job Corps must be continued as a part of the effort to eliminate poverty.

Furthermore, even though the Job Corps has scored only a few breakthroughs in social technology to date, it still has great potential for advancing our understanding of the complexities of teen-age poverty and for developing more effective solutions. As a program, it is not tied to any particular professionalism; therefore, it is free to blend different systems and approaches in almost infinite variety. It is nationwide in scope, with small and large centers in both rural and urban settings. It still has great potential to mobilize brainpower, and Congress has opened the door to day students at Job Corps centers, adding even further flexibility to the kinds of approaches that can be planned and tested.