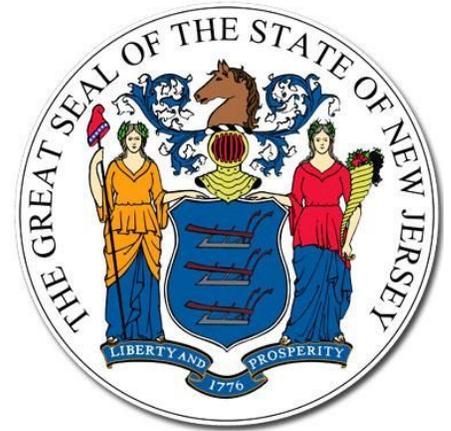


# YMCA New Jersey Youth & Government 2017 Officers' Topics List



## Economics

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Krishna Boppana, Livingston Assembly Clerk  
Jashanveer Johal, Cleveland Assembly Clerk  
Rafaela Laitamaki, Wilson Assembly Clerk  
Matthew Kim, Kean Assembly Speaker  
Dustin Han, Kean Assembly Clerk  
Kevin Schwartz, Cleveland Senate Clerk

Income Inequality  
Pension Payments  
Minimum Wage  
Charity Care  
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Jacob Senkewicz, Livingston Senate Clerk  
Ryan Kim, Cleveland Senate President  
Connor Dedrick, Livingston Assembly Speaker

Honeybees  
Water Pollution  
Habitat Destruction

## Public Services

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Ronak Rijhwani, Wilson Senate Clerk  
Anjali Ravichandran, Wilson Assembly Speaker

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Common Core

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William Huang, Livingston Senate President  
Dhruv Mandal, Wilson Senate President  
  
Sarika Bhattacharjee, Cleveland Assembly Speaker  
Nicholas LaBelle, Kean Senate Clerk  
Sean Corley, Kean Senate President

Medical Marijuana  
Municipal Court  
Appointments  
Prison System  
Heroin Usage  
Voter Turnout

## Economics

### “Income Inequality”

Krishna Boppana

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**Issue:** The persistence of income inequality in New Jersey increases the amount of social and economic constraints put on New Jersey’s lower class population.

**Necessary Background:** The income gap between low and high income families has increased since 2009. New Jersey’s population can be split into five equal income groups or quintiles each containing 20% of the population. The top quintile income is \$140,000 and above, the fourth quintile income is \$87,600 to \$139,000, the middle quintile income is \$53,800 to \$87,599, the second quintile income is \$26,800 to \$53,799, and the bottom quintile is \$26,799 and below.

**Evidence of Problem of Existing:** Since the 1990s the the top quintile of New Jersey's population has experienced a disproportionate increase in their nominal income compared to the income growth of the bottom quintile (Top quintile income growth: 21.1%. Bottom quintile income growth: 3.9%). Although the federal government reports that the poverty line for a family of four is \$24,300, the estimate does not account for New Jersey’s cost of living. This federal estimate is translated to \$61,200 for a family of four in new jersey. Because of this increased cost, around 38% of families are not able to meet basic needs each year.

**Impact:** This gap directly affects low income families especially through education. Higher income families are able to invest more time and money into their child's development. This puts many students at a disadvantage because they are not able to receive resources that more privileged students have access to. Because of the growing amount of lower income families, more students each year are not able to pursue higher education and contribute to the large sectors of our economy. In addition policy decisions tend to favor the middle to upper class because these individuals have more access and influence over the political system. This lack of sufficient help for lower class families increases the likelihood of mental and physical health issues to develop.

**Possible Solutions:** While there is no simple solution to address income quality, we can re-allocate funds to account for the income gap. New Jersey can reform its progressive state income tax to be more sympathetic towards lower income families. Another way to decrease the income gap is to address the families in extreme poverty. Currently in New Jersey, there are 140,000 children who live in extreme poverty. The organization that helps families in extreme poverty is the TNAF, Temporary Assistance To Needy Families. Although this organization was very prominent in 1980s, it only provides support for 20% for families currently. This organization can help mitigate the effects of poverty for many people if there is reform that addresses resource allocation for the TNAF.

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### “Pension Payments”

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**Issue:** New Jersey is underpaying the recipients of pension payments.

**Necessary Background:** Over the past 20 years, New Jersey has failed to meet the Statutory Annual Required Contributions for pension payments. This failure to address a proper minimum pension amount stems from the desire to maintain economic stability in other departments of the government that already maintain enough funding. As such, pension payments are too low for all former federal employees and they are forced to enter back into the job market despite unhealthiness or sickness at an old age. “Over a 14-year span, Republican governors underfunded the pension system by \$2.6 billion, then Democratic governors did so by \$10.2 billion” [1]. Thus, the stagnation of the problem precipitates an exponential growth in the cost of fixing it.

**Evidence:** These past 2 decades, the government has consistently taken less money than required out of their budget to pay for pension payments. Additionally, a resulting debt can be seen to the recipients as the years pass by. Ever since the departure of Governor James Florio and entry of Governor Christine Whitman in 2001, the ratio of actual contributions to required contributions has been negligible at best due to the pursuance of pursuing the economic enhancement of other federal offices. Governor Chris Christie has additionally been allowed to bypass the allocation of these funds by state courts despite numerous appeals by both citizens and unions.

**Impact:** By underpaying those in need of pension payments, many people don’t gain the allocated amount of pension money are often forced to break out of retirement or take on multiple jobs. Lower and even middle class citizens who do not have a guaranteed excess amount of money they can save rely on monthly pensions payments to get by during their retired career. Without adequate reparations for the money these citizens pay initially every month during their career, these people are placed in a pit of debt and economic detriment and are thus forced to virtually work until their death. The upper and wealthier classes however do not face a large detriment due to the extra money they are able to save throughout the years. Not only does this destroy an ease of life for pension recipients but it also closes of the workforce to many others due to the lack of supplementary income many people are facing. Even on a governmental scale, suffering is inevitable. As the years pass, liabilities start to grow and the monetary value that eventually needs to be reciprocated builds. With an unstable economy and workforce, a lack of stability in pension payments creates a rift that needs fiscally wise governors for 60-70 years to come. Without a clear consensus now on how to proceed, we will only see further economic entrenchment in the future and thus see a decline in the state economy.

**Possible Solutions:** Many fingers point towards an amendment to the Constitution that requires the state to make full pension payments in which the statutory minimum pension amount given must be met; otherwise federal to state funding will be halted. So far, Governor Christie has found a loophole to not pay in full, but an amendment will force him to do what is necessary. By paying more money every

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payment, less interest accrues and the hefty fee garnered from a lack of payments can be readily dealt with. Additionally, a reduced cumulative pension payment could be achieved by cutting back unnecessary bonuses and fees given to financial managers and attributing them to the pension fund. By issuing a quarterly system rather than an annual one, a responsible payment schedule is made and future debts are mitigated, paving the way to fiscal betterment.

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## “Minimum Wage”

Rafaela Laitamaki

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Issue: The current minimum wage of \$8.38 per hour is inadequate for New Jersey residents [1].

Necessary background: In 2013 the minimum wage in New Jersey was increased to \$8.25 per hour through a constitutional amendment [5]. Since then the minimum wage has been adjusted annually based off the Consumer Price Index [5]. From 2013 to 2015 the minimum wage in New Jersey was \$8.25 per hour, but in January 2015 the minimum wage was raised to \$8.38 per hour [2]. Recently, Speaker Vince Prieto proposed a bill that would increase the minimum wage from \$8.38 per hour to \$10.10 per hour in 2017 [3]. This bill would gradually increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2021 [3].

Evidence: The United Way of Northern New Jersey has estimated that a single adult in New Jersey would need to earn \$13.78 per hour to meet his or her basic needs; thus, the current minimum wage is inadequate [2]. According to the National Employment Law Project, more than a dozen United States cities and states approved a \$15 minimum wage last year [2]. Many New Jersey citizens want to follow suit by raising the minimum wage in order to reduce poverty rates and decrease reliance on government assistance programs [6]. In addition, increasing the minimum wage would allow workers to spend more money which would ultimately increase the revenue of retailers and other businesses [6].

Impact: The minimum wage plays a vital role in the New Jersey economy. According to the United States Department of Labor increasing the minimum wage could help stimulate the economy and create opportunities [7]. Furthermore, research suggests that when the minimum wage is increased the economy improves because low-wage workers spend additional earnings which raises demand and job growth [7]. Unfortunately, in recent years the minimum wage has barely covered the basic costs of living for many New Jersey residents which has increased the reliance of workers on government programs [6].

Possible Solutions: One possible solution is to increase the minimum wage to \$10.10 per hour through the bill that Vince Prieto proposed. Currently, 2.8 million New Jersey citizens live in poverty, but this

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bill would help boost the economy in New Jersey [4]. Although Governor Chris Christie vetoed Vince Prieto’s bill in August 2016, Democratic leaders in Trenton are planning on introducing an amendment to the State Constitution to gradually raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2021 [6]. In contrast, another possible solution is to keep the minimum wage at \$8.38 per hour. Certain business owners and lobbyists in particular believe that the minimum wage should not be raised because it would increase prices and stimulate the automation of many jobs [5].

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### “Charity Care”

**Matthew Kim**

**Kean Assembly Speaker**

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**Issue:** With the cuts in federal and state disproportionate share hospital (DSH) funding occurring this year, hospitals that provide substantial charity care will be at risk of bankruptcy due to the New Jersey’s impractical allocation of DSH funds [2]. As a result, the thousands of those uninsured and undocumented relying on these hospitals for care will also be put at risk.

**Necessary Background:** By law, New Jersey hospitals are required to uphold an “open door” policy, mandating that care is provided to patients regardless of the fact if they are uninsured and cannot pay [1]. This policy inevitably creates a large wealth disparity between hospitals that are located in more impoverished communities and hospitals that are in more affluent ones. The hospitals in poorer communities treat a greater number of patients who cannot pay or pay at a reduced rate, and as a result, they accumulate a lot of uncompensated care costs. To mitigate this lack of funding, the federal and state government provide DSH funds to hospitals that accumulate a large amount of uncompensated care costs. However, instead of allocating all of the funds to hospitals that treat the most uninsured patients, known as safety net hospitals, New Jersey distributes aid based on how much a hospital provides to the uninsured, despite if that amount is very small [1]. For example, in 2015, Memorial Hospital in Salem County only received \$19,000, compared to \$63 million that was given to St. Joseph Regional Medical Center in Paterson. [5]. Coupled with the imminent cuts in DSH funding, this policy jeopardizes the economic security of hospitals that provide large amounts of charity care.

**Evidence:** New Jersey’s current distribution formula provides all hospitals with DSH funding, which not only hurts safety net hospitals, but also could lead to penalization by the federal government for not targeting the most needy hospitals, and thus an even greater reduction in funding [2]. There have also been many instances where hospitals were overpaid for charity care services. For example, in 2014, a

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federal audit found that four New Jersey hospitals received \$44 million in reimbursements that they were ineligible for; a result of the inadequate distribution formula [3]. Estimates have put the undocumented immigrant population at 525,000 who do not qualify for insurance, and therefore rely on charity care [6]. The stability of safety net hospitals is crucial, and the need for DSH funds will not recede anytime soon; with cuts in the budget, funds must be allocated more wisely.

**Impact:** With the reformation of the system of allocation of DSH funds, a dropoff in the number of bankrupt hospitals in New Jersey will be observed. Over the past decade, numerous hospitals have filed for bankruptcy as a result of the accumulation of uncompensated care costs, and the unfulfilled reimbursement for the costs. A greater amount of funds that are allocated to hospitals that are amassing large uncompensated costs would ensure their stability, as well as the wellbeing of the patients that rely on the care provided by those hospitals.

**Possible Solutions:** In order to solve this issue, changes can be made to New Jersey’s distribution formula to make it more selective, and target hospitals that are in the most need. Although hospitals located in affluent communities do treat some number of uninsured patients, they have sufficient funding to make up for those uncompensated costs. Additionally, insurance coverage could be expanded, subsequently reducing the need for DSH funds as hospitals are accumulating less uncompensated care costs.

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## “Tourism”

Dustin Han

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**Issue:** The recent failures of the New Jerseyan tourism industry has severely endangered the entire state economy

**Necessary Background:** Tourism is the third leading industry in New Jersey, thus being a major aspect of the economy. One significant part in this booming business is Atlantic City, one of the biggest tourist attractions in the world. Atlantic City pulls in tourists of all kind with its large variety of leisure including gambling, its close proximity to New York City and other large cities, and its easy accessibility. So far, various tourism businesses have succeeded enormously. In total, the tourism industry has brought in a record \$43.4 billion dollars in revenue in 2015, which is a stark contrast to the \$9 billion back in 2005. Simply put, New Jersey’s reliance upon tourism is undeniable.

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**Evidence of Problem Existing:** In 2013 alone, the casinos in Atlantic produced only a total of \$235 million dollars, which was 35% worse than the earnings made from the previous year. In the following year, Revel, the new casino that was supposed to save Atlantic City, went bankrupt after opening a little more than two years. In 2015, three other large casinos were filed for bankruptcy while 2016 saw the largest casino in New Jersey called Borgata fail to pay its monthly property tax bill. The failure of these businesses has led to an alarming 14% unemployment rate, which contributed to an even more alarming 30% of people living in poverty in the Atlantic City area. All these glaring issues together has brought Chris Christie to threaten a shutdown and provide only a couple months for Atlantic City to recover and fix the abnormally large problem it has.

**Impact:** Because of these problems, various effects are negatively inflicting New Jersey. With failing businesses and many lost jobs, there have been significant losses in a key source of tax money in the casinos and gambling, which is used for various public services such as school funding. An even more alarming effect is the long term future of New Jersey, as hotels, casinos, and other tourism business both within and not within Atlantic City may move out, while other business outside New Jersey would have a difficult time finding an incentive to locate themselves in New Jersey. Also, the difficulty of replacing tourism with another industry to cover up what tourism had done would be astronomical. New Jersey simply lacks the funds and the current businesses to bring in more money and beat out the other states that specialize in other industries.

**Possible Solutions:** A potential solution is to focus on alternative sources of entertainment. There are various other reasons to come into this tourist hotspot, one of them being the environment. Specifically, the New Jersey beaches are rare and aesthetically pleasing to view. Keeping both these ecological and economic treasures intact and using them as new sources of tourism in addition to utilizing historical areas in New Jersey would be vital. Another potential solution would be to restore what Atlantic City was in a different location. Starting over in North Jersey and incentivizing new tourism businesses to come in through potentially lower taxes and other ways could have a lot potential.

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## “Citizen Departure”

Kevin Schwartz

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**Issue:** New Jersey’s high cost of living, due to high taxes, is causing citizens to emigrate , leading to an unstable tax base.

**Necessary Background:** For the fourth time in five years New Jersey has led the nation in outward migration[1]. New Jersey taxes its property at the highest rate of any state at 1.89%[2] and is one of two states that has both an estate and inheritance tax [7]. Personal income taxes account for about 40% of New Jersey’s state revenue [8] and also contribute to the 6th highest cost of living in the country [3].

**Evidence:** As stated in the necessary background, New Jersey relies on the income tax to fund the government. Yet less than 1% of taxpayers contribute to nearly a third of the income tax for the state[10]. This is compounded by the fact that half the people leaving are over 55 years old [1] and that the highest earning years for males is over 50 years old. Therefore the highest earning demographic is leaving, robbing the state of necessary revenue. [9].

**Impact:** Citizen departure presents many issues for the income of the state. Over half of the people leaving are aged older than 55 with retirement being the top cited reason for leaving[1]. This renders the dual estate and inheritance tax ineffective as the demographic that pays the most in these taxes by this is leaving. Another issue is that these departures could lead to property value loss, lowering the money that the government gains through property tax. When the supply stays neutral and the demand goes down, by people not entering the state, the price goes down[8]. In its simplest sense the housing market pricing works on supply and demand so the less demand will lead to falling prices. This devaluation of property strips the government of money through the property tax as it is based on house value.

**Possible Solutions:** The 1st potential solution is to lower property taxes. That would encourage more people to move into the state causing more housing competition and more employment competition. However this would strip funds from local governments. A second solution could be a repeal or lessening of the estate tax. Currently, New Jersey is one of 2 states that has both an estate tax and an inheritance tax[7]. While in name both of these taxes are different, in practice they function the same. This could encourage elderly to stay in state, allowing the inheritance tax to function more effectively. The third solution is giving property tax breaks to those moving into the state. This will incentivise those who are younger into moving into the state, balancing out the cost of living and making New Jersey competitive cost wise. A combination of these three ideas posed above will probably have the best result, but this is a complicated issue lacking a simple solution.

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### Environment

#### “Honeybees”

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**Issue:** Honey Bees are beginning to die off in large numbers due to certain chemicals and other detriments.

**Necessary Background:** In recent winters New Jersey has been losing around 30% of its bees over a three month span [1], this presents a major complication as they provide the primary means of pollinating nearly two thirds of produce eaten by humans [1]. This is attributed to two main factors, which are the Varroa mites and a type of insecticide known as neonicotinoids [1, 2].

**Evidence:** As mentioned earlier, there was a survey done that reported about one third of all honeybees die throughout the course of the winter. In one instance a farmer actually lost nearly 37 million of his bees [1] resulting in a great loss of revenue and pollination.

**Impact:** The result of honeybees dying off is much greater than it appears at the surface level. As honeybees begin to die off there are fewer bees to pollinate the plants in New Jersey, some of these plants are used to feed animals such as cows [1], which would result in a scarcity of food for cows driving down the population and increasing the cost of milk. These effects spread throughout all industries that require pollinated food source, subsequently increasing the cost of their products too. Honeybees are responsible for nearly \$200 million worth of produce in the state of New Jersey [3] and losing a portion of this is a significant amount of income n revenue. Additionally, some New Jersey citizens are dependent on bees for their livelihood and it is their sole way of generating income for their families, losing nearly one third of their inventory per say (1), would be deadly to nearly every other business and thus this situation needs to be remedied.

**Possible Solutions:** There are many possible solutions to solve this crisis, however one is controllable and just requires regulation. Large chemical companies are currently producing a pesticide that is far too powerful and needs to have a certain cap on it; this would decrease the amount of honey bees that die each year as a result of pesticides. Another option would be for the chemical companies to come up with a more natural solution that does not affect the bees but still does its job properly. Addressing the Varroa mite [2] problem would also decrease the amount of honeybee deaths each year, maybe by treating areas near the honeybee colonies if Varroa mites are present.

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## “Water Pollution”

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**Issue:** New Jersey waterways persist as several of the most polluted in the country. They jeopardize the health and safety of not only aquatic life but also the citizens of New Jersey.

**Background Information:** By far the greatest sources of water pollution in New Jersey arise from “nonpoint” sources. These sources are pollutants that contaminate waterways through polluted land runoff, precipitation, atmospheric deposition, drainage, seepage, etc. [1]. Less significant yet still impactful sources of pollution arise from “point” sources, or single and identifiable sources of pollution like factories and sewage treatment plants [2]. Current water quality standards fall under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) through the federal Clean Water Act (CWA) of 1972. On a state level, the New Jersey Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NJPDDES) of New Jersey’s Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Water Quality is in charge of implementing guidelines for wastewater management established by the EPA [3]. Yet, existing laws fail to adequately address pollution of nonpoint sources like stormwater. Even under the NJPDDES, manufacturers are permitted in certain instances to discharge point sources into the environment, thereby **contributing to the pollution of waterways** and negatively impacting water quality.

**Evidence of Problem Existing:** In 2014, the EPA verified an estimate of 1770 polluted waterways in New Jersey- this marked the development of over 300 new polluted water systems from four years prior [4]. Meanwhile, the water quality of only 17 waterways were adequately improved in this same time period due to state efforts to address water contamination [5]. Of all assessed waterways, 90% of river and stream miles, 95% of the surface area of lakes, reservoirs, and ponds, 89% of the area of bays and estuaries, and 100% of coastal/ocean waters failed state water standards [6]. Part of the issue results from sewage treatment plants, which are permitted to discharge a point source known as combined sewer overflow (CSO) into nearby bodies of water in the presence of excess stormwater runoff; CSO results from the incapability of treatment plants to handle the volume of water, and can cause severe damage to human health and the environment [2]. When not discharged as CSO, contaminated stormwater runoff (a nonpoint source) can also directly enter waterways if not properly drained by sewage systems.

**Impact:** The cost of state, local, and private efforts to improve water quality of contaminated waters in New Jersey is extremely high due to the sheer magnitude and breadth of water pollution in New Jersey. In one severe case, the EPA has allocated \$1.7 billion for cleanup efforts in 8 miles of New Jersey’s polluted Passaic River [7]. Despite the high costs, it is imperative that actions are taken to address water contamination in New Jersey to protect the safety of aquatic and human life. The most common contaminants in New Jersey- PCBs (14%) and arsenic (13%)- are highly toxic [4]. PCBs are a probable carcinogen, cause acute irritation, developmental disorders in fetuses, and disrupt immune and

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endocrine system functions [8]. Arsenics are also carcinogens, and can cause a variety of other impairments like carotid atherosclerosis, developmental disorders in fetuses, and heart disease [9]. Other pollutants- such as gasoline, fertilizers, and pesticides from stormwater pollution can severely hurt fish and cause beach/shellfish bed closures. Fish exposure to pollutants also detracts citizens, as these contaminants can further be passed on to humans through consumption.

**Possible Solutions:** Several methods may be employed to clean up polluted waters. To remove gasoline and other oil contaminants from water, for example, oil dispersants may be utilized over tainted surface water. Oil dispersants break down oil into smaller droplets that may be more easily biodegraded by aquatic microbes, and cost an estimated \$7,350 per ton [10]. Other costly methods, like removing dredged sediment from water, remove pollutants from water, though they cannot alone restore waterways to their original state [6]. The cost of implementing renewed efforts to improve the poor water quality of New Jersey waterways will certainly be high, but must be undertaken to protect public and marine health. Aside from improving existing waterways, further legislation must be enacted to prevent the further contamination of existing and unpolluted water systems. To combat the problem of both nonpoint and point source pollution, strategies to reduce stormwater runoff into CSO systems as well as directly into waterways need to be taken. For example, “green” infrastructure projects like rain gardens and permeable pavement can be constructed. These infrastructure fill with contaminated water, which filters into the ground or evaporates rather than into sewers and waterways [11]. Furthermore, “gray” infrastructure projects like building holding tanks for more stormwater, expanding treatment plants, or building new ones also address CSO and stormwater pollution. These infrastructure projects are necessary to prevent the further pollution of water systems, which would host greater environmental and health hazards as well as a greater cost to combat.

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### “Habitat Destruction”

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**Livingston Assembly Speaker**

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**Issue:** Destruction of New Jerseyan ecosystems are at an all time high due to the presence of invasive species and human expansion.

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**Background:** New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the Union with a staggering 1210 people per square mile. This high population density means that New Jersey is highly urbanized and resource demands are high and byproducts of resource manufacturing releases hundreds of deadly toxins into our ecosystems. Additionally, the presence of invasive species is a serious threat to our ecosystems. Rapid development has diminished the total area of habitats for native species of flora and fauna. From 1986 to 2007, New Jersey developed almost 25% of its total area, broken down by ecosystem, 24% of its agricultural lands, 7% of its forested lands and 5% of its wetlands [1]. Furthermore, the presence of over 1,000 invasive species cost the state an estimated \$290 million each year in damages [3].

**Evidence:** New Jersey is home to extremely diverse wildlife, however the increased destruction of their lands and presence of non-native species is promoting a monoculture, which leaves organisms extremely susceptible to disease. 85% of all endangered species are classified as such to due habitat loss [2]. Even in cases where the land is not being developed, habitats are being fragmented. A variety of forest biomes are under threat, not because of increased residential development but because of increased agriculture. When calculating new developments, deforestation for pastures and fields is not included. Additionally, outside of agriculture costs, invasive species still wreak havoc upon taxpayers. Due to insufficient funds, the Department of Environmental Protection can only afford to manage the species but cannot afford to take any further action against them. Entire industries have nearly collapsed due to invasive species, the oyster industry was brought to its knees by two strains of pathogens and nearly 21,000 mature trees are destroyed each year due to the presence of the Asian longhorned beetle[3]. The managing of purple algae alone costs the state \$100,000 each year [2] and as these species become even more prevalent, the costs to keep them at bay will continue to increase.

**Possible solutions:** When it comes to the loss of habitat due to human expansion, a number of different strategies can work. A decrease in overall building permits issued each year would slow loss of habitats or increased regulations on deforestation and habitat reconstruction could even reverse the effects of expansion. As far as invasive species are concerned, strict regulation on the purchase and movement of invasive species should be implemented to slow the arrival of said species in addition to expanding strict hunting quotas that would allow native species to regain their numbers. Eventually, the focus should be turned to the removal of said species and the routine survey of the state of native flora and fauna.

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## Public Services

**“School Funding”**  
**Ronak Rijhwani**

# YMCA New Jersey Youth and Government 2017 – Officers’ Topics List

**Wilson Senate Clerk**  
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**Issue:** Low socioeconomic status has been directly tied to poor academic achievement and substandard rates of academic progress relative to higher socioeconomic communities.

**Necessary Background:** Minorities and low-income families are often at an inherent disadvantage in terms of their financial, locational, and employment situations. As a result, the general social values of these families are characterized by a lack of educational emphasis due to the greater need for reinforcement on overcoming basic struggles, such as ensuring the availability of food and maintaining safety from local crime and drugs. Children forced to grow up in these environments usually attend public schools that lack the necessary funding to provide each student with an adequate education. Latinos and African Americans are more likely to attend schools with higher poverty rates than Caucasians and Asian Americans students. In New Jersey, the dropout rate of high school students by race was led by Latinos and followed by that of African Americans. Even though legislative strides have been made to provide these children with better educations, substantial institutional gaps that are tied to socioeconomic and racial statuses are prevalent.

**Evidence:** Young students with higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to exhibit proficiency on standardized tests. Children from townships with high numbers of low-income families began high school more than three grade levels behind those from economically stable townships. Moreover, students from low socioeconomic groups learned less over four years than did children from higher groups, graduating more than four grade levels behind average. In New Jersey, the high school dropout rate for the demographic of people sixteen to twentyfour years old was nearly seventeen percent in low-income families as opposed to high-income families, with a dropout rate of approximately three percent.

**Impact:** The overwhelming disparity in educational aptitude creates obstacles for economically unstable families and individuals to better their lives financially. Some students attend public universities because they cannot afford an education anywhere else, but even less fortunate students do not attend college at all due to financial challenges. Since the average cost of higher education in New Jersey has increased even quicker than the state’s inflation rate, the college dream has become nearly impossible to achieve for poor, but qualified students. A perpetual cycle of poverty becomes the reality for many families who cannot afford an education and later cannot provide the same for their children. This cycle not only impacts these families, but our state’s economy as well.

**Possible Solutions:** Legislation that provides funding for schools that lack financial support will result in an initial loss of money; however, the long term financial and social effects of educating our state’s youth will outweigh the primary costs. More specifically, standardizing the general range of pay for public school teachers in New Jersey may provide an equal quality of teaching across school districts, even in inner cities and low-income schools. Alternatively, legislation that reverses the current reward system of funding schools that perform well on standardized test may level the playing field of investment in high-minority and low-socioeconomic school districts.

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### “Common Core”

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**Issue:** With the adoption of the New Jersey Common Core State Standards in the year of 2010, an uprise of controversy has since surfaced.

**Necessary Background:** Common Core State Standards are a method states across America have been adopting for the purpose of generalization of public education. Common Core creates definitive grade level expectations for the grades of kindergarten to high school, which outline what is crucial in both English Language Arts and Mathematics upon entrance to college and the workforce. In the state of New Jersey, upon the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, educators of the grades of kindergarten to high school are expected to create curriculums that ensure New Jersey public school students arrive at the outlined expectations of Common Core Standards.

**Evidence of Problem Existing:** Common Core State Standards are most commonly compared to the No Child Left Behind programs, which after “A 10-year experiment in the use of federally mandated standards and tests called No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that has been almost universally acknowledged as a failure” [1]. With the frequent comparison between the two programs, it seems rational to predict the eventual and detrimental failure of the Common Core State Standards program. On May 28, 2015, Governor Chris Christie vocally expressed the failures of Common Core in the state of New Jersey. The action Christie proceeded to take was assembling a team who would redefine state standards which led to the eventual PARCC or the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. PARCC initially set out to help ensure that all students, regardless of income, family background or geography, have equal access to a world-class education that will prepare them for success after high school in college and/or careers. [3]. The general reaction to the PARCC exam in the state of New Jersey has resulted in many parents and students refusing to partake in the testing of this exam as many do not understand the benefits or need for the exam. Another issue surrounding PARCC testing is the fact that New Jersey is spending about \$25.50 per student, or about \$22 million on the new exam this year. Within four years, the price tag could go as high as \$108 million [4].

**Impact:** The controversy surrounding these national and statewide standards have caused unrest in the state leading to numerous protests caused by teachers, students, and parents. The PARCC assessment itself has put too much of a burden on resources and teaching time [3]. Furthermore, many people, including Governor Chris Christie, doubt the effectiveness of the CCSS, and believe that if changes are not made soon the quality of New Jersey’s education system will continue to deteriorate. Given that PARCC testing is \$2.5 million more expensive than New Jersey’s previous standardized tests, the issues

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surrounding Common Core State standards are creating a substantial economic burden for the state [4].

**Possible Solutions:** The most demanded and practical approach to the resolution of the growing issue that Common Core State Standards have surfaced is the termination of the adoption of the system and progression towards standards that cater directly to New Jersey student. Along with the end of the adoption of CCSS, the state of New Jersey should move towards the end of reliance on the PARCC test with the replacement of a different standardized test that tests qualities teachers, students, and parents approve of.

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## Social Issues

### “Medical Marijuana”

William Huang

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**Issue:** The State of New Jersey currently has a marijuana-dispensary program in place where patients may obtain their prescription cannabis. Since its conception in 2010, the program has proven to be ineffective since its implementation and legal restrictions have made it difficult for patients to obtain the right marijuana. As a result, NJ doctors are reluctant to prescribe marijuana to their patients, so it has been called a “dysfunctional system” by many medical marijuana activists.

**Necessary Background:** Beginning with the diagnosis, patients must battle their way through convoluted legal processes and demanding criteria in order to qualify for a medical marijuana license. Furthermore, the exorbitant costs involved for patients and growers alike have contributed to the low enrollment rate of this program. The three dispensaries in NJ (Garden State Dispensary, Greenleaf Compassion Center, and Compassionate Care Foundation), were only able to produce a fraction of the amount of marijuana that was in demand, which has caused many patients to leave NJ in search of it elsewhere.

**Evidence:** NJ dispensaries do not offer lozenges or edible products, which has caused concern among anti-smoking users. This is why of the tens of thousands of people who were expected to register, only 2,342 patients have joined as of January 2014. The 2 ounce restriction for possession of marijuana has also deterred potential users since they may face charges for exceeding the limit. Furthermore, dispensaries are going bankrupt. The Compassionate Care Foundation in Egg Harbor Township said it needed 2,000 patients to break even, and has so far treated 600. At the Garden State Dispensary, over

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10,000 were expected to be served within opening, with only 1,700 patients treated in their first six months.

**Impact:** The State of New Jersey will be denying life-saving medication to patients who suffer from debilitating pain. Every day, these people will remain dependent on potent, destructive pharmaceutical drugs that contribute to weakened nerve endings and severe side effects. Not to mention, New Jersey will also be discounting itself from millions of dollars of tax revenue and an impending economic boon from the marijuana industry.

**Possible Solutions:** Increasing the number of dispensaries would significantly increase supply to meet rising demand for medical marijuana. Reforming the \$200 patient fee for licensing, the physician attending statement, and lost ID Card mechanisms, will treat patients more effectively and reduce the price of state-subsidized health care in NJ. Furthermore, the type of drug distributed must be regulated by the government for safety concerns in order to maintain consistency of symptom-alleviation.

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## “Municipal Court Appointments”

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**Issue:** Currently in the state of New Jersey, the supposed “impartial” process of municipal court judge appointments has been verging on partisan - the panels and boards hand-picked for the process of choosing judges are wrought with members of certain interest groups (i.e. law enforcement representatives.). The aforementioned development hugely affects sentences of petty criminals and possesses possible implications for the necessary impartiality of the New Jersey judicial system.

**Necessary Background:** Municipalities are “administrative divisions” within state boundaries that possess self-government and jurisdiction. Each of the 565 municipalities in the state of New Jersey contains its own legal departments and courthouses; each courthouse, of course, has one judge. But it’s the way these judges were chosen that brings up huge controversy in current state affairs. The process of appointing municipal court officials begins with the New Jersey State Legislature. New Jersey legislators initially decide upon municipal demarcations unilaterally. As a result, municipal districts are created from the series of demarcations, analogous to the federal court structure. However, the structure of municipal, appellate, and/or superior courts is not a byproduct of the NJ Legislature - in fact, the structuring of said courts is solely defined by the Constitution. The fundamental structure of these courts, like any policy or establishment defined by the Constitution, can be altered by a new amendment. As it stands, nevertheless, no single piece of legislation, no matter

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how well-supported, can change the Constitutionally-defined court structure. And while legislators do in fact have a say in how much power a municipal judge is allowed in matters like mandatory minimum sentencing and misdemeanors, they do not have any power to institute structural changes. As of right now, the governing bodies of municipalities form the boards that appoint judges to their respective municipal courts. These governing bodies consist of elected members, but there is no filter on the affiliation of those who are elected. Thus, members of certain departments or lobby groups can gain entry into the boards for municipal court appointments and influence the type of judge that inherits the position.

**Evidence:** Due to reported cases of the influence of politics and money on jurisprudence and the court system, the Task Force on Judicial Independence was created in 2014 and held public hearings across the state in order to investigate said reports. According to their findings and concerns of local lawyers, issues surrounding judicial independence arise when judges are seen as sources of monetary gain on behalf of the municipality. By finding more defendants guilty, more fines are delegated and the court brings in more money on behalf of the municipality. The monetary gain and guilty verdicts, in addition, keep law enforcement agencies satisfied. However, if a judge finds more defendants not guilty, then law enforcement representatives on the governing board can vote the judge out - one town witnessed a case where a judge refused to hire and pay an expert who would have helped a defendant’s case so that the defendant would be found guilty and forced to pay fines. Another case in Eatontown, NJ featured leaked emails between members of the appointment board complaining that the wrong judge had been chosen due to the lack of revenue the judge was bringing in; in addition, the board members discussed to vote out the judge on his reelection due to concerns from special interests groups like other town departments who needed funding and the police.

**Impact:** The bias surrounding these judicial appointments have huge implications for the justness associated with jurisprudence in New Jersey. With appointment boards with a greater number of law enforcement representatives, defendants may face harsher and borderline unjust sentences due to special interests of the municipality’s governing body and a need for revenue. For example, a municipality with a panel containing many police officers may choose judges who support higher fines for misdemeanors and civil asset forfeiture in order to gain more revenue for their police station. Rather than choosing the best person for the job, judicial appointment boards are choosing the person that can serve the municipality’s needs the best. The abuse of the municipal court system undermines the judicial system of the state of New Jersey and needs to be altered so that the law can be meted out fairly and in accordance with the offense committed. The law cannot be used to manipulate sentencing into what better funds the municipality - thus the system must be altered.

**Possible Solutions:** It has been established in the “Necessary Background” section that the fundamental structure of municipal courts cannot be changed due to restrictions imposed by the Constitution. The board appointment process in essence must stay intact. However, the process can be moved and reorganized under a different governing body, thus does not interfere with Constitutional limitations. A possible solution to remedy this issue would be to use the New Jersey Senate to appoint and confirm municipal judges rather than a board of municipal officials. This way the bias that some municipal officials place on their choices for appointments can be eliminated. While there could be some concern over whether the reorganization of the board appointment process could be seen as a structural change (which is forbidden by the Constitution), the power of the unitary system and central government of New Jersey can most likely override the power of town sovereignty. If not, then an amendment can always be legislatively introduced to alter the New Jersey Constitution into allowing the Senate to deal with municipal court appointments. Another possible solution that could be

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implemented with less ramifications is the introduction of a bill dealing with appointment board selection within municipalities. Bills that prevent certain interest groups from having a say in the judicial selection can help mitigate the bias of a municipally-elected appointment board.

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### “Prison System”

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**Issue:** Repeat offenders are New Jersey prisons’ main constituents, and their reentries into the prison systems are what is draining the state’s budget for public prisons.

**Necessary Background:** In the past, New Jersey has been credited as a leader on prison reform, since it has changed the ways drug laws are interpreted in order to reduce prison population. However, now, its efforts must focus on returning criminals that compose the majority of most prisons. The state must find ways to decrease recidivism rates, which are the rates at which former prisoners re-enter the prison system.

**Evidence:** According to a Department of Corrections Report published in 2009, around 60% of New Jersey’s former inmates are arrested again within 3 years of their release, showing the New Jersey justice system’s lack of rehabilitative support for prisoners. The impact of the excessively harsh criminal justice system of the 1980s, which supported strict sentencing for smaller crimes, is still being seen today, as many people within the state are constrained to a cycle of poverty that prevents them from finding jobs away from the sector of organized crime. Unfortunately, many of these economically disadvantaged people are minorities. Many believe that New Jersey officials simply do not do enough to ease criminals’ lives after they leave prison to break them out of the entrenched system of poverty. For example, Senator Ray Lesniak proposed a reentry plan that focused on criminals’ lives up to 60 days after leaving the prison, yet other policy makers failed to come to a conclusion on how to solve the issue and the plan did not work.

**Impact:** The New Jersey prison system’s lack of rehabilitative efforts hurts its maintenance of criminal justice system principles, as one of the three main goals of the criminal justice system is to rehabilitate offenders to prevent further crimes from being committed by the same people. This high rate of recidivism also enables the building of a cycle of poverty; crime is usually present within the same areas and those who begin committing crimes are usually linked to returning offenders. Lastly, as returning

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criminals compose the majority of New Jersey’s prison population, they also have a draining impact on the state budget to maintain fair prison conditions.

**Possible Solutions:** Many legislators believe that employment must be the primary avenue to develop in terms of post-prison rehabilitation; employment programs for ex-criminals must be created that help them ease back into the rigors of society and earn a stable income. Similarly, programs that build centers for drug addiction and meetings for ex-criminals must be expanded, as they have been proven to have beneficial effects. However, prison rehabilitation does not have to be limited to post-prison; in fact, many states have found it extremely effective to implement a rehabilitation program within state prison sentences, with some going as far to mandate therapy sessions and employment counseling during a prisoner’s sentence.

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**“Heroin Usage”**  
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**Issue:** Heroin is a drug that is highly addictive, leads to eventual death, and has an effect on families that is near impossible to calculate.

**Necessary Background:** Heroin was a hardly known drug until the late 80’s and early 90’s. At first it was deemed too expensive by most drug cartels, and so it was not available to the majority of the public. However, several methods of cheaply producing heroin allowed for a massive influx of the drug and increased usage. Due to New Jersey’s proximity to several other drug epicenters such as Philadelphia and New York, the drug became much more accessible. [1] The region facing the harshest consequences was Southern Jersey, with Camden County being the most negatively impacted. The city still deals with a chance of heroin abuse thirty times higher than other cities [3].

**Evidence:** As of last year, every single county in New Jersey had experienced at least one death due to heroin. In the year of 2014, there were over 781 deaths as a direct result of heroin overdose. Bear in mind, deaths from other complications involved with heroin and crime result in over 1,000 deaths [1]. In terms of the effect on individuals, over 28,332 persons have been admitted to the Department of Human Services, with the majority of these individuals having been treated. To put this into perspective, that number represents near half of the 64, 766 persons admitted for substance abuse and related activities. [1]

**Impact:** Heroin presents a financial damage, a societal damage, and a cultural damage. Heroin is hurtful enough for an adult population, but the dependents that are affected due to usage represent

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even more of a concern. Being that the average mother using heroin has 2.4 children, the usage by an adult has a direct effect on a significant amount of New Jersey children. These children are then at least three times more likely to become engaged in crime themselves[2] In terms of cost on the state-wide healthcare system, heroin usage costs over two billion dollars in resources.

**Possible Solutions:** When discussing heroin, numerous situations and solutions should be considered. Since the Reagan Administration, heroin has been included in the “War on Drugs” policy. [4] There are some policy makers who wish to retain the harsh penalties for heroin and to further punish anyone involved in the process. Another ideology is that the state should focus primarily on rehabilitation of individuals addicted to heroin, and should work to punish dealers . A certain component of programs such as these are needle replacement programs, which do not punish heroin use but instead attempt to allow safer usage and a gradual discouragement of the drug. The converse solution to Reagan's philosophy is that that heroin be decriminalized, education about the drug be emphasized, and families facing addiction helped and victims treated.

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## “Voter Turnout”

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**Issue:** In recent years, New Jersey has faced historic lows in voter turnout.

**Necessary Background:** Prior to 1998, New Jersey’s voting rates were always above 50 percent; in fact, in some presidential elections, in which the voting rates are generally higher than in other elections, over 80 percent of registered voters went to the polls and casted their votes. However, recently, New Jersey’s voting rates have been historically low [1].

**Evidence:** In 2009, only 47 percent of registered voters traveled to the polls to vote for either Republican Chris Christie or Democrat Jon Corzine for the governorship. In 2010, a dim 42 percent of registered voters participated in the midterm elections. In 2012, 67 percent of registered voters took part in the presidential election, a record low presidential election voting rate for the state. In 2013, a special election was held in October on a Wednesday to elect a new Senator following Frank

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Lautenberg’s death; only 24.5 percent of registered voters showed up at the polls, a record low for any statewide election in New Jersey history. In 2016, 40 percent of registered voters took part in the gubernatorial election, another record low for the state [1].

**Impact:** Since, oftentimes, more than half of New Jersey citizens who are registered to vote are not voting, elected officials may not represent the beliefs of the majority of New Jersey’s citizens. Also, considering that the voting pool often consists of less than half the population of eligible voters, candidates in elections can win by slim margins; elections could therefore turn the other way if more registered voters went to the polls.

**Possible Solutions:** One potential method of increasing voter turnout would be to make voting days statewide holidays. Voters are often too busy during the week to travel to the polls and vote; hence, designating voting days as holidays would mitigate this issue by giving voters plenty of time to cast their votes. Online voting may be another possible avenue to upraise voting rates. Though there would be security concerns involved with this process, online voting is already an established procedure in certain countries, such as Estonia [2]. Early voting, a system in which citizens could cast their ballots in the days prior to voting day, might raise voting rates as well [1].

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