Trends among New York City Children and their Implications for Child Welfare

POLICY BRIEF NO. 3

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SUMMARY

This brief discusses trends among New York City's (NYC) children and families that may impact the future of child welfare services in NYC, including transition age youth in foster care. Most trends among NYC's children and families show marked improvements in living conditions and child well-being over the last several years. In tandem with reforms at the NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS), these improvements likely contributed to the long-term declines in foster care entries and census.[1] Some data points, such as persistent racial disparities in poverty indicators, raise concerns that more children and families may experience child welfare interventions in coming years.[2]

BACKGROUND

To frame the context for our work with transition age youth in NYC foster care, we reviewed data in the Citizen's Committee for Children's "Keeping Track Database," which aggregates a mix of city, state, and federal datasets.[3] In some instances, we augmented these data with other sources. Unless otherwise noted, the trends described below are linear, meaning that the trend line from the first point to the last point is straight rather than bouncing up and down from year to year.

Many factors contribute to changes in child welfare activity, and several are independent of trends among children, families and communities.[4] These factors include media coverage, investigative practice, the composition of the judiciary, policies on mandated reporting, service

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[1] See The Foster Care Strategic Blueprint FY 2019-FY 2023, which outlines keys priorities and strategies for improving foster care. Retrieved from https://www1.nyc.gov/site/acs/about/fcstrategicblueprint.page; A. Yaroni and T. Ross. 2014. "Innovations in NYC Health and Human Services Policy: Child Welfare Policy." Available at https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/policybriefs/child-welfare-brief.pdf last accessed August 18, 2018.

[2] For space reasons this brief focuses much less on the significant variations on the neighborhood level and among racial and ethnic groups. Future work may address these issues.

[3] Readers are encouraged to visit https://www.cccnewyork.org/data-reports/keeping-track-database. All data are from the Keeping Track Database unless otherwise noted. The timeframes, data sources, and calculation methods vary by the characteristics examined and readers are directed to the Keeping Track Database for more information. The trends are usually examined from 2005 onward where the data are available; in most cases, the date ranges discussed are a function of available data.

[4] Child welfare activity refers to the number of investigations, family court petitions, court ordered supervision, entries into preventive services, entries into foster care and more.

availability, and more. Still, there are underlying patterns related to poverty, education, health, and other domains that are associated with involvement in child welfare.[5]

Trends suggesting future decreases in child welfare involvement

Population. The number of children under 18 years old in NYC is declining. The total population declined from 1,890,627 children in 2009 to 1,715,077 in 2019 (-9.3%). All age ranges declined in this period, apart from the population of children 10 to 14 years old, which increased slightly from 2016 to 2017 and plateaued through 2019. The population of children 5 to 9 years old declined more than other age groups.

As a proportion of the total, Black children declined from 25.1% of the child population in 2010 to 21.8% in 2019. The population of White children rose from 24.7% in 2010 to 26.4% in 2019. The number of Asian children increased to 12.0% in 2019 from 11.0% in 2010, while the Latinx population has only changed marginally since 2010, hovering around 35.4%. Fewer children in NYC suggests a lessening of potential demand for child welfare services.

Household composition and child poverty. Single parent households with children often grapple with increased stress and higher poverty rates. The number of single parent households declined from 594,517 in 2012 to 518,765 in 2019 (-12.7%).
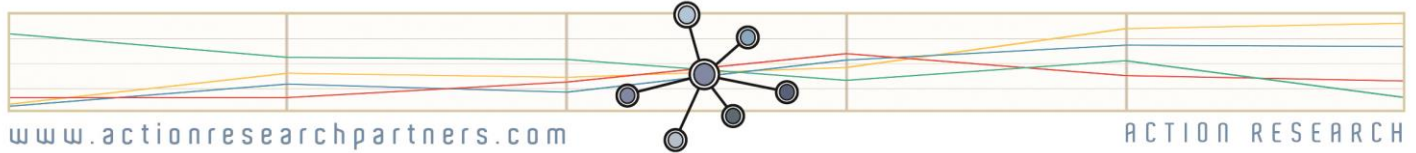
The number of children living in poverty declined from the high of 553,499 in 2012 to 372,358 in 2019 (-32.7%). The child poverty rate was 22.2% in 2019, marking a substantial drop of nearly 10 percentage points from the high of 31.4% in 2012. Child poverty continues to decline, down 1.6% from 2018 and 4.4% from 2016. Racial disparities are discussed in later sections.

Concentrated poverty. Low-income families living in areas of concentrated poverty often experience more disadvantages than similar families living in working class or middle-class neighborhoods, including child welfare involvement.[6] The number of NYC children living in areas of concentrated poverty, defined as census tracts with poverty rates higher than 40 percent, is declining.[7] The total population of New Yorkers living in *concentrated* poverty, defined as people living in census tracts with poverty rates higher than 40 percent, rose from 624,600 in 2010, peaked in 2015 at 856,704, and has since declined to 558,797 in 2019 (-34.8%). The trends in concentrated poverty from the early 2010's reversed, as the number of children living in areas

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[5] See Leroy H. Pelton. "The continuing role of material factors in child maltreatment and placement." *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Volume 41, 2015, Pages 30-39; Paul Bywaters, et al. 2015. "Exploring inequities in child welfare and child protection services: Explaining the 'inverse intervention law'". *Children and Youth Services Review*. Volume 57, Pages 98-105.

[6] See Vanessa Sacks. 2018. Five Ways Neighborhoods of Concentrated Disadvantage Harm Children. Available at https://www.childtrends.org/child-trends-5/five-ways-neighborhoods-concentrated-disadvantage-harm-children last accessed August 18., 2018; Sacha Klein, Darcey H. Merritt. 2014. "Neighborhood racial & ethnic diversity as a predictor of child welfare system involvement." *Children and Youth Services Review*. Volume 41, Pages 95-105.

[7] Demographers have long used the 40 percent poverty as a definition of concentrated poverty. See William Julius Wilson, 1987. The Truly Disadvantaged. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Some have used a 30 percent standard (see http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-ChildrenLivingInHighPovertyCommunities-2012-Full.pdf , last accessed July 1, 2021.)

of concentrated poverty peaked in 2015 at 263,563 and has since dropped to 171,875 in 2019 (-34.8%). Finally, the number of children in poverty *and* living in areas of concentrated poverty peaked in 2015 at 158,753 and has declined steadily since then down to 100,663 in 2019 (-36.6%). Racial disparities are prominent in concentrated poverty data; see the "Racial and geographic disparities" section of this brief for more.

Child-bearing and health. NYC experienced stark changes in teen birth rates the past several years. From 2005 to 2015, the NYC teen birth rate dropped by almost half, from 32.9 per 1,000 females in 2005 to 17.5 in 2015 (-46.8%). The teen birth rate continues to decline, having hit a new low in 2018 at 13.1 per 1,000 females (-60.2% from 2005, -25.1% from 2015).[8] This resulted in thousands of fewer births each year among a group at high risk of child welfare involvement. Compared to 2010, there were 76 fewer births in NYC in 2018 to children under 15 years old, 1,473 fewer births to children 15 to 17 years old, and 2,826 fewer births to women 18 to 19 years old. In total, there were 4,375 fewer births to teen mothers in NYC in 2018 than in 2010.[9]

The number of children without health insurance dropped from 108,658 in 2008 to 36,336 in 2019 (-66.5%), but there has been a small increase of 1.1 percentage points since 2016. There was an increase in children without health insurance in 2017 (+37.5%), marking a striking change from the continuous decline. While there is no causal evidence to connect the two, the timing of this sharp increase lines up with the 144-day lapse in the Children's Health Insurance Program and the ensuing drop in enrollment for children between May and June of 2017. The number of uninsured children has continued to drop since then. Finally, the number of children under 6 years old with elevated lead levels plummeted from 3,082 in 2005 to 720 in 2018.[10]

Education. Educational improvements are also striking. The NYC Department of Education attendance rate rose from 88.6% in the 2005 school year to 91.5% in the 2019 school year—an improvement that translates to millions of additional school days. The attendance rate has changed only marginally since 2015. The dropout rate continued to decline from 18.8% in 2005 to 5.9% in 2020 (-13%), which was a 2% decrease from the previous year. The 4-year graduation rate rose from 56.4% in the 2008 school year to 76.9% in the 2020 school year, marking a 20.5% increase over 12 years and a 3.0% increase since the 2019 school year.[11] These improvements likely contributed to a decline in "disconnected youth" (youth age 16 to 24 years who are not in school and not working) from 17.6% in 2012 to 13% in 2019.

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[8] See "Teen Births" from the CCC Keeping Track Database. https://data.cccnewyork.org/data/map/79/teen-births#79/a/3/123/40/a/a

[9] These data are obtained from NYS Department of Health— Table 7: Live Births by Mother's Age and Resident County New York State & New York City 2005-2018. Retrieved from https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/vital_statistics/2018/table07.htm. For more information, see the reproductive health policy brief in this series.

[10] Elevated blood levels here are defined as greater than 10 mcg/dL as tested by DOHMH. The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) controversy concerning lead levels involves follow up inspections in NYCHA apartments where children register between 5 and 9 mcg/dL, as the CDC recommends. As far as we know, no questions have been raised about the accuracy of the DOHMH lead level tests or the data cited here.

[11] Data are from the NYC Department of Education as reported in the Citizen's Committee for Children's Keeping Track Database: http://data.cccnewyork.org/data/map/121/graduation-rate#121/a/5/205/25/a.

Figure 1: NYC Dropout, Attendance and Graduation Rates for NYC Public High School Students from 2008-2019
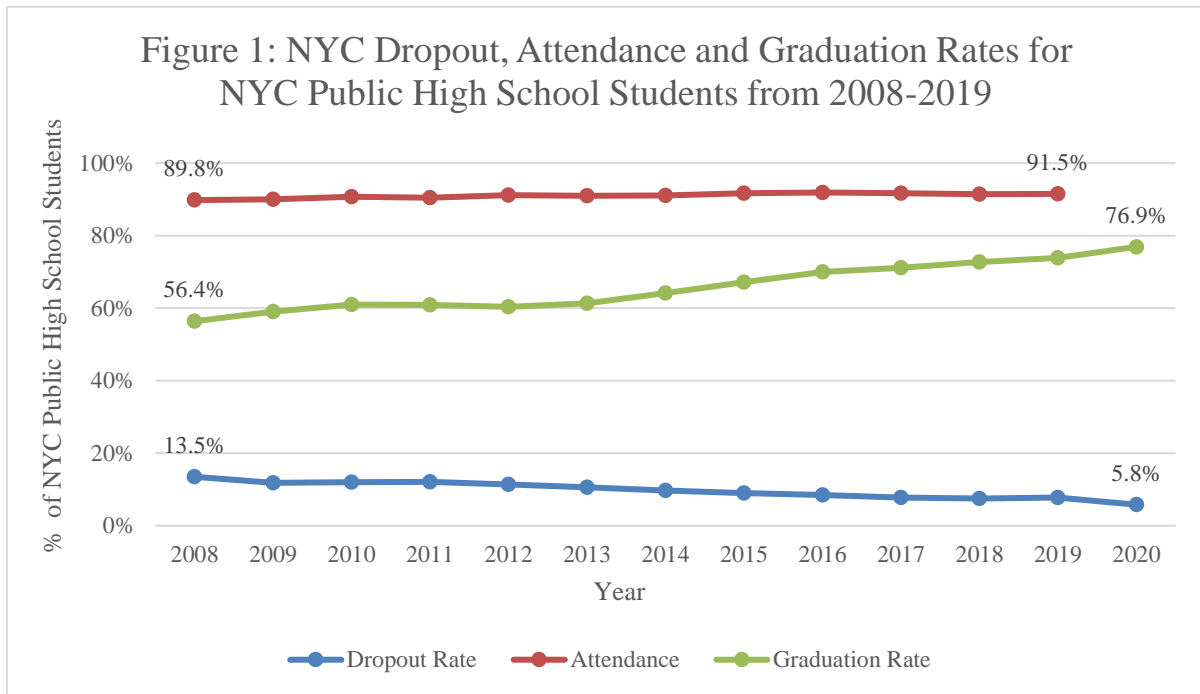
Figure 1: New York City Education Statistics from the Department of Education, reported by CCC Keeping Track Database. Note that attendance data from 2020 is not yet available.

Justice. Juvenile arrests plunged from over 12,370 in 2011 to 3,430 in 2018 (-72.3%). Criminal arrests of 16 and 17-year-olds have continued to decline, down from 28,289 in 2010 to 7,902 in 2018 (-72.1%). This striking decline is a 50% decrease from two years prior in 2016. Involvement in the justice system can lead to involvement with child welfare or entry into foster care. While ACS does not make figures public on the number of youth who "crossover" between foster care and juvenile detention, we expect that declines in the number of older youth, older youth in foster care, and the number of youth involved in juvenile and criminal activities translated into declines in the number of crossover youth as well.

Additionally, Raise the Age legislation in 2017 raised the age of criminal responsibility in New York State from 16 to 18. As of June 2020, there were no youth under age 18 detained with adults or sentenced to local jails or state prisons in New York. This means far fewer youth under 18 are entering the criminal justice system, representing large-scale justice reform with the potential to dramatically change future outcomes of affected youth.[12]

Together, these trends suggest that fewer youth in NYC are at risk of involvement with the child welfare system. There are, however, some countervailing trends that point in the other direction.

Children and families in shelter. The number of children who spent time in a NYC shelter decreased from 45,672 in city fiscal year 2015 to 22,670 children in FY2020 (-50.4%), while the total number of people served by the shelter system each year dropped from 133,883 to 66,266 (-

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[12] See Raise the Age Task Force Final Report, 2020.
https://www.ny.gov/sites/ny.gov/files/atoms/files/FINAL_Report_Raise_the_Age_Task_Force_122220.pdf
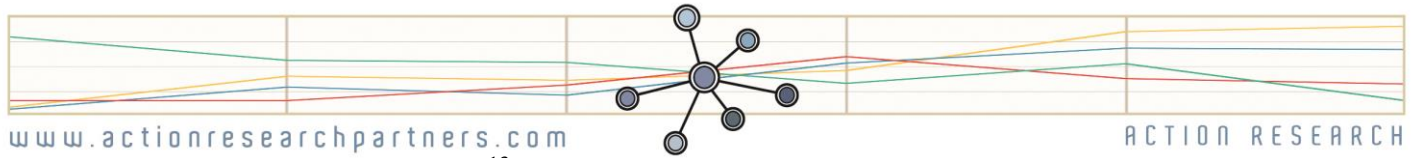
50.4%) during that same period.[13] While these numbers are promising, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may have skewed this data. NYC DHS served 11% fewer individuals in families in June 2020 compared to June 2019. Shelters across NYC were closed or at limited capacity due to the pandemic, resulting in fewer individuals served even with skyrocketing demand. There has, however, been a fairly steady decrease in families served over the last several years, with DHS seeing a 5% decrease in individuals in families served from June 2018 to June 2019.[14] The data indicates a decline in need of the shelter system, but the negative economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may reverse this trend.

Entering shelter is associated with very low income and social isolation, both factors linked to child welfare involvement. In addition, the instability of shelter housing and the increased surveillance of shelter families may increase the likelihood of involvement.[15] Studies show that Black and Latinx New Yorkers are disproportionately affected by homelessness.[16]

Racial and geographic disparities

Most indicators show a similar direction of changes across racial groups and geographies. Nonetheless, disparities between Whites and Asian compared to Latinx and Black populations persist. Neighborhoods with high child welfare involvement and large percentages of Latinx and Black populations also have worsened outcomes than Whites and Asians on most of the indicators discussed above.

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[13] See NYC DHS Data Dashboard - Fiscal Year 2020.
https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dashboard/tables/FY20-DHS-Data-Dashboard-Data.pdf
[14] See NYC DHS Data Dashboard - Fiscal Year 2019.
https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dashboard/tables/FY19-DHS-Data-Dashboard-Data.pdf
[15] See Biel, Matthew G. et al. 2014. "Family Homelessness: A Deepening Crisis in Urban Communities." *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. Volume 53, Issue 12, 1247 – 1250.
[16] See "NYC Homelessness Fact Sheet 2021," from the Coalition for the Homeless.
https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NYC-HomelessnessFactSheet-4-2021_citations.pdf
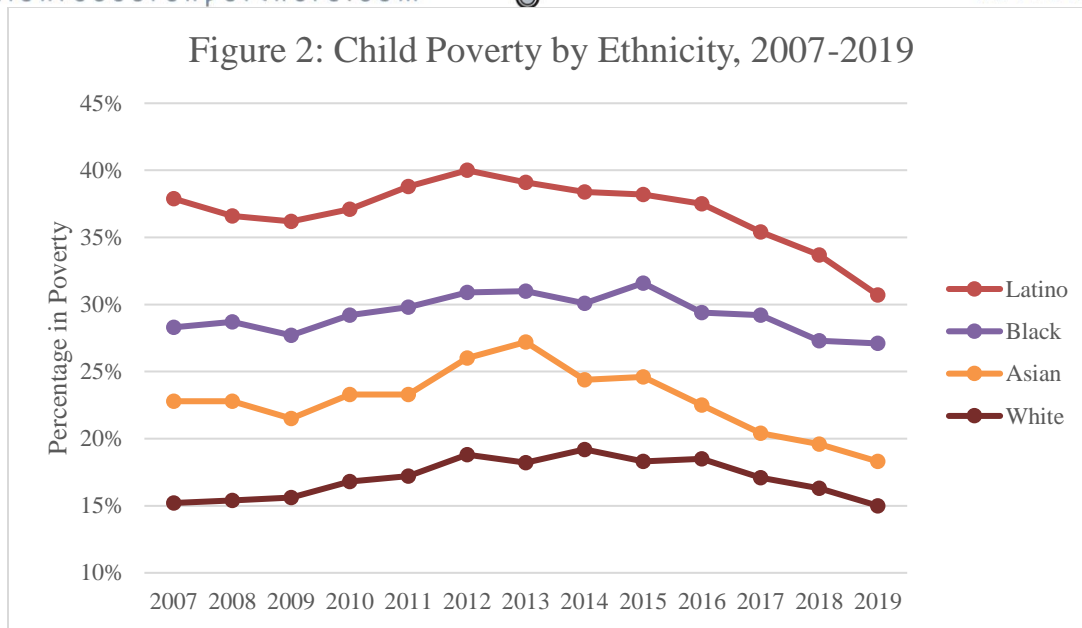
Figure 2: Child Poverty in NYC by Ethnicity. Data from Keeping Track Database.
*Note that the Y axis ends at 50%

For example, the child poverty rate overall has declined sharply in the last several years, but that drop is heavily influenced by the declining rate of child poverty among White and Asian populations. The Black child poverty rate in particular has stagnated in recent years around 27-29% with very little decline since 2015. The rate among White children is around 15%, while the rate for Latinx children continues to sit above 30% for the past 10+ years. The racial disparities among children in foster care also remained high in 2019, with Black and Latinx children representing 86% of children in care.[17] While the number of foster care placements continues to decline, the vast majority (53%) of placements are Black children.

Black and Hispanic residents of NYC are overrepresented in areas of concentrated poverty as well. Though the overall rate continues to decline, as of 2018, 9.6% of New Yorkers and 22.3% of New Yorkers in poverty still live in census tracts deemed areas of concentrated poverty. Roughly 1 in 6 Hispanic New Yorkers (16.1%) live in concentrated poverty, compared to 13.1% of Black individuals, 4.4% of White individuals, and 3.4% of Asian and Pacific Islanders. Areas of concentrated poverty lack the resources that people need to ensure quality of life, and the poor outcomes affect children most of all.

Areas of concentrated poverty tend to have low-quality housing leading to higher rates of asthma among children, are more likely to be food deserts that negatively impact diet, and have lower quality schools with youth more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system.[18] Recent studies have found a link between neighborhood poverty and limited economic mobility, where

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[17] See "Watching the Numbers 2020: Covid-19's Effects on Child Welfare System" from the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School. http://www.centernyc.org/reports-briefs/2021/2/4/watching-the-numbers-2020-monitoring-new-york-citys-child-welfare-system

[18] See Narrowing the Gap Equity Indicators, "Poverty and Place," 2018. https://nyc.equityindicators.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/10/Narrowing-the-Gap-Vol34_Low-Income-1.pdf
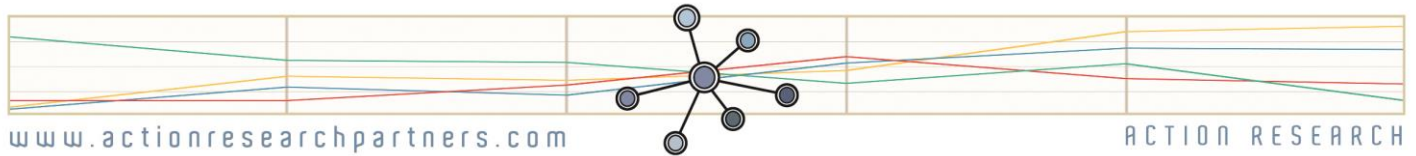
low-income families with children growing up in these areas tend to have lower incomes in adulthood than children of low-income families in affluent areas. The negative economic impact is intergenerational, meaning that outcomes are passed on to their own children later in life.[19] The persistence of these disadvantages places these areas at particular risk of child welfare activity, especially if the positive trends cited above reverse.[20]

Many of the trends discussed in this brief have the potential to be self-sustaining in positive and negative directions. As more youth graduate high school, their children have better odds of graduating high school. In contrast, children who grow up in areas of concentrated poverty are likely to pass the negative economic outcomes on to their own children, ensuring intergenerational cycles of poverty. Stakeholders and policymakers to remain vigilant, as racial disparities persist through most indicators. Still, the long-term trends in NYC suggest that the number of youth facing the challenge of transitioning out of foster care will decline.

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[19] See Narrowing the Gap Equity Indicators, "Poverty and Place," 2018. https://nyc.equityindicators.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/10/Narrowing-the-Gap-Vol34_Low-Income-1.pdf
[20] See Samuel L. Myers, Jr et al. 2018. "Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality in Foster Care." In E. Trejos-Castillo and N. Trevino-Schafer (eds.). *Handbook of Foster Youth.* New York, NY: Routledge.