

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

## POLICY BRIEF NO. 3

Tim Ross, *Action Research*

Members, **Child Trends Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Team**

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation Foster Youth Initiative

### SUMMARY

This brief discusses some of the 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.<sup>1</sup> Some data points, such as the increase in children living in concentrated poverty, raise concerns that more children and families may experience child welfare interventions.<sup>2</sup>

### 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> These factors include media coverage, investigative practice, the composition of the judiciary, policies on mandated reporting, service

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Readers are encouraged to visit <https://www.ccnnewyork.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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

*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 1,799,754 in 2016 (-4.8%). All age ranges declined, though the population of children 5 to 9 years old declined less than other groups. As a proportion of the total, Black children declined from 26.0% of the child population in 2009 to 23.0% in 2016. The Latino population rose from 34.0% to 35.4% during that period, while the number of White and Asian children changed only marginally. Fewer children 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 564,566 in 2016 (-5.0%). The number of children living in poverty declined from 505,098 in 2009 to 471,190 in 2016 (-6.7%). Though the child poverty rate only declined from 27.1% to 26.6% from 2009 to 2016, the rate peaked at 31.4% in 2012. The nearly five percentage point drop in the following four years is substantial.

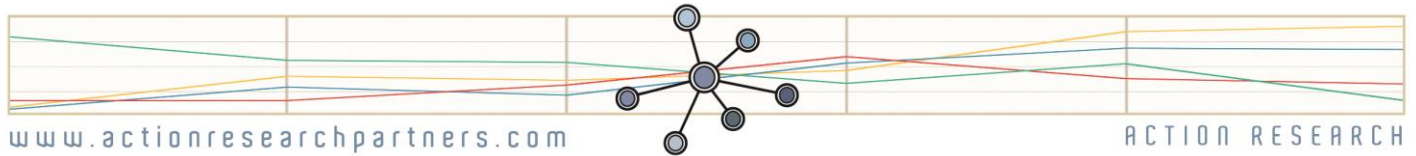
**Child-bearing and health.** NYC experienced stark changes in teen birth rates the past several years. From 2005 to 2015, the NYC teen birth rate dropped by almost half, from 36.5 per 1,000 females in 2005 to 19.4 in 2015 (-47%). This resulted in thousands of fewer births each year among a group at high risk of child welfare involvement: 86 fewer births to children under 15 years old, 1,684 fewer births to children 15 to 17 years old, and 2,753 fewer births to women 18 to 19 years old.<sup>6</sup> The number of children without health insurance dropped from 108,658 in 2008 to 35,982 in 2016 (-67.0%). The number of children under 6 years old with elevated lead levels plummeted from 3,082 in 2005 to 822 in 2016.<sup>7</sup>

**Education.** Educational improvements are also striking. The NYC Department of Education attendance rate rose from 88.6 percent in the 2005 school year to 91.7 percent in the 2016 school year—an improvement that translates to millions of additional school days. The dropout rate declined from 18.8 percent in 2005 to 8.5 percent in 2016. The graduation rate rose from 50.7

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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. Retrieved from [https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/vital\\_statistics/2015/table07.htm](https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/vital_statistics/2015/table07.htm). For more information, see the reproductive health policy brief in this series.

<sup>7</sup> 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.



percent in the 2005 school year to 74.3 percent in the 2017 school year.<sup>8</sup> 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 percent in 2012 to 14.7 percent in 2016.

**Justice.** Juvenile arrests plunged from over 12,371 in 2011 to 4,615 in 2016 (-61.7%). Criminal arrests of 16 and 17-year-olds dropped from 28,289 in 2010 to 14,499 in 2016 (-48.7%). 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.

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.

### *Trends suggesting future increases in child welfare involvement*

**Concentrated poverty.** Low income families living in areas of concentrated poverty often experience many more disadvantages than similar families living in working class or middle-class neighborhoods, including child welfare involvement.<sup>9</sup> The number of NYC children living in areas of concentrated poverty, defined as census tracts with poverty rates higher than 40 percent, is rising.<sup>10</sup> 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 to 800,858 in 2016 (+28.2%). The number of children living in those census tracts rose from 208,570 in 2010 to 247,048 in 2016 (+18.4%) even as the overall child poverty rate fell. And finally, the number of children in poverty *and* living in areas of concentrated poverty rose from 124,376 in 2010 to 149,689 in 2016 (+20.4%). This increase in concentrated poverty is consistent with trends in income inequality, increases in the number of people living on almost no income, and gentrification taking place in Brooklyn, northern Manhattan, and other neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> 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> and reflect the graduation rate as of August 2017.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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 access August 21, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> See Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer. 2016. *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*. New York, NY: First Mariner Books; “New York City Gentrification Maps and Data.” *Governing*, available at <http://www.governing.com/gov-data/new-york-gentrification-maps-demographic-data.html> last accessed December 12, 2018.

***Children and families in shelter.*** The number of children who spent time in a NYC shelter rose from 40,238 in city fiscal year 2011 to 45,672 children in FY2015 (+13.5%), while the total number of people served by the shelter system each year rose from 110,112 to 133,883 (+21.6%) during that same period. 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.<sup>12</sup>

***Racial and geographic disparities.*** Rates on most indicators show changes across racial groups and geographies in a similar direction. Nonetheless, disparities between Whites and Asian compared to Latinos and Black populations persist. Neighborhoods with high child welfare involvement and large percentages of Latino and Black populations also have less advantageous rates on most of the indicators discussed above. The persistence of these disadvantages places these areas at particular risk of child welfare activity, especially if the positive trends cited above reverse.<sup>13</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Many of the trends discussed in this brief have the potential to be self-sustaining. As more youth graduate high school, for example, their children have better odds of graduating high school, especially as more youth delay starting families until their 20s or later. Stakeholders and policymakers, however, need to remain vigilant, as NYC has experienced sharp increases in foster care removals that were unconnected to long term trends. 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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<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.