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# EARLY CHILDHOOD POVERTY TRACKER

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**ROBIN HOOD**

## THE YOUNGEST NEW YORKERS:

### The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker is a new collaboration between Robin Hood and Columbia University. Launched in 2017, this study is following a representative sample of more than 1,500 families with young children in New York City, using repeated surveys to provide a detailed description of the challenges and resources that shape the development of children during the critical early years of life. Complementing these surveys, the study will conduct in-person assessments of school readiness, and will eventually incorporate information on longer-term educational outcomes. Because of its longitudinal, multidimensional, and New York City-specific design, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker will be a distinctive and valuable resource for policy leaders and child advocates in the city.

This report is the first to analyze this rich new data source on the lives of the youngest New Yorkers. In the future, we will release annual reports that discuss the state of poverty and disadvantage among young children, as well as shorter reports on diverse topics such child care and early education, child health and wellbeing, and service use in the city.

This inaugural report presents key findings from our initial survey of 1,540 parents of young children in the city. Young New Yorkers face significant levels of disadvantage:



0-3 years old

24%

Nearly **ONE IN FOUR** children ages 0-3 lives in poverty. Poverty is much more common among young children (24%) than adults (18%) in the city.

More than a third of young children (38%) are living in families who faced a material hardship — in other words, who could not afford one or more basic necessities like having enough food to feed their family.

38%



34%

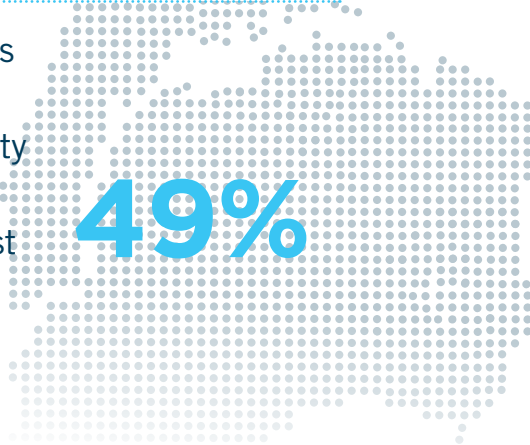
A third of young children (34%) live with a parent who reports either moderate or serious psychological distress.

Children who are Black or Hispanic face higher rates of all forms of disadvantage including poverty, material hardships, and health problems.



Nearly half of the city's young children (49%) live in lower-opportunity neighborhoods with poverty rates of at least 20 percent.

49%



These conditions are especially concerning because disadvantage in the early years can have such a profound effect on children's subsequent health and development. By following families with young children over these early years, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker will help us set priorities for interventions to reduce poverty and promote child wellbeing and healthy development.



# INTRODUCTION

TO THE EARLY CHILDHOOD POVERTY TRACKER

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In New York City, as in most large cities, there are stark contrasts in young children’s living conditions — contrasts that can shape children’s trajectories throughout school and into adulthood. On average, children who grow up in poverty have poorer health and developmental outcomes than children who do not.<sup>1,2</sup> Poverty is especially concerning among young children, because the earliest years of life are so consequential for so many aspects of physical, socioemotional, and cognitive development. A child’s circumstances during this time — including poverty, material hardship, and other forms of disadvantage — can have an outsized impact on later-life outcomes.<sup>3-5</sup>

At the same time, poverty and disadvantage do not fully determine child development. The relationship of poverty to child health and development is likely to be shaped by access to public and nonprofit resources, including federal programs such as SNAP (food stamps) and the Earned Income Tax Credit, New York City initiatives such as Pre-K for All, and food pantries and other community programs. Over the longer term, low-income parents may be able to gain economic stability through education or job training. Especially during the critical early years of childhood, these kinds of supports could make a significant difference for many children and families.

We know too little about how economic disadvantage in early childhood shapes health and development over time, and how public and nonprofit programs can mitigate the effects of this disadvantage. That is why Robin Hood and Columbia University have launched the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker. This mixed-methods study is following a sample of New York City families with young children over time. The study uses repeated surveys to gather information about living conditions, family composition, employment, health, early education, and child health and development. Complementing the surveys are in-person child assessments and, in the future, linkage to administrative data on long-term school and health outcomes.

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The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker has three key features:



### LONGITUDINAL DESIGN

The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker surveys the same families every few months for up to four years, providing a detailed picture of the dynamics of poverty and hardship. This “panel design” is important because many families move in and out of disadvantage. Some families are only intermittently disadvantaged, while others remain disadvantaged consistently over time. Compared with intermittent disadvantage, persistent disadvantage takes a greater toll on families.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker surveys capture the changes that occur as a parent gains or loses a job, receives or loses public benefits, or faces health shocks or other unexpected events. The panel design also allows us to follow parents as they make key decisions about their children’s care and schooling. For instance, when parents begin to look for a pre-kindergarten or kindergarten program for their child, we ask what features of schools and curricula are most important to them, and we then follow up as they submit applications and decide where to enroll their child. As the children move through school, the study will incorporate educational outcomes via linkages to New York City administrative data on public school progress and achievement.



### MULTIDIMENSIONAL MEASURES

Building on the Poverty Tracker study, launched by Robin Hood and Columbia University in 2012, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker measures multiple dimensions of both disadvantage and protective factors. This broad array of measures is important; while the relationship of poverty to child outcomes is well documented, we know far less about the implications for children of hardship and other forms of disadvantage.<sup>7-9</sup> With that in mind, we ask questions about material hardship and economic insecurity in every survey, and we regularly ask parents about their physical and mental health. To assess protective factors, we ask about community resources parents access, including social services and child care.



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## NEW YORK CITY FOCUS

Although there are other longitudinal studies of early childhood, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker is unusual for its focus on New York City. The initial sample includes more than 1,500 children ages zero to three, a larger sample of New York City children than most national studies can offer. In addition, the surveys include questions about New York City government programs such as Pre-K for All and 3-K for All, and about issues of special interest to New Yorkers, such as the high cost of housing. Eventually, we will use local data to understand the neighborhood contexts in which study families live, including neighborhood assets such as social services and early education as well as challenges such as spatial isolation or crime. Because of this local focus, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker will be a distinctive and valuable resource for policy leaders and child advocates in the city.

By providing in-depth information about children's circumstances during the critical early years of childhood, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker study will help us better understand both disparities and protective factors in child development — and what we can do about them.

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The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker  
is a survey of more than 1,500  
New York City households with  
young children ages 0-3.



# STUDY DESIGN AND BASELINE DATA

The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker study began in 2017 when the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) conducted NYC Kids, a telephone survey of randomly selected households with children ages 0-13 in New York City. After completing the DOHMH survey, respondents with children under age three were invited to complete a short survey for Columbia, and to join the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker cohort. A total of 1,402 parents completed a baseline survey for Columbia and most remain active participants in the study. In addition, 138 respondents with children under age three from the ongoing Robin Hood-sponsored Poverty Tracker study agreed to join the study, bringing the total baseline sample to 1,540 parents of young children. The study centers on a randomly selected child who was 0-35 months old at the start of the study in June 2017, or who was born during the following 12 months.

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The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker study includes several components: regular surveys of the parents, in-person child assessments, and linkage to selected administrative data such as school records.

### REPEATED SURVEYS OVER TIME

The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker is following a sample of New York City parents with young children for up to four years, collecting detailed information on a focal child. While cross-sectional studies survey their participants only once, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker reaches out to study participants with a survey every three to four months, asking parents to tell us how their lives and family circumstances have changed over time.

The survey questions parallel those used in another Robin Hood-Columbia collaboration, the Poverty Tracker, but with a special focus on topics related to early childhood. Topics include parent employment and finances, housing, child care and early education, and parent and child health. Once a year, we ask detailed questions about household income and expenses, allowing us to estimate poverty using both the official poverty measure and the newer Supplemental Poverty Measure. Also on an annual basis, we field a detailed set of questions about child development and behavior.

### IN-PERSON CHILD ASSESSMENTS

Complementing the surveys, we also conduct in-person assessments with Early Childhood Poverty Tracker children. After the child turns three and a half, we meet with the parent and child either in their home or on the Columbia University campus to complete the following assessments:

**Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test IV (PPVT)** – The PPVT is an assessment of language development, specifically receptive vocabulary (the words children know). The child is given a series of words and asked to choose which of four pictures best corresponds to the word. Most children take the test in English, but there is a Spanish version (Test de Vocabulario en Imágenes or TVIP) as well; children from English-Spanish bilingual households are given a short assessment to identify their dominant language before taking the PPVT or TVIP. The PPVT is a commonly used measure of school readiness and is predictive of children's later language and reading skills.

**EF Touch** – EF Touch is a computerized assessment of executive functions, which the child takes on a laptop. Executive functions are important skills that help children control their attention and behavior so they can focus on learning or other goal-directed behavior. Executive functions help children to succeed in school.<sup>10-12</sup> We collect data on three dimensions of executive functions: working memory, attention shifting, and inhibitory control.<sup>13</sup>

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**Three-Bag Assessment** – The Three-Bag Assessment, drawn from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project, is a 10-minute videotaped free play session. The parent and child are given three bags and asked to play with them sequentially; the bags contain a picture book, a toy cash register with plastic foods, and a set of blocks. The resulting videotapes are coded for scales describing parent and child behaviors that are important to children’s learning.<sup>14</sup> Measuring these qualities directly provides more objective and accurate data than measuring them with surveys.

These assessments provide a snapshot of key aspects of school readiness and the home environment a year or so before the child enters kindergarten. The assessments can help us understand how experiences like poverty, material hardship, family stress, and other kinds of disadvantage are related to school readiness.<sup>15-17</sup>

## ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

To understand long-term outcomes for children, we will link Early Childhood Poverty Tracker survey data to administrative data collected by the New York City DOHMH and Department of Education (DOE). With parent consent, which we request during the in-person assessment – and with rigorous protection of family privacy – survey records will be linked to specific information from New York City birth certificates, Medicaid, Early Intervention Program (a program for young children with developmental delays), and school information such as school achievement and graduation.

For families who choose to participate in this part of the study, as most do, administrative data will provide invaluable information on how children’s early life conditions are related to educational outcomes. The birth certificate, Early Intervention, and Medicaid data will add to our knowledge about health and service use in childhood, while linkage to New York City public school records will provide information about educational outcomes as children move through school. Among children from low-income backgrounds, completing high school and earning higher levels of academic achievement are critical steps towards escaping poverty as an adult.<sup>18</sup> Studies that relate early childhood experiences to long-term child outcomes are rare. A few large national studies have followed children over time, including the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-Children/Young Adults study, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort. These studies remain invaluable resources for research, but they are not city-specific, and because the children in these studies were born a decade or more ago, these studies do not reflect recent policy developments such as the expansion of public pre-kindergarten programs in New York City.

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## CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

With its repeated surveys, in-person assessments, and linkage to administrative data, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker study provides unusually rich longitudinal data on early childhood in New York City. With these data, we can better understand what dimensions of poverty and economic hardship are important for outcomes later in life, describe the trajectories of child health and development through early childhood and beyond, and examine patterns, predictors, and consequences of service use and non-use.

The study does have some limitations. First, our descriptive results are representative only of young children in New York City who were born in New York State.<sup>i</sup> While this design misses children who were brought to the state (or country) after birth, fully 93 percent of the city's young children were born in New York State.

Second, the surveys are conducted only in English and Spanish; parents who did not speak one of those languages could not participate.<sup>ii</sup> These exceptions notwithstanding, the study represents the diversity of the city. The DOHMH's NYC Kids survey oversampled families in selected low-income neighborhoods — where survey participation can be low — ensuring that the experiences of children in these neighborhoods will be well represented. The figures presented in this report are weighted statistically to be representative of New York State-born children living in New York City.

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Data from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker will be linked to administrative data to better understand long-term educational and health outcomes for children.

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<sup>i</sup>In the American Community Survey 2015-17, 7 percent of New York City children aged 0-3 were born outside New York State, with about half of those born outside the U.S. and half in other U.S. states. In the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker baseline data, only a few children were born outside of New York State, making weighted results for this sub-group unreliable. The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker sample under-represents children born outside of New York State because of how the sample was selected. The households in the DOHMH survey who were eligible to join the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker included only those in which someone had a child born in New York City between 2011 and 2016. Most of the remaining Early Childhood Poverty Tracker participants were recruited from the 2015 Poverty Tracker cohort. The Poverty Tracker parents had been New York City residents for at least two years at the time of their recruitment into the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker study, and most of their young children were born in New York City.

<sup>ii</sup>In the 2017 American Community Survey, about 3 percent of NYC children aged 0-3 lived with parents who did not speak English well and who did not speak Spanish.

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## THE EARLY CHILDHOOD POVERTY TRACKER FAMILIES AT BASELINE

This initial report is drawn from the baseline survey, conducted between July 2017 and June 2018. Like most household surveys, ours relies on one person, the survey respondent, to report on characteristics for an entire household. As Table 1 shows, this person is nearly always a parent — usually the child’s mother — with most in their 20s or 30s.<sup>iii</sup> For 2 percent of focal children, the survey respondent was another family member, usually a grandparent. Reflecting the city’s diversity, 35 percent of respondents are Hispanic, 31 percent are non-Hispanic White, and 20 percent are non-Hispanic Black, with the remainder being of Asian or other backgrounds. Nearly half of the survey respondents were born outside the United States.

The lower panel of Table 1 describes the households of the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker children. About 73 percent of children lived in a two-parent family, and more than one in five lived in extended households (including relatives such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, or cousins).<sup>iv</sup> Most families were small, with just one or two children. Four of five children lived in households in which at least one parent was working. In almost a third of the families, both parents worked. Almost half the children lived with at least one college graduate, and more than half lived with at least one parent born outside the United States.

Not surprisingly given the high proportion living with immigrant parents, about half the children lived in a household in which a language other than English was spoken; 31 percent lived in bilingual homes, in which both English and another language were spoken, and 19 percent lived in homes in which English was not usually spoken. Across the entire Early Childhood Poverty Tracker sample, more than 50 different languages were spoken; aside from English, Spanish was the language most commonly spoken at home. Finally, almost half the children lived in a high-poverty neighborhood (in accord with the U.S. Census, we define high-poverty neighborhoods as zip code areas in which 20 percent or more of the residents are living in poverty).

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<sup>iii</sup>The NYC Kids survey from which our sample is drawn randomly selected a child under age 14 in the household, then sought to interview a parent or guardian of that child. If the person reached by phone was the father of the focal child, he was asked if he knew enough to answer questions about the child’s health, doctor visits, school, and general activities; if the answer was no, the interview was terminated. The mother of the focal child was not asked this question. When we contacted the DOHMH sample, we began with the person who completed the NYC Kids survey. After describing the study, we asked to speak with the person who knows the most about the focal child’s health, development, and daily routines; only 16 people asked us to speak to someone else in the household. Because we had already conducted multiple surveys with the Poverty Tracker respondents, we did not allow them to switch to another respondent when they joined the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker cohort.

<sup>iv</sup>These two-parent families include both married couples and (unmarried) domestic partners. If we exclude domestic partners, the share of Early Childhood Poverty Tracker children in married two-parent families is very close to the share of New York City births to married women: in 2016, 63 percent of New York City births were to married women; in the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker baseline sample, 64 percent of children lived with mothers who were married.

TABLE 1

### Characteristics of Early Childhood Poverty Tracker Respondents and Households at Baseline

	Percentage
<b>Respondent Characteristics</b>	
Female respondent	<b>88</b>
Respondent is parent of the focal child	<b>98</b>
<b>Respondent age</b>	
18-29	<b>28</b>
30-34	<b>32</b>
35-39	<b>23</b>
40+	<b>17</b>
<b>Respondent race/ethnicity</b>	
Black non-Hispanic	<b>20</b>
Hispanic	<b>35</b>
White non-Hispanic	<b>31</b>
Asian or other background	<b>14</b>
Born outside the U.S.	<b>45</b>
<b>Household Characteristics</b>	
Child lives in two-parent family	<b>73</b>
Child lives in extended household	<b>23</b>
<b>Number of children in family</b>	
1	<b>30</b>
2	<b>38</b>
3 or more	<b>32</b>
At least one parent employed	<b>80</b>
At least one college graduate in household	<b>48</b>
At least one immigrant parent in household	<b>54</b>
<b>Household members speak a language besides English at home</b>	
Speak English and other language	<b>31</b>
Speak other language only	<b>19</b>
Household lives in a high-poverty neighborhood	<b>49</b>

Source: Baseline data from the New York City Longitudinal Study of Young Children. N=1,540. High-poverty neighborhoods had an official poverty rate of 20 percent or higher. Households that included relatives other than the focal child's parents and siblings were defined as extended. Figures for children from Asian or other backgrounds should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.



# DISADVANTAGE

Like the Poverty Tracker, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker study captures three main dimensions of disadvantage: income poverty, material hardship, and health problems.

## Poverty Tracker Measures



**INCOME POVERTY**



**MATERIAL HARDSHIPS**



**HEALTH PROBLEMS**



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To measure income poverty, we use the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which takes into account non-cash benefits such as SNAP (food stamps) and housing subsidies, work expenses, and differences in cost of living (see text box). In the year prior to the baseline survey, nearly one in four (24 percent) Early Childhood Poverty Tracker children lived in poverty.<sup>v</sup>

Material hardship captures whether families can afford basic expenses such as food or housing. From the Poverty Tracker study, we learned that material hardship was more widespread than poverty, with many families unable to meet their daily needs even though their incomes were above the poverty line. The same is true among the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker families. While 24 percent of young children lived in poverty, 38 percent faced material hardship.

Physical health problems include poor self-rated health or a work-limiting disability. In the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker, when we measure health as a dimension of disadvantage, we consider the health of the child's parent. About 8 percent of children lived with parents who had a physical health problem; this rate is relatively low because most parents in the study are young, in their 20s or 30s.

Table 2 compares these core dimensions of disadvantage for children ages zero to three and adults in New York City. Children had higher rates of poverty and hardship, while adults had higher rates of health problems. More than half the city's young children – more than 200,000 – faced at least one of these types of disadvantage, similar to the rate for adults.

## The Supplemental Poverty Measure

Every year in September, the U.S. government releases the latest results on poverty in the United States using the official poverty measure. The official measure was developed in the 1960s, and compared families' total before tax cash income to a poverty line, or threshold, based on the cost of a minimally adequate diet at the time, and how that cost factored into families' budgets in the same era. With some minor adjustments, this measure has mostly only been updated over time for changes in inflation.

But over time, this formula has become increasingly outdated. Food costs have become less important in family budgets, while things like housing and child care have become more important. A focus on before tax cash income ignores benefits that many families receive through the tax system, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, or in noncash form, such as food stamps or housing vouchers. And, importantly in a city like New York, the poverty threshold under the official measure does not vary with costs of living, particularly housing costs, which are notoriously high in the city.

The SPM improves the measurement of poverty on all of these fronts. The poverty threshold is based on contemporary spending not just on food, but on other necessities like clothing, shelter, and utilities. The value of tax credits and noncash benefits are counted as income. And the poverty threshold in places like New York City is higher given its higher than average housing costs. For families who face them, medical and child care costs are subtracted from income. The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker collects all the requisite data necessary to directly calculate the SPM in its sample of New Yorkers, and forms the basis of our income poverty statistics.

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<sup>v</sup>Among Early Childhood Poverty Tracker children, the poverty rate was slightly higher using the SPM than the official poverty measure: 23.8 percent versus 23.3 percent. The SPM is usually lower than the official rate among children, but the SPM tends to be higher than the official rate in states like New York with a high cost of living.

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# Poverty Tracker

## Measures of Disadvantage

The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker design was modeled on the Poverty Tracker, a project developed in 2012 in partnership between Robin Hood and Columbia University. The Poverty Tracker surveys a sample of New York City adults every few months, following them for up to four years. Using those surveys, we construct three core measures of disadvantage:

### MEASURES OF DISADVANTAGE

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**INCOME  
POVERTY**



**MATERIAL  
HARDSHIP**



**HEALTH  
PROBLEMS**

### INCOME POVERTY

While the Poverty Tracker captures the official poverty measure, it focuses on a newer measure, the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), discussed above, which takes into account geographic differences in housing costs; estimates of taxes paid and tax credits received; the value of noncash benefits such as housing assistance and SNAP; medical out-of-pocket expenses; and work-related expenses such as child care and commuting. The Supplemental Poverty Measure also treats cohabiting couples as equivalent to married couples when determining poverty status.

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## MATERIAL HARDSHIP

While income poverty measures a family's resources, material hardship captures whether that income is adequate to meet the family's needs. The Poverty Tracker taps five domains of material hardship, listed below. Our summary measure defines families as experiencing material hardship if they faced any of these difficulties in the past 12 months.



### FOOD HARDSHIP

Running out of food or often worrying food would run out without enough money to buy more



### BILLS HARDSHIP

Having utilities cut off because of a lack of money



### HOUSING HARDSHIP

Having to stay in a shelter or other place not meant for regular housing, or having to move in with others because of costs



### FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

Often running out of money between paychecks or pay cycles



### MEDICAL HARDSHIP

Not being able to see a medical professional because of cost

## HEALTH PROBLEMS

The Poverty Tracker health indicators include a widely used measure of self-rated health in which respondents rate their health as excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor. We also asked respondents whether they had a work-limiting health condition. Respondents who report either poor health or a work-limiting health condition were categorized as having a physical health problem.





The Poverty Tracker examines the three core dimensions — income poverty, material hardship, and health problems — separately, and also combines them into a single measure of disadvantage. A respondent who faces at least one of these difficulties is coded as experiencing disadvantage.<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>vi</sup>For more information about the Poverty Tracker design and measures of disadvantage, see Christopher Wimer, Irwin Garfinkel, Madeleine Gelblum, Narayani Lasal, Stephanie Phillips, Yajuan Si, Julien Teitler, and Jane Waldfogel. 2014. "Poverty Tracker – Monitoring Poverty and Well-Being in NYC, Report 1." New York, NY: Columbia Population Research Center and Robin Hood Foundation.

TABLE 2

Disadvantage among Young Children and Adults in New York City

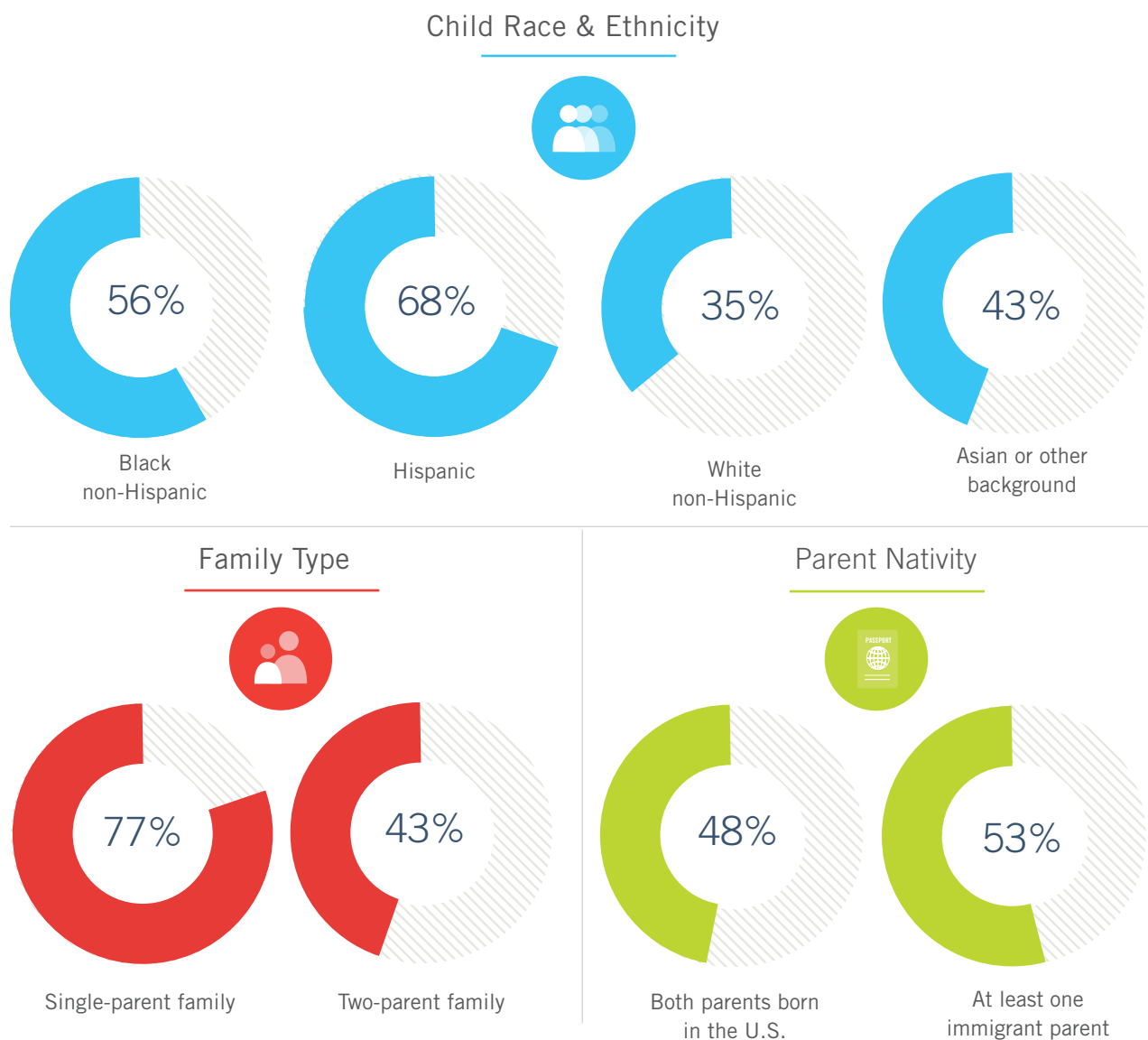
		All children ages 0-3		Adults, 18+	
		Percentage	Estimated count		
<b>POVERTY</b> 		24%	96,000	18%	
	<b>HARDSHIP</b> 	38%	152,000	33%	
		<b>PARENT PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS</b> 	8%	32,000	22%
	<b>ANY TYPE OF DISADVANTAGE</b> 		52%	209,000	51%

Source: For children: Baseline data from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker. N=1,540. For adults: Annual survey data from Poverty Tracker, 2017-18. Poverty measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure.

The risk of disadvantage is higher for some children than for others. Figure 1 compares rates of disadvantage by race/ethnicity, family type, and parent nativity. Black and Hispanic children had higher rates of disadvantage than other children. A startling three out of four children in single-parent families lived with at least one type of disadvantage. Differences between children with U.S. born and immigrant parents were relatively modest.

**FIGURE 1**

Percentage of Children Ages 0-3 Living with Disadvantage by Child Race/Ethnicity, Family Type, and Parent Nativity



Source: Baseline data from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker. N=1,540. Poverty measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure. Figures for children from Asian or other backgrounds should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.



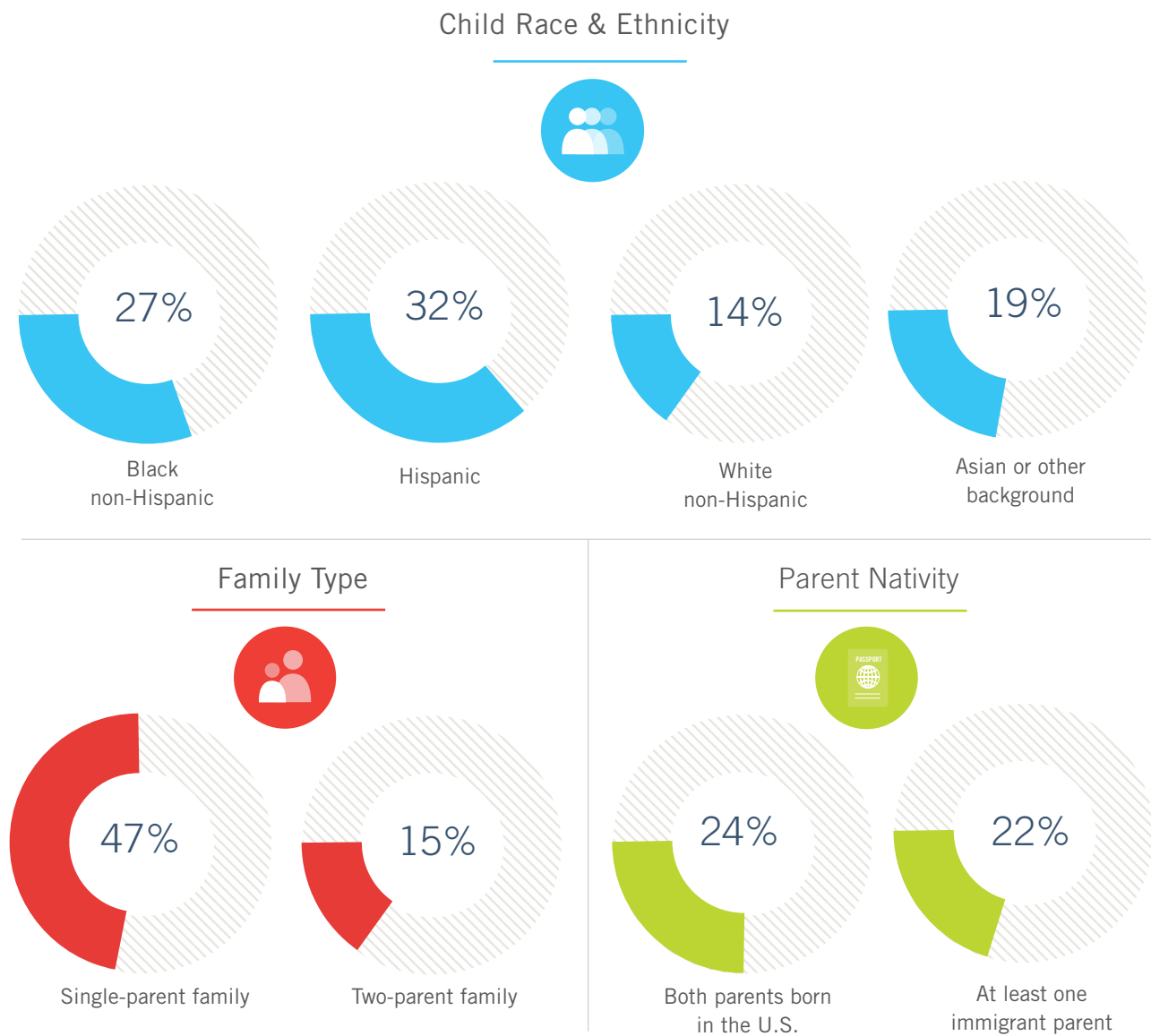
# INCOME POVERTY



Poverty rates differed by race and ethnicity, family type, and nativity of parents (Figure 2). Differences by race and ethnicity are similar to what we see for adults in the city: children in Black and Hispanic families faced the highest risk of poverty. Family type was very strongly correlated with poverty; nearly half the children living in single-parent families were poor, compared with only 15 percent of children in two-parent families. Poverty rates were similar for children of immigrant and U.S.-born parents.

**FIGURE 2**

Poverty Rates by Child Race/Ethnicity Family Type, and Parent Nativity



Source: Baseline data from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker. N=1,540. Poverty measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure. Figures for children from Asian or other backgrounds should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.

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Table 3 presents patterns of poverty in more detail. Three out of five young children in New York fell under 200 percent of the poverty line; in contrast, less than half of New York City adults fell below that level. This threshold is important because analyses of the Poverty Tracker suggest that families between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty line face significant risk of slipping into poverty. Also notable: nearly one of 12 children faced “deep poverty” — with incomes less than half the poverty line – which may be especially harmful for children.

Black and Hispanic children were more likely to be in deep poverty and less likely to be above 200 percent of the poverty line. Single-parent families were especially vulnerable, with one in five living in deep poverty. While differences between U.S.-born and immigrant families were smaller, children with immigrant parents were more likely to fall below 200 percent of poverty.

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**60%** of young children ages 0-3 were within **200%** of the poverty line.

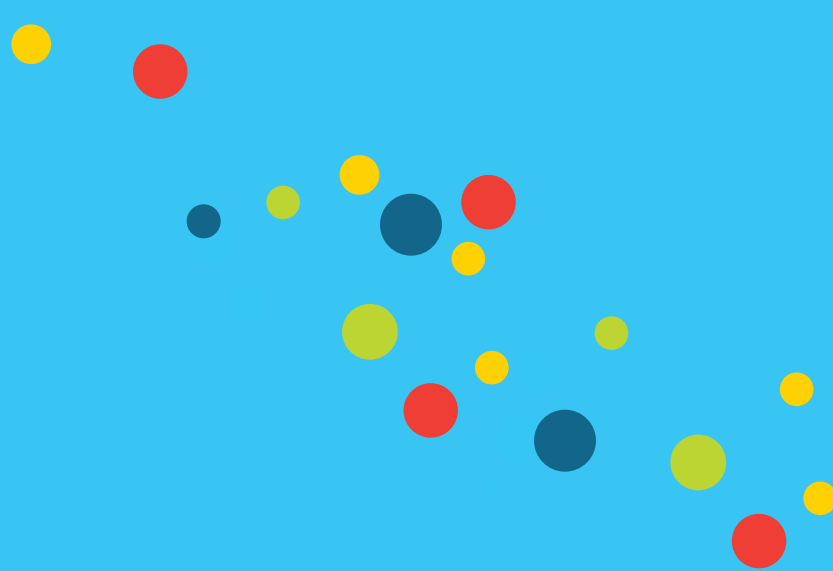


TABLE 3

## Levels of Poverty by Child Race/Ethnicity, Family Type, and Parent Nativity

		Percentage below 50% of poverty line	Percentage between 50% and 100% of poverty line	Percentage between 100% and 200% of poverty line	Percentage at or above 200% of poverty line
BY AGE	All children 0-3	7	16	37	40
	Estimated count	29,000	66,000	147,000	159,000
	Adults 18+	5	18	30	52
BY RACE	Black non-Hispanic	9	17	38	36
	Hispanic	11	21	43	25
	White non-Hispanic	3	11	29	56
	Asian or other background	4	15	36	45
FAMILY TYPE	Single-parent family	20	28	33	20
	Two-parent family	3	12	38	47
PARENT NATIVITY	Both parents born in the U.S.	7	17	32	44
	At least one immigrant parent	8	15	41	36

Source: For children: Baseline data from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker. N=1,540. For adults: annual survey data from Poverty Tracker, 2017-18. Poverty measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure. Figures for children from Asian or other backgrounds should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.



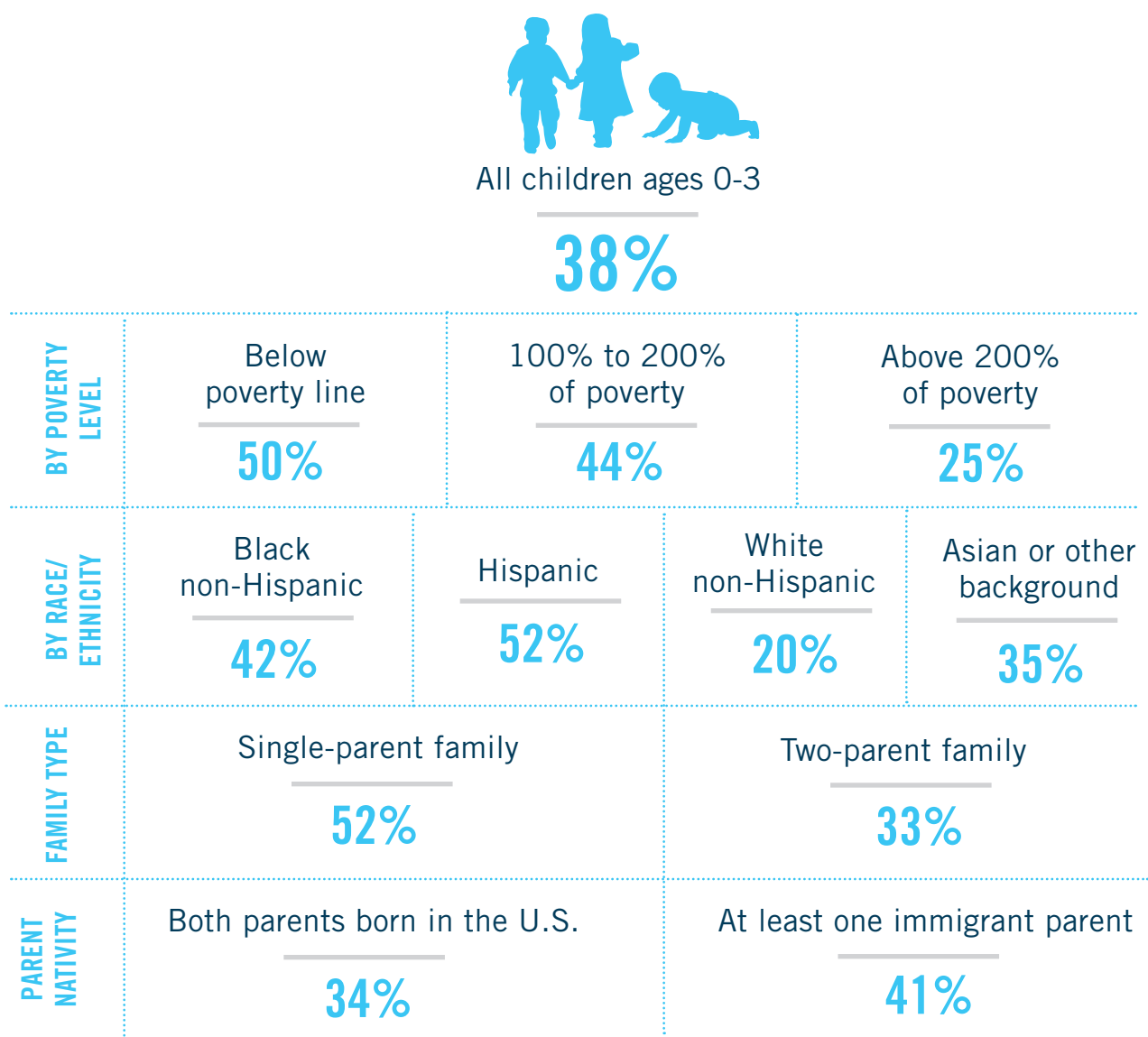
# MATERIAL HARDSHIP



Table 4 shows how hardship rates vary by poverty, race/ethnicity, family structure, and nativity. About half of all poor children faced some form of hardship in the previous year. Hardship was also common among children with Black or Hispanic parents and immigrant families. Single-parent families faced the highest rates of material hardship (52 percent).

**TABLE 4**

**Material Hardship Overall and by Child Race/Ethnicity, Family Type, and Parent Nativity Among Children Ages 0-3**



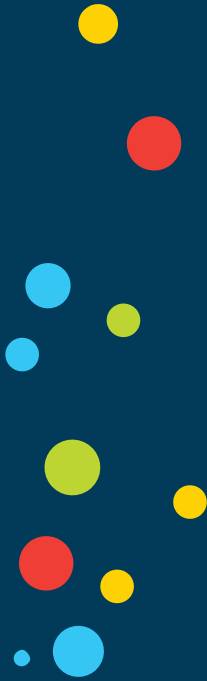
Source: Baseline data from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker. N=1,540. Poverty measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure. Figures for children from Asian or other backgrounds should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.

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The most common forms of hardship were medical hardship (17 percent), financial hardship (15 percent), and bill hardship (15 percent). By our definition, only 8 percent of children faced food hardship – a rate that may seem surprisingly low given the high rates of poverty among these children. Widespread participation in food support programs may help explain this low rate. In addition to SNAP, low-income families with young children may be eligible for WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children). The majority of families received some form of federal food assistance: 12 percent received SNAP only, 14 percent received WIC only, and 26 percent received both. An additional 3 percent of families did not receive federal food assistance but did use food pantries or other nonprofit food assistance programs.

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Families between **100%** and **200%** of the poverty line and below the poverty line both had high rates of material hardship at **44%** and **50%**, respectively.



**HEALTH**



The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker captures self-reported physical health for the survey respondent – most often the child’s mother. The physical health measure captures poor self-rated health and work-limiting disability. Because parental health and wellbeing are important factors in caregiving, this measure provides insight into how families are faring.

Physical health problems are relatively uncommon: 8 percent of children lived with a parent who had a physical health problem. Parents living in poverty were also most likely to face physical health challenges, likely compounding the difficulties they faced due to their low income (Table 5).

**TABLE 5**

Parent Health Overall and by Race/Ethnicity, Family Type, and Parent Nativity

	Percentage with a physical health problem
Parents of children 0-3	<b>8</b>
Adults 18+ (Poverty Tracker)	<b>22</b>
Below poverty line	<b>14</b>
100% to 200% of poverty	<b>7</b>
Above 200% of poverty	<b>5</b>
Black non-Hispanic	<b>10</b>
Hispanic	<b>12</b>
White non-Hispanic	<b>3</b>
Asian or other background	<b>5</b>
Single-parent family	<b>14</b>
Two-parent family	<b>5</b>
Both parents born in the U.S.	<b>10</b>
At least one immigrant parent	<b>5</b>

*Source: For children: Baseline data from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker. N=1,540. For adults: Annual survey data from Poverty Tracker, 2017-18. Poverty measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure. Figures for children from Asian or other backgrounds should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.*

# OTHER STRESSORS



ECONOMIC  
INSECURITY



PSYCHOLOGICAL  
DISTRESS



NEIGHBORHOOD  
POVERTY

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We also gathered data on three other types of stressors that could pose challenges for the development of young children: economic insecurity, psychological distress, and neighborhood poverty.

## Economic Insecurity

Many families who do not face poverty or material hardship may still experience economic insecurity: they may live paycheck to paycheck or have little savings to tap in case of an emergency. Here we consider two measures of economic insecurity. First, we asked whether respondents were not able to pay the full amount of their rent, mortgage, or utility bills at any point in the past 12 months because they didn't have enough money, a situation that could cause stress and anxiety, and consume a parent's time and energy.<sup>vii</sup> Second, drawing from the Federal Reserve's Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking,<sup>viii</sup> we asked people how they would cover an unexpected expense of \$400. People who said they would borrow the money, sell something, or not be able to pay the expense at all were considered economically insecure. The other options were to use cash or its equivalent (i.e. taking money from a checking/savings account, or using a credit card and paying it off in full at the next statement).<sup>18</sup>

Overall, 38 percent of children lived in families that were unable to pay a housing or utility bill in full over the past year, and 61 percent lived in families that could not cover an unexpected \$400 expense with cash or its equivalent. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) faced at least one of these types of economic insecurity. Insecurity was more common among young children than among adults in New York City; half of adults were insecure by this measure.

Although the prevalence of economic insecurity was higher for some children than for others, overall it was a broadly shared condition. Among families in poverty, for instance, 85 percent reported financial insecurity, as did 71 percent of families between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty line and nearly half — 47 percent — of families above 200 percent of poverty. Economic insecurity was particularly common for Black and Hispanic children. Children in single-parent families faced the highest levels of economic insecurity at nearly 90 percent.

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<sup>vii</sup>These indicators are conceptually distinct from material hardship because hardship involves actually having utilities or other services cut off.

<sup>viii</sup>Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. "Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2017." May 2018. <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2018-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2017-dealing-with-unexpected-expenses.htm>



TABLE 6

Economic Insecurity in Past 12 Months, Overall and by Race/Ethnicity, Family Type, and Parent Nativity

	Percentage who did not pay housing/utility bills in full	Percentage who could not cover a \$400 expense with cash or equivalent	Percentage with either type of economic insecurity
All children 0-3	<b>38</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>65</b>
Adults 18+ (Poverty Tracker)	<b>22</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>50</b>
Below poverty line	<b>52</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>85</b>
100% to 200% of poverty	<b>42</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>71</b>
Above 200% of poverty	<b>25</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>47</b>
Black non-Hispanic	<b>50</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>75</b>
Hispanic	<b>52</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>83</b>
White non-Hispanic	<b>18</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>42</b>
Asian or other background	<b>27</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>56</b>
Single-parent family	<b>56</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>88</b>
Two-parent family	<b>31</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>57</b>
Both parents born in the U.S.	<b>37</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>59</b>
At least one immigrant parent	<b>37</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>69</b>

Source: For children: Baseline data from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker. N=1,540. For adults: annual survey data from Poverty Tracker, 2017-18. Poverty measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure. Figures for children from Asian or other backgrounds should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.

## Psychological Distress

To assess psychological distress, we used the six-item Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) to determine how many parents faced at least moderate psychological distress. The K6 scale ranges from 0 to 24; scores of 5-12 are considered moderate while scores of 13-24 are considered serious.<sup>19</sup> K6 scores tend to be higher in urban areas, including New York City.<sup>20</sup>

Psychological distress was common among families with young children: 34 percent of children lived with a parent experiencing at least moderate psychological distress and 4 percent lived with a parent with serious psychological distress. (Psychological distress was even more common among New York City adults than among parents of young children.) Some disparities appear in these measures, although most differences are relatively small. Note that parents living in poverty were also very likely to face psychological distress, likely compounding the difficulties they faced due to their low income.

TABLE 7

Parent Psychological Health by Race/Ethnicity, Family Type, and Nativity

	Percentage with moderate or serious psychological distress	Percentage with serious psychological distress
Parents of children 0-3	<b>34</b>	<b>4</b>
Adults 18+ (Poverty Tracker)	<b>45</b>	<b>8</b>
Below poverty line	<b>46</b>	<b>8</b>
100% to 200% of poverty	<b>35</b>	<b>3</b>
Above 200% of poverty	<b>26</b>	<b>2</b>
Black non-Hispanic	<b>41</b>	<b>3</b>
Hispanic	<b>40</b>	<b>6</b>
White non-Hispanic	<b>25</b>	<b>1</b>
Asian or other background	<b>29</b>	<b>5</b>
Single-parent family	<b>48</b>	<b>8</b>
Two-parent family	<b>29</b>	<b>2</b>
Both parents born in the US	<b>33</b>	<b>4</b>
At least one immigrant parent	<b>35</b>	<b>3</b>

Source: For children: Baseline data from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker. N=1,540. For adults: annual survey data from Poverty Tracker, 2017-18. Poverty measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure. Figures for children from Asian or other backgrounds should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.

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## Neighborhood Poverty

We also consider residence in high-poverty neighborhoods, defined here as neighborhoods with poverty rates of at least 20 percent. Neighborhood poverty is an important indicator because poor neighborhoods often have higher levels of crime and less access to resources for healthy development. Children growing up in nonpoor neighborhoods are more likely to reach school ready to learn.<sup>21</sup> Neighborhood economic status is related to mobility between one generation and the next.<sup>22</sup>

Nearly half the young children in the sample lived in high-poverty neighborhoods — a rate higher than that for adults in New York City. Among children below 200 percent of poverty, more than half lived in such neighborhoods. Paralleling family poverty, residence in poor neighborhoods was more common among Black and Hispanic children. Single-parent families were the most likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods. Children with immigrant parents were slightly less likely than other children to live in poor neighborhoods.

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Nearly half (**49%**) of young children aged 0-3 lived in a high-poverty neighborhood.

TABLE 8

Residence in High-Poverty Neighborhood Overall and by Child Race/Ethnicity, Family Type, and Parent Nativity

	Percentage living in a poor neighborhood
All children aged 0-3	<b>49</b>
Adults 18+ (Poverty Tracker)	<b>44</b>
Below poverty line	<b>65</b>
100% to 200% of poverty	<b>55</b>
Above 200% of poverty	<b>34</b>
Black non-Hispanic	<b>61</b>
Hispanic	<b>61</b>
White non-Hispanic	<b>42</b>
Asian or other background	<b>26</b>
Single-parent family	<b>66</b>
Two-parent family	<b>43</b>
Both parents born in the U.S.	<b>52</b>
At least one immigrant parent	<b>46</b>

Source: For children: Baseline data from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker. N=1,540. For adults: annual survey data from Poverty Tracker, 2017-18. Poverty measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure. Figures for children from Asian or other backgrounds should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.



# CONCLUSIONS

This report introduces the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker study, a new study of early childhood in New York City. With its longitudinal, multidimensional, and New York City-specific design, the study will provide a wealth of information about the critical early years of childhood in the city, helping us to understand and address disparities in the health and development of children.

This initial report presents results from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker baseline survey. We found that economic disadvantage was widespread among families of young children in the city. Nearly one in four children lived in families in poverty, and more than a third faced material hardship in the past year. And although most parents were in good physical health, one in three faced some level of psychological distress — related, perhaps, to their precarious economic circumstances. Many children (about two in three) lived in families facing economic insecurity. One in two lived in poor neighborhoods. These kinds of hardship and stress are known to be detrimental to child development.

These high levels of economic disadvantage are notable given that four out of five children had at least one working parent. Future reports will examine how low wages, unsteady employment, and part-time work contribute to economic disadvantage among working parents with young children. We will also consider child care availability and cost as a constraint on parent employment.

An important focus of the study will be on children's early education in preschool, Head Start, and the city's 3-K and Pre-K for All programs. Early childhood education can do much to promote school readiness among low-income children, but an income gap remains in participation in early education programs. By checking in with parents several times a year about this topic, the study seeks to understand parents' perspectives on what their children need and how they navigate the application process for early education programs.

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We will also examine how parents access resources and supports for their families. While New York City can boast innovative public programs and a vibrant nonprofit sector, these resources may not always meet family needs, whether because of lack of knowledge, barriers to access, or lack of fit with parent priorities. The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker surveys will tap parents' own knowledge and perspective about these resources.

The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker surveys will repeat our questions about poverty, hardship, health, and other stressors on an annual basis. Future reports based on these annual surveys will describe the dynamics of poverty and disadvantage and consider how movement into and out of disadvantage shapes children's outcomes.

By following families with young children over the critical early years of life, the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker will help us set priorities for interventions to reduce poverty and promote child wellbeing and healthy development. We hope the study will become a distinctive and valuable resource for policy leaders and child advocates in the city, and we look forward to engaging with city agencies — including the DOHMH and Department of Education — and with nonprofit organizations to highlight issues most relevant to the wellbeing of the city's children.

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