POVERTY TRACKER

CENTER ON
POVERTY &
SOCIAL POLICY
at Columbia University

Columbia CPRC
Columbia Population Research Center

ROBIN HOOD

MONITORING POVERTY AND WELL-BEING IN NYC

Spotlight on:

TRANSPORTATION IN NEW YORK CITY

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INTRODUCTION

With the cost of basic necessities outpacing income growth and the overall rate of inflation, New York City's poverty rate hit a historic high of 25% in 2023.[1] In the midst of what has been called an affordability crisis, many New Yorkers continue to struggle to pay for food, housing, and other basic necessities. Poverty Tracker data on material hardship is often used to quantify how many New Yorkers are not able to consistently meet these basic needs in the domains of food, housing, utilities, and health care. However, one basic necessity that can sometimes be overlooked is transportation.

Most New Yorkers need to use some form of transportation to get to work and earn a living, but the costs of transportation can eat up a meaningful share of their paychecks. Further, lengthy commutes take significant time away from New Yorkers that they could spend doing other things — like being with family, making dinner, doing other tasks, or working. And the extent to which New Yorkers are burdened by transportation costs, both in terms of time and money, likely varies across the income distribution. Recent policy discussions related to fare increases and congestion pricing have brought these transportation-related issues into the forefront of public discourse.

Designing the best policy response to address these transportation-related challenges requires data on how New Yorkers get to work, the length of time they spend commuting, how much they are burdened by transportation costs, and their feelings about safety in relation to public transportation. Leveraging data from the Poverty Tracker, a longitudinal study of poverty and well-being in New York City, this spotlight presents data on these topics and examines how they vary by income.

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[1] *Poverty Tracker Research Group at Columbia University (2025). The State of Poverty and Disadvantage in New York City, Volume 7. Robin Hood.*

KEY FINDINGS

New Yorkers are much more likely to use public transportation to get to work than drive, and those in poverty are the least likely to drive to work.

Roughly half of New Yorkers report commutes that are less than 30 minutes long, but those in poverty are the most likely to report having longer commutes, with nearly 1 in 4 reporting commutes of over one hour in length.

1 IN 4 NEW YORKERS IN POVERTY

report over one hour commutes

THOSE IN POVERTY PAY 10%

Annual transportation expenses are similar across the income distribution on average, but this means that those in poverty must dedicate a substantially larger percentage of their resources (nearly 10% on average) to transportation expenses.

Feelings of safety on the subway vary substantially with income: those experiencing poverty or that are low income are the least likely to report feeling safe and correspondingly have the highest rates of taking the bus in place of the subway due to these safety concerns.

Across the income distribution, a substantial share of New Yorkers reduced use of transportation to manage rising prices in recent years, including the majority (55%) of those in poverty and those with low incomes.

55% of New Yorkers in poverty reduced use of transportation due to cost
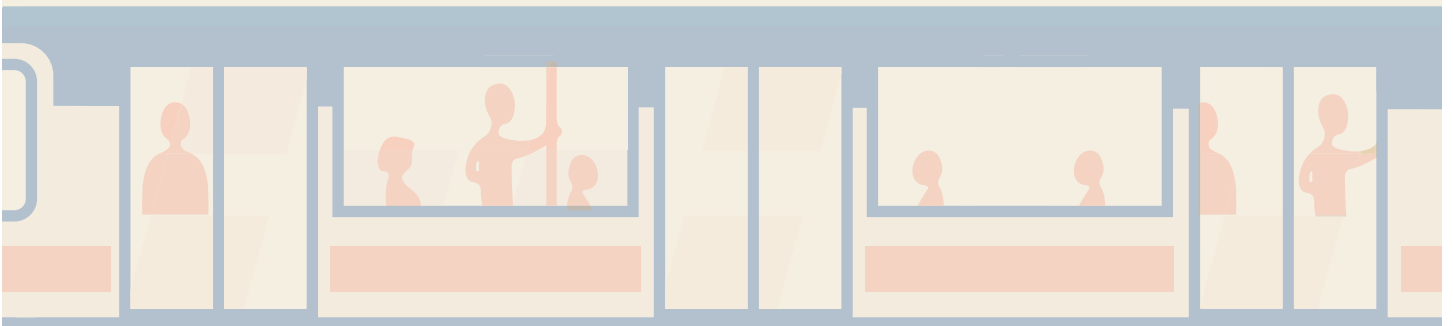
About the Poverty Tracker

Launched in 2012, the Poverty Tracker surveys a representative sample of New Yorkers several times a year, providing critical information on the dynamics of poverty and other forms of disadvantage in the city. Unlike other surveys, the Poverty Tracker explores how New Yorkers experience poverty and material hardship over time, rather than in a single day, month, or year. In addition, the Poverty Tracker focuses on more than just income poverty; we also collect data on other core measures of disadvantage, such as material hardships and health problems. We use these alternative measures to understand how certain disadvantages, or multiple, overlapping disadvantages, make it harder for New Yorkers to survive. For this spotlight, findings are drawn from pooled longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the second through fifth study cohorts in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2022.

How are poverty and income measured in this spotlight?

In this spotlight, poverty is measured using the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which the Census Bureau began producing in 2010. Among other changes, the SPM improves upon the Official Poverty Measure by accounting for geographic variation in costs of living, as well as the role of government taxes and transfers in determining poverty. We use the SPM to categorize New Yorkers into three separate groups that indicate how far they are living from the poverty threshold for their family size:

(1) below 100% of the SPM threshold;

(2) between 100% and 200% of the SPM threshold, and

(3) above 200% of the SPM threshold.

In the research literature, these groups are often referred to as "in poverty," "low income," and "moderate income or higher," respectively. In 2023, the latest year for which we can construct these thresholds, the SPM poverty threshold was $47,190 for a family of four living in rental housing in New York City, and 200% of the threshold for the same family was $94,380.

How do New Yorkers get to work?

Public transit plays a critical role in meeting commuting needs for all New Yorkers. Commuting to work by **subway or bus is the most used form of transit regardless of income**, with the majority of New Yorkers in each income category reporting some use of subways or buses in their daily commutes. However, there are small variations in transportation use by income: **New Yorkers in poverty are the least likely to report driving as part of their commute** (20%) compared to those above the poverty line (29%), and the most likely to report walking (25%) compared to those above the poverty line (19%).

Commute mode among working New Yorkers by income group
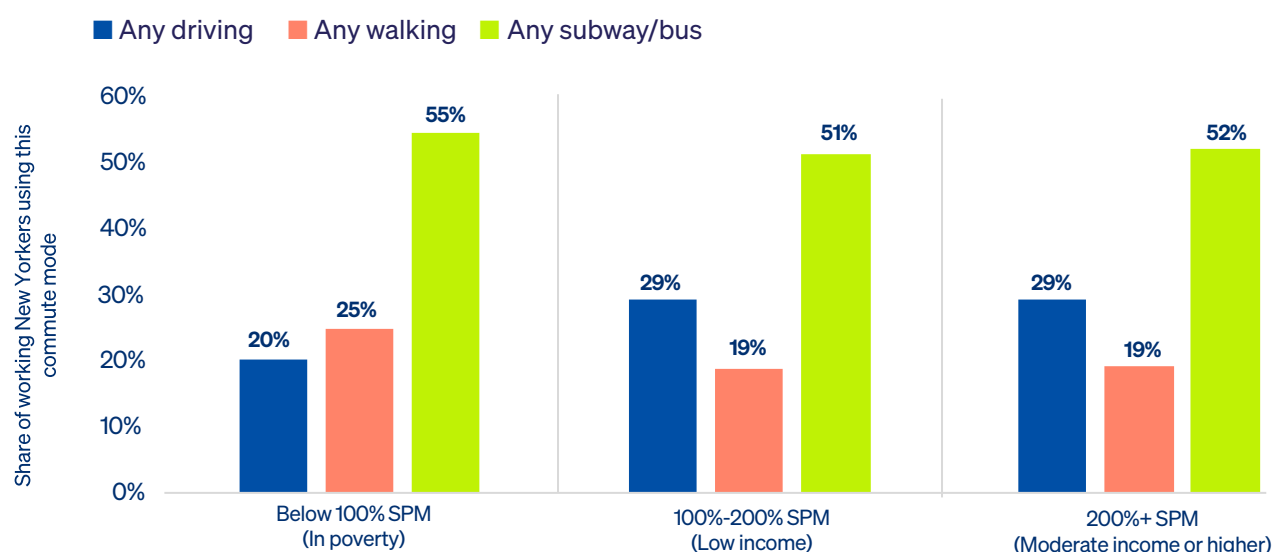
Source: Findings drawn from pooled longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the second through fifth study cohorts in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2022. Poverty Tracker respondents were asked about their use of different modes of transit at any point in their commute.
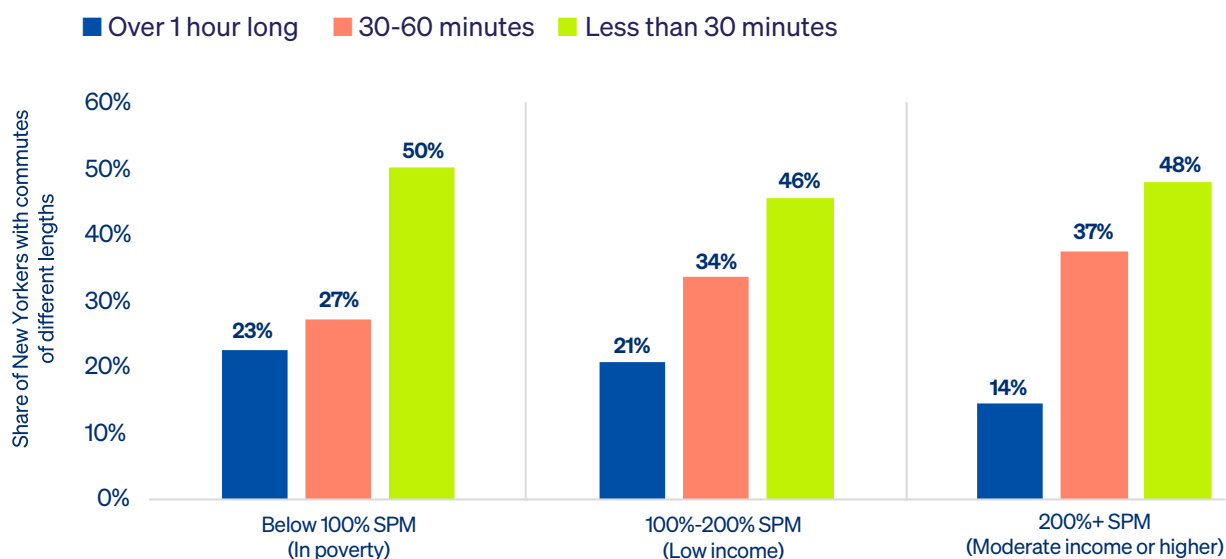
Note: In 2023, the SPM poverty threshold was $47,190 for a family of four living in rental housing in New York City, and 200% of the threshold for the same family was $94,380. "New Yorkers" refers to adults ages 18 and older.

How much time do New Yorkers spend commuting?

Among New Yorkers in each income group, roughly half report having commutes that are less than 30 minutes long. Importantly, while commute length looks fairly similar among New Yorkers of different income levels, **those in poverty or that are low income tend to have the longest commutes:** 23% of those in poverty reported having commutes longer than one hour compared to 21% of low-income commuters (100%-200% SPM) and 14% of higher-income commuters (200%+ SPM).

Figure 2

Commute length among working New Yorkers by income group

Source: Findings drawn from pooled longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the second through fifth study cohorts in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2022. Poverty Tracker respondents were asked about the length of their commute in minutes. Responses were sorted into the three categories above.
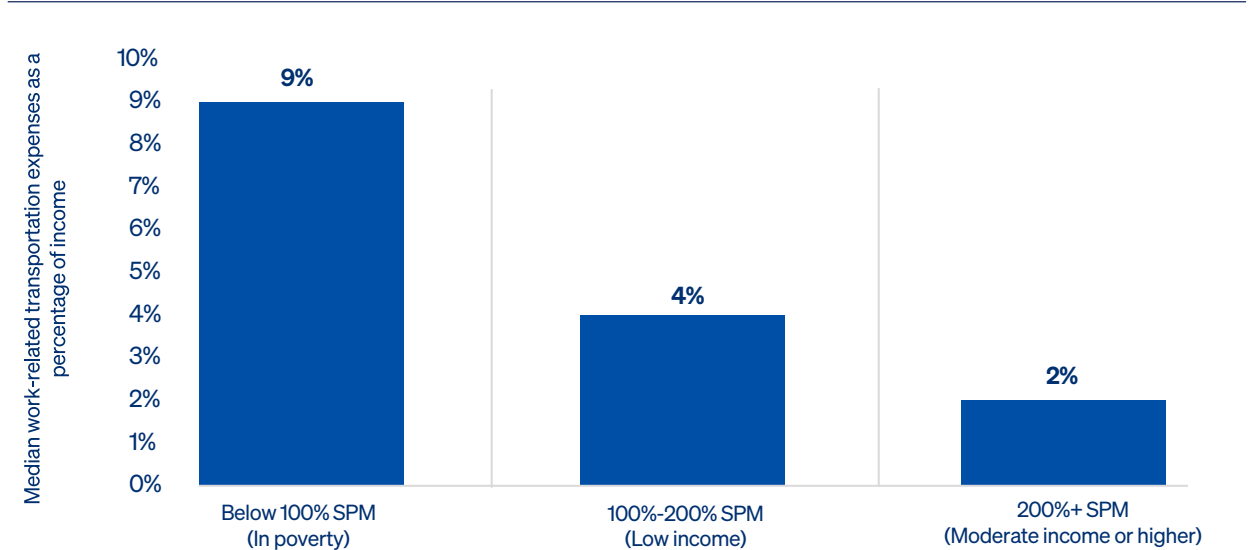*Note: In 2023, the SPM poverty threshold was $47,190 for a family of four living in rental housing in New York City, and 200% of the threshold for the same family was $94,380. "New Yorkers" refers to adults ages 18 and older.*

How much do New Yorkers spend on transportation?

While commute mode and length appear quite similar across the income distribution, clear differences emerge when examining transportation costs and how New Yorkers have managed these costs in response to rising prices.

Poverty Tracker surveys ask respondents how much they (and their spouses or partners, when relevant) pay for transportation to and from work. This includes payments for the bus, subway, train, gas, parking, and tolls. We find that, regardless of income, New Yorkers spend roughly $1,800 to $1,900 per year on transportation costs,[2] meaning that lower income commuters pay a much higher *relative* share of their income on transportation. Figure 3 depicts median transportation expenses as a percentage of income across the income distribution. **For those in poverty, transportation expenses account for nearly 10% of income, almost five times the amount of those above 200% of the SPM line (2% of income).**

Median work-related transportation expenses as a percentage of income among working New Yorkers by income group
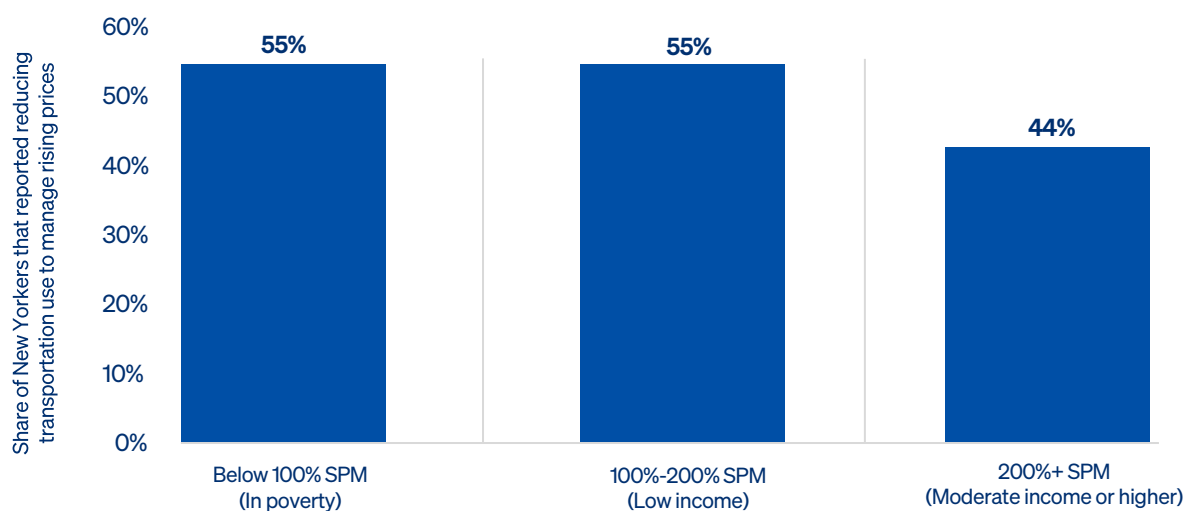

Source: Findings drawn from pooled annual Poverty Tracker data collected from the second through fifth study cohorts in 2018, 2019, and 2022. Data from the peak years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 and 2021) are excluded because they are less reflective of experiences today, and many of the policy expansions that New Yorkers benefited from in those years are no longer in effect. Note: Income is measured using SPM resources. In 2023, the SPM poverty threshold was $47,190 for a family of four living in rental housing in New York City, and 200% of the threshold for the same family was $94,380. "New Yorkers" refers to adults ages 18 and older.

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[2] *Median transportation costs are in 2023 dollars and based on pooled estimates from annual Poverty Tracker data using the second through fifth cohorts. Dollar amounts were adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers.*

Similarly, rising prices in recent years have led New Yorkers to reduce their transportation use, and those with the fewest resources have scaled back transportation use the most. Poverty Tracker surveys completed in 2024 asked New Yorkers how they have been navigating rising prices in recent years, with questions related to reducing spending on transportation, groceries, and other expenses. **More than half (55%) of both New Yorkers in poverty and those that are low income reported reducing transportation use to manage rising prices.** Additionally, the fact that 44% of those with higher incomes also reported reducing transportation use points to the widespread impact of rising prices on the ability of New Yorkers to meet their basic needs.

Share of New Yorkers that reported reducing transportation use to manage rising prices by income group

Source: Findings drawn from longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the fourth and fifth study cohorts in 2024.
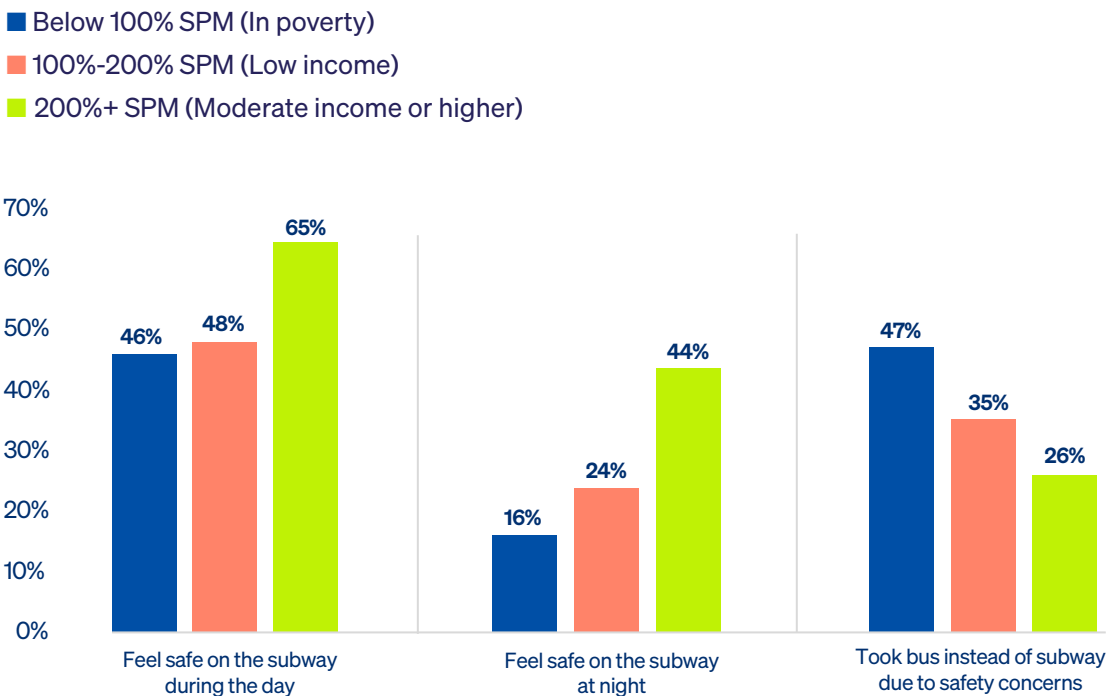*Note: In 2023, the SPM poverty threshold was $47,190 for a family of four living in rental housing in New York City, and 200% of the threshold for the same family was $94,380. "New Yorkers" refers to adults ages 18 and older.*

How safe do New Yorkers feel on the subway?

Transportation is not only about financial well-being. Across the income distribution, there are also clear differences among New Yorkers with respect to feelings of safety on the subway. Notably, less than half of New Yorkers who are low income (48%) or in poverty (46%) feel safe on the subway during the day, compared to the majority of those with higher incomes (65%). These differences are even starker when it comes to feelings of safety on the subway at night, with only 16% of those in poverty and 24% of those that are low income reporting feelings of safety compared to 44% of those with higher incomes. These feelings of safety are also reflected directly in the fact that nearly half (47%) of those in poverty reported taking the bus instead of the subway due to safety concerns. Understanding this variation is an important avenue of future research.[3]

Figure 5

Feelings of safety on the subway among New Yorkers by income group

■ Below 100% SPM (In poverty)
■ 100%-200% SPM (Low income)
■ 200%+ SPM (Moderate income or higher)

Source: Findings drawn from longitudinal Poverty Tracker data collected from the second through fifth study cohorts in 2022 and 2023. Note: In 2023, the SPM poverty threshold was $47,190 for a family of four living in rental housing in New York City, and 200% of the threshold for the same family was $94,380. "New Yorkers" refers to adults ages 18 and older.

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[3] *Possible explanations for this variation may include disparities in station maintenance and staffing across the city; differences in the times that New Yorkers are on the train, with lower-income New Yorkers being more likely to have commutes late at night or early in the morning; and patterns of ridership varying across neighborhoods, with trains being more populated in denser, more commercial areas.*

CONCLUSION

Across the city, transportation time and costs constitute additional burdens for many New Yorkers that are already struggling to afford basic needs like food and housing, especially for those with fewer resources. While certain patterns related to commute mode and length may look relatively similar across the income distribution, the fact remains that those in poverty tend to have the longest commutes and spend the highest shares of their incomes on transportation costs. Additionally, the fact that the majority of New Yorkers in poverty report reducing transportation to manage rising prices points to the difficult tradeoffs people must make every day to afford basic needs. As in other domains, policy responses that increase New Yorkers' resources or make transportation easier and less costly can help fill these resource gaps and reduce hardship.