

Foreword

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“We can do a better job aiding the children of New York State along their life’s journey—especially low-income, minority and immigrant kids.”

—James Lytle, Chairman
Schuyler Center for Analysis
and Advocacy

“I’m tired of hearing about kids in poor neighborhoods who beat the odds. I want to change the odds.”

Geoffrey Canada
President and CEO, Harlem Children’s Zone

Think of the New York State government as a complex transportation network. Each road, highway or transit line is a program that helps people reach their destinations. New York’s children are navigating this system, which ranges from superhighways like the K-12 educational system to local roads like the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program, which provides vital services to 12,000 kids who have nowhere else to turn.

Who operates the transportation network? The Governor and the State Legislature, for the most part, aided by state agencies, mayors, county executives, school boards and other local elected officials. The vast majority of these officials take their responsibilities seriously. They keep the traffic lights in good working order, put up new traffic signs as needed and build new roads when they can—all on a tight budget.

Yet some children get lost on a dead-end road, or their car goes off a cliff. Policymakers too often don’t know the consequences of their choices until years afterward, and perhaps not even then.

That’s where the book you hold in your hands comes in. *Growing Up In New York* is the product of months of research by the policy staff of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy. They grappled with the available hard data to understand what is happening to New York’s children in the key areas of interest to policymakers. What they came back with is truly impressive and well worth a few minutes of your time to leaf through.

You may find yourself convinced, as I was, that we can do a better job aiding the children of New York State along their life’s journey—especially low-income, minority and immigrant kids. They face steep odds in life. We as a society need to even those odds for their sake and for our own. If you agree, I encourage you to get involved in the work of the Schuyler Center and help us keep New York’s children on the road to success.

Introduction

Growing Up In New York is a compilation of charts selected and designed to reveal meaningful information about children, more specifically the interaction between children in New York State and government public policy at the state and local level.

SCAA conceived *Growing Up In New York* for a straightforward reason: the State of New York does not have a vision for giving every child the opportunity to fulfill his or her potential. Such a vision is long overdue. New York should focus on the needs of children because it is the right thing to do, of course, and because we as citizens care deeply about the welfare of children.

Yet the tug of compassion can obscure other, more pragmatic imperatives that drive the necessity for a child-focused public policy. For example, there is New York's aging population. Over the next 20 years, the baby boomers will retire, leading to a surge in the needy elderly and a decline in the number of working adults. The jobs on which our prosperity depends may go unfilled if we fritter away the opportunities of today's children.

Further, New York's economy two decades hence will be very different from the economy that today's adults experienced as children. The

global economy will reward regions with educated and technologically savvy workforces and punish those that tolerate high dropout rates and large pockets of concentrated poverty. New York has historically chosen the high road of economic development, but without a renewed focus on promoting opportunities for today's children and youth, we risk sliding down the low road of minimum wage jobs and stagnant business investment.

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If New York is to invest in its next generation of workers, citizens and leaders, policymakers need to know much more than they do now. They need to know what is happening to children today, what has been happening in their lives over the past decade, what government programs have done for them or to them, and which children might be falling between the cracks of programs designed to help them succeed.

Growing Up In New York is intended to bring policymakers some of the information they need to map out a cost-effective strategy to dramatically improve the lives of children throughout New York State. Just as important, it should begin a dialogue over what information is needed that we do not yet have, and how such information could support a change agenda on behalf of New York's next generation.

Methodology

SCAA identified seven areas for analysis: education, birth to five, health, mental health, economic security, child welfare and youth. Our policy analysts sought data on trends over time in these fields to understand not only where children are now, but where they're coming from. They made many valuable and instructive discoveries, but *Growing Up In New York* makes no attempt to be comprehensive. This book omits many important indicators, and should be viewed as the beginning of a discussion rather than the last word.

SCAA relied primarily on administrative data from New York State government agencies and population surveys conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control and private organizations. It should be noted that population surveys are derived from samples, which can provide misleading information due to such factors as inadequate sample size or communication gaps in the interview process.

In addition, SCAA made extensive use of KIDS COUNT, the national pioneering data analysis and presentation project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), and NYS Touchstones/KIDS COUNT, a state project funded by AECF, as well as the Kids Well-being Indicator Clearinghouse (KWIC). Produced by the Council on Children and Families, the *NYS Touchstones/KIDS COUNT Data Book* is an annual report on children's indicators, and KWIC is an interactive website that makes those indicators available in a readily accessible format. We are deeply appreciative of the contributions that KIDS COUNT and KWIC have made to the understanding of child well-being in New York State.

Where possible, agencies and leading experts in the field peer-reviewed the charts prior to publication. However, the responsibility for any errors lies with SCAA.

Major Themes

SCAA's six-month research project to develop *Growing Up In New York* found several recurring themes.

Child well-being in New York has improved in several areas. Juvenile arrest rates dropped sharply over the past decade, while health insurance coverage jumped. The share of children in low-income families fell, dramatically so in New York City. More students are taking advanced placement classes and graduating with Regents Diplomas. Some of these trends were spurred by the strong economy during the late 1990s, and they have slowly reversed course as the regional economy has cooled.

Education should be the great equalizer but is falling short. Universal education is intended to equalize opportunities between rich and poor. But high dropout rates among low-income and minority youth, as well as youth with emotional and behavioral problems, testify to a promise unfulfilled. The shortcomings in our educational system ripple out into such areas as economic security, mental health, juvenile justice and child welfare.

Some children are not being reached. Four out of ten high school students fail to graduate in four years. One out of eight children remain uninsured and one out of nine teenage mothers get late or no pre-natal care. More than a third of children eligible for food stamps are not enrolled. In area after area, from one service program to another, we found a core group of children and youth not being effectively reached.

New York needs to focus on the needs of disconnected youth. New York State has almost 90,000 teenagers between ages 16-19 who are not in school and not employed, 9% of all teenagers in that age group. These youth, who are failing at a crucial time in their lives to gain their first experiences in the working world, have been dubbed "disconnected youth." They are at high risk of not connecting to employment and drifting into a disappointing, dysfunctional adulthood.

Throughout this report the risk factors for disconnection form a recurring pattern, one that may help to explain why so many teenagers fall through the safety nets year after year.

Data needed to inform policy decisions is stuck in agency silos. A frequent obstacle to SCAA's research was the unavailability of data that could be critically important for shaping and evaluating policy on behalf of children. In particular, the state is unable to track children and youth from one program to another. The State does not know what services children in foster care receive, for example, impeding improvement of service delivery and the evaluation of innovative service models. Nor does the State track high school dropouts to see what jobs they get and what government services they use afterwards. The large gaps in data suggest an urgent need for integrative planning and data collection.

It is common to lament the shortsightedness of New York's leaders, the weakness of government policy, the waste of taxpayer dollars on frivolous priorities. Yet a quick survey of other states demonstrates that over the long term, New York's leaders have been remarkably successful in positioning the state to succeed in the emerging global economy. But only a focused investment in the state's children and youth can sustain our advantages in the generation to come.

Selected Chapter Findings

Eighth-grade students are almost one-third less likely to read at grade level than fourth-grade students. Fewer than half of all eighth-grade students (48%) scored a 3 or 4 on the 2005 English Language Arts Examination and can therefore be considered proficient in basic reading skills, compared to 70% of fourth-grade students. The number of students reading below grade level rises from 58,000 in fourth grade to 112,000 in eighth grade. In addition, the share of students with disabilities considered proficient in reading drops from 28% in fourth grade to 10% in eighth grade, a steep drop-off from an already low baseline.

Large numbers of students are being left behind. The rate of 4-year graduation remains only slightly above 60%, 40% of Blacks and Hispanics are not completing high school in four years, and 8% of all teens are high school dropouts. In the Big Five cities, more students with disabilities (33%) are dropping out than receiving a diploma (25%).

Fewer teen mothers receive early prenatal care than the national average, and no improvement has taken place since 1997. In 2004, 59% of all mothers under 18 received early prenatal care (that is, care in the first trimester), compared to 64% nationwide.

Students classified as having an emotional disturbance are 75% more likely to drop out than graduate. About 32% graduate while 56% drop out. The record is far better for students with mental/developmental disabilities (49% graduation rate) and physical disabilities (67% graduation rate).

The share of children living in poverty who receive public assistance dropped by half between 1993 and 2004. Public assistance enrollment declined among children in poor families (families at the Federal Poverty Level or below) from 69% in 1993 to 36% in 2004, a 33 percentage point decline in 12 years. The drop may indicate that falling enrollment over many years—typically celebrated as signaling the end of a culture of dependency—may be putting the economic security of some children at risk.

Of all child maltreatment reports in 2004 only one out of six reported families (17%) received service. The remaining 83% received only an investigation, a frequently adversarial process notorious for traumatizing families, worsening family discord, and failing to offer support.

In 2004, one out of eleven youth (9%) were considered "disconnected youth," defined as not employed and not enrolled in school. These 87,000 youth, ages 16-19, are at high risk of negative outcomes as adults. Individuals most likely to become disconnected are high school dropouts, those in the juvenile justice system, unmarried young mothers, and young people in or formerly in foster care.