



Improving New York Child Welfare Outcomes by Strengthening Family Economic Security

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SCHUYLER CENTER FOR ANALYSIS AND ADVOCACY



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Executive Summary

More than one in five New York children live in poverty, a greater percentage than in 32 other states. Those numbers are substantially higher for children of color. Poverty has far-reaching impacts on families and, particularly children. Among the most devastating impacts of childhood poverty is that it can lead to—or be mistaken for—child maltreatment.

Childhood poverty can contribute to numerous negative outcomes for children in all areas of their lives and with effects that can last through adulthood. According to a widely cited government report, poor children are seven times more likely to experience neglect than other children. Impoverished families are more likely to struggle to meet children's basic needs, which is a central element of neglect. New York has the resources and expertise to reduce child poverty and maltreatment. We need the will.

Here are some concrete steps that the State could take to substantially decrease the rates of child poverty and child maltreatment, and improve the lives of thousands of its children.

Continue to invest in affordable, comprehensive health coverage for children and families: Affordable and robust health insurance coverage, inclusive of behavioral health, does at least two things. It helps make it possible for children, families, and expecting mothers to get the care they need to grow up strong and healthy, and when coverage is affordable, it keeps money in the hands of families who need it.

Invest in Primary Prevention for Families before Involvement with the Child Welfare System: Funding for primary prevention will help low-income families and communities with stressors that increase risk of maltreatment (or perceived maltreatment) to avoid child welfare involvement and allow children to remain safely with their families.

Increase the State EITC and CTC: Increases in the State Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit will help low-wage families edge away from poverty closer to economic security, and, as a result, reduce the stress and deprivations associated with poverty that can increase the risk of child maltreatment.

Increase child care subsidies: Increased State subsidies for child care would eliminate one significant barrier preventing low-income families face would not have child care as an obstacle to greater economic security. Greater access to subsidies would reduce the stressors that are triggered by poverty, and which can lead to maltreatment.

Make a Substantial Investment in Home Visiting: Maternal, infant, and early childhood home visiting—a whole-family approach to strengthening families with young children—has been shown to help reduce child abuse and neglect. An increase in funding for these programs could reduce the number of New York children that become involved in the child welfare system.

Invest in Systems to Create More Transparent Child Welfare Data: Improving the collection, publication, and sharing of data on prevention services offered in each county could lead to dramatic improvements in the effectiveness of the State's child welfare services.

New York must work to reduce childhood poverty as part of our efforts to address maltreatment and to improve the health, safety and well-being of our children. In order to do so, New York must ensure that counties, cities, and communities have the resources necessary to meet families' needs, build family economic security, and prevent child maltreatment.

I. Introduction

Poverty is pervasive among children and families across the United States, with more than 13 million children living poverty.¹ In New York, even as the State's economy steadily grows, its child poverty rate remains high, with 20% (853,769) of New York children living below the federal poverty line (FPL).² New York children of color experience poverty at substantially higher rates, with 29% of Black children and 32% of Latino children living below the FPL.³

Childhood poverty can contribute to numerous negative outcomes for children in all areas of their lives, with effects that can last well into adulthood.^{4,5} Among the most devastating impacts of child poverty is that it can lead to—or be mistaken for—child maltreatment. Indeed, poverty is widely considered to be the single best predictor of child maltreatment, particularly neglect.⁶ According to a widely cited government report, poor children are seven times more likely to experience neglect than other children.^{7,8} This correlation is attributed to a number of factors, including that poverty causes families tremendous stress, a factor in abuse and neglect.⁹ In addition, children living in poverty face a greater risk of being misidentified as neglected because impoverished families are more likely to struggle to meet their children's basic needs, which is a central element of child neglect.

Whether poverty causes or worsens maltreatment, or poverty is mistakenly (and unfairly) labeled as maltreatment, it is essential that we work to reduce child poverty as part of our efforts to reduce child maltreatment and improve the health, safety, and well-being of New York State's children.

II. The Landscape: New York's Children Living in Poverty

THE OFFICIAL FEDERAL POVERTY NUMBERS MASK THE TRUE NUMBER OF NY CHILDREN IMPACTED BY POVERTY

There are many ways to define poverty. The federal government defines poverty, for a family of four, as income of less than \$24,600 a year.ⁱ Using this standard—which has been widely criticized on various grounds, including that it does not take into account the tremendous differences in costs of living across the country, and that it is set far too low—one in five New York children live in poverty.ⁱⁱ Two hundred percent of the federal poverty level is considered by many to be a better measure of the minimum amount a family needs to achieve a modicum of financial stability. Applying that measure, 40% (1,612,000) of New York children who live at 200% of poverty or less are struggling.ⁱⁱⁱ The United Way has developed a different measure for the working poor called ALICE, or Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. Under this measure, the working poor are defined as “people who work hard, often at more than one job, yet still struggle to make ends meet” and “whose wages are not sufficient to sustain them and their families” and “who are one small emergency away from a major financial crisis.”^{iv} Under the ALICE definition, a New York family of four “survival budget” is met by families with a minimum annual income of \$68,808, more than twice the FPL. Applying this standard to New York households, while 14% met the federal poverty definition in 2016, 45% of New York households lived at less than the ALICE threshold.^v

ⁱ Poverty guidelines updated periodically in the Federal Register by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under the authority of 42 U.S.C. 9902(2).

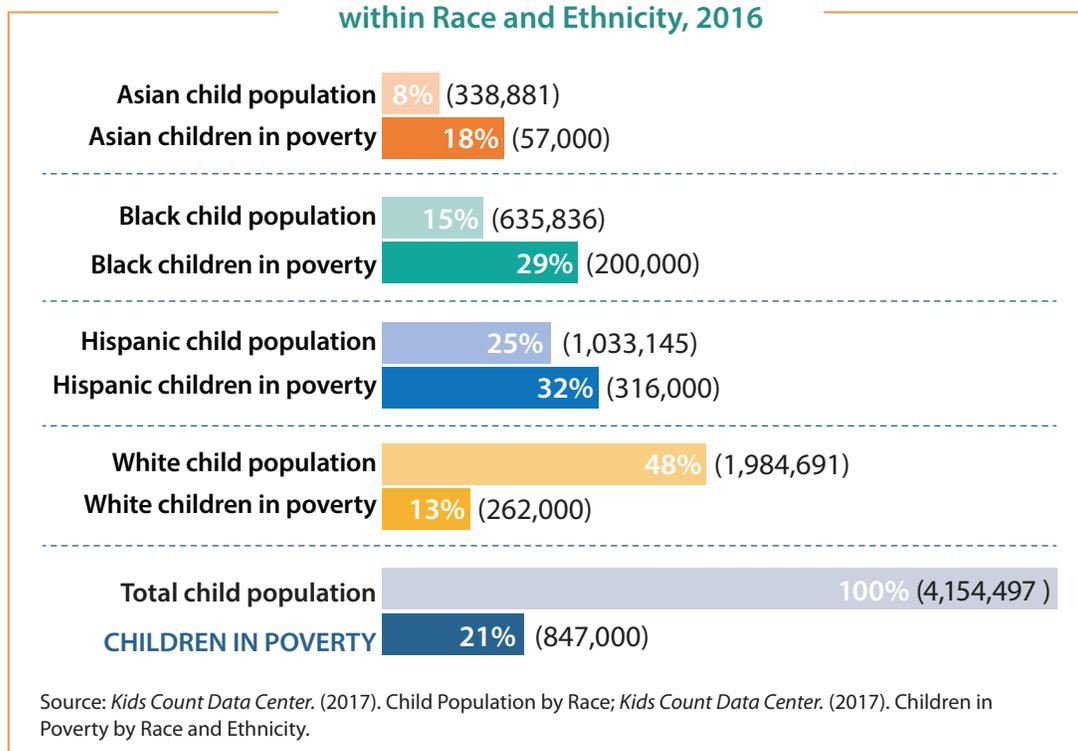
ⁱⁱ Cauthen, N.K. (July 2008). Statement on Establishing a Modern Poverty Measure. *National Center for Children and Poverty*. http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_831.html

ⁱⁱⁱ *Kids Count Data Center*. (2017). Children below 200 percent poverty. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/47-children-below-200-percent-poverty?loc=34&loct=2#detailed/2/34/false/871,870,573,869,36/any/329,330>.

^{iv} *United Way of New York State*. (2016). ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed New York, Study of Financial Hardship (p. 311).

^v ALICE: A Study of Financial Hardship in New York. 2018 Report. https://www.dropbox.com/s/k3t7w19lz3rprqj/18UW_ALICE_Report_NY_Refresh_Lowres_9.6.18.pdf?dl=0

Percentage of NY Children in Poverty within Race and Ethnicity, 2016



The faces of children in poor families are diverse. However, a disproportionate number of the state’s children living in poverty are children of color.

Poor children live in all corners of the state: cities, suburbs and rural areas. The state’s three largest, and most geographically and demographically diverse cities—New York City, Buffalo and Rochester—all share high percentages of child poverty, 28.8%, 47.7% and 50.3%, respectively.¹⁰

It is not only children living in New York’s big cities who experience poverty; many in smaller cities and suburbs face poverty as well. In Schenectady, 38.2% of children experience poverty, and in Albany the child poverty rate is 33.3%.¹¹ Twenty percent of the Long Island village of Hempstead lives in poverty.¹² Suburban structures present challenges less common in cities such as limited access to public transportation and fewer social services.¹³

Rural communities are also home to many impoverished New York children, and the poverty rates in many exceed the state average. For example, child poverty in the largely rural county of Franklin is 27.1% with 2,650 children living in poverty.¹⁴ However, rural poverty is often overlooked because such a small portion of New York State’s total population resides in rural areas. Families in rural poverty face unique challenges, including a concentration of low-wage jobs, lower educational attainment among adults, and a dearth of social supports, like child care and public transportation. In addition, poverty in rural communities is more likely to be persistent for the reasons noted above, and due to physical isolation and a lack of human and social capital.¹⁵

It is widely understood that many more families than those living below the federal poverty level struggle to meet basic needs. Forty percent of New York children live in households with income below 200% of the federal poverty level, which is considered by many to be the minimum amount a family needs to achieve a modicum of financial stability.¹⁶ More than half of New York children of color live in families with income below 200% of FPL, including 52% of Black children and 57%

of Latino children.¹⁷ Many of these children live in families in which one or more members of the family work. Sixty-seven percent (606,435) of children in poor families have at least one parent who works at least part time.¹⁸ More than 18% of New York families with children reported experiencing food hardship in 2017—meaning that, at some point during the year, they were unable to afford the food their family needed.¹⁹

Some of New York’s impoverished children live in areas where poverty is concentrated, which can exacerbate poverty’s impacts. In some New York communities, child poverty exceeds 50%.²⁰ In the Bronx, 152,875 children live in poverty—that’s more than the total population of the city of Syracuse.^{21, 22} New York children living in these neighborhoods are disproportionately children of color.²³ Studies have shown that poor families that live in high poverty neighborhoods have even more difficulty meeting their basic needs than those who don’t, and children who live in those neighborhoods are more likely to experience harmful levels of stress and behavioral and emotional problems.²⁴

Nine percent of New York’s impoverished children live in “extreme poverty,” households living below 50% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).²⁵ The United Nations expands upon the definition, noting that extreme poverty is “a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services.”²⁶

Finally, a growing number of studies demonstrate that income inequality leads to distinct negative outcomes for children in lower-income families relative to wealthy families. For instance, income inequality has been shown to directly undermine equality of opportunity. Children from families with less income have limited access to social networks and enrichment opportunities compared to children from wealthy families, increasing the likelihood that children from low-income families get stuck on less lucrative career paths and grow up to be low-income adults.²⁷ A high degree of income inequality within counties has been associated with increased rates of maltreatment.²⁸ New York State ranks first in the nation on the extent of its income inequality, as measured by the ratio between the top one percent and bottom 99 percent.²⁹

POVERTY HAS LONG-TERM EFFECTS ON CHILDREN, EVEN INTO ADULTHOOD

Even if a child grows up to escape economic poverty, it has long-term effects. The groundbreaking Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study established a strong correlation between early childhood trauma and health, social-emotional, and well-being outcomes in adulthood.ⁱ Economic hardship as a child is the most reported ACE trauma.ⁱⁱ The ACEs assessment, which is now widely used in child welfare, social work, and health care settings, measures a person’s childhood experiences and shows that these experiences have an impact on a child’s brain development, as well as future prospects of experiencing violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity. Trauma created by poverty may linger and contribute to chronic poverty for generations to come. Since more people of color live in poverty, they are at a higher risk to have a high ACE score. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention views early adversity and child maltreatment as a public health issue.

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html>

ⁱⁱ Sacks, V., D. Murphey and K. Moore. (2014). Adverse Childhood Experiences: National and State-Level Prevalence. *Child Trends*. https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Brief-adverse-childhood-experiences_FINAL.pdf

Children in Poverty and Reports of Maltreatment by County

| NYS County | Child poverty (2016) | Percentage of children living in poverty | Children in indicated reports (2016) | Children in indicated reports rate/1,000 |
|-----------------------|----------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| New York City | 473,409 | 26.8 | 30,394 | 16.2 |
| Albany County | 8,865 | 15.6 | 1,046 | 17.2 |
| Allegany County | 2,411 | 25.8 | 232 | 22.2 |
| Broome County | 9,096 | 24.4 | 1,715 | 42.4 |
| Cattaraugus County | 3,517 | 20.5 | 509 | 26.7 |
| Cayuga County | 2,848 | 18.7 | 308 | 18.7 |
| Chautauqua County | 7,520 | 28.9 | 961 | 32.4 |
| Chemung County | 4,137 | 22.7 | 731 | 36.8 |
| Chenango County | 2,166 | 21.8 | 423 | 39.1 |
| Clinton County | 2,612 | 18.4 | 404 | 25.8 |
| Columbia County | 1,930 | 18.5 | 260 | 20.8 |
| Cortland County | 1,904 | 21.1 | 391 | 38.1 |
| Delaware County | 2,226 | 28.6 | 342 | 38.6 |
| Dutchess County | 6,377 | 11.4 | 940 | 14.7 |
| Erie County | 36,878 | 19.8 | 5,239 | 27 |
| Essex County | 1,117 | 18.3 | 154 | 21.3 |
| Franklin County | 2,520 | 26.2 | 436 | 41.4 |
| Fulton County | 2,379 | 22.6 | 307 | 25.5 |
| Genesee County | 1,914 | 16.2 | 312 | 24 |
| Greene County | 1,649 | 21.3 | 216 | 22.8 |
| Hamilton County | 116 | 18.4 | 9 | 11.9 |
| Herkimer County | 3,068 | 23.7 | 321 | 22.7 |
| Jefferson County | 5,799 | 21.5 | 755 | 23.3 |
| Lewis County | 1,471 | 24.3 | 177 | 25.4 |
| Livingston County | 1,865 | 16.4 | 262 | 20.6 |
| Madison County | 2,170 | 15.9 | 332 | 22.2 |
| Monroe County | 32,671 | 21 | 2,366 | 14.4 |
| Montgomery County | 3,495 | 31.9 | 383 | 32.1 |
| Nassau County | 23,688 | 8.1 | 1,585 | 5.3 |
| Niagara County | 7,741 | 18.4 | 1,157 | 25.1 |
| Oneida County | 12,467 | 25.9 | 1,525 | 30.2 |
| Onondaga County | 19,678 | 19.9 | 1,917 | 18.2 |
| Ontario County | 3,106 | 14 | 528 | 23 |
| Orange County | 18,526 | 19.3 | 856 | 8.4 |
| Orleans County | 1,797 | 22.2 | 239 | 26.4 |
| Oswego County | 5,743 | 23.1 | 1,071 | 38.3 |
| Otsego County | 1,839 | 19.3 | 305 | 27.3 |
| Putnam County | 1,282 | 6.4 | 181 | 8 |
| Rensselaer County | 5,530 | 17.6 | 835 | 24.1 |
| Rockland County | 22,774 | 25.4 | 230 | 2.5 |
| St. Lawrence County | 4,954 | 22.8 | 232 | 31 |
| Saratoga County | 3,549 | 7.7 | 326 | 13 |
| Schenectady County | 5,996 | 18.2 | 578 | 11 |
| Schoharie County | 1,011 | 17.9 | 852 | 23.5 |
| Schuyler County | 741 | 22.1 | 154 | 23.7 |
| Seneca County | 1,437 | 21.1 | 157 | 44.9 |
| Steuben County | 4,435 | 21.4 | 555 | 24.5 |
| Suffolk County | 33,212 | 10.5 | 3,678 | 10.3 |
| Sullivan County | 3,960 | 25.4 | 406 | 23 |
| Tioga County | 1,985 | 19.2 | 248 | 21.7 |
| Tompkins County | 2,321 | 15.4 | 251 | 14.9 |
| Ulster County | 5,563 | 17.6 | 521 | 14.7 |
| Warren County | 2,158 | 18.3 | 225 | 16.9 |
| Washington County | 1,964 | 17 | 435 | 32.3 |
| Wayne County | 3,182 | 16.4 | 476 | 22.6 |
| Westchester County | 24,640 | 11.5 | 1,375 | 6.1 |
| Wyoming County | 1,093 | 14.4 | 158 | 19 |
| Yates County | 1,271 | 23.5 | 201 | 31.4 |
| New York State | 853,773 | 20.8 | 71,182 | 16.2 |

Source: Kids Well-being Indicators Clearinghouse. (2016 data). KWIC Indicator Data: Children Living Below Poverty 0-17 years. And: Children in Indicated Reports of Abuse/Maltreatment. https://www.nyskwic.org/get_data/indicator_data.cfm

III. Poverty and Child Welfare: Intersections

Numerous studies have shown that poverty at the individual, family, and community level increase the risk of child maltreatment.³⁰ At the family level, the federal Administration for Children and Families' *National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect IV* found that children in families of low socioeconomic status (SES) (defined as households with an income of \$15,000 or less, both parents lack a high school degree, or the household receives welfare assistance), are over seven times more likely to experience abuse or neglect than their more affluent peers.³¹

The Stresses of Poverty Can Negatively Impact Parenting Capacity

The reasons that children from impoverished families are more likely to experience maltreatment are varied and complex.³² Many child welfare researchers have found evidence that the stress poor parents experience struggling to provide day-to-day necessities for their children can have a negative impact on their parenting capacity.³³ Poverty also can trigger or exacerbate mental health or substance use disorders, which can, in turn, lead to maltreatment and child welfare involvement. And, while middle-class parents also struggle with these issues, they generally have access to resources such as private counseling, respite, or other assistance, making it less likely they will be pulled into the child welfare system.³⁴

Poverty Can Be Mistaken for Maltreatment

Another explanation for the disproportionate number of low-income children identified as maltreated is that poverty can be mistaken for maltreatment when children are hungry, improperly dressed, or manifest other symptoms of poverty. This misinterpretation is possible because a key feature of both child poverty and neglect is the deprivation of basic necessities. Specifically, under New York child welfare law, a child is deemed “neglected” when the child’s “physical, mental or

The vast majority of reports of maltreatment are of neglect. In 2017, New York City reported that 73% of its 55,340 reports were reports of neglect.

—NYC Administration for Children's Services, 2017

emotional condition” has been “impaired or is in imminent danger of becoming impaired” because of the parent or caregiver’s failure “to exercise a minimum degree of care in providing the child with food, clothing, shelter, education, health care or supervision.”³⁵ The one factor that distinguishes poverty from neglect under New York law is that the neglect standard is met only if the parent “is financially able to” provide these basic needs or has been “offered financial or other reasonable means to do so,” and yet nevertheless fails to provide for the child.

Notwithstanding this point of distinction, the lines between poverty and neglect can blur. That there exists a real danger of mistaking poverty for neglect is underscored by a bulletin on the New York State Office of Children and Family Services website that lists the following factors as “signs” of neglect:

- Obvious malnourishment, listlessness or fatigue;
- Stealing or begging for food;
- Lack of personal care—poor personal hygiene, torn and/or dirty clothes;
- Untreated need for glasses, dental care or other medical attention;
- Frequent absence from or tardiness to school; and
- Child inappropriately left unattended or without supervision.³⁶

Notably, many of these behaviors or experiences may also be present among children living in poverty notwithstanding their parents’ best efforts.

PROPOSED FEDERAL “PUBLIC CHARGE” RULE COULD HAVE A DEVASTATING IMPACT ON NY’S IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

In October 2018, a federal rule was proposed that would radically expand the number of family supports, including SNAP, Medicaid, and housing subsidies, that would factor against a lawfully present immigrant’s application to gain permanent immigration status in the United States. It is estimated that this “public charge” rule will cause approximately 2.1 million New Yorkers to withdraw from essential public supports, either because they are directly covered by the rule, or believe (inaccurately) that they are covered. If this regulation is adopted, among the affected would be 680,000 New York children with at least one non-citizen family member.ⁱ In fact, already there have been reports that families are withdrawing from benefits critical to child well-being, like WIC, due to fear surrounding the rule. In the child welfare context, this rule may present a complicated question as to how an immigrant parent’s withdrawal from public benefits to guard the family from adverse immigration consequences, including family separation, would factor into evaluations of neglect or maltreatment.

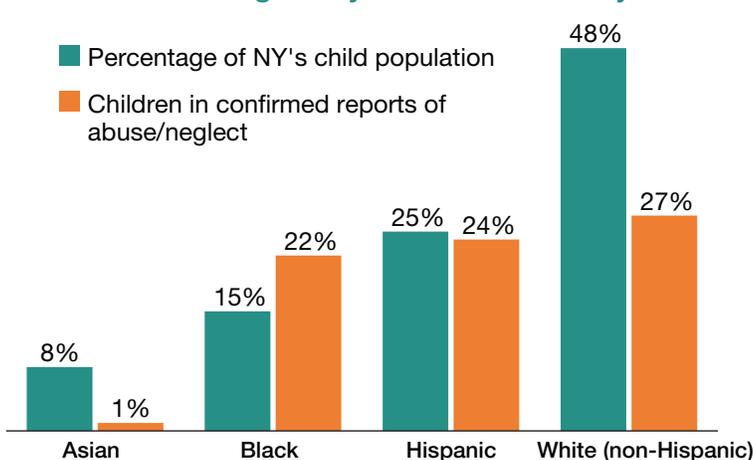
ⁱ Fiscal Policy Institute. (October 11, 2018). “Only Wealthy Immigrants Need Apply.” How a Trump Rule’s Chilling Effect Will Harm New York. <http://fiscalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NY-Impact-of-Public-Charge.pdf>

Racial Bias in the Child Welfare System

Another factor that contributes to a disproportionate number of families in poverty being involved in the child welfare system is racial inequity. In New York State—and across the nation—children of color are overrepresented in the child welfare system. In 2016, Black children made up 22% of all confirmed reports of maltreatment in New York, while approximately 15% of the children in the state were Black.^{37, 38} In contrast, non-Hispanic white children made up just 27% of maltreatment cases and 48% of the general population of children.^{39, 40} These disparities persist throughout the child welfare system, extending to time in foster care and speed with which children are placed in permanent homes.⁴¹

One contributing factor to the racial and ethnic disproportionality of children involved in the child welfare system is that a disproportionate number of children of color are poor (and as such, as

Percentage of NY Children in Confirmed Reports of Abuse/Neglect by Race and Ethnicity



Source: Kids Count Data Center. (2017). Child Population by Race. (2016). Children who are confirmed by child protective services as victims of maltreatment by race and Hispanic origin. Note: Confirmed reports do not total 100% as we have excluded “other” categories.

noted above, more likely to be identified as experiencing maltreatment). However, a study by the federal General Accounting Office found that other factors also account for the disparity, including racial bias, inadequate access to social services and economic supports, and challenges in finding permanent homes for children of color.⁴² The report concluded that bias, cultural misunderstandings and distrust between child welfare decision makers and the families they serve contributed to decisions to remove children of color from their homes at a much higher rate than white children.⁴³ This, in turn, can cause families of color to be unwilling to reach out and ask for services when they need them for fear that their children will be taken away from them.⁴⁴

Distrust of Child Welfare Systems Can Dissuade Poor Families and Families of Color from Seeking Help

It is well understood that parents in poor neighborhoods tend to deeply distrust child welfare services, decreasing the likelihood that these families will seek assistance, and, potentially, increasing the chances they may be found to be neglecting their children.⁴⁵ Parents may refrain from seeking services that could help alleviate the effects of poverty for fear that their children may be taken away from them if they are perceived as having neglected them. These fears are not entirely unfounded. Stories emerge with some frequency about mothers who, attempting to seek attention for post-partum depression and anxiety, instead find themselves faced with police and child welfare inquiries. As one mother, who was escorted to the emergency room by police after speaking to her OB about post-partum depression, said, “I was treated like a criminal and then discharged with nothing but a stack of Xeroxed printouts with phone numbers on them.”⁴⁶

While it is the law across the nation that children cannot be removed from their families solely due to poverty, there are many cases where poverty was a substantial factor in a court’s removal decision. For example, in a 1997 Nevada case *Recoda v. Department of Human Resources*, the court upheld a termination of parental rights because of the mother’s failure to maintain steady employment, housing and to visit her child regularly while in foster care. The court reached this conclusion even though the record showed that the mother did not have transportation to allow her to visit her child for at least part of the period the child was in foster care.⁴⁷ As noted above, New York’s definition of neglect closely resembles common experiences of impoverished children. Accordingly, it is easy to understand why impoverished New York families may be reluctant to reach out for help from social service agencies, even when they really need it.

IV. Interventions Should Prioritize Family Economic Security

Given the overwhelming evidence of connections between poverty and maltreatment (whether real or perceived), a focus of child welfare interventions in low-income families should be connecting the family with comprehensive and ongoing economic supports. Too often, this is not the case.

In most cases, families living in poverty who become involved with the child welfare system are eligible for various social services, including income support programs like TANF and SNAP; health care coverage, like Medicaid and CHIP; and parenting supports like child welfare preventive and protective services. While each of these provide an essential support to families, it can be difficult for a family to access all prior to imminent child welfare involvement. Without an array of support, further involvement with the child welfare system becomes more likely.

New York has made significant investments in providing child welfare preventive services to families when children are at risk of being placed in foster care. Among the assistance that is to be provided to families receiving preventive services are economic supports, including emergency cash grants, job training, and child care assistance.⁴⁸ Moreover, under current state law, all families eligible for preventive services are to be offered them before a child is removed from the home.⁴⁹ However, data show that 39% of children statewide are removed from their families without having received preventive services.⁵⁰

Moreover, there is a dearth of data at the state level documenting how preventive dollars are spent, on what types of services, and with what indicators of success. Accordingly, there is no way to determine what percentage of families receiving preventive services are provided with economic supports.

Further, the vast majority of preventive services in New York are available to families *only* when there is a determination that a child in the home is at risk of placement into foster care.⁵¹ This means that preventive services are reaching families late—when there has already been some documented risk to a child. Families that distrust child welfare services—particularly low-income families and families of color—may be more amenable to accepting family support services when they are not under a threat that their child will be removed.

V. Recommendations to Reduce Child Maltreatment by Strengthening the Economic Security and Providing More Comprehensive Supports to At-Risk Families

New York has the resources, expertise and workforce to reduce child poverty and maltreatment. New York's economy is strong and growing. New York has long been a leader in the nation in its investment in preventive services designed to give comprehensive support to families at risk of child welfare involvement. Here are some concrete steps that the State could take to substantially decrease the rates of child poverty and child maltreatment, and dramatically improve the lives of thousands of its children.

Continue to Invest in Affordable, Comprehensive Health Coverage for Children and Families

Affordable and robust health insurance coverage, inclusive of behavioral health, does at least two things. It helps make it possible for children, families, and expecting mothers to get the care they need to grow up strong and healthy, and when coverage is affordable, it keeps money in the hands of families who need it.

Invest in Primary Preventive Services for At-Risk Families Before Child Welfare System Involvement

Primary prevention includes voluntary services provided to families prior to any involvement with the child welfare system. Targeted at the community level, rather than the family level, these services take a community-based approach to child maltreatment prevention, which can remove the stigma that is often associated with needing “services.”⁵² So, too, primary prevention at the community-level, unconnected with a child welfare investigation, can reduce the distrust between families and providers, making families more likely to take advantage of these services.

As noted above, the majority of services to prevent child abuse and neglect in New York are only available to families once a child welfare case has been opened.⁵³ This is considered “secondary prevention.” Commencement of a child welfare case often discourages families from availing themselves of services that could help because they are wary of involvement with the system. Primary prevention, on the other hand, includes family strengthening services that are available to families before there is contact with the child welfare system. By connecting families to comprehensive supports early on, and by addressing the factors that impose stress on a family, there is a greater opportunity to not only reduce the risk of child maltreatment, but also to prevent Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and associated trauma. Primary prevention addresses child welfare from a public health perspective, at the family and community levels, inclusive of environmental conditions that may be risk factors for maltreatment. An investment in strong primary prevention would focus support on low-income communities. A community-based approach works to improve the health and well-being of individuals and communities by addressing

conditions where people live, work and play. Primary prevention can help to strengthen families and connect them to resources so that any maltreatment, or perceived maltreatment, may be addressed early.

New York State funding for primary prevention (through a program called Community Optional Preventive Services, or COPS) was once \$55 million per year, but has been frozen at \$12.1 million since 2009, and may only be used by the districts funded at that time.⁵⁴ Increased funding for primary prevention could help countless low-income and other families facing stressors and obstacles that place them at risk for maltreatment (or perceived maltreatment), avoid child welfare involvement and allow children to remain safely with their families.

One promising new model of primary prevention is being implemented in New York City. In 2017, the City awarded funds for three new community-based Family Enrichment Centers—welcoming families regardless of child welfare involvement—which will focus on building family resilience and stability by providing an array of supports that reinforce economic mobility, parenting skills, positive relationships, housing, child development and education, community engagement and supportive advocacy. This demonstration project may serve as an example for the rest of the state as one way we may work to strengthen families and communities, and prevent child abuse and neglect.

Implement Family First Act’s Prevention Provisions for Federal Funding of Evidence-Based Preventive Services

The new federal Family First Prevention Services Act will allow states to seek federal reimbursement for evidence-based preventive services. New York should adopt this provision of the new law to help fund and expand existing eligible services, and expand access to evidence-based preventive programs to currently unserved areas. Furthermore, the State should encourage its counties to review the impact and efficacy of their existing practice and to shift resources to preventive services that better meet the needs of their families and communities, as appropriate.

Strengthen the Economic Security of Low-Income New York Families

In 2016, New York State made historic strides in improving family economic security by enacting paid family leave and increasing the State’s minimum wage. Specifically, once the State’s paid family leave law is fully phased-in, employees will be eligible for 12 weeks of paid family leave for caring for a new child (including foster or adopted) and sick family members, to relieve family pressures.⁵⁵ So, too, by 2021, the State’s minimum wage will gradually increase to \$15 an hour in some parts of the state, and to \$12.50 in the rest of the state.⁵⁶ Providing paid leave and increasing family income are proven ways to reduce the risk of child maltreatment because they reduce parental stress and improve parents’ ability to meet their children’s basic needs.⁵⁷

As significant as these new policies are, many New York families will continue to struggle to make ends meet, even after these new laws go fully into effect. To further strengthen the economic security of the state’s families, and decrease the risk of child maltreatment, New York should redouble its efforts to substantially reduce child poverty by devoting significant resources to programs proven to strengthen family economic security, including:

Increase the State EITC and CTC

Tax credits that benefit families with children, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC) help increase the income of low-income families and encourage participation in the labor force. Even when the State’s minimum hourly wage increases to \$12.50,

a minimum wage earner will still only make \$26,000 a year, nudging a family of four just over the FPL to 107% of poverty.⁵⁸ Add \$6,557 in federal and State EITC and \$2,660 in federal and State CTC (at the current rates), the family income rises to \$35,217 (145% of poverty). And this family will, nevertheless, still struggle to make ends meet.

Second, there are still a good number of low wage workers who work part time—either because they cannot find full-time work, or because child care or other responsibilities prevent them from working full time. Specifically, in 2016, 30% of New York children lived in families where no parent had full-time secure employment (defined as more than 35 hours per week, and 50 weeks of work for the prior 12 months).⁵⁹ Relatedly, there are scholars who estimate that New York's wage increase could result in job cuts and reduced hours, so the number of underemployed low wage workers might increase as the minimum wage hike is phased in.⁶⁰ A married worker with two children whose hours have been cut back to 30 hours a week would earn \$23,400 a year at \$15 an hour, below the FPL. Add the federal and State EITC and CTC at the current rates, the family income would rise to \$33,272 or 137% of FPL.

An increase in the State EITC and CTC could provide a buffer for those families where one or more wage-earner(s) are stuck in part-time work due to the economy or family responsibilities, and help all low-wage families edge away from poverty and as a result, reduce the stress and deprivations associated with poverty that can increase the risk of child maltreatment.⁶¹

Increase child care subsidies

Access to quality affordable child care is critical to enabling low-income New York parents to secure and retain full-time employment, and in this way move—and stay—out of poverty.⁶² Moreover, parents receiving subsidies generally choose higher quality child care, which decreases the risk of child maltreatment in child care. Having access to quality child care has been associated with reduced parental stress and maternal depression, both risk factors in child maltreatment. Further, access to quality child care may reduce the chance of parents relying on adults unfit to care for children, reducing the chance of maltreatment by unrelated adults.⁶³

Fewer than a quarter of eligible New York families receive child care subsidies, and this number may decrease even more in the coming year because the State did not budget sufficient funds to both maintain the current level of subsidies and cover the costs of new federally-mandated regulations.⁶⁴ Beyond the 80% who are eligible but do not receive subsidies, there are thousands more whose incomes are just above eligibility levels and for whom child care is an onerous monthly expense that they must assume, so that parents can work. The average cost of full-time infant care in a child care center in New York State exceeds \$15,000 a year.⁶⁵

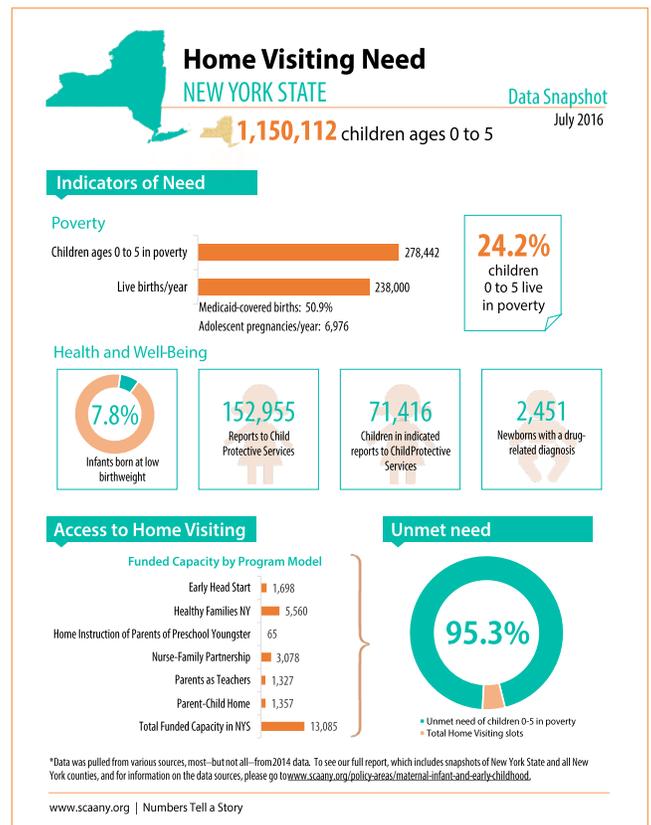
An increase in state subsidies for child care would mean that more low-income families would not have child care as an obstacle to greater economic security. In addition, fewer families would be forced to place their children in substandard care to enable them to work. As such, greater access to subsidies would reduce the stressors that are triggered by poverty and worry, and which can lead to maltreatment.

Make a Substantial Investment in Home Visiting—An Intervention Proven to Strengthen Families and Help Children to Thrive

Maternal, infant, and early childhood home visiting—a dual-generation, whole-family approach to strengthening families with young children—has been shown to help prevent or reduce the frequency and severity of child abuse and neglect in some cases. Home visiting staff work with families who have young children, assessing each family's needs, providing direct services, coaching

parents, connecting families with appropriate services, and monitoring their ongoing well-being. Home visiting can be effective at preventing child maltreatment because parents learn how to manage anger, discipline effectively and without violence, and ask for help when they need it.^{66, 67, 68} Home visiting programs that offer life skills training have been shown to strengthen the economic security of participating families by leading parents to participate at greater rates in job training and higher education.⁶⁹ Parents engaged in home visiting are also more likely to be employed.⁷⁰ Participating in home visiting has also been shown to reduce families' need for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).^{71, 72}

Home visiting is often used as a form of primary prevention for families deemed at risk of becoming involved in the child welfare system because they are impoverished, headed by a teen-age mother, or some other factor. At present, home visiting reaches fewer than 5% of New York children in families living below the federal poverty line.⁷³ An increase in funding for these proven programs could substantially reduce the number of New York children that become involved in the child welfare system, and keep more safely with their families.



Invest in Systems to Create More, Better Child Welfare Data

While New York State has made substantial investments in child welfare, particularly in preventive services, it has invested little in understanding the root causes of child maltreatment—including the interplay between poverty and maltreatment—and in tracking what interventions are having the best, lasting, results. An increased investment in improving the collection, publication, and sharing of data on prevention and post-adoption services offered in each county, demographic information on families served, and the outcomes of those services could lead to dramatic improvements in the effectiveness of the State's child welfare services.

VI. Conclusion

It is clear that there is a strong connection between poverty and child maltreatment. Whether poverty causes or worsens maltreatment, or poverty is mistakenly labeled as maltreatment, we must work to reduce childhood poverty as part of our efforts to reduce child maltreatment, and to improve the health, safety and well-being of New York State's children. In order to do so, New York State must ensure that counties, cities, and communities have the resources available to meet families' needs, build family economic security, and prevent child maltreatment.

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540 Broadway
Albany, New York 12207
Tele. 518-463-1896 ♦ Fax 518-463-3364
www.scaany.org