New York City in the 1990s

Poverty rate soaring among children

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25 February 1999

The Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC), an advocacy organization which documents the effects of poverty and lobbies for increased social services for the poor, has just issued the fourth in its series of reports on the social conditions of the city's under-18 population. The reports, entitled *Keeping Track*, have been published every two years beginning in 1993.

The detailed statistics on life in various neighborhoods of the metropolis provide a graphic look at life in the wealthiest city of the world at the end of the decade and the end of the twentieth century. They show that behind the boasts of declining crime rates, the reduction of the welfare rolls and the "cleanup" of Times Square, the actual conditions of life are worse for millions of New Yorkers than they were 10 years ago.

The poverty rate among children in the city, based on official guidelines, was 43 percent as of 1995. The percentage of children born into poor families was higher, reflecting the larger families of the poor, including the immigrants who have flooded into New York at a rate of more than 100,000 annually during this period. Between 1990 and 1996 the percentage of children born poor increased substantially, from 44 percent to 52 percent.

Significantly, the jump in this figure came almost entirely from an increase in poverty among whites and Asians. Since the beginning of the decade the figures for black and Hispanic children born into poor families had remained roughly the same, at 60 and 75 percent respectively. For whites, however, the percentage had jumped from 13 to 22 percent, while for Asians the increase was from 22 to 48 percent. In both of these cases the statistics reflect both the continuing problems of unemployment, significantly above the national average, as well as factory shutdowns and downsizing. But contributing as well have been changing immigration patterns, bringing hundreds of thousands of workers from Asia and from countries in Eastern and southern Europe to the US. While the black and Hispanic workers continue to suffer from poverty out of proportion to their numbers, economic changes and immigration patterns have combined to demonstrate that class is the common denominator behind the growing poverty rate.

The CCC report details conditions in areas of the city which it calls "pockets of deep poverty," comprising millions of people. In 1996 more than a third of households in 14 out of the city's 59 community districts had an annual income of less than $10,000, which is itself far below the poverty line.

The poorest neighborhoods were in the Bronx, where the following percentages of households earned less than $10,000: Hunts Point (56 percent), Mott Haven (56 percent), East Tremont (49 percent), Morrisania (49 percent) and Concourse/Highbridge (40 percent). This income level would provide enough to pay about $800 a month in rent, a typical rent for a barely adequate two-bedroom apartment, and leave not a penny for food or any other expenses! As of 1996, nearly 60 percent of the city's rents were more than $600 a month.

Citywide unemployment decreased from 9.5 percent in 1997 to 7.6 percent in 1998, but the city's jobless rate is still much higher than it was in 1990, before the last recession. The rate also fails to include many thousands of workers who have left the labor force in discouragement, and does not take into account that many thousands work at jobs that do not pay enough for rent and food.

While poverty has jumped, especially among children, funding for children's services has dropped.

The Department of Homeless Services, the Human Resources Administration and the Health and Hospitals Corporation each have smaller budgets for 1998 than they did for 1994, even before taking inflation into account. Funding for family shelter operations decreased by 21 percent, for instance, and funding for youth training and placement was cut by nearly 20 percent. The Board of Education cut funding for special education, pupil transportation and school safety by 9.6 percent, 14.8 percent and 6.3 percent respectively. Funding for foster care was also cut.

The welfare rolls fell from a 1994 peak of 1,140,600 to 763,000 four years later, but the report acknowledges that little of this drop is connected to recipients finding decent jobs. The city's Work Experience Program has been used to replace city employees with workers paid the minimum wage, while imposing severe sanctions against those who miss their job assignment, thus pushing many thousands off the rolls. The city's welfare "reform" program supposedly includes job search, training and the minimum wage WEP jobs. In the last two years, however, the city's own figures show that the number of welfare recipients enrolled in job search and training dropped by 12 percent and 41 percent respectively, while those in WEP increased by 36 percent.

Federal affordability standards state that no more than 30 percent of monthly income should be spent on rent, yet a family with one full-time wage earner at the minimum wage would have a gross income of only $890, leaving only $267 available for rent. A family of three on welfare receives a housing allowance of only $286 a month, yet only about 1 in 10 apartments in the city rent for less than $300, and the number of such apartments becoming available can perhaps be counted on the fingers of two hands.

Almost one in five New York City children had no health insurance as of 1996. And the city is not close to meeting the United States Surgeon General's national child health objectives for the year 2000. In 1996, for example, 8.6 percent of children in the city were born with low birthweight, compared to the Year 2000 goal of 5 percent. The Year 2000 goal is full immunization for 90 percent of children before their second birthday. In 1996 only 72 percent of children were immunized, a drop from 78 percent in 1995.

The great majority of the 1,017,490 students in the New York City public schools in 1997 were poor. Three out of every four students received free lunches, provided to those who meet poverty guidelines. Hundreds of thousands of these students attend schools that are overcrowded and dangerous. Elementary school students in 13 community school districts attend classes in extremely overcrowded conditions. The number of poorly performing schools, which are placed under state review, has been increasing, from 72 in 1994-95 to 97 in 1998-99.

Poverty also is reflected in the availability of public services and facilities such as parks and public libraries. Five community districts, including Pelham Parkway in the Bronx, Crown Heights South, Borough Park and East Flatbush in Brooklyn, and Woodhaven in Queens, have at least 2,200 children for every park acre, compared to less than 37 children per park acre in some other neighborhoods. Despite the use of thousands of welfare workers to clean the parks, nearly twice as many (20 percent) were rated unacceptably dirty in 1998 as compared to 10 years earlier.

In the Mott Haven, Morrisania, Bedford Stuyvesant, Crown Heights North, and East Harlem neighborhoods, each child had access to less than two library books in 1997, compared to better off neighborhoods where this figure was more than 16 books per child. As the report indicates, this access to books directly relates to a student's performance and achievement in school.

These are only some of the statistics documenting the depth of poverty and its overall impact on social and living conditions in New York. This social crisis exists after nearly a decade of uninterrupted economic boom on Wall Street, leading to record tax revenues and budget surpluses. What will be the impact when the Wall Street bubble ends, unemployment inevitably shoots up, and the budget surpluses turn into massive deficits?