Poverty Soars in New York City, With Children Bearing the Brunt

**By Stefanos Chen**

After several years of declining poverty, New York City ssaw a sharp reversal in 2022, when it experienced its largest yearly increase in the poverty level in a decade.

Twenty-three percent of the city’s residents were unable to afford necessities like housing and food, according to a new report by a research group at Columbia University and Robin Hood, a large philanthropic organization. In 2021, the number was 18 percent.

The number of New Yorkers living in poverty, nearly two million in all, including one in four children.

The findings mark a major setback from New York City, where expanded government id during the coronavirus pandemic had helped to counter act job losses, rising rents and high inflation., which grew by 500,

With most of the programs ending, poverty has risen nationwide, but the surge has been especially clear in New York, said Chritopher Wimer, director of the Centr on poverty and social Policy at the Columbia school of Social Work and a co-author of the report.

The national poverty rate in 2022 was 12.4 percent, up from 7.8 percent in 2021, the largest one-year jump on record, according to the United States Census Bureau. New York City’s rate was nearly double the national average, and there are signs that the gap is widening, Dr. Wimer said.

“It’s dispiriting.” Dr. Wimer said. “We’re going in the wrong direction.”

The biggest reason for the increase in poverty, both nationally and in New York, ws the end of pandemic-era policies like the expanded child tax credit, enhanced unemployment insurance and come families keep up with rising costs, Dr Wimer aid.

The steep rise in the number of New Yorker living in poverty, which grew by 500,000 residents in 2022, underscores wide and longstanding disparities.

Black, Latino and Asian New Yorkers were roughly twice as likely as white residents to live in poverty, according to the report, and women were more likely than men to be unable to afford they basic necessities.

The report, part of a study that begin in 2012, was based on surveys of a representative sample of more than 3600 New York City residents that were conducted in 2022 and 2023.

The researchers used a metric called the supplemental poverty measure, which considers other income and noncash support like food stamps, as well as the local cost of living.

It differs from the Census Bureau’s official poverty measure, which only counts cash resources.

In 2022, under the supplemental measure, a family on New York City renters made up of two adults and two children was considered below the poverty line if it made less than about $44,000. The poverty threshold for a single adult renter was $20,340.

A major reason for the disparities seen among those living in poverty is the lopsided jobs recovery, said James Parrott, the director of economic and fiscal policy at the Center of New York City Affairs at the New School.

Dr. Parrott, a former chief economist for New York City, was not involved with the report, but broadly agreed with its findings.

“A lot of the progress made in the prepandemic years in reducing poverty and child poverty has been undone with diverging unemployment rates by race and ethnicity,” Dr. Parrott said.

While the city said in October that it had recovered all the jobs lost during the pandemic, the positions that have returned have largely been in low-paying industries.

The retail sector, which pays around $54,000 a year and employs a large share of Black, Latino and Asian workers, has shed more jobs than any other industry, Dr. Parrott said. But the industry that is hiring the most employees, home health care, pays workers far less – around $32,100 a year. The median household income in New York City is about $75,000.

The average unemployment rate in 2023 among Black New Yorkers was 9.3 percent, more than three times higher than among white residents, according to Dr. Parrott.

“The Covid-19 pandemic took a disproportionate toll on our most vulnerable neighbors,” said Charles Litvak, a spokesman for Mayor Eric Adams. But he pointed to a number of initiatives, including investments in a summer youth employments program and the expansion of the city’s earned income tax credit, as signs of progress.

A full 25 percent of children in New York City lived in poverty in 2022, the highest rate since 2015, according to the report.

It was a sharp reversal from 2021, when the expansion of the federal child tax credit program cut child poverty in the city by 30 percent, said Chloe Sarnoff, the director of policy research and initiatives at Robin Hood.

The program temporarily increased the annual tax credit to up to $3,600 from $2,000 for each qualifying child under 6 years old, and up to $3,000 for older children. But Congress did not extend the benefits.

The need for public aid is clear at Grand Street Settlement, a non-profit social services group in Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn that has seen its food pantry lines swell to 2,800 people a month, up from 500 before the pandemic.

A growing childcare crisis is fueling the rising poverty rate. “If we’re going to reduce poverty in the City of New York, we have to invest in childcare,” said Robert Cordero, the group’s chief executive, adding that dwindling support from the city for its free preschool program is smoking it harder to parents to make ends meet.

Shavon Johnson, 30, who lives in public housing on the Lower East Side, is a recent widow who was fired in September from her job as a dog food cook, where she made $20 an hour. She said she was let go because she couldn’t get to work on time and still drop her 4-year-old son, Dominique, off at school.

Now she is enrolled in a medical program in the hopes of becoming a nurse – a goal she couldn’t accomplish without the free day care program offered by Grand Street Settlement, which enables her to afford other necessities.

“I would be homeless” if not for the program, she said.

The report recommended permanently expanding public benefits such as the federal child tax credit and New York’s Empire State Child Tax Credi, a credit for state residents that was first passed in 2006.

Robin Hold said it supported expanding the Empire State lax credit to a maximum benefit of $1000 a year, per child, up from $330, and cutting income criteria that disproportionately leaves out Black and Hispanic families.

The changes could lift up to 76,000 children out of poverty, according to an analysis by the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia.

The report also supported zoning reforms that would increase the supply of affordable housing, and an expansion of rental assistance vouchers to help keep low-income residents in their homes.

The City Council said on Wednesday that it planned to join a lawsuit ordering the city to comply with laws that would expand the vouchers program, known as CityFHEPS. Mayor Adams has opposed such as expansion, arguing threat it would be too costly.

Dulce Tellez, 22 is a teaching assistant for middle school students in Long Island City, Queens, where she is paid about $32,000 a year. After taxes, she said she cleared about $1,600 a month.

Every month she spends $1,000 for a babysitter and another $1,000 for her share of the rent in an apartment in Bushwick, Brooklyn, where she lives with family. She is also chipping away at more than $4,000 in student debt.

Since her expenses exceed her monthly take-home pay, she sometimes picks up shifts at a gelato shop, or works extra hours at her school.

She estimates that 60 percent of the teaching assistants she works with have to take on hourly side jobs, including as security guards or hotel receptionists.

“It makes it seem normal,” she said. “But it shouldn’t be normal.”