Findings at a Glance

Qualitative Study to Enhance the NYCgov Poverty Measure

Compounding challenges are significant and persistent across the lives of those experiencing poverty.

In New York City, 3.5 million people (41.3% of the total population) were poor or near-poor in 2018 according to the NYCgov poverty measure (*see box*). In 2018, the City partnered with Abt Associates to conduct the *Qualitative Study to Enhance the NYCgov Poverty Measure* to better understand the diversity of lived experiences and challenges facing New Yorkers living near or below the poverty line. The report presents findings from a series of in-depth interviews with poor or near-poor New Yorkers in the Bronx and describes the ways in which issues such as underemployment, low wages, benefits access, housing and healthcare intersect and result in financial vulnerability. The project used community-based participatory research (*CBPR, see box pg.2*) methods as part of a commitment to understanding New Yorkers' experiences from their own perspectives.

Key Findings

- **Financial precarity** leaves many New Yorkers one emergency away from a downwards spiral.
    - A majority of interviewees reported trouble meeting their day-to-day costs and often worried their food would run out before they could buy more. Only a few participants reported being able to cover a sudden $250 emergency expense with savings.
    - For most participants, their poverty was a result of a series of financial shocks, other setbacks and compounding challenges rather than a single trigger event.
- **Underemployment and low wages in the labor market are bigger issues than a lack of jobs** or poor labor market engagement.
    - Employed interviewees reported that their wages were inadequate to cover their living expenses, especially because most worked part-time and/or erratic schedules despite wanting to work more hours.

What is the NYCgov Poverty Measure?

The New York City government (NYCgov) poverty measure is an official metric of the New York City government, developed in 2008 as a measure of poverty adapted to the realities of the city's economy. The poverty threshold accounts for housing costs that are higher than the national average. The measure of family resources includes public benefits and tax credits, but also acknowledges spending on medical costs and work-related expenses such as childcare and commuting. As a result, the NYCgov poverty rate, threshold, and income measure are higher than those same figures in the official U.S. measure.

Data Collection – Research Sample
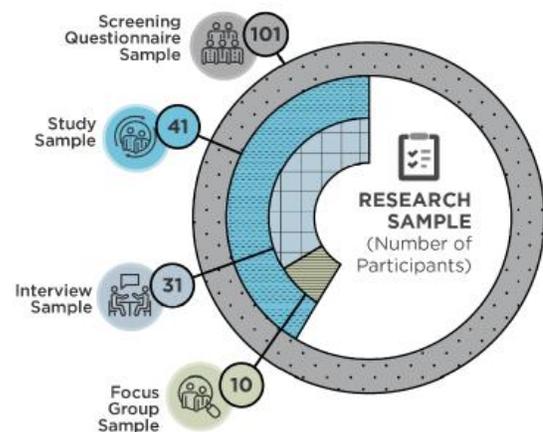
Source: Qualitative Study to Enhance the NYCgov Poverty Measure pg. 3.

- Study participants identified a need for good jobs – which they defined as having reliable, consistent, and sufficient hours – in order to facilitate exits from poverty, but few have been able to access such work.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

This study used CBPR methods which engage community members as research partners throughout the study process. The research team worked with the local resident and service provider community in several ways beginning with a partnership with BronxWorks, an active and trusted service organization in the study area. The team employed community members as researchers and also convened a Community Advisory Board (CAB) consisting of community researchers, academics and BronxWorks staff. The CAB was vital at every stage, from formulating research questions and collecting data to analyzing and interpreting findings.

- **Public benefits** reduce hardship, but the study indicates they may not provide enough assistance for many participants and often present a new set of constraints to navigate. A few common issues were described:
  - Interviewees reflected on their experiences with the "**benefits cliff**" **where an increase in work hours or pay triggers a loss of various public benefits**, resulting in an overall neutral or even negative change in their income.
  - Many participants reported **administrative barriers** like confusing eligibility guidelines and onerous documentation requirements.
  - Some respondents also reported avoiding accessing benefits they were eligible for due to **social stigma** and **poor service experiences** such as long lines and demeaning interactions.

- **Housing costs** placed the greatest financial burden on participants. They reported needing additional housing assistance more than any other public benefit. Even for those with a housing voucher, many were still unable to secure housing due to a shortage of affordable housing, upfront costs, and experiences of discrimination against voucher holders.

- Study participants reported significant physical and mental health challenges. At the same time, the study found that many poor New Yorkers were unable to reliably access affordable healthcare services. Participants described a resulting cycle of chronic poor health, financial burden and mental health issues.

- Despite the numerous challenges described, many study participants were **resilient, strategic in navigating poverty, and optimistic about their long-term financial outlook:**
  - Participants described a range of methods by which they took control of their lives to navigate poverty, demonstrating resilience in addressing these hardships and challenges. These include coping mechanisms such as religious faith, strategies to navigate the practical aspects of getting by, reciprocal personal networks for emotional and practical support, and public resources to fill gaps in their household's needs.

- Study participants expressed a desire for the **experience of poverty and the needs of the poor to be better understood and more publicly discussed**. At the same time participants emphasized it was **necessary to offer more resources** for those in need, in addition to increasing awareness of existing resources.

Looking Ahead

This study took place in the summer of 2018 as part of an effort to complement the NYCgov poverty measure and provide depth and nuance to our understanding of poverty in New York City. The research focused on neighborhoods in the South and Southwest Bronx, communities with the highest poverty rates in the city. As we release this report during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings and challenges detailed in the report are as relevant as ever and have taken on even greater urgency. The pandemic has amplified long-standing inequities in our society, with historically high unemployment rates impacting the most vulnerable communities and driving low-income New Yorkers further into poverty.

Since the inception of the NYCgov poverty measure, the data it contains have been an important tool in fighting poverty. NYC Opportunity remains committed to also learning from the voices and lived experiences of New Yorkers living in poverty and applying this knowledge as we build an equitable recovery in a city facing unprecedented challenges.

Further Reading:

- **Qualitative Study to Enhance the NYCgov Poverty Measure**
- **The New York City Government Poverty Measure Annual Report, 2018**