

National Survey on Child Poverty

by {ga=pfarber}

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Children in New York are better off financially than they were two years ago, according to a national survey released in early November by the Urban Institute and Child Trends of Washington, D.C.

Fewer children live below the federal poverty line, fewer families report having trouble putting food on the table, and fewer children live in single parent homes.

However, New York families still lag behind the rest of the nation in obtaining economic stability, and there is still a large segment of New York State children living in extreme poverty. Furthermore, children as a group are still poorer than other Americans.

"Although we found reductions in the gap between low income children and the rest, there still is an alarming gap," said Sharon Vandivere, of Child Trends, and one of the authors of the study.

The survey of 42,000 households across the country produced state-specific results for New York as well as national results, making it possible to compare the economic well-being of New York families to that of families nationally.

Among the findings:

- The child poverty rate declined in New York, but a large portion of children remain very poor. The percent of children living in poverty slipped from 25 percent in 1997 to 22 percent in 1999. Children in poverty live in families that have less than the amount the federal government identifies as the minimum annual income needed to avoid shortages of basic necessities (\$13,133 for a family of three). Nationwide, the rate of child poverty dropped from 21 to 18 percent over the two years.
- The poverty rate is much higher for children than adults. In New York 13 percent of adults New Yorkers live below the poverty line. Nationally, 11 percent of adults do.
- Nearly half of New York children, 44 percent, reside in low income families. These are families with annual incomes of less than 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold. There was no change in the size of this group in New York from 1997 to 1999. Nationally, the percent of children living in low-income families dropped from 43 to 40 percent.
- New York single parents made large gains in employment from 1997 to 1999. The

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employment rate for poor single parents in New York jumped from 50 percent in 1997 to 62 percent in 1999, an increase that dwarfed employment gains made by parents in other states and in other income categories.

- Low income families found it easier to afford food in 1999 than in 1997. 57 percent of low income families ran out or nearly ran out of food at least once during 1997, compared to 50 percent in 1999.

- The proportion of low income youngsters living in single family homes dropped from 1997 to 1999. In New York, the percentage fell from 51 percent to 47 percent, and nationally, from 44 percent to 42 percent.

The Urban Institute and Child Trends teamed up to conduct this survey in an effort to measure the impact of welfare reform on family well-being. The team did an earlier survey in 1997 and a third round is planned for 2002.

Child Trend's Vandivere said the survey does not show whether children are being harmed or helped by welfare reform. "Family structure and poverty rates are targets of welfare reform but we cannot assume a causal connection between reforms and reductions in poverty or the other things," she said. "Changes in these things could also be due to the fact that this is the longest economic expansion in the country's history."

Peggy J. Farber is freelance journalist specializing in children's issues. Her reporting on conditions of NYC children has appeared in City Limits Magazine as well as on National Public Radio.