

Testimony for the Senate Standing Committee on Cities 2 Poverty and Concentrated Poverty in Small and Medium Sized Cities December 12, 2023

Thank you for holding this hearing today and for the opportunity to submit testimony about this critically important issue. My name is Pete Nabozny and I am the Director of Policy at The Children's Agenda in Rochester, NY.

The Children's Agenda is a children's policy and advocacy organization. Through analysis, advocacy, and collaboration with partners locally and statewide, we advocate for programs and policies that address the serious challenges facing children and families in our community and throughout New York State.

I am also an appointee to the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council, a body which is charged with providing recommendations to guide New York State to a 50% reduction in child poverty by 2031.

The issues associated with concentrated poverty in cities across New York State are vast and complicated. They involve dynamics like job and housing discrimination, historic and ongoing resistance to education and housing integration, decades of economic stagnation, and an inadequately constructed social safety net. Poverty also affects New Yorkers of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. To focus my testimony today, I will attempt to restrict my commentary to the issue of child poverty in cities across New York State.

I am proud to live with my family in the city of Rochester. I am far less proud of Rochester's distinction as home to one of the highest child poverty rates among cities its size in the nation. According to the most recent American Community Survey data, Rochester has a child poverty rate of 42%.¹ Almost 19,000 of the 45,000 children who reside in the city of Rochester are forced to experience the trauma of childhood poverty each year. And yet, most other parts of Monroe County have extremely low rates of child poverty. The county outside the city is broadly affluent, while child poverty in Monroe County is highly concentrated within the city of Rochester's boundaries. The Census Bureau estimates that only 9% of Monroe County children outside the city of Rochester are in poverty, a rate almost 4.5 times lower than that found in the city.

This dynamic is not unique to Rochester. In Onondaga County, the child poverty rate in Syracuse is 45%, while the child poverty rate in the parts of the county outside Syracuse is 10%. In Erie County, the child poverty rate in Buffalo is 39% and its 34% in Lackawanna. In the rest of the county, it is 8%. In the city of Schenectady, the child poverty rate is 31%. In the rest of the county, its 5%.

¹ See American Community Survey table [S1701](#) for child poverty rates across county subdivision across New York State.

To be clear, poverty is bad for children wherever they live. Children who experience material deprivation and economic insecurity are at greater risk for many negative experiences throughout their childhood and after they reach adulthood. But growing up poor is particularly bad in neighborhoods and communities with high rates of poverty. Children who reside in neighborhoods with high rates of child poverty are more likely to experience poorer physical² and mental health³, are more likely to drop out of high school⁴, be victimized by crime⁵, and have far lower chances of becoming a more economically secure adult⁶ than children who experience poverty in communities with lower rates of child poverty.

In summary, growing up poor anywhere makes it difficult for a child to reach their full potential. Growing up poor in an impoverished community just further stacks the deck against a child and their family.

Housing Instability in the Rochester City School District

Several months ago, I authored a report⁷ that explored one concrete way concentrated poverty harms families and children. The report examined housing and school instability of children in the Rochester City School District. It pulled together data from several different sources but was primarily based on an analysis of school placements and home addresses across the past two school years.

From 2021-22 to 2022-23, 33% of all students in grades K-11 in the Rochester City School District either changed addresses within the school district or left the school district entirely. Excluding children who switched schools because they had been in the highest grade at a particular school (like a 6th grade student in a Pre-K to Grade 6 school), 38% of children had either changed addresses, left the district, or switched schools between the two years. In some schools, nearly 50% of children enrolled in that school in the 2020-21 school year experienced some form of housing or school instability within the following year.

Elementary aged children in Rochester were more likely to experience housing instability than their slightly older peers, and rates of housing movement among Black and Hispanic children were nearly twice that of white and Asian children in Rochester.

Children and families move for many reasons, some good and some bad. But an extensive body of research suggests that in the aggregate, there is a negative association between housing instability and childhood well-being. Children who

² See <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301420>

³ See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1448013/>

⁴ See <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0003122411420816>

⁵ See <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00148-015-0579-3>

⁶ See <https://www.nber.org/papers/w21156>

⁷ See <https://thechildrensagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Housing-Stability-FINAL.pdf> All data in this section of the testimony is derived from that report.

experience housing instability are more likely to repeat a grade, face mental health challenges, and drop out of school. Children with high rates of housing mobility during their early years are significantly more likely to exhibit behavioral problems throughout their school years.

Data on evictions and student homelessness, along with reports from community members throughout Rochester suggest that while people do move for many reasons, many families in Rochester are moving because of unsafe housing conditions, threatened or actual evictions, and a host of other negative reasons.

Children experiencing homelessness, eviction, and unstable housing need additional support in school. But because of the intense socio-economic and racial segregation that exists in Rochester and Monroe County, most children struggling from housing instability in the Rochester region attend the Rochester City School District. During the 2018-19 school year, about 25% of children attending public school in Monroe County went to the Rochester City School District. But 75% of children experiencing homelessness in the county that year were Rochester City School District students.

This heavy concentration of children experiencing housing instability in one school district makes it more difficult (among many other reasons) for schools in that district to succeed in their mission of teaching children to read & write, learn math, and become broadly educated members of the community. That difficulty reinforces certain decisions that many families with more financial resources make about where to live in the Greater Rochester region. This, in turn, perpetuates the concentration of poverty that we see in Rochester and in similar communities across much of New York State.

Recommendations

There is a great deal New York State can do from a public policy perspective to address the concentration of child poverty in small and medium sized cities across the state. The state has the resources and the responsibility to enact policies that will better support economically insecure children and families. I will highlight a few of those policies below.

Expand New York State's Child Tax Credit

Since 2006, New York State has offered many low- and middle-income families a small child tax credit of between \$100 and \$330 per child. This credit was expanded in the 2023-24 state budget to finally include children birth to 3 years old. However, it has never been adjusted for inflation since being introduced almost two decades ago and is notably less robust than the credit offered in some neighboring states. The credit also penalizes very low-income families by preventing them from receiving the full credit. The Working Families Tax Credit legislation (S.277-A/A.4022-A) sponsored by Senator Gouardes and Assemblymember Hevesi would transform New York's approach to tax policy for families and provide significant support to families struggling to support themselves across Rochester, Buffalo, Utica, and throughout the state.

Increase the Public Assistance Shelter Allowance

The size of a cash aid grant a family applying for public assistance can receive is comprised of two main parts: a “basic grant,” which does not vary by location in New York State, and a “shelter allowance,” which is intended to address housing cost differences across the state. The shelter allowance amount, which is established by state regulation, has not been updated since 2003 and is significantly lower than the average cost of rental housing anywhere in New York State. For example, in Monroe County, the 2023 shelter allowance for a family of 4 is only \$374 per month, well below the cost of any housing suitable for a family that size.

Increasing the shelter allowance to the Housing and Urban Development “Fair Market Rent” level would allow families receiving public assistance to find and remain in decent housing while receiving assistance and engaging in public assistance program activities. Providing housing assistance up to this level would likely reduce homelessness and increase housing stability.

Create a New York State Housing Access Voucher Program

Research shows that rental assistance programs have tremendous benefits to families that receive them, but the federally funded Housing Choice Voucher program only serves approximately a quarter of households who are eligible to receive it. A state funded voucher program like the one (S.568-B/A.4021-A) proposed by Senator Kavanagh and Assemblymember Rosenthal that operates alongside the federal voucher program could help eliminate waitlists for the federal program and could be tailored to help address some of New York’s specific needs and challenges.

Promote Education and Housing Policies that Reduce the Concentration of Poverty

We cannot address the particular harm of concentrated child poverty in cities across New York State without adopting measures that actually reduce socio-economic and racial segregation across New York State. In an education policy context, this means finding ways to integrate schools across existing school district lines. We have made great strides as a state in the past few years at more equitably funding schools by fully funding the foundation aid formula. But school funding alone will not bring about more equitable educational outcomes for children. We must also look for more ways to create more socio-economically and racially diverse schools in communities like Rochester with intense concentrations of child poverty.

Similarly, we must find ways to reduce the concentration of poverty through housing policy beyond just expanding housing subsidies (though those are critically important). Communities need to adopt zoning that allows multi-family housing and more affordable housing for low-income families. State leaders should find a way to remove barriers to new housing production, incentivize new construction and affordable units, and ensure

that restrictive zoning laws do not prevent the construction of housing in communities that need greater affordability.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this testimony today and for holding a hearing on this important subject.

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