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TRACKER**



Columbia
Population
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Center

ROBINHOOD

MONITORING POVERTY AND WELL-BEING IN NYC

SPOTLIGHT ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Accessing Help:
A Portrait of Service Use
Among New York City
Families with Children

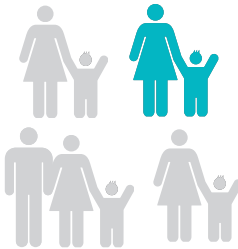
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Executive Summary

The Poverty Tracker provides a rare opportunity to learn about the extent to which families with children in New York City are able to access help to address the challenges they face. Poor and low-income families in New York City report elevated needs for child-related problems, from academics to child care to behavior issues. Examining data on families' need for and receipt of help, we find the following:



More than **A QUARTER** of New Yorkers whose children needed help did not seek help for at least one of those problems. Help seeking did not differ dramatically by income, though low-income families (those between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty line) exhibited the highest level of help seeking.



The **TOP THREE REASONS** for not seeking help were:

1. "I didn't know where to go,"
2. "I couldn't afford it," and
3. "I wanted to take care of the problem myself."



In contrast to poor and higher-income families, **LOW-INCOME FAMILIES** (those between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty line) were the least likely to get all of the help they needed for their child-related problems and to see those problems improve, indicating a potential **SERVICE GAP**.

Introduction

The Poverty Tracker, implemented by Columbia University's Population Research Center and the Center on Poverty and Social Policy, in partnership with Robin Hood, is an ongoing initiative to better understand the well-being of individuals and families in New York City. Since its launch in 2012, over 6,000 families have participated, revealing the trajectories of New Yorkers from all walks of life in a series of snapshots that capture poverty, hardship, health, and well-being every three months.

To date, our reports have described trends among adults — this brief is the first to present Poverty Tracker data on the children of New York City, with a focus on child-related problems and on how families seek and receive help. Unlike most other data sets, the Poverty Tracker tells us not only about the challenges children and their families face, but also about the extent to which services and resources address those challenges.

Because children in poor and low-income families are likely to face more challenges, we examine families separately by income.¹ We classify New Yorkers into three groups: poor (below 100 percent of the poverty line), low-income (between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty line), and higher-income (over 200 percent of the poverty line). As we document in the pages that follow, poor and low-income children suffer a host of problems and service gaps relative to their higher-income peers.





This brief draws on Poverty Tracker data collected between 2012 and 2017. Poverty Tracker data consists of two representative samples of New York City residents, the first collected from 2012-2015 and the second that started in 2015 and is still currently in the field. Respondents are surveyed every three months. For this analysis, we pooled both samples to create a total sample size of 6,195 New Yorkers. Of these, 1,520 had a child under the age of 18 during their initial Poverty Tracker survey, and 1,419 reported on child-related service needs six months following their initial survey.

¹We use a New York City-specific poverty line that accounts for the city's high housing costs. See http://povertytracker.robinhood.org/download/RobinHood_PovertyTracker_Spring14.pdf for more details.

Disparities Among Children in New York City

It is well understood that children in poverty fare worse than their more advantaged peers in terms of health and development. The Poverty Tracker is unique, however, in that it provides information on how families with children respond to their children’s problems. With the Poverty Tracker, we can begin to understand who needs help and who seeks it. Where do people turn? Does the help sought ameliorate their problems? Are specific groups not receiving the help they need?

We address these questions using survey data from the Poverty Tracker. Specifically, approximately six months after respondents were recruited into the survey, they were asked if they needed help for a child in their household in the following four categories:²

<p>Academic performance/ school readiness</p> 	<p>Finding child care/ after-school programs</p> 	<p>Behavior issues/ acting out</p> 	<p>Emotional/ developmental problems</p> 
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Who Needs Help?

Thirty-seven percent of respondents with a child in the family reported needing help with at least one child-related problem. Among poor and low-income families, the reported need for help was almost identical, **43 percent** and **41 percent** respectively, compared to **31 percent** of higher-income families. Children in poor and low-income families fared worse in every problem category (Figure 1). Similar patterns were observed by race, with black and Hispanic families reporting higher rates of child-related problems compared to white families (Figure 2). When comparing who needed help by borough, those living in the Bronx and Brooklyn reported needing help at the highest rates (Figure 3).

²Respondents were also asked if they needed help with any “other” child-related issues. These responses were not included in the following analyses.

Figure 1

Child-Related Problems by Income

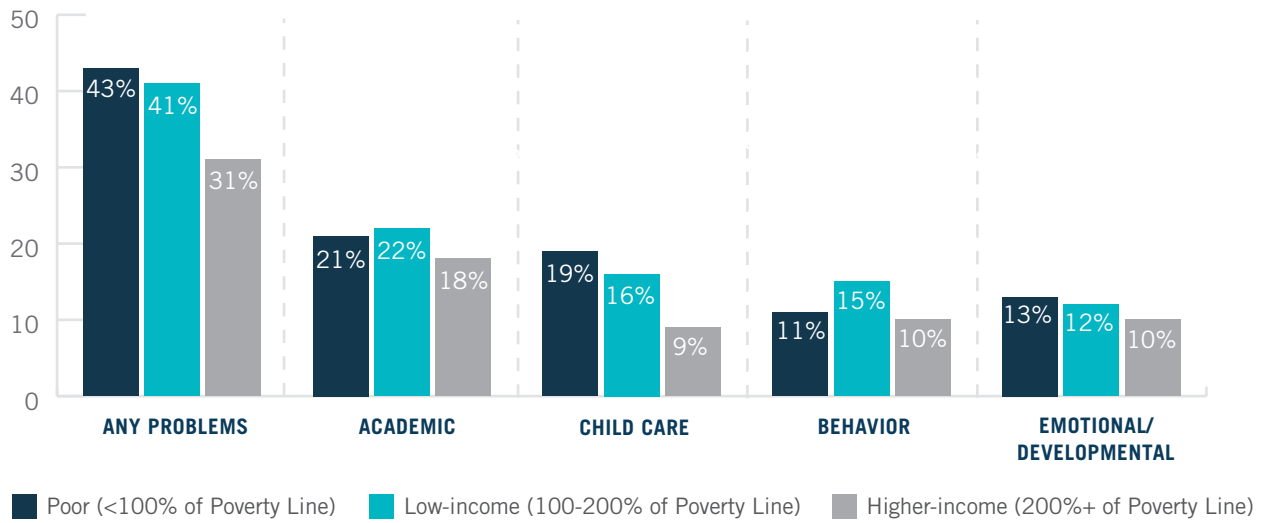
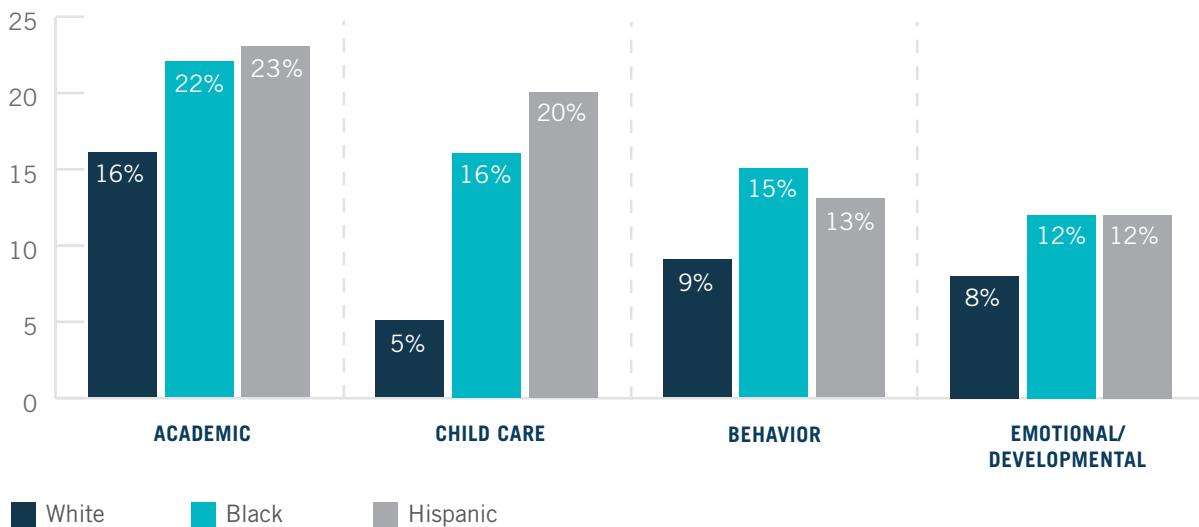


Figure 2

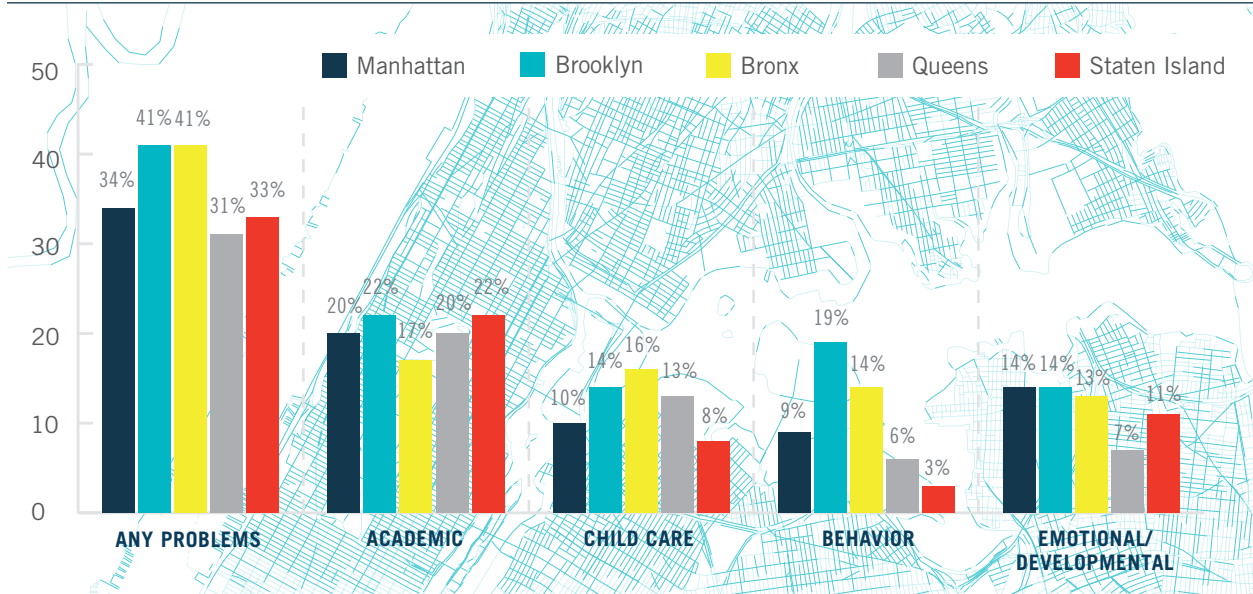
Child-Related Problems by Race/Ethnicity



Note: We focus on the three largest racial and ethnic groups in the Poverty Tracker sample for this Spotlight, given small sample sizes for Asian non-Hispanic New Yorkers and Other/Multiracial non-Hispanic New Yorkers. Smaller general sample sizes for these groups are compounded when the sample is restricted to a) those with children; and b) those who have children with service needs.

Figure 3

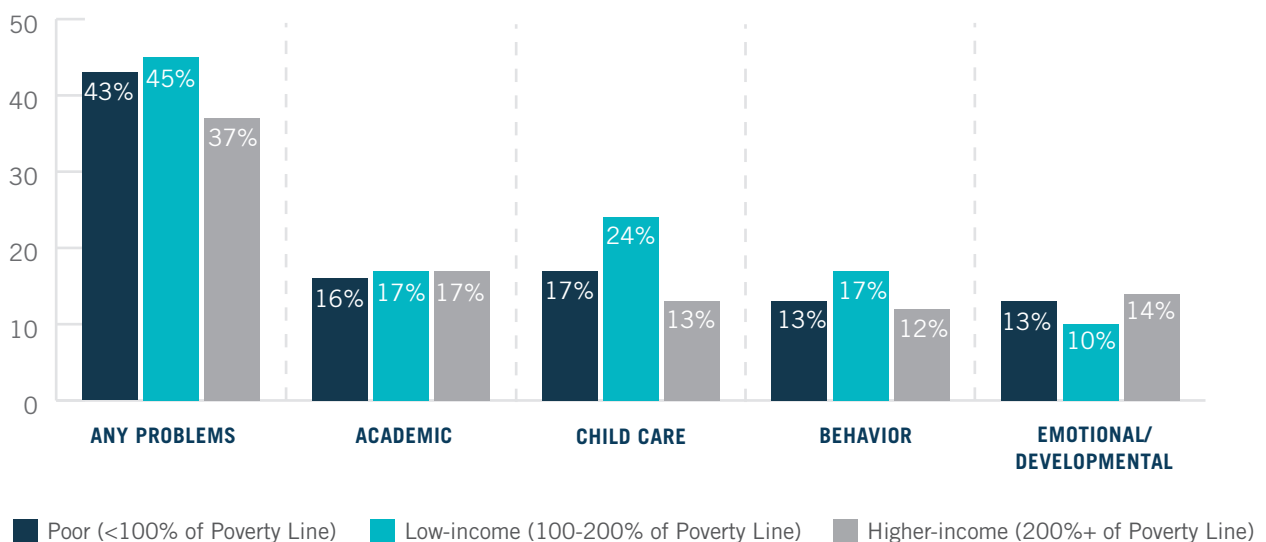
Child-Related Problems by Borough



We also look at reported need for help by income specifically among families with children under the age of six, as children in this age range are most vulnerable developmentally. Figure 4 shows that low-income families with children under the age of six had an elevated risk of needing help with child care and behavior issues.

Figure 4

Child-Related Problems by Income (Among Those with Young Children in Household)



Who Seeks Help?

Poverty Tracker data provides rare insight into differences in help-seeking behavior. We find that 18 percent of respondents who reported needing help for a child did not seek any help; another 10 percent sought help for some problems but not all; and 72 percent of respondents sought help for all of their child-related problems. Thus, more than a quarter of New Yorkers whose children needed help did not seek it for at least one of those problems.

Help seeking did not differ very much between poor and higher-income families. Among poor families, 68 percent sought help for all of their reported child-related problems, compared to 71 percent of those in

higher-income families. Those in low-income families were the most likely to seek help for their child-related problems, at 75 percent; however, as described in the following section, these families are also the least likely to receive all of the help they need, indicating a potential service gap. Disparities by race were more pronounced, with Hispanic and black families being less likely to seek help than white families (Figure 5). Help seeking also differed by borough; families in the Bronx were less likely to seek help compared to families in other boroughs (Figure 6).³

Figure 5

Help Seeking by Race/Ethnicity

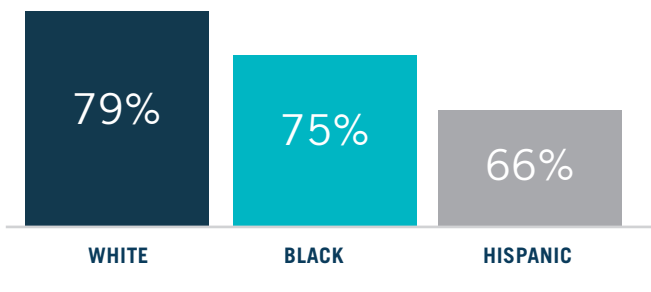
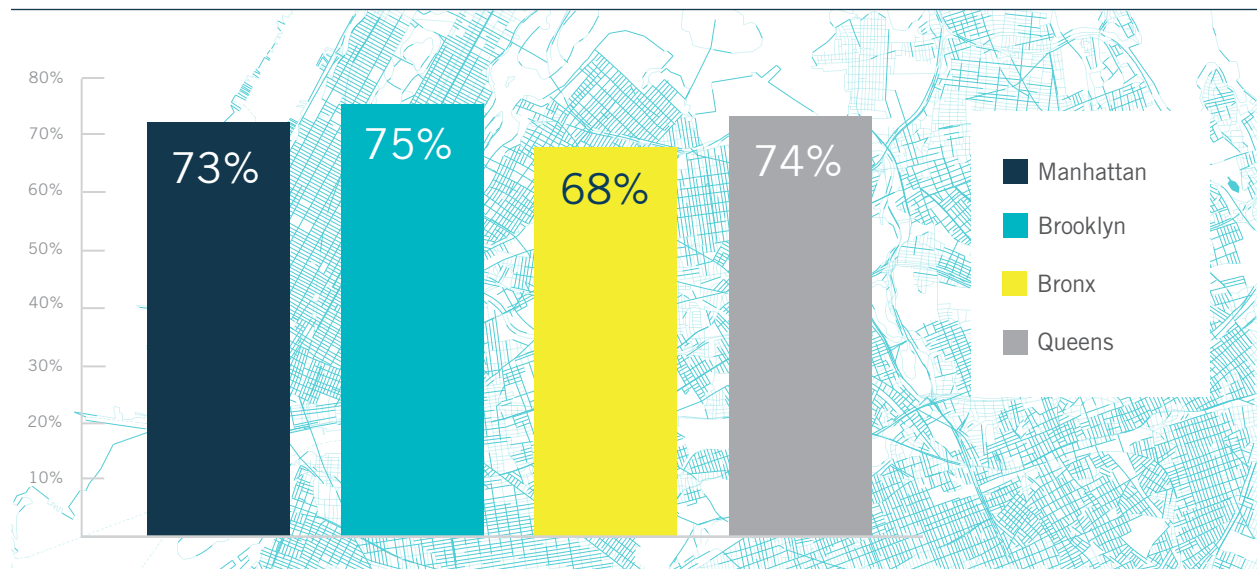


Figure 6

Help Seeking by Borough



³We do not present results for Staten Island given limited sample size of families with children.

Where Do People Go for Help?

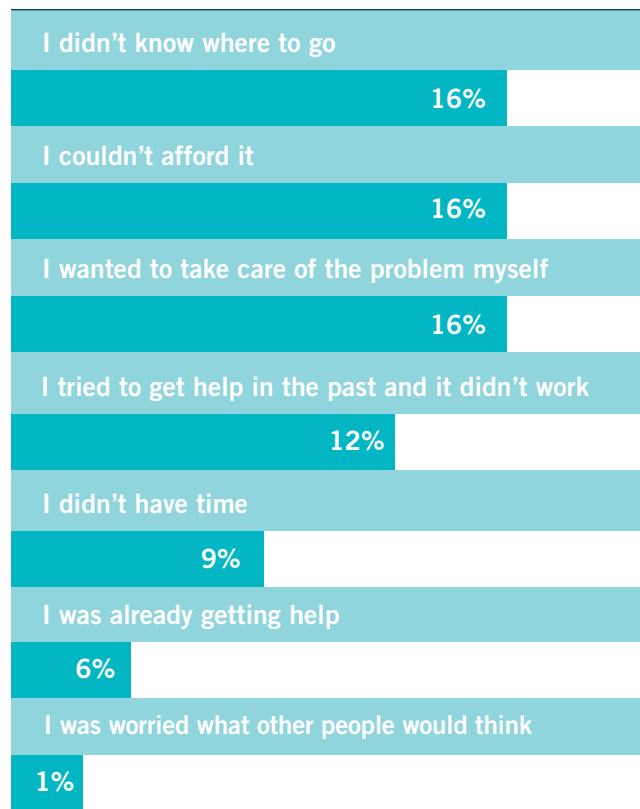
The Poverty Tracker also shows where people sought help for child-related problems. Respondents' answers revealed a wide range of resources, including, but not limited to: school, government and community-based organizations, health care providers, and family. For each child-related problem, we highlight the most frequently reported sources of help that respondents turned to. Respondents listed the child's school as the most common place for help with academic performance/school readiness. Government programs and families were the most frequently cited sources for help with finding child care or after-school programs. For behavior issues, acting out, and emotional/developmental problems, health care providers were the most common resource.

Why Don't Families Seek Help?

Approximately 18 percent of respondents who reported needing help with a child-related issue did not seek help for any of their children's problems, and another 10 percent of respondents did not seek help for at least one of their child-related problems. Poverty Tracker data gives a glimpse of the reasons why people who

Figure 7

Reasons Respondents Did Not Seek Help



reported a need for help with a child-related problem didn't seek it (Figure 7).

The top three identifiable reasons reported by parents were: "I didn't know where to go," "I couldn't afford it," and "I wanted to take care of the problem myself." These results mirror findings from our winter 2016 report on the barriers to social service utilization in New York, highlighting the invisibility of resources, financial inaccessibility, and the cultural narrative of personal responsibility.

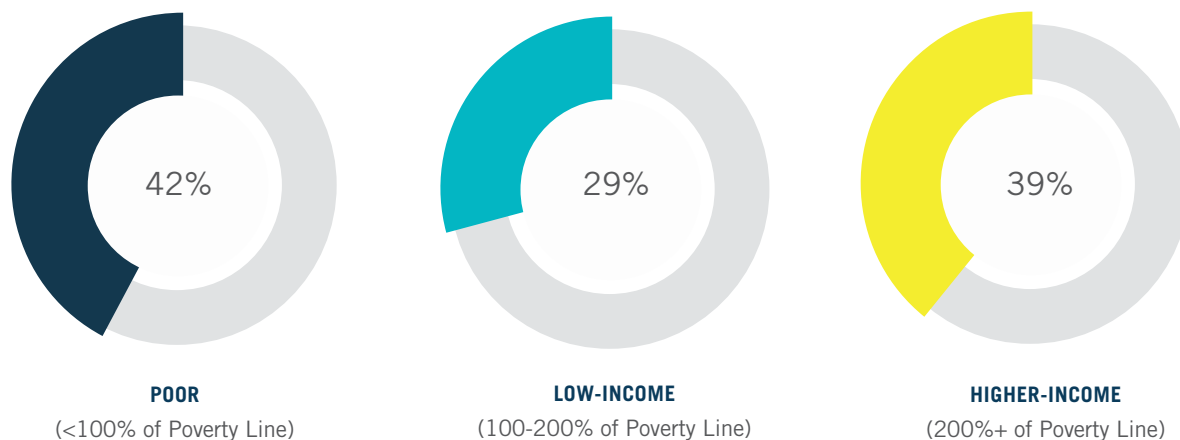
The reasons for why families did not seek help can be further broken down by income level. The most common reason that poor families reported not seeking help was that they didn't know where to go for help. For low-income families living right above the poverty line, not having enough time was the most common reason for not seeking help. For higher-income families, the most common reason was that they wanted to take care of the problem themselves.

Who Receives Help?

While the majority of families seek help for their child-related problems, many do not receive adequate support. Poverty Tracker data captures the distinction between seeking and actually receiving help. Low-income families were the least likely to receive all the needed help (29 percent), compared to poor and higher-income families (approximately 40 percent, Figure 8). This indicates a potential service gap for families who live above the poverty line. Existing data on income disparities demonstrates a similar trend. Low-income children, for example, are slightly more likely to be uninsured than poor children, and low-income families are less likely to receive public aid compared to poor families. For these reasons, households who are right above the poverty line have sometimes been referred to as the “missing class,” as they are often overlooked by policymakers.^{4,5}

Figure 8

Received All Help Needed with Child-Related Problems by Income Level



When looking at households with children under the age of six (Figure 9), we see that the prevalence of receiving all of the help needed is lower for poor and low-income families with young children as opposed to higher-income families with children. This is concerning, as the first five years of life are a particularly formative time for children’s health and development.⁶

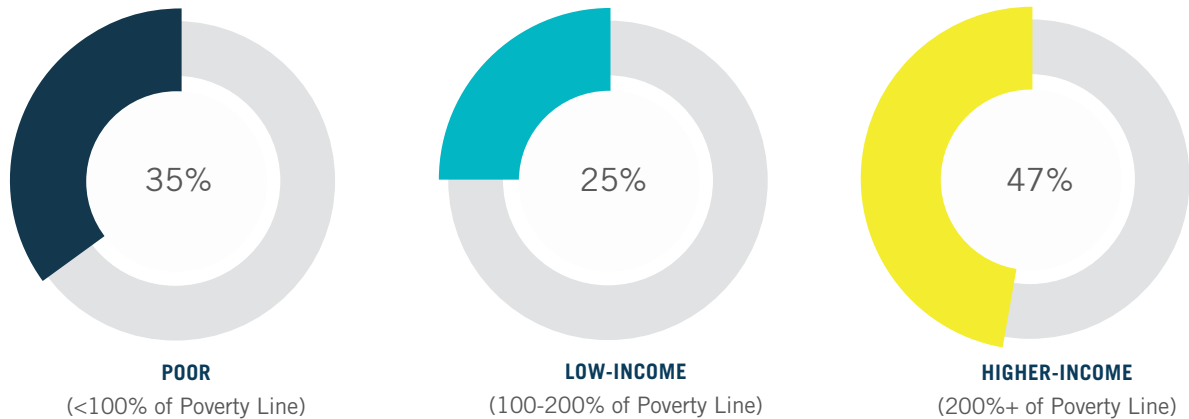
⁴Luhby, Tami. (2012). *America's near poor: 30 million and struggling*. CNN Money. Retrieved from: <http://money.cnn.com/2012/10/24/news/economy/americans-poverty/index.html>

⁵Jiang, Y., Granja, M.R., Koball, H. (2017, January). *Basic Facts about Low-Income Children*. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED578998.pdf>

⁶Center on the Developing Child (2007). *The Science of Early Childhood Development (InBrief)*. Retrieved from: <https://46y5eh11fh-gw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/03/InBrief-The-Science-of-Early-Childhood-Development2.pdf>

Figure 9

Received All Help Needed with Child-Related Problems by Income Level (Among Those with Young Children in Household)

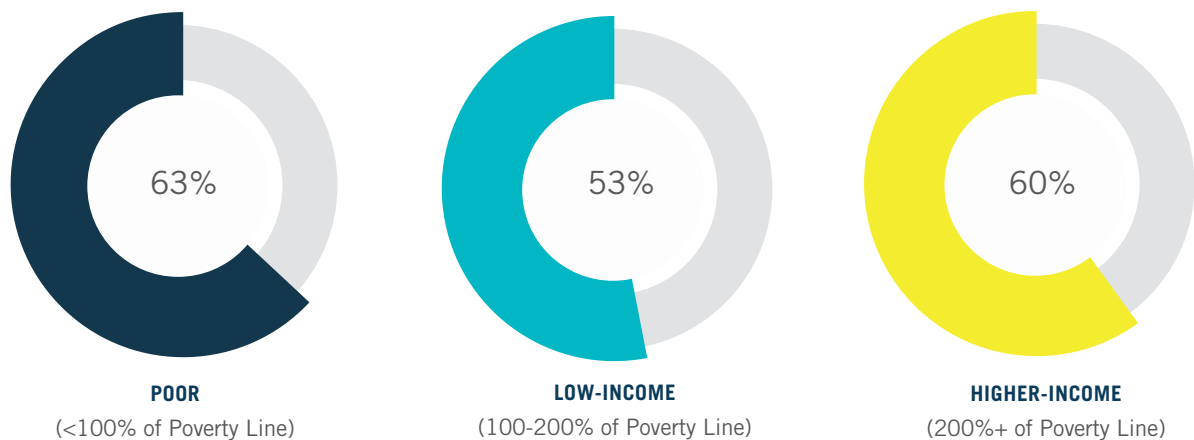


Whose Problems Improve?

Poor families and higher-income families were the most likely to report that their problems improved, with 63 percent and 60 percent improving, respectively. Low-income families were least likely to see their problems improve, at 53 percent, again indicating a potential service gap (Figure 10).

Figure 10

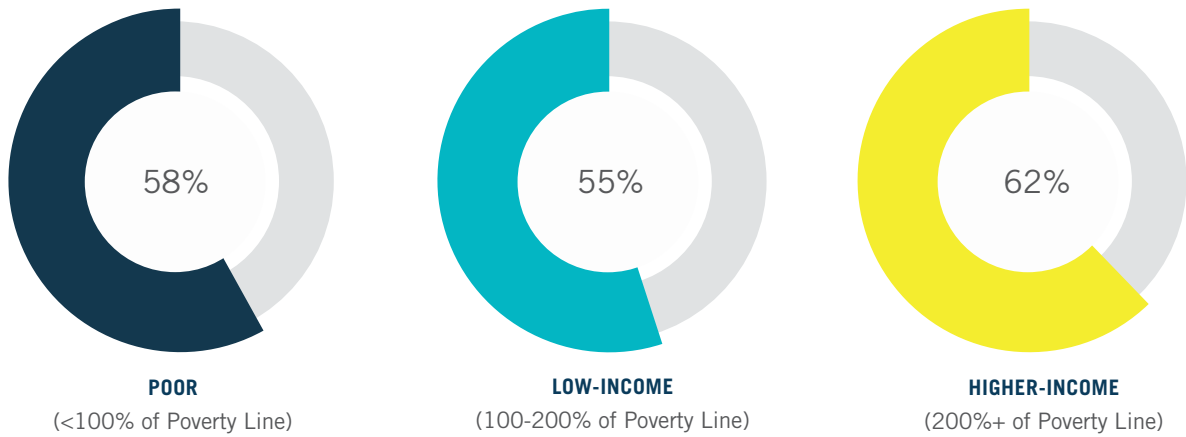
Problem Improvement with Child-Related Problems by Income Level



Similar patterns hold true for families with children under the age of six (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Problem Improvement with Child-Related Problems by Income Level (Among Those with Young Children in Household)



Conclusion

This brief provides the first analysis of Poverty Tracker data on the child-related problems that families face and the extent to which they seek and receive support. Overall, more than a quarter of New Yorkers with children did not seek help for at least one of their children’s problems. Unsurprisingly, poor and low-income families exhibit substantially elevated levels of need when it comes to child-related problems, relative to their higher-income peers. These patterns of disadvantage are often more pronounced for poor and low-income families with young children (0-5 years).

When asked why, the most common reasons parents reported for not seeking help were a lack of knowledge, a lack of affordability, or a desire to handle the problem independently. Results indicate that low-income parents, those just above the poverty line, were the least likely to have their children’s problems met and the least likely to see their children’s problems improve. While continued investment in services for poor families is essential, child service providers in New York City should consider increased targeting of support to low-income families who remain on the margins.