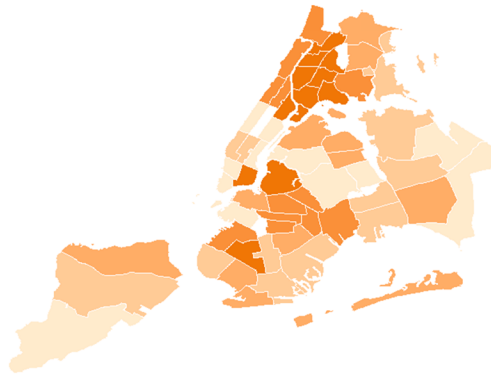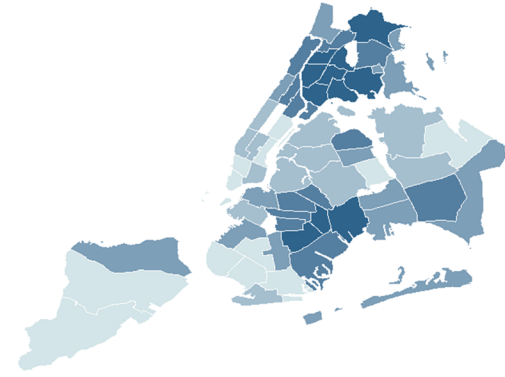**CHILD WELFARE INVESTIGATIONS PER 1000 CHILDREN**

CHILD POVERTY RATE

PERCENT OF POPULATION THAT IS BLACK OR LATINO

Data Brief:
Child Welfare Investigations and New York City Neighborhoods

THE NEW SCHOOL
CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS
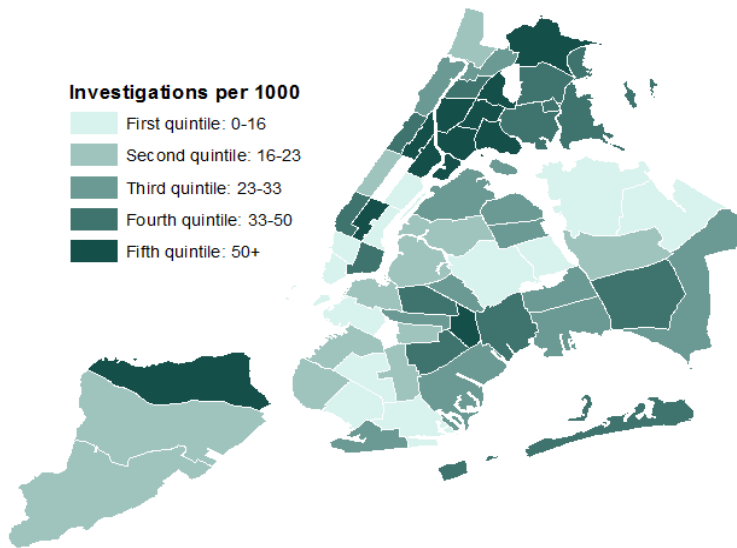
By Angela Butel

June 2019

New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) investigated nearly 60,000 allegations of abuse or neglect in 2017—in other words, one investigation for every 30 children under the age of 18 in the city.[1] These investigations were much more heavily concentrated in some neighborhoods than others. Below, we delve into which parts of New York City experience concentrated child welfare activity and which do not. The 10 community districts in New York City with the highest rates of child poverty had rates of investigation four times higher, on average, than the 10 districts with the lowest child poverty. And among districts with similar poverty rates, those with higher concentrations of Black and Latino residents tended to have higher rates of investigation. For a table showing data for all community districts, click here.

Indicated cases are investigations in which ACS finds some credible evidence of abuse or neglect. The data by community district show a correlation between child poverty rate and the rate at which investigations in those districts are indicated. There is not, however, a significant correlation between a neighborhood's concentration of Black and Latino residents and its indication rate.

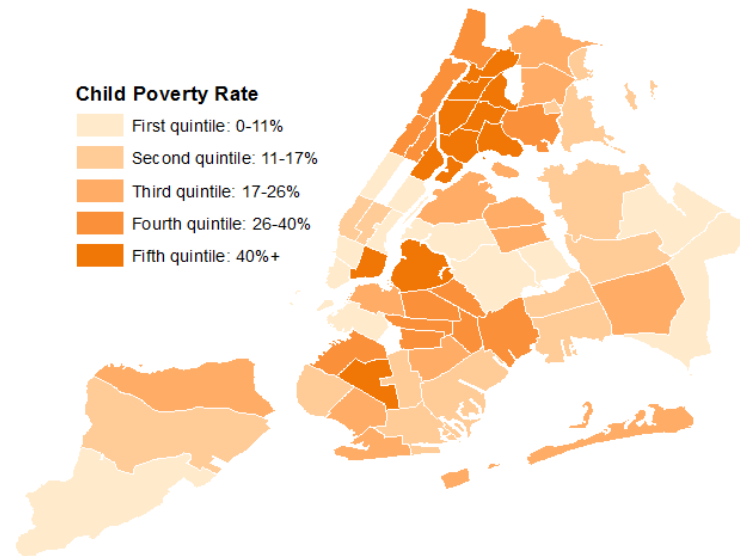
1   All data are from calendar year 2017, the most recent year for which detailed population data are available, and are aggregated at the community district level. Community districts are relatively large areas that encompass significant diversity. An analysis at a smaller geographic level would provide an even clearer picture of the trends, and could be a fruitful area for future research.

ACS does not choose, independently, which families to investigate. As set forth in New York State law, child welfare investigations are sparked by reports of suspected abuse or neglect made to a statewide hotline, the State Central Register (SCR). Reports can be made by anyone, but people in some jobs, like teachers and healthcare professionals, are mandated to report any possible sign of maltreatment. The SCR passes on to ACS any report that, if true, would qualify as maltreatment; ACS must investigate all reports it receives from the SCR. If ACS finds no evidence of maltreatment, the investigation is closed; if any evidence is found, the case proceeds to one of several possible next steps.
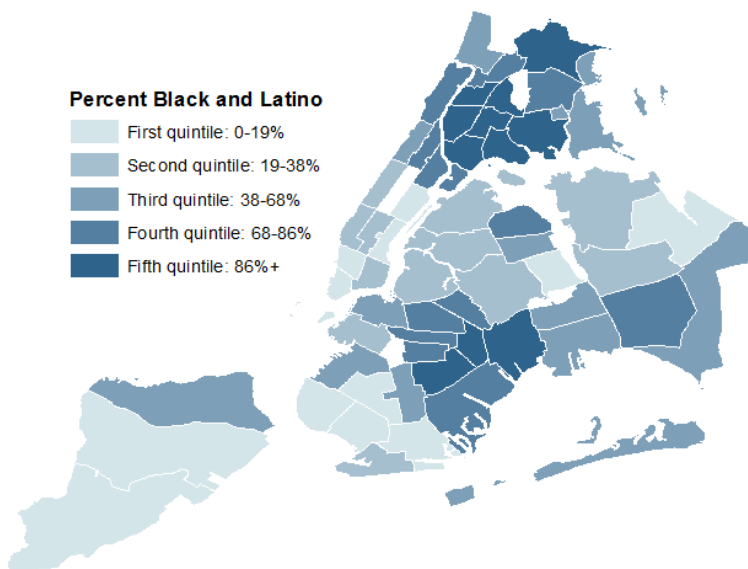
Child Welfare Investigations per 1000 Children

Investigations per 1000
- First quintile: 0-16
- Second quintile: 16-23
- Third quintile: 23-33
- Fourth quintile: 33-50
- Fifth quintile: 50+

Child Poverty Rate

Child Poverty Rate
- First quintile: 0-11%
- Second quintile: 11-17%
- Third quintile: 17-26%
- Fourth quintile: 26-40%
- Fifth quintile: 40%+

Percent of Population that is Black or Latino

Percent Black and Latino
- First quintile: 0-19%
- Second quintile: 19-38%
- Third quintile: 38-68%
- Fourth quintile: 68-86%
- Fifth quintile: 86%+

As these maps show, there is significant overlap in concentration of child poverty and of Black and Latino residents. However, each factor correlates with investigation rates even when controlling for the other factor.[2]

When controlling for child poverty rate—looking for variation among neighborhoods with similar proportions of children in poverty—we found that those with more Black and Latino residents tended to have higher rates of investigation. Consider three neighborhoods, all with child poverty rates between 15 and 16 percent: Staten Island Community District (CD) 2, which covers the middle third of Staten Island; Brooklyn CD 10, which includes Bay Ridge; and Queens CD 9, which includes the neighborhoods of Kew Gardens and Ozone Park. The Staten Island and Brooklyn CDs both had about 18 percent Black and Latino residents, and had very similar investigation rates: 18 and 17 per 1000 children, respectively. Queens CD 9, with 48 percent Black and Latino residents, had 28 investigations per 1000 children, significantly higher than the other two neighborhoods.
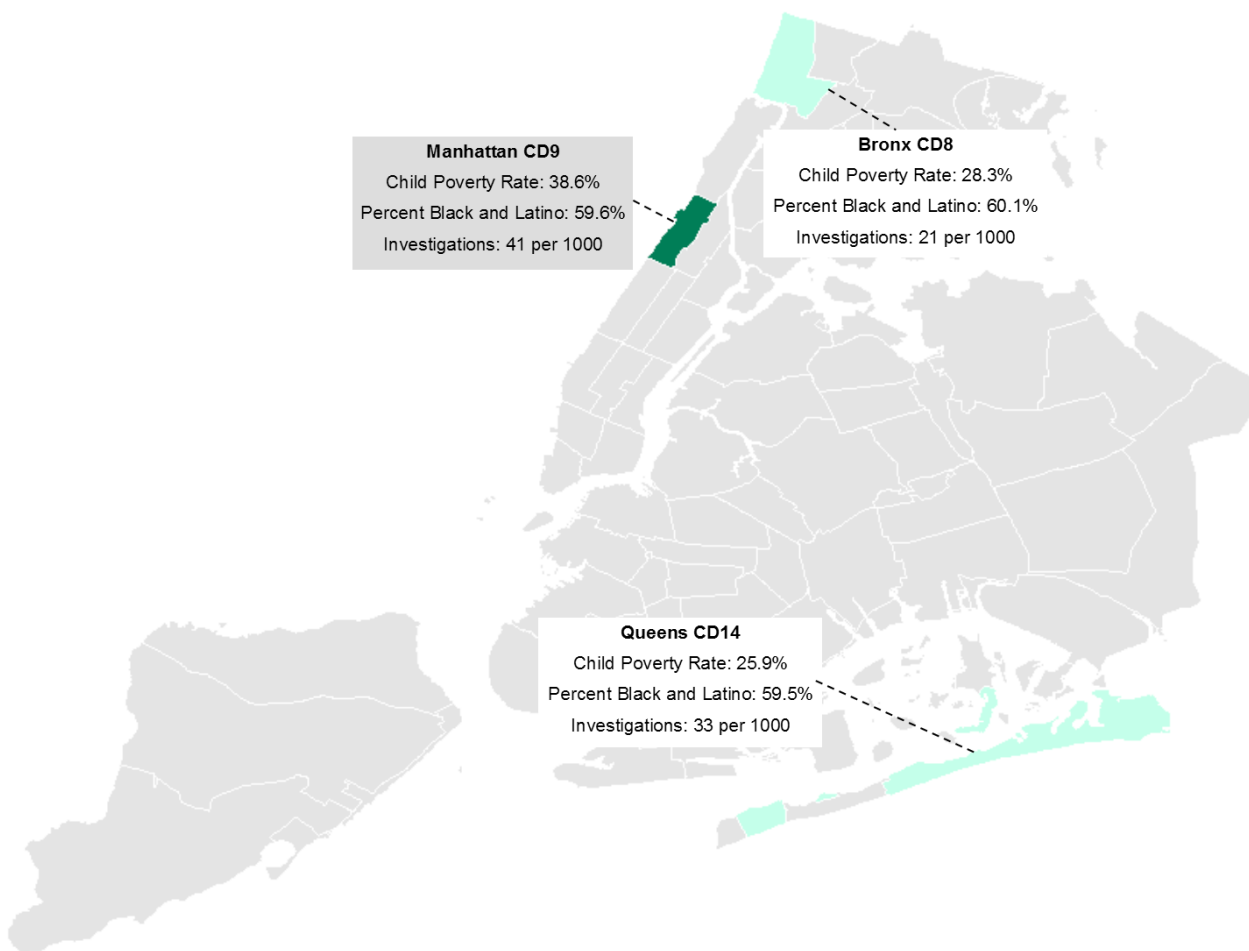
Community Districts with Similar Child Poverty Rates and Varying Racial Demographics

Queens CD9
Child poverty rate: 14.9%
Percent Black and Latino: 47.7%
Investigations: 28 per 1000

Staten Island CD2
Child poverty rate: 14.9%
Percent Black and Latino: 17.8%
Investigations: 18 per 1000

Brooklyn CD10
Child poverty rate: 15.7%
Percent Black and Latino: 17.6%
Investigations: 17 per 1000

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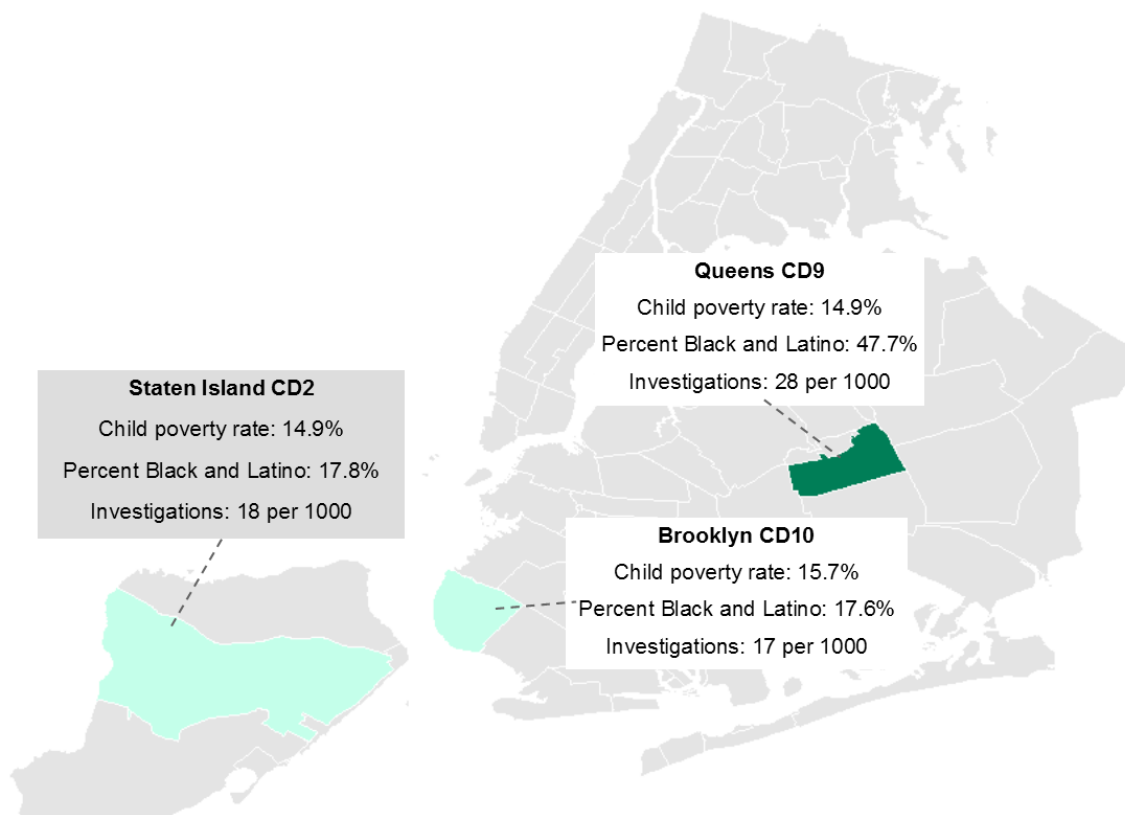
2   In a bivariate regression of investigation rates on child poverty, living in a community district with high child poverty is a significant predictor at a 99.9% confidence level, with an R-squared of .45. Adding the percentage Black and Latino residents to the regression increases the overall R-squared to .55, and the model with both predictors is significant at a 99.9% confidence level.
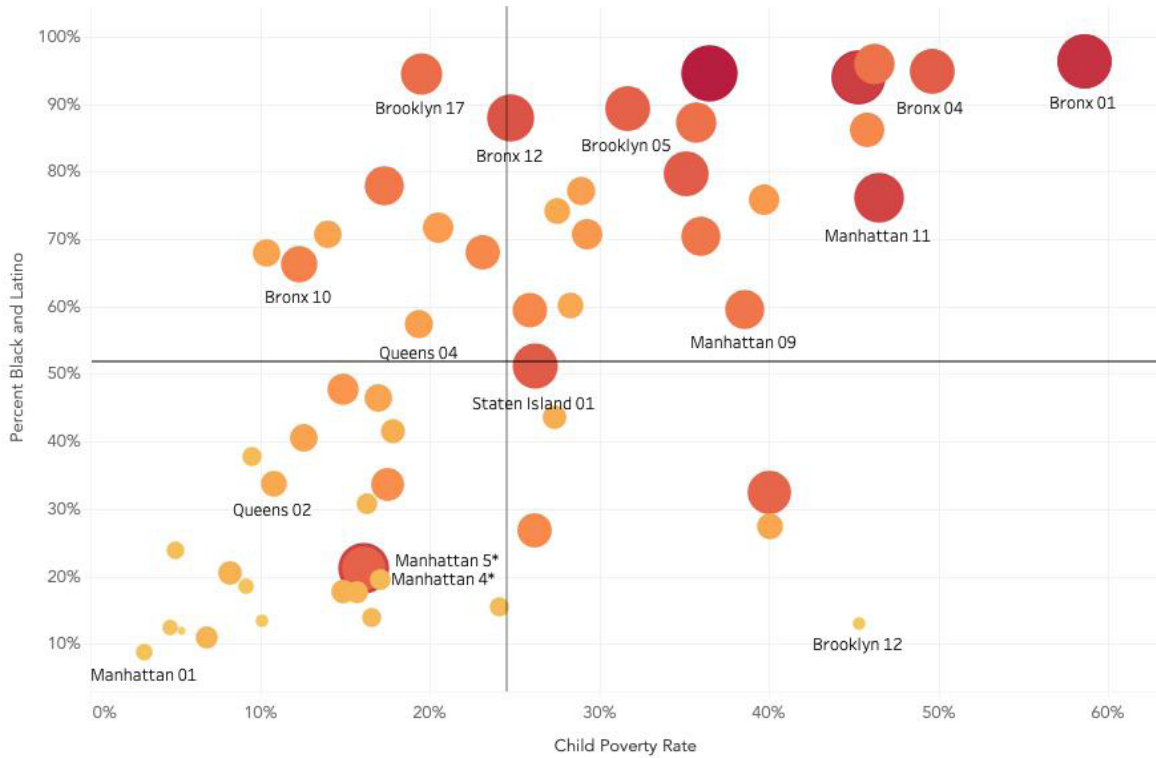
And when controlling for race, we found that neighborhoods with higher child poverty rates also had higher rates of investigation. To illustrate this, the map below shows three community districts: Queens CD 14 (the Rockaways), Bronx CD 8 (Kingsbridge and Riverdale), and Manhattan CD 9 (West Harlem). All three neighborhoods had about 60 percent Black and Latino residents. Queens CD 14 and Bronx CD 8 both had child poverty rates below 30 percent, and had 33 and 21 investigations per 1000 children, respectively. Manhattan CD 9 had a higher child poverty rate—39 percent—and a significantly higher investigation rate at 41 investigations per 1000 children.

Community Districts with Similar Racial Demographics and Varying Child Poverty Rates

Manhattan CD9
Child Poverty Rate: 38.6%
Percent Black and Latino: 59.6%
Investigations: 41 per 1000

Bronx CD8
Child Poverty Rate: 28.3%
Percent Black and Latino: 60.1%
Investigations: 21 per 1000

Queens CD14
Child Poverty Rate: 25.9%
Percent Black and Latino: 59.5%
Investigations: 33 per 1000

The matrix below plots all 59 community districts according to where they fall along the axes of child poverty rate and percentage of Black and Latino residents. The size and color of the dots represent the rate of investigations and make it clear that, on average, having either a higher child poverty rate or higher concentration of Black and Latino residents is associated with higher rates of investigation. Neighborhoods with the most child welfare investigations are those in the upper right, with both high poverty rates and a high concentration of Black and Latino residents. Neighborhoods with the fewest investigations are clustered in the bottom left corner, with low poverty rates and low concentration of Black and Latino residents. For an interactive version of this matrix, click here.
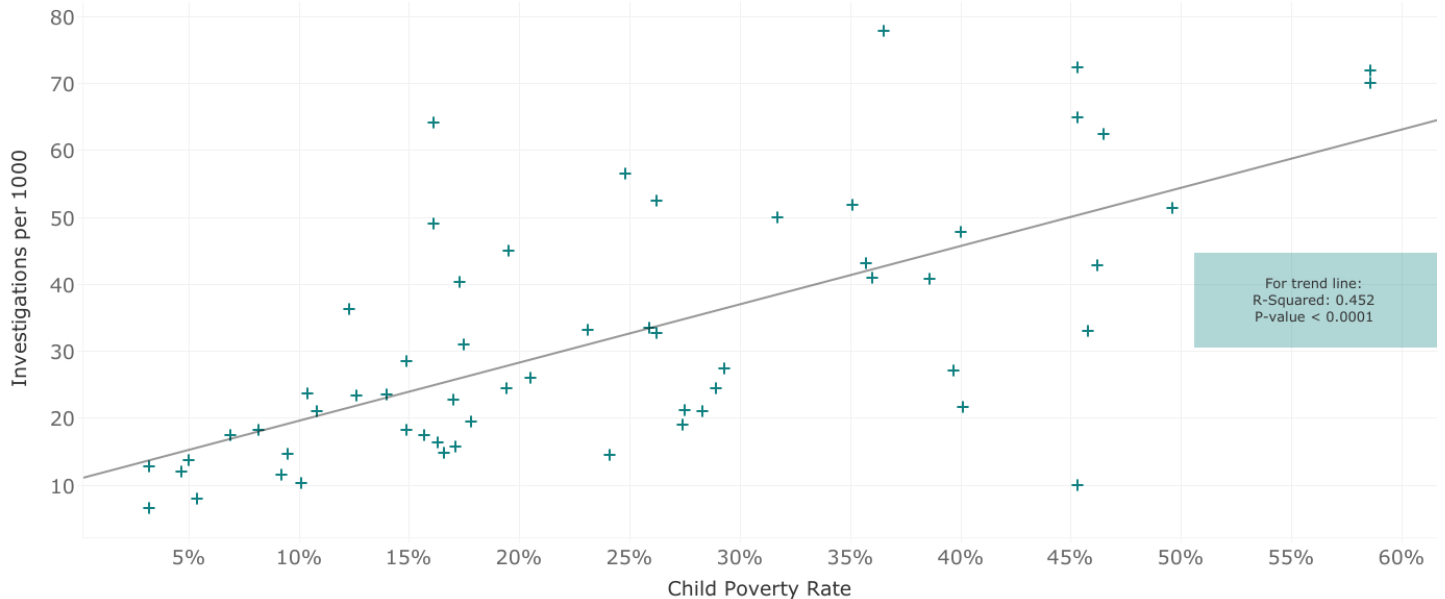
NYC Community Districts by Child Poverty, Race, and Rate of Child Welfare Investigation

Percent Black and Latino (y-axis, 0%–100%) vs. Child Poverty Rate (x-axis, 0%–60%)

Labeled districts: Brooklyn 17, Bronx 12, Brooklyn 05, Bronx 04, Bronx 01, Bronx 10, Manhattan 11, Queens 04, Manhattan 09, Staten Island 01, Queens 02, Manhattan 5*, Manhattan 4*, Brooklyn 12, Manhattan 01
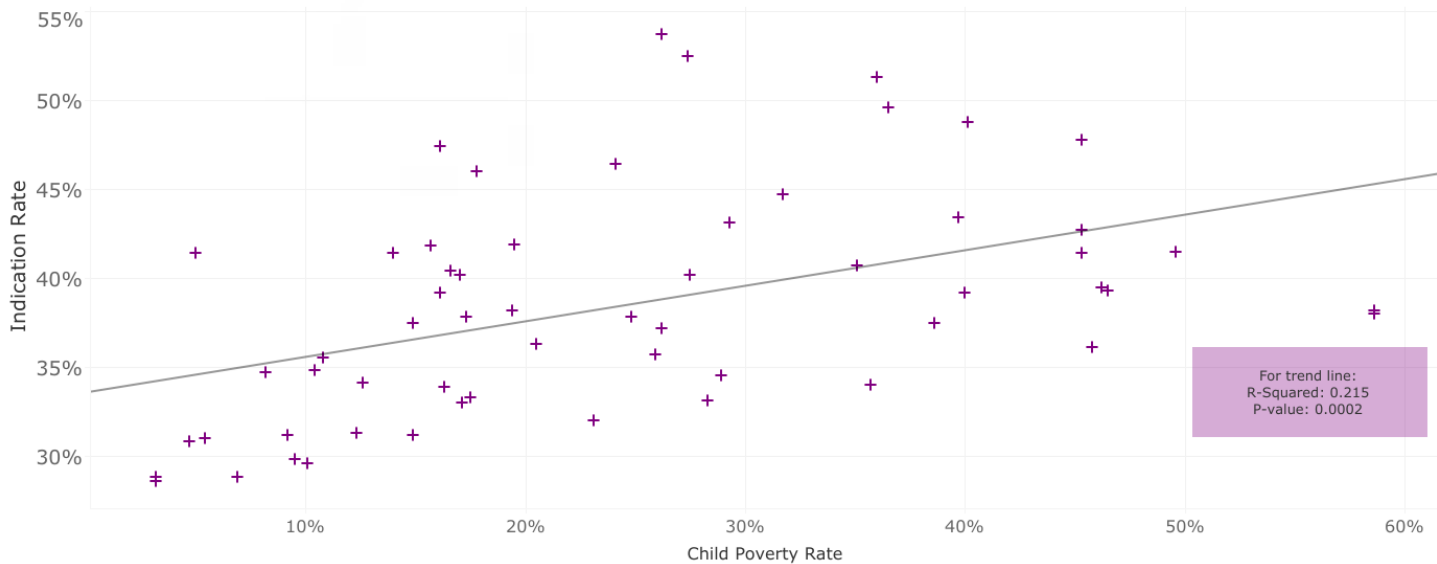
*Manhattan Community Districts 4 and 5 have high concentrations of family shelters. Children who live in these shelters may not be counted accurately in census population data, making the child population numbers less accurate for these districts. The rate of child welfare investigation in these districts is likely an overestimate.

Interestingly, the correlation between a neighborhood's racial demographics and investigation rate does not extend to indication rate—the rate at which those investigations find some credible evidence of abuse or neglect. Child poverty rate is correlated with indication rate; in higher-poverty neighborhoods more investigations, on average, are indicated. But the pattern among neighborhoods with high concentrations of Black and Latino residents is much less clear, and the trend is not statistically significant.
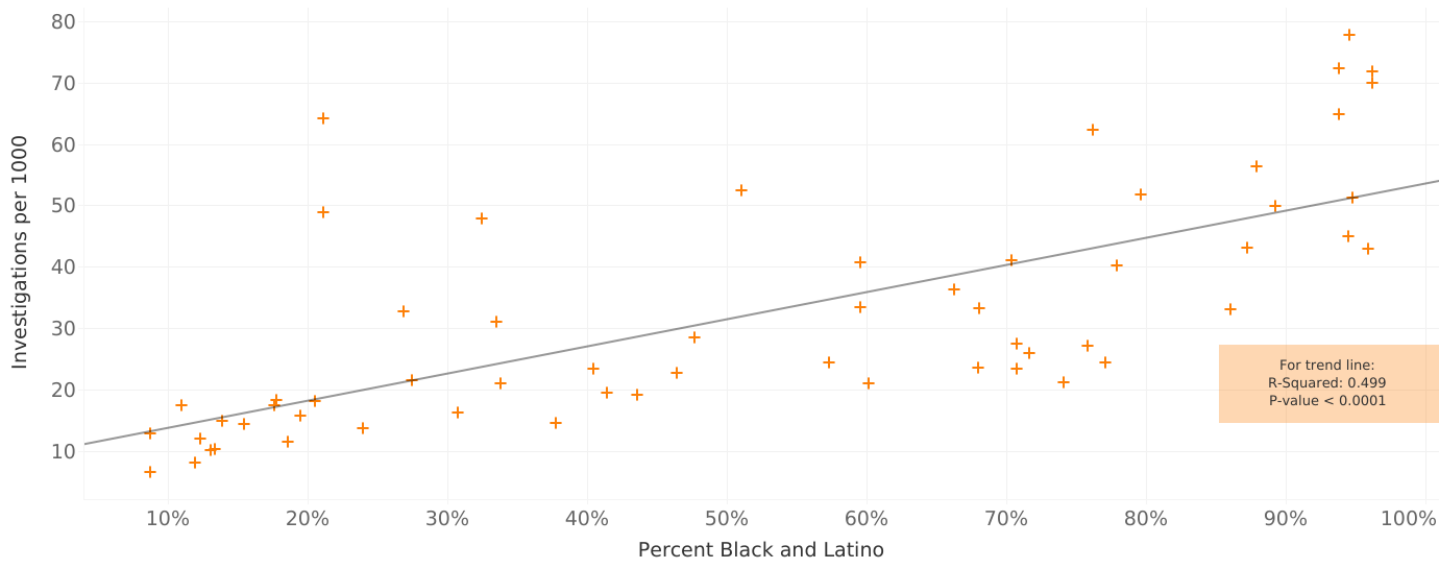
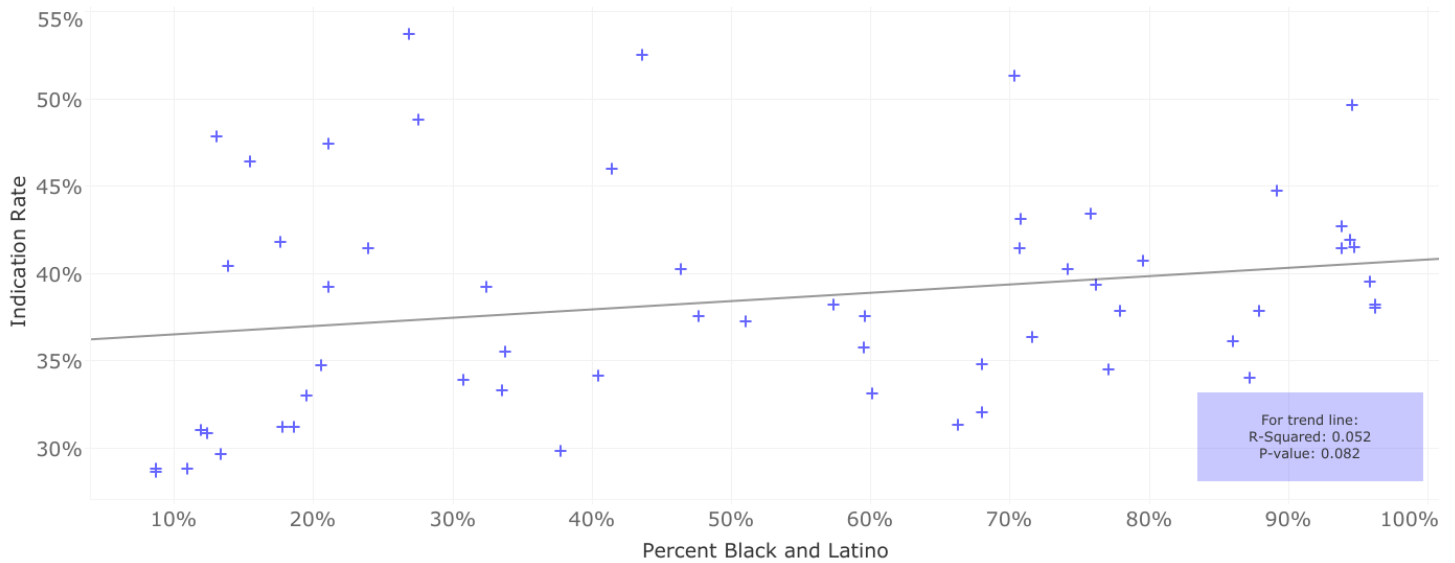NYC Community Districts by Child Poverty Rate and Investigation Rate

Investigations per 1000 (y-axis, 10–80) vs. Child Poverty Rate (x-axis, 5%–60%)

For trend line:
R-Squared: 0.452
P-value < 0.0001

NYC Community Districts by Child Poverty Rate and Indication Rate

For trend line:
R-Squared: 0.215
P-value: 0.0002

NYC Community Districts by Race and Investigation Rate

For trend line:
R-Squared: 0.499
P-value < 0.0001

NYC Community Districts by Race and Indication Rate

For trend line:
R-Squared: 0.052
P-value: 0.082

Why might we see more reporting of families in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods but not systematically higher rates of indication? There is long-established acknowledgement of implicit bias in child welfare reporting; mandated reporters such as teachers and medical professionals, as well as the general public, may hold racial biases that make them more likely to report a family of color than a white family under similar circumstances.[3] There is less consensus in the research about whether racial biases persist at the point of indication.[4] The data used for this analysis are at the neighborhood rather than the individual level, so we cannot draw definitive conclusions about the extent of racial bias in indication rates in New York City's child welfare system. Our findings do, however, suggest possible areas for fruitful future research.

What is clear from this data is that in New York City, child welfare investigations disproportionately affect low-income families and families of color, especially in neighborhoods with high concentrations of both groups. Life is changed for the families involved in these investigations.

ANGELA BUTEL is a research assistant at the Center for New York City Affairs and works on projects related to child welfare, early childhood education, and economic policy.

3   Robert B. Hill, "Synthesis of Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update," October 2006. https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-CFS-SynthesisOfResearchOnDisproportionalityInChildWelfareAnUpdate-2006.pdf
4   Hyunil Kim and Brett Drake, "Child maltreatment risk as a function of poverty and race/ethnicity in the USA," International Journal of Epidemiology, Volume 47, Issue 3, June 2018, Pages 780–787; Emily Putnam-Hornstein, Barbara Needell, Bryn King, and Michelle Johnson-Motoyama, "Racial and ethnic disparities: A population-based examination of risk factors for involvement with child protective services," Child Abuse and Neglect, Volume 37, Issue 1, January 2013, Pages 33-46.

Related Work

Moms Groups and Movie Nights: Can a New Approach to Child Welfare Win Families' Trust?

O.U.R. (Organizing to be United + Resilient) Place, located in Hunts Point in the Bronx, is a family enrichment center (FEC), a new type of family support being piloted by New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS). It is one of three FECs that have been open for about a year. FECs are intended to fit into ACS's continuum of preventive services aimed at strengthening families and keeping kids out of foster care.
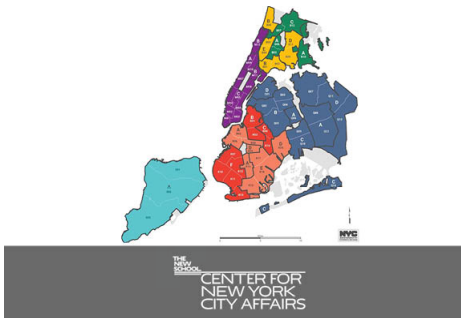
Long Hours, High Caseloads: An Ongoing Surge of Cases Weighs on Child Welfare Workers

In the poorest neighborhoods of New York City, frontline child welfare workers frequently carry caseloads far above recommended levels. Caseworkers in the agency's busiest offices say they're struggling—and the chaos spills onto the families they were hired to help.

Watching the Numbers

Watching the Numbers is our rolling six-year statistical survey of key indicators on New York City's child welfare system. The surge in child protective activity that we noted in last year's Watching the Numbers largely continued into FY2018; however, foster care discharges returned to pre-FY2017 levels, and fewer children returned to foster care after discharge than at any time in the previous six years.

The Center for New York City Affairs at The New School is dedicated to advancing innovative public policies that strengthen neighborhoods, support families, and reduce urban poverty. Our tools include: rigorous analysis; journalistic research; candid public dialogue with stakeholders; and strategic planning with government officials, nonprofit practitioners, and community residents.