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A Citywide Framework To Hold Upstream Efforts Accountable

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Illustration by Christine Ongjoco.

Each year, New York City releases a [500-page scorecard](#) on its agencies' core impacts. Little black dots next to data points indicate “equity indicators.” In 2022, the Human Resources Administration's equity goals included increasing the number of people receiving cash assistance. The parks department tracked one equity metric: the percent of residents who live within [walking distance to a park](#) (83.6%).

Clearly, the city is working toward goals that are also “[upstream](#)” investments in family life with the potential to reduce child welfare involvement. Even so, achieving upstream progress can seem insuperable, resting on the capacity of an entire city — or country — to inch toward equity.

In the 20-year push to reduce family separation in New York City, it's been critical to break the problem down into [clearly defined metrics](#) so the progress of the city child welfare agency, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), could be monitored through [public data](#). In this next phase of reform focused on improving city policy, not system policy, performance metrics will again be important.

So how can we track progress in a manageable way that can help hold the city accountable for advancing the specific policies and investments most likely to shrink the system's footprint?

Some upstream investments, like economic policies, are city- or statewide and relatively easy to keep track of. Is the [minimum wage](#) keeping up with inflation? Are welfare [benefits](#) lifting families above the poverty line? Are [housing subsidies](#) preventing family homelessness? Many city and state groups advocate for and track progress on economic policies shown to reduce child welfare involvement, and it wouldn't be hard to construct a basic dashboard. (In New York City, the answers for all three are “no.”)

Most family investments live at the neighborhood level, though. Here, New York City data is surprisingly detailed, too. Through the [Citizens Committee for Children](#) (CCC), it's possible to track a ton of metrics related to family well-being — from supermarket access to commute times. The city's new [equity mapping website](#) also overlays neighborhood poverty rates with indicators of city services. Purple and orange dots show locations of job training

programs and “tenant support outreach attempts” against fields of greens and gray that represent neighborhood need, like unemployment and eviction levels. So far, the city services mapped are meager, but it begins to tell a story about how well the city is moving its budget to disinvested communities.

All of this information can make it easier for organizers to hold the city accountable to address how their neighborhoods have been shortchanged. But to really grasp conditions, it’s important to get down to the ground level. It’s not just the presence of city services, but their quality and accessibility that matters.

For example, recent CCC reports on [Brownsville, Brooklyn](#) and [Corona, Queens](#) start to tell a deeper story about how conditions affect families. Brownsville has the [highest number](#) of CPS investigations for Black children in the city, and Corona has the fourth-highest number for Latino children.



Nora McCarthy

In Brownsville, the structural inequalities that make it difficult to hold a job and take care of your kids are obvious. Commute times are the longest in Brooklyn. Childcare is scarce. After-school and summer programs for older kids are lacking. Greenspace is minimal.

Going more deeply, parents told CCC researchers that they hesitate to take their kids to play outside because of violence, and that they avoid local mental health providers because they fear ACS involvement. When possible, families travel to a more distant and higher-quality hospital and send their kids to schools out of the district. In short, the neighborhood is structured for stress.

In Corona, conditions aren’t as harsh, but many families live doubled up, working long hours with little relief. Parents there told CCC researchers they wanted mediation for their conflicts with youth, and support to deal with economic stress and discrimination. Families also wanted access to adult literacy and English classes to improve their job prospects, and for tip workers to make minimum wage ([which just happened](#)).



It's time to change how we support kids



These reports did not intentionally focus on the relationship between neighborhood conditions and child welfare involvement, but they begin to capture local stresses and solutions. A next step would be to ask directly what families believe is contributing to hotline calls and family separation (including institutions that over-report); what they think could be done to prevent many of these calls; then develop community frameworks that can be used in advocacy and planning.

This kind of neighborhood-by-neighborhood approach can help move from the broad visions parents laid out in Rise's [Unavoidable System](#) report and in recommendations by the [Narrowing the Front Door Work Group](#) and make them actionable plans at the local level.

It's not impossible to do this kind of hyperlocal planning — which can be [led by and centered in](#) the perspectives of parents and youth — in the city's most impacted communities. Child welfare involvement is so [concentrated and segregated](#) in New York City that efforts can focus on a subset of the city — the people and places most harmed.

It's Black families who face [extraordinary overexposure](#) to child welfare's harshest impacts. In 2019, Black families faced investigations at a rate of 1 investigation for every 15 children, and Black children entered foster care at twice the rates of Latino children and 10 times the rates of white or Asian children.

For Black families, a quarter of investigations are concentrated in just nine zip codes. Two of these overlap with the nine zip codes that produce a quarter of the investigations of Latino families. These neighborhoods, which include Brownsville and Corona, are places to start.

Combining frameworks for local accountability with a dashboard for big-picture legislative policy change can focus planning and advocacy to take direct aim where they'll matter most.



The good news is that, if we had a set of upstream performance metrics, there would already be progress to track on a number of targeted investments. The city’s 2022 [childcare expansion](#) prioritized 17 community districts, most of which have the highest investigation rates, and [voucher enrollment](#) in these districts has gone up 170%, according to ACS. Legislation passed in June would allow children to be in child care for longer than their parent’s exact work hours — a significant plus for families.

On cash access, the state legislature this spring [expanded the Empire State Tax Credit](#) to families with children under 4, who had previously been excluded. Almost a third of families impacted by investigations and foster care have children under 4 years old.

In June, the City Council also [overrode the mayor](#) to drastically expand housing vouchers. That should cut system involvement: a quarter of [families in shelters](#) are typically system-involved.

Some data that’s not now available in New York City would help further target and keep track of progress.

For instance, information on families’ economic circumstances at the time of ACS involvement can help focus economic policy shifts. A [report](#) on the city’s single parents, for instance, documented that they more frequently experience the kinds of material hardships that predict child welfare involvement — like running out of food, or having the electricity turned off — and found that increased housing subsidies and food stamps enrollment would best reduce their hardship.

More detailed annual data on child welfare impacts at the neighborhood level would also be useful. ACS has started to share [public data](#) in ways that will make it easier to see whether local investments are having an effect, especially for Black families.

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Performance metrics are a form of storytelling that can not only track progress but help accelerate it. Americans suffer from a mindset known as the “[family bubble](#)” — the idea that parents should be so resilient and independent that they can keep a bubble intact around

political leadership, media and the public that these anti-poverty measures and basic investments in neighborhoods can chip away at ACS involvement.

A set of citywide and community-level indicators that puts ACS numbers in perspective can keep progress on track and help a more accurate understanding of child welfare's structural drivers take root in the public mind.

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