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MI

ISSUE BRIEF

**POVERTY AND PROGRESS
IN NEW YORK XIII:
THE DE BLASIO YEARS**

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Executive Summary

New York mayor Bill de Blasio entered office in January 2014, promising to “take dead aim at the Tale of Two Cities ... [and] put an end to economic and social inequalities that threaten to unravel the city we love.” The Manhattan Institute’s “Poverty and Progress in New York” series has tracked the effects of de Blasio’s policies, with a particular focus on lower-income New Yorkers. This update summarizes past findings and recent developments.

The MI series has focused on a number of key quality-of-life measures tied to the administration’s major policy actions or developments: income inequality and job growth, pedestrian and traffic safety and Vision Zero, welfare enrollment, crime citywide and in public housing, and ELA and math proficiency in the public schools.

The administration’s record has been mixed:

- ✓ Income inequality is up from 2014.

- ✓ Vision Zero, after years of progress, has recently seen a regression, with a rising number of pedestrian traffic fatalities.

- ✓ Welfare enrollments have declined, following a modest initial increase through 2015.

- ✓ There is still substantially more violent crime in public housing than in the rest of the city. The safety gains in the 15 NYCHA developments targeted by the mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety appear to have stalled out, although a controlled trial of street lighting improvements has demonstrated significant safety improvements.

- ✓ Changes to curriculum and testing have made it impossible to measure changes in student performance over the years; nevertheless, fewer than half of public school students are proficient in math and English.



Income Inequality

Household income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, was essentially flat, at 0.5504 in 2017 (the latest year for which data are available). Inequality is up slightly since Mayor de Blasio took office in 2014—but not by much. The key point is that income inequality has not declined.¹

Mayor de Blasio has shunned his divisive “Two Cities” campaign rhetoric in favor of a focus on job growth, while ensuring that there is still room in NYC for both “Cities”—wisely so, as New York’s biggest challenge is to remain inclusive of the working class amid booming job growth. To be sure, the city’s Gini coefficient could be made to look “better,” to those obsessed with this measure, by driving low-income residents out of the city (say, by pricing jobs out of their reach), or by driving the rich out of the city to nearby friendlier states—but neither of these possibilities would be an edifying achievement for the city.²

Pedestrian/Traffic Safety

In May 2017, the Manhattan Institute analyzed the administration’s Vision Zero street safety program. It found that the intersections receiving street improvements during or before December 2015 experienced 34% fewer traffic fatalities between 2009 (the first year for which data were available) and 2016 (the final full year of data analyzed).³

There was an apparent income bias in the initial rollout of street safety treatments, driven especially by early and intense improvements in Manhattan’s Upper East and Upper West Sides. Yet there was no bias in the intersections and corridors laid out in the “Vision Zero Priority” planning documents and data published by the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT). News reports of NIMBYism in Queens and Brooklyn against street safety improvements suggested that resistance on unrepresentative community boards in poorer neighborhoods was the cause of the geographic/income disparity.

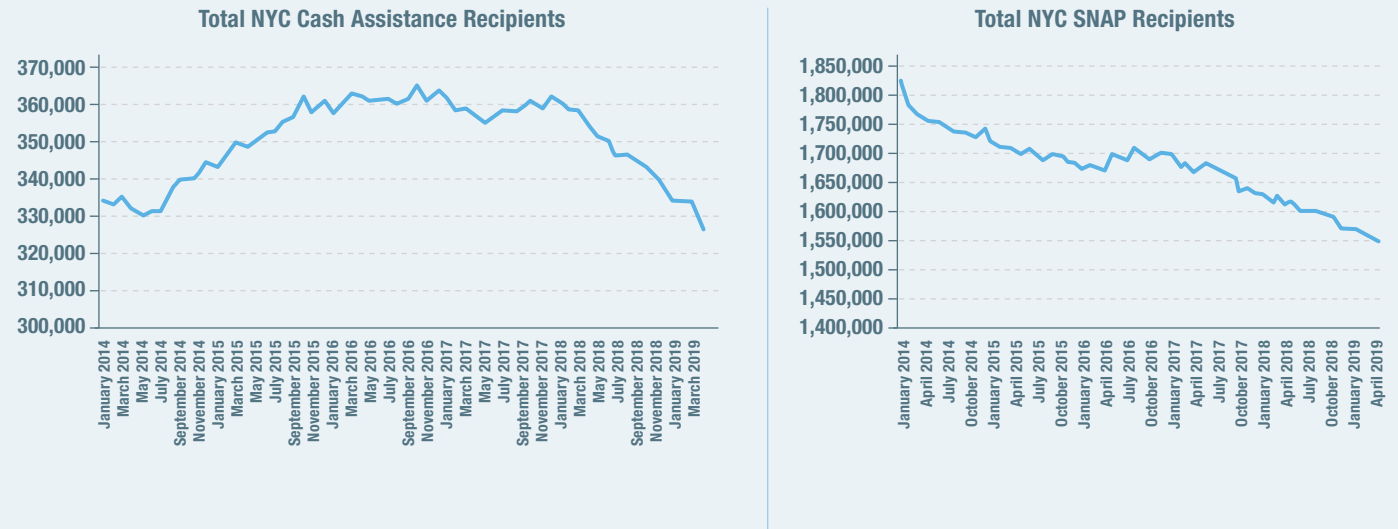
Road deaths are up by some 15% year-to-date.⁴ Deaths are still extremely low by recent standards, and the current disturbing trend does not wipe out all the last decade’s improvements. But rising fatalities merit a serious examination of the current pace and methods of the administration’s Vision Zero efforts.

Welfare

Cash assistance enrollments rose through 2015, then stabilized and declined. SNAP, aka food stamps, has continued its postrecession enrollment decline (**Figure 1**).

FIGURE 1.

Welfare Assistance



Source: New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance

Safety in Public Housing

The de Blasio administration conducted a controlled trial of street lighting in the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) across 40 public housing developments—beyond the original 15 developments—to have enough statistics to draw a reliable conclusion about the causal impact of street lighting at night. So far, the trial has shown significant local declines in crime where streetlights have been deployed.⁵

NYCHA’s overall share of murders and rapes in the city through mid-July 2019 is down slightly from the highs of 2011 and 2012, but public housing’s share of the sum of all index crimes (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft) is slightly up.⁶

Education

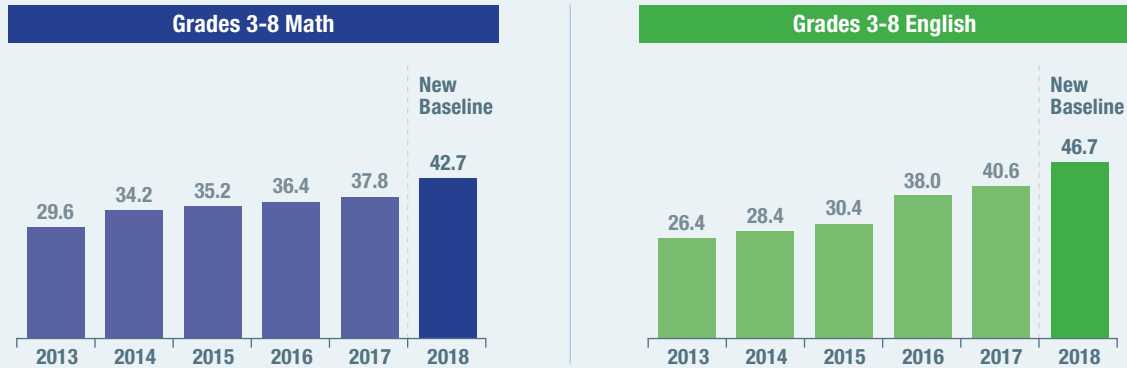
The NYS Department of Education has made it all but impossible to measure progress or retrogression, by making changes to Common Core exams for grades 3–8.⁷ The major problem is not the particular changes; it is that “proficiency” is ideally supposed to mean something over time. We cannot properly measure how much value individual teachers add to individual student knowledge unless we can compare individual student proficiency at the end of this year with last year in a valid way (**Figure 2**). In any event, fewer than half the students in New York City’s public schools have scored proficient in math and English.

The mayor did not pursue policies that critics called a “war on charter schools,”⁸ but he has not expanded or supported their use as a reform tool, either. Meanwhile, wait lists for the city’s public charters continue to grow.⁹

FIGURE 2.

Proficiency Rates for NYC Students in Math and English

In 2018, NYSED rescaled the Math and ELA exams to account for a change in test administration from 3 days to 2 days. Therefore, 2018 results cannot be compared to prior years.



Source: NYC Department of Education, "2018 NYS Test Results: NYC Grades 3–8"

Conclusion

Much has gone contrary to expectations since the beginning of the de Blasio administration. The revolution that was promised during the election to end the “Tale of Two Cities” never came. Steven Banks, the firebrand welfare advocate-cum-HRA administrator, has run an apparently ordinary status quo operation. William Bratton, Giuliani’s police commissioner, returned to repair police–community relations and help reduce crime. No major tax hikes have passed; an outright war on charter schools was abandoned; and, while job growth has slowed from a booming 3%, it remains steady at 2%.¹⁰

This mayoralty has not been a rerun of past liberal Democratic mayoral administrations, characterized by major regressions in public safety, welfare policy, and education policy. But treading water amid massive spending increases¹¹ is reason to question whether New Yorkers can be satisfied when most public school students test below proficiency in math and English; when NYCHA residents still suffer from perennially higher violent crime rates; and when many temporary assistance recipients would still rather have a hand up than a handout.



Endnotes

- ¹ Alex Armlovich, "Poverty and Progress in New York XII: Income Inequality Under Mayor de Blasio, 2014–16," Manhattan Institute, Oct. 17, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, table B19083.
- ² Armlovich, "Income Inequality Under Mayor de Blasio, 2014–16."
- ³ Alex Armlovich, "Poverty and Progress in New York City XI: Vision Zero and Traffic Safety," Manhattan Institute, May 25, 2017.
- ⁴ Vincent Barone, "Vision Zero Failing as New Yorkers Turn to Cars over Mass Transit," *AM New York*, July 9, 2019.
- ⁵ Aaron Chalfin et al., "Reducing Crime Through Environmental Design: Evidence from a Randomized Experiment of Street Lighting in New York City," NBER Working Paper 25798, May 2019.
- ⁶ Author's calculations, NYPD Eagle Report, July 16, 2019.
- ⁷ Alex Armlovich, "Poverty and Progress in New York: English and Math Proficiency in NYC Schools, 2015–2016," Manhattan Institute, July 25, 2017.
- ⁸ See, for example, Frank Rosario and Carl Campanile, "De Blasio Starts His War on Charter Schools," *New York Post*, Feb. 27, 2014; David Kinkade, "NYC Mayor's War on Charter Schools Triggers Pushback," U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Mar. 14, 2014; Petr Svab, "Charter Schools Rebuff de Blasio's Shift in Tone," *Epoch Times*, Mar. 25, 2014.
- ⁹ NYC Charter School Center, "Growth and Demand," Aug. 26, 2019.
- ¹⁰ New York State Department of Labor, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, July 16, 2019.
- ¹¹ Nicole Gelinas, "How de Blasio Has Bloated the City's Budget," *New York Post*, June 26, 2019.

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