

# Failures and Solutions: New Yorkers' Views on Homelessness

JULY 2011

an ICPH Public Opinion Poll

Over one-quarter (27.8%) of New York City residents are worried about becoming homeless. According to a January 2011 New York City public opinion poll conducted by the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness in conjunction with Baruch College School of Public Affairs, more strikingly, two-fifths (37.9%) of families with children perceive themselves as at risk of homelessness. Those feeling the most vulnerable include more than half of respondents who lack a high school diploma (57.2%) or live in poverty (54.8%).

Results also reveal that the City's solutions for ending homelessness have not met New Yorkers' expectations. Two-fifths (38.2%) of residents think the City is doing a poor job of assisting homeless families and individuals. Although the public believes that the City's homelessness strategies are ineffective, New Yorkers are willing to help fund positive changes. Over half (54.6%) of citizens would support paying higher taxes to reduce homelessness.

## Who is worried about becoming homeless?

With more than one-quarter (27.8%) of New Yorkers apprehensive about becoming homeless, parents have the most concern. A staggering two-fifths (37.9%) of families are afraid they may end up without a home, as compared to one-fifth (22.3%) of households without children. This perception mirrors reality, as families with children are more likely to become homeless. Of the 44,889 persons sheltered by the City in January 2011, two-thirds (67.0%) were parents or children. Unfortunately, the City's own statistics indicate that homelessness is a reality for an increasing number of families; a record 45,705 families applied for shelter during fiscal year 2010.<sup>1</sup>

Comparing concern across the five boroughs, nearly half (46.9%) of Bronx residents perceive themselves to be at risk of homelessness, followed by more than one-quarter of persons living in Brooklyn (28.6%) or Queens (25.5%). In contrast, one in five

## Top public opinion poll findings:

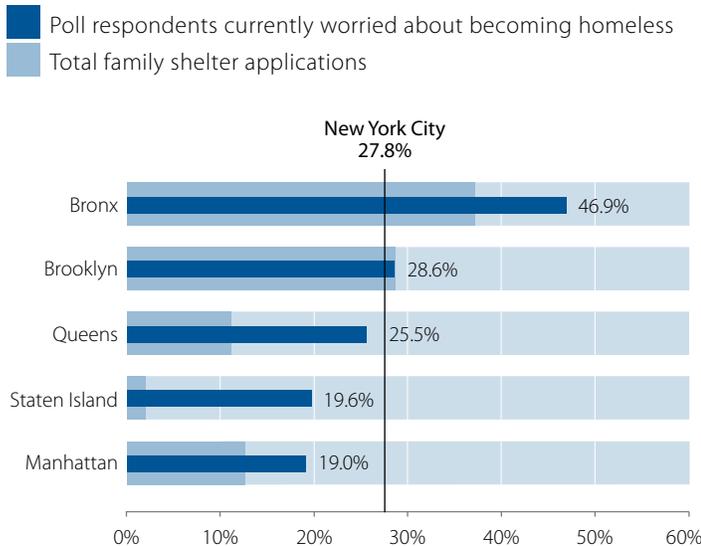
- Over one-quarter (27.8%) of New York City residents are worried about becoming homeless.
- Two-fifths (38.2%) of residents think the City is doing a poor job of assisting homeless families and individuals.
- Over half (54.6%) of citizens would support paying higher taxes to reduce homelessness.

Manhattan (19.0%) or Staten Island (19.6%) residents are worried they will become homeless. These results echo city applications for shelter; two-thirds (65.6%) of families applied from the Bronx or Brooklyn in 2010. Although poll results indicate that one-quarter of persons living in Brooklyn or Queens feel at risk, shelter applications from Brooklyn families outnumber those from Queens nearly three (28.5%) to one (11.0%).<sup>2</sup> While many factors force households to become homeless, these findings may serve as an early warning that more Queens residents could end up without a home in the future.

Poll results also reveal racial and ethnic differences among those anxious about becoming homeless. Nearly half (44.4%) of Hispanic and one-third (32.6%) of black New Yorkers are insecure about their current housing status. In comparison, one in five (17.6%) Asian and one in ten (12.9%) white residents feel at risk. These findings are consistent with the racial and ethnic composition of shelter residents in New York City; four-fifths (84.8%) of homeless persons living in City shelters are either black (52.5%) or Hispanic (32.2%).<sup>3</sup> Hispanic residents apply for shelter two-fifths (38.7%) less often than blacks, but are more concerned about becoming homeless. Poll results indicate that greater numbers of Hispanic families may ultimately apply for shelter.

**PERCEIVED RISK OF HOMELESSNESS\* VERSUS NEED FOR SHELTER SERVICES**

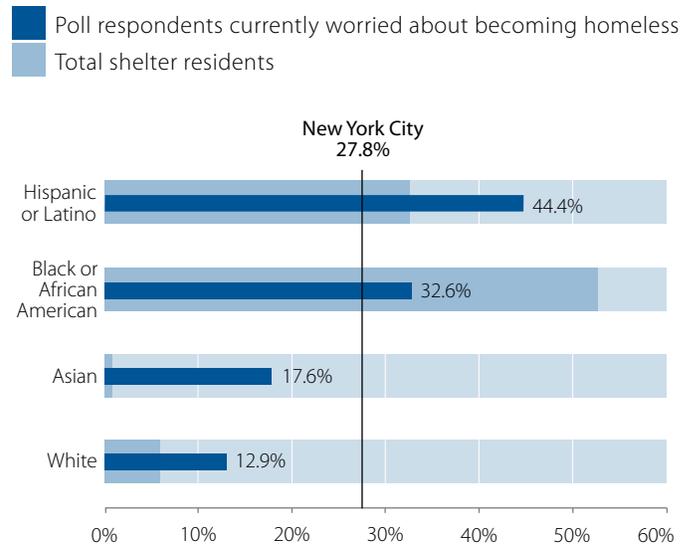
(by "yes" responses and borough)



\*Respondents answered "yes" to the question, "Are you currently worried that you, or your family, might be at risk of becoming homeless?" Percentages and numbers are weighted and are based on 991 responses. For results based on subsets, the number of responses is lower. Source: "Total family shelter applications" refers to all homeless families applying for shelter in New York City during Fiscal Year 2010. Percentages may not total to 100% due to the exclusion of applicants residing outside of New York City; New York City Department of Homeless Services, *Critical Activities Report: Total Services — Fiscal Year 2010*, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/statistics/statistics.shtml>.

**PERCEIVED RISK OF HOMELESSNESS\* VERSUS SHELTER USE**

(by "yes" responses and race or ethnicity)



\*Respondents answered "yes" to the question, "Are you currently worried that you, or your family, might be at risk of becoming homeless?" Percentages and numbers are weighted and are based on 991 responses. For results based on subsets, the number of responses is lower. Source: "Total shelter residents" refers to all persons residing in New York City homeless shelters during Fiscal Year 2010. Percentages may not total to 100% due to the exclusion of other races; New York City Department of Homeless Services, *Critical Activities Report: Total Services — Fiscal Year 2010*, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/statistics/statistics.shtml>.

Interrelated aspects of poverty—such as limited education, insufficient income levels, and financial instability—influence New Yorkers' perceived risk of homelessness. Lower levels of educational attainment lead to lower annual earnings, which eventually leaves residents struggling to make ends meet.<sup>4</sup> When New Yorkers have difficulties paying for basic living expenses, concern grows. With the City's high rental costs, lack of job opportunities, and widespread underemployment, housing instability weighs heavily on the minds of many New Yorkers.

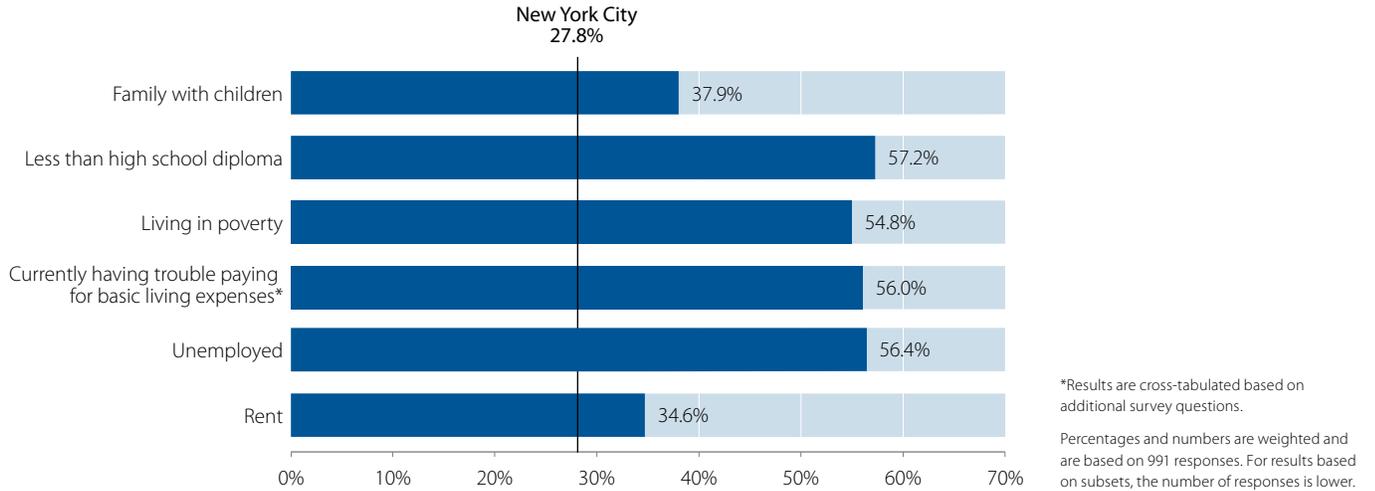
The following factors contribute to New Yorkers' concerns regarding housing status:

- Over half (57.2%) of New Yorkers with less than a high school diploma perceive themselves as vulnerable to becoming homeless, compared to one in five (21.0%) residents with at least a high school diploma or equivalent.

- More than half (54.8%) of residents living in poverty have concerns regarding homelessness, as opposed to one in five (19.0%) who are not living in poverty.
- When asked about household budgets, over half (56.0%) of New Yorkers who say they are having difficulty covering basic living expenses are worried about entering homelessness, contrasted with one in ten (13.6%) who can afford necessities.
- Over half (56.4%) of unemployed New Yorkers are anxious about becoming homeless, compared to one in four (24.7%) of those who are employed or not in the labor force.
- One-third (34.6%) of renters feel at risk of becoming homeless, as opposed to one in ten (13.7%) homeowners.

**ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORRIED THAT YOU, OR YOUR FAMILY, MIGHT BE AT RISK OF BECOMING HOMELESS?**

(by "yes" responses and demographic characteristic)

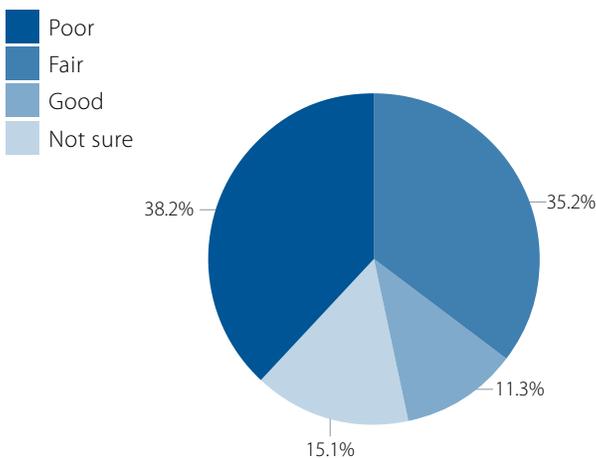


**How is the City doing and how are New Yorkers willing to help?**

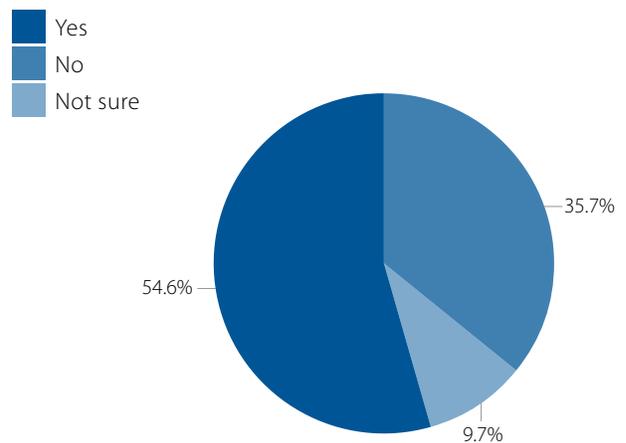
New Yorkers believe that the City is not doing a good job assisting those who are homeless and are willing to help finance improved policies and strategies. When asked to evaluate its performance, two-fifths (38.2%) of New Yorkers think that the City is doing a poor job serving homeless families and individuals. One-third (35.2%) of residents give the City a fair rating on homelessness, while only one in ten (11.3%) view its efforts as successful. An additional one in ten (15.1%) New Yorkers remained undecided.

Rather than simply criticize the City and then ignore the problem, New Yorkers are willing to aid their most vulnerable neighbors. More than half (54.6%) of residents would support paying higher taxes to reduce homelessness in New York City. Only one-third (35.7%) opposed increasing taxes, while one in ten (9.7%) remained undecided. Significant differences in opinion did not emerge across the five boroughs, nor were there racial or ethnic differences. Regardless of income, level of educational attainment, or perceived risk of homelessness, a majority of New Yorkers would be willing to pay higher taxes to support proven solutions to reduce the number of homeless families and individuals in the City.

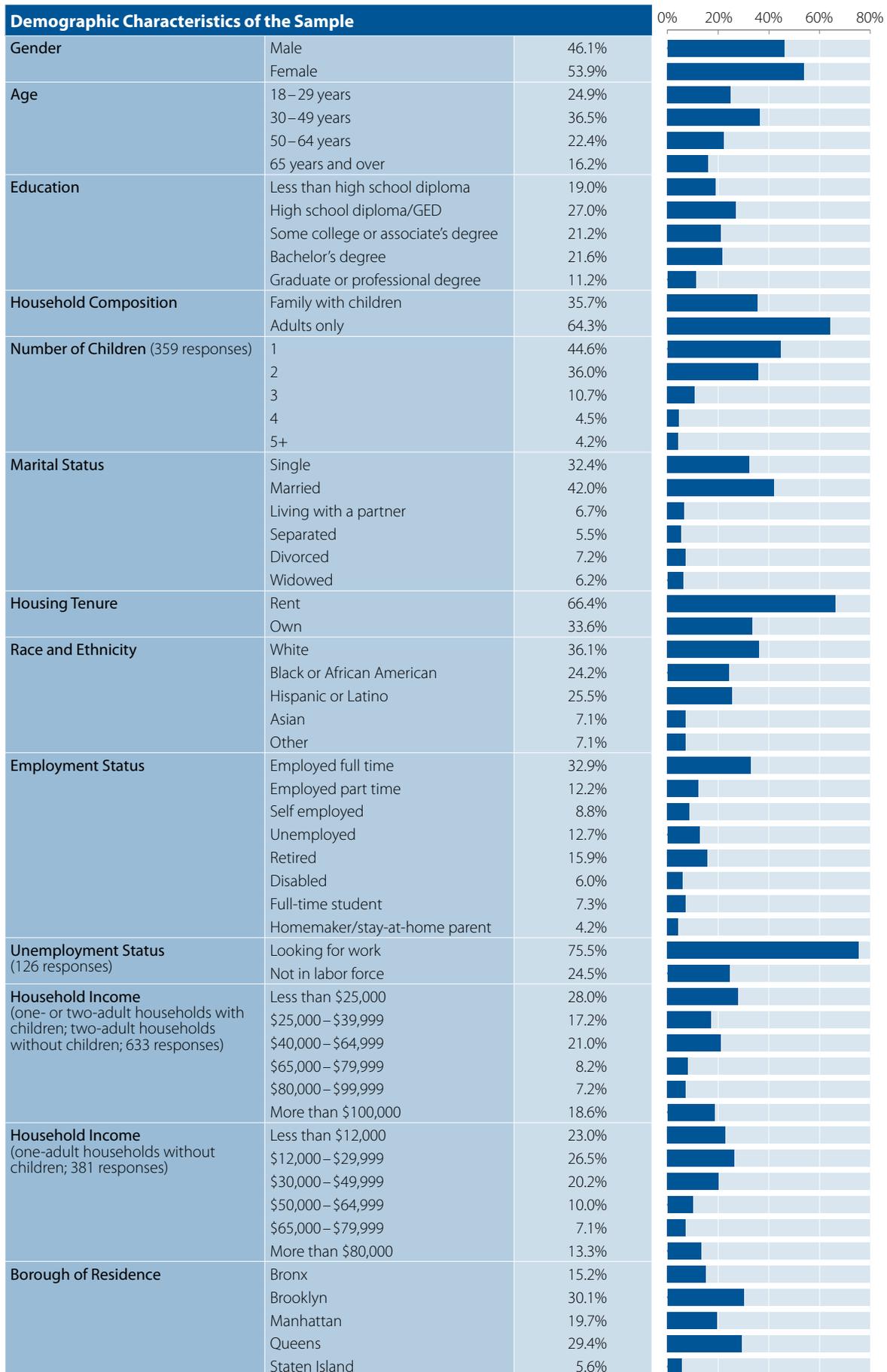
**HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE JOB NEW YORK CITY'S GOVERNMENT IS DOING IN HELPING THOSE WHO ARE HOMELESS?**



**WOULD YOU SUPPORT PAYING HIGHER TAXES TO REDUCE HOMELESSNESS IN NEW YORK?**



Percentages and numbers are weighted and are based on 1,012 responses. Percentages may not total to 100% due to the exclusion of two "refused" responses.

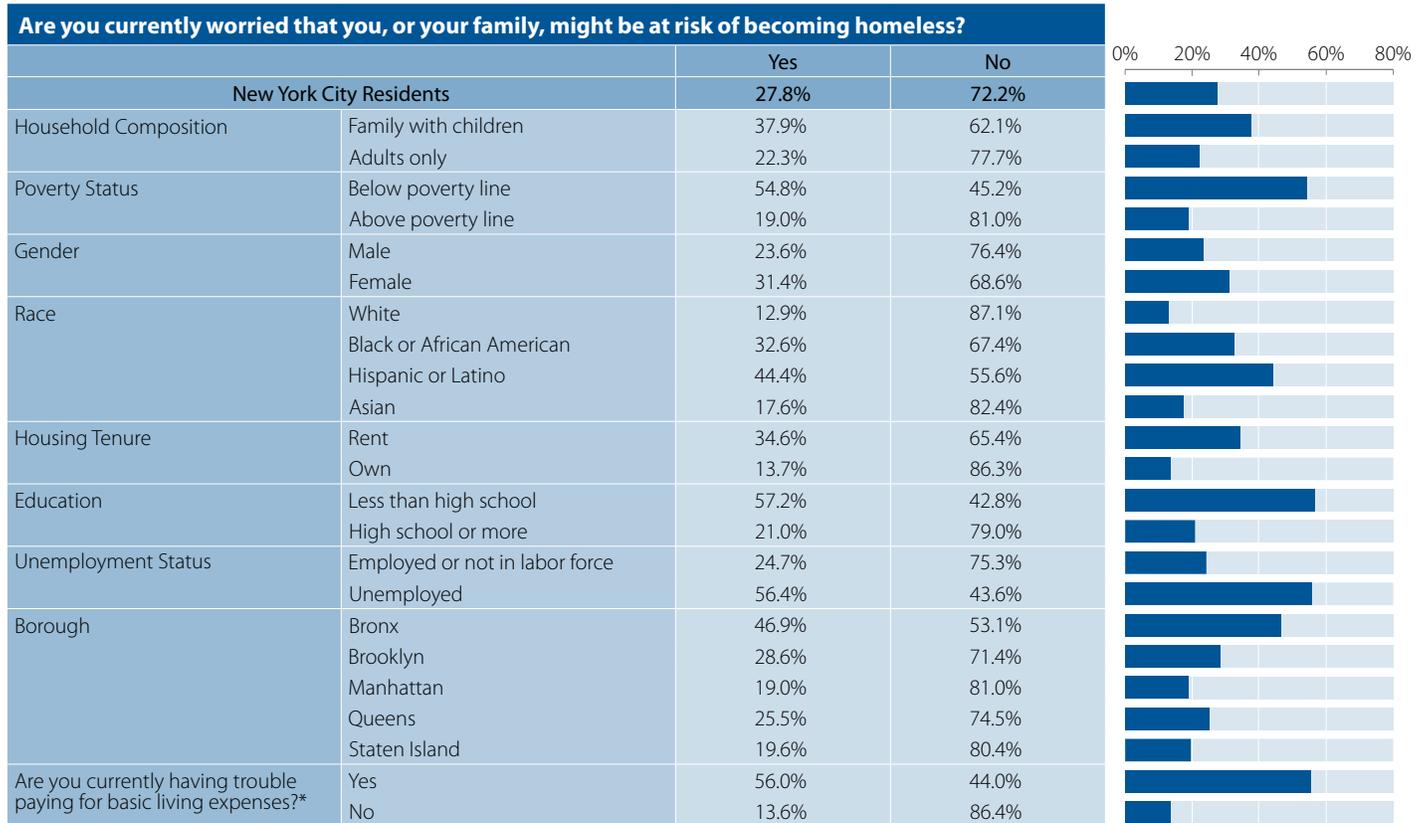


Percentages and numbers are weighted and are based on 1,014 responses. For results based on subsets, the number of responses is lower.

### Survey Methodology

This Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness public opinion survey—a administered between January 18, 2011 and February 1, 2011—polled a random sample of 1,014 adults residing in New York City. Baruch College Survey Research con-

ducted the telephone interviews by landline (811) and cell phone (203) in English and Spanish. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus three percentage points. For results based on subsets, the margin of sampling error is plus or minus three and one-half percentage points.



\*Results are cross-tabulated based on additional survey questions. Percentages and numbers are weighted and, depending on the category, are based on 991 responses. For results based on subsets, the number of responses is lower.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services, *Critical Activities Report: Total Services—Fiscal Year 2011*; New York City Department of Homeless Services, *Critical Activities Report: Families with Children Services—Fiscal Year 2010*; Coalition for the Homeless, *While More New York City Families and Children Seek Shelter, the City Turns Away More Families Than Ever*, May 2011.
- <sup>2</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services, *Families with Children Services—Fiscal Year 2010*.
- <sup>3</sup> New York City Department of Homeless Services, *Total Services—Fiscal Year 2010*.
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings*, July 2002.

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The Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness (ICPH) is an independent nonprofit research organization based in New York City. ICPH studies the impact of poverty on family and child well-being



and generates research that will enhance public policies and programs affecting poor or homeless children and their families. Specifically, ICPH examines the condition of extreme poverty in the United States and its effect on educational attainment, housing, employment, child welfare, domestic violence, and family wellness. Please visit our Web site for more information: [www.ICPHusa.org](http://www.ICPHusa.org).