



Testimony of

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Before the  
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General Welfare Committee

*Oversight: Barriers that Youth and Young Adults Face In Accessing Public Assistance*

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Good morning. My name is Louise Feld and I am the Policy Associate for Education, Food and Economic Security at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is a 67-year-old independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe. I would like to thank Chair Palma, as well as the members of the General Welfare Committee, for holding today's hearing to explore the barriers that youth and young adults face in accessing public assistance.

A lack of access to public assistance can have disastrous consequences for youth, who often do not have family financial resources or wide community support systems, and therefore need the critical help that public assistance provides. Without the public assistance safety net, many of these youth will be prevented from pursuing an education, achieving financial stability, and ultimately breaking the cycle of poverty.

Recent data demonstrate that a substantial number of New York City youth are unemployed, and therefore lack financial means to support themselves if necessary. The U.S. Bureau of Census's 2007-2009 American Community Survey Three-Year Estimates show that just over 30 percent of New York City teenagers age 16-19 were unemployed during that time period.<sup>1</sup> Examination of data about each of New York City's community districts reveals that the youth unemployment rate was much higher in communities of color and communities with higher poverty rates. For example, three-year Census estimates suggest that 56.9 percent of teens in University Heights in the Bronx were unemployed, as were 44.6 percent of teens in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and 41.5 percent of teens in East Harlem, Manhattan.

The teen unemployment data from the Census becomes even bleaker when considered in conjunction with statistics about the teens' school participation rates, which are included in CCC's June 2010 edition of *Keeping Track of New York City's Children 2010*. The data in *Keeping Track 2010* paints a vivid picture of young people's health and welfare, both citywide and in each of New York City's 59 community districts.<sup>2</sup> This most recent data highlights both the significant number and characteristics of New York City youth who will suffer if unable to successfully access public assistance benefits because they are entering adulthood without employment or a high school education, and therefore lack a foundation upon which to achieve economic security.

The data in *Keeping Track 2010* show that youth of color and youth from neighborhoods with higher poverty rates are the most overwhelmingly at risk of facing poverty as they enter their adult years as a result of neither working nor going to school. Overall in New York City in 2008, eight percent of youth ages 16-19 were neither in school nor in the labor force; however, about 30 percent of teens in both Mott Haven and Hunts Point, the Bronx, 15.7 percent of teens in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and 12.2 percent of teens in Central Harlem, Manhattan were neither working nor going to school. Data also revealed that almost ten percent of both Black and Latino teens were not in the labor force and not

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<sup>1</sup> The Census defines "unemployed" as without a job but actively looking for work.

<sup>2</sup> The data from *Keeping Track* is also available at [www.cccnewyork.org](http://www.cccnewyork.org).

in school, while this was true of only 5.6 percent of White teens and 4.3 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander teens.

Similarly grim is the data about teens who are not in school, and have not graduated from high school. In 2008 this statistic applied to 6.8 percent of teens citywide, but to 22.8, 13.3, and 12.4 percent of teens in Mott Haven, East Harlem, and Bedford Stuyvesant, respectively. Further, 10.7 percent of Latino teens and seven percent of Black teens were not in school and had not graduated, compared to three percent of White and 3.6 percent of Asian/Pacific teenagers. Without a high school education and diploma, these youth do not have the credentials needed for the pursuit of higher education, and often lack the skills needed for well-paying employment. This leaves these young people with a greater chance of finding themselves financially insecure as they enter adulthood.

Finally, certain groups of teens who may be included in the afore-mentioned data find themselves at even greater risk of poverty. For example, recent data in *Keeping Track* about teenage mothers demonstrate that a sizeable number of New York City's teenage girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have children, and may therefore need more assistance to achieve economic security. In 2007, over 30 out of every 1000 girls in New York City aged 15-19 had a baby. This rate was much higher in certain neighborhoods, such as Concourse/Highbridge, the Bronx (70.6); Mott Haven, the Bronx (66.6); Elmhurst/Corona, Queens (55.5); and East Harlem, Manhattan (53.7), as well as for Latina teens (52.8) and Black teens (34.6).

Youth who were aging out of foster care, because they were neither adopted nor reunified with a birth parent, represent another incredibly vulnerable segment of New York City's residents. Out of the 7602 children discharged from New York City's foster care system in 2008, 14.2% of them – almost 1100 children – were discharged from care to independent living. Social supports, such as public assistance, are critical to many of these children, who lack a stable family structure or adult on whom they can financially rely.

In sum, recent data show that a large number of young people face the particularly daunting task of entering adulthood on unstable economic footing. Far too many of these young people attempt to support themselves and their young families – without a high school diploma or a consistent source of income. It is incumbent upon our City to ensure that these teens have access to the public benefits to which they are entitled. Further, the City must provide these young people with necessary educational supports and much-needed services, such as child care. Access to cash assistance, combined with these services, will enable New York City's economically-vulnerable youth to avoid poverty and achieve financial stability.