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N.Y. Poverty Data Paint Mixed Picture

By Sam Roberts
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In a departure from the national picture, family income rose slightly in New York City in 2008 from 2007, and the proportion of poor people was virtually unchanged, according to census figures released Tuesday.

Still, the city and surrounding region had its share of grim news: The Bronx remained the country's poorest urban county; the income gap in Manhattan was still higher than in any other county; and the poverty rate in Connecticut rose faster than in any other state.

And the relatively positive part of the local economic picture was tempered by the fact that the latest census figures from the rolling [American Community Survey](#) captured only the start of the recession.

In New York City, the poverty rate in 2008 was 18.2 percent — the lowest this decade — compared with 18.5 percent in 2007. Median household income was unchanged, at \$51,116, but median family income rose to \$56,552 from \$54,846.

Those figures masked vast disparities, though, based on race, ethnicity and geography.

In the Bronx, the median household income was \$35,033, and nearly 28 percent of the borough's residents — and 47 percent of its households headed by women with children — were living in poverty.

Citywide, the poverty rate for racial and ethnic groups stayed relatively unchanged in 2008 compared with the previous year: 11 percent for non-Hispanic whites, 17 percent for Asians, 21 percent for blacks and 26 percent for Hispanics.

The proportion of people receiving food stamps increased in New York State by about a percentage point, to 10.6 percent.

In Connecticut, the poverty rate climbed to 24.2 percent from 21.3 percent. In largely suburban Fairfield County, it jumped to 20 percent from 15 percent.

Until recently, New York City trailed the national economic downturn, but the city's unemployment rate is now higher than the national average, which makes finding jobs more difficult.

"I suspect we'll see some worsening of poverty statistics, too," said Steve Malanga, a senior fellow at the [Manhattan Institute for Policy Research](#), a conservative group.

“However,” Mr. Malanga added, “I also think we should credit the Bloomberg administration for a continuing strong emphasis on welfare to work, which I think continues getting people back into the work force and out of poverty.”

Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#), who declared that reducing poverty would be a priority of his second term, commissioned experts to devise a more accurate measure of poverty. Under that measure, the rate was 23 percent in 2006, compared with the official poverty measure that year of 19 percent. The city’s formula has not been updated.

“Since the existing poverty measure doesn’t consider regional cost-of-living variations on the expense side, or government aid to households on the income side, it doesn’t tell the whole story and doesn’t help us in our fight,” said [Linda I. Gibbs](#), the deputy mayor for health and human services.

Mark K. Levitan, the director of poverty research for the city’s [Center for Economic Opportunity](#), said the city’s anti-poverty efforts were bearing fruit. Mr. Levitan pointed to a declining poverty rate among blacks and Hispanics from 2006 and 2008.

He also said that programs that encouraged people to apply for food stamps or tax credits that provided cash assistance were not reflected in the government’s official poverty rate.

But [Joel Berg](#), executive director of the [Coalition Against Hunger](#), said that a growing number of poor homeless people were not counted, and he predicted that the overall poverty rate would rise next year. Besides, he said, “I don’t think a million and a half people in poverty is a great victory.”

[David R. Jones](#), president of the [Community Service Society](#), which serves as an advocate for low-income New Yorkers, said his research found that “people are having increased hardship, and it’s Latinos who are taking the brunt, because they tend to cluster in manufacturing and construction.”

An analysis by [Andrew A. Beveridge](#), a demographer at [Queens College](#), found that the share of income in Manhattan going to the wealthiest declined slightly in 2008, signaling an end to the boom.

The median income among those in the top 5 percent was \$857,000, and that group collected nearly twice the total income of those in the bottom 60 percent. The top 20 percent made about 42 times as much as the bottom 20 percent. Income disparities were higher in New York than in any other state.