

*Kindergarten Readiness and Childhood Poverty in Syracuse, NY*

An Investigative Data Story

Molly Harrigan

Syracuse University

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Syracuse, NY is one of the most impoverished cities in the United States with nearly 14,000 children falling below the poverty line as of 2022<sup>1</sup>. Though the city faced roughly a two percent decrease in its child poverty rates<sup>2</sup>, the city's children are still falling behind. Unlike many similar small cities, riddled with industry and manufacturing zones, Syracuse, NY serves a role as a major transportation hub with its overlapping major interstates and is home to over 100 thousand residents.

With a handful of early childhood development programs with the shared goal of bolstering the community's children, many impoverished and marginalized groups of children remain unaccounted for. Though data exists reiterating these claims, we know little of the accessibility of many pre-kindergarten readiness programs and how the lack thereof inadvertently impacts numerous students below the poverty line.

The city of Syracuse's poverty line is set at an annual household income of \$29,678 or less with Syracuse ranking the second-highest in the United States for percentage of families living off less than ten thousand dollars annually and topping national charts in childhood-poverty numbers.

The poverty estimates are determined based on annual earnings, unemployment benefits, and government cash aid but neglects food stamps and tax credits. Thus, it's plausible many families considered as "below poverty-line," were surviving off of more than reflected in the data. This can be accredited to a government effort in the previous year to mitigate the child poverty crisis. However, these efforts have lapsed and have not yet been approved for renewal by Congress.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ktampone@syracuse.com, Kevin Tampone |. "Census: Syracuse Child Poverty Dips, but Falls More Elsewhere." *Syracuse*, 8 Dec. 2022

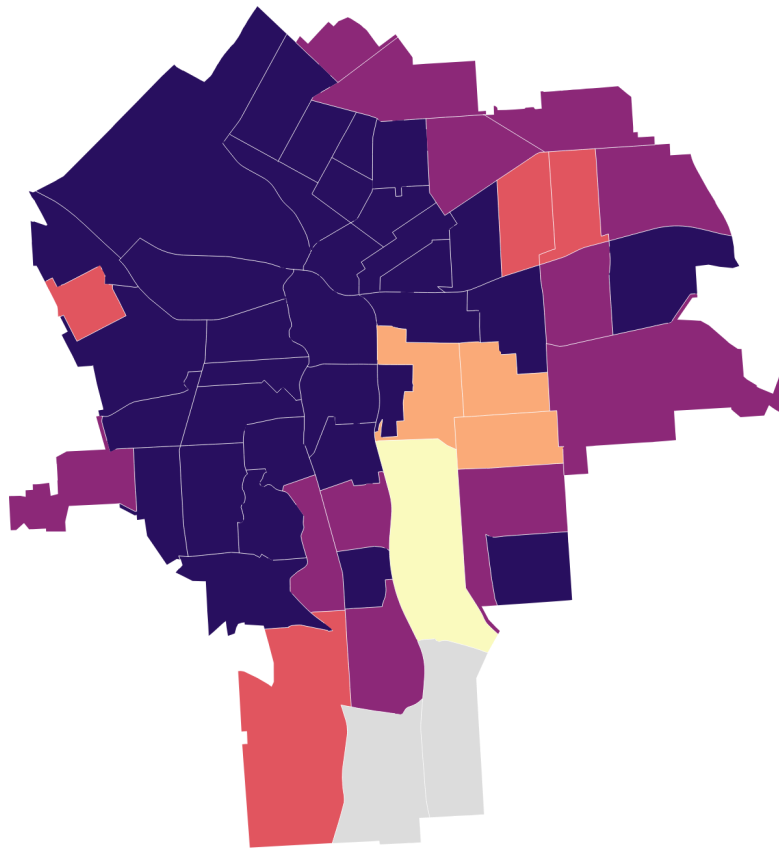
<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

## Poverty Across Syracuse, NY by Census Block

Poverty Percentage

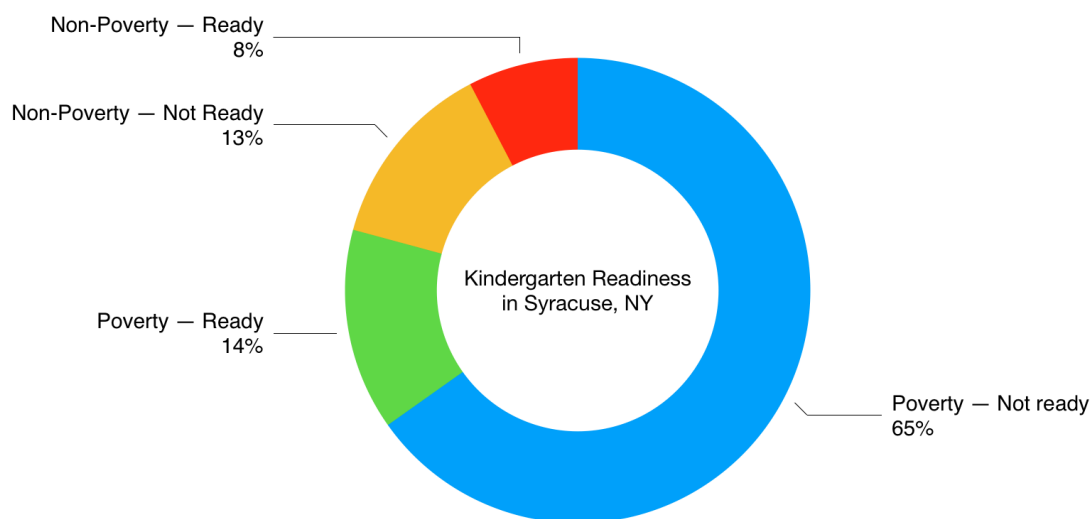
< 0.20% 0.20%–0.40% 0.40%–0.60% 0.60%–0.80% ≥ 0.80%



Created with Datawrapper

Nearly 37% of Syracuse citizens living in poverty are under the age of 18 with a little over 46% of children in poverty, translating to about 2 out of every 5 children.

The Syracuse city government released data revealing which children below Kindergarten are considered “ready” or “not ready” in relation to their family’s poverty status. There are notable discrepancies in the number of children noted to have fallen behind in schooling due to their poverty level in contrast to non-poverty-level students. “Readiness” is a critical factor the city uses to determine schooling standards and mandated assessments and is measured based on students' performance in first-grade level classes.



The New York State education system no longer mandates pre-K or kindergarten schooling for children. If parents opt to keep their children at home until first grade, they are able to do so. However, many urge the importance of early childhood development work regulated in Pre-K and Kindergarten. Former first grade and kindergarten teacher and now administrator at Syracuse’s Seymour Dual Language Academy, Illiana Rosa, says, “Requirements for kindergarten are very heavy - kindergarten is not what it used to be even back in the day. Back when I went to kindergarten, you had your nap time and you had your playpen- you learned to play. Kindergarten has now become standards-based in NY state and you have to meet certain levels and make high enough marks on a number of assessments; The state determines "readiness" based on performance within these new standards. So if parents aren't aware of these standards and keep their child at home by choice or due to financial circumstances, they might not come into their mandated first-grade curriculum with the skills they need to succeed.”

The district has a universal pre-K system in place but only offers a limited number of spots for children, all of which are application-based on a number of factors, many of which are limiting to

children of families who are unfamiliar with certain educational standards and guidelines, having no prior experience with education themselves. With strict guidelines in place *intended* to protect families under the poverty line regarding the exact poverty-line income level, many families who are barely considered above that line are not permitted participation. Aside from the application processes' strict regulations, the actual process of sending a child to and from these programs serves as a challenge within itself. There is no means of public transportation provided to students in pre-K, posing a provocation for parents that either work multiple jobs or are unable to afford alternate transportation for their children. Either way, the problems begin to snowball. Rosa says, "How accommodating are we to make sure the educational system becomes a priority for the student and the family?"

In order for impoverished children to succeed, the responsibility lies within the administrators, educators, and city policy-makers to ensure students and families alike are taken care of. Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs student Xiaoyan Zhang exclaims, "The continued high rate of poverty among children in single-mother families points to the urgent need for more investment in policies and programs to assist these families, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP)."<sup>4</sup>

Community participation can also be paramount in dismantling crises as dire as childhood poverty. If citizens outside of crises are paying attention, government officials are oftentimes held more accountable.

The Syracuse University School of Architecture offers students an opportunity at city participation. "We had a project our second year where we visited a community center which was intended to bring the community together but the program did such a poor job at educating all of us as to the real issues of the city and why we were doing what we were doing. It's

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<sup>4</sup> "Child Poverty Has Been Declining in Single-Mother Families, but the Gap Remains Large." *Maxwell School*

something our professors would occasionally mention in passing but it was never at the forefront of the project. If we were provided with all of this information about kids in Syracuse and of the crippling conditions many of our peers live in, maybe we would have cared more and worked harder. We could have done something more meaningful and impactful but we didn't have the information and we certainly weren't provided with adequate resources. Why isn't there a greater emphasis put on this problem at Syracuse? We live here now. It's our home just as much as it is theirs and we should care," says Romi Moller, current SU Architecture student and former resident advisor (RA) at the school.



Sample of SU Architecture's Community Center Proposal Project via Romi Moller

With only about 33% of Syracuse residents with more than a high school or bachelor's degree, many of Syracuse children are first-generation students. Without families having a prior understanding of what goes into schooling and what's important to their child's development, these kids are falling behind.

Illiana Rosa urges, "Once a child falls behind due to missed steps, it becomes a challenge. if they go to pre-k and the 4 year old programs, by the time those kids go to kindergarten, it becomes a routine which is crucial in a young child. Routine and structure. When kids are unstructured, especially if their household isn't structured, it's critical they are able to find structure from someone or something else outside of their homes, these programs give them this."

The problem is access. There are programs in place, but how many students are able to access them? With crippling waitlists and a lack of accommodation for families from different language backgrounds and educational structures, a huge majority of children are left with no solution on the false premise of governmentally-facilitated help.

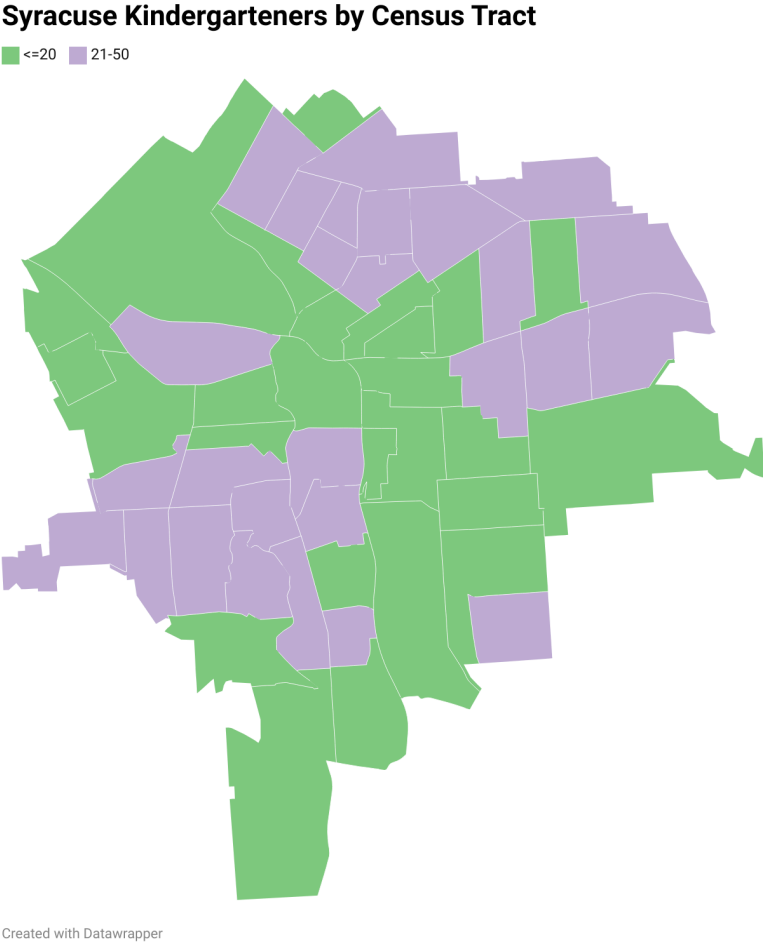
With district-provided pre-K programs having a limited number of spots allotted for children under the poverty line, many organizations have sprouted in the region to attempt to mitigate this accessibility issue, yet the problems prevail. Elmcrest Children's Center, "focuses on developing early literacy, math, and social skills, and also works to guide and nurture young children toward enrollment in a traditional kindergarten curriculum,"<sup>5</sup> similar to other programs in the region such as PEACE Inc.'s "Head Start" program which shares similar promises. Parents visiting both websites looking for information about child registration are prompted with large, all-red lettering: "APPLY NOW," with an understanding that spots are limited and unlikely. Even if their child is selected for placement, these programs don't have the resources and funding required to care for these children in the ways they require.

With language and ability differences, stunted emotional growth due to varying unstable home lives, and challenges in the kids' relationships and interactivity with other children, many of

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<sup>5</sup> "Early Education." *Elmcrest Children's Center*, 29 Aug. 2023, [elmcrest.org/early-education/](http://elmcrest.org/early-education/).

these programs are hostile environments for both students and staff. Stephanie Gratzel, a former Elmcrest staff member who resigned from her position just days after this interview, shared “It’s an impossible job daily. I hurt for the kids, they all have different things on their plates, all more impossible than the last. A good majority of them have grown up in chronic homelessness. It’s a taxing field of work and there are never enough people on staff.” Staff are overworked and underpaid with a number of children still left unaccounted for.



With each sector of the Syracuse census housing up to 50 incoming kindergarten-aged students, each early education center can potentially expect a majority of that number to apply for pre-K. Each school in the district is responsible for numerous census tracts, meaning each



school and program in the area would have over 20 applicants at the minimum each school year.

“There is inequity in the numbers of kids you see enrolled in these programs. Yes, we have programs for these kids but they only allow for say, 18 kids to go in. That doesn’t mean we only have 18 kids to consider. Only the small majority of kids are able to be placed into these programs. The question should be: are there enough programs for all of these kids? And the answer is no. It’s a shame. These systems are failing our poverty-line children both at home and at school. So many children are left unaccounted for before they can even spell their own names,” Gratzel claims.

The Syracuse community adamantly requires more government participation and a greater facilitation of efforts, funding, staff, and community participation to mend this prevailing crisis or the city will see the perpetuation of impoverished children who are unable to advocate for themselves in the line of destruction.

## Citations -

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*Maxwell School*

[www.maxwell.syr.edu/research/lerner-center/population-health-research-brief-series/article/child-poverty-has-been-declining-in-single-mother-families-but-the-gap-remains-large](http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/research/lerner-center/population-health-research-brief-series/article/child-poverty-has-been-declining-in-single-mother-families-but-the-gap-remains-large). Accessed 12 Dec. 2023.

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**Data Source -** [https://data.syr.gov/datasets/c154f50be810420ebbdeb890340d9f7d\\_0/about](https://data.syr.gov/datasets/c154f50be810420ebbdeb890340d9f7d_0/about)\*

## Presentation Link -

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