

CITY LIMITS

Report: Young NYers Face Higher Barriers To Public Assistance

A study of low-income New Yorkers under the age of 24 indicates they have trouble getting welfare benefits to which they are entitled. City officials say the report—and others that raised similar questions—suffers from poor methodology.

By Neil deMause
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Marc Fader/City Limits

The New York City Human Resources Administration Job Center on 14th Street in Manhattan. For years, HRA and advocates have wrestled over whether the decline in welfare rolls indicates that poor New Yorkers have found other ways to support themselves, or that eligible families are being denied welfare. A new report focuses that debate on young, low-income people.

It's a story that's repeated itself several times now under the Bloomberg administration: A leading New York social services agency issues a report harshly criticizing the Bloomberg administration's welfare policies as inappropriate for many poor New Yorkers, and ineffective at moving people into economic self-sufficiency. City officials respond by insisting that the study is flawed, and that the city's "Work First" model has been a success at connecting low-income New Yorkers with employment.

The latest study, "[Missed Opportunity](#)," was issued jointly last month by the Community Service Society (owner of *City Limits*) and the Resilience Advocacy Project to investigate how young applicants for public benefits are handled by the city Human Resources Administration, which manages public benefits. Their answer: poorly.

“When young people are really at their lowest point, down on their luck, they seek cash assistance,” says CSS youth policy director Lazar Treschan. Yet despite state directives that young people, especially those without high school diplomas, should be offered educational options, he says, “the young people we spoke to told us that just isn't happening. It's not just that they're not being placed, they're not being encouraged. They're not even receiving information that education is an option. In fact, there is this byzantine series of procedures that make it impossible for anyone to make it into an education program as their work requirement.”

Matthew Brune, HRA's executive deputy commissioner for family independence, counters that drawing any conclusions from a small sample — the study interviewed 100 under-24 New Yorkers who'd applied for public benefits — is unwarranted. “I think ultimately the concern would be that it still remains a very small sample group, and it's not broadly illustrative of what HRA does, and does well, for millions of New Yorkers.”

Common concerns amplified for the young

The problem of “disconnected” youth — those neither working nor attending school — has long been a concern for CSS and other city policy advocates, who warn that those who miss out on getting a good start to their academic and work lives can end up permanently behind. And there are more and more of them: Treschan notes that according to Census data, 173,000 17- to 24-year-olds in New York — 18 percent — are neither in school nor working, the highest ratio in the country; 63,000 of these are in households below the poverty line. The numbers have been exacerbated by the economic downturn (and by continuing cuts to [summer youth jobs programs](#)), but have been headed upwards for the past two or three decades, he says: “Even in the upswing of 2003 to 2007, you didn't actually do that well.”

The research underlying “Missed Opportunity” was prompted, says Resilience Advocacy Project director Brooke Richie, by a year-long effort to get HRA to provide data on applications and outcomes for teenagers and young adults. “HRA was extremely unforthcoming,” she says, “It took about a year for me to realize that they were giving me the runaround—they just didn't have the data.” Finally, she says, she filed a Freedom of Information Law request—only to receive a formal response that “HRA does not track data based on age.”

Instead, Richie partnered with CSS, which conducts the annual [“Unheard Third” survey](#) of low-income New Yorkers, to conduct focus groups and interview applicants for benefits outside city job centers, to, as Richie puts it, “break open the black box of HRA.”

Many of survey responses included [familiar complaints](#) about the public benefits system: HRA Job Center workers who, instead of tailoring referrals for their individual cases, send applicants to “one-size-fits-all” job readiness programs where they spend full days composing resumes and watching job-training videos. “Everything that applies to adults applies to young people,” says Richie. “What is different is there are additional access barriers that don't apply to adults.”

In particular, Richie says that “an alarming number” of young people report that they have been told by HRA workers that they're not allowed to apply for benefits until they turn 21—a

violation of state and federal law. (When Richie noted this trend at a City Council [general welfare committee](#) hearing last fall, committee chair Annabel Palma noted that the same thing had happened to her two decades ago as a pregnant 17-year-old applying for benefits.) Of 16 under-21 applicants who participated in focus groups for the "Missed Opportunity" study, five said they had been turned away by HRA on their first visit because of their age.

How many are helped?

Brune replies that while HRA is always concerned about any reports of workers not following city rules, he views anyone being turned away because of age as "outlier instances." HRA, he says, "has one of the best training departments in the city, probably the country," and the policy is well-understood. "So no, I don't view it as a problem."

The report also charges that some HRA workers did a poor job of establishing whether under-21 applicants were living on their own — and so eligible for their own public assistance cases — telling some young parents that they should move in with their parents, though in many cases they may have left abusive homes or been kicked out after becoming pregnant. "There's no real standard to guide workers," says Richie. "And so most of them use their own intuition—which tells them the kids should be living at home."

For those who do successfully apply, almost all end up placed in Back to Work, the job-readiness program that the city spends \$50 million a year paying contractors to run. Of 46 respondents to the HRA/RAP survey who lacked a high school diploma, 39 had been placed in Back to Work — including 16 who were under 21 years of age. Though [state law](#) directs agencies to place 18- and 19-year-olds in education programs — except those for whom workers deem school "not appropriate" — several respondents said HRA had pulled them out of an agency-approved GED program and sent them to Back to Work.

The results, at least for those who participated in in-depth focus groups for the report, were dismal: Eighteen out of 21 applicants who'd been sent to Back to Work ended up dropping out of that program, and only one ended up with a job. One 18-year-old complained that she didn't miss much by dropping out: "I was there one to two weeks. It was nothing. They let us do resumes. But if I never had a job, what was my resume going to look like?"

Back to Work has been the target of harsh criticism in the past, in particular from the low-income membership group Community Voices Heard, which in 2008 issued [a report](#) that charged that only 8 percent of applicants ended up finding jobs that lasted at least 30 days. [Later HRA documents](#) showed a somewhat better success ratio, but still indicated that most Back to Work participants don't complete the program—and at most one-third of those left because they found steady work, with outcomes for the rest unknown.

Debate over data

HRA's response to the CVH report was to charge that the figures were inaccurate without providing details, beginning a pattern that carried through into later reports: When the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies released a [2009 study](#) of the city Human Resource Administration's overall treatment of welfare applicants, then-HRA spokesperson Barbara Brancaccio dismissed it as "flawed." After *The New York Times* editorialized last

month that "research has discredited inflexible workfare programs that shunt people into dead-end jobs instead of giving them education and training that could improve their long-term prospects," specifically citing the CSS/RAP study, HRA commissioner Robert Doar fired back with a letter to the editor—calling the report, again, "flawed"—and citing both Back to Work's placement record and the city's [historic welfare roll lows](#).

Asked to elaborate, Brune told *City Limits* that his main concern about the CSS/RAP report was its sample size, which he considers too small to be significant. Every applicant for PA, he stressed, goes through an employment plan where they are asked about their educational level and interests, "and we'll take it from there. So there are opportunities for an applicant to state his her or preference." Still, he stresses, "HRA is an employment, work-first model, and it is our firm expectation that people who can work should go to work."

CSS's Treschan insists that his 100-person sample — 86 of whom were randomly selected after an initial 14-person focus group — was sufficient to highlight problems, especially given the strong concurrence of the replies. "When you have 100 people, and 80 or 90 are saying one thing, sampling science will tell you that you really don't need much more than that," he says. And in any case, he says, so long as HRA can't or won't provide its own statistics, it's all that we have to go on: "If they want to engage in a substantive conversation, they should share their data."

"Missed Opportunity" includes numerous policy prescriptions that it says would help get disconnected youth on the right track, including shifting Back to Work dollars to other programs, such as the Department of Education's Learning to Work program, which provides academic support for students who've fallen behind in their pursuit of high school diplomas, and the Department of Youth and Community Development's Young Adult Internship Program, which couples GED classes and job readiness training with short-term internships. It also calls for changing HRA's "organizational culture" by tracking youth data and creating new "youth liaison" specialists, as has been done in other states.

For Richie, the bottom line is that "we're talking about kids. Applying for college when I was a teenager was overwhelming. I can only imagine if filling out those forms correctly meant the difference between my eating and having a place to stay, and not eating and not eating a place to stay."