



*The Women of Color Policy Network is dedicated to ending the invisibility and enhancing the life chances of women of color through policy research, advocacy, public education and mentoring a new generation of advocate-researchers.*

Testimony: Walter Stafford and Diana Salas  
Women of Color Policy Network  
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*Oversight Hearing: "Issues for Women in 2006"*

Thank you for inviting us to discuss the status of women of color in New York City. My name is Walter Stafford. I am a professor of Urban Planning and Public Policy at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University. I am joined by Diana Salas, researcher for the Women of Color Policy Network. The Network is dedicated to ending the invisibility of women of color in public policy through policy research, advocacy, public education and mentoring a new generation of advocate-researchers.

The invisibility of women of color is attributable to three factors.

1. **The failure of analysts and policy makers to identify the trends, needs and problems among women of color.** Although women of color have been the majority in the city since 1990, analysts failed to identify their problems and issues. This omission of women of color from policy deliberations has had consequences, many of which we will talk about today.
2. **The tendency of analysts and policy makers to view the issues and problems of women of color through the prism of white women.** This tendency has often led to a false collective construction of "women" that minimizes the particular issues of Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native American women. This problem has been exacerbated by the paucity of women of color in policy-informing faculty and research positions and in the larger advocacy community.
3. **The tendency to misdiagnose problems that have been identified.** Even when the issues and problems of women of color have been identified, they have been misdiagnosed because of stereotypes and cultural and language barriers. Historically, these problems have been especially acute for Black and Puerto Rican women. They have become more complicated with the increase of immigrant women from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. New York City has the country's most diverse female population among cities with populations of 500,000 or more. We have a special need for policies that are culturally sensitive.

This presentation is focused on three main issue areas: income and poverty, employment, and health.

### **Income and poverty**

According to the 2004 American Community Survey, poverty and income rose simultaneously in the city. The median household income grew from \$39,937 in 2003 to \$41,509 in 2004 and poverty increased from 19 percent to 20.3 percent. Blacks were the only group to see a drop in their median household income, from 33,340 to 33,259 in 2004.



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Among women, poverty increased from 10.9 to 11.4. The majority of these women were women of color. In 2004, Latinas accounted for 43 percent of all women in poverty followed by Black women (31 percent). Asian women had a poverty rate of 9.3 and white women a rate of 19.4. The rise in poverty is largely explained by the decline in women's earnings. For women who worked full time in the past 12 months, their earning dropped 1.8 percent (from 35,838 in 2003 to 35,205 in 2004). Men saw a slight gain in earning, from 40,076 to 40,314 in 2004.

Public assistance data shows that although the number of TANF recipients dropped between Oct 2003 and Oct 2004 by nearly 2 percent, the number of persons on Safety Net Assistance grew by 4 percent. The number of food stamp recipients – who do not receive SSI or public assistance – increased by 23 percent.<sup>1</sup>

The number of food stamp recipients – not on PA or SSI – increased dramatically across all five boroughs (Bronx 27 percent, Brooklyn 20 percent, Manhattan 20 percent, Queens 28 percent, and Staten Island 30 percent). Staten Island was the only borough where the number of TANF recipients increased (8 percent).

Although the number of people on welfare has decreased, their needs were being addressed by other entitlement programs like Safety Net and food stamps.

### **Employment**

Unemployment rates are only a partial measure of economic distress. However, they have been an important barometer of the problems facing women of color, particularly Black women and Latinas, who had the highest unemployment rates during the prior decade. Although the rates for the two groups have declined, they remain much higher than the rate for white women. In 2005, the city's unemployment rate was 5.8 percent, but the rates for Latinas and Black women were 7.2 and 7.1 respectively. The rate of 5.0 for white women was below the city's average. The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect similar information on Asian women.

The Employment to Population Ratio (E/P ratio) which measures the population 16 years and over actually in the workforce, is low among Latinas (43.7). White women have an E/P ratio of 46.6, while Black women have an E/P ratio of 50.3.

Despite the widening array of job opportunities in the 1990s, women of color often remained segmented in low paying jobs and industries with limited mobility. Our examination of the 2004 American Community Survey data reveals that Black women and Latinas are concentrated in service and sales. Asian women are more diversified.

More than half (52 percent) of women employed as managers, professionals and in business-related occupations were white females, and only 22 percent were Black, 15 percent Latina and 10 percent were Asian. Women of color are over represented in the service occupations – 40 percent were Black and 32 percent were Latinas.

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<sup>1</sup> District Resource Statement, New York City Human Resources Administration, 2004-2005



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Similar segmentation patterns prevail in the Mayoral agencies. Although Black females constituted 22 percent of the mayoral workforce in 2003, they are over half (55 percent) of all clerical workers.

Overall, 57 percent of the top administrative jobs in the Mayoral agencies were held by white males and 21 percent by white females. Taken together, women of color accounted for only 8 percent of these top-level jobs.

### **Health**

If in 1990, politicians and analysts had given more attention to the growing share of women of color in the city's population, they could have identified many of their health problems and concerns, particularly HIV-AIDS. Black women and Puerto Rican women make up 80 percent of all the deaths to HIV disease.

Other health problems and needs that could have benefited from early attention are diabetes, cancer and homicide -- particularly for Black women -- and, tellingly, infant mortality rates.

Infant mortality rates for the city declined significantly from 1990 to 2004, however, the rates among Black women and Puerto Rican women continue to exceed both local and national averages. Paralleling the rise in poverty has been a rise in infant mortality rates: from 6.0 in 2002 to 6.5 per 1,000 live births in 2003; although it decreased in 2004 to 6.1 per 1,000 live births. Among Blacks the infant mortality rate in 2004 was 11.6 per 1,000 live births, a slight increase from 2003. The infant mortality rate among Puerto Ricans was 7.5 in 2004. The other groups remained below the citywide average of 6.1 -- Asians had a rate of 4.1, Other Hispanics of 4.5, and the infant mortality rates among whites was 3.5 per 1,000 live births. Ultimately, this has been one of the clearest manifestations of a lack of commitment from the city to these invisible women.

Although the number of HIV diagnoses among women has decreased between 2003 and 2004<sup>2</sup>, the -largest decrease among Latinas- other sexually transmitted infections have increased. Chlamydia rates among women increased from 567 per 100,000 in 1999 to 644.8 in 2003. The rates from gonorrhea also increased slightly from 151.9 to 158.8 in 2003. According to a NYCDOH report on condom use and HIV testing, persons with multiple partners reported using inconsistent condom use and low levels of HIV testing. Among New Yorkers with 3 or more sex partners, 37 percent of women reported that a condom was used the last time they had sex, far fewer than the 61 percent of men.<sup>3</sup> This can be explained in part by women's lack of control over condom use.

The continued failure to support and lift poor women, women of color, and their families out of poverty highlights the importance of finding new ways to address this issue. The Network will continue to update and track the issues facing poor women and women of color.

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<sup>2</sup> HIV Surveillance and Epidemiology 2005 Fourth Quarter Report, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (October 2005)

<sup>3</sup> "Sex in the City: More HIV testing and Condom Use Needed!" New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (July 2003).