

**SPOTLIGHT ON** Hope and Opportunity:

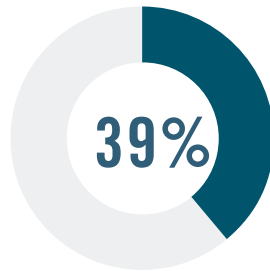
# New Yorkers' Perceptions of Economic Mobility and Opportunity

LILY BUSHMAN-COPP, MATTHEW MAURY, AND CHRISTOPHER WIMER

---

## Key Findings:

---



New Yorkers by and large perceive the economy as unfair and opportunity to be limited, including children's chances of outperforming their parents.

*55% of New Yorkers think the economic system in the U.S. is unfair. Only 39% of New Yorkers think that life in America is better than it was 50 years ago.*

---

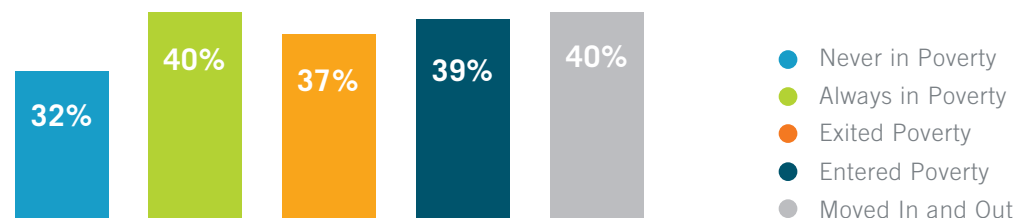
Despite this relatively gloomy outlook on the state of affairs in the country, most New Yorkers remain optimistic about their own chances of seeing their situation improve.



New Yorkers who have recently entered poverty or hardship were the most likely to feel that in this country we do not give everyone an equal chance to succeed. Conversely, those who have recently exited poverty are the most likely to feel that everyone does have an equal chance to succeed, and that the economic system in the United States is just.

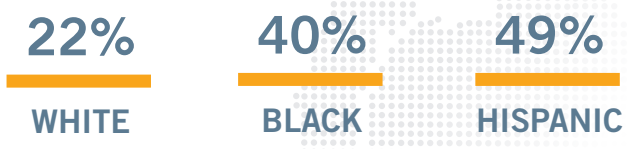
---

*Do you think children today will be better off than their parents?*



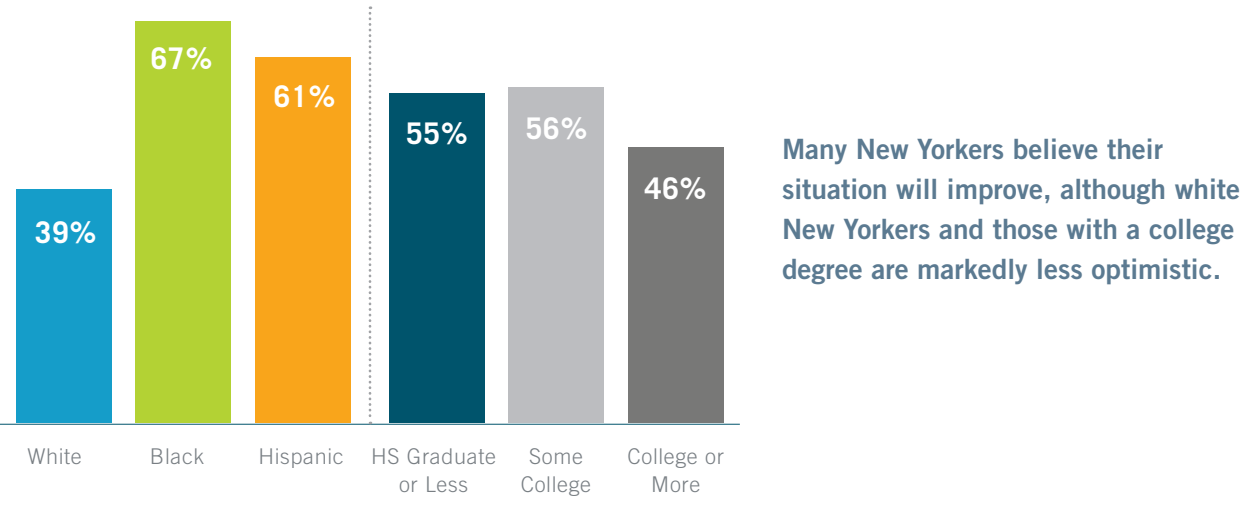
New Yorkers who have experienced poverty are more likely than those who have never experienced poverty to express optimism that children today will do better than their parents financially.

White New Yorkers expressed more pessimism than black and Hispanic New Yorkers about the chances of their own situations improving, and were less likely to believe that children will be better off than their parents.



White New Yorkers were much less likely (22%) than black (40%) and Hispanic New Yorkers (49%) to believe children today will be better off financially than their parents. In fact, Hispanics were more than twice as likely as whites to expect their children's lives to be better than their own.

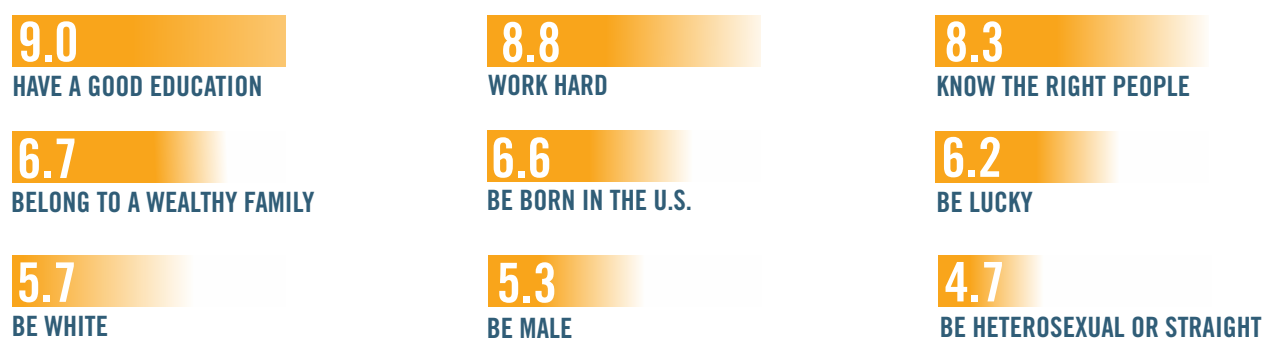
Over the next year, do you expect your situation to improve? (Improve a lot or a little)



When asked what drives chances of achieving success, New Yorkers cited having a good education, hard work, and knowing the right people. They less often cited factors like being male, white, or heterosexual.



Rating importance of different factors for getting ahead in life (on a scale of 0 to 10).



---

# Introduction

Since 2012, Robin Hood and Columbia University have collaborated on the Poverty Tracker, an innovative longitudinal survey of New Yorkers that tracks the dynamics of income poverty, material hardship, health problems, and other forms of economic and social well-being. The Poverty Tracker thus provides a powerful tool for assessing the fortunes of New Yorkers over time. In support of Robin Hood's goal of understanding mobility out of poverty, we added a battery of questions in 2018 to the Poverty Tracker that gauge New Yorkers' perceptions and opinions about their and their children's chances of achieving mobility in the future. We call this our "Hope and Opportunity Module." This brief summarizes the key results emanating from the first fielding of this survey module to a representative sample of New Yorkers. We are thus able, for the first time, to provide comprehensive data on how New Yorkers see opportunity in the city and the country, as well as how they see their own and their children's opportunities for achieving success.

The current panel of the Poverty Tracker follows roughly 4,000 New Yorkers across all boroughs and all walks of life. The sample was recruited in 2015, meaning the team at Columbia has followed this panel of New Yorkers for over three years as of this writing. In our 33-month survey (33 months after initial recruitment) we added questions about hope and opportunity. We also asked respondents about their experiences of discrimination across a range of domains such as employment, housing, and civic participation, and about perceptions of being treated unfairly in everyday life. We will publish these findings in a future brief.

---

## How do New Yorkers view the economic system and opportunity in the United States?

Our findings indicate New Yorkers overwhelmingly believe that, in the United States, not everyone has an equal chance, and a majority think that the economic system is unfair. Seventy-one percent of New Yorkers report that in this country we do not give everyone an equal chance (Figure 1A). Adding to this, over half of respondents say the economic system in the U.S. is unfair.

We found that the way New Yorkers view the playing field varies based on their experiences of poverty and hardship. We look at these questions again in Figure 1B, categorizing responses based on whether a subject has never been in poverty, always been in poverty, entered poverty, exited poverty, or moved in and out of poverty over time. In Figure 1C, we view these results through the lens of experiences of hardship. We define the “exited” groups as those who began in poverty or hardship but were no longer in poverty or hardship in either of the following years. Entering poverty or hardship is defined the same way but in reverse. New Yorkers who have experienced an entry into either poverty or hardship were the most likely to say that not everyone in this country is given an equal opportunity. Conversely, those who experienced a stable exit from poverty were more likely to believe everyone has an equal chance of success, even more so than respondents who had never been in poverty. Likewise, respondents who have exited poverty were the least likely to feel that the economic system is unfair. New Yorkers who have always experienced either poverty or hardship, and those who move in and out of poverty and hardship, were more likely to feel that the system is unfair.

FIGURE 1A

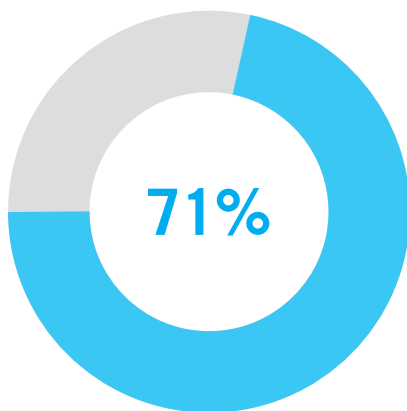
---

### Fairness and Opportunity in the United States

---

One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance.

**(Agree or Strongly Agree)**



Do you think the economic system in the U.S. is fair?

**(Unfair)**

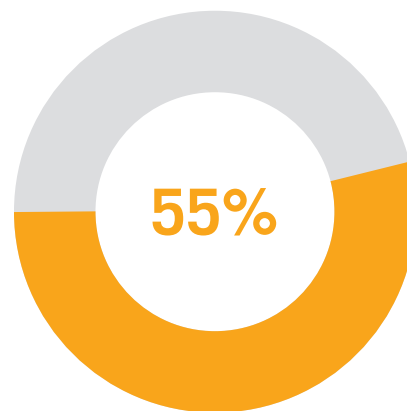
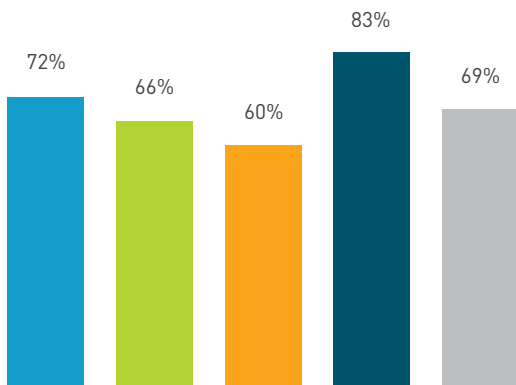


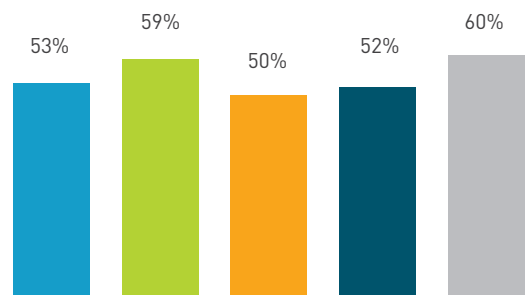
FIGURE 1B

## Fairness and Opportunity, by Movement In and Out of Poverty

One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance.  
**(Agree / Strongly Agree)**



Do you think the economic system in the U.S. is fair?  
**(Unfair)**

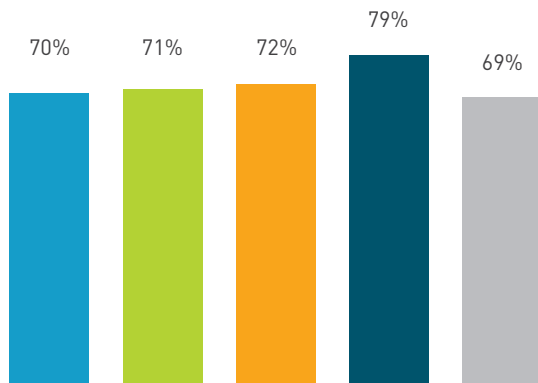


● Never in Poverty ● Always in Poverty ● Exited Poverty ● Entered Poverty ● Moved In and Out

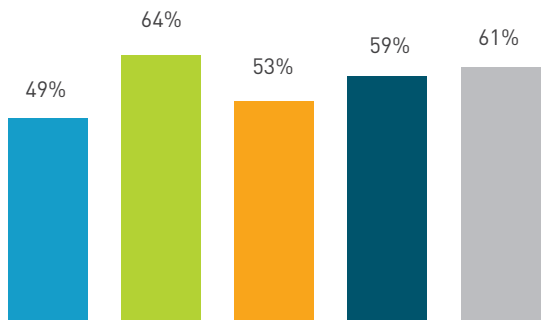
FIGURE 1C

## Fairness and Opportunity, by Movement In and Out of Hardship

One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance.  
**(Agree / Strongly Agree)**



Do you think the economic system in the U.S. is fair?  
**(Unfair)**



● Never in Hardship ● Always in Hardship ● Exited Hardship ● Entered Hardship ● Moved In and Out

---

## How do New Yorkers view the present and future in the United States?

To understand the direction that New Yorkers believe the country is moving in, we asked about the present and future in the United States. As illustrated in Figure 2A, only 39 percent said life in America is better for people like themselves than it was 50 years ago, and only 35 percent said they thought children would grow up to be better off financially than their parents. Once again, those experiencing poverty or material hardship held more pessimistic views about how much things in the United States have improved. Those who entered into poverty or hardship were less likely to feel that the country had improved in the past 50 years, as seen in Figures 2B-C. However, those who never experienced poverty or hardship were the least optimistic that children today will grow up to surpass their parents' economic status. Poor and struggling New Yorkers seem more hopeful that their children will have better economic futures. Optimism about the future also differed by race (Figure 3). White New Yorkers were much less likely than black and Hispanic New Yorkers to believe children today will be better off financially than their parents. In fact, Hispanics were more than twice as likely as whites to expect their children's lives to be better than their own.

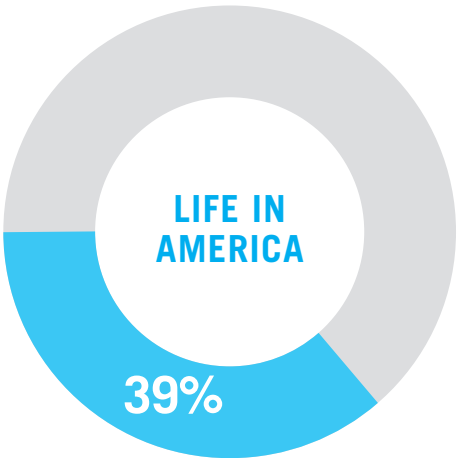
FIGURE 2A

---

### Views of the Present and Future in the United States

---

In general, would you say **life in America** is better or worse than 50 years ago? **(Better)**



Do you think **children** today will be better or worse off than their parents? **(Better)**

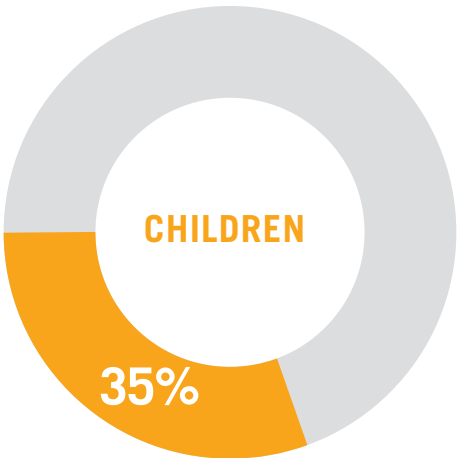


FIGURE 2B

## Views of the Present and Future in the U.S., by Movement In and Out of Poverty

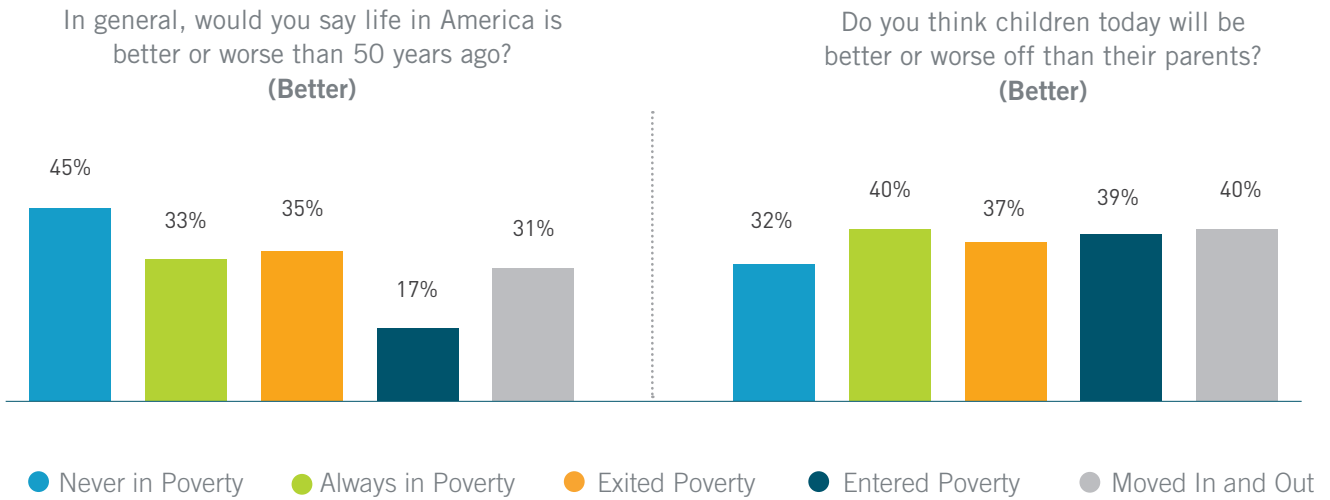
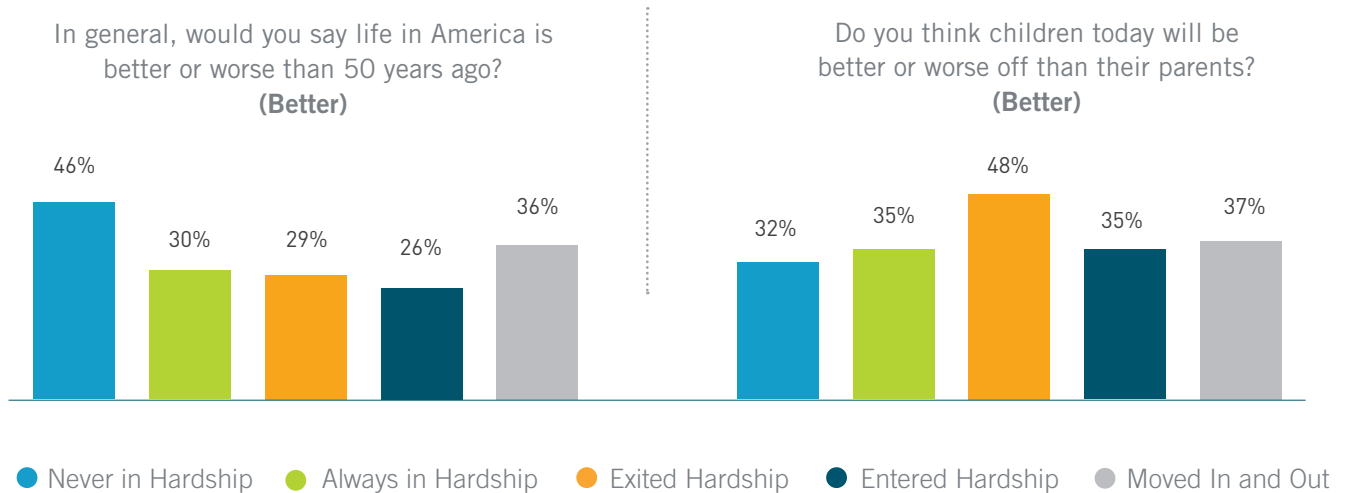


FIGURE 2C

## Views of the Present and Future in the U.S., by Movement In and Out of Hardship



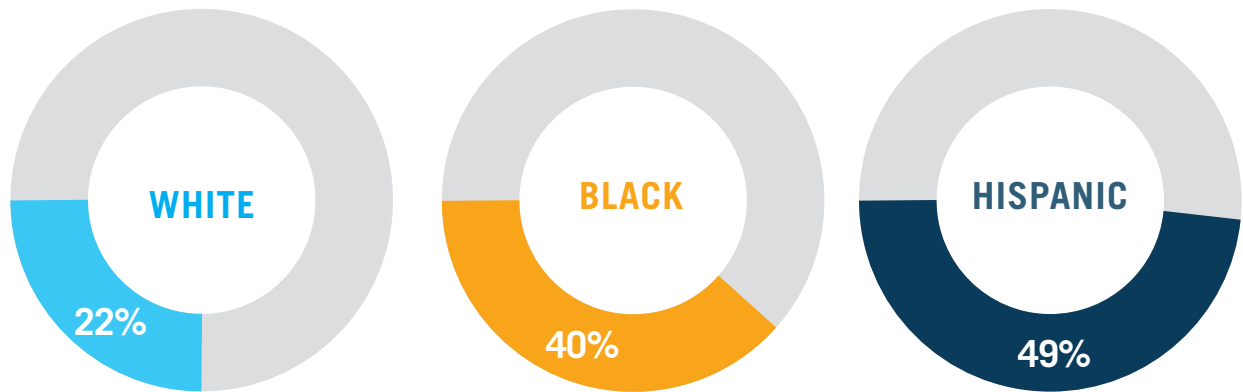


---

FIGURE 3

## Believe Children Will Be Better Off Than Their Parents

---



---

## What do New Yorkers view as the critical factors to personal economic success and life improvement?

In order to better understand the factors that contribute to New Yorkers' beliefs about opportunity, we asked respondents to rate how important each of nine factors are in terms of getting ahead in life (on a scale of zero to 10). Table 1 contains the average rating for each factor listed. New Yorkers ranked having a good education and working hard as having the largest impact on getting ahead in life. However, they also believe that knowing the right people and coming from a wealthy background are important factors for achieving success, which adheres to the overall perception of injustice in the American economic system. While New Yorkers rated individual characteristics such as race, gender, and sexual preference of lower import for advancement, they still gave each about a five out of 10 rating. These findings suggest that while New Yorkers believe a person's efforts at work and school are important, they also believe their background in terms of class, gender, and race impact their ability to get ahead.

---

**TABLE 1**

## Rating Importance of Different Factors for Getting Ahead in Life

---

— (ON A SCALE OF 0 TO 10) —

**9.0**

**HAVE A GOOD EDUCATION**

**8.8**

**WORK HARD**

**8.3**

**KNOW THE RIGHT PEOPLE**

**6.7**

**BELONG TO A WEALTHY FAMILY**

**6.6**

**BE BORN IN THE U.S.**

**6.2**

**BE LUCKY**

**5.7**

**BE WHITE**

**5.3**

**BE MALE**

**4.7**

**BE HETEROSEXUAL OR STRAIGHT**

---

## How do New Yorkers view their personal futures and opportunities?

Overall, most New Yorkers express a rather dour perception of the opportunity structure in the United States. Despite these findings, we found that a remarkable number of New Yorkers remain optimistic about their personal futures. We asked respondents to imagine a ladder representing their own lives, with steps numbered from zero to 10 (zero being the worst possible life and 10 the best). Respondents selected which step of the ladder they felt they stood on, as well as which step they thought they would stand on five years from now. Figure 4A shows that, on average, New Yorkers rank their lives at about six out of 10, and in five years they expect to be closer to an eight. These findings indicate that, generally, New Yorkers expect their lives to improve. Those who start out with a lower current rating often anticipate the most improvement over the next five years. As shown in Figures 4B-C, respondents who are consistently below the poverty line or struggling with material hardship may rate their current life about one step lower than the average, but their five-year projection is similar to that of subjects who have never been in income poverty or hardship. New Yorkers who have experienced unstable financial circumstances, such as entering or moving in and out of poverty, also remain optimistic about their five-year trajectory.

FIGURE 4A

## Difference in Current Life Rating and Five-Year Projection



FIGURE 4B

## Life Rating and Five-Year Projection, by Movement In and Out of Poverty

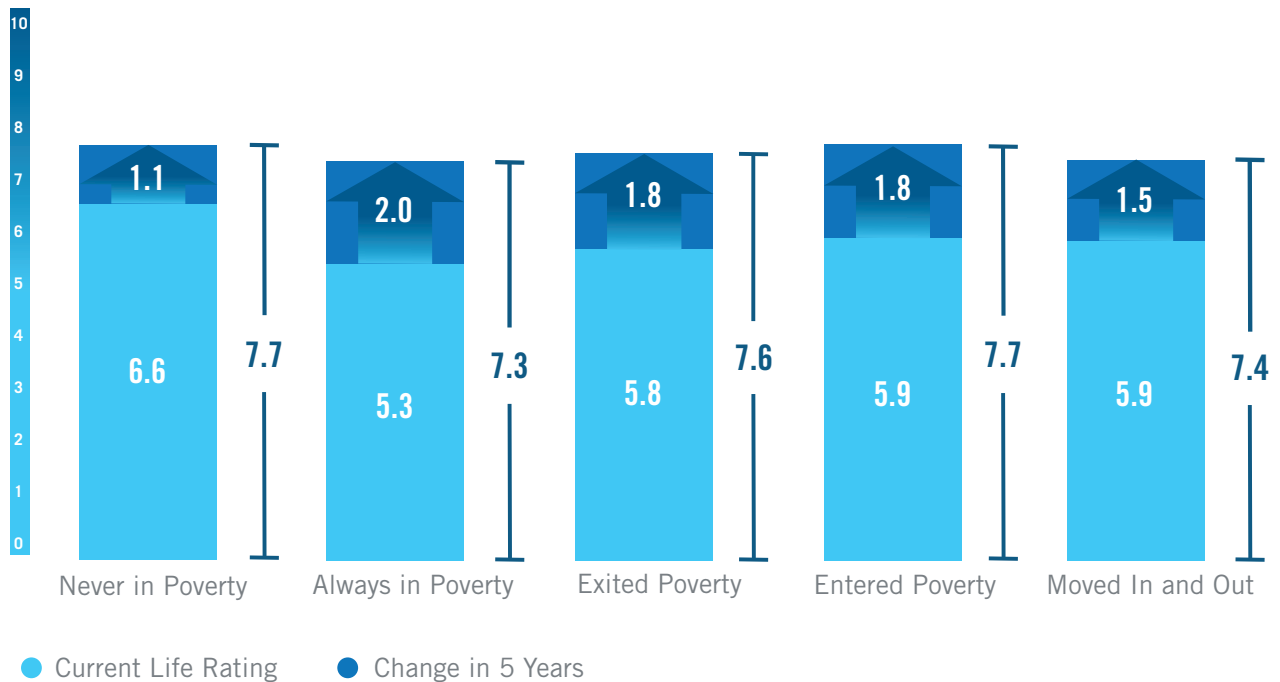
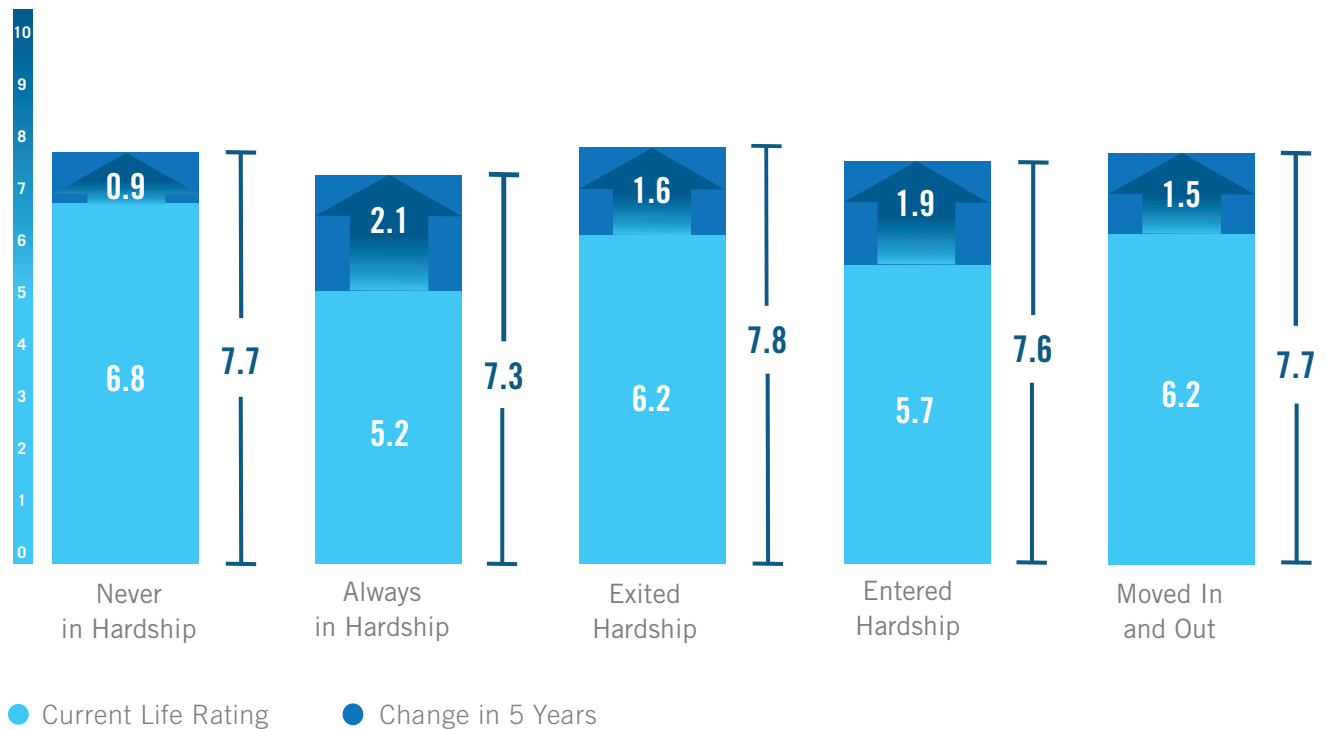


FIGURE 4C

## Life Rating and Five-Year Projection, by Movement In and Out of Hardship



When we compare rankings by demographic groups, we continue to see that while some groups rank their current situation poorly, most still believe their lives will be better in five years. Again, groups who are typically considered disadvantaged had the biggest differences in their current life rating compared to their expected rating. Figure 5A shows that 18- to 34-year-olds and black New Yorkers said their lives would be over two points better five years from now (representing the largest differences seen between current and future life rating). In Figure 5B, we see that women expect more improvement in five years than men do, and those with less than a college education anticipate greater improvement than those with a college degree or more. Foreign- and U.S.-born New Yorkers expect similar rates of improvement over five years. On the flip side, those with a severe health problem predict less improvement over five years than those without such a problem (Figure 5B). This might be the result of an older cohort, for whom chronic health problems and the aging process may affect their projected quality of life. Despite their starkly different starting points, New Yorkers from different demographic groups and financial circumstances have similar predictions about their future well-being.

FIGURE 5A

### Life Rating and Five-Year Projection, by Age and Race

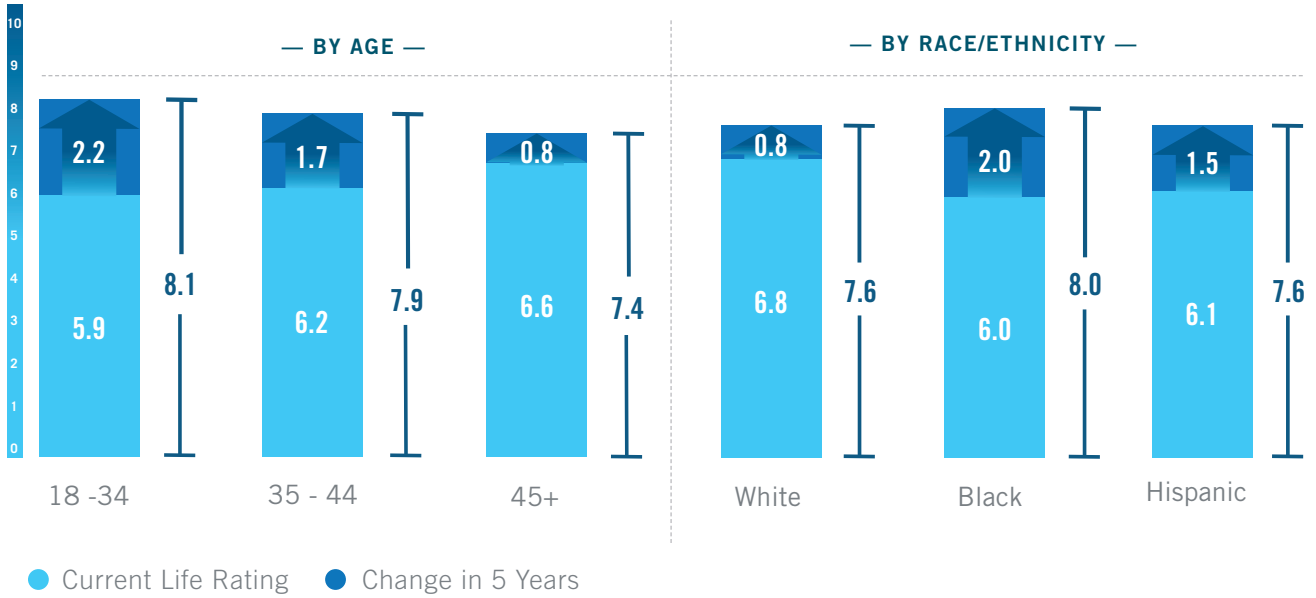
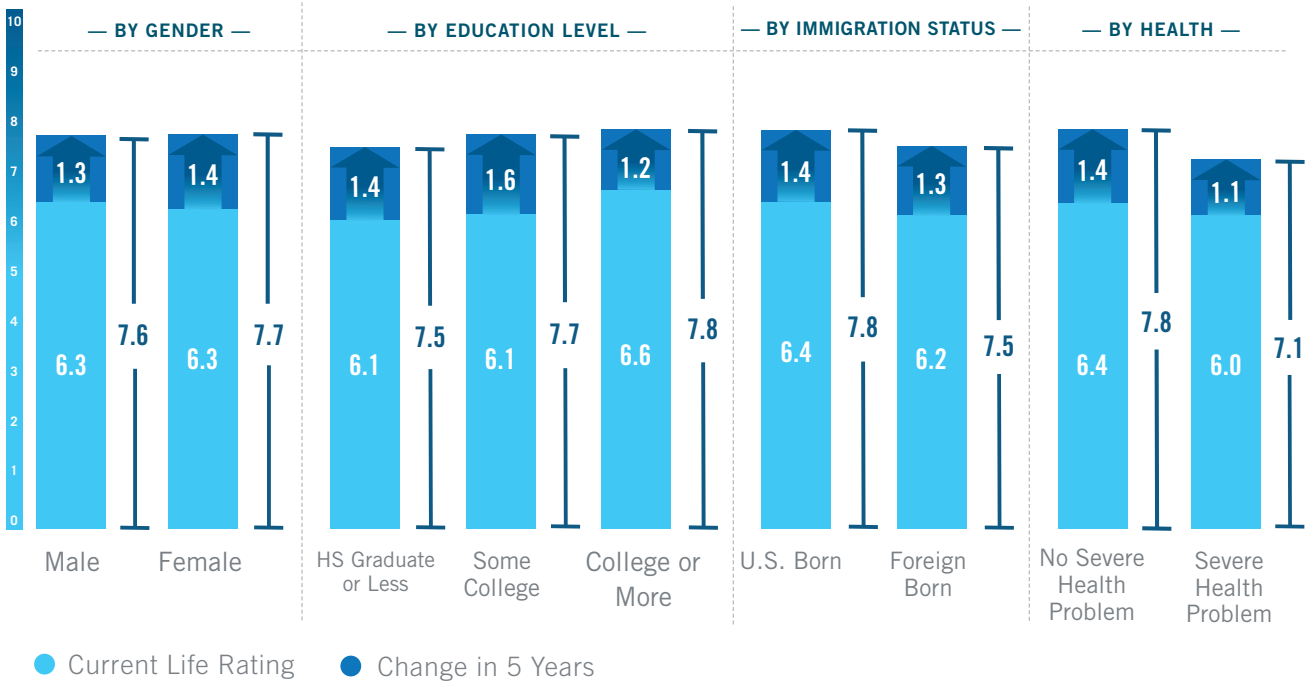


FIGURE 5B

### Life Rating and Five-Year Projection, by Gender, Education Level, Immigration, and Health Status

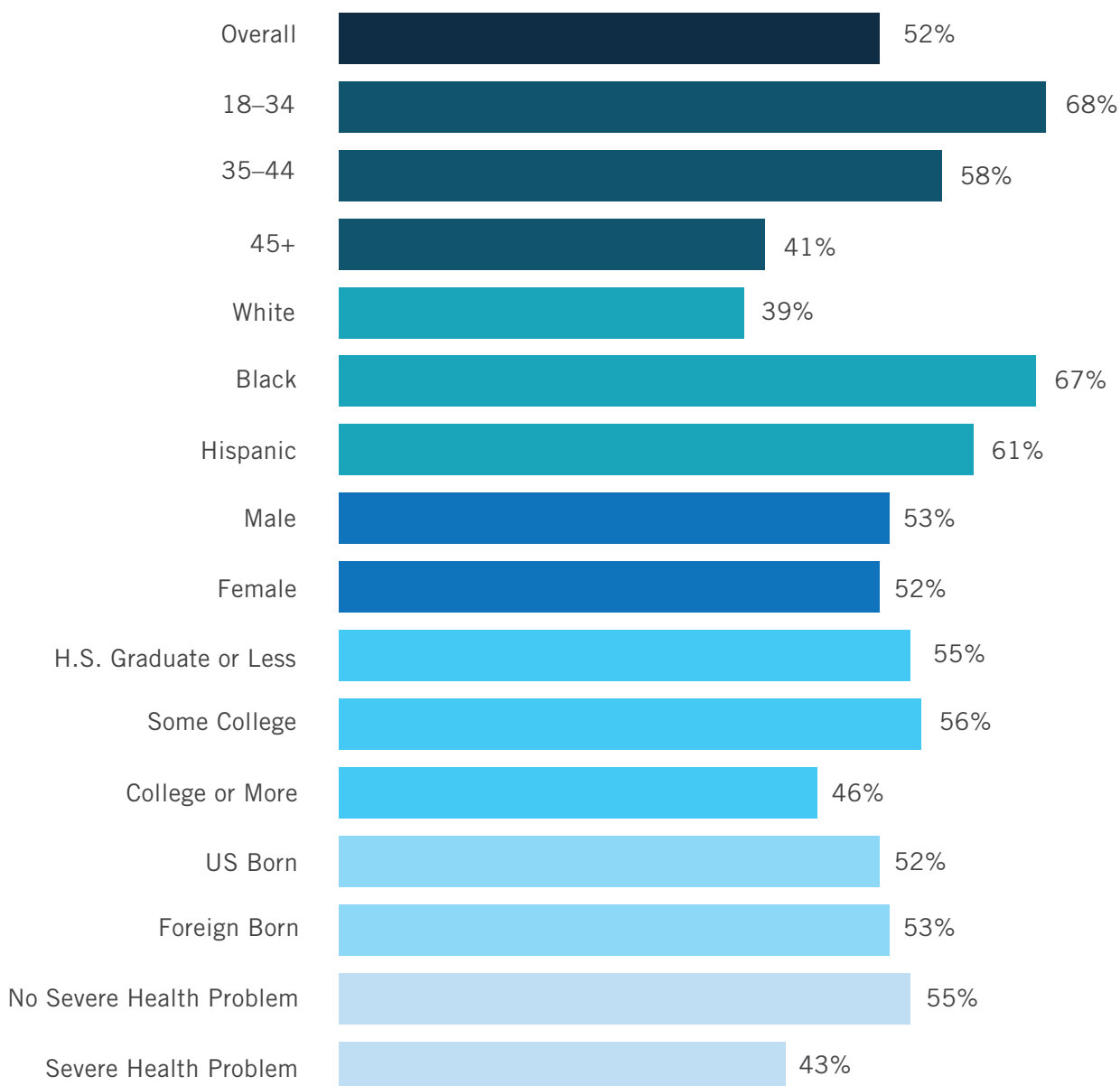


New Yorkers showed similar optimism when asked if their personal economic circumstances will improve over the next year. Figure 6A builds on the idea that most New Yorkers (52 percent) think their situation will improve a lot or a little, and that disadvantaged groups are often the most optimistic about the likelihood of their lives improving. We see again that 18- to 34-year-olds and black and Hispanic New Yorkers are the most

FIGURE 6A

## Over the Next Year, Do You Expect Your Situation to Improve? (Improve A Lot or A Little)

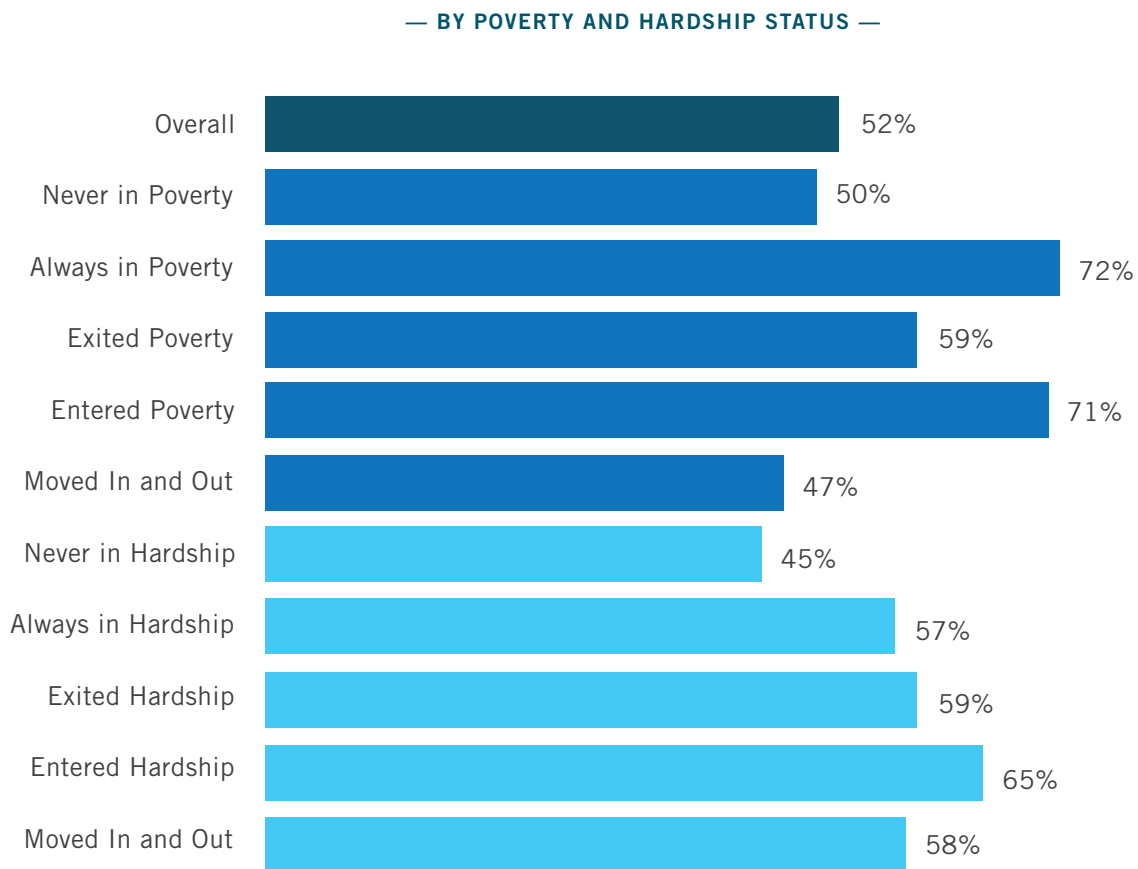
— BY AGE, RACE/ETHNICITY, GENDER, EDUCATION LEVEL, IMMIGRATION, AND HEALTH STATUS —



likely to think their situation will improve. Those with less than a college education expect more improvement than those who completed college or more. White New Yorkers, on the other hand, are less likely than other groups to expect their financial situation to improve. In Figure 6B, we see that the dynamics of entering and exiting poverty shape how hopeful New Yorkers are about the near future. Subjects who have experienced poverty and hardship, whether consistently or for a shorter period, appear most hopeful that their economic situation will improve over the next year. This was especially true of those who are always in poverty, and those who have recently entered poverty or hardship. In other words, people who have experienced persistent financial struggles, and those whose fortunes recently took a turn for the worse, seem most optimistic about the near future.

**FIGURE 6B**

## Over the Next Year, Do You Expect Your Situation to Improve? (Improve A Lot or A Little)



---

# Conclusion

New Yorkers feel pessimistic about the state of the country overall, believing that the economic system is unfair, that life has not improved in the last 50 years, and that children today will be worse off than their parents. Those who recently entered into poverty or hardship were very likely to believe that chances for success are unequal and the economic system unjust. Although New Yorkers demonstrated a belief that hard work and education are the most important factors in improving one's life circumstances, they also acknowledge the importance of individual connections and family wealth as contributing strongly to one's chances in life. However, New Yorkers demonstrate optimism when it comes to their individual prospects for financial and overall life improvement. This is particularly true of people who are struggling with poverty and material hardship, and for black and Hispanic New Yorkers. Rather than diminishing hope, persistent financial and material privation often corresponded with the greatest sense of optimism, such that New Yorkers of all backgrounds envision a similarly positive future for themselves, despite different starting points.