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Poverty in New York City: Social, Demographic and Spatial Characteristics, 1990-2019

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Table of Contents

Guide to Figures

Guide to Maps

Executive Summary

This report analyzes trends in poverty in New York City over a period spanning from the year 1990 to 2019. The data summarizes information about New York City's five boroughs using the American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Series (PUMS) for all years included in the analysis.[1] The years included in the study are the ACS from the years 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2019.

Poverty refers to people falling below the official poverty level, determined by family's total income for the previous year as a percentage of the poverty thresholds. The report assesses the characteristics of people in poverty by socio-demographic information such as sex, age groups, educational attainment, race and ethnicity, the largest Latino subgroups, nativity, and citizenship.

The analysis also includes a cross-sectional reading of poverty for the city of New York. Additionally, there is also a spatial analysis that aggregates poverty at the level of Public Use Micro Areas (PUMAs)[2], which illustrates the differential prevalence of poverty across space. The spatial component of the analysis is illustrated in a series of five maps.

This report has two main findings. First, the overall poverty level in New York City peaked in the year 2000, only to register a steady decline over the time period that followed. However, the decline in poverty rates was not equal across the board. Some salient examples are that in 2019, women were still more affected by poverty than men (17.4% and 14.6% respectively); poverty is a more persistent for older age groups (18.7% among people 65 years and older), and that the reduction in poverty was unequal depending on race and ethnicity.

Latinos and non-Hispanic blacks were more affected by poverty (21.4% and 19.4% respectively) compared to non-Hispanic whites and Asians (9.9% and 14.6%). And while the Puerto Rican population had the highest poverty rate (23.2% in 2019), Colombians registered the lowest poverty rates among the largest Latino subgroups in New York (10.8% in the same year).

The second main finding is that poverty is not equally distributed across space, and that these patterns persisted despite the general decline of poverty between the years 2000 and 2019. Essentially, poverty hotspots that were mainly located in the Bronx when poverty rates peaked, remained in the same geographical areas even after the general decline in poverty. Additionally, the highest poverty areas are also majority Latino and non-Hispanic black areas. Conversely, areas with low poverty rates are mainly also regions with higher levels of non-Hispanic white population.

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[1] Data for all years included is released by the Census Bureau and harmonized for public use by the Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota. Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020. https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V10.0.

[2] PUMAs are non-overlapping, statistical geographic areas that partition each state or equivalent entity into geographic areas containing no fewer than 100,000 people each.

It is important to observe that this report presents trends in poverty levels for the city of New York up to before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from the moment of the pandemic was not available at the time of this analysis. And while the pandemic is expected to have had an important impact on city poverty levels, this report can be seen as a snapshot of poverty at the precise moment before COVID-19 unfolded in New York City.

Introduction

This report analyzes the descriptive statistics of poverty in New York City for the last three decades. Data comes from four different years of the American Community Survey (ACS): 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2019. The analysis is divided into two sections. The first section is a descriptive analysis of the trend of and socio-demographic characteristics of poverty for the city of New York over the time period analyzed. The second section is a spatial analysis poverty at the PUMA level.

Poverty status is determined according to the ACS for all people except institutionalized people, people in military group quarters, people in college dormitories, and unrelated individuals under 15 years of age. The level of poverty is determined by the Census Bureau as a set of dollar value thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty.[3] If the total income of a person is less than the threshold, then the person is considered below the poverty level.[4] This reports crosses poverty status with socio-demographic characteristics of the population, including a set of variables related to the Latino population in the city.

The spatial component of the analysis includes a description of the spatial distribution of poverty rates across the city, aggregated to PUMA levels. This spatial aggregation allows to compare poverty across space and identify areas most affected by poverty and those least affected by it. As evidenced by the spatial analysis, there are hotspots of both high and low levels of poverty in the city, that are persistent over time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presumably impacted poverty across the board. However, data that reflect the consequences of the pandemic on poverty was being published and made accessible after the writing of this report. Nevertheless, the importance of this report is that it provides a snapshot of what poverty looked like immediately before the arrival of COVID-19 to New York City. And as becomes evident below, the context of poverty was one of decline.

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[3] For an extensive review of the evolution of the poverty threshold, see Fischer 1992, The Development and History of the Poverty Thresholds, Social Security Bulletin, Vol. 55, No. 1, Spring 1992, pp. 43 46. Available at https://usa.ipums.org/usa/volii/fisher_art.shtml

[4] For a complete definition of poverty levels by the Census Bureau, please refer to Definition of Poverty in The IPUMS Samples, available at https://usa.ipums.org/usa/volii/poverty.shtml

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Poverty in New York City

This section analyzes the sociodemographic composition of people living below the poverty threshold in New York City over the study period (1990, 2000, 2010, and 2019). Figure 1 reports the general poverty levels for New York City and its trend across almost three decades. After peaking in 2000 at 21.2% of the population, the proportion of people living in poverty had a consistent decline, reaching its lowest point in 2019 at 16.1%.

Figure 1
Percentage of the Total Population Living in Poverty
New York City, 1990-2019
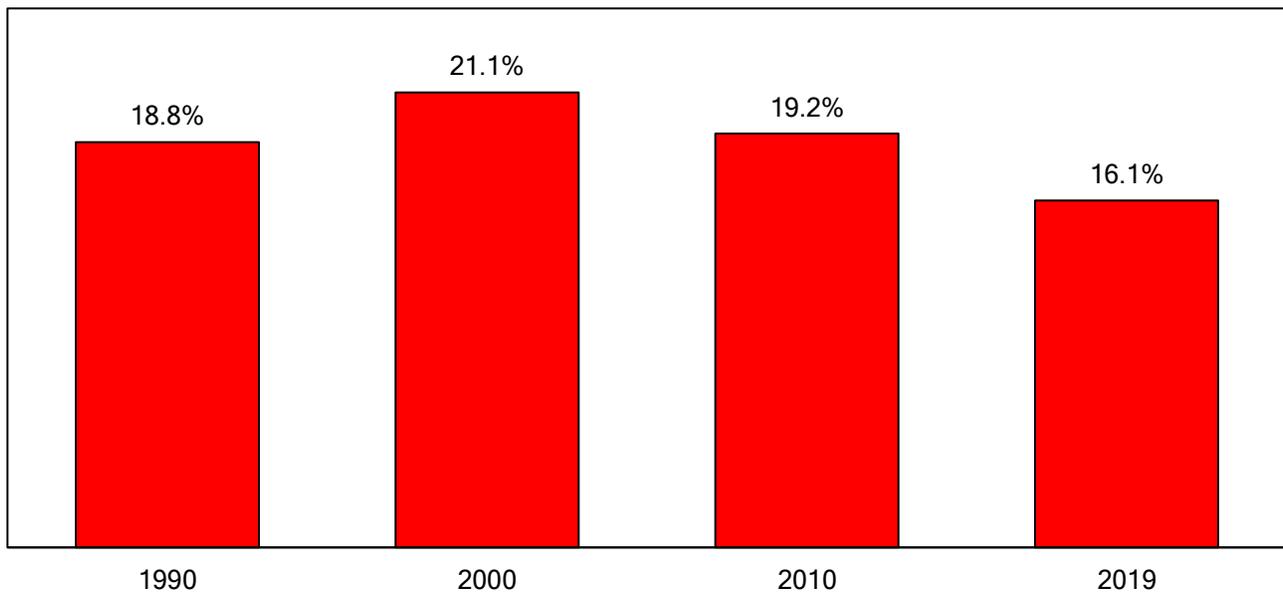
There is a clear gender gap in poverty levels in New York City. Throughout the years analyzed, women's poverty rates have consistently been both higher than men's poverty rates and the general rate for the city. (See figure 2.) In1990, 20.7% of women lived in poverty—a figure peaking at 22.6% in 2000 and declining to 17.4% in 2019. In contrast, men's poverty rates were 16.7%, 19.5%, and 14.6% during the same time.

In parallel to the decline of poverty, there has also been a reduction in the gap between male and female poverty. This reduction persisted during through the poverty increase registered in the year 2000. However, while poverty disparities between men and women decreased from a 4-percentage points difference in 1990 to a 2.8 percentage point difference, women were still more affected by poverty than men in 2019.

Figure 2
Percentage of the Total Population Lliving in Poverty by Sex
New York City, 1990-2019

■1990 ■2000 □2010 ■2019
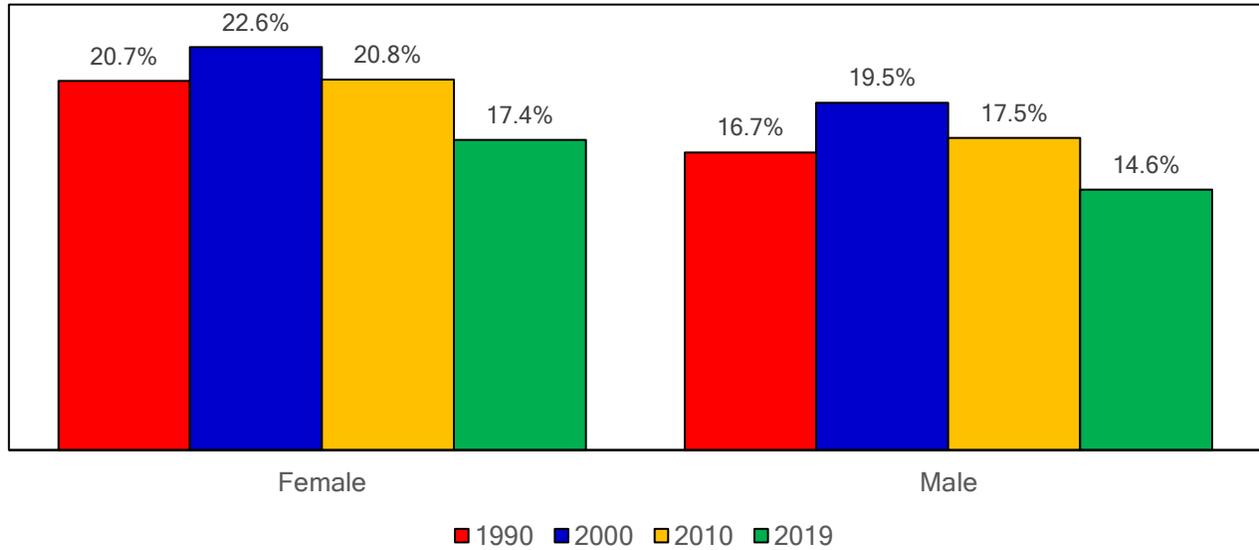
The age groups most affected by poverty over the period analyzed in this report were the youngest and the oldest. (See figure 3.) However, while poverty levels decreased among the younger age groups after the 2000-year peak (going from 21.4% to only 15% in 2019), following the general poverty trend over the last two decades, older age groups were worse off in the end (an increase from 16.5% in 1990 to 18.7% in 2019–the highest that year).

Figure 3
Percentage of the Total Population Living in Poverty by Age Categories
New York City 1990-2019


■1990 ■2000 □2010 ■2019
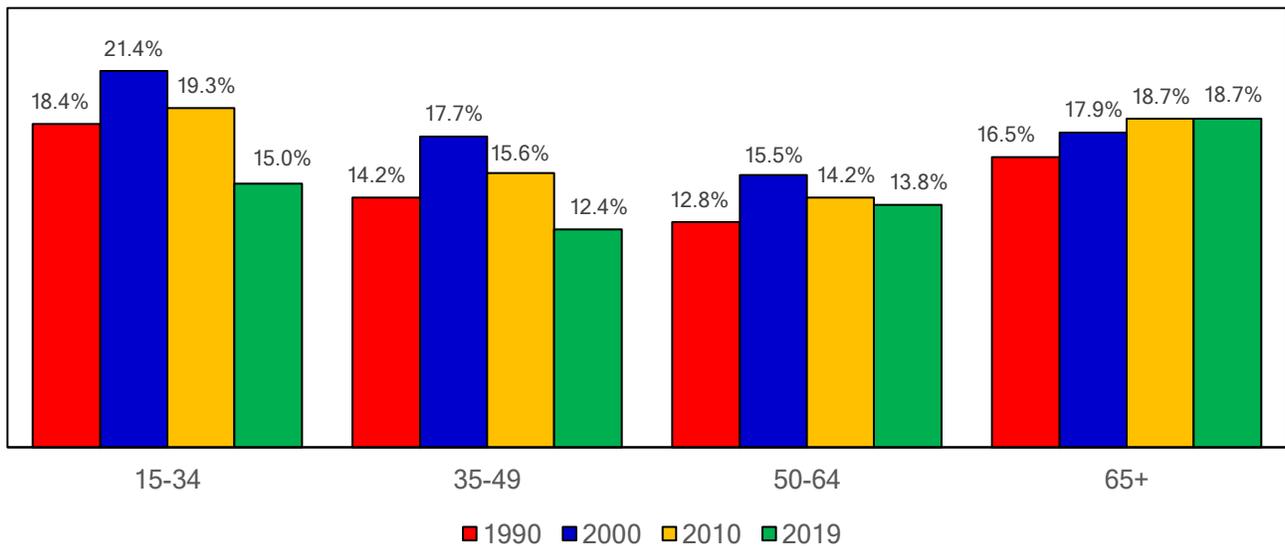
The data clearly suggest that poverty in older populations was a more enduring vulnerability over time compared to poverty in younger age groups. In other words, the oldest age groups experienced increases in poverty rates.

High school graduation seems to be the most important threshold for poverty when the latter is broken down by educational attainment. (See figure 4.) Poverty is particularly high among those without a high school degree. About one-quarter of the population without a high school diploma (26.0%) was living in poverty in 1990—a figure that increased in 2000 and 2010 but that lowered back down to 27.8% in 2019, making it the largest one among all groups that year.

Those without high school degrees had a poverty prevalence more than four times higher than those with the highest levels of educational attainment –BA degree or higher–: 5.9% versus 27.8% in 2019. The highest-educated was the only group with a one-digit poverty rate throughout the period studied in this report, which also was less than half of the overall city poverty prevalence in every year.

Poverty did not reduce but rather increased since the 2000-year poverty peak among two groups. Among people with a high school degree, poverty increased from 13.6% in 1990 to 18.3% in 2019. And among those with an associate degree, poverty increased from 9.6% to 12.2% during the same time period. While beyond the scope of this analysis, this finding highlights the need to further clarify the impact of secondary and post-secondary education on poverty reduction, especially in the context of poverty decline.

Figure 4
Percentage of the Total Population Living in Poverty by Educational Attainment
New York City 1990-2019
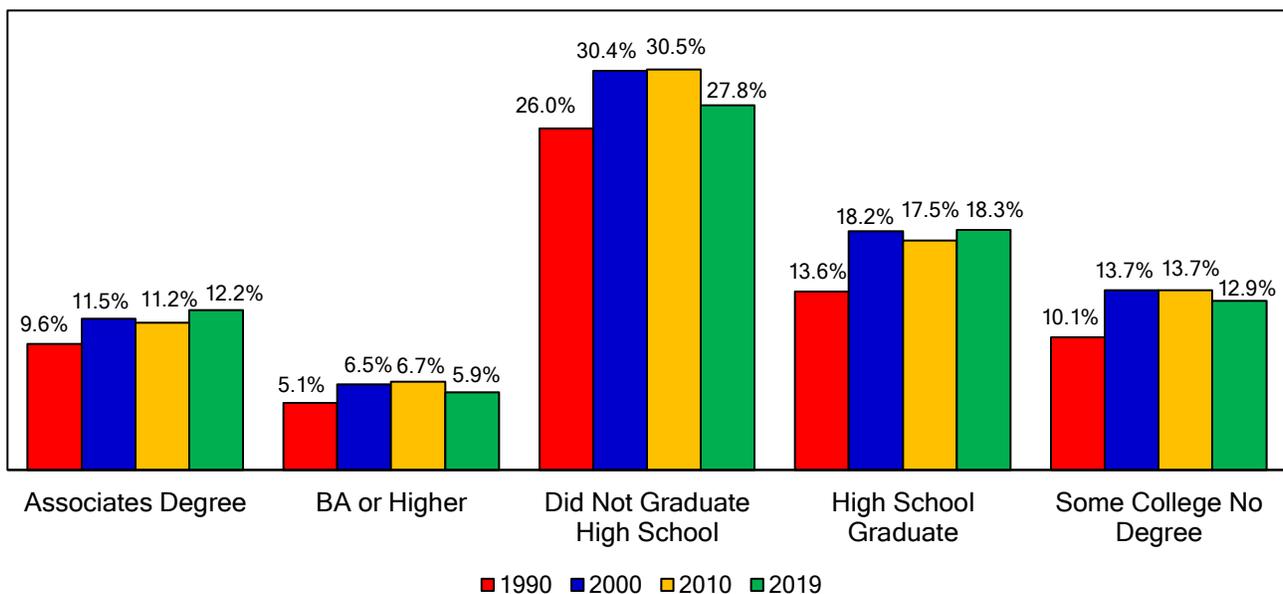
Both foreign- and domestic-born populations experienced a reduction in poverty levels that also reached its lowest values in 2019 after peaking in 2000. (See figure 5.) However, while the trend followed the same downward direction as the city poverty levels, there have been consistent although small differences depending on nativity. The foreign-born population has registered somewhat higher levels of poverty compared with the domestic born. In 1990, 17.6% of the foreign-born population was living in poverty compared to 19.2% among the domestic born. By 2019, the poverty rate among domestic-born people was of 16.7%, compared to a 15.1% poverty rate among the foreign born. Some caution is advisable when reading this variable given the fact that foreign-born people are not equivalent to non-citizens (a variable analyzed below).

Figure 5
Percentage of the Total Population Living in Poverty by Nativity
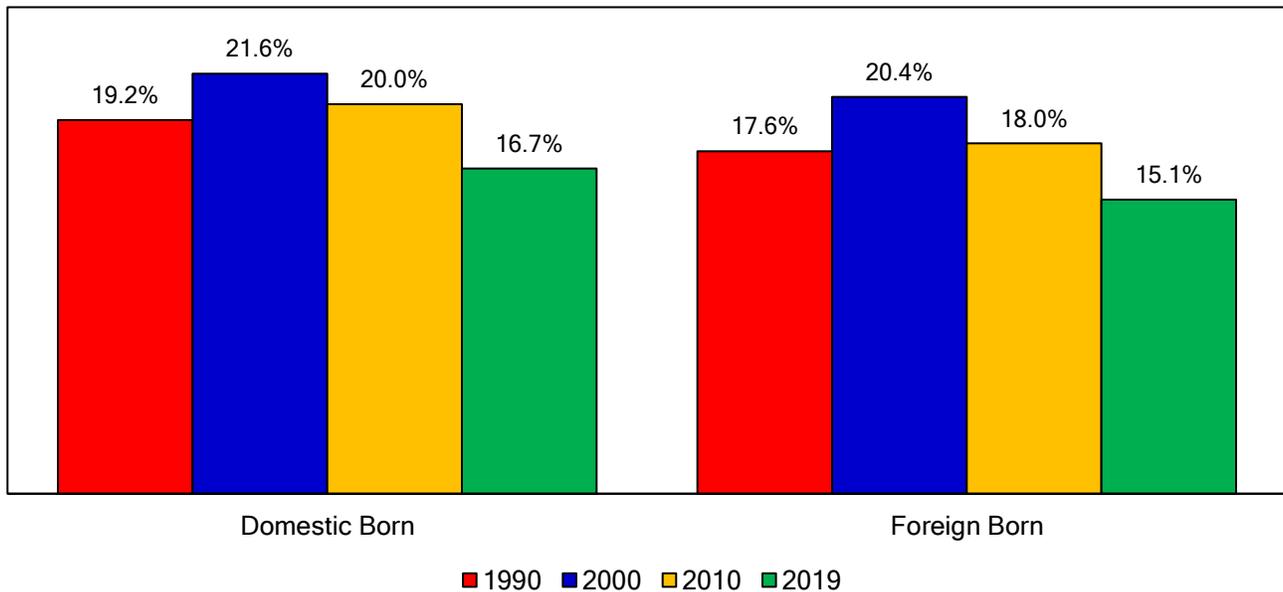New York City, 1990-2019

Figure 6 below reports poverty by race and ethnicity. Poverty decreased across the board in 2019 compared to the levels of the year 1990 but did so unequally depending on race and ethnicity. Two ethnic groups are salient: Latinos and non-Hispanic whites. (See figure 6.) The Latino population experienced the most dramatic reduction in poverty across the year studied, decreasing from 32.3% in 1990 to 21.4% in 2019. Despite this decrease, it was still the racial and ethnic group with the highest level of poverty across all years.

In contrast, non-Hispanic whites registered the lowest levels of poverty overall: 9.9% in 2019. That was less than half than the poverty rate of Latinos. Comparatively, poverty did not change that dramatically among non-Hispanic whites. In 1990, the percentage of non-Hispanic whites in poverty was 9.2%.

The non-Hispanic black population has consistently been most affected by poverty next to Latinos across all years. And while their poverty level has decreased from 23.4% in 1990, it still hovers around one in five (19.4%) in 2019. Although both the Latino and the non-Hispanic black poverty rates had the lowest levels of poverty registered in 2019 compared to previous years, they are still above the overall city poverty prevalence.

Poverty among the Asian population followed the general decline since the year 2000 (18.9%), and registered its lowest level since 1990, at a rate of 14.6 %, which is also below the city poverty rate.

Figure 6
Percentage of the Total Population Living in Poverty by Race/Ethnicity
New York City, 1990-2019
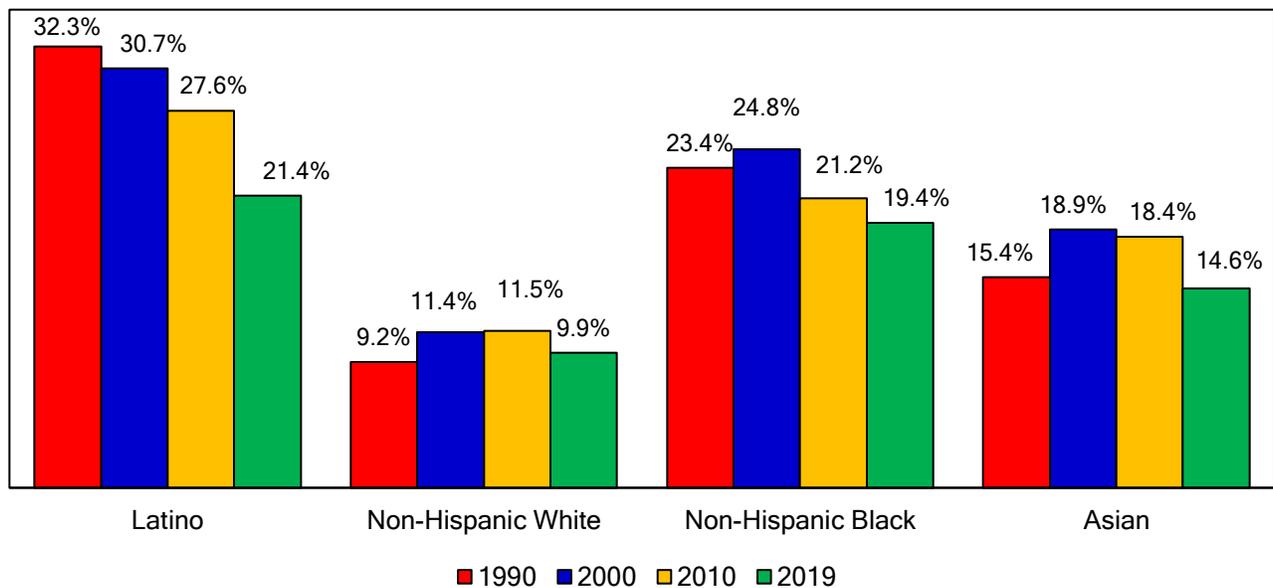
Although the Latino population saw an overall reduction in poverty, this trend was not the same when accounting for national origins. Figure 7 reports poverty levels for the five largest Latino groups by national origin in New York City.

Like the general trend, all main national groups experienced a reduction in poverty since the year 2000, but the Puerto Rican population remained the most affected by poverty in 2019 with a rate of 23.2%, going down from 37.9% in 1990. The poverty rate among Puerto Ricans was more than double of the city in 2019.

Puerto Ricans were not the only group by national origin that had higher poverty rates than the general city levels. The percentage of Mexicans and Dominicans living in poverty was higher than the overall city poverty rate in 2019, with a 20.1% and 19.7% respectively. However, Dominicans had the steepest

poverty reduction since 1990 of all national groups. Over three decades, poverty decreased almost 16 percent points, from 37.6% in 1990 (the second-highest that year) to 19.7% in 2019.

Colombians and Ecuadorians were the two national groups with poverty levels below the overall city rate in 2019 and the two lowest among all Latino subgroups. Colombians had a poverty rate of 10.8%, and Ecuadorians a rate of 12.4%.

Figure 7
Percentage of the Total Population Living in Poverty by Country of Origin
New York City, 1990-2019
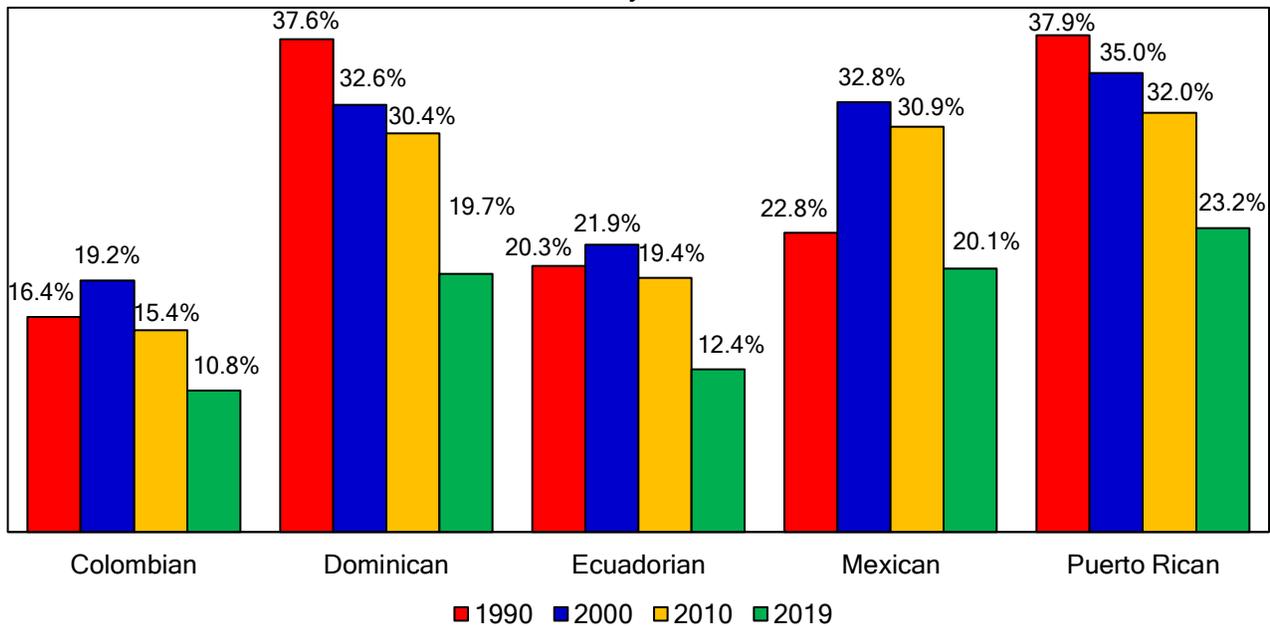
Poverty was not only higher among the largest Latino communities, but it seemed to be related to citizenship status as well. Citizens had consistently lower levels of poverty compared to non-citizens across all the years studied. For example, in 1990, the percentage of citizens in poverty was 18.2% compared to 21.9% among non-citizens. By 2019, the levels were 15.8% and 17.5% respectively.

That said, the gap in poverty between citizens and non-citizens seemed to have decreased during the same period. Despite a narrowing gap, non-citizens' poverty rate (17.5%) was nonetheless above the city rate, while citizens' poverty rate was 15.8%, which was slightly lower than the city poverty rate in 2019.

Figure 8
Percentage of the Total Population Living in Poverty by Citizenship Status
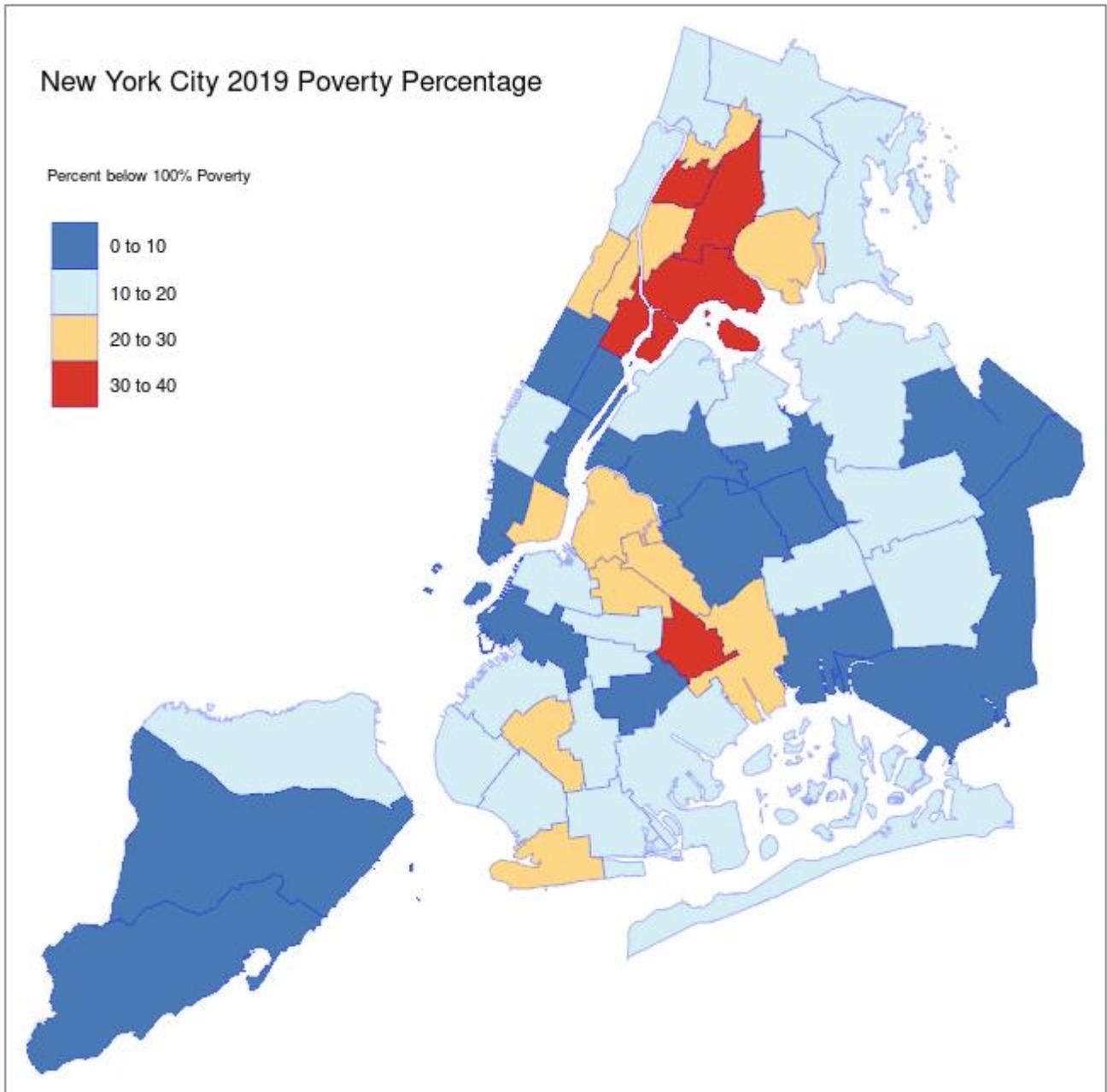New York City 1990-2019
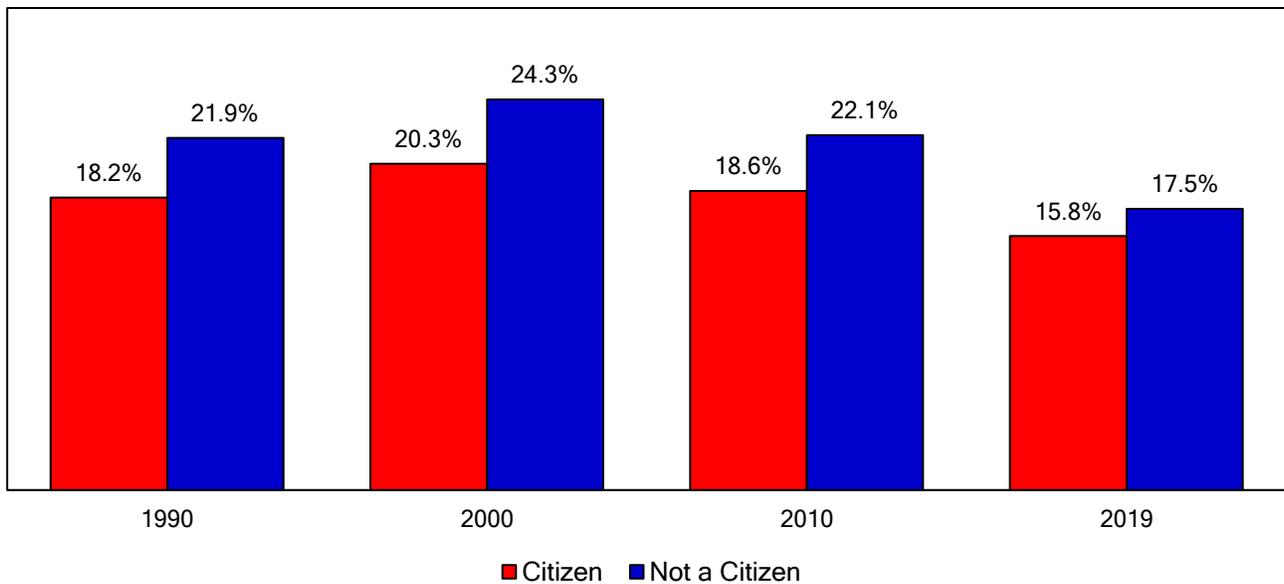
Spatially Located Poverty

Looking at poverty in the city of New York from a geographical perspective illustrates that it is not equally distributed across space. As map 1 suggests, there were hotspots[5] of both high and low levels of poverty in different boroughs of the city. In 2019 there was one main hotspot for high levels of poverty, and several hotspots for low levels of poverty.

The main hotspot of high poverty in 2019 (in red) was in the southern region of the Bronx. (See Map 1). Low poverty hotspots (in blue) were located in Manhattan, specifically, in the Upper East and West side; in east and southwest Queens; and in Staten Island. Compared to the 2000 levels, there was a lower percentage of people living in poverty in 2019, represented by the higher amount of blue areas in map 1 compared to the red and yellow areas in map 2.

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[5] A hotspot refers in this case to a geographical area with several subregions (PUMAs) of either high levels or low levels of poverty. High levels are those with poverty affecting over 40% of the PUMA population. Low level poverty are those PUMAs with less than 10% poverty in its PUMA population.

Map 1
Poverty Distribution
New York City, 2019

New York City 2019 Poverty Percentage

Percent below 100% Poverty

0 to 10
10 to 20
20 to 30
30 to 40

Map 2
Poverty Distribution
New York City, 2000

New York City 2000 Poverty Percentage

Year 2000 -br-Percent below 100% Poverty

0 to 10
10 to 20
20 to 30
30 to 40
40 to 50
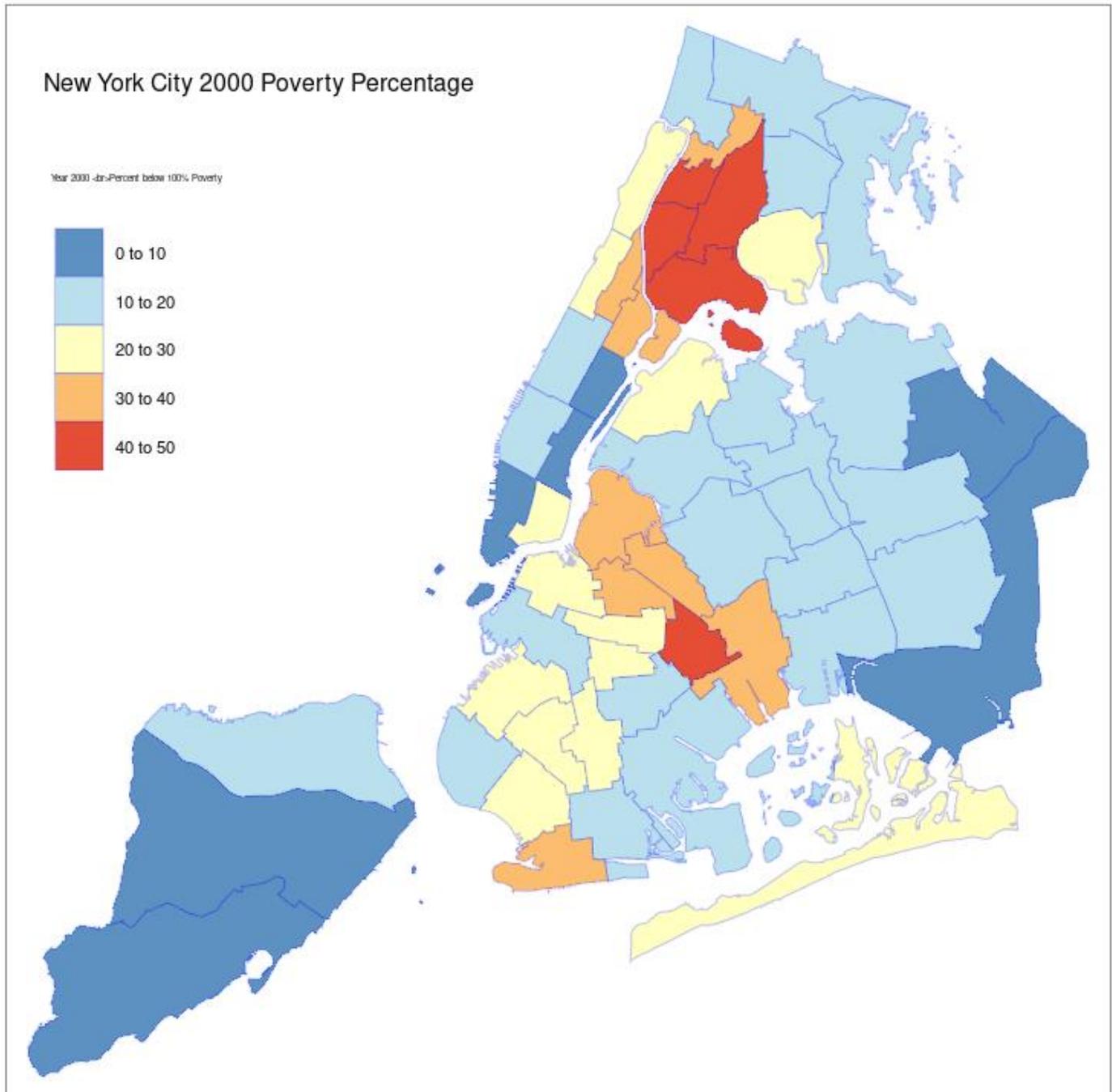
Two closely intertwined structural characteristics of poverty in New York City are how persistently poverty both remained in the same area, and how it affects Latino and non-Hispanic Blacks. The areas most affected by poverty have changed little over a decade. Map 2 shows the hotspots of high and low

poverty of the year 2000, when poverty rates for the city peaked. While all areas had lower rates of poverty in 2019, they are geographically located in the same PUMAs. That is, the Bronx poverty hotspot of 2019 was also a hotspot a decade earlier.

The decrease in poverty also varied across Boroughs. The PUMAs with 10 or more percentage-point decreases in poverty were mainly located in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and less so in the Bronx and Queens. In Manhattan, both Washington Heights / Inwood as well as Central Harlem had the highest reduction in poverty rates compared to 2000. In Brooklyn, Bedford Stuyvesant, Williamsburg / Greenpoint, Bushwick, and Flatbush all had more than 10 percentage-point differences in poverty rates, compared to the rates of 2000. In the Bronx, Highbridge / S. Concourse and Kingsbridge Heights / Mosholu were the two PUMAs that had a 10 percentage-point difference with their 2000 poverty rates. In Queens, Corona Astoria and Elmhurst / Corona had poverty rates around 9 percentage points lower than their poverty rates of 2000.
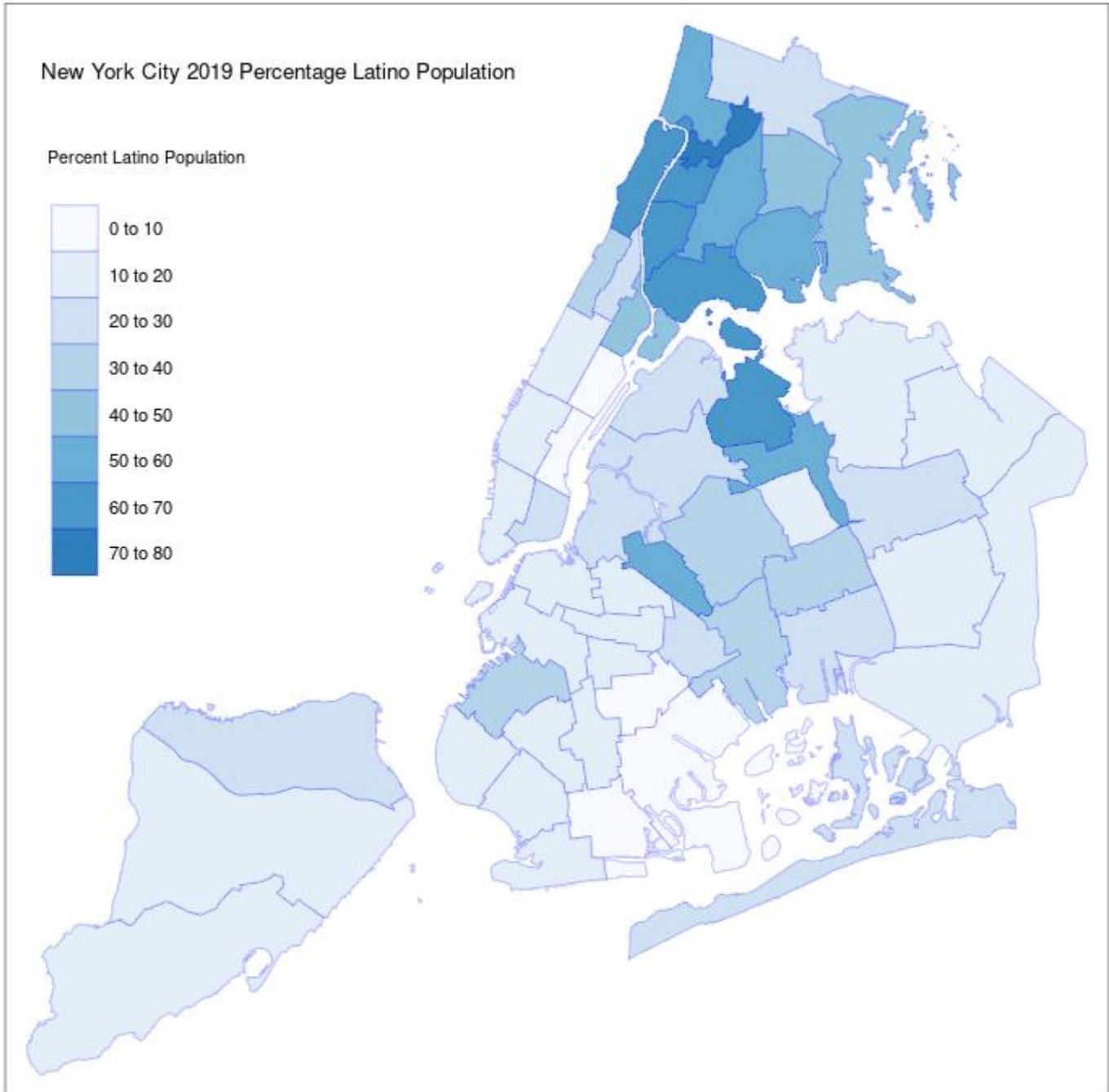
There were a handful of PUMAs where, contrary to the trend, poverty increased compared to 2000. In the Bronx, specifically in Throgs Neck / Co-op City, poverty in 2019 was 3 percentage points higher than in 2000. And in Flushing / Whitestone Queens, there was a 3.5 percentage-point increase. Besides these geographies, poverty did in general decrease in 2019.

The poverty hotspots overlapped with a higher concentration of Latino population. (See Map 3). Aside from the South Bronx areas, Spanish Harlem in Manhattan is the only PUMA region outside of the Bronx where high poverty areas were at the same time a majority Latino area. In all these areas, the second largest population is non-Hispanic Black.

The only other PUMA with poverty affecting over 40 % of its population in 2019, was Brownsville/Ocean Hill, in Brooklyn. There, the majority population is non-Hispanic Black, and its second largest population is Latino.

The hotspots for low poverty levels are mainly also geographical regions with higher levels of non-Hispanic white population. The exception was Queens, where PUMA regions with low levels of poverty coincide not only with majority non-Hispanic white populations. Elmhurst/Corona is at the same time a low poverty area, with a majority Latino population. Sunnyside/Woodside and Bayside/Little Neck had both a majority Asian population and a poverty rate below 10%. And majority non-Hispanic Black Bellerose/Rosedale, in east Queens was also a low poverty area. In all other hotspots of low poverty, the majority population was non-Hispanic White.

Map 3
Poverty Distribution among the Latino Population
New York City, 2019

New York City 2019 Percentage Latino Population

Percent Latino Population

0 to 10
10 to 20
20 to 30
30 to 40
40 to 50
50 to 60
60 to 70
70 to 80

Finally, maps 4 and 5 illustrate the spatial distribution of characteristics related to nativity and citizenship in New York City.
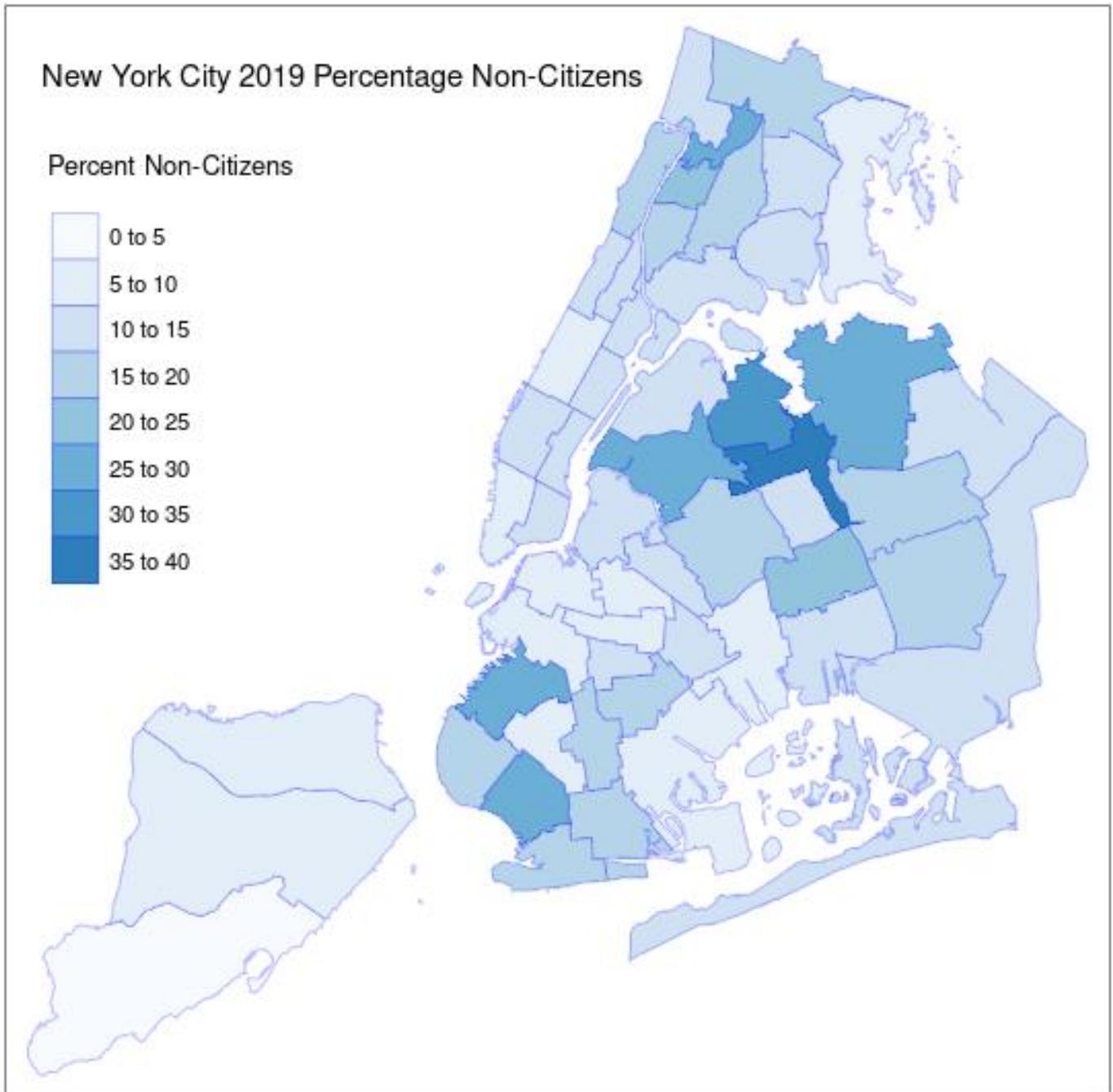
The poverty hotspot in the Bronx overlapped partially with a higher presence of foreign-born population, particularly in University Heights / Fordham (45%) and Morrisania / East Tremont (34%). In Mott Haven/Hunts Point, the percentage of foreign-born population was less than 30%. (See Map 4). By comparison, there are areas in the Bronx with even higher percentage of foreign-born populations had relatively lower poverty rates, like Pelham Parkway with 40% foreign-born and a 13.8% poverty rate.

Map 5 depicts that the majority non-citizen population in the city was in Queens. And these areas did not overlap with the highest levels of poverty; the contrary seemed true. The exception was in the Bronx, specifically in Kingsbridge Heights / Mosholu, where both the non-Citizen population and poverty hovered around 25% in 2019.

Map 4
Poverty Distribution among the Foreign-Born Population
New York City, 2019
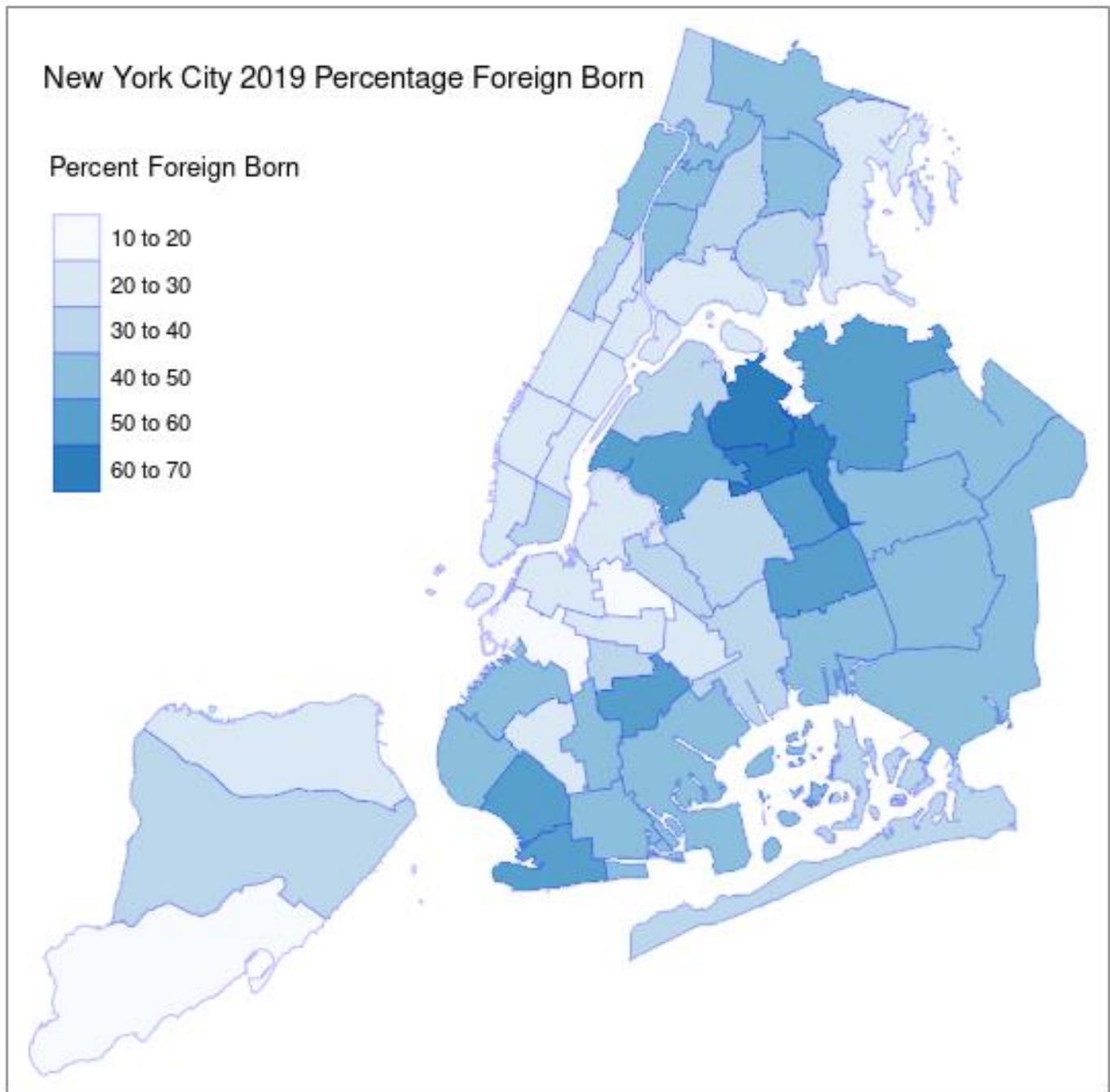
Map 5
Poverty Distribution among the Non-Citizen Population
New York City 2019

New York City 2019 Percentage Non-Citizens

Percent Non-Citizens

	0 to 5
	5 to 10
	10 to 15
	15 to 20
	20 to 25
	25 to 30
	30 to 35
	35 to 40

Conclusions

By the year 2019, poverty levels had declined in the city of New York since peaking in the year 2000. But while the general trend is one of decrease in poverty rates in the city, there are two aspects of poverty in the city that this report sheds light on. Namely, that the reduction in poverty was not equal among all groups and that poverty is persistent in its location.

First, the decrease in poverty rates was not equal among all demographic groups, and for some it even increased. Poverty was a more persistent vulnerability among older age groups, with poverty rates higher than the overall city rate. While disparities between men and women have decreased, it is still present, and women still have higher poverty rates than men. There is evidence of an increase poverty rate among those with secondary or an associate degree, which is telling in a context of poverty decline. However, not finishing high school is still associated with a higher poverty rate by far. There is also a racial dynamic to poverty. While Latinos and non-Hispanic Blacks have had the highest poverty rates according to race and ethnicity, non-Hispanic Whites have consistently had the lowest rates.

Second, poverty is not equally distributed across space, and despite its reduction, geographies that had the highest rates of poverty in 2000 were almost the same in 2019. So were the areas with the lowest rates of poverty. The hotspots for low poverty rates were consistently also the geographical regions with higher levels of non-Hispanic white population. And the opposite was equally consistent: High poverty areas were also majority Latino and non-Hispanic Black and persisted over time in the same geographical regions.

Taken together and acknowledging the context of a general decline in poverty, the data presented here points to structural realities of poverty in New York City that are persistent over time, and pervaded by gender, racial, and spatial dynamics. The data renews the need to further investigate the impact of poverty in the context of a possible increase in poverty, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic.