EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New York Social Indicators 1999 - Pulling Ahead, Falling Behind
By Marcia K. Meyers and Julien O. Teitler

The New York City Social Indicators Survey (NYSIS) is designed to take the "social temperature" of New York City. Every two years, we contact a representative sample of New York City families to collect data on their perceptions of life in the city and indicators of their quality of life and experience of hardship.

In our inaugural report, A Tale of Many Cities, we described life in the city as of 1997. We characterized New York as not one but as many cities - in which rich and poor, native and foreign-born varied widely in their quality of life, well-being, and levels of economic distress.

In this report we examine these same dimensions as of 1999, asking whether the quality of life in the city changed for the better or the worse between 1997 and 1999. This two-year period was one of strong economic performance in New York City, as in the rest of the country. It was also a period of substantial change in welfare, health care, and other public policies. The New York City Social Indicators provides a unique tool with which to track the consequences of these changes for well-being and inequality in the city, across a wide range of social indicators.

The data suggest three conclusions.

- In this two-year period, life improved in the city on many dimensions. In comparison to 1997, more families had some financial assets and at least moderate affluence, more considered their neighborhoods to be good and safe, fewer were crime victims, and more were satisfied with life in the city and with city services in 1999. But there was little improvement on indicators of distress and disadvantage. The same proportion of families were poor and had zero or negative assets in both years. The proportion of families living in poor quality and overcrowded housing did not change. And the proportion experiencing economic hardship may have grown.

- Disparities between the "haves" and the "have nots" in the city remained wide in 1999. Families who were poor, who were headed by an immigrant adult, or who had children, continued to lag their more advantaged counterparts in financial and economic resources, living conditions, and satisfaction with life in the city.

- Between 1997 and 1999, inequality grew between the "haves" and the "have nots" of the city on several dimensions. The gap between the rich and poor narrowed on some important dimensions, such as crime and neighborhood satisfaction, while it grew wider on indicators of wealth, financial hardship and satisfaction with the city. The gap between immigrants and non-immigrants grew wider on nearly all dimensions of economic and financial well-being, quality of life, and satisfaction. The gap between families with and without children also grew wider on most social indicators.

The 1999 New York City Social Indicators raise a question that should compel the attention of policy officials and citizens alike. As we move forward into the twenty-first century, are all the
city's residents moving forward together, or are the "haves" pulling ahead while the "have nots" fall even further behind?