

Work and Housing for 19th Century Poor and Paupers

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A recent television commercial promoted a popular fast food chain as a caring firm, worthy of our patronage, by showing that the company employs workers with Downs Syndrome at its restaurants. Indeed, in today's world an organization that treats mildly retarded persons as contributing members of society, and helps them to support themselves financially, is noteworthy. Yet in earlier times the physically and mentally impaired, along with single parents and others who could not *fully* provide for their own needs, were aided by specialized private organizations in *partially* meeting those needs. These poor of a century ago were only partly dependent on charity; society provided them with work opportunities that allowed them to contribute to their support. In many cases, this support included providing for housing needs.

Roots of Modern Problems

Today, government prohibits work compensated at less than a legislated minimum wage, and it effectively taxes the working poor at marginal rates that exceed 100 percent if the loss of housing assistance, food stamps, Medicaid, and other "welfare" benefits are considered. Many poor people thereby are kept off the first rung of the economic ladder to success. Our new President's view that welfare should not be a way of life suggests that welfare dependency has indeed *become*, for many, a way of life.

Through the 19th century, the social philosophy of the US had both liberal and religious components. The classical liberal viewed society as a community of self-interested people joined for mutual benefit, whereas the spiritually-minded felt that people were to treat each other with justice and charity out of a sense of moral duty. While these views might seem at odds, both supported the moral autonomy of the individual, the subjectivity of value, a limited role for government, and the need for work in fostering responsibility. Thus, classical liberalism and approaches based on religion proved remarkably compatible.

Then, in the 20th century, a new social philosophy emerged, based on the idea that human needs could be quantified and met by government through minimum wage legislation, social insurance, and the redistribution of wealth. In the US, this philosophy was best exemplified in the Progressive movement (in England, it was seen in utilitarianism and Fabian Socialism). In this new view, poverty was defined materialistically, with reference to a specified income, and work was viewed primarily as a means toward the end represented by that income. This view proved so attractive that it was embraced by many among both the modern liberals and the more spiritually-minded.

Housing Based on Need

The 19th century's poor could be classified into three groups: 1) workers who received supplemental aid through private charity; 2) those incapable of working, who were cared for by relatives or private charities, or were sent to *poorhouses* supported by local government, and 3) those who were capable of working but refused to do so. The latter were referred to as "paupers;" they were drifters, beggars, and alcoholics who lived hand-to-mouth. The social welfare system identified paupers as undeserving, and it therefore denied them assistance.

Government's role was relatively minor. Through a few publicly assisted poorhouses and some other limited relief programs, government provided only for those manifestly unable to work. A typical poorhouse was managed by a farm family that, in return for some support from local government, provided housing and care for the aged, the mentally and physically ill, and orphans who could not be placed for adoption. Conditions in these facilities were minimal; accordingly, the able poor generally tried to provide themselves with other forms of housing through wages and any supplemental charity they could obtain. In addition, relatives, friends, neighbors, and co-workers recognized the Spartan housing conditions offered by the

poorhouses, and therefore often were willing to open their own homes to the elderly, disabled, and orphaned. This willingness may have been facilitated by the extended social units that prevailed during the era; even rent-paying boarders, while ostensibly self-sufficient and "on their own," often shared in the family activities of those with whom they lived.

Because each poorhouse severely restricted the lifestyles of its residents, assignment to a poorhouse involved a trade of liberty for subsistence. Someone living in a poorhouse certainly could not engage in substance abuse, prostitution, or cohabitation. Furthermore, because those who were assigned to poorhouses had represented themselves as unable to work, they were not permitted to supplement their meager provisions with work "off the books." The stark terms of the deal offered by the poorhouse were attractive only to those who lacked any better housing alternatives.

Poorhouses in rural areas and smaller cities generally were sufficient to their task of providing shelter and other basic necessities. But in large cities, the private charity poorhouse system was challenged by the concentration of poverty and the breakdown of community associated with urbanization. (Even so, no American city could compare to London, the sometimes-dreadful conditions of which were described by Charles Dickens.) Chicago and other major urban centers were like missionary lands for the large private charities. They created networks through which orphans from cities were adopted by rural families, and the urban elderly were sent to live with rural relatives, however distant in bloodline or geography. Money flowed in the opposite direction, to schools, hospitals, and private relief agencies, especially church organizations, in the urban ghettos.

Housing Obtained Through Work

Viewing themselves as "anti-pauper" rather than "anti-poverty," private charities demanded that those who could work should be employed in order to receive assistance. "Need" was defined

Historical Notes

not merely as a lack of income, but rather as a lack of the dignity that accrues to the self-responsible. Early charities therefore tried to find jobs for those able to work, placing men as farm hands and laborers, boys as apprentices, and girls and women in boarding situations. Private agencies' tying of assistance to work is illustrated by Associated Charities of Boston, which in 1881 identified those worthy of permanent assistance as orphans, the aged, and the infirm, while those worthy of only temporary aid were persons temporarily incapacitated from work by sickness or accident. Others worthy of help included persons out of work but able and willing to work; those with insufficient earnings to support their families; widows who

banking to housing. Thus, charities in many cities sponsored self-help agencies that included thrift institutions, consumer cooperatives, and employment agencies, along with *workhouses* that assured that no person would be without food and a place to stay for lack of work. In some places, workhouses provided factory work for unskilled ex-convicts and other hard-to-place individuals. Among other types of work provided by the workhouses were wood yards for men and laundries for women. At a wood yard, a man would work for three to four hours to earn room and board. The younger men would chop, and the older men would stack the wood, which was sold, often to the working poor. Work was

mothers. The stay usually lasted from a month or two before the delivery until three to six months following. These facilities usually encouraged mothers to keep their infants, and included training in domestic, clerical, or practical nursing skills to enable them to do so. Even so, few single women were able to raise their children without receiving continued assistance from private charities and public agencies, and most got married. A 1925 study found that one third of such women married by their children's fifth birthdays and that another third also eventually wed. The remaining third typically lived with relatives or worked for employers that provided housing.

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Solutions That Caused New Problems

The effort necessary for an unmarried woman with limited job skills to raise a family was probably even more heroic at the turn of the century than it is today. Out of compassion for these women and their children, Illinois in 1911 adopted the nation's first "mothers' aid" program, thereby decoupling government welfare from the poorhouse for the first category of persons not manifestly incapable of working. By 1928, 42 states, the District of Columbia, and the territories of Alaska and Hawaii had followed suit. While these initial efforts were modest, they were the first steps toward replacing 19th century work-based social views with a 20th century need-based philosophy. No longer would income depend on work or aid be based on charity. Instead, housing assistance and other forms of welfare came to be seen as a right, with the benefits received to be based on need.

Today, America's urban poor live in near anarchic conditions, with abysmal housing, a breakdown of the family, and widespread violent crime. Ironically, the principal victims of this situation are the intended beneficiaries of 20th century welfare reform: unwed mothers and their children. Until those compassionate people who wish to offer help come to realize the great risk of destroying incentives for the poor to care for themselves, the situation will only get worse. ■

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had young children but were willing to work; and persons who, while lazy and intemperate, were not yet hopelessly so. Those needing discipline were assigned to "tough-love" volunteers.

Yet the requirement of work accomplished more than minimizing the burden of assistance and inducing contributions from the more fortunate. It also undergirded the working poor by protecting the wages paid to unskilled workers of normal abilities. Social activists of the late 1800s feared that the working poor would receive lower wages if they had to compete in the labor market against those who subsisted on public support but worked occasionally. They understood, as Adam Smith had argued a century earlier, that there is a natural floor under subsistence level wages since a worker's income must, over time, support the raising of a family. Social activists did not want, in short-sighted compassion, to undermine the floor wage by forcing the working poor to compete with those who could work for less than living wages because they received charitable support.

Private charities sought to provide the working poor with services ranging from

similarly apportioned at laundries, with younger women washing and older women mending and sewing. In addition to washing clothes, these facilities sold second-hand garments and rag carpets to the working poor. Workhouses provided not only housing, but also rudimentary day care centers for the children of single-mother residents.

As might be expected, unmarried women with young children were of special concern to the charitable institutions of the day. These organizations sought alternatives to the separating of households that resulted when infants were put up for adoption, boys were apprenticed-out, and girls were placed with the unmarried mothers in factory owners' barracks-like boarding houses. Private charities sought to enable these women to care for their children themselves, and single mothers came increasingly to provide housing for their families by working as live-in domestic servants.

By the 1920s, charity maternity homes sponsored by the Crittendon Mission, Salvation Army, and various churches provided temporary housing for approximately half of all unmarried