

Steve BURGHARDT
Michael FABRICANT

WORKING UNDER THE SAFETY NET

Policy and Practice with the
New American Poor



A SAGE HUMAN SERVICES GUIDE

47

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Dedicated with love and respect to

the late Steve Zeluck (1922-1985), a man of unbending principle and unwavering belief in the rights and dignity of working people, and

Jacinta Fernandes, who, by example, daily instructs on the true meaning of empowerment, courage, integrity.

INTRODUCTION

If ever there were a country where there should be no poor, it is the United States of America. With a Gross National Product in the trillions, 70% of the largest economic corporations in the world, and its overabundance of foodstuffs found in warehouses throughout its agricultural heartland, America is indeed rich. But it is also poor. The federal debt, too, is well over a trillion dollars; American corporations have let go 18% of their 1973 workforce as they struggle to remain competitive in a leaner, more capital-intensive world economy; and the overabundant heartland faces the largest number of farm foreclosures since the 1930s.

This book is about the poor America, one that in fact "has always been with us," but one also different in its form and much of its content than that of the past. Most of the poor have always served as a reserve pool of labor for the American economy, entering it in robust times, forced to leave it in lean.¹ This classical economic and social function continues its present role in determining the fate of the poor. It will be touched on in various chapters of the book. But many of the poor of late twentieth-century America have been affected also by the particular dynamics of the welfare state, especially since its drastic overhaul begun under the Carter administration and greatly intensified under Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

Some of these poor have been on welfare for years and perhaps view it in dependent ways that are coming to distress progressives and liberals. Others need social services and entitlements only at old age and view their new status with shame, others with fear. And there are many poor who have never been in need before and do not understand why in their most productive years they are unable to find work.

Conforming to classical functions in many ways, these American poor are yet often distinguishable in their needs, expectations, and service interests today. But they, and the human-service workers who work with them, are joined together by a further dynamic common to late twentieth-century America: a welfare state whose rate of growth is diminishing, not increasing. The corresponding strains created by this falling rate of growth, when coupled with the distinct needs of today's American poor, have led to as much variation in practice delivery as in any other time in American social-welfare history.

Working Under The Safety Net: Policy and Practice with the New American Poor examines these issues. For some, the welfare state appears a blessing; more entitlements and benefits are available now than at any time in American history. For others, working or trapped inside it, the net looks down at them like a web, ensnaring them in bureaucratic red tape and social stigma that makes their poverty even more painful. Recognizing these shifting perceptions, this book is designed with three purposes. The first is straightforward: to critically analyze the dimensions of American poverty and to present the forms of service intervention recently created to work with, and advocate, the poor. Each chapter will explore the arguments surrounding the existence and relative poverty facing each group. For example, there are sharply varying opinions today about the degree of hunger, the causes of homelessness, and the amount of welfare dependence. This descriptive overview will synthesize the discussion surrounding each poor group so that interested professionals and activists will have access to pertinent points of view on each subject.

Second, we will review the forms of intervention that have sprung up so that others, if they wish, can replicate or modify them for their own communities' use. For example, there were few "new unemployed" before 1975; there had been few unemployed councils or utility rate freeze campaigns since the Great Depression. Knowing the forms of intervention and the lessons of various types of advocacy (which will range from individual case advocacy to organizing such as the above-mentioned utility rate-freeze campaign) can simplify other service workers' efforts in the future.

There is also a third objective to this work. By examining the concrete forms of service and the particular needs of the American poor, we also will be critiquing, for better *and* for worse, the present welfare state and its policies. For example, there is new evidence emanating from important black organizations such as the

Urban League that some of the ways in which welfare grants have been distributed may have served to undermine the structure of the poor urban black families. On the other hand, Medicare, while not addressing long-term care needs at all, has served to prolong and improve life for many senior citizens.

We will use this critique in combination with the description of new service innovations among the poor to outline the direction of progressive change that needs to occur throughout the welfare state if human-service workers and their allies are to move out of the defensive posture in which they now find themselves. While this latter discussion will form much of the last chapter, it is integral to any of the specifics undertaken among particular groups of the American poor. It is important, as Santayana said, to learn the lessons of the past so that we are not doomed to repeat them. The tremendous urgency that human-service workers feel to help the homeless, feed the hungry, and assist the increasingly impoverished disabled should not blind them to the responsibility to create services that not only help individuals but carry within them the seeds of lasting change. For only such change can permanently diminish the oppressive conditions experienced by the poor.

This book is designed to meet these three objectives in a simple and accessible form. The first chapter presents an overview of the economic and social landscape of the United States that has created the American poor of late twentieth-century America. Unlike the chapters that follow, it will emphasize the apparent causes of poverty today, examining how and why political and policy choices have helped create the conditions that the poor now face. Chapters 2 through 7 look at the particular subgroups of the poor: the homeless, the hungry, the single-parent mother on AFDC, the physically disabled, poor seniors, the new unemployed. At times, parts of each group will overlap with another. However, each group, its problems, and the forms of service intervention are varied enough to warrant distinctive treatment. At the end of each chapter will be appendices, checklists, and sets of procedures for the reader to use to begin establishing equivalent services in her or his area. The last chapter will summarize the service and policy implications of working with the American poor today. It will also identify a process of empowerment and program/agency building that has structural implications for reform within the welfare state.

Unlike most other Human Service guides' lists and appendices, the end-chapter materials lack uniformity in their headings and suggestions for intervention, etc. This variability reflects the dis-

tinctiveness each group warrants, with advocacy and services being highly developed for some, much more preliminary for others.

NOTE

1. The best American interpretation of this phenomenon remains Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's *Regulating the Poor*. See especially chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 1

THE RECENT INTENSIFICATION OF POVERTY

THE PROBLEM

Newspaper headlines constantly remind us that despite pronouncements of economic recovery, large numbers of Americans are falling over the abyss into the most acute forms of poverty witnessed in this country since the Great Depression. Marked increases in homelessness, hunger, and chronic unemployment among former blue-collar workers and minority youth have not abated, but rather have expanded substantially in the 1980s. For example, 15.2% of all Americans under 18 presently live in poverty as compared to 14.3% in 1969-1970 (Bureau of the Census, 1984). Just as important, the circumstances of other vulnerable groups such as the elderly, female-headed families and the physically disabled have deteriorated significantly during this period. Today, 53% of all black Americans in single-headed families live in poverty as compared to 39.6% in 1969 (Joe and Rogers, 1985). Too often this rapid intensification of poverty has been defined as isolated (albeit persistent and expanding) pockets of misery and not associated with the larger economy.

In part this is a consequence of the manner in which homelessness, hunger, and the new unemployed have come to public consciousness in the 1980s. In effect, the complex social, political, and economic variables that account for the recent intensification of poverty have been reduced to moral formulations fashioned centuries ago. The physical and emotional deterioration associated with homelessness, recent unemployment, or hunger is described by

many who are sincerely concerned about these problems as a moral affront in a land as affluent as the United States. The immediate, and for many, long-term responses to this circumstance have been to create shelters or soup lines and, perhaps just as significantly, recreate the "gift relationship" of services, which defines the worthy poor or homeless, disabled, hungry, and recently unemployed, as passive, grateful, and spiritually saint-like (Stern, 1984). Finally, this perspective has tended to emphasize the responsibility of private individuals and church groups in any overarching plan that is intended to affect positively this circumstance. In effect, church groups are expected to use their resources to develop shelters, soup lines, jobs, and the like, and thus establish a partnership with the public sector. This initiative has emerged in part out of the frustration of public officials who have, for instance, seen the contradictory outcomes of geometric expansion in soup lines and shelters concurrent with the demand for more facilities continuing unabated. This call can also be traced to the presumption that individuals must make such personal and moral choices if the struggle against poverty is to be successful (New York Times, December 4, 1984).

These trends in part reflect the ongoing reduction of the public sector's role in addressing or resolving social problems. These moral invectives and the currently modest policy initiatives perhaps represent critical first steps in developing a strong constituent group for those citizens who are increasingly falling below the "safety net." Ultimately, this grouping, however, will have to develop an analysis and agenda that both adequately explains the recent intensification of poverty and has the potential to develop some long- and short-term policies that meet the constellation of needs of these citizens.

In the pages that follow we will develop a preliminary sketch of the relationship between the political and economic landscape and the intensification of poverty. In our analysis we will be particularly concerned with explaining the response of the welfare state and the larger social order to the homeless, hungry, physically disabled, elderly poor, female-headed families, and recently unemployed within the context of a crisis in the marketplace. The first section of each chapter specifically examines the relationship between the fiscal crisis and marketplace wage reductions. This discussion will establish a context for explaining the dramatic decline(s) in the real value of the social wage (a basement income

available to Americans through entitlements such as Aid for Families with Dependent Children [AFDC], Social Security Insurance [SSI], food stamps, and unemployment insurance) and the intensification of poverty.

THE CRISIS IN THE MARKETPLACE AND THE REDUCTION OF WAGES

The seeds of the present growth in poverty were sown during the 1970s. This decade was marked by the most acute expressions of economic crisis since the 1930s. Investment decisions, private savings, and weekly paychecks were affected by sustained bouts with double-digit inflation. The nation witnessed the loss of approximately 30 million jobs during this period. As Bluestone and Harrison have documented (1982), by 1976 plant shutdowns had wiped out 39% of the jobs that existed in 1969, or an average of about 3.2 million jobs destroyed each year. During this period approximately 110 jobs were created for every 100 jobs that were destroyed by plants shutting down. This ratio represents a sharp reduction in the job-creation capacity evidenced by the economy during the 1950s and 1960s. This stalled economic motor is further illustrated by the striking increase in the rate of unemployment during the decade. Between 1970 and 1981 the rate of unemployment soared from 5% to approximately 10%.

The various regions of the United States experienced this economic slowdown differentially. For instance, the northwestern corridor experienced a net loss of jobs. Alternatively, the sunbelt had the greatest net gain of jobs in the country (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982). The differential pattern of growth and decline has clearly contributed to the migratory pattern of workers from the northeast and midwest to the south, southwest, and far west in search of employment. These southern and western states, however, have been increasingly unable to absorb this surplus group of laborers into their workforce. This message did not reach the droves of dislocated workers who continued until recently to migrate south in the 1980s only to learn that jobs, housing, and social services are as in short supply in Houston, Texas, as they are in Cleveland, Ohio, or Buffalo, New York.

Underlying the inflation, job loss, unemployment, and migration of the 1970s is a crisis of capital accumulation. As Ian Gough (1979) has noted: