

# Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home

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PUBLIC WELFARE IS AS OLD AS THE THIRTEEN colonies. Its origins lie not in the New Deal but in attitudes and practices interwoven with American social experience over the last three centuries. Welfare is not a rational creation, a set of clear and consistent policies; it is a drafty, crazy, ungainly structure constructed over long periods of time. Throughout the century before the New Deal, the poorhouse dominated the structure of welfare (or, as it was called, relief). Despised, dreaded, and often attacked, the poorhouse nonetheless endured as the great central arch of public welfare policy. Even in the twentieth century it did not disappear. Instead, through a gradual transformation it slid into a new identity: the public old age home. This essay is an overview of its story (see also Leiby 1978; Trattner 1979; Schneider 1938; Schneider and Deutsch 1941).

## Institutions and Poverty

There were few formal, specialized institutions in colonial America. Criminals, for instance, were not punished by long periods of incarceration. Rather, they were held in jail only until trial; if found guilty, they were punished by fines, whipping, or execution. The

mentally ill were cared for by their families or dumped in the few large almshouses that had been built in the eighteenth century. The poor were cared for largely through some form of outdoor relief, or were auctioned off to local farmers. Poor strangers were warned out of town. Children learned to read in a variety of ways: at home; in tiny, private schools; or in town schools that they attended irregularly.

By 1850 all of this had changed. Specialized institutions had been founded to care for the mentally ill, to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents, to educate the blind, deaf, and dumb, and to eradicate ignorance. New penitentiaries had been constructed on novel principles, and hundreds of almshouses had been built to implement new policies for the relief of the poor (Rothman 1971; Grob 1973; Katz, Doucet, and Stern 1982).

All of the new institutions rested on optimistic assumptions about the possibilities of reform, rehabilitation, and education. Their sponsors believed that institutions could improve society through their impact on individual personalities. Because of their environmental sources, crime, poverty, ignorance, and mental illness could be eradicated. Even intemperance could be treated in institutions because it originated in causes extrinsic to individual character, most often a faulty family life in childhood and an absence of religious and secular education. Institutions would seal off individuals from the corrupting, tempting, and distracting influences of the world long enough for a kind but firm regimen to transform their behavior and reorder their personalities. Even poorhouses shared in this rehabilitative vision; they would suppress intemperance, the primary cause of pauperism, and inculcate the habit of steady work.

The institutional explosion that included the almshouse burst forth from both voluntary and state sponsorship, dotted the landscape with both residential asylums and nonresidential schools, and eventually encompassed almost everyone. Given its broad, inclusive quality and its shared goals, the institutional development of the early and mid-nineteenth century should be defined as the creation of formal organizations with specialized clienteles and reformist or character-building purposes. It was this use of secular institutions as deliberate agencies of social policy, their specialization, and their emphasis on the formation or reformation of character that represented a new and momentous development in modern history (some of the reasons for the development of the institutional state are discussed in Katz, Doucet, and Stern 1982, 349–91).

Despite their general role in social and personal transformation, each institution responded to a particular set of issues. In the case of poorhouses, it was the way in which the great economic, social, and demographic transformations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made poverty a major American problem. Poverty was not unusual among the American working class in the early nineteenth century. In fact, working-class people often were poor at some point in their lives. Thus, no clear line demarcated ordinary working people from those in need of relief. This periodic poverty was a structural consequence of the great transformation of American life after about the mid-eighteenth century: the emergence of capitalist social relations, or, to put it another way, the creation of a class of highly mobile wage laborers subject to irregular, seasonal, dangerous, unhealthy, often badly compensated work. Those in need of relief were destitute immigrants, young men thrown out of apprenticeships or looking for work, unemployed household heads with families, widows without children, and those sick and elderly people without kin who could care for them. Crises were built into the very fabric of working-class experience, and periods of dependency were normal. They were part of the very structure of social and economic life. With luck, some people pulled themselves out. They got well or found work. Others were not so fortunate. For there was no provision for the periodic unemployment endemic to the emerging system, no provision for the women left widows, or for the elderly without families. Working-class experience was a continuum; no clear line separated the respectable poor from paupers. This is why all attempts to divide the poor into classes and all policies based upon those divisions—including the creation of poorhouses—ultimately failed. It is one reason why poorhouses so rarely matched the ideal of their founders. (See Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982 for an overview of the American social structure and its relation to the structure of the labor force. See also Patterson 1981 on the causes of poverty.)

### Early Poor Relief Practice and the Origins of Poorhouses

Poorhouse advocates had high expectations. They viewed themselves as reformers, promoting the best alternative among existing poor relief practices, which varied widely even within the same state. Of these

practices, the most important were: auction, contract, outdoor relief, and poorhouses. In the late eighteenth century, some larger towns and cities had established poorhouses while smaller towns and villages usually auctioned (that is, assigned the care of) individual poor people to the lowest bidder, contracted with one person to care for the town poor, or aided the poor in their homes. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, most states passed legislation enabling counties to establish poorhouses; only New York made them mandatory. Nonetheless, even without coercion, the poorhouse became a familiar American institution during the first decades of the nineteenth century, and by the Civil War poorhouses had spread from the outskirts of cities and the more densely populated seaboard to rural towns and counties throughout most of the settled regions of the country (Creech 1936; Klebaner 1952).

Early American relief for the poor, it is important to stress, drew heavily on English precedents (Oxley 1974; Henriques 1979; Crowther 1981; Williams 1981). In fact, four principles inherited from England underlay the dazzling variety of local practice. First, relief of the poor was a public responsibility, usually assigned to officials called overseers of the poor. Second, it was profoundly local. Each parish in England or each town or county in America organized its own system of relief and retained responsibility for its own people, even when they had temporarily moved away. This made the question of legal residence, or settlement, the most contentious practical problem in aid to the poor. Kin responsibility, the third principle, denied public aid to individuals with parents, grandparents, adult children, or grandchildren who could take them into their homes. Finally, concerns about children and about work were combined in legislation that authorized overseers to apprentice the children of paupers to farmers and artisans who agreed to train and care for them in their homes (Klebaner 1952; Wiberley 1975; Leiby 1978).

Poorhouses did not replace all existing relief practices, and any attempt to write a general history confronts a bewildering array of local variations. Still, there were certain main themes. Chief among these were the objectives of reform, of which the first was to reduce the expense of caring for paupers. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, state and local officials everywhere claimed that pauperism was rising at an alarming rate, especially in cities. Unlike some social fears—such as moral decay, lax family discipline, a decline in civility,

or, even, to some extent the safety of the streets—the increase in the number and expense of paupers was tangible. Relief expenses were not nebulous or largely a product of perception. Rather, they were concrete, measurable, translated into tax dollars. Indeed, poor rates (taxes for relief of the poor) often were billed separately from other taxes, making taxpayers immediately aware of every increase in public relief expenses (Quincy Report 1821; Yates 1824).

Early nineteenth-century observers developed a clear explanation for the increase in pauperism. They placed some blame on the growth of cities and immigration. Even more, they stressed the role of intemperance. But the real villain was existing relief practice, including its legal basis, its administration, and the practices of private charity. None of the poor law critics, it must be stressed, proposed to eliminate poverty. To most people of the time, the idea would have been preposterous. Even in America, the vast majority would have to scabble hard for a living. Nor was the issue redistributing wealth. Rather, it was this: How to keep the genuinely needy from starving without breeding a class of paupers who chose to live off public and private bounty rather than to work? These were the goals that contemporary relief practice defeated (Quincy Report 1821; Yates 1824; Klebaner 1952).

As the Quincy Report in Massachusetts (1821, 53) made clear, there were two classes of paupers:

1. The impotent poor; in which denomination are included all, who are wholly incapable of work, through old age, infancy, sickness or corporeal debility. 2. the able poor; in which denomination are included all, who are capable of work, of some nature, or other; but differing in the degree of their capacity, and in the kind of work, of which they are capable.

There was no question about relieving the first class of poor. Christian charity and ordinary human compassion made their care a clear duty, although it was not so clear where and by whom they should be aided. The real issue concerned the able-bodied poor. According to the Quincy Report, all the “evils” attributable to the current system of poor relief could be traced to the same root: “the difficulty of discriminating between the able poor and the impotent poor and of apportioning the degree of public provision to the degree of actual impotency.” Underlying this assertion—which, with somewhat different

language, could have been made at any point in the last 150 years—was the assumption that the able-bodied poor should fend for themselves. Indeed, the core of most welfare reform in America since the early nineteenth century has been a war on the able-bodied poor: an attempt to define, locate, and purge them from the rolls of relief (Piven and Cloward 1971).

According to poor relief critics, private charity and outdoor relief (assisting people outside of institutions) encouraged idleness by undermining the relation between work and survival. Indiscriminate charity and outdoor relief eroded the will to work and destroyed character, while generous public aid through taxation had begun to teach the poor that relief was a right. Thus, public relief of the poor promoted militancy and eroded the deference that should govern class relations. The problem of pauperism, therefore, extended beyond increased taxes. By draining the working class of its incentive, relief for the poor interfered with the supply of energy available for productive labor. Paupers were living proof that a modestly comfortable life could be had without hard labor. Their dissipation was a cancer, demoralizing the poor and eroding the independence of the working class.

It was, of course, a question of perception. The tiny amount of relief available from public or private sources could do little more than prevent starvation. Relief never approximated the wages that an employed laborer could earn, and, by themselves, without supplements from wives and children, even these were too low to support a family. Compassion, moreover, was an essential component of Christian charity, and no one advocated allowing needy people to starve or freeze to death. How to reconcile compassion with the need to deter people from relying on public and private relief was the great and irreconcilable dilemma at the core of relief for the poor (Carey 1828).

Beside the expense of pauperism and the impact of outdoor relief and private charity on the character of the poor, critics attacked two other major features of relief: the practice of auctioning off the poor, and settlement laws. The case against the former had two sides. One was its brutality. In New York the Yates report (1824) concluded: "The poor, when farmed out, or sold, are frequently treated with barbarity and neglect by their keepers." The other side was the way the poor sometimes apparently turned the system of auction or sale to their own advantage. Families bid for the care of their own relatives, and they often put in the low bid because they were willing or able

to care for them with very little additional money. In these instances, public funds subsidized a modestly comfortable life for dependent people with their kin. To poor law critics, these subsidies were an outrageous abuse of the taxpayers. But it was an abuse that was hard to eradicate because of the resistance posed by coalitions of poor people, their relatives, friends, and neighbors, and even local professionals and merchants who profited from their business, and justices of the peace and overseers of the poor who earned at least some of their living from the unreformed system (Yates 1824, 993, 1061).

Here is a hint that the substitution of poorhouses for other methods of relief met popular resistance. Indeed, in England, as British historians have shown, opposition to poorhouses was widespread (Henriques 1979; Crowther 1981). Although American historians have not studied resistance to poorhouses, there is every reason to believe that American working people in the early nineteenth century understood the meaning of reformed poor laws as well as their British counterparts. Poorhouses were designed to enforce discipline and help regulate labor markets and wages. Their advocates wanted to remove people too poor, sick, or old to care for themselves from their friends and families and put them into a harsh, degrading institution. In these circumstances, resistance was neither venal nor unreasonable.

The other great problem with the poor laws was settlement. Towns often spent more money ridding themselves of paupers than they would have in supporting them. Aside from the trouble and expense of endless litigation, the system often was cruel, for old and sick paupers frequently were shipped from town to town in the middle of winter. The Yates report (1824, 951–53) estimated that one-ninth of all the taxes raised for relief were spent “in the payment of fees of justices, overseers, lawyers and constables” involved with the determination and administration of settlement. Part of the problem was the obscure nature of the laws themselves, which were “so technical, numerous, and complicated, if not obscure, that even eminent counsel” were “often at a loss to determine questions arising upon this branch of our pauper system.” What, then, could be expected from the decisions of local officials “unlearned in our laws?”

The mix of outdoor relief, the auction of paupers, and their transport from town to town, although unsatisfactory for everyone, appeared especially harsh on children. Although the further demoralization of the adult poor was a serious danger, many of them were thought to

be already beyond redemption. It was quite another matter with their children. By failing to intervene in pauper families, the state had abandoned the opportunity to break the mechanism through which pauperism and its allies, crime and ignorance, perpetuated each other. This inability to break the cycle of pauperism was one result of the poor laws that added urgency to appeals for reform.

## Poorhouse Goals

Both the Quincy Report in Massachusetts and the Yates report in New York rejected the views of British political economists who advocated the total abolition of all relief to the poor. They found such a draconian solution offensive and contrary to American sentiment. But they did echo the sentiments of British writers who advocated replacing most forms of outdoor relief, the auction, and the contract system with a network of poorhouses (or almshouses). Within the almshouses, work—especially farm labor—would be mandatory for all inmates neither too sick nor too feeble, and both idleness and alcohol would be strictly prohibited. Able-bodied men would be rigorously pruned from the relief rolls; begging would be barred and punished; children would be schooled; and settlement laws would be greatly simplified. To their sponsors, poorhouses were partly an attempt to mitigate the harshness of contemporary relief practice by ending the auctioning of the poor to the lowest bidder and stopping the shunting of the poor from town to town regardless of their health or the weather. Thus, they seemed an ideal way to accomplish a broad array of economic, disciplinary, rehabilitative, and humanitarian goals (Quincy Report 1821; Yates 1824).

The state reports advocating poorhouses believed they had good reason to be optimistic. Although poorhouses were novel institutions in America, there were enough of them there and in England to provide an accumulating body of evidence about their virtues. And the verdict appeared unanimous. Every town or city with a poorhouse reported a reduction in the cost of poor relief and an improved moral climate. Clearly, in their early years, it was at least plausible to think of almshouses optimistically, as humane, reformatory institutions, reducing expenditures for relief and checking the growth of a demoralized pauper class (Channing 1843; Quincy Report 1821; Yates 1824).



But it is difficult to believe that even in these early years the picture was quite as cheery as poor law reformers would have had their contemporaries believe. For one thing, recall the hints of opposition, the local resistance to poorhouses. From their inception, poorhouses were not popular with the working class. Nor were they supposed to be. And here is the heart of the issue. Built into the foundation of the almshouse were irreconcilable contradictions. The almshouse was to be at once a refuge for the helpless and a deterrent to the able-bodied. It was to care for the poor humanely and to discourage them from applying for relief. In the end, one of these poles would have to prevail. Asserting that poverty was not a crime, almshouse sponsors protested against the inhumanity of existing relief practices such as auctioning off the poor or shunting them around from town to town. At the same time their discussions of the poor and their administrative policies confounded crime and poverty. Not least, they expected institutions designed to house only the most helpless and infirm paupers to be hives of industry and productivity. If the almshouses worked, the aged and infirm would be casualties of the war on able-bodied paupers. In essence, social policy advocated institutionalizing the old and sick away from their friends and relatives in order to deter the working class from seeking relief. In this way, fear of the poorhouse became the key to sustaining the work ethic in nineteenth-century America.

### The Failure of the Poorhouse

By the 1850s almost every major institution founded in the early nineteenth century had lost its original promise. For a short time, mental hospitals had reported astonishing rates of cure; reform schools apparently were transforming young delinquents; and poorhouses were slowing the growth of pauperism and sheltering the helpless. But within several years the early optimism of institutional promoters had faded. Mental hospitals did not cure; prisons and reform schools did not rehabilitate; public schools did not educate very well; and poorhouses did not check the growth of outdoor relief or promote industry and temperance. A preoccupation with order, routine, and cost had replaced the founders' concern with the transformation of character and social reform. Everywhere, reform gave way to custody as the basis of in-

stitutional life (Lewis 1965; Katz 1968; Rothman 1971; Grob 1973; Mennel 1973).

The situation in poorhouses was especially bad. Most investigations found them filthy and badly ventilated, their inmates unclassified, largely idle, and lacking adequate medical care, their management negligent, corrupt, and often brutal. Poorhouses had not even managed to reduce the expense of caring for paupers. Despite the confident predictions of their founders in the 1820s, it proved more expensive to support someone in a poorhouse than on outdoor relief (New York State Senate 1857).

One reason was the contradiction between deterrence and compassion: the spread of fear and the kindly treatment of decent poverty. One or the other always had to prevail, and in the end deterrence won. Another reason was public indifference. Critics who blamed public apathy and neglect for some of the hideous conditions in poorhouses reflected a growing fear that the well-to-do had abandoned their civic responsibilities. Not only the corruption of politics but the decay of public institutions and the emergence of a militant and undeferential working class, so it was argued, resulted from the withdrawal of educated, well-off citizens from their role as "moral policeman," that is, from active participation in local government, the oversight of public institutions, and their former close and personal contact with the poor (Board of Commissioners of Public Charities [New York State] 1869; 1872).

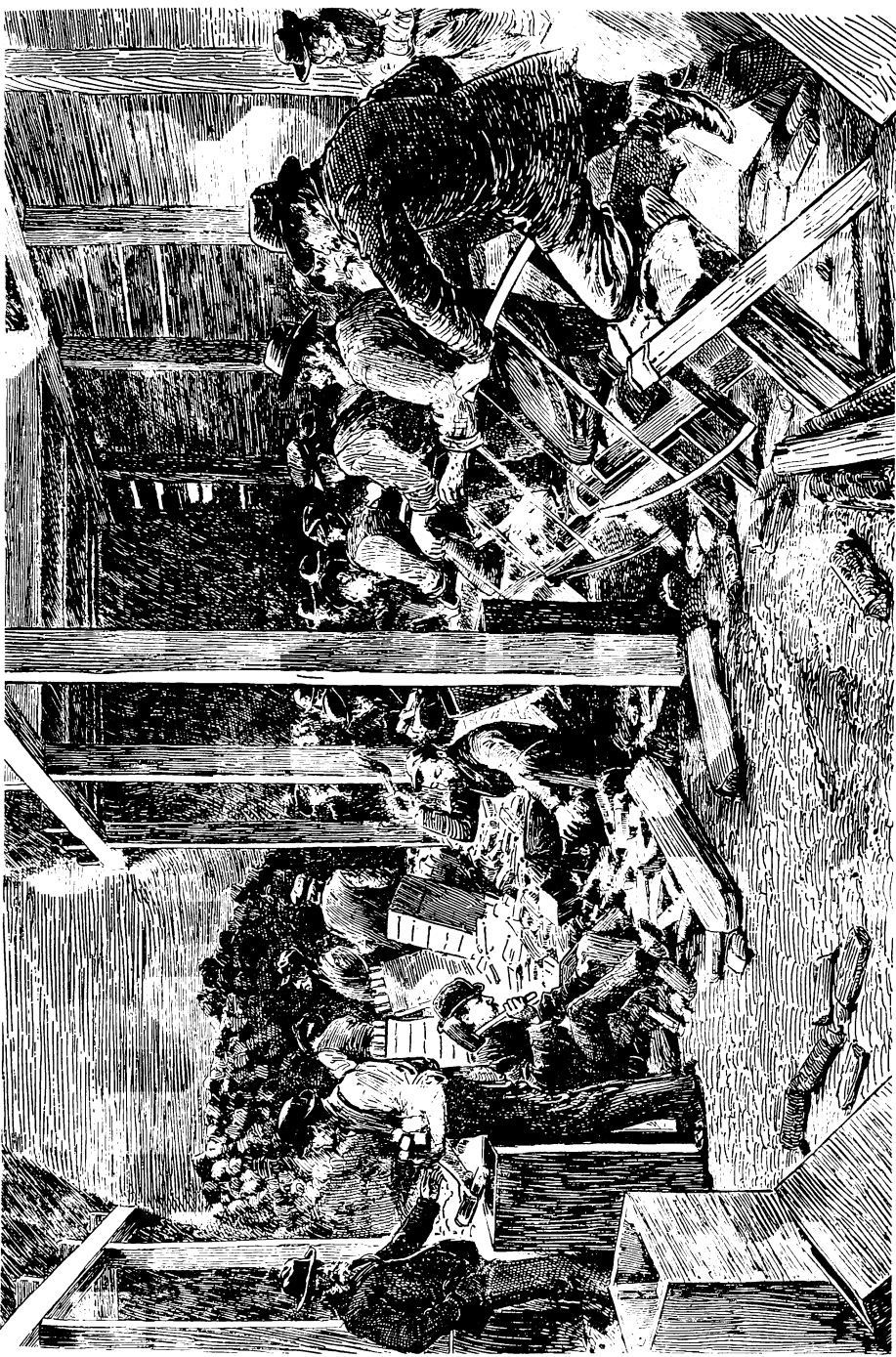
The reassertion of the citizen as "moral policeman," a major theme of late nineteenth-century history, affected the history of poorhouses through the creation of local visiting committees (usually consisting of affluent women), which tried to monitor conditions in poorhouses and stimulate improvements. Most notable of these was the New York State Charities Aid Association, a coalition of local committees founded in the early 1870s, which, as might be expected, had a stormy relation with the superintendents of poorhouses whose work they scrutinized and sometimes attacked. In fact, the Westchester County visitors (the nucleus of the organization) at first were denied entrance to the local poorhouse. Using their influence, however, they turned to the state legislature and, within a year, had sponsored a bill granting them access to poorhouses. Their success revealed both the power and influence of their membership, and the close, complex relations between the state and voluntarism, the indistinct boundaries between public and

private that always have been a feature of American life (Board of Commissioners of Public Charities [New York State] 1872).

A third reason why poorhouses failed to meet the expectations of their founders was the difficulty of providing work for inmates. In Philadelphia, for example, almshouse managers repeatedly tried to make inmates run factories that would produce an income. They never succeeded. Only a minority of inmates were well enough or strong enough to work; often goods were produced more cheaply outside the almshouse; and inmates had few skills. Nonetheless, managers clung to the importance of work for its moral as well as its economic returns. No clearer example exists than in the 1820s when they sold the poorhouse horses and constructed tread wheels instead, which, according to Priscilla Clement (1977, 172–73, 307–9), they used to punish men and women inmates. When there were too few paupers who needed punishment because they were lazy or had contracted venereal disease, the managers used mentally ill inmates to work the tread wheels. Despite their inefficiency and a committee's recommendation to replace them with steam-driven machinery, most officials wanted to retain the tread wheels to deter the poor from seeking public relief.

In 1855 a New York critic of relief praised the success of the Providence, Rhode Island, poorhouse which, he claimed, utilized pauper labor so efficiently that it operated much more cheaply than almost any other urban almshouse. Even if the almshouse managers had no "profitable work," they set inmates to work at some task, however pointless. During his last visit, he "saw a party of men carrying wood from one corner of the yard to another and piling it there; when it was all removed it was brought back again and piled in the old place." This sort of practice rid "Providence of all lazy drones, such as infest our poor houses to a great degree." This critic had begun his argument by stressing the need to increase the profitability of pauper labor, but he slipped without transition into the virtues of labor, any hard labor, for its own sake. In the end, it was deterrence, not profitability, that mattered ("Franklin" 1855, 103–4).

It is not surprising that satisfactory work arrangements rarely existed. Work's deterrent, educational, and money-making purposes contradicted each other, and the large share of inmates who were old, sick, and disabled left only a minority able to labor. The most successful form of work was farming. Poorhouses often were built in the country with farms attached to them. Indeed, in many states they were called poor



Wayfarers' lodge in Philadelphia—Setting the tramps at work. From a sketch by H. L. Brown (The Bettmann Archive).

farms rather than poorhouses. In some instances, superintendents who were both good managers and good farmers ran productive farms that provided a large share of the inmates' food. However, in many instances, farms, like manufacturing operations, were failures. One reason was the seasonal relation between their population and work. Farms needed able-bodied labor in the summer; but it was in the summer that able-bodied men left poorhouses because they could find paid work. Indeed, poorhouses were most crowded in winter when they could offer their inmates little outdoor labor. Thus, even in the country most poorhouses failed to employ their inmates usefully (Brown 1928, 80; Klebaner 1952, 200).

Another set of reasons for the failure of poorhouses reflected weaknesses in poorhouse management and organization. Managerial problems in relief began with the office of overseer of the poor. So unpopular was the job that fines sometimes were necessary to force men to serve. Because superintendents or overseers of the poor often used their offices as sources of graft, petty corruption infected the administration of relief. Poorhouse keepers often were men of limited ability. With "dreary work, small pay, and practically no general recognition" for their services, whatever their quality, "a sensitive, high-minded, ambitious man" was not likely to take the job, and, "almost of necessity," the typical keeper was "a tolerably stolid, unsympathetic person, and one who has not been very successful in other lines." (Clement 1977, 149; "Franklin" 1855, 150-51; Warner 1894, 152). Unfortunately, the job usually exceeded his abilities.

Like the other new service professions that developed during the nineteenth century, poorhouse administrators had to forge an occupational identity over the course of several decades. The first school systems, penitentiaries, reform schools, mental hospitals, and poorhouses could not draw on a pool of trained administrators or a body of technical and managerial knowledge. In each case, as officials accumulated practical experience, they developed their own organizations, journals, and, eventually, training procedures. By the early twentieth century, all of them had generated new professions: school superintendent, penologist, psychiatrist, social worker, public welfare official. In New York State, the Annual Convention of the County Superintendents of the Poor, which met first in 1870, was a loosely knit organization that held annual conventions, published its proceedings, and sometimes lobbied the state legislature. Over the years, its proceedings show the

gradual emergence of a sense of occupational identity, fostered, especially late in the nineteenth century, by attacks on county poorhouses and attempts to remove the insane to state institutions. A few superintendents, who held their jobs for many years, obviously were well read in contemporary literature about pauperism and relief of the poor, and they tried to run their own institutions professionally and to stimulate their colleagues throughout the state to higher standards. Indeed, by 1913 the professionalization of poorhouse administration had reached the point where the county convention changed its name to the New York Association of Public Welfare Officials. (For the relation between superintendents of mental hospitals and the emergence of psychiatry as a profession, see Grob 1973.)

Nonetheless, probably no more than a few poorhouses were very well administered. In small county poorhouses there were few staff besides the keeper or superintendent and his wife. Cities such as Philadelphia or New York developed elaborate hierarchies for administering their large poorhouses, but these, too, were understaffed. Medical care, always insufficient, sometimes was the responsibility of local doctors for whom the poorhouse was a lucrative and steady source of income (and a source of contention among local physicians who sometimes underbid one another for the contract). Occasionally, as in Philadelphia, medical students provided much of the medical care. Professional nurses were almost nonexistent. Most of the nursing, in fact, was done by other patients.

Indeed, patients did a great deal of the routine work around poorhouses. They not only nursed other patients and gardened but also often cooked, cleaned, sewed, and did other domestic jobs. In fact, in some ways the patients ran the larger poorhouses, as in Philadelphia, where they greatly outnumbered the paid staff. With inmates serving as attendants, officials had little control over life on the wards. As a consequence, large poorhouses were rowdy, noisy places in which discipline was almost impossible. According to Clement, in Philadelphia some of the inmates formed their own organizations; others fought with each other; and the city's ethnic tensions erupted into conflicts within the almshouse. Even liquor was fairly easily available. Doctors failed to conceal the keys to the liquor cabinet; the inmates managed to steal liquor from the managers' private supply; employees smuggled in liquor which they sold; and doctors prescribed a great deal of liquor as medicine (Clement 1977, 337-38, 400).

The ease with which inmates could enter or leave almshouses exacerbated discipline problems. Despite the rule requiring inmates to work off the cost of their care, in Philadelphia it was a simple matter to leave the almshouse permanently. Inmates went to an official who checked the records and, in most cases, finding nothing wrong, handed them their clothes and allowed them to leave. (Inside the almshouse all the inmates had to wear the same uniform.) One expert complained of the "laxness" of admission and discharge policies. Because everyone was "entitled to be saved from starvation and death from exposure," anyone could enter the almshouse. However, because it was "not a penal institution" and it was "in the interest of no one to have persons stay there who can support themselves outside," inmates could discharge themselves at will. "The average almshouse official regards the justification of our laxness indicated above as entirely conclusive." Thus, "the door swings . . . outward or inward with the greatest ease." As a result, the almshouse became a temporary refuge for the degenerate poor. It was "a winter resort for tramps, and a place where the drunkard and the prostitute" recuperated "between debauches." The open door policy had spawned a class of almshouse recidivists (Clement 1977, 335; Warner 1894, 155-59).

A failure to classify inmates underlay the administrative problems of poorhouses. According to critics throughout the century, many poorhouses did not separate paupers by age and condition, allowed moral inmates to mingle with the degraded, and failed to send the insane or other handicapped inmates to special institutions. "Probably a majority of the grave evils which could be charged at the present time to the American almshouse," asserted an authority, "have their origin in a lack of proper classification." There were two aspects to classification. One stressed that some categories of people (children, the insane) should be taken out of almshouses altogether. The other dealt with the inmates who remained. Wherever possible, classification should be based on color, "the separation of the sexes," "isolation of defectives," "special provision for the sick," "age," and "the character . . ." of inmates ("Franklin" 1855, 106; Warner 1894, 152-54).

One other administrative problem made classification impossible and prevented the poorhouse from reaching any of its goals except deterrence. That, of course, was the cheapness that governed poor relief, or, as one critic said, the "culpable stinginess on the part of the appropriating power, resulting in inadequate or unhealthful food,

lack of proper building, heating apparatus, clothing and so forth" (Warner 1894, 163). Everywhere, the real concern of public officials was to keep the expense of poor relief as low as possible. In the end, all of the various goals of poor law reform throughout the century could be sacrificed, as long as the poor tax went down.

Between 1850 and 1930 almost all observers painted similarly depressing portraits of poorhouses. Poorhouses appeared the backwaters of social policy, stagnant and festering exceptions to the progressive spirit in American life. Although an occasional county or an unusual superintendent might run a decent poorhouse, most remained dreary, lifeless, and degrading. Yet, even contemporary observers missed the point that this static portrait was only partly valid, for even poorhouses had a history of their own. It may be traced in two ways: through official policy and through the actual demography of the institutions themselves. Although both policy statements and demography show roughly the same trends, the fit between the two perspectives is far from perfect. Especially after 1870, within policy the great theme became the attempt to siphon special groups from the poorhouse into separate institutions. The blind and the deaf and dumb were the first to receive separate institutional care, but the three groups that caused the most controversy and the most difficulty were children, the mentally ill, and the able-bodied.

## Children

According to their founders, poorhouses would educate and redeem destitute children, but these early expectations soon proved illusory. Poorhouses, everyone soon came to see, were a terrible environment for children, and by the last quarter of the nineteenth century a broad consensus across the country urged their removal. In New York by the early 1870s, individual counties had begun to move children out of poorhouses into orphan asylums or, less frequently, foster homes. As a consequence, the number of children in New York poorhouses dropped from 1,222 in 1868, when the commissioners first investigated the problem, to 579 in 1873. Still, the number was too large, and in 1875 the New York State legislature passed the Children's Act, ordering that all children between the ages of 2 and 16 be removed from poorhouses. Other states took action in the same period (Board



of Commissioners of Public Charities 1874; Heffner 1913; Brown 1928; Bruce 1936; McClure 1968).

No policy could seem more humane and less controversial than taking children out of poorhouses. But consider one of its consequences: the breakup of families. Families that entered poorhouses now had to surrender their children. Although—given conditions in most poorhouses—children probably did receive better care elsewhere, even without their parents, other alternatives were possible. One was to develop an adequate standard of outdoor relief. The other was to create decent family quarters within poorhouses. Neither alternative would have been impossible to implement or substantially more expensive. Rather, they were unacceptable for two reasons: first, it was thought that they would encourage pauperism; second, the breakup of families was one goal of policy. For many officials and reformers believed that pauperism was perpetuated within families and that only by rescuing the children of paupers from their parents could they be saved from a life of idleness, dissipation, dependence, and crime.

By breaking up families, public authorities created new problems. One was what to do with children. Should they be kept in special institutions or placed with foster families? How would the state assure that they received adequate care? The answers to these questions, which were debated at length in the late nineteenth century, fueled the creation of whole new bureaucracies dedicated to managing the intervention between parents and children, and the subsequent care of children removed from their families.

### The Mentally Ill

Despite the creation of state mental hospitals, most of the institutionalized mentally ill remained in almshouses throughout the nineteenth century. Thus, the treatment of mental illness continued within the framework of public welfare. For decades, reformers (most notably Dorothea Dix) and public officials criticized the inadequate care of the mentally ill in poorhouses. Although Dix's indefatigable campaigns within several states had promoted the creation of large state mental hospitals, even these new institutions were unable to accommodate a majority of those in need of care. In larger states, poorhouses near cities often had separate departments for the mentally ill or separate hospitals for the insane poor. But in more rural areas, the mentally ill remained in

almshouses, mixed with the other inmates, receiving little if any special treatment (Rothman 1971; Grob 1973).

The first major state attempt to improve the care of mentally ill paupers began in New York in the 1860s and culminated in the State Care Act of 1890. In 1864, Dr. Sylvester D. Willard, secretary of the Medical Society of the State of New York, acting on behalf of the state legislature, investigated the condition of the state's insane poor. His report stressed the "gross want of provision for the common necessities of physical health and comfort, in a large majority of the poor houses where pauper lunatics were kept." Willard urged the state to create a hospital for the incurably insane that would take chronically mentally ill paupers out of the almshouses (Grob 1973, 309–10). In 1865 the legislature authorized the new institution, and in 1869 the Willard Asylum for the Insane opened. (Its purpose also was to free the state asylum at Utica to deal only with the potentially curable or acute insane.) Willard was the first of a new kind of asylum. "The early State asylums," commented Amos Warner, "had been comparatively small, designed for not more than 300 persons. In the later sixties and seventies, the agitation for the removal of the insane from county to State care resulted in the building of mammoth institutions, capable of accommodating in some cases as many as 2,000 patients" (Warner 1894, 269).

Public criticism of the new institutions often focused on their cost. Extraordinarily expensive, they sometimes featured luxurious quarters for the superintendent and his family as well as imposing architectural details. These new asylums cost between \$1,000 and \$3,000 or more per occupant for building and plant at a time when the equivalent cost of constructing a luxurious hotel was not more than \$1,500. Even more, they did not reduce the burden on the counties. When Willard opened, there were 1,500 insane persons in county care in New York State; six years later Willard was full and 1,300 mentally ill people still remained in county institutions. Indeed, county almshouses continued to house most of the state's insane. In October 1889, for instance, 59.7 percent of the state's 15,482 institutionalized insane lived in either city or county asylums affiliated with poorhouses. Another 2,084 were in state asylums for the chronic insane, 2,061 in state asylums for the acute insane, and the rest scattered among private asylums, the Asylum for Insane Criminals, and the State Asylum for Insane Immigrants (Warner 1894, 269).

By the 1880s, the State Charities Aid Association had accumulated

the experience and political influence necessary to launch a major attack on the care of the poor in county almshouses. Alleging neglect, abuse, and incompetence, the association advocated removing the insane to state institutions where they would receive better care and more professional treatment. Their campaign culminated with the passage of the State Care Act in 1890 under which the state (except for three large counties) assumed complete care of all the insane poor. The act required moving all the mentally ill in county institutions to state hospitals as soon as possible. The act also ordered the state to pay the entire expense of the new system.

Most histories herald the State Care Act as a major triumph of nineteenth-century reform, a great step forward in the treatment of the mentally ill, and everywhere, progressive opinion supported removing the insane poor from county almshouses to state hospitals. However, like the removal of children from the almshouse, the other great accomplishment of the period, the issue was not quite so unambiguous as its champions declared (Trattner 1979, 179; Ellwood 1903, 390).

According to the County Superintendents of the Poor, the large state asylums for the chronic insane were cold, impersonal, and often brutal bins for warehousing the mentally ill. The superintendents stressed the importance of localism, warmth, and intimacy. The oversight of local people combined with the small size of county institutions assured humane care. Good institutions existed in a close, symbiotic relation with their communities. Cut off from their local roots, allowed to grow without restraint, institutions became huge, impersonal, and ineffective bureaucracies. Mental illness, moreover, required little in the way of expert care. Experts did as much harm as good. What the mentally ill needed were their friends, familiar surroundings, and a kind, domestic setting (New York. County Superintendents of the Poor. 1887 (18th), 4; 1888 (19th), 14, 38, 50; 1889 (20th), 5–6).

The State Care Act, by contrast, reflected a faith in experts, a distrust of localism, a commitment to economies of scale, and an equation of progress with centralization and the growth of state power. Even if the criticisms of county care were accurate, moving the insane to large state institutions did not follow ineluctably. One alternative was to improve the smaller, local institutions by better management and, perhaps, more state supervision. Thus, the controversy over the State Care Act was about the centralization of state power as well as about the care of mentally ill paupers.

Whatever the accuracy of specific claims, the controversy between the superintendents and their critics illustrates the impact of social values on questions of policy. It acquired its momentum not only from the abuses documented by promoters of state care but from the drive to extend the reach of the state. Although the extension of state power had formed a dominant theme in the history of welfare and social reform since the revised poor laws in the 1820s, it assumed a powerful new thrust in the last quarter of the century. State governments, like business corporations, sought monopolies as they attempted to consolidate and rationalize their control over welfare, social services, and education, and, as with the State Care Act, they were remarkably successful. The question lies in what they accomplished. Indeed, whether their efforts achieved much more than the augmentation of state power at the expense of local communities remains an open issue. For the state did not move mental illness from under the mantle of welfare; it did not transform the quality of care. Rather, it shifted its location and perhaps its style. In the process, the centralization of state power and the growth of large institutions built the model of care whose abuses and limits have been documented by other reformers for more than a century (Rothman 1980).

### From Poorhouse to Flophouse

Of all the varieties of unfortunate people in poorhouses, none proved as troubling as the healthy, working-age men who often stayed in poorhouses for a few weeks or months in the winter, during depressions, or between jobs. Some reformers tried to purge the able-bodied from relief; others advocated work-tests; and many tried to eject them from poorhouses. Most officials and reformers would have agreed that any relief given the able-bodied should be as unpleasant and degrading as possible. Nor should it be offered freely. Only those men willing to break stone or cut wood for their meagre supper and spartan bed should be sheltered from the streets (Board of Commissioners of Public Charities [New York State] 1869, 210; 1871, xv; 1872, 38).

Although the exact mechanisms are unclear, poorhouses slowly managed to eject the able-bodied, and, after 1880, able-bodied men found it much harder to gain shelter in poorhouses or to persuade public and private agencies to give them outdoor relief. What, then, were

they to do? Reformers would answer in a word, work. For they believed that without relief the able-bodied would be forced to support themselves. But even in the best of times thousands of men were underemployed, and, of course, during the severe depressions that punctuated late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America, many men found it impossible to locate work of any kind. The massive immigration from southern and eastern Europe compounded employment problems by flooding the labor market with unskilled young men. Given these conditions, ejecting the able-bodied from almshouses and outdoor relief could not eliminate the problem; it could only displace it.

The able-bodied went first to police stations where they were allowed to sleep on the floor or sometimes in cells. Until the late 1890s, thousands of homeless men (called "lodgers") slept in police stations every night. During the last quarter of the century, police stations sheltered many more men than did poorhouses. Conditions within police stations varied greatly, but most were crowded, dirty, and uncomfortable (Monkkonen 1981).

By the late nineteenth century reformers had mounted a sustained attack on police station lodging. Their case rested partly on humanitarian grounds: the unhealthful, filthy, overcrowded conditions in police stations. However, it had other motives as well. For reformers coupled their attempt to end police station lodging with their campaign against outdoor relief. Each was a prong of an attack intended to purge the able-bodied from public assistance. The first great reform victory occurred in New York City in 1896 when the commissioner of police, Theodore Roosevelt, influenced by Jacob Riis, forbade lodging at the station houses and persuaded the charter revision committee "to remove from the organic law of the city the clause giving to the police the care of vagrants." As a way of assuring that homeless, able-bodied men would be cut off from food as well as shelter, New York City also passed the "Raines Law," which outlawed the free lunches given out in many bars. These "had been the sustenance for many of the homeless" (Monkkonen 1981, 108).

Reformers did more than end police station lodging, outlaw free lunches, eject able-bodied men from poorhouses, and cut them off from outdoor relief. They also attacked lodging in private homes, the other major source of shelter for single men living away from their families. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century, reformers launched a major campaign against the "lodger evil," by which they meant

the presence of boarders in poor (particularly immigrant) families (Modell and Hareven 1977).

Homeless men did not quietly disappear when they were ejected from their customary sources of shelter. To the contrary, so many of them still needed shelter every night that temporary lodging houses offering cheap shelter blossomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In these years many cities opened municipal (or wayfarers') lodges to accommodate homeless men. These municipal lodges inherited the poorhouse's mixed goals of shelter, punishment, and deterrence. For example, the lodge opened in Baltimore in 1894 could shelter 125 men each evening, and no one could spend more than three consecutive nights there. "Wood-sawing and splitting was offered as the only means of payment for meals and lodgings. Certain compulsory features, such as a hot bath every evening under the supervision of an attendant, with a liberal use of carbolic soap, and nightly disinfection of wearing-apparel, were regularly exacted. Clean night-gowns and slippers were also furnished." The lodge opened on January 15, 1894, only three weeks after the meeting at which it had been proposed. Police immediately started sending lodgers, and on February 3 (at the height of a depression) the "police stations were finally closed to male lodgers." Nonetheless—undoubtedly as a result of its stringent rules—the new institution never was filled to capacity (Solenberger 1911; Gould 1894; Higgins 1904; Robbins 1904; Jackson 1903; Ring 1885).

Alice Willard (later Solenberger) remained skeptical of municipal lodging houses, which, she observed, failed to "solve the problem of vagrancy in any city" because they did not "reach the lowest and most dangerous class of lodging house men." Men who entered municipal lodging houses came mainly from "the better grades of such men, the unfortunate, and the workingmen out of work." The "parasites" avoided it entirely because they knew that the lodging house remained fundamentally a "police institution." (Indeed, superintendents of municipal lodging houses often had police powers.) Moreover, "men of independence and refinement" shrank from the intrusions that accompanied assistance, the "questions of the officer in charge, however kindly put, and from the publicity of the street-work test." Willard pointed out that, in 1901, 92,591 men had been given police lodgings in Chicago. When the municipal lodging house opened the next year, it provided 11,907 lodgings and the police gave only 5,740, making

a total of 16,837, a drop of 75,754. "Where," asked Willard, "were these 75,000 men lodged? These are the men we must reach" (Willard 1903).

Many of them slept in the cheap lodging houses that she described in her book on homeless men, published posthumously in 1911. There in the flophouses of great cities where the conditions were as wretched as they had been in the worst poorhouses was the legacy of the campaign to purge the able-bodied from poorhouses and outdoor relief.

### Poorhouse Demography in Fact and Fabrication

By stripping away one group after another, policy makers came closer and closer to their goal: the transformation of poorhouses into old age homes. When everyone else had been siphoned off elsewhere, the only group remaining was the elderly. The process took a long time because administrative policy was only one of the forces shaping the history of poorhouses.

As an example of the complex demographic history of poorhouses, consider the Erie County, New York, almshouse, which served Buffalo and the surrounding region. Between its opening in 1829 and the mid-1880s, four distinct periods marked its history. From its founding through the early 1840s, many families—parents with children—used the poorhouse, and most inmates had been born in America. Both of these features changed in the 1840s as large numbers of Irish immigrants began to enter the poorhouse. In these years, fewer families came to the poorhouse together, and most inmates entered by themselves. The third era was the Civil War. Not surprisingly, the proportion of young men in the poorhouse dropped sharply then, and many more young, unmarried women entered. However, when the war ended, the proportion of women and children started to decline, and the proportion of elderly inmates climbed. By the end of the century, the poorhouse clearly was becoming an old age home. Nonetheless, at no time in the nineteenth century was the poorhouse a monolithic institution, for it always sheltered many different kinds of people, including young men (Katz 1983).

The length of time people spent in the poorhouse highlights its dual role as both a short-term refuge for people in trouble and a home for the helpless and elderly. Throughout these years a strikingly high

proportion of inmates stayed for only a short time. At least two-fifths of the inmates stayed in the poorhouse for three weeks at most. In fact, nearly three-fifths were there for a maximum of six weeks, and only between one-fifth and one-quarter stayed there for a year or more. For most people the poorhouse was a temporary refuge during crises, not a permanent home.

By and large, therefore, inmates were not passive, degraded paupers drifting into poorhouses where they lived out the rest of their lives in a dependent stupor. Despite official policy, the poor used the almshouse for their own purposes: early in its history as a short-term residence for native families in crisis, and in later years as a place to stay during harsh seasons, unemployment, or family emergencies. At the same time, it was a hospital where unmarried mothers could have their children and a home of last resort for the sick poor and the destitute elderly.

Poorhouse demography did not match official images of paupers or the goals of policy very well. Inmates did not come from a degraded culture of poverty marked by illiteracy and intemperance. They were not by and large apathetic, unwilling to work, and permanently pauperized. Many were able-bodied, short-term residents looking for work. To be sure, fewer were children, and increasing numbers were elderly. But the poorhouse remained a much more complex place than its sponsors conveniently could admit. The problem became acute in the 1870s when relief policy suddenly toughened and became even more punitive. Central to the justification of harsh policies was the argument that paupers, who had brought their misfortunes on themselves, merited only minimal sympathy, and that the truly deserving poor were far fewer than most people believed. Although these ideas about poor people were far from new, they were articulated with special ferocity in the 1870s. Here, the relevant point is their implication for the way public officials and welfare reformers interpreted poorhouse populations.

Even late nineteenth-century public officials and reformers recognized that their arguments about paupers rested more on experience and intuition than on hard data. To justify deploying harsh new policies, they needed something more, concrete, irrefutable evidence that paupers were degraded, brought to the poorhouse through their own weak characters. To provide data about pauperism, the New York State Senate and Assembly instructed the Board of State Charities to conduct



a survey of all the poorhouse inmates in the state in 1874–75. The board's secretary, Dr. Charles S. Hoyt, carried out the work, and his 60-question survey administered to 12,614 inmates became the most influential and widely quoted document on pauperism in the late nineteenth century. Its influence rested partly on its extensive sample and exhaustive questionnaire but, even more, on its conclusions. For Hoyt told people what they wanted to hear. Despite his veneer of empiricism, Hoyt neatly sidestepped the most troublesome facts about poorhouse inmates and fabricated an image that suited the times (see also Katz 1983).

By administering his questionnaire only to the "fixed population" of poorhouses and by lumping together paupers, inmates of insane asylums attached to poorhouses, and some children in orphanages, Hoyt could claim that he had discovered few able-bodied men in poorhouses and that most inmates were long-term residents, helpless people destroyed by their own shiftless, degraded lives. He would concede only that many of them lacked responsibility because they had inherited their distaste for work and their fondness for drink from their pauper parents. In fact, Hoyt knew perfectly well that the poorhouses were full of able-bodied men. He even had pointed out the problem forcefully in his fourth report, but the image spread by his survey only a few years later was dramatically different.

A reanalysis of Hoyt's data and an examination of the registers of poorhouses in the last quarter of the nineteenth century show quite a different picture than the one he presented. Indeed, Hoyt failed completely to discuss one of the most remarkable and consistent patterns in the data: the greater number of elderly men than women among the inmates. From the demography of poorhouses, it appears that children were less willing to take care of their fathers than their mothers. The question is why? According to Mary Roberts Smith, Assistant Professor of Social Science at Stanford (1896), women less often ended their lives in poorhouses because the public recognized "the inevitable dependence of women by considering it a most disgraceful thing for relatives or children to allow an old woman to go to the almshouse." But men were thought to "have had their chance to lay up money, and if they have not done so they must take the consequences. This one-sided filial obligation keeps large numbers of women out of the almshouse who are wholly dependent."

Despite his claims, Hoyt's survey failed to show that pauperism was hereditary or that most paupers were the drunken offspring of intemperate parents. In fact, his data showed that almost all poorhouse inmates had lived their lives in the most vulnerable sectors of the working class. A very high proportion of the men had been unskilled laborers; only a tiny fraction had worked at white-collar occupations. Most women listed no occupation; those that did usually had been domestic servants. Most, moreover, had received very little public relief before entering the poorhouse. Few had received outdoor relief and most were in a poorhouse for the first time. Because they had not worked for wages, women became dependent earlier than men, especially when they were widowed. Thus, the women in poorhouses had been dependent longer than the men. As well, they were more likely to have received outdoor relief, especially when they had children. Poor men were able to support themselves until relatively late in their lives and avoided the poorhouse longer than did women. Although women more often succeeded in avoiding it altogether, when they did enter they usually did so younger than men because of their vulnerability and lack of employment opportunity. Among the insane poor, by contrast, men received less help from relatives and were institutionalized earlier than women, although, overall, many more women than men ended up in insane asylums.

What most characteristically set men and women in poorhouses apart from other poor people was their lack of children. A very high proportion had never married; about three-quarters of the widowed paupers had either no living children or only one. These proportions were far higher than in the population as a whole. Thus, many people entered poorhouses simply because they had no one to give them a home. They did not end their lives in poorhouses because they were especially debauched, idle, or thriftless. Rather, they were so poor that the death of a spouse or sickness pushed them over the "verge of pauperism." And they were unlucky enough to lack grown children to whom they could turn for help.

Hoyt managed to avoid the demography of destitution by excluding the mass of young, temporary poorhouse inmates from his sample, lumping together men, women, the sane, insane, and children into the same analyses, manipulating the categories with which he reported his results, and simply ignoring uncomfortable patterns. Nowhere in

his more than 300-page report did he mention the great depression that raged around him.

Dismayed by the sloppy record-keeping in poorhouses, Hoyt designed registers to be kept in every institution. These would have shown a picture equally at variance with prevailing images of pauperism if anyone had cared to analyze them. In the late nineteenth century, most inmates of New York's almshouses were literate and had been to school. Most, too, came from working-class families. However, fewer inmates than their fathers had worked in agriculture, and many appear to have been men and women caught in the transition from agriculture to industry. Even though their families were working-class, few inmates came from pauper backgrounds.

What the demography of dependence shows is quite the opposite of what Hoyt intended and what his most influential and articulate colleagues and contemporaries believed. It gives a picture of poverty rooted in the conditions of working-class life. Seasonal work, fluctuating demands for labor, and periodic depressions often produced destitution. Thus, many paupers were men on the move in search of work, either by themselves or with their families, needing short-term help between jobs. Others—victims of industrial accidents, the mentally ill, the chronically sick—unable to care for themselves, landed in poorhouses where they remained for long periods of time. Still other people were casualties of the working-class life cycle. They were widows with young children; young, pregnant women; orphans; and, especially, old people without spouses, kin, or children able or willing to care for them. All of these people crowded into large, nineteenth-century poorhouses at the same time. Thus, the lack of classification, the heterogeneous quality of poorhouse populations, about which critics tirelessly complained, was not only the product of bad management. Even more, it was a consequence of the complex causes of destitution, a structural artifact of working-class life.

After nearly 100 years, the campaign to restrict poorhouses to the old and helpless finally succeeded in the early decades of the twentieth century. In New York, by "the end of the [First] World War," the poorhouse "was being looked upon as an institution mainly for the care of the aged and infirm" (Schneider and Deutsch 1941, 278). Here, in the gradual transformation of poorhouses, lay the origins of public old age homes. The departure of children, the mentally ill,

and the able-bodied did not mean that conditions in poorhouses improved dramatically for those left behind. Throughout the early twentieth century, investigations routinely uncovered wretched conditions. In some less populous states, poorhouses remained relatively unspecialized, mixing children, the insane, sick, able-bodied, and elderly.

Old age homes paid a price for their origins as poorhouses. Emerging as part of the structure of public relief, they never wholly lost the stigma attached to welfare. They were places of last resort, dreaded by the poor. Writing of homeless old men in Chicago in the early twentieth century, Alice Willard Solenberger observed, "Dread of life in an institution seems to be almost universal among them, although the particular institution most dreaded is, of course, the poorhouse" (Solenberger 1911, 124).

The fears of these poor old men in Chicago point once again to the triumph of deterrence over compassion in the history of poorhouses. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the decision to try to force almost all needy people into poorhouses was the first victory for advocates of deterrence. The mean-spirited administration of poorhouses showed their hold on welfare policy throughout the next century. It would be facile to dismiss this consistent resolution of the contradiction between deterrence and compassion as ironic, the unintended or unanticipated outcome of the efforts of men and women of good will trapped by the intellectual boundaries of their time. For welfare practices deliberately were designed to deter people from applying for relief; the stigma associated with poorhouses was an intended, not an accidental, consequence of policy. Nor will it do to lament the lack of realistic alternatives. For sane, reasonable people always pointed to more compassionate options. In the end, there is no way to avoid recognizing the uncomfortable facts of the matter. Throughout American history policy for relief of the poor has held the needy—even the old and sick—hostage to the demand for low taxes, cheap labor, and a sober, deferential working class.

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