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The Problem of the Transient

By ELLEN C. POTTER

CONSPICUOUS among the problems revealed by the economic collapse of 1929, followed by the long continued depression, was that of the unemployed persons who in rapidly increasing numbers took to the road to find a job and who, at the end of twelve months' fruitless search, found themselves not only without a job but "men without a country," for our archaic poor laws and laws of legal settlement denied them any right to material assistance.

In the third year of the depression every state, city, town, and village stood with its defenses raised against men, women, and children who could not prove long-time residence within its jurisdiction. The leading citizen as well as the common laborer resented the presence of the migrant; the public official, in response to local demand, threw him into the lockup or ran him over the border to the next county or the next state; he was considered a menace instead of a human being to be integrated into the social structure of the community.

The migrant, whether he be a professional man or a common laborer, is no new phenomenon in America. Our country has been developed by those men and women of various national origins who had the courage to leave lands which they knew to seek out another land where political and religious liberty might be found and where adventure and opportunity to "better themselves" was assured.

Our English forebears brought with them not only this urge to better themselves, but also certain patterns of human relationship embodied in the

old English Poor Law and the laws of legal settlement. These insured that those who prospered would assume, through the overseer of the poor and tax moneys, responsibility for providing, under certain conditions, the necessities of life for those less fortunate. These conditions required that a man or a family to be entitled to relief must have lived a certain number of months in a given locality to establish "legal settlement" and consequent right to assistance. Twelve months was the usual requirement, and to this day, in almost all the states of the Union, this is the law.

There is, further, this complication, that the administration of relief previous to the establishment of Federal Emergency Relief was not a *state* function but a purely *local* responsibility; and as a result, the person in need might have legal settlement in the state but not in the county or the municipality, and therefore no relief was to be had.

STUDIES OF TRANSIENCY

Because of these deplorable conditions and the absence of any legal responsibility for the care of this army of wanderers, the Federal Children's Bureau, in the summer of 1932, undertook a survey of the situation in the Southwest, with especial reference to boys and young men who by the thousands (estimated 200,000 for the United States) were found "riding the rods" of the railroads, their whole future endangered and their lives in jeopardy. The publication of the findings of the Bureau focused national attention on the problem.

In October 1932 a group of individuals, members of national agencies¹ deeply concerned with this problem, together with a number of persons² actively engaged in the study of the subject, organized themselves under the auspices of the National Social Work Council as a discussion group to explore the size and content of the problem, to plan experiments for its handling, and to bring more closely together the agencies already in the field in order to arrive at an understanding of the social phenomenon and, if possible, to work out some practical plan for its relief.

The activities of the Committee, financed by Mr. Tracy W. McGregor, included deep delving into the historic background of the development of the United States as it relates to movements of population; survey of conditions relating to the homeless and transient in two areas, the South Atlantic and the Northeast Central States, which had not previously been studied. A census of "transiency" was taken in January and again in March, 1933. These figures were analyzed and interpreted. Standards of care and types of services were evolved, and a definite effort was made to disseminate information as to the cause of this vast movement of population, possible methods of meeting the need, and methods of prevention.

¹ Association of Community Chests and Councils; American Public Welfare Association; Bureau of Jewish Social Research; Child Welfare League of America; Family Welfare Association of America; International Migration Service; National Association of Travelers' Aid Societies; National Social Work Council; National Urban League; Y. M. C. A.; Y. W. C. A.; N. Y. Joint Application Bureau; Salvation Army.

² Tracy W. McGregor of Washington and Detroit; Nels Anderson, Columbia University; A. W. McMillen, Chicago University; Harold P. Winchester, Albany.

Representatives of the Committee participated in the hearings held before the Congressional Committee previous to the creation of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and as a result the act creating that Administration included the definite provision that the Federal funds appropriated were to provide

the necessities of life to persons in need as a result of the present emergency, and/or to their dependents whether resident, transient or homeless.

It was also provided that:

The Administrator may certify out of the funds made available . . . additional grants to states applying therefor to aid needy persons who have no legal settlement in any one state or community.

It may be profitable briefly to review the findings of the Committee resulting from its study, surveys, census, and discussion.

HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF MIGRATION

Migrancy is no new phenomenon in America. The early settlers and the more recent emigrants left intolerable conditions in order to find a more satisfactory way of life in a new environment. The early years of our development saw the colonists and later their descendants leave the seaboard for the Alleghenys, then on to the Mississippi, and across the plains to the Northwest and California. Alaska provided the last frontier where men could plant their stakes and claim the land for their own and out of it win success by a combination of physical strength, intelligence, and luck.

With this flow of population toward the West went the traditions of the old English Poor Law. So long as frontiers beckoned to the man and the woman who had courage, initiative, and health as their capital with which

to undertake a new adventure, they were almost certain to succeed. To-day the frontiers are closed, and legal barriers stand in the way of the man who takes to the road looking for opportunity.

This fact, that success in these pioneer undertakings was largely predicated upon individual initiative and hard work applied to the natural resources of the country, developed an American tradition, namely, that the man who failed had only himself to blame for his inability to "get on." The "great depression" has shaken our faith in this belief.

This pioneer epoch was followed by the era of development and exploitation. Our canals and railroads were built and our forests were exploited by men who were lured far from home by good wages and high adventure. Our gold tempted thousands, with packs on their backs, into the gold fields hundreds and thousands of miles away from home, and often they remained and created a new and prosperous community.

With the development of the West, with its crops of grain, fruits, fish, and so forth, came the demand for seasonal labor; and the movement of population, men alone or with their families, followed the crop season from South to North, drifting "back home" with a little money in hand after the season's labor.

Industrialization in the North and East after 1880 brought a steady drift of population from the country to the city, the younger generation of men and women finding opportunity beckoning. So great was the demand for labor, skilled and unskilled, that as a nation we deliberately encouraged immigration from Europe, without regard to quality and with no program for the assimilation of those who came.

The census of 1880 shows 26.6 per cent of our population urban as against 56.2 per cent in 1930—a great shift in the economic balance of the country.

Into the midst of these movements of population a new factor was thrown in the early part of this century. The mechanization of industry threw men out of work more rapidly than new types of industry could find use for them, and again the phenomenon of men on the road looking for work became a fact, but at the time it was given scant recognition. It is now estimated that at least three million were out of work in 1929.

Within our major movements of population there was also the migration of the Negro from the South to the North to be reckoned with, while the decrease in international trade sent the seamen to shore with no job.

These population movements have always constituted a risk to the individual who might find himself in need, for the rigid laws of settlement and public relief were likely to deny him assistance.

With the long continued depression, industry and commerce stagnant, private charity without funds, public charity with its back to the wall, holding its relief funds for "citizens only" and inadequate at that, it is not to be wondered at that men and families took to the road, nor is it strange that the local community turned its back upon the stranger in need.

TRANSIENT COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES AND CONCLUSIONS

The Committee on the Care of Transient and Homeless, having digested these historic facts, undertook to look at first hand upon the present-day conditions. Surveys were made and on two occasions, early in 1933, a census was taken of the transients in

care in various localities. Reports were received from 809 cities in 48 states and the District of Columbia from more than 1,300 agencies.

The first census, covering 3 days, recorded 370,000 personally registered, and of these 304,000 were males. Boys under 21 years numbered 16,500; girls 2,700; women 14,482. The South and West showed the largest percentage of boys registered, and it was generally recognized that they were not seeking the assistance of social agencies but were fending for themselves in "jungles" outside the cities, and en route on the railroads and highways.

The second census, on March 22, 1933, enumerated 201,000 persons, 177,483 being males. All the states in the Union were represented, indicating that while each made its contribution to this moving stream of transients, it also shared unequally in the burden imposed by them. Florida, California, New Mexico, and Arizona carried a heavy load that winter.

This census made clear that while the younger men take the long trail across the country, the bulk of the transient army moves within a radius of five hundred miles of its home base. The March census also showed 3,165 families on the move, representing 14,187 persons, with 5,544 of them under 14 years of age.

Estimates made of the transients on the road ranged as high as one million plus, but this was a rough guess.

Recognizing these stark facts, realizing that there was no law to compel a local community or a state to provide for these wanderers, the conclusion reached was that, at least for the period of the depression, these persons without legal settlement must be considered as a national responsibility and plans for their assistance must be worked out on a national basis, to be administered by the states upon a level

of decency and social understanding better than that accorded the unattached man who was provided for in municipal shelters.

THE FEDERAL PLAN

In August 1933, the Federal Relief Administrator accepted responsibility for the unsettled person and his family and began to develop plans for an attack on the problem. The attention of all governors was called to the fact that each state was adding its contingent to the army of transients by its own inadequate relief program, and they were urged to give greater consideration to the prevention of transiency.

For purposes of administration a "transient"³ was defined as an individual (or family) who had resided within state boundaries less than twelve months. This was a definite recognition of the fact that in nearly all states twelve months' residence could be required for settlement. A transient when accepted for care was to remain a continuing responsibility of the State Transient Bureau until successfully adjusted.

The basic principles upon which the Federal transient program was to be built were these:

1. The plan must be comprehensive in its scope and undertake to meet the needs of men and boys, women and girls, and families in a manner adapted to the needs of each individual.
2. It must be nation-wide in its application.
3. It must be dominated by Federal leadership as to standards and policy, and financed entirely from Federal funds, except for hospitalization.
4. It must be worked out and ad-

³ A "Federal Transient" had resided in a state less than 12 months. A "State Transient" had lost his municipal settlement but had not moved outside the state.

ministered on a state and regional basis, adapted to the situation in each state.

5. Any plans made to meet the present conditions should also include long-term social planning for revision of the laws of settlement, relief, and vagrancy. It was hoped that plans developed for the care of transients would inevitably improve standards of care for the local and state homeless.

The original Federal transient plan provided for a Federal Director of Transient Activities. Each state was requested to set up a transient bureau under a director to be approved by the Federal Administrator.

The State Transient Director was required to survey the state situation as it related to transiency, and, in cooperation with others interested, to devise a plan to meet the state needs. With the approval of the State Emergency Relief Administration Director, this plan was to be submitted to the Federal Administrator, and when approved by him, was to become the working plan for the state.

A total of \$15,000,000 was earmarked for purposes of this social experiment, and as plans were approved an allocation of funds was made.

STATE PLANS

In general, state plans conformed to the following pattern: Under the State Transient Director there were set up at strategic transportation points regional registration⁴ and service centers, with a trained case-work supervisor and staff of interviewers in charge. This center received all applicants who had lived in the state less than twelve months.

An effort was made to plan with the client for his immediate relief and for his future. No compulsion was exercised in this planning.

⁴ Approximately 340 for the United States.

The following services were authorized under the Federal regulations: shelter, food, clothing, medical and health service (excluding hospitalization), transportation where indicated, work for wages or work for relief, integration into the community where found desirable, educational, recreational, and character-building programs, and case-work assistance if desired. Some localities provided shelter under state and Federal auspices; in others, local municipal, Salvation Army, or other shelters were used on contract or per diem basis. For young people, private social agencies such as the Young Women's or Young Men's Christian Association were used. In many areas camps⁵ were established to meet the need of shelter, health building, and productive work. Great latitude was granted the states in the development of plans. Imagination was a prime requisite, and a great diversity of successful experimentation has been the result.

The development of state plans was relatively a slow process. Some declared they had no transient problem; others, while acknowledging the problem, were slow to work out the details and recruit staff. As of June 15, 1934, the District of Columbia and all the states except Vermont and Montana had their programs in operation, with 192,288 persons in care. Of these state and Federal transients there were 114,848 unattached individuals, of whom 111,152 were males and 3,696 were females; and 77,440 individuals in 21,252 families.

The "case loads" by states ranged from 126 in Idaho, 473 in Rhode Island, and 579 in Delaware, the three lowest, to 21,604 in California, 15,320 in Ohio, and 11,717 in Texas, the three highest. New York and Pennsyl-

⁵ Two hundred or more now in operation.

vania were slow in developing their plans and are not yet fully functioning. Florida, New Mexico, and Arizona show registration high in proportion to their population, probably due to climatic conditions and the search for health.

FINANCING AND ANALYSIS OF CASE LOAD

The financial obligations incurred by the Federal Government on behalf of transients during February totaled \$1,972,392⁶ with approximately 138,000 under care. These funds are used for food, clothing, shelter, medical care (except hospitalization), construction in camps and shelters, salary of staff, and money allowance to the man in camp, which ranges, in accordance with the responsibility of his job, from one to three dollars per week.

An analysis of the transient figures available on May 23, 1934 indicates that of the 166,476 under care, 40 per cent were in family groups. Of the unattached newly registered in March, 116,036 were white males, 207 Indians, 1,153 Mexicans, and 9,965 Negroes. Of the women, 1,980 were white, 5 Indians, 11 Mexicans, and 324 Negroes. The Oriental races were represented by 152 men and one woman. Of the families, 6,749 were white, 26 Indian, 127 Mexican, 367 Negro, and 3 Oriental.

Considering the age distribution, 818 boys and 53 girls were under 16. Between 16 and 21 years there were 21,225 boys and 351 girls. Between 21 and 24 years there were 23,863 young men and 348 young women. In the family groups there were 681 under one year of age; 2,984 between

1 and 6 years; and 4,518 between 6 and 15 years.

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

The records of the Transient Bureau are devised not only for administrative purposes but also in the belief that the mass of social data obtained may provide material which, when analyzed and interpreted, will give us guidance in developing programs of prevention and treatment for this symptom of a serious social disorder.⁷

As yet, no satisfactory interpretation of the results of the present program is available. We know that in March the closed cases indicated that 3,930 individuals had been assimilated into local communities; 684 had been provided with permanent institutional care; 5,746 had been sent from city centers to camps; 3,786 had been returned to their legal residences; 1,715 had been transported to relatives; 2,484 had secured work; 9,249 had left because of definite plans which they had formulated; 813 had been transferred for care to local relief organizations; and 33 had died.

But 102,000 of those interviewed had either refused to make any plans or left of their own accord without explanation. This lack of success must undoubtedly be attributed in part to lack of training and skill of the staff hastily recruited, with very little experience in making short-term contacts fruitful on behalf of the individual who has become infected with the lure of the road.

That the problem of transiency as we are at present viewing it is a serious one must be evident. In the moving army there are estimated to be 10 per cent of the chronic hobo type, but the remaining 90 per cent are found to be average normal individuals with at

⁶In June, Mr. Aubrey Williams, Assistant Administrator, stated that expenditures are averaging \$2,500,000 per month, part of this for camp and shelter construction.

⁷Illinois is undertaking social studies of the alcoholic, the Negro, and the chronic hobo.

least a common school to high school education; older men with good work habits; boys and younger men with no work records because of the depression; family groups moving from place to place, and little children growing up with no sense of security, no background, and no normal community contacts and education.

If we do not handle the situation wisely and constructively, we run the risk of developing a nomadic tribe, irresponsible in its habits of life, subsisting ultimately as parasites upon society and potentially a dangerous group, contaminated, as it is bound to be, by the "chronics" who begin as petty thieves and end as criminals.

On May 1 the Federal Administrator issued an order decentralizing much of the responsibility for transient administration and emphasizing the responsibility of the Emergency Relief Administration State Director for the promotion of the program. Funds, however, are to continue to be earmarked for the purpose of the transient activities. Where State Emergency Relief Directors have an appreciation of the gravity of the problem and imagination, which will stimulate the State Transient Director in the development of his plans, this shift in authority will be of advantage. Too often this understanding is lacking, and the development of state plans will be retarded unless the Federal Transient Director is ready and willing to give the State Director support.

FIELD SURVEY OF THE PROGRAM IN ACTION

A field survey undertaken by the Committee on the Care of Transient and Homeless (with the approval of the Federal Transient Director) under the direction of Dr. Ellery F. Reed is now in progress for the purpose of evaluating the results of the first year

of transient activities under Federal direction. Preliminary observations indicate:

1. A marked improvement in local handling of the transient problem as contrasted with twelve months ago. Public opinion is swinging from indifference to interest in the transient program.

2. Persons recruited from the ranks of the transients are being used in important places of leadership within the group, and in certain areas there is genuine participation.

3. Case-work procedures in relation to the transients are better understood and are more nearly the main line of dependence in the program, but group-work procedures are essential to success.

4. There has not yet developed a unified standard transient philosophy and program throughout the Union, and there is still great need of Federal promotion in this field.

5. Camps established on public land with public works projects, and work projects for public advantage in cities, offer one of the most satisfactory solutions of the transient problem, pending the revival of industry.

Health services throughout the transient program are at a minimum, and the Federal refusal to provide hospitalization is a serious handicap.

7. The transients themselves are not a hotbed for communistic propaganda, but rather are a conservative lot.

8. The transient is everywhere better cared for than is the local homeless, and as a result there is a constant recruiting into the transient army.

These preliminary observations seem to indicate that the acceptance by the Federal Relief Administrator of responsibility for the transient, "unsettled" person has resulted in minimizing the social injustice which had

become the bitter lot of the man on the road. It is developing, by practical experimentation, new methods of handling the unattached, unemployed man. It is arousing the public to a consciousness of the fact that our union of states creates a nation, and that from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Canada to the Gulf, our unfortunate fellow citizens have certain rights to material and spiritual assistance which cannot be ignored.

THE FUTURE TASK

To secure the maximum return from the expenditure of Federal funds in this undertaking, much more field service under Federal auspices is required to interpret and guide the program.

A more active exchange of experience between states through conference or publications is desirable. More research based upon the social material available, in coöperation with university departments, is essential if we are to dig down to the roots of this problem and plan more intelligently for its immediate handling and for its prevention.

In addition, it is of the greatest importance that the Federal Relief Administration, in coöperation with other social agencies, shall promote the revision of our laws relating to relief and to vagrancy in the light of sound social practice, and that it shall help to secure either the abolition of the laws of settlement or their unification throughout the Nation.

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