



The Welfare Mess

ROBERT CLANCY

THERE IS currently a "welfare backlash" in the USA, a general revolt against the rising cost of public assistance to the poor. In New York, one out of seven is on welfare; in Washington, under the shadow of the Capitol, one out of five is on welfare.

Politicians are moving to cut down on the cost of providing welfare by making it harder to get on welfare rolls, cracking down on cheaters, dismissing social service workers, etc. Whereas in 1971 welfare costs rose by more than one-third over the previous year, in 1972 they rose by "only" 17 per cent. (Hardly a decrease!)

A good deal of the backlash is caused not only by the shocking costs but also by a misconception about poor people. A widespread attitude is that those on welfare are a lazy and shiftless lot who want something for nothing, and the resentment against this is fierce. Quite often this resentment is piled up against ethnic minorities such as Negroes and Puerto Ricans who are seen as the chief welfare recipients. Certain politicians play upon this attitude, for there is nothing easier than to make a scapegoat of an underdog during troubled times.

When a welfare family was put temporarily into a room in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New Yorkers boiled over with resentment. Yet international gangsters who are robbing us blind constantly use the best hotels causing hardly a ripple. Stories of thefts and misappropriations of millions and billions of dollars by public officials and financial magnates are read with passive curiosity. The book and the movie "The Godfather" were immensely popular, suggesting something approaching admiration for big-money criminals. Besides, it is futile and dangerous to protest against large-scale larceny by powerful people. The time-honoured method is to kick the fellow underneath.

Recent research* has shown that the stereotype of the welfare client is far from the truth. The vast majority of the able-bodied poor are anxious to get off the welfare rolls and to find jobs. They are the first to agree with the current slogan "workfare not

welfare." They exceedingly dislike the degradation of being permanently on welfare. Thus the traditional method of solving poverty by reforming the poor is irrelevant. After all the training and moral preaching, they still cannot find jobs.

There has been much ado in Congress during the past year about reforming welfare. Proposals have ranged from a requirement that all welfare recipients must work, to a guaranteed annual income with no requirements. After much wrangling, nothing has been done.

So the latest in the periodic wars on poverty ends in a stalemate as usual. The underlying reason has been given by sociologist Herbert Gans:

"None of the programs . . . can do much about the welfare problem itself. That problem is really in the heart of the American economy, which simply does not need all the unemployed looking for work at a living wage, and which cannot provide for all the working poor who require higher wages to support their families. Ultimately, therefore, an end to the welfare problem requires either remaking the economy so that it produces full employment at a living wage, or altering public beliefs about welfare so that the Government will provide the unneeded and underpaid with a decent income."

Since the prospect of "remaking the economy" requires a change in current thinking, it is less likely to be undertaken than the guaranteed annual income which is only carrying present procedures a step further.

The prospect of providing work for the poor under present conditions also poses too many difficulties: industry has not got the jobs and labour unions resist newcomers. Public works appear to be the last resort, the makeshift of the Great Depression - the man with a shovel digging a hole and filling it up again.

When we decide to become more fundamental, we might recall that poor laws arose in England as the common lands were enclosed and public assistance rose in America as the frontier was closed. Fundamental reform will require the re-opening of natural opportunities as a permanent outlet for employment. This is the sort of "remaking the economy" that is needed. Since this will step on monopolistic toes, it is not likely to be the first measure undertaken. It seems easier to go on doling out money.

But in the long run (and not so long run), welfare is the more troublesome method and can only lead to more of the kinds of trouble we are experiencing today - more taxes, more bureaucracy, more social unrest. So, as we go on bumbling and patching and further inequities and disorders arise, hopefully some day we may see the light and be ready for fundamental reform.

**Do the Poor Want to Work?* by Leonard Goodwin, The Brookings Institution; *Reforming the Poor* by Joel F. Handler, Basic Books.