

Storm Center of Relief: Dependent Children's Aid

Soaring Costs and Rising Illegitimacy Rate Make Program One of The Most Controversial

This series of articles on public welfare follows six months of research and study by the staff of The News, including service by a reporter as a caseworker for the Erie County Department of Social Welfare.

The welfare problem, not confined to Erie County, is growing more costly each year. This series, spotlighting the system, is intended as an aid to officials who are struggling to confine welfare to the needy and thus benefit the taxpayer. All names of clients and places are fictitious to comply with New York State law.

By ED MAY

Three children played noisily, unaware their father had deserted them more than two years ago.

A few hours earlier the mailmen dropped off the monthly welfare check that allows four people to call themselves a family.

But less than a mile away a similar check went to a woman whose case history includes this report:

"Special investigator on home call discovered one S. P. hiding in the bedroom. S. P. receives his mail at (same address). The banks are now being cleared since the April check to Mrs. S. was endorsed by S. P. and 'for deposit only.'"

Bill Doubled in 5 Years

The gulf between these two cases today has become the battleground of the most controversial program in public assistance—Aid to Dependent Children.

In New York State it jumped from \$59 million in 1948 to \$121.4 million in 1958. In Erie County alone, ADC bills have doubled in the last five years and monthly average costs last year rose 17.9%.

These catapulting statistics—paralleled in many areas of the country—have brought protests ranging from the Erie County Board of Supervisors to the U. S. Senate Finance Committee, which is currently making an ADC investigation.

Because the illegitimacy rate also has jumped by leaps and bounds, some ADC critics have made a cause-and-effect relationship out of the two statistics. ADC, they say, encourages immorality.

Money Not Only Need

In New York City, for example, ADC in 1958 supported 54,000 illegitimate children.

On the other side of the coin, the question often is put this way: What do you propose to do? Let these children starve because of the mistakes of their parents?

Of all the public assistance categories, experts agree, this is the one where caseworkers find some of the toughest problems. Money is only part of the help these broken families need.

Too often, leaders in the welfare field admit, "case work" stops after the routine eligibility questions have been answered and the checks begin rolling.

For example, every ADC investigation must answer this: Is the welfare of the children safeguarded?

"Extras" Are Costly

When, as a welfare caseworker for Erie County, I got to this part in my first investigation, I was cautioned:

"You've got to judge these homes with each other. You can't compare them with what you think is normal. What you think is bad now isn't going to be after you've seen some more of them."

The prediction turned out to be true.

It is here, too, because of the large families—anywhere from one to a dozen children—that the "extras" of welfare made ADC such a costly category.

In one of my cases just household furnishings in a four-month period cost \$197 in addition to the monthly cash grant. And this doesn't count possible medical, hospital or drug cost.

Appliances Break Down

Here is a breakdown of these items:

July 2, refrigerator and estimate\$53
July 31, washing machine\$40
Oct. 2, studio couch.....\$15
Oct. 23, gas heater.....\$73
Oct. 28, refrigerator repair and estimate....\$16

The refrigerator, as the list shows, broke down in six months. The washing machine lasted two months longer before it had to be fixed and consequently added another \$22 to the welfare tab.

Among my cases there also were some ADC stories which, as one official put it, "would really look bad in the newspapers."

One of these is Mrs. Jane B., the mother of eight children, three of whom are out-of-wedlock, who receives more than \$300 every month. The highlights of the case are these:

Husband Falls to Pay

Her separated husband was ordered by a court to pay \$20 a week, but his account is credited only with \$62 last year. Joe L., the father of two out-of-wedlock children, pays \$20 weekly to the Welfare Department and receives his mail at her address and pays regular visits there.

Nov. 2, 1959, when Jane B. entered the hospital to give birth to twins, she signed her name as Mrs. Joe L. and wrote his name under the "spouse" heading.

Another out-of-wedlock child

was born in December 1958, but the Welfare Department didn't learn about this until a month before the twins were born.

And in 1949, when Jane B. first applied for relief, the department wrote her home town to find out if her parents could support her.

Relief Termed Unnecessary

This was the answer:

"Elizabeth W. and her husband, who are father and mother of Jane B. are in very good shape financially and should be able to take care of this family if they were in 'Valoria.' We do not think it is necessary for these people to be on relief in New York or anywhere else."

The special investigators, a division created last year, have routed out some of these cases. In the search for deserting husbands—one of ADC's perennial problems—they have had better than 50% success.

But sometimes the cheats they nab are back on the welfare rolls in mere months. "There are children in the home," the law says.

Mary S., the woman whose "gentleman friend" was caught hiding in the bedroom, shortly afterward went off welfare because she moved in with relatives. But last March she re-applied for help and I started the checks rolling again.

ADC Mother As "Expert"

The first grant had hardly gone out when an elderly man came to see me on my last day with the Welfare Department.

"You ought to investigate her. Go out there at night. Watch the men who go in there. One man, he lives right there. They give her more money than you people ever do."

That cases like this are viewed as representative of all ADC has added fuel to the controversy. They are not. Needy children are being fed, clothed and reared because of this program.

But the leaders in the field are concerned with its shortcomings.

"You're asking an ADC mother to act as an expert," Fred DelliQuadri, dean of the New York School of Social Work, told this reporter. "You send them money and you only go in there once every three months or less. How are you going to help them? What do you expect?"

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NEXT — Work for welfare clients.

On Aid to Dependent Children

One viewpoint expressed below is part of a press release issued by the State Department of Social Welfare last Feb. 1 to introduce the 1959 annual report.

The second, released eight days later, is a part of an appendix to the presentation of the Kings County (Brooklyn) grand jury, which made an 18-month study of New York City welfare conditions.

FROM STATE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WELFARE

"Public welfare, by providing care for millions of needy children at one time or another in their lives, has helped them to become useful citizens and to contribute to the strength that has made the United States the world leader it is . . ."

"Everywhere in America, in every state, in every city, in countless towns, there are millions of men and women who are living useful, productive lives, making their contributions to America and the free world, thanks to public welfare," the report states.

FROM KINGS COUNTY GRAND JURY REPORT

"Investigations carried on by this grand jury have brought shocking revelations concerning a great number of out-of-wedlock children in our city and the deplorable conditions under which they live."

"Many of these unfortunate children live in the most wretched and degrading circumstances calculated to wrap any normal child's development and thwart any hope of improvement toward a decent life."

"They not only live in most inadequate housing, in many cases mere hovels, neglected and deprived of all but the most indifferent care, but in the sordid atmosphere of immorality as well . . ."

"Here there is no decent environment, only quarters where children are brought into the world and kept in a depraved atmosphere leading directly to delinquency and crime."

"Here are the spawning grounds of neglect where in large part potential inmates of our prisons and penitentiaries are raised."

"Yet the Welfare Department, spending millions of dollars annually to maintain these out-of-wedlock children in neglected homes, is either unconcerned about the situation or grossly inept in handling it."