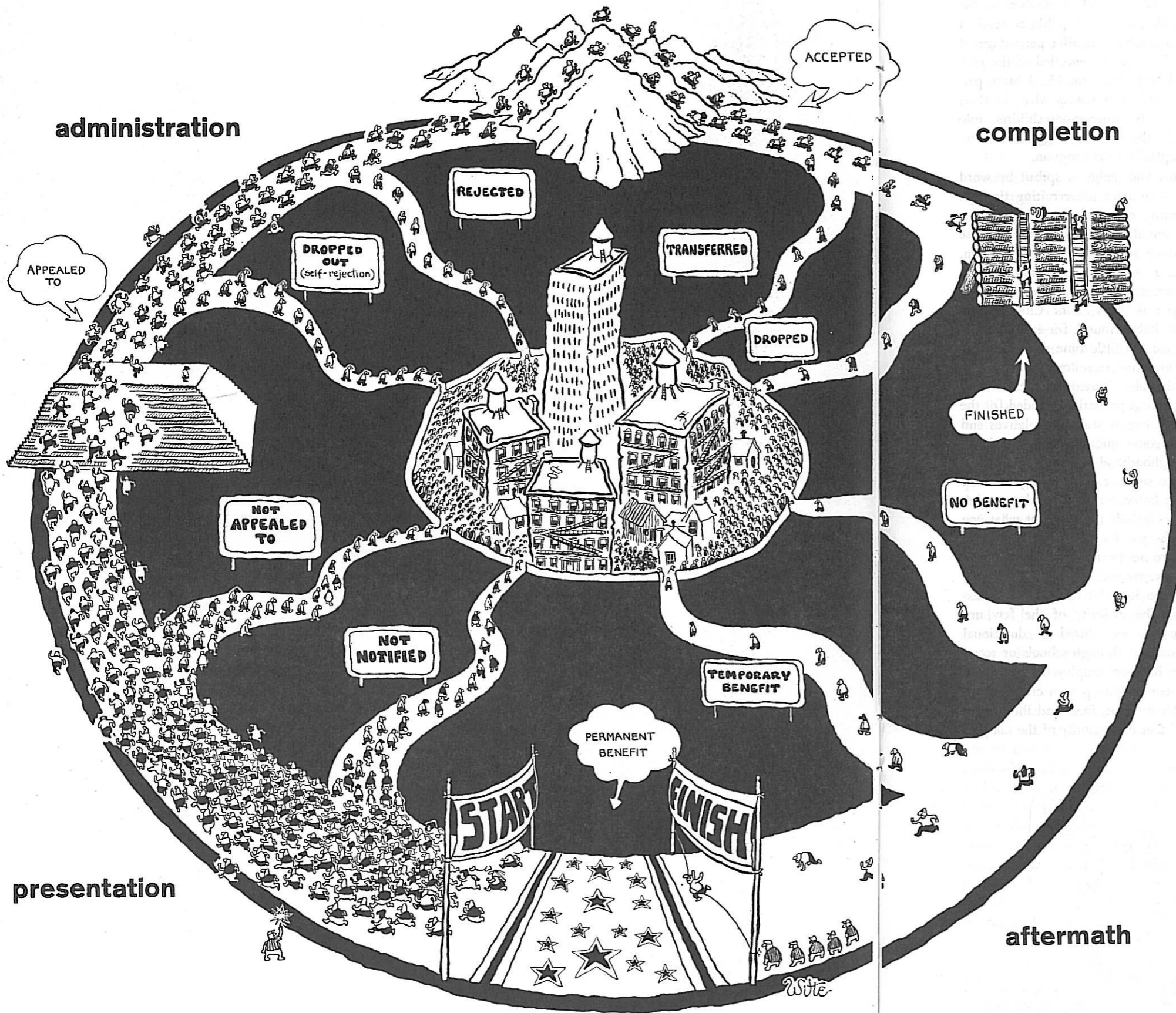


# Creaming the Poor

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A lesson that we are still slow and reluctant to learn is that the question posed by poverty in this country is not, fundamentally, one of poverty but inequality. Most poor individuals in the United States do not experience the degree of suffering of Calcutta's homeless poor. Rather, most of the poor of the affluent economy suffer from lagging incomes; they are falling behind the rising standards of society. They are unequal. Nor can their inequality be calculated in narrow economic terms only. Current income is not the sole dimension of well-being. The neglected dimensions include not only other material markers like basic services and assets but more importantly, perhaps, the satisfaction, status and self-determination which differentially mark citizens.

Since the declaration of the poverty war, the United States has moved toward policies that seek to include more people in the services and opportunities open to the affluent majority of the population. But acts of inclusion also exclude. Efforts to improve the condition of the poor, when effective, generally result in improving the conditions of those at the top of the bottom, leaving the bottommost untouched. Those left behind may be worse off than before. Their relative deprivation may grow, or their feeling about themselves may become negative. The selective mobility of some may mean the selective debasement of many others. "On the dark side of every conception of 'opportunity' lies an equal measure of exclusion and rejection," wrote Peter Schrag. The poor are not an undifferentiated mass; their conditions and outlooks vary widely. We must become aware of their range of reactions to various kinds of interventions and programs.

The process by which mainly the least poor are included in poverty programs we in America have called creaming. Why does creaming occur? One answer might come from looking at the supposedly disabling social-

psychological characteristics of the poorest. Despite its popularity, we think that this interpretation is inadequate.

In this essay we want to show, first, that creaming is a prominent result of most social policies intended to assist the poor and, second, to explore why creaming takes place.

## Organizational Exclusion

Why and how do the very institutions that are nominally intended to include the excluded bar the most excluded of our society? The pervasive processes of selecting and excluding individuals may be viewed as a problem in the sociology of organizations. The conventional approach of organizational sociology concentrates on an analysis of the recruitment, selection and the behavior of staff and personnel. Our perspective differs in that we view the organization from the perspective of the low-income applicant, client or consumer. As the social services (in the broad sense of health, education and training services as well as social work and recreation) grow in this country, it will be increasingly important for social scientists to concentrate on the processes that influence the ways that organizational activities affect clients. Organizational policies and practices, frequently having nothing to do with individual applicants, largely determine who receives and who does not receive services. Persons who make and administer organizational policy select and process applicants on the basis of how they fit their own and their organization's needs and outlook.

Selection and exclusion of potential recipients occur at several points in the contact between agency and poor client. Clients who attempt to improve their well-being through the use of social services are confronted with four major steps: presentation, admission, completion and the aftermath (see drawing at left).

Obtaining benefits from social services, then, is a matter of taking the hurdles. People must jump the obstacles, whether these are placed by themselves or by organizations, in order to obtain delivery of services. By schematizing the process through which individuals move to and eventually gain benefit from services, we do not imply that there is necessarily a sequential development, for some of the steps obviously overlap. We believe, however, that it is worthwhile to make analytical separations in the process in order to see at what points it might be possible to improve the delivery of services. We are dealing with the twin processes of how the individual behaves and how the organization behaves. Let us look at the hurdles one by one.

### Presentation

Erving Goffman has portrayed the many ways individual people present themselves and manage the impressions others form of them in everyday life. Similarly, we are interested in the way social agencies and programs present themselves to the public, especially the poorest of the poor. We are assuming, of course, the existence of services. Yet it's worth noting that many people are excluded from social services because they are not available in certain geographical areas or for certain ethnic groups. The poorest Americans live in predominantly rural areas, while most services and training programs are concentrated in urban and suburban areas. The inequality in the distribution of health services among various regions is particularly striking. New York state in 1966 for instance had 211 doctors per 100,000 population. Mississippi had 74. Los Angeles County had 127 physicians per 100,000 population; the southeast district of Watts had 38.

Three major questions are involved in the presentation of programs for the poor. First, who is notified of the program? Second, what impression does the program make on its audience? Third, is the program or service accessible to people who find it appealing and would like to participate in it?

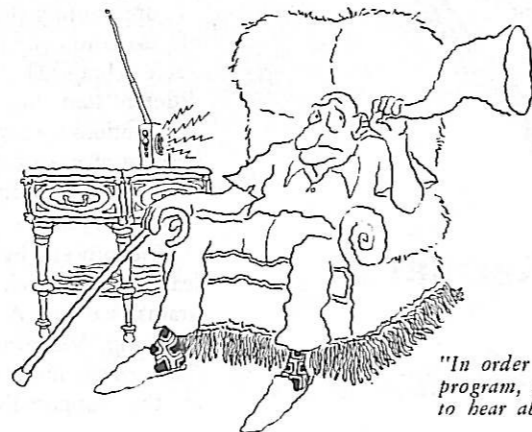
In order to get to a program, people have to know about it. Obviously, little, if any, knowledge is evenly distributed in the society, and knowledge about particular services is no exception. Ignorance of a program's existence frequently prevents the majority of the poor from participating in it. Max Wolff and Annie Stein's study of Project Head Start in New York City, for example, showed that in contrast to the notion that people refuse to use services, nearly 60 percent of the parents interviewed who didn't send their children to Head Start had never heard of the program or had heard of it too late to register their children. Nearly 90 percent of those who heard about it too late said they would have sent their children if they had been notified about it in time.

The means by which programs are publicized naturally affect who learns about them. If the publicity about a program is related primarily through newspapers, posters and

other printed media, it is less likely to reach the poorest. The Wolff study found that the Puerto Rican mother, living alone with her children and supported by welfare, was very much more isolated than the black mother in the same situation. Because little Head Start publicity reached these isolated homes, a substantially smaller percentage of Puerto Rican than black children was enrolled in the programs. When both Head Start and non-Head Start parents were asked by the Wolff interviewers what, in their opinion, was "the best way to bring more children into Head Start next summer?" the majority suggested home-visiting by local people explaining the program.

Furthermore, since much knowledge is spread by word of mouth, many programs do a lot of recruiting through the contacts of their existing clientele. Because most organizations do not deal initially with the poorest, those who are best informed about new programs are, in turn, likely to be the less poor. Last minute rush programs are unlikely to have careful recruiting methods. In a study of educational aides employed in New York City summer schools, one of us (Pamela Roby) found, for example, that administrative personnel had too little time at the start of the program to develop an active recruitment program to alert poor or nonpoor to the jobs. Consequently, those who learned about these job openings primarily intended for the poor were not the poor but largely students, relatives and other persons who were in communication with principals, coordinators, teachers, neighborhood antipoverty agencies and others involved in the summer school program. The old saw "It's not what you know, but who you know, that counts" has to be revised to include the fact that what you know often depends on who you know. In this case "who one knew" became important not because of deliberate nepotism and favoritism but because one needed to know persons involved in the program in order to know of its existence and job openings. The majority of the few unskilled low-income people who were hired as educational aides learned about the positions through schools or recreational agencies where they had been employed formerly.

In later years the real poor caught up with one program and filled most jobs. In Washington, D.C. and Pittsburgh, Daniel Yankelevich found that the majority of the nonpro-



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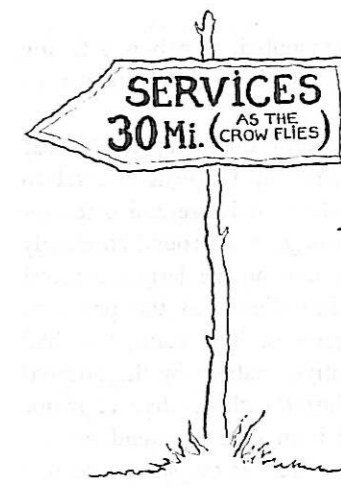
fessionals in community action programs were hard core poor. And this was so because of the fact that in these cities deliberate efforts were made to alert the poor to the new jobs. In Washington program workers went out on the streets, into the bars and even to prisons to stimulate applications. In Pittsburgh community meetings were held for recruitment purposes.

The second major question in the presentation of a program is the impression it gives to the people who do come in contact with it. Is it attractive? What does the service appear like to the poor?

The way the organization presents itself (consciously or unconsciously) very much affects whether people judge it as interested in their problems and capable of helping them. The social distance between agencies and those who might use their services is probably greatest for those at the very bottom. As a consequence, many of the poor avoid using services or present themselves timidly and withdraw quickly when forced by various emergencies to seek help. Two studies of Boston—William F. Whyte's in 1940 and Herbert Gans' in 1958—describe the low appeal, and consequent low use, of middle-class-administered social agencies in low-income Italian neighborhoods. Gans noted that middle-class, unlike working-class "West Enders," viewed the agencies and institutions of the established society as supporting its aims, not theirs. The West End's middle-class "caretakers" never attempted to understand the working-class West Enders' culture, a close, peer-oriented society different from their own. Consequently, agency workers had to believe that "the West Enders' refusal to follow object-oriented middle-class ways was pathological. . . ." The West Enders, in turn, viewed the "caretakers" as deviants. It was hard for the twain to meet.

More recently it has been again realized that "means tests," intended to provide services specifically for the poor, tend to be stigmatizing and humiliating experiences for low-income clients. Consequently, many individuals do not use services they need and are entitled to. Various experiments have been begun in an effort to eliminate degrading means-test ceremonials. New York City appears to have reduced the amount of demeaning questioning and probing but a certain amount still persists. Joseph Goldman reports that even in the experimental centers, "the use of caseworkers as intake staff appears to foster a situation in which there is an undue concern with past patterns of behavior and an excessive exploration of background issues during the determination of eligibility. Many workers have been unable to accept the client's own declaration of eligibility as the sole basis for deciding eligibility. They feel that it is their responsibility to 'catch' applicants who may not be truly eligible." Recommendations have been made to change this situation.

Finally, people may also be barred from a program prior to admission by its physical inaccessibility or its inconvenient hours of operation. Physical inaccessibility is not



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merely a matter of where the service is located but of the relative ease with which the poorest people can get to it. Frequently, services are far from the poor, and even when efforts are made to bring services closer to the poor through decentralization, agencies tend not to be located in the poorest neighborhoods. Location affects who sees and consequently who learns about a service. And because transportation is less available to the poor and the poorest, the physical location of services also crucially affects the apparent availability of services and who will stay in and complete a program. For example, Max Wolff found that 6 percent of the parents whose children did not attend Head Start kept their children at home either because the mother was working and had no one to bring the child to school or because there were young babies at home whom the mother could not leave. Similarly, 1,082 of the 58,700 trainees who left the Work Experience and Training Program funded under Title V of the Economic Opportunity Act between the fall of 1964 and the spring of 1967 indicated that they did so because of transportation problems.

Thus in the presentation stage, even prior to the determination of admission, an individual may be excluded from a program by his ignorance about its existence, by being turned off by the impression it gives him or by finding it physically inaccessible.

### Admission

Those individuals who surmount their first hurdle face admission. What happens to people who apply for a service or a program? How do agencies treat them?

Very often applicants for services are not simply admitted or rejected. They are made to wait for long periods in noisy, overcrowded and bleakly uninviting places with inadequate seating. The use of waiting lists to keep people in nominal touch with a program but not to provide services tends to push out or drop out the poorest. They have the least resources, and when they apply for services they usually need them immediately. The waiting list has the effect, often unplanned, of getting rid of such people. In some cases the immediate emergency passes before

the red tape of agencies is surmounted. Somehow a family manages to get through days without food money or months without furniture.

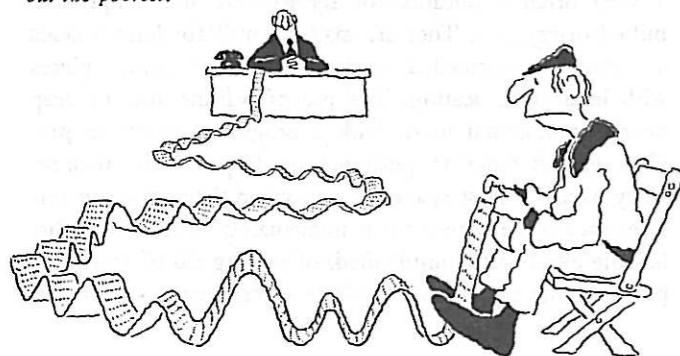
Anselm Strauss has noted (*trans-action*, May 1967) that in the field of health the system of frequent referral to specialized clinics results in fragmented care and often total lack of care. In a survey, George James found an elderly indigent man who lived near one of the largest medical centers in the world whose life illustrated the problems presented by many referral systems. The man, who had been labeled as an "uncooperative" patient by the hospital because he had stopped attending the clinics, had 12 major pathologic diagnoses. He had been told to attend no less than ten specialty clinics; but as he was too sick to do this he stopped attending any.

Admission does not mean that the waiting is over. Each visit for services may mean more of it. Mothers who cannot afford baby-sitters for their young children have to wait two or three hours in clinics for medical treatment for themselves or their children.

In admitting individuals into a program, agencies use a variety of standards. These criteria lead to the exclusion of the poorest from the potential benefits of the program. Agencies want to know if the applicant is a good risk and if he is easy to manage. Formal qualifications such as education, age, permanent United States residency and a clear criminal record also bar many from programs.

In May 1968 New York City liberalized its standards for admission to low-income housing. The old standards, similar to those still existing in many cities, illustrate the bewildering complexity that may characterize the admissions process. Under the old system, a family whose members fell into any of 21 behavior categories was considered a "potential problem" whose application warranted further study by the authority's social service division. The consequent evaluation process took so long that chances of getting an apartment were remote if an applying family were referred to the social service division. The old behavior categories included out-of-wedlock children, alcoholism, narcotics use, "a record of antisocial behavior," membership in a "violent teen-age gang," a history of poor rent payments, frequent separations of husband and wife, a common-law relationship, mental illness that required hos-

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pitalization, "unusually frequent" residence changes, poor housekeeping standards "including lack of furniture," "obnoxious conduct" in applying for public housing and whatever other traits might indicate future trouble. The following six criteria are still included under the new procedure: a history of recent serious criminal activity, a pattern of violent behavior, confirmed drug addiction, conviction for rape or sexual deviation, grossly insanitary or hazardous housekeeping and a record of serious disturbance of neighbors, destruction of property or other disruptive or dangerous behavior.

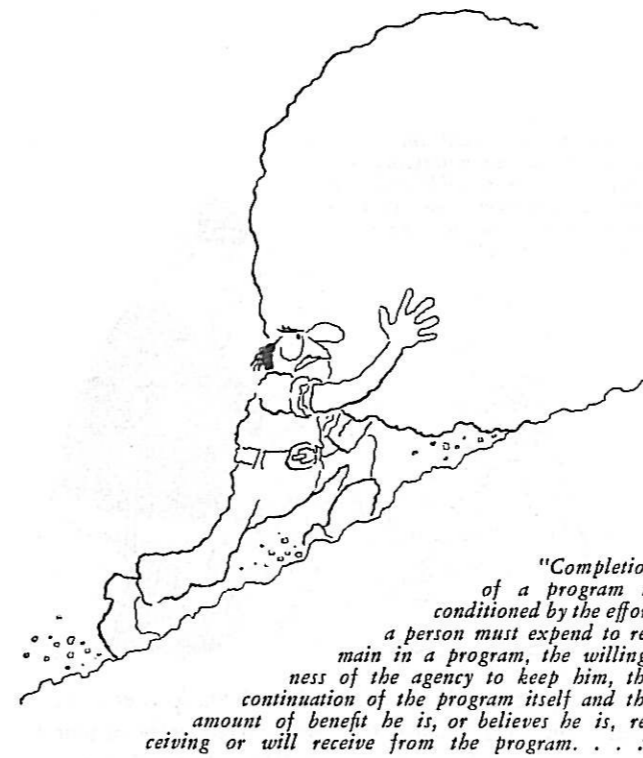
In some programs, periods of testing to determine the appropriateness of the individual for the available service and of waiting for test results may be a trying experience leading applicants to drop out before they are either admitted or rejected. There may also be a process of routing individuals through a referral system to other places. The net effect frequently is that the poorest do not get the service, either because the receiving agency does not provide it or because the client eventually gives up.

Thus it is frequently difficult to separate withdrawal by the applicant from exclusion by the agency. The style of decision-making and of decision-makers may inadvertently or deliberately induce withdrawal. The overall result, we believe, is that services have been kept away from the poorest.

#### Completion

Who completes a program, and what is involved in their completing it? There is a big difference between those who begin and those who finish a program. The percentage of beginners who go on to "graduation" is frequently low. For example, during the program's first nine months in existence, 2,800 enrollees dropped out of the Department of Labor's Concentrated Employment Program without completing the course. Forty-six percent of the enrollees in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's Work Experience and Training Program were dropped from or dropped out of the course before completion. The reasons given for the 25,858 enrollees leaving the program were, in the order of their frequency (and excluding the problem of accessibility noted above), poor attendance (which may be caused by many organizational and individual factors), lack of child care, dissatisfaction with assignment, termination of projects, lack of progress, misconduct, refusal of assignment and inconvenient hours of work.

Completion of a program is conditioned by the effort a person must expend to remain in a program, the willingness of the agency to keep him, the continuation of the program itself and the amount of benefit he believes he is receiving or will receive from the program training. Agencies can make it easier for individuals to remain in their programs by providing transportation and child care services and, as in the case of manpower training programs, by paying the trainee a small stipend to compensate for the income he may forego during the training and to allow him to maintain himself. Agencies vary in their understanding of and openness to various modes of individual



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behavior. In some agencies, people whose behavior does not conform closely to middle-class styles are encouraged to leave or are dismissed prior to completion. All too frequently completion of a program is entirely outside the clients' control because the entire program is terminated by the lack of renewed funding.

The amount of benefit a client believes he is receiving or will receive from a program depends upon both its mode of presentation and the actual benefits it confers on him and on others who have progressed further through the program. Individuals are more likely to continue with health or training programs, for example, if the reason for particular treatments or training is made understandable to them.

The completion stage of some programs offers the benefits the client seeks immediately, while others are geared to preparing the client to seek the benefits after he finishes the program. For example, the "new careers" programs allow nonprofessionals to work in stimulating jobs as they learn, while other programs require the individual to complete weeks of training without the guarantee of a job at the end. People are likely to drop out of the latter programs if they see that friends and neighbors who finish before them are unable to obtain jobs or other promised benefits—the final stage in the delivery of services.

#### Aftermath

In evaluating social services it is not enough to ask merely about the availability of services and the numbers who complete various programs. We must also ask about the aftermath of services. Does anyone benefit from the services? If so, who? How lasting is their benefit? Does the improvement in the individual's life help him obtain other benefits for himself or others?

The unfortunate fact that completion of manpower training programs does not guarantee jobs is illustrated by the Department of Labor's Concentrated Employment Program.

In the early stages almost half of those who had completed one or more training programs were waiting for jobs or transfer to another program. Of the 56,000 trainees who completed the Work Experience and Training Program, 28 percent had not been immediately employed.

The JOBS program, which subsidizes private employers who hire so-called hard-core workers, has recently been damaged by other government policies. The deliberate contraction of the economy by the Nixon Administration has led to the firing of JOBS workers, notably by the Chrysler Corporation. The most-difficult-to-place workers are those most likely to be adversely affected by economic recession.

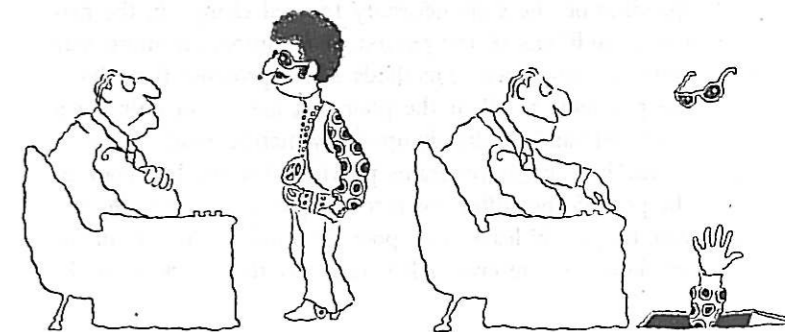
At the same time, however, a person may benefit from a program without completing it. For example, the Neighborhood Youth Corps frequently functions as an aging vat by allowing youth to maintain themselves until they grow up into the more employable "non-teen-age" status.

The Westinghouse study of Head Start concluded that brief summer programs were ineffective in producing any gains in cognitive and affective development that persist into the elementary grades, but that full-year programs, while ineffective in regard to the measures of affective development used in the study, were somewhat effective in producing gains in cognitive development that could be detected in grades one, two and three. The Westinghouse report also noted that all-black Head Start centers in the Southeastern United States and scattered programs in the central cities appeared to be more effective. It would be useful to learn what differentiated these more "successful" programs from the others. The Westinghouse researchers themselves stress that their study sought only to determine the degree to which Head Start had a psychological and intellectual impact on children that persisted into the primary grades. The study did not address the question of Head Start's medical or nutritional impact; it did not measure the program's effect on the stability of family life; nor did it assess Head Start's impact on the total community, on the schools, on the morale and attitudes of the children while they were in the program.

#### For and Against Creaming

In the delivery of services the poorest are the most likely to be excluded or left behind at each of the four hurdles

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discussed above. It is unlikely that these exclusion processes will be eliminated from either selective poverty programs or universalistic programs aimed at benefiting all segments of the population, for they serve several purposes of agencies and their staff. Exclusion homogenizes institutions and programs. Their staff can more easily manage the agencies. Exclusion of persons less socialized to middle-class styles and current agency practices allows older institutions to avoid large-scale change; those most amenable to existing programs are chosen or asked to participate. Real success comes slowly to the poorest, for they have the farthest to climb. By including only the already upwardly mobile poor, a program is more likely to have "success." It can then impress Congress and foundations with its achievements and gain more funding.

Thus, many agencies have conflicting objectives. Their efforts to reduce risk, to make a record and to help those most likely to benefit from assistance all work against the objective of dealing with the poorest.

Creaming can also serve to maintain the status quo of the larger society. It co-opts the potential or actual leaders of the poor and leaves untouched those poor who may be too miserable to pressure for change.

Exclusion enhances the prestige of those who are included. For this reason, many universities on the way up make great efforts to keep out poor students, frequently without filling their enrollments, so as to enhance the prestige of the students whom they enroll. Similarly, manpower training certificates may be more respected by potential employers if a relatively select few of those needing training are allowed to participate in the programs.

Creaming may be beneficial in certain circumstances, but in others, perhaps most, it is harmful. When creaming occurs, those left behind become disillusioned and embittered. They see that not only have promises been left unfulfilled once again, but they are in a worse position than before the programs began. Now they are asked, "Why didn't you take advantage of these programs?" They are labeled with yet another failure. When programs move the least poor out of ghettos, the poorest are left in neighborhoods shorn of their old leaders and of whatever assistance the less poor could give.

Creaming may lead the larger society to believe mistakenly that easy success is possible and that limited resources can have a great impact on the poor: "a little can do a lot." The consequence may be to reduce pressure for spending on the scale necessary for real change in the material conditions of the poorest. In addition, creaming may result in confidence in methods and approaches for solving the problems of all of the poor that are useful only for a restricted band of already upwardly mobile poor.

The benefits of programs provided for the less poor of the poor do not filter down to the poorest because the former frequently leave their poor communities as a result of the help they receive. Also, methods that work with the

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less poor frequently do not work with the poorest. On the other hand, services for the poorest frequently benefit the whole of the poor community. They do so first because when the poorest are better able to cope with their own problems, they are less likely to be disruptive and more likely to be contributing members of the low-income community. Second, when services are initiated first for the poorest, they are likely to be sufficiently flexible to be later adapted to the less poor; the reverse is frequently not true. Third, when services are initiated first with the poorest, the less poor who want to be included in the programs generally have the strength to politically organize and demand that they too receive such a service. For example, middle-income parents have demanded that their children also be included in Head Start programs which were initiated for low-income children. While the less poor and the middle income frequently have the political strength and know-how to demand that a greater portion of the nation's resources be devoted to social and educational services so that they too may be included in programs originally aimed for the poorest, the poorest by virtue of their poverty do not have the strength to make such demands for themselves.

#### An Answer From France

How can creaming be combated? Only a deliberate counterpolicy can prevent the natural tendency of organizations serving the poor to serve the better-off of the poor. Agencies must be made aware of whom they are including and excluding at each step in the delivery of their services. Inclusion of the poorest will not occur naturally; the poorest must be actively recruited and helped to complete and benefit from services.

Employment of the poor and the recently poor on social service staffs may make the services less ominous to the poorest. Training programs can help make social service workers from nonpoor backgrounds more aware of creaming processes. Peter Blau has demonstrated that the general orientation of the organization and its leaders is also im-

portant. If an organization is positively oriented toward working with the poorest, the actions of individual workers are likely to reflect this orientation whether or not they personally believe in it.

Funding agencies and the general public must be taught to recognize creaming in programs and be made aware that creaming harms the poorest. Foundations and government funding agencies can help combat creaming by requiring agencies to report on the economic, educational and other characteristics of people who apply to, complete and benefit from their programs. They can stipulate that the poorest be included in programs and emphasize their needs. Outside agencies and individuals can also deliberately check on whether organizations are creaming and criticize those which do.

A useful model is that of the French poverty association Aide à Toute Détresse (ATD), whose primary objective is anti-creamming or working with the poorest of the poor. The association checks on government programs and acts as an advocate of the poorest when programs or services intended for all are found to exclude them. ATD found, for example, that the poor in many of France's shantytowns were not included in the nation's censuses or its educational system. The fact that education and many of the nation's welfare programs were not universal went unnoticed. At the insistence of the Association, the nation has now provided buses to take young children from the shantytowns to distant schools. The Association also drew on its experience with the children in the shantytowns to help teachers and schools develop means of working with these "new" youngsters. Within the shantytowns ATD workers helped parents and children learn how to cope with and benefit from the educational system. A team of Aide à Toute Détresse volunteers who have been living in New York's Lower-East Side for the last several years have found similarly that the poorest, most "difficult," children of the area are continuously sent home or totally excluded from schools, social services and tutoring programs.

The Association's volunteers are keenly conscious of the needs of the poorest because they live as well as work within the poor communities which means that they share, around the clock, the conditions of the poor and learn, first hand, the effects of various community conditions and of social services intended to help the community. By living in the community they eventually also become trusted as neighbors. The poorest as well as the less poor of the community come to seek the help of their ATD neighbors . . . sometimes to use their telephone for an emergency call; sometimes to inquire about where to go for legal services; sometimes to figure out what to do when a son has continuously been kicked out of school. Because the volunteers are neighbors, they are accessible day or night, they present familiar rather than forbidding faces, and they frequently do not have to be filled in on all the details of a problematic situation.

We have made two assumptions which should be made explicit. One assumption is that the services and resources which are being distributed are worth getting. We are not fundamentally questioning the usefulness of these services as are some critics and social scientists. Our analysis centers only on the distributive question of who receives the service or resource. If the question of relevance of usefulness is introduced, then new issues emerge. Does the availability of one kind of resource or another differentially benefit a particular section of the poor? It might be, for example, that an emphasis on providing services rather than money usually results in the better-off of the poor receiving a disproportionate amount of the service, while a program providing cash aid on the basis of need is more likely to benefit those at the bottom.

The second assumption is that it is desirable to concentrate more resources and activities on the poorest than is now done. In contrast, it can be argued that as long as social welfare funds are limited, creaming is useful and desirable social policy. Persons holding this view maintain that society should concentrate resources and programs on those more likely to benefit from them and that as the least poor graduate from poverty the resources may be transferred to the group just below who presumably have the best chance of benefiting from the resources. A cost-benefit analysis might well come to this conclusion, for, as Leonard Granick has pointed out, social services do not at the moment have enough manpower or resources to assist successfully both the "easy shots" and the "hard shots." Indeed, we may also lack the technology or knowledge necessary to assist successfully the hard shots. Inadequate resources and knowledge, of course, say more about society and science than about the poorest.

To argue for the importance of recognizing creaming tendencies and for the desirability of combating them is not to assert that anticreaming is always the first priority of poverty policy. But it should have a high priority position. We will only assert here that creaming cannot always be the most useful policy. There are losses as well as advantages in it, and creaming is often the unplanned consequence of purposive social actions to aid the poor. We need a better balance between unplanned and widespread creaming and planned concentration on the worst off.