I. MANY VIEWS ON POVERTY AND HOW TO HELP

Virtually no one is indifferent to poverty in the United States. However, very different ideas prevail about how to help the poorest in our society. The average citizen wants successful and efficient antipoverty programs, even if he or she is “against welfare.” Some persons would like to transfer the public program responsibility to state governments, while others believe that federal leadership is both an economic and political necessity. Some prefer giving the poor cash; others want to restrict spending by providing aid as in-kind goods. Still others want to provide service and job training. Some want to limit the duration of federal assistance; others disparage that approach. Some prefer a “tough love” approach that would limit direct assistance to very young single mothers. Others feel such an idea is out of touch with the real causes of poverty, dependency, and the rise of the number of births to unmarried women. Poverty and dependency are linked in the public mind. One thing is clear: the resolution of the poverty problem in a democratic society requires a healthy respect for those with distinct and different ideas about how best to conceptualize the problem.

A. Conceptualizations of Poverty

Dinitto (2000) defines five different approaches to the conceptualization of poverty in the United States: poverty as deprivation; poverty as inequality; poverty as culture; poverty as exploitation; and poverty as structure.

1. Poverty as Deprivation
   In this view, poverty is conceptualized as insufficiency in food, housing, clothing, medical care, and other items required to sustain a decent standard of living. This definition assumes that there is a standard of living (poverty level) below which individuals and families can be considered “deprived.”

2. Poverty as Inequality in the Distribution of Income
   In this view, some people perceive that they have less income than most Americans (relative deprivation) and believe they are entitled to more.

3. Poverty as Culture
   In this view, poverty is seen as a way of life passed on from generation to generation. This conceptualization of poverty includes not only low income, but also attitudes of hopelessness, indifference, alienation, apathy, and lack of incentives and self-respect. Proponents of this view would argue the futility of providing opportunities for upward mobility for the poor, as they would be likely not to take advantage of them.

4. Poverty as Exploitation by the Ruling Class
   In this view, more government assistance is seen as going to the middle and upper classes than to the poor. If this view of poverty prevailed, the only way to resolve it would be to radically restructure society to eliminate class differences.

5. Poverty as Structure
   In this view, the continuum of poverty is fostered by institutional and structural discrimination. For example, poorer school districts typically receive fewer resources that can be used to purchase state-of-the-art technologies to support their educational programs than schools in wealthier districts. This results in the deepening of what has come to be known as the digital divide, or the gap between the technological competence of students enrolled in poor school districts compared to wealthy school districts.

B. Definitions of Poverty

Regardless of how poverty is conceptualized, the definition of poverty is elusive. Poverty generally means that a household income is inadequate as judged by a specific standard.

1. The Standard
   When the federal government began measuring poverty in the early 1960s, the continued existence of poor people in an “affluent society” was considered an anomaly. One way to measure poverty is to measure the number of households with incomes below some fixed official standard. How the fixed standard is determined is one reason that different poverty rates are reported by various sources.

2. The Market Basket
To counter this problem, public officials use a definition of poverty based on a market basket concept. Mollie Orshansky (1965) developed the market basket concept by some relatively simple calculations. She used a survey that determined the cost of a minimum adequate nutritional diet for families of different sizes. She used another survey to determine that families generally spend one-third of their income on food. Orshansky then multiplied the diet figure for a household of a given size by three, so that a family could purchase the minimum diet and still have twice that amount left over for housing and other purchases. Since 1969, poverty thresholds based on this definition have been adjusted by taking into account the changes in the Consumer Price Index.

II. WHO ARE AMERICA’S POOR?

Many factors interact to determine who is poor in the United States. Four factors, however, predominate in affecting poverty demographics: overall performance of the economy; composition of the households within the nation; levels of expenditure of social programs; and types of programs implemented and the effectiveness of those programs. Although most people’s stereotype of a poor family in the United States is an African American single mother on welfare with three or more children living in an inner-city ghetto, the poor are a very diverse group. Overall, nearly 11% of all people residing in the United States are living in poverty. About one in 10 adults 65 years and older lives in poverty. Greater numbers of women live in poverty than men. The poverty rates for Latino women and African American women are about three times the rate for white women. Many people are surprised to learn that one of every five children in the United States lives in poverty. Poverty rates also vary considerably depending on where one lives. The poverty rate for central cities of large metropolitan areas is more than double the rate for persons who live in large metropolitan areas but outside of central cities (i.e., suburbs).

III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF AID FOR THE POOR

Structures and systems of aid for the needy are derived from the dominant social values of the historical period of time in which they are formulated. Social values change with the flow of history, and therefore, attitudes toward and delivery of economic assistance to the poor also change with the flow of history.

A. Colonial America and Pre-Civil War Years: 1647-1860

In colonial America, times were rough, life was austere, and there was not money to go around. The social welfare response during this time was heavily influenced by the Poor Laws of Elizabethan England. The major focus was on controlling the poor, especially those who were unable to locate employment and who might cause disruption. The goal was to protect communities against strangers who threatened the stability of a society that was wary of new ways and different cultures.

The years between the American Revolution and the outbreak of the Civil War were characterized by major political, economic, and social changes. These changes were accompanied by rapid population growth, enormous geographic expansion, mechanization of farm and factory, and intense political and ideological struggles. Between 1830 and 1860, consecutive waves of immigration resulted in over 5 million persons entering the United States. Immigrants as a group were perceived as a threat to resident Americans. Many arrived in need of immediate employment or emergency financial aid, thereby swelling the public assistance rolls and threatening to push an already precarious social welfare system over the edge.

The extensive industrialization and urbanization of this period led to many social welfare problems, the need for financial aid chief among them. Overall, society’s view of poverty and the plight of families in need changed little from that of the colonial period. Welfare legislation of the time continued to focus on individual and family responsibility. Local and state government assumed the ultimate responsibility for the relief of individual suffering, but at the lowest possible cost to the taxpayer.

B. Post-Civil War Years to Early 1900s

The post-Civil War years and the first decade of the 1900s witnessed continued industrialization, heavy immigration, and migration from rural areas (particularly the South) into cities. At the same time, poverty problems intensified and the distinction between the
economic classes – primarily the “haves” and the “have-nots” - became more pronounced. Government was generally reluctant to acknowledge social responsibility for poverty as well as to understand or appreciate being poor in the context of affluence. Large-scale immigration continued to pose a threat to wage standards as well as the employment of the existing native workforce.

Scientific knowledge was applied extensively to fuel advances on the industrial front. It was not long before private and public social welfare leaders turned to science and to the organization of scientific knowledge as a means to improve their efforts at eradicating poverty and pauperism. The growing number of public institutions and the proliferation of private charitable societies resulted in the creation of State Boards of Charities, whose overall function was to protect the poor and the public. The Charity Organization Society (COS) movement embraced social Darwinism with its emphasis on evolution toward a more affluent society, combined with the openness of that society to individual achievement. The COS movement used the term *scientific charity* to describe its efforts to eradicate poverty and pauperism, and a system of services was developed that emphasized the individual and not the environment as the cause of the problem.

The settlement house movement also took root during the latter part of the 19th century. Settlement houses emphasized neighborhood services and community development and served as a place where educated persons might live among poor immigrants. Unlike the COS movement, in which the individual was seen as the cause of his or her problems, the settlement house movement sought to connect private problems to public causes such as poor working conditions, substandard living arrangements, crowding, health hazards, and the like.

Social work as we know it today emerged from the intersection of the COS movement and the settlement house movement. Overall, the late 1800s to the early 1900s represent the liveliest period of social reform and political advocacy in the history of the social work profession.

C. The Great Depression, the New Deal, and Beyond: Late 1920s to 1940s

The 1920s, a decade of economic prosperity, was characterized by large-scale stock market speculation and out-of-control credit buying. Spending outstripped the ability to save. Poverty was seen as something that could be conquered. This euphoria abruptly ended with the stock market crash of October 24, 1929, and the ensuing Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Depression of the 1930s is considered to be one of the bleakest periods in U.S. history. In 1933, a quarter of the civilian labor force was unemployed. Economic ruin spread deep into the ranks of America’s middle class. The stock market failed to sustain any kind of rally. Banks closed, industries failed, and farmers went into bankruptcy. The U.S. economy came to a standstill. For the first time, the country came to believe that one could be poor and unemployed, not because of individual shortcomings, but as a result of the malfunctioning of society.

For the first time in U.S. history, large-scale federal intervention was required to get the country back on its feet. The New Deal programs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt epitomized this intervention.

The Social Security Act approved by President Roosevelt on August 13, 1935, constituted the major piece of social legislation resulting from the Great Depression and the New Deal. This landmark legislation, considered to be the cornerstone of American social policy, served as demonstrable evidence of the federal government’s concern for the social and economic well-being of the people of the United States.

D. The Great Society, the War on Poverty, and Beyond: The 1950s, 1960s, and Early 1970s

Public welfare in the early 1950s expanded primarily through legislative changes that increased the number of potential program recipients, as well as formula changes that liberalized benefit payments. Despite the general well-being of the economy, public assistance rolls and the costs of maintaining these rolls continued to climb.

By 1964, the number of public assistance recipients in the country had reached 4 million, including 3 million children. Despite good economic times, high levels of poverty persisted, especially among rural families and persons of color. In 1964, ever cognizant of the economic problems of the poor and the growing strength of the civil rights movement, President Lyndon
B. Johnson urged Congress to declare a “war on poverty.” The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 established American public policy in relation to the elimination of poverty. The act provided for a series of youth programs aimed at giving young people and families, most often with limited income and of color, the education, skills, and experiences deemed necessary for access to mainstream society.

The most popular programs funded by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 included Head Start, Upward Bound, childcare centers, neighborhood recreation centers, and neighborhood health centers. The attainment of jobs was at the core of the Economic Opportunity Act: job training, job placement, and counseling for a variety of social ills were viewed as essential to reducing the welfare rolls.

The Economic Opportunity Act soon fell into disfavor, particularly among mayors of cities in the United States who were concerned over the federal funding of projects over which they had no control. In addition, programs funded under the act were often mismanaged, poorly conceptualized, or subject to fraudulent business practices. Congress and the general public grew disenchanted with the War on Poverty, which to their way of thinking fell far short of achieving its stated goals. The Vietnam War and social unrest in the U.S. also drew attention and resources from War on Poverty efforts.

Despite the significant investment of tax dollars on War on Poverty programs, the number of public assistance recipients and total expenditures for public assistance programs continued to climb. Congress reacted by enacting a series of legislation that curbed public social service expenditures. By the end of the 1960s, the pendulum had swung yet another time to reflect a much more punitive and conservative approach to public welfare in the United States.

Widespread disillusionment with the public welfare system ensued, underscored by the prevailing attitude that public assistance programs encouraged dependency and discouraged self-determination. A period of retrenchment set in, characterized by the decline of public support and government expenditures for public social welfare programs.

E. The 1980s: A Last-Ditch Effort to Reduce the Welfare Rolls

Economic stagnation continued throughout the 1980s. At the same time, a demand for restraint in government budgets grew in intensity. By the mid-1980s, the public had grown weary of government expenditures for cash assistance programs and nutritional assistance efforts. The most significant social welfare legislation of the 1980s was the passage of the Family Support Act in 1988. The act established more punitive measures for mothers who remained on public assistance and did not get jobs. The Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) training and education program was established as part of the legislation to ensure compliance with the requirement that families avoid long-term welfare dependency through gainful employment. Other aspects of the act provided for childcare and Medicaid as transitional benefits while welfare recipients moved from welfare to work. However, there were delays in the release of final regulations for the JOBS program, coupled with inadequate funding levels for the program and the absence of jobs in the marketplace that paid a living wage. Not surprisingly, the programs of the Family Support Act met with little success in reducing the welfare rolls.

F. The 1990s: An End to Welfare as We Knew It

The U.S. economy recovered toward the latter half of the 1990s, fueled by technology and the globalization of key markets. Cutting the federal budget became a major goal of the Republican-dominated Congress. Republicans promised to carry out a new “Contract with America” that emphasized a balanced federal budget, reduced taxes, and decreased social welfare expenditures. American social welfare policy once again shifted to an emphasis on personal and family responsibility for those in need.

The most significant social welfare legislation enacted during the 1990s was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Budget Reconciliation Act of 1996 signed into law by President Bill Clinton on August 22, 1996. The act featured deep cuts in basic programs for low-income children, families, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, as well as fundamental structural changes in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, renamed Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The bill also included an almost 20% reduction in food stamp program expenditures. Poor legal immigrants became ineligible for almost all forms of assistance.
The most recent round of welfare reform has done a good job of reducing the welfare rolls in the United States, but to consider this reduction in rolls a victory would be short-sighted. Although many advocates for the poor agree that the previous “welfare system” created dependency for many recipients, most believe that the 1996 legislation and the reauthorization proposed by the Bush administration will not reduce poverty in the long term because, like previous efforts, they fail to address issues of education and training in job skills that lead to employment at or above the living wage.

In contrast, welfare reform advocates argue that local resources such as faith-based organizations, food banks, voluntary agencies, and the like should take up the slack in addressing the unmet needs of former welfare recipients. However, this private or voluntary infrastructure is simply not robust enough to accomplish the job. As a result, increasing numbers of welfare recipients are becoming more deeply mired in poverty.

Although the White House and Congress herald their accomplishments in “ending welfare as we knew it”, welfare rolls would not have decreased as significantly without the strong economy of the late-1990s. The real test of these recent welfare reform policies has come with the current economic downturn in the early-2000s and the resulting rise in unemployment. The private and faith-based infrastructure for helping people in need quickly became saturated. The rush to dismantle the public welfare infrastructure in this country marks the disappearance of a safety net for those who need temporary assistance in difficult times.

IV. CURRENT STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING POVERTY

Welfare policy requires an understanding of the relationship between market forces and the social welfare system. It is useful to think of poverty as those left behind after the market, social insurance, and welfare programs have “done their job.”

A. A Strong Market and Family System

The first defense against poverty is a market and family system structured to provide full employment at wages sufficient to bring the worker and his or her family out of poverty. Within the family, work and childcare are to be integrated in a way that children are cared for and jobs are done.

B. Social Insurance Programs

The second line of defense against poverty is a social insurance system that provides retirement income to supplement private pensions and savings of aged and persons with disabilities and their survivors. The social insurance system is structured for income security to all income classes, not just the poor. The most extensive social insurance program in the United States is Old Age Survivors Disability Insurance (OASDI), commonly referred to as social security.

Another type of social insurance is unemployment compensation, a program that operates much like OASDI. The federal government requires employers to contribute to state-operated unemployment trust funds. These monies are used to provide assistance to certain groups of unemployed individuals. Persons who have been laid off involuntarily can apply for unemployment compensation.

Workers’ compensation, another type of social insurance, provides medical assistance and cash benefits to employees injured on the job or those who develop job-related illnesses.

C. Public Assistance Programs

The third line of defense against poverty is a system of public assistance to those whose family system has fallen apart and to those who have limited or no wage income. These persons are helped by cash assistance programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), general assistance, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The benefit amount is never enough to bring a person above the poverty line, only up to a standard that is established for the particular benefit program and the level of funds that a state is willing to put up to match federal funds for this purpose.

D. In-Kind Benefits and Tax Credits

The final line of defense against poverty is a complex system of tax credits. The most significant is the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program. Food stamps, subsidized housing, and Medicaid are other types of in-kind benefits designed to assist the poor.

E. Other Antipoverty Programs
Five types of programs exist to combat poverty that occurs despite our best efforts to prevent it through sound macroeconomic policies:

1. cash support;
2. direct provision of basic necessities such as food, shelter, and medical care;
3. efforts to help the poor learn new behaviors to empower them to feel more in control of their own lives;
4. job training and job searching help; and
5. restructuring of existing institutions to produce a greater quality of economic opportunity.

Considerable efforts have been expended on behalf of the poor over the years in each of these five areas. Billions of state and federal dollars have been spent since the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935 to eradicate poverty in the United States and to ameliorate the negative effects of a market (capitalist) economy on those unable to reap the benefits of that economy.

F. The New Millenium: 2000 and Beyond

State and federal welfare reform efforts continue to enjoy success in reducing public assistance rolls throughout the United States. This success was buoyed initially by a robust economy, a plentiful supply of low-paying service sector jobs, and a strong public anti-welfare sentiment. We have yet to see the long-term effects of welfare reform. The latest efforts at reform have swelled the ranks of the American underclass.

The 1996 welfare reform legislation had yet to be reauthorized as of 2004 because of partisan debates in Congress over the terms of the reauthorization as well as the demands on Congress to address issues such as homeland security, the war on terrorism, and the war with Iraq.

The G. W. Bush administration welfare reform reauthorization plan includes the following features:

1. Families would be required to be engaged in work activity for 40 hours per week (currently 30 hours per week or 20 hours per week for single parents with young children). In addition, states would be required to put 70% of their caseload to work (currently 50%) or suffer the financial consequences.
2. States would be mandated to require parents to spend at least 24 hours a week in unsubsidized employment, work experience, community service, or on-the-job training while allowing them to use other activities such as job search, GED classes, or vocational education for the remaining 16 hours of required work.
3. No new childcare funds are provided for the next 5 years, despite the increased work requirements.
4. No new dollars will be added to the TANF block grant. Inflation will cause the block grant to lose nearly 30% of its value over the next 5 years.
5. Job search, vocational education, or job skills training directly related to employment do not count toward the first 24 hours of required work in a family’s 40-hour work week. The current law allows job skills training and education related to employment to count as a work activity (up to a maximum of 12 months).
6. No efforts are made to ensure that families moving from welfare to work get such benefits as food stamps, health care, childcare, and transportation assistance for which they are eligible.
7. Most legal immigrants would continue to be banned from receiving federal welfare assistance until they have been working in the United States for at least 5 years (continued from the 1996 legislation).

Many critics argue that the Bush administration’s stance on welfare reform continues to reflect a punitive, “blame the victim” approach. The administration’s current proposals have more stringent requirements than those contained in the original 1996 legislation. Early studies on the negative effects of the 1996 welfare reform law on former welfare clients have failed to convince most politicians and the general public that the United States is pursuing a social welfare policy that has disastrous consequences for millions of families. As a consequence, the underclass is the fastest-growing socioeconomic group in the United States today.
It is imperative that social workers and other groups continue to conduct sound research studies on the impact of welfare reform, the needs of the poor, and the types of programs that are successful at reducing poverty among specific groups.

V. HOMELESSNESS

Increases in the numbers of persons living in poverty in the United States, coupled with substantial increases in the costs of housing, have resulted in large numbers of individuals and families who are homeless. Homelessness is not a recent phenomenon in the United States. During colonial times, individuals who were poor and had nowhere to live were housed in poorhouses and orphanages. During the Great Depression, a nationwide census conducted by the National Committee on Care of Transient and Homeless suggested that some 1.2 million persons, or about 1% of the country’s population, were homeless.

Two trends are largely responsible for the growth in the homeless population in the past 15 to 20 years: a growing shortage of affordable rental housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty. Demographic groups who are more likely to experience poverty are also more likely to experience homelessness.

A. Characteristics of the Homeless

1. Homeless Youth. Homeless youth are individuals under the age of 18 who lack parental, foster, or institutional care. Sometimes these individuals are referred to as “unaccompanied minors” or “unaccompanied youth.” Causes of homelessness among youth fall into three interrelated categories: family problems, economic problems, and residential instability.

2. Homelessness Among the Elderly. Although the proportion of older persons among the homeless population has declined over the past two decades, their absolute number has grown. Increased homelessness among elderly persons is largely the result of declining availability of affordable housing and poverty among certain segments of the elderly. Once on the street, elderly homeless persons often find getting around difficult, and, distrusting the crowds at shelters and clinics, they are more likely to sleep on the street.

3. Women and Families. Families with children represent the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population – approximately 40% of people who become homeless today represent this group. Stagnating wages and recent changes in welfare programs account for increasing poverty among families. Homelessness impacts the health and well-being of all family members, particularly children.

4. Ethnicity. About 50% of the homeless population today is African-American, 35% is Caucasian, 12% is Latino, 2% is Native American, and 1% is Asian. The effects of oppression and the subsequent lack of access to quality education and good jobs are more pronounced among people of color living in poverty without formal or informal networks that can help provide housing.

5. Survivors of Domestic Violence. The homeless population in America also includes domestic violence survivors. In a recent study of homeless people conducted in 10 U.S. cities, 22% indicated that they left their last residence because of domestic violence. Forty-six percent of the cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 2001 also identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness. A 1990 Ford Foundation study found that 50% of homeless women and children were fleeing domestic abuse. States that have looked at domestic violence and welfare recipients report that between 50% and 60% of current recipients say they have experienced violence from a current or former male partner.

6. Veterans. Forty percent of homeless men have served in the armed services. Homeless veterans are more likely to be white, better educated, and previously or currently married than homeless non-veterans. Despite the over-representation of veterans in the homeless population, homelessness among veterans is not clearly related to combat military experience. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs administers two special programs for homeless veterans: the Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veterans program and the Health Care for Homeless Veterans program. Both provide outreach, psychosocial assessments, referrals, residential treatment, and follow-up case management to homeless veterans.
7. **People with Mental Illness.** Although many people become homeless because their mental illness impairs their ability to function, some individuals experience severe emotional problems after becoming homeless. Homeless people with mental disorders remain homeless for longer periods of time and have less contact with family members and friends than those without mental disorders. They encounter more barriers to employment, tend to be in poorer physical health, and have more contact with the legal system than homeless people who do not suffer from mental disorders.

8. **Addiction Disorders.** Untreated addictive disorders contribute to homelessness. The onset or exacerbation of an addictive disorder for persons with below-living wage incomes and just one step away from homelessness can plunge these individuals into residential instability. Many homeless people with addictive disorders desire to overcome their addiction, but the combination of being homeless and a service system ill-equipped to respond to these circumstances essentially prevents their access to treatment services and recovery supports.

9. **Employment.** Inadequate income and lack of affordable rental housing leave many people homeless. The U.S. Conference of Mayors (2001) survey of 27 American cities found that 20% of the urban homeless population was unemployed.

10. **Health Care and the Homeless.** Poor health is closely associated with being homeless. The rates of both chronic and acute health problems are extremely high among the homeless population. Many homeless people have multiple health problems. They are also at greater risk of trauma resulting from muggings, beatings, and rape. Homelessness precludes good nutrition, good personal hygiene, and basic first aid. Some homeless people with mental disorders use drugs or alcohol to self-medicate, and those with addictive disorders are more at risk of contracting HIV and other communicable diseases.

11. **HIV/AIDS and Homelessness.** Studies show that the prevalence of HIV among homeless people is between 3% and 20%, with some groups having much higher burdens of the disease. Many homeless adolescents find that exchanging sex for food, clothing, and shelter is their only chance of survival on the streets. Homeless people with HIV face many barriers to optimal care. Injection drug use and lack of insurance have been shown to negatively affect health care utilization, level of medical care, and health status.

B. **Rural Homelessness.**

Many people experience homelessness in America’s small towns and rural areas. Because there are far fewer shelters in rural areas, people experiencing homelessness in these areas are more likely to live in a car or camper or with relatives in overcrowded or substandard housing. Homeless people in rural areas are likely to be white, female, married, currently working, homeless for the first time, and homeless for a shorter period of time.

1. **Isolation.** Homeless people increasingly detach from traditional social roles, such as being a family member or an employee. As time goes on, the homeless become more isolated from others, more entrenched with other homeless persons, and lose touch with other social support systems that might help them in alleviating their situation, such as locating employment or housing.

C. **Policies and Programs That Address Homelessness**

1. **The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act**

   In late 1986, legislation containing emergency relief provisions for shelter, food, mobile health care, and transitional housing for homeless persons was introduced as the Urgent Relief for the Homeless Act. Following an intensive advocacy campaign, the legislation was passed by large bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress. After the death of its chief Republican sponsor, Representative Stewart B. McKinney of Connecticut, the act was renamed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. The act was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan on July 22, 1987. The act originally consisted of 15 programs providing a range of services to homeless people, including emergency shelter, transitional housing, job training, primary health care, education, and some permanent housing. The act has been amended four times. These amendments have, for the most part, expanded the scope and strengthened the provisions of the original legislation.
However, McKinney programs have suffered setbacks in recent years. Although Congress authorized slightly more than $1 billion in expenditures for McKinney Act programs in 1987 and 1988, a total of $712 million was actually appropriated for those years. Funding levels increased between 1988 and 1995; however, in fiscal year 1996, funding for McKinney programs was cut by a total of 27%. Several programs saw their funding eliminated entirely (Adult Education for the Homeless Program, Homeless Veterans Reintegration Project, the Emergency Community Services Homeless Grant program, and Family Support Centers). Since 1996, funding has been partly restored to some of these programs, although few have surpassed their fiscal year 1995 funding levels.

Although inadequate funding impedes the effectiveness of the McKinney programs, the act’s greatest weakness is its focus on emergency measures— it responds to the symptoms. The Community Partnership to End Homelessness Act of 2002 (S 2573) amended the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act and reauthorized the Act for the 5-year period 2003 to 2007. The bill provided an alternative to the G. W. Bush administration’s request for block grant homeless dollars, simplifying grant application processes for community groups working to provide low income housing, maintaining the process for funding decisions at the local level, incorporating funding for shelters and prevention efforts, and requiring outcome-based performance evaluations of funded programs.

Another piece of legislation introduced in Congress in 2002 was designed to amend and extend certain laws related to housing and homelessness (The Housing Affordability for America Act of 2002). Although considerable activity was focused in Congress on this bill, it was not passed.

2. Other Programs

In addition to the programs authorized under the McKinney Act, 16 other national programs provide assistance to the homeless in some way. As with the McKinney programs, most of these programs concentrate on emergency assistance and do not address underlying causes. A number of innovative programs to address problems of homelessness have been developed throughout the United States. The common themes among these programs include an emphasis on community-based initiatives that include the homeless and homeless service providers in program design and development and empowerment.

VI. THE ROLES OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

Social work, more than any other profession, maintains a strong commitment to fighting poverty at all levels of the environment. Social workers provide direct services to individuals and families living in poverty; advocate for programs and policies that improve the lives of the poor and reduce poverty at the community, state, and federal levels; and develop and administer policies and programs that serve America’s poor. The values base of the social work profession mandates that social workers treat all clients, including those who live in poverty, with dignity and respect and work to empower them to be in charge of their own lives. Much of the debate in the years ahead will be about the place of faith-based organizations in supplementing publicly funded efforts to combat poverty and dependency.

VII. SUMMARY

Welfare involves contradictory views that different segments of society hold about poor and vulnerable people and how to prevent poverty. As the United States evolves with increasing technological sophistication and constrained public spending, the issues of welfare in general will not disappear. There are no easy answers; even more importantly, there are no correct answers, and that is why poverty is such a challenging and interesting problem.