

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
DIVISION OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

THE TRANSIENT UNEMPLOYED

A Description and Analysis of the
Transient Relief Population

BY

JOHN N. WEBB

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HARRY L. HOPKINS, *Administrator*

CORRINGTON GILL
Assistant Administrator

HOWARD B. MYERS, *Director*
Social Research Division

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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

Washington, D.C., March 10, 1936

Sir:

I have the honor to transmit herewith a report dealing with problems of the transient unemployed as faced by the Transient Division of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for the period beginning with the establishment of that Division and continuing through June 1935.

This report brings together the results of a series of studies conducted in the Division of Research, Statistics and Finance of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and presents an exhaustive analysis of the characteristics of the transient relief population, their movements, their reasons for migration, and the problems involved in the reabsorption of this group into private industrial employment.

This report was prepared by *John N. Webb*, under the supervision of *Henry B. Arthur*, Assistant Director, and the general direction of *Howard B. Myers*, Director, of the Division of Social Research, Works Progress Administration. Acknowledgement is made of the assistance rendered by many other individuals and departments who cooperated or contributed in the work of preparing this report.

CORRINGTON GILL
Assistant Administrator

Hon. HARRY L. HOPKINS
Works Progress Administrator

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RESUMÉ

The transient relief population consisted of unattached individuals and family groups who were not legal residents of the community in which they applied for relief. Because non-residents were generally ineligible for relief from existing public agencies, special provision for their care was included in the Federal Emergency Relief Act of May, 1933. In the administration of relief under this provision, transients were defined as unattached persons or family groups that had not resided for one continuous year or longer within the boundaries of the State at the time of application for relief.

Prior to the enactment of the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933, the number of transients was variously estimated to be between one and one-half and five million persons. These estimates proved to be greatly in excess of the number of transients who received care in accordance with the provisions of the Emergency Relief Act. A careful examination of registrations indicates that the maximum size of the transient relief population during the operation of the Transient Relief Program was 200,000 unattached persons and 50,000 family groups. But because the transient relief population was constantly undergoing a change of membership, it seems probable that the number of individuals and family groups that *at some time* received assistance from transient bureaus was two to three times these estimates.

The personal and occupational characteristics of this mobile relief population were determined from a study of monthly registrations in thirteen cities, selected to represent the several sections of the country. The more important findings of the study of characteristics may be summarized as follows:

(a) Approximately two-thirds of the unattached persons and one-half of the heads of family groups were between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five years.

(b) The proportion of unattached women did not exceed 3 percent in any month, while approximately 15 percent of the heads of family groups were women.

(c) The great majority of transients were native white persons; Negroes represented approximately one-tenth of the monthly registrations, and foreign-born whites, approximately one-twentieth. In the transient relief population the proportion of native white persons was higher, the proportion of foreign-born whites, lower, and the proportion of Negroes, about the same, as in the general population.

(d) Only 2 percent of the unattached transients and 3 percent of the heads of transient families had no formal education; approximately two-thirds of both groups had a grade-school education, or better.

(e) Ability and expressed willingness to work were reported for about 95 percent of the unattached persons and 90 percent of the heads of family groups.

(f) Broad groupings of usual occupations show that the proportion of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the transient relief population was higher than the proportion of such workers in the general, or in the resident relief, population.

(g) The most frequent reason for the depression migration of needy persons and family groups was unemployment. Other reasons of importance were ill health, search for adventure, domestic trouble, and inadequate relief.

(h) When the origins of the transient relief population (total United States) are considered, it is found that unattached transients came principally from States to the east, and transient families from States to the west, of the Mississippi River.

(i) Based upon registrations in thirteen cities, approximately 80 percent of the unattached persons and 70 percent of the family groups came from urban centers (2,500 or more population). Moreover, transients from rural areas came more frequently from small towns (under 2,500 population) than from farms and open country.

(j) The largest and most persistent net gains in population resulting from the movement of transients were reported by States located in the Western and Southwestern sections of the country; while the largest and most persistent net losses were reported by States in the Eastern, Southeastern, and West Central sections.

The evidence presented in this report points to the conclusion that transiency was largely the result of two circumstances—widespread unemployment, and population mobility. The relief problem presented by this group was the result of a third factor—legal settlement (or residence) as a prerequisite for relief from public and private agencies in each community.

Except for the fact that they were non-residents, there seems little reason for considering transients as a distinct and separate group in the total relief population. Although they could be distinguished from the resident unemployed, it was principally because they were younger, and included a greater proportion of unattached persons. Actually the transient population represented the more active and restless element among the great number of unemployed created by the depression. Migration offered an escape from inactivity; and, in addition, there was the possibility that all communities were not equally affected by unemployment.

The migration of a considerable part of the transient relief population appears to have been a waste of effort. Much of the movement was away from urban areas that from the point of

view of economic development were more likely to afford employment than were the areas which particularly attracted the transient. As business and industry recover, it may be expected that many of the depression transients will return to areas similar to the ones they left.

It seems evident from this study that the problem of depression transiency can be solved only through an adjustment of this mobile labor supply to areas where there is a demand for their services. Resettlement and stability are contingent upon economic opportunity. Therefore, it seems highly probable that the dissolution of the transient population will proceed only as rapidly as business and industry can provide the employment essential to stability. To whatever extent this provision falls short, the transient problem will remain unsolved.

INTRODUCTION

The removal of individuals and family groups from one community to another is ordinarily the cause of no great concern to the communities affected. As long as those who move are self-supporting, and do not disturb the traditions, nor arouse the prejudices of the communities in which they stop, they are welcome. But when, as in 1930 and subsequent years, the movement of population includes an increasing number of unemployed persons in need of assistance, communities become alarmed, and either adopt the policy of "passing on" the needy to other communities, or refuse assistance on the grounds that their own residents have a prior claim on the public and private funds available for relief.

Either procedure is in keeping with the tradition in this country that each locality is responsible only for the care of its own needy citizens. The tradition is written into the statutes of most of the States, and has governed the poor relief practices in all of them. The doctrine of local responsibility for relief has a long history reaching back to English poor relief practices in the sixteenth century, when its avowed intent was to protect each parish from the inroads of "stalwart rogues" and "sturdy beggars". But neither in England where it originated, nor in this country where it was adopted, has the principle of local responsibility prevented the needy unemployed from quitting a community in which they could find no work. Moreover, poor relief procedure based upon this principle makes no attempt to distinguish the temporarily unemployed who have set out to find work, from the chronic wanderer—the hobo, the tramp, and the bum. By excluding all needy non-residents, the poor laws force the former to adopt the means of livelihood employed by the latter, with the result that some of the temporarily unemployed never resume a sedentary life.

The size of this mobile population has never been known, either in times of depression or prosperity. Social service agencies have long been familiar with the homeless man, the migratory worker, the runaway boy, the stranded workman, and other types of non-resident needy. These agencies knew that the number increased during depressions and declined during periods of prosperity. But with a population that was constantly moving, and largely anonymous, it was obviously impossible to estimate the total from the observations in any one agency, community or State.

For many years one or more of the social agencies in each of the large cities have been particularly concerned with the care of transient and homeless persons. These agencies gave what relief their funds permitted, arranged for the return of non-residents when the home community or relatives would accept

responsibility, established means by which cases could be investigated with a minimum of delay, and attempted to prevent the needy non-resident from becoming a permanent social outcast. But for every case that was helped, there were many more that either escaped notice or could not be assisted. The problem was principally one of interstate migrations; and nothing short of a change in the prevailing principle of local responsibility, or Federal intervention, could prevent a serious problem of destitution with each recurring period of unemployment.

Contrary to expectation, it was Federal intervention, rather than a break with the tradition of local responsibility, that, in 1933, made funds available for the relief of the needy non-resident. When the Seventy-third Congress met in the spring of 1933, unemployment relief was recognized as a national problem. The inability of the localities to care for the needs of their citizens was frankly admitted; and the Federal Emergency Relief Act of May, 1933, provided for the cooperation of the Federal Government with the States and communities in the relief of destitution. But this Act, which by title and intent was an emergency measure to assist the States, went even further; it provided additional, and wholly Federal funds for the care of needy non-residents, or transients, who otherwise would have remained an excluded group.

The Relief Act of May, 1933, recognized that during an emergency caused by nation-wide unemployment, the transient relief population was necessarily a Federal responsibility. Thus, for the first time it became not only possible, but necessary to study the characteristics of a depression migration of needy unemployed, and to determine the extent to which it represented the chronic wanderer, and the sedentary person turned migrant in search of a more favorable environment.

It is the purpose of this report to present the results of a study of the individuals and family groups who comprised the transient relief population under the provisions of the Federal Emergency Relief Act of May, 1933.

The report consists of several sections, the first of which defines the group and states the problem of the transient unemployed, reviews the efforts that were made to obtain consideration for them as a relief group, and presents data on the number of persons included. The second section is concerned with the personal characteristics of the two types of transient relief cases—the individual case, or unattached transient, and the group case, or transient family group. The next section describes the occupational characteristics of unattached transients and heads of transient family groups, and discusses some of the factors which condition their prospects of absorption by private employment. The fourth section is devoted to an

analysis of the reasons for the depression migration of individuals and family groups, the duration of their migration, their origins in terms of the State of residence before migration, and their destinations in terms of States that gained population as a result of this migration. The final section summarizes the principal findings of this report, and discusses the relation of the transient relief population to the general problem of unemployment relief during the depression.