

Newsletter from Boston

May 6, 1989

Well, here I be in Boston with many of my friends in various spots around the country. We all continue to live and grow and have such few occasions to discuss various political, social, scientific and metaphysical issues. I find frequently that I am rehashing many issues in discussion with old friends without sufficient time to really discuss these issues in depth.

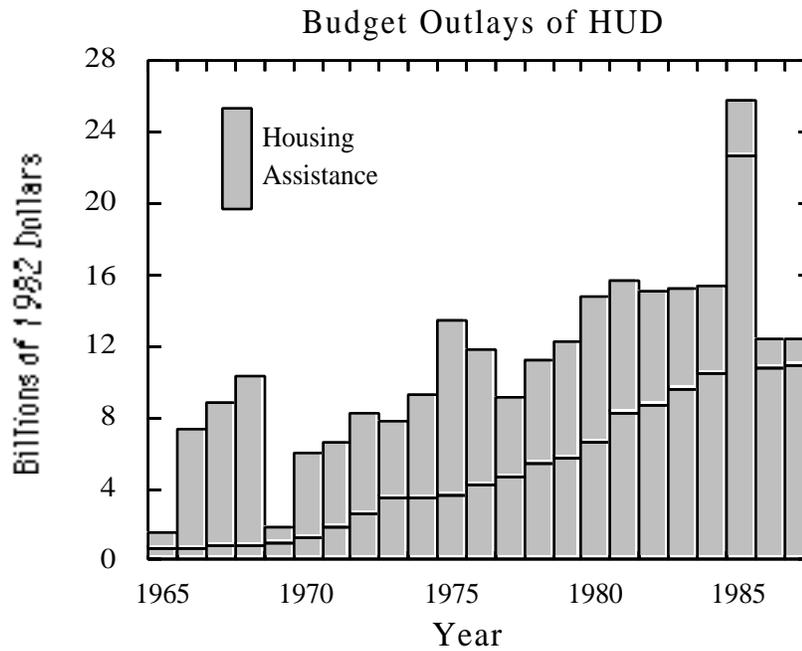
This distress (and my acquisition of a computer) is the impetus for the initiation of a "newsletter." I hope to try and write such a letter once every few months (time permitting). As I am not sure who is interested and who is not, I will be sending this out to a number of good friends. If you are interested in continuing to receive such a correspondence, drop me a line and let me know (in absence of a reply, I will assume that your interest in receiving such a letter is minimal at best).

The initial goal of this newsletter will be to explore several pertinent social issues with an emphasis on the presentation of facts in a **neutral** fashion (in so far as that is possible). Too often, we are presented with choices on social issues with each side presenting the facts as that side sees them. I have often been puzzled how the same data can be used to support opposing sides of view; this frequently is the result of selective presentation of data. I hope to explore in these letters whether this is a necessary aspect of the dialectic associated with conflict resolution or whether this practice could be eliminated by a more objective presentation of the facts. Feedback as to whether I have been able to refrain from biased presentation of the facts would be useful.

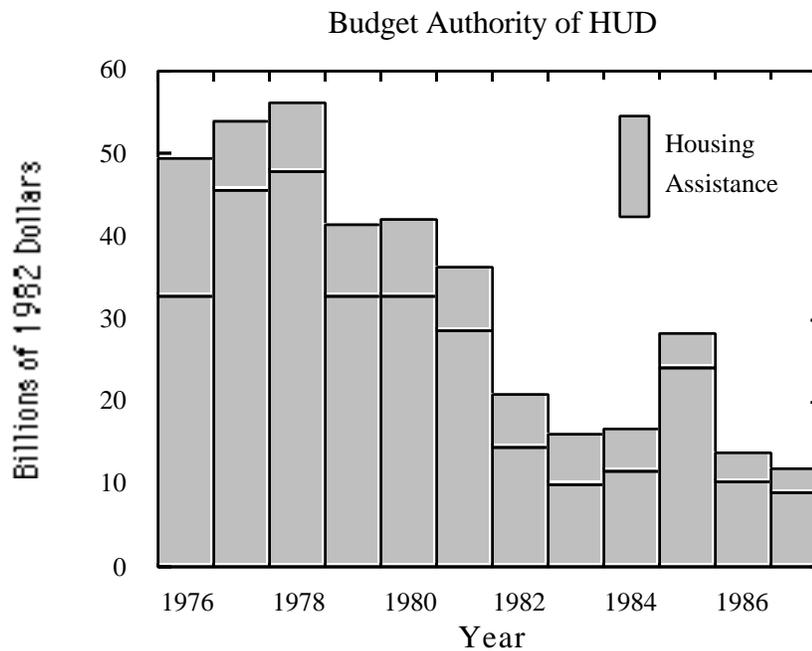
Issue 1: The Homeless. It is disheartening that in our country of plenty, such a large number of people should be without a private place to sleep at night, and subsequently arrive at such a hopeless situations. It has seemed to me that the news media have consistently concentrated on whether the funds provided by the administration are sufficient to tackle the homeless problem: liberals claim that the budget cuts are responsible for the homeless problem, while conservatives claim that there is plenty of money available but it is being used improperly. I hope to demonstrate that in fact neither of these views are correct; furthermore, I would propose that much of the homeless problem has resulted from the social migration back into the cities, and that the solution to the homeless problem lies in the recognition of its genesis.

I begin by challenging the proposition that the homeless problem has resulted from the Reagan cutbacks in funding for low income housing (although this may well have made the problem somewhat worse). Shown below are the budget outlays of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the twenty or so years (Historical Tables, Budget of the United States Government 1988). The cross-hatched region is the total government assistance to housing while the bar height is total HUD outlays. The data shown (inflation adjusted, Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics) does not show the drop that is alleged to have precipitated the

housing crisis. In fact, the housing assistance funding through the eighties is over twice the level of such funding in the seventies.



Here immediately arises the question of selective use of data. What is plotted in the figure above is the actual budget outlays of HUD. In the graph below are shown data of the budget authority of HUD (same data sources) :



The difference is striking, both in terms of level and in terms of trend. I believe that these are the much vaunted housing "budget cuts" of the Reagan administration. As I understand, budget **authority** has to do with what present and future financial contracts a department of the government can enter into, while budget **outlays** are what was actually spent. It seems that the Reagan administration was primarily cutting budget authority to decrease the growth of spending in the off-years. While this may have exacerbated the problem of the homeless, the data on budget outlays indicates that we are spending as much or more now on governmental assistance to housing as we ever have. This cannot be the genesis of the problem.

It is my feeling that we need to look to changes in the structure of society to explain the possible causes. The fifties and the sixties were marked by urban flight and the growth of suburban America, a land most of us are quite familiar with as these were our 'formative' years. Beginning in the seventies and throughout the eighties there has been a great reversal of this trend. The gentry (us) have moved back into the city in a process sometimes referred to as regentrification. Condominium conversion has become a problem during the past decade.

This social trend must have been an essential aspect of the "homeless" problem. The homeless problem resulted not from the fact that these people lost their ability to make an income, but rather that their income was no longer sufficient to pay the bills as housing prices rose in response to the regentrification. Perhaps this problem is best seen here in Massachusetts. While business was booming during the eighties (Michael Dukakis' "Massachusetts Miracle"), the homeless problem was just as bad here as in other large cities around the country (perhaps even worse than midwest cities). Yet the unemployment level here was among the lowest in the country. Why didn't the "homeless" problem greatly diminish here in Massachusetts?

The families of these people probably moved into the cities when the urban flight occurred in the fifties and sixties. The jobs that they then acquired were sufficient to keep them just over the margin. Now the return of the gentry has driven up rents and the price of living in the city is too high for them to manage. But they can not leave for their jobs are here.

Clearly more money cannot be the solution. Property values continue to escalate in the city: government does not have nearly enough funds to keep the poor in the cities. Furthermore, regentrification is unlikely to be stopped. Thus it seems to me that we need a drastic solution: move the poor out of the city! Cruel, perhaps ... but we need to stop the suffering now and move toward a solution.

The price of public housing in downtown areas is not at all cost effective. But it should be possible to build very nice public housing developments well outside of the cities. (Consider how quickly property values drop when the area becomes more rural.) Support by the communities where the public housing complexes are to be placed would be crucial. Incentives (such as no state taxes for the residents of such community for 5 years) would be necessary along with an attempt to spread these developments among a number of communities. While there might be a reasonably large price tag on this program, it would hopefully be a one time cost that might lead to alleviation

of the homeless problem, rather than the continued, non-productive use of housing assistance being pursued presently.

Issue 2: Abortion. Here I enter trepidaciously into an area that I feel none to comfortable with. There are many moral issues here and, as is most obvious, strong held feelings are evoked on each side of this issue. Such strong feeling make one suspect that the arguments of each side are sound.

My purpose in writing here is not to amplify on the issues of freedom of choice or of the sanctity of life, but to point out that there is a seeming contradiction in the position of each side. I here am concerned with the time limits (post conception) when an abortion should be allowed. My understanding of the positions of the antagonists (perhaps protagonists would be a better term in this case) follows. Pro-life groups argue that following conception, the fetus is a human being and thus entitled to all moral and legal protections. Pro-choice advocates argue that the decision as to when the fetus becomes a human being is a moral decision to be based upon ones religious beliefs, and thus is a matter of personal choice and not subject to legislation.

I find both of these opinions vague (in a scientific sense): the pro-choice argument is perhaps the easier to dismiss. I think we would all agree that if a women was to undertake an abortion within one week of term, for other than reasons of health, that we would find this objectionable and furthermore that it should be subject to restriction. I believe that the current criteria used by the courts is that of a "viable fetus." But modern medical science has made such rapid progress that the definition of a "viable fetus" seems to change yearly. This seems an unacceptable fashion to resolve a difficult legal and moral issue. However, it seems clear that some time limit must be placed upon the time (post conception) until which an abortion is allowable.

The view of the Pro-Life movement seems also to be suspect. Recall here the current legal definition of death: "cessation of brain function." The pro-life view seems to be that any life form containing a complete set of human genetic information is a human being. If we were to apply this definition of life to the end of a citizen's life, many of them would have to be prolonged on respirators long after their 'death' as we can continue to maintain their bodies (and thus their genetic structure) long after the brain is dead. This is untenable.

It seems to me (as must be obvious) that the answer is somewhere between these two positions, and to my mind, it seems that we can use the definition of death to find a definition of life. What about defining life as the "genesis of brain function?" While I don't believe that science can currently define when this event occurs, it could be studied scientifically and an answer could be arrived at in fairly short order. It would only be necessary to define when coherent electrical activity begins in the brain of the fetus. Perhaps science can be of some assistance in resolving this difficult moral issue.

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