A Brief History of Poverty in the United States
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The Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1601

- Why the Poor Laws?
- International wool trade
- Enclosure movement
- Henry VIII
- Closing of the monasteries
- Flight of the poor to the cities
Provisions of the Elizabethan Poor Law

- Family responsibility for the poor if possible
- Distinction between worthy & unworthy poor
- Apprenticeship programs to help children
- Collection of taxes for poor relief
- Local responsibility & control for poor relief
- Government regulation of programs for the poor
- Residency requirements to obtain poor relief
Colonial America

- Poverty was common and many lived close to the edge of being poor
- Poverty not a necessary evil but rather a blessing for others to do good
- Poor relief was administered at the local level
- The poor were often cared for in private homes at public expense
- Poor relief was built on the Elizabethan Poor Laws
The American Revolution

- Some writers feel that poverty may have been a major cause of the American Revolution due to high taxes for poor relief.
- Religious factors also motivated people to care for the poor.
The American Civil War (1861-1865)

- Issues were slavery and conflict between federal government and state governments
- Public health measures
- US Sanitary Bureau
  - Forerunner of the American Red Cross
- US Freeman’s Bureau
  - Transportation of soldiers and communication with their families
Post Civil War/19th Century America

- Significant growth of capitalism
  - industrialization, immigration, and urbanization
- Poverty continues to be a problem
  - one response: institutionalization of the poor (poor houses/almshouses)
- Social movements that were at the root of the Social Work profession
- Charity Organization Societies
  - the use of science to make charity a rational process
Post Civil War/19th Century America continued

- COS
  - The friendly visitor
- Settlement House Movement
  - Neighborhood and community change
- Jane Addams
- Residence, Reform, Research
- The Century of the Child
  - Child Labor, Child Saving, and Child Justice Movements
- End of the 19th Century de-emphasis on institutions to care
Social Work’s Quest to be a Profession

- The search for a method (case work)
- The influence of Freud
- The book
  - Social Diagnosis by Mary Richmond
- Growth of schools of Social Work and professional organizations
The Great Depression in America (1929)

- Poverty hits America at a rate of 25%
- Passage of the Social Security Act (1935) – the birth of the American Welfare State
- Social Security Act
- The end of The Great Depression – Due to World War II?
End of World War II

- Return to normalcy and prosperity
- The re-discovery of poverty
- Michael Harrington’s book – The Other America
- The growth of the military industrial complex and the growth of multiple welfare states – corporal, fiscal, and for the poor
The War on Poverty

- A social service strategy – job training, education, and health issues
- Establishment of Medicare & Medicaid; food stamps program
- Head Start
- Was the War on Poverty a success?
From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare

- The Reagan Years
- Dismantling Welfare
- Nixon – expansion of social security benefits
Ending Welfare as We Know It

- 1996 President Clinton signs Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act
- TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families)
- State administered programs
- Welfare cut by $75 billion
- 5 year limit for Welfare
- Is it working?
Obama Years

- Stuck in the Great Recession
- Growth of Poverty
- Possibility of Healthcare for Everyone
- Supreme Court rules in June 2012 about the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act
Basic Question Facing America Regarding Social Welfare

- Should private institutions be responsible for helping the poor?
- What is the role of government in assisting the poor?
- Government expansion vs. Government contraction
- What is the role of Social Work in helping the poor today?