

CHAPTER ONE

# Nashville, Tennessee

## *Off the Charts in Music City*

Those who are poor and in infancy or childhood ... have a right to require from society a distinct attention and more scrupulous and precise supervision. Their career of existence has but just commenced. They may be rendered blessings or scourges to society. Their course may be happy or miserable, honorable or disgraceful, according to the specific nature of the provision made for their support and education.

From an 1821 Massachusetts legislative committee report authored by Josiah Quincy<sup>1</sup>

I grew up in Nashville and now figured it would serve me as well as any other place to appreciate the realities faced by homeless families. My childhood there was housed and privileged in a prosperous suburb. Setting out on this project, I knew I might gain no real insight into the daily lives of homeless families by living briefly side by side with them. These were people who were trapped and sinking, while I had the ultimate privilege of being able to leave whenever I wanted. To think I could parachute into their lives and understand anything much in a few

weeks was a gross presumption. No one willingly jumps into homelessness; people fall into it. It's a pit. But at least I would be breathing the same air as they were, seeing the same sights in front of my eyes, suffering for a moment in the same sinkhole. I wanted to understand how this could be happening in the United States, what was done over the past centuries to deal with family homelessness, and what is—or is not—being done today.

Single men are not allowed in family shelters, so those doors were closed to me. While the majority of homeless families live doubled or tripled up with family and friends, I reasoned they would be hard pressed to find room for me in their lives. I could however pay for a motel room and live among that sizeable minority of homeless families who find themselves doing the same.

I started my research in November 2003, at the Trinity Inn motel. The tools I brought to the job were few and easily assembled: glasses, rental car keys, Swiss Army knife, wallet, reporter's notebook, ballpoint pen, and a handheld tape recorder, a \$39.95 analog item, the only specialized tool required. A dulled sense of shock and outrage also helped. I would be spending time in the neighborhood around the motel, putting my nose into other people's business, asking questions, recording interviews, trying to get an idea of what life was like for the millions of children who were living in motel rooms across the United States for a few weeks, or months, or years of their lives.

The Trinity Inn was close to an exit off Interstate 65 south. It was alongside four-lane Dickerson Pike, a five-minute drive from downtown Nashville in a neighborhood given over to folks having a rough go of it, people who were living in motels and trailer parks. It was a neighborhood that repeated itself in all of the nation's mid-sized and small cities: convenience stores doing a big business in cigarettes, beer, and lottery tickets; used-car

lots with prices soaped on the front windshields of vehicles on offer; check-cashing storefronts; and chain discount stores offering cheap goods to poor people with uncertain futures. The occasional sign in Spanish—"El Mecanico" chalked on a big blackboard in front of a rickety garage with a tin roof—indicated the presence of a certain Latino population, but the vast majority of Dickerson Pike's residents were poor black or white Nashvillians.

"This was a middle-class neighborhood in the Fifties," long-time resident Michael Douglas told me. He was balding, white, fifty years old, and the owner of Charlie Bob's Restaurant, a meat-and-three-sides place, the only real eatery remaining on the Pike and a good one. He was also its cook. "Dickerson Pike was a major route in and out of Nashville. My dad bought two motels here. They were both rated Triple A by the Automobile Association. That was the best rating they gave. This was before 1968 when the interstate went in. It killed everything. When things began to go downhill, my dad sold the motels. People bought them for the girls working the street to use."

Use them they did, and use them they still do. Sex industry workers were not in short supply along Dickerson Pike. Women wearing far too few clothes for the weather, all dressed up with no apparent place to go, could be found walking along the sides of the Pike at almost any hour. As I was leaving the motel one evening, a young woman with long, stringy, blonde hair and a spotty complexion was standing in an open doorway of a room a few doors from mine. She met my eye as I pulled hard on the door behind me checking to make sure it had locked. She asked for a ride down the road to the Dickerson Pike market, a convenience store a few blocks away. It was cold and drizzling and she had on a thin, blue shiny satin jacket.

“I’m Red,” she introduced herself when she was settled in the front seat, although the reddest thing about her was her left eye, bloodshot and drooping. “You get high?”

“No. I used to,” I said companionably.

“Well, I don’t know what you’re doing here, then. Everybody at this place gets high. You date?”

“No, I’ve got a girlfriend.”

I dropped her off at the market and when I drove back by half an hour later she was still there, standing under an edge of the store roof’s overhang, thin jacket slick and gleaming under an outside light in the cold, wet night air. I almost stopped to offer her a ride, but didn’t, and drove on back to the motel. My room was a world in itself although not one in which you’d want to raise your children. It had an emerald-green carpet pocked with brown cigarette burns that looked like cockroaches in the dim light of the one overhead bulb—and sometimes they were.

The drawers in the room’s scarred bureau were so nasty that I left my underclothes in my suitcase and took care to keep it shut. An oppressively heavy smell of old cigarette smoke hung in the air; it had seeped into the walls, mirror, and every surface. The room had no wastebasket. Neither did the tiny bathroom, with its mildewed shower curtain, rust-streaked tub and sink. I hung a plastic bag from a nail in the wall for my trash. No cups or glasses were provided. In return for my \$150 a week, someone dumped off a napless towel and a change of bedding each Friday, and the gray sheets always had a few small holes in them.

One night about 11 P.M., half asleep, propped up on the wide bed watching the big television on top of the bureau, I was jerked to wakefulness by a banging on my door. I opened it to a guy about my size, short and skinny, with Latino features. His dark brown eyes were out of control, flashing with need. He looked

like some fierce little beast inside him was struggling to get out. "Gimme some," he growled.

"I'm not whoever you think I am, and I don't have anything to give you."

"Man, gimme some," he hissed, rearing back, desperate with urgency.

"I don't have anything," I repeated, shutting the door hard and waiting, breath held, to see if he would knock again. He didn't.

The front desk at the Trinity Inn was a thick plastic shield with a round hole in it through which the public could speak to a motel employee should one happen to be there, which was not likely. Taped up beside the hole was a printed list of a dozen "Rules for Guests." Some, such as the one reading "No visitors after 9 P.M.," were not taken seriously. People came and went all night; knocks rang out on doors; voices rose and fell; cars idled in the parking lot under the shadowy lighting, plumes of smoke issuing out of their tailpipes into the cold air. Or the rule "All visitors must sign in at the office." I never saw anyone doing so. Most of the time no one was in the office. To speak with motel staff it was easier to knock on the door of the room behind the office, or go across the parking lot to the convenience store. One posted rule taken seriously at the Trinity Inn read "Anyone evicted will have their things thrown away."

On a regular basis families were evicted from rooms for not paying the rent; they were locked out and all their belongings inside were forfeited. Children's toys and favorite things were gone forever. Anyone who has ever watched a young child form an attachment to some beat-up raggedy doll, some scrap of material, or the way children pour all of themselves, their affection, anger, everything into one object and who with nothing

more than that scrap can sleep soundly just about anywhere, will understand that its sudden overnight loss may generate terrible anxiety. Kids regularly arrived at school with only the shirts on their backs. Textbooks needed to be replaced.

It happened frequently enough that teachers at Shwab Elementary School, with 350 students from kindergarten through fourth grade, kept sets of kids' clothes in various sizes laundered and tucked away in drawers. The school sat almost directly across the four lanes of Dickerson Pike from the Trinity Inn. It was a solid and safe two-story brick building, opened in 1890, permanent and anchored, built back behind a grassy turnaround that set the school well off the Pike. Inside it was a school like any school, providing a structured day with rules to follow and things to learn. In 2003 about 75 percent of the Shwab Elementary student body had been homeless at some point in their young lives. Many of the kids who began the academic year enrolled at Shwab in September would be attending a different school by the end of the year in June. Some had changed schools more than a dozen times by the end of second grade.

Life for the children who lived in a half dozen motels scattered around Dickerson Pike—each of which usually had some homeless families among its tenants—was a long way from the childhood most Nashvillians had. This was a part of town in which I had never found myself in more than thirty years of living in Nashville as a child and an adult. Most who did pass this way drove through with their car doors locked. There were no community centers around the Pike, nor libraries, and because of the neighborhood's dubious character even the Bookmobile would not serve it. "The closest libraries are a couple of bus stops away," said Paula Poag, a reading teacher at Shwab. "People who don't have the money to pay their rent are not going

to be spending bus fare to go to the library. Kids here have nothing.<sup>2</sup>

“These families living in motel rooms, cooking on hot plates, might be a mom, dad, and two or three kids in one room. They might have a pet. The kids don’t go home to anything close to a quiet, calm environment. Everything’s in upheaval, even if they’re not moving. And, they move a lot. Our turnover is always greatest on the day the rent is due. That’s when people move around.

“It’s a huge problem,” said Poag, with a grimace. She was a young, round-faced, blonde woman with a certain air of tenderness, who seemed like she would be a fine teacher. Our interview in the “reading room” was regularly interrupted by kids coming in with a note that needed signing or a question that needed answering. She gave them all the same firm response: “Miss Poag is in a meeting now, dear,” and sent them on to another room.

“I think Shwab has the highest number of homeless students in Nashville,” she told me. “We are considered the prime school that the Homeless Act affects.” The Homeless Act, otherwise known as the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, was passed into federal law in 1987 and later rebaptized the McKinney-Vento Act. It mandates that each public school and public school system provide a certain set of services for children who are homeless. One of the most effective things it did was to define which students in fact should be considered homeless. Since its passage the number of children falling under its provisions has grown steadily.

“It involves people living in hotels, motels, weekly rentals, and trailer parks, as well as in shelters and doubled up with relatives,” explained Poag. “Our trailer parks are our most stable population. Those are the people who stay. We have people in some of the trailer parks who have lived there for generations, almost like a lot of public housing. Grandmother lives there,

then everyone moves on in. That's kind of what our trailer parks are like. It's more of a generational thing.”

Not if they were in the kind of trailer that Jennifer Page\* rented, in which she and her three kids lived at the back of a Dickerson Pike mobile home park a few blocks north of Shwab School. Her trailer did not look like it had a generation's worth of use left in it. The front of the park was ordered with neat spaces, well-kept mobile homes one next to the other, each with a little rectangle of grassy ground, the miniature yards shaded by tall, old trees—oaks, hickories, and walnuts. It was indeed possible to imagine generations living in them. But the one road into the place continued back behind the bulk of the park, down a dip where a creek ran through a culvert under the pavement, and up a rise; on one side undergrowth and brambly blackberry bushes, on the other run-down trailers. A half dozen small cats lolled in the sun on the road, ambling aside when a car passed.

Jennifer Page and her two youngest children—a brother and sister, five and three years old—slept in one bedroom, and her oldest son, twelve, had another smaller, closet-sized room. Mildew seemed well advanced in the ceiling of his room; the small bathroom smelled rank; a ragged hole had been punched into its particle-board wall. The back bedroom was almost entirely filled by the mattress for three and a small table with a television on it. Another wider TV sat at one end of the living room, across from a broken-down couch covered with a paisley-print cloth.

At thirty-nine Jennifer Page had done some hard living and it showed in her face. She had deep, dark circles under her eyes. Still it was not hard to imagine she was once a lovely young woman—she also had long blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and a

\* An asterisk denotes people whose names have been changed.



quick smile. She had red polish on her fingernails, but her hands were rough; the skin of her fingers was cracked. She did not blame what had happened in her life on anyone or anything other than herself and bad luck, she told me. Like me she had been raised in another part of the city, in what she said was a standard Nashville middle-class household.

“My parents were pretty well-off and we had it made. We weren’t wealthy, but we had a nice home and two cars, and my parents worked. Then they got divorced and things just kind of fell apart from there. I’ve got no family left, really. My father passed away three years ago. I have one brother and he’s in the federal penitentiary in Arizona. So, it’s just me, nobody to turn to. I’ve had a hard row to hoe.”<sup>3</sup>

She did not graduate from high school and had held a number of minimum-wage jobs: telemarketer, waitress, cashier. She left an abusive husband who gave her four children. Despite the run-down condition of the trailer, Page was glad to have been in it for the past six months. It was, she said, the third time she had lived in this trailer park, and this time she had arrived after living eleven months in the Colonial Inn, a motel a few blocks away.

Tears came into her eyes. “It’s not what I want for my children. I want better for my kids. I see men and women every day struggling like me. There’s people in this trailer park right now I could take you to who have nothing, zero; they live from day to day wondering where they’re going to get their next meal, how they’re going to pay their bills. It’s not easy.”

Her life had taken a sharp downward turn a couple of years before I met her, she told me, when her oldest son died of cerebral palsy. “I lost my job, and my son died, and I fell into substance abuse. I was taking pain pills. Dilaudid. Everything caught up with me. I was staying in another trailer park at the

time, but I lost that place and we stayed for a week in my car. Three kids in that car,” she nodded toward the front door of the trailer and the battered 1989 Honda parked outside.

“Then, I managed to get enough together for a week’s rent at the motel. Week after week. It was so *hard* living there. I hope I never have to go through that again. But there’s plenty of people that do. I was really surprised to see how many families were living at these motels around here. I don’t know how they can do it. My kids stayed sick all the time cooped up in that room. The carpets were so nasty, and it was full of germs in there. I didn’t understand why they were staying so sick and the doctor told me, ‘It’s that room you’re in.’

“They never got any sunlight in there. I kept the curtains drawn all the time. I didn’t want my kids seeing out and I didn’t want nobody seeing in. It was horrible, horrible. I had to wash my dishes in the bathtub. A friend of mine gave me a little refrigerator and that’s where I’d keep a half gallon of milk, maybe some lunch meat and cheese. I couldn’t pay the extra they wanted for a microwave. We did a lot of eating of sandwiches. That’s how we lived,” she said, quietly.

“I was working at a fast-food restaurant and the kids got home before I did. I told them never to open the door. I had a key, so if someone knocked it wouldn’t be me, and I told them if anyone ever did knock to be very quiet, not to make a sound. That’s how we had to live. There were a lot of drugs, a lot of prostitution there. And killings, too, there was a lot of death up there. The kids had a bad time with it. It was scary. They started having nightmares.”

Her oldest son, whose name was Joseph Charles\*, was called J.C. He was a big kid, tall, and somewhat overweight. He had lively, kind brown eyes and was generally studious, his mother said. Before the family moved to the motel, he had been on the

honor roll. “While we were staying at the motel, he would do his homework at night. It wasn’t easy. All of us in one room, the TV would be on, the little ones would be playing. It all really got on the kids’ nerves. [J.C.’s] grades started falling. My five-year-old got to the point where he was pulling his hair out, and the doctor said it was a nervous disorder.”

The experience of Jennifer Page’s family in their motel room was typical of what millions of families have lived through. A report issued by the National Center on Family Homelessness concluded that children who are homeless are in fair or poor health twice as often as other children and four times as often as children whose parents earn more than \$35,000 a year. The report also noted that homeless children are more anxious and do less well in school, displaying a wide range of developmental problems.<sup>4</sup>

Growing up in a motel room does not necessarily limit a child’s future to the lowest level of the socio-economic scale. It is possible to climb out of deep poverty even from a childhood involving homelessness, but it is much more difficult. Studies of homeless children repeatedly arrive at the same conclusion. Not surprisingly it is identical to the conclusion Page reached during her eleven months at the Colonial Inn: homelessness is not good for children. It puts them at increased risk for physical and behavioral problems.

A disproportionate number of homeless preschoolers have chronic illnesses. The most common are ear infections, asthma, stammering, and eczema. They are four times as likely to be asthmatic as other children.<sup>5</sup> Studies have concluded that there is no category of diseases to which only homeless children are vulnerable but that they are at significantly greater risk of suffering from numerous illnesses than the general pediatric population. Many of these health risks are associated more with

poverty than with homelessness. They are present for desperately poor housed children as well. But throwing homelessness into the mix increases the potential for physical stress and psychological damage.

Many of these kids have already had more trauma in their lives than is good for them. They are at greater risk of experiencing physical or sexual abuse. If they do not personally experience it, they are more likely to witness violent incidents between adult family members, often men physically abusing women. A safe, secure world in which to learn and develop does not exist for children exposed early and often to violence, whether that is gunfire in the streets of their neighborhood, or a father beating a mother, or someone beating them. The effects of such early exposure are profound. Studies suggest that such experiences not only contribute to mental illness in adults but also generate it and can directly cause a range of mental problems including chronic depression, impaired functioning, substance abuse disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>6</sup>

Ellen Bassuk, a retired associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a founder and longtime president of the National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH), concluded that the lifetime prevalence of these disorders was higher among homeless mothers than among mothers with stable housing. Her study compared 220 homeless families in Worcester, Massachusetts, to a control group of 216 low-income families that were housed. Nearly a third of the homeless mothers she interviewed had made at least one suicide attempt. She also found a significantly higher number of homeless mothers who were hospitalized for emotional problems or substance abuse than housed mothers.<sup>7</sup>

“The average age of mothers heading up homeless families is about twenty-seven years old,” Bassuk told me in 2009. “Our

data show that 42 percent of them have been molested by the age of twelve, usually by multiple perpetrators. If you extrapolate that to a public school class, one out of every two kids there is being abused, and it probably is that high. Our society is very violent.”<sup>8</sup>

She was a professor of psychiatry at Harvard when I first spoke with her, although she had little time to dedicate to academic pursuits. She was too busy as president of the NCFH. The center served as the oversight agency for government grants to “demonstration projects” at homeless service agencies around the country. It provided technical services, evaluated the projects, set up conferences, and worked with about forty different sites. She spent a lot of time traveling, including trips to Washington to testify before Congress when the issue of homeless families came up, which it did far too infrequently to suit her. She had spent three decades watching the problem worsen while public responses—way too little, way too late—failed to stem the growing numbers of homeless women and children.

Bassuk stepped down as president of the center in 2012, after serving as its director since its beginning in 1988, and she founded a new organization, the Center for Social Innovation. She had not set out to spend her professional life as an institutional advocate for homeless families. “I’m a doctor, I’m a medical doctor. I was on staff at one of the teaching hospitals in the early eighties. We started seeing an influx of individual homeless people with mental illness and we had no place to send them. I was asked to run a task force for then-governor Dukakis.

“I didn’t know much about it, but I went into the shelters and I began to write about it, and I became the instant expert. In this country you write one article and you’re it. They make you an expert and then you’re in trouble,” she laughed ruefully. By the

end of the 1980s Bassuk's studies were increasingly alarming. She founded the NCFH and began to work with homeless families. The more she learned, the more she became convinced that simply looking at homelessness as a housing problem was wrong. It was also a health problem, often a mental health problem, frequently rooted in the violence that mothers and children routinely experienced.

"The hidden picture, the subtext of homelessness is violence," she told me when we spoke in 2009. "In this country, violence is completely enmeshed in the entire problem of homeless families. Unlike the singles on the streets who have major mental illnesses, these mothers have post-trauma responses. That leads to high rates of depression and then they self-medicate, which means substance abuse. That's the pathway; it's not the other way around. It's not that these mothers are intrinsically mentally ill. They've been beaten up all their lives by family members.

"Little kids watch this violence, they witness it, and they are terribly traumatized. They've seen Dad beating up Mom; they've seen fist fights. We asked a bunch of young, school-age kids what they'd seen. They'd seen people get shot, people get stabbed; they'd seen dead bodies. What is going on here? This country focuses on Iraq and Afghanistan, but does not pay attention to what's going on in its own backyard.

"Post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, makes people feel emotionally distressed and upset. They have flashbacks and relive their abuse. These women are just tremendously distressed and they don't know where it's coming from, and they don't understand they have post-traumatic stress disorder. It's the same sort of thing that soldiers suffer who are coming back from Vietnam or Iraq. We see it all the time. Women feel like they're crazy."

In 1996 Bassuk published a paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*). In the study 91.6 percent of the homeless women reported severe physical and/or sexual assault at some point in their lives, as compared to 81.8 percent among the housed women studied who were at the same level of poverty. The study found no significant difference in rates of chronic mental illness between the homeless and the housed, but three times as many homeless women were suffering from PTSD.

“Post-traumatic stress disorder is characterized by intrusive thoughts, periods during which past traumas are relived, vivid recollections, and symptoms of increased arousal such as intense startle reactions and sleep disturbances. These are interspersed with periods of constricted affect and psychic numbing,” Bassuk wrote in the *JAMA* article.

When a parent cannot do an adequate job of raising children, the task often falls to others. Some of the adults raising children in twenty-first-century motel rooms across the country are not their parents but their grandparents. For instance, in 2014, 75,913 grandparents in Tennessee were responsible for grandchildren living with them. Of these, 31,032 were responsible for their grandchildren without a parent present, according to the Children’s Defense Fund.<sup>10</sup> It’s that way across the nation: some 4 percent of children are being raised primarily by grandparents. The percentage of grandparents who served as primary caregivers nationally nearly doubled between 1970 and 1997, an increase that happened almost entirely in poor and minority families.<sup>11</sup>

People who thought their child-rearing days over with were finding otherwise, and sometimes they also found themselves homeless, Jennifer Cox told me back in December 2003. This was in the midst of a “strong” economy, four years before the Great Recession began. Cox was Shwab Elementary School’s

designated liaison with its homeless families. It was her job to make sure the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act were carried out. She was a solid woman with short dark hair who liked her job and worked long days at it. She kept tabs on Shwab students who were homeless or precariously housed, initiating each school year with a visit to the trailer, or motel, or shelter where they were staying.

“One frightening thing is I’m seeing more grandparents caring for grandchildren without having official custody of them, which leads to all sorts of problems. A son or daughter will drop the kids off with grandparents saying, ‘Can they stay with you for a couple of weeks?’ and a year later the kids are still there. They frequently can’t get insurance or health care for the kids. We have a lot of children in our school that have been diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or with some other medical disorders that need certain medications. The grandparents don’t want to go to court and get custodial guardianship of their grandchildren, because they don’t want their children to be angry at them.<sup>12</sup>

“A lot of times, too, the parents still get the food stamps for the children, sometimes a housing subsidy for the children, or aid to families with dependent children. The grandparents are trying to raise those kids and do the best they can by them, but they’re not getting any of the benefits. It’s tough. I’m particularly worried right now, because we’re close to Christmas. I’m not worried because the kids won’t be getting any gifts; I’m worried because they’re out of school for two weeks, so where are they going to find breakfast and lunch?”

For grandparents who intended to live the rest of their lives on fixed pensions, the responsibility of grandchildren plus a little bad luck can easily combine to devour their family finances and put them out of a house without the means to get the necessary



funds together to find another one. “All of a sudden, grandparents find themselves living in one room in a motel with their grandchildren, and their money’s way too tight to get out of there, even though they are paying \$640 every month,” said Cox. “Sure they get utilities for that, but that’s it. We’re talking about an efficiency that’s basically just a big room.”

John Griswold\* was living in such a room on the second floor of the Trinity Inn with his wife and two grandchildren during the time I was there. The kids slept on a rollaway bed in the front area and the grandparents had the bed in the back. Griswold was a wiry, tough African American, a scuffler, a survivor. “My daughter, you know, she just can’t keep it together,” he told me sadly, as we stood out back of the motel one late-spring morning, the light a gun-metal gray, big low clouds heavy with moisture moving rapidly across the Nashville sky.

His wife was a medium-sized, blonde woman, who walked slowly. She had a pacemaker, and diabetes, and received a disability check. She had a hard time getting up and down the stairs at the Trinity, stopping two or three times to recover her strength over the two flights, and she stayed mostly in the room. Just paying the rent exhausted her disability check, so John, fifty-three, served as the motel’s handyman for a substantial rent reduction.

He had gone through a hip replacement a few years before, walked with a limp, and couldn’t work like he used to, but the calloused skin on his hands indicated that he had done plenty of hard work in his life. He inherited a house from his mother where the whole family was living, but it had old wiring and caught fire one morning. He had no insurance. The family had been living in one room at the Trinity for the past ten months. His ten-year-old grandson was on the fourth-grade honor roll at

Shwab, and his eight-year-old granddaughter was doing well in second grade. The kids did their homework at school in the afternoons, and John and his wife checked it in the evenings.

Mornings, he swept up around the motel. He kept a Rottweiler and a Doberman in a kennel he had built in a back corner of the parking lot, and he liked to take a break by the cage while the dogs paced tight circles inside it. He held his broad-brush, parking-lot broom in one hand while we spoke, and an open Miller beer in the other. He wore spectacles, and his gray hair curled tightly on his head. He always had a cigarette lit and his harsh smoker's cough interrupted him frequently during our morning chats.

After he cleaned up the motel grounds, Griswold spent a good part of each day doing whatever tasks the motel's owner, Deepak Gupta\*, assigned him. Gupta, thirty-five, who described himself as "a Hindu from northern India," came to Detroit to study before settling in Nashville. When I stayed at the Trinity, he had just opened a convenience store across the motel's parking lot, and Griswold had done most of the work bringing the building up to market standards. It had taken almost a year to get the place ready, Gupta told me. It sold just what all the other convenience stores up and down Dickerson Pike did: cigarettes, overpriced canned goods, beer and soft drinks from a cooler in the back.

Gupta was a broad-chested, round-faced man with a trimmed beard and a thick black mustache. He had bright brown eyes, dark hair clipped short, and a gold stud in one ear. Around his neck was a gold chain complimented by a heavy gold bracelet gleaming against the skin of his arm. He was one of tens of thousands of Tennesseans who were licensed to carry a firearm, and his gun of choice was a 9 mm pistol worn in a belt holster.

He said he used to teach a philosophy class at Wayne State University in Detroit. "I've owned this motel for fourteen months and I've made it a better place," he told me from behind the store's cash register. "There used to be a row of broken-down trailers up behind the parking lot, mostly occupied by hookers, and I cleaned all that out."<sup>13</sup>

John Griswold got along well with Deepak Gupta, he said, but he was doing what he could to get his family into better living quarters. He had applied for public housing, but the waiting list was many months long. Meanwhile life was a matter of getting by from day to day. "It's true that staying in a motel is not how you want to be living, everyone in a room, but at least we have a place to sleep."

• • •

A place to sleep. To what degree is it a community's responsibility to provide that for families? It is a question that presented itself as soon as the *Mayflower* delivered the first Plymouth colonists to these shores in 1620, and it has been asked ever since. In those first years no Plymouth family went without shelter. Poverty, like illness or accident, was initially viewed as something that was brought on by unavoidable, cataclysmic events in peoples' lives, and a poor person's neighbors were expected to step up with assistance. In the Puritans' Massachusetts colony if ill fortune affected one family, the whole community was bound to respond. Everyone had to be fed and housed, just as everyone had to work diligently, worship fervently, and behave in a morally acceptable manner. These things had to be done correctly or God would be displeased with the entire community. Those who fell into poverty would be taken care of to whatever degree and in whatever manner was necessary to stabilize their situation. If

their dire circumstances were due to personal failings, then these faults would be corrected, harshly if need be.

This worked while the number of settlers was small. If a family was homeless, a house was shared with another family until a new home could be built. If a family did not have enough to eat, food was provided by others. For the *Mayflower's* passengers community solidarity became an issue right away during the terrible first Plymouth winter of 1620–21. By the time spring arrived, about half of the colony's original settlers were dead. One of those who lived to tell the tale, William Bradford, wrote:

But that which was most sad and lamentable was, that in 2 or 3 months time half of their company died, especially in January and February, being the depth of winter, and wanting houses and other comforts; being infected with the scurvy and other diseases, which this long voyage and their incomodate condition had brought upon them; so as there died some times 2 or 3 of a day, in the fore-said time; that of 100 and odd persons, scarce 50 remained. And of these in the time of most distress, there was but 6 or 7 sound persons, who, to their great commendations be it spoken, spared no pains, night nor day, but with abundance of toil and hazard of their own health, fetched them wood, made them fires, dressed them meat, made their beds, washed their loathsom clothes, clothed and unclothed them; in a word, did all the homely and necessary offices for them which dainty and queasy stomachs cannot endure to hear named; and all this willingly and cheerfully, without any grudging in the least, showing herein their true love unto their friends and brethren.<sup>14</sup>

With a rich fishery in the ocean and much land that could be cleared and farmed, some Puritan settlers initially supported the idea of bringing poor children over from England. Francis Higginson settled in Salem in the summer of 1629 and served as the first Puritan minister of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In a

letter he sent back that year to friends in Leicester, England, he lauded the opportunities to put children and the poor to work in Salem: "Little children of 5 yearsould may by setting corne one month be able to get their own maintenance abundantly. Oh what a good work might you that are rich do for your poore brethren to helpe them with your purses onely to convey them hither with their children and their families, where they may live as well both for soule and body as any where in the world."<sup>15</sup>

The next year, 1630, a fever ravaged the Salem colony and carried off Higginson along with many others, proving again that despite its possibilities the New World was as rich in dangers as in resources. It was inevitable that some of its settlers would find themselves in dire straits. John Winthrop, four-time governor of Massachusetts, laid it out for his fellow Puritans in 1630 as their ship sailed toward the New World where they would establish Boston and Charlestown: "When there is no other means whereby our Christian brother may be relieved in his distress, we must help him beyond our ability rather than tempt God in putting him upon help by miraculous or extraordinary means. This duty of mercy is exercised in the kinds: giving, lending and forgiving [of a debt]. . . . We must bear one another's burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren."<sup>16</sup>

As towns and cities formed and grew, the numbers of poor began to exceed the capacity of a system in which officials responded on a case-by-case basis to the misfortunes that befell their neighbors. It became clear that a more formal arrangement was required for dealing with the needs of those in poverty. For this the colonists looked to the old country. The English Parliament had passed the Elizabethan Poor Law in 1601. It was a piece of landmark legislation that would remain in force for almost 250

years, and the Poor Law's provisions were used as the basis for public policy in the New World.<sup>17</sup> When communities began to organize poor relief, they often applied the Elizabethan Poor Law pretty much whole cloth, and any changes made locally were usually just modifications of that basic structure.

One of the Poor Law's principal innovations in England was that it differentiated between the able-bodied, those who could find work but did not wish to, and those whose infirmities or advanced age precluded them from participating in the economic system. Since then, an effort to distinguish between those who can't work and those who can but won't has always been part of public policy toward desperately poor families, right up to the present day.

For instance, currently in many states the provision of food stamps to "able-bodied adults without minor dependents" requires those adults to perform volunteer labor or be enrolled in some kind of job training class. And in 1996 with the same motivation of winnowing from the welfare rolls those who could work but wouldn't, the Clinton administration implemented welfare reform. The Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, in place for more than sixty years, was replaced by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, with an emphasis on the word "temporary." Block grants to states replaced means-tested federal assistance to children and families in need.

"Thus the residual social safety net was definitively shredded, effectively ending poor children's entitlement to minimum forms of public assistance," wrote Valerie Polakow in *The Public Assault on America's Children*: "TANF block grants . . . were tied to a set of mandatory work requirements that custodial parents, predominantly single mothers, were required to meet in order

to qualify for public assistance. The mandatory requirements have escalated yearly. . . . After 2 consecutive years, states may choose to cut all benefits whether or not welfare recipients have found employment, and there is a lifetime limit of 5 years on public assistance for the family.”<sup>18</sup>

The question is, and has always been, who among the poor deserves our help and how much of it should we provide? Today a sizeable segment of our fellow citizens rails against “welfare queens” and keeps pressure on elected officials to hold subsidies for families in poverty to a bare minimum. What they often do not recognize is the extent to which their own families are helped by government subsidies, things like the federal tax deduction on mortgage interest. Rather they see assistance to homeless families as a waste of taxpayers’ money.

Authorities in the seventeenth century devoted considerable time and investigation into understanding the circumstances of the families that were granted relief. When authorities determined families to truly lack anyone able to earn a living wage, they were then accepted as necessary burdens. Many municipalities, “boarding out” impoverished adults and children who could not look after themselves, paid with municipal funds for another family to take them in—the nation’s first form of foster care. A related and widespread policy was sometimes called “selling the poor.” Towns held auctions to board out their poor, in which the lowest bidder would contract to care for a given indigent individual or family for a certain length of time at a fixed price.

These auctions of the poor often took place at the village tavern on a Saturday night.<sup>19</sup> They were called “vendue” after the French word *vender*, to sell, and they resembled the public sale of slaves, except that instead of chained Africans from across the ocean it was one’s own neighbors who, struck by some misfortune

and rendered poor, were now being sold off, placed in what might well prove to be unpleasantly harsh conditions.

In the case of cattle, sheep, and hogs, noted one observer, the highest bid was the one accepted, whereas with the human poor the lowest bidder took them home. The margin of profit was usually so tight that it allowed the winning bidder to provide only the minimum conditions to maintain life. “A man who would remunerate himself in such risks, must be a man of great faith in the ability of paupers to live on almost nothing, to suffer almost everything, and to be contented with almost anything!” wrote one observer.<sup>20</sup>

The other principal form of organized public assistance employed in the seventeenth century was “outdoor relief,” which meant that if a family was able to provide only a part but not all of the income needed to keep itself afloat, some form of direct assistance would be provided. It might be a share in a cow, a fraction of the profits from a wheat crop, a cord of wood, or a small monthly stipend. Outdoor relief is still an important public policy strategy for combating homelessness among families and in fact is preferred in many municipalities. Today it is called “housing first,” or “rapid rehousing,” and is most often provided in the form of rent subsidies rather than a share in a cow or a cord of wood. An April 2014 report on rapid rehousing by the National Alliance to End Homelessness concluded: “Rapid rehousing appears to have encouraging outcomes: decreased length of homelessness, fewer returns to homelessness, lower costs per household than other interventions, and decreased homelessness in communities. On an individual level, rapid rehousing minimizes the amount of time an individual or family spends homeless and rapidly helps them stabilize in their own housing.”<sup>21</sup>



In April 2013 the state of Washington initiated a pilot program to provide rapid rehousing to homeless families in five counties, and to do so in coordination with TANF caseworkers. The plan was to facilitate coordination between housing and employment specialists. Funds were made available to spend on housing search, landlord negotiation, rental assistance, and home-based case management. Early results were promising enough that the program was extended to the entire state in 2014.<sup>22</sup>

Outdoor relief is still based as it was in the seventeenth century on the idea that a family in desperate poverty is likely to represent an economic problem with an economic solution, rather than being the fault of a parent's bad character or morals. The provision of just enough money to make up the difference between what people have and what they need to pay their rents for a certain period keeps families housed. If this assistance is provided before a family becomes homeless, it is often an effective preventive measure; it also appears to have a high rate of success with families who are already homeless. As we shall see, the experience of towns and cities across the nation is that families receiving this kind of assistance are likely to stay in their housing even after the subsidy stops.<sup>23</sup>

Boarding out and outdoor relief were the two principal means used by early colonists to care for the poor among them. These strategies were not so different from today's alternatives of either taking a family's children into custody and placing them in foster care with a set cash incentive paid to another family to take them in, or keeping a family together with direct assistance.

In the seventeenth century, as now, strict rules were drawn up to determine eligibility for public assistance. Colonial towns assumed no responsibility for the care of a person or a family that could not prove a legal right to live in that community. Even today

if parents are unable to show they are legally residing in the United States, their families are likely to be deemed ineligible for public assistance. In fact many parents in that situation will entirely avoid any public assistance that might be available rather than possibly expose themselves to discovery and deportation.

One consequence of the colonial system was that each township endeavored to keep as many poor people as possible out of its precincts. Anyone deemed likely to become poor was not welcome to take up residence. Population in most places was still low enough so that newcomers were easily identified, and it was the job of municipal authorities to judge whether they would be allowed to remain and given “inhabitancy” (official residency), or whether they would be “warned out”—told to move on. In 1670 selectmen in Salem, Massachusetts, ordered a person appointed “to goe from house to house aboute the towne, once a moenth, to inquire what strangers are come or who have privately thrust themselves into towne and to give notice to the Selectmen in being, from tyme to tyme, and he shall have the fines for his pains, or such reasonable satisfaction as is meet.”<sup>24</sup>

For the needy families among those who had legitimate inhabitancy—locals born and raised in a town or who had been granted permission to stay—the authorities provided direct assistance or paid someone to care for them. Medical bills were paid for bona fide residents who were ill and indigent. The doctors who treated them would bill the town for their services, as did the gravediggers if the doctors failed to cure their patients.

For the early colonists, the phrase “idle poor” came to hold the same significance as “welfare queen” did some three hundred years later: it connoted someone who preferred taking handouts to working. Some taxpayers began to express resentment that their money was going to people who were capable of

working but simply out of laziness did not. What's more, as towns grew ever larger, it became harder to enforce inhabitancy. Municipalities did everything possible to ensure that they were not spending money on people who did not deserve it, and that included able-bodied children. In 1641 the colony of New Plymouth passed a law stipulating that "those that have relief from the towns and have children and do not employ them, that then it shall be lawful for the township to take order that those children shall be put to work in fitting employment according to their strength and abilities or placed out by the towns."<sup>25</sup>

Local authorities often removed children of poor families from their parents and apprenticed them to others in the community, and this was frequently done against a parent's will. For a poor mother who feared that her children were about to be taken, few alternatives were available. One was to move to another town and try to stay beneath the radar of local authorities until she could establish the family on a sound economic footing. This way of life was not so different from that of homeless families today who try to stay hidden, living packed in a car or a motel room, trying not to attract the notice of public officials for fear the family will be broken up and the children remanded into state custody.

Isaiah Brown\* was someone who knew all about living like that. The Syracuse, New York, native was working as a long-distance truck driver when a job took him to Nashville. There he met the woman who would become the mother of his child. When she got pregnant, he decided to stay in Nashville, but four days after their son was born in 2008 the family found themselves evicted and homeless.

"I had a job as a short-order cook and a waiter at a Waffle House, doing both jobs," said Brown, a short, stocky African American,

thirty-five years old with a goatee and a shaved head. “I knew I was behind on the rent, and I was trying to get the money up. The sheriff’s department came and put me out, two days after we got back from the hospital. I knew nothing about it. The maintenance person who ran the place signed my name on [the warrant], and it was the first I knew about being put out. All my stuff was put up the street towards the fence, and I remember people just walking by and going through my stuff. It was a really hurtful feeling.”<sup>26</sup>

The idea of turning to a public agency for help was the furthest thing from his mind, Brown told me. He was not about to risk losing four-day-old Joseph\* to the state. The family moved in with an aunt of Joseph’s mother while they tried to get enough money together to find a place of their own. Then the child’s mother disappeared from their lives, leaving him with full custody of Joseph. And, he said, the aunt turned out to have a crack habit.

“[Joseph] was at the age then when he was starting to teethe. It was a huge problem: she was high, he was crying, she was getting upset. Just to get away from the house, I would walk with him to downtown. I had a stroller for him. There’s a building right across from the Municipal Auditorium, and him and I would go up to the fourteenth floor where there were bathrooms that nobody ever went up to, and him and I would just hang out there during the day. I kept him changed and clean, and we’d go to a church for lunch. We tried to stay out of [the aunt’s] house as much as we could. We’d come back at seven at night, get a little sleep, and be out early the next morning, just as the sun was starting to come up.”

When I spoke with him in 2013, father and son were living in a run-down trailer park a couple of blocks east of Dickerson Pike. A handful of balloons from Joseph’s recent fifth birthday party were still floating up by the ceiling. The trailer had seen better days, but Isaiah Brown felt his fortunes were improving

and he was grateful for the place, which a Nashville nonprofit named Safe Haven had found for him. He was working as a cook and anticipated shortly being able to move into an apartment. Joseph was an alert, energetic five-year-old with dreadlocks and a big smile. He ran in and out of the trailer's open front door. "It was all scary," Brown characterized his time as a homeless father. "Every single day was scary for lots of reasons, but the scariest thing of all was worrying that the DCS [Department of Children's Services] would take [Joseph]. I was always careful not to have anything to do with them."

When a public agency steps in to remove children from their biological families, whether in the seventeenth or twenty-first centuries, it always represents a decision not to use outdoor relief to keep a family together but rather to break it up. Such an action is rooted in a decision that a given biological family is incapable of protecting a child from want or harm. What is different today is that when children are separated from parents, they are not going to be put to work as children were in the seventeenth century.

In the colonies obedience and hard labor were seen as the corrective measures for most ills. Children, even in sound and structured biological families, were expected to work. In 1646 the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed legislation calling for extremely disobedient adolescents to be put to death. No record has been uncovered of capital punishment ever being applied, but it was on the books. The statute's language was drawn nearly verbatim from Deuteronomy 21:18–21. The 1646 Massachusetts version read:

If a man have a stubborn or rebellious son, of sufficient years and understanding, to wit sixteen years of age, which will not obey the voice of his Father, or the voice of his Mother, and that when they have chastened him will not harken unto them: then shall his Father and Mother being his natural parents, lay hold on him and bring

him to the Magistrates assembled in Court and testify unto them, that their son is stubborn and rebellious and will not obey their voice and chastisement, but lives in sundry notorious crimes, such a son shall be put to death.<sup>27</sup>

If children in stable families were expected to work, this applied even more to children whose families were barely getting by economically. Children as young as six years were expected to do a daily part of the chores needed on a farm, or in a kitchen, or helping out in a shop. “The labor of children was a social fact, not a social problem,” wrote historian Robert Bremner, in *Children and Youth in America*.<sup>28</sup>

While breaking up a family by placing out the children as indentured servants or apprentices was what the town fathers frequently preferred to do, it was often the thing that families most dreaded. Nevertheless the priority was to keep children off the outdoor relief rolls and working so that a town was no longer responsible for their upkeep. Authorities had the legal right to remove children from poor families and put them to work by apprenticeship or indenture, and they frequently exercised it.

The terms and conditions of the contracts for apprentices and indentured labor varied from colony to colony, but when they dealt with children they generally called for seven years of job training, acquisition of basic literacy and arithmetic skills, along with room and board, in exchange for a six-day work week as soon as the child was able—usually when they reached the age of nine or ten—and church on Sundays. Often they were not allowed even to leave the house without their master’s permission. Girls were usually apprenticed as household maids or cooks. Those boys who were unlucky wound up as field hands, but many received training in a large variety of skilled professions like goldsmith, bricklayer, druggist, blacksmith, or shipbuilder. Often

the children began to put in full, adult workdays at an early age, but hard labor was not the only thing they had to endure. Excessive physical discipline and abuse were not uncommon.

Simply taking children away from a family was frequently not enough to pull that family out of poverty, particularly if it was still left with children who were too young to work. Outdoor relief continued to drain local treasuries. As the seventeenth century progressed, growing populations, combined with the expense of keeping poor families in their homes, caused many municipalities to begin considering other means of remedying the sufferings of the poor. Policy makers grew increasingly amenable to the idea of “indoor relief,” grouping all the desperately poor together in one place. It appeared logical that congregate housing would be a more effective use of resources, that is, cheaper. If all the paupers and their children were together, supplies could be bought in bulk and expenses would be much easier to control. Another advantage to indoor relief would be that under such an arrangement inmate behavior could be closely monitored, and those who could work would not be able to dissimulate. The first almshouse in Boston was opened in 1662.<sup>29</sup>

Petty criminals, the mentally ill, and the poor all lived together in the early almshouses. Those who could work did so during the day, and those who couldn't occupied themselves in other ways. One of the jobs in which the more able-bodied often were put was caring for those who couldn't care for themselves. Inmates of almshouses nursed, washed, and fed one another. Small children lived among the general population until they grew old enough to be indentured or apprenticed. In smaller towns and cities, almshouses were a kind of boarding house for the poor. A householder contracted with local authorities to provide room and board to a limited number of poor persons at

a given price. Many of the adult poor were too ill or old or weak to work, while others were able to labor at menial tasks like taking apart old ropes and picking out the oakum for recycling, or some other unskilled occupation to help defray the costs of a bed in a dormitory and something to eat. The same institution often served as both poorhouse for those unable to labor and workhouse for those who could.

Not surprisingly social theory followed economic exigency and public policy swung toward the idea that the best way to break the cycle of poverty was to place the poor under a single roof where they would learn survival and work skills and get themselves off the public dole. Gradually outdoor relief disappeared and those in need of assistance had to accept congregate housing in an almshouse, or nothing at all.

As we shall see, in many places the choice for twenty-first-century homeless families is the same as it was then: almshouses or nothing. And in today's almshouses—called shelters—it is not unusual to find children thrown together with mentally ill adults, just as was happening centuries ago. Night after night, month after month, year after year, hundreds of thousands of our children have no choice but to go to sleep and wake up in congregate shelter amid families not their own, and some of those families include individuals who are truly disturbed or just plain weird.

. . .

Four years after the month I spent poking my nose into other peoples' business along Dickerson Pike, I came back for another look. It was Christmas 2007, just before the deep recession set in, and much of the United States was still prospering. I had thought to put up at the Trinity Inn, but there were no vacancies. In fact the place seemed to have given up most aspirations to normal



motel-dom. Nothing alerted passing motorists to the fact that this was a motel or anything but a run-down, two-story apartment building. The big sign announcing “Trinity Inn” had blown off the roof months ago and had not been replaced, according to the middle-aged white man who came out from the room behind the office when I pushed the buzzer by the plastic shield. His gray-brown hair tied back in a ponytail, he told me his name was Brian Dunning\* and he was managing the place.

The same list of notices was taped up beside the hole in the shield, but one had been added: “As most of our guests are here for extended stays we have decided to do away with housekeeping. Sheets and towels will still be washed. They will be collected as needed.” The convenience store was shut down and empty, and Deepak Gupta had moved to Texas, Dunning told me, although he still owned the property. John Griswold and his grandkids had moved out more than a year ago, he said, and left no forwarding address. But there was a new set of grandparents with grandchildren in a second-floor room around the back, and another mother with kids had left just the week before. “Seems like there’s more families staying in all these motels around here,” Dunning said.

He was right, confirmed Melanie McElhiney, all too right. Federal law requires each public school district to budget a position for someone to deal with homeless students. Catherine Knowles had been that person in Nashville since 1998, but in the winter of 2007 she was away on maternity leave and McElhiney, her longtime assistant, was charged with the county’s homeless students. Christmas was fast approaching and the numbers were discouraging. McElhiney told me that the 2007–8 school year was on track to set a dismal record. By Christmas, with five months still to go, she had 1,038 homeless students identified in the system, 132 of whom were living in motels.

Four years before, during the 2003–4 school year, only 306 homeless students were identified, of whom just 33, including John Griswold’s two grandchildren, were in motels. In the four years since then, she told me, the number of homeless students in Nashville’s schools had skyrocketed, growing sevenfold. Large numbers of families were just one missed paycheck, a couple of debts, and a little bad luck from being homeless. “These are just people who have hit hard times,” said Melanie McElhiney. “Maybe they got sick and had to stay off work a few days, and suddenly they can’t pay their rent and it’s downhill from there. After a while it just comes down to trying to keep a roof over your family’s head.”<sup>30</sup>

Brian Dunning told me that he was happy to be running the Trinity Inn for Deepak Gupta and living in the room behind the office with his wife. “It’s okay for us, you know? You got your cable TV, your lights, your phone, it’s all right there. Adults can make a home out of a motel room; you just have to learn to live in a room, learn to cook with what you got, a microwave, an electric skillet, maybe a Crock-Pot. But it’s gotta be awfully tough on kids. I have seen a lot of them come through here. I don’t think you can make a fit home for children in a motel room. No, I really don’t think you can.”

. . .

Maybe not, but every year since 2007 when he said that, more and more Nashvillians have been forced to try. By 2012 the population of homeless students in city schools had increased by more than seven hundred kids over what it had been in 2007. The number of mothers with children seeking shelter space had outstripped the number of available congregate housing beds. Although these children were enduring precarious day-to-day lives, little notice

was taken of them. The homeless families living in the city's shelters, its motels, or in cars parked on its side streets were generally invisible to the average, housed Nashvillian. Their very existences would have come as a surprise to people living in most parts of the city, and that's the way the homeless families wanted it, because it reduced their risk of losing their children.

Homelessness in general did not escape public notice, however, because Nashville's downtown, alongside the Cumberland River, was chockablock with visibly homeless people. Amid the skyscrapers, banks, main library, and the Legislative Plaza surrounded by state office buildings, the streets were plentifully populated by chronically homeless individuals. They gravitated to downtown: drifters, grifters, the mentally ill, substance abusers, and people just plain down on their luck pushing a grocery cart piled high with their belongings.

For decades city officials generally ignored the growing population of chronically homeless individuals. Downtown Nashville during the second half of the twentieth century was largely abandoned to the poor. Lots of money was made as developers built out the suburbs with single-family homes and shopping malls for a largely white, moneyed, motorized population. Nobody was concerned that homeless individuals were colonizing downtown. Most Nashvillians never went downtown unless they worked for the state or had public business to transact. But during the first decade of the twenty-first century Nashville's urban planners, like their colleagues in many other midsized cities, found it economically desirable to renovate a badly deteriorated downtown, to do what was necessary to make it an attractive place to live, shop, work, and hold conventions.

What they found was that while they had been busy developing the suburbs, the chronically homeless had settled the downtown

streets. Shelters, missions, and services for homeless individuals were in place, and a substantial tent city had grown up alongside the downtown banks of the Cumberland River. Nashville is a city with a major railroad yard and three intersecting interstate highways. It has always had its share of chronically homeless individuals, mostly single men, and a network had developed to care for them.

Over three decades a dedicated ex-priest, Charles Strobel, and an interfaith group of concerned Nashvillians worked jointly with the Union Rescue Mission to create a downtown Campus for Human Development. It served homeless men, incorporating a place to sleep, shower, and be fed as well as providing health, education, and counseling services. In 2010 a new downtown space for the Campus was inaugurated with a 45,000-square-foot building. It had a day room with computers, a lending library, and a wide-screen television. By 2014 the Campus housed some fifty to sixty men every night. Single women or families were not admitted to the shelter at the Campus but were sent to the Family Life Center located in a different neighborhood. It had shelter space for some forty single mothers and their families. Single males with children, like Isaiah Brown, were not admitted at either shelter.

The Campus also administered a program called “Room at the Inn” in which some 180 church congregations around Nashville offered their buildings once or twice a year to house homeless people overnight, transporting them from downtown to the place of worship, where they would be fed a hot meal prepared by volunteers and given a mat or a cot to sleep on in a communal sleeping area. On any given night in winter the program served about two hundred individuals and turned away another hundred for lack of resources. Families with children were not accepted.

In Nashville as in almost every U.S. city many homeless people lived in encampments in the woods or under bridges. Despite the occasional outburst of civic indignation and brief periodic sweeps of these makeshift campgrounds by police, city officials tacitly acknowledged that without the canvas tents, cardboard and plywood shacks, and lean-tos many more homeless would have been living on the downtown streets. The tent cities were permitted to remain because they kept homeless individuals grouped together out of sight, not bothering housed citizens, not discouraging commerce, nor sleeping on the downtown sidewalks making Nashville look more like New Delhi than the “Athens of the South,” as local boosters liked to call their hometown.

Nashville also had a “street newspaper” called *The Contributor* published by a nonprofit corporation. Founded in 2007, it was sold by homeless vendors each day in the streets. In addition to providing some revenue to the vendors, *The Contributor* served as a link between the homeless and the housed, and was the largest such newspaper in the country. Vendors wore badges identifying themselves as newspaper hawkers, which by definition meant they were homeless. They frequently stood by traffic signals and silently offered the paper to people waiting in their cars at a red light. They bought their copies at the beginning of the day for twenty-five cents each and were on the streets in time to work the morning rush-hour traffic, charging a dollar per copy. Vendors averaged earnings of \$30 per day, which helped with but did not meet the estimated daily cost of living in Nashville. An individual needed \$45.41 to eat three meals and sleep in a cheap room.<sup>31</sup> Anyone trying to bring home enough daily wages to support a family was not going to be able to do so by selling *The Contributor*.

Survey after survey revealed that the presence of so many homeless people in the streets and on the sidewalks was one of

the main reasons Nashvillians avoided shopping, or living, downtown. City officials began to focus on the homeless population. In 2004 the first point-in-time count was made, tallying a total of 1,832 homeless individuals in Nashville.

This kind of count is a required component of a municipality's application for any federal funds that come available to local and state programs for homeless relief. The counts are conducted by volunteers who go out during one twenty-four-hour period each January and count the number of homeless people they find. These include people staying in shelters and in the streets. Because these counts do not include families who are doubled or tripled up with relatives or friends, people sleeping in their cars, or people staying in motels, their totals tend to substantially underrepresent the numbers of families who are actually homeless.

Nevertheless the 2004 count of Nashville's homeless population was high enough to cause alarm. In April 2004 the mayor appointed a task force to study homelessness, and in 2005 the Metropolitan Homeless Commission (MHC) was formed to seek solutions to homelessness, and was provided with a million-dollar annual budget. Clifton Harris, who was directing Catholic Charities' efforts to reduce homelessness in Memphis, was hired as director of the MHC at an annual salary of \$100,000. The city and the MHC committed to a ten-year plan to end homelessness in Nashville by 2015.

It did not take long before the commission recognized that the goal was unrealistic, and it changed the plan's official mission from ending homelessness in Nashville to reducing it. By 2012 it was clear that even this was out of reach, although the MHC's yearly budget had grown to \$1.4 million. Homeless numbers had continued to grow and over the course of seven years the MHC took responsibility for housing only a few hundred

people. Most of these were chronically homeless individuals, not families.<sup>32</sup>

Across the United States virtually every city has a ten-year plan to end homelessness. In 2008, for instance, 355 ten-year plans to end homelessness were written for cities and counties across the country, yet the numbers of homeless families were rising in these cities.<sup>33</sup> The people who design and implement these plans, and write the subsequent grant applications, often are paid handsome salaries. Many times their ideas and efforts are unsuited to the realities of the situation. Even when ideas are good and plans well meaning, they are often limited by economic or political constraints. The scant resources at their disposal (not including the take-home pay) are likely to be directed at the population of chronically homeless individuals who by reason of mental illness, substance abuse, incompetence, or preference are living on the street, and who are far more visible and annoying to civic authorities than are families in shelters or motels.

By 2011 the MHC had spent six million dollars without much to show for it. The point-in-time count for January 2012 registered over 2,200 homeless individuals in Nashville.<sup>34</sup> In July 2012 Clifton Harris resigned to “pursue a wonderful opportunity that God has provided for me and my family,” as he wrote in his resignation letter. He opened a “personal luxury vehicle service.”

Will Connelly began work as MHC’s new director in January 2013. He was a thirty-four-year-old lanky, tousle-haired, white Nashvillian who had spent more than a decade as a homeless activist. He was a cofounder of *The Contributor* newspaper and thoroughly familiar with homelessness in Nashville. In a move lauded by homeless advocates, he was hired to replace Clifton Harris, and he promptly reduced his own salary from \$100,000 a year to \$80,000.<sup>35</sup>

Connelly began work in 2013 with two primary goals, he told me. The first was to implement a central intake system whereby a homeless person could make one phone call and be directed to the appropriate services. The second was to have the city commit to the rapid rehousing approach. The initial population to whom he wanted to apply it were chronically homeless individuals who were at risk of dying on Nashville's streets.

The support of policy makers for rapid rehousing is rooted both in its effectiveness and in its savings. This was a dramatic change from past decades when the priority of many social service agencies was to get homeless people to a stage of "housing readiness." This meant that before they moved into housing they would be prepared with tools like money management classes, job training, getting sober, and so on. The rapid rehousing model called for getting people under a stable roof as quickly as possible, then addressing their other problems, ideally with a network of available social services.

"With that old housing readiness model, people will continue to die on the streets because they won't have access to housing and won't be able to get through those hoops," Connelly said. "Housing first basically says that people are ready now, that everyone is ready for housing. We're going to offer housing as immediately as possible, and then once you have that stability, support services will follow."

The downside to rapid rehousing is that it requires an inventory of low-rent or wholly subsidized housing and this was often in short supply, particularly in a city like Nashville with a growing young and affluent population and a small stock of available affordable rental properties. The situation was the same in every prosperous city: between 2007 and 2011 the number of low-income renters rose by 2.5 million across the country while the availability



of low-income rentals remained flat.<sup>36</sup> In Nashville many landlords had their choice of tenants and they were reluctant to rent to homeless families, who perhaps had bad credit ratings or an earlier eviction on their records. Even though the monthly rent might be guaranteed by the MHC, many landlords preferred different sorts of renters and in the tight Nashville market they had no trouble finding them.

The other problem with rapid rehousing, said those working with homeless families, was that a disproportionate amount of resources allotted to it went to chronically homeless individuals instead of families. Often when politicians referred to the homeless they failed to make the critical distinction between the chronically homeless and families that were without shelter. The former were a disparate group of individuals, made up of the mentally ill who had no place to go, the old, the infirm, the substance abusers, and those who in another era were known as tramps, people who simply preferred to have no fixed address. While substance abuse and mental illness might also be present in many homeless families, a parent who was taking responsibility for a child had different needs and issues from those of someone living unhoused and alone.

Will Connelly acknowledged that initially families would be underserved by the commission's programs, but he added that his charge from the city was to deal with chronically homeless individuals. "We are going to miss a lot of families. We're focusing on individuals on the street who are at risk of dying. But I guess this will be kind of a first step and a demonstration that we can identify, and target, resources to this particular group, line up housing, and move chronically homeless people in quickly; and then along the way we'll work on implementing a central intake process for families, so maybe some of these innovations will allow us to broaden this, and include families."

Joyce Lavery was the director of a small nonprofit, ten-family shelter called Safe Haven. She moved to Nashville from Southern California's Orange County in 2009 to take the job, and she had become one of Nashville's most vocal and respected advocates for homeless families. She liked Connelly's idea of a central intake system, a "best practice" that she had seen working well in other cities. What she did not like so much was the MHC's target population. "There's new leadership at the Homeless Commission, and Will Connelly has brought more optimism," she told me in April 2013. "But their focus remains chronically homeless individuals, who unlike families are visible. The devastation of children who are small and homeless can be pretty great, but these kids are easy not to see."<sup>37</sup>

Safe Haven was the only shelter in Nashville that allowed a two-parent family to stay together or a single father to stay with his children. This had enabled Isaiah Brown to keep Joseph with him while he stayed at Safe Haven and the staff helped him find a place to live. "We adore [Isaiah]," said Lavery. "He's a great dad. He's had a bumpy road. He's a prime example of what happens with single fathers. If they lose their housing, the state basically takes their child away. They have to go to foster care. He was on that edge where if he didn't find us, he probably would have lost his child."

Safe Haven had shelter space for only ten families. The average length of a family's stay in 2012 was sixty-eight days. In the shelter each resident family had its own room and shared a bathroom, and there was a common kitchen and dining area. The complex had a computer room and a play space and offered a wide range of social services including help for adults with finances, job searches, day care, and emotional issues. Even with all that, a Safe Haven family trying to get back on its feet faced a

number of obstacles besides not having a stable home. Often the breadwinners in these families worked at minimum-wage jobs.

“Many of these low-wage jobs are very rigid,” Lavery said. “We’ve had a lot of clients not be able to keep a job because they had to take a bus to get to work, first to take their kids to day care, then to work. With a lower-income job you have to be there when you have to be there. You don’t get paid sick leave; you don’t get time off. And, it’s even harder to be looking for a job. You can’t even get a child care voucher if you don’t already have a job.”

The ability to work closely with each resident allowed Safe Haven to concentrate on moving people as quickly as possible into housing. The shelter was not open to everyone. Applicants to Safe Haven underwent a drug screening. If parents had felonies on their records the shelter looked at them on a case-by-case basis. If the felony was a sex crime or arson, the person was automatically denied admission (“We serve children and families,” Lavery said by way of explanation).

“We’re seeing family homelessness growing [in Nashville], but the money is going toward permanent supportive housing for chronically homeless people. Chronic homelessness is stabilizing and even going down a bit, because there’s so much attention to it, while family homelessness is set to skyrocket. That should just be unacceptable. We shouldn’t have children who live in cars, or doubled up in unsafe circumstances.”

For many Nashville families by 2013 the recession was over and life was back on an even economic keel; but for those who fell into deep poverty during the economic downturn, things had only gotten worse. In 2009 about 1,600 homeless students were enrolled in Nashville’s public schools. Only three years later, in 2012, that had risen to more than 2,500, according to Catherine Knowles at the board of education.

Some things hadn't changed: Knowles and Melanie McElhiney still made up the entire department administering Nashville's Homeless Education Program. When I visited in 2013, the two of them were working out of a rectangular portable building, which sat on the edge of a parking lot behind the solid brick complex that was the Metropolitan Nashville Board of Education's central office. Space in the portable building not occupied by their desks and file cabinets was taken up by stacks of clothes and blankets destined for homeless students and their families.

Catherine Knowles told me that she did not expect an increased focus on rapid rehousing to begin reducing the number of homeless children in Nashville's schools any time soon. "We have to create more units of affordable family housing. Here in Davidson County, the waiting list for public housing is so long that they've stopped taking applications."<sup>38</sup>

The number of homeless families had grown steadily, but the number of shelter beds had stayed the same, Knowles said, resulting in twice as many people housed in motels as living in shelters. Some 70 percent of the homeless students she identified in 2012 were living doubled up with other families; 20 percent were in motels; and 10 percent in shelters. "If a family can avoid going into a shelter, they do," she concluded.

Oftentimes packing too many people into too small a space may prove a way station on a family's road to being on the street. One out of every twelve families that was doubled up in someone else's home in the United States would eventually find itself on the street, as opposed to one in every two hundred families in the general population.<sup>39</sup>

In Nashville the alternatives were scant for homeless families headed by a single mother who needed immediate shelter. "When

families call in for assistance because they have just been evicted or have been burned out of a home, there is usually some sense of hope in their voice for the first few minutes of their call,” Knowles told an interviewer in the fall of 2014. “I listen to their stories, offer information about the support and resources that are available, but most of the time families are stunned that there is no safety net, no immediate place for them to go other than the limited family shelters that we have. My heart breaks a bit each time I hear the hope they had fade away to be replaced with shock, anger, or utter devastation. Homelessness is tragic, but it is a very real event for many in our community.”<sup>40</sup>

If Safe Haven was full, and it usually was, the desperate mother on the phone was likely to wind up at the Family Life Center, which was the Union Rescue Mission’s family facility. At the Family Life Center mothers and small children slept in dormitories with other families and shared a bathroom. Behind the center was a diminutive park with brightly colored playground equipment. The park had three covered areas with benches and a couple of metal picnic tables bolted to a cement slab. On nice days the women sat outside sharing cigarettes and chatting while toddlers played.

The center usually had about forty families in residence, but there was always room for one more, according to Carolyn Grossley, the facility’s director. “We never turn anyone away. We take everyone. We’ll even put them in the day room for a night or two while we try to figure out how to switch things around, but we don’t turn anybody away. For a family, a shelter is absolutely the place of last resort. They’ve tried to stay with relatives; they’ve even tried to stay in bad relationships, in motels, in their cars; they’ve tried it all. They’re really scared until they get here and see that we really care about them.”<sup>41</sup>

Grossley, a navy veteran, was a solidly built African American woman who had worked in the homeless services sector since 1986, both with families and with chronically unsheltered individuals. She had been the director of the center since the fall of 2012. “We have lockers here for all of our guests. If you come here there’s no charge; you can shower, sleep, and eat three meals a day, and the only requirements are that you don’t disrespect or bully people, and that you go to chapel for an hour in the evening. We’re about Christ, so we’re going to have that somewhere in our mix. It’s the same thing at the men’s mission.”

She was convinced that housing was the key to getting the sheltered families back on track. “Housing is where we should dedicate our dollars. We need to create affordable housing options. We don’t even have to go out and build. I think it would be cheaper if we subsidized housing for people. If we were able to offer housing, or affordable housing for a year or six months, we could wipe family homelessness out pretty quickly.

“Most of these women don’t want to be homeless with their children. I have mothers here who are holding down jobs. If I was setting policy, I’d go to landlords and say we’d subsidize the rent for whatever time a family needed, and then that family would be able to get training, look for jobs, and do a whole lot of things while they still have safe housing.

“The real issue is housing. Most of the women here want to work, and many of them do. Some even have two jobs. But if you make a thousand dollars a month, you should only be paying a third of that on rent. Go see what kind of place you can rent for you and your family for \$350 a month in Nashville. So a mother might go get a place for \$550, then she’s got [to pay] lights and all those other things. There’s no way she’s going to make it. It

might not be next month, or the month after, but she's going to go under. So, housing is really the issue."

In her first six months on the job at the women's campus Grossley said she had instituted a case management program where mothers were seen within a day of their arrivals and a personal plan was drawn up for what they were going to accomplish during their stay in the shelter. With this in place she estimated that four months was about the maximum stay of a family at the Family Life Center.

Sandra Blake\* was hopeful that her family's stay would be a lot shorter than that. She was not happy about having to move herself and her three daughters, ages fourteen, ten, and one, into the shelter. Blake, a short, attractive, thirty-four-year-old African American, had a round face and she looked younger than her age. "I intentionally don't want all I've been through to show on my face," she told me. "I try not to hold stuff in, not to stay angry, not to be miserable and unhappy. I don't want to look like I've been through a lot."

She was originally from Cleveland, Ohio, and moved to Tennessee to be close to her partner, who was in the 101st Airborne Division at Clarksville, forty miles north of Nashville. When he was shipped to Afghanistan, she could not pay the rent and headed to Nashville to look for work. In short order she and the girls were staying in a motel.

"I didn't like that at all," Blake said. "Not only are you paying for the motel, but you have to pay for all your food; you have nowhere to stock up on food; we had the cost of having to always eat out every day, and the baby had to have milk every day."<sup>42</sup>

She had been at the shelter for three weeks and had already found a job at a wholesale pharmaceutical warehouse. Her two

oldest kids were in school and the baby was in day care. Because the shelter did not let children on the property without a parent, her kids would go to the local branch of the public library after school and wait for their mother to pick them up. They were sleeping in a dormitory with other families, and she said her whole family had been sick with one thing and another since they arrived at the shelter.

Sandra Blake had been living on her own, independently, since she was eighteen. Although she was grateful for a clean place to stay, she didn't like having to live by someone else's rules. She was eager to get herself and her kids out of the Family Life Center and into housing. "They start serving supper at five, and you have to have your plate by 5:45, or you don't eat. I get back from work at five-thirty, so I have to scramble to get us all fed. At six-thirty they have roll call and announcements in the chapel, and at seven you have an hour of religion. So I have between five-thirty and six-thirty to eat and shower and get to chapel. It's really rush, rush, rush."

She was chafing under the rules, but a strict code of behavior has always been the norm in congregate housing for the poor. The 1735 regulations for Boston's almshouse called for punishment for a long list of misbehaviors including causing a clamor; using abusive language; drinking liquor; behaving lasciviously, immorally, irregularly; or being absent from religious services. Punishment depended on the severity of a person's misbehavior and whether it was the first time:

They shall be punished either by denying them a meal, or a whole day's allowance, or by gaging [*sic*], or by causing them to wear a collar round about their necks . . . or by obliging them to stand on a stool in a public place with a paper stuck on their breast denoting their crime in capitals, for the space of one hour or by ordering



them into the dungeon to be kept with bread and water, not exceeding forty-eight hours, or by an addition of labor to their daily task according to the nature and circumstance of their crime.<sup>43</sup>

For Sandra Blake in 2013 it was not just the regulations and strict timetable at the Family Life Center that added stress to her family's days and nights. It was also the lack of privacy and family intimacy. The same lack that no doubt also oppressed families in eighteenth-century almshouses. By taking away the dignity of privacy, indoor relief acted, and still acts, as a punitive measure. In exchange for daily survival a family has to give up control of its life.

Individual rooms at the Family Life Center were reserved for mothers with children over twelve. "We're in a dormitory with seven other families," Blake told me. "There's at least two kids in each family. There's bunk beds and cribs. There must be twenty-five or thirty of us. Most of the time we sleep all right, but sometimes it's hard to sleep. I didn't sleep well last night. Every now and then you'll have a baby crying whose mom won't get up and leave the room; she'll just lie there like, 'I'm not getting up, I don't feel like it,' and her and the kid will stay in the room. That's what happened last night, and I didn't get much sleep, but usually we all sleep fairly well."

• • •

In that, she was lucky. I did not get one good night's sleep at the Trinity Inn over the weeks I stayed there. Maybe John Griswold and his family up there on the second floor got used to it, but I never did and I suspect that lots of folks have trouble getting a real rest in those rooms. Mostly what living at the Trinity and paying \$150 a week for the privilege did for me was to afford a bad night's sleep.

Whoever rented the adjoining room, behind the headboard of my bed, never got in until three or four in the morning, by which time I would have finally fallen asleep until wakened by their noise, the nightly roistering, hollering, and laughing, with the radio turned up loud to a hip-hop station. After a half hour the radio was switched off and the moaning began. It was always hers, murmuring, exclaiming, urging on a man. The curtains next door were pulled during the day and I never saw the occupant, but I heard the same recital almost every night. The exertions did, always, finally come to an end, and by 5 A.M. I could get back to sleep for another three hours until the alarm clock sounded on the little night table by the bed and I got up, brushed my teeth, showered, shaved, dressed, and tucked the tools of my trade into various pockets.