

ADMINISTRATIVE CLOSINGS OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE CASES: THE RISE OF HUNGER AND HOMELESSNESS IN NEW YORK CITY†

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ABSTRACT

The administration of public assistance programs determines the extent to which the social welfare system achieves its goal of providing a minimum income to those in need. As the research by the East Harlem Interfaith Welfare Committee¹ (EHIWC) demonstrates, hunger, homelessness, and the other ills associated with poverty become inevitable when administrative complexities prevent the delivery of public benefits.

Each year, thousands of public assistance cases in New York City are closed for administrative reasons — reasons unrelated to changes in a family's income. When a case is closed for an administrative reason, the reason always relates to a recipient's failure to comply with certain administrative requirements for continued eligibility, such as the failure to complete a questionnaire or to appear for a face-to-face interview. According to many recipients surveyed by EHIWC,² their failure to comply with administrative requirements was due to problems of communication, unworkable administrative procedures, and computer error.³ Those same recipients often then reapply to the

† The following is an abstract of a larger work in progress to be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Review of Law & Social Change*.

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1. The East Harlem Interfaith Welfare Committee (EHIWC) was founded in 1974 to work for systemic change in legislation related to, and in the administration of, public assistance programs. EHIWC is a coalition of voluntary religious agencies which provide non-perishable food supplies to families with food emergencies and advocate on their behalf.

2. EHIWC has conducted research into the causes of hunger and homelessness since 1979. Its primary research includes completing two-page surveys with families who seek emergency food supplies from EHIWC's volunteer agencies. The families are informed that the survey is being administered to determine why people do not have enough money to buy their own food. The families are also informed that their participation is anonymous and entirely voluntary: their decision not to complete the questionnaire would have no bearing on their ability to obtain future emergency food services from EHIWC's volunteer agencies. The results of these surveys are reported each year in EHIWC's annual report. *See infra* note 7.

In addition to conducting surveys, EHIWC also compiles data published by the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA). That data is set forth in Tables 1 and 2, partially depicted in Figure 1, and briefly discussed in the text of this abstract.

3. Because a number of recipients lack permanent addresses, many never received questionnaires or notification of an appointment time for their face-to-face interviews. Yet, other recipients reported that their cases were closed because of both human and computer error:

system and regain their benefits. "Churning," the practice of administrative closing and subsequent reopening of public assistance cases, leaves many recipients without income for food and shelter for weeks, sometimes months, at a time.

Data published by the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) document the rise in the number of administrative closings over the ten-year period from 1975 to 1984 and the corresponding increase in the number of case reopenings.⁴ As the data in Table 1 illustrate, administrative closings more than doubled from 1975 to 1984,⁵ as did case reopenings. Figure 1 displays the correlation between administrative closings and case reopenings.⁶ As the data also demonstrate, of all cases closed from 1975 to 1984, most — seventy-six percent — were closed for administrative reasons. Case reopenings similarly comprised the bulk of all case openings, representing sixty-two percent of all case openings.

Based on its research, EHIWC develops recommendations for reform of the administration of public assistance. Each year, EHIWC publishes its research in an annual report⁷ and meets regularly with representatives of HRA

their caseworkers had informed them that their cases were open while the computers had instead reported that their cases were closed. Other recipients reported that their cases were closed because of their own failure to fulfill administrative requirements.

4. See OFFICE OF POLICY AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH, NEW YORK CITY HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATION THIRTY-DAY ADMINISTRATIVE CLOSINGS: HOW OFTEN AND TO WHOM? 16, table 1 (1987) [hereinafter ADMINISTRATIVE CLOSINGS]; OFFICE OF POLICY AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH, NEW YORK CITY HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATION, DEPENDENCY: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DATA FOR NEW YORK CITY 40, table 12 (1987) [hereinafter DEPENDENCY]. The administrative closing data contained in this abstract were computed by multiplying by twelve the "average monthly" administrative data reported in *Administrative Closings* to conform the administrative data to the year end data reported in *Dependency*. An official of the Human Resources Administration has verified the soundness of such an approach.

In analyzing this data, it is important to recognize that the data presented represent the number of *instances* of case closings and case openings, not necessarily the number of *cases* closed or reopened. For example, the fact that there were 181,320 administrative closings in 1984 does not necessarily mean that 181,320 individual *cases* closed for administrative reasons. Some recipients may have their cases closed *more than once* per year. Thus, for example, if the average recipient had her case closed twice per year for administrative reasons, that would mean that on average, 90,660 cases were closed twice in 1984. There is, however, no such average data available. One should therefore recognize the data for what they are: representations of the number of *instances* of closings and openings of public assistance cases.

5. HRA is now in the process of updating its administrative closing data for the period after 1984 and should provide the author with the additional data by the time her full article is published.

6. The fact that administrative closings increased by 249.5% over the ten-year period reported while case reopenings increased by 250.7% suggests the existence of churning on a large scale. While there is no certain way of knowing (due to the unavailability of data) whether the *same* cases which are closed for administrative reasons are subsequently reopened, EHIWC's primary research, see *supra* note 2, confirms the existence of churning on a case-by-case level.

7. EHIWC has produced annual reports documenting the problems of hunger and homelessness in East Harlem since 1979. See, e.g., A. DEHAVENON, THE TYRANNY OF INDIFFERENCE AND THE RE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF HUNGER, HOMELESSNESS AND POOR HEALTH: A STUDY OF THE CAUSES AND CONDITIONS OF THE FOOD EMERGENCIES IN 1,905 HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN IN MANHATTAN, BROOKLYN AND THE BRONX IN 1987

to discuss EHIWC's findings and recommendations. Over the past year, HRA has adopted and begun implementation of several of EHIWC's recommendations.⁸

The full article, to appear in a later issue of the *Review of Law & Social Change*, will contain a complete discussion of EHIWC's research, its recommendations for reform which have been adopted by HRA, and its additional recommendations for reform. The full article will also discuss strategies for reform, including the role of the media in EHIWC's advocacy efforts.

(1988); A. DEHAVENON, THE TYRANNY OF INDIFFERENCE AND THE RE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF HUNGER, HOMELESSNESS AND POOR HEALTH: A STUDY OF THE CAUSES AND CONDITIONS OF THE FOOD EMERGENCIES IN 1,708 HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN IN MANHATTAN, BROOKLYN AND THE BRONX IN 1986 (1987); A. DEHAVENON, THE TYRANNY OF INDIFFERENCE AND THE RE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF HUNGER, HOMELESSNESS AND POOR HEALTH: A STUDY OF THE CAUSES AND CONDITIONS OF THE FOOD EMERGENCIES IN 1,576 HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN IN MANHATTAN, BROOKLYN AND THE BRONX IN 1985 (1986). The reports are available upon request from the East Harlem Interfaith Welfare Committee, 2050 Second Avenue, New York, New York 10029, (212) 427-1500.

8. As of this writing, HRA has implemented several of EHIWC's suggestions and attributes a decrease of three thousand administrative closings per month to the reforms. This change represents a twenty-one percent decrease in the number of administrative case closings: from 110,043 for the six-month period of May 1, 1988, to October 31, 1988, to 86,770 for the six-month period from November 1, 1988, to April 30, 1989. EHIWC and other advocates commend HRA's Commissioner William K. Grinker and his staff for having initiated these reforms. In doing so, they have substantially reduced the risk of food emergencies and the other forms of poverty for many households.

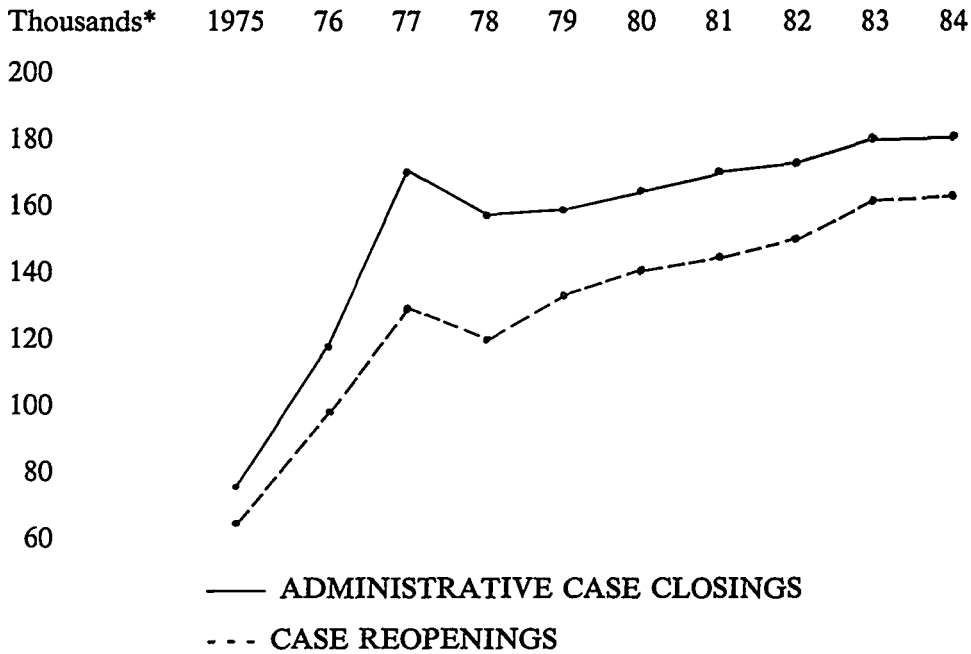
TABLE 1 *Administrative Case Closings, As A Percent of All Case Closings*

Year	Year End Caseload	Total Closings	Average Annual Admin. Cl.	As a Percent of All Closings
1975	348,991	116,071	72,660	62.6%
1976	359,636	162,086	117,828	72.7%
1977	347,471	211,091	169,716	80.4%
1978	337,323	196,841	157,212	79.9%
1979	328,250	211,869	158,748	74.9%
1980	333,493	212,439	166,008	78.1%
1981	335,740	219,807	171,612	78.1%
1982	351,311	223,316	172,824	77.4%
1983	372,067	235,210	180,996	77.0%
1984	<u>387,767</u>	<u>247,466</u>	<u>181,320</u>	<u>73.3%</u>
Total/Average	3,502,049	2,036,196	1,548,924	76.1%
Percent Change Over 10 Years	111.1%	213.2%	249.5%	117.0%

TABLE 2 *Case Reopenings, As A Percent of all Case Openings*

Year	Total Openings	New Openings	Case Reopenings	As a Percent of All Openings
1975	148,107	83,307	64,800	43.8%
1976	172,731	81,794	90,937	52.6%
1977	198,926	69,686	129,240	65.0%
1978	186,693	64,887	121,806	65.2%
1979	202,796	70,225	132,571	65.4%
1980	217,682	75,595	142,087	65.3%
1981	222,054	77,703	144,351	65.0%
1982	238,887	89,458	149,429	62.6%
1983	255,966	94,315	161,651	63.2%
1984	<u>263,166</u>	<u>100,712</u>	<u>162,454</u>	<u>61.7%</u>
Total/ Average	2,107,008	807,682	1,299,326	61.7%
Percent Change Over 10 Years	177.1%	120.9%	250.7%	141.1%

FIGURE 1
PUBLIC ASSISTANCE
ADMINISTRATIVE CASE CLOSINGS AND CASE REOPENINGS



*CASE STATISTICS ARE ROUNDED TO THE NEARER THOUSAND