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Pauper Fiction in Economic Science: “Paupers in Almshouses” and the Odd Fit of *Oliver Twist*

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Abstract The almshouse dominated the thinking about poverty and the poor during America’s period of industrialization and its greatest economic downturns. Yet economists had surprisingly little to say about the facts of almshouse demography, and what they have written has been a rather bad fiction when seen in contrast with American novels. The main object of the paper is to delineate typical characters and characteristics of almshouses in America, and to examine the plausibility of various literary characterizations in light of the facts. The data certainly suggest new stories about paupers in American history: economists, and even the new social historians, have gotten it wrong. Between the Civil War and the Great Depression, the typical pauper living in an almshouse was not Oliver Twist (as many believe). He was not the Shiftless Man of the classical imagination (as Malthusians and Benthamites believe). The typical pauper of an American almshouse was plural. Instructive examples in American literature include Lennie, of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*; Denver, of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*; Mrs. Thomson, of Edward Eggleston’s *The Hoosier School-Master*; and Forrest Gump, of Winston Groom’s *Forrest Gump*.

Keywords: welfare, poverty, history, rhetoric, fiction, classical economists

Mainstream economists are not very critical of their fictional constructions of human agents. Critical questions concerning the preference-structure and the basic motivating forces of “the representative agent” are considered to be either settled or insipid. Social economists do not of course believe that the model of human agency is so settled; in fact, they do not believe that one single model can explain or describe the rich diversity of human life. The reasons for professional dissent may lie in part in a difference identified by James Henderson. In a paper in this *Review* concerning the usefulness of Charles Dickens for the practice of

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economic science, Henderson argues plausibly that mainstream economists are more concerned with “relationships among mathematical symbols” while social economists are more concerned with “relationships among people” (James Henderson 2000: 150). But the difference must lie deeper than that. After all, social economics, institutional economics, and even feminist economics have roots that pre-date and defy the mathematical hegemony of the mainstream.

The difference between a Dickens and a Debreu must also lie in their attitude toward monism and evidence in models of human agency. A telling example of monism without the math is the Shiftless Man of the classical imagination. The Shiftless Man was constructed by Malthus and other classical economists (specifically Nassau Senior and Edwin Chadwick) to represent the chief pauper and failure of indoor relief under the Old Poor Laws—the able-bodied man, sapped of his energies (S. G. and E. O. A. Checkland (eds) 1834 [1976]: 127, 425).

“Indoor relief” is aid to the poor that is literally given *indoors*. It was a catch-all term, and by the late nineteenth century included the workhouse as well as the home for the feeble-minded. As Senior pointed out in 1834, the terms almshouse, poorhouse, and workhouse were used synonymously (in Checkland and Checkland (eds): 124). The loose usage of the lexicon was no different in the United States, and brought little harm to either place, excepting in the occasional municipality that built a site for hard labor in lieu of or in addition to a county jail, and in the handful of experiments with workhouses designed solely for the able-bodied and to the letter of Chadwick’s ideal of “the workhouse test” and the principle of “less eligibility” (p. 429; Finer: 73–77; Rose 1971: 160–161; in Indianapolis: Weeks 1976: 177–181).

In his *Essay on Population*, Malthus offered two pages of narrative suggesting that the workhouse “forces more [would-be industrious and able-bodied poor] to become dependent” and “careless” (Malthus [1798], in E. A. Wrigley and David Souden (eds): 33, 35). “The poor laws are strongly calculated to eradicate [the] spirit [of independence],” Malthus said, and “[t]hey have succeeded in part” (p. 33). It may be said that in 1798, Malthus drew attention to the Shiftless Man primarily to condemn a system promoting early marriage among the poor. But in the hands of Senior and of Chadwick (who was a disciple and secretary of Bentham), the Shiftless Man was given additional tasks. Senior and Chadwick were the principal authors of *The Poor Law Report of 1834*—the so-called New Poor Law of Britain (Checkland and Checkland (eds) 1834 [1976]; Finer 1952 [1980]: Ch. 3); Senior named the “evils” (Senior 1834, in Finer: 71) of the Old Poor Laws in the first half the Report and Chadwick proposed “remedies” (p. 71) in the second half. In a section called “In-door Relief,” Senior writes:

In some very few instances, among which Southwell, in Nottinghamshire, is pre-eminent, the workhouse appears to be a place in which the aged and impotent are maintained in comfort, and the able-bodied supported, but under such restrictions as to induce them to prefer to it a life of independent labour. *But in by far the greater number of cases, it is a large almshouse, in which the young are trained in idleness, ignorance, and vice; the able-bodied maintained in sluggish sensual indolence.*

(Senior 1834, in Checkland and Checkland (eds): 127; emphasis added)

Three hundred pages later, Chadwick would echo Senior: “the principal evil of the [workhouse or almshouse] system,” said Chadwick, is “the increase in the number of able-bodied paupers” (p. 425). The relationship between shiftlessness and the almshouse was thus lodged in the rhetoric of economics. The almshouse should be reformed, Senior and Chadwick argued, because “in by far the greater number of cases” it trained the young in “idleness” and “vice,” and maintained a large number of “able-bodied” adults “in sluggish sensual indolence.”

The Shiftless Man of the classical imagination, their representative pauper in an almshouse, was seen by Dickens to be such an objectionable and false fiction that he set out to replace him with his own fictional pauper, Oliver Twist (Dickens 1838 [1980]; Fielding 1987: 53–54). Using a rich set of data from the US Bureau of the Census, this paper examines the hypothesis that an economic history of the almshouse will do well to scrap both Oliver Twist and The Shiftless Man.

The rise and fall of the almshouse in the United States, or rather of its modal activity, spanned the hundred-some years between the 1820s and the Great Depression. The almshouse dominated the thinking about poverty and the poor during America’s period of industrialization and its greatest economic downturns (Trattner 1974 [1994]; Katz 1983, 1986; Hannon 1985; Ziliak and Hannon, in Carter *et al.* (eds) 2003). It is something of an embarrassment, then, that the almshouse in America is an unknown institution to the economic imagination. The work of Joan Underhill Hannon stands as a major exception. Still, the economic histories of the almshouse, Hannon’s included, are limited to nineteenth-century New York (Hannon 1984, 1985) and to selected states of the antebellum period (Kiesling and Margo 1997).

Imagine a pauper living in an almshouse in America between the Civil War and the Great Depression.

Who are you imagining? More than a few economists will imagine the character described by the classicals, who was often seen wandering in economic prose—yet seldom heard working in charitable institutions. This may be explained in part by the fact that The Poor Law Report of 1834 has long been

chalked-up as a victory for Benthamite utilitarianism in the public domain (Gordon 1991: 189–190). And even Schumpeter, while turning a scornful eye toward “Benthamite sociology,” let in the back door the Shiftless Man as representative pauper of the twentieth century (Schumpeter 1954: 271, 401–402). Prior to the birth of cliometrics in the late 1950s, there was certainly no scarcity in the blur of economic fact with idea, and British ideas made especially good substitutes for American facts. Indeed, the modal reader probably imagines the representative pauper to be Dickens’ angelic waif and moral compass, the orphan boy Oliver Twist.

And why not? In some respects, the survey hardly sparks an interest. Forget the fact that Oliver was born in a Chadwickian workhouse, not in the miscellaneous almshouse, and in Britain, not in America. If a test of civilization is the degree of care that a society shows toward its children, then the homeless boy is an almshouse dweller the reader should be thinking of, a helpless orphan the civilized world shall not ever forget.

Only the iron-willed Benthamite could not feel chilled by *Oliver Twist* (1838 [1980]) and the persistent power that Oliver’s story wields in almshouse mythology. The story of *Oliver Twist* is catholic (small-c). His story provokes ecumenical acts of charity. It seeks out the common ground. It reaches the darkest alleys of the collective conscience. It saves its warmest tear for the fragile and friendless even though “nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver’s breast” (p. 29). In the 1830s a man confessed his vote on the Poor Laws of England by the way he spoke about *Oliver Twist*. But nowadays, like the Nativity of Jesus, Oliver’s story gets re-told for ritualistic purposes. And this ritual—by contrast with the professors’ repetition of Chadwick’s “workhouse test” and the principle of “less eligibility”—makes little claim to partisan politics or to fact-finding science.

This paper is an exploration of abandoned census data on “paupers in almshouses,” 1850–1923. The main object of the paper is to delineate typical characters and characteristics of almshouses in America, and to examine the plausibility of various literary characterizations in light of the facts. During America’s industrial period, the almshouse—or what was commonly called “the poorhouse”—stood in the foreground of any city’s plan for organizing charity and securing justice. The fear of going to the poorhouse was infectious; some believed that the very existence of the poorhouse was crippling to American happiness. If scholars are to understand the economic and social history of paupers in almshouses they may especially care to know how well *Oliver Twist* fits the facts.

THE ODD FIT OF OLIVER TWIST

Not very well. *Oliver Twist* does not fit the empirical face of a pauper in an almshouse. Orphaned children were rarely born or raised in almshouses during America's period of industrialization because children of any kind were rarely born or raised in almshouses. (Timothy Hacci 1997: Ch. 1, argues that throughout the period, most orphaned or half-orphaned children were in fact helped in orphan asylums, if at all.) In 1880 the percentage of almshouse residents less than 9 years of age was 10 percent. By 1904, the share had fallen to 2.5 percent, and by 1923 it had dropped to less than 2 percent (US Bureau of the Census, *Paupers in Almshouses* 1926: 10). In other words, only 0.1 percent of all paupers in almshouses were, like Oliver, children with neither parent living (*Paupers in Almshouses* 1915: 36–37). If one wants to put an empirical face on paupers in almshouses, Civil War to the Great Depression, one would not choose the personal and environmental attributes of *Oliver Twist*.

In like fashion it would be incorrect to associate America's "paupers in almshouses" with the protagonist described in the nineteenth century by Malthus and the opponents of the Old Poor Laws. A better fit with the facts is John Steinbeck's Grampa Joad, supposing the old, senile, native-born, white, illiterate, and somewhat maimed farm laborer of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939 [1992]) had been successful in his attempt to buck the family's migration to California. It is true, as Uncle John remarked at Grampa's grave site, that "[the Joads] never did have no paupers" (p. 190). Still, from the Civil War to the Great Depression, from Blackwell's Island to Salinas, Grampa Joad is a close fit to the profile of 30–50 percent of the nation's almshouse paupers.

Likewise, it would be more useful for social science to imagine Forrest Gump a representative pauper of the almshouse. Between 1850 and 1923, almost half the nation's paupers in almshouses were "feeble-minded," "crippled," "maimed," or "insane" (Figure 1). By 1910 men outnumbered women in almshouses more than 2:1, and similarly among those with "defects" (Figure 2). More than half the men throughout the period had been common laborers prior to admission. Eighty-five percent of the men were alone. And most of them never married (*Paupers in Almshouses* 1926: 37). Owning a shrimp boat (as Forrest does in the motion-picture) was obviously a fantasy for someone with Forrest Gump's life-chances. In Winston Groom's novel, Forrest was feeble-minded. He had no wife. His father, a longshoreman, was killed on the job; and his "mama," who took in boarders to pay the bills, eventually went to the "po house" herself (Groom 1986 [1994]: 119, 125). Feeble-mindedness, insecure labor, and lack of family would lead a Forrest Gump to the poorhouse.

REVIEW OF SOCIAL ECONOMY

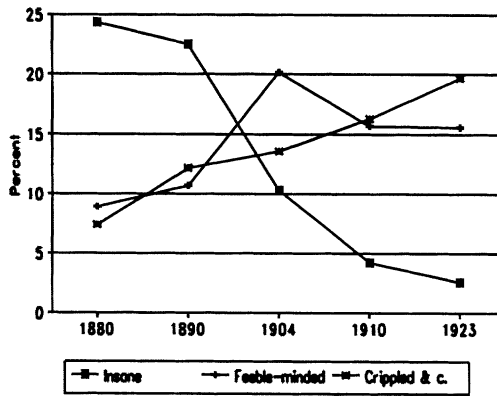


Figure 1: Paupers in almshouses by “defect”

If you asked Forrest who he imagined to be in the poorhouse along side his mother he would probably name Steinbeck’s Lennie. “The [idiot] I like best is ole Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*” (Groom: 2), Forrest says to the reader, in a critic’s mood. Forrest liked Lennie best because the “writer feller got it straight” (p. 2). As Forrest perceives, Steinbeck’s Lennie is a realistic example of one kind of man in the almshouse (Shillinglaw in Shillinglaw (ed.) Steinbeck 1937 [1994]: xii; Steinbeck: 15). Lennie’s story is largely that of a real man who worked next to Steinbeck on a ranch. In the novel Lennie is feeble-minded and homeless. He has one friend and he has no family. With his friend he travels in California from ranch to ranch looking for wages during the Depression. When

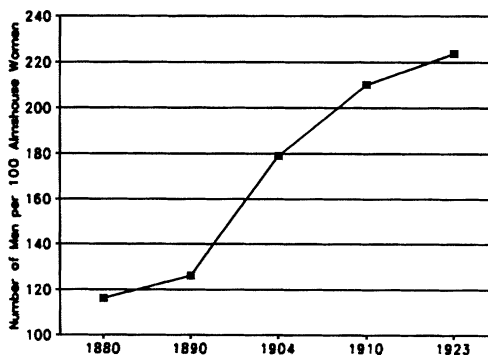


Figure 2: Sex ratios in almshouses, 1880–1923

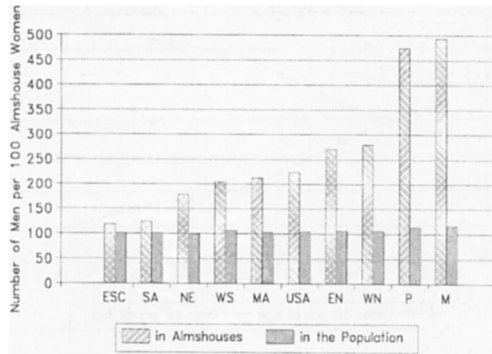


Figure 3: Sex ratios by Census region

the friend of the real Lennie got fired from the ranch Lennie killed the foreman with a pitchfork. “[S]tuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you how many times” (Steinbeck in Shillinglaw: xiii). Some almshouses were the keepers of the criminal insane, particularly when the county provided no insane asylum. The almshouses of Iowa City, Iowa and Bowling Green, Ohio are examples. In the 1930s the real Lennie wound up in a California insane asylum (p. xiii). But as many as 20 percent of the nation’s almshouse inmates were, like Lennie, registered with “feeble-mindedness” as their primary “defect.” In California’s almshouses men outnumbered women 5:1, and the higher share had, like Lennie, worked as common laborers (Figure 3). As the nation’s almshouses became more male and feeble-minded, the young and the old flip-flopped. In 1880 about half the inmates were over 50-years of age. By 1923 80 percent of all inmates enumerated were over 50-years of age (Figure 4). Like Grampa Joad’s, the story of Forrest Gump and Lennie became commonplace.

These are a few of the findings from a rich set of data, all but forgotten, on “Paupers in Almshouses.” The data are the yield of the “special reports” of the United States Bureau of the Census, the enumerations of the almshouses of every state in 1880, 1890, 1904, 1910, and 1923. The almshouse is here defined “as an institution supported or controlled by town, municipal, county, or State authorities and used for the shelter of persons who are without means of self-support and who have no relatives able and willing or legally bound to aid them” (Paupers in Almshouses 1926: 2). At least two leading historians have generalized the nation’s almshouses through the examples of one or two county homes in New York (Katz 1983, 1986; Trattner 1994). Now that the “Paupers in Almshouses” data are joined with the (limited) almshouse data from the period

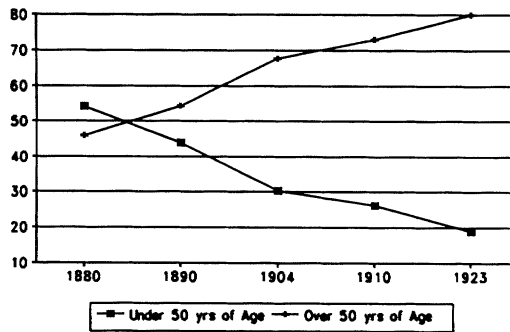


Figure 4: Age distribution of paupers in almshouses, 1880–1923

1850–1880—found in the 1880 Census of “the Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes”—a national portrait of paupers and almshouses can emerge.

The data on paupers in almshouses can do more than correct impressions of almshouse history. Taken together the data allow one to examine shifts in occupation, family structure, age, gender, race, nativity, literacy, mental health, physical health, temperance, duration of stay, allocation of time during a stay, and means of exit of people who came in and out of America’s almshouses. The data contribute to the histories of retirement and leisure; of immigration and family; of race and poverty after the Civil War; of state and local administration of welfare; of female labor force participation; of unskilled labor and “social control;” of health and disability; and of self-reliance and the rise of social insurance.

The data suggest, for example, that the widespread fear of the poorhouse was a tale for millions of people who would, in the end, be saved from its agonies. At peak usage (in 1860) the poorhouse did not provide relief to more than 0.27 percent of the nation’s population (Figures 5, 6, and 7).

DELINEATING THE TYPICAL CHARACTERS

Still, tens of thousands of Americans would go. The inmates of the almshouse were not all white men with physical and mental disabilities. The data do confirm another fictional character, that of “Denver,” the domestic servant of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Morrison did not explore Denver’s entire life-cycle. But Denver would find herself fitting the facts of poorhouse demography. She is the only surviving daughter of Sethe—the ex-slave played by Oprah Winfrey in the motion-picture production of Morrison’s novel. In youth Denver

PAUPER FICTION IN ECONOMIC SCIENCE

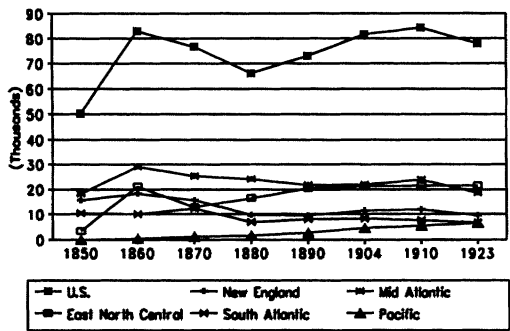


Figure 5: Paupers in almshouses, 1850–1923

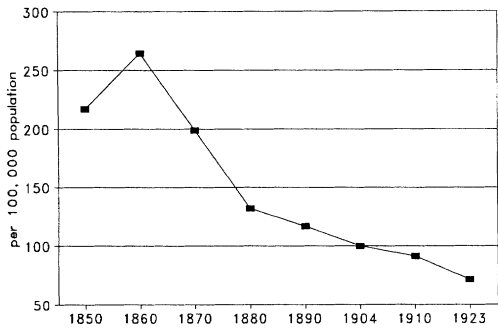


Figure 6: The fall of the almshouse population, 1850–1923

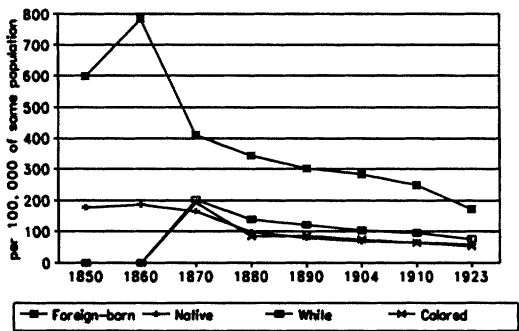


Figure 7: Race and nativity in almshouses, 1850–1923

takes care of herself and her sick mother by working as a “domestic servant” in the home of a white family in Cincinnati (pp. 253–254). The experience of the black and unmarried servant was widespread in the poorhouse, especially in the South Atlantic region, and yet her story remains untold. Throughout the period 1850–1923, more than half the nation’s women in poorhouses had prior to admission been domestic servants—cooks, nurses, knitters, and cleaners. In 1904 nearly 80 percent of all women living in almshouses had worked as domestic servants. Eighty-five percent of the nation’s women in almshouses were either widowed or, like Denver, never married. In the South Atlantic states, more than a third of the women in almshouses were black, and more than 70 percent of those women had worked as domestic servants. Denver was tutored in reading in the home of a biracial woman. But in 1904 as many as 80 percent of the black domestic servants living in almshouses were illiterate (Paupers in Almshouses 1906: 32).

Aging immigrants with mental or physical disabilities were also found in large numbers in almshouses. Middle class readers were at one time aware of this fact, or of its possibility, the immigrant pauper having worked her way into the imagination through an American novel. Edward Eggleston’s *The Hoosier School-Master* (1871) is counted among the classics of regional American literature. There, one finds a realistic rendering of a “Mrs. Thomson,” an immigrant pauper living in a poorhouse in rural Indiana. By design the fictional Mrs. Thomson was close to the facts of almshouse demography. Eggleston’s Mrs. Thomson was the “sorrowful, intelligent English woman” whose “sight was defective” (p. 166). She lived in the poorhouse for at least 2 years, and at that time—the 1870s—2 years was probably the average length of a completed spell in an Indiana almshouse. (By contrast, Oliver’s 9 years of captivity was two-to-four times the average spell in America (Figure 8).) Mrs. Thomson was white and widowed. And she had two young children who had been “bound out” to local men (pp. 83–84, 166–168). Her story was commonplace among paupers in almshouses.

In truth, then, the almshouse was largely the custodial refuge of the native-born; more aging laborers and domestic servants than not, more men than women, more white than black, mainly widowed or never married, many illiterate, now crippled or feeble-minded, perhaps insane, and having no relatives able or willing to care for them. One could find in the occasional almshouse the absent-minded professor and his mad poet. But they were more rare than Oliver. Like *The Hoosier School-Master*’s Mrs. Thomson, a sizeable share of paupers were aging and “defective” immigrants. They tended to be found in New England and the Mid Atlantic states more than elsewhere. Immigrants averaged about a third of the nation’s almshouse population, and at

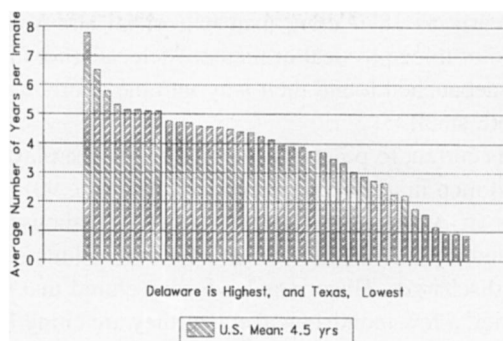


Figure 8: Length of stay in almshouses in 1880, by state

their peak share (in 1910) immigrants comprised about 40% of the total almshouse population. For some, the almshouse was a kind of hospice, a death watch. But more often, the almshouse provided economic and personal shelter for a lonesome lot of indigent and previously self-reliant adults.

A wing or two of the poorhouse did resemble what would come to be called “the flophouse,” a cheap hotel with a revolving door. Although the poorhouse churned transient workers and “the debauched,” this wing of the poorhouse was hardly the domain of the Shiftless Man. In 1850 only a third of the nation’s paupers were able-bodied at the time of admission: that is, only one-third met the minimum requirement for “shiftlessness.” Their share fell continuously in trend, apparently (Table 1). By 1923 the share of able-bodied admitted to almshouse populations had fallen to a mere 15 percent. The trend would

Table 1: The able-bodied status of paupers 10 years of age or older living in almshouses

	Total	% Able-bodied	Number who are . . .		
			Able-bodied	Able to do light work	Incapacitated
1880	66,200	34.6	22,910		30,130
1904	78,860	11.7	9,230		67,070
1910	77,090	15.4	11,880	31,240	33,970
1923	75,710	7.1	5,380	28,950	41,380

Sources: 1880 *Census of Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent*, pp. 464–465; *Paupers in Almshouses* (1926: 31–32); *Paupers in Almshouses* (1915: 41); *Paupers in Almshouses* (1906: 34 and 132).

intensify, but as early as 1890 more than half of all almshouse inmates were burdened with two or three physical or mental “defects” (not including old age). The shiftless and debauched found their way into the poorhouse, to be sure, but their numbers were small.

Michael Katz is correct to point out that the poorhouse played a second role, aiding women and men in a short-term crisis (Katz 1986: 90). According to the data on “Paupers in Almshouses,” each year the almshouse population was practically matched by new admissions, and new admissions were almost matched by new discharges. Historians have conjectured that time spent in the poorhouse was brief, a few months on average (they are citing Katz 1983: Ch. 2, Part I, and Katz 1986: 90). But the state-by-state, cross-sectional evidence suggests that in 1880 and in 1910, the average stay in the poorhouse (measured by the stock) was more than 4.5 years, and varied considerably across states (Figure 8; only the regional pattern of average stay is depicted in the graph—the raw data are available from the author).

In other words the preliminary research reveals a strikingly novel history of the almshouse. Between the Civil War and the Great Depression, the pauper in an almshouse was plural: he was Lennie and Forrest and Grampa Joad; she was Mrs. Thomson and she was Denver. These were the typical paupers. They shared quarters and lives, in various ways, in the county farm house. They were the teams working the fields and mending the sheets, trying to keep comforts and to make the almshouse self-sufficient. But only rarely would self-sufficiency or comfort be encouraged by arrangements.

[In an Indiana poorhouse, the School-Master] found that all the women with children, twenty persons in all, were obliged to sleep in one room, which, owing to the hill-slope, was partly under ground, and which had but half a window for light, and no ventilation, except the chance draft from the door. Jones had declared that the women with children must stay there—“he warn’t goin’ to have brats a-runnin’ over the whole house.” Here were vicious women and good women, with their children, crowded like chickens in a coop for market. And there were, as usual in such places, helpless, idiotic women with illegitimate children.

(Eggleston 1871 [1984]: 163)

The good and the vicious were the lovers and the producers, the victims and the ghosts, when the poorhouse found public favor and when it fell into ill repute. Paupers were disenfranchised in at least 13 states. They could not vote and they could not run for public office (Brown 1940: 10). To an unusual degree paupers in almshouses internalized the externalities of a liberal economic order: the contradiction of charity and corrections, the contradiction of compassion and desert—the amazing growth of the market and the cruel rationing of citizenship. Like other humans, paupers died of heart disease and cancer, tuberculosis and

pneumonia (Paupers in Almshouses 1926: 37–39). Upon their death these colorful fossils of the industrial period were carted off to a pauper's burial—typically in a fruit-box casket, with no ceremony, no grave-stone, and no obituary.

Economists have not written a realistic account of the almshouse in America. We should get at least as close to the facts as the American novelists have gotten. The blind and sorrowful woman of Edward Eggleston's *The Hoosier School-Master* and the childless black servant of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are rather important for understanding economic history. *Oliver Twist* is not. It is true that some women entered the almshouse pregnant: in 1910, for example, about 14 percent were "lying in" (Paupers in Almshouses 1915: 20, 31–32). But 20 years before even a quarter of the states had banned children from almshouses (1900), the *Oliver Twists* had already been moved in large numbers to an orphanage, to a special institution, or to a private household. The Shiftless Man is important for understanding the history of economic thought; he is less important for understanding American economic history.

THE DATA

Within the special reports there are issues of data continuity and comparability which need to be addressed. For example, the 1880 and 1890 data include "paupers and indigent inhabitants of institutions, poorhouses, or asylums, [and those who were] boarded at public expense in private houses." In other words, the enumerations of 1880 and 1890 cover a broader range of indoor relief than do the enumerations which follow in later years. The difference is not going to be so great as to preclude comparisons, 1880–1923: boarding at public expense was probably negligible in most localities.

In the 1880 Census of the Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes, the supervisor of the enumeration, Frederick Wines, attempted to separate public outdoor relief (recipients of aid in cash and in kind) from public indoor relief (the inmates of the poorhouse). Prior to 1880, the data are no doubt tainted by errors of omission: the returns on outdoor relief were far from complete, and Wines made no formal attempt to improve his estimates of 1880. (Between the early 1870s and the turn of the century, outdoor relief was abolished or sharply reduced in more than a dozen larger cities and for some time, but it never disappeared entirely (Ziliak 1996)). Thus we have some concern with data comparability, the 1850–1870 data being inflated by an unknown number of outrelievers. This is a bias that can in principle be corrected by comparing the statewide, aggregate data with the original schedules from individual almshouses.

It should be noted, too, that the special reports on "Paupers in Almshouses" were not identical in the questions they sought to answer. For instance the inquiries relating to the parentage of native white paupers, the fecundity of pauper women, the literacy of paupers, the occupations of paupers prior to admission, and the length of residence in the United States of foreign born paupers were not included on the 1923 schedule. Questions regarding the "mother tongue" of paupers are not included on the 1904 or 1910 schedules. And the special report of 1904 is the only report to inquire about the schooling of children living in almshouses.

THE AMERICAN ALMSHOUSE IN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY

Beatrice and Sidney Webb showed in 1929 with British evidence how wrong the classical economists had been in their rhetoric of shiftlessness and the workhouse test, and much has been written by historians after the Webbs to dispel the myth of success maintained by the mainstream (Webb and Webb 1929: 973–974; e.g., Rose 1971: 160–162). Unfortunately, much less has been written on the American side and, from the quantitative point of view, what has been written is biased by non-representative case studies.

One finds no mention of the special reports in David Rothman's little classic, *The Discovery of the Asylum* (1971), and one finds no influence of the special reports in the new social histories of welfare by Michael Katz. Likewise, one finds no trace of the reports in Walter Trattner's popular history, *From Poor Law to Welfare State*, whose brief evaluation of the poorhouse relies upon the empirical research of Katz (Trattner 1994 [1974]: 62–63).

Katz has done much to improve our empirical understanding of paupers and almshouses. His portrait of the nation's paupers in almshouses is found most prominently in his history of social welfare, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse* (1986). The quantitative content draws nearly exclusively upon his quantitative work on the Erie County, New York Poorhouse (Katz 1983: Chs 1, 4). Yet Katz has pushed his quantitative research on Erie County toward a general history of the poorhouse in the United States (Katz 1983: Pt. I, II; 1986: Chs 1, 4). Unfortunately, the national data suggest that Erie County was not typical of the national pattern.

The Able-bodied

In a section called "Poorhouse Demography in Fact and Fabrication," Katz (1986: 86–91) attempts to correct the data on the able-bodied and the

interpretations of Dr. Charles Hoyt, the author of a nineteenth-century heredity-explains-all criticism of the poorhouse. Katz's project was noble, and remains so in a world of bell curves deviating around single standards of intelligence. In 1874 and 1875, Hoyt surveyed 12,614 inmates of the poorhouse. Hoyt's goal, according to Katz, was not "objective social inquiry. Rather, it was the confirmation of scientific charity's image of the unworthy poor" (Katz: 86). (Advocates of scientific charity believed strongly in the ability of the workhouse test to reveal who was work shy, and therefore unworthy of assistance: Ziliak 1996, 1997, 1999.) According to Katz, since Hoyt pooled his data on paupers in almshouses with data on inmates of insane asylums and with data on children in orphanages, "Hoyt could claim that he had discovered few able-bodied men in poorhouses" (p. 87). To that Katz replies forcefully, "[i]n fact Hoyt knew perfectly well that poorhouses were full of able-bodied men" (p. 87). Hoyt's survey, taken in 1874 and 1875, was limited to New York's poorhouses. Yet according to the 1880 Census, just a few years later, only 22,900 of 66,200 inmates (or about 1/3rd) were able bodied, nationwide (1880 Census of Def., Dep., and Del.: Table CXIII: 464). By 1923 the number of able-bodied paupers enumerated in the nation's almshouses had fallen to 7 percent. Comparisons are not exact: the 1880 Census includes children under 16 years of age. But in a choice between Hoyt's "few" and Katz's "full," the national data suggest that Hoyt was closer to the truth: few able-bodied paupers could be found in almshouses.

Few or full?—the fact of the matter is important. It determines the range of stories one may tell about the self-sufficiency of almshouses. Suppose that Katz is correct and that Hoyt's survey did show New York almshouses to be full of able-bodied women and men. Were the scope of Hoyt's survey nationwide, like that of the Census, then Hoyt would have found little more than a third to be able-bodied in the 1870s, and by 1923 he would have found less than 10 percent able-bodied. New York was unique. "Even discounting the sick and old," Katz continues, "inmates did not earn a third of the cost of their support" (Katz: 31). Actually, the evidence from 1890s New York suggests that inmates did not earn one tenth the cost of their support (Ziliak and Hannon 2003: Table PVF.D.8). The hypothesis of self-sufficiency would not be surprising when rejected, but not because the almshouse failed as an economic institution by allowing able-bodied men to treat the almshouse as a flophouse, as Katz argues. In 1880 more than half the poorhouse residents were "incapacitated" at enumeration. By 1923 the number incapacitated had increased to 90 percent. Furthermore, new admissions to the poorhouse did not make up for the invalids' lack of labor, and could not. Between 1880 and 1923 and on average, less than 30 percent of the

new admissions were able-bodied. In 1923 a mere 15 percent of the new admissions were fully able to work. And as Katz shows, the short-term residents, the fully able-bodied included, came and went *between* the seasons of outdoor work—between the seasons of slaughtering and of planting and harvesting for sale. The almshouse was not self-sufficient. A lack of able-bodied workers in the almshouse seems to be a primary reason.

Length of Stay

Drawing upon his research on the Erie County Poorhouse, Katz makes a general claim about the length of stay in poorhouses in the nineteenth century. “Throughout these years,” says Katz, “a strikingly high proportion of [Erie County] inmates stayed for only a short time. At least two-fifths of the inmates stayed for three weeks at most. In fact, nearly three-fifths were there for a maximum of six weeks, and only one-fifth to one-quarter stayed there for a year or more.” Katz goes on to say that “Erie County was not unique” (p. 90).

It is not clear whether Katz measured length of stay by the “flow” (following the new entrants through the end of a spell) or by the “stock” (finding the average length of stay at a single enumeration). The difference matters: the econometrician Tony Lancaster has shown that in exponentially distributed data—which are typical in socio-economic dynamics—the expected value of the flow is one-half the expected value of the stock (Lancaster 1990 [1995]: 95). Either way, the Erie County data appear to be unique. The Erie County data deviate a lot from the national data of the Census. Length of stay in 1880 can be computed directly from the 1880 data. The nationwide evidence suggests an average stay of 4.5 years. The 1880 Census of Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes almost surely provides a stock estimate of the length of stay. Halve that and the national average is still 2 1/4 years, or more than double the average that Katz found in Erie County.

The average length of stay in 1910 can be estimated crudely, using the population frequency distribution of lengths of stay (in the paupers in almshouses data) to calculate a weighted-average. Using the frequency distribution and the inclusive-interval method the unconditional expected length of stay in an almshouse in 1910 was about 4 years and 8 months. Seen in contrast with the average length of stay on “outdoor relief” among the able-bodied, the almshouse durations appear to be plausible. In 1880s Indianapolis and Baltimore and Boston the average stay of the able-bodied on outdoor relief was between 9 and 13 months, and in 1910s Brooklyn and New York the average stay of widowed women was approximately 12–15 months (Ziliak 1996, 1999).

“Recidivism”

Katz argues that contrary to the intentions of poorhouse managers, the poorhouse created a class of almshouse “recidivists.” Yet if the almshouse did enable such a class, then that class probably occupied a tiny percentage of almshouse inmates. Katz claims that the poorhouse had an open door policy, harming the intentions of poorhouse designers to deter the working poor from applying for relief and harming the discipline within a given almshouse population. He says that “the ease with which inmates could enter or leave almshouses made discipline problems worse” (p. 29). He cites favorably an organizer and student of “scientific charity,” the Stanford economist Amos Warner, saying that “the almshouse became a temporary refuge for the degenerate poor, ‘a winter resort for tramps . . . a place where the drunkard and the prostitute’ recuperated ‘between debauches’” (p. 29). He cites a fantastic anecdote supplied by Warner, reporting the case of one woman who “‘came and went thirteen times in twenty-two and one-half months.’” Katz concludes: “The open-door policy, as characteristic of Charleston as of Philadelphia, had spawned a class of almshouse recidivists” (Katz: 29).

The conclusion is mistaken. The national data on paupers in almshouses, 1880-1923, suggest seasonal movement but the main thrust does not seem to identify a “class” of “recidivists.” The implication of the word “recidivism” is that the same able-bodied men and women were in and out of the poorhouse frequently and at whim, a penniless poor exploiting a welfare hotel. But in 1922 75 percent of everyone enumerated had not previously lived in the almshouse in which they were found (*Paupers in Almshouses* 1926: 23). (The average was higher for women.) Most of these paupers had never even seen the inside of an almshouse, and 90 percent were incapacitated (p. 31). In other words, three-fourths of the almshouse population were first-generation almshouse dwellers who were not able to work at the time of admission (p. 31). Charles Hoyt’s data on 12,600 New Yorkers in almshouses tell a similar story.

Literacy

According to Katz’s findings, “[m]ost inmates of [Erie County] New York’s almshouses were literate and had been to school” (p. 89). Again, what was true for Erie County, New York was not necessarily true for the nation. In 1910 the percentage of literate paupers in almshouses in the United States was 70 percent. In other words, the pauper literacy rate was far below the national average, but still sizeable. (The national literacy rate for the population was reportedly 92 percent). The literacy rate among paupers, however, hides vast differences by

race, by region, and by gender. As late as 1923 only 30 percent of black paupers were literate. According to the special report of "Paupers in Almshouses, 1904", one-third of all black paupers living in almshouses were literate in 1904 (Paupers in Almshouses 1906: Table XXVI). The literacy rate was lowest among black women in the South Atlantic, at 20 percent. Data on schooling are available for the enumeration of 1904 only. But here, too, one sees a picture quite different from that which Katz has rendered. Among all children 16 years of age or younger and living in almshouses in 1904, only 20 percent had been "taught in school." About 5 percent more had been "taught in [an] institution"—the almshouse or a special institution, such as the orphanage. Schooling showed marked regional and racial variance, too. For example, only 4 percent of the black children living in almshouses of the South Central region had received any schooling (Paupers in Almshouses 1906: 204).

Temperance

Katz says of a large sample of Dr. Hoyt's paupers, "Nor were the majority intemperate, even by the stringent standards used at the time" (p. 89), and passes it off as a generalization for the nation of paupers. The generalization is reasonable. According to the Special Census of 1880, 7,000 of the 30,130 disabled paupers were listed with "intemperance" as their primary disability. The "intemperate" accounted for almost one fourth the disabled, and they made up approximately 10 percent of the almshouse population (1880 Census: Table CXIII: 465).

Deterrence

From the viewpoint of New York, Katz finds that "[m]ost poorhouses offered few comforts or attractions. By the close of the century, at the latest, dread of the poorhouse was virtually universal. In the end, deterrence won" (p. 34). The national data suggest that "deterrence won," but not only in the end, and not symmetrically across states or social groups.

Nationwide, the poorhouse was hardly ever used. In particular, as early as 1850 the poorhouse was hardly used by able-bodied workers—the objects of "deterrence"—the ones whose work ethic may have been compromised by a too-generous poorhouse. Kiesling and Margo (1997) have identified in a number of states a rise in the "rate of pauperism"—the number of recipients of indoor and outdoor relief per capita. Between 1850 and 1860 the rate of pauperism increased from 4.6 to 7.9 paupers per 1,000 population. The data used by

Kiesling and Margo do not allow them to distinguish indoor from outdoor relief. The national data on paupers in almshouses suggest that Kiesling and Margo have revealed an increase in the number of (short-term) recipients of *outdoor* relief per capita (Kiesling and Margo 1997: 408–409). According to the national data, the almshouse rate increased between 1850 and 1860, though less dramatically: from 2.2 to 2.7 inmates per 1,000 population. Most paupers—especially able-bodied workers with a short-term need—were to be found on outdoor relief (Hannon 1985). The relatively short spells of relief found by Kiesling and Margo (between 1.5 and 11.5 months on average) lend support to the large presence of outreliefers in their data.

Still, paupers in almshouses were growing in total numbers, and as late as 1910. The decrease of paupers in almshouses between 1910 and 1923 can probably be explained by the conscious effort of the Boards of State Charities to shift the feeble minded, the epileptic, and the insane into special institutions. Poorhouse usage dwindled but total institutional usage rose throughout the period (Table 2).

By the end of the century (thanks especially to Dorothea Dix) caring for the insane in the barren and barred rooms of the miscellaneous poorhouse was at least frowned upon in most regions (David Lightner 1999). But the rise in the poorhouse of the “feeble-minded,” the “crippled,” the “maimed,” and the “deformed” was not a matter of mere arithmetic, the result of the great exodus of the insane. Nor does it seem to be the case that almshouse managers re-labeled their diagnoses of affliction, diminishing the number of insane, even though (to the student of welfare) such behavior would not be shocking. In 1880 5,870 paupers in almshouses were counted as “feeble minded.” By 1904 their numbers had risen to 16,550. In like fashion, the “crippled” in almshouses grew from 4,900 in 1880 to 11,120 in 1904. While the share of the insane fell from 24 percent of the almshouse population in 1880 to 4 percent of the almshouse population in 1910, the feeble-minded and crippled doubled their relative shares.

Table 2: Although almshouse usage decreased, total institutional usage increased (inmates of various asylums per 100,000 population, 1890–1923)

	1890	1904	1910	1923
Almshouses	117	100	92	72
Insane Asylums	118	184	204	242
Homes for the Feeble-minded	8	18	23	39

Sources: *Paupers in Almshouses* (1923: 5; Paul Lerman 1982).

(The contribution of workplace injury to the “crippled” and “maimed” is not discernible in the published reports.)

Nearly a century after the reforms of 1834, Sidney and Beatrice Webb summarized the English experience:

The tragedy of the whole business [they find] is that all experience indicates that the Able-bodied Test Workhouse, designed to discipline the wastrel and the loafer, is not in fact applied to them. The persons actually subjected to this stern regimen have not been these men at all, for they seldom stay and never re-enter; it is the . . . debilitated weakling, the man genuinely without alternative, the honestly destitute man, often of weak intellect, who [returns to the workhouse] again and again [.] driven by dire necessity”.

(Webb and Webb: 973–974)

Though innocent of the almshouse in America, the Webbs had nearly characterized it.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

This exploration of a new data set, “Paupers in Almshouses,” suggests new stories about paupers in American economic history. Between the Civil War and the Great Depression, the typical pauper of an American almshouse was plural. Instructive examples include Grampa Joad, Forrest Gump, Lennie, Denver, and Mrs. Thomson.

The typical pauper in an almshouse was incapacitated or could work only lightly. When an able-bodied person did enter the poorhouse it was usually for reasons of seasonal unemployment or temporary illness, and he tended to leave quickly. Only a fraction were intemperate. The stayers were elderly, sober, unmarried, illiterate, physically disabled, insane, and “feeble-minded.” In order of magnitude the nation’s paupers in almshouses were native-born white, foreign-born white, and native-born black. Prior to admission some three-quarters of the women had been domestic servants and half the men had been laborers. Even at admission only a minority were able-bodied and able to work. At any single enumeration between 1880 and the Great Depression, the average duration of a life spent in an almshouse was about 4 years, and the average completed spell was about 2 years. *The Hoosier School-Master’s* Mrs. Thomson is remarkable for her realism.

The rise and fall of the literal poorhouse is at variance with the fear which still burns in popular myth and metaphor: between 1850 and the Great Depression, the fraction of the population going “on the county” (Walton and

Rockoff 1998: 560) was never more than 2.7 persons in 1,000. From its peak in 1860 the fraction of the population living as paupers in almshouses fell at each enumeration and to a low in 1923 of 0.08 percent.

A dean of American letters, William Dean Howells, believed that the fear of landing in the poorhouse was crippling to the happiness of Americans. Speaking through Basil in his *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), Howells said: “We go moiling and toiling on to the palace or the poor-house. We can’t help it” (E. Carter (ed.) 1976: 437). The evidence says that we can help it, and did. Verbalizing one’s fear of the poorhouse served a ritualistic function, primarily, for a culture moiling in a Manichaen story of self-reliance. The story was pursued with such enthusiasm that it stole clean from the laborer, the widow, and the domestic alike their dignity and their liberty. The New Deal may have “emancipated” (Walton and Rockoff 1998: 560) “millions of workers” from a fear of the poorhouse, but they weren’t going to the poorhouse anyway. Going “on the county” was common only in myth-making of the either/or type. An example is the able-bodied Shiftless Man, who wanders around nineteenth-century economic literature.

Since the Gilded Age and perhaps before, it appears that the American novelists of pauper *fiction* have been doing the better economic *science*. Basil’s exaggerated metaphor is an exception (though Basil *is* a recognizable bourgeois, in neither palace nor poorhouse). Oliver will probably continue to occupy the popular imagination. But no longer should economists assume the Shiftless Man to be the representative occupant of an American almshouse. It can be conceded that his character does sit well with a science content to explain in theory how a certain one-dimensional fiction—less realistic than Forrest Gump—is regulated by a panopticon of pleasures and pains.

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