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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

In recent years, New England has done itself proud. The chronic post-World War II decline in its manufacturing sector has been replaced by what for the present at least continues to be a record growth in services directly and indirectly related to high technology and a continuing competitiveness in high technology itself. As a result, the region leads the nation in growth in per capita income and enjoys the lowest level of unemployment in the country as well. Self-congratulation, however, is too often a prescription for complacency, and complacency inhibits the kind of searching inquiry which assumes that economic miracles are not the result of a divine intervention by a benign providence partial to the presumed moral superiority of New Englanders but the product of complex decisions, themselves often based on imperfectly understood relationships between social, economic, political, and cultural variables.

This issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* examines the nature of some of these relationships and illustrates how aggregate data are potentially misleading indicators of social and economic performance and especially inappropriate tools for formulating and evaluating public policy questions.

Thus, in Andrew Sum, Paul Harrington, William Goedicke, and Robert Vinson's analysis of poverty in New England, we find, despite the hoopla and media hype with which New England's economic boom is being marketed, that the economic resurgence has not contributed to an improvement in the relative economic welfare of those at the bottom of the income distribution. Family poverty has become more concentrated among single-parent, female-headed families, among blacks and Hispanics, and among the dependent poor. Even a casual study of the authors' data reveals the dimension of the problem: nearly half of all black and non-Hispanic families in New England in 1985 were headed by a woman, with no husband present; 85 percent of all black poverty families were headed by a woman; 80 percent of all single-parent Hispanic families headed by a woman were poor. The most conspicuous characteristic of poverty in New England, moreover, is the extent to which it is a woman's problem. The feminization of poverty has increased more rapidly in New England, according to Sum et al., than in the rest of the country, and an increasing share of the region's

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poverty population is composed of children under eighteen years of age. Three broad policy conclusions emerge: First, since the poverty problem in New England is increasingly structural, economic growth in and of itself will not eliminate it; second, strategically targeted education and job training programs for heads of poor families (most of whom are within the prime working age groups) would alleviate the problem; and third, unless specific steps are taken to reduce the proportion of children in the poverty population, the region is in danger of depleting the future potential pool of skilled labor from which it must draw if its economic revitalization is to last into the twenty-first century. This last consideration, however, will require the development of family policies at the state level, that is, measures to maintain, nurture, and strengthen families at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum.

Margaret O'Brien's observations on demographic trends in Boston and their probable impact on the demand for municipal services complements the conclusions of Sum et al. She, too, finds, when she disaggregates her data, that the boom which transformed the Boston skyline and stimulated growth in its population for the first time in decades has had a highly uneven impact on income distribution: Boston families were worse off in 1984 than families in the rest of the country, and, more distressingly, they were worse off in 1984 than they were in 1979. O'Brien also focuses on the feminization of poverty (78 percent of those living in poverty in Boston are women and children) and the need for family support measures in the educational sphere (half of the children in Boston schools do not live in two-parent families, and 45 percent live in poverty).

Jack Hoy provides both the rationale and the macro-context for developing state and regional manpower policies that will address poverty-related issues. The New England economy, he argues, is knowledge intensive. New England has the highest proportion of its total work force in high technology-related jobs and the highest proportion of professional and skilled technical workers in the nation. Continued growth, therefore, will depend on the capacity of the region's higher educational system to meet knowledge-intensive employment demands, a task that will become increasingly difficult, given the anticipated decline in college enrollments, especially between 1988 and 1992—a decline that will repeat itself in professional and graduate schools between 1992 and 1996. Hence the need for market-oriented labor strategies to bring single women who are household heads into the labor pool and for education-oriented strategies to improve minority retention in public schools, access to higher education, job counseling, and student financial aid. Besides addressing issues of simple economic justice, these strategies would ameliorate the imbalance between the demand for and the supply of labor and would prevent rising wage rates from eroding the region's edge in what will be an increasingly competitive, knowledge-intensive international economy.

The notion of "family" and the effectiveness of family-like support systems emerge in Ira Jackson's and Jane O'Hern's reflections on the reforms implemented by Jackson at the Massachusetts Department of Revenue. During his first three years as commissioner of revenue, annual revenue collections increased by 60 percent without any broad-based tax increases. While an innovative tax amnesty program and the judicious application of measures to improve voluntary compliance had much to do with Jackson's success, the key ingredients were the involvement of the agency's staff in the process and the conviction that em-

ployees will do a good job if management provides them with the strategy, resources, and power to get it done—in short, the fostering of a family spirit. Management and employees would either sink or swim together, their respective efforts a collaborative arrangement, not a competitive confrontation.

Jackson and O'Hern also emphasize the crucial need to identify and cultivate an external constituency and to harness its advocacy potential by articulating and then communicating a sense of mission in simple and understandable terms—something which proponents of funding for research in Boston Harbor and Massachusetts and Cape Cod bays have as yet been unable to do, according to Gordon Wallace. Programs to clean up the harbor/bay system, he maintains, are inherently flawed, since “one cannot hope to effectively manage what one does not understand.” He concludes that Boston’s application for a waiver from the Clean Water Act–mandated requirement for secondary treatment of sewage was both deficient and wasteful because it failed to generate the information required for future management decisions. The cost of this failure, according to Wallace, will continue to be immense, since the investment already undertaken to “correct” the problem took place in the almost total absence of a scientific understanding of the harbor and its adjacent waters. On the other hand, a small investment, relative to the total costs of the current harbor cleanup effort, could generate the knowledge required for effective management of these resources. Given this investment and the continued growth of a well-informed and vocal constituency, Wallace is optimistic that the current degradation of Boston Harbor and its adjacent bays can yet be reversed.

Considerations of family underlie many of the contributions in this edition of the journal. It is perhaps only fitting, therefore, that our series on the New England state of mind should address itself to this subject. *The Clouds: A Portrait of One Family in Wartime Cambridge*, by Fanny Howe, is a poignant memoir of the loss that accompanies interruptions and disruptions in family life. Yet it is also a memoir of the continuity and the sense of community that provide stable environments in which loss and the remembrance of things past can be assimilated and finally accommodated.

Finally, Shaun O'Connell also links continuity and community in his inquiry into how Boston’s sense of itself is reflected in its imagery: “Boston’s history is characterized by . . . pervasive social divisions, but Boston offers in compensation an ideal vision of itself which . . . renews its sense of communal, political, and literary life.” In this conclusion lie the implicit beliefs that social cohesiveness is in part a by-product of the mythologies of the past and that those who establish public policy without an understanding of these traditions do so not only at their own peril but with peril to the public they supposedly serve. 🐼