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Homelessness in Boston

The Media Wake Up

Ian Menzies

Why did it take the media so long to “discover” and report on the dramatically rising rates of hunger and homelessness throughout the nation? Did that failure make it easier for presidential counselor Edwin Meese to declare in December 1983 that allegations of hunger in America were “purely political” and that people who go to soup kitchens do so because the food is free, statements matched a short time later by President Ronald Reagan’s claim that people who sleep on grates do so “by choice.” In this article, Menzies tells the unfolding story of how hunger and homelessness finally became a recognized issue in one city — Boston — how he became involved, how the story developed, and why he believes the media took so long to react.

It began for me, not inappropriately, in Boston’s historic Faneuil Hall, a building that for 250 years has resounded frequently to challenging calls for action.

The occasion was an all-day meeting to discuss “The Role of the Church in the City,” a hearing sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Along with others, I had been invited as a panelist “to listen to testimony and ask pertinent questions.”

The date was October 31, 1978.

Those testifying included a broad spectrum of people concerned with the inner city, among them Governor Michael Dukakis, Superintendent of Boston Schools Robert Wood; Larry Myer of Project Bread; Jack Calhoun, commissioner of Youth Services; Father Thomas Corrigan of Fair Share; Alex Rodriguez of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination; Ron Hafer of Urban Edge; and some fifteen clergymen and sisters of different faiths.

One testifier in particular made me sit up and take especial notice; that was Kip Tiernan, founder in 1974 of Rosie’s Place, a shelter for homeless and abused women in the South End. Tiernan, who to me will always be “the nun in the soft hat,” is an articulate, passionate woman who knows the value of shock treatment and uses it to her considerable advantage.

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Her introductory remarks before the Episcopal bishops and other clergy on that last day of October fourteen years ago, which I filed for later reference, are worth repeating, and I leave it up to the reader to judge their shock value.¹

"Sisters, brothers," she began, "here we are again at still another commission, at another public spectacular of the walking wounded. It is nice of you to come to us. You've probably noted that lots of us don't come to you anymore. Roman Catholics had something like this recently, and it was called the 'Call to Action.' So far all we get out of that, from my own jaundiced view, is more workshops, more seminars, and communion in the hand. I hope the Episcopal hearings offer substantially more."

Tiernan, a key player in the poor people's network, then pointed out that it was because of the growing number of homeless in the city that she and others had founded Rosie's Place, adding that gentrification — the buying and renovation of handsome old Victorian row houses in the South End — was a contributory factor to homelessness, having taken six hundred rooming houses off the market.

Near the end of her testimony, Tiernan asked, in rising tones, what the church had done for Rosie's Place, for the mentally ill, or for those left homeless by the meat-ax 1975 welfare cuts. "The church," she said, "unless it develops a political theology to go along with the times, is of no value to us. What would Jesus do? Do you think He'd form a committee? Why is it so hard to live the gospels? Jesus was a passionate man. He took sides with life."

When she finished there was silence. Then Episcopal Bishop Brooke Mosely of Philadelphia said, quietly and thoughtfully, "That was a prophetic statement from the very heart of our Christian theology."

That tableau remains vividly with me to this day. It was like a morality play. It *was* a morality play.

On November 6, 1978, the heading on my column in the *Boston Globe* read: "Are Churches Failing the City and Its Residents?" It created quite a stir, which went deeper than the several critical and defensive letters to the editor that followed.²

Most media people knew about the Pine Street Inn and its good works, but we thought about it as catering to a small number of down-and-outs who, as they used to say, "are always with us." What Kip Tiernan was trying to tell us was that things were worse than we thought. But we, myself included, didn't quite get the message, not yet.

Although I followed up with other columns on the churches, I got sidetracked, because at the time the emphasis among Greater Boston's churches was toward world peace and local racial understanding, as, for instance, when the church-led Covenant for Justice, Equity, and Harmony was formed in November 1979 following the shooting in Charlestown of a fifteen-year-old black schoolboy named Darryl Williams.³ The mood of the time was focused on racial harmony almost, in retrospect, to the exclusion of hunger and homelessness as a priority. Even a twice-a-week column somewhat limits the range of topics one can cover; nevertheless, I should have followed up on Kip Tiernan's remarks. But what was inexcusable was that the newsroom did not, especially as it was suggested they should.

It was interesting to recall that 275,000 signed the covenant pledging support for racial understanding, and to the surprise of some, the usually quiet, reserved Humberto Cardinal Medeiros spoke out passionately, saying, "Racism, root, stem, and branch must now and forever be driven out of the hearts and minds, out of the

living rooms and neighborhoods, and out of the social atmosphere and institutions that make up Boston.” He did not mention hunger or homelessness. This was the same year, 1979, that Pope John Paul II visited the city.

Tiernan, however, had gotten through to my subconscious, because shortly after her Faneuil Hall testimony, I reacted angrily to a December 1978 story in *Harper's Magazine* headlined “The Urban Crisis Leaves Town,” and then, in much smaller print below, “and moves to suburbs.”

How, I asked in another *Globe* column, can the media claim that the urban crisis has left the cities when the facts say just the opposite? “What is frightening,” I wrote,

is that *Harper's*-type stories have enormous influence, especially on those who are against cities, which seems to include much of Congress.

The frenetic search by writers who covet notoriety is no longer merely a fad designed to entertain but a full-blown social menace that can affect the destinies of millions.

Writers are so absorbed in self-promotion, in personal aggrandizement, in bottom-line competitiveness, that they truly know not what they do, nor whom they hurt.⁴

One has to wonder just how much stories like *Harper's* — and there were others — led the Reagan administration to deny, even five years later, that hunger existed, but we'll come to that.

Hunger and homelessness were simply not issues in the media during 1980 and 1981, at least not directly, although I noted in a column in December 1980, following an interview with Lewis (Harry) Spence, that homelessness was on the rise.⁵ In February 1980, Judge Paul G. Garrity had appointed Spence to be the receiver-administrator of the Boston Housing Authority — the same Harry Spence who is today trying to resuscitate the city of Chelsea with receiver James Carlin.

The gist of the column was the positive progress Spence had made over ten months in improving housing conditions for many of the fifty thousand tenants (one in ten of the population) who, at the time, were living in public housing in Boston. I closed the column with a quote from Spence that “the day is coming when some people in Boston just won't have any shelter, they'll be on the street. Boston is touted as a livable city, which it is, but it could dramatically come apart.”

Let me now fast-forward to September 1982 and an invitation from the United Community Planning Corporation (UCPC), the planning arm of the United Fund, to speak on “pressing community issues.”⁶ Recalling the Faneuil Hall tableau three years earlier, I thought, Who better to call than Kip Tiernan of Rosie's Place? — which I did — and I called others as well. My little speech included a plea for the United Fund to endorse the need for national health care, and I pointed out that many of those they served received the least care.

Then, explaining that I had done some street research as well as talking to those aiding the poor, I moved to more local concerns. “People in Boston are going hungry,” I said, “and we are not meeting those needs. The housing situation is also alarming. The task of meeting critical urban needs is being left almost solely to volunteer groups who work with the poor and underprivileged. Wouldn't it perhaps be possible to make available some free-floating United Way funds that could be dis-

tributed directly to those alternative groups such as the Boston Food Bank and Project Bread?" I had stuck my neck out a bit and hit an embarrassing weakness in the United Way at the time — a rigidity in allocating funding, a lack of flexibility.

On October 7, 1982, I led off my twice-weekly column on the front of the Metropolitan page as I had my talk: "There Is Hunger in the City of Boston . . . but just as critical as the food shortage is the lack of shelter, the growing number of homeless." I quoted the Reverend Tom Kennedy of Trinity Church, which had run a "ministry for transients" for forty years, as stating bluntly, "We, the churches, have failed to get together and collectively pressure government to build low-cost housing, but we must." I concluded: "Until public agencies get their act together, the United Way could perhaps, through a more flexible approach, help fill the hunger gap. The public has been poorly informed. If asked to help, the public would respond."

Clearly, and this is a point that needs to be made, the media bore as much, if not more, responsibility for the public's being ill informed on hunger and homelessness, particularly the latter, as did the United Way, charitable institutions, and state and local welfare agencies. To their great credit, the UCPC called a meeting for November 2, 1982, entitled "Hunger in Greater Boston," to which shelter and food-bank people were invited, as were representatives of banks, corporations, and foundations.

Having been invited to attend the meeting by UCPC president Nancy Beecher and executive vice president Jerome Wild, I did a follow-up column on November 4, summarizing the discussion.⁷ Some snapshot remarks included:

Dan Daley, then head of Project Bread: "Most of us are totally sheltered from the sights of people who are really hungry."

Nancy Beecher: "Aren't there any contact points between government and those going hungry?"

Paul McGerigle of UCPC: "There is no legal responsibility in the Legislature for food and homelessness. Hunger is no one's responsibility in Massachusetts."

Eileen Brigandi of Rosie's Place: "If you're homeless you can't get welfare. You must have an address. It's Catch 22."

Carol Johnson, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless: "Why hasn't the city raised the question of hunger and homelessness? Why is it doing nothing?"

Dan Daley: "We worry about those we don't see — the proud poor who won't take anything they don't consider rightfully theirs and mothers supporting children on minimum 'fast food' wages and the locked-in elderly."

It was a quiet and powerful story that had a strong impact on UCPC officials who, as planners for the United Way, recommend where collected moneys should go. There were also helpful clarifications made at the meeting as, for instance, when Larry Meyer, then head of the Boston Food Bank supplying some 425 pantries and on-site emergency food centers in Greater Boston, said that it wasn't so much more food that was needed but trucks, freezer space, and staff to distribute it. That meeting resulted in the establishment of a \$300,000 fund by the United Way to respond to emergency needs, and the establishment of an entirely new strategy.

In a November 25, 1988, column,⁸ I was able to write that the response to my "There Is Hunger in Boston" column resulted in contributions of close to \$5,000 from readers, according to Dan Daley. People also called to volunteer their services. Three weeks later, on December 16, 1982,⁹ I was able to report that the late Gino

Bellotti, then executive director of the Permanent Charity Fund of Boston (now the Boston Foundation), with an endowment of close to \$100 million and an annual distribution of \$8 million, had made a \$50,000 grant to set up a Project Bread Hunger Hotline, to be run by JoAnn Eccher, a nutritionist. Nevertheless, outside of the Greater Boston Walk for Hunger, also sponsored by Project Bread, there was still minimal attention being given to hunger or homelessness in Massachusetts by the state, the city, or the media.

I concluded my November 25 column by saying that “without the men and women who give so much of themselves to help the homeless and hungry, there would be nothing. Government, at all levels, has walked away from this responsibility. It is something the public should know.”

In early February 1983, Dan Daley called to tell me that *Globe* readers had contributed \$30,000 to Project Bread since the succession of columns began, a gesture he described as “absolutely incredible,” and one that surprised me as well, as I was not in the fund-raising business. Along with \$20,000 from the United Way and \$50,000 from the Permanent Charity Fund, the people of Greater Boston and its voluntary agencies had put together \$100,000 to meet the emergency.¹⁰

A month earlier, Governor Dukakis had gotten into the act, pledging state aid to all those in “desperate need” — a commitment passed along to his then director of the new Office of Human Resources, Philip Johnston, but the promise was never fulfilled. Members of the dedicated homeless-hungry network were caught by surprise by the governor’s call for a statewide effort to aid those to whom they had been ministering, but they accepted it with “cautious enthusiasm,” as I outlined it in a column on January 13, 1983.¹¹

Another facet of this whole story I found myself covering began in the fall of 1982, when the Boston Food Bank and Project Bread asked Dr. J. Larry Brown of the Harvard School of Public Health to evaluate the rising need for emergency food in Massachusetts and to survey 172 Greater Boston food pantries and 35 soup kitchens. Dr. Brown, director of the school’s Community Health Improvement Program, agreed to the request just as some Boston physicians began to report an increase in hunger-related health problems among their patients, particularly children and pregnant women.

In April 1983, Dr. Brown, testifying before the U.S. Senate’s Agricultural Subcommittee on Nutrition, chaired by Robert Dole, said the effect of the federal Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act of 1982 had resulted in 40 percent of the commonwealth’s schoolchildren being dropped from the school breakfast and lunch programs, nearly 20 percent of families being deprived of food stamps, and more than 20 percent of children being dropped from Aid to Dependent Children.¹²

“Altogether,” he testified, “364,000 people in Massachusetts, mainly children, lost the ability to participate in nutritional programs and these are not the most impoverished Americans — the so-called ‘old poor’; but the ‘new poor’; people who have been living on the margin and who then lost the support of these programs.” I wouldn’t say Dr. Brown’s testimony died aborning, but it certainly didn’t trigger any headlines or investigative media follow-ups throughout the nation.

Rumors that there was a “hunger situation” did eventually reach the White House, and in the summer of 1983, President Reagan announced that he would set up a task force to look into “reports of hunger,” which he did, but the task force was loaded with people who were on record as disliking what could be termed “hand-

out” programs. But before the report was even made public, Edwin Meese, counselor to Ronald Reagan, came out with the gauche remark that hunger in America is “purely political” and “that people who go to soup kitchens do so because the food is free,”¹³ — churlish, inaccurate remarks almost topped by his boss’s own ill-informed generality that people who sleep on grates do so “by choice.”¹⁴

These sound bites, of course, made page 1 without difficulty, whereas the growing tragedy of hunger and homelessness that led to the insensitive, ignorant remarks by Reagan and Meese did not. Interestingly, it was the day after President Reagan announced the “no-holds-barred” task force on hunger that Dr. Brown reported, following a study, that hunger was affecting 20,000 individuals in Massachusetts and that soup kitchens in the commonwealth were serving 200,000 meals a month.¹⁵

For about a year, in the course of going about my business in the downtown, I would see a long line of people, men and women, queued up outside Saint Anthony’s Shrine on Arch Street, waiting for a lunchtime sandwich prepared by the brothers. It was sad, disturbing. I had also heard that the rector, Father Louis J. Canino, OFM, who wanted to do more for the hungry and homeless than just serve cold sandwiches, had been shopping around for a building that he could convert to uses better able to serve the needy.

By now I was very much into the whole subject of hunger and homelessness throughout the state and obviously, through my columns, had become somewhat of a missionary (a columnist’s prerogative), prompted in part by what I felt was the *Boston Globe’s* weak coverage of both hunger and homelessness and the poor and underprivileged, which had not been the case back in the 1960s. Its indifferent coverage was, however, no worse than that of the rest of the media.

After an energizing interview with Father Canino, I opened my December 15, 1983, column as follows:

Edwin Meese may question if there is hunger in America. The Franciscan Friars of Boston do not; they know there is.

What’s more they have taken a dramatic step-up to expand their service to the city’s homeless and hungry.

Led by Rev. Louis J. Canino, rector of St. Anthony’s Shrine, the Franciscans have purchased an 11-story building in downtown Boston to aid their ministry to the poor.

It will not only serve as a sit-down soup kitchen for both street and poor people, but will also provide clothing, showers, nursing care, professional guidance and, says Fr. Canino, “give back to some the dignity they have apparently lost.”¹⁶

Then we came to the bottom line, the question of the \$125,000 down payment for the handsome eleven-story building at 39 Boylston Street, between Washington and Tremont streets — negotiated without public announcement. Father Canino had posted a Letter of Appeal at the entrance to the Arch Street Shrine, where two to three thousand attended Mass daily. It was the first time the Franciscans had made a public appeal for money in their more than thirty-year tenure at Arch Street.

Nevertheless, people responded. The building fund mounted, but could Father Canino raise the \$125,000 by the deadline of October 16? On October 14, he was still short \$40,000.

At that point he called a man who had said he would leave some money for an improved soup kitchen when he died. “I told him,” said Father Canino, with a

chuckle in his voice, “that I couldn’t wait until he died, that we needed the money in two days, and I suggested that he sleep on it because I didn’t want to pressure him. He came in with a check for \$10,000 the next day, and other checks followed.” Again *Globe* readers responded, contributing thousands of dollars.

Father Canino passed papers December 1, 1983, and with a heavenly glance upward, said he planned to open Saint Francis House on January 30, 1984, although to do so he would still have to raise another \$200,000 for renovations and mortgage payments by that date. Few thought he could do it, but although the opening was delayed nine months because of the need for an entirely new heating system, the smiling friar, now a member of a Franciscan team in Greensboro, North Carolina, made it — thanks, he said, to great help from Kitty Dukakis, wife of the governor, corporate executives, *Globe* readers, and friends.¹⁷

One of his great hopes, currently being fulfilled, was to help guests of Saint Francis House find jobs. “A person can’t even apply for a job,” he said at the time, “unless he or she looks clean and neat. That’s where we can help. We’ll also be providing an address.” A local bishop characterized the Father Canino story accurately, describing it as “nothing less than a leap of faith.”

Saint Francis House is today the largest day shelter for the homeless in New England, providing meals, clothing, health care, crisis intervention, job counseling, and substance-abuse and psychiatric counseling as well as pastoral counseling. Although the Franciscans have all the responsibility for the building, staff costs are picked up by the city and the state because, as one observer commented, “Regular bureaucratic agencies could never act with the same sensitivity as this humanitarian group.”

What I learned from this wonderful and rewarding experience is that the media — newspapers, television, and radio — are doing a disgracefully poor job of “covering” the inner city and the poor and underprivileged, whether they live in the commonwealth’s cities or suburban towns. There is a reason. Today’s big-city media reporters come overwhelmingly from a suburban middle-class background. Most of them have no idea of the quality of urban life outside the Faneuil Hall Marketplace and the downtown business district, and regretfully, those who direct them don’t insist that they find out. Unfortunately, too, the few minority reporters who work for big-city dailies are, all too often, not interested in covering the low-income inner city, the poor and needy, because power and money in the media lie elsewhere.

There is much still to tell . . . and do. As Kip Tiernan, who is also head of the Poor People’s United Fund, told me recently, “Food stamps are not enough; families run out of food stamps before the end of the month. Hunger is still around.”

And, although shelter capacity has increased since 1978, many homeless people are afraid of shelters, yet there is no long-range program in Massachusetts to either provide homeless families with subsidized housing or single men and women with single room occupancy in low-budget hotels or rooming houses. In short, what both Massachusetts and most other states lack are transitional programs that will upgrade homeless families and singles from shelters, which lack privacy, to subsidized apartments or rooms.

Part of the craziness is that it costs \$2,700 a month in Massachusetts to house a family in a shelter motel or hotel, whereas for \$500 a month (half paid by the federal government), a family could be located in a market-rental apartment. The fact is that the gentrification of the old rooming houses, combined with the discharging of patients with mental illness from hospitals back in the 1960s and 1970s, has left us

with the enormous and still unresolved problem of hunger and homelessness, and attendant health problems.

Private nonprofits like the Boston Community Loan Fund and the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless struggle to improve the plight of the displaced, but it is an uphill struggle. The poverty network and the dedicated men and women, lay and clerical, who support it cannot do it all. The job is just too large. Government has to play a larger role.

There is a crying need not just for a study of what is lacking, but for a long-range corrective program. The initiative to produce such a program should begin in the governor's office, but the media, through some good old-fashioned investigative reporting into hunger and homelessness, could jump-start the process.

Notes

1. Speech by Kip Tiernan at hearing sponsored by Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, Faneuil Hall, October 31, 1978.
2. Ian Menzies, "Are Churches Failing City and Its Residents?" *Boston Globe*, November 6, 1978.
3. Ibid., "A Covenant That Offers New Hope," "What Can Be Done About It," *Boston Globe*, October 19, November 23, 1979.
4. Ibid. "A Crisis That Hasn't Gone Away," *Boston Globe*, February 5, 1979.
5. Ibid., "There's Some Cheer This Christmas for Public Housing," *Boston Globe*, December 15, 1980.
6. Correspondence from United Community Planning Corporation, dated August 9, 1982, September 21, 1982, September 28, 1982, November 29, 1982, and March 8, 1983.
7. Ian Menzies, "Just Look Around Us, the Hungry Are There," *Boston Globe*, November 4, 1982.
8. Ibid., "A Response to Hunger," *Boston Globe*, November 25, 1982.
9. Ibid., "The Extent of Hunger," *Boston Globe*, December 16, 1982.
10. Ibid., "One of Those Good Things," *Boston Globe*, February 17, 1983.
11. Ibid., "Words Faster Than Deeds," *Boston Globe*, January 13, 1983.
12. Testimony of J. Larry Brown, Ph.D., of Harvard School of Public Health before U.S. Senate Agricultural Subcommittee on Nutrition, Chairman Robert Dole, April 6, 1983.
13. United Press International news story, *Boston Globe*, December 9, 1983.
14. Benjamin Taylor, *Boston Globe* news story, February 1, 1984.
15. Ian Menzies, "Hunger: It's a Sad Reality," *Boston Globe*, August 4, 1983.
16. Ibid., "It's Faith vs. Hunger," *Boston Globe*, December 15, 1983.
17. Ibid., "To Serve the Hungry," *Boston Globe*, September 13, 1984.