Social Isolation in Welfare Hotels: "Where It's Easier to Get Crack than a Cup of Coffee"

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Imagine a system that takes the mentally ill, ex-convicts, and the poorest urban residents, and puts them in one city building. Sounds like the plot of a bad movie, right? Believe it or not this was a commonplace practice and hackneyed response to homelessness among welfare recipients in New York City in the 1970s and '80s. The plot played out just as expected; welfare hotels became the epicenter of crime, drugs, and prostitution, usually with deplorable conditions for its tenants, and served as a transformative and criminalizing harbinger for the children who entered the hotels.

Use of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels for those needing temporary housing in New York City goes back to the 1800s, when single men came to the city looking for employment and needed cheap housing. These first SROs consisted of a five-by-seven foot cubicle with one toilet for fifteen men. Through the 1930s more brownstones were converted to SROs by subdividing larger rooms in order to make profits. By the 1960s and '70s landlords found it profitable to accept welfare recipients as tenants because of the guaranteed check from the government. Policy by the 1980s was to send welfare recipients in need of housing directly to SRO (welfare) hotels.[1]

In their investigative and historical look into the tenants of the welfare hotels, Ellie Winberg and Tom Wilson explain that since the 1800s, welfare tenants have been characterized with more or less the

[1] Ellie Winberg, and Tom Wilson, *Single Rooms: Stories of an Urban Subculture* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1981), xii-xiii.

same problems: "loneliness, isolation from opportunity...and crime."[2] This, compared to prominent 1980s sociologist William Julius Wilson's postulation that the process of social isolation, in which contact between different classes of people and availability of jobs are limited enhance the effects of living in a highly concentrated poverty area, provides an interesting link between the macro-structural problem of poverty, ghettos and crime, and welfare hotels and crime.[3] This paper aims to evaluate welfare hotels as micro-environments in the framework of the social isolation theory of poverty and the "underclass," which will partly redefine the term "underclass" as we understand it.

Relevant Historiography

Welfare hotels are as close to forgotten as a major governmental blunder can historically be, with few historiographical works existing on the subject. Instead, this paper will look at the larger historical issue of the underclass, and use this as a lens to deconstruct and reevaluate the hotels in an historical perspective. The issue of the black underclass that took form in the 1970s and '80s remains an unresolved, though thoroughly studied, issue among historians. There are numerous explanations for the links (or lack thereof) between this class' creation and welfare policy. The authoritative work on the liberal view of the issue of the underclass and structural factors in its creation is Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged.* Conversely, Charles Murray champions the major conservative camp in his book *Losing Ground* from 1984, which has been called "the most devastating sustained attack ever made against the welfare state,"[4] .His view is more focused on how policy affects people's decision making, causing them to inadvertently keep themselves poor.

This paper adopts an argument somewhere between Murray's and Wilson's, finding common ground between them. That is, Murray's arguments in *Losing Ground* is centered on the idea that welfare programs negatively affect our decisions concerning work and family, and therefore cause the breakup of families and create a barrier to getting out of poverty (a more people-based argument). Murray introduces his argument by stating that the government's social policy sets the rules of the game, and the more a population lacks independent resources, the

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[2] Ibid., xv.

[3] William J. Wilson, *The Ghetto Underclass: Social Science Perspectives* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993), 5.

[4] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Family and Nation: the Godkin Lectures*, *Harvard University* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 124.[5] Charles A. Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 9.

more decisive the effects.[5] Wilson may agree with the latter part of this, but contends that the economic landscape sets the rules, and that people will simply be reactive to this. That is, if there are no jobs, families will suffer.[6] So will the make-up, spaces, and solidarity of the community.[7]

Murray asserts that policy in the 1960s –that of the "Great Society" era– altered the decision-making scheme of people and families by making it profitable to behave in certain ways that are self-destructive in the long term. He explains this in a thought experiment concerning a hypothetical couple: Harold and Phyllis. Compared to before Johnson-era reform, if Phyllis were to have a baby, between welfare payments and Harold's job, it would make the most economic sense not to get married. He therefore attributes expanded welfare programs to creating different "rules" of our economic decision-making that results in the dissolution of family, which he believes in central to economic stability.[8] By providing for the poor, the government created a trap that kept people poor. Welfare hotels show that providing for the poor creates a trap that keeps people poor.

Wilson's more liberal view on the issue of underclass and poverty in *The Truly Disadvantaged* is that an impoverished underclass is created from a mix of structural changes including economic changes, and not just government actions. His major attack on *Losing Ground* was his discovery that joblessness among black males positively correlated with a decrease in unskilled labor demand. This was due to the loss of manufacturing and similar jobs in metropolitan areas between 1947 and 1972 to the suburbs.[9] He views unemployment as the cause of a decrease in the pool of marriageable black men, which then led to an increase in single parenthood among black women.[10]

Further, the exodus of middle-class blacks and whites from the urban centers created a socially isolated area of poverty. He argues that with this exodus, it was more difficult for a community to maintain certain social institutions like churches, schools, and recreational facilities; and thus the sense of community and positive neighborhood identification also declined.[11] Isolating poverty into the "ghetto" allowed a certain culture to take shape by limiting visibility of employment and social mobility, "good examples," and the institutional stability provided

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[6] Ibid., 105.
[7] Ibid., 137-138.
[8] Ibid., 162.
[9] William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 100.
[10] Ibid., 105.
[11] Ibid., 137-138.

by more affluent members.[12] Mickey Kaus, a neoliberalist journalist, later expanded on this idea of public spaces and community.

One of Kaus' focal points in *The End of Equality,* which discusses public spaces like churches, schools, and class mingling, adds significantly to this view on social isolation and ghetto culture. Kaus argues that as the middle class people who could afford to maintain the public spaces and schools moved away, these public places declined and became overrun by criminals and the homeless.[13] Schools lost the good teachers and the cultural capital of the more affluent students. Thus, the classic places of social mingling, like parks where kids rich and poor could play, or bars where people of different classes could mix, declined. Speaking generally in 2012 about his firsthand experience in New York City housing projects in the 1980s, Lieutenant Zachary Slavin (Ret.) notes, "public spaces were dangerous places to be."[14] He uses as an example the well-intentioned Midnight Basketball events for inner city kids, at which there would be drive-by shootings.[15] The culture of the isolated ghetto did not allow for positive, constructive infrastructure and community mingling. This area of social theory is an effective lens for looking at welfare hotels.

Michael B. Katz in *Improving Poor People* presents another view on the underclass that incorporates the idea of hope. Katz argues that in earlier periods, poverty in the cities was associated with expansion of opportunity due to industrialization and modest avenues of social mobility. In effect, poverty still came with an essence of hope, which was intuitively beneficial for its members. In the 1960s and '70s however, depopulation and deindustrialization, as described by Wilson, limited chances of mobility and employment, thus asserting that "poverty now exists in a context of hopelessness."[16] The concentration of the hopeless poor into communities was especially harmful because it restricted contact between rich and poor, and thus allowed these communities to create "a set of mutually reinforcing and self-feeding spirals of decline."[17] America's poor were cut off from the rest of the socioeconomic strata spatially, socially, and economically. Katz points out that this phenomenon was unprecedented in American history making this period

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[12] Ibid., 144.
[13] Mickey Kaus, *The End of Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 55.
[14] Zachary Slavin, *Phone Interview with a Former NYC Housing Authority Police Lieutenant,* November, 2012.
[15] Ibid
[16] Michael B. Katz, *Improving Poor People: The Welfare State, the "Underclass," and Urban Schools as History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 79.
[17] Ibid., 81.

of particular historical concern.[18] This sentiment is superbly evident in the voices of those in or writing about the hotels.

By looking at welfare hotels, we find a way to bridge these two opposing views between conservatives and liberals. That is, while underclass culture can be perpetuated by structural changes like concentration of the poor, social isolation, loss of sense of community and "good examples," and the idea of hopelessness, along with the decline of public spaces, all these factors can be enforced by people's life decisions in response to government welfare policy. If liberal historians were arguing that certain natural processes create an underclass disposed to crime, drugs, and family disorganization, welfare hotels acted as an active *creation* of this environment. Instead of urban centers being left with the poorest and most unstable individuals, welfare policies *placed* all these people into the same building.

This paper aims to look at welfare hotels in these terms. Certain conditions like those listed above can perpetuate a culture estranged from what we would consider typical American, or even human, behavior. Welfare hotels, in all their squalor, crime, infestation, and feelings of imprisonment and hopelessness, acted, in retrospect, as a perfect social experiment to see the forces of social isolation in creating a pathological culture that inducted members (adults and children alike) by sheer proximity of location.

By using mostly journalistic sources that rely heavily on the voices of those in the hotels, along with a handful of congressional testimonies on the problems of the hotels, I will first show that the culture of the hotels were detached from typical society (i.e. underclass). Then I will show how the hotels themselves metaphorically strong-armed the impoverished people living there into its culture. Finally, I will show the effect living in isolated, impoverished and neglected communities had. Doing this, however, will amend the definition of the underclass, now adding that the underclass was not just a group of people with similar values, but a breathing organism that involuntarily drew people into it and imposed its culture unto them. On a technical note, this paper will use the term, as some historians of poverty do, "pathology." This is not to imply that people displaying said pathologies are innately diseased, but rather that they display some abnormal characteristic that is "contracted" from others, can be passed on to others, and is destructive to the community. I will also depict perpetuating poverty as a policy issue, rather than strictly a shared behavioral fault.

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[18] Ibid.

Welfare Hotels as Physical Environments of the Underclass

To begin, it is necessary to show that welfare hotels very generally represent, or at least replicate, the underclass. The notion of "underclass," in Wilson's analysis, is a potentially diverse group of people, such as long term welfare recipients and criminals, that are socially isolated from "mainstream patterns and norms of behavior," whose culture and communal social structures are thus "collectively different" than the rest of society.[19] In his 1993 testimony to the House of Representative's Subcommittee on Employment, Housing and Aviation, Andrew Cuomo correctly points out that the welfare hotel system "serves only to isolate [the homeless] from the rest of society."[20] As for the impact on the external community, police and community groups have referred to the hotels as the "bases of operation" for crime and as the responsible party for most of the crime and criminals within a significant radius of the hotel.[21]

The institutional and psychological differences of the welfare hotel society that this creates were very visible. In one early article on the issue of crime in and around the hotels, the police officers that were called to investigate a body that was found dangling upside-down from an air shaft noted that the hotel resident who pointed it out to them just kept eating his sandwich, "seemingly unperturbed."[22] The psychological abnormalities that this exposes hardly need explanation. What does need explanation is *how* this behavior takes shape. Leonard Stern, the creator of a non-profit in the 1980s that started an alternative to the hotels, asserts humans respond to their environment: put them in squalor and they will act "squalorly."[23]

Hopelessness and the Underclass

This squalor not only refers to the physical condition of the hotels, where as many as six people lived to a nine by twelve foot room, with two beds and a hallway bathroom strewn with junkies' blood, crack vials and paraphernalia. Squalor also refers to the fact that families had to

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[19] Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged, 8*.

[20] Employment, Housing and Aviation Subcommittee, *Welfare Motels: A Waste of Federal Funds,Harmful to Homeless Familes,* Hearing in H.R., *103rd Cong., 1st sess.,1993, 73*.

[21] Max Seigel, "Wide Community Crime Traced to 'Singles' In welfare hotels," *New York Times*, November 16, 1972, 97.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Elisha Omri, and Rebecca Walkowitz, "By Children For Everybody: Home is where...," *New York Amsterdam News*, *Children's Express*, March 19, 1988, 26.

hang their food from the ceiling to keep it from being eaten by mice.[24] Children were also regularly exposed to illicit drugs, violent crime and prostitution.[25] What might be even more important is the "sense of hopelessness" in the hotels. Jonathan Kozol, a well known non-fiction writer on education and poverty issues, despite finding it difficult to do the concept justice, describes this sense of hopelessness as "unbroken dreariness that dulls the vision and impairs one's faculties for self-location and discernment."[26]

This sentiment of hopelessness and being lost or stuck is manifest in the tenants themselves. In a *New York Times* article from 1987, 35-year-old tenant Arlene Bruce said she planned to leave before long because she felt like she was sleeping in a coffin.[27] Although referring specifically to her bottom bunk, one may imagine that she was responding to more than the structure of the bed itself.Theresa, an interviewee in a *New York Amsterdam News* article noted that she had been trying continuously for three years to get out to an apartment but could not.[28] Further, Wanda Price a year later emphasized that she wanted to get out badly, but "once you get in here, you're stuck."[29] This was not caused by any lack of effort on the part of tenants. As Mayor Koch pointed out in his testimony to the House's Subcommittee on Public Assistance and Unemployment Compensation that there were simply not many homes available at the price the state allowed.[30]

The effect that this hopelessness and squalor had on parents in the hotels is frightening, and is unique to the hotels and such communities of poverty. This effect is so apparent, it can be used to explore Katz' discussion of hopelessness in poverty. Right from birth, there was little hope. In their testimony to the same Subcommittee, the Legal Aid Society drew attention to the figures of infant mortality in the hotels, which surpassed not only that of the poorest neighborhoods but those of some poor, developing nations.[31] The fear did not stop there

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[24] Subcommittee on Public Assistance and Unemployment Compensation, Use of Emergency Assistance Funds For Acquisition of Temporary and Permanent Housing For Homeless Families, Hearing in H.R., 99th Cong. 2nd sess, 1986, 73.
[25] Ibid., 83.
[26] Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), 28.
[27] Lidia Chavez, "Welfare Hotel Children: Tomorrow's Poor," *New York Times*, July 16, 1987, B1.
[28] John Sheils, "10 year-old Calls Life in Welfare Hotel Madhous," *New York Times*, August 02, 1986, 3.
[29] "In a Welfare Hotel, an Earnest Teacher and a Willing Class." *New York Times*, pg. C6, October 27, 1988.
[30] Subcommittee on Public Assistance, 1986, 34.
[31] Ibid., 84.

though. In a 1983 *New York Times* article on life in the welfare hotels, Mrs. Jenkins explained her belief that if her and her children are in the hotel too long, "they're going to be dead."[32] Kozol's "Rachel" reiterates this sentiment, resigning herself to this inevitability unless, she says, her children learn to kill.[33] Although this sounds absurd, the realities that the children had to adjust to in the hotels and the ways this changed them will be discussed later.

Hope is an important notion in hierarchical, class-based societies. In response to the Mayor's fears that a housing program that was "too good" would be taken advantage of, used by individuals for too long, and by people only as a vehicle for getting a cheap apartment, New York City councilman Gerges argues the contrary, calling this fear "outrageous."[34] Gerges instead suggests that his study of housing programs strongly indicates that the better the program and the facilities, the quicker people move on to more independent and stable housing and lifestyles. Why? Because, unlike in facilities such as the hotels, they can still regard themselves as human beings, and "haven't lost all hope."[35] It is probably hard to see yourself as a human being that has a right to a proper home when you share your bed with mice.[36]

Reluctant Adoption of Behavior

All this presumably results in creating abnormal patterns of behavior. What is important to note about the adoption of these patterns is that most people did so reluctantly. We see this in the way tenants spoke about their self-defense, which sheds light on the violent nature of the environment. Again in the *New York Times* article on life in the welfare hotels subtitled "Life on the Edge," a 21-year-old woman explains that she keeps a foot long carving knife in her drawer for much needed protection, as most people have knives that are even bigger.[37] Later in the article, Raphael Rodriguez, a 28-year-old construction worker explained that while he did not want to kill anybody, his having a knife and his intention to kill the man who next tries to burglarize him was a matter of life or death: "I've got to live," he explains.[38] Another woman responding to her child's broken arm decided that she'd "have to buy

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[32] Philip Shenon, "Welfare Hotel Families: Life on the Edge."*New York Times*, pg. B1, August 31, 1983.
[33] Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children, 68*.
[34] Subcommittee on Public Assistance, 73.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Shenon, Welfare Families*, New York Times.*
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., B8.

them baseball bats so they can fight back."[39] Though many tenants may very well have been peaceable people against violence, the *collective* need for weapons and the life-or-death mentality creates a community of violence either in thought or in action, distinguishing this group behaviorally from typical society.

In some way then, Charles Murray is correct in contending that the government sets the rules of the game. By isolating poverty into dense spaces, it facilitated, as Lt. Slavin (ret.) saw it:

> ...a sense of lawlessness. [The ghettos] weren't operating in a normal civil society, they were operating in an isolated drug-gang controlled environment where the gangs were the enforcers. And the cops would only come to pickup the pieces, but *you* have to defend *yourself* [emphasis added]. [You] have to walk past drug dealers that have guns, and will shoot you, stab you, or rape your wife.[40]

Operating in this environment, which the government necessarily created by using hotels as homeless welfare shelters, forced people to abandon values, modes of behavior, and a respect for authority we might consider normal, in order to survive in their isolated world.

Children in the Hotels: Pathology and Induction

It seems that a major issue with the welfare hotels—or any ghetto—is that an abnormal set of values and violent culture was carved into physical space, making the adoption and absorption into this culture almost inevitable. We see this process in the children that lived in the hotels, those that Steven Banks, a staff attorney for the Homeless Family Rights Project of the Legal Aid Society, called a "lost generation" that would be scarred forever due to their exposure to the living conditions and the quality of life in the hotel.[41] A resident of one of the hotels explains, "Hotel kids learn different things than other kids."[42] Whether these things were how to hustle, how to act tough, or that their existence was an inconvenience to society, this was disturbingly true.

The quotations from Steven Banks and the unnamed resident above come from a *New York Times* article from 1988 about a 19-year-old

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[39] Sheils, "Welfare Hotel Madhouse"*, New York Times.*

[40] Slavin, *Phone Interview,* November 2012.

[41] Don Terry, "Blueprint for Trouble: A Child's Life in Welfare Hotels." *New York Times*, February 22, 1988, B6.

[42] Ibid.

boy who was stabbed by a group of kids while he was carrying $1000 in cash and a quantity of crack-cocaine. Regarding the young man's history, his father notes that his son had moved into a hotel at nine-years-old and that was when he first "learned how to hustle."[43] In 1987 he moved into another hotel and by then had stopped going to school, though he was the only one of his siblings to graduate 6th grade.[44] One third of high school age students in the hotels dropped out.[45] Other residents described him as "just a kid himself," who spent time playing with the other children, or by running errands for other residents.[46] Clearly there doesn't seem to be any innate characteristic of his that would lead to his involvement in drug dealing, but such was the nature of the hotels.

Looking at younger childrens' thoughts, we see how this induction might occur to otherwise innocent children. Speaking to a "By Children" section of the *New York Amsterdam News*, Letitia, a twelve-year-old resident of the Prince George Hotel in Manhattan explains that the "people in the hotel they change the way you act."[47] She felt, probably correctly, that if you're around a group of people for long, you begin to act like them. Kareem, also twelve, agrees, adding with his own experience. Before he came to the hotel, he says, he never caused trouble. Now, however, he finds himself "bothering everybody, hittin' them, takin' their stuff. They say something to me and I just go for their head."[48] In another edition of this column, the young reporters mention a girl in their school that feels that if she doesn't beat people up and act tough, "that something's going to happen to her."[49] This is the tragic way in which some hotel children saw themselves in their relation to others, and how they adjusted to their environment.

For other children, the violent pathology seems to have pervaded even deeper. At the weekly classroom sessions with a psychiatrist at the Prince George Hotel, as reported by the *New York Times*, people asked questions that revealed this pathology in children. One woman asks the psychiatrist running the sessions what to say when her son threatens to cut her. Another woman asks if it is healthy that her son asked her and her stepfather if they wanted him to go kill his real father. Though other factors may have contributed to her son's offer, like the fact that his real father had abused him, his mother, and his brother,

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[43] Ibid., B6.
[44] Ibid., B1.
[45] Chavez, Welfare Hotel Children, *New York Times.*
[46] Terry, Blueprint for Trouble, *New York Times, B6*.
[47] Golz , Glenn. "Living In a Welfare Hotel, Part 1/Roundtable." *New York Amsterdam News*, , sec. Children's Express, pg. 20, September 05, 1987.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Omri, Home is where..., *New York Amsterdam News.*

as another attendee of the sessions explains, "you can have the best children in the world...but when you bring them in here, it changes them."[50] Kozol's "Rachel" explains that her children still have the concept and respect for life, but resigns to the fact that the hotels will cause them to lose it.[51]

The hotels had a demonstrably devastating effect on the development of children. As one psychologist, Dr. Steve Himmelstein explains, the children in the hotels "simply don't trust from a very early age" and adds that this would make it hard for them to make genuine "give-and-take" relationships in the future. [52] Another psychologist adds that they will tend "toward anger, criminality, and poor educational achievement."[53] But how could these children learn to trust when even the institutions of security and authority are involved in the same criminal behavior as the junkies and gang members? In the Children's Express interviews at the Prince George, twelve-year-old resident Carlos explains that the security guards do not do anything about the drug sales because they sell crack themselves.[54] If he tried to report on them they will "come and get you or something an' I'm not about to die. They're the crack-heads and they're the security guards."[55] There was clearly a blending and confusion between the roles of good and bad, the authority figures and the marginalized (such as the decline of typical societal institutions) in the hotels.

What made it even harder for these children to see themselves as deserving members of society with opportunity for reentry was the badge that society itself pinned on them. Concerned about the image of a bunch of welfare children waiting outside the hotel, one hotel's management forced the children to wait for their school bus at the back door of the hotel where the garbage was kept and near the drug paraphernalia shop.[56] Even when trying to fit in with society and achieve an education, these children were shown that they were a stain on the image of their community, and that they belonged with the garbage and the drug paraphernalia. Once at school, it was likely that they would be picked on for being "hotel kids."[57] It hardly needs to be said that kids are especially impressionable, but one depressing example of this was written in a 1988 *New York Times* article in which a woman explains that having lived in a

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[50] Earnest Teacher and Willing Class, *New York Times.*
[51] Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children,* 66.
[52] Chavez, Welfare Hotel Children, *New York Times.*
[53] Ibid.
[54] Golz, Living in a Welfare Hotel, *New York Amsterdam News.*
[55] Ibid.
[56] Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children,* 157.
[57] Sheils, Welfare Hotel is Madhouse, *New York Times.*

hotel for some time with her son, after they moved to an apartment her son "took his plate and sat on the floor to eat, even though they now had a table."[58] Ways and conditions of life in the hotels could be imprinted onto children for longer than their stay there.

In the words of Leonard Stern, the effect all this has on children is that, "[we are] breeding a generation of underclass that is going to be so tragic and so angry that the rest of society is going to pay a terrible price."[59] The question is whether this was avoidable, or whether it was an inevitable product of the innate values or culture of the people there. Though it may surprise conservatives like Mayor Koch that place blame on the people by arguing that it takes people to make the smell of urine in the hallways, historically experimental evidence demonstrates that this environment was not exclusively created by the hotel residents, but rather by government negligence and poor planning.[60] Smaller organizations had more successful programs for homeless reintegration that far from resembled the conditions and environment of the hotels.

Evitability and Alternatives

To quickly remove the argument that blames the people themselves, I look to the fact that the majority of the those being provided emergency shelter, according to the Legal Aid Society in their testimony to the Subcommittee on Public Assistance and Unemployment Compensation, were homeless because of circumstances beyond their control. These include fires, vacate orders due to dangerous or unhealthy conditions and overcrowding, and other incidental catastrophes like loss of employment.[61] Due to these structural issues, as Wilson explains, they were relegated to live in a confined space with only people as poor as, or poorer than them. Further, there is no evidence, and only evidence to the contrary as shown above, that people *naturally* had behaviors that were prevalent in the hotels. Instead, all evidence points to the fact that people were trying to get out of the hotels, but felt stuck, and not comfortable. Rachel probably reflects most people's sentiment when she asks, "Can the mayor give me a part time job? I am capable of doin' somethin'!"[62]

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[58] Josh Barnabel, "As a Hotel is Emptied, the Poor Move on."*New York Times*, December 27, 1988.

[59] Omri, Home is Where, *New York Amsterdam News.*

[60] Lisa Belkin, "What's Holding the Underclass Down?."*New York Times*, , sec. Week In Review, August 28, 1983.

[61] Subcommittee On Public Assistance, 83.

[62] Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children,* 68.

Unfortunately, unskilled jobs were not available to some.[63] Affordable housing was also unavailable.[64]

Described by Kozol, the New York City policy towards the homeless was that of "lurching from court order to court order...crisis management is the *modus operandi.*"[65] The effect that this had—along with the people-to-blame view represented above by Mayor Koch—was the creation of a system in which those responsible for it have no respect for the community or the processes that are meant to prevent such conditions from becoming reality. For example, in the Martinique, one of the biggest hotels, there were seven HRA caseworkers for the 400 families in the hotel (one for nearly every 60 families).[66] Due to the overwhelming caseload, the policy of contacting each family once or month was really only nominal, reduced to no more than a note under the door.[67]

A *New York Amsterdam News* article about the alarming statistics and stories of child abuse and deaths in the hotels blamed mostly negligent, or rather absent, social work for these problems.[68] One ex-offender given a monologue on the life in the hotels in *Single Rooms* has an interesting take on this negligent attitude, explaining that the people's surroundings necessitate an apathetic attitude. This, he says, "gives welfare and housing officials the ideal excuse not to do anything. They seem to feel that the tenants have been in this environment for so long that it's almost an impossibility to tear down the old and make new changes."[69] Essentially, instead of improving the conditions, they assumed that the people had adjusted to them, or at least that they would eventually. This unfortunate attitude is not only baseless but also what prevented policy and policy-makers from making much needed improvements, and what aided the perpetuation of these patterns of behavior.

This begs the question then, what if this apathetic attitude of social workers and organizers was removed? Was better policy possible? Adding to Councilman Gerges testimony on his better programs, Leonard Stern also ran a non-profit organization for housing people while they helped them look for homes. His program had one full-time social worker for every 18-20 families, house-searching specialists, day

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[63] Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged, 39-45*
[64] Subcommittee on Public Assistance, 34.
[65] Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children,* 38.
[66] Barbanel, *New York Times.*
[67] Kozol, *Rachel and her Children,* 27.
[68] Jesse H. Walker, "City child abuse deaths to reach epidemic proportions." *New York Amsterdam News,* pg. 3, April 23, 1988.
[69] Winberg and Wilson, 66.

care centers, and contact with schools to ensure attendance. He also notes that, unlike the hotel owners who just ignore issues, his inns have repair budgets and someone on-call to make repairs. He claims that in his program, people stay in the inns for about six months, unlike the hotels that can last a year or more.[70] Mr Gerges makes an assertion about hope.[71]In the same spirit, Stern argues that if you give people a "decent environment that respects them as human beings, [then] you will find they respect their environment."[72] Looking at the welfare hotels in these terms and juxtaposed with Gerges' and Stern's models, the environment of the hotels and the responses of their tenants were far from surprising. To look at this issue in today's context, the Prince George has since been renovated into a new, better-run, welfare hotel type shelter, but as of October 2012, it is considered "just another stitch in the neighborhood's fabric."[73]

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to use welfare hotels to explore the concentrated effects of poverty along with the pathological symptoms of social isolation. Though few historiographical works exists on the hotels themselves, the historical works on the underclass and cultures of poverty in the 1970s and '80s provide a framework and larger context in which this study of welfare hotels operates. We may use these larger arguments and theories to deconstruct the culture and social processes of the hotel environment, and then use these deconstructed elements to support and add to the social isolation arguments for the underclass. This paper first defined the groups of people in the hotels as a socially detached class, explored Katz' idea of hopelessness within the context of hotels, examined the "community of violence in thought or action," discussed the issue of the underclass occupying physical space and how this created induction processes especially for children, and finally how the entire issue of welfare hotels was avoidable. In sum, it is evident that policy makers should not become too distracted by finding blame while discussing policy issues; but rather, should endeavor to find the best course of action that prevents the cycle of the next generation inheriting the same set of problems from the last. The hotels show us that social ills that are isolated are allowed to fester, and then permeate an entire community. While this happens it becomes increasingly harder for young

[70] Omri, *New York Amsterdam News.*
[71] Subcommittee on Public Assistance, 73.
[72] Omri, *New York Amsterdam News.*
[73] Elizabeth A Harris, "Still Housing the Needy, in a Changed Manhattan." *New York Times*, , sec. The Appraisal, October 08, 2012.

people to break free from these ills, manifesting in a magnified and long-lasting mark on the chidren who grow up there.

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