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*Big Cities in the Welfare Transition.* Alfred J. Hahn and Sheila B. Kamerman. Reviewed by John R. Graham, University of Calgary.

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## Book Reviews

Alfred J. Kahn and Sheila B. Kamerman, *Big Cities in the Welfare Transition*. New York: Columbia University School of Social Work, 1998, \$25.00 papercover

Local governments are a central cornerstone of most welfare states. This is particularly true of advanced industrialized nations in the English speaking world, inheriting a six-century-old Poor Law tradition of local responsibility for charity. Then came the twentieth century welfare state. In the United States, like Great Britain, Canada, and other countries, the 1930s ushered in a new era of social service financing and delivery. The Great Depression was a catalyst for local governments to “upload” these responsibilities to higher levels of government possessing, among other things, more robust fiscal and administrative capacities. Sixty years later, in light of social welfare retrenchment, fiscal neoconservatism, global financial capitalism, and other, largely ideological trends, local government leaders are increasingly forced to assume those responsibilities that had, in recent times, belonged to higher levels of government. Old habits, it seems, die hard, even if their passing had proceeded through several generations. The late twentieth century is rapidly ushering in previous centuries’ customs of local government social welfare responsibility. So too are older, blame-the-victim attitudes finding new favour.

Canadian policy analyst Ken Battle aptly describes the past twenty-odd years of retrenchment as “social policy by stealth”: the process has been piecemeal, incremental, and complex to the point of being difficult for the popular media, let alone academe, to convey clearly. Herein lies the extraordinary contribution of this book. In clear, accessible prose, Alfred Kahn and Sheila Kamerman provide a useful update on urban America’s recent responses to two rapidly emerging and interrelated phenomena: increasingly punitive attitudes towards society’s most needy, and the “downloading” of social welfare administration and funding responsibilities to the municipal realm. With the support of the Ford Foundation, the authors convened a 35-member round table of academics, public sector analysts, social service administrators,

municipal politicians and their top-ranking civil servants between late 1995 and mid-1997. "Early efforts of big" American "cities" are reported in light of "the new politics of child and family policies" (v). A particular rallying point was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), 1996, destined to spell out much different approaches to American income security programmes.

The resulting book is in three parts. The first contains chapters outlining "the plight of big cities and the factors that ellipsis leave them with heavy burdens and limited power and resources." (ix). Political scientist Ester R. Fuchs provides a superb chapter, "The Permanent Urban Fiscal Crisis", persuasively portraying endemic budget shortfalls, and commensurate cuts to services and lay-offs to bring local government spending in line with available revenues. Persistent budget problems in major American cities—in some cases reducing urban credit to junk bond status—have tragically sidetracked municipal leaders' attention and have pummeled municipal services. Indeed, many local jurisdictions can no longer "keep their infrastructure intact or provide basic housekeeping services effectively", to say nothing of providing a satisfactory redistributive capacity (p. 70). Urban America is in deep, and seemingly irretrievable crisis. Its social fabric and quality of life will not improve unless its fiscal structures are rendered more functional. Here is a chapter that should be taught in every American high school civics class and read by every federal, state, and municipal politician.

Part two examines specific approaches adopted by six major cities: Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cleveland, New York City, Boston, and Los Angeles. Although having a balance of local government and other sources of data, these pages sometimes have the nuance, rhetoric, and disposition of official local government discourse. But they likewise reveal determined, albeit piecemeal, responses in the formidable wake of compromised local government fiscal and political choices. "The cities seem to line up in a continuum", the authors write, "with those at one end 'buying' the new federal principles" of social service delivery "and trying to do little more than implement them (New York), and those at the other end attempting to use the new law and its possible loopholes to bring sound policies to their population ellipsis. (Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston)" (p. 233). Part three, a concluding chapter, brings

together several themes from two, including the disproportionate concentration of state poverty and welfare populations in major American cities, as well as the looming anxiety around decreasing federal and state funding of basic public assistance programmes.

*Big Cities in the Welfare Transition* will be of particular interest to scholars, graduate students, and practitioners wanting a current, accessible, and comprehensive overview of several large American cities' struggles with fiscal retrenchment, neoconservatism, and the further ideological decline of higher governments' financial and administrative support of society's most marginalized. The book provides some of the big picture analysis, but concentrates especially on current goings-on and on providing recent information. Intended to be a progress report, the data is fresh, salient, and potentially the basis of further, more comprehensive and contextually elaborate research on urban America's contemporary social welfare crisis.

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Leon Ginsberg, *Conservative Social Policy: A Description and Analysis*. Chicago, Nelson Hall, 1998. \$23.95 papercover.

Two decades after conservatism assumed hegemony in domestic policy, social work is finally coming to grips with its implications. *Conservative Social Welfare Policy* serves as a fine primer of conservative ideology as it has influenced American social programs. Ginsberg's analysis is multifaceted, fair, and insightful. This book is essential reading for students of social welfare policy.

As a first edition, significant omissions are evident, however. Ginsberg's distinction between conservatism and *neoconservatism* illuminates one cleavage within conservative thought; however, the difference between libertarians and the traditionalist movement also warrants exploration. The works of three central thinkers are omitted: Theda Skocpol who substantiates Union veterans' benefits as the first federal welfare program—created by the Republican party, no less; Peter Berger and John Neuhaus's *To Empower People*, which presents the theory of mediating structures; and Lawrence Mead's *Beyond Entitlement*, the seminal argument behind "the new paternalism" in welfare policy. Moreover, no overview of the conservative influence in social